

Hallel

FROM HABIT
TO HIGHLIGHT

*Discover the
deeper story of
Hallel, and the
spiritual strength
it holds.*

RABBI LEVI LEBOVITS

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BRINGING HALLEL TO LIFE

Why are you looking forward to Chanukah?

This is a “select all that apply” question. Here are the possible answers:

- A. The beautiful experience of lighting the menorah
- B. The fun and festiveness of the time
- C. The once-a-year treats
- D. The family togetherness
- E. The many opportunities to recite Hallel

Chances are, you quickly nodded at all or most of options A-D. Then, when you got to E, you did a small double take.

Either you told yourself, *well, um, I am kind of looking forward to Hallel... I'm supposed to, right?* Or you just shrugged because honestly, not really.

Well, join the club! Most of us don't have a deeply inspired relationship with Hallel. Especially not on Chanukah, with the exciting, once-a-year mitzvah of menorah taking center stage.

We know Chanukah was established “k'dei l'hodos ulehallel,” “for the purpose of thanking and praising.” We know the recitation of Hallel is the only other actual mitzvah tied to the Yom Tov of Chanukah. But somehow, it doesn't end up playing

much of a meaningful role in our Chanukah avodah (spiritual work).

Why not? And how can we change that? What needs to change so the mitzvah of Hallel can light us up with enthusiasm like the mitzvah of kindling Chanukah lights already does?

Here's one challenge when it comes to Hallel. We think of it as a collection of different passages. The common threads between them? Well, they're all from the same several chapters of Tehillim, and they all praise Hashem. They make a very nice script for us to do the praising-Hashem thing.

We do our part to connect by having kavanah (intent) in specific lines. But we don't realize there's a beautiful, flowing narrative linking them all.

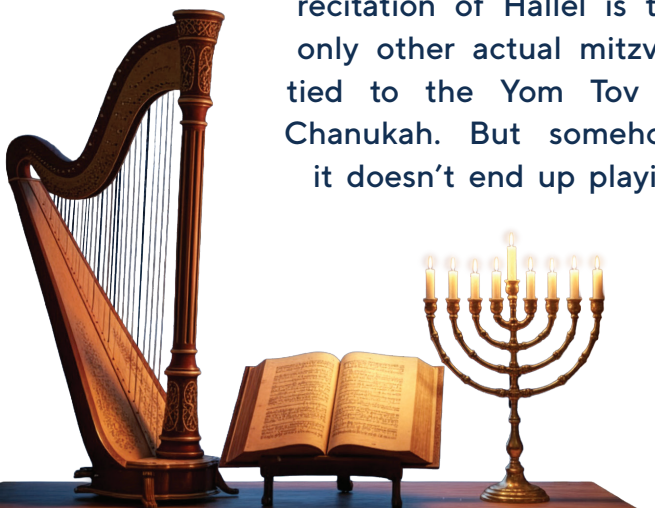
What is Hallel really? It's one big, multi-layered portrait describing our relationship with Hashem. His relationship with Klal Yisrael as a whole, as well as the individual relationship He has with each one of us.

His love for us. His unconditional acceptance. His countless acts of care and kindness. His eternal commitment. Each section is an ode to another facet of how He cares for and cherishes His chosen nation.

Once we understand how to see this picture in the series of passages, Hallel stops being a one-sided song of praise to Hashem.

Instead, it becomes a duet. As we sing the words, we start to hear Hashem's care and devotion reflected back to us. And Hallel becomes a space where we can sit and bask in the depth and delight and strength-giving nourishment of our most precious relationship.

Where we can be touched anew by the extent of Hashem's deep love for us.



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And where we discover new means for doing our part to strengthen the bond.

If Hallel really became that space for you, wouldn't you be excited about saying it on Chanukah?

Culled from Rav Reuven Leuchter shlita's shiurim, this Hallel guidebook will illuminate the cohesive picture within the tefillah we've probably never seen before. It will strengthen both our understanding and our tangible experience of our relationship with Hashem. And it will kindle within us new lights of chizuk and uplift that will warm us throughout the year.

Levi Lebovits
Chanukah 5786

הללוי-ה הללו עבדי ה'

***Praise Hashem! Give praise,
servants of Hashem***

So. Hallel is more than a nice collection of praises and thank-yous. It's an affirmation and an ode to the Jewish people's special relationship with Hashem.

What is that relationship exactly? Hallel starts by labeling us Avdei Hashem – "Give praise, servants of Hashem, praise the name of Hashem." What are avdei Hashem? What does this role mean for us?

It doesn't just mean we exist to do what Hashem tells us to. It means He's charged us with a mission. He's gifted us with the privilege of serving as His representatives on earth. His agents in helping the world fulfill its purpose – recognizing and drawing close to Him.

The next line of Hallel, our response to the first, shows we understand our role.

"May the name of Hashem be blessed forever and ever! From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of Hashem is praised."

Why do we specify the entirety of time and earthly space? Because it's our job to reveal Hashem's goodness in every detail of the world.

It's also more than a job. It's an inborn quality. It's what sets us apart from the rest of humanity.

"High above all the nations is Hashem, His glory is above the heavens." The other nations, we point out, see Hashem as detached from the world. To them, He is far away in the heavens, exalted beyond what lowly humanity can connect to.



But we? We know differently. "There is no one like Hashem our G-d, Who dwells on high, [yet] descends to look upon heaven and earth." Despite Hashem's unfathomable exaltedness, we know with clarity that He's also fully present in our lives. Intimately involved with every detail of them.

And we've always known this – since Hashem "lifted the destitute from the garbage heaps" during the birth of our nation, Yetzias Mitzrayim (the Exodus).

In the years before the Exodus, the descendants of Yaakov had sunk so low that we were almost indistinguishable from the spiritually sullied Egyptians. Even the angels questioned Hashem's plan to redeem us.

But He knew better. And so He lifted us out of the grime of Egypt and "seat[ed] us with nobles, the nobles of His nation." He reinstated us to our exalted position as children of the Avos – which, like "a mother with her children," is essentially our rightful place.

We know who we are. And we're so grateful, we burst forth with thanks. Thanks for the privilege of serving as Hashem's representatives in this world. And for the unique capacity He has given us to connect to and recognize His presence in every aspect of our lives.



בצאת ישראל ממצרים

When Yisrael went out of Egypt

Last passage was our turn. Now, we start to learn about Hashem's side of the relationship. And we'll pull an entire facet of its depth and strength from just one word. "Mamshelosav" – "the ones He rules over."

Usually, Hashem refers to Himself as our melech, our king. Why does the verse use the word "moshel" or "ruler" here instead?

We're used to understanding the word "moshel" as a downgrade. As the Vilna Ga'on famously explains, a melech, or king, rules with his nation's loyal consent, while the word "moshel" refers to a despot who rules by force, regardless of his subjects' approval. We're told in Tehillim 22:29, "Ki laShem hamelucha, u'moshel bagoyim." We've accepted Hashem as our beloved King, while to the nations of the world, He's a moshel, ruling over them whether they like it or not.

Why is the verse suddenly putting this seemingly undesirable label on Hashem's relationship with us?

Because when "mamshelosav" is used in reference to us, it means something beautiful.

In the first section, we defined our connection by our role as His servants.

Which might lead us to conclude that if we stop doing our job, if we throw off His yoke, chas v'shalom, our special relationship ends.

That isn't right, the word "moshel" teaches us. Hashem will always maintain His rule over us – and His relationship with us. We'll always be avdei Hashem. Even when we use our bechira (free will) – the tool He gave us to reveal His glory – to

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turn away from Him. Even when we make mistakes.

Our bond with Hashem is unbreakable, no matter what we may do to strain it.

"Why do you flee, O sea, and you, the Jordan, turn your back? O mountains that skip like rams? O hills like young lambs?" Why did the Red Sea and the Jordan River split for us? Why did the mountains in the Desert flatten themselves out?

Hashem set a natural order for the world. Generally, it's immutable. So why did He allow nature to so wildly break its laws for us?

"Milifnei Eloka Yaakov – before the G-d of Yaakov." Because of this unbreakable bond. Because our existence supersedes anything and everything. The laws of nature. Our own sins.

He'll stop at nothing to preserve us, and our chances of success in the mission He's entrusted to us.

This holds true for the Jewish people at large – and for each of us individually.

There are times when we feel we've done too much. We're too far away. We've broken something irrevocably between us and Hashem.

This passage in Hallel assures us – that can never be the case. His commitment to us is everlasting. We're "stuck" with Him, still held in His embrace, no matter how far we fall.

לא לנו ה' לא לנו

Not for our sake, Hashem, not for our sake

After hearing about how the Almighty King of Kings has singled us out and elevated us with such deep interest and devotion, we might be expected to react with some self-glorification. *Hm, yes, we're really something else.*

But in the next passage of Hallel, we rush to express a very different – and very Jewish – thought.

"Not for our sake, Hashem, not for our sake. For the sake of your name [do we] give glory."

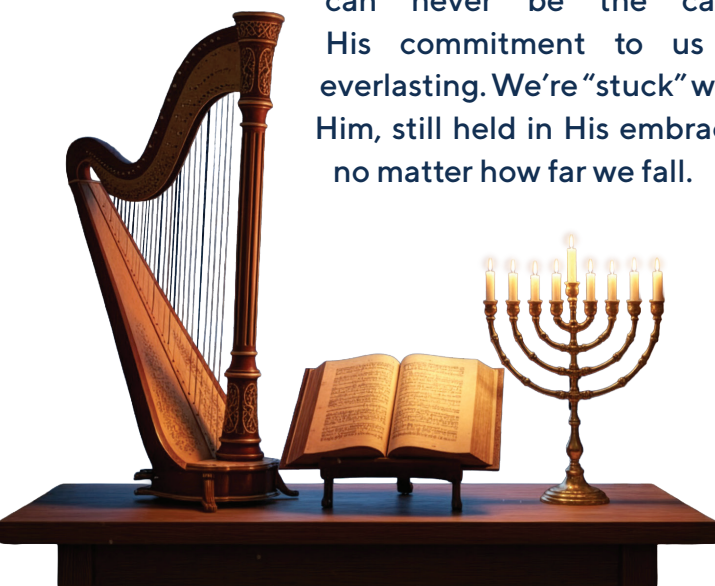
We have no identity separate from Hashem. Yes, Hashem has showered us with blessing and made us special – but we're the first ones to declare that it's not about us. We are solely and entirely here to glorify His name. We're nothing on our own – our identity is completely bound up in Him.

And we're fully dependent, we add, "on Your kindness [and] on Your truth."

The rest of the world developed naturally, according to the nation-development process Hashem set in place during creation. We didn't. We came about completely supernaturally. Through Hashem's reversal of the Imahos' (foremothers') barrenness. Through miracles like the Exodus from Egypt, Splitting of the Sea and the revelation at Har Sinai.

Since we aren't part of this world, it can't sustain us. Our sole lifesource is Hashem and His direct kindness.

And just as we don't depend on the world for nourishment, we don't need to relate to our circumstances in a logical, worldly way.



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The nations of the world, with their earthly essence, look at the tremendous suffering we've endured throughout history, and taunt us: "Where is your G-d now?"

And we, secure in our relationship to the world as nothing but a veneer for the eternal, true world of spirituality, respond calmly: "Our G-d is in the heavens. Whatever He desires, He does." His lofty decisions can't be comprehended in this world. But we can handle that, because we know we belong beyond this world as well.

You are what you rely on, we then explain. You, worldly nations, believe only in concrete, externally-apparent G-dliness. Which is why you serve tangible "silver and gold, man-made creations."

But they are spiritually lifeless – and "so will be their makers," those who declare allegiance to them, who choose them as their lifesource.

Our G-d, our lifesource, may be intangible. But it is eternal. And so we, alone among the nations, are promised the "help and shield" of eternal life.

ה' זכרנו יברך

Hashem Who has remembered us will bless

Just like the kind of help and protection Hashem grants us is supernatural, the manner – and the volume – in which He blesses us is also supernatural.

In the middle of this paragraph, we describe Hashem as "Oseh shamayim va'aretz," "Creator of heaven and earth." That's because Hashem embedded a tremendous amount of blessing into the natural order of the world.

Crops grow. New generations are born. The world is filled with abundance. And that abundance sustains the people Hashem placed on earth.

All people except for us. We aren't sustained by the "natural" blessings of the world. We're sustained directly by Hashem. "Beruchim aтем laShem" – "Blessed are you, the Jewish people, by Hashem."

What's deeply special about receiving our blessing directly from Hashem?

Firstly, the closeness and love our unique position reflects. Take the words, "Hashem, Who has remembered us, will bless us."

Why do we use the word "remember"? Are there times Hashem doesn't remember us? Does He only bless us when He does?

Of course not. The concept of remembering helps us see Hashem like that doting parent who, whenever their child's name comes to mind, feels a gush of love and a desire to do good for them. (Or like that doting grandparent who can't pass a toy store without going in and getting something new for the grandchildren.)



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That's how beloved we are to Him. Simply "thinking" about us fills Him with desire to bless us.

Our special closeness also affords us a much higher level of individual attention: "Blessed is the house of Yisrael. Blessed is the house of Aharon. Blessed are those who fear Hashem..." Each segment of Klal Yisrael gets its own unique brand of blessing.

And it's not just the frequency and the individualization of the blessings that's special. Hashem's direct blessings also come in unique levels of abundance.

"Yosef Hashem aleichem, aleichem v'al bineichem" – "Hashem will add onto you, you and your children." Physically and spiritually, the Jewish people have always enjoyed abundance beyond the natural standards of the world.

In Egypt, our population ballooned from 70 to around 15 million in a few hundred years. The constant regrowth of Jewish communities throughout history is an awesome phenomenon. Beyond the specific blessing of children, we've been showered with supernatural financial blessing, and every kind of worldly success. And, spiritually, Hashem has granted us access to an abundance of kedusha.

"As for the heavens – the heavens are Hashem's. But the earth He has given to man." Hashem dwells high in the heavens, and humanity

on earth. But He's given His privileged nation the ability to bridge the gap. To transcend physicality, latch onto the Source of true life, and merit His blessing.

We've been vested with a unique power to spiritually impact the world. "The dead do not praise Hashem, nor do those who descend into silence. But we bless Hashem forever and ever."

The nations of the world can certainly choose to praise Hashem. But, connected as they are to the physical world as their lifeline, their spiritual impact ends with their deaths.

We Jews, however, who've been granted connection to the world of eternal life, praise forever. Our spiritual impact lingers in the world once we leave it – endlessly abundant, like everything else about Hashem's direct blessings.

We've all had experiences where it felt like Hashem was reaching down directly and bestowing overflowing blessing. Those events were small tastes of the special manner in which Hashem blesses His precious nation – more personally and more abundantly than anyone else in the world.

אהבתי כי
ישמע ה' את
קולי תחנוני

***I love [Him] for Hashem hears
my voice, my supplications***

In the last four sections, we've delved into many ways Hashem has brought us close to Him.

But He's also done more. He's vested us with the power to draw Him closer to us.



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"I love that Hashem hears my voice, my supplications."

Hashem has gifted us the ability to arouse His interest in us through tefillah. Like we see in the story of Yetzias Mitzrayim, when "we cried out to Hashem the G-d of our forefathers, and Hashem heard our voice, and He saw our affliction and our toil and our pressure." (Devarim 26:7)

Why? "Because He has inclined His ear to me." We don't really need to remind Him of our needs. But He gave us prayer because He so dearly loves hearing from us.

Like a father bending to hear his young son, charmed by the boy's sweet voice and filled with desire to grant his request, Hashem "bends His ear" to listen to our prayers.

"When ropes of death encircle me, and the confines of the grave have found me" – no matter how dire the situation – "I call out in the name of Hashem."

We recognize that "Hashem shows us favor and is righteous," no matter the outcome of our tefillos. We acknowledge "our G-d is merciful" and does everything in our best interest, even when things aren't to our liking. Yet we feel perfectly confident calling out to Him – confident that He wants to hear from us no matter what.

Hashem's mercy extends even to the "fools" – those who don't recognize Him, or whose yetzer hara has overwhelmed their logic –

and to those "destitute" of mitzvos. And He listens. And He saves.

"Return, my soul, to your rest, for Hashem has been kind to you." With renewed clarity in these principles – that we can always call out to Hashem, and that His answer will always bring us an outcome perfectly suited to our best interests – we gain new peace of mind. We reach a state of menucha, contentment, secure in the knowledge that Hashem will indeed "save my soul from death, my eyes from tears, and my feet from stumbling."

No longer do we think, as we might have "in [our] hasty assessment," that man is worthless, a meaningless "bundle of lies." We've regained confidence that we can "walk before Hashem" – that He's gifted us with a relationship where we play a real, significant role.

We can draw the Almighty G-d into a closer connection with us. And we have that opportunity every time we open a siddur or murmur a tefillah.

מה אשיב לה'

How can I repay Hashem

If we're honest with ourselves, we may find we don't totally relate to the lofty concepts we've been discussing. But seeing them laid out and explained, even within the limited scope of this little guidebook, we can't help but be impressed by the magnitude and scale of what Hashem has given us. We can't help genuinely saying, "Wow." He's given us so, so much.

An elevated position uniquely close to Him. Ironclad commitment no matter how we strain the relationship. Constant protection ensuring us eternal life.



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Uniquely abundant blessing in every area.

Beyond all that, He's invited us to build closeness with Him. Invested us with a power and a level of connection that, given the stature difference between us, boggles the mind.

"What can I return to Hashem in light of all the kindnesses He's bestowed upon me?"

When we're gifted, we want to give back. So we ask ourselves: what can we little humans give back to the all-powerful Master of the universe, Who lacks nothing?

We can give Him ourselves.

Giving Him ourselves starts with recognition. Recognition of who we are to Him, and who He is to us.

"I'll raise the cup of salvation and call out in the name of Hashem." We extend full-hearted thanks for everything He does for us – attributing it, of course, to His name.

Then we move a step further. Because the best way to thank Hashem for His blessings is by using them for the purpose for which He's given them to us. "I will pay my vows to Hashem," we pledge, dedicating our possessions, strengths, all the gifts He's showered us with to His service.

"The death of His pious ones is precious in His eyes." Why? Because those who've lived life according to Hashem's will return to Him more developed, more refined, more perfected

than they were when they began life.

That's the third and most complete level of repaying Hashem "with ourselves."

"I am your servant, the son of your maidservant," we declare. Hashem, we recognize we're fully and completely yours, by our essence and by our earliest origins. So please, we ask, "release us from the bonds" holding us back from actualizing that essence. That's all we really want – to fully grow into our potential as His servants. To "offer thanksgiving services" and "call out in the name of Hashem." And to do those things in the most complete, elevated way: in "the courtyards of the House of Hashem, in the midst of Yerushalayim."

No, we don't currently have that ultimate opportunity. But we can still do our part to, on some tiny level, give back to Hashem. Every time we step out of our comfort zone for His Torah or His people. Every time we stretch a bit more than is comfortable.

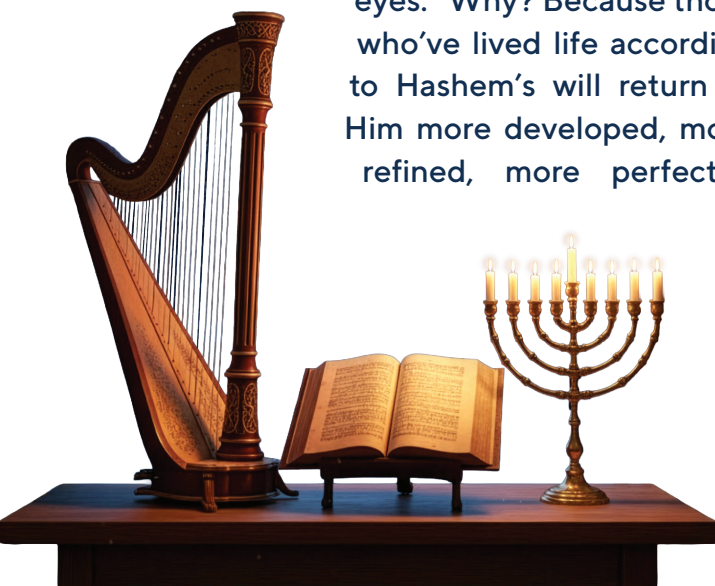
When we push ourselves to "give" to Him, we offer Him the currency He prizes more than anything.

הללו את ה' כל גוים

Praise Hashem, all nations

More than once, we've explored the difference between our perception of Hashem and that of the other nations. How they look at Him as lofty and removed, while we sense His involvement in every detail of our world and our lives.

But there will come a time when the nations, too, will fully grasp the extent of Hashem's sovereignty



within His world. And they'll come to that clarity because of us, the Jewish people.

When the final redemption comes, "Hashem's kindness toward us will overwhelm us." The chesed He's done for His people will become dazzlingly clear. The nations of the world will rub their eyes in astonishment as they finally understand that this nation, whom they watched face near-destruction time and time again, was in the loving hands of their devoted Creator all the while.

They'll be forced to admit the truth, and to proclaim it aloud - "The truth of G-d is eternal."

It might be hard to imagine that day today. The world is drowning in denial and disdain for Hashem. And from all angles, they're pelting His people - whose job it is to spread awareness of His truth - with noxious, baseless hatred.

But we know this day will come. So we praise Hashem today. We know the world will one day see the truth. And we're grateful for the privilege of serving as the vehicle to reveal it.

הודו לה' כי טוב

Give thanks to Hashem for He is good

These next verses emphasize the same phrase four times. "Hodu laShem ki tov, ki l'olam chasdo." "Praise Hashem because He is good; His kindness endures forever."

Why the many underscores? And haven't we already mentioned Hashem's eternal kindness in previous sections of Hallel?

Yes we have. But we're emphasizing it again - and again - to remind ourselves that His kindness doesn't just endure forever. It endures consistently.

What does that mean?

Many out there walk around with a sense that Hashem can be a cruel G-d. That sure, He showers us often with blessings, but occasionally, He's out to get us.

In these verses, we work on rooting out that misconception. No. Hashem's kindness is constant. He always does chesed. Always looks out for our good. Even when things feel difficult.

Yes, we've endured agonizing times as a nation. But we realize Hashem's fundamental approach is one of chesed. And that the difficulties, no matter how we perceive them, were provided truly and consistently in our best interest.

Klal Yisrael as a whole is called upon to reaffirm this. Then we turn to the Beis Aharon - who serve Hashem through chesed - and the Yirei Hashem, those who serve Hashem out of fear. And both agree - Hashem's is constantly, unfalteringly, purely full of chesed.



מן המצר קראתי י-ה

From the straits I called out to Hashem...

In this last, grand section of Hallel (which we'll split in two for reading convenience), we take a second look at all the insights we've gathered – and make a foundational paradigm shift.

The greatest gift of our special relationship with Hashem isn't one of the benefits that stems from it. It isn't the privilege, the commitment, the protection, the blessing, the future prospect of salvation.

The greatest gift is the relationship itself.

The first several lines of this section form a buildup toward this realization. First, we recount how "From narrow straits I called out to Hashem; He answers me with expansiveness." We describe how, before we call out to Hashem, we're surrounded by dead ends, feeling stuck. Then we place our trust in Him – and unending possibilities open before us.

Fortified by our reliance on Hashem, we realize, "Hashem is with me; I have nothing to fear. What can man do to me?" Even man,

vested with bechira (free will), is powerless to harm us without Hashem's consent.

A life of bitachon, we affirm,
carries so much more

comfort and peace than a life dependent on man. "It's better to rely on Hashem than on man... or on nobles."

No matter how closely the nations of the world "surround me, in the name of Hashem I cut them down." The nations of the world might come ever closer to destroying us, but we know all the while Hashem will destroy them and miraculously save us.

We also know the source of our salvation – the "strength and praise" we express to Hashem. The bitachon, the certainty, that He is protecting us and will continue to protect us. Our bitachon leads us to declare with certainty: "I will not die – rather, I will live and relate the deeds of Hashem."

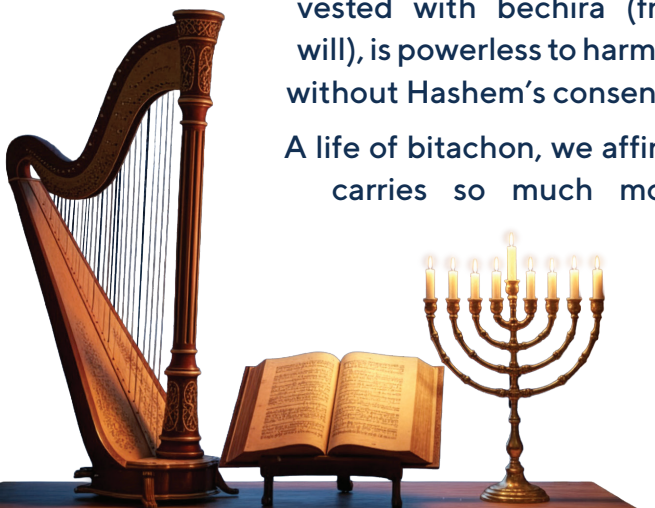
And then comes the paradigm shift: that bitachon, closeness to Hashem, isn't just the trigger of our salvation. It *is* our salvation.

How do we express this realization?

First, "Pischu li shaarei tzedek," We ask that "the gates of righteousness – bitachon – open up," allowing us to enter within them and thank Hashem." Our ultimate desire has now become the ability to live our lives within a bubble of bitachon, constantly connected to Hashem and thanking Him for this ultimate goodness, this closeness with Him. To live the lives of the "righteous [who] enter through it" – who exist in an elevated reality where closeness to Hashem is everything.

Next, we thank Hashem "because You have answered me, and become my salvation." Yes, physical salvation hasn't necessarily come yet, but we aren't even focused on physical salvation anymore.

We're just grateful for the precious relationship Hashem has granted us. The connection we develop when we call out to Him.



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When the final redemption comes, we repeat, the nations of the world will see the extent of our closeness with the King of Kings. "The stone the builders disdained will become the cornerstone." History's hated pariah, the Jewish people, will be recognized as G-d's elevated representatives, the very anchor of His connection with the world.

And as they digest this new reality, we will bask in the wonder of it. "This came from Hashem!," we'll declare, awestruck at the miracles Hashem will employ to reveal His sovereignty in His world.

On that day, when our priceless relationship with Hashem will be fully revealed, we'll "rejoice and be glad."

With this image in our minds, we turn to Hashem and cry urgently, "Please, Hashem, save now! Bring us success now!" Hasten this day when Your Kingship will be universally revealed – along with the full extent of Your bond with Your eternal people.

ברוך הבא
בשם ה'

***Blessed is he who comes
in the name of Hashem***

As Hallel reaches its culmination, we take a few moments to live in the glorious future of redemption we've been describing and davening for.

"Blessed is the one who comes to serve Hashem – we bless you in the House of Hashem." The Beis Hamikdash, the ultimate conduit from which Hashem's blessing can flow into the world, will be ours to visit and draw blessing from.

Once we've reached this point, we'll proclaim with dazzling clarity: "Hashem is Kel," a G-d of pure kindness – a kindness that "illuminates [our lives]." And we'll fullheartedly commit to "binding ourselves to His alter," serving Him consistently and dedicatedly.

And then, with the full beauty and meaning of Hallel reverberating in our minds, we stop speaking as a member of the greater Jewish people, and start speaking personally.

"Keili Atah, v'odekah." I personally feel You are a G-d of pure kindness – and so I personally thank you.

"Elokai, aromemeka." I personally recognize Your intimate involvement in my life – and I will wholeheartedly exalt You with my praise.

And then, once more, we repeat, "Thank Hashem for He is good; His kindness endures forever." Because this verse sums up all our thoughts, feelings, and newfound wisdom.

Hashem's unbounded kindness to His people is everlasting and unwavering. And, now fully conscious of its greatness, we thank Him from the depths of our hearts.



OUR HALLEL TAKEAWAY

We've learned so much on this journey through Hallel.

About the extent and depth of our relationship with Hashem.

About the tremendously elevated position we've been gifted – the ability to “walk with Hashem” as valued members of a relationship.

About how closeness with our Creator isn't just an enhancement to life – it's the most desirable thing in life. How, whatever our circumstances, living in a state of connection to Hashem means living in a state of salvation.

It's a lot to internalize, and a life's work to do so fully. But we can all take small steps forward by repeating the following mantra to ourselves:

Hashem is good. I am good. And I want closeness with Him more than anything else.

Use this mantra today. Repeat it tomorrow. On all the days of Chanukah. And every day afterwards.

And the core messages of Hallel will come to life inside us.



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