

The *Hallel* Recitation in the Synagogue on the First Night of *Pesach*

The recitation of *hallel* has always assumed a prominent role in the *Pesach* celebration. Already at the time of the Exodus, *Benei Yisrael* sang *hallel* to give praise to G-d for rescuing them from Egyptian bondage.

When the *Beit Hamikdash* stood, *hallel* was recited both during the slaughtering of the *korban pesach* (paschal sacrifice) on the afternoon of *Erev Pesach*, as well as at night, after the partaking of the sacrificial meat. After the Temple's destruction, *Chazal* enacted the recitation of *hallel* at the *seder*.

Masekhet Soferim, which was composed during the early *Ge'onim* period, records a custom to recite an additional *hallel* in the synagogue on the night of *Pesach*, with a *berakha*. Some later writers claimed that this recitation actually took place on the afternoon of *Erev Pesach* and served to commemorate the *hallel* that was recited during the slaughtering of the *korban pesach*. Most commentators, however, accept the straightforward reading, that *Masekhet Soferim* refers to a synagogue reading held on the night of *Pesach*.

The *Ge'onim* rejected this custom recorded in *Masekhet Soferim*, and indeed, for many generations, Jews throughout Europe, Africa and Asia did not conduct a synagogue *hallel* reading on the night of *Pesach*. Numerous arguments were raised against this custom.

- The Babylonian *Talmud* and the *Rishonim* make no mention of this *hallel* recitation.¹

¹ *Rokei'ach*, *Or Zaru'a*, *Nezirut Shimshon*, *Maharitz*, *Rabbi Shlomo Kluger*, *Arukh Hashulchan*, *Hit'orerut Teshuva*.

- The *hallel* reading in the synagogue was intended only for the uneducated Jews who were unable to recite *hallel* by themselves at home. It was thus read in the synagogue as part of a more general *seder* service conducted on behalf of these Jews, and not as a separate service after *arvit*.²
- Some authorities opposed this reading because it marked a deviation from the custom passed down through the generations.³
- *Chazal* instituted the *hallel* reading at the *seder* to enhance the spirit of joy and praise, not as a formal *hallel* recitation like the one conducted during the slaughtering of the *korban pesach*, and therefore no *berakha* is recited over *hallel* on *Pesach* night.⁴
- *Chazal* established that *hallel* be recited on *Pesach* night in the context of *matza* and the four cups of wine, and thus one who recites *hallel* in the synagogue before the *seder*, fulfills the obligation to a lower standard, and not in its proper context.⁵
- The recitation of a *berakha* over *hallel* in the synagogue may constitute a *berakha levatala* (a *berakha* recited in vain).⁶

In practice, this custom recorded in *Masekhet Soferim* fared differently in different regions:

² *Tosefta, Shiblei Ha-leket, Abudarham, Vilna Ga'on, Sho'el U-meishiv.*

³ Re'avya, Maharil, Maharitz, *Sho'el U-meishiv*, Rabbi Yosef Asher Limans, *Hit'orerut Teshuva, Yalkut Ha-gershuni.*

⁴ Rabbi Yosef ibn Migash, Rashi, *Sefer Ha-mikhtam*, Meiri.

⁵ Netziv, *Hit'orerut Teshuva.*

⁶ Maharil, Maharitz, *Nezirut Shimshon, Eishel Avraham*, Rabbi Shmuel Salant, *Chazon Ish.*

Spain

The Ramban, following the ruling of his French rabbis, maintained that a *berakha* should be recited over the *hallel* reading at the *seder*, both before the *hallel* section included as part of *maggid*, and before the *hallel* section recited after the meal. Others, however, were uncomfortable with this view, noting that it ran in opposition to the long-standing custom not to recite any *berakha* over *hallel* on *Pesach* night.



Haggadah reading for members of a Spanish community that are incapable of reciting themselves – Illustration in Barcelona Haggada of the 14th century

The Rashba and the Ritva recommended as a possible solution (and not as a requirement) to conduct a complete *hallel* reading before the *seder* either at home or in the synagogue, with a *berakha*. The Ra'ah went even further, asserting that such a reading is obligatory, and thus attempted – with limited success – to establish a synagogue *hallel* reading before the *seder* throughout the Spanish communities. During the subsequent two centuries, until the expulsion from Spain, divergent practices existed among the Spanish Jewish communities, as documented in the writings of the Spanish *Rishonim*. In any event, the majority of Spanish Jews followed the original custom, and recited *hallel* only at the *seder*.

The expulsion from Spain resulted in the integration of customs that had not been followed in Spain. In the Middle East, for example, where many of the Spanish exiles settled, there were many who supported reciting *hallel* in the synagogue on *Pesach* night. In North Africa, by contrast, even until much later periods, communities continued the original practice of not reciting *hallel* in the synagogue.

Yemen

The early generations of Yemenite Jews were entirely unaware of the custom to read *hallel* in the synagogue. This practice made its way into a number of Yemenite communities only around the year 1740, against the ruling of the 18th century Yemenite *posek* Rabbi Yichye Tzalach (Maharitz). Some communities in Yemen recited *hallel* without a *berakha*. But other Yemenite communities, especially those affiliated with the Baladi sect, adhered to the original custom of their ancestors not to recite *hallel* at all before the *seder*.

France

French communities never adopted the practice of reading *hallel* in the synagogue on the night of *Pesach*. It should be noted that a number of Provençal scholars held that the *berakha* of לפיכך אנחנו חייבים recited towards the end of *maggid* constitutes the *beracha* over *hallel* recited at the

seder. They therefore did not need to resort to the practice of adding a *hallel* reading before the *seder*, as proposed by the aforementioned Spanish *Rishonim*.

Italy

The early Italian Jewish communities did not recite *hallel* in the synagogue on the night of *Pesach*. Even the Italian Kabbalists who wished to recite *hallel* after *arvit* on *Pesach* night, did so privately. However, after the Jews' expulsion from Spain, a number of communities of Spanish exiles were established in Italy, and these newcomers brought with them the Spanish custom to recite *hallel* in the synagogue. With time, this practice spread and gained acceptance among several Italian communities.

Hungary

Hungarian communities in the Oberland (northwestern region of Hungary) were known for not reciting *hallel* in the synagogue on *Pesach* night. In the Unterland (northeastern region of Hungary), however, where the *Chassidic* movement gained acceptance, the *hallel* reading made its way into the synagogue service, even into local *Ashkenazic* communities. The introduction of this custom was often against the will of the congregation, and was fraught with controversy, frequently resulting in compromises such as omitting the *berakhot* or delaying the recitation until after the completion of the entire *arvit* service.

Poland

Originally, Polish communities did not follow the practice of reciting *hallel* in the synagogue on *Pesach* night, but this reading was instituted as the *Chassidic* movement spread through the country. Galician communities rejected this custom outright, and even among the *Chassidim* themselves there were those who questioned the validity of the *berakha* recited over this *hallel* reading.

Lithuania

Lithuanian Jews generally remained loyal to the authentic tradition, and did not conduct a *hallel* reading in the synagogue, a practice that they saw as a *Sephardic* custom. Different claims have been made as to the personal practice of the Vilna *Ga'on* in this regard. What is known, however, is that his ancestors, rabbis and fellow Lithuanian Jews, including the leading Torah figures, did not conduct the synagogue *hallel* reading. The exception was the *Chassidim* in Lithuania, who joined the Polish *Chassidim* in deviating from their forefathers' tradition and reciting *hallel* in the synagogue on *Pesach* night, stirring considerable controversy in the process.

Eretz Yisrael

The small Jewish community that lived in *Eretz Yisrael* during the time of the *Ge'onim* and *Rishonim* seems not to have followed the custom of reading *hallel* in the synagogue. This practice was introduced by the Jews who settled there after the expulsion from Spain. The *Ari-zal* explained this custom based on *Kabbalah*, leading to its acceptance both in *Eretz Yisrael* and among his followers in the Diaspora.

The students of the Vilna *Ga'on* who settled in *Eretz Yisrael* recited *hallel* in the synagogue on *Pesach* night, which was not their practice in Lithuania, due to the strong influence of the *Sepharadim*. Nevertheless, some of the leading rabbis of the *perushim* community in Jerusalem, as well as several Lithuanian and Hungarian rabbis who came later, omitted the *berakha* over this recitation. Others did not recite *hallel* in the synagogue altogether, or at least delayed the recitation until after the conclusion of the *arvit* service.

Germany

The Jewish communities in Germany, which always displayed great loyalty to their ancestral traditions, never adopted the practice of reading *hallel* in the synagogue on *Pesach* night. Around the period World War I,

Chassidic immigrants established several *Shtetlach* in German towns, and introduced the recitation of *hallel*. Other than that, the custom never earned acceptance in Germany and indeed, to this day, German communities across the world do not recite *hallel* in the synagogue on *Pesach* night.



Seder night in Germany as illustrated in the 15th-century *Danneberg Haggadah*