

HADRAN: Why the Pit of Destruction?

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A *siyum* of a *masechta* of Gemara is truly a joyous occasion, usually the culmination of many weeks or months of rigorous, challenging, edifying, and uplifting group study. The centerpiece of the *siyum* is undoubtedly the customary recitation of the unique Kaddish and special additional prayers framing the accomplishment as an integral link in the chain of dissemination of Torah — from the Tannaim and Amoraim whose divine words we ponder, to the great Rishonim and Acharonim who guide us in revealing their Talmudic treasures and infusing them into the modern world.

Fortunate is our lot!

Our gratitude is expressed in the prayer of Rabbi Nehunia Ben HaKana¹, who contrasts our exalted state with that of the *yoshvei kranos* — those not fortunate enough to join us in the *beis medrash*. The *yoshvei kranos* are identified by Rashi as idle shopkeepers who waste their time in frivolous conversation and are deprived of the rich rewards of Torah study, both in this world and in the next. They are to be pitied and even disdained for their boorish lack of concern for lofty matters.

Rabbi Nehunia's prayer proceeds a step further, however, by including the concluding verse from Tehillim 55:24, which curses the ignorant with early death, destruction, and perhaps even damnation. "And you, Hashem, will lower them into the pit of destruction; men of blood and deceit will not live out even half their days." Are they really so wicked? At our joyous *simchah*, shouldn't we rather be resolving to help inspire and be *mekarev* these poor folk?

Did the creator of this prayer, Rabbi Nehunia Ben HaKana, or anyone from Chazal recite this verse? If so, then there would certainly be a good reason for us to recite it. A survey of the sources reveals a resounding *no*. Not only does it not appear in *Brachos* 28b, but it does not appear in any of the known manuscripts, Rambam², or any of the many *poskim rishonim* who quote the prayer. Early versions of the Hadran prayer do not include the verse from Tehillim either! {See the photo of the early Venice edition of the Talmud.³}

The verse only appears in one known halachic source: the Halachos of the Rif (Rabbi Yitzchak Alfasi).

Why would the Rif add this verse? He is usually involved with editing away verses from the Gemara, not adding them! Does it reflect an ancient custom of his? Why didn't any of the great Rishonim who studied the Rif cite this verse?⁴ Ra'ah, in his commentary on the Rif, quotes the entire prayer without mentioning the verse. *None* of the many known manuscript versions of the Rif mention the verse!⁵ Its earliest known appearance in this prayer is in the first printed edition of the Rif (published exactly 500 years ago, in Constantinople). Why did these publishers include the verse?

The answer may lie in a marginal gloss of one lone manuscript version of the Rif⁶.

In the left-hand side of the manuscript, one can see that a later scribe added a citation to a verse. Only a few letters are visible in the microfilm and these clearly refer to a different verse, one cited at the end of the version of the prayer found in the Talmud Yerushalmi: "For you will not abandon my soul to the grave, you will not allow your pious one to see [his] destruction." (Tehillim 16:7)

This verse is most fitting and proper here as a conclusion of the prayer. It lacks all of the problematic vitriol of the other commonly found verse. This scribal addition undoubtedly represents an ancient custom⁷, which the printers of Constantinople may have been unfamiliar with.⁸ The verse they substituted, however, was certainly most familiar to them in a different context; it is found in a *mishnah* in the fifth *perok* of *masechtas Avos*: "But the students of the wicked Bilaam inherit Gehinnom and descend into the pit of destruction, as it is said in Tehillim 55. And you, Elokim, will bring them down into a pit of destruction — men with blood and deception on their hands, who will not live out half their days, and I trust in You."⁹

Men of deception with blood on their hands are certainly deserving of such a curse, for they are involved in sorcery, treachery, and other wickedness. If only they would be idle like the shopkeepers; that would be a tremendous improvement!

The custom of reciting *Pirkei Avos* on Shabbos afternoon dates back to time immemorial, and as a result of regular study, many have mastered its teachings literally

by heart. It doesn't seem at all far-fetched to assume that the printing of this verse in the Rif was a simple oversight. Eventually the verse entered into the Hadran prayer as we know it.

The prayer of Nehunia Ben HaKana is also found in many printed siddurim in its original form, to be recited upon leaving the *beis medrash*. It is usually found just after Shacharis.⁹ Many contain the verse, such as the siddur printed by Rav Yaakov Emden on his private press,¹⁰ but many do not contain the verse at all.¹¹

Rambam ruled that upon entering and exiting the *beis medrash* it is obligatory to recite the prayer of Nehunia Ben HaKana¹².

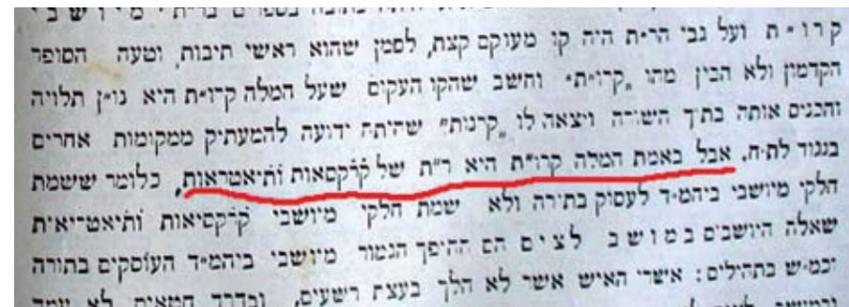
The Shulchan Aruch also follows his *psak*. As a result, printers have recently begun printing the prayer in the inside front covers of their Gemaras and Mishnayos, including the verse. The editors of ArtScroll are sensitive to the issue and now include the verse in parentheses.

It's well worth noting that a precedent to this custom of the printers is found in the *pesichah* to the famous Tosafos Yom Tov commentary on the Mishnah by Rav Yom Tov Lipman Heller. He writes that since the recitation of these prayers is obligatory, and since many are unfamiliar with them, as they do not appear in the siddur (of his time), that he is printing them **according to the nusach of the Rif**. And his *nusach* follows the printed version of the Rif. He does not explain why he chose the Rif's version over that of the Talmud¹³, but it seems clear that he did not have access to manuscripts of the Rif, and, unfortunately, relied on corrupted printed versions.¹⁴ This "endorsement" of the Tosafos Yom Tov to the printed version of the Rif probably contributed to the eventual inclusion of the verse in later printings of the Hadran and in siddurim.

We are not the first ones to find the *nusach* of the Hadran to be overly contentious. Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel, was deeply disturbed by this prayer's tone. *Yoshvei kranos* are today's *balebatim*, he said. They keep mitzvos and give *tzedakah*. The *takanah* to read the Torah on Monday and Thursday is for them, so they should not go too long without hearing words of Torah. It goes completely against the grain

of Chazal to curse them! In fact, even without the verse, why should they be punished at all?

Rav Kook proposed the following reconciliation. He contended that a corruption occurred in the text of the Talmud Bavli with the *yoshvei kranos*: the word *kranos* was really an acronym that should have been spelled *kra'os*, which implies those who attend "karkasios" (the circus) and "tartiynos" (theaters), those who patronize theaters and circuses — which, in fact, is the exact *nusach* of the version of the prayer found in the *baraisa* of the Talmud Yerushalmi!



What exactly goes on in these theaters and circuses? The Gemara, in *Avodah Zarah* 18b, states that they are essentially a *moshav leitzim*, foolish and irreverent. Another opinion cited there is that these were much more nefarious centers of *avodah zarah* and *sh'fichus damim*, gladiator sports, public executions, and the like. Historically, both of these opinions seem correct — theaters and circuses where occasionally more pernicious activities took place.

The curse of Rav Nehunia's prayer is directed against these insidious people who waste their free time with such sordid foreign entertainments, as opposed to the *bnei Torah* who spend their free time immersed in learning in the *beis medrash*, or in prayer in the *beis knesses*, even if during the workday they are but simple "idle" shopkeepers. In this context, even the dubious additional verse is somewhat appropriate¹⁵.

Rav Kook went so far as to adopt the version of the Talmud Yerushalmi. That proposition certainly has merit, but how does this square with the true intention of the Talmud Bavli itself?

We cannot resolve this question. However, it seems that his insight into the tradition of the Talmud Yerushalmi and its stark opposition to "theaters and circuses" teaches a lesson which is especially perti-



From the first complete printing of the Talmud, Venice, 1520

nent today, and can deepen our appreciation of the importance of this truly enigmatic prayer.

The Aderes in *Tefillas Dovid*, p.12, states that *yoshvei kranos* are also engaged in nefarious activities, as seen in the Talmud Yerushalmi. He claims that *yoshvei kranos* here doesn't follow its normal

Tosafos Yom Tov. He makes no reference to the Rif. Thanks to Dr. Ezra Shvat, of the Israel National Library Manuscript Department, who is preparing a new critical edition of the Rif (scheduled to be used in the upcoming edition of Shas Lublin), for allowing me to utilize his forthcoming work. Further, he guided me to four less reliable manuscripts which were not used in preparing the new edition, none of which contain the verse.

6 Oxford Huntington 135.

7 A fascinating new *teshuvah* by Rav Yitzhak Ratsaby of Bnei Brak has just been published (*Ma'ayan*, Nissan 5770) on the exact question addressed in this article, the inclusion of the concluding verse in the prayer of Rav Nehunia ben HaKana. There, Rav Ratsaby cites Yemenite siddurim and *teshuvos* which demonstrate that the custom of reciting the verse from the *Talmud Yerushalmi* (like the scribe of the Rif manuscript) continued among certain Yemenite *kehillos* until almost the present day.

8 Although it seems quite doubtful that the printers had this *exact* manuscript in front of them, it seems likely that they had a similar manuscript.

9 So that one may go *mechayil el chayil*, from the *beis haknesses* to the *beis medrash*.

10 The reliability of the wordings found in this siddur are quite questionable, based on Rav Yaakov Emden's own testimony in the introduction that many texts were simply copied from other siddurim.

11 Among current siddurim: the accurate *Tefillas Yosef* and *Eizor Eliyahu* do not include the verse. *Siddur Vilna*, on the other hand, does contain the verse.

12 *Commentary on the Mishnah*. See *Levush* and *Aruch HaShulchan* (*Orach Chayim* 110) for explanations as to why many do not recite the prayers.

13 Probably because he assumed that this was the *nusach* in the Talmud of the Rif himself, as Rav Ratsaby understands.

14 It's also unclear as to whether his concerns for proper *nusach* centered on the concluding prayer at all, or on the prayer recited upon entering the *beis medrash*, whose wording is much more varied between different manuscripts and printed versions.

15 This fact was noted independently in the responsa of Rav Yitzhak Ratsaby, *Ma'ayan*, Nissan 5770

16 Rav Kasher, in *Torah Shleimah*, Vol. 15, page 140, dismisses Rav Kook's theory entirely, claiming that the version in the Talmud Bavli is the original one. His proof is the fact that a parallel to the Bavli appears in *Pirkei Avos d'Rebi Nossan*. However, that collection is widely acknowledged as postdating the Bavli itself, which it quotes from frequently.