

*Excerpt from the Kehot Tehillim
in honor of 11 Nissan 5780
"The Rebbe's Kapitel" - Psalm 119*

תהלים TEHILLIM BOOK of PSALMS

*With commentary from the Talmud, Midrash, Kabbalah,
classic commentators, and the Chasidic Masters*



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TEHILLIM BOOK OF PSALMS

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נסדר ע"י הת' שניאור זלמן בן מרדכי שלמה הכהן וברכה אסתר שיחיו
הת' שלום דובער בן הר' יוסף וחסיא ליבא שיחיו
והת' יעקב הירש בן הר' מאיר עזרה ואסתר גיטל שיחיו

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DAY 25

David composed this prominent psalm in alphabetical sequence—eight verses for each letter. Every verse contains one of the following words (referring to different aspects of the Torah): *Way, Torah, Testimony, Precept, Commandment, Statement* (translated

119

- 1 Fortunate are those whose way is artless, who walk with the Torah of God. 2 Fortunate are those who guard His testimonies, who seek Him with all their hearts. 3 Indeed, they have not done iniquity; they walked in His ways. 4 You have commanded Your precepts to be observed diligently.



confined our souls within the ego's self-oriented worldview. This realization triggers our heartfelt cry and intensifies it until it reaches a crescendo of genuine soulful longing. And because this cry comes from the core of the soul, it reaches, touches, and elicits the core of God.

This idea is expressed in the present verse, in its literal translation: *From narrow straits I called to God; with a vast expanse, God answered me:* to experience the limitless, vast expanse of God's Essence, we must first be conscious of the woeful *narrow straits* in which we find ourselves (Rabbi Shalom DovBer of Lubavitch).⁹¹

PSALM 119

This psalm is the loftiest of all the Psalms (Ibn Yachya). David prays that God help him to know God's ways. David expresses his intense desire for Godly knowledge and affirms that his enemies will fail to distract him from his spiritual pursuit. At all times, his eyes and heart will be dedicated to serving God and cleaving to the ways of Torah and mitzvot. He asks for God to help him succeed in these efforts.

With the Godly spirit with which he was graced, David

expresses his yearning with an abundance of praises for Torah and mitzvot (Meiri).

David declares that God's Torah is the path by which we can attain eternal life. He begs God's mercy for himself and all of Israel, that He guide us and help us to understand His greatness and therefore revere Him, that we perceive the goodness of His ways and thus love Him. Foreseeing the exile of his people, the ingathering of the exiles, the war of Gog, the birth pangs of Mashiach's arrival and subsequent redemption, David arose and prayed for God's deliverance (Sforno; see verse 105).

Almost every verse in the psalm contains at least one of ten terms that describe various elements of the Torah, explained in the chart below. Some verses contain two of the terms. When the Psalmist refers to a particular term, he does not intend to exclude the other terms. [E.g., when he says that those who guard God's testimonies are fortunate, the same applies to those who guard His statutes.]

The psalm includes a number of verses that David composed in times of distress or when he was fleeing his enemies. When he composed the present psalm, he included these verses, since they express his frustration over his difficulties, which hindered his involvement with the Torah and wisdom (Radak).⁹²

91. Sefer Hamaamarim 5671, p. 1.

92. Meiri counts an additional two terms: *orach* (path) and *niflaot* (wonders).

Torah Aspect	Radak	Other Commentators
Torah (instruction)	<i>The Torah's instructions regarding how the mitzvot should be performed.</i>	<i>A general term for all of the Torah (Meiri). A reference to one of the two Torahs—the Written Torah or the Oral Torah (Alef Binah).</i>
Derech (way or path)	<i>Refining one's character traits by adopting God's ways—being kind like God, merciful like God, etc.</i>	<i>Mitzvot that guide a person on the path to refined character traits (Meiri).</i>
Chukim (statutes)	<i>Mitzvot whose reasons have not been revealed (to the masses—Rabbi Avraham Ben-Ramoch).</i>	<i>Chukecha refers to positive commandments; chukotecha refers to negative commandments (Alef Binah).</i>

א אֲשֶׁרִי תִמְיַי־דָּרְךָ הֶהְלֵכִים בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה: ב אֲשֶׁרִי
נִצְרִי עֲדָתִי בְּכָל־לֵב יִדְרְשׁוּהוּ: ג אֶף לֹא־פָעַלְוּ עוֹלָה
בְּדַרְכָּיו הֵלְכוּ: ד אֶתָּה צוֹנֵיתָה פִּקְדֵיךָ לְשֹׁמֵר מֵאֹד: ה אֲחֵלִי יִפְנוּ



יום כה

זה המזמור נכבד מאד וחברו דוד על שמונה א"ב וכל אות ח' פסוקים ובכל פסוק יש בו דרך או תורה עדות פקודים מצוה אמירה דבור משפט צדק חקים, כל המזמור הוא מוסר ובקשות גדולות שמן הראוי לכל אדם לאמרו בכל יום והוא הכנה גדולה לעבודת הקדוש ברוך הוא (פר"ץ ב"ן דמ"ה סימן שבעה) מלת עדותיך בוי"ו חולם:



Mitzvot	Mitzvot whose description in the Torah contains the word mitzvah.	Both positive and negative commandments (Alef Binah).
Mishpatim (laws or judgments)	The Torah's laws that govern human interactions.	This can refer either to Torah laws or to punishment that atones for sin (Alef Binah).
Eidot (testimonies)	Mitzvot that testify to and commemorate Jewish values, such as Shabbat, the Festivals, tzitzit, tefillin, and the like.	A reference to both the Written and Oral Torahs (Alef Binah).
Pikudim (precepts)	Mitzvot that are dictated by human logic as well as by the Torah. ⁹³	Prayer (Alef Binah).
Tzedek (righteousness)	Justification of the commandments, demonstrating their righteousness.	Mitzvot that govern human interactions (Meiri).
Dibbur and Amirah (statement, word, promise)	1. General terms that include all mitzvot; 2. God's promises; 3. Dibbur alludes to God's will in creation.	Dibbur refers to the Talmud, wherein God's speech is properly expounded and clarified. Amirah refers to the secrets of the Torah (Alef Binah).
Emunah (faith, truth, trustworthiness)	The fulfillment of His word in creation.	

Why Eight?

The commentaries offer various suggestions as to why David composed eight verses for each of the letters of the Aleph Bet.

- The number eight corresponds to eight means by which wisdom is acquired: the five senses, information acquired from teachers, extrapolation, and faith (Radak).
- The number eight corresponds to eight elements of the self: the five senses and three elements of the spirit—growth, desire, and intellect. By repeating eight verses per letter,

David alludes to his desire to commit every element of his being to the service of God (Meiri).

- The number eight alludes to the Jewish people, who are circumcised on the eighth day (Chazeh Tzion).
- Eight represents the miraculous, that which transcends the natural order, which is epitomized by the number seven, as in the seven days of the week. The number eight therefore appears in the context of that which is beyond the natural and rational. For example, the covenant of circumcision, expressing the bond between us and God that transcends reason, occurs on the eighth day. Similarly, we received the Torah, which transcends this world, on the fiftieth day, after seven weeks of counting. In choosing eight verses per letter, David similarly affirms the tran-

93. They are called pikudim, which is cognate to pikadon, "a deposit," since these mitzvot are "deposited" and implanted in the human heart (Radak).

here as *Word* or *Promise*), *Word*, *Judgment* (or *Laws*), *Righteousness*, or *Statute*. Replete with morals and prayers, this psalm should be recited daily as a powerful preparation for the service of God. (In verses beginning with one of the letters of the mnemonic PeReTZ BeN DaMaH, the word “עֲדוּתֶיךָ” is pronounced “eidvotecha.”)

5 My wish is that my ways be directed to keep Your statutes. **6** Then I will not be ashamed when I gaze upon all Your commandments, since I will have fulfilled them. **7** I will give thanks to You with uprightness of heart, when I learn the judgments of Your righteousness. **8** I will keep Your statutes superbly; do not forsake me. **9** How can a lad keep his way pure? By observing Your word. **10** With all my heart I have sought You; do not let me stray from Your commandments. **11** I have harbored Your word in my heart, that I might not sin against You. **12** Blessed are You, O God, teach me Your statutes. **13** With my lips, I have recounted all the judgments of Your mouth. **14** I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies,



scendent nature of Torah and mitzvot (see Maharal, *Ner Mitzvah*, p. 23).

The early commentators do not seem to address whether there is a particular theme to each set of eight verses. Alshich, however, does point out certain themes. For example, in the first set of eight verses, the Psalmist emphasizes his commitment to the mitzvot with simple faith. In the second set, he asks God to help him understand the reasons behind the mitzvot (see commentary by Rabbi Avraham Ben-Ramoch).⁹⁴

119:5



אֶחָלַי יִכְנֹוּ דְרָכֵי לְשֹׁמֵר חֻקֶּיךָ **My wish is that my ways be directed to keep Your statutes.** The “statutes” of the Torah are those mysterious *mitzvot* whose rationale is unknown to us, e.g., the laws of the red heifer. These *mitzvot* are the hardest to observe. David therefore asks that God help him to fulfill the *statutes*, which will lead automatically to his fulfilling the other *mitzvot* (Alshich).

Patients do not need to understand how a medicine prescribed for them effects their healing. Similarly, understanding how a mitzvah works need not be a prerequisite to its performance. David alludes to this metaphor with the word for *my wish* (*achalai*), which contains the root for *ill* (*choleh*). Thinking about the metaphor of the patient helps one to adhere to the *statutes* (*Etz Hadaat Tov*).

94. Several works are dedicated to explaining this psalm, most prominently *Alef Binah*, by the saintly Kabbalist Rabbi Yaakov Abuchatzera. See *Yashmia* for an extensive list.

119:6

❧ MISPLACED HUMILITY ❧



אֲנִי לֹא אֶבְשֹׁם בְּהִבְטִי אֶל-כָּל-מִצְוֹתֶיךָ **Then I will not be ashamed when I gaze upon all Your commandments.** One who possesses knowledge must not shy away from teaching others. When it comes to Torah erudition, humility is misplaced. As the Psalmist declares, *I will not be ashamed when I gaze upon all Your commandments*: I will not hide my knowledge of the Torah—I will share it (*The Rebbe*).⁹⁵

119:8

אֶת־חֻקֶּיךָ אֲשֶׁמֶר אֶל־תִּשְׁכַּחַנִּי עַד־מָאֵד **I will keep Your statutes superbly; do not forsake me.** I intend to keep Your statutes superbly—with all my heart and with all my strength. Respond to me in kind, and do not forsake me—help me fulfill the *mitzvot* (Radak).

Alternatively: *I will keep Your statutes; do not forsake me utterly*. Although You do not interfere with our moral decisions and “forsake us” to our own free choice, *Do not forsake me utterly*—give me some help to incline my heart to You (*Sforno*).

119:9

בְּמָה יִזְכֶּה־נַּעַר אֶת־אָרְחוֹ לְשֹׁמֵר כְּדָרְכֶךָ **How can a lad keep his way pure? By observing Your word.** A person must practice what he has studied; otherwise, his way is the opposite of pure. Just as we must train young

95. *Torat Menachem*—*Hitvaaduyot* 5746, vol. 2, pp. 684-685. Rambam uses this verse as the opening to his *Mishneh Torah*. Rambam had an ambitious vision for the *Mishneh Torah*, viewing it as the authoritative codification of Torah law. In anticipation of those who would doubt such a claim, Rambam prefaces his work with this verse, effectively saying that he is confident in his studies and that his knowledge obligates him to teach others (*ibid*).

דַּרְכֵי לְשֹׁמֵר חֻקֶּיךָ: וְאִזְּ לֹא-אֲבוֹשׁ בְּהִבִּטִּי אֶל-כָּל-מִצְוֹתֶיךָ:
וְאוֹדֶךָ בְּיֶשֶׁר לֵבָב בְּלִמּוּדֵי מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ צְדָקָה: ח אֶת-חֻקֶּיךָ אֲשֶׁמֹּר
אֶל-תַּעֲזִיבֵנִי עַד-מָאֵד:

ט בְּמֶה יִזְכֶּה-נַעַר אֶת-אַרְחוֹ לְשֹׁמֵר כְּדָבָרְךָ: י בְּכָל-לְבִי דִרְשָׁתֶיךָ
אֶל-תִּשְׁגֵּנִי מִמִּצְוֹתֶיךָ: יא בְּלִבִּי צִפְנֹתִי אִמְרָתְךָ לְמַעַן לֹא אֶחָטְא-
לָךְ: יב בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה לְמַדְנִי חֻקֶּיךָ: יג בְּשִׁפְתֵי סִפְרָתִי כָל
מִשְׁפָּטֵי-כִיד: יד בְּדֶרֶךְ עֲדוּתֶיךָ שִׁשְׁתִּי כַּעַל כָּל-הוֹן: טו בְּכַפּוּדֶיךָ



people to study, so must we train them from a young age to adhere to the word of God, which they are being taught. By doing so, we ensure that their path in life will be pure, from their youth into adulthood (*Radak*).

According to *Meiri*, David is humbly referring to himself as if he were but a lad, still in need of maturing. The verse describes his intense desire to perfect himself and his belief that he has not yet reached his goal despite all his efforts. He therefore turns to God for help in reaching yet higher. Accordingly, the verse is read not as a question and an answer but as a rhetorical question of yearning: *How can a lad, the yet imperfect person, purify his way so that he can attain the ultimate level of observing Your word?*

❧ ALEF & BET ❧



In the previous verses, David asks God to help him keep the *statutes, mitzvot* whose reason escapes us. Now, he asks God to teach him the reasons for these *mitzvot*. He introduces this new request with a disclaimer: An immature lad should fulfill the *mitzvot* with simple faith. *How does a lad keep his youthful way pure? By observing Your word as You spoke them, without delving into their reasons.*

But one who has matured should seek the reasons for the *mitzvot*, since he does so not to justify their performance but out of a thirst for Divine wisdom. As David states in verse 10: *With all my heart I have sought You.* Understanding the reasons for *mitzvot* introduces the danger of tampering with them. King Solomon, for example, thought that he could ignore the mitzvah that a king should not have many wives, thinking that the *reason* for that mitzvah did not apply to him. David therefore concludes that verse with a note of caution: Teach me the

reasons for the *mitzvot* but *do not let me stray from Your commandments* (*Alshich*).⁹⁶

❧ HOSPITALITY FOR A SON ❧



Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, after fourteen years of marriage, asked his teacher, Rabbi DovBer of Mezritch, for a blessing that he have a son. Rabbi DovBer responded with a homiletic interpretation of the verse:

How does one merit to have a son (בְּמֶה יִזְכֶּה נַעַר)? *By welcoming guests* (אֶת אַרְחוֹ). Rabbi Schneur Zalman followed his teacher's advice and, soon thereafter, merited to have his first son, Rabbi DovBer (*Igrot Kodesh* by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, vol. 4, p. 30).⁹⁷

119:10



With all my heart I have sought You. This alludes to one who achieves complete dominance over the animal soul during prayer. This person seeks God with his or her *entire heart* so that both the Godly soul and its animalistic antagonist join in the pursuit of Godliness (*Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi*).⁹⁸

119:11

I have harbored Your word in my heart, that I might not sin against You. I have engraved Your laws in my memory so that I not forget them and sin out of ignorance (*Radak; Meiri*).



The evil inclination is powerless when in the proximity of Torah. Consequently, one who harbors the

96. See *Kehot Pirkei Avot*, commentary to 2:1.

97. See also *Sefer Hasichot* 5697, p. 161. *Sefer Hatoldot Admur HaEmtza'ee*, p. 19.

98. *Likkutei Torah, Matot* 85c.

as one would rejoice over an abundance of riches. **15** I will speak of Your precepts, and gaze intently upon Your ways. **16** I will delight in Your statutes; I will therefore not forget Your word.

17 Deal kindly with Your servant so that I may live to keep Your word. **18** Unveil my eyes, that I may behold wonders from Your



Torah in his heart is protected from the evil inclination. Thus: *I have harbored Your word in my heart so that I might not sin against You (Midrash Tehillim).*

119:14

✿ MITZVOT AS WITNESSES ✿



בְּדֶרֶךְ עֲדוּתֶיךָ שִׂשְׁתִּי כְּעַל כְּלִיָּהוֹן I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies, as one would rejoice over an abundance of riches. Numerous times throughout this psalm, the *mitzvot* are referred to as *testimonies*. Testimony illuminates an otherwise murky state of affairs. When we cannot ascertain what truly happened in a given situation, testimony enlightens us. *Mitzvot* are the ultimate “witnesses,” testifying to the existence of God, which is otherwise obscured by creation. When we fulfill God’s commands using the materials of this world, we make God visible in creation. Thus, the Psalmist refers to *mitzvot* as the *way*, or *path*, of *Your testimonies*, since the *mitzvot* form a path that leads us to recognize our Creator (*Rabbi Shalom DovBer of Lubavitch; Tzemach Tzedek*).⁹⁹

119:15

✿ DIVINE PATHWAYS ✿



בְּפִקּוּדֶיךָ אֲשִׁיחָה וְאִבְטִיחָ אֶרְחֵיךָ I will speak of Your precepts, and gaze intently upon Your ways. At times, one’s mind and heart may be insensitive to the Godly light within the *mitzvot*. Still, one can appreciate that they are God’s *ways*. Just as people revere the path on which the king treads, even when the king is not present, so should we revere the path of the *mitzvot*, even if we cannot discern their inherent Divine light. As the Psalmist declares: *I will gaze upon Your ways*—I will follow the *mitzvot* because they are Your ways, the pathway on which You tread (*Rabbi DovBer of Lubavitch*).¹⁰⁰

99. Or *Hatorah, Bereishit*, vol. 5, pp. 1712-1713; B’Shaah Shehikdimu 5672, vol. 1, p. 76.

100. *Ner Mitzvah V’Torah Or* 3b.



Reciting Psalm 119. One who recites this psalm regularly opens his heart to the study of Divine wisdom and to become conscientious in the service of God (*Ibn Yachia*).

Chida writes: One should try to complete the recitation of Psalm 119 each week.¹⁰¹ Doing so brings protection from all types of harm (*Avodat Hakodesh*).

Some have the custom to recite this psalm each day before the *Minchah* prayer, especially on Shabbat. Some communities had the custom of bringing school children to the synagogue each day before *Minchah* to recite this psalm (*Me’am Loez*).

In some communities, it is customary to recite it every Shabbat after the *Minchah* prayer. This was the custom of the Rebbe’s father, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson (*Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 29, p. 289, fn. 19).

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה לְמַדְנִי חֻקֶּיךָ

Blessed are You, O God, teach me Your statutes (119:12).

Torah Blessings. Before reading from the Torah, a Jew must recite a blessing. This is alluded to in the present verse: *Blessed are You, O God, teach me Your statutes*—the Psalmist first blesses God and only then studies the Torah (*Devarim Rabbah* 8:2).¹⁰²

101. See *Tanya, Kuntres Acharon*, end.

102. See *Berachot* 21b, where a different verse is cited. Each day, prior to the reciting the blessing, it is forbidden to *speak* words of Torah, but one can *think* words of Torah. This resolves the contradiction between verses 11 and 13. In verse 11, the Psalmist proclaims that he keeps God’s word *in his heart*, which implies that he does not verbalize them. In verse 13, however, he proclaims that he recounts God’s judgments with his lips. What changed from verse 11 to 13? The answer is: verse 12, which alludes to the blessing recited over reading the Torah (*Tehillah L’David* by Rabbi Avraham Chai Musafya, citing his teacher).

The verse alludes to another situation where one ought not to verbalize words of Torah—when studying Kabbalistic aspects of the Torah in the presence of those unable to comprehend them (*Kedushat Levi*).

According to *Chida*, verse 11 refers to a situation where one is in an unclean place and therefore forbidden from even *thinking* words of Torah. Thus: *In my heart I hid Your word*—I suppressed any Torah thought—so that I would not sin to you.

Citing *Sefer Chasidim* (§546), *Chida* writes that in the merit of suppressing a Torah thought when required, one merits to be enlightened by God and to

אֲשִׁיחָה וְאֶבִּיטָה אֶרְחֹתֶיךָ: מִן בְּחֻקֶּיךָ אֲשַׁתַּעֲשֶׂה לֹא אֶשְׁכַּח
דְּבָרְךָ:

יִגְמַל עַל-עַבְדְּךָ אֲחִיָּה וְאֶשְׁמְרָה דְּבָרְךָ: יְיָ גַּל-עֵינַי וְאֶבִּיטָה



Mistaken Blessings. The first three words of this verse (in Hebrew) are identical to the first three words of a standard blessing: *Baruch atah Ado-nai* (Blessed are You, God). This allows one to “recover” in the midst of mistakenly reciting an unnecessary blessing. For example, if one began reciting a blessing over a drink and then spilled the drink midsentence, he cannot complete the blessing, and his recitation of God’s Name will have been in vain. But if he has only said the words *Baruch atah Ado-nai*, he should immediately say the last words of the present verse, *lamdeni chukecha* (teach me Your statutes). In effect, he has then simply recited a verse from the Torah, in which one may recite God’s Name (see *Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim* 206:13).

119:18

✽ UNNATURAL REQUEST ✽



Unveil my eyes
that I may behold wonders from Your

Torah. As long as the soul resides in this world, the wonders of God’s Torah remain obscured. Only after ascending to the next world and shedding its material shell can the soul apprehend the deepest secrets of the Torah.

In verse 17, David expresses his desire to remain alive in this world so that he can keep God’s Torah. Yet, ironically, as long as he remains in this world, its materiality impedes his ability to comprehend the Torah’s depths. He therefore prays that God unveil his eyes so that he can behold the wonders of the Torah even while physically alive (*Alshich*).

✽ TORAH’S BODY & SOUL ✽



A human being is comprised of body and soul. Clothes cover the body, which, in turn, cloaks the soul. The Torah, too, has a figurative soul, body, and garments. The stories of the Torah are its garments. The Torah’s law is its body. And the secrets of the Torah, the deeper meanings of its laws and stories, is its soul. The fool appraises people based on their garments. The per-

better understand the Torah. This is alluded to in the subsequent verse: *Blessed are You, O God, teach me Your statutes.*

ceptive person examines the soul. David asks to be privy to the soul of Torah, its wondrous meanings and messages: *Unveil my eyes, that I may behold wonders from Your Torah* (*Zohar*).¹⁰³



The *wonders from Your Torah* are the mystical ideas buried beneath the Torah’s exterior. The human mind cannot fathom these Godly secrets. Our inability to relate to the Torah’s secrets is partially due to the limitations of the intellect but mainly due to the intrinsic subtlety of these concepts. The *wonders* elude us not just because we are limited but because they are God’s inner “thoughts,” so they remain essentially unfathomable.

If so, why does David ask God to *unveil my eyes*, implying that the only obstacle to seeing *Your wonders* is David’s shortsightedness? Surely a more effective request would be to ask God to “show” or “reveal” these wonders directly to us. It would seem that since these wonders are beyond our intellectual reach, the only remedy is for God to miraculously demystify them.

The vision God has for creation is the merging of heaven and earth, i.e., that the Godly truth evident in heaven becomes obvious in the physical realm. But God does not wish to impose the truth of His being upon His unknowing creations. He wants the earth to “ascend to heaven,” to absorb this truth on its own terms. The world must absorb the Godly reality to the point where it becomes obvious and self-evident to us.¹⁰⁴

The same holds true in regards to the Torah. The “heavenly” realm of the Torah is its wondrous secrets, which God wants to introduce to us. Granted, God can suspend our limitations and inundate us with His *wonders*, but we would not assimilate these ideas—they would not be ours. God desires for us to see the deeper dimension of the Torah with our own eyes. David’s request, therefore, is that God *unveil my eyes*. We do not ask for the Torah’s *wonders* to be conveyed to us miraculously; we ask to

103. *Zohar* III:152a. See *Zohar* I:131b. *Rambam* also interprets the present verse as referring to the secrets of the Torah; see his *Introduction to Pirush Hamishnayot*. See also *Yahel Or*.

104. See *Tanchuma, Va’era* 15. *Shemot Rabbah* 12:3.

Torah. **19** I am a sojourner on earth and will eventually pass on; therefore, do not hide Your commandments from me during my sojourn. **20** My soul is crushed with a longing for Your judgments every moment. **21** You have rebuked the accursed sinners, who stray from Your commandments. **22** Remove insult and contempt from me, for I have kept Your testimonies. **23** Though princes sit and speak against me, Your servant speaks of Your statutes. **24** Indeed, Your testimonies are my delight and my advisers.

25 My soul cleaves to the dust; revive me in accordance with Your word. **26** I have related my matters to You, and You answered me with guidance; teach me, likewise, Your statutes. **27** Make me understand the way of Your precepts, and I will speak of Your wonders to others. **28** My soul drips away out of grief; sustain me in accordance with Your word. **29** Remove from me the way of falsehood, and graciously endow me with Your Torah. **30** I have chosen the way of faith; I have placed Your judgments before me always. **31** I held fast to Your testimonies, O God, put me not to shame. **32** I will run on the path of Your commandments, for You will broaden my heart.



be able to absorb them with *our eyes*, with our distinctly human capabilities.

Accordingly, we can appreciate another interpretation of the present verse: David's request is that we be able to discern the *wonders*, the mystical secrets, *from Your Torah*—from the revealed Torah, its stories and laws. That is, we should be able to see how the revealed Torah alludes to its mystical antecedent.¹⁰⁵

We readily relate to the revealed Torah. Its stories and laws are accessible and comprehensible. The secrets of the Torah are more elusive. If we are to ascend to the secrets of the Torah with our own minds, we must use tools that are familiar to us. Thus, we look to the revealed Torah to find allusions to its mystical counterpart so that we can absorb the mystical Torah through our natural mode of understanding (*The Rebbe*).¹⁰⁶

119:19



I am a sojourner on earth; do not hide Your commandments from me. God's commandments empower us to elevate physical objects and actions. By using them

in accordance with God's desire, we reveal the Godliness latent in them. This transformative power is called *earth*, since the physical earth is a representation of the heavenly "earth," the Divine faculty of action. God gives us this earth, the Divine ability to effect change in the material world.

There are degrees, however, in how we take possession of this earth. We can be "residents," that is, full citizens who can call the land their own. Or we can be "sojourners," temporary visitors who do not enjoy the full benefits of the land. A "resident" fully possesses God's gift of transformative action. He can effect change in the material world through the commandments. The "sojourner," however, can draw God's light into the world, but he cannot create change. He cannot infuse the corporeal with the Divine. At Sinai, God gave us this power completely. From then on, through *mitzvot*, we were empowered to fuse God and creation.

David, however, felt that he lacked the full intensity of this gift. This is because the Temple had yet to be built in his lifetime. The Temple is the ultimate expression of the unity between God and matter, where a physical space becomes a home for the Divine. Until the Temple was built, David felt he was only a *sojourner on earth*—he could not completely transform creation. He therefore

105. *Torat Shmuel* 5638, p. 148.

106. *Sefer Hamaamarim Melukat*, vol. 5, pp. 271-274 [new ed.—vol. 3, pp. 291-294].

נִפְלְאוֹת מִתּוֹרָתְךָ: יָי אֶנֶכִּי בָאָרֶץ אֶל־תַּסְתֵּר מִמֶּנִּי מִצְוֹתֶיךָ:
 ב גִּרְסָה נִפְשִׁי לְתַאֲבָה אֶל־מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ בְּכָל־עֵת: כֹּא גַּעְרָתָ זִדִּים
 אֲרוּרִים הַשֹּׁגִים מִמִּצְוֹתֶיךָ: כֵּב גַּל מֵעַלִּי חֶרְפָּה וּבֹז כִּי עֲדִיתִךָ
 נִצַּרְתִּי: כֶּג גַּם יֵשְׁבוּ שָׁרִים בִּי נִדְבְּרוּ עֲבֹדְךָ יִשְׁיַח בְּחֻקֶּיךָ: כֶּד גַּם־
 עֲדִיתִךָ שֶׁעָשִׂי אֲנִשִּׁי עֲצָתִי:

כֶּה דְבַקָּה לְעֵפֶר נִפְשִׁי חֲיִנִּי בְּדִבְרֶךָ: כֶּו דְּרָכֵי סִפְרָתִי וַתַּעֲנֵנִי לְמִדְּנִי
 חֻקֶּיךָ: כֶּז דְּרֹךְ־פְּקוּדֶיךָ הִבִּינִנִּי וְאִשְׁיַחָה בְּנִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ: כֶּח דִּלְפָּה
 נִפְשִׁי מִתּוּגָה קִיַּמְנִי בְּדִבְרֶךָ: כֶּט דְּרֹךְ־שֹׁקֶר הָסֵר מִמֶּנִּי וְתוֹרָתְךָ
 חֲנִנִּי: ל דְּרֹךְ אֱמוּנָה בַּחֲרָתִי מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ שְׁוִיתִי: לֹא דְבַקְתִּי בְּעֲדוֹתֶיךָ
 יְהוָה אֶל־תִּבְשִׁשְׁנִי: לֵב דְּרֹךְ־מִצְוֹתֶיךָ אֲרוּץ כִּי תִרְחִיב לִבִּי:



asks to be graced with the power of the *commandments*, despite being, in his mind, a *sojourner on earth*. Even though *I am a sojourner on earth; do not hide Your commandments from me*—let me see the full impact of Your commandments (Tzemach Tzedek).¹⁰⁷

119:20-21



גִּרְסָה נִפְשִׁי לְתַאֲבָה אֶל־מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ בְּכָל־עֵת: גַּעְרָתָ זִדִּים
 אֲרוּרִים הַשֹּׁגִים מִמִּצְוֹתֶיךָ **My soul is crushed with a longing for Your judgments every moment. You have rebuked the accursed sinners, who stray from Your commandments.** Homiletically, the verses allude to the idea that one studying the Torah must interrupt his study in order to do a mitzvah that would otherwise go unperformed. David thus says: Although *my soul is crushed with a longing for Your judgments every moment*, to study God's Torah constantly, I will interrupt my study to do a mitzvah. I will not be like those *who stray from Your commandments* with the excuse that they are busy studying Torah. As our Sages put it (Yevamot 109b): One who says I have only Torah is bereft even of Torah, since Torah must be accompanied with *mitzvot* (Chida).

119:25

דְּבַקָּה לְעֵפֶר נִפְשִׁי חֲיִנִּי בְּדִבְרֶךָ **My soul cleaves to the dust; revive me in accordance with Your word.** According to Radak, David refers to when he was in danger, fleeing from Absalom and close to death. He therefore beseeches God to revive him in accordance with God's promise to David through the prophet Nathan, *Your days will be filled, and you will repose with your forefathers* (II Samuel 7:12).

119:28

דִּלְפָּה נִפְשִׁי מִתּוּגָה קִיַּמְנִי בְּדִבְרֶךָ **My soul drips away out of grief; sustain me in accordance with Your word.** Sustain me in my kingship, as You assured me through the prophet Nathan (II Samuel 7:16), *Your throne will be established* (Radak).



The *gematria* of the word for grief (תּוּגָה) is equal to that of the word for holiness (קְדוּשָׁה). This alludes to the fact that David's "grief" was spiritual in nature—a yearning to attain holiness (*Alef Binah*).

119:32

דְּרֹךְ־מִצְוֹתֶיךָ אֲרוּץ כִּי תִרְחִיב לִבִּי **I will run on the path of Your commandments, for You will broaden my heart.** By broadening my heart, You will enable me

107. Or Hatorah, Shemot, vol. 7, pp. 2562-2563.

33 Teach me, O God, the way of Your statutes, and I will keep it to the end of my days. **34** Grant me understanding, and I will keep Your Torah; I will observe it with all my heart. **35** Direct me in the path of Your commandments, for that is my desire. **36** Incline my heart to Your testimonies and not to greed. **37** Avert my eyes from seeing vanity; by Your ways give me life. **38** Fulfill for Your servant Your promise that my kingship will pass to my descendants, who will cleave to the fear of You. **39** Remove my shame, which I fear, for Your judgments are benevolent. **40** Behold, I have longed for Your precepts; by Your righteousness give me life.

41 And let Your kindness come to fruition for me, O God, Your salvation as You promised. **42** And I will offer a retort to those who taunt me, for I trust in Your word. **43** And do not at all remove the word of truth from my mouth, for I hope to fulfill Your judgments. **44** And I will keep Your Torah always, forever and ever. **45** And I will walk in spacious paths, for I seek Your precepts. **46** And I will



to run in the path of the *mitzvot* without any impediment (*Radak*). Alternatively: I will perform Your *mitzvot* with alacrity, for I know that, in their merit, You will broaden my heart with the spiritual delights of the World to Come (*Metzudot*).

✿ EMULATING A MITZVAH ✿



David also alludes to circumstances where it is impossible to fulfill a given mitzvah. For example, after the Temple was destroyed, many *mitzvot* became impossible to perform, such as the mitzvah of *Bikkurim*, bringing one's first fruits to the Temple to give to the priest.

Regarding such *mitzvot*, one should try to do something that approximates the mitzvah. For example, by bringing a gift to a saintly person, one approximates the mitzvah of *Bikkurim*.

Thus, David says: Even when a mitzvah cannot be fulfilled in its literal sense, *I will run in the path of Your mitzvot*—I will seek to emulate some aspect of the mitzvah (*Chida*).

✿ RUNNING FOR A MITZVAH ✿



Achitophel once encountered David walking to the study hall and commented: “When you go to pray, run like a person following a king.” David took this to

heart, as is evident from the current verse (*Kallah Rabbati* 5:4).

119:35

✿ THE PIOUS PATH ✿



הַדְרִיכֵנִי בְּנֶתִיב מִצְוֹתֶיךָ כִּי־בֹ הַפְּצֵתִי **Direct me in the path of Your commandments, for that**

is my desire. The word used here for *path*, *netiv*, implies a narrow path. Following the “narrow” path of the commandments refers to meticulous observance that goes beyond the letter of the law.

Remaining on this path is particularly difficult, since it is not strictly required. David therefore asks of God: Please do not leave me alone after showing me this path. Even once I am on it, direct me so that I do not slip away from it. I am particularly susceptible to doing so, since remaining on this path is not mandatory—I am on it only because *it is my desire* to follow it (*Alshich*).

119:36



הִטְלֵה לִּי אֶל־עֲדוּתֶיךָ וְאֶל־אֵל־בָּצַע **Incline my heart to Your testimonies and not to greed.**

Although there are spiritual and material rewards for *mitzvot*, incline my heart to fulfill them purely because they are Your testimonies, not for any personal gain.

Moreover, there are those who covet wealth so that they can be charitable and so that they can honor Shabbat and

אֶל הוֹרֵנִי יְהוָה יִרְדֵּךְ חֻקֶּיךָ וְאַצְרְנָה עֲקֵב: לֹד הִבִּינִי וְאַצְרָה
תּוֹרָתְךָ וְאַשְׁמְרָנָה בְּכָל-לֵב: לֹה הִדְרִיכֵנִי בְּנִתִּיב מִצְוֹתֶיךָ כִּי-
בֹו חָפְצָתִי: לוֹ הִטְלֵבִי אֶל-עֲדוֹתֶיךָ וְאֵל אֶל-כָּצַע: לז הֶעֱבֵר
עֵינַי מִרְאוֹת שָׁוָא בְּדֶרֶכְךָ חֲיִנִי: לח הָקֵם לְעַבְדְּךָ אִמְרָתְךָ אֲשֶׁר
לִירְאָתְךָ: לט הֶעֱבֵר חֲרָפְתִּי אֲשֶׁר יִגְרָתִי כִּי מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ טוֹבִים:
מ הִנֵּה תִאֲבָתִי לְפָקוּדֶיךָ בְּצִדְקָתְךָ חֲיִנִי:

מא וַיִּבְאֵנִי חֲסִדְךָ יְהוָה תְּשׁוּעָתְךָ בְּאִמְרָתְךָ: מב וְאַעֲנֶה חֲרָפִי
דָּבָר כִּי-בִטְחָתִי בְּדַבְּרֶךָ: מג וְאֶל-תֵּלַעַל מִפִּי דְבַר-אֱמֶת עַד-מָאֵד
כִּי לְמִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ יִחְלָתִי: מד וְאַשְׁמְרָה תּוֹרָתְךָ תָּמִיד לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד:
מה וְאַתְּהִלְכָּה בְּרַחֲבָה כִּי פָקֻדֶיךָ דָּרָשְׁתִּי: מו וְאֶדְבַּרָה בְּעֲדוֹתֶיךָ



the festivals. David therefore asks: *Incline my heart to Your testimonies and not to greed*, even the type that is a means to fulfilling Your testimonies. My heart should be inclined to nothing but *Your testimonies* (Alshich).

119:39

Remove my shame, which I fear, for Your judgments are benevolent. Remove the shame of my sin from my descendants, for Your judgment is benevolent and forgiving. Your punishment does not extend to the full measure of the crime (Radak).

119:45

And I will walk in spacious paths, for I seek Your precepts. If You will help me in my study of Torah, its path will become spacious before me (Radak), and I will not stumble in my interpretation of it. Because *I seek Your precepts*, it is proper that You enlighten my eyes about them (Metzudot).



Homiletically, the word for spacious paths (רחבה) is interpreted as thoroughfare. David proclaims that he is able to walk through marketplaces and thoroughfares without being spiritually harmed by their mundane and materialistic atmosphere. He is capable of

doing so because he always remains focused on God and revealing His presence in the world.

Thus: *I will walk in thoroughfares unharmed, for I seek Your precepts* always (Baal Shem Tov).¹⁰⁸

✿ HOLY EXTRAVAGANCE ✿



A Jew must serve God bigheartedly and generously. When it comes to fulfilling our obligations in Torah study and charity, we ought to aim higher than satisfying the minimum requirements. As the Psalmist says, *I will walk in spacious paths*—we must go beyond our comfort zones in every facet of our Divine service.¹⁰⁹

A similar approach should be brought to the financial and material spheres of our Divine service. For example, as a community, we must have a confident and bold approach to imagining the scope of our educational institutions. No student should be turned away due to a perceived lack of funds. We must *walk in spacious paths*, sparing no effort or dollar in these enterprises. God will surely reimburse us (*The Rebbe*).¹¹⁰

108. *Degel Machaneh Efraim*, parashat Teitzei.

109. *Torat Menachem—Hitvaaduyot* 5722, vol. 2, pp. 339-340.

110. *Torat Menachem—Hitvaaduyot* 5713, vol. 3, pp. 125-127.

speak of Your testimonies before kings, and I will not be ashamed. **47** And I will delight in Your commandments, which I love. **48** And I will lift up my hands to receive Your commandments, which I love, and I will speak of Your statutes.

49 Remember the word promised to Your servant, by which You gave me hope. **50** This promise is my comfort in my affliction, for Your word has given me life. **51** Though the wicked ridiculed me severely, I did not stray from Your Torah. **52** When I remember Your judgments of the wicked in the past, O God, I take comfort. **53** Trembling seized me because of the wicked, those who forsake Your Torah. **54** Yet Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my wanderings. **55** At night, I remembered Your Name, O God, and I kept Your Torah. **56** This, my success, comes to me because I kept Your precepts.



119:46

וְאֶדְבָּרָה בְּעֵדוּתֶיךָ נֶגֶד מְלָכִים וְלֹא אֶבֹּשׁ **And I will speak of Your testimonies before kings, and I will not be ashamed.** According to *Metzudot*, *kings* here refers to Torah scholars. David proclaims that if God will grant him understanding of the Torah and its testimonies, he will be able to speak of them without being ashamed, since his words will be accurate and flawless (see *Meiri*).

✿ ADMISSION OF IGNORANCE ✿



Homiletically, David means that he will not be ashamed to admit that he does *not* know. As our Sages teach: If you wish to learn, do not speak of what you have not heard, “I heard.” And if you are asked about something in which you are not proficient, do not be embarrassed to say, “I do not know.”

From where is this derived? From David, who said: “*And I will speak of Your testimonies before kings, and I will not be ashamed*—I will not be ashamed to consult with my teacher Mephibosheth on how to proceed, whether to prohibit or to permit” (*Masechet Kallah Rabbati* 4:5; see *Berachot* 4a and 86:2, above).

Alternatively, the *kings* of the verse are understood literally as monarchs, who scoffed at David’s study of Torah, yet David is not ashamed (*Radak*). At times, a person is more embarrassed in front of people than before the Creator. As Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai told his students: “May it be that you should fear heaven as much as you fear mortals.” David thus says to the idolatrous kings who mocked his study of Torah: *And I will speak of Your*

testimonies before kings, and I will not be ashamed (*Tur, Orach Chaim* 1).

119:50

✿ LIVING WORDS ✿



זֹאת נַחֲמָתִי בְּעָנִי כִּי אִמְרַתְךָ הִתְנִי **This is my comfort in my affliction, for Your word has given me life.** *Your word* alludes to the words of the Torah. Every soul is rooted in a letter of the Torah. That letter is an individual’s life-force. When we are *afflicted*, we turn to the words of Torah—our source of life—for rejuvenation (*Rabbi Shalom DovBer of Lubavitch*).¹¹¹

119:54

יְמֵרוֹת הָיִדְלִי הִקִּיד בְּבֵית מִגְוִרִי **Yet Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my wanderings.** Wherever I sojourned during my exiles and wanderings, I would study Torah with joy, like someone who is singing (*Metzudot*).

The word for *my wanderings* (מִגְוִרִי) can also mean *my fear*: Even when I was fearful of my enemies, I continued to study Your Torah with joy, as if I were secure (*Meiri*).

✿ DAVID’S MISTAKE ✿



When David returned the Ark after it had been captured by the Philistines, he placed it on a wagon.¹¹² David momentarily forgot the law that states that the Ark may only be carried on the Levites’ shoulders and never on a wagon.¹¹³ This blunder led to a fatal consequence:

111. *Sefer Hamaamarim* 5678, p. 50. *Yom Tov Shel Rosh Hashanah* 5666, p. 385.

112. See II Samuel, ch. 6.

113. Numbers 7:9.

נִגְדַּר מִלְכִּים וְלֹא אִבּוֹשׁ: **מו** וְאַשְׁתַּעֲשַׁע בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר אֶהְבֵּתִי:
מח וְאַשָּׂא כַּפִּי אֶל־מִצְוֹתֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר אֶהְבֵּתִי וְאַשִּׁיחָה בְּחֻקֶּיךָ:
מט זָכַר־דָּבָר לְעִבְדְּךָ עַל אֲשֶׁר יִחַלֶּתְנִי: **נ** זֹאת נַחֲמָתִי בְּעֵינַי כִּי
 אֶמְרָתְךָ חֵיתָנִי: **נא** זָדִים הֵלִיצֵנִי עַד־מָאֹד מִתּוֹרָתְךָ לֹא נָטִיתִי:
נב זָכַרְתִּי מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ מַעֲלָם | יְהוָה וְאַתְנָחֶם: **נג** זִלְעָפָה אֶחְזֹתֶנִי
 מִרְשָׁעִים עֲזָבִי תּוֹרָתְךָ: **נד** זְמֵרוֹת הַיּוֹלֵי חֻקֶּיךָ בְּבֵית מְגוּרֵי:
נה זָכַרְתִּי בְּלִילָה שִׁמְךָ יְהוָה וְאַשְׁמְרָה תּוֹרָתְךָ: **נו** זֹאת הִיְתָה־לִּי
 כִּי פָקַדְךָ נִצָּרְתִּי:



the death of Uzza, one of the Ark-bearers. The Talmud states that David's lapse in judgment and the subsequent fatality was a punishment from God for his having called the Torah a "song," as he says in this verse, *Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my wanderings*. God admonished David saying, "David, the Torah, about which it is written (Proverbs 23:5), *Should you blink your eyes at it, it is not here*—you call it a song? I will cause you to forget a law that even children know" (*Sotah* 35a).



The Torah is the blueprint of creation. Indeed, every detail of the cosmos is rooted in the Torah. The existence of creation is therefore contingent upon the observance of the Torah and its commandments. When we observe the *mitzvot* properly, we facilitate the continued existence of creation. Conversely, when we are lax in our observance, we disrupt the flow of Divine energy to creation.

When we realize that our vast universe depends upon one minute detail of a mitzvah, we change our perception of the material world as it relates to the Torah. Our material discomforts become less significant, even insignificant.

David admired this aspect of Torah because it brought him solace in times of distress. David was terrified when he was pursued by his enemies and forced to flee to foreign lands. But upon recalling that all of creation is contingent on the Torah, he recognized the insignificance of the material world. His troubles evaporated when he recalled the Torah (the song).

This theme is further alluded to in the word used here for *song* (זָמַר), which is related to the word for "cut" or

"sever." The Torah, David is saying, can cut away the fear we experience throughout life. Moreover, the forces of evil that impede our Divine service can be eradicated when we focus on the hegemony of Torah.¹¹⁴

Yet David was scolded for adopting this approach to his suffering. Ultimately, we are expected to improve our circumstances and better our surroundings, not shun them or grow fatalistic. Prayer embodies this loftier approach, in which we attempt to raise all the aspects of our lives, our trials and weaknesses, to a higher reality. Our challenges become opportunities. If we reflect only on the Torah's supremacy, although we may succeed in anesthetizing our painful reality, we forfeit the chance to refine that reality. So, while David's approach was effective in his situation, he was expected to find a more comprehensive solution in which his enemies would be elevated and not eliminated entirely (*Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch*).¹¹⁵

The Essence of Torah

Alternatively, David was punished for focusing on an external aspect of Torah and not appreciating the Torah's true beauty. In its purest form, Torah is God's wisdom. It

114. David found comfort in the Torah's sovereignty over creation by reflecting on the level of Torah that is represented by its *chukim* (statutes), the supra-rational laws of the Torah. Unlike the *mitzvot* that the mind can appreciate, *chukim* are incomprehensible to the human mind. They are simply God's pure and unadulterated will. Thus, they represent the aspect of Torah that is divorced from the human realm. On the other hand, those *mitzvot* that are comprehensible represent how the Torah interacts with us within our realm. The supra-rational *mitzvot*, however, remind us that ultimately, Torah dominates creation. David realized the dominance of Torah when he focused on *Your statutes*—on how the Torah completely transcends the human sphere (*Sefer Hamaamarim Melukat*, vol. 2, pp. 56-58 [new ed.—vol. 4, pp. 14-16]).

115. *Sefer Hamaamarim* 5687, pp. 202-208.

57 God is my portion, I said, to keep Your words. 58 I pleaded before You with all my heart; have compassion upon me in accordance with Your word. 59 I contemplated my ways, and returned my feet to Your testimonies. 60 I hurried and did not delay to keep Your commandments. 61 Bands of wicked men plundered me, yet I did not forget Your Torah. 62 At midnight, I rise to thank You for Your righteous judgments. 63 I am a friend to all who fear You and to those who keep Your precepts. 64 Your kindness, O God, fills the earth—teach me Your statutes.

65 You have dealt goodness to Your servant, O God, in accord with Your promise. 66 Teach me the goodness and wisdom of the Torah's reasons, for I believe in Your commandments. 67 Before I



is one with God Himself and, like God, utterly transcends creation. Once we begin to speak of a relationship between the Torah and creation, even one in which the Torah is dominant, we are describing a secondary dimension of the Torah. Thus, David understated the quality of the Torah when he portrayed its supremacy over the world.

David is therefore punished with forgetfulness. We forget that which we have not fully internalized. Conversely, when we grasp the core of an idea, we become one with it and inseparable from it. By focusing on the external, subordinate aspect of Torah, David relinquished his absolute unity with the Torah's essence and was therefore prone to forgetting its laws (*Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi*).¹¹⁶

The Unembellished Song

Alternatively, David erred in referring to the Torah as a *song*. The word for *song* that is used in this verse refers to instrumental music. Whereas instruments constrain and modify the song they play, vocal singing conveys a song's purest and most authentic expression. By describing the Torah as an instrumental song, David implied that the Torah is a modified expression of God, when in reality, the Torah is a vocal song, the purest expression of God Himself (*Yahel Or*).¹¹⁷

119:57

הָלְקִי יְהוָה אֲמַרְתִּי לִשְׁמֹר דְּבָרֶיךָ **God is my portion, I said, to keep Your words.** Whereas others choose money and physical pleasures as their portion, I proclaim

God as my portion. My only objective in life is *to keep Your words* (*Radak*).

Alternatively: I proclaim God as my portion—the One in Whom I believe and find salvation—so that those who hear my proclamation will follow my example and *keep Your words* (*Metzudot*).

119:59

הִשְׁבַּחְתִּי דְרָכֶי וְאָשִׁיבָה רַגְלִי אֶל-עֲדוּתֶיךָ **I contemplated my ways, and returned my feet to Your testimonies.** I contemplated the cost of a mitzvah versus its reward and the reward of a sin versus its cost. My conclusions led me to *return my feet to Your testimonies* (*Rashi*; *Radak*—see *Avot* 2:1).

Alternatively, I contemplated the various worldly paths open before me and did not find a good path like that of Your testimonies. I therefore turned away from the ways of the world and walked in the path of Your testimonies (*Radak*).

119:62

הִצֹּת-לַיְלָה אָקוּם לְהוֹדוֹת לָךְ עַל מִשְׁפָּטֶי צְדָקָךְ **At midnight, I rise to thank You for Your righteous judgments.** David would awaken and rise from his bed to thank God for the righteous judgment that He executed against the wicked. Alternatively, he would compose Psalms to thank God for the laws He has given us, which are just and righteous (*Radak*).



Your righteous judgments can also be interpreted as *Your judgments and Your benevolences*. David would thank God for the *judgments* He brought upon Pharaoh after Sarah was taken to his palace (*Genesis*

116. *Kuntres Acharon* §6. See *Derech Mitzvotecha* 42b.

117. See commentary to 67:1.

נז חֲלָקִי יְהוָה אִמְרָתִי לִשְׁמֹר דְּבָרֶיךָ: נח חֲלִיתִי פָנֶיךָ בְּכָל-לֵב
 חֲזַנִּי בְּאִמְרָתְךָ: נט חִשְׁבֹּתִי דְרָכֶי וְאִשְׁיְבָה רַגְלִי אֶל-עַדְתֶּיךָ:
 ס חֲשֵׁתִי וְלֹא הִתְמַהֲמַהֲתִי לִשְׁמֹר מִצְוֹתֶיךָ: סא חֲבַלִּי רִשְׁעִים
 עוֹנִדְנִי תוֹרַתְךָ לֹא שָׁכַחְתִּי: סב חֲצוֹת-לַיְלָה אֲקוּם לְהוֹדוֹת לָךְ עַל
 מִשְׁפָּטֶי צְדָקָךְ: סג חֵבֶר אֲנִי לְכָל-אֲשֶׁר יִרְאוּךָ וְלִשְׁמֹרֵי פְקוּדֶיךָ:
 סד חֶסֶדְךָ יְהוָה מְלֵאָה הָאָרֶץ חֲקִיד לִמְדָנִי:

סה טוֹב עָשִׂיתָ עִם-עַבְדְּךָ יְהוָה בְּדַבְּרְךָ: סו טוֹב טַעַם וְדַעַת
 לִמְדָנִי כִּי בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ הֶאֱמַנְתִּי: סז טָרֵם אֶעֱנֶה אֲנִי שׁוֹגֵג וְעַתָּה



12:17) and for the benevolences He bestowed upon Abraham and Sarah on that occasion.

Similarly, the verse alludes to the *judgments* God brought upon the Egyptians and the *benevolences* He bestowed upon our ancestors in Egypt. The Israelites, at that time, did not have *mitzvot* to perform with which to merit redemption. God in His benevolence gave them two *mitzvot*: the blood of the Paschal lamb and that of circumcision (*Rut Rabbah* 6:1).

❧ MIDNIGHT PSALMS ❧



Midnight never found David asleep. Rav Zeira said: Until midnight, he would study while dozing on and off like a horse. From midnight and on, he would strengthen himself like a lion. Rav Ashi said: Until midnight, David would study the Torah. From midnight and on, he would sing praises to God. Hence: *At midnight, I rise from my studies to thank You for Your righteous judgments.*

How was David able to identify the exact moment of midnight (see *Rashi* to Exodus 11:4)? A harp hung above his bed. At midnight, the northern wind would blow upon it, causing it to play on its own. David would immediately stand up and engross himself in Torah until the rise of dawn (*Berachot* 3b and *Rashi* there).¹¹⁸



At midnight, David would stand up and sing praises to God. If you suggest that he sang praises while sitting or lying in bed—this cannot be. Rather, it is as is written, *At midnight, I rise to thank You*; David would

118. Although the verse states that David would thank God from midnight, perhaps this means that he would compose and recite his Psalms, which have the status of Torah (*Chadashim Gam Yeshanim*, *Halachah* 25, cited by *Sdei Tzofim*, *Berachot* 3b).

stand on his feet to engross himself in the songs and praises of the Torah (*Zohar* I:82b).¹¹⁹

119:63

I am a friend to all who fear You and to those who keep Your precepts. I love and befriend those who fear You (*Radak*). I do not treat them like subjects of a king but as colleagues (*Meiri*).¹²⁰



There was none like David in scrupulous observance of the *mitzvot* and fear of heaven. Although our Sages taught that one who comes from a journey is exempt from prayer, David would not rely on this leniency. Wherever he went, he would not refrain from prayer (*Pesikta Rabbati* §9).

119:64

Your kindness, O God, fills the earth; teach me Your statutes. Every creature exists by virtue of Your kindness. The kindness that You can do for me is to teach me Your statutes, to give me the insight to understand them (*Radak*).

119:66

❧ DIVINE DELIGHT ❧



Teach me the goodness and wisdom of the Torah's

119. See *Hayom Yom*, 29 Tammuz: A handwritten note of the Tzemach Tzedek was discovered. In the note, he writes of his commitment to study Talmudic and Halachic texts six hours every night, while *standing*. He had fulfilled this pledge and had completed the study of the both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds and the *Shulchan Aruch*—all studied in depth.

120. Alternatively: *I am a comrade to those who fear You—I fear You*, as they do (*Meiri*).

recited, i.e. studied the *mitzvot*, I would blunder; but now I observe Your word. **68** You are good and benevolent—teach me the mysteries of Your statutes. **69** The wicked have associated me with false piety, while in truth, I keep Your precepts with all my heart. **70** Their hearts grew thick as fat because of their shallow indulgences; as for me, Your Torah is my delight. **71** It is for my good that I afflicted myself with arduous study, so that I might learn the depths of Your statutes. **72** The Torah of Your mouth is better in my eyes than thousands of bars of gold and silver.



reasons, for I believe in Your commandments.

The heart of a *mitzvah* is the intense delight God finds in its performance. This Divine pleasure is the ultimate impetus for its existence. The reasons given for the *mitzvot* are merely a façade concealing the true “reason” for the *mitzvot*: God’s delight. This is the *goodness and wisdom of the Torah’s reasons*, the Divine delight in the *mitzvot* (Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi).¹²¹

The Psalmist asks to behold the Divine joy in the *mitzvot* since *I believe in Your commandments* with unquestioning faith. One who fulfills God’s commands obediently does so without the pretense that he knows the true reasons for those commands. His acceptance of God’s sovereignty frees him to experience the fullness of God’s unknowable delight. And because he has transcended his need for intellectual contentment, God graces him with the very Essence of His Being, showing him *the goodness and wisdom of the Torah’s reasons* (Rabbi DovBer of Lubavitch).¹²²

The Psalmist not only asks to be granted an awareness of God’s delight in the *mitzvot*, he hopes to internalize it as well. As the verse says, *Teach me*—let me assimilate and digest God’s delight in a personal way, as one would absorb an intellectual concept (Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch).¹²³

praises. Indeed, it is written: *At midnight, I rise to thank You* (Kaf Hachaim 238:9).¹²⁴

119:69

תַּפְּלוּ עָלַי שָׂקֶר יָדִים אֲנִי בְּכָל-לֵב אֲצַר פְּקוּדֶיךָ **The wicked have associated me with false piety, while in truth, I keep Your precepts with all my heart.** They claim that my pious behavior is a façade, covering an impious interior. In truth, though, *I keep Your precepts with all my heart*—my behavior reflects my inner being (*Metzudot*; see Radak).

Alternatively: *The wicked have banded together against me without cause* to divert me from my worship of You, yet *I keep Your precepts with all my heart* (Meiri).



The wicked have banded together against me without cause—this alludes to when Pharaoh commanded the Jewish midwives to kill the newborn Israelite males. But because of their fear of God, the midwives did not listen to Pharaoh (Exodus 1:10-12). In that difficult circumstance, they kept God’s precepts with all their heart (*Midrash Tehillim*).

119:70

✿ ACCESSING DIVINE DELIGHT ✿



תַּפְּשׁ פִּתְּחָלָב לִפְנֵי תוֹרָתְךָ שְׂעִשְׂעֵמֶי **Their hearts grew thick as fat because of their shallow indulgences; but as for me, Your Torah is my delight.** As mentioned (verse 66), the essence of the *mitzvot* is God’s delight in them. The present verse alludes to how we can channel this delight into our world. An anagram of the word *אֲנִי* (*as for me*) is *אֵין*, which means nothingness. Our role in this world is to transform *me*—the ego—into a humble selflessness (“nothingness”). This is accomplished through denying our unhealthy desires and instead focusing our energies on the service of God.



תַּצֹּת-לַיְלָה אָקוּם אֶקוּם לְהוֹדוֹת לָךְ
At midnight, I rise to thank You (119:62).

Reciting Psalms After Midnight. Although one should not recite Scripture at night, it is permitted to recite Psalms after midnight, since they are songs and

121. Siddur Im Dach 131b.

122. Ner Mitzvah V’Torah Or 27b-28a.

123. Sefer Hamaamarim Kuntreisim, vol. 3, p. 175. See further, Sefer Hamaamarim 5722, p. 3 ff.

124. See also: Torat Menachem—Hitvaaduyot 5745, vol. 5, p. 3102.

אִמְרַתְךָ שְׁמַרְתִּי: **סח** טוֹב־אַתָּה וּמִטִּיב לְמִדְּנִי הִקִּיד: **סט** טָפְלוּ
עָלַי שִׁקָּר וְדִים אֲנִי בְּכָל־לֵב | אֶצֶר פְּקוּדֶיךָ: **ע** טָפַשׁ כְּחֶלֶב לִבִּי
אֲנִי תוֹרַתְךָ שָׁעֲשַׁעְתִּי: **עא** טוֹב־לִי כִי־עָנִיתִי לְמַעַן אֶלְמַד הִקִּיד:
עב טוֹב־לִי תוֹרַת־פִּיךָ מֵאֲלָפֵי זָהָב וְכֶסֶף:



When humility replaces hubris, we become proper vessels for God's *delight* (Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi).¹²⁵

119:71

It is for my good that I afflicted myself with arduous study, so that I might learn the depths of Your statutes. Study of Torah weakens a person. Yet I view this harm as good, since through study, I am able to learn the depths of Your statutes (*Metzudot*). I consider my affliction and toil as pleasure (*Radak*). According to *Meiri*, affliction here refers to David's fasting or meditative solitude.

❧ BENEFITS OF AFFLICTION ❧



While Moses was on Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, he neither ate nor slept. God said to him: "You endured discomfort. By your life, you will not lose out. In the first Tablets, there were no more than ten commandments. Now that you have endured discomfort, I am giving You laws, *midrashot*, and *aggadot*. The Torah, Prophets, and Writings should be written, whereas the *halachot*, *midrash*, *aggadot*, and the Talmud should be transmitted orally."

When Moses heard this, he proclaimed: *It is for my good that I was afflicted so that I might learn Your statutes* (*Shemot Rabbah* 47:7).

119:72

The Torah of Your mouth is better in my eyes than thousands of bars of gold and silver. Others afflict themselves and toil to amass wealth; I afflicted myself and toiled to acquire Torah, *for the Torah of Your mouth is better than thousands of bars of gold and silver* (*Radak*).

❧ THE TRADE-OFF ❧



Gold and silver allude to the love and fear of God that resides in our soul.¹²⁶ Prior to the soul's descent

125. Likkutei Torah, Bamidbar 19c-d.

126. The word for *silver* (כסף) is related to the word for "yearning" (כִּסּוּף). We yearn for what we love. The soul's love for God is thus described as "silver." The verse states in regards to gold, *Gold comes from the north* (Job 37:22). The north represents God's judgment. God's judgment inspires fear. Thus, gold alludes to

into the body, its love and fear of God radiate effortlessly. But once the soul enters the body, this love and fear struggle to find expression.

For what purpose, then, does the soul descend into its body? Because *the Torah of Your mouth is better in my eyes than thousands of bars of gold and silver*. When we fulfill God's *mitzvot*—*the Torah of Your mouth*—we create an unbreakable bond between ourselves and God. This bond cannot be fashioned by a disembodied soul; only in the physical world does this opportunity arise. And although the palpable emotions of love and fear may diminish during the soul's terrestrial sojourn, *the Torah of Your mouth is better*, since it enables us to cleave to God Himself (Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi).¹²⁷

❧ MONETARY CONSIDERATIONS ❧



Rabbi Yosay ben Kisma said: Once I was walking on the road when a certain man met me. He greeted me, "Shalom," and I returned his greeting, "Shalom." He said to me, "Rabbi, which place are you from?" I said to him, "I am from a great city of scholars and sages." He said to me, "Rabbi, do you wish to live with us in our place, and I would give you a million golden *dinars*, precious stones, and pearls?" I replied, "Even if you were to give me all the silver and gold, precious stones, and pearls in the world, I would dwell nowhere but in a place of Torah." And so it is written in the Book of Psalms by David, king of Israel: *The Torah of Your mouth is better in my eyes than thousands of bars of gold and silver* (*Avot* 6:9).



The above story demonstrates Rabbi Yosay's commitment to Torah and how he valued Torah over material wealth. At a deeper level, the sage is saying that even though wealth can be seen as a means to facilitate the performance of *mitzvot*, such as charity, he still considers Torah to be more valuable.

Rabbi Yosay then cites proof from King David: When David speaks of thousands of bars of gold and silver, surely he is not speaking of money to be used for indulgence.

fear of God (*Torah Or*, *Vayeshev* 26d).

127. *Torah Or*, *Vayeshev* 26d-27a.

73 Your hands have made me and designed me to acquire wisdom—grant me therefore understanding, that I may learn Your commandments. **74** Those who fear You will see me in my success and rejoice, because I put my hope in Your word. **75** I know, O God, that Your judgments are just; righteously have You afflicted me. **76** Now, let Your kindness be upon me to comfort me from my affliction, in accordance with Your promise to Your servant. **77** Let Your mercies come upon me so that I may live to keep Your Torah, for Your Torah is my delight. **78** Let the wicked be shamed, for they have falsely condemned me as a sinner; yet as for me, all my discussions are of Your precepts. **79** May those who fear You and those who know Your testimonies then return to me. **80** Let my heart be perfect in Your statutes, so that I not be shamed.

81 My soul longs for Your salvation from my enemies; I hope for Your word. **82** My eyes are weary from looking to Your promise, saying, “When will You comfort me?” **83** Though I became dried out like a wineskin in smoke, I did not forget Your statutes. **84** How many are the days of Your servant? When will You execute judgment upon my pursuers? Will I still be alive? **85** The wicked have dug pits



Rather, he refers to the fact that his wealth enables him to fund his army and government as well as to give charity. Yet even with this noble view of wealth, he still considered his Torah study to be more precious.

In citing the verse from Psalms, Rabbi Yosay uncharacteristically states that the verse is written in the “Book of Psalms, by David, king of Israel.” Many verses are cited in the Rabbinic writings, yet the source and author is generally omitted. Here, however, Rabbi Yosay anticipates a possible rejection of his teaching. One might argue that such a lofty view of Torah cannot be demanded of the average Jew. He therefore prefaces his proof text by stating that it derives from the Book of Psalms, which David wrote on behalf of all Jews and which must therefore be relevant to all of them.

Moreover, the fact that it was David who stated the verse anticipates the argument that a rabbi’s exhortation toward spiritual living is flawed, since the rabbi has no experience with the pleasures of this world. Rabbi Yosay therefore emphasizes that the verse was stated by King David, who possessed immense wealth and to whom the pleasures of this world were readily accessible and who nevertheless valued Torah above all else (*The Rebbe*).¹²⁸

128. *Sichot Kodesh* 5741, vol. 4, pp. 24-29.

119:73

יְדִידְךָ עָשׂוּנִי וְיִכְוֶנְנִי הִבֵּנִי וְאַלְמְדָה מִצִּוְתֶיךָ **Your hands have made me and designed me to acquire wisdom—grant me therefore understanding, that I may learn Your commandments.** The human body is designed for the acquisition of wisdom. For example, we stand upright (with our heads supreme), unlike other living beings (*Radak*).

✽ LINING THE WINE CASK ✽



David said: “One does not put wine into the wine cask until it is lined with pitch. So, too, line me with pitch, i.e., understanding, then pour wine into me, i.e., learning. *Grant me understanding, and I will then learn Your commandments.*”

One who has knowledge without understanding is like someone with bread in his hand but nothing to eat it with. One who has understanding without knowledge is like someone with a savory dish but without bread to eat it with. One who has both knowledge and understanding is like someone who has both bread and a savory dish. He eats both of them and is sated.

Thus did David say: *Grant me understanding, and I will learn Your commandments* (*Midrash Tehillim*).

עַג יְדִיד עֲשׂוֹנִי וַיְכַנְּנוּנִי הִבִּינִי וְאַלְמֶדָה מִצֹּתֶיךָ: עַד יֵרָאֶיךָ
יִרְאוּנִי וַיִּשְׂמְחוּ כִּי לְדַבְּרֶךָ יִחְלָתִי: עַה יִדְעָתִי יְהוָה כִּי־צָדִק
מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ וְאַמוּנָה עֲנִיתָנִי: עו יִהְיֶנָּה חֲסִדֶךָ לְנַחֲמָנִי כְּאַמְרָתֶךָ
לְעַבְדֶּךָ: עו יִבְאֹנִי רַחֲמֶיךָ וְאַחִיָּה כִּי־תוֹרָתֶךָ שֶׁעָשָׂעִי: עַה יִכְשׁוּ
זָדִים כִּי־שָׁקַר עֲוִתוֹנִי אֲנִי אֲשִׁיחַ בְּפִקְדֶיךָ: עַט יֵשׁוּבוּ לִי יִרְאֵיךָ
וְיִדְעִי עֲדָתֶיךָ: פ יִהְיֶ־לְבִי תָמִים בְּחֻקֶיךָ לְמַעַן לֹא אֲבוֹשׁ:

פֹּא כָל־תָּה לַתְּשׁוּעָתֶךָ נִפְשִׁי לְדַבְּרֶךָ יִחְלָתִי: פֹּב כָּל־י עֵינֵי לְאַמְרָתֶךָ
לֵאמֹר מָתִי תִנְחַמְנִי: פֹּג כִּי־הֵיִיתִי כְּנָאֵד בְּקִיטוֹר חֻקֶיךָ לֹא
שָׁכַחְתִּי: פֹּד כִּמָּה יִמִּי־עַבְדֶּךָ מָתִי תַעֲשֶׂה בְּרִדְפִי מִשְׁפָּט: פֹּה כְּרוֹ־



119:74

Those who fear You will see me in my success and rejoice, because I put my hope in Your word. They will rejoice in the knowledge that their reward will be like mine. Just as I was granted success because I feared You and hoped in Your word, so will they be granted success (*Rashi; Metzudot*).

Alternatively, *those who fear You will see my success in attaining wisdom, and they will rejoice that You have fulfilled my hope, which is Your word and assistance (Radak).*



David's *halachic* rulings were accurate, leading the God-fearing to rejoice when they saw him. Saul, by contrast, did not merit such *halachic* accuracy. The difference between the two kings was that while they both studied Torah, only David taught others as well (*Eiruvim 53a*).¹²⁹



When are the Jewish people happy? When they see their king or leader occupied with the study of the Torah. Thus: *Those who fear You will see me studying the Torah and rejoice, etc. (Midrash Tehillim).*

129. Alternatively, David merited to reach accurate conclusions because he would delve into the reasoning behind the laws (*Rashi* *ibid.*).

According to *Meiri*, David would announce the subject of an upcoming lecture he would be giving. This gave the students a chance to study the material ahead of time and to ask appropriate questions, which in turn led to a clearer understanding of the law. By giving them advance notice of the subject matter, David ensured that they would be educated on the subject during the lecture instead of being ashamed of their ignorance. They would therefore rejoice when they saw him (*Meiri* *ibid.*).

119:79

May those who fear You and those who know Your testimonies then return to me. After David's sin with Bathsheba, the Sages of the Sanhedrin disassociated themselves from him. He therefore prays that they return to him (*Rashi and Radak*).

✽ SANHEDRIN'S RETURN ✽



For six months, David was afflicted with *tzaraat*, the Divine presence departed from him, and the Sanhedrin separated themselves from him (*Sanhedrin 107a*).

According to Torah law, one afflicted with *tzaraat* must sit apart from the community. The Sanhedrin therefore parted from him. David then was without a quorum of ten with whom to pray and without study partners with whom to study.

He therefore prays: *May 1) those who fear You and 2) those who know Your testimonies return to me.* He asks for the return of *those who fear You*, with Whom he could pray, and for the return of *those who know Your testimonies*, with Whom he could study (*Maharsha*).

119:85

The wicked have dug pits for me, in violation of Your Torah. This refers to the plots of Saul's or Absalom's advisers to kill David. These designs violate the Torah, which commands

for me, in violation of Your Torah. **86** All Your commandments are true; help me, therefore, and save me from those who pursue me falsely. **87** They nearly consumed me upon the earth; yet as for me, I did not forsake Your precepts. **88** As befits Your kindness, grant me life, and I will keep the testimony of Your mouth.

89 Forever, O God, Your word stands firm in the heavens. **90** Your faithfulness persists for all generations: You established the earth, and it stands. **91** They stand ready today to execute Your judgments—for all are Your servants. **92** Had Your Torah not been my delight,



that innocent blood may not be shed (Deuteronomy 19:10; *Radak*) and that we are to love our fellow as we love ourselves (Leviticus 19:18; *Metzudot*).

119:86

כל-מצותיך אמונה שקר רדפוני עזרני **All Your commandments are true; help me, therefore, and save me from those who pursue me falsely.** You commanded us not to persecute the weak; You promise to exact justice on their behalf (see Deuteronomy 10:18). If so, help me and save me from those who pursue me falsely and without cause (*Radak*).

Alternatively: *All Your commandments are intended to be pursued with faithfulness*, i.e., for the sake of the mitzvah. My enemies, however, *pursue me* to speak falsehood about me. They pretend to be pious, claiming that I am a sinner and that their intention is to fulfill God's command to eradicate evil. In truth, they pursue me with evil intent, to speak falsehood about me (*Metzudot*).

According to *Rashi*, the persecution by David's enemies spoken of in these last few verses refers to their claim that his lineage was tainted, since he descended from Ruth, who was a Moabite. These "pits" that they dug for him, however, violate the Torah, which prohibits us from marrying a Moabite male but permits us to marry a Moabite female. Thus, David's enemies pursued him without cause.

119:85-88

✽ NOT BY FAITH ALONE ✽



There are those who attempt to interpret Torah in a way that deviates from its ordinary meaning. They say, for example, that the prohibition on pork was a temporary one, or that it is to be understood as a metaphoric reference to the evil inclination. They claim that the essence of Torah is the belief of one's heart, not the physical fulfillment of the *mitzvot*. But their claim is baseless,

and the burden of proof rests upon them. One cannot dispense with the plain meaning of the commandments and claim that they are dependent upon some unmentioned condition or time period.

David alludes to this battle in these verses: *The wicked have dug pits for me in violation of Your Torah*. They say that *all of Your commandments are about faith alone* and that their time has passed and there is no need for actual performance of the *mitzvot*. *They pursued me with this fallacy; therefore, O God, help me*. *The wicked have nearly consumed me from the earth with these arguments, yet I did not forsake Your precepts*.

David concludes: *As befits Your kindness, grant me life, and I will keep the testimony of Your mouth*. I will keep the commandments in their literal sense, for they are *the testimony of Your mouth*. Just as testimony is given in a manner that is to be understood literally, so it is with Your commandments. No man has the authority to reinterpret and eliminate the simple meaning of the *mitzvot* (*Sefer Ha'ikkarim, maamar 3, ch. 21*).

119:87

במעט בלוגי בארץ ואני לא עזבתי פקדיך **They nearly consumed me upon the earth; yet as for me, I did not forsake Your precepts.** Although I had the opportunity to kill them, I refrained from doing so. *I did not forsake Your precepts*, in which You prohibit murder. Although they deserved death for pursuing me without cause, I left the matter in Your hands, since You have written: *I will not exonerate the wicked* (Exodus 23:7; *Radak*).

119:89

נצב בשמים יהוה דברך לעולם **Forever, O God, Your word stands firm in the heavens.** Your word and desire that brought the heavens into being stand firm forever (*Radak*).

לִי יָדַיִם שִׁיחֹת אֲשֶׁר לֹא כְתוּרְתָּךְ: פו כָּל-מִצְוֹתֶיךָ אֱמוּנָה שָׁקֵר
רָדְפוּנִי עֲזָרְנִי: פו בְּמַעַט כְּלוּנִי בָאָרֶץ וְאֲנִי לֹא-עֲזֹבְתִי כְּקִדְיָךְ:
פח בְּחֶסֶדְךָ חִינִי וְאַשְׁמְרָה עֲדוֹת פִּיךָ:

פט לְעוֹלָם יִהְיֶה דְבָרְךָ נִצָּב בַּשָּׁמַיִם: צ לְדָר וָדָר אֱמוּנָתְךָ כּוֹנֵנָת
אָרֶץ וְתַעֲמֹד: צא לְמִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ עֹמְדוֹ הַיּוֹם כִּי הַכֹּל עֲבָדֶיךָ: צב לוֹיִלִי



❧ ARGUING OVER ABRAHAM ❧



When Abraham was thrown into a fiery furnace (for rejecting idolatry), the angels began arguing with each other. Michael said, “I will descend and save him.” Gabriel said, “I will descend and save him.” God then said: “I will descend with My glory and save him.” As it is written (Genesis 15:7): *I am God, Who took you out of Ur Kasdim.*

God said to the angels: “You will save Abraham’s descendants.” This was fulfilled many generations later, when Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were likewise thrown into a fiery furnace and were saved by an angel. The angels then said: “*Forever, O God, Your word stands firm in the heavens. Your faithfulness persists for generations. You fulfilled Your promise that we would descend to save the descendants of Abraham*” (*Tanchuma, Tetzaveh 12*).

❧ CONSTANT CREATION ❧



God asks: “On what do the heavens stand? On the word that I spoke, ‘*Let there be a firmament in the midst of the water...and it was so...*’” (Genesis 1:6-7). The heavens stand firm forever by virtue of the words with which they were created. As the present verse states, *Forever, O G-d, Your word stands firm in the heavens* (*Midrash Tehillim*).



The Baal Shem Tov taught that the very words that God spoke, *Let there be a firmament in the midst of the water*, stand forever in the heavens and bring them to life. These words must remain in the heavens, since without them, the heavens would cease to exist. The same is true in regards to all of creation: if the life-giving words with which God created the world were to depart, all of creation would revert to nothingness (*Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi*).¹³⁰

130. *Shaar Hayichud VehoEmunah*, ch. 2. The interpretation of the Baal Shem Tov is nearly identical to that of the Midrash. Nonetheless, Rabbi Schneur Zalman attributes this interpretation to the Baal Shem Tov because he propagated this teaching throughout the Jewish community. His passion for this idea made it his “own,” so it is repeated in his name (*Sefer Hamaamarim Melukat*, vol. 2, p.

Creation was not a one-time event in which God created a self-sustaining world. It is a continuous phenomenon in which God renews creation every single moment. Never for a moment is our world devoid of God’s energy; it pulsates with Godly vitality.

This awareness lends us tremendous encouragement in our quest to live a Divinely inspired life. Confronted with an obstacle to doing a mitzvah, we do not despair. After all, if God animates the very circumstances that appear to impede us, can it possibly prevent us from performing God’s will? Clearly, challenges to our Divine service are merely perceived by us as such. In reality, they are nothing more than a mirage (*The Rebbe*).¹³¹

❧ LIMPID PILLARS ❧

On the day of his passing, Rabbi Schneur Zalman called his grandson, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, into his room and asked him, “Do you see the beam over there?” Perplexed, Rabbi Menachem Mendel answered in the affirmative. Rabbi Schneur Zalman then said: “Believe me—I see nothing other than the Godly force that brings that beam into being.”¹³²

After a lifetime of spiritual labor, Rabbi Schneur Zalman became wholly aware of God’s immanence. Although we may never achieve Rabbi Schneur Zalman’s level of perception, we can and must strive to attain it. By meditating on the idea of constant creation, we can come closer to realizing the immediacy of God in our material lives. All of our interactions with the physical will then be informed by our awareness of God in creation (*The Rebbe*).¹³³

119:91

לְמִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ עֹמְדוֹ הַיּוֹם כִּי הַכֹּל עֲבָדֶיךָ They stand ready today to execute Your judgments—for all are Your

93 [new ed.—vol. 4, p. 263]). Similar instances where a teaching is ascribed to a later source as opposed to its progenitor include *Avot* 4:19 and *Vayikra Rabbah* 16:2. See *Igrot Kodesh* by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, vol. 18, p. 185.

131. *Torat Menachem—Hitvaaduyot* 5716, vol. 1, p. 194.

132. *Shivchei Harav*, pp. 35–36, cited in *Beit Rebbe*, vol. 1, p. 46a, note 1.

133. *Torat Menachem—Hitvaaduyot* 5712, vol. 1, p. 258.

I would have perished in my affliction. **93** Never will I forget Your precepts, for through them, You have sustained me. **94** I am Yours; save me, for I have sought Your precepts. **95** The wicked hope to destroy me, but I meditate upon Your testimonies. **96** I have seen an end to every finite thing; but Your commandments are infinitely vast.

DAY 26

97 How I love Your Torah—all day, it is my discussion! **98** Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies, for the Torah is



servants. Although the universe stands firmly by virtue of God's word, were He to decide to alter the natural order, the heavenly and earthly hosts would execute His will, since they are all His servants (*Meiri*).

119:92

לֹאִי תוֹרַתְךָ שְׂשׂוּעִי אִם אֶבְדָּתִי בְּעָנִי **Had Your Torah not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.** Had I not known from the Torah that the natural order is subservient to Your will—as mentioned in the previous verse—I would have given in to despair. I would not have thought to pray to You for deliverance from my enemies, and I would have perished from this world and the next (*Meiri*).

✽ A COMFORT IN EGYPT ✽



Moses said: *When my forebodings multiply within me, Your consolation delights my soul* (above, 94:19). In Egypt, the Israelites had scrolls of Torah, with which they would delight from one Shabbat to the next. They thus survived Pharaoh's persecution. As David says: *Had Your Torah not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction* (*Midrash Tehillim*).

✽ A LONG WAIT ✽



A king once married a matron and wrote a generous ketubah for her. He promised to give her a certain number of canopies and garments of purple wool. But then he left her and traveled overseas, where he tarried. The matron's neighbors teased her, saying: "The king has left you and gone overseas, never to return to you." The matron would cry and sigh. But when she would enter her home, she would open her ketubah and read the promises the king had made. And she would be comforted.

Eventually, the king returned. He said to her, "My daughter, I wonder: how did you wait for me all these years?" She said to him: "Your majesty, were it not for the generous ketubah that you wrote and gave to me, my neighbors would have already destroyed me."

Similarly, idolaters torment the Jewish people, saying: "Your God has hidden His face from you and removed His presence from among you. He will never return to you." The Jewish people then cry and moan.

But when they enter their synagogues and places of Torah study, they read the Torah and find the following verses (Leviticus 26:9-12): *I will turn to you, and I will make you fruitful... And I will place My dwelling in your midst... And I will walk among you.* They are then comforted.

When the redemption arrives, God will say to us: "My children, I wonder how you waited for Me all those years!" We will respond: "Master of the Universe! Were it not for the Torah that You gave us, the nations would have already destroyed us."

And so did David say: *Had Your Torah not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction* (*Eichah Rabbah* 3:7).

119:95

לִי קוֹי רָשָׁעִים לְאַבְדָּנִי עֲדִיתִךָ אֶתְבוֹנֶן **The wicked hope to destroy me, but I meditate upon Your testimonies.**

By persecuting me, the wicked attempt to destroy me from this world. By overwhelming me and attempting to divert me from the rational path, they seek to destroy me from the World to Come. Despite their efforts, *I meditate upon Your testimonies* (*Meiri*).

119:96

לְכָל־תְּכֵלֶה רְאִיתִי קִץ רַחֲבָה מִצְוֹתֶיךָ מְאֹד **I have seen an end to every finite thing; but Your commandments are infinitely vast.**

Although the *mitzvot* are limited in number, they give rise to infinite offshoots. Alternatively, the *mitzvot* that involve the physical body are indeed limited. But those that involve the heart are without limit (*Radak*).

Alternatively: *I have seen an end*, a possible satisfaction, to every craving. But *Your commandment*—Divine

תִּוְרַתְךָ שֶׁעָשִׂי אֶז אֶבְרַתִּי בְּעֵינַי: צג לְעוֹלָם לֹא־אֶשְׁכַּח פְּקוּדֶיךָ
בִּי־כֶם חַיִּיתִנִּי: צד לֹךְ־אֲנִי הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי כִּי פְקוּדֶיךָ דְּרָשְׁתִּי: צה לִי
קִנּוּ רִשְׁעִים לֹא־בִגְדִי עֲדַתֶּיךָ אֶתְבּוֹנֶן: צו לְכָל־תַּכְלָה רִאֲתִי קִין
רַחֲבָה מִצֹּתְךָ מְאֹד:

צו מִה־אֶהְבֶּתִּי תִוְרַתְךָ כָּל־הַיּוֹם הִיא שִׁיחָתִּי: צה מֵאִי־בִי תִחַכְמֵנִי יום כו



wisdom—is infinitely vast. The more one grasps of it, the more one yearns to delve even deeper (*Meiri*).

Broad Space

The word for *finite being* also means “desire” or “yearning.” In its plain sense, the verse depicts the pleasures of this world as finite pursuits. On a deeper level, the verse suggests that all pleasures, even spiritual ones, are finite.

The soul finds spiritual delight in comprehending God. As the soul ascends through the spiritual worlds and gains a more acute understanding of God, its pleasure intensifies. But the comprehensible aspects of God are mere emanations of Him. God’s love, compassion, and intellect are themes that the soul can come to appreciate. God Himself, by contrast, cannot be grasped by the soul. While the soul can relate to defined concepts, it cannot relate to that which is simple and indivisible—God Himself. Thus, the spiritual delight gleaned from apprehending God’s qualities is a limited one.

The only way to access God Himself is through the *mitzvot* because they derive from the deepest part of God. Like the human’s primal desires, which cannot be attributed to the intellect or emotions, the *mitzvot* are likewise inextricably bound with God Himself. By fulfilling them, we invite God Himself into our world. The Psalmist thus describes the *mitzvot* as *immensely broad*: they are *broad* and *capacious* vessels that can receive the *immensity* of God Himself (*Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi*).¹³⁴

119:97



How I love מִה־אֶהְבֶּתִּי תִוְרַתְךָ כָּל־הַיּוֹם הִיא שִׁיחָתִּי
Your Torah—all day, it is my discussion!

David alludes to a special day, Shabbat, a particularly auspicious time to study Torah. On Shabbat, David would delight in the study of Torah *all day* (*Rabbenu Bachaye* to Exodus 2:7).

134. Maamarei Admur Hazaken 5570, p. 58. See Iggeret Hakodesh §17. Torah Or, Shemot 53d.

SHUFFLING WISDOM



The word for *discussion* (שִׁיחָה) also implies movement from place to place.¹³⁵ When we discuss the words of the Torah, we set in motion a Divine odyssey in which God’s light travels into our realm. While God’s wisdom is transcendent and pure, the laws of the Torah are detailed ordinances that address mundane, physical realities. And in order for the wisdom of God to don the concrete garments of the Torah, it must journey through a transformative crucible. Upon its emergence, it assumes the form of the Torah’s directives.

When we invoke the Torah’s words, we renew this Divine journey, bringing God’s wisdom into the Torah and into our minds (*Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi*).¹³⁶

119:98

Your command- מֵאִי־בִי תִחַכְמֵנִי מִצֹּתְךָ כִּי לְעוֹלָם הִיא־לִי
ments make me wiser than my enemies, for the
Torah is always with me. I am constantly immersed in Your Torah; it therefore makes me wiser than my wicked enemies (*Metzudot*). David refers to Doeg and Achitophel, who, unlike David, failed to reach accurate *halachic* conclusions. David succeeded where they failed because the secret depth of the Torah was always with him. Furthermore, as the following verse attests, David received wisdom from many teachers in addition to his primary teacher (*Rashi*).



Because they lacked fear of heaven, Doeg and Achitophel failed in their study of Torah, despite their sharp intellect. David, however, did fear God. He was humble and therefore a vessel for the *Shechinah*, the Divine presence. Thus, he was wiser than his enemies

135. Literally “to swim,” as in Isaiah 25:11: *As the swimmer spreads out his hands to swim* (לִשְׂחוֹת). Swimming is essentially the act of propelling oneself from one place to another. For another example of שיחה with a similar interpretation, see Yoma 75a, commenting on Proverbs 12:25: דאגה בלב איש ישונה. See commentary to 55:18 above.

136. Likkutei Torah, Chukat 66a-b.

always with me. **99** From all my teachers I have gained wisdom, for Your testimonies are my discussion. **100** I will be more perceptive than elders, because I have guarded Your precepts. **101** I have restrained my feet from every evil path, so that I might keep Your word. **102** I have not turned away from Your judgments, for You have instructed me. **103** How sweet is Your every word to my palate, sweeter than honey to my mouth! **104** From Your precepts I gain understanding; I therefore hate every path of falsehood.

105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. **106** I have sworn—and I will fulfill it—to keep Your righteous judgments. **107** I am utterly subdued; O God, grant me life in accordance with Your promise. **108** Accept with favor, O God, the offerings of my lips, and teach me Your laws. **109** My soul is in danger always; yet I have not



because *she* (היא), the *Shechinah*, was always with him, guiding him to the truth (*Chida*).

heaven—for Your testimonies are my discussion (*Bartenura* *ibid.*).

✿ LEARNING FROM THE ENEMY ✿

Alternatively: *Your commandments* teach me to *learn wisdom from my enemies*. When I see that they are unable to remove Your Torah from my mouth—it is mine forever—I become wise, recognizing that this is Your will and desire and that You created me for this (*Radak*).



My enemies can also allude to the evil inclination. By examining the undesirable traits and tendencies of my evil inclination, I become *wiser*. Self-knowledge guides me to my unique mission in life: refinement of my character (*The Rebbe*).¹³⁷

119:99

מִכָּל-מְלַמְדֵי הַשְּׂפָלָתִי כִי עֲדוּתֶיךָ שִׂיחָה לִּי **From all my teachers I have gained wisdom, for Your testimonies are my discussion.** My teachers taught me that Your testimonies should always be my discussion (*Radak*).

✿ TRUE WISDOM ✿



Who is wise? The one who learns from every person—as it is written: *From all my teachers I have gained wisdom, for Your testimonies are my discussion* (*Avot* 4:1). Praiseworthy wisdom is the sort that is gained selflessly. David thus proclaims that he learned from all sorts of teachers, even those who were inferior to him. He thereby demonstrated that his pursuit of wisdom was not for self-aggrandizement but purely for the sake of

✿ THE UNFLAPPABLE STUDENT ✿



How does discussing God's testimonies enable one to learn from anyone?

Witnesses and their testimony have no intrinsic connection. One need not be a murderer to testify about murder nor a hero to testify about an act of heroism. The court can hear testimony from any trustworthy witnesses, so long as they have beheld the incident in question.

When we realize that everything around us proclaims something about God, His *mitzvot*, or His Torah, we are open to learning from anyone. Instead of scrutinizing the messenger, we will be attentive only to the message being shared. Thus, because I see everything as *Your testimonies*, I can learn from *all my teachers* (*The Rebbe*).¹³⁸

✿ TWO TYPES OF TEACHERS ✿



From some people we learn how to act, from others how not to act. God places them both before us, since both have something to teach us (*Baal Shem Tov*).¹³⁹

119:100

אֶתְבונֶה כִּי כְפָדִיד נִצְרָתִי **I will be more perceptive than elders, because I have guarded Your precepts.** The purpose of my study is to apply it in practice. I will therefore be more perceptive than elders, since I will pay greater attention to my studies in my attempt to know how to behave properly (*Metzudot*).

138. *Torat Menachem*—*Hitvaaduyot* 5745, vol. 4, pp. 2384-2385.

139. *Keter Shem Tov*, *Hosafot* §114 and §115.

137. *Hayom Yom*, 8 Nissan.

מִצֻּוֹתֶיךָ כִּי לְעוֹלָם הִיא־לִי: צט מִכָּל־מַלְמְדֵי הַשְּׂכָלָתִי כִּי עֲדוֹתֶיךָ
שִׁיחָה לִּי: ק מְזִקְנִים אֶתְבוֹנֶן כִּי פִקְדֶיךָ נִצָּרְתִּי: קא מִכָּל־אַרְח
רַע כָּל־אֹתִי רַגְלִי לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁמֶר דְּבָרְךָ: קב מִמִּשְׁפָּטֶיךָ לֹא־סָרְתִּי
כִּי־אַתָּה הוֹרַתָּנִי: קג מִה־נִּמְלָצוֹ לַחֲפִי אִמְרָתְךָ מִדְּבַשׁ לִפִּי:
קד מִפִּקְדוֹתֶיךָ אֶתְבוֹנֶן עַל־כֵּן שָׁנְאַתִּי | כָּל־אַרְח שָׁקֶר:

קה גֵּר־לְרַגְלִי דְּבָרְךָ וְאוֹר לְנִתְיָבְתִּי: קו נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי וְאַקִּימָה לְשֹׁמֵר
מִשְׁפָּטֶי צְדָקָה: קז נִעֲנִיתִי עַד־מָאֵד יְהוָה חֲנִי כְּדְבָרְךָ: קח נִדְּבֹת
פִּי רִצְה־נָּא יְהוָה וּמִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ לְמִדְּנִי: קט נִפְשִׁי בְּכַפִּי תָמִיד וְתוֹרָתְךָ



“Elders” are sages who have gained wisdom through experience. David nevertheless says that, despite his youth, he will be more perceptive than them (*Meiri*).

Alternatively: *From elders I gained understanding because I have guarded Your precepts.* At first, in my youth, I guarded Your precepts out of faith. At a later stage, I gained understanding—I observed the precepts with an understanding of their rationale (*Radak*).¹⁴⁰

119:105

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. A lamp at night protects a person from stumbling in the darkness. So does God’s word protect David from sinning (*Metzudot*).

Alternatively, when David would seek to render *halachic* rulings, he would refer to the Torah, and it would keep him away from the forbidden, like a lamp that saves a person from pitfalls (*Rashi*).

PSALM FOR THE EXILE

As we have seen, David’s prayers foreshadow the prayers of the Jewish people in exile. *Sforno* interprets much of this psalm in this vein (from the verses that begin with the letter כ, verse 81 and on).

He interprets the present verse as follows: *Your word*, the stories of the Torah about how our patriarchs interacted with their contemporaries, *is a lamp to my feet*—these

stories teach the Jewish people in exile how to interact politically with the nations.

Your word is also a *light to my path*—teaching us how to observe Your *mitzvot* and how to pray to You.

STREETLAMPS



The *mitzvot* are God’s word. Just as a person’s words tell us something about him or her, so do the *mitzvot* tell us about God. At first, *Your word is a lamp*—the *mitzvot* guide me personally, as a lamp guides an individual. Eventually, the *mitzvot* become a *light to my path*—they illuminate my environment. *Mitzvot* illuminate my personal life and, ultimately, the world I inhabit (*The Rebbe*).¹⁴¹

119:107

I am utterly subdued; O God, grant me life in accordance with Your promise. My persecution at the hands of my enemies has so crushed me that I am close to death (*Meiri*). O God, Grant me life, in accordance with Your promise, conveyed by the prophet Nathan, that I would live (*Metzudot*).

Alternatively, *grant me life in accordance with Your word* in the Torah regarding the *mitzvot*, that a person should do them and live by them (Leviticus 18:5). And I, David, keep Your *mitzvot* (*Radak*).

119:109

My soul is in danger always; yet I have not forgotten Your Torah. Literally: *My soul is in my palms always*—it is always in danger, like something held in a closed hand, which

140. Verses 98-100 all begin with the prefix “מ,” which can be read either as “from” or as “greater than.” *Meiri* explains them all as “greater than,” then suggests how they can be understood as “from.” *Radak* is consistent in reading all of them as *from*. *Metzudot* reads the “מ” of 98 and 100 as “greater than” and that of 99 as *from*. The “מ” of verse 104, however, is interpreted by all commentators as *from*.

141. *Torat Menachem—Hitvaaduyot* 5747, vol. 3, pp. 349-350.

forgotten Your Torah. **110** The wicked laid a snare for me; yet I have not strayed from Your precepts. **111** I have taken Your testimonies as an eternal heritage, for they are the joy of my heart. **112** I have inclined my heart away from worldly pleasures and toward performing Your statutes forever, to the last of my days.

113 I despise vain thoughts, but I love Your Torah. **114** You are my refuge and my shield, for I place hope in Your promise to protect me. **115** Turn away from me, you evildoers, so that I will be able to keep the commandments of my God. **116** Support me according to Your promise, and I will live; do not shame me in my hope by leaving it unfulfilled. **117** Sustain me and I will be saved, and, left unperturbed by my enemies, I will be able to immerse myself in relating Your statutes always. **118** You trample all who stray from Your statutes, for their ploy—their false piety and their claim that their sins are unintentional—is a lie. **119** You have purged all the wicked of the earth like dross; therefore do I love Your testimonies. **120** My flesh bristles from fear of You, and I fear Your judgments.



can fall at any moment the hand is opened. Yet I have not forgotten Your Torah, despite the dangers that I face (*Metzudot*).



On the first night that David fled from Saul, he studied more Torah with the prophet Samuel than an outstanding student could study in a hundred years (*Yalkut Shimoni* §129).

Even in times of great danger, the righteous continue to study Torah. Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg was condemned to solitary confinement for seven years, yet he continued to study Torah and write novel insights to the Talmud. For example, in his commentary to *Ohalot* he writes: “Blessed is He who bestows kindness and illuminates for His servant and assisted me in the tower of Ensisheim to explain the (present) chapter...” “Praise to the God of my prayer, Who has not removed His kindness from me and whose word has been a lamp for my foot and a light for my path in the darkness...” (commentary of *Maharam* to *Ohalot*, end of chapter 4 and 9, cited by *Hatorah Hatemimah*).

119:110

נָתַנוּ רָשָׁעִים פֶּחַ לִי וּמִפְקֹדֶיךָ לֹא תָעִיתִי The wicked laid a snare for me; yet I have not strayed from Your precepts. They placed snares for me in paths that I intended to walk, yet I did not stray from Your precepts (*Radak*; *Meiri*).

Alternatively, though they laid a snare for me, I did not stray from Your precepts to take revenge upon them (*Metzudot*).



נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי וְאֶקְיָמָהּ לִשְׁמֹר מִשְׁפָּטֶי צְדָקָה

I have sworn—and I will fulfill it—to keep Your righteous judgments (119:106).

Oath for a Mitzvah. From where is it derived that one can take an oath to fulfill a mitzvah? From the verse: *I have sworn—and I will fulfill it—to keep Your righteous judgments.* Even though we each took an oath already at Mount Sinai to fulfill all the *mitzvot*, one can still take an oath to fulfill a mitzvah as a means to motivate oneself (*Nedarim* 8a; see *Rambam*, *Hilchot Shevuot* 11:3).

According to *Sefer Chasidim* (§1110), this was true only for the people of earlier generations, who were willing to die before abrogating an oath. These days, however, one should not take an oath to fulfill a mitzvah, lest one abrogate the oath in addition to transgressing the mitzvah.

119:113

סָעַפִּים שִׁנְאַתִּי יִתּוֹרֶתְךָ אֲהַבֵּתִי I despise vain thoughts, but I love Your Torah—and all my thoughts are focused

לֹא שָׁכַחְתִּי: **קִי** נָתַנּוּ רָשָׁעִים פֶּח לִי וּמִפְקוּדֶיךָ לֹא תָעִיתִי:
קִיא נִחַלְתִּי עֲדוּתֶיךָ לְעוֹלָם כִּי־שִׁשּׁוֹן לְבִי הִמָּה: **קִיב** נָטִיתִי לְבִי
 לַעֲשׂוֹת חֲקֶיךָ לְעוֹלָם עֶקֶב:

קִיג סַעֲפִים שָׁנֵאתִי וְתוֹרָתְךָ אֲהַבְתִּי: **קִיד** סִתְרִי וּמִגְנִי אֶתְּךָ לְדַבְרְךָ
 יִחַלְתִּי: **קטו** סוּרוּ מִמֶּנִּי מֵרָעִים וְאַצְרָה מִצּוֹת אֱלֹהֵי: **קטז** סִמְכֵנִי
 כְּאִמְרָתְךָ וְאַחִיָּה וְאַל־תִּבְיֹשְׁנִי מִשִּׁבְרִי: **קִיז** סַעֲדֵנִי וְאוֹשָׁעָה
 וְאוֹשָׁעָה בְּחֻקֶּיךָ תָּמִיד: **קיח** סָלִיתָ כָּל־שׁוֹגִים מִחֻקֶּיךָ כִּי־שִׁקָּר
 תִּרְמִיתָם: **קיט** סִגִּים הַשֶּׁבֶת כָּל־רָשָׁעֵי־אָרֶץ לָכֵן אֲהַבְתִּי עֲדוּתֶיךָ:
קכ סָמַר מִפְּחָדְךָ בְּשָׁרִי וּמִמְשַׁפְּטֶיךָ יִרְאֵתִי:



on it (Radak). Alternatively, *I despise those who harbor iniquitous thoughts*. The word *se'iphim* means thoughts. When vocalized *sei'aphim*, as it is in our verse, it refers to those who harbor thoughts (Rashi).

According to *Meiri*, *se'iphim* are the teeming thoughts of a confused person. Elijah used this word when he confronted the confused people of his generation, whose hearts were divided between allegiance to God and serving idols. He said to them (I Kings 18:21): “*Until when will you vacillate between two thoughts (se'iphim)?*”



David said: I despise that which You despise; I love that which You love (Midrash Tehillim).

119:115



Turn away from me, you evildoers, so that I will be able to keep the commandments of my God. The *evildoers* refers to Doeg and Achitophel. David would say to them, “Why are you pressing me? Leave me alone for one moment so that I can sit and immerse myself in Torah.” David thus said of them to Saul (I Samuel 26:19): “*Now, my master the king, please listen to the words of his servant...for they have today driven me from cleaving to God’s heritage, saying, ‘Go and worship foreign gods!’*” But did David in fact serve foreign gods? Rather, what he meant is this: Because they are pursuing me, and I cannot immerse myself in studying Torah, it is as if I am serving foreign gods!

He therefore declares: *Turn away from me, you evildoers... (Midrash Tehillim).*

119:119

You have purged all the wicked of the earth like dross; therefore do I love Your testimonies. Many times have I seen You punish the wicked, purging them from the earth like dross. *Your testimonies* similarly cleanse a person from all dross and teach him to be authentic so that his inner self is consistent with his external acts of piety. *Therefore do I love Your testimonies* and cleave to them (Radak).

119:120

My flesh bristles from fear of You, and I fear Your judgments. The evildoers mentioned above do not fear You, claiming that You cannot see them. But I know that You see me and know my deeds. I therefore fear You to the point that *my flesh bristles*. I fear that You will judge me according to my actions, and I therefore take great care not to transgress Your *mitzvot* and laws (Radak).

My flesh bristles. The word for *bristles* (*samar*) is related to the word for “nail” (*massmer*). In his great fear of God, David’s flesh hardened and stood up like a nail. We find a similar expression in Job (4:15): *The hairs of my flesh bristle, or stand on end* (Metzudot).

121 I practiced justice and righteousness and did not oppress anyone; leave me not therefore to my oppressors. **122** Guarantee Your servant goodness such that the wicked will no longer oppress me. **123** My eyes long for Your salvation, and for the fulfillment of the word of Your righteousness. **124** Treat Your servant in accordance with Your kindness and teach me Your statutes. **125** I am Your servant—grant me understanding, that I may know Your testimonies. **126** There is a time in the future for God to act against those who have abrogated Your Torah. **127** Therefore do I love Your commandments, more than gold and even fine gold. **128** Therefore do I affirm the uprightness of all the precepts of all Your commandments; I loathe every path of falsehood.

129 Your testimonies are unfathomable; therefore does my soul guard them all. **130** Your opening words illuminate; You enlighten



119:121

עָשִׂיתִי מִשְׁפָּט וְצֶדֶק בְּלִתְנִיחָי לְעֹשְׂקֵי **I practiced justice and righteousness; leave me not to my oppressors.** The word used here for *my oppressors* (עֹשְׂקֵי) denotes extortion and theft (*Metzudat Tzion*).



GOOD DEEDS UNPUNISHED

When David would adjudicate between two parties, he had a unique practice. If a poor person before his court was found liable to pay, David would take of his own funds and provide for the pauper. He would do justice followed by charity (*Sanhedrin* 6b).

David's practice was susceptible to exploitation by cynical thieves. Two people, one rich and one poor, could fabricate a dispute and bring it to David for adjudication. They could agree in advance that, if the pauper lost the case and received money from David, they would split David's gift between them.

David therefore prays: *I practice justice, and if the liable party is poor, I practice charity.* This leaves me susceptible to exploitation, as in the scenario above. Thus, *leave me not to my exploiters* (*Chida; Maharsha to Sanhedrin* *ibid.*).

119:123

עֵינֵי בְּלֹ לִישׁוּעָתָךְ וְלִאֲמֶרֶת צִדְקָךְ **My eyes long for Your salvation and for the fulfillment of the word of Your righteousness.** My eyes long for when You will save me from the wicked. I do not look for salvation from man—only to *Your salvation* and to *the word of Your right-*

eousness, to the time that Your promise to me will be fulfilled and thereby made “righteous” (*Radak*).

During the exile, the eyes of the Jewish people long for Your salvation and for the fulfillment of Your promise to redeem them (*Sforno*).

119:125

עֲבֹדְךָ־אֲנִי הִבֵּנִי וְאֲדַעַה עֲדֹתֶיךָ **I am Your servant—grant me understanding, that I may know Your testimonies.** My only desire to study is for the purpose of serving You—I *am Your servant*. Grant me, therefore, *understanding so that I may know* the essence and the reasons of *Your testimonies* (*Radak*).

119:126

עַתָּה לַעֲשׂוֹת לַיהוָה הַפְּרוּ הַזֹּרֶתְךָ **There is a time in the future for God to act against those who have abrogated Your Torah.** Although You presently show forbearance to the wicked, the time will come when You will administer justice to them, i.e., the time of the redemption (*Radak*).

Many other interpretations of the verse are given, including the following:

- David asks God to strengthen him in his commitment to the Torah and the *mitzvot*, since he is living during *a time* when a person must strengthen himself *to act for God*, since the people of his generation have *abrogated Your Torah* (*Radak*).
- *The time has come* for those who *abrogated Your Torah* to finally repent and *act for God* (*Meiri*).

קבא עשיתי משפט וצדק בלתיחני לעשקי: קבב ערב עבדך
 לטוב אל-יעשקני ודים: קבג עיני כלו לישועתך ולאמרת צדקך:
 קבד עשה עם-עבדך כחסדך וחקך למרגי: קבה עבדך-אני
 הבינני ואדעה עדתיך: קבו עת לעשות ליהוה הפרו תורתך:
 קבז על-בן אהבתי מצותיך מזהב ומפז: קבח על-בן | כל-פקודי
 כל ישראל כל-ארח שקר שנאתי:

קכט פלאות עדותיך על-בן נצרתם נפשי: קל פתח-דברך יאיר



- David speaks of the obstinacy of his enemies, who cling to their wickedness even during times that are conducive to humility and repentance, such as in old age or times of duress. Even at *an auspicious time to act for God, they abrogate Your Torah* (Ibn Ezra, as cited by Meiri).
- Our Sages derived from this verse that there are times when we temporarily suspend some of the *mitzvot* in order to act for God. For example, to disprove the claims of the prophets of Baal, Elijah offered sacrifices on a private altar, which was prohibited at that time. He abrogated the Torah in order to act for God's Name (Rashi; Meiri).
- Our Sages further derived from this verse that a person who is not busy, yet only studies Torah intermittently—he makes *a time to act for God* instead of committing to Torah constantly—abrogates the Torah (Rashi; Meiri).
- Do not despair of repentance: *There is a time for God to act* and accept the repentance of those who formerly *abrogated Your Torah* (Meiri).

119:127

Therefore do I love Your commandments, more than gold and even fine gold. Because I know that the time will come when You will judge those who abrogate Your Torah, *therefore do I love Your commandments*, etc. (Metzudot).

Alternatively, when I see that others have abrogated Your Torah and are consumed by greed, I recognize that it is a time for the pious to redouble their efforts to act for God. *I therefore love Your commandments*—to study them and observe them—*more than gold and even fine gold*, which is the pursuit of others (Radak).

Alternatively, David had previously stated (in verse 125)

that he is God's servant and therefore asks God to grant him understanding of the testimonies. One might have asked: Is this all David wishes to ask for? In the present verse, David answers this question by saying that indeed his only desire is to serve God (Alshich).

119:128

Therefore do I affirm the uprightness of all the precepts of all Your commandments; I loathe every path of falsehood. Translation follows Rashi. Alternatively: I affirm all the precepts that are written explicitly in the Torah, as well as those that are not written, but which are accepted as law by the Jewish people (see, for example, Ruth 4:7). All of these precepts are upright (ישר), and I affirm their uprightness (ישרתי) in the face of their opponents, whose laws and customs are the loathsome *path of falsehood* (Radak).



Alternatively: It is natural for the part to yearn for sublimation within the whole. Why then are we not constantly in a state of yearning to cleave to our Creator? It is because our misdeeds weaken our natural state of yearning. David, however, says: *Therefore were all the precepts of the One Who is Everything upright before me because I loathed every path of falsehood*. Because he distanced himself from sin and the pleasures of this world, his natural desire to cleave to God was fully animated, leading him to find all of the precepts upright and seeing them as a means to cleaving to God (Alshich).

119:129

Your testimonies are unfathomable, therefore does my soul guard them all. Your *mitzvot* are concealed from the human

the fools. **131** I opened my mouth wide, drawing in air, because I craved Your commandments. **132** Turn to me and favor me, as is Your practice toward those who love Your Name. **133** Set my steps to walk in Your word, and let no iniquity rule over me. **134** Deliver me from the oppression of man, and I will be free to keep Your precepts. **135** Let Your face shine upon Your servant, and teach me Your statutes. **136** My eyes shed streams of water, over their not keeping Your Torah.

137 Righteous are you, O God, and Your judgments are upright. **138** You commanded Your testimonies, whose righteousness and faithfulness are immense. **139** My zeal consumes me, because my enemies have forgotten Your words. **140** Yet Your word is very pure, and Your servant cherishes it. **141** I am considered juvenile and despised by my enemies; yet I do not forget Your precepts. **142** For Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and Your Torah is



mind—we do not know their reward. We cannot understand, for example, why we are promised immense reward for the relatively easy mitzvah of sending away the mother bird. *Therefore does my soul guard them* all, since any one of them might be a source of great reward (*Rashi; Metzudot*).

119:130

Your opening words illuminate; You enlighten the fools. Having called the *mitzvot* “unfathomable,” David now explains that one should not, therefore, despair of understanding them. Rather, when a person begins exploring God’s *mitzvot*, his eyes will be enlightened and his understanding will increase (*Radak*).

Alternatively, God’s opening words at Sinai enlightened the hearts of the Jewish people. God said: *I am God, your God, Who took you out of Egypt*, etc. (Exodus 20:2). He thus established that they were beholden to Him for having acquired them from the house of slavery and that He was their Master. They ought to therefore accept His sovereignty and reject all other gods. Only after illuminating their hearts with these opening words did God present them with His laws.

Alternatively, David refers to God’s opening words at Creation: *Let there be light* (*Rashi*).

“God first created the earth and then introduced light.” The present verse supports Rabbi Yehudah: God’s first act of creation, His *opening words*, was to *illuminate* (*Bereishit Rabbah* 3:1 and *Etz Yosef* there).¹⁴²

Light is only useful in a world with things that need illumination. Why then did God create light before anyone could benefit from it?

The Midrash teaches that God’s process of creation mirrors the process of physical construction.¹⁴³ Before embarking on a project, one first formulates a conception and purpose of the project. Similarly, God’s vision for creation precedes its actual implementation.

God’s first utterance, His *opening words*, are the statement of this vision. God’s ultimate desire from creation is, *Let there be light*—the unfettered revelation of Godliness. All subsequent creation is set against this backdrop—the goal of introducing God’s light into every facet of the world.

We can now reexamine the dispute between Rabbis Yehudah and Nechemiah. The earth is inherently dark. But was its darkness formed before light was introduced or afterward?

To say that darkness came first implies that darkness exists outside the purpose of all creations, which is for the created matter to be illuminated by God. Darkness

GOOD BEGINNINGS



Rabbi Yehudah said: “God first created light and then created the earth.” Rabbi Nechemiah said:

142. The straightforward meaning of the verse supports Rabbi Yehudah. According to Rabbi Nechemiah, the verse means that God’s *opening words in the Torah* is *let there be light* (*Pirush Maharzu*).

143. *Bereishit Rabbah* 1:1.

מִבֵּין פְּתִיִּים: קִלָּא פִי פִּעְרִיתִי וְאֶשְׁאַפָּה בִּי לְמִצְוֹתֶיךָ יֵאָבְתִּי:
 קִלָּב פִּנְה־אֵלַי וְחִנְנִי כְּמִשְׁפָּט לְאַהֲבֵי שְׁמֶךָ: קִלָּב פִּעְמִי הִכֵּן בְּאִמְרַתְךָ
 וְאֶל־תִּשְׁלַט־בִּי כָל־אָנוֹן: קִלָּב פִּדְנִי מֵעֶשֶׂק אָדָם וְאֶשְׁמְרָה פְּקוּדֶיךָ:
 קִלָּה פָנֶיךָ הָאֵר בְּעִבְדְּךָ וְלִמְדִנִּי אֶת־חֻקֶּיךָ: קִלָּו פִּלְגֵי־מַיִם יִרְדּוּ
 עֵינַי עַל לֹא־שֹׁמְרוֹ תוֹרָתְךָ:

קִלָּו צַדִּיק אַתָּה יְהוָה וְיִשָּׁר מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ: קִלָּה צְוִיתָ צֶדֶק עֲדֹתֶיךָ
 וְאֶמוּנָה מְאֹד: קִלָּט צִמְתַּתְנִי קִנְאָתִי בִּי־שֹׁכְחוֹ דְּבָרֶיךָ צָרִי:
 קִמ צְרוּפָה אִמְרַתְךָ מְאֹד וְעִבְדְּךָ אֶהְבֶּה: קִמָּא צָעִיר אֲנִכִּי וְנִבְזָה
 פְּקָדֶיךָ לֹא שָׁכַחְתִּי: קִמַּב צִדְקָתְךָ צֶדֶק לְעוֹלָם וְתוֹרָתְךָ אֱמֶת:



exists, in this view, as a contrast to light, to provide the opportunity to reject darkness in favor of light. The purpose of darkness, then, is not to be illuminated but to be shunned. This is Rabbi Nechemiah's opinion.

Rabbi Yehudah maintains that darkness, too, followed light's creation. Thus, darkness and the negativity it represents are formed within the context of light. Even darkness shares the purpose of all creation—to be transformed by God's light (*The Rebbe*).¹⁴⁴

119:131

I opened my mouth wide, drawing in air, because I craved Your commandments. David speaks metaphorically of his craving for God's commandments. Just as a hungry person opens his mouth in anticipation as the food is being brought to him—at which time he draws nothing but air into his mouth—so is David's yearning for God's commandments (*Radak*).

119:133

Set my steps to walk in Your word, and let no iniquity rule over me. Guide me in the observance of the positive commandments, and do not give the evil inclination the power to rule over me and cause me to transgress any of the negative commandments, even a seemingly minor one (*Radak*).

119:136

My eyes shed streams of water, over their not keeping Your Torah. David would cry over the sins he committed. He blames his eyes for his sins, since they wander, and the sinner strays after what his eyes see. As our Sages teach (Jerusalem Talmud, *Berachot* 1:5): "The eye and the heart are the two agents of sin" (*Radak*).

119:141

I am considered juvenile and despised by my enemies; yet I do not forget Your precepts. My enemies view me as *young and despised* because I do not follow them and, instead, immerse myself in Your Torah and follow Your *mitzvot*. But I pay no attention to their mockery, and, unlike them, *I do not forget Your precepts* (*Radak; Meiri; Metzudot*).

Alternatively: *I am young and humbled*—I humble myself in the presence of those engrossed in the study of Torah so that I can learn from them—because *I do not forget Your precepts* (*Rashi*; see verse 99, above).



צִדְקָתְךָ צֶדֶק לְעוֹלָם וְתוֹרָתְךָ אֱמֶת
For Your righteousness is an everlasting
righteousness, and Your Torah is truth (119:142).

The Tzidkatecha Prayer. It is customary to recite this verse toward the conclusion of the *Minchah* prayer on Shabbat afternoon. Some say that it takes the place of

144. *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 10, pp. 7-12, fn. 31.

truth. **143** Thus, even when trouble and anguish have taken hold of me, I do not abandon You; indeed, Your commandments are my delight and comfort. **144** Your testimonies are righteous forever; grant me understanding of them so that I may live forever like them.

145 I call out with all my heart; answer me, O God, so that I will be able to keep Your statutes. **146** I call out to You—save me, and I will be able to observe Your testimonies. **147** I preceded all others by arising while it is still night and crying out, for my hope is in Your word. **148** My eyes preceded the night watches, that I may discuss Your word. **149** Hear my voice in accordance with Your kindness, O God, grant me life, as is Your practice. **150** Those who pursue abomination draw near to it, and they distance themselves from Your Torah. **151** You are near, O God, and all Your commandments are truth. **152** From the beginning, I discerned from Your testimonies that You had established them forever.

153 Behold my affliction and deliver me, for I have not forgotten Your Torah. **154** Wage my battle and redeem me; grant me life so that I will be able to fulfill Your word. **155** Salvation is far from the wicked, for they do not seek Your statutes. **156** Your mercies are abundant, O God; grant me life in accordance with Your practice to be merciful. **157** My pursuers and my enemies are abundant, yet I did not turn away from Your testimonies. **158** I saw traitors and I



Tziduk Hadin—a prayer that is said toward the end of a funeral, in which we proclaim that God’s judgment is just—since it is our tradition that Moses passed away on Shabbat afternoon.

Two other verses that proclaim God’s righteousness—36:7 and 71:19 above—are recited before the present verse. This follows the order in which they appear in Psalms. Each verse describes our appreciation of God’s righteousness in ascending greatness: In the first, it is *like the mighty mountains*; in the second, it is *to the heavens*; and in the third, *everlasting*.

The *Minchah* prayer of Shabbat is the final prayer of the week and thus its “seal.” We therefore conclude our week with the word *truth*, since God’s “seal” is truth (*Shibolei Haleket* §126; see there and *Avudraham* for other reasons for this custom).

119:148

קִדְמוֹ עֵינֵי אֲשֶׁמְרוֹת לַלַּיִת בְּאַמְרֶיךָ **My eyes preceded the night watches, that I may discuss Your word.** The night is divided into three “watches,” or times, to wake up (see *Berachot* 3a). David would sleep only during the first “watch,” after which he would arise to immerse himself in God’s words and ways. He would do this often when the nights were long (*Radak*).

Until midnight, he would immerse himself in the study of the Torah—as it is written, *that I may discuss Your word*. From then on, he would immerse himself in songs and praises of God—as it is written, *at midnight I arise to praise You* (verse 62, above—see commentary there; *Rashi*).¹⁴⁵

145. According to *Rashi* to *Berachot* 3a, the “watches” of the night refer to the different shifts of angels who praise God during the night.

קמו צר־ומצוק מצא־וני מִצֻּוֹתֶיךָ שְׁעֲשֵׂעִי: קמו צַדִּיק עֲדוֹתֶיךָ לְעוֹלָם
הַבִּינֵנִי וְאַחִיָּה:

קמה קִרְאתִי בְּכָל־לֵב עֲנֵנִי יְהוָה חֲקִיךָ אֶצְרָה: קמו קִרְאתֶיךָ
הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי וְאַשְׁמְרָה עֲדוֹתֶיךָ: קמו קִדְמָתִי בְּנִשְׁפָּה וְאַשְׁוִיעָה לְדַבְרְךָ
יַחְלָתִי: קמו קִדְמוּ עֵינֵי אֲשֻׁמְרוֹת לְשִׁיחַ בְּאַמְרָתְךָ: קמו קוֹלִי
שִׁמְעָה כְּחִסְדְּךָ יְהוָה כְּמִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ חֲיִנִּי: קו קָרְבוּ רִדְפֵי זִמָּה מִתּוֹרָתְךָ
רַחֲקוּ: קמו קָרֹב אַתָּה יְהוָה וְכָל־מִצְוֹתֶיךָ אֱמַת: קמו קֶדֶם יִדְעָתִי
מִעֲדוֹתֶיךָ כִּי לְעוֹלָם יִסְדָּתָם:

קמו רֵאֵה־עֵינֵי וְחַלְצֵנִי כִּי־תוֹרָתְךָ לֹא שָׁכַחְתִּי: קמו רִיבָה רִיבֵי
וּגְאֻלִּנִּי לְאַמְרָתְךָ חֲיִנִּי: קמו רַחֲוֹק מִרְשָׁעִים יִשְׁוִעָה כִּי־חֲקִיךָ לֹא
דָּרָשׁוּ: קמו רַחֲמֶיךָ רַבִּים | יְהוָה כְּמִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ חֲיִנִּי: קמו רַבִּים רִדְפֵי
וְצָרִי מִעֲדוֹתֶיךָ לֹא נָטִיתִי: קמו רֵאֵתִי בְּגִדִים וְאַתְקוּמָטָה אֲנִשׁר



119:151

You are near, O God, and all Your commandments are truth. The wicked are far from You and Your Torah, but *You are near* to all who call to You. The wicked distance themselves from Your *mitzvot*, since they do not know them. They do not realize that *all Your commandments are truth* (Radak).

The *mitzvot* embody truth and faithfulness. They themselves faithfully repay those who observe them (*Metzudot*).

119:152

From the beginning, I discerned from Your testimonies that You had established them forever. I saw that Your testimonies are built upon righteousness and uprightness. This insight led me to the conclusion that *You established Your testimonies forever*—the *mitzvot* are eternal—just as righteousness is eternal (Radak).

Alternatively: *Before* a thing came about, *I knew of*

it from Your testimonies. Before the Israelites inherited the Land of Israel, You had already commanded them regarding the *mitzvot* of first fruit, *terumot*, and tithes. And before You gave them respite from their enemies, You commanded them to appoint a king, destroy Amalek, and build the Holy Temple.

For You established them to address all future events, *forever* (Rashi; see *Sanhedrin* 20b).

119:157

My pursuers and my enemies are abundant, yet I did not turn away from Your testimonies. Although I am burdened immensely by my enemies who pursue me, *I did not turn away from Your testimonies* (*Metzudot*).

Alternatively: *I did not turn away from Your testimonies* in my treatment of my enemies—I did not repay their evil in kind. I conformed with Your commandments forbidding revenge, bearing a grudge, or ignoring the plight of an enemy's animal (Radak).

quarreled with them, because they did not keep Your words. **159** Behold how I love Your precepts; O God, grant me life in accordance with Your kindness. **160** The beginning of Your word is truth, and forever are all Your righteous judgments.

161 Princes have pursued me without cause, but my heart fears Your word. **162** I rejoice over Your word, like one who finds abundant spoil. **163** I hate falsehood and abhor it, but Your Torah I love.



119:160

הַבִּיטָה אֵלַי וְרַחֲמֵנִי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ כְּלֹלֵם כָּל־מִשְׁפָּט צְדִיקָהּ **The beginning of Your word is truth, and forever are all Your righteous judgments.** Your first commandment at Sinai—the obligation to serve only You—expresses an eternal truth. Similarly, You commanded us regarding all Your righteous judgment, that we should observe them forever (*Radak*). They are timeless, as is the truth of Your oneness (*Metzudot*).

Alternatively, in order to comprehend the truth of Your oneness, we must forever keep *all Your righteous judgments*, which are like a ladder by which to ascend to knowledge of the Divine (*Radak*).

Alternatively, when the nations heard the first four commandments, they said, “These are all for His benefit and glory!” But when they heard the commandments regarding honoring parents and the prohibitions on murder and adultery, they admitted that the beginning of God’s words—His first commandments—are true (*Rashi*; see *Kiddushin* 31a).

119:161

לְכִי עֲרִיבֵי חַיִּים וְרָפוּנִי חֲנֹם וּמִדְּבָרְךָ פָּחַד לִּי **Princes have pursued me without cause, but my heart fears Your word.** *Princes* refers either to the princes of Israel aligned with Saul or those aligned with David’s rebellious son, Absalom. David’s fear of transgressing one of God’s *mitzvot* was greater than his fear of his pursuers (*Radak*).

Although he had the ability to take revenge on his pursuers, David feared God and therefore did not harm them (*Metzudot*).

119:162

שִׂשׁ אֲנֹכִי עַל־אֲמֶרְתְּךָ כְּמוֹצֵא שָׁלָל רַב **I rejoice over Your word, like one who finds abundant spoil.** I rejoice

over Your promise to me. Alternatively, I rejoice when I come to understand one of Your inscrutable statements.

Alternatively, *I rejoice over Your word* (אֲמֶרְתְּךָ)—over the mitzvah of circumcision given to Abraham, as it is written, *And God said* (וַיֹּאמֶר) *to Abraham: “And you shall keep My covenant.”* Circumcision is a mitzvah that accompanies a person always, even when in a bathhouse, where he can neither wear *tzitzit* or *tefillin* nor study Torah. David realized this fact while visiting a bathhouse and exclaimed upon leaving it: *I rejoice over Your word like one who finds abundant spoil* (*Rashi*; see *Menachot* 43b).



Any mitzvah that the Israelites accepted with joy, such as circumcision—as it is written, *I rejoice over Your word like one who finds abundant spoil*—they still observe with joy (*Shabbat* 103a).

✿ THE JOY OF CIRCUMCISION ✿



The Psalmist likens circumcision to the *one who finds abundant spoil*. But how does circumcision resemble the taking of plunder?

Rambam, in his philosophical exploration of the *mitzvot*, reasons that the value of circumcision is that it curbs the natural urges of man.¹⁴⁶ The uninhibited cravings of a person’s ego are his foe. Our challenge is to sanctify our very physical lives. This we do with *mitzvot*, which enrich our material activities with spiritual purpose. The mitzvah of circumcision means that one’s body is devoted to spiritual ideals and not pursuits of the flesh. By following the dictates of the Torah to commandeer our natural urges for holy purposes, we take *abundant spoil* from our egocentric foe (*The Rebbe*).¹⁴⁷

What is unique about circumcision, which caused David to rejoice over it? The objective of *mitzvot* is to

146. *Guide to the Perplexed*, vol. III, chs. 35, 49.

147. *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 3, pp. 920-921.

אִמְרַתְךָ לֹא שָׁמְרוּ: קִנֵּט רָאָה כִּי־פָקוּדֶיךָ אֶהְבֵּתִי יְהוָה בְּחֶסֶדְךָ
 חֲיִינִי: קִם רֹאשׁ־דְּבָרְךָ אֵמֶת וּלְעוֹלָם כָּל־מִשְׁפָּט צִדְקָךָ:
 קִסָּא שְׁרִים רִדְפוּנִי חֲנֻם וּמִדְּבָרְךָ פָּתַח לִבִּי: קִסֵּב שֵׁשׁ אֲנָכִי עַל־
 אִמְרַתְךָ כְּמוֹצֵא שְׁלָל רַב: קִסֵּג שֶׁקֶר שִׁנְאַתִּי וְאַתְעֵבָה תוֹרַתְךָ



infuse this physical world with Godliness. This ideal is most fully expressed in the commandment of circumcision, which permanently alters one's very flesh. In the words of God to Abraham: *My covenant shall be in your flesh as an everlasting covenant* (Genesis 17:13).¹⁴⁸

Other *mitzvot*, such as belief in God or love and fear of God, refine us and sensitize us to the spiritual, but they do not permanently imprint us with God's will. Circumcision, however, remains with us forever; it effects an *everlasting* refinement of our physical selves. The mitzvah of circumcision is thus the ultimate embodiment of what a mitzvah is: the irrevocable refinement of the physical world. The Psalmist therefore finds his greatest joy in the mitzvah of circumcision (*The Rebbe*).¹⁴⁹

✽ HOLY PREAMBLE ✽



Homiletically, the verse can be read as follows: I rejoice over the "I" (אֲנֹכִי) that You spoke at Mount Sinai, "I am God Your God," because that first word enables me to understand *Your* subsequent words.

We encounter holiness gradually. First we are conditioned to be sensitive to Godliness, then we become a vessel for God's light. The Midrash teaches that the entire Torah is contained within the first word God uttered at Sinai, "I (am God your God)."¹⁵⁰ With this word, God altered us completely, forging us into a nation receptive to the Divine. The ensuing commandments and words of the Torah could then illuminate us because we had been primed by God's original revelation. David therefore rejoices over the "I" that God spoke because, with that "I,"

we were given the capacity to appreciate all of God's words (*Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi*).¹⁵¹

✽ TREASURES LEFT BEHIND ✽



A traveler stumbles upon a great treasure. He urgently gathers what he can, frantically filling every pocket with jewels. But the treasure is vast, and he is forced to leave most of it behind. As he continues on his journey, he rejoices over his find, yet he is pained at what he could not take.

So, too, *I rejoice at Your word*—I am ecstatic at the opportunity to learn *Your word*—the Torah, but, *like one who finds abundant spoil*, I am pained by my inability to fathom the entirety of Your Torah (*Baal Shem Tov*).¹⁵²

✽ KOSHER SPOIL ✽



The first letters of the words *finds abundant spoil* (כְּמוֹצֵא שְׁלָל רַב) form the word "kosher" (כָּשֵׁר) (*Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson*).¹⁵³

"Spoil" refers to assets seized during war that were initially in the hand of the enemy. Similarly, the physical world, though created by God, contains "*spoil*" that we must redeem, for God made us His partners in creation and charged us with the mandate to "conquer" the world—to take the permitted, "kosher" elements of the world and utilize them for a holy purpose.

For example, when we use a public thoroughfare and musical instruments for a holy celebration, we transform them and reveal their inherent Godliness. Like the *spoils* of war taken from the adversary, these physical items are redeemed and brought into the domain of holiness (*The Rebbe*).¹⁵⁴

148. Genesis 17:13.

149. *Sefer Hasichot* 5748, vol. 1, pp. 56-58.

150. *Tanchuma*, Korach 12; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:16. *Rashi* to Exodus 24:12.

151. *Maamarei Admur Hazaken Haketzarim*, p. 242.

152. *Keter Shem Tov* §209.

153. From a letter to the Rebbe, *Likkutei Levi Yitzchak*, *Igrot*, p. 198.

154. *Torat Menachem—Hitvaaduyot* 5745, vol. 1, pp. 283-284.

164 Seven times a day, I praise You for Your righteous judgments. **165** There is abundant peace for those who love Your Torah, and there is no stumbling for them. **166** I hoped for Your salvation, O God, and I performed Your commandments. **167** My soul has kept Your testimonies, and I love them intensely. **168** I have kept Your precepts and Your testimonies, for all my ways are before You.

169 Let my prayer approach Your presence, O God—grant me proper understanding in accordance with Your word. **170** Let my supplication come before You; save me in accordance with Your promise. **171** My lips will utter praise, when You will teach me Your statutes. **172** My tongue will proclaim Your word, for all Your commandments are just. **173** Let Your hand be ready to help me, for I have chosen Your precepts. **174** I long for Your salvation, O



119:164

שִׁבְעַת בְּיָוֶם הַלְלֵתִיךָ עַל מִשְׁפָּטֶי צְדָקָה **Seven times a day, I praise You for Your righteous judgments.** *Seven times* is not to be understood literally. We find other instances in the Torah where *seven* is used to mean *many*, such as (Proverbs 24:16): *The righteous person falls seven times and stands back up*. Many times during the day, David praises God for giving us His righteous judgments (*Radak; Metzudot*).

According to *Rashi*, David refers to the seven blessings that accompany the reading of the *Shema*—three blessings that accompany the morning reading and four for the evening reading (see Jerusalem Talmud, *Berachot* 1:5).

119:168

שְׁמַרְתִּי פְקוּדֶיךָ וְעֵדוּתֶיךָ כִּי כָל־דְּרָכֵי נִגְהָה **I have kept Your precepts and Your testimonies, for all my ways are before You.** I know that You know of all my ways, since You keep watch over everything (*Rashi; Metzudot*).

Alternatively: *all my ways are before You*—everything I do is for Your sake. Proverbs (3:6) similarly states: *Know Him in all your ways*. And our Sages have said: *Let all your deeds be for the sake of heaven* (*Avot* 2:12). It was God's precepts and testimonies that taught David how to conduct himself (*Radak*).



Psalms in Practice

שִׁבְעַת בְּיָוֶם הַלְלֵתִיךָ עַל מִשְׁפָּטֶי צְדָקָה
Seven times a day, I praise You for Your righteous judgments (119:164).

The Amidah of Shabbat. The word *day* in the verse alludes to the day of Shabbat, when we recite only seven blessings in the *Amidah*, as opposed to the nineteen recited during the week. David thus says: with seven blessings *on the day* of Shabbat do I praise You. Shabbat was given to us for enjoyment, holiness, and peace of mind. Were we to pray on Shabbat for the things we pray for during the weekday *Amidah*, we would grow distressed as we remember our needs. The Shabbat *Amidah* therefore omits requests for our physical needs, focusing instead on our spiritual needs and thanking God for the Shabbat (*Tanchuma, Vayera* 1; *Midrash Tehillim* to Psalm 29; see verse 97, above).

119:169

תִּקְרַב רִנָּתִי לְפָנֶיךָ יְהוָה כְּדִבְרֶךָ הִבִּינִי **Let my prayer approach Your presence, O God—grant me proper understanding in accordance with Your word.** My prayer is that You help me understand Your Torah properly, *in accordance with Your word*, i.e., according to the true intent of Your word (*Metzudot; Rashi*).

אֶהְבֵּתִי: קסד שֶׁבַע בַּיּוֹם הִלְלִיתִךָ עַל מִשְׁפָּטֶי צְדָקָךָ: קסה שְׁלוֹם
 רַב לְאֹהֲבֵי תוֹרָתְךָ וְאִין לָמוּ מִכְשׁוֹל: קסו שְׁבַרְתִּי לִישׁוּעָתְךָ
 יְהוָה וּמִצּוֹתֶיךָ עָשִׂיתִי: קסז שְׁמֶרָה גַּפְשִׁי עֲדֹתֶיךָ וְאֹהֲבֶם מְאֹד:
 קסח נִשְׁמַרְתִּי פְקוּדֶיךָ וְעֲדֹתֶיךָ כִּי כָל־דְּרָכֶי נִגְדָּךָ:

קסט תִּקְרַב רַנְתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ יְהוָה כְּדַבְּרֶךָ הִבִּינִנִי: קע תָּבוֹא תְהַנֵּתִי
 לְפָנֶיךָ כְּאִמְרָתְךָ הִצִּילֵנִי: קעא תִּבְעֶנָה שְׂפָתַי תְּהִלָּה כִּי תִלְמַדְנִי
 חֻקֶּיךָ: קעב תֵּעַן לְשׁוֹנִי אִמְרָתְךָ כִּי כָל־מִצְוֹתֶיךָ צֶדֶק: קעג תְּהִי־יָדְךָ
 לְעֶזְרִי כִּי פְקוּדֶיךָ בָּחַרְתִּי: קעד תֵּאֲבֹתִי לִישׁוּעָתְךָ יְהוָה וְתוֹרָתְךָ



According to *Radak*, David's prayer is that God give him the understanding and wisdom to behave *in accordance with His word*.

119:170

תָּבוֹא תְהַנֵּתִי לְפָנֶיךָ כְּאִמְרָתְךָ הִצִּילֵנִי **Let my supplication come before You; save me in accordance with Your promise.** According to *Radak* (cf. *Metzudot*), David is not speaking about physical salvation from physical difficulties, of which he makes no mention in this verse or in the preceding ones. Rather, he speaks of the salvation of the soul from sin.

Although God has given us free choice, He helps us along the way if we set ourselves on the upright path. He therefore granted us the vision at Sinai, which was like a great key to open our hearts to the path of goodness and to steer us away from sin. Indeed, Moses describes the purpose of God's revelation at Sinai as follows: *so that awe of Him would be upon your faces so that you should not sin* (Exodus 20:20).

Similarly, God says: *Who would give that it should remain in their hearts...to fear Me and to keep all of My commandments...* (Deuteronomy 5:26). If we "give" our effort, God promises to help us fear Him and keep His mitzvot.

David therefore asks of God: Save me from sin *in accordance with Your promise*—in accordance with Your promise in the Torah. I have given my heart to Your service; You, in turn, should give me Your assistance (*Radak*).

119:172

✽ GOD'S MOUTHPIECE ✽



תֵּעַן לְשׁוֹנִי אִמְרָתְךָ **My tongue will proclaim Your word.** When we internalize the ideas of the Torah, our minds become united with God's. Yet because the depth of our Torah study is limited by the extent of our intellect, the union with God produced by study is incomplete.

Not so when we simply recite the words of Torah. The Torah's words are God's words; when we set aside our individual tools of perception and become absorbed in God's words, nothing interposes between us and Him. This is the union the Psalmist alludes to: *My tongue will proclaim Your word*—my tongue is a blank canvas filled only with God's pristine word (*The Rebbe*).¹⁵⁵

119:174

יִהְיֶה וְתוֹרָתְךָ שְׂעִשְׁעִי **I long for Your salvation, O God, and Your Torah is my delight.** *I long for Your salvation*—the salvation of my soul in the World to Come; and *Your Torah is therefore my delight*, since it is the Torah that will bring me salvation (*Radak*).

Alternatively: *I long for Your salvation*—for You to deliver me from my enemies—and then, freed of persecution, *Your Torah will be my delight* (*Metzudot*).

155. *Sefer Hamaamarim* 5718, pp. 234-235.

God, and Your Torah is my delight. **175** Let my soul live so that it will praise You, and let Your judgments help me. **176** I wander like a lost lamb—seek out Your servant, for I have not forgotten Your commandments.



119:175

תְּחִי־נַפְשִׁי וְתִהְיֶה לְךָ וּמִשְׁפָּטְךָ יְעִזְרֵנִי **Let my soul live so that it will praise You, and let Your judgments help me.** I pray for life not so that I can enjoy the pleasures of this world but so that my soul can praise You. And let Your judgment of my enemies help me praise You, as I will no longer have to contend with their aggression (*Ibn Ezra; Metzudot*).

Alternatively, *let Your judgments help me* to praise You, since they are like a ladder by which one can come to truly know God and articulate His praise (*Radak*). I will better my understanding of You by following Your commandments. These refine and elevate a person, and the perfection of character leads to the perfection of the mind (*Meiri*).

119:176

אֶעֱיִי כֶשֶׁה אֶבֶר בְּקֶשׁ עֲבָדְךָ כִּי מִצֹּתִיד לֹא שָׁכַחְתִּי **I wander like a lost lamb—seek out Your servant, for I have not forgotten Your commandments.** Because of all my burdens, my soul wanders away from You in this world, like a lost lamb that knows not how to return to its shepherd. *Seek out Your servant* like a faithful shepherd and return my soul to You. Just as *I have not forgotten Your commandments*, do not forget me (*Meiri*).

I wander from the path of knowing You. Like a lamb lost from its home, my soul is lost from its home—it knows not how to return to its essence. And just as a faithful shepherd seeks out the lost lamb, finds it, and returns it to its place, so should You *seek out Your servant*, grant me insight, and return me to my essence (*Radak*).

✽ THE LAMB IN EXILE ✽

The Jewish people in exile are like a lost lamb, fleeing from one place to another because of the decrees and

persecutions of their host nations. We ask God to *seek out Your servant*—as Isaiah (27:12) prophesied that He would gather us, one by one, and return us to our land. For despite the best efforts of our enemies through their various decrees, *we have not forgotten Your commandments* (*Sforno*).



When a lamb is lost, who seeks out whom? Does the lamb seek out the shepherd, or does the shepherd seek out the lamb? Indeed, the shepherd seeks out the lamb. In this vein, David asks God, our Shepherd, to seek us out like that lost lamb (*Midrash Tehillim*).

✽ SEARCH AND RESCUE ✽



In exile, we are like *a lost lamb*. But we are not hopelessly lost, for we have a shepherd who will *seek out Your servant* (*Makkot 24a*).

The Torah's discussion of the obligation to return lost objects includes a seemingly redundant word. The Torah states: *You shall not see your brother's ox or sheep straying, and ignore them. Rather, you shall return them to your brother... So shall you do with his donkey, and so shall you do with his garment...* (Deuteronomy 21:1-3).

The Torah offers four examples of lost objects: ox, sheep, donkey, and garment. The Talmud derives specific laws regarding the return of lost objects from three of these but deduces nothing from the mention of "sheep." The Talmud ends its discussion of this verse without identifying the purpose of the word "sheep," saying that "the mention of sheep in the passage poses a difficulty to every opinion."¹⁵⁶

Although the mention of sheep seems to have no *halachic* consequence, it does impart a powerful idea concerning our relationship with God. The sheep of the verse alludes to the Jewish people: God's sheep. This sheep is lost

¹⁵⁶ Bava Metzia 27a.

שֶׁשָׁעִי: קֵדָה תִּחְיֶי-נַפְשִׁי וְתִהְלֶלְךָ וּמִשְׁפָּטְךָ יַעֲזָרְנִי: קֵדָה תִּלְעִיתִי
כִּשְׁהָ אֶבֶד בִּקְשׁ עֲבֹדְךָ כִּי מִצֹּתֶיךָ לֹא שָׁכַחְתִּי:



in exile, as the Psalmist laments, *I stray like a lost sheep*. But God, our Shepherd, is searching for us so we can be under His protection once again (*Maharsha*, conclusion to Tractate *Makkot*).



The Tzemach Tzedek takes this analogy further. To reclaim a lost object, one must present valid proof of ownership. The claimant, for example, can describe the object's distinctive marks or dimensions. By offering these details, known as *simanim*, he demonstrates that the object is indeed his.

But there is another way to reclaim a lost object: immediate recognition. One who is known to be trustworthy can simply state that he recognizes the object as his own. He does need not to provide any additional details about the object.¹⁵⁷

In the above Talmudic discussion, the Talmud attempts to use the superfluous mention of “sheep” as the Biblical source for the legal power of *simanim*. The Talmud rejects this when it recognizes that this power is actually derived from the word “garments.” Thus, the Talmud concludes that the Torah’s mention of sheep does not teach us about *simanim*.

Beneath this legal analysis of lost items and proof of ownership lies the spiritual drama of lost souls. There are two ways for the rightful owner, God, to reclaim His lost souls: through *simanim* or through immediate recognition. The signs are Torah and *mitzvot*, the distinguishing marks that set us apart from all other nations.

But God does not need *simanim* to recognize us. We are indelibly imprinted in God’s Essence; when He sees us, He instinctively recognizes us as His own.¹⁵⁸ God claims

us as His own because of our inherent unity with Him (*Yahel Or*).

✿ REMEMBERING MITZVOT ✿



The commandments are to be observed, not merely “remembered.” Why, then, does David take pride in having *not forgotten Your commandments*?

We can only forget that which is removed and distant. If something is current and present, it will not stray too far from our minds. There is a class of *mitzvot* whose fulfillment is possible only when the Temple is standing. These are the laws of the sacrificial order, as well as many laws related to agriculture. Throughout exile, we are denied the ability to fulfill these *mitzvot*. Thus, it would not be unexpected for us to forget these laws. Yet throughout our exile, we have preserved our knowledge of these laws through Torah study.

Although we cannot fulfill these laws practically, we can study them and thus ensure that they are never forgotten. David therefore declares on our behalf that, though *I stray like a lost sheep* in exile, *I have not forgotten Your commandments*—we still cling to all the commandments, even those we cannot presently fulfill.

In a broader sense, the mundane tasks that occupy the majority of our time is an “exile” of sorts. The demands of career and family make it difficult to attend to one’s spiritual needs, but we must remain mindful of our true purpose, our service of God. If in the midst of fulfilling our material obligations we do not *forget Your commandments*, God is present with us even in that exile (*The Rebbe*).¹⁵⁹

157. Rambam, *Hilchot Gezeilah Vavedah* 14:12.

158. As the verse states, *All who see them shall recognize them, that they are seed*

that God blessed (Isaiah 61:9).

159. *Torat Menachem—Hitvaaduyot* 5742, vol. 4, pp. 1910-1911.

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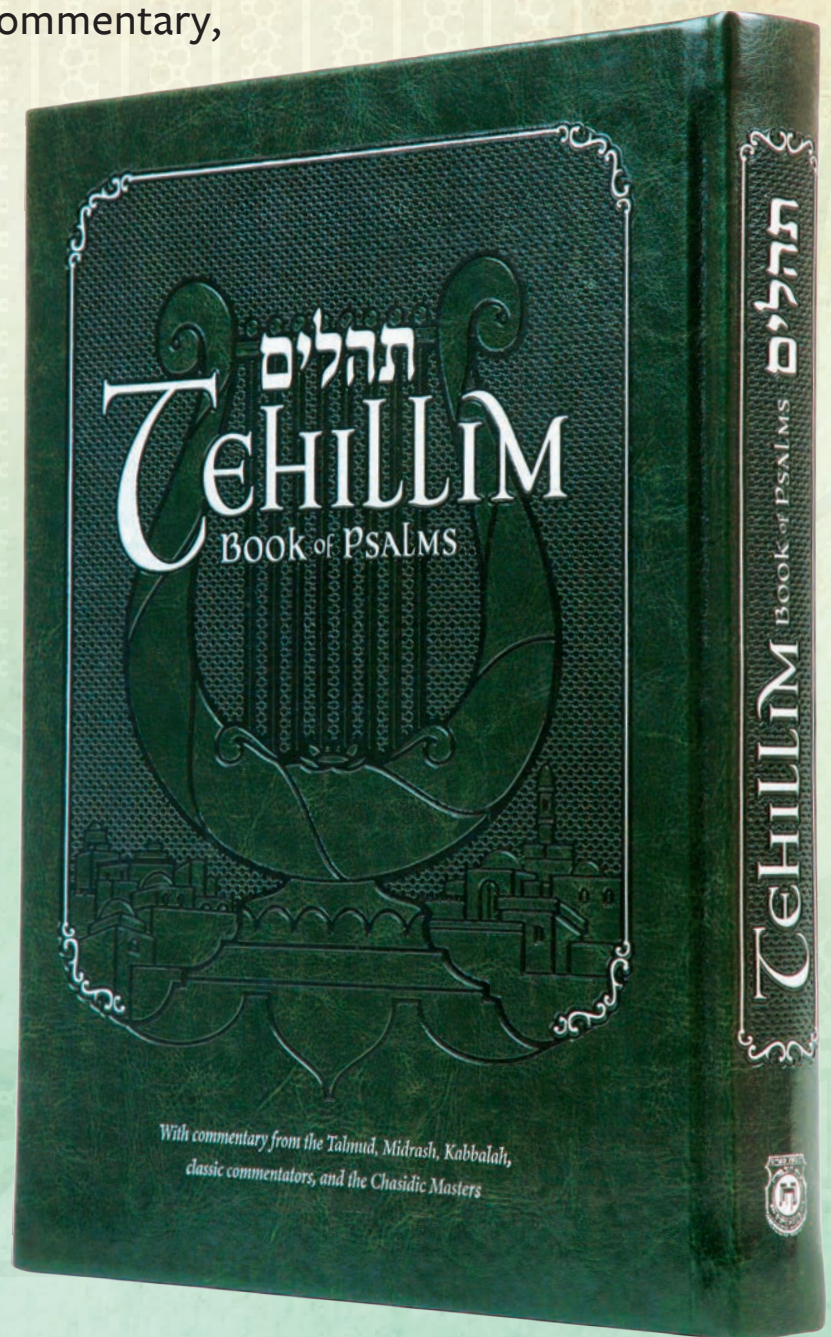
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