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ABOUT A VAV: ARGUMENTS FOR CHANGING THE NUSACH MASORTI REGARDING HANUKKAH

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I. Introduction

The current *nusach masorti* has a *vav* in the second blessing over the Hanukkah candles where all other modern *nusachim* have none, and it thereby extends the performance of outright miracles “until our time” where all others confine them to ancient times. The additional *vav* and its interpretation, it is argued here, sets Conservative Judaism unduly apart from all other modern Jewish denominations, breaks without sufficient justification from a tradition that had been followed by virtually all Jews for hundreds of years, contradicts suggestions in the Babylonian Talmud and the *Sefat Emet* that “Hanukkah is the last miracle,” and is incompatible with the Jewish experience of the Holocaust. For these reasons, a change in the *nusach masorti* is due.

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II. By extending the performance of open miracles “until our time,” Conservative Judaism stands apart from all modern Jewish denominations, which confine them to ancient times.

The *Siddur Sim Shalom*, first published in 1985² and revised in 1998,³ invites Conservative Jews to recite the second blessing over the Hanukkah candles as follows:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מְלִךְ הָעוֹלָם
שְׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם וּבְזֶמַן הַזֶּה

Praised are you Adonai our God, who rules the universe,
Accomplishing miracles for our ancestors from ancient days **until our time**.⁴

On its website, the Rabbinical Assembly, the international association of Conservative rabbis, endorses this version of the blessing.⁵ No other modern *siddur*, and no other modern Jewish denomination, has done so. The ArtScroll *Siddur*, for example, renders the blessing as follows:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מְלִךְ הָעוֹלָם
שְׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם בְּזֶמַן הַזֶּה.

² *Siddur Sim Shalom: A Prayerbook for Shabbat, Festivals, and Weekdays*, ed. Jules Harlow, (New York: Rabbinical Assembly Publications, 1985).

³ *Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals*, ed. Leonard S. Chahan, (New York: Rabbinical Assembly Publications, 1998).

⁴ *Idem.*, 307 (emphasis supplied).

⁵ See “Lighting the Hanukkah Candles: Blessings and Songs,” The Rabbinical Assembly, accessed December 15, 2013, <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/wp-content/uploads/public/jewish-law/holidays/hanukkah/lighting-hanukkah-candles.pdf> and “Al Ha-nissim,” The Rabbinical Assembly, accessed December 15, 2013, <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/wp-content/uploads/public/jewish-law/holidays/hanukkah/or-hadash-al-hanisim.pdf>.

Blessed are You, HASHEM our God, King of the universe,
Who has wrought miracles for our forefathers, in those days **at
this season.**⁶

Where the *Siddur Sim Shalom* has וּבְזִמְנֵי הַזֶּה (*u-va-z'man ha-zeh*), the ArtScroll *Siddur* has בְּזִמְנֵי הַזֶּה (*ba'zman ha-zeh*), and where the *Siddur Sim Shalom* extends the performance of open miracles “until our time,” the ArtScroll *Siddur* confines their performance to the days of our ancestors. Other orthodox *siddurim*, such as the Hertz *Siddur*,⁷ the Hirsch *Siddur*,⁸ and the Sacks *Siddur*⁹ all have a version of the blessing without the *vav*, as do Reform¹⁰ and Reconstructionist¹¹ *siddurim*. *Vav*-less versions of the blessing are endorsed by Chabad-Lubavitch,¹² the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America,¹³ the Union for Reform Judaism,¹⁴ and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.¹⁵ In other words, in adding a *vav* to the second blessing over the Hanukkah candles, and in thereby extending

⁶ *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur: Weekday/Shabbat/Festival*, ed. Nosson Scherman (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1984), 782-3 (emphasis supplied).

⁷ *The Authorised Daily Prayerbook: Hebrew Text, English Translation with Commentary and Notes*, ed. Joseph H. Hertz, (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1975), 948-9.

⁸ *Siddur Tefilot Yisrael: The Hirsch Siddur*, ed. Samson Raphael Hirsch, (New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1997), 691.

⁹ *The Koren Siddur: A Hebrew/English Prayerbook for Shabbat and Holidays*, ed. Jonathan Sacks, (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009), 896.

¹⁰ *Mishkan T'Filah: A Reform Siddur*, ed. Elyse D. Frisman, (Boston: CCAR Press, 2007), 572.

¹¹ *Limot Hol: Daily Prayerbook*, ed. David A. Teutsch, (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 2006), 386-7.

¹² See “Blessings on the Menorah,” Chabad.org, accessed December 15, 2013,

¹³ See “The Lights of Chanukah: Laws and Customs,” Orthodox Union, accessed December 15, 2013, <http://www.ou.org/holidays/chanukah/laws/>.

¹⁴ See “Hanukkah Blessings,” ReformJudaism.org, accessed December 15, 2013, <http://www.reformjudaism.org/practice/prayers-blessings/hanukkah-blessings>.

¹⁵ See “New Blessings for Hanukkah,” Ritualwell, accessed December 15, 2013, <http://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/new-blessings-chanukah>.

the performance of miracles from the days of our ancestors “until our time,” Conservative Judaism stands truly alone.

Before proceeding any further, it should be noted that at issue here are only what Nachmanides calls “the great, manifest [*i.e.*, open] miracles”¹⁶ (הַגְּדוֹלִים הַמְּפָרָסִים), or “events which cannot be explained by natural law”¹⁷ such as the miracle of Hanukkah. Not at issue here are what Nachmanides calls “the hidden miracles”¹⁸ (הַנְּסִים הַנְּסָתָיִם) in which “the world functions according to its normal way while they occur,”¹⁹ such as when rain falls at the appropriate time. All modern denominations and all modern *siddurim* recognize the continued performance of such hidden miracles in our time by including a thanksgiving “for Your miracles that daily attend us” (עַל נִסֶּיךָ שֶׁבְּכָל־יּוֹם עִמָּנוּ) in the *modim* prayer.²⁰ This is clearly a reference to the “normal [*i.e.*, hidden] [*n*]issim in our lives.”²¹ For Hanukkah, the *al ha-nissim* thanksgiving for open miracles is added to this prayer, and again the *Siddur Sim Shalom* has a *vav* where all other modern *siddurim* have none.²² The same arguments apply against that *vav* as well.²³

¹⁶ Nachmanides, *Ramban 3 – Shemos/Exodus Vol. 1: Chapters 1-20*, ed. Hillel Danziger, (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications Ltd., 2007), 13:16.

¹⁷ Evelyn Garfield, *Service of the Heart: A Guide to the Jewish Prayer Book*, (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1989), 108.

¹⁸ Nachmanides, *supra* note 15 to Exodus 13:16.

¹⁹ *Idem.*, to Leviticus 26.11.

²⁰ *Siddur Sim Shalom*, *supra* note 2, 118. See also, for example, *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*, *supra* note 5, 426-7.

²¹ Garfield, *supra* note 16, 103. See also *infra* note 22.

²² Compare *Siddur Sim Shalom*, *supra* note 2, 119—“We thank You for the miraculous deliverance...of our ancestors from ancient days until our time” (עַל הַנְּסִים...שֶׁעָשִׂיתָ לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ) (בְּיָמֵם הָהֵם וּבְזִמְנָן)—with *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*, *supra* note 5, 426-7: “(And) for the miracles . . . which You performed for our forefathers in those days, at this time” (עַל הַנְּסִים...שֶׁעָשִׂיתָ לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ בְּיָמֵם הָהֵם בְּזִמְנָן הַזֶּה).

²³ The very fact that, for Hanukkah, a special thanksgiving is added to the *modim* prayer suggests that the reference to “Your miracles” in the latter is a reference to His hidden miracles rather than to open miracles such as Hanukkah. This would also explain why, for

III. For hundreds of years, virtually all Jews have blessed God for performing open miracles for our ancestors “in those days, at this time,” rather than “from their days until this time.”

When *Siddur Sim Shalom* was first published, Rabbi Jules Harlow, its original editor, explained the addition of the *vav* to the second blessing over the Hanukkah candles and the *al ha-nissim* addendum for Hanukkah to the *modim* prayer as follows:

Siddur Sim Shalom follows the text of Rav Amram Gaon, emending the introductory formula which expresses gratitude for miracles “in other times, at this season,” to read “in other times, and in our day,” *bayamim hahem u-vazman hazeh*. The addition of the *vav* adds a basic theological dimension that miracles are not confined to a remote and unavailable past.²⁴

In an article that is posted on the website of the Rabbinical Assembly, Rabbi Alvan Kaunfer states that this variant is found in “most manuscripts” of the earliest known Jewish prayer book, the ninth century *Seder Rav Amram Gaon*, and adds that “the tenth century *Siddur Rav Saadia Ha-Gaon*, and the [somewhat later] *Mahzor Vitry* (from the school of Rashi) also read *u-va-z’man ha-zeh*.”²⁵ Rabbi Kaunfer also notes that in his commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch*, David ben Shmuel Ha-Levi Segal (1586-1667), known as the “Turei Zahav” or “Taz,” takes issue with the adoption of this variant in the *Levush Malchut* of Mordechai ben Avraham Joffe

Purim, no special thanksgiving is added to the *modim* prayer, as it is among the hidden miracles remembered there.

²⁴ Jules Harlow, “Introducing *Siddur Sim Shalom*,” *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 37, no. 4 (1985), 15.

²⁵ Alvan Kaunfer, “Miracles on Those Days and in Our Own: A Note on the Hanukkah Blessing,” The Rabbinical Assembly, last modified November 29, 2012, accessed December 15, 2013, <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/miracles-those-days-and-our-own-note-hanukkah-blessings>.

(1530-1612).²⁶ Rabbi Kaunfer concedes that “[t]he *Taz*’s position [in favor of the *vav*-less version] was maintained in later *halakhic* decisions.²⁷

Regarding the adoption of the variant in the *Siddur Sim Shalom*, Rabbi Kaunfer reports:

I asked Rabbi Jules Harlow, the editor of the original *Siddur Sim Shalom*, how the committee arrived at the decision to include the *u-vaz’man hazeh* version. He responded to me in an e-mail that, “It grew out of a suggestion of Rabbi Hayyim Kieval, z”l, at a meeting of the Prayer Book Committee for *Siddur Sim Shalom*. After he presented his case, there was no extended discussion.”²⁸

Thirty years after having instituted this break from a *nusach* that had been followed by virtually all Jews for hundreds of years, Conservative Judaism still stands apart from all other modern Jewish denominations in this regard. The following—and necessarily brief—analysis of relevant passages in the Babylonian Talmud and the *Sefat Emet* further supports repairing the break by returning to a *vav*-less version of the blessing, as does a look at recent Jewish history.

IV. The Talmud suggests that Hanukkah “is the end of all the miracles,” and the *Sefat Emet* explicitly states that “Hanukkah is the last miracle.”

The Babylonian *Gemara* to tractate *Yoma* contains a comment on a statement by Rav Assi that suggests that Hanukkah is “the end of all the miracles”:

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. Rabbi Elie Muk similarly notes that “most authorities take issue with [the *Levush*’s] rendering” of the blessing. (Elie Munk, *The World of Prayer: Commentary and Translation of the Siddur*, ed. Michael Plotkin, vol. 2 of the *Shabbat and Festival Prayers* series, [New York: Feldheim Publishers, 2007], 413.) In light of the fact that, as noted above, “some early editions of the prayer liturgy” have the additional *vav*, Rabbi Munk “found [it] necessary to point out explicitly that the wording we use today, omitting the particle ו (‘and’), is the correct one” (Idem.) 406-7.

²⁸ Kaunfer, *supra* note 24.

Rav Assi said: Why is Esther compared . . . to the morning? To tell you that just as morning is the end of the entire night, so too, the redemption wrought by Esther is the end of all the miracles.

The Gemara asks: But there is the miracle of Chanukkah, which occurred after the Purim miracle.

The Gemara answers: **We** meant to **say** that [**Purim**] is the last miracle **allowed to be recorded** as part of the Holy Scriptures.²⁹

Here, the *Gemara* does not question that there has been an “end of all the miracles.” It merely suggests that Hanukkah, rather than Purim, was the end of all the miracles. Had the *Gemara* intended to question whether there has been an end of all the miracles, it could have asked, “But have the miracles ceased?” or “But are there no miracles that are being performed for us today?”

Indeed, the *Gemara* was compiled during a period of such intense and sustained oppression of the Jewish people at the hand of the Romans that anybody who believed that there had been no end of all the miracles would have expected clear evidence of great miracles, commensurate to the magnitude of the oppression, and actually being performed for them then and there. Conversely, the fact that the Jewish people had to endure half a millennium of unparalleled misery under Roman rule, without any clear signs of miracles being performed for them, must have been powerful evidence to the compilers of the *Gemara* that there had been an end of all the miracles.

Now, it is true that the Babylonian *Gemara* to tractate *Berakhot* prescribes a blessing to be recited by one who sees a place at which a miracle was performed for him in the past,³⁰ and that this blessing is included in many modern *siddurim*, including some that include the *vav-*

²⁹ *Talmud Bavli: The Schottenstein Edition, Yoma 29a*, ed. Hersh Goldwurm, (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1990-2004). English text in bold type represents a literal translation of the *Gemara*; English text in plain type represents elucidation by its modern editors. Formatting original, footnote omitted.

³⁰ See *Idem.*, *Berakhot* 54a.

less version of the second blessing over the Hanukkah candles.³¹ This suggests that miracles were still being performed in *amoraic* times and are still being performed today. However, it is unclear whether any of the examples listed in the *Gemara* as requiring this blessing must be interpreted as open miracles or whether all of them (the rescue of an unnamed person from a lion attack, the appearance of a well for the thirsty traveler Mar bar Ravina, and the opening of a crack in a wall to shelter the same Mar bar Ravina from a wild camel attack)³² can be understood as hidden miracles. Even if any of these examples must be interpreted as open miracles, they all are examples of a miracle that was performed for an individual rather than, like the miracle of Hanukkah, a miracle that was performed for the entire Jewish people.³³

The mention of these miracles in tractate *Berakhot* therefore does not support the notion that open miracles are still being performed for the entire Jewish people. Moreover, earlier in the Babylonian *Gemara* to tractate *Berakhot*, Rav Pappa asks Abaye why miracles occurred for earlier generations but not for theirs,³⁴ yet Rav Pappa and Abaye belonged to the same generation as Rava who, when approached by the unnamed survivor of a lion attack, instituted the blessing discussed in the previous paragraph!³⁵ It must be concluded that while some miracles still occurred for that generation, others did not, and it is tempting to identify the former with hidden miracles and the latter with open miracles.³⁶

³¹ See, for example, *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*, supra note 5, 230-1: בְּרוּךְ שֶׁעָשָׂה לִי נֶס בְּמָקוֹם הַזֶּה ("Blessed...who performed a miracle for me at this place").

³² See *Talmud Bavli*, supra note 28, *Berakhot* 54a.

³³ See *Ibid.*

³⁴ See *Talmud Bavli*, supra note 28, *Berakhot* 20a.

³⁵ See *Idem.*, *Berakhot* 54a.

³⁶ Matters are further complicated, however, by the fact that the only concrete example cited by Rav Pappa to Abaye of a miracle that occurred for an earlier generation, but not for theirs, appears to be an example of a hidden miracle, *i.e.*, that rain would fall as soon as Rav Yehuda removed one of his shoes to participate in a public fast asking for an end to a drought,

What is only suggested in the *Talmud Bavli* is explicitly stated in the Torah commentary of Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger (1847–1905), also known as “Sefat Emet.” He unambiguously writes in his work by the same name, “Ḥanukkah is the last miracle that was performed for us. . . God has not yet performed another outright [*i.e.*, open] miracle.”³⁷

V. The Jewish experience of the holocaust is incompatible with the notion that God performs open miracles even in our time.

Towards the beginning of his Holocaust memoir, *Night*, Elie Wiesel recounts how Moishe the Beadle escaped the shooting pit: “How had he, Moishe the Beadle, been able to escape? By a miracle. He was wounded in the leg and left for dead.”³⁸ Moishe himself insists: “I was saved miraculously.”³⁹ In his “Preface to the New Translation” of *Night*, however, Wiesel rejects the idea that he likewise escaped the Holocaust by a miracle:

I don’t know how I survived; I was weak, rather shy; I did nothing to save myself. A miracle? Certainly not. If heaven could or would perform a miracle for me, why not for others more deserving than myself? It was nothing more than chance.⁴⁰

Just as the fact that the Jewish people had to endure half a millennium of unparalleled misery under Roman rule—without any clear signs of miracles being performed for them—must have been powerful evidence fifteen-hundred years ago that there had been an end of all the miracles, so also is the fact that the Jewish people had to undergo the experience of the Holocaust—again without any clear signs of miracles being performed for them—powerful evidence that there has been an end to all the

whereas Rav Pappa and Abaye would go to much greater length, but alas to no avail. (See *Idem.*, *Berakhot* 20a.)

³⁷ *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger*, trans. Arthur Green, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), 380 [1:208].

³⁸ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 6.

³⁹ *Idem.*, 7.

⁴⁰ *Idem.*, vii-viii.

miracles. To claim otherwise, as the *Siddur Sim Shalom* does when it states that God has been “[a]ccomplishing miracles . . . until our time,” is to pose an unanswerable question: If God still intervenes in human affairs, then why did He not do so even when “[i]nfants were tossed in the air and used as targets for the machine guns”?⁴¹

By contrast, if God no longer intervenes in human affairs, then the question of why He did not do so to prevent the near annihilation of European Jewry becomes answerable. He may, for example, still trust that humankind will yet choose right over wrong by its own free will, that it will be guided by the miracles that were performed for it in its infancy but without the need for further miracles in its maturity, when such miracles would unduly influence—to the point of spoiling—the outcome of the Divine experiment that is humankind. Viewed from this perspective, God’s refusal to prevent the Holocaust is a cause for hope rather than despair, and His inaction is that of the God of loving-kindness who cries when His children are suffering at each other’s hands.

VI. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the *vav* that was added to the second blessing over the Hanukkah candles in the *Siddur Sim Shalom* should be deleted therefrom, and that the performance of outright miracles that was thereby extended “from ancient days until our time” should once again be confined to “those days, at this time.” The proposed change in the *nusach masorti* also strikes the right balance between rationalism and observance, thus allowing Conservative Judaism to play a much-needed role among modern Jewish denominations.

⁴¹ *Idem.*, 6.