

Mizmor 129

A Nation in Pain

Key Concepts

As in many of the previous mizmorim of this series, the mizmor speaks of a time when the Jewish people are in Exile. David composed the mizmor to put the pain of Exile in a historical context, which began with the sojourn in Mitzrayim when the Jewish nation was still young. That knowledge does not necessarily lessen the pain but demonstrates the possibility of *Geulah*.

Navigating Tehillim. This is the tenth 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

The mizmor consists of two parts, of four pesukim each. The first part is a cry of pain which ends with an expression of hope for relief due to the kindness of Hashem. The second part is an appeal to Hashem to permanently end the Exile.

PART 1. A NATION IN PAIN. David begins his song by expressing the pain of Exile. The nation has endured the pain of Exile intermittently over thousands of years, beginning when we were slaves in Mitzrayim (Egypt). The suffering is visualized as that of a field which is being trampled upon by strangers. They cruelly plough up the land with long and painful furrows. Relief is symbolized by the cutting of the harness that connects the oxen to the yoke of oppression.

Immediately after starting his song, David interrupts himself and calls upon his listeners to affirm the historical truth of what he is about to describe. Once the people have joined in, they draw encouragement at having survived. They then sense a glimmer of hope as the pain is relieved.

(א) שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת רַבַּת צָרְרוּנִי מִנְעוּרֵי יִאֲמַר נָא יִשְׂרָאֵל: (ב) רַבַּת צָרְרוּנִי מִנְעוּרֵי גַם
 לֹא יָכְלוּ לִי: (ג) עַל גְּבִי חָרְשׁוּ חֲרָשִׁים הָאָרִיכוּ לְמַעֲנִיתָם: (ד) ה' צָדִיק קִצַּץ עֲבוֹת
 רְשָׁעִים:

(1) *A song of the steps. They have been tormenting me for a long time, from my youth —*

[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) “They have been tormenting me for a long time, from my youth. Yet they did not prevail over me. (3) Ploughmen were plowing on my back. They lengthened their furrow. (4) Hashem is righteous; He cuts the ropes of the resha'im (wicked).”

Navigating Tehillim. This mizmor features an unusual construction in which the singer interrupts himself because he is overwhelmed by the emotion of what he is describing. A similar form appears in Mizmor 124 (The Bird has Escaped), where the singer is overwhelmed by the thought of what might have happened to us in past centuries if it were not for the loving hand of Hashem.

PART 2. A PRAYER FOR HELP. The nation calls upon Hashem to destroy its wicked enemies and demonstrate to all how transitory they really are. David compares the resha'im (wicked nations) to the dried out tufts of grass that temporarily spring up in the dust of rooftops. It is apparent to any farmer that these outcroppings have no real value. Whereas agricultural crops that are nurtured in healthy soil draw forth blessings by those who see them, the random growths are not even worthy of being harvested.

The mizmor ends by describing typical blessings with which Jews greet each other at harvest time to show their joy at seeing the prosperity of their fellows. These blessings demonstrate the goodwill that is lacking in the resha'im. They are similar to those exchanged between Boaz and the reapers (see Rus 2:4).

(ה) יִבְשׁוּ וְיִסָּגוּ אַחֲרָיו כֹּל שֹׂנְאֵי צִיּוֹן: (ו) יִהְיוּ כַחֲצִיר גִּגּוֹת שֶׁקִּדְמַת שְׁלֶפָה יִבֶּשׂ: (ז) שְׁלֵא מִלֵּא כִפּוֹ קוֹצֵר וְחֲצֹנּוֹ מְעַמָּר: (ח) וְלֹא אָמְרוּ הָעֹבְרִים בְּרַכַּת ה' אֵלֵיכֶם, בְּרַכְנוּ אֶתְכֶם בְּשֵׁם ה':

(5) Let them be shamed and turned back, all who hate Tzion. (6) Let them be like the grass on rooftops, which withers before reaching maturity, (7) [with] which the reaper cannot fill his hand nor the binder of sheaves his pack, (8) and of which passersby do not say, “Hashem’s blessing upon you”, “We bless you in the Name of Hashem.”

Navigating Tehillim. In contrast to the honest Jewish farmer who is worthy of a blessing, the wicked are like useless stubble upon whom a blessing would be wasted. Instead of being solidly grounded in morality and integrity like grain that grows from the earth they are like the temporary weeds that grow in the dust that cannot sustain them. As David said in Mizmor 001, they are

like the straw that the wind blows away (*Tehillim* 1:4).

Additional Thoughts

There is a natural and instructive relationship between Mizmorim 128 and 129. Mizmor 128 showed how the blessings that are earned by living a virtuous life begin with the devotion of the individual and then progress to the family and the entire nation.

Mizmor 129 carries that thought forward and reminds us that just as we were redeemed from Mitzrayim we will be redeemed from the present Exile. An underlying contributing factor to the first Exile in Mitzrayim and to our subsequent Exiles was the failure in brotherly love demonstrated by the selling of Yosef into slavery. Thus, it is significant that Mizmor 129 ends with the warm blessings of prosperity that conscientious Jews offer each other as a sign of goodwill and brotherly love.

Brotherly love begins in the family setting as described in Mizmor 128. The goodwill that children show each other as they are gathered around the family table becomes the source of blessing for the next generation and the entire nation.

Learning the Mizmor

PART 1. A CRY OF PAIN.

(א) שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת

This is the tenth **song of the steps** – שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת.

רַבַּת צָרְרוֹנֵי מִנְעוּרֵי -

My enemies — **they have been tormenting me for** such a long time — רַבַּת צָרְרוֹנֵי, **from my** very youth as a nation — מִנְעוּרֵי when I was persecuted in Mitzrayim!

Overwhelmed by the thought, the singer has interrupted 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) רַבַּת צָרְרוֹנֵי מִנְעוּרֵי

[All joining in:] **They have been tormenting me for** such a long time — רַבַּת

מְנַעֲרֵי מִן־עַרְוֵנִי **from my very youth** — as a nation!

גַּם לֹא יִכְלוּ לִי:

And yet **they did not prevail over me** — גַּם לֹא יִכְלוּ לִי.

(ג) עַל גְּבִי חָרְשׁוּ חֲרָשִׁים

In their scorn my enemies have trampled upon me like the ground under their feet. It was as though **ploughmen were plowing** a furrow **on my back** — עַל גְּבִי חָרְשׁוּ חֲרָשִׁים.

הֶאָרִיכוּ לְמַעַנְיָתָם:

They lengthened their furrow — הֶאָרִיכוּ לְמַעַנְיָתָם and I eagerly waited for the respite that comes when the plough is turned around at the end of the cut. But in their cruelty, the ploughmen have extended the furrow and the wait seemed endless.

(ד) ה' צַדִּיק

קִצַּץ עֲבוֹת רְשָׁעִים:

Hashem is righteous — ה' צַדִּיק. Even though I don't deserve it, **He cuts the ropes** with which **the resha'im** — קִצַּץ עֲבוֹת רְשָׁעִים have harnessed the yoke of oppression.

PART 2. A PRAYER FOR HELP.

(ה) יִבְשׁוּ וְיִסְגּוּ אַחֲרָיִךְ

כָּל שִׁנְאֵי צִיּוֹן

Let them ultimately **be shamed** by my release **and** let them be **turned back** — יִבְשׁוּ וְיִסְגּוּ אַחֲרָיִךְ from the evil plans of **all who hate** the nation of **Tzion** — כָּל שִׁנְאֵי צִיּוֹן and its *kedushah* (holiness).

(ו) יִהְיוּ כַחֲצִיר גִּגּוֹת

שֶׁקִּדְמַת שְׁלֵף יִבֶּשׁ:

Let them be transitory **like the** random **grass** — יִהְיוּ כַחֲצִיר, which sometimes takes root on **rooftops** — גִּגּוֹת, but **which withers before reaching maturity**, — שֶׁקִּדְמַת שְׁלֵף יִבֶּשׁ, ...

(ז) שְׁלֵא מִלֵּא כְּפוֹ קוֹצֵר

וְחִצָּנוּ מֵעֵמֶר:

... **which** is so sparse and useless that **the reaper cannot fill his hand** — שְׁלֹא ...
מִלֵּא כְּפוֹ קוֹצֵר with it, **nor the binder of sheaves his pack** — וְחִצָּנוּ מֵעֵמֶר ...

(ח) וְלֹא אָמְרוּ הָעֹבְרִים

בְּרַכַּת ה' אֵלֵיכֶם

בִּרְכָנוּ אֶתְכֶם בְּשֵׁם ה':

... **and of which passersby do not** bother to **say** — וְלֹא אָמְרוּ הָעֹבְרִים, "May Hashem's blessing be upon you — בְּרַכַּת ה' אֵלֵיכֶם," and "We bless you in the Name of Hashem — בִּרְכָנוּ אֶתְכֶם בְּשֵׁם ה'."

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 Anguish.

[129:1] HISTORY OF PAIN. – רַבַּת צָרוּנִי מִנְעוּרַי – "They have been tormenting me for a long time, from my youth." Put your anguish in a historical context. Remind yourself that Hashem rescued you in the past. Surely He will do so again.

[129:4] – ה' צַדִּיק קָצַץ עֲבוֹת רְשָׁעִים – "Hashem is righteous; He cuts the ropes of the resha'im."

Tefillos for Life - Your Yeshuah.

[129:5] TURN THEM BACK. – יִבְשׂוּ וַיִּסְגּוּ אַחֲרָיו כָּל שֹׂנְאֵי צִיּוֹן – "Let them be shamed and turned back, all who hate Tzion." Ask Hashem to demoralize the enemy so that they no longer have the heart to persecute us.

Tefillos for Life - Your Berachah.

[129:8] GREETING. – בְּרַכַּת ה' אֵלֵיכֶם – "Hashem's blessing upon you." You may greet another Jew with a prayer to Hashem to bless him.

[129:8] – בִּרְכָנוּ אֶתְכֶם בְּשֵׁם ה' – "We bless you in the Name of Hashem."

Sources

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

ה - אבן עזרא, רד"ק, המאירי, מצודות, מלבי"ם
ו - אבן עזרא
ז - אבן עזרא, המאירי
ח - אבן עזרא

א - אבן עזרא, ספורנו, מלבי"ם, נר לרגלי
ב - המאירי
ג - אבן עזרא, רד"ק
ד - אבן עזרא, מלבי"ם

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