YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***Tehillim* (Series II)**

**Rav Elchanan Samet**

**Shiur #07: Psalm 113 - “Give Praise, O Servants of the Lord,**

**Praise the Name of the Lord”**

**The First Psalm of Hallel (Part II)**

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| 1. Halleluya! | | | |
| I | Give praise, O servants of the Lord,  praise the name of the Lord. | V | (5) Who is like the Lord our God,  who is enthroned on high,  (6) and yet looks far down to behold  the things that are in heaven, and on the earth! |
| II | (2) Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth, and for evermore. | VI | (7) He raises up the poor out of the dust,  And lifts the needy out of the ashheap;  (8) That He may set him with nobles,  with the nobles of his people. |
| III | (3) From the rising of the sun to its setting,  the Lord’s name is to be praised. | VII | (9) He makes the barren woman to keep house,  And be a joyful mother of children. |
| IV | (4) The Lord is high above all nations,  And His glory is above the heavens. |  |  |
| Halleluya! | | | |

### VI. The first half as a whole

In section II, we analyzed stanzas II, III, and IV of the psalm. We demonstrated that they all share a common theme – the greatness of God that is reflected in three different dimensions in the world.

What must now be clarified is whether or not stanza I, the appeal directed toward the servants of the Lord to praise Him, belongs specifically to the first half of the psalm. The rest of the psalm until its end constitutes a response to this appeal (see section I), and so perhaps there is room to suggest that stanza I should be seen as an introduction to the entire psalm, standing outside of the psalm's division into two halves.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This, however, is not the case, as the content and style of stanza I clearly indicate that it belongs specifically to the first half.

First of all, the phrase "the name of the Lord," which appears at the end of the stanza, appears twice again in the next two stanzas, and we already explained in section II the significance of this phrase, with respect to the atmosphere of the distance between God and His world. (Stanza IV, which describes God's elevated seat in heaven, shares this atmosphere.)

Second, the appeal in stanza II, which is directed toward "the servants of the Lord" (and not, for example, to "His pious ones," as in 149:1), also expresses a connection of fear and distance.

Third, the fact that stanza I belongs to the first half of the psalm is particularly evident in its connection to stanza III:

I: Give praise… praise the name of the Lord

III: the Lord's name is to be praised.

Finally, each of the four stanzas in the first half are comprised of two lines and a single verse, and they all have a similar number of words.

To summarize, the primary meaning of the appeal directed to "the servants of the Lord" – "Praise the name of the Lord" – is: Praise the Lord for His greatness, His exaltedness, and His might. This appeal is answered specifically in the first half of the psalm, with a description of God's greatness and exaltedness in three dimensions of the universe.

Two stylistic phenomena characterize all four stanzas of the first half and distinguish it from the second half:

1. God's name: God's name appears **five times** in the first half of the psalm: twice in stanza I, and once in each of the next three stanzas. In contrast, God's name appears only once in the second half, at the very beginning of that half: "Who is like the Lord our God," and no more.

2. The first half contains a group of semantically connected words, whose purpose is to crown God with greatness:

Stanza I: Praise (twice) (*hallelu*)

Stanza II: Blessed (*mevorakh*)

Stanza III: Praised (*mehullal*)

Stanza IV: His glory (*kevodo*)

In contrast, not one of these words or any similar word is found in the second half.

This can be explained by the fact that the subject of the first half is **God's greatness** and exaltedness in the mouths of His servants. From here stems the double appeal to them ("Praise") and their response by way of the words "blessed" and "praised," and from here stems also the repeated mention of God's name in each stanza. The theme of the second half is entirely different, as will be demonstrated in the next section.

### VI. The second half as a whole

In section II we asked: Where in the broad praise that encompasses our entire psalm do we encounter a change in atmosphere? We answered that this change is evident in the call at the beginning of stanza V: "Who is like the Lord **our God,"** with its possessive pronoun, which expresses God's closeness to His servants who praise Him. This expression of closeness reflects a change in the psalm's atmosphere, coming as it does after the first four stanzas, which express distance and fear. A striking change in a Biblical literary unit usually signifies the beginning of the second half of that unit.

Indeed, this change at the beginning of stanza V heralds a change in atmosphere that continues the entire length of the second half of the psalm. Sections III, IV, and V of this study were dedicated to an analysis of the three stanzas that make up the second half of our psalm, stanzas V, VI and VII. In these sections we saw that a single whole idea emerges from all three of these stanzas. Stanza V praises God "who is enthroned on high, and yet looks far down, in the heaven and the earth," and stanzas VI and VII both illustrate the lowering of God's gaze toward the earth – His providence over its inhabitants and His concern for the unfortunate members of human society, whom He redeems from misfortune. We see, then, that the entire second half expresses God's closeness to His world – His "humility."

In this half as well we can point to literary-stylistic features that characterize its stanzas, and distinguish it from the first half.

We already noted that two of the three stanzas comprising the second half, stanzas V-VI, are "long" and contain four poetic lines and two verses each. This stands in contrast to the four short stanzas in the first half of the psalm.

We can now add two literary features that distinguish the second half along its entire length:

1. The verbs relating to God in each of the three stanzas all have an additional *yod*, a feature of Biblical poetry:[[2]](#footnote-2) In stanza V: "who is enthroned" (*ha-magbihi*); "and looks far down" (*ha-mashpili*). In stanza VI: "He raises up" (*mekimi*); "that He may set him" (*le-hoshivi*). In stanza VII: "He makes" (*moshivi*).

2. In each of the three stanzas that make up the second half, we find a verb derived from the root *yod-shin*-*bet* relating to God:[[3]](#footnote-3) In stanza V: "Who is enthroned (*la-shevet*) on high." In stanza VI: "That He may set (*le-hoshivi*)him with nobles." In stanza VII: "He makes (*moshivi*) the barren woman."

What is the nature of this connection? How does the root *yod-shin-bet* link together the three stanzas of the second half?

In stanza V, the root appears in the form of an infinitive, and it describes God **who is enthroned** onhigh in heaven. This stanza describes two opposite attributes of God **one alongside the other.** He "is enthroned on high," and yet "He looks far down to behold the things that are on the earth." The verb *la-shavet* is used to describe God's greatness – his "sitting" high in heaven.

In stanzas VI-VII, the root appears twice in the *hif'il* conjugation as a transitive verb, and the two verbs describe God who **sets** the unfortunate whom He redeems from their prior situation in their new "place." These stanzas illustrate the other characteristic described in stanza V – that God "looks far down to behold the things that are on the earth." Now these actions "on earth" are connected to the same verb from the root *yod-shin-bet*: He who is **enthroned** (*la-shevet*) on high **in heaven** also **sets** (*moshiv*) the poor and the needy with nobles, and **makes** (*moshiv*) the barren woman to keep house and be a joyful mother of children, and both of these actions are performed **on earth.**

These two opposite attributes of God do not stand now **one alongside the other,** but rather **stem one from the other.** To be more precise: God's actions on earth that bring about the redemption of the unfortunate stem from His being enthroned on high. His humility and gentleness is a consequence of His power. We already demonstrated in section VII how our psalm expresses this idea by way of its double use of the root *resh-vav-mem*: In stanza IV: "The Lord is **high** (*ram*) above all nations," and in stanza VI: "He **lifts** (*yarim*) the needy from the ashheap." He who is **high** (*ram***) – lifts** (*yarim*)up the low to Him; He who **is enthroned** (*la-shavet*) **– sets** (*moshivi*)the oppressed in a new place.

The second half as a whole expresses the idea that there is no contradiction between God's power and His humility. On the contrary, His power is the very root of His gentleness.

### VIII. The difference between the first half and the second half

It seems that the words of R. Yochanan cited as a motto at the beginning of this study – "Wherever you find the power of the Holy One, blessed be He, you also find His humility mentioned" – are exceedingly appropriate to serve as headings for the two halves of the psalm:

First half – God's power

Second half – God's gentleness

What causes the change in atmosphere between the first half of the psalm and the second half?

The appeal directed at "the servants of the Lord" to praise "the name of the Lord" is answered in the first half with a description of God's greatness and exaltedness. The servants of the Lord continue to praise God for His exaltedness, just as they had done up until now, when they say: “Who is like the Lord our God, who is enthroned on high…”

But as soon as they use the possessive pronominal suffix in relation to God – **"our God"** – they are "suddenly" overwhelmed by the opposite attribute of God. They experience the intimacy expressed in this phrase, and they continue to develop the idea of God's closeness to the world and His providence over the downtrodden. In this way, the psalm "develops" into its second half, which is so different in nature from the first half, and which balances and complements it. If so, the change in the psalm's atmosphere at the beginning of its second half is a surprising turn in the psalm's "plot," in its underlying "story," one that could not have been anticipated from the beginning. Of course, a psalm is not a story and does not have a plot, but nevertheless, even the course of a psalm can take a surprising turn, a poetic development, that parallels a turn in the plot of a story. This turn, in a poem as in a story, marks the beginning of the second half.

We must now clarify the relationship between the two halves. What is the central idea of the psalm as a whole, which joins together its two halves?

We must first examine the relationship between the lengths of the two halves. The first half has one more stanza than the second half, but with respect to the number of verses, the opposite is true. If, however, we count the words in each half, we find that the two halves are almost equal in length: The four stanzas of the first half contain 29 words, while the three stanzas of the second half contain 27 words.[[4]](#footnote-4)

We can now ask: What kind of parallelism is there between the two halves of the psalm? The relationship between the two halves can be described by way of the vertical axis found in both of them, heaven-earth.

God's power in the first half finds expression in the praise offered by His creatures **on the earth** from the far east to the far west (stanzas I-III), and the praise ends with "His glory is **above the heavens"** (stanza IV). God's gentleness, on the other hand, begins in heaven: "Who is like the Lord our God who is **enthroned on high** and yet looks far down to behold the things that are **in heaven"** (stanza V), but it finds expression in the actions that are performed **on the earth** (the continuation of stanza V and stanzas VI-VII).

Thus, structurally, the parallelism between the two halves is chiastic parallelism. The end point of the first half in stanza IV, "The Lord is **high** above all nations, and His glory is above **the heavens,"** serves as the starting point of the second half. Stanza V repeats the words found in stanza IV: "Who is like the Lord our God, who is enthroned **on high… in heaven,"** so that with respect to their contents, the conclusion of the first half and the opening of the first half stand in synonymous parallelism.[[5]](#footnote-5)

However, the gist of the first half, stanzas I-III, and the gist of the second half, stanzas VI-VII, stand in antithetical parallelism. God's power in the first half, proclaimed by the people who bless and praise His name, rises from the earth toward heaven; God's gentleness in the second half, rooted in the heights of His seat in heaven "who is enthroned on high," finds expression in the deeds that He performs among the people living on the earth – "and yet looks far down … on the earth. He raises up the poor…."

The relationship between the two halves can be diagrammed as follows:

First half: Stanzas I-III: **Earth** – God's power and praise

(movement from the earth to heaven)

Stanza IV: **Heaven**

Second half: Stanza V1: **Heaven**

Stanzas V2-7: **Earth** – God's gentleness and deeds

(movement from heaven to the earth)

Despite the antithetical parallelism between the two halves of the psalm, there is a literary common denominator between the description of God's "power" in the first half and the description of His "gentleness" in the second half. Both accounts involve actions from one end to the opposite end.

We already noted the "ends" in the first half in section II; here we will mention them briefly. The blessing of God in stanza II is "**from** this time forth **and for** evermore;” in stanza III, God is praised "**from** the rising of the sun **to** its setting;” God's superiority in stanza IV is "above all nations… above the heavens." These ends mark the broadest ranges that exist in the dimensions of time and place, and what they mean is that God's blessing and praise fill all of existence.

The second half is also built on "ends." In stanza V, God who is enthroned "on high" "looks far down," this taking place "in heaven, and on the earth." This opposition between the two extremes is not like the earlier oppositions in the first half. There the ends express absolute wholeness and inclusion, whereas in stanza V they express the paradoxical nature of God's attributes.

The motif of "ends" is found again in the second half of the psalm in the description of God's actions on the earth. God raises the poor and the needy from the dust and the ashheap, and sets them among the nobles, the elite of the land. These are the two opposite extremes of human social standing. God also make the barren woman into a joyful mother of children, these being the two opposite extremes of a woman's standing in her family in the Bible. Here too the ends express distant opposites, which can only be bridged by God when He changes the standing of these people.

The motif of "ends" runs through our psalm from beginning to end, but in each context it serves a different purpose, in accordance with the need of the psalm and its changing subject matter.

Finally, let us note a concealed parallelism between the opening of the first half of the psalm and the opening of the second half (a parallelism that does not follow from the chiastic structure of the psalm). The appeal at the beginning of the psalm to praise God is directed at "the servants of the Lord." The construct state of the expression *"avdei Hashem*" denotes belonging: "the servants **of** the Lord."

This appeal is answered at the beginning of the second half with the words of God's servants, who speak in first person plural and praise God by saying, "Who is like the Lord **our God**…." With the term that they use in reference to God – "our God" – they express God's belonging to His servants: He is **our** God.

This mutual belonging, the servants belonging to their master God and God's belonging to His servants who praise Him, is reflected in the ancient *piyyut* found in the Ashkenazi *machzor* in the *Selichot* recited on Yom Kippur:

For we are Your people and You are **our God**…

We are **Your servants** and You are our Lord.

### Appendix: Psalm 113 – The opening psalm of *Hallel* and the meaning of the concept of "Hallel" in the words of *Chazal*

Psalm 113 is the first of the set of six psalms (113-118) that together constitute the psalms of *Hallel*.[[6]](#footnote-6) The Sages instituted the recitation of this *Hallel* in two contexts:

1) On specific occasions over the course of the year – on Festivals and on Chanuka (*Ta'anit* 28b):

For R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Shimon ben Yehotzedek: On eighteen days in the year, the individual [worshipper] completes the *Hallel*, and they are: the eight days of the Festival of Sukkot, the eight days of Chanuka, the first day of Pesach, and the Festival of Shavuot; but in the Diaspora, [the *Hallel* is completed] on twenty-one days….

2) As an expression of thanksgiving for a miracle that was performed on behalf of Israel (*Pesachim* 117a):

The prophets among them ordained that Israel should recite it at every important epoch and at every misfortune — may it not come upon them – and when they are redeemed, they recite it [in gratitude] for their redemption.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The term *Hallel* for this set of psalms stems perhaps from the concentration of calls of "*Halleluya*" found in these psalms. Psalm 113 opens and closes with this call, and Psalms 115, 116, and 117 close with it. But as we will see below, *Chazal* speak of a certain *Hallel* in which there is not even a single "*Halleluya*."

The manner in which *Hallel* is recited by the congregation is described in both Talmuds. After each clause recited by the prayer leader, the congregation responds, “*Halleluya*.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Special verses were repeated by the congregation in full. This apparently was the manner of reciting *Hallel* already in the time of the Temple, and certainly in the days of the *Tanna’im*, and this is the manner of reciting *Hallel* according to the Yemenite rite until this very day.

*Chazal* use the term *Hallel* also in connection with two other contexts in the book of *Tehillim*:

R. Yose said: May my portion be of those who recite **the entire *Hallel* every day.** But that is not so, for a Master said: He who reads *Hallel* every day blasphemes and reproaches [the Divine name, for *Hallel* was enacted as an expression of thanksgiving for a miracle]. We [the words of R. Yose] refer to *Pesukei De-Zimra* ("the verses of song"). (*Shabbat* 118b)

The Rif explains, following the *Geonim*, that the term "*Pesukei De-Zimra*" refers to the six psalms that close the book of *Tehillim* (145-150), psalms which are indeed recited every day at the beginning of the morning service.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In *Pesachim* 118a we find the following *baraita*:

Our Rabbis taught: At the fourth [cup], he concludes the *Hallel* [which he began with the recitation of Psalms 113-114 before the meal, and now he recites the remaining four psalms], and he recites **the great *Hallel***.

In the *gemara*, R. Yehuda[[10]](#footnote-10) explains that "the great *Hallel*" is Psalm 136, whose twenty-six verses ends with the words "for His steadfast love endures forever."[[11]](#footnote-11)The *gemara* there clarifies the meaning of the term "the great *Hallel*":

And why is it called the great *Hallel*? R. Yochanan said: Because the Holy One, blessed be He, sits in the heights of the universe and distributes food to all creatures.

Rashi explains that R. Yochanan is referring to the last two verses in Psalm 136:

(25) Who gives bread to all flesh; for His steadfast love endures forever.

(26) O give thanks to the God of heaven; for His steadfast love endures forever.

"The God of heaven" sits in the heights of the universe, and from His elevated throne concerns Himself with the maintenance of every creature, providing it with its food: "Who gives food to all flesh." As Rashi says, "This is a great thing."

The similarity between what R. Yochanan says here and his statement that we brought as a motto at the beginning of our study of Psalm 113 – "Wherever you find the power of the Holy One, blessed be He, you also find His humility mentioned" – is manifest.[[12]](#footnote-12)

From our discussion thus far, we see that there are three types of *Hallel*:

* "Everyday *Hallel*" – *Pesukei De-Zimra*.
* "*Hallel*" – which is recited on special days and over miraculous deliverance.
* "The great *Hallel*" – which is recited on the night of Pesach.

Is there some fundamental common denominator linking together these three different types of *Hallel*,which by Rabbinic enactment must be recited on different occasions (apart from the fact that all three types are taken from the fifth book of *Tehillim*)?

In this study, we demonstrated that Psalm 113, with which *Hallel* opens, gives broad poetic expression to two related Divine attributes that at first glance contradict each other, and which R. Yochanan joins together in his statement. We cautiously suggest that this idea is the common denominator of the three types of *Hallel*. We praise God for the fact that even though He is "great, mighty, and terrible," and precisely because He is that, He attentively watches over His creatures and provides each and every one of them with whatever it needs, and this is "His humility." According to R. Yochanan himself, this is the very reason that Psalm 136 is called "the great *Hallel*." If so, praise of God involves recognition of and gratitude for the paradoxical nature of God's attributes. When we will discuss Psalms 145-150 – the everyday *Hallel* – we will see that at the beginning of this *Hallel* as well (in Psalms 145-146), this dialectical idea is expanded upon greatly.

If our suggestion is correct, there is special importance to the fact that *Hallel* opens with Psalm 113. It seems that the content of this psalm, as we have presented it in this study, is what brought it to be established as "*Hallel*," together with the five psalms that follow it.[[13]](#footnote-13)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Regarding the possibility of such a structure with respect to a psalm in the book of *Tehilim*, see the introduction to this series of *shiurim*, section IV. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The addition of a *yod* for literary embellishment is found also in other chapters of *Hallel*: 114:8 – *ha-hofekhi*; 116:7 – *li-menuchaikhi*; *alaikhi*; 116:12 – *tagmulohi*. This addition has no grammatical significance, and needless to say, *moshivi* does not mean: "He makes, sets me." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It appears that this verb is used in order to connect the three stanzas, as it would have been possible to use verbs with a different root. For example, stanza VII could have said, “*Hofekhi akeret ha-bayit*,” similar to what is stated in *Tehillim* 114:8: “*Ha-hofekhi ha-tzur*,” "Who turned the rock into a stone of water." (This argument is based on the explanation that we adopted in section V to the words *akeret ha-bayit*). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In this count, we did not include the word "Halleluya" appearing at the beginning and at the end of the psalm. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We are not drawing a parallel here between stanza IV and stanza V in its entirety, as stanza V is comprised of a description of God's power (as a starting point) and of His gentleness: "Who is enthroned on high/ and yet looks far down." [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The enactment of the recitation of these six psalms as "*Hallel*" raises the question of whether these psalms constitute an organic literary unit, or if perhaps it was only the enactment that they be recited together that turned them into a single unit. We will not discuss this important issue in this context. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. These words are first cited there in the name of *Amoraim* – R. Yehuda in the name of Shemuel. Later, the very same words appear at the end of a long *Baraita* that discusses the question: "This *Hallel* – who said it?", and this is the position of the Sages. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Sukka* 38b-39a; *Yerushalmi Shabbat* 16:1 (15c). The *Yerushalmi* counts the number of these responses – 123, corresponding to Aharon the priest's age at the time of his death. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rashi thinks otherwise, explaining that the reference is to two psalms of praise: "Praise the Lord from the heavens" (Psalm 148); "Praise God in His sanctuary" (Psalm 150). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In the printed editions of the *gemara*, it is erroneously written "R. Yehuda," who is a *Tanna*, but in the manuscripts and in the *Rishonim*, the sage who explains this is the *Amora* R. Yehuda. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. According to R. Yochanan and R. Acha bar Yaakov, who are cited there in the *gemara*, "the great *Hallel*" includes also Psalm 135. This psalm opens with the very same words as does Psalm 113, but in a different order: "*Halleluya*. Praise the name of the Lord; give praise, O servants of the Lord." The continuation of this psalm contains a passage (verses 5-12) that has parallels in Psalm 136 (2-22), and another passage that has parallels in Psalm 115 (4-11). It turns out that Psalm 135 includes a combination of two *Hallels*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. According to R. Yochanan, God's power that is repeated in the Prophets is that God is "High and lofty… I dwell in the high and lofty place" (*Yeshayahu* 57:15); and His gentleness that is stated a third time in the Torah is that God "… loves the stranger, in giving him food and clothing." These two opposites in the attributes of God are similar to what is stated at the end of Psalm 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Rava's statement in *Megila* 14a attests to the special importance of Psalm 113 with regard to the possibility of reciting *Hallel*. The *gemara* there clarifies why it was not instituted that *Hallel* be recited on Purim for the miracle of Israel's being saved from death: "Rava said: There is good reason in that case [of the exodus from Egypt], because it says [in *Hallel*], 'Give praise, O servants of the Lord' – who are no longer servants of Pharaoh. But can we say in this case: 'Give praise, O servants of the Lord' – who are no longer servants of Achashverosh? We are still servants of Achashverosh."

    The *gemara* in *Berakhot* 56a refers to this *Hallel* as "the Egyptian *Hallel*" (and this is what it is called by the commentators and *Posekim*). It is called by a special name in order to distinguish between the various *Hallels*, as Rashi writes ad loc.: "Because there is another [*Hallel*], which is called 'the great *Hallel*,' this is called 'the Egyptian *Hallel*.'" [↑](#footnote-ref-13)