
Hallel: Songs of Human Joy

A New Translation and Annotated Commentary

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Introduction

THE HEBREW WORD *HALLEL* MEANS “PRAISE.” IN JEWISH LITURGY, *HALLEL* REFERS TO A SET OF PSALMS THAT PRAISE GOD, TRADITIONALLY RECITED ON SPECIAL FESTIVALS. THIS NEW TRANSLATION AND commentary seeks to inspire an understanding of the history of Hallel, the emotional structure of its poetry, and the ways it can be used by prayer groups as a musical expression of personal and communal joy.

Hallel is a discrete prayer service which consists of Psalms 113 through 118, with introductory and concluding *brakhot* (blessings). In synagogues Hallel is recited during the three biblical festivals—Sukkot, Shavuot and Pesach—when ancient Jews traveled to the Holy Temple. A slightly reduced version (“half Hallel”) is read publicly on Rosh Chodesh (the start of each Hebrew month) and on the last six days of Pesach.¹ Congregations also sing the full Hallel during the post-biblical holiday of Chanukah, and today religious Zionist Jews recite Hallel on Yom Ha-Atzmaut (Israel Independence Day) and Yom Yerushalayim (the anniversary of the 1967 unification of Jerusalem).²

Hallel is usually recited after the morning *Shacharit* service. On each day of Sukkot (except Shabbat), congregants wave lulav branches during the recitation of Hallel. Hallel also comprises part of the Passover seder. These festivals are communal times of happiness; Hallel expresses—and thus helps us to experience—joy. For this reason, by contrast, a person who is sitting *shiva* (in mourning) never says Hallel.

History

WHO COMPOSED THE HALLEL PSALMS? WHO COMPILED AND BEGAN THE CUSTOM of reciting Hallel as a unit? The wording of its six psalms suggests some specific historical event or victory which Hallel originally celebrated.

The Talmud includes various ancient rabbinical opinions on Hallel's origin in occasions when the Jewish nation celebrated its delivery from danger, such as Moses and the people at the Sea; Deborah after defeating Sisera; and King Hezekiah after resisting the siege of Senacherib. One classical Jewish view is that Hallel expressed the joy the Jews felt at their return from the Babylonian Exile and the building of the Second Temple, perhaps around 500 BCE. In the nineteenth century, the first historical critics of Jewish texts theorized that the Hallel service was composed for the victory of the Maccabees and the rededication of the Second Temple, around 164 BCE.³ Much of the imagery (e.g., "Adonai is God who has given us light!" Ps. 118:27) supports this theory.

Subsequent Bible scholars challenged this theory, dating some of the Hallel psalms much earlier, to the First Temple era. Louis Finkelstein⁴ conjectured that the oldest parts of Hallel were Psalms 113-114 which speak of the Exodus from Egypt. These may have accompanied the original celebration of the Passover rite. The rest of Hallel, Psalms 115-118, may have come from Maccabean times.

We can be certain that the Hallel service reached its present form in antiquity, since the Mishnah (codified by 200 CE) mentions it as part of the Pesach celebration in the Second Temple era.

Charting the Emotional Structure of Joy

WHY MULTIPLY OUR PRAISE OF GOD? DOES GOD NEED OUR COMPLIMENTS? Hallel bypasses these questions, presuming that the expression of joy is integral to the human experience of joy. People do not fully appreciate happiness—the service seems to suggest—without reflecting on the experience, expressing gratitude, and offering praise.⁵

The Hallel sequence charts the emotional dimension and progressions of joy. The first Hallel psalm (Ps. 113) begins with an expansive view of

God's role in the world, encouraging us to praise Adonai who is simultaneously above the world and involved in it, and whose involvement lifts up those who are temporarily "down and out."

Psalm 114 brings us back to the central memory of the Jewish people, our going out of Egypt. The retelling is poetic rather than historic, and the joy of liberation is expressed by the natural world. This ballad is perhaps the oldest core of Hallel, the original liturgy which accompanied each Jewish family's killing, roasting, and eating of a lamb together with matzah and bitter roots on the evening of Pesach.

Psalm 115 is divided into two sections in Hallel, both dealing with the certainty of Jewish belief and defining the community of believers. The first part is oratory, criticizing pagan religion and crediting God rather than human agents for the Jews' success over their pagan enemies. The second part offers an assurance of blessing for those who respect Adonai. Deep statements of philosophy find their way into this poetry.

In the fourth psalm, Hallel steps into the realm of the personal. Psalm 116 progresses through individual depression to recovery. Liturgically, Psalm 116 is divided into two prayers, corresponding to these psychological states. The first part recalls the individual's personal despair, recognizing that God has listened to the cry of the person in need. The second section expresses gratitude at having survived the difficulties.

Hallel next moves from the personal to the national, and then to the universal. The shortest of the psalms, Psalm 117, eloquently calls upon all the world's peoples to respect Adonai's kindness. Psalm 118, a processional song of national thanksgiving, celebrates victory over foreign enemies. It is structured to be sung aloud. Presumably the pilgrims sang Psalm 118 at festival times as they walked to Jerusalem, ascended Mount Zion, approached the Holy Temple, and entered its gates. There they were greeted in song by the Levites, inviting them to enter and approach the altar.⁶ Like the pilgrim throng, Psalm 118 moves geographically and spiritually: while outside the Temple, the pilgrims thank God for rescuing the Jewish people from great danger; once inside the Temple, they plead with God for continued help in life.

This translation asks its readers to imagine their way back to this original recitation, and also to adapt the words of Hallel to their own personal cycles of trouble and rescue, fear and relief, sadness and joy. Thus, this translation utilizes the contemporary idiom of American English, with an egalitarian

sensibility. The Hebrew psalms are reprinted from *Siddur Sim Shalom*, with permission of the Rabbinical Assembly.

Davening Hallel as Musical Poetry

TRADITIONALLY, CONGREGATIONS DAVEN (PRAY) HALLEL BY CHANTING AND singing the psalms. The lyricism of the psalms makes them especially conducive to musical and choral recitation. In most of the Bible God speaks to people; in Psalms people speak to God.

Biblical poetry is marked by rhythm and repetition. Four kinds of parallelism, or repetition of thought, characterize biblical poetry. In synonymous parallelism, verse A and verse B say the same thing in different words (e.g., Ps. 114:4, 115:17). In antithetic parallelism, verse A contrasts with verse B (e.g., Ps. 113:5-6; 115:16). Synthetic parallelism causally relates verse A and verse B, which need each other to complete a thought (e.g., Ps. 114:1-2). Finally, in climactic parallelism, verses A, B, and C begin with the same words and build to a climax (e.g., Ps. 118:10-12).⁷

These poetic devices can be reflected in the manner in which each psalm is recited. The *Tosafot*, later commentators on the Talmud, ruled that Hallel may be recited in any language.⁸ Congregations and havrot should experiment with different ways of chanting Hallel as a spiritual vehicle for feeling and expressing joy.

Many congregations have developed melodies for verses in Hallel, creating a kind of spiritual “jam session” within the words of the six psalms. Refrains have always been used to recite Hallel communally. For example, Yemenite Jews preserve an ancient custom recorded in the Palestinian Talmud where the group responds with “Hallelu Yah!” after the leader chants each half-verse.⁹ Repetition of certain verses in Psalm 118 (e.g., lines 1, 21, 26, the opening lines, and the closing lines) was common at various times and places over the last two millennia.¹⁰

Congregations can experiment with different methods of recitation for each psalm, in English as well as Hebrew. Choral reading without melody can be profoundly moving when lines are read with feeling. Each line of a psalm may be read aloud in Hebrew and/or English by a different individual. Imagining the historical setting for a psalm may also provide spiritual focus. Groups

may wish to try some of the following “stage directions” for reciting Hallel:

- The leader chants—and the group repeats—the opening blessing in segments, in both English and Hebrew.
- Read Psalm 113 in English individually, then chant it responsively in Hebrew after the leader. Or chant it antiphonally, separating the group into two choruses who face each other and alternate lines.
- Pair off and read the English of Psalm 114 with a partner in alternating lines. Then sing the ballad aloud as a group in Hebrew.
- Chant Psalm 115A together in English as a chorus, using a *nusach* (prayer mode) usually used for the Hebrew. Use leader-and-chorus repetition at the end.
- Try setting the English of Psalm 115B to its familiar Hebrew melody.
- Ask members of the group to share aloud something joyous for which they wish to give thanks, before Psalm 1145B. Then ask everyone to bring this personal joy to the Hallel prayer like an offering brought by our ancestors to Adonai at the ancient Temple, as the psalm is recited antiphonally (with two groups addressing each other).
- Recall some low point or trouble in your personal life, and keep it in mind as you individually murmur Psalm 116 A aloud, in English or Hebrew. This will produce a classic group *davenen* sound, and bring out the theme of the words.
- Ask pairs to retranslate the very short Psalm 117 in their own imaginative words. Then sing it and the opening of Psalm 118 aloud.

Congregations might try all or parts of Psalm 118 in any of five different ways. The ancient midrash called *Mekhilta* describes three ways in which ancient Jews recited their prayers: (1) repeating each line after the leader, (2) repeating a refrain after each line recited by the leader, and (3) an inspired chorus (in which the leader speaks half a line and the community responds with the full line, demonstrating that all have the gift of prophecy).¹¹ Another method, (4) the antiphonal chorus was used by pilgrims on their way to the Temple (Soncino). A more modern method, (5) the responsive reading of leader and congregation, was probably not preceded in antiquity. Where possible, while chanting Psalm 118, the group should walk, either toward the *bimah* [platform] or in a circle, recreating the feeling of a processional.

To help with melodies, congregations can turn to a large and varied body of recorded Hallel music. Among the most beautiful Hallel melodies are those recorded or composed by Ben Zion Shenker from the Modzitzer Hasidim, and the hymns used for Hallel by Sephardi Jews.¹²

Opening Blessing

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְקַרְא אֶת-הַהִלֵּל.

Bless you Adonai our God, leader of the world, whose *mitzvot* make our lives holy, and who taught us to chant the Hallel.*

COMMENTARY ON THE BLESSING

A Blessing for Hallel? Unless an action is commanded, it requires no blessing. Since the Bible contains no commandment to sing Hallel, a debate arose as to why a blessing is said before reciting Hallel. The use of a blessing for Hallel was accepted in Mishnaic times.¹³ However, the great medieval French commentator Rashi (1040-1105 CE) recited Hallel without a blessing.¹⁴ Medieval authorities debated whether reciting Hallel was biblically or only rabbinically required.

The origin of this dispute may go back to the ancient struggle between the Saducees, the priestly upper class in Second Temple times, and the Pharisees, the emerging rabbinic leadership. The Saducees were disinterested in the whole idea of prayer, preferring to maintain the divinely-ordained cult of sacrifice. The Pharisees promoted the custom of reciting Hallel and, adding divine authority to their rabbinic teaching, developed the blessing stating that God “instructed us to read the Hallel” (Dembitz). Jewish practice followed the Pharisees because, even without a direct biblical commandment to say Hallel, we are fulfilling God’s word by “carrying out what our religious teachers prescribed.”¹⁵

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However, no blessing for Hallel is recited at the Seder. Ashkenazic Jews recite the blessing for Hallel on all festivals. Sephardic Jews, and Hasidim who adopted Sephardic ritual, follow the ruling of Maimonides and do not recite the blessing for Hallel on Rosh Chodesh (Donin).

Jews today differ on the definition of *mitzvot* (commandments)—whether they are laws to be obeyed, norms, teachings, customs, folkways, or individual or communal choices. By leaving the word untranslated in the English, I leave open the question. My translation of *vetzivanu* as “taught us” (rather than the traditional “commanded us”) reflects the Pharisaic origin of the blessing for Hallel.

Which Blessing? There was a difference of opinion as to whether the blessing should be worded *ligmor et ha-Hallel* (“to complete the Hallel”) or *likro et ha-Hallel* (“to read the Hallel”). Sephardim use the blessing *ligmor* for the full Hallel, and *likro* for the half Hallel. Ashkenazim use the blessing *likro* for all synagogue recitations of Hallel.¹⁶

Translating the Blessing: Translating a *brakhah*, the most classic Jewish prayer formula, is a difficult task. The word *barukh* (blessed) comes from *berekh* (knee) which connotes bowing as a sign of respect. The Hebrew word for blessing may originally have meant “to make fertile.”¹⁷ *Barukh* is also used as part of a welcome or greeting.

May people bless God? Or does the *brakhah* acknowledge that God is endowed with blessing, that blessedness is inherent in the divine? The conventional translation “Blessed art thou” or “Blessed be thou” can be read either way. I have translated the blessing formula as “Bless you Adonai our God...” because of its simplicity and directness. The formula recognizes that people do have the power to bless, and that we in turn are blessed as we bless God.

Likro: This could be translated as “to call out the Hallel,” “to read the Hallel,” “to recite the Hallel” or, more loosely, “to sing the Hallel.” Nahum Sarna asserts that silent reading was very rare in ancient times, so that the verb *likro* can mean to “proclaim” or “call” as much as to “read” (Sarna). Combining these alternatives, I have translated it simply as “to chant the Hallel.”

The First Psalm of Hallel

PSALM 113: PRAISE YAH!

הַלְלוּיָהּ.
הַלְלוּ, עַבְדֵי יְהוָה, הַלְלוּ אֶת־שֵׁם יְהוָה.
יְהִי שֵׁם יְהוָה מְבָרָךְ מְעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם.
מִמְזֶרְח־שָׁמֶשׁ עַד מְבֹאוֹ מְהַלֵּל שֵׁם יְהוָה.
רָם עַל כָּל־גּוֹיִם יְהוָה, עַל הַשָּׁמַיִם כְּבוֹדוֹ.
מִי בִיהוּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, הַמְגַבִּיהֵי לְשָׁבֶת,
הַמְשַׁפִּילֵי לְרֵאוֹת בַּשָּׁמַיִם וּבְאָרֶץ.
□ מְקִימֵי מַעְפָּר דָּל, מְאַשְׁפֵּת יָרִים אֲבִיוֹן,
לְהוֹשִׁיבֵי עִם נְדִיבִים, עִם נְדִיבֵי עַמּוֹ.
מוֹשִׁיבֵי עֵקֶרֶת הַבַּיִת, אִם הַבָּנִים שְׂמֵחָה.
הַלְלוּיָהּ.

1. HalleluYah!
Praise, you who work for Adonai,
Praise the name Adonai.
2. Let the name Adonai be blessed,
From now and forever.
3. From sunrise to sundown,
The name Adonai is praised.
4. Above all the nations is Adonai,
Its glory beyond the sky.
5. Who is like Adonai our God,
Who lives up high
But drops down to see
What happens in the sky and on earth?
7. Lifts up the lowly from the dust,
Raises the poor from the garbage-dump
8. To be seated with leaders
The leaders of their people,
9. Makes a home for the childless woman and
Joy for the mother of children.
HalleluYah!

COMMENTARY ON PSALM 113

Avdey adonai, line 1: The conventional reading is that this psalm is addressed to Adonai’s “servants.” A more accurate translation might be Adonai’s “slaves,” the literal and traditional meaning of *avadim*. Midrash Tehillim (the rabbinic midrash on the Book of Psalms) explains that this psalm was first sung by the Jews on the night of the exodus from Egypt. Pharaoh urged the Jews to leave that very night, fearing that by morning, all the Egyptians would be dead from the plague of the killing of the firstborn. Moses and Aaron responded that if Pharaoh wanted them to leave immediately, he must release them from slavery. Pharaoh assented: “Before you were my slaves...Now you are Adonai’s slaves, and must praise Adonai with the words ‘*Hallelu avdey Adonai*’—Praise, you slaves of Adonai!”¹⁸

Based on line 1, at least three Jews must be present to recite Hallel: one to speak to the “servants of Adonai,” and at least two “servants” to listen, since the word “servants” is plural (Midrash Tehillim 113:3).

The translation of *avdey Adonai* given here draws upon the Anchor Bible,¹⁹ which emends the vowels so that the word reads *avdey*, and therefore refers to Adonai’s *works*, rather than to Adonai’s servants.

Why is Hallel not recited on Purim, despite the holiday’s joyous nature? The Talmud offers two reasons. First, the reading of the Megillah, the Scroll of Esther, is itself an expression of praise, and replaces Hallel. Second, Hallel begins “Praise, you servants of Adonai”—i.e., praise your liberation from slavery into the service of God. At the end of the Purim deliverance, however, the Jews remained servants of King Ahashverosh and the Persian Empire. As Rashi notes of Purim, “We were saved from death, but not from servitude.”²⁰

Return from exile, lines 2 and 9: Soncino aptly comments that “from now” in line 2 implies a particular historical event—specifically, the return of the Jews from the Babylonian Exile. Hallel contains several verses parallel to those in the book of Nehemiah and apparent allusions to problems and joys faced upon the return from the First Exile, which Jews viewed as parallel to the biblical exodus. Thus Rashi interpreted the “barren woman becoming a happy mother” in line 9 as “fallen Zion upon her return from exile.” The “princes of [God’s] peo-

ple” in the second half of line 8 may similarly be seen as a nationalistic reference to the returning Jewish nobility (e.g., Zerubavel, Nehemiah, Ezra).

Theology: There are several important points of theology in Psalm 113. Line 3 states that Adonai is worshipped “from sunrise to sundown,” or, more concretely, “from East to West.” Adonai is thus God of the whole world. This universalist conception likely developed in Judaism after (and perhaps as a result of) the Exile and the return from Babylon.²¹ Thus, the “servants of Adonai” addressed in line 1 include both Jews and non-Jews, an approach confirmed later in Psalms 117 and 118:4.

Psalm 113 depicts God as both transcendent—“above the sky/heavens,” “lives on high” (lines 4-5)—and immanent, or directly involved in human affairs—“drops down to see what happens in the sky and on earth,” “lifts up the lowly” (lines 6-9). That the transcendent deigns to become immanent the Psalmist finds remarkable.

What does God do in the world? The Anchor Bible calls Psalm 113 a hymn celebrating Yahweh as helper of the lowly. The *gematriya*, or numerical value, of the word *hallelu* is 71, which is taken as a reference to the 70 souls plus one God who initially went down to Egypt.²² Thus, the liberation of the Jews from Egypt resonates in God championing the lowest of the low.

Women and mothers: Line 7 and the first half of line 8 are quotations from the prayer of Hannah in I Samuel 2:8. Line 9 is similarly an allusion to Hannah, and also to the line of barren biblical women made happy when God gave them children: Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, and the (unnamed) mother of Samson. Metzudas Dovid (18th century commentary) offers a rather sexist interpretation that line 9, “Who maketh the barren woman to dwell in her house” means that “He causes barren women to return to their homes and have children.”²³ My translation of line 9 praises God for permitting both the non-parent and the parent to be happy: the non-parent may have a real home, and the parent has joy in children.

The Second Psalm of Hallel

PSALM 114: LIBERATION FROM EGYPT

בְּצֵאת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם, בֵּית יַעֲקֹב מֵעַם לֵעָו.
הֵיְתָה יְהוּדָה לְקֹדֶשׁוֹ, יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמְּשֻׁלוֹתָיו.
הַיָּם רָאָה וַיָּנֶס, הַיַּרְדֵּן יָסַב לְאַחֹר.
הַהָרִים רָקְדוּ כְּאֵילִים, גְּבְעוֹת כְּבָנֵי צֹאן.
מָה לָּךְ הַיָּם כִּי תִנוֹס, הַיַּרְדֵּן תִּסַּב לְאַחֹר.
הַהָרִים תִּרְקְדוּ כְּאֵילִים, גְּבְעוֹת כְּבָנֵי צֹאן.
□ מִלִּפְנֵי אֲדוֹן הוֹלִי אֶרֶץ, מִלִּפְנֵי אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב,
הַהֹפְכֵי הַצּוּר אֶגְמֹת מַיִם, חֲלָמִישׁ לְמַעַיְנֹו מַיִם.

1. When the Jews left Mitzrayim,
Jacob's family from among a strange people,
2. Judah became its holy place,
Israel its realm.
3. The Sea saw it and ran away,
The Jordan River reversed course,
4. The mountains danced like deer,
The hills like lambs.
5. What's with you, Sea, that you flee?
With the Jordan, that you turn around?
6. With the mountains, that you dance like deer?
With the hills, like lambs?
7. Quake, you land, before your lord,
Before Jacob's God!
8. Who turned the rock into a pool of water
Pebbles into a source of water....

COMMENTARY ON PSALM 114

History: The Anchor Bible dates the composition of Psalm 114 after the Jewish nation split into North (called “Israel”) and South (called “Judah”) in 922 BCE but before the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 721 BCE. This conclusion is based on line 2 which distinguishes between Judah and Israel and presumably comes from a time when both existed. Anchor’s view might be supported by the reference to Judah as God’s “holy place,” which could mean the Temple, located in Judah. However, the reference to Judah and Israel may simply be poetic parallelism.

Finkelstein surmises that the oldest parts of Hallel were Psalms 113-114, composed during the era when Judea was under Persian rule, after the return from the Babylonian Exile but before the Ptolemies ruled Egypt and Judea. These psalms may have been sung as part of the eating of the paschal lamb, to fulfill the biblical injunction to teach the Exodus from Egypt on Passover night. Finkelstein believes that Psalm 114 was then suppressed for many years during the era when the Egyptian Ptolemies and the Syrian Seleucids alternated ruling Judea. Initially the Jews omitted Psalm 114 to avoid offending the Egyptians, described in line 1 as *am lo-eyz*, “barbarians.” Later, when the Seleucids ruled, Psalm 114 was omitted because the Egyptian origin ascribed to the Jewish nation would have politically and culturally offended the Syrians.

Even after achieving national independence under the Hasmonean-Maccabean monarchy, the Sadducees continued to omit Psalm 114, while the Pharisees included it. This difference, Finkelstein notes, is echoed in the dispute later recorded in the Mishnah over the seder liturgy. The School of Shammai (identified with the Sadducees) held that one recites only Psalm 113, while the more Pharisaic School of Hillel, whose views were ultimately followed, prescribed the recitation of Psalm 114 as well.²⁴

Which crossing of a body of water does Psalm 114 describe? The Israelites left Egypt and crossed the Sea of Reeds (or the Red Sea) under Moses’ leadership. Forty years later they crossed the Jordan River (or a part of the Dead Sea) from the east into Canaan under Joshua’s command. The book of Joshua (3:14-15) tells us that the Jordan River also split to permit the Jews to reach the Promised Land.

Anchor argues that lines 3 and 7 refer to the entry of the Jews into Canaan, because they explicitly invoke the “Jordan.” The mountains and hills in lines 4 and 6 would then refer not to Mount Sinai in the desert, but to the mountains in Canaan, the home of the Canaanite gods. Thus, the mountains do not dance for joy, but tremble in fear, the fear of the Canaanite gods at the approach of the Jews and their God, for Yahweh had chosen Palestine as a sacred abode. The earthquake threatened in line 7 reinforces this interpretation. The Hebrew words *rakdu* and *tirkidu* in lines 4 and 6 can be translated variously as “dance,” “skip,” “jump,” “tremble,” or “shake.”

Traditional Jewish sources are divided on this question. While the Malbim (a 19th century commentator) believes that Psalm 114 refers to the entry into the Land of Israel (Artscroll), Rashi asserts that when the Sea of Reeds split for the children of Israel, all other bodies of water in the world simultaneously parted. This is why Psalm 114, traditionally understood to be about the exodus from Egypt, speaks of the Jordan. Possibly the following midrash forms the basis for Rashi’s understanding:

“The Jordan turned backward. What was this? What concern was it of the Jordan? Were the children of Israel at the Jordan? You learn, however, from this verse that when the master of the guild flees, the entire guild flees. So when the Jordan beheld the sea in flight, it, too, fled.” (Midrash Tehillim 114:9; Braude, p. 222.)

It is also possible that Psalm 114 records *both* events, telescoping the seminal events of Jewish history with poetic parallelism. The “Sea” alludes to the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, while the “Jordan” refers to the entry into Canaan; the wonders during the desert journey between these two events are evoked in line 8. This central national memory, however, is neither historically chronological nor complete. Soncino aptly notes that Psalm 114 seems to end abruptly, and may be a fragment of a longer poem whose concluding verses were lost.

Mitzrayim, line 1: I have transliterated the Hebrew name for Egypt to emphasize its emotional connotation. Mitzrayim also connotes a “narrow place” or “straits of difficulty.” In a sense, then, leaving Egypt may be interpreted as “getting out of a rut.”

Beyt Yaakov, line 1: The “family of Jacob” was traditionally interpreted as referring to Jewish women.

Me'am lo'ez, line 1: Commentators do not agree on how to translate these words. Did the Jews leave “from a people of strange language” (Soncino)? “a barbaric people” (Targum, Anchor)? “an alien people” (Harlow²⁵)? “an alien tongue” (Artsroll)? or a nation of “stammerers” (Hertz)? The key issue here is that of language and assimilation.

Jewish tradition understands the liberation from slavery as resulting from Jews retaining their names and their language while in Egypt. Midrash Tehillim 114:4 interprets lines 1-2 as “When the house of Jacob came forth from a people of strange language, Judah kept to *kodsho*, its holiness—that is, kept to its *lashon kodesh*, sacred language, Hebrew.” Interestingly, however, the names of some prominent Jews mentioned in the Book of Exodus (e.g., Moses) appear to be Egyptian in origin! While views of the Bible’s historical accuracy differ, most commentators agree that the national origin of the Jewish people was in Egypt.²⁶ Jewish national consciousness is therefore imbued, from its earliest time, with an ambiguous relationship to the non-Jewish world, living both within it and apart from it.

Rabbi Acha interpreted *me'am lo'ez* in the name of Rabbi Jonathan: “A nation from the midst of another nation” resembles the drawing forth a baby from its mother in childbirth. It is painful to the baby (the Jewish people) that is drawn forth and to the midwife (God) who draws the baby forth (Midrash Tehillim 114:6). Rabbi Acha might have added that it is also painful to the mother (Egypt) who is being delivered! But Rabbi Berechiah in Midrash Tehillim 114:1 sees the Exodus as a harmonious parting, interpreting *me'am lo'ez* as “from a people that was glad.” To illustrate, he cites a fable of a fat man riding on a donkey:

The fat man was wondering “When can I get off the ass? and the ass was wondering “When will he get off me?” When the time came for the fat man to get off, I do not know which one was more glad.

Israel its realm(s), line 2: Since the Hebrew word (*mamshelotav*) is literally plural, Rabinowicz suggests that it may connote the pluralistic nature of the Jewish people.

Seder recitation: The image of Jews roasting and eating lamb and singing Psalm 114 on Passover night is a powerful one. In ancient Jerusalem, the houses were opened so that families could hear each other chanting Hallel.

The midrash recalls the melodious, loud and jubilant singing of Hallel by the pilgrims who came to Jerusalem each year on the three festivals. This gave rise to a popular saying: “Pesach in the house and the Hallel breaks the roof” (Song of Songs Rabbah II:14, 7).²⁷ To avoid the implication that these seders turned into boisterous banquets, the Gemara explains that the saying refers to the practice of going up to the rooftops after the seder meal to reverently sing Hallel (Pesachim 85a-85b).

The New Testament confirms the practice of singing Hallel at the seder. Jesus and his disciples were said to have sung a hymn, in all probability the Hallel psalms, after their paschal meal, before departing for the Mount of Olives.²⁸

Evening Hallel: The Talmud mentions that Hallel was added to the evening prayer service in ancient Palestine. This is still the custom among Mizrahi (Oriental) and Hasidic Jews in Israel (Encyclopaedia Judaica). When the Hasidic movement arose in Europe in the late 18th Century, its adherents decided to recite Hallel at Maariv, a departure from local Ashkenazic custom. By the early 19th Century, Hasidic customs became popular even in non-Hasidic synagogues. Subsequently, a responsum by the *misnagdish* (anti-Hasidic) Rabbi Joseph Saul Nathanson permitted this prevalent departure from tradition.²⁹ Interestingly, the Reform movement also added an abridged Hallel to its evening service for festivals (Hoffman).

Pebbles, line 8: I have followed the translation of Samson Raphael Hirsch instead of the more customary but less comprehensible “flint.” The American Bible Society³⁰ translates *chalamish* as “solid cliffs.”

The Third Psalm of Hallel

PSALM 115: JEWISH FAITH

A. Vindication of Jewish Belief

[Not recited on the last six days of Passover or Rosh Chodesh]

לֹא לָנוּ יְהוָה, לֹא לָנוּ,
 כִּי לְשִׁמְךָ תֵּן כְּבוֹד עַל חַסְדֶּךָ עַל אֲמֹתֶךָ.
 לָמָּה יֹאמְרוּ הַגּוֹיִם אֵיךְ נָא אֱלֹהֵיהֶם.
 וְאֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּשָׁמַיִם, כֹּל אֲשֶׁר חָפֵץ עָשָׂה.
 עֲצַבְיָהֶם כְּסֹף וְזָהָב, מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי אָדָם.
 פֶּה לָהֶם וְלֹא יִדְבְּרוּ, עֵינַיִם לָהֶם וְלֹא יִרְאוּ.
 אָזְנַיִם לָהֶם וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ, אֵף לָהֶם וְלֹא יִרְיחוּ.
 יְדֵיהֶם וְלֹא יִמְיִשׁוּן, רַגְלֵיהֶם וְלֹא יִהְלְכוּ,
 לֹא יִהְיוּ בְּגִרוֹנָם.
 כְּמוֹתָם יִהְיוּ עֲשִׂיהֶם, כֹּל אֲשֶׁר בְּטַח בָּהֶם.
 □ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּטַח בִּיהוָה, עֲזָרָם וּמַגְנָם הוּא.
 בֵּית אֶהְרֹן בְּטַחוּ בִּיהוָה, עֲזָרָם וּמַגְנָם הוּא.
 יִרְאֵי יְהוָה בְּטַחוּ בִּיהוָה, עֲזָרָם וּמַגְנָם הוּא.

1. Not we, Adonai, not we
But your name deserves credit
For your kindness, your truth.
2. How can the pagans ask
“Where is their God?”
3. Now our God in the sky
Did just what was planned.
4. Their silver and golden statues
Are the work of human hands.
5. They have mouths but do not speak,
They have eyes but do not see,
6. They have ears but do not hear,
They have noses but do not smell,
7. Hands—but do not feel,
Legs—but do not walk,
They do not even groan.
8. Their makers will become like them,
All those who believe in them.

Here the leader chanted and the Levite choir responded in chorus:

9. Jews, believe in Adonai—
Chorus: Their help and their protection!
10. Priests, believe in Adonai—
Chorus: Their help and their protection!
11. Those non-Jews who respect Adonai, believe in Adonai—
Chorus: Their help and their protection!

COMMENTARY ON PSALM 115A

Jewish faith: Yehezkel Kaufmann believed that the monotheistic core of Judaism emerged from the Jewish reaction to national defeat by the pagan Babylonian Empire. Those who saw Adonai as a limited, national god, living in and ruling over the Jewish people only in their own land, naturally questioned the power of Adonai in exile. Rather than causing the Jews to abandon Judaism, however, the Exile produced a broader view of Adonai as God of all the world and all humanity. The Jews' eventual recovery of national self-government and rededication of the Temple cemented this faith. Instead of accepting the pagans' religion, the Jews mocked and derided it. The same process must have occurred again when the Maccabees overthrew Antiochus' Seleucid subjugation of Judea in 167 BCE and rededicated the Temple. The celebration on one or both of these occasions probably included Psalm 115 sung by the Levite choir in the restored Temple.

Exclusions for the last six days of Pesach and Rosh Chodesh: Several explanations exist for truncating Hallel. Because Rosh Chodesh is a minor festival, only a part of Hallel is recited (Abrahams). No paschal offering was brought on the last six days of Passover, hence only half Hallel is recited. By contrast, on each day of Sukkot a special sacrifice was offered (B. Arachin 10a,b).

A more inspiring explanation is that the angels wished to sing a song when the Egyptians were defeated at the Sea of Reeds. God refused them permission, asking “Will you sing praises, when my children are drowning in the Sea?” (Megillah 10b) Our joy, too, is diminished by compassion even for our enemies.

According to Louis Finkelstein, much of Psalms 115 through 118 was