

## Mizmor 090

# The River of Time

### Key Concepts

This is the first of a series of 11 *mizmorim* that were composed by Moshe Rabbeinu in his capacity as a prophet of Yisrael. The *mizmorim* were handed down from generation to generation and ultimately incorporated by David into his Book of Tehillim.

*Mizmor 090* was composed as a *tefillah* to Hashem to evoke His mercy and and ask Him to grant redemption to the Jewish nation during a future time of anguish, such as the present.

The central theme of the mizmor is the passage of time, which is visualized as a flowing river. A person standing on the shore sees the water continually flowing past like the days continually flowing through our lives. The days that have passed are no more. It is as if they have vanished, never to return. However, we are responsible for the harm that we have done in those vanished days. The memory of the past hangs over us, affecting our present and our future. This is revealed in Hashem's attitude of anger towards us, which is the cause of our present anguish. The memory of the past also determines our duty to repent our sins.

We are given a limited number of years to live out our lives and it is up to us to use them in a way that was intended by our Creator. If we fail in our mission, there remain fewer and fewer days to correct our mistakes.

In the mizmor the singer speaks for the Jewish people. We reflect upon our situation and seek to use that insight to correct our failings, thereby earning a positive change in Hashem's attitude towards us, a change from anger to sweetness.

### Exploring the Mizmor

**PART 1. G-D AND TIME.** In the opening verses of the mizmor, Moshe introduces himself as a mortal man (אִישׁ), destined to exist on this earth for a only brief segment of eternity. Even so, he has been granted the privilege of having direct contact with G-d (הָאֱלֹהִים) Who encompasses all of eternity and is beyond any earthly dimension. Since G-d's existence encompasses the entire dimension of time, Moshe speaks of Him as the unchanging Home of time (מְעוֹן).

(א) תִּפְלָה לְמֹשֶׁה אִישׁ הָאֱלֹקִים אֲדֹנָי מְעוֹן אֶתָּה הָיִיתָ לָנוּ בְּדֹר וָדֹר: (ב) בְּטָרִם הַרִים יִלְדוּ וְתַחֲלוּל אֶרֶץ וְתִבֵּל וּמַעוֹלָם עַד עוֹלָם אֶתָּה אֵל:

*(1) A tefillah by Moshe, a man of G-d. Hashem, You have been our Home of flowing time in every generation. (2) Before the mountains were brought forth and before You fashioned the earth and the inhabited world, and from all of the past and to all of the future, You are G-d.*

**PART 2. MAN AND THE RIVER OF TIME.** Although Moshe has been granted awareness of the spiritual existence that is beyond earthly dimensions, he firmly reminds himself not to get carried away with pride. He does not claim a more noble status than the least worthy members of mankind (אָנוּשׁ) and he recognizes that his life on this earth will occupy only a few moments in the endless stream of time.

(ג) תָּשֵׁב אָנוּשׁ עַד דָּכָא וְתֹאמַר שׁוּבוּ בְּנֵי אָדָם: (ד) כִּי אֶלֶף שָׁנִים בְּעֵינַיִךְ כְּיוֹם אֶתְמוּל כִּי יַעֲבֹר וְאַשְׁמוּרָה בְּלִילָה: (ה) זָרְמַתְּם שָׁנָה יִהְיוּ בַּבֶּקֶר כְּפָחַצִּיר יַחְלֹף: (ו) בַּבֶּקֶר יִצִּיץ וְחָלֵף לְעָרֵב יְמוּלֵל וַיֵּבֵשׁ:

*(3) You return man to the dust and You say, "Return, O sons of man." (4) For in Your eyes a thousand years is like a day gone by and like a watch in the night. (5) You cause [the years] to flow past like sleep. By morning they are [gone] like grass that has wilted. (6) [Man's energy] blossoms in the morning, but wilts and by the evening it withers away and is dried up.*

**PART 3. MAN'S FAILING.** Moshe speaks for all of mankind and acknowledges our failure to make proper use of the time we have been given. We have earned Hashem's anger and as a result our brief time on earth has been further shortened.

(ז) כִּי כָלֵינוּ בְּאַפָּךָ וּבַחֲמַתְךָ נִבְהַלְנוּ: (ח) שַׁתָּה עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ לְנִגְדֶךָ עַל־מְנוּ לְמֵאוֹר פְּנִיֶךָ: (ט) כִּי כָל יָמֵינוּ פָּנוּ בְּעִבְרַתְךָ כָּלֵינוּ שָׁנֵינוּ כְּמוֹ הַגֶּה: (י) יָמֵי שָׁנוֹתֵינוּ בָּהֶם שְׁבָעִים שָׁנָה וְאִם בְּגִבּוֹרֹת שְׁמוֹנִים שָׁנָה וְרַהֲבָם עָמַל וְאָוֶן כִּי גַז חִישׁ וַיִּנְעָפָה:

*(7) [Our lives have been cut short] for we are consumed by Your anger and we are terror-struck by Your fury. [8] You have set our sins before You, our hidden [and unfulfilled] potential before the light of Your face. (9) For all our days pass by in Your fury. [Because of our sins] we waste our years like mumbled words. (10) The days of our life are [but] seventy years, or if with strength, eighty years. Their pride are but trouble and sorrow for it is quickly cut down and we fly [to the grave].*

**PART 4. LEARNING TO UNDERSTAND TIME.** To overcome our failings, we need to acknowledge their gravity in the eyes of Hashem. We need to focus more intensely on making effective use of the time we have been given. The shorter that time is, the more precious it is and the greater is the urgency not to waste it.

(יא) מִי יוֹדֵעַ עוֹ אַפְּךָ וּכְיִרְאַתְךָ עֲבָרְתְּךָ: (יב) לְמִנּוֹת יָמֵינוּ כִּן הוֹדַע וְנָבֵא לְבַב חֲכָמָה:

*(11) Who can know the intensity of Your anger? Your fury is [great] like Your awesomeness (12) Teach us to count our days. Then we will acquire a heart of wisdom.*

**PART 5. FROM FURY TO SWEETNESS.** Moshe appeals to Hashem to relent from His anger and give His people an opportunity to properly fulfill their mission once more. We look forward to experiencing Hashem's attitude of sweetness and approval of what we do in our desire to please Him.

(יג) שׁוּבָה ה' עַד מָתַי וְהִנָּחֵם עַל עֲבֹדְיָךְ: (יד) שְׁבַעְנוּ בְּבִקְרָתְךָ חֲסִדֶּךָ וְיִרְנְנָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה בְּכָל יָמֵינוּ: (טו) שְׂמַחְנוּ כִּימוֹת עֲנִיתָנוּ שָׁנוֹת רָאִינוּ רָעָה: (טז) יִרְאָה אֶל עֲבֹדְיָךְ פְּעֻלָּתְךָ וְהִדְרֶךָ עַל בְּנֵיהֶם: (יז) וַיְהִי נָעִם אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ כּוֹנֵנָה עֲלֵינוּ וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ כּוֹנֵנָה:

*(13) Turn back, Hashem. How much longer? Change Your attitude toward Your servants. (14) Gratify us in the morning with Your kindness. Then we will sing and rejoice all our days. (15) Give us joy as the days when You afflicted us, the years [when] we endured misfortune. (16) May Your [continuing] work [of Creation] be apparent to Your servants, and Your glory upon their children. (17) May the sweetness of Hashem, our God, be upon us. May the work of our hands be firmly achieved for us. The work of our hands, let it be firm.*

## Learning the Mizmor

### PART 1. G-D AND TIME.

#### (א) תַּפִּלָּה לְמֹשֶׁה אִישׁ הָאֱלֹקִים

This mizmor is a **tefillah** composed by **Moshe** Rabbeinu — **תַּפִּלָּה לְמֹשֶׁה, a man of G-d** — **אִישׁ הָאֱלֹקִים**, who was granted the power of *nevuah* (prophecy), enabling him to foresee the future tragedies that would befall *Klal Yisrael*. The mizmor had

been passed down through the generations and when David discovered it he incorporated it into his Book of Tehillim. It is the first of a series of 11 such *mizmorim*.

אֲדֹנָי מֵעוֹן אֶתָּהּ הָיִיתָ לָּנוּ בְּדֹר וְדֹר:

**Hashem, You have been our lifegiving home of flowing time — אֲדֹנָי מֵעוֹן אֶתָּהּ in every generation — בְּדֹר וְדֹר** since before time existed.

(ב) בְּטָרָם הָרִים יִלְדוּ וַתְּחוּלֵל אֶרֶץ וַתִּבֵּל  
וַיִּמְעוֹלָם עַד עוֹלָם אֶתָּהּ אֵל:

**Before the primeval mountains were brought forth — בְּטָרָם הָרִים יִלְדוּ, and before You fashioned the earth and the inhabited world — וַתְּחוּלֵל אֶרֶץ וַתִּבֵּל, and from all of the past and to all of the future, — וַיִּמְעוֹלָם עַד עוֹלָם, You are forever G-d — אֶתָּהּ אֵל**, perfect in Your benevolence and perfect in Your omnipotence. Since You have always existed, there is nothing that can be added to You. You have always been complete and will always be complete.

## PART 2. MAN AND THE RIVER OF TIME.

(ג) תָּשֵׁב אָנוּשׁ עַד דָּפָא  
וַתֹּאמֶר שׁוּבוּ בְּנֵי אָדָם:

Man is a transitory being. In his old age You take away his strength and humble him. Then **You return man to the dust — תָּשֵׁב אָנוּשׁ עַד דָּפָא** from which he was fashioned. **And You say, "Return to your previous state, O sons of man." — וַתֹּאמֶר שׁוּבוּ בְּנֵי אָדָם** for your brief time on earth is up."

(ד) כִּי אֶלְף שָׁנִים בְּעֵינֶיךָ כְּיוֹם אֶתְמוּל כִּי יַעֲבֹר  
וַאֲשֶׁמוּרָה בְּלֵילָה:

**For the duration of a person's lifetime in Your eyes, even if were to be a thousand years — כִּי אֶלְף שָׁנִים בְּעֵינֶיךָ, like that of Adam, it is like a day gone by — וַאֲשֶׁמוּרָה בְּלֵילָה — כְּיוֹם אֶתְמוּל כִּי יַעֲבֹר**, and like a watch in the night — וַאֲשֶׁמוּרָה בְּלֵילָה, whose swift passage is not even marked by a visible event in the night skies.

In his youth a man may think he will have a long life, but his vision encompasses only the brief span through which he lives. He cannot grasp the significance of time on the larger scale of history. Furthermore once the time has passed, what

difference does it make whether it seemed long or short? It's over.

(ה) זָרַמְתָּם שָׁנָה יְהִיו  
בְּבֹקֶר כְּחֻצִיר יַחֲלֶף:

**You cause** the years of a man's life **to flow past** — זָרַמְתָּם, like a swift-moving river so that **they become** like a dream in the midst of **sleep** — יְהִיו שָׁנָה יְהִיו that is quickly forgotten. **By morning** they are gone **like grass that has wilted** — בְּבֹקֶר — כְּחֻצִיר יַחֲלֶף in the light of day.

(ו) בְּבֹקֶר יִצִּיץ וְחָלַף  
לְעֶרֶב יְמוּלֵל וַיֵּבֵשׁ:

And even if a man's energy **blossoms in the morning** of his life **it wilts** — בְּבֹקֶר יִצִּיץ וְחָלַף as the years go by, **and by the evening** of life **it withers away and is dried up** — לְעֶרֶב יְמוּלֵל וַיֵּבֵשׁ. The enthusiasm of youth is replaced with the despondency and resignation of old age. Instead of doing *teshuvah* in view of the time when he will have to give an accounting of his actions, he lets wither the very good deeds he had set out with in his idealistic youth.

### PART 3. MAN'S FAILING.

(ז) כִּי כָלִינוּ בְּאַפְּךָ  
וּבְחַמְתֶּךָ נִבְהַלְנוּ:

As a result, instead of "death" being merely a long sleep, our lives have been cut short **for we are consumed by Your anger** — כִּי כָלִינוּ בְּאַפְּךָ, **and we are terror-struck by Your fury** — וּבְחַמְתֶּךָ נִבְהַלְנוּ. Thus, our sins have prevented us from rising to our full potential.

(ח) שָׂתָה עֲוֹנֹתֵינוּ לְנֶגְדְּךָ  
עַלֵּמְנוּ לְמָאוֹר פְּנֶיךָ:

**You have set our sins before You** — שָׂתָה עֲוֹנֹתֵינוּ לְנֶגְדְּךָ and they have angered You. You have set **our hidden** and unfulfilled **potential before the light of Your face** — עַלֵּמְנוּ לְמָאוֹר פְּנֶיךָ. You have been angered by the sins that we committed out of ignorance because of the implied insult to Your Torah, which came to us from the light of Your face.

(ט) כִּי כָל יָמֵינוּ פָּנוּ בְּעִבְרָתְךָ  
כְּלֵינוּ שְׁנֵינוּ כְּמוֹ הֶגְהָ:

**For** in this bitter Exile **all our days pass by in Your fury** — כִּי כָל יָמֵינוּ פָּנוּ —  
בְּעִבְרָתְךָ. Through our sins **we waste our years like** quickly **spoken words** —  
כְּלֵינוּ שְׁנֵינוּ כְּמוֹ הֶגְהָ.

(י) יָמֵי שְׁנוֹתֵינוּ בָּהֶם שְׁבַעִים שָׁנָה  
וְאִם בְּגִבּוֹרֵת שְׁמוֹנִים שָׁנָה

Because of our sins that You have set before You, **the days of our life are** but  
**seventy years** — יָמֵי שְׁנוֹתֵינוּ בָּהֶם שְׁבַעִים שָׁנָה, **or if they are empowered with**  
natural **strength, eighty years** — וְאִם בְּגִבּוֹרֵת שְׁמוֹנִים שָׁנָה. Very few can expect  
to live longer than that.

וְרִהַבִּם עָמַל וְאָוֶן  
כִּי גַז חִישׁ וְנִעְפָּה:

**Their** days of **pride** during these years **are but trouble and sorrow** — וְרִהַבִּם  
וְאָוֶן **for** pride **is quickly cut down and we fly** to the grave as swiftly as a  
bird — כִּי גַז חִישׁ וְנִעְפָּה.

#### PART 4. LEARNING TO UNDERSTAND TIME.

(יא) מִי יוֹדֵעַ עַל אַפֶּךָ  
וּכְרִאתְךָ עֲבָרְתְךָ:

In such a short lifespan **who can** acquire the understanding to **know the**  
**intensity of Your anger** — מִי יוֹדֵעַ עַל אַפֶּךָ and guard himself from exposing  
himself to it? **Your fury is** great **like Your awesomeness** — וּכְרִאתְךָ עֲבָרְתְךָ,  
which we have sadly not learned to appreciate.

(יב) לְמִנּוֹת יָמֵינוּ כִּן הוֹדַע  
וְנִבֵּא לִבָּב חֲכָמָה:

**Teach us to count our days** — לְמִנּוֹת יָמֵינוּ כִּן הוֹדַע, and be more conscious of  
the limited time available to us. **Then we will** be motivated to strive harder to

acquire a heart of wisdom — וְנָבֵא לִבְּךָ חֵכְמָה.

PART 5. FROM FURY TO SWEETNESS.

(יג) שׁוּבָה ה' עַד מָתַי  
וְהִנָּחֵם עַל עֲבֹדֶיךָ:

Turn back to us, Hashem — שׁוּבָה ה'. How much longer will You forsake us —  
עַד מָתַי ? Change Your attitude toward Your servants — וְהִנָּחֵם עַל עֲבֹדֶיךָ from  
anger to pity.

(יד) שְׁבַעֲנוּ בַבֶּקֶר חֲסִדֶיךָ  
וְנִרְנְנָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה בְּכָל יְמֵינוּ:

Gratify us in the morning of every new day with Your kindness — שְׁבַעֲנוּ בַבֶּקֶר  
חֲסִדֶיךָ, so that we may confidently face what the day will bring. Then we will  
surely sing and rejoice all our days — וְנִרְנְנָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה בְּכָל יְמֵינוּ.

(טו) שְׂמַחֲנוּ כִּימוֹת עֲנִיּוֹתֵנוּ  
שָׁנוֹת רָאִינוּ רָעָה:

Give us intense joy just as there were days when You afflicted us intensely —  
שְׂמַחֲנוּ כִּימוֹת עֲנִיּוֹתֵנוּ, in all the years when we endured misfortune — שָׁנוֹת רָאִינוּ  
רָעָה.

(טז) יִרְאֶה אֶל עֲבֹדֶיךָ פְּעֻלָּתְךָ  
וְהִזְרֵךְ עַל בְּנֵיהֶם:

May Your continuing action to sustain Creation be apparent to Your servants —  
יִרְאֶה אֶל עֲבֹדֶיךָ, and may it not be limited to one generation, but let Your glory be  
visible upon their children — פְּעֻלָּתְךָ וְהִזְרֵךְ עַל בְּנֵיהֶם.

(יז) וַיְהִי נַעַם אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹקֵינוּ עָלֵינוּ

As for us, may our actions please You so that the sweetness of the Presence of  
Hashem, our G-d, will be upon us — וַיְהִי נַעַם אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹקֵינוּ עָלֵינוּ for having fulfilled  
Your wishes.

וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ כּוֹנֵנָה עָלֵינוּ  
וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ כּוֹנֵנָהוּ:

**May the work of our hands** in serving You **be firmly achieved for us** — **וּמַעֲשֵׂה** **יָדֵינוּ כּוֹנֵנָה עָלֵינוּ** so that it is well grounded on Your teachings and on our abilities. **May the work of our hands in everything else we do be firmly grounded** — **וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵינוּ כּוֹנֵנָהוּ** so that what we produce will have lasting value and will be effective for what it is intended.

## Sources

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

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

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