

Rabbi's Reflections

On *Ma'oz Tzur*: History, Melody, Meaning, Modern Israel, and Us

Ma'oz Tzur is one of the most well-known hymns, some say second only to *Ha-tikvah*. The musical theme represents *Hanukkah* in other liturgical uses. The few who sing other *Hanukkah* hymns use this melody, though both *Ma'oz Tzur* and they have other melodies sung now only in small regions. Originating in an old German folk song, known to Jews as early as 1450, even closer versions appeared in a soldier's song later in the 15th century, and in church hymns as early as 1474, including the first of Martin Luther's 1523 German chorales. The earliest known marriage of lyrics and melody appears in 1744 by Judah Elias of Hanover, though they may have been paired in the 16th century. Repeating the last verse is a bad modern "improvement." Without question the melody matches the lyrics and the spirit of the holiday, being hopeful and confident, majestic and daring, stirring and bright. You can imagine the Maccabees marching off to battle.

Mordekhai (the initial letter of the first five stanzas spells his name) wrote *Ma'oz Tzur* in the thirteenth century. Some say it is Mordekhai ben Isaac ha-Levi of France, who wrote the *Shabbat* table hymn *Mah Yafit*, "How beautiful and delightfully sweet you are, O Sabbath," or the *Tosafot* scholar of *Niddah* 36a, or a son-in-law of a 1096 Mayence martyr. Most scholars agree that the rarely printed sixth stanza, containing the acronym, *hazak* ("strength," appended to the poet's name wishing long life), was added later. It has been attributed to Rabbi Moshe Isserles (*ReMa*, Poland, 16th century, part author *Shulkhan 'Arukh*), Rabbi Jeremiah Wuerzburg, or Rabbi Samuel ben David Moses ha-Levi (Poland, 17th century, author *Nahalat Shivah*). Most people only know the loose, free *Union Hymnal* translation by Marcus Mordechai Jastrow and Gustav G. Gottheil.

The overall theme is that God unfailingly redeems us. Each stanza has four lines of two equal halves of six long syllables. The half line rhyme scheme is AB, AB, BB, CB. The verbs use the imperfect tense, meaning past actions and mind-states are not completed and continue to happen in later as in earlier time. Composed in a Jewish community that lived through 3 crusades in a generation, the setting is the Maccabees celebrating. Written in the first person, the author personifies the people Israel. The first stanza expresses our messianic hopes for restoring the Temple and its worship so we can sing songs of praise at the altar's dedication, both with and like the Maccabees. Stanzas 2-5, list four examples in chronological order where we suffered and God redeemed us. First is slavery in Egypt followed by the Exodus and the Egyptian army's drowning. Next is Babylonian exile followed by the Return to Zion (the words *shivat Ziyon* do not appear). Third is the *Purim* story, Mordekhai saves us from Haman's plot to kill us, and hangs his sons and him. Fourth is the *Hanukkah* story, the Hasmoneans (*i.e.* Maccabees) defeat the Greeks (*i.e.* Seleucids, *i.e.* Syria, and King Antiochus IV Epiphanies), referring to the singing and the small oil flask miraculously lasting eight days in the newly rededicated Temple. In the sixth stanza, we hope God speedily will avenge us and bring salvation from Christians (German Emperor Frederic Barbarossa, 1121-90 if it is original, which is unlikely, but may refer to later inter-Christian struggles, the Reformation). (Some include Muslims, but Jews from non-Christians lands do not sing it, so it is unlikely). Most books

omit this stanza, and often it is not sung when printed, “for the sake of peace” with our neighbors. Jastrow and Gottheil’s English version keeps the deliverance theme, but in the form of freedom, and lessens the ideas of vengeance, Temple service, and return from exile. It diminishes military might and encourages reliance on God.

The sixth stanza by updating history, questions the song’s theology. If God redeemed us in the past, why were earlier ones so brief and we still await the messianic kingdom? Professor Ismar Schorsch answers, see *Midrash Tehillim* on Psalm 31. *Ma’oz Tzur*’s opening is based on Psalm 31:2, “I seek refuge in You, O Lord; may I never be disappointed; as You are righteous, rescue me.” On *le’olam*, “never,” it asks how we reconcile the promise of redemption, and the fact of having been redeemed many times before, with the harsh reality of life; why, if redemption is everlasting, do we continue to suffer? God answers that previous redemptions have been effected through human agency, like Moses, Joshua, judges and kings, although God influenced events. By juxtaposing our current conditions, Schorsch argues, the sixth stanza tells us that previous redemptions mediated by mortal agency are not true redemption and must be of limited duration. This last one under Christian rule, only God directly can overthrow.

Schorsch writes, the *midrash* “confront[s] the harsh divergence between history and theology.” He concludes, “taken together, the two strata of *Maoz Zzur* blend into a liturgical reflection on Jewish history—the precariousness of minority existence, the reality of Divine concern, the consolation of collective memory, and the rarity of true messianism.” He further warns us not to overemphasize the human role in the *Hanukkah* story for deliverance was only temporary. Only when God brings the messiah will it become permanent. Without spelling it out, he draws a parallel to current Israel politics. Just as the Maccabees achieved only a limited redemption, he warns that, “messianism, properly understood, leads to political restraint.” *Ma’oz Tzur* reminds us that we should be careful what we see in the interaction of theology and history, that only God fulfills ultimate redemption.

--- Rabbi Michael Rascoe