

Mizmor Segment 119-017

Gimel Pesukim: Overcoming Obstacles

(017 - 024)

Key Concepts of the Gimel Pesukim

(יז) גִּמְלָל עַל עַבְדְּךָ אֲחִיָּה וְאַשְׁמְרָה דְּבַרְךָ:

(17) Act with kindness toward Your servant that I may live and keep Your word.

Gimel 1: Kindness - In the Aleph segment of the Mizmor David introduced the idea that the Torah and mitzvos share a unity of common purpose, which is serving our Creator. He then moved on to the Beis segment in which he approached the vast complexity of the Torah and its wisdom from the perspective of the eager student. He introduced the importance of a systematic program of learning all aspects of the Torah and mitzvos.

David now begins the Gimel segment in which he humbly asks Hashem to grant him an act of Divine kindness. He is hoping to receive from Hashem the ability to withstand all the obstacles and distractions that prevent him from fulfilling his personal mission.

(יח) גַּל עֵינַי וְאַבִּיטָה נִפְלְאוֹת מִתּוֹרַתְךָ:

(18) Unveil my eyes that I may perceive wonders from Your Torah.

Gimel 2: Perception - In the Gimel segment David is asking Hashem's help in overcoming the obstacles that prevent him from fulfilling his personal mission in this world. These obstacles are inherent in man's earthly existence. But man has been given the opportunity to overcome them with Hashem's help.

One of the obstacles facing every person is his limited intellectual grasp. The profound depth and complexity of the world that Hashem has created are infinite. The qualities of physical existence are matched by the wonders of the Torah which served as the blueprint for Creation. Man perceives the reality of his existence through a fog which surrounds him like a mysterious veil. As an act of Hashem's kindness, He lifts the veil at times to expand the understanding and vision of each

person.

(יט) גַּר אֲנִי בְּאֶרֶץ אֲל תְּסַתֵּר מִמֶּנִּי מִצְוֹתֶיךָ:

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

Gimel 3: Strangeness - From the moment a person is born he feels like a stranger (גַּר) 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.

(כ) גִּרְסָה נִפְשִׁי לְתַאֲבָה אֶל מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ בְּכָל עֵת:

(20) *My soul is crushed with yearning for Your Mishpatim at all times.*

Gimel 4: Yearning - Ordinary daily living is filled with activities and concerns that distract a person's attention from the Torah he wants to learn and the mitzvos he wants to perform. So how can a person overcome the effect of all these distractions and seemingly necessary activities?

David found that a person can stay focused on something if it is important enough to him. He developed such a great attachment to the Mishpatim that when external influences distracted him, he yearned with all his heart to get back to the Torah thoughts he was thinking about. His intense yearning helped David overcome the the worries and concerns that were affecting him. They even gave him the strength to muster his energies and increase the level of his actual commitment to meaningful Torah study.

He now shares this simple secret with us here in the fourth pasuk of the Gimel series. Of course, to implement it is easier said than done. It requires the

dedication and effort necessary to prepare the mind through study, seeking to understand and appreciate what Hashem is saying to us in the words of the Torah.

(כא) גְעַרְתָּ יְדֵים אַרְוֵרִים הַשְּׂגִים מִמְצוֹתֶיךָ:

(21) You have rejected the accursed deliberate sinners who deviate from [the intent of] Your mitzvos.

Gimel 5: Hypocrisy - Unfortunately there are people who choose to deliberately violate some aspects of Hashem's mitzvos for their own convenience and comfort. As bad as that is, they aggravate the effect of their behavior by making a pretense of being fully observant. They do this by publicly distorting the meaning of the mitzvos so that they can claim to be in full compliance.

The hypocrisy of such people has a tragic effect on weak-minded individuals who are ready to accept a spurious interpretation of the halachah. For this reason, David condemns the hypocrites as being accursed (אַרְוֵרִים). The effect of their hypocrisy can be far-reaching and David calls attention to it so that others will be forewarned and will guard themselves against the danger of being corrupted

(כב) גַּל מֵעַלִי חֲרָפָה וְבוֹז כִּי עִדְתִּיךָ נִצַּרְתִּי:

(22) Remove scorn and contempt from me, for I have kept Your testimonies.

Gimel 6: Honor - We owe a debt of gratitude to Hashem for having given us the blessing of life and a Torah of truth to make our lives meaningful. In return we have an obligation to revere Him and honor His Name. This means we have to live honorable lives so that people who see us as His servants will want to emulate our devotion to Him.

This ideal situation is frustrated whenever ill will and hatred cause evil people to persecute us and dishonor us. As a result, instead of being a model of the benefits that come about from serving Hashem, we run the risk of becoming a model of rejection, something to be avoided. Then, whether or not we are at fault, we are failing to fulfill our mission of bringing honor to our Creator.

Furthermore, our ability to dedicate our minds to the Torah and mitzvos is hampered when we are distracted by the behavior of our enemies. Then we become burdened by the inclination to visualize ourselves as our enemies see us.

David was inspired by this challenge to incorporate into this mizmor a prayer to Hashem to remove the scorn and contempt to which we have been subjected at times. The tefillah puts his request in the best possible light, pointing out that sometimes our very act of openly doing the will of Hashem arouses ill will and jealousy on the part of our misguided enemies. Accordingly, David suggests that

rather than being subjected to insult and calumny we want to be worthy of being blessed and thanked.

(כג) גַּם יָשְׁבוּ שָׂרִים בֵּי נְדָבְרוּ עֲבָדֶיךָ יְשִׁיחַ בְּחֻקֶיךָ:

Though aristocrats sit together and speak against me, Your servant meditates upon Your decrees.

Gimel 7: Detachment - As the king of a great nation David lived a complicated life with many worries and distractions. Despite everything he learned to free his mind from his concerns so that he could immerse himself in learning the Torah.

Among the distractions that he faced were criticisms and attacks by important people of his day, including the aristocracy of other nations and even members of his own extended family. Some of these critics prided themselves on their nobility and occupied themselves with pastimes and pleasures. They lived what they thought of as the good life and mocked David for his commitment to a demanding way of life. They frequently met together to plot against David's rule, threatening the stability of his kingdom.

In order to make himself indifferent to the disturbing accusations and arguments of the aristocrats David found it necessary to withdraw from time to time into a state of detachment in which he could more easily disregard anything that did not contribute to strengthening his bond with Hashem. In this state he was able to immerse himself in the wisdom of the Torah and mitzvos.

(כד) גַּם עֲדֹתֶיךָ שְׁעֵשְׂעֵי אֲנָשֵׁי עֲצָתִי:

(24) Indeed, Your Testimonies are my vocation, they are my counselors.

Gimel 8: Vocation - It is common for people to define themselves in terms of their profession or business. They see this as their primary focus because it is their vocation or calling. In moments of relaxation their mind turns to the work challenges they are currently facing.

In contrast, David understood his true vocation to be his role in life as a servant of Hashem. That means he saw his life from the perspective of his interaction with his Creator through the Torah and mitzvos. He viewed everything that interfered with his mission as a temporary distraction.

David now completes the Gimel series of the mizmor with a poetic statement of his true vocation. He refers to the Testimonies as symbolic of the mitzvos whose meaning is evident. He thinks of the Testimonies as personal counselors sent by Hashem to guide him through life.

Learning the Mizmor

GIMEL 1: KINDNESS

(יז) גִּמְלַל עַל עֲבֹדְךָ
אֶחֱיָה וְאַשְׁמְרָה דְבָרְךָ:

Act with kindness toward Your servant — גִּמְלַל עַל עֲבֹדְךָ for that is how I see myself. Grant me health and strength so **that I may live and keep Your word** — אֶחֱיָה וְאַשְׁמְרָה דְבָרְךָ without being unnecessarily distracted by the needs of daily life.

Here in the Gimel segment of the Mizmor David sees himself as Hashem's devoted servant. In this way he demonstrates that his motivation is pure and he feels justified in humbly asking Hashem to act with kindness towards him.

David hopes that through the kindness of Hashem he will be granted life and strength to enable him to do the will of his Creator. Here David emphasizes that he is not motivated by selfish considerations but by the sincere desire to learn Torah and observe the mitzvos.

Additional Insights:

(1) The word גִּמְלַל generally refers to an action that is driven by a strong feeling, such as love or hate. In this case, David hopes that his devotion will invoke Hashem's love for him and so he will be deserving of Hashem's kindness. (מלבים)

(2) In the previous segment (119:16) David had expressed his determination not to forget the word of Hashem. This strong declaration forms the backdrop to his present plea for life. (אבן עזרא)

(3) David emphasizes that he is not asking for life so that he can enjoy worldly pleasures but so that he will be able to keep the word of Hashem. (רד"ק)

(4) David is asking Hashem to help him overcome the distractions that interfere with his devotion to the Torah, such as the effort needed to obtain the necessities of life and the burdens of ill health. He is also concerned with the demands of running the kingdom and fending off enemies. (אבן יחי"א, ספורנו)

(5) David has been acquiring Torah knowledge and he now asks for an opportunity to observe the mitzvos and the lessons that the Torah has taught him. (רשר"ה)

GIMEL 2: PERCEPTION

(יח) גַּל עֵינַי

וְאַבִּיטָה נִפְלְאוֹת מִתּוֹרַתְךָ:

Unveil my eyes — גַּל עֵינַי — that I may perceive wonders from Your Torah —
וְאַבִּיטָה נִפְלְאוֹת מִתּוֹרַתְךָ.

David humbly declares his dependence upon Hashem for his ability to perceive the wonders of the Torah. He trusts that if he puts in the effort to learn the Torah, Hashem will grant him marvellous insights and intellectual visions by lifting the veil of perception.

The relationships between the perfect design of the physical universe and the corresponding wonders of the Torah are explored in Mizmor 019 (Seeking Perfection).

Additional Insights:

(1) Examples of the hidden mysteries of the Torah are the mitzvos called Chukim and the secrets of Creation as outlined in the Book of Bereishis. Other examples are in the workings of the human mind and the ways that character traits can be perfected. (רד"ק, המאירי)

(2) The word **נִפְלְאוֹת** (wonders) is derived from the root **פלא**, which means separation. The mysteries and wonders of the Torah are hidden, and are thereby separated from normal awareness. (המאירי)

(3) How does a person gain access to the wondrous insights of the Torah? Through dedicated study and reflection. Someone who travels abroad to see the wonders of the world should stop and think of the vast possibilities of intellectual discovery and vision that are available to him within the four walls of the Bais Hamidrash. (טיב התהלות)

GIMEL 3: STRANGENESS

(יט) גַּר אֲנֹכִי בְּאֶרֶץ

אֵל תִּסְתֶּר מִמֶּנִּי מִצֹּתֶיךָ:

I am a stranger in the world — גַּר אֲנִי 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 — אַל תַּסְתֵּר מִמֶּנִּי מִצְוֹתֶיךָ.**

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.

Additional Insights:

(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. (רש"י, רד"ק, ספורנו)

(2) David feels like a stranger who easily gets lost in unfamiliar streets and roads and so he asks Hashem to guide him. (אבן עזרא)

(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. (מצודות)

(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. (מלבים)

(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. (בן רמוך)

(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. (נר לרגלי)

(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. (דעת סופרים)

GIMEL 4: YEARNING

(כ) גִּרְסָה נִפְשִׁי לְתַאֲבָה
אֶל מְשַׁפְּטֶיךָ בְּכָל עֵת:

My soul is crushed — גִּרְסָה נִפְשִׁי with yearning — לְתַאֲבָה for Your Mishpatim
— אֶל מְשַׁפְּטֶיךָ **at all times** — בְּכָל עֵת, no matter what I may be doing.

Here David gives us a sense of the yearning he has developed for the words and thoughts of the Torah. In effect, he feels as though his deepest soul is almost breaking apart as it reaches out to comprehend every detail and nuance in the Torah. He describes this powerful longing as being with him at all times. That means even when he is busy taking care of the affairs of state or family matters, his mind is drawn to the Torah thoughts that he is missing.

Additional Insights:

(1) This pasuk may also be read as an earnest tefillah to Hashem, asking Him to remove the shell of indifference that a prevents a person from feeling the spiritual emotion of attachment to the Torah and mitzvos. (מלבנים)

(2) This pasuk teaches an important lesson for those whose circumstances prevent them from devoting as much time and effort into learning Torah as they would like. They should take an example from David and, if nothing else, they should be aware and be moved by their deep and sincere desire to be more involved in Torah. This also has great value. (טיב התהלות)

GIMEL 5: HYPOCRISY

(כא) גָּעַרְתָּ זְדִים אָרוּרִים
הַשְּׂגִים מִמְצוֹתֶיךָ:

זְדִים אָרוּרִים — גָּעַרְתָּ the accursed deliberate sinners — You have rejected
מִמְצוֹתֶיךָ — השְׂגִים from the intent of Your mitzvos — who consciously **deviate**
because of an erroneous interpretation of what Hashem has declared.

David calls down Hashem's rebuke upon the hypocrites who distort His Torah for their own ends. In effect, he warns his listeners to avoid falling into the trap of intentional distortions in the law.

Additional Insights:

(1) The word **השגים** refers to a deviation from the right path based on an erroneous interpretation of what that path really is. It is based on the root **שגה** and differs from words based on the root **שגג** that imply an error through carelessness. The deliberate sinners justify their sins using an erroneous interpretation of Hashem's will. As bad as their sins are, they are not as pernicious as the erroneous interpretation that they use to justify it. That is why David calls them **אָרוּרִים**. (רש"י)

(2) Another way of understanding this pasuk is that it refers people to who deliberately neglect the study of the halachah because they don't want to put in the effort that it requires. As a result of that conscious neglect they fail to perform the mitzvos properly. This failure cannot be ascribed to innocent error because it is owed to their deliberate failure in learning the Torah as they should. (רד"ק, מצודות)

GIMEL 6: HONOR

(כב) גַּל מֵעַלֵי חֶרְפָּה וְבוֹז
כִּי עֲדַתְיָךְ נִצְרָתִי:

It is only right that You **remove scorn and contempt from me – גַּל מֵעַלֵי חֶרְפָּה – וְבוֹז**, for the ill will is brought about by the fact that **I have kept Your testimonies – כִּי עֲדַתְיָךְ נִצְרָתִי**.

David begins his tefillah for the removal of scorn and contempt with the word **גַּל**, which may also be translated as "roll away." This word implies the removal of a foreign object that is out of place. He feels he is undeserving of the ill will because it is motivated by the resentment aroused due to his observance of the mitzvos of Hashem, especially those mitzvos which testify to Hashem's greatness.

Additional Insights:

(1) The word **גַּל** also suggest a reversal. David is asking that at the same to the scorn is removed from him, it is heaped upon those of his enemies who really deserve it. (רד"ק)

(2) David is also arguing that since he has faithfully observed the Torah it would not be fair to the honor of Torah to be subjected to be disgraced. (מצודות)

(3) The testimonies are those mitzvos which testify to what happened in the past concerning the destruction of the wicked and the extra protection provided by Hashem to our righteous forefathers. All of this provides good reason for their descendants to be granted release from any disgrace they are now experiencing. (מלבים)

(4) Since I have openly observed the Torah it would be a desecration of the Name of Hashem if people would point to my misfortune and say how they don't want such a fate to happen to them. (גר לרגלי)

GIMEL 7: DETACHMENT

(כג) גַּם יִשְׁבוּ שָׂרִים בִּי נִדְבָרוּ
עֲבֹדָה יִשִּׁיחַ בְּחֻקֶיךָ:

Though the **aristocrats** continue to **sit** together **and speak against me** — **גַּם**
יִשְׁבוּ שָׂרִים בִּי נִדְבָרוּ, **Your servant** is indifferent to them and **meditates upon**
Your statutes — **עֲבֹדָה יִשִּׁיחַ בְּחֻקֶיךָ**.

In his tefillah to Hashem, David bewails the challenging situation in which he finds himself. The aristocrats, who are a constant source of trouble, continue to meet and speak against him. Despite everything David has managed to immerse his mind in the Torah, even the decrees for which the reasoning is not apparent. The aristocrats have questioned David's spending his time on something so difficult, but David sees himself as Hashem's devoted servant and so is confident that their arguments have no basis.

Additional Insights:

- (1) The aristocrats ridiculed David for his devotion to the Torah. (רש"י)
- (2) Alternately, the aristocrats ridiculed the decrees of the Torah since they couldn't understand the rationale. (מלבים).
- (3) Some aristocrats take pride in their intellectual achievements, which put them above the lower classes. But this didn't stop them from ridiculing David's immersing himself in the intellectual exploration of Torah concepts. (בן רמוך) .

GIMEL 8: VOCATION

גַּם עֲדוֹתֶיךָ שְׁעִשְׁעֵי
אֲנִשִּׁי עֲצָתִי:

Indeed, Your testimonies are my preoccupation and my delight — **גַּם עֲדוֹתֶיךָ**
שְׁעִשְׁעֵי. They are my counselors — **אֲנִשִּׁי עֲצָתִי** to guide me through my life.

David describes the Testimonies as his primary preoccupation and his most fulfilling activity (שְׁעִשְׁעֵי). In his mind each of the mitzvos has a personal character which he consults for guidance throughout his life.

Additional Insights:

(1) The Testimonies demonstrate the power and faithfulness of Hashem. They advise David that also (גַּם) in every situation he may encounter Hashem will remove any obstacle that may lie in his way. (בן רמון, ספורנו)

(2) The message of this pasuk is that when anyone needs advice he should be sure to go to someone who is immersed in Torah because any guidance he gives will be consistent with the Torah outlook. (ספורנו)