**זֵיתִים נִכְרָתִים שְׁנֵי – Optimism and hope in poetry as we celebrate light in the midst of darkness**

-Rabbi Yitzhak Aharon L. Szyf

**Introduction**

It is Shabbos Chanukah. We are looking forward to reading the prophesy of Zechariah about a future redemption that by now is history. The prophesy has in in fact occurred (with the building of the second *Beis Hamikdash*) but it has not lasted for forever. Exile is again a reality. We are celebrating Chanukah and our prayers signal the joy, but they are not fully in tune with reality. We are about to recite the blessing of *yotzer ha’meoros* over the lights, very fitting for this time of year. But is the light truly shining?

Sitting in the darkness of the middle ages, the Jew could not simply say *yotzer ha’meoros* on Shabbos Chanukah without interruption. A *piyut* was needed to address the grim current reality, while promising a brighter future ahead. Its beauty has provided hope and optimism for 1000 years, and its message is equally relevant today. This piyut is זֵיתִים שְׁנֵי.

**Background**

*Maoz Tzur*, composed in the 13th Century, may be the most well-known *piyut* of Chanukah, but it is not the only one to have been commonly included in our liturgy. In fact, it is predated by a number of *piyutim* that have adorned our *tefillos* on Chanukah, the most noteworthy of which is זֵיתִים שְׁנֵי, written in the 11th Century by R’ Shlomo Ibn Gevirol.

Throughout the Jewish communities of Europe, in both *Minhag Ashkenaz* and *Minhag Polin*, it was customary to include, amongst the special *yotzros* of Shabbos Chanukah, this *piyut* of זֵיתִים שְׁנֵי. While the *piyut* is in fact of Sephardiorigin, composed by the famed Sephardi *paytan* Ibn Gevirol, it was widely accepted in Ashkenaz and was recited long after the Sephardim ceased to recite *piyutim* in the blessings of *Shema*.

Although it is printed in *Siddur Otzar Hatefila*[[1]](#footnote-1), which follows *Minhag Polin*, it has unfortunately disappeared from most synagogues that follow the Eastern European traditions.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is 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, 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 שְׁנֵי[[3]](#footnote-3) (although today זֵיתִים שְׁנֵי is sung to at least three different beautiful melodies, whether in the Frankfurt, Dutch, or Strasbourg traditions).[[4]](#footnote-4)

The *piyut* is in the form of a ,מאורהwhich is to be said right before אור חדש and the blessing of יוצר המאורות. Literally,זֵיתִים נִכְרָתִים שְׁנֵי can be translated as “two severed olives”.

This begs for a number of questions.

* Why did Ashkenazi communities opt to interrupt the blessing of יוצר המאורות on Shabbos Chanukah with this *piyut*?
* What is the message of the *piyut*?
* More specifically, what/who are the “two olives” and why are they “severed”?

Hopefully, in addressing these questions, we will be able to shed new light on the place of this *piyut* on Shabbos Chanukah and on the historical and philosophical dimensions of the Chanukah story.

***Haftorah* of Shabbos Chanukah – the basis of the *piyut***

In the *Haftorah* that is read on Chanukah, there is a beautiful description of the prophesy of Zechariah:

“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)[[5]](#footnote-5)

The *Navi* poetically describes this somewhat modern-sounding “system” by which the oil would flow from the olive trees through the seven ducts to the Menorah.[[6]](#footnote-6)

After Zechariah inquires regarding its symbolism, the angel responds by asking “Do you not know what these are?” When Zechariah answers that he does not, the angel explains: “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): “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 responds in his usual way by asking “Do you not know what these are?” When Zechariah answers that he does not, 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.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

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 with the building of the second temple, just as the Menorah’s light will be rekindled.

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?

**R’ Shlomo Ibn Gevirol’s *piyut* rises to the task**

Our piyut begins by describing the two olives or **זֵיתִים שְׁנֵי**, like in the *Haftorah,* but now they are “נִכְרָתִים”, they are severed.

As we are about the recite the blessing over the lights, **יוצר המאורות**, the *paytan* felt that this issue 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.

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 once again shine, **בְּגַן נָעוּל יַצְהִירו**. They will light up the nation as they face the menorah, which symbolizes the Jewish people but perhaps also alludes to the light of the torah that will be their guiding force. The first stanza thus 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[[8]](#footnote-8)**

* שְׁנֵי זֵיתִים– The “two olives” – King and High Priest - 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/garbs (these are the two עֲטָרוֹת)
* מוּל מְנוֹרָה– And they will face the Menorah and shine upon the Jewish nation (likened to the Menorah) like candles
* **הֵן בְּמַחֲנֶה אֶל מוּל פְּנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה יָאִירוּ**  - Each stanza concludes with this particularly powerful refrain, 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 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.

Third, the *paytan* offers a more detailed sad but honest description of the present situation, contrasting the past with the present, using an impressive play on words. 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 *Dovid 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 Zecharia’s prophesy and, just like the people were saved then and the prophesy came to fruition, so too they should 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[[9]](#footnote-9), 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 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.

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.

**The deeper message of the *piyut*, an intrinsic Chanukah message**

Besides the obvious connection between the *piyut* and the prophesy of Zechariah in the *Haftorah*, there is another, perhaps deeper, message.

On Chanukah, the Hasmoneans who were *Kohanim* took control of Jerusalem, a task that is generally reserved only for descendants of *Malchus Beis Dovid* and is not a role to be played by anyone else, including *Kohanim*. The extraordinary circumstances of the situation may have justified the Hasmoneans’ usurping of a role that was not designated to them. Nevertheless, once they were safely in power, this position should have been transferred back to the *Malchus Beis Dovid* and this was not done.

The Chasam Sofer explains that this is in fact the reason that R’ Yehudah Hanasi did not include a *maseches* on Chanukah in the *mishnah*. He himself was a descendant of *Malchus Beis Dovid* and was not in favor of the actions of the Hasmoneans. As *Kohanim*, and clearly not descendants of *Dovid Hamelech,* they had no right to create a royal dynasty. They should have focused on their own unique roles without overstepping their boundaries.

The Ramban, when discussing the *pasuk* לא יסור שבט מיהודה (בראשית מט' י') explains that this is what led to the downfall of the Hasmoneans. 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 as 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 is only because they did not heed to the warning that a King cannot come from any tribe but *Yehudah* and from descendants of *Dovid 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.

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 *Dovid 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* of שְׁנֵי זֵיתִים subtly seems to acknowledge this failure of the Hasmoneans to adhere to the separation of powers, with its 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 hope 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.

But they will not shine in a vacuum. 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* 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.

1. Siddur Otzar Hatefilah, pages 296-297 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. English translation taken from the Artscroll Tanach. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. According to the description of the מהרי קרא on the *pasuk*, there were little cisterns collecting the olives that fell from the two trees and the olives would then be pressed on their own “נכתשין מאליהן”. A series of ducts would then collect the olive oil from the cisterns into all of the branches of the Menorah. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Moshe Rosewassr’s *perush* on the piyut 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 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-8)
9. Rashi on ‘כז ‘כהבראשית explains that “ציד יןדע” refers to Esav’s tendency to “אביו את ולרמות לצוד”, 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. (Sifsei Chachamim explain that it is learned from the symmetry with Yaacov who reflects the opposite characteristics. Yaacov is an “תם איש”, an honest man, rather than a “ציד יןדע”, a man who deceives, and he is a “אוהלים יושב” rather than an “שדה איש”.) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)