



Discover the Joy of Shabbos

Explore the deeper meaning of the Zemiros, Tefillos and Hanhagos of Shabbos.



Lecha-Dodi – A Mixed-up Message?

By Rav Eli Mansour (Shiur E4)

Adapted by Ephraim D. Becker

If you could enter the mind of a great Kabbalist, what would your thoughts be like? Would we be greater than we are if we were to enter his world, or would we remain observers, looking on without internalizing?

The usual role of a literary critic

When a literary critic approaches a poem, he tries to get into the head of the author. That usually means that the critic is 'sane' and objective while the author was in some intense 'mood' that prompted him to write the poem. The critic tries to understand that 'mood' so that he can decide how the poet has captured that mood in the poem.

Learning from a Tefilah

The story changes dramatically when the poet is the 'sane' one and has written the poem to help us latch onto some of his perspective. We are then trying to decode the messages of the poem so that we can meet the poet at his place of clarity. That is what happens when the poet is one of the great Kabbalists of the 16th Century. And that is why we take pains to try and reach some of the truths contained in his most famous poem, Lecha Dodi.

Introducing Rav Shlomo Alkabetz

Rabbi Shlomo Halevy Alkabetz lived for the first 76 years of the 16th Century. Most of his adult life was spent in the holy city of צפת, where he, together with his close circle of Kabbalists, had moved from Turkey. His close circle included the great Rav Yosef Caro, the Alsichich, and Rav Moshe Cordevero (his brother-in-law). Rav Alkabetz was a Kabbalist, scholar, and poet and his Lecha Dodi was universally accepted as the

poetic welcome to the holy Shabbat. It is part of the welcome for Shabbat all over the world. With an interesting exception:

The Syrian Minhag

Interestingly, the Syrian-Jewish community skips some of the stanzas of Lecha Dodi in their communal recitation. This 'skipping' has its origins in the dark period of Jewish history when false messiahs cropped up, most notably Shabtai Tzvi. The lure of the Sabbatian movement and of messianism in general was strong and the effect on the faith of the Jewish communities that were drawn into them was devastating.

A way to deflect attention from messianism and back to normative Torah Judaism was to talk less about the Messiah. In that spirit, the Syrian-Jewish communal leaders saw fit to skip those stanzas of Lecha Dodi which referred to the coming of the Moshiach and the imminent restoration of the Jewish community to its Homeland and Temple. Now, when you visit a Syrian Shul for Kabolat Shabbat you will not be surprised by the omissions.

Two renditions of the Ten Commandments

The first stanza of Lecha Dodi opens with the words שְׁמוֹר וְזָכוֹר בְּדַבְּרוֹר אֶחָד הַשְּׁמִיעֵנוּ א-ל הַמִּיָּחָד. This is a reference to the fact that the עֲשֵׂרַת הַדְּבָרוֹת, the Ten Commandments, are rendered twice in the Torah. The first is in Shemos, in Parshas Yisro, and the second is in Devarim in Vaeschanan. Of interest to us now is the fact that there are differences between them. One of the best-known differences between them (likely because of this line in the Lecha Dodi) is the opening word of the

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Shabbat on
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commandment to observe Shabbat. In Shemos the commandment begins with זכור (remember) while in Devarim it begins with שמור (protect). Note that the first occurrence in the Torah is זכור and the second is שמור.

Two words B'dibur Echad - simultaneously

Since the revelation at Har Sinai was a singular event, we are left wondering which one was said by Hashem at the revelation, זכור or שמור? The answer is that the two words were said together, simultaneously. And while a person cannot utter nor hear two words at once, that limitation does not apply to Hashem. Hashem said both words at once and caused us to be able to hear both, as well. Hence the reference in the פיט that the two words were said simultaneously, and Hashem caused us to be able to hear them both, as well.

The order in the Torah is זכור and then שמור

As mentioned, at times חז"ל spoke of this miracle as זכור ושמור, thus keeping to the order in which they appear in the Torah, and at other times חז"ל refer to them in the reverse order, שמור וזכור, which is the order that R' Alkabetz chose for this פיט.

The simple answers

It might be simple to dismiss the question of why this order or that since the two words were said and heard simultaneously. If they were both said at the same time, is there really room to wonder about the order? The order would seem to be random given the event that we are describing. Still, we are left to ask if there is significance in the order that the Torah chose to present the words (זכור and then שמור) versus the order that R' Alkabetz chose for the פיט?

Another simple answer for the order that he chose here is the fact that the פיט is written as an acrostic of the

name of the author. His name, שלמה הלוי is stamped into the Lecha Dodi as the first letter of each of the stanza. And given that the first stanza is to start with a ש, the first letter of שלמה, it made sense to choose the wording of שמור וזכור rather than the reverse. If we are satisfied with this simple answer, then we need not pursue the question.

A Kabbalistic answer

But there are those who look for more. Is there a deeper level that can be culled from the choice of the poet? Perhaps a bit more digging will yield additional insight into the mind of R' Alkabetz.

The רמב"ן understands the words שמור and זכור as referring to two aspects of Shabbat.¹ That explains the plural use of שבתות when speaking about Shabbat. While it could refer to many שבתות, it can logically refer to two aspects of each Shabbat. Elsewhere the רמב"ן cites an early source which identifies שמור as the 'service' of the night of Shabbat and זכור as the 'service' of the day.² Thus, in sequence of Shabbat, שמור comes before זכור, and that could explain why many sources, including R' Alkabetz, use that order.

To flesh out what is implied by the night/day division, we could turn to a formulation which is frequently found in Kabbalistic literature. That which receives the impression of something else is called feminine, while that which impresses upon another is called masculine. (נקבה is מקבל and זכר is משפיע.)

The nighttime is called לילה. That is an intriguing word. While it is זכר, it is exceptional. Looking at the word לילה one would recognize the feminine ending (ה) and expect it to be נקבה. Indeed, the Vilna Gaon understands the first question of the Seder night (מה נשתנה הלילה הזה) as asking why לילה is masculine.

¹ רמב"ן על התורה ויקרא יט:ג

² רמב"ן על התורה שמות כ:ח



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If we work with nighttime as feminine (מקבל) we understand that at night, we refer to Shabbat as the כלה – the bride. In a sense, we 'cause' (משפיע) the קדושה of Shabbat on Friday night by reciting Kiddush. By contrast in the day, Shabbat is the male משפיע and 'causes' the קדושה to descend on us.

It would then be logical that R' Alkabetz chose שמור as the version of the Mitzvah of Shabbat for the פיוט of Friday night. He is keeping with the order of night/day. We energize Shabbat on Friday night and we get back from Shabbat in the day.

Takeaway: I will remind myself that there is much more to the words of our prayers than meets the eye.



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