

Alumni Study Session
April 4, 2016
From: Barry

On April 4th, Rabbi Michael Balinsky, a graduate of MTEI Cohort 4 led a conference call study session for MTEI graduates, aimed at giving us some insights in preparation for the Passover Seder which will soon be upon us. The title of the session: **Breaking Up is Hard to Do: The Place of Hallel in the Passover Seder.**

Michael chose an interesting focus, one that most of us rarely think about or even notice—the fact that the Hallel prayer is inserted into the Haggadah. He asked us to consider what we might find striking about the placement of Hallel during the Seder ritual and the possible meanings behind the Rabbis' decision to incorporate Hallel into the Seder.

Participants pointed out a few interesting features and Michael added some other elements to our inquiry. First, it was noted that although Hallel, when it is said as part of a prayer service, is preceded by a *berakha*, a blessing, here in the Haggadah Hallel is simply recited without a blessing. Second, the most surprising element is that only the first two Psalms of Hallel are said in the first part of the Seder, that is, before the meal; while the rest of the Hallel plus additional prayers of praise are recited after the meal. The Hallel, in other words, is broken into two parts for the Seder.

To help explore the reasons behind the breaking up of Hallel into two parts, Michael turned to a talk given by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in 1972. In the teachings of the Soloveitchik tradition, it is important to note a distinction between two different mitzvot: 1) *zikhirat yetziat mitzrayim*, remembering the Exodus from Egypt; and 2) *sippur yetziat mitzrayim*, telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt. “Remembering” is a mitzvah that is common—every time we say Kiddush on Friday night we remember the Exodus in the language of the Kiddush (“*zekher yetziat mitzrayim*”), for example. But the *sippur*, telling the story, of the Exodus is what the Seder is meant to communicate. And telling involves a personal connection to the Exodus. Hence the famous lines of Rabban Gamaliel that each of us should see ourselves as having gone out of Egypt—lines that almost immediately precede the recitation of part one of the Hallel (before the meal).

Why should Hallel be connected to Rabban Gamaliel's directive that we need to feel a personal connection to the story of Exodus, for clearly that is what Rabban Gamaliel means? Because, Rav Soloveitchik pointed out, if one feels personal connection to the Exodus, of course the obvious reaction is to praise God for this miraculous redemption! How else would a person experience this—if we truly inhabit the experience of the Exodus, our mouths should be filled with praise. Hence the almost immediate move into Hallel. And this is a Hallel that doesn't require a blessing to precede because we are not fulfilling a halakhic obligation to recite (*l'kro et ha-Hallel* as we say on a holiday) the Hallel; instead this is really *shirah*, singing! In response to “our” miraculous deliverance.

But, as Michael taught, Rav Soloveitchik also relates to the question of why the Hallel is broken up into two parts—why do we only do the first two Psalms at this point in the Seder? Because those two Psalms are only about praise and thanks. There is no “agenda,” here of asking for something; there is no petitionary prayer in these two Psalms. But if you look at the Psalms in the second part of the Hallel, recited after the meal, we do see prayers asking for help, like “Save us, O Lord.”

But, Michael showed, Rav Soloveitchik does not end here with a *halakhic* explanation. The Rav, as is typical with him, explores this *halakhic* matter at a philosophical level as well. Human beings, he says, do not live in a perfect world. We pray for a future redemption; but none of us live in a “redeemed” world. We cannot be in the situation where we only are praising and thanking God because that would suggest the perfected world. “We pray and petition God for the future,” the Rav says, because Judaism understands that human beings are never truly “secure.” At the moment in which we too experience the Exodus—the moment in the Seder around the time of the second cup of wine—we do get a taste of a world of pure praise. A moment of absolute happiness.

But that can’t last. We live in an imperfect world, so the rest of our Hallel is the part where praise and thanks is mixed with pleas and petitions.

At this point I asked Michael a question: I said this sounded almost like a Woody Allen perspective—there is never security; there is always one more thing to worry about. A bit of Jewish neurosis in fact! But Michael’s answer to me on behalf of Rav Soloveitchik was powerful and convincing. Rather than think of it as neurotic anxiety, better think of the Rav’s view as an ethical challenge to all of us. When we say the part of the Hallel which is mixed with petition, we are affirming that the world needs perfecting and that our task is an ethical one—to commit ourselves to making a more perfect world come into being.

Let me add one note in support of Michael’s teaching. In the Mishnah on Passover there is a small debate between R. Tarfon and R. Akiva about whether one says a full blessing (a blessing with a *hatimah*, a “seal” at the end) right after we say the first part of the Hallel. R. Tarfon says—we shouldn’t say a full blessing, but just say that we remember that God redeemed us from Egypt. R. Akiva says, yes we should remember that we were redeemed from Egypt but we should also say add a fully “sealed” blessing that talks about the future. In other words, as Akiva sees sit the redemption from Egypt in the past is sign that a perfected world is possible in the future. In the Haggadah we follow R. Akiva’s tradition.

To all of us:

The traditional Passover greeting in Hebrew: *Hag kasher v’sameah*. A kosher and happy holiday.

AND

The traditional Passover greeting in Yiddish: *A zissen Pesah*. A sweet Passover. I've often wondering: why should the Yiddish greeting for Passover be about sweetness? We don't say that for any of the other holidays? I think maybe to remind us that with all the work of preparation, with all the cleaning and complaining that I do every year, with all the remorse that I haven't ever done quite enough—remember and experience the sweetness of the holiday too.