

## Shabbat Prayer #30

### Av HaRachamim

R. Yaakov Bieler

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As opposed to much of the liturgy on Shabbat morning which is fairly standardized, there are times when the prayer Av HaRachamim ("Father of Compassion", Koren, p. 529), said in the portion of the prayers just before the Tora is returned to the Ark, is omitted. From the instructions that are recorded in the Siddur re occasions when this prayer is not recited,

(It) is omitted on days when Tachanun is not said.<sup>1</sup> It is also omitted on Shabbat Mevorchim (except during Sefirat HaOmer) and on the Arba Parashiot,<sup>2</sup>

as well as its deliberate inclusion immediately after the completion of Yizkor prayers,<sup>3</sup> it becomes apparent that Av HaRachamim is associated with sadness in general, and recalling Jews who have died in particular. Consequently, on days when intense national or personal celebrations are celebrated, the prayer is deemed inappropriate; for days commemorating national mourning,<sup>4</sup> like Sefirat HaOmer, as well as personal mourning, manifested in the

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<sup>1</sup> Koren, p. 145.

Tachanun is not said on: Rosh Chodesh, Chanuka, T'U B'Shvat, the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of I Adar, Purim, Shushan Purim, the month of Nisan, Yom HaAtzmaut, the 14<sup>th</sup> of Iyar, LaG B'Omer, Yom Yerushalayim, from Rosh Chodesh Sivan through the 12<sup>th</sup> of Sivan, Tisha B'Av, T'U B'Av, Erev Rosh HaShana, and from Erev Yom HaKippurim through Rosh Chodesh MarCheshvan.

Tachanun is also not said on the morning of a Brit...if a Chatan is present on the day of his wedding or during the week of Sheva Berachot, in a house of mourning.

<sup>2</sup> Shekalim, Zachor, Para and HaChodesh.

<sup>3</sup> Yizkor is recited on Yom HaKippurim, Shmini Atzeret, the last day of Pesach and the second day of Shavuot.

<sup>4</sup> The listing of Tisha B'Av as a day on which Tachanun is omitted (Av HaRachamim is not an issue because Tisha B'Av cannot occur on Shabbat) is due to the irony that this day is viewed as a form of Yom Tov, based upon Eicha 1:15 "The Lord hath set at nought all my mighty men in the midst of me; He hath called a 'לעון' against me to crush my young men; the Lord hath trodden as in a winepress the virgin the daughter of Judah." Some claim that such an approach is essentially Messianic in accordance with the belief that when the Messiah arrives, Tisha B'Av will become a happy day—(Zecharia 8:19) "Thus saith the LORD of hosts: The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth (counting Nisan as the first month), and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful seasons; therefore love ye truth and peace."

recitation of Yizkor, Av HaRachamim is treated as solidly within the spirit of at least part of the day<sup>5</sup> and is therefore included.

R. Dr. Joseph Hertz, who served as Chief Rabbi of the British Empire between 1913 and 1946, calls “Av HaRachamim”—a “Requiem for the Martyrs”.<sup>6</sup> In other words, this is not a general memorial prayer for those who are no longer with us, but it specifically addresses the unfortunate circumstance that Jews have suffered over the course of much of their history—persecution and oppression. R. Hertz offers the following historical background for the prayer:

(It was) probably composed soon after the First Crusade in 1096, when a large number of communities in Germany<sup>7</sup><sup>8</sup> were annihilated through massacre or through self-immolation to escape baptism. Its recital originally followed the reading of the list of martyrs<sup>9</sup><sup>10</sup><sup>11</sup>...

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<sup>5</sup> As opposed to a day devoted exclusively to mourning, like Tisha B’Av and the other fasts associated with the destruction of the Temple, most other days of the Jewish year reflect dialectical tensions between celebration and sadness. Yizkor on Yom Tov, when there is a Tora Mitzva: (Devarim 16:14) “VeSamacha BeChagecha” (and you will rejoice on your holiday), particularly in Israel when Shmini Atzeret and Simchat Tora are celebrated on the same day, creates a manic sense of being on an emotional roller coaster. To a lesser and quantitatively shorter degree, the combination of Shabbat regarding which there is a Mitzva of (Yeshaya 58:13) “Oneg Shabbat” (enjoyment of Shabbat) and the prayer “Av HaRachamim” also creates a sense of dissonance.

<sup>6</sup> The Authorized Daily Prayer Book, Bloch Publishing Co., New York, 1963, p. 511.

<sup>7</sup> Probably for this reason, R. Hertz notes that “the prayer occurs only in the Ashkenazi Rite.” A parallel dichotomy between Ashkenazi and Sephardi practice, reflecting that the Sephardi historical experience did not include the types of persecutions experienced by the Ashkenazim, manifests itself with respect to mourning during Sefirat HaOmer:

...Traditionally, Sephardic Jewry accepted the mourning period from Pesach (or rather immediately after Pesach) until Lag BaOmer, because the Gemara (Yevamot 62b) says that this is the period during which the students of Rabbi Akiva died...

Rav Moshe Isserless (known as the Ramo) cites the major Ashkenazi custom to mourn from Rosh Chodesh Iyar until three days before Shavuot, when the Crusaders of the Eleventh Century destroyed the pious Ashkenazi communities around the Rhine river like Speyers, Mainz and Worms...

<http://www.ohrtorahstone.org.il/features/q&a45.htm>

<sup>8</sup> One of the Kinot recited on Tisha B’Av, #25 “Mi Yitain Roshi Mayim” (would that my head were water; Koren, pp. 455-7), similarly mentions the catastrophes that took place in Speyer, Worms and Mainz, all cities in Germany during the crusades marking the Middle Ages.

<sup>9</sup> The specific association with the Crusades might account for the custom in German synagogues to recite Av HaRachamim only on two Shabbatot during the year—

On the Shabbat before Shavuot, since Shavuot marks the end of the Sephira period when the massacres perpetrated during the Crusades claimed the most victims (in the Kina mentioned in fn. 8, the beginning of the month of Sivan—Shavuot is on the 6<sup>th</sup> of Sivan—is mentioned as the

However, this prayer does not serve only to memorialize victims of massacres and torture. R. Yisachar Yaakovson<sup>12</sup> notes that the Av HaRachamim prayer can be divided into two distinct parts:

- a) HaShem should remember all those who gave up their lives, sanctifying God's Name, and
  - b) in turn Avenge their deaths,<sup>13</sup> with a series of five proof texts drawn from the Tora, the Prophets and the Writings,<sup>14</sup> demonstrating that such a sentiment, i.e., a call for Divine Retribution, is a legitimate part of Jewish tradition.<sup>15</sup>
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time when the Jewish populations of these three cities were murdered), and on the Shabbat preceding Tisha B'Av, in commemoration of the period of national mourning observed by all the people of Israel.

R. Elie Munk, The World of Prayer: Commentary and Translation of the Sabbath and Festival Prayers, Vol. 2, Feldheim, New York, 1963, p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> Whereas today, many synagogues contain memorial boards upon which the names of those who have passed away are recorded, this obviously was not possible in earlier times and some means had to be found whereby the names of these individuals could be recalled. While we retain today the practice of making "Keil Maleh"'s on the anniversary of a particular individual's death, when the numbers of those who died or were killed as the result of persecutions were extremely numerous, a different means by which they could be recalled, but where "Tircha D'Tzibbura" (troubling the congregation) could be avoided, had to be found. Just as we have a day dedicated to "Yom HaShoa", Av HaRachamim serves a similar purpose on almost a weekly basis, to commemorate the victims of the Crusades, pogroms and other deadly attacks.

<sup>11</sup> This calls to mind the poster that the One Family organization (<http://www.onefamilytogether.org/pages/Home.aspx>) sends out annually, upon which are depicted snapshots of all those who have died as a result of terrorist attacks in Israel. While there hasn't developed a specific practice in synagogues to call out the names of these individuals, seeing their photos calls to mind not only the tragedy of individual losses, but the ever-increasing mass of humanity that is being taken from the midst of the Jewish people.

<sup>12</sup> Netiv Bina: Peirushim Velyunim BaSiddur, Vol. 2, Sinai, Tel-Aviv, 1968, p. 238-9.

<sup>13</sup> "The Father of Mercy Who Dwells on high in His great Mercy will Remember with compassion the pious, upright and blameless, the holy communities, who laid down their lives for the Sanctification of His Name. They were loved and pleasant in their lives and in death they were not parted. They were swifter than eagles and stronger than lions to carry out the Will of their Maker, and the Desire of their Steadfast God. May our Lord Remember them for good, together with the other righteous of the world, and may He Redress the spilled blood of His Servants."

<sup>14</sup> When proof texts are brought, not from a single text, but rather from all of TaNaCh, i.e., Tora, Nevi'im and Ketuvim, the centrality of the concept is clearly demonstrated. Other instances of comprehensive textual demonstrations are the ten verses that are cited for Malchiyot, Shofrot and Zichronot respectively during the Musaf Amida on Rosh HaShana, as well as the Gemora's contention in Bava Kamma 92b, concerning how the assumption of a particular popular saying can be seen to be reflected in sources both in the Written and Oral Tora traditions:

...This matter was written in the Pentateuch, repeated in the Prophets, mentioned a third time in the Hagiographa, and also learnt in a Mishnah and taught in a Baraita...

The proof texts all address the Divine Quality of Meting out just punishments to whoever has oppressed the Jewish people. In this regard, it would appear that Av HaRachamim is similar to the “Shefoch Chamatcha” (pour out your wrath) paragraph that is recited at the beginning of the final portion of the Pesach Seder.<sup>16</sup> The confluence of Pesach with holidays celebrated by other religions sometimes resulted in blood libels and other campaigns against Jews, leading to the incorporation within the Haggada of a call for Divine Justice and Protection.

On the one hand, such dramatic calls for God’s Intervention on behalf of persecuted Jews could be viewed as a violation, if not of the letter, than at least of the spirit of the verse in VaYikra:

VaYikra 19:18

Thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people,<sup>17</sup> but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself: I am the LORD.

However, R. S.R. Hirsch explains that there is great difference between carrying out vengeful acts, and appealing to God to Do so:

The one factor which more than anything else has protected us from the base impulse of vengefulness, is constituted by the recital of these portions of our

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<sup>15</sup> Devarim 32:43 “Sing aloud, O ye nations, of His people; for He doth Avenge the blood of His Servants, and doth Render vengeance to His Adversaries, and doth Make expiation for the land of His People.”

Yoel 4:21 “And I will hold as innocent their blood that I have not held as innocent; and the LORD Dwelleth in Zion.”

Tehillim 79:10 “Wherefore should the nations say: 'Where is their God?' Let the Avenging of Thy Servants' blood that is shed be made known among the nations in our sight.”

Ibid. 9:13 “For He that Avengeth blood hath Remembered them; He hath not Forgotten the cry of the humble.”

Ibid. 110:6-7 “He will Judge among the nations; He Filleth it with dead bodies, He Crusheth the head over a wide land. He will Drink of the brook in the way; therefore will He Lift up the head.”

<sup>16</sup> A series of three verses which also emphasize the theme of Divine Vengeance against the oppressors of Israel:

Tehillim 79:6-7 “Pour out Thy Wrath upon the nations that know Thee not, and upon the kingdoms that call not upon Thy Name. For they have devoured Yaakov, and laid waste his habitation.”

Ibid.69:25 “Pour out Thine Indignation upon them, and let the fierceness of Thine Anger overtake them.”

Eicha 3:66 “Thou wilt Pursue them in Anger, and Destroy them from under the heavens of the LORD.”

<sup>17</sup> Naturally, some might claim that the verse limits the prohibition to how one treats other Jews. The citation from R. Hirsch that follows suggests otherwise.

prayer book (!) which teach us that we must leave all vengeance and retribution for that which others may do to us, to none other than God...

It is only due to our trust in these promises (found in the Bible) that we have found the strength to submit to murder without becoming murderers ourselves, to bear strangling without ever becoming hangmen ourselves, and to tolerate robbery at the hands of our foes without ever robbing in return...

These appeals to God have helped us remain human and kind. Such is the fruit yielded by these prayers in which we turn to God as the Avenger of all the innocent.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, the Av HaRachamim prayer and others like it, demonstrate that to feel frustrated and angry when atrocities are perpetrated against the Jewish people is utterly normal and understandable. And certainly, whatever must be done to protect oneself and others from future assaults is authorized by Jewish tradition in terms of its concern for survival and self-protection.<sup>19</sup> However, when it is a matter of repaying in kind for no other reason than because it appears to be just or because it makes one feel better, this is not to be a human endeavor, but rather something left to God. In effect, R. Hirsch argues that the call for vengeance constitutes an abject lesson in not personally engaging in vengeful behavior, but rather relying upon some Greater Power, not affected by the vagaries of subjectivity and bias, to even the score.

Who would have thought that “Av HaRachamim” contained such profound sentiments?

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Munk, p. 51 (see fn. 9).

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Berachot 58a “One who comes to murder you, rise up early and kill him.”

Yoma 82a “Nothing stands in the way of saving a life except idolatry, sexual immorality and murder.”