

On the birkon Siman Levanim, by Aharon N. Varady

It was during the third meal of Shabbat in 2018 when Honi Sanders and I sat down over left-over cholent to talk about siddurim. I had over the previous three years crafted a siddur for welcoming the Shabbat: *Siddur Livnat haSapir*, a copy of which he had acquired.

“Please explain why you are translating דבר (diber) as *logos*,” he asked. And so I began to explain my understanding of midrash as more than a particular sort of exegesis, an expression of a particular mode of hermeneutic, but an experience of working with a living text, and it was this idea of a living text that I felt vividly when I worked on interpreting and translating and breathing the creative vitality of the text through my own living imagination. In this, I also felt as if I might be participating in the lineage of rabbinic Judaism, deriving meaning from Torah in ways that other Jews and non-Jews once found radical. I wasn’t the first to translate *diber* as *logos*, as James Davila had used this translation in his *Descenders of the Chariot* (Brill 2001), an exploration on who the authors of the *heikhalot* writings were. The idea connecting midrash to *logos* was also central to Azzan Yadin’s *Scripture as Logos* (Upenn Press 2004). And so this conversation continued over left-over cholent on a white tablecloth at a round table in an otherwise empty Stamford Hilton hotel and convention center ballroom for the next couple of hours.

A few months later, Honi wrote to me asking whether I might prepare his wedding *benscher*. The project would, essentially, restore the family *birkon* that his mother had prepared for her own wedding in 1986. He sent me his scan of the complete *birkon* in black and white but covered in a patina of wine stained fingerprints. His mother had added her own details to a generic Mondrian; her creative spirit filled the *birkon*, the liturgy and translation of which was largely copied from Rabbi de Sola Pool’s Sepharadi siddur. Honi’s vision for the *benscher* would expand upon his mother’s by also including a Sepharadi text copied from Hazzan Azose’s *Siddur Zekhut Yosef*, a full Ashkenazi *birkat hamazon*, and a dozen or so *zemirot* not found in the original. Honi would send me original translations of those. The entirety of the work would be shared under an open content license, the Creative Commons Attribution license, thus providing a resource for others interested in using it as the basis for their own *birkonim* for wedding and *bnei mitsvah* celebrations. These translations by Honi and his brother Akiva will be made available at the Open Siddur Project (opensiddur.org).

This *birkon* is unique for providing both Sepharadi and Ashkenazi variations of the *birkat hamazon*. There are also several other treatments that I want to provide an explanation for in case any one should wonder. Firstly, I believe that divine names should remain untranslated and that their invocation is significant. For these reasons, divine names appear untranslated and in Hebrew within the text of the English translation.

Secondly, when I learned that this *birkon* was also a container for the memory of Miriam Hasson’s creative spirit as well as of the *simḥah* of Honi & Simona, a different appreciation of Mrs. Hasson’s artwork took hold of me. She had penned a cluster of grapes at the beginning and at the end of her *birkon* – the latter all gone, consumed, and thus fitting for the verse “when you will eat and feel satiated, you will bless YHVH, your *elo’ah*.” It occurred to me that this drawing would serve well for the beginning of the *birkat hamazon* uttered only after the consumption of the meal. Opposite the memories of her family in the preface, this consumed cluster would also represent

the memory of her full life. (Her drawing with the as-yet unconsumed cluster appears on the cover and title page.)

Finally, the designer and architect, Charles Rennie Macintosh remarked “There is hope in honest error, none in the icy perfections of the mere stylist.” This birkon is a collection of works shared by numerous individuals. If you find what you believe (with or without certainty) to be an error, please contact me to improve the text for others who might use it. Shgiyot mi yavin? Ministarot nakeni (“Who can know all one’s flaws? From hidden errors, correct me.”) —Psalms 19:13.

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