

Pesach

Psalm 114: The Maggid Ends, The Earth Trembles

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When we sing the poeticized order of the seder at the beginning of the night, we are led to believe that Maggid and Hallel are separated by eight other elements of the seder. In truth, the last paragraphs of the Maggid are themselves the first paragraphs of the Hallel, which is then put on pause as we say the blessing to close the Maggid and begin to eat, first the obligatory and symbolic foods of the night, and then a full meal. At the close of the meal, after Barech, we continue the Hallel— now well fed and sleepy.

These overlapping moments between the Maggid and the Hallel have been the subject of much discussion, dating back to the arguments between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. This debate appears in the Mishnah, but a more extended version is found in the Tosefta:

Tosefta Pesachim 10:9

How much does he recite [before the meal]? Beit Shammai said until “the mother of sons rejoices” (Psalm 113) and Beit Hillel says until “the flint into a spring of water” (Psalm 114) and then you finish with the blessing of “redemption”.

Beit Shammai said to Beit Hillel: had they gone out of Egypt yet, that you are commemorating the Exodus?

Beit Hillel responded: Even if he waited until the crowing of the rooster, they didn't leave Egypt until the sixth hour of the day! By your logic, how could they make a blessing of “redemption” if they were not yet redeemed?

תוספתא מסכת פסחים (ליברמן) י:ט
עד היכן הוא אומר?

בית שמיי או' עד אם הבנים שמחה
ובית הלל אומר' עד חלמיש למעינו מים וחותם בגאולה

אמרו בית שמיי לבית הלל וכי כבר יצאו שמזכירין
יציאת מצרים

אמרו להם בית הלל אפילו הוא ממתין עד קרות
הגבר הרי אילו לא יצאו עד שש שעות ביום היאך
אומר את הגאולה ועדין לא נגאלו

Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel agree that some amount of Hallel should be recited before the meal. Many different reasons have been given for why we do this. Most compellingly, in my opinion, the Maharal suggests in *Gevurot Hashem* (5:62) that we recite some Hallel before the meal and some after because then we are truly saying Hallel on and around the consumption of the Korban Pesach (in the times of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, when the Temple stood) and the Matzo (today). The Maharal writes:

If we had only said the Hallel before or after, it would not be apparent that the Hallel is on the consumption of the Pesach.

אילו היה לפנינו או אחריו הכל לא היה נראה שההלל הוא
על הפסח.

But how do we decide how much Hallel to say before the meal? This is the debate of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. Dr. Joseph Tabory in The JPS Commentary on the Haggadah writes:

There was a fundamental difference between the houses in the understanding of the paschal meal. The Shammaites assumed that the meal was not a celebration of the Exodus but rather a reenactment of the first paschal meal. The Hillelites answered that the Shammaites were being inconsistent. According to their reasoning, they should not recite the blessing of redemption either (p.48).

Beit Hillel, in these arguments, takes hold of the shape of the seder. We are not reenacting the night of the Passover in all of its details; we are celebrating it. Our celebration needs to feel personal and relevant, but our Maggid is a telling of the complete story, through to the end – even if, according to the original timing, the Israelites would not have left yet. And when we tell that complete story, it concludes in a particular way, with Psalm 114. What makes Psalm 114 the proper culmination of the Maggid?

Famously, Rav Hai Gaon describes the Hallel of the whole night as song – “בתורת אומר שירה.” The Ran uses this articulation as a way of justifying the division of Hallel on the seder night (Ran on the Rif Pesachim 26b). This is not your standard Hallel, this is a Hallel of Song, and the rules are different. Rabbi Yitzchok Zev HaLevi Soloveitchik ztz”l writes that the Hallel of Song is the Hallel of someone who has personally undergone a miraculous redemption (חידושי מרן רי”ז הלוי חנוכה פרק ג) (הלכה ו). By the end of the Maggid, even though we are not reliving the Exodus to the minute as Beit Shammai might have liked, we have experienced a full redemption, and we are singing out our Hallel as a semi-spontaneous praise that simply cannot wait until after the meal. But still, we are left to wonder why it is that our song takes the particular form of Psalm 114.

For Jews who grew up with a traditional liturgy, the liturgical words that roll off the tongue are sometimes the most foreign when it comes to their meaning. So let us review Psalm 114. The Psalmist tells us that when Israel left Egypt, Judah became Hashem’s special one and Hashem ruled over Israel. When that happened, the sea fled, the Jordan turned back, and the mountains and the hills began to skip. The Psalmist asks the sea and the river and the mountains and the hills about the cause for their actions-- and they respond that they are trembling at the revealed presence of the Lord, who brought water out of the rock. The Psalm seems to read the story of water pouring out of the rock not only as a retelling of one of the many miracles wrought in the desert, but also as a metaphor for the Exodus, with the rock being Egypt and the water being the Israelites.

Psalm 114 (NJPS, trans)

- 1 When Israel went forth from Egypt,
the house of Jacob from a people of strange speech,
- 2 Judah became His holy one,
Israel, His dominion.
- 3 The sea saw them and fled;
Jordan ran backward.
- 4 Mountains skipped like rams,
Hills like lambs.
- 5 What alarmed you, O sea, that you fled,
Jordan, that you ran backward,
- 6 Mountains, that you skipped like rams
Hills, like sheep?
- 7 Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord,
at the presence of the God of Jacob,
- 8 who turned rock into a pool of water,
the flinty rock into a fountain.

תהלים פרק קי"ד

(א) בְּצֵאת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם
בֵּית יַעֲקֹב מֵעַם לֵעָז:
(ב) הִיטָה יְהוּדָה לְקֹדֶשׁוֹ
יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמְשֻׁלֹתָיו:
(ג) הַיָּם רָאָה וַיָּנֹס
הַיַּרְדֵּן יָטָב לָאָחוּר:
(ד) הַהָרִים קָדְדוּ כְּאֵילִים
גָּבְעוּ וְזֹת כְּבָנֵי־צֹאן:
(ה) מֵהֵלֶךְ הַיָּם כִּי תָנוּס
הַיַּרְדֵּן יָטָב לָאָחוּר:
(ו) הַהָרִים תִּרְקְדוּ כְּאֵילִים
גָּבְעוּ וְזֹת כְּבָנֵי־צֹאן:
(ז) מִלִּפְנֵי אָדוֹן חוּלֵי אֶרֶץ
מִלִּפְנֵי אֱ-לֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב:
(ח) הַהֶפְכִי הַצּוּר אֲגָם־מַיִם
חֲלֹמֵי־יֵשׁ לְמַעֲיְבוֹת־מַיִם:

A Midrash found in Midrash Tehillim adds some insight into why we end our Maggid with this Mizmor.

Midrash Tehillim (Buber) 114:1

“When Israel went forth from Egypt.” This is related to what the verse says “Egypt rejoiced in their leaving” (Tehillim 105:38). Rabbi Berachya said: this is a parable for a fat man who was riding on a donkey. This one says “when will I get off the donkey!” and this one says “when will this get off of me!” The time came for him to get down, and I don’t know which one was happier. When David saw how happy the Egyptians were when the Israelites left Egypt, he began to praise the Exodus, and wrote “When Israel went forth from Egypt.”

מדרש תהלים (בובר) מזמור קי"ד:א

בצאת ישראל ממצרים. זהו שאמר הכתוב שמח מצרים בצאתם (תהלים קה לח), אמר ר' ברכיה משל לבעל בשר שהיה רוכב על החמור, זה אומר מתי ארד מן החמור, וזה אומר מתי ירד זה מעלי, הגיע זמן שירד, ואיני יודע מי שמח ביותר, כיון שראה דוד היאך היו שמחים בצאתם ממצרים, התחיל מקלס על יציאת מצרים, ואומר בצאת ישראל ממצרים.

The Midrash compares the opening of our Psalm to a line in Psalm 105:38:

The Egyptians rejoiced in their leaving.

שמח מצרים בצאתם

The Midrash then goes on to relay a parable in the name of Rabbi Berachya. When a fat man rides on a donkey, each one despises the journey. When the time comes for the fat man to get down, it is hard to tell who experiences more relief. King David, according to the Midrash, reflects upon the happiness of the Egyptians at the Exodus in light of this parable, and then composes Psalm 114.

This Midrash can only be understood in light of the content of Psalm 114. Psalm 114 does not sing of the relief experienced by the Israelites when they were freed from slavery. In fact, it says nothing of their emotional state at all. Psalm 114 rejects the parallelism expressed by Rabbi Berachya's parable. While Psalm 105 tells us of the happiness of the Egyptians, Psalm 114 speaks of unnatural events: the sea taking flight, the Jordan receding, mountains and hills skipping – the whole earth trembling. This is not the relief of the donkey or the fat man. When the Midrash imagines Psalm 114 as a response to Psalm 105, it reminds us that the Exodus was not just about the experience of the Israelites. It is about the entire earth trembling before Hashem. It is about all of existence being changed permanently by divine intervention.

When Beit Hillel mandate that we end the Maggid with Psalm 114, the reason is this: to fully celebrate the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim, we need to broaden our perspective beyond our attempts to re-live and re-enact the human experience of our ancestors. Beit Shammai would have had our seders limited to that project. That is why the Shammaites wanted to end the Maggid with Psalm 113, a Psalm that speaks of the Israelites becoming “עבדי ה'” servants of God, and focuses on joyful human transitions (“מקימי מעפר דל”) “He raises the poor from the dust” for example) as if that were the primary effect of the Exodus. Beit Hillel respond with a different model, wherein the story of the Maggid ends with a wider perspective, joyfully recognizing in our Hallel of Song that Yetziat Mitzrayim was not just about the Jews, but about the entire earth, waters and mountains, being changed through the act of divine intervention which was the Exodus.



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