

Thoughts on Hallel

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Hallel is recited on holidays and on the semi-festival of the new moon (Rosh Hodesh) Many Jews also recite it on the modern festivals of Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israel Independence Day) and Yom Yerushalayim (Jerusalem Day).

What are the ideas expressed in Hallel? The Gemara (the Rabbinic debates on the Mishnah) tells us that Hallel includes five major themes (Pesachim 118a):

1. The Exodus from Egypt
2. The splitting of the Red Sea
3. The giving of the Torah
4. The revival of the dead
5. The difficulties preceding the Messianic Age

In other words, Hallel deals with all of Jewish history from the birth of our nation to the establishment of the Messianic Era. In Hallel we express our joy at past miracles and our faith in future miracles.

What is the nature of Hallel? In it, we praise God's providence for the individual and for the sake of the nation as a whole. In the second section we implore God not to forsake us, neither the nation nor the individual. In the last part of Hallel we thank God for miracles past, present, and future. Since Hallel is a commandment, we must start it with a blessing. We also conclude it with a blessing, which is voluntary. The Rabbis argue over whether the recital of Hallel is a Torah commandment or of rabbinic origin.

We begin Hallel by reciting Psalm 113, a psalm of introductory praises. In Psalm 114, King David shows how God's providence freed the Jews from Egyptian bondage and made their survival possible. In Psalm 115, we appeal for God's assistance. In Psalm 116, we plead with God for survival. In Psalm 117, the shortest of all the Psalms, we invite the nations of the world to join our songs of thanksgiving for our redemption. Finally, Psalm 118 can be interpreted in two different ways. David perhaps personally thanks God for his survival, or perhaps David represents the Jewish people and therefore the Psalm is a song of thanksgiving for the entire nation of Israel.

When we come to the end of Hallel, we ask God to save us and let us be successful. Those two requests derive from one verse (Psalms 118:25). There is a principle in Judaism that we must always quote a verse in its entirety and therefore we should properly repeat the entire verse before saying it a second time, but we do not. The reason is that according to the Talmud (Pesachim 119a), the verses we double were part of a dialogue between the prophet Samuel, Yishai—the father of David—and David and his brothers. Each one of those present when David was told he would be king of Israel participated in the dialogue. According to this, *ana Hashem hoshi'ah na* ("Please, Hashem, save us") was said by the brothers. *Ana Hashem hatzlichah na* ("Please, Hashem, make us successful") was said by David himself. True, those two requests were from one verse; however, they were uttered by different people and expressed different ideas. In this special case, we may stop in the middle of a verse.

We conclude Hallel with a blessing that is not obligatory. According to the Gemara (Sukkah 39b) it depends on the custom of each community. Today, all communities say this blessing.

By [Rabbi Isaiah Wohlgemuth](#)

