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Hope In History: A Closer Look at Ma'oz Tzur

Torah Reading: Genesis 41:1-- 44:17
Haftarah Reading: Zechariah 2:4-- 4:7

Of the rich tradition of piyyut—liturgical poetry—composed for Ḥanukkah, today two are customarily used: *Ha-Nerot Hallalu* and *Ma'oz Tzur*, which are sung after lighting the Ḥanukkah candles. The first, *Ha-Nerot Hallalu*, is cited in Massekhet Soferim and reappears later in the medieval period, when Maharam of Rothenberg mentions it again. Reflecting rabbinic discussions of the mitzvah of the Ḥanukkah candles, this straightforward hymn recalls the miraculous events, explains that the candles' light is not for practical use, and expresses gratitude. The medieval piyyut *Ma'oz Tzur*, by contrast, though widely known, remains a remarkable, unsettling composition, its meaning often concealed by heavy-handed translation. The skillful rhyming pattern carries with it painful words: "Establish the Temple, and there I shall sacrifice in gratitude. For the occasion, prepare an offering of the braying enemy." One of the central themes of *Ma'oz Tzur* is vengeance; it longs, with anguish, for an end to exile and the dawning of a new, better age—one, which, the author hints, has already

begun to unfold. *Ma'oz Tzur* recalls the rededication of the Temple only obliquely, centering it as a motif and drawing it into the author's present rather than the Hasmonean past. As the following stanzas reveal, *Ma'oz Tzur* is not so much a poem about Ḥanukkah as it is a poem about calamity and triumph throughout Jewish history, prompted by the remembrance of the Hasmoneans. Reciting it, we are transported from Egypt to Babylon to Shushan, and finally to Jerusalem. Interestingly, its sixth and final stanza reemerges in print only in the eighteenth century; because this lost stanza includes the acrostic *ḥazaq*, scholars believe it is original to the piyyut.

The author of *Ma'oz Tzur* is known only by his personal name, Mordecai, preserved in an acrostic formed by the first letter of its first five stanzas.. Textual evidence suggests that *Ma'oz Tzur* was written in early thirteenth-century Ashkenaz, after violence from multiple waves of Crusades and blood libels had greatly affected the old center of Jewish Ashkenazi life in the Rhineland Valley. As well as causing the loss of life and the destruction of Jewish homes and institutions, the threat of grave danger impelled many to take the lives of friends, family members, and themselves. We see several responses to such external and internalized violence arising over the course of the twelfth century and into the thirteenth, and I would suggest that *Ma'oz Tzur* is to be included among them.

When Rashi was a young student, he had to travel the 250 miles from his home in Troyes, in the Ille-de-France, to the Rhineland Valley in Germany, then the center of Jewish learning in northern Europe. After the First Crusade, that center shifted to France, as the lesser-effected communities of Ẓarfat and the influence of Rashi's teaching prompted the flourishing of Tosafist academies with their new ways of reading Torah, Talmud, and the liturgy. In Germany, the pietistic movement of the Ḥasidei Ashkenaz responded to changed sociocultural conditions by cultivating ascetic behaviors, emphasizing the need for repentance, and taking a renewed interest in mystical traditions. Another Ashkenazi response was the writing of prose chronicles that recorded the events surrounding the Crusades. Interestingly, in modernity six additional stanzas recounting deliverance from harm in later periods were appended to *Ma'oz Tzur*, including one attributed to Moses Isserles (the Rema). There are also poems from medieval Ashkenaz, which try to make sense of the violence by analogy to biblical persons and events. The community is imagined, collectively, as Isaac during the Akedah, only no angel comes to stay Abraham's hand. David bar Meshullam of Speyer recalls in a poem, "Children and women assented together to the binding (*le-eked*)." Alternatively, the poetry may draw upon the language of accusation directed towards the community, as in Ephraim of Bonn's words, "I am stoned, I am trampled so as to be crucified."

Ma'oz Tzur reflects both an interest in historiography and in the use of typological interpretation. Our first hint at Mordecai's purpose is in the opening words which also provide its title, an allusion to Isaiah 17:10: *"For you have forgotten the God Who redeems you, and the Rock of your strength (Tzur Ma'ozekh) you did not recall; because of this, though you plant delightful saplings, nevertheless you shall sow foreign shoots."* (My translation follows Radak; see also Psalms 31:2, from which Mordecai likewise draws.) Along pietistic lines of thinking, Mordecai seeks a reason for the violence and prolonged exile he experiences, and suggests that it stems from a lack of faithfulness. His poem, then, is an expression of faith—in God as a timeless source of strength, and as a just agent in human history. Each calamity Mordecai recalls is subsequently overturned: in the second stanza, the people are saved from Pharaoh's enslavement; in the third, the nation returns from Babylon to rebuild the Temple; in the fourth, Haman is hanged, his plot foiled; in the fifth, the Greek's defilement of the Temple is miraculously subverted. In this way, Mordecai suggests a

hopeful typological motif present in Jewish history, one of repeated exile and annihilation—even for ancient and revered generations—but, always, eventual deliverance. In closing, Mordecai expresses a deep yearning for redemption in his own time: “Hasten the end of salvation, wreak vengeance upon the wicked people on behalf of your servant. For the hour has greatly lengthened for us, and there is no end to these terrible times.” Though these stirring words may be challenging, they powerfully demonstrate the dialectic of self-searching and hope that characterized the Jewish response to the uncertainty and fear of prolonged insecurity. By understanding the words of Ma’oz Tzur in their context, we can bring them into our own, engaging with them authentically and meaningfully to explore our own deep fears and abiding hopes.

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