

# The Malach of Hoshana Rabbah

*Do not grieve, for the joy of G-d is your strength.*

**Nechemiah 8:10**

בכל יום מקיפין את המזבח פעם אחת ואומרים אנא ד' הושיעה נא אנא ד' הצליחה נא. רבי יהודה אומר אני והו הושיעה נא.

ואותו היום מקיפין את המזבח שבעה פעמים.

*Every day they would circle the altar once and say, "Please, G-d, save us now! Please, G-d, make us succeed now!"*

*Rabbi Yehudah says, "Ani Vaho, save us now." And on that day [Hoshana Rabbah] they circled the altar seven times.*

**Mishnah, Succah ch. 4**

וכיצד הוא סדר ההקפה? כל ישראל גדולים וקטנים נוטלים את לולביהם בידיהם הימנית ואתרוגיהם בידיהם השמאלית ומקיפין אחת, ואותו היום היו מקיפין שבע פעמים. אמר ר' חייא זכר ליריחו.

הא תינח בזמן שיש מזבח, בזמן הזה חזן הכנסת עומד כמלאך האלקים וס"ת בזרועו,

והעם מקיפין אותו דוגמת מזבח:

*What is the order of circling? All Israel, old and young, take their lulavim in their right hands and their etrogim in their left hands and circle once. And on that day [Hoshana Rabbah] they circle seven times. Rabbi Chiya said: This is a memorial for Yericho.*

*That's fine when there is an altar. Today, the chazan of the gathering stands like a malach of G-d, with a Torah scroll in his arm, and the congregation circles him, like the altar.*

**Yalkut Shimoni to Tehillim #703**



**Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner**

Rosh Beit Midrash, YU Torah Mitzion Zichron Dov  
Beit Midrash of Toronto

**T**he image of making a daily circuit around the bimah, upon which one member of the congregation holds a Torah, is well-known. Rabbi Chiya's association with the conquest of Yericho<sup>1</sup> is visible, both in the act of circling and in our appeal to Divine aid in our time of need. But why is the person holding the Torah compared to a *malach*, a Divine agent? To appreciate the comparison, let us examine why we perform the Hoshanot circuits.

## The Hoshanot

One traditional understanding of Hoshanot is that this ritual is part of our annual appeal for rain. The prophet Zechariah declared that seasonal rainfall can be a Divine response to the Succot pilgrimage to the Beit haMikdash.<sup>2</sup> A mishnah informs us that our annual rainfall is determined by G-d on Succot.<sup>3</sup> And in the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer states explicitly that the mitzvah of taking the *arba minim* on Succot is a prayer for rain.<sup>4</sup> In that light, carrying the *arba minim* around the bimah, and

crying out, "Save us," is a plea for the rain our crops need. However, there is another way to view Hoshanot: As a victory march.

In the words of a midrash, commenting on the last words of Tehillim 16:11:

ואמרי רבנן לולב בימין ואתרוג בשמאל. מה טעם? "נעימות בימין נצח," במי שהוא נוטל לולב בימין ונוצח ובאין. בנוהג שבעולם הנדייסין רצין באיפרכוס, מי נוטל ובא? מי שהוא נוצח.

כך בראש השנה באין כל באי עולם ועוברין לפנינו כבני מרון, ואף ישראל עוברין לפנינו עם כל באי עולם, ושרי אומות העולם אומרים "אנו נצחנו וזכינו בדין," ואין אדם יודע מי נצח, אם ישראל נוצחים או אומות העולם. עבר ראש השנה וכל ישראל באים ביום הכפורים ומתענים בו, ולובשים בגדים לבנים ונאים. עבר יום הכפורים ואין אדם יודע מי נוצח, אם ישראל אם אומות העולם. כיון שהגיע יום טוב הראשון של חג, וכל ישראל גדולים וקטנים נוטלין לולביהם בימנם, ואתרוגיהם בשמאלם, מיד הכל יודעין שישראל נוצחין בדין. וכיון שהגיע יום הושענא רבה, נוטלין ערבי נחל, ומקיפין שבע הקפות, וחזן הכנסת עומד כמלאך אלקים, וספר תורה בזרועו, והעם מקיפין אותו דוגמת המזבח.



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*And the Sages said: The lulav in the right and the etrog in the left [while circling the altar]. Why? "The pleasant items are in your right, for victory. (Tehillim 16:11)" This refers to the one who takes the lulav in the right and is victorious with the branches. Customarily, competitors race in the arena, and who takes the branches? The one who wins. So, too, on Rosh HaShanah, all who enter the world come and pass before Him, like sheep, and Israel too passes before Him with all of the others who enter this world. And the nobles of the nations say, "We won, we triumphed in the judgment," and no one knows who won, whether Israel won or the nations. Rosh HaShanah passes, and all Israel comes on Yom Kippur and fasts, wearing white, beautiful clothing. Yom Kippur passes and no one knows who won, Israel or the nations.*

*When the first day of Succot arrives, all Israel, old and young, take their lulavim in their right hands and their etrogim in their left. Immediately, everyone knows that Israel has triumphed in judgment. And when the day of Hoshana Rabbah arrives, they take willow branches and circle seven times, and the chazan of the gathering stands like a malach of G-d, with a Torah scroll in his arm, and the nation circles him like the altar.*

#### **Midrash Tehillim 17:5<sup>5</sup>**

In the eyes of this midrash, the focus of our Hoshanot is not on our plea for Divine aid, despite our "Save us" cry. Rather, this is primarily a celebration of the acceptance of our earlier pleas.

#### **Bar Kochba's Coins**

The image of the *arba minim* as a sign of victory may also be seen in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century coins of Bar Kochba, which include *shekalim* marked with the image of a lulav bundle.

Some contend that Bar Kochba may have perceived in Succot an image of national redemption and sovereignty appropriate to his cause.<sup>6</sup> The first Beit haMikdash was dedicated just before Succot,<sup>7</sup> and the altar of the second Beit haMikdash was dedicated likewise just in time for Succot.<sup>8</sup> Historical sources suggest that the eight days of the original Chanukah celebration, marking rededication of the second Beit haMikdash, may have been modeled on the eight days of Succot.<sup>9</sup> And so Bar Kochba may have adopted Succot as a rallying point.

However, others<sup>10</sup> contend that Bar Kochba may have selected the branches of the lulav bundle as a symbol of triumph, as presented in the midrash above. For centuries, Jews who had come to the Beit haMikdash on Succot had been invited into the interior *Heichal* to march around the altar with their branches held high, declaring victory in our judgment before G-d. Now Bar Kochba borrowed that image for his own campaign.

#### **The Malach**

In this victorious context, the holder of the sefer Torah functions as a *malach*, a representative of G-d, conveying to us the news of our victory and contributing to an atmosphere of triumph. Indeed, the midrash cited above continues to say that when we circle the altar, "Immediately the ministering *malachim* rejoice, declaring, 'Israel has won! Israel has won!'"

The *malach* as herald and celebrant of victory is well-established in Tanach. Yehoshua was visited by a *malach* who declared himself to be an officer of G-d's army, signifying that G-d

would bring Yehoshua military victory over Yericho.<sup>11</sup> Gidon was visited by a *malach* to herald the defeat of Midian.<sup>12</sup> And Hatzlelponi, mother of Shimshon, was visited by a *malach* who foretold the birth of her son, who would begin to rescue the Jews from the Plishtim.<sup>13</sup> Along these lines, the *malach* at the center of our Hoshanot is a Divine representative, announcing our victory in judgment before Hashem, and rejoicing with us.

The celestial *malach* is not necessarily seen in the human holder of the Torah, though; the emphasis may be on the Torah itself. Indeed, according to Rabbi Aharon haKohen of Narbonne,<sup>14</sup> we primarily circle the Torah. The only reason we have someone stand in the center is in order to honor the Torah by holding it. The Torah itself is G-d's representative, broadcasting the news of our victory.<sup>15</sup>

#### **The Basis for our Confidence**

One problem remains, though: How do we know that we have been victorious? How can we hold a triumphant parade and claim that a *malach* has arrived to certify this win?

One might contend that we are always confident that G-d is "on our side," as the *Tur* asserts regarding rejoicing on Rosh HaShanah.<sup>16</sup> However, our midrash emphasizes that we do not know whether we triumphed in judgment. Rather, an alternative answer may lie in Abbaye's classic justification for the symbolism-rich menu of Rosh HaShanah:

אמר אביי, השתא דאמרת: סימנא מילתא היא, [לעולם] יהא רגיל למיחזי בריש שתא קרא ורוביא, כרתי וסילקא ותמרי.

*Abbaye said: Since we say that signs are substantive, one should accustom himself*

to see gourds and fenugreek, leek, beets and dates at the start of the year.<sup>17</sup>

Commentators suggest that the central function of these symbols is to inspire optimism.<sup>18</sup> As Nechemiah instructed the Jews of his generation on Rosh HaShanah, “Go eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks, and send portions to those who have none prepared, for today is sacred to our Master. Do not grieve, for the joy of G-d is your strength.”<sup>19</sup>

Use of symbols to inspire optimism is not unique to Rosh HaShanah. When Yehonatan, son of King Saul, sought to attack the Plishtim, he determined whether to proceed based on the words he heard from the Plishtim when they spotted him. He planned:

אִם כֹּה יֹאמְרוּ אֵלֵינוּ דַּמוּ עַד הַיָּעֲנֹנוּ אֲלֵיכֶם  
וְעַמְדָנוּ תַּחְתֵּינוּ וְלֹא נַעֲלֶה אֲלֵיהֶם. וְאִם כֹּה  
יֹאמְרוּ עָלֵינוּ וְעַלֵּינוּ כִּי נִתְּנָם ה' בְּיָדֵנוּ וְזֶה  
לָנוּ הָאוֹת.

*If they say to us thus, ‘Be still until we reach you,’ then we will remain in our place, and not ascend to them. But if they say to us thus, ‘Ascend to us,’ then we will ascend, for G-d has given them into our hands, and this is our sign.*

#### **Shemuel I 14:9-10**

As Rabbi David Kimchi (Radak) explained, this was a message he would hear, strengthening his heart, as a sign and symbol regarding the venture.

Perhaps, then, this is the role of our

victory march around the altar in the Beit haMikdash, and around the bimah in the synagogue. Any new initiative requires confidence, and this is certainly true as we emerge from Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur and begin the new year. To inspire confidence, on each day of Succot we bear the lulav bundle which signifies victory, and call upon G-d to “save us,” making good on that victory by bringing us salvation and success. We rally around the Torah that is G-d’s message to us, and its bearer is transformed for us into a *malach* like those who inspired Yehoshua, Gidon and the Hatzlelponi. On the seventh day, Hoshana Rabbah, we make seven such circuits, as we did in our victory over Yericho. And armed with this sense of victory, inspired by the image of G-d’s *malach*, we march into the new year, ready to manage the challenges which come our way.

#### **Endnotes**

- 1 Yehoshua 6.
- 2 Zechariah 14:17.
- 3 Mishnah Rosh HaShanah, Perek 1.
- 4 Talmud, *Taanit* 2b; and see *Vayikra Rabbah* 30:13 as well.
- 5 Translated in part based on Aruch *hindivisin* and notes of Salomon Buber at [http://www.hebrewbooks.org/pagefeed/hebrewbooks\\_org\\_14295\\_258.pdf](http://www.hebrewbooks.org/pagefeed/hebrewbooks_org_14295_258.pdf). A similar idea may be expressed in Yalkut Shimoni Tehillim #703.

6 Dr. Paul Romanoff, *Jewish Symbols on Ancient Jewish Coins*, American Israel Numismatic Association (1971).

7 Melachim I 8.

8 Ezra 3; and see Nechemiah 8.

9 *Maccabees* II Chapter 10.

10 Avraham Tendler, “הדגמים של המקדש והפולחן במטבעות מרד בר כוכבא” accessible at <https://biu.academia.edu/AvrahamTendler>.

11 Yehoshua 5:13-15, as explained by Radak, Abarbanel and Malbim. *Sanhedrin* 44b identifies criticism for Yehoshua in the *malach*’s visit, but as noted by Radak to Yehoshua, it is difficult to sustain this on the level of *p’shat*. Radak goes so far as to claim that the author of that midrashic passage confused certain verses.

12 Shoftim 6:11-24. Radak, Abarbanel and Malbim believe that this is a *malach*; Ralbag believes it is a human prophet.

13 Shoftim 13:5.

14 *Orchot Chaim* I, *Seder Tefilot haPesach uShar haMoadot* 14.

15 For other explanations of why we circle the Torah, see *Bach, Orach Chaim* 660 and *Maharam Schick, Derashah* 63.

16 See *Tur* and *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 581, supporting an atmosphere of joy on Rosh HaShanah because “we know that G-d will perform a miracle on our behalf.”

17 Talmud, *Horiyot* 12a.

18 Note that Maharal (*Beer haGolah, Beer* 2) takes Abbaye’s prescription as a step with practical consequences, initiating fulfillment of an anticipated good verdict so that it will gain force by virtue of its implementation. See Ramban to Bereishit 12:6, too.

19 Nechemiah 8:10.

