

B'rich Sh'meih in the Siddur HaSh'loh

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B'rich Sh'meih

B'rich Sh'meih is the well-known prayer recited while the *Sefer Torah* is being retrieved from the ark for reading. Originally a passage in the *Zohar*, some of its phrasing was altered for implementation as liturgy. Over time variant readings and versions have evolved, some still in use, others surviving only in rare editions of the Siddur.

In the course of *B'rich Sh'meih* we declare our dependence on G-d, exclusive of any other forces:

Lo al enash rachizna v'lo al bar elohin somichna – “I do not rely on man and I do not depend on a *bar elohin*”

Bar elohin is defined by most Siddur commentators¹ as “angel.”² Others^{3,4} translate as “a person of strength and influence”⁵ or “a powerful ruling magistrate”. (See Exodus 22:7, 8, 27.)

The Siddur of the Sh'loh HaKadosh

The *Sh'loh HaKadosh*, R' Yeshaya HaLevi Horowitz (d. 1630), wrote a Kabbalistic commentary to the Siddur entitled *Sha'ar HaShamayim*, Gateway to Heaven. His son, R' Sheftel, prepared the manuscript for publication in 1636.⁶ It has been re-set and printed many times over the centuries with new editions appearing even today.

A rare edition of this Siddur was printed in Amsterdam in 1717. One extant copy from this printing is now part of the private Judaica collection of Mr. Irving Langer, Lawrence, N.Y. and contains a most startling variant reading of the aforementioned phrase. (See Fig. 2.) It reads (along with other minor differences):

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Lo al einash r'chizna v'lo al malka dishmaya samichna – “I do not rely on man and I do not depend on the king of heaven”

. . . an apparent reference to G-d! How does one make sense of such an astonishing heresy inserted into a Siddur?

A Deliberate Corruption?

At first this seemed to me a deliberate corruption, perhaps introduced by Sabateans. There is anecdotal evidence that well-known and respected *s'forim*, particularly those printed in Turkey, were tampered with by later followers of Shabtai Zvi (1626-1676). They intended to subtly infect otherwise acceptable books with Sabatean philosophies.

Rabbi Zvi Hirsh Farber of London (early 20th century) enjoyed a close relationship with Rabbi Shlomo Elyashiv, well-known Lithuanian Kabbalist and author of the *Leshem*. In a recently published letter, he writes (my translation): “It was told to me that he (Rabbi Elyashiv) distanced himself from the books of Rabbi Eliyahu HaKohen Itamari, author of the *Shevet Mussar*. I didn't know the reason. Later I sensed his reasoning because in his (Rabbi Itamari's) book *Midrash Talpios*, in the entry for *Mashiah*, he writes things which are forbidden to say. . . I saw that Rabbi Yosef Shaul Nottenzohn sensed this, too, and wrote that it (the *Midrash Talpios*) was first printed in Smyrna and disciples of the false Messiah Shabtai Zvi were there. The printer, too, was from them and he added things on his own. I found more books in which they added bad things. The brilliant and holy authors are innocent. . .”⁷

A similar charge is mentioned in Responsa *Teshuva MeiAhava* 1:60, from R' Elazar Flekles, elder disciple of the *Noda BeYehuda*.

However, this particular change seems an unlikely candidate for such activity. It is apparently the only such alteration in this Siddur, and certainly not a skillfully inconspicuous one which might go unnoticed (as, for example, the well-known controversy concerning certain names of angels recorded in *Rosh HaShana Mahzorim* in the Order of the Shofar Sounding).⁸

A Transcription Error?

Consider this version of *B'rich Sh'meib*:⁹

v'lo al mal'achaya dishmaya samichna – “and I do not depend on heavenly angels”

“*Mal'achaya dishmaya*” is synonymous with the original *bar elohin* according to those who identify it with “angel”. (A similar version – *mal'achaya ila'ei*, “lofty angels” – precedes our 1717 *Siddur HaSh'lob* and appears in printed editions¹⁰ of works written by the author of *Kitzur Sh'lob*.)¹¹

If the text before the typesetter was *mal'acha dishmaya* in the singular – “heavenly angel”, he might have simply missed setting the first *aleph* in *mal'acha*. The difficulty with this scenario (aside from the lack of support for a singular “*mal'acha*” reading) is the dot – the *dagesh* – in the letter *caph*. Forgetting the *aleph* does not produce a *dagesh*. Was that subsequently inserted by mistake?

Alternately, perhaps the typesetter made a “mental” error: he read *mal'acha* but, possibly unaccustomed to seeing this word, his mind substituted *mal'ka*, and that's the word he set.

In any case, a transcription error might explain why this goes unmentioned in works which compile alternate readings of *B'rich Sh'meib*. Though due possibly to the rarity of this 1717 edition, it may also be that the compilers, believing it to be a mere “typo,” purposely excluded it from consideration, simple errors having no place in a list of significant *nuschaos*.

Whether malicious or inadvertent, it is curious that there is no evidence of controversy or outrage at this “little mistake.” Amsterdam was a prominent publishing center, in the midst of teeming Jewish communities. A Siddur, especially the morning service, was certainly seen by many. The absence of any recorded reaction is remarkable.

Problem Solved

The real answer to the *mal'ka dishmaya* version may lie in a phrase found several times in the book of Jeremiah.

In his admonishments Jeremiah (7:18) mentions broad idolatrous practices being directed *limlechesh* (without an *aleph*) *bashamayim*. In Jeremiah 44:17-19, others in conversation with Jeremiah use this expression repeatedly in describing the object of their idolatrous devotions.

Most commentators¹² explain that *m'lechesh shamayim* refers to the sun – the “king of the heavens” – because of its size and because of its perceived or actual dominion over celestial bodies.¹³

The literal Aramaic for *m'lechesh shamayim* is ***malaka dishmaya!***

No error occurred at all. The phrase *v'lo al malaka dishmaya samichna* simply means “I do not depend on false deities,” a familiar theme in Scripture and in our prayers and certainly not one to provoke protest or suppression.

The problem is solved.

Nevuchadnezzar’s “Homage” to G-d

Despite these references, the usage of *malaka dishmaya* to describe *avoda zara* is admittedly unusual even in Scripture. Its use in prayer is otherwise non-existent. Why would it be purposely used here?

Regarding my initial assumption, I realized in retrospect that *malaka dishmaya* would have been quite an unlikely reference even for G-d. Ubiquitously we say *melech ha'olam*, King of the world, or *malaka d'alma* in Aramaic,¹⁴ without limiting His monarchy to the heavens.

The only place “king of heaven” refers to G-d is in a narrative by Nevuchadnezzar where he calls G-d *melech shmaya*.¹⁵ Curiously, the only place *bar elobin* – the original phrase – is used, is also (Daniel 3:25) in Nevuchadnezzar’s mouth!

“Rabbi Reuven said: At that moment (when Nevuchadnezzar said *bar elobin*) the angel Michael descended and slapped him across the mouth, and told him “Hey, wicked one, putrid droplet, He has a son?! Recant, take back your words!”¹⁶

Nevuchadnezzar’s concept and description of spiritual entities was severely flawed. (This Midrash was the initial motivation for the authorities who changed the text from *bar elobin*.^{3,4})

Nevuchadnezar's "King of heaven" may also be faulty, inappropriately employing a title which was already in use to describe idolatry. (Nevuchadnezar was contemporary with Jeremiah.) Furthermore, our syntax of blessings and prayers which use *melech ha'olam* was established by that time. *Melech sh'maya* contrasted flagrantly with Israel's consistent use of the inclusive *melech ha'olam* – King of the whole world – and instead implied "G-d may be King, but that's in heaven. On earth – I am King!"¹⁷

Those authorities were reluctant to allow *bar elobin* into the daily prayer after its potential for abuse was demonstrated by the "wicked, putrid" despot. They chose instead another of his flawed expressions, deliberately using it in its idolatrous context and exposing the arrogance and insolence implicit in Nevuchadnezar's "homage" to G-d. ❧



Fig. 1, Front Page

NOTES

¹ R' Shabsi Sofer, R' Samson R. Hirsch, Otzar HaT'fillos, ArtScroll.

² See Daniel 3:25 in Aramaic. In the Hebrew: Job 1:6 and 38:7 according to the Targum, and Rashi Yoma 67b *s.v.* *Uza V'Azrael* referring to Genesis 6:2.

³ Siddur Z'lusa D'Avraham.

⁴ R' Yitzchak Frankel in Yeshurun Vol. 2, pp. 577-579.

⁵ See Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Ramban Genesis 6:2.

⁶ The approbations of R' Yoel Sirkes, the BaCh, and R' YomTov Lipman, the Tosefos YomTov, are printed in every edition, and are dated (5)396 = 1636.

⁷ Yeshurun Vol. 5, p. 662.

⁸ See, coincidentally, the aforementioned Responsa in *Teshuva MeiAbava*.

⁹ See notes 3 and 4 for sources, based on the Midrash (note 20) as well as on subsequent major events still relevant today, that this phrase was purposely inserted to replace the highly sensitive "*bar elohin*." Interestingly, and in contrast to my first reaction (section III), some authorities ordered this very substitution – *malachaya dishmaya* for *bar elohin* – because it is precisely *bar elohin* that might be misconstrued as validating some Sabatean beliefs! But see the final section of this article.

¹⁰ *Kitzur Sb'lob*, fourth edition, Berlin 1715, and all subsequent editions. Siddur *Derech YeShara* by the same author, second edition, Frankfurt on the Oder 1703. See note 4.

¹¹ An early, oft-quoted and well-regarded Halachic work based largely but not exclusively on the rulings of the *Sb'lob*.

¹² To 7:18 see Rashi, Radak, Mezudos and Malbim.

¹³ Compare *V'limshol bayom uvalayla* (Genesis 1:18), *Es hashemeh lememsheles bayom* (Psalms 136:8) and *Tovim me'oros ... libyos moshlim b'kerev tevel* ([K]el Adon, Sabbath morning service).

¹⁴ *Y'kum purkan*, Sabbath morning *Musaf* service.

¹⁵ Daniel 4:34. The usage of the Hebrew *melech* rather than the Aramaic *malka* is noteworthy. That entire portion of the book of Daniel is in Aramaic, and the form *malka* appears frequently in reference to

Nevuchadnezar. Why this one word in Hebrew? This is an issue which deserves a full and separate treatment.

¹⁶ Midrash *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 7:9 on the verse *E'eleh b'samar*. Similarly, Jerusalem Talmud Shabbos, Ch. 6, final paragraph.

¹⁷ For precedence for such implication, see Rashi to Genesis 24:7. Comparison must be drawn cautiously as *B'rich Sh'meib* itself, initially introducing *morei alma* – Master of the world, refers afterwards to *eloko dishmaya*. The reason for this shift is not documented or readily apparent and its resolution may affect my contention in this section.