

Mizmor 123

An End to Contempt

Key Concepts

As in the previous mizmor, King David foresees a time in the future when the Jewish people are in Exile. The people are tragically dependent upon the goodwill of surrounding nations, even though they resent us and treat us with contempt. Their scorn is hurtful to us and has become a key aspect of our suffering, especially when it becomes the excuse for physical maltreatment.

The mizmor is in the form of a plea to Hashem to look upon our suffering and have pity on us. The tefillah compares our situation to that of an indentured servant who is totally dependent upon his master and desperately seeks his master's goodwill. The goodwill of a human master is unreliable, but the Jewish people know that the favor of Hashem will surely be granted if they continue with their earnest tefillos.

Navigating Tehillim. This is the fourth in the series of 15 mizmorim to be sung by the Leviim in the Beis HaMikdash while standing on the 15 steps leading up from the women's courtyard to the men's courtyard.

Exploring the Mizmor

PART 1. DECLARATION OF BITACHON. Speaking for the Jewish people, the singer declares his trust in Hashem and total dependence upon Him. The singer affirms that his destiny is determined by Hashem and it is only Hashem's goodwill that is important.

(א) שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת אֶלֶיךָ יְיָ אֱתֵי עֵינַי הַיֹּשֵׁב בַּשָּׁמַיִם:

(1) A song of the steps. I have raised my eyes to You, Who dwells in the heavens.

PART 2. A PLEA FOR HELP. The Jewish people now turn directly to Hashem and plead for His help out of their bitter situation.

(ב) הִנֵּה כְעֵינַי עֲבָדִים אֶל יָד אֲדוֹנֵיהֶם כְּעֵינַי שֹׁפְחָה אֶל יָד גְּבוֹרָתָהּ כִּן עֵינַי אֶל ה'

אֱלֹהֵינוּ עַד שִׁיחֲנוּ:

(2) Behold! Like the eyes of servants to their master's hand, like the eyes of

a serving-maid to her mistress's hand, so are our eyes unto Hashem, our G-d, until He will favor us.

PART 3. DISGRACED FOR TOO LONG. Hoping to arouse Hashem's pity, the singer concludes by describing our tragic situation. In comparison to a good master who provides his servants with their needs, the arrogant nations feed us with contempt.

(ג) חֲנֻנוּ ה' חֲנֻנוּ כִּי רַב שָׁבַעְנוּ בּוֹז: (ד) רַבַּת שָׁבַעָה לָּהּ נַפְשֵׁנוּ הַלְעַג הַשְּׂאֲנָנִים הַבּוֹז לַגְּאִיוֹנִים:

(3) Favor us, Hashem, favor us for [the Exile] has been very long. We have become fully sated with contempt. (4) Too long has our soul been sated with the mockery of the [nations who are] complacent in their smugness.

Additional Thoughts

Mizmor 123 offers a dramatic mood shift from the previous *Shir Hamaalos*. In contrast to Mizmor 122, which nostalgically celebrated the past glories of Yerushalayim, the current *Shir Hamaalos* expresses the emotional pain of being treated with contempt by the nations.

However, both *mizmorim* are *tefillos* for the *Geulah* (Redemption). It is even possible that by comparing the two *mizmorim* we can get a better understanding of how we got into our present situation. The scorn which the current *Shir Hamaalos* describes is a symptom of the smug complacency and arrogance of the nations who persecute us. Tragically, the Jewish people have also been guilty of self-satisfied pride (*gaavah*), and it has made us vulnerable to the sins for which we lost our *Bais HaMikdash*.

Thus, the all-too brief periods of national glory described in Mizmor 122 were a great challenge and *nisayon* (test of character). It is not easy to be humble when everything is going well. As expressed in the current *Shir Hamaalos*, we now pray that Yerushalayim will be restored out of Hashem's kindness, and as a relief from our emotional pain, but not because we deserve it. Hopefully, we will hold on to that humility and we will merit to serve Hashem in the new *Bais Hamikdash* that will be rebuilt soon in our days.

Learning the Mizmor

PART 1. DECLARATION OF BITACHON.

(א) שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת

This is the fourth **song of the steps**.

אֶלֶיךָ נִשְׁאַתִּי אֶת עֵינַי
הִישָׁבִי בַשָּׁמַיִם:

I have raised my eyes to You — אֶלֶיךָ נִשְׁאַתִּי אֶת עֵינַי, looking for Your help and Your favor. I know that I cannot depend upon the nations among whom I live in Exile. Instead, I turn to **You Who dwells in the heavens** — הִישָׁבִי בַשָּׁמַיִם for I know that You are unaffected by the vicious attitudes of my enemies.

PART 2. A PLEA FOR HELP.

(ב) הִנֵּה כְּעֵינַי עֹבְדִים
אֶל יַד אֲדוֹנֵיהֶם

Behold — הִנֵּה! Our eyes look to You **as the eyes of servants** — כְּעֵינַי עֹבְדִים who are totally dependent upon their masters, and therefore continue to look **to their master's hand** — אֶל יַד אֲדוֹנֵיהֶם for sustenance even when that hand is punishing them.

כְּעֵינַי שֹׁפְחָה אֶל יַד גְּבֵרָתָהּ

Our eyes are also **like the eyes of a serving-maid** who continues to look **to her mistress's hand** — כְּעֵינַי שֹׁפְחָה אֶל יַד גְּבֵרָתָהּ, even though she knows that the mistress is herself dependent upon the goodwill of the master. Sometimes Hashem also punishes us through intermediaries.

כִּן עֵינֵינוּ אֶל ה' אֶלְקֵינוּ
עַד שִׁיחַנֵּנוּ:

Just as the servant and the serving-maid don't give up hope because they have no choice, **so are our eyes** looking **to Hashem, our G-d** — כִּן עֵינֵינוּ אֶל ה' אֶלְקֵינוּ, **until He favors us** — עַד שִׁיחַנֵּנוּ.

PART 3. DISGRACED FOR TOO LONG.

(ג) חֲנִינוּ ה'

חֲנִינוּ כִּי רַב שָׁבַעְנוּ בּוֹז:

Even though we are undeserving, **favor us, Hashem** — חֲנִינוּ ה', in Your kindness. Also, **favor us** — חֲנִינוּ, because surely we have been adequately punished, **for** the Exile **has been very long** — כִּי רַב. We have foolishly looked to the nations for our nourishment but they have fed us with scorn instead and so **we have become fully sated with contempt** — שָׁבַעְנוּ בּוֹז.

(ד) רַבַּת שָׁבַעָה לָּהּ נַפְשֵׁנוּ

הַלְעֵג הַשְּׂאֲנָנִים

Too long has our soul been sated — רַבַּת שָׁבַעָה לָּהּ נַפְשֵׁנוּ **with the mockery** — הַלְעֵג **of the** nations who are **complacent in their smugness** — הַשְּׂאֲנָנִים and feel themselves to be beyond criticism. They mock us for our devotion to *avodas* Hashem.

הַבּוֹז לְגֵאֵי יוֹנִים:

Furthermore, even that mockery is looked down upon with **contempt** — הַבּוֹז by the arrogant ones who think they are totally superior, acting like **proud** — לְגֵאֵי eagles **among** weak **doves** — יוֹנִים. They are the arrogant atheists who feel no humility of subservience to their Creator.

Living the Mizmor

Listed below are some of the thoughts you might have in mind when you say the words of the mizmor as *tefillos* expressing your gratitude to Hashem and as *tehillos* expressing your recognition of Hashem.

Tehillos for Life - Contemplation of Hashem.

[123:1] ON HIGH. – אֵלֶיךָ נִשְׂאֵתִי אֶת עֵינַי הַיֹּשֵׁבִי בַשָּׁמַיִם – “*I have raised my eyes to You, Who dwells in the heavens.*” Hashem is described as dwelling on high. This signifies that He is unaffected by the viciousness and corruption of sinful human beings on earth. However, He observes all and is ready to intervene when the time right.

Lessons for Life - Your Attitude.

[123:2] SUBMISSIVENESS. – הִנֵּה כְּעֵינֵי עֲבָדִים אֶל יַד אֲדֹנָיָהֶם – “Behold! Like the eyes of servants to their master’s hand.” To ask for Hashem’s favor, you need to be totally humble and submissive to Him. Don’t take the attitude that He owes you.

[123:4] SMUGNESS. – רַבַּת שְׂבַעָה לָּהּ נַפְשֵׁנוּ הִלְעַג הַשְּׂאֲנָנִים – “Too long has our soul been sated with the mockery of the [nations who are] complacent in their smugness.” Avoid the complacency of which our enemies are guilty.

Tefillos for Life - Your Yeshuah.

[123:3] END OF CONTEMPT. – חֲנִנּוּ ה' חֲנִנּוּ כִּי רַב שְׂבַעְנוּ בּוֹז – “Favor us, Hashem, favor us for [the Exile] has been very long. We have become fully sated with contempt.” Humbly ask Hashem to teach the nations that it is not in their interest to deride us.

Sources

The primary sources used in the interpretation of the verses of this mizmor are listed below.

ד – אבן עזרא, מצודות, מלבי"ם, רשר"ה,
נר לרגלי

א – המאירי, רד"ק, מצודות, מלבי"ם
ב – המאירי, רד"ק, מצודות, נר לרגלי
ג – אבן עזרא, רד"ק, מלבי"ם, נר לרגלי

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