

MAGDIL AND MIGDOL – LITURGICAL RESPONSES TO TEXTUAL VARIANTS

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Towards the end of Grace after Meals (*Birkat ha-Mazon*), we find the verse, *Magdil* [or *migdol*] *yeshu'ot malko ve-oseh hesed li-meshiho le-David u-le-zar'o ad olam*: *He magnifies* [or *is a tower of*] *victory for His king and deals kindly with His anointed, with David and his descendants for ever*. The source text has two forms, one found in II Samuel 22 (the *haftarah* for the seventh day of Passover), and the other in Psalm 18, the one prescribed for that day according to the custom of the Vilna Gaon (Ha-Gra). There are several differences between the two versions, especially in verse 51, where Psalm 18 has the *hif'il* participle *magdil* [magnifies] and II Samuel 22 the noun *migdol* [is a tower].

The Psalms version seems better linguistically, since *magdil* as a verb is paralleled by the verb *oseh* in the second half of the verse. Still, it is not unknown for God to be described as a tower, e.g., in Ps. 61:4, where He is called *a tower of strength*. The Masoretes note in II Samuel that although the *keri* ("read" version) of verse 51 has *migdol*, a noun, the *ketiv* (written version) has a verb, *magdil*. Both sets of consonants are the same, *mem-gimel-dalet-lamed*; but should the *dalet* and *lamed* be separated by a *yod* or by a *vav*? Note that by pronouncing the word as *migdol* the Masoretes treated the *yod* as a shortened *vav*.

It is almost impossible to account for all the differences between these versions. One cannot rightly blame the variants on scribal carelessness, since there seems to be a degree of consistency between them, in that many verbs in the Samuel version are in the past tense, whereas the future is more common in Psalms. If Samuel is the original text, it could have been a historical record that was later altered when the text was turned into a prayer. Samson Raphael Hirsch reflects the common Jewish position when he says: "This psalm was set down in II Samuel, chapter 22, as a part of the story of David. David himself made some changes in it when it was finally turned over to the people as a kind of national hymn."¹

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In this way David turned II Samuel 22:51 from a historical report, *God is [or was] my tower of support*, to a prayer of hope that God may in future support the Davidic dynasty. In the *Da'at Mikra* edition of Psalms, Amos Hakham notes other evidence of material that was reworked to become a prayer for the future. For example, Ps. 18:2 introduces a statement about the future not found in Samuel, saying *erhamekha* (using an Aramaism for "love"): *I will love You, O Lord, my support*.

Moshe Zvi Segal, in his commentary to the *Kiryat Sefer* edition of the Books of Samuel, makes a similar point: "David, who calls himself the Lord's king or anointed one, hopes or prays that the loving kindness of the Lord will never turn away from his house." This reflects the natural ambition of a ruler to see his dynasty endure. It must be pointed out, however, that biblical Hebrew does not always have a clear distinction between tenses.²

The liturgical practice is to assign *magdil* to the Grace after Meals on weekdays and *migdol* to Sabbaths and festivals. *Barukh she-Amar* by Barukh Halevi Epstein, maintains that although people tended to use *magdil* (the Psalms version), prayer books had a marginal note, "*bet-shin-bet: migdol*," i.e., "in II Samuel" (*bi-Shemuel Bet – migdol*), which, he claims, was misread owing to the use of the abbreviations as "*be-Shabbat: migdol*," meaning "on Sabbath (and festivals): *migdol*."³ Epstein argues that either version is acceptable and that there is no need to assign the alternatives to different occasions. He assumes that the custom he criticizes may have emerged with the invention of printing (Hebrew printing began in the second half of the fifteenth century), when a printer misinterpreted the marginal reference to II Samuel (*bi-Shemuel Bet*) and turned it into a rubric: "on Sabbath (and festivals): *migdol*." This appears to find support in the fact that the terms I and II Samuel were first used in the Bomberg Bible of 1516/17. In the Septuagint, these two works were called I and II Kingdoms, those we know as I and II Kings being called III and IV Kingdoms.

However attractive the Epstein theory may be, the *magdil/migdol* dichotomy antedated printing, and the printers cannot be blamed (or praised) for it. R. David Abudarham, who lived in the fourteenth century, well before the age of printing, states in his work on the liturgy that the two versions of Grace after Meals were already known to his teachers ("*kibbalti me-*

rabbotai") and his (pre-letterpress) generation knew they should say *migdol* on Shabbat and *magdil* on weekdays.⁴ In light of this historical evidence, we can hardly ascribe the two versions to a printer's carelessness.

Abudarham provides a rather far-fetched explanation, that Shabbat is *mel-ekh gadol* ("the great king") of the week (as against the weekdays, which are only *melekh katan*, a small or lesser king), indicated by the stronger vowels of *migdol*. It is possible that Abudarham read *migdol* as a contraction of the words *melekh gadol*. He also suggests that the Psalms verse was written first, before David became king, and the II Samuel verse written later, when he was at the peak of his majestic grandeur; hence, the latter possesses a greater status and is reserved for sacred days.

A different homiletical approach is ascribed to Elijah Gaon of Vilna, who is thought to have seen in the Talmudic debate (TB *Shabbat* 115a-b) about rescuing books from a fire on the Sabbath a halakhic dictum banning the study of *Ketuvim* (the Hagiographa or "Writings") on Shabbat. This is quoted in *Siddur Tzelota de-Avraham* as a justification for replacing the verse from Psalm 18 on Shabbat by the version from II Samuel.⁵ But the *Shirata di-Tzelota* of Ya'akov Werdiger comments that if there were a real objection to *Ketuvim* on Shabbat, it is difficult to explain how so much material from the Book of Psalms entered the Sabbath liturgy, e.g., in the early morning *Pesukei de-Zimra*. This objection is dealt with by Solomon of Chelm in his volume of responsa, *Lev Shlomo*, where he distinguishes between *Pesukei de-Zimra*, a set part of the prayer service which cannot be changed, and Grace After Meals which can draw on one of two sources for the same verse.⁶ One might also ask how the employment of a verse from Psalms can be regarded as a study exercise. Perhaps the disapproval of *Ketuvim* was really aimed at works like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and possibly Job, which were considered theologically debatable, but not against Psalms.

Whatever the original reason for the practice, it may be an example of a tendency to allot two versions of a text to different occasions.⁷ It would therefore be logical for one version to be kept for weekdays and the other allocated to the Sabbath.

It is possible that the Psalms version was retained for more frequent use, namely weekdays, because of a theory that the *Ketuvim* (at least the Psalms) predated the *Nevi'im*. The earlier version thus takes precedence over the later

one. Another example of this practice is the Additional (*Musaf*) Service for Rosh Ha-Shanah, where the sequence of proof texts in each of its three sections – *Malkhuyyot*, *Zikhronot* and *Shofarot* – is *Torah-Ketuvim-Nevi'im-Torah* as against the customary placing of *Ketuvim* after *Nevi'im*.

Whatever the relative merits of the two texts, a wider question remains. Why do we need to conclude *Birkat ha-Mazon* with the *magdil/migdol* verse at all? This is based on the practice of ending major liturgical units (*Amidah*, *Kaddish*, *Alenu*, the Passover *Haggadah*, etc.) with a reference to messianic redemption. As *Grace (Birkat ha-Mazon)* draws to a close, a messianic theme⁸ is inserted in the prayer: "May the Merciful One make us worthy of the days of the Messiah and the life of the World to Come." This is followed by *magdil/migdol* and the universalistic *Oseh shalom*: "He who makes peace in His high places, may He make peace for us and for all Israel" (based on Job 25:2). Shabbat, according to the Grace itself, is a foretaste of eternity, and the Tower of David (Song of Songs 4:4) represents the pride, power and dignity of messianic redemption. *Midrash Tehillim* (on Ps. 18:51) makes this point explicitly. "Can *mighty tower* be understood in any other way other than that the lord Messiah will become like a tower for them? Thus Scripture states, *The Name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous hastens to it and is set on high* (Prov. 18:10)."

NOTES

1. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Psalms*, trans. Gertrude Hirschler (New York: Feldheim, 1978) p. 116.
2. An early analysis of the "elasticity" – S. R. Driver's word – of the verb structure is Driver's famous 1881 work, *Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew*; King David's *erhamekha* may therefore be no more than "I love You."
3. Barukh Halevi Epstein, *Barukh she-Amar* (1970) pp. 214-215.
4. David Abudarham, *Sefer Abudarham* (Jerusalem: Even Yisrael Publishing, 1994), vol. 2, p. 368.
5. Abraham Landa, *Tzelota de-Avraham*, vol. 2, p. 555. See also Ya'akov Shemuel Spiegel, "Kunteres Amar Eliyyahu," *Yeshurun*, vol. 6 (1999) pp. 759-762.
6. Shlomo of Chelm, *Lev Shlomo* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1972), *siman* 23, p. 134.
7. Seligmann Baer, *Siddur Avodat Yisrael* (Schocken edition, 5697) pp. 561-2.
8. The tower (*migdal*) in particular is often used as a messianic symbol; see Shubert Spero, "Towers of Spice, Towers of Salvations: An Inquiry into the Logic of Explanation," *Jewish Art*, vol. 15 (1989).