

Ma'amireka—Ma'amirenu

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The traditional liturgical poem for the Jewish holy day Yom Kippur *kī 'ānū 'ammexā* ("For We are Your People") asks for divine forgiveness, justifying it on the basis of the bond between Israel and God. That bond is depicted as reciprocal in nature, metaphorically expressed in terms of a variety of relationships, for example, people and God, children and parent, servants and master, sheep and shepherd. The first eleven of these complementary pairs reflect imagery and conceptualizations familiar from the Hebrew Bible. The twelfth pair, however, employs relatively rare and imperfectly-understood terms: *'ānū ma'āmirexā ve'attā ma'amirenū*.

English renderings differ considerably from one Yom Kippur prayer book to another, as in the following sampling: "We have *chosen* You, and You have *chosen* us;"¹ "We are the ones You *address*, and You are the One to whom we *speak*;"² "We are thy *worshippers*, and thou art our *exalting* One;"³ "We are your *faithful*, and you are our *source of faith*."⁴

In an extended discussion of the liturgy for the Days of Awe, one translator of our poem pursues a different course: "We are *pledged* to Thee and Thou art *pledged* to us."⁵ The pair *ma'āmirexā-ma'amirenū* is then

¹ Jules Harlow (ed.), *Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 1978).

² Edward Feld et al. (eds.), *Mahzor Lev Shalem* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2010).

³ Philip Birnbaum (ed.), *High Holiday Prayer Book* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1951).

⁴ David Teutsch (ed.), *Kol Haneshamah: Prayerbook for the Days of Awe* (Jenkinstown, PA: Reconstructionist Press, 1999).

⁵ Max Arzt, *Justice and Mercy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), 214.

traced back to its biblical source in Deut. 26:17-18, which likewise speaks of God and Israel in a mutual relationship, identically expressed by the verb *he’ēmīr*, i.e., the *hiph’il*, or causative conjugation, of *’āmar*, “to say.”

The relevant portions of Deut. 26:17-18 reads and is here understood as follows:

’et YHWH he’ēmārtā hayyōm lihyōt lakā lē’lōhīm...

waYHWH he’ēmīrākā hayyōm lihyōt lō lə’am sēgullā....

Today you had YHWH pledge (lit. “say”) to be your God...

And today YHWH had you pledge (lit. “say”) to be His treasured people....

Here, each of the two forms of the verb *he’ēmīr* is taken to mean “to have someone say (something),” that is, to make someone pledge or verbally commit to something publicly.

For obvious reasons, Israel’s “having” or “making” God speak the required words is a notion not without theological difficulties. Translations, ancient and modern alike, have tried to avoid the problem by avoiding a literal rendering. Thus the Septuagint translated these verses into Greek as “Today you have *chosen* God...Today the LORD has *chosen* you (*hairéō*)...,” an interpretation followed in the Latin of the Vulgate (*dēligo*). The Aramaic Targumim offer: “Today you have *acted well* towards the LORD...Today the LORD has *acted well* towards you...” (Onkelos), and “Today you have *made* ‘The Word of God’ *King* over you...Today ‘The Word of God’ has *acted well* towards you...” (Pseudo-Jonathan).

In medieval Jewish exegesis, Rashi, for example, explains the text as employing the language of “setting apart and separating,” i.e., Israel’s having *separated* YHWH for itself from among foreign gods, and God, in turn, having

set Israel *apart* for Himself from among the nations of the earth. Quite differently, Ibn Ezra associates *heʿēmīr* with the language of “greatness,” citing *ʿāmīr* in Isa 17:6, “top-most bough,” further comparing Arabic *ʿamīr* “chief.” Accordingly, he renders *heʿēmīrākā* in Deut. 26:18 “He has *exalted* you.”⁶ In a similar vein, Naḥmanides understands the two verses as expressing mutual “magnification” and “elevation,” i.e., the exaltation of God by Israel, and the exaltation of Israel by God.

As examples of modern translations, *The New English Bible* has “You have *recognized* the Lord this day...The LORD has *recognized* you this day...,” and *The New American Bible* renders the verses: “Today you are *making this agreement* with the LORD...And today the LORD is *making this agreement* with you....” Everett Fox translates: “YHWH you have *declared* today...And YHWH has *declared* you today....”⁷ The 1917 Jewish Publication Society *The Hebrew Scriptures* follows the 1611 King James translation with “Thou hast *avouched* the LORD this day...And the LORD has *avouched* thee this day...,” while its more recent translation⁸ updates the English of its rendering of *heʿēmīr* from the archaic “*avouched*” to “*affirmed*,” while adding a note that its meaning is uncertain.

It will be observed that the above renderings do not reflect the simplest and most straightforward understanding of the transitive use of the verb *ʿāmar* in the *hiphʿil*, with the Deity as its direct object (following the *nota accusativi*), namely that Israel had elicited, and so brought about YHWH’s solemn declaration. Rather, one might hazard the guess that in these translations the use of the *hiphʿil* of *ʿāmar* has been construed as having

⁶ M. Friedlander, *The Commentary of Ibn Ezra on Isaiah*, I (London, 1873; reprint: New York: Feldheim, 1966), 82.

⁷ *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 971.

⁸ *Tanakh* (Philadelphia, New York and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

strengthened the verb, so as to transform a simple act of speech into a formal affirmation, or public avowal.

The lone attestation of the verb *he'ēmīr* in the Mishnah is found in *Sotah* 9:15, cited in TB *Sotah* 49b. The usage there, however, is of no help for the proper translation of either Deut. 26:17-18 or its echo in our liturgical poem. Indeed, there is no unanimity in the interpretation of the Mishnaic passage itself: *bə'iqqəvōt məšīḥā' ḥuṣpā' yisge' veyoqer ya'āmīr*. The translations of both Danby⁹ and Neusner¹⁰ understand it to mean that, as the Messianic age approaches, both “presumption” as well as “dearth” will “increase.”¹¹ To the contrary, the Soncino edition renders “insolence will *increase* and honour *dwindle*.”¹²

That the meaning of the verb *he'ēmīr* in Deut 26:17-18 is to be understood in the context of taking solemn oaths was grasped as early as the Midrash *Lamentations Rabbah* 1:53 (// BT *Gittin* 57b): “We swore to our God not to exchange Him for some other deity, and, even as we swore to Him, He swore to us not to exchange us for some other nation.” The understanding of Deut. 26:17-18 as referring to mutually-binding promises of loyalty spoken by God and Israel is further developed in medieval exegesis. As my friend and colleague, the late lamented Chaim Cohen ז"ר pointed out (private communication), Ibn Ezra (12th c.) follows his own interpretation with that of “Rabbi Judah ha-Levi the Spaniard,” who derives the biblical verbs from *ʾāmar*, “to say, speak,” explaining that both God and Israel had acted in such a way as to prompt each other’s declarations of loyalty. It may be added that in the same period virtually the same interpretation was advanced by Rabbi

⁹ Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 306.

¹⁰ Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 465.

¹¹ Cf. Hanoach Albeck, *Shishshah Sidrei Mishnah* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1955), *Seder Nashim*, 261-262: *yigdal, ya'ā'leh*.

¹² *The Soncino Talmud*, CD-ROM, Judaica Classics Library (New York, 1991-1995).

Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam; 12th c.), who spoke of God and Israel having each morally obligated the other to declare their respective commitments.¹³

The preeminent biblical scholar S. R. Driver surmised the precise legal nuance and force of the language employed in Deut. 26, explicating as follows:

heʿēmīr (which occurs only here and in v. 18) was perhaps a term used technically by the contracting parties in a covenant, each causing the other to recite the terms of the agreement between them....That Israel “*caused, or occasioned, Jehovah to say,*” is not, of course, literally exact; but the expression follows from the nature of the case, and is a consequence of Jehovah’s having condescended to become one of the contracting parties to a covenant.¹⁴

The precise legal force of *heʿēmīr*, “to have, or cause someone to say,” finds documentation in a striking parallel drawn from the language of oath-taking or treaty-making in Akkadian. The exact equivalent of Hebrew *heʿēmīr* in Akkadian is *šuzkuru*, i.e., the common verb *zakāru*, “to say,” employed in the III, or causative, conjugation. Akkadian *šuzkuru* is used in the sense of making someone recite an oath or, more specifically, to commit to the terms of a treaty by way of a formal, public declaration. So, for example, the Neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon administers an oath to those who swear to insure his legitimate succession: *zikiršun kabtu ušazkiršunūti*, “I made them swear (lit. “speak”) their solemn oath.”¹⁵ Likewise attested in

¹³ I am grateful for having been reminded by the editors of the valuable insights into the biblical models of covenantal reciprocity made by our late teacher Yochanan Muffs; see his *Love and Joy: Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel* (New York and Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), 50-51.

¹⁴ S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, ICC, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1895), 293.

¹⁵ Borger, *Esarhaddon*, 40:19, cited CAD, Z, 21. Cf. Arthur C. Piepkorn, *Historical Prism Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal, I*, (*Assyriological Studies* 9; Chicago, 1933), 80, Ed. B, VII: 97-98 *šu[m ilāni rabūti] uša[z]kiršūma a[tarsamain] utīrma ad(d)inšu*. “I made him pro[n]ounce the oat[h of the great gods] and returned A[tarsamain] to him.”

Akkadian is the use of the synonymous verb *qabû*, “to speak, say,” in the causative conjugation (*šubû*), denoting to make someone recite his oath: *šum ilāni* (the star) Sirius *ultaqbīš*, “he made him swear (lit. “speak”) the oath (lit. “name”) of the gods by (the star) Sirius.”¹⁶

Akkadian *šuzkuru* and *šubû*, causative forms of verbs meaning “to speak, say,” are clearly the exact morphological and semantic equivalents of Hebrew *he’ēmīr*, likewise the causative form of the verb “to speak, say.” It is suggested here that these three verbs also share the same specific legal application, i.e., making parties to a treaty recite their respective oaths. The broader context of Deut. 26:16-19 involves verbalizing Israel’s agreement to abide by God’s law, as well as God’s re-stating the promises made to Israel. That is, it reflects the element of formal, spoken dialogue in performance of a ritual solemnizing the covenant between God and Israel, as attested, for example, in Joshua 24. In v. 22 of the latter, at God’s behest, the people are bidden to acknowledge their acceptance of the Deity’s terms by pronouncing in unison the word *‘ēdīm*, “(We are indeed) witnesses!” In the particular case of Deut. 26:17, however, the roles are reversed, and it is Israel who elicits from the Deity a statement of divine commitment.

In the liturgical poem with which I began, *kī ‘ānū ‘ammexā*, the line *‘ānū ma’āmīrexā ve’attā ma’āmīrenū* clearly echoes the language and underlying legal ritual of Deut. 26:17-18, deviating from its biblical source by having replaced the use of *he’ēmīr* in the perfect with the participle *ma’āmīr*. Reproducing in English translation the compactness of what is only four words in the Hebrew poem poses its own kind of challenge, but, in this case, so does attempting to preserve the legal formality of the original. Tentatively, I offer as a suggestion something along the lines of, “We’ve had

¹⁶ R. P. Dougherty (ed.), *Goucher College Cuneiform Inscriptions*, II (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), 395:24, cited CAD, Q, 41.

You give Your word, and You've had us give ours," or, more succinctly,
"We've taken Your oath, as You've taken ours."