

Mizmor 119

019 - Strangeness

Key Concepts (Gimel 3)

From the moment a person is born he feels like a stranger (גֵר) in the world. It is as though he is a newcomer to a strange land. As a stranger has to learn how to speak properly and function effectively.

David uses this analogy to explore his feelings about the vast and complex world of Torah and *mitzvos*. There is so much to know in terms of how the *mitzvos* are to be performed and what they mean. How does he allocate his time among his many duties? What is personal mission in this world and how does he relate it to the changing circumstances of his life? Which aspects of daily life should he emphasize and which should he de-emphasize? How does he reconcile the spiritual nature of his soul with the material nature of his body?

David realizes that he will be unable to find his way through this strange world without the help of Hashem. He will have to learn the Torah traditions that have been handed down through the generations and he will have to learn from the example of teachers who are older and wiser. He will have to use his own intelligence to adapt everything he has learned to his unique situation, for every individual is unique. But ultimately, he will need to receive the continued spiritual guidance of his Creator.

Exploring the Mizmor

(יט) גֵר אֲנִי בְּאֶרֶץ אֵל תִּסְתֵּר מִמֶּנִּי מִצְוֹתֶיךָ:

I am a stranger in the world, don't hide Your mitzvos from me.

In this pasuk David acknowledges how much he has to learn. He humbly admits that he is like a stranger who has just arrived in the land. But he is ready and eager to learn and so he places himself at the mercy of Hashem, the ultimate Teacher.

Learning the Mizmor

(יט) גַּר אֲנֹכִי בְּאֶרֶץ
אֵל תִּסְתֵּר מִמֶּנִּי מִצְוֹתֶיךָ:

I am a stranger in the world – גַּר אֲנֹכִי בְּאֶרֶץ and although I have so much to learn, I will be here in this life for only a short while. **Don't hide Your *mitzvos* from me** – אֵל תִּסְתֵּר מִמֶּנִּי מִצְוֹתֶיךָ.

Additional Insights

A series of interpretations illuminating this pasuk are presented here. Each of the interpretations lend further insight into what David was thinking. The numbers identifying the interpretations refer to the listing of sources below.

- (1) David views himself as a traveller who is just passing through. He has stopped off in this world and he will be here for only a short time. He doesn't know how long that will be, so the urgency of learning what he has to know and fulfilling his mission is all the greater.
- (2) David feels like a stranger who easily gets lost in unfamiliar streets and roads and so he asks Hashem to guide him.
- (3) David's soul feels out of its element in this material world. It longs to be reconnected to the spiritual world and it hopes that Hashem will teach it the secrets of the Torah and mitzvos so that it will be able to achieve its goal.
- (4) Because of its spiritual nature, David's soul is having difficulty in dealing with the needs of the material world and so it needs extra help from Hashem.
- (5) David is desperately seeking fulfillment but he knows he can only work on his *middos* (character development) in this world. In the next world it will be too late. So he asks Hashem's help in avoiding the circumstances that interfere with his moral growth.
- (6) David does not want to rely on the fact that he is the product of a noble heritage. He wants to approach the study of Torah and mitzvos like a convert, who takes nothing for granted and doesn't want to miss any detail of what he needs to know.
- (7) At the end of the pasuk when David is concerned about the *mitzvos* that

are hidden from him, he is especially concerned about the unspecific *mitzvos*, such as his responsibilities as king to the people, and as husband and father in the family.

Sources

The primary sources used for the additional insights illuminating this pasuk are listed below.

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| (5) - בן רמוך | (1) - רש"י, רד"ק, ספורנו |
| (6) - נר לרגלי | (2) - אבן עזרא |
| (7) - דעת סופרים | (3) - מצודות |
| | (4) - מלבים |