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Speaking from Personal Experience

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Ki Tavo

Speaking from Personal Experience

It's that somber time of year again—the time of year we mark September 11.

Each September 11 morning, there is a memorial ceremony.

What was interesting at one 9/11 ceremony is that President Barack Obama, instead of giving a speech in memory of those who died, chose to recite Chapter 46 of Psalms.

The story is told about a Chasidic Rebbe sitting at the Shabbos table with his Chasidim who asked each one to share a Dvar Torah, a Torah insight. And so it went from one to the other, with each commenting on the Torah portion.

And so they came to the end of the table, and at the very end of the table sat a simple Jew who didn't know how to study the Torah or even read. So when it came to his turn to share a word or two, he said the only thing he knew: "Shma Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad!" "Hear O Israel, the L-rd is Our G-d, the L-rd is One!" It's probably the most famous single verse in the entire Torah.

Of course, however, all the people at the table burst out in laughter. What kind of Torah thought is this? It's something everyone knows!

But to their surprise, their Rebbe turned serious and said to them: "Everything you said could be refuted. But what he said is the absolute truth."

And so it was with the President's visit to Ground Zero. If the president had given a speech, there would be those who would agree with it and those who didn't. But when it comes to a chapter of Psalms, there is only wall-to-wall agreement.

Now what does it say in chapter 46? What does it talk about?

Chapter 46 is one of those chapters of Psalms that begin with "Lamnatzayach livnei Korach"—"For the Choirmaster, for the sons of Korach." But who were these "sons of Korach" and how did they end up in the Book of Psalms?

Psalms was written by David, King of Israel. But when you look deeper into Psalms, you discover that he actually didn't write all of the 150 chapters of Psalms—he also compiled pre-written Psalms that had been recited by ten elders, including Adam, Moshe, Heiman the Ezrachite and also the three sons of Korach, Asir, Elkanh and Aviasaf.

Therefore, there are Psalms that start with the words "Tefilah l'Moshe"—"A prayer by Moshe," or "Mizmor l'Asaf"—"A Psalm by Asaf," and even by the sons of Korach.

So again, who were the sons of Korach?

We've all heard the story of Korach, the first cousin of Moshe Rabbeinu and a very distinguished, blue-blooded and wealthy man. One day, Korach decides that he's jealous of his cousins Moshe and Aharon, one of whom was basically the king of the Jews and the other the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, while he was nothing at all. So he started a smear campaign against them: "...all the congregation is entirely holy... why do you raise yourselves above G-d's congregation?" He argued that Moshe had not made all his appointments on order from G-d but had made them up himself.

So Korach incited all 250 chief justices of the Jewish community, and other important people, against Moshe. Not only that, but Korach also organized a massive demonstration against Moshe! And, of course, who could you expect to be there but Dasan and Aviram, the notorious duo who were always making trouble against Moshe. With them on board, a real mess began.

Moshe first tried to convince them to stand down from this dispute. But nothing helped. Finally, Moshe turned to the entire community and said, "...if these men die the death of all men... it is not G-d who sent me. But if G-d should create a creature, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them... then you shall know that these men have spited G-d" (Bamidbar 16:30).

And the very next verse states: "And the earth opened its mouth"—there was an earthquake and they all fell into a bottomless pit, families and all.

But two Torah portions after the portion of Korach, the Torah reveals to us (Bamidbar 26:11), "And the sons of Korach did not die."

Now what happened there?

In the Book of Psalms (42:1), Rashi comments, "At first, they followed their father's counsel, and at the time of the dispute, they withdrew; when all their surroundings were swallowed and the earth opened its mouth, their place stayed inside the mouth of the earth... and they rose up from there and the Divine Spirit rested upon them and they prophesied."

What that means in plain English is that they recanted in their hearts, and so what happened is that they were saved from this supernatural earthquake and lived on, even starting families and having kids. The great prophet Samuel was one of their descendants.

But here we can ask a question: True, they did teshuvah. They repented. But we still don't understand why King David put their Psalms into his book. What was so special about them that they of all people were included in Psalms more so than other great prophets and even the Patriarchs?

So Rashi comes along in Chapter 46 in Tehilim and says something amazing: "The sons of Korach saw that a miracle had occurred to them, that their surroundings had all been swallowed up and they stood in one place in the air, and they said to Israel with the Divine Spirit that "a likeness of this miracle shall be done unto them in the future."

In other words, the sons of Korach were speaking from personal experience—just as we were saved from the earthquake, we say to you: Jewish Nation! You have nothing to worry about. G-d will rescue you just like He rescued us."

The way the world works, when a person is in pain and someone comes along to comfort him, he says to him, "G-d will help. Don't worry. Trust in G-d"—and the person listening thinks to himself, "Easy for him to say—he never had the suffering I'm having. Sure, it's very easy to encourage someone else when you're not suffering yourself."

But when someone who has suffered from that same situation, and who got out of it, comes along, he says, "Listen: I was in the exact same situation as you. I know exactly what you're going through. And I'm here to tell you that I survived—and you, too, will survive."

When someone can say that, it's a different speech altogether. Such words from such a person truly give strength and encouragement.

And that's the significance of Chapter 46 of Psalms, written by the sons of Korach.

In that chapter, the sons of Korach are speaking to their fellow Jews out of experience. They had been saved from the earthquake and now, they are encouraging their fellow Jews and saying, "Therefore we will not fear when the earth changes"—you guys have nothing to fear. G-d will save you just like He saved us.

And in essence, this is the secret of the strength of the Book of Psalms as a whole. All the prayers and consolations in Psalms were said by those who themselves had suffered and survived such ordeals.

For example, when King David says in Psalm 23, "Even when I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil," he is not speaking philosophically that this is how one should be and that this is what is demanded by the Torah. Rather, he is speaking from personal experience about how he once was in a hostile desert and felt he was in "the valley of the shadow of death," in a lethal situation, he still did not lose his faith and felt that "You are with me."

Or, as he writes in Chapter 27, which we recite throughout the month of Elul all the way through Sukkos, "For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the L-rd gathers me in"—it was an experience that he had experienced himself.

And this, my friends, is the mighty power of Tehilim, of Psalms. It's not a rabbi delivering words of inspiration in situations he has mostly not experienced. Instead, every word of Tehilim was said those who had experienced those very things in the flesh.

Perhaps we can even say that this is the reason the sons of Korach are included in the first place in Tehilim—because they experienced something that no other human being had experienced. And so, when you're talking about an earthquake, only they are able to inspire and motivate the Jewish Nation.

So the lesson, my friends, is this: Every Jew who wants to strengthen his or her faith in G-d and thus automatically also get his or her prayers accepted more quickly should recite Tehilim.

As Chapter 27 ends, "Hope for the L-rd, be strong and He will give your heart courage, and hope for the L-rd."

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