

***“Upon the Wings of Eagles” and
“Under the Wings of the Shekhinah”:
Poetry, Conversion and the Memorial Prayer***

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It may be trite to say that “when speaking to our Creator, each and every word has meaning,” but the adage still rings true, despite our many protestations to the contrary. There is a specific connotation to each word and prayer, and care must be taken to make sure that what we do say matches what we are trying to say. It may be that in numerous synagogues today, Jews come to pray with a general sense as to the topic of particular prayers, but without consideration of the meaning of each and every word in those prayers,— but this does not mean we should refrain from knowing the precise meaning of each word. This essay will examine one short prayer in particular, where inattention to precise, nuanced meaning leads many congregations to inadvertently make a philosophic judgment about the nature of conversion, which they would likely disavow and never make consciously as part of their service.

Part of the underlying problem in establishing the meaning of the words of prayer is the old hermeneutic distinction between the subjective, intuited reading of a text supplied by the reader, and the objective, intended linguistic meaning of the words used by the author of the text. If the prayer reader intuits one meaning to the words, can he be censured for ignoring an underlying linguistic meaning that the author intended, but that the reader might not have in mind? In our case, if the precise meaning of the prayer as written and as originally conceived considers converts to Judaism to be of lesser status than those born Jewish, should this concern the prayer leader if he rejects this interpretation at the time of prayer?

One of the most recognizable prayers in the Ashkenazi liturgy is “*Kel Male Rahamim*,” the memorial prayer recited on various occasions to pray for the soul of the deceased. This prayer, originally written in Medieval Germany to be recited on Shabbat to remember the deceased who had

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made donations for the synagogue or community, is now recited as part of the funeral service, as part of the *Yizkor* service, and also as part of the regular Shabbat or weekday service to remember the souls of those departed.

Taken as a whole, the prayer contains many interesting and possibly controversial notions about Jewish eschatology and the philosophy of the soul, and it deserves serious study for its continued contributions to those realms of Jewish thought. The purpose of this paper, though, will be to focus on a key three-word phrase at the start of the prayer, and examine those three words and their role in Prayer, Jewish Philosophy and Jewish Thought.

After beginning with an invocation of the Almighty: “God, full of mercy; Who resides in the highest places,” the prayer asks that the soul of the departed find a firm, established resting place in proximity to the Divine Presence. One word in this opening line is in question—the preposition that describes the relationship between the soul and the ‘wings’ of the Divine presence.¹ Some traditions read “*taḥat*”—that the soul finds its repose *under* the ‘wings’ of the Divine presence, while others read “*al*”—that the soul finds its repose *above* the ‘wings’ of the Divine presence. This paper will examine the rationales behind the two versions, and the reasons given to prefer one version over another.²

Increasingly, congregations in the United States have begun turning to the text “*al kanfei ha-Shekhinah*.” This is likely the result of the dominant siddur publisher in the United States market preferring this text. The wide array of *ArtScroll* daily and festival prayer books, the more ubiquitous

¹ We translate “wing,” as this is the most basic translation of the Hebrew word “*kanaf*” in at least seventeen Biblical passages. Later, we will discuss other potential translations for this word in the context of the memorial prayer. The word *kanaf* is used in unambiguous contexts to refer to the wing, an appendage or body part that is unique to birds. See *Bereshit* 1:21 & 7:14, *Devarim* 4:17, *Vayikra* 1:17, *Yehezkiel* 17:3,7,23, 39:4,17, Psalms 68:14, 78:27, 148:10, *Mishlei* 1:17, 23:5, *Iyov* 39:13, *Kobelet* 10:20. *Zekharyah* 5:9 uses the root three times: in one time, it refers to the wings of a bird; in the other two it refers to the vision of two women with “*kanaf*.” *Yeshayah* 10:14 and 8:8 uses the word “*kanaf*” in a larger parable about birds as well. In *Yeshayah* 18:11, it probably refers to the wing, although that text is somewhat ambiguous.

² One siddur that demonstrates awareness of the confusion about the text is *Siddur Ozar ha-Tefillot* (725), published in Vilna in the early twentieth century, which records both versions, with “*taḥat*” in parentheses and “*al*” in brackets, indicating that the two texts were prevalent, but that the prayer-book editor was advocating for the latter. A footnote to the text explains why “*al*” is the preferable text, giving the explanation we will discuss in the final section of this essay.

prayer books in Orthodox circles today, all have “*al*.”³ Even ArtScroll’s halakhic publications indicate a preference for the “*al*” text. Their *Siddur Neḥemat Yisrael: The Complete Service for the Period of Bereavement* provides the text “*al*,”⁴ and explains:

There are divergent views among the authorities if the proper wording of the memorial prayer is “*taḥat kanfei ha-Shekhinah*” or “*al kanfei ha-Shekhinah*.” Preferably, “*al kanfei ha-Shekhinah*” should be recited.⁵

Their *Mourning in Halachah* similarly writes:

Some rule that in *Kel Male Raḥamim* the correct wording is “upon the wings of the Shekhinah.” Others say “in the shade of the wings of the Shekhinah.” Still others rule that the correct phrase is “under the wings of the Shekhinah.”⁶

Here, the preferred text is “*al*,” while the “*taḥat*” text is relegated to the third tier. A footnote notes that the first version may be best, because the other version “is dangerous for the soul of the deceased, God forbid, since it brings him down.”⁷

Even siddurim published in the last few decades specifically for the Modern Orthodox community contain the version “*upon* the wings of the Divine presence,” thereby further cementing this version in Modern Orthodox communities. The most current Rabbinical Council of America Siddur,⁸ published by ArtScroll, contains the text “*al kanfei ha-Shekhinah*.” The new bilingual siddur published by Koren and the Orthodox Union, ostensibly for use by North American English-speaking Jews, continues likewise with the text “*al*,” as does the new Koren *Mesorat ha-Rav Siddur*,

³ ArtScroll is not the only modern publisher to prefer this text. See Y. Beker, *Siddur Tefillat Yosef* (Jerusalem, Lismobil, 1995), 302, and *Siddur Aliot Eliyahu* (Brooklyn NY: Weinreb Publishing, 1993), 305, which both also have “*al*.”

⁴ Jacob J. Schacter and David Weinberger, *Siddur Neḥemat Yisrael: The Complete Service for the Period of Bereavement* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1995), 92, 196, 336, and 362.

⁵ Ibid, 487.

⁶ Chaim Binyamin Goldberg, *Mourning in Halachah* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1991), 402.

⁷ Ibid. We will discuss this cryptic allusion in the final section of this essay.

⁸ The original Siddur of the Rabbinical Council of America, David de Sola Pool, *The Traditional Prayer Book* (New York: Berman House, Inc., 1960), 483, has “*Ṭaḥat*.”

⁹ Koren, *The Koren Siddur with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009), 793.

which is designed to present the views about prayer of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, leader of twentieth-century Modern Orthodoxy.¹⁰

The dominance of this version in modern siddurim and modern communities is particularly striking in light of the practice of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik to use the “*taḥat kanfei ha-Shekhinah*” formula.¹¹ Soloveitchik, the leader of Modern Orthodox American Jewry for decades, preferred one version, although today, increasingly, congregations and prayer books that purport to represent the Modern Orthodox ideology prefer the other version.

Thus, it behooves us to give greater attention to the two versions, and the relative strengths and weaknesses of each—in order to determine which practice is most in consonance with the philosophy and ideology of the community here in America. Our study is both a study of the generic philosophic, linguistic, and poetic criteria that may underlie the versions, and also an attempt at a recreation of the reasons for preferring one version over the other.

Poetic Considerations

In explaining why one text is preferred over the other, many offer poetic considerations to favor one particular version. This is because the image of the Shekhinah’s wings might signify or connote different things depending on whether the soul is above or below the wings. Put differently,

¹⁰ In recent years, publishers have devoted new interest to the text of prayer used by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik at the Maimonides Minyan in Brookline that he founded in the summer of 1963, and to the changes he made from the conventional verbiage. See for example Koren, *The Koren Mesorat ha-Rav Siddur with Commentary based upon the Teachings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2011); Arnold Lustiger, *Yom Kippur Maḥzor with Commentary Adapted from the Teachings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (New York: K’hal publishing, 2006); and Arnold Lustiger, *Rosh Hashbanah Maḥzor with Commentary Adapted from the Teachings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (New York: K’hal publishing, 2007). Koren, *Soloveitchik*, 835–837 is cited in this text above. The lengthy introduction listing Rabbi Soloveitchik’s many customs of prayer on pages lix–lxxxvi makes no reference to any other version than “*al kanfei ha-Shekhinah*.”

¹¹ Personal conversation with Rabbi Joseph Abelow, March 23rd, 2012. Rabbi Abelow attended Rabbi Soloveitchik’s *minyan* where the Rav would lead the *Kel Maleh Raḥamim* prayer weekly for two decades, and later was appointed by the Rav to recite the prayer in the Rav’s presence in his own lifetime. The practice of the Rav’s Minyan, thus, has been to use the phrase “*Taḥat Kanfei ha-Shekhinah*,” for the last thirty years under the recitation of Rabbi Abelow, and for the two decades prior to then under Rabbi Soloveitchik, according to the chazzan most qualified to speak to the Rav’s custom.

being under the Divine differs greatly from being above It. ArtScroll writes:

When this term is used to mean Heavenly protection from danger, we say *under* the wings, using the analogy (sic) of a bird spreading its protective wings over its young. In this prayer, where we speak of spiritual elevation, we reverse the analogy, comparing (sic) God’s presence to a soaring eagle that puts its young on top of its wings and carries them aloft.¹²

ArtScroll argues that there are two different poetic senses that can be conveyed. Being below the Divine indicates “protection,” while being above it indicates “elevation.” The choice of preposition indicates whether the idea is one of protection or one of elevation, since protection is below the wings, and elevation is above the wings.

There are numerous scriptural passages that also convey the poetic image of being “under the wings” of a stronger and more powerful Divine Being in the context of protection from danger. Psalm 17:8 creates an identity—through Biblical Parallelism—between “Hide me away in the shadow of Your wings” and “Protect me like the apple of an eye.” Psalm 61:4-5 conveys similar sentiments: “For you have been a cover for me, and tower of might in the face of an enemy. I will dwell in Your tents forever, I will be covered by being hidden by Your wings, *selah*.” Other Psalms also speak about refuge, shelter, or concealment under God’s wings in difficult times.¹³

Psalm 91, known to the Talmud as the “Song of [Protection from] Adversaries” (*Shevu’ot* 15b), also uses the image of the wings of the Deity

¹² Nosson Scherman, *The Rabbinical Council of America Edition of the ArtScroll Siddur* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1984), 814.

For our purposes, we will leave aside the considerations of the unclear terminology for the way the image of the wings functions in Scherman’s commentary. At first glance, the prayer contains an anthropomorphized *description* of the Deity; yet Scherman refers to it in his comment as both an *analogy* to a **bird’s** wings and a *comparison* to an **eagle’s** wings. The simple reading of the text indicates anthropomorphism, and not analogy or comparison. For our purposes, our argument remains the same even if it is an analogy or comparison.

¹³ See Psalm 36:8: “ובצל כנפך יחסיוך,” Psalm 57:2: “ובצל כנפך אחסה עד יעבור הוות,” Psalm 63:8 is less definite, but probably is meant to be taken in a similar way: “ובצל כנפך ארנך.”

in a similar sense. This Psalm speaks both of *kanaf*, the conventional Hebrew word for wing and the one used in the Memorial prayer, and “*ever*,”¹⁴ which also connotes the wing or a part thereof:

יֵשֵׁב, בְּסֹתֵר עֲלִיּוֹן, בְּצֵל שָׁקִי, יִתְלוֹנֵן. אָמַר לֵה' מַחְסִי וּמְצוּדָתִי, אֱלֹקֵי אֲבֹתָהּ-
בּוֹ. כִּי הוּא יִצִּילְךָ מִפַּחַ יְקוּשׁ, מִדְּבַר הַוּוֹת. בְּאַבְרָתוֹ יִסָּךְ לְךָ וּתְחַת-כַּנְפָּיו
תְּחַסֶּה, צָנָה וּסְחָרָה אֲמַתּוֹ. לֹא-תִירָא מִפַּחַד לַיְלָה, מִחֶץ יְעוֹף יוֹמָם.

He Who dwells in the cover of the Most High, and abides in the shadow of the Almighty; I will say about Hashem that he is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust. For He will save you from the trap that ensnares, from the plague that comes. He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you shall be covered; His truth is a shield and armor. You will not be afraid of the terror by night, nor of the arrow that flies by day.

In contrast, there are no scriptural precedents for the image of being *upon* the wings of the Deity per se. In speaking of being upon the “wings of an *eagle*”¹⁵ ArtScroll brings to mind two scriptural passages, which both speak of the wings of the *eagle* in connection to the Divine (without speaking of the wings of the Deity). In each of those passages, the image and the referent are clear, but the implication of the comparison is not. Exodus 19:4 speaks of the process of Exodus as if the Jews were “carried upon the wings of eagles,” and *Devarim* 32:11 speaks of the eagle awaking his young “who spreads his wings and takes him, and carries him upon his wing.”¹⁶ In both of these cases, the attribute of care is conveyed through the process of the bird carrying its charges upon its wing—but the exact purpose for being upon the wings is not clear.

Classical commentaries differ on the import and implication of this phrase. Most agree that the image conveys something other than protec-

¹⁴ This root appears eight times in Tanakh. On many occasions, it is used in parallel to “*kanaf*,” indicating a similar body appendage such as this source (91:4) and the source from *Devarim* discussed below (32:11), along with other sources (Psalms 68:14, *Yehezkiel* 17:3, Job 39:13,26). On other occasions, the word is used to indicate the body part used specifically for flight (often more explicitly than “*kanaf*” is used for flight) such as Psalms 55:7: “who can give me an *eiver* like a dove with which to fly?” (In this regard see also *Yeshayah* 40:31.)

¹⁵ Following ArtScroll, and in light of the traditional translation, we translate “*nesher*” as eagle—though understanding that other translations of the word may be technically more accurate.

¹⁶ The second use of “wing” in this verse is the related word “*eiver*” discussed above.

tion, but they disagree as to what. No fewer than four different interpretations are given. Seforno (Exodus 19:4) gives the explanation closest to that of ArtScroll, speaking of the majesty and grandeur of being above all else, being on top of the eagle, the highest-flying bird. In a similar vein, Ibn Ezra discusses how the eagle flies highest, and therefore it fears no other bird. Rashi speaks of the speed indicated in the verse (in his first view), while Rashbam says that being on the wings of eagles conveys the idea of flight. Ibn Ezra to *Devarim* (32:11) combines many of these elements saying, “they left with a strong hand, and came quickly to Sinai.”

Still, some commentaries take this metaphor, of being “upon” the wings of eagles, as giving the same sense as being “under the wings” and protection of something more powerful. Rashi, in his second view (s.v. *al*)¹⁷ says that the eagle’s method of protecting its young is by carrying them on its wings.¹⁸ Rashbam’s second view also says that the key point is that “you were not harmed.” Thus these two interpretations indicate that the images of being above and below the wings convey similar sentiments, thereby challenging ArtScroll’s contention that the two images convey different meanings.

Though less famous than these two Biblical references to flying upon the wings of an eagle, three other Biblical verses also speak about traveling “upon the wings” of a thing. Three Psalms of David speak about traveling “upon the wings of the wind” (2 Shmuel 22:11, Psalms 18:11, 104:3).¹⁹ Here too, many—but not all—commentaries say that the image indicates speed. Radak explains the metaphor in all three occasions to refer to the

¹⁷ This interpretation follows Mizrahi that Rashi intends here to give two separate explanations of the metaphor: “It seems to me that the original version is in error, and it should read ‘another explanation,’ for this is the way it appears in *Mekbilta*, that the first explanation explains the metaphor of being upon the wings of eagles as speed and swiftness, that just as the eagle moves quickly, so too Israel gathered quickly at Ramses from where they were dispersed in Goshen... and the second explanation explains the metaphor of the wings of Eagles as loving care for his children, that just as an eagle would rather an arrow harm it than his children, so Hashem chooses that the arrows be accepted by Him so that they not harm Israel.”

¹⁸ Rashi offers just the second explanation at 32:11, and just the first at Exodus 12:37 (based on *Mekbilta*, loc. cit).

¹⁹ Clearly, in this context the word ‘wing’ itself is to be taken metaphorically, because the wind lacks wings. Thus, in the case of the eagle’s wings, the word “wing” is to be taken literally, while the entire phrase is taken metaphorically (since the Jews did not leave Egypt upon eagles’ wings). Here, both the word “wing” and the entire phrase are metaphoric (since the wind lacks wings, and nothing travels upon the wind).

speed of the movement, as does Ibn Ezra in his commentary to *Tebillim*. The commentaries disagree as to the subject of this metaphor (who or what travels upon the wings of wind? The clouds? God Himself? God's decrees?), but they at least grant that this metaphor indicates speed. Of course, even if the metaphor of "upon the wings of the wind" indicates speed, the metaphor of being "upon the wings of eagles" could still convey a slightly different sense.²⁰

In sum, it is possible that the change in the preposition in our prayer would change the poetic connotation of the wing image. However, we cannot argue unequivocally that this is so, for at least in some interpretive traditions, the poetic image of a bird's wings is always one of protection—whether the object is under the wings of a less mighty bird, or above the wings of the eagle.

Even if we establish that poetically, being "upon the wings" has a different poetic connotation than being "under the wings," it is hard to make an ironclad case for either textual version over the other in the prayer. Both the notion of the soul being protected by the Deity, and the notion of the soul traveling briskly on the wings of the Deity, could be fitting prayers for the sake of the soul deceased—and so it behooves us to look at other considerations to determine which text should be preferred.

We should note that the memorial prayer ends with a phrase that parallels the beginning: "therefore, may the God of mercy conceal the deceased in the concealment of his wings for eternity." This ending of the memorial prayer clearly invokes the image of protective wing-cover, and thus it would be hard to argue that this image is an inappropriate one for the memorial prayer—even if one preferred the grand image of being upon the eagle's wings, all things being equal.

Philosophic Considerations

There may be significant philosophic implications to the text chosen, however, at least according to Maimonides, in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. What follows is Rambam's treatment of the word *kanaf*, as discussed in the 43rd chapter of his *Guide of the Perplexed*. Hebrew quotes have been inserted to reflect where Maimonides used Hebrew quotes in the original instead of Arabic:

²⁰ Daniel 9:27 may be another model speaking about "upon the wings of their idol." See Rashi loc. cit.

"כנף" is an equivocal term, and its equivocality is mostly due to its being used in a figurative sense. The first meaning given to it is that of a wing of the living beings that fly. Thus "כָּל-צִפּוֹר כָּנָף, אֲשֶׁר תָּעוֹף בְּשָׁמַיִם."²¹

Subsequently, it was applied figuratively to the extremities and corners of garments. Thus: "עַל-אַרְבַּע כַּנְפוֹת כְּסוּתָךְ."²²

Afterwards, it was applied figuratively to the farthest end and extremities of the habitable part of the earth, which are remote from the places where we live. Thus: "מִכְּנַף הָאָרֶץ," "לְאַחַז, בְּכַנְפוֹת הָאָרֶץ" "זָמַרְתָּ שְׂמֵעָנִי."²³

Ibn Janah²⁴ says that the term also occurs with the signification of concealing, as it is akin to the Arabic, in which one says *kanafu al-shaian*, "I have hidden something," meaning: I have concealed it. He accordingly interprets the verse "וְלֹא-יִכְנַף עוֹד מִוְרִידֶךָ"²⁵ as meaning: Your [teacher] shall not be concealed and hidden away from you, and this is a good explanation. In my opinion, this meaning occurs also in the verse "וְלֹא יִגְלֶה, כְּנָף אָבִיו"; which means he shall not uncover that of his father which is concealed. Similarly the verse

²¹ Devarim 4:17, and see the sources discussed above in note 1.

²² Ibid, 22:12. This sense is also conveyed in *Be-Midbar* 15:38 (twice), 1 Shmuel 15:27, *Haggai* 2:12 (twice), *Zekbariah* 8:23, and numerous times in 1 Samuel 24 (4, 6, 12, 12). This is probably also the sense in *Yehezkiel* 5:3, *Yirmiyahu* 2:34, and 4:19 (although that final verse is more cryptic in its sense). This usage is found in Tanakh almost as many times as the primary one is.

Yehezkiel 16:8 is particularly intriguing. On the one hand, in the context of the elaborate parable in the chapter, the verse does seem to refer to a garment being placed on an unclothed individual. However, since the speaker in the parable is the Almighty, one wonders whether Maimonides would place this verse in the later list of verses that relate the "כנף" to the Deity.

²³ Job 38:13 and *Yeshayah* 24:16, respectively. This usage is less common, and generally refers in compound form to "the ends of the Earth." See *Yeshayah* 11:12, *Yehezkiel* 7:2, and *Iyov* 37:3. The notion of "*kanaf*" referring to a spreading to the farthest extremities is also how Ibn Ezra takes Malachi 3:20: "A sun of righteousness, and healing in its wings." Jeremiah 48:40 and 49:22 uses the word in metaphorical context as referring to the spreading of a bird's wings, where the referent is a nation spreading their influence to the extremities of their territory. This may indicate that "*kanaf*" as extreme territory began as a metaphor, which gradually caused the meaning of the word "*kanaf*" to change as a result of dead metaphor. See in this context *Iyov* 39:26, and *Yirmiyahu* 48:40 and 49:22 as well.

²⁴ In his *Book of Hebrew Roots*.

²⁵ *Yeshayah* 30:20

"ויפרשת כנפך על-אמתך" has to be interpreted in my opinion as meaning: spread that by which you conceal over your handmaid.²⁶

In my opinion, it is in this sense that wing is figuratively applied to the Creator, may He be exalted, and also to angels (For according to our opinion, the angels have no bodies, as I shall make clear). Accordingly, the interpretation of the dictum of scripture "אשר-באת, לְהַסוֹת תַּחַת-כְּנָפָיו" should be: you are come to be hidden under that by which Conceals Him. Similarly, in all cases in which *kanaf* occurs with reference to the angels,²⁷ it signifies that which conceals.²⁸

According to Maimonides, whenever the word “wing” is used in reference to the Deity, it must be translated as “that which conceals” or “that which covers.” As is common throughout the *Guide*, Maimonides here indicates that the very translation of the word *kanaf* is “tool of covering or concealment.” One should **not** translate the word as wing, and then take it to mean protection or concealment, in a metaphoric way. Instead, the word is exactly translated as “that which conceals.”

Maimonides’ theory is borne out by virtually all the sources that associate the Almighty with *kanaf*. The six verses discussed earlier, in our discussions of the poetics of the phrase, all explicitly make reference to covering or protection elsewhere in the verse, to indicate this is the meaning of the phrase. Maimonides’ own proof-text, which itself may be the source for the text of the memorial prayer, also uses the verb *חסה*, which again indicates the idea is protection, hiding, or coverage.

²⁶ *Devarim* 23:1, and *Ruth* 3:9, respectively. One imagines Maimonides would take *Devarim* 27:20 the same way. Other commentaries assume that these sources all use the second definition of the word, and take it to mean garment, or edge of a garment.

²⁷ The word “*kanaf*” appears in Tanakh to refer to actual angels in the visions of the chariot in *Yeshayah* 6 (v.2, twice), and *Yehezkiel* 1 (6, 8 [twice], 9, 11, 23, 24 [twice], 25 and 3:13) and 10 (5, 8, 10, 12, 19, 21 [twice]; 11:22), and Maimonides appears to have these visions in mind—judging from the continuation of the passage, and the general context in the guide.

In many passages, the word “*kanaf*” refers to a physical *representation* of angels, and in those contexts, it could not refer to the theoretical concept “protection,” since the “*kanaf*” actually exists in real space. Perhaps Maimonides would grant that the word refers to wings, proper in these contexts (*Exodus* 25:20 and 37:9 (twice each), 1 *Kings* 6:24 (four times), 6:27 (six times), 8:6, 8:7, 2 *Chronicles* 3:11 (four times), 3:12 (three times), 3:13, 5:7, 5:8).

²⁸ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* 1:43, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 93-94. I have modernized nonessential parts of the translation.

Returning to the memorial prayer, Maimonides’ dictum would indicate that the preferable text would be “*taḥat*,” or “under.” When we use Maimonides’ translation for “*kanaf*” together with the preposition “*taḥat*,” we can produce a reasonable and grammatical translation of “under the covering of the Divine presence.” However, were we to use the preposition “*al*” together with the Maimonidian interpretation of “*kanaf*,” the resultant translation is “upon the covering of the Divine presence,” which is substandard usage in Hebrew as in English.

The texts that indicate speed by being on top of wings speak only about being on top of the wings of an *eagle*, or of the *wind*, but never about being on top of the wings of the *Deity*. This observation is critical for Maimonides: for Maimonides, when speaking of eagles, the word “wing” is to be taken literally even if the larger phrase is taken metaphorically, and thus one can speak of the idea of being on top of an actual, physical wing. However, when speaking of the Deity, the word itself, is taken to mean “concealment,” on the metaphoric level, and the larger phrase is taken literally, and one cannot speak about being on top of that which protects or conceals.

By this account, Maimonides’ logic would strongly suggest the reading “*taḥat kanfei ha-Shekhinah*.” This also may account for the position of Rabbi Soloveitchik who did, on other occasions, change or adjust the conventional text of the prayers in an effort to prevent an overly anthropomorphic reading of the prayers,²⁹ and he may have preferred “*taḥat kanfei ha-Shekhinah*” for similar reasons as well.

Kabbalistic Considerations

Why would anyone prefer the version “*al*”? Most of the sources that we have cited that prefer the text “*al*” attribute this position to the Shelah, Isaiah Horowitz, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Prague and Safed. There are no known earlier citations to the “*Al*” text before Horowitz. Some of the sources that prefer the text “*Al*” cite the later *Gesber Ha-Ḥayyim* of Yehiel Mikhel Tukachinsky (1:31:2:1), although he too, gives no further source for the “*al*” text besides Horowitz.³⁰

Sefer Shenei Luḥot ha-Brit addresses the memorial prayer, in a lengthy section about the holiday of Shavu’ot,³¹ where he speaks, in particular, about the idea that the souls of converts are on a lesser level than the souls

²⁹ For example, he changes “מושב יקר” to “כסא כבוד”; see Koren, *Soloveitchik*, lxxii.

³⁰ Yehiel Mikhel Tukachinsky, *Gesber ha-Ḥayyim* Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Solomom, 1947), 288.

³¹ Isaiah Horowitz. *Sefer Shenei Luḥot ha-Berit* Vol. 2 (Warsaw:1930), 40b.

of those born Jewish. Noting that this is “a deep secret that I didn’t think to write down,” Horowitz speaks in vague terms about his ideas in the text itself, but explains in more detail in a lengthy full-page gloss to his own work. He writes:

For converts are far from the place of the essence of the Divine Presence even after conversion, as we shall explain. And thus, through this, they at least come **under** the wings of the Divine presence... For the status of converts is that they are **under** the wings of the Divine presence; however, Jews are carried **upon** wings. Thus, those cantors who recall the memory of the important people and say “find proper rest under the wings of the Divine presence”—it is better that they be silent than they speak, for they are lowering them down.

Essentially, then, Horowitz’s initiative to change the text of the prayer is based on Kabbalistic considerations about the status or ordering of Jewish souls.³² Any author who would fail to make this distinction of where souls reside *vis-à-vis* God’s wings would not need to insist, with such firm language, that the text be changed.

How mainstream is Horowitz’s position that converts remain at a lower status even after conversion? The idea is found in the Introduction to the Zohar (13b), a Kabbalistic, although not necessarily mainstream, work.³³

One short Talmudic passage (*Kiddushin* 70b) does discuss the status of converts, although the Talmudic passage does not go as far as Horowitz does. We will first cite the passage, and then discuss what it does say—and more importantly what it does not say.

Said Rabbi Hama son of Rabbi Haninah: when the Holy One, Blessed be He, rests His presence, He rests it only on a family with lineage in Israel... Said Rabbi Helbo, converts are as difficult to Israel as leprosy...

³² For more on the status of souls in general, and Horowitz in specific, see Hanan Balk, “The soul of a Jew and the Soul of a Non-Jew” *Hakira* 16 (Winter 2013) 47–76.

³³ Rabbi Soloveitchik was reluctant to consider Zoharitic cosmology as mainstream enough to influence prayer service, so the Zohar’s adoption of this theory is not likely to have affected his analysis of prayer; see Koren, *Soloveitchik*, lxxi. See also the discussion in *Margoliot ha-Yam* to Sanhedrin 96b (15), who also evaluates how widespread this reluctance to use “*tabat*” is.

This Talmudic passage makes two statements: first, that prophecy is afforded only to those who have “family lineage,” and second, that converts are unfortunate, like leprosy. The first statement, in particular, may not be relevant to converts at all. Rosh, in his commentary to this Talmudic passage, writes that the Midrash clearly was of the view that converts could be prophets, and so this statement excludes only Jews who descend from forbidden marriages and the like, and makes no reference to converts at all.³⁴

The second statement is the only one that can be cited as surefire support for the status of converts. However, it does not indicate that the souls of converts are of lesser cosmological status, only that the conversion process presents “difficulties” for the Jewish people. In fact, most commentaries understand these statements not as describing the personal status of converts, but instead, as reflecting the level of practice of some converts, or other extraneous considerations that only barely relate to the converts themselves. Some even believe that this statement speaks positively about converts, and negatively towards those born Jewish.³⁵

³⁴ Rosh’s exact words are:

י"מ משום דגורמין לשכינה שמסתלקת מישראל ע"י שהגרים מעורבים בהם ואין הקב"ה משרה שכינתו אלא על משפחות המיוחסות. ולא נהירא דגרים ראויים שתשרה עליהם שכינה כדאמרינן עובדיה גר אדומי היה! והא דאמרינן הכא דאין הקב"ה משרה שכינתו אלא על המשפחות המיוחסות שבישראל היינו למעוטי משפחות שיש בהם פסול, שאינן ראויין לבא בקהל.

Though Ri in *Tosafot* Loc. Cit and Yehudah ha-Leivi in *Sefer Kuzari* (115) disagree with Rosh’s reading—he does represent a well-known midrashic tradition that converts can achieve prophecy, and this may reflect the more prevalent position in Jewish writing.

³⁵ The Tosafists provide six interpretations for the final statement in the Talmud. The first five all discuss practical challenges that are the result of conversion, and it is only the sixth and final interpretation that leaves open the *possibility* that converts have any lesser status on an ontological level.

[1] New converts might err, and other Jews will copy them and sin further (given by Rashi as well, and Maimonides, *Isurei Bi'ab* 13:18).

[2] New converts might sin, and collective punishment might befall others as a result. (This explanation is rejected).

[3] Accepting converts creates an obligation to treat them in a non-hurtful way, and failure to meet this challenge can be bad for the Jewish people as leprosy.

[4] The purpose of exile is to attract converts, and the failure of the Jewish people to meet this challenge can be as bad for them as leprosy. (This explanation is also rejected.).

[5] Since converts follow the law more than other Jews, their observance highlights the failings of non-observing Jews.

Even if one grants that the Talmud and Zohar do mean to argue that converts have this lesser status, this still does not automatically grant that the language of the memorial prayer, as constructed, was incorrect, since the status of converts need not correlate or connect with the use of “*taḥat*” or “*al*.” It is only Horowitz who insists that these prepositions, and their role in the memorial prayers, make statements about Jewish Cosmology.³⁶

Conclusion

The question of the formula of the memorial prayer hinges upon three different considerations, and consequently, the choice of language requires an inspection of each reason individually, and also a choice of which consideration is more critical in scripting the text of the prayer. Kabbalah would clearly prefer one version, while rationalistic philosophy would clearly prefer the other. One could side either with one side or with the other, or go even further and reject one side as being irrelevant or incorrect on its face.

The “*taḥat*” language is older historically, more consistent with Biblical precedents and the rest of the prayer, and also more in line with Maimonidian philosophy, and this probably explains the ancient preference of this version. Still, others for generations have preferred to go in the other direction, and have moved the practice more recently in America more towards “*al*.” ❧

[6] Since prophecy comes only to those with “family lineage,” the children of converts cannot achieve prophecy, and the difficulty for the Jewish people is that fewer can receive prophecy than otherwise.

³⁶ At this juncture it is worth noting that other prayers, such as the *pišmon* “*Yāḥbe’eiṇu*” of the *Sliḥot*, also use the language “under the wings of the Divine presence”; thus one wonders if Horowitz would argue to amend those texts as well.