



Min ha-Meitzar

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Since October 7, I have been thinking about the prayer—often [sung](#)—called “A_heinu.” At its core, it is a request for God to have mercy on captives and free them:

Our family, the whole house of Israel, who are in distress, or in captivity —who stand either in the sea or on dry land— may the Omnipresent have mercy on them and take them out from trouble to blessing and from darkness to light and from oppression to redemption, now, swiftly, and soon!	אֲחֵינוּ כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל הַנִּתְּוִנִּים בְּצָרָה וּבִשְׁבִּיָּה הָעוֹמְדִים בֵּין בָּיִם וּבֵין בִּיבְשָׁה הַמְּקוֹם יִרְחֵם עֲלֵיהֶם וְיוֹצִיאֵם מִצָּרָה לְרוּחָה וּמִאֲפֶלֶה לְאוֹרָה וּמִשְׁעָבֹד לְגָאֹלָה הַשְׁתָּא בְּעִגְלָא וּבְזִמְן קָרִיב
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This is an old prayer: it appears in **Mahzor Vitry**, a 12th century prayerbook from the school of Rashi. It was said on Shabbat afternoon, after the Torah was read. An old Italian tradition includes it at the moment of declaring the new moon, which happens during the Torah

service. Today, Ashkenazim recite it on Mondays and Thursdays, also after the Torah reading. The common thread is that “Aheinu” was said in the presence of the Torah, when Jews are gathered together.

In the prayer, we ask God to take the captives from “trouble to blessing, and from darkness to light, and from oppression to redemption.” This echoes the language we recite on Seder night, that remembers the original moment of our liberation from captivity:

Pesah Haggadah [We praise the One...] who took us out from slavery to freedom, from suffering to joy, from mourning to festival; from darkness to a great light, and from oppression to redemption.	הגדה של פסח הוציאנו מעבדות לחירות מיגון לשמחה ומאבל ליום טוב ומאפילה לאור גדול ומשעבוד לגאולה.
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As slaves in Egypt, our ancestors’ original moment of desperation, their cries were answered and God delivered them. Significantly, the Haggadah tells us that God not only did this for our ancestors, but also for “us.” That is why we have to imagine in each and every generation (בכל דור ודור) as if we ourselves went out from Egypt. In this moment, that is not a theoretical exercise, but a desperate, daily plea.

One phrase in the prayer confuses me. Older versions started, “Our family Israel who are in distress and captivity.” But now, the prayer opens with: “Our family, **the whole house of Israel**, who are in distress and captivity.” How could it be that **all** of Israel is in distress and captivity? If so, who is left to pray for them?

It is possible to read this opening phrase not as defining the captives, but as an address: “Our family, the whole house of Israel! [Those] in distress and captivity... may the Omnipresent



have mercy on them.” In other words, before addressing God, the prayer is first speaking to the entire community, focusing them on those who are in distress.

Indeed, the phrase “our family, the whole house of Israel” is used in this manner in the Talmud, where it comes in moments of great suffering. When R. Akiva’s sons die, he addresses those who came to comfort him as “our brothers, the house of Israel” (Mo’ed Katan 21b). When one priest stabs another in the Temple, R. Tzadok addresses the nation to rebuke them by saying: “our brothers, the house of Israel” (Yoma 23a).

This is how I imagine the prayer opening: it speaks to the entire house of Israel, reminding us that we are all family. The prayer calls us to attention, saying: we need to focus on this. Our request is a simple one: God, please bring home the captives. Just as our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt, may they journey from darkness to light—right now.

