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PRAYER FOR RAIN BY ELIJAH
AND BY HONI THE CIRCLE-MAKER.
TWO ENDS OF THE SAME CONCEPT IN THE
LIGHT OF LAZAR GULKOWITSCH' IDEAS

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PRAYER AND RAIN

In Judaism, both water and prayer sustain the world – the outward and inward one alike. They form the bases of Jewish life and mean life.¹ And they both become intertwined in the prayer for water (more precisely for rain), which in turn enables us to exemplify some important traits of the Jewish faith and a worldview during the biblical and early rabbinical times that still build the core of the Jewish world of ideas. Discussion on the prayer for rain in Judaism allows us to explore the various aspects of prayer – its essence and forms, modes and aspects and its connection with miracles and natural order. But before moving on to the main object of this study – the prayer for rain and persons who have a special charisma to pray for rain, Elijah and Honi the Circle-Maker – some preliminary notes on the Jewish approach to both prayer and water are necessary.

Prayer in Judaism can be seen as a reciprocal and indivisible “I-Thou” relationship.² It rests upon the conviction that God exists, hears, and

¹ E.g. in the tractate *'Aboth D'Rabbi Nathan*, 34:10 water is named among the ten things that are distinguished by the expression “living”: “Water is described as living, as it is stated, *And it shall come to pass on that day, that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem (Zech. 14:8)*”. See Abraham **Cohen** (ed.), *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Minor Tractates: 'Aboth D'Rabbi Nathan* (London: Soncino Press, 1984).

² A concise summary of the meaning of prayer in Judaism can e.g. be found in Israel **Abrahams** and Louis **Jacobs**, “Prayer” – *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 16 (Pes-Qu) (Detroit MI: Thomson Gale Macmillan, 2007), 456–460 that forms also the bases of the following few paragraphs. See also Philip **Zaleski** and Carol **Zaleski**, *Prayer: A History* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005).

answers (Ps. 65:3; cf. 115:3–7). Therefore, the prayer is an expression of man’s quest for the divine and his longing to unburden his soul before God (Ps. 42:2–3; 62:9). However, God also seeks Man (Isa. 50:2; 65:12). Therefore, it is not only about searching for God and finding Him but also about communication with Him. This communication can take many different forms most common of which is the impetration, a request made to God for something specific believed to be good. The more familiar term for this is “petitionary prayer” or simply “petition”. Intercession and confession (expiation) also belong to this type of prayer. In addition, there are meditation (contemplation), recollection (anamnesis), expostulation, thanksgiving, praise and adoration. Even if the source of the prayer is the same – the yearning of human heart – the spectrum (as described in the Hebrew Bible) of its subject-matter can range “from the simplest material needs to the highest spiritual yearnings (Ps. 51:1ff.; 119:1ff.), transcending, like prophecy, the horizon of history, and reaching to the realm of eschatology (Isa. 66:22–23).”³

Though in its essence prayer is emotional, spontaneous and personal, it also became statutory and took liturgical forms (Ezra 2:65; 1 Chr. 16), being a daily reminder of the relationship between man and God and of its character.⁴ Even then the ultimate criterion remained an earnestness and passion of the whole heart – *kavvanat ha-lev* (Joel 2:13; Jer. 29:13) – as the Scripture states: “And serve Him with all your heart” (Deut. 10:10), on which the rabbis commented by saying: “What is Service of Heart? You must needs say, Prayer” (Ta’anit 2a⁵). According to rabbi Eleazar the prayer is dearer to God than good works and sacrifices (Berakhot 32b⁶).

There was an early relationship between sacrifice and prayer (Gen. 13:4; 26:25), which persisted until the destruction of the Second Temple. The sacrifice suggested man’s submission to the will of God. Something that set the Jewish prayer apart from any worship that rested upon magic, whereby the deity could be compelled to fulfil the worshiper’s wishes, a

³ Israel Abrahams and Louis Jacobs, “Prayer”, 457.

⁴ The obligation of offering up prayer, though supported by a scriptural verse, is considered to be rabbinic, not biblical.

⁵ Joseph **Rabbinowitz** (tran.) – Isidore **Epstein** (ed.), *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Ta’anit* (London: Soncino Press, 1990). Hereinafter: Ta’anit.

⁶ Maurice **Simon** (tran.) – Isidore **Epstein** (ed.), *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Berakoth*. (London: Soncino Press, 1990). Hereinafter: Berakoth.

worship lacking a moral element. In biblical faith, the divine response is essentially linked to ethical and spiritual values of the one who prays.⁷ For this reason, prayer was probably closely correlated with a special charisma of prayer delivery possessed by people of extraordinary piety, whose prayers were more bound to be answered. And there were also persons who due to their profession or vocation had a special strength of prayer and who therefore were also obligated to represent the request of whole the congregation or people in a public prayer (that fitted into the common sequence: transgression-distress as punishment for transgression – expiation – forgiveness – removal of the distress). It seems, that in biblical times, it was the kings (1 Kgs. 8; 2 Sam. 7:27; 2 Chron. 30:18 and 6:19–21) and prophets, of whom especially the latter provided the spiritual soil necessary for a prayer (Jer. 1:6ff.; Hab. 1:13–2:3) free of eudaimonism.

The Jewish understanding of prayer is inclined to overcome eudaimonism in prayer that connects it to magic. The object of prayer should be others and ultimately God himself. Therefore, the Jewish prayer is mostly an intercessory prayer, a plea for others. This kind of the essence of the prayer and its charisma emerge clearly in the Jewish prayer for rain, that in its origins was a freely spoken (and often public) prayer offered in times of distress (drought) in the Land of Israel and that later acquired a wording that became part of the Amidah prayer.⁸

It is not hard to see why Judaism is rich with resources that foster an ethic for the respect and protection of water.⁹ Unlike its neighbours

⁷ Israel Abrahams and Louis Jacobs, “Prayer”, 258.

⁸ See David B. Brooks, *Geshem and Tal: The Prayers for Rain and for Dew in our Liturgy*, http://adath-shalom.ca/divrei/geshem.htm#_edn1, accessed 19.08.2017 and **The Rabbinical Assembly**, *The supplement for festivals – Tal* (2013), <http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/jewish-law/holidays/sukkot/or-hadash-geshem-and-tal.pdf>, accessed 19.08.2017. The connection between prayer, ritual, and rainfall (and the season of it) is characterised also by one of the most important Temple rituals in which water played the central role – the water libation called “Water Drawing Ceremony” (*simhat bet hashoavah*) According to rabbinic tradition, this ritual took place every day of Sukkot. It was intended to bring on the rains for the fertility of the land, since it was believed that Sukkot was the time at which God decided on the rainfall for the coming year. (See Lawrence **Troster**, *Jewish Teachings on Water*, http://www.faithinwater.org/uploads/4/4/3/0/44307383/jewish_teachings_on_water-greenfaith.pdf, accessed 19.08.2017.)

⁹ See also Arthur O. **Waskow** (ed.), *Torah of the Earth: Exploring 4,000 Years of Ecology in Jewish Thought*, Vol. 1: *Biblical Israel & Rabbinic Judaism* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000).

Mesopotamia and Egypt, there were no major river systems in the land of Israel, making it almost completely dependent on rain for drinking water and agriculture. Water is inextricably intertwined with life or as it has been said: “When rain is plentiful, it’s an afterthought. During a drought, it’s the only thought.”¹⁰ Moreover, what is on one’s mind is often on one’s tongue – so there are at least six different words in Biblical Hebrew used to describe liquid precipitation (*geshem, matar, yoreh, malkosh, revivim, seirim*) which denote different times and intensities of rainfall.¹¹ In addition, there are eight words for “cloud,” and numerous terms for springs, wells, cisterns and aqueducts.¹²

In the Biblical and Jewish context, water is approached from both, an ecological and theological perspective. It is a source of life and creation (Gen. 1; Ps. 104; Job 38:8–11) as well of recreation.¹³ Water is seen as wiping impurities clean and allowing the person, almost, to be recreated or reborn: it figures in various purification rituals known from biblical times¹⁴ as well as in the rites retained in rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of

¹⁰ Mark **Batterson**, *The Legend of the Circle Maker. The Circle Maker Sermon 1* (2011), <https://thecirclemaker.com/resources/The%20Circle%20Maker%20Sermon%201%20-%20The%20Legend%20of%20the%20Circle%20Maker.pdf>, accessed 19.08.2017.

¹¹ Jeremy **Benstein**, “The Forgotten Language of Rain” – *Jerusalem Report* (Fall 2005). Electronically available at http://more.masortiolami.org/EduCD/space/israel/The_Forgotten_Language_of_Rain.pdf, accessed 19.08.2017.

¹² See on the terminology and topic further in Garry A. **Rensburg**, “From the Desert to the Sown: Israel’s Encounter with the Land of Canaan” – *The Mountains Shall Drip Wine: Jews and the Environment*. Ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 2009), 112–113; Daniel **Hillel**, *The Natural History of the Bible: An Environmental Exploration of the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 317 n. 12; John **Peter**, “Water Works” – *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 6. Ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 883–893.

¹³ A short overview of Jewish teachings on water is given by rabbi Lawrence Troster, *Jewish Teachings on Water*. In addition, water, wells, dew, rain, cisterns and fountains serve as metaphors for the divine or divine attributes in the Hebrew Bible. One of the most important recurring metaphors for God, particularly in the prophetic books, is that of the Fountain of Living Waters (Hebrew: *Mekor Mayyim Hayyim*) such as in Jeremiah 2:13f. In rabbinic sources, water is a metaphor for Torah because of water’s necessity for life and as a transformative substance. (Lawrence Troster, *Jewish Teachings on Water*.)

¹⁴ The ordination of the priests (Ex. 29), the sacrifices (Lev. 1–7), childbirth (Lev. 12) the cure of skin diseases (Lev. 13–14), bodily emissions (Lev. 15) and purification after contact with dead animal carcasses and human corpses (Lev. 11:24–40; Num. 19). (*Ibid.*)

the second temple to modern times¹⁵. Water and more precisely rain was also a means to express the covenant between God and Israel, as abundant rain was considered to be an expression of divine blessing and approval, a means of measuring Israel's commitment to the covenant, and a matrix from which life emerges. Rain comes from heaven under divine consent and control. Or as the Babylonian Talmud states: "Palestine is watered by the Holy One, blessed be He, and the rest of the world is watered by a messenger, as it is said, Who giveth rain upon the earth, and sendeth waters upon the fields (Job 5:10)" (Ta'anit 10a) and that here is direct connection between the behaviour of the Jewish people and the amount of rain that God will bring for the coming year (Rosh Hashanah 17b¹⁶). Rainfall in the proper time and amount, assuring the fertility of the land is not a random natural occurrence dictated by changes in geography or climate, but a divine response dependent upon Israel's fulfilment of the covenant as it is evident from the second paragraph of Shema (Deut. 11:11–17).

According to this scheme, drought is a punishment for deviating from the covenant and the only way to escape perishing is to return to the old righteous ways. Yet there is room for divine interventions into the natural course of things brought by the prayer for rain. Lack of rain is divine punishment and yet as far as the textual sources suggest, all the prayers for rain are answered. The latter is undoubtedly connected to the fact that charisma to pray for rain was gifted to few extraordinary persons, who were especially pious.

From an outside perspective, the ability to make rain fall may be ascribed to either magical powers of the person asking for it or to a miracle¹⁷. The question is seemingly about bending the natural law. An ambiguity regarding prayer and natural phenomena that was also felt by

¹⁵ Full-body immersion (using a *mikvah* or ritual bath) for rituals such as conversion and the purification of women after childbirth or menstruation. Hand washing (*netilat yada'im*) before eating a meal, after waking from sleep, before prayer and for the *kohanim* prior to their pronouncing the Priestly Blessing (Num. 6:23–27) over the congregation at synagogue services. As well as the later tradition of *Tashlikh* based on Mich. 7:18–20. (*Ibid.*)

¹⁶ Maurice Simon (tran.) – Isidore Epstein (ed.), *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Rosh Hashanah*. (London: Soncino Press, 1990). Hereinafter: Rosh Hashanah.

¹⁷ On the problem of petitionary prayer and miracles, see also Robert Young, "Petitioning God" – *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 11 (1974), 193–201.

one of the leading Jewish philosophers and theologians, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: “Prayer never entwines directly with the chain of physical cause and effect; the spiritual does not interfere with the natural order of things. The fact that man with undaunted sincerity pours into prayer the best of his soul springs from the conviction that there is a realm in which the acts of faith are puissant and potent, that there is an order in which things of spirit can be of momentous consequence.”¹⁸

According to a more rationalistic approach in Judaism, God greatness lays in the unparalleled validity of the natural law created by Him as the manifestation of His power, whereas for the more mystical approach it bestows exactly on His freedom that makes Him independent even from natural law that He by Himself created.¹⁹

This ambiguity goes even further and concerns the question if petitionary prayer makes sense at all.²⁰ Eleanor Stump, for example, raises the question if a belief in the efficacy and usefulness of petitionary prayer is consistent with a belief in an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God?²¹ For example, if I pray to God for rain tomorrow, and it does rain tomorrow, is it so because my prayer was effective, or because it was predestined to rain. An effective prayer in this sense would be a prayer that made a difference by influencing God to act.²² Stump also points out, that it is not always clear whether a petitionary prayer is requesting just an earthly state of affairs, or God’s bringing about that earthly state of affairs.²³

For Judaism that centres around the “I-Thou” relationship, the latter

¹⁸ Abraham Joshua **Heschel**, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), 239–240.

¹⁹ Lazar **Gulkowitsch**, *Die Bildung des Begriffes hāsīd I. Der Begriff hāsīd in der Gattung der Ma’āsījōt. 1. Hāsīd und Wunder*. ACUT, B XXXVII.6 (1936) (Tartu, 1935) = TÜJST. ASLJUT, 2, 29.

²⁰ A question often asked in Christian theology: see e.g Thomas **Aquinas**, *Summa theologiae*, 2a–2ae, 83, 1–17; *Summa contra gentiles*, I.III. 95–96; *In IV. Sent.*, dist. XV, q. 4, a. 1.; **Augustine**, *City of God*, Bk. V, ix and Eric George **Jay**, *Origen’s Treatise on Prayer*. Vols. V–VI (London, 1954), 92–103.

²¹ Eleonore **Stump**, “Petitionary Prayer” – *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1979), 81–91.

²² Scott A. **Davison**, “Petitionary Prayer” – *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/petitionary-prayer/>, accessed 19.08.2017.

²³ Eleonore Stump, “Petitionary Prayer”, 84.

should be valid. In the Jewish world miracle is a cognitional and not metaphysical phenomenon. It is the perceptible and yet uncommon, unexpected intervention by a transcendental power. Yet it is not about the intervention into the natural law but about the perception of the transcendent initiator behind it.²⁴ The precondition for prayers' effectiveness is piety, a term that is closely linked to the Hebrew *hesed*.

PRAYER FOR RAIN – ELIJAH AND HONI THE CIRCLE-MAKER

We have two exemplary stories that illustrate the charisma of praying for rain: one from the Hebrew Bible and one from rabbinical sources, the first one centring on a prophet and the second one on a pious man and a miracle-worker, both possessing the gift of their prayers for rain being heard regardless of their way of praying.

The Hebrew Bible presents us with one of its most famous men of thaumaturgy and prayer – Israelite prophet Elijah active in Israel in the reigns of Ahab and Ahaziah (ninth century B.C.E.). The most dramatic point of Elijah's activity was his confrontation with the prophets of Baal and Ashera on mount Carmel in order to prove the superiority of the God of Israel over Baal (1 Kgs. 18:19–40), during which Elijah's prayer (1 Kgs. 18:36–37) is answered immediately (1 Kgs. 18:38).²⁵

This striking story, which ends with the killing of Baal's prophets at the brook of Kishron, is interwoven with another story connected with drought, the beginning and end of which were prophesied by Elijah. In 1 Kings 17:1 he says to king Ahab: "As the LORD the God of Israel lives,

²⁴ Gulkowitsch, *Die Bildung des Begriffes ḥāsīd I. Der Begriff ḥāsīd in der Gattung der Ma'āsijjōt. 1. Ḥāsīd und Wunder*, 30

²⁵ See on Elijah also Joshua **Gutmann** and S. David **Sperling**, "Elijah" – *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 6 (Detroit MI: Thomson Gale Macmillan, 2007), 331–333; Moses **Aberbach**, "Elijah: In the Aggadāh" – *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed, Vol. 6 (Detroit MI: Thomson Gale Macmillan, 2007), 333–334; Samuel Abba **Horodezky**, "Elijah: in Mysticism" – *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 6 (Detroit MI: Thomson Gale Macmillan, 2007), 334; Dov **Noy**, "Elijah: In Jewish Folklore" – *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed, Vol. 6 (Detroit MI: Thomson Gale Macmillan, 2007), 335.

before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”²⁶ And indeed a drought came over the land and only after defeating Baal’s prophets, Elijah went back up to mount Carmel to pray for rain to come as the Israelites had turned away from following Baal (1 Kgs. 18:41–46). Only that now, even though Elijah knew that rain would fall according to his word, as God had told him, it did not happen immediately. Elijah was not praying in front of the public but in solitude:

“(42b) there he bowed himself down upon the earth and put his face between his knees. (43) He said to his servant, “Go up now, look toward the sea.” He went up and looked, and said, “There is nothing.” Then he said, “Go again seven times.” (44) At the seventh time he said, “Look, a little cloud no bigger than a person’s hand is rising out of the sea.” Then he said, “Go say to Ahab, ‘Harness your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.’” (45a) In a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind; there was a heavy rain.”

Elijah and his followers saw this as a sign that God had forgiven the repentant people their sin of Baal-worship, which had been the cause of the drought (cf. 1 Kgs. 17:1).²⁷ One could naturally ask why did God need Elijah’s prayer when He as an omniscient being must have been aware of the repenting and if as such it was an effective prayer at all. It seems however that in this story of “I and Thou” it is the human who need constant perceptible proof to strengthen his faith. Therefore, it was yet another proof that Elijah was a man of God, and that the word of God in his mouth was truth (cf. 1 Kgs. 17:24).

It is exactly for this prayer for rain that Elijah is often used as an example on how to pray. This is especially true for the Christian tradition, as already James states in his epistle: “Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.” (James 5:17–18). Though in the light of the Hebrew Bible one could rephrase at least the first part of this sentence as: “He said it would not rain and it did not rain” as well as one could argue, what does it mean that he was a man just like us – not

²⁶ This and the following Bible-quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Edition.

²⁷ Gutmann and Sperling, “Elijah”, 332.

everybody can have the gift of prophecy but as it seems James refers to the fact that everybody can achieve the same level of righteousness necessary for ones prayers to be heard and Elijah here is exemplary for his trust and belief. Therefore, it is highlighted,²⁸ that Elijah prayed in faith (1 Kgs. 18:41), he prayed humbly (verse 42), persistently and definitely (verse 43), and he prayed successfully (verses 44, 45).

From the period of the second temple (first century B.C.E.) we have another man, a renowned miracle-worker and more precisely a rainmaker – Honi Hameaggel or Honi the Circle-Maker.²⁹ Talmudic literature contains several versions of more or less the same story that he is famous for.³⁰ According to one of them, Mishna Ta’anit 3,8³¹ it once happened, “that they said to Honi Hameaggel, ‘Pray for us, that rain may fall.’ He told them, ‘Go and bring in the Passover ovens, that they may not be spoiled by the rain.’ He prayed, and the rain did not descend. What did he then? He marked out a circle³², and placing himself within it,³³ thus prayed, ‘Creator of the world! thy children have looked up to me as being peculiarly favored by thee; I swear, by thy Great Name, that I will not move from this place until thou wilt have compassion on thy children.’ The rain began to drop down [gently]. He said, ‘It was not for this that I petitioned,

²⁸ E.g. by Max **Frei**, *Elias Gebet um Regen. I Könige 18,42–45* (2008), <http://www.chrischona-duebendorf.ch/Predigten/2008/Oktober/Predigt26Oktober2008.pdf>, accessed 19.08.2017.

²⁹ Judah Goldin, “On Honi the Circle-Maker: A Demanding Prayer” – *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (1963), 233–237.

³⁰ See the references in Ta’anit 19a and 23a (e.g. in the edition of H. Malter (New York, 1930) and cf. the variants and comments in his notes *ibid* and also Rabbinowitz and Epstein, *Ta’anit*), Mishna Ta’anit III, 8 (cf. Ta’anit 19a), Tos. Ta’anit III,1, jTa’anit III, 10–12 and Tanhuma, Ki Tavo.

³¹ Here according to the Sefaria Community Translation. (= <https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah-Taanit.3.9?lang=bi&with=all&lang=en> (09.10.2017)). (see also Rabbinowitz and Epstein, *Ta’anit*, 19a)

³² His name, Hameaggel (“circle drawer”), is usually taken to be connected with this incident. Zemah Gaon, however regarded it as the name of a place, and another suggestion is that it refers to his calling, which was to repair roofs – or ovens – with a *magillah* (“roller”). (“**Honi ha-Me’aggel**” – *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 9 (Detroit MI: Thomson Gale Macmillan, 2007), 518–519.

³³ In Ta’anit 23a it is said, that he stood inside the circle, in the manner that the prophet Habakkuk did, as it is stated: “And I will stand upon my watch and set myself upon the tower, and I will look out to see what He will say to me, and what I shall answer when I am reproved” (Hab. 2:1).

but for rain [sufficient to fill] wells, cisterns, and caves.’ The rain then fell in violent torrents; when he said, ‘Not for such rains did I petition, but for mild, felicitous, and liberal showers.’ The rain then fell in the usual manner, until the Israelites of Jerusalem were obliged to go from the city to the Temple mountain, on account of the rain. They came and said to him, ‘Even as thou didst pray that the rains might come down, thus pray now that they may cease.’ He said to them, ‘Go and see whether the Toim stone is covered by the waters’. Shimon ben Shetah sent him word, ‘If thou wert not Honi, I would order thee to be anathematised; but what shall I do to thee? Since thou sinnest against God, and yet he forgives and indulges thee like a favored child, who sins against his father, and is yet forgiven and indulged. To thee may be applied the text, ‘Thy father and mother shall rejoice, and they who begot thee shall be glad.’ (Prov. 23:25).”

A much shorter version of the story is found in Josephus’ “Antiquities”: “Now there was one, whose name was Onias, a righteous man he was, and beloved of God, who, in a certain drought, had prayed to God to put an end to the intense heat, and whose prayers God had heard, and had sent them rain.”³⁴

The story does not cast light upon the reasons for the drought but it does tell us that by this time there were people in Israel – or at least one man – who were known for and approached for their ability to pray effectively for rain, the latter being a gift or merit for piousness. When Gods chosen prophet Elijah had to wait for a while before rain fell, Honi managed to achieve immediate rainfall and the way it rains is changed upon his demand. Therefore, it is not a humble petitionary prayer but a demanding and bold one³⁵. Moreover, one, that some scholars think, is bordering on magic – circle-drawing being a magical act.³⁶ Yet this could also be interpreted in an historical context as an implication of urgency – circle-

³⁴ Flavius **Josephus**, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 14, Section 19 – *The Works of Flavius Josephus*. Translated by William Whiston, A.M. (Auburn and Buffalo: John E. Beardsley, 1895). (=http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0146%3Abook%3D14%3Asection%3D19 (09.10.2017))

³⁵ See on this specific aspect in Goldin, “On Honi the Circle-Maker: A Demanding Prayer”.

³⁶ Thus, for instance Joshua **Trachtenberg**, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York: Behrman’s Jewish Book House, 1939), 121; Judah **Goldin**, *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* (New Haven, 1955), 187, n. 25; Samuel **Daiches**, *Babylonian Oil Magic in the Later Jewish Literature* (London: Jews’ College, 1913), 33.

drawing being an authoritative act.³⁷ Making a circle and demanding from God to be heard links Honi actually to another prophet. In Midrash Tehillim 77:1³⁸ it is said of the prophet Habakkuk that he “drew the figure (of a circle) and standing inside it said before the Holy One, blessed be He: ‘I shall not stir from here until Thou hast told me how long Thou wilt be long-suffering with the wicked in this world’.” (cf. also Ta’anit 19b).

Even though Shimon ben Shetah would rather denounce him for his arrogance and dubious practice, he recognises his position as Father’s favourite child, who can misbehave but still get what he wants. A kind of parallel to Honi’s position can be found in Berakhot 34b where Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai is reported as acknowledging that he would not have been able to prevail in prayer (during his child’s illness), whereas his disciple Hanina ben Dosa could: “for the latter is like the king’s servant” (Rashi: enjoying entrée to the king at all times), “whereas I am like the king’s officer” (and hence can be admitted only by appointment).³⁹ Only that Honi’s charisma for prayer lay only in the prayer for rain.

TWO ENDS OF THE SAME CONCEPT IN THE LIGHT OF LAZAR GULKOWITSCH’ IDEAS

Was Honi a miracle-maker or a folk prophet as the Jewish Encyclopedia describes him and what binds him to Elijah?⁴⁰ An answer could possibly be found in the works of Lazar Gulkowitsch (1898–1941)⁴¹ that show that

³⁷ E.g. Goldin, “On Honi the Circle-Maker: A Demanding Prayer”, 233–234 (against his own views in Goldin, *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, 187).

³⁸ Solomon **Buber** (ed.), *Midrash Tehillim* (1891), 172a and W.G. **Braude** (trans.), *The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959) (= Yale Judaica Series 13[1–2]).

³⁹ Goldin, “On Honi the Circle-Maker: A Demanding Prayer”, 235.

⁴⁰ “Honi ha-Me’aggel”, 519.

⁴¹ A concise description of his life and work can be found in Anu **Pöldsam**, “Lazar Gulkowitsch” – *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception*, vol. 10: Genocide – Hamutal (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2015); more thorough description of his life, work, influence and reception can be found in Anu **Pöldsam**, *Lazar Gulkowitsch – eine vergessene Stimme der Wissenschaft des Judentums: seine Tätigkeit, sein Werk und seine*

the core of these two stories is the same, that they reflect the same story and same ideas, through different *typoi* and terms – namely the idea of Hasid. Gulkowitsch' decades-old ideas might be forgotten but they are not necessarily outdated. (Re)Introducing them is even more relevant as they have not been sufficiently introduced to an English-reader and due to the growing actuality of his views.⁴²

His scholarly objective was to capture the phenomenon of Judaism, both as a historical and as a contemporary religion, by exploring the Hebrew language as a mirror and basis of the history of Jewish ideas, and by outlining both its formal-grammatical and its material-conceptual aspects. He applied a method based on the history of ideas (*begriffsgeschichtliche Methode*), defining the central idea of Jewish culture (God, good, *hesed*, etc.). Gulkowitsch argued that the different periods of history have been characterised by the actualization of different aspects of this central concept. While in the context of the monotheism of the HB, the concept manifested itself in the notion of the God of history, which was then unfolded by the prophets, the further course of Jewish history introduced another aspect of the concept of God, namely its ethical aspect. Gulkowitsch then asked how this concept, the comprehension of God, was transposed into reality, that is, whether and in what way the idea was lived. He applied his method to the concept of "hasid" and followed it from its first appearance in the HB, through rabbinic and medieval Jewish narrative literature, to the Hasidic movement of the 18th–19th centuries. In Hasidism, according to him, the dialectic movement of the concept of Hasid was fulfilled.

For the demonstration of the inner cultural aspect of this development Gulkowitsch founded his study of the history of ideas on the concept of Hasid (devout, pious), an ideal type or a concept of attributes, that contains in itself all that seems for a Jew as admirable and desirable and that corresponds to the religious-ethical spiritual approach of Judaism and also embodies all the aspects of Jewish social life. The social aspect

Wirkung im zeitgeschichtlichen Kontext (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2011).

⁴² Ernst Müller, "Die Sprache ist immer die letzte Zuflucht" – *Frankfurter Allgemeine Feuilleton*. 16.07.2017. For the background see also Ernst Müller and Falko Schmieder, *Begriffsgeschichte und historische Semantik. Ein kritisches Kompendium* (= suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft; 2117) (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2016).

of the concept is according to Gulkowitsch of importance, as it can lead us to an understanding of the social structure of Judaism in general and to an insight of the importance and problem of the social phenomena for the history of the culture. Gulkowitsch aim is to clarify what modifications the concept of Hasid has undergone and what is the character of these modifications and further, through a case study of a word, to recognise the essence of a pious person and the manifestations of piety.⁴³ Additional questions that arise in connection to the concept Hasid are its character and interaction with other relevant concepts in Judaism – like prayer. Gulkowitsch therefore presents the development of the term Hasid through the OT and *Maasiyot* literature and undertakes a thorough research of the phenomenon of Hassidism.⁴⁴

He concludes that the concept of Hasid had primarily a sociological aspect, it served to describe a commonwealth and was not yet linked to religion in a strict way or when such purpose was needed, the name of God was added to the term. Therefore, the Hasidim of God was a cultural

⁴³ Lazar **Gulkowitsch**, *Die Bildung des Begriffes ḥāsīd I. Der Begriff ḥāsīd in der Gattung der Ma'asijjōt. 1. Ḥāsīd und Wunder*. ACUT, B XXXVII.6 (1936), (Tartu, 1935), 8. 15; Lazar **Gulkowitsch**, *Die Entwicklung des Begriffes ḥāsīd im Alten Testament*. ACUT, B XXXII.4 (1934) (Tartu, 1934), 5.

⁴⁴ His study began with his habilitation theses Lazar **Gulkowitsch**, *Der Hasidismus religionswissenschaftlich untersucht*. Veröffentlichungen des Forschungs-Instituts für vergleichende Religionsgeschichte an der Universität Leipzig, II. Reihe, Heft 6. (Leipzig, 1927) and resulted in individual studies: Lazar **Gulkowitsch**, *Die Entwicklung des Begriffes ḥāsīd im Alten Testament*. ACUT, B XXXII.4 (1934) (Tartu, 1934) = TŪJST. Acta Seminarii Universitatis Tartuensis Judaici, 1; Lazar **Gulkowitsch**, *Das Charisma des Gebetes um Regen nach der Talmudischen Tradition. Ein Beitrag zur Erfassung des religiösen Volkslebens in der Zeit Jesu*. (Vorlesungen und Übungen, gehalten an der Universität Uppsala, 24.–31. Oktober 1938). ACUT, B XLVI.4 (1940), (Tartu, 1939) = TŪJST. ASLJUT, 8.; Lazar **Gulkowitsch**, *Die Bildung des Begriffes ḥāsīd I. Der Begriff ḥāsīd in der Gattung der Ma'asijjōt. 1. Ḥāsīd und Wunder*. ACUT, B XXXVII.6 (1936), (Tartu, 1935) = TŪJST. ASLJUT, 2.; Lazar **Gulkowitsch**, *Die Bildung des Begriffes ḥāsīd I. Der Begriff ḥāsīd in der Gattung der Ma'asijjōt. Ḥāsīd und Gebet*. ACUT, B XLVI.5 (1940), (Tartu, 1940) = TŪJST. ASLJUT, 9. This thorough work with sources was followed by a trilogy of works dealing with Hassidism as a phenomenon, in which the dialectic movement of the term Hasid was completed. Lazar **Gulkowitsch**, *Die Grundgedanken des Chassidismus als Quelle seines Schicksals. Ein Beitrag zum Problem Idee und Leben*. ACUT, B. XLII.1 (1940) (Tartu, 1938) = TŪJST. ASLJUT, 6. (1938/40), Lazar **Gulkowitsch**, *Das kulturhistorische Bild des Chassidismus*. ACUT, B XLIII.3 (1939) (Tartu, 1938) = TŪJST. ASLJUT, 7.) and Lazar **Gulkowitsch**, *Der Chassidismus als kulturphilosophisches Problem*. ACUT, B XLVI.6 (1940) (Tartu, 1940) = TŪJST. ASLJUT, 10.

community, whose members partook in the ritual of the Temple and in a broader sense; anyone belonging to the people of Israel could have been called a Hasid. Gradually the expression became confined within the religious sphere and was used as a synonym for the religious community of Israel. The growing ethical aspect of Jewish religion affected also the usage of the term Hasid – now only a pious Jew could be called a Hasid. However, this did not inevitably mean the loss of the primary sociological character of the concept. Hasid became the ideal prototype of the pious community. It is in the medieval *Maasiyot* literature that Hasid is described as a simple individual whose convinced and active piety sets an example for all within the commonwealth.⁴⁵

A Hasid is someone who has a special relationship, special devotion like once the prophets had. Gulkowitsch explores the relationship of the Hasid to the attributes of the prophets by using as an example a group of texts that he calls Hasid-Elijah-stories. In these stories, Elijah, who plays a popular and multi-faceted role in Jewish tradition is a helper in need (*Nothelfer*) – an aid in acute distress, a representative of Gods redeeming justice – or even as a friend and teacher. He is “an embodiment of the communion with God that exists despite of and exactly because of all the suffering. He is the visible principle of the helping love of God and Israel’s communion with God.”⁴⁶ For Gulkowitsch Elijah symbolises the optimism inherit in Judaism that asserts itself in all the suffering and is as such an antithesis for the Christian idea of the wandering and suffering Jew.⁴⁷ He is God’s agent. His mouth is the mouth of God, his deeds are the realization of God’s will. He sees and knows more than others know. He is free of the narrow human perception of time and space. He is the guardian of justice and moral, judge and teacher of the people who knows that he is

⁴⁵ Lazar **Gulkowitsch**, *History as the History of Ideas with Special Reference to O.T. and Jewish History* (Read at Cambridge by Professor L. Gulkowitsch [Tartu]). *Lectiones in Vetere Testamento et in rebus judaicis*, No. 2. Shapiro. (London: Vallentine & Co., 1939), 10–11.

⁴⁶ University of Tartu Library Collection of Manuscripts and Rare Books (UTL CMRB), 47.9 (= Lazar **Gulkowitsch**, *Der Begriff des Idealismus in der israelitisch-jüdischen Geistesgeschichte. Konzepte, Notizen* (1932 or 1933)), 26. This file contains also his introduction and summary for the paper “Chassid und Elia” (the manuscript of the paper has been lost).

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

acting upon God's assignment even when he has no expressive guidance to do so. He is a charismatic of religious insight on one side and on the other an embodiment of religious life. The prophet is a helper in need whose help is bound to a single condition: religious-ethical worthiness.⁴⁸ His own gift is also bound to the same worthiness and therefore being a prophet is intertwined with possessing the charisma of prayer.⁴⁹

According to Gulkowitsch' understanding of the history of ideas the narrower meaning of the concept (*Begriff*) "prophet" changes but the concept itself is still existent in the term "Hasid", whose function lies not in the mystical, audio-visual experiences but in piousness, that finds proof in the world perceptible by senses.⁵⁰

Gulkowitsch assumes that for a limited period there existed a type of Hasid representing the prophetic heritage and possessing the charisma of prayer for rain. This charisma was linked to Hasid especially in the tannaitic period and from there on it became gradually a privilege of a certain family – the one of Honi the Circle-Maker.⁵¹ The bases for this assumption is found in the textual sources, the different variations of the story of Honi in Talmudic literature and in their comparison. Gulkowitsch shows that these texts – Ta'anit III, 10 (cf. Ta'anit 19a), Tosefta Ta'anit III, 1, (Zuckerman, 218), Ta'anit 23a and jTa'anit III, 10–12 – contain one story that underwent changes in regard of its focus (Pesach ovens; the flood; muttering people) and the main character.⁵² A story of an anonymous Hasid, an exemplary pious typos (Tos. Ta'anit III, 1) was

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ UTL CMRB, 47.14 (=Lazar **Gulkowitsch**, *Notizen und Bruchstücke der Aufsätze über den Chassidismus* (s.d)).

⁵¹ Gulkowitsch, *Die Bildung des Begriffes ḥāsīd I*, 35. One possible reason why this type of Hasid as prayer for rain later disappeared (in the Middle Ages), is according to Gulkowitsch connected to the milieu – in the context of the Jewish life outside Palestine, other distress might have become more important for the community than the lack of rain. (*Ibid.*, 25.)

⁵² Gulkowitsch does not give further reference on which edition of the Babylonian Talmud he is using as a source here; his quotes from Tosefta Ta'anit are taken from the Zuckerman edition (based on the Erfurt and Vienna Codices of which Gulkowitsch relies on the Erfurt one), he also refers to Codex Kaufmann and to the Edition by W.H. Lowe (Cambridge, 1883); his quotes from jTa'anit are taken from the Krotoschin edition of the Talmud Yerushalmi (Gulkowitsch, *Das Charisma des Gebetes*, 20–21).

connected to a tradition linked to the name of Honi – the ability to pray for rain is allotted to a certain family in a manner that must seem arbitrary in the short sighted view of men –, which in turn led to the abandoning of the tradition of Hasid in this particular story.⁵³ But there are still other stories, where the charisma to pray for rain is, in addition to the members of the family of Honi the Circle-Maker, related to specific *hasidim* like the *tannaim* Hanina ben Dosa, Shmuel Hakatan, rabbi Akiva, rabbi Jehuda Hanasi and *amoraim* Jehoshua ben Levi, Nahman bar Papa and others.⁵⁴

According to Gulkowitsch the correlation of this charisma with one family shows a magical background to this tradition, whereas the stories connected to Hasidim show this charisma as God's gift for their special piety. A prayer for rain can of course also be a genuine prayer but one cannot deny that causing rain to fall belonged to one of the regular tasks of magic. And in the person of Honi we can feel the growing influence of magic but he still keeps a balance – that's why Shimon ben Shetah cannot anathematise him.⁵⁵ Magic tries *de facto* mostly to solve an acute distress through an intervention by a non-human power. However, it does so by implementing a force, a compulsion that affects the causal law. Prayer comes from the opposite direction; it is a renunciation of one's own performance and power. That is why a prayer can never be wrong or ineffective.⁵⁶ The fulfilment of the prayer is not a condition *sine qua*. However, magic is always right only when it is effective.⁵⁷

It is obvious that for Gulkowitsch the most intriguing story can be found in Tosefta Ta'anit III, 1, where the main character is not called Honi but is an anonymous Hasid. The central question is, why do the people beseech specifically a Hasid to pray for rain? Was it because they expected miracles from him and assumed that he is a magician, a sorcerer? As we have already mentioned, the prayer for rain combines in it both the magical as well as the religious moment, but the typical Hasid shows according to Gulkowitsch little tendency to be identified with the typical Magician – on the contrary, the Hasid-stories exhibit a tendency to overwhelm the

⁵³ Gulkowitsch, *Das Charisma des Gebetes*, 32.

⁵⁴ Cf. Ta'anit 23a, 24ab, 25ab and Hullin 60a. (*Ibid.*, 37.)

⁵⁵ Gulkowitsch, *Das Charisma des Gebetes*, 39–40.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 39–40.

magical character of this charisma in favour of the religious character.⁵⁸ So the only reasonable answer to the question above seems for him to be that the Hasid appears in this context as someone of whom it is known that his prayers and therefore his prayer for rain are always answered. A Hasid is and remains a pious man, one of the folk; he is nothing that someone else could not be.⁵⁹

To be a Hasid is not an appointment but a special disposition. His distinctiveness lies not that he is a master of word and deed. He is also not a charismatic in the same way a prophet is – meaning a person who has received a special task given to him through a special gift. He embodies the society and therefore his task is one common to all the people without exception. The essence of the Hasid manifests itself only in how he fulfils this task.⁶⁰ Miracles do happen for him but he is only seldom a miracle worker. Not everyone can be a prophet (a leader and teacher of the congregation), but anybody can be a Hasid. It would of course be an ideal state of things if everyone was a prophet but the gift of prophecy is not a state of soul that one can acquire during one's religious development from one stage to another. It is not an unattainable level but a different category altogether, it is a gift bestowed upon someone with a specific purpose: prophets arise when the time demands it (compare Sota IX, 15 and others).⁶¹

The people and Hasid both possess the certainty of the prayers being answered, and it is exactly because of the certitude that the Hasid has the obligation to pray. It is an obligation like any other and one to be taken as seriously as any other is. Hasid understands that the efficiency of his prayers is God's gift for piety that is not expressed in external actions

⁵⁸ Gulkowitsch, *Das Charisma des Gebetes*, 38; Gulkowitsch, *Die Bildung des Begriffes ḥāsīd I. Der Begriff ḥāsīd in der Gattung der Ma'āsijjōt. Ḥāsīd und Gebet*, 21. Even if there is tendency to identify the Hasid with a charismatic man of prayer, it did not prevail. The reason for this lay possibly that such specific charisma would have led to a creation of a new class in the society, which contradicted the nature of Hasidim, who were representatives of the people as a whole and not of a specific class. (*Ibid.*, 49).

⁵⁹ Gulkowitsch, *Das Charisma des Gebetes*, 27f; Lazar Gulkowitsch, *Die Bildung des Begriffes ḥāsīd I. Der Begriff ḥāsīd in der Gattung der Ma'āsijjōt. Ḥāsīd und Gebet*, 16, 21, 22, 35, 41.

⁶⁰ Gulkowitsch, *Die Bildung des Begriffes ḥāsīd I. Der Begriff ḥāsīd in der Gattung der Ma'āsijjōt. 1. Ḥāsīd und Wunder*, 98.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 101–102.

but manifests itself in the integrity of the religious disposition – in the absolute commitment to God’s will.⁶² Gulkowitsch states that in some stories this disposition reveals itself in contemplative prayer. The latter, however, is used only for the purpose of a narration-technique, as the Hasid as such was not a representative of *via contemplativa*, but of practical piety, of *tzedakah*: “There is no place for mysticism here – the human does not disconnect himself, on the contrary, it is the human who speaks out here.”⁶³ Another variation of prayer connected with the typical Hasid in the stories, is the praise, the hymnal prayer, that occurs as a variant of the contemplative prayer. The aim of the praise is to exemplify how all this that is perceived by everybody as self-evident, is seen by the Hasid as the gift of God (even the most mundane things) and as a reason for joy – for the Hasid everything is religion and he lives for religion alone.⁶⁴

It is exactly this kind of awe of God, which is in Gulkowitsch’ words characteristic for the whole life of the Hasid as well as for a typical Hassidic prayer. This awe is the source of the intensity of Hassidic prayer that turns it into a worship that will not be interrupted even in the case of danger. And it is this awe that turns the Hassidic prayer into an authentic, simple and genuine petitionary prayer and thanksgiving.⁶⁵ In his view, this motif of the kind of close relationship between Hasid and God is present in all the Hasid-stories he studied. This reflects the ideal type of community, where every single person should have exactly this kind of relationship with God, this kind of trust and fulfil the religious obligations (*mitzvot*) without hesitation. Gulkowitsch arrives in his work to the conclusion that: “Im Typus des Chassid schuf sich die jüdische Religion, und zwar die gelebte Religion und nicht die Theologie, ein Symbol ihres Seins” (In the type of Hasid the Jewish religion – the lived one and not the theology – created a symbol for his being).⁶⁶

⁶² Gulkowitsch, *Die Bildung des Begriffes ḥāsīd I. Der Begriff ḥāsīd in der Gattung der Ma’āsijjōt. Ḥāsīd und Gebet*, 41, 51.

⁶³ Gulkowitsch, *Die Bildung des Begriffes ḥāsīd I. Der Begriff ḥāsīd in der Gattung der Ma’āsijjōt. Ḥāsīd und Gebet*, 37, 51.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 37–39. Gulkowitsch emphasises here that this is the reason why a Hasid can never be an ascetic.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 45, 47–48.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

This essence of Hasid is also the one that connects the charisma of prayer of the prophets with the one of a single family and exemplifies the essence of prayer as a “I-Thou” relationship, the quality of which relies on the religious-ethical effort made by humans. Prayer is a bridge between humans and God that everyone can build, though some are more skilled in this matter due to their hard work or special talent.