

# The Gospel of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz

*David Stern*

THE SECOND MOST FAMOUS PIECE OF LITURGY THAT we recite on the *yamim noraim*, the High Holidays, and arguably, the most impressive of all the prayers we recite as a work of literature, is U-Netaneh Tokef. The *most* famous liturgical work is, of course, Kol Nidrei, but the text of Kol Nidrei and its contents are not really what we remember. What sticks in our memory is the haunting melody with which it is sung, and the scene, the almost theatrical performance, that it stages.

U-Netaneh Tokef is very different. It is a *piyyut*, a liturgical poem, and although it is close to prose, it actually is a poem inasmuch as in its different sections there are constant rhymes (although the rhyming lines actually alternate with non-rhyming lines). What's most memorable about the text, though, is less its poetic virtuosity than its subject matter — the epic, cosmic, almost mythological heavenly scene that it depicts, a scene in which God, surrounded by His heavenly retinue of angels, is portrayed in almost shockingly anthropomorphic terms. This scene could have come out of Homer. It's more than surprising to find it in a Jewish text, especially on a day as solemn as Rosh Hashanah, although it has by now come to be so much a part of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy that it would be no exaggeration to say that its myth-like depiction of the heavenly scene has shaped the very way we think about Rosh Hashanah as a day of judgment and reckoning.

In the formal generic terms of *piyyut*, classical Jewish liturgical poetry, U-Netaneh Tokef is a *siluk*, literally, a “closer,” called this because the *siluk* is the final poem in a larger section of *piyyutim* called the Kedeshtah, which elaborates on God's holiness and segues right into the Kedushah.<sup>1</sup> The composition, as we have it, is divided into three sections. The first section begins with the words by which we know the poem, *U-Netaneh tokef. Netaneh*, from

the verb, t-n-h, is an unusual verb; it is related both to the Hebrew sh-n-h (as in Mishnah, “to repeat, teach”), and the Aramaic *tanna* (as in the word for an early Rabbinic sage) and it means to relate, narrate, describe. *Tokef* is strength, and together with what follows them, the words seem to mean, “let us describe or relate the intensity of the day’s holiday.” And how are we to do this? Essentially by reciting this poem.

---

Its myth-like depiction of the heavenly scene  
has shaped the very way we think about Rosh Hashanah  
as a day of judgment and reckoning.

---

The poem goes on immediately to describe the great heavenly scene, the enthronement of God on His heavenly seat, which He sits upon “in truth,” and where God is judge, prosecutor, expert, witness, secretary, and signatory all wrapped up together in Himself — in other words, a one-man, or one-God, court, which no one can escape, where all forgotten things are remembered, where the book of memories, *sefer ha-zikhronot*, is opened and divulges its contents on its own, and where the sign or signature of every person is inscribed. And not only every person, but even the angels, for they too are seized by fear and trembling as the day of judgment approaches and, as they know, *no one*, not even themselves, will survive judgment, and all the inhabitants of the universe will pass before this one-God court like a flock of sheep, *kivnei maron*. Early texts of this line actually have a variant, a loan-word from Greek, *ki-ve-numeron*, “like the soldiers in a brigade,” but the image of sheep passing before God is certainly the one that has captured our imaginations. The section concludes by describing how God not only counts us as we pass by like sheep, but decides our *gzar din*, our fate, whether we will live or die. (I have to confess at this point that, since I was a little kid, I’ve always associated this line with counting sheep, so that every time I recite U-Netaneh Tokef, I get sleepy, and every time I lie in bed with insomnia and try to count sheep, I’m filled with dread and awe.)

The next section of U-Netaneh Tokef expands upon this last image, the allotment of our fates, in what is probably the most excruciatingly detailed lines of the poem. It recounts, one by one, the decisions as to how many of us in the

coming year will pass away, how many will be born, who will live, who will die, and whether of old age or prematurely, before his or her time, or by fire or by drowning, by sword or by being devoured by a beast, by hunger or by starvation, by earthquake or by plague, and even for those who are fortunate to live, on this day it is decided whether their lives in the coming year will be peaceful and happy and prosperous, or oppressive and humiliating and impoverished.

This second section concludes with the famous cry, which sounds almost like a protest: *u-teshuvah, u-tefilah, u-tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'a ha-gezeirah* / And repentance and prayer, and charity avert (*ma'avirin*) — or better, *convert*, that is, change or transform — the evilness of the decree. As scholars have long recognized, this line is taken from the Talmud Yerushalmi, the Jerusalem Talmud, but it has been deliberately changed from its source. The original text reads *teshuvah, tefilah, u-tzedakah mevatlin ha-gezeirah* / Repentance, prayer, and charity *annul* the decree. We do not know whether the original was emended because it is manifestly untrue — as we all know,

repentance, prayer, and charity do *not* prevent evil or suffering — or if there was another reason for the alteration. Even so, the meaning of the new phrase — that these three acts can alter or somehow modulate the terribleness of the decree — manages to up-end and transform the terrifying and discouraging



inevitability of the judicial scene that has preceded it, at the least giving us a sense of some hope of averting the fate that we truly deserve. (I should add that for those who might miss the point, some *machzorim*/High Holiday prayerbooks actually print in small letters above each of the key words — *teshuvah, tefilah, and tzedakah* — what these words really mean; that is, *teshuvah* is *tzom*, fasting; *tefilah* is *kol*, praying as loud as you can; and *tzedakah* is *mammon*, money. This is the proof-text for the annual Rosh Hashanah appeal!)

The third and final section continues to back away from the terror of the middle section and its depiction of the heavenly court. God is praised for

being like His name, that is, merciful, which is the traditional interpretation of *Adonai* as meaning the *midat rachamim*, the principle of compassion, hard to anger, easy to appease. He's praised as a God who wants the wicked to repent, not die; as patient and long-waiting; and as the one who knows the nature of humankind. And here, the poem plunges again into the depths, for what He knows is that we come from dust and return to dust, that each of us is nothing more than a broken piece of pottery, a withered blossom, a passing shadow or a vanishing cloud or — in what is probably the most startling image in the entire piyyut — nothing other than a dream that is immediately forgotten. That is who we are, all our lives, everything we think we have done and accomplished, everything we have *made* — a dream that is immediately forgotten. It is very sobering. And all this in contrast to the eternal ever-existing God, whose years have no measure, whose glory and name have no dimensions, whose holiness has no limit, the epitome of infinity and endlessness which of course does not stop the angels in heaven, God's retinue, from praising Him and His holiness in the Kedushah which now immediately begins while we are still standing and trembling from this piyyut.

---

What He knows is . . . that each of us  
is nothing more than a broken piece of pottery . . .  
a dream that is immediately forgotten.

---

This, then, is the content and structure of U-Netaneh Tokef. In fact, it is less a prayer — it doesn't really ask for anything — than a narrative journey, with these massive perspectival and mood-swings, as the poem depicts the heavenly court, then the universal scheme of things, and finally, our minuscule place in that scheme. If it were not for the poem's extraordinary majesty, which we feel as we recite it, this poem would be extraordinarily depressing, but it isn't. Some people may find its scene alarming, even terrifying, while others may experience its majesty as elevating, but in either case, it rings like a wake-up call for us to hasten to meet our fates.

We have no hard facts that tell us about the piyyut's origins. Today there is almost universal agreement among scholars that U-Netaneh Tokef is an ancient composition dating back to the sixth or seventh century, and pos-

sibly composed by the great early *paytan*/poet Yannai. One of the earliest medieval texts to mention U-Netaneh Tokef has, however, a different story about the poem's authorship and composition. In a famous 13th century halakhic work entitled the *Sefer Or Zaru'a*, the book's author, Isaac of Vienna, writes that he found a statement by Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn, a well-known 12th-century German sage famous for writing chronicles and poems about the 1096 Crusader massacres of Jews. In this statement R. Ephraim attributed U-Netaneh Tokef to a certain Rabbi Amnon of Mainz who composed the poem in the following circumstances.

Amnon, he tells us, was a man of great wealth and family lineage, as well as the greatest sage of his generation, and for a considerable length of time, the gentile ruler of Mainz had tried to persuade him to convert to Christianity. Amnon, of course, refused even to listen to the request. One day, however, the Christian ruler was so insistent that Amnon replied, "Let me think it over for three days and consult my colleagues, and I will tell you." Now Ephraim hastens to assure us that Amnon said this only to get the Christian off his case, but as Ephraim goes on to recount, Amnon immediately regretted having said what he said because it gave the appearance that he would actually consider conversion. When he returned home, he was so troubled by what he had done he could not eat or drink. He soon grew ill, and even when his family and friends tried to comfort him, he refused to be consoled for the terrible sin he believed he had committed.

Three days later — the time Amnon had told the Christian ruler he would give him an answer — the ruler sent for him, but Amnon refused to see him. Finally, the ruler had his servants forcibly bring Amnon to him. Once Amnon was in his presence, the ruler demanded to know why Amnon had broken his promise to come. Amnon replied, "Let *me* determine my punishment for my disobedience. Cut off the tongue that lied to you." But the Christian ruler responded, "No, your tongue spoke well (by saying you would consider conversion)! I will not cut off your tongue, but I will cut off your feet which did not come when you said they would, and then your arms and the other limbs of your body." Which he did. And before they cut off each limb, they again asked Amnon if he would convert, and each time he refused, and they amputated another limb. Finally, after all his limbs had been cut off, the servants of the Christian ruler placed Amnon on a shield with his severed feet, arms, and fingers, and sent him home.

Not long after this, the time of Rosh Hashanah approached. Rabbi Amnon commanded his relatives to carry him with his limbs (that had been embalmed to preserve them) to the synagogue where they placed him next to the hazzan. When the hazzan was about to recite the Kedushah, Amnon spoke up, “Wait. I will sanctify the Great Name.” And then he recited the piyyut itself, saying, “It is true that You, God, are judge and prosecutor and so on, and that you will remember every living being and their deeds for everyone’s fate is decided on Rosh Hashanah.” As soon as he completed reciting U-Netaneh Tokef, Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn writes, Rabbi Amnon was taken away (*nistalek*) to heaven, just like Enoch or Elijah in the Bible. *Nistalek* has the same root as *siluk*, and with a little liberty, one might even translate the verb (in its reflexive form) as “he turned into a *siluk*,” which is essentially what happens. Three nights later, we are told, R. Amnon appeared to another sage in a vision and taught him U-Netaneh Tokef, and he commanded this sage to disseminate the piyyut throughout the Exile as a memorial to him.

This is a remarkable, gruesome, and troubling story. It is a story that probably tells us more about the twelfth and thirteenth centuries — the times of Isaac of Vienna and Ephraim of Bonn, the Crusader period when the Jews of Ashkenaz suffered horribly — than it does about U-Netaneh Tokef and the time when the piyyut itself was composed. As scholars have long recognized, Amnon is an invented figure — we know nothing about him; he is mentioned nowhere else. His name means “faithful” (from *amenet*, the long form of *emet*, truth), which is what he proves to be in the poem. He is obviously a martyr figure. The Hebrew word for martyrdom is *kiddush ha-shem* / sanctification of the name. U-Netaneh Tokef, as I mentioned earlier, is part of the Kedeshtah which speaks of God’s holiness and segues into the recitation of the Kedushah. When Amnon is brought to the synagogue and placed next to the hazzan, he says, *Akadeish et ha-shem* / I will sanctify the Name, which could mean either I will die as a martyr, or I will recite the Kedushah.

But as scholars have also recognized, Amnon is an unusual martyr figure. For one thing, as he is described in the poem, he has certain traits that are very reminiscent of a Christian martyr, even the figure of Jesus. He is tortured. His severed limbs are treated like relics. He does not die, but is removed to heaven. And most strikingly of all, like Jesus in the gospels, he miraculously re-appears three days (or nights) after his death to his disciple, and teaches him his “gospel,” as it were. Amnon’s gospel of salvation, however, is very dif-

ferent from that of Jesus. If Jesus taught that faith was the way to salvation, Amnon teaches that *teshuvah*, *u-tefilah*, *u-tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'a ha-gezeirah*. Not faith, but deeds, will change the evil decree.

Now the appropriation of Christian motifs and ideas — such as we see in this story — was in fact typical of Ashkenazic culture in the Middle Ages when its Jews on a daily basis confronted the challenge of a more powerful Christian culture in which they had to live, and to which they responded, creatively and sometimes combatively, by taking Christian ideas and Judaizing them, that is, converting and transforming them into Jewish ones. Which is also something we see in this story, as a number of scholars who have treated this tale have shown us in the recent past.<sup>2</sup> But what does Amnon's story of martyrdom have to do, really, with U-Netaneh Tokef? This piyyut is not a martyr's poem. Why associate it with a martyr like Amnon? The answer to this question has to do with the other unique feature of Amnon's character, particularly his character as a martyr figure. Amnon is not your typical martyr. Martyrs do not typically respond (when they're faced with the choice of conversion or death), "Hmmm. Let me think it over." The ten martyrs we remember on Yom Kippur do not hesitate one second to die for God and Torah. They never waver. They jump at their chance to sanctify God's name. There is something super-human about their willingness and eagerness to die for their faith.

---

Amnon is not your typical martyr.

Martyrs do not typically respond. . .

"Hmmm. Let me think it over."

---

Amnon is a much more human martyr. He is more like us. The same scholars who have pointed out the Christian features of the story of Amnon have also suggested that he reflects what was in fact a real anxiety of Ashkenazic Jewry. Many Jews in Ashkenaz in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when they were confronted by the Crusaders and presented with the choice of conversion or dying, probably chose conversion (even if they did so in bad faith). They were human, and the sages in Ashkenazi knew that Jews were like other humans and would choose life over death even if it meant compromis-

ing their faith. Which is also why they felt they needed *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah* to change their fates and enable them to re-enter the fold of the Jewish community. And that is the same reason we need *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah*. The challenges we face are not the same, but we too are constantly faced with predicaments challenging our faith, with moments that require compromises we would rather not have to make. And this is what the story of Amnon can help us to understand about the meaning of our own lives as we rise to recite U-Netaneh Tokef.

NOTES:

1 The Kedeshtah, in turn, is called by this name because it elaborates upon the third blessing in the Amidah, *ha-keil ha-kadosh*, and it essentially introduces the high point of this blessing, the Kedushah itself. Hence the position of *U-Netaneh Tokef* which segues right into the Kedushah. A *siluk* always begins with the formula, *u-v'khein lekha ta'aleh kedushah, ki atah elokeynu melekh /* and accordingly, to You ascends holiness, for You are our Lord, O King.

2 There has been considerable scholarship about this story over the last several decades. The key text is Ivan G. Marcus, "A Pious Community and Doubt: Jewish Martyrdom among Northern European Jewry and the Story of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz," in *Essays on Hebrew Literature in Honor of Avraham Holtz* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2003), 21-46; Marcus' article includes a complete translation of the story. See, as well, Israel J. Yuval, "The Silence of the Historian and the Ingenuity of the Storyteller: Rabbi Amnon of Mayence and Esther Minna of Worms," *Common Knowledge* 9 (1997)/ 2: 228-40.



**DAVID STERN** is a professor of Classical Hebrew Literature at the University of Pennsylvania. He has written widely on midrash and medieval and modern Jewish literature, and currently studies the history of the Jewish book as a material artifact.