



TOWARDS MEANINGFUL

TEFILLA

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YOM HA'ATZMAUT



שיר המעלות

The first time I davened in shul on Yom Haatzmaut in Israel, I was extremely confused. I could not understand the weird combination of Tefillot...words from Birchat Rosh Chodesh, shofar blowing, parts of Lecha Dodi, etc.....And finally we concluded with שיר המעלות, the perek of Tehillim (126) usually recited before bentching on Shabbat and Yom Tov!!! What was this paragraph of bentching doing in our Yom Haatzmaut davening??

Though it might seem strange at first glance, when one looks at the words of this mizmor, it becomes very clear why שיר המעלות fits right into the theme of the day. In fact, shortly after Israel became the Jewish state, there was a discussion as to what song to choose for its national anthem. Ultimately, the HaTikva was chosen, but one of the other prime candidates was none other than שיר המעלות.

Let's take a moment to take a deeper look at these very familiar words.

שיר המעלות בשוב ה' את־שיבת ציון היינו כחלמים: אָז

יִמְלֵא שְׂחוֹק פִּינוּ וּלְשׁוֹנֵנוּ רִנָּה אֲזַי אִמְרוּ בְּגוֹיִם הַגְּדִיל ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת עִם־אֱלֹהֵי: הַגְּדִיל ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת עִמָּנוּ הָיִינוּ שְׂמֵחִים

A song of ascents. When Hashem returns the returnees to Zion, we shall be like dreamers. Then our mouths will be filled with laughter and our tongues with songs of praise. Then they will say among the nations, "Hashem has done great things for these people." Indeed, Hashem has done great things for us and we are happy.:

In this first half of the perek, we sing about the feelings evoked at the time that Bnei Yisrael return to Eretz Yisrael. We describe the utter and complete joy upon re-entering the land. שיר המעלות is the song of our redemption, of our return to Eretz Yisrael.

When was this song sung? **Rashi** explains that it was sung at the end of Galut Bavel. After 70 years in Babylonian exile, we were given the opportunity to return to Eretz Yisrael. Koresh, the King of Persia, granted permission for those who wished to return. As those Jews arrived in Israel, they exclaimed in disbelief, they felt like it was all a dream, that they had been miraculously returned to their land. The **Radak** on the other hand, explains that this is a song for the future. When we finally return to Israel after the second exile, this will be our song of redemption. Many of us who have made Aliya, have felt these



very feelings of tremendous joy, of the unbelievable fact that our dreams have been realized.

It's not surprising that these two commentaries understand this perek to be referring to two completely different eras. Tehillim was purposely written ambiguously so that its words can apply in all times. Past and future are interchangeable, leaving room for varying interpretations.

We now continue with the second half of the perek.

שׁוֹבָה ה' אֶת־שְׁבִיטֵינוּ כְּאֶפְיָקִים בְּנִגְבִּ: הַזְרְעִים בְּדִמְעָה
בְּרִנָּה יִקְצְרוּ: הַלֹּחַ יֵלֵךְ וּבִכָּה נִשְׂא מִשָּׁךְ־הַזֶּרַע בְּאֵיבוֹא
בְּרִנָּה נִשְׂא אֶלְמִתָּיו:

Return, Hashem, our captives like streams in dry land. Those who plant with tears will harvest with song. He will walk along weeping, carrying the seeds; but he will return with song, carrying his sheaves.

The second half of the perek is a follow-up request to Hashem. We are so happy with what we have but things are not yet perfect. This is true in both of the above interpretations. In the times of Ezra and Nechemya, despite Koresh's permission, very few people actually chose to return and there was a lot of political unrest and religious laxity. The same is true today – we have so much to be thankful for - we have our own Jewish state, Aliya is on the rise, amazing advancements have been made in all areas. And yet, there leaves a lot to be desired. And so, from the midst of our euphoria and feelings of gratitude, we call out to Hashem and ask that He continue to

bring in the waves of Aliya and that all of our efforts will yield fruit.

It's interesting to note that though we end off on an imperfect note, this chapter of Tehillim is considered to be one of quintessential simcha. When searching for an appropriate perek to recite before bentsching at a meal of simcha (Shabbat, Yom Tov, brit milah etc), this one was specifically selected. Why? Perhaps the answer is as follows. Sometimes, we can get so frustrated with the situation we are in. We are working so hard to build up the Jewish state, whether it be politically, socially, academically, religiously, or technologically. But sometimes, we feel that we are stuck. This mizmor ends off with a reassuring message – we may plant those seeds with tears, it may be very difficult, but ultimately we will harvest the crops with song and joy. We will see the fruits of our labor. And so this is the ultimate song of happiness, because even though life in Medinat Yisrael may not be perfect, it's all part of a process leading towards complete Geula במהרה בימינו. ■

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