

## On Changing the Text of the B'rakhot

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Beginning in the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century in Europe, liberal and progressive Jews have excised or rewritten many passages of the traditional prayerbook (*siddur*) that conflict with their ideals and values. These include the *b'rakhot*, the “benedictions” that begin with the formula ברוך אתה ה', “Praised are You, Adonai.” By the 1840s, Reform liturgists had altered some of the language of the *t'filah*, the Nineteen Benedictions of the daily worship service, to which they took exception. These included references to physical resurrection (second *b'rakhah*), the return to Zion (tenth *b'rakhah*), restoration of our judges (eleventh *b'rakhah*), the “blessing” for the wicked (twelfth *b'rakhah*), the rebuilding of Jerusalem (fourteenth *b'rakhah*), the Davidic Messiah (fifteenth *b'rakhah*), and the restoration of the Temple service (seventeenth *b'rakhah*). The alterations often included revised *hatimot*, the concluding *barukh atah* statements for each paragraph.<sup>1</sup> In addition, some reformers were prepared to rewrite the *b'rakhah* language for Rabbinic *mitzvot* (e.g., the recitation of Hallel, the reading of *m'gilat Esther*, and the lighting of the Hanukkah lamp) because they felt that the customary wording “who has sanctified us with *mitzvot* and commanded us” did not apply to rituals enacted by human authority.<sup>2</sup> In our own time, progressive liturgists have sought to replace the masculine-gendered language of the traditional *b'rakhot* with egalitarian or even feminine versions.<sup>3</sup>

So there's no question that progressive Judaism has a long history of revising the text (*nusah*) of the traditional *b'rakhot*. But does this innovative liturgical activity accord with *halakhah*? This essay will argue that the halakhic tradition permits us, within certain limits, to alter the texts of the *b'rakhot* and that most of the changes introduced by our progressive liturgists fall comfortably within those limits.

That argument will have to overcome the counterclaim, which apparently enjoys strong support in the halakhic literature, that it is forbidden to tamper in any way with the language of the traditional *b'rakhot*. We begin with Rambam in his *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot B'rakhot* 1:5:

ונוסח כל הברכות עזרא ובית דינו תקנום, ואין ראוי לשנותם ולא להוסיף על אחת מהם ולא לגרוע ממנה.

Ezra and his *beit din* enacted the text for all the *b'rakhot*, and it is not proper to alter them, to add to them, or to detract from them.

Modern scholarship can't vouch for the historical accuracy of Rambam's narrative, namely that the *nusah* of the *b'rakhot* – and for that matter the core of the Jewish worship service<sup>4</sup> -

<sup>1</sup> The most systematic treatment is Jakob J. Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe* (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> Petuchowski, 265-276.

<sup>3</sup> A good example is Sue Levi Elwell, ed., *The Open Door: A Passover Haggadah* (New York: CCAR, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> See Rambam, *Hil. T'filah* 1:4ff.

originates with Ezra the Scribe. The tradition itself offers several alternatives. One passage attributes the formal *t'filah* to מאה ועשרים זקנים ומהם כמה נביאים, “one hundred twenty elders, including some prophets” (*B. Megillah* 18a). Another asserts that אנשי כנסת הגדולה תקנו להם, “the members of the Great Assembly established for the Jewish people the language of the *b'rakhot*, *t'filot*, *k'dushot*,<sup>5</sup> and *havdalot*” (*B.B'rakhot* 33a). Okay – so maybe it *wasn't* Ezra! But what unites the Rabbinic sources is the conviction that the texts and forms of Jewish liturgy were legislated by ancient authorities whose acts were presumably meant to be permanent. “Legislation” is the sense behind the root ת-ק-ן that appears in all of them, and traditional halakhists know how difficult it is to annul or change a *takkanah* of the ancient Rabbis.

The problem becomes more acute when we look at *B. B'rakhot* 40b, one of the fundamental Talmudic passages behind this *halakhah*:

ראה פת ואמר כמה נאה פת זו ברוך המקום שבראה - יצא. ראה תאנה ואמר : כמה נאה תאנה זו ברוך המקום שבראה - יצא, דברי רבי מאיר ;  
רבי יוסי אומר : כל המשנה ממטבע שטבעו חכמים בברכות - לא יצא ידי חובתו.

One who says over bread: “How wonderful is this bread; praised be the Omnipresent who created it” - fulfills one’s obligation. One says over a fig “How wonderful is this fig; praised be the Omnipresent who created it” – fulfills one’s obligation. These are the words of Rabbi Meir.<sup>6</sup>

Rabbi Yose says: One who alters the form (*matbe`a*) of the *b'rakhah* that was set by the Sages does not fulfill their obligation.

The *halakhah* in such disputes generally follows Rabbi Yose. It does here, too, apparently, as Rambam states in the continuation of *Hil. B'rakhot* 1:5:

וכל המשנה ממטבע שטבעו חכמים בברכות אינו אלא טועה.

And one who alters the form of the *b'rakhah* that was set by the Sages commits an error.

The word *matbe`a*, “form,” which also means “coin,” suggests something stamped and fixed. If the *maḥloket* between these two *tana'im* concerns the *nusah* of the *b'rakhot*, then *any* departure from the received text is unacceptable according to *halakhah*.

And yet that is not the case, at least according to Rambam as read by one of his leading interpreters. To see what we mean, let’s take a look at two *halakhot* from the *Mishneh Torah*. (We’ve already seen some of this material, but we’re reading it now in its wider context.)

<sup>5</sup> Understood to mean *kiddushim*, blessings for the sanctification of the day (Rashi).

<sup>6</sup> A version of this *maḥloket* appears in *Tosefta B'rakhot* 4:5. The traditional commentators there say that even R. Meir requires that the *b'rakhah* contain a mention of God’s name and God’s sovereignty; see below.

ונוסח כל הברכות עזרא ובית דינו תקנום, ואין ראוי לשנותם ולא להוסיף על אחת מהם ולא לגרוע ממנה, וכל המשנה ממתבע שטבעו חכמים בברכות אינו אלא טועה, וכל ברכה שאין בה הזכרת השם ומלכות אינה ברכה אלא אם כן היתה סמוכה לחבירתה.

Ezra and his *beit din* enacted the text for all the *b'rakhot*, and **it is not proper to alter them**, to add to them, or to detract from them. **And one who alters the form of the *b'rakhah* that was set by the Sages commits an error**, and any *b'rakhah* that does not contain a mention of God's name and sovereignty is not a *b'rakhah* at all, unless it is recited next to a *b'rakhah* that mentions these.

וכל הברכות כולן נאמרין בכל לשון והוא שיאמר כעין שתקנו חכמים, ואם שינה את המתבע הואיל והזכיר אזכרה ומלכות וענין הברכה אפילו בלשון חול יצא.

Any of the *b'rakhot* may be recited in any language, provided that they resemble the *b'rakhot* as the Sages enacted them. **If one alters the form (*matbe`a*) of the *b'rakhah*, even when reciting it in another language, one still fulfills their obligation, so long as the *b'rakhah* mentions a Divine name and God's sovereignty and adheres to the content of the *b'rakhah*.**

The sections in bold font are the ones that demand our attention, and they raise several questions.

1. In *halakhah* 5, Rambam writes that “it is not proper” (ואין ראוי) to change the texts of the *b'rakhot* as determined by Rabbinic legislation. This expression, though fairly common in Rabbinic literature, does not appear in *B. B'rakhot* 40b, the Talmudic source for this *halakhah*. Rambam chooses to employ it in this context, but what precisely does it mean?
2. In *halakhah* 5, Rambam clearly follows Rabbi Yose's position in *B. B'rakhot* 40b that one ought not to change the *matbe`a* of a *b'rakhah* that the Sages enacted. Yet while Rabbi Yose says that one who does so לא יצא ידי חובתו, “does not fulfill their obligation,” Rambam replaces those words with אינו אלא טועה, “(that person) commits an error.” Inasmuch as Rambam frequently uses the phrase לא יצא ידי חובתו or its variants in his *Mishneh Torah*, why does he reject it here in favor of אינו אלא טועה, a phrase he uses but this one time in his entire Code? And what is its halakhic meaning? If I recite an “erroneous” *b'rakhah*, does that necessarily imply that I don't fulfill my obligation?<sup>7</sup>
3. In *halakhah* 6, Rambam tells us that one who does alter the *matbe`a* of a *b'rakhah* nonetheless fulfills their obligation, so long as that altered *b'rakhah* meets certain other requirements. But doesn't this contradict the rule of Rabbi Yose, which Rambam adopts as authoritative in the previous *halakhah*?

The “leading interpreter” of whom we speak is R. Yosef Caro, who in addition to the foundational halakhic works *Beit Yosef* and *Shulhan Arukh* is also the author of *Kesef Mishneh*, a

<sup>7</sup> For example, see the discussion at the top of *B. B'rakhot* 40b: suppose I recite the benediction *shehakol niyhad bid'varo* over bread or wine. I am clearly in “error” for having done so; I should have recited *hamotzi* or *borei p'ri hagafen*. Yet there is a *mahloket* over whether I am *yotzei*, that is, whether I have fulfilled my obligation.

commentary on the *Mishneh Torah*.<sup>8</sup> In order to appreciate Caro's explanation of these difficulties, we need to go back to the text in *B. B'rakhot* 40b, which continues:

בנימין רעיא כרך ריפתא ואמר : בריך מריה דהאי פיתא. אמר רב : יצא.

Binyamin the shepherd ate some bread and said (in Aramaic): "Praised be the creator of this bread." Rav says: he fulfilled his obligation.

Binyamin's *b'rakhah* clearly seems to violate Rabbi Yose's requirement that one preserve the *matbe'a* set by the Sages. Yet Rav, an early-third century C.E. Babylonian *amora*, accepts the *b'rakhah* as valid (if not optimal<sup>9</sup>). The *s'tam* or anonymous voice of the finds two problems with his ruling.

1. והאמר רב כל ברכה שאין בה הזכרת השם אינה ברכה "Didn't Rav say: 'Any *b'rakhah* that does not contain the name of God is not a *b'rakhah* at all?'"<sup>10</sup> That is, according to Rav's own standard Binyamin's *b'rakhah* does not pass muster. Therefore, the Talmud emends that *b'rakhah*: דאמר : בריך רחמנא מריה דהאי פיתא "(what Binyamin really) said was: 'Praised be the Merciful One, the creator of this bread,'" containing one of God's names so that Rav would accept the *b'rakhah* as valid.
2. – "But don't we require three benedictions [for *birkat hamazon*]?" That is, how can Rav say that Binyamin "fulfilled his obligation" if he recited but this one *b'rakhah*? The answer: נמי, יצא ידי ברכה ראשונה – "when Rav says 'he fulfilled his obligation,' he meant the obligation of the first [of three] *b'rakhot*."

The Talmud now goes on to inquire as to the deeper significance of Rav's ruling.

מאי קמשמע לך - אף על גב דאמרה בלשון חול -  
תנינא, ואלו נאמרים בכל לשון : פרשת סוטה, וידוי מעשר, קריאת שמע, ותפלה,  
וברכת המזון -  
אצטריך, סלקא דעתך אמינא ; הני מילי - דאמרה בלשון חול כי היכי דתקינו רבנן  
בלשון קדש, אבל לא אמרה בלשון חול כי היכי דתקינו רבנן בלשון קדש אימא לא -  
קמשמע לך.

What does this statement of Rav come to tell us? That even though it is permitted to recite a *b'rakhah* in another language, as we read in *M. Sotah* 7:1:

"The following may be recited in any language: the *sotah* passage, the confession over the tithe, the recitation of *Sh'ma*, the *t'filah*, and *birkat hamazon*" -

<sup>8</sup> The major project of the *Kesef Mishneh* is to identify the Talmudic sources of the rulings in the *Mishneh Torah* (inasmuch as Rambam himself does not provide them.). In this, his work resembles the *Magid Mishneh* of R. Vidal de Tolosa (14<sup>th</sup> century), which explains why Caro's work is much more extensive on those sections of the *Mishneh Torah* on which R. Vidal does not comment. But as we see here, Caro is also interested in resolving difficult passages in Rambam and in defending him from the criticism of other halakhic authorities.

<sup>9</sup> The word יצא indicates that the benediction is "valid" *b'di'avad*, "ex post facto": it meets the minimum halakhic requirements even though ideally (*l'hatkilah*) Binyamin should have used the more standard *barukh atah* form.

<sup>10</sup> Rav is quoted to this effect further down the page on *B. B'rakhot* 40b, where he is locked in a dispute with Rabbi Yoḥanan, who requires that a *b'rakhah* contain a mention of *malkhut*, God's sovereignty. The final *halakhah* combines both requirements.

Rav needed to make this ruling, because you might have thought that *mishnah* applies only to vernacular *b'rakhot* that are translated precisely as the Sages enacted them in Hebrew, so that if the *b'rakhah* were *not* translated precisely as the Sages enacted it in Hebrew, he would *not* fulfill his obligation – Therefore, Rav comes to tell us that he does fulfill the obligation.

This section teaches us two details of critical importance. First, *birkat hamazon*, the only *b'rakhah* that tradition holds to be enacted by the Torah,<sup>11</sup> may be recited in a vernacular language, just as Binyamin recited it in Aramaic. And second, in Rav's opinion this vernacular *b'rakhah* need not be a precise translation of the original Hebrew composed by the ancient Rabbis. Binyamin's *b'rakhah*, definitely *not* a word-for-word Aramaic rendering of the first benediction of *birkat hamazon* (*hazan et hakol*), is therefore acceptable.

Now we are ready to study R. Yosef Caro's *Kesef Mishneh* to *Hilkhot B'rakhot* 1:5.

וקשה לי : למה שינה רבינו הלשון וכתב "אינו אלא טועה"? וכך יש לדקדק למה כתב "ואין ראוי לשנותם" וכ"ו?

Why does Rambam change the language (of Rabbi Yose) from “does not fulfill their obligation” (*B. B'rakhot* 40b) to “commits an error”? And why does he write “it is not proper to alter them” (rather than “it is forbidden”)?

ונראה לי דתרי גווני שינוי הן.

It seems to me that there are two kinds of “alteration.”

האחד שהוא אומר נוסח הברכה שתקנו חכמים אלא שהוא מוסיף בה או גורע ממנה או שהוא אומר כעין נוסח שתקנו חכמים אבל הוא אומר אותה במלות אחרות ומ"מ הם רומזות לנוסח שתקנו חז"ל וכיון שכוונת דבריו עולה למה שתקנו חז"ל אין כאן טעות אבל אין ראוי לעשות כן.

The first kind of “alteration” is a) if one recites the text of the *b'rakhah* as the Sages enacted it but adds to or detracts from it, or b) if one recites a text that resembles the Sages' text but renders it in different words which nonetheless hint at the text composed by the Sages. In these cases, since one's meaning (*kavanat d'vara v'*) approximates that which the Sages composed, no “error” is involved, though it is still “not proper” to do so.

השינוי השני הוא שמשנה כוונת הברכה כגון ברוך המקום שבראה שהיא ברכה כוללת וחז"ל תיקנו לברך על כל דבר בפרטות המוציא לחם מן הארץ בפה"ע וכיוצא ועל זה כתב שאינו אלא טועה כלומר וכיון דטועה הוא לא יצא ידי חובתו וכדברי יוסי.

The second kind of alteration is this: if one [recites a text] that alters the intention of the (Sages') *b'rakhah* – for example, if one recites “Praised be the Omnipresent who created it,” a *b'rakhah* framed in general language, when the Sages ordained

<sup>11</sup> All the other *b'rakhot* are *d'rabbanan*, enacted by the Rabbis. See Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hil. B'rakhot* 1:1-4.

that we frame the *b'rakhot* in detailed language: “who brings forth bread from the earth,” “who creates the fruit of the tree,” and so forth. Regarding this, Rambam writes “commits an error,” that is, since it is erroneous, one does not fulfill one’s obligation thereby, in accordance with the view of Rabbi Yose.

Caro thus accounts for the two puzzling expressions in Rambam’s *halakhah*.

1. ואין ראוי לשנותם וכי, “it is not proper to alter them, to add to them, or to detract from them” refers to changes in the traditional *nusah* that do not affect the *kavanah* – the sense, intention – of the original. Such altered texts are not “erroneous” and therefore are acceptable as *b'rakhot*: one fulfills their halakhic obligation by reciting them, even if “it is not proper” to do so.
2. אינו אלא טועה, “one commits an error” refers to *b'rakhot* that alter the intention behind the original version (שמשנה כוונת הברכה) and therefore do not discharge one’s halakhic obligation.

There is, however, one more problem. In *Hilkhot B'rakhot* 1:6, Rambam writes that “If one alters the form (*matbe`a*) of the *b'rakhah*, even when reciting it in another language, one still fulfills their obligation, so long as the *b'rakhah* mentions a Divine name and God’s sovereignty and adheres to the content of the *b'rakhah*.” How does this square with Rabbi Yose’s position in *B. B'rakhot* 40b that one who alters the *matbe`a* of a *b'rakhah* does *not* fulfill their obligation? Moreover, as Caro notes,<sup>12</sup> Rambam’s ruling here contradicts his statement in *Hilkhot K'ri'at Sh'ma* 1:7 that one who alters the *matbe`a* “errs” (הרי זה טועה) and does not fulfill their obligation. To resolve this confusion, Caro writes:

דבריש הלכות ק"ש מיירי ששינה שחתם בברוך או פתח במקום שהתקינו שלא לחתום או שלא לפתוח או ששינה ולא חתם או לא פתח בברוך במקום שהתקינו לחתום או לפתוח והכא מיירי ששינה בנוסח הברכה ולא אמר אותו לשון ממש אלא שאמר ענין הברכה בנוסח אחר ולא שינה לא בפתיחה ולא בחתימה.

In *Hilkhot K'ri'at Sh'ma* Rambam is talking about one who begins a paragraph with “*Barukh atah*” in a place where the Sages say he shouldn’t or who concludes with “*Barukh atah*” in a place where the Sages say he shouldn’t. Here, he is talking about one who does not violate the rules concerning beginnings and endings of paragraphs but who alters the text or language of the *b'rakhah* but recites its content/meaning in different wording.

In Rambam’s view (as explained by R. Yosef Caro), there are two kinds of *matbe`a*. The first, the one he mentions in *Hilkhot K'ri'at Sh'ma*, has to do with the structure of the *b'rakhah*, specifically *matbe`a arokh* and *matbe`a katzar*, the “long” and “short” forms of *b'rakhot*. The “long” form both begins and ends with *Barukh atah*; an example is the first *b'rakhah* of *k'ria'at Sh'ma*.<sup>13</sup> The “short” form contains but one *Barukh atah* statement; examples are the remaining

<sup>12</sup> *Kesef Mishneh, Hil. B'rakhot* 1:6, citing the *hasagah* (critical note) of R. Moshe Hakohen of Lunel, a contemporary of Rambam, to that *halakhah*. See S. Atlas, “השגות שהשיג ר' משה הכהן מלוניל על ספרי רבינו משה ז"ל”, *Hebrew Union College Annual* 27 (1956), Heb. Section, p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> *Yotzer or* (at *shaharit*) and *ma`ariv aravim* (at *arvit*)

*b'rakhot* that surround *Sh'ma*.<sup>14</sup> When Rambam says in *Hilkhot K'ri'at Sh'ma* that one who alters the *matbe`a* “errs,” he means one who recites a “long form” *b'rakhah* where the Sages require a “short form” and vice versa. The second kind of *matbe`a*, to which Rambam refers in *Hilkhot B'rakhot*, has to do with the text or *nusah* of the *b'rakhah*. If one alters the *nusah*, as did Binyamin the shepherd, the *b'rakhah* is valid so long as it is כעין שתקנו חכמים, i.e. that it resembles the original *b'rakhah* and captures its sense and intention (*kavanah*).

So here is our argument, a halakhic justification for changing the traditional *nusah* of the *b'rakhot*. To be sure, the authority upon whom we rely, Rambam, does not recommend that changes be made. On the contrary, he holds that “it is not proper” to do so, even if the revised texts are still valid *b'rakhot* and are acceptable after the fact (*b'di`avad*). But judgments of propriety are dependent upon time and place. Prayer language that Rambam found unobjectionable in the twelfth century often fails to serve the religious needs of worshipers in our day. Indeed, we pay a significant intellectual and emotional price when we are forced to recite a *nusah* that conflicts with value commitments we hold dear. To alter a *nusah* in such a way that it captures the *kavanah* of the original text while also conforming to our progressive ideals is therefore, arguably, a “proper” thing to do.<sup>15</sup>

Why “arguably”? Because the fact that *halakhah* permits us to change the *b'rakhot* texts does not necessarily mean that we *should* change the *b'rakhot* texts. We *also* pay a price when we diverge from the liturgical language that has united the Jewish people around the world and throughout history. Sometimes, it’s obvious that the benefit we reap by revising language that no longer speaks to us – that indeed may be offensive to us - outweighs the cost of changing the *nusah*. But not always. The decision is one of policy or doctrine (*hashkafah*) rather than of *halakhah*. Therefore we, who are committed to “progressive” values as well as to the tradition of halakhic thinking, believe that any proposed change to *b'rakhot* language must pass a two-level test: a) is the revised text כעין שתקנו חכמים, that is, does it capture the substance and intent of the original? And b) is this change really necessary?

Most of the innovations that fall under the heading “gender equality” easily pass this test. Adding the names of the Matriarchs to the first *b'rakhah* of the *t'filah* and the phrase *v'ezrat Sarah / u'fokeid Sarah* to its *hatimah* maintains the *kavanah* and substance of the traditional text. Moreover, in our progressive view this change corrects a long-standing inequity in the text.<sup>16</sup> Other changes are more difficult to defend. For example, the feminine-gendered *b'rakhot* of publications such as *The Open Door Haggadah*<sup>17</sup> substitute the phrase רוח העולם for the traditional מלך העולם, presumably because the concept of “sovereignty” is inherently masculine. This raises two problems: first, that concept of God’s sovereignty is a major element in Jewish doctrine and teaching, and we stand to lose a great deal if we banish it from our prayerbooks. And second, according to *halakhah* the mention of God’s sovereignty is an essential element in

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<sup>14</sup> *Ahavah rabah / ahavat olam* and *emet v'yatziv at shaharit* and *ahavat olam, emet v'emunah*, and *hashkiveinu at arvit*.

<sup>15</sup> In this our view differs from that of [Rabbi David Golinkin](#), who emphasizes that Rambam’s acceptance of change in *b'rakhot* language is very much *b'di`avad* and not *l'hatkhalah*. He’s right, of course, but that means forcing Rambam’s 12<sup>th</sup>-century standards of “propriety” upon us, which we don’t accept.

<sup>16</sup> See CCAR responsum no. [5763.6](#) (*Reform Responso for the Twenty-first Century*, vol. 2, pp. 19-26), and Rabbinical Assembly (RA) Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) [OH 112.1990](#).

<sup>17</sup> See note 3.

*b'rakhot*.<sup>18</sup> One possible response is that *רוח העולם* implies God's sovereignty even without the word *מלך*, just as the phrase *אלהי אברהם* in the first *b'rakhah* of the *t'filah* (which doesn't contain the word *melekh*) is understood to imply God's sovereignty.<sup>19</sup> Whether this *teirutz* satisfies us is, of course, a matter of judgment.

Then there are the other changes in language that, as we note at the outset of this essay, go back to the beginnings of the reform movement in Judaism and that persist in progressive liturgy to this day. Some of the revisions clearly do not capture the *kavanah* of the original texts. It is instructive that the latest North American Reform *siddur*, *Mishkan T'filah*, displays a marked trend toward recovering the traditional *b'rakhah* language (especially in the *ḥatimot* of the *t'filah*) that earlier reformers removed. This perhaps reflects an awareness of the benefits we derive from using the traditional language, even if more “creative” alternatives are available.

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<sup>18</sup> Rambam, *Hilkhot B'rakhot* 1:6; *Shulḥan Arukh Oraḥ Ḥayim* 214. The exception is any *b'rakhah* that is *סמוכה* לחברתה, that follows another *b'rakhah* in a series. The first *b'rakhah* in that series will mention God's sovereignty; those that follow generally don't.

<sup>19</sup> See *Tosafot*, *B'rakhot* 40b, *s.v. abar Abaye*: *אל* אבל *אלהי אברהם* הוי כמו *מלכות דאברהם* אבינו המליך הקדוש ברוך הוא על כל העולם שהודיע מלכותו (*elohei Avraham* implies “sovereignty” because Abraham proclaimed God as the sovereign of the entire world). For other explanations see *Beit Yosef*, *Oraḥ Ḥayim* 214.