

# Chosen by chance? The *Aleinu* and its paradoxes

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- France 1171* You are among a group of Jews who refuse to renounce their Judaism. As you are led to the stake, you sing the *Aleinu* and astound your executioners.
- Prussia 1777* You are in shul reading from your siddur. You get to the *Aleinu*. Outside the shul there stands a Protestant theologian, straining to hear the sounds of the congregation. If your congregation chants audibly the full text of the *Aleinu*, you will be subject a government edict that threatens physical violence and expulsion.
- Scotland 2015* You are a Liberal Jew. Your siddur is *Lev Chadash*. Reading the above, you wonder what all the fuss was about.

The Shabbat Morning Service is often presented as a rising and a falling; a spiritual arc: we go to the top of the mountain for *Kriat Hatorah*, and we return. The *Aleinu* is bundled with Kaddish as ‘concluding prayers’ in a liturgical diminuendo. But the rising and falling of our spiritual alertness is subjective and variable. After a difficult, tiring week, the high point might be an exhilarating *Mah Tovu!* And then you wander spiritually downhill for the rest of the service. Or, perhaps the congregational togetherness culminates, for you, as a support for your grieving when the time comes for *Kaddish*.

A close reading of the *Aleinu* — its words and what they have come to signify — might position the *Aleinu* at the zenith of our liturgical experience. It all depends on the version of the *Aleinu*, and where and when it is being said. A textual analysis alone cannot do it justice, so much does the *Aleinu* resonate: with a millennium of history, and with what lies beyond history, as we reach out towards universal redemption.

Though the language of the *Aleinu* draws on the Torah and Prophetic sources, its origin is usually ascribed to *Rav* (Abba Arikha, a third-century Talmudist in Babylon). Its early use was restricted to the Rosh Hashanah *Musaf* service, but it became a standard part of services, and therefore the Siddur, in Medieval times.

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## Whose *Aleinu*?

Jews the world over share the first two lines in common. But then we diverge. *Aleinu* in *Lev Chadash* starts like this.

Let us now praise the Sovereign of the universe  
and proclaim the greatness of its Creator,  
whose unity it is our **mission** to make known,  
whose rule it is our **task** to make effective.

עֲלֵינוּ לְשַׁבַּח לְאֲדוֹן הַכֹּל  
לְתֵת גְּדֻלָּה לְיוֹצֵר בְּרֵאשִׁית.  
אֲשֶׁר שָׁם חִלְקֵנוּ לְיַחַד עֵת־שְׁמוֹ.  
וּגְוַרְלָנוּ לְהַמְלִיךְ מַלְכוּתוֹ:

The second two lines tell us to make God's name One (לְיַחַד עֵת־שְׁמוֹ) and to cause God's kingdom to reign (לְהַמְלִיךְ מַלְכוּתוֹ). It is *our portion* חִלְקֵנוּ and *our lot* גְּוַרְלָנוּ to do so. 'Portion' and 'lot' are good translations but they are literary terms, and what they really imply is not obvious when we do not use these words in other contexts. *Lev Chadash* substitutes *mission* and *task* (inherited from *Service of the Heart*).

The full import of these words only becomes clear when we consider the rest of the prayer and see what are other Jews are praying. After the standard opening, the traditional Ashkenazi text follows as shown below.

Again, our *portion* and *lot* are asserted, but in this paragraph, at least, we do not find out what they are. We are asked to praise God for what we are not. (Elsewhere Orthodox men thank God that they are not-women and not-*goyim*.)

who has not made us like the nations of the lands  
nor placed us like the families of the earth; who  
has not made our **portion** like theirs, nor our  
**destiny** like all their multitudes. For they worship  
vanity and emptiness, and pray to a god who  
cannot save.

שְׁלֹא עָשָׂנוּ כְּגוֹיֵי הָאָרְצוֹת  
וְלֹא שָׂמְנוּ כְּמִשְׁפְּחוֹת הָאֲדָמָה.  
שְׁלֹא שָׁם חִלְקֵנוּ כֶּהֱם  
וּגְוַרְלָנוּ כְּכֹל הַמּוֹנִם  
שֶׁהֵם מִשְׁתַּחֲוִים לְהֶבֶל וְרִיק  
וּמִתְפַּלְלִים אֶל אֵל לֹא יוֹשִׁיעַ:

Translation from the *Koren Sacks Siddur*, 2009.

Note that גְּוַרְלָנוּ, *lot*, which became *task* in *Lev Chadash*, is *destiny* in *Koren Sacks* (and also in one of the American Reform variants). *Task* is fairly neutral: something you have been told to do. *Lot* suggests something that falls to you randomly when it could just as easily have fallen to someone else. But *destiny* suggests quite the opposite of *lot*: the purpose for which you personally have been selected.

*Mishkan T'filah* (2007), the American Reform siddur, offers alternatives: 1. the Hebrew of *Lev Chadash* (with a variant translation); 2. the traditional version without the last two lines ('For they worship ... cannot save'); 3. a reordered version that omits all reference to chosenness.

In *Seder Hatefillot* (2008), the British Reform siddur, Jonathan Magonet makes a radical departure, in, making use of Micah 4:5:

For let all the peoples walk each one in the name  
of its god, But we will walk in the name of the  
Eternal One our God for ever and ever.

כִּי כָל־הָעַמִּים יֵלְכוּ אִישׁ בְּשֵׁם אֱלֹהָיו וְאֲנַחְנוּ נֵלְךְ  
בְּשֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד:

The disjunctive וְאֲנַחְנוּ ('But we ...') draws a contrast with 'the peoples'. However, in the context of what precedes (none shall be afraid beneath their vine and fig tree, etc.) the contrast is weakened, since Israel is envisaged at peace with the nations. *Seder Hatefillot* takes Micah a further step to pluralism, conjoining the clauses. 'The peoples walk ... **and** we will walk.'

## The paradox of the universal and the particular

The pluralism is taken up explicitly in the second, universalist, part of the *Aleinu*. *Lev Chadash* has 'help us to perfect the world' (לְתַקֵּן עוֹלָם) but does not make it abundantly clear who 'we' are.

Magonet's version in *Seder Hatefillot* (drawn from the Israeli Progressive Kol HanesHEMA community) reads: 'We are all partners in the work of repairing Your world.' The 'we' is emphatically pluralist and not exclusive.

The second part of the *Aleinu* poses a theological paradox. The more universalist and pluralist our claims, the more we use particularist (Jewish) concepts to express them. "When is 'universalism' merely 'particularism' writ large?" asks Jonathan Magonet (in, Cornille, *Criteria of Discernment in Interreligious Dialogue*, 2009). Particularism that masquerades as universalism is a modern form of idolatry. I suggest that the language of casting lots might resolve the paradox. Shraga Bar-On, of the Hartman Institute, has studied the role of lots in Jewish history: 'casting lots does not result in the tension that is attributed to resolutions based on more rational arguments or on the basis of power struggles'.<sup>1</sup>

Experiencing powerlessness in the face of chance is a way of internalising our finitude before the face of God. Could the narrative of casting lots dispossess us of the power to overstate Jewish particularism, and thereby protect us from making an idol of Israel?

### The paradox of *Tikkun Olam* and the vengeance of Jerusalem

After asking God to help us 'perfect the world' (לְתַקֵּן עוֹלָם), in what we consider to be the 'universalist' second part, the *Aleinu* builds to a crescendo with a vision of that perfection drawn from Zechariah. But the passage in question (Zech 14:9) is part of a vengeful oracle (probably relating to a triumphalist restoration of the Temple after the fall of Babylon), in which all enemies of Jerusalem will be violently subjugated.

On that day the Eternal God shall be One, and  
God's name shall be One.

בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יְהוָה יְהוָה אֶחָד וְשֵׁמוֹ אֶחָד:

I propose that Jeremiah 3:16-17 would inspire a more appropriate Liberal finale to the *Aleinu* than Zechariah.

And it shall happen that ... they shall say no more:  
'the ark of the covenant of the Eternal One';  
neither shall it come to mind; neither shall they  
make mention of it; neither shall they miss it;  
neither shall it be made any more.

וְהָיָה ... לֹא יֵאמְרוּ עוֹד אַרְוֹן בְּרִית יְהוָה וְלֹא יֵעָלֶה  
עַל־לֵב וְלֹא יִזְכְּרוּ בּוֹ וְלֹא יִפְקְדוּ וְלֹא יַעֲשֶׂה עוֹד:

At that time they shall call Jerusalem the throne of  
the Eternal One; and all the nations shall gather in  
Jerusalem, to the name of the Eternal One, to  
Jerusalem; and they shall no longer follow the  
stubbornness of their evil heart.

בְּעֵת הַהִיא יִקְרְאוּ לִירוּשָׁלַם כְּסֵא יְהוָה וְנִקְוּ אֵלֶיהָ  
כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם לְשֵׁם יְהוָה לִירוּשָׁלַם וְלֹא יִלְכּוּ עוֹד אַחֲרֵי  
שָׂרְרוֹת לְבָם הָרָע:

### The paradox of Liberal Jewish universalism in *Lev Chadash*

Some Liberal communities find that the 'universalist' part of the *Aleinu* does not express the hope for *Tikkun Olam* in language that is sufficiently accessible. Judy Chicago's poem, 'And then all that has divided us will merge'<sup>2</sup> (*LCh* p. 213), is frequently substituted. It appears in many prayerbooks, Jewish and Christian. Its language is wholly secular. But I pose the question: could it have gained such prominence in Jewish liturgy, as an expression of pluralist *Tikkun Olam*, had it not been written by a Jew?

1 [http://hartman.org.il/Research\\_And\\_Comment\\_View.asp?Article\\_Id=457](http://hartman.org.il/Research_And_Comment_View.asp?Article_Id=457)

2 <http://www.judychicago.com/author/merger-poem.php>

## Paradoxically, unity and universalism must precede division and chosenness

Both חלק and גורל suggest a part of something more. A *portion* (חלק) is a share. In Deuteronomy it often means a tract of land. A *lot* (גורל) means one of several small pieces (small stones or sticks). Once cast, one's lot can suggest a sealed fate (indeed a 'destiny'). But until the casting of it, all are bound together on the brink of possibility.

Shraga Bar-On and Yakir Paz<sup>3</sup> identify an ancient tradition of God and the angels casting lots by which Israel is chosen. Though obscure, the tradition survives for particularist polemical reasons (ironically). For the Gnostics, election by chance discredited Jewish claims. By contrast, for the Hellenists, Jewish election by chance was a definitive rebuttal to the Christian challenge to Judaism. In *dividing* the nations, each according to its portion, God assigns to Jews the task of proclaiming God's *unity* (חִלְקֵנוּ לְיַחַד עֵת־שָׁמוֹ)

## *Aleinu* as the litmus test of Jewish–Christian relations

The last two lines of the opening paragraph especially ('For they worship ... cannot save') have been a litmus test of interfaith tension since the *Aleinu* became an everyday prayer in the early Middle Ages. In what context might we presume to disdain the prayers of others? The traditional text draws on Second Isaiah.

to Egypt, which gives help that is *vain and empty* (הַבַּל וְרִיק) Isaiah 30:7; God is bemoaning the foolishness of trusting in Egypt)

They know nothing, whose carry their wooden idols and *worship a god that cannot save*.

(וּמִתְפַּלְלִים אֱלֹהִים לֹא יוֹשִׁיעַ) Isaiah 45:20)

The *Aleinu* draws on other phrasing from this part of Isaiah (Second Isaiah, in which the Persian Cyrus is called upon to deliver the Jews from exile in Babylon). In Isaiah 45 especially, we see the assertion of monotheism over monolatry: belief in one God, and not simply worship of one god among many): I am יְהוָה and there is no other. (אֲנִי יְהוָה וְאֵין עֹדִי) Isaiah 45:6)

Certainly, no one during the Babylonian exile could have been casting aspersions on Christianity. It is unlikely that Abba Arikha was doing so either in his use of Second Isaiah. There is no evidence of Christians taking offence until the second millennium CE. Once the *Aleinu* entered the core of the liturgy, it attracted Christian attention. The first recorded objection appears in a 14th-century handbook for inquisitors. Throughout Europe, the centuries pass; printing becomes industrialised; the Reformation arrives, then the Enlightenment. Over this period, the text from Second Isaiah is at first blacked out, then replaced by a blank line, then removed completely from the page.<sup>4</sup> In the 20th century, this line was restored in Orthodox siddurim, first in the newly founded State of Israel, then in North America (and, finally, six years ago in the United Synagogue).

Jewish Scholars (Korn, Lander, and Langer<sup>5</sup>) at the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, Boston College, have gone so far as to write:

Only in the late twentieth century did some Ashkenazi Jews restore this verse, particularly in Israel, but also in some American orthodox circles. Others, though, and *all liberal Jews, are grateful to the censors for removing what they consider an unnecessary denigration of their neighbors*.<sup>6</sup> [My emphasis]

Their assertion begs two questions.

First, are the said Liberal Jews themselves at fault if they assert that the only motivation to restore this line would be denigration? That would be a presumption of theological superiority over the Orthodox, just as the Orthodox in turn have (re)claimed superiority over those who worship wood

<sup>3</sup> Bar-On and Paz, "The Lord's Allotment is his People": The Myth of the Election of Israel by Casting of Lots and the Gnostic-Christian-Pagan-Jewish Polemic,' *Tarbiz* 79 (2010-11)

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Langer, 'The censorship of Aleinu in Ashkenaz and its Aftermath,' in, *The Experience of Jewish Liturgy: Studies Dedicated to Menahem Schmelzer*, Debra Reed Blank, ed., 2011.

<sup>5</sup> 'Jewish Understanding of Other', Center for Christian-Jewish Learning

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research\\_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/sourcebook/Aleynu.htm](http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/sourcebook/Aleynu.htm)

(whoever they may be). Do we want these scholars to speak for us? If Medieval Christendom had left the *Aleinu* alone, Progressive liturgists would nevertheless have redacted it according to Enlightenment values and beliefs. In 1841, the West London Synagogue went further than the Medieval Censors and reframed the lines about Jewish election, moving from negative to positive, praising God for giving us the Torah.<sup>7</sup>

Second — we should still enquire — why are the Orthodox reclaiming this line? For reasons of authentic tradition? To deny the validity of Christian redemption? Or simply to reject historical censorship on principle?

### Final thoughts

That the *Aleinu* is contentious and its text dynamic should not be surprising. We are all at risk of claiming ‘My god is bigger than your god!’<sup>8</sup>: whether more ethical, more transcendent and ineffable; less hewn from human passion; whether more partisan, supernatural, and open to propitiation; whether Progressive or Orthodox, Jewish or Christian, modern or ancient. In the rise and fall of the service, its cosmic themes offer a possible culmination. The language of the ancient prophets becomes the springboard from which we continue to leap towards the Eternal One.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.rabbiblock.com/archive/the-problem-with-the-Aleinu-adoration/>

<sup>8</sup> As the Spitting Image team put it back in 1989  
[http://spittingimage.wikia.com/wiki/My\\_God\\_Is\\_Bigger\\_Than\\_Your\\_God](http://spittingimage.wikia.com/wiki/My_God_Is_Bigger_Than_Your_God)