

Reciting Al Tira After Aleinu

By: ZVI RON

Many Ashkenazic prayer books indicate that it is customary to recite three verses after *Aleinu*: Proverbs 3:25, Isaiah 8:10 and Isaiah 46:4.¹ In this article we will explore how this custom originated and what purpose these three verses serve at the conclusion of the prayer service.

The three verses are first found linked together in *Esther Rabba* 7:17. There it is related that after the decrees against the Jews were sealed and handed over to him, Haman and his cohorts were filled with joy. They happened upon Mordechai who was walking in front of them. Just then Mordechai saw three young children on their way home from school. Mordechai ran over to them, and Haman and his friends followed to see what Mordechai wanted with the children. Mordechai asked the children *P'sok li psukkha*, tell me what verse you are studying in school. The first child quoted Proverbs 3:25, *al tira*, "You will not fear sudden terror, or the holocaust of the wicked when it comes." The second child quoted Isaiah 8:10, "Plan a conspiracy and it shall be annulled, speak your piece and it shall not stand, for God is with us." The third child quoted Isaiah 46:4, "Until your old age I am unchanged, and until your hoary years I will carry you, I made you and I will bear you, I will carry you and I will rescue you." When Mordechai heard this he laughed and was filled with a great joy. Haman asked him what he found so joyful in the words of the children, and Mordechai replied that he was just informed that he should not be

¹ See for example, *Siddur Avodat Yisrael*, p. 132, *Siddur Rinat Yisrael*, p. 102, *Siddur Tefillat Shai*, p. 70, *ArtScroll Siddur*, p. 160.

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scared from Haman's plots against the Jews. This infuriated Haman who then decided to kill the Jewish children first.

The custom to recite these three verses after *Aleinu* is found in many books, but they all reference one of a few major sources. The earliest source generally given for this custom is the 16th century work *Manot Ha-Levi*, a commentary on the book of Esther written by R. Shlomo Alkabetz. Alkabetz was one of the kabbalists of Tzfat, a contemporary of R. Yosef Caro and brother in law of R. Moshe Cordovero. He is best known as the author of *Lekha Dodi*. In his commentary to Esther 3:15 he quotes and explains *Esther Rabba* 7:17. During the course of his explanation he mentions that R. Yehuda Ibn Shushan wrote in his own commentary to Esther that based on this midrash, the people of Provence would add these three verses to the end of their prayers (בסוף תפלתם) every day, a custom he adopted.²

Ibn Shushan's commentary to the *Five Megillot* is lost to us today.³ Excerpts from this work are incorporated throughout Alkabetz's commentaries.⁴ Not much is known about R. Yehuda Ibn Shushan. His work on the laws of blessings, *Birkat Ha-Nehenin*, dated 1495, states that his full name was R. Yehuda ben Itzhack ben Avraham ben Shushan Ha-Sefaradi. According to most biographers he was among the exiles from Spain.⁵ Ibn Shushan mentions in *Birkat Ha-Nehenin* that he left his homeland, and that at the time he wrote this work he was living in Provence.⁶ According to some

² Shlomo Alkabetz, *Manot Ha-Levi* (Jerusalem: 2002) p. 231.

³ Chavatzelet, Avraham, "Birkat Ha-Nehenin L'R. Yehuda Ibn Shushan," *Moriah* 72 (1983) p. 41.

⁴ Alkabetz thus saved elements of many works that would otherwise be totally lost today. See Nigal, Gedaliah, "Peirusho Shel R. Yosef Ya'avatz Le-Rut," *Sinai* 76 (1975) p. 155.

⁵ Naftali Yaakov Ha-Kohen, *Ozar Ha-Gedolim* (Bnei Brak: 1966) p. 103, part 4, section 250. While it is very probable that Ibn Shushan was among the Spanish exiles, there is no conclusive evidence of this. See Chavatzelet, pp. 39, 40. Ibn Shushan is mentioned in passing in R. David Conforte's *Korei Ha-Dorot* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom, Yad Samuel Franco, 2008) pp. 109, 123.

⁶ Chavatzelet, p. 40.

sources he later settled in Turkey,⁷ and was possibly among the Jewish exiles from Provence in 1501. Ibn Shushan was a great scholar and is cited by R. Yosef Caro in his *Kesef Mishneh*⁸ and *Beit Yosef*.⁹ He was considered a saintly figure and is often referred to as Ha-Hassid R. Yehuda Ibn Shushan. An oft-quoted story about Ibn Shushan is related in the 16th century kabbalistic *mussar* book *Reishit Hokhma* by R. Eliyahu de Vidas. He writes that R. Shabtai Lapidot, one of the great kabbalists of Zfat and a colleague of R. Yosef Caro, reported to R. Moshe Cordovero that he was visited by Ibn Shushan in a dream some time after the latter's death. Ibn Shushan's face was "glowing like the sun, and each and every hair of his beard was glowing as if it was a torch." When R. Lapidot asked him how he merited such an honor, Ibn Shushan replied that it was because of his trait of silence that he never in his life engaged in frivolous conversation.¹⁰ While we do not know much about Ibn Shushan, it is clear that he was well known and highly regarded by the Zfat kabbalists.

But where did the Jews of Provence that Ibn Shushan observed get this custom from? One of the earliest forms of Jewish public worship was the institution of the *ma'amadot* during the time of the Temple. Representatives of the people would come to Jerusalem to be in attendance during the daily sacrifices. This would give the sacrifices the character of a communal undertaking, seeing as it is in the presence of and with the participation of representatives from all over the Land of Israel. The people were divided into twenty-four districts, whose members would take turns every week sending representatives to "stand over" (עמדו על גביו) the sacrifices in the Temple, and so they were called *ma'amadot*. It is not clear exactly what prayers the *ma'amad* liturgy consisted of, but some of the service is described in the first Mishnah of the fourth chapter of *Ta'anit*, where we read that the special services included readings

⁷ *Ozar Ha-Gedolim*, p. 103.

⁸ *Kesef Mishneh, Hilkhot Shehita* 3:13, *Hilkhot Berakhot* 3:8.

⁹ *Beit Yosef, Orakh Hayyim* 168:10.

¹⁰ Eliyahu de Vidas, *Reishit Hokhma* (Mukachevo: 1943) *Sba'ar Ha-Ahava* chapter 6, pp. 71b, 72a.

from Genesis and the priestly blessing.¹¹ Even after the Temple was destroyed, the practice of reciting a *ma'amad* service continued. Prayer books from the middle ages show that it was customary for individuals in France and Germany to recite a *ma'amadot* prayer after morning services.¹² This prayer was based on an approximation of what the *ma'amad* service was in Temple times. It consisted of readings from Genesis, various selections from the Prophets and Psalms, readings relating to sacrifices, *ein ke-Elokeinu*, *pitum ha-ketoret*, the Psalm of the day, the Torah portion describing the manna, the Ten Commandments and various verses said for protection. These verses of protection took many forms; some services included eleven verses that begin and end with the letter *nun*, verses that can be read both forwards and backwards, and other verses that were considered for some reason significant. The *ma'amad* service concluded with *Aleinu*. At that time the public morning service concluded with the Kaddish after *kedusha desidra*, and then individuals who wanted to would say the *ma'amadot* service. Toward the end of the 12th century a process began whereby some of this *ma'amad* service became incorporated into the main body of the public prayer (*ein ke-Elobeiynu*, *pitum ha-ketoret*, the Psalm of the day, *Aleinu*), some stayed in their position after the service to be recited by individuals (the Torah portion describing the manna, the Ten Commandments) and some were left out altogether (readings from Genesis, various selections from the Prophets). What happened to the verses recited for protection? This is where our three verses come in. A British prayer book following the French custom dated from around 1190 (Ms. Corpus Christi College, 133) provides an example of an early *ma'amad* service that was incorporated into the regular public service. The last elements of this section are a string of verses, Isaiah 8:10, Proverbs 3:25, Isaiah 46:4, I Kings 8:54–60, Micah 4:5, followed by *Aleinu*.¹³ Three of these are the familiar

¹¹ Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993) pp. 190–191.

¹² Urbach, E. E., “*Mishmarot and Ma'amadot*,” *Tarbiz* vol. 42, numbers 3–4 (1973) pp. 313–327.

¹³ Israel M. Ta-Shma, *The Early Ashkenazic Prayer: Literary and Historical Aspects* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2003) pp. 139–153.

verses listed in our prayer books, but in a different order. We can now understand what Ibn Shushan saw in Provence: it was a relic of the *ma'amad* service that had been incorporated into the public service.

R. David ben Shmuel Ha-Levi (the Taz, d. 1667) writes in *Turei Zahav*, his commentary to the *Shulhan Arukh*, that he would recite these three verses while the chazzan said *Sim Shalom* in his repetition of the *Amidah*. He notes *Esther Rabba* and says that in Provence they would say these verses every day.¹⁴ It is interesting to note that certain customs placed elements of the *ma'amad* service (including *ein ke-Elokeinu* and *pitum ha-ketoret*) after the chazzan's recital of *Sim Shalom*.¹⁵ We see here an echo of the idea that the recitations of these verses have their origin in the *ma'amadot* prayers, and so they were said at this point in the service.

Any connection to the *ma'amadot* was quickly forgotten. The custom to say these verses is mentioned in *Or Zadikim* by R. Meir Popperos, first published in 1690. Popperos was a popularizer of the kabbalistic teachings of the Ari. He states that "the sages of Israel" established the custom to say these three verses before leaving the synagogue. He explains that the purpose of the verses is to awaken divine mercy and hasten redemption.¹⁶ The sages to whom Popperos refers are most probably the Jerusalem kabbalists with whom he studied.¹⁷ It is this work that is quoted as the source of the custom in the very popular book of customs, *Sefer Ta'amei Ha-Minhagim U-Mekorei Ha-Dinim*.¹⁸ By the 1700s the verses were simply understood as a mystical formula for protection.

Another major source for this custom is the book *Avodat Ha-Kodesh* by the 18th century sage R. Chaim David Azulai (the Hida). In the second section of this work, entitled *Tziporen Shamir*, he

¹⁴ *Shulhan Arukh, Turei Zahav, Orakh Hayyim* 132:2.

¹⁵ See the Warsaw 1865 edition of *Seder Rav Amram Gaon*, p. 14, and the note on the bottom of the page.

¹⁶ Meir Popperos, *Or Zadikim* (Warsaw: 1889) *Beit Tefillah* 84, p. 27.

¹⁷ Noach Aminach and Yosef Nitzan, *Gedolei Ha-Achronim* (Jerusalem: Jewish Agency, 2000) p. 19.

¹⁸ Abraham Sperling, *Sefer Ta'amei Ha-Minhagim U-Mekorei Ha-Dinim* (Jerusalem: Shai Lamora, 1999) section 148, p. 63.

writes, “The people of Provence have a custom to say these three verses every day at the end of their prayers.”¹⁹ He references R. Yehuda Ibn Shushan and *Manot Ha-Levi* as the source for this custom. He then adds that the 17th century kabbalist R. Moshe Zacuto (the Ramaz) would follow this custom and add a short personal prayer of his own.²⁰ In all sources seen so far there is no mention of placement specifically after *Aleinu*.

Modern *siddurim* instruct us to say these verses specifically after *Aleinu*. Where did the association of these three verses with *Aleinu* come from? It comes from the book that is most often quoted as a source for the custom to say these verses, *Zikbron Zion*, published around 1680 by Yechiel Michel ben Avraham Berech.²¹ *Zikbron Zion* is a twenty-two page booklet of prayers and *segulot* based on the teachings of Lurianic kabbalah, especially the classic kabbalistic work by R. Isaiah Horowitz, *Shnei Luhot Ha-Brit*. It contains prayers for the amelioration of a bad dream and supplications to be said on various occasions. It is here that we find for the first time an explicit instruction to recite the three verses after *Aleinu*. On page 17, under the heading “after *Aleinu* recite,” the three verses are listed, with no explanation or additional instructions. At this point these verses, which originally were recited as part of the *ma‘amad* service specifically before *Aleinu*, have been shifted to after *Aleinu*.

In 1683 the first edition of *Kizur Shnei Luhot Ha-Brit* by R. Yechiel Michel Epstein was published. This work was written in order to make the practices contained in *Shnei Luhot Ha-Brit* more widely known, and included various customs and practices from other works as well. It became very popular and was republished many

¹⁹ Chaim David Azulai, *Avodat Ha-Kodesh* (Warsaw: 1874) *Tziporen Shamir* 2:35, p. 19.

²⁰ רבון העולמים זכנו לעסוק בתורה לשמה ובמצוות וגמילות חסדים ולהשכים בהם ולהעיריב בהם וזכנו לראות בבנין מקדשנו החרב או “א הראנו בבנינו וכו’ עד תמידין כהלכתן.

²¹ Bodleian Library, Opp. 8vo 874 (2). There is no publication date listed anywhere in the booklet, only a note that it was published in Prague during the reign of Leopold I (1658–1705). Isaac Yudlov, Director of the Institute for Hebrew Bibliography at Hebrew University, understands that it was published around 1680. My thanks to Rahel Kasemaa, Assistant to the Hebraica and Judaica Librarian at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, for her assistance.

times.²² After writing about *Aleinu*, he quotes the custom of the Taz to recite these verses while the chazzan says *Sim Shalom*. He adds that through the recitation of these verses a person will be saved from all evil decrees. In a gloss, *Zikbron Zion* is quoted as stating that the verses are to be said after *Aleinu*. He adds that they are a “wonderful *segulah*” and contain many great secrets. If for some reason the verses could not be said directly after *Aleinu*, they should be said before leaving the synagogue.²³ R. Yaakov Emden included the book *Kizur Shnei Luhot Ha-Brit* in a list of Sabbatean works.²⁴ However, R. Emden was not concerned about the particular custom of reciting these three verses after *Aleinu* being in any way connected to Sabbateanism, since he himself included the custom to say these verses in his *Siddur Beit Ya'akov*, explaining that it is a *segulah* against evil decrees.²⁵

This custom was also included in *Sefer Zekhira ve-Inyanei Segulot*, a collection of *segulot* first published in 1709 and written for a general audience. Although the book claims to be quoting *Zikbron Zion*, it is actually quoting *Kizur Shnei Luhot Ha-Brit*, using his terminology that the verses are a “wonderful *segulah*” and that they contain many great secrets.²⁶ The same quote, this time including the idea that these verses save the supplicant from evil decrees, attributed to *Zikbron Zion* but again actually from *Kizur Shnei Luhot Ha-Brit*, was included in *Ozar Ha-Tefillot*, a very popular 19th century prayer book printed by the widow and brothers Romm, publishers of the Vilna Shas.²⁷ These works were then quoted by other later books, and so the custom to say the verses after *Aleinu* became better known. All of these works stress that it is important to say these verses before leaving the synagogue. Since *Zikbron Zion* was a

²² Yechiel Michel Epstein, *Kizur Shnei Luhot Ha-Brit* (Jerusalem: 1944) p. 3, author's introduction.

²³ *Kizur Shnei Luhot Ha-Brit, Inyanei Tefilla*, p. 133.

²⁴ Leiman, Shnayer Z., “Sefarim Ha-Hashudim Be-Shabtaut,” in *Sefer Ha-Zikaron Le-Rav Moshe Lipshitz* (New York: 1996) p. 889 note 12.

²⁵ Yaakov Emden, *Siddur Beit Ya'akov* (Lemberg: David Balaban Publisher, 1904) p. 91a.

²⁶ Zecharia Simner, *Sefer Zekhira ve-Inyanei Segulot* (Hamburg: 1709) p. 29.

²⁷ *Ozar HaTefillot* (Vilna: 1928) p. 437.

short booklet, and not readily available after its initial publication, *Kizur Shnei Luhot Ha-Brit* became the source for information about this custom and contributed to its widespread popularity.

Various homiletic connections have been made between *Aleinu* and these three verses, for example that as long as Amalek exists in the world, God's Name cannot be complete, and that therefore the three verses indicating the downfall of Amalek come right after the end of *Aleinu* where we speak of a time when the Name of God is complete.²⁸ However, in fact there was never any essential connection between the three verses and *Aleinu* in particular. It is simply that *Aleinu* is the last part of the service and by the late 1600s the custom was to say them before leaving the synagogue. In contemporary prayer books the *Mourners' Kaddish* after *Aleinu* is placed either before or after the *al tira* verses. Since these verses have no intrinsic connection to *Aleinu* and must simply be said before leaving the synagogue, it would seem that the verses more properly belong after the *Kaddish*.

From these sources it is clear that this custom began as part of the *ma'amad* service. It was observed and noted by Ibn Shushan and adopted by kabbalists who held him in high regard, such as R. Alkabetz, R. Popperos, the Ramaz and the Hida. The general population was made aware of the custom through works like *Kizur Shnei Luhot Ha-Brit* and *Sefer Zekhira*, books that were written with the goal of spreading kabbalistic practices among the masses.²⁹ Kabbalistic prayer books that appeared before the publication of these popular works do not include these verses.³⁰ Originally the verses were recited at the end of the prayer service before *Aleinu*, but over time, as *Aleinu* came to be seen more and more as integral to the morning service, the verses were placed exclusively after *Aleinu*. This assured that the verses would be said before leaving the synagogue. The connection to *Aleinu* was first established in *Zikbron Zion* and po-

²⁸ Cohen, David, "Hearot be-Inyanei Tefillah," *Ha-Darom* 50 (1980) pp. 232, 233.

²⁹ *Kizur Shnei Luhot Ha-Brit*, pp. 4, 5, publisher's introduction.

³⁰ For example, the verses are not included in *Siddur Ha-Mekubbal Ha-Rav Herz Sbliah Zibbur Ztz"l* (Bnei Brak: Morgenstern, 1971), first published in 1560.

pularized by *Kizur Shnei Luhot Ha-Brit*. All the books that quote *Zikhron Zion* connect the verses to *Aleinu*, and the books that don't reference *Zikhron Zion* associate the verses with the end of the service.

What was seen as the role of these verses and why was it considered so important not to leave the synagogue without saying them? *Kizur Shnei Luhot Ha-Brit* mentions the secrets contained in these verses, adding that they are a “wonderful *segulah* to rescue one from many evil decrees.” This explanation is quoted in *Otzar Ha-Tefillot*.³¹ Similarly, Popperos in *Or Zadikim* notes that these verses awaken divine mercy. According to this reasoning, as long as a person is still in the synagogue he is on some level safe, but once he goes out into the world he may be at the mercy of any number of “evil decrees.” Therefore these verses of protection must be said before going into the dangerous outside world. Since these verses imparted to Mordechai that he should not fear the decree of Haman, they continue now to function as a mystical formula to annul all evil decrees. This was the role of these verses going back to the time of the medieval *ma'amad* service, when they were part of a series of verses of protection. In fact, a French *siddur* from the late 1200s adds a prayer specifically against evil decrees after the *ma'amad* service.³²

Once this reasoning is understood, it is easy to understand why this custom captured the imagination of Ibn Shushan, who first saw this custom after being driven out of Spain. The evil decree of expulsion decimated the great Jewish community of Spain, sending tens of thousands into forced exile from their adopted homeland. The verses that comforted Mordechai at the time of Haman's evil decree were now observed being recited by the Jews of Provence. Ibn Shushan adopted this custom in the time of the evil decree in his own land. Over time these verses were popularized as a general

³¹ *Kizur Shnei Luhot Ha-Brit*, *Inyanei Tefillah*, p. 133, *Otzar Ha-Tefillot*, p. 437.

³² Urbach, p. 317. The prayer concludes: ופדינו מכל גזירות רעות הבאות ומתרגשות בעולם ותושע ברחמיך הרבים משיח צדק ועמך.

kabbalistic *segulah* to undo evil decrees.³³ Even though the custom was originally mentioned by Sefardic mystics, since the books that popularized this custom are Ashkenazic, these three verses did not become entrenched in Sefardic prayer books. They contain different verses that are to be recited after *Aleinu*, and for other purposes.³⁴

Having seen the origin of the recitation of the three verses, we know that originally they were said only as part of the morning service, when individuals would say the *ma'amadot*. The current custom to recite these three verses after *Aleinu* developed over many centuries, from the *ma'amadot* service of Provence when they were said before *Aleinu*, through Ibn Shushan to the Zfat kabbalists; and then through the popularity of a Sabbatean book of mystical customs they became forever associated with *Aleinu*. Once these verses became seen as a complement of *Aleinu*, it became customary to recite them at the end of *Minḥab* and *Ma'ariv* as well. ❧

³³ R. Chaim Malinowitz informed me that he inaugurated the public recitation of these verses after *Aleinu* in Beit Tefillah, Ramat Beit Shemesh, during the time of the 'Disengagement' in Israel. Even though he did not know the full history of this custom at the time, it is particularly fitting when we consider that it was originally popularized by a Jew who was expelled from his own home in Spain.

³⁴ Macy Nulman, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Prayer* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1996) p. 23.