

Cup of Salvation

A Powerful Journey
Through King David's
Psalms of Praise

RABBI PESACH WOLICKI

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PSALM 113

HOW GOD RUNS OUR WORLD

Psalm 113, the opening of the *Hallel* psalms of Praise serves as an introduction to the five other psalms that follow.

The theme of this psalm is the extent of God's total control and mastery over all of human affairs.

In the first three verses the psalmist makes a general call to praise and bless the Lord.

Verses 4 and 5 then describe God's dominance over the fates and wills of nations. This is the theme of psalms 114 and 115. This is hinted at by the reference to God as ELOHENU - *our God* - in verse 5. This name of God, as opposed to *the Lord*, appears later in these psalms only in reference to God's special relationship to Israel; see 114:7 and 115:2-3.

The final four verses of psalm 113 tell of the Lord's concern, involvement, and willingness to perform miracles even with regard to the lives of individuals who are in need no matter how insignificant those people may seem in the grand scheme of history.

Each of these themes will be expanded upon in later psalms in the *Hallel* series. The Lord's dominion over the fates of nations, and Israel in particular, will be expanded upon in Psalms 114, 115, and 117; the Lord's redemptive concern for the individual who is suffering in Psalms 116 and 118. And as we will see, these two themes are synthesized as the *Hallel* reaches its conclusion.

God is master of nations, of history, and at the same time He shows compassion for the poor person or the childless mother suffering quietly at home. He is as lofty as He is humble.

113:1 *What's in a name?*

*Praise the Lord. Praise,
O servants of the Lord; praise
the Name of the Lord*

Why praise a name?

What does it mean to praise the *Name of the Lord*? Why not just say that we must praise God and leave it at that? What does it even mean to praise a *name*? Would I care that much if a friend of mine or an admirer told me that they admire me not only as person but they admire *my name* as well? "You're a great guy. And you know what? You've got a great *name* too!"

And yet, frequently Scripture refers to the *Name* of God as though God's Name has importance over and above God Himself. To cite just one example among many,

The Lord will be king over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be One and *His Name* will be One. (Zachariah 14:9)

I understand what it means that the Lord will be One. There is only one God. Power must not be attributed to anything else, that God alone will be recognized as the supreme being. Well, here's our question. What is added by saying that "His *Name* will be One"?

It can't possible mean that God only has one name because we know that that is not true. God has many names that appear throughout Scripture.

A name means that people know me

Think about what a name is. If you lived alone on a desert island you would have no need for a name. In fact, you wouldn't really have a name at all. I mean, you'd *have* a name but only in theory. It would never get used. A *name* is a means by which we are known and addressed by

others. To have a *name* means that someone is interacting with me and recognizes me. More specifically, it means that my identity - what makes me who I am and what defines me is *known*. This is what makes a *name* different from an *attribute*.

An *attribute* is one aspect of who I am. For example, my kids call me *Dad*. Lots of people are called *Dad*. *Dad* is not a unique name to me. Moreover, it is only *one aspect of my identity*. *Dad* is not who I am to my wife or to my students. The title *Dad* refers to *one attribute* of my total self. My *name* is a different story. My *name* is who I am. My *name* encompasses the fullness of my persona. *Pesach Wolicki* is my name. *Pesach Wolicki* is a Dad, a husband, a Rabbi, an excellent scrambled egg maker (according to my kids), etc. *Dad* and *Rabbi* are *attributes*; *Pesach Wolicki*, on the other hand, is not an attribute; it's my *name*. It is the fullness of my self.

To sum up, a *name* means two things:

1. It means that others see me and are interacting with me. (Think of the desert island).
2. It means that the *fullness of who I am* is perceived and not merely a single attribute.

Praise God vs. Praise His Name

Now we can understand the difference between praising God and praising *His Name*. When I praise God I am praising the creator and ruler of heaven and earth – *whether I see Him or not*. When I praise *God's Name* I take it a step further. I am saying, in effect,

1. *God is perceptible*, I see Him in the world and in my life. I am interacting with Him.
2. *All of His attributes are One*. I am praising the totality of who God is. All of the different aspects of His creation, of life, and of the complicated reality around me are One. They are all contained within Him. They are all parts of the same ultimate Will, plan, and purpose. They are all expressions of the same Living God.

Why *servants* of the Lord?

With this in mind, we can understand why our verse begins by calling on the *servants of the Lord* to praise Him. *Servants*, by definition, are subservient to the will of their master. Servants do not follow their own will. They are *servants*. It is not their understanding or free will that determines their behavior. They subordinate their own will to the will of their master. In other words, referring to people of faith as *servants of the Lord* focuses on the fact that part of faith in God is the willingness to negate ones own understanding and will in favor of the will of God – even though it is beyond our understanding.

To accept and praise the fullness of who God is, one must relate to God as a servant and be willing to embrace what is unknowable to limited human beings.

Praise, O servants of the Lord. Praise the Name of the Lord. When we accept and praise the fullness of the Lord as servants; when we express our faith in the fact that all attributes of God are One; it is then that through us *His Name*; i.e. *the fullness of the Lord* is praised.

As a servant of the Lord I praise and worship the fullness of God – His Name – even beyond the limits of my human perception.

113:2 *Does God need our blessings?*

*May the Lord's name be blessed
from this time to Eternity.*

What blessings does God need?

Does God need to be blessed by us? What are we actually doing when we bless God? I understand what it means to *bless* another person. It usually means either that I am bestowing gifts upon them or that I am offering a prayer for their success and well-being. When we speak of *blessing* someone we mean that we have something to offer them that will benefit them. Colloquially, someone is *blessed* with wealth or with a particular talent.

PSALM 114

THE MIRACLES OF ISRAEL

Psalm 113 introduced us to the fact that God governs the world both on the historical scale as well as the personal individual level. Psalm 114 turns our attention to two new themes. The People of Israel and God's miracles.

In the first two verses of this psalm we will be introduced to Israel's dual identity as both a separate people set apart and distinct as well as a nation charged with the universal mission to bring knowledge of God to all humanity.

The psalm then turns to the subject of God's miraculous upending of the natural order in order to save His people. The splitting of the Reed Sea, the revelation at Sinai, and Moses' bringing forth water from stone serve as examples of nature bowing to the will of God.

No human being was alive to witness the God's creation of the universe in Genesis. From Genesis alone we would only know God as creator by faith in His word. The Exodus from Egypt and the wholesale upending of the natural order demonstrated unequivocally to all humanity that God, and God alone, is Master and Creator of all.

Psalm 114

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| בְּצֵאת יִשְׂרָאֵל, מִמִּצְרַיִם;
בֵּית יַעֲקֹב, מֵעַם לֵעָז. | א | 1. <i>When Israel came out of
Egypt, the house of Jacob from
a people of foreign tongue</i> |
| הַיְתָה יְהוּדָה לְקֹדֶשׁוֹ;
יִשְׂרָאֵל, מִמְּשֻׁלֹתָיו. | ב | 2. <i>Judah was His holy one, Israel
His dominions.</i> |
| הַיָּם רָאָה, וַיָּנֹס;
הַיַּרְדֵּן, יָסָב לְאַחֹר. | ג | 3. <i>The sea looked and fled, the
Jordan turned back;</i> |

- ד הַהָרִים, רָקְדוּ כְּאַיִלִים;
גְּבֻעוֹת, כְּבָנֵי צֹאן.
- ה מֵה לָד הַיָּם, כִּי תָנוּס;
הַיַּרְדֵּן, תִּסָּב לְאַחֹר.
- ו הַהָרִים, תִּרְקְדוּ כְּאַיִלִים;
גְּבֻעוֹת, כְּבָנֵי צֹאן.
- ז מִלִּפְנֵי אֲדוֹן, חוּלֵי אֶרֶץ;
מִלִּפְנֵי, אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב.
- ח הַהֶפְכִי הַצּוּר אֶגֶם מַיִם;
חֲלֵמֵיֶשׁ, לְמַעְיָנוּ מַיִם.
4. *The mountains danced like rams, the hills like young sheep*
5. *What is there to you, O sea that you fled; O Jordan that you turned backward;*
6. *O mountains that you dance like rams; O hills like young sheep?*
7. *Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob*
8. *Who transforms the rock into a pool of water, the hard rock into springs of water.*

114:1 *Israel and the House of Jacob*

*When Israel came out of Egypt,
the house of Jacob from a
people of foreign tongue,*

Psalm 114 is made up entirely of verses that appear to repeat themselves, with each verse composed of two phrases that seem to be simply poetic redundancy.

Notice that this verse is actually an incomplete sentence. In other words, it will be completed with the verse that comes next. This is particularly interesting because of the three terms used for the people of Israel in these verses. Here, in our verse we have *Israel* as well as the *House of Jacob*. In the next verse we see the term *Judah* and then *Israel* again. We will deal with *Judah* in the comments to verse 2. For now we will deal with the two titles for God's chosen people that appear in verse 1.

Israel vs House of Jacob

Israel. House of Jacob. These two titles for the chosen people appear throughout scripture. In fact, there are two verses that describe the nation of Israel during their sojourn in the Sinai desert that both of these names in the same verse.

The first is right after the exodus from Egypt when the nation arrives at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah.

Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the House of Jacob and what you are to tell the *People of Israel*: (Exodus 19:3)

These two names appear a second time when Bilaam the wicked prophet is overcome by the spirit of God and, despite his original evil intent to curse Israel, he blesses Israel:

How beautiful are your tents, *Jacob*; your tabernacles, *Israel*!
(Numbers 24:5)

Tents vs. Tabernacles

Notice that Bilaam refers to *tents* in relation to *Jacob* and *tabernacles* in relation to *Israel*.

How beautiful are your tents, Jacob; your tabernacles, Israel!
(Numbers 24:5)

These words bring to mind the words of Genesis 25:27 where, as youngsters, Jacob is described as a *dweller of tents* in contrast to his brother Esau; *a hunter and a man of the field*.

Tents are homes. They are private places. A *tabernacle*, on the other hand, is very public. The entire purpose of a tabernacle is the glory of God. It is open to all to come to worship and be inspired.

Tent = Private dwelling
 Tabernacle = Public place of worship

The *public covenantal relationship with God* is implied by the *tabernacle*. Anyone who has faith in God and devotes their life to serving Him understands that the focus of that service is to bring knowledge of God to the entire earth. *Israel* is a name that implies this grand mission. It is derived from two words. SaR – meaning *prince* or *minister*, and EL – *God*. *Israel* connotes the *ministering, influencing* role of God's people.

The House of Jacob;... your tents Jacob. *Jacob* describes the *private relationship to God*. Any devoted servant of God confronts challenges on a daily basis. It is true that the primary task in serving God is to influence, to lead, and to help others get close to Him. But there can be no influence without interaction. It is impossible to repair the world without engaging in it. And with that engagement, people of faith often find themselves in the position of being influenced by the darker parts of society, even as they try to make the world a better place.

To face this challenge we need to be like *Jacob; dwellers of tents*. To stay strong in one's religious values; to have the strength to continue to influence the world for the good, we must sometimes *retreat from it*. We must travel inward to our homes; to our families; to our *tents*.

Israel = Public, ministering role = Tabernacle
 Jacob = Private relationship to God; retreat = Tents
 from the outside influences

When Israel came out of Egypt,

Israel the strong. Israel the influential. Israel who sings the song at the sea and testifies to the world about the glory of God, emerges from Egypt, land of slavery and bondage to humans who declare themselves to be gods. This is the leadership role that all who call on God and have faith in Him are called upon to play. To wrestle the forces of evil and to win. To be princes and ministers and a light to the world. To be *Israel*.

the house of Jacob from a people of foreign tongue

How do we survive when the society that surrounds us seems to be speaking a *foreign tongue*? How do we stay strong in our convictions and faith when the culture in which we live is driven by values that threaten us? This verse provides a guide for any person of faith who wants to impact the world without losing himself in the process. We retreat into the *house of Jacob*.

The external redemption – our ability to influence and inspire others – must be built on the foundation of the private redemption. The redemption of the family; of the home.

114:2 *The Kingdom of Priests*

*Judah was His holy one, Israel
His dominions.*

Here, as in the previous verse, two different names are used for the Jewish people. While it is true that Judah is only one tribe of the twelve tribes of Israel, the name *Judah* can sometimes refer to the entire nation due to the fact that the royal lineage comes from Judah. Since a king represents the entire nation and makes decisions for the entire nation it is fair to refer to the whole nation as *Judah*.

The name *Judah* in this verse refers to the entire people. This is clear from the context. The previous verse used two names for the entire people; *Israel* and the *House of Jacob*. In this verse the name *Israel* appears again in the second phrase of the verse. As I pointed out at the beginning of Psalm 114, the verses of this entire psalm are made up of poetically repetitive couplets describing the same idea in different words with different nuances of meaning. So clearly *Judah* in this verse refers to the entire nation.

So what does this name for the people of Israel imply? What makes it different than the name *Israel*? Furthermore, why does the verse state that *Judah* was God's *holy one* and *Israel* His *dominions*?

PSALM 115

THE MISSION TO DESTROY FALSE GODS

The previous psalm described how God upended the laws of nature and performed great miracles for the benefit of His people Israel.

Now in Psalm 115 the psalmist opens with the emphatic statement, *Not to us!* With this the tone and theme are set for this entire Psalm; that the goal of God's blessings upon those who serve Him is the increase in knowledge of Him on earth.

The first eight verses of the psalm serve as a kind of polemic arguing against pagan beliefs in and worship of the forces of nature. The psalmist attacks both the futility of worship of these forces as well as the spiritual damage done to those who engage in such worship.

Beginning in verse 9 the psalm focuses on those who serve God and carry out the mission of bringing knowledge and glory of Him to all humanity. They trust in Him. He assists and protects them. Beyond protecting them, He increases them and blesses them thus enabling them to be even more successful in their mission.

The final two verses conclude by circling back to where Psalm 115 began. Those who put their faith in the mortal, finite, natural system are doomed. They can not appreciate, praise, or connect to the infinite God, Master of past, present and future.

115:1 *Why the Exodus was a Certainty*

*Not to us, O Lord, not to us,
but to Your name give glory, for
the sake of your kindness; for
the sake of your truth."*

Literally... it's NOT about us!

The previous psalm described the many great miracles that God performs for the redemption of His chosen nation. Now, in Psalm 115, the psalmist wants to make it clear that the purpose of all of this miraculous dominance over the natural order is not the chosen nation at all. The victory and survival of His people is actually not an end in itself. In truth, the supernatural survival and victory of God's people over their enemies is a means to the higher goal – the glory of God over all the earth. This is actually an obvious point. Think about it.

The purpose of the Exodus is the establishment of the Nation of Israel. The purpose of the Nation of Israel is the establishment of God's kingdom over all the earth, i.e. the recognition and glorification of the one God. If $A = B$ and $B = C$ then $A = C$. The purpose of the Exodus is the glory of God over all the earth.

The Redemption of Israel is not about Israel

Exodus (A) → Creation of Nation of Israel (B)
Creation of Nation of Israel (B) → God's Kingdom on Earth (C)

Therefore:

Exodus (A) → God's Kingdom on Earth (C)

The people of Israel are identified as the bearers of God's covenant – the messengers who brought His word to the world. With this in mind, this psalm makes the following statement: "Whatever happens to the people

of Israel happens to God's glory on this earth." If the people of Israel are persecuted, weak, and exiled there is a diminishing of God's glory in the world. When they are victorious and restored to strength in their land, God's glory is increased.

Ezekiel actually states this explicitly:

So I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed throughout the countries; I judged them according to their ways and their deeds. When they came to the nations, wherever they went, *they profaned My holy name—when they said of them, 'These are the people of the Lord, and yet they have gone out of His land.'* But I had concern for My holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations wherever they went. "Therefore say to the house of Israel, "Thus says the Lord God: "I do not do this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy name's sake, which you have profaned among the nations wherever you went. *And I will sanctify My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord,*" says the Lord God, "when I am hallowed in you before their eyes. *For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land.* (Ezekiel 36:19-24)

There it is. The exile of the Nation of Israel profanes the name of the Lord. He restores Israel to their land in order to sanctify His great name – *not for the sake of Israel!*

What if there had been no promises?

This actually makes a lot of sense. God made numerous covenantal promises to Israel. For example, God told Abraham that his descendents would suffer and be enslaved in a foreign land and would then emerge wealthy and strong (Genesis 15:12-14). This is precisely what happened.

Now, just imagine if God had saved Israel from Egypt and the Exodus story had played out exactly the same way but *without the prior promise to Abraham*. Would the message be any different?

It certainly would. Had the Exodus happened without the prior promise to Abraham we easily would think that God saved Israel from Egypt because they merited it or because of God's mercy upon them. In other words, without a prior promise we could make the mistake of thinking that the Exodus was a *possibility* but not a *certainty*. If it's not a certainty it must depend on circumstances. If it depends on circumstances, it stands to reason that Israel's merit or lack thereof would determine if the Exodus would happen or not.

Since God *promised* that after subjugation and slavery He would redeem Israel from Egypt, *the Exodus was a certainty*. God does not break a promise. If the Exodus is a certainty it does not depend on Israel. It has nothing to do with whether or not they are deserving.

It's about God

But why? Why should the redemption of Israel be a sure thing? Shouldn't they be able to break the covenant?

The answer is no. Not if it isn't about Israel. And it isn't. It's about God. And because it's about God, the covenant can not be broken. Let me explain.

Let's say that God makes a promise that may or may not be fulfilled depending on the merit of the people. Let's say that the promise is then not fulfilled. There are two possible conclusions that can be drawn from this. One conclusion, of course, is that the people with whom covenant was made were not deserving of the fulfillment of the promise. The second conclusion one might draw is that God does not keep His promises or – even worse – that God is *not capable* of keeping His promises.

And this is precisely the point of Psalm 115. *Not to us!* The miraculous salvation described in the previous psalm is not for the sake of God's people. *Whether or not they are deserving is irrelevant*. It is not in

their merit. It is not for them or about them. In fact, this makes a lot of sense. After all, the purpose of Israel is to be *a kingdom of priests* (Exodus 19:6) – in other words, a nation that helps the rest of the world enter into a relationship with God. *Their entire raison d’etre is not about them, it’s about the glory of God.*

Let me sum up what we have said up to this point:

- The Exodus from Egypt was a promise of God.
- Therefore it had to happen.
- Why?
- Because if God promises and then does not deliver on his promise He seems weak and not all-powerful.
- AND The entire purpose of Israel is to give glory to God.
- Conclusion: The Exodus was not for Israel’s sake but for the sake of the glory of God.

Your Kindness, Your Truth

This is the meaning of the end of the verse, *for the sake of your kindness; for the sake of your truth*. The Hebrew words HeSeD – *kindness*, and EMeT – *truth* are used here. HeSeD – *kindness* is not merely kindness in the sense of politeness. HeSeD – *kindness* always implies something *that is given*. Specifically, something that is *not earned or deserved*. If I work and get paid my agreed upon wage, we would not call that *kindness*. If I receive a nice tip over and above my salary, - something not necessarily earned or deserved – it would be an expression of *kindness*. Simply, HeSeD means *kindness that is not earned*.

The verse is saying that God’s supernatural redemption of His people displays *His kindness* precisely *because the redemption is undeserved*. In addition, because the redemption is undeserved it shows God’s *truth* – His commitment to keep His promises unconditionally.

God keeps His promises and bestows kindness upon those who serve Him not as an end in itself. It is not about us. It is about the glory of His name.