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A D'var Torah for Rosh Hashana

Karen Miller, Editor

THE SONG OF THE *SHOFAR*:  
THE LESSONS OF THE SONS OF KORAH

By Malka Hubscher <sup>1</sup>

The highlight of the High Holiday services is the sounding of the *shofar*. The blasts of the *shofar*, which are heard from the first of Elul until the final moments of Yom Kippur, inspire powerful emotions that resonate within us throughout the year. The one hundred blasts sounded at *mussaf* of Rosh Hashana signify the climax of this mitzvah. However, the mitzvah does not consist of hearing the *shofar* blowing alone. We also perform acts of preparation to ready ourselves spiritually for the *shofar* blowing.

Before performing any commandment, a blessing is recited to focus one's mind and heart on the meaning behind the mitzvah. This is exemplified by the blessing of "*l'shmoah kol shofar*," which is recited before sounding the *shofar*. The blessing is preceded by the recitation of Psalm 47 seven times and the reading of several additional verses. During this time one has an opportunity to meditate on the upcoming *shofar* blowing, and prepare oneself to be spiritually awakened by the blasts.

Why was Psalm 47 chosen for this role? This psalm is the appropriate selection since it touches upon two of the predominant themes of Rosh Hashana, (1) the coronation of God as King over the world (*malchuyot*), and (2) sounding the *shofar* in His glorification (*shofarot*). However, there is an even more profound connection between this psalm and the sounding of the *shofar*. The text of Psalm 47 reads as follows:

- (א) למנצח לבני קרח מזמור:
- (ב) כל העמים תקעו כף הריעו לאלהים בקול רנה:
- (ג) כי ה' עליון נורא מלך גדול על כל הארץ:
- (ד) ידבר עמים תחתינו ולאמים תחת רגלינו:
- (ה) יבחר לנו את נחלתנו את גאון יעקב אשר אהב סלה:
- (ו) עלה אלהים בתרועה ה' בקול שופר:
- (ז) זמרו אלהים זמרו זמרו למלכנו זמרו:
- (ח) כי מלך כל הארץ אלהים זמרו משכיל:
- (ט) מלך אלהים על גוים אלהים ישב על כסא קדשו:

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<sup>1</sup> Malka Hubscher has an M.A in Bible from Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University. She is currently teaching in various women's learning institutions in Jerusalem.

(\*) נדיבי עמים נאספו עם אלהי אברהם כי לאלהים מגני ארץ מאד נעלה

To the chief musician, a psalm to the sons of Korah.  
All people clap hands, shout to God with the voice of joyous song.  
For *Adonoy* is most high, awesome; a great king over all the earth.  
He subdues people under us, and nations under our feet.  
He chose for us our inheritance, the pride of Jacob whom he loves. Selah.  
God has ascended with a blast, *Adonoy*, with the sound of the *shofar*.  
Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our king, sing praises.  
For King of all the earth is God; sing praises with skillful art.  
God has reigned over nations; God is seated upon His holy throne.  
The nobles [converts] among the people gathered, [joining] the people of Abraham;  
for God has the power to shield earth, he is greatly exalted<sup>2</sup>.

One of the most striking elements in Psalm 47 is the introductory sentence, which attributes this song to *b'nei Korah*, the sons of Korah.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Psalm 47 is one of eleven different chapters in the Book of Psalms which begins with these words. The first mention of the sons of Korah in the Bible appears in chapter 16 of *Bamidbar* (Numbers) in reference to the infamous story of Korah's rebellion against the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Korah and his cohorts met their fatal end when the earth opened its mouth and consumed them alive. The verse (Numbers 16:32-33) relates:

לב) ותפתח הארץ את פיה ותבלע אתם ואת בתיהם ואת כל האדם אשר לקחה ואת כל הרכוש  
לג) וירדו הם וכל אשר להם חיים שאלה ותכס עליהם הארץ ויאבדו מתוך הקהל

The Earth opened her mouth and consumed them, their homes and every man who joined Korah and all the[ir] possessions. And they, and all that belonged to them went down alive to she'ol and the earth covered them and they were lost to the congregation.

The story in Numbers relates that all remnants and memories of Korah were erased, yet, according to Psalms, his sons were somehow able to survive this calamity. A verse from Numbers 26:11, which appears in the midst of a genealogy of the Jewish people in the desert, expresses this explicitly:

ובני קרה לא מתו

The sons of Korah did not die.

Who were these men? How did they survive? Did they defy their father and stand with Moses, or did they join the rebellion and nonetheless manage to survive? The biblical text is vague regarding the identity of the sons of Korah. Aside from the aforementioned text, we do not encounter the sons of Korah again until the Book of Psalms.<sup>4</sup> However, the midrash completes the story of these mysterious personalities. The Talmud in Sanhedrin 110a, in explicating the verse in Numbers 26:11, explains

<sup>2</sup> All English Translation of Tehillim taken from *The Metsudah Tehillim*, 1995. All other translations of texts are my own.

<sup>3</sup> It remains unclear if these psalms were actually composed by the sons of Korah or was written by others and simply sung by the decedents of Korah's family.

<sup>4</sup> Although they are mentioned in Shemot 6:21, they are only listed by name as part of a genealogical list.

that while the verse clearly says the sons of Korah did not die, it is not explicitly stated that they lived either.

בני קרח לא מתו, תנא, משום רבינו אמרו: מקום נתבצר להם בגיהנם, וישבו עליו ואמרו שירה

The sons of Korah did not die, our Rabbis taught: a [special] place was fortified for them in *Gehenom* where they sat and sang praises [to God].

The Talmud suggests that from the moment Korah and his men were swallowed up by the earth his sons lived in a state of limbo, neither completely alive in this world nor dead in *Gehenom*. They were saved from the punishment that befell the rebels, and they lived out the remainder of their days singing praises to God. It is implicit in this passage of the Talmud that the praises they sang are the aforementioned eleven chapters ascribed to them in the Book of Psalms. It is from these same psalms that the prelude to the *shofar* blowing is taken.

These eleven psalms were actually sung by the sons of Korah in gratitude and recognition to God that they were miraculously spared their sentence of death. One might therefore assume that the songs of Korah's sons are filled with trepidation, fearful that their salvation is not merited, and at any moment God could reverse their decree. Yet as they linger between life and death, the predominant theme of their psalms is worshipping God through joy and happiness. They sing:

...With loud rejoicing and thanksgiving, a multitude gathered for a holiday. (42:5)  
...With rejoicing and gladness they enter the palace of the King. (45:16)  
There is a river- its streams will make the city of God rejoice...(46:5)  
...The joy of all the earth is Mount Zion...(48:3)  
Let Mount Zion rejoice, let the daughters of Judah exult...(48:12)  
...My heart and flesh will sing for the joy to the living Almighty. (84:3)

So too Psalm 47, which we say prior to the *shofar* blowing, is one that is filled with joy and spirited praises to God.

There are several similarities between the situation that the sons of Korah found themselves in and the state we find ourselves in on Rosh Hashana. We, like the sons of Korah, find ourselves in a state of limbo. On Rosh Hashana God's judgment is upon us and our destiny is hanging between life and death. It is unlikely that this text was chosen solely because of the textual reference to the blowing of the *shofar*, for there are numerous other texts throughout the Bible that refer to the sounding of the *shofar*. Rather, it was specifically chosen because it is attributed to the sons of Korah, whose position we can identify with.

Moreover, although one commonly associates the blast from the *shofar* with the feelings of awe and apprehension, in Psalm 47 the *shofar* is not functioning as a mechanism through which a commandment is performed, but as a musical instrument through which one can sing glorious and joyful praises to the Almighty. By prefacing the *shofar* blowing with Psalm 47 we are reminded that the sons of Korah were able to relate to God with joy and elation despite their precarious situation. Thus, the notes emanating from the *shofar* are not only an expression of God's power and sovereignty over the world, but also represent our aspiration to sing and rejoice with the Lord. "God has ascended with a blast, *Adonoy*, with the sound of the *shofar*. Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our king, sing praises." (Psalm 47:6-7) In some ways Psalm 47 represents our desire to thank and praise God even before our own fates have been sealed.

However, it is still unclear why the sons of Korah were spared and merited such a role. Rashi on Numbers 26:11 comments on the midrash found in Sanhedrin 110A and suggests an answer:

ובני קרח לא מתו - הם היו בעצה תחלה, ובשעת המחלוקת הרהרו תשובה בלבם...

The sons of Korah did not die - They originally were part of the rebellion [of Korah] but during the dispute they repented in their hearts [but not in deed].

According to Rashi, the sons of Korah were spared the moment that the initial feelings of remorse began to penetrate their hearts. They saw the fallacy in their father's claim and recognized the validity of Moses' and Aaron's leadership. They understood that joining their father was ultimately a rebellion against God and they regretted their actions. Yet, for some reason they did not act upon these remorseful feelings. Nevertheless, God accepted their repentance even though it was incomplete, and this is how their songs of praise and thanks to the Almighty are eventually recorded in eleven different chapters in the Book of Psalms.

And so, we identify with the sons of Korah in yet another way. The sons of Korah teach us the power of '*hirhur teshuva*', the stirrings of repentance. Often we have strong desires and high hopes of changing our ways. Ideally, all thoughts of repentance should lead to action; however, even if these goals are not acted upon, they are nonetheless still cherished and rewarded by God. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik understands this to be the precise purpose of the *shofar* blasts on Rosh Hashana:

"One is not only required to hear the blasts, but he must also experience the jarring awakening associated with *hirhur teshuva*. ... The required response to the *shofar*... is the abrupt, tragic realization that the false assumptions upon which we build our lives have come crashing before our eyes. We are jolted with the sudden awareness of the grievous extent to which our actions have alienated us from God."<sup>5</sup>

The sound of the *shofar* is meant to elicit preliminary feelings of repentance. Once we are awakened from our spiritual slumber on Rosh Hashana we can truly undertake the challenge of changing our actions to achieve full repentance. The rest of the High Holiday season is dedicated to actualizing these goals of improvement, culminating with the *shofar* blowing at the final moments of Yom Kippur. Only then, are we granted full forgiveness allowing us to face the new year with a clean slate. We recite Psalm 47 because in many ways we resemble the sons of Korah. Like them, we are unsure if we will be forgiven for what we have done wrong, but we praise and thank God in the hope that we will be forgiven. Moreover, we are inspired by the sons of Korah whose thoughts alone were accepted by God, and we pray that the *shofar* instills in us *hirhur teshuva*.

Through understanding the story of the sons of Korah we gain a greater appreciation of the significance of the *shofar* blasts. We repeat Psalm 47 numerous times so that the multifaceted significance of the *shofar* will reverberate within our hearts and minds. The words of the psalm are meant to inspire us to view the *shofar* as a conduit through which we can produce the most beautiful songs of praise and joy to God, and as a mechanism to arouse us to begin the long and arduous process of *teshuva*.

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<sup>5</sup> *Before Hashem You Shall be Purified*, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on the Days of Awe, summarized and annotated by Arnold Lustiger, 1995, pp. 8-9.