

Mizmor 081

The Message of the Shofar

Key Concepts

The prophet Asaph begins this mizmor with a song of celebration and gratitude to Hashem, linking the festival of *Rosh Hashanah* to the *Geulah* (redemption) of Yisrael from slavery in Mitzrayim. Although the physical exodus from that land did not occur until the month of Nissan, the process of liberation actually started six months earlier on the date we now observe as *Rosh Hashanah*. This was when our ancestors were released from the physical drudgery of servitude. Furthermore, it was on this day that Yosef *Hatzadik* was miraculously liberated from prison and elevated to the role of viceroy of Pharaoh.

Rosh Hashanah is known as the festival when we remind ourselves that Hashem is our King and Judge. The ceremony for the accession of an earthly king to his throne is typically marked by majestic music and so it is in this mizmor that the celebration for the King of Kings begins with an invitation to the people to declare their loyalty and devotion in song. Their words of praise are accompanied by a variety of musical instruments and since it is Rosh Hashanah, the *shofar* (ram's horn) is especially featured.

All of these thoughts are touched upon in the opening verses of the *mizmor*. Asaph then assumes an ominous tone as he speaks with the voice of Hashem, calling upon His people to take to heart the message conveyed by the stirring sounds of the *shofar*. A failure to do so would be an invitation to calamity. But the people are assured that if they observe the will of their Creator, they can still count on His blessing.

Today most people are familiar with this mizmor because of its designation as the Song of the Day (*Shir Shel Yom*) for the fifth day of the week. The connection between the subject of the *mizmor* and this particular day is based on the fact that the fifth day of Creation was the day on which the birds of the air and fish of the sea were brought into being. Birds are known for their ability to sing with a variety of beautiful and melodious sounds. Thus, our *mizmor*, with its emphasis on the role of song and music is an appropriate choice to praise the Creator of all these wonders.

Exploring the Mizmor

PART 1. CELEBRATING ROSH HASHANAH. The first part of the mizmor is an invitation for the people to come and celebrate the festival of *Rosh Hashanah* and to express their gratitude for their liberation from Mitzrayim, a liberation which was most dramatically symbolized by Yosef being raised out of the dungeon to a position of high authority and honor.

(א) לְמַנְצֵחַ עַל הַגִּתִּית לְאַסָּף: (ב) הֲרַנִּינוּ לְאֱלֹקִים עֲוִזֵנוּ הֲרִיעוּ לְאֱלֹקֵי יִעֲקֹב: (ג)
 שָׂאוּ זְמֵרָה וּתְנוּ תוֹף כַּנּוֹר נְעִים עִם נֶבֶל: (ד) תִּקְעוּ בַחֲדָשׁ שׁוֹפָר בַּכֶּסֶה לְיוֹם חַגֵּנוּ:
 (ה) כִּי חֹק לְיִשְׂרָאֵל הוּא מִשְׁפָּט לְאֱלֹקֵי יִעֲקֹב: (ו) עֵדוֹת בִּיהוֹסֵף שָׁמוּ בְצֵאתוֹ עַל
 אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם שְׁפַת לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֲשַׁמְעֵ: (ז) הִסְרֹתִי מִסָּבֵל שְׁכֵמוֹ כַּפָּיו מִדָּוִד
 תִּעְבְּרָנָה:

(1) For the musician on the "gittis" instrument, a mizmor by Asaph. (2) Cry out joyously to the G-d of our strength and hail the G-d of Yaakov. (3) Raise up a song and sound the drum, [accompanied by] the sweet [sounds of the] harp and bagpipe. (4) Blow the shofar on the New Moon, on the [day of its] veiling, for the day of our festival of Rosh Hashanah. (5) Because it is a statute for Yisrael, a judgment day for the G-d of Yaakov. (6) He designated it as a testimony for Yosef when he became charged with going out over the land of Mitzrayim. [Yosef had said] "I heard a language unknown to me." (7) [Then Hashem recalled,] "I relieved his shoulder from the burden. His hands were removed from the vat."

PART 2. DISAPPOINTMENT, REBUKE, AND HOPE. The second part of the mizmor expresses the thoughts of Hashem as He reflects upon His disappointment with the behavior of Yisrael subsequent to their liberation. Hashem expected gratitude and loyal devotion, but this was tragically mixed with stubbornness and disloyalty. Hashem is first visualized as addressing Yisrael directly in a strong rebuke for their failure to adhere to the Torah, especially the first two of the Ten Commandments.

Hashem reveals the depth of His disappointment by expressing in human terms the pain of one whose love has been rejected. But Hashem's love for His people is so strong that that He finds hope in the possibility of their change of heart. He reflects upon His eagerness to reward them with the blessings of a good life if they would only come back to Him.

In describing all these emotional thoughts, Asaph uses poetic license to rapidly switch back and forth between the words of Hashem directed to Yisrael, His words

of self-reflection, and Asaph's own observations.

Hashem rebukes Yisrael:

(ח) בַּצָּרָה קָרָאתָ וְאֶחֱלָצְךָ אֶעֱנֶךָ בְּסִתְרֵי רַעַם אֶבְחָנְךָ עַל מֵי מְרִיבָה סִלָּה: (ט) שְׁמַע עִמִּי וְאֶעֱיֵדָה בְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אִם תִּשְׁמַע לִי:

(8) You called in distress and I freed you. I answered your secret call with thunder. [But You failed Me when] I tested you at the Waters of Strife. (9) Listen, My people and I will earnestly caution you. O Yisrael, if you would but listen to Me.

Hashem recalls Sinai:

(י) לֹא יִהְיֶה בְּךָ אֵל זָר וְלֹא תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאֵל נֹכְרִי: (יא) אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ הַמַּעֲלֶיךָ מִמִּצְרָיִם מִצְרַיִם הִרְחַב פִּיךָ וְאֶמְלֵאָהוּ:

(10) "There shall be no strange god among you, nor you shall bow before an alien god. (11) I am Hashem, your G-d, who brought you up out of the land of Mitzrayim. Open wide your mouth [in prayer] and I will fill [your requests]."

Hashem reflects upon His disappointment:

(יב) וְלֹא שָׁמַע עִמִּי לְקוֹלִי וְיִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא אָבָה לִי: (יג) וְאֶשְׁלַחְהוּ בְּשָׁרֵירוֹת לִבָּם יִלְכוּ בְּמוֹעֲצוֹתֵיהֶם:

(12) But My people did not listen to My voice; Yisrael did not want Me. (13) So I let them follow the stubbornness of their hearts and follow their own counsels.

Hashem reflects upon His hope:

(יד) לוֹ עִמִּי שָׁמַע לִי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּדַרְכָּי יִהְלְכוּ: (טו) כִּמְעַט אוֹיְבֵיהֶם אֶכְנִיעַ וְעַל צָרֵיהֶם אֲשִׁיב יָדִי:

(14) If only My people would listen to Me and Yisrael would walk in my ways, (15) I would quickly subdue their foes and I would turn My hand against their tormentors.

Asaph says of Hashem and Yisrael:

(טז) מְשַׁנְּאֵי ה' יִכְחָשׁוּ לוֹ וַיְהִי עֲתָם לְעוֹלָם: (יז) וַיֹּאכִילֵהוּ מִחֶלֶב חֶטֶה וּמִצּוֹר דָּבַשׁ
אֲשֶׁר בִּיעָד:

(16) *Those who hate Hashem would disavow [their hatred, still hoping] that their time would last forever. (17) And He would feed him (Yisrael) with the finest of wheat.*

Hashem says to Yisrael:

And I would sate you with honey from a rock.

Learning the Mizmor**PART 1. CELEBRATING ROSH HASHANAH.**

(א) לְמִנְצַחַ עַל הַגִּתִּית לְאַסָּף:

This song was prepared **for the musician** — לְמִנְצַחַ — who will perform it **on the** instrument called "**gittis**" — עַל הַגִּתִּית. It is **a mizmor** composed **by Asaph** — לְאַסָּף. The *gittis* was a unique musical instrument fabricated in the city of Gass in the land of the Plishtim.

(ב) הֲרִינֵנוּ לְאֱלֹקִים עֲזֵינוּ

הֲרִיעֵנוּ לְאֱלֹקֵי יַעֲקֹב:

Cry out joyously — הֲרִינֵנוּ — with praise **to the G-d of our strength** — לְאֱלֹקִים עֲזֵינוּ for He is the source of our immortality in world history. **Hail the G-d of Yaakov** — הֲרִיעֵנוּ לְאֱלֹקֵי יַעֲקֹב — with a joyful salute on the *shofar* in celebration of the freedom from slavery that began on this day. The servitude of Mitzrayim is associated with our forefather Yaakov since the 210 years of slavery in that land are counted from the time Yaakov arrived to join Yosef.

Furthermore, we hail G-d as our King on Rosh Hashanah and we declare that He will always be our G-d despite the weaknesses symbolized by Yaakov, for a major part of Yaakov's descendants were destined to be cut off from their people.

(ג) שָׂאוּ זִמְרָה וּתְנוּ תֵף
כְּנֹר נְעִים עִם נָבֶל:

Raise up a song and sound the drum — שָׂאוּ זִמְרָה וּתְנוּ תֵף, accompanied by the **sweet** sounds of the ten-stringed **harp** — כְּנֹר נְעִים, **with** the stirring melody of the ten-tone **bagpipe** — עִם נָבֶל.

(ד) תִּקְעוּ בַחֲדָשׁ שׁוֹפָר
בַּיּוֹם הַלְלוּ חֲגִינוֹ:

Blow the shofar on the New Moon — תִּקְעוּ בַחֲדָשׁ שׁוֹפָר, that is, **on the** first day of the month, which begins with the **veiling** of the moon — בַּיּוֹם הַלְלוּ. Indeed, blow the shofar **for the day of our festival** — לְיוֹם חֲגִינוֹ of *Rosh Hashanah*, which occurs on the the first of the month of Tishrei. The concealment of the moon on *Rosh Hashanah* alludes to the concealment of G-d's judgment on this day, recalling our task to strive upwards and return to the light.

(ה) כִּי חֻק לְיִשְׂרָאֵל הוּא
מִשְׁפָּט לְאַלְקֵי יַעֲקֹב:

Because it is a statute for Yisrael — כִּי חֻק לְיִשְׂרָאֵל הוּא that the *shofar* be sounded every year on this day, announcing it as **a judgment day for the G-d of Yaakov** — מִשְׁפָּט לְאַלְקֵי יַעֲקֹב and calling upon the people to submit humbly to judgment.

(ו) יַעֲדוּת בִּיהוֹסֵף שְׁמוֹ
בְּצִאתוֹ עַל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

He designated that day **as a testimony** to future generations **for** the liberation of **Yosef** from prison — יַעֲדוּת בִּיהוֹסֵף שְׁמוֹ, which took place on *Rosh Hashanah*. That was the day **when he became** the viceroy of Pharaoh, **charged with** the mission of **going out over the land of Mitzrayim** — בְּצִאתוֹ עַל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם to direct the economy of the country. Hashem marked this special designation by adding an extra letter to Yosef's name so that the divine Name would be incorporated within it (*yod heh*). Through this action Yosef came to symbolize the entire nation of Yisrael which Hashem promised to free from slavery and exile in the future.

שִׁפְתַי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֲשַׁמְעַ:

Upon being promoted to his new position Yosef faced a language problem. As a royal minister he was required to have mastered many languages. This challenge recalled the one that the people of Yisrael encountered upon first entering Mitzrayim and hearing the strange speech of the local populace. But when Yosef said, "**I heard a language unknown to me**" — שִׁפְתַי לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֲשַׁמְעַ, Hashem sent the angel Rafael to secretly teach him what he needed to know.

(ז) הִסִּירוֹתַי מִסָּבֶל שְׁכָמוֹ

כַּפְּיֹ מִדְּוִד תִּעְבְּרָנָה:

Recalling the liberation of Yosef, Hashem said, "**I relieved his shoulder from the burden** — הִסִּירוֹתַי מִסָּבֶל שְׁכָמוֹ of the loads he was forced carry in prison. **His hands were removed from the vat** — כַּפְּיֹ מִדְּוִד תִּעְבְּרָנָה in which he mixed mortar for bricks."

PART 2. DISAPPOINTMENT, REBUKE, AND HOPE.

(ח) בִּצְרָה קָרָאתָ וְאַחֲלִצְךָ

אֶעֱנֶךָ בְּסִתֵּר רָעַם

Hashem rebukes Yisrael: When you were slaves in Mitzrayim **You called** to Me **in distress** — בִּצְרָה קָרָאתָ, **and I freed you** — וְאַחֲלִצְךָ even though you only came to Me because of your distress. Though you called **secretly** in your fear **I answered you** — אֶעֱנֶךָ בְּסִתֵּר and My answer was with open miracles for the world to see, which was then continued with the awesome spectacle of **thunder** — רָעַם and lightning at Sinai.

אֶבְחַנְךָ עַל מִי מְרִיבָה סָלָה:

I did this for you even though you were to be proven unworthy, for when **I tested you at the Waters of Strife**, you failed the test, **Selah** — אֶבְחַנְךָ עַל מִי מְרִיבָה סָלָה. Nevertheless, your lack of faith did not prevent Me from granting You the Torah at Sinai.

(ט) שְׁמַע עִמִּי וְאַעֲיֵדָה בְּךָ

יִשְׂרָאֵל אִם תִּשְׁמַע לִי:

After having done so much for you, it is reasonable for me to ask that you **listen**,

My people — שְׁמַע עָמִי, and I will now earnestly caution you — וְאָעִידָה בָּךְ; O Yisrael, if you would but listen to Me — וְיִשְׂרָאֵל אִם תִּשְׁמַע לִי, I will treat with love and will shower kindness upon you. You will be the vehicle to carry My Name to the world.

(י) לֹא יִהְיֶה בְּךָ אֵל זָר
וְלֹא תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאֵל נֹכַר:

Hashem recalls Sinai: "There shall be no strange god among you — לֹא יִהְיֶה בְּךָ אֵל זָר. You are to even avoid idolatrous thoughts for a degenerate attitude leads to a degenerate lifestyle. **Nor you shall bow before an alien god** of other nations — **וְלֹא תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאֵל נֹכַר."**

(יא) אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ
הַמַּעֲלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם

"Remember the Ten Commandments, which begin with the basic statement of belief that there is only One G-d. There is no other. **I am Hashem, your G-d, who brought you up out of the land of Mitzrayim — אֲנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ הַמַּעֲלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם** — **מִצְרַיִם**, especially out of the degenerate culture of that land. It is up to you to preserve that spiritual elevation."

הִרְחַב פִּיךָ וְאִמְלֵאֲהוּ:

"It would be foolish to look to their false gods for I alone have the ability to provide for all your needs. **Open wide your mouth** in prayer — **הִרְחַב פִּיךָ and I will fill your requests — וְאִמְלֵאֲהוּ."**

(יב) וְלֹא שָׁמַע עָמִי לְקוֹלִי
וְיִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא אָבָה לִי:

Hashem reflects upon His disappointment: But My people, who should have known better, did not listen to My voice — וְלֹא שָׁמַע עָמִי לְקוֹלִי; Yisrael did not want to listen to Me — וְיִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא אָבָה לִי. Even when they observed My commandments they acted to satisfy their own purposes and not for My sake.

(יג) וְאַשְׁלַחֵהוּ בְּשָׁרִירוֹת לִבָּם
יִלְכוּ בְּמוֹעֲצוֹתֵיהֶם:

So I let them follow the stubbornness of their hearts — וְאַשְׁלַחֵהוּ בְּשָׁרִירוֹת לִבָּם. I let them **follow their own counsels — יִלְכוּ בְּמוֹעֲצוֹתֵיהֶם** and take the consequences of their misguided decisions. I let them for once see what they could achieve if they refuse to obey My Torah and attempt to determine their own destinies."

(יד) לוֹ עַמִּי שָׁמַע לִי
יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּדַרְכֵי יְהוָה:

Hashem reflects upon His hope: If only My people would listen to Me — לוֹ עַמִּי שָׁמַע לִי out of sincere gratitude and love for Me. If only **Yisrael would walk in My ways — יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּדַרְכֵי יְהוָה** out of a love for holiness instead of following their own counsels.

(טו) כִּמְעַט אוֹיְבֵיהֶם אֶכְנִיעַ
וְעַל צָרֵיהֶם אָשִׁיב יָדִי:

Then **I would quickly subdue their foes — כִּמְעַט אוֹיְבֵיהֶם אֶכְנִיעַ**, and **I would turn My chastising hand** away from them, but instead **against their tormentors — וְעַל צָרֵיהֶם אָשִׁיב יָדִי**.

(טז) מִשְׁנָאֵי ה' יִכְחָשׁוּ לוֹ
וְיִהְיֶה עֲתָם לְעוֹלָם:

Asaph says of Hashem and Yisrael: Those who have been persecuting Yisrael because they **hate Hashem** and His moral laws — **מִשְׁנָאֵי ה' would** cower in fear and **disavow** their hatred **to Him — יִכְחָשׁוּ לוֹ**, hoping that they would not perish and **that their time on earth would last forever — וְיִהְיֶה עֲתָם לְעוֹלָם**.

(יז) וַיֹּאכִילֵהוּ מִחֶלֶב חֹטָה

He would feed him (Yisrael) as He has in the past with the finest of wheat — וַיֹּאכִילֵהוּ מִחֶלֶב חֹטָה.

וּמְצוֹר דְּבִשׁ אֲשֶׁבִיעֶךָ:

Hashem says to Yisrael: And I would sate you with honey from a rock — וּמְצוֹר

דְּבִשׁ אֲשֶׁבִיעֶךָ. (The sweetness of date honey represents all the delights of the earth that are promised to Yisrael if only they would listen to Hashem and observe His Torah.)

Sources

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

א - רש"י, מלבי"ם	נר לרגלי
ב - רד"ק, מצודות, המאירי	י - רד"ק, דעת סופרים
ג - מצודות	יא - רש"י, המאירי, דעת סופרים
ד - רש"י, רד"ק	יב - מצודות, רשר"ה, נר לרגלי
ה - רש"י, מצודות, בן־רמון	יג - אבן עזרא, רד"ק, רשר"ה
ו - רש"י, אבן עזרא, מצודות, ספורנו, אבן יחייא, נר לרגלי	יד - אבן עזרא, נר לרגלי
ז - רש"י	טו - רש"י, נר לרגלי
ח - רש"י, רד"ק, אבן יחייא, נר לרגלי	המאירי, המאירי, רשר"ה, המאירי,
ט - רש"י, אבן עזרא, מצודות, מלבי"ם, רשר"ה,	טז - אבן עזרא, נר לרגל
	יז - רש"י, רד"ק, ספורנו

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