

# *U-Va Le-Tzion Go'el, Kedushah De-Sidra, and the Yeshiva Curriculum*

## PREFACE

The prayer known colloquially as *U-Va Le-Tzion* (“A [redeemer] shall come to Zion”) and formally as “*Kedushah De-Sidra*” is recited just before *Aleinu* near the conclusion of the daily *Shacharit* service, just after *Ashrei* at the start of *Minchah* on *Shabbat* and *Yamim Tovim*, and at the beginning of *Ne'ilah* on *Yom Ha-Kippurim*, again following *Ashrei* (which is skipped at *Minchah*). It comprises an assortment of some twenty biblical verses drawn from: *Shemot* (1), *Yeshayahu* (5), *Yirmiyahu* (1), *Yechezkel* (1), *Mikhah* (1), *Tehillim* (10), and *Divrei Ha-Yamim* (1). The predominance of *Tehillim* is, of course, standard liturgical fare.

A second dimension of *U-Va Le-Tzion* is noted by Rashi (*Sotah* 49a):

This *Kedushah* order was only instituted so that all Israel could engage daily in a minimum of Torah study. By reciting the verses and their [Aramaic] translations, they engage with Torah. Since this applies to all Jews – both scholars and simple folk – it has a double advantage of being both a sanctification of God and Torah study; hence its endearment.

The nexus between Torah study and *U-Va Le-Tzion* is also accentuated by its inclusion of the formulaic blessing customarily associated with public Torah readings: “Blessed is He, our God, who created us for His glory...gave us His proper Torah; [a source of] eternal life He implanted it within us.”<sup>582</sup> For this reason, we have divided our analysis of *U-Va Le-Tzion* in two sections, dealing with both its constitution as a prayer and its relationship to Torah study.

## U-VA LE-TZION AND PRAYER

### Kedushah x 3

The most prominent verses assembled in this prayer are those that comprise the *Kedushah* (*Yeshayahu* 6:3 and *Yechezkel* 3:12). Their appearance here triples its daily recital:

First, during *Birkhot Keriyat Shema* (aka “*Kedushat Yotzer*,” or “*Kedushah De-Yeshivah*”);

A second time during the repetition of the *Amidah* (aka “*Kedushah De-Amidah*”);

Yet a third time as part of *U-Va Le-Tzion* (aka “*Kedushah De-Sidra*”).<sup>583</sup>

The first *Kedushah* was instituted to suppress the heretical claim that God had abdicated control of the universe to the heavenly bodies, by indicating that they, too, offer Him regular praise.<sup>584</sup> The last *Kedushah* was instituted as a concession to the simple folk (“*amei ha-aretz*”) who regularly came late to the *Shacharit* service and missed the earlier opportunities for its recitation.<sup>585</sup> The incorporation of the vernacular Aramaic translation supports the assumption that

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<sup>582</sup>. It is the Torah that is implanted within us, not eternal life. Cf. David Flusser, *Tarbitz* 58 (1989), 127 ff.

<sup>583</sup>. The term “*sidra*” indicates scriptural readings for liturgical purposes and is related to “*sedarim*,” the Palestinian way of designating weekly Torah and *Haftarah* lections. It was customary to recite *Kedushah* after such public readings, hence: *Kedushah De-Sidra*. To round out the nomenclature, the *Kedushah* of *Musaf* (*Shabbat* or festival) is called *Kedushah Rabbah* (major) or *Kedushah Ila'ah* (sublime) (cf. *Zohar*, *Vayak'he* 92).

<sup>584</sup>. Seligman Baer, *Siddur Avodat Yisrael*, 79.

<sup>585</sup>. Cf. Abudirham (popularly, but erroneously, called Abudraham), who also explains that since people generally come on time for *Shabbat* and festival services, we forego the third *Kedushah* on those occasions.

its primary beneficiaries were simple folk who were unable to understand the Hebrew words.<sup>586</sup> It was included in *Minchah* of *Shabbat* because that service followed closely upon the heels of the weekly sermonic discourse (*derashah*), which was well attended by those same simple folk who would remain thereafter for the *Minchah* service.<sup>587</sup>

Of the three *Kedushot*, only *Kedushah De-Amidah* requires a *minyan* and must be recited while standing, since it is, essentially, a reenactment of the *Kedushah* performance of the angels who stood and recited it in a quorum. The other two are “merely the accompaniment of a private biblical exposition”<sup>588</sup> and therefore have no such prerequisites.<sup>589</sup>

Lest we are beguiled by the ostensible superfluity of *U-Va Le-Tzion* into underrating its significance, the *Shulchan Arukh* asserts: “It is prohibited for a person to leave the synagogue before *Kedushah De-Sidra*” (O.C. 132:2).

## U-VA LE-TZION AND TALMUD TORAH

The second dimension of *U-Va Le-Tzion*, reflected in Rashi above, is that of Torah education. The incorporation of the Aramaic translations (*targum*) of several of its verses served not only to enlighten the uneducated but to provide an opportunity for more intensive study by the cognoscenti.

### The Historical Background

In the mid-ninth century, R. Natronai Ga’on (of Sura) was asked to explain the eclectic prayer that had already come to be known as *U-Va Le-Tzion*, and, in particular, to account for the presence therein of the Aramaic translations. His extended reply is brought here in somewhat abbreviated form.

You asked regarding [the verses of *Kedushah*]: Why are they read and translated, and why did the Sages place them in the *Seder Kedushah* [i.e., *U-Va Le-Tzion*]?

This is a venerable practice. Wherever scholars gather, they would pray and then they would fall on their foreheads [i.e., recite *Tachanun*] and recite *Kaddish*. After saying “May the prodigious name be blessed” [i.e., when the service was over], they would bring a book of the Prophets and read ten verses therefrom – more or less – and translate them. Then they would say: “One called to the other and said...” and translate that, just as they had translated the text of Prophets. Then they would say: “I was carried aloft by the wind” to its completion, in order to conclude in praise of God.

Then, they would recite *Kaddish*, and study Torah. Some chose to study *Mishnah*, others studied Talmud, providing that they fulfilled the advice of the Sages: “One should always divide his study time into thirds comprising [Bible],<sup>590</sup> *Mishnah*, and Talmud.”

When poverty became widespread throughout the land and scholars were forced to earn a living, they became unable to study Torah constantly and to divide their time in thirds on a daily basis. They relied, therefore, on the exclusive study of Talmud – uprooting Bible and *Mishnah* – relying on the proverb: “All rivers flow to the sea”; Bible, *Mishnah*, and *Midrash* [flow into the Talmud].<sup>591</sup>

The “widespread poverty” refers to the consequences of the Muslim conquest of Persia in the eighth century, which all but terminated the agrarian lifestyle that had been so characteristic of Jewish life in the talmudic era. For a variety of reasons, many Jews now moved to the cities (particularly Baghdad, capital of the Abbasid dynasty) where they began the mercantile and financial vocations that came to characterize them throughout the Middle Ages.

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<sup>586</sup>. Joseph H. Hertz, *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book* (NY, 1948), 203.

<sup>587</sup>. Abudirham, op. cit.

<sup>588</sup>. Hertz, op. cit.

<sup>589</sup>. Students of the Rav have told me that he insisted on the presence of a *minyan* for the public proclamation of *Kedushah De-Sidra* (as opposed to its private, silent recitation) as well.

<sup>590</sup>. Even if the word “Bible” is absent from this text of the responsum (see following note), it is clearly attested to in all texts of the Talmud (*Kiddushin* 30a).

<sup>591</sup>. *Teshuvot Ha-Ge'onim Sha'arei Teshuvah* 55. There are several versions of this responsum reflecting some confusion regarding its precise wording. Cf. *Teshuvot Ha-Ge'onim* (Lyck) 90, *Machzor Vitry* 47, and *Siddur Rashi* 62. See Robert Brody, *Teshuvot R. Natronai Ga'on* (Jerusalem, 1994), 146–147.

## The Curricular Consequences

To understand R. Natronai's response, it is sufficient to presume that the move from agriculture, which is hard work but limited to certain times of the day and certain seasons of the year,<sup>592</sup> to commerce and banking, which have no such natural constraints, exacted its toll particularly in the amount of leisure time available for study. This is the predicament they faced: If the tripartite curriculum were continued in spite of the new time constraints, people would be adhering to tradition while not acquiring a meaningful education in any single area. The solution, then, required a radical revision of the curriculum that would honor its spirit even if it ran afoul of its letter.

The practical question, then, was: Which segment(s) of the traditional curriculum should be preserved at the expense of which other(s)? A quick look at two talmudic sources that bear on this subject will give us an insight into how the dilemma may have been resolved. These sources bespeak a predisposition to view Talmud study as superior to that of either Bible or *Mishnah* and the displacement of the latter by the former is understandable in their light.

## Half Measures

The first source evaluates the three curricular subjects in relationship to one another:

Bible study is a half-measure, *Mishnah* is a full measure and rewarding, but Talmud<sup>593</sup> is the greatest measure of all.

R. Chananel (Kairouan; eleventh century) understood this to restrict Bible study to its practical, halakhic consequences:

Bible studied exclusively with no engagement with Talmud constitutes a half-measure because one is not engaged thereby in the interpretation of *mitzvot*.... But one who engages in Talmud, instructing and interpreting the *mitzvot* properly and ruling on their practical applications, that is the greatest measure of all.

## Restrain Your Children from What?

The second source, although somewhat ambiguous, was nevertheless understood in the same sense as the previous one.

Restrict your children from meditation.<sup>594</sup>

The word "*higayon*" can be defined either as articulation (the prohibition against pronouncing the Divine name is designated), or as contemplation (related to "*higayon*," logic). It has been interpreted both ways. By the Middle Ages, though, it was understood high universally as restricting the study of Bible.

R. Tzemach Ga'on (ninth century) interpreted it as a prohibition against engaging in the study of problematic biblical texts, which potentially leads to heretical conclusions.<sup>595</sup>

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<sup>592</sup>. The *yarkhei kallah* (assemblies for the general public) that distinguished the Babylonian *yeshivot* occurred during the months of *Adar* and *Elul* primarily because they were agriculturally fallow and could be attended at no, or little, economic cost to the participants.

<sup>593</sup>. Every time we find the word "*talmud*" in the text of the *Gemara*, we have cause to suspect that it does not refer to the literary corpus called the Talmud (with a capital T), but to the process of textual analysis and hermeneutics that is exemplary of *Gemara* study. "*Mishnah*," too, when it appears in the *Mishnah* is not a reference to the six canonical orders but to the process of study by repetition, through which the knowledge of the Oral Law was originally obtained. "*Mikra*" almost invariably designates the Bible, but when it appears in the company of lower case *mishnah* and *talmud*, it, too, is likely an allusion to the educational process of reading – mechanical, at first, and, later, with comprehension.

<sup>594</sup>. No fewer than three scholarly essays on the study of Bible have been devoted to this declaration. Mordechai Breuer, "*Min'u Beneikhem Min Ha-Higayon*," in: Yitzchak -Gilat and Eliezer Shtern (eds.), *Mikhtam Le-David* (Ramat Gan, 1978), 242–261; Frank Talmage: "Keep Your Sons from Scripture; The Bible in Medieval Jewish Scholarship and Spirituality," in C. Thomas and M. Wyschogrod (eds.): *Understanding Scripture* (NY, 1987), 81–101; Ephraim Kanarfogel: "On the Role of Bible Study in Medieval Ashkenaz," in *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume 1* (1993), 151–166.

<sup>595</sup>. Cited in *Sefer Yuchasin: Amora'im*, no. 5, part two. Cf. Jordan Penkower, "*Tahalikh Ha-Kanonizatziyah Shel Peirush Rashi La-Torah*," in: Hayyim Kreisel (ed.), *Limmud Va-Da'at Ba-Machshavah Ha-Yehudit* (Beersheva, 2006), 130 n. 37.

R. Natan of Rome (eleventh century), too, relates the term to Bible, defining “*higayon*” “interpreting a verse literally”<sup>596</sup> – and whose view is clarified by the Me’iri (thirteenth century) who adds – “in any text whose literal sense predisposes towards heresy.”<sup>597</sup>

Even Rashi, biblical exegete par excellence, treats *higayon* as a reference to Bible rather than to philosophy, commenting: “Do not habituate them to Bible excessively.”<sup>598</sup>

### Where Do We Stand Today?

The sources we have just cited indicate that by the time the curricular challenge was posed to R. Natronai Ga’on the balance had already shifted away from *Mikra* and *Mishnah*, per se, and was noticeably tilted in favor of Talmud.

However, they did not always remain that way. Throughout sub-sequent Jewish history, and particularly at those junctures at which the restoration of economic self-sufficiency allowed greater leisure for study (the “golden age” of Spain, for instance), we consistently find a return to the status quo ante: a renewal of interest in biblical studies, a revitalization of study of *Mishnah*, and the assumption of even such unprecedented curricular objectives as philology, philosophy, and poetry (secular as well as liturgical).

Logic and historical precedent indicate that we, who largely enjoy unprecedented affluence and concomitant leisure time, would be better served by a commensurate broadening of our curriculum rather than its constriction. With all due deference to *daf yomi* and its adherents, daily measures of *Tanakh*, *Mishnayot*, *Machshevet Yisrael*, and even the reconsideration of Hebrew philology and prosody, would be truer to our original selves and of greater value to our bicultural commitments and responsibilities, than the continued preoccupation with learning *Gemara* exclusively.

### Completing the Hermeneutic Circle – Combining Prayer and Study

Even throughout the geonic and early medieval periods, such a curricular renaissance occurred regularly on *Shabbat*, as attested to by the following halakhic explanation of the recitation of *U-Va Le-Tzion*, provided by R. Tzidkiyah Ha-Rofeh (Italy, thirteenth century):

They curtailed the tripartite [curriculum] on account of the public inconvenience, so people would not have to cancel work. On *Shabbat* and holidays, however, when there is no cancelation of work, they restored the status quo ante – reading Torah, translating it and reading from the Prophets. This is why we do not say *U-Va Le-Tzion* during *Shacharit* [of *Shabbat* or holidays], although it is recited during *Minchah* [on those days] in order to prevent it from falling into desuetude during the week. And venerable custom has the force of Torah.<sup>599</sup>

### Postscript: Not-quite *U-Va Le-Tzion*

A final iteration of *U-Va Le-Tzion* requires mention here. In its guise as *Kedushah De-Sidra*, it is recited following the *Amidah* on *Motza’ei Shabbat* as the accompaniment to *Vi-Yhi No’am* (*Tehillim* ch. 90–91).

The earliest reference to this practice<sup>600</sup> is the *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Pesachim* 4) and it reappears in geonic literature in the eighth-century *She’iltot* of R. Achai Ga’on,<sup>601</sup> the ninth-century *Siddur* of R. Amram Ga’on<sup>602</sup> and, thence, in the *Halakhot Gedolot*.<sup>603</sup> R. Sherira Ga’on, on the other hand, disputed it, and is so reported in *Shibbolei Ha-Leket*.<sup>604</sup>

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<sup>596</sup>. *Sefer He-Arukh*, s.v. *h”g*.

<sup>597</sup>. *Beit Ha-Bechirah*, *Berakhot* (28b).

<sup>598</sup>. His full comment is: “Do not habituate them to Bible excessively (*targilum*) because it is seductive. Alt.: [Restrict them] from childish banter.” If *hergel* means forming habits without rationale, and if *higayon* derives from the root *h-g-h*, to articulate, then conceivably the prohibition is against “mindless” repetition for the purpose of memorization alone, as opposed to comprehension. This would mitigate Rashi’s opposition to Bible study, and accords with his biography and bibliography.

<sup>599</sup>. *Shibbolei Ha-Leket* 44.

<sup>600</sup>. See Yisrael. Ta-Shma, *Ha-Tefillah Ha-Ashkenazit Ha-Kedumah* (Jerusalem, 2003), 127 ff.

<sup>601</sup>. *She’ilta* 1, ed. Mirsky, p. 12.

<sup>602</sup>. P. 81–82.

<sup>603</sup>. Spanish version, p. 190.

<sup>604</sup>. 129.

The question that presents itself to us, however, pertains to the elimination, in this case, of the two preliminary verses of *U-Va Le-Tzion*. In his definitive study of *Kedushah De-Sidra*, Yosef Ofer explains<sup>605</sup> that the custom in those days was to begin a liturgical recital (known as a *sidra*) from the last verse of the preceding chapter, and to follow it with the public recitation of *Kedushah*. In keeping with this strange practice, we still recite the final verse of *Tehillim* chapter 90 (*Vi-Yhi No'am*) as the prologue to our recital of *Yosheiv Be-Seter* (*Tehillim* ch. 91), and we repeat the final verse of *Tehillim* chapter 91 ("*orekh yamim...*") as the prologue to our recitation of *Kedushah*, which under these conditions does not require the introductory verses of *U-Va Le-Tzion* since it is already part of a *sidra*.

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<sup>605</sup>. *Tarbitz* 58 (1989), 155–191.