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TEHILLIM: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Rabbi Avi Baumol

"Blessing One's Soul:"

The Formula for a Meaningful Life

Psalm 49

While we are most familiar with "the Lord is my shepherd," psalm 23, as the main psalm on the theme of death, it is by no means the most substantive, and perhaps for this reason it is not chosen as the psalm to be recited in the house of mourning. Instead, our sages elected psalm 49. What about this poem merits the distinction of embodying the seven-day mourning experience?

To understand this, we first must analyze the idea of "shiva," the week of mourning. These seven days aim to first and foremost recall the happy memories of the deceased, and then to comfort the survivors as they attempt to deal with a life without their loved one. The eulogy sets the stage for the praising of the life led by the loved one; the conversations, recollections, and fond memories during the week add to the theme. It is at this time, when the family members, consciously or unconsciously, paint a fuller portrait of their loved one, that they crystallize the understanding of the essence of that individual. The recitation of Psalm 49 which, as we will learn, focuses our attention on the purpose of life, and the goals we should and should not set out to fulfill as we live our lives, is therefore most appropriate.

Here is a loose translation of a difficult psalm:

To the Victor, a psalm for the sons of Korach.

Listen all you nations; pay attention all that dwell on this earth.

My mouth shall speak wisdom; the meditations of my heart will express understanding.

Why shall I fear when adversity knocks at my door? When my time will come, I shall accept it. There are those fools who think that their riches and their wealth can stand up for them at such a time. But...

Man cannot pay off God with all his riches to redeem his soul.

And with all his valuables and glory will he indeed live forever?

After all, we see the wise man and the fool dying together, leaving their possessions behind to someone else. They think that their fortune will last forever, that their houses can distinguish them from other aspects of the world. But...

Man, despite his riches and honor, is likened to silenced animals, death to them both, ends the drive toward "living forever."

There is only God who will redeem the soul from the depths; He will take me (therefore, I fear not). You, too, should fear not...

Fear not when a man amasses a fortune, when honor in his house grows large, for in his death he will not take those riches; his honor will not descend with him to his grave.

But only if he blesses his soul (not his body) during his life will he be worthy of praise.

True wisdom stems from understanding the important aspects in life, not in pursuing honor, pleasure, or glory. Since...

Man with honor, but without knowledge (of the true path to take in life), is likened to the silenced animals.

This is the psalmist's view of life and death. It is echoed by one of the most famous lines in English literature: "Death be not

proud...why swellest thou then?" In his sonnet, John Donne not only personifies death but also renders him full of pride and glory. It is not just that death controls, but that he is proud of it.

Indeed, Judaism has always fought against the attitude that honor and glory are to be one's object in this world. The famous story of Korach and his rebellious clan illustrates this point effectively. Korach was given honor; he was from the chosen tribe of Levi; he worked in the service of God all his life. Nevertheless, he wanted more. He asked Moshe and Aharon, "Why should you exalt yourselves?" (Bemidbar 16:3), indicating that it was not the spiritual side of his cousins' position which upset him, but the wealth and dignity. Why should a little honor not come his way?

At the behest of God, the earth opened up and swallowed the Korach clan, ending their quest for honor. Yet the Torah comments, "but the children of Korach did not die" (Bemidbar 26:11). Our sages explain their miraculous escape in different ways. All explain that the three boys contemplated teshuva – repentance to God – minutes before their demise. This was enough for their lives to be spared (teaching us an important element of a Jewish mentality: until the very last moment, we can mend our ways).

Some however, express their dilemma in an interesting way. A fundamental tenet in Jewish life is honoring and respecting one's parents: "kabeid et avikha ve-et imekha" (Shemot 20:12). This precept was handed down in the Ten Commandments and carries with it great weight. In a religion concerned with repelling honor, it prescribes honoring those who create and sustain each individual: one's parents. What happens when there is a clash between honoring one's parents and honoring God? Whose honor is

greater? It is clear from the Talmudic sources as well as the Biblical narrative that God's honor comes first in this regard; yet the sons of Korach were ambivalent, resulting in the situations that they began to be swept into the abyss with the same parents they honored over God.

At the last moment they repented, stating, "Moshe is right, our father is wrong," thereby rescuing themselves from death, but at the same time witnessing the demise of their entire family. It is with this background that we can appreciate the sobering words of psalm 49, "a psalm for the sons of Korach."

"Man who seeks a life of honor without wisdom dies silently like the animals." This is the chorus of psalm 49; it recurs in verse 13 and 21 and in a paraphrase in verse 15. The theme of the psalm is to impart wisdom about the futility of life when it involves only a desperate hunt for honor. The author or authors open with a universal call for all to hear his parable. It is quite uncommon in Psalms for the author to introduce his idea to the world, and yet, this introduction clearly does so; in fact, the first four verses are dedicated to preparing the audience for the message.

Perhaps it is the new title or the new author that requires an introduction. Perhaps, on the other hand, it is the subject that has a universal call, hence the necessity to make a sweeping summons to all to listen. Pain and suffering are not new to the Psalter; life and death, however, alongside philosophical parables, riddles, and comments on the futility of life without an overall theistic purpose are new dimensions in our purview.

Let us consider the body of the text. The first segment has the author referring to the people who put their faith in their riches, presuming their wealth will protect them. But money will not bring a person eternal bliss, or even eternal life. Lest one think his or her future can be bought, the startling truth is stated bluntly: the wise and the foolish die together and leave their wealth to others.

The analogy used to liken man at the time of death to silenced animals startles us. We spend our lives convincing ourselves, and having the Torah convince us, that we are higher than the animals, that we are created in "the image of God" (Bereishit 1:27), as opposed to the animals; yet, here the analogy is employed in full force. The idea might be that it depends on how we live our lives. If we attempt to satisfy our "guf" - our mundane physicality - and ignore the spiritual side throughout our lives, then we are in fact like animals, especially at the time of death, when the soul departs.

If, however, we bless our souls in our lives, to follow the advice of verse 19, then we separate ourselves from the other animals, and we elevate our souls and our bodies in this world - and truly grasp the message of the sons of Korach.

There is a slight change in the chorus from its first use in verse 13 to the final time in verse 21. Through the understanding outlined in verse 19, and based on having acknowledged the futility of a life in pursuit of hedonism and honor, the final point in the poem inserts a stipulation. One who is involved solely with honor, without understanding the more important elements in his or her life - the soul, spirituality, other-worldliness - is likened to the silenced animals.

I would like to share an idea I found in a wonderful book on death by Rabbi Dr. Abner Weiss, "Death and Bereavement." There is a section on Talmudic thoughts and dicta that can be used to describe a departed loved one. I found there a message imbedded in a mishna that relates directly to the language and the outlook of the children of Korach as portrayed in this psalm. The Mishna in Avot (4:12) states: "Rabbi Shimon said, 'There are three crowns: the crown of priesthood, the crown of royalty, and the crown of Torah knowledge; but the crown of a good name surpasses them all.'" The mishna in Ethics of our Fathers teaches us of attaining the highest levels in one's field. Judaism acknowledges the crown of the priestly service, as well as that of the monarchy: each person, if lucky enough to be born into the tribes of Levi or Yehuda, respectively, can reach this crown through perseverance and diligence. The third crown, however, is not limited to a tribe, a sex, or an age: it is the crown of studying the wisdom and the messages of the Torah and its multi-faceted commentaries. This equalizer allows everyone to work hard and achieve his or her appropriate level.

Rabbi Shimon maintains, however, a critical distinction between the first three crowns and the fourth. While the crowns of priesthood, royalty, and Torah are attainable by an individual, the crown of a good name one cannot place on oneself. The nature of acquiring a good name lies in realizing that only others can crown one as a "generous" person, "kind" or "loving"

or "smart." This great honor can be bestowed upon a person only from without. It is what one's friends and acquaintances think of that individual, as opposed to what one think of his or her self.

In this way we can appreciate the psalmist's rejection of people seeking honor and riches in their lifetime, for "not in his death will he take it all; his honor shall not descend with him to his grave." Rather, "while he is alive he should bless his soul, and they will praise him if he does so." In other words, the true reward comes from our cultivation of our own spiritual name, by fortifying our spirit, following in the ways of God, seeking kindness towards fellow man, helping out others, and living a spiritual and moral life.

Blessing one's soul raises one's spirit, allowing the person to earn a name for him or her self, the "keter sheim tov," the crown of a good name, which rises above all else. Perhaps this is the true message of Psalm 49, and it is apropos for this psalm to find its way into to the liturgy of the mourner's house.

For when one takes the time and care to bless his or her soul while still in the land of the living, that person will truly be praiseworthy.

[Edited by Yoseif Bloch]