

**A Reading of Psalm 118, the Most Important Psalm in the Hallel Service**  
**Rabbi Eliot Malomet Shabbat Hol Ha-Mo'ed Pesach April, 27, 2024 19 Nisan 5784**

We love Hallel. We love to sing the melodies together. There are probably more musical compositions for Hallel than any other part of Jewish liturgy. And while we love the experience of praying with song, we sometimes lose sight of the larger story that is going on within any of the Psalms that make up the Hallel. Liturgical habit will do that to us. Psalm 118, the Psalm that begins and ends with **הודו לה' כי טוב**, is the most liturgically active psalm in Hallel. On Sukkot we shake the lulav several times while chanting it. There are probably five or six popular congregational melodies within it; it could take fifteen minutes to sing it, if we sang every one of them! The first four lines are either sung in unison or as a call and response (customs vary). The **מְוַהֲמָצֵר** immediately calls to mind the familiar Carlebach melody. Whenever we sing the verses of Psalm 118 with their separate melodies, we lose sight of the Psalm as a complete unit. What if we looked at it with a fresh pair of eyes? What would we discover?

Let's start with the first four lines:

הודו לה' כי טוב כי לעולם חסדו:
<b>Praise the Lord, for He is good, forever is His kindness</b>
יאמרנא ישראל כי לעולם חסדו:
<b>Let Israel now say: forever is His kindness.</b>
יאמרונא בית-אהרן כי לעולם חסדו:
<b>Let the house of Aaron now say: forever is His kindness.</b>
יאמרונא יראי ה' כי לעולם חסדו:
<b>Let those who fear the Lord now say: forever is His kindness.</b>

Who is speaking here? Let's imagine, that we are at the Temple and that there is a group of Levites standing at the gates as pilgrims make their way up the stairs to offer their sacrifices of thanksgiving. It is a great pageant of people and song. The Levite gate-keepers call out to everyone within earshot -

ordinary Israelites, priests, God-fearers - to praise God. **Friends! Israelites! What a great moment this is!** And then, one person comes forward and says this:

מְוַהֲמָצֵר קראתי יה ענני במרחב יה:
<b>From the straits I called to Yah. Yah answered me in a wide-open place.</b>
ה' לי לא אירא מה-יעשה לי אדם:
<b>The Lord is for me, I shall not fear. What kind a man do to me?</b>
ה' לי בענני ואני אראה בשנאי:
<b>The Lord is for me among my helpers, and I shall see the defeat of my haters.</b>

What did this person experience? What are the **straits** to which he is referring? Could he have been in jail, in a cell of some

sort? These words sound very similar to the first words of Jonah's prayer: **קראתי מצרה לי אליה' - In my trouble I called to God**, and he of course, was confined in the belly of a big fish; when we read that this person has gone from the dire **straits** to **a wide-open place** we sense that he has experienced some kind of liberation. We often connect **מצר** to **מצרים** and understand this psalm as a psalm of national

liberation. But here, the context is limited to an individual. What's the story? **Conjecture:** Maybe this person was being held as a hostage for ransom. An **enemy**, a **hater**, was inflicting this suffering upon him. **In the depths** of this terrible experience, he turned to God and **he was rescued**. **Allies** came, **took him out of his confinement, and set him free**. And now he is approaching the Temple in thanksgiving, noting also that God **was with him in his terrible moment, and he never had anything to fear**. With his physical state restored, **he is assured that his tormentors will be punished by God**. The Temple singers respond with wisdom gained from this experience, wisdom that all of us can learn from:

טוב לחסות בה' מבטח באדם:
<b>Better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust people.</b>
טוב לחסות בה' מבטח בנדיבים:
<b>Better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.</b>

In other words, they are saying, **This survivor proves that God is a shelter. That when it comes to trust, God is the ultimate salvation. You**

**can't rely on ordinary people, and you can't rely on people in power. But you can rely on God.** To which we might add, you can also rely on God to inspire people, good people, to come to your aid.

And now, another individual appears before the gate-keepers:

כל-גוים סבבוני בשם ה' כי אמילם:
<b>All the nations surrounded me. With the Lord's name I cut them down.</b>
סבוני גם-סבבוני בשם ה' כי אמילם:
<b>They swarmed round me, oh they surrounded me. With the Lords' name I cut them down.</b>
סבוני כדבורים דעכו כאש קוצים בשם ה' כי אמילם:
<b>They swarmed round me like bees, burned out like a fire among thorns. With the Lord's name I cut them down.</b>
דחה דחיתני לנפל וה' עזרני:
<b>You pushed me hard to knock me down but the Lord helped me.</b>
עזי וזמרת יה ויהי-לי לישועה:
<b>My strength and my might is Yah, and He has become my rescue.</b>

What did this person experience? **Conjecture:** He was a warrior who found himself in the thick of battle surrounded by fierce **enemies** and he defeated them. He credits his victory to **God's name**. Did he utter God's name and miraculously defeat them? Or did he understand himself to be fighting in God's name, saving lives, and defending the innocent against the barbaric cruelty of his genocidal enemies? As a bearer of God's name, he trusted that he would ultimately prevail against their evil.

Again, the Temple gate-keepers respond:

קול ו רָגָה וישועה באהלי צדיקים ימיו ה' עשה חיל:
<i>A voice of glad song and rescue in the tents of the just: the Lord's right hand does valiantly.</i>
ימיו יהנה רוממה ימיו ה' עשה חיל:
<i>The Lord's right hand is raised, the Lord's right hand does valiantly.</i>

They affirm and validate his experience that God was the source of his salvation. That his cause was just, and that he has taken his rightful place in the tents of the righteous for having valiantly fought a just battle, presumably saving lives and defending others from harm. Now, a third speaker comes before the Temple gate-keepers:

לא־אָמוֹת כִּי־אָחִיָּה וְאֶסְפֹּר מַעֲשֵׂי יְהוָה:
<i>I shall not die but live and recount the deeds of Yah.</i>
יִסֵּר יִסְרוֹנִי יְהוָה וְלָמוֹת לֹא נִתְּנִי:
<i>Yah harshly chastised me but to death did not deliver me.</i>
פִּתְחוּ־לִי שַׁעֲרֵי־צֶדֶק אֲבֹא־בָם אוֹדָה יְהוָה:
<i>Open for me the gates of justice I would enter them, I would acclaim Yah.</i>

What is his story? **Conjecture:** Here is someone who experienced an illness so severe that he thought he was going to die. He thought God *punished* him. But having been spared of *death*, he wants to enter the Temple in gratitude. The gate-keepers affirm his transformation:

זֶה־הַשַּׁעַר לַיהוָה צְדִיקִים יָבֹאוּ בוֹ:
<i>This is the gate of the Lord the just will enter it.</i>

To which he responds with praise:

אוֹדָה כִּי עֲנִיתָנִי וְתִהְיֶ־לִי לִישׁוּעָה:
<i>I acclaim You for you have answered me, and you have become my rescue.</i>

*I have come here after having experienced my travail. I am here to thank God for being healed. I thank God that I am alive.* The next six verses are a chorus from the gate-keepers, welcoming these individuals into the Temple. Each of them has experienced some kind of turmoil. In their confinement, embattlement, or disease, they have been diminished. Life has damaged them, and they have felt humiliated and rejected. But now that they are restored, whole and free, the Temple gate-keepers convey to them their ultimate dignity: *You were once rejected, now you are at the beginning of the restoration of your lives. You were discarded, but now you are the foundation of something greater than yourself.* They are validated by the knowledge and faith that their restoration is from God and that God made everything happen for them to be there. *God made this day, and this day is not yours alone, it belongs to all of us. It behooves us all to celebrate and express our gratitude for you, with you. We pray now for everyone else, not here, to similarly experience salvation. We welcome you to the Temple and we welcome your offering*

*of thanksgiving in celebration with you for having reached this day.*

אָבֵן מֵאֲסוּ הַבּוֹנִים הָיְתָה לְרֹאשׁ פִּנֵּה:
<i>The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.</i>
מֵאֵת ה' הָיְתָה זֹאת הִיא נִפְלְאוֹת בְּעֵינֵינוּ:
<i>From the Lord did this come about it is wondrous in our eyes.</i>
זֶה־הַיּוֹם עָשָׂה ה' נִגִּילָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה בוֹ:
<i>This is the day that the Lord has made— let us exult and rejoice on it.</i>
אָנָּה ה' הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא אָנָּה ה' הַצְּלִיחָה נָּא:
<i>We beseech You, Lord, pray, rescue. We beseech You, Lord, make us prosper.</i>
כְּרוּךְ הַבָּא בְּשֵׁם ה' בְּרַכְּנוּכֶם מִבֵּית ה':
<i>May who comes in the name of the Lord; We bless you from the House of the Lord.</i>
אֵל וְיֵאָר לָנוּ אֲסוּרֵי־חַג בַּעֲבַתֵּימ עַד־קַרְנוֹת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ:
<i>The Lord is God; and He shine upon us. bind the festive offering with ropes all the way to the horns of the altar.</i>

Now each individual says this as a personal affirmation of their deliverance:

אֵלֵי אַתָּה וְאוֹדָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲרוּמָמְךָ:
<i>You are my God and I will praise You; My God and I will extol You.</i>

To which everyone responds:

הוֹדוּ לַיהוָה כִּי־טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ:
<i>Praise the LORD for He is good, forever is His kindness.</i>

The gate-keepers and the pilgrims recite this line together, ending this psalm as it began. The three redeemed individuals have entered the Temple and join the chorus of all those who praise God for God's everlasting kindness in saving people. While many may disagree with this reading, the goal here is to refresh our appreciation of this psalm. We sing it so often, we miss its meaning for the melodies. Certainly, we resonate with individual verses. But when we imagine this psalm outside its liturgical place in the Hallel, what we have is an amazing story, a story of individuals who have experienced some of life's most difficult challenges: conflict, war, and disease. Whether literally and metaphorically, they survived and lived to tell others about it, and express their gratitude at the Temple. The people minding the gates are there to welcome them and honor them for all that they have gone through, and all that they are yet to become. By their example, they inspire us to hope that God will lift us all up from whatever difficulties and challenges that we may currently face, as individuals, and as a people.

**Day 204. May the hostages be released from their bondage during this Festival of Freedom. God shield and protect Israel!**

*Shabbat Shalom! Mo'adim Le-Simha!*