

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

ALEINU: THE CLIMAX OF MYSTICAL ASCENSION

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What is the emotion felt by most people, clergy and laity, upon hearing the call to rise for Aleinu? Relief. The service is almost over. This is definitely the ninth inning. A rousing song before the open ark and then bittersweet Kaddish and perhaps a closing song and benediction and we're "outta here". What a pity that this powerful piece of liturgy is consigned to such a fate.

In Ma'aseh Merkavah, one of the forms of mysticism that existed during the rabbinic era (70-500 C.E.), the Aleinu (in singular form, i.e., "Alai") is the prayer the mystical journeyer utters upon reaching the seventh, final heavenly hall. It is a song of triumph. The long pilgrimage is over and the journeyer stands at the very footstool of God, having made his/her way through all the seven heavenly halls. In many prayer books the Aleinu comes after the Kaddish and is completed with a recitation of the Shema.

In the Merkavah literature the Aleinu is an individual's prayer and reads as follows:

It is incumbent upon me to praise the Lord of all; to ascribe greatness to the Former of Creation, who did not make us like the nations of the lands and did not place us like the families of the earth. Who did not place my lot among them and my destiny among all their masses. For they bow down to vanity and emptiness and pray to a god who cannot save. But I pray before the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He. (Michael D. Swartz. Mystical Prayer in Ancient Judaism, p. 228).

The rather inflammatory assertion that others bow to emptiness is excised from Ashkenazic prayer books but can still be found in Sephardic prayer books. Some Sephardic congregations do not go on to recite the second part of the Aleinu as we find it in our prayer books today which expresses the hope that the messianic age will arrive quickly and that God's name shall be one.

Discussion Questions:

1. Try saying the Aleinu in the first person rather than the second person. Does it make the prayer different for you? In what ways? Would like to see this version of the prayer adopted in daily and/or weekly services?
2. Would including the Shema at the end help you make sense of the verse from Zechariah 14:9: "On that day God shall be one and God's name shall be one."? What do you think that verse actually means?
3. Should the Aleinu be placed after the Kaddish? Should synagogue services contain traces of ancient Jewish mystical practices?
4. How do you feel about the statement that, "They bow to emptiness."?

I look forward to your answers!