

# The Story of Leonard Cohen's 'Who by Fire', a Prayer in the Cairo Genizah, Babylonian Astrology and Related Rabbinical Texts<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In this essay, I trace the textual background, ancient ideas and influences behind the song 'Who by Fire', a well-known composition by the Jewish Canadian poet and singer-songwriter, Leonard Cohen. It is a standard number in his live repertoire and in his album compilations.<sup>2</sup> The song's lyrics consist of a mixture of verbatim and modern rewording of the second section of *Unetaneh toqef*, a Hebrew liturgy recited in the synagogue on the Jewish New Year – Rosh Hashanah, and the Day of Atonement – Yom Kippur, ten days later, that describes various rewards and unusual fatal punishments to be meted out according to the outcome of divine judgement. The part of *Unetaneh toqef* on which Cohen's song is based opens with the verse: 'On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.' This is a reference to one's forthcoming fate in the coming year.

The first section of the synagogue prayer is quite different.<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise specified all references to *Unetaneh toqef* refer to the second part, that which

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Ben Outhwaite, Head of the Genizah Research Unit, Cambridge, for re-dating the Cairo Genizah manuscript and for assistance with the problematic first line of the text at my request, and to Francesca Rochberg for kindly sending me her unpublished paper on the Babylonian concept of divine law. I am also grateful to Pennina Barnett for her feedback on the final draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen's albums which contain 'Who by Fire' include: *New Skin for the Old Ceremony* (Columbia, 1974), *The Best of Leonard Cohen* (Columbia, 1975), *So Long, Marianne* (Columbia, 1989), *Cohen Live* (Sony, 1994), *The Essential Leonard Cohen* (Columbia, 2002), *MOJO Presents: An Introduction to Leonard Cohen. 23 Classic Songs* (Sony, 2003), *Live in London* (2009). The song was covered by the band The House of Love on the tribute album *I'm Your Fan* (EastWest Record, UK; Sony, France; Atlantic Records, US; 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Idelsohn summarizes the first section of *Unetaneh toqef* as describing 'the procedure of Judgment and the stir it occasions among the hosts on high.' A. Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy and Its Development*, New York: Dover Publications [replication of 1st edition 1932, New York: Henry Holt], 220. The 'procedure' includes God writing in the Book of Remembrance, sealing it, and considering the souls of all mankind, the angels trembling in awe and mustering for the Day of Judgement, and the sounding of the trumpet of judgement, the *shofar*, a ram's horn.

contains the words in the title of Cohen's song, 'Who by Fire'. The song's title is taken from a hemistich in the synagogue liturgy, who will die by fire, one way amongst several possible ways that a person's natural life can be curtailed. The synagogue liturgy infers that everyone has a destiny and it closes with a verse exclaiming that the 'evil decree' can be bypassed by practising 'repentance [*teshuvah*], prayer [*tefillah*] and charity [or righteousness, *tzdaqah*].'

This essay follows the path from Cohen's text back through 1,000 years of history: the *Unetaneh toqef* as it is read in synagogues today, the eleventh-century Cairo Genizah version of the prayer in a water-damaged Hebrew manuscript rediscovered in this research and presented in a preliminary translation for the first time, a Babylonian astrological tablet, Hebrew Bible texts and related rabbinical writings. Cohen's song, in which each stanza is written in the style of the synagogue prayer, may be regarded through a telescope of history, taking into account historical discussions about how one can control one's destiny.

This study begins with Cohen's own intellectual and musical interpretations of his version of the prayer as he has performed it for more than 35 years.

### *Unetaneh toqef* in Cohen's words

'Who by Fire' first appeared on Cohen's 1974 album, *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*, in the form of a duet with Janis Ian. The lyrics begin with 'And who by fire, who by water,' strongly alluding to the forms of dying, fate and judgement recited in the synagogue prayer, using an intriguing mixture of rural and traditional, with urban and modern imagery.

The composition consists of four verses of three couplets each, the fourth verse repeating the lyrics of the first. The first five lines in each verse take the form of parallel, contrasting statements, such as, 'Who in the night-time, who in the day-time,' echoing contrasting forms of parallelism in Hebrew poetry. They are prefixed by the interrogative phrase 'Who by . . .' or 'Who in . . .' As Ratcliffe notes, no verb follows the roll-call of the destinies of different souls.<sup>4</sup> The sixth and final line – a question – in each verse contains the only verb in each stanza: 'And who shall I say is calling?' It is an unexpected rhetorical device, not in the synagogue prayer, and it is disconnected structurally from the preceding lines, yet on a mystical and thematic level it fits them perfectly.<sup>5</sup>

In a video interview accompanying a performance of 'Who by Fire', Cohen explains that he based his composition on the contemporary synagogue

<sup>4</sup> M. Ratcliffe, *Leonard Cohen: The Music and the Mystique* (London: Omnibus, 2012), 31.

<sup>5</sup> For copyright reasons we are unable to provide the lyrics. Readers may use a search via a licensed provider, to find the lyrics using key words, such as 'Who by Fire.' One such licensed website is, <http://www.metrolyrics.com/> [accessed 24 January 2014].

prayer and that he changed the central idea of Judgement.<sup>6</sup> The interview is as follows:

Leonard Cohen: That song derives very directly from a Hebrew prayer that is sung on the Day of Atonement or the evening of the Day of Atonement, *Mi Bamayim, Mi Baherev* (מי במים מי בהרב) 'Who by fire, Who by sword, Who by water' [sic].<sup>7</sup> According to the tradition, the Book of Life is opened and in it is inscribed all those who will live and all those who will die for the following year. And in that prayer is catalogued all the various ways in which you can ... [he pauses] quit this vale of tears.

The melody, if not actually stolen, is certainly derived from the melody that I heard in the synagogue as a boy. But, of course, the conclusion of the song, as I [Cohen's emphasis] write it is somewhat different: 'Who shall I say is calling?' [There is longer pause].

Interviewer: Who is calling?

Leonard Cohen: Well, that is, that is, that is what makes the song into a prayer. For me, in my terms, who is it, or what is it that determines who will live and who will die.

The musical arrangement of Cohen's 'Who by Fire' has developed in various ways over 35 years. Some of the videoed performances are different from the range of musical arrangements on the live and studio albums (there are now hundreds of performances available to watch or listen to on YouTube, many having been filmed at his concerts and uploaded by fans). The original version was musically unusual enough to be commented on by several biographers and musical journalists. Tim Footman describes the 1974 musical arrangement with Janis Ian, as hinting at 'Hasidic melancholy'.<sup>8</sup> The song's ending is abrupt, possibly in keeping with the musical depiction of the one who is 'calling'. Whatever the reason, the effect impressed the music writer Ratcliffe sufficiently to remark:

(I am not aware of any other instance of a song ending in a bass solo. If it is as unique as my experience suggests, then it is a marvellous bit of musical originality dropped casually into the set).<sup>9</sup>

Ratcliffe reports that the arranger of 'Who by Fire', Tony Palmer, thought that it was

<sup>6</sup> The URL on [www.youtube.com: Leonard Cohen-Who By Fire with interview \(1979\)](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=elbG-SFJM8w) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=elbG-SFJM8w> (uploaded on 21 March 2009 by 'messalina79'). [Accessed 12 September 2013]. The source of the video, with French sub-titles, is not given in the metadata.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen does not translate 'Who by fire' (*Mi Ba'esh*) into Hebrew.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Footman, *Leonard Cohen. Hallelujah. A New Biography* (New Malden, Surrey: Chrome Dreams, 2009), 97.

<sup>9</sup> Ratcliffe, *Leonard Cohen. The Music and the Mystique*, 77.

one of his [Cohen's] most profound songs . . . The first time you hear it, you're struck by the power of the imagery . . . the simplicity of the music . . .

Describing it as a 'haunting, eerie hymn-like song' Ratcliffe explains that it

. . . did in fact owe its origins to the eleventh century Jewish prayer known as *Unetanneh Toqef* or *Unesanneh* [Ashkenazi pronunciation] *Toqef* but Cohen rarely spoke of the background to his songs and the musicians and producer responded to them purely as music.<sup>10</sup>

Stephen Scobie remarks that the dominant string arrangement in the original recording reflects the song's spirit of deep anticipation:

'Who by Fire' is a brilliantly unsettling *memento mori*. The verses simply list possible ways of dying. The ominous mood is marvellously sustained by the backing vocals and the jerky strings arrangement.<sup>11</sup>

Dorman and Rawlins intuit that Cohen is articulating a revision of the Jewish theme of divine judgement:

'Who by Fire,' based on a prayer recited at the sacred time of atonement, when reconciliation is effected, echoes the response-to-the-voice that repeatedly finds expression in later work. But the context to the original prayer is one of judgement; a call to self-examination. There can be no reconciliation without that, is the inference.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to the emphasis on arrangements with stringed instruments in different versions of 'Who by Fire,' Cohen's only jazz and blues-style rendition of his prayer (to my knowledge), took place on an American jazz and eclectic music show, 'Night Music'.<sup>13</sup> He was accompanied by the world famous saxophonist Sonny Rollins, other session jazz musicians, and harmonizing male backing singers (highly unusual for Cohen) in addition to his then-regular female backing singers. The prominent wind instrumentals produced a very different type of lead-in, appearing to riff on the sound of the blowing of the *shofar*, part of the ritual for Rosh Hashanah.

Rollins completes the song on his saxophone with a solo that also appears to follow the pattern of the *shofar*. These notes are the *tekia*, a long stretched sound; *shevarim*, three broken notes; and *tērua*, nine staccato notes, then the repetition of

<sup>10</sup> Ratcliffe, *Leonard Cohen. The Music and the Mystique*, 119. His assertion that the prayer can be sourced in an eleventh-century text is supported in this essay (he does not give a source for his information).

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Scobie, *Leonard Cohen* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1978), 167.

<sup>12</sup> Lorraine S. Dorman and Clive L. Rawlins, *Leonard Cohen, Prophet of the Heart* (London: Omnibus, 1990), 277.

<sup>13</sup> TV show 'Night Music', 13 February 1989, 'Who by Fire', featuring Sonny Rollins on YouTube [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) (Leonard Cohen/ Sonny Rollins-Who By Fire-Night Music, uploaded 24 April 2011). The recording is not on an album.

the *tekia*.<sup>14</sup> This sound sequence has little to do with any recognizable jazz rhythm or musical harmony. The saxophone solo contrasts with the original ending, on a bass, ending abruptly, but it retains the challenging idea of the End of Life by concluding on what must surely be the lowest possible notes on a saxophone.

The visual presentation of the 'Night Music' performance is also memorable. The camera begins on a close-up of Rollins and slowly pulls out during the instrumental introduction to reveal the other musicians and Cohen who, against convention, has his back three-quarters profile to the audience, facing Rollins, who is behind him. After singing the lyrics to 'Who by Fire', enhanced by counter harmonies, blues-style and accompaniments by a male vocalist, Cohen turns around a full 180 degrees. He presents his back to the camera completely and watches Rollins's *shofar*-sax finale, as if facing the *bimah*. Ratcliffe comments that Cohen is 'visibly moved' and that he observes Rollins's solo 'with obvious reverence'.<sup>15</sup>

### Various transmissions

In his biography of Cohen, *Various Positions* (the book title comes from Cohen's 1984 album of the same name), Nadel describes Cohen's Orthodox Jewish background and his connection with rabbis and Judaic scholars on both sides of his family.<sup>16</sup> Intellectually and spiritually, Simmons informs us in the biography, *I'm Your Man* (named after the title-track of Cohen's 1988 album) that Cohen leans towards Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah.<sup>17</sup> Cohen's deep Judaic knowledge is probably reflected in a hermeneutical aspect of the lyrics in 'Who by Fire'; in particular, Cohen's verse: 'Who by high ordeal, who by common trial,' may be an allusion to line 10 in the second section of the *Unetaneh toqef*. It is best to see this in its surrounding context, and so here is the relevant part of the liturgy, as experienced in today's synagogue service.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Unetaneh toqef*

1. On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed,
2. And on the Day of the Fast of Kippur it is sealed.
3. How many will pass over and how many will be created,
4. Who will live and who will die,
5. Who will reach the end of his days and who shall not reach the end of his days,

<sup>14</sup> See Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy*, 211–12, for the technical description of the blowing of the *shofar*.

<sup>15</sup> Ratcliffe, *Leonard Cohen. The Music and the Mystique*, 217.

<sup>16</sup> Ira B. Nadel, *Various Positions: A Life of Leonard Cohen* (New York: Random House, 1996), 7, 9, 10, 11–14, 19, 213–4.

<sup>17</sup> Sylvie Simmons, *I'm Your Man: The Life of Leonard Cohen* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012), 438–440.

<sup>18</sup> My modified translation from Scherman, *Artscroll Machzor*, 532–3. The arrangement of verses is mine to illustrate the poetry.

6. Who by water and who by fire,
7. Who by sword and who by beast,
8. Who by famine and who by thirst
9. Who by earthquake and who by plague,
10. Who by strangulation and who by stoning.
11. Who will rest and who will wander,
12. Who will have quiet and who will be savaged,
13. Who will be undisturbed and who shall be tormented,
14. Who will be poor and who will be enriched,
15. Who will be brought low and who will be exalted,
16. But repentance, and prayer and charity avert the evil decree<sup>19</sup>

The stich, 'Who by strangulation and who by stoning.' מי בחניקה ומי בסקיילה, may be an allusion to the four methods of capital punishment for biblical sins or crimes, described in the Mishneh (*Sanhedrin* 45a and 52a, 52b) and codified by Maimonides (1135–1204) in his *Mishneh Torah* (*Sanhedrin*: chapter 15): stoning, *Seqilah*; burning, *Serefah*; beheading, *Hereg*; and strangulation, *Heneq*.<sup>20</sup> It is possible that for the author of line 10, the hemistichs 6b and 7b – 'Who by Fire,' *Mi Baesh* and 'Who by Sword,' *Mi Baherev* – refer to rabbinical methods of execution. Such an interpretation might be in keeping with the prayer for atonement that includes advice on how to avoid a terrible punishment.

It would be fair to say that most modern congregants would not know that the inclusion of strangulation referred to a rabbinical method of biblical capital punishment. To worshippers without advanced knowledge of the Talmud, the verse seems incongruous. The language of verse 10 is not poetic, but legalistic and somewhat obscure – stoning is mentioned in the Bible,<sup>21</sup> and therefore, understood, but strangulation is not. It is not an absolute given that 'death by fire' and 'death by sword' refer to capital punishments; in fact, those manners of death are not specific. Furthermore, the technical legal terminology for capital punishment by burning: pouring molten lead down a person's throat, and being put to the sword: decapitation,<sup>22</sup> are not used in the liturgy. The poetry states *Mi Baesh*, 'Who By Fire,' not *Mi Baserefah*, 'Who By the Burning Punishment.'

<sup>19</sup> See also Rabbi Joel M. Hoffman (Trans), 'Behind the Translation,' in *Who By Fire, Who By Water—Untaneh tokef*. Edited by Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2010), 33–48.

<sup>20</sup> Irene Marker Rosenberg and Yale L. Rosenberg, 'Of God's Mercy and the Four Biblical Methods of Capital Punishment: Stoning, Burning, Beheading and Strangulation,' *Tulane Law Review* 78 (2003): 1169–1212 (esp. 1169–1204).

<sup>21</sup> Deut: 22:20, 24.

<sup>22</sup> The mishnaic methods for the four methods of execution are given as: stoning in tractate *Sanhedrin* (45a); burning: *Sanhedrin* (52a); decapitation and strangulation: *Sanhedrin* 52b; Fred Rosner (ed. and trans) *Maimonides' Commentary on the Mishnah: Tractate Sanhedrin* (New York: Sepher Hermon Press, 1981).

I would argue that Cohen's verse 'Who by high ordeal, who by common trial' is exegeting and poeticizing 'Who by strangulation and who by stoning,' since he is working closely with the synagogue text. His verse, referring to different types of earthly judgement, may suggest that Cohen has understood that the synagogue prayer contains a reference to rabbinical capital punishment. If so, it is possible that Cohen translated the line to keep the Hebrew poetic parallelism and the prayer's abbreviated, repetitive literary form in order to faithfully render the liturgy's meaning.

### The history of the history

Until the 1950s there was an accepted tradition that the *Unetaneh toqef* was an early medieval liturgical poem that had been either composed or introduced into the Rosh Hashanah service by a Rabbi Amnon of Mainz who was martyred in the eleventh century. Rabbi Amnon is said to have appeared in a dream to a well-known medieval rabbi telling him to disseminate the prayer in the diaspora as his memorial.<sup>23</sup> In Scherman's account Rabbi Amnon intended the prayer to be said at the Rosh Hashanah service and it was included in the Yom Kippur service in most communities at a later date. Some modern *machzorim* (the prayer book used for services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur) repeat this tradition.<sup>24</sup> The current dominant view, however, is that the prayer originated in Palestine in the Byzantine period and that Rabbi Amnon is a legend.<sup>25</sup>

The story of Rabbi Amnon was reassessed in the late 1950s following the information from Dr M. Zulay, of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, that the

<sup>23</sup> The story is contained in the *Sefer Or Zarua*, a work by Rabbi Isaac ben Moses of Vienna (1180–1250) who said he took it from a manuscript written by Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn (1132–1197) who stated that the story came from Kalonymous of Mainz (c.1000) who said that *Unetaneh Toqef* had been revealed to him in a dream by Rabbi Amnon of Mainz and that he should spread it to dispersed Jews. E. Werner, *The Sacred Bridge: The interdependence of liturgy and music in synagogue and church in the first millennium* (London: Dobson, 1959), 252–253. E. G. L. Schrijver, 'Some Light on the Amsterdam and London manuscripts of Isaac Ben Moses of Vienna's Or Zarua', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library* 75:3 (1993): 53–82. See, Ivan G. Marcus, 'A Pious Community and Doubt: Jewish Martyrdom among Northern European Jewry and the Story of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz,' in *Essays in Hebrew Literature in Honour of Avraham Holtz* (ed. Zvia Ben-Yosef Ginor; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2003), 21–46 (at 35–37). See, the article by Rabbi Prof. David Golinkin, President of the Schechter Institutes, 'Do Repentance, Prayer and Tzedakah Avert the Severe Decree?' in The Schechter Institutes's online newsletter, *Insight Israel* 6 (2005), Appendix A: <http://www.schechter.edu/insightisrael.aspx?id=19>.

<sup>24</sup> Scherman, *Artscroll Machzor*, 530.

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence A. Hoffman, 'Un'taneh Tokef as Poetry and Legend,' in *Who By Fire, Who By Water*, ed. Hoffman, 13–24; and idem (trans), 'The Legend of Rabbi Amnon,' 26–8. Cf. Menahem Schmelzer, 'Penitence, Prayer and (Charity?),' in *Minhah le-Nahum: Biblical and Other Studies Presented to Nahum M. Sarna in Honour of his 70th Birthday* (eds. Marc Brettler and Michael Fishbane; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 291–9 (at 291).

prayer was in a manuscript from the Cairo Genizah and that it probably dates back to the eighth century.<sup>26</sup> The reliability of this date, which is much earlier than most other manuscripts in the Genizah, seems questionable. Dr Zulay's opinion on the age of the manuscript has now been re-evaluated by Dr Ben Outhwaite, Head of the Genizah Research Unit at Cambridge University. At my request Dr Outhwaite kindly looked at the digitized manuscript on the Friedberg Genizah Project website and considered there was no reason to date the manuscript to an unusually early period. He also found that the handwriting style was Syro-Palestinian, not European:

... it's a Syro-Palestinian hand of the 11th c., I would say: not particularly early, but very much Classical Genizah Period. Also it's on paper, so a date before the end of the 10th c. would have to have extraordinary justification.<sup>27</sup>

The manuscript has, therefore, very probably been unrealistically dated to the late eighth century,<sup>28</sup> instead of the eleventh century, the period into which most of the medieval Jewish archive from the Cairo Genizah falls. As it is written in a Syro-Palestinian hand, there is no primary source evidence of its having eleventh-century European origins to support the story of Rabbi Amnon.

Below is my translation of the second section of the prayer *Unetaneh toqef* from the Cairo Genizah, that is, the section that contains the 'who by fire' *piyyut*; the text is in the British Library's Oriental manuscripts collection and online.<sup>29</sup> It is the first translation of this segment of the prayer.<sup>30</sup> The square brackets in the translation indicate letters or words that are water damaged on the page (the text is written in ink which has washed away in patches). The line by line arrangement, below,

<sup>26</sup> *The Complete Artscroll Machzor*. Co-edited by M. Zlotowitz and A. Gold (Translation. N. Scherman) (Brooklyn: Mesorah 1998), Heb. and trans.: 530–3 (opening verse: 530–1); the 'Who By Fire' section, is at 532–3. The 10 days between the Jewish New Year on the first day of the seventh month (1 Tishri) and Yom Kippur (10 Tishri) are known as the Days of Awe.

<sup>27</sup> Private communication with Dr Ben Outhwaite, 30 April 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Dated by Eric Werner or M. Zulay (unclear) in a communication to Werner from Zulay cited in Werner, *The Sacred Bridge*, 253; accepted Golinkin, 'Do Repentance, Prayer and Tzedakah Avert the Severe Decree?' §2 online, op. cit.

<sup>29</sup> British Library, MS shelfmark: Or 5557 G fols. 67b–68b. The manuscript is digitized and online in the Friedberg Genizah Project [www.Genizah.org]. Page 1 of the prayer begins three-quarters down the page on London, British Library Or. 5557G.67 (FGP shelfmark C253223, frg 1 v). The extant 'Who By Fire' section is at London, British Library Or. 5557G.68 (FGP shelfmark C253225, frg 1 v).

<sup>30</sup> Some verses in the first section of *Unetaneh toqef* were translated by Werner, *Sacred Bridge*, 254. Werner's study focuses only on this part of the liturgy. It is unclear in his book if the given folio numbers (Or 5557 G fols. 67b–68b) included the remainder of the prayer, or constituted the first section only. Further, it was not stated whether the second section existed at all in the Genizah manuscript (it could have been added at another time or in a different version), and if so, how close it was to the prayer used in the synagogue today. Seeing the 'Who By Fire' section – 'who by water, who by fire' is perfectly clear in Hebrew letters undamaged by water – was beyond my expectation. It was surprising and felt quite thrilling to actually see the iconic words of Cohen's song, in Hebrew, 1000 years old.



reproduces the lay-out of the remaining 1,000-year-old text. The commentary that follows this translation indicates the text's reception history. The shorter length of the Genizah version probably indicates that it is older than the version currently recited from the High Holy Days prayer book.

*Unetaneh toqef* (source: Cairo Genizah)

[On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed]

1. And on Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many [will pa]ss over.
2. And how many will be created. [*vacat*] Who will live;
3. And who will die. Who will reach the end of his days. Who shall not
4. Reach the end of his days. Who by water. Who by fire.
5. Who by sword. Who by beast. Who by earthquake.
6. [Who by pla]gue. [Who will re]st. [Who will w]ander.
7. [Who will have] qu[iet]. Who will be savaged. Who will be undisturbed.
8. Who [shall be torment]ed. [Who will be] exalted. Who will be brought low.
9. [Who will be po]r. [Who will] become enriched. But repentance,
10. [and prayer and charity avert] the evil decree

In Table 14.1, the translations of the two texts are placed side by side so that the comparisons between them are easier to see (the additional lines in the synagogue version are in bold).

It is evident that the Genizah version differs, but not drastically, from the surviving synagogue version of the 'who by fire' pericope. Before comparing the textual differences, I shall first note some important points in the material text that are relevant to our understanding of the poem in the Cairo Genizah manuscript.

**Table 14.1** *Unetaneh toqef* synagogue and Genizah versions compared

Synagogue version verse by verse	Genizah text line by line on the page
1. On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed	[On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed] (overleaf)
2. And on the Day of the Fast of Kippur it is sealed.	1. And on Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many [will pa]ss over.
3. How many will pass over and how many will be created	2. And how many will be created. [ <i>vacat</i> ] Who will live;
4. Who will live and who will die,	3. And who will die. Who will reach the end of his days. Who shall not
5. Who will reach the end of his days and who shall not reach the end of his days	4. Reach the end of his days. Who by water. Who by fire.
6. Who by water and who by fire,	5. Who by sword. Who by beast. Who by earthquake.

(Continued)

Table 14.1 (Continued)

Synagogue version verse by verse	Genizah text line by line on the page
7. Who by sword and who by beast	6. [Who by pla]gue. [Who will re]st. [Who will w]ander.
<b>8. Who by famine and who by thirst</b>	7. [Who will have] qu[iet]. Who will be savaged. Who will be undisturbed.
9. Who by earthquake and who by plague	8. Who [shall be torment]ed. [Who will be] exalted. Who will be brought low.
<b>10. Who by strangulation and who by stoning</b>	9. [Who will be po]or. [Who will] become enriched. But repentance,
11. Who will rest and who will wander	10. [and prayer and charity avert] the evil decree
12. Who will have quiet and who will be savaged	
13. Who will be undisturbed and who shall be tormented	
14. Who will be poor and who will be enriched	
15. Who will be brought low and who will be exalted	
16. But repentance, and prayer and charity avert the evil decree	

### Material description and textual commentary

The folio on which the *piyyut* is written is part of a codex: page 68 verso (marked on the manuscript as 68b), that is, the right-hand sheet.<sup>31</sup> As can be seen on the online digitized copy, there are a number of small lacunae in addition to the large tear from the middle to the bottom of the page. Despite ink bleeding through the sheet, the damaged words can be discerned enough to be partially reconstructed and compared with the synagogue version of *Unetaneh toqef*. Aside from the lacunae, some letters in line 1 are unclear.<sup>32</sup> Most notably, it is unlikely that a *piyyut* would begin with a preposition. It is therefore probable that 'And on Yom Kippur it is sealed' is the second half of the verse. However, much of the lower section of the page is missing and so we cannot be sure what the first half of the verse would be. Based on comparisons with the prayer in current usage, we can, however, conjecture

<sup>31</sup> In codices written in right-to-left scripts such as Hebrew the verso is on the right and the recto is on the left, the opposite of verso-recto in left-to-right handwriting.

<sup>32</sup> The *pe* in Yom Kippur looks like a *tav* due some rubbing; the *kap* in כמה ('how many') looks like a *bet* because of the scribe's unclear handwriting; finally the *yud ayin* of בירון ('will pass over') the last word on the line is missing. I thank Dr Ben Outhwaite for his restoration of this word and for his advice on the other two letters.

that the verse begins with 'On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed' at the bottom of the previous page, that is, overleaf on the recto.<sup>33</sup> A large part of the lower section of the page is now missing.

The punctuation of the poem creates the rhythm. There is a point in the middle of each space between every hemistich and a double point like our colon (:) after 'Who will live'. This phrase is preceded by a larger-than-average word space, as if indicating a pause. Due to the care taken in apparently giving directions for this section to be chanted or recited aloud, such as the colon-like marks, it is unlikely that the scribe accidentally missed out the two additional lines that appear in today's *Unetaneh toqef*.

The section of the Genizah *Unetaneh toqef*, upon which Cohen's 'Who by Fire' is based, is divided into three sections of four verses each, with each verse consisting of parallels, some of which are alliterative. Section A, lines 1–5, opens with the judgement motif for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and lists synonyms for living and dying. Section B, lines 6–10, describes contrasting pairs of methods of dying; section C, lines 11–15, lists opposing qualities of life.

Given the 1,000 years of transmission history between the Genizah text and the version known today, the two recensions are very close. The verse 'who by famine, who by thirst' in line 8 of today's *Unetaneh toqef* that is absent from the Genizah text is an addition that completes the symmetrical tripartite structure of the poem. It may have been added later, perhaps at the same time as the verse on capital punishment to even up the number of paired verses, or because it is based on a different tradition.

The verses that are absent from the Genizah's *Unetaneh toqef* (not due to damage) are: 'Who by hunger and who by thirst', found in line 8 of today's *Unetaneh toqef* and, as discussed above, 'Who by strangulation and who by stoning' (line 10). The Genizah *Unetaneh toqef*, has 'Who will be exalted and who will be brought low' (line 8) instead of line 15 in today's *Unetaneh toqef*, 'Who will be brought low and who will be exalted.' The received version we know today places this verse after 'Who will be poor and who will become enriched,' whereas in the Genizah text it precedes it, so that 'Who will be poor and who will become rich' finalizes the list of fates or judgements. The re-ordering of the verses (assuming the Genizah text is the more original) is open to further analysis.

## Repentance, prayer and charity

The final admonition of both versions of *Unetaneh toqef* states the three ways of overcoming one's predestined fate: 'repentance, prayer and charity.' This formula

<sup>33</sup> See Friedberg Genizah Project (FGP) online, London, British Library Or. 5557G. 68 recto. (FGP shelfmark, C253224. frg 1r)

emanates from a lesson in the Jerusalem Talmud [*Yerushalemi*], tractate *Ta'anit* 2:1. III 5, which is attributed to 'Rabbi Eleazar'.<sup>34</sup> It is part of his commentary on 2 Chron 7:14:

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

In the Babylonian Talmud,<sup>35</sup> tractates *Shabbat* 156a and *Shabbat* 156b,<sup>36</sup> there are linked narratives that conclude with the statement that charitable deeds can overturn a fated decree of death, in each tractate, from a venomous snake. In both stories, astrologers' predictions that the subject of either passage would die from a snake bite were averted by the individuals themselves acting from free will. One, a woman (Rabbi Akiva's daughter), and one an unnamed man, performed charitable acts just before the snake that had been destined to kill each of them was due to bite them fatally. (The astrologer predicted that the unnamed man would return from the journey where he was destined to meet the snake, if he was an Israelite.)

The message of R. Eleazar is repeated in the medieval rabbinical commentary on Genesis, *Midrash Rabba* 44:12.<sup>37</sup> This citation repeats the order in the Jerusalem Talmud ('prayer, charity, repentance', not that of *Unetaneh toqef*: 'repentance, prayer and charity'). The hermeneutical context here is to provide the influence of astrology, specifically citing Jer 10.2 ('Do not ... be terrified by signs in the heavens'). The locus of the midrashic discourse is Abram's statement that he could not have children because it was his planetary fate: *Midrash Rabba* 44:10–12 (esp. 44:10):

R. Samuel b. Isaac commented: [Abraham said:] My planetary fate oppresses me and declares: Abram and Sarai cannot beget a child. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: 'Let it be even as thy words: Abram and Sarai cannot beget but Abraham and Sarah can beget.' (See Footnote)

(Footnote): By changing your names I will free you from your planetary fate.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Theological Dictionary of Rabbinic Judaism. Part One. Principal Theological Categories. Studies in Judaism* (Lanham, MD, 2005), 135; Golinkin, 'Do Repentance, Prayer and Tzedakah Avert the Severe Decree?' §3.#4.

<sup>35</sup> For further background on the Jerusalem Talmud, see S. Stern, 'The Talmud Yerushalmi,' in eds., P. S. Alexander and M. Goodman, *Rabbinic Texts and the History of Late-Roman Palestine*. (Proceedings of the British Academy 165. London: British Academy, 2010), 143–64.

<sup>36</sup> *Soncino Babylonian Talmud*. 18 vols (v. *Shabbat*) (ed. I. Epstein; London: Soncino, 1961).

<sup>37</sup> (Translation). *Midrash Rabba. Genesis in Two Volumes*. Translated by Rabbi Dr H. Freedman and Maurice Simon. 10 vols. (London: Soncino Press), 368 fourth paragraph. Hebrew: *Bereschit Rabba*, 44:12 (ed. Theodor Albeck, 1912), page 434.

<sup>38</sup> *Midrash Rabba*, (English) op. cit, 367–9; *Bereschit Rabba* (Heb), op.cit, 432–4. For online hyperlinks, see note above. Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Nedarim* 32a. It describes how Abram has gazed at the constellation that rules his destiny and seen that he is not fated to have children but God tells him that Israel is not subject to planetary influences.

The solution to overcoming Abram's negative planetary influence, according to *Midrash Rabba*, was that God changed his name to Abraham, 'meaning father of a multitude'.<sup>39</sup> The sages in *Midrash Rabba* conclude that Jews can overcome their astrological fate through prayer, charity, repentance, fasting, changing one's name, and also moving place (the interpretation of Gen 12:1 is that God tells Abram to leave Haran) in order to change his pre-determined destiny.

This example of intertextuality between the Bible, astrology, both Talmuds, Rabbi Eleazar, Genesis Rabba and the final verse of the Genizah *Unetaneh toqef* illustrates the complexity of reception. It is possible to look more closely at one of these items, astrology, to get an idea of depth as well as breadth.

### A Babylonian horoscope handbook and related rabbinical writings

One of the most noticeable aspects of *Unetaneh toqef* is that there is a similarity with sections of a late Babylonian astrological tablet (AO 6483), from around 300–150 BCE.<sup>40</sup> The cuneiform tablet, translated and edited by Abraham Sachs, appears to be the equivalent of an instruction book for astrologers, explaining how a particular astrological method works, and how to use it in practice. This Babylonian divination guide contains an explanation, near the beginning, of how to subdivide each of the 12 signs of the zodiac into 12 zodiac signs again over 30 days of the month in order to fine-tune a horoscope (AO 6483 obv. 8–20).<sup>41</sup> Sachs coined the term for this system of sub-divisions in the zodiac, the 'micro-zodiac'.<sup>42</sup>

There then follows a brief prediction of the kind of life or death for the subject of a horoscope when a celestial body, that is, a planet or the sun and moon is in one of the zodiacal sub-divisions.<sup>43</sup> The predictions are listed in an orderly sequence of the signs of the zodiac from 'the place' of Aries (the first sign of the zodiac) to 'the place' of Pisces (the last sign of the zodiac) within the lunar month of 30 days (obv. lines 22–6). For ease of reference this will be referred to as Section A.

<sup>39</sup> *Midrash Rabba*, op. cit, 393, n. 5.

<sup>40</sup> A. Sachs, 'Babylonian Horoscopes,' *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 6 (1952): 65–75, translations, 68, 70, Tablet no. TCL VI No. 14 (AO 6483) obv: lines 22–25; rev: lines 29–38.

<sup>41</sup> The text describes a 360-day zodiac calendar: the months have 30 days each of which is assigned to one sign of the zodiac, as the moon goes through each sign of the zodiac in a month, every 2½ days it changes sign (AO 6483 obv. 10–12) (trans. Sachs, 'Babylonian horoscopes,' 68). The mathematics is schematic, and Sachs refers to each of the portions as 'synthetic astrological' points (Sachs, 'Babylonian horoscopes,' 73); he explains the system and includes comparative information from Hellenistic astrology (Sachs, 'Babylonian horoscopes,' 71–3).

<sup>42</sup> Sachs, 'Babylonian horoscopes,' 72. I studied this section of the tablet for my PhD dissertation on zodiac calendars in the Dead Sea Scrolls and their reception (PhD, Manchester, UK, 2011) and was struck by the similarity between the sections on astrological predictions and *Unetaneh toqef* 2.

<sup>43</sup> Sachs, 'Babylonian horoscopes,' 73.

AO 6483 lines 22–5 obv. (Section A)

22. The place of Aries: death of his family. The place of Taurus: death in battle. The place of Gemini: death in prison.
23. The place of Cancer: death in the ocean; longevity. The place of Leo: he will grow old, he will be wealthy; secondly, the capture of his personal enemy. The place/ he will grow old/ he will be wealthy; secondly, the capture of his personal enemy. The place of Virgo: he will be wealthy; anger.
24. The place of Libra: wealthy; anger; good days; he will die at the age of? 40? years (?) The place of Scorpius: death by rage (is?) his death by fate. The place of Sagittarius: death in the ocean.
25. The place of Capricorn: he will be poor<sup>44</sup> he will be hysterical (?), he will grow sick and die. The place of Aquarius: (at the age of? 40 (?) years (?), he will have (?) sons; death by water. The place of Pisces: (at the age of?) 40 (?) years (?), he will die; distant days . . .

Section A intersects with *Unetaneh toqef* with respect to:

- ‘death by water,’ (line 25, ‘in the place of Aquarius’); possibly ‘death in the ocean,’ as a synonym (lines 23, 24, Cancer, Sagittarius)
- ‘he will be wealthy,’ (lines 23: Leo. Virgo. Line 24: Libra); ‘he will be poor’ (line 25, Capricorn 1)
- ‘Death in battle’ (line 22, Taurus) is similar to ‘Who by sword.’
- ‘Death by fate’ recalls ‘who will die at the end of his days’ interpreted in the *Artscroll Machzor* as ‘who will die at his predestined time,’ as noted above.
- If ‘death in prison’ (Line 22, Gemini) means a capital punishment it may be an early echo of ‘Who by strangulation and stoning’ in *Unetaneh toqef*. If that is the case then the author of that variant may have been Judaizing this prediction.

The tablet includes further sections stating brief predictions for the subject of the horoscope when certain planets are rising and setting, and, finally, when specific stars in constellations are rising (rev. 29–38),<sup>45</sup> known as *ziqpu* stars; when their culminations are used to measure the hours.<sup>46</sup> Like the section above, these lines contain predictions that are relevant to our discussion, here called Section B.

<sup>44</sup> Compare the 4Q186 Zodiacal Physiognomy in the Dead Sea Scrolls in which ‘he will be poor’ is associated with the subject’s connection with the sign of Taurus. See 4QZodiacal Physiognomy frg 1 col. 11 line 9, M. Popović, ‘4Q186. 4QZodiacal Physiognomy. A Full Edition’ in *The Mermaid and the Partridge. Essay on the Copenhagen Conference on Revision Texts from Cave 4* (Studies on the Texts of the Deserts of Judah 96; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 235.

<sup>45</sup> Sachs, ‘Babylonian horoscopes,’ translation, 70–71.

<sup>46</sup> Sachs, ‘Babylonian horoscopes,’ 74; Francesca Rochberg, *The Heavenly Writing: Divination, Horoscopy, and Astronomy in Mesopotamian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 6.

AO 6483 lines 29–38 rev. (Section B)

29. [If? a? child? born? When  $\alpha$  bootis comes forth, he will . . .]. When  $\epsilon$  bootis comes forth, he will not [have?] a son.
30. [When  $\beta$  coronae borealis comes forth, he will . . .] When  $\beta$  herculis comes forth, death (caused) by a crane (?)
31. [When  $\zeta$  herculis comes forth, he will . . .] When  $\mu$  herculis comes forth, he will be poor.
32. [When  $\alpha$  lyrae comes forth, he will . . .] When  $\delta$  cygni comes forth, he will have the itch (variant: he will be deaf).
33. [When  $\alpha$  cygni comes forth, he will . . .] When  $\eta$  pegasi comes forth, (he will die) the death of his fate.
34. [When  $\alpha$  andromedae comes forth, he will . . . When the constellation around  $\nu$  andro]medae comes forth, death (caused) by a snake.
35. [When  $\gamma$  andromedae comes forth, he will . . . When  $\beta$  per]sei comes forth, death by we[apon (?)].
36. [When  $\epsilon$  persei comes forth, he will . . . When  $\alpha$  aurigae] comes forth, he will be rich; death by a we[apon (?)]
37. [When  $\tau$  aurigae comes forth, he will . . . When  $\alpha$  geminorum] comes forth, death in pri[son (?)]
38. [When  $\beta$  geminorum comes forth, he will . . . When  $\iota$  canceri] comes forth, death by a weapon [ . . .]

Section B intersects with *Unetaneh toqef* in a similar manner to Section A: 'He will be poor,' 'he will be rich,' 'death by weapon' ('he will die) the death of his fate,' and 'death in prison'.

In addition there are parallels with other Jewish texts. The prediction, 'he will not [have?] a son' (line 29) appears to foreshadow the midrash that Abram saw that he would not have a son by gazing at his constellation that ruled his destiny (b. *Ned* 32a), telling God that his planetary fate oppressed him in this regard (*Midrash Rabba* 44:10).

'Death by snake' (line 34) is an astrological prediction that seems to be echoed in the Babylonian Talmud, tractates *Shabbat* 156a and *Shabbat* 156b, as noted above. It appears to have been a known culturally transmitted malevolent prediction. The pericopae on the emphasis on doing genuine charitable deeds (having a good heart) to dispel a malevolent astrological destiny in b. *Shabbat* 156a and *Shabbat* 156b also intersects with the three acts that 'nullify the harsh decree . . . prayer, charity and repentance' in the Jerusalem Talmud (y. *Ta'an* III.5). This statement is apparently, in turn, echoed in the *Unetaneh toqef* in the final line: 'But repentance, prayer and charity avert the evil decree.'

I argue that this sequence of textual interconnections suggests that the *Unetaneh toqef* is influenced by astrological definitions of fate and destiny from Babylonian horoscope manuals and that these have been absorbed into Jewish culture and

debated in rabbinical texts. The sages of late antiquity, like their modern counterparts, probably felt uncomfortable about the idea that one's life was entirely pre-determined by the stars. Interestingly, the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmud passages on astrology discussed in this essay, as well as the *Unetaneh toqef*, are not putting forward an argument in favour of free will and against the idea that astrological determinism does not exist. Instead, they are advocating that Jews perform intercessionary actions to thwart any possible negative destiny that is written in the stars, or that people should move to a different country to change their predestined fate. Finally, God can intervene to change a name, thereby also manipulating the person's fated bad luck.

### Questions of 'reception history'

By being inspired by Leonard Cohen's 'Who by Fire' and the second section of *Unetaneh toqef*, I have been able to uncover a hitherto untranslated version of *Unetaneh toqef* and a likely connection to astrological texts. The synagogue prayer ends with the verse that originates from the Jerusalem Talmud, reflecting a belief in astrological predestination amongst the sages in Palestine. Interestingly, Schmelzer states:

To counteract these forces, the rabbis urge the individual to resort to three things [repentance, prayer and charity], which for sure, will act as an antidote to ill fate destined by astrology or predicted by dreams.<sup>47</sup>

It appears to be taken for granted by some scholars, therefore, that there was a linkage between one's journey through life and the stars. There is a wide cultural and temporal gap between the astrological predictions of the Babylonian tablet A06453 and what looks like a poeticized, yet similar, wording of that which fate may have in store for us all expounded in the second part of *Unetaneh toqef*. The synagogue liturgy that possibly originated from a copy of the text in the Cairo Genizah may have been influenced and mediated by rabbinical commentaries. Its concise question, 'Who by water, who by fire?' has also travelled far and wide: it muses that there is divine judgement and also fate in some form, but that one's destiny is ultimately in one's own hands.

Cohen's version of the prayer may mirror a similar process 1000 years forwards in time from the eleventh century. In Cohen's 'Who by Fire', the medieval literary construction has been transformed and set within a completely different time, place and culture to that of the medieval Jewish community in Egypt. The cosmology of antiquity discussed in rabbinical literature, reformulated in liturgical

<sup>47</sup> Schmelzer, 'Penitence, Prayer and (Charity?)', 292.



poetry, and transformed into contemporary lyrics in the 'haunting' music performed by some of the world's top musicians, has been preserved outside of time. Cohen took a poetic theme: destiny, divine judgement, or self-determination, from the liturgy of the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement and created a modern 'prayer', as he himself describes his song.

What this study has done is to open up new vistas of exploration. The origins of the prayer are unknown, though it comes with its own chronologically linear background narrative, that of Rabbi Amnon, a historical account that is said to have been related in a dream by one rabbi and recorded by another. The handed-on narrative about the process of the legend's reception spanning 300 years was written down by yet another rabbi. It is not improbable that the author of the legend, whoever wrote it, was aware of the *piyyut*, a copy of which lay in the Cairo Genizah for 900 years before being found and eventually stored in the British Library.

Possibly, in a parallel transmission, in another span of time, a variant of the Genizah liturgy found its way into the High Holy Days prayer-books of the Jewish diaspora, and inspired Leonard Cohen to write one of his most mystical, musically enchanting songs. A clue to the origins of this text from medieval Cairo remains to be uncovered.

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