

# Mizmorim

## Lesson 5 – Mizmor 1: Happiness = Goodness

### Goal:

Students will gain experience with the following skills:

1. Defining important words by comparing their uses in many different pesukim.
2. Finding poetic devices such as alliteration, assonance, parallelism, and metaphor.
3. Breaking down the structure of a Mizmor.
4. Summarizing the main idea of a Mizmor.
5. Showing how the poetic devices and structure effectively convey the message of a Mizmor.

Students will also discuss the content of the Mizmor and think about how its message can apply to their own lives.

### Activity:

1. *What is the heading for Mizmor 1?* There is none; it is an anonymous Mizmor. In fact, the first two as well as the last five Mizmorim of Tehillim are all anonymous. While most anonymous Mizmorim within Tehillim are simply continuations of the Mizmorim that precede them, which do have titles, these Mizmorim at the beginning and end of Tehillim stand alone. They form an introduction and conclusion to the entire book. *What do you expect to find in an introduction?* An introduction should say something about the theme of the rest of the book.

Write this quote on the board:

ר' יודן אומר המזמור הזה משובח מכל המזמורים  
(מדרש תהלים מזמור א)

We see that this Mizmor is not only first but also foremost, “the most praiseworthy of all the Mizmorim.” As we read it, let us think about what makes it so special and what it tells us about the entire book of Tehillim.

2. Have a student read the Mizmor out loud. Encourage him to read it with slowly trying to bring out its poetic qualities. You may have to demonstrate. Have another student read it in English, if necessary. Then ask, *What is the main idea or message of this Mizmor? Try to summarize it in one sentence.* It discusses good and evil, reward and punishment, giving in to peer pressure... It encourages the reader to stay away from evil and desire Torah because that will bring stability and success in the end. *This seems to be a basic and simple message that we were able to sum up in one sentence. Why didn't the writer just write one simple sentence? What does the poem add that is missing in our summary? How does the poem succeed in more effectively conveying its message?* See if students are able to find and appreciate any of the poetic devices used in this Mizmor. Once they have exhausted their creativity begin a line by line analysis.

3. Line by Line Analysis

Have a student read and explain Pasuk 1. Then analyze the Pasuk further using the leading questions below. Do the same for each Pasuk. Of course, you do not need to use these exact question in this order. It may even be preferable to ask a more general question like, *What do you notice about this Pasuk?* This will give the class a chance to develop reading skills on their own. If they don't see all the points then use more specific questions.

(א) אֲשֶׁרִי הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר

Read the first three words and ask students what sounds they hear. They should recognize the alliteration of ש and assonance of א. Notice how similar these three words are, especially אֲשֶׁרִי and אֲשֶׁר. *What does this alliteration accomplish?* Besides being aesthetically pleasing to the ear, it also grabs the listener's attention. It sets up the expectation of a well presented and thought out statement about the happy man – surely something everyone wants to hear. *Why does the writer choose אִישׁ instead of גֵּבֶר or צַדִּיק or אָדָם?* Besides adding to the alliteration, אִישׁ also has more specific connotation that just “a person.” Look up the three pesukim which contain the word אִישׁ on the handout, “People in Verse 1,” and their contexts. In all three, אִישׁ means someone who is steadfast, strong, and courageous. The Mizmor is not addressed to the person who is already a צַדִּיק but rather to any person who is resolute about doing what is right as he faces difficult choices in life.

לֹא הֵלֵךְ בְּעֵצָת רְשָׁעִים  
וּבְדֶרֶךְ חַטָּאִים לֹא עָמַד  
וּבְמוֹשֵׁב לְצִידִים לֹא יָשָׁב:

*How many phrases are in the rest of Pasuk 1 to describe the happy man?* Three. Write them out on different lines on the board. Notice the parallelism between them. *What words are parallel?* Circle the nouns – לְצִידִים – חַטָּאִים – רְשָׁעִים and underline the verbs – הֵלֵךְ – עָמַד – יָשָׁב. *What does רָשָׁע mean?* After suggestions from students have them look up the pesukim on the source sheet. רָשָׁע violates various laws ranging from lying, borrowing without paying back, returning hatred for a favor, to taking advantage of the weak, stealing, and killing. *What does חַטָּאִים mean?* See source sheet. The root חָטָא as a verb means to miss a target. חַטָּאִים require guidance from God when they have veered from the right path. All people transgress sometimes whether by mistake or because they are just not so careful. But the חַטָּא is not as bad as the רָשָׁע. Note that חַטָּא is in the noun form which usually indicates an occupation like נִגְרַר or סֹפֵר. Unlike הוֹטָא, who sins occasionally, חַטָּא sins regularly. *What are the characteristics of the לֹץ?* See source sheet. לֹץ is compared with fools and contrasted with חֲכָם. He is haughty and makes fun of everything. Although his cynicism and foolishness can cause harm in the long run, he does not actually go out and do anything bad and so is not as bad as the רָשָׁע or הוֹטָא. *Can you explain why they are in this order?* The Mizmor praises the man who does not walk with the wicked; and not only that, he also does not stand with the transgressor; and what's more, he won't even sit with the fool. *Do you see a progression in the verbs?* The verbs go from activity to stasis - from walk to stand to sit. Not only does the happy man not go out seeking evil, he does not even stay in a path that will lead to sin. Not only that, he does not even sit passively doing nothing bad but also not being productive. Notice that the verb comes before the noun in the first verset but after the noun in the next two. Perhaps this emphasizes the movement of the wicked who is always looking for his next victim while the sinner and fool are more passive.

(Some commentators such as Ibn Ezra explain in reverse that the verbs imply the successive steps in the career of the wicked from simply following suggestions of the wicked, to staying consistently on the sinner's path, to finally sitting with and being one of them. This is also valid and if suggested by a student should be recognized as such.)

**The People Mentioned in Mizmor 1:1**

**Connotation of איש**

**שמואל א פרק ד פסוק ט**

התחזקו והיו לאנשים פלשתיים פן תעבדו לעבדים פאשר עבדו לכם והייתם לאנשים ונלחמתם:

**שמואל א פרק כו פסול טו**

וי אמר דוד אל אבנר הלוא איש אתה ומי כמוך בישראל ולמה לא שמרת אל אדניך המלך כי בא אחד העם להשחית את המלך אדניך:

**מלכים א פרק ב**

- (א) ויקרבו ימי דוד למות ויצו את שלמה בנו לאמר:
- (ב) אנכי ה' לך בדרכך כל הארץ ותזקת והיית לאיש:

**Attributes of the רשע**

**תהלים פרק צד**

- (ג) עד מתי רשעים יד' נד עד מתי רשעים יעל' זו:
- (ד) נביעו ודברו עתק ותאמרו כל פ' עלי אנו:
- (ה) עמך יד' נד ונפאו ונחלתך יענו:
- (ו) אלמנה נגר ונהר' גו ויתומים ירצחו:

**תהלים פרק קט**

- (ב) פי פי רשע ופי מרמה עלי פתחו דברו אתי לשון שקר:
- (ג) ודברי שנאה סבבוני וילחמוני חנם:
- (ד) תחת אהבתי ישטנוני ואני תפלה:
- (ה) וישומו עלי רעה תחת טובה ושנאה תחת אהבתי:

**תהלים פרק לו**

- (י) חרב פתחו רשעים ודרכו קשתם להפיל עני ואביון לטבוט ושרי דרך:
- (כא) ל' נה רשע ול' א' שלם וצדיק חונן וגונו:

**Attributes of the חוטא\חטא**

**שופטים פרק כ פסוק טז**

מכ' ל' העם הנה שבע מאות איש בחור אטר נד ומינו כל זה ק' לע באבן אל השערה ול' א' יחטא:

**תהלים פרק כה פסוק ח**

טוב וישר יד' נד על פן יוכה חטאים בדרכך:

**קהלת פרק ז פסוק כ**

פי אדם אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה טוב ול' א' יחטא:

**Attributes of the לץ**

**משלי פרק א פסוק כב**

עד מתי פתים תאבדו פתי ולצים לצון חמדו להם וכסילים ישנאו דעת:

**משלי פרק ט פסוק ח**

אל תוכח לץ פן ישנאך הוכח לחכם ויאהבך:

**משלי פרק כא פסוק כד**

יד יהיר לץ שמו עושה בעברת זדון:

**משלי פרק כט פסוק ח**

אנשי לצון יפיהו קריה וחקמים ישיבו אף:

(ב) כי אם

בְּתוֹרַת יְדֹד־חֲפָצוֹ  
וּבְתוֹרָתוֹ יִהְיֶה יוֹמָם וּלְיָלֵלָה :

The next Pasuk goes on to describe in positive terms what the happy person does do. By delaying this description until Pasuk 2, a greater sense of suspense is created to know exactly who is the happy person. He desires Torah and recites it all the time. The verbs here continue the progression begun in Pasuk 1 – walk, stand, sit, (desire – there is no actual verb in this verset), recite/meditate. *Can you find the parallelism in this Pasuk?* תורתו is parallel to ה' תורה while חפצו is expanded to יוֹמָם וּלְיָלֵלָה. The first half says in general terms that God's Torah is his desire, but the second half details the specific way he fulfills that desire – by reciting it by day and by night.

(ג) וְהָיָה כְּעֵץ שֶׁתוֹלַע עָלָיו פִּלְגֵי מַיִם אֲשֶׁר

פִּרְיוֹ יִתֵּן בְּעֵתוֹ  
וְעֵלְתוֹ לֹא יִבּוֹל

וְכָל אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה יִצְלִיחַ :

*What does Pasuk 3 describe?* The reward or end result of keeping away from evil and following the Torah. Notice that the progression of verbs from most active to most stationary continues here. The end result of someone who does not run after evil but rather sits and meditates on Torah is that he have stability like a permanently rooted tree. This stability and the happiness and success which it engenders it not an external reward as much as the automatic effect of being good just as a tree well-planted by a stream will necessarily produce. (Meir Weiss brings further proof along the lines of this interpretation based on comparison with Jeremiah 17:5-8. See bibliography.) *What poetic device is used here?* Simile. *How would you break up this Pasuk?* It has the same structure as Pasuk 1 – a noun phrase followed by אשר followed by three descriptions. *Do you see a progression in the three descriptions?* They go from good to better to best. This tree gives fruit in its season, as any good tree should. Not only that, its leaves never wither. In fact, it prospers in all ways. *To whom or what does the last phrase refer?* Some students will say it refers to the tree. Others will say it refers to the overall success of the person. Perhaps it is purposely ambiguous and can apply to both at the same time. This serves to ease the listener out of the metaphor. *Does the imagery in this metaphor remind you of anything in Humash?* Gan Eden. The beginning of Tehillim is similar to the beginning of Humash. Also the steady stream of water may symbolize the Torah that the upright man recites all the time.

(ד) לֹא כֵן הִרְשָׁעִים כִּי אִם כַּמֶּץ אֲשֶׁר תִּדְפְּנוּ רוּחַ :

*What does this Pasuk describe?* The doomed fate of the wicked. *What poetic device does it use?* It uses the same agricultural simile as in the previous Pasuk. The wicked are like the chaff of the wheat which is blown away during threshing. This is completely opposite from the well-planted tree. *How many phrases were there describing the reward of the wicked in Pasuk 3?* Four. *How many phrases are there in this Pasuk to describe the punishment of the wicked?* One. *Why?* This reinforces the substantiality of the righteous versus the fleetingness of the wicked person.

(ה) עַל כֵּן לֹא יִקְמוּ רְשָׁעִים בְּמִשְׁפָּט וְחַטָּאִים בְּעֵדוּת צְדִיקִים :

*What two nouns in the Pasuk have we already seen beforehand?* רשעים and חטאים were mentioned in Pasuk 1. *What kind of people are mentioned here explicitly for the first time?* צדיקים. We even find a “council of righteous” reminding us of the “council of

wicked” in Pasuk 1. *Why does this Pasuk repeat elements from Pasuk 1?* Pasuk 1 set up a scene where a single individual is surrounded by groups of wicked people, sinners, and fools who are luring him to join their ranks. Although it may be difficult, the righteous man sticks his ground and follows the Torah. In Pasuk 5, the lonely righteous man has been successful, bore fruit, and gathered around him a whole group of righteous people. Now it is the sinners who are unable to stand in the council of justice and righteousness. The tables have turned. *Can you think of examples from modern history of individuals who were able to reverse an evil in society by staying their ground and doing what they knew was right?* Discuss the accomplishments of Rosa Parks, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandella.

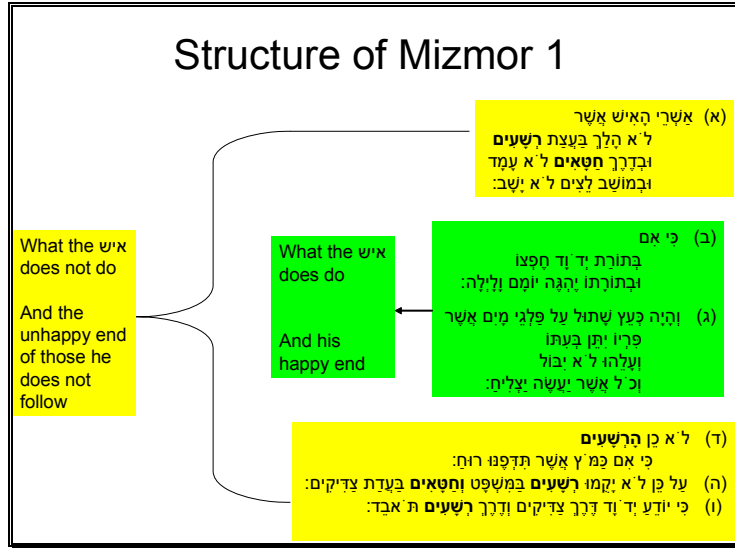
(ו) כִּי יוֹדַע יִדְוֹד דְּרַךְ צְדִיקִים וְדְרַךְ רָשָׁעִים תֵּאבֵד :

This is an example of antithetical parallelism or תְּקוּבֹלֶת נִיגוּדִית. However, for the parallelism to be exact we would expect to find “and God hates the way of the wicked.” Instead we find a passive verb, “the way of the wicked is lost.” The wicked person is not given the dignity of having any relationship with God, not even a negative one. He is simply blown away in the wind and forgotten. (Compare this to Rambam’s view of reward and punishment in Mishneh Torah Hilkhos Teshubah, ch. 8.)

Pasuk 5 opened with wicked and closed with righteous. This verse opens with righteous and closes with wicked. This creates a chiasmatic structure (ABBA) where righteous is at the center.

(ה) עַל כֵּן לֹא יִקְמוּ רָשָׁעִים בְּמִשְׁפָּט וְחַטָּאִים בְּצֶדֶת צְדִיקִים : (ו) כִּי יוֹדַע יִדְוֹד דְּרַךְ צְדִיקִים וְדְרַךְ רָשָׁעִים תֵּאבֵד :

This structure also applies to the Mizmor as a whole. The transition phrases **אִם כִּי** and **לֹא כֵן** in Pesukim 2 and 4 are key words in this Mizmor. They do not occur anywhere else in Tehillim and they serve to emphasize the difference between good and bad by placing them in stark contrast. These terms are placed at the major turning points in the Mizmor. The first **אִם כִּי** in Pasuk 2 marks the transition from what the happy person does not do to what he does do. **לֹא כֵן** and the second **אִם כִּי** in Pasuk 4 mark the transition from the end result of the righteous person to the end of the wicked people. The Mizmor begins with mention of the actions of the wicked and ends with description of their doom. In the middle of the Mizmor is a description of the actions of the righteous and his prosperity. The righteous man is the center of attention while the actions and fate of the wicked is only mentioned to provide contrast. This chiasmatic structure (wicked – righteous – righteous – wicked) can be seen graphically in this chart:



L5 - Structure - Summary Chart.doc

#### 4. Application to life

*Is the basic premise of this Mizmor actually true in real life? Do the righteous always prosper and the wicked always suffer?* Of course in the short run wicked may prosper and the upright man can feel lonely and threatened. This reflects the feeling in Pasuk 1. But the Mizmor encourages us to look to the long term when truth and goodness will prevail. The corruption of communism lasted for a long time but it could not stand up to the freedom of democracy in the long run. The most successful corporations are those with solid financial grounding and which truly provide for their customers. Companies that cheat their customers or exaggerate their earnings can last for a while; but, soon enough they vanish into thin air. (Cite Enron or whatever corporate scandal is happening while you are teaching this.) The criminal can make a few successful robberies. But he will always have to be looking over his back, he can never relax. The happy person follows Torah, does what is right, and thereby achieves stability, comfort, and prosperity.

Rober Alter summarizes the main message of this Mizmor as follows:

The essence of wrongdoing is to miss the mark, to pursue foolish or unattainable objects of desire that will lead only to frustration, while the man whose delight is in the Lord's teaching knows the art of sitting still in the right place, of finding fulfillment within the limits of law and of his own human condition. (The Art of Biblical Poetry, p. 117)

The message of this Mizmor correlates with Mishna, Pirke Abot 4:1. The strong person is not he who goes out and conquers cities but rather one who can control his will. The rich person does not run after endless wealth but is happy with his lot.

בן זומא אומר איזהו חכם הלומד מכל אדם שנאמר (תהלים קיט: צט) מכל מלמדי השכלתי איזהו גבור הכובש את יצרו שנאמר (משלי טז: לב) טוב ארך אפים מגבור ומושל ברוחו מלוכד עיר איזהו עשיר השמח בחלקו שנאמר (תהלים קכח: ב) יגיע כפיך כי תאכל אשריך וטוב לך אשריך בעולם הזה וטוב לך לעולם הבא

איזהו מכובד המכבד את הבריות שנאמר (שמואל א' ב') כי מכבדי אכבד ובוזי יקלו:

### **Additional Discussion:**

The midrash here also notices that the wicked are not directly described but only in terms of what the righteous person does not do. The midrash explains that David learned from Humash that it is always better to speak about positive things and let the negative be inferred indirectly. This allows one to focus on the good.

### **מדרש תהלים מזמור א:ג**

[אשרי האיש אשר לא הלך. זהו שאמר הכתוב] בצדק כל אמרי פי אין בהם נפתל ועקש (משלי ח ח), אין בהם לא קפדנות ולא עקמומות, מצינו שעיקם הכתוב שתים ושלש תיבות, שלא להוציא דבר מגונה מפיו שנאמר מן הבהמה הטהורה ומן הבהמה אשר איננה טהורה (בראשית ז ח), אמר ר' יודן בר מנשה אף כשבא לפתוח [בסימני בהמה טמאה, לא פתח אלא] בסימני טהרה, את הגמל כי לא מפריס פרסה אין כתיב כאן, אלא כי מעלה גרה (ויקרא יא ד), ואת החזיר כי לא מעלה גרה, אין כתיב כאן, אלא כי מפריס פרסה (ויקרא י"א ז), אמר דוד אף הקב"ה העיד עלי ואמר בקש ה' לו איש כלבבו (שמואל א' יג יד), וכינה שמו לבוראו, מה בוראו לא הוציא דיבור מגונה, אף דוד כן, היה לו לומר ארור האיש אשר הלך בעצת רשעים, או אשרי האיש אשר הלך בעצת צדיקים, ולא אמר אלא אשרי האיש אשר לא הלך בעצת רשעים.

### **Bibliography:**

- Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. New York: Basic Books, 1985, pp. 111-118.  
Sarna, Nahum. *On the Book of Psalms: Exploring the Prayers of Ancient Israel*. New York: Schocken Books, 1985, pp. 25-47.  
Weiss, Meir. *The Bible From Within*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984, pp. 135-163, 248-251.  
----- . *מקראות כוונתם*. Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1987, pp. 111-134.