

Covenantal Hope in the Morning Liturgy: Supplementary Material

Covenant as Reward and Punishment: The Sh'ma *Covenant as Hope-Filled Pleading: Tachanun* *Covenant as Study: The Kedushah D'Sidra*

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1) *Covenant as Reward and Punishment: The Sh'ma*

The second paragraph of the *Sh'ma* serves as a primer on what will happen should Israel fail to keep up its end of the covenantal bargain, a feature that is often present in biblical treatments of the covenant. The covenantal theology of reward and punishment also contains an element of hope: if straying from the covenant will bring disaster, returning to it will usher in better times.

If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving YHWH your God and serving [God] ... with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil—I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle—and thus you shall eat your fill. Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For YHWH's anger will flare up against you, and [God] ... will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that YHWH is assigning to you (Deut. 11:13-17).¹

The theme of covenantal reward and punishment could not be clearer. Keep the covenant, and hopes for the future will be rosy; stray, and it will be a nightmare. Historically, the dynamics of the covenantal relationship, with its rewards and punishments, allowed Israel, or at least its prophets, to conclude that if the people had fallen on hard times, it must have violated the covenant. Collective suffering was simply the punishment that biblical texts had long ago predicted. The additions to the Festival *Musaf* Amidah make this abundantly clear: “Because of our sins we have been exiled from our land...”

How does this notion of covenant nurture hope? In classical Jewish thought, once Israel accepts suffering in a covenantal context, the road to redemption and reward is clear: give up sin, return to God, and the future will improve. According to Alan Mintz, a covenantal reading of Jewish history provides the key to understanding it:

It was not just that national suffering became intelligible; in the depths of suffering there was a further basis of hope: God in His wrath would punish, but not destroy utterly. The relationship was at bottom unconditional and contained an element of *hesed*, “covenant love,” which insured that there would always be a remnant and always a restoration.²

Without judging this viewpoint, it is important to acknowledge that historically, it has provided the Jewish people with an enormous source of hope.³ Reversals are not random, punishment is not undeserved, and, most important, we hold the key to a brighter future in our hands. All we need to do is return to the straight and narrow, and God will deliver on the Divine half of the bargain—if not tomorrow, then eventually.

Covenant as Hope-Filled Pleading: Tachanun

Immediately following the Amidah in the morning and afternoon service, it is customary to quietly recite a short liturgy known as *Tachanun* (Supplication). The earliest reference to what would eventually evolve into this liturgy seems to be in the Tosefta, a law code or teaching manual that developed roughly contemporaneously with the Mishnah around 200 CE. The Tosefta merely says that one may utter words [of private supplication] after the Amidah.⁴ In contrast to the Amidah (Standing Prayer), *Tachanun* is recited sitting, with the head bent down over on a forearm. The difference in posture signals a shift from the comparatively confident petitions of the Amidah to the hope-laden pleas of *Tachanun*. On Monday and Thursday mornings, weekdays when the Torah is read, a longer form of *Tachanun* is recited.⁵

There are many explanations for how and why this longer form developed; suffice to say, many elements of it that now appear in traditional prayer books can be found in a late-eleventh-century prayer book associated with the circle of Rashi (1040-1105, France).⁶ Scholars disagree as to the balance between two factors that may have contributed to the development and spread of the longer *Tachanun*: the persecution of Jews during the medieval period and the increase in personal piety throughout much of Europe during this era.

As one scholar of Jewish liturgy wrote, of the longer version of the liturgy, “the *Tachanun* is introduced by seven heart-rending elegies. They speak repeatedly of Israel’s unending suffering, which, they say, are a just retribution for Israel’s unfaithfulness to the covenant. Nonetheless they plead for God’s forgiveness.”⁷ Here is an excerpt from the longer *Tachanun*:

O look down and speedily have mercy on Your people for the sake of Your name ... Have mercy on us for the sake of Your covenant; look down and answer us in time of distress, for salvation is Yours, YHWH; our hope rests with You ... Remember the covenant with Abraham; let the attempted sacrifice of his only son appear before You for Israel’s sake. ... We are exhausted from war and captivity, pestilence and plague ... Rescue us for You are our hope; put us not to shame. For You we wait ... for You we hope. ... Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; consider not our stubbornness, our wickedness and sinfulness. ... Afflict us not with Your silence, for the nations say, “Their hope is lost.” ... Yet despite all this, we have not forgotten Your name. O [God] please do not forget us. ... Strangers say to us: “There is no hope for you [two synonyms for hope are used here, *tochelet* and *tikvah*].” Be gracious to a people that hopes for Your name. ... Why should the nations say: “Where is their God?” For your own sake, deal kindly with us and delay not. ... We know not what to do, but our eyes are upon You. May Your kindness rest upon us, YHWH, *as our hope*

*rests on You [Ps. 33:22] ... Help us our saving God, for the sake of Your glorious name; rescue and pardon our sins for Your name's sake [Ps. 79:9].*⁸

Eleazar ben Judah of Worms (c. 1160-1230), one of the greatest sages of Ashkenaz, suffered the loss of his wife and two daughters during the Crusades. He offered a laconic but poignant interpretation of “Strangers say to us: ‘There is no hope [*tochelet* and *tikvah*] for you,” saying, “‘No hope’ (*tochelet*) refers to Israel,” implying that strangers perceive the future of the entire people of Israel as hopeless. Further, these strangers say that “there is no hope that you (Israel, second person plural) have expectation of [or hope for] God’s salvation.” Eleazar ben Judah continues, “The nations of the world say this because *they* are strangers to God.” The language that Eleazar ben Judah uses when he refers to “expectation of [or hope for] God’s salvation” alludes to a passage in the Talmud that describes the six questions Jews will be asked upon their final judgment before entering the gates of heaven. The fourth question is, “Did you expect [or hope for] salvation?”⁹ This sage from Ashkenaz, who knew the horrors of the Crusades first-hand, also knew that God had not permanently turned against the Jewish people, nor had the Jewish people turned against God “despite all this.”

Tachanun is noteworthy not only because of its frequent references to hope but also because it provides a classic illustration of hope, described by the philosopher Joseph Albo (1380-1444, Spain).

Hope is of three kinds: 1) Hope of mercy. One hopes that God will help one by way of mercy and not as a matter of obligation. 2) Hope of glory. One hopes that God will help one because God has been in the habit of providing help before, and if God failed one now, God’s glory would suffer. For if a master who been in the habit of helping his servant fails to deliver him from trouble in a given instance, the people say that it is because of the master’s inability. 3) Hope due to a promise. This is the hope of truth, the individual hoping that God will verify Divine promises.¹⁰

Tachanan clearly includes all elements of Albo’s three-fold hope: hope of receiving divine mercy, hope that God will come to Israel’s aid in order to preserve respect for God’s good name, and hope that God will honor Divine covenantal promises to Israel’s founding ancestors. It is not clear if Albo was familiar with *Tachanun* as we know it today, but if he were, he might well have used its hope-filled pleading to exemplify what he wrote about prayer: “By reason of our hope, ‘You [God] hear our prayer’ [Psalms 65:3], for prayer resulting from hope is the best.”¹¹

How are we today to relate to these hope-filled pleas to God for salvation? First, they are a reminder of how our forebears persevered holding on to the source of their ultimate hopes especially times of severe testing. Although we may no longer expect God to fulfill our hopes, we too will face experiences that test strength of our hope and our ancestors’ lesson in perseverance can stand us in good stead. Second, we might remember the Tosefta’s reference to the ancient form of this liturgy as simply private words—which over time developed into a scripted liturgy of hope for Divine salvation. In light of this evolution, today we might use *Tachanun* as special moment to lay our deepest hopes before the One of All Being and seek guidance as to their worthiness.¹²

Covenant as Study: The Kedushah D’Sidra

Our third exploration of hope and covenant in the morning service brings us to a particularly opaque prayer known as *Kedushah D'Sidra* (literally, “Sanctification of the Order”), but, as we’ll see, it reflects some fascinating allusions to hope and covenant. It comes shortly before *Aleinu*, near the conclusion of the service. The prayer opens with two introductory verses from Isaiah about redemption and covenant. Next comes the ancient core of the prayer, three biblical verses that appear in the Amidah, each followed by an Aramaic midrashic (interpretive) translation.¹³ The prayer concludes with a long list of biblical verses, some of which refer to God’s promises to Abraham and Jacob and others to the centrality of Torah in the lives of the pray-er.

The Talmud attributes extreme importance to the *Kedushah D'Sidra* (probably referring to its ancient Aramaic midrashic core). It makes this point after recounting the bleak state of affairs following the destruction of the Temple. The account reads almost like a diagnostic check list for depression: every day is worse than the day before. Fruits have lost their taste and fragrance. People of faith have disappeared. But if the world continues to unravel more and more each day, the Talmud asks, “How can it continue to survive?” The answer? The *Kedushah D'Sidra* “allows the world to exist!” How so? The Talmud quotes Job (10:22): “‘A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any *order*, and where the light is as darkness.’ But if there are *orders* of prayer and study, the land shall appear from amidst the darkness.”¹⁴

The *Kedushah D'Sidra*, the Sanctification of the *Order*, embodies a unique rabbinic formula for finding light and hope amidst darkness and chaos: a judicious blend of order and creative study of our ancient texts.¹⁵ The destruction of the Temple brought the end of sacrifices, the ancient bridge that connected God and the Jewish people. What would replace it? Prayer and study of Torah, God’s word. Study, finding new meaning in old texts—as in the interpretive translation of prophetic verses into the Aramaic spoken by Jews at the time—would provide a secure foundation for rebuilding Jewish life.

An oft-repeated midrash likens the midrashic process of using one verse in scripture to illuminate another to stringing pearls amidst flashing fire, just as Sinai itself had been ablaze when Moses received the original revelation: Ben Azzai, who lived in the period following the destruction of the Temple, proclaimed that “the words were just as joyous and sweet as they were when they were presented at Sinai.”¹⁶ The ongoing encounter with God through the study of Torah has sustained a sense of meaning and hope among Jews over the ages.¹⁷

In early times, the daily morning service included a time for Torah study, which was concluded with the *Kedushah D'Sidra*. The demands of work led to the elimination of that daily opportunity for text study, and all that now remains is the *Kedushah D'Sidra*, the emblematic coda, as it were, for a session of morning study.

The morning service says nothing about the significance the Talmud attributes to the *Kedushah D'Sidra*. But the introductory verses from Isaiah, which were added by at least the ninth century, highlight its importance.¹⁸ They frame this piece of prayer/study in the language of redemption and covenant:

[God]... shall come as redeemer to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn back from sin — declares the Lord. And this shall be My covenant with them, said YHWH: My spirit

which is upon you, and the words which I have placed in your mouth, shall not be absent from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your children, nor from the mouth of your children's children—said YHWH—from now on, for all time (Isaiah 59:20-21).

Rashi (on Is. 59:21) explains that God's covenantal promise to Israel will be fulfilled, because even in exile they will not forget God's word. Here Isaiah echoes Moses' reassurance that God's word, Torah, would be eternally accessible: "But the word is very near to you, in your mouth..."¹⁹

Eleazar ben Judah of Worms (12th-13th centuries) who lost family members during the Crusades offered the following explanation of why this passage from Isaiah became part of the liturgy.

During the time of the [Hadrianic] persecution studying Torah was forbidden. These words from Isaiah were added to our prayers because they say that we have not been cut off from hope. We hope in God and words of Torah [i.e., Torah study] will not leave our mouths.²⁰

Scholars doubt if the passage from Isaiah entered our liturgy as early as the Hadrianic persecutions. But that's not the point. Isaiah's message clearly resonated with the experiences of Eliezer ben Judah, and of Jews throughout our history. The prophet's words provide a beautiful expression of the relationship between covenant, hope, and study. Combine all three, teach them each to your children and your grandchildren, and you have the ingredients for redeeming the Jewish people from whatever straits they may face.

¹ I've tried to create more gender-sensitive translations of biblical passages by using *The Contemporary Torah* "A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation" edited by David E. S. Stein (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006) for the Pentateuch (except using YHWH for יהוה) and applying its general approach to passages from Prophets or Writings. I've often gender sensitized other quoted sources by replacing gendered language with alternate text in brackets.

² Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 19.

³ Belief in this theology dovetails with results from a study showing that, on measures of optimism, Orthodox Jews scored higher than Reform Jews. See Sheena Sethi and Martin E. P. Seligman, "Optimism and Fundamentalism," *Psychological Science* 4, no. 4 (July 1993): 256-259. Another study, comparing traditional Jewish liturgy to Russian Orthodox liturgy, found the former to be more optimistic, "particularly in the permanence dimension. In Jewish material positive events were projected further in time—nice things would last longer—and negative events were more curtailed." See Martin E. P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 203-204.

⁴ Tosefta Berakhot 3:6.

⁵ There are numerous days when *Tachanun* is not recited, including *Rosh Chodesh* (the day or days marking the beginning of a month), Hanukkah, and the entire month of Nisan, among many other occasions.

⁶ See the Machzor Vitry, section 93.

⁷ Abraham Millgram, *Jewish Worship* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1971), 462. For our purposes, more important than the details of how the expanded form evolved is its repeated plea of desperate hope for aid from Israel's Divine covenantal partner. For an excellent treatment of the *Tachanun* in general, see Lawrence A. Hoffman, *My People's Prayer Book*, vol. 6, *Tachanun and Concluding Prayers* (Woodstock, NY: Jewish Lights, 2013). For more on the longer form, see Zvi Ron, "The Development of the Expanded Tachanun on Monday and Thursday," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 12, no. 1 (2018): 88-106. Even from the excerpts I've presented from the longer version of *Tachanun*, it is clear that certain themes are repeated. Scholars of liturgy attribute this to the fact that the liturgy as we know it today may include what had been a number of independent, supplicatory prayers that were later combined.

⁸ The translation of the non-biblical portions of the text generally follows Phillip Birnbaum, *Daily Prayer Book* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1949), 106-118.

⁹ BT Shabbat 31a.

¹⁰ Joseph Albo, *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim* (The Book of Principles), trans. Isaac Husik (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1946), vol. 4, part 2, 457.

¹¹ Albo, *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim*, vol. 4, part 2, 471.

¹² For more on prayer and hope see *Choosing Hope*, 6-8.

¹³ These three verses (Is. 6:3, Ez. 3:12, and Ps. 146:10) appear in a section of the Amidah known as the *Kedushah*, or, *Kedushat ha-Shem*, "Sanctification of God's Name."

¹⁴ BT Sotah 49a. The translation follows the King James Version for Job and the William Davidson Talmud, available online at <https://www.sefaria.org/Sotah.49a?lang=bi>. Along with the *Kedushah D'Sidra*, the Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 49a, attributes the same importance to a phrase in what it calls the *kedushah d'aggadata*, the *kaddish* recited after study. For a good explanation of these terms, see *My People's Prayer Book*, vol. 6, ed. Hoffman, 26. Ruth Langer explains that the Talmud is most likely attributing greater importance to the formal communal *study* of Torah than to simply the *reading* of Torah during prayer services. She also quotes a ruling by Rabbi Eliahu of London in the medieval period, which concludes, "In truth there is a great principle and a hidden secret and a great foundation in the Aramaic translation" of biblical verses recited in the *Kedushah D'Sidra*. See Ruth Langer, *To Worship God Properly: Tensions between Liturgical Custom and Halakhah in Judaism* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1998), 193 and 211. Thanks to Rabbi Jeffrey Hoffman for bringing this book to my attention. The importance of *Kedushah D'Sidra* is also attested to by the fact that when it is not included in the morning service (as on Shabbat and festivals), it is added to the afternoon service.

¹⁵ It's interesting that Torah is often compared to light, fragrance, and sweetness, among the things said to be absent following the destruction of the Temple. For example, Exodus Rabbah says the lamp of God is Torah (36:3). The Zohar (Bereshit 85b) interprets "His fruit is sweet to my taste" (Song of Songs 2:3) as referring to Torah. And Song of Songs Rabbah (1:19) compares Torah to fragrant oil.

¹⁶ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:52. See also Jerusalem Talmud, Chagigah 2:1, Lev. Rabbah 16:4, and Ruth Rabbah 6:2.

¹⁷ In the Babylonian Talmud (Ta'anit 29a-b), the third-century sage Rav explicates a passage from Jeremiah (29:11): "To give you a future and a hope." Rav says, "By this is meant palm trees and flaxen garments." While this clearly refers to the comforts of life in Babylonia, the date palm and flax of Babylonia are also symbols of Torah study. See Meir Ben Shahr, "'A Future and a Hope' in Babylonia: Three Sayings of Rav as a Diasporan Manifesto," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 24 (2017):101-121.

¹⁸ These verses from Isaiah are discussed in the responsum of Natronai Gaon, Orach Chayim 39, *T'shuvot ha-Geonim*, ed. Jacob Mussafia (Lyck, Poland: Miktse Nirdamim, 1864), 29, para. 90, available online at Google Books, <https://bit.ly/2TfzwNQ>, Bar Ilan Responsa Project.

¹⁹ This promise fulfills a simply expressed, recurrent hope in Psalms: "For Your word I hope" (Robert Alter translation). See, e.g., Ps. 119:81, 114, and 147; and Ps. 130:5.

²⁰ "U'Va L'Tzion," in *Commentaries on the Prayer Book of the Rokeach* (Jerusalem: Rav Hershler Institute, 1992), 428-29, [HB 49926](https://bit.ly/2TfzwNQ), Bar Ilan Responsa Project.