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**SHNEI ZEITIM: A HANUKKAH PIYYUT  
ABOUT THE SEPARATION OF POWERS  
YITZHAK SZYF works as an economist in  
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These days, if one walks into the average synagogue on Shabbat Hanukkah, the *tefillot* would not feel all that different from those of any other Shabbat—other than the additions of *Hallel* and *Al ha-Nissim*. But this was not always the case. Not so long ago, the prayers of special *shabbatot* and *yomim tovim* were marked by unique poetic compositions, or *piyyutim*. This article sheds light on the once famous and beautiful Shabbat Hanukkah *piyyut* of *Shnei Zeitim* written in the eleventh century by Solomon ibn Gabirol. *Shnei Zeitim*, in fact, predates *Maoz Tzur*—whose tune actually originated from it—by roughly 200 years. As I will explain, this *piyyut* comforted worshippers in medieval Europe despite the darkness of the exile and helped them understand the *haftarah* of the day. Its critical lesson in leadership remains as relevant today as it was 1000 years ago when it was composed.

Just as on many special *shabbatot*, the *tefillot* of Shabbat Hanukkah<sup>1</sup> were traditionally beautified by special *yotzerot piyyutim* recited in the blessings of the *Shema*. The *piyyut* of *Shnei Zeitim* takes the form of a *meorah*, which is a *piyyut* meant to be said right before *ohr hadash* and the blessing of *yotzer ha-me'orot*. Despite its Spanish origins, which explain the relative simplicity of its Hebrew, it was widely accepted in Ashkenaz and remained part of the Shabbat

Hanukkah prayers long after the Sephardim ceased to recite *piyyutim* in the blessings of *Shema*.

While the *yotzerot* recited throughout the year differed by community, those of Shabbat Hanukkah—including *Shnei Zeitim*—are part of the liturgy of both *minhag Ashkenaz* (German and Western European custom) and *minhag Polin* (Polish and Eastern European custom). The *piyyut* is printed in *Siddur Otzar Ha-tefillot* (296-297)—which follows *minhag Polin*—as well as in many other *siddurim* that include all of the *piyyutim*. Despite the fact that *minhag Polin* forms the basis of the liturgy of most Ashkenazi synagogues, the *yotzerot* of Shabbat Hanukkah (as well as those of other special weeks such as Shabbat *Bereishit*) have disappeared from the vast majority of synagogues today that follow the Eastern European tradition and are still recited only in a handful of places.<sup>2</sup> *Shnei Zeitim* and the other *yotzerot* are more commonly recited today by synagogues that specifically follow the Western European traditions.<sup>3</sup>

While most of the *yotzerot* tend to be mumbled quickly—a reality that led many people to dislike them and eventually led most synagogues to drop them—*Shnei Zeitim*, to this day, is sung to a variety of beautiful melodies. Many of these tunes—from varying traditions—can be listened to on the *Attar Ha-piyyut Ve-hatefillah* website.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, it is believed that the tune currently used for *Maoz Tzur* was originally used on Shabbat Hanukkah for *Shnei Zeitim*.

Here is a simple (but not exact) translation of the *piyyut's* first stanza:<sup>5</sup>

**Shnei Zeitim Nikhratim / Be-gan na'ul yatz'hiru:** The “two olives trees”—king and high priest—are now severed, but they will once again be a source of light for the Jewish people;

**Le-rosh kehati ve'efrati / sh'tei atarot yakhtiru:** At this time, the king (*efrati*) and high priest (*kehati*) will both wear their respective crowns/headplates (these are the two *atarot*);<sup>5</sup>

**Ve-al menorah ha-tehorah / ke-mo nerot yazhiru:** And they will face the menorah and shine upon the Jewish nation (likened to the menorah) like candles;

**Hen be-mahaneh el mul pe-nei ha-menorah ya'iru:** Within the camp, they will shine toward the middle of the menorah.

At first glance, the *piyyut* appears obscure. Why is it talking about olive trees, the king, and the high priest? The key to understanding the *piyyut* lies in the *haftarah* for Shabbat Hanukkah.

The *haftarah* presents, in its final verses, the prophet Zechariah's striking vision of a menorah with olive trees on its two sides, just as we have in the *piyyut*:

There is a menorah [made entirely] of gold with its bowl on its top; its seven lamps are upon it, and there are seven ducts for [each of] the lamps on its top. There are two olive trees over it, one on the right of the bowl and one on its left. (Zechariah 4:2-3)

Zechariah inquires as to the symbolism of the menorah. At first, the angel acts surprised that he doesn't know the answer and asks: “You don't know?” to which Zechariah responds that he really does not. Then the angel invokes the famous phrase, “This is the word of God to Zerubbavel, saying, ‘Not through army and not through strength, but through My spirit’ said God” (Zechariah 4:6).

The *haftarah* for Shabbat Hanukkah ends after just one more verse. Zechariah's question remains unanswered. The explanation only comes in the verses that follow, which we do not actually read on Hanukkah. In a separate vision, Zechariah again asks, “What are these two olives, on the right of the menorah and on its left? What are the two clusters of olives that are next to the two golden presses, which are pouring golden [oil] from themselves?” (4:11-14).

Now the angel finally explains, “These are the two anointed men who are standing by the Lord of all the land.”

As Radak and other commentators point out, the two “anointed men” in the time of Zechariah are Zerubbavel himself (scion of King David) and Joshua the high priest (from the family of Aaron).<sup>7</sup> Both the king and the high priest were anointed, and both are critical pillars in Zechariah's prophecy of the future redemption. Just like the olives provide the oil to light the menorah, the king and the high priest provide “light” to the nation. In this hopeful vision of redemption, the menorah will be rekindled, and both the high priest and the king of Israel will rule again.

The prophecy was indeed fulfilled. The Second Temple was built, and for years, the kings and priests filled their roles. Yet in the aftermath of the story of Hanukkah, a different kind of leadership emerged. The Hasmoneans—a noted family of *kohanim*—took control of the political leadership of Jerusalem. Political leadership in Israel had traditionally been a task reserved solely for descendants of King David and the Tribe of Judah, to the exclusion of everyone else (including the *kohanim*). The extraordinary circumstances of the situation may have justified the Hasmoneans' usurping of a role that was not designated for them. Nevertheless, once they were safely in power, it was expected that the political leadership would have been immediately transferred back to the descendants of King David. This did not occur.

Hatam Sofer explains that this is in fact the reason that Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi did not include a tractate on Hanukkah as part of the Mishnah. Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi himself was a descendant of the Davidic Dynasty and was not in favor of the actions of the Hasmoneans. As *kohanim*—and not descendants of King David—they had no right to create a royal dynasty. They should have focused on their own unique roles without overstepping their boundaries.<sup>8</sup>

Ramban, when discussing the verse “The scepter shall not depart from Judah” (Genesis 49:10), explains that the usurping of the role of political leadership is what led to the downfall of the Hasmoneans. Despite the fact that they were righteous, and it is only thanks to them that the Torah was not forgotten by the Jewish people, they were punished severely. All four Hasmonean sons who ruled one after the other died by the sword of the enemies, and their descendants were lost as well. Ramban adds that the fact that they were *kohanim* made their sin graver, since they should have focused on their particular method of religious service rather than ruling over the nation.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks takes this one step further. In his commentary (as found in the *Koren Sacks Siddur*) to the Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* (4:13) about the three separate crowns of Torah, priesthood, and kingship, he writes that the crowns represent “the Judaic principle of the separation of powers. Kingship is the crown of government; priesthood, the crown of religious worship; and Torah is the crown of Jewish study and education.” He explains that “the Sages were critical of the Hasmonean kings, some of whom appointed themselves as high priests, thus breaching the separation of the crowns of kingship and priesthood.” Religious leadership is in the hands of the priests, and the political leadership belongs to the king.

Perhaps this insight about the separation of powers is implicit in Zechariah’s vision as well. In it, the priest and king are on separate sides of the menorah. Zechariah’s vision suggests that each will serve in their defined roles, not breaching any boundaries. However, the role of the Hasmoneans in the aftermath of the Hanukkah story was not consistent with this ideal.<sup>9</sup>

If Zechariah’s vision indeed drops hints about the separation of powers, that makes it particularly appropriate to recall on Hanukkah when we commemorate the Hasmoneans. But the *haftarah* ends before the meaning of the two olive trees is revealed, cut off right before the complete answer to Zechariah’s question. One might suggest that this is intentional, so as not to put a negative spin on the miracle of Hanukkah which lacked this critical element of Jewish leadership (separation of powers) that the two olive trees represented. By ending with the stirring phrase “‘Not through army and not through strength, but through My spirit’ said God,” the *haftarah* celebrates the restoration of the Temple brought about by God. The focus is not on our earthly role, but on God’s spirit.

Instead, the *piyyut* of *Shnei Zeitim* comes to make Zechariah’s point about the separation of powers that the *haftarah* omits. In at least three distinct places it acknowledges the critical place of *both* separate forms of leadership as part of the prayer for the future redemption.

Immediately in the first stanza, the *piyyut* alludes to the redemption promised in Zechariah’s prophecy: ***Shnei zeitim nikhratim / be-gan na’ul yatz’hiru***: The “two olive trees”—the king and high priest—are now severed but will once again be a source of light for the Jewish people. It then notes that this redemption involves two separate crowns (for the king and priest): ***Le-rosh kehati ve’efrati / sh’tai atarat yakhtiru***: At this time, the king (*efrati*) and high priest (*kehati*) will don two distinct (i.e., only their respective) crowns/headplates.

The third stanza, similarly, argues for the restoration of the two key roles of priesthood and kingship. Two of its lines read as follows:

*Ve-hagevirah ve-hatzefirah / be-rosh  
David / te-simenah;  
U-mitznefet me-ulefet / be-rosh Aharon  
/te-kimenah.*

It begs for the crowns/hats to be placed on “*Rosh David*” (the head of David, i.e., the king) and “*Rosh Aharon*” (the head of Aaron, i.e., the priest). We are pleading for both, as there cannot be a proper redemption without the return of both distinct roles.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, each stanza of the *piyyut* concludes with a powerful refrain: *Hen be-mahaneh el mul pe-nei ha-menorah ya’iru*: the two olive trees will spread their light toward the front of the menorah. This line alludes to the second verse in *Parashat Be-ha’alotekha*, which states: *El mul pe-nei ha-menorah ya’iru shiv’at ha-nerot* (toward the center of the menorah, the seven candles shall shine). Yet rather than the candles facing the rest of the menorah as in the *pasuk*, the *piyyut* speaks of the “olive trees” (king and high priest) facing the “menorah” (the Jewish nation). The imagery of the menorah is indeed fitting for the Jewish people since, like the menorah, we are a *mikshah ahat*, a single unit, but with many branches. The *payyetan* points out that these two “olive trees,” the king and the high priest, will “light” the entire nation and will serve as a unifying force even though they are each on their respective branches.

The *piyyut* of *Shnei Zeitim*, with its extensive focus on both the priesthood and the kingship as separate components in the leadership of the Jewish nation, thus subtly acknowledges the failure of the Hasmoneans to adhere to the separation of powers. The *piyyut* directly builds upon the imagery of the “two olive trees” described in Zechariah, which portrays the king and priest on the two separate sides of the menorah. It then describes the fallen state of these two leaders today and presents a vision of a future in which these two key leaders each observe their unique roles.

In this way, the *piyyut* complements the *haftarah*. After reciting the *piyyut*, congregants would know exactly what the two olive trees in Zechariah signify, even though the *haftarah* ends before the matter is addressed. And they now know that by observing the separation of powers, the next redemption can in fact be even more complete than the one in the days of Hanukkah.

The *piyyut*'s optimism is particularly appropriate to Shabbat Hanukkah. In the darkness of exile with the Temple in ruins, the lights of Hanukkah are not shining at their fullest. When the congregation is about to recite the blessing over the lights, *yotzer ha-me'orot*, it feels devoid of the true lights of Hanukkah. Solomon ibn Gabirol felt that the darkness must be addressed. The *piyyut* begins by describing the two olive trees, or *Shnei Zeitim*, signifying the priesthood and kingship

<sup>1</sup> When referring to "Shabbat Hanukkah" in this article, in a case where the first day of Hanukkah is Shabbat and there are two *shabbatot* on Hanukkah, we are always referring to the *first* one. The second Shabbat has a different *haftarah* and *piyyutim*, and this is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>2</sup> There are just a handful of places that I am aware of where the authentic *minhag Polin*, including the recitation of *yotzerot* throughout the year, is practiced. One such place is the Kazinczy Shul in Budapest. Another is GGBH (Munk's) in Golders Green, London.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the *piyyut* is recited by K'hal Adath Jeshurun (Breuer's) in Washington Heights, New York, K'hal Adas Yeshurun in Jerusalem, and Beis haKnesses K'Minhag Ashkenaz in Bnei Brak.

<sup>4</sup> In addition, a rendition of *Shnei Zeitim*—or "Les Deux Oliviers," as it is known in French—is available on the *website of the Alsace Lorraine Jewish community* in the Strasburg tune as it is sung today (with background and translation in French).

<sup>5</sup> For a line-by-line English translation of the *piyyut*, see Feldheim's *Piyyutim Le-shabbatot Ha-shana Le-fi Minhag Ashkenaz*. For a more conceptual explanation in Hebrew, which also includes the relevant background *midrashim*, see Moshe Rosenwasser's book "*Ha-shir Vehashevah*" (which provides an excellent line-by-line explanation of the *piyyutim*). The explanations in this article borrow from both, as well as from other sources.

<sup>6</sup> The term *kehati* relates to Aharon who is a descendant of *Kehat*. *Efrati* relates to King David as seen in 1 Samuel 17:12.

<sup>7</sup> Based on the Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 18:16), commentators express that since oil does not have children, the words "*eleh shnei benei ha-yitzhar*" (these are the two anointed men) in the verse must be referring to those who were *anointed* by oil and are thus like its children. The verse is thus referring to Aharon (and the family of *kohanim*) and to David (and the family of the kings).

as *nikhratim*—severed—but then offers that they will once again shine in their unique ways. The priests will once again serve, and the kings will yet reign. What is meant to remain separate will indeed remain separate, and in this manner, both can flourish. In its prayer for redemption, the *piyyut* promises hope.

<sup>8</sup> See *Ta'amei Ha-Minhagim U-Mekorei Ha-Dinim*, 847.

<sup>9</sup> The same midrash that explained that *be-nei ha-yitzhar* referred to those anointed by oil brings an interesting twist to the word "*yitzhar*" (oil). It points out that Korah, whose father's name was also Yitzhar, used that term to "prove" his supremacy. Just as oil always rises on top, Korah, the "true" son of Yitzhar, thought he should be on top. What is particularly noteworthy in the Midrash, however, is its emphasis on the fact that Korah aimed to serve two distinct roles, that of a priest and that of a king. He was the first to break the tradition of "separation of powers" that began with Moshe (the "King") and Aharon (the "Priest") accepting two separate and clearly defined roles. If so, the sin committed by the Hasmoneans of overstepping roles can be compared to the sin of Korah, one of the most divisive figures in the Torah.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, however, just days before this article was published, another article on this same *piyyut* was published on the Seforim Blog. It provides an interesting read of the *piyyut*, but comes to the opposite conclusion on this specific issue. The author of that article explains: "they will be crowned with 2 (royal) wreaths, but the sense is of combined authority uniting the priesthood and kingship. Note how this unity is presented as the ultimate achievement of the Maccabees, unlike in classical rabbinic thought where the priestly Maccabees were criticized for (also) usurping kingship." I respectfully disagree with that reading. If that were the case, the *piyyut* (and the *haftarah*) would not be discussing "two olive trees" but one. It would say that a *single* olive tree (i.e., leader) would don two crowns. Instead, it says that the *two* trees (the kings and priests) will don two crowns. The *piyyut* also specifically points out that one hat/crown will be placed on David and the other on Aharon. Each leader has its distinct role and only then can they shine together in unity toward the center of the menorah.

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## MASCULINITY AND THE HANUKKAH HERO: TOWARD A NEW INTERPRETATION OF BIBLICAL GEVURAH

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**T**he story of masculinity, heroism, and Hanukkah has been told countless times in the past century. Depending on who is talking, it is variously recounted to champion a return to pre-rabbinic biblical values (think David Ben Gurion) or, more recently, as a call to recover a “softer” rabbinic model of masculinity (with Daniel Boyarin in *Unheroic Conduct*). However, a closer examination of the biblical term *gevurah*, at least as it appears in one seminal biblical passage, suggests that both narratives are oversimplified, and that the claim that the Bible champions the warrior is more complex than is often contended.

Beginning with biblical *gibborim* such as Samson, Saul, and David, and throughout most of the biblical period, physical prowess was seen as heroic and worthy of emulation. It was almost exclusively associated with masculinity (thus *gever* and *gevurah* share the same root). As recorded in I Maccabees, Hanukkah initially celebrated the physical heroism of the Maccabees. Later, the Talmudic rabbis pivoted, downplaying the military victory in favor of the spiritual miracle of the oil. This shift, scholars such as Boyarin contend, reflected a fundamental rabbinic ambivalence about the ideal of the male-as-warrior. Owing to a mix of political realism and a radical reconceptualization of Jewish life in exile, the Rabbis sought to redirect the locus of Judaism toward the themes of spiritual worship and divine intervention. In fact, the shift from the early biblical conception of heroism from physical strength to moral power began earlier, the hero no longer defeats his enemies on the battlefield, but “conquers his evil inclination” (*Avot* 4:1) and pursues victory in the study hall.

The rabbinic view of the hero dominated throughout the exilic period until the rise of Zionism at the turn of the twentieth century. Countering the image of the physically degenerate European, many secular Zionists embraced variations of Max Nordau’s “muscle Judaism.” Physical prowess and the ability to engage in warfare were championed again. It was only nearly two thousand years later, when the Zionists reclaimed the image of the Maccabees as warrior-heroes, that the classical biblical paradigm of the soldier was restored.

Of course, both of these narratives are oversimplified. The rabbis, for all their ambivalence about taking up arms against the Romans and their embrace of Torah study as a new ideal of masculine religiosity, maintained the prohibition against women bearing arms, which according to cultural norms were still viewed as “masculine items” (*Nazir* 59b). Additionally, Maimonides maintained at least the theoretical view of the Messiah as a military-spiritual leader. Perhaps most important, the rabbinic house of study, far from a place of gentlemanly discourse, has been not unfairly described as a site of verbal “violence,” substituting for the battlefield where most rabbis no longer waged their wars (Jeffrey Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, chap. 3).

But it is not just the rabbinic period that resists key aspects of this storyline, but even the idealization of the biblical warrior-hero - both its definition and its celebration - that requires reconsideration. Given that the term *gibbor* is generally understood to be the biblical term for *gevurah*, we therefore turn to this phrase in search of insight into the biblical definition and valuation of the *gibbor*.

All 221 biblical uses of the root *G-V-R* in regard to human beings appear exclusively in reference to physical warriors. By contrast, in regard to divine *gevurah*, while the term sometimes similarly depicts God as a warrior, on other occasions it refers more generally to God’s ability to perform anything He desires. This raises the key questions, what exactly are the definition and attendant characteristics of divine *gevurah*, and what are its implications for the human *gibbor-gever*?

As a case study, we will examine one key section to which the Talmud draws our attention:

For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God [*ha-keil ha-gadol, ha-gibbor, ve-hanora*] who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. (Deuteronomy 10:17-18, with rough parallels in Jeremiah 32:18 and Nehemiah 9:32)

The plain meaning of these verses make an essential point about God’s actions as a *gibbor*. A Talmudic passage in *Megillah* 31a underscores this verse’s implications for developing a biblical view of *gevurah*:

Rabbi Yohanan said: Wherever you find the might [*gevurato*] of the Holy One, Blessed be He, you find

His humility. This matter is written in the Torah, repeated in the Prophets, and stated a third time in the Writings.

It is written in the Torah: “For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords” (Deuteronomy 10:17), and it is written afterward: “He executes the judgment of the fatherless and widow” (Deuteronomy 10:18). It is repeated in the Prophets: “thus says the High and Lofty One that inhabits eternity, Whose name is sacred” (Isaiah 57:15), and it is written afterward: “with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit,” (Isaiah 57:15). It is stated a third time in the Writings, as it is written: “Extol Him Who rides upon the clouds, Whose name is the Lord” (Psalms 68:5), and it is written immediately afterward: “A father of the fatherless, and a judge of widows” (Psalms 68:6).

This passage declares a fundamental principle, illuminating *peshuto shel mikra*: in all three sections of the Bible, it is precisely where we encounter God’s strength [*gevurah*] that we find His humility, as manifest in His preparedness to lower Himself and care for the needy.

Yet the use of *gevurah* in the passage in *Megillah* is unusual. While the continuation of the first verse does use the term *gevurah*, the latter two do not, instead describing God as “dwelling on high” (Isaiah) and “riding in the clouds” (Psalms). Why does the Gemara go out of its way to use the term “*gedulato*” of the Holy One, Blessed Be He instead of, for instance, “*gedulato*”?

Indeed, when referencing the Gemara, some commentators, including Keli Yakar, Shelah, Netziv, and Rabbi Lamm, substitute the language “*gedulato*” for “*gevurato*.”<sup>1</sup> After all, the common denominator between the three texts would seem to be that despite his exalted nature, God descends to be present with the needy. The word “*gedulah*,” a more generic term for greatness, would seem a more fitting appellation for this characteristic than “*gevurah*,” which generally denotes physical might.

We might simply infer from these commentators that the Talmud was imprecise in its terminology. But this interpretation is difficult. With one exception, all available manuscripts of the Gemara have the language *gevurah*.<sup>2</sup> The same holds for the Gemara’s midrashic parallels, such as *Yalkut Shimoni* (to Deut. 10:17).

Further, this interpretation does not accord with the way the Sages implicitly understood this verse in their construction of the *Amidah*. As noted in another Talmudic

passage, the verse in Deuteronomy serves as the framework for the first three blessings of the *Amidah*:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Why are the Sages of those generations called the members of the Great Assembly? It is because they returned the crown of the Holy One, Blessed be He, to its former glory. How so? Moses came and said in his prayer: “The great, the mighty, and the awesome God [*ha-kel ha-gadol, ha-gibbor, ve-hanora*]” (Deuteronomy 10:17). Jeremiah the prophet came and said: Gentiles, are carousing in His sanctuary; where is His awesomeness? Therefore, he did not say awesome in his prayer: “The great God, the mighty Lord of Hosts [*ha-kel ha-gadol ha-gibbor*], is His name” (Jeremiah 32:18). Daniel came and said: Gentiles are enslaving His children; where is His might? Therefore he did not say mighty in his prayer: “The great and awesome God” [*ha-kel ha-gadol ve-hanora*] (Daniel 9:4).

The members of the Great Assembly [by including the full phrase *ha-kel ha-gadol ha-gibbor ve-hanora* in the *Amidah*] came and said: On the contrary, this is the might of His might, that He conquers His inclination in that He exercises patience toward the wicked. God’s anger is flared by the gentile nations’ enslavement of His people, yet He expresses might by suppressing His anger and holding back from punishing them immediately. And these acts also express His awesomeness: Were it not for the awesomeness of the Holy One, Blessed be He, how could one people, who are alone and hated by the gentile nations, survive among the nations? (*Yoma* 69b)

The Talmud makes it clear that the themes of “The great, the mighty, and the awesome God,” drawn from our verse in Deuteronomy, serve as the basis for a phrase toward the very beginning of the *Amidah*. In fact, when we compare Deuteronomy to the prayers, we find that the term “*gibbor*” is the central phrase of the second blessing of the *Amidah*. The pointed usage of the term “*gevurah*” in the second blessing suggests that “*gedulah*” and “*gevurah*” are not interchangeable, particularly in the context of the verse in Deuteronomy. Further, the term *gevurah* in the *Amidah* seems to have little association with war. God, who is all-Powerful, brings the rain and revives the dead. This seems to have little to do with conquering external, or even internal, enemies.

The text of *Shemoneh Esrei*, then, suggests that the Gemara *Megillah* should not be understood as conflating *gedulah*

and *gevurah*. So why does the Gemara go out of its way to use the term *gevurah*, and what does this tell about the phrase's larger significance?

Maharal (*Hiddushei Agadot Megillah* *ibid.*) offers an answer that brings us much closer to a satisfying resolution. Maharal explains that while the Talmud acknowledges that the word *gevurah* only appears in the first of the three verses, it intentionally uses that language to sharpen its larger theme. Typically, a human *gibbor* remains distant from the needy and downtrodden. This is not so in the case of God, who "brings them closer and provides special care for them."

In effect, because the term *gevurah* effectively captures this divine characteristic, the Talmud uses *gevurah* to cover all three verses. In other words, the Gemara is suggesting that in fact *all three verses refer to this quality of gevurah*. In human affairs heroism is typically manifest through physical aggression. But biblical *gevurah*, at least in connection with God, is not strictly tied to warring against an enemy. God exercises such powers in a variety of ways, including His ability to bring rain (*gevurot geshamim*), revive the dead (*mehayeh meitim*), and provide salvation (*rav le-hoshia*). It is to this aspect of God's power that we appeal in *Shemoneh Esrei*. Because God is all-powerful, we beseech him to utilize His powers toward compassionate ends, as manifest in God's far-reaching capacity to revive the dead.

The prayer, in turn, helps illuminate the Gemara's choice to depict *gevurah* instead of *gedulah*. A *gibbor* is not just a warrior, but a mighty individual who possesses a degree of superiority over others. It is the title given to one who has achieved a hierarchical relationship with others through strength or another form of supremacy. The greatest example, of course, is God.

But all this is merely the backdrop to the burning *ethical* question confronting the *gibbor*: in light of this broader definition of *gevurah*, how does he interact with others? How does he use his power? He may remain distanced and aloof, as Maharal suggests is the norm, or he may approach and be present with the needy. Will he lord over others or see that his strength is meant to position him to use his

power to assist the vulnerable? God does the latter, and it is precisely this trait that is reinforced in Torah, Prophets, and Writings.

The Gemara in *Megillah 31a* is therefore very precise: while the term *gevurah* does not appear in all three contexts, the *concept* appears in all these places. As the ultimate *gibbor*, God is hierarchically superior to all humans, yet He opts to exercise this *gevurah* in relation to the needy by drawing close to them and caring for their needs.

Crucially, by noting that the same theme appears in all three sections of the Bible, the Gemara seems to be emphasizing that this point should not be understood as a rabbinic innovation, but is in keeping with *peshuto shel mikra*. The passage in *Megillah*, along with the rabbinic appropriation of this verse as a foundational component of the daily prayer service, suggests that the verse in Deuteronomy offers us a profound insight into the quality of Godly *gevurah*.

The next verse in Deuteronomy finally emphasizes the most important point of all:

You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (10:19)

God's behavior must be a model for ours. We too must assist the foreigner, for in that interaction, any non-foreigner is, in our broader definition of one who is less vulnerable, a *gibbor*.

If Deuteronomy is any indication, physical strength is neither inherently glorified nor vilified in the Torah. The most important part of the Hanukkah story is not the fact that the Hasmoneans were warriors, though that was used toward a positive end and was therefore laudable. Their position as *gibborim* was, at that time and often in ours, a starting point, a fact of life. The question is what we do with it. The human *gibbor* may not revive the dead or summon the rains, but must always use his position to not to defeat the innocent but to advocate for the indigent. Above all, like God, he must lower himself to simply be present in the same space as the less fortunate.

<sup>1</sup> Citations for the first three appear here: <http://www.halachabrura.org/agada/meg29-32.htm#%D7%9C%D7%90>. Rabbi Lamm's appears in a sermon delivered for *Parshat Vayishlah* entitled "Some Fatherly Advice," available at

[https://archives.yu.edu/gsd/collect/lammserm/index/assoc/HASH01f3.dir/doc.pdf#\\_ga=2.58975021.1083807460.1607022597-1798889377.1605041228](https://archives.yu.edu/gsd/collect/lammserm/index/assoc/HASH01f3.dir/doc.pdf#_ga=2.58975021.1083807460.1607022597-1798889377.1605041228).

<sup>2</sup> *Ketav Yad* Munich 95 actually has *gedulato* instead of *gevurato*. See Hachi Garsinan of the Friedberg Project for Talmud Bavli Variants.