

Hallel

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Source: Tovah Leah Nachmani in <http://elmad.pardes.org/2016/04/the-pardes-companion-to-the-haggadah/>

Praising as a spiritual practice

How is this Hallel on seder night different from all other Hallel's? What are we aiming to accomplish in this Hallel of seder night?

Unlike every other holiday Hallel, the Hallel of the seder (and in synagogue) is sung at night. Unlike other Hallel's, it is sung without an introductory blessing, and it is recited sitting down. Unlike every other Hallel, this Hallel is divided into two parts by eating!

Why is Hallel sung at night? Perhaps because the miracle of the Exodus began at night with the first Passover meal, and the killing of the firstborns in Egypt. And perhaps because on other holidays there is no immediate miracle involved, whereas on this night we are not only retelling but reliving the night where our nightmare ended and our glorious national future began.

On seder night we don't need to be told, "Praise now!" And we don't need to stand up. In this Hallel we are spontaneously cheering the miraculous moment when Pharaoh in pajamas shouts to Moshe that every last Israelite should leave his country. We are rooting for God Who made it happen back then, on this very date and time of night. We are rooting for God Who is making it happen in perhaps less overt ways, today.

The Jerusalem Talmud claims that this Hallel is not "recited", rather it is belted out in the kind of song which suits a miraculous moment of reclaiming our lives after a national near-death experience. It is a current, relevant, real singing of salvation, said by Jews worldwide, every year.

The first part of the Hallel is sung joyously straight after recounting the painful and bitter experiences of affliction which morphed into freedom to leave our oppressive reality.

The second and longer part of the Hallel is sung an hour or more later – after we are stuffed with food and drowsy from three cups of wine!

This makes our eating not an act of satisfying a growling stomach, rather a glorious meal of gratitude. Thanksgiving dinner, you might say. A sanctified expression of extolling God.

It is not for us, God! It is not for us, rather for Your honorable reputation!" begins the second part of the Hallel, the Great Hallel, which follows our festive meal.

Is anyone listening? Is anyone still awake at this late hour? Are most people at the seder chatting by now, or cleaning up the kitchen? One year at our seder when I saw people nodding off, and losing steam, I ran to the toy box and pulled out big colorful pom poms for all the children and a few adults to shake crazily while we sang the Hallel .

In preparation for Hallel, a few good Yoga stretches might be in order after the meal to jumpstart people for the grand finale, because singing the Great Hallel could be the climactic moment of the entire night!

It is for me.

On this night I attempt to identify with the pain and tortures of the darkest nights of history. On this night, in contrast, I feel more a deep connection to my modern reality in which I am SO blessed to be living, no matter how great the daily challenges around us and within me.

What are we aiming to accomplish in the Hallel?Hallel literally means PRAISE. It weaves verses and psalms of thanking praise with praising praise. In parts of Hallel we are THANKING God with all our heart and soul for taking our families out of Egypt, and for redeeming us from our narrow straits and stuck places, our own personal egypt. Singing Hallel in this case becomes a resounding TOAST of gratitude to the living God who performed spectacular signs and wonders and miracles on behalf of our ancestors – so that we can be here today.

But in other parts of Hallel we are not thanking, rather PRAISING God. Which is greater - praising or thanking? When I thank someone, I am recognizing and acknowledging what they have done for ME. But when I praise someone, or when I commend them on an action, an attitude or a character trait unrelated to me, I am seeking out and seeing them more fully for who they are. Not just for what they have done for me.

Some say that praising God is the most exalted spiritual practice there is. Some say it is like a spiritual elevator, bringing us to Higher Realms.** Toasting God with our glasses raised high Hallel is a way of saying that what You, God, do for me and what You did for my ancestors before me is unforgettable, but it is only a part of what You fully are, and what You desire in this world which is infinitely infinite.

The Passover story is our story, but it is also part of a larger universal story – called in our tradition the “Springtime of the World”. It is a story which has an ethical monotheistic beginning and an ethical monotheistic aim. In our own small way we hunger to be partners in this aim when we ask, “how I can use my God given gifts and talents to contribute to God’s world and the people who share it?”

Perhaps this is the reason we can interrupt our Hallel chorus by eating a meal on seder night. Because our Passover feast is not just chicken soup and brisket, rather it is a meal of spiritual practice. Using matza and haroset, together with maror, we are celebrating on this night the greatness of God, and the belief in our ability to partner with God to bring about the ultimate triumph of good over evil.

We needed this belief in the past, we need it in the present and it looks as if we’re going to need it big time as we look to the future.

Make Hallel the highlight of your seder

Discuss how we have partnered with God since last Pesach to bring about a more ethical family, community, or beyond

Invite your guests to sing, and even get up and dance in praise of God

Make a spiritual practice of praising by seeking out the good qualities and genuinely commending people we meet at the seder

Invite people around the table to close their eyes, or to look around – and to first thank and then praise God in their own words