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A Psalm for Independence Day

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The first Chief Rabbis of the State of Israel, Rav Herzog and Rav Uziel, along with several other important rabbinical figures, selected chapter 107 of *Tehillim* for recitation on Yom Ha-atzmaut (Israel Independence Day). This prophetic psalm is composed with a view towards the future (“God’s redeemed shall declare...”); it is indeed well suited to the day, as it speaks of the ingathering of the exiles, to which we are witness in our generation and of which Yom Ha-atzmaut is the principal symbol.

The *gemara* (*Berakhot* 54b) views the situations described in this psalm as obligating four categories of people to offer praise to God for their salvation: one who has sailed by sea, one who has traversed a desert, a person who was ill and has been healed, and one who was imprisoned in a jail and has now emerged to freedom.¹ This conclusion is not an “*asmakhta*,” rather, the *halakha* is spelled out explicitly:

They shall cry out to God in their trouble; He shall save them from their distress.

Let them praise God for His loving kindness and His wonders to the children of men. (vv.8, 15, 21, 31)

This *halakha* applies in all instances of these four experiences, whether the person concerned is in *Eretz Yisrael* or on the way there, or in some other country or on the way there. These experiences create a sense of personal thanksgiving; every individual stands alone with his personal salvation before God. However, if we return to the source of this *halakha*, we discover an important principle – personal thanksgiving is a derivative of the general, public thanksgiving for the redemption of the people as a whole. The experiences actually described in the psalm are all part of the general experience of national redemption.

Let us examine the first part of the psalm:

¹ According to some *Rishonim*, praise and thanksgiving is obligated in other instances as well; see Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chaim 219.

Give thanks to God, for He is good; His loving kindness endures forever.
So shall say the redeemed of God, whom He has redeemed from the hand
of the enemy,
And gathered them out of the lands – from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south. (vv. 1-3)

This psalm, then, is the declaration of thanksgiving by those whom God has redeemed. There can be no doubt that the redemption spoken of here is on a national scale; we are speaking of the ingathering of the exiles. The verse, “And gathered them... from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south,” represents a third “layer” of Divine commitment to this ingathering, on the foundations of the promise given in the Torah and reiterated by the prophets:

Then God will return your captivity and have compassion on you, and He will return and gather you from all the nations amongst whom the Lord your God scattered you. Even if your outcasts will be at the furthestmost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you and from there He will fetch you. (*Devarim* 30:3-4)

... From the east I shall bring your seed, and from the west I shall gather you; I will say to the north, “Give over,” and to the south, “Do not keep back; bring back my sons from afar and my daughters from the furthestmost parts of the earth.” (*Yeshayahu* 43:5-6)
For I will take you from among the nations and gather you out of all the lands, and I will bring you to your land. (*Yechezkel* 36:24)

I will whistle to them and gather them, for I have redeemed them, and they shall increase as they increased formerly. And I will sow them among the nations, and they will remember Me in faraway places, and they will live with their children, and will return. And I will bring them back from the land of Egypt and I will gather them from Ashur... (*Zekhariah* 10:8-10)

The introduction of our psalm is formulated in the future tense – “So shall say the redeemed of God” – to refer mainly to a national redemption that will occur in the future.

But the path of these “redeemed of God” is strewn with all kinds of difficulties and obstacles. Some must spend time in the desert on their way to *Eretz Yisrael*; others encounter storms at sea. The mighty forces of nature rise up and block the way to those who are gathered in, as though waiting for a Divine rebuke and an order to cooperate:

I will make all My mountains a path, and My highways will be raised up.
(*Yeshayahu* 49:11; see also 51:9-10; 42:15-16)

However, this Divine intervention will not occur until those who are gathered recognize the Lord of Hosts as their Redeemer and cry out to Him:

Then they cried to God in their trouble; He delivered them out of their distresses. And He led them forth by the right way... (vv. 6, 28)

There are also those who “sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, bound in affliction and iron” – those unable to proceed because they are detained in prison or incapacitated by illness. In this context, we find something that was not mentioned previously:

Because they had rebelled against the words of God, and rejected the counsel of He Who is most high, so that He made their heart submissive with labor... (vv.11-12)

Similarly,

The foolish were afflicted on account of their sinful ways and their iniquities.
They loathed all food and drew near the gates of death.

These are two categories of people whose orientation, at the outset, is not focused on redemption. They are occupied with their personal suffering and deprivation, and see the error of their ways only as they approach death's door. It is only then that they repent and are redeemed:

They stumbled, and there was no one to help.
Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them from their distress. (vv. 12-13)

They drew near the gates of death.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distresses. (vv. 18-19)

These two categories are grouped together in the psalm as the second and third types of people obligated to give thanks to God for their salvation.

These four types of people who give thanks are the four original types of *olim* (immigrants) who returned to *Eretz Yisrael*. The four categories are actually only two: those who actively seek and endeavor to journey there through the desert or by sea, and those who are alienated, finding themselves in camps and prisons or afflicted with severe disease, but ultimately abandoning their stance and repenting. All of this as part of the redemption of the nation and the land. The redemption and blessing that come to the individual and for which he must offer thanks are no more than manifestations of the national redemption.

This psalm does not speak of the redemption of the world, nor of the redemption wrought by Mashiach; it makes no mention of the *Beit Ha-mikdash* or the End of Days. The redemption it speaks of is the ingathering of the exiles “to their desired haven” (v.30) in *Eretz Yisrael*. It is a psalm that speaks in physical, terrestrial terms of a physical, terrestrial redemption.

If we look closely at the text, we find, in addition to the difficulties in arriving in the Land, another two obstacles that the nation encounters once it reaches its desired haven of *Eretz Yisrael*. One is an external, material challenge:

He turned rivers into a wilderness, and springs of water into dry ground;
a fruitful land into barrenness, because of the wickedness of those who dwell in it. (vv. 33-34)

The wicked inhabitants of the land have caused it to become dry and barren. God rectifies this situation, healing the land with extensive agricultural and urban settlement, with sources of life, with fields and fruit:

He turned the wilderness into a pool of water, and dry ground into springs of water.
And He caused the hungry to dwell there, and they establish a city for habitation,
And they sow fields and plant vineyards, and these yield fruit and produce.
He blesses them and they multiply greatly, and He also does not let their cattle decrease. (vv.35-38)

Then comes the final crisis, the most difficult of them all – a crises of diminishment and of leadership:

They are diminished and brought low through oppression, affliction and sorrow,
He pours contempt upon nobles and causes them to wander in chaos with no path. (vv. 39-40)

Confusion and worthlessness, contempt for all honor and for all nobles, are manifestations of the final stage in this psalm on the path to the recognition of independence and the ingathering of the exiles. For the nation to extricate itself from this situation requires wisdom, understanding, and integrity:

The righteous shall see it and shall rejoice... let them observe the kindness of God. (vv. 42-43)

In other words, recognition and acknowledgment of God’s kindness, understanding of what He has done for His people, and joy in response are the keys to healing this crisis – the final hurdle described in the psalm.

Indeed, we must give praise and thanks to God for all of these four salvations, and, beyond these, for every manifestation of the light of redemption during the hundred or so years of our process of redemption and ingathering. The deficiency in our power of acknowledgment and thanks arises from a general weakness of faith, from a lack of sufficient psychological and spiritual insight to observe God's kindness towards us and towards our forefathers and to thank Him wholeheartedly.

But what if one were to argue that our praise and thanks are not whole and complete because the redemption itself is not complete, that a spiritual reawakening is missing and that light and shadow still intermingle in our reality?

Indeed, the light and the shadow are both present. Anyone who takes a sober, honest look at history will see that every stage of light was accompanied by shadow, and corresponding to every instance of praise there was also room for complaint. A person who believes in God's acts, who understands God's kindness, will view the shadows as the inevitable byproduct of the light that shines forth in the morning, before it is noon; he prays and anticipates and does what he can to amplify and increase the light. Recall that the Song of the Sea – the source and prototype for all songs of praise (*Pesachim* 117) – was sung before the Torah was given at Sinai, before the nation entered the land, and before the Temple was built!

One who argues that political freedom without deeper content, without Jewish values and Torah, has no meaning and should not be celebrated should not recite *Hallel* on Pesach. That *Hallel* is sung over the "time of our freedom" – before we were introduced to the concept of Shabbat, before we received the Torah, entered *Eretz Yisrael*, or built the Temple. On the other hand, anyone who views political freedom as our complete redemption – without Shabbat, without Torah, without *Eretz Yisrael*, without a Temple – is like someone who eats *chametz* on Pesach. *Chametz*, the symbol of completeness, is forbidden on Pesach and is only offered in the Temple seven weeks later, on Shavuot, when the Torah was given.

It is fundamental to our religious worldview that redemption be seen and understood as a process, with ups and downs, with light and shadows, with songs of holiday praise and with painful crises. There are four different expressions of redemption, not only one. Leaving exile is redemption – but not a complete redemption. Salvation from mortal danger or suffering is redemption – but not complete redemption. Completion is still a great distance away in many areas. The nation is not yet complete and perfect; the land is not yet complete. The Torah is not complete in the reality of our lives, nor is the redemption. All of these areas are still continuing to develop, with falls and anguish along with great and wondrous miracles. The test is to recognize God's kindness within this partial, conflicted reality; to sing and to give praise for all that we have merited to

see and experience, and not to complain because of the hardships and disappointments.

This has historically been the approach of religious Zionism. Its opponents argued, from the very start, that redemption must be complete, messianic, instantaneous, with perfection of the entire world – or not at all. But the Torah teaches otherwise: the redemption from Egypt came gradually, in stages, as symbolized in the counting of the *Omer*. From the Exodus from Egypt until the building of the First Temple took 480 years! The prophets, likewise, teach:

As in the days of your Exodus from Egypt, I shall show him wonders.
(*Mikha 7*).

Psalm 107, too, teaches otherwise: the redemption manifest in the ingathering of the exiles has its own song of thanks. And the reality of our own lives teaches otherwise; some of the bitterest opponents of Zionism were saved thanks to Zionism – and most never acknowledged this.

Yom Ha-atzmaut is a song of praise to God for a partial redemption, a gradual, imperfect, developing redemption that is nevertheless, by God's kindness, a firm and tangible boulder in our reality and our lives.

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I am convinced that the special prayers and singing of *Hallel* on Yom Ha-atzmaut – not to mention the public ceremonies – are not sufficient as songs of thanksgiving unless they are accompanied by a festive meal. Fanning the barbecue is also not sufficient. It is our custom to recite, at the Yom Ha-atzmaut festive meal, the verses starting with, “And it shall be, when you come to the land...”, including “a wandering Aramean was my father,” including “and He has brought us to this place,” up to “Look down...” (*Devarim 26*), and afterwards to recite the blessing, “*borei peri ha-gafen*” over wine. Then we recite the “*ha-motzi*” blessing over bread and *matza* – commemorating the sacrifice of thanksgiving, which included both *chametz* and *matza* (*Vayikra 7*).