

Introduction

On the brink of despair, we call out to God in a state of loneliness. More than just a call for salvation, this is a cry to be seen, heard, and remembered.

A psalm of the Korahites. For the leader; mahalat leannot. A maskil of Heman the Ezrahite. Lord, God of my deliverance, when I cry out in the night before You, let my prayer reach You; incline Your ear to my cry. For I am sated with misfortune; I am at the brink of Sheol. I am numbered with those who go down to the Pit; I am like someone helpless abandoned among the dead, like bodies lying in the grave of whom You are mindful no more, and who are cut off from Your care. You have put me at the bottom of the Pit, in the darkest places, in the depths. Your fury lies heavy upon me; You afflict me with all Your breakers. Selah. You make my companions shun me; You make me abhorrent to them; I am shut in and do not go out. My eyes pine away from affliction; I call to You, Lord, each day; I stretch out my hands to You. Do You work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise to praise You? Selah. Is Your faithful care recounted in the grave, Your constancy in the place of perdition? Are Your wonders made known in the netherworld, Your beneficent deeds in the land of oblivion? As for me, I cry out to You, Lord; each morning my prayer greets You. Why, Lord, do You reject me, do You hide Your face from me? From my youth I have been afflicted and near death; I suffer Your terrors wherever I turn. Your fury overwhelms me; Your terrors destroy me. They swirl about me like water all day long; they encircle me on every side. You have put friend and neighbor far from me and my companions out of my sight.

שִׁיר מִזְמוֹר לְבְנֵי קֹרַח לְמִנְצַח עַל־מַחְלַת לְעֹנֹת
מִשְׁפִּיל לְהִימֹן הָאֶזְרָחִי: יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יְשׁוּעָתִי
יוֹם־צַעֲקוֹתַי בְּלַיְלָה נִגְדָּדָה: תָּבוֹא לִפְנֵיךָ תִּפְלְתִי
הִטָּה אֲזַנְךָ לְרִנָּתִי: כִּי־שָׁבַעַה בְּרָעוֹת נַפְשִׁי וְחַי
לְשָׂאוֹל הִגִּיעוּ: נִחַשְׁבֹּתִי עִם־יֹרְדֵי בּוֹר הַיְיִתִּי
כְּגֹבֵר אִין־אֵיל: בְּמִתִּים חֲפָשִׁי כְּמוֹ חֲלָלִים שְׁכָבִי
קֶבֶר אֲשֶׁר לֹא זָכַרְתָּם עוֹד וְהִמָּה מִיָּדְךָ נִגְזְרוּ:
שְׁתַּנִּי בָבוֹר תִּחְתִּיּוֹת בְּמַחְשָׁכִים בְּמִצְלוֹת: עָלִי
סָמְכָה חַמְתָּךְ וְכָל־מִשְׁבְּרֵיךָ עֲנִיתָ סָלָה: הִרְחַקְתָּ
מִיָּדַעִי מִמְּנִי שְׁתַּנִּי תוֹעֵבוֹת לְמוֹ כָּלֹא וְלֹא אֲצֵא:
עֵינֵי דָאֲבָה מִנִּיעֲנִי קָרָאתִיךָ יְהוָה בְּכָל־יוֹם
שִׁטְחֹתִי אֶלֶיךָ כִּפִּי: הִלַּמְתִּים תַּעֲשֶׂה־פְלֹא אִם־
רְפָאִים יִקוּמוּ יוֹדוּךָ סָלָה: הִיִּסְפֹּר בְּקֶבֶר חֲסִדְךָ
אֲמוֹנָתְךָ בְּאֲבָדוֹן: הַיּוֹדַע בַּחֲשָׁךְ פְּלֹאֵךְ וְצִדְקָתְךָ
בְּאֶרֶץ נְשִׁיָּה: וְאֲנִי אֶלֶיךָ יְהוָה שׁוֹנֵעַתִי וּבִבְקָר
תִּפְלְתִי תִקְדָּמְךָ: לָמָּה יְהוָה תִּזְנַח נַפְשִׁי תִסְתִּיר
פְּנֵיךָ מִמְּנִי: עָנִי אֲנִי וְגוֹעַ מִנְעַר נִשְׁאֲתִי אֲמִיָּה
אֲפוּנָה: עָלִי עָבְרוּ חֲרוֹנֶיךָ בַּעוֹתֶיךָ צְמֹתוֹתַנִּי:
סְבוּנֵי כַּמִּים כָּל־הַיּוֹם הִקִּיפוּ עָלִי יָחַד: הִרְחַקְתָּ
מִמְּנִי אֶהָב וְרַע מִיָּדַעִי מִחֲשָׁךְ: (תהלים פח)

In Psalm 88, we cry out to God vividly describing the anguish and loneliness that frequently accompany illness. The Psalm depicts death and despair in many ways, as a person grasping for the words to express themselves after many years of illness. "From my youth I have been afflicted" (עָנִי אֲנִי וְגוֹעַ מִנְעַר נִשְׁאֲתִי אֲמִיָּה). "When I cry out in the night... I am sated with misfortune; I am at the brink of Sheol... I am like someone helpless" (אֲפוּנָה). "When I cry out in the night... I am sated with misfortune; I am at the brink of Sheol... I am like someone helpless" (צַעֲקוֹתַי בְּלַיְלָה נִגְדָּדָה... כִּי־שָׁבַעַה בְּרָעוֹת נַפְשִׁי... נִחַשְׁבֹּתִי עִם־יֹרְדֵי בּוֹר הַיְיִתִּי כְּגֹבֵר אִין־אֵיל). We feel overwhelmed, cut off, shunned, and "abandoned among the dead, like bodies lying in the grave" ("כְּמוֹ חֲלָלִים"). We are overcome with angst and terror, wherever we turn.

What does a person in this situation want? The Psalm includes a brief call for salvation, for mercy, reprieve from pain, perhaps even healing. "As for me, I cry out to You, Lord; each morning my prayer greets You" (אֲנִי)

(אֵלֶיךָ יְהוָה שׁוֹעֵתִי וּבִבְקָר תִּפְלְתִי תִקְדָּמְךָ). Yet more than anything, we want to be seen. We feel abandoned by friends and rejected by God. “Why do you hide Your face from me” (לָמָּה יְהוָה תִּזְנַח בְּפָשִׁי תִסְתִּיר פְּנֵיךָ מִמֶּנִּי)? Our heartfelt cries pierce the heavens.

The Psalm gives expression to the need of the sick to feel seen and heard. “You have put friend and neighbor far from me and my companions out of my sight” (הִרְחַקְתָּ מִמֶּנִּי אֶהֱב וְרַע מִיָּדַעִי מִחֻשָּׁה).

As family and friends of someone suffering, we must heed this call. We can't always provide therapy or medicine, but we can ensure that the ill don't feel they have been left out in the darkness.

