

An Early Modern Version of Shalom Aleichem for Women after Friday Candle Lighting

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Article abstract

The singing of the hymn Shalom Aleichem upon returning home from the synagogue on Friday night is a well-known tradition. It is assumed that the Talmudic passage in Tractate Shabbat (B. Shabbat 119b) is the source of this tradition. In fact, it is a kabbalistic custom more influenced by the Zohar. There is a second version of Shalom Aleichem to be recited by women after the lighting of the Sabbath candles, that was first published in a collection of prayers entitled Birkhat ha-Mazon, Basel, 1600. This study analyzes the origins and history of this second version of Shalom Aleichem for women.

An Early Modern Version of *Shalom Aleichem* for Women after Friday Candle Lighting

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Abstract

The singing of the hymn *Shalom Aleichem* upon returning home from the synagogue on Friday night is a well-known tradition. It is assumed that the Talmudic passage in *Tractate Shabbat* (B. *Shabbat* 119b) is the source of this tradition. In fact, it is a kabbalistic custom more influenced by the *Zohar*. There is a second version of *Shalom Aleichem* to be recited by women after the lighting of the Sabbath candles, that was first published in a collection of prayers entitled *Birkhat ha-Mazon*, Basel, 1600. This study analyzes the origins and history of this second version of *Shalom Aleichem* for women.

The singing of the hymn *Shalom Aleichem* upon returning home from the synagogue on Friday night is a well-known tradition that is first documented in the early seventeenth century.¹ It is generally assumed that the Talmudic passage in *Tractate Shabbat* (B. *Shabbat* 119b) that describes how two angels accompany the person home on Friday night from the synagogue was the source of this tradition.

“It was taught in a *baraita*: Rabbi Yose bar Yehuda says: Two ministering angels accompany a person on Shabbat evening from the synagogue to his home, one good angel and one evil angel. And when he reaches his home and finds a lamp burning and a table set and his bed made, the good angel says: May it be Your will that it shall be like this for another Shabbat. And the evil angel answers against his will: Amen. And if the person’s home is not prepared for Shabbat in that manner, the evil angel says: May it be Your will that it shall be so for another Shabbat, and the good angel answers against his will: Amen.”

The origin of *Shalom Aleichem* and its role in the Friday night home ritual is more complicated. It is a part of the revolution and transformation of Jewish customs and rituals by the kabbalists of sixteenth-century Safed. Virtually every Jewish ritual and religious practice was touched in some way by these kabbalistic innovations.² There were also rituals and practices that were unknown before 16th cent. Safed and disseminated to Jewish communities all over the world in the following century. Among the best-known rituals created in Safed and relevant to the current study is *Kabbalat Shabbat*, both the synagogue and home rituals.³ Before Safed, the Friday night service began with Psalm 92 and 93 and continued with the Ma’ariv service.⁴ Both *Kabbalat Shabbat*, from Psalm 95 through *Lekha Dodi*, and the home rituals that include *Shalom Aleichem*, and *Eshet Hayil*, were unknown before Safed.

Tikkunei Shabbat Malketa, published in Cracow, 1612, is the first published collection of the kabbalistic rituals created in Safed that came to be observed on the Sabbath. It is also the first published text that contains *Shalom Aleichem* as a hymn that is to be sung Friday night prior to the recitation of the *Kiddush*. *Shalom Aleichem* is the first of three hymns that one sings or reads before the *Kiddush* on Friday night, according to this kabbalistic custom. The second one is known by its opening words, *Ribon Olamim* (Sovereign of the Universe). It is a bricolage of passages from several sources. They include passages from *Heikhalot Rabbati*, and a reworking of a prayer by Rabbi Jacob Moelin, author of *Sefer Maharil*. This hymn can be found in some modern prayerbooks but is missing in others.⁵ There are even some Hasidic groups that would be normally expected to follow kabbalistic customs who leave out this hymn because of its petitionary *Tehinnah* form.⁶ The third prayer is *Eshet Hayil* (The Woman of Virtue), the passage from Proverbs, 31. It was not recited on Friday night before Safed and is a hymn to the *Shekhinah*.⁷ The header introducing the *Eshet Hayil* passage in *Tikkunei Shabbat Malketa* makes it very explicit that this passage is to be sung as a hymn in praise of the *Shekhinah*, and not as a hymn to one's wife as has become the common belief regarding this hymn.

The passage about the angels from Tractate *Shabbat* might explain the inclusion of *Shalom Aleichem* in the home ritual, but why is *Eshet Hayil* included? The answer to that is found in a passage from the *Zohar Hadash*. According to this text, not only do the angels visit the Friday night home, but the *Shekhinah* also accompanies them. That is why one sings a hymn to the *Shekhinah* in addition the hymn to the angels:

“When the person comes home from the synagogue, angels come on both sides of him, and the *Shekhinah* above them all, like a mother above her children ... All of this is when the person comes to his house and receives the guest (*Ushpiza*) with joy. When the *Shekhinah* sees the burning candles, the table set, and the husband and wife in joy and peace, the *Shekhinah* says: These are mine – “*Israel in whom I glory*” [Isaiah, 49:3].”⁸

The Version of *Shalom Aleichem* for Women in the *Birkhat ha-Mazon*

The version of *Shalom Aleichem* that was to be recited by women after they lit the Friday night candles, is first found in an edition of the *Birkhat ha-Mazon*, published in Basel, 1600. It was reprinted in a number of later editions of the *Birkhat ha-Mazon*.⁹ The Early Modern *Birkhat ha-Mazon* or *Siddur Berakhah*¹⁰ is very different from the modern publications of this name. The Early Modern prayerbook typically had the regular prayers daily and Sabbath prayers but did not

include all the other prayers and rituals that were not part of the regular prayers and synagogue services, but still played an important role in Jewish religious life. The prayers and rituals that were missing from the Early Modern prayerbook were to be found in the *Birkhat ha-Mazon* or *Seder Berakhot*.¹¹ It was the repository for the prayers and rituals that were not part of the statutory prayers but were integral to the cycle of Jewish life and the rhythms of the Jewish calendar. The table of contents of the *Birkhat ha-Mazon*, Basel 1600 is typical of the prayers included in works of this genre:

1. Psalm 23. 2. *Birkhat ha-Mazon*. 3. *Zemirot*. 4. *Havdalah*. 5. *Hanukkah*. 6. Purim songs. 7. Purim *Reshut*. 8. Wedding ceremony. 9. *Eruv Tavshilin* and *Eruv Hazerot*. 10. *Kapparot*. 11. Prayers for visiting Cemetery. 12. Circumcision ceremony. 13. *Shema* at Bedtime. 14. Sabbath *Kiddush*. 15. *Kiddush* for *Rosh Hashanah*. 16. *Kiddush* for *Pesach*, *Shavuot*, *Sukkot*. 17. *Havdalah* for festivals when the second day is a Sabbath. 18. Passover *Haggadah*. 19. *Birkhot ha-Nehenin*. 20. *Al ha-Michyah*. 21. *Tehinnah* for women to be recited after candle lighting on Friday night.

The Hebrew text of this version of *Shalom Aleichem* for women is found on the last page in the Basel edition of the *Birkhat ha-Mazon*.¹² Perhaps its placement indicates an expectation that it will be recited regularly. It begins like *Shalom Aleichem* and then continues in a form that resembles the latter part of the *Ribon Olamim* (Sovereign of the Universe) hymn. In other words, it is in classic *Tehinnah* form, asking for the blessings normative for *Tehinnot*.¹³ This *Tehinnah* is unusual in that it is in Hebrew and not in Yiddish as is normative for *Tehinnot* for women. The answer is found in the same Talmudic passage that prohibits petitioning for healing on the Sabbath. The rabbis state there that the angels only understand Hebrew,¹⁴ and this *Tehinnah* specifically addresses the angels. Thus, in order to be effective, the *Tehinnah* must be in Hebrew, so that the angels will understand what is being asked of them. In any event, the key Hebrew terms are part of the Hebrew component of Yiddish, so that anyone conversant in Yiddish would have a general idea of what is being asked in this *Tehinnah*.

The kabbalists did not seem to be concerned with the rabbinic prohibition of asking for healing on the Sabbath and festivals. A better-known example of a *Tehinnah* that is recited on Sabbaths and festivals with great ceremony in the synagogue is *Berikh Shemei*, a passage from the *Zohar* that is recited when the Torah is taken out of the Ark to be read. The text of this *Tehinnah* is found in the *Zohar*, where Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai explicitly instructs his disciples to recite

this prayer whenever the Torah is taken from the Ark, since it is a special time of grace (*Et Razon*).¹⁵ Since the *Zohar* was traditionally ascribed to Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, it was treated as a tannaitic text, and its authority was as great or greater than the other talmudic passage concerning the rabbinic prohibition of petitions on the Sabbath and festivals.

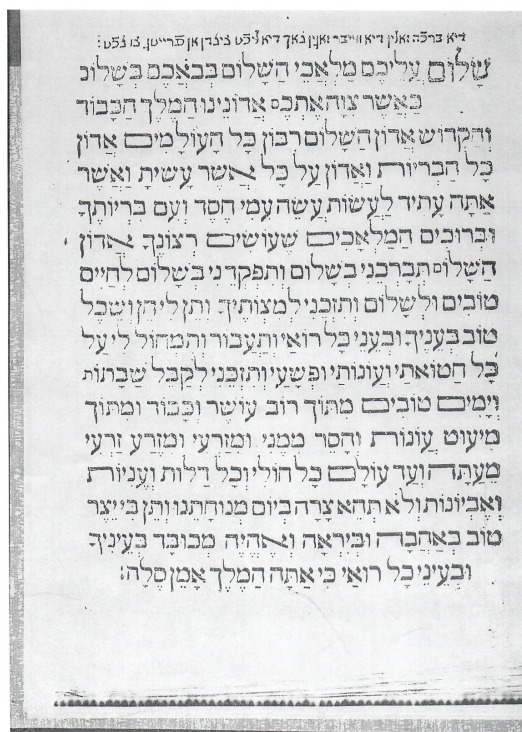
It is possible to analogize the lighting of the Sabbath candles to the taking the Torah from the Ark as also being a special time of grace (*Et Razon*) that transcends the normal rules. Moshe Henochs Altschul-Yerushalmi, the author of the influential Yiddish ethical text, *Sefer Brantshpigl* (Cracow, 1596), writes about a woman who lights the Sabbath and Festival candles: “The sages write, when someone lights with good intentions then one fulfills the commandment to honor God, blessed be He, and to honor the Sabbath and the festivals, it is accorded for her as if she lit the candelabrum in the Temple.”¹⁶ Chava Weissler has written about later *Tehinnot* where the authors quote this Zoharic passage and elaborate on this imagery.¹⁷

Appendix

1. Translation of the text of the women’s *Shalom Aleichem* from *Birkhat ha-Mazon* (Basel, 1600).

The women should recite this blessing after lighting the candles on Friday night.¹⁸

Peace unto you, angels of peace, with your coming in peace, as you have been commanded by our Lord, the holy and honored King, the Lord of peace, the Ruler of the worlds, the Lord of all creatures, the Lord of everything you have made and everything you will make in the future. Act compassionately with me and with all of your creatures. Blessed are the angels who do Your will. Lord of peace, bless me with peace, remember me with peace and good life and for peace. Make me worthy to fulfill your commandments, and give me favor and wisdom in Your eyes, and in the eyes of all who see me. Absolve and forgive me for all my sins and transgressions, and crimes. Make me worthy to receive Sabbaths and Festivals in the midst of wealth and honor, and with few transgressions. Remove from me, my children, and my children’s children from now and forever, all illness, penury, poverty, and neediness. There should not be any troubles on the day of our rest. Give within me a good inclination, with love and awe, and I should be honored in Your eyes and in the eyes of all who see me, for You are the King, Amen Selah.



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¹ The pioneering study of this topic is Moshe Hallamish, *Kabbalistic Practices on the Sabbath* [Hebrew]. Jerusalem: Orhot, 2006, 293–300.

² The leading scholar on the origins and influence of Kabbalah on Jewish ritual and practice is Moshe Hallamish. Among his works on this subject are, *Kabbalah in Liturgy, Halakhah, and Customs* [Hebrew]. Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2002; *Kabbalistic Ritual: The Integration of Theory and Practice* [Hebrew]. Tel Aviv: Idra, 2016. An English work that summarizes some of these customs and practices is Morris M. Faierstein, *Jewish Customs of Kabbalistic Origin*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013.

³ A summary of the Safed influence on Friday night rituals is Faierstein, *Jewish Customs of Kabbalistic Origin*, 28–46.

⁴ There are some communities that rejected the inclusion of *Kabbalat Shabbat* and other Safed rituals because they did not accept that the Safed innovations were the result of divine inspiration [*Ruah ha-Kodesh*]. Two of these communities that were the disciples of the Vilna Gaon and the S.R. Hirsch/Breuer community of Frankfurt.

⁵ For example, *Siddur Rinat Yisrael*. Jerusalem: Moreshet, 1981, has the first and third hymns but is missing the second hymn. On the other hand, *Siddur ha-Shalem*, ed. Paltiel Birnbaum. New York: Hebrew Publishing Co. 1977 has all three hymns and includes an English translation. The Habad siddur, *Siddur Tehillat ha-Shem*, is an example of a Hasidic *Siddur* that does not include the second hymn.

⁶ Hallamish, *Kabbalistic Practices*, 293–294, discusses the complicated composition of this prayer.

⁷ See, *ibid.* 298–300.

⁸ *Zohar Hadash*. Warsaw, 1902, 48b. Quoted in Hallamish, *Hanhagot*, 294.

⁹ The text of this version of *Shalom Aleichem* was reprinted in a number of later editions of the *Birkhat ha-Mazon*. The editions include: Amsterdam, 1701, 1722, 1723; Frankfurt am Main, 1727; Homburg an der Hohe, 1727; Frankfurt am Oder, 1753; Fürth, 1780.

¹⁰ The former term is used in the Ashkenazi realm while the latter term is used by Sephardic and Italian communities.

¹¹ For convenience, the term *Birkhat ha-Mazon* will be used to describe both.

¹² The Hebrew text and an English translation of the text of this *Tehinnah* is found below in the Appendix.

¹³ For the origins and early history of *Tehinnot* see, Morris M. Faierstein, “The Earliest Published Yiddish *Tehinnot* (1590–1609). *Hebrew Union College Annual* 91 (2020): 157–206.

¹⁴ B. *Shabbat* 12b.

¹⁵ Concerning the history of this prayer see, Avishai Bar-Asher, “*Berikh Shemei*: The History of an Anonymous Aramaic Prayer that Found its Way into *Sefer ha-Zohar* and the Prayer Book.” *Tarbiz* 86, 1 (2018): 147–198.

¹⁶ *Sefer Brantshpigl* (Basel, 1602), 134a. His comment is an allusion to *Zohar*, I: 48b.

¹⁷ Weissler, Chava. *Voices of the Matriarchs*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998, 89–103.

¹⁸ This sentence is in Yiddish. The rest of the prayer is in Hebrew.