



# Bet Horaah

## בית הוראה

# Shaare Ezra

## שערי עזרא

Parshat Emor

Zmanim for New York:

Candle Lighting: 7:49pm

Shabbat ends: 8:56pm

R"T 9:21pm

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### ELOKAI, RABBI SHIMON: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTROVERSY

WRITTEN BY RABBI SHAY TAHAN

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The following article addresses an issue raised regarding a popular song about Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, often sung on Lag BaOmer. As with previous articles—such as the discussion on the song "I Will Always Have Only Good" and the debate over whether Hashem needs us—the intention here is not to take a side, but to present and clarify the various perspectives involved in the conversation. Here is the beginning of the song:

לכבוד התנא האלוקי רבי שמעון בר יוחאי  
אורחים נכבדים, ידידים נחמדים, מי  
לכם פה ומה לכם פה,  
לכבוד התנא האלוקי רבי שמעון בר יוחאי

בני ירושלים, אהובים ושלמים, מי לכם פה ומה לכם פה,  
לכבוד התנא האלוקי רבי שמעון בר יוחאי

#### Translation:

*In honor of the Tanna Elokai, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai*

*Honored guests, dear friends—who is here for you and what brings you here?*

*In honor of the Tanna Elokai, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai*

*Sons of Jerusalem, beloved and whole—who is here for you and what brings you here?*

*In honor of the godly Tanna, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai*

The repeated words of songs sung in honor of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai include phrases "L'kavod HaTanna Elokai," which translates to "In honor of the Tanna, my God." This usage has raised questions among scholars and community members about the appropriateness of such language, as it may blur the distinction between reverence for a revered sage and the worship due only to Hashem.

Critics argue that referring to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai with a term typically reserved for Hashem

could inadvertently suggest a form of deification, which is contrary to core Jewish beliefs. They emphasize the importance of maintaining clear boundaries in language to preserve the monotheistic integrity of Jewish worship.

They further argue that the original lyric used the word *Eloki*, meaning "a godly sage," but that those singing it later altered it to *Elokai* in order to rhyme with the following word, *Bar Yochai*. This change, however, is seen by some as problematic, as it introduces theological concern and risks attributing a title reserved for Hashem to a human being.



### Explanation of the term Elokai

To explain the use of the word *Elokai*, Rabbi Moshe Brandsdorfer (a prominent posek in Yerushalayim) notes a distinction between saying *Elokai* and *HaElokai*—with the added *hei*. He argues that since the song uses the form *HaElokai*, it is permitted, as this indicates that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai is godly or connected to the Divine, rather than identifying him as God Himself. On the contrary, Rabbi Yitzchak Ratzabi argues that the *hei* makes it even worse, as it more directly refers to Hashem.

Some explain the grammar by noting that in Aramaic, *Elokai* is used instead of *Eloki*. Others attribute it to a Chassidic pronunciation style, while still others argue that it should actually be *Eloka'i*, which also means "godly."

Some bring the following fascinating explanation of the Hor Hachayim (Vayikra 18; 4): "The divine Tanna, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai (Zohar I:170b), said that the 248 limbs and 365 sinews of a person correspond to the 248 positive commandments and the 365 negative commandments. When a person performs a mitzvah using a particular limb, the Name of Hashem—specifically the four-letter name Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh—rests upon that limb.

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From here we learn that through the performance of a mitzvah, a person becomes a chariot (merkavah) for the Shechinah, and Hashem walks within him. This is the meaning of the pasuk, "to walk in them," and it further clarifies who walks in them: "I am Hashem"—as if to say, "to walk—I, Hashem—in them." This is the secret of the pasuk (Exodus 25:8): "And I will dwell among them."

Accordingly, the phrase "in them" can be understood literally: through the performance of mitzvot, a person creates the vessel for Hashem to dwell within him. This is the secret behind the pasuk (Leviticus 26:12): "And I will walk among you," and the pasuk (Deuteronomy 4:4): "And you who cling to Hashem, your God."

I will not attempt to explain these words of the Ohr HaChaim, as even a slight misinterpretation could, God forbid, cross the line into heresy. However, one must be careful not to mistakenly think that he meant, Heaven forbid, that Hashem was clothed in Rashbi and that he became a god—an idea that parallels, disturbingly, the Christian belief about their deity.

But we do find on the command (Shemot 34: 23) to appear three times a year before the Master—Hashem, that the Zohar comments that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai is described in terms that seem to ascribe divine qualities, such as the expression "מִי פָנָיו" "הַאֲדוֹן דָּא-רַשְׁבִּי"—"Who is the face of the Master? This is Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai." While such language originates within deeply mystical contexts, it has raised significant concerns among later authorities who caution against interpreting these phrases literally. The Yaavetz (Mitpachat Sfarim) voice strongly rejecting any literal interpretation of these expressions writes:

'Who is the face of the Master? This is Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.' Such a phrase is undoubtedly offensive and blasphemous. In this matter, I show no partiality to anyone—even if it were the real Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai himself (Heaven forbid to suspect him of accepting divinity; on the contrary, this proves such words never came from him, and never crossed his mind. Even if the greatest of prophets said it, I would not obey. I will accept no justification in such a matter).

Heaven forbid to imagine these are the words of our holy Torah sages, who are faithful to Hashem—to give His glory to another. Such a thing must not occur in Israel. One who associates the Name of Heaven with something else... Here lies an open gateway for those who breach the boundaries of

the world."

Others explain (Matok Midvash on the Zohar) that the Zohar does not imply that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai is a god, but rather that, because Hashem is always with him, he is akin to the face of the Shechinah, or more accurately, the forefront. In this sense, through his presence, the righteous are glorifying Hashem.

### Praying at the gravesite

Another issue to keep in mind is the controversy surrounding the practice of asking the deceased—particularly great tzaddikim—for help or intercession is a longstanding and sensitive topic. While many visit the graves of righteous individuals to pray, the halachic and theological boundaries of what is permissible in such prayers are debated among authorities.

Some authorities permit asking the deceased to intercede on one's behalf before Hashem, viewing it as a form of *zechut avot*—asking Hashem to help in the merit of the righteous. This is often understood not as praying *to* the tzaddik, but rather *with* their merit or asking them to pray to Hashem on the person's behalf.

Others, however, strongly oppose any formulation that appears to address the deceased directly, arguing that it borders on forbidden practices such as *doresh el ha-meitim* (seeking out the dead), which is explicitly prohibited in the Torah (Devarim 18:11). These authorities insist that all prayers must be directed solely to Hashem, without invoking the dead in any active or intermediary role.

The language used is often the core issue. Phrases that directly address the deceased (e.g., "Rebbi, help me") are particularly controversial. Some poskim allow phrases like "May the merit of the tzaddik stand for me," while others are more stringent and require even that to be carefully worded so as not to imply any power independent of Hashem.

This controversy is especially relevant at gravesites of great tzaddikim such as Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai on Lag BaOmer, where masses gather and songs or prayers may include language that some interpret as bordering on problematic forms of intercession. Great care is advised in how such practices are approached, and many rabbanim emphasize the importance of maintaining clarity that all salvation comes only from Hashem.

## ANTI-SEMITISM: IT'S NOT WHAT WE'VE DONE WRONG, BUT WHAT WE'VE DONE RIGHT.

Following Holocaust Remembrance Day, a leading Jewish organization combating antisemitism revealed that incidents of Jew-hatred and violence are at their highest since the Holocaust. This sobering reality forces us to confront an enduring and painful question: Why is there such deep-rooted hatred toward the Jewish people?

Some might argue that antisemitism stems from centuries of Church indoctrination, teaching that Jews were responsible for the death of their god and prophet. While the church is absolutely responsible for inciting Jewish hatred, if that were the root cause, why have Jews been persecuted for generations by Muslims, who do not even believe in that crucified deity?

Others claim the hatred arises because of the State of Israel,

seen by some as an occupying force. But if that's the case, how do we explain the violent pogroms against Jews in nearly every Arab country long before the modern Jewish state ever existed?

Could it be about race? That doesn't hold either. Jews come from every continent and reflect the appearance, language, and customs of the societies they lived in. Sephardic Jews ate the same food as their neighbors, and so did European Jews.

Perhaps it's about being visibly different—like the Chassidic Jews who dress in distinct traditional garb. But then again, the most virulent Jew-hatred of the last century came from Germany, where Jews largely looked and acted just like everyone else.

So what, then, is the reason?

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Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau Shlita, shed some light on this phenomenon:

"In advance of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony in 2009, I received an official invitation to speak at the United Nations General Assembly. It wasn't the first time, but this time the topic was defined. I was asked to deliver a lecture on 'the causes and reasons behind global antisemitism,'" Rabbi Lau recounts.

A single question hovered in the air, one I was asked to attempt to answer: What causes the Jewish people to be persecuted for generations over thousands of years?

I stood at the podium, facing representatives from many countries and nations.

The moment itself dictated the words 'Ladies and gentlemen,' I began, 'if you examine the story of the Jewish people, both its near and distant past, you'll discover the answer to your question. I've done it for you. I looked into this complex story and formed a clear conclusion.'

Antisemitism has no logical explanation! One cannot rationally explain the roots of Jew-hatred and persecution of the Jewish people. I tell you—don't even try,'" said Rabbi Lau firmly, and he offered the following proof.

I was a Jewish child born in Poland. Around us lived tens of thousands of Jews—citizens of Poland—who were easily identifiable. They had long beards and prominent sidecurls, wore distinctive *kapotes*, donned hats or *shtreimels*, and spoke mainly Yiddish. In short, we were visibly different from the rest of the population.

Often we heard harsh criticism. It was claimed that our insistence on remaining separate—through our names, language, clothing, and culture—was what fueled the hatred. And honestly, many among us tended to believe that. The thought was that if only we would get rid of the *shtreimel* and *kapote*, start speaking Polish, and integrate into public roles, everything would change for the better. The hatred would end, the neighbors would learn to appreciate our talent and knowledge, and antisemitism would disappear.

Just a few kilometers from our home,' Rabbi Lau continued telling the ambassadors, 'lay the German empire. There too lived tens of thousands of Jews. But they behaved entirely differently. For hundreds of years, they were careful not to wear *kapotes* or *shtreimels*. They shaved their beards, dressed accordingly, spoke refined German—more polished than the Germans themselves—read Goethe and Schiller, and strove to integrate in every sphere.

Thousands of Jews in Germany and Austria fought shoulder to shoulder with their fellow Germans in World War I. Others became part of the high culture industry, composed works, performed music—not to mention the layer of bankers who supported the national economy, and the scientists and scholars who advanced higher education, research, and modern science.

Amazingly, these Jews were met with the exact opposite accusations. Everyone claimed they were going too far, that they needed to be more modest and not take over the country. *The Proto-*



*cols of the Elders of Zion* portrayed them as plotting to dominate culture and the economy, and we all know how that ended.

In Poland, they hated us for being different. In Germany, they persecuted us for being the same, Rabbi Lau cried out in pain.

They threw us out of Europe because we were guests, and they hate us because we act like natives.

And here's another piece of evidence, another memory from Rabbi Lau's childhood: "In almost every subway station across Europe, you could find graffiti in various languages: 'Jews, go to Palestine.' As a small child, I saw that phrase in at least four languages, including French," he told the nations' representatives.

There was a certain claim in that. They hated us because we were subtenants in a house not our own. Painful as it was, there were moments we almost believed the cry of our neighbors, who shouted at us: 'Get out of our country. Establish your own home, and we will respect you. Just don't live at our expense.'

Years passed, and we returned home. We survived the Holocaust, and all we wanted was to go to our land. And what do you know? Suddenly, the gates were closed. We had to sneak in on illegal immigrant boats, smuggle across borders, and struggle.

After we finally arrived and settled in our home, nothing helped. Just two and a half years after the Holocaust, we found ourselves facing seven Arab armies seeking to throw us into the sea, and we were horrified to see the world silent once again.

They threw us out of Europe because we were guests, and they hate us because we act like homeowners.'

These contradictions only deepen. In Russia, they persecuted us because we were perceived as capitalists. In Germany, they hated us because we were communists. And to this day, look at the college campuses in Europe and the U.S.—on the surface, there is no visible difference between Jewish students and their peers, yet they are hated.

I have no other explanation but this," Rabbi Lau concluded his painful speech, "antisemitism is a collective mental illness. Don't try to find a logical explanation."

Although Rabbi Lau Shlit'a didn't offer a specific explanation, I believe there is one common thread that may lie at the root of this hatred: Jewish success. Throughout history and across the globe, Jews have consistently excelled—intellectually, financially, professionally, and spiritually. And success, more often than not, breeds jealousy.

As someone once pointed out, in a classroom, it's not the top student who mocks those who struggle—it's usually the other way around, those who feel left behind are the ones who lash out at the good students.

This pattern repeats itself on a national scale. The Jewish people have long been successful—not just materially, but in wisdom, ethics, and cultural contribution. We have a rich heritage, a deep and meaningful religion, and an undeniable presence in the fields of education, business, science, and the arts. Even in appear-

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ance, Jewish boys and girls are often blessed with a refined and dignified look.

Perhaps it's not what we've done wrong that draws hatred, but what we've done right.

I always remember the way King David expresses it in Tehillim (chapter 144). He begins by describing his readiness for battle, and then shifts to highlighting the differences between the Jewish people and their enemies. What's the connection? King David is teaching us that this clear distinction—between our values, character, and way of life and that of our enemies—provokes jealousy and resentment, which ultimately lead to conflict. He fights not for conquest, but to defend his people from those who cannot tolerate that difference.

The pasuk states: *"For our sons are like saplings, nurtured from their youth; our daughters like cornerstones, fashioned in the form of a palace."*

King David draws attention to the nobility of the next generation—our sons, growing straight and handsome; our daughters, dignified and refined.

One doesn't even need elaborate commentary to grasp this truth. Just look at the Jewish youth in colleges and yeshivot, and compare them to the universities protesters—or rather, rioters. Our youth are modest, respectful, well-mannered, and refined. The contrast couldn't be starker, even just externally. But more than that, the internal difference—values, purpose, and morality—is

even greater.

The next pasuk says: *"Our storehouses are full, overflowing with all kinds of produce; our flocks multiply by thousands and tens of thousands in our fields."*

Here, David Hamelech notes the material blessing and prosperity that follow the Jewish people. We are builders of life, not destroyers. We cultivate, develop, and enrich the world. We are blessed with professionals in every field — medicine, law, education, finance, engineering, science, technology, the arts, and beyond. In contrast, our enemies invest in destruction. Israel's transformation into a global hub of innovation and development in just over seventy years is a living example of this pasuk.

Then he shifts to leadership: *"Our leaders carry themselves with dignity; there is no breach, no going out, and no outcry in our streets."*

Jewish leadership, at its core, is rooted in Torah—guided by righteous scholars and moral clarity. In contrast, the leaders of our enemies often incite violence, exploit their own people, and hide behind civilians while calling for war. While their leaders are busy blaming others for their misfortunes, often the result of their own destructive actions, our leaders teach us not to cry or blame others, but to strive for excellence.

These are just a few of the many distinctions between good and evil—but they are enough to stir envy, and that envy often leads to hatred and violence.

## תספורת וגילוח בל"ג בעומר- ערב שבת

ידוע שינוי המנהגים בין האשכנזים לספרדים בנוגע לתספורת וגילוח השיער בל"ג בעומר, שלדעת הספרדים יש להמתין עד ל"ד בבוקר על מנת להסתפר ולהתגלח, וכמו שנכתב בשולחן ערוך (סימן תצג ס"ב): "נוהגים שלא להסתפר עד ל"ג לעומר שאומרים שאז פסקו מלמות, ואין להסתפר עד יום ל"ד בבוקר", והאשכנזים נוהגים להסתפר כבר בל"ג בבוקר, וכמו שהעיר הרמ"א: "ובמדינות אלו אין נוהגין כדבריו, אלא מסתפרין ביום ל"ג ומרבים בו קצת שמחה ואין אומרים בו תחנון (מהר"ל ומנהגים), ואין להסתפר עד ל"ג בעצמו ולא מבערב".



אמנם אם חל ל"ג בעומר ביום ששי כמו השנה, הקיל השולחן ערוך גם לספרדים להסתפר, וז"ל: "ואין להסתפר עד יום ל"ד בבוקר, אלא אם כן חל יום ל"ג ערב שבת שאז מסתפרים בו מפני כבוד השבת". וכתב הגר"ע יוסף (חזון עובדיה יו"ט עמוד רסז) שאם יש לו סיבה כל שהיא המונעת אותו מלהסתפר בערב שבת, רשאי להסתפר אף בליל ששי לכבוד השבת.

Shaare Ezra is a one of a kind, multi-faceted organization that's there for the community. Under the leadership of HaRav Shay Tahan שליט"א, Shaare Ezra feels that proper Halachic guidance should be accessible to everyone, therefore we offer the community the opportunity to call, text, WhatsApp, or e-mail any halachic questions they may have, through the Bet Horaah, where qualified, trained and ordained Rabbis are available to answer your questions in English, Hebrew and Russian. Shaare Ezra is from the community—for the community.

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