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Abraham's Prayer—and Ours

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Gmar hatimah tovah

The page you see is from a medieval manuscript known as the Leipzig Mahzor. The Mahzor is known by this name because today it's in the University Library in Leipzig. The Mahzor itself was actually composed in the city of Worms in the Rhineland in southwest Germany around the year 1310. Worms was a major center of Jewry at that time, the site of the Rashi shul, where Rashi had supposedly studied in the eleventh century, and the home of many distinguished rabbis including many Hasidei Ashkenaz, Pietists, in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Like other towns with Jewish populations in medieval Germany, Worms suffered through many persecutions and travails but its community was also fairly prosperous, and it had an especially strong communal identity. Its cemetery is the oldest surviving, continuously used Jewish cemetery in Europe.

A mahzor, as we all know, is a holiday prayerbook, but in the Middle Ages, particularly in Ashkenaz, a Mahzor was slightly different from our mahzor today. It was not a layperson's book, and it did not contain the standard prayers—the pesukei de-zimrah, the shema', the various amidot, and so on. It was specifically intended for the Hazzan, the sheliah tzibbur, and it basically contained only the special prayers and the piyyutim that were recited on the holidays. These mahzorim also tended to be monumental books, folio-sized, often super-folio-sized. Mahzor Leipzig, which actually consists of two volumes, is larger than 19 by 14 inches, and like many of these Ashkenazi mahzorim, it is spectacularly illustrated. In fact, Leipzig may be the most spectacular of all the Ashkenazi mahzorim. Even though they were used in the synagogue

only by the hazzan, they were definitely meant to be seen by everyone in the community—whether people peeped over the hazzan's shoulder as he was davening, or whether they looked at the mahzor when he left it open on the bimah. In that sense, they can be described fairly as communal books.

This page is a typical page in Mahzor Leipzig. An elaborate architectural gate with two towers and a crenelated wall between the towers on its top frames a piyyut that begins with the line *eitan hikir emunatkha*, "the strong [or mighty or steady one] recognized your truth or faith." The first word *eitan* is written inside the upper part of the gate against a purple floral background, the piyyut is written in carefully laid out stanzas inside the gate, and beneath it, on the bottom of the page, there is a narrative scene that I'll come to in a second.

The piyyut on the page is of a type called the *kerovah*, which is meant for the beginning of the *Amidah*, and typically there is a stanza of poetry for each of the opening three berakhot of the Amidah. The word *eitan* in Rabbinic literature is an epithet often used for Abraham, the steadfast believer in God, and accordingly, the piyyut's first stanza for the berakhah *magen Avraham* is about Abraham. The stanza praises Abraham for being God's constant and loyal servant, for obeying his every command, for spreading knowledge about God throughout the world,. The second stanza, for the blessing *mehayei meitim*, is about Yitzhak, and as you would expect, about the Akeidah; and the third stanza, for *ha-kel ha-kadosh*, is dedicated to Jacob as the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. All three patriarchs are invoked as sources of merit, who are appealed to as sources of salvation on Yom Kippur as we seek atonement. This particular page is actually the beginning of the *minhah* service for Yom Kippur, but the piyyut is fairly generic, and could be the opening of virtually any 'amidah, including musaf.

The illustration on the bottom of the page, however, is something else. It too is about Abraham, but it is only tangentially related to the piyyut. It illustrates a famous story about Abraham that most of you are probably familiar with but in case you've forgotten it, I'll re-tell it. As you may or may not know, there is not the slightest indication in the Bible that Abraham is the father of monotheism. That is the invention of post-Biblical legend, basically an attempt of early Hellenistic Judaism to turn Abraham into a proto-philosopher who logically deduces that there must be one God in the universe and not many. Our story takes off from this legend. Terah, Abraham's father, is an idol-maker in the city of Ur—one of the main idol-makers in Ur-- and Abraham is a precocious and mischievous little boy who has begun to suspect that his father's idols are false gods. One day, Terah has to go out and leaves Abraham in charge of his shop. When he is alone with the idols, Abraham decides to test his suspicions. He places food before the idols and commands them to eat. Of course, they don't budge. He commands them again, and they still don't move. And again, and again. The boy becomes increasingly annoyed, then infuriated, until he finally grabs each idol and smashes it to bits to show the idol how powerless it is. When Terah returns home, he sees his entire stock of idols lying smashed on the floor. In shock, he asks Abraham what happened. Abraham replies: Well, they were hungry and they wanted to be fed, so I put food in front of them, but they were so hungry that they all wanted to eat the food at the same time and got into a terrible food fight, and ended up beating each other to bits. Terah listens to his son incredulously, and yells at him, What kind of fool do you take me for? You know as well as I do that these gods are only wood and stone, that they can't eat or move or fight. To which Abraham responds: Do your ears hear what your mouth says?

At which point Terah does what any of us would do after their child has destroyed nearly everything they own --—he turns Abraham over to the police. In this case, he turns Abraham over to Nimrod, the king of Ur, and that is the scene that you see on the bottom of the page. On the left hand side, Nimrod, wearing a crown and holding a scepter, is seated on a throne, while in front of him, prostrating on the ground, there is one of his subjects, perhaps a servant. Nimrod is one of the great wicked figures in the first part of Genesis. His name includes the letters *mem-reish-daled*, which also form *marad* or *mered,* rebel or rebellion, and Nimrod is the great rebel against God, who believes that he himself is a god. (He is also the driving force behind the building of the Tower of Babel.) So when Terah brings Abraham to Nimrod, Nimrod commands Abraham to bow down to him, just as the figure on the ground is doing, and Abraham refuses. Standing before Nimrod is Terah, and behind him, Terah's two sons—Abraham and his brother Haran (who according to legend, hesitated whether to side with his father or with Abraham, and as a result, died in his father's lifetime, as the verse says, "Haran died in the presence of his father (*'al pnei Terah aviv*, Gen. 11.28). Terah, as you can see, is pointing at Nimrod while gesturing to Abraham, telling the king of his son's impious deed. Both Abraham and Haran are wearing the cone-shaped pointed Jew's hat, the *pileus cornutus* or *Judenhut*, that Jews were forced to wear in the lands of Western Christendom since the year 1215. And then, on the right-hand side, you see the outcome of Terah's action and Nimrod's subsequent judgement of Abraham. Abraham has been condemned to the flames, he is being burned to death in a pyre. But as you can also see, he is being saved by God, whose hands are reaching down from a cloud to grab Abraham's two outstretched hands in order to pull him out of the flames. Note the parallel between Abraham's hands as he's being pulled out of the fire and the way they are raised in almost exactly the same position as he stands behind Terah as his father is condemning him to

Nimrod. Upraised hands are one of the conventional visual representations of prayer, and in the latter case, I would suggest, Abraham's hands are raised in prayer to God. And now God is responding to his prayer by lifting him out of the flames with those very hands with which he prayed. (Note, too, the odd positioning of Haran's hands, one arm up, the other down, as though the artist was signaling to the viewer Haran's equivocating deliberations as to whom to side with, Abraham or Terah.)

This illustration is unusual for many reasons. For one thing, the illustrations in a mahzor usually refer in one way or another to the text on the page. Yes, the stanza of the piyyut on this page is about Abraham, but there is no mention whatsoever of this particular legend or aggadah. Moreover, Abraham is more commonly associated with Rosh Hashanah than with Yom Kippur, and the story that he is associated with on Rosh Hashanah is the Akeidah, which is a story, as you all know, about Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac as an act of absolute obedience to God. The story being illustrated on this page is about a father who is willing to sacrifice his son because he is *not* willing to worship idolatry. Now the story of the Akeidah *is* illustrated in the Leipzig Mahzor—several times, in fact, but on pages of the Mahzor dealing with Rosh Hashanah. Moreover, it is important to know that in the Middle Ages in general, and in Ashkenaz in particular, the Akeidah was interpreted as a story about martyrdom, indeed as a model for martyrs. Even though he is spared in the end of the Biblical story—and even though he barely has a line in the story as it's found in Genesis—Isaac was depicted in midrashim, and even more so in medieval piyyutim, as a willing, even active and eager participant in the Akeidah, literally as *dying* to be sacrificed. Moreover, the Biblical story had a terrible contemporary resonance in Ashkenaz. During the Crusader massacres in the late eleventh,

twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, parents killed children and each other rather than allow them to be forcibly converted to Christianity. Active, willing martyrdom was promoted as a form of religious heroism. Abraham's destruction of Terah's idols and his refusal to bow down to Nimrod were certainly understood by Jews in Ashkenaz in the light of these contemporary events. The Abraham story is also not the only such story. In fact, it is probably modeled upon a similar story in the Book of Daniel about the three Jewish youths who refuse to bow down to Nebuchadnezar and are thrown into a fiery furnace and then are saved by heavenly intercessors. In both the story in Daniel and in this story about Abraham, however, what happens to the three Jewish youths and to Abraham is the one thing that *never* happens to real martyrs. They're saved from death. Martyrs never are. So this illustration is a very bad illustration for martyrdom.

So what is this illustration doing on this page? I suggest that this is not an illustration about martyrdom or dying for God. It is an illustration about praying to God in a time of dire need and having one's prayers answered by God. It's about prayer and salvation. In point of fact, it's hard to think of many moments of real salvation in the Bible, let alone dramatic salvation, and even harder to think of illustrations in medieval mahzorim of scenes of salvation, let alone ones with the clout of this illustration, where Abraham is being dramatically pulled out of the flames by his hands *and* by the hands of God. There are many illustrations, for example, of the Jews marching through the Red Sea with the Egyptians pursuing them, but that national salvation is not the same thing. This picture is about an individual literally being saved by God himself, and in response to his prayers And with his Jew's hat, I think that a Jew in thirteenth century Worms would have seen not just Abraham being saved by God but even someone like himself—

or perhaps, even himself—being saved as well. In other words, this is a picture about prayer and personal salvation through prayer. And certainly a very apt one on Yom Kippur when we are all praying for such salvation from judgement.

We are about to begin musaf now. As I said earlier, this page with *eitan hikir emunatkha* is actually the beginning of the minhah service. As you all know from past years, the day of Yom Kippur has its own cycle of religious and psychological moods—Kol Nidrei begins on a very ceremonial, formal note of high drama, thrusting us theatrically into twenty-four hours of prayer and reflection; then we come to shul in the morning fresh from sleep (albeit slightly groggy without our coffee) and ready to pray, and we persevere through musaf. By the time of minhah, however, we all feel more than slightly exhausted and somewhat depressed like Jonah; many of us would prefer to be thrown into the sea rather than go on for one more minute of fasting, which may be the reason why, perhaps, the scribe of Leipzig Mahzor decided to place this illustration of personal salvation on this page. But as I said, this is a fairly generic piyyut, and even now, at the beginning of musaf, we may need this extra oomph in order to get through the rest of the day.

Musaf for Yom Kippur is, in any case, the most complicated prayer in the entire Jewish liturgy in the year. It commemorates not one but two additional sacrifices—the special sacrifice for Yom Kippur as a holiday and also the scapegoat ritual, which we just read about in our parashah for the Torah reading, and which is then re-narrated in the musaf in the form of the Seder Avodah. The Seder Avodah is then followed by what are actually the truly distinctive prayers for Yom Kippur, recited during all the amidot, the selihot, the various piyyutim for forgivance that serve

as occasions for reciting the Thirteen Attributes of God, Kel rahum ve-hanun, and so on. These attributes are the real essence of the selihot, along with the refrain that God promises to respond to the recitation of the Middot by forgiving Israel for their transgressions. In a remarkable passage in the Talmud, God is said to have wrapped himself in a tallit like a prayer-leader, a sheliah tsibbur, and to have taught Moses the order of the prayers, the Thirteen Attributes, telling him, "Whenever the Jewish People sin, let them act before me in accordance with this order, and I will forgive them." These thirteen attributes that describe God, however, are themselves intensely human-like qualities—compassion, graciousness, slowness to anger, extending loving-kindness, forgiving iniquity—even if not easy ones for a mere human being to perform. So God takes on the role of a human hazzan to teach Moses to tell Israel to act like God in his most anthropomorphic features so that He can forgive them for *not* acting the way humans should properly behave. It is a very circular and paradoxical prayer. We are to imitate God as He acts like a human should (but usually doesn't) act. And the last of the selihot that serve as an occasion for reciting the Thirteen Attributes is a piyyut that we know as the Martyrology. The traditional martyrology, Eleh Ezkerah, narrates the story of the Ten Rabbis who were martyred during the Roman period for teaching Torah publicly. These rabbis acted as humans should.

The martyrology is not a *yizkor* prayer, a remembrance of the dead, nor is it a memorial for Jews who have been murdered for being Jews. (There is another place in the Yom Kippur liturgy for reciting yizkor and memorializing the Holocaust.) In classical Judaism during the ancient and medieval periods, martyrdom was not viewed as victimization. The martyr was an exemplar of pure faith, the most intense and extreme love of God. That is what Abraham represents with his

unwavering belief and dedication to God. The martyrology is not, in purpose, different from the piyyut to which our illustration is attached. In both, the subjects—the martyr, Abraham and the other patriarchs—are invoked as sources of merit, as reasons, as it were, for God to remember us, to remember our few good deeds and to inspire us to be more like him, and to forgive us our transgressions, and to save us. This, I think, is what the illustration of salvation on the page represents. To remind God how he remembered Abraham's prayers and saved him, so that he might hear our prayers and save us as well.

May we all share in the coming hours in the same good fortune that Abraham enjoyed when he was pulled out of the flames.

Gmar hatimah tovah.