

## Dedication

To My Parents,  
Rabbi & Mrs. Emanuel & Norma Holzer

The honor to be a *shamash haRav* was an inherited one. Growing up in my parents' home, I understood that the Rav was the leader of a generation, and any chance to connect with him was a chance to connect with greatness.

My earliest memories of the Rav were his public *shiurim*, which my father took me to at every opportunity. But the connection was not just from appreciating the Rav's brilliance of mind. It was also a treat to just come along as my father drove the Rav to and from the airport each week, or watch my Mom excitedly straighten up the house when she knew the Rav would be coming to our house for a *Sheva Berachot* – or her more rushed preparations when the visit was a surprise!

My parents were able to pass down *Ahavas Hatorah*, a feeling which dramatically changes your perspective on life. The warmth that the Rav felt toward my parents was extended to me, and is what made the unique insight into the Rav in this volume possible. May *Hashem* grant them continued Long Life with Health and Happiness.

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## Introduction

The Rav, Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, was the eldest grandson of R. Chaim of Brisk, and embodied that grand, scholarly rabbinic tradition.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, he was steeped in the scientific and philosophical thought of the modern world. Like many of the great *rishonim*, he was a powerhouse in both the *halachic* and the philosophical worlds. In its struggle to define itself, Modern Orthodoxy has seen his words and writings as a source of direction and legitimacy.

Having served as the Rav's *shamash* for six years, I enjoyed a unique opportunity, which in turn charges me with a unique obligation: to attempt to present the Rav's views on the hundreds of issues which I had the opportunity to discuss with him over the years.

As it was difficult to write everything down on the spot, the Rav allowed me at times to tape record our conversations as a "backup", to correct any misconceptions. After reviewing my notes and discussions some thirty years later, it is clear to me that the value of the recordings far exceeds that of

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<sup>1</sup> R. Chaim Soloveitchik (1853-1918), also known as R. Chaim Brisker, is widely renowned for creating the "Brisker" approach to *gemara* study followed today in *yeshivas* world wide.

the notes. Without access to the precise language, notes tend to be reconstructed in accord with one's own perspective, consciously or not.

It is very important to stress that these are transcripts of the Rav's informal "off-the-cuff" conversations. As such, they lack the extraordinarily careful structure, vocabulary, and precision which characterize his other published works. Like all conversational material, it includes redundancies, incomplete sentences, unfinished thoughts, less-than-perfect grammar, and other stylistic quirks which would never appear in a formal venue. At the same time, these are also the features that give it the genuine flavor of a one-on-one informal conversation, of being a fly on the wall in the Rav's study. You can hear the Rav as a public speaker in many other books, but here I would like to present his *personal* voice, which you may not find elsewhere.

It is also critical to remember that these discussions are not necessarily his final words on a particular topic, and should *not* be considered definitive *piskei halachah*. Please consult your local Orthodox rabbi for that. Nevertheless, they do provide great insight into how the Rav thought, how he approached various topics, and his dealings with people who knew him personally. As the Rav himself said, in a section which will appear later in this book:

“Whatever I said, don’t consider them as *piskei halachah*. I am not a *posek*. It is simply sharing my thoughts with you. If you feel that I am wrong, I wouldn’t feel offended. And if you feel that I am right, so you’ll give more time to *Torah* and study harder. But it’s not *piskei halachah*, it’s not advice, it’s not that. It’s simply **thinking aloud** and sharing.” *[emphasis added. We have borrowed the Rav’s phrase as the title of this book]*

This first volume will deal with the Rav’s biographical background, and a broad range of general *hashkafah* and philosophical topics. Future volumes will, *Y”H*, deal with a wider range of topics in *halachah*, as well as discussions on *chumash*.

In addition to personal tape recordings, some sections have been supplemented with note-based material. I have been careful to separate and clarify which content was derived from transcripts, and which from notes alone. All content from notes is set off in a box.

Even when working from notes, I have tried my best to not allow my personal views to influence the content. After all, while *Chazal* insisted on properly

attributing quotes to their authors<sup>2</sup>, they would hardly approve of “attributing” statements that the author didn’t actually say!

When someone other than the Rav is speaking, *the text is italicized*. I am usually the speaker in these conversations (indicated by “[DH:]” before the text). When a different person is speaking, he will be identified when known. When the Rav is speaking, the text is not italicized. Transliterated words from other languages (Hebrew, Latin, Yiddish, etc.) will also be italicized.

The same italicization scheme is also used in the content derived from notes. The notes themselves were often taken in a question-and-answer format, which is replicated here. This format makes the concepts easier to understand.

Occasional clarifications are provided through brackets and footnotes. Clarifications are there as interpretations, which may reflect the Rav’s actual views – or not. Other times the brackets indicate areas of the tape that were difficult to hear or understand, and where the best guess as to the words is given (arguably an interpretation as well!). The date when the conversation took place is provided in a footnote when known.

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<sup>2</sup> 'אמר רב אלעזר אמר רבי חנינא: כל האומר דבר בשם אומרו מביא גאולה לעולם' (מגילה טו.)

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the reviewers who contributed considerable time and energy to this book. I would like to especially thank my brother-in-law, Dr. David Epstein, for his extensive grammatical and stylistic comments. Thanks as well to my wife, Rona; my mother, Norma; and my sons, Zecharia and Avrami, for their reviewing, corrections, and comments. Thanks as well to my son-in-law, Avshalom Baskin, for his help in finding a printer. Most of all, I would like to thank my son, Aryeh, for his tireless effort in transcribing and editing this book.

I would like to thank Hashem for the all the chessed He has done for me and my Eishes Chayil Rona. Granting us wonderful children, in laws, and grandchildren. Aryeh, Zecharia and Devora, Shani and Marc and their daughters Sara Dina and Haddasah Malka, Avrami and Malka Baila and their daughter Hadassa, Sara and Avi, Tuvia, Moshe, Tehila and Yaakov. May Hashem grant us continued Nachas from all of them.

I hope this book will prove as enlightening to you in reading it as it was to me in writing it.

- Rabbi David Holzer  
Miami Beach, Rosh Chodesh Adar 5769



## **Format Summary**

### Content Source

Standard – Content from Tapes

Boxed – Content from Notes

### Speaker

*Standard – The Rav speaking*

*Italics – Someone else speaking*

## **In Place of a Haskamah**

*[The following is a transcript from a speech given by the Rav at the sheva brachos for me and my wife Rona (née Zweig). The sheva brachos was held at the home of my parents, R. Emanuel and Norma Holzer.*

*This transcript picks up as the Rav was concluding a longer drashah describing how elements of the beis hamikdash are mirrored in the Jewish home.]*



(The Rav with Emanuel and Norma Holzer. Photo credit: Holzer family)

Every equation is reversible. If the *beis hamikdash* is a home, then the home must be a *beis hamikdash* [as well]. And this is exactly the task of a new married couple. To build a home means to build a sanctuary: that every home should have an *aron*, a *shulchan*, a *menorah*, and be accommodating as far as *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* is considered.

It is hard for me to speak about David. David is a part of – I don't believe he belongs to Rabbi Holzer [audience laughter]. I lay claim to him. Priority. I am so used to him, that it is impossible for me to imagine how I will function without him. Now he is taken away from me, he was taken away. I believe the husband belongs to the wife. In this regard I am quite progressive [audience laughter]. If he will come [to visit me] too often, I assure you [that] I will send him home.

I am not trying to be affectatious or engage in sentimentalism. It is a sense of nostalgia I have because I am losing David. Of course, as a *talmid*, no [I am not losing him] - but as a son [I am losing him]. Basically there is another equation which is important: of *talmid* and son. It is a basic equation. "בני הנביאים, אלו תלמידי הנביאים"<sup>3</sup>, and vice-versa, the *תלמידים* are *בנים*. It is very hard to – I came here tonight with the feeling of sadness. I'm not joking. But I will not compete with you [audience laughter].

David is a wonderful boy. First of all, he is a *ba'al kishron*. He has a good, sensitive intellect. He has two things which are sensitive: his intellect, and his heart. That's very important. Some people have a sensitive intellect, but their heart is not sensitive at all. And other people, on the contrary, have a

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<sup>3</sup> רש"י מלאכים ב ד: א



sensitive heart, but not a sensitive mind, so these people cannot grow intellectually. But David has both. He has a sensitive heart, and no one is as kind as he is.

Please forgive me for telling מקצת שבהו בפניו. Because I always say that when the *gemara* says “ מקצת שבהו ”<sup>4</sup>, it’s not a *heter*, not a [mere] license for flattery [, but an actual obligation]. I have to do it. Because the *gemara* derives it, the *midrash* derives it, from *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. If *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* said part of the flattery to Noach – “ כי אתך ראית צדיק ” – it means that everyone among us is obligated, duty-bound, to compliment this person if he feels this person has accomplished a great deal, and he acts rightly and in accordance with the *Torah*. You have to compliment him. כי אתך ראית צדיק.

Even though על פי דין you’ve got to say how wonderful the *kallah* is, the *chosson* you don’t have to praise. כיצד מרקדין לפני הכלה.<sup>5</sup> The *gemara* never asks כיצד מרקדין לפני החתן. You tell the truth about the *chosson*. The *kallah* is regardless כלה נאה וחסדה [audience laughter].

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<sup>4</sup> עיר ובין ה: :

<sup>5</sup> כתובות טז: :

But מקצת שבהו של אדם בפניו אומרים, and this is בפניו now at the *sheva brachos*. I can tell you, David, “ קשה עלי ”<sup>6</sup>, because you will have to spend more time with your wife than with me.

This relationship of *talmid* and *rebbe* plays an important role in my life. I have only one son, two daughters and one son. But [my] son is also my *talmid*, and so are the daughters. And the basic relationship between me and my children is that of teacher and student, not so much of father and child. I was brought up in an environment where the basic relationship – and it comes to expression in many of my *ma’amorim* – is not a biologically justified relationship of father and son, where we have in common sometimes nothing else but the genetic code (although the *Torah* has respected this common denominator in people, which science calls the genetic code), but there is a higher relationship, this of *rebbe* and *talmid*. It has nothing to do with genetic code, for we have two different genetic codes. But there is a certain sense of identification.

When I teach young boys, no matter how complicated the *sugya* is, I try to pass on to them not only the knowledge, the abstractions and the concepts of *halachah*, but something which I experience, something personal, intimate, a part of

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רש"י וקרא כג: לו" עזרת הוא" <sup>6</sup>

myself I try to pass on to my *talmidim*. Some receive it. Some accept it. Some can't accept it. Because the modern, American or European, Western man, has never known what this relationship between *talmid* and *rebbe* means. Never understood *yahadus*. Perhaps Plato and Socrates understood it; I don't know. Between master and disciple. I don't know.

But in *yahadus*, this relationship is the foundation of *Torah she'bal peh*, of the great *mesorah*, the great tradition, [in] which one generation passes a great message to another generation, and by passing on the message, the first generation gives itself to the second generation. There is a merger, so to say, an existential merger of generations throughout the ages and the millennia.

This relationship I can't establish with every *talmid*. Some *talmidim* resist it. They look upon me, or they look upon any other teacher, as a technician. While they are in class, and I explain, they are pretty good sometimes. But once the *gemara* is closed, and they are outside of the room, it is a world which I do not know and they don't recognize me. But some *talmidim*, who have sensitive hearts as well as sensitive minds, sustain that relationship. And perhaps the most outstanding among them is David. So I will always be with you, *im yirtzeh Hashem*.

Now I have to say a few words to you [i.e., Rona] [audience laughter]. That you are a *כלה נאה וחסודה* you don't need my judgment. I spoke with her several times and I believe she is like David. *כיצד מרקדין לפני הכלה כלה נאה וחסודה*.

And to the parents, Rabbi and Mrs. Holzer: Rabbi Holzer, I'll tell you frankly, he was in my classroom as a *talmid* in the *yeshiva*. Later, how he came, he attended my lectures about – you were the only one from our group who attended the lectures, for two years, I believe – it was a wonderful time.<sup>7</sup> It was before I was operated [on], it was a wonderful time. And it was very strange, because he attended not only my *gemara shiurim*, but my *shiurim* in *hashkafah*, so this bond of *talmid* and *rebbe* was strengthened. And I always look upon him and I have the impression that he and I know of one secret which no one else knows.

Ay, what the secret is, I don't know [audience laughter], and I don't care to tell. But Manny Holzer will understand me.

Because at that time it was a world, not of *kanoim* and *meshugaim*, it was a more liberal world and the

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<sup>7</sup> The Rav is referring to the Religious Definition of Man lectures, which R. Emanuel Holzer had the rare honor of attending. For details on these lectures, as well as our interpretations of a number of the *shiurim*, please see Section III of this book.

*rebbe* could say anything he wanted to, and a *talmid* could agree or disagree. There was no tension which now prevails and separates *rav* from *rav*, and *yeshiva talmid* from *yeshiva talmid*. It is a very strange atmosphere which prevails in the United States now. I don't know who is responsible for it. I mean, I am speaking about the religious community. Somehow there is an air of suspicion, people are suspicious of each other. "I am not enough *frum*, I should be more, because the people are critical of me" and so forth. I see this now: the mentality of Orthodoxy in America is simply to assure the next door neighbor that I am good.

And there is a tendency on the part of people to somehow tell the next door neighbor that I am just like you. There is no difference between me and you. We have the same *hashkafos*, the same outlook on the world.

And it has a very negative, destructive effect upon our intellectual accomplishments. American Jewry is now first of all very prosperous, and second of all creative. Whether the right is right or wrong, it is a creative Jewry. Jews in America have reached the phase of creativity. What is missing in American Jewry is a sense of confidence and love for each other, and understanding.

But I want to tell you, Rabbi Holzer still belongs to the old world in this regard. And I tell you, I always have the impression as if he and I know something which you don't share with somebody else because the people wouldn't understand it. It is something so precious that you don't want to expose this treasure to others. *Zol zein kein ayin hara*. And you belong to this world that David and his bride ...

And I wish to David and his bride, and to Rabbi and Mrs. Holzer, and the entire family, *mazal tov* and *brachah*, and I participate in your *simcha* the way I would participate if I had married off a member of my household. *Mazal tov*.



## **Family Stories**

### **R. Yoshe Ber – The Beis Halevi (the Rav's paternal great-grandfather)**

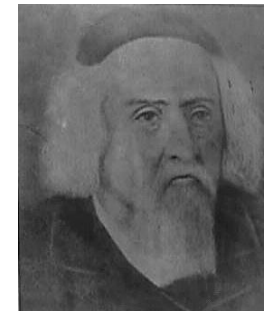
*[DH:] I found an interesting thing in the encyclopedia about R. Chaim Volozhin,<sup>1</sup> that his father-in-law asked him the nusach ha'tefilos, the seder ha'tefilos, and he didn't know the proper seder ha'tefilos for yom tov – I don't know if for yom tov or Rosh Hashanah, according to the article it's yom tov – and because of that he forced him to divorce his daughter.*

Divorce his daughter?

*[DH:] Yes. R. Chaim Volozhin was –*

You are making a mistake. There is a story about R. Yoshe Ber.

The story was with R. Yosef Ber, and it was simply a question about *av harachamim*.



R. Yosef Ber  
(Yoshe Ber)  
Soloveitchik (1820-  
1892)

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<sup>1</sup> R. Chaim Volozhin (1749-1821) was the great-grandfather of R. Yosef Ber (Yoshe Ber) Soloveitchik (1820-1892), who was in turn the great-grandfather of the Rav. He should not be confused with the Rav's grandfather, R. Chaim Soloveitchik (1853-1918; i.e. R. Chaim Brisker).

[DH:] *About av harachamim?*

He asked R. Yosef Ber whether he should say *av harachamim* or not, or *tzidkasecha tzedek*. He [R. Yosef Ber] said he didn't know, look it up in the *luach*. His father-in-law, the first father-in-law<sup>2</sup>, was terribly annoyed. Since R. Yosef Ber didn't know the answer, said look it up in the *luach*, he forced his daughter to divorce him. Not R. Chaim Volozhin.

[DH:] *Ah, R. Yosef Ber ... I guess father-in-laws were very powerful then: they could force their daughters to get divorced.*

*Nu, nu?* He had one daughter by this marriage, R. Yosef Ber. She married somebody Shapiro, from Lebau<sup>3</sup>. Her son was one of the leading socialists in the Russian Empire. The First Duma – Duma means the parliament which was elected in Russia – he was the leader of the Social Democratic party. R. Chaim, whenever he came to Lebau, used to go up to see him.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>R. Yosef Ber would eventually marry three times.

<sup>3</sup>Now known as Liepaja, this is the third largest city in Latvia.

<sup>4</sup>Probably Yakov Nokhovich, (1865-???), elected as one of only six Jewish deputies to the Second Duma in 1907. Although the Rav said that he was prominent in his party in the time of the First Duma (in 1906), it is possible he was not elected to the Duma itself until the second elections in 1907. The Rav is now referring obviously to R. Chaim Soloveitchik, who lived until 1918.

This is the daughter of R. Yosef Ber by his first marriage.

[DH:] *Mistama he was a very wealthy gevir this person.*

Yes, he was from [inaudible]. A total *am ha'aretz*. The encyclopedia has this story?

[DH:] *Yes, the Encyclopedia Judaica has the story.*<sup>5</sup>

It's true. *L'mai'seh*, it was either *tzidkasecha tzedek* or *av harachamim*. He said to look it up in the *luach*.

[DH:] *Maybe that's why it says לעלם... ישא בת תלמיד חכם*<sup>6</sup>

"כל המשא בתו לעם הארץ כאילו כופתה ומניחה לפני ארלי"<sup>7</sup>.



[DH:] *Did [R. Samson Raphael] Hirsch ever see R. Chaim? Did they ever meet?*

<sup>5</sup>Volume 15, page 131, in an article about R. Yosef Ber Soloveitchik (the Rav's great-grandfather, as noted earlier).

<sup>6</sup>שמים מש:

<sup>7</sup>10-78

No. R. Chaim met Breuer.<sup>8</sup> Hirsch was a contemporary of R. Yoshe Ber.

[DH:] *Hirsch died in 1888.*

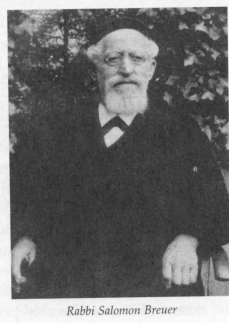
About Hirsch, I don't know how much knowledge he had [*i.e., how much knowledge R. Yoshe Ber had of R. Hirsch*].

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<sup>8</sup> R. Shlomo Zalman (Solomon) Breuer (1850-1926), the son-in-law of R. Hirsch R. Chaim Solovitchik (1853-1918) would have been his contemporary. By contrast, R. Hirsch (1808-1888) was a contemporary of R. Yosef Ber Solovitchik (1820-1892).



R. S. R. Hirsch



R. S. Z. Breuer

Azriel Hildesheimer came to Brisk.<sup>9</sup> R. Yoshe Ber told his people, and he himself went out to meet him, I don't know how far, with candles. He gave this kind of respect to two people: R. Azriel Hildesheimer, and the Malbim. I had a great-aunt. She was an aunt of my father, she was the daughter of R. Yoshe Ber. I heard it from her.

The Malbim had opponents too. He was too modern for his age, too.

[DH:] *Where is the yesod that you go out with candles?*

The story about *Shimon HaTzaddik*.<sup>10</sup> When Alexander came to *Yerushalayim*, *Shimon HaTzaddik* went out with candles – torches.<sup>11</sup>




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<sup>9</sup> R. Israel Azriel Hildesheimer (1820-1899), German rabbi and founder of the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminar.



R. I. A. Hildesheimer

<sup>10</sup> י"ט ט"ז

<sup>11</sup> 8-16-77

## Introduction to Section II

On *Yom HaAtzmaut*, 1978, *hallel* was said during *shacharis* in the Morgenstern dormitory. That day, prior to beginning his daily *shiur*, the Rav had a discussion with his *talmidim* in which he addressed his objections to *hallel* as it was said that day.

This off-the-cuff discussion is presented in its entirety in order to give a fascinating insight into the Rav's personal views, not only regarding reciting *hallel*, but on a host of topics relating to *Eretz Yisrael*. Although the Rav often asked me not to record certain informal discussions, in this instance he fortunately did allow it.

As elsewhere in this book, questions and comments from various students in the class are indicated in *italics*. The **headings in bold font** have been added to make it easier to find particular topics.

## Hallel on Yom HaAtzmaut

I want to say something. The fact that I walked out today when I saw them taking out the *sefer Torah* and *haftorah* from *nevi'im*, I want you to know [that it] should not be interpreted in any political terms. The prestige of the Bnei Akiva has not been affected at all.<sup>1</sup> But usually I cannot do things which, *b'mechilas kavodchem*, smell of a *m ha'areztus* [audience laughter]. I cannot. It is my instinctive reaction. And to read a *haftorah* today is so absurd.

To say *hallel* today with a *brachah*, they shouldn't have done it. As a matter of fact, I'll ask [the person who was *shliach tzibur*; name deleted] – where is he? – to leave the *brachah* out. I'll tell you, had he left the *brachah* out, I would have said *hallel* with them. But since he said a *brachah*, I didn't say *hallel* at all. I just answered “הודו לה' כי לעולם חסדו” because it's a *davar she'b'kedushah*, but otherwise I did not say *hallel*.

Because there is a *gemara*. I can't put away the *gemara*. “כל האומר הלל בכל יום” is forbidden.<sup>2</sup> It would appear from Rashi in *Shabbos*, in “כל כתבי”, that the heter of saying *hallel* is based on *takanas ha'nevi'im*.<sup>3</sup> I don't believe there is voluntary saying of *hallel*. To

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<sup>1</sup> Religious-Zionist youth movement, founded in 1929.

<sup>2</sup> שבת קה :

<sup>3</sup> שבת קה: ד"ה "הרי זה מחורף ומגדף"

such an extent, you see, on *Pesach*, *hallel* is only recited for one day, according to the Rambam.<sup>4</sup> Saying half-*hallel* is only a *minhag* according to the Rambam.<sup>5</sup> Because the *kedushas ha'yom* of all seven days of *Pesach* is uniform – in contrast to *Sukkos*, where each day has a separate *kedushas ha'yom*, because the *musafim* change, *Pesach* has only one *kedushas ha'yom* – one *hallel* is enough. I could ask *Chazal* “Why not, why be so stingy?” Apparently you don’t say *hallel* unless you have to. I can’t help it.

### Hallel Without a Brachah

When you say it still without a *brachah*, so you say it in a voluntary manner. And it might be [that even though the גמרא writes] “כל האומר הלל בכל יום אין לו חלק” [there] means [it is a problem only] if I say it *b’toras chiyuv*, but if I say it voluntarily, it’s like reading *hallel*, like someone

<sup>4</sup> הנכוחה ג:ו

<sup>5</sup> הנכוחה ג:ז

<sup>6</sup> It appears that the Rav was quoting the aforementioned *gemara* in *shabbos*, which reads: “הקורא הלל בכל יום - הרי זה מחרף ומגדף”. It appears from later in the discussion that the Rav meant that a *מחרף ומגדף* loses his share in *dam haba'ah*, as he says later “That’s what you see from *chazal*. כל האומר הלל בכל יום אין לו חלק לעולם הבא. Apparently they addressed themselves to certain events: some people used to say *hallel b’chol yom*. Why should *Chazal* say *b’chlal* [at all] *מחרף ומגדף*”. See for instance: טו: בבא בתרא where the two are linked:

הביא הקב"ה עליו יסודו תהי למודף ומגדף שפלו הקב"ה שסרו בעוה"ז [כדן] לטרדו מן העולם הבא

who recites *tehillim* the whole day can say the *hallel* the whole day [and therefore be permitted].<sup>7</sup> Some people say part of *tehillim* every day. I knew people who used to say almost the whole of *tehillim* every day. So when they come to *hallel*, to “הללו עמי ה'”,<sup>8</sup> what do they do? They say it. This is not meant by the *gemara*, “כל האומר הלל בכל יום”. *Hallel b’chol yom* means if he says it *b’toras tzivui*, as a mandatory performance, or at least he gives the impression that he says it *b’toras tzivui*.

If there is no *brachah*, [then] the *hallel* is not recited *b’toras chiyuv*, so I say it. But when there is a *brachah*, “אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו לקרוא את ההלל”, and the *shliach tzibur* said it on behalf of the *kahal*, so I didn’t say the *hallel* at all because then my recital of the *hallel* would be associated with the *brachah*. [It] could be I recited *hallel* not *b’toras kriah b’kesuvim*, but *b’toras mitzvas hallel*. And there is no *takanah* today, and if there is no *takanah*, there is no *hallel*.

### Permitted Method if the Tzibur Wants to Say Hallel

That is why I did not say *hallel* today, even though when I *davven* in a *minyán* on *yom ha'atzmaut* I do

<sup>7</sup> מגן אברהם תקפד:א

<sup>8</sup> תהלים קיג