

# INTRODUCTION TO TEHILLIM

## Sefer Tehillim

The *Sefer Tehillim* consists of the text for 150 Divinely inspired *mizmorim* (poetic songs) which have served as the basis for the *tefillos* (prayers) of the Jewish people throughout the centuries. The *mizmorim* are a reflection of the character and life of *David Hamelech* (King David), their primary composer.

David originally wrote the *mizmorim* to express his personal devotion to Hashem but ultimately structured them so that they could be employed by every Jewish individual to communicate with his Creator. This was possible because David imbued the *mizmorim* with his lifelong sense of Hashem's universal presence.

That continuing awareness of Hashem enabled David to express the emotions of both love and fearful reverence towards the unseen Being that is the Author of all existence. The attitude of awareness of Hashem's presence throughout every moment of our lives has made Tehillim an essential accompaniment to the Torah.

The close relationship between the Torah and Tehillim is demonstrated by the fact that Tehillim is structured as five books, corresponding to the five Books of the Torah.

Although many of the *mizmorim* clearly relate to specific events in David's life they are not arranged in a chronological sequence because that relationship is incidental to the message of the *mizmor* from the point of view of Tehillim. Also, although David composed most of the *mizmorim* himself and later adapted them to the structure of the Book, he also included *mizmorim* that were originally composed by ten "elders", including Adam, the first man, and Moshe Rabbeinu, who taught us the Torah.

## The Emotional Undercurrent of Tehillim

All of the *mizmorim* convey an emotional awareness of Hashem's involvement in every aspect of our lives. That attitude pervades Tehillim whether the composer is experiencing joy or sadness, pain or pleasure. This is an important point. It is comparatively easy to feel positive towards Hashem when times are good. After all, we owe everything to Him. It is much more challenging to value the relationship when one is being punished or when tragedy strikes for an unexplained reason.

David teaches us that hard lesson because his entire life was filled with challenges. He had every reason to feel resentment for finding himself a hunted fugitive after being promised the glory of royalty. Yet he accepted the will of Hashem with humility and love. That is what the beautiful poetry of Tehillim teaches us.

The emotional content of Tehillim was further enhanced by musical accompaniment which has been sadly lost to us. We have only the names of some of the instruments to remind us what emotional depths were conveyed to the people who were privileged to hear the *mizmorim* as they were sung by the Leviim in the *Bais Hamikdash* (Temple). However, this great loss has happened because it is the will of Hashem, perhaps to teach us to focus our attention on the meaning of the words. That is what we have attempted to do in the NAFSHI project.

## **The NAFSHI Presentation of Tehillim**

The presentation of each mizmor in the NAFSHI project begins with a "Concepts" section that introduces some of the ideas the mizmor works with. If applicable, that is followed by a "Historical Background" section, which helps place the mizmor in a historical context, primarily with regard to David's life.

The next section, which is called "Exploring the Mizmor", introduces you to a simple translation of the text and the overall structure of the pesukim, showing how they fit together.

This is followed by the "Learning the Mizmor" section, which is intended to serve as a text for a detailed study of the mizmor. The organization of this section follows the structure of the mizmor as it was introduced in the "Exploring the Mizmor" section.

In conclusion, there is the important "Living the Mizmor" section, which helps you apply the mizmor to your life.

## **Living the Mizmor**

The "Living the Mizmor" section is intended primarily for the benefit of people who recite Tehillim on a regular basis, but who sometimes have difficulty knowing what thought (*kavanah*) they should have in mind as they say each posuk. Also, some people would like help in relating the text to specific needs in their own life.

To help overcome this challenge, we have identified certain categories of meaning and then explained how each relevant posuk fits into a particular category. We start with three very broad categories: *Torah*, *Tefillos*, and *Tehillos*.

In preparing these analytic interpretations we have not attempted to identify every possible *kavanah*, only some of those that seem especially significant. Also, you will find that any one *posuk* can fit easily into more than one category. Of course, all

possible meanings are relevant, but time and space restrictions prevent us from attempting to document every one.

**TORAH.** The *Torah* category is used for those pesukim that can be understood as teaching you the will of Hashem in regard to your behavior or your attitude (thoughts). When you come across one of these pesukim it would be helpful for you to stop and think about how this lesson might affect your life.

### Lessons For Life

**Your Behavior** - Tehillim gives you specific guidelines for what to do and how to do it.

**Your Attitude** - Tehillim gives you advice on what your attitude should be when you are thinking about the major issues in your life.

**TEFILLAS.** The *Tefillos* category is used for those pesukim that serve primarily as the basis for a *tefillah* (prayer) to Hashem. Such a prayer might be a *bakashah* (request) for a specific form of Hashem's kindness in the future. Alternately, a posuk in the Tefillos category might be an expression of personal gratitude for a specific form of kindness that Hashem has shown you in the past. It might also be an expression of your present relationship with Hashem (how you feel towards Him). We will try to show how the posuk you are saying expresses one of these kinds of meaning.

### Tefillos For Life

**Your Gratitude** - Tehillim gives you many *pesukim* with which you might express your gratitude to Hashem for specific kindnesses.

**Your Relationship** - These are *pesukim* in which you can focus on your relationship with Hashem.

**Your Anguish** - These are *pesukim* in which you can contemplate the meaning of suffering or difficulties that you may be experiencing.

**Your Teshuvah (Repentance)** - These are *pesukim* in which you can express your guilt and regret for sins that you may have committed. And you can ask Hashem to forgive you and cleanse your soul.

**Your Requests** - These are *pesukim* with which you might be expressing a plea to Hashem for a specific need.

**Berachah (Blessing)** - Ask Hashem to bless you with such kindnesses as health, livelihood, and children.

**Refuah (Healing)** - Ask Hashem to grant you relief from physical ailments.

**Yeshuah (Deliverance)** - Ask Hashem to overcome threats and persecution, to protect you from harm, and to defeat your enemies.

**Geulah (Redemption)** - Ask Hashem to bring the time of universal peace and recognition of the One G-d, heralded by the Mashiach.

**TEHILLOS**. The *Tehillos* category is used for those *pesukim* that serve primarily as the basis for a *tehillah* (praise) to Hashem. They are, in effect, your expressed recognition of Hashem's qualities and attributes as perceived by mankind. By intelligently reciting such *pesukim* you are intensifying your *emunah* (faith) in His eternal truth and your *bitachon* (trust) in His future actions toward you and the world.

### **Tehillos For Life**

**Contemplation of Hashem** - Think and speak about about the infinite wisdom and kindness of Hashem, as seen in the wonders of Creation and taught in the Torah.

**Public Acclaim** - Join others in publicly acknowledging and praising the greatness of Hashem. When people offer public recognition of Hashem they inspire each other and strengthen their *emunah*. They are also contributing to the important goal of universal recognition of Hashem.