

# R. Yohanan ben Nuri and the Unique Prayers of Rosh Ha-Shanah

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The Rosh Ha-Shanah Musaf prayer consists of nine sections. Some of these sections are essentially prayers, but they are called “blessings” because each of them contains a blessing to God at the end of each section. The first three sections are the same as those recited every day in the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer (however, they contain some variations for Rosh Ha-Shanah and the ensuing Ten Days of Repentance). The third blessing, known as *Qedushat Ha-Shem* (Holiness of the Name), begins with **You are holy**, and concludes with **The Holy God**. During the Ten Days of Repentance, it concludes with **The Holy King**.

Besides the first three and the last three sections, the Musaf prayer on Rosh Ha-Shanah also contains three special sections:

- a) *Malkhuyyot* (Verses of Kingship): attesting to God’s past, present and future and ultimate Kingship;
- b) *Zikhronot* (Verses of Remembrance): dealing with God’s attribute of remembering all the deeds of mankind, good and bad, and his examination of them all on this Day of Judgment;
- c) *Shofarot* (Verses of Shofar): discussing God’s Revelation through the shofar blasts at Mount Sinai, and His future Revelation through the shofar that heralds the advent of the Messianic King.

Each section consists of an opening prayer related to the particular topic, a selection of relevant Scriptural verses and a concluding prayer and blessing.<sup>1</sup>

As a yom tov, Rosh Ha-Shanah also must contain a berakhah that mentions *Qedushat Ha-Yom* (the Holiness of the Day). How does this aspect of the Rosh Ha-Shanah liturgy fit with the obligation to add the three berakhot of *Malkhuyyot*, *Zikhronot* and *Shofarot*? How does the obligation to blow the shofar in connection with the three berakhot fit with the additional liturgy? These issues are

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<sup>1</sup> This section has been taken from the ArtScroll introduction to the Mishnah on *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, p. 32a.

the subject of a debate between R. Yohanan ben Nuri and R. Akiva in the Mishnah located in the fourth chapter of *Massekhet Rosh Ha-Shanah* (32a). The Mishnah states:

*This is the order of the blessings in the Musaf prayer: One says the blessings of Patriarchs, Powers and Holiness of the Name, and combines the Kingship passage with them, but does not blow the shofar; then he says the blessings of the Holiness of the Day and blows the shofar, the blessing of Remembrance and blows the shofar and the blessing of Shofarot and blows the shofar; then he says the blessings of the sacrificial Service and Thanksgiving, and the Benediction of the Kohanim. These are the words of R. Yohanan ben Nuri.*

*R. Akiva said to him: If one does not blow the shofar for the Kingship passage, why does he mention it? Rather, the order is this: he says the blessings of Patriarchs, Powers and Holiness of the Name, then combines the Kingship passage with the blessing of the Holiness of the Day and blows the shofar, says the blessing of Remembrance and blows the shofar and the blessing of Shofarot and blows the shofar; and then he says the blessings of the sacrificial Service and Thanksgiving, and the Benediction of the Kohanim.*

סדר ברכות: אומר אבות  
וגבורות וקדושת השם,  
וכולל מלכיות עמהן ואינו  
תוקע. קדושת היום -  
ותוקע, זכרונות - ותוקע,  
שופרות - ותוקע, ואומר  
עבודה והודאה וברכת  
כהנים, דברי רבי יוחנן בן  
נורי. אמר לו רבי עקיבא:  
אם אינו תוקע למלכיות למה  
הוא מזכיר? אלא: אומר  
אבות וגבורות וקדושת  
השם, וכולל מלכיות עם  
קדושת היום - ותוקע,  
זכרונות - ותוקע, שופרות -  
ותוקע, ואומר עבודה  
והודאה וברכת כהנים.

In sum, R. Yohanan ben Nuri holds that one recites *Malkhuyyot* with *Qedushat Ha-Shem* (berakhah #3) whereas R. Akiva holds that one recites *Malkhuyyot* with *Qedushat Ha-Yom* (berakhah #4). Both views hold, however, that the first blowing of the shofar is done at berakhah #4.

The Gemara (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 32a) begins its discussion on the Mishnah by querying R. Akiva's question. How could he say to R. Yohanan ben Nuri, "If one does not blow the shofar for the Kingship passage, why does he mention it?" This implies that it is conceivable that one, under certain circumstances, not be obligated to recite the *Malkhuyyot*! But *The Merciful One said to mention it!*<sup>2</sup> Thus it is obligatory in any event, no matter where in the liturgy one recites it!

The Talmud answers that this is what R. Akiva meant to say: Why (according to R. Yohanan ben Nuri that one recites the blessings of *Malkhuyyot* with berakhah #3, *Qedushat Ha-Shem*, but nonetheless blows the shofar with berakhah #4, *Qedushat Ha-Yom*) does he mention **10** verses of Kingship? [A subsequent Mishnah on the same page, 32a, teaches that one should recite ten Scriptural verses each for *Malkhuyyot*, *Zikhronot* and *Shofarot* blessings.<sup>3</sup>] Let him say only **nine** verses (at berakhah #3), for we should reason that since *Malkhuyyot* is different from *Zikhronot* and *Shofarot* in the regard that the shofar is not blown for it, it is also different in regard to the **number** of verses recited.

<sup>2</sup> Although the Gemara (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 34b) states that the obligation to recite these berakhot is only rabbinic whereas the language "The Merciful One said" implies that the obligation is biblical, various authorities (Rashba, *Turei Even*) explain that since there is a scriptural allusion to these blessings, it is legitimate to use the language of "The Merciful One." See ArtScroll, ad loc., n. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Although that Mishnah states that R. Yohanan ben Nuri on the *be-di-aved* level also disputes this other ruling and holds that if one recites merely three verses in total he has fulfilled his obligation, we are postulating here that as on the *le-chatchila* level he also requires ten verses altogether, in full agreement with R. Akiva.

This passage is extremely difficult to understand. The Gemara derives the obligation to recite **10** Scriptural verses for *Malkhuyyot*, *Zikhronot* and *Shofarot*. There is no evidence that there is any difference between the three sets of verses. Granted that R. Yohanan ben Nuri held that one should recite *Malkhuyyot* with berakhah #3, *Qedushat Ha-Shem* (be the reason what it may), why in the world would anyone think that consequently, one should arbitrarily delete one of the verses?

Maran Ha-Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *zt"l*, explained the matter, and in the course of doing so explained the conceptual substructure of the debate between R. Yohanan ben Nuri and R. Akiva as well.<sup>4</sup>

The Rav understood that there is a difference between the nature of the obligation to recite the **first nine Scriptural verses**—of all three sets of berakhot and the obligation to recite the last, **10<sup>th</sup> Scriptural verse**—of all the three sets. The first nine verses serve as Scriptural proof texts for the ideas latent in the additional berakhot of *Malkhuyyot*, *Zikhronot* and *Shofarot*. This is in line with the formula that appears numerous times in rabbinic literature; a particular idea is “Written in the Torah, repeated a second time in the Prophets, and repeated a third time in the Writings.” These first nine verses can be subsumed under the rubric of *shevach*—praise of God.

The 10<sup>th</sup> verse in each set, however, is connected to the concluding *hatimah* of each berakhah, in which we beseech God to exercise His attributes of action exemplified by *Malkhuyyot*, *Zikhronot* and *Shofarot* and establish His kingship over the world, remember the Jewish people, and blow the shofar of deliverance for His people. Thus it is a verse of *baqashah*, of petition, and distinct from the previous nine verses of *shevach*.

In our *nusah ha-tefilah* of *Zikhronot* and *Shofarot* this distinction is clearly seen, for the 10<sup>th</sup> verse is written one whole paragraph after the 9<sup>th</sup> verse and *immediately* near the final *hatimah*. In our *nusah* of *Malkhuyyot* (which, following R. Akiva, is part of the berakhah of *Qedushat ha-Yom* [berakhah #4]) however, this is not so; it is recited immediately following the other nine verses and one whole paragraph before the final *hatimah*. But, the Rav maintained, that does not change the conceptual point that is true for all three sets of verses. The 10<sup>th</sup> verse (*Shema Yisrael*) of *Malkhuyyot*, like that of *Zikhronot* and *Shofarot*, is still a *baqashah* and not a *shevach*. We beseech God to make manifest in the world his Utter Divine Oneness and Uniqueness.

To underscore this point, the Rav on Rosh Ha-Shanah would instruct the hazan to pause between his recitation of the first nine verses of *Malkhuyyot* and the 10<sup>th</sup> concluding verse, to demonstrate that halakhically the 10<sup>th</sup> verse is different than the nine previous ones. Thus, the verse is connected with the *baqashah* that concludes the berakhah of *Malkhuyyot*.

But why, at the end of the day, did Hazal not equate the pattern of *Malkhuyyot* with the pattern of *Zikhronot* and *Shofarot*, and simply place the 10<sup>th</sup> verse all the way at the end of the berakhah? This, the Rav explained, is because the *Malkhuyyot* verses are inserted in the berakhah of

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<sup>4</sup> My citations of the Rav's explanation are taken from two sources: (a) *Masorah*, ed. By R. Hershel Schachter and R. Menachem Genack, Vol. 2 (*Tishrei*, 5750 {1989}), p. 14-16 (b) R. Michel Shurkin, *Harerei Qedem* (Jerusalem, 2009), #30, pp. 56-58. There are a few differences between the two presentations, but the main points are the same in both sources.

*Qedushat Ha-Yom* (berakhah #4). The berakhah of *Qedushat Ha-Yom* is, of course, recited even on other *tefilot* of Rosh Ha-Shanah (Shaharit, Minhah and Arvit), where there is no insertion of Scriptural verses at all. Hazal did not, according to the Rav, wish to change the actual *nusah* of the *hatimah* of Musaf from the way it is recited on the other *tefilot* of the day. Conceptually however, the point remains that in *Malkhuyyot* as well, the 10<sup>th</sup> verse is logically connected to the *baqashah* immediately before the *hatimah*.

Moreover, we can now establish a particular connection between the 10<sup>th</sup> verse and the blowing of the shofar. For the blowing of the shofar, as the Rav explained numerous times, contains an element of petitionary prayer. That is why, to cite one of several proofs, the Gemara (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 26b and Rashi ad loc.) connects the obligation to have a bent shofar with the bent position one assumes in prayer. Through the blowing of the shofar one prays to God.

With this conceptual substructure, the Rav now proceeded to analyze the debate between R. Yohanan ben Nuri and R. Akiva.

The first question is where the berakhah of *Malkhuyyot* should be placed. R. Yohanan ben Nuri maintained that the 10 verses of *Malkhuyyot* should be recited at berakhah #3 (*Qedushat Ha-Shem*) and not berakhah #4 (*Qedushat Ha-Yom*). Why? Actually, on Rosh Ha-Shanah, the *hatimah* of **both** berakhah #3 and berakhah #4 contain an element of *Malkhuyyot* as well (*Ha-Melech Ha-Qadosh* at berakhah #3; *melech al kol ha-aretz, meqadesh yisrael* at berakhah #4). Thus both berakhot would be legitimate places for the ten verses. However, R. Yohanan ben Nuri felt that *mi-din ein ma'avirin 'al ha-mitzvot*, the principle that states that one should not pass on an opportunity to perform a mitzvah is paramount, and therefore one should recite the berakhot at the first appropriate place, which in this case would be berakhah #3 (*Qedushat Ha-Shem*).

The second question is where the first set of shofar blasts, those of *Malkhuyyot*, should be placed. Here R. Yohanan ben Nuri felt that the shofar blasts should be blown at the last berakhah that contains an element of *Malkhuyyot* (berakhah #4; the berakhah of *Qedushat Ha-Yom*), and consequently, the shofar blasts would connect to all previous words of *Malkhuyyot*.

Alternately, one can make an even stronger claim and say that according to R. Yohanan ben Nuri, since, as has been explained, the blowing of the shofar itself constitutes an act of *tefilah*, and more specifically, the petitionary aspect of *tefilah*, and one may not petition God during the first three berakhot, one **may not** blow the shofar during berakhah #3 (in spite of the fact that the *hatimah* of the berakhah contains an element of *Malkhuyyot*), and therefore one must wait until the berakhah #4 (*Qedushat Ha-Yom*) to blow the shofar.<sup>5</sup>

From this analysis, it seems clear that R. Yohanan ben Nuri, who apparently maintains that one should recite **all** the verses of *Malkhuyyot* during berakhah #3 (*Qedushat Ha-Shem*), holds that even the 10<sup>th</sup> concluding verse should not be construed as a verse of *baqashah* but a verse of *shevach*. That is why he allows even the 10<sup>th</sup> verse to be recited there, although he does not

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<sup>5</sup> This presentation follows the one in *Masorah*, in which the prohibition to petition God during the first three berakhot is presented as a second way to explain R. Yohanan ben Nuri. In *Harerei Qedem*, the order of the two ways to understand R. Yohanan ben Nuri's view are reversed, and this point is immediately presented as the basis of R. Yohanan ben Nuri's view.

permit the shofar to be blown then. But, as we have seen above, R. Akiva disputes this very point and maintains that the 10<sup>th</sup> verse is a verse of *baqashah*. This, then, is the full import of his retort to R. Yohanan ben Nuri: Since you, R. Yohanan ben Nuri, do grant that the *teqi'ot shel Malkhuyyot* themselves may not be blown during berakhah #3 and must be blown during berakhah #4, by the same token, you should admit that the 10<sup>th</sup> of the ten verses of *Malkhuyyot*, which is also a verse of *baqashah*, should for the very same reason also be recited during berakhah #4, *Qedushat Ha-Yom*, and not during berakhah #3, *Qedushat Ha-Shem*.

Our *nusah ha-tefilah*, in which both the ten verses of *Malkhuyyot* are recited and the *teqiyyot* of *Malkhuyyot* are blown during berakhah #4, *Qedushat Ha-Yom*, follows R. Akiva and **not** R. Yohanan ben Nuri. Interestingly, the Yerushalmi to *Rosh Ha-Shanah* (4:5) writes that in Judea, the *minhag* was according to R. Akiva, in the Galilee according to R. Yohanan ben Nuri, and *bedi-aved* if one followed the Galilean *minhag* in Judea, or the Judean *minhag* in the Galilee, one would fulfill his mitzvah in any event. The Rav remarked that this passage seems to indicate that the debate is merely one of different *nusha'ot*, all of which are acceptable. (The Rav interpreted a Tosefta regarding this matter quoted in the Gemara (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 32a) in the same fashion.) Thus, it would not be halakhically impossible for some remnant of R. Yohanan ben Nuri's view to be extant in our *nusah ha-tefilah* today.

These remarks served as the preface for the Rav's quotation of the astonishing interpretation given by his maternal uncle, R. Menachem Krakovsky, author of the work '*Avodat Ha-Melech* on *Rambam's Sefer Ha-Madda*. We all know that on Rosh Ha-Shanah we recite three paragraphs all beginning with the Hebrew word *u-ve-khen*. What, conceptually, are these paragraphs doing in the middle of the berakhah of *Qedushat Ha-Shem* (berakhah #3)? R. Krakovsky suggested that these paragraphs constituted a part of the blessing of *Malkhuyyot* that were recited in the Galilee according to the view of R. Yohanan ben Nuri!

We have already mentioned how the verses of *Malkhuyyot*, *Zikhronot* and *Shofarot* are proof texts to the fundamental ideas being expressed in these berakhot. This applies to the *u-ve-khen* paragraphs as well. Moreover, according to the aforementioned analysis, the Rav concluded, the interpretation of the word *ten* in *u-ve-khen ten* is not a petition, a *baqashah*, but a declarative statement. The Hebrew word after *u-ve-khen*, **ten** should be construed as **titen** (future tense). We proclaim: You, the *Ribono Shel Olam*, shall indeed set Your fear, give glory, the righteous shall rejoice, and You shall reign (*ve-timlokh*) in an undisputed manner.<sup>6</sup>

Although we possess very few statements of R. Yohanan ben Nuri in Shas, it is remarkable how this particular dispute with R. Akiva regarding the liturgy on Rosh Ha-Shanah can be the source of such rich, profound insights regarding the various aspects of our prayer to God on the New Year.

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the historian of liturgy Ismar Elbogen, in his work *Jewish Liturgy, A Comprehensive History* (translated by Raymond P. Scheindlin [Philadelphia, New York and Jerusalem, 1992], p. 118), also concluded that these paragraphs (including *ve-timlokh*) were a vestige of R. Yohanan ben Nuri's view.