

## Lesson 6 – Mizmor 8: The Paradox of Being Human

### Goal:

1. Students will practice looking for parallelism within a Pasuk and noticing the development of an idea from one Pasuk to the next.
2. Students will be able to formulate the fundamental paradox of human existence which is at the core of this Mizmor and be able to explain how the poetic aspects of the Mizmor come together to express that paradox.

### Activity:

1. *Do you ever feel inspired? What do you find inspiring? Is there a time of the day, of the week, of the year, when you are more likely to feel moved by something?* Encourage students to open up by sharing a personal story of your own. They may feel inspired by nature, music, exercise, love, reading, a class, a great person... *What do you feel like when you become inspired?* Try to elicit a range of responses such as feeling small or unimportant, feeling like going out and accomplishing something, feeling a sense of awe or fear, feeling alive or connected... Point out that some of these emotions can be contradictory, which is ok since our emotions need not make rational sense.

2. Have a student read the entire Mizmor. The rest of the class should read along and look for key words or phrases, or basic structural aspects of the Mizmor. Students should pick up on the repetition of Pesukim 2 and 10.

3. Go around the room having each student read a Pasuk, translate it, and explain its use of parallelism.

(א) לַמְנַצֵּחַ עַל הַגִּיתִית מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד :

Pasuk 1 – *לַמְנַצֵּחַ* means that this Mizmor was given to or dedicated to the leader of the choir or orchestra in the Bet Mikdash. Compare how this word is used in Divere haYamim 1 15:21. *עַל הַגִּיתִית* may be a musical instruction to play this Mizmor on an instrument from the city of Gat.

Pasuk 2 – *How many parts are there in this Pasuk?* Three.

(ב) יְדֹנֵד אֲדֹנֵינוּ      מֶה אֲדִיר שְׁמֶךָ בְּכֹל הָאָרֶץ      אֲשֶׁר תִּנָּה הַדּוֹךְ עַל הַשָּׁמַיִם :

*What is the relationship between the three? Do you see any parallelism?* The first part addresses the Mizmor to Hashem, like the beginning of a letter. Indeed the rest of the Mizmor speaks to Hashem in second person as someone speaking to a close friend about deep thoughts. The word *מֶה* in the second part introduces a rhetorical question – “How majestic is your name throughout the earth!” *Why does the Pasuk emphasize God’s name instead of God himself?* The name of something indicates its essential quality. (Compare Adam giving names to the animals in Bereshit 2:19.) *In what way is God’s name majestic throughout the land?* This can refer to the majesty of the natural creation on earth. Or, more likely, to the praise given to God on earth in the mouths of people. *What inspires people to praise God?* This is explained in the third part. “For you placed your splendor all over the heavens.” When people look up to the splendor of the sky, they appreciate the majesty of the Creator. *הַשָּׁמַיִם* is parallel to *הָאָרֶץ*.

(ג) מפי עוללים וינקים יסדת עז למען צורריך להשבית אויב ומתנגם :

Pasuk 3 – This is a very difficult Pasuk. Because there is no single simple explanation for it, this can be a good opportunity for students to be creative and see if they can come up with any original ideas about how to understand these words. Any explanation should answer, *Who are the enemies of Hashem here? What do the mouths of babies signify? How does all this fit into the context of looking up to the heaven?* One possible explanation is that the enemies are those people who deny that Hashem is the creator. They look up to heaven and say all its beauty came into being by accident. They don't appreciate the beauty of the world. The writer says that even the babble of babies is such an amazing event that it can act as a stronghold to fight off the arguments of those enemies. The great expanses of the sky and the quiet cooing of an infant both send the same message to an attentive person who sees a guiding hand in the world. (See Sarna for an interesting alternative explanation.)

Pasuk 4 – *How would you break down this Pasuk into parts?* It begins with a subject and verb, “when I see,” and continues with three objects. The first verb applies to all three objects. Represent this graphically on the board:

(ד) כִּי אֶרְאֶה שָׁמַיִךְ  
מַעֲשֵׂי אֶצְבְּעֹתֶיךָ  
יָרַח וְכוכְבִּים אֲשֶׁר כוֹנְנָתָה :

*Do you see a progression from one object to the next?* We see a progression just by looking at the number of words, from one to two to four. This numeric sequence parallels the development of ideas from one phrase to the next. The first is a general term for the sky, although it emphasizes that God created it by calling it “your sky.” The second is more poetic – “the work of your fingers.” *The usual expression is מעשי ידיך – the work of your hands. Why does the poet use fingers here?* This expression points to the delicate details of the sky, the care God took for the fine points. The last phrase presents specific examples of amazing aspects of the nighttime sky, the moon and the stars. Once again, the poet emphasizes God's role in their creation by adding “which you set in place.”

Pasuk 5 – *How does this Pasuk relate to the previous one?* This Pasuk expresses the reaction of someone who experiences the grandeur of the night sky. We need to fill in the missing words: “When I see your heavens...[then I wonder] what is man...” *Analyze the parallelism in this Pasuk.* This is a straightforward word for word parallelism. מה applies to both halves. תפקדנו=תזכרנו, כי=כי, בן אדם=אנוש.

(ה) מָה אָנוּשׁ כִּי תִזְכְּרָנוּ      וְבֶן אָדָם כִּי תִפְקְדָנוּ :

*Do the two halves say exactly the same thing or is there a progression?* אנוש means man or mankind and connotes human mortality (see Tehillim 108:15, Iyob 4:17). בן אדם even further emphasizes the lowliness of humans who come from and will return to the earth – אדמה (see Bereshit 2:7). *What is the difference between תזכרנו and תפקדנו?* זכר means to recall or to think about. פקד means to attend to, visit, pay attention to (see Bereshit 21:1). The first says that God generally thinks about man while the second adds a personal, caring and gracious God. In order to highlight this step-up parallelism, we can translate, “What is man that You think about him; mere mortals that You should take care of him.”

(ו) וַתַּחַסְרֵהוּ מֵעֵט מַאֲלֵהִים וַיְכַבֹּד וְהָדָר תַּעֲטֶרְהוּ :

Pasuk 6 – *How would you translate the ו of וַתַּחַסְרֵהוּ?* The ו prefix does not always mean “and.” Here it means “yet.” Man is mortal and not worthy of God’s attention and care. Yet, God has made him only a little less than divine. *Is the second half parallel to the first?* The words in each half do not correlate and so there is no repetition. Rather, the second part completes the idea begun in the first half. In what way did God make man only a little less than divine? By crowning him with honor and glory. The rest of the Mizmor delineates in detail the nature of man’s glory.

(ז) תַּמְשִׁילֵהוּ בַּמַּעֲשֵׂי יָדָיִךְ כָּל שְׁתֵּה תַּחַת רַגְלָיו :

Pasuk 7 – *The previous Pasuk said that man is only a little less than divine. In what way do we see that divine aspect according to this Pasuk?* Just as God rules over the world, so too does man rule over all other species. This similarity between God’s sovereignty and man’s domination appears in Bereshit 1:26 as well:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱ-לֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ  
וְיִרְדּוּ בְדֹגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל הָרֶמֶשׂ הָרֹמֵשׁ עַל הָאָרֶץ :

God announces His intention to create humans “in our image, after our likeness.” He then continues, “They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.” *What is the connection between the two parts of the Pasuk? What is the connection between being in God’s image and ruling over the animal kingdom?* To be in God’s likeness means to have the intellect and ability to rule over others.

*Find the parallel phrases in the two halves of Pasuk 7.* מעשי, שתה תחת רגליו=תמשילֵהוּ. *Do you notice more emphasis in the second half over the first?* “You have made him master,” in the first half becomes a vivid picture in the imagery of the second half: “You have placed under his feet.” In ancient times, a victorious king would place his foot on the neck of the losing king as a sign of his domination. Here we have the image of man with the whole world under his feet.

“The work of His hands” in the first half is expanded to “everything” in the second. In fact, the word כל is a keyword in this Mizmor. It occurs four times: twice in the refrain (pesukim 2, 10), and twice in the body (pesukim 7 and 8). The two in the refrain apply to God who is great in “all the land.” The two in the body of the Mizmor refer to that which is under the rule of mankind. The use of this keyword reinforces the comparison between God and man in their relationship to “everything” on earth.

(ח) צִנֹּה וְאֶלְפִים כָּלִם וְגַם בְּהֵמוֹת שָׂדֵי :

Pasuk 8 – This and the next two pesukim present a list of all the creature under man’s rule. *Do the two halves of this Pasuk refer to the same thing or are there two different sets of creatures in each?* Sheep and oxen are domesticated animals. “Animals” in the second half can simple be a more inclusive term for all animals. However the conjunction וגם, “even,” implies that there is something completely new in the second half. בהמות שדי is better translated as “wild beasts.” Not only does man rule over domestic animals on the farm, but even the wild beasts of the field.

(ט) צִפּוֹר שָׁמַיִם וְדָגֵי הַיָּם עֵבֶר אֲרָחוֹת יָמִים :

Pasuk 9 – *How many more sets of creatures are listed in this Pasuk?* Only two (not three): birds and fish. “Whatever travels the paths of the sea” in the second half is parallel

to and expands “fish of the sea.” Notice that **הים** is singular in the first half and becomes plural **ימים** in the second. This emphasizes the great expanse of all the seas and everything in them. There are over 25,000 documented species of fish besides plants and other organisms in the seas. *Did anyone ever go snorkeling? What did you see?*

*Make a list of all the creatures in these two pesukim. In what order are they presented? Compare it with the order in which they were created in Bereshit 1.*

|                     |            |
|---------------------|------------|
| Mizmor 8:8-9        | Creation   |
| 1. Domestic animals | 1. Fish    |
| 2. Wild animals     | 2. Birds   |
| 3. Birds            | 3. Animals |
| 4. Fish             |            |

*Why are they in opposite order?* Bereshit organizes them from the least complex to the most complex, the order in which they were created (or evolved). This Mizmor wants to show how amazing it is that man can control so many things. Therefore the list goes from the easiest to control to the most difficult and inaccessible. Animals are on land and easy to get to. Birds in the air require traps to bring them down to the ground and catch them. Fish are the most difficult since humans do not live on the sea. Only by building boats and casting nets are they able to dominate the seas as well.

(י) דִּדְךָ אֲדַגִּינוּ מָה אֲדִיר שְׁמֶךָ בְּכָל הָאָרֶץ:

*Why is this Pasuk repeated? Don't we know this already? What does the envelope structure accomplish?* When we read the refrain at the beginning, it does not impact us on an emotional level. We agree with it intellectually but it sounds like a truism. After reading the body of the Mizmor, we read the refrain with an entirely new appreciation. After we have time to concentrate on the greatness of God, the expanse of the nighttime sky, the puniness of man, the paradox of human existence, and our responsibility as God's appointed rulers of earth, we exclaim with fresh enthusiasm that Hashem is truly majestic throughout the land.

### Bibliography

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