

# Neilah

- Mayer Waxman.

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The old joke about Aleinu, Asher Yatzar and the mamzer is based on a mistaken premise.

The story goes that Aleinu complained about being said at the end of tefillah, being said last, as the congregation's minds are already on escaping the rules, decorum, and strictures of the beit haknesset; men are peeling off their tfillin and taleisim and have one foot out the door. Aleinu complains that people say Aleinu half-heartedly at best, without duly paying attention to what they are saying, and certainly without the appropriate kavanah and concentration.

Although I will leave the rest of the joke for those who ask me after Yom Kippur, the response that Aleinu is given is that, yes, Aleinu is not given a fair shake, so to make up for that slight, Aleinu will be added as a key element of the Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur davening.

This is in fact the opposite of the origin of Aleinu. In fact, Aleinu was a part of the Rosh HaShanah liturgy long before Aleinu was added to the rest of the services throughout the year. Aleinu was added to culminate – to serve, if you will, as a Neilah – to all services, Shacharit Minchah and Maariv of weekdays, Holidays and Shabbat, because of what it means, what it reminds us, and what it looks forward to.

Before we look into the meaning of Aleinu I want to address the end of the High Holiday season from an angle one step beyond where most Neilah speeches begin. Most Neilah speeches talk about the fact that we are coming to the end of the period of opportunity that God has granted us to repent. “Neilah,” the time of closing; the 10 day opportunity to earn heavenly forgiveness for past transgressions and to commit to changing our future ways is coming to a close.

But I want to talk about tonight. The Halachah sfarim say that it is proper tonight, immediately after Yom Kippur, to begin to build the Sukkah. We begin to prepare for the holiday of Sukkot, the holiday referred to in the torah as “Chag,” – and the Torah says “V’samachta b’Chagecha,” “and you should rejoice on your holiday,” on Sukkot. The Tefillot refer to Sukkot as “zman simchateinu,” the time of our happiness. The ten days of repentance which begin with Rosh HaShanah end, and we move on to jubilant celebration.

Reflect on that while we look at this special tefillah which was written to be part of the Rosh HaShanah service and which was added to every service we pray.

The origin of Aleinu is a bit of a mystery. Some Gaonim attribute Aleinu's authorship to Yehoshua Bin Nun; Joshua established the recitation of Aleinu upon his conquering the city of Jericho. Others say that Aleinu was initially a part of the Beit HaMikdash services, and when the officiates of the Temple service said the words “vaanachnu korim umishtachavim umodim lifnei Melech, Malchei hamlachim...” “and we bend our knees and bow and acknowledge before the King, King of kings...” the gathered would bend and bow and prostrate themselves before God,

not unlike that which we do in our Musaf services of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. And the last opinion regarding the authorship of Aleinu is that it is the Tefillah referred to in Gemara Yerushalmi Rosh Hashanah (1: 3) which says that Rav wrote a Tefillah as an introduction to seder Zichronot, one of the three special prayer sections in which we blow shofar on Rosh HaShanah. This opinion says that this introductory tefillah was Aleinu, which introduces seder Zichronot, 'the order of remembrances' in the Rosh HaShanah Musaf to this day.

Regardless of the origins of Aleinu, we know that it was exclusive to Rosh Hashanah for centuries, until sometime after the period of the Gaonim.

When the Jews did decide to add the Aleinu to all tefillot, our forbearers were subjected to hardships on account of this fundamental prayer. Perhaps many of you are not familiar with the original text of Aleinu, but if you look in the ArtScroll siddur you will find the line "shehem mishtachavim lahevel varik, umitpalilim el ail lo yoshea," "that they bow to waste and nothingness, and pray to a god who does not redeem." The Christians didn't take kindly to this reference, and they used some pretty erudite contemplations to decide that this was written as a swipe at Jesus. In around the year 1400 CE, some numero-linguo anti-Semite came to the conclusion that "varik," "nothingness" from "shehem mishtachavim lahevel varik," was a coded reference, as the gematria, mathematical value of the word Vav-resh-yud-kuf is 316; the same gematria as Jesus, Yeshe, yud-shin-vav, 316. In fact, they were even more insightful, and utilized the special gematria known as mispar katan, small numbers, in which all values are interpretively summed without their extra zeroes so that yud, 10, would be one, chaf, 20, would be two, and kuf, 100 would also be one. They realized that in mispar katan, hevel, hey-veis-lamed, is 10, and Yeshe, yud-shin-vav, is 10. And as upset as the Christians were by these realizations, they were more infuriated by the fact that the Jews were punctuating their every prayer service with this Aleinu.

The obvious fallacy of this well reasoned computation lies not in the theory that Jewish psalmists might use hidden messages to convey deeper meaning; of course they would. The problem with this interpretation is that by two historical views of Aleinu's authorship, the opinion that Yehoshua wrote it, that it was used in the Beit HaMikdash, leinu was written long before there was a Christianity. And even if Aleinu was written by Rav, it would have been written before Christianity had spread widely, and especially before it would have had affect in Bavel. [I suppose you could say the Christians were accusing the Jews of preemptively denigrating Jesus – as Aleinu was written by mortals, I don't know what the implications of such an assessment would be, nor what its impact would be on Aish HaTorah's Discovery seminars on Bible Codes...]

Nevertheless, the Jews were subjected to additional hardships on account of the phrase "shehem mishtachavim lahevel varik, umitpalilim el ail lo yoshea," so they replaced it with the more unspecified "shelo sam chelkeinu kahem v'goraleinu k'chol hamonam," "that He did not apportion for us the same as them, nor our lot like that of all the others." And still to this day many people do not say "shehem mishtachavim lahevel varik, umitpalilim el ail lo yoshea."

What was it about this prayer that motivated the Jews to place it in every service? Let's look at what the tefillah is about. "Aleinu l'shabeach l'Adon Hakol, Latet gdula l'Yotzer Breishit," why

is it incumbent on us to praise the Master of all? To give grandiosity to the Orchastrator of creation? “Shelo sam chelkeinu kahem v’goraleinu k’chol hamonam, shehem mishtachavim lahevel varik, umitpalilim el ail lo yoshea...” that is the crux of the first paragraph of Aleinu, but it is not an insult nor an indictment of any other religion or grouping; it is a statement of gratitude for giving us different structure, different goals, and different objectives.

We are uni-dimensionally motivated “lifnei Melech Malchei Ham’lachim,” toward the one King of kings, we follow Torah. We do not otherwise differentiate ourselves from other people, we certainly dare not say that we are personally better than anyone; rather, they think that their ways and beliefs are right, we know ours to be right. It is the other nations that impose different rules against Jews. In Bavel, Jews were restricted from building shuls in the city. They had to build them in the fields. And that was before streetlights so Jews would travel to shul in groups with torches to ward off robbers and wild animals. And on Shabbos the tefillot were set in such a way that people would have to stay until the end – the group recitation of vayeichulu and the Chazan’s brachot and Magen Avot were established so that people would have to stay to the end to assure they would leave in groups, because on Friday night they were more vulnerable because they could not carry torches. Yet in Bavel, the more dangerous the lifestyle became, the closer Jews would cleave to HaShem, until Bavel burgeoned into history’s greatest and most accomplished makom Torah – arguably until the growth of places of Torah in the recent decades. And the more immersed in Torah the Jewish populace becomes, the more grateful we are to HaShem “shelo sam chelkeinu kahem.” This commitment to God and observation of the differences of goals is what made this tefilla a long-time part of the High holiday service, and what naturally extended it to our every prayer service.

Now think again about building the Sukkah tonight, about beginning to immerse ourselves in zman simchateinu. What are we doing? We are, with Neilah, summing up our New-Year. We made our New-Year’s resolutions – but it took us 10 days as opposed to the one secular New Years Day; and our commitment to better ourselves came through cleaving to Torah and Mitzvot. And tonight, we celebrate the new year, we throw an eight day – nine days outside of Israel – we throw a new years bash – but our celebration and our joy are not drunken contradictions to our resolutions, but a religious embodiment of them as we move ourselves into the sukkah, a representation of God’s protecting embrace.

And what should we be doing in the coming year? What should we be planning and committing ourselves to and looking forward to as we begin to recite Neilah? Let’s look to the text of the second paragraph of Aleinu, “Al kein, nikaveh l’cha Adoshem Elokeinu,” therefore, because “HaShem Hu HaElokim bashamayim mimaal v’al haaretz ein od, “ because “God is the Master in heaven and earth,” we hope to soon behold God’s majesty. We look forward to God’s being accepted by all as the One Who’s name is One. We embrace and take pride in our being different, and we hope for the time when the whole world understands why that is. The second paragraph of Aleinu says that when abominations are removed from the world and the false gods eradicated, the time we look towards is a time “litaken Olam” – a time of fixing, of perfecting the world. This term, Tikun Olam has become somewhat of a buzzword. Secular Jews have taken it as a mandate, which is great, but we see tikkun Olam as something “bMalchus Shakai,” there can be no true ‘fixing the world’ without following God’s authority, the rules of Torah.

As we end our aseret y'mai teshuvah, our ten days of repentance, we should be thinking about how we can work toward bettering the world – in a way that will help bring about the appreciation of the uniqueness and glory of God. And what better way to do so than by throwing a party: a good clean, joyous festival, “v’samachta b’chagecha,” the uniquely public display of religion of Sukkos. We should be looking forward to starting to build the sukkah, “shehem mishtachavim lahevel varik...vaanachnu korim umishtachavim umodim lifnei Melech, Malchei hamlachim.”