

The Rebbe's Kapitel

~ Chapter 124 ~

Yud Alef Nissan 5785

An Excerpt from:

תהלים TEHILLIM BOOK of PSALMS

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



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א שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְדָוִד לְלוֹי יִהְיֶה שְׁהִיָּה לָנוּ יְאִמְרָנָא
 ב לְיִשְׂרָאֵל: לְלוֹי יִהְיֶה שְׁהִיָּה לָנוּ בְּקוּם עָלֵינוּ אָדָם:
 ג אֲזֵי חַיִּים בְּלָעוּנוּ בְּחֶרֶת אַפָּם בָּנוּ: ד אֲזֵי הַמַּיִם שִׁטְפוּנוּ נְחֻלָּה
 ה עָבַר עַל־נַפְשֵׁנוּ: ו אֲזֵי עָבַר עַל־נַפְשֵׁנוּ הַמַּיִם הַיְדוּנָיִם: ז בְּרוּךְ




 During his sojourn with Laban, Jacob's goal was to “redeem the sparks” of holiness that were present in Laban and in his world, to sanctify and elevate his experiences and interactions. Laban claimed—and his claim is echoed to this day—that Judaism should be relegated to the synagogue and rituals; in the “real” world, says Laban, one cannot succeed without compromising Torah law, such as the Torah's restrictions on dishonesty, infringement on the livelihood of others, and the like. Jacob resisted Laban's corruptive influence with the inspiration he received from the Psalms. Furthermore, he was able to sanctify and elevate his experiences in and interactions with Laban's world.

He recognized that by his strength alone he could not succeed—*were it not for God Who was with us, let Israel declare!* Only by submitting himself to God could he fulfill the purpose of his sojourn, which was to demonstrate that God is the Ruler not only of the “heavens,” of spiritual matters, but of earthly matters as well—He is *Maker of heaven and earth* (*The Rebbe*).¹⁹⁴

124:2-3

✿ HAMAN & PHARAOH ✿

 **When men rose up against us...they would have swallowed us alive.** Or: *when a man rose up against us.* This refers to the days of Purim, when a man (Haman), not a king, rose up against us (*Megillah* 11a and *Rashi* there).¹⁹⁵ Were

night, a position that he ultimately rejects (*Yosef Ometz* §54).
 194. *Torat Menachem—Hitvaaduyot* 5711, vol. 1, p. 143; see *Kehot Chumash*, Genesis 31:43. His help came from *ayin*, from recognizing that he was “nothing” without God's help (*Hitvaaduyot*, *ibid.*). See above on 121:1 and introduction to Psalm 120.
 195. The connection of the psalm to the events of Purim is alluded to in the three appearances of the word for “then,” אז, in verses 3-5, each of which is numerically equivalent to 18, and together to 54. David was praying for the downfall of Haman and his ten sons, who are associated with the number 54: Haman's name is mentioned 54 times in the Scroll of Esther and the listing of Haman's ten sons contains 54 letters. (The number 54 appears also in the number of words in this psalm, excluding the introduction, “A song of ascents by David”—*Rokeach*.)
 The appearance of 18 three times alludes also to the three daily prayers, each of which contains the *Amidah* of 18 blessings. These prayers protect us from


it not for God, Haman would have “devoured” us immediately because of his burning rage.¹⁹⁶ God caused him to postpone his genocidal plan, thus allowing us time to fast and repent (*Alshich*).

Alternatively, “man” or “men” refers to Egypt, as in Isaiah (31:3): *Egyptians are men and not God...* (*Midrash Tehillim* on 114:1). The *Zohar* (II:43a) similarly interprets the previous verse as referring to when the Jewish people were being chased by Egypt and faced the Sea. In the merit of Jacob, they were saved. Hence: *Let Israel (i.e., Jacob) declare*.¹⁹⁷

124:4-5

The waters...the raging waters. “The waters” refers to the times of Purim, when our enemies sought (primarily) our physical destruction. The “raging waters” refers to the times of Chanukah, when the Greeks sought our spiritual destruction, to disconnect us from God (see *Alshich*).

124:6

 **Blessed is God, Who did not permit us to be prey for their teeth.** Just as every lie must contain some kernel of truth (see *Rashi* on Numbers 14:27), the forces of evil can only exist because of the spark of holiness that is exiled within them. Ironically, this spark of holiness is their “teeth”—it is what gives them the power to threaten us. We therefore thank God for protecting us from the “teeth” of our enemies, from the exiled sparks of holiness that empower them.

We combat the “teeth” of the wicked with our own. The Jewish people are praised in Song of Songs (6:6) with the phrase: *your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that*

being devoured by our enemies (*Chida* citing Rabbi Menachem Azariah of Fano and *Avudraham*).
 196. See *Metzudot*: Like a famished person who is so intent on eating he will swallow food “alive” (the word for “alive” (*chai*) also means “raw”), so are our enemies hungrily intent on devouring us.
 197. I.e., we were saved in the merit of Jacob's prayer (*Matok Midvash* on *Zohar*, *ibid.*).

124

1 A song of ascents by David. Were it not for God, Who was with us in our exiles—let Israel declare— 2 were it not for God, Who was with us when men rose up against us, 3 then they would have swallowed us alive in their burning rage against us. 4 Then the waters, i.e., our many enemies, would have inundated us, the torrent would have swept over our soul; 5 then the raging waters would have surged over our soul. 6 Blessed is



provide us generously with all that we request (*Likkutim*, s.v. *Hinei K'einei*).¹⁹¹

merciful are treated mercifully from on High... (*Mishneh Torah*, end of *Sefer Kinyan*).¹⁹²

123:4

Derision of the complacent. The other nations live tranquil lives and mock us who live among them, poor, suffering, (*Radak*) and transient (*Alshich*).

The scorn of arrogant tormentors. The word(s) for “arrogant tormentors”—*lige'ei-yonim*—is one of fifteen instances in the Torah where two words are written as one but read as two (*Minchat Shai*), *lige'ei*=arrogant, and *yonim*=tormentors (*Metzudot*). According to *Rashi*, the verse means that too long have we suffered the scorning of the “valley (*lige'ei*) of doves (*yonim*)”, i.e., the scorning of Jerusalem.

PSALM 124

THE FOUR EXILES

Alshich explains at length how the psalm alludes to the “four exiles” or subjugations of the Jewish people: verse 1—Babylonian exile; verses 2-4—Persian exile (which saw the events of Purim); verses 5-7—Greek exile (which saw the events of Chanukah); verse 8—Edomite (current) exile.

124:1-2

Were it not for God...were it not for God. *Sforno* explains this repetition as follows: The first refers generally to God’s protection in all our exiles, since in every generation our enemies rise up to destroy us. The second refers to a specific exile, namely the Persian exile.

124:1

OVERCOMING LABAN

Let Israel declare. For the twenty years during which he worked for Laban, Jacob did not sleep at night. What was Jacob saying during that time? The fifteen Songs of Ascent in the Book of Psalms. As it is written: *A song of ascents... Were it not for God Who was with us—let Israel declare...* this refers to Jacob, whose name was also “Israel” (*Bereishit Rabbah* 68:11).¹⁹³

192. Human mercy is evoked by the condition of the other and is therefore limited to and affected by the status of the other. God’s attributes, however, are infinite and unconditional, which is why His mercy extends to all. *Rambam* here is suggesting that we act mercifully—in imitation of God—even in situations where our human mercy is not aroused and is seemingly unwarranted, e.g., feeding one’s servants and animals before taking one’s own meal (see at length *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 37, p. 77).

193. According to another opinion cited there, Jacob recited the entire book of Psalms. *Chida* cites this teaching as a reason to allow the recitation of Psalms at



כְּעֵינֵי עֲבָדִים אֶל־יַד אֲדוֹנֵיהֶם

As the eyes of servants are turned to the hand of their masters (123:2).

Rambam, citing this verse, tells us how one should treat a servant: Be merciful and pursue righteousness. Do not make the yoke of your servant too heavy and do not pain him. Provide him from every food and drink. The sages of old would give their servants food from each dish of the foods eaten by the masters. They would feed their animals and servants before eating themselves. Indeed the verse states: *As the eyes of servants are turned to the hand of their masters, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress...*

Do not humiliate him either with your hand or your words.... Speak to him pleasantly and listen to his claims.... We have been commanded to imitate God’s attributes and God is merciful to all. And all who are

191. See *Sefer Hamaamarim Kuntreisim*, vol. 1, p. 3a.

יְהוָה נִשְׁלָא נִתְנַנְנוּ טָרַף לְשִׁנְיָהֶם: ז נִפְשֵׁנוּ כְּצִפּוֹר נִמְלֵטָה מִפֶּחַ
 יוֹקְשִׁים הַפֶּחַ נִשְׁפָּר וְאֲנַחְנוּ נִמְלֵטָנוּ: ח עֲזָרְנוּ בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה עֲשֵׂה
 שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:

« שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלֹת הַבְּטָחִים בִּיהוָה כְּהַר־צִיּוֹן לֹא־יִמוּט
 לְעוֹלָם יֵשֵׁב: ב יְרוּשָׁלַם הָרִים סְבִיב לָהּ וַיְהוּה סְבִיב
 לְעַמּוֹ מְעַתָּה וְעַד־עוֹלָם: ג כִּי לֹא יִנוּחַ שְׁבֹט הַרְשָׁע עַל גּוֹרֵל



124:7-8

The snare broke.... Our help comes by calling in the Name of God. It is not by our efforts that we were saved, but by calling in the Name of God (*Metzudot*).



Ben Ish Chai suggests that the last two verses refer to the future redemption. Unlike prior redemptions that gave way to subsequent exiles, the final redemption, brought about by God Himself—*our help comes by the Name of God*—will be eternal. The “snare” will break, never to rise again.

PSALM 125

125:1

Those who trust in God will be like Mount Zion, which will not falter. In the times of Mashiach, Jerusalem will never again falter (*Radak; Ibn Ezra*).

✿ UNFALTERING TRUST ✿



An alternative interpretation of the verse: *Those who trust in God like Mount Zion*—with a trust that is like Mount Zion—*will not falter....*

Trust in God, as opposed to believing that whatever happens is for the good, means that we trust that He will take care of us, like the simple and absolute trust of a small child in a parent. But are we truly capable of an unfaltering, mountainlike trust in God (especially when we assume that our needs have not always been met in the past)?

Although all mountains symbolize a state of permanence, the verse specifies Mount *Zion*. *Zion* alludes to the soul’s inner core, which is unwaveringly bound up with God. When we are disconnected from our soul’s inner

Zion—when it lies like a flatland, or, worse, dormant like a valley—our trust in God falters. But when we trust in God like *Mount Zion*—when our inner “Zion” is removed from its dormancy and stands tall like a mountain, infusing our consciousness—our trust never falters (*The Rebbe*).²⁰³

125:2



Jerusalem—mountains surround her. Jerusalem alludes to our worship of God in general and particularly our Torah study.²⁰⁴ Protective mountains refer to the submission to God that is the foundation and gateway to all Divine worship.²⁰⁵ This submission must *surround* our Jerusalem—it must underlie all aspects of our Divine worship from its humblest beginnings to its loftiest levels, just as the mountains of Jerusalem protect the entire city, including its holiest place. Likewise in Torah study: not only must we *preface* our Torah study with a sense of submission to its Author, we must maintain that awareness throughout our study.

203. *Torat Menachem—Hitvaaduyot 5745*, vol. 1, p. 618. According to this interpretation, the phrase “like Mount Zion” describes the type of trust the verse is referring to. See similarly *Eretz Hachaim*: Zion is numerically equivalent to Joseph. Thus, *Those who trust in God like Zion*—i.e., as Joseph did—*will not falter*, etc. (Regarding Joseph’s unique level of trust in God, see *Kehot Chumash*, Genesis 40:23.)

This is in contrast to the conventional interpretation, which is that those who trust in God *will be* like Mount Zion.

See *Zohar* II:143a: Before the times of Mashiach, the trust of the righteous is “weak.” Despite their trust in God, they are fearful like Abraham and Isaac, who referred to their wives as their sisters out of fear of being killed, and Jacob, who was afraid before his encounter with Esau. In the future, however, the righteous will be strong *like Mount Zion*, confident that the merit of their righteousness will protect them. After teaching the above, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai turned to his inner circle and said: “Your trust in God is certainly like Mount Zion; fortunate are you in this world and the World to Come.” (Apparently, Rabbi Shimon raised his students to the level that will be experienced in the future—*Matok Midvash*.) Cf. commentary of *Chida*, cited in the footnote to verse 3.

204. As in the verse, *For from Zion will the Torah go forth, and the word of God from Jerusalem* (Isaiah 2:3).

205. Mountains are made of “inanimate” stone and dirt and therefore symbolize submission to God, which stands independent of any intellectual or emotional inspiration.

God, Who did not permit us to be prey for their teeth. **7** Our soul is like a bird that has escaped from the snare of fowlers; the snare broke, and we escaped. **8** Our help comes by calling in the Name of God, Maker of heaven and earth.

125

1 A song of ascents. Those who trust in God will be like Mount Zion, which will not falter but will abide forever. **2** Jerusalem—mountains surround her; so does God surround and protect His people from now and for all time. **3** For at that time, the rod, the dominion, of the wicked will not rest upon the lot



ascended from the washing.... The function of teeth is to take a bulky item and grind it into digestible crumbs. Having “teeth” means to break down the mass of our daily lives and recognize its many small acts, words, and thoughts, each of which must be analyzed and conducted properly. Refinement of *behavior* then leads to the transformation of *character*—we become clean and pure, like ewes who have ascended from the washing.¹⁹⁸

(The letters of the word for tooth, *shen*, can be also be read as *shin*, which is one of the letters of the Alef Bet. *Shin* is the middle letter of the word for wicked person, *rasha*, as well as the first letter of the word for falsehood, *sheker*. The letters *Reish* and *Ayin* of *rasha*, as well as *Kuf* and *Reish* of *sheker*, are letters that embody falsehood and the opposite of holiness. These two words co-opt the letter *Shin*, a holy and truthful letter, to exploit its holiness for their existence. (This is why *Shin* was disqualified from being the first letter of the Torah, because of its susceptibility to exploitation.) We therefore thank God for protecting us from the holy “*Shins*,” which the wicked possess and can use against us.¹⁹⁹)

124:7



נַפְשֵׁנוּ כְּצִפּוֹר נִמְלָטָה מִפֶּחַ יוֹקְשִׁים הִפְחַ נְשָׁבַר וְאִנְהַנוּ נִמְלָטָנוּ **Our soul is like a bird that has escaped from the snare of fowlers; the snare broke and we escaped.** Like a bird trapped in a snare, unable to soar heavenward, so is the soul trapped in the unhealthy or worrisome thoughts that permeate the mind.

198. The word for “tooth” (שן) is cognate to the word for “change” (שינוי) or “transformation” (*Sefer Ha’arachim* cited below).

199. Based on *Zohar* (1:2b), *Siddur HaArizal*, *Haggadah*, s.v. *Hakheh*, and *Sefer Ha’arachim* on the letter *Shin*, p. 418. See *Kehot Haggadah* (p. 41b) regarding “blunting the teeth” of the wicked son and above on 3:8.

The Tzemach Tzedek explains that the *Shin* that empowers the wicked is from the fallen shards of the broken vessels of the world of *Tohu*. Since *Tohu* is a loftier world than our world of *Tikkun*, it would be “natural” for them to overpower us, and it is only by God’s protection that we are not harmed (see *Sefer Ha’arachim*, *ibid.*).

These thoughts restrain the soul from climbing the ladder of prayer, from soaring heavenward during prayer.

If one is worthy, however, these thoughts can be “cleansed” during the dream state (see below, p. 51, fn. 61). The “snare” is then broken, and the “bird” can soar once more (*The Rebbe*).²⁰⁰

✿ THE GREEK SNARE ✿



Under the Greeks, we were forced to choose between two snares: either turning our backs on God or being killed. These two snares are alluded to in the plural of *fowlers*. We chose death, allowing our souls to soar like a bird to heaven. In this merit the “snare” of the Greeks was broken (*Alshich*).²⁰¹

✿ BREAKING THE TABLETS ✿

Alternatively, the verse alludes to the breaking of the Tablets by Moses, which were a “marriage contract” between God and the Jewish people. Had Moses not broken them, the Tablets would have been an indictment of the Jewish people’s betrayal of their “spouse” by worshipping the Golden Calf (see *Kehot Chumash*, Exodus 32:19 and on Deuteronomy 34:12). Hence: *the snare broke and we escaped* (*Ma’ateh Tehillah* citing a statement by *Chida* just prior to the latter’s passing).²⁰²

200. *Torat Menachem—Hitvaaduyot* 5722, vol. 1, p. 257.

201. Over the eight days of Chanukah, we kindle 44 lights (including the *shamash*). Our kindling below evokes a heavenly kindling of “lights” on High, totaling 88 lights. The word for “snare” (פח) equals 88. It is the breaking of the “snare” (88)—the kingdom of Antiochus—that leads us to kindle the 88 lights. This explains the Arizal’s version (and thus the Chabad version) of the blessing for the Chanukah lights: *Lhadlik Ner Chanukah* (להדליק נר חנוכה)—not *shel Chanukah*. This is because the first letters of those three words—ל (30), נ (50), and ח (8)—equal 88 (*Kedushat Levi*, *Drush LChanukah*, s.v. *Anu Madlikin*).

202. The word for snare, פח, is equivalent to the value of “tablet” (לוח—44) multiplied by two: 88 (*ibid.*). *Ma’ateh Tehillah* mentions that *Chida* offered this interpretation just before he died. Perhaps this suggests that just as the breaking of the Tablets was meant to protect and benefit the Jewish people, likewise the death of the saintly brings blessing and protection to the Jewish people (*Yashmia*).