

## Tehilim 139: G-d's Servant Predetermined or Free to Choose

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Dr. Esther Shkop

The Ibn Ezra writes that mizmor 139 is unique among the five books of Tehilim. The psalm has a great deal in common with the book of Iyov and consequently many commentators have questioned- is it a prayer, a contemplation, a complaint or a lament?

It begins with, "Hashem you've examined me and you know, you understood my thoughts and ideas even from a distance. You seem far away and yet You seem to understand and know my comings and goings, my ideas, hidden thoughts and feelings. You know my pathways, the choices I made."

"Zeirita," comes from the root word zer-You

encircled. I thought I was going in a perpendicular direction but I ended up where I started as if going in circles. Alternatively, it can mean, wherever I go I am encircled; You're all around me and I can't seem to get away from You. Or, wherever I am that is where You are. Does this indicate protection or companionship or is there a sense of constantly being observed?

"This knowledge is too wondrous and exalted to comprehend; I can't prevail over it or digest it." I can't comprehend myself, much less my Maker. It seems as if Hashem is making me put down whatever thoughts and words are in my mind and I wonder if I have any freedom at all. There is a sense that I am a creature made by the hand of Hashem and its wondrous to

contemplate what and who I am.

"Where can I get away from your spirit and to where can I flee from your face. I thought, surely the darkness will hide me, but come night there too the light finds me. Even the darkness is not too dark for You and the night lights up just like the day." For in Hashem's eyes, darkness is as the light. It makes no difference. There is no hiding from Him and while we try to hide, there's also a sense of comfort that no matter where we are, Hashem is there holding on to us. It is a mystery that on the one hand we want to be free and on the other hand we take such comfort in leaning on Him.

## The Last Words of Moshe Rabbeinu

Based on a shiur by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn

Sefer Devarim differs from the other four chumashim in that the first three chumashim, Moshe Rabbeinu speaks in third person and we hear it as though directly from Hashem. In Devarim, Moshe speaks in first person and it is considered as if it were his own words.

When Hashem spoke to a prophet, he had to give the prophecy over to the Jewish people but he was able to do so at a later time and there was room for the prophet to use his own language. The Maharal explains that Sefer Devarim is somewhat like this. Hashem spoke to Moshe who then gave it over to Klal Yisrael the way he understood it. However, it differs from the Neviim because Hashem took the words of Moshe and added it as part of the Written Torah. It follows that Sefer Devarim has the qualities of the Written and the Oral Torah and is considered a link between the two.

The commentators divide Sefer Devarim in several sections. According to some, the first

part contains the tochacha of Moshe. Moshe recalls past events that happened in the 40 years in the desert so that Bnei Yisrael can learn from their mistakes and correct it. In turn, we can learn from history. The second part enumerates the mitzvot. But Rav Hirsh sees the first chapters of the mitzvot through chapter 11 as still part of section one because these mitzvot form the basis of emunah and belief in Hashem and Torah and the understanding we need to have in order to keep the mitzvot. Therefore, he connects it to the first part the tochacha, the events that took place and what we must learn from them and the basic beliefs we must have as the Chosen Nation.

At the beginning of Sefer Devarim, Moshe recounts klal Yisrael's past history, unique among the nations. In terms of the blessings and the difficulties we experienced, our history is beyond nature. No nation ever encountered the supernatural experiences Klal Yisrael had in the desert. It was Gan Eden on earth. So too, when we look at the brachot in Ki Tavo,

the Torah discusses things that are supernatural to the extent that the Ramban says we never experienced it in its fullest sense yet. Similarly, when we go through difficulties it's also beyond what other nations experienced.

I read a book about a child of five who went through the Holocaust and remained loyal to Torah. She explained that the situation was so beyond human comprehension that she knew it must be from Hashem and this is what kept her strong despite the difficulties.

What we experienced on Oct. 7 in Israel is beyond our understanding and when we see the reaction of the world, how they distorted the facts, we see there is something beyond nature there as well. When we witness our history unfolding in a supernatural way, it brings some comfort, knowing Hashem hasn't abandoned us. We don't understand what happened but we do know we are His nation and His love for us will never wane.



## Connecting to the Destruction Through the 9 Days

Based on a Naaleh.com class by Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller Gottlieb

We are approaching the Nine Days of mourning which will one turn into incredible joy. The Three Week period is the backward version of what Hashem gifts us during the Yomim Naroim. The 21 days of Bein Hametzarim parallel the 21 days from Rosh Hashana through Hoshana Rabbah when Hashem comes down to us in the field. In contrast, during the Bein Hametzarim we must come to Him and the suffering is meant to awaken us. The Gemara tells us how Rabbi Yochanon ben Zakai went to speak with the Roman General, Vespasian who gave him a chance to ask for three wishes. He asked for a doctor to heal Rabbi Tarfon and for the family of Raban Gamiliel and for Yavne and its sages to be left unharmed. Rabbi Akiva notes here that he did not ask for Yerushalayim to be saved as Hashem sometimes draws a person's heart away. We needed Yerushalayim's destruction. The only other option would have been the continuous downward and outward flow of constant hatred that we were indulging in which would lead to our ultimate disappearance as a people. Tragically, we needed the suffering for our ultimate existence as a people. As we are still in exile, we obviously still need it. That doesn't mean we want it and it is definitely bitter. An alarming 70% assimilation rate, the rising trend of children off the derech, the skyrocketing rate of children born with birth defects is beyond anything we can explain.

How can we heal? Rav Tzvi Meir Zilberberg points out that the root of all exiles began with the sin of the spies. "Visinat Hashem otonu." Klal Yisrael said, Hashem brought us here to this desert because He hates us. Wherever life has taken you, if your response is that Hashem hates you and that's why you're here, then you've totally missed the boat. Hashem created the world so we could draw close to Him. When we suffer it's for us to say – It's not the externals of life, my expectations or my will to control; it's my desire for things to be good that's driving me. Open the gates,

Hashem.

The first step we have to do is increase our ahavat Hashem. The simplest way is through gratitude, not to just fleetingly feel it, but to talk it out. When you get up in the morning you can thank Hashem for giving you a day of life, for your senses and your ability to function. Hashem creates a backdrop and you can make choices and attain spirituality wherever you are. Besides all the physical things Hashem gives you, you're Jewish and living a life that's beautiful. Gratitude changes your relationship towards living. If you see everything coming to you as an expression of His love, you're going to respond with love. This includes people you encounter. If you love Hashem, you're going to say -This is one of His people, let's see what can I teach him and what he can teach me. That's the first lesson of this time period.

The second lesson which is directly related, is loving your fellow Jew. Ahavat chinam doesn't appear anywhere in chazal. Don't love people for no reason. Look what there is to love in the people you encounter and you'll find it. I was reading a story about Rabbi David Trenk. He went to get a coffee in a gas station and he saw a threatening six foot guy with tattoos all over him, sporting a Magen David. You could say- What a disgrace, who could believe this person is Jewish. Or you could say- Look at that Jewish star, a Jewish heart beats under his skin, I love him because he's one of us. Although these two approaches are very different, they both sound authentic and the nisayon is to discern what is really true.

Let's briefly go through the laws of ahavas Yisrael. First, speak well of your fellow Jew. When there's something good to say, say it to them. It makes a person aware of who they are which brings forth their desire to be better. Second, give respect to people. This means taking them seriously and really listening to them. The society we live in trains us to be

phony which is sad. Third, try to protect people from loss. If you see someone dropped something, don't just ignore it, try to figure out how you could return it.

The fourth point is tefilah. Tefilah is a way of expressing our absolute dependence on Hashem. Throughout history there were many attempts to end the exile such as secular Zionism and various other assimilationist movements. It never worked. Tell Hashem -I'm dependent on You, we don't like it as it is, it's not good for us, we want to draw close to You. So many times throughout the day we recall our longing for the redemption, not just in shemonei esrei, but also in birchat hamazon. Recognize that all of the travail is coming from one source which is the estrangement of exile. Exile means being apart, not just from Hashem but from your identity, your higher self. Use this period of Bein Hametzarim for tefilah. Have extra kavanah in the tefilot you are saying anyway.

It's permitted during the Three Weeks to say Tikkun Chatzot at midday and it's divided in two segments, Tikkun Rachel and Tikkun Leah. Tikkun Rachel is about the pain. Even if you can't say the entire tikkun at least express the pain. The problem we have is that although we understand personal pain, we don't understand collective pain. It's very hard to feel the loss of something you never had. We have no concept of the bet hamikdash, of being truly forgivable, of being beloved, of being a light, a star in the heavens, not only as a people but as an individual. We should at least give it some thought, what we had and what could be. One of the names of the bet hamikdash was levanon which means white. You went in burdened with sin and came out pure. This is a good time to learn about the bet hamikdash, what it looked like and what it meant to us, to have some appreciation of what life would be if we were forgiven and close to Hashem and truly loved each other.