

Rabbi Judy Weiss
The Biblical Text

LEADER'S GUIDE
Psalms 113 and 114

Question: *Have you ever heard echoes of your life story in a biblical story?*

Leader: Psalms 113-118, known in our liturgy as Hallel, are recited on festive holidays and they are also included in our Passover haggadah.

We will focus just on Psalms 113 and 114 which are recited during seder immediately following the haggadah's explanation of pesach, matzah and maror. At this point in the seder, we assert that every generation is obligated to see themselves as having been redeemed from Egypt by God. After reciting Psalms 113 and 114, we wash and eat matzah, maror and dinner (the rest of Hallel is recited after dinner).

Leader: *Let's read together Psalm 113, a song of praise, which exalts God who has the power to reverse the fate of the poor and the barren.*

Psalm 113

Hallelujah.

O servants of the LORD, give praise;
praise the name of the LORD.

²Let the name of the LORD be blessed now and forever.

³From east to west the name of the LORD is praised.

⁴The LORD is exalted above all nations;

His glory is above the heavens.

⁵Who is like the LORD our God, who, enthroned on high,

⁶sees what is below, in heaven and on earth?

⁷He raises the poor from the dust,
lifts up the needy from the refuse heap

⁸to set them with the great,

with the great men of His people.

⁹He sets the childless woman among her household
as a happy mother of children.

Hallelujah.

Leader: *What are the parallels to the theme of the seder?*

Answers might include:

- God reverses the fate of the poor and barren as God made slaves into free people
- *Matzah* changes from the bread of affliction at the beginning of seder into a symbol of freedom

- The cries of abused slaves turn into the joyful songs of free people praising their redeemer
- The seder and the psalm both promise that the reversal of fortune that happened in that day can happen to us too, no matter what enslaves us

Leader: *Psalm 113 describes how God reverses the fate of individuals in need. Let's read Psalm 114 which recounts the early history of the community of Israel.*

Psalm 114

When Israel went forth from Egypt,
 the house of Jacob from a people of strange speech,
²Judah became His holy one,
 Israel, His dominion.
³The sea saw them and fled,
 Jordan ran backward.
⁴mountains skipped like rams, hills like sheep.
⁵What alarmed you, O sea, that you fled,
 Jordan, that you ran backward,
⁶mountains that you skipped like rams, hills, like sheep?
⁷Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord,
 at the presence of the God of Jacob,
⁸who turned the rock into a pool of water,
 the flinty rock into a fountain.

What are the reversals of fate in this poem?

- Israel left Egypt, they left slavery to become God's sacred possession
- Israel entered the Promised land; wanderers got their own homeland
- The Reed sea fled, turning to dry land allowing Israel to cross
- The Jordan River reversed direction (turned upstream) leaving dry land so Israel could cross into the Promised land (see Joshua 3:14-17; 5:1 for the story)
- Heavy, permanent mountains begin to shake, quake, or move quickly before God
- God turns rock and hard flint into water
- The whole earth (sea, rivers, hills and mountains) tremble before God who has the power to disrupt nature

Leader: *In Psalm 114, history is telescoped: different events are treated as if they happened close in time. For example:*

- Verse 1 refers to Israel leaving Egypt. It is set alongside verse 2 which describes the land of Judah becoming God's sanctuary, when Israel entered the land after forty years in the wilderness.
- Verse 3 recounts the Exodus, when the sea saw something and fled leaving dry land. The rest of the verse juxtaposes this event to an event from 40 years later: when Israel crossed the Jordan River into Canaan, the river ran backward leaving a dry river bed.

Question: *Why do you think events from different eras were telescoped or conflated into one event?*

- Leaving Egypt was only the beginning of the story; the story was not finished until the people entered their national homeland
- The psalmist learns that God redeemed one generation from slavery, brought another generation into their homeland, and therefore can always be trusted
- The historical events of one generation may seem unique, extraordinary, unheard of. But they are all just versions of what has already happened, and may be understood in terms of the past

Question: *Psalm 114 is a Passover hymn. Why do you think we recite it specifically after we discuss pesach, matzah and maror, and before we wash and eat?*

- The rabbis teach that we recite *Hallel* because Moses and Israel recited it as they came up from the sea; at the seder, we are supposed to imagine ourselves as having been redeemed from Egypt, so we recite these psalms with Moses and Israel.
- The rabbis also teach that *Hallel* was recited by the priests in the Temple when they made the Passover sacrifices. As we sit around our table, we act like priests (washing our hands) and our table substitutes for the Temple's altar (with the Passover sacrifices, shank bone and egg).
- The joyful songs add to our festive evening and help us internalize feelings of thanksgiving
- Psalm 114 reminds us that we were not freed just to be free; we were freed to be sacred to God (see verse 2)