

## What is the Origin of the Word מחילה?

By: MITCHELL FIRST

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The concept of מחילה is commonly assumed to be integral to our *yamim noraim*. Yet surprisingly, neither the word מחילה nor the verb מחל appears in *Tanakh*.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Rabbi Avrohom Lieberman, Sam Borodach, and my son Shaya First for reviewing the draft and for their valuable insights. I would also like to thank R. Moshe Yasgur for many helpful conversations on this topic, and Allen Friedman for providing many useful references. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the article by J. Abraham, “A Literary Solution to the Name Variations of Esau’s Wives,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 7 (1997), pp. 1–14, which also provided many useful references.

<sup>2</sup> There are people in *Tanakh* with names built around the letters מחל. These are: מחול (I Kings 5:11, but see Rashi), מחלה (daughter of Tzelafhad, referred to several times, and a male referred to at I Ch. 7:18), מחלון (son of Elimelekh), מחלי (two different individuals, referred to a few times), and מחלת (a wife of Esau; later, a wife of Rehoboam). The *Tanakh* also refers to a place called אבל מחולה (Judges 7:22, and I Kings 4:12 and 19:16; see also I Sam. 18:19 and II Sam. 21:8). Based on all of this, it can be argued that the verb מחל and a concept of מחילה did exist in Biblical times. This will be discussed further in Part III.

The *Tanakh* also includes words like מחלת (musical instrument) and מחול (musical instrument, dancing). But almost certainly the initial *mem* in these is not a root letter and these derive from חלל or חול.

That the verb מחל is not found in *Tanakh* explains many instances in our *tefillot* where a citation to a verse about מחילה might be expected and yet none is provided. See, for example, the *zekhor lanu* section of our *selihot*. See *Siddur Kol Yaakov: The Complete ArtScroll Siddur* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.,

---

Mitchell First resides in Teaneck and practices personal injury law in NYC. He has an M.A. in Jewish History from Bernard Revel Graduate School and is the author of “Jewish History in Conflict: A Study of the Major Discrepancy Between Rabbinic and Conventional Chronology” (Jason Aronson 1997); “The Origin of Ta’anit Esther” (*AJS Review* 34:2, November 2010); and other articles on history and liturgy in *Biblical Archaeology Review* (July-August 2012), <seforim.blogspot.com> and *Hakirah* (vols. 11, 13 and 16). A collection of his articles is forthcoming, to be published by Kodesh Press.

When do the terms מחילה and מחל first appear and in what contexts? What is their precise meaning? Can we differentiate between the meaning of the verb מחל and the meaning of the verb טלה? (The latter appears 50 times in *Tanakh*.) This article will attempt to deal with these issues.

## I. The First Appearances

Although the noun מחילה and the verb מחל do not appear in *Tanakh*, the noun מחילה (in the form מחילת) and various forms of the verb מחל do appear in the *mishnayot* of *Bava Kamma*, *Terumot*, *Sotah*, *Yoma*, and *Avot*.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the noun מחילה (in the form מחילת) and various forms of the verb מחל also appear in the *Tosefta*.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that the root מחל does not appear in *Tanakh* and then appears in Mishnaic Hebrew is surprising. But it is not unusual. This is the case with many other roots as well.<sup>5</sup>

The word מחול with the meaning “waive” or “forgive” also appears once in a very fragmentary passage in a text from the Dead Sea.<sup>6</sup>

## II. What are the Origin and Meaning of the Root מחל?

I will now present three suggestions for the origin and meaning of the root.

---

1990), p. 830. See also *Machzor Zichron Yosef: The Complete ArtScroll Machzor: Yom Kippur: Nusach Ashkenaz* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1986), p. 682: *timhol ve-tislah la-avoneinu ka-katuv... vesalahta....*

<sup>3</sup> *Bava Kamma* 8:7 and 9:6, *Avot* 6:1, *Terumot* 6:1, 7:1, 7:3 and 7:4, *Sotah* 7:7 and 7:8, and *Yoma* 7:1.

<sup>4</sup> *Bava Metz'aj'a* 8:9, *Bava Batra* 5:4, *Yoma* 3:13, 4:9 and 4:12, *Sukkah* 4:2, *Gittin* 5:11, *Sanhedrin* 9:3, and *Shevu'ot* 3:2-3.

<sup>5</sup> See M. Moreshet, *Leksikon Ha-Poal She-Nithadesh Bi-Leshon Ha-Tannaim* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan Univ., 1980). (His discussion of מחל is on pp. 86 and 209.) Admittedly, many of the new Tannaitic roots can be easily connected to earlier Hebrew or Aramaic roots, or to earlier roots in other Semitic languages. But in the case of מחל, this is not the case.

<sup>6</sup> See 4Q267 4:4 (*Discoveries in the Judean Desert XVIII*, p. 99): מחול לוא יביאנו. The surrounding words have not survived, so the context is unknown. The handwriting is an “early Herodian formal hand” (*ibid.*, p. 96).

**First Suggestion:** The root derives from the noun חלל, and its meaning of “open space” or “emptiness.”

There is a noun in Mishnaic Hebrew חלל, which seems to have “open space” or “emptiness” as its fundamental meaning.<sup>7</sup> It is fairly clear that this word lies behind Biblical words such as חליל (flute),<sup>8</sup> מחלות (caves, hollows),<sup>9</sup> and חלון (opening, window).<sup>10</sup> Probably, the Hebrew word for bread חלה derives from חלל as well.<sup>11</sup> Ancient Middle Eastern bread probably looked like pita, *i.e.*, had a hollow center.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the verb מחל originated in the form מחלל, the הפעיל (causative) of חלל, meaning “to turn something into a void.”<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, the second *lamed* dropped.<sup>14</sup>

**Second Suggestion:** The root derives from the verb חלל, and its meaning “release, make loose, untie.”

A root חלל with the meaning of “release, make loose, untie” is found in Arabic.<sup>15</sup> There is no such root in Hebrew,<sup>16</sup> and our sources for חלל in

<sup>7</sup> See, *e.g.*, *Bava Batra* 3:8, *Uktzin* 2:8, and *Ma'aser Sheni* 3:7. This word is also known to us from the blessing *asher yatzar* (חללים).

<sup>8</sup> I Sam. 10:5 and elsewhere.

<sup>9</sup> Is. 2:19.

<sup>10</sup> Gen. 8:6 and many other places. See, *e.g.*, S. D. Luzzatto, comm. to Gen. 8:6.

<sup>11</sup> See, *e.g.*, S. Mandelkern, *Heikhal Ha-Kodesh* (Lipsiae: Veit, 1896), p. 396 and E. Klein, “A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English” (New York: MacMillan, 1987), p. 217.

<sup>12</sup> In a different context, R. Shlomo Riskin writes:

“The word *hol*, as in *hol ha-moed*, means ‘empty’; it does not mean “profane.” There exist the holy and the still-empty-of holiness, the holy, and the not-yet-holy, which is waiting for us to express its inherent sanctity.”

See his *The Passover Haggadah* (New York: Ktav, 1983), p. 25. Although his idea is a profound one, almost certainly *hol* does not mean “empty” in the expression *hol ha-moed*; it means “low/profane.” See similarly the meaning of the term *hol* at Lev. 10:10 (*bein ha-kodesh u-vein ha-hol, u-vein ha-tame u-vein ha-tabor*).

<sup>13</sup> See, *e.g.*, Y. Steinberg, *Mail-Jewish*, vol. 50, number 31 (2005).

<sup>14</sup> The dropping of the second of two *lameds* is not an infrequent occurrence.

<sup>15</sup> See A. Even Shoshan, *Millon Even Shoshan* (Israel: *Ha-Millon He-Hadash*, 2003), vol. 2, p. 565, entry חלל. (Klein, p. 219, lists the Arabic word as having the meaning “united, undid.” But “united” is surely a typographical error for “untied.”)

<sup>16</sup> It is possible to argue that חלל means “release” in the *Tanakh*, *Mishnah* and *Tosefta* any time the term is used to describe an object going from a holy state to a

Arabic with this meaning are many centuries after the period of Mishnaic Hebrew. But the root in Arabic raises the possibility that Hebrew may once have had such a root and that this underlies the word מחל.<sup>17</sup> If the verb הלל was one that was conjugated in the *piel* construct, the present tense would have had an initial *mem* (מחלל). Over time, this *mem* could have become part of the root, and the second *lamed* could have dropped.<sup>18</sup>

That מחל arose from הלל is supported by the fact that there is a root הלל in Aramaic with the meaning of “forgive” or “relinquish.”<sup>19</sup>

---

profane state. But much more likely, the meaning of הלל in this context is “profane/lower,” and not “release.”

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., A. Kohut, “*Sefer Arukh Ha-Shalem*” (1970), vol. 5, p. 110, entry מחל, and Y. Kutscher, “*Arkei Ha-Millon He-Ḥadash Le-Sifrut Ḥazal*,” vol. 1 (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan Univ., 1972), pp. 5 and 66.

<sup>18</sup> Alternatively, perhaps the verb מחל originated in the form מחלל as the *biphil* of הלל, meaning “to cause something to be released, made loose, or untied.” Subsequently, the second *lamed* dropped. Or the verb הלל generated a noun מחלל, an object that was released, and this noun later generated the verb מחל. Such a development occurred in the case of the verb תרם. The original verb רום (raise) led to the creation of the noun תרומה. This noun later generated the verb תרם.

<sup>19</sup> See M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Ramat Gan and Baltimore: Bar Ilan and Johns Hopkins, 2002), entry הלל. Sokoloff categorizes the Babylonian Aramaic root as הלל, even though none of his references have a double *lamed* following the *bet*. M. Jastrow had listed the relevant Aramaic root for these references as חול. See his *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: Traditional Press), p. 432.

It is unclear whether there was an Aramaic root מחל with a meaning of “forgive” or “relinquish” in the Amoraic period. Words such as מחל, מחיל, מחלי, and מחילנא with a meaning of “forgive” or “relinquish” are found in the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds. (For the references, see Sokoloff’s above dictionary, entry הלל, and his *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period*, entry מחל.) But many scholars believe that the initial *mems* here are not root letters. See, e.g., Kutscher, vol. 1, pp. 5, 66, and Moreshet, p. 209, n. 8\*\*. If the initial *mem* is a root letter, the Aramaic root מחל may derive from the Hebrew root.

Sokoloff seems to believe that there was a root מחל in the Palestinian Aramaic of the Amoraic period, but not in the Babylonian Aramaic of this period. His *Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic*, entry מחל, lists only Geonic usages of the root. The words in the Babylonian Talmud with the initial *mem* are categorized in the entry הלל. But in his *Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*, he categorizes the words in the Jerusalem Talmud with the initial *mem* in an entry מחל. Similarly, L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, in *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden-New York-Köln: Brill, 1994), entry מחלי, take the position that Palestinian Aramaic had a root מחל with the meaning “forgive.”

**Third Suggestion:** The root מחל is related to the root מחה.

The root מחה is attested to many times in *Tanakh*.<sup>20</sup> It has the meaning “to erase, blot out, remove, wipe away.” It has been suggested that מחל is related to this root.<sup>21</sup>

Supporting this is the possibility that, in the earliest stages, Hebrew roots had only two letters.<sup>22</sup> There may have been an original two-letter root מח, which had some meaning related to “erase, blot out, remove,” and both מחה and מחל ultimately derive from this root.

Interestingly, an anonymous passage in *Midrash Tanhuma* seems to assume a close relationship, and perhaps an identity of meaning, between מחל and מחה. The passage makes a statement about God being מוחל, but then cites a verse referring to מחה:<sup>23</sup>

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: בעולם הזה נתכפר להם על ידי קרבן ולעולם הבא אני  
מוחל פשעיהם בלא קרבן שנאמר אנכי אנכי הוא מחה פשעיהם למעני...

\*\*\*

Admittedly, our first and second suggestions are difficult because they have to postulate that an initial *mem* eventually became part of the root. Although we have suggested scenarios in which this could have occurred, these scenarios are farfetched.

Therefore, of our three suggestions, the third seems most likely: a connection between מחה and מחל based on an original two-letter מח root.

---

<sup>20</sup> For example, it is the verb used in connection with the commandment to remember Amalek. See Ex. 17:14, and Deut. 25:19.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., R. Jacob Emden, *Siddur Beit Yaakov* (Lemberg, 1904), p. 68: והוא ענין: המחייה ומחיקה לגמרי יותר מהסליחה. Jastrow, p. 761, seems to believe there is a relation between them as well.

P. Peli, in setting forth the view of Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik, uses the phrase *mehikat ha-avon* in discussing the meaning of the root מחל. See *Al Ha-Teshuvah* (Jerusalem: Histadrut Ha-Tzionit, 1975), p. 265. Regarding the root מחק, see below.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., E.Y. Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem: Magnes and Hebrew Univ., 1984), p. 6. The one example that Kutscher provides are the several verbs whose first two root letters are פר: פרט, פרך, פרם, פרק, פרס, פרץ, פרך, פרץ. They all seem to have an underlying notion of “divide.” Another example may be נג: נגש, נגע, נגד. These all relate to “coming close to something.” (Perhaps נגה and נגף are related as well.) In the two-letter root model, the third letter acts as a semantic modifier, distinguishing between the different types of the verb.

<sup>23</sup> *Midrash Tanhuma, Shemini*, section 10. The verse cited is Is. 43:25.

But it may just be coincidence that מחל and מחה begin with the same two letters; there may be no relationship between the two at all. After all, the Biblical verbs מחא and מחץ (both meaning “strike”) are probably not related to the verb מחה.<sup>24</sup>

### III. Light Shed by Archaeology

It has long been observed that there are people and places in *Tanakh* with the names מחול, מחלה, מחלון, מחלי, מחלת, and אבל מחולה.<sup>25</sup> These can support an argument that the root מחל and the concept of מחילה existed in Biblical times.<sup>26</sup> But one can easily respond that these names were much

<sup>24</sup> With regard to the Biblical verb מחק, it appears only once in *Tanakh*, at Judges 5:26 (*mahakab rosho*). From the context, its meaning seems to be “hit,” “crushed,” “split,” or “destroyed.” In Mishnaic Hebrew, the root מחק means “rub out,” “blot out,” “scrape,” or “smooth.” It is possible to interpret Judges 5:26 using the Mishnaic meaning, but such an interpretation seems farfetched in the context. Most likely, the מחק of Judges 5:26 is related to the Biblical מחא. See, e.g., Moreshet, p. 209, n. 13\*.

It is noteworthy that the *Avinu Malkeinu* prayer includes the lines for מחל, מחה and מחוק in direct succession. (The first of these begins סלה ומחל.)

<sup>25</sup> See above, n. 2.

<sup>26</sup> For example, J. Talmud, *Bikkurim* 3:3 and *Genesis Rabbah* 67:13 read into the מחלת (Gen. 28:9) an allusion that God forgave Esau’s sins. See also Rashi to Gen. 36:3.

The Sages have found other ways to read the concept of *mehilab* into *Tanakh*. For example:

- The Talmud, at *Shabbat* 118b, includes a statement that reads the term homiletically into Is. 56:2 (מחלל).

- A passage in *Midrash Tebillim* (88:1) interprets the מחלת (musical instrument) of Psalms 88:1 as an allusion that God forgave David’s sins.

- *Sifrei, Parshat Haazinu*, sec. 319, records a view that ותשכח א-ל מחוללך refers to God as a forgiver of sins. But the parallel ילדך in the same verse (Deut. 32:18) indicates clearly that מחוללך here means “the one who gave birth to you.” ילד and חלל are parallel many times in *Tanakh*. See Ps. 90:2 and Is. 23:4, 54:1, and 66:8. (Some suggest that the root of חלל in its “birth” meaning is חיל, due to the trembling of the birth mother. Others suggest that the root is חול and point to the whirling and writhing of the birth mother. Others suggest that the root is חלל, alluding to the womb.) P. Peli, in setting forth the view of R. Soloveitchik, writes that the term *mehilab* is not found anywhere in *Tanakh* except “perhaps” at Deut. 32:18, and cites to this *Sifrei*. See *Al Ha-Teshuvah*, p. 265.

more likely founded upon the “musical instrument,” “dancing,” or “joy” meanings of the letters מחל.<sup>27</sup>

But archaeology has now provided us with a name from the late Biblical period that is likely related to a “forgiveness” or “relinquish” meaning of מחל. An incense altar from Lachish has been discovered that names יאש בן מחליה as its owner.<sup>28</sup> The altar dates from the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. and most likely, this owner was a Jew.<sup>29</sup> The name מחליה is undoubtedly meant to provide a description of God, and God is much more likely to be described as a “forgiver” or “relinquisher (of punishment)” than as a “musician” or “dancer,” or described with some meaning related to “sickness.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, the meaning of the name מחליה is almost certainly: “God has forgiven/relinquished.” We now have a reasonable basis to infer that the root מחל with a meaning relating to “forgive” or “relinquish” existed at least in late Biblical times.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> The “musical instrument” and “dancing” meanings derive from חול or חלל. Very likely, מחול eventually took on the meaning “joy.” See Ps. 30:12 and Lam. 5:15. If so, the birth name can be seen as a commemoration of the joy that the parents felt at the time of the birth. See *Encyclopedia Mikra'it*, entry מחול, p. 788.

It seems very unlikely that someone would give a child a birth name related to “sickness,” or that someone’s name would later be changed to reflect such a meaning.

<sup>28</sup> See Y. Aharoni, *Investigations at Lachish* (Tel Aviv: Gateway, 1975), pp. 6-7.

<sup>29</sup> Aharoni considers the inscription to be Hebrew and its owner to be a Jew. He points out that Neh. 11:30 refers to a Jewish community at Lachish. There are scholars who argue that the owner of the altar was an Arab, or an Edomite, or a Canaanite. But the last two letters of the name מחליה point strongly to its Jewishness; non-Jews probably did not utilize such name endings in this period.

<sup>30</sup> “Joy” seems unlikely here as well. Also, it would require a spelling of מחוליה.

<sup>31</sup> I had initially thought it possible that מחל originated as a contraction of מחה and the prefix ל. In the Mishnah and the Tosefta, מחל is often followed by the prefix ל. But the Biblical verb מחה, used in connection with an object, is typically followed by את. See, e.g., the commandment to remember Amalek at Ex. 17:14 and Deut. 25:19. Sometimes the Biblical verb מחה is not followed by את and one time it is followed by אל, but it is never followed by the prefix ל. If מחל with a meaning related to “forgive” or “relinquish” already existed as a verb in Biblical times, it would seem extremely unlikely that its origin was as a contraction of מחה ל.

#### IV. Can we differentiate between סליחה and מחילה?

Over the centuries, many rabbinic authorities have attempted to differentiate between סליחה and מחילה.<sup>32</sup> For example, R. David Abudarham writes that סליחה is more efficacious, since with סליחה, there will not remain a *hakpadab muetet* (=lingering minor ill-feeling).<sup>33</sup> R.

<sup>32</sup> The difference between them is not just relevant to the *yamim noraim*. For example, in the prevalent version of the daily *Amidah*, both סלה and מחל are found in the sixth *berakhab*. (But from the Cairo Genizah, we learn that the Palestinian version of the *Amidah* did **not** include מחל here. After the initial phrase beginning with סלה, the next phrase began with מחה in the Palestinian version. See U. Ehrlich, “*Tefillat ha-Amidah Shel Yemot ha-Hol* [Jerusalem, 2013], pp. 99-104.)

There are passages in classical rabbinic literature where the roots סלה and מחל are found together. For example, at *Ta’anit* 30b and *Bava Batra* 121a, an anonymous passage describes Yom Kippur as a day of both סליחה and מחילה. At Ber. 32a, the Palestinian amora R. Abbahu describes Moses as declaring that he is not going to let go of God *ad she-timhol ve-tislah lahem*. See also J. Talmud, *Yoma* 45c (last page of the tractate). (Here, a possible distinction is implied: מחילה is requested from עון, while סליחה is requested from חטא. But compare *Leviticus Rabbah* 3:3. See further Isaac Baer, *Avodat Yisrael* (Rödelheim, 1868), p. 416, notes.)

There are many passages in the Yom Kippur and yearly liturgies in which both סלה and מחל are included and a possible distinction between the roots could be implied (as in the above passages from the Jerusalem Talmud and *Leviticus Rabbah*). But it is doubtful that these passages are Tannaitic in origin, and the original distinction between סלה and מחל was most likely lost by the time these passages were composed. Moreover, the original distinction between סלה and מחל may have been lost even in the Tannaitic period.

<sup>33</sup> *Sefer Abudarham Ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem: Even Yisrael, 1995), pp. 110-111 (*shaharit shel hol*). Interestingly, the earliest edition of *Siddur Kol Yaakov: The Complete ArtScroll Siddur* cites Abudarham as saying the exact opposite! This error was corrected in subsequent editions. See the comm. to *Amidah* of daily *shaharit*, p. 103. (But the language in the corrected passage remains awkward.)

Also, Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik has expressed the view that סליחה is more efficacious. See Peli, p. 265. R. Soloveitchik takes the position that even after מחילה (which is described as *mehikat ha-avon*), one still needs סליחה to purify the soul and return it to its former status. R. Soloveitchik takes the position that מחילה is the equivalent of כפרה, and סליחה is the equivalent of טהרה. See also I. Wohlgemuth, *A Guide to Jewish Prayer* (Brookline, MA: J. Robinson, 1999), p. 165:

*Slach* involves divine grace. If we sin, we have done something wrong... But God in His divine grace can elevate us above our sins and treat us as though they never occurred. It is a complete forgiveness by divine grace. *Mchal*,

Jonathan Eybeschuetz writes that סליחה is לגמרי, while one still receives יסורים in the case of מחילה.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, R. Jacob Emden writes that מחילה is a מחייה and מחיקה, and that these are לגמרי, unlike סליחה.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, R. Hanoch Zundel writes that מחילה has the implication of לגמרי, while סליחה just delays the time of the punishment.<sup>36</sup>

A most interesting differentiation is made by R. Samson Raphael Hirsch:<sup>37</sup>

סליחה is **personal forgiveness** granted so that the transgression that was committed may not permanently blight the **relationship** of the transgressor to the one against whom he has sinned. מחילה is objective pardon, the **waiver of the punishment** which the transgressor would have deserved (emphasis added.)

This suggestion is attractive because it clearly delineates two different concepts, each deserving of its own root. One is the psychological forgiveness granted so that the relationship between the transgressor and the other party can be maintained. The other is the waiver/relinquishment of the objective punishment or financial penalty.

The problem with this suggestion is that by the time the root מחל appears in the Mishnah and Tosefta, it appears in the contexts of both waiver<sup>38</sup> of objective punishment/financial penalty and psychological forgiveness.<sup>39</sup> Most probably, the name in the altar from Lachish from the

---

however, means canceling the debt. It means that you really did sin, but God will not collect the “payment” for the sin by punishing you.

<sup>34</sup> See his *Yearot Devash*, cited in *Siddur Otzar Ha-Tefillot: Nusah Ashkenaz* (New York: A. I. Friedman), vol. 1, p. 326 (comm. of *Etz Yosef*). On the other hand, an argument can be made from Num. 14:20–23 that סליחה does not preclude punishment.

<sup>35</sup> *Siddur Beit Yaakov*, p. 68. He is obviously taking the third approach.

<sup>36</sup> See his *Siddur Otzar Ha-Tefillot*, vol. 1, p. 385, *Etz Yosef* comm.

According to R. Judah *He-Hasid* (d. 1217), commenting on Num. 14:20–23, סליחה means additional time is given for repentance that will lead to complete forgiveness. מחילה means the forgiveness is total. See *Perushei Ha-Torah Le-R. Yehudah He-Hasid*, ed. I. S. Lange (Jerusalem, 1975), pp. 174-75.

<sup>37</sup> S. R. Hirsch, *Siddur Tefillot Yisrael: The Hirsch Siddur* (Jerusalem and New York: Samson Raphael Hirsch Publications Society and Feldheim Publishers, 1972), pp. 136-37.

<sup>38</sup> From now on, for the sake of simplicity, I will use the term “waiver,” instead of “waiver/relinquishment.”

<sup>39</sup> For מחל as psychological forgiveness in the Mishnah, see *Bava Kamma* 8:7 (*af-al-pi she-bu noten lo, eino nimbal lo ad she-yevakesh mimenu*) and *Avot* 6:1 (*u-mohel al elbono*). In the case of *mehilat ha-avon* (*Yoma* 7:1, *Sotah* 7:7 and 7:8), it is unclear if the

fifth century B.C.E. also alludes to the psychological forgiveness aspect of מהל.<sup>40</sup> But it is at least possible that originally מהל had only the meaning of waiver of an objective punishment and/or financial penalty, and that סלה had only the meaning of psychological forgiveness, and over time the root מהל expanded to include psychological forgiveness.

An alternative suggestion can be made, based on the fact that the root סלה appears in *Tanakh* only in the context of the **Divine**.<sup>41</sup>

סלה was the root used for **Divine** forgiveness or waiver of an objective punishment/financial penalty, while מהל arose as the root for human beings, whether they were giving out psychological forgiveness or waiving an objective punishment/financial penalty. Over time, מהל also began to be used in the context of Divine, as evidenced by the altar from Lachish from the fifth century B.C.E.<sup>42</sup>

---

reference is to Divine waiver of punishment or to Divine psychological forgiveness.

For מהל as Divine psychological forgiveness in the *Tosefta*, see *Shem'ot* 3:2-3, *Yoma* 3:13, 4:9 and 4:12, *Sukkah* 4:2, and *Sanhedrin* 9:3. But admittedly one could interpret all of these as referring to Divine waiver of punishment.

The context of מהול in the Dead Sea text 4Q267 is unknown. The passage is too fragmentary.

<sup>40</sup> Since God both forgives us and imposes punishments or financial penalties, the allusion in the name מהליה could be to either aspect. But probably the psychological forgiveness aspect is primary and is what would be emphasized in the name.

<sup>41</sup> The root never appears in *Tanakh* as something given by, or requested from, a human being. See Reif, p. 87, and J. Hausmann, entry סלה, *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), vol. 10, pp. 258–265. (Interestingly, in Akkadian, סלה occurs in non-Divine contexts as well. Hausmann, *ibid.*)

In Akkadian, the root has the meaning “sprinkle.” Some believe that this was the original meaning of the root. (Words normally have concrete meanings before they develop abstract meanings.) See, e.g., Hausmann, p. 259 and *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 6:1433. The Aramaic root זלה, “sprinkle” (see, e.g., Jastrow, p. 401), is also perhaps related to סלה. A relationship between סלה and סלק (go up, go away) has also been suggested. See, e.g., Mandelkern, p. 799.

Malbim had pointed out that the root סלה appears in *Tanakh* only in the context of the Divine. See his comm. to Ps.130:4. He suggests that סליחה treats the sin as if it had never occurred and only God is capable of doing this. He suggests that this may be the meaning of *ki imkha ha-selihah* at Ps. 130:4.

<sup>42</sup> Also, over time, the root סלה began to recede from common use, since it was a word used only in Divine contexts. The root סלה is never found in the Mishnah and is found only twice in the *Tosefta* (both times at *Nazir* 3:6). In both Talmuds, its use is limited to discussions of forgiveness by God, and quotations from

## Summary and Conclusion

We provided three suggestions to connect מחל to otherwise known roots of חלל and מהה. Of these, the third is most likely: a connection between מהה and מחל based on an original two-letter מה root. But it is possible that there was an original Hebrew root מחל and that it had no connection to the root מהה.

We suggested that מחל originally meant waiver of an objective punishment or financial penalty, while סלה had the meaning of psychological forgiveness. We suggested alternatively that מחל originally arose as the root applicable to human beings, whether they were giving out psychological forgiveness or a waiver of an objective punishment/financial penalty.

But admittedly, all of this is mere speculation. מחל in the context of the Divine, and probably in the context of psychological forgiveness, is already found in the altar from Lachish from the fifth century B.C.E.

If מחל was not originally synonymous with סלה, this makes it more of a possibility that מחל existed as a root in the early Biblical period, even though our earliest clear evidence for it is only from the fifth century B.C.E. altar from Lachish. The *Tanakh* may simply have not had the occasion to use the root.<sup>43</sup> The possibility that the root existed in the early

---

Biblical verses and *nusah ha-tefillah*. It is never used in either Talmud to describe forgiveness by an individual. It is very ironic that the expression in modern Hebrew for “excuse me” is סליחה.

<sup>43</sup> If we follow the suggestion of R. Hirsch, there is little reason for מחל to have appeared in *Tanakh*. When the *Tanakh* sets forth legal provisions affecting the rights of individuals, it is concerned with setting forth fundamental principles. The concept of someone waiving his entitlement is just a side matter, not a subject that we should expect mention of. If we follow our alternative suggestion, there is also perhaps little reason for מחל to have appeared in *Tanakh*. *Tanakh* is a work much more concerned with Divine forgiveness and waiver than forgiveness and waiver by human beings.

In his entry נחל (p. 734), Mandelkern was willing to suggest that Ex. 34:9, *ve-salahta la-avoneinu u-le-patoteinu u-nehaltanu* originally read *ve-salahta la-avoneinu u-le-patoteinu u-mehaltanu*. Then the root מחל would be found in *Tanakh*! Even though *mem* and *nun* do look somewhat similar in Old Hebrew, there is no reason to take Mandelkern’s speculation seriously. On the other hand, it has been suggested that the root נחל once had a meaning of “forgive” and that this was its meaning here. See Z. Ben-Hayyim, *Ivrit Ve-Aramit Nusah Shomron*, vol. 3, part II (Jerusalem: *Ha-Akadeemyah Le-Lashon Ha-Ivrit*, 1967), pp. 358-359. (If this is correct, perhaps מחל derives from נחל!)

Biblical period encourages us to look again at all the people and places in *Tanakh* with names based on the letters מחל. That a concept of מחילה may be reflected in some of these names becomes more of a possibility.

\*\*\*

I will close on a homiletical note.<sup>44</sup> The *yamim noraim* are a time when God has a special relationship with the Jewish people.<sup>45</sup> Since the concept of מחילה is not found explicitly in *Tanakh*, it can be considered a special Divine gift, appropriate to this unique period! ❧

---

Ben-Hayyim suggested that מחל is related to the Arabic root מהל, which has the meaning of “acting kindly or patiently.”

<sup>44</sup> For some humorous material in connection with the terms מחל and מחילה, see M. Wex, *Just Say Nu* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007), pp. 24-25.

<sup>45</sup> See Is. 55:6 and *Rosh ha-Shanah* 18a.