

Mizmor 058

Against Complacency

Key Concepts

Mizmor 058 contains a reproach directed at those who are in position to put an end to evil, but keep complacently silent. Because of their complacency they share in the guilt for all the evil that they might have prevented. The specific targets of David's reproach were Avner ben Ner, King Shaul's commander-in-chief, as well as the other senior men of Shaul's court. David felt that it was their duty to intervene and stop Shaul from acting unjustly in his treatment of David.

Historical Background

The mizmor is based on another episode in King Shaul's pursuit of David. Shaul had set up camp in a place called Chachilah Hill, but his men had neglected to post proper guards. David stole into the camp under cover of darkness, accompanied by Avishai ben Tzeruyah, one of his best warriors. They found Shaul asleep in the middle of the camp with Avner ben Ner lying nearby. Avishai urged David to kill Shaul, but David refused, just as he had refused in the incident of the cave (see Mizmor 057). Instead, he took Shaul's spear and his water flask, and escaped to the top of the hill. From that safe vantage point David called out to Avner ben Ner and berated him for having left his king vulnerable to attack. By sparing Shaul's life, David clearly demonstrated that he had no intention of harming the king (see I *Shmuel* 26).

Navigating Tehillim. This is the second of three mizmorim (057 through 059) in which David asks to be saved from destruction by Shaul but without the need of killing either Shaul or his warriors. This theme is expressed in the first posuk of each mizmor: "Let there not be destruction."

Exploring the Mizmor

PART 1. THE CHALLENGE. David accuses Avner and his colleagues of acting like mutes when they should be seeing to it that there is justice in the land. They have sinned by failing to speak up. They are effectively participating in the violence.

(א) לְמִנְצַחַ אֵל תִּשְׁחַת לְדוֹד מִכְתָּם: (ב) הָאֲמָנִם אֲלֵם צָדֵק תִּדְבְּרוּן מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל

תִּשְׁפֹּטוּ בְּנֵי אָדָם: (ג) אַף בְּלֵב עוֹלֹת תִּפְעֲלוּן בְּאַרְץ חַמֵּס יְדִיכֶם תִּפְלִסוּן:

(1) For the musician, [based on the theme,] Let there not be destruction, a *michtam* by David. (2) “Are you indeed mute? You should be speaking [with] justice! You should be judging people fairly. (3) Even in [your] heart, you are doing wrong. [And even worse, the] violence of your hands is in the land, [and you are] allocating it [everywhere].”

PART 2. A PATTERN OF EVIL. David describes Avner and his colleagues as *resha'im* (wicked men) who have been insensitive to sin for so long it is as if they had gone astray from the time they were born. They have refused to listen to moral guidance for so long that they are like a type of deaf snake which does not respond to the voice of the snake charmer.

(ד) זָרוּ רְשָׁעִים מֵרַחֵם תָּעוּ מִבֶּטֶן דִּבְרֵי כָזָב: (ה) חַמַּת לָמוּ כַּדְמוּת חַמַּת נָחַשׁ כְּמוֹ

פִּתְוֹן חֲרָשׁ יֵאָטֵם אֲזֵנוֹ: (ו) אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמַע לְקוֹל מְלַחְשִׁים חוֹבֵר חֲבָרִים מִחֶכֶם:

(4) The *resha'im* have deviated [early in their lives, as if] from birth. The speakers of falsehood have gone astray from [their mother's] belly. (5) Their poisonous [talk] is like the venom of a snake. They [refuse to listen to moral guidance and] are like a deaf viper that [behaves as if it] closes its ear (6) so as not to hear the voice of snake charmers, [or] the most skillful caster of spells.

PART 3. TO DISABLE EVIL. Since the *resha'im* are confirmed in their evil ways, David calls upon Hashem to neutralize their ability to harm him. Removing their power of evil speech is described in terms of breaking their teeth, which are key organs of speech.

David does not ask that the *resha'im* be physically destroyed, but that they lose confidence in their choice of loyalty to Shaul. They will then gradually abandon him and thereby make his threat ineffective. David compares the gradual weakening of Shaul's position to water that runs off when there is nothing to hold it. He also compares that weakening to the loss of moisture in a snail when it is exposed to the sun.

David also compares the fate of his enemies to the darkness experienced by the mole which cannot see the light of the sun. If the mole miscarries, the stillbirth represents the ultimate loss of light.

(ז) אֶלְקִים הָרַס שְׁנִימוֹ בְּפִימוֹ מִלְתַּעוֹת כְּפִירִים נִתְץ ה': (ח) יִמָּאֲסוּ כְּמוֹ מַיִם

יִתְהַלְכוּ לָמוּ יְדָרְךָ חֲצִי כְּמוֹ יִתְמַלְלוּ: (ט) כְּמוֹ שֶׁבִּלּוֹל תִּמָּס יִהְלֶךְ נֶפֶל אִשָּׁת בֶּל חָזוּ

שְׁמִיט:

(7) “O G-d, break their teeth in their mouths. Shatter the fangs of [the resha'im who are like predatory] lions, O Hashem. (8) Let them melt away like water that runs off. [Then, seeing his men desert him, when Shaul] aims his arrows, he will be as if he is withering away. (9) [Let them disappear gradually] like the snail [appearing to] melt as it slithers away. [Let them be in darkness like] the stillbirth of a mole, which did not see the sun.”

PART 4. A WARNING. David speaks directly to the *resha'im* and warns them that they will be unable to complete their evil intentions. They are like a soft briar which has not yet hardened into a destructive thorn. Hashem will not let them reach that point.

(י) בְּטָרִם יְבִינוּ סִירְתֵיכֶם אֶטָד כְּמוֹ חֵי כְּמוֹ חֶרוֹן יִשְׁעֵרְנוּ:

(10) [You resha'im:] “Before your tender briars develop into hardened thorns, [Hashem] will act angrily and stormily sweep them away.”

PART 5. A POSITIVE LESSON. David concludes the mizmor by pointing out that even if the *rasha* is not physically destroyed, the thought of what could happen should be a lesson to the *tzaddik* to keep his own steps through life as pure as he can. The knowledge that a harsh judgment against *resha'im* is possible should also be a lesson to all of mankind that “There is indeed, a G-d judging the earth”.

(יא) יִשְׂמַח צַדִּיק כִּי תִזָּה נֶקֶם פְּעַמָּיו יִרְחַץ בְּדַם הַרְשָׁע: (יב) וְיִאֱמַר אָדָם אֵךְ פָּרִי לְצַדִּיק אֵךְ יֵשׁ אֱלֹקִים שֹׁפְטִים בְּאָרֶץ:

(11) The *tzaddik* will rejoice when he visualizes the vengeance [that will befall the *rasha* who does not mend his ways. The *tzaddik* will then keep his own steps pure. In effect,] he will bathe his steps in the blood of the *rasha*. (12) And mankind will say, “There is indeed, a reward for the *tzaddik*. There is indeed, a G-d judging the earth.”

Learning the Mizmor

PART 1. THE CHALLENGE.

(א) לְמַנְצֵחַ אֶל תְּשׁוּחַת

A song prepared **for the musician** — לְמַנְצֵחַ, based on the theme, “**Let there not be destruction**” — אֶל תְּשׁוּחַת. This theme expresses David’s plea to Hashem that he emerge from the encounter with Shaul without the loss of human life.

לְדוֹד מִכָּתָם

This song is a **michtam** composed **by David** — לְדוֹד מִכָּתָם. A “michtam” is a very fine composition, whose name means “adornment of purest gold”.

(ב) הָאֱמָנִים אֵלִים

צֶדֶק תִּדְבֵּרוּן

מִישָׁרִים תִּשְׁפֹּטוּ בְּנֵי אָדָם:

You senior advisors of King Shaul, why have you not spoken out against what he has been doing to me? **Are you indeed mute** — הָאֱמָנִים אֵלִים ? **You should be speaking with justice** — צֶדֶק תִּדְבֵּרוּן ! **You should be judging people fairly** — מִישָׁרִים תִּשְׁפֹּטוּ בְּנֵי אָדָם and instead you have given in to Shaul’s prejudice.

(ג) אַף בְּלִב עוֹלַת תִּפְעֵלוּן

בְּאֶרֶץ חַמָּס יִדְיְכֶם תִּפְלְסוּן:

It is bad enough that you are failing to speak up for what is right. **Even in your heart** — אַף בְּלִב where you should be thinking the truth, **you are doing wrong** — עוֹלַת תִּפְעֵלוּן by making plans to justify your misdeeds. And even worse, the **violence of your hands is everywhere in the land** — בְּאֶרֶץ חַמָּס יִדְיְכֶם, and **you are standardizing it** — תִּפְלְסוּן, so that your twisted behavior becomes the norm.

PART 2. A PATTERN OF EVIL.

(ד) זָרוּ רְשָׁעִים מִרְחָם

תָּעוּ מִבֶּטֶן דְּבָרֵי כָזָב:

The resha'im (wicked) **have deviated** — זָרוּ רְשָׁעִים from the right path so early in their lives that they have lost the sense of right and wrong. It is as if their

wickedness is with them **from the womb** — מִרְחֹם. Similarly, **the speakers of falsehood have gone astray from** the moment they were in **their mother's belly** — תָּעוּ מִבֶּטֶן דְּבָרֵי כֶזֶב. It is not enough that they fail to correct Shaul's negative thinking, they have been telling Shaul outright lies about me in order to exacerbate his hatred.

(ה) חֲמַת לָמוּ כְדָמוֹת חֲמַת נָחָשׁ
כְּמוֹ פֶתֶן חָרַשׁ יֵאָטֵם אָזְנוֹ:

Their poison — חֲמַת לָמוּ which they emit in the form of destructive talk **is like the venom of a snake** — כְּדָמוֹת חֲמַת נָחָשׁ. With one word they can sentence a person to death. They refuse to listen to moral guidance and so they are **like a deaf viper that behaves as if it closes its ear** — כְּמוֹ פֶתֶן חָרַשׁ יֵאָטֵם אָזְנוֹ ...

(ו) אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמַע לְקוֹל מְלַחְשִׁים
חוֹבֵר חֲבָרִים מְחַכֵּם:

... **so as not to hear the voice of snake charmers** — אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמַע לְקוֹל מְלַחְשִׁים, or even the voice **of the most skillful caster of spells** — חוֹבֵר חֲבָרִים מְחַכֵּם.

[Snakes attack a person only if they think he intends to harm them. Accordingly, the experts who handle snakes whisper to them to soothe them so that they do not feel in danger. But those soothing sounds are not effective for a specific type of venomous viper, which acts as if it can't hear the incantations. Similarly, David's enemies are slandering him in order to defuse the harm that they think he intends to cause them. They refuse to listen to his claim that he has no designs against them.]

PART 3. TO DISABLE EVIL.

(ז) אֶלְקִים, הָרַס שְׁנֵימוּ בְּפִימוּ
מִלְתָּעוֹת כְּפִירִים נִתְּץ ה':

O G-d, since they do not respond to moral guidance, take drastic action and **break their teeth in their mouths** — אֶלְקִים הָרַס שְׁנֵימוּ בְּפִימוּ to prevent them from continuing to spit out their poison. **Shatter the sharp fangs of the wicked men who are like predatory lions, O Hashem** — מִלְתָּעוֹת כְּפִירִים נִתְּץ ה'. Don't let them tear me apart with their weapons of war.

(ח) יִמָּאֲסוּ כְמוֹ מַיִם יִתְהַלְכוּ לָמוּ

יִדְרֹךְ חֲצִיּוֹ כְּמוֹ יִתְמַלְּלוּ:

Let them lose their self-confidence and desert Shaul so that they will **melt away like water that runs off** – יִמָּאֲסוּ כְּמוֹ מַיִם יִתְהַלְּכוּ לָמוֹ – and is no more. Then, seeing his men desert him, when **he aims his arrows** – יִדְרֹךְ חֲצִיּוֹ – to kill me, **he will be** weakened and be **as if withering away** – כְּמוֹ יִתְמַלְּלוּ.

(ט) כְּמוֹ שֶׁבֶלּוּל תִּמָּס יִהְלֹךְ

Let them melt away gradually **like the snail** – כְּמוֹ שֶׁבֶלּוּל – that seems to be **melting** – תִּמָּס – because of the slimy track it leaves behind as **it slithers away** – יִהְלֹךְ.

נִפְלֵ אֵשֶׁת בַּל חֲזוּ שְׁמֶשׁ:

Let them be hidden away in darkness like **the stillbirth of a mole** – נִפְלֵ אֵשֶׁת, **which did not see the sun** – בַּל חֲזוּ שְׁמֶשׁ. [The mole lives in darkness, a darkness which is total for its stillbirth.]

PART 4. A WARNING.

(י) בְּטָרָם יִבִּינוּ סִירְתֵיכֶם

אָטָד כְּמוֹ חֵי כְּמוֹ חֲרוֹן יִשְׁעֶרְנוּ:

[The singer addresses the *resha'im*.] Before you are able to solidify your wickedness, you will vanish from the scene. That is, **before your tender briars develop** – בְּטָרָם יִבִּינוּ סִירְתֵיכֶם – **into hardened thorns** – אָטָד, **He will act angrily and stormily sweep them away** – כְּמוֹ חֵי כְּמוֹ חֲרוֹן יִשְׁעֶרְנוּ.

PART 5. A POSITIVE LESSON.

(יא) יִשְׂמַח צַדִּיק כִּי תִזֶה נֶקֶם

פְּעָמָיו יִרְחֹץ בַּדָּם הַרְשָׁע:

The tzaddik will rejoice when he realizes that there is justice and **he visualizes the vengeance** – יִשְׂמַח צַדִּיק כִּי תִזֶה נֶקֶם – that will befall the *rasha* (wicked one) who does not mend his ways. The *tzaddik* will learn from this and keep his own steps pure. In effect, **he will bathe his steps in the blood of the rasha** – פְּעָמָיו יִרְחֹץ בַּדָּם הַרְשָׁע.

(יב) וַיֹּאמֶר אָדָם אֵךְ פְּרִי לְצַדִּיק

אֵךְ יֵשׁ אֱלֹקִים שְׁפָטִים בְּאֶרֶץ:

And all of mankind will say – וַיֹּאמֶר אָדָם – “There is indeed, a reward for the tzaddik – אֵךְ פְּרִי לְצַדִּיק – אֵךְ יֵשׁ אֱלֹקִים שְׁפָטִים בְּאֶרֶץ here in this world, as well as in the world to come.”

Living the Mizmor

Listed below are some of the lessons that you can draw from this mizmor, as well as some of the thoughts you might have in mind when you say the words of the mizmor as a *tefillah*, expressing your devotion to Hashem.

Lessons for Life - Your Behavior.

[58:2] SPEAK UP. – הֲאִמְנָם אֵלִים צֶדֶק תִּדְבְּרוּן – “*Are you indeed mute? You should be speaking [with] justice!*” When you see an injustice being done you have an obligation to speak up. If you don’t take action, you are effectively complicit in the crime.

[58:4] PATTERN OF EVIL. – זֶרוּ רְשָׁעִים מִרְחֹם – “*The resha’im have deviated [early in their lives, as if] from birth.*” A sinful pattern of behavior typically starts at an early age and becomes ingrained. This makes it all the more important to maintain effective guidance and discipline in raising children.

Tefillos for Life - Your Yeshuah.

[58:8] MELT AWAY. – יִמָּאֲסוּ כְּמוֹ מַיִם – “*Let them melt away like water that runs off.*” Ask Hashem to save you by gradually disabling your enemies, so that they will be like water that runs off.

[58:9] – כְּמוֹ שֶׁבִּלּוֹל תִּמָּס יְהִלֵּךְ – “*[Let them disappear gradually] like the snail [appearing to] melt as it slithers away.*”

Lessons for Life - Your Attitude.

[58:11] CHIZUK. – יִשְׂמַח צַדִּיק בִּי תְּזֶה נֶקֶם – “*The tzaddik will rejoice when he visualizes the vengeance [that will befall the rasha who does not mend his ways].*” By visualizing the downfall of evil people your own *emunah* and *bitachon* will be strengthened.

[58:12] – וַיֹּאמֶר אָדָם אֵךְ פְּרִי לְצַדִּיק אֵךְ יֵשׁ אֱלֹקִים שְׁפָטִים בְּאֶרֶץ – “*And mankind will say, “There is indeed, a reward for the tzaddik. There is indeed, a G-d judging the earth.”*”

Sources

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

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| ז - רד"ק, בן־רמון | א - המאירי, מלבי"ם, רשר"ה |
| ח - רש"י, אבן עזרא, אלשיך | ב - רש"י, רד"ק, בן־רמון, מצודות |
| ט - רד"ק, המאירי, ספורנו, אבן יחיאל | ג - רש"י, רד"ק, המאירי, בן־רמון, מצודות |
| י - רש"י, בן־רמון, רשר"ה | ד - רד"ק |
| יא - מלבי"ם, רשר"ה | ה - רש"י, רד"ק, מצודות, מלבי"ם |
| יב - רש"י, אלשיך | ו - רש"י, רד"ק |

© COPYRIGHT NOTICE

All rights to this document are reserved by the author. For further information contact Isaac Kirzner at isaac@kirzner.com