

## A TALMUDIC READING OF THE HIGH HOLIDAY PRAYER *UN'TANEH TOKEF*

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Jews flood the synagogues on Rosh Hashanah. Many who do not show up at any other time find their way to services on the very day that the liturgy is the longest. True, they come to hear the *shofar* blown, but they also come to hear, at the beginning of the repetition of *Musaf*, the *Un'taneh Tokef* (ונתנה תקף)<sup>1</sup> prayer. What makes this prayer so attractive? Could it be the poignant question, "Who will live and who will die?" Or the daunting list of ways in which one may die?

Most people think that the message of this *piyyut*, or liturgical poem, is that our fate is in God's hands, that it is God who determines how long we live, and that we have, at best, little control over our future. These ideas are borne out, or perhaps suggested, by many of the English translations of the climactic line of this prayer, *ut'shuwah, ut'filah, uz'dakah ma'avirin et ro'a hazezeirah* (ותשובה ותפלה וצדקה ומעבירין את רע הגזירה)<sup>2</sup>. Here are a few:

*Gates of Repentance* (Reform, 1978): "But repentance, prayer, and charity temper judgment's severe decree."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These words mean, "We will acknowledge (נתנה, *netaneh*) the power (תוקף, *tokef*) [of this day's holiness]." This prayer is a well-known feature of the Ashkenazi rite. It rarely appears in Sephardi rites.

<sup>2</sup> The poem continues after this line, but, at most services, this is where the public recitation and the cantorial rendition end. The first several paragraphs of *Un'taneh Tokef* are the subject of this article.

<sup>3</sup> Chaim Stern (ed.), *Gates of Repentance: Shaarei Teshuva* (Central Conference of American Rabbis 1978; revised version 1996), p. 178.

*Mishkan Hanefesh* (Reform, 2015): "But through return to the right path, through prayer and righteous giving, we can transcend the harshness of the decree."<sup>4</sup>

*High Holiday Prayer Book* (Conservative, 1951): "But repentance, prayer, and righteousness avert the severe decree."<sup>5</sup>

*Mahzor Hadash* (Conservative, 1977, 2001), "But repentance, prayer, and deeds of kindness remove the severity of the decree."<sup>6</sup>

*Mahzor Lev Shalem* (Conservative, 2010): "But *T'shuvah*, *T'fillah*, and *Tz'dakah* have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny."<sup>7</sup>

*Artscroll Mahzor* (Orthodox, 1985): "But repentance, prayer, and charity remove the evil of the decree."<sup>8</sup>

Lawrence Hoffman's *Prayers of Awe* series: "And<sup>9</sup> repentance, prayer and charity help the hardship of the decree pass."<sup>10</sup>

*Wikipedia*, "Unetanneh Tokef:" "But Repentance, Prayer, and Charity annul the severe Decree."<sup>11</sup>

These translations share two ideas: they call God's decision about a person's fate in the coming year a "decree," and they see the

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<sup>4</sup> Hara Person (ed.), *Mishkan Hanefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe*, (Central Conference of American Rabbis 2015), p. 180.

<sup>5</sup> Morris Silverman (ed.), *High Holiday Prayer Book*, (The Prayer Book Press for the United Synagogue of America 1951), p. 148.

<sup>6</sup> Sidney Greenberg and Jonathan D. Levine (ed.), *The New Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: Mahzor Hadash* (Prayer Book Press 1977), p. 285.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Feld (ed.), *Mahzor Lev Shalem* (Rabbinical Assembly 2010), p. 144.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Nosson Scherman (ed.), *The Complete ArtScroll Machzor: Rosh Hashanah (Nusach Ashkenaz)* (Mesorah 1985), pp. 483 and 521.

<sup>9</sup> This is the only translation of this group that begins with "and" rather than "but." I will argue below that "but" makes more sense.

<sup>10</sup> Joel M. Hoffman, "Un'taneh Tokef: Translation" in Lawrence Hoffman (ed.), *Who By Fire, Who By Water: Un'taneh Tokef* (Jewish Lights 2010), pp. 29-32, esp. p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> See "Unetanneh Tokef - Wikipedia" at *Wikipedia*, as accessed at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unetanneh\\_Tokef](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unetanneh_Tokef) on June 12, 2018.

outcome of repentance, prayer, and acts of kindness<sup>12</sup> as reducing the severity of the decree but not eliminating it. Only *Wikipedia*, of these translations, says that the three actions can completely cancel it.

In my opinion, most translators have misunderstood the import of this key line of *Un'taneh Tokef*.<sup>13</sup> It is clear from the language of the *piyyut* that the author, whose identity remains unknown,<sup>14</sup> based his *piyyut* on Talmudic teachings. A good way, therefore, to determine his message is to examine the sources he utilized. The words *ut'shuvah ut'filah uz'dakah*, already appear in the Jerusalem Talmud (Ta'anit 2:1, 65b), albeit in a different order from the High Holiday prayerbook:

א"ר לעזר שלשה דברים מבטלין את הגזירה קשה ואלו הן תפלה  
וצדקה ותשובה ושלשתן בפסוק אחד ויכנעו עמי אשר נקרא שמי  
עליהם ויתפללו זו תפלה ויבקשו פניי זו צדקה... וישבו מדרכיהם  
הרעים זו תשובה אם עשו כן מה כתיב תמן ואני אשמע השמים  
ואסלח לחטאתם וארפא את ארצם.

R. Lezar<sup>15</sup> said: **three things cancel the harsh decree**, and they are: **prayer**, **zedakah**, and **repentance**. And all three appear in the same verse: "When My people, who bear by My name, humble themselves and pray" (II Chronicles 7:14)—this [phrase] refers to **prayer**; "and seek My fa-

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<sup>12</sup> I am rendering *zedaqah* (צדקה) as acts of kindness. It is beyond the scope of this article to thoroughly investigate this hard-to-translate term.

<sup>13</sup> Some of these translations are likely to be theological interpretations. My goal in this article is to recover the Talmudic origins of the liturgical poem and to translate this line accordingly.

<sup>14</sup> Much has been surmised about the authorship of this *piyyut*. See Lawrence Hoffman, "Un'taneh Tokef as Poetry and Legend," in *Who By Fire, Who By Water* (Jewish Lights 2010), pp. 23-24, in particular. My assumption throughout this article, despite the mystery surrounding the *piyyut*'s authorship, is that the same person composed all of *Un'taneh Tokef*'s first section, *i.e.*, beginning with the words *Un'taneh tokef* and ending with *ro'a hagezeirah* (רע הגזירה). My conclusions hold even if the second part of *Un'taneh Tokef* was written later by a different author.

<sup>15</sup> Translation of the verse is from the New Jewish Publication Society of America Tanakh (Jewish Publication Society 1985). Rest of translation is mine.

vor," –this [phrase] refers to *zedakah*... "and turn from their evil ways" (*ibid.*) –this [phrase] refers to **repentance**. If they do thus, "I will hear in My heavenly abode and will forgive their sins and heal their land" (*ibid.*).<sup>16</sup>

This teaching of R. Lezar appears in tractate Ta'anit, a volume dealing with communal fasts, those instituted by leaders of the community when a drought, locusts, or other calamity seems imminent.<sup>17</sup> People back then understood these untoward events as punishment by God for their misdeeds. R. Lezar suggests that, if the members of the community pray, engage in acts of kindness, and turn from their evil ways, they may influence God to withhold retribution. His fitting prooftext from II Chronicles is God's response to King Solomon's entreaty. Upon dedicating the temple he built in Jerusalem, the king asked God to hearken to the pleas of people who will come there to ask for deliverance. God replied that if they submit themselves to Him and abandon their evil ways, He will forgive their sins. R. Lezar's statement shows that the phrase *ut'shuvah ut'filah uz'dakah* originated in a context other than the High Holidays.

We turn now to the Babylonian Talmud. R. Yizhaq, who lived a little later than R. Lezar,<sup>18</sup> and possibly was his student,<sup>19</sup> appropriated R. Lezar's teaching for a different but related purpose. R. Yizhaq's teaching appears not in tractate Ta'anit but Rosh Hashanah (16b). The *amora*<sup>20</sup> presents a collection of eight statements<sup>21</sup> related to the holiday. The sixth, below, is of particular interest:

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<sup>16</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>17</sup> See Mishnah, Ta'anit 3:5-7.

<sup>18</sup> Both are land of Israel *amoraim* (אמוראים), scholars of the rabbinic tradition in the period immediately following the compilation of the Mishnah. R. Lezar is a second-generation *amora* (אמורא, the singular of *amoraim*), and R. Yizhaq a second-third-generation *amora*. R. Yizhaq's statement appears only in the Babylonian Talmud.

<sup>19</sup> As suggested by the biographical note in the Bar Ilan database.

<sup>20</sup> See fn. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Some talk about shofar blasts and others about sin. A few talk about holiday behavior in general.

ואמר רבי יצחק: ארבעה דברים מקרעין גזר דינו של אדם, אלו הן: צדקה, צעקה, שינוי השם, ושינוי מעשה.<sup>23</sup> צדקה דכתיב וצדקה תציל ממות; צעקה דכתיב ויצעקו אל ה' בצר להם וממצקותיהם יוציאים; שינוי השם דכתיב שרי אשתך לא תקרא את שמה שרי כי שרה שמה, וכתיב וברכתי אתה וגם נתתי ממנה לך בן; שינוי מעשה דכתיב וירא האלהים את מעשיהם, וכתיב וינחם האלהים על הרעה אשר דבר לעשות להם ולא עשה. ויש אומרים: אף שינוי מקום, דכתיב ויאמר ה' אל אברם לך לך מארצך, והדר ואעשך לגוי גדול.

R. Yizhaq also said: **Four things rip up a person's verdict<sup>24</sup> and they are: zedakah, crying out [to God], changing one's name, and changing one's behavior.**<sup>25</sup> *Zedakah*, for it says, "*Zedakah* saves from death" (Proverbs 10:2); **Crying out**, for it says, "they called out to God in their difficulties, and God will deliver them from their distresses" (Psalms 107:6); **Changing one's name**, for it says, "Sarai, your wife, shall no longer be called by this name but rather Sarah shall be her name," and the verse continues, "and I will bless her and give her a child" (Genesis 17:15); **Changing one's behavior**, for it says, "God saw their deeds," and the verse continues, "God changed His mind about the punishment He was about to visit upon them" (Jonah 3:10). And some say, also **changing where one lives** [will rip up a person's verdict]. As it says, "God said to Abram, go forth from your birth-

<sup>22</sup> The Munich 95 manuscript of this passage omits the word *gezar* (גזר, "edict"), only saying that four things rip up a person's *din* (דין, "judgment"). When the two words appear together, the phrase *gezar din* means a "verdict." The absence of *gezar* here in Munich 95 is likely a copyist's error and thus ought not affect one's understanding or translation of the printed Vilna text reproduced above.

<sup>23</sup> One further related manuscript variant is that there is a *vav* (ו, meaning "and") before the second, third, and fourth required acts.

<sup>24</sup> See fn. 22.

<sup>25</sup> See fn. 23.

place," and then it says "And I will make you into a great nation" (Genesis 12:1,2).<sup>26</sup>

Before comparing R. Yizhaq's statement in the Bavli (*i.e.*, the Babylonian Talmud) to R. Lezar's in the Yerushalmi (*i.e.*, the Talmud of Jerusalem), there is one more text to bring into this conversation. On the same page of Talmud as R. Yizhaq's High Holiday "sermon,"<sup>27</sup> we find the now-famous statement that, on Rosh Hashanah, God opens the Book of Life and the Book of Death and decides the future of each individual:

אמר רבי כרוספדאי אמר רבי יוחנן: שלשה ספרים נפתחין בראש השנה, אחד של רשעים גמורין, ואחד של צדיקים גמורין, ואחד של בינוניים. צדיקים גמורין נכתבין ונחתמין לאלתר לחיים, רשעים גמורין נכתבין ונחתמין לאלתר למיתה, בינוניים תלויין ועומדין מראש השנה ועד יום הכפורים. זכו נכתבין לחיים, לא זכו נכתבין למיתה.

Said R. Krosipedai in the name of R. Yohanan: Three books lie open on Rosh Hashanah: one for [inscribing] those who are completely evil; one for inscribing those who are completely righteous, and one for those in the middle. The completely righteous are immediately inscribed [on Rosh Hashanah] and sealed for life; the completely evil are immediately inscribed and sealed [on Rosh Hashanah] for death. As for those in the middle, their fate remains undecided from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur. If they merit, they are inscribed for life; if not, they are inscribed for death.

This statement makes it very clear that on Rosh Hashanah there are only two fates that God metes out to His subjects: life and death. It follows that, when R. Yizhaq says that four acts on Rosh Hashanah can cause God to tear up a person's verdict – a *gezar din* (גזר דין) – the verdict the *amora* most likely refers to is death.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> Bavli, Rosh Hashanah 16b.

<sup>28</sup> When R. Lezar used the expression "harsh decree" (גזירה קשה, *gezeirah qashah*) he was referring to calamities like droughts which lead to

If we now align the two teachings of R. Lezar and R. Yizhaq, we will see that R. Yizhaq did not issue an independent statement but modified R. Lezar's teaching to make points of his own. The first modification lies in R. Yizhaq's increasing the number of actions from three to four. R. Yizhaq repeats R. Lezar's request for acts of kindness, prayer, and repentance, and then adds a fourth, "changing one's name," which is way of adopting a new identity. Also true is that, for mnemonic assistance, R. Yizhaq alters the designation of two of R. Lezar's three actions: he calls prayer *ze'aqah* (צעקה, "crying out"),<sup>29</sup> instead of *tefilah*, so that it sounds like, and rhymes with, *zedakah*; and he calls repentance *shinui ma'aseh* (שינוי מעשה), which means "changing one's deeds," so that it sounds like *shinui hasheim* (שינוי השם "changing one's name"). He convincingly argues that, in the Bible, change of name necessarily means change of role and fate, as it did for Abraham and Sarah. As for changing one's deeds, he cites an apt verse from Jonah (3:10): when God saw the improved behavior of the people of Nineveh, He rescinded His plan to destroy the city and its inhabitants.

The second way in which R. Yizhaq modifies R. Lezar's teaching is even more significant: instead of claiming that three actions can help an entire community avoid a common disaster, R. Yizhaq asserts that those same three actions, plus one more, if performed on Rosh Hashanah, can save an individual from a personal disaster, *i.e.*, from God's verdict of death. R. Yizhaq is thus transforming Rosh Hashanah, characterized by the Torah as a day of blasting (*teru'ah*) and offerings,<sup>30</sup> into a day of prayer and repentance and acts of kindness to be performed by an individual for the individual's benefit. That is—according to R. Yizhaq, if prayer, acts of kindness, and repentance can save a community from impending disaster, as noted by R. Lezar—it stands to reason that these three actions can do the same for an individual who faces a decree of death. Mishnah Yoma does talk about repentance<sup>31</sup> but gives few details on how to accomplish it.

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death. Thus, when R. Yizhaq employs the term *gezar din* in conjunction with Rosh Hashanah, a term similar to R. Lezar's *gezeirah qashah*, it most likely connotes a verdict of death in the coming year.

<sup>29</sup> See Mishnah, Ta'anit 3:7.

<sup>30</sup> Numbers 29:1-6; Leviticus 23:24.

<sup>31</sup> See Mishnah, Yoma 8:9:

R. Yizhaq spells out what repentance and related behaviors look like.<sup>32</sup> Understanding Rosh Hashanah as a day of judgment,<sup>33</sup> already noted by statements in the Mishnah and Tosefta,<sup>34</sup> made good sense in post-Temple times when many holidays were undergoing change given that offerings were no longer possible. One might even say that R. Yizhaq, upon seeing R. Lezar's proof-text from II Chronicles, is suggesting that the special connection to God that Jews had in the time of the Temple can now be maintained via the High Holiday strategy that he prescribes.

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עבירות שבין אדם למקום יום הכפורים מכפר. עבירות שבין אדם לחבירו אין יום הכפורים מכפר עד שירצה חברו.

Transgressions between a person and God, Yom Kippur atones for. Transgressions between one person and another, Yom Kippur does not atone for until the offender appeases the person offended.

<sup>32</sup> R. Yizhaq is not the first to say that repentance cancels a verdict. See, for instance, in the Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 17b: "אמר רבי ... יוחנן: גדולה תשובה שמקרעת גזר דינו של אדם..." ("R. Yohanan said: great is repentance for it rips up a person's verdict [of death]..."). R. Yohanan lived in the land of Israel a little before R. Yizhaq. R. Lezar was R. Yohanan's student.

<sup>33</sup> We cannot be sure that R. Yizhaq views Rosh Hashanah as the beginning of ten days of repentance, culminating in Yom Kippur, but it is likely that he does. Although the Mishnah calls Rosh Hashanah the one and only day of judgment for human beings, the Tosefta and the two Talmuds see Rosh Hashanah as the beginning of a period of repentance. See the next footnote.

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah 1:2, which calls Rosh Hashanah a day on which people are judged. Tosefta, Rosh Hashanah 1:13 understands Rosh Hashanah differently:

הכל נידונין בראש השנה וגזר דינו נחתם ביום הכפורים דברי ר' מאיר.  
All are judged on Rosh Hashanah, and every person's verdict is sealed on Yom Kippur; these are the words of R. Me'ir.

See also my discussion of these and other texts, in *Rereading the Mishnah* (Mohr Siebeck 2005), pp. 12-13.



With these Talmudic texts in the background, we can now turn to *Un'taneh Tokef*. The prayer's wording makes it abundantly clear that the author was familiar with these Talmudic texts when he composed his poem. The first paragraph describes God as writing, recording, and sealing, as we saw above in a text from tractate Rosh Hashanah. The second paragraph says that God is like a shepherd who makes each sheep pass under his staff so that he can count them accurately, as stated in Mishnah Rosh Hashanah.<sup>35</sup> So too, the prayer continues, again basing itself on the same Mishnah, all inhabitants of the world will pass before God as God decides the fate of each for the coming year. The third paragraph states that individuals are inscribed on Rosh Hashanah and that their fate is sealed on Yom Kippur. It goes on to say that God decides in this ten-day period how many individuals will pass away in the coming year and how many will be born, who will live out the year and who will not, who will die at the end of his days and who prematurely, and so on.

Following this long list of possible outcomes, both good and bad, the author says that repentance, prayer, and deeds of kindness will "make pass," *i.e.*, cancel, the evil decree,<sup>36</sup> meaning death. After

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<sup>35</sup> Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah, 1:2 reads:

בארבעה פרקים העולם נידון: בפסח על התבואה, בעצרת על פירות האילן, בראש השנה כל באי עולם עוברין לפניו כבני מרון...  
At four seasons, **the world is judged**: at Pesach for grain; at Azeret (Shavuot) for fruit of trees, **at Rosh Hashanah all inhabitants of the world pass before Him like sheep...**

Emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup> Rabbi Jeff Hoffman has noted that "the evil decree" is the correct translation of *ro'a hagezeirah*. Although the word for "evil" (*ro'a*, רוע) in the phrase *ro'a hagezeirah* appears as a noun in the construct state, it was common among medieval Hebrew poets to turn a noun in a construct state into an adjective. Hence, the phrase *ro'a hagezeirah* is the equivalent of the *gezeirah ra'ah* (גיזרה רעה, "evil decree"). See Hoffman's note on translating *ro'a hagezeirah*, in "A Linguistic Analysis of the Phrase *Ma'avirin et Ro'a HaGezeirah*—מעבירין את רוע הגזירה" at *TheTorah.com: A Historical and Contextual Approach*, as accessed at <http://thetorah.com/linguistic-analysis-of-maavirin-et-roa-hagezeirah> on June 12, 2018.

asserting that so much depends on God, the author surprises his audience by suggesting that there are ways for human beings to change God's mind, to take control of their own future.<sup>37</sup> He thus provides an incredibly upbeat, optimistic conclusion to the first section of his liturgical poem.<sup>38</sup>

Not everyone agrees with this interpretation of that line of the prayer. The translators cited above argue that the notion of being in control of one's fate does not follow logically from the preceding paragraphs. At best, they say, one can lessen the harshness of the decree, but not cancel it. In my opinion, in this climactic passage the poet is saying that our fate is in our own hands. God has a plan for each one of us, but we have it within our power to cause God to alter it. To understand the phrase "who will live and who will die" as asserting that life and death are determined by God alone is to distort what this poet is saying. His point is just the opposite: the actions of the individual can determine his or her own fate. True, God may be thinking of inscribing him or her in the Book of Death, but, the author says, each person has the ability to stay God's hand. A key reason this *piyyut* induces fear and trembling in many people is that they don't understand it correctly. The fault lies in part with the misleading translations. The correct message of *Un'taneh Tokef*, which, as I have shown, is based on the teachings of R. Lezar and R. Yizhaq, is that—despite the warnings of awful ways to die—there is a possibility for complete reversal of fate via prayer, acts of kindness, and repentance. That is the core message of *Un'taneh Tokef*. The author of this liturgical poem has conflated the teachings of R. Lezar in the Yerushalmi and R. Yizhaq in the Bavli; the anonymous poet requires three forms of behavior, precisely those mentioned in the Yerushalmi, but claims that they will

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<sup>37</sup> For this reason, translating the opening *vav* (ו—the *u* in *ut'shuvah*) as "but [repentance...]" is more correct than translating it as "and," as suggested by Joel Hoffman. See fn. 10.

<sup>38</sup> See Reuven Hammer, *Entering the High Holy Days* (JPS 1998), p. 89. According to Hammer, this climactic line says that no matter what one has done, the penalty of death can be averted by performing the three acts of prayer, charity, and repentance. His source is *Bereishit Rabbah* 44:12 (Theodor-Albeck eds., p. 434), a collection of midrashic teachings dating to the Talmudic period. See next note.

save the individual, not the community, from disaster, as in the Bavli.<sup>39</sup>

One more step is needed to clinch this argument, and that is to determine why the author chose to use the word *ma'avirin* in his key statement, which literally means that the three actions will “make [the decree] pass,” rather than “cancel.” Does the Hebrew word *ma'avirin* (מעבירין) imply that rather than cancel a decree, God is simply going to downgrade it to something lesser, just “transform” or “temper” it somewhat? I think not. The verb in the Yerushalmi is *m'vat'lin* (מבטלין), which means to “cancel,” and, in the Bavli, *m'qar'in* (מקרעין), which means to “rip up.” Both teachings thus speak of total abrogation.

There is a reason that the author of this liturgical poem, who wanted to convey outright cancellation of the harsh decree, chose a verb that is open to more than one interpretation. He utilizes the root 'B.R (ע.ב.ר) in this final statement because he employed this verb a number of times earlier in the prayer, as already noted by Rabbi Jeff Hoffman.<sup>40</sup> This is good literary form. Each time the root 'B.R appears, it means something different. The first use is in the statement, “as a shepherd passes (מעביר, *ma'avir*) each sheep under the staff when counting them.”<sup>41</sup> This line is taken from Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah 1:2., which uses that very phrase.<sup>42</sup> In the next section of the prayer, the author asks, how many will pass away (יעברון, *ya'avrun*) and how

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<sup>39</sup> It is less likely that the poet knew only the passage in *Bereishit Rabbah* which presents R. Lezar's teaching, and which is followed by R. Yizhaq's teaching in a significantly abbreviated form. Furthermore, *Bereishit Rabbah* does not place the passage in a High Holiday context. It appears in Genesis, in connection with God telling Abraham to count the stars; see Genesis 15:5. The very next verse says that God considered Abraham's steadfast belief in Him to be a *zedaqah*, the same word that appears in the statements of both R. Lezar and R. Yizhaq.

<sup>40</sup> See fnn. 36-37. I am elaborating on R. Jeff Hoffman's point that the root 'B.R. is a leitmotif of *Un'taneh Tokef*.

<sup>41</sup> The same verb 'B.R is used three times in this context.

<sup>42</sup> The two words, *b'nei meron*, are really one, *numero*, meaning “troops,” as stated later in the Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 17a. But another view in the Talmud understands these words as sheep. See also Hanokh Albeck (ed.), *Mishnah Mo'ed, Rosh Hashanah* (Bialik 1952), p. 486.

many will be created (יבראוּן, *yibarei'un*). Initially using the same root, 'B.R.—this time meaning to die—the author balances this usage with a verb that sounds similar—B.R.' (ב.ר.א.)—but which means just the opposite, to be born. And finally, toward the end of that paragraph, instead of using a verb from either of the two Talmuds to express the notion that one's fate can be reversed, the author again chooses to employ the verbal root 'B.R.—*ma'avirin*. He utilized this verb, more opaque than either R. Yizhaq's "ripping up" (Q.R., ע.ר.ק) or R. Lezar's "cancelling" (B.T.L, ל.ט.ל), because this verb ('B.R) runs through the author's *piyyut*. By replacing the Talmud's *m'vat'lin* and *m'qar'in* with *ma'avirin*, the author is not changing the meaning of the verb—it still connotes to cancel—he is just using, for poetic effect, the same verb he used earlier, now giving it an active rather than passive connotation. Unlike sheep passing before a shepherd, people are being told to assert control over their own future.

In this way, the anonymous poet has incorporated into the High Holiday liturgy a Talmudic teaching about our ability to take our fate into our own hands. As stark as is the paragraph describing all the ways that God can punish an individual, the poet's point is that we can still exercise control over our own destiny.

People are right to crowd the synagogues on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to hear *Un'taneh Tokef*. Its message is direct, hopeful, and exhortative. No matter how many misdeeds one has committed in the past year, by means of prayer, repentance, and acts of kindness, one can get a reprieve and start over, *tabula rasa*. That is the immensely appealing theme of the High Holidays, and of this poem in particular.

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