

U'Netaneh Tokef: Will the Real Author Please Stand Up

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U'Netaneh Tokef is a spiritually uplifting prayer recited on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. It is a *tefillah* that weaves Biblical verses and Talmudic statements into a poetic prayer that has become a centerpiece of the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur services. Some examples of its interpolated texts include: Chabakuk 1:5, “אִים וְנֹרָא—terrible and dreadful”; Bamidbar 24:7, “וְתִנְשֵׂא מַלְכוּתוֹ—His kingdom shall be exalted”; Yeshayahu 16:5, “וַיֵּשֶׁב עָלָיו בְּאֱמֶת—and He sits on it in truth”; *Pirkei Avot* 4:22, “הוּא הַדִּין הוּא הָעֵד—He is the witness, He is the Judge”; and a Gemara in *Ta’anit* 2:4, “בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה זִכְרָה הַנִּשְׁכַּחוֹת—blessed are You, Hashem, Who remembers all things forgotten.” The author of this *tefillah* seems to have predicated much of the language and concepts on earlier biblical and Talmudic texts. In a similar manner, the end of *U'Netaneh Tokef* speaks to the fleeting nature of our lives echoes *pesukim* in Tehillim, such as, “כַּחצִיר יָמָיו כְּצִיץ הַשָּׂדֶה כֵּן יִצִיץ—his days are as grass; as a flower of the field” (103:15), and “לְהַבֵּל דְּמָה יָמָיו כְּצֶל עוֹבֵר—his days are like a shadow which passes by” (144:4).

Who Wrote *U'Netaneh Tokef*?

I found in the writings of Rav Ephraim from Bonn that Rav Amnon from Mainz established U'Netaneh Tokef because of an episode which occurred...

**Ohr Zarua (1180-1250) Hilchot Rosh Hashana
276**

מצאתי מכתב ידו של ה"ר אפרים מבונא בר
יעקב. שר' אמנון ממגנצא יסד ונתנה תוקף על
מקרה הרע שאירע לו ...
ספר אור זרוע חלק ב - הלכות ראש השנה
סימן רעו

R. Yitzchak of Vienna, the author of *Ohr Zarua*, then recounts the following episode: A high-ranking Christian general wanted to convert all the Jews of Mainz and asked Rav Amnon to convert. After many requests, Rav Amnon replied that he needed a few days to think it over and would return to the general with a response but never did. This greatly angered the general, who arrested Rav Amnon. Rav Amnon apologized and said that the general should cut out his tongue which said he would return, suggesting that he might agree to convert, something Rav Amnon

never intended to do. The general responded that he would not cut out Rav Amnon's tongue but rather, he would punish each of Rav Amnon's limbs that did not obey the order to appear before the general. The general cut off Rav Amnon's legs and other extremities. The story continues that Rav Amnon returned home dismembered and asked to be carried to the synagogue on Rosh Hashana where he recited *U'Netaneh Tokef* and died at the conclusion of the prayer. The *Ohr Zarua* then tells us how *U'Netaneh Tokef* became part of our machzor:

Three days after [R. Amnon's] passing, he appeared in a dream to R. Kalonymus son of R. Meshulam ... and taught him the prayer of U'Netaneh Tokef and directed him to send it to the entire Diaspora.

ביום השלישי לטהרתו נראה במראות הלילה לרבנא קלונימוס בן רבנא משולם... ולימד לו את הפיוט ההוא ונתנה תוקף קדושת היום ויצו עליו לשלוח אותו בכל התפוצות הגולה.

This story is found in many machzorim, written next to *U'Netaneh Tokef*. It is highly unusual for a *piyut* or *tefillah* to be accompanied by an explanation of how it was conceived. Furthermore, it is not simply a modern phenomenon to have the story included in the machzor. An Oxford manuscript from 1205 has the story accompanying the *tefillah*.

To appreciate the significance of this story, a better understanding of its characters is needed:

1. The Kalonymus Family: In a responsum dealing with issues of paying taxes to the local government, the *Ohr Zarua*, Vol. III, *Baba Kammah* no. 560, identifies Rabbi Kalonymus, the person to whom Rav Amnon appeared in a dream, as the uncle of R. Simcha of Speyer (12th century–13th century). R. Simcha was the *Ohr Zarua's* teacher. The Kalonymus family was an aristocratic family who played an integral leadership role with the German Jewish communities from the 9th to the 13th century, specifically the Rhineland communities. Their leadership was valiantly displayed during the First and Second Crusades. They were not just leaders of the community but also well-known composers of prayers.
2. Rav Ephraim of Bonn (b. 1132) was a liturgical poet and commentator, a Talmudic scholar who served as *av beit din* (head of the Jewish court) and a teacher in Mainz and Speyer. He lived in Bonn in 1197, and only left the city three days before the Jews were massacred. Furthermore, Rav Ephraim of Bonn is known specifically for two things: the sharing of the story of Rav Amnon of Mainz and the recitation of *U'Netaneh Tokef*; and for his extensive knowledge of the prayers of Rabbi Eleazar HaKalir and, according to some, of Kalir's rebbe, Rabbi Yannai.

To summarize: R. Yitzchak of Vienna, the *Ohr Zarua*, who lived approximately 100 years after Rav Amnon of Mainz, tells the story of Rav Amnon in the name of Rav Ephraim of Bonn, an expert in the prayers of Kalir and Yannai. R. Yitzchak of Vienna has a direct connection through his teacher to the Kalonymus family who were reported to have received the prayer *U'Netaneh Tokef* in a dream from Rav Amnon of Mainz. This historical information will lead to the creation of a beautiful tapestry of understanding of *U'Netaneh Tokef*.¹

¹ *The Encyclopedia Judaica* provides further information on these personalities. See "Kalonymous," 11:747-748 and "Ephraim ben Jacob of Bonn," 6:460.

Is U'Netaneh Tokef Consistent with Talmudic Sources?

The major refrain of *U'Netaneh Tokef* is “ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רוע הגזירה”—repentance, prayer and charity help diminish the evil decree.” This statement seems to be based on a statement found in the Gemara:

R. Yitzchak said: *There are four things a person can do to destroy an evil decree: charity, prayer, changing one's name, and changing one's actions.*

Rosh Hashana 16b

ואמר רבי יצחק: ארבעה דברים מקרעין גזר דינו של אדם, אלו הן: צדקה, צעקה, שינוי השם, ושינוי מעשה.

מסכת ראש השנה דף טז:

Rabbi Shmuel Eidels (1555–1631), the Maharsha (ad loc.), asks why the author of *U'Netaneh Tokef* did not quote the Gemara fully, failing to include *shinui ha'shem*, change of name, in his list of actions necessary to diminish the evil decree. R. Eidels then suggests two answers:

Changing one's name has nothing to do with repentance from sin; rather, it is a means of changing one's *mazal*. R. Eidels cites the change in name of our patriarch and matriarch from Avram and Sarai to Avraham and Sarah. Their name change was not due to their sins but for a change in *mazal* to help them have a child. For this reason, it is not included in the *U'Netaneh Tokef* prayer. Rav Amnon of Mainz only used the actions listed in the Talmud that relate to repentance.

A second reason is that Rav Amnon of Mainz knew that when a person goes through the *teshuva* process on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, his/her identity changes as a result. The change of identity is in fact a form of existentially changing one's name. This seems to be the approach of Rambam to *shinui hashem*:

Part of the repentance process includes the repenter constantly calling out to God through tears and supplication; giving charity based on one's means; distancing oneself from the object that caused one to sin; changing one's name, meaning that "I am a different person and I am not the same person that performed these deeds"; changing one's ways and improving on them...

Rambam Hilchot Teshuva 2:4

מדרכי התשובה להיות השב צועק תמיד לפני השם בבכי ובתחנונים ועושה צדקה כפי כחו ומתרחק הרבה מן הדבר שחטא בו ומשנה שמו כלומר אני אחר ואיני אותו האיש שעשה אותן המעשים ומשנה מעשיו כולן לטובה ...

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה ב:ד

While this is not suggested by R. Eidels, another answer to the question can be found in Rosh's manuscript on the Talmudic phrase in Rosh Hashana. When the Rosh quotes this Gemara in a responsum (17:12), he presents the Gemara as saying that there are only **three** things that can diminish the evil decree. In the Rosh's manuscript of the Talmud changing one's name is mentioned as a *yesh omrim*, a supplemental opinion.

A list of only three things can also be found in the Jerusalem Talmud:

R. Eleazar said: *Three things nullify the evil decree and they are, prayer, charity and repentance and all three are derived from the same verse (Dvrei HaYamim II 7:14), "If My people upon whom My name is called, shall humble themselves and pray,"*

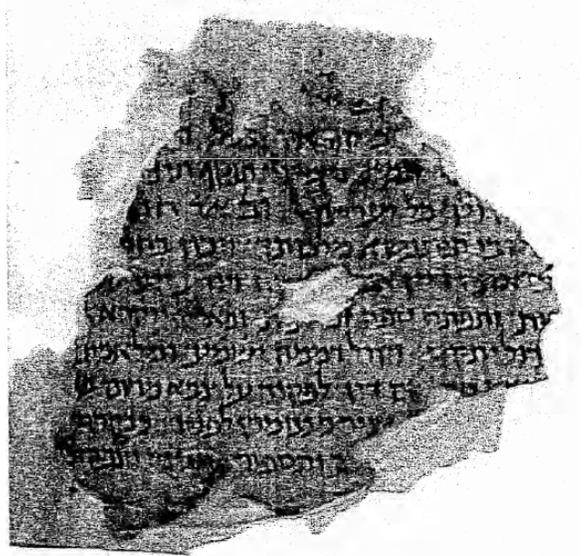
אמר רבי לעזר שלשה דברים מבטלין את הגזירה קשה ואילו הן תפילה וצדקה ותשובה ושלשתן בפסוק אחד ויכנעו עמי אשר נקרא שמי עליהם ויתפללו זו תפילה ויבקשו פני זו

a way of acknowledging the sinful behavior and distance created by sin in the relationship with God. The act of recognition and prayer is then followed by the need for action, *tzedakah*.

The Cairo Genizah Manuscript

A manuscript was found in the Cairo Genizah² that raises questions about the entire historical premise of *U'Netaneh Tokef*.

This manuscript is the text of *U'Netaneh Tokef*, and was clearly written before the 11th century C.E. Rav Amnon of Mainz could not have written *U'Netaneh Tokef*! This problem was publicized by many including Professor Daniel Goldschmidt (1895–1972), an expert on Jewish liturgy, in his *Machzor L'Yamim Noraim* pg. 42. Since the publication of Professor Goldschmidt's machzor, new manuscripts were discovered and it appears that *U'Netaneh Tokef* was written by a composer by the name of Yannai,³ who according to some was the teacher of R. Eleazer HaKalir and lived in Israel sometime between the 4th and 7th centuries. One critical question remains: If R. Ephraim of Bonn was an expert in the liturgy of Yannai, why would he attribute Yannai's *U'Netaneh Tokef* to R. Amnon?



U'Netaneh Tokef was placed in our Rosh Hashana prayers as part of the introduction to *Kedusha*. The piyut (prayer) that introduces *Kedusha* contained four sections. Prior to the First Crusade, a piyut of Rabbi Eleazer HaKalir was recited. The last section of the introduction, known as the *siluk*, narrates a conversation between the angels and God. The angels approach God and ask, "Why do the Jewish people continue to be in Your good grace? They don't treat You properly or listen to Your words. You should not forgive them!" Hashem defends us and the angels continue, "Why do You defend the Jewish people? They don't listen to You and are sinners." Once again Hashem responds and settles the questions. The angels then praise Hashem with the "*Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh...*"⁴ Sometime after the First Crusade, this *siluk* was removed and replaced with Yannai's *U'Netaneh Tokef*; for how could the Rhineland communities tolerate such an introduction to *Kedusha*? They witnessed unprecedented acts of martyrdom within the Jewish Community, acts of resistance against forced baptism by the Catholic Church, which included the taking of their own lives and the lives of their family. It did not seem appropriate to introduce *Kedusha* with a critique of the Jewish people by the angels when Jews were sacrificing their lives and the lives of their families in order to observe the Torah. The ideals found in

² The Cairo Genizah is a collection of manuscripts found in the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo. The manuscripts were written between the 9th century and 19th century and their time of writing is identified based on the type of paper they were written on and the language and style of the text.

³ Ya'akov S. Spiegel *Birur B'Divrei HaPaytan 'U'Teshuva U'Tefillah U'Tzedakah Ma'avirin et Ro'a HaGezeirah' V'al Kefifut HaPaytanim LeHalacha, Netuim* Vol. VII (2002): 23-42.

⁴ See Yosef Yahalom, *Piyut U'Metziut B'Shilhi HaZeman He'Atik* (1989), pp. 241-243.

Yannai's *U'Netaneh Tokef* seem much more apropos to the circumstances of the Rhineland community and this is why it replaced the original *siluk*.

This new historical context resolves the difficulty that arose regarding the language of *U'Netaneh Tokef*. Depending when Yannai lived, it is possible that his compositions are prior to the final redaction of the Talmud, which means there was no completed Talmudic text that Yannai was bound to. This explains why he did not include *shinui hashem* as one of the action items that one can use to help diminish difficult decrees. Additionally, even if he lived after the redaction of the Talmud, the compositions of *paytanim* from his era were generally based on the Talmud Yerushalmi, not the Talmud Bavli. If the actual prayer was composed in the 11th or 12th century, we would expect the composer to follow the Talmud Bavli and include all four activities in his formula to annul difficult Divine decrees. However, if Yannai was the composer, the listing of only three is consistent with the Talmud Yerushalmi's formulation. Furthermore, we can explain the deviation in order. The Talmud Yerushalmi's order is based on a verse in Chronicles that views atonement process from God's perspective.⁵ However, if one looks at atonement from the perspective of the order of actions a person should take to improve and nullify the evil decree, repentance must come first, followed by prayer and then charity.

U'Netaneh Tokef and its Relevance to the Crusades

U'NetanehTokef is relevant to the period of the Crusades.

Maimonides summarizes the laws of martyrdom in the fifth chapter of the Laws of Fundamental Principles of the Torah (*Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah*):

When an idol worshipper forces a Jew to violate one of the commandments of the Torah or face death, one should violate the commandment and not allow oneself to be killed because it states [in the Torah (Leviticus 18:5)] regarding commandments "So that one should fulfill them and live by them," they should live by them and not die by them. If one chooses death over violating the commandment, they are responsible for their own death. When is this true? Regarding all commandments except for idol worship, incest and murder. Regarding these three commandments, if one is told to violate them or die, one should choose death.

Rambam, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 5:1-2

כל בית ישראל מצווין על קדוש השם הגדול
הזה שנאמר ונקדשתי בתוך בני ישראל,
ומזהרין שלא לחללו שנאמר ולא תחללו את
שם קדשי, כיצד כשיעמוד עובד כוכבים
ויאנוס את ישראל לעבור על אחת מכל
מצות האמורות בתורה או יהרגו יעבור ואל
יהרג שנאמר במצות אשר יעשה אותם
האדם וחי בהם, וחי בהם ולא שימות בהם,
ואם מת ולא עבר הרי זה מתחייב בנפשו.
במה דברים אמורים בשאר מצות חוץ
מעבודת כוכבים וגלוי עריות ושפיכת דמים,
אבל שלש עבירות אלו אם יאמר לו עבור
על אחת מהן או תהרג, יהרג ואל יעבור
רמב"ם הלכות יסודי התורה ה:א-ב

The Rambam introduces the ideals of martyrdom with the obligation of every Jew to preserve his life. Yet there are exceptions, situations where one must give up one's life to observe certain mitzvot, and one who does so fulfills the mitzvah of *Kiddush Hashem*, of sanctifying God's name.

⁵ See R. Avraham ben Uziel (13th century), *Arugat HaBosem* Vol. II pg. 119 who writes that the verse presents the order based on effectiveness of receiving atonement. Prayer is least effective, charity is more effective and repentance is most effective.

During the Crusades, these situations were not only relevant to the Jewish people, but also they were the site of the most complex questions of martyrdom: the taking of the life of others—members of his/her immediate family. Some of the Tosafists reflect upon these experiences:

Rabbeinu Tam ruled that when there is a concern that someone will be forced by non-Jews to violate one's religion through torture that one cannot withstand, then there is a mitzvah to harm oneself, as we find in Gittin (57b) regarding the children who threw themselves into the sea.

Tosafot, Avodah Zarah 18a

ואל יחבל עצמו - אור"ת דהיכא שיראים פן יעבירום עובדי כוכבים לעבירה כגון ע"י יסורין שלא יוכל לעמוד בהם אז הוא מצוה לחבל בעצמו כי ההיא דגיטין (דף נז:): גבי ילדים שנשבו לקלון שהטילו עצמם לים (וע"ע תוס' גיטין דף נז: ד"ה קפצו).
תוספות מסכת עבודה זרה דף יח.

One of the Tosafists, Rabbeinu Elchanan (12th century, Dampierre, France), in his commentary to *Avodah Zarah* 18a, grapples with this question and concludes: "סברא הוא דשרי ומצוה היא—it is logical that it is permissible (to kill oneself and one's family) and it is a mitzvah to do so." The Tosafists introduce us to the challenging question of proactively killing oneself and one's family to avoid torture and forced baptism by the Christians during the Crusades. The Ritvah (1250-1330, Seville, Spain) echoes this concept and discusses the permissibility of proactively killing one's children to prevent them from being taken away and forcibly converted:

This is the source for those who slaughter young children during times of persecution to prevent them from being forcibly converted. This is what I have found in the writings of the Tosafists and these are concepts that require great Talmudic analysis, but the great rabbi (Rabbeinu Tam) already ruled [leniently] on the matter and I heard that the great sages of France permitted this as a matter of practical law.

Ritvah, Avodah Zarah 18a

ומכאן לומדין לשהוט הנערים בגזירות מפני העברת הדת, ע"כ מצאתי בגליוני התוספות, והם דברים שצריכין תלמוד ועיון גדול, אלא שכבר הורה זקן, ושמענו בשם גדולי צרפת שהתירו כן הלכה למעשה.
ריטב"א, עבודה זרה יח.

With this in mind, it is reasonable to suggest that *U'Netaneh Tokef* is a pre-Crusade text that was inserted into our Rosh Hashana prayers during the time of the Crusades. Many people were facing the challenge of being killed by Crusaders or committing suicide to avoid forced baptism. *U'Netaneh Tokef*, with its words "Who will live? Who will die?," and its mention of horrific death scenarios, is consistent with the struggles facing the Jews living in the Rhineland at this time. *U'Netaneh Tokef* was chosen as part of the introduction to *Kedusha* in place of Rabbi Eleazar HaKalir's introduction because of its thematic relevance to that time period. This *tefillah* resonated with the challenges of the Rhineland Jewish communities of Mainz, Speyer, and Worms.

Nevertheless, the question that needs to be asked is: Why is *U'Netaneh Tokeh* proactively attributed to Rav Amnon of Mainz?

There are times when the authors of a prayer are not those who originally composed the text but those who did something more important—lived the message of the text. An example includes a statement by the Tanna Shmuel haKatan. Shmuel haKatan is quoted (*Avot* 4:19) as having said, "in the downfall of your enemy, do not rejoice." However, this saying is found in a verse in *Mishlei* (24:17) that was written by King Solomon. Why is it attributed to Shmuel haKatan? It is

because several times in Talmud we see that Shmuel haKatan exemplified this concept in his own life:

Our rabbis taught: Shimon HaPakuli arranged the order of the 18 blessings [of the weekday Amidah] before Rabban Gamliel in Yavneh. Rabban Galmiel said to the rabbis: Is there someone who knows how to institute the blessing against apostates? Shmuel haKatan stood up and instituted it.

Berachot 28b

An incident occurred involving Rabban Gamliel who said: Bring seven people to the attic first thing in the morning. When he arrived, he found eight. He said: Whoever came without permission should leave. Shmuel haKatan stood up and said: I came without permission, and didn't come to be involved in the leap year but to learn the law ... In reality, it wasn't Shmuel haKatan who [was not invited] but rather someone else and [Shmuel haKatan] did this to protect the other from embarrassment.

Sanhedrin 11a

Another time, they were reclining in an attic in Yavneh and a heavenly voice stated: One of you is worthy of receiving the Divine presence but the generation is not worthy. They all assumed that [the voice] was referring to Shmuel haKatan. When he died, they eulogized him: He was humble, he was pious, a student of Hillel.

Sotah 48b

Only Shmuel haKatan, the humble individual who put the needs of others before his own, was worthy of instituting the prayer against the apostates. The prayer could not be instituted by someone who would enjoy watching the downfall of their enemies. It was instituted by Shmuel haKatan, who lived by the words "in the downfall of your enemy, do not rejoice." Shmuel haKatan may not have written the adage that focuses on modesty in the face of a defeated enemy, but he lived it, and that makes him the author of the text!

Perhaps Rav Amnon represents the community of Mainz. His name comes from the word *emunah*, faith. He represented the acts of faith performed by the members of the community of Mainz, Speyer, and Worms. People of *emunah* scribed the message of *U'Netaneh Tokef* through the lives they led. Whether R. Amnon was a single individual or a composite of many individuals who sacrificed their lives, it is he or them who wrote the prayer through their actions.

Perhaps that is what the *Ohr Zaruah* is relating when he sources the story of *U'Netaneh Tokef*. He uses the following language:

that R. Amnon of Mainz **instituted** *U'Netaneh Tokef*.

תנו רבנן: שמעון הפקולי הסדיר שמונה עשרה ברכות לפני רבן גמליאל על הסדר ביבנה. אמר להם רבן גמליאל לחכמים: כלום יש אדם שיודע לתקן ברכת המינים? עמד שמואל הקטן ותקנה.

ברכות כח:

מעשה ברבן גמליאל שאמר: השכימו לי שבעה לעלייה, השכים ומצא שמונה. אמר: מי הוא שעלה שלא ברשות? ירד! עמד שמואל הקטן ואמר: אני הוא שעליתי שלא ברשות, ולא לעבר השנה עליתי, אלא ללמוד הלכה למעשה הוצרכתי ... ולא שמואל הקטן הוה, אלא איניש אחרינא, ומחמת כיסופא הוא דעבד.

סנהדרין יא.

ושוב פעם אחרת היו מסובין בעלייה ביבנה, נתנה להן בת קול מן השמים ואמרה להן: יש בכם אדם א' שראוי שתשרה שכינה עליו, אלא שאין דורו זכאין לכך, נתנו עיניהם בשמואל הקטן, וכשמת, הספידוהו: הי עניו, הי חסיד, תלמידו של הלל.

סוטה מה:

שר' אמנון ממגנצא יסד ונתנה תוקף

He never mentions that R. Amnon actually composed it, but that he instituted it, perhaps alluding to the fact the prayer already existed.

We too have the opportunity to become the "authors" of the prayers we read and the Torah we study—when we internalize their messages, live by the prayers we articulate, and become true representatives of the norms and mores of the Torah that we study.

As we recite *U'Netaneh Tokef* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we should keep in mind the extreme challenges that the Jews of the Rhineland faced during the Crusades. They guaranteed the immortality of the Jewish experience through their sacrifice of life, and we can guarantee the eternity of the covenantal relationship by scribing the norms and mores of Torah onto hearts and souls. Our willingness to embrace Torah ideals, creating a personal and communal rendezvous with God empowers us and allows us to become the authors of a tradition forged thousands of years ago. Hopefully our *teshuva*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* will enable us to be scribed in the book of life.