

HALLEL (I): HAL'LU AVDEI HASHEM

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

לע"נ אמי מורתי מרים בת יצחק ורבקה הכ"מ

In anticipation of the upcoming festival, we will be devoting the next few essays to in-depth analyses of the Psalms that make up the "Hallel". This first shiur will focus on an overall introduction to Hallel - in its various forms - along with an analysis of the first section, Psalm 113. Due to space limitations, we will only allude to Halakhic considerations relating to the saying of Hallel - our main focus, as per the general parameters of this forum, will be oriented towards understanding the text.

I

INTRODUCTION TO HALLEL

The term "Hallel" is used by Haza"l in reference to three sequences of psalms, which are recited at different occasions. We will briefly attend to two of them before beginning our analysis of the third.

A: "DAILY HALLEL" - P'SUKEI D'ZIMRA R. Yossi said May my portion be of those who recite the entire Hallel every day. But that is not so, for a Master said: He who reads Hallel every day blasphemes and reproaches [the Divine Name]? — We refer to the P'sukei d'Zimra. (BT Shabbat 118b).

R. Yossi, in listing several supererogatory behaviors that he admires, notes that completing (or reading) Hallel every day is a laudatory practice. The challenge to his evaluation of this custom is odd - why would someone who praises G-d every day considered a blasphemer?

It is evident from this selection that the term "Hallel" has multiple referents, one of which is the "default referent". In other words, there is one liturgical selection that is known simply as "Hallel" without qualifiers. Whatever that selection may be, daily recital of those passages somehow qualifies as blasphemy - whereas the "Verses of Song" (P'sukei d'Zimra) are free of this taint.

Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that the Hallel which is the "default referent" here includes praise for G-d for his great miracles, to be offered at a time when we celebrate Divine intervention on our behalf via those miracles. Although the sun rising every day, the birth of a baby and other natural occurrences are miraculous, we run the risk of lessening the impact of G-d's suspension of the laws of physics on behalf of His people if we equate all miracles - daily and supernatural (see Ramban, Sh'mot 13:16). Hence, daily recital of the "Hallel" would inhere a form of blasphemy. "P'sukei d'Zimra", on the other hand, which include either Psalms 145, 148 and 150 (Rashi) or 145 through 150 (Rif, Rambam), are

gorgeous weaves of praise for G-d for his daily miracles - sustaining His creation, natural meteorological phenomena etc.

R. Yossi wishes that his portion would be that of those great people who sing G-d's praises every day - for the miracles which we enjoy and appreciate every day. This "Hallel" is commonly known as "P'sukei d'Zimra" or "Hallel sheB'khol Yom" (Daily Hallel) and is included in all traditions as a preface to the morning T'fillah. (MT T'fillah 7:12)

B: "THE GREAT HALLEL" -HALLEL HAGADOL

In discussing the role of the fourth cup at the Seder, the Rabbis state:

At the fourth he concludes the Hallel and recites *Hallel haGadol* (the great Hallel) this is the view of R. Tarfon. Others say: *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want*. What comprises *Hallel haGadol*? Rav Yehudah said: From *O give thanks until the rivers of Babylon*. While R. Yohanan said: From *A song of ascents until the rivers of Babylon*. R. Aha b. Ya'akov said: From *for the Lord hath chosen Jacob unto himself until the rivers of Babylon*. And why is it called *Hallel haGadol*? — Said R. Yohanan: Because the Holy One, blessed be He, sits in the heights of the universe and distributes food to all creatures. (BT Pesachim 117b).

One immediately senses that normative practice must follow R. Tarfon, since the Amora'im debate the text parameters of *Hallel haGadol* (they wouldn't bother doing this if the practice was to recite Hashem Ro'i lo Eh'sar); however, the wording here raises an enigma for the reader. By referring to *Hallel haGadol* as an already known liturgy, it seems clear that it was recited on other occasions. We have no record of its use at other times - but there was, evidently, wider use of the "Great Hallel" in the Tannaitic period.

The three Amoraic opinions as to the parameters of *Hallel haGadol* are presented in a way that reflects the lack of assignation of chapter numbers to Biblical text. The first opinion (R. Yehudah), reckons Psalm 136, R. Aha b. Ya'akov adds 135 to 136 and R. Yohanan expands the scope of *Hallel haGadol* backwards to include anywhere from one added chapter (134, the last of the fifteen sequential Shirei haMa'alah) to 15 (the entire sequence of Shirei haMa'alah). The one psalm upon which all opinions agree is 136 - which includes 26 lines of praise for G-d, each ending with the refrain Ki l'Olam Hasdo. This psalm was likely recited antiphonally - i.e. in call and response - and, as we suggested elsewhere (see **V'shinantam 1:28, §6**) **may have been performed with the full response of Hodu...Hasdo after each phrase of praise.**

What makes Psalm 136 the undisputed focus of *Hallel haGadol* is the provided explanation for its moniker. R. Yohanan suggests that this is the great praise of G-d because of one line - which appears as the penultimate line of 136: Notein Lehem l'Khol Basar, Ki l'Olam Hasdo. (He gives food to all manner of flesh, His kindness endures forever).

This explanation itself is somewhat difficult. The key verse stands alone in its praise for G-d as the

One Who sustains all creatures. Why does Psalm 136, replete with praise for G-d for both creation and miraculous events related to the Exodus earn its name from the final verse?

Perhaps the very placement of the verse speaks of its significance. Having praised G-d for the magnificence of creation and for the Divine power revealed during and subsequent to the Exodus and through the desert travels (including the defeat of the two great warlords, Sihon and Og), one is struck by the apparently anticlimactic nature of the conclusion. Human nature revels in the supernatural and finds little to get excited about in the mundane. This is, counter-intuitively, where our praise becomes ever more intense. As the Midrash (B. Rabbah 97:3) points out, the miracle of G-d's beneficence manifest in our lives is ever greater than the suspension of the laws of nature (although the significance of the latter must never be underestimated, as noted above).

There is also a morphological nuance that sets off the final praise from the rest and allows for it to be read as the defining feature of the psalm.

All of the other praises for G-d follow the first line; to wit: "Give thanks to G-d...to the One Who..." Each line (some lines may be more than one verse) begins with the directive *lamed* - e.g. *l'Oseh Orim G'dolim* (To He who makes the great luminaries). In other words, the community is being adjured to give thanks to G-d Who has done each of these praiseworthy acts. No "definition" of G-d is proffered here, rather an item-by-item "provocation to praise". The directive *lamed* is missing here, implying that unlike the earlier praises which are given to the G-d "Who does X", this praise is given to G-d Who is the One who gives food to all creatures. Unlike the earlier praises, this one actually describes (so to speak) the Almighty - whereas He performed the acts of creation and salvation, He is the One who sustains His creatures. Hence, this one line becomes the defining feature of the psalm and is the source of its name, *Hallel haGadol*.

As to the reason itself, R. Yohanan suggests that the greatness of G-d is most manifest in this world when He, from on high, deigns to feed all of His lowly creatures.

This jibes well with a famous aphorism of the selfsame R. Yohanan, which he supports with texts throughout the T'nakh:

R. Yohanan said: Wherever you find [mentioned in the Scriptures] the power of haKadosh Barukh Hu, you also find his gentleness mentioned. This fact is stated in the Torah, repeated in the N'vi'im, and stated a third time in the K'tuvim...(BT Megilah 31a)

The juxtaposition of G-d's power throughout psalm 136 with the penultimate line fits this model of Biblical praise well - G-d's greatness is particularly appreciated when, against the background of His creative and saving prowess, He "lowers Himself" to take care of the lowliest of creatures.

C: "HALLEL HAMITZRI" - THE HALLEL OF SALVATION

The term "Hallel haMitzri" (or, alternatively, "Hallel Mitzrayim"), used commonly in the literature of the

Rishonim to refer to the liturgical recitation of psalms 113-118 on the Three Festivals and Hanukkah, shows up nowhere in early classical Rabbinic literature. There is a reference in the Gemara (Berakhot 56a) to "Hal'la Mitzra'ah", but it isn't overly clear that the referent is our series of psalms. Rashi (ad loc. s.v. Hal'la Mitzra'ah) suggests that the reason it is called Hallel haMitzri is to distinguish it from *Hallel haGadol*. Rashi himself makes things more confusing, however, by referring to the Hallel in question as "the one we read on Pesach"; why refer to it that way, since it is read on all of the Festivals and Hanukkah?

In any case, the "default Hallel" which is the focus of our ongoing analysis, beginning this week, includes Psalms 113-118 inclusively and is known in the literature of the Rishonim as "Hallel haMitzri" or "Hallel Mitzrayim", attaching it directly to the Exodus.

Regarding this Hallel, there is a curious discussion in the Gemara as to its authorship:

Rav Yehudah said in Sh'mu'el's name: The Song in the Torah was uttered by Mosheh and Yisra'el when they ascended from the [Reed] Sea. And who recited this Hallel? The prophets among them ordained that Yisra'el should recite it at every important epoch and at every misfortune — may it not come upon them! and when they are redeemed they recite [in gratitude] for their redemption.

Who recited this Hallel? R. Yossi said: My son El'azar maintains [that] Mosheh and Yisra'el said it when they ascended from the [Reed] Sea, but his college disagree with him, averring that David said it. But his view is prefer able to theirs: Is it possible that Yisra'el slaughtered their Passover-offerings or took their palm-branches without uttering song! Another argument: Micah's image stands at Beki and Israel recites the Hallel!

Our Rabbis taught: Who uttered this Hallel?

- i) R. El'azar said: Mosheh and Yisra'el uttered it when they stood by the [Reed] Sea...
- ii) R. Yehudah said: Yehoshua and Yisra'el uttered it when the kings of Canaan attacked them...
- iii) R. El'azar the Modiite said: Deborah and Barak uttered it when Sis'ra attacked them...
- iv) R. El'azar b. 'Azariah said: Hezekiah and his companions uttered it when Sennacheriv attacked them...
- v) R. Akiba said: Hananiah, Misha'el and Azariah uttered it when the wicked Nebuchadnezzar rose against them...
- vi) R. Yossi the Galilean said: Mordekhai and Esther uttered it when the wicked Haman rose against them...
- vii) But the Sages maintain: The prophets among them enacted that the B'nei Yisra'el should recite at every epoch and at every trouble — may it not come to them! — and when they are redeemed, they recite it [in thankfulness] for their delivery. (BT Pesachim 117a)

Note that the selection cited is made up of three sections.

The first statement, attributed to Sh'mu'el (c. 250 CE), maintains that Hallel was composed by the prophets "among them" (apparently meaning "among the B'nei Yisra'el at the time of the Exodus"). This raises several problems. First of all, where do we have a record of "prophets among them", besides Miriam, before the diffusion of Mosheh's spirit on the seventy elders (Bamidbar 11) - an event which took place over a year after the splitting of the sea? Even assuming the presence of other prophets at the time, it isn't entirely clear that they would have the right to assume prophetic stature in the presence of Mosheh (see, inter alia, Megillah 14b regarding the relationship between Huldah and Yirmiyah). Besides these questions, we have one overriding one that certainly makes this assertion difficult. If the B'nei Yisra'el sang the "Song in the Torah" (i.e. the Song at the Sea, Sh'mot 15:1-18) and the "prophets among them" authored Hallel, why did the former merit inclusion in the Torah and the latter was relegated to K'tuvim?

The answer that immediately springs to mind is that the Song at the Sea was led by Mosheh, unlike the putative Hallel. This doesn't help much, since we have another song sung "just" by Yisra'el (the song at the well - Bamidbar 20) which is included in the Torah.

We will address this question in a later installment in this series.

The second section is a quote from the Tanna R. Yossi b. Halafta, who states that the issue of authorship of Hallel was the subject of dispute between his son El'azar and his son's colleagues. El'azar's approach was even clearer than that expressed by Sh'mu'el and, while eluding the problems of "other prophets", must still be defended from the last challenge we raised. If the selfsame Mosheh and B'nei Yisra'el sang both "songs", why was one placed in the Torah and the other in T'hilim?

El'azar's colleagues maintained - perhaps because of this challenge - that David was the author of these psalms. R. Yossi's argument in favor of his son's position is curious - it presupposes that the Korban Pesach as offered before the construction of a Mikdash was accompanied by song (and that the taking of the Lulav must also be accompanied by song) and that song is specifically the lyric of Psalms 113-118.

Even if we accept this premise, it needn't lead us to Mosaic authorship.

Ramban argues in his critique of Rambam's Sefer haMitzvot (Shoresh I), there is no reason to suppose that the song that accompanies these rituals must be those same words which make up those six psalms. Rambam argues that Hallel must be a Rabbinically ordained command, since the words which we use to fulfill that Mitzvah were composed after the Torah was given. Ramban counters that, just as Rambam considers T'fillah a Mitzvah from the Torah even though the text was composed much later; the Mitzvah of T'fillah is to praise, petition and thank G-d, non-word-specific. Ramban maintains that the same might be said for Hallel. As the Gemara in Arakhin (11a) suggests, the basic Mitzvah of Levitical singing in the Mishkan/Mikdash may be Toraic in source, yet the words

were only fixed when composed much later. In the meantime, following the model of T'fillah, the Toraic Mitzvah of Hallel is to sing praises to G-d at specific times and the words were composed and fixed at a later time in history.

Davidic composition of these psalms is by no means a matter of consensus, as the final Baraita demonstrates. Seven opinions as to the author(s) of these six psalms (which are consistently viewed as a unit, not only liturgically but also regarding the time and circumstances that motivated their composition) are presented - the first six in chronological order. Surprisingly, three of these opinions credit authors much later than David with the composition of these psalms- a matter we will address in the next section.

II

A BRIEF EXCURSUS REGARDING THE AUTHORSHIP OF T'HILLIM

Among the overall issues that any student of Sefer T'hilim must address is the problem of authorship. Although conventional wisdom holds that David was the sole author of T'hilim, the text belies this assumption in several ways. In addition, mainstream Rabbinic opinion, both in classical and medieval sources, deny David sole authorship of the work. The most famous (due to its accessibility) statement in this regard is found in the Bavli, at the end of the first chapter of Bava Batra which identifies the authors of the various books of the T'nakh:

David wrote the Book of Psalms, including in it the work of ten elders, namely, Adam, Malkizedek, Abraham, Mosheh, Heiman, Yedutun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korah.

The last six of these were the Levites who David appointed to oversee the singing in the Mikdash (see I Divrei haYamim 6:16-34) and whose names appear in the superscriptions of several psalms.

According to this approach, David was the final redactor of T'hilim, contributing his own psalms and adding them to a growing work of songs of praise, supplications etc. that had begun with creation itself.

This approach was adopted by many - but not all - rabbinic commentators. Sa'adiah Ga'on (892-942), for reasons that will be explored in a later installment, maintained that David alone was the author of all of Sefer T'hilim - and he is the only major figure among traditional commentators who grants David sole authorship.

The chronological range of opinions presented in the Baraita above demonstrates the lack of consensus in reference even to Davidic redaction - according to three opinions noted there, at least the six psalms of Hallel were composed later than David - as late as the Persian period (Mordechai and Esther - 5th century BCE - five centuries after the death of David).

One might argue that "recited" (Amaro) in the Baraita doesn't mean "composed", rather "instituted".

This argument is attractive, as it credits some earlier author (which might be David) with composition - in which case, the text remained extant until it was adopted by Hezekiah, Misha'el et al. or Mordekhai and Esther and inaugurated into use for thanksgiving after Divine redemption from danger.

This argument, however, does not stand the test of the text. Remember that the same word - "recited" is used to advance Mosaic and Yehoshuan origins. Would R. El'azar and R. Yehudah, then, argue that someone else composed the text before that time and it was adopted for use by Mosheh or Yehoshua, respectively? How would we then understand psalm 114 - ***B'Tzet Yisra'el MiMitzrayim?***
When was that composed?

Although we will investigate the issue in greater depth later on, there is both Midrashic evidence and Rabbinic opinions - both medieval and "contemporary" - that support post-Davidic contributions to T'hilim. The Midrash in Shir haShirim Rabbah 4:5 states:

...What is Talpiot (Shir haShirim 4:4)? A book written by many mouths (Piot) Ten men composed the book of T'hilim: Adam, Avraham, Mosheh, David, Sh'lomoh; regarding these five there is no disagreement. Who are the other five? Rav and R. Yohanan disagree: Rav maintains Asaph, Heiman, Yeduthun, the three sons of Korach and Ezra. R. Yohanan holds Asaph, Heiman, Yeduthun are one, the three sons of Korach are one and Ezra.

Note that the Midrash identifies - and, regarding this, there is no disagreement within this passage - the last contributor to T'hilim as Ezra, who lived some years after Mordekhai and Esther.

R. Moshe ibn Gikatilah (11th c. Spain), was a well-known and highly respected scholar, grammarian, philologist and preacher who composed a commentary on T'hilim in Arabic. This commentary, lost to the generations, was recently discovered in the Leningrad library (and has yet to be translated into Hebrew and published). We do have access to a significant number of his comments on T'hilim through the good devices of the commentary of R. Avraham ibn Ezra, who quotes him no fewer than fifty times throughout T'hilim.

Ibn Gikatilah maintains that T'hilim continued to be composed and added to the canon throughout the prophetic period - i.e. until Ezra's time. Note, for example, his suggestions regarding the composition of Ps. 137 and the last two verses of Ps. 51.

One of the leading figures in European Orthodoxy in the 19th century was R. Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel (1809-1879), - known by the acronym of his name, "Malbim". His comprehensive commentary on N'vi'im and K'tuvim is considered standard curriculum in most serious traditional schools.

In his introduction to T'hilim, Malbim argues that the composition of T'hilim continued well past the Davidic epoch, until the end of the period of prophecy.

Again, this general approach and each of these opinions will be analyzed in a later installment - suffice it to say that a straightforward reading of each of the opinions in Pesachim 117a does not present us with a conflict.

And now, we are prepared to begin our analysis of Pirkei Hallel haMitzri.

III

MIZMOR 113: THE TEXT

1. Halleluyah! Praise, O you servants of Hashem, praise the name of Hashem.
 2. Blessed be the name of Hashem from this time forth and for evermore.
 3. From sunrise to sunset Hashem's name is to be praised.
 4. Hashem is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens.
 5. Who is like Hashem our God, who dwells on high,
 6. Who looks far down to behold the things that are on heaven, and on the earth!
 7. He raises up the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap,
 8. That he may set him with nobles, with the nobles of his people.
 9. He gives the barren woman a home, and makes her a joyful mother of children.
- Halleluyah!

IV

VERSES AND STANZAS

Customarily, the first job of a student is to make sure that the words of the unit are clear. Our psalm is, for the most part, free of these difficulties, although we will briefly comment on several words later on. This allows us to move directly to the second step - identifying the structure of the psalm.

In most books of T"nakh (Eikhah is the greatest exception to this rule), the overall literary unit is not properly bounded by chapter divisions (a Christian intrusion into the text) nor, necessarily, by Masoretic Parashah divisions - some literary units are made up of several Parashiot and some Parashiot include multiple literary units (e.g. the entire Bal'am narrative). This is not the case in T"hillim, where the overall unit is made up of one psalm, usually bounded by some formulaic beginning (e.g. "Halleluyah", "Mizmor", the name of a Levitic singer etc.). Although this makes our job of identifying the boundaries of the unit easier - thus making proper understanding of the text more accessible - it does not free us of the obligation to further analyze the make up of the psalm.

Within a given psalm, there may be a number of "stanzas" - which do not correspond to verses. A stanza is usually made up of a number of verses and can be identified by all sorts of rhetorical tools which mark it off.

What are the stanzas in our psalm? Where does each one begin and end?

Although these questions may seem pedantic and trivial, running the risk of sterilizing the study of T'hillim, the opposite is true. Resolving the structure of the psalm will allow us to properly investigate the meaning that it aims to inculcate in the reader.

Our psalm is made up of nine verses; the first includes a "caption word" (Halleluyah) that is echoed in the "conclusion word" at the end. Generally, Haza"l did not reckon these words as part of the essential text.

The First "Bayit": Shem haShem

Looking at the text, we immediately note the repetition of a key phrase - **Shem haShem** - that appears three times within the first three verses (a quick check of a Concordance demonstrates that this is a very intensive level of repetition of this phrase). What is more surprising is that this phrase never shows up again in the psalm. We can easily identify the first stanza of the psalm as vv. 1-3, and note that **Shem haShem** is the theme of that stanza:

- 1) A call (from the leader to the assemblage) to praise **Shem haShem**.
- 2) The response - that **Shem haShem** should be praised at all times...
- 3) ...and in all places. ("sunrise" and "sunset" may be more properly rendered "east" [the location of its rising] to "west" [the location of its setting])

The Second Bayit: Rom'mut Hashem

Identifying the parameters of the second stanza will require a different tool - there is not word or phrase that repeats with unusual intensity here. There is, however, one constant theme in the next few verses which is exclusive to those verses.

- 4) G-d's "place", high above the nations, even above the heavens (more on this phrase below)
- 5) G-d needs to "lower Himself" to manifest Himself in the heavens... 6) and on earth.

It is quite clear that the theme of this stanza - a theme that disappears immediately after v. 6 - is the transcendence of G-d. There is no call to praise G-d (as in the first stanza), which attaches itself to Mankind (who praises), nor is there any mention of G-d's direct interaction with Mankind (as in the final verses) - this stanza is purely "about G-d".

The pregnant phrase: 'Al haShamayim has been disputed - does it mean that G-d's Presence is even above the heavens, or does the preposition 'Al mean "over" (see Radak), indicating not position but power. As Radak notes, these two verses may be rendered: "who rises to sit in the heavens and lowers Himself to see the doings on earth" - which would mean that Al haShamayim cannot mean

"higher than".

The Final Bayit: Hashem's "Modesty" The final stanza is easy to identify; the psalmist returns to the interaction between G-d and Man, but, as opposed to the first stanza, this one focuses on G-d's kindness to His creatures.

Even though the theme is sufficient to identify the boundaries of the stanza, there is a rhetorical device which is nearly unique, within the psalm, to this stanza. The first word in each of the final three verses ends with a poetic yod, which is not the pronominal suffix indicating first person singular:

- 7) He lifts up the destitute,
- 8) To sit with nobility,
- 9) Bringing gladness to the formerly barren woman

This section echoes, quite clearly, the sentiments expressed by Hannah (I Sh'mu'el 2:1-10, especially vv. 7-8); yet, unlike Hannah, it only focuses on G-d's resuscitative power.

The apposition of G-d's "lowering Himself" to earth against His raising up the impoverished should not be lost on the reader - G-d is high above, yet He lowers Himself, not to condescend or rule harshly - but to raise us up to sit with His nobles.

In sum, we have found that this opening psalm is made up of three stanzas, evenly meted out at three verses each. The first calls on the assemblage to praise G-d at all times and places, the second is the actual praise of G-d in His "nobility" and the final stanza praises G-d Who raises up the fallen and gladdens the despondent.

V

AN APPROPRIATE BEGINNING

As noted earlier, the "Great Hallel" is given that name because it juxtaposes G-d's great power with His sustaining of His creatures. We see that "Hallel Mitzrayim" begins with the same theme - G-d's greatness is not only a barrier to His involvement with our lives, it is the reason for that care and concern.

The psalm begins with a call to "the servants of Hashem"; as Haza"l point out (BT Megilah 14a), the implication is that this is addressed to those who are exclusively G-d's servants, and not enslaved to other servants (e.g. Pharaoh).

The many Midrashim which point to the critical role played by the women in Egypt - the women who believed, in spite of the terrible loss of their babies to the Nile, that we would be redeemed - serve to bond the final verses to the rest of Hallel. G-d lifts up the destitute nation of slaves, seating them

as nobility; He makes the formerly barren woman into the joyful mother of children -
Halleluyah!

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