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“And Return Her to Your Land...”: Kah Keili as an Introduction to Musaf

It has been well documented that the Ashkenazic liturgy once contained considerably more *piyutim* than it does now. Although there are still some communities that recite *yotzrot* and the like, the vast majority do not, and many standard *siddurim* and *machzorim* do not typically print them, other than for the *Yamim Nora'im* when they are more widely accepted, and even then there are diverse customs. One *piyut* that has made it into the regular Yom Tov liturgy and is in fact printed in most Ashkenazic *siddurim* nowadays is the poem known (by its opening words) as “*Kah Keili*.” This short *piyut* is recited following the blessings at the conclusion of the *Haftarah*, immediately preceding *Tefillat Musaf*.

The author and age of this *piyut* are unknown, although it may contain an acrostic which reads “Yehudah.” It first appears in print in the *Siddur Sha'ar Ha-Shamayim* compiled by R. Isaiah Horowitz (1565–1630), otherwise known as the Shlah Ha-Kadosh, which was published in 1707, which may place its authorship at some time in the early 1600s. From there, it was copied into the *Machzor Minhagei Poland* through which it was further disseminated among the Jews living there, and as such it subsequently ended up in most Ashkenazic *machzorim*.²⁶⁷

The *piyut* is a difficult one to read and understand on many levels. The structures of the three stanzas do not really match each other and the connection between the refrain and the other lines of the *piyut* is far from clear.²⁶⁸ It is possible and even likely that certain lines were lost during the printing and that other mistakes crept in over the years. Additionally, the author may be alluding to esoteric and little-known kabbalistic ideas, as is certainly the case in the last stanza which mentions ideas found in the *Sefer Yetzirah*.²⁶⁹

One major problem with the *piyut* which is pointed out by a number of modern commentators is the first word of the refrain, “*ve-todah*,” which refers, of course, to the *korban todah*. The refrain opens with a list of several sacrifices, of which the *todah* is one, but the question is why begin with the *todah*. It is by no means the most important or the most frequently offered sacrifice on the list and it could even be omitted altogether, given that it is actually in the category of *shelamim* (see *Vayikra* 7:11–12); the *todah* sacrifices are in fact sometimes referred to as “*shalmei todah*.”²⁷⁰ It is also of a lower level of sanctity than the four sacrifices that follow it on the list. Another problem is the lack of the letter “*lamed*” as part of the prefix of the word *todah*, given that that letter is part of the prefix of every other sacrifice mentioned on the list. Furthermore, one may ask why are the “*milu'im*” listed at all? This is a reference to the sacrifices brought on the occasion of the inauguration of the Tabernacle; they are not brought as part of any other regular service and it is thus strange that they are included here among the more common sacrifices.²⁷¹

In a fascinating article on this *piyut*, contemporary scholar Bernard Septimus suggests a slight textual emendation that answers all three of these questions. Instead of “*ve-todah*,” as it currently reads, he says to change the word to “*ve-torah*,” with a “*reish*” instead of a “*daled*,” a reference not to the *korban todah*, but to the Torah. Now, the line fits perfectly with the verse in *Vayikra* 7:37, which reads:

This is the law (*ha-torah*) of the burnt-offering, of the meal-offering, and of the sin-offering, and of the guilt-offering, and of the consecration-offering, and of the sacrifice of peace-offerings.

²⁶⁷. *Machzor for Sukkot*, compiled by Daniel Goldschmidt, Introduction, p. 44, note 80.

²⁶⁸. There are also some problems with the refrain itself that we will return to momentarily.

²⁶⁹. See Septimus, below fn. 13.

²⁷⁰. See *Vayikra* 6:11–12 and Rashi there.

²⁷¹. The Ramban (*Hasagot Le-Sefer Ha-Mitzvot Shoresh* 3) does say that they will be brought again in the Messianic Era, at the inauguration of the Third Temple, but the reference still seems out of place here.

This explains why the line begins with that word – as the word “torah” appears at the start of the list of the sacrifices in that verse – and why the “lamed” prefix is missing from that word, while appearing in all the others – as that word is not part of the list of the actual sacrifices and no “lamed” prefix appears with it in the Torah, as it does with the other words there. It also explains why this list of sacrifices in this particular order is used in the first place – as that is the order in the Torah (though the *shelamim* remains out of order) – and why the *milu'im* sacrifice is included – as it is included in that verse. The author of this *piyut* is merely following the presentation found in the Torah. The misplacing of a “daled” instead of a “reish” is a very easy printing mistake to understand, making this explanation extremely plausible.

Septimus goes further, however, and explains the significance of the selection of this verse as the foundation for the *piyut's* refrain. The *gemara* in *Menachot* (110a) states: “...Rava says (explaining our verse) that anyone who is involved in Torah, does not need an *olah*, a *chatat*, a *minchah*, or an *asham*.” Previously, Reish Lakish asserts there that one who is involved in Torah is considered as if he has brought these sacrifices; Rabbenu Bechaye (to this verse) understands this *gemara* as teaching that whoever learns the Torah of each of these sacrifices (i.e., the verses and laws relating to them) is considered as if he brought these sacrifices himself and therefore does not need to actually bring them.²⁷² A *piyut* built around the verse which teaches that reading about the sacrifices is tantamount to offering them is thus an appropriate introduction to the *Musaf* service, in which the offering of the holiday sacrifices is highlighted.

To go a step further, we may now add that this *piyut* actually serves as a perfect introduction to *Musaf* as it actually touches upon two major themes of the *Musaf* for Yom Tov, namely, sacrifices and redemption. The first theme, sacrifices, is as stated: The *Musaf* prayer on Yom Tov commemorates the special sacrifices that were brought on that particular Yom Tov, and we recite the verses in the Torah that detail them; similarly, *Kah Keili* refers to all the different sacrifices that individual people could bring²⁷³ and mentions how they brought favor to God.

The second theme stressed in the *Musaf* prayer is the state of exile that we presently find ourselves in, resulting in our no longer being able to bring the sacrifices that we are reading about. The prayer elaborates on our desire to be returned to our homeland and to rebuild the Holy Temple where we will be able to bring these sacrifices once again. In a directly parallel fashion, *Kal Keili* calls on God to remember “the weary nation” and return them to their land, for the purpose of bringing the sacrifices just described.

The mention in *Kah Keili* of all these sacrifices thus reflects the idea that we are reciting the various verses about the sacrifices in the *Musaf* prayers in lieu of our ability to actually bring them ourselves, as the verse being paraphrased is the very source of this idea that studying Torah and learning about the details of the sacrifices brings one merit as if he had actually brought them. At the same time, though, we yearn for the rebuilding of the Temple so that we may once again bring these sacrifices in reality.

Perhaps we can now explain why this *piyut* has lasted until today as part of our liturgy and was not dropped like so many other *piyutim* were. As we have explained, this *piyut* provides a perfect introduction to *Musaf* (which in a way begins with *Ashrei*, appropriately highlighted at the end of each stanza of *Kah Keili*, and that may have contributed to its popularity and survival). On each of the High Holy Days, the famous prayer called “*Hineni*” serves as the *chazan's* introduction to *Musaf*; it is a prayer which was and still is considered a highlight of the liturgy. Although it is recited by the *chazan* only, the theme documented therein of coming before God empty-handed and unworthy is one that applies to all, and this prayer thus helps set the mood of the entire congregation before the upcoming *Amidah*. It seems plausible to suggest, therefore, that we have a similar prayer to recite on each of the *Shalosh Regalim*, times when most people could be found in shul. This introductory prayer, also recited by the *chazan*, but usually accompanied by the congregation, is likewise used to set a tone for the upcoming *tefillah* where will be yearning for the sacrifices, once a highlight of the holiday, and we will be reciting the verses about them in the hope that that will be accepted in place of the sacrifices. This *piyut* may thus be seen as an important and necessary introduction to *Musaf*.

This fact about *Kah Keili* may also be the reason why it is omitted on the days of each holiday when *Yizkor* is recited.²⁷⁴ Some *siddurim* say that this *piyut* is too joyous in nature and thus conflicts with the somber nature of *Yizkor*.²⁷⁵ I always found that explanation lacking, though, as there is nothing particularly joyous about *Kah Keili*

²⁷². A parallel reference may be found in *Vayikra Rabbah* 9:8. Also see *Ta'anit* 27b where our forefather Avraham is quoted as asking for a guarantee that his descendants will not ultimately be destroyed like the generation of the flood was. God replies that they will retain the land in the merit of the sacrifices which they bring. Avraham then asks what merit they will have after the Temple will be destroyed and sacrifices can no longer be brought; God assures him that the Jews will be able to study the laws of the sacrifices, and He will treat it as if they brought them.

²⁷³. As opposed to the “*Korbanot Tzibbur*,” public sacrifices that were brought by the *Kohanim* on behalf of the people as a whole.

²⁷⁴. See *Sha'arei Ephraim* (10:40).

²⁷⁵. See *Artscroll Machzor* for Shavuot, 292.

(although admittedly it is often sung in an upbeat tune). Perhaps we can suggest instead that *Yizkor* already provides the more serious tone that is needed for *Musaf* as well as a sense of longing for things that are gone. There is therefore less of a need for a pre-*Musaf piyut* on those days and it is therefore not recited then.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁶. There are some who have the custom not to recite *Kah Keili* when we will recite *Tefillat Geshem* and *Tefillat Tal*. Those two *piyutim* might likewise have provided enough of a tone for *tefillah*, making *Kah Keili* unnecessary. Perhaps something similar could be argued for its omission on Shabbat when *Yekum Purkan* takes its place. Of course, it is also possible that *Kah Keili* was dropped because the congregation simply did not want to say so many *piyutim*.