

Reflections on Shabbat Prayer #11

“*Shalom Aleichem*”: The Liturgical Poem Marking the Beginning of the Friday Night *Shabbat* Meal

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Although many could not think of reciting *Kiddush* on Friday nights without first singing “*Shalom Aleichem*,” the custom to sing this *Piyut* (liturgical poem) is in fact only of relatively recent origin. Aryeh Leiv ben Shlomo Gordon, in his commentary *Iyun Tefilla*,¹ writes,

This *Piyut* is neither found in the *Siddurim* of the *Rishonim* (the Rabbinic luminaries who lived between 1000 and 1700 CE) or of the *Teimanim* (Yeminite Jews whose traditions are considered among Judaism’s most ancient.) And its recitation was initiated by the Kabbalists 180 years ago.² And *Sepharadim* also say it.

Nevertheless, even if mystics were the first to incorporate “*Shalom Aleichem*” into the Friday night home rituals, the fact that its underlying concept is derived from a fairly straight-forward Talmudic *Aggada* (poetic, philosophical, theological, historical, exegetical material as opposed to *Halachic* discussions and dicta) suggests that in addition to whatever esoteric meanings some may have attributed to the poem’s words, there are ideas and concepts that are accessible to Jews on every level of observance and learning. Consequently a careful consideration of its concepts and underlying ideas has the potential to significantly enhance our experience of *Shabbat*.

Shabbat 119b

Said R. Chisda in the name of *Mar Ukba*: Everyone who prays on Friday evening and recites *VeYechulu*,³ two Serving Angels accompany him and rest their hands upon his head and say to him: (*Yeshayahu* 6:7) “...And your iniquities will depart and your sins will be atoned.”

It was taught: R. Yose *bar* Yehuda says, “Two Serving Angels accompany a person on Friday evening from the synagogue to

¹ *Siddur Otzar HaTefillot, Nussach Seforad*, Vol. 1, Israel-America Offset, Tel Aviv, 5720, p. 313a.

² Since the volume in which this commentary appears was first published in 1915, the prayer therefore must have first become widespread during the 18th century.

³ Verses from *Beraishit* 2:1-3, that are recited as part of the Friday evening *Ma'ariv* service. See ArtScroll *Siddur*, pp. 340, 346.

his home, one good and one 'Ra' (evil.)⁴ And when he comes to his home and finds a light lit, a covered/set table and a made bed, the good Angel says, 'Let it be the Divine Will that the same should be true for another (the upcoming) *Shabbat*.' And the evil Angel proclaims, 'Amen' against his will. And if not, the evil Angel says, 'Let it be the Divine Will that the same should be true for another *Shabbat*' and the good Angel proclaims 'Amen' against his will.

Several themes emerge from R. Yose *bar* Yehuda's presentation:

- a) It is assumed that ideally the way to usher in *Shabbat* is by praying with the community in a designated place rather than alone in one's home. The community should ideally be the entity that each of us experience as welcoming the *Shabbat* rather than doing this as individuals.
- b) Every *Mitzva* in which one engages always carries with it at least two possibilities with regard to ongoing observance: either one will incorporate the Commandment's regular and proper observance into his lifestyle, or he will do so irregularly and/or improperly, and it will be a cause for religious frustration and annoyance rather than inspiration and spiritual growth. Furthermore, just because someone has done something correctly over the course of a long period of time, does not necessarily guarantee that such a pattern will continue. Freedom of choice is such that each instance is new and contains within it the seeds for compliance and continuation or rebellion and rejection.⁵
- c) The externalities of one's environment contribute greatly to the spiritual atmosphere that one experiences. Consequently, if *Shabbat* lights are absent, the *Shabbat* meal is not what it could/should be, the house is messy and obviously unprepared for *Shabbat* observance, then this will take a certain toll upon one's inner mindset and experience; and of course the converse is also true. The Talmudic dictum that perhaps sums this verity up in the most succinct manner is: (*Avoda Zora* 3a) Whomever troubles

⁴ While it might appear that an "evil angel" is an oxymoron in the sense that a servant of God ought to do His Will, which by definition would be good, the Heavenly array includes angels of destruction such as Gavriel, who destroyed Sodom and Amora, the Destroyer who carried out the plague of the firstborn in Egypt, and *Satan* who is empowered to sorely test *Iyov*. These entities are doing the Will of God; however their mandates involve destruction and punishment. Ultimately, if punishments secure atonement for the sinner or serve as deterrents for potential sinners, they are serving a good purpose in the long run, even if in the short term they bring about discomfort and even destruction.

⁵ This is the theme of the *Mishna* in *Avot* 2:4 quoting Hillel, "Do not believe in yourself (that what you do and who you are is secure and stable) until the day of your death." This is expanded upon in *Berachot* 29a where the Talmud discusses a powerful example of this principle: Behold, Yochanan, the High Priest, served in this capacity for 80 years (!) and in the end became a Sadeucee.

himself on Friday, will eat on *Shabbat*; someone who does not trouble himself on Friday, from where will he eat on *Shabbat*?⁶

- d) The principle enunciated by *Ben Azai* in *Avot* 4:2, "...One *Mitzva* drags along/precipitates another *Mitzva*, and one transgression drags along/precipitates another transgression, applies not only to different Commandments and sins, but to the same ones as well. In other words, even though we have free will and each action can be completely independent of the next, nevertheless the manner in which I perform a Commandment or transgress a sin can and usually does profoundly affect the way I observe the same ritual when the next opportunity presents itself. The kind of *Shabbat* I strive to have one week will very much impact on the one that I have the following week.

Consequently, if we keep in mind these and associated ideas at the advent of *Shabbat* when we greet those coming home from *shul*, including the Angels that we can imagine accompany them, and we sing:

Peace be upon you ministering angels, angels of the Exalted
One...

May your coming be for peace...

Bless me for peace...⁷ (i.e., **I dearly hope that I have done
enough in preparation to merit your blessing and
all that such a blessing implies**)

May your departure be to peace...

we are essentially praying that the *Shabbat* that is beginning should not only be an exceptional experience in its own right, but that it will be able to be assessed objectively by outside spiritual observers as a touchstone for both *Shabbatot* to come, as well as our total Jewish spiritual experience. With good reason we should sing "*Shalom Aleichem*" with gusto and intense *Kavana*.

⁶ Although the quotation is taken out of context, i.e., it appears as a metaphor for all Divine Commandments within a give-and-take between *HaShem* and the nations of the world regarding whether the latter would be given a second chance in order to deserve entrance into the World to Come, nevertheless, what applies to all other *Mitzvot* certainly applies to *Shabbat* itself.

⁷ *Sepharadim* add an additional stanza beginning "*BeShivtechem LeShalom*" (Dwell [with us] for peace)...