

Is It Heretical to Ask God for Protection?

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Jacob's words of blessing to Joseph in chapter 48 surprise me every time that I read them. Though putatively an attempt to bless his son, they are primarily directed at his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh, and gain authority from Jacob's fathers and from the shepherding and redeeming God he has known so intimately throughout his life:

And he blessed Joseph, saying, / May the God in
whose ways walked / My fathers Abraham and
Isaac / God who has been my shepherd / Of old to
this day / The Angel redeeming me / From all
evil—

Bless the lads

And call my name upon them /and the names of
/My fathers Abraham and Isaac,/And may they
grow as /Fishlike multitudes/ In the land. (Gen.
48:16)

Just as God protected Jacob from physical harm and granted him many children, Jacob asks that “the lads” (not Joseph directly) be blessed and wax in number like fish. Verbs from the Hebrew root “נ.ג.ד” usually mean “to fish”, i.e., to take fish from the water. But here, with poetic license, this verb illustrates the idea of being *like fish*, swift and numerous in reproduction. Structurally, the poem places Jacob's fathers both before and after the moment when the blessing is transferred, but also places God in the first paragraph as the active subject. Appositionally, Jacob's descendants become like fish in the final concluding lines, the passive recipients of the requested Divine blessing.

Most interestingly, God is described as “The Angel redeeming me from all evil.” To me, this seems like demotion of the Divine role bordering on heresy, with its focus on the instrumental power of God to ward and protect rather than

God as the object of our devotion and service. Jacob seems audacious and bold, calling on God—as an angelic protector—to prevent harm from coming to his children so that they may produce countless schools of Israelite offspring.

Yet Jacob's invocation of heaven's protection, while spiritually daring, is not as heretical as it may at first seem. My argument derives from an ancient Rabbinic ritual that remains in Jewish religious practice, *birkat hagomel*, a blessing recited publicly in synagogue by those who have recently survived danger: “Blessed are you, ADONAI, Ruler of the universe who grants good things to those deserving punishment.” In a bold-faced admission, we Jews regularly assert our unworthiness as candidates for Divine protection. In truth, we say, we *deserve* to have perished in whatever recent crises we faced. Yet, somehow, perhaps because of the merit earned by our ancestors, God has instead chosen to ward off the jeopardy we face and prevent harm from coming to the children of Israel. This idea—that those who have faced danger should publicly say a blessing of thanksgiving for undeserved Divine protection—has its origin in another poetic text, a psalm from which we have been quoting of late to appeal for the swift release of hostages taken by Hamas on October 7th: Let them praise ADONAI for this lovingkindness, / For granting these wonders to human beings. (Psalm 107, refrain at v. 8, 15, 21, and 31).

The liturgical resonance with *birkat hagomel* (and its attendant demand for Divine prophylaxis) is unmistakable to the initiated ear. The Talmud expresses the requirement for *birkat hagomel* this way:

Rav Judah said in the name of Rav: Four classes of people must offer thanksgiving: Those who go down to the sea, those who journey in the wilderness, the invalid who recovers, and the prisoner who has been set free. (B. Berakhot 54b)

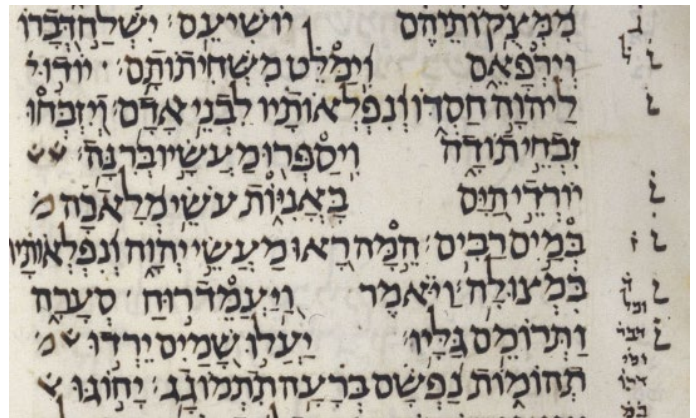
The four categories are directly taken from four narratives presented in Psalm 107. In each of these four cases the undeserving subject—whether lost in the wild, held captive, deathly ill, or in crisis at sea—calls out to God in their distress and lovingkindness and wonders follow on from heaven saving them. Between each of these narratives we hear the refrain at v. 8, 15, 21, and 31 exhorting these survivors to praise the God of Israel “. . . for this lovingkindness, / For granting these wonders to human beings.”

Calling out to God for protection is far from heretical in either the eyes of the Psalmist or the Sages of the Talmud. They seem unconcerned that we may change the Divine plan when we entreat the Divine will. However, the idea of an angelic God who grants good things and lovingkindness to some individuals while denying others does trouble my modern sense of what constitutes Divine justice. When I hear *birkat hagomel* my mind recalls a passage in Primo Levi’s 1959 book *If This Is a Man* (also published in English as *Survival in Auschwitz*) describing the aftermath of a *selektion*, the survivors now back in their bunkroom:

“Silence slowly prevails and then, from my bunk on the top row, I see and hear old Kuhn praying aloud, with his beret on his head, swaying backwards and forwards violently. Kuhn is thanking God because he has not been chosen. Kuhn is out of his senses. Does he not see Beppo the Greek in the bunk next to him, Beppo who is twenty years old and is going to the gas-chamber the day after tomorrow and knows it and lies there looking fixedly at the light without saying anything and without even thinking anymore? Can Kuhn fail to realize that next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what has happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again? If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn’s prayer.”

Do such abominations in modernity wipe out the legitimacy of propitiatory prayer? Does God now spit with disgust on our small prayers of thanksgiving when we (intuitively, I think) reach out with praise for our perception of lovingkindness and wonders?

Amazingly, the Talmud already seems to consider a similar question e. In Tractate Rosh Hashanah (17b) the Talmud asks what value crying out to God can have if all judgment is determined at the High Holidays. If the Divine mind is made up at Yom Kippur, how can our prayers for protection have any effect at other times of the year? Isn’t such a prayer illegitimate, a waste of breath when our fates are already set? The Talmud turns to a set of odd graphical signs commonly written in Bible manuscripts of the day next to the portion of Psalm 107 that deals with those lost at sea (and still written in printed Hebrew bibles and [even some of those online](#)). A series of backwards Hebrew letters *Nun* appear at the start of each of these verses, as illustrated in the following image of a tenth-century Bible manuscript.



These signs may have had their origins in marking a piece of a text that was moved from its original location. But the Talmud uses these signs to solve another problem of dislocation: When we are alone, as individuals, we cannot change our set fates. But when we come together in community, we are no longer alone and powerless before the great sea of our troubles. When we come together, as the Talmud claims these backwards letters indicate, we have a greater voice. We become numerous and powerful (like fish, can we say?) and the great sea is not the realm of our troubles, but the living waters of our lives, our home and even the light and length of our days. So we ask for Divine protection while pursuing our safety as a community and a nation in as many ways as we are able. *Am yisrael hai*.