

Hoshanot

The Meaning of “Ani Vahu”*

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Hoshanot

One of the high points of the prayer service for Sukot is *Hoshanot* (traditionally pronounced “Hoishanas”), which literally is the plural form of the liturgical chorus “*Hoshana*,” meaning, “Grant salvation.” With slight variations between different customs, every day (excluding Shabbat) of Sukot, immediately after reciting the *Halel*, we encircle the synagogue’s *bimah*, the central table on which the Torah is read, while holding our four species and reciting a different set of prayers each day. Our *Hoshanot* echo the rite of the *aravah* (the willow branches) that was performed on each day of Sukot in the Holy Temple.¹

When saying *Hoshanot* one is constantly struck by the recurring motif of God granting salvation, not just for the sake of that which is being saved, but for His own sake. One of the most cryptic parts of *Hoshanot* is the chorus “*Ani Vahu Hoshee’ah Na*.” What does this phrase mean? It sounds like we are asking God to save “me and him.” But, the word “him” (הוּ) is not written in its usual Hebrew form (אִי). It may be known to some people that there are some Kabbalistic intentions openly inserted into our liturgy for this day. As we shall see, this phrase is one of the earliest purely Kabbalistic wordings appearing in our liturgy, dating from at least the time of the Temple. Over the years, this phrase has also been understood by the greatest sages to allude to Biblical and philosophical concepts as well. We will look at the phrase’s origin and its meaning. We will then proceed to offer six different explanations offered by the commentaries and another one that is not explicitly mentioned. We will see how these different explanations correspond to the *sefirot* from loving-kindness to kingdom, together weaving a tapestry of meaning.

The rite of the willow branches

In the tractate of *Sukah*, we find a description of the rite of the *aravah*:

What is the rite of aravah? There was a place, lower than Jerusalem, called Motza. They would descend there and gather *Moravi’ot* [willows], and they would tie them around the altar with their top extending beyond the top of the altar and bent over it. They would sound a prolonged blast [with the Temple horns], a quavering note, and a prolonged blast. Each day they walked in procession once around the altar

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and recited אָנִי וְהוֹ הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא. אָנִי וְהוֹ הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא, "Please God, save us. Please God, grant us success." [But,] Rabbi Yehudah says [that they recited]: אָנִי וְהוֹ הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא, "Ani Vahu, save, please."

The first opinion of the *mishnah* and Rabbi Yehudah dispute what was said while encircling the altar. According to the first opinion it was the verse from the Hallel: אָנִי וְהוֹ הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא. But, according to Rabbi Yehudah it was a seemingly similar, but still cryptic statement: אָנִי וְהוֹ הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא. Incidentally, there are two opinions about what those encircling the altar would be carrying. One opinion holds that the altar was encircled while people carried only the *aravot*, willow branches, while there is another opinion that they would encircle the altar with all four species, as we do.

In fact, we rule according to Rabbi Yehudah, as we say אָנִי וְהוֹ הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא during *Hoshanot*. But, there is something very deep here that needs to be understood. Rabbi Yehudah's version is very mysterious. It includes a word that is not a word: וְהוֹ. This word is very similar to the word וְהוּא, which means "and him," but it is missing the *alef* at the end. Why do we prefer a cryptic statement to the explicit verse brought by the first opinion?

Kingdom: gematria

The first explanation is offered by Rav Ovadyah Bartenurah (and is quoted by many other commentaries, including *Rashi*). He observes that the two words that form the variation between the two phrases, אָנִי וְהוֹשִׁיעָה נָא and אָנִי וְהוֹ are numerically equivalent; let us add that they both equal 78, which is also the numerical value of the word (in Aramaic form, the form most commonly used for this word in Kabbalah) מְוִלָּא, meaning "[good] fortune."²

According to *Ma'ayan Hachochmah*, an ancient text traditionally attributed to Moshe Rabbeinu himself, all numerical analysis occurs in the context of the *sefirah* of kingdom (especially for those people who do not require any further explanations beyond a mathematical one).

Loving-kindness: two of the 72 Names of God

But, most of the commentaries do not consider the numerical equivalency between the two phrases to be enough to justify Rabbi Yehudah's opinion. In other words, Rabbi Yehudah's cryptic words are not based on merely a mathematical manipulation. Moreover, the numerical equivalency does not explain why we prefer Rabbi Yehudah's version.

Therefore, *Rashi* and the Bartenurah and other commentaries reveal a deeper secret here. They explain that these two words, אָנִי וְהוֹ are two of the 72 names of the Almighty that are constructed from the three verses וַיִּסַּע וַיִּבֶּן וַיִּט found just before the Song of the Sea. Each of these three consecutive verses has exactly the same number of letters (72)—something which we find only in one more place in the entire Torah.³

72 is the numerical value of חַסְדִּים, "loving-kindness." Although a complex subject, let us mention that there is a Kabbalistic Name of the Almighty that corresponds to each of

the ten *sefirot*. The Name that corresponds to loving-kindness is all 72 (three-letter) Names (constructed from the three above verses) together.

The essence of the festival of Sukot is loving-kindness. Sukot follows the Days of Awe, *ימים נוראים*, *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kipur*. The awe, trembling, and fear that are an integral part of these holidays that begin the year are meant to push away our feeling of self-importance and self-involvement and clear the path to the higher selfless Divine soul that we each possess to appear.

The sages teach that the left hand should be used to push away, but only when balanced by the right hand embracing and bringing closer. This is how the Alter Rebbe explains the beautiful verse: "His left [arm] under my head and his right arm shall embrace me." After our egos (the feeling of the ego and the self normally reside in our consciousness, i.e., in our heads) have been pushed away, as it were, by the Almighty's left arm during the Days of Awe, His right arm, as it were, embraces us during Sukot. This is not merely a half-embrace, holding our side. The Almighty embraces us completely and totally, metaphorically holding our back-side which represents all our imperfections. God accepts us in our totality. Normally, we have to follow the *Zohar's* advice that to allow ourselves to burn with the fire of holiness, we have to chop ourselves into little pieces. But, during Sukot, God embraces us completely, with our shortcomings and problems.

After we had many days with a lot of holy tension, Sukot is the time to let a little bit loose from this tension. During the Days of Awe, we are required to cut ourselves into pieces. But during Sukot, we are as we are, and as we are we feel the joy of the "time of our joy."

The Name of 72 is actually mystically built into every *sukah* built for Sukot. Halachically, it is best that a *sukah* take the shape of a cube, or any other six sided volume; a round *sukah* is questionable. With six sides (four walls, a roof made of *schach*, and a floor), a *sukah* has twelve diagonal borders (*יב גבולי אלכסון*). Each of the beams that form the cube of the *sukah* is considered a "diagonal border." There are altogether 12 of them. They are called "diagonal" because if you are standing in the middle of the *sukah* you have to look off to the diagonal in order to see any of the 12 beams. Now, each of the beams itself has 6 sides to it (4 around and 2 on each end). So altogether, between them, the beams have 72 sides. These are referred to as the "dimensions" with which the Almighty constantly forms and reforms the world through the working of the chariot (*מעשה מרכבה*), and each of these dimensions corresponds to one of the 72 Names of God.

The 72 Names of God are constructed by taking the first letter of the first verse (*ויסע*), the last letter of the second verse (*ויבא*), and the first letter of the third verse (*ויט*). The first Name that comes out of this construction is *והו*, which is also equal to *טוב* = 17, or good. The 37th Name that is formed is *אני*.

What is special about the 37th Name that it would go together with the first? The *Tosafot Yom Tov* writes, that if you divide the 72 Names in half, each half will have 36 Names. [$36 = 6^2$, which means that $72 = 2 \cdot 6^2$ is a double-square number.] Thus, *והו* is the first Name of the first half, and *אני* is the first Name of the second half.

In the language of the *Zohar*, the 72 Names are called the 72 *Bridges of Loving-kindness*. Specifically, the loving-kindness that the *Zohar* is referring to is the aspects of loving-kindness of knowledge (חסדים ודעות). Let us contemplate the image of a bridge for a moment. To build bridges, especially bridges between minds, between different ways of seeing the world, is like arbitration. In order for a person to be a good arbitrator, which is a very sought after occupation today, he has to know the secret of these 72 Names that are bridges. In addition the word "bridge" in Hebrew, גשר, is phonetically equivalent to the word for "connection," or "bond" קשר. It is the role of the *tzadik* to connect the souls of the Jewish people. The first such *tzadik*-arbitrator was Aaron the High Priest, who would go around making peace between husband and wife and settling disputes, etc.

It is known that in every generation there are 36 revealed *tzadikim*. But there are also 36 concealed *tzadikim*. These two sets of *tzadikim* correspond one-to-one to each of the two sets of 36 Names in the 72 Names. The first of the revealed *tzadikim* is called אבי, and the first, who is the consummate concealed *tzadik* is called יהו.

So now that we have corresponded these two Names to the two types of the consummate *tzadik*, we see that indeed Sukot is the holiday for connecting to *tzadikim*, which is a beautiful explanation for our hosting the *usphezin*, the holy guests in our *sukah*.

What is the difference between a revealed and a concealed *tzadik*? A revealed *tzadik* is known for his Halachic prowess; his understanding of the law and his ability to rule on it. But, by attaching ourselves and binding our hearts and minds with the concealed *tzadik*, we receive love, awe, and faith. The Alter Rebbe writes in the *Tanya* that after the concealed *tzadik* passes away, it actually becomes easier to connect with him and receive new love, awe, and faith. He becomes revealed at a higher and higher level, which is completely different than the level one could perceive during his lifetime.

Until the revelation of Chassidut, one was either a revealed or a concealed *tzadik*. But, from the Ba'al Shem Tov and on, there could be a *tzadik* who was both אבי יהו.

Clearly, this explanation for the meaning of אבי יהו corresponds to the *sefirah* of loving-kindness.

Might: I awaken Him

There is an explanation based on the *Zohar*,⁴ that when we do the will of the Almighty we add "strength" to the Almighty. This is hinted to in the verse: "Give might to God."⁵ How is this possible? One of the ways to understand this concept is the sages' likening of God's relationship with us to that of a cow to her nursing calf. More than the calf wants to suckle, the cow wants to nurse. Likewise, God only wants to give, and when he sees that His will is done, His yearning to give increases even more. Thus, our taking, i.e., performing His will, increases His might, i.e., His yearning to give.

But, the opposite is also true. To understand how this is possible we need to understand that the Almighty is like a father. The only will that the Almighty has is to benefit creation, just as a father only wants the best for His children. But, when He sees that His children do not follow His direction, then, like a father, He is weakened as it

were. When we do not do God's will, the Torah says: "You have weakened the Rock [the Almighty] who has fathered you."⁶

Based on this explanation, the אנני is simply us and יהו is the Almighty and the reasoning is that by saving us, hence helping us perform His will, the Almighty is actually saving Himself, as it were; He is adding strength in Himself. In Chassidic terminology, this concept is known as "From awakening below comes awakening above."⁷ This concept is associated with the *sefirah* of might. The *sefirah* of might is the strength, as it were, that we are giving the Almighty.

We can add to this something from a famous discourse of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's.⁸ It is well known that the 40 days from the first of Elul until Yom Kipur are hinted to in the verse: "I am to my beloved, and my beloved is to me," because in Hebrew the final letters of these words equal 40 (אני לדודי ודודי לי). This verse is clearly an example of "From awakening below" ("I am to my beloved"), "comes awakening above" ("...and my beloved is to me.") But, Sukot is obviously not part of these 40 days, so perhaps it does not exhibit this relationship. Where can we find this reciprocating relationship in Sukot? The Lubavitcher Rebbe replies that it can be found in the verse: "In Sukot you shall dwell for seven days."⁹ From this verse, he shows how the obligation of Sukot is dependent on our building and dwelling in a *sukah*. It is the *sukah* itself which creates the holiness that necessitates the performance of the *mitzvot* associated with Sukot. This, unlike Passover, when the holiness and the halachic requirement to eat matzah (and not eat leaven dough) come entirely from Hashem. Thus, even on Sukot (not just the 40 days ending with *Yom Kipur*) it is our awakening below to build the *sukah* that awakens God above to command us with taking Four Species, etc. This is a beautiful addendum to the concept that our actions below awaken the will and the holiness of the Almighty, which then dwells upon us.

Beauty: Two Aspects of God

Maimonides in his commentary to the Mishnah, indeed acknowledges the commentaries that say that these are two Names of God. But, he argues that these two words refer to the verse: "See now that I myself am He! [There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand]" (ראה אני הוא עתה כי אני הוא).¹⁰ Maimonides' explanation immediately offers a simple explanation for why אני comes before הוא, as this is their order in the verse.¹¹

Maimonides' explanation sees Rabbi Yehudah's phrase as an invitation to "look at the splendor of the King." The verse that Maimonides cites discusses two aspects of God, noting that both are One. In Kabbalistic terminology these two aspects of God are called:

- the light that fills all worlds, which is revealed, is imminent, and experienced even by subjective beings and therefore is referred to by the first person article "I" (אני), and
- the light that encircles all worlds, which is concealed and transcendent and therefore referred to by the third person article "He" (הוא).

We are calling out and admitting (much like at the end of the Yom Kipur service) that these two aspects of God are one and the same. They are not separate. God is both the filling, experienced light, and also the concealed, encircling light. To see the splendor of the Almighty this way, is akin to looking at the *sefirah* of beauty.

Victory: God is with you in times of trouble

Next there are two very similar explanations. Both are based on the concept that our cry for salvation from God must rely on the notion that God Himself needs the salvation. There are two slightly different versions of this explanation, a fact that immediately tells us that they are probably related to victory and acknowledgment, which are always considered to halves of one body. These are also the deepest of all the explanations and originate from the *Yerushalmi* (the Jerusalem Talmud) and the *midrash*.

In the *Yerushalmi* we find that Rabbi Yehudah says that we recite: אָנִי וְהוּא הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא. This is a very slight variation, but it transforms the cryptic word וְהוּא into the common אִתּוֹ, which means “and he.” The sages of the Jerusalem Talmud explain that Rabbi Yehudah means to involve God in our salvation. They quote the verse, “Your nation which You have redeemed for Yourself from Egypt....”¹² What do the words “for Yourself” mean? It is as if God redeemed himself.

The *Ritva*, one of the *Rishonim* (medieval sages), notes that the *Yerushalmi*'s concept is expressed in the verse “I am with him in times of trouble.”¹³ Thus, the words אָנִי וְהוּא refer to the Jewish people and the Almighty, that both should be saved together. And, He is always with us in our state of exile. And because He is exiled with us, as it were, then He is destined to finally redeem us, because He will redeem Himself. This is the state described as “God cries in His inner chambers.”¹⁴ This is also the meaning of the verse: “It is a time of trouble for Jacob and because of it he will be redeemed.”¹⁵

The *Ritva*'s rendering of the *Yerushalmi* corresponds to the *sefirah* of victory, because it is the “Eternal of Israel”¹⁶ that is always with us, even in our times of trouble. And it is to Him that we pray that He should redeem both us and, as it were, Himself.

Acknowledgment: I am you in times of trouble

The next explanation is found quoted in the *Tosafot* in *Sukah*.¹⁷ It is very similar to the *Ritva*'s explanation, but is even bolder and more extreme. The *Tosafot*, who write their commentary on the version of אָנִי וְהוּא (without an *alef* at the end) found in the Babylonian Talmud, begin by noting that these are indeed two of the 72 Names of God. But, they remain dissatisfied with this explanation by itself. They question why were these two specific Names were chosen. Their answer is based on the Midrash *Aichah Rabbati* where it is explained that there are two verses that specifically allude to the idea of God being with us in times of trouble and therefore that He too, as it were, requires salvation. These two verses are:

- “And I am in the exile,”¹⁸ (וְאָנִי בְתוֹךְ הַגּוֹלָה), and
- “He is bound in chains,”¹⁹ (וְהוּא אָסוּר בְּאֲזָקִים).

The first describes the context of Ezekiel's prophecy of the Divine chariot. Ezekiel was standing “in the exile,” when the heavens opened and he saw visions of God.²⁰ The “I”

in the verse literally refers to Ezekiel. It was he who was in the exile. The “he” in the second verse refers to Jeremiah who was bound in chains. But the *Tosafot* explain that according to the Midrash, both verses are actually talking about the Almighty. It was the Almighty, who as it were, was in the exile. And, it was God himself, as it were, that was bound in chains.

According to the *Ritva’s* explanation, it is we who are in jeopardy, but God is continually with us in order it seems to be able to comfort us and to lift us out of harms way. But here, the image is much bolder. The literal meaning of these two verses is that two prophets are in jeopardy, two human beings, mortal beings are in danger. But, the Midrash explains that the words “I” (in “I am in exile”) and “He” (in “And he is bound in chains”) are referring to God himself.

This is a wonderful source for the Chassidic concept of “the self and essence of the Almighty dwelling in a physical body.”²¹ What this explanation does is it takes the previous one and multiplies its impact many times over. Not only is it that God is with us, but it is God Himself who is in peril. Why is this related to acknowledgment? We know that acknowledgment is the most transmutable of all the *sefirot*. On the one hand, it designates charisma and strength of character, on the other hand it can be the source of all maladies, as in the verse: “My acknowledgment has turned on me to destroy me.”²² The concept of “the self and essence of the Almighty dwelling in a physical body” is such a concept, as the Lubavitcher Rebbe himself said, that one who wants to accept this idea, may he be blessed, but he does not want to argue with someone who does not.²³

In order to understand how the idea of crying out for God to save us because His essence is within us, let us picture Jeremiah the prophet being led out of the jail in chains. Do we imagine that as he is being led out he is in high spirits, jovially saying “*Shalom Aleichem*” to all of his students? Probably not! He was experiencing tremendous suffering. And yet, what we are being told is that the Almighty’s dwelling within Jeremiah during his suffering was even more apparent than was His dwelling within Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai during the festivals, a time of joy and good spirits.²⁴ How is this possible? We know that two of the 10 extremes mentioned in *Sefer Yetzirah* are “extreme height and extreme low.”²⁵ The extreme height corresponds, in the Arizal’s terminology, to the lower seven *sefirot* of the higher *partzuf* of the crown, *Atik*, while the extreme low corresponds to the three higher *sefirot* of the same *partzuf*. Thus, the extreme low is more revealing than is the extreme height.

What the *Tosafot* are teaching us is that Sukot is the time to enter the inner chambers of the Almighty, which is where *Hashem* allows Himself, as it were, to cry. And that is why we cry out אָנִי וְהוּא הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא, we are calling out for *Hashem* to bring the *Mashiach* to redeem Himself. But the key that unlocks the door to God’s inner chamber is the joy of Sukot, which is the essential time of our joy.

Foundation: Rabbi Yehudah, the tzadik of Sukot

What we have left is to review a seventh explanation which is not brought explicitly. Let us recall that the *mishnah* we are learning appears in the tractate of *Sukah*. We have

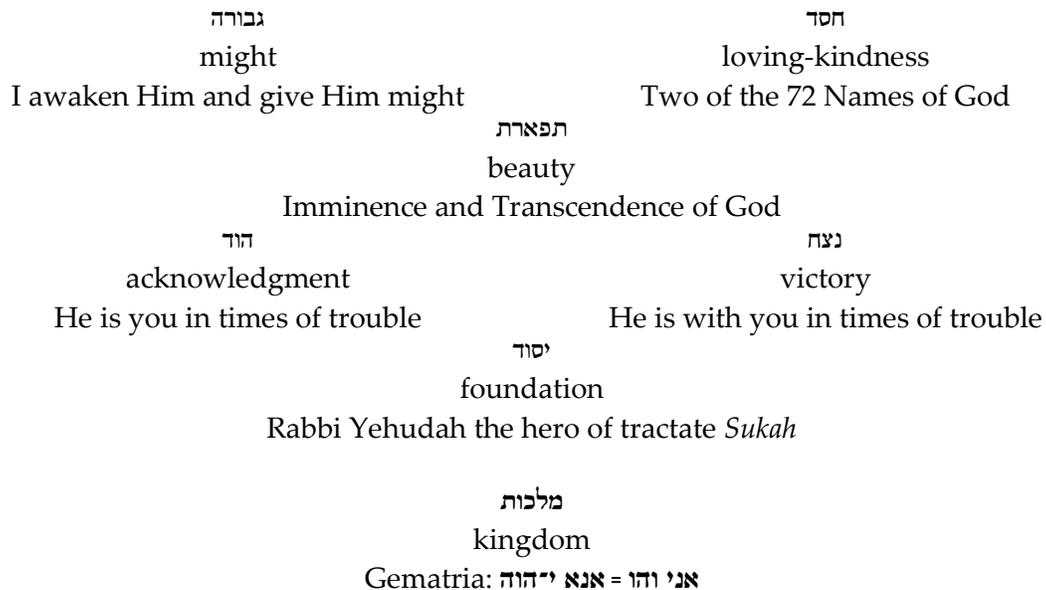
taught many times before that every tractate in the Talmud has a hero. There is no question that the hero of the tractate of *Sukah* is Rabbi Yehudah. Rabbi Yehudah is called “the first speaker.”²⁶ As will be explained in a separate article, Rabbi Yehudah’s soul root is capable of rectifying all those Rabbis whose true loyalty lies with those who appointed them and not with the Almighty and His Torah.²⁷ As will be discussed in that forthcoming article, like Moshe Rabbeinu whom the *Zohar* says has to return in every generation in order to rectify the negative impact of the foreign multitudes that he took out of Egypt at his own discretion, Rabbi Yehudah’s soul has the power in every generation to rectify these “Rabbis by appointment” who say what they say only in order to appease those who pay their salaries.

Rabbi Yehudah literally takes control of the tractate of *Sukah*. So this seventh explanation that we are now offering suggests that אָנִי וְהוּא refers to Rabbi Yehudah:

- אָנִי alludes to the verse “I am the first and I am the last.” Rabbi Yehudah is the first sage mentioned in the tractate of *Sukah* and the last one mentioned. And,
- וְהוּא, which numerically equals 17 alludes to the 17 times that Rabbi Yehudah is mentioned in the tractate.

Summary

Let us summarize all seven explanations in our tapestry of meaning by presenting them in the traditional Kabbalistic form of the *sefirot*:



It is indeed proper that during *Hoshanot*, when reciting the chorus “*Ani Vahu Hoshee’ah Na,*” we meditate on this full spectrum of meanings.

¹. *Smag* (*Sefer Mitzvot Gadol*), positive commandment 44.

². Indeed, in chapter 116, two chapters earlier in Psalms, the word אָנא, meaning “please” is written, אָנה, but here it is written with an *alef* at the end, providing the numerical equivalency. אָנא (with an alef) = בֶּן, “son.”

³. For more on the Name of 72 letters, see *What You Need to Know About Kabbalah and Body, Mind, and Soul*.

⁴. *Zohar* II, 32b.

⁵. Psalms 68:35.

⁶. Deuteronomy 32:18. See *Rashi ad. loc.*

⁷. באתערותא דלתתא אתערותא דלעילא. *Tanya* ch. 14. *Orach Chayim* to Exodus 19:3. See *Zohar* III, 92b.

⁸. *Likutei Sichot* (Yiddish), v. 22, p. 122ff.

⁹. Leviticus 23:42.

¹⁰. Deuteronomy 32:39.

¹¹. Even though Maimonides does not say so explicitly, it seems that he upholds the reading of this *mishnah* found in the Jerusalem Talmud, which we shall see shortly.

¹². II Samuel 4:23.

¹³. Psalms 92:15.

¹⁴. *Chagigah* 5b, based on Jeremiah 13:17.

¹⁵. Jeremiah 30:7. See in length in our Hebrew volume titled וממנה ישע (From it he will be redeemed).

¹⁶. I Samuel 15:29.

¹⁷. *Sukah* 45a s.v. *Ani vehu*. See *Tur Orach Chaim*, 660.

¹⁸. Ezekiel 1:1.

¹⁹. Jeremiah 40:1.

²⁰. In order for the heavens to open for us to see visions of the Almighty, we too must first be in the exile.

²¹. עצימות ומהות בגוף. See Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Torat Menachem* vol. 1, p. 25.

²². Daniel 10:8.

²³. *Torat Menachem*, *ibid.*

²⁴. See *Zohar* II, 38a.

²⁵. *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:4.

²⁶. See *Shabbat* 33b.

²⁷. In Hebrew these are called *Rabanim mita'am* (רבנים מטעם).