**Chanukah – *Kehunah* and *Malchus*:**

**Exploring the timeless message of the 1000-year old *piyut* of זֵיתִים שְׁנֵי**

-Rabbi Yitzchak Szyf

At the conclusion of the famous events that we celebrate on Chanukah, the *Chashmonaim* – a noted family of *Kohanim* – take control of the political leadership of Jerusalem. Political leadership in Israel has traditionally been a task reserved solely for descendants of *David Hamelech* and the Tribe of Yehudah*,* to the exclusion of everyone else including *Kohanim*. The extraordinary circumstances of the situation may have justified the *Chashmonaim*’s usurping of a role that was not designated to them. Nevertheless, once they were safely in power, it was expected that the political leadership would have been immediately transferred back to the descendants of *David Hamelech*. This did not occur.

The Chasam Sofer explains that this is in fact the reason that R’ Yehudah Hanasi did not include a tractateon Chanukah as part of the *Mishnah*. R’ Yehudah Hanasi himself was a descendant of *Malchus Beis Dovid* and was not in favor of the actions of the *Chashmonaim*. As *Kohanim* – and clearly not descendants of *David Hamelech* – they had no right to create a royal dynasty. They should have focused on their own unique roles without overstepping their boundaries.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Ramban, when discussing the *pasuk* לא יסור שבט מיהודה (בראשית מט' י') explains that the usurping of the role of political leadership is what led to the downfall of the *Chashmonaim*. Despite the fact that they were righteous, and it is only thanks to them that Torah was not forgotten from the Jewish people, they were punished severely. All four Hasmonean sons who ruled one after the other died by the sword of the enemies, and their descendants were basically lost as well (or became slaves). This happened only because they did not heed to the warning that a King cannot come from any tribe but *Yehudah* and from descendants of *David Hamelech*. Further, the Ramban adds that the fact that they were *Kohanim* makes their sin even greater since they should have focused on their particular *Avodas Hashem*, rather than on ruling over the nation.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the last section of the *Haftorah* of Shabbos Chanukah, and the verses in Zechariah that follow, hint to the unique roles of the two great leaders of Israel.

Zechariah witnesses the following scene in his prophesy:

“There is a menorah [made entirely] of gold with its bowl on its top; its seven lamps are upon it, and there are seven ducts for [each of] the lamps on its top. There are two olive trees over it, one on the right of the bowl and one on its left.” (Zechariah 4:2-3)[[2]](#footnote-2)

Zechariah first inquires regarding the symbolism of the Menorah, to which the angel responds:

“This is the word of Hashem to Zerubbavel, saying, ‘Not through army and not through strength, but through My spirit’ said Hashem.” (Zechariah 4:6)

With one additional verse, this is basically where the *Haftorah* for Shabbos Chanukah ends, definitely an appropriate finale for a holiday that celebrates the Jewish spirit and the triumph of righteousness over evil.

But the story isn’t complete and, in the verses that follow, Zechariah then goes on to ask the obvious next question (in Zechariah 4:11-14), regarding the meaning of the “two olives”:

“What are these two olives, on the right of the menorah and on its left?” “What are the two clusters of olives that are next to the two golden presses, which are pouring golden [oil] from themselves?”

The angel explains:

"אלה שני *בני* היצהר" (זכריה ד' יד') - “These are the two anointed men who are standing by the Lord of all the land.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

As many of the commentators point out, the two “anointed men” in the time of Zechariah are Zerubbabel himself (scion of King David) and Joshua the *Kohen Gadol* (from the family of Aharon). Both the King and the High Priest were anointed and both are critical pillars in Zechariah’s prophesy of the future redemption. Just like the olives light the menorah, the King and the High Priest “light” the nation. The message of this prophesy is that both the High Priest and the King of Israel will rule again, each with their unique roles, with the building of the second temple, just as the Menorah’s light will be rekindled. Zechariah’s prophesy not only instills hope about redemption, but subtly points to the reality that, unlike in the days of the *Chashmonaim*, true redemption involves a separation of powers – the religious leadership as symbolized the Priests, and the political leadership as symbolized by the King.

The prophesy was indeed fulfilled.

But what does this all mean to the Jew sitting in exile following the destruction of the second temple, again void of any proper כהונה and מלכות? Particularly, what does this mean to the congregant on Shabbos Chanukah who is going to hear this *Haftorah* about a redemption that has already occurred, while yearning for a new redemption that is yet to occur? Is it enough to read the *Haftorah* or do we need something more to address our current situation in exile?

*The piyut fills a void, while continuing to highlight our central message*

As the congregation is about the recite the blessing over the lights, **יוצר המאורות**, but feels so devoid of the true “lights” of Chanukah while in exile, the famous *paytan* R’ Shlomo Ib Gevirol felt that the “darkness” of exile must be addressed. The olives are severed and the lights of Chanukah are not shining at their fullest. It is the *paytan*’s goal to give the congregation a new sense of optimism and hope. R’ Shlomo Ibn Gevirol, in his beautiful poetry, rises up to this task.

The *piyut* of **זֵיתִים שְׁנֵי** was traditionally inserted just prior to the *bracha* of **יוצר המאורות** throughout the Ashkenazi communities of both Western and Eastern Europe (see Box 1 for background). The *piyut*, which begins by describing the two olives or **זֵיתִים שְׁנֵי**, as “נִכְרָתִים”, severed, offers a message of hope and optimism to the congregation at the point where they need it most. It realistically portrays the situation of the Jews in exile, while offering a description of a brighter future, and a sincere prayer for redemption (see Annex).

The *piyut* also continues the theme of “separation of powers” and notes the critical importance of the two unique leadership roles as part of the future redemption. It builds on the imagery of the “two olives” described in Zechariah, which portray the King and Priest on the two separate sides of the Menorah. It describes the fallen state of these two leaders today, and then presents the vision of the future with a clear description of the unique place of these two key holders of power.

For example, the first paragraphs reads as follows:

שְׁנֵי זֵיתִים / נִכְרָתִים / בְּגַן נָעוּל יַצְהִירוּ

לְרֹאשׁ קְהָתִי / וְאֶפְרָתִי / שְׁתֵּי עֲטָרוֹת יַכְתִּירו

מוּל מְנוֹרָה / הַטְּהוֹרָה / כְּמוֹ נֵרוֹת יַזְהִירו

**הֵן בְּמַחֲנֶה אֶל מוּל פְּנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה יָאִירוּ[[4]](#footnote-4)**

* שְׁנֵי זֵיתִים– The “two olives” – King and High Priest – are now severed, but will once again be a source of light for the Jewish people
* לְרֹאשׁ קְהָתִי– At this time, the King and High Priest will both wear their respective crowns/headplates (these are the two עֲטָרוֹת)[[5]](#footnote-5)
* מוּל מְנוֹרָה– And they will face the Menorah and shine upon the Jewish nation (likened to the Menorah) like candles.

The *piyut* of שְׁנֵי זֵיתִים subtly acknowledges the failure of the *Chashmonaim* to adhere to the separation of powers, with its extensive focus on both the Priesthood and the Kingship, as both being necessary and separate components in the leadership of the Jewish nation. And it brings out the optimism that is most appropriate for Shabbos Chanukah. Although the two “olives” signifying the Priesthood and Kingship are severed, they will once again shine in their unique ways. The message of this *piyut* is that you need both “olives” for a true redemption.

Background to the *piyut* and the *yotzros* of Chanukah

Just as on many special shabasos, for more than 1000 years, the *tefillos* of Shabbos Chanukah have been beautified by special *yotzros piyutim* to be recited specifically in the *brachos* of *Shema.* While some of these differed by communities, the most famous *piyut*, **זֵיתִים שְׁנֵי**, is part of the liturgy of both *Minhag Ashkenaz* (Germany and Western Europe) and *Minhag Polin* (Poland and Eastern Europe)*.* It was composed in the 11th Century by R’ Shlomo Ibn Gevirol, and was originally recited in Spanish communities as well. Despite its Spanish origins, it was widely accepted in Ashkenaz and was recited long after the Sephardim ceased to recite *piyutim* in the blessings of *Shema*.

The *piyut* is printed in *Siddur Otzar Hatefila* and other siddurim that include all of the *piyutim* such as *Siddur Hashlah*, which follow *Minhag Polin.* Unfortunately, despite the fact that *Minhag Polin* forms the basis of the liturgy of most Ashkenazi synagogues, the *yotzros* of Shabbos Chanukah (as well as those of other special weeks such as Shabbos Bereishis) have disappeared from the vast majority of synagogues today.2 **זֵיתִים שְׁנֵי** and the other *yotzros* are still commonly recited today by synagogues that follow the Western European traditions or *Minhag Ashkenaz*, including *Khal Adath Yeshurun* (Breuer’s) in Washington Heights, NY*, K’hal Adas Yeshurun* in Jerusalem, [*Beis haKnesses k'Minhag Ashkenaz* inBnei Brak](http://www.moreshesashkenaz.org/en/communities/26-bnei-brak-ben-yaakov),and *Kehillas Ashkenaz* in Baltimore.

Interestingly, it is believed that the tune currently used for *Maoz Tzur* was originally used on Shabbos Chanukah for זֵיתִים שְׁנֵי3 (although today זֵיתִים שְׁנֵי is sung to at least three different beautiful melodies, whether in the Frankfurt, Dutch, or Strasbourg traditions).4

The *piyut* of **זֵיתִים שְׁנֵי** is in the form of a ,מאורהwhich is to be said right before אור חדש and the blessing of יוצר המאורות. Ashkenazi communities have found it appropriate to interrupt their blessing of *yotzer hameoros* with a *piyut* that has provided optimism and hope.

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Siddur Otzar Hatefilah, pages 296-297

2 There are very few places that this author is aware of where the authentic *Minhag Polin*, including the recitation of *yotzros* throughout the year, is practiced. One such place is the Kazinsky Shul in Budapest.

3 See Jewish Encyclopedia entry on MA'OZ ẒUR, found at: [www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10384-ma-oz-zur](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10384-ma-oz-zur)

4 For the Strasbourg tune, see the website of the Alsace Lorraine Jewish community. The link to the *piyut* with the text translated into French (the *piyut* is known in French as “Les deux oliviers”) and a recording of the entire *piyut* can be found at: http://judaisme.sdv.fr/traditio/hanouka/zeitim/zeitim.htm

Each stanza of the *piyut* concludes with a particularly powerful refrain: **הֵן בְּמַחֲנֶה אֶל מוּל פְּנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה יָאִירוּ** , stating that the two olives will spread their light toward the front of the Menorah. This line, of course, alludes to the first *pasuk* in בהעלותך, which states:

שִבְעַת הַנֵרוֹת" הַמְּנוֹרָה יָאִירוּ "אֶל מוּל פְּנֵי. Rather than the candles facing the rest of the Menorah as in the *pasuk*, the *piyut* speak of the “olives” (King and High Priest) facing the “Menorah” (the Jewish nation). The imagery of the Menorah is fitting for the Jewish people since, like the Menorah, we are a מקשה אחת, a single unit, but with many branches. Despite the many branches, however, the *paytan* points out that these two “olives”, the King and the High Priest, will “light” the entire nation and will serve as a unifying force.

The Mishnah in פרקי אבות further sheds light on the unique roles of *Kehunah* and *Malchus*. It states:

רבי שמעון אומר: שלשה כתרים הן, כתר תורה וכתר כהונה וכתר מלכות (פרקי אבות ד:יז)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his commentary on this Mishnah (as found in the Koren Sacks Siddur) writes that the three crowns represent “the Judaic principle of the separation of powers.” כתר מלכות (crown of kingship) is the crown of government, כתר כהונה (crown of priesthood) is the crown of religious worship, and כתר תורה (crown of Torah) is the crown of Jewish study and education. He adds that “the Sages were critical of the Hasmonean kings, some of whom appointed themselves as High Priests, thus breaching the separation of the crowns of kingship and priesthood.” Rabbi Sacks focuses not on the fact that they ruled even though they were not descendants of *David Hamelech* (perhaps accepting that this was an unusual situation) but on the fact that as Kings, they also appointed themselves High Priests. No one can play both roles.

The *piyut* builds on the theme of the Mishnah in *Avos*, and perhaps most importantly, points out that the two leaders, Kings and Priests, will serve unique roles but will not shine in a vacuum. The refrain: **אֶל מוּל פְּנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה יָאִירוּ** can be understood as proclaiming that both “olives”, the olive signifying the כתר כהונה and the olive signifying the כתר מלכות, will shine - **אֶל מוּל פְּנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה יָאִירוּ** - toward the center of the Menorah, which, in addition to the Jewish people itself, represents the light of Torah. In other words, the כתר כהונהand כתר מלכות will face, and will get direction from the third crown portrayed in the Mishnah in *Avos*, the כתר תורה.

While we value the separation of powers and the uniqueness of the contribution of every individual, ultimately we are unified and are directed toward a single front, which is represented by the Menorah and the כתר תורה.

The timeless message of the *piyut* –particularly relevant in the context of Chanukah and the controversial political leadership of the *Chashmonaim* – reminds us that the best way to achieve a united view toward the כתר תורה is by appreciating the unique roles and contributions of the different members of the Jewish community, each serving their purpose while facing **אֶל** מוּל פְּנֵי הַמ**ְּנוֹרָה**. זֵיתִים שְׁנֵי achieves all of this while giving new hope to the congregant on Shabbos Chanukah about another *Chanukas Habayis* that is yet to come.

**Annex – A detailed analysis of the role of the *piyut* of זֵיתִים שְׁנֵי**

As we are about the recite the blessing over the lights, **יוצר המאורות**, the *paytan* felt that the “darkness” of exile must be addressed. The olives are severed and the lights of Chanukah are not shining at their fullest. It is the *paytan*’s goal to give the congregation a new sense of optimism and hope. Through the five methods described below, R’ Shlomo Ibn Gevirol, in his beautiful poetry, rises up to this task.

First, he keeps using the image of the olive despite the fact that neither the King nor the High Priest are leading the nation today. While the olive is severed or dry, a dry olive remains a symbol of something that may now be dry but once exemplified glory. The *paytan* wants us to remember who we were. He looks at the situation of the Jews and he sees in those broken slaves, the glory of the past, the son of the king is still the son of the king!

Second, the *paytan* promises from the outset, in the first stanza, that these “olives” the Priesthood and Kingship, will shine once again, **בְּגַן נָעוּל יַצְהִירו**. As discussed above, they will light up the nation as they face the Menorah, which symbolizes the Jewish people. The Menorah that the two leaders face also alludes to the light of the Torah, which will be their guiding force.

Third, the *paytan* offers a sad but honest description of the present situation, contrasting the past with the present. Through an impressive play on words that portray the negative situation today as so close in sound to the ideal, he tries to show that things may look bad now but they are so close to looking better. The following expressions are examples, which appear at the beginning of the second stanza:

לְבֵן אֶפְרָת / צִיץ נִכְרַת / אֲשֶׁר הָיָה / כְּצִיץ נוֹבֵל

לְבֶן הָמְשַח / אֲשֶׁר הוּשַׁח / כְּמוֹ אֳנִיָּה / בְּלִי חוֹבֵל

* לְבֵן אֶפְרָת / צִיץ נִכְרַת - the description is of *David Hamelech*, called בן איש אפרתי in שמואל א יז' יב' whose צִיץ, crown, is נִכְרַת , severed and, in contrast, is now like a צִיץ נוֹבֵל a dried up flower.
* לְבֶן הָמְשַח / אֲשֶׁר הוּשַׁח - the contrast is between the people which were once anointed (הָמְשַח), now being blackened (הוּשַׁח), playing with the similar root in both words, similar yet so different.
* The Jewish nation is described as an "אֳנִיָּה / בְּלִי חוֹבֵל", a ship without a captain. In other words, a nation which is in need of its leaders. The *paytan*, again, is alluding to the lack of a King and High Priest.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, this *piyut* is a prayer, and the *paytan* directly asks Hashem to remember Zechariah’s prophesy and, just like the people were saved then and the prophesy came to fruition, so too should they be redeemed again.

The second stanza thus continues as follows:

זְכֹר מַרְאָה / אֲשֶׁר רָאָה/ זְכַרְיָהו / בְּעִיר בָּבֶלּ

כְּמוֹ זְכַרְתָּם / וְהוֹשַׁעֲתָּם / אֲזַי עַל יַד/ זְרֻבָּבֶל

זְכֹר זַרְעָם / לְהוֹשִׁיעָםּ / בְּעֵת תִּקְרָא / שְׁנַת יוֹבֵל

וְשִׂים אוֹתָם / מְקוֹם אֲבוֹתָם / הֱיוֹת מוֹשְׁלִים / בְּכָל תֵּבֵל

וּמֵעַל יַד / אִישׁ צַיָּד / טַבַּעְתָּם יָסִירוּ

**הֵן בְּמַחֲנֶה אֶל מוּל פְּנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה יָאִירוּ**

* זְכֹר מַרְאָה - The *paytan* asks Hashem to remember Zechariah’s prophesy in Babel
* כְּמוֹ זְכַרְתָּם - He pleads that as the Jewish nation was remembered and rescued during the rule of Zerubabel, זְכֹר זַרְעָם - so too Hashem should remember their offspring and announce the jubilee year – a year of redemption.
* וְשִׂים אוֹתָם - He asks that they should be returned to the place of their forefathers and to be world leaders.
* וּמֵעַל יַד – Here, the *paytan* describes the removal of the ring from צַיָּד , the hunter, which alludes to Esav and the Roman Empire. There is a deeper meaning here as well. By calling Esav and the Romans, צַיָּד, he alludes to the idea that Esav is full of trickery[[6]](#footnote-6), and that he didn’t get his position honestly. Therefore, that position will not last, and the Jewish nation’s honor will once again be restored.

Finally, following a more detailed description of the return to Zion and to the temple service in the 3rd and 4th stanzas, the *paytan*, using beautiful contrasts, again reiterates his optimism for the future, and shows that that it may be closer than we think. He concludes as follows:

וְאֹם פְּרוּכִים / יְהוּ בְרוּכִים / כָּל רֹאֵיהֶם / יַכִּירוּ

**הֵן בְּמַחֲנֶה אֶל מוּל פְּנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה יָאִירוּ**

* With a simple switch from a “ב” to a “ּּפ”, letters that sound all so similar, the *paytan* is using the imagery of something that may look broken but really, is so close to being just the opposite.
* He is alluding that the Jewish nation who is now פְּרוּכִים ,in a state of suffering and subjugated by the nations (פְּרוּכִים being similar to פרך עבודת), but will soon be seen by the world as בְרוּכִים, blessed, and כָּל רֹאֵיהֶם יַכִּירו, everyone will recognize and appreciate the Jewish people for who we are, and the blessings that we represent. The idea, perhaps, is to show that, if deserving, redemption may be close at hand, like a simple change from a “ּּפ” to a “ב”.

At this point, the congregant is truly inspired and ready to recite יוצר המאורות on Shabbos Chanukah, while he gets ready to soon listen to Zechariah’s prophesy in the *Haftorah*.

1. See Ta'amei HaMinhagim U'Mekorei HaDinim 847  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. English translation taken from the Artscroll Tanach. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Moshe Rosewassr’s *perush* on the *piyut* of שְׁנֵי זֵיתִים (which is described below) in his book ומלכות כתר כהונה (which provides an excellent line-by-line explanation of the *piyutim* of Chanukah and Purim). In his introduction to שְׁנֵי זֵיתִים, he explains, based on the *Midrash* that since oil does not have children, אלה שני *בני* היצהר, must be referring to those who were anointed by oil, and are thus like its children. The *pasuk* is thus referring to Aharon (and the family of *Kohanim*) and to Dovid (and the family of the Kings), each one waiting to regain their respected roles. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a line-by-line English translation of the *piyut*, see Feldheim’s *Piyutim* *le-shabatot ha-shana le-fi minhag Ashkenaz* (the blue book commonly used in Minhag Ashkenaz shuls). For a more conceptual explanation in Hebrew, with a *perush* on the wording as well as background *midrashim*, see Moshe Rosewassr’s book ומלכות כתר כהונה. The explanations in this article borrow from both, as well as from other sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The term קְהָתִי relates to Aharon who is a descendant of קְהָת and the family of Kohanim. אֶפְרָתִי relates to *David Hamelech* as seen in שמואל א יז' יב'. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rashi on ‘זכ ‘הכבראשית explains that “דיצ עדוי” refers to Esav’s tendency to “ויבא תא תומרלו דוצל”, to ensnare and to deceive his father with his mouth. For example, he would ask his father “how do we tithe salt and straw?” leading his father to believe that he was very careful in his observance of *mitzvos*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)