

BS"D

God, History and Birchat Hallel on Yom HaAtzmaut

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How do you have so much faith?

This was the question posed to me by a student – could have been in a group from Australia – I give talks on Innovation, the Startup Nation, and the wonder that is the creation of the State of Israel. In these talks I explain that I believe the Start-up nation success, the Mobileye success (that I was fortunate to have been a part of), really all of our successes, are made only – besiyata dishmaya – with the help of heaven. So he asked me how do I have so much faith?

Now I could have answered him in the words of Blaise Pascal (1670), famous mathematician turned catholic theologian: “The heart has reasons of which reason knows nothing.” (ללב סיבות משלו). That is, people believe in God in an unexplainable way.

That said, we learn in Pirke Avot (2:14), **וְדַע מַה שֶׁתִּשָּׂיב לְאִפְיָקוּרוֹס** “Know what to answer a heretic” which some interpret today to include “the heretic in you.” So, if you had to point to some rational justification for your belief, what would it be? To address this question, a friend of mine wrote a book called “Permission to Believe” (רשות להאמין) in which he discusses 4 different reasons:

1. **Absolute Morality** – That is, if you believe that there is some objective moral truth then you must believe in God; for there can only be objective morality if there is a Creator. Dostoyevsky made this idea famous when he wrote in his Brothers Karamazov: If there is no God, all is permitted.
2. **Cosmological Argument** – Modern science’s discovery of the big bang has provided powerful support for the notion of Creation, as the world started from nothing. This is an idea that believing Jews have held strong to despite that the entire world maintained that the universe was eternal. This was not a simple

position to stand by, as can be seen in the Rambam's rationale against Aristotle. But today science has made that belief in Creation a matter of fact.

3. **Teleological Argument** – The argument from design: the world looks like it was designed and thus it has a designer. The more science reveals about just how precisely the universe is aligned to allow for human life, the more difficult it is for atheists to claim that we are all just the lucky result of random processes. The probabilities are astronomically low. This argument for God has become known as the Anthropic Principle – the world is precisely attuned to allow for our existence.
4. **Jewish History** – We are a historical **anomaly**. If we said that the probabilities are astronomically low for the universe to come into existence and support human life, well, the odds that the Jewish people would still be here – celebrating our Yom HaAtzmaut, our national independence – approaches zero.

And that brings us to an interesting halachic dispute regarding the recitation of Hallel on Yom HaAtzmaut. Now, there are many disputes about Hallel on Yom HaAtzmaut:

- Should we even say Hallel? (For those of you who were with me on Shabbat learned that I believe that only should we say Hallel but we should say Shira).
- If so, do we say the Full Hallel or Half-Hallel?¹
- Do we say Hallel at night *and* day (like on the first day of Pesah) or in the day only?²
- Is the obligation a *hiyuv D'oraita* or *D'Rabanan*?³

¹ “Modern poskim differ on whether and what type of Hallel should be recited on days of national celebration for recent miracles such as Yom Ha’Atzmaut (Israel Independence Day). According to Rav Ovadiah Yosef, a miracle only qualifies for whole Hallel with a blessing if the entire Jewish nation, as opposed to a community, was saved thereby. According to Rav Ovadia, Yom Ha’Atzmaut would not qualify because it was the Jewish community in Israel and not outside Israel whose lives were threatened by the Arab onslaught. In addition, writes Rav Yosef, the Israel War of Independence was won at the cost of many casualties.” <https://www.jewishpress.com/judaism/halacha-hashkafa/whole-hallel-half-hallel-no-hallel/2019/05/09/>

“Rav Soloveitchik (quoted by Rav Schachter in *Nefesh HaRav* p. 96) held that one should only say half Hallel without Brachot. Sh"t Yabia Omer 6:41-2 writes that one shouldn't make a Bracha on Hallel on Yom HaAtzmaut. Yalkut Yosef 218:1 codifies this.”

https://www.halachipedia.com/index.php?title=Yom_HaAtzmaut#cite_note-3

² https://ph.yhb.org.il/en/05-04-08/#_ze01fenref4_8

³ “The Rambam (Hilkhot Megilla Ve-CHANUKA 3:6) writes that the recitation of Hallel on the festivals and on Chanuka is only a mitzva mi-derabbanan. The Ramban (Sefer Ha-mitzvot, shorsh 1), however, disagrees. He writes that Hallel on the festivals is either a halakha le-Moshe mi-Sinai or included in the fulfillment of the biblical obligation of simcha (rejoicing) on the festival. The Ra’avad (Rambam, *ibid*.)

While these are all fascinating issues, the question that I would like to discuss is very “simple”: do we say Hallel with a bracha or not?⁴ Now while this question may seem a bit picayune, and you may be asking yourselves, “is he really going to drag us through some detailed halachic debate?” The answer is “yes”! But I ask you to stay with me because we all know that “God is in the details.” And really, the decision to say a blessing is really quite critical, philosophically. Saying a blessing is what turns the whole recital of Hallel from simply **reading some Tehillim** (Psalms) to a **serious religious event**. The question over saying the blessing is in essence a question over the **significance of the State of Israel**.

There are numerous important thinkers on both sides of the issue. Those who hold that we should say Hallel WITHOUT a BRACHA refer to various things lacking in the event to allow it to qualify for this special status:

- 1) Hallel is said with a blessing only when **ALL** of Israel experiences a miracle (Chida); but when we declared independence only a minority of world Jewry lived in Eretz Yisrael. All Israel passed through the splitting of the Red Sea
- 2) We should give thanks only for a **complete** salvation (like when ALL the Egyptians died in the Sea); but our **enemies** still threaten us on all sides. [As an aside, this argument reminds me of the day I visited my dad’s office as a little kid. I was about 7-8 years old and my dad was a travel agent. In his office he had a giant map of the world, and then next to it, he had an even bigger map of the state of Israel. I asked him, what is that map – he said, that is Israel, the home of the Jews. So I looked at him quite innocently, and asked, so why don’t we live there? Now, my dad was a proud Jew and proud of Israel; but he was also, let’s say, a conservative Jew. So he pointed to the map and said, you see that, that’s Lebanon – they want to throw the Jews into the sea; and you see that, that’s Syria, they want to throw the Jews into the sea; and that, Jordan, and there, Egypt. They all want to throw the Jews into the Sea and I don’t want my boys in the army. And so he succeeded in not having any of his three boys serve in the IDF. But I am proud to report

describes the obligation to recite Hallel as “mi-divrei kaballa” – from the prophets.”

<https://www.etzion.org.il/en/celebrating-yom-ha-atzmaut-and-yom-yerushalayim>

⁴ See R. Melamed for most of the material following: <https://ph.yhb.org.il/en/05-04-07/>

that all three of his grandsons serve in top commando units in the home of the Jews.] Anyway, it is because of this state of war that we still find ourselves that some argue we should not say Hallel with a Bracha.

- 3) The wanting **spiritual state** of the country's leaders and many of its citizens – i.e., that they are not religious [diminishes our joy].
- 4) Hallel should be said only when a **REVEALED** miracle occurs, like the miracle of the **Menorah** on Hannuka, whilst the establishment of the **State** was a **NATURAL** miracle – so they say.
- 5) It is unclear whether the day of thanksgiving should be set for the day we **declared** independence [the 5th of Iyar], or the day the **War** of Independence **ended**, or the day the **United Nations** decided to **establish** a Jewish State, which was the sixteenth of Kislev (Nov. 29).

Among the voices that hold this position of Hallel **WITHOUT** a **BRACHA**:

- **Rabbi Ovadyah Hadayah** (one of the leading rabbis at the founding of the state, he won the Israel Prize for his rabbinic writings) – [[Hallel **without a blessing**. Hallel should be said only over a miracle that happened to Klal Yisrael, adding that the salvation [of 1948] was not complete (Yaskil Avdi, vol. 6, O.C. 10).]]
- **Rabbi Ovadyah Yosef** (his greatness so dwarfs all other poskim that an Ashkenazi Dati Leumi Rabbi – i.e., not Shas – said that we need to make a new distinction in rabbinic eras, we have Tannaim and Amoraim, Rishonim and Achronim. He says we have to now say “Achrai Rav Ovadya”) [[- Hallel **without a blessing**, because the miracle did not happen to all of Klal Yisrael and because we still have a long way (Yabi'a Omer, vol. 6, O.C. 41).]]
- **Rabbi Shaul Yisraeli; Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu**

A slightly accommodating opinion is that of:

- **Rabbi Avraham Shapiro** (Rosh Yeshiva of Mercaz Harav) [[- holds that one should recite the Hallel **without a blessing**, but holds that one who wants to recite the blessing, in accordance with his custom, is permitted to do so (cited in Sefer HaRabbanut HaRashit, vol. 2, pp. 901-903).]]

And these are just some of the more prominent names in this camp. On the other hand:

Among the voices that hold we should say Hallel **WITH a BRACHA**

- **Rabbi Meshulam Roth** (for those not familiar, R. Tzvi Yehuda Kook called him the Gadol HaDor), held that Hallel is to be said **with a blessing**. He writes:

“The leaders who chose this day in particular were correct, for that was when the main miracle occurred, when we went from bondage to freedom by declaring independence. Had we postponed this declaration for a different day, we would have missed the opportunity and we would not have attained the recognition and consent of the world’s major powers, as is well known. This miracle also brought in its wake the second miracle: being saved from death to life, both in terms of our war against the Arabs in Eretz Yisrael and the salvation of the Diaspora Jews, who immigrated to the Land. This led to the third miracle: the ingathering of the exiles.”

He holds we say Hallel **with a blessing** since the **miracle actually did happen to Klal Yisrael**. Thus, even the Chida would agree. Furthermore, **the residents of Eretz Yisrael are considered the entirety of Israel**.

- **Rabbi Goren** and **Rabbi Gershuni** [[explain in accordance with R. Meshulam Roth (Hilchot Yom HaAtzmaut VeYom Yerushalayim).]]
- **Rabbi Yosef Mashash** [[(Otzar HaMichtavim 3:1769) [holds that one should recite the full Hallel **with a blessing**. Rabbi Shalom Mashash felt that one should recite the blessing, but when he heard Rabbi Ovadyah Yosef’s opinion, he ruled that one who already has a custom to say the blessing should continue to do so, while one who does not have such a custom should **refrain from reciting** the blessing (Shemesh U’Magen 3:63, 66)].]]
- **Rabbi Tzvi Yehudah HaKohen Kook** [[(L’Netivot Yisrael, vol. 1, pp. 248-49) says **that the courage displayed in declaring the State was miraculous, in and of itself**; see Bava Metzia 106a, with Tosafot. One should say Hallel **with a blessing** [but, since the Rabbanut HaRashit poskined against saying a bracha AND given that Mercas Harav is a national icon, Rav Tzvi Yehuda decided to tow the party line. That is, for individuals or less central/iconic organizations/yeshivot/shuls – they could do as their heart dictated.

"בישיבתנו המרכזית נהגנו כפסק הרבנות כי אין אנו קלויז של חוג מיוחד - שייכים אנו לענייניו של כלל ישראל המרוכז בירושלים, ומכיון שבכללנו של הציבור יש לעת עתה, לצערנו, ולבושתנו, עיכובים

בשלמות האמונה והשמחה, ומתוך כך - בחיוב הברכה, נכון הוא שננהג אף אנו כהוראת הרבנות
הראשית לכלל כולן⁵

However, when the Chief Rabbinate (1974), after the events of 1967 and 1973 (which was a victory despite the tragic losses), Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren and the head of the Rabbinate decided, by majority vote, to say full Hallel **with a blessing**, HaRav Tzvi Yehudah HaKohen Kook said to recite Hallel **with a blessing**.]]]

Now, while I am certainly not (to use a Talmudic expression) going to put my head between these mountains and decide what the halacha should be, permit me to conclude on a personal note by answering that original question that I was asked: How do I have so much faith?

The fact is: I don't. That is, without the State of Israel, I doubt I would be religious, all the more so that I would be a Rabbi. But ask yourselves the same question: Where would you be without the State of Israel? Where do you think the Jewish people would be without the State of Israel? For me, there is no greater testament to the living God than the modern State of Israel. The State of Israel is the fulfillment of ancient prophecies. That we have returned to our land after millennia of antisemitism, that we have not only survived but succeeded as a nation is above nature, it is, in the words of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, above history. That is, historically, we should not be here, in the world, alive. History dictates that a people exiled from its homeland, dispersed among the nations who are likened to 70 wolves against one sheep – should be gone.

So, for me, there is no greater holiday than Yom HaAtzmaut. It is the day to acknowledge that there is a God. Not only the God of creation, but the God of History, who continues to be involved in the ongoing miracle called the State of Israel.

Hag Atzmaut Samayach.

⁵ <http://meyda.education.gov.il/files/hemed/arv1.pdf>