

# *Yatziv Pitgam*, One of Our Last Aramaic Piyyutim

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How many times have you been in a shul on the second day of Shavuot and noticed confusion at the beginning of the haftarah? Either the person called up to maftir suddenly finds out that after the first verse of the haftarah he is to recite an Aramaic text that he may never have seen before and/or the melody of which he does not know, or if the maftir does indeed know what he is doing, the congregation is flustered when he begins to chant the unfamiliar text that is often not in their Siddurim. This situation results from a combination of historical tendencies but gives us the opportunity to learn about, and be inspired by, a very beautiful poem that is part of our yom tov Machzor.

In ancient times, after Hebrew gradually gave way to other languages as the spoken language of the Jewish people, the custom of translating the Bible into the vernacular became common. Already in Hellenistic times, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, the process of translating the Bible into Greek began, leading to the creation of the Septuagint. The Dead Sea Scrolls preserve not only fragments of Greek translations of parts of the Bible, but also a fragment of a Targum (an Aramaic translation) of Vayikra as well as large parts of a Targum to Job. The Mishnah (Megillah 4:4) discusses the custom of translating Torah and Haftarah readings into Aramaic, the former verse by verse and the latter in groups of three verses. This custom spread to the Diaspora and flourished especially in Babylonia way into the Geonic period (c. 640-1050 CE). The rise of Arabic as the vernacular of Jews in the Middle East as well as dialects of Judeo-German (later Yiddish) practically drove this custom out of use by the Middle Ages, except that it has persisted until today among Yemenite Jews.

Medieval Ashkenazic Jews, as we learn from the Machzor Vitry and other sources, for some reason retained this ancient custom on Pesach and Shavuot. But they went even further: in Byzantine times when Aramaic flourished in the land of Israel and in Babylonia it became customary to write poetic introductions to important portions and Festival readings, as well as to insert poetic and prose expansions into the text. This is a further development from what can be seen by comparing Targum Onkelos and the Targum Eretz Yisrael, usually titled Targum Yonatan, in a standard Mikra'ot Gedolot. This pattern of expansion eventually resulted in more extensive poetic and prose passages being added to the Targum. Such poetic expansions continued to be composed in the Middle Ages, and two of them survived in our Machzor for Shalosh Regalim, *Akdamut* before the Torah reading on the first day of Shavuot, and *Yatziv Pitgam*, an introductory poem for the haftarah of the second day of Shavuot.

The survival of these two Aramaic poems is no doubt due to their beautiful content and to the traditional melodies associated with them. (The melody for *Akdamut* is also used for the Kiddush for Shalosh Regalim and that for *Yatziv Pitgam* used to be used also for *Ya-h E-li*.) Otherwise, we would have expected them to have fallen out of disuse. Two factors might have led to their elimination from our liturgy. First, as already described, is the fact that the Aramaic translations to which these poems are introductions are no longer part of our service. However, the second factor is the overall elimination of most of the piyyutim (liturgical poetry) for the Shalosh Regalim. While some halakhic justifications have been given for this process, it is clear today that daveners have no patience for complex, medieval praises of God, no matter how beautiful they may be. The reality is that special prayers for holidays have been in decline in the Ashkenazic Jewish community for several hundred years. Nonetheless, these two poems remain part of the tefillot of most communities.

*Yatziv Pitgam* is intoned after the reading of the second verse of the haftorah, Habakkuk 3:1, since it is an introduction to that chapter of Habakkuk. (The first verse of the haftarah is Habakkuk 2:20, the last verse in the chapter.) In a similar way, *Akdamut* used to be recited after the first verse of the first aliyah on the first day of Shavuot, since it is an introduction to that Torah reading. Since translations are no longer recited as part of the Torah reading, *Akdamut* was considered a *hefsek* (interruption) by poskim and is now recited before the kohen says the blessing before the kri'ah. Because the reading of the haftorah is treated more leniently, *Yatziv Pitgam* was left in its original place.

The poem *Yatziv Pitgam* consists of sixteen stanzas, only fifteen of which appear in our Machzor and are recited. The extra stanza is omitted because it refers specifically to the recital of the Targum that follows, no longer the case in our ritual. Each stanza is composed of two lines of one or two words each which rhyme with each other, followed by a third line of 3 or 4 words. The third line of each stanza ends with the syllable “*rin*.”

The initial letters spell out the name of Jacob ben Meir Levi, most probably a reference to Rabbenu Tam (c. 1100-c.1171) from Orleans in France, the grandson of Rashi. Many have speculated that the popularity of this poem, like that of *Akdamut*, stems in part from its composition soon after the First Crusade in 1096. *Yatziv Pitgam* describes the majesty of the revelation that took place at Har Sinai and closes with a prayer for the protection of those who keep the Torah.

Here is an original translation and some comments on this beautiful hymn:

Firm is the praise (of God)    Who is the sign and mark,    (Who stands out among) the myriads of myriads of angels.

I do here chant    In the presence of a quorum,    Of those who have hewn through the four mountains.

Before Him,    Into His cisterns,    Does flow and proceed a river of fire.

In a mountain of snow    And flash of light,    And shooting stars, fiery flashes and torches,

He created and perceives    What is (concealed) in darkness,    While with Him there reposes light.

He observes what is distant    With nothing unnoticed    While to Him are revealed hidden things.

I ask of Him    His permission,    And then that of men,

Those who know the laws, Mishnah, Tosefta, Sifra and Sifrei.  
 The King Who lives Forever, May He protect the people who place their hope in Him.  
 Of these it was stated, "They will be as sand, And will be innumerable like (grains of) dust."  
 White as sheep May their valleys be (filled with grain), And may their vats overflow with wine.  
 Grant their wishes; May their faces be joyous, May they shine like the morning light.  
 Grant me strength And lift Your eyes, And see Your enemies who deny You.  
 Let them vanish as straw Within the brick, May they be silenced like a stone in shame.  
 (While I stand (here), I (will) translate The words of the greatest of all books.)  
 God gave (the Torah) (through) the humble one (Moshe), Therefore to Him let us express our gratitude.

*Who is the sign and mark.* Based on the explanation of the description of the revelation at Sinai in Devarim 33:2, as explained by Bavli Hagigah 16a, God revealed Himself surrounded by myriads of angels, yet nonetheless His presence could be distinguished from the angels. His presence was considered to be a sign or mark that the Torah was truly given by God.

*I do here chant in the presence of a quorum.* The reader is about to chant the haftarah in the presence of a minyan.

*hewn through the four mountains.* This refers to those who have studied the four orders of the Babylonian Talmud, Mo`ed, Nashim, Nezikin, Kodashim, since most of Zera`im and Tohorot have no gemara.

*a river of fire.* The entire stanza is derived from Daniel 7:10 describing a river of fire that comes forth from before God's throne. The stanza seems to emphasize divine control of all power in the universe.

*In a mountain of snow.* This entire stanza is influenced by the visions of the divine throne in Daniel 7:9 and Yehezkel 1:13. The greatness and power of God are symbolized by bright lights in these passages that represent prophetic mystical experiences and are not to be taken literally.

*He created.* This stanza is simply a paraphrase of Daniel 2:22. This and the following stanza emphasize that God is omnipotent and omniscient.

*And then that of men.* Before reading the haftarah, the reciter asks permission from the congregation to proceed. It is forbidden to serve as chazzan or read from the Torah or haftarah without the permission of the congregation.

*Mishnah.* This stanza, as well as the reference above to those learned in the four Sedarim of the Talmud Bavli, indicate that the author of the poem intended it to be recited before a very learned audience. The medieval Ashkenazic tradition of piyyut generally assumes a very high level of learning on the part of communities who would have understood and been inspired by complex poems in difficult Hebrew.

*Tosefta.* A collection of tannaitic statements and traditions not included in the Mishnah but arranged in the order of the Mishnah.

*Sifra.* Literally, "the book," referring to the tannaitic, halakhic midrash on Vayikra.

*Sifrei*. Literally, "the books," short for Sifrei deVe Rav, referring to the tannaitic, halakhic midrashim to Bemidbar and Devarim. Omission here of the Mechilta, the tannaitic midrash to Shmot, may be because the author intended it to be included under the heading Sifrei, a phenomenon sometimes observable in medieval texts.

*May He protect the people*. In the next few stanzas, the author prays for the welfare of the Jewish people. No doubt, in the circumstances of medieval Franco-German Jewry, the reader would have thought directly about the welfare of his own and surrounding communities.

*it was stated*. Bereshit 13:16, 28:14, 22:17, 32:13.

*White as sheep*. In this stanza, the author prays for the economic welfare of his community.

*Grant their wishes*. On the Festival, the author asks God to grant joy to His people. While today Ashkenazic synagogues recite this prayer on Shavuot, in the Middle Ages, some recited it as well on Pesach.

*And see Your enemies who deny You*. This is clearly a reference to Christian persecutors of the Jews. Their attacks on God's people are seen as tantamount to denying Him.

*While I stand*. This stanza, originally part of the medieval version of the poem, has been omitted in our Machzor since it refers directly to the translation of the haftarah into Aramaic that used to follow when the old custom was maintained in the Middle Ages on Pesach and Shavuot. Since all that follows today is the reading of the haftarah in Hebrew, with no Aramaic translation, this line does not appear in modern versions.

*God gave (the Torah)*. Hebrew *yeho-natan* (normally the name Jonathan). This is likely a play on the name of Yonatan (Jonathan) ben Uzziel who translated the prophets into Aramaic (Bavli Megillah 3a). Actually, the title Targum Yonatan refers directly only to this Targum. It was from a version of this text that medieval Jews read when they continued to recite the translation in between the verses of haftarah readings on the festivals.

*The humble one (Moshe)*. Bemidbar 12:3 describes Moshe as the humblest of all human beings.

*Therefore to Him let us express our gratitude*. The expression is derived from the very last words of Bavli Bava Metzia 119a, the end of the tractate. The reference in *Yatziv Pitgam* is clearly to giving praise to God, not to Moshe to whom He had given the Torah. It is possible that this poem was originally intended to be recited before the brachah before the haftarah that thanks God for giving Israel the Torah through Moshe and the Prophets. In this case, the reference to "gratitude" specifically refers to reciting of the benediction before the haftarah.

### Bibliography

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