

Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge

Frankfurt
Jewish Studies
Bulletin

Begründet von Arnold Goldberg
im Auftrag der Gesellschaft
zur Förderung judaistischer Studien
in Frankfurt am Main e. V.
herausgegeben vom Seminar für Judaistik der
Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main



הסערה

44 · 2021/22

Rezensionen

Yahalom, Joseph: שורשי שירת הקודש – *Sources of the Sacred Song, Crossroads in Jewish Liturgical Poetry.* – Jerusalem: Magnes Press Hebrew University 2019. XIV + 284 S. ISBN 978-965-7008-41-6. € 30. [Hebrew]

Piyyuṭ or pre-modern hymnography of the synagogue is an integral part of Jewish religious life. In recent decades, the study of Piyyuṭ has made great strides. This specialism, occasionally considered somewhat eccentric within Jewish studies, has received increased attention as a consequence of the Cairo Geniza findings and the resulting proliferation of published studies and editions. Tens of thousands of hitherto unknown Jewish liturgical hymns or piyyuṭim offer many new insights into synagogue worship throughout the centuries.

The beginnings of Piyyuṭ are situated in the Graeco-Roman Diaspora in association with the continued relevance and use of the Psalter, indicating the need for new poetic creativity in a Hellenized-Christian environment. Piyyuṭ was mostly composed in the Hebrew language and spread from Byzantine Palestine to other regions within and beyond the Byzantine Empire, eastwards to Babylonia and once within the Islamic world to North Africa and Spain. Likewise, Jewish communities in Italy, Germany and France also adopted piyyuṭim and generated important hymnists (payṭanim). Wherever Piyyuṭ was introduced, local communities were willing to accept it and fit it into their own rituals. Cantors everywhere followed suit and became part of an ever-expanding Piyyuṭ tradition. The transmission of specific poetic genres guaranteed a certain degree of conventionality, while at the same time poetic models and prosodic effects could be adjusted to the personal preferences of the composer and his congregation, including substantive allusions to contemporary circumstances.

Someone who undeniably occupies a central position in the academic development of Jewish hymnological studies is the author of the present book, Joseph Yahalom, professor emeritus of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a renowned expert in Hebrew language and literature. Throughout his long career, Yahalom has built up a varied oeuvre of books and articles covering a range of topics with primary focus on Piyyuṭ. The present book contains ten (sometimes previously published) chapters, highlighting striking

aspects of this type of Hebrew verse. As in his 1999 book on the relationship between synagogue poetry and contemporary Jewish society (פיוט ומציאות) (בשלהי הזמן העתיק), Yahalom shows that he is not only interested in literary aspects of the hymns but also wants to disclose the ideas expressed by the payṭanim. Jewish hymnology is not an isolated phenomenon strictly delimited by liturgical practices; in the poetic-rhetorical potentiality of the hymns, thoughts and ideas are borrowed from Targum and Midrash or show much familiarity with the world of Jewish mysticism and magic. One of the intriguing questions with regard to the early Piyyuṭ corpus concerns its transmission history: how have hymns been recorded over time and became part of a fixed collection or codex (*mahzor*) that within a given Jewish community evolved into a liturgical rite?

Chapter 1 opens with a reference to the Talmudic saying in tractate *Hullin* (91b), in which Rav Ḥanan'el, on behalf of Rav, states that there are three groups of angels on duty who recite a hymn every day based on the words of Is. 6:3. The first group of angels says "Holy", and a second group of angels also says "Holy", and the third group says "Holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory." This tradition leads to numerous statements in Talmud and Hekhalot literature on the qedusha or *trisagion* intended for the morning prayer on Shabbatot and holidays. Yahalom ingeniously connects the liturgical standardisation of the qedusha with Byzantine emperorship as a model of orderliness and lawfulness in politics and religion. Of course, the early payṭanim were not directly aware of this, yet they too designed a fixed structure and established a clear liturgical function in a series of piyyuṭim entirely focused on the prominent liturgical role of the qedusha. These multi-part *qedushta'ot* conclude with a remarkable hymn, the *silluq*, in which aspects of the angelic liturgy are compared with the liturgy of the people of Israel. Yahalom discusses numerous thematic details in a selection of early hymns, one of which is intended for the morning prayer on Rosh ha-Shana (ותתנה תוקף), and has a long history stretching back to the days of the great Byzantine Jewish hymnists such as Yannai and Qallir in the sixth/seventh centuries until the twelfth-century in Jewish communities of medieval Germany and France, adding an unknown edition of this composition, that is surrounded by legends and stories. From his analysis of this and other *silluqim* it becomes clear to what extent the mystical world of *Hekhalot* and *Merkava* has left an imprint on the hymnology of the early synagogue, even though direct references to mysticism have been largely suppressed.

Following on from his reflections on the position of the qedusha, in chapter 2, Yahalom continues this theme and discusses the third piyyuṭ of the *qedushta* in which a particularly interesting characteristic has been noted: the consistent reference to the weekly *Haftara* according to the triennial scriptural reading scheme in the synagogues of Byzantine Palestine. This reference is made on

the basis of a specific keyword, which always occurs in the last line of this piyyuṭ and preludes to the main motive of the reading from the Prophets. This composition was originally a closing piece, but at an early moment the transition to the qedusha prayer was postponed, as it were, with a fourth piyyuṭ and subsequently with additional piyyuṭim before the composition would come to an end. Yahalom offers a thorough analysis of the fourth piyyuṭ and describes the narrative nature of its content which takes the form of a supplication prayer.

Chapter 3 is an exploration of prosodic features in the ancient genre of the *ʿavoda* for the liturgy of Yom Kippur, structured by balanced forms of parallelism that are visible in the four-part division of each verse line. The occurrence of this four-part model in both Midrash and Piyyuṭ has been discussed by Aharon Mirsky, and Yahalom seems to share his views on the comparison between Midrash and Piyyuṭ to a large extent. In doing so, he describes the rhetorical effects arising from the division into four stanzas, such as the opposite analogy in word and intention, which is illustrated by meaningful examples. From the internal order of a verse line to the alphabetical order within a piyyuṭ is a logical step in chapter 4, mainly concerning incomplete acrostics in the fifth hymn within the *qedushtaʾot* of Yannai. Chapter 5 is an application of Yahalom's insights to crossed rhyme and its semantic effects, again exemplified by the piyyuṭim of Yannai and Qallir.

In chapter 6, the *sidre ʿolam* (literally “world orders”) for the festival of Weeks are examined, the culmination of which is to argue about the donation of the Tora to humans to whom this divine treasure can barely be entrusted. This peculiar idea originates from rabbinic understanding of a pre-revelation existence of the Tora in heaven based on Proverbs 8:22 (“The Lord possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old”). Some *sidre ʿolam*, especially in medieval Ashkenaz, contain exceptional accounts in which God argues with the personified Tora as to whom she should be revealed. The Tora even contradicts God in His suggestions of whether to be offered to Adam or Noah or the Patriarchs. Even though God recommends these great personalities, the Tora considers them to be unfit with reference to the errors they have made in their lives. Ultimately, the Tora agrees to her revelation to Moses who has the right qualities to handle this responsibility. Yahalom shows that this dramatic staging, originally from Qallir, was (perhaps for blasphemous reasons) controversial in Ashkenaz and was therefore removed from liturgy, a telling example of self-censorship.

Starting from the concept of leptology in late antique Latin poetry, as expressed in Michael Roberts' renowned book “The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity” (Ithaca 1989), chapter 7 describes the repetitive effects of alphabetical enumerations such as lists of curses and miracles in the *rehiṭim* (particular poems that are based on a consistently styled structure).

Yahalom discusses the special prosodic characteristics of these poems that seem to underline the magical power of their contents regarding the intimate relationship between God and Israel. Subsequently, Chapter 8 involves political and apocalyptic reflections of Piyyuṭ in Byzantine Palestine, proving that Jewish life in Byzantium was affected by the pressures of time, particularly before and during the wars in the early decades of the seventh century.

Chapter 9 serves a twofold purpose, the apparent starting point being the material on which piyyuṭim have been handed down: papyrus or parchment. The first part is devoted to a detailed explanation of a unique Galilean papyrus in the Beinicke collection at Yale University, followed by the full edition of the extant piyyuṭim. The second part is reminiscent of Yahalom's earlier publications about parchment fragments or detached folios scattered throughout the Geniza that allow the reconstruction of parts of original liturgical codices or *maḥzorim*. With the support of palaeographic criteria and codicological features, these ancient and unfortunately few *maḥzor* reconstructions provide crucial information about their liturgical-poetic contents and the process of canonization of prayers and poems. In some cases types of Palestinian vocalisation are found that are proof for their early date.

The tenth and final chapter harks back to chapter 3, investigating the possibility that themes in Yannai's piyyuṭim may not only go back to existing or lost midrashic sources but may also contain personal additions or elaborations that can be counted among the payṭan's own *derashot*. This is an exciting fact regarding the essential question of whether Midrash invariably acts as a source for Piyyuṭ or, in certain apparent cases, Piyyuṭ acts as a source for Midrash. The latter is what Yahalom convincingly argues regarding the fifth hymns in Yannai's *qedushta'ot* in connection with *Midrash Tadshe*, much in line with Tsvi Novick's recent book about "Piyyut and Midrash, Form, Genre, and History" (Göttingen 2018). In addition, certain piyyuṭim were so popular that they in turn gave rise to later payṭanic elaborations.

This volume is the product of Yahalom's long-established scholarship and reveals the wide scope of his expertise within and across the field of Hebrew hymnology, as well as his lifelong academic commitment to Jewish sacred song in all its ways of expression. Undoubtedly, these fascinating chapters are inspiring for colleagues and students who are involved in studies of Jewish hymnography.

Wout van Bekkum