

The Mediator in the Machzor: “Yeshua Sar haPanim” and a Lost Chapter of Shared Tradition

MICHAEL SINCLAIR*

1. Introduction: The Textual Anomaly in the Machzor

In 1985, the Jewish world was embracing a new liturgical standard. The Artscroll Machzor, a High Holiday prayer book, had achieved enormous success. It was Orthodox (Jewish), meticulous, and its English translation and commentary opened up the ancient prayers to a new generation. A worshiper on Rosh Hashanah that year, deep in the *Musaf* (additional) service, would have come to the crescendo of the day: the *shofar* blasts. In the pause between the piercing sounds, many editions, including the 1985 Artscroll edition, included a mystical *Yehi Ratzon* (“May it be Your will”) prayer. This supplication, deeply Kabbalistic, invokes a series of angelic names to ensure the *shofar* blasts ascend to the heavenly court.

But the 1985 Artscroll contained a line that might have stopped a reader in their tracks. The prayer asks God to accept the blasts: “...just as You accepted prayers through **Elijah** (אליהו), who is remembered for good; **Yeshua (the Kohen Gadol), minister of the Inner Chamber** (שר הפנים ישוע); and the **ministering angel Metatron** (ישר מט'ט).”¹

Yeshua Sar haPanim

The name “Yeshua” (ישוע) is the non-polemical original Hebrew name for Jesus. To see it in an Orthodox prayer book—invoked alongside the prophet Elijah and Metatron, the most exalted and chief archangel in Jewish tradition—was jarring. The title that was applied to Yeshua—Sar haPanim (Prince of the Presence or Prince of the Face) – is overwhelmingly identified in Jewish mysticism (Heikhalot literature and Kabbalah) with Metatron. This entity is far beyond a mere angel; he is often referred to as the “Little YHWH” (יהוה הקטן), denoting a shared divine identity and a function as the supreme heavenly mediator. Thus, the inclusion of

* Michael Sinclair, Ph.D., Independent Scholar, USA, sincla@gmail.com.

¹ *The Complete Artscroll Machzor: Rosh Hashanah (Ashkenaz)*, ed. Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1985), First Impression (August 1985), 436.

“Yeshua Sar haPanim” between two legendary ascended figures – Elijah and Metatron – placed him squarely into the role of celestial mediator.

The Artscroll editors, Rabbis Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, were clearly aware of the textual difficulty. Their English translation offered a pivotal interpretation, attempting a scholarly neutralisation. By adding the parenthetical “the Kohen Gadol,” they identified this “Yeshua” with Yehoshua the High Priest, a figure mentioned in the Book of Zechariah (3:1-5) and the Book of Ezra (3:2) as the High Priest during the return from the Babylonian Exile. Furthermore, the editors translated *Sar haPanim* (שר הפנים) as “minister of the Inner Chamber,” an unmistakable reference to the *Kodesh HaKodashim* (Holy of Holies), where the High Priest alone ministered. This act was a deliberate recontextualization, anchoring the name to an unimpeachable biblical Jewish figure to provide worshippers with a clear, traditional frame of reference.

The solution did not hold. Due to the significant theological and historical debate the inclusion provoked, the Artscroll editors were forced to abandon their solution. The line had vanished by the sixteenth printing in 1999.² The Hebrew words “ישוע שר הפנים” (and Yeshua Sar haPanim) were quietly excised from page 436, following the consensus of rabbinic authorities who advised total omission. The transition from re-interpretation to omission was an act of theological rectification, completing a process that began in the 19th century. This small phrase, however, is not a simple typo, nor is its story merely a modern editorial curiosity. It is a textual relic that, when examined, opens a window into a deep, complex, and long-forgotten theological history, offering a surprising bridge for Jewish-Christian dialogue.

2. The Rabbinic Discussion

The 20th-century editors of Artscroll were not the first to grapple with the “Yeshua Sar haPanim” textual difficulty. For generations, rabbinic authorities had raised serious objections to the phrase. The concern, voiced in numerous responsa, was that this “Yeshua” was a reference to Jesus of Nazareth. This led to the widespread rabbinic conclusion that the phrase was not an authentic part of the Machzor’s original text. Authorities proposed different hypotheses to explain the name’s presence:

² *Ibidem*, Sixteenth Impression (January 1999), 436.

2.1. *The Argument from Absence*

Rabbi Yosef Stern (1831-1903), in his responsa *Zekher Yehosef* (Part 4, Siman 210),³ offered a logical argument rooted in the question of textual and theological authority, urging the omission of the phrase “Yeshua Sar haPanim” (ישוע שר הפנים). He ruled against its inclusion because it is a “foreign phrase” (הלשון הזר) found in the Machzorim and because “no hint of this is found in any book of the Kabbalists.” Regarding the entire practice of invoking angels for the blasts, he argued that “no source is found for the existence of a specific angel over any mitzvah,” noting that the names of angels “were not called by name except by someone who introduced them into the Machzorim.” Rabbi Stern further observed that the name “Yeshua” appears in a text where another name may have been “erased,” concluding that the saying of the Yehi Ratzon supplications containing such material has “corruption... greater than its purification” (קלקולו יתר מטהרתו). Stern concluded that since the phrase lacked foundational support in tradition and constituted a dangerous innovation, “The knowledgeable should understand for themselves to prevent saying them, that they should be abolished,” and that man should serve God “alone and not any intermediary” (ולא לשום אמצעי).

2.2. *Publishing Error*

Rabbi Chaim Elazar Spira of Munkacs (the Minchat Elazar, 1868-1937), a leading 20th-century authority, made the connection with Jesus explicit and his ruling decisive in his responsa, *Minchat Elazar*, Siman 75.⁴ While he argues that the *Yehi Ratzon* prayers themselves are not a legal interruption to the Shofar blasts, because they are “from the matter of the blast,” he ruled against the practice of saying them for a different reason: the concern about the content. He notes that his own father had already taken action “to prevent [the people] from saying [them].”

Drawing on earlier authorities, he identified the phrase as problematic because the name “Yeshua” is “like the name that those who incite [to idolatry] called the ‘Known One’, may the Merciful One protect us” (שהוא כמו שם שכינו המסיתים להידוע ר"ל). He noted that this name, Yeshua, is “not mentioned anywhere and is not recognised as the name of any

³ Yosef Stern, *Zekher Yehosef*, Part 4 Siman 210, hebrewbooks.org/772, accessed Nov 17, 2025.

⁴ Chaim Elazar Spira, *Minchat Elazar* (Munkacs: 1901-1902), Siman 75, hebrewbooks.org/1859, accessed Nov 17, 2025.

angel". Most pointedly, it is "not found in [any of the teachings of] the Ari (Rabbi Isaac Luria)."

He concluded that the name was an insertion resulting from an "error" (שגיאה) and that it had "gotten stuck in (נשתררב) by mistake (or perhaps intentionally once by an inciter)." Due to the "concern over admixtures" (חשש תערובות), the Minchat Elazar urged that the worshiper should "publicize and make this matter known" to "prevent those who say them and intend them [from doing so]," concluding that "one who guards his soul should completely distance himself from them" (מהם לגמרי) (שומר נפשו ירחק).

2.3. Forgery

The *Alvonah Shel Torah* is a passionate and comprehensive polemical work dedicated to exposing, in the author's view, the deliberate corruption of Jewish sacred texts, primarily by Christian polemicists and censors. It presents the origin of the phrase *Yeshua Sar haPanim* as a forgery introduced by heretics (מינים), as follows:

They forged (זייפו) the prayers between the Shofar blasts (*Tekiot*), and inserted among the angels appointed over the *Tekiot*, 'Yeshua Sar haPanim'. And he is Yeshua the Nazarene, the new angel who was appointed by those who love him as the Prince of the Presence.

Thus it has been printed in *Siddurim* and *Machzorim* in almost all printings for hundreds of years.

And the incident that occurred was that one of the book merchants in Yemen bought many books from the Romm press [in Vilna], and among them was one prayer book according to our version, which differs greatly from the Yemenite version. And it came to pass that their Rabbi (sage) saw the name of the aforesaid angel, and he was astonished and horrified and cried out, 'Alas! The Romm printers have placed an idol in our Holy Sanctuary!' (הציבו צלם בהיכל קדשנו)⁵

2.4. Textual Corruption and Fear of Censors

Beyond the question of forgery (the theory that the text was a deliberate, heretical insertion by Christian missionaries or apostates), other rabbinic authorities focused on textual corruption as the cause of the anomaly.

⁵ Shafan haSofer, *Alvonah Shel Torah* (Berlin: Tzvi Hirsch Ipschinsky, 1928-1929), 26, hebrewbooks.org/45081, accessed Nov 17, 2025.

The Yitzhak Yeranen provides the foremost textual-critical argument for this position.⁶

The author of Yitzhak Yeranen explains that the name “Yeshua” (ישוע) is not found among the 70 names of the Prince of the Presence found in the Sefer haHesheq (ספר החשק). But since the 64th name is Yeshayah (ישעיה), the author proposes that the original name in the *Yehi Ratzon* is Yeshayahu (ישעיהו, the prophet Isaiah). Via a complex gematrial correspondence, the author presents ישעיהה as an alternative spelling attested in one Machzor and infers that it was corrupted into ישוע (Yeshua).

The corruption was attributed not to a simple printing error, but to an external censor or scribe. Specifically, the author claimed that corruption occurred during the period when censorship of holy books was practised in Europe, especially during the last “two hundred years”. The author believed that “one of the censors, from one of the wicked ones of the covenant and apostates...had a hand in this malicious deed.”

The physical act of corruption was when the censor intentionally “distorted the letters of the name «Yeshayahu» and omitted two of them,” resulting in the name “Yeshua”, which evolved into *Yeshua Sar haPanim*. This altered text was then “propagated in subsequent printings” due to “fear of the censor,” making it difficult to reverse.

This rigorous internal rabbinic debate, marked by diverse theories of error, corruption, and forgery, confirms both the phrase’s controversial nature and the lack of a consistent tradition regarding its origin. The rabbinic authorities were, it seems, taken unawares by its discovery, and their late response (beginning in the 19th century) shows it had gone unchallenged for centuries.

3. The Scholar’s Refutation

The case, however, was reopened in 1987 by one of the world’s foremost scholars of Jewish mysticism, Professor Yehuda Liebes of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In his definitive article, “The Angels of the Shofar and Yeshua Sar haPanim,” Liebes turned the rabbinic assumption on its head.⁷

⁶ Yitzhak Barda, *Yitzhak Yeranen* (1981), Siman 47, hebrewbooks.org/21258, accessed Nov 17, 2025.

⁷ Yehuda Liebes, “The Angels of the Shofar and Yeshua Sar Ha-Panim,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6, no. 1/2 (1987): 171–95.

3.1. Analysis of the Rabbinic Hypotheses

After meticulous textual analysis, Liebes concluded that the phrase was **not** a late mistake, forgery, or textual corruption. His reasoning was powerful:

- a. **It's in the Manuscripts:** The prayer's origin isn't in modern printed books (where it first appears in 1585 AD in a Machzor printed in Prague). Liebes traced it back to the medieval mystical texts of the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* (German Pietists) of the 12th-13th century, specifically their "Sefer haHesheq" (Book of Desire). He even found the name "hidden" in a manuscript "where the hand of a missionary is not likely to rule."
- b. **It's Heretical to Christians:** The title *Sar haPanim* (Prince of the Presence) designates an *angelic* mediator. Liebes notes this title would be *more* offensive to orthodox Christianity, which views Jesus as God, than to Judaism. In fact, early Church Fathers condemned sects for this very heresy of viewing Jesus as a created being.⁸
- c. **Christians Never Used It:** If missionaries had successfully forged this text, it would have been their most significant polemical victory. Yet, Liebes notes, "in no place did we find that Christians used this passage in their polemics."
- d. **It Uses the Wrong Name:** Medieval Christian polemics in Hebrew used the shortened "Yeshu" (ישו). This prayer, on the other hand, uses the original, non-polemical Hebrew name Yeshua (ישוע), pointing to a much older, pre-polemical origin.

Liebes also refuted the theory that "Yeshua" was a simple scribal corruption of another name (like "Yesha'yah-heh" - ישעיהה), writing that the latter "has no basis or place and is not even pronounceable" and concluding that "Yeshua Sar haPanim" was, in fact, the original reading of the prayer.

⁸ This specific point deserves nuance. While Liebes correctly defines the Arian heresy from the perspective of Orthodox Christianity, his critique may overlook the nature of the figure being described, or at least present it as amenable to asserting that Yeshua is an angel and therefore created. However, the entity known as Metatron or *Sar haPanim* (Prince of the Presence) was never a mere angel. On the contrary, this was a title reserved for a "second God" figure, a concept known in antiquity as "Two Powers in Heaven." Daniel Abrams, for instance, notes that the "Orthodox" mystical belief (as opposed to Elisha ben Abuya's "heretical" view) was that Metatron "is ultimately one with God, a conception similar to that of a logos in Christian and Gnostic thought". This figure is also called the "Little YHWH" (יהוה הקטן), a title that explicitly denotes a shared divine identity. This entity is less a mere angel and more a figure that strongly resembles the later Christological concept of the Son being consubstantial with the Father.

3.2. *The Discovery in Sefer haHesheq*

To prove his claim of originality, Liebes demonstrated that the phrase was integral to the authentic mystical tradition of German Pietists, thereby establishing its provenance in a shared, archaic theological framework.

The prayer's spiritual context is traced to *Sefer haHesheq*, a key work of the Hasidei Ashkenaz. Liebes theorised that the triad of ascended mediators (Elijah, Yeshua Sar haPanim, Metatron) once formed the original, crucial opening of *Sefer haHesheq*, which was later lost or censored in printed editions.

Liebes detailed his process of recovering “Yeshua Sar haPanim” within the manuscripts of *Sefer haHesheq*:

- a. **The Obscure Manuscript Triad:** The original opening was found in various manuscripts, and though it lacked the explicit name “Yeshua,” it contained two known figures and one obscure reference. The manuscript version included a discussion linking Yehoel (יהואל), Elijah (אליהו), and Elohai (אלהי). The triad itself was defined by the words: “Yehoel. The letters of Elijah and Elohai. For to anyone to whom Elijah is revealed, everything is from the power of Yehoel and Elohai.”
- b. **The Shorthand Clue:** The key to uncovering the third figure lay in the manuscript discussion that followed. The manuscript instructed the reader: “And begin in the middle of Yehoel and place it next to the Yod of Sar haPanim, and you will find Elohai.” Liebes pointed out that the phrase “Yod of Sar haPanim” (שר הפנים יי של) was completely “obscure and lacks almost all understanding” in its current form.
- c. **Graphical Corruption and Deduction:** Liebes concluded that the obscure manuscript reading “Yod of Sar haPanim” must be a minor graphical corruption (שיבוש קל) of the actual name “Yeshua Sar haPanim” (ישוע שר הפנים). The presence of Sar haPanim and the Yod strongly suggests this substitution.
- d. **Confirmation through Mystical Code Words:** This textual deduction was confirmed by the content found immediately preceding the opening. In the same mystical corpus, the figure in question (Yehoel-Elohai) is explicitly given two unique code names: “Ben” (בן, son) and “Kelev” (כלב, dog or heart, via gematria/midrash). Liebes noted that “Ben” and “Kelev” were widespread, established code words in medieval Ashkenazi Kabbalistic literature used to reference Jesus (Yeshu).

This convergence of textual deduction, graphical analysis, and mystical vocabulary led Liebes to conclude that the three ascended figures in the original core text of *Sefer haHesheq* were indeed the exact triad found in the *Machzor*: Elijah, Yeshua Sar haPanim, and Metatron.

4. A Relic of Jewish-Christianity

So, if it is not a forgery or an error, what is it?

Liebes's stunning conclusion is that the prayer is a genuine "relic" (שריד) from an ancient, pre-modern Jewish-Christian (יהודי-נוצרי) mystical tradition from the first centuries CE.

He argues that this ancient prayer was preserved, likely uncritically, by the 12th-century German mystics, who were fascinated by *Heikhalot* (Palaces) mysticism and its complex angelology. They absorbed this formula and, because it fit their mystical framework, embedded it in their *shofar* rituals. From there, it eventually entered the mainstream printed prayer book, where it survived for centuries—a relic from a lost world, its original meaning forgotten.

What was that original meaning? It lies in the triad itself: Elijah, Yeshua, and Metatron.

- Elijah is the prophet who ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot.
- Metatron is the supreme angel, the "Prince of the Presence" (*Sar haPanim*), who, according to the Book of Enoch and other mystical texts, was the human patriarch Enoch who "walked with God" and was "taken" to heaven and transformed into this angelic being.
- Yeshua is the third figure to ascend bodily into heaven after rising from the dead.

Liebes points out that this *exact triad* of ascended mediators—Enoch (Metatron), Elijah, and Yeshua—is a known theme in ancient Jewish-Christian literature, such as the *Apocalypse of Peter*, which identifies the two witnesses in Revelation 11:3 as Elijah and Enoch. These ancient Jewish-Christian sects *did* view Yeshua as a divine mediator and *did* identify him with the exalted office of Metatron. The prayer in the *Machzor*, Liebes argues, is the last liturgical remnant of this ancient belief.

This brings us to the profound theological weight of the title itself: *Sar haPanim* (שר הפנים). This is not a generic title. It means "Prince of the Presence" or "Prince of the Face". In this mystical worldview, this title implies the *only* being who, like the Son, can "see the Face" of the Father and then mediate that Presence to the lower worlds—the very definition

of a *Logos*. The connection to the Heavenly High Priest is not just an academic inference; it is embedded in the 1985 Artscroll translation. The editors translated *Sar haPanim* as “minister of the Inner Chamber.” The “Inner Chamber” is a direct and unmistakable reference to the *Kodesh HaKodashim*, the Holy of Holies, which only the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) could enter. This translation, grounded in the mystical tradition, inadvertently confirms the identification of the *Sar haPanim* with the Heavenly High Priest. This concept resonates powerfully with the description of the Son’s ministry in the Book of Hebrews.

5. Blurred Boundaries and a Bridge for Dialogue

This is where the conversation becomes a bridge, rather than a battle. Liebes’s work was reinforced by Professor Daniel Abrams, who, in his 1994 article “The Boundaries of Divine Ontology,”⁹ explored the complex links between Metatron and Jesus.

Abrams, accepting Liebes’s thesis, discusses this as a prime example of how the “boundaries” between God, angel, and human were far more fluid in this early mystical tradition than we assume today. He even cites a 13th-century Jewish text that *warns* Jewish polemicists *not* to discuss the mystical idea of God’s “body” (*Shi’ur Qomah*) with Christians. Why? Because the Christian “will say that if so, man too has a body and you will be caught [on this point] and will fail.”

This warning is incredibly revealing. It shows that both traditions were drawing from a shared mystical grammar of a chief mediator, a “divine form,” and a “Prince of the Presence.”

The story of “Yeshua Sar haPanim” is therefore not a story of a text being “corrupted” from the outside. It is the story of a family argument in which one branch of the family (Rabbinic Judaism) eventually quarantined a theological idea it once shared with another branch (early Jewish-Christianity).

The internal rabbinic discussion and the 1999 Artscroll omission were the final acts of tidying up a history deemed messy and theologically dangerous. But as Professor Daniel Boyarin has argued, these prayers were “rectified by nineteenth-century Jewish authorities, who saw in them (suddenly?) a threat to monotheism,”¹⁰ that is, the simple unitarianism

⁹ Daniel Abrams, “The Boundaries of Divine Ontology: The Inclusion and Exclusion of Metatron in the Godhead,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 87, no. 3 (July 1994): 291–321, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816000030741>.

¹⁰ Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 294.

that normative Judaism had come to adopt, the mystical tradition of the Prince of the Presence, however, leads to esoteric currents still alive in Judaism that are not so simple.

For those seeking common ground between Judaism and Christianity, the Mediator in the Machzor is a profound starting point. It reminds us that the Jewish nature of Jesus is not just about a 1st-century rabbi, but about a deep, shared mystical vocabulary of mediation, ascension, and divine presence. It is a reminder that the sharp boundaries of today were once the blurred lines of a shared and sacred past.