

Joseph Isaac Lifshitz

## ***Av ha-raḥamim:***

## **On the 'Father of Mercy' Prayer**

אב הַרַחֲמִים שׁוֹכֵן מְרוֹמִים,  
בְּרַחֲמָיו הַעֲצוּמִים הוּא יִפְקֹד בְּרַחֲמִים  
הַחֲסִידִים וְהַיִּשְׂרָאֵלִים וְהַתְּמִימִים,  
קָהְלוֹת הַקֹּדֶשׁ שֶׁמְסְרוּ נַפְשָׁם עַל קִדְשַׁת הַשֵּׁם,  
הַנָּאֻהָבִים וְהַנְּעִימִים בְּחַיֵּיהֶם וּבְמוֹתָם לֹא נִפְרְדּוּ,  
מִנְּשָׂרִים קָלוּ, מֵאֲרִיּוֹת גָּבְרוּ,  
לַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹן קוֹנֵם וְחַפֵּץ צוּרָם.  
יִזְכְּרֵם אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְטוֹבָה עִם שְׂאֵר צְדִיקֵי עוֹלָם,  
וְיִנָּקֵם בְּיָמֵינוּ לַעֲיִנֵּנוּ נִקְמַת דָּם עֲבָדָיו הַשְּׁפוּדִים,  
כַּכְּתוּב בְּתוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה מִלְּפָנֶיךָ אֵלֶּיךָ הָאֱלֹהִים:  
"הֲרַגְנוּ גּוֹיִם עִמּוֹ, כִּי דָם עֲבָדָיו יָקוּם.  
וְנָקָם יֵשִׁיב לְצָרָיו, וְכִפֹּר אֶדְמָתוֹ עִמּוֹ."  
וְעַל יְדֵי עֲבָדֶיךָ הַנִּבְיָאִים כְּתוּב לֵאמֹר.  
"וְנִשְׁתִּי דָמָם לֹא-נִקְיִיתִי, וְהָ' שׁוֹכֵן בְּצִיּוֹן."  
יִבְכְּתִיב הַקֹּדֶשׁ נֶאֱמַר:  
"לִמָּה יֹאמְרוּ הַגּוֹיִם אֵיךְ אֱלֹהֵיהֶם,  
יִנָּדַע בְּגוֹיִם לַעֲיִנֵּנוּ נִקְמַת דָּם-עֲבָדֶיךָ הַשְּׁפוּדִים."  
וְאֹמְרִים: "כִּי-דָרַשׁ דָּמִים אוֹתָם זָכַר, לֹא-שָׁכַח צַעֲקַת עֲבָדָיו."  
וְאֹמְרִים: "יִדִּין בְּגוֹיִם מְלֹא גִּוְיוֹת,  
מִחֵץ רֹאשׁ עַל-אֲרֶץ רַבָּה: מִנְּחַל בְּדָרֶךְ יִשְׁתָּה, עַל-כֵּן יָרִים רֹאשׁ".

The Father of mercy who dwells on high  
in His great mercy  
will remember with compassion  
the pious, upright and blameless  
the holy communities, who laid down their lives  
for the sanctification of His name.  
They were loved and pleasant in their lives  
and in death they were not parted.  
They were swifter than eagles and stronger than lions  
to carry out the will of their Maker,  
and the desire of their steadfast God.  
May our Lord remember them for good  
together with the other righteous of the world  
and may He redress the spilled blood of His servants  
in our sight, in our time,  
as it is written in the Torah of Moses the man of God:  
'O nations, make His people rejoice  
for He will redress the blood of His servants  
He will retaliate against His enemies  
and appease His land and His people'.  
And through Your servants, the prophets it is written:  
'Though I forgive, their bloodshed I shall not forgive

When God dwells in Zion'  
 And in the Holy Writings it says:  
 'Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?"'  
 Let it be known among the nations in our sight  
 that You avenge the spilled blood of Your servants.  
 And it says: 'For He who exacts retribution for spilled blood  
 remembers them  
 He does not forget the cry of the humble'.  
 And it says:  
 'He will execute judgement among the corpse-filled nations  
 crushing the rulers of the mighty land;  
 from the brook by the wayside he will drink  
 then he will hold his head high'.

## 1 Introduction

The prayer, *Av ha-raḥamim* ('Father of Mercy'), recited to this day in Ashkenazi communities during the Sabbath morning prayers,<sup>1</sup> is mentioned in the Worms community records as a prayer that was composed in memory of those killed in the riots that took place during the First Crusade (1096). In this paper I intend to show how *Av ha-raḥamim*, though initially composed as a memorial prayer, was later invested with a variety of deeper theological meanings. It were these theological meanings that gave it the importance that it has carried into our own days.

*Av ha-raḥamim* appears in later halakhic writings as a memorial for those who were killed during the First Crusade. Thus we find in the writings of the 'Maharil' (R. Ya'aqov Moellin, 1360–1427): 'In all the Rhineland they say the prayer *Av ha-raḥamim* only on the Saturday before Pentecost, for this is the time that the holy ones of the decree of תתנ"ו (the year 5856/1096) are commemorated'.<sup>2</sup> That is, *Av ha-raḥamim* is recited only when those murdered during the First Crusade are being commemorated. What is the meaning of the prayer *Av ha-raḥamim*, as recited throughout those generations, until our own times? What was meant by its composers, and how did it come to be

---

<sup>1</sup> In most communities, *Av ha-raḥamim* is recited every Sabbath except for those which fall before the new month (according to the Hebrew calendar), on the first day of the month, and during the month of Adar. In the Jewish-German custom, *Av ha-raḥamim* is recited only before Pentecost and before the Ninth of Av.

<sup>2</sup> R. Ya'aqov son of Moshe Moellin, *Sefer Maharil (Minhagim)*, ed. by Shlomo J. Spitzer (Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 1989), p. 159 (*Hilkhot Shavu'ot*).

preserved? Was it meant, as some say, as a memorial prayer, or, as others suggest, as a polemical prayer, – or is it maybe something altogether different?

In order better to understand the meaning of *Av ha-raḥamim*, we must consider the significance of the First Crusade for the Jewish communities. During the First Crusade, as is well known, some of the crusaders attacked Jewish communities on their way to the Holy Land. During these attacks, the attackers demanded that the Jews convert to Christianity; those who refused to do so were killed. Some Jews indeed converted, some were executed and some took their own lives rather than convert. This period became instilled in Jewish consciousness as a particularly traumatic episode – nothing less than the destruction of the Jewish community in the Rhineland.

According to Robert Chazan,<sup>3</sup> the events were not as widespread as tradition would have it; that is to say, that in comparison with much of Jewish history, which was so full of disasters, the 1096 events do not count among the worst. They were regarded as especially disastrous only in the subjective perception of medieval Jewry. Chazan's view has been challenged by Avraham Grossman who contends that Jewish sources relate, not only by poetry but by chronicles that state evident that are grave indeed.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of this disaster's objective degree of severity, it constituted a trauma that inspired the extensive acts of memorialization by medieval Rhineland Jewry. That is why they wrote the names of those who were killed in *Memorbücher*, and why they wrote prayers of commemoration like *Av ha-raḥamim*. But there, is more to it than that. Beyond the emotional experience involved, there was also a theological crisis that drove the Jews to emphasize these events. The existence of the small Jewish community in Christian Europe was possible due to the Christian 'Doctrine of Witness'. According to this doctrine, the humiliation of the Jews proved the truth of Christianity, and that is why their existence as a lowly people was necessary, as it provided reassurance for Christians. At the same time, the humiliated Jews felt that the truth of their religion was becoming

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 62–63. See also Simon Schwarzfuchs, *A History of the Jews in Medieval France* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001), pp. 109–13; Simon Schwarzfuchs, 'The Place of the Crusades in Jewish History', in *Culture and Society in Medieval Jewry, Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson*, ed. by Menachem Ben-Sasson, Robert Bonfil, Joseph R. Hacker (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Shazar Center, 1989), pp. 251–67.

<sup>4</sup> Avraham Grossman, 'Shorshaw shel Qiddush Ha-Shem be-Ashkenaz Ha-Qeduma' in *Sanctity of Life and Martyrdom, Studies in Memory of Amir Yekutiel*, ed. by Isaiah M. Gafni and Aviezer Ravitzky (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Shazar Center, 1992), pp. 102–3.

undermined. The experience of a disaster like that of 1096 made it difficult for the medieval mind to justify the truth of Judaism. The Jews were constantly being faced with their image in the eyes of the Christians. In the famous artistic depiction, Judea leans on a broken staff with her eyes covered, while Ecclesia stands straight, holding a staunch staff, her eyes wide open. If the reality of daily events serves as a theological proof, how could the Jews maintain their religion? The way they battled against such so-called proofs was by assuming a postponement of good fortune to the future. So, while misery is the property of the present, good fortune is the property of the future. In this messianic theodicy, not only will the Jewish condition improve in the future, but whoever oppresses the Jews in the present will be punished in the time to come. Thus, revenge was very much a central motif in medieval Jewish Ashkenazi theology. This brief overview of Jewish perspectives regarding the 1096 riots provides us with a solid background of the *Av ha-raḥamim* prayer. As already noted, and as I shall demonstrate in more detail, both aspects of the Jewish condition in the Rhineland after 1096 – the emotional trauma and the theological humiliation – found their expression in this prayer. *Av ha-raḥamim* has a strong element of commemoration and, at the same time, an element of revenge that serves a theodicy, and as a polemical claim against the Christian attack on Judaism based on the Jews' physical misfortune. Often, these two elements are presented as mutually contradictory, but, in fact, they did not necessarily co-exist in time, but, rather, were emphasized in different eras. That having been said, it must be noted that these two elements in *Av ha-raḥamim* are not the only ones that were to be identified among those reciting this prayer over the years. As I shall demonstrate, the martyrs were viewed as holy people, and their merits were counted as assets before the Almighty. Prayers in their memory were essentially prayers for the sake of the people who remained.

## 2 Commemoration

For a long time Torah scholars interpreted *Av ha-raḥamim* as a commemoration of the 1096 riots. Reading halakhic sources from the end of the thirteenth century in Ashkenaz, one cannot avoid seeing the connection between *Av ha-raḥamim* and the martyrs of 1096. One should note, however, that the first appearance of the prayer is in this century, and not earlier. This gap of at least a century and a half between the time the events took place and the appearance of the prayer should engage our attention, as it makes it difficult to claim

that the prayer served as a sort of documentation of the dead.<sup>5</sup> But it is not only the time gap that arouses our suspicions. A careful reading of the sources reveals that this prayer was not written exclusively as a memorial. If we start with the *Sefer Minhagim* ('Book of Customs'), based on the customs of R. Meir of Rothenburg ('Maharam' ~1220–1293), one can identify a distinction between *Av ha-rahāmim* and the memorial prayer recited before it:

There is a tradition that on the last days of the pilgrim festivals, while the cantor is sitting on the *migdal* (central podium), holding the Torah, before reciting *Ashrei* (Psalm 145), the leading member of the community takes an object and a book in his hand and goes from one [person] to another, and blesses everyone, one by one, separately, for the merit of promising to give a donation for the sake of God and the festival. *And in places where it is customary to do so, they [also] commemorate the dead and say Av ha-rahāmim* [my italics].

מנהג שבכל יומי[ם] אחרוני[ם] של רגלים בעוד החזן יושב על המגדל והס"ת [= והספר תורה] בידו קודם אשרי הגדול שבעיר לוקח חפץ [ו]ספר בידו והולך מזה לזה ומבורך כל העם אחד ואחד בפני עצמו בעבור שיתן נדר לכבוד המקום ולכבוד הרגל ובמקום שנהגו מזכירין נשמות ואומ[ו]ר[ים] אב הרהמים.<sup>6</sup>

A similar citation is found in the *Sefer Minhagim* of R. Yiṣḥaq Tyrnau (end of the fourteenth century to the beginning of the fifteenth century). Here, too, *Av ha-rahāmim* appears as a prayer separate from the one that commemorates the dead:

On the Sabbath before the first day of the month, they offer a blessing for the new month and say 'May the One who performed miracles for our patriarchs etc ...' And then they do not commemorate the dead nor do they say *Av ha-rahāmim*. The same rule applies to a wedding and all the more so to the first day of the month and to *Hanukka*.

בשבת שלפני ראש חדש מברכין החדש מי שעשה נסים וכו', ואז אין מזכירין נשמות, ואין אומרים אב הרהמים וכן בחתונה, וקל וחומר ראש חדש וחנוכה ...<sup>7</sup>

5 On mentions of the dead in prayer-books see Avriel Bar Levav, 'The Concept of Death in the 'Book of Life' (*Sefer Ha-Hayyim*) by Rabbi Shimon Frankfurt' (doctoral dissertation, submitted to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997), pp. 160–225, Regarding a prayer for commemorating the dead, see Bar-Levav, pp. 177–79; Susan L. Einbinder, *Beautiful Death: Jewish Poetry and Martyrdom in Medieval France (Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World)*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 17–44.

6 *Sefer Minhagim Devei Maharam, Minhagim ben Pesah Le-Shavuot*. And further: 'And after Nisan is over, one says *zulatot* every Sabbath ... and on the Sabbath before Pentecost the souls of the murdered of the [1096] decrees are commemorated and *Av ha-rahāmim* is said.'

'ולאחר שעבר ניסן אומרי' בכל שבתות זולתות כגון אזכרה דודי אלהי אל דמי לך עד שבועות ובשבת שלפני שבועות מזכיר (הרוגי גזירות) נשמות של הרוגי (גז') גזירות ואומ' אב הרהמים'.

7 R. Yiṣḥaq Tyrnau, *Sefer Ha-Minhagim*, by S. Y. Spitzer, *Minhag shel Shabbat* (Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 1979), p. 26.

The separation appears even more clearly in the *Qoveš Minhagim* ('Collection of Customs') of R. Zalman Jent, who lived in the same time and place as Yiṣḥaq of Tyrnau and towards the end of his life moved to Italy:

The Sabbath before Pentecost, [the custom is to] wake up early and say *pesuqe de-zimra* (the Psalms recited at the beginning of the prayers) quickly in order to commemorate the murdered and the burned of the communities of Speyer, Worms and Mainz. And *Av ha-raḥamim* is said, as well as, in the *yoṣer* (additional poetry inserted in that particular section) in *Ahava Rabba* – 'It is You that we were eager for all day' and the *zulat* (additional poetry inserted in that particular section) – 'My God! We heard it in our own ears'. שבת שלפני שבועות משכימין וממהרין פסוקי דזמרה כדי להזכיר הרוגי ושרופי קהילות שו"ם, ואומרים אב הרחמים ואומרים ביוצר באהבה רבה אותך כל היום קיונו וזולת אלה באזנינו שמענו.<sup>8</sup>

In all the passages I have cited above, the recitation of *Av ha-raḥamim* is mentioned together with that of the commemoration of the martyrs, although they are clearly perceived as separate prayers. From the next citation I can demonstrate that the recitations were separate from each other:

In the Sabbath that falls after the [fast-day] of Seventeenth of Tammuz, ... after the Torah reading, the decrees against the murdered are commemorated and the community is blessed. And Ashrei (Psalm 145) is recited, and afterwards *Av ha-raḥamim* is said, and special Sabbath clothes are not worn.

בשבת אחר י"ז בתמוז ולאחר קריאת התורה מזכירין גזירות ההרוגים] ומברכין הקהל, ואומרים] אשרי ואח"כ [= ואחר כך] אומרים] אב הרחמים ואין לובשין בגדי שבת.<sup>9</sup>

These sources indicate that *Av ha-raḥamim* is not only about commemoration. The next source appears to contradict my claim and to make a halakhic connection between *Av ha-raḥamim* and the commemoration of the dead: R. Zalman Jent teaches us that *Av ha-raḥamim* is recited only on those days when the dead are commemorated. Hence we learn that *Av ha-raḥamim* is also considered a sort of commemoration:

On *Shabbat Teshuva* (the Sabbath before Yom Kippur), the *yoṣer* (an added piyyuṭ to the prayer) 'Light of the World' [is said] [...] and the dead are not commemorated and *Av ha-raḥamim* is not said. This is the rule: on every Sabbath that has a *yoṣer*, the commemoration of the dead is not recited and *Av Ha-raḥamim* is not recited. That is also the case on a Sabbath when the benediction of the new month is recited.

בשבת תשובה היוצר אור עולם קראו והאופן כי אם שם אדיר ולא אמת ויציב ד"ט [= דיום טוב – של יום טוב] והזולת אל לבבנו והפטרה שובה ולא יאמר אותה נער. ואין מזכירין נשמות ואין אומרים] אב הרחמים, וזה הכלל בכל שבת שיש בו יוצר אין מזכירין נשמות, וכן בשבת שמברכין בו ראש חדש אין מזכירין.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> R. Zalman Jent, *Qoveš Minhagim*, included in the edition of Tyrnau's *Minhagim* ed. by S. Y. Spitzer (Jerusalem: Mekhon Yerushalayim, 1979), p. 179.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

The same rule can be found in the writings of R. Ya'aqov Moellin, based on R. Jent, where the link between *Av Ha-raḥamim* and the mention of the dead is very clear – *Av ha-raḥamim* is recited only when the martyrs of 1096 are mentioned:

In all Rhineland *Av ha-raḥamim* is not said, except on the Sabbath before Pentecost, when the martyrs of the 4856 [1096] decree are mentioned, and on the *Shabbat Ḥazon* [the Sabbath preceding the Ninth of Av] these martyrs are also commemorated and *Av ha-raḥamim* is said.

בכל מדינת ריינוס א"א [= אין אומרים] אב הרחמים אלא בשבת דלפני שבועות דמזכירין את הקדושים גזירת תתנ"ו. ובשבת חזון ישעיהו מזכירין ג"כ אותן הקדושים ואומר אב הרחמים.<sup>11</sup>

In the next source, R. Ya'aqov Moellin connects the commemoration of the dead with *Av ha-raḥamim*, without any separation:

In Mainz, on *Shabbat Ḥazon* they recite 'It is you that we love ...' and the *zulat* 'Lions they expelled' (names of *piyyuṭim*) and they commemorate these holy martyrs of 5856 [1096], *Av ha-raḥamim*.

במגנצא בשבת חזון ישעיהו אומר אותך כל היום לאהבה, וזולת אריות הדיחו, ומזכירין קדושים תתנ"ו, אב הרחמים.<sup>12</sup>

These sources reveal a link between *Av ha-raḥamim* and the commemoration of the dead, though almost all of them present *Av ha-raḥamim* as a separate prayer. *Av ha-raḥamim* is not necessarily presented in these sources as a prayer commemorating the martyrs; that commemoration was done separately. But nonetheless, it is clear that there is an association between the two. Thus, both tradition and allusions in the above-mentioned texts connect *Av ha-raḥamim* to the 1096 events.

At the same time, it seems that *Av ha-raḥamim* was not perceived solely as a prayer of commemoration. The names of the communities are not even mentioned, although they are mentioned elsewhere. Even their acts of martyrdom are described anonymously as 'the holy communities, who laid down their lives'. We thus have to proceed to the other meaning inherent in *Av ha-raḥamim* – the polemic one.

### 3 The polemical-theological purpose

In his book, *Two Nations in Your Womb*, Yisrael Yuval points out two motifs in *Av ha-raḥamim*. The liturgist prays for redressing 'the spilt blood of His ser-

<sup>11</sup> *Sefer Maharil (Minhagim)*, p. 159 (*Hilkhot Shavu'ot*).

<sup>12</sup> *Sefer Maharil (Minhagim)*, p. 243 (*Hilkhot Shiv'a 'Asar be-Tammuz we-Tisha be-'Av*).

vants in our sight, in our time. This prayer is a request for redemption that includes revenge (as distinct from redemption that includes conversion of the Gentiles).<sup>13</sup> The second motif appears in the liturgist's prayer to God to remember, as opposed to human beings remembering: 'The Father of Mercy who dwells on high, in His great mercy, will remember with compassion the pious, upright and blameless ...'.<sup>14</sup> Regarding the first motif, Yuval puts a special emphasis on the words, that 'He redress the spilled blood of His servants in our sight, in our time'. The quest for a redressing to take place in our time is closely tied to a certain kind of redemption. Yuval's main attention is focused on the idea of revenge and its very close connection with redemption.

Borrowing Avraham Grossman's distinction between two perspectives of redemption that were common in the Middle Ages – a redemption of revenge and a redemption of conversion<sup>15</sup> – Yuval understands the revenge in *Av ha-raḥamim* as being of the former type.

According to Grossman, both redemptions provide a solution for the difficult state of the Jews in the Middle Ages. But according to Yuval, the two kinds of redemptions are typical of the differences between West and East, between Jews in the Christian world and Jews in the Islamic world.

For the Jews under Christian dominion, the difficulty was not only physical but also theological. As mentioned above, the 'Doctrine of Witness' played an important role in the Christian's perception of the Jews. Christianity used the miserable situation of the Jews to prove Judaism's fallacy. The Jewish reply to this claim was that although the present seems bad, the future will change the picture. In the future, not only will the Jews will benefit from a better life, but God will take revenge on the Christians for oppressing the Jews. This messianic solution is a redemption of revenge, unique to Ashkenaz. Hence, according to Yuval, we find an emphasis on revenge in Ashkenazi liturgy.

In the East, on the other hand, we find a different messianic expectation. R. Hai Gaon, for instance, claims that at the end-time, all the Gentiles will convert to Judaism. That kind of redemption involving conversion knows no violence or revenge of the sort we find in the Ashkenazi world.

The second motif is expressed in the words: 'The Father of Mercy who dwells on high, in His great mercy will remember with compassion the pious, upright and blameless ...'.<sup>16</sup> As Yuval explains: 'The purpose of the ritual is

---

<sup>13</sup> Yisrael Y. Yuval, *Shnei Goyim be-Vitnekh* (Tel Aviv: Alma, Am Oved, 2000), p. 152.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Avraham Grossman, 'Redemption of Conversion in the Writings of the Early Sages of Ashkenaz' (Hebrew), *Zion*, 59 (1994), pp. 325–42.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



not to augment human memory but, rather, Divine memory. The liturgical meaning ... does not relate to human beings remembering, but to God who remembers.<sup>17</sup>

In saying that, Yuval is in effect criticizing the opinion that holds that *Av ha-raḥamim* was meant to commemorate the dead. When the communities were praying for the memory of the deceased, they were not engaging in an active act of remembering as in Marcel Proust's works, but, rather, in a religious act, requesting that God should remember.

I find Yuval's claims convincing, not only because rituals of self-commemoration in this context sound anachronistic, but also because of the very special wording of the prayer: 'In His great mercy will remember ...'.

## 4 Tremendous mercy

Simha Goldin has already shown the early roots of the expression 'Father of Mercy'.<sup>18</sup> But the idea of remembering with *tremendous* mercy has no precedence. In *Av ha-raḥamim* the liturgist is not satisfied with mercy as a means of remembering the deceased; he needs 'tremendous mercy'. The question that arises, then is, why? Why does God need all His mercy in order to remember them with compassion?

It seems that the people of that generation were sure that the acts of the martyrs did not deserve just any kind of mercy; but that only tremendous mercy could assure Divine remembrance.

There is no doubt that the liturgist of *Av ha-raḥamim* was well acquainted with the talmudic source that tells us, with regard to the martyrs of the city of Lod, that 'no creature can stand in their place'.<sup>19</sup> The common explanation of this source is that these martyrs gave their lives for the sake of the Jews of Lod, and thus achieved great spiritual heights.<sup>20</sup> If martyrdom is so respected,

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Simha Goldin, *The Ways of Jewish Martyrdom* (Hebrew; Ganei-Aviv; Lod: Dvir publishing House, 2002), pp. 131–36.

<sup>19</sup> *bPesah*. 50a; *bB. Bat*. 10b. Parallel *midrashim* appear in *Midrash Qohelet Rabba* 9.10 (24b), and *Midrash Zuṭa – Qohelet* 9 (ed. Buber, 74a).

<sup>20</sup> Rashi, *bTa'an*. 18b: 'And that is what is said in every place (*bB. Bat*. 10b): As for the martyrs of Lod, no creature can stand close to them in *Gan 'Eden*, and there are those who say that they were killed because of a princess who was found murdered. It was said that the Jews had murdered her, and there was a decree against the enemies of Israel [euphemism for the Jews themselves], and these [two] stood up and rescued Israel, saying "We murdered her," and the king killed only those.'

why is tremendous mercy necessary? It is not unlikely that the liturgist could not think of the praise deserved by the Ashkenazi martyrs without feeling that their act also warranted some criticism. Although he praised them for being 'pious, upright and blameless' he also indicated that they required tremendous mercy. What sort of criticism, then, is being levelled at them?

The answer is that the martyrs not only committed suicide, but also killed others, in a collective attempt to prevent forced conversions. It is this element that raises questions, halakhic as well as moral.<sup>21</sup>

Despite all this, love and appreciation of the martyrs should also be recorded. The following sentences express a respect and a love that reflects something much powerful than the prayer's polemical elements:

They were loved and pleasant in their lives, and in death they were not parted. They were swifter than eagles and stronger than lions to carry out the will of their Maker, and the desire of their steadfast God.

Commemoration, polemics, controversy – all are present. But one issue still remains – that of the prayer's continued presence in the prayer-book. Is there some content in it that goes beyond these time-connected elements? In the next section I will explore additional aspects of the prayer, which may serve to answer this question.

---

**21** R. Meir son of R. Barukh of Rothenburg, *Teshuvot, Pesaqim u-Minhagim (Responso, Rulings and Customs)*, ed. by Isaac Z. Cahana, Jerusalem, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1960), p. 54, section 59. Moshe Aryeh Bloch included the following responsum at the end of the collection as one transmitted to him by Rabbi Dr Gross, who had received it from Dov Goldberg without any indication of the location of the original manuscript. See *Sha'arei Teshuvot Maharasham ben Rabbi Barukh z"l*, pp. 346–47. The explanations in brackets are in the original:

I do not know how to assess this matter properly, for certainly one who kills himself for the sake of the unity of God is permitted to harm himself thus ... But it has become common to permit killing family members for the purpose of sanctifying God's name, for we have heard and read about many great people who slaughtered their sons and daughters ... And whoever says that he must atone for this is slandering the earlier generations. His intention was worthy; arising out of his great love for our Creator, that is why he struck down his loved one ...

לא ידענא שפיר מה אידון ביה [= איני יודע כיצד לדון בדבר כראוי], כי ודאי ההורג עצמו על ייחוד ה' רשאי לחבול בעצמו ... מיהו דבר זה פשט היתירו [= ברם התפשט ההיתר – להרוג בני משפחה כדי לקדש את השם], כי שמענו ומצאנו שהרבה גדולים שהיו שוחטין את בניהם ואת בנותיהם ... ואחרי שכוונתו [= יצרו] היה לטובה; מרוב אהבת יוצרינו יתברך שמו פגע ונגע (במעמד) [במחמד] עינו. גם הם חילו פניו על ככה ... ואין להחמיר עליו כלל.

On this responsum see Goldin, *Jewish Martyrdom*, pp. 228–42, Haim Soloveitchik, 'Religious Law and Change: The Medieval Ashkenazic Example', *AJS Review*, 12 (1987), pp. 205–21.

## 5 The merit of the forefathers

Defining the communities 'who laid down their lives for the sanctification of His name' as holy gives the impression that they were truly great people in Jewish history: patriarchs, people whose merits go beyond simple human virtues. It seems to me that *Av ha-rahāmim* was intended for the living much more than for the dead. The martyrs' merits are therefore mentioned as a way of according them a status that will benefit the living.

Requesting that the deceased serve as our advocates in heaven was common in medieval Ashkenaz. Thus, R. Mordekhai Yaffe at the end of the sixteenth century teaches us to remember the acts of the dead:

One remembers the acts of the dead and says: 'If this dead man were alive, he would have been giving charity.' When this is said, his merits are remembered. If the deceased was poor but generous and would have given this charity on his own, if he had had money, then giving this charity can bring him some merit, because the living can ask for a more lenient judgement of the dead. That is why charity is given on their behalf, so that they, too, if they were righteous [in their lives], will speak up for their offspring and relatives. But if one gives for a confirmed sinner, it will not help him.

זוכר מעשה המתים ואומר, אם היה אותו המת בחיים היה ג"כ נותן צדקה ואגב זוכר לו זכותו, ואם היה עני אותו המת אך היה לבו טוב והיה נותן לרצונו אם היה לו, אז תועיל לו קצת, כי החי יכול לבקש להקל דין המת, כדוד על אבשלום [סוטה י ע"ב] וכו' מאיר על אחר [ע' חגיגה טו ע"ב], הלכך נותנים לכבודם כדי שגם הם אם היו הם צדיקים יהיו מליצים על צאצאיהם וקרוביהם, אבל אם נותן בעבור רשע אין מועיל לו.<sup>22</sup>

Remembering the acts of the dead was meant to grant them atonement and improve their state in the afterworld. At the same time, it might help their living relatives in this world.

This source from the end of the Middle Ages was based on perspectives from the earlier High Middle Ages. R. Eleazer of Worms (~1165--~1230) related to the custom to pray for the merits of the deceased as common knowledge:

And regarding the giving of charity on behalf of the dead, on Yom Kippur and not on Yom Tov, there is a source for it in the Torah ... And how does it help the deceased that the living give charity on his behalf? Well, the Lord examines the hearts of the living and the dead. If this deceased person gave charity when he was alive, or if he was a poor but generous man who would have given charity, then the merit of charity will help him somewhat.

ומה שפוסקין צדקה עבור המתים ביום הכפורים ולא ביום טוב יש להם אסמכתא שכתוב בסוף פרש' ואתה תצוה הכפורים אחת בשנה יכפר וסמיך ליה ונתנו איש כופר נפשו ליי' בזמן שיתן לכפר' הנפש. ומה מועיל למת שהחי נותן צדקה בעבורו אלא השם בוחן לבות

<sup>22</sup> R. Mordekhai Yaffe, *Levush, Oraḥ Ḥayyim*, 621.

החיים והמתים אם אותו המת בחיים היה נותן צדקה ואם היה עני אותו המת אך לכו בטוב והיה נותן אם היה לו אז תועיל לו קצת.<sup>23</sup>

Both R. Mordekhai Yaffe and R. Ele'azar are relating to the custom, common in their times, of giving charity on High Holy Days. According to them, charity is beneficial to the deceased only if they would have acted similarly when they were alive. And only the righteous can be advocates for their relatives. They are, then, not recommending the custom, but, rather, trying to justify it. This shows the extent to which viewing the dead were viewed as possible advocates in heaven was common in the Rhineland, even from the beginning of the thirteenth century.

The usefulness of seeking such advocates is not necessarily a given; but it seems that the general approach was that there was nothing wrong with the custom. R. Šidqiya, the son of Avraham Ha-Rofe (1210–1275) recommends, in his *Shibbolei Ha-Leqet* in the name of Rashi, that one should make efforts to receive all possible help from such sources. Actually, Rashi was referring to angels, but angels, too, can serve as go-betweens:

R. Yoḥanan said: A person should always seek full encouragement from earthly powers, as well as having no enemies on high. And Rabbenu Shelomo explained this to mean that the heavenly angels should assist him by asking for mercy, and that he should have no antagonists above. And also in the *Midrash Shir Ha-Shirim*, on the verse 'I adjure you', it says, *The community of Israel* says to the angels that stand at the gates of prayer and the gates of tears: 'Bring my prayer and my tears before the Holy One, Blessed be He, and be my true advocates before Him, so that he will forgive me for my intentional and unintentional transgressions. And it says, 'If there is one advocating angel for him out of a thousand etc.'

אמר ר' יוחנן לעולם יבקש אדם שיהיו הכל מאמצין את כחו מלמטה ואל יהי לו צרים מלמעלה ופי' רבינו שלמה זצ"ל שייסיעוהו מלאכי השרת לבקש רחמים ושלא יהיה לו משטנים מלמעלה וגם במדרש שיר השירים על פסוק השבעתי אתכם אומרת כנסת ישראל למלאכים העומדים על שערי תפלה ועל שערי דמעה הוליכו תפלתי ודמעתי לפני הקב"ה ותהיו מליצי יושר לפניו שימחול לי על הזדונות ועל השגגות ונאמר אם יש עליו מלאך מליץ אחד מני אלף וגו'.<sup>24</sup>

The request that the dead serve as advocates is, then, what was at the base of commemorating the dead. It seems to me that this meaning has also affected the understanding of *Av ha-raḥamim*. Including the martyrs with other righteous people in the words 'May our Lord remember them for good together

<sup>23</sup> R. Ele'azar of Worms, *Sefer Ha-Roqeaḥ Ha-Shalem*, ed. by Barukh Shneurson (repr. Jerusalem: Otzar Posqim, 1967), p. 110 (*Hilkhot Yom Ha-Kippurim*). On giving charity on behalf of the dead on Yom Kippur, see Bar Levav, *The Concept of Death*, pp. 226–30.

<sup>24</sup> R. Šidqiyahu the son of R. Avraham Ha-Rofe, *Sefer Shibbolei Ha-Leqet Ha-Shalem*, ed. Buber (Wilna, 1887; repr. Jerusalem: Pe'er Ha-Tora, 1959), p. 133b (*Rosh Ha-Shana*, section 282).

with the other righteous of the world' carries with it the notion of the merit of the forefathers. The request is not only for these particular martyrs, but also for the benefit of those living today. This explanation of mine may help explain another phenomenon that developed with regard to *Av ha-raẖamim*. As mentioned above, this prayer was said on those days of the year on which the 1096 events occurred, namely before Pentecost, as described in R. Zalman Jent's collected customs, already cited above.

This also helps us to understand the custom to say *Av ha-raẖamim* immediately before the Ninth of Av, as mentioned in the book of customs of the Maharam of Rothenburg: 'And there are places where *Av ha-raẖamim* is said only on the Sabbath before the Ninth of Av'.<sup>25</sup>

And so also in the 'Maharil', in continuation of the passage quoted above:

... And on *Shabbat Hazon Yesha'yahu* (the Sabbath preceding the Ninth of Av), those martyrs are also mentioned, and *Av ha-raẖamim* is said. And so Maharaz Jent instituted ...  
 ... ובשבת חזון ישעיהו מזכירין ג"כ אותן הקדושים ואומר אב הרחמים. וכן הנהיג מהר"ז  
 ייענט ...<sup>26</sup>

But it is difficult to understand the role of *Av ha-raẖamim* in the prayers of the three festivals, as cited above from the Maharam's customs, namely, that 'there is a tradition that on the last days of the holidays, while the cantor is sitting on the *migdal* (central podium), holding the Torah ... and in places where it is customary to do so, they [also] commemorate the dead and say *Av ha-raẖamim*.'<sup>27</sup> In my opinion, the fact that saying *Av ha-raẖamim* also became common on the festivals supports my thesis – that the point of this prayer, as viewed by these people, was to mention the merits of the forefathers, and therefore it is to be said not only on days when tragic events occurred, but on the festivals too. On days that are considered days of judgement there is a special need for the merits of our forefathers, and therefore a special role was also assigned to the Rhineland forefathers.

<sup>25</sup> R. Meir son of R. Barukh, *The Book of Customs from the Sphere of the Maharam*, section on Seventeenth of Tammuz.

<sup>26</sup> R. Ya'aqov b. Moshe Moellin, *Sefer Maharil, The Book of Customs*, section of the laws of Shavu'ot, ed. Shlomo Y. Spitzer (Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 1989), p. 199.

<sup>27</sup> R. Meir of Rothenburg, *Ibid*, section of Customs Between Pesah and Shavu'ot, p. 28, and later in p. 29: "and after the month of Nisan they say ... and mention the souls of the murdered of persecutions, and say *Av ha-raẖamim*".

## 6 Summary

The recital of *Av ha-raḥamim* is a custom that persists to this day. Its historical survival teaches us about its deep and varied levels and about its powerful meaning. Unlike during the Middle Ages, not everyone is aware of its connection to the events of 1096, and it is generally viewed as a general commemoration of the many communities that were destroyed during the long exile. Our Sages have taught us that recent troubles make us forget earlier ones.<sup>28</sup> It seems that the 1096 events went through a similar process, one that affected *Av ha-raḥamim*. The terror of the Crusades began to wane. The prayer then became meta-historical and absorbed memories of other massacres, of other communities. In the meantime, the original memory, together with its connection to the 1096 events, weakened. Its general wording forced the Ashkenaz communities that wished to remember that particular memory to do so by way of saying a separate prayer of commemoration for the dead. As mentioned above, this process may be seen in the separation that occurred during thirteenth and fourteenth centuries between the 1096 riots and the introduction of *Av ha-raḥamim*.

But beyond those two meanings, *Av ha-raḥamim* acquired an additional meaning. The 1096 martyrs became figures whose merits protected the living. *Av ha-raḥamim* gradually lost the personal connection to the martyrs of the Crusades. They became holy figures – not mere mortals who need mercy – and their memory became a source of strength for the Jews, not only when facing their Christian neighbours, but mainly when facing the Creator Himself. The merit of those martyrs is seen as what provides one with the necessary power to stand before God and the heavenly court.

---

<sup>28</sup> *bBer.* 13a.