

הלל: Praising God When our People are Captives

During the seder and on each day of Passover, we chant and sing the psalms of Hallel, verses of praise. One section of Hallel calls on us to praise God, “For God is good and God’s steadfast love is eternal! Thus let the redeemed of the Lord say, those God redeemed from adversity” (Psalm 107:1-2). With so many still held captive in Gaza, this declaration may be particularly hard to recite this year.

Our celebration of ancient redemption is weighed down with grief not only over the captives but over all that has been lost. But in addition to its moments of celebration, Hallel is also an expression of hope for a Divine response. The psalms of Hallel remind us that we can pray “from the narrow place” and hope that soon, “God [will] answer with abundance” (Psalm 118:5). Below we have included two additions to the seder that span both poles: the joy of a family reunited and a prayer for the strength to keep hoping for redemption.

What Blessing Do You Say When You Suddenly Get Your Life Back?

Jacky Levy

“The kids have returned!” That is all we can mumble.

While our family is usually very verbal, during this long period when the children were in captivity, everything had shrunk to a few isolated words of hope: “They will come back!” For two months, our inability to speak threw us into the arms of old songs and biblical verses, the Israeli musical feed, and the childhood heritage of our Judaism. Every classic line, every verse, and every word revealed itself anew. Suddenly they were charged with relevance as if they had been written just for this moment.

Ever since we finally saw the faces of the children of Kibbutz Nir Oz, and among them, our family members, Sahar and Erez, the words from the opening of the Psalm recited on Passover: “Praise God! For God is good and God’s steadfast love is eternal!” have been coursing through my heart. “Thus let the redeemed of the Lord say, those God redeemed from adversity” (Psalm 107:1-2).

How often have I recited these well-worn festive words, without taking the time to think about how those redeemed really feel? What does a human being feel and say when he is granted his life anew after having been held hostage in the hands of his enemy? After loved ones have spent days, weeks, or months in a place where their lives are not worth a cent, suddenly the time for a hug arrives—the very opposite of the clutches of “the enemy’s hands.” Apparently, one should say, “Praise God! For God is good and God’s steadfast love is eternal!”

Even though, in this leftwing Zionist family of *kibbutzniks*, I am almost the only one who prays and feels at home among these ancient verses, something like “Praise God!” is exactly what the children’s mother, Hadas, said. She said these words after she was told that they had been liberated and after she roared like a lioness who had just rescued her cubs from the teeth of the jackals. After Hadas stretched up her arms to the heavens (arms that I think have of late become elongated by ten centimeters), she said, “Yes, there is a God!” That is just an updated version of saying “Praise God! For God is good!”

Questions for Conversation

- As you read the verses of Hallel, including the verses about the redeemed captives, are there ways in which these ancient verses resonate differently this year or feel hollow?
- How do you navigate moments when our liturgy or rituals do not align with how you are experiencing the world? How are you framing these texts for yourself and those at the seder with you this year?

Questions for Conversation

- Jacky Levy’s essay powerfully expresses one family’s experience of Jewish liturgy brought to life as a mother was reunited with her kidnapped children. Have you ever experienced a moment like this, of prayer brought to life?
- While Hadas was reunited with her children, their father, Ofer, was not released in the hostage exchanges. How do we sit with the reality of an incomplete redemption?

To Hold Onto Hope Without Letting Go

Oded Mazor (Translated by Ayelet Cohen and adapted by Noam Zion)

Oded Mazor recited this prayer at a demonstration for the release of captives in Jerusalem in 2023.

*“For everything there is a season ... under Heaven...
A time for weeping and a time for laughing,
A time for mourning and a time for dancing ...
A time for war and a time for peace. ” (Ecclesiastes 3: 1,4,8)
In those days when each time collapses into the next
We have no choice but to cry and to laugh with the same eyes
To mourn and to dance at the same time
And the long arc of history is compressed into one day and one hour.
We ask for the strength to contain
The intensity of our bursting hearts,
To rejoice with those who are fortunate to embrace today,
To enfold all of those withdrawing into their longing, their souls trembling,
To hold onto hope without letting go,
And to leave some quiet space for a silent scream.
Please, grant us the room to shatter into pieces,
And the spirit to be rebuilt anew.*

Questions for Conversation

- In this poetic prayer, Oded Mazor reminds us that life is not quite as simple as Ecclesiastes describes. Instead, we often feel many emotions at once. What gives you strength in those moments?
- Here, Oded describes a quiet space for a silent scream. How do you release your built up emotions?