אשא בכוס ישע, Essa Bechos Yesha‘

**Introduction:** This poem for Havdala begins with the lifting of the “cup of deliverance” (Ps. 116:13) and making the distinction between holy and profane (Lev. 10:10). The poem criticizes the ignorance of the time and pleads with God to remember his chosen nation in its poor, driven, and separated state, ending with an urgent hope for redemption.

**Category:** Zemirot (Songs)  
  
**Genre:** Zemer for Havdala  
  
**Occasion:** Conclusion of the Sabbath  
  
**Name:** אשא בכוס ישע, Essa Bechos Yesha‘  
  
**Composer**: Zeraḥ ben Natan  
  
**Location:** Troki, Lithuania  
  
**Date:** 1586–1640  
  
**Acrostic:** א”ב, זרח בן נתן חזק the alphabet, “Zeraḥ son of Natan, be strong!”  
  
**Source:** Vilna Siddur, Volume 4, page 119  
  
**Visual Representation of Meter:** - - v - - - / - - v - - -  
  
**Description of Meter:** Each line consists of two half-lines, each of which contains two full vowels, followed by a vocal sheva and a full vowel, followed by two more full vowels.  
  
**Davidson number:** א 7740  
  
**Karaite origin:** Yes  
  
**About the Author:** Zeraḥ ben Natan was a Karaite scholar with profound interest in Jewish philosophy, Kabbalah, and Karaite philosophy. He lived most of his life in Troki, although his family was originally from Birże (Lith.: Biržai) in northern Lithuania. As a young boy, he was tutored by the famed Karaite scholar Yitsḥaḳ ben Abraham, author of the poem *Odé Le’el Maḥsi*. Decades later, Zeraḥ would write to the famous Jewish printer and philosopher Menasheh ben Yisra’el (1604–1657) in Amsterdam requesting the publication of Yitsḥaḳ ben Abraham’s polemic against Christianity, *Ḥizzuḳ Emuna*.

In the headings of his poems, Zeraḥ is referred to as a *ḥacham*; he probably conducted some administrative and religious duties in the Karaite community of Troki. Most of his life, however, was dedicated to a never-ending quest for knowledge. He collected an impressive library of both printed works and manuscripts. In 1618, he travelled to Istanbul, where he studied Kabbalah and secular sciences with the Turkish Karaites for two years.

Back in Troki by the early 1620s, he began to correspond with the rabbinic scholar and polymath, Yosef Shelomo Delmedigo (Crete, 1591‒1655), who at the time was employed by Prince KrzysztofRadziwiłł II (1585–1640) in Vilna. In his letters, Zeraḥ posed intricate questions on mathematics, astronomy, medicine, Kabbalah, and theology, published in Delmedigo’s highly influential scientific opus *Sefer Elim* (“The Book of Elim”, Amsterdam, 1629). Thus, Zeraḥ played a key role in the early modern history of science in Hebrew literature.

In addition to many extant poems both in Hebrew and in the Karaim language, he wrote a treatise on the medieval philosophical classic, *Guide for the Perplexed* by Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), and a Kabbalistic commentary on the Song of Songs. Zeraḥ died in 1657/8 at the age of seventy-nine.

**Sources**: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*; Mann, *Texts and Studies*.

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| Essa bechos yesha‘ : Uvshem adon eḳra  Navdil leven shabbat : Ben ḥol leyamenu. | אֶ֒שָֹּא בְּכוֹס יֶשַׁע : וּבְשֵׁם אָדוֹן אֶקְרָא  נַבְדִּיל לְבֵין שַׁבָּת : בֵּין חֹל לְיָמֵינוּ: |
| I shall raise the cup of deliverance and invoke the name of the Lord  We shall distinguish between the Sabbath and the profane, all our days. | |
| Ba’u yemé haḥol : Hatslaḥ lechol ‘oved  Gavehu derachecha : En ban betochenu. | בָּ֒אוּ יְמֵי הַחֹל : הַצְלַח לְכָל עֹבֵד  גָּ֒בְהוּ דְ֒רָכֶיךָ : אֵין בָּן בְּתוֹכֵנוּ: |
| The profane days have arrived; make all that serve [You] succeed!  Your ways are lofty; none among us understands them. | |
| Hodecha ve‘oz yadecha : Mi hu asher yaskil  Ziv or devarecha : Ḥashechu le‘enenu. | ה֒וֹדְךָ וְ֒עֹז יָדְךָ : מִי הוּא אֲשֶׁר יַשְֹכִּיל  זִ֒יו אוֹר דְּבָרֶיךָ : חָשְׁכוּ לְעֵינֵינוּ: |
| Your splendor and mighty hand, who could understand them?  The radiant light of Your words are dim in our eyes! | |
| Ḥoḳerav halo afesu : Tasu leḳinnehem  Yode‘av beḳivrehem : Ot hi le‘enenu. | חֹ֒קְרָיו הֲלֹא אָפְסוּ : טָ֒סוּ לְקִנֵּיהֶם  יֹ֒דְעָיו בְּקִבְרֵיהֶם : אוֹת הִיא לְעֵינֵינוּ: |
| Its scholars? Aren’t they gone? They flew to their nests!  Those who know are in their graves; may this be a sign to our eyes. | |
| Kamah veḡam tamah : Nafshi ‘alé chol zé  Lirot betsara zo : En dé leruḥenu. | כָּ֒מַהּ וְגַם תָּמַהּ : נַפְשִׁי עֲלֵי כָל זֶה  לִ֒רְאוֹת בְּצָרָה זוֹ : אֵין דֵּי לְרוּחֵנוּ: |
| My soul is aching and amazed by it all:  Seeing this predicament is not enough for our spirits. | |
| Ma omera eli : Haflé ḥasadecha  Haser lemone‘im na : El ra‘ayonenu. | מָ֒ה אוֹמְרָה אֵלִי : הַפְלֵה חֲסָדֶיךָ  הָסֵר לְמוֹנְעִים נָא : אֶל רַעֲיוֹנֵינוּ: |
| What will I say, my God? Display Your mercies,  Please, purge us from those things that suppress our minds. | |
| Niḳmat ‘avadecha : Tinḳom be’appecha  Tishlaḥ le’ahavatecha : Ben ish le’aḥenu. | נִ֒קְמַת עֲבָדֶיךָ : תִּנְקוֹם בְּאַפֶּךָ  תִּשְׁלַח לְאַהֲבָתְךָ : בֵּין אִישׁ לְאַחֵינוּ: |
| The revenge of Your servants—avenge it with Your wrath;  Send Your love between each of us and our brethren. | |
| Sovelé le‘ol datecha : ‘Oreḡim ka’ayyalim  Haḳel le‘avdutam : Hachret lemonenu. | ס֒וֹבְלֵי לְעוֹל דָּתְךָ : ע֒וֹרְגִים כָּאַיָּלִים  הָקֵל לְעַבְדוּתָם : הַכְרֵת לְמוֹנֵינוּ: |
| The bearers of the yoke of Your Law yearn like harts.  Relieve their servitude; Destroy our oppressors. | |
| Pattaḥ lemasaram : Yehgu vetoratecha  Yit‘anneḡu tamid : Ahvat elohenu. | פַּ֒תַּח לְמַאְסָרָם : יֶהְגּוּ בְתוֹרָתְךָ  יִתְעַנְּגוּ תָמִיד : אַהְבַת אֱלֹהֵינוּ: |
| Release their restraints; let them contemplate your Torah  And forever enjoy the love of our Lord. | |
| Tsavvé sheluḥecha : ‘Osé devarecha  Barech yevarechunu : Kol ma‘avadenu. | צַ֒וֵּה שְׁלוּחֶיךָ : עוֹשֵֹי דְבָרֶיךָ  בָּרֵךְ יְבָרְכוּנוּ : כָּל מַעֲבָדֵינוּ: |
| Command your emissaries, the ones fulfilling your words.  May they bless us, all of our deeds! | |
| Ḳinat levavenu : Tasir lechol adam  Gam ken leḳinatam : Battel leḳamenu. | קִ֒נְאַת לְבָבֵנוּ : תָּסִיר לְכָל אָדָם  גַּם כֵּן לְקִנְאָתָם : בַּטֵּל לְקָמֵינוּ: |
| Remove our jealousy of any man;  Annul the jealousy of those who rise against us. | |
| Ruma ve‘uzzecha:Shuv meḥaronecha  Tivné levetecha : Maher beḥeldenu. | ר֒וּמָה בְעֻזֶּךָ : שׁ֒וּב מֵחֲרוֹנֶךֶָ  תִּ֒בְנֶה לְבֵיתֶךָ : מַהֵר בְּחֶלְדֵּנוּ: |
| Be exalted through Your strength; turn away from Your anger;  Build the Temple, soon, in our times. | |
| Zachor beḥirecha : Reshit beru’echa  Ḥosheḳé amarecha : Kol maḥshevotenu. | זָ֒כוֹר בְּחִירֶיךָ : רֵ֒אשִׁית בְּרוּאֶיךָ  ח֒וֹשְׁקֵי אֲמָרֶיךָ : כָּל מַחְשְׁבוֹתֵינוּ: |
| Remember Your chosen ones, the first among Your creatures.  We pine for Your words, in all our thoughts. | |
| Bina haḡiḡ haddal : Niḡrash veḡam nivdal  Tarud vehameduldal : Toch ‘am ‘adatenu. | בִּ֒ינָ֒ה הֲגִיג הַדַּל : נִגְרָשׁ וְגַם נִבְדָּל  טָרוּד וְהַמְדֻלְדָּל : תּוֹךְ עַם עֲדָתֵינוּ: |
| Consider the lament of the deprived, the expelled, the divided,  The troubled and impoverished amidst our congregation. | |
| Naḥem tenaḥem na : Bochim bemar galut  Zullut veḡam dallut : ‘Od lo ye’unnenu. | נַ֒חֵם תְּ֒נַחֵם נָ֒א : בּוֹכִים בְּמַר גָּלוּת  זֻלּוּת וְגַם דַּלּוּת : עוֹד לֹא יְאֻנֵּנוּ: |
| Please, console those who weep in the bitter exile.  Worthlessness and poverty shall no longer befall us! | |
| Ḥusha zeman ḳodesh : Shabbat veyom aruch  Navdil leven ḳodesh : Ben ḥol leyamenu. | ח֒וּשָׁה זְ֒מַן קֹ֒דֶשׁ : שַׁבָּת וְיוֹם אָרוּךְ נַבְדִּיל לְבֵין קֹדֶשׁ : בֵּין חֹל לְיָמֵינוּ: |
| Hasten the sacred time, the Sabbath, and the eternal day.  We shall distinguish between the sacred and the profane in our days. | |
| Kakkatuv: Ulhavdil ben haḳḳodesh uven haḥol. | כַּכָּתוּב וּֽלֲהַבְדִּ֔יל בֵּ֥ין הַקֹּ֖דֶשׁ וּבֵ֣ין הַחֹ֑ל (ויקרא י, י) |
| As it is written: For you must distinguish between the sacred and the profane (Lev. 10:10). | |