Aleinu: Obligation to Fix the World or the Text?1

By: MITCHELL FIRST

The Jewish obligation of עולם תיקון (=improving the world) is widely referred to and it is traditionally assumed that the Aleinu prayer is one of the texts upon which this obligation is based.

This article will show that a very strong case can be made that the original version of Aleinu read ליתכן עולם (=to establish the world under God’s sovereignty), and not ליתכן עולם (=to perfect/improve the world under God’s sovereignty).2 If so, the concept of תיקון עולם has no connection to the Aleinu prayer.3

1 I would like to thank Yehiel Levy for showing me his Yemenite siddur which read ליתכן, which inspired this research. I would also like to thank R. Moshe Yasgur for sharing his thoughts and for always being willing to listen to mine. I dedicate this article to my beloved wife Sharon, whose name has the gematria תיקון, and who needs no improvement.


3 One scholar who has already suggested that the original reading was ליתכן is Meir Bar-Ilan. See his “Mekorah shel Tefillat ‘Aleinu le-Shabeah,’” Daat

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4 The Jerusalem Talmud, at Avodah Zarah 1:2, includes the following passage:

A very similar passage is found at J. Talmud RH 1:3 (where the reading is מנה של儀 מר והלך מבית הרואה). The sentence referred to from the liturgy (היוםaryl רכוש יבשה) is from the introductory section to the ten verses of zikhronot. A reasonable inference from these Talmudic passages is that Rav composed (at least) the introductory sections to zikhronot, malkhuyot and shofarot. Aleinu is part of the introductory section to malkhuyot. Since the sentence quoted from the introduction to zikhronot corresponds to the present introduction to zikhronot, it is reasonable to assume that their introduction to malkhuyot corresponded to the present introduction to malkhuyot, i.e., that it included Aleinu. Admittedly, Rav could have made use of older material in the introductory section he composed. The fact that Aleinu has been found (in a modified version) in beikhalot literature is evidence for Aleinu's existence in this early period, even though the prayer is not specifically mentioned in any Mishnaic or Talmudic source. (Regarding the dating of beikhalot literature, see below.) On the version of Aleinu in beikhalot literature, see Michael D. Swartz, “Alay Le-Shabbeah: A Liturgical Prayer in Ma'aseh Merkabah,” Jewish Quarterly Review vol. 77, Philadelphia: 1986-1987, pp. 179-190. See also the article by Bar-Ilan cited above. For parallels in later sources to the two passages from the Jerusalem Talmud, see Swartz, p. 186, n. 20. See also RH 27a.

A statement that Aleinu was composed by Joshua appears in a collection of Geonic responsa known as Shaarei Teshuvah (responsum #44). But the statement was probably a later addition by the thirteenth century kabbal-
Aleinu: Obligation to Fix the World or the Text  :  189

A text of Aleinu included in any of the classical midrashim. Therefore, we must look to later sources for texts of Aleinu.

When we do, we find that the reading הַלַּכְנֶן is found in the text of the RH Amidah in the Siddur of R. Saadiah Gaon (d. 942), and in the text of the RH Amidah in the Mishneh Torah of Rambam (d. 1204). Statements that Aleinu was composed by Joshua are found in various Ashkenazic Rishonim. For the references, see Wolfson, pp. 380-381.

There is much evidence that Aleinu could not have been composed by Joshua. For example: 1) Aleinu cites verses from the prophet Isaiah (this will be discussed below); 2) ha-kadosh barukh hu was not an appellation for God in Biblical times; 3) olam was a time-related word, and not a word for “world” in Biblical times (see, e.g., Daat Mikra, comm. to Psalms 89:3, p. 138, n. 5); and 4) terms are found in Aleinu that are characteristic of heikhalot literature.

As noted, Aleinu has been found (in a modified form) in heikhalot literature. There are five manuscripts which include the relevant passage. But four of these manuscripts only include Aleinu in an abbreviated form and are not long enough to include the phrase העולם לתקן. See Peter Schäfer, Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1981, sec. 551, pp. 206-207. The only manuscript that includes the phrase reads לתקן. But this manuscript, N8128, dates from around 1500. See Ra’anan S. Boustan, “The Study of Heikhalot Literature: Between Mystical Experience and Textual Artifact,” Currents in Biblical Research vol. 6.1, Los Angeles: 2007, p. 137.

Regarding the dating of heikhalot literature, Bar-Ilan (Mekorot, p. 22, n. 85) estimates this literature as dating from the third through fifth centuries. Moshe Idel, in the second edition of the Encyclopaedia Judaica (11:592) summarizes the subject as follows:

Even though it is quite possible that some of the texts were not edited until this period [=the geonic era], there is no doubt that large sections originated in talmudic times, and that the central ideas, as well as many details, go back as far as the first and second centuries.

Siddur Rav Saadiah Gaon, p. 221. Admittedly, what has been published here is not a manuscript composed by R. Saadiah himself. Neither R. Saadiah nor Rambam recited Aleinu in the daily service.
Moreover, it is also found in at least four texts from the Cairo Genizah which include all or part of Aleinu: 1) a fragment of the RH Amidah first published by Jacob Mann in 1925; 2) a fragment of the RH Amidah first published by Richard Gottheil and William H. Worrell in 1927; 3) a fragment of the RH Amidah first published by Mordecai Margaliot in 1973; and 4) a text of Aleinu first published by Mann in 1925. In this last text, Aleinu is included in the Pesukei de-Zimra section of the Palestinian shaharit ritual.
Furthermore, the reading לָתַכֵּנָה survives in Yemenite siddurim to this day. It was also the reading in the original tradition of the Jews of Persia.\footnote{Since the second word of the Aleinu prayer is לָשֵׁבַח, it was probably seen as fitting to include this prayer in the Pesukei de-Zimra section. A main theme of both Barukh she-Amar and Yishtabah, as well as of the entire Pesukei de-Zimra, is שָׁבַח. A Palestinian practice of reciting Aleinu in Pesukei de-Zimra may also explain a statement found in several Rishonim (e.g., Sefer ha-Mahkim, Kol Bo, and Orhot Hayyim) in the name of Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer (a work composed in eighth century Palestine): הצריך לשתיאו בעלינו ישגדול שבח מעומד לאומרו. The statement is obviously not giving an instruction regarding the RH Amidah recited by individuals. Nor does the language of the statement (לאומרו) fit as an instruction to individuals listening to the repetition of the RH Amidah. The recital of Aleinu in a context outside of the Amidah seems to be referred to. (The statement is not found in the surviving texts of Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer.)}

Admittedly, the reading in Europe since the time of the Rishonim has been לָתַכֵּנָה.\footnote{See Shelomoh Tal, Nusah ha-Tefillah shel Yebeudei Paras. Jerusalem: Makhon Ben Zvi, 1981, p. 154 (RH). The Persian-Jewish prayer ritual followed that of R. Saadiah in many respects. At the end of the eighteenth century the Persian Jews were influenced to adopt a Sefardic prayer ritual and their own ritual was forgotten.} See, for example, the following texts of Aleinu:

- \textit{Mahzor Vitry} of R. Simhah of Vitry (daily shaharit and RH);\footnote{Ed. Aryeh Goldschmidt. Jerusalem: Makhon Ozar ha-Poskim, 2004, pp. 131 (daily shaharit) and 717 (RH). The earliest surviving manuscript of \textit{Mahzor Vitry} seems to have been copied around the year 1145; a calendar for this year is found within it. See Israel Ta-Shema, “Al Cammab Inyanei Mahzor Vitry,” Alei Sefer vol. 11, Ramat Gan: 1984, p. 87.}
- \textit{Siddur Hasidei Ashkenaz} (daily shaharit and RH);\footnote{Ed. Moshe Hirschler, Jerusalem, 1972, p. 125 (daily shaharit), and p. 214 (RH). (This work was published by Hirschler together with another work, \textit{Siddur Rabbenu Shelomoh}; both are integrated into the same volume.) \textit{Siddur Hasidei Ashkenaz} was compiled by the students of R. Judah he-Hasid (d. 1217) and presumably reflects his text of Aleinu. Hirschler’s edition of this siddur is based on several manuscripts.}

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- Peirush ha-Tefillot ve-ba-Berakhot of R. Judah b. Yakar (RH);17
- Peirushei Siddur ha-Tefillah of R. Eleazar b. Judah of Worms (RH);18 and
- Sefer Arugat ha-Bosem of R. Abraham b. Azriel (RH).19

The three main manuscripts of Seder Rav Amram Gaon also read לתקן.20 But these manuscripts are not from the time of R. Amram (d. 875); they are European manuscripts from the time of the later Rishonim.21

Earlier than Mahzor Vitry, we have circumstantial evidence for the reading לתקן in comments on Aleinu that were probably composed by R. Eliezer b. Nathan of Mainz (c. 1090-1170). Here, in

17 Ed. Samuel Yerushalmi. Jerusalem: Meorei Yisrael, 1979, sec. 2, pp. 91-92. R. Judah flourished in Spain and died in the early thirteenth century. Aside from the text of Aleinu in the manuscript published by Yerushalmi including the reading לתקן, it is also clear from the various explanatory comments by R. Judah that he was working with a text that read לתקן.
18 Ed. Moshe Hirschler. Jerusalem: Machon Harav Hirschler, 1992, p. 659. R. Eleazar died circa 1230. The text of Aleinu is found in his commentary to the Aleinu of RH. In his commentary on the daily shabbat, only the first two words of Aleinu and the last two (timlokh be-khavod) are recorded. In his Sefer ha-Rokeah, his references to Aleinu in both the RH Amida and the daily shabbat are similarly very brief.
19 Ed. Ephraim E. Urbach. Jerusalem: Mekizei Nirdamim, 1963, vol. 3, pp. 469-470. Sefer Arugat ha-Bosem was composed in 1234, in Bohemia. Aside from the text of Aleinu published here including the word לusalem, it is also clear from R. Abraham’s explanatory comment (p. 469, lines 8-9) that he was working with a text that read לNTSTATUS
Other early European texts of Aleinu include that of Ms. Cambridge Add. 667.1 (early thirteenth century) and the three texts of Aleinu in Ms. Oxford Corpus Christi College 133 (late twelfth century). I have not been able to check these readings. I have no reason to suspect that they do not read לNTSTATUS.
21 Ibid., introduction, pp. 11-13. A few fragments of the Seder Rav Amram Gaon have been found in the Genizah, but these are very small and do not include our passage.
Hamburg MS 153, the following explanatory comment about Aleinu is expressed (without a text of the line itself): ההעולם לכל ויהיו בשמך יקראו וכלם מלכותך מתוקנים...

Another manuscript, also largely composed of the comments of R. Eliezer b. Nathan, has essentially this same reading in two places.

Another manuscript, which is probably the Siddur of R. Eliezer b. Nathan, has a similar reading:...

Admittedly, I cannot prove that לתכן was the original reading. But this seems very likely, as לתכן is by far the better reading in the context. We see this by looking at all the other scenarios that are longed for in this section:

This manuscript is generally considered to be largely composed of the comments of R. Eliezer b. Nathan. See, e.g., Urbach, Sefer Arugat ha-Bosem, vol. 4, p. 24 and the facsimile edition of this manuscript published by Abraham Naftali Zvi Rot, Jerusalem: 1980, pp. 21-30. The manuscript itself is estimated to have been copied in the fourteenth century (Rot, p. 21).

See Rot, p. 20a (comm. to RH Aleinu).

See Alter Yehudah Hirschler, “Peirush Siddur ha-Tefillah ve-ha-Mahzor Meyubah le-Rabbi Eliezer ben Natan mi-Magenza (ba-Ravan),” Genuzot vol. 3, Jerusalem: 1991, pp. 1-128. In this siddur commentary (pp. 78 and 114), is found in the commentary to daily Aleinu in shabirat, and is found in the commentary to RH Aleinu. (One should not deduce from this manuscript that R. Eliezer b. Nathan recited Aleinu daily in shabirat.)

Beginning with the second line, Ḥakirah, the Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought

... מלכותך ואול עול ועדות לעולם מהרה עליהם מלך המלכות שלך היא López ועולם על המלך בכם

With regard to the first line, properly understood and its mystical and elevated language decoded, it is almost certainly a request for the speedily rebuilding of the Temple.27 Taken to

26 Gershom Scholem recognized long ago that Aleinu includes several terms that are not only post-Biblical, but are characteristic of beikhalot literature. See his Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1965 (2d. ed.), pp. 27-28. He points to the terms yoger bereshit, moshav yekaro, and shekhinat uzo. Meir Bar-Ilan (Mekorah, p. 8) also points to the term adon ba-kol. (I suspect that gavhei meromim, another non-Biblical term, will eventually be found in this literature as well.) All of this suggests that Aleinu was composed by someone with some connection to beikhalot literature, or composed at a time after terms originating in beikhalot literature came to be in normative rabbinic use. This explains how Aleinu easily came to be borrowed into beikhalot literature. Due to the common terms, the authors of this literature probably saw Aleinu as a text “related to their own hymnology.” Scholem, p. 28.

In beikhalot literature, Aleinu serves as a prayer of gratitude purportedly recited by R. Akiva (in the singular form עלי לשבח) on return from a safe journey to heaven. See the article by Swartz referred to above. Meir Bar-Ilan, Mekorah, pp. 12-24, argues that Aleinu originated here, and was then changed into the plural and borrowed into the RH service. This is very unlikely. There are too many themes in Aleinu that are out of context and extraneous under the assumption that Aleinu originated merely as a prayer of gratitude on return from a safe journey to heaven (e.g., the hope for God’s future reign and that the nations shall acknowledge God’s sovereignty). See Swartz, p. 188.

27 The idiom is based on verses such as Psalms 78:60-61 (ותפארת לעז)(ורל), 96:6 (ותפארתי בעז), and Isaiah 60:7 (お互い הפורת וה喤) and 64:10 (ו להיות כן ויזכר). This interpretation is probably implicit in the commentary of R. Judah b. Yakar. On ירהו נחרית המפורת, he writes: דרך עליה עלי המכמשה יירהו כקרוב מנעיה שלקתי ולהיאת יירהו ב preds שיכלRAM הפורת אסף.
together, this whole section is a prayer for the rebuilding of the Temple and the establishment God’s kingdom on earth. This fits the readingperfectly.

That this section of Aleinu is fundamentally a prayer for the establishment of God’s kingdom makes sense given that, most likely, this section was composed as an introduction to the malkhuyyot section of the RH Amidah.28

See the Peirush ha-Tefillot ve-ha-Berakhot of R. Judah b. Yakar, part II, p. 91. R. Judah’s statements are adopted by R. David Abudraham in his commentary to the Aleinu of RH. See also R. Shemtob Gaugine, Keter Shem Toe, Kedainiai, 1934, p. 104. Unfortunately, this interpretation of the phrase נסירה ואריך has generally been overlooked. Scholom (p. 28, n. 18) notes the following passage found in other heikhalot texts: עזوة בתפארת ומברוך הדרו במעלום שם ברוך. The parallel to נסירה יחרertiary in this passage represents the physical Temple. For heikhalot texts with this passage see Mordecai Margaliot, Sefer ha-Razim, Jerusalem, 1966, pp. 107-09, and Martin Samuel Cohen, The Shi’ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1985, pp. 173 and 175.

Aside from the fact that the theme of the section fits as an introduction to verses of malkhuyot, the section ends with four words from the root מלך: אדם את ממלאו והמלוך ויקבלו מלכותך כי עד לעולם המלכות על עולמי היא שלך תמלוך עד בכבוד. I have little doubt that the first section of Aleinu (which includes the words המלכים מלכי מלכינו) was also composed at the same time. This is contrary to the view of many scholars who point to the two separate themes in the two sections as evidence of different authors. Aleinu is a short prayer, and in the earliest texts of Aleinu there is no division into sections. Therefore, our presumption should be one of unitary authorship. Close analysis of the verses cited shows that both sections quote or paraphrase from the same chapter of Isaiah (45:20: ותפתלום אלה ואלה׃ יז וי התייה אל בכי תשון אלה׃ וישוע and 45:23: ותהיה יד אלהים בברך ובברך חסד אלהים׃ וישוע there are quotes and paraphrases of other verses from chapter 45, and from 44:24 and 46:9 as well.) This strongly suggests that both sections were composed at the same time. (I have not seen anyone else make this point.) The terms characteristic of heikhalot literature are found in both sections as well.

While it cannot be proved that Rav (early third century, Babylonia and Palestine) was the author of Aleinu, it has been observed that “in some of Rav’s homilies a tendency to a certain mystical thinking is discernible.” See EJ 13:1578 and the citations there, as well as the statement of Rav at Ber. 55a: ויהי הוא ברויאל לברך אתיה ענוה ברויאל ברויאל... Also, several
Moreover, we can easily understand how an original reading of לָתַבְּכָר היהלָמַד עָלָם, a term related to the familiar term הָלָמַד עָלָם (always with the definite article) is widespread in early rabbinic literature.²⁹ For example, it is found thirteen times in the Mishnah, and seventeen times in the Babylonian Talmud.³⁰ The alternative scenario, that the original reading was לָתַבְּכָר היהלָמַד and that this evolved in some texts into עֵלָּם לָתַבְּכָר is much less likely.

Finally, the ב of י-שד בְּמֵלכָּה seems to fit better in לָתַבְּכָר היהלָמַד בְּמֵלכָּה-שְדָי (= to establish the world under God’s sovereignty) than in either of the two ways of understanding י-שד בְּמֵלכָּה. ³¹ Also, the lack of an את before the object עֵלָּם perhaps fits the reading לָתַבְּכָר better. I will leave a detailed analysis of these aspects to grammarians.

Talmudic passages record Rav’s authorship or contribution to the text of other prayers. Most of these passages are collected at Ismar Elbogen, Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History, tr. Raymond P. Scheindlin, New York: Jewish Publication Society and Jewish Theological Seminary, 1993, pp. 207-208. Most relevant is Ber. 12b where the changes for the Ten Days of Repentance are recorded in the name of Rav.

²⁹ הָלָמַד עָלָם was the correct classical term, even though it has now been replaced in popular parlance by הָלָמַד עָלָם. Rosenthal, p. 214, n. 1.

³⁰ Rosenthal, p. 214, n. 1. It is also found eight times in the Jerusalem Talmud and four times in the Tosefta. Most of the time, the term is used in the context of the laws of divorce, but it is found in other contexts as well (e.g., Hillel’s enactment of prozbol at M. Gittin 4:3). Rosenthal suggests that the concept originated in the context of the laws of divorce, and was later expanded into other contexts. See Rosenthal, pp. 217-219.

³¹ As mentioned earlier, in the reading י-שד בְּמֵלכָּה, there are two ways to translate בְּמֵלכָּה: “under the sovereignty” or “through the sovereignty.” If the translation is “under,” establishing a world under the sovereignty of God is a simpler reading than perfecting a world under the sovereignty of God. If one wants to advocate for the translation “through,” it requires investigation whether the prefix ב could have been used to mean “through” in the Talmudic period.
Conclusion

There is no question that social justice is an important value in Judaism. Moreover, classical rabbinical literature includes many references to the concept of העולם תקון, both in the context of divorce legislation and in other contexts. The purpose of this article was only to show that it is almost certainly a mistake to read such a concept into the Aleinu prayer, a prayer most likely composed as an introduction to the malkhuyyot section of the Amidah, and focused primarily on the goal of establishing (חזרה) God’s kingdom on earth. Even if we do not fix the text of our siddurim, we should certainly have this alternate and almost certainly original reading in mind as we recite this prayer.

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