

# ROSH HASHANAH: PSALM 47

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I

## INTRODUCTION

Although the custom of reciting Psalm 47 seven times before the sounding of the Shofar is a relatively new one, the custom is widespread, at least in Ashkenazi communities. The tradition of the Vilna Ga'on, not to recite Psalm 47 - is one major exception. In most congregations, this Psalm is repeated many times just before the climactic moment of T'kiat Shofar.

Regarding the recent spread of the custom: compare the two editions of the early 19th century Roedelheim Siddur; it only appears in the later one. This isn't to claim that there is no mention of this custom earlier than this period - R. Ya'akov Emden (d. 1776) included it in his Siddur as noted below - just that it wasn't nearly as universal within the Ashkenazi world until two centuries ago.

In spite of the recent spread of the custom, the association of this Psalm with Rosh haShanah is quite old. The Mishnah (Tamid, 7:1) records the various Psalms recited by the Levi'im in the Beit haMidash for each day of the week. Massechet Sof'rim (19:2), a work from the Geonic period which records traditions from the Rabbinic period (and earlier), notes that Rosh haShanah has its own "Psalm of the day" - "O clap your hands, all you peoples" - i.e. Psalm 47.

In this brief essay, we will examine the Psalm, utilizing the analysis of its structure and unique linguistic and personality associations to suggest a reason for the propriety of this Psalm to the powerful moment of just preceding T'kiat Shofar. This will, hopefully, enable us to shed further light on the significance of this Mitzvah and the Day of Judgment - Rosh haShanah.

II

## THE TEXT

This is as decent a translation as is available - but in our verse-by-verse examination, we'll comment on some of the equivokes and how they might best be rendered.

- 1) To the chief Musician, A Psalm for the sons of Korah.
- 2) clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to Elokim with the voice of triumph.
- 3) For Hashem Most High is awesome; He is a great King over all the earth.
- 4) He subdues peoples under us, and nations under our feet.
- 5) He chooses our inheritance for us, the pride of Ya'akov whom he loves. Selah.

- 6) Elokim has gone up with a shout, Hashem with the sound of a shofar.
- 7) Sing praises to Elokim, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises.
- 8) For Elokim is the King of all the earth; sing a Maskil psalm.
- 9) Elokim reigns over the nations; Elokim sits on the throne of his holiness.
- 10) The nobles of the peoples are gathered together, the people of the God of Avraham; for the shields of the earth belong to Elokim; he is greatly exalted.

### III

#### ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

##### v. 1: To the chief Musician, A Psalm for the sons of Korah.

Although when we "recite" T'hillim we regularly read all of the words in every verse in the given Psalm or Psalms, some of the words are not properly part of the text. Many Psalms have superscriptions - some comprising one word (e.g. "liShlomoh" [#72], "l'David" [#27]) others containing two words (e.g. "Mizmor l'David" [#23], "l'David Mizmor" [#24], "Mizmor l'Asaph" [#79], "Shir haMa'a lot" [#120]), others three words (e.g. "Shir haMa'alot l'David" [#122], "laM'natze'ach Shir Mizmor" [#66]) and others making up an entire verse - such as ours.

These superscriptions may indicate authorship - such as "l'David" in Psalm 27 (which we will analyze in the next essay), or they may indicate a "dedication" (according to some Rishonim, that is the meaning of the superscription to #122 - "Shir haMa'alot l'David"). Another suggestion that has been raised relative to the various Psalms associated with the various Levite singers (e.g. B'nei Korah, Asaph, Heiman) is that these Psalms were either composed to be sung by these particular Levites or that these Levites composed the music, to accompany words written by David or another author.

Before assaying the superscription of our Psalm, it is prudent to note that the Korahide Psalms (those superscribed to B'nei Korah) are found in two series in T'hillim. Psalms 42, 44-49 form one series and 84-85, 87-88 form a second series.

The first series, which is our direct concern, presents a sequence of ideas which has a rationale behind it. This rationale usually goes unnoticed (and unappreciated), as this Psalm (along with #48 - the Psalm for Monday and #49, recited at a house of mourning) is usually recited out of context. Nonetheless, the Rishonim generally view the meaning and setting of this Psalm as context-sensitive and, as such, it behooves us to get a sense of the thrust of the previous Psalms.

Ps. 42, the beginning of the series, is a song of longing for God:

*As the hart longs for water streams, so does my soul long for you, O God. (v. 2)*

Ps. 44, the next in the series, (Ps. 43 seems to be a continuation or epilog of 42), is a painful dirge relating the terrible persecution felt by the people:

*You have given us like sheep to be eaten; and have scattered us among the nations. You sell Your*

*people for nothing, and You do not ask for a high price. You make us a taunt to our neighbors, a scorn and a derision to those who are around us. (vv. 12-14)*

Ps. 45 seems to be a wedding song, celebrating the wedding of the king to his beautiful bride. This suggests a reunification between God and His people:

*Daughters of kings are among your ladies of honor; at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir. Listen, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear; forget your own people, and your father's house; And the king shall desire your beauty; bow to him because he is your lord. (vv. 10-12)*

Ps. 46 is an exultation of Divine victory, representing a turnabout from the ideas expressed in Ps. 44:

*Come, behold the works of Hashem, the desolations that He has made in the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; He breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; He burns the chariot in the fire. (vv. 9-10)*

If we accept the theory (proposed by a number of the Rishonim; see, inter alia, Radak at 47:1) that this series of psalms should be understood in context, then our Psalm represents a prophetic paean to be sung subsequent to this great victory, prophesied in the works of several N'vi'im (e.g. Tzeephaniah, Zekhariah).

The role of the Korahides is spelled out clearly in Chronicles:

*And these are they whom David set over the service of song in the house of Hashem, after the ark rested there. And they ministered before the dwelling place of the tabernacle of the congregation with singing, until Shlomoh built the house of Hashem in Yerushalayim: and then they performed their duty according to their order. And these are the men who served and their sons. Of the sons of the K'hati: Heiman a singer, the son of Yo'el, the son of Sh'mu'el, the son of Elkanah, the son of Yeroham, the son of Eliel, the son of Toah, the son of Zuph, the son of Elkanah, the son of Mahath, the son of Amasai, the son of Elkanah, the son of Yo'el, the son of Azariah, the son of Zephaniah, the son of Tahath, the son of Assir, the son of Eviasaph, the son of Korah, the son of Yitz'har, the son of K'hat, the son of Levi, the son of Yisra'el. (Divrei HaYamim I 6:16-23)*

We have a basic grasp of the identity of "B'nei Korah" - they were descendants of Korah who were appointed by David to be [Levite] musicians in the Beit haMikdash. We are not able to ascertain, however, which generation of B'nei Korah is intended in the superscription. Indeed, we may wonder whether the various psalms ascribed (or superscribed) to B'nei Korah are all using the same referents - perhaps there are different generations of Korahide musicians whose contributions to the Psalter are noted generically.

In addition, as asked above, do we maintain that these psalms were composed by the Korahides? Perhaps they were composed to be played or sung by the Korahides (in which case the specific author remains anonymous). One additional possibility, which we will revisit further on, is that the composition of the psalm predates the Korahides and they were inspired (or commissioned) to

create and arrange music to accompany the lyrics. The final word of the superscription - Mizmor - indicates that the role of the Korahides may be related to the musical aspect, supporting either the second or third explanation.

v. 2: Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to Elokim with the voice of triumph.

The original of the first phrase ("clap your hands") is Tiq'u Khaph - which may also mean "join your hands". Either way, the simple intent of the text is a call to "all of the nations" (more on this later) to join hands and praise God. The curious turn of the phrase, however, appears only here, in Nachum (3:19) and in one much earlier reference - which we will revisit further on.

In any case, the odd phrasing for "clap hands" or "join hands" seems to be foreshadowing a later verse (v. 6) which explicitly mentions the Shofar. Note that the second stich - shout to Elokim - uses the relatively uncommon Hari'u (instead of the more usual Ran'nu, e.g.) - again an allusion to the Shofar. Indeed, the first verse allusions to both sounds of the Shofar - T'qi'ah and T'ru'ah, using those same words.

[note: the "middle sound" of the Shofar is referred to as a "T'ru'ah" in the Torah; Haza"l suggested that there are three ways to interpret this word, hence we have Sh'varim-T'ru'ah, Sh'varim and T'ru'ah as fulfilling all three options. See, however, R. Zerahiah haLevi's interpretation of R. Abbahu's ordinance (BT Rosh haShanah 34a) that we make all three types of T'ru'ah. (Sefer haMa'or, Rosh haShanah, 11a s.v. v'Nishtanu).]

The call to "all of the nations" is a bit difficult, given the general approach adopted by most Rishonim to view this psalm as prophetic and belonging to the postbellum period subsequent to the apocalyptic war of Gog uMagog. If that is the case, who are the nations who are being called here?

The general approach adopted by the commentators is to treat these nations as the remainder - those who have survived the cataclysm. This is a bit difficult, as the call goes to Kol ha'Amim - all of the nations. In addition, how are we to understand vv. 4-5, which highlight our trampling of nations and being given our inheritance by God? Has the audience switched? Are we "lording it over" the nations?

These questions will be revisited at the end of the essay, when we suggest an alternative approach to the entire psalm.

v. 3: For Hashem Most High is awesome; He is a great King over all the earth.

This is one of the two occurrences of Y-H-V-H in the psalm; that Name, which generally is understood to refer to God's compassion, is coupled with another cognomen - Elyon. We will turn our attention to this descriptive at the end of the essay. The Name of God which is used throughout the psalm is Elokim, the Name generally associated with judgment. R. Ya'akov Emden noted in his Mahzor that the propriety of reading this psalm on the Day of Judgment (Rosh haShanah) is rooted in the seven mentions of Elokim; in our terminology, we would refer to Elokim as the "leitwort" or Milah

Manhah (key word) which helps to shape and define the underlying theme of the passage.

v. 4: He subdues peoples under us, and nations under our feet.

To whom is this passage addressed? We might propose that it is directed at the nations mentioned in v. 2 - but to what end? If these are the selfsame peoples whom we have subdued, what is the point of the statement? If we are referring to other nations who we have subjugated, again - what is the purpose of the statement, if not to scare the nations into voluntary subjugating themselves before us out of fear that they will meet the same fate?

v. 5: He chooses our inheritance for us, the pride of Ya'akov whom he loves. Selah.

It is unclear whether the first word Yivhar means "chooses" or "chose"; the latter is preferable, as there is no sense of ongoing selection of our inheritance found in T'nakh - however we may read that inheritance. The inheritance itself likely refers to Eretz Yisra'el, as that word is usually used in the context of Land (see, e.g. T'hilim 135:12, 136:21-22, 105:11).

What is "the pride of Ya'akov"? The Rishonim generally agree that the referent is the Beit haMikdash - such that the verse telescopes in from "inheritance" (the Land) to "pride of Ya'akov" (Beit haMikdash).

One philological note is called for here - regarding the word Ga'on. In modern Hebrew, the word has taken on the meaning of "genius" - but in T'nakh the word has no association with mental acuity. The root G'H means "pride" - such that the Song at the Sea begins Ashirah laShem ki Ga'oh Ga'ah - for He has demonstrated His power.

(The word was never used as an honorific until the 8th century in Bavel, when the heads of the Academies at Sura and Pumbedita were given the title, e.g. "G'on Sura", to wit: "The pride of Sura". The title fell out of use with the death of R. Hai Ga'on in 1038. No one was graced with this descriptive until R. Eliyahu Kramer of Vilna (d. 1797) who was, indeed, the pride of Vilnius and was therefore known as "der Vilner Ga'on"; since his fame was principally associated with his incredible mental powers, the title became associated with genius.)

Others suggest that "the pride of Ya'akov" refers to the mountains of Israel, building on a topographical image and following the lead of "our inheritance" in the first stich. The suggestion has even been raised that "the pride of Ya'akov" means the monarchy - which is appealing due to the association with Ga'on (see above) but is otherwise difficult to sustain due to the lack of contextual support.

One challenge posed to all three of these interpretations is the use of "Ya'akov" here - why is this patriarch's name associated with any of these (Beit haMikdash, mountains or monarchy)? Several defenses have been proposed, but none is very appealing.

One final question regarding the second stich; what is it that God loves? Does God love Ya'akov or

"the pride of Ya'akov"? The word Asher is ambiguous and allows for a variety of approaches.

The final word here, Selah, is not properly part of the text but is some sort of a musical notation, the specific meaning of which has been lost to us.

v. 6: *Elokim has gone up with a shout, Hashem with the sound of a shofar.*

As we will demonstrate further down, this verse is clearly the central verse in the psalm; even within our liturgical context, it is singled out for inclusion among those verses recited by the Ba'al T'ki'ah just before the actual sounding of the Shofar. In this one verse, both Names of God are used, forming a perfect inclusio with the first verse (#2) which alluded to both Shofar-sounds. S'forno explains the use of both Names of God - both within the context of the Shofar - as indicating the great distinction between our lot during the Messianic era and that experienced by those nations. While God has greatly ascended, triumphing over the nations amidst the sound of the Shofar, He compassionately gathers us together to the same sound.

We should note that the opening word here, 'Alah, has the same root as the relatively uncommon Divine cognomen used above in v. 3 ('Elyon) - and is the same as the final word in the psalm - Na'alah. This root, therefore, forms a kind of "bookend/bookmark", at the beginning, middle and end of the psalm. This structural observation calls for analysis - which will come further down.

Note that the tone of the psalm has subtly shifted - from addressing an audience (whether parochial or global) to descriptive and laudatory.

v. 7: *Sing praises to Elokim, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises.*

Like several other verses, this is a perfect parallel, where stich A parallels stich B, substituting Malkeinu for Elokim. The tone of the psalm has changed, again addressing an audience who are exhorted to sing - an exhortation which is evidently fleshed out in the next verse. Combined with the word Mizmor in the superscription and the synonymous Rinah in v. 2, the root ZMR appears seven times in this psalm, producing another leitwort. Put together, the two "key words" in this psalm result in the notion - "sing to Elokim" - which is the thrust of vv. 7-8.

One final note regarding the audience - if this verse is addressed to the global audience of vv. 2-3, then what are we to make of the possessive Malkenu? Have these nations become subjects of the one True King? Or should this audience be understood to be purely Yisra'elite?

v. 8: *For Elokim is the King of all the earth; sing a Maskil psalm.*

The sentiment expressed in v. 3 is repeated here, after which the audience is exhorted Zamru Maskil. This last phrase is confusing and has led to a number of interpretations. Some suggest that Maskil is, like Selah, a musical notation; alternatively, it may be a type of instrument or, as indicated by the translation here, a particular type of musical composition. The Me'iri suggests that the call to compose a Maskil - psalm stands in contradistinction to the clapping (or joining) of hands called for

in v. 2; this action takes wisdom and sophistication.

v. 9: *Elokim reigns over the nations; Elokim sits on the throne of his holiness.*

This verse, again, reiterates the notion expressed in v. 3 & 8 - but what are we to make of the coronation scene described here?

v. 10: *The nobles of the peoples are gathered together, the people of the God of Avraham; for the shields of the earth belong to Elokim; he is greatly exalted.*

This final verse describes a mass gathering of world leaders, ostensibly to give homage to God. What are we to make of the identification of God as "the God of Avraham"? Why the sudden mention of "the shields of the earth"? Indeed, this final verse presents us with several interpretive challenges; as God's transcendent nature ("greatly exalted") is juxtaposed with His immanence ("the shields of the earth"). How are we to understand this coda?

#### IV

##### STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Sh'mu'el Cohen, writing in Beit Mikra in 1992, presented an interesting analysis of the structure of this psalm which enhances our understanding of the themes at play here.

He notes that the psalm is made up of 5 "verses", made up of a total of 9 p'sukim. They follow a common pattern, in which two p'sukim combine to form a couplet which is made up of one pasuk which is a parallelism and a second which expands that idea in one complex thought. This is true for verses 1,2,4 and 5 - the middle verse stands alone and is comprised of only pasuk - : Elokim has gone up with a shout, Hashem with the sound of a shofar, the central verse in the psalm.

The first couplet, for example, exhorts the nations to clap their hands and (=) shout before God (1st pasuk)...because He is the great noble King. The second couplet notes that He has caused us to subjugate nations and (=) peoples under our feet. This is followed by the statement of the Divine selection of our inheritance and pride.

Cohen develops his analysis in great detail, reproduction of which is beyond the space allotment of this essay. The interested reader is directed to the Hebrew version or an English rendition, published in JBQ in 1995. (#23,4 pp. 258-264).

#### V

##### CONTEXT CONSIDERATIONS

R. Yehudah Shaviv (Megadim 9, pp. 70-80) presented a cogent analysis of the psalm - one which we will not use save for a mention of one introductory coment relating to the context within which the psalm was composed. Shaviv suggests that this psalm, besides its propheti/apocalyptic aspect, would have served quite neatly as a psalm of thanksgiving for the Yehoshuan wars of conquest - notably the miraculous victory in Yericho. He pointed to the lack of any song of praise for these wars

and suggested that perhaps this psalm (and others?) was originally composed for that purpose and later included in the psalter. This would support the notion that the Korahides were commissioned with the task of composing the musical accompaniment to this age-old psalm.

## VI

### LINGUISTIC ALLUSIONS

In Shaviv's article, he points to the odd phrase which opens the psalm: *Tiq'u Khaf* and notes that they evoke a phrase which is totally dissimilar in context and meaning but is morphologically related:

And Ya'akov was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Ya'akov's thigh was out of joint (*vaTeqa' Kaf*), as he wrestled with him. (B'resheet 32:25-26)

This interaction, as we learn later on, involved Ya'akov and a heavenly being - who evidently represented and foreshadowed his upcoming *tete-a-tete* with brother Esav. Haza"l express this by describing this being as the angelic minister of Esav.

Picking up on this observation of Shaviv's, I'd like to suggest an approach to the psalm which resolves some of the questions we raised and adds another connection between the psalm and the sounding of the Shofar.

To begin with, who are the "nations" addressed in the opening line? In addition, there are three terms used in this psalm to indicate "nations" - 'Amim, L'umim and Goyyim. Why the variations?

A perusal of several passages in B'resheet presents us with a startling possibility:

- And God said to Avraham, As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give you a son also of her; and I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people (*Malkhei 'Amim*) shall be of her (17:15-16). Who are the "people" who issued from Sarah? Yitzchak - which leads us to Ya'akov and Esav, each of whom is blessed with kings of their peoples (note B'resheet 36).
- And Hashem said to her, Two nations (*Goyyim*) are in your womb, and two peoples (*L'umim*) shall be separated from your bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger. (25:23)
- Therefore God give you of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine; Let people (*'Amim*) serve you, and nations (*L'umim*) bow down to you; be lord over your brothers, and let your mother's sons bow down to you; cursed be every one who curses you, and blessed be he who blesses you. (27:28-29)

Ya'akov and Esav are called 'Amim, L'umim and Goyyim - the same three which appear throughout our psalm.



If chapter 47 is, as we propose, a psalm of victory over Esav, we now understand the "reparation" involved in Tiq'u Khaf, as Ya'akov's children order/exhort Esav's children to complete the circle opened up those many years ago in Nahal Yabok when Ya'akov's hip was pulled out of its joint - now, instead of separation, the hands are brought together.

This being the case, we now understand the mention of "the pride of Ya'akov" in v. 5 - it is the ultimate claim of ownership over our inheritance, that among all of Avraham's children, his inheritance belongs to Ya'akov (and, by implication, to Yitzhak). The phrase Asher Ahev now becomes clear - it is not "the pride of Ya'akov" that He loves, rather Ya'akov himself, as we explicitly read at the beginning of the prophecy of Malakhi:

*The burden of the word of Hashem to Yisra'el by Malakhi. I have loved you, says Hashem. Yet you say, How have you loved us? Was not Esav Ya'akov's brother? says Hashem; yet I loved Ya'akov, And I hated Esav... (1:1-3)*

This psalm, rather than global in scope, is a prophetic call for that day of victory over Esav, as prophesied by Ovadiah:

*And saviors shall ascend Mount Tziyyon to judge the Mount of Esav; and the kingdom shall be Hashem's. (Ovadiah 21)*

There are two other puzzles in this psalm which are now resolved. Since this entire scene involves the children of Avraham exclusively, the people who gather - the "nobles of the people" - are the nation of the God of Avraham, since they are all his descendants. We also understand that this scene is reminiscent of the first time that Avraham's mission began to be realized - to be a source of blessing for the entire world (B'resheet 12:3):

*And Melchizedek king of Shalem brought forth bread and wine; and he was the priest of the most high God. And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Avram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth; And blessed be God the Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand...(B'resheet 14:18-20)*

Malkizedek is called a priest of Elyon, and that is how he blesses both God and Avraham. Since our psalm evokes this image, the same cognoment is used, and marked at the beginning, middle and end of the psalm as noted above.

The final question is the ascendance to God's throne - but, armed with our Esav-connection, we can answer that, as well.

The first victory over Amalek was memorialized by Mosheh with an altar which he called Yad al Kes Y-H - (Sh'mot 17:16). Rashi, following the Midrash, notes that both the "throne" (Kisei) and God's Name (Y-H) are truncated. His comment is: God's Name and His Throne are incomplete until the seed of Amalek is wiped out. (Rashi ad loc.). Now that Esav stands before our God, giving praise and resonding to the sound of the Shofar (with which they should have a unique association among all

the nations, due to our common father Yitzhak and his unique association with the Shofar...), Amalek is obviously no more. As such, God ascends to His Throne and is received as Malkenu by all of Yitzhak's children. (note that Yishma'el is nowhere to be seen...)

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