

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

The Image of The Other  
in Jewish Interpretations of *Alenu*\*

Jeffrey Hoffman

At the center of the ancient Jewish prayer, *Alenu*, stands the image of the non-Jewish Other, whom it contrasts with Jews, the only worshipers of the true God. *Alenu* juxtaposes Israel's correct religion with the Other's erroneous religion. There is a long history of Jewish interpretation of *Alenu*. Some acknowledge and even grotesquely expand the negative image of the non-Jewish Other; others diminish and even deny it. Thus, Jewish interpretations of *Alenu*, over time and across various geographical locations, form an interesting bellwether of Jewish approaches to the Other in general. A comprehensive presentation would require a book length treatment. Rather, this essay will survey representative interpretations over the centuries.

### The Text and its History

Before turning to these interpretations, let us turn to the prayer itself, its text and its history. This article will refer regularly to this contextual translation of the prayer, one that takes into account the text's historical, literary, and grammatical context.<sup>1</sup> While there can be no translation that completely

---

\* I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Ruth Langer for graciously reading several drafts and suggesting many improvements in both style and content. These have certainly helped to sharpen my argument. Any remaining faults are, of course, my own.

<sup>1</sup> Here I am appropriating language and concepts explicated by Stephen Garfinkel in a discussion of interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, but these are perfectly applicable to the liturgy as well. See his essay and extensive bibliography in "Clearing *Peshat* and *Derash*," in Magne Saebø, ed., *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co., 1996), II: 129-134. For addi-

eliminates the subjective predilections of the translator, a contextual translation endeavors as much as possible to minimize subjectivity and place the text into its original setting.

It is our duty to praise the Lord of all,  
to ascribe greatness to the former of creation,  
that he did not make us like the nations of the lands  
And did not place us like the families of the earth.  
That he did not make our lot like theirs,  
nor our fate like all their multitudes.  
For they bow to vanity and emptiness,  
and pray to a god who does not save.  
But we bow and prostrate and thank the king of kings,  
the holy one blessed is he.  
For he stretches out the heavens and establishes the earth.  
His seat of glory is in the heavens above,  
and his powerful presence is in the highest heights.  
He is our God, there is no other.  
He is our true king, there is no other.  
As it says in his Torah:  
“Know therefore this day and keep in mind that the Lord  
alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no  
other” (Dt. 4:39).

Therefore, we hope in you, Lord, our God,  
to soon see your powerful splendor.  
(And to see you) remove detestable things<sup>2</sup> from the earth,  
cut down idols, and perfect the world in the kingdom of the  
Almighty.  
All flesh would (then) call on your name,  
all the wicked of the earth would turn to you.  
All that dwell in the world would acknowledge and know  
that to you every knee bends and every tongue swears.  
Before you, Lord our God, they will bow and fall (upon their  
knees),

---

tional analysis of these two types of exegesis, see Uriel Simon, “The Religious Significance of the Peshat,” trans. Edward Greenstein, *Tradition* 23, no. 2 (1988): 41-63.

<sup>2</sup> *Gilulim*, a derogatory word for idols. See Deut. 29:16.

and they would ascribe honor to your glorious name.  
 All would accept the yoke of your kingship.  
 May you reign over them soon and forever.  
 For the kingdom is yours, may you reign forever in glory,  
 as it says in your Torah:  
 “The Lord will reign forever and ever” (Ex. 15:18).  
 And it is said:  
 “And the Lord shall be king over all the earth; in that day  
 there shall be one Lord with one name” (Zech. 14:9).<sup>3</sup>

*Alenu* thus consists of two discrete sections. Relevant here is that the first declares that “we,” Israel, are grateful that we worship the Lord of *all*; *all* others worship nothingness.<sup>4</sup> The second section asks that since the God that we worship is the only God in the cosmos—therefore, may you, God, cause all people to accept you as the one God. These two sections work together to express a triumphalist message: We praise God because he designated us as the only ones who worship the only true God and we hope that “all flesh,” “all the wicked

---

<sup>3</sup> Translation based upon the text as it appears in Seligmann Baer, *Seder Avodat Yisrael* (Roedelheim, 1868), 131-132, except for the oft-censored line, *shehem mishtahvim...*, omitted there. For that line, I use the version in I. Davidson, S. Assaf, B.I. Joel, eds., *Siddur R. Saadya Gaon* (Jerusalem: Mekitse Nirdamim, 1951), 221. Aside from this and alternatives to the word *yeqaro*, “his glory,” both discussed below, there are only a few minor lexical variations in the textual history of this prayer, none of which are significant enough to require discussion here. See Daniel Goldschmidt, *Mahzor Leyamim Hanora'im*, (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1970), 1:150; Naphtali Wieder, “Regarding an Anti-Christian *Gematria* (in the prayer *Alenu*)” [Hebrew], *Sinai* 76 (1975): 1-14, republished with corrections and additions in Naphtali Wieder, *The Crystallization of the Texts of Jewish Prayer in East and West* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mekhon Ben Tzvi and Hebrew University, 1998), 2: 453-468; Yaakov Elbaum, “Regarding Two Textual Changes in the Prayer *Alenu*” [Hebrew] *Tarbiz* 42 (1973): 204-208.

<sup>4</sup> The word *kol*, “all,” is used twice in the first section in just these ways. The first *kol* refers to the Lord of “all.” The second refers to “all” of their – the Others’ – multitudes. This word is a kind of a *leitmotif* in the prayer as a whole. The second section contains seven occurrences of the word *kol*, each of which refers to “all” of the non-believing Others.

of the earth” will similarly join us and accept the one true God.

The text of *Alenu* can first be documented in the 10<sup>th</sup> century as part of the introduction to the *Malkhuyot* (“Kingship verses”) section of the *Amidah*<sup>5</sup> of *Musaf* (the additional service) on *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year. It is found in that location in *Siddur Rav Saadya Gaon*<sup>6</sup> as well as in several documents from the genizah.<sup>7</sup> It ultimately appeared as

---

<sup>5</sup> The central prayer of every service, consisting of an extended series of blessings: nineteen on weekdays, seven on Sabbaths and holidays, but nine on Rosh Hashanah *musaf*.

<sup>6</sup> *Siddur R. Saadya Gaon*, 221.

<sup>7</sup> These documents, though not datable with exactitude, also probably derive from approximately the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Scholars had previously identified two genizah fragments: Ms. Oxford 2721/13 – see Ismar Elbogen, “Die Tefilla für die Festtage,” *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 55 (1911): 426-446, 586-599; Ms. Oxford 2700 – see M. Margalio, *Hilkhot Eretz Yisrael Min Ha-Genizah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1974), 148-149. A fresh search of the genizah material on the Friedberg Genizah Project (November 23, 2014) yields additional examples. To the extent that the documents include at least a number of lines from the prayer, they all either match, or are very close to the text in *Siddur Rav Saadia Gaon*:

- Ms. Cambridge T-S H18.25 includes the entire text of *Alenu*.
- Ten documents include a significant portion of the text of *Alenu*. Mss. Cambridge T-S 8H23.1, T-S AS 62.36, T-S AS 105.114, and Or. 1081 1.52; Mss. JTS ENA 603.4, ENA 1208.6, ENA 2108.6, and ENA 2213.1; Ms. Paris AIU IV.A.110; and Ms. Vienna: H 117.
- Nine documents include only the words *alenu leshabbe’ah* (i.e., as instructions to recite this prayer) or the first line or two of the prayer: Mss. Cambridge T-S 18.31, T-S 10K20.6, T-S Misc. 34.5, T-S AS 100.160, T-S AS 107.154, and Or. 1080 10.2; Ms. JTS ENA 3474.6; Ms. Paris AIU IV.A.119; Ms. Philadelphia CAJS; and Ms. Halper 174.

All of the examples are for the *Musaf* service of *Rosh Hashanah*. Ms. JTS ENA 3474.6 is identified by the Lieberman Catalog as for the *Amidah* of *Shabbat/Haggini*. However, the context of the surrounding prayers makes it clear that it is indeed part of the *Musaf* service of *Rosh Hashanah*. The context of Ms. JTS ENA 2108.6, however, is not entirely clear and may not derive from *Rosh Hashanah*. See also Ezra Fleischer, *Eretz-Israel Prayer and Prayer Rituals: As Portrayed in the Geniza Documents* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988), 127. Although *Alenu* is also found in

part of the introduction to *Malkhuyot* in the liturgy for *Rosh Hashanah* in all rites. While there is one Genizah fragment that contains *Alenu* in the liturgy for *Yom Kippur* in its *Musaf* service, it was incorporated into the liturgy for *Yom Kippur* at a slightly slower pace than it was into that of *Rosh Hashanah*.<sup>8</sup>

the 9<sup>th</sup> c. *Seder Rav Anram Gaon*, Daniel Goldschmidt, in his critical edition (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1971), 21, 141, indicates that it is likely a later addition there.

<sup>8</sup> It is not found where one might expect it in the *Amidah* of *Musaf* on *Yom Kippur* in *Seder Rav Anram*, 166-168, nor in *Siddur Rav Saadia Gaon*, 262-264, nor in Ms. Oxford Corpus Christi College 133, the first precisely dated (1189) manuscript in which *Alenu* appears outside the *Rosh Hashanah* liturgy (see below, n. 11), nor in the *Mishneh Torah* (12<sup>th</sup> century), nor in several twelfth to thirteenth century liturgical sources deriving from Haside Ashkenaz, e.g., *The Siddur of R. Solomon ben Samson of Garmaise (including the) Siddur Haside Ashkenas* or in *Rabbi Eleazar of Worms, Rokeach, Pirushy Siddur HaTefilah LaRokeach: A Commentary on the Jewish Prayerbook*, ed., Moshe Hershler and Yehudah A. Hershler (Jerusalem: Machon Harav Hershler, 1992), 2 vols., or in *Or Zarua* by David Ben Judah (ca. 1240-ca. 1320).

Five lines of the prayer appear first in a Genizah fragment, Ms. Cambridge T-S Misc. 10.210, identified as part of the *Amidah* of *Musaf* for *Yom Kippur* by the Friedberg Genizah Project Transcriptions Team and by the personal handlist of Menahem Ben Sasson. It subsequently appears in that location in the following sources:

- Simḥah ben Samuel (11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century), *Mahzor Vitry*, ed. Aryeh Goldschmidt, (Jerusalem: Mekhon Otsar Haposkim, 2009), 3:781.
- Abraham ben Nathan Hayarḥi (1155-1215), *Sefer Hamanḥig* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1978), 351 (introduced by *yesh omrim*, “there are those who say” indicating that it was not yet a wide-spread custom).
- Nathan bar Yehudah (13<sup>th</sup> century), *Sefer Hamahḥkim* (Cracow: Eshkol, 1909), 41.
- Aaron ben Jacob Hakohen of Lunel (end of 13<sup>th</sup> C. - first half of 14<sup>th</sup> C.), *Orḥot Hayyim* (Jerusalem: Yosef Dov Steizberg and Son, 1986), *Siman* 37, p. 238.
- Jacob ben Asher (14<sup>th</sup> century), *Arba’ah Turim* OH 621.
- David Abudraham (14<sup>th</sup> century), *Abudraham Hashalem* (Jerusalem: Usha, 1963), p. 287.

Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin (Philadelphia, New York: The Jewish Publication Society, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1993 - a translation of the 1972 Hebrew translation and revision of the original 1913 German edition) does not mention *Alenu* in connection with *Yom Kippur*

*Aleynu* gradually became one of the concluding prayers of daily services beginning in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries in the Franco-German region. It entered the morning *Shaharit* service first, and within a couple of centuries, it concluded all services, three times a day, throughout the entire liturgical year.<sup>9</sup>

The reason for this immense extension of this prayer's recitation (from three times a year on the High Holidays to three times a day, every day) has been much studied. Stefan Reif denigrated attempts to explain it as a result of the supposed chanting of *Aleynu* by the martyrs in the blood libel in Blois in 1171, writing, "[S]uch tendencies to see all Jewish liturgical developments as the result of persecution are not historically convincing, especially since the more general usage seems to have predated the massacre." Reif's own explanation is that *Aleynu* was added at the end of the newly canonized morning, afternoon, and evening services because of "the need for formal conclusions to match what had come to be regarded as the formal body of the liturgical text."<sup>10</sup> In other words, there was nothing specific about the content of *Aleynu* that recommended it to serve as the conclusion of the thrice-daily services; it simply fit the need for formal conclusions to these services which themselves had recently become canonized by geonic authority.

While Reif is correct that the "lachrymose" theory of Jewish history has been marshaled too often in explaining liturgical innovation, in this case, it may be warranted. He cites no examples to support his claim that the "general usage" (i.e.

---

at all. Stefan Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer: New Perspectives on Jewish Liturgical History* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 209,. simply notes that the prayer first found its place in the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah before being incorporated into the *Yom Kippur* liturgy without saying when.

<sup>9</sup> For the general history, see Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 71-72, 119, and Daniel Goldschmidt, *Mahzor Leyamim Hanora'im*, I:28 (in the Introduction).

<sup>10</sup> Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer*, 209.

daily usage) of *Alenu* preceded the Blois massacre; similarly, he provides no evidence to support his alternative explanation that *Alenu* simply fulfilled a need for a concluding passage in the newly canonized worship services. In fact, there is no evidence of *Alenu* in a liturgical location other than the High Holiday prayers before the Blois massacre. The earliest liturgical document in which *Alenu* appears outside the service of the High Holidays is dated no later than 1189.<sup>11</sup> Shortly thereafter, it is mentioned as the conclusion of the daily morning service in the circle of Ḥaside Ashkenaz by Eleazar ben Judah of Worms (d. c. 1230), who cited it in the name of his teacher, R. Judah the Pious (d. 1217)<sup>12</sup> and it is found in that location in several thirteenth-century Ashkenazic sources.<sup>13</sup> Many of these same works cited Joshua as the author of *Alenu*, apparently as a support for the innovation. The fact that *Alenu* is still not found in the daily services in works by medieval Sefardic sources, e.g., Maimonides (d. 1204) and Abudraham (fl. 1340), supports the impression that its movement to daily use began in Ashkenazic circles soon after Blois, and proliferated in French-German locales within a couple of centuries.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ms. Oxford Corpus Christi College 133. *Alenu* occurs there in three places: at the end of the weekday morning service, in a section early in that service called *Ma'amadot* (on this, see the discussion below), as well as introducing *Malkhuyot* on *Rosh Hashanah*. On this manuscript see Malachi Beit-Arie, *The Only Dated Medieval Hebrew Manuscript Written in England (1189 C.E.) and the Problem of Pre-Expulsion Anglo-Hebrew Manuscripts* (London: Valmadonna Trust Library, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> See *Sefer Haroqe'ah Hagadol* (Jerusalem: S. Weinfeld, 1960), 221.

<sup>13</sup> *Siddur of R. Solomon ben Samson of Worms*, ed. Moshe Hershler, (Jerusalem: Hemed, 1971), 126; Menahem ben Solomon Meiri, *Bet Habehirah al Masekhet Berakhot* (Jerusalem: Makhon Hatalmud Hayisraeli Hashalem, 1960), 118; Jacob ben Asher, *Arba'ah Turim*, OH 133; Nathan ben Judah, *Sefer Mahkim*, ed. J. Freimann (Cracow: Eshkol, 1909), 13; and the *Kol Bo* (rpt. Tel Aviv: n.d.), 9b - all cited in Elliot R. Wolfson, "Hai Gaon's Letter and Commentary on 'Aleynt: Further Evidence of Moses de Leon's Pseudepigraphic Activity," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 81, nos. 3-4 (January-April, 1991): 381-382.

<sup>14</sup> Israel Yuval's presentation of this argument, though flawed, seems credible. See my discussion of it below and in his *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. Barbara Harshav and Jonathan Chipman (Berkeley: University of

It is, in fact, reasonable to consider the movement of *Alenu* from *Rosh Hashanah* to daily worship as another example of vicarious vengeance for the antisemitic attack at Blois.<sup>15</sup> It is true that there are no clear statements in the sources connecting the introduction of *Alenu* into the daily service with the attacks at Blois. However, this may simply be the result of prudence and self-preservation in the face of a powerful majority culture. Nevertheless, the fact that *Alenu* as a whole forms a strident statement of pride in the Jewish religion's correct understanding and worship of the true God and a condemnation of the nations' false theology and rituals made it an appropriate vehicle for expressing defiant self-defense.<sup>16</sup> The point is not, as Israel Yuval (and others) hold—see below—that *Alenu* was pushed into prominence as a daily prayer in reaction to the Jews of Blois actually chanting it as they were martyred, since there is indeed reason to question the report of the Jews actually chanting *Alenu* at Blois.<sup>17</sup> The point is that the Jewish communities of the region appear to have taken that report quite seriously and literally. It is *Alenu's reported*

---

California Press, 2006), 119, 129-133, 192-203. See also Susan L. Einbinder, "Pucelleina of Blois: Romantic Myths and Narrative Conventions," *Jewish History* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 29-46.

<sup>15</sup> See my "Akdanut: History, Folklore, and Meaning," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 161-183, especially 171f., for another example of this same phenomenon, in the same region, less than a century earlier. In the case of *Akdanut*, it is doubtful, and ultimately irrelevant, whether the author meant his poem as a protest against Crusader violence. The poem, as a result of the Yiddish folktale that extolled the poet as an avenging hero, became a paean of Jewish triumph and a source of emotional relief in the centuries following the Crusades.

<sup>16</sup> *Alenu*, and especially its second paragraph, accords with Arthur Green's characterization of "The avenging God of post-Crusades Ashkenaz." See his "Shekhinah, The Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs," *AJS Review* 26, no. 1 (April 2002): 30, n. 118. Green, in turn, is here citing Israel Yuval in Yuval's "Vengeance and Curse, Blood and the Libel: From Holy Libels to Blood Libels," [Hebrew], *Zion* 58, no. 1 (1993): 34-45, esp. 36.

<sup>17</sup> See the report of Ephraim of Bonn in M. Weiner, *Emek Habacha von R. Joseph ha-Cohen* (Leipzig: O. Leiner, 1858), Hebrew appendix, 8. On viewing the report as a discourse with its own agenda as opposed to an objective and accurate account, see Kirsten A. Fudeman, *Vernacular Voices: Language and Identity in Medieval French Jewish Communities* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 60-63; 70.

role that is crucial. It is quite plausible that Jewish communities in the region, following the report about Blois, began to chant *Alenu* on a daily basis in support of their faith that the martyrs of Blois went to their deaths singing of the superiority of Judaism over Christianity. The very fact that the Jews showed themselves willing to die for their faith indicated to medieval Jews the truth of Judaism, and the testimony of their chanting *Alenu*—whose theme echoed this triumphalist view—only emphasized the ultimate vindication of the martyrs and their religion.

The question of when *Alenu* was originally composed, and for what purpose, has not been resolved. Many scholars assert that *Alenu* derived from the talmudic period based on the citation in rabbinic literature—not of *Alenu* itself—but of one small passage that introduces the next section, the *Zikhronot* (“Remembrance”) verses in the service for *Rosh Hashanah*.<sup>18</sup> Daniel Goldschmidt, however, wisely cast doubt on this theory since it was based almost entirely on under-documented speculation.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> The rabbinic references to this brief passage is found in yRH 1:3, 57a; yAZ 1:2, 39c; bRH 27a; PDRQ 151a (Buber); *Tanḥuma, Ha’azinu* 4. See Leopold Zunz, *Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden historisch entwickelt*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Frankfurt am Main, 1892; rpt. Hildesheim, 1966), 386-387. The Hebrew edition, *Haderashot Beyisrael Vehishtalshelotam Hahistorit*, ed. and revised Ḥanokh Albeck, (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1954), 181, n. 74, adds the note: “*Alenu leshabbe’ah*, therefore, was not composed against Christianity.” See also: Kaufmann Kohler, “*Alenu*,” *Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company: 1906), 1: 336-338; Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 119-120; Hayyim Herman Kieval, *The High Holy Days: A Commentary on the Prayerbook of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur* (Jerusalem: The Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2004), 152, n. 63; Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud: Forms and Patterns*, trans. Richard Sarason (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1977), 272, n. 42, a translation and revision of his *Prayer in the Period of the Tanna’im and the Amora’im: Its Nature and Patterns* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964), 173, n. 41; and Joseph Yahalom, “*Piyyut* as Poetry,” in *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lee I. Levine (New York and Philadelphia: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and The American Schools of Oriental Research, 1987), 114.

<sup>19</sup> *Mahzor Leyamim Hanora’im*, I: 28 of the Introduction.

Before *Alenu* can be documented in the liturgy, it appears in an ancient mystical text that is almost certainly earlier, in *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, part of the *Hekhalot* or *Merkavah* mysticism literature. There, R. Akiba recites the prayer in gratitude for emerging safely from the experience of being granted heavenly visions as a “descender to/in the chariot,” that is, a mystic who has ascended heavenward to view the *hekhalot*, “sanctuaries,” the angels, and, ultimately, God. The two recensions of this prayer both resemble closely the liturgical text of *Alenu* (including the second paragraph), but there are some differences, most strikingly that both of the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* texts mingle singular and the plural subject(s)/speaker(s), while the liturgical versions of *Alenu* include only the plural forms. Thus instead of beginning with *Alenu leshabbe'ah*, “It is our duty to praise,” the longer recension begins, *Alai leshabbe'ah*, “it is my duty to praise.” Both then go on to say, in the plural, *shelo asanu*, “who has not made us,” but then return to the singular in the phrase *shelo sam helki*, “who has not made my portion.”<sup>20</sup>

Scholars offer divergent interpretations of the intersection of these texts. On the basis of the appearance of *Alenu* in *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, Meir Bar-Ilan posited that this prayer originated in the circle of the *Merkavah* mystics and dated it to the 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries, C.E.<sup>21</sup> From there, according to Bar-Ilan, it

---

<sup>20</sup> See Michael D. Swartz, “*Alay le-shabbeah*: A Liturgical Prayer in *Ma'aseh Merkavah*,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 77, nos. 2-3 (October 1986 - January 1987): 179-180, nn. 2, 5, and 9 for bibliographic information about Rabbi Akiba's prayer. See also Peter Schafer's critical edition of *Hekhalot* literature, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: Hans-Georg von Mutius, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1981), paras. 544-596.

<sup>21</sup> *Meqorah shel Tefillat 'Alenu Leshabbe'ah*, *Da'at* 43 (1999): 22, n. 85. See also his extensive argument there with those who place *Hekhalot* literature at a slightly later date. Bar-Ilan had made the same argument twelve years before in his book *The Mysteries of Jewish Prayer and Hekhalot* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1987), 38-39. This article rebuts point by point Israel Ta-Shma's argument. Opinions about the date of the *Hekhalot* literature vary from the tannaitic period (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c.) to the late geonic period (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> c.). For a summary, see Rachel Elijor, *The Three*

entered the liturgy of *Rosh Hashanah*.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, Israel Ta-Shma claimed that *Alenu* did not originate in *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, but instead *Alenu* derived from the liturgy of the *ma'amadot* in the Second Temple period.<sup>23</sup> From there, it entered both *Ma'aseh Merkavah* and the liturgy for *Rosh Hashanah*.<sup>24</sup> The main issue allowing these widely diverging opinions is that, while the text of *Alenu* seems largely appropriate to both contexts, its themes and literary style are also somewhat discordant with both. The most reasonable approach is that of Michael Swartz, who considers *Alenu* an independent passage that was adapted for use in both contexts.<sup>25</sup> Of these, the *Rosh Hashanah* liturgy became the source of *Alenu's* spread to all other services.

### *Alenu* and Jewish Views of the Other

As *Alenu's* content compares Jews and the religious Other, Jewish interpretations of *Alenu*, over time and across various geographical locations, form an interesting bellwether

---

*Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford/ Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), 232, n.3.

<sup>22</sup> Aaron Mirsky attempted to prove, on the basis of literary analysis alone, that *Alenu* derived from the period between the Bible and the beginning of the Mishnah. See his *Hapiyyut: The Development of Post Biblical Poetry in Erets Israel and the Diaspora* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990), 72-74.

<sup>23</sup> On the *ma'amadot*, see Jacob Liver and Daniel Sperber, "Mishmarot and Ma'amadot," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 14:317-319; and Ephraim.E. Urbach, "Mishmarot U'Ma'amadot" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 42 (1973): 304-327.

<sup>24</sup> Israel M. Ta-Shma, "Meqorah Umeqomah shel Tefillat 'Alenu Leshabbe'ah' Basiddur Hatefillah: Seder Hama'amadot U'she'elat Siyyum Hatefillah," in *Sefer Zikaron L'Efrayim Talmage*, ed. Barry Walfish (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 1992-1993), I; 85-98, reprinted with an abbreviated title in Ta-Shma's, *The Early Ashkenazic Prayer: Literary and Historical Aspects* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2003), 139-153. See also Kenneth E. Berger, "Issues and Developments in the Liturgy of Ashkenaz During the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: The *Arvit* Service" (Ph.D. diss.: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2006), 202-209.

<sup>25</sup> Swartz, "Alay le-shabbeah," 190. See also Stefan Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer*, 208.

of Jewish approaches to the Other. Our survey will demonstrate a movement from an ancient and medieval severely negative image to a softening and eventual rejection of the obvious meaning of the received language in the modern period as Jews find ever greater acceptance.

### 1. *Alenu* in the *Hekhalot* Literature: The Negative Image of Non-Jewish Nations

*Ma'aseh Merkavah* depicts Rabbi Akiva as narrating the details of his mystical ascent to Rabbi Yishmael. In the final stage of his visionary journey, he relates, "I saw 6,400,000,000 angels of service before the throne of glory, and I saw the knot of the *tefillin*<sup>26</sup> of (a multi-word, untranslatable, name) the God of Israel, and I gave praise for all of my limbs." Following this, is the text of Rabbi Akiba's praise, namely, *Alenu*. "Praise" (*shevah*) is, of course, the root of the second word in *Alenu*.

Here, the meaning of *Alenu* flows from its specific setting as the climax of a successful cosmic journey.<sup>27</sup> *Alenu* expresses Rabbi Akiba's thanksgiving for his safe ascent and vision of God upon God's throne of glory. Rabbi Akiba's immediate turn from personally experiencing the reality of Israel's God in the most palpable, forceful, compelling, and persuasive way to declaring, over and over, the falsity of non-Jewish nations' worship constitutes a most rhetorically powerful condemnation of the non-Jewish Other. This censure of the Other's mistaken worship is the central message of his "praise."

---

<sup>26</sup> God's *tefillin* (phylacteries) are mentioned in bBer 7a and bMen 35b.

<sup>27</sup> On deriving meaning from a text's setting, see Yitshak Heinemann, *The Ways of the Aggadah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1970), chapter 12; Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1989), 2f.; Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), especially 1-19.

This is consistent with the negative view of the Other in this early form of Jewish mysticism. It continues the generally negative view of the nations in the Bible and rabbinic literature and anticipates the especially antagonistic stance of medieval Kabbalah. What the *Hekhalot* tradition adds to the biblical and rabbinic views is its cosmic element: Not only are the nations not the chosen of God, but Rabbi Akiba's experience testifies that from the vantage point of the highest heaven, from the seat of God himself, their worship is false and misguided.

## 2. *Alenu* In The *Rosh Hashanah* Liturgy: The Negative Image of Non-Jewish Nations Defines the Positive Image of the Jewish Nation

Just as the context in which *Alenu* is embedded in the passages from the *Hekhalot* literature reveals something unique about the condemnation of the Other in the prayer, so too does *Alenu's* context in the *Rosh Hashanah musaf* service. This service embeds three clusters of ten biblical verses on the themes of God's sovereignty, remembrance, and the shofar respectively.<sup>28</sup> Prayers introduce and conclude each cluster, leading, in the repetition, to a series of shofar blasts. *Alenu's* two paragraphs surround the *Malkhuyot* ("Kingship verses") and consequently the root *m-l-kh*, "king," occurs four times in the first paragraph and seven times in the second paragraph.

This focus on God's kingship shapes the central message of *Alenu* in this context. Worshipers enact the role of loyal subjects of their divine king, publicly and communally declaring their allegiance at the beginning of a new year. One of the classic roles of the Other is to function as a foil against which a people defines itself.<sup>29</sup> The message proclaimed as

---

<sup>28</sup> The structure and content of these sections is discussed in mRH 4:6-8; bRH 32b, and yRH.4:7, 59c.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Laurence J. Silberstein, "Others Within and Others Without: Rethinking Jewish Identity and Culture," in Laurence J. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn, eds., *The Other in Jewish Thought and*

another new year begins is “we” are not like “them.” “We” serve the one and only true divine king. “They” serve false kings. As R. Joseph Caro (1488-1575) wrote in his *Bet Yosef*, “*Alenu leshabbe’ah* was instituted only because we are (about to) recite the Kingship verses. (Therefore), we first praise God, may he be blessed, (through the words of *Alenu*) for having separated us from the misguided ones (*hato’im*).”<sup>30</sup> This, then, is the key meaning of chanting *Alenu* on New Year’s day: By invoking the misguided path of the Others, the in-group—the Jewish People—declares to itself and to its divine king its fealty and loyalty to the one true God.

*Alenu’s* placement in this section of the *Rosh Hashanah* service is relatively modest and obscure. Although *Rosh Hashanah* is an important holiday, *Alenu* is tucked inside the third blessing (out of nine) in only one of the four *Amidot* of the holiday, and even here it serves merely as the introduction to the featured section, the *Malkhuyot* (Kingship verses). This placement reflects a modest kind of confidence: It perpetuates the biblical and rabbinic vaunting of Israel as the Chosen People, but it does not broadcast it.

### 3. A 12<sup>th</sup>-Century Version of *Alenu*: An Explicitly Negative Image of Christians

An early version of *Alenu* found in a few late twelfth-century manuscripts contains wording not found in other texts of the prayer. All other versions describe non-Jewish worship fairly generically, saying, “For they bow down to vanity and emptiness and pray to a god who cannot save.”<sup>31</sup> In a manuscript dated 1189 that French Jews brought with them to

---

*History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity* (New York: NYU Press, 1994), 5f.

<sup>30</sup> On the *Tur*, OH 591, s.v. *V’omer alenu leshabbe’ah*. Compare R. Joel Sirkes (1561-1640), in his *Bayit Hadash* commentary there.

<sup>31</sup> This line was the subject of repeated censorship and to this day it is missing in most non-Orthodox versions of the prayer. More on this below.

London and in a few parallels from that world, we find a grotesquely expanded version of this line, as follows:<sup>32</sup>

For they bow to vanity and emptiness—a man of ash, blood, bile, rotting flesh (inhabited by) maggots; (those who bow down to this man are) defiled men and women, adulterers and adulteresses, dying in their iniquity and rotting in their wickedness, decaying in the dust, rotten with maggots and worms—and pray to a god who cannot save.

As Ruth Langer observes, “This is apparently a direct reference to Jesus, emphasizing his base humanity and denying his resurrection; it asserts in graphic terms that his body decomposed like anyone else’s.”<sup>33</sup> What is arresting is the particular vehemence, intensity, and fervor with which this version transforms the prayer to express a complete disdain and scorn for the specifically Christian Other.

The fact that this version of *Aleinu* is not known beyond a few, isolated manuscript leaves is not surprising. If anything, the fact that this reading survived Christian censorship at all is remarkable. Nevertheless, given the overall theme of the prayer, it is not altogether unexpected that it became the locus for an expansion to vehement anti-Other wording. Israel

---

<sup>32</sup> Ms. Oxford Corpus Christi College 133, 72b. An additional three manuscripts with similar, but not identical, versions were found by Moshe Hallamish, discussed in his *Kabbalah: In Liturgy, Halakah and Customs* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2000), 627-630. One of these manuscripts (Ms. Paris BN heb. 391) is incomplete, and the page is torn in the middle of the prayer, perhaps - but only perhaps - deliberately. The other two are Ms. Paris BN heb. 633, which Neubauer identified as deriving from the twelfth-thirteenth c. and Rabbi Jacob Ben Jehuda Hazan of London, *The Etz Hayyim*, ed. Israel Brodie, (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1962), 126, written in 1287. All seem to derive from the Northern French orbit.

<sup>33</sup> Ruth Langer, “The Censorship of Aleinu in Ashkenaz and Its Aftermath,” in *The Experience of Jewish Liturgy: Studies Dedicated to Menahem Schmelzer*, ed. Debra Reed Blank (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2011), 150. See also: Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb*, 119, 129-133, 192-203.

Yuval hypothesizes that these sharply worded versions of *Aleynu* may have responded to the martyrdom of the Jews at Blois in 1171. Further, he suggests that adding *Aleynu* to the daily service may have been a kind of “refutation” of the Christian prayer *Te Deum laudamus* (We Shall Praise You, O God), which—claims Yuval—is similar in content to *Aleynu* and also began as an ancient prayer that only gradually became statutory.<sup>34</sup>

Yuval’s theory is quite suggestive even though he somewhat exaggerates his evidence. He assumes that the Jews actually sang *Aleynu* as they were burned to death at Blois,<sup>35</sup> while those chronicles may well be apocryphal or exaggerated.<sup>36</sup> There are several parallels in content between *Aleynu* and *Te Deum*, but it would not be difficult to find similar parallels with many prayers that praise God. Finally, a slow transition from sporadic recitation to statutory status is a typical of many prayers in many religions. Still, Yuval’s approach is provocative. Jewish reactions to persecution were sometimes expressed liturgically, and it frequently took some time for those liturgical reactions to coalesce.<sup>37</sup> Even if clear lines of causality cannot be drawn between this extreme version of *Aleynu* and the reactions to the martyrdom at Blois, they may well be linked. The graphic negativity of this version of *Aleynu*, in precisely this period and region, is clearly a reflection of Jewish *angst* and anger. By portraying the founder of Christianity and his followers in the image of rotting and decaying corpses, this prayer may be foisting the horrifying visions of Jewish victims of Christian anti-Semitic violence onto its perpetrators.

---

<sup>34</sup> Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb*, 192-203.

<sup>35</sup> See above in the discussion of the prayer’s history. Likewise, Hanoch Avenary, “*Aleynu le-shabbe’ah*,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, (Keter Publishing House, Jerusalem: 2007), 1:609, assumes that the martyrs actually sang *Aleynu* and explained the emergence of *Aleynu* in daily worship as a possible reaction to the events at Blois.

<sup>36</sup> See Kirsten A. Fudeman, *Vernacular Voices*, 60-63; 70.

<sup>37</sup> See my “*Akdamut...*,” 171-173.

#### 4. Thirteenth-Century Sources I: The Negative Image of Worshipers of Jesus and Muhammad

A provocative interpretation of *Alenu* in its location in the High Holiday liturgy that attracted notice in both Jewish and non-Jewish sources was a commentary (in the hermeneutic style known as *gematria*) that equated the word *variq* (“emptiness” in the phrase “For they bow down to vanity and emptiness...”) with the word *Yeshu* (Jesus) because the numerical values of both words’ letters add up to 316.<sup>38</sup> This interpretation thus understood *Alenu* to hint that Christians who bow down to Jesus are, in fact, worshipping “emptiness.” This interpretation was known by Jews in this period.

Several sources expanded the interpretation to include Muhammad (and therefore, his adherents) as well.<sup>39</sup> None of the texts that contain this allusion derive from lands with sizable Muslim populations. The likelihood is that one inventive interpretation sparked another in its wake, and once *variq* was interpreted as representing and condemning Jesus,<sup>40</sup> resource-

<sup>38</sup> See the studies of this *gematria* by: Naphtali Wieder, “Regarding an Anti-Christian *Gematria* ...”; Yaakov Elbaum, *Regarding Two Textual Changes in the Prayer Alenu*,” 204-208; and Stefan Reif, “Regarding the Text of *Alenu*” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 43 (1975): 202-203.

<sup>39</sup> For a list of sources that include the *gematria* about Muhammad, see Naphtali Wieder, “Regarding an Anti-Christian *Gematria*,” 455, n. 8. In this reading, the words *lahevel variq* (“to vanity and emptiness”) are found to equate 413; 316 for *Yeshu* (Jesus) and 97 for Mushammed, spelled *mem-ḥet-mem-tet*. However, *lahevel* only adds up to 67, not 97. This disparity caused some Jewish sources to actually alter the spelling of the word *variq* in the prayer itself, adding an extra *lammied* (*velariq*) – whose numerical value is 30 – in order to supply a hint to the missing value. See also Yaacov Deutsch, “Jewish Anti-Christian Invectives and Christian Awareness: An Unstudied Form of Interaction in the Early Modern Period,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 55 (2010): 41-61.

<sup>40</sup> In this same way, Wieder, “Regarding an Anti-Christian *Gematria*,” 457-466, explains the origin of a *gematria* that viewed the word *yeqaro*, “his glory” in *Alenu*’s line “His seat of glory is in the heavens above” as another hint to Jesus. The word *yeqaro* is an anagram of the word *variq* and thus also totals 316. In this case, a hidden reference to Jesus would praise Christianity’s messiah, as if it said “God’s seat of glory (= Jesus) is in the heavens above.” Thus were born several alternatives to *yeqaro*, all more or

ful readers searched for and “found” an equivalent hint condemning the founder of Judaism’s other daughter religion. Note the misunderstanding of Islam here: Muhammed is neither divine nor an object of worship. Naphtali Wieder collected nine examples known to him to have escaped censorship.<sup>41</sup> One such example is found in *Arugat Habosem* by R. Abraham ben Azriel:

I have heard that one ought to (have in mind as one) prays (the words) “to vanity and emptiness” that in *gematria* (these words are equivalent to) Jesus and Muhammed. This proves that all who believe in those two bow down “to vanity and emptiness.”<sup>42</sup>

It did not take much time before these interpretations aroused the wrath of non-Jewish, especially Christian, authorities. The most famous Christian accusation in Ashkenaz that Jews cursed Jesus through the recitation of *Aleinu* is from a 1399 book of apologetics, *Sefer Nitsahon*, by Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Muehlhausen. In the book’s appendix, he attempted to rebut the charges of a Jewish apostate known as Pesah (who, upon converting to Christianity, changed his name to Peter).<sup>43</sup> It is more than likely that this was not an isolated incident. Pesah-Peter makes a number of charges, both impugning the Jewish religion and accusing the Jewish community of cursing Jesus and Christianity in *Aleinu*. In Muehlhausen’s counter-argument, he denies in several creative ways that *Aleinu* has anything to do with Jesus or Christians. Whether or not Muehlhausen fully believed his own arguments is not entirely

---

less meaning “His seat of glory” including *hadaro, kevodo, umoshavo hayaqar, bemoshav hadaro, umoshav tifarto, vekhise khevodo*, etc.

<sup>41</sup> Wieder, “Regarding an Anti-Christian *Gematria*,” 454, n. 7.

<sup>42</sup> Avraham ben Azriel, *Arugat Habosem*, ed. E.E. Urbach (Jerusalem: Mekitse Nirdamim, 1963), 3:468-469.

<sup>43</sup> Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 71-72. See also: Langer, “The Censorship of *Aleinu*,” 154-155; and Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 131-142, especially 134, n. 1. There is also an earlier source for the arousal of non-Jewish authorities: See Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, “The Inquisition and the Jews of France in the Time of Bernard Gui,” *Harvard Theological Review* 63 (1970): 357, 359.

clear. But what is uncontested is that in spite of Muehlhausen's claims, Jewish interpretations of *Alenu* as condemning Christian (and Muslim) worship and worshipers certainly predated him. Whether equating of the word "emptiness" in *Alenu* with "Jesus" was a reaction to specific anti-Jewish incidents or not, this interpretation's appearance marks that the basic anti-Other stance of previous eras spread in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries.

##### 5. Thirteenth-Century Sources II: Joshua as the Author of *Alenu* - An Apologetic Meant to Blunt the Anti-Christian Interpretation of *Alenu*?

Many thirteenth-century sources assert that the biblical Joshua was the author of this prayer. This medieval idea may be at least partially based upon the talmudic tradition that Joshua, the conqueror of the land, composed the second blessing of the *Birkat Hamazon* (the blessing after meals),<sup>44</sup> which specifically thanks God for the produce of the land of Israel. However, it is also possible that this attribution of *Alenu* to Joshua arose because in medieval Jewish folklore, Joshua was seen as an anti-Jesus figure.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps medieval Jews attributed this image to Joshua based upon Joshua's biblical warrior status, and imagined him as a kind of fictional defender of Jews against Christian knights and crusaders.

However, other explanations emerge from thirteenth-century texts. There are at least eight Ashkenazi sources that posit Joshua as the author of *Alenu*.<sup>46</sup> One such example reads:

Joshua Bin Nun instituted it (*Alenu*) when he besieged Jericho and conquered it. He saw there the people's idols that were emptiness and products of their delu-

---

<sup>44</sup> bBer 48b.

<sup>45</sup> See Yisrael Rosenson, "*Alenu LeShabe'ah* - The Legends About The Ancient Author" [Hebrew], *Mehqere Hag* 12 (2001): 74-86.

<sup>46</sup> See the full list in Elliot R. Wolfson, "Hai Gaon's Letter and Commentary On *Alenu*, 380-381; 404, n. 2.

sions, and he (therefore) began to recite, “It is our duty to praise the Lord of all, to ascribe greatness to the former of creation” (i.e., the prayer *Aleinu*, whose next lines condemn the idol-worship of the nations).<sup>47</sup>

One motivation for this assertion was apparently to justify adding *Aleinu* to the daily worship. If such an ancient and important personality were, in fact, the author, then certainly the prayer merited recitation on a more frequent basis than just the High Holidays.<sup>48</sup> As we have seen, there were already anti-Christian and anti-Muslim interpretations of *Aleinu* in Jewish sources in the thirteenth century as well as anti-Christian interpretations from earlier times. This explanation, then, by placing the prayer’s origins long before the advent of Christianity, perhaps constituted an apology, denying that this statement against contemporary Others was the original intent of the prayer.<sup>49</sup>

## 6. Kabbalistic Sources: The Negative Image of The Non-Jewish Nations Who Represent Demonic Evil

The most influential text of Kabbalah is the thirteenth-century *Zohar*. There, the source of non-Jewish souls is “the other side,” (*sitra aħra*), i.e., the demonic realm, and non-Jews are considered sub-human. A typical passage reads, “(O)n the other side, side of impurity: the spirit spreading through the other nations emerges from the side of impurity. It is not human (*Adam*), and so does not attain this name. The name of that spirit is Impure, not attaining the name human, having no share in it.”<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> *The Siddur of R. Solomon ben Samson of Garmaise*, 124. See also p. 126.

<sup>48</sup> Elbogen’s trenchant observation is that had *Aleinu* continued to be recited only on the High Holidays, it might have escaped the kind of attention it attracted by non-Jews once it began to be recited on a daily basis. See his *Jewish Liturgy*, 71.

<sup>49</sup> Langer, *The Censorship of Aleinu*, 149, n. 8.

<sup>50</sup> *Zohar* 1:20b. Translation from Daniel C. Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) 1:157. As Matt notes in n.

While the *Zohar* does not comment directly upon *Alenu*, an extant kabbalistic commentary attributed to Rav Hai Gaon (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> c.) was almost certainly authored by Rabbi Moses de Leon (1240-1305, Spain), the writer or co-writer of the *Zohar*.<sup>51</sup> Regarding *Alenu*'s words, "That he did not make us like the nations of the lands," this commentary presents two striking images. The first is that Israel resembles the fruit and trunk of a tree while the nations resemble branches that must be pruned so that the tree itself and its fruit might flourish.<sup>52</sup> The second image is that the nations are sustained by the divine energy overflowing from the Land of Israel, like dogs who wait under the table for a bone to fall. The common thread between these metaphors is that the nations of the world are demonic forces that feed off of the divine flow of blessing vouchsafed from God only to Israel. In *Alenu*, then, when the worshiper recites "That he did not make us like the nations of the lands," the worshiper is expressing gratitude for not being a member of the sub-human, demonic, non-Jewish nations who sustain themselves only by sapping the divine energy that overflows to Israel.

This extremely negative image of non-Jews was certainly known and of great influence on later Kabbalists. This is quite obvious in the writings of R. Isaac Luria (1534-1572, Ottoman-ruled Palestine), the central figure in the great Kabbalistic renaissance in sixteenth-century Safed. Luria did not write down most of his teachings, but his disciple, R. Hayyim Vital, did. De Leon's basic approach is quite evident in Luria's commentary on *Alenu*. Luria equated the "the nations

---

386, there were parallel medieval Christian views of the demonic nature of the Jews.

<sup>51</sup> Elliot Wolfson, "Hai Gaon's Letter and Commentary On '*Alenu*,'" 406-407. See also 392-395.

<sup>52</sup> In a personal communication, Ruth Langer raised the question of whether or not De Leon could have been responding to Paul's Letter to the Romans 11:16-24. In turn, Elliot Wolfson commented in a personal note that while it is possible that De Leon was reacting to the Pauline text - he may have had access to an oral or written transmission - it is hard to know without a textual witness. Therefore, the question remains.

of the lands” and “the families of the earth” with the *qelipot*.<sup>53</sup> *Qelipot* in Lurianic Kabbalah are demonic “shells” that have no separate existence, but derive their vitality from the sparks of holiness that they encompass. Luria taught that it should be “our intention (when reciting *Alenu*) to cause the *qelipot* to disperse and capitulate ... and when we praise God and denounce the *qelipot* (by reciting these lines in *Alenu*), then the *qelipot* capitulate.” Thus, in Luria’s view, *Alenu* is a kind of incantation: When a Jew recites its praises of God and denounces the gentile nations (who are the embodiment of the demonic), the demonic forces break up and withdraw from the presence of the Jews at worship. While Luria was not the only Kabbalist who taught this interpretation of the Other in *Alenu*,<sup>54</sup> Luria had, by far, the greatest influence on subsequent Jewish liturgy. His interpretations of prayers, including *Alenu*, and his ritual innovations were published in dozens if not hundreds of editions of prayer books and other guides, with or without attribution. An example is *The Gates of Zion (Sha’arei Tzion)* by R. Nathan Nata Hannover (d. 1683), originally published in Prague in 1662 and reprinted 119 times by only 1803.<sup>55</sup> This perspective in Kabbalistic literature represented possibly the nadir of the Jewish image of the Other, and that is mirrored in Kabbalistic commentaries on *Alenu*.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Hayyim Vital, *Peri Ets Hayyim, Sha’ar Qeri’at Sefer Torah*, (Jerusalem: Widovsky, 1988), ch. 6.

<sup>54</sup> See, e.g., the prayer book commentary of another major Kabbalist of sixteenth-century Safed, R. Moshe Cordevero, *Siddur Tefillah Lemoshe* (Jerusalem: Mekhon Otserot Hatorah, 2004), 160a-161a. See also Bracha Sack, *The Kabbalah of Rabbi Moshe Cordevero* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1995), 193-202; idem, “Prayer in the Teaching of R. Moshe Cordevero” [Hebrew], *Da’at* 9 (1983): 5-12.

<sup>55</sup> Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 6, n. 9. For a number of other interesting examples of this interpretation over the centuries, see Moshe Hallamish, “*Aleinu Le-Shabe’ali* in the Kabbalistic Literature and its Importance” [Hebrew], *Da’at: A Journal of Philosophy and Kabbalah* 68-69 (2010): 67, n. 47.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Elliot Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 40. See also Alan Brill, *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding* (New York: Palgrave-McMillan, 2010); Idem, “Many Nations Under God: Judaism and Other

Harold Bloom has taught us that all writers respond to those who wrote before them.<sup>57</sup> When it comes to the world of religion, where saints and events of the past are often literally venerated, this insight is even more astute. Given the immense popularity of Luria's kabbalistic vision, almost any Jewish writer who commented on a prayer like *Alenu* would have been influenced by this interpretation from the time that Luria's teachings gained traction in the early modern period until the Enlightenment presented reasons to counteract the essence of this interpretation.

## 7. The Early Reform Movement: The Negative Image of the Others Deleted or Interpreted Out of Existence

As the early Reform movement accepted a modern, liberal approach to non-Jews, it grew uncomfortable with the idea of Israel's chosenness.<sup>58</sup> The rank and file of the nascent Jewish liberal movement could usually ignore talmudic and midrashic examples of this idea since these volumes were not well known to them, whereas they encountered the liturgy regularly. *Alenu*, going beyond merely asserting the chosenness of Israel to declare that Israel alone worships the true God, became a focus of modification.<sup>59</sup>

---

Religions," *Conversations, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideas* (October 24, 2008), <http://www.jewishideas.org/alan-brill/many-nations-under->

<sup>57</sup> Bloom has expounded on this in many of his works, but first introduced it in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

<sup>58</sup> See Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Rise of Reform Judaism* (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1963); Michael Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Eric L. Friedland, *Were Our Mouths Filled With Song: Studies in Liberal Jewish Liturgy* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1997).

<sup>59</sup> See Jakob J. Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe: The Liturgy of European Liberal and Reform Judaism* (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1967), 298-306. All English translations of German prayers are his. See also Joel S. Kaminsky, "Attempting the Impossible: Eliminating Election from the Jewish Liturgy," *Midstream* (January/February 2005): 23.

One trend in the initial liberal prayer books was to interpolate wording within the translation that identified the Other as pagans who worshiped idols, i.e., not Christians, but earlier peoples. A good example of this reading comes from the 1853 liberal prayer book published in Aachen, Germany. The Hebrew text of *Alenu* is unchanged, but the German translation of one of the early lines in the prayer reads:

...that Thou hast redeemed us of all false belief and superstition, and enlightened us with the light of Thy revelation. Not before wood and stone, wrought by the hand of man, and not before silver and gold, refined by the smelter's fire, but before Thee, the King of Kings, the All-Holy do we bow down.<sup>60</sup>

Another particularly interesting instance derives from Joseph Saalschütz's 1859 (Koenigsberg) German paraphrase of the prayer book, meant to accompany the traditional Hebrew. This reads, in part, "...that He hath not let us be like the pagans, and that He hath given us a lot different from that of their large multitude." A footnote explains, "Two thirds of mankind, as is known, still belong to paganism. Israelites, Christians, and Mohammedans together represent only one third of the inhabitants of the earth."<sup>61</sup>

Another technique that early Reform prayer books employed was to delete the contrast to the Other, at least in the beginning of the prayer. This required some significant rewriting. These amended versions now constructed chosenness positively, praising God for giving the Jews a true understanding of God's oneness and omitting any mention of the other nations. For example, in Abraham Geiger's 1870 prayer book, instead of the traditional line *shelo sam helkenu kahem*, "(God) did not make our portion like theirs," we find *shesam helkenu leyahed et shemo*, "(God) made our portion

---

<sup>60</sup> Cited in Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe*, 301-302.

<sup>61</sup> Cited in Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe*, 302. See also pp. 6-7.

to unify his name.”<sup>62</sup> Both of these trends—eliminating any mention of the distinction between Israel and the other nations, as well as identifying the Other as idol-worshipping pagans—are found in many liberal prayer books of the nineteenth century; sometimes both are found in the same prayer book, with one of these ideas found in the Hebrew version of the prayer and the other in the translation.<sup>63</sup>

The leaders of liberal Jewry in mid-nineteenth century Germany and other western European countries sought to communicate a less triumphalist stance to their own adherents as well as to the non-Jewish community. Liturgical change did not happen all at once, nor was there general agreement to modify one or another particular prayer. At Adath Jeschurun in Amsterdam, for example, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, civil equality had become a fact, and beyond a few deletions in the service (including the vengeful *Av Haraḥaman* from the Crusader period), the main modifications were only esthetic.<sup>64</sup> At the other extreme, we find Rabbi Aaron Chorin (1766-1844) who advocated for the complete removal of *Aleinu* from the prayer book, insisting from his pulpit in Hamburg “repeatedly (even tediously) that Jews were required to treat Christians as ‘brothers’ no less than fellow Jews.”<sup>65</sup> Still, the general tendency was to emphasize universalism and to downplay Jewish particularism. The alterations to the text of *Aleinu* documented in this section ought to be contextualized in the general movement among German and European liberal Jewry away from supremacist nationalism and toward universalism.

---

<sup>62</sup> Cited in Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe*, 303.

<sup>63</sup> For an example of the latter, see, among others, the 1882 Glogau prayer book, cited in Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe*, 303.

<sup>64</sup> Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 26.

<sup>65</sup> Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 158.

## 8. Nineteenth-Century Modern Orthodoxy - Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch: Affirmation and Denial of the Negative Image of the Non-Jewish Others

The Modern Orthodox movement found one of its original spokesmen in Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Germany, 1808-1888). Although Hirsch strongly opposed the emergent Reform Movement as too liberal, he did not, by any means, reject modernity *in toto*. He, too, welcomed the beginnings of acceptance that the Enlightenment brought Jews in certain areas of western and central Europe. His tendency was to pioneer ways for Jews to play roles in modern civil society while remaining loyal to the traditional practices and beliefs of Judaism. His qualified openness to modernity brought with it a conscious or unconscious sensitivity to the negative ways in which certain Jewish texts compared non-Jews to Jews. He expresses this in his commentary on *Aleinu*:

In its first part it proclaims the sharp contrast between our own concept of God and of our relationship to Him, and that of the other nations of mankind. But in the second part of this prayer beginning with *al ken*, etc., we cite our own concept of God as the basis of our firm confidence that one day all the rest of mankind, too, will return and dedicate itself wholly and without reservations to the exclusive service of God, the One Sole God, and we express the fervent hope that this day may come to pass soon and that we may see it with our own eyes.<sup>66</sup>

Here, he affirms the negative image of the non-Jewish Other found in *Aleinu*. However, when he clarifies the hope in the prayer's second paragraph that non-Jews will ultimately take upon themselves the Jewish conception of God, he engages in a complex form of apologetics:

---

<sup>66</sup> *The Hirsch Siddur: The Order of Prayers for the Whole Year. Translation and Commentary by Samson Raphael Hirsch* (New York: Feldheim, 1969), 208. Originally published in German in 1895 under the title *Israels Gebete ubersetzt und erlautert von Samson Raphael Hirsch*.

According to the teachings of Judaism, however, such a hoped for “return” is not meant to be identical with a mass conversion of all men to Judaism; it will be no more than the conversion of all mankind to true humanity. It merely means that all men will then recognize God, the One Sole God, as the only God in Heaven above and on earth below, and do Him homage forever by living a life of loyal obedience in accordance with the universal moral law which has been handed down in the Torah of Judaism for all the rest of mankind as well to follow.<sup>67</sup>

Hirsch’s approach to universalism and to Christianity is complicated. He did not believe that the non-Jewish Other was required to convert, *en masse*, to Judaism. He also held Christianity in high esteem because of that religion’s acceptance of the Old Testament as holy. On the other hand, he believed that non-Jews were obligated to observe the seven Noahide laws. For Hirsch, the Noahide laws equaled the universal moral law. Part of the complication is that identifying all of the Noahide laws is very difficult, if not impossible, without access to the Rabbinic tradition. Therefore, even for Christians, even though conversion to Judaism is not required, correct knowledge of what is required comes only through knowledge of at least parts of the Jewish religion. Hirsch’s interpretation of *Alenu* reflects this multifaceted approach. He apparently claims that *Alenu* only expresses the hope that all of humankind will recognize one true God and accept “the universal moral law” - with the emphasis on the word “universal.” Yet, his equating “the universal moral law” with “the Torah of Judaism” expresses his ambivalence.

It is interesting to compare Hirsch’s approach with that of some of the early reformers surveyed in the previous section. Hirsch did distinguish the Jewish conception of God from that of the nations much more clearly than the liberal prayer books of nineteenth-century Germany. The reformers

---

<sup>67</sup> *The Hirsch Siddur*, 208-209.

did not deny a unique role to the Jewish people. They did take pains, however, to frame that special role in the positive and did not compare it to any negative roles of the nations. Hirsch in contrast attempted to frame in universalist terms an essentially supremacist role for the Jewish people. For the Orthodox Rabbi Hirsch, as for the German and other European liberal rabbis, *Alenu* became an important locus to articulate an image of the non-Jewish Other. All of them struggled to balance traditional Jewish views with the emerging spirit of tolerance and acceptance.

#### 9. Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Academic Scholars of Liturgy: Diminishing or Denying the Negative Image of the Non-Jewish Other.

We turn now to the discussions of contemporary Jewish scholars of Jewish liturgy, citing commentaries on *Alenu* from the academic writings of Ismar Elbogen (Reform rabbi, 1874-1943) and Jakob Petuchowski (Reform rabbi, 1925-1991) and from the popular publications of Reuven Hammer (Conservative rabbi, 1933- ) and Lawrence A. Hoffman (Reform rabbi, 1942- ). All four diminished or even denied the negative image of the non-Jewish Other in *Alenu*, probably from embarrassment at it.<sup>68</sup> Consequently, the earlier defensive or apologetic stance remains to some degree apparent in their work. They are no less concerned about how the non-Jewish world would judge the prayer than about the reaction of their fellow-religionists to the harsh view of the Other in *Alenu*; all but ultra-Orthodox Jews have, to various degrees, accepted modern, western, liberal views of the Other. Likely, part of this softened image of the Other results from their difficulty in admitting, even to themselves, an abhorrence for this traditional prayer. In popular works, a desire to provide a

---

<sup>68</sup> The same basic approach is found in Reuven Kimelman, "Is Judaism Too Important To Be Left Just to Jews?: The *Sh'ma* and the *Alenu*," in *All the World: Universalism, Particularism, and the High Holy Days*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2014), 98-106.. My thanks to Prof. Kimelman for providing an advance copy of his essay.

sympathetic view of Jewish liturgy and tradition also tempers this image of the Other. For all, these interpretations reflect the changing view of the Other among western Jews in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Ismar Elbogen's 1913 book-length study of the history of Jewish liturgy has not yet been surpassed. He wrote his *Jewish Liturgy* as a professor, presenting an academic study of the historical development of Jewish liturgy. He confines any evaluative comments on the relative worth of a given prayer to a rare brief sentence. He does comment on *Aleinu*, writing, "It was of high religious significance that the lofty ideal of the future union of all mankind in the world to come in the service of the one God became part of the daily service."<sup>69</sup> Elbogen evinces no irony in this statement. He appears to consider triumphalism praiseworthy and of great spiritual value. Interestingly, he does not ameliorate this by invoking the claim that the prayer was written against pagans before the advent of Christianity.

Jakob J. Petuchowski expands upon Elbogen's interpretation in his 1968 *Prayerbook Reform in Europe*. He understands *Aleinu's* traditional text to present "a balance" between the particularistic tendency in Jewish tradition (in the first paragraph of the prayer) and the universalistic tendency (in the second paragraph).<sup>70</sup> However, both paragraphs of *Aleinu* together form a cohesive message: The first paragraph declares that we, Israel, are grateful that we worship the Lord of all; all others worship nothingness. The second section expresses a straightforward plea that since the other nations erringly worship false gods – therefore, may you, God, cause all people to accept you as the one God.

In straining to identify a very limited vision of "universalism" in this popular prayer and to shield it from charges that it was irredeemably particularistic, Petuchowski defends

---

<sup>69</sup> Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 71.

<sup>70</sup> Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe*, 298.

the trend of early Reform prayer books to add the words “heathens” and “pagans” to their translations of the first paragraph of *Alenu*, writing, “This approach to the translation of that prayer has, on occasion, been criticized as being too ‘apologetic’ and something less than completely honest. Actually the *original* version of the ‘*Alenu*’ prayer completely justifies this kind of translation.” In support of this claim, he cites the censored line, “For they bow to vanity and emptiness, and pray to a god who does not save.” He continues:

From this original version of the prayer it can clearly be seen that the contrast between Israel and the other peoples was motivated by the consideration that “they bow down to vain and worthless things; but *we* bow down to the King of Kings.” The meaning of “nations of other countries” and “families of the earth” [elsewhere in the prayer] is, therefore, quite definitely that of “pagans” and heathen tribes” and the “modernized” translations we have mentioned are thus quite justified.<sup>71</sup>

Petuchowski here seems to hint at the same principle that stands behind the medieval attribution of authorship of *Alenu* to Joshua, namely, that the prayer was written *contra* idol-worshipping pagans and not monotheistic Christians. The weakness in his argument is that he does not marshal true evidence to support this assumption. One wonders whether or not his desire to contribute to improving relations with Christianity affected his more typically rigorous approach to the analysis of liturgical texts. We will encounter this approach in other, modern, interpretations of *Alenu* below.<sup>72</sup>

Reuven Hammer also holds that *Alenu* was written during the pre-Christian era, justifying the negativity since it

---

<sup>71</sup> Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe*, 299-300.

<sup>72</sup> This same approach also appears in Menachem Kellner, “Overcoming Chosenness,” in *Covenant and Chosenness in Judaism and Mormonism*, ed. Raphael Jospe, Truman G. Madsen, and Seth Ward (Cranford, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2001), 149-152.

was directed at paganism. He suggests that it “seems very plausible” that *Alenu* was composed during the time of the Maccabean revolt in the second century B.C.E. This finds reflection in the prayer’s content. He writes:

The nations are to be pitied and we – Israel – are the fortunate ones, for God has shown us the truth and permitted us to worship Him, while they are still praying to emptiness. The Lord alone exists. Twice we are told, “There is no other,” a phrase that is even more powerful in the Hebrew with its two staccato beats: *ein od*. Such a statement must have been written at the height of the conflict between idolatry and Judaism, when Judaism wished to defiantly vaunt its creed in opposition to all else.<sup>73</sup>

A subsequent statement underlines this apology: “We are not praising God for creating us different from others in some absolute sense. We do not claim superiority. Our only advantage is the fact that we recognize and worship the true God while others are misled into idolatry.”<sup>74</sup>

Hammer, here, attempts to soften the negative view of the Other in *Alenu*. Nevertheless, to accuse the Other of failing to “recognize and worship” the true God is very strong criticism. To Hammer’s credit, he does admit in his prayer book commentary that “in the Middle Ages, Jews and Christians both came to understand the line (about bowing down to nothingness) as directed against belief in Jesus...” For all that, his understanding of *Alenu* permits him to evaluate the whole prayer positively, writing “Indeed, it is an original, unique, and quite magnificent creation of unknown writers, worthy of standing with the best of the biblical writings.”<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer*, 207.

<sup>74</sup> Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer*, 208.

<sup>75</sup> *Or Hadaash: A Commentary on Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly and The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 2003), 183.

Lawrence A. Hoffman includes an analysis of *Alenu* in his *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries*, writing about the censored line: "Though originally a polemic against paganism, the line was interpreted by some medieval Jews to denote Christians and Muslims."<sup>76</sup> One wonders whether Hoffman, like Petuchowski and Hammer, surrendered to a desire to date the prayer to the earlier period in order to avoid any appearance that the original intent of the prayer was anti-Christian. Including Elbogen, all four mitigate the negativity of the image of the Other in the prayer.

10. Contemporary Jewish Movements in the United States:
  - a. The Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative Movements Diminish or Deny the Negative Image of the Non-Jewish Others
  - b. The Orthodox Movement Affirms the Negative Image with Some Softening
  - c. Jewish Renewal Transforms the Negative Image into a Positive One

One could profitably trace the development of the image of the Other in *Alenu* by all contemporary Jewish movements globally and historically, but that would require a far longer treatment. Instead, I will conclude this survey by highlighting the decisions made for the most recent editions of the prayer books published by the major Jewish movements in the United States. A diminished negative image of the Other is not unexpected in prayer books meant to be meaningful for the modern worshiper, and that—in varying degrees—is mainly what appears in their treatment of *Alenu*. The table presents selected lines from versions of the prayer representative of the various movements' approaches. The extent to which each movement uses the English translation to soften the harsh image of the Other will be evident when comparing it to the contextual translation of the traditional Hebrew text in the first column.

---

<sup>76</sup> Lawrence A. Hoffman, ed., *History Commentary, My People's Prayer Book* (Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont: 1997), 6, 135.

Contextual Translation	Orthodox <sup>77</sup>	Conservative <sup>78</sup>	Reconstructionist <sup>79</sup>	Reform <sup>80</sup>	Renewal <sup>81</sup>
It is our duty to praise the Lord of all, To ascribe greatness to the former of creation	It is our duty to praise the Master of all, to ascribe greatness to the Molder of primeval creation,	It is for us to praise the ruler of all, to acclaim the Creator,	It is up to us to offer praises to the Source of all, to declare the greatness of the author of Creation,	Let us now praise the Sovereign of the universe, and proclaim the greatness of the Creator	We rise to praise You Source of All. Your generous work as Creator of All.

<sup>77</sup> *The Complete Art Scroll Siddur*, ed. Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, Rabbi Sheah Brander (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1984, and reprints), 158-160.

<sup>78</sup> *Mahzor Lev Shalem for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2010), 173.

<sup>79</sup> *Kol Haneshamah Prayerbook for the Days of Awe* (Elkins Park, PA: The Reconstructionist Press, 1999), 1201-1202.

<sup>80</sup> *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2007), 586.

<sup>81</sup> From a private email received from Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, January 2, 2013. Jewish Renewal does not issue official, movement-approved prayer books, but many prayer books issued by Renewal communities reflect this translation. See, e.g., *Ivdu Et Hashem B'Simcha: A Siddur For Spiritual Renewal*, ed. Rabbi David Zaslow (Ashland, OR: We! The Wisdom Exchange: 1997, 2003), 221.

That he did not make us like the nations of the lands	For He has not made us like the nations of the lands	who has not made us merely a nation,	who has made us different from the other nations of the earth,	Who spread out the heavens and established the earth,	You made us one with all of Life
And did not place us like the families of the earth.	and has not emplaced us like the families of the earth;	nor formed us as all earthly families,	and situated us in quite a different spot,	Whose glory is revealed in the heavens above <sup>82</sup>	You helped us to share with all mankind

<sup>82</sup> It should be noted that the English in this cell, and the two cells that follow it, is neither a translation of the traditional Hebrew text that serves as the basis of the contextual translation, nor a revised version of the traditional Hebrew text. Rather, it is a translation of a short passage from later in the first paragraph that this prayer book uses to replace the traditional Hebrew text here.

That he did not make our lot like theirs,	for He has not assigned our portion like theirs		and made our daily lot another kind from theirs,	And whose greatness is manifest throughout the world.	You linked our fate with all that lives and made our portion with all in the world
Nor our fate like their multitudes.	nor our lot like all their multitudes.	nor given us an ordinary destiny.	and given us a destiny uncommon in this world.	You are our God; there is none else.	
For they bow to vanity and emptiness, And pray to a god who does not save.	(For they bow to vanity and emptiness and pray to a god which helps not.)				Some of us like to worship You as emptiness and void;

<p>But we bow and prostrate and thank the king of kings, The holy one blessed is he.</p>	<p>But we bend our knees, bow, and acknowledge our thanks before the King Who reigns over kings, the Holy One, Blessed is He.</p>	<p>And so we bow, Acknowledging the supreme sovereign, The Holy One, who is praised...</p>	<p>And so, we bend the knee and bow, acknowledging the sovereign who rules above all those who rule, the blessed Holy One.</p>	<p>Therefore we bow in awe and thanksgiving before the One who is Sovereign over all, the Holy and Blessed One.</p>	<p>Some of us want to worship You as King of Kings</p>
--	---	--	--	---	--

The prayer books of Orthodox and Conservative Movements preserve all, or nearly all, of the traditional text. The Reconstructionist Movement supplies two highly revised adaptations of the first paragraph of *Alenu*; the first of those is presented in the table. It also prints the traditional version of the first paragraph in a smaller font and at the bottom of the page, in a format consistent with supplementary interpretations of prayers offered in the rest of that prayer book. The Reform Movement provides three highly revised adaptations of the first paragraph; the first of those is presented in the table. This prayer book, too, includes the traditional version of the first paragraph in addition to these three revised versions. The Renewal Movement's prayer book contains a highly revised text of the prayer.

The Orthodox version—cited from a prayer book commonly used in the United States—offers the full text of *Alenu*; it is the only one to include the full censored line albeit in parentheses. Its translation does not veer from the contextual meaning in any significant way. That is the approach of this edition in general: its translations are more consistent than the liberal *Siddurim* with the contextual meaning of the Hebrew, and it evinces much less concern for modern, western, notions of universalism. Nevertheless, that is not always true of its commentary. While its commentary on *Alenu* affirms that the prayer makes clear and distinct divisions between Israel's proper worship of God and the nations' failure to serve God correctly, it quotes Samson Raphael Hirsch's claim that the prayer does not imagine a mass conversion to Judaism. Thus, this prayer book, too, attempts to soften the attack on the nations' religions by claiming that "only" a switch to the proper view of God is necessary.

The editors of all of the non-Orthodox prayer books surveyed face a dilemma in rendering *Alenu*. On the one hand, as part of their adherence to the basic structure of the traditional service and its markers, all of them continue to include it as the conclusion of nearly all worship services as well as in a central position on the High Holidays. On the other

hand, they are all uncomfortable with the traditional text's negative portrayal of the non-Jewish Other, often substantially rewriting or translating it to re-interpret the most offensive lines.

Consequently, they all downplay the harsh treatment of the Other. The Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform prayer books obfuscate the "us" versus "them" structure of the language, variously combining several phrases into one and replacing the negative view of "them" with only a positive view of "us." Furthermore, they do not restore the censored line. This requires them to translate the *vav* beginning the next line, not as the disjunctive "but we bow..." in opposition to the nations' worship, but as a conjunctive. This yields a crucial change in the meaning of the paragraph, subverting its triumphalist message. One reading these liberal translations would not glean that the Hebrew repetitively compares the positive and unique role of Israel with the negative and errant views and roles of the non-Jewish Others. Thus they neutralize the essential anti-Otherness of the prayer by both deletion and "creative" translation.

The Conservative movement accomplishes this through translation because it prefers not to emend or delete central, traditional prayers. This particular prayer book specifically lists felicity to the Hebrew meaning, even when that may cause difficulty for the modern reader, as the first of seven principles of translation in its introduction.<sup>83</sup> Nonetheless, the prayer book offers the traditional Hebrew text of the prayer with an interpretive translation and commentary that would never give the worshiper the impression that *Alenu* contains negative statements about non-Jewish Others.

As mentioned above, the Reform and Reconstructionist prayer books each offer several modified versions of the prayer, but also include the Hebrew text and a translation of the traditional version. This is an interesting phenomenon,

---

<sup>83</sup> *Maḥzor Lev Shalem*, x.

likely part of a recent trend of including more traditional texts and rituals in general within these liberal movements. One wonders, though, whether the editors of these prayer books – perhaps not unlike the editors of the Conservative prayer book – are preserving or re-introducing the traditional version of *Aleinu's* text without the will or desire to fully consider the challenging theological implications within that text.

The approach to *Aleinu* of the founder of the Renewal Movement, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (1924-2014), crystallized during the summer of 1974 at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, while he was on the faculty along with the poet Allen Ginsberg. Schachter-Shalomi's father died that summer, and he gathered a group of Jewish-Buddhists—including Ginsberg—to form a *minyán* (quorum) so that he could hold a worship service in his father's memory.

I said the kaddish and then we said *aleinu*... In the middle of *aleinu* it was like lightning hit me. There's a line that goes, 'For they bow down to emptiness and void and we bow down to the king of kings, the holy one blessed be he.' Now usually it means, they bow down to *gornisht mit gornisht* (Yiddish: nothing with nothing), emptiness, void, stupid... But *there*, I read it: They bow down to Emptiness... and Void... and we bow down to the King of kings... and both of these are legitimate ways. You can imagine how that hit me. That's a story I tell people who are involved in Buddhism. If you do meditation and you see deep in meditation what this is all about, you see that emptiness and void is just one look and king of kings is the other look.<sup>84</sup>

Schachter-Shalomi eventually embodied his insight into a new translation of *Aleinu*, a translation that completely transformed

---

<sup>84</sup> Cited in Rodger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 238.

the negative image of the Others into the admiring and accepting approach that he first experienced at Naropa. That translation has influenced many Renewal worship groups. Jewish Renewal is the only non-Orthodox American group I know of that retained a version—albeit a completely transformed version—of the often-censored line, reading now “Some of us like to worship You as emptiness and void; Some of us want to worship You as King of Kings.” This directly reflects Schachter-Shalomi’s personal moment of enlightenment.

Schachter-Shalomi made another noteworthy revision to the text, namely, the Hebrew line *shelo asanu kegoyei ha’aratsot*, rendered in the contextual translation as “That he did not make us like the nations of the lands.” First, he changed the spelling of *shelo* from שלא to שלו, thus emending the first half from “That he did not make” to “That he made us his,” while preserving nearly the same pronunciation. Second, in the second half, he substituted the word *im* (“with”) for the prefix *ke-* (“like”), thus changing the meaning from “like the nations of the lands” to “with the nations of the lands.” This he then translated, not literally as “That he made us his with the nations of the lands,” but interpretatively as “You made us one with all of Life.” The exegetical distance from the line’s contextual translation, “That he did not make us like the nations of the lands,” to “You made us one with all of Life” is quite obvious.

Like the four contemporary commentators surveyed in the previous section, the prayer books of all of the contemporary liberal Jewish movements in the United States moderate and temper the severe image of the Other in *Alenu*. In contrast, the contemporary Orthodox prayer book softens yet still affirms that negative image. This reflects the fact that more American Jews view the non-Jewish Other through a pluralist lens than any previous Jewish community in history. The treatment of *Alenu* in these modern prayer books is eloquent testimony to the vast change in Jewish perception of the Other across the centuries.

## Conclusion

Settings and interpretations of *Aleinu* from late antiquity through the Middle Ages embraced the prayer's negative image of the Other, even at times underlining it with demonizing expansions. However, starting in the modern period, with its potential for more integration of the Jewish community into gentile society, attempts were made to soften the adverse representation of the Other. In fact, nearly every one of the interpretations reviewed from the beginning of the modern period to the present attempted to diminish its harshness. Even without (vast) changes to the received text, this prayer's interpretations have changed, allowing it to accommodate a more pluralistic reality. The tension between particularism and universalism persists and at times is expressed in denial of the contextual meaning of the preserved Hebrew text, but many find ways to celebrate Jewish particularism without conveying a negative image of the Other.