

Ps. 104: The Meaning of Hallelujah

Hallelujah is a remarkable word. In the Bible, it appears only in the book of Psalms, yet this exuberant exclamation of joy and gratitude has survived the passage of centuries, transcending the barriers of language and culture. What exactly does it mean? According to the Talmud, *Hallelujah* is the most sublime expression of God's praise, combining together in one word both praise (hallel) and God's name (the two-letter Name Ya-H). Yet Hallelujah does not appear throughout the book of Psalms. It is only used in the last third of the book, starting with chapter 104. "Let sin be finished from the earth, and evil be no more. May soul will bless God, Hallelujah!" (Ps. 104:35) What is special about this particular verse, that it contains the very first usage of the word *Hallelujah*?

DOWNFALL OF THE WICKED

The Sages noted (Berachot 9) that the theme of this verse is the destruction of evil. King David, they explained, only began employing this special praise of God after he witnessed the downfall of the wicked. The explanation requires further examination. In what way does the word *Hallelujah* relate to the downfall of the wicked? Also, why does it contain the short two-letter name of God and not the more commonly used Tetragrammaton, the full name of God consisting of four letters?

PRAISE IN AN INCOMPLETE WORLD

We need first to determine the inner meaning of the name Ya-H. The name for God appears in the Torah after Amalek's unprovoked attack on the Israelites as they left Egypt. God took an oath, as it were, "upon the throne of Ya-H, a war against Amalek throughout the generations" (Ex. 17:16) The Sages taught that as long as evil exists in the world—as long as Amalek has not been destroyed—God's name is incomplete, containing only two letters. Thus the name Ya-H refers to the state in which the world is not yet perfected. As long as there is room for evil and violence in the world, God's rule is incomplete. God's full name belongs to the era in which injustice and corruption will be no more, when evil will dissipate like smoke, and all will acknowledge and praise God with His complete name. The loftiest praise, combining God's praise with His full name, belongs to a future time. But the praise of *Hallelujah* reflects a sublime form of praise for our days.

If we can raise our sights and understand the purpose of evil, if we can grasp that a world in which evil once existed and was subsequently overcome is greater than the one in which evil never played a part, then we can honestly combine God's praise with the name Ya-H. This combination indicates that we recognize the value of a world in which injustice is allowed to exist. *Hallelujah* is an expression of this lofty outlook, acknowledging God's praise in an incomplete world.

King David gained this insight when he witnessed the fall of the wicked. "Let sin be finished from the earth and evil be no more." He understood the role of the wicked and their downfall, and at that point he was able to call out: 'HALLELUJAH!'

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