

## Two Hallel

### I.

*Chazal* designated two texts in Psalms as *Hallel*, songs of praise. Best known is *Hallel Ha-Mitzri*, the Egyptian *Hallel*, comprising chapters 113–118. It is so named because Psalm 114 (“When Israel left Egypt”) refers to the Exodus. This *Hallel* is recited on festive occasions: in full or partial form it follows the *Shacharit Amidah* on most holidays, on Chanukah, and on Rosh Chodesh; it is also recited as part of the *Seder* and, by most, after *Ma’ariv* on the *Seder* nights.

There are different opinions about the extent of *Hallel Ha-Gadol*, the “great *Hallel*” (see *Pesachim* 118a). On one view it begins with Psalm 134 and continues through Psalm 136. Psalm 134 is a short invitation to praise, addressed to the servants of God who stand in the House of God in the night. Psalm 135 presents the song of praise of the servants of God who dwell in the House of God. For purposes of literary analysis it is significant that Psalms 135 and 136 cover the same ground. They survey, in fairly similar language, God’s acts, beginning with creation and listing the great series of Divine interventions in the history of Israel. The accepted view limits it to Psalm 136. Note that the consequence of adopting this position is omitting the theme of the Temple in Psalm 134 and in the opening part of 135.

Psalm 135:14–18 contains additional verses about the futility of the idols worshipped by the nations. As we shall see, the passages on idol worship resemble *Hallel Ha-Mitzri*, particularly chapter 115. The psalm concludes with a call to bless God, addressed to Israel, then to the house of Levi, then to the fearers of God, and is finally enacted: “Blessed is God who dwells in Zion”; this call is reminiscent of the opening of Psalm 118 is *Hallel Ha-Mitzri*.

Psalm 136 consists of twenty-six items of praise, seconded by the refrain *ki le-olam chasdo*, “His lovingkindness is everlasting.” This refrain, too, appears in *Hallel Ha-Mitzri* (118:1–4) where the invitation to bless God is extended four times: in general, and then to Israel, to the house of Aaron, and to the fearers of God.

*Hallel Ha-Gadol* plays three roles in the liturgy. When a public fast is called due to a prolonged drought and rain falls immediately, the day is transformed into a day of feasting and is celebrated through recital of *Hallel Ha-Gadol* (see *Tosefta Ta’anit* ch. 2 and *Gemara Ta’anit* 19 and 26). During the *Seder*, the meal is followed by the completion of *Hallel Ha-Mitzri* and then *Hallel Ha-Gadol*. Lastly we include Psalms 135 and 136 in the *Pesukei De-Zimrah* for Shabbat and holidays. Recital of *Hallel Ha-Mitzri* is assigned to those festivals marked by abstention from work, plus Chanukah, which commemorates redemption from the Hellenistic-Seleucid persecution, and other episodes of redemption from troubles.<sup>290</sup>

R. Yochanan (*Pesachim* 118a) explains why *Hallel Ha-Gadol* is called the “great” *Hallel*. It is because God’s providing sustenance for all creatures is great: according to Rashbam this view takes the penultimate verse of the chapter as determinative of its message – “He who gives bread to all flesh.” R. Yehoshua b. Levi adds that the number 26 signifies the twenty-six generations from Adam until the giving of the Torah: these generations were not sustained by their own service to God but through His *chesed*. R. Chisda comments on the word *tov* (good) in the phrase “Thank God for it is good,” meaning that God sustains each creature according to its particular endowments.

If Psalm 136 is indeed so great, asks the Talmud, why did the *Halakhah* not decide that one should read it rather than *Hallel Ha-Mitzri*? Because of the following five themes: the Exodus from Egypt (114:1); the parting of the sea (114:2); the giving of the Torah (“the mountains danced like rams” – 114:4); resurrection (“I will walk before God in the lands of the living” 116:9); and the travails of the Messianic age (115). Other *amora’im* either refine these themes or expand upon them.

To summarize this discussion: Regarding *Hallel Ha-Gadol*, *Chazal* emphasize the universal themes. God provides graciously for the world, not only for Israel. God manifests His concern in the natural sustenance of the universe. *Hallel Ha-Mitzri*, by contrast, highlights God’s intervention in the story of the Jewish people and in the eschatological redemption of history.

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<sup>290</sup>. On whether *Hallel Ha-Mitzri* is a biblical obligation, see Rambam and Ra’avad *Hilkhos Chanukah* 3:6 and Ramban’s notes to Rambam’s *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, First Principle; also see *Sha’agat Aryeh*, section 69. Recitation on Rosh Chodesh is a secondary custom.

## II.

Offhand the *gemara's* determination, that *Hallel Ha-Mitzri* is historical, and *Hallel Ha-Gadol* is not, is puzzling. Many incidents in Jewish history are mentioned in Psalm 136 – of the twenty-six verses, fifteen mention historical events; the same is true of 135, with five verses on the Exodus and its aftermath. Both Psalms 135 and 136 refer to persecution and to Divine rescue. Thus history, if anything, is more conspicuous here than in *Hallel Ha-Mitzri*.

There are additional differences between the Hallel, that were not remarked by *Chazal*, but which nevertheless help to disclose the underlying structures discerned by *Chazal*. *Hallel Ha-Mitzri*, on careful examination, is not a scene of pure praise. It is full of petitions. The speaker in this *Hallel* is surrounded by enemies; he is in distress. So desperate is he that he must plead for Divine intervention, using the argument familiar from *Ha'azinu* (*Devarim* 32) and elsewhere in the Bible to the effect that God must save us, not for our own merit, but for the honor of His Name: “Not for us, but for Your Name give honor (115:1).” *Hallel Ha-Mitzri* repeatedly depicts Divine intervention as the overcoming of human opposition. The salvation of the speaker is the occasion of converting onlookers to recognition of God.<sup>291</sup>

There is nothing of this sense of conflict and distress in *Hallel Ha-Gadol*, neither in Psalm 136 nor in its twin *Mizmor* 135. God's providence is not a response to prayer, nor is it portrayed as overturning the designs of enemies and adversaries.

It seems to me that this deep difference between the two Hallel, underlies their different functions. God's intervention in human history is inevitably associated with the defeat of human resistance. The redemption of human history must be punctuated by recognition of God's sovereignty by those who had previously opposed it: “Praise God all the nations” (117:1). *Hallel Ha-Gadol* speaks of God's grandeur, including His triumphs in human history, but it does not depict the very real conflict and pain and distress that precede His acts, nor does it devote attention to the opposition of adversaries.

The difference in tone is evident not only in the overall content of the two Hallel. It is manifest in the details, even where the differences appear to be minor.

Take, for example, the ways idolatry is presented. Chapter 115 in *Hallel Ha-Mitzri*, as noted, begins with a sense of despair: we beseech God to act for His name, if not for our sake: “Why should the nations say ‘where is their God?’” After this opening, we declare the gods of the nations to be mere human artifacts of gold and silver: “They have a mouth but do not speak; they have eyes but do not see; they have ears but do not hear; they have a nose (*af*) but do not smell. Their hands do not feel; their feet do not walk; they do not articulate with their throats” (5:7). The negation of the gods and those who worship them is followed by a call to Israel to rely on God, and several verses declaring God's blessing of Israel.

The passage strikingly resembles Psalm 135 14–21, that precedes *Hallel Ha-Gadol* and is linked to it in content and style. Note, however, the differences: in Psalm 135, the passage about the idols begins by quoting *Devarim* 32:37: “When God takes the part of His people...” Whereas in *Devarim* the Torah goes on to describe the almost hopeless situation that precedes God's intervention, an act that is explicitly ascribed to concern for His Name, in Psalm 135 God's intervention is merely gestured at through the allusion, without in any way depicting the desperate circumstances. The psalmist continues as in *Hallel Ha-Mitzri*: “They have a mouth but do not speak; they have eyes but do not see; they have ears but do not hear; nor even is there breath in their mouths (*af ein yesh ru'ah be-pihem*).” And the chapter ends, not with a proclamation of God's blessing, but with a call to Israel to bless God.

In both poems the “organ recital” of the idols begins with the dumb mouth, the unseeing eyes, the unhearing ears. Where *Hallel Ha-Mitzri* goes on to include their nose, hands, feet, and throat, *Hallel Ha-Gadol* denies them respiration. The point of divergence is highlighted by a play on the word *af*: in chapter 115 it means “nose”; in 135 it means “even.” It is as if the speaker began to cite 115 and then, upon reaching the nostrils, chose to veer away from his model by changing the meaning of the word *af*.<sup>292</sup>

This alteration of the list is more than merely an exercise in punning. The change redefines the entire purpose of the catalogue. In *Hallel Ha-Mitzri* we declare that the idols have no power. That is what is meant by saying that their eyes do not see, their noses do not smell, their hands do not grope, and their feet do not walk: they are incapable of

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<sup>291</sup>. It is not accidental that the *sugyah* in *Pesachim* 118 identifies the scenarios for this *Hallel* with Israel at *Yam Suf* or the three Jews cast into the fiery furnace in *Daniel* 3.

<sup>292</sup>. The fact that Psalm 135 is punning on Psalm 115 implies that it was composed later. As Ramban pointed out, even if *Hallel Ha-Mitzri* is a biblical commandment, as he holds, this does not imply that the particular text we use was available at the time of Moshe but it is nevertheless consistent with the antiquity of this *Hallel*. In any event, as I argue here, the relative dating can be inferred from the pun. In *Yerushalmi Pesachim* 5:7, Bar Kappara holds that *Hallel Ha-Mitzri* provides the text for the rain celebration as well. Offhand, as we demonstrated, Psalm 136 is more appropriate for that occasion. Perhaps, because *Hallel Ha-Mitzri* came first and was established first, he believed that it was adopted and became entrenched for all situations.

doing anything. The contrast is with the true God who acts, whose actions are effective, and whose blessing is a genuine blessing. In *Hallel Ha-Gadol*, our purpose is not to assert that the false gods have no power, but that they have no being, as symbolized by their lack of animation – “there is no breath in their mouth”; it is unnecessary to continue with the hands and feet that represent the ability to act.<sup>293</sup>

In a word, *Hallel Ha-Mitzri* is the *Hallel* of entreaty; it is a song of praise that is also a call for redemption. For that reason it is especially suited to the celebration of holidays in the *Mikdash*, commemorating the first liberation from Egypt and looking forward to the Messianic redemption, or upon salvation from distress. *Hallel Ha-Gadol* is the praise that arises from satisfaction with what God has provided. It is likewise appropriate for occasions of joy which are not associated with overcoming adversity, like the *Hallel* of thanksgiving for rain or the full stomach of the Passover *Seder*.<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>293</sup>. The first catalogue of actions the idols cannot perform appears in *Devarim* 4:28: “Gods made by man, wood and stone that do not see or hear or eat or smell.” In this verse, the emphasis is not on the futility of the idols but on their unsuitability as objects of worship. *Devarim* is thus a warning about the consequences of exile, while *Psalms* is a satire. That is why seeing and hearing are joined by eating and smelling, the point being the futility of serving idols through sacrificial cult. Eating drops out in *Psalms*.

<sup>294</sup>. One prominent element that appears in both series of *Psalms* was in effect removed by *Chazal* from *Hallel Ha-Gadol*. I refer to the setting of the *mizmorim* in the Temple. Had the *Halakhah* begun *Hallel Ha-Gadol* with Psalm 134 or even with 135, it would have preserved the context of those *Psalms* as a celebration in the *Mikdash* in which various groups within Israel and among the Gentiles are invited to praise God. Since we use only Psalm 136, all that remains of this idea is the phrase *ki le-olam chasdo* (“for His *chesed* is everlasting”). Thus the version of *Hallel Ha-Gadol* that became normative for the liturgical role of the *Psalms* worked to underplay the eschatological call for the universal recognition of God. This magnifies the differences already present in the biblical text itself.