

Mizmor 124

The Bird has Escaped!

Key Concepts

As in the previous *mizmorim* of this series, Mizmor 124 speaks of a time when the Jewish people are in Exile. David composed the mizmor to shatter our complacency and shock us into realizing the debt of gratitude we owe to Hashem for our very existence. The survival of our nation has been repeatedly threatened and it is only because of Hashem's direct help that we still exist. David drives his point home through the use of poetic repetition and by means of three vivid metaphors. In this way he makes the disasters that might have occurred more real to us. He compares our enemies to wild beasts swallowing their prey whole, to raging flood waters, and to a hunter's cruel trap. A bird is caught in the trap, but escapes and flies up into the free air, and for this David gratefully blesses Hashem.

Just as the bird is trapped in the snare we are trapped among the nations. The only way that we can escape is for the trap to be broken. We are then like a bird which escapes by flying upwards to freedom. Similarly we escaped by attaching ourselves to Hashem. By observing His *mitzvos* we reached a state of holiness that is beyond the grasp of our pursuers.

Navigating Tehillim. This is the fifth 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. INTRODUCTION. David begins by contemplating where we would be without Hashem's help. Immediately after beginning his song, David interrupts himself and calls upon everyone in Yisrael to affirm the historical truth of what he is about to describe.

(א) שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְדָוִד לְגִילֵי ה' שֶׁהָיָה לָנוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל: (ב) לְגִילֵי ה' שֶׁהָיָה לָנוּ בְּקוֹם עָלֵינוּ אָדָם:

(1) *A song of the steps, by David. Were it not for Hashem, Who was for us,*

[there would have been no one to help us].

[Overwhelmed by the thought, the singer has interrupted himself and now calls upon the nation to join him in affirming it:]

Let Yisrael say this now: (2) Were it not for Hashem, Who was for us, [there would have been no one to help us] when a man [Haman] rose against us.

PART 2. FIRST METAPHOR - THE BEASTS. In his first analogy of threatened disaster, the singer visualizes us as being the victims of ravenous beasts.

(ג) אַיִי חַיִּים בְּלַעוּנוּ בַחֲרוֹת אָפָם בָּנוּ:

(3) Then they would have swallowed us alive when their fury raged against us.

PART 3. SECOND METAPHOR - THE FLOODS. In his second analogy of threatened disaster, the singer visualizes us as being the victims of torrential floods.

(ד) אַיִי הַמַּיִם שְׁטַפוּנוּ נַחֲלָה עָבַר עַל נַפְשֵׁנוּ הַמַּיִם הַיֵּדוּנִים:

(4) Then the [flood] waters would have overwhelmed us; [the] torrent would have swept over our life. (5) Then there would have swept over our lives — the maliciously churning waters.

PART 4. THIRD METAPHOR - THE TRAP. In his third analogy, the singer visualizes us as hunted animals, escaping the traps that have been set for us:

(ו) בְּרוּךְ ה' שֶׁלֹא נִתַּנְנוּ טֶרֶף לְשִׁנֵיהֶם: (ז) נַפְשֵׁנוּ כְּצִפּוֹר נִמְלְטָה מִפֶּחַ יוֹקְשִׁים הַפֶּחַ נִשְׁבַּר וְאֲנַחְנוּ נִמְלְטָנוּ:

(6) Blessed is Hashem, Who did not give us over as prey to their teeth. (7) Our life is like a bird escaped from the hunter's trap; the trap was broken and we escaped.

PART 5. CONCLUSION. After presenting the three dramatic scenarios of what might have been, David concludes with a resounding statement of trust in Hashem, the Maker of heaven and earth. This is the point of the entire mizmor. We owe our survival to the fact that throughout all our tribulations we continued to call upon His Name.

(ח) עֲזַרְנוּ בְּשֵׁם ה' עֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:

(8) *Our help is by [calling upon] the Name of Hashem, Maker of heaven and earth.*

Additional Thoughts

Mizmor 124 is an urgent reminder that we owe our continued existence to Hashem's help in the face of the horrendous encounters we have had with the nations of the world over the centuries. The pattern was set when Yaakov had to face the hatred of his brother Esav. It was then that Hashem helped him withstand the spirit of Esav for all time. That struggle and that power from Hashem were memorialized in Yaakov's new name, Yisrael. And it is the name Yisrael that David invokes in the first posuk of Mizmor 124 when he calls upon Yisrael to realize that without Hashem's help we would have been lost.

Learning the Mizmor

PART 1. WERE IT NOT FOR HASHEM.

(א) שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְדָוִד

This is the fifth **song of the steps** – שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת, by David – לְדָוִד.

לוֹלֵי ה' שְׁהֵיָה לָנוּ -

If it **were not for Hashem** – לוֹלֵי ה', **Who was for us** – שְׁהֵיָה לָנוּ, there would have been no one to help us.

Overwhelmed by the thought, the singer interrupts himself and now calls upon the nation to join him in affirming it.

לֵאמֹר נָא יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Let Yisrael say this now – לֵאמֹר נָא יִשְׂרָאֵל:

(ב) לוֹלֵי ה' שְׁהֵיָה לָנוּ

בְּקוּם עָלֵינוּ אָדָם:

[All joining in] **Were it not for Hashem, Who was for us** – לוֹלֵי ה' שְׁהֵיָה לָנוּ, there would have been no one to help us in every generation, when **a man** like the wicked Haman **rose against us** – בְּקוּם עָלֵינוּ אָדָם.

Haman represents the worst of our enemies because in his time all Jews were under the control of one empire and it was his intent to achieve their total destruction.

PART 2. FIRST METAPHOR - THE BEAST.

(ג) אָזִי חַיִּים בְּלַעֲוֵנוּ
בַּחֲרוֹת אַפָּס בָּנוּ:

Then — אָזִי they would have swallowed us alive — חַיִּים בְּלַעֲוֵנוּ when their fury raged against us — בַּחֲרוֹת אַפָּס בָּנוּ.

We would have been at the mercy of the vicious enemies who are like ravenously hungry beasts that don't even wait to chew their prey. It would have been terrible to see our impending doom while we are totally helpless to save ourselves. But why are they so furious with us? It is because our moral behavior refutes their lame excuses for perversion and corruption.

PART 3. SECOND METAPHOR - THE FLOODS.

(ד) אָזִי הַמַּיִם שְׁטַפוּנוּ
נַחֲלָה עֶבֶר עַל נַפְשֵׁנוּ:

Then — אָזִי the flood waters — הַמַּיִם of extinction would have overwhelmed us — שְׁטַפוּנוּ; the torrent would have swept over our life — נַחֲלָה עֶבֶר עַל נַפְשֵׁנוּ, drowning us. Our spiritual existence might have been suffocated by the culture and religion of our enemies.

The word אָזִי is repeated to emphasize that we have repeatedly escaped danger.

(ה) אָזִי עֶבֶר עַל נַפְשֵׁנוּ
הַמַּיִם הַיִּדּוּנִים:

Then — אָזִי there would have swept over our lives — עֶבֶר עַל נַפְשֵׁנוּ — the maliciously churning waters — הַמַּיִם הַיִּדּוּנִים. The enemy would have replaced their false friendship with forced conversions and would have swept away our purity and holiness.

PART 4. THIRD METAPHOR - THE TRAP.

(ו) בְּרוּךְ ה' שֶׁלֹּא נִתְּנָנוּ טָרֶף לְשֹׁנֵיהֶם:

Blessed is Hashem — בְּרוּךְ ה' Who did not give us over — שֶׁלֹּא נִתְּנָנוּ to be caught like birds that are snared by hunters and then become as prey to be

chewed up by **their teeth** – טָרַף לְשֵׁנֵיהֶם.

(ז) נִפְשָׁנוּ כְּצִפּוֹר נִמְלָטָה מִפֶּחַ יוֹקְשִׁים
הִפֵּחַ נִשְׁבֵּר וְאַנְחָנוּ נִמְלָטָנוּ:

Our life is like a bird that has escaped – נִפְשָׁנוּ כְּצִפּוֹר נִמְלָטָה **from the hunters' trap** – מִפֶּחַ יוֹקְשִׁים; **the trap was broken** – הִפֵּחַ נִשְׁבֵּר **and we escaped** – וְאַנְחָנוּ נִמְלָטָנוּ from being subservient to our enemies.

PART 5. CONCLUSION.

(ח) עֲזָרְנוּ בְּשֵׁם ה'
עֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:

Our help – עֲזָרְנוּ did not come about through our strength or in the *zechus* of our righteousness, but **by** calling upon **the Name of Hashem** – 'בְּשֵׁם ה', **Maker of heaven and earth** – עֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ. He alone has the ability to help us and take us out of the Exile. Because He created the heaven and the earth there is nothing our enemies can do to withstand His will.

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.

Tefillos for Life - Your Gratitude.

[124:3] THE BEASTS. – אֲזִי חַיִּים בִּלְעוֹנֵי בַחֲרוֹת אִפְסֵ בָנוּ – “Then they would have swallowed us alive when their fury raged against us.” Thank Hashem for saving us from wicked men eager to expend their fury and hatred against us.

[124:2] – לוֹלִי ה' שְׁהִיָּה לָנוּ בְּקוֹם עָלֵינוּ אָדָם – “Were it not for Hashem, Who was for us, [there would have been no one to help us] when a man [Haman] rose against us.”

[124:4] THE FLOODS. – אֲזִי הַמַּיִם שֶׁטְפוּנוּ נַחֲלָה עָבַר עַל נַפְשָׁנוּ – “Then the [flood] waters would have overwhelmed us; [the] torrent would have swept over our life.” Thank Hashem for saving us from all kinds of natural disasters and economic difficulties.

[124:5] – אָזִי עָבַר עַל נַפְשֵׁנוּ הַיְדוֹנָיִם – “Then there would have swept over our lives — the maliciously churning waters.”

[124:7] THE TRAP. – הִפַּח נִשְׁבָּר וְאֶנְחָנוּ נִמְלָטָנוּ – “the trap was broken and we escaped.” Thank Hashem for saving us from difficult situations from which there seemed no escape.

Lessons for Life - Your Attitude.

[124:7] THE METAPHOR. – נַפְשֵׁנוּ כְּצִפּוֹר נִמְלָטָה מִפֶּחַ יוֹקְשִׁים – “Our life is like a bird escaped from the hunter’s trap.” Don’t let yourself be depressed by a difficult situation in life. Follow David’s example and visualize your difficulty with a metaphor that will help you see how Hashem’s help is on the way.

[124:8] HELP. – עֲזָרְנוּ בְּשֵׁם ה' עֲשֵׂה שְׂמִים וְאָרֶץ – “Our help is by [calling upon] the Name of Hashem, Maker of heaven and earth.” In every challenge of life, whether it is of human origin, a natural disaster, or other threat, call upon Hashem to help you for there is nothing that is beyond His ability to control.

Sources

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

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| ה - מצודות, מלבי"ם, אבן יחיאל | א - אבן עזרא, המאירי, ספורנו |
| ו - רד"ק, מלבי"ם | ב - אבן עזרא, ספורנו, מצודות |
| ז - רש"י, רד"ק, מלבי"ם, נר לרגלי | ג - רד"ק, מצודות, נר לרגלי |
| ח - רד"ק, מצודות, נר לרגלי | ד - מצודות, מלבי"ם, אבן יחיאל |

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