



D'var Torah Naso - June 3, 2023

By Roger Klein

This drash is about praise and prayer.

The Hebrew word usually translated as "praise" – hallel – does not appear in this parsha. Nor does the word translated as prayer – Tefillah. I find this odd, because Naso is full of actions you and I might describe as praising or praying to God. To me, the parade of the tribal leaders bringing offerings for the dedication of the Mishkan seems like the Biblical equivalent of what you and I might call worship. But the Torah doesn't describe it this way. In fact, the words hallel and tefillah do not appear in the entire Torah, which also seems odd for a text focused on the Israelites' respect for and relationship with G-d.

So where did our modern ideas about praising and praying to God come from? How should we, as Jews, praise and pray to God? That is the subject I hope to address this morning.

Since the Torah doesn't talk directly about praise and prayer, it seems we have to look at other sources to answer these questions. Though the word hallel is absent from the Torah, it is all over the Psalms. The word Hallelujah – which means "praise God" – appears 24 times in the Psalms. Hallelujah is also the title of a beautiful song by Leonard Cohen and a great documentary about how Cohen, a religiously complex Cohain, wrote the song. But that's not important now.

Psalm 150 – the final Psalm – begins and ends with Hallelujah. Each of this Psalm’s verses contains the word “hallel”. Psalm 150 starts with an instruction:

“Praise God in his holy place
Praise him in the vault of his power
Praise him for his mighty acts”

OK, we’re supposed to praise God. But how? The rest of Psalm 150 tells us how:

“Praise him with the shofar blast
Praise him with the lute and lyre
Praise him with timbrel and dance
Praise him with strings and flute
Praise him with crashing cymbals.”

Horn blasts, lutes, lyres, tambourines, flutes, dances, crashing cymbals. What do these have in common? They are loud. They’re designed to grab our attention. In fact, the semitic root of the Hebrew word “halel” is “to sing loudly” and the root of the Tefilah may be “to make yourself the object of someone’s attention”.

To me, this attention-grabbing is similar to the parade of offerings in Naso. One by one, the tribal leaders arrive at the Tabernacle with treasures – sparkling silver, glittering gold, bellowing bulls. For the thousands camped in the dusty desert, I imagine this would have been a ceremony not to be missed. Perhaps the kahal sang loudly while the leaders attempted to make themselves the subjects of God’s attention.

So is this what praise and prayer are all about – a grand public ceremony, the louder the better?

Maybe not. Psalm 33 presents a different model of praise and prayer. Psalm 33 starts off big and loud like Psalm 150:

“Sing gladly of the Lord with joyous shout
Acclaim him with the lyre and the ten-stringed lute”

But Psalm 33 finishes with a different message:

“The Lord sees those who yearn for his kindness
We urgently wait for the Lord
In him our heart rejoices”

Yearning, waiting, rejoicing in our hearts: This is another way to pray – quietly and soulfully. This is the prayer of Hannah. Here is the description in Samuel of Hannah praying at the temple gates: “Only her lips moved. Her voice could not be heard. Hannah was praying in her heart.” Hannah is not trying to attract attention or prove anything to anyone. Instead of the lutes and lyres of Psalm 150, Hannah models kavannah – all that counts is what’s in your heart.

So it seems we have two models of praise and prayer – the grandeur of Naso and the quiet kavannah of Hannah.

What does Jewish law say about this? A discussion in Tractate Brachot finds the Hannah story to be a key precedent. But it reaches conclusions that I find surprising. The rabbis endorse Hannah’s praying in her heart. But they conclude that heartfelt prayer is not enough. They base this conclusion on the statement that “only Hannah’s lips moved”, which they interpret to mean that prayer must be enunciated – merely thinking the words is not sufficient. So prayer must be said aloud. But not too loud. The rabbis interpret the statement that Hannah’s “voice could not be heard” to require that prayer be loud enough only to hear one’s own voice.

The rabbis also find the Vihohavta and the Shema to be relevant precedents. Yet again, their interpretation is not what I find the most natural. They see the Viyahavta’s command “Let these words be upon your heart...” as an endorsement of

Hannah's view of heartfelt prayer. Yet some rabbis argue that this is overridden by the "Hear o Israel" phrase of the Shema. To me, "Hear O Israel" suggests an command to broadcast far and wide to all of Israel. Yet the conclusion in Tractate Brachot seems to be consistent with the Hannah rule – "Hear O Israel" means only that each individual pray only loud enough so that she can hear her own voice.

The rabbis apply these ideas in a discussion about on the strange subject of whether a deaf person can lead the Megillah. Applying the rule that prayer must be loud enough for the davener to hear her own voice, the rabbis lean toward the view that the answer is no, because the deaf person's cannot hear her own voice. Strangely, there is no discussion at all from the perspective of the deaf person and no consideration of the moral issues raised by the exclusion of a disabled person from the community.

So maybe we have three models of prayer.

We have the grand ceremonies of Naso and Psalm 150. Sing loud in search of attention from whoever you want attention from.

We have the Kavanah of Hannah, slumped and at the temple gates, tear pouring down her cheeks.

And we have the middle ground of the Talmud – pray aloud loud enough so that you can hear your own prayer.

Which of these is best? I won't be tackling that one here. But as someone who tends to be drawn toward the Kavannah side of the spectrum, I'll finish this drash with a thought experiment to help consider the opposite perspective – the grand ceremony of Naso.

Day after day, one by one, each tribal leader marches into the center of the community with exorbitant gifts – sparkling silver, glittering gold, bellowing bulls. Let's imagine you are Netaniel, the leader scheduled for the second day. When you first learn of this ceremony, you must feel honored to be chosen for this visible leadership

role. But might you also feel something else – maybe a little hesitant, or even burdened? Maybe, when you think of the treasures you must deliver, you also think of the thousands of homeless families you’re responsible for. Maybe you wonder if this is the best use of your tribe’s resources.

On the morning of the first day, you and the kahal watch as Nashon approaches. Is it possible you’re secretly hoping it all won’t happen? Maybe Nashon won’t show or if does, he’ll be a bit light on the shekels and sheep. But Nashon does show up with the full entourage of gifts. Now you know you can’t escape responsibility. So on the second day, you arrive as planned with the full offering of choice animals and precious metals. But instead of feeling burdened, you have an unexpected feeling -- belonging. The community is growing and you’re helping it grow. Over the next ten days, as you watch the other leaders arrive, you feel pride that perhaps your public enthusiasm helped inspire others to do the same.

I’ll finish this drash with the words that Leonard Cohen, the religiously complex Kohen, sang to thousands of people at the end of a concert in Tel Aviv, just after delivering the priestly blessing:

“I’ve done my best, though it wasn’t much
I couldn’t feel, so I tried to touch
But even if it all went wrong
I’ll stand before the Lord of song
With nothing, nothing on my tongue but ... Hallelujah.”