

SAVING US—AND GOD

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EVERY DAY ON Sukkot, we circle the synagogue carrying the *lulav* and *etrog*, accompanied by poems, a different one each day, all with the same refrain: “הושע נא - save now!”¹ And each day, after the circling, we recite an additional poem, which is always the same. We often rush through this poem, but a closer look reveals that it has profound theological messages to teach us.

The poem, written by one of the greatest Hebrew poets of all time, R. Eleazar ha-Kalir (7th century), has a simple structure: an alphabetical acrostic with eleven lines, two letters in each line.² Each line opens with a past memory of God saving us (“כהושעת” - as You saved”), and ends with a request for God to save us again, as God saved before, now (“כן הושע נא” - so save now!”). For instance, the poem reminds us that God delivered us from slavery in Egypt:

כהושעת זכים מבית עבדים
חנון בידם מעבידים – כן הושע נא!

*As You saved the pure ones from the house of
bondage*

*O Gracious One, as You saved those enslaved
with manual labor—so save now!*³

But a curious theme appears in almost every other line of the poem: not only are we meant to be saved, but God is also meant to be saved. Why does God need redemption? Because, states the poem, God went into exile with Israel.

God never abandons the Jewish people, even when we have sinned against God. And God feels our pain directly, needing the same rescue that we need.

This all plays out—subtly at first—in the poem’s verses. For instance, the poem opens as follows:

כהושעת אלים בלוד עמך
בצאתך לישע עמך – כן הושע נא!

*As You saved Israel in Egypt,⁴ together with
Yourself*

*When You went forth to save Your people—so
save now!*

God saved not only Israel from Egypt, but also God saved Godself from Egypt. Why was God in Egypt with the Israelites? Because God never abandons us, and will never abandon us.

This is expressed with the simple word עִמָּךְ, translated as “together with Yourself.” One could easily miss that word and its import (especially as it looks the same as the word עַמְּךָ, “Your nation,” in the following stich). Indeed, at the beginning of the poem, God’s need for redemption is understated. But as the poem progresses, the poet expresses more boldly the claim that God is with us in our troubles and is in need of salvation.

Indeed, a few of the lines of the poem reread certain words to indicate that God accompanies us in exile:

1 Or: “Save please!”; the word נא can have both meanings. But one Rabbinic strand (e.g., Bavli Berakhot 9a) claims that נא always indicates a plea.

2 A twelfth line appears in current versions of the poem, but was a later addition; see Daniel Goldschmidt and Yonah Fraenkel, *Mahzor le-Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, ve-Simhat Torah* (1981), p. 182.

3 These translations are based on Jacob Petuchowski, *Theology and Poetry: Studies in the Medieval Piyyut* (2004), pp. 92ff.

4 As is the style of religious poetry, Kalir uses synonyms to represent Israel and Egypt, playing on more obscure references to these peoples in the Bible. Israel is called אֱלִים in Isaiah 61:3; Egypt is known by its descendent Lud, see Genesis 10:13.

כהושעת קהילות בבלה שלחת
רחום למענם שלחת – כן הושע נא!

*As You saved the congregation You sent to
Babylon (shilahta)
Merciful One, for their sake You Yourself were
sent there (shulahta)—so save now!*

God sent us (שִׁלַּחְתָּ) into the Babylonian exile for our sins,
but God also was sent (שִׁלַּחְתָּ) into exile with us. Because
God is with us in exile, God will also be taken out of exile
when we are redeemed:

כהושעת מאמר והוצאתי אתכם
נקוב והוצאתי אתכם – כן הושע נא!

*As You saved by uttering: “And I will bring
you out”
Rephrased as: “With you I shall be brought
out”—so save now!*

In Exodus 6:6, God promises to take out the Israelites from
Egypt (וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם). But in the poem, God repoints the
same letters of these two words to read “וְהוֹצֵאתִי אִתְּכֶם - I
will be brought out with you.” This subtle shift, marked
by different vowels, not consonant letters, changes God’s
role from savior (exclusively) to both savior and saved.⁵

Indeed, the refrain we recite at the end of the poem—
and at the end of all the poems of Hoshanot—gives
expression to this view of God, the Being Who can save
and Who also needs saving. We plead:

אני והו הושיעה נא

I and He—save now!

R. Yehudah is the one who recommends to recite this
line, instead of the more common: “אנא ה' הושיעה נא -
please God, save now.” It seems that R. Yehudah’s phrase
is short for והוא אני, and the הוא refers to God. We are
asking God to save us—and also Godself.⁶

This poetic representation of God as participating in
our struggles of exile and in need of redemption appears
throughout Rabbinic literature. It is championed most
clearly by one of R. Yehudah’s primary teachers, R. Akiva:⁷

מכילתא, מסכתא דפסחא יד

ר' עקיבא אומר: ... וכן את מוצא בכל מקום שגלו
ישראל כביכול גלתה שכינה עמהם....
וכשעתידין לחזור כביכול שכינה חוזרת עמהן....

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*R. Akiva said: ... And so we find in every
place that Israel was exiled, it is as if the
Shekhinah was exiled with them....*

*And when in the future they will return, the
Shekhinah will also return with them....*

R. Akiva teaches that God’s immanent presence, the
Shekhinah, is in exile and needs redemption. This is a
vision in which God is not distant from the suffering
of the Jewish people or the world, but is in fact party to
it. We are not alone in our quest for redemption; God is
in need as well.

Sometimes in moments of prayer, and in my life more
broadly, I imagine God to be entirely removed from me,
uninterested in my individual feelings. When I experience
pain, I am sometimes tempted to think that God is far
from me and my pain. But in certain rabbinic traditions,
quite the opposite is true: God experiences our pain, and
feels it intensely. This was articulated most poignantly in
the 20th century by R. Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, the
rabbi of the Warsaw Ghetto. In February 1942, he wrote:

אש קודש פרשת משפטים תש"ב

דהנה האיש הישראל המעונה ביסוריו חושב שרק
הוא מצטער, וכאלו כל יסוריו הפרטיים ויסורי
הכלל ישראל אינם נוגעים למעלה ח"ו. אבל
הפסוק אומר "ובכל צרתם לו צר".... ובספרים
הקדושים איתא שהרבה יותר ממה שהאדם
מצטער, כביכול הוא ית' מצטער ביסורי איש
הישראלי.

5 Kalir offers another example of this shift in the poem, changing “וְיִוָּשַׁע - God saved” (Exodus 14:30) to a passive verb with the same letters: “וְיִוָּשַׁע - God was saved.”

6 See Mishnah Sukkah 4:5 (older manuscripts read והוא rather than והו, which we recite today, but the meaning is the same). See the commentary of Mishnat Eretz Yisrael on this *mishnah* (vol. 7, p. 211, and on Sefaria). See also Otzar ha-Geonim to Sukkah, p. 66, #170.

7 See Meir Eyali, “Ha-El ha-Mitzta’er be-Tza’aram shel Yisrael,” in *Mekharim be-Hagut Yehudit*, eds. Sara Wilensky and Moshe Idel (1989), pp. 29-50, who argues for the attribution of this theology to R. Akiva’s school more generally.

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*Now the Jew who is tormented by his afflictions thinks that he alone suffers, as if all his personal afflictions and those of all Israel do not affect [God] above, God forbid. The verse states, however, "In all their troubles, He was troubled" (Isaiah 63:9)... Our sacred books tell us that when a Jew is afflicted, Blessed God suffers as it were much more than the person does.*⁸

Prayer is not just a moment to ask God for redemption and salvation. It is a moment to connect with God's own pain at the suffering in this world, and to remember that we are in league together in seeking an end to exile.

In making the theological claim that God is in exile and in need of redemption, R. Akiva complicates the notion of an all-powerful God—why would an omnipotent God need to be redeemed?—but he gains something in deepening God's connection to us in our lived emotional lives. As R. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

In the school of R. Akiva, God's bond to Israel is one of intimate empathy. God, as it were, is linked to Israel with bonds of love, participating in its suffering and redeemed by its salvation.... R. Akiva and his cohorts believed that it is better to limit

*belief in God's power than to dampen faith in God's mercy.*⁹

God is not just the object of our prayers, prepared to listen or to ignore. God is in need of the redemption we pray for as much, or perhaps even more, as we are... and in that connection point with God, we may find comfort, even as we wait for the ultimate redemption.¹⁰ ♦

⁸ Translation R. Nehemia Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto* (1999), p. 116.

⁹ From R. Gordon Tucker (trans.), *Heavenly Torah as Refracted through the Generations* (2007), pp. 116, 119. This does not mean that Heschel (through his reading of R. Akiva) understood the concept of God's omnipotence as abandoned, but rather as voluntarily limited. Indeed, as argued by my colleague R. Shai Held, Heschel thought: "God chooses to surrender His power in order that His merciful presence may be manifest more clearly.... God chooses to be known through His compassionate presence rather than through His power." See Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (2011), p. 169, and see p. 285, n. 181.

¹⁰ For a further exploration of this approach to God in exile, see my essay on Parashat BeShallah, "Praying for God's Sake: God Needs Miracles," available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/praying-your-sake-god-needs-miracles>.