

TEFILLAH TIPS

TEFILLAT SHACHARIT—SHABBAT

Understanding *Maoz Tzur*

As we begin to celebrate Chanukah this week, we will aim to achieve a better understanding of the most well known song of Chanukah—“*Maoz Tzur-Rock of Ages*”.

To identify the name of the author of *Maoz Tzur*, simply read the (acrostic) first letter of each stanza and you’ll see his name—Mordechai **מְעוֹזֵי תְּעוֹתֵי דְּבִירֵי קְרוֹתֵי יוֹנִים**. Very often, we can find the name of the author of *Zemiroth* and *Pizmonim* built into the fabric of the song/hymn.

The content of *Maoz Tzur* charts our voyage through the long and often bitter exile throughout the centuries. In it, we also pray to *Hashem* to return us to His house, the *Beit Hamikdash*, where we will one day soon renew the Temple service once again, light the Menorah, and witness the return of G-d’s greatness and splendor to the entire world.

Each paragraph deals with a different Jewish experience in the Diaspora. After the opening praises to G-d, the second stanza “*Raat Sava Nafshi*” is about our stay in Egypt for 210 years which culminated in our Exodus, while Pharaoh and his army drowned in the *Yam Suf-Red Sea*. “*Dvir Kadsho*” tells of the Babylonian exile where we stayed for 70 years until returning to Jerusalem, led by the great Ezra the Scribe. “*Krot Komat*” refers to our frightening encounter with Achashverosh and Haman in Persia which left Haman and his children (*Rov Banav*) dangling from a tree. “*Yevanim Nikkbetzu*” addresses our current holiday of Chanukah. It is about our battle with the Greeks and their tempting culture, which ended with the military victory by the Maccabees as well as the miracle of the oil in the Temple. Finally, “*Chasof Zroa*” calls upon *Hashem* to literally “Bare his Forearm (so to speak)” and finally shlep us out of our current exile, *Galut Edom*, which has lasted for over 2000 years, and bring comfort to the people of Israel through the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

The word “*Tzur*”, which refers to G-d, is translated as a Rock. The Torah, Talmud, and Siddur refer to *Hashem* in tens of different ways—but a ROCK? How can we understand this? The answer is that a rock symbolizes something solid that one can lean on, and find support no matter how unstable he or she feels. This is what *Hashem* is to every single one of us. No matter what predicament we find ourselves in, we have a “Rock” to lean on. In essence this is the message of Chanukah and also the message of *Maoz Tzur*. No matter what land we are in, no matter who our enemies are in any generation, the “Rock” is there.

The word “*Tzur*” is also found in the introduction to the prayer of “*Ayn Kalokaynu*”. The verse reads “*Ain Tzur Kaylokaynu*” translated, as there is no Rock like our G-d. The Talmud interprets the word *Tzur* as related to the word *Tzayar* which means “Creator/Artist” - teaching that there is **NO** artist like *Hashem*. Who else could create the Swiss Alps, Hawaii, and the Grand Canyon? Who else could create a human being with all of its complexity and a heavenly soul within? Only *Hashem*, the greatest artist of all...

So what is *Hashem*- A Rock, or a Creative Artist? The answer is that He is **both!** And we should study the paradox therein. A creative artist is often perceived as otherworldly, artsy, and possibly eccentric... but not necessarily stable and reliable. Only G-d Himself can be THE MOST CREATIVE ARTIST in the history of the universe, but also be the “ROCK OF AGES” that provides love, strength, and direction and awaits our praise and prayers every day. As we stand in song this week chanting the *Maoz Tzur*, May the Great Rock i.e. the Great Artist hear our prayers and will the rebuilding of the third *Beit Hamikdash* soon in our days.

Best wishes for beautiful Shabbos and a light filled Chanukah.
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