

## A Psalm Brainteaser

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Let's get that out of the way at the start: I'm a terrible congregant. During services on the first and last days of Pesach, I was listening to the beautiful singing of Hallel when... I noticed something strange in the grammar. I haven't been able to find out what the text is telling me, so now I'm asking you.

Psalm 118 starts out in this way:

|                                     |                              |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Praise (plural) God for He is good  | for His goodness is forever! |
| Let Israel say (singular)           | for His goodness is forever! |
| Let the House of Aaron say (plural) | for His goodness is forever! |
| Let those who fear God say (plural) | for His goodness is forever! |

We have a similar construction in Psalm 115:9-12:

|   |                                    |
|---|------------------------------------|
| Israel, trust (singular) in God               | their help and their shield is He! |
| House of Aaron trust (plural) in God          | their help and their shield is He! |
| Those who fear the Lord trust (plural) in God | their help and their shield is He! |

The texts and the variants here are clear: Israel is singular while everyone else is plural. So this isn't a mistake. It's a message. The question is: how do we decode the message?

In Psalm 118, I can easily see the Levites leading the congregation in song in the Temple. First, they give us the refrain, "for His goodness is forever!" Then they call on the Israelites to sing it, then the priests (i.e., the house of Aaron). Finally, they call on either the non-Jews present, the people who converted to Judaism or everyone altogether to sing it. But that still doesn't tell us why Israel is singular and everyone else is plural.

### Discussion Questions

1. Can you think of a reason why Israel, seemingly the Jewish people altogether, is a singular noun while the priests and converts and/or non-Jews are plural? What is the Psalmist trying to tell us?
2. Have you ever experienced being absolutely at one with a group? When was it? What happened?
3. One of the real mysteries is why the Psalmist is consistently referring to the Israelites as one whole being while component constituents are pluralities. And it isn't just the Psalms. We say, "Hear o Israel!" which is singular, too.

Help solve the mystery! The message is there, I just can't figure out what it is. I hope you are the super-sleuth who solves the case!