The Meaning of the Word Hitpallel (התפלל)

By Mitchell First[1]
MFirstAtty@aol.com

It is clear from the many places that it appears in Tanakh that התפלל connotes praying. But what was the original meaning of this word? I was always taught that it meant something like “judge yourself.” Indeed, the standard ArtScroll Siddur (Siddur Kol Yaakov) includes the following in its introductory pages: “The Hebrew verb for praying is מתפלל; it is a reflexive word, meaning that the subject acts upon himself. Prayer is a process of self-evaluation, self-judgment…”[2]

More recently, when I searched Jewish sites on the internet for the definition that was offered for hitpallel and mitpallel, I invariably came up with a definition similar to the above. Long ago, Rabbi S. R. Hirsch (d. 1888) and R. Aryeh Leib Gordon (d. 1912) also gave definitions that focused on prayer as primarily an action of the self.[3]

In this post, I would like to share a different interpretation offered by some modern scholars, one based on a simple insight into Hebrew grammar. This new and compelling interpretation has unfortunately not yet made its way into mainstream Orthodox writings and thought. Nor has it been given proper attention in academic circles. For example, it did not make its way into the widely consulted lexicon of Ludwig Koehler and Walter
Baumgartner.[4] By sharing this new interpretation of פלל, we can ensure that at least the next generation will understand the origin of this critical word.

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There are two issues involved in parsing this word: 1) what is the meaning of the root פלל? and 2) what is the import of the hitpael stem, one that typically implies doing something to yourself?

With regard to the root פלל, its meaning is admittedly difficult to understand. Scholars have pointed out that the other Semitic languages shed little light on its meaning.[5] If we look in Tanakh, the verb פלל is found 4 times:[6]

1) It seems to have a meaning like “think” or “assess” at Genesis 48:11: re’oh fanekha lo filalti… (=I did not think/assess that I would see your face).[7]

2) It seems to have a meaning like “intervene” at Psalms 106:30: va-ya’amod Pinḥas va-yefalel, va-teatzar hamagefah (=Pinchas stood up and intervened and the plague was stopped).[8]

3) It seems to have a meaning like “judge” at I Sam. 2:25: im yeheta ish le-ish u-filelo elokim…(If a man sins against another man, God will judge him…).[9]

4) It also appears at Ezekiel 16:52: את שאי כלلتך אשר פללת (= לאחותך גם pilalt to your sisters). The sense here is difficult, but it is usually translated as implying some form of judging.
What I would like to focus on in this post, however, is the import of the *hitpael* stem in the word התפלל.

Most students of Hebrew grammar are taught early on that the *hitpael* functions as a “reflexive” stem, i.e., that the actor is doing some action on himself. But the truth is more complicated.

One source I saw counted 984 instances of the *hitpael* in *Tanakh*.[10] It is true that a large percentage of the time, perhaps even a majority of the time, the *hitpael* in *Tanakh* is a “reflexive” stem.[11] Some examples:

- “station oneself”; the verb עצב is in the *hitpael* 48 times in *Tanakh* (e.g., היתязב)
- “strengthen oneself”; the verb חזק is in the *hitpael* 27 times in *Tanakh* (e.g., היחזק)
- “sanctify oneself”; the verbקדש is in the *hitpael* 24 times in *Tanakh* (e.g., היתקדש)
- “cleanse oneself”; the verb터רש is in the *hitpael* 20 times in *Tanakh* (e.g., היתחרש)

But it is also clear that the *hitpael* transforms meanings in other ways as well. For example:

- At Genesis 42:1 (*למה תיתרוא*), the form of תיתרוא is *hitpael* but the meaning is likely: “Why are you looking at one another?” This is called the “reciprocal” meaning of *hitpael*.
- Another example of this reciprocal meaning is found at II Chronicles 24:25 with the word היתקרו; its meaning is “conspired with one another.”

- The root הלכ appears in the *hitpael* 46 times in *Tanakh*,
e.g., hithalekh. The meaning is not “to walk oneself,” but “to walk continually or repeatedly.” This is called the “durative” meaning of the hitpael. There are many more durative hitpaels in Tanakh.[12]

Now let us look at a different word that is in the hitpael form in Tanakh: התפלל. The root here is חנן which means “to be gracious” or “to show favor.” חנן appears in the hitpael form many times in Tanakh (תחנן, אתחנן, etc.). At I Kings 8:33 we even have a hitpael of פלל and a hitpael of חנן adjacent to one another: והתחננו והתפללו. If we are constrained to view התפלל as doing something to yourself, then what would be the meaning of התפלל? To show favor to yourself? This interpretation makes no sense in any of the contexts that the hitpael of חנן is used in Tanakh.

Rather, as recognized by modern scholars, the root חנן is an example where the hitpael has a slightly different meaning: to make yourself the object of another’s action. (This variant of hitpael has been called “voluntary passive” or “indirect reflexive.”) Every time the root חנן is used in the hitpael, the actor is asking another to show favor to him. As an example, one can look at the beginning of parshat va-et-ḥanan. Verse 3:23 states that Moshe was אתחנן to God. אתחנן does not mean that “Moshe showed graciousness to himself.” Rather, he was trying to make himself the object of God’s graciousness.

Let us now return to our issue: the meaning of התפלל. Most likely, the hitpael form in the case of התפלל is doing the same
thing as the hitpael form in the case of התפלל: it is turning the word into a voluntary passive/indirect reflexive.[13] Hence, the meaning of התפלל is to make oneself the object of God’sフラ (assessment, intervention, or judging). This is a much simpler understanding of התפלל than the ones that look for a reflexive action on the petitioner’s part. Once one is presented with this approach and how it perfectly parallels the hitpael’s role in התפלה, it is very hard to disagree.[14]

Some Additional Comments

1. It is interesting to mention some of the other creative explanations for התפלל that had previously been proposed (while our very reasonable interpretation was overlooked!):

   a. The root is related to a root found in Arabic, falla, which means something like “break,” and reflected an ancient practice of self-mutilation in connection with prayer.[15] Such a rite is referred to at 1 Kings 18:28 in connection with the cult of Baal (“and they cut themselves [=va-yitgodedu] in accordance with their manner with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them”).[16]

   b. התפלל is derived from the root פל (fall) and reflected the ancient practice of prostrating oneself during prayer.[17]

   c. התפלל did not originate based on a three-letter root, but was a later development derived from a primary noun תפלה. In this approach, one could argue that התפלל is not even a hitpael. (This approach just begs the question of where the word תפלה would have arisen. Most scholars reject this
approach because חַלֹּךְ does not look like a primary noun. Rather, it looks like a noun that would have arisen based on a verb such as פָּלוֹל or פָּלָה.

2. There are other examples in Tanakh of words that have the form of hitpael but are either voluntary passives (like התפלל and התן) or even true passives, as the role of the hitpael expanded over time.[18] Some examples:[19]

a. Gen 37:35: va-yakumu khol banav ve-khol benotav le-nahamo, va-yemaen le-hitnahem…(The meaning of the last two words seems to be that Jacob refused to let himself be comforted by others or refused to be comforted; the meaning does not seem to be that he refused to comfort himself.)

b. Lev. 13:33: ve-hitgalaḥ (The meaning seems to be “let himself be shaved by others.”)

c. Numb. 23:9: u-va-goyim lo yithashav

d. Deut. 28:68: ve-hitmakartem sham le-oyvekha la-avadim ve-li-shefaḥot… (It is unlikely that the meaning is that the individuals will be selling themselves.)

e. Psalms 92:10: yitpardu kol poalei aven (The evildoers are not scattering themselves but are being scattered.)

f. Is. 30:29: ke-leil hitkadesh ḥag…(The holiday is not sanctifying itself.)

g. Prov. 31:30: ishah yirat Hashem hi tithalal

h. Jonah 3:8: ve-yitkasu sakim ha-adam ve-ha-behemah…
(Animals cannot dress themselves!) 

i. II Kings 8:29 (and similarly II Kings 9:15, and II Ch. 22:6): va-yashav Yoram ha-melekh le-hitrape ve-Yizre’el… (The meaning may be that king Yoram went to Jezreel to let himself be healed by others or to be healed.)

3. As we see from this post, understanding the precise role of the hitpael is important to us as Jews who engage in prayer. Readers may be surprised to learn that understanding the precise role of the hitpael can be very important to those of other religions as well. A passage at Gen. 22:18 describes the relationship of the nations of the world with the seed of Abraham:  

(The phrase is found again at Gen. 26:4.) Whether this phrase teaches that the nations of the world will utter blessings using the name of the seed of Abraham or be blessed through the seed of Abraham depends on the precise meaning of the hitpael here. Much ink has been spilled by Christian theologians on the meaning of hitpael in this phrase.[20]

Whoever suspected that grammar could be so interesting and profound!

(Does the last word mean “let us strengthen ourselves,” “let us continually be strengthened,” or “let us be strengthened”? I will leave...
Notes:
[1] I would like to thank my son Rabbi Shaya First for reviewing and improving the draft.
[3] The edition of Rav Hirsch’s Pentateuch commentary translated by Isaac Levy includes the following (at Gen. 20:7): התפלל means: To take the element of God’s truth, make it penetrate all phases and conditions of our being and our life, and thereby gain for ourselves the harmonious even tenor of our whole existence in God…. [התפלל is] working on our inner self to bring it on the heights of recognition of the Truth and to resolutions for serving God…Prior to this, the commentary had pointed out that the root פלל means “to judge” and that a judge brings “justice and right, the Divine Truth of matters into the matter…”

R. Aryeh Leib Gordon explained that the word for prayer is in the hitpael form because prayer is an activity of change on the part of the petitioner, as he gives his heart and thoughts to his Creator; the petitioner’s raising himself to a higher level is what causes God to answer him and better his situation. See the introduction to Siddur Otzar Ha-Tefillot (1914), vol. 1, p. 20. The Encyclopaedia Judaica is another notable source that uses the term “self-scrutiny” when it defines the Biblical conception of prayer. See 13:978-79. It would be interesting to research who first suggested the self-judge/self-scrutiny definition of prayer. I have not done so. I will point out that in the early 13th century Radak viewed God as the one doing the judging in the word
The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (1994). The authors do cite the article by E.A. Speiser (cited in the next note) that advocates the interpretation. But they cite the article for other purposes only. The interpretation of התפלל that Speiser advocates and that I will be describing is nowhere mentioned.

[5] For example, E.A. Speiser writes that “[o]utside Hebrew, the stem pll is at best rare and ambiguous.” See his “The Stem PLL in Hebrew,” Journal of Biblical Literature 82 (1963), pp. 301-06, 301. He mentions a few references in Akkadian that shed very little light. There is a verb in Akkadian, palālu, that has the meaning: “guard, keep under surveillance.” See the פלל article in Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, vol. 11, p. 568 (2001), and Koehler-Baumgartner, entry פלל, p. 933. This perhaps supports the “assess” and “think” meanings of the Hebrew פלל.

[6] Various forms of a related noun, פלילים, פללים, פלילי and פליליה, appear 6 times. The meanings at Deut. 32:31 (ve-oyveinu pelilim), Job 31:11 (avon pelilim), and Job 31:28 (avon pelili) are very unclear. The meaning at Is. 16:3 (asu pelilah) is vague but could be “justice.” The meaning at Is. 28:7 (paku peliliah) (=they tottered in their peliliah) seems to be a legal decision made by a priest. Finally, there is the well-known and very unclear ve-natan be-flilim of Ex. 21:22. Onkelos translates this as ve-yiten al meimar dayanaya. But this does not seem to fit the words. The Septuagint translates the two words as “according to estimate.” See Speiser, p. 303. Speiser is unsure if this translation was based on guesswork or an old tradition, but thinks it is essentially correct.

[7] Note that Rashi relates it to the word maḥşavah. Sometimes the verb is
translated in this verse as “hope.” Even though this interpretation makes sense in this verse, I am not aware of support for it in other verses. That is why I prefer “think” and “assess,” which are closer to “intervene” and “judge.” Many translate the word as “judge” in this verse: I did not judge (=have the opinion) that I would see your face. See, e.g., The Brown- Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, entry פלט. [8] Brown- Driver-Briggs translates פלט using a similar verb: “interpose.” See their entry פלט. Alternatively, some translate פלט here as “executed judgment.” [9] It has been suggested that the “judge” meaning is just a later development from the “intervene” meaning. [10] The exact number given varies from study to study. I have also seen references to 946, 780 and “over 825.” See Joel S. Baden, “Hithpael and Niphal in Biblical Hebrew: Semantic and Morphological Overlap,” Vetus Testamentum 60 (2010), pp. 33-44, 35 n.7. [11] We must be careful not to assume that the hitpael originated as a reflexive stem. Most likely, the standard Hebrew hitpael is a conflation of a variety of earlier t-stem forms that had different roles. See Baden, p. 33, n. 1 and E.A. Speiser, “The Durative Hithpa‘el: A tan-Form,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 75 (2) (1955), pp. 118-121. [12] See the above article by Speiser. For example, with regard to the hitpael of אבל, the implication may be “to be in mourning over a period of time.” With regard to התמם (the hitpael of рем), the implication may be “to be continually upright.” Some more examples: משתחו at Gen. 24:21
(continually gaze), נְסָרָה at Deut. 5:18 (tenth commandment; continually desire), רָעָנָה at Ps. 18:8 (continually shake), and עָנָה at Ps. 142:4 (continually be weak/faint). Another example is the root חֶנָּה. When it is in the hitpael, the implication may be “to come into and remain in possession.”


[14] Rav Hirsch views חָנָן as “to seek to make himself worthy of concession.” See his comm. to Deut. 3:23. This is farfetched. Hayim Tawil observes that there is an Akkadian root enēnu, “to plead,” and sees this Akkadian root as underlying the Hebrew חָנָן. He views the hitpael as signifying that the pleading is continuous (like the import of the hitpael in hithalekh). See his An Akkadian Lexical Companion For Biblical Hebrew (2009), pp. 113-14. But there is insufficient reason to read an Akkadian root into חָנָן, when we have a very appropriate Hebrew root חָנָן.


[16] The Soncino commentary here remarks that this was “a form of worship common to several cults with the purpose of exciting the pity of the gods, or to serve as a blood-bond between the devotee and his god.”


[18] One scholar claims
to have located as many as 68 such instances in Tanakh, but does not list them. For the reference, see Baden, p. 35, n. 7. Baden doubts the number is this high and believes that the true number is much lower. Baden would dispute some of the examples that I am giving. *Hitpaels* with true passive meanings are found more frequently in Rabbinic Hebrew. The expansion of the meaning of the *hitpael* stem to include the true passive form took place in other Semitic languages as well. See O.T. Allis, “The Blessing of Abraham,” *The Princeton Theological Review* (1927), pp. 263-298, 274-278. [19] These and several others are collected at Allis, pp. 281-83. For a few more true passives, see Kohelet 8:10, I Sam. 3:14, Lam. 4:1, and I Chr. 5:17.