

Dr. Aaron Koller

“Beloved of the Soul” (Yedid Nefesh): Individual Yearning and Communal Redemption

The poem *Yedid Nefesh* is beloved in Jewish communities around the world. Although originally it had no connection to Shabbat at all, it has found two regular homes within the rituals of the day: in many congregations it is sung on Friday evening, before *Kabbalat Shabbat*, and in many it is sung at *Se’udah Shelishit*. Contemporary *siddurim* often print it in both locations, but almost always include it at least once, such is its popularity.

The poem is slightly less than half a millennium old, being found first in the notebook of Elazar Azikri (1533–1600),⁵⁷ a resident of sixteenth-century Tzefat, a disciple of R. Jacob Berab, and a colleague, student, and friend of Rabbis Yosef Karo, Moshe Cordovero, Isaac Luria (the Ari), Shlomo Ha-Levi Alkabetz, and Israel Najara, among others. An autograph copy of Azikri’s work, *Sefer Chareidim*, which includes the poem, is found in the collections of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, where it is labeled JTS ms 3541. The poem is found on f 5v, and a photograph of the manuscript page, courtesy of the JTS library, is on p. 31 below.⁵⁸ As can be seen, the poem has a heading in the manuscript: “*bakashah al ha-yichud -ve-ha-ahavah*” – “a request for unification and the love,” and the word “*cheishek*” – “desire” is inserted above the word “*ve-ha-ahavah*,” possibly intending to correct the title to “a request for unification and the desire of love.”

The heading shows that for Azikri, this was not a liturgical, communal poem, but a personal, intimate one. Indeed, in the -seventeenth century it was printed as part of the ritual for *Tikun Chatzot*, and the musicality and the theme of lovesickness and a desire for romantic union with God are perfectly appropriate for that setting.⁵⁹ The song was printed in various contexts in *siddurim* over the following decades. It appeared in a Sephardic *siddur* in 1740 (located at the beginning of *Shacharit*), and in R. Yaakov Emden’s Ashkenazi *siddur Amudei Shamayim* in 1745. R. Emden writes that his father, the Chakham Tzvi, used to recite the poem at night, and it is possible that the Chakham Tzvi had learned the song during his time in Salonika.⁶⁰

The text in the manuscript differs in a few significant details from the printing from recent centuries, but a number of recent *-siddurim*, including notably the Israeli *siddur Rinat Yisrael* and the Koren *siddur* with a commentary by Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, include the text of the poem as found in Azikri’s own notebook.⁶¹ The

⁵⁷. Ezra Chwat, “Who Wrote the Poem ‘Yedid Nefesh?’”, July 29, 2010 post on his blog *Giluy Milta b’Alma* (<http://imhm.blogspot.co.il/2010/06/who-wrote-yedid-nefesh.html>, accessed August 2012), discussed some evidence that Azikri may not have written it. He cites MS 320 of the Guenzburg collection, in which the last item is a series of poems, the last of which is *Yedid Nefesh* with the heading, “4 stanzas of the name of the Holy One, which we have heard from the holy mouth, from the honorable sage, our teacher Rabbi Gedaliah, son of the angelic kabbalist our teacher Rabbi Moshe Cordovero.” As Chwat explains, this does not actually attribute the composition of the poem to R. Gedaliah Cordovero, son of ReMaK; and in any case, “Gedaliah Cordovero and Elazar Azikri are likely to have been well acquainted.”

⁵⁸. My thanks to R. Jerry Schwarzbard, Warren Klein, and Professor David Kraemer for their assistance and generosity in obtaining the new high-resolution photo of the manuscript as well as permission to publish it here.

⁵⁹. Elie Kaunfer, “The Liturgical History and Significance of *Yedid Nefesh*,” in *Mittuv Yosef: Yosef Tobi Jubilee Volume* (ed. Ayelet Oettinger and Danny Bar-Maoz; Haifa: The Center for the Study of Jewish Culture in Spain and Islamic Countries – University of Haifa, 2011), 1.375. Kaunfer’s study is insightful on both the history and the -meaning of the poem.

⁶⁰. Yaakov Efrati, “About the *piyut* Yedid Nefesh,” *Shma’atin* 123–124 (1995): 78 [Hebrew].

⁶¹. See Shlomo Tal, *The Development of the Siddur, and Answers to Questions in Light of the Siddur “Rinat Yisrael”* (Jerusalem, 1985), 66–67 [Hebrew], and Morris Silverman, “Further Comments on the Text of the Siddur,” *Journal of Jewish Music & Liturgy* 13 (1991–1992): 39.

text as it is found in Azikri's own hand is as follows. (There are no vowels in the autograph, and there are some ambiguities as a result; the vocalization provided here is an educated guess, but should be treated as interpretation.⁶²)

Beloved of the soul, -Compassionate Father,	יְדִיד נֶפֶשׁ אֵב הַרְחֵמֵן	1
draw Your servant to Your will;	מְשׁוּבָה עֲבָדְךָ אֶל רְצוֹנְךָ	2
He shall hurry like a deer	יְרוּץ עֲבָדְךָ כְּמוֹ אֵיל	3
He will bow before Your glory;	יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה מִלִּל הַדְרָךְ	4
for Your love will be sweeter to him	כִּי יַעֲרֵב לוֹ יְדִידוֹתֶךָ	5
than comb-honey or any sweet flavor.	מִנּוֹפֶת צוּף וְכָל טַעַם	6
Glorious, lovely, eternally radiant,	הַדּוֹר נֶאֱדָה זֵיו הָעוֹלָם	7
my soul is ill, desiring of your love.	נֶפְשִׁי חוֹלֵת אֶהְבֶּתְךָ	8
Please, O God, please – please heal her,	אֲנֵא אֵל נָא רַפֵּא נָא לָהּ	9
by showing her the pleasantness of Your radiance.	בְּהִרְאוֹת לָהּ נַעַם זֵיוֹךְ	1 0
then she be strong and be healed,	אֲז תִּתְחַזַּק וְתִתְרַפֵּא	1 1
and she shall be Your eternal maidservant.	וְהִיְתָה לָהּ שִׁפְחַת עוֹלָם	1 2
Enduring One, may Your mercy be aroused	וְתִיק יְהִי רַחֲמֶיךָ	1 3
and please take pity on the son of Your lover,	וְחוּס נָא עַל בֶּן אוֹהֶבְךָ	1 4
because it is already long that I have yearned intensely	כִּי זָה כְּמָה נִכְסוּף נִכְסַף	1 5
to see the splendor of Your strength.	לְרִאוֹת בְּתִפְאֵרַת עוֹזְךָ	1 6

⁶². There are a few words whose orthography is ambiguous, and which could be -interpreted in ways different than what is presented here (e.g., vocalizing *ěhōv* rather than *āhūv* in line 23). I have not pursued these possibilities here.

Please, my God, darling of my heart,	אָנָא, אֱלֹהֵי מִחְמַד לִבִּי	1 7
hurry! and do not hide!	חֹשֶׁה נָא וְאַל תִּתְעַלֵּם	1 8
Reveal Yourself, please, and spread – my Beloved –	הַגְּלֵה נָא וּפְרוֹשׁ חֲבִיב	1 9
upon me your peaceful shelter;	עָלַי אֶת סִכַּת שְׁלוֹמְךָ	2 0
Let the earth shine because of Your glory,	תִּאֲרֵר אֶרֶץ מִכְבוֹדְךָ	2 1
and we shall rejoice and be happy in You.	נִגִּילָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה בְּךָ	2 2
Hasten, Beloved, for the time has come,	מְהֵרָה אֶהוּב כִּי בָא מוֹעֵד	2 3
and show me grace as in days of old.	וְחֹנְנֵי כִימֵי עוֹלָם	2 4

There are a number of aspects of the poem that are significant for its meaning. Elazar Azikri describes his feelings for God as one might describe a love and a longing of one human for another. The poem opens and closes with images drawn from *Shir Ha-Shirim* 1:4:

Draw me after you, we shall run! The king brought me into his chambers – we shall rejoice and be happy in you.
We will praise your love more than wine – they rightfully love you!⁶³

The beginning of the poem (l. 2) draws on the first half of the verse, with the request “draw Your servant to Your will”; the poem ends (l. 22) with the climax: “we shall rejoice and be happy in You.”

This pause, or delay, between the request made in the first stanza and the fulfillment in the final stanza, is central to the emotional meaning of the poem. In our current state, it is not possible for the poet to be confident that he will have the pleasure of “-rejoicing” in God. The problem is the current state of exile in which the author – and all the Jews – find themselves. In real life, Azikri founded a group called “Sukkat Shalom,” dedicated to the perfection of *middot* and the hastening of the Messianic Age, so the plea that God spread His “peaceful shelter” (*sukkat shelomakh*) is a transparent reference to that endeavor.⁶⁴

The poem’s major theme is the tension between the individual yearning for union with God and the distance imposed by national exile. When the poet beseeches God to “take pity on the son of Your lover,” the reference is apparently to Avraham, who is called the *ohev* of God in *Divrei Ha-Yamim Bet* 20:7. The context there does more, though:

⁶³. Benny Gesundheit, “Yedid Nefesh – The Author, Sources, and Meaning of the Piyut,” *Ha-Ma’ayan* 45.2 (2005): 53 [Hebrew] (also available on *Daat* online, <http://www.daat.ac.il/DAAT/sifrut/maamarim/nefesh-2.htm>, accessed August 2012).

⁶⁴. Gesundheit, “Yedid Nefesh,” 56.

You, our God, cast the inhabitants of this land out to make room for Your people Israel, and You gave it to the seed of Avraham, Your lover, forever.

By alluding to a text that makes the claim for Israel's *eternal* connection to God, the poet regains hope that the despondence of exile will end. Another passage in which Avraham is called the *ohev* of God may be even more resonant:

But you, Israel, My servant, Yaakov, whom I chose, seed of Avraham My lover, ...I said, "You are My servant"; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. (*Yeshayahu* 41:8–10)⁶⁵

These passages establish for the poet that Israel can expect redemption, initiated by God, imminently.

This raises one further point about the redemption anticipated within the poem. It is entirely divinely-initiated; not a hint of human repentance or return is found. (Elsewhere in Azikri's writings, this is not the case.) In this text, the human merely awaits, pining away for his Divine beloved to appear and join him.

The lovesickness is poignantly expressed in the second stanza, drawing again from *Shir Ha-Shirim*. The Shulamit there says (2:4) she is "love-sick" (*cholot ahavah*), a statement echoed in l. 8 here, with further specification: it is the poet's "soul" that is love-sick, and it is not merely desiring of love, but specifically of "Your" love. The poet then cites Moshe's famously terse prayer for healing: "God, please, heal her, please" (*Bemidbar* 12:13), and adds one more "please" to the beginning of the line. In this context, it is clear how the terseness is to be read. It is the voice of a forlorn lover close to despair, who can manage no more than a few, strained words, pleading for the return of her lover.

The issue of gender, raised in the previous line, is pursued consistently in the second stanza, and finds a dramatic apex in lines 11–12. Using feminine verbs to refer to his soul, the poet promises that if God heals his soul by "showing her the pleasantness of Your radiance," she will be healed and strengthened, and will then be indentured to God eternally. The image of the love-sick soul, finally redeemed, offering herself in eternal bondage to her loving redeemer, is so powerful it can be disturbing.

In fact, the single most significant difference between Azikri's -original version of the poem and the one current in most *siddurim* is the change from "she [= my soul] shall be Your eternal maidservant (*shifchat olam*)" to "she shall have eternal happiness (*simchat olam*)." This was already the reading in R. Yaakov Emden's *siddur* in the eighteenth century, although it is impossible to know if someone made this change -intentionally, or if it was an accident. In the early nineteenth century, however, one *siddur* was published with the change from "*simchat*" back to "*shifchat*." This was condemned by R. Chaim Halberstam, the *Rebbe* of Sanz, who bitinglly said, "this has made the soul into a maidservant!" Of course, Azikri meant to do just that, but this episode reveals much about how the Sanzer *Rebbe*, and by contrast Azikri, viewed the soul vis-à-vis God.

The last stanza asks God once more for the personal revelation that will bring bliss to the poet's existence. Here there is a fascinating movement – the only one of the poem – from singular to plural. Arthur Green noted, "With the exception of a single line in the last stanza, the poem is composed entirely in the singular, and its subject is the longing of a single soul for God, not that of the Community of Israel."⁶⁶ This single line, however, is crucial to understanding how the poet envisions the course of his personal redemption. It will not be experienced alone, but rather in a group: "we shall rejoice and be happy in You."

The final stanza is suffused with allusions to texts that refer to the redemption of the *nation*. The very last words, "*ki-yimei olam*," allude to the end of the book of *Amos* (9:11):

On that day, I will raise up the fallen booth (*sukkah*) of David, I will fence in where it is breached and rebuild what was destroyed therein; I will build it up like the days of old (*ki-yimei olam*).

The idea, and the words, that "the time has come," as well as the verb *ch-n-n* in the final line, are drawn from *Tehillim* 102:14:

You, arise and console Zion, for it is the time to *grace* her (*-le-chenenah*), for the time has come (*ki va mo'ed*).

⁶⁵. Ibid., 55 with n. 35.

⁶⁶. Arthur Green, "Religion and Mysticism," in *Take Judaism, For Example: Studies Toward the Comparison of Religions*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Chicago, 1983), 81; Kaunfer, "The Liturgical History and Significance of *Yedid Nefesh*," 383.

And the key plural line, “we shall rejoice (*nagilah*) and be happy (*-ve-nismechah*) in You,” is indeed drawn from *Shir Ha-Shirim* 1:4, as mentioned earlier, but it is also an allusion to *Yeshayahu* 25:9:

It will be said that day, “Here is our God, whom we hoped for, that He would redeem us! This is the Lord! We hoped for Him. We will rejoice and be happy in His redemption.

In sum, the final stanza, as opposed to the poem until this point, emphasizes national redemption rather than individual salvation. This does not alter the fundamental tenor of the poem, however, which is still radically individual, and in fact, returns to the individual in the last line. The national redemption seems to be a mere means to an end here, a necessary prerequisite for the individual’s reunion with God. As long as the nation is in exile, no personal revelation is possible. Let God redeem the nation, therefore, for the time has certainly come for that – and then “show me grace as in days of old.”⁶⁷

In concluding, it is worth meditating on the emotional movement of *Kabbalat Shabbat*, introduced by this poem. Certainly the focus on the individual exists in *Lekha Dodi*, as well, with its repeated request to the beloved to greet the bride, and its singular addresses (e.g., “*kumi ori*”).⁶⁸ There, too, however, the song reaches a climax in the idea that the personal redemption will be part of a national redemption: “In the midst of the faithful members of your treasured nation, come in, O Bride, come in, O Bride!” Our prayers, as the Shabbat enters, reflect both our being part of the community, and also being individual souls full of yearning and desire.

⁶⁷. R. Yaakov Emden’s *siddur* reads *chaneinu* in the final line, which entirely alters the dynamic (cf. Kaunfer, “The Liturgical History and Significance of *Yedid Nefesh*,” 378).

⁶⁸. Kaunfer, “The Liturgical History and Significance of *Yedid Nefesh*,” 383.