

Pesach

Giving Thanks: the Challenge of Saying Hallel During Difficult Times

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"I think you'd better come home. Your dad is in the hospital." It was two days before Pesach, and my mom was calling to let me know that my father was admitted into the hospital, and that as the eldest, she needed me to help hold down the home front while she tended to my dad. He would probably be there through Pesach, most likely with her at his side. My heart sunk. My father suffers from type II diabetes, and his kidneys had been deteriorating at an alarming rate. He was on the precipice of being tested to be put on the organ donor list, and this hospitalization would delay that process. After years of illness, the hope of transplant and better health seemed like a light at the end of the tunnel, but one that was now further off. Uncertain about what the future held for him, I was anxious about what our sederim would be like without him, and most likely for my mother as she would be with him. Was this a foreshadowing of future hagim, as his health worsened?

As the days wore on, I went through the motions of preparing for Pesach, but my heart was not in it. I felt troubled, fear of what the future would bring. Would it be the same on Pesach? I couldn't imagine reciting the haggadah, singing hallel, with a troubled heart. **How do you say hallel when fear and sadness eclipse one's sense of gratitude?**

More than any other holiday, hallel defines the first days of Pesach. The Syrian tradition that I grew up with was to recite hallel at night in the synagogue, after arbit, for a grand total of three hallels the first day¹ (second being at the seder, the third the next morning in synagogue). I had always loved how luxurious it felt to rush all day erev Pesach, only to sing a full hallel in synagogue before heading home for the seder. Each year, I would eagerly make my way to the synagogue after a full day of preparations, to join with the kahal in ushering in our first hallel in the Jewish holiday of Pesach. Would God understand if this year, I might not be able to muster the proper spirit?

The Gemara in Yoma² raises a similar question on a deeper theological level. Moshe had praised God as "hagadol, hagibor v'hanora", as "the Great, Mighty and Awesome", yet the Gemara relates that the prophets Yirmiyahu and Daniel had each left off one of those appellations in describing God, because of the harsh realities around them. Yirmiyahu, witnessing the pillaging and destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, God's glorious Temple, could not describe God as awesome. Daniel, living in exile, saw persecution at the hands of a foreign power, and could not describe God as mighty. Yet, how could they have done this, the Gemara asks, and uprooted the tradition that Moshe established in praising God? Rabbi Elazar offered a reply: Because they know that the Holy Blessed One is a God of truth, they could not lie to Him. Yet, the Anshe Knesset Hagedolah, the "Men of the Great Assembly" who established the liturgy, returned God's full regalia to our daily prayers.

No matter what is going on in the world, or in our lives, three times a day we recite those praises. This internal dilemma manifests in every religious or spiritual person at some point in their lives, with varying intensity, depending on the gravity of the crisis. Reflecting on this phenomenon, I turned to the Aish Kodesh, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, for insight, as someone who faced a crisis of unimaginable proportions during the Holocaust, personally and as the rabbi of a community in the Warsaw Ghetto. He is best known for the weekly sermons he gave his students for the four years he was in the Warsaw Ghetto, before being transported to death camps and murdered in 1943. As the days of the Ghetto came to a close, Rabbi Shapira hid these writings in a canister, and placed them in the Ghetto walls. They were discovered after the war, and posthumously published

¹ Shulhan Arukh 487(2) and the Remo there for the Ashkenazi custom not to recite hallel. See Yehave Da'at V:34, indicates that this practice is an obligation for women as well, in addition to the hallel at the seder, as it is included in the principle of "af hen hayu b'oto hanes" -The women, too, were included in the miracle. He notes, there, that the Nodeh B'Yehuda took this practice upon himself, and that it is an appropriate custom for Ashkenazim to take on privately, if their congregation follows the custom of the Remo not to say hallel before the seder.

² Yoma 69b

under the title *Aish Kodesh*, “Holy Fire. In these sermons, he faced head on the uncertainty and fear which gripped the Jews of Europe, each year more and more as the war escalated and with it, suffering and loss. The Aish Kodesh sought to inspire, to give Jewish language to their experiences. In April of 1939, on Erev Pesah, he sent out a letter to his community to spiritually prepare them to celebrate Pesah, with war threatening on the horizon. He wrote:

When the time comes for the Pesach evening Ma’ariv prayer, you should rejoice in your tremendous fortune, in the great privilege you have to be engaged in the Avodah of Pesach. You should say to yourself, “My joy is without bounds that I have been granted the opportunity to achieve my purpose in the world and to be elevated to the upper spheres. True I have my problems, both material and spiritual, but for now I discard them, the entire world is longer important to me....My only thought is to praise and glorify his great name and to draw down the Holy splendor of HKB”H’s light into the world, into my own soul and into the souls of my family....he is imbued with such holiness that he is replete with sorrow when he finishes each word; if only he could go back and recite the Hallel another 1000 times, he would do so. His whole being is at one with his Creator as he recites words of incredible sweetness; the Haggadah lying open in front of him. One must endeavor to provide sanctuary for the holiness of this night, so that it will abide by him for the whole year.”³
(The full text can be found in another compilation of his writings, Derekh HaMelekh)

How does one stir up that sense of gratitude? Where do you begin, when coming from a place of sorrow? The Aish Kodesh continues, “Light is like a seedling; at the beginning it requires our nurturing and our efforts to foster its growth.” One must dig deep to find a kernel of light, a spark of grace, which, when fostered, can allow a person to transcend their troubles.

Dayenu offers one model for cultivating gratitude. I was always confused by dayenu, since I was old enough to understand beyond the catchy tune. Would it really have been enough? To be saved from slavery only to be drowned in the sea; to be led into the wilderness from slavery, only to die of starvation? Dayenu encourages us to change our perspective, to be thankful for all that we have, each step of the way, even when we are uncertain where it will lead us⁴. Shehehiyanu, which we say to mark all celebratory festivals and life cycle events, also captures this idea to be thankful for the very opportunity to experience this moment.

Two years later, things have come full circle. That Pesah was challenging for my family, finding hope and faith that things would work out. This experience taught me how to gain perspective and develop a deeper sense of gratitude for what I have. We are so blessed, that shortly following that very Pesah, my youngest brother tested as a match, and several months later, donated a kidney to our father. Pesachim sedarim will never be the same.



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³ Translation attributed to a post by Rabbi Binyomin Gidon HaLevi Kelsen, Esq. on Cross-Currents, April 17, 2011

⁴ Interestingly, Dayenu contrasts with the Israelites response in real-time (see Shemot 14:11- “hamibli ein kevarim b’mitzrayim, “Where there not enough graves in Egypt?!”; Bamidbar 11:5-6-Nostalgia for the food in Egypt, as opposed to the miraculous manna provided by God.