

Diversity of Thought, Duality and Stoicism in Aleinu Prayer

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Abstract. Aleinu, a prayer that initially left us with questions, contains interesting qualities. 1. It comprises the text that has changed its tone over generations. Having become more peaceful and perhaps accepting, Aleinu has kept its power to bind Jewish people together as a reminder to praise God collectively. 2. Co-existence of both particularistic and universalistic themes in such a short piece of liturgy is quite a powerful thing. While preserving the very kernel of Jewish theology (oneness of God and His connection with Jewish people) the text of Aleinu goes further and suggests a very brave idea which signifies an ability of all to understand universal ethics. 3. The historic association of Aleinu with stoicism of Jewish people in the face of tragedy creates an additional dimension for understanding of the meaning of the prayer as a source of hope and comfort. When S. Sulzer created his light melody the most communities know today, he realized the re-assuring spiritual potential of Aleinu.

Keywords: the traditional Jewish liturgical music, the Hebrew Bible (Tanach), the Plato's Tripartite division of the soul, Neshamah–Nefesh–Ruah, the “life-affirming vs. mourning” dichotomy, the Mourner's Kaddish memorial prayer, K'vod Ha-met, Nihum Aveilim

1. Introduction

During one's journey towards the traditional Jewish liturgical music, one can be at some point under an impression that this religious vocal music by and large is an art form that is carved to convey the mellow and sometimes even sad emotions, that it focuses on modesty and subservience while seemingly avoiding expression of the sense of power or dominance. To put it in the Taoist philosophical terms, the Jewish liturgical music at a first glance is

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presented to the unprepared listener rather Yin than Yang. One of the authors remembers, being at his first Simchat Torah service, an occasion that one fills with happiness and joy; he noticed that the sizeable part of the songs that had this uplifting lyrical content had been, to his surprise, in the minor keys.

Other example was a conversation he had with a woman called Bella, a person of an extraordinary destiny which started in the pre-Soviet Moldavia and carries on in Britain today, who speaks Romanian, Russian, Yiddish, English, and Hebrew with an almost equal ease. It had been a Yiddish-themed party. Bella was talking to her friends about various famous Klezmer singers/musicians when she mentioned her favourite one whose name the co-author now struggles to recall. However, he fondly remembers her words describing the musician's "voice": you should listen to his playing at least once because he uses a traditional *dreydlekh* (musical ornaments, reminiscent of the human voice, e.g. "sobs", "weeping"), and it will make you cry.

Bella sounded as if the musician's ability "to shed tears" with his expressive music (imitation of the devotional paraliturgical singing/cantillation) was seen by her as a mark of quality, a signifier of musical mastery and artistic delivery, and a skill that is expected of a secular musician who incorporates a traditional Jewish melody or vocal theme in the music vocabulary. It can be compared with the skill of the professionally trained cantor/hazzan (*sh'liah tzibbur*) who functioning as a precentor helps the community to lead the prayer motifs (known as *steiger*).

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Objectives

A deeper and more informed acquaintance with the Jewish liturgical music, especially when the British co-author started attending the Shabbat morning services on a regular basis, helped him challenge and eventually change his opinion. At first, most of the Shacharit (morning) melodies: Torah service (reading), the Shema recitation, and the Kedushah tunes (prayer), etc. still sounded like they had been written in the minor modes. However, every time the minyan in a synagogue reached the conclusion of the liturgical service everybody felt captivated by the oldest Jewish prayer, Aleinu, this cathartic, life-affirming, and joyful melody.

As the co-author continued to attend the services, he began to ponder why the Shabbat morning liturgy is organized so that one of the lightest melodies of the service was placed at almost the very end of it, but another co-author wanted to prolong this sort of speculation

while adding one more remark: why is the most joyful melody of the Jewish liturgy located just before another life-affirming melody which is the Mourner's Kaddish? It is worth discussing because the Mourner's Kaddish is a memorial prayer (traditionally recited in memory of the passed away). The authors formulate their task as to find some explanations of this paradoxical ("life-affirming vs. mourning") dichotomy.

1.1.2 Methodology

Methods of investigation the authors utilized are the following: the theoretical (the analysis and the generalization) analysis and the historical one. The latter is the basis for finding correlations with nowadays situation.

The comparative and the cause-and-effect analysis was also necessary for speculations.

2. Discussion

Optimistic *Aleinu leshabei'ach* is the only prayer which is obligatory for recitation before the death. Being in this very case the preparation to the death it is oriented to the future. The explanation is not complicated. The prayer makes no mention of death. Instead, it is a prayer dedicated to praising God. For better understanding it will be necessary to differentiate the beliefs regarding the life after the death, the soul existence, and its path. The Hebrew Bible (Tanach) gives few concepts of the Israelite comprehension of the soul (or spirit). Three notions having the meaning of "soul" are condensed in Tanach (these words can have different meanings in different contexts): *Neshamah*, *Nefesh*, and *Ruah*. They are in accordance with the Plato's Tripartite – rational, spirited, and appetitive – division of the parts of the soul as the seat of human forces.

According to the Genesis *Neshamah* (from Hebrew: "a breath" which corresponds etymologically to the translated from Hebrew "psyche", i.e. "a breath", in the classical Greek philosophy, and is used as a synonym for the soul) means "a breath of life" which God blowing into a man, otherwise, it is the animating element. According to the Biblical tradition *Neshamah* – the body and the soul – co-exist in a harmonious hierarchical order, the body cannot live without the soul nor the soul without the body, they are not separate from each other. It is the so-called "divine" (or "spirited") component of a person.

Nefesh is an equivalent to "a person", "a living being", "a breath", "life", "a gullet", etc., and a synonym to the "blood" (the life of the flesh is in the blood) where the "... blood confirms the signification "life force", which is here associated with blood, and not with

breath.” [Bauks 2016: 191]. In the mind of the Sages, the sin is not the product of an unruly body asserting itself over a pure soul; moreover, the body and the soul are in an equal responsibility for all the doings during the life period. Without the body, the soul would be unable to fulfil meticulously the holy, redemptive work of following Mitzvot (613 religious commandments). Thus, the soul (Nefesh) exists only in a living human body; with the death of the body it dies too, and becomes sublated. A soul is only a guest. It is the so-called “physical” (or “appetitive”) component of a person.

Ruah is also “a breath” (as Neshamah) or precisely “a wind” but it is an animating force from God within the man since he is flesh and this force ends with the mortal body at death. In the stunning poem of Ecclesiastes (the last chapter), the human being’s death is shown as occurring: “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: it came from, and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it”. [King James Bible Ecclesiastes 12: 7]. In this very meaning “the spirit” corresponds to Ruah.

Ruah can be also authenticated as an intellectual constituent, something which is directed towards the person’s spiritual development which is not stable; it includes cognition, mentality, emotions, morality, good and evil, etc. But it is not homogeneous. For example, in the Kabbalistic Tree of Life it is subdivided into six (seven) subsequent nodes (sephiroth) which illustrate six (seven) cognitive/emotional functions (the primary and secondary conscious divine emotions) as the divine emanation of God: memory (*Chesed*), will (*Geburah*), imagination (*Tiphereth*), desire (*Netzach*), sincerity (*Hod*), instinct (*Yesod*), humility (*Malkuth*) [Kraig 2010]. Ruah is a bandage between Neshamah and Nefesh. It is the so-called “rational” component of a person.

The soul (in all three variants) does not belong the body precisely, as to the concept that the soul is an animating spirit, one should say that it is much more than an animating spirit merely. Many Talmudic rabbis and some theoreticians (Neil Gillman, Ben Kamin, Lori Palatnik, Simcha Paul Raphael, Elie Kaplan Spitz, Rifat Sonsino Syme, David Wachtel, etc.) follow from their claim the soul exists in a fully conscious state in an ethereal realm.

They combed the Bible, the Talmud, and the whole spectrum of Judaism’s sacred writings to give their view on the Jewish concept of reincarnation, e.g. Rabbi DovBer Pinson [Pinson 1999] or David M. Wexelman [Wexelman 1999] and some other concepts of the path of the soul afterlife. Nevertheless, the path of the disembodied soul following death was not a particularly significant matter of speculation for the Sages, nor is there consensus on the matter in Midrash: “The immortality of the soul was of little interest in the world of the Bible.” [Cook 2007: 660]. For Judaism with its optimism the emotions of the heart (Temimut,

or the sincerity of will, heart, and action) in all its aspects, is an innate gift of God to the Jewish soul [Carralero 2018].

For resequencing of the “soul” typology (concerns the human’s lifetime but not the afterlife) in the framework of contemporary Judaism let us look at practice of a 2000-year-old Mourner’s Kaddish reciting in the funerary context, the prayer praising God’s name recited by mourners beginning with the burial service and continuing at daily services throughout the period of mourning. Kaddish either does not make any mention of death, like *Aleinu*. Again, like *Aleinu*, the Mourner’s Kaddish memorial prayer is included in all three daily prayer services and is dedicated to praising God.

Traditionally, Jewish men are required to recite the Kaddish for a deceased parent, spouse, sibling, or child. However, many women recite the Kaddish as well, and it is also permissible to do so for loved ones who are not parents, spouses, siblings, or children. Traditionally, Jews are required to say the Kaddish for 30 days after burial for a child, spouse, or sibling, and for eleven months after burial for a parent. From then on, one recites Kaddish on a loved one’s *Yahrzeit* (the Hebrew anniversary of their death), and at *Yizkor* (memorial) services. This tradition dates back the Talmud. The prayer was written in Aramaic, because it was the vernacular, the language spoken by most Jews at the time.

Practically, the Jewish way of mourning is “based on two principles: 1) *K’vod Ha-met* (honoring and respecting *Met*, or the deceased), and 2) *Nihum Aveilim* (consoling the mourners).” [Freidson (ed.) 2003: 3]. In “Nihum Aveilim: A Guide for the Comforter” booklet, Rabbi Stuart L. Kelman, Dan Fendel, and Rabbi Jason Weiner write that the prayer originally was not connected with the mourning itself. Moreover, it was an appeal to God’s reign and was known as the Rabbi’s Kaddish [Kelman et al. 2015]. The Kaddish was also called the Orphan’s Kaddish (recited only by children for the deceased parents). Now it concerns other mourners. There are also other forms of the Kaddish used in the daily prayers as well as at funerals.

Why was the life-affirming Kaddish chosen for memorializing? There are many different theories, but no definitive answer. In “Jewish Literacy”, the acclaimed author Rabbi Joseph Telushkin suggests that most likely, people believed that the finest way to honour the dead was to recite the Kaddish, thereby testifying that the deceased person left behind worthy descendants, people who attend prayer services daily and proclaim their ongoing loyalty to God [Telushkin 2010].

Saying Kaddish also can provide much-needed routine and structure in a life that has been upended by loss and participating in a ritual Jews have been practicing for centuries

gives one a feeling of being part of something larger. Reciting Kaddish for a parent gives the son or the daughter an opportunity to receive communal sympathy for this entire time and even to channel his or her own bereftness into positive action. The need to attend services regularly often gives a new focus to the mourning child and fills a void left by the death of the parent, the community's attention substituting in a certain way for parental attention no longer available to him or her.

Jewish mourning customs reflect the natural course of grief and recovery following the death of the deceased. The period from the moment of death until the burial is called *aninut*, and a mourner in this stage is called *Onen*. Onen has no religious obligations except to attend to the practical necessities of arranging for the funeral. The Jewish understanding is that an onen cannot focus on anything other than the immediate issue of the burial and should not be expected to be capable of any ritual observances, even those that might otherwise be performed on a daily basis (such as reciting the Shema).

Traditionally, the Jewish funerals take place as soon after death as possible, often within 24 hours. The funeral service generally happens at a synagogue, funeral home or in the cemetery, either at a cemetery chapel or beside the grave. The service typically includes some readings from Jewish texts, a eulogy and *El Maleh Rahamim* ("God Full of Compassion") memorial prayer expressing faith in the immortality of the soul. The Talmud mentions that after a person dies his/her soul continues to dwell for a while in the grave where he/she was buried. Putting stones (pebbles) on a grave keeps the soul down in this world, which some people find comforting. Another related interpretation suggests that the stones keep demons and golems from getting into the graves.

Jewish tradition offers very specific recommendations for gradual re-entry into normal life. The first week after the funeral is known as *shiva* (literally, "seven"). During this period, the mourners are treated with the utmost care and respect. Their needs are met by the community – both their physical needs, such as meals, and their spiritual and emotional needs. During this time, mourners mostly remain at home and a service is held daily (often in the evening) at the home, so that the mourners may recite the Kaddish. Mourners are encouraged to join the congregation on Shabbat to say Kaddish. In some communities services are held in the home both morning and evening. The tradition is that the Mourner's Kaddish is said in the presence of a minyan, to insure that mourners do not grieve in isolation but rather surrounded by members of their community.

Friends, relatives, and community members visit and bring some food for the household. The shiva period gives the mourners a time to withdraw from the business of the

world and begin to integrate and accept their loss. At the close of shiva, friends or family traditionally accompany the mourner for a brief walk to symbolize the start of re-entry into the world. The next stage of the mourning process is known as *Sh'loshim* (literally, “thirty”). This 30-day period is counted from the day of the funeral (and so includes the period of shiva). Following shiva, the mourner returns to work during sh'loshim but is still not completely back in the world. This ongoing mourning is expressed by avoiding parties, concerts, and other forms of public entertainment.

At the conclusion of sh'loshim, the formal mourning period ends, except for those who are mourning parents. For these mourners, formal mourning, including the recitation of the Mourner's Kaddish, lasts eleven months (or a full year). Some people may wish to mark the end of sh'loshim with a special minyan (prayer service) at which the mourner or family members speak about the deceased. Also, if there is to be a public memorial service, it is usually held at the conclusion of sh'loshim.

The memorial service may include several speakers and music or poetry that might not have been included in the funeral service. Traditionally, mourners who have lost a parent say the Mourner's Kaddish daily for eleven months, whereas mourning for all other relatives ends with the sh'loshim. In modern practice, mourners may recite the Mourner's Kaddish for eleven months for other immediate relatives as well. This is a time people are encouraged to get back into life fully, while honoring our dead on a daily basis through the saying of the Mourner's Kaddish. There is a traditional obligation to create some form of *matzevah* (“monument,” usually a gravestone) to mark the site of the grave. The “unveiling” is a formal ceremony following the placement of the tombstone.

Customs differ, but the unveiling is generally held after sh'loshim and usually in the month before the first *yahrzeit*. The unveiling service is a relatively recent practice originating in the United States. Technically, a rabbi need not be present, but it is helpful to have an experienced person officiate.

As it was said before, the funeral ceremony is very brief and usually includes some psalms and readings, a few words about the deceased, the removal of a covering from the monument, the *El Malei Rachamim* prayer, and, if a minyan is present, the Mourner's Kaddish. One may ask the rabbi to assist the family in putting together an appropriate service to mark the occasion. The unveiling reminds people that they will continue to visit the grave on *yahrzeits* and during the High Holiday season, and that the memory of the person will always be with them as their life continues. *Yahrzeit* is the yearly anniversary of a loved one's death (traditionally observed on the Hebrew calendar). People observe *yahrzeit* at home by

lighting a *yahrzeit* candle (which burns for 24 hours) in memory of the deceased. In the synagogue, people observe *yahrzeit* by saying the Mourner's Kaddish at services.

J. Telushkin notes that reciting the Kaddish is psychologically beneficial because it gets mourners to go out in public and join a community. After the relative's death, a person might well wish to stay home alone, or with a few family members, and brood. But saying Kaddish forces a mourner to join with others [Telushkin 2010].

Coming back to *Aleinu* prayer itself (from Hebrew: "on us" which means "It is incumbent on us" or "It is our duty") we should mark that this relatively short piece in a liturgy and practically the final phase of daily prayer services is surrounded by a multitude of ideas and facts that might appear diverse and at times even controversial. Firstly, the authorship of the prayer has become an area of debate. Macy Nulman highlights that "the prayer, according to one tradition is ascribed to Joshua upon the conquest of Jericho. Others assign its authorship to the Amora Rav, the third-century Babylonian sage, because he is originally credited with editing the entire Rosh Hashanah Musaf, which incorporates this prayer. Another view is that it was written by the Men of the Great Assembly during the period of the Second Temple." [Nulman 1996: 24].

Other source of discussion is a part of *Aleinu* that is altered in many modern siddurim, it is *Aleinu*'s line in the first paragraph which praises God who created the Jewish people not like the other nations as well as the last line of the paragraph that says about the impossibility of salvation under the auspices of other deity/s sparked controversy in the past and was opposed by the Christians in the Middle Ages as they might felt the line hinted on the vanity of their theology. Perhaps for that reason and generally out of a practical desire to keep peace with the neighbours, many Jewish communities saw the evolution of the paragraph and the entire omission of the last line. A similar approach is taken by the Conservative Siddur *Sim Shalom* which gives a euphemistic translation of the original Hebrew. No Reform, Conservative or Reconstructionist prayer books retain the reference to "a God who cannot save." [Winberg 2015].

Besides, *Aleinu* is thought to express both particularistic and universalistic ideas (the latter is not typical to Judaism). The first (particularistic) part highlights a specifically Jewish obligation to praise God. The second – universalistic – part implies the universal recognition of God by all the people ("and all humanity will call upon your name") [Winberg 2015]. This duality, on which S. Winberg insists, is an interesting quality to reflect upon. While it is arguable how particularistic certain modern branches of Judaism are, until relatively recently traditional Jewish thought has been normally associated with the chiefly particularistic ideas

and practices that were exercised by different Jewish communities both voluntarily and under pressure. Understanding of a special mission of the Jewish people as the chosen nation is usually the first example of Jewish particularism that comes to mind. Additionally, it was common to see the European Jewish communities to be built and organized separately from their mainly Christian neighbours during the medieval times until the late 18th century.

Moreover, for various, often political reasons, most Jewish communities abstained from mass conversion of their neighbours. “The political status of Jews in the Middle Ages, essentially subordinate to the Christian and Muslim authorities under whom they lived, combined with the continuing illegality of conversion to Judaism [forced] to prevent many conversions ... Under such circumstances, conversions were continued on an individual basis, with mass conversions occurring only during those rare moments when the political status of the Jews was improved.” [Epstein 2015].

However, it is also commonly understood that since the Haskalah movement (and Moses Mendelssohn’s thoughts) in the 18th and the 19th centuries, the Jews have played an increasingly significant role in the advancement of the modern science and intellectual culture in general [Grassie 2009]. The Jewish people, while retaining their Jewish identity, became essential players on the European cultural scene. The new-found areas where post-Emancipation generations thrived extended from the French science, German literature, and music to Russian art and cinematography. Meanwhile, the whole process led to a dichotomy that remains one of the prominent motifs of the contemporary Jewish history: modern Jews are torn between the particularistic teachings of their religious tradition and the universalistic aspirations of science [Grassie 2009].

Aleinu, while containing two seemingly contradictory concepts, can also be understood as a prayer that might offer a solution to this contradiction and to the dichotomy mentioned above. On one hand, a Jewish person is reminded about a special Jewish obligation to praise God, to recognize Him as the Creator of things, to remember about the unique role the God plays in the Jewish history. On the other, Aleinu hymn understands and encourages the comprehension of the fact that the world is a shared place where the whole humanity has a capacity to accept and follow the universal ethics. The prayer is far from being universalistic in a strictly spiritual sense. Perhaps, it is almost like a call upon the Jewish people: remain who you are and make the world a better place in a feeling of togetherness with other people. There is indeed a common ground and things will improve.

Finally, Aleinu is often associated with the Jewish martyrdom: “Most notably, the prayer was chanted during the 1171 massacre in Blois, France. Jews of the town were accused

of murdering a Christian child during Passover. This was the first time that the accusation of ritual murder, known as the “blood libel”, was made in continental Europe, and as a result some thirty Jews were burned at the stake. There are three reports extant that describe the victims intoning Aleinu as they died amid the flames.” [Friedman 2009].

The connection of the prayer itself with this tragic episode of Jewish history is a vivid example of a sense of stoicism and spiritual strength that Aleinu contained. Suffering from the utter injustice, public ostracism and facing a horrible ordeal, the victims of the massacre could only turn to their spiritual tradition, their last resort of hope and comfort. The melody they sang is believed to be from the Malkhuyot part of the High Holidays service developed between the 12th and the 15th century.

Despite the fact a later melody written in the end of the 19th century by the Austrian hazzan/cantor and composer Salomon Sulzer would become a more recognizable tune for the prayer, perhaps more importantly, the very text of Aleinu (which was made in the early Talmudic era) has grown into one of the symbols of the strength of Jewish spirit that often had to be expressed in the times of hardship, and into the theme of universal recognition of monotheism complemented the Shema.

3. Conclusion

Aleinu, a prayer that initially left the listener with questions, contains some interesting qualities. At first, it comprises a text that has changed its tone over generations. Having become more peaceful and perhaps accepting, Aleinu has kept its power to bind the Jewish people together as a reminder to praise God collectively. Secondly, co-existence of both particularistic and universalistic themes in such a short piece of liturgy is quite a powerful thing. While preserving the very kernel of the Jewish theology (oneness of God and His connection with the Jewish people) the text of Aleinu goes further and suggests a very brave idea – an ability of all to understand the universal ethics. Finally, the historic association of Aleinu with stoicism of Jewish people in the face of tragedy creates an additional dimension for understanding the meaning of the prayer as a source of hope and life-affirming.

Perhaps, when S. Sulzer created this optimistic and light melody most communities know today, he realized the re-assuring spiritual potential of Aleinu prayer. Possibly, the communities, in their turn, accepted his work as their own because they felt that the multitude of themes and values the prayer delivers can and should be expressed with the very musical means the modern version of Aleinu is composed of – the joyful melody, the upbeat rhythm, and the sing-along arrangement.

The question that has brought about this speculation is the last one to be answered: why this uplifting melody is placed in the conclusive part of the Shabbat morning service? Let us come across a Native American saying: “The eyes that did not know tears will not see a rainbow”. However, while it is agreeable that tackling difficulties and sometimes even suffering is a big part of life, personally, focusing on these things might often make many life experiences seem daunting. As if addressing that, the Shabbat service and Aleinu prayer, among other ideas, give a really moving message: “In the end, we will see a rainbow. Everything is going to be fine”.

The same is relevant to the Kaddish prayer in which mourning corresponds life-affirming. Since Judaism focuses on life, the tradition often sees death as a lessening of God’s presence in the world. The positive, affirming, and hopeful text of Kaddish prayer, which focuses on increasing God’s grandeur in the world, is meant to counteract that.

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