

# HEARING THE SHOFAR WITH KORAH'S CHILDREN

*Dr. Ethan Schwartz*



THE ATERET ZVI PRIZE IN HIDDUSHEI TORAH  
Seventh Annual Winner, 5786

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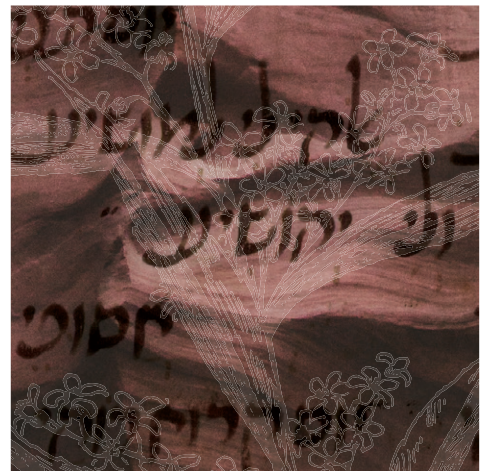
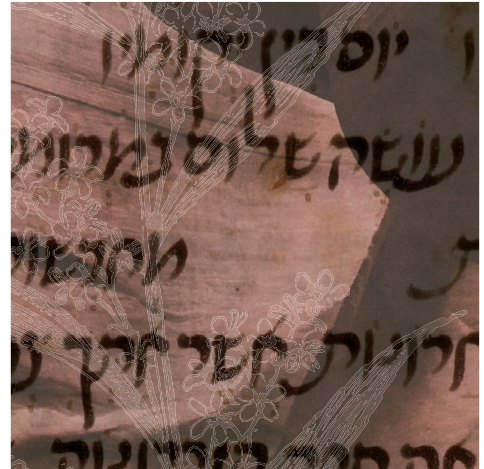
#### THE AUTHOR

Ethan Schwartz is Assistant Professor of Hebrew Bible at Villanova University. He received his PhD from Harvard University in 2020 and was a Hadar summer fellow in 2011 and 2014. His research focuses on the biblical prophetic literature, with particular interests in the prophets' social critique and interactions with ancient empires. Ethan is also an active participant in Jewish-Christian dialogue. His scholarship has been published in journals such as *Harvard Theological Review* and *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel*, while his writing for a general audience has appeared in venues including *JTA* and the *Jewish Review of Books*. Ethan is married to Rabbanit Leah Sarna; they live in the Philadelphia suburbs with their children.

#### THE ATERET ZVI PRIZE IN HIDDUSHEI TORAH

The Ateret Zvi Prize recognizes yearly a work of innovative and exceptional Torah scholarship. The prize is endowed in loving memory of Professor and Rabbi Zvi H. Szubin, a lifelong scholar and teacher who uncovered rich insights buried in traditional texts using legal, historical, and linguistic tools—an approach he termed “text archaeology.”

Professor Szubin studied at Yeshivat Hevron and received the *semikhah* of *yoreh yoreh, yadin yadin* from Chief Rabbi Herzog. He served in the Israeli Army for three years, and was deployed during the 1956 Sinai campaign. After completing university and an LL.B. degree in Israel, he came to the United States and received his Ph.D. from Dropsie College. He taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary and the City College of New York and, ultimately, became the Chair of the Classical Languages and Hebrew Department at City College. Professor Szubin was a supporter of Hadar, in particular its fierce commitment to traditional Jewish values and texts, its unabashed egalitarianism, and its promising efforts to energize thoughtful Jews of all ages.



## INTRODUCTION

THE YAMIM NORA'IM are an optical illusion. When you try to look at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur separately, they seem like one long holiday. Their themes and liturgies blur together. Yet when you start looking at them **that** way, they seem like two distinct holidays after all. It is hardly obvious how the lofty celebration of divine kingship on Rosh Hashanah fits with the humble preoccupation with human sinfulness on Yom Kippur.

The *shofar*, the most iconic symbol of these momentous days, embodies this complexity. Consider how the psalm at the heart of the Rosh Hashanah *shofar* service describes it:

תהילים מז:ו  
עלה אלקים בתרועה  
ה' בקול שופר:

### *Tehillim 47:6*

*God ascends on trumpet blasts;  
Hashem, on the call of the shofar.*

For this psalm, the *shofar* announces Hashem's exalted coronation. The sound of the blasts is invigorating, directing our attention upward. There is no mention of *teshuvah*. Now consider the Rambam's famous account of the *shofar's* function:

רמב"ם, משנה תורה, הלכות תשובה ג:ד  
אף על פי שתקיעת שופר בראש השנה גזרת הכתוב,  
רמז יש בו, כלומר: עורו ישנים משנתכם ונרדמים  
הקיצו מתרדמתכם, וחפשו במעשיכם וחזרו  
בתשובה וזכרו בוראכם.

### *Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah 3:4*

*Although blowing the shofar on Rosh  
Hashanah is a scriptural decree, it has a  
deeper meaning: "Wake up from your sleep,  
sleepy ones! Arise from your drowsiness,  
drowsy ones! Search out your deeds, do  
teshuvah, and remember your Creator!"*

For the Rambam, the *shofar* responds to human lowliness. The sound of the blasts is piercing, directing our attention inward. There is no mention of kingship.

In this essay, I offer an account of the relationship between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, between kingship and *teshuvah*, that centers on someone unexpected: Korah—the infamous Levi who leads an ill-fated rebellion against Moshe and Aharon (Bemidbar 16).

By the time Rosh Hashanah arrives, most Jews probably have not thought about Korah since they last read the *parashah* that bears his name and tells his unhappy story. However, he shows up right at the beginning of the *shofar* service. It is so quick that, if you blink, you might miss it:

תהילים מז:א  
למנוצח לבני קרח מזמור:

### *Tehillim 47:1*

*For the menatzeah; a psalm of Korah's  
children.*

The coronation psalm is ascribed to Korah's children. It is a strange choice: while confirming Hashem's kingship, we quote the descendants of Benei Yisrael's greatest insurrectionist.

One could argue that this psalm was chosen simply for its thematic relevance; the ascription is incidental. However, I do not find this explanation satisfying. There is, after all, a psalm with no connection to Korah that also links kingship with the *shofar*:

תהילים צח:ו  
בחצצרות וקול שופר  
הריעו לפני המלך ה':

### *Tehillim 98:6*

*With trumpets and with the shofar's call,  
make noise before King Hashem!*

Familiar from Kabbalat Shabbat, this psalm invites creation itself to praise Hashem. Creation is, of course, another central theme of Rosh Hashanah, as the Rambam suggests. The psalm therefore could have provided an elegant transition to Musaf *piyyutim* such as Ha-Yom Harat Olam. Yet the liturgy declines this option.

Accordingly, I want to suggest that our experience of this pivotal liturgical moment may be enriched if we consider the possibility that there is a specific, substantive reason for invoking Korah's children, of all people, in this context. The midrashic tradition contains a lively, extensive debate about whether Korah's children joined their father's rebellion, how they were punished if they did, and whether they did *teshuvah* for it. In other words, these heralds of the theme of Rosh Hashanah are the subjects of a story about the theme of Yom Kippur. I trace two divergent interpretive trends in the debate and then offer two corresponding readings of the *shofar* service. Hearing the *shofar* with Korah's children activates its function as a potent nexus of the Yamim Nora'im as a whole.

Even apart from the Yamim Nora'im, Korah's children have long presented an exegetical puzzle. The confusion begins in the Torah itself. Later in Bemidbar, in Parashat Pinhas—a few *parshiyot* after the account of the coup—a genealogy of the tribe of Reuven mentions Korah's coconspirators, Datan and Aviram, saying:

במדבר כו:ט-י

ובני אליאב נמואל ודתן ואבירם הוא דתן ואבירם [קריאי] העדה אשר הצו על משה ועל אהרן בעדת קרח בהצתם על ה': ותפתח הארץ את פיה ותבלע אתם ואת קרח במות העדה באכל האש את חמשים ומאתים איש ויהיו לנס:

**Bemidbar 26:9–10**

*And the children of Eliav: Nemuel, Datan, and Aviram. These are the same Datan and Aviram, men of the assembly, who incited against Moshe and Aharon in Korah's assembly, when they incited against Hashem. The earth opened up and swallowed them and Korah, when the congregation died when the fire consumed the two hundred fifty men—and they became a sign.*

This is hardly news to anyone who paid attention during Parashat Korah; the goal here seems to be simply to connect the genealogy with a story that the readers already know. However, the Torah then quickly issues the following clarification:

במדבר כו:יא

ובני קרח לא מתו:

**Bemidbar 26:11**

*But Korah's children did not die.*

This is noteworthy, as it provides a detail that Parashat Korah never mentions. In fact, the wording in the *parashah* might appear to suggest precisely the opposite:

ותפתח הארץ את־פיה ותבלע אתם ואת־בתיהם ואת כל־האדם אשר לקרח ואת כל־הרכוש:

**Bemidbar 16:32**

*The earth opened its mouth and swallowed [Datan and Aviram] and their families—plus all of Korah's people—and all the property.*

In fairness, the phrase “Korah's people” is ambiguous. It could refer only to his associates, not to his children.<sup>1</sup> However, given the reference to the other rebels' families, one could reasonably conclude that Korah's children died too. Later, in Parashat Pinhas, the Torah goes out of its way to emphasize that this is not the case.

As it turns out, there is a good reason that it does so. If we were to continue reading Tanakh under the assumption that Korah's line had ended, we would be in for a shock: eleven psalms, including the one from the *shofar* service—Tehillim 42; 44–49; 84–85; 87–88—are ascribed to Korah's children.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, they survived and went on to do what the Levi'im were famous for: they sang songs of praise to Hashem. Yet this raises another question: Why are the descendants of Benei Yisrael's most infamous rebel playing such an honored role? With each additional piece of information, Korah's children only become more mysterious.

INTERPRETATION #1:

KORAH'S CHILDREN WENT TO GEHINNOM

Speaking historically, the contradictory data about Korah's children can be read as disagreements among the biblical writers as to whether Levi'im such as Korah were full priests on the level of Aharon and his sons.<sup>3</sup> However, if we approach the Tanakh as an internally consistent whole, we can see the exegetical complexities surrounding Korah's children as a reflection of the theological complexities surrounding sin. One starting point for exploring these complexities is an ominous statement about Korah in the Mishnah:

משנה סנהדרין י:ג

עדת קרח אינה עתידה לעלות.

1 So the Bekhor Shor on Bemidbar 26:11.

2 On this as the rationale for the clarification in Bemidbar 26:11, see Ibn Ezra there.

3 For an overview, see Ethan Schwartz, “No, Korah Is Not the Hero,” *Jewschool*, June 9, 2021, <https://jewschool.com/no-korah-is-not-the-hero-173243>.

### Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:3

*Korah's assembly is not destined to arise [in the resurrection].*

This is part of a list of exceptions to the general rule that all Jews have a share in the world to come. Elaborating on why this ignominious list features Korah and his associates, the Bavli relates a wild tale that brings Korah's children into the picture:

בבלי סנהדרין קי.

ובני קרח לא מתו. תנא משום רבינו אמרו: מקום נתבצר להם בגיהנם וישבו עליו ואמרו שירה. אמר רבה בר בר חנה: זימנא חדא הוה קאזילנה באורחא, אמר לי ההוא טייעא: תא ואחוי לך בלועי דקרח. אזלי חזאי תרי בועי דהוה קא נפק קיטרא מנייהו. שקל גבבא דעמרא, אמשייה מיא, ואותביה בריש רומחיה, ואחלפיה התם. איחרך. אמר לי: אצית מה שמעת. ושמעית דהוה קאמרי הכי: משה ותורתו אמת והן בדאים.

### Bavli Sanhedrin 110a

*"But Korah's children did not die." It is recited: They said in the name of Rabbeinu: A place was fortified for them in Gehinnom, and there they sat and sang. Rabbah bar bar Hanah said: One time I was on the road and a traveling merchant said to me, "Come—I'll show you [the people] of Korah who were swallowed up." So I went and saw two fissures with smoke coming out of them. [The merchant] took a woollen fleece, moistened it, placed it on the tip of his spear, and passed it over [the fissures]. It was sizzling [from the heat]! He said to me, "Listen—what do you hear?" I listened. [Voices in the fissure] were saying, "Moshe and his Torah are true—and [the others, i.e., we ourselves] are liars."<sup>4</sup>*

The Torah's notice that Korah's children survived might suggest an exemption from the Mishnah's notice that Korah's associates are damned. However, the Bavli

harmonizes them. It claims that while Korah's children indeed survived, they did not escape perdition.<sup>5</sup> Hashem spares them by relegating them to a special place in hell.

Why would Hashem do this? The psalms, originally part of the exegetical problem, now become the solution. We saw that, when the Torah recalls Korah's coup, the upshot is that the rebels became a "sign" (נס). The original story clarifies what this means:

במדבר יז:

זכרון לבני ישראל למען אשר לא יקרב איש זר אשר לא מזרע אהרן הוא להקטיר קטרת לפני ה' ולא יהיה כקרח וכעדתו כאשר דבר ה' ביד־משה לו:

### Bemidbar 17:5

*[The remains from the conflagration are] a reminder for Benei Yisrael: An outsider—i.e., one not descended from Aharon—is not to approach to offer incense before Hashem, so as not to become like Korah and his assembly, just as Hashem said to him through Moshe.<sup>6</sup>*

Korah emerged as a cautionary tale for anyone who would dare to challenge Hashem and/or Hashem's legitimate representatives. The Bavli explains how Korah's children also played this function even though they did not die. Hashem keeps them alive only to make an "example" of them in the negative, punitive sense. Their public role as psalm-singers actualizes this function. Sitting in Gehinnom and singing about Moshe's truth and their own falsehood, they perpetually bear witness to their transgression.

### INTERPRETATION #1 AND THE SHOFAR SERVICE: KORAH'S CHILDREN AS A NEGATIVE MODEL TO BE AVOIDED

It is not difficult to read this punitive account of Korah's children into their words during the *shofar* service: the psalm is an ironic self-indictment, affirming the kingship that they once challenged. This fits well with a prominent theological dimension of Rosh Hashanah: the

4 A much briefer parallel appears in Bavli Megillah 14a.

5 Interestingly, the *aggadah's* depiction of subterranean fire combines the two modes of destruction that unfold in parallel in the biblical story, seen by many scholars as stemming from two originally distinct rebellion accounts: the earthquake (Bemidbar 16:31–34) and the fire (Bemidbar 16:35). The use of the word קיטרא for "smoke" is also elegant because Korah's contest with Aharon is decided by offering incense (קטרת).

6 On the connection with the נס in Bemidbar 26:10, see Rashi and Ibn Ezra there.

cosmic battle between good and evil. The liturgy puts it memorably:

מחזור לראש השנה וליום כיפור  
וכל הרשעה כלה כעשן תכלה כי תעביר ממשלת  
זדון מן הארץ.

**Mahzor for  
Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur**

*And every last trace of evil will go up like  
smoke, for you will remove the dominion of  
insolence from the earth.*<sup>7</sup>

This apocalyptic dualism is reflected in the starkest of Rosh Hashanah's alternative titles: "Judgment Day" (יום הדין). As good and evil take their respective stands, Hashem's kingship—indeed, the world itself—hangs in the balance. Whose side are we on?

Korah's children, singing from Gehinnom, underscore the gravity of our answer. They represent the evil, chaotic forces that would challenge Hashem's just order.<sup>8</sup> This, the late R. Rachel Cowan argued, is why the Torah emphasizes that they did not die: "We certainly see them today: cynical political, religious, and communal leaders cloaking self-interest in the language of democracy, nationalism, or God."<sup>9</sup> When we recite their psalm during the *shofar* service, perhaps the liturgy is reminding us of what happens to those who question Hashem's reign. Perhaps we are meant to hear the song as if it were emanating faintly from one of those burning fissures in the ground.

Yet if this punitive interpretation coheres with a key dimension of Rosh Hashanah, it also misses a key dimension of Yom Kippur. The former makes it seem as if the enemies of Hashem's kingship are all "out there." The latter, however, confronts us with the fact that the evil that will one day go up like smoke comes, in good measure, from us. We ourselves are the enemies of divine sovereignty:

סליחות לימים נוראים

סרנו ממצותיך וממשפטיך הטובים, ולא שוה לנו.  
ואתה צדיק על כל הבא עלינו כי אמת עשית, ואנחנו  
הרשענו.

**Selihot for Yamim Nora'im**

*We have strayed from Your commandments  
and Your good laws, and it has gotten us  
nothing. You are justified in everything that  
befalls us, for You have acted faithfully and we  
have done evil.*

This is not to say that everyone has, like Korah, directly rebelled against Hashem's rule. Rather, **all** transgression inherently undermines Hashem's vision for an ordered, just world.

The Yom Kippur liturgy is brutally realistic about human inadequacy. At the same time, however, it stubbornly maintains hope and resists resignation. The God of Yom Kippur is the God about whom Unetanneh Tokef, paraphrasing Yehezkel, declares:

מחזור לראש השנה וליום כיפור  
כי לא תחפץ במות המת כי אם בשובו מדרכו וחיה.

**Mahzor for  
Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur**

*For You take no pleasure in the death of those  
who die [for their sins] but rather in their  
doing teshuvah from their [present] course  
and living.*<sup>10</sup>

Even though—or, perhaps, precisely because—we have transgressed, we have a crucial role to play in defeating evil and affirming Hashem's reign: doing *teshuvah*.

Hazal are able to say this because they internalize the moral dualism that characterizes Rosh Hashanah. Every person's soul is a front in the cosmic war between good and evil—between our best and worst aspects, or,

7 Citations of the liturgy follow the Ashkenazi *nusah*.

8 Note the connection between the incineration of Korah's group and the Mahzor's statement that evil is destined to "go up like smoke."

9 Rachel Cowan, "Contemporary Reflection [on Parashat Korah]," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (URJ Press, 2008), pp. 911–12, here p. 911; see also Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "לשמה ושלאל-לשמה" (Part 1), in מאמרים והרצאות: אמונה, היסטוריה וערכים: מאמרים והרצאות (Akademon, 2002), pp. 25–45, here p. 42.

10 The original *pasuk* is Yehezkel 33:11; see also Yehezkel 18:23, 32. All three *pesukim* are quoted in Ne'ilah.

in Hazal's terminology, between our *yetzer ha-tov* and *yetzer ha-ra*. R. Cowan, however, recasts it as “an ongoing conflict between an ‘inner Moses’ and an ‘inner Korah’—between humility and arrogance, between selflessness and selfishness. And until we can hear the difference between those two voices, our actions will not be effective in countering the power of the Korahs at large in the world.”<sup>11</sup> On this reading, we invoke Korah's children in the *shofar* service to set ourselves on notice. Their negative example helps us to recognize the seditious forces in our own souls and to do *teshuvah* accordingly. If we do so, then we, unlike them, are not doomed to a special place in hell.

INTERPRETATION #2:  
KORAH'S CHILDREN DID TESHUVAH

Internalizing the negative example of Korah's children offers one way to think about how coronation and *teshuvah* intersect on the Yamim Nora'im. However, the conceptual basis for this move—namely, the Bavli's punitive reading—is not the only possible explanation of these enigmatic characters. A *midrash* in the Tanhuma goes in a very different direction:

מדרש תנחומא קרח ה  
אמר אפשר הגדלה הזו עתידה לעמד ממני ואני  
אובד? ולא ראה יפה, לפי שבניו היו עושין תשובה  
ועומדין מהן.

*Midrash Tanhuma Korah 5*

[Korah] thought, “Could such greatness [as a respected line of Levi'im] really come from me if I myself am to perish?” But he did not foresee accurately, for his children had done *teshuvah* and abstained from [the rebellion].

Korah knows that his descendants will become important, holy servants of Hashem. This destiny empowers him to act with impunity because he assumes that it must constitute their continuation of his own righteousness. What he fails to consider is that it might constitute their *teshuvah* from his own wickedness.

Later *mefarshim* (commentators) endeavored to square this with the claim that Hashem sent Korah's children to Gehinnom. For instance, Rashi explains:

רש"י על במדבר כו:יא  
הם היו בעצה תחלה ובשעת המחלוקת הרהרו  
תשובה בלבם. לפיכך נתבצר להם מקום גבוה  
בגיהנום וישבו שם.

*Rashi on Bemidbar 26:11*

*They were involved in the plot initially, but during the rebellion they had thoughts of teshuvah in their hearts. This is why a high place was fortified for them in Gehinnom and they sat there.*<sup>12</sup>

Rashi's synthesis, however, has its own ambiguities. Is he making a positive point—that the *teshuvah* of Korah's children was powerful enough to mitigate the consequences of their sin? Or is he making a negative point—that their *teshuvah* was not powerful to undo those consequences fully? The Sifte Hakhamim<sup>13</sup> adopts the positive reading. Rashi, he argues, is using the Tanhuma to soften the Bavli:

שפתי חכמים על במדבר כו:יא  
התקין להם הקב"ה מקום גבוה שלא העמיקו כ"כ  
בגיהנם ולא מתו:

*Sifte Hakhamim on Bemidbar 26:11*

*The Holy Blessed One established a high place for them so that they would not descend too deep into Gehinnom and therefore not die.*

A subterranean perch is more hospitable and respectable than the true depths of hell. Because Korah's children did *teshuvah*, Hashem spared them the worst possible fate. The Maharal,<sup>14</sup> however, is more skeptical. He takes Rashi to be making the negative point:

גור אריה על במדבר כו:יא  
מדכתיב ובני קרח לא מתו, ולא כתיב ובני קרח חיו,  
משמע דלא מתו, אבל חיים נמי לא הוון. [...] והיינו  
מפני שהרהרו תשובה בלבם, ותשובה גמורה לא

<sup>11</sup> Cowan, “Contemporary Reflection,” p. 911.

<sup>12</sup> We may infer that the Tanhuma is the source of Rashi's reference to *teshuvah* because he cites it in asserting “[Korah's] children did *teshuvah* (בניו עשו תשובה)” on Bemidbar 16:7.

<sup>13</sup> A supercommentary on Rashi by R. Shabtai Bass (Poland, 1641–1718).

<sup>14</sup> R. Yehudah Loew (Prague, c. 1524–1609), who also wrote a supercommentary on Rashi called Gur Aryeh.

עשו, ולפיכך לא חיים ולא מתו, ונתבצר להם מקום  
גבוה וישבו שם:

תהילים מד:ה  
אתה הוא מלכי אלקים  
צוה ישועות יעקב:

#### **Gur Aryeh on Bemidbar 26:11**

*Why does it say, "But Korah's children did not die," not, "But Korah's children lived"? It means that while they indeed did not die, they also did not really live. "They had thoughts of teshuvah in their hearts"—but it was not complete teshuvah. As such, they neither lived nor died, but "a high place was fortified for them in Gehinnom and they sat there."*

On this reading, Rashi is subordinating the Tanhuma's positivity to the Bavli's condemnation. If Korah's children had done **authentic teshuvah**, the Maharal suggests, then perhaps they would have escaped altogether.

These syntheses are creative and compelling. However, I would suggest that there is also value in letting the Bavli and Tanhuma stand in their divergence. Like the Bavli, the Tanhuma follows the Torah's lead in making Korah's children an example. Unlike the Bavli, however, the Tanhuma makes them a **positive** example. Once again, Hazal turn the psalms ascribed to Korah's children into the solution to their own exegetical problem. These are not the psalms of those who rebelled against Hashem. They are the psalms of those who did *teshuvah* for that rebellion.

#### INTERPRETATION #2 AND THE SHOFAR SERVICE: KORAH'S CHILDREN AS A POSITIVE MODEL TO BE EMULATED

One might object that crediting Korah's children with *teshuvah* is a contrived solution. Where is the textual evidence? This critique would limit the relevance of this interpretation for the *shofar* service. *Teshuvah* is hard work. Unless Korah's children demonstrate that hard work, they cannot provide a very meaningful model. However, their hard work is hiding in plain sight: in their psalms. It is not enough simply to acknowledge the sheer fact that Korah's children recited psalms. We need to examine the content of the psalms themselves.

If we turn to these psalms with the *shofar* service in mind, we see that our coronation psalm fits a broader profile of celebrating divine kingship. For example:

#### **Tehillim 44:5**

*You are my king, O God;  
command victories for Jacob!*

Here, Hashem is depicted as a mighty Warrior-King who personally leads Am Yisrael to victory in battle. This royal ideal is broadly attested in Tanakh and elsewhere in its ancient cultural context.<sup>15</sup> Another psalm in the collection declares:

תהילים פד:ד  
גם צפור מצאה בית  
ודרור קן לה אשר שתה אפרחיה  
את מזבחותיך ה' צבאות  
מלכי ואלקי:

#### **Tehillim 84:4**

*Even the sparrow finds a home,  
the swallow, a nest in which to set her young,  
at Your altars, Hashem Tzeva'ot,  
My King, my God.*

This poem activates a different biblical and ancient Near Eastern association with kings: their beneficent care for their subjects. Prowess in battle was not the only measure of royal strength. Powerful kings provided for their people.<sup>16</sup>

Yet alongside Hashem's kingship, the psalms of Korah's children also focus on something different: a pressing awareness of human lowliness and alienation from the divine King. The opening line of the whole collection is one of the most famous biblical expressions of these ideas:

תהילים מב:א-ג  
למנצח משכיל לבני קרח:  
כאיל תערג על אפיקי מים  
כן נפשי תערג אליך אלקים:  
צמאה נפשי לאלקים לא-ל חי  
מתי אבוא ואראה פני אלקים:

<sup>15</sup> See also, e.g., Tehillim 149.

<sup>16</sup> See also, e.g., Tehillim 72.

**Tehillim 42:1–3**

For the *menatzeah*; a maskil of Korah's children.

Like a deer longing for watercourses,  
my very being longs for You, O God;  
my very being thirsts for God, the living God.  
When will I enter and look upon God's face?

By invoking thirst, the speaker vividly expresses their distance from Hashem as if it were a fundamental, physical deprivation. In contrast to the royal psalm, in which even birds find refuge in the divine King's palace, here the speaker can only wonder if they will ever experience that sacred space. Korah's children are also credited with the psalm traditionally recited in a Shivah home. It declares:

תהילים מט:ג  
ואדם ביקר בל ילין  
נמשל כבהמות נדמו:

**Tehillim 49:13**

Human beings, so precious, cannot abide;  
they are like the beasts that perish.

In language reminiscent of Kohelet, this poem confronts the futility of human life. Despite our pretenses to grandeur, we are far closer to the humblest of creatures than to the divine King.<sup>17</sup>

In the psalms ascribed to Korah's children, we find divine coronation alongside human humility—precisely the unintuitive combination that characterizes the Yamim Nora'im. This, I suggest, undergirds the role of Korah's children as models of *teshuvah* in the *shofar* service. A process of *teshuvah* fits well with their lowly psalms of contrition. Yet, given their transgression, a process of *teshuvah* also fits surprisingly well with their exalted psalms of coronation. The Rambam emphasizes that real *teshuvah* involves a concrete, public process of corrected action.<sup>18</sup> It therefore makes sense that, having grappled with their human limitations, Korah's children would devote their psalms to the issue on which they had so gravely erred.

For these reasons, we do not **need** to imagine Korah's children reciting the coronation psalm of the *shofar* service from Gehinnom. Instead, we can place them exactly where Sefer Tehillim does: in the Beit ha-Mikdash, serving the God Whom they now duly recognize as King. They merit this

role not in spite of their transgression but in virtue of how they sought to correct it—in virtue of how they recognized and responded to the elements within themselves that were undermining Hashem's sovereignty. In this way, they model the radical, transformative power of the *teshuvah* to which the *shofar* calls us all.

CONCLUSION

On the Yamim Nora'im, it is easy to swing entirely toward either the cosmic drama of Rosh Hashanah or the personal introspection of Yom Kippur; it is easy to hear the *shofar* only as a herald of Hashem's kingship or only as a call to *teshuvah*. In this essay, I have argued that the liturgy suggests a way to avoid this compartmentalization: hearing the *shofar* with Korah's children. It is no coincidence that we recite one of their psalms at Hashem's coronation. Their words are shaped by their personal experience with transgression.

The precise nature of that experience is, as we have seen, debatable. Some might hear the *shofar* and be haunted by the image of Korah's children paying for their sins in Gehinnom. Others might hear it and be inspired by the image of Korah's children doing *teshuvah*. Ultimately, we do not need to come down in favor of one interpretation over the other. Taken as a negative model, Korah's children underscore that evil is real and that actions have consequences. Taken as a positive model, Korah's children underscore that goodness is real and that actions do not permanently define us. Both messages have a role on the Yamim Nora'im.

When we perform the *shofar* service, Korah's children give us some of our tradition's most august words for affirming Hashem's kingship:

תהילים מזג  
כי ה' עליון נורא  
מלך גדול על כל הארץ:

**Tehillim 47:3**

For Hashem Most High is awe-inspiring,  
the Great King over the whole earth.

But Korah's children also remind us that if we genuinely mean these words on Rosh Hashanah, then we must commit to *teshuvah* as we look ahead to Yom Kippur. That is what makes these words a reality; that is what truly makes Hashem King.

<sup>17</sup> Note the stark contrast with the accounts of humanity in Bereishit 1:27–30 and Tehillim 8, both of which employ ancient Near Eastern royal motifs.

<sup>18</sup> Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Teshuvah 2:1–5.