

The Spiritual Origin of the *Piyyut*

Max Stern

Ariel University, Ariel, Israel

This paper discusses the various sources of inspiration that motivated individuals to create liturgical poetry beyond the fixed Orthodox Jewish liturgy. It is neither a historical review nor a comprehensive categorization of the *piyyut* as such, but rather an exploration into the aesthetic impulses, sensibilities, and communal responsibilities that encouraged those deeply involved in Jewish life as teachers, creative figures or religious leaders to express their devotional feelings through this poetic medium.

Keywords: *piyyut*, *zemiroth*, *selichot*, *kinot*, sacred song, creativity

Introduction: Sources of Inspiration

The *piyyut* or religious poem (*i.e.* a Jewish liturgical form), be it hymn (*e.g.* *Adon Olam*), *zemiroth* (table songs, *e.g.* *Baruch Eyl Elyon*), *kinot* (laments, *e.g.* *Tzion Halo Tishali*), or *shir* (songs of praise, *e.g.* *Anim Zemirot*) derives from an attitude of sacred devotion. In all, the archetype for the various *piyyutim* structures and content are inspired in one way or another after the Psalms of David—warrior, king, musician and poet, along with topics from the Torah, Prophets, Writings, Oral Traditions, or historic events which the *paytan* either experienced personally or heard about; and perhaps, even local secular folk songs their authors were familiar with.

Structure

Piyyut forms are often structured in 2, 3, or 4-line stanzas, frequently in verse-refrain patterns. Many are arranged in lines, verses, or stanzas according to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet (*e.g.* Psalm 34, or the Book of Lamentations). Sometimes one finds responsorial patterns, similar to Psalm 118 (where the phrase *for his mercy endureth forever* alternates after each line). At other times, embedded into the formal structure of the texts, we discover in one way or another, the letters of the names of its authors. The Sabbath *piyyut* *Mah Yedidut*, for example, makes use of Hebrew letters, after the name of its author, *Menachem* in its construction.

Why?

The *piyyut* is a poetic creation inspired by the desire of man to embellish fixed and time-honored ritual-prayer-texts and concepts (*i.e.* *Shema* and its benedictions, 18 blessings of the *Amidah*, etc.) with original insights and reflections on topics embellished through words, meter, and rhyme, which often are enriched through chant, melody, and song. Frequently the poets who wrote *piyyutim* were themselves rabbis, learned wise

Max Stern, a pioneer figure in Israel's musical life, composer and creator of biblical compositions released on twenty-two CDs, emeritus professor of music at Ariel University, music critic for *The Jerusalem Post* and author of books on *Bible & Music*, *Psalms & Music*, *The Speech of the Angels*, *The Art of the Music Critic*, and *In Search of a Sacred Ethos*.

men (*chachamim*), or cantors (*hazzanim*), familiar with Scripture and Oral Law (*i.e.* *Mishnah*, *Talmud*, or *Midrash*).

For some, writing *piyyutim* was an expression of their own creative impulse by way of arranging words into a form that externalized their inherent love of the Divine. For others, it answered a functional need to create literary forms that embellished communal worship, adding a human touch to congregational gatherings (*i.e.* births, deaths, memorials, circumcisions, bar mitzvahs, weddings, etc.). Reaching beyond the strict requirements of the *mitzvah* (religious law), the *piyyut* fostered, and sustained both personal feelings and congregational involvement.

Role of the *Piyyut*

The introduction of *piyyut* and *hymn* to liturgy should not be underestimated in its power to engender community. Fore it created a culture in the *Galut* (*Diaspora* of the Jewish people), that served as a spiritual substitute for the loss of a land that Jews, in consequence of their forcible dispersion from the Holyland, could call their own. Not only of the chanting or singing of *piyyut* united the faithful, just as significant was the shared knowledge of, and familiarity with the repertoire itself. Beyond poetic insights, theological content, mystic significance, and musical rhapsody was the consciousness of a communal heritage it fostered in the *wandering Jewish soul*.

To hear the same tune sung at home with family, in the synagogue with a congregation, at gatherings with friends and neighbors—at extended social *seudot* (meals) such as *Passover seders*, between obligatory prayers on the Sabbath such as *seuda shlishi*—the third meal of the Sabbath between afternoon and evening prayers (*Mincha & Maariv*), *Selichot* (penitential poems), Festive occasions in *Sukkot* booths, and at life cycle events (*i.e.* bar mitzvah's, weddings, funerals, etc.)—gave the wandering Jew a sense of spiritual rest and social belonging.

In this context, the Yemenite wedding *piyyut* tune, *Bo LeShalom Chattan* (Come to rest bridegroom) is an apt example. Sung during *Shabbat Chatan*, the Sabbath after the wedding ceremony in the Yemenite community, it gives comfort and consolation to the man who has found his bride at last. In this sense we begin to grasp the spiritual connection between the poetic *piyyut* and the strictures of Jewish law through marriage.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the foremost *paytanim* were among Israel's greatest rabbis, scriptural exegetes, scholars, preachers, prophets, cantors, and poets. Since the overwhelming concern of the framers of *halacha* (Jewish law) and the creators of *piyyut* was the same: *The preservation of the Jewish people* by way of covenant, prayer, and ritual - the sustaining power of community. Fore without people there can be no justification for Divine Law!

Home and Community

In this respect, the rituals of the home, along with costumes, dress, and traditional songs—like *Shalom Aleichem* (*i.e.* Peace to You) on the Sabbath; *Hanerot Halalu* (These Lights) and *Maoz Tzur* (Rock of Ages) for the Festival of Lights (*Hannukah*), or *Chad Gadyo* (This Goat) for the Passover Seder - spoke warmly to all, young and old, even more than the intellectual skills exercised in the learned halls of study (*beit hamidrash*). Since the *beit midrash* is the domain of men (generally over the age of 13), while the home, synagogue, congregation, and community are the meeting grounds for all. If the *beit hamidrash* tends to be a place for learned

speculation, it is in the home that the richness of poetic feeling is more frequently brought to bear upon the rigors of religious life—with its dos and don'ts, *muttar* (permitted) or *assur* (forbidden) that rule in public forums.

If within *halacha* and its restrictions there is little space for spontaneity, the *piyyut* in its poetic call to faith and devotion is an expression of a simpler, less tutored spirituality, often overlooked by the analytical world of *Talmudic* citation, intellectual and critical thinking. The *piyyut* is an attempt to root the human soul in the emotive force of the Divine, and to enrich that holy soil from which the thirsty seed of mankind's feelings can sprout, expand, and flourish.

Illustrating the Creative Connection between Scripture and Piyyut

It is the object of religion that the two hearts of man meet—the longing for righteous and objective justice on the one hand, and the subjective inclination towards feeling, mercy, and compassion on the other. Both need transfiguration, and thus, through poetic expression, both are blended into the service of the Eternal One, the living all-present.

For the *paytan* (liturgical poet) the connection begins in his search for thematic material and content, often from Scripture—Torah, Prophets and Writings—but also from Oral Literature and Tradition (*i.e.* *Mishnah*, *Talmud*, *Midrash*), along with historical events. Sometimes, it is only the scrap of an-idea or an impression that seeds his poetic imagination. This insight the poet waters through the creative process, tending his inspiration thoughtfully and diligently, until it matures into a fully grown plant, the *piyyut*.

Example ***from the Prophecy of Jeremiah***

A prophecy from the *Book of Jeremiah* provided an anonymous *paytan* with the germ of an idea in the creation of the *piyyut* *Ki Hineh Kachomer* (For Like Clay), later incorporated into the liturgy for the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*). Its inspiration is found in chapter 18 verse 6: *Behold, as clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel.* It is the Divine Word—the light breaking through the darkness, a communication of the eternal and infinite God to man through his prophet: *The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying: Arise and go to the potter's house and there I will cause thee to hear My words* (Jer. 18:1-2). *At one instant I may speak concerning a nation...to pluck up and break down to destroy it. But if that nation turn from evil...I repent of the evil I thought to do unto it* (Jer. 18:7-8). This unfathomable message conveys the truth that God may be influenced by the prayers, intentions, and actions of mortal man. We do not know who the anonymous poet was that penned this *piyyut*, but clearly, he was inspired by these verses from Jeremiah.

Ki Hineh Kahomer

*1. Like clay in the hand of the potter
Who thickens or thins it at his will,
So are we in Thy hand gracious God.
Forgive our sin. Thy covenant fulfill.*

2. *Like a stone* *in the hand* *of the mason*
Who preserves *or breaks* *at his will,*
So are we *in They hand* *Lord of life.*
Forgive our sin. *Thy covenant fulfill.*

3. *Like iron* *in the hand* *of the craftsman*
Who forges *or cools it* *at his will,*
So are we *in They hand* *our Keeper.*
Forgive our sin. *Thy covenant fulfill.*

4. *Like the wheel in the hand of the seaman*
Who directs or holds it at his will,
So are we in They hand, loving God.
Forgive our sin. Thy covenant fulfill

5. *Like the glass in the hand of the blower, Who dissolves or shapes it at his will,*
So are we in They hand, God of grace. Forgive our sin. Thy covenant fulfill.

6. *Like the cloth in the hand of the tailor, Who smooths or drapes it at his will,*
So are we in They hand, God of grace. Forgive our sin. Thy covenant fulfill.

7. *Like silver in the hand of the smelter, Who refines or blends it at his will,*
So are we in They hand, God of grace. Forgive our sin. Thy covenant fulfill.

Analysis

We see here how the original Scriptural citations have been restructured into seven 4-line verse-meter stanzas. The meter of lines 1-2-3 are grouped asymmetrically around three primary pluses per line, typical of Hebrew poetry in general, and not as in Latin poetry with fixed meters (*e.g.* iambic, dactyl, anapest, etc.). Line 3 (*So are we in They hand....*) however, makes a kind of half-variation within itself. While line 4 (*Forgive our sin. Thy covenant fulfill.*) is repeated exactly with the same text each time. Its 4-line stanza structure may be analyzed as: ABCD, EFCvar1D, GHCvar2D, etc.

But viewed in wider perspective, we may analyze each stanza as an extended 2-line structure with A, C, D, E, etc. representing the first-two changing lines of text, while B represents the last two lines of the verse where line 3 (with its variations) and repetitive line 4 are grouped together as B. (See an example of this structure in our arrangement of verses 5, 6, and 7, noted above.) Thus we generate a two-line form of: AB, CB, DB, etc. Here is a musical transcription of the above as sung in the Ashkenazi synagogue on *Yom Kippur*.

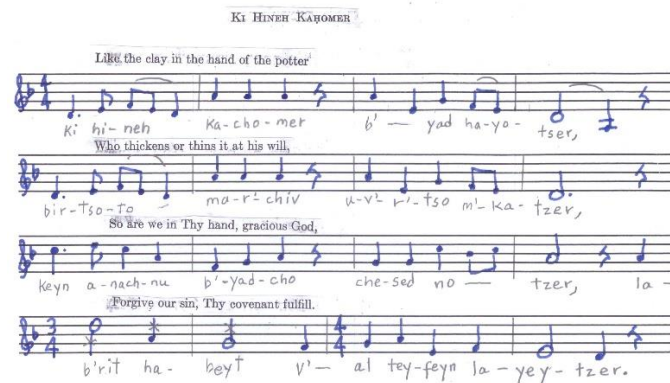


Figure 1. Transcribed by Max Stern after Oral Tradition.

Direction of Thought

In either case, the Biblical narratives from Jeremiah have been transformed into poetic song-like verse. However—and this is the essence of the matter—the *direction of thought* has changed. It is no longer God addressing man, but rather man appealing to God. Inspired from attitudes voiced in the Psalms, for example, *piyyut* has become prayer. It has become an expression of the faithful servant supplicating its Maker. The prophetic dimension of limitless imperative has been put into a human frame. Images that first appeared as prophecy have been transformed and expanded by way of poetic craft. The hand of God has been metamorphized into the hand of man (*i.e.* potter, mason, craftsman, seaman, glass blower, tailor, and smelter). The ontological perspective of Scripture has been humanized. The human being has become empowered with a spark from the Divine. Man has become a creator in his own right, with a will of his own. His daily activity has been placed into a personal relationship to the Creator, as a humble servant of the Eternal.

Conclusion

If Biblical verse speaks to us directly, as Moses addressing the Children of Israel by communicating a gesture of faithful revelation in conveying the brilliance of the Divine light, the *paytan* or liturgical poet speaks to us as his brother Aharon, or as the Rabbis—translating, transforming, modifying, and elaborating upon the Divine message, in order to mold boundless truth into a down-sized mortal framework and human dimension. Like day following day, season following season, and year following year, the *piyyut* became a cultural heritage in its own right, repeated cyclically on various religious occasions and celebrations (*i.e.* Sabbaths, Festivals, Holidays, Births, Weddings, etc.). And thus it was perpetuated - taught, learned, rehearsed, shared, and passed on. Its thrust being to convey Eternal truths by way of poetic imagination, transforming Divine precepts into categorical imperatives which people can grasp on a level more closely related to their experience.

If the poetic voice is not exactly the received Word of God, it partakes of something nonetheless profound and essential, as an interpretation and expression of the Divine. The depth of understanding which *piyyutim* convey is neither stale recitation nor cerebral hodgepodge, but a literary vehicle by which the congregation may voice their own unique insights and aspirations, leading them back to the source of All, by drawing men, women, and children a step closer in the direction of the Eternal.

An Afterthought

So often *piyyutim*—created with enthusiasm and effort—once learned and oft-repeated become clichéd. The sanctification they were meant to express and inspire becoming lowered to the drab and unthinkingly prosaic. What is the solution? The *piyyut* is potential and like all potentials may or may not become realized. It demands the free-willed desire, concentration and acknowledgment from its recipients for fulfillment. Its message may sometimes fall on fallow soil, deaf to the original message either: geographically (sung in places far from the original source), ethnically (by different kinds and types of Jewish communities), generationally (alienated from the circumstances and issues that gave them birth), or historically. But in this article we address not routine habits but vital imperatives—intent, motivation, aspiration, creativity and commitment.

References

- Bokser, B. Z. (Trans. & Ed.) (1959). *The high holiday prayer book* (p. 285). New York: Hebrew Publishing Company.
- Lehmann, M. (commentary). (1969). *Passover Hagadah* (pp. 332-356). London: The Gateshead Foundation for Torah.
- Rosenfeld, A. (Trans. & Annot.). (1965/1979). *Kinot for the Ninth of Av* (p. 224). New York: Judaica Press.
- Rosenfeld, A. (Trans. & Annot.). (1978). *Selichot for the Whole Year* (p. 411). New York: Judaica Press.
- Scherman, N., & Zlotowitz, M. (Eds.). (1979). *Zemiroth: Sabbath Songs with additional Sephardic Zemiroth, anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources* (p. 320). Brooklyn, New York: Mesorah Publications.