

Is Yom Haatzmaut Worth a Hallel?⁸⁴

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Michlelet Mevaseret Yerushalayim

It is one of the most significant and hotly debated issues today: How should we understand our stage in history? Is it the beginning of the redemption? To put it slightly differently, is there cause to say Hallel on Yom Haatzmaut or not?⁸⁵ The answer, as we will see, has important and far-reaching implications for our personal lives, as well as for our national self-understanding, that even go beyond questions pertaining to the Land and State of Israel.

Let us begin by defining the question precisely. In order to do so, we need to make a number of preliminary observations.

Despite the numerous points of disagreement within the Jewish community relating to the State of Israel, and the great diversity and range of points of view regarding the current situation in Israel, there are two points which one cannot reasonably dispute:

The first is that there have been incredible and unprecedented⁸⁶ miracles, salvations and achievements. Who can honestly deny that so many prophecies, dreams and prayers of millennium have finally been realized?⁸⁷

The second is that there is yet so far to go, so much that is still critically wrong. Jews disagree as to what the correct solutions are, and even as to how we ought to formulate the problems, but we all recognize that there is much that needs to be rectified. Similarly, we all realize that we face many existential threats (from within and without).

⁸⁴ This essay is a modified excerpt from the soon to be published, B"H, *Amittah Shel Torah* Part II: Insights into the cycle of the year.

⁸⁵ The discussion here is hashkafic rather than halachic. It focuses on whether there is reason to say Hallel, in principle- not on its technical feasibility. While the two issues are interrelated, they are, nonetheless, distinct. In terms of Halachah, see the definitive discussion of Hagaon Rav Meshulam Rothe, zt"l, Responsa *Kol Mevaser* (1:21). See also *Pesachim* (117a) and the *Sheiltot, Parshat Vayishlach* (§26). [It is very hard to fathom why the suggestion that there is a halachic problem based on *Shabbat* (118b) is taken seriously by anyone who has learned the *sugya* with the *Rishonim*, but that is beyond the scope of this article].

⁸⁶ To mention the most obvious example: Jews have immigrated en masse to Israel from all over the globe for the first time in all of history. This is a clear and unique fulfillment of Biblical prophecies and Jewish prayers of millennium.

⁸⁷ See e.g. Hagaon Rav Menachem Kasher zt"l's seminal discussion of our era through the prism of Torah in *Hatekufah Hagedolah*.

The question then is this: In a situation such as ours, where there is so much good and at the same time so much that is not, how are we to respond? Is progress as incomplete and fragile as we enjoy cause for *shevach v'hallel*? Can it be termed redemption? This is the issue that all serious Torah Jews of today must struggle with. How does the Torah teach us to respond to our situation?

Let us examine some pertinent sources, starting with the famous (although not usually properly understood) Yerushalmi in *Yoma* (chap. III) that compares the redemption to dawn:

A narrative: R. Chiyah the great and R. Shimon b. Chlaftah were walking in the valley of Arabel at the end of the night. They saw dawn breaking. R. Chiyah the great said to R. Shimon b. Chlaftah: "Great one! Such is the redemption of Israel. In the beginning it is a bit at a time, but as it goes on it becomes brighter and brighter." What is the basis for this? "Even as I sit in darkness, Hashem is a light for me." So too, originally, "and Mordechai was sitting in the palace gate". Then, "and Mordechai returned to the palace gate". Then, "and Haman took the garments and the horse". And then, "and Mordechai left the king's presence in royal trappings". And then, "and the Jews had light and joy".

דלמא רבי חייא רובא ורבי שמעון בן חלפתא הוו מהלכין בהדא בקעת ארבל בקריצתה ראו אילת השחר שבקע אורה אמר רבי חייא רובה לרבי שמעון בן חלפת' בר ר' כך היא גאולתן של ישראל בתחילה קימעא קימעא כל שהיא הולכת היא הולכת ומאיר מאי טעמא כי אשב בחושך ה' אור לי כך בתחילה ומרדכי יושב בשער המלך ואחר כך וישב מרדכי אל שער המלך ואחר כך ויקח המן את הלבוש ואת הסוס וגו' ואח' כך ומרדכי יצא מלפני המלך בלבוש מלכות ואחר כך ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה:

This famous source is often understood as merely teaching us that the redemption will occur in stages. While this is true, it not the essential point. Let us examine the text, one dimension at a time.

First, the analogy: At the crack of dawn there is barely more light than during the night. A subtle difference separates the two sides of dawn, the night that precedes it and the day that follows. And yet, the Halachah rules that they are entirely different. The fact that immediately following dawn it is still mostly dark does not alter the fact that it is defined as day.

The critical point is not that the light of day appears slowly and in stages. It is the fact that the Torah defines it as day, though darkness is still the majority. This has major implications, Chazal teach us, for how we are to view the early stages of redemption.

This is echoed by the Yerushalmi's paradigm for redemption, namely the story of Purim. Most of the Yerushalmi's stages of redemption reflect a situation of extreme danger and crisis. When Mordechai was sitting in the gates of the palace, the threat of extermination was at its zenith. Nonetheless, it is called redemption! This is the precise parallel to the Yerushalmi's point about dawn.

The final aspect of the Yerushalmi dovetails perfectly with the other two. The proof text upon which the entire Yerushalmi rests tells us that although we may be sitting immersed in darkness, the light (redemption) that Hashem has given us is truly light. We are not permitted to ignore the light, despite the abundance of darkness.

The “*Dayeinu*” section of the Haggadah consists of a long list of statements declaring that were God to have done X and not Y, “it would have been enough”. It is clear that each X is insufficient (physically or spiritually), indeed meaningless, without the Y’s that follow. And yet, we state that “it would have been enough”!

How would being taken out of Egypt have been sufficient for us, had we perished at the bank of the Reed Sea? Would we have really benefited from the splitting of the sea had the Egyptians followed us across and massacred us on the other side? Each line of this famous song poses the same sort of difficulty.

The answer lies in the introduction:

How many wonderful steps do we need to be thankful to God for. | כמה מעלות טובות למקום עלינו

The redemption is a ladder, made up of small steps. Standing on any given rung, it is possible to think that there is no significance to one’s ascent up to that point. What good does it do to be on the third rung of a fifty step ladder? When we are taken out of Egypt, is there truly redemption yet? After all, what we’ve gained is worthless so long as the Egyptian army is following and the sea looms ahead.

This is not the Torah’s approach. It is this that the *Dayeinu* negates. There is no doubt that the third step is valuable only as a means of reaching the top, yet in so far as it allows one to stride in the right direction it must be appreciated. The importance of each phase of the Exodus is not diminished by the long road ahead that remains.

Despite the many critical steps ahead, each stage in the redemption is sufficient to obligate us in *shevach v’hodah*. We celebrate the earliest stages of the redemption from Egypt on Pesach, despite how much is yet lacking- physically and spiritually.

This is clear from the text of Hallel itself. In the midst of praise and thanksgiving, we cry out:

Please Hashem save us! Please Hashem make us successful! | אָנָּה ה' הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא, אָנָּה ה' הַצְּלִיחָה נָּא.

The implication is quite powerful. Even though we are yet in need of assistance, even rescue, we are nonetheless engaged in the singing of Hallel! Thus, the very text of Hallel reflects the perspective that we developed above. This is a crucial perspective on how we ought to view events in our lives- both individually and nationally!

Rav Saadia Gaon points out (in the introduction to his commentary on Daniel) that the period of the second Temple was not a negation of the first destruction. It was merely a mitigation of the exile- not its termination. The Abravanel⁸⁸ explains that the return to Israel in the days of Ezra and Nechemiah and the rebuilding of the Temple was an opportunity for the Jewish People to build on what was given to them, and thereby bring about a full redemption.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ See his commentary on Yirmiyahu (chapter 29), *passim*:

⁸⁹ This, he notes, is the meaning of the prophecy of Yirmiyahu (29:10-13):

(י) כִּי כֹה אָמַר ה' כִּי לִפִּי מְלֵאת לְבַבְךָ שִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה אֶפְקֵד אֶתְכֶם וְהִקְמַתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם אֶת דְּבַרֵּי הַטּוֹב לְהָשִׁיב אֶתְכֶם אֶל הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה:

Tragically, it was an opportunity that we squandered⁹⁰. The Talmud in *Sanhedrin* (94a) teaches an incredible lesson that is very relevant to our discussion:

The Holy One blessed be He, wished to make Chizkiyahu the Messiah, and Nebuchadnezzar Gog and Magog. The attribute of justice said before him, "Master of the universe! If you did not make David the Messiah, despite all of the praises and hymns that he said before you, are you going to make Chizkiyahu the Messiah, when you did all of these miracles for him, and he didn't sing your praises?! Therefore it [the letter mem] is closed... It was taught in the name of R. Papayus: It is a disgrace for Chizkiyahu and his group that they did not sing Hahsem's praises until the Earth opened up and did so on their behalf...

ביקש הקדוש ברוך הוא לעשות
חזקיהו משיח, וסנחריב גוג ומגוג.
אמרה מדת הדין לפני הקדוש ברוך
הוא: רבוננו של עולם! ומה דוד מלך
ישראל שאמר כמה שירות ותשבחות
לפניך - לא עשיתו משיח, חזקיה
שעשית לו כל הנסים הללו ולא אמר
שירה לפניך - תעשהו משיח? לכך
נסתתם... תנא משום רבי פפיס: גנאי
הוא לחזקיה וסייעתו שלא אמרו
שירה, עד שפתחה הארץ ואמרה
... שירה

These sources provide a major lesson for us: When we are given even a glimmer of redemption, it is up to us to develop the potential that is latent in that fledgling redemption. We do this by responding with Hallel and thereby showing that we value the redemption that God has given us. If we fail to do so, God forbid, we then lose that potential- as we did in the days of Chizkiyahu and the era of the second Temple.

(יא) כי אנכי ידעתי את המחשבת אשר אנכי חשב עליכם נאם ה' מחשבות שלום ולא לרעה לתת לכם אחרית ותקוה: (יב) וקראתם אתי והלכתם והתפללתם אלי ושמעתי אליכם: (יג) ובקשתם אתי ומצאתם כי תדרשני בכל לבבכם:

10 So says Hashem, after seventy years of Babylonia, I will remember you, and fulfill my promise to you, by bringing you back to this place. **11** For I know my intentions towards you, says Hashem, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. **12** And if you call to me, and go, and pray to me, I will listen to you. **13** And if you seek me, you will find me, when you search for me with all your heart.

⁹⁰ As noted by the *Kuzari* (II:24) and others.