The **calembour** in Rabbi Raphael Aharon Monsonego’s “Neot midbar”*  

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**EL CALAMBUR EN LA OBRA POÉTICA «NEOT MIDBAR» DE R. RAFAEL AHRÓN MONSONEGO.—** R. Raphael Aharón Monsonego fue un rabino marroquí que vivió entre los siglos XVIII y XIX. Su extensa obra literaria incluye textos religiosos de la Halajá, como también poemas que se caracterizan por el frecuente recurso a la técnica del calambur, por la cual hace referencia a versos bíblicos en un contexto diferente. El calambur es un artificio lingüístico, un tipo de alusión utilizada por poetas judíos del norte de África, que está basada en «el encuentro de dos textos, uno implícito (basado en la memoria y en la conciencia del lector) y otro explícito (por ejemplo, el texto aquí expuesto)». El calambur se caracteriza por el uso de pequeños cambios ortográficos o fonéticos en palabras y fragmentos que provocan cierto efecto humorístico y asociativo. Concretamente «el calambur toma una palabra o una frase de un texto bíblico o rabínico y la presenta con un mínimo cambio escrito o vocálico […] creando así cierta agudeza lingüística que da un nuevo sentido a lo expresado». El lector, que reconocerá intuitivamente el texto original puesto que está vinculado con la literatura clásica judía basada en la Biblia y en la Halajá, podrá apreciar el juego de palabras, pese a los pequeños cambios anotados, disfrutar y valorar dichas agudezas. El objetivo de este artículo es examinar de diferentes formas el uso del calambur en la poética de Monsonego a través de varios ejemplos y especialmente analizar uno de sus textos en el que hace amplio uso de dicha técnica: «Im omar avo ha-ʿir» (‘Si decido alzar mi lamento’).  

**PALABRAS CLAVE.—** R. Raphael Aharón Monsonego; calambur; intertexto; pronunciamiento de vocales y consonantes hebreas; homónimos hebreos; homógrafos hebreos; ambigüedad; juegos de palabras.

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Rabbi Raphael Aharon Monsonego was a Moroccan rabbi who lived in the 18th-19th centuries. His literary creation is extensive, and apart from halachic texts he wrote a series of poems that are characterized by abundant use of the *calembour* technique. The calembour (in English, *pun*) is a specific type of allusion used by North African Jewish poets and writers. Like all allusions it is based on “a meeting of two texts, one implicit – i.e., in our consciousness and memory, and the other explicit – i.e., in the actual text in front of us.” A calembour differs from other types of allusions in that it consists of “phonetic and spelling changes in the words, idioms and fragmented verses in order to gain a humorous effect and other associative allusion.” Namely, in the calembour a word or phrase from a biblical or rabbinic text is presented “with a minimal change in letter or vowel etc. […] creating a witticism or a new meaning.” The author assumes, then, that the reader is able to intuitively identify the original text despite the changes made and even enjoy and appreciate the linguistic witticism since he is well-versed in the Jewish sources (especially the Hebrew Bible and halachic literature). The aim of this paper is to examine the use of the calembour in Monsonego’s poetry through several examples of its different forms and especially through the analysis of one of the poems that features a larger use of this technique: “Im omar avo ha-‘ir” (‘If I resolve to arouse lament’).

**KEYWORDS:** Rabbi Rafael Aharon Monsonego; Calembour; Intertextuality; Consonant and Vowel Pronunciation; Literal Meaning of Nouns; Lexical Ambiguity; Metaphor; Union and Disassembly.

Rabbi Raphael Aaron Monsonego was born in 1760 into a distinguished family in Fez, Morocco. ¹ His father, Rabbi Yedidia Moshe, was one of the sages and religious judges of the city. Monsonego studied at the rabbinical school of Rabbi Shaul Siriro, was ordained as a rabbi by Rabbi Eliyahu Ha-Sarfati, and was eventually elected to replace his father in the rabbinate. Rabbi Raphael was a preacher and posek (halachic decider), poet and writer. He was famous for his modesty and his warm dealings with the pu-

blic. He was also known for his love for the Land of Israel, glad when it experienced peace and saddened in troubled times. Monsonego passed away on the Ninth of Av 1840 at the age of eighty. He was survived by four sons, great sages of Torah: R. Shelomo, R. Eliezer, R. Isaac and R. Yedidia.  

Monsonego wrote several works, including Me Ha-Shiloah, a monograph on the laws of divorce, and Maskiyot Levav – a broad commentary in Pardes style on Psalm 119 (both works were printed with the expansion of printing presses in Morocco).  

He also left many unpublished sermons on the Jewish festivals and the weekly Torah readings. Because he was a famous halachic decider, sages from all over Morocco sent him halachic questions, and some of his decisions (responsa) were published in an appendix to his Me Ha-Shiloah and in books of contemporary sages (e.g., Avne Shaish Responsa by R. Shaul Abitbul). In addition to halachic writing, Monsonego also wrote eighty-six poems and piyyutim (liturgical poems) and twenty-one rhymed epistles, and these were preserved in the collection Neot Midbar (‘Oases’).  

R. Raphael used every appointed time and event of Jewish life with its special ritual as an opportunity to furnish it with a poem or a piyyut. Actually, his poetic oeuvre encompasses all four of the constant cycles of Jewish life: he wrote nine piyyutim – requests and supplications – for the prayer cycle, thirty-three poems and piyyutim for the annual cycle (Jewish festivals), twenty-three poems and laments for the life cycle – for the central events in the life of the Jew from birth to death, and twenty-one poems for the cycle of the individual and society, among them personal poems and poems of praise for great Torah sages. His piyyutim abound in epithets and allusions – many of them punning calembour allusions.

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2 Rabbi Yedidia Monsonego, the youngest son, followed his father as chief rabbi of Moroccan Jewry.

3 Sefer Me Ha-Shiloah (Casablanca, 1929); Maskiyot Levav (Fez, 1930); see AMAR, “Introduction to Shiyure Mitsva,” p. 9, and AMAR, “Introduction to Me ha-Shiloah,” p. 5.

4 See AMAR, “Introduction to Me ha-Shiloah,” p. 5.

5 See R. Hitin-Mashiah and T. Lavi From Neot Midbar: Rhymed missives by R. Raphael Aaron Monsonego (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2010 [in Hebrew]).

6 The manuscript is owned by Rabbi Moshe Amar. I am grateful to Rabbi Amar for graciously letting me have a photocopy and a transcription of the manuscript.
The calembour (in English, *pun*) is a specific type of allusion used by North African Jewish poets and writers. Like all allusions it is based on “a meeting of two texts, one implicit – i.e., in our consciousness and memory, and the other explicit – i.e., in the actual text in front of us.” A calembour differs from other types of allusions in that it consists of “phonetic and spelling changes in the words, idioms and fragmented verses in order to gain a humorous effect and other associative allusion.” Namely, in the calembour a word or phrase from a biblical or rabbinic text is presented “with a minimal change in letter or vowel etc. […] creating a witticism or a new meaning.” The author assumes, then, that the reader is able to intuitively identify the original text despite the changes made and even enjoy and appreciate the linguistic witticism since he is well-versed in the Jewish sources (especially the Hebrew Bible and halachic literature).

By its very nature the calembour device is intertextual, for it is based upon the encounter between two texts within a single literary work. The writer inserts words into the artistic text that include a hidden linguistic clarification yet are present in the consciousness of the reader who is knowledgeable in Jewish sources. The reader notices the slight change in the written word (made by the *payyetan*) and identifies it in the original text (the one that the reader is currently not facing). The connection between the explicit words and the hidden words yields a conceptual linkage between the two texts: the newly written text and the source. That is, inherent in every text is the potential to correspond with other texts within the reader’s realm of knowledge. Thus an intertextual discourse takes place, which adds another interpretation to what is being written, one that expands and extends the idea expressed by the actual text.

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The Hebrew calembour originates in the *al tikra* (do not read) statements in the interpretations of *Hazal* (the sages) of Jewish law and *Talmud*. That is, one should not read what is written as it is, but rather should read it differently. This is one of the ways to learn Tanach – to read the verse as if it was written differently. For example, in writing about Genesis Chapter 3 “Rachel weeping for her children” Racanati wrote “do not read ‘Rachel’ but rather ‘the spirit of God.’” According to this exegesis it is the spirit of God that is weeping for her children. Lamentations 1:16 states: “For these things I weep; mine eye, mine eye runneth down with water; because the comforter is far from me, even he that should refresh my soul; my children are desolate, because the enemy hath prevailed.”

The Hebrew calembour was already used as an artistic poetic device during the Middle Ages in the secular Hebrew literature of Spain. Evidence of the use of the calembour in epistolary Hebrew writings can be found in missives written in Europe from the mid-13th century. R. Yisrael Najara (1550-1625), who lived in Eretz Israel, also used calembours in his writings. The sages of the East and of North Africa used the calembour technique widely in letters, introductions to books and missives to one another. The writers usually marked the calembour with a *geresh* (apostrophe) or *gershayim* (double quotation marks).

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11 H. Shirmant (*The History of Hebrew Poetry in Christian Spain and Southern France*). Edited, Annotated and Supplemented by Ezra Fleischer [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997 [in Hebrew]] p. 475 criticizes Avraham Ben Yitzhak Habadrashi (Provence, second half of the 13th century) due to his writing style which was influenced by “plays on words and games with letters.”


14 For more on the calembour, see Nizri, “Linguistic jokes.”
Although the calembour involves a humorous effect, the North African payyetanim (piyyut poets) used the calembour as an artistic poetic device for all circumstances, including their laments. That is, they did not limit its use for humoristic texts. How so? Discussing one of the calembours of R. David ben Aaron Hasin inserted in a lament, Hazan writes:

This calembour calls for a short discussion, for sometimes in the context of complete sadness and deep mourning, the poet inserts a calembour allusion which is basically a witticism, and in normal circumstances we would have understood it as a word play […] To reinforce this point which seems strange to us we will add one more example. In a dirge on the death of Rabbi Shelomo Toledano the poet opens with: “The voice of the shofar was heard in the camp / I heard and had compassion on him // and I was told: Here is / the death (מיתתו, literally ‘his death’) of Shelomo” and the word ‘his death’ is marked by gershayim before the final letter (to indicate the change [from the original מיטתו, i.e., ‘his bed, Shelomo’s bed’ in Song of Songs 3:7]). It is hard for us to see the appropriateness of this calembour, unless we say that it is precisely the gap between the event and the linguistic use that creates a sort of shock of pain and sadness, and this use of allusion enhances and reinforces the words of sadness and eulogy.

Nizri offers another explanation. In his view, the words of consolation inserted in the lament present “a seemingly solemn occasion that is based on the belief in the passage of the soul into eternal life and its exalted meeting with the Divine Presence.

[…] This is an expression of optimism even in death. This optimism in a lament is, apparently, the explanation […] for the calembour allusions and word play, for they all express optimism and belief in a passage that is all good.”

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16 Gershayim is customarily rendered in print with the typographically similar double quotation marks. For typographical reasons, the calembours will be emboldened in translation. If the calembour is within a larger emboldened unit, it will be italicized as well.


Rabbi Raphael Aaron Monsonego introduced two main innovations in integrating the calembour technique into his poetic works. The first is his extensive use of the calembour in his poem “Ein Ach Vera” (Unique) and the second is his use of the calembour technique as an amusing play on words in lamentations for Tisha B’Av and in piyutim of adominishment for Yom Kippur.

The pervasive use of the calembour in Monsonego’s poetry is truly unique and this is the main innovation in his poetical work. The calembour allusions are a basic building block in all of the poetical work of Monsonego. He amply employs them, especially in songs of praise, in dirges for the dead, in exhortations and laments for the Ninth of Av, and they are even the mainstay of two memorial laments for the Destruction of the Temple: “If I decide to arouse lament” (piyyut 18) and “Woe, what happened to me” (piyyut 22). We learn from this that R. Raphael did not limit the use of the calembour to comical contexts only, but thought of it as an aesthetic artistic device suitable to be used in other circumstances as well, and he uses it to enrich the text and to reinforce its meaning.

19 A simple statistical examination of the extent of Monsonego’s use of the calembour technique shows that he uses this artistic device in more than half of his poems (in 48 out of 83 in the Neot Midbar collection = 58%). A total of 230 words marked with double quotation marks were found (=1.7% of all the words in his poetry), constituting 141 different entries. Some of the calembours are used more than once and some are joined together into a linguistic combination, but most are independent and appear only once. See R. Hitin-Mashiah and T. Lavi, “Word play marked by gershayim in the poetry of R. Raphael Aaron Monsonego,” Masorot 13 (2007 [in Hebrew]) pp. 105-124.

20 Even-Shoshan Dictionary, p. 1196.

21 A simple statistical check about the use of the calembour establishes that Monsonego uses this artistic device in more than half of his poems (in 48 out of the 83 poems in the collection “Neot Midbar” =58%). All in all there were found two hundred and three word tokens with gershayim “quotation marks” (=1.7% of all words in his poems), word occurrences of one hundred forty-one word types used more than once. Some of the calembours occur more than once, and some of them are combined with others into one linguistic unit, yet most of them are independent and occur only once; Hitin-Mashiah and Lavi, “Word play marked by gershayim.”

22 It should be noted that some of the calembours have been used by others, e.g., limpad lerushiah le-hemotah “to mourn about the trouble and to weep for it” [הַשָּׁשָּׁה ‘trouble’, instead of Sarah in the original verse, Genesis 23:2], similar to Hasin (see Hazan and Elbaz, Tehilla le-David, p. 467, poem 129). One should also note that a similar calembour (without gershayim) is already found in Todros (Spain, 13th century) in his eulogy on the
Since the piyyut is a text that is delivered orally to begin with, one may expect the poet to use words having great phonetic similarity in order not to burden the listener too much. And, indeed, in most cases Monsonego makes minimal changes, yet the techniques used in his poetry are multiple and varied. Here are the various types in descending order of incidence:

1. Creating a calembour through changes in the pronunciation of consonants and vowels. For example, הָרָזִי סֹבֵב ארז ברוש תדהר / هو the thinker of secrets (70, line 15), based on סובר ארזים, “breaker of cedars,” Psalm 29:5. “the thinker of secrets” (with changes of shin/samech and aleph/he) is an epithet for Rashbi (R. Shimon bar Yochai). Sound changes have been found most frequently in sibilants, which have no clear phonetic distinction in the North African pronunciation of the poet. Another example: אהל שכן וֹשִׁל вамֵשׁין (“a tent dwelling in man is his temple”) (33, line 24); מקדש השם מקדש ויֶל (“the temple of the Lord is his temple”) (75, line 12). can be read as either the temple of God in Shiloh (based on Psalm 78:60) or כְּלָל, “his” 3rd person singular possessive particle. The pronunciation of both words is identical due to the lack of distinction between the vowels [i] and [e] in the North African pronunciation of the poet.

2. The creation of a calembour based on the literal meaning of names (names of persons and places as well as names of signs and terms). For the death of Isaac ben Zadok, see D. YELLIN, ed., Gan ha-meshalim veha-hidot: osef shire Todros ben Yehuda Abu El ‘afya ‘al pi ktav yad Shaul ben ‘eyed-El Yosef, 1 (Jerusalem: Defus Hasefer, 1932) p. 134, columns 37-38. Todros uses the calembour frequently as an artistic device, causing SHIRMAN (Poetry in Christian Spain, p. 395, especially note 105) to comment: “Even in eulogies he amuses himself with strange, astonishing, calemboirs that one cannot read with equanimity.”


24 Concerning the phonetic articulation of vowels see BAR ASHER, Traditions linguistiques, p. 341.

example, “לhelp him from evil / through help from companions and friends” (28, line 21), based on Num. 26:45, where Heber and Beriah are the names of descendants of Asher, while the intended meaning here is ‘companions and friends’ (חברים ורעים).

Another example: רוש ומעמך / מתי עץ בץ / for two reasons.” (22, line 19), “poison, wormwood and gall / for two reasons.” Tere Ta’amim (literally ‘two cantillation notes’) is the name of a biblical cantillation note mentioned in the Zarqa Table, Sephardic tradition (=Mercah kefulah), whereas here it means “two reasons” (טעם).

3. The creation of a calembour based on lexical ambiguity. For example, “Even with a faltering leg (or “in a pilgrimage festival and holy day”)/ let there be no singing (in it),” based on Proverbs 25:19. The poet means here both ‘faltering leg’ and ‘pilgrimage festival’ (יכב ו🎶 ( hvor וָלֶנֶדֶת) (רַגְל).’

4. The creation of a calembour based on a metaphorical sense. For example, “for He has dressed you in garments of salvation” (45, line 10), based on Isa. 61:10. בגדי ישע are festive clothes worn by those who were saved from distress, and here they are used as a name for ritual fringes and phylacteries.

5. The creation of a calembour based on a double reading of homographs. For example, “most of her princes (rulers) are quiet princes” (47, line 20), based on Jer. 51:59, “And this Seraiah was a quiet prince” (Jer. 51:59), and the poet changed the proper name Seraiah into its homographic “her princes.”

6. The creation of a calembour based on uniting word pairs or dividing a single word into two. For example, “He was like both a brother and a father / a help and refuge to me / like a friend” (74, line 20). The word אַ״חְאָ״ב is a fusion (more precise-

(74, line 20).

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ly, concatenation) of the words for brother and father, respectively, also meaning ‘the father’s brother, uncle’ (and it looks as if he is not alluding to the homophonic biblical Ahab).

Up to now we have given examples of the methods of formation of the various types of word play indicated with _gershayim_ (“double quotation marks”). In what follows I give several examples of the artistic use that Monsonego makes of this device in his entire poetical oeuvre:

לאת עוכי יבוח / מים בובר מצלמה

“For this reason my eyes flow / water in the pit of _agony and calamity_”

In the _piyyut_ אָם אוֹמַר אָבוֹא הָעִי״ר, “If I decide to _arouse lament_,” a lament for the Ninth of Av, R. Raphael bewails the many troubles befalling the Jewish people and describes the tears pouring like water, namely, _לאת עוכי יבוח / מים בובר מצלמה_ “For this reason my eyes flow / water in the pit of _agony and calamity_.” This utterance is based on the place name בור הסירה, “the cistern of Sirah,” mentioned in 2 Sam. 3:26. The poet takes this name as a starting point and adds to it the poetic column _לאת עוכי יבוח / מים בובר מצלמה_ “For this reason my eyes flow water,” while changing “the cistern of Sirah” to a cistern (or pit) of ציראה (by changing the letter samech into tsadi), namely, to a reservoir of troubles (צרות) and a place into which the tears flow. Thus one hears at the background of the sound pattern of pangs and pain an allusion to the troubles and suffering that have befallen the Jewish people because of the Destruction of the Temple and the ensuing deep sorrow of the poet: his eyes flow water because of the many agonies (צירים) and calamities (צרות) in the Vale of Tears that he and his generation are immersed in.

וּגְבָרֵינ״ מִבְחַר הוא נָגִיד וּמְצַוֶּה /

“He is a ruler and commander / _the choicest of our men_”

In the dirge for the dead “I will bitterly lament” that he wrote on “the taking away of the mighty one of the city, the great man,” the poet eulogizes the deceased and says of him: _מבחר乙烯וב_ “the choicest of our men.” In this dirge the deceased is described as “the choicest of our men,” based on _לגנדי נצולה / מבחר乙烯וב_ “He is a ruler and commander / _the choicest of our men_” (Gen. 23:6). The identity of sound in both phrases causes one to identify with the pain on the loss of a man who was one of the choicest of the people and on bringing him to burial.
In “I will glorify God,” a thanksgiving poem on his recovery from grave illness, Monsonego calls:

"From the choicest fruit of my speech / I will offer to the Dweller of Heaven.”

This utterance is based on the story of the descent of the children of Jacob to Egypt. In the biblical story Jacob commands his children to offer the Egyptian governor from זמרת הארץ (Gen. 43:11), namely, to offer him from the choicest fruit of the Land of Israel. R. Raphael introduces two changes in the biblical phrase. He changes זמרה meaning ‘fruit’ to זמרה meaning ‘song’ and ‘chanting’ and he changes ארץ ‘land’ into ארש ‘whisper of prayer’ (by exchanging the letters tsadi and sin). In this way he is praising the Almighty and thanks Him for lifting him up from his sickbed and he offers Him his choicest poetry.

An office of the humble he shoulders / the Lord God is with him”

Num. 6:3 mentions המשרת ענבים “the juice of grapes,” that the Nazirite should abstain from. In the song of praise “I will prepare a song of praising” to “a mighty and great one in Israel,” R. Raphael changes on phonetic similarity ענבים ‘grapes’ to ענונים ‘humble ones,’ and משרות ‘juice of’ to משרות ‘office of,’ in order to describe the virtue of humility and modesty characterizing the deceased and to indicate his eminence. Through the biblical verses the poet ascribes to the praised person additional virtues: the virtue of saintliness is ascribed to him because of the indirect reference to the Nazirite, and the use of the rare word משרה ‘office, rule, dominion’ gives rise to the biblical superlatives associated with this word, as it is said:

“… and the office shall be upon his shoulder and his name shall be called Wonder, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:5[6]).

For my sides are parts of spine / as well as shattered ribs”

In order to describe the state of the Jewish people in exile and his own pain, in “If I decide to arouse lament” R. Raphael says: “For my sides are parts of spine / as well as shattered ribs”
as shattered ribs.” The phrase מְשַׁבֵּר צְלָעִיָם is based on 1 Kings 19:11, וְהָנָה הָעָר בְּרוֹא וַדַּלֵּה תְזֻקָּה מִפְּרָק הַרִי מְשַׁבֵּר סְלָעִים, “and behold the Lord is passing and a strong and mighty wind tears mountains apart and shatters rocks.” Thus he compares his ribs to shattered rocks (the calembour צְלָעִיָם ‘ribs’ is according to the North African pronunciation of the poet who reads סלעים as כִּתּוּת סְלָעִים ‘rocks’). He also refers to the Mishna in Tractate Hullin (chapter 3, Mishna 1) that talks about a domestic animal whose spine is broken and is hence unfit, and compares himself and the Jewish people to it. In this fashion he causes the reader to identify with the feeling of pain and brokenness of the Jewish people lost in exile.

“My soul is like illnesses / I am crushed to dust with sorrow”

In the lament for the Ninth of Av “I will think bitterly with sadness,” R. Raphael compares his sorrow on the destruction of the temple and on the lengthy exile to an oppressive illness, saying: כִּתּוּת מֵכְתַּת חֳלָאִיָּם, “my soul is like illnesses.” The calembour חֳלָאִיָּם is based on Song of Songs (7:2): חֲלָאִים מעשה יד אָמִּן, “The curves of your thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a skillful craftsman.” In the original the word חֲלָאִים means ‘jewels,’ but the poet changes the meaning of the word to חֳלָיִים ‘illnesses,’ to describe his sick soul. The rest of the column is based on a quote from the Talmud: כִּתּוּת מֵכְתַּת שֶׁיָּדוּר, “its sizes have been crushed to dust” (Tractate Eruvin, leaf 80, page B). Basing himself on an utterance discussing the use of broken splinters of wood of Asherah and their sizes, Monsonego introduces an utterance referring to the breaking fall and the crushing blow that the Jewish people suffered and to the deep sadness resulting from the destruction of the temple.

Dry as a tree emptied / of speech guilelessly”

The idiom מֵשִׂיַח לְפִי תֻּו originally means ‘a truthful speaker.’ Mai- monides in Hilchot Gerushin (12, 1) states who is a reliable witness: “A man who is disqualified because of an infringement of a law of Torah is unreliable if he comes as a witness to a woman and tells her that her hus-

27 Unless otherwise noted, all Talmudic references are to the Babylonian Talmud.
28 From תינוק מסיח לפי תומו, “a child speaking in all innocence” (Talmud Baba Kamma 114B).
band is dead. Yet if he were speaking in all innocence (משיח לפי תומו) he is reliable.” In the lament for the Ninth of Av “I weep bitterly and cry,” the word מָשִׂיחַ also concerns talking and speech, yet the initial letter mem is used as a preposition, namely, מִשִּׂיח, meaning ‘from talk, from speech.’ R. Raphael, then, is using this idiom to express the complete emptiness that is taking hold of his soul, to the point that he becomes speechless, and his mouth is completely “dry” and bereft of speech, of talking (in Hebrew the preposition used is “from,” i.e., “from speech”= of speech).

29 It should be born in mind that there is no distinction in the poet’s North African pronunciation between the vowels [i] and [e].
If I resolve to arouse lament

The time: for the Ninth of Av
Structure: belt song
Rhyme: ababab / cccz / dddz / efefef / gggz / hhhz
Rhythm: seven syllables in each half verse (צלע)
Signature: I am Raphael Aaron Hazaq
Guidepost: Marpe ‘el tsir (מרפא אל ציר) (Treasury, m-2436)

If I resolve to arouse lament / my troubles just abound and augment
Then as I write just a little bit / stalk and reed do wilt
Even when night is awake as day / and time ceased yet they stay
When I count them they increase as sand grains countless / the yoke of their kingdom is growing boundless / because of this my eye flows / water into the pit of throes
Alas if I live my mortal days / only sorrow and suffering I spread / the breach of my blow is fatal / to whom should I flee for succor
My heart melts away like water / each day I am frying in the pan
Pangs causing howling as far as Eglaim / and the enemy’s speech is harsh as the speech of the Hittites
He doubly arouses his lament / the laments grew fourfold
Sevenfold / is this illness of all other illnesses / it goes up ascending / overcoming all else
Woe for this they pour down rain / my eyes pour out water / until are broken apart / all spinal vertebrae

30 For typographical reasons, in translation the calembours are emboldened (and not marked with gershayim). If a whole line is emboldened, the calembour is italicized as well. No attempt was made to keep either rhyme or rhythm of the original throughout.

31 One should point out that his signature in the address is אני רפאל אהרן חזק,” whereas in the acrostic it is: אני רפאל, “I am Rapha’el” (the letter aleph is duplicated), as if reading רפא-אל, “heal, God.”
I am worn out from groaning / for this **sadness** has grown
I found no rest / every day from evil doers
I was hit by a tree / suffering harm and injury
This one hit me with a cane / that one with his bag / I am weary of holding it in and I am not / able to mourn

**for this trouble**

15 Woe when I see my protection removed / all who see me mock me / when they ask me / why God has abandoned me

Broad **broad** is my mouth **calling** / when God distributes sorrows

I call: “Deborah, wake up, / your honey the locust ate up,
He destroyed root and fruit / the **shocks** and standing grain he torched”

Ah, there is no medicine / to me from the sons of the giant / how was dawn turned into darkness / and the maidservant supplanted the mistress

20 Oh, my heart, calm down, be still / and let me curse my day / for my people have become lost sheep / looted, sold for nothing

My face has fallen until / it descended into deep pits
For these descendants of **Asher** / who became scattered loot
Utterly consumed by oppression, / affliction, and untold damage
Whatever crawls on its belly / thought itself as Og and as Sihon / me they called stench / and cried out: “impure, impure”

25 Woe, when a thinking fellow remembers this period / the blood of his heart curdles / how a Father sold the firstborn / and He despised the right of the firstborn

I will call for a fast, a sacred assembly, / tearing my heart to pieces
My eye, my eye flows / **pours and absorbs** the forty lashes
For my sides are broken parts of **spine** / as well as shattered **ribs**
For they have been banished from a nation / they were **butchered and cut up** / neither cleansed nor bandaged / from an enduring blow

30 Woe for the slain, how many, / my heart is as without blood / listen my brothers and people / let us mourn with lament **for the trouble**

I ask of you a word of prophecy / by consulting spirits, or casting spells
The calembour in Rabbi Raphael Aharon Monsonego’s “Neot Midbar”

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For my lips are in the wilderness, / gone astray, turned speechless
Why was my horn broken / and an enemy overcame me
The burden of Egypt till when / will it defeat? while his hand,
how much? / he had a princess a maid
/ and removed her from being queen

35 alas, adding lament to pain / I spread it on my bed / for to
the desert owl and screech owl / the Delightsome Land
was abandoned

My heart of hearts throbs / as I just mention these
Behold my throat is parched / I feel for it
You will elect David’s offspring / he has the right of firstborn
Speedily do arise, anoint him, / remember and appoint him
/ his horn will rise, may his banner
/ rise swiftly and speedily

40 Then with psalms of praise and thanks / and with approbations
of delight / I will sing your name and read
/ all the words of this song.
הֵן שְׂפָתַי בַּמִּדְבָּ״ר / תָּעוּ לֹא יָכְלוּ דַּבֵּר
מַדּוּעַ קַרְנִי נִשְׁבַּר / וְצָר עָלַי מִתְגַּבֵּר
מַשָּׂ״א מִצְרַיִ״ם עַד מַה / יִּגְבַּר וְיָדוֹ כַּמָּה / וְלוֹ בַּת מֶלֶךְ אָמָה / וַיְסִירָהּ מִגְּבִירָה
אוֹי סְפוֹת הַצִּי״ר סְפוֹ״ד / אֶת יְצוּעִי בּוֹ אֶרְפּוֹד / כִּי לְקָאַת וְקִפּוֹד / אֶרֶץ חֵפֶץ נִמְסְר
לְבָבִי בִּי סְחַרְחַר / אַךְ עֵת אֵלֶּה אַזְכִּירָה
הִנֵּה גְּרוֹנִי נִיחַר / רַחֲשִׁי לוֹ מְתוֹאָרָה
בְחַר / לוֹ מִשְׁפַּט הַבְּכוֹרָה
ה תִּנּין יִשַּי אַתָּ
חִישׁ קוּם נָא מְשָׁחֵהוּ / זָוכְרֵהוּ וְנָוקְבֵהוּ / קַרְנוֹ תָּרוּם דִּגְלֵהוּ / יָרוּם חִישׁ קַל מְהֵרָה
אָז בְּהַלֵּל וּבְהוֹדָאָה / וּבְאִשּׁוּרֵ״י הֲנָאָ״ה / שִׁמְךָ אָשִׁיר אֶקְרָאָה / אֶת כָּל דִּבְרֵי הַשִּׁיר

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Sources and Glosses

1 if ... arouse lament: based on 2 Kings 7:4, where מעיר is a locative adjunct (‘the city’), while here it is used as a verb meaning ‘arouse, call forth lament,’ as in Mishna Mo'ed Katan 1:5: “A man may not call forth lamentation for his dead nor arrange a funeral oration for him for thirty days before a Festival.” (Blackman translation, italics added).—my troubles ... abound: see Ps. 3:2[1].

2 then ... bit: even if I mention only just a few of my troubles, see Isa. 28:10.—stalk ... wilt: stalk and reed, namely, pen and paper (stalk קנה = calamus, whence קולמוס, writing reed, and reed סוף, papyrus reed, papyrus, paper), based on Isa. 19:6.

3 night is awake: based on Ps. 139:12. In the source text ‘gives light, shines’ (יאיר), while here a witticism: even the night is awake (יעיר) and ready to tell in it of all my troubles.—time ... stay: meaning ‘life will end before the troubles are over.’

4 I count ... countless: describing the innumerable troubles that surpass the countless grains of sand on the seashore, based on Ps. 139:18. Reversal of fortune: the blessing has changed to a curse, cf. Gen. 22:17.—the yoke ... boundless: the source text (Num. 21:30) concerns the war of the Lord against the kingdom of Heshbon, where ונירם is traditionally construed as “their kingdom” (cf. Rashi, ibid.). ניר may also mean ‘yoke, burden,’ and the meaning here is that it’s impossible to count and sum up (Heshbon read as its homographic ‘count, sum’) the burden and yoke of the enemy because of its infinitude.—my eye flows: I weep profusely, alluding to Lam. 3:48-49.—in the pit of throes: based on “the cistern of Sirah,” 2 Sam. 3:26.

5 mortal days: mortal man whose life is short, based on Job 10:5.—sorrow and suffering: based on Jer. 20:18, here he means the lot of the people.—my blow is fatal: based on Jer. 15:18.—to whom ... succor: based on Isa. 10:3.

6 melts ... like water: alludes to Josh. 7:5.—frying in the pan: based on 1 Chron. 9:31. In the source text it refers to the offering of the High Priest, while here the poet is describing his heart that is like the fine flour kneaded and sizzling in the frying pan. It may also allude to the sound of clasps (חבטים).

7 howling ... Eglaim: based on Isa. 15:8, meaning a great outcry that is heard afar (Eglaim is a city in Moab).—speech ... Hittites: created through concatenation, based on “His bed was a bed of iron” (Deut. 3:11)
“land of the Hittites” (Josh. 1:4). Here Monsonego changes, by way of calembour, the word *his bed* (אריש, cf. ארשוי, “expression of the lips”) thus hinting at the enemy whose speech to the people is harsh and frightful and the land of exile is hard for the people as iron.

8 *wakes … lament*: based on Deut. 32:11.– *grew … fourfold*: based on Mishna *Kritot* 1,7. Fourfold, to indicate the multiplicity of laments.

9 *sevenfold*: literally ‘seven pairs,’ based on “… and twenty-two fundamental letters. Three mothers and seven pairs and twelve single ones and there is wind, spirit, in each of them” (*Sefer Yetsira* 1,8), and here indicating ascending multiplicity.– *illness … illnesses*: based on Ps. 124:4, “Then the waters had overwhelmed us, the brook (נחל) had gone over our soul.” The word *נחל* means (among others) either “illness” (based on Talmud *Baba Batra* 117a) or ‘brook, rivulet’.– *goes up ascending*: based on the Burial Prayer, and see also Mishna *Tamid* 6,1.

10 *pour down rain*: based on Job 36:27, referring to his tears.– *pour out*: literally ‘make empty, empty out,’ see Eccles. 11:3.– *broken … vertebrae*: see Talmud *Berachot* 28b, where the talk is about a person’s spinal vertebrae loosening and “falling apart” due to ritually bowing down. Here they fall apart due to the yoke of the enemy.

11 *I am worn … groaning*: based on Jer. 45:3.– *this sadness* (ẓavir): a witticism based on Ps. 118:20, “This gate (שער) of the Lord the righteous will enter.”

12 *I found no rest*: based on Jer. 45:3.– *evil doers*: literally ‘children of iniquity’ (cf. 1 Sam. 3:34), an epithet for the enemy.

13 *hit by a tree*: based on the Mishna *Yevamot* 6,4, meaning the damage is great and irreversible.– *harm and injury*: great losses.

14 *this one … his bag*: based on Talmud *Baba Batra* 133b, they attack him harshly.– *weary holding in*: based on Jer. 20:9, he can no longer bear his suffering.– *mourn for this trouble*: a calembour based on Gen. 23:2.

15 *my protection removed*: literally ‘shadow, shade,’ figuratively ‘protection,’ from Num. 14:9.– *all … me*: based on Ps. 22:8.– *God has abandoned me*: ignores; literally ‘feigns oneself a she-stranger’ (1 Kings 14:6).

16 *broad … calling*: witticism based on the Talmudic saying: “Whosoever says: ‘Rahab, Rahab’ immediately experiences ejaculation” (Talmud *Ta’anit* 8b) and meaning ‘a great hue and cry.’ The name Rahab also
meaning ‘broad, wide’.– *distributes sorrows*: from Job 21:17, here the poet bewails the fate of the Jewish people.

17 *Deborah, wake up*: based on Judg. 5:12, an epithet for the Jewish people, calling and encouraging it to stand up and do something about its sorry state.– *your honey … ate up*: based on Jl 1:4, *locust* is an epithet for the enemy who plagues the people.

18 *destroyed … fruit*: total destruction.– *shocks … torched*: shocks, i.e., sheaves of grain, based on Judg. 15:5. The calembour alludes to the idiom הגדיש את הסאה, ‘to go too far, overdo, exaggerate,’ which shares the same root as *shocks* (גדיש), and the poet means the boundless damage the enemy has caused the people.

19 *from the sons of the giant*: based on 2 Sam. 21:18, an epithet for the enemy.– *how … darkness*: expressing surprise, based on Amos 4:13.– *maidservant … mistress*: an allusion to Gen. 16:4. A reversal of status: in the source text Hagar supposedly inherits, supplants, Sarah, whereas here the enemy inherits the senior position of the Jewish people (see also Talmud Ta’anit 21B).

20 *calm down, be still*: based on Jer. 47:6, while Jeremiah refers to the sword of the LORD that does not cease from killing the enemy, here he means that there is no rest for his weary heart.– *curse my day*: alludes to Jer. 20:14.– *lost sheep*: based on Isa. 52:3, an allusion to God’s promise to His people Israel that their rulers will let them leave their place of residence in exile and go up to the Land of Israel without payment.

22 *these … Asher*: following 1Chron. 7:40, an epithet for the leaders of the people who understood things perfectly (לארש ומשר, sharing the same root with Asher), or confirmed (משר ומשר, sharing the same root) rulings as judges. Also, Asher, Jacob’s son, is mentioned to indicate numerous progeny as is written in a midrash to the same verse in Sifrei: “you will not find one that is blessed with sons as Asher was” (cf. Deut. 33:24).– *became … loot*: based on 2 Kings 21:14.

23 *utterly consumed*: based on Ps. 73:19, ‘destroyed’.– *oppression, affliction*: based on Ps. 107:39, ‘evil government’.– *untold damage*: great losses, following Talmud *Ketubot* 41B.

24 *whatever … belly*: based on Lev. 11:42, the enemy is likened to a snake.– *as Og and as Sihon*: based on Deut. 31:4, similes for the enemy.– *cried out impure*: based on Lev. 13:45, the people is outcast as a leper.
25 thinking fellow: based on Baba Kamma 54B.– father … first-born: based on Gen. 25:34, here the Almighty seemingly abandons the Jewish people called “my firstborn son Israel.”

26 I … assembly: I will get ready for a fast and calling to God, based on Jl 1:14.

27 my … flows: based on Lam. 3:49.– pours … forty lashes: based on Mishna Hullin 7,3, the calembour means for us to read it as “absorbs forty lashes.”

28 for … spine: based on Mishna Hullin 3,1.– shattered ribs: based on 1 Kings 19:11.

29 for they … nation: based on Job 30:5.– butchered and cut up: based on Zeph. 2:1.– neither … bandaged: were not given any treatment, based on Isa. 1:6.– enduring blow: a blow that does not end, alluding to Isa. 1:5.

30 the slain how many: based on Shemot Rabbah 1, 34, meaning that his heart is dead (like the heart of the slain).– without blood: based on Talmud Hullin 58B.– listen … people: based on 1 Chron. 28:2.– mourn … for the trouble: based on Gen. 23:2.

31 consulting … spells: based on Deut. 18:11, he is addressing all sorts of mediums specializing in summoning the spirits of the dead.

32 my lips … wilderness: a calembour based on: “your speech is comely” (Song of Songs 4:3), the word מדבר meaning both ‘wilderness’ and ‘speech’.– gone astray: based on Ps. 107:4, the clause “my lips … gone astray” is made by concatenation, and this emphasizes the dryness of his lips (either from suffering or from continuous supplication and prayer). Thus, when talking, his lips go astray as if in the wilderness, and they do not find the proper way of expression.

33 my horn broken: see Jer. 48:25, referring to Moab, whereas here he refers to the Jewish people whose glory has faded and its strength is gone.– an enemy overcame: alludes to Lam. 1:16.

34 burden of Egypt: an oracle concerning Egypt, based on Isa. 19:1. The calembour is understood as the synonymous ‘burden’ or yoke of Egypt, and it points at the people who suffer straits and distress (the word for Egypt in Hebrew is מצרים, which can also be read as ‘straits’).– princess a maid: describing the reversal of fortune of the Jewish people.– removed her from queen: based on 1 Kings 15:13, it is here a continuation of the previous clause, as God apparently despising his people.
35 add: based on “Add your burnt offerings unto your sacrifices” (Jer. 7:21).– lament the pain: based on 2 Kings 4:38, where the original clause means ‘set fire on the pot, boil.’ The calembour changes it to the phonetically similar “lament the pain,” hence the whole unit means “add lament to the pain”.– spread … bed: based on Job 17:13, the pain serves as bedding to sleep on.– to the desert owl and screech owl: based on Isa. 34:11, traditionally construed to be nocturnal birds of prey (cf. Rashi, ibid.), an epithet for the enemy.– delightful Land: based on Mal. 3:12, the Desirable Land, an epithet for the Land of Israel.

36 my heart throbs: based on Ps. 38:11[10].

37 my throat is parched: based on Ps. 69:4[3].– I feel for it: refers to the sounds emanating from his throat.

38 elect … offspring: to become king.– he has … firstborn: based on Deut. 21:17, continued from the previous clause, and meaning that the kingship was given to the House of David.

39 arise … anoint him: based on 1 Sam. 16:12, a call urging for the coming of redemption through the Son of Jesse, the messiah Son of David.– remember and appoint him: literally ‘make it either masculine or feminine,’ and it can also be read (as it is here) as “remember him and mention his name.” Here it is a continuation of the preceding and meaning: “remember and determine” (the king from the House of David, harbinger of Redemption).– his horn will rise: based on Ps. 89:25[24].– swiftly and speedily: based on Isa. 5:26, here describing the swiftness of the coming of the messianic king.

40 approbations of enjoyment: a punning reversal of the original “prohibitions of enjoyment,” as in Talmud Eruvin 31A. The calembour continues from the preceding since the Jewish people will thank the Almighty for its redemption through singing, enjoyment (and joy).– all … song: based on Deut. 32:44.

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32 This phrase is used in grammatical discussions about masculine and feminine gender. Mentioned in Arugot Ha-Bosem 7, 28, it is ascribed to Ibn Ezra; see E. Goldenberg, “Linguistics and proper Hebrew in the Middle Ages,” Leshonenu 54 (1990 [in Hebrew]) pp. 190-216.