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Jewish Influence on Secular Society

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A Digression: Two Rabbinic Views of Chanukah

From Boston Jewish Spirit

CHANUKAH AND CHRISTMAS: THE DEEPER CONNECTIONS

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Emmanuel Church in the City of Boston
December 18, 2005

One of the most dramatic reflections of the cultural and religious diversity that is the hallmark of contemporary American society, is the way in which Chanukah and Christmas have come to be joined together in the popular consciousness as a shared holiday season. While this is something of a relatively recent phenomenon, there is good reason for the linking of these two festivals beyond their convergence in the calendar.

It is, of course, always important to acknowledge the asymmetries and differences between these celebrations, particularly the very different places they occupy in our respective faith traditions. Christmas is one of the two major festivals of the Christian church—its High Holy Days, if you will. A more accurate Jewish parallel would be the autumn holy day of Rosh Hashanah, the New Year. Easter, in turn, corresponds to both the pre-eminent sanctity of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, as well as its more immediate historic and symbolic links to Passover.

Chanukah, on the other hand, is designated in the Jewish liturgical calendar as a “minor festival”, much later in origin than these more ancient and venerable Biblically ordained holy days. Its observance has been, until our time, primarily a family centered folk celebration. In contemporary America and Israel, however, Chanukah has undergone a transformation and has emerged as a major celebration of Jewish identity - with the renewal of many of its old traditions and the creative development of new dimensions to its observance. And yet—while the common perceptions that *equate* Chanukah and Christmas are, on significant historical and theological levels, inaccurate—there are nevertheless many deep and meaningful parallels and connections between them.

One of the most important connections is the common root of both holidays in ancient and universal winter solstice celebrations—which I reflected on in my contribution to the current issue of Emmanuel’s parish journal *VOICES*. The celebration of *light* and *life* in the midst of the barren darkness and cold of winter, is certainly at the heart of both Chanukah and Christmas - so clearly reflected in the symbols of both holidays—the kindling of light and the ancient image of the “tree of life”. Both Judaism and Christianity incorporated these pre-existing celebrations into their respective developments of Chanukah and Christmas, adding, of course, distinctive new historical and theological meanings as well.



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But there also are many other deep and fascinating links between our two holidays... including an unexpected but profound connection particularly suggested by this morning's Gospel text from Luke's narrative of the Annunciation.

Now to fully appreciate the convergence, we must understand the story of Chanukah—which commemorates the victory of the Jewish struggle against the oppression of the Hellenistic Syrian overlords of the land of Israel in the centuries following the conquering of the ancient Middle East by Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC. Two centuries after Alexander's relatively enlightened and benevolent tolerance of religious and cultural diversity in his far flung empire, his successors became ever more zealous in their efforts to impose—by force—Greek culture, language and religion on their subjects. In 170 BC, the Greco-Syrian ruler of occupied Israel, Antiochus IV, defiled the great Temple in Jerusalem with the erection of a statue of Zeus within its Sanctuary, and decreed that the most important observances of Judaism were to be prohibited. A rebellion broke out in the year 168 BC. The leader of the humble shepherds, farmers and villagers who joined in this grass roots resistance, was Judah, the son of Mattathias, the Jewish Priest of the small village of Mod'in. His ragged band of rebels took the name **Maccabees**—an acrostic formed by the first letters of the Hebrew words that they adopted as their motto, a phrase from Exodus 15:11, “Who is like unto You O Lord, among the mighty”.

Despite daunting, overwhelming, indeed impossible odds, the rebellion of this small rabble against the greatest military forces of the time was dramatically and miraculously victorious. Three years later in the winter of the year 165 BC, the Maccabees recaptured Jerusalem, drove out the tyrannical rulers and - significantly - on the 25 th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev, mid December in 165 BC, rededicated the Sanctuary to the worship of the God of Israel. They ordained a new festival of freedom and thanksgiving they called **Chanukah**—the Hebrew word for “dedication”. The mythic narrative of these events included the popular miracle story of the lights of the Temple menorah burning undimmed for eight days during that first celebration of the newly instituted holiday.

But within a century, a far more powerful and cruel oppressor was to descend upon Israel—the ruthless power of imperial Rome. It was in the tumultuous years of the early first century BC, with the Maccabean spirit of resistance and rebellion against tyranny resurfacing once again among the people of the Roman Province of Judea, that the stage was set for the events surrounding the birth, life and death of Jesus. And in no sense is the true historical and spiritual link between Chanukah and Christmas more clear than in the context of the Gospel story of the Annunciation. Mary—more accurately Miriam [Hebrew], or Maryam [Aramaic]—the Galilean peasant girl of the tiny village of Nazareth, whose destiny as the mother of Jesus unfolds in this Gospel narrative, is visited by the angel Gabriel who tells her that she is about to give birth to a child.

The text relates how troubling this announcement was to the young girl. However, the usual focus on her virginity, was actually, the least of the disturbing implications of her encounter with Gabriel. Mary may have been a simple illiterate peasant girl, but like all Jews she was acutely aware of the oppression of her people by the Roman forces who ruled over them. She would have been very familiar with the story of the heroism of Judah and the Maccabees two centuries earlier. And she would have been aware of the talk among the people of the village of hopes for a new redemption from tyranny. Mary and her family probably observed Chanukah, although still in a rudimentary form. As a national commemoration of liberation, the festival was, in this period, certainly suppressed by the Romans and



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their puppets—Herod the King and the priestly establishment of the Jerusalem Temple - regarded as traitors and collaborators by most common people in the Jewish community. And yet, Miriam of Nazareth would also have been fully aware of the profoundly dangerous and subversive political implications of Gabriel's revelation—that her son's name was to be *Yeshua*, meaning savior, and that his destiny would be the “ inheriting of the throne of King David, to rule over the House of Jacob forever”.

That such a deliverance could happen again—as had been granted in the days of the Chanukah story two centuries earlier—and that she, a simple young woman from an obscure desert village, would be the source of this redemption—was more than troubling for Mary. Unlike Matthew, who explicitly states the political implications of Jesus' geneology and birth, Luke couches the issue in safe symbolic terms for the oppressive times in which he wrote his narrative. Luke focuses on Mary's virginity and the seeming impossibility of her conceiving a child. But when the angel tells her “With God, nothing is impossible”, it is the idea of a new liberation, and that her son would usurp the power of Rome, that surely must have seemed most miraculous of all. It is striking that this phrase seems to so clearly echo the words of Judah himself as recounted in the Chanukah story from the Apocrypha. When many expressed doubt and fear at the prospect of the small Maccabean band resisting the powerful forces of Antiochus, Judah replied “With the God of Heaven, it is the same to save by many or by few!” That phrase would have possibly been familiar to Mary and was doubtlessly known by Luke. And this faith in the miraculous power of God to change human history—to bring freedom and redemption - both political and spiritual - in the most unlikely circumstances - is at the heart of both narratives. This message is, indeed, the most profound link between the Chanukah and Christmas stories. Above all the parallels—and the contrasts—between the two festivals, both ultimately affirm the miracle of redemption ... of liberation and salvation ... of God's love ... and of the deliverance of humanity.

This is a miracle we still yearn and pray for today—a time in world history that seems all too much like the first century two millennia ago. Humanity still lives under the yoke of oppression and of war—of the denial of freedom and liberty to so many people in our world.

Chanukah and Christmas, both proclaim the promise of light in the midst of darkness... of life in the face of death... of liberation from all oppression... and of the hope for peace on earth. And both affirm that with God—who achieves His purpose whether by many or by few—nothing is impossible. As we prepare to usher in both of these beloved festivals a week from today, may we all be granted faith in the possibility of such miracles, and a realization of each of our roles in making these dreams a reality!

In that spirit, we will now share in the ceremony of the lighting of the Chanukah Menorah, as it will be observed beginning next Sunday night for the first of the eight nights of the festival in Jewish homes around the world.

I hope as we share in this ancient and beloved tradition, that the link between these candles and those of Advent—and the message proclaimed in the miracles of both Chanukah and Christmas—will inspire love and courage in all of our hearts ... with faith and hope for a world of peace.

Amen



From Chancellor Ismar Schorsch, "Polarities in Balance"

A MEDITATION ON MAOZ ZUR

Family history has graced me with a special affection for the holiday of Hanukkah. Fifty years ago, back in the fall of 1938, it literally marked a moment of redemption. As the last Rabbi of Hanover, my father, along with thousands of other German Jews, was interned by the Nazis on the still unimaginable night of Kristallnacht. Several weeks later, a visa to England - secured through the good offices of Joseph H. Hera, the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire - managed to effect his release, and, like our ancestors in Egypt, we left Germany in haste, by plane, on the first day of Hanukkah. My father was fond of recounting that in that fateful year we lit the first candle in Germany and the second in England. I had just turned three a month before and our dramatic flight was to become my only tangible memory of Germany.

The conjunction of Hanukkah with our personal escape from Nazi tyranny prompted my father later on to enliven our celebration of the festival with a lusty rendition of the traditional hymn *Maoz Zur*. While the practice among American Jews generally is to sing only the first stanza, and maybe the fifth, we sang all five, skipping only the sixth and final stanza. The poem's theme of redemption seemed to offer a poignant comment on our family's experience. Thus, in time, I developed an existential interest in the poem, spiced by the curious omission of its final stanza. When questioned, my father would simply declare that the stanza was a later and inferior addition.

The purpose of this meditation on *Maoz Zur* is to reclaim it for the liturgical enrichment of Hanukkah. The sudden popularity of Hanukkah, spurred by Zionist achievement and American need, has outgrown the traditional liturgical garb, predicated on a different valence for the festival. In this bind, we are ill-served by dispensing with a poetic ornament that actually accords with our historical and religious sensibilities. Nor should we be satisfied by an act of tokenism - the retention of a single stanza mistranslated to mask its real meaning.

In its present form, *Maoz Zur* consists of six stanzas. Since the days of Leopold Zunz, the first five have been ascribed to an unknown German poet named Mordecai, who lived sometime before the middle of the thirteenth century and whose name survives **as** an acrostic formed by the first letter of each stanza. Each stanza of four lines is laced with a complex and varied rhyming pattern, while each line contains two equal halves of six long syllables. Though the use of the quantitative metrical principle is a trademark of medieval Sephardic poets writing under Arabic influence, the well-known lilting melody by which the hymn is traditionally sung, echoing the strains of a fifteenth-century German folksong, seems to underscore the Ashkenazic provenance of the original text. Congruently, the poem is absent from the Sephardic rite.

One is tempted, therefore, to argue that *Maoz Zur* conveys the collective anguish of a



community stunned by three Crusades in the span of a single century and threatened with a deteriorating political situation. But, for medieval Jews, *Galut* (exile) was a state of mind even during interludes of tranquility, and the pervasive angst of its religious poetry was often generic rather than specific. If *Maoz Zur* does, in fact, bear witness to the darkening horizon of thirteenth-century German Jewry, its testimony is delivered with disarming restraint.

The setting of the original poem of five stanzas is somewhat indeterminate. The speaker is clearly the national voice of Israel addressing God with customary immediacy. But when? My preference is to date the moment of dialogue not long after the reconquest of the Temple. *Maoz Zur* is a song of thanksgiving for the recurring and unfailing instances of divine compassion for Israel. The rescue from "Greek" tyranny triggers a recollection of earlier cases when God's intervention redirected the course of Jewish history. In stanzas two through four the poet recalls, in chronological order, the experience of national degradation in Egypt, Babylonia and Persia, with the slide into oblivion reversed each time only through a dramatic exhibition of divine power. The redemption at the time of the Hasmoneans, described in the fifth stanza, is seen retrospectively to be yet another confirmation of God's guardianship of Israel, which guarantees its survival. And soon thereafter, in stanza one, the voice of Israel celebrates the destruction of its arrogant foe and the resumption of its cultic link to eternity. The introductory stanza thus anticipates the mood of exultation that follows the climactic act of redemption emphasized by the poem.

But the imperfect tense employed by Mordecai in that opening stanza injects a touch of ferule ambiguity. The suffering of Israel was only momentarily interrupted by Hasmonean victory. The fate of Israel in the poet's own age continues to bang in the balance. The fluidity of time, suggested by what might grammatically be construed as a continuous present (a form well known in the Bible), points to past as well as future exultation. Collective memory posits the assurance of ultimate messianic salvation.

What may, indeed, tenuously connect *Maoz Zur* to the age of the Crusades is its conception of the Jewish experience in terms of persecution. A deepening sense of exile seems to be constricting what is worth remembering to episodes of national humiliation. While a full-fledged "lachrymose" theory of Jewish history would have to await the more worldly Sephardic historians of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the chronicles and poetry of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Ashkenazic liturgists surely testify to the oppressive reality of mounting insecurity. A compression of the ancient history of Israel to four salient crises has all the earmarks of an inchoate worldview born in dark times. Yet, the mood of *Maoz Zur* is not funereal, or else its traditional melody would be grotesquely inappropriate. Each crisis is recalled to emphasize its well-timed resolution and to visualize the blessing of God's enduring protection. The suffering of Israel, whatever its cause, is always relieved by an act of salvation.

With the exposition of the five authentic verses of *Maoz Zur*, our analysis might easily be ended, adequate and unexceptional. But what has come to intrigue me, in fact, is the addition of the sixth stanza, an unabashed messianic plea for divine retribution upon Israel's Christian oppressors, often left untranslated by the modern prayerbooks that deign to print it. To probe the reasons for this poetic codicil is not only to clarify the meaning of the original poem by Mordecai, but also to confront the religious doubts evoked by the defiant autonomy of history.

Internal evidence, like the acrostic, is not the only basis for decoding the lateness of



the sixth stanza. External evidence is provided by a German *halakhist* at the end of the seventeenth century, who relates having found several different versions of a sixth stanza affixed to the original text of *Maoz Zur*. Obliging, he cites all three, including one penned by none other than Moses Isserlis, the renowned Polish rabbinic authority of the sixteenth century. However, the version that eventually gained currency appeared anonymously, perhaps because the acrostic of its first three words spelled the bracing command "*hazak*" (be strong). According to our source, all three versions strove for the same effect: to update and complete *Maoz Zur* by reference to the fourth and final overlord of Israel's endless subjugation.'

Classic rabbinic messianism, based on the apocalypse of Daniel, had plotted the plight of Israel on a grid of four empires: Babylon, Persia-Media, Greece and Rome. Inevitably, medieval Jewish history had imposed modifications on the identity of the Imperial players, but the schematic framework held firm, and the Hebrew cognomen, *Edom*, came to encompass medieval Christendom as well as ancient Rome. From the number of additions to *Maoz Zur* that were in circulation by the seventeenth century, it is obvious that Jews who had endured the recurring expulsions from German principalities in the late Middle Ages, and had witnessed the colossal breakup of the Papal empire itself, suddenly invested the old prayer with fresh messianic fervor. The lack of any allusion to the fourth kingdom and its downfall was now felt to be intolerable.

The language of the anonymous stanza that was finally accepted bristles with particular hostility. Besides a blunt entreaty for revenge against "the wicked kingdom," it dares to allude to the internecine struggle fracturing the unity of the Christian world: "*dehei admon be-zel zalmon*" (vanquish Christianity [*admon*, a variant of *edom*] with the shadow of death).¹ Understandably, somewhat later, the stanza was softened by universalizing the line: "*mehei fesha ve-gam resha*" (erase all sin and transgression). Left untouched, though, is the rousing messianic finale, "and send forth the seven shepherds," a passage from Micah (5:4) that the rabbis took to mean the reappearance of a phalanx of seven biblical figures led by David (*Succah*52b).

The various additions proffered thus confirm my reading of Mordecai's poem as a song of thanksgiving set back in the days of the Maccabees. The authors behind them also understood the opening stanza as primarily a celebration of Maccabean reconquest and rededication. Ultimate messianic redemption had to await the travails of yet a fourth kingdom - Rome. The vision of *Maoz Zur* did not dearly extend beyond the third, that of the "Greeks," rendering it slightly sterile for the impatient victims of the most formidable of all the kingdoms. But the addition of the sixth stanza altered subtly the theological message of the entire poem. Mordecai had found consolation in the constancy of divine concern; the author of the codicil implied displeasure at the brevity of the result. Evidently, not all instances of divine pathos were of equal efficacy. The messianic temper questioned the long-term value of earlier redemptive acts. What prompted this criticism was not only experience but also exegesis. In the final analysis, to comprehend fully the issue on which the completed poem turns, we must return to its literary source. For *Maoz Zur* is a commentary on an exquisite piece of midrashic thought.

That midrash is to be found in Psalm 31, the biblical quarry from which Mordecai had hewn the opening phrase of his poem: "O mighty Rock of my salvation." The Psalm itself is the entreaty of a tried and beleaguered man who has always experienced his trust in God to be mercifully rewarded. The second verse aptly captures the mood throughout: "I seek



refuge in You, O Lord; may I never be disappointed; as You are righteous, rescue me." The midrash seizes on the problematic word "never" (*lealam*) to ponder the efficacy of God's protection. The word, as well as the whole Psalm, seems to imply that, once bestowed, God's salvation will never lapse. The person so blessed will never again know shame and discomfiture. Indeed, Isaiah confirmed that very proposition when he declaimed: "Israel has won through the Lord triumph everlasting. You shall not be shamed or disgraced in all the ages to come!" (45: 17).

After this prologue, the midrash weaves a dialogue between Israel and God in order to confront the harsh divergence between history and theology. The people ask God for immediate redemption, because their state of subjugation is forever accompanied by degradation and disgrace. "Redeem us and we shall be rid of degradation. Why? Because Your redemption is everlasting." And they buttress their use with the verse from Isaiah. But God rejects the underlying assumption. "I have already redeemed you in the past and I will be your redeemer again in days to come." He, too, cites scriptural evidence of past intervention and continued engagement.

Nevertheless, Israel remains unmollified. "To be sure, You have already redeemed us through Moses, through Joshua, and through some judges and kings. But we have once again been subjugated and endure degradation as if we had never been redeemed." To which God responds that, in fact, those were cases of redemption effected by mere mortals, beings of flesh and blood. "Your leaders were men, alive one day and buried the next. It is for this reason that your redemption was only redemption for an hour. But in days to come I, who live and endure forever, shall redeem you Myself. I shall redeem you with an eternal redemption, as it is said: 'Israel has won through the Lord triumph everlasting.' Consequently, 'You shall not be shamed or disgraced in all ages to come!'"³

In short, the sordidness of history need not confute the purity of theology. The courage to distinguish between relief effected by men, no matter how exalted and inspired, and redemption through unmediated, divine interjection affords a fragile reconciliation between what we see and what we believe. God's fleeting presence is insufficient to bring history to its rightful end, though it has left traces of enduring and sustaining brilliance.

I am convinced that the final stanza of *Maoz Zur* rests on this profound and sober midrash. Centuries after Mordecai, another Ashkenazic Jew, stirred by the tremors and aftershocks of the Reformation, appended his messianic codicil. Prior achievements of national redemption, from the Babylonian exile to Syrian oppression, were of limited duration because of man's mediation. The passing references, in earlier stanzas, to Zerubbahel, Mordecai and the Hasmoneans suggest as much. In contrast, the fourth kingdom could be overcome only by God Himself. Hence the form of direct address: "Bare Your holy arm," which, given its original redemptive use by Isaiah (52:10), is redolent with messianic urgency. Short of such direct intervention, every respite attained by human hands, even with divine aid, is flawed and perishable.⁴

Taken together, the two strata of *Maoz Zur* blend into a liturgical reflection on Jewish history - the precariousness of minority existence, the reality of divine concern, the consolation of collective memory, and the rarity of true messianism. Paradoxically, the final stanza, with all of its messianic fervor, accentuates the modern emphasis on the human role in the Hanukkah story. The hunger for irreversible redemption is not to be satisfied by human counterfeit. Messianism, properly understood, leads to political restraint. To my



mind, no lesson is more vital to a generation like ours, which is so prone to misread the signs of recent Jewish history.

Published in **Judaism**, Fall 1988.

O mighty stronghold of my salvation,
to praise You is a delight.
Restore my House of Prayer
and there we will bring a thanksgiving offering.
When You will have prepared the slaughter
for the blaspheming foe,
Then I shall complete with a song of hymn
the dedication of the Altar.

My soul had been sated with troubles,
my strength has been consumed with grief.
They had embittered my life with hardship,
with the calf-like kingdom's bondage.
But with His great power
He brought forth the treasured ones,
Pharaoh's army and all his offspring
Went down like a stone into the deep.

To the holy abode of His Word He brought me.
But there, too, I had no rest
And an oppressor came and exiled me.
For I had served aliens,
And had drunk benumbing wine.
Scarcely had I departed
At Babylon's end Zerubabel came.
At the end of seventy years I was saved.

To sever the towering cypress
sought the Aggagite, son of Hammedatha,
But it became [a snare and] a stumbling block to him
and his arrogance was stilled.
The head of the Benjaminite You lifted
and the enemy, his name You obliterated
His numerous progeny - his possessions -
on the gallows You hanged.

Greeks gathered against me
then in Hasmonean days.
They breached the walls of my towers
and they defiled all the oils;
And from the one remnant of the flasks
a miracle was wrought for the roses.
Men of insight - eight days
established for song and jubilation

Bare Your holy arm
and hasten the End for salvation -
Avenge the vengeance of Your servants' blood
from the wicked nation.
For the triumph is too long delayed for us,
and there is no end to days of evil,
Repel the Red One in the nethermost shadow
and establish for us the seven shepherds. (from OU.org)

כַּעֲזָ צוֹר יִשׁוּעָתִי לֶךְ נִאֶה לְשִׁבְחָ.
תִּכּוֹן בֵּית תְּפִלָּתִי וְשֵׁם תוֹדָה נִזְבַּח.
לַעֲת תִּכְיֶן כִּטְבֵּחַ כִּצֹּר הַקִּנְיָנִים.
אֲז אֶגְמֹר בְּשִׁיר מִזְמֹר חֲנֻכַּת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ:

רְעוֹת שְׂבָעָה נִפְשֵׁי בְּגוֹן כֹּחֵי כֹלָה
חַיִּי מִרְרוּ בְּקִשֵׁי בְּשִׁעְבוֹד מַלְכוּת עֲגָלָה
וּבְיָדוֹ הַגְדוּלָה הוֹצִיא אֶת הַסִּגְלָה
חֵיל פְּרָעָה וְכָל זֶרְעוֹ יִרְדּוּ בְּאֶבֶן בְּקִצּוֹלָה:

דְּבִיר קִדְשׁוֹ הִבִּיאֵנִי וְגַם שֵׁם לֹא שִׁקְטָתִי
וּבָא נֹגֶשׁ וְהִגְלֵנִי כִּי זָרִים עֲבַדְתִּי
וַיֵּין רַעַל מִסִּכְתִּי כִּכְעֹט שְׁעִבְרָתִי
קֵץ בָּבֶל זֶרְבָּבֶל לֶקֶץ שְׂבָעִים נֹשְׁעָתִי:

כְּרוֹת קוֹמַת בְּרוֹשׁ בְּקֶשׁ אֶגְגִּי בֶן הַכְּדָתָא
וְנִהְיִתָּה לוֹ לִפְחָ וּלְכֹזֶקֶשׁ וְגִאֲנָתוֹ נִשְׁבַּתָּה
רֹאשׁ יְחִינִי נִשְׁאֲתָ וְאוֹיֵב שָׂכֹן כִּחִיתָ
רַב בְּנֵיו וְקִנְיָנָיו עַל הָעֵץ תָּלִיתָ:

יָנִים נִקְבְּצוּ עָלַי אֲזִי בִימֵי חֲשֹׁמִים
וּפְרָצוּ חוֹמוֹת מְגִדְלֵי וְטִמְאֻ כָּל חֲשֹׁמִים
וּכְבוֹד תֵּר קִנְיָנִים נִעְשָׂה גַם לִשְׁוֹשָׁנִים
בְּנֵי בִינָה יָכִי שְׂכוֹנָה קִבְּעוּ שִׁיר וּרְנָנִים:

חֲשׂוֹף זֶרַע קִדְשֶׁךָ וְקִרְבֵּךָ קֵץ הַיְשׁוּעָה
נִקָּם נִקְמַת עֲבֹדֶיךָ מֵאֶפְרַיִם הַרְשָׁעָה
כִּי אֶרְכָּה הַשָּׁעָה נֶאֱמַר קֵץ לִימֵי הַרְעָה
דָּחָה אֲדֹכּוֹן בְּצֹל צִלְכוֹן הַקָּם לָנוּ רוּעִים שָׁכְרָה