

Zulat piyyut for the fourth Sabbath after Pesah
(Eastern Ashkenazic Rite):
Elohai Bekha Ehavek

Translated by Dr. Gabriel Wasserman¹

This *zulat* is by the twelfth-century poet Ephraim of Regensburg. Like the Eastern *zulatot* for the other weeks of Sefira, this one has a short refrain after every pair of two stanzas, but here the refrain is unique: *al tirhak mimmenni*, “Don’t stay far from me!”

This pithy refrain brings out one side of a contrast, which runs throughout the poem: distance vs. uncomfortably close tightness. Already in the first stanza, the poet says: “My God, I cling (*ehavek*) to you, Like a drowning person struggling (*ye’avek*) to a harbor. I say: it’s good to be clinging (*devek*).” Three rhyming words, at the ends of the Hebrew lines, all referring to clinging, tight embrace. *Ye’avek*, “struggling”, comes from the story of Jacob’s night-long wrestle (*vayye’avek*) with the angel. I am trying as hard as possible to hold on tight to God, but he is distant, far away. Is it indeed “good” to be clinging so hard to God when he is so far away? It’s better than the alternative — to adopt the religion of the Christians — but is it in fact “good”? The expression “it’s good to be clinging” (*omer tov ladevek*) in fact comes from a Biblical context that is not exactly positive, Isaiah 41:7, where the artisans, making idols, “say that the glue (*devek*) is good” for making the idol! This “clinging” (*davak*) to God appears over and over in the poem.

How is it even possible to “cling” to God, if he is not reciprocating the embrace, but remains so far away? The poet says (stanza *dalet*): “I cling greatly to your testimonial laws.” If I cannot cling to you, I can cling to your law. Throughout, we see the Jews fiercely loyal to Judaism. While many Jews in medieval Europe surely did choose to convert to Christianity under pressure, we do not hear a word about that in this piyyut.

Meanwhile, the Jews are experiencing uncomfortable closeness and violence from the Christians: while they do not “cling” (*davak*) to me, they pursue (*radaf*) and drag (*mashakh*) me, words that appear multiple times. And they kill and beat Jews, as the *yud* stanza states: “But (the Jews), who fear you, are being stoned and strangled, And these are the

ones that are beaten — Those that cling to the Lord.” The words “stoned and strangled”, and especially “These are the ones that are beaten”, allude to the openings of chapters from the Mishna, tractates Sanhedrin and Makkot — but here these are inflicted not by the due process of the Sanhedrin, but by the Christians, against the blameless Jews, who “cling” to God.

Towards the end of the poem, the poet moves from imagery of physical closeness to imagery of slavery, with language taken from *Parashat Behar*. This *parasha* is always read during the period of Sefira, although it is not clear that the poet chose this imagery due to the calendrical *parasha* connection. In manuscripts, the poem can occur in any week of Sefira, from the second through the sixth, so the connection to specifically *Parashat Behar* is somewhat weak. The poet writes: *May he return to the land of his ancestor’s inheritance*, like the Hebrew slave at the end of his servitude (Lev. 25:41); *because of the many years* (Lev. 25:16); *Go calculate with the one that has acquired them, what is their price* (cf. Lev. 25:50); *I’m hoping to him that I will leave (my servitude) in the Jubilee year* (cf. Lev. 25:28). The poet connects this last line, about the calculation of the Jubilee when we shall go free from our servitude, to calculations of the time of redemption in the Book of Daniel.

At the end of the poem comes the hope: “This calculation cannot be fathomed, but at the time of (gloomy) evening, there will be (redemptive) morning!” The poet’s own time is one of darkest night, but eventually light will come. God will “release the burden from my shoulder”, and the oppressive closeness of the Christians will be gone, with their downfall. And then, what will closeness to God look like? Not like the desperate clinging of the beginning of the poem, not uncomfortable closeness, but “a gleaming ray, like the light of noontime”. Light is productive, and can cause “a blossoming of the withered people”, a divine closeness that is full of blessing, not of suffocating physical physical closeness.

This blessing will be “like the day when they went up from the Land of Egypt”: the *zulat* ends with a reference to the Exodus. In Ephraim’s time, Ashkenazic Jews were certainly resuming the liturgy after the *zulat* with the words *‘ezrat avotenu*, but nonetheless he ends not with a reference to *‘ezrat*, but rather to the Exodus, which comes up later in the paragraph — evidently following a model of earlier poets, whose liturgy indeed resumed with the lines discussing the Exodus.

¹ With thanks to Prof. Laura Lieber for helping brainstorm the introduction.

אֲלֹהִים, בָּךְ אֶחְבֵּק
כְּטוֹבֵעַ לְנַמֵּל יֵאָבֵק
אִמַר טוֹב לְדַבֵּק

My God, I cling to you,
Like a drowning person struggling to a harbor.
I say: it's good to be clinging.

בְּשֵׁמֶךָ תָּמִיד חֲתַלְתִּי
אִף כִּי עָלֶיךָ נִקְטָלְתִּי
נִפְתּוּלֵי אֲלֹהִים נִפְתַּלְתִּי

Through your name I have always been bandaged,
[So], even when I am being killed for you,
Great strivings for God I strive.

אל תרחק ממני!

Don't stay far from me!

גִּרְתִּי עִם־מֶשֶׁךְ וְתוּבַל
נִמְשַׁכְתִּי בְיַד שׁוֹבַל
כְּשֶׂה לְטַבַּח יוֹבֵל

I have sojourned among Meshech and Tubal [gentile nations],
I have been dragged by Shobal [another nation],
Like a lamb brought out to slaughter.

דָּבַקְתִּי מְאֹד בְּעֵדוּתֶיךָ
הִסְתּוֹפֵף בְּכַנֹּף מְדוּתֶיךָ
קִצְיֵעוֹת כָּל־בְּגָדֶיךָ

I cling greatly to your testimonial laws,
To stand at the threshold of the corner of your garments,
The cassia (fragrant spices) of all your clothing —

אל תרחק ממני!

Don't stay far from me!

הִרְחַקְתִּי נְדוּד מִמְּךָ
וְלִבִּי קָרוֹב לְשֵׁמֶךָ
וְרֵאָה כִּי עַמֶּךָ

I have gone far off into wandering away from you,
But my heart is close to your name.
See that your people —

וְצֹאן יָדָךְ נִמוּגָה
וְאַחֹר לֹא נִסּוּגָה
רֵעָה אֶת־צֹאן הַהֲרָגָה

— and your hand-raised flock are dissolved into agitation,
But they have not turned back in mutiny.
Pasture the flock, who are being slaughtered.

אל תרחק ממני!

Don't stay far from me!

זְכוֹר הַרְג רַב
עַלֶיךָ נַפְשֵׁי תִקְרַב
וְנָפְלוּ מִמֶּנִּי רַב

Remember the great slaughter,
My soul approaches you,
And many of me have fallen —

חֲסִידֶיךָ וּמִיחַדֶּיךָ מִקְרַב
בִּקְרָר וְצֹהָרִים וְעָרַב
עִם שְׂרִידֵי חֶרֶב

Your pious people, who declare your unity with deep internal (sincerity),
Morning and noon and night,
The people remaining from the sword.

אל תרחק ממני!

Don't stay far from me!

טָחִי תִפְלוּ וּמְדוּחִים
אֵלַי גִּיל הַשְּׂמֵחִים
וּבְמִשְׁכָּנוֹת מְבֹטָחִים

(The gentiles), who whitewash themselves with worthless and misleading
(lies),
Get to enjoy happiness,
And live in security,

יִרְאֶיךָ נִסְקָלִים וְנִחְנָקִים
וְאֵלוֹ הֵן הַלּוֹקִים
בְּיַד הַדְּבָקִים

But (the Jews), who fear you, are being stoned and strangled,
And these are the ones that are beaten —
Those that cling to the Lord.

אל תרחק ממני!

Don't stay far from me!

כּוֹרֵעַ לְתֵלוּי בְּמַגּוֹד
יַעֲצֵנִי בְּךָ לְכַגּוֹד
לְבוֹל עֵץ לְסַגּוֹד

The (gentile), who kneels to (the Christian god), who was hanged on a
hanger,
Advises me to betray you,
To prostrate myself to a block of wood.

לֹא אֶצְתִּי לְרֵעוֹת אַחֲרָיו
נִמְתִּי: "יִבְשׂוּ כָּל־חֲבָרָיו"
רַע יְרוּעַ כִּי עָרַב

I did not hasten to follow him to pasture,
I said: "Let all his friends be ashamed!"
The wicked (*ra'*) will be crushed (*yeroa'*), because he pledged himself (to
idolatry).

אל תרחק ממני!

Don't stay far from me!

מַחֲמַת עֶפְרָז זֹחֵל
לִירְחֵי שָׁוָא אֲנִי נוֹחֵל
מֵה־כַּחֲסֵי כִּי אֵיחֵל

נִפְשִׁי בְּךָ דֹּבְקָה
כְּיוֹנֵק נִכְנָס לְרִבְקָה
הַשְּׂבִיעַ נֶפֶשׁ שִׁקְקָה

אל תרחק ממני!

שׁוֹנְאֵיךָ בְּלִבּוֹת זְהוּהִים
לְשׁוֹנָם מְדַבֵּרֵת גְבוּהִים
שָׁוָא עֲבַד אֱלֹהִים

עַמָּךְ בְּעֵצָתָם לֹא יָשֵׁב
וּבְגוֹיִם לֹא יִתְחַשֵּׁב
הַשְּׂמֵרִים הַבְּלִי שָׁוָא

אל תרחק ממני!

פְּלִיאָה, בְּעֵינַי נִשְׁגָּבָה,
לְמַדְהֵבָה הֲיֵשׁ קִצְבָה?
הֲיֵה קָמָה וְגַם נִצְבָה.

צוּעֶקֶת: "הֲבֵא מְדוּד!",
אוֹמְרַת לִי: "מַה לְּךָ נְדוּד,
וּמַה דוֹדֶךָ מְדוּד?"

אל תרחק ממני!

On account of the (gentile), slithering around in the dust (like a snake),
I inherit months of emptiness —
What strength do I have to look forward (to better days)?!

My soul clings to you,
Like a suckling animal entering the fattening stall (which is filled with
treats),
To quench my yearning soul.

Don't stay far from me!

Your enemies are haughty in their hearts,
Their tongue speaks highly arrogantly,
That it is worthless to serve God.

Your people does not sit in their council,
It is not numbered among the nations,
Who pay regard to worthless vanities.

Don't stay far from me!

This is beyond my comprehension, astonishing in
my eyes,
Is there any end to Madheva?*

She has arisen, stood up.
She cries: "Bring in, measure!" (*havé medod*),
And she says to me: "Why should you be
wandering (in exile),
And what distinguishes your Beloved from any
beloved?"

Don't stay far from me!

***Madheva.** A term used in Isaiah 14:4 in connection with the Kingdom of Babylonia, here referring to the oppressive Christian regimes of the poet's own day. In b. Shabbat 150a, the word is homiletically read as *Medod ve-havé*, "Measure and bring in (taxes)!"

קוּמָה לְצֵאת כְּפַעַם-בְּכַפְּעַם
תִּרְעַם בְּשִׁבְט רָעַם
הָעַם אֲשֶׁר זָעַם

רוֹדֵף אַחֲרַי בְּלֵב יָחַם
תָּמִיד בִּי מִתְרַגֵּז וּמִתְלַחֵם
אֲכָלִי עַמִּי אֲכָלוּ לָחֵם

אל תרחק ממני!

נִשְׁפָּף דָּמוֹ לֹא כֶסֶה,
נָתַן יַעֲקֹב לְמִשְׁפָּה
וְאֲכָלְיוּ עֲוֹנוֹ יִשְׂא

תּוֹעֵי רוּחַ כָּלוּ
רַעֲיָתָהּ בְּהִלּוֹ וּשְׁכָלוּ
וְהַנּוֹתֵרֶת מִמֶּנָּה יֵאָכְלוּ

אל תרחק ממני!

אֵלֵי גּוֹאֲלֵי דָמַי דּוֹרֵשׁ
לֹא יַעֲזוּב לָהֶם שְׂרָשׁ
כָּלָה גָרֵשׁ יִגְרֵשׁ

פִּינָה חַיֵּית קִנָּה
וּמַלְכוּתָהּ תִּקַּל מִנָּא מִנָּא
תּוֹצִיא אוֹתָהּ אֶל-מַחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה

אל תרחק ממני!

Arise, to go forth, as you have done each time,
Crush them with a thundering staff,
The nation that has raged out against you,

Pursuing me with a heated heart,
Constantly furious and battling me,
Consuming my people (as if) consuming bread.

Don't stay far from me!

The spiller of their blood has not covered it,
He has made Jacob (the Jewish people) an object of plunder —
Those that consume (the Jewish people) will bear their sin.

Those who stray in their spirit have exterminated
Your beloved, and horrified and bereaved her,
And what remains of her, they consume.

Don't stay far from me!

May my God, my redeemer, avenger of my blood,
Not let any root remain for them,
May he thoroughly banish, yes banish them.

Clear out (the Empire of Edom), the beast of the marsh-reeds,
And its kingdom — *tekel, mené, mené** —
Take it out, outside the camp!

Don't stay far from me!

* *Tekel, mené, mené*. The famous writing on the wall in Daniel 5:25, which Daniel explains as “God has measured and weighed your kingdom”, that your kingdom is about to be overthrown.

רוֹמָה יַחַד תִּצְיָתְנָה
לִירְכָתִי בּוֹר תִּשְׁפָּתְנָה
עֲוֵה עֲוֵה תִשִּׁיתְנָה

יְעַן מִשְׁכָּתַנִּי בְעַבְדוֹת
נִשְׁפָּטְתִי בְכָל־מִינֵי מַרְדּוֹת
הֶקְצוֹר קִצְרָה יָדְךָ מִפְדּוֹת

אל תרחק ממני!

מִשְׁכָּנִי בְעָלוּ מִשְׁתַּטְח
לְתַבְנִית כָּל בּוֹטָח
מוֹשְׁכוֹת כָּסִיל תִּפְתָּח

בְּרַב־רַחֲמֶיךָ שׁוֹב
לְנִשְׁכַּח כְּפֶת חָשׁוֹב
אֶל־אַחֲזֵת אֲבוֹתָיו יָשׁוֹב

אל תרחק ממני!

יָדַעְתִּי כִּי לֹא לְצִמִּיתֶת
נִמְכַר עַמְּךָ לְחָלִיטוֹת –
וְאֵיךְ סִפֵּר כְּרִיתוֹת?

צֵא וְחָשׁוֹב עִם קוֹנֵם
מֵה מְכָרָם וּמֵה קוֹנֵינָם
כִּי־לִקַּח עַמִּי חִנָּם

אל תרחק ממני!

Rome — may you burn it all together,
And place it in the edges of the deep pit,
Make it desolate, completely desolate.

Since you, (O God), have dragged me into servitude,
I have been judged with all types of subjugation —
Is your arm too short to give deliverance?!

Don't stay far from me!

He dragged me with his yoke — he that prostrates himself to,
And trusts in, statues of all things.
(O God), release the cords (tied by) the fool!*

In your great mercy, return
To (the Jewish people), forgotten and considered dead;
May he return to the land of his ancestor's inheritance!

Don't stay far from me!

I know that it is not forever
That your people has been sold completely —
Where is the writ of divorce?

Go calculate with the (gentile nation) that has acquired them,
What is their price, what is their sale-value,
For my people has been bought for nothing!

Don't stay far from me!

*Release the cords (tied by) the fool (*moshkkhot kesil tefatteah*). Language taken from Job 38:31, where it means “Can you (O mortal) loosen the belt of the constellation Orion (*kesil*)”. Here the poet uses *kesil* in its more usual meaning, “fool”, and directs the line to God, greatly changing the meaning.

הוֹשֵׁה לְהַסְעִיר בְּשַׁעִיר
בְּרַפֵּת אָב תְּעִיר
וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צַעִיר

קָרוּ עִמָּךְ תָּרִים
תִּקְפוּז קִז וְתַעֲרִים
מְדַלֵּג עַל הַהָרִים

אל תרחק ממני!

חֲשַׁבְתִּי עֶדֶן עֶדְנִים
עֵינַי בְּלוֹת לְזַמְנִים
לְפִי רַב הַשָּׁנִים

זְמוֹתַי לְקִץ זֶה אִינוֹ חֲקָר
אֵךְ לְעֵת עֶרֶב יִהְיֶה בְּקָר
נִצַּח יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יִשְׁקָר

אל תרחק ממני!

קְוִיתִי לוֹ אֲצַא בַּיּוֹבֵל
וְיִסֵּר שְׁכָמִי מִסֶּבֶל
וְהִיְתָה צִיצֵת נֹבֵל

קָרוּ נִגְהַ כְּאוֹר צְהָרִים
לְנִדְחֵי יְהוּדָה וְאֶפְרָיִם
וּכְיוֹם עֲלוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

אל תרחק ממני!

Hasten to storm (*lehas 'ir*) against Seir (=Edom).
Summon the blessing of Father (Isaac):
The older (Edom) will serve the younger (Israel)!

Raise up the horn of your people,
Jump to the end-time, in a clever way,
O you who jump over mountains (and bypass, “jump over”, centuries of
planned exile to reach the time of redemption early)!

Don't stay far from me!

I have calculated the age and the ages,*
My eyes wear out, (looking
forward) to the times,
Because of the many years.*

I think: This calculation cannot be fathomed,
But at the time of (gloomy) evening, there will
be (redemptive) morning!
God, the eternal victor (*netzah*) of Israel will not
lie!

Don't stay far from me!

I'm hoping to him that I will leave (my servitude) in the Jubilee year,
That he will release the burden from my shoulder,
And it will be a blossoming of the withered (people) —

A gleaming ray, like the light of noontime,
For the dispersed of Judah and Ephraim,
Like the day when they went up from the Land of Egypt!

Don't stay far from me!

***The age and the ages.** Daniel 7:25, a calculation of the time of redemption: *they will be given over to the hand (of the tyrant) until an age and ages ('iddan ve'iddanin) and half an age.*
***Because of the many years.** Leviticus 25:16 (next week's *parasha*, Behar): If a Jew sells land to another Jew, the rate must be calculated in accordance with the remaining time until the Jubilee — the year of redemption. In the next pair of stanzas, the poet picks up on this imagery again.