

Mizmor 053

Exposing Evil

Key Concepts

In Mizmor 053 of Tehillim David exposes the presence of evil in the world. He emphasizes that wickedness is the direct result of a failure to recognize the presence of G-d. If man is not accountable to G-d for his actions he is liable to give in to his selfish interests and urges.

Navigating Tehillim. This mizmor is almost identical to Mizmor 014, but the language used here is slightly harsher. Hashem has shown patience to the evildoers in the past but whereas Mizmor 014 referred to Him by the Name of His attribute of mercy, He is now referred to by His attribute of justice (Elokim).

Exploring the Mizmor

David composed the mizmor to be understood by Jews of the present day. We have seen mass political and cultural movements that appear on the scene from time to time in the interest of improving the lot of mankind, but end up failing to respect basic morality and human life. Sadly these movements affect large portions of the Jewish people as well as the nations of the world.

The mizmor has three parts. First, David challenges the people who have succumbed to corrupted attitudes and wicked behavior. He then speaks about how these people are driven to persecute the Jewish nation and rebukes them for their cruelty and unfairness. Finally, he expresses the hope that Hashem will initiate the process leading to a return to peace and righteousness in the world.

PART 1. CHALLENGE TO THE WICKED. David addresses the "villainous fool" who leads a mass political or cultural movement. This individual has set in place the framework by which Jews and non-Jews reject the idea of G-d. Those who follow him cannot resist the tide and they behave unthinkingly. If they would only pause and reflect they would realize that their entire system of thought is based on a fallacy.

(א) לְמַנְצַחַ עַל מַחֲלַת מִשְׁפִּיל לְדוֹד: (ב) אָמַר נָבֵל בְּלִבּוֹ אֵין אֱלֹקִים הַשְּׁחִיתוֹ
וְהִתְעִיבו עָוֹל אֵין עֲשֵׂה טוֹב: (ג) אֱלֹקִים מִשְׁמַיִם הַשְּׁקִיף עַל בְּנֵי אָדָם לְרֵאוֹת הַיֵּשׁ

מִשְׁכִּיל דִּרְשׁ אֶת אֱלֹקִים: (ד) כֵּלֹ סָג יַחְדּוֹ נִאֲלָחוּ אֵין עֲשֵׂה טוֹב אֵין גַּם אָחָד:

(1) For the musician on the machalas instrument, a song of enlightenment by David. (2) The villainous fool says in his heart, "There is no G-d." They have acted corruptly and committed despicable wrongdoings. There is not one who does good. (3) From Heaven G-d looks down upon mankind to see if there is an enlightened man seeking G-d. (4) But all have become [worthless] like dross. They have gone foul together. There is no doer of good; there is not even one.

PART 2. REBUKE TO THE NATIONS. David cries out to the nations of the world who have turned their distorted world-view against Yisrael. They seek a victim and the people of Yisrael fall prey to their cruelty. Instead of appreciating the moral beacon of devotion to the Creator that Yisrael carries, they deride our commitment to the holiness of Hashem and the Torah.

(ה) הֲלֹא יָדְעוּ פְעֻלֵי אֹן אֲכָלִי עַמִּי אָכְלוּ לֶחֶם אֱלֹקִים לֹא קָרְאוּ: (ו) שָׁם פָּחַדוּ פָחַד לֹא הָיָה פָחַד כִּי אֱלֹקִים פָּזַר עֲצָמוֹת חֲנָךְ הִבְשִׁתָּה כִּי אֱלֹקִים מְאֹסִם:

(5) Don't they know, all the wrongdoers, the devourers of my people, devouring them like bread? They do not call upon G-d. (6) They will be stricken with terror. Never has there been such terror, for G-d has scattered the bones of those encamped against you. You put them to shame for G-d has spurned them.

PART 3. HOPE FOR THE FUTURE. David sings of the hoped for time when Hashem will show us the way forward and get us started again on the steps we need to take to deserve His active help in restoring us to what we were in days of old.

(ז) מִי יִתֵּן מִצִּיּוֹן יִשְׁעוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשׁוּב אֱלֹקִים שְׁבוּת עַמּוֹ יִגַּל יַעֲקֹב יִשְׂמַח יִשְׂרָאֵל: (7) May Yisrael's rescue come from Tzion! When Hashem restores the exiles of His people, Yaakov will exult, Yisrael will rejoice.

Learning the Mizmor

PART 1: CHALLENGE TO THE WICKED.

(א) לְמִנְצִיחַ עַל מַחְלַת
מִשְׁכִּיל לְדָוִד

This mizmor has been prepared **for the musician** — **לְמִנְצִיחַ**, who will perform it **on**

the *machalas* instrument — על מַחֲלַת. It is a **song of enlightenment** composed by David — מִשְׁכִּיל לְדָוִד.

(ב) אָמַר נָבֵל בְּלִבּוֹ אֵין אֱלֹקִים
הַשְׁחִיתוּ וְהִתְעִיבוּ עוֹל
אֵין עֲשֵׂה טוֹב:

The villainous fool, who promotes misguided political and cultural movements, **says in his heart** — אָמַר נָבֵל בְּלִבּוֹ, "There is no judgment of G-d — אֵין אֱלֹקִים for me to worry about!" He has persuaded the people who follow him to reject basic morality. They **have acted corruptly** — הַשְׁחִיתוּ **and committed despicable wrongdoings** — וְהִתְעִיבוּ עוֹל. **There is not one** among his followers **who does truly good** — אֵין עֲשֵׂה טוֹב and holds faithfully to time-honored moral standards. Even when they can satisfy their desires in a moral way, they prefer depravity.

The phrase used here for "they committed despicable wrongdoings" (וְהִתְעִיבוּ עוֹל) is slightly more severe than that used in Mizmor 014 (הִתְעִיבוּ עֲלֵיךָ), "they committed despicable acts" (14:1). The implication of the word עֲלֵיךָ there is to something not initially evident as being evil, but which becomes so only at the end. The word עוֹל used here implies something evidently evil from the beginning.

(ג) אֱלֹקִים מִשְׁמַיִם הַשְׁקִיף עַל בְּנֵי אָדָם
לִרְאוֹת הַיֵּשׁ מִשְׁכִּיל דֹרֵשׁ אֶת אֱלֹקִים:

However, Hashem sees all. **From Heaven G-d looks down** — אֱלֹקִים מִשְׁמַיִם **הַשְׁקִיף upon mankind** — עַל בְּנֵי אָדָם. This is the same G-d that the villainous fool denied. With G-d's all-encompassing view He sees the detailed actions and thoughts of every person. And so He is constantly looking **to see if there is an enlightened man** — לִרְאוֹת הַיֵּשׁ מִשְׁכִּיל like Avraham Avinu, someone using his intelligence to sincerely **seek G-d** — דֹרֵשׁ אֶת אֱלֹקִים, to understand what G-d wants from us.

From time to time Hashem probes for a response by afflicting men with illness and misfortune. Those who deny G-d's existence pretend that they only accept what they see with their senses. They say everything else is coincidence. But they readily accept the laws of nature even though they are just as invisible to the eye as the spiritual laws. If they would just reflect upon the meaning of our existence as Avraham Avinu did they would realize the fallacy of their thinking.

(ד) כִּלּוֹ סָג
 יַחְדָּו נֶאֱלָחוּ
 אִין עֵשָׂה טוֹב
 אִין גַּם אָחָד:

But instead of responding to Hashem's probing of mankind **all** the foolish people **have become like dross** [a worthless scum formed on the surface of cooled metal] — כִּלּוֹ סָג. After having turned away from the good path [see *Tehillim* 14:3], **they have gone foul together** — יַחְדָּו נֶאֱלָחוּ, encouraging each other to become further immersed into materialism. **There is no doer of good** — אִין עֵשָׂה טוֹב because an individual tempted to do good is embarrassed to be seen by his fellows as being too virtuous. **There is not even one** — אִין גַּם אָחָד who will stand up and call his fellows to task.

PART 2: REBUKE TO THE NATIONS.

(ה) הֲלֹא יָדְעוּ כָּל פְּעֻלֵי אֲוֹן
 אֲכָלֵי עַמִּי אֲכָלוּ לֶחֶם
 אֲלֻקִּים לֹא קָרְאוּ:

Don't they know — הֲלֹא יָדְעוּ **all those wrongdoers** — כָּל פְּעֻלֵי אֲוֹן of the nations, the **devourers of my people** — אֲכָלֵי עַמִּי, oppressing them and **devouring them like bread** — אֲכָלוּ לֶחֶם? Surely they must know that the power they have to persecute others comes from G-d, and yet **they do not** take to heart the holy message carried by My people and **call upon G-d** — ה' לֹא קָרְאוּ.

(ו) שָׁם פָּחְדוּ פָּחַד
 לֹא הָיָה פָּחַד
 כִּי אֲלֻקִּים פָּזַר עֲצָמוֹת חֲנָדָּךְ
 הִבְשַׁתָּה כִּי אֲלֻקִּים מָאָסָם:

Don't they know that **there** in their own lands where they feel masters of their fate **they will be stricken with terror** — שָׁם פָּחְדוּ פָּחַד? Never has there been such terror — לֹא הָיָה פָּחַד, for G-d has **scattered the bones of those encamped against you** — כִּי אֲלֻקִּים פָּזַר עֲצָמוֹת חֲנָדָּךְ. **You will put them to shame** — הִבְשַׁתָּה, for G-d has **spurned them** — כִּי אֲלֻקִּים מָאָסָם.

- "May Yisrael's rescue come from Tzion! When Hashem restores the exiles of His people." Ask Hashem to bring the *Geulah* now. May He restore the Jewish people to Tzion and the service of Hashem as in ancient times."

Sources

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

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| ד - דעת סופרים, נר לרגלי | א - מצודות, רשר"ה |
| ה - רד"ק, רשר"ה | ב - אבן עזרא, רד"ק, בן־רמון, באר אברהם, |
| ו - רש"י, אבן עזרא, המאירי, בן־רמון | דעת סופרים, נר לרגלי |
| ז - רש"י, ספורנו, אלשיך, באר אברהם | ג - אבן עזרא, בן־רמון, מצודות, מלבי"ם, רשר"ה |