

Backward and Forward: An Unusual Feature of Kiddush Levanah

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Introduction

In a monthly ritual replete with interesting features, one aspect of *Kiddush Levanah* stands out. It is a custom that to my knowledge is unique in all of Jewish liturgy. I refer to our practice of reciting this verse: תפל עליהם אימתה ופחד בגדל זרועך ידמו כאבן (Exodus 15:16) and then reciting the same verse again, backwards: כאבן ידמו זרועך בגדל ופחד אימתה עליהם תפל.¹

The straightforward reading of the verse appears simple enough. It is taken from the song uttered by Moses at *kerias Yam Suf* following the exodus from Egypt. The prayer asks for the terror and dread of God to befall Edom, Moav, and the inhabitants of Canaan, the nations mentioned in the immediately preceding verse. The verse continues by requesting that with the display of Divine power, these same nations should be silenced, as stone. As these verses are situated independently in the *Kiddush Levanah* prayer, we may, perhaps, presume they apply to all nations generally, not just to the ones mentioned. Thus, leaving aside the general question of why this particular verse is recited in the first place (a question not discussed here), the verse is nonetheless simple enough to understand. But why

¹ Certain purists do not like the term “*kiddush levanah*” and insist upon the more ancient formulation, “*birkat halevanah*.” See, for example, the comments of the late Rabbi Yosef Kapach in his edition of the *Moreh Nevuchim*, 2:5, fn. 15. But it seems that *kiddush levanah* is the more generally used term, at least in the western world, and in the spirit of *vox populi vox dei*, we adopt this form here.

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recite it backwards? In all of Jewish liturgy, this is the only instance where Jews around the world find themselves doing such a thing.² Why? What is the source of this strange custom, and how did it develop? Of the many traditions associated with *Kiddush Levanah*, this, it seems to me, is the strangest.³

Suggested Explanations

Various attempts have been made to explain the custom. As might be expected, some explanations resort to the mystical. Thus, for example, Rabbi Alexander Ziskind of Horodna/Grodno (d. 1794), in *Yesod VeShoresb HaAvodah*, asserts that the recitation of this verse, backwards and forwards, accomplishes, “according to the kabbalah, great and wondrous things in the upper worlds, and to drive away the shells.” (תיקונים גדולים ונפלאים על דרך סוד בעולמות העליונים ולהבריח הקליפות).⁴ Yet while the custom may indeed cause wondrous events in the world of the kabbalah, it is still not clear why *Kiddush Levanah*, alone among the entire Jewish liturgy, should feature such a unique phenomenon. And while it is undoubtedly true the kabbalah has had a profound impact upon the development of the *siddur*, there is no evidence that the reversal of the verse in question comes from kabbalistic sources.

² In the longer version of the bedtime *Kerias Shema* ritual, some have the custom of repeating the verse from Genesis 49:18—“I long for your salvation, O God”—in different permutations. The commentators explain that these permutations provide a method by which one can arrive at a combination of letters that equals a Divine name, affording protection from one’s enemies. (See *Rabbeinu Bechaye*, Genesis 49:18.) In order to achieve the desired result, the verse must be turned about in different ways. Yet, in addition to the comparatively few people who follow this practice, this custom is not connected in any way with the discussion here, where permutations are not used, but rather, the verse is simply repeated backward. As we shall see, this custom has no bearing on the one under discussion.

³ Other traditions include thrice-repeated greetings to one’s fellow, shaking out one’s clothing, kissing one’s *tzitzis* fringes, and asking for Divine assistance for toothaches. *Ta’amei HaMinbagim* (Jerusalem 1982), p. 198.

⁴ Jerusalem (1978), p. 192.

Nearly a century later, in a book dealing with *Kiddush Levanah* and various other prayers, R. David Weissman cites a Talmudic passage in *Berachos* (60a) where Hillel the Elder was confident that a cry he heard was not emanating from his home.⁵ Rava applied to him the verse 'משמועה רעה לא ירא נכון לכו בטוח בה' which, Rava said, could be read in both directions: One does not fear bad news, because he trusts in God; and one who trusts in God will have no fear of bad news. R. Weissman explains (citing *Mabarsba*) that Rava meant to say that a righteous individual is “protected” on all sides, so to speak, as is indicated by the fact the verse can be read in both directions. R. Weissman suggests that the same is true in the converse, and evil individuals will have occasion to fear the vengeance of God from all sides. Accordingly, R. Weissman concludes, in a suggestion perhaps more clever than convincing, the intent in reading the verse forward and backward in *Kiddush Levanah* is that when we ask God to have the dread of Him befall our enemies, this dread, too, should be an all-encompassing dread, from all sides.

R. Yitzchak Lipiatz, the author of *Sefer Matamim HaChadash* (Warsaw 1902), offers another explanation:

The verse refers to the wicked and the righteous; concerning the wicked, which turn from the right to the left, the verse reads “may fear and dread etc., they should be silenced like a stone”, i.e., in the future God will remove the wicked from the world, just like the evil inclination, which is likened to a stone, will also be removed from the world. And [reading backwards] from the end of the verse towards the front, the verse speaks of the righteous, who turn from left to the right, “like a stone they will be silenced, your arm, in its greatness.” This means that at the time when God’s strength [becomes manifest] then the righteous will be comparable to a stone, meaning the Divine presence, which is also likened to a stone, as the Gemara states that the righteous are referred to in the name of God.⁶

This kabbalistic-sounding interpretation is a little difficult to understand. Whatever it means, though, it fails to answer some of the basic questions posed above—why here, and why now? No reason is offered to explain why *Kiddush Levanah* is any more or less

⁵ *Zohar HaLevanah* (Tzernowitz 1874), p. 26.

⁶ *Sefer Matamim HaChadash* (Warsaw 1902), p. 75.

appropriate than any other time to incorporate such an unusual device.⁷

Rabbi Dr. Elie Munk (d. 1981) in “The World of Prayer” suggests the backwards form invokes the supernatural:

As opposed to the original sequence of a sentence, the reverse order in Hebrew always implies a reverse order of things. In other words, here it implies a supernatural, wondrous divine providence which reverses the normal, natural course of events and which we pray may be demonstrated by our victory over our enemies, through occurrences that seem natural or else by obviously supernatural happenings.⁸

No source is offered as support for this suggestion, and indeed, the weakness is manifest. Prayer for the downfall of our enemies, or prayers for universal reverence of God, is a common feature of the liturgy, even appearing as part of the basic *Amidah*. But nowhere else do we recite verses backwards in order to symbolize God’s ability to use the supernatural events. Why, then, suddenly and dramatically, should we do so here? For that matter, what it meant by “the reverse order in Hebrew always implies a reverse order of things”? Where else do we find “the reverse order in Hebrew,” that one might confidently posit what such reversals imply?⁹

Finally, in a book dedicated entirely to the subject of *Kiddush Levanah*, Rabbi Chaim U. Lipschitz suggests as follows:

The verse is then recited in reverse. The reason is that there are two possible alternatives, both of which may be true in different

⁷ At my behest, a friend of mine asked Rabbi Zev Leff, of Moshav Matityahu, about the backwards recitation, for inclusion in his popular series of online questions and oral answers. The question is preserved at www.rabbileff.net, question #1189. Rabbi Leff answers that the custom is “based on kabbalah,” but proceeds to give the same answer suggested by *Sefer Matamim HaChadash*.

⁸ *The World of Prayer* (New York 1963), Vol. II, p. 99.

⁹ In the *Mussaf* service of the Sabbath *Amidah*, we find a prayer beginning with the phrase “*tikanta Shabbat*,” which features a reverse alphabetical acrostic. However, a poetic construction is obviously very different from the recitation of a solitary verse backwards. Indeed, even Rabbi Munk (*op cit.*) does not explain the *Mussaf* prayer with reference to the concept he suggested by *kiddush levanah*.

circumstances: sometimes it is when God reveals his powers to his children that the forces of evil are broken, while at others it is the fall of the wicked which make all aware of the presence of God.¹⁰

The difficulties with this explanation are legion. Where do we find an “awareness of God” as a leitmotif running through *Kiddush Levanah*? Where does the verse suggest an awareness of God arising from punishing His enemies? And how does a revelation of Godly might, in itself, break the forces of evil?

The better-known commentaries to the *siddur* do not hazard an answer to this question. Thus, the Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Yakov Emden in *Siddur Beit Yaakov*, the commentaries collected in *Otzar Tefillos*, R. Baruch Epstein, and Rabbi J. H. Hertz, all discuss various questions in connection with *Kiddush Levanah*, but allow the specific phrase under question to pass without comment. *Encyclopedia Judaica* does not mention or otherwise acknowledge the custom exists.¹¹

As we have shown, there have been very few suggestions put forward to explain this unusual feature of the ritual. (And none of the later suggestions cite any of the earlier ones.) Yet even after reviewing all the various extant suggestions, the basic question still nags at the reader. Why here? Why in *Kiddush Levanah*, and nowhere else, do we find ourselves repeating a verse backwards? To answer this question, it is necessary to trace the source of the custom itself.

¹⁰ *Kiddush L'Vonoh: Text, Commentary, Laws and Customs* (Brooklyn, NY, 1987), p. 58. In a bibliography in the back of his work, Rabbi Lipschitz cites as his source, “*Hanesher Hasbevei* 5699 (1939), *siman tzadi*.” (This is actually a reference to *Pnei HaNesher*, a rabbinic journal published in various European locations by R. Avraham Schwartz of Munkacs. The name later changed to simply *Hanesher*. Remarkably, at least twelve volumes appeared between 1933 and 1944, even in the midst of WWII.) However, a review of the *Pnei HaNesher* in question shows that while it addresses our verse, it does not address our question. (It is only concerned with the fact that the verse as we read it is truncated, discussed below in fn. 32.) Indeed, this source does not even say what R. Lipschitz attributes to it. The true source for this suggestion is, in fact, R. Eliyahu Ki-Tov (1912–1976) in the English classic, *The Book of our Heritage* (*Cheshvan*, p. 242.) For some reason, the author chose not to credit R. Ki-Tov for the explanation, and instead credited a journal that does not speak about the issue at all.

¹¹ Jerusalem and NY (1972 & 2007), Entry under *Moon, blessings of*.

The Source of the Custom

We begin our search in the *Shulchan Aruch* (R. Yosef Caro). Like any *halachic* commentator that discusses *Kiddush Levanah*, the *Shulchan Aruch* cites the passage in *Sanbedrin* 42a, where the basic blessing to be recited over the new moon is stated.¹² He then adds that following the blessing, one recites three times “may there be a good sign upon Israel,” “blessed is the Creator,” but concludes only with an “etc.” He makes no explicit mention of the custom under discussion. But in a gloss, R. Moshe Isserles (“*Rama*,” d. 1572) states, “one recites *tipol aleihem*, etc., then backwards, *ka’aven yidmu*, etc., three times.” The *Be’er HaGolah* identifies the *Tur* as the source of the *Rama*’s gloss, and our attention is thus turned back some 200 years earlier, to the monumental work of R. Yakov ben Asher of Spain (“*Tur*,” 1275–1340).

The *Tur*, in the pertinent part of *Orach Chayim*, § 426, states as follows:

גרסי' במסכת סופרים אין מברכין על הירח אלא במ"ש כשהוא מבושם ובגדיו נאים ותולה עיניו כנגדה ומיישר רגליו ומברך ואומר ג"פ סימן טוב תהיה לכל ישראל ברוך בוראך ברוך יוצרך ברוך מקדשך ורוקד ג"פ כנגדה ואומר בכל פעם כשם שאני רוקד כנגדך ואיני יכול ליגע בך כך אם ירקדו אחרים כנגדי להזיקני לא יגעו בי ואומר תפול עליהם אימתה ופחד בגדול זרועך ידמו כאבן ולמפרע¹³ כאבן ידמו זרועך בגדול ופחד אימתה עליהם תפול ואומר כן ג"פ אמן ואמן הללויה ואומר לחבירו ג"פ שלום עליך וילך לביתו בלב טוב וי"א בזה הסדר ברוך יוצרך ברוך עושך ברוך קונך ברוך בוראך וסימן יעקב והיא רמז לו.

We learn in *Maseches Soferim* that a person does not bless the moon except on Saturday night, when he is perfumed and his clothing is pleasant. He directs his eyes towards it, straightens his feet, and proclaims three times, “May a good sign be upon Israel. Blessed is He Who created you, blessed is He Who formed you, blessed is He Who sanctified you.” One then dances three times in the direction of the moon, stating each time, “Just as I dance toward you and yet I cannot touch you, so too, if others dance towards me to harm me, they should not be able to come in

¹² *Orach Chayim*, §426:4.

¹³ In מכון הטור השלם, הוצאת מוסדות "שירת דבורה" מכון ירושלים תשנ"ג In the text of the *Tur* reads: ...ולמפרע יאמר גם כן כאבן ידמו.

contact with me.” One then states **“let fall upon them fear and terror, at the greatness of Your arm, let them be still as stone” and then backwards as well, “as stone let them be still, your arm at the greatness of, and terror, fear upon them let fall.”** One then says three times, “Amen, Amen, Hallelujah.” One then says to his friend three times, “peace unto you” and then heads home with a happy heart.

A number of interesting customs are thus adduced by the *Tur*, almost all of which have been incorporated into common practice. But our focus must be on two specific points: 1) the *Tur* quotes the verse, “*tipol aleibem*” etc., and states we are to recite it forwards then backwards, i.e., *ka’aven yidmu*, etc.; and 2) the *Tur* explicitly states that this custom is based on *Maseches Soferim*.

The problem is, *Maseches Soferim* says no such thing. In the passage quoted by the *Tur*, which appears in the nineteenth chapter of *Maseches Soferim*, we find the following:

מסכת סופרים פרק י"ט הלכה י':

ואין מברכין על הירח אלא במוצאי שבת, כשהוא מבושם, ובכלים נאים. ותולה עיניו כנגדה ומיישר את רגליו, ומברך, אשר במאמרו ברא שחקים, וברוח פיו כל צבאם, חוק וזמן נתן להם שלא ישנו את תפקידם. פועלי אמת שפעולתם אמת, וללבנה אמר שתתחדש באור יקר ועטרת תפארת לעמוסי בטן, שהם עתידים להתחדש כמותה, ולפאר ליוצרם על כבוד מלכותו, ברוך אתה י"י מקדש ישראל וראשי חדשים. ואומר שלש פעמים, סימן טוב, סימן טוב, סימן טוב תיהוי לכל ישראל, ברוך בוראך, ברוך יוצרך, ברוך מקדשך, ורוקד שלש רקידות כנגדה, ואומר שלש פעמים, כשם שאני רוקד כנגדך ואיני נוגע בך, כך אם ירקדו בני אדם כנגדי לא יגעו בי, **תפול עליהם אימתה ופחד, ולמפרע, אמן אמן אמן, סלה הללויה.** ואומר לחבירו שלש פעמים שלום עליך, וילך לביתו בלב טוב. והדא היא מפסיקין לראשי חדשים.¹⁴

... One says three times, “May a good sign, a good sign, a good sign be upon all Israel. Blessed is He Who created you, blessed is He Who formed you, blessed is He Who sanctified you.” One then dances three dances toward her [the moon] and recites three times,

¹⁴ The Hebrew text is from the critical edition of *Maseches Soferim* (19:10) by M. Higger (New York, 1937) as it appears on the *Bar-Ilan Responsa Project CD*, version 8. The standard text, printed at the back of *Maseches Avodah Zarah*, is similar and appears in chapter 20, rulings 1–2.

“Just as I dance toward you, and yet I do not (i.e., cannot) touch you, so too if people dance towards me [to harm me], they should not be able to touch me. **Let fear and terror fall upon them.**” *Ulimafre’a*, “Amen, amen, amen, *selah*, hallelujah.” One then says to his friend three times, “peace unto you,” and he heads home with a happy heart.

There are several differences between the *Tur* and *Maseches Soferim*, but for our purposes, the words I have highlighted in bold are critical. The actual phrase of *Maseches Soferim* is . . . ואומר שלש פעמים. תפול עליהם אימתה ופחד ולמפרע. However, the *Tur* phrases this far more expansively, turning it into ואומר תפול עליהם אימתה ופחד בגדול זרועך ידמו כאבן ולמפרע כאבן ידמו זרועך בגדול ופחד אימתה עליהם תפול.

Everything turns upon the key word “*ulimafre’a*.” Marcus Jastrow, in his famous dictionary, translates this word as any student of the Talmud would: *backwards, retroactively, retrospective*.¹⁵ But what does it mean in the *Maseches Soferim* passage? The *Tur* obviously understood it to mean “backwards.” Thus, the *Tur*, followed ever since by virtually all the commentators, understood the passage as laying down the custom we have today: First recite the verse in its straightforward manner, and then recite it backwards. For this reason, when quoting the passage from *Maseches Soferim*, the *Tur* added in some explanatory words so that this meaning would be clear: “and then backwards **as well, “as stone let them be still, your arm at its greatness, and terror, fear upon them let fall.”**” These bold print words, which make clear the understanding of the *Tur*, do not appear in *Maseches Soferim*.

It seems strange that *Maseches Soferim* itself would suggest reading a verse backwards, as the *Tur* interpreted it. What might not be out of place in a kabbalistic or chassidic text, seems decidedly out of place in *Maseches Soferim*. This work, composed in about the middle of the 8th century, is generally a sober *halachic* text governing the laws of scribes, Torah reading, and liturgy.¹⁶ Although some *aggadic* passages are included in the work, nowhere else in *Maseches Soferim* do we find anything remotely resembling a suggestion to read a verse out of order.

¹⁵ Entry for *mafre’a*.

¹⁶ See the introductory discussion in the Soncino edition of *The Minor Prophets* (London 1984).

If the *Tur*'s understanding of *Maseches Soferim* is correct, one would expect to see corroboration in a text earlier than the *Tur* itself (who, as stated above, lived from 1275 to 1340). Any source after this time frame may well have been influenced by the *Tur*'s understanding, and cannot serve as a useful vehicle for understanding the passage in *Maseches Soferim*. Thus, for example, the “backwards” interpretation appears in Abudraham (late 14th century), who attributes the custom to *Maseches Soferim*.¹⁷ However, we may assume Abudraham, who flourished after the lifetime of the *Tur*, and in the same country of Spain, learned this interpretation from the *Tur*. Indeed, Abudraham is thought to have been a student of the *Tur*.¹⁸

Many early *Rishonim* cite the basic form of the blessing mentioned in *Sanbedrin*, and some even cite the passage in *Maseches Soferim*, either word for word, or with a few words followed by “etc.,” to acknowledge the customs mentioned there. But a general survey of the more influential *halachic* literature of the appropriate time period reveals no one, with one possible exception discussed below, who shared the understanding of the *Tur* :

1. R. Saadiah *Gaon* (882 or 892–941), in his discussion on *Kiddush Levanah*, simply records the basic blessing, without mentioning the custom in question.¹⁹
2. R. Amram *Gaon* (d. 875) makes no mention of the custom.²⁰
3. *Halachos Gedolos* (c. 8th century) does not mention it.²¹
4. R. Simcha Vitry (d. 1105) in *Machzor Vitry*, quotes, without citations, the exact language of *Maseches Soferim* as quoted above: תפול עליהם אימתה ופחד ולמפרע אמן אמן סלה הללויה.²²
5. *Rif* (1013–1103) to *Sanbedrin* 42a does not mention the custom.
6. *Rambam* (1135–1204), like R. Saadiah *Gaon*, records only the basic blessing, and makes no mention of the passage under discussion.²³

¹⁷ *Abudraham* (Jerusalem 1923)

¹⁸ See the entry on R. Yaakov Ba'al HaTurim in *The Rishonim* (Brooklyn, NY 2001), p. 147.

¹⁹ *Siddur Rav Saadiah Gaon* (Jerusalem 2000), p. 91.

²⁰ *Siddur Rav Amram Gaon* (Bnei Brak 1994) Vol II, §48.

²¹ *Halachos Gedolos* (Jerusalem 1992), p. 89.

²² *Machzor Vitry* (Nirenberg 1923), p. 183.

²³ *Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Berachos*, 10:16

7. *Sefer Eshkol* (1110–1179) does not mention it.²⁴
8. *Ravya* (1140–1225) does not mention it.²⁵
9. *Tashbetz* (c. 1285) does not mention it.²⁶
10. *Or Zarua* (late 12th century) records the same language as *Maseches Soferim*.²⁷
11. The anonymous *Sefer HaNayyar* (c. mid-13th century) states the basic blessing, and adds the language of ברוך יוצרך ברוך עושך etc. He does not mention the custom in question.²⁸
12. R. Menachem Meiri (1249–1306) in *Beis HaBechirah* to *Sanbedrin* 42a, writes only תפול עליהם אימתה ופחד etc.²⁹
13. *Rabbeinu Yerucham* (1280–1350) in *Toldos Adam V'Chavah* writes only תפול עליהם אימתה ופחד etc.^{29,30}
14. *Shibolei HaLeket* (1230–1300) records the same language as *Maseches Soferim*.³¹

Thus, the classic works of *Geonim* and *Rishonim* from the relevant time period are silent on this most unusual of customs. While they do not provide alternative understandings for the passage in *Maseches Soferim*, they also do not provide support for the *Tur*'s understanding.

There is, however, one source that *may* support the *Tur*. And that is Rabbi Elazar of Worms, Germany (1165–1238), the famed author of the *Roke'ach*. This enigmatic author's comments on *Kiddush Levanah* have come down to us in two different versions. In his commentary to the *siddur*, the *Roke'ach* simply records the custom exactly the same way as written in *Maseches Soferim*, and is thus inconclusive. But in a different work, *Sefer Roke'ach*, the author quotes the entire verse of תפול עליהם—not simply the first half of it—then quotes the entire verse again, backwards. This second version seems to have the weight of tradition behind it, as it is cited by *Magen Avraham* (1633–1683) approvingly. So far as my research has disclosed, he is the only

²⁴ *Sefer Eshkol* (Halberstadt 1868), *Hilchos Rosh Chodesh* §4.

²⁵ *Ravya* (Jerusalem 1965), *Berachos* §146.

²⁶ *Tashbetz* (of R. Shimshon Bar Tzadok) (Warsaw 1862), §87.

²⁷ *Or Zarua* (Zhitomir 1862), §456.

²⁸ *Sefer Hanayyar* (Jerusalem 1994).

²⁹ *Beis HaBechirah* (Jerusalem 1965).

³⁰ *Toldos Adam V'Chavah* (Venice 1553), §11:1.

³¹ *Shibolei HaLeket* (Vilna 1886), §177.

commentator I am aware of that mentions this understanding prior to the *Tur*.³²

However, it seems to me that, as likely as not, the *Roke'ach* was actually the *original source* for the interpretation codified in the *Tur*. Indeed, students of the *Roke'ach*, a member of the *chassidei ashkenaz*, will recognize the propensity of that group to favor the mystical over the prosaic. Consider also the chain of transmission between the *Roke'ach* and the *Tur*. The primary teacher of the *Tur* was his own father, Rabbi Asher ben Yechiel, the *Rosh* (1250 or 1259–1328). The *Rosh* himself studied under the *Tosafist*, Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg (*Maharam*) (1215–1293). And the *Maharam*, in turn, actually was born and studied with the *Roke'ach*, together in the same town of Worms.³³ Indeed, R. Efrayim Urbach reports, in his classic work *Ba'alei HaTosfot*, that “in all aspects of prayer and benedictions, he [*Maharam*] followed in the paths of Rabbi Yehudah HaChassid and Rabbi Elazar Ha-Roke'ach, and, like them, he explains customs and textual versions [*nuschaot*] by way of *gematriyot*.”³⁴ Hence, it seems very likely that the interpretation found in the *Tur* came via an oral tradition

³² See *HaRoke'ach HaGadol* (Jerusalem 1960), §229, *Magen Avraham* to *Orach Chayim*, 426:10. In a slim volume devoted exclusively to the topic of *kiddush levanah*, R. Raphael Shapiro cites the two different versions of the *Roke'ach*. (*Birkas R'SH*, Beit Shemesh, 1999), p. 109. He connects them with another issue that has drawn the attention of the commentators, and that is the fact that the verse as we recite it in *kiddush levanah* is incomplete. The full verse continues, “*ad ya'avur amcha Hashem, ad ya'avur am z'oo kanita*.” Thus, our verse presents a possible violation of the dictum set forth in *Megillah* 22a, “*kol possuka diloh poskei Moshe, anan loh poskeinen* (i.e., we do not punctuate verses in any way other than the way in which we received our tradition of punctuation from Moshe). Since we recite a truncated version of the verse, is this not a violation of that dictum? R. Shapiro analyzes the possibility that the *Roke'ach* advocates reciting the entire verse so as to avoid this problem. He does not seem to be aware of, however, or otherwise address, the problem under discussion here.

³³ *Ba'alei HaTosfot* (Jerusalem 1955), pp. 406, and 411.

³⁴ *Ba'alei HaTosfot* (Jerusalem 1955), p. 429.

from his father, the *Rosh*, who received it from his teacher, the *Maharam*, who in turn received it from his own teacher, the *Roke'ach*.³⁵

Thus, with the exception of the *Roke'ach* as discussed above, no other authority in the relevant time frame espouses the interpretation of the *Tur*, and many do not even mention the custom at all. It is more than likely that there was no common custom of reciting the verse at all, and certainly not in backwards form, prior to the *Tur*. The passage in *Maseches Soferim* is certainly enigmatic. But if *limafre'a* does not mean what the *Tur* suggested (influenced, perhaps, in this instance, by the mystical bent of the *chassidei ashkenaz*) then what could it mean? If we accept that *Maseches Soferim* never itself intended to have a verse read backwards, what does the word “*ulimafre'a*” mean?

I confess that this juncture was the most difficult part of this investigation. For while I was satisfied that there was indeed a “problem” in the way we were currently saying *Kiddush Levanah*, and I was (and remain) convinced the *Tur* had given a meaning to the “*ulimafre'a*” in this context that could not have been intended by *Maseches Soferim*, there was no solution immediately forthcoming that would explain what the passage actually did mean.

One possible solution that occurred to me takes the word at its alternative meaning (mentioned by Jastrow, *supra*) as “retrospective.” Indeed, this is exactly how the Soncino translation understood the verse: “Let terror and dread fall upon them and may this be retrospective.” (The translator did not provide a footnote to explain this translation, nor did he appear aware of how radical this translation looks when compared to universal practice.) This understanding flows from the usage of the verse as a curse directed against the enemies of Israel. We are asking God to use His powers

³⁵ In written works all three are silent concerning the custom. The *Rosh* does not address the issue in his Talmudic commentary, citing only the basic blessing in *Sanhedrin* (*loc cit.*). The *Maharam* of Rothenberg does not write anything about the custom, although he was certainly aware of the passage in *Maseches Soferim*, as evidenced by his student’s citation of the passage, and testimony that *Maharam* would wear his finery when making the blessing. See *Hagabos Maimoni to Rambam* (*loc cit.*). And, somewhat surprisingly, *Sefer Chassidim* of Rabbi Yehudah HaChassid does not seem to address the topic of *kiddush levanah* at all. (Bologna ed. of R. R. Margolios, Parma ed. of R. A. Price).

to deliver us from our enemies, and punish them for their misdeeds towards the Jews. According to this interpretation, then, *Maseches Soferim* is advising to curse our enemies with punishment, and to specifically ask that such punishment should not merely take effect now, but rather, it should include retribution for all previous and prior attacks. Alternatively, since the blessing can be recited up to approximately the middle of the month, we might be asking for retrospective application of punishment, to date back to the first of the month. This answer, while plausible, did not entirely satisfy me, and I was thus left in that unhappy no-man's land halfway between heaven and earth, with a *kasha* better than the *teretz*.

It was thus obvious that *Maseches Soferim* needed to be understood differently. After considering all the possible meanings, it appears that the word ולמפרע is not connected with the words before it, but, rather, with the words after it. That is, the phrase ולמפרע אמן אמן סלה means simply, “as to what has previously been recited, add אמן אמן סלה הללויה.” In other words, we are directed to recite an elaborate “Amen” following the first part of the *Kiddush Levanah* blessing. (The word “*ulimafre'a*” is thus synonymous with the more modern term “*ha'nirab le'eil*”.) This explanation, however, is still difficult. If *Maseches Soferim* wanted us to add אמן אמן סלה הללויה, why was it necessary to stick in the word ולמפרע? There are two possible reasons:

1. *Maseches Soferim* had just provided a list of items to be recited three times. Without the word ולמפרע we might have misunderstood that the phrase אמן אמן סלה הללויה should also be recited three times instead of once.³⁶
2. In general, one does not say “Amen” after his own blessing. An exception to this rule is when the “Amen” comes after a series of blessings.³⁷ *Maseches Soferim* is thus telling us that despite the general rule against adding an “Amen” to one's own blessing, here it is proper to do so because it is actually a series of blessings: the original blessing, followed by “blessed is your Creator, blessed is your Maker” etc. The word “*ulimafre'a*” thus notes that an “Amen” can be said

³⁶ I would like to thank Heshey Zelcer of *Hakirah* for this insight.

³⁷ See *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 215:1.

“retrospectively” on the original blessings that were interrupted with the verse תפול עליהם.³⁸

In the above solutions the word “*ulimafre’a*” retains its usual meaning and we are not forced to understand *Maseches Soferim* as instructing us to repeat a Torah verse backwards. Although one can never be certain we may perhaps say, as the Talmud states in a different context, ניכרין דברי אמת.³⁹

Conclusion

Reciting a verse in backwards form is a unique custom, to say the least, and the few attempts to explain why we do so in *Kiddush Levanah* have been unsatisfying. The custom found its way into general practice via the *Tur*. But the *Tur*’s understanding was based upon his reading of the *Maseches Soferim* (or, perhaps, an idiosyncratic tradition of how to read it) and the understanding of the passage is questionable. While the true meaning of the word “*ulimafre’a*” in *Maseches Soferim* still remains enigmatic, it appears more likely that the word was only an explanatory note in connection with the “Amen” offered after the blessings. It must be stressed that, unless some early text surfaces to corroborate this hypothesis, everything written here, convincing or not, must remain only that—a hypothesis. And a *Shalom Aleichem* to all.⁴⁰ ❧

³⁸ I am indebted to R. Asher Benzion Buchman of *Hakirah* for this solution.

³⁹ *Sotah* 9b.

⁴⁰ In addition to the aforementioned editorial staff of *Hakirah*, I am indebted to the following people who were kind enough to read and comment upon early drafts of this article: Rabbis Shnayer Leiman, Marc Shapiro, and Dan Rabinowitz. Mistakes, of course, are mine alone.