

Psalm 47

- 1 For the leader. Of the Korahites. A psalm.
- 2 All you peoples, clap your hands,
raise a joyous shout for God.
- 3 For the Lord Most High is awesome,
great king over all the earth;
- 4 He subjects peoples to us,
sets nations at our feet.
- 5 He chose our heritage for us,
the pride of Jacob whom He loved. *Selah.*
- 6 God ascends midst acclamation;
the Lord, to the blasts of the horn.
- 7 Sing, O sing to God;
sing, O sing to our king;
- 8 for God is king over all the earth;
sing a hymn.
- 9 God reigns over the nations;
God is seated on His holy throne.
- 10 The great of the peoples are gathered together,
the retinue of Abraham's God;
for the guardians of the earth belong to God;
He is greatly exalted.

Last week, I offered you a lament in Psalm 13, one that, I think, speaks to our fears and worries in this strange and difficult time. I remarked then that we can hold in our hearts at the same time both anguish and hope, that we can express these as complaint and praise in the same song. While we often assume – both in the psalms and in our real experience – that they are sequential, there is no reason for that. Even in the midst of our concerns and our sadness, good things happen. There are reasons to sing songs of praise that express our excitement, enjoyment, and appreciation.

The psalm I have picked for this week is Psalm 47. It strikes me as appropriate for Pesah for several reasons. First among them is that it is a psalm of praise. While Pesah is not the holiday on which we are actually commanded to rejoice (that is Sukkot: Deut 16:14; but maybe also Shavuot in Deut 16:11), it is a celebration of our freedom when we sing Hallel (Songs of Praise) and we do wish each other *Hag Sameah*, a happy holiday!

A second reason, perhaps more meaningful, shows up right at the beginning of the psalm. Pesah is a holiday of participation in a way that no other holiday is. Sure, there are mitzvot for every holiday that we are supposed to do, but only on Pesah is the most well-known ritual one that is fundamentally participatory. Among the more important mitzvot in the Torah for Pesah are those in which we are commanded to explain to our children why we continue to celebrate this holiday. In the Seder, we pick up on these mitzvot and expand on them. We ask questions; we answer questions; we *each* need to feel as if we came out of Egypt. The Seder is by its nature about engagement, and so is Psalm 47.

The psalm opens – after verse 1, which probably was instructions on how it was to be performed – with an invitation to participate. This invitation is not just addressed to us, but to all peoples, all

nations. We all should clap along and raise our voices to God. (This may be the equivalent of “If you’re happy and you know it clap your hands!”) Whether or not the joyful shouting is supposed to be singing along or not, these instructions also provide an opportunity for those who do not know the words to engage: clapping hands. Clapping along allows us to feel like we are part of the performance, that we, too, are affirming the ideas of the psalm. Even when we are like the child who does not know how to ask questions, the song opens for us the words of praise, and invites us to own them by our engagement.

Like most of our hymns, after our initial invitation to participate in the praising, we are given the reason why. What has God done that is so worthy of praise? In this case, as with Pesah, we are interested in the way that God helps to raise us up over our enemies. Verse 3 describes God as ruling over the whole world; this makes our God more powerful than the gods of the other nations. This theological statement is echoed by its more mundane reflex in verse 4: God sets other nations at our feet. We remind ourselves that this is part of the covenant, God’s heritage for us, in verse 5.

In response to verse 2, we are told of the power of our participation in verse 6. Our clapping and joyful shouting there is parallel to the acclamation and the sound of the shofar. This parallel is based on a symbolic representation. The clapping is a way of acclaiming, and the joyful shouting is loud and wordless like the shofar. In addition, it is interesting to note that the words also connect. The Hebrew words in verse 2 come from the same roots as two of the names of the shofar blasts. One of those shofar blasts *teru’a* appears in verse 6 and is translated here as ‘acclamation.’ All of this participation, all of our noise-making in praise of God, has the effect of helping God to ascend. This is analogous to when we cheer and applaud performers and speakers: we raise them up. Our praise raises God in stature in the world. On the one hand, we may believe that our power is negligible compared to God’s; however, what little we can do *can* positively affect God.

As in most hymns, the third part of this psalm resumes the invitation to praise God that we saw at the beginning. Since we have been praising God through song to this point, here we are told to continue singing. In particular, we are invited to sing a hymn (kind of like we are doing when reciting this!). But then we have another reason why. In verses 8 and 9, the reasons are similar to those we saw in verses 3 and 4. The difference is in what is missing this time. No longer do we sing of putting our enemies beneath our feet, but rather of God as ruler over all nations. We still are claiming God’s ultimate dominion, but we have removed ourselves from the status as mediators of that dominion.

This difference plays out further in verse 10. By invoking here Abraham, where Jacob was mentioned in verse 5, we have extended the field beyond just the people of Israel. Jacob was the father of the Israelites, but Abraham was blessed to be the father of many nations. It is not just Israel that praises God, but all the nations may; moreover, when that should happen, God would not just be raised up as in verse 6, but “greatly exalted.”

There is far more to talk about in this psalm. There is a complex structure that seems in a way to contradict itself. There is a section in the second half that is excerpted in our Rosh Hashanah service, and I could talk for a while about the wonderful musical arrangement that Hazzan Vogel uses with his choirs. But more important than those issues, there are two takeaways that I would like to share with you from this psalm.

First, we – puny humans – have great power, even when compared to God. Our praise has efficacy. Remember, prayer is not just about asking for things or thanking God for some

beneficence. Just like cheering for a performer or clapping after a speaker, we show appreciation – not necessary for something specific she did for us, but for all she accomplished and for all the effort it took to do. Similarly, when we acclaim God, we demonstrate the appreciation we feel for God, for everything that God has accomplished, whether it has a direct impact on us or not. Most surprising, I think, is how we may acclaim God through song: we need not know the tune, the words, or even the language. There are opportunities for us to join in with whatever we have. Some of us can sing words; some of us cannot. Some cannot sing but can hoot and holler, some of us play instruments like the shofar, and some of us join in by clapping our hands. We all have a part to play in praising God through the music.

The second of the takeaways is that by praising God in public, we help God to grow in power and influence. When a restaurant critic writes a positive review of a new chef, that restaurant becomes more popular, and the chef is able to exercise more innovation with the menu. God too gains power when we share our appreciation. Imagine if more of the world shared the same values that might be derived from appreciation of our God. If we could somehow promote less strife and a greater sense of community in the world, then God would indeed be greatly exalted!