

THE PEOPLE'S PRAYER:  
THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT  
OF THE MISHEBERAKH PRAYER

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## INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, I was introduced to the Debbie Friedman version of the Misheberakh prayer. It seemed to me to be vastly different from the other Friday night prayers. Perhaps it was the song, perhaps calling out people's names, perhaps the immediate connection that I made between my prayer life and the life of my friends who were challenged by illness. I was moved to tears that evening. The prayer was not a standard part of my congregation's Shabbat prayers, and so the times when it was used were particularly poignant.

Then I began thinking about the meaning of the prayer. What did it mean to ask God to send healing to a particular person? What would happen if I did not ask God for healing? Would that harm the ill person? What benefit could I provide by my prayer that ill persons could not achieve on their own? The prayer began to trouble me.

During my year in Israel, a very ill friend of mine would ask me to say a misheberakh for her, to "pray for her." She was in Boston, I in Jerusalem. I could not understand what it meant to pray for another person remotely. I understood that there was a communal benefit to say a person's name within her own community, thereby alerting congregants to the needs of the others in their midst. However, I could not understand the benefit of saying the prayer thousands of miles away in a community where the woman was unknown.

The first conversation I had with Rabbi Levy, while in Jerusalem, was a lengthy discussion of the meaning and efficacy of the misheberakh for healing. At that time, I

had little use for the prayer. However, during the last 5 years I have challenged, expanded, and deepened my understanding of prayer. In my internships, I have worked with the ill and dying. The misheberakh for healing has brought tears to the eyes of a patient who otherwise felt completely disconnected from Jewish life. Hearing it has helped family members as they grapple with the impending death of their loved ones. And to me, standing at the bedside of an unresponsive, unconscious patient, it has given a formula by which to begin responding to the person. When Rabbi Cutter introduced me to the rich, diverse and complicated history of the prayer, I realized I could use it as a vehicle to explore the many questions I still have about the nature of prayer. But that is not what happened when I began working on this prayer. Instead, I became focused on the historical and sociological development of this prayer, as well as cataloguing the many variations that have been composed throughout the centuries. This prayer can tell us a great deal about Jewish communities and the issues that were important to them.

### **Literature review**

The misheberakh prayer has yet to be the subject of an in-depth, English language, study. This is surprising given its resurgence of popularity in Reform worship services. The most comprehensive study of the prayer is from a series of articles published in Kiryat Sefer: Bibliographical Quarterly of the Jewish National and University Library (D. Cohen; Fried; Ya'ari "Misheberakh "; Ya'ari "Supplement ") in the late 1950's and early 1960's. These articles, written in Hebrew, do not seem to be widely known as they are rarely cross-referenced in other works.

By the 12<sup>th</sup> century the format of the misheberakh prayer was established. It was widely known and published in prayerbooks throughout the diaspora. It was also mentioned in early commentaries and compilations such as the Machzor Vitry (11<sup>th</sup> century), Abudraham (14<sup>th</sup> century) and Kol Bo (15<sup>th</sup> century) (Nulman 244). The first documented occurrence of the prayer is from the 8<sup>th</sup> century work of Rav Amram; however, there is a possibility that the prayer is from a later era and was inserted, by others, into later editions of the work. None of these early works discusses the origins of the prayer or give explanations of any variations of language which occurs within them.

The most significant research on this prayer was conducted by Abraham Ya'ari in the 1950's (Ya'ari "Misheberakh "; Ya'ari "Supplement "). With access to prayerbooks from many centuries and lands, he reproduced over eighty prayers. Further research was conducted by Daniel Cohen (1964) who commented on Ya'ari's original research and also added examples of another fifty-five prayers. In large part, both Ya'ari and Cohen make inferences about the customs and uses of the prayers by examining prayerbooks and manuscripts. They then correlate the prayers with known sociological and religious practices of the time. I do not have access to the original sources of these prayers; therefore, I have greatly relied on these articles for my source materials. I have also conducted a limited review of modern prayerbooks and other source materials (e.g. internet) for more recent examples of the genre.

Most contemporary discussions of the prayer are primarily concerned with two areas: the mechanics of the placement and recitation of the prayer in the worship service (e.g., how a list of names for the healing misheberakh are compiled and read) and the

efficacy of the prayer and the individual meanings that are attributed to the prayer. In reviewing modern usages of the prayer, I will focus primarily on the latter area of concern.

Throughout the paper, there are many examples of misheberakh prayers. In translating these prayers, I have tried to maintain the original integrity of the prayer. To that end, there are many terms which I have deliberately not translated; the majority of which are expressions referring to God. For example, the term "*ribono shel olam*" may be translated as "Sovereign of the World" or "Master of the Universe" or other similar expressions. I do not feel that any of these capture the idiosyncratic cultural and emotional meaning of the original. More so, than other prayers in the liturgy the misheberakh prayers has been customized and personalized for specific situations and the language referring to God is an integral component of that<sup>1</sup>. Until recent times, men and women had different prayer experiences in the synagogue and the prevalent voice during the Torah services was that of men. My language in this paper reflects that situation. In referring to contemporary prayer I have tried to use inclusive language. My translations are *not* appropriate for a liturgical or ritual setting. For those purposes, there are at least 2 substantive changes that would need to be made: a) the language referring to God would need to be made inclusive and b) the language would need to be less literal and more appropriate to a worship service.

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<sup>1</sup> (For readers who may be unfamiliar with these phrases, I will give a 'standard' translation the first time the phrase is used.)

## **Appendices**

In this paper I will examine the origins and development of the prayer. Appendix A consists of a list of occasions for which a misheberakh prayer has been composed. It is not an exhaustive list and only contains published materials. Appendix B consists of the English text of misheberakh prayers from wide range of eras and locations. Where possible I have indicated the Hebrew source of the material.

## HISTORICAL PERIOD OF THE PRAYER'S ORIGIN

At the height of the Geonic period, nearly all Jewish communities were united under the centralized authority of the Babylonian Geonim. From the great academies of Sura and Pumbedita, direction on all matters of Jewish life was determined and all disputes adjudicated. From throughout the communities of Europe and Northern Africa local rabbis would look to Babylonia for guidance, sending their questions and receiving responsa. Along with their queries, they also sent money to maintain the great institutions of Babylonia. These institutions were grand and complex. A traveler to Baghdad in the 12<sup>th</sup> century described the great synagogue of the exilarch as having "columns of marble of various colors overlaid with silver and gold, and on these columns are sentences of the Psalms in golden letters. And in front of the ark are about ten steps of marble; on the topmost step are the seats of the exilarch and the princes of the House of David" (Marcus 187).

The academies were more than scholarly institutions; they were responsible for the daily governance of the people, resolving all judicial matters, and even collecting taxes. Jewish society, of that time, seems to have been structured in order so that the academies could flourish. The influence of the exilarch reached far beyond Babylonia. The local rabbis of communities throughout the diaspora were appointed by and given authority by the Exilarch. In return, the local rabbis would send gifts and money to the Exilarch (Marcus 187).



By the late 8<sup>th</sup> century the power of the Babylonian academies was beginning to wane and tolerance for diversity was beginning to increase. Having decisively established their preeminence over the Palestinian academies, Babylonian academies were less afraid of the competition from their rivals and thus more willing to allow Palestine's rites and customs into its midst. However, with increasing diversity, it was harder and harder for the Geonim to retain hegemony (Brody 334). The new competition was coming not merely from Palestine but from all over the Diaspora. , Rav Amram noticed that it was increasingly difficult to ensure that proper Jewish practices (especially in matters of liturgy) as established by the Babylonian authorities, were being maintained throughout the diaspora. Therefore, he compiled the first written siddur

The Babylonian leadership, acknowledging both the inevitability of change while still trying to control it, appointed an outsider, Rav Saadia to the position of Gaon in 928 (Brody 18). Saadia was an outsider both in his training and in his philosophy. Born in Egypt and having studied in Palestine, Saadia brought with him openness for the practices and customs of diaspora Jews. Ultimately, however, the leadership of Saadia weakened the system that gave him his power. The academy of Sura was forced to closed shortly after his death in 942, effectively ending the influence of the Babylonian leadership on the world Jewry.

Diaspora communities were beginning to exert more control over their local affairs and to set up local academies. As a result, less money was sent to maintain the Babylonian academies. Without centralized control from the Geonim, there was increasing diversification of the practices and leadership of the Jewish communities. The Geonim began the practice of inserting additional prayers into the service before

returning the Torah to the ark (Millgram 186) and they used this innovation to compose a prayer extolling the virtues of the Geonim, hoping that this would renew the influence of these Babylonian leaders. This prayer, written in Aramaic, is known as the *yekum purkan*.

May salvation arise from heaven. May grace kindness and mercy—long life, ample sustenance and divine aid; physical health, perfect vision, and healthy children who will never neglect the study of Torah—\*be granted to our scholars and teachers, to the holy societies that are in the land of Israel and in the land of Babylon, to the heads of the academies and the chiefs of the captivity, to the presidents of the colleges and the judges of the towns, to their disciples and the disciples of their disciples, and to all who study the Torah.\*<sup>2</sup> May the King of the universe bless them, prolong their lives, increase their days and add to their years; may they be saved and delivered from all distress and disease. May our Lord who is in heaven be their help at all times; and let us say, Amen. (Birnbaum 378)

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<sup>2</sup> In the second *yekum purkan* prayer this sentence is replaced with the following: “be granted to this entire congregation, great and small, women and children.”

The prayer proved to be very popular with communities. Within a short time a second *yekum purkan* prayer was added to the service, this one praising the community itself, not only its leaders.

A third prayer, *misheberakh*, was then added to the Torah service, this one in Hebrew, a language more familiar to most of the diaspora communities. The prayer was intended to “awaken God’s mercy” and “stir up the people’s generosity” (Millgram 187). Originally, the prayer was only part of the Monday and Thursday Torah services. Because of this limited original use of the prayer, it has been argued that the “essential reason for this prayer is nothing other than to encourage the congregation to come to the synagogue to pray and to give *tzedekah* on Mondays and Thursdays<sup>3</sup>.” (Ya’ari “Misheberakh ” 120) The *tzedekah* was collected through pledges by the congregants who would pay in order so that the prayer would be said on their behalf or on behalf of their relatives. By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the prayer the prayer was primarily recited on Shabbat, holidays and other times of celebration. In most communities it was no longer recited on Mondays and Thursdays.

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<sup>3</sup> translation my own

## THE FORMAT AND STRUCTURE

Here is the prayer as found in Rav Amram's siddur:

The One<sup>4</sup> who blessed Abraham, Isaac and Jacob our fathers<sup>(a)</sup>, may He bless all our brothers and sisters of the children of Israel that are coming to the synagogue<sup>(b)</sup> for prayer and charity<sup>(c)</sup>. May *ha-kadosh baruch hu* hear their prayers, fulfill their desires and answer their requests for the good<sup>(d)</sup>. And we say, Amen<sup>(e)</sup>.

The misheberakh prayer consists of 5 components: (a) calling upon the merit of our ancestors (b) identifying those to whom the blessing is directed; (c) blessing the action and/or situation of the recipient(s); (d) identifying the reward which will be bestowed by God; (e) a congregational response. This structure allows for adaptation for numerous situations covering all events in a person's life as well as in the life of the community.

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<sup>4</sup> I have translated the word misheberakh as "the one who blessed.... may he....". If I am using an English citation of the prayer I did not alter the wording.

The power of the misheberakh prayer is derived from the merit of our ancestors, "*zichut avot.*" We ask God to bestow goodness on us, not because of our merit, but because of our ancestors. One way of understanding the concept of *zichut* is that it reminds God that we are part of a long tradition, and even if we are not meritorious, we ask to be granted blessings for the sake of our meritorious ancestors. Other prayers, such as the Amidah, also begin by invoking *zechut avot*: "Blessed are you Adonai our God, God of our Fathers and Mothers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob. God of Sarah, God of Rebecca, God of Rachel and God of Leah." The *avot* are not the only ancestors upon whom we depend to bestow merit upon us. The concept of *zichut imahot* was established in the Rabbinic era, and though it is referred to less often than *zichut avot*, it is interpreted as being a "parallel and equivalent" (Kaunfer 96) with *zichut avot*, as illustrated in this passage from Leviticus Rabbah:

If you see that the merit of the Patriarchs is failing and the merit of the Matriarchs slipping away, go and occupy yourself with deeds of lovingkindness. (Lev. Rabbah 36, 6; translation Kaunfer).

One of the ways in which *zechut imahot* is used in midrashic literature is to save the Israelites during times of imminent danger such as the battle with Amalek and the exodus from Egypt as illustrated in this exegesis from the Mekhilta on the battle of Amalek:

Tomorrow I will stand upon the hill (Ex. 16:19). R. Eleazar of Modim says, (Moses said) Let us declare tomorrow a fast day and be ready, relying on the deeds of the ancestors. For the "top" refers to the deeds of the fathers; the "hill" refers the deeds of the mothers....This bears upon what we have already said above—to make mention of the deeds of the fathers and the deeds of the mothers (Kaunfer 96)<sup>5</sup>

This concept of protection from times of trouble adds an additional level of understanding to the *misheberakh* for childbirth (above). Not only were the biblical characters themselves saved from illness, but the *imahot* protect the woman from danger as well.

One of the most extraordinary *misheberakh* prayers, also from late 12<sup>th</sup> century Poland, is recited on behalf of a woman in the midst of a difficult childbirth. The prayer calls not only upon the merit of the *imahot*, but also on the merit of Hezekiah, Miriam, Naaman, Moses and Elisha: biblical figures who successfully recovered from physical illnesses:

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<sup>5</sup> Translation by Kaunfer

The One who blessed Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, and who healed Hezekiah, King of Judah, from his illness, and Miriam the prophetess from her *tzarah*<sup>6</sup>, and Naaman from his *tzarah*<sup>7</sup> and the One who sweetens the bitter on account of Moses, and the One who gives relief on account of Elisha, may He bless and heal *plonit bat ploni*<sup>8</sup> for the sake of her husband who pledges *tzedekah* on her account. In reward for this *HaMakom*<sup>9</sup> will guard her and save her and help her and cause her to convalesce and alert her to the pangs of childbirth, and will send her a full recovery along with all the daughters of Israel who suffer in childbirth. Amen. (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " (47))

In addition to misheberakh prayers regarding childbirth, there is another set of prayers, said only on behalf of women, which call upon *zechut imahot*. In an 1856 Italian Machzor, a misheberakh was composed to bless the women who create the ornamentation for the Sifrei Torah. In other communities, it seems as though this prayer might have been added to the weekly Shabbat service (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 132).

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<sup>6</sup> Tzarah is understood to be a scaly affliction of the skin

<sup>7</sup> 2Kings chapter 5

<sup>8</sup> "Ploni/t is an Aramaic term similar to "John Doe". It is used as a placeholder for the name (and parent's name) of the person on whose behalf the prayer is recited.

<sup>9</sup> The literal translation of this phrase is "The Place." It is a common expression used to refer to God.

The One who blessed our mothers Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, may He bless all the daughters of Israel who create a covering or mantle in honor of the Torah and the and maintains the lamp in honor of the Torah. Ha Kadosh baruch Hu will recompense her and give her good reward. Amen (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 240).

Other biblical characters are called upon depending on the situation of the person on whose behalf the prayer is recited, as in this the late 12<sup>th</sup> century prayer for captives:

The One who blessed our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, and who brought out Joseph from the prison, may He bless our captive brothers in the land of 'plonit', them and all those that are with them, for the sake of the tzedekah which was given on their behalf. And in reward for this *HaMakom* will guard them and save them immediately from the "goyim" and bring them out of the prison speedily, from the darkness to the light. And He will cause them to escape from all



trouble, oppression, evil, and bad judgments, along with all of Israel their brothers, and we will say Amen (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 245).

The reference to Joseph is from Genesis 40-41. Joseph is imprisoned in Egypt and successfully interprets the dreams of the cupbearer and the baker; however, Joseph still remains in prison another 2 years before he is freed by Pharaoh. God does not directly release Joseph from prison. Joseph credits God for the gift of interpreting dreams, but God does not overtly intervene to remove Joseph from the prison. Why then is Joseph recalled on behalf of the captives? Just as Joseph was successfully freed from his imprisonment, so should the captives on whose behalf the prayer is recited. Perhaps as well as giving hope to those left behind by the captives, the message of Joseph's imprisonment is also to remind the captives that Joseph actively worked for his own release and did not wait for a "miraculous" intervention from God. Other misheberakh prayers, especially those from Sephardic cultures call upon Moses and Aaron, as well as David and Solomon.

## CLASSIFICATIONS AND SITUATIONS

The misheberakh prayer originated as a prayer said on behalf of the entire community. It then developed into a prayer for praising good deeds, dissuading bad deeds, on behalf of those in trouble (sickness, etc) and recognizing exemplary individuals in the community (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 124).

In reviewing examples of the prayer from its origins to the present time, I have found that the prayers can be classified into 8 categories<sup>10</sup>.

- a) on behalf of the welfare of the entire community
- b) on behalf of a person with an aliyah to Torah<sup>11</sup>
- c) on behalf of a person who has benefited the community, (through acts of chesed, tzedekah and/or occupation
- d) on behalf of a person who has performed a mitzvah (e.g. donating for the poor in Israel)
- e) on behalf of a person who is undergoing a life transition (change in status) (e.g. bar mitzvah, parenthood),
- f) on the occasion of a particular holiday, season, or other time-based occurrence
- g) as a proscription against unwanted behavior
- h) on behalf of a person in need of healing

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<sup>10</sup> These categories are not exclusive and a single prayer may fill more than one purpose.

<sup>11</sup> Often a person is given an aliyah in recognition of one of the categories discussed; therefore, the misheberakh is for both the aliyah and the situation which merits the aliyah.

#### A. PRAYERS FOR THE WELFARE OF THE COMMUNITY

By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the misheberakh prayer for the welfare of the community (recited after the *yekum purkan* prayers) was fairly standardized throughout the Ashkenazi communities and is still found in modern prayerbooks:

May he who blessed our fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, bless this entire congregation and all other congregations—their wives, their sons and daughters, and all that belong to them. May he bless those who dedicate synagogues for worship and those who enter therein to pray, those who provide lamps for lighting and wine for Kiddush and Havdalah and those who give food to the transient guests and charity to the poor, as well as all those who faithfully occupy themselves with the needs of the community. May the Holy One, blessed be he, grant them their reward, remove from them all sickness, preserve them in good health, and forgive all their sins; may he bless and prosper their work and the work of all Israel their brethren; and let us say, Amen (Birbaum 380).

This prayer, in addition to blessing all the members of the congregation and their families, makes special mention of people who have contributed to the welfare of the entire community. According to Joseph Karo writing in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the fulfillment of these charitable acts was burdensome on the community; therefore, it was hoped that hearing the great reward for these actions would encourage others to share the burden. (Scherman and Zlotowitz 451). On festivals and holidays the misheberakh often includes an insert specific to the occasion. For example on the High Holy Days a phrase such as "and renew them for a new year and forgive their sins" (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 130) is added.

#### B. PRAYERS FOR ALIYAH TO TORAH

The honor of an aliyah to Torah is often highlighted with a misheberakh prayer recited by the *shaliach tzibbur* on behalf of the *oleh*:

The One who blessed Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, may He bless *ploni ben ploni* who has come to honor *HaMakom* and the Torah. In reward for this, may *hakadosh baruch hu* protect and deliver him from all trouble and distress and from all plague and illness; and may He send blessing and

success to all of his handiwork along with all Israel, his brothers. And we say, Amen<sup>12</sup>.

If the one called to Torah is also experiencing a significant life event, the misheberakh may be adapted to include the situation, or an additional misheberakh prayer may be recited.

The misheberakh prayer was used to reinforce the values of Torah.

Rav Simcha wrote in the Machzor Vitry (circa 1190): "After the maftir is finished the chazzan blesses all the businesses of the kahal and the heads of the yeshivot, so that from all of them, from every place torah and 'instructions' will go forth to the people of Israel. This was established by the Rishonim in order to strengthen and fortify the people in their awe of God. For in their view, reinforcing the good encourages them more and more." (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 120) The charitable contributions are showcased so that all the community will learn how greatly they will be rewarded by God for their good actions. (Scherman and Zlotowitz 451). Perhaps to further reinforce the behavior, the prayer itself became associated with donations. In many communities a person would pledge an amount to the synagogue for the honor of having the blessing said on his behalf. Even though money is not a subject discussed on Shabbat, by the middle ages, the misheberakh prayer served as a lucrative and steady stream of income for congregations (Elbogen 161). The Mishnah Beruriah rules that: "There are authorities who say that where it is customary to recite a "misheberakh" for the reader of Torah, who then vows to donate

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<sup>12</sup> appropriate inserts are added for Shabbat and Yom Tov

money to charity or to the chazzan, it is forbidden to specify on Shabbat the amount of the donation [instead, one should simply say, "recite a 'misheberakh' for me" without mentioning the amount of the donation].... The custom, however, is to be lenient, because it is permitted to allot charity on Shabbat (Feldman and Orenstein 349).

Throughout the ages some communities tried (unsuccessfully) to reform the recitation of the prayer. Some leaders felt that the practice of pledging money was so out of control, that the misheberakh prayer itself became more important to the community than the reading of Torah. Other leaders believed the practice had the potential to embarrass congregants without the means to make a donation. . In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Rabbi Elijah Menachem of London abolished the practice of reciting a misheberakh prayer for each *oleh* and only said one, on behalf of all, after the Torah reading concluded. (Nulman 244)

### C. PRAYERS FOR THOSE WHO PROVIDE A BENEFIT TO THE COMMUNITY

The Misheberakh prayers afford great opportunity to customize the prayer in order to reinforce community standards and teach community history. One of the greatest of the mitzvot that a person can perform is to care for the dead, and the *chevrei kadisha* always had an honored place in a community. Therefore it is not unexpected to find a misheberakh prayer to bless the *chevrei kadisha* and those who maintain the cemetery, as well as the gravediggers. Here is an 18<sup>th</sup> century example of one of these prayers which was recited at a yearly celebration held in honor of those who cared for the dead:

The One who blessed our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, David and Solomon, may he bless this holy society of gravediggers in the work that they do, attending to the needs of the dead, and reciprocate them with chesed that is true chesed. In reward for this, *Ha Kadosh Baruch Hu* will watch over them and save them all trouble and anguish, from all affliction and illness and send them blessing and good fortune in all that they undertake, along with all Israel their brothers. Let us say, Amen (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 240).

Every Kol Nidrei it was the custom of a New York Sephardic congregation to bless the benefactors who built the first synagogues in their community (Nulman 244). It was also a Sephardic custom was to bless and honor the women who beautified the Torah mantles :

The One who blessed our mothers Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, may He bless all the daughters of Israel who create a covering or mantle in honor of the Torah and maintain the lamp in honor of the Torah (Ner Tamid). *Ha*

*Kadosh Baruch Hu* will pay her reward and give her good fortune. Amen (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 240).

Another community composed a prayer on behalf of a person who donates a Torah scroll:

May He who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, bless \_\_\_\_\_, the son of \_\_\_\_\_, and his wife, and his sons and daughters, for the generosity of his heart and the willingness of this spirit to donate a gift to the synagogue for public use, in honor of God, and in honor of the Law, and in honor of this holy congregations (*name of congregation*). for this, may the Holy One, praised be He, grant him life, keep him and save him from all evil and distress, and from all disease and sickness. May He send a blessing and prosperity in all the works of his hands, with the rest of his brethren, the children of Israel. Let us say, Amen<sup>13</sup> (Goldin 79).

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<sup>13</sup> Translation by Goldin



#### D. PRAYERS FOR THOSE WHO HAVE PERFORMED A MITZVAH

Another important congregational function that was often recognized through the use of a special misheberakh was donations of tzedekah. Donations for the regular maintenance of the congregation are a standard part of the misheberakh prayer for the community (as discussed earlier). However, there are also several occasions on which additional monies are collected as donations. On three particular holidays, the last day of Passover, the second day of Shavuot and on Shemini Atzeret it was customary to give money on behalf of the community as well as the "poor in the land of Israel." These holidays came to be known as "*yom tov shel matnat yad*" (Ya'ari "Misheberakh "). Here as an example of one of these prayers from Germany (1916):

The One who blessed our fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, David and Solomon, may He bless this holy congregation along with all the holy congregations, and the dwellings and surroundings of every city; the leaders and sons and daughters of all who are within them; and all who give a gift of their heart (donation), men and women, as a protest against the miserable conditions of the souls in our holy land, for the poor of Jerusalem, the holy city, and to strengthen the gates of Torah in our adopted land. In reward for this, *ha kadosh*

*baruch hu* will merit them to see the rebuilding (of Jerusalem) and will be gladden by her restoration; and (God) will guard them from all trouble and anguish and from every illness and affliction, in with great lovingkindness will guard our troops and strengthen us for eternity, and guard our ruler, and give us peace in our land, and merit us to see the coming of our Messiah, and to bring our donations, for the (re-) building of the Bet Mikdash, speedily and soon. Send blessings and good fortune to all our handiwork, that we will merit to go up for pilgrimage with all Israel our brethren, and we will say, Amen.

(Ya'ari "Supplement " 112)

Aside from misheberakh prayers recited on behalf of an expecting or new mother, and the prayer cited above for the ornamentation of the Torah, there are few prayers in which women are singled out for their service. This German prayer from the middle 17<sup>th</sup> century is an exception:

The One who blessed our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, bless these dear women who are outside of "The

Land" (Israel), those in congregations and those in settlements, for the sake that they send donations from their monies to the poor, Ashkenazi women of Jerusalem, may it be rebuilt and repaired. In reward for this ha kadosh baruch hu will save them from all trouble and anguish, the barren among them will merit seed and will survive; and the pregnant among them will not lose the fruit of their womb; and those who are 'sitting to deliver' will go from darkness to light, and the nursing will not be without milk in their breasts, and their children will not have diphtheria, and they will be saved from the 'evil eye' (may'ayin harah) and troublesome spaces. And cause their sons to grow to be students of Torah and for their daughters to marry wise students, and that there will always be peace in their homes, and with their husbands, and they will merit the coming of the our messiah, and will bring their donations to the Bet Mikdash speedily in our days, along with all of Israel our brethren, and we say, Amen (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 247).

## E. PRAYERS FOR A LIFE TRANSITION

There is a misheberakh prayer for every (Jewish) transition in a person's life, from birth to death. As has been noted, there are special prayers for pregnant women as well as women in childbirth. A newborn infant is welcomed into the community with a misheberakh at either the *brit milah* or the naming ceremony. As the ceremony of a "*brit bat*"<sup>14</sup> has become more prevalent, many misheberakh prayers have been written for this occasion:

May the God who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, bless \_\_\_\_\_ daughter of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. As this little child has touched the Torah, so the Torah touch her life, filling her mind with wisdom and her heart with understanding. May \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, who have brought her here today, always strive to bring her close to the ways of God and our people, May they teach her Torah every day through their words, and their deeds. May the parents be privileged to raise their child to womanhood and may \_\_\_\_\_ enjoy the blessing of Torah, *chuppah*, and a life of *ma'asim tovim* (good deeds) (D. N. Cohen 159).

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<sup>14</sup> celebration to welcome a daughter into the covenant

Several additional prayers for a *brit bat* are cited in Appendix B.

The youth is blessed again after becoming bat/bar mitzvah and several years later upon engagement to be married. At the wedding ceremony a misheberakh prayer may be recited before the birkat ha'mazon (Goldin 21). A misheberakh prayer is even part of a yizkor service, blessing the relatives who have given tzedekah in the name of the deceased:

May He, who blessed our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, David and Solomon, bless \_\_\_\_\_ son of \_\_\_\_\_ because he offered to contribute to charity in memory of the soul he memorialized this day, in honor of God, of the Torah, and of the Festival (*on the Day of Judgment, add: and on this Day of Judgment.*) As a reward for this deed, may the Holy One, praised be He, keep him and deliver him from all evil and distress, and from all disease and sickness. May He send a blessing and prosperity in all the works of his hands; (*On the Day of Atonement, add: And may He grant him a happy life on this Day of Judgment*) with all his brethren, the children of Israel; and let us say, Amen (Goldin 181).

Not all life transitions are for the good; there misheberakh prayer can also mark times of distress for both an individual or a community. . Throughout history the centuries other, extraordinary, life situations have also been marked by a misheberakh prayer. We have already examined the prayer on behalf of captives. In modern times it this has been adapted for those taken into forced labor during the second World War:

The One who blessed our fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, may He bless all of our brothers, the children of Israel, who have been sent from their houses to forced labor. (Bless them) on account of the tzedekah donated by ploni ben ploni on their behalf. In reward for this God will assist them so that there should not be any obstacle or hindrance, and will save them from every evil and fear, affliction and illness, and from all damage. And return all of them and bring peace to their homes and their families, speedily, without misfortune or damage, to life and blessing. May the merit of Torah strengthen us and our descendants. Amen. May this be God's will (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 249).

The mitzvah of freeing the captives has also been applied to the imprisonment of Jonathan Pollard, an American sentenced to life in prison for spying on behalf of Israel. Prayer cards with the misheberakh and other prayers are available to download from the internet. "...by reprinting and distributing the free Pollard prayer cards, Manhigut Yehudit not only has an enormous share in the mitzvah of Pidyan Shvuyim but also in the mitzvah of Zikui haRabbim. Zikui haRabbim means enabling the public at large to do a mitzvah. The merit of Zikui haRabbim is immeasurable. Our sages teach that the merit of this mitzvah extends throughout the generations, benefiting the doer and his/her descendants to eternity<sup>15</sup>..... Whenever these prayers are said for Jonathan, they abundantly bless anyone who says them. As well, all of Israel is blessed<sup>16</sup>."

May He who blessed our forefathers Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaacov, Moshe and Aharon, David and Solomon, Bless YEHONATAN BEN MALKA POLLARD who did so much on behalf of the Nation which dwells in Zion. May the Holy One Blessed-Be-He protect him and save him from all anguish and distress and from all affliction and illness. And speedily release him in complete freedom and grant him the merit to go up to Zion joyfully, And bestow blessing and success upon all the work of his hands. May he merit long life and may his years be blessed with

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.jonathanpollard.org/2004/081204.htm#order>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.jonathanpollard.org/prayers.htm>

abundant strength and peace. For the sake of all of the congregation praying for him and in this merit may the Holy One Blessed-Be-He bestow mercy upon him, strengthen him, and end his distress. Our Father in Heaven may it be Your will that our prayers and requests come before Your merciful throne And in the merit of the forefathers redeem the sons, and realize for him the verse "Take my soul out of confinement to praise Your name" Speedily in our day, amain (Metzger).

#### F. PRAYERS FOR A SPECIFIC TIMES AND HOLIDAYS

The misheberakh prayer said on behalf of the entire community is often customized for a particular holiday or festival. Simchat Torah, the holiday celebrating Torah, is a time well suited for special blessings on behalf of those who are called for an aliyah to Torah, although the custom varied from community to community. In some Italian communities a blessing was said for the person whose aliyah completed the cycle of Torah reading and for the one who began the next cycle (Ya'ari "Supplement " 110). This blessing was recited after the regular misheberakh blessing for the congregation, and before returning the Torah to the ark:



May the one who blessed our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, David and Solomon, bless this good, beloved, honorable, exalted, Rabbi *ploni* that completed (or began) the Torah of our God. He donated money, according to his heart, to Jerusalem. *Malkah d'alma* will bless him and exonerate him, and hear his prayer, and will seal him in the book of Good Life. May this be God's will. Amen. (Ya'ari "Supplement " 110)

In Italian communities that followed the Rome custom, they did not read *parshat bereshit* (Genesis) on Simchat Torah, but did choose the person who would be called for the first aliyah to Torah on Shabbat Bereshit. Therefore they adapted the wording of the blessing to read "who will go up, in his good fortune to begin (Torah) (Ya'ari "Supplement " 110).

Because of the flexibility and adaptability of the misheberakh prayer it is suitable for times of distress as well as celebration. One of these communal times of distress is occurs when the *tochechot* (Leviticus 14-45; a long passage listing numerous retributions) are read from Torah. Unusual in this misheberakh prayer is the self-reference of the shaliach tzibbur: 'The One who blessed our fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, may He bless this Holy and congregation and **also me and my household**'(Ya'ari "Supplement "). The reading of the *tochechot* is traumatic and distressing therefore it is understandable that the shaliach tzibbur would want to benefit from the comfort the

community received from God's blessing. Seventeenth century Italian, Sephardic communities also recited an unusual, elaborate and lengthy misheberakh the following week on the occasion of *Shabbat Nachamu*<sup>17</sup> (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 237). Concentrating on the theme of consolation, this prayer repeatedly reminds the congregation of God's mercies and kindnesses to Israel.

#### G. AS A PROSCRIPTION AGAINST UNWANTED BEHAVIOR

During the years 1648-49, in the Ukraine, there was an exceedingly brutal and violently devastating massacre of Jews. Instigated by Bohdan Chmielnicki, the Cossacks attacked the Jews in an attempt to gain political independence. Over 100,000 Jewish men, women and children were tortured and murdered. Entire communities were killed.

In response to the Chmielnicki massacres, Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Heller composed a misheberakh for his community. But this prayer was not about giving comfort to those who had survived the ordeal; rather it was a proscription for proper behavior. Heller believed that the massacres were punishment for the people's lack of appropriate behavior during the worship services (Bulua). He used the prayer to impress upon the congregation the proper behavior and the reward they can expect for that behavior.

Although some scholars claim that he composed this prayer (Nulman 245), it actually

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<sup>17</sup> This Shabbat occurs during the 'weeks of consolation' that follow the holiday of Tisha B'Av and lead up to the High Holydays.

pre-dates him by nearly 400 years. It is possible that he was unaware of the older tradition, or more likely, he re-instituted the prayer in response to the tragedy of the massacres. Here is an example of the prayer from a late 12<sup>th</sup> or early 13<sup>th</sup> century (Worms) manuscript (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 122).

The One who blessed our fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, David and Solomon, may he bless this holy congregations and *those who are meticulous in their speech, and do not engage in everyday talk once the shaliach tzibbur has begun, until the conclusion of the prayers, and they stand on their feet and do not leave the congregation until after all the prayers are finished and the Kadish Yatom is said.* In reward for this *HaMakom* will watch over and save them all trouble and anguish, and send them blessing and good fortune in all that they undertake all with all of Israel their brothers. And let us say amen (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 244).

As a general rule the genre of misheberakh prayers praise desired behaviors rather than punish unsocial behavior. The only exception to this (that I have found) is a 1679 misheberakh prayer that blesses everyone *except* those who gossip and slander:

The One who blessed Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, David and Solomon, may He bless everyone in this holy congregation except for the slanderers, informers,

those who give false testimony, those who are destructive... or who give advice which strengthens an argument....(Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 243)

#### H. PRAYERS FOR HEALTH/WELFARE

In contemporary Reform prayer services, the pre-eminent misheberakh is the one said for the health and welfare of members of the community. This may be derived from the custom of saying a misheberakh prayer for the health and welfare of the family of the oleh. Sephardic custom included the souls of dead relatives as well. (Elbogen 161). Elbogen, who informs us that this recitation of private prayers became so lengthy and such a significant part of the service that eventually most communities eliminated the practice, would be astonished at its current revitalization. (Elbogen 161).

If you question the average synagogue attendee about the meaning of the misheberakh prayer, they would tell you that it is a "prayer for healing" and most likely, they would think of the popular rendition of the prayer by the songwriter Debbie Freidman. The use of the misheberakh prayer on account of one that is ill has eclipsed any other modern use of the prayer, especially in Reform congregations. But praying for healing has a far older history. Our first recorded prayers for healing are notated in the Bible, but praying for the welfare of another is, most probably, an instinct that is as old as civilization. The Torah gives us the brief, eloquent, heartfelt prayer of Moses on behalf

of his sister Miriam, "El nah, refah nah la" (Numbers 12:13) "Please God, heal her please". And from there the liturgy of praying for healing has flourished. Healing liturgies are the subject of much current research, however this paper will only be concerned with the sub-genre of misheberakh prayers for healing.

Along with the oldest recorded misheberakh prayers is one for the health and welfare of a person who makes a donation to the synagogue. It was also the custom that people would make a donation expressly for a misheberakh to be recited on behalf of a sick loved one. It was hoped that the monetary donation would increase the likelihood of God's favor upon them. There was a belief that both illness and health had divine sources and thus health is a becomes the result of a divine intervention. Therefore, people do what they can to increase God's favor upon their loved one.

This misheberakh prayer from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century illustrates nearly every instance of healing in the Bible. It also presents for us numerous models of how healing can be enacted:

The One who blessed our ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, David and Solomon, the early pious ones, and the One that sweetened the waters of Marah through the hands of Moses Rabbenu, and the One who healed Miriam the prophetess from her *tzarah* and the One who healed the waters of Jericho through

the hands of Elisha, and who healed Hezekiah, the King of Judah, from his illness and Benjamin the Tzadik from his illness, may He bless *ploni* son of *ploni/plonit* who is ill on whose account *ploni ben ploni* has donated tzedekah. In reward for this, may *HaMakom* heal him and strengthen him and give him life and health and strength and cause him to stand firmly and send him full healing of his body and all of his flesh and all of his limbs amidst all the ill of Israel; now, speedily and soon and we will say Amen. (D. Cohen 550)

The waters of Marah refers to the first place to which the Israelites traveled after being redeemed from Egypt and at this time a link is made between good health and faithfulness to God:

They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; that is why it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" So he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There He made for

them a fixed rule, and there He put them to the test. He said, "If you will heed the LORD your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments and keeping all His laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I the LORD am your healer"<sup>18</sup> (Exodus 15:23-26)..

The example of Miriam illustrates that God has both the power to strike a person with illness, as well as heal. Healing, in this situation, is in response to a relative's prayer. Miriam is struck down with the illness of *tsara'at* and exiled from the camp. Moses beseeches God for her health, and after seven days, she is re-admitted to the camp. The text does not explicitly say that she was healed, but it is clear that her renewed health is a direct result of God's interventions.

Elisha's healing of the waters of Jericho is not generated in response to prayer, nonetheless, it is a powerful example of God's power over the natural world. In the name of God, Elisha heals the water: "Thus said Adonai: I heal this water; no longer shall death and bereavement come from it!" The water has remained wholesome to this day, in accordance with the word spoken by Elisha. turns bad water to good water." (2Kings 2:21-22)

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<sup>18</sup> All biblical translations refer to the 1985 JPS translation (unless otherwise noted) however, I have inclusive language for referring to God whenever possible.

Hezekiah was also healed by an agent of God. Hezekiah's earnest and heartfelt prayers reminded God of Hezekiah's faithful service.

“.....Hezekiah fell dangerously ill. The prophet Isaiah... said to him, "Thus said Adonai: Set your affairs in order, for you are going to die; you will not get well." Thereupon Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to Adonai. He said, "Please, Adonai, remember how I have walked before You sincerely and wholeheartedly, and have done what is pleasing to You." And Hezekiah wept profusely. Before Isaiah had gone out of the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him: "Go back and say to Hezekiah, the ruler of My people: Thus said Adonai, the God of your father David: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears. I am going to heal you. (2Kings 20:1-5)."

The story of Benjamin the Tzadik can be found in the Talmud rather than the Bible. It provides an important link between charity and health. A woman approached Benjamin and asked for alms for herself and her 7 children. Because there was no money in the community charity box, Benjamin paid her out of his own pocket, thus saving the



lives of the woman and her children. Later when Benjamin, himself, was at the brink of death, the angels interceded with God on his behalf and reminded God that Benjamin saved lives through the giving of tzedekah. Benjamin returned to health and lived another twenty-two years (Baba Batra 11a).

In a misheberakh prayer from the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 245), the biblical character of Naaman is added to the list of those who have been healed adding an even more complex relationship between healing and prayer. Naaman was a warrior who had *tsara'at*. His wife was told by a young servant girl that there was a prophet in Samaria who could cure him of his ailment. Bearing gifts, Naaman approaches the King of Samaria and asks to be healed. The King was alarmed by this request. He knew that he did not have such powers and did not want to provoke a battle. Elisha then heard about the situation and offered to cure Naaman. Naaman was told to bath in the river Jordan, but he did not believe that this would lead to healing and had to be convinced of its efficacy by one of his servants. After bathing in the river Jordan, Naaman was indeed cured of his leprosy and transformed into a man of faith and generosity (2Kings Chapter 5). Naaman's relationship with healing is the most complex of all the examples. He is given a remedy, but does not trust that it will work. His healing is not a result of his prayer but intercessory prayer by the King. In fact, it is not even clear that Naaman would have sought out healing if not for the urging of his wife. He seemed to be able to function quite successfully even though he had *tzarah*.

These six examples of healing demonstrate a range of relationships that are possible between God and an ill person. Miriam and Benjamin are mute with regard to their illness, depending on the prayers of another to intercede for the sake of their health. The Israelites at the well of Marah do not even seem to know how to speak on their own behalf. They know that there is a problem, but unlike the people in Jericho, they are unable to articulate a solution. Hezekiah is the only one who prays on his own behalf.

## THE PRAYER IN THE COMMUNITY

Throughout the history of the misheberakh prayer there seems to be tension between the meaning the prayer has for the community and its significance to the prayer leaders. Even though the prayer was created in order to stir the hearts and pocketbooks of the people, its popularity seems to have outpaced the intention of its creators. The prayer flourished and became an integral part of the prayer service, not because of its important liturgical meaning, but because it was popular with the congregants. It is because of this popularity, that the prayer continued to be an effective generator of revenue in the congregations, and thus became indispensable. Even today, some congregants complain louder for leaving out the misheberakh than leaving out the *Aleinu* prayer!

By convention, the misheberakh prayer is recited during the Torah service, however, there have been other traditions. According to a reference in an early 17<sup>th</sup> century Jerusalem prayer book, the misheberakh was recited after the *Aleinu* prayer during weekday services in order to bless the diaspora communities. (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 127)

Periodically leaders have attempted to eliminate or at least curtail its disruption to the service. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi Elijah Menachem of London objected to the prayer being said after each aliyah and said it only after the Torah reading was completed (Nulman 244). This did not become the tradition; the prayer continues to be recited after each aliyah. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Rabbi Jacob Molin, known as the Maharil, would walk

through the congregation, Chumash in hand, collecting pledges and reciting the misheberakh for each member of the congregation. After he blessed everyone individually, he would then bless the entire congregation and all their families (Ya'ari "Misheberakh ").

## CONCLUSION

All of the diversity, challenge, richness and complexity of the Jewish religion is manifest in the misheberakh prayer. As the prayer has developed during the past 1100 years it has reflected the hopes, prayers and values of the people. Like the prayerbook itself, the misheberakh prayer changes in response to the needs of the time, while at the same time remaining stable and recognizable. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century when many young children died of disease, the misheberakh reflected that reality. In the modern era, the prayer is recited for those who have HIV/AIDS and those caring for people with the illness. In each situation, we ask God to bestow blessings upon us for the sake of the good deeds which have been done. Even those who may not believe in the active force of God directly altering our reality, take comfort in the prayer. Despite rational and logical understanding of the mechanisms of prayer, many people find the misheberakh prayer mysterious and almost "magical."

## **Appendix A: Occasions For Reciting a Misheberakh Prayer**

1. aliyah to torah, Monday, Thursday, Shabbat, holidays
2. betrothal/marriage/newlyweds
3. Silver and Gold wedding anniversary
4. birth of child
5. bat/bar mitzvah
6. Pregnancy, birth and motherhood
7. for the health of relatives
8. for the health of members of the community
9. the fast of *tananit BaHab* (a community 3-day fast (Monday, Thursday, Monday) which was enacted to end a drought
10. the 10 days of repentance
11. for those who demonstrate decorous behavior in synagogue (refraining from talking, arriving on time and remaining throughout the service)
12. for those who don't drink wine forbidden by sages (only kosher wine)
13. for a conversion to Judaism
14. for a repentant apostate
15. 70<sup>th</sup> birthday
16. Simchat Torah: chatan torah, chatan bereshit
17. those who helped build first synagogues
18. for those in distress (forced labor, imprisonment, illness, travel)
19. for the women who decorated the torah scrolls
20. for IDF soldiers
21. for giving charity
22. for the maintenance of the synagogue
23. for the chevrei kadisha and those who tend the cemetery
24. against those who gossip
25. for those who contribute to the "poor" in Israel
26. for a child or youth

27. for relatives who live in the diaspora
28. for those in forced labor
29. captives (modern example: Jonathan Pollard)
30. for a benevolent ruler
31. new residents (see egabbai list)
32. for one who donates a Torah scroll to synagogue
33. for a person reciting gomel
34. during memorial service for one who contributes to charity
35. prayers for the family of the oleh (see artscroll machzor)

## Appendix B: Representative Examples of Misheberakh Prayers<sup>19</sup>

### PRAYERS FOR THE WELFARE OF THE COMMUNITY

Geonic period, Babylonia: Monday and Thursdays

The One who Blessed Abraham, Isaac and Jacob our fathers, may he bless all our brothers and sisters of the children of Israel that are coming to the synagogue for prayer and charity. May *ha-Kadosh baruch Hu* hear their prayers, fulfill their desires and answer their requests for the good. And we say, Amen. (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 128)

14<sup>th</sup> century France: Shabbat and Holidays

The One who Blessed Abraham, Isaac and Israel our fathers, and the first pious ones, may He bless this holy community along with all the holy communities, their leaders, sons and daughters, and all of them, and all who establish synagogues for worship, and who enters them for prayer, and those who give candles for light and wine for Kiddush and Havdalah and bread for the visitors and tzedekah for the poor, and all those who strive to meet the needs of the community, *ha-Kadosh baruch Hu* pay them their reward and will patrol their battles, and will cancel out any negative decrees and will heal their bodies and forgive their sins and bless all their deeds and all of the congregation of Israel. And we say, Amen.

1886, Spain and Northern Africa: Shabbat and Holidays

The One who Blessed our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses, and Aaron, David and Solomon, and all the holy and pure congregations, may he bless this holy congregation—the great and the small, they and their leaders and sons and daughters. King of the Universe, (*malka d'alma*) will bless their intentions and exonerate their intentions and hear their prayers, redeem them from all trouble and distress.....and spread a 'sukkat' of peace among them, and plant in their sons love and brotherhood and peace and neighborliness; remove wanton hate (*sinat chinam*) from them; and break the yoke of the "goyim" from around their necks; and in them fulfill the scripture that God, the God of their ancestors wrote, increase them a thousand-fold and bless them as you told them (in Torah). May this be God's will, Amen (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 129).

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<sup>19</sup> Translations are by author unless otherwise noted



12<sup>th</sup> century, Worms: Sabbath and Holidays

The One who Blessed Abraham, Isaac and Jacob our fathers, may He bless this holy congregation and their sons and daughters, and all of them, on account of coming to the synagogue in the morning and evening; and in complete faith are striving to meet the needs of the community, In reward for this *ha makom* will hear their prayers, watch over them, and save them from every trouble and anguish, and will send to them blessing and good fortune in all of their deeds, and will bless them along with all their fellow Israelites. And we say, Amen. (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 128)

### PRAYERS ON BEHALF OF AN INDIVIDUAL IN AN EXTRAORDINARY SITUATION

12<sup>th</sup> Century, Worms: Prayer for Captives

The One who blessed our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, and who brought out Joseph from the prison, may He bless our captive brothers in the land of 'plonit', them and all those that are with them, for the sake of the tzedekah which was given on their behalf. And in reward for this HaMakom will guard them and save them immediately from the "goyim" and bring them out of the prison speedily, from the darkness to the light. And He will cause them to escape from all trouble, oppression, evil, and bad judgments, along with all of Israel their brothers, and we will say Amen. (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 245)

2004, Israel: Prayer for Jonathan Pollard<sup>20</sup>

May He who blessed our forefathers Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaacov, Moshe and Aharon, David and Solomon, Bless YEHONATAN BEN MALKA POLLARD who did so much on behalf of the Nation which dwells in Zion. May the Holy One Blessed-Be-He protect him and save him from all anguish and distress and from all affliction and illness. And speedily release him in complete freedom and grant him the merit to go up to Zion joyfully, And bestow blessing and success upon all the work of his hands. May he merit long life and may his years be blessed with abundant

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<sup>20</sup> The Hebrew of this prayer can be found at <http://www.jonathanpollard.org/2004/092704.pdf>

strength and peace. For the sake of all of the congregation praying for him and in this merit may the Holy One Blessed-Be-He bestow mercy upon him, strengthen him, and end his distress. Our Father in Heaven may it be Your will that our prayers and requests come before Your merciful throne And in the merit of the forefathers redeem the sons, and realize for him the verse "Take my soul out of confinement to praise Your name" Speedily in our day, amain. (Metzger)

1939, United States: Prayer for One who offers thanksgiving ("bench golem")

May he who blessed our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, bless \_\_\_\_\_ son of \_\_\_\_\_ who was called today in honor of God and in honor of the Torah, and to give thanks for all the good that God has done for him. As a reward for this deed, may the Holy One, praised be He, grant him life and keep him from all evil and distress, from all disease and sickness. May He grant him life and mercy, blessing and peace in all the works of his hands, with the rest of his brethren, the children of Israel. Let us say, Amen. (Goldin 85)

#### **PRAYERS ON BEHALF OF THOSE WHO OBSERVE MITZVOT**

Krakow: Prayer for the Philanthropic Society

The One who blessed our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, David and Solomon, may he bless all the members of this philanthropic society along with humanity. In reward for this ha kadosh baruch hu will watch over them, and save them from all trouble and anguish and from all affliction and illness, and send them blessing and good fortune in all that they undertake all with all of Israel their brothers. And we will say amen. (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 240)

1845, Koningsburg (Ashkenaz): Prayer for those who fast the 'Monday, Thursday, Monday' fast

The One who blessed our fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, David and Solomon, may he bless all who take upon themselves the Monday, Thursday, Monday fast. In reward for ha kadosh baruch hu will watch over them , and save them from all trouble and anguish and from all affliction and illness and send them blessing and good fortune for

all that they undertake, and receive their prayer and hear their cries, along with all of Israel, their brothers, Amen. (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 241)

1729, Konitz: Prayer for those who fast the 'Monday, Thursday, Monday' fast

The One who blessed our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, may he bless everyone in this holy congregation, all who take upon themselves the fast of Monday, Thursday, Monday. In reward for this ha kadosh baruch hu will receive their fast and hear their cries and anguish and ??? their prayers, forgive their iniquities, and bless them and their households, and guard them from all trouble and pain and from all pain and illness, and send them blessings and good fortune in all that they undertake and ?????? along with all Israel, their brethren, and we say, Amen. (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 241)

#### PRAYERS FOR NEWBORN INFANTS, NEW PARENTS, AND PREGNANT MOTHERS

2001, United States, Prayer for Naming a Baby Girl<sup>21</sup>

May God who blessed our mothers, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, Miriam the prophet, Abigail and Queen Esther, bless this lovely girl \_\_\_\_\_, daughter of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ at this favorable and blessed hour. May she grow in health, peace, and tranquility and be raised to a life of Torah, the wedding canopy, and good deeds. May her parents merit to see her joyful, blessed with children, prosperity, and honor, brining fulfillment and refreshment to their old age. May this be God's will. Amen (D. N. Cohen 158)

2001, United States, Prayer for Naming a Baby Girl

May the God who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, bless \_\_\_\_\_ daughter of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ . As this little child has touched the Torah, so the Torah touch her \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>21</sup> This prayer and the following two are direct citations from the Cohen book.

life, filling her mind with wisdom and her heart with understanding. May \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, who have brought her here today, always strive to bring her close to the ways of God and our people, May they teach her Torah every day through their words, and their deeds. May the parents be privileged to raise their child to womanhood and may \_\_\_\_\_ enjoy the blessing of Torah, *chuppah*, and a life of *ma'asim tovim*. (D. N. Cohen 159)

2001, United States, Prayer for Naming a Baby Girl

May He who blessed our mothers Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, Miriam the prophetess, Avigail, and Esther the queen, bless also this darling babe. In happy augury may her name be called \_\_\_\_\_, daughter of \_\_\_\_\_ (father's name). May He bless her to grow up in weal, health, and happiness. May He give to her parents the joy of seeing her happily married, a radiant mother of children, rich in honor and joy to a ripe old age. May this be the will of God and let us say: Amen. (D. N. Cohen 203)

1939, United States: Prayer for a circumcised infant<sup>22</sup>

May He who blessed our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, bless this tender infant who was circumcised, and may He grant him a perfect cure. May his parents (or: relatives) deserve to raise him up to the study of the Law, to the nuptial canopy and good deeds. Let us say, Amen. (Goldin 36)

1998, United States: Prayer upon the birth of twin girls

He who blessed our forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—may He bless the woman who has given birth (new mother's Hebrew name) daughter of (her father's Hebrew name) with her daughters who have been born at an auspicious time, [and may their names be called in Israel—the older daughter, (baby's Hebrew name) daughter of (babies' father's Hebrew name), and the younger daughter, (baby's Hebrew name) daughter of (babies' father's Hebrew name)] for her husband, the infant's father, will contribute to charity on their behalf. In reward for this, may they raise them to (Torah,) marriage and good deeds. Now let us respond: Amen (Scherman 443b)

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<sup>22</sup> Citations from Goldin are direct from the text

**Contemporary: Simchat Bat**

May the One who blessed Miriam, Moses' sister, with the joy of life, a passion for dance and made her an inspiration to other women to pray and celebrate together, bless [name of girl] with the love of her sisters, daughters of Israel and the comradeship of women.

May the One who blessed Ruth with a heart of gold and devoted loyalty, who gave her strength to face yearnings for her country, her homeland and her sisters, bless [name of child] with the joy of giving, the skill of listening and the strength to endure longings.

May the One who blessed Deborah the Prophetess with leadership, bless [name of child] with inspiration and authority.

May the One who blessed the daughters of Zelophchad and justified their claim, bless [name of child] with complete equality.

May the One who blessed Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, and Miriam the Prophetess and Avigail, and Queen Esther, daughter of Avichail, bless [name of child] with good fortune and a blessed future. May she grow up in good health, peace, and tranquility. May her parents be privileged to witness her joy and nuptials, sons and daughters, happiness and honor. They shall be fruitful in their old age and humorous and fresh. So be it! And we shall say Amen. ([www.ritualwell.org](http://www.ritualwell.org))<sup>23</sup>

**PRAYERS FOR LIFE TRANSITIONS**

**1939, United States: Prayer for a Bar Mitzvah**

May He who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, bless this youth who was called up today in honor of God and in honor of the Torah, and to give thanks for all the good that God has done for him. As a reward for this, may the Holy One, praised be H, keep him and grant him life. May He incline his heart to be perfect with Him, to study His Law, to walk in His ways, to observe His commandments, statutes and judgments. May he be successful and prosperous in all his ways, and may he find grace and mercy in the eyes of God and man. May his parents deserve to raise him up to the study of Law, to the nuptial canopy and to good deeds. Let us say, Amen (Goldin 54)

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<sup>23</sup> Rabbi Naamah Kelman in Neshama Hadasha published by Kehillat Kol Haneshama in Jerusalem.

**PRAYERS FOR THOSE WHO SERVE THE COMMUNITY**

1939, United States: Prayer for the Donator of the New (Torah) Scroll

May He who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, bless \_\_\_\_\_, the son of \_\_\_\_\_, and his wife, and his sons and daughters, for the generosity of his heart and the willingness of this spirit to donate a gift to the synagogue for public use, in honor of God, and in honor of the Law, and in honor of this holy congregations (*name of congregation*). for this, may the Holy One, praised be He, grant him life, keep him and save him from all evil and distress, and from all disease and sickness. May He send a blessing and prosperity in all the works of his hands, with the rest of his brethren, the children of Israel. Let us say, Amen. (Goldin 79)

Frankfort, 1650 Prayer for women who donate to the poor of Israel

The One who blessed our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, bless these dear women who are outside of "The Land" (Israel), those in congregations and those in settlements, for the sake that they sent donations from their monies to the poor, Ashkenazi women of Jerusalem, may it be rebuilt and ??????. In reward for this ha kadosh baruch hu will save them from all trouble and anguish, the barren among them will merit seed and will survive; and the pregnant among them will not lose the fruit of their womb; and those who are 'sitting to deliver' will go from darkness to light, and the nursing will not have be without milk in their breasts, and their children will not have diphtheria, and they will be saved from the 'evil eye' (may'ayin harah) (Ya'ari "Misheberakh " 247)

## PRAYERS FOR COUNTRY AND LEADERS

### Prayer for the Welfare of the State of Israel

May he who blessed our fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, bless the State of Israel, and manifest the glory of his reign upon the land which he has solemnly promised our fathers to give to us.

Please, O Lord, be kindly disposed to its leaders and counselors, to help them to establish it firmly, and to sustain it in justice and righteousness from now and evermore.

Inspire them with the love and fear of thee to serve thee loyally and faultlessly, and may the message of thy servants the Prophets be fulfilled in our days, for out of Zion shall go forth the Torah and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

Heavenly Father, grant peace in thy Holy Land, and everlasting happiness to all its inhabitants, so that Jacob shall again be in quietude and at ease, and none shall make him afraid. Spread the tabernacle of thy peace over all the dwellers on earth. May this be thy will, and let us say, Amen. (Friedlander 78)

## PRAYERS FOR HEALTH AND HEALING

### Contemporary: Communal Misheberakh for Healing

May the One who blessed our ancestors Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah bless and heal all those who are ill. As those who came before us were blessed in the presence of communities that sustained them, so we too pray for those among us that are in need of healing and those around the world who have no one to pray on their behalf for healing. Send them comfort and relief speedily in our days and grant them a complete healing of body, mind, and spirit. Guard them beneath the wings of your *Shechinah*. Blessed are you, Source of Life, who helps us to bring light where there is darkness, healing where there is brokenness, and peace to all of the earth's inhabitants. (Greene)

## Contemporary: A Misheberakh for those dealing with HIV/AIDS

God who blessed our ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel, be with all of those who struggle with AIDS, whose health has been impaired by this illness and whose lives have been placed in jeopardy. Give them courage and strength to face their illness and hope for a cure that will embrace them in life.

May your healing presence remain with those who have contracted HIV. Through your caring and the wisdom You have imparted to human healers they have been enabled to succeed in their struggle with their disease. Keep them on the path of Health and life.

Be with those who care for people with AIDS and attend to their needs. Bless them with strength and compassion as they labor to ease the lives of those who look to them for comfort and well-being. Let them know the value of their labors, and assist them in their noble work.

Share your wisdom with those searching for an ultimate cure for this disease. Bestow your healing knowledge upon them and reward their efforts with fulfillment.

Bless all of us with compassion and understanding that we may see all those afflicted as You see them: not as recipients of some sort of retribution, but as worthy objects of our concern and love.

May the day come speedily when this scourge too, like so many before it will not afflict Your children and all of us are liberated from the shadow of its terror. Amen. (Polish)

## A Misheberach for the Dying of Mind or Body<sup>24</sup>

May the One who blessed our ancestors,

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah

bless those who are fading from life, \_\_\_\_\_.

Compassionate One, be filled with compassion for them.

Let them be granted peace.

Compassionate One, let your Presence rest upon all who watch over them.

Bless them with courage and strengthen their hands.

And let us say, Amen.

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<sup>24</sup> Composed by Terry Treseder, 2006 (unpublished thesis)



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