

*Pray and Mean It is an occasional listserv – every 2 to 3 weeks. Its aim is to build an understanding of and connection to Jewish prayer step by step. It is administered through googlegroups. (Your inclusion in this group is confidential. I am the only person who has access to the names and e-mail addresses on the list.) People who wish to be added to the listserv may visit the googlegroups site or e-mail me at [CantorJC@aol.com](mailto:CantorJC@aol.com). All postings can be viewed with clear legible Hebrew at my synagogue's website, [www.tiferethisrael.org](http://www.tiferethisrael.org) You are welcome to share this with others who might find it interesting or valuable. Recipients will NOT be able to respond to the entire list, but may correspond with me.*

*Thanks and best wishes – Cantor Jack Chomsky, Congregation Tifereth Israel, Columbus Ohio*

### **Pray and Mean It 13**

This is the 13th installment in this series.

The previous two b'rachot touched on turning and forgiveness -- personal challenges in our everyday world. This next brief blessing uses one of those big scary word/concepts -- *g'ulah* -- redemption. This is one of those concepts that I think a lot of people struggle with today. We are afraid that we can't believe in a redemptive God -- so we try not to think about it! (If God is so strong as to have this redemptive power, why doesn't God use it more often?)

I would suggest that confronting this huge issue a little bit each day is a good prescription for making some progress with it.

Let's look at the text:

*R'eih na v'onyeinu, v'rivah riveinu*

*U-g'aleinu m'heirah l'ma-an sh'mecha*

*Ki goeil chazak Ata*

*Baruch Atah Adonai*

*Go-eil yisrael.*

רֵאֵה נָא בְּעֵינֵינוּ, וְרִיבָה רִיבֵנוּ,  
וּגְאַלְנוּ מִהֲרָה לְמַעַן שְׁמֶךָ,  
כִּי גּוֹאֵל חָזַק אַתָּה.  
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'  
גּוֹאֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Look please at our affliction and fight our fight,  
and redeem us speedily for your name's sake;  
for you are a mighty Redeemer.

Praised are You, Adonai,  
Redeemer of Israel.

For starters -- *r'eh v'onyeinu* -- look at our "affliction." I've put the word in quotes because "affliction" is the usual elegant word that we use. But when I look at the text, I see in the word עֵינֵינוּ (onyeinu) the word עֵינֵי (oni) -- a word for pauper or poverty. So in a sense we are saying "look at our poorness."

This is an idea we can consider on a number of levels. In one sense -- look at the poorness of the situation that faces us -- which would seem to be the simple intent of the text, since it ultimately asks for redemption. But I can't help but consider the phrase "look at our poorness" as a self-rebuke for the amount of poverty we allow to exist around us. In asking for redemption, we are ultimately asking to have the strength to address this situation. Perhaps looking at the text this way also overcomes some of the discomfort we might feel about that distant redemptive (or non-redemptive) God I mentioned above.

Next we come to *riva riveinu* -- fight our fight. This phrase is a tricky one in a sense -- other translations include “deliver us” and “plead our cause.” The second captures the essence more than the first. I like “fight our fight” in the sense that it captures the alliterative repetitiveness of the Hebrew -- “verb our noun” so to speak: fight our fight, strive our strife, battle our battle.

We may wish to turn the obvious meaning on its head: we are likely to feel guilty or embarrassed about asking God to fight our fights (although when we are in a *difficult* place, it’s an expression we will appreciate having access to). But we’ll feel less guilty about asking God to fight our fight by giving us the strength to fight the good fight the right way.

*And redeem us speedily for your name’s sake* -- On one level, we struggle because of our inability to believe in a redemptive God. Where was God in the Holocaust? Why does God permit such suffering today? The adverb *m’hera* (speedily) may be the solution to this conundrum: it shifts our mind’s sight from the issue of whether we believe in the redemptive God to the issue of when that redemption should begin -- immediately if not sooner! On one level, I relate to this as looking for a little bit of redemption each time I recite the prayer. And if I can imagine even the tiniest bit of redemption in that *m’hera moment*, it will make me more open to the redemption idea over time.

On another level, when we consider what redemption has looked like when it has occurred in history, it is dirty and painful. The redemption from Egypt was no picnic. The establishment of the State of Israel came after an unimaginable amount of bloodshed (the Holocaust AND the war of Independence) and continues to involve the shedding of blood to this day. The end of slavery in the United States, the civil rights movement -- these look neat in the history books. But in real life, they are not only painful, but deadly to many people. In this sense, asking for redemption speedily is a deep emotional sentiment quite appropriate to the task: When you need to remove a Band-Aid, sometimes you need to count to three and tear it off! So, too, as we perceive future redemption, it can be worthwhile to imagine it coming quickly, rather than so painfully, day in and day out.

*For you are a mighty redeemer.* The way that this text is expressed is a deep personal and direct conversation with God. Note where the word *Atah* appears -- and how it appears. The text could have said **כִּי גּוֹאֵל חֹזֵק אַתָּה** (ki ATAH goeil chazak). Instead, it says **כִּי גּוֹאֵל חֹזֵק אַתָּה** (ki goeil chazak ATAH). Thus, it really says *because a mighty redeemer are YOU*. I use caps here because the positioning of *atah* at this point in the phrase causes it to be pronounced *A-tah* instead of *A-tah*. (This was also the case with the phrasing in the previous *b’rachah* -- **כִּי מוֹחַל וְסוֹלַח אַתָּה** -- although I didn’t comment on it at the time.) This act of saying *A-tah* is like pointing a finger right into God’s face. (Are you talkin’ to ME? Yes, I’m talkin’ to YOU!)

With the conclusion of the *b’rachah*, we affirm God as redeemer -- realizing (I hope) that God will not be our redeemer alone. If redemption is going to come, it will come because we are partners in redemption -- with God and with each other.

One more note about this *b’rachah*: Some might look at a text like this and say to themselves “I’m okay with looking for universal redemption -- but uncomfortable that the text closes with *goel Yisrael* -- redeemer of Israel. Isn’t this a little parochial?” I would answer that one needs to understand the text in whatever way has most resonance. Does “fight our fight” mean to fight humanity’s fight? Or Israel’s fight? It depends on who says the prayer. When I say Praise be to You, Adonai, Redeemer of Israel, I understand that I am speaking to the Redeemer of the world through my relationship as a member of the people Israel. When you find yourself struggling with the scope of our prayers (are they for us individually, us as a people or us as everyone), it seems like a good idea to resolve the understanding in a

way that has meaning for you. What's a better solution? Finding the language that works with you, adapted in translation? Or abandoning the enterprise entirely? You know how I would want you to answer that one!

If you wish to respond, you may e-mail me at [CantorJC@aol.com](mailto:CantorJC@aol.com).