

The *Shema qolenu* Prayer as Poetry and as Liturgy*

Most worshipers nowadays are too sophisticated to cry in synagogue. But come the first night of *Selihat*, the prayers for forgiveness said before and during the High Holydays and the Ten Days of Penitence, and in many a synagogue at least a scattering of sobbing elders can still be heard. The weeping will most likely have been set off by the prayer *Shema qolenu* ('Hear our voice') and comes as an early climax during the *Selihat* services. It has long been one of the most appreciated and best-loved prayers among synagogue goers.

Surprisingly, very little has been written about this classic stimulus of religious emotion. This may be because it is a mere anthology of verses, taken mostly from The Book of Psalms, on which so many commentaries have been written, down through the ages. The following is an analysis of *Shema qolenu* tracing the strategy of its compiler(s), in an attempt to understand what might have made this selection of ancient verses so particularly powerful and popular as a piece of poetic liturgy.

#L1#Structure#/L1#

The first of the nine verses of *Shema qolenu* is a fitting introduction to any prayer, let alone to this very special appeal: 'Hear our voice, O Lord our God; spare us and have compassion upon us; and accept our prayer in mercy and favour.' It is very familiar to regulars as it comes from the sixteenth benediction of the *Amidah*, said thrice daily.

* The author is most grateful for the expert research assistance of Rabbi Tzvi Tal, MA, and his comments. He also wishes to thank sincerely his sons, Menahem and David Blondheim and grandsons, Shachar and Dagan Wertman, for much help and many helpful suggestions. Special thanks to Prof. Daniel Sperber for graciously reading and commenting on the manuscript, from which much was gained.

The next verse is hardly less familiar as it is traditionally said at least three times a week in public prayer after reading from the Bible scroll on Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays, and on holydays as well. This verse, 'Restore us to Thee, O Lord, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old,' is the next-to-last verse of The Book of Lamentations (5:21). After completion of the synagogue reading of Lamentations on the ninth of Av fast, this verse is repeated by the congregation and then by the Reader. The verse, by evoking the memory of the catastrophic destruction of the Temple so harrowingly described by the prophet, can be most effective in raising congregational emotion. The phrase 'that we may be restored' (*ve-nashuvah*) is particularly appropriate, conveying the concept of repentance (*teshuvah*), the theme of the *Selihot* period.

Then comes a selection of seven verses from six non-consecutive chapters of Psalms. The first three of these verses constitute a 'triad' of verses, which are at the heart of *Shema qolenu*.

Do not cast us out of Thy presence; (Ps. 51:13)

and Thy holy spirit from us take not.

Do not cast us out in the time of old age; (Ps. 71:9)

when our strength fails forsake us not.

Do not forsake us, O Lord our God; (Ps. 38:22)

from us distance Yourself not.

This first triad seems to form a compact, unitary mini-prayer. The next three verses, a second triad, also seem to form a unitary mini-prayer, but quite different in both form and substance from the first (see *schema*).

The final verse summarizes all the appeals of *Shema qolenu* in a request that they be answered: 'let the words of our mouth and the meditation of our heart be acceptable before Thee; O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer.' Connecting back to the first verse of the prayer, this concluding verse is once again a familiar one, uttered thrice daily as the conclusion of the *Amidah*.

#L1#Literary Techniques#/L1#

The text of *Shema qolenu* was thus composed by 'weaving together' eight well-chosen biblical verses, and one from the *Siddur*. It combines a number of different stylistic manoeuvres, which together make not only for a uniformity of form, but also for novel and striking meanings. The selection of verses and their re-combination demonstrates literal and aural repetitiveness, together underscoring *copia*. Such redundancies, which support backlooping, are consonant with liturgy's orientation to orality, and echo masoretic technique of seizing on assonance.¹

The 'weaving together' of *Shema qolenu* is quite intricate. In the first triad, each verse consists of two complimentary parts, and the first word of each of the verses, as well as the first word of the second part of each verse, are all the same word, *al*, 'do not' (see *schema*). The second words of each of the first two verses are also identical: *tashlihenu* '[do not] cast us off.' These two are the only verses in The Book of Psalms that begin with *al tashlihenu*. For a third verse to complete a more or less consistent triad, the compiler chose a verse with a different verb, but nevertheless similar in both meaning and sound: (*al*) *te'azvenu*, '(do not) forsake us.' And it is with these same words, *al te'azvenu*, that the preceding verse ends. So the third verse is also linked by identical words with the preceding, second verse, but to its end rather than to its beginning (see *schema*).²

Thus, not only is the first verse bound to the second and the second to the third, but the third, in turn, is cyclically bound back again to the first. And not only are the first

¹ W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London 1982); I. Yeivin, *Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah*, translated and edited by E.J. Revell (n.p. 1980); A. Dotan, 'Masorah', in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 16 (Supplements) 1409–1413.

² The linkage by identical words of the ending of one verse to the beginning of the following verse is a standard Hebrew rhetorical form known as *shirshur* (cf. *sharsharet*, 'chain').

three words of each verse of this first triad the same or in the same format, but two of the three final words of the first and last verses are identical: *al ... mimmennu*, 'do not [take] from us [Thy holy spirit]' and 'do not [be far] from us.' Even the middle words in each of these two phrases, *tiqqah* and *tirhaq*, while not identical, are not only similar in meaning, but in sound as well, representing alliteration (stylistic relationships shown graphically in *schema*).

Another characteristic of the first triad is that it consists only of negatively worded appeals by *us*:

Cast *us not* away ... take *not* ... from *us*.

Do *not* cast *us* off ... forsake *us not* ...

Do *not* forsake *us* ... be *not* far from *us*.³

The unity produced by combining these three different verses is thus emphasized by the six fold use of the same negative, *al*, 'do not,' and by the multiple use of the same plural suffix *-nu*, 'us'.

The plural number was substituted by the compiler of *Shema qolenu* for the singular of the Psalms throughout (i.e., *qolenu* for *qoli*) in order to adapt the wording of the personal psalms of David to the congregational prayers of the synagogue. This is the only exception in the body of *Shema qolenu* to the otherwise consistent interdiction of even minor changes in the text of The Book of Psalms, from which it was largely excerpted.

³ *The Authorised Selichot for the Whole Year According to the Rite in Use among Hebrew Congregations in the [British] Commonwealth and in Central Europe*, translated and annotated by Rev. Abraham Rosenfeld with the sanction of the Chief Rabbi, The Very Rev. Dr. Israel Brodie (London 1962³).

In contradistinction to the first triad, all phrases of the second triad are positively worded, but they also all refer to *us* (-*nu*):

Show us (*'ase 'ima-nu*) a sign ... that our adversaries (*sone-nu*) (Ps.
may see it (*yir'u*) and be ashamed; because Thou ... hast 56:XXX)
helped us (*azarta-nu*) and comforted us (*ve-nihamta-nu*).
Give ear to our words (*amare-nu ha'azinah*) ... consider our (Ps. 5:2)
meditation (*binah hagige-nu*).
Let the words of our mouth be acceptable ... our Rock and our (Ps. 19:15)
Redeemer (*tzure-nu ve-go'ale-nu*).

The compiler also unites the three verses of this second triad by choosing those that have 'God,' both as the subject and as the antepenultimate word (the third from the end) of each sentence (see *schema*):

... God, our Helper and Comforter.
... God, understand our thoughts.
... God, our Rock and Redeemer.⁴

⁴ The Hebrew text used for this analysis, and to a large extent the English as well, are from *The Authorized Selichot*. Before its publication (London 1956), the Hebrew text had been edited, eliminating the *teamim* but adding some punctuation. Thus, in the middle verse of the second triad, a comma was inserted after the word 'God.' This comma interrupts the three-word count-back to the antepenultimate position of the word 'God,' impairing slightly the triad's unity of format (see *schema*). But this modern incursion is much less disturbing than the association of this unusually short, five-word middle verse, with the triad's other verses that are both at least twice as long. This rare inconsistency highlights the extraordinary ability of the compilers in crafting this anthology of quoted verses, otherwise so very well-balanced in format and style.

Another unifying feature of this triad is a graded climax, from an emphasis on *us*, the congregants, in the first verse: 'Show *us* a good omen ...,' to an emphasis on *God* added in the second verse: 'Give ear to our words, *O Lord*.' The climax (in the third verse), has both these elements combined in a plea by *us*, addressed to *God*: 'May the words of *our* mouth ... be acceptable unto *Thee* ...' Here 'our words' are not only to 'be heard,' but to 'be accepted' as well.

Finally, each verse in this second triad mentions one or more organs of the body. The verses are arranged out of their biblical order, but in an order that presents the body parts in descending anatomical order: from eye-to-ear-to-mouth-to-heart. The reverse, the ascending order of organs, is exemplified in the order of the blessings of the *Havdalah*.⁵

After the second triad comes a single, summarizing, final verse that asks that the requests of our prayer be answered. The verse is striking in the way the word *attah*, 'You,' is used in addressing God. In the standard blessings ('Blessed are You, O God ...'), God is blessed, not told what to do. But in this request, not really a plea, the tone seems presumptuous in almost demanding—'You will answer' (*attah ta'aneh* ...)—in the imperative. While this importunate style of the Psalmist is striking, it is not unique here.

#L1#Liturgical Content#/L1#

The multiple verbal and stylistic linkages found within each of the triads emphasize the overall theme of the *Shema qolenu* prayer: dread of estrangement from God. The theme

⁵ Compare with the mnemonic for the order of *berakhot* of *Havdalah*, which are in ascending anatomical order: mouth (*pri ha-gefen*), nose (*besamim*), eyes (*me'ore ha-esh*), and mind/brain (*ha-mavdil ben qodesh le-hol*). In Psalm 115, incorporated into *Hallel*, (eight) body parts (of idols) are referred to in no apparent order, anatomical or otherwise ('mouths that do not speak, hands, ... feet, ... throat, ...'); true also of the body parts referred to in Ps. 135.

is further emphasized when the thought expressed in the first half of each verse is rephrased in its second half in accordance with the principle of biblical parallelism.

The emotional peak of *Shema qolenu* comes not near its end, but early on in the second verse of the first triad with the plea: 'Do not cast us off in old age, when our strength fails us.' This is a fervent appeal for physical health in one's declining years. And in the next verse comes a plea that God '(not) distance (Himself) from us,' essentially a plea for spiritual well-being and integrity.

What then is the significance of *ruah qodshekha al tiqqah mimmennu*, 'Your holy spirit do not take from us,' in the first verse of that triad? It cannot be the divine spark of God Himself, traditionally understood to be present in each individual, because two verses later there is almost the very same plea, that God (including, of course, His divine spark) not 'distance Himself from us.'⁶

A most appropriate interpretation of *ruah qodshekha* in this setting is the God-given gift of human intelligence, including the powers of thought, reason, logic and a well-developed memory.⁷ This interpretation rests on the abilities of the human mind and its cognitive skills, considered, since antiquity and in the Middle Ages, as the major characteristic differentiating man from animals. Thus, the plea not to be deprived of *ruah ha-qodesh* may well be a plea for *mental* health, that one does not become senile as he ages. And like the plea for physical health that follows immediately, both losses are age-related.

However, if the forgoing properly interprets the particular thrust of each of the pleas, they appear to be out of order. A plea for physical health set between pleas for

⁶ It is not the divine spirit of prophecy, an old biblical meaning of *ruah ha-qodesh*, for the spirit of prophecy has been absent since the destruction of the (Second) Temple.

⁷ The classical commentators do not dwell on this interpretation of *ruah ha-qodesh* as the faculty of human thought, but in modern times it has also been suggested by Rabbi Israel Schepansky in *Or Ha-mizrach* (New York 1980), published by Torah Education Department—Mizrachi of USA and Canada.

mental and spiritual health, is at best awkward. More appropriate would be the sequence: physical, mental and spiritual health, or the reverse. It would seem that this peculiar order of the verses is imposed because a different one would disrupt the special stylistic relationships of the other words of the triad of verses so carefully selected and arranged by the compiler, as discussed above.

#L1#Disruptions by *Nusah*#/L1#

The second triad of *Shema qolenu* does not affect congregational emotion nearly as deeply as does the first. One important reason is that it is commonly rattled off in an undertone by the congregation together with the last verse of the first triad. This is in accordance with the demands of *nusah* (traditional wording of text and/or the chant used for it) as laid down in an instructional rubric in many editions of *Selihot*, in both its Central and Eastern European versions (there was an interim of about a century between the first printing of the Central European and that of the first East European versions). Here the *hazzan* is required to stop alternating antiphonally with the congregation in cantorial display, while the congregation no longer heartily responds aloud as in the first triad.

Why *nusah* intervened to violate the integrity of the Central European version of *Shema qolenu* remains curious. The early compiler seems to have intended the first triad of verses to constitute a coherent unit, having shaped it in such an intricate but completely consistent format. Moreover, the three verses of the first triad are not only so similar in wording and style to each other, they also differ so greatly in structure and content from the second triad. But *nusah* amputates the last verse of the first triad and transplants it to head the second triad. Not surprisingly, the resulting tetrad of miss-

fitting verses tends to be mumbled more or less quietly in synagogues today, right on through to the end of the fifth and final verse.⁸

#L1#Textual Development#/L1#

Unlike many of the *Selihot* prayers whose authors are known, the original compiler of *Shema qolenu* remains unknown. Moreover, the contemporary version clearly had more than one compiler. In its first printed edition—Soncino 1487—only three of *Shema qolenu's* final verses are provided. It subsequently developed until it finally reached its current nine verses.⁹ But the succession of compilers all confined themselves rigidly to the original literary strategy. After the first two introductory verses, all the filler-verses were carefully chosen from among the 150 chapters and 2,484 verses of the text of The Book of Psalms, without additions, deletions or changes in word order, save the consistent substitution of the plural for the singular number.

Any temptation to introduce the compilers' own words was rigorously suppressed. Yet creativity and inventiveness are revealed in the artistry of sensitive selection and novel ordering of verses of the original psalms. Through the creative application of cutting and pasting techniques, the ancient verses were woven together into a well-integrated, self-contained composition. The Psalmist's personal poetry was thus converted by a series of consistent compilers into an original and explosive public prayer.

#L1#Conclusion#/L1#

There may be a general moral emerging from the great literary triumph scored by the compilers of *Shema qolenu*, as they applied their particular literary composition technique. The success of their arrangement may ultimately be due to the unique fit

⁸ The seventh and eighth verses of the Mercaz Europa version used in this study became the third and fourth verses of the Polyn version. This effectively destroyed the second triad, and with it the relationship of the triad's verses to each other, as discussed above.

⁹ The prayer itself does not appear in Sephardi versions.

between literary strategy and the dynamics of Jewish heritage—between a complicated poetic form, and the ideological substance of traditionalist self perception. The fundamental contradiction built into religious life is the tension between programmatic adherence to a sacred historical heritage and its inevitable and constant adaptation to changing circumstances. *Shema qolenu* structurally parallels this conflict and its creative resolution: the prayer did not add nor subtract a word from the sacred biblical verses, they were merely imaginatively selected and re-arranged. But this intervention generated new and emotionally intense meanings for the particular place and time of the recital of the traditional texts: the synagogue, during the Ten Days of Awe and Penitence.

S.H. Blondheim