Singing the Hallel in Yerushalayim

Pesach was celebrated with great joy in the times of the Bet haMiqdash (the Temple of Jerusalem, destroyed in the year 68 of the Common Era). Hundreds of thousands of Jews came to Yerushalayim from all corners of Israel to sacrifice the Qorban Pesach (a sheep or goat) on the 14th of Nisan. They stayed with relatives, acquaintances, or often wherever there was room. The houses in Yerushalayim were open to all who needed a place to stay. Only when there was no more room available would a red cloth be hung above the door to announce it.

Today, we remember this beautiful act of hospitality when we say at the beginning of the Haggadah: “Let all who are hungry come and eat; let all who need come and celebrate Pesach with us.”
In the homes of Yerushalayim, people gathered in groups of families, friends, and guests called Haburot (singular: Habura). Each Habura, which could consist of 50, 60, or even up to 100 people, would partake of the same Qorban.

The lamb was brought on the afternoon of the 14th of Nisan to the Bet haMiqdash by one or two representatives of each Habura, and it was sacrificed while the Hallel was recited.

There is a beautiful custom, still practiced today in a few communities, that was observed for centuries in remembrance of this Hallel on the eve of Pesach. Do you know when people used to bake the Matsot used for the Pesach Seder? On the 14th of Nisan! That is, in the afternoon of the eve of Pesach, at the very time the Qorban was sacrificed. This is in fact the ideal time to prepare Matsot—just as we prepare Halot on a regular Friday afternoon. And while preparing the Matsot, the family would sing the Hallel!

Let’s return to Yerushalayim. After being slaughtered, the animal was roasted whole and brought back home. That night, already the 15th of Nisan, the Seder was conducted—very much like we do today. The Haggadah was read, the Ma Nishtana questions were asked, and a large meal was served, including other offerings such as the Korban Hagiga, and all accompanied, of course, by Matsa, Maror, and Haroset. People reclined on couches or cushions and ate like nobles. They drank four cups of tempered wine, toasting to our salvation, redemption, freedom, and our assignment as the chosen people.

At the end of the meal, before midnight, the Qorban Pesach was distributed as the Afiqoman (the final course or “dessert”) among all members of the Habura. Everyone had to eat at least a portion the size of an olive (Kazait).

Today, we remember the Qorban Pesach by placing a shank bone on the Pesach tray (or a chicken leg among Ashkenazim). At the end of the Seder, we also eat an additional portion of Matsa, the Afiqoman, saying: “We eat this Matsa in memory of the Qorban Pesach, which was eaten when one was already satisfied.”

After eating the Qorban Pesach, we recited the Birkat haMazon, the blessing of gratitude to HaShem for our food.

Towards midnight, once the Pesach meal was complete, something truly “magical” happened. People would go up to the terraces of their homes and from there, looking toward the Bet haMiqdash—illuminated by the full moon—they would sing the Hallel, the Psalms of Tehillim recited to thank HaShem for freeing us from Egypt.

I believe this was the most beautiful moment of the night: the voices of hundreds of thousands of Yehudim, the entire Jewish People, coming together to sing the Hallel, all at once, with one melody, filling the holy city with that extraordinary song. The Gemara says that the voices of this multitudinous

chorus were so powerful that the city literally “trembled.”

To preserve the memory of that beautiful Hallel and make it part of our national memory, we all sing the Hallel together in the synagogue before the Seder begins.

May HaShem grant us the merit to sing the Hallel next year, all together, in Yerushalayim, with one voice before our Bet haMiqdash. AMEN.

יהי רצון שנזכה לחגוג את חג הפסח בבנין בית תפארתינו במב ”י , אמן