

**Yosse Ben Yosse**  
**The Social Function of Liturgical Poetry in Fifth Century Palestine**

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## ABSTRACT

### **Yosse Ben Yosse: The Social Function Of Liturgical Poetry In Fifth Century Palestine**

Esther R. Mayer

The literary genre of Piyyut reflects the time and place in which it was composed, and may therefore be considered an appropriate means for research concerning the sociological religious culture of 5th century Palestinian Jewish life, given the paucity of original source materials from this post-destruction formative period in Judaism. Piyyutic literature was an engine for engendering national identity, fostering kinship and cohesiveness, and displacing revenge or assimilation in favour of Torah observance, which was deemed by the Sages to be essential for the maintenance of the vitality and continuity of Judaic life until its prophesied messianic regeneration.

Yosse ben Yosse composed his Piyyutim in Hebrew, labouring in the Galilee under Byzantine rule. His poems are analyzed as vehicles for transmitting religious, political, social, and didactic messages that were incorporated into the worship lives of Jews. This paper examines the ontological aspects of identity construction, 5<sup>th</sup> century Jewish historiographic understanding of the nature of time, and elements of messianism that pervade the prayerful Piyyutim. Through tenacious adherence to Hebrew as a repository of culture and destiny, Yosse ben Yosse drew biblical and midrashic allusions, and articulated the rabbinic ethos and concerns with his unique literary style and cadence which mark him as the first in a line of many Paytanim who left their mark on Jewish liturgy.

Seven of his known Piyyutim are presented and translated into English, as a means of fostering further scholarly investigation of Yosse ben Yosse's contribution to the Piyyutic genre.

## Acknowledgements

This thesis is an important milestone in my Jewish education and scholarly evolution. I had stumbled upon the works of Yosse ben Yosse almost by accident at a rather late stage in my studies, but it was for me love at first sight, and a veritable *coup de foudre*. I had hitherto never read his Piyyutim with care, skimming the surface or even skipping over the liturgy on Yom Kippur as many of us are, alas, wont to do. When my supervisor, Professor Ira Robinson challenged me to translate the Piyyutim into English, he inadvertently opened a door for me, a door leading me to a passionate encounter with the fifth century poet and his contemporaries. As I delved deeper into the subject I discovered a wealth of subjects that could each sustain several dissertations, and I had to curb my enthusiasm and limit the research endeavour so that a thesis will be produced in time. I hope and plan to continue my research and expand its parameters in the future.

This present enterprise is the result of my scholarly efforts, but it is also a testament to the many individuals who made its realization possible. I could not have written this thesis, nor indeed could I complete my studies, without the limitless goodwill, support, and encouragement of friends, colleagues, staff, and faculty members. First and foremost I would like to thank the Graduate Program Assistants at the Department of Religious Studies- Tina Montandon and Munit Merid. Both Tina and Munit have nimbly made navigable the labyrinth of academic life for me, always offering their help and advice with a smile and a friendly demeanour. Thank you.

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To Rabbi Mordechai E. Zeitz, my Rabbi, I give my reverence and admiration. I want to thank Professor Michael Brecher, my teacher and guide these many years, whom I am proud to call my friend. I also thank Professor Patrick James, now at the University of Southern California, who in 1988 guided my first MA thesis at McGill University, and has since been my very good friend and advisor.

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sage counsel to me. I am also grateful to Professor Lorenzo DiTommaso for decoding apocalypticism and messianism for me, and making them part of my investigative effort, thus contributing to the present study's comprehensive nature. I thank him too for his exemplary uncompromising pursuit of excellence, which has inspired me greatly and will, I hope, continue to guide all my future endeavours. I thank Professor Naftali Cohn for his razor-sharp bibliographical assistance, for his excellent observations regarding the structural organization of this thesis, and for illuminating for me new aspects of Scripture, leading me to deeper and greater understanding of foundational Jewish texts.

The *primus inter pares* is, of course, Professor Ira Robinson, my instructor and advisor, indeed my mentor, to whom I owe the greatest debt. An extraordinary scholar, Professor Robinson has done much more than merely teaching me the facts of Jewish history. He has patiently guided me through the years, helping me discover and re-discover the enormous depths of Jewish learning, and he has nurtured and honed my scholarly 'tool box', teaching me through his own example, to strive for greater understanding and insights. His wisdom and sage advice, his humility and his patience, have made the experience of studying at Concordia University one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I feel fortunate to have been counted among his students, and to have seen first-hand his devotion to the calling of teaching, as he shares his vast knowledge so gracefully with us all. Thank you so very much.

To my parents, the noblest of people, Yitzchak and Rivkah Mayer, and my sisters Effi Mayer-Josephson and Chayahle Mayer-Miller, I thank you for everything that I am, for forgiving my inadequacies with boundless love, and for your inimitable strength and support. Thank you, Abba and Imma, for leading me to the fonts of righteousness; I will forever walk in your shadow, striving to emulate your brilliance.

To my sons Nathaniel and Gabriel Mayer-Heft, of whom I am the proudest mother, thank you for being patient and supportive, for lighting up my world, and for being the splendid, kind, intelligent, compassionate people that you are. You are the source of my joy, you are my profound happiness, you are my true legacy, and for that I am grateful, and of that I am proud.

Finally, I wish to thank my dearest friend, my husband Robert Heft, who has stood by me and supported my every endeavour with grace. Thank you for being a wonderful father to our boys. Thank you for all our yesterdays and for all our tomorrows yet to come, thank you for making our days rich with meaning and purpose, and thank you for our beautiful life.

As I was writing this thesis, a terrible fire tore through the Carmel mountains in Israel, killing 44 people. The conflagration also consumed much of my childhood vistas, as well as many structures in my home village of Yemin Orde. I wish to dedicate this thesis to my mountain, to my sky, and to my Yemin Orde which will forever live in my heart.

הַלְלוּ-יְהוָה:  
הַלְלוּ-יְהוָה בְּקִדְשׁוֹ;  
הַלְלוּהוּ, בְּרִקְיעַ עֲזָו. הַלְלוּהוּ בְּגִבּוֹרֹתָיו;  
הַלְלוּהוּ, כְּרֹב גְּדֻלוֹ. הַלְלוּהוּ, בְּתִקְעַ שׁוֹפָר;  
הַלְלוּהוּ, בְּנִבְל וְכִנּוֹר. הַלְלוּהוּ, בְּתֹף וּמְחֹל;  
הַלְלוּהוּ, בְּמִנִּים וְעִגְב. הַלְלוּהוּ בְּצִלְצָלִי-שִׁמְע;  
הַלְלוּהוּ, בְּצִלְצָלֵי תְרוּעָה. כָּל הַנְּשָׁמָה, תְּהַלֵּל יְהוָה:

הַלְלוּ-יְהוָה.

(תהילים ק"נ)



The Liturgist, Oil on canvas, Esti Mayer, 2010

Hallelujah.

Praise God in His sanctuary; praise Him in the firmament of His power.

Praise Him for His mighty acts; praise Him according to His abundant greatness.

Praise Him with the blast of the horn; praise Him with the psaltery and harp.

Praise Him with the timbrel and dance; praise Him with stringed instruments and the pipe.

Praise Him with the loud-sounding cymbals; praise Him with the clanging cymbals.

Let every thing that hath breath praise the LORD.

Hallelujah.

(Psalms 150)

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## INTRODUCTION

Yosse ben Yosse lived, so think researchers, in or around the 5<sup>th</sup> century of the Common Era,<sup>1</sup> possibly in or near the Land of Israel, but certainly under Byzantine rule.<sup>2</sup> The Temple in Jerusalem had by the 5<sup>th</sup> century long turned to rubble, not a stone was left upon a stone, its services and rituals sinking into oblivion.<sup>3</sup> Christianity was a budding new world religion, competing with Judaism, her older sibling, for the hearts and minds of believers. The People, exiled from Judea, carried some memory of their sovereign and religious pasts, and they still felt Chosen, albeit chastened by God for their sins.<sup>4</sup> To the dispossessed Jews, the Temple in Jerusalem represented the *axis mundi*, for not only was it the focal point and centre of their cultural and religious lives, not only was it the primary instrument of worship, it was, in their understanding of the world, the very *umbilicus mundis*, and the beating heart of Creation.

In a Braita in the Babylonian Talmud's Tractate Pessachim [84:A] it is said: "*We have learned that seven things were created before the world was created, and those are: the Torah, Repentance, the Garden of Eden, and Hell, God's Throne of Glory, and the Temple, and the name of the Messiah... The Temple, as it is written: "Like the Throne of Glory, primeval exalted, is the place of our Sanctuary"*.<sup>5</sup> The world was considered secondary to the primacy of the Temple, and thus the loss of the Temple was a crushing blow not only to Jews and Judaism, but in their understanding, for the world entire.<sup>6</sup> It is for those reasons that ancient Rabbis turned the Temple into a virtual Temple, an abstract

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<sup>1</sup> Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 13; Adin Steinzaltz, The Siddur and Prayer [Hebrew], p. 185

<sup>2</sup> לקסיקון לתרבות ישראל <http://lexicon.cet.ac.il/wf/wfTerm.aspx?id=603>

<sup>3</sup> Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 15

<sup>4</sup> דעת- אתר לימודי יהדות ורוח <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/sifrut/maamarim/reshit6-2.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah 17:12

<sup>6</sup> Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 7

idea which could be internalized by the people and, given its residence in the people's hearts, was a mobile Temple that could continue to cement the relationship between Israel and their God even and in spite of the post-destruction dispersal.<sup>7</sup> The Temple continued to live and function in the religious imagination of rabbis and laity alike. The agent of transformation was Midrash,<sup>8</sup> which facilitated the maintenance of faith and hope in the eventual fulfillment of Scriptures, making the prophesies of the Bible reliable, relevant, and tangible. Deliverance was promised and was deemed as sure to happen as did the prophesied destruction. Scripture was the blueprint for history and as such it elevated reality into the sacred plane. New rituals and practices performed had to move on to the new reality of exile, but all these rituals and practices were cast in the template of the Temple, giving the people the continuity and hope they so desired.

The Deuteronomic understanding of the dynamic between individual and communal human deeds, and divinely mandated consequences, was the coin of the realm in the 5<sup>th</sup> century (and for many remains valid to this day as an article of faith), and so the dispossessed Jews understood their condition to be the expression of divine censure.<sup>9</sup> The Siddur states: *"Because of our sins we have been exiled from our land and sent far from our soil"*. History, according to this normative worldview for the faithful, was not haphazard. Israel's millennia-long distress was understood to be the result of the people's sins and it is therefore axiomatic that only repentance can reverse this process.<sup>10</sup> The Jews did not sever ties with their God despite the calamity which befell them as a People. On the contrary, they sought to supplicate God, to seek His mercy and forgiveness, to

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Swartz & Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah*, p. 4

<sup>8</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], p. 38

<sup>9</sup> William Horbury, *Suffering and Martyrdom*, p. 166

<sup>10</sup> מוסף לשלוש רגלים: קדושת היום

atone somehow for breaching His Word and His Law. They yearned to return and build the Temple anew. Their reference was the Bible. It told of the Temple destroyed and rebuilt, it spoke of a pattern in history which must, they believed, apply to their situation, and must therefore obey the rules of cyclical and rationalizable history.

Begging forgiveness, they also endeavoured to make the bond between the People and God as vivid as possible, always invested with meaning and understanding of the present as it was refracted through Scripture. They studied and learned the Bible as a way of maintaining that bond between Heaven and Earth, their Rabbis mined the Bible and the Mishna, sealing the Talmud as the Sages created a travelling Temple for the People in the form of the written word. Temple ritual had to be replaced by texts that memorialized the past yet transformed it into something new, into rituals of the mind, something one can put in one's satchel and travel in the Diaspora and still feel right at home, in Jerusalem, standing before the mythic Temple, hearing the Levites sing to God, looking upon the Kohanim fulfilling their destiny in daily, monthly, yearly service at the altar. Synagogues had come to replace the Temple grounds.<sup>11</sup> This is where prayer took place, exchanging sacrifices for words and prayers of the heart; this is where men studied, exchanging the Temple outer court for contemporary rooms in a myriad of geographical settings, reading and exploring sagacity as it poured forth from the parchments as well as from the local rabbi or teacher; this is where the Avodah of the now destroyed Temple was preserved as a living fundamental pillar of worship, albeit not in deed but in word,<sup>12</sup> this is where the congregation gathered thrice daily to ritualize and make communal the bond between the People and their God, and to cement the bonds between the individual

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<sup>11</sup> דעת- אתר לימודי יהדות ורוח <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/sifrut/maamarim/reshit6-2.htm>

<sup>12</sup> William Horbury, Suffering and Martyrdom, p. 166

members of the community as well as the bond between disparate communities. Synagogues became key locations for the preservation of memory of the past, and the maintenance of redemptive hope for a better future of a People reborn, delivered from their foes, sovereign in their ancestral homeland, serving God as He would have them serve Him.<sup>13</sup>

In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, poetry and songs were primary vehicles for transmitting spiritual mystery, for inculcating a sense of community, for serving as a mnemonic device for illiterate folks who still needed to communicate and commune with their gods.<sup>14</sup> Piyyutim, long an Israelite tradition, were transmitted orally from person to person and from one community to another. The millennial oral tradition comprised not only the Piyyutic verses, but the scriptural, Halachic, and cultural “baggage” these verses carried as well. Piyyutic literary traditions were the proverbial yeast to the dough of Jewish literature. They coined new words, they toyed with grammar, and they pulled and pushed the ancient language, prodding it to always be reborn, to always adapt itself to new social, religious, and political realities.<sup>15</sup> The stylish word crafts impressed the laity and the wordsmiths, and artists were admired and revered for their divine inspiration and creative gifts. Poetry was able to express the ineffable, and as such it was a way of practicing one’s faith, a way of finding meaning in the quotidian. Audiences were attuned to the allusions and Biblical references poets wove into their verse, and, once spoken, multiple levels of perspicacity and understanding were interacting, entwining meanings and teachings in a most satisfying manner for both the poet and his audience.<sup>16</sup> Listening

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Swartz & Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah*, pp. 5-8

<sup>14</sup> The pagans, with their multiple deities, and the Jews with their One God.

<sup>15</sup> Menachem Zulai, *The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim* [Hebrew], p. 65

<sup>16</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad*, p. 69

to poetry was a way for people to reconnect with their sacred texts, their history, their collective desire to be relieved of sorrows, it was also a culturally accepted way of escaping the daily hustle and bustle and of focusing inwardly and healing through ritual and through symbolic union with the divine. Poetry was read aloud in communal gatherings, it adorned religious ceremonies and rituals, it was performed in synagogue, it was sung, it was remembered, it was CNN and the Siddur rolled into one in the pre-Gutenberg era.<sup>17</sup>

Yosse ben Yosse did not invent the liturgical Piyyut. The style was already established, in form and function,<sup>18</sup> when he took pen to parchment. What began with acrostic poetry in Psalms,<sup>19</sup> evolved into a complex, sophisticated, and multifaceted literary style which, for several centuries, defined Jewish (and even Christian) liturgy. Little is known about the process of poetic evolution, but judging from its fruit, we know the tree to have been well rooted in the cultural soil of the time.<sup>20</sup> Piyyutim became adjuncts to prayer over time, the poetic accompaniment to prayer, even as their centrality in synagogue services ebbed and flowed over the millennia.<sup>21</sup> Certain prayers hark back to pre-destruction times, and have survived intact to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The prayer **יוצר אור** for instance, spoken in morning services, was part of the Temple service and is mentioned in the Talmud.<sup>22</sup> It is likely therefore that Yosse ben Yosse and the communities among which he lived and laboured, were familiar with the evolving body

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<sup>17</sup> Karen Armstrong, Muhammad, p. 66

<sup>18</sup> Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 50; Yosse ben Yosse is the first Paytan to be identified by name. He lived and worked in what is termed the “anonymous period” of Piyyut creation, as the paper will describe in greater detail. It is generally assumed that he lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century, in the Land of Israel then called Palestine. See: Adin Steinzaltz, The Siddur and Prayer [Hebrew], p. 185; See also: J. Yahalom, Poetic Language in Early Piyyut [Hebrew], pp. 31-36

<sup>19</sup> Psalms 145 for instance

<sup>20</sup> Hannan Hever, “*Our Poetry is Like an Orange Grove*”, The Anthology in Jewish Literature, pp. 281-304

<sup>21</sup> Aharon Mirsky, Piyyut Anthology [Hebrew], p. vii

<sup>22</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brachot (11-2), cited in: Adin Steinzaltz, The Siddur and Prayer, [Hebrew], p. 74

of Jewish prayers, even though the prayers were not yet codified as text in ink on scroll. The oral and aural traditions of prayer were memorized and recited from memory by specialists for the communities of Jews. At the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, as Palestinian communities all but lost touch with the major centres of Jewish learning, and as they spread farther and wider throughout Northern Africa, Europe, and the Levant, it became necessary to commit these prayers to writing. Some fragments of prayer books have been found in the Cairo Geniza,<sup>23</sup> dating back to the Gaonic period, indicating that the hitherto rabbinic reluctance to change from oral to textual memory was resolved, for the risk of the dissolution of memory became greater than the risk of a modification in tradition which the Rabbis extolled.<sup>24</sup> In time, prayer books were the most published and most copied books in the Jewish world, displaying a rich array of forms and stylized renditions of prayers inflected by local traditions and mores.

The particular style of Piyyut-type poetry is characterized by artificiality, by neologisms and literary gymnastics, it features *wortspiele* and cryptic allusions, it sometimes appears in acrostic forms, and it most often written in rhyming verse. Often, form trumps content, as Paytanim literally get “carried away” by the sport of writing acrobatics, although one can safely say that in the case of Piyyutim, the medium is indeed the message. Hebrew was no longer the language of every day, it was a language reserved for religious purposes of prayer and study, and therefore the Piyyut poetry, which lionized Hebrew (as opposed to the lingua franca of the day- Aramaic, influenced

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<sup>23</sup> The word “Geniza” is derived from the root גנז which means to hide, to conceal, to secrete, cover, and bury. The “Geniza” is a place wherein holy texts are concealed in order to prevent them from being desecrated. The main difference between the Dead Sea Scroll documents and the Geniza documents is that the Dead Sea Scrolls were meant to be preserved for future generations, whereas the Geniza documents were hidden in a virtual scroll cemetery. See: Menachem Zulai, The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim [Hebrew], pp. 17, 21

<sup>24</sup> Adin Steinsaltz, The Siddur and Prayer [Hebrew], p. 171

by Hellenic linguistic imports), appears stilted to the modern-ear, but at the time it must have had some popular appeal else it would not have been written or preserved.<sup>25</sup>

The form of Piyyut poetry is not an arbitrary affectation, but a reflection of a style which audiences favoured in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and an emotionally charged form of liturgy.<sup>26</sup> The Piyyutic ecstatic emotional expression, as well as its cadence and vocabulary, were intended to astonish, to surprise, and to delight audiences. The language created by Paytanim predates the codification and systemization of Hebrew grammar, as well as the rules of spelling and punctuation.<sup>27</sup> It also precedes the systemization of verb inflections and syntax, and is a significant bridge between the lively use of Hebrew in the everyday of antiquity, the remembered Scriptural Hebrew framed by daily use of Aramaic and Greek in 5<sup>th</sup> century Palestine,<sup>28</sup> and the nascent written Hebrew of literary and cultural expressions. It was a new and exciting language, it expresses a rejection of Byzantine influences which coincides with the cultural and religious rejection of Byzantium by the Jews,<sup>29</sup> who regarded their rulers as secondary to the Real King,<sup>30</sup> the Master of the Universe, the sublime God they could carry with them into any of their exiles, the King whose majesty trumps all earthly kings,<sup>31</sup> the God they could take in

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<sup>25</sup> Yosef Yahalom, The Language of Poetry [Hebrew], p. 32

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 9

<sup>27</sup> Menachem Zulai, The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim [Hebrew], pp. 35-44

<sup>28</sup> In approximately 390, Palaestina was further organised into three units: **Palaestina Prima**, **Secunda**, and **Tertia** (First, Second, and Third Palestine). Palaestina Prima consisted of Judea, Samaria, the coast, and Peraea with the governor residing in Caesarea. Palaestina Secunda consisted of the Galilee, the lower Jezreel Valley, the regions east of Galilee, and the western part of the former Decapolis with the seat of government at Scythopolis. Palaestina Tertia included the Negev, southern Jordan — once part of Arabia — and most of Sinai with Petra the usual residence of the governor. Palestina Tertia was also known as Palaestina Salutaris. This reorganization reduced Arabia to the northern Jordan east of Peraea. See: <http://www.solarnavigator.net/geography/palestine.htm> See also: <http://www.ancient-synagogues.com/>

This thesis makes repeated reference to Palestine as a single entity, but it must be clarified that the region I am most concerned with is in fact **Palaestina Secunda** where Yosse ben Yosse lived. See Addendum p. 24

<sup>29</sup> Yosef Yahalom, The Language of Poetry [Hebrew], p. 41

<sup>30</sup> Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], pp. 16-18

<sup>31</sup> Zechariah 14:9

their satchels into exile and feel chosen by Him; and it paints “arabesques” of and with words,<sup>32</sup> appealing to the stylistic aesthetics of the day.<sup>33</sup> The Piyyutic literary form puts great emphasis on symbolism, on creating mosaics of images and ideas which were à la mode at the time,<sup>34</sup> inspired by Byzantine aesthetic culture.<sup>35</sup> Those were the formative days of Christianity, a new religious wave that began to sweep European civilization. Its favoured “PR” tool was poetry, which was a way of attracting new believers in song and rhyme, in hymn and verse. Partisans of Christianity sang their songs, Arabs in the slowly awakening Arabian deserts sang their plaintive undulating songs,<sup>36</sup> and the Jews developed their own poetic style that elevated the quotidian to sacredness, and which expressed their yearnings for Messianic deliverance.<sup>37</sup>

Men of learning sought to compose prayers that would serve as the proverbial glue between God and Man, between men, between communities of Jewish exiles, between past and present, and between the present and the future. The process of codification of synagogue services took millennia. Scripture and Midrash were combed through for verses that would comprise that glue: words, verses, images, and exegeses that would resonate with the community, and would trigger an instant recognition of words, verses, images, and exegesis which were the People’s daily bread.<sup>38</sup> Some efforts

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<sup>32</sup> Aharon Mirsky, Piyyut Anthology [Hebrew], pp. xii-xiv

<sup>33</sup> Yosef Yahalom, The Language of Poetry [Hebrew] Ch. 8

<sup>34</sup> Michael Swartz & Joseph Yahalom, Avodah, p. 11

<sup>35</sup> The mosaic motif may also be associated with the revolutionary rabbinic decision to braid opinions, to avoid a closed canon and entertain polysemy and multivocality- so evident in the Talmud. No verse has a singular meaning, every word, every nuance may be interpreted endlessly, embracing a multiplicity of views rather than a uniform body of thought. The omnisignificance and omnirelevance of Scriptures as God’s blue print for humanity, was a way for the rabbis to insinuate Scripture into reality and apply Midrashic interpretation to the specific audiences, the specific time and place and to the particular circumstances. It enabled them to derive meaning and relevance from Scripture and invest their lives with significance. This effort was given artistic contours in poetic liturgy, taking the dialogue between the people and Scripture and the dialogue between the people and God, to a new level, not as intellectually demanding as Midrashic study, and more emotionally charged practice. See: David Stern, “Anthology and Polysemy”, p. 364

<sup>36</sup> Karen Armstrong, Muhammad, p. 67

<sup>37</sup> Yosef Yahalom, The Language of Poetry [Hebrew], p. 109

<sup>38</sup> Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 55

were rewarded with longevity. The prayer book, slowly gathering form and shape, became the Siddur, the order of spoken service to God, a book each person could access either by reading it or hearing it being read to him at the synagogue, its music and cadence began to fashion their own paths into consciousness, becoming the only way to access the heavens, the right way of worshipping the God of Israel, for centuries and all time henceforth. Some compositional efforts however were somewhat less successful. Yosse ben Yosse, whose liturgical prose is so intricate and ornate, was all but lost to time and memory. Yosse ben Yosse has fallen into obscurity in the modern age. His works are complex, written in almost impenetrable verse which requires the prayerful yet perennially rushed worshipper to stop and think, a decidedly un-modern way of “doing business”. Details of his life and person have all but vanished, even the remnants, discovered in the Cairo Geniza, are as intricately beautiful as they are all but inaccessible to contemporary worshippers.

Yosse ben Yosse was one of the first known Paytanim.<sup>39</sup> He is predated by several anonymous poets, whose work is less sophisticated, but he is the first to be identified by name. The ancient Piyutim embellished Biblical poetic forms.<sup>40</sup> His work, as far as we know, was the harbinger of a new liturgical creative effort, a new style of worship, that nevertheless lost the battle for centrality in the modern Siddur, even as it remains ensconced in back pages as a nod to posterity and a vestige to be carried forth into the future through some sense of filial obligation. I chose to translate and analyze some of Yosse ben Yosse’s Piyutim precisely because he has fallen from fashion, because his works are less often given voice, because the poems have less pizzazz than

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<sup>39</sup> Yosef Yahalom, *The Language of Poetry* [Hebrew], pp. 31-32

<sup>40</sup> דעת- אתר לימודי יהדות ורוח <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/sifrut/maamarim/reshit6-2.htm>

subsequent Piyyutim by subsequent Paytanim who stood on Yosse ben Yosse's shoulders and sang even prettier compositions to God. Not much is known about him. Some researchers speculate that he was an orphan,<sup>41</sup> named for his deceased father. His work, however, speaks volumes of his erudition, his facility with the written word, his familiarity with Scripture and Midrash as well as with the aesthetics of his day.<sup>42</sup> His prayer-poems have remained to this day, now as embellishments to prayer primarily reserved for Yom Kippur services, but in his day it is safe to assume the Piyyutim he penned were more central to synagogue worship.<sup>43</sup> Yosse ben Yosse was the first of the named poets whose elegant "*sitz im Leben*" poetry<sup>44</sup> was considered important and valuable enough to be preserved.<sup>45</sup> He worked in the same environment as did the Sages who compiled Genesis Rabbah, Lamentations Rabbah, and Leviticus Rabbah, in a fecund period that saw the flowering of early Haggadic Midrashim.<sup>46</sup> Whereas his successors, such as Kalir and Yannai, wrote Piyyutim rich in rabbinic material, Yosse ben Yosse had a more Bible-centric approach, and he only occasionally brought in a rabbinic Midrash, for the field was still relatively new and perhaps Yosse ben Yosse felt his audience might not yet be familiar with the Midrashic content as they would with the Biblical quotations.<sup>47</sup> The few preachers and learned men were vastly outnumbered by unlearned, uneducated people, whose understanding, erudition, linguistic abilities, and familiarity with Midrash were the boundaries within which communal services were defined.<sup>48</sup> The Jewish tradition of preaching and teaching facilitated the transition into synagogue

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<sup>41</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], p. 9

<sup>42</sup> John Bullard, Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World, <http://www.enotes.com/yose-ben-yose-salem/yose-ben-yose>

<sup>43</sup> דעת- אתר לימודי יהדות ורוח <http://www.daat.ac.il/encyclopedia/value.asp?id1=2225>

<sup>44</sup> Michael Swartz & Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah*, p. 18

<sup>45</sup> William Horbury, *Suffering and Martyrdom*, p. 144

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], p. 38

<sup>48</sup> Marc Hirschman, "*The Preacher and His Public*", p. 108

worship services, where the unschooled could feel included and as important as the learned in the congregation, through recitation of easy-to-remember poems that rolled off the tongue in alphabetic order and familiarized congregants with the Holy Texts at the same time.

Reading Yosse ben Yosse's liturgical poetry is a meditative experience. He liked clarity,<sup>49</sup> his pen runs like a scalpel through concepts, he is "tight" and rich with scriptural references. He favours less rhyming and more rhythmic patterns, he sometimes pays no heed to meter but at other time makes special emphasis of meter. He is fond of using word couplets, splicing verses directly from the Bible and forging them into new meanings.<sup>50</sup> These stylistic tendencies make for poignant poetry.<sup>51</sup> The topics are repetitive. They sound like mantras with their achingly archaic and beautifully crafted language. The contemporary ear cannot easily penetrate the mysteries wrapped in Biblical and Midrashic allusions, making the Piyyutim sound almost otherworldly, holy, outside the realm of the mundane, becoming mysterious rituals written on thesis and sung out loud. Several Piyyutim are written in the acrostic and thus become temple-like, they represent holiness and wholeness in space and time, they circumambulate the *axis mundi*, God, as the spirit is taken round and round by the words, repeating the endless patterns, always returning to the point of departure, always ending at finality and then starting again.<sup>52</sup> Something ethereal and eternal lurks in these works, something physical, which requires both an intellectual effort to decipher the codes embedded in the lines of each Piyyut, and an inner perspicacity of the art and beauty crafted by a master wordsmith and

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<sup>49</sup> לקסיקון לתרבות ישראל <http://lexicon.cet.ac.il/wf/wfTerm.aspx?id=603>

<sup>50</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], p. 42

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14

<sup>52</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad*, p. 68

a man obviously trained rabbinically, whose fingers are worn from walking the pages of Scriptures, and whose mind is alive with their meaning.<sup>53</sup>

Yosse ben Yosse was didactic, to a point, encouraging his readers and listeners to do some intellectual work if they were to understand the meaning of the verses to the full. He tended to use aliases, alternative names<sup>54</sup> for the persons evoked in his poetry, often resorting to Midrashic appellations.<sup>55</sup> A few examples illustrate this stylistic particularity: Esau is “the hirsute one”, Jacob is “smooth skinned”, Moses is “the faithful”, Miriam is a “drummer maiden”, Elijah is “the Tishbi”, and Jonah “the fleeing emissary”.<sup>56</sup> Each figure receives a figurative name which encapsulates entire scriptural chapters and retell, with a word, with a symbol,<sup>57</sup> with Haiku-like precision and economy, the entire tale associated with the figure. He reserves his most fecund re-naming for the People of Israel, and quotes chapter and verse, literally, with each name he sweeps from the Song of Songs, from Daniel and Zechariah, from Isaiah and Jeremiah, from Genesis and Lamentations, from Proverbs and Job and more. Each name implies and contains and encapsulates a unique flavour, from sin to penitence, from forgiveness to divine Grace. This exegetical re-naming has become a characteristic of many Piyyutim that followed Yosse ben Yosse.

Yosse ben Yosse was primarily concerned not with individual pain but with communal suffering. He focused on “Knesset Israel”, the Nation, the People, the Community.<sup>58</sup> His topics touched the “hot” issue of the day, the loss of the Temple and

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<sup>53</sup> דעת- אתר לימודי יהדות ורוח <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/sifrut/maamarim/reshit6-2.htm>

<sup>54</sup> Michael Swartz & Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah*, p. 12

<sup>55</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], pp. 61-70

<sup>56</sup> דעת- אתר לימודי יהדות ורוח <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/sifrut/maamarim/reshit6-2.htm>

<sup>57</sup> Michael Swartz & Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah*, p. 35

<sup>58</sup> William Horbury, *Suffering and Martyrdom*, p. 149

its attendant centrality in the ritual life of the nation; as well as on the dispersal, the exile, the virtual disintegration of a People now fragmented into small shards of the original, who must, if messianic hope is to be nurtured and realized, be reunited and reintegrated into a new whole despite the geographic dispersal.<sup>59</sup> Yosse ben Yosse's verse are replete with messianic hope, with Biblically derived allusions to consolations delivered by the Prophets which foreshadowed the end of servitude and the return to Israel, to a re-established Temple, the Song of Song's Bride returned to her Beloved.<sup>60</sup> Past glory was the template for a glorious future, the sorrow-filled present notwithstanding. The People restored, they will once again garner God's favour and will rebuild his abode in Jerusalem, and all oppression and distress be gone.

Yosse ben Yosse wrote dynamic verses, peppered with more verbs than adjectives, creating constant movement. His Piyyutim imbue the reader and worshipper with a great energy, with a sense that things are happening all the time, that nothing stands still, and that God is in the details of all these movements. The prayerfulness of the verses is supplemented with a sense of urgency, a sense that redemption is near, that change is on the way, and therefore one may entertain hope.<sup>61</sup> His messianism is theocentric, God will deliver His Chosen, once they repent of their sins and prove their worthiness by observing the Law without faltering. The Deuteronomic basis for this messianic hope reverberates through all of Yosse ben Yosse's Piyyutim.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], p. 22

<sup>60</sup> William Horbury, *Suffering and Martyrdom*, p. 146

<sup>61</sup> דעת- אתר לימודי יהדות ורוח <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/sifrut/maamarim/reshit6-2.htm>

<sup>62</sup> William Horbury, *Suffering and Martyrdom*, pp. 150-166

Yosse ben Yosse devotes much of his oeuvre to the Avodah,<sup>63</sup> the rituals performed by the Kohanim at the Temple before its destruction.<sup>64</sup> The Avodah services are prayers and Piyyutim recited on Yom Kippur, in which the work of the Kohen Gadol at the Temple is repeated in word rather than in deed, and lamentations are expressed for the loss of the Temple and for the necessity to make do with the verbal service to God instead of an actual performance of the offerings. There are numerous versions of the Avodah texts, inflected by local traditions of Ashkenaz, Sefarad, Yemen, and Italy. The earliest version, recited in French communities in the early Middle Ages,<sup>65</sup> preferred a Yosse Ben Yosse rendition of **אתה כוננת**<sup>66</sup> indicating the antiquity of this tradition, brought over from the Galilee to French shores with the exiles of Zion. The Kohen Gadol's Avodah on Yom Kippur receives much attention from Yosse ben Yosse, who transformed the transcendent experience of the Kohen's world-saving ritual from deed to word. He turned the Avodah into a literary genre and set the tone for subsequent Paytanim and Darshanim. Moreover, he went beyond the geographical confines of Jerusalem, wherein the Temple stood and wherein the Kohen Gadol through ritual, cemented the bond between Heaven and Earth, and painted the awesome scene of this most sacred occasion on a canvas that embraces Jerusalem, the Land of Israel and the entire world. He framed the Avodah against the backdrop of Creation, he began from the beginning and proceeded to describe the sublime ritual as the rite which saves the world entire. My choice of Piyyutim singled out for translation and analysis in this thesis was guided by the difference between Avodah poetry, with its detailed rendition of the High

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<sup>63</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], pp. 23-37

<sup>64</sup> Michael Swartz & Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah*, p. 19

<sup>65</sup> Adin Steinsaltz, *The Siddur and Prayer* [Hebrew], p. 101

<sup>66</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], pp. 172-199

Priest's service on Yom Kippur, and the remaining poems which deal with more general themes. Those more general poems were more suited for a discussion of the social function of the Piyyut as a genre. Future research must encompass the Avodah poetry as well, if we are to strive for a more complete understanding of Yosse ben Yosse's oeuvre.

Given that the People were dispersed across the world, Yosse ben Yosse thus made the Avodah part of their world, wherever they may be, he made the Avodah seem "at home" in Byzantium as it was in Arabia and all points in between and beyond. He wove the history of the People of Israel with the history of the world,<sup>67</sup> based on Scripture of course, and turned the Avodah into an epic story that can take place year after year in any and all locations where Jews congregated to re-enact, if only in word, this sublime and awe-inspiring redemptive ritual that will, they knew, save the world.<sup>68</sup> He made the Avodah an abstraction, he made it universally relevant, and painted his proverbial canvas with resonant words of the Prophets with daring imagination and creativity.

Fifteen of the Piyyutim, which may once have been sung or performed as "spoken art" in synagogues, have reached the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and they are treasures of linguistic elaboration seldom studied, as well as windows into the minds of times past. They speak of 5<sup>th</sup> century concerns of the exiles, they speak of their powerlessness as a group, of their dreams and messianic aspirations, they give us a glimpse into the hearts and minds of Jew who 1400 years ago sought a rational and spiritually satisfying bond with their God, as many of their contemporary kin still do. The Piyyutim are a bridge between the centuries,

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<sup>67</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], p. 55

<sup>68</sup> דעת- אתר לימודי יהדות ורוח <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/sifrut/maamarim/reshit6-2.htm>

they enable us, once we decipher their coded and loaded meanings, to hold hands with Jews past, to make even that weakest of links in the Messoratic chain, hold.

Yosse ben Yosse is often neglected. It is a shame. When I delved into his oeuvre, I began to feel Yosse ben Yosse's hand, to see and hear his genius, and I wanted to make a small contribution to the remembrance of this man by preserving his words and bringing them to the attention of English speaking scholars. Their collective acuity will hopefully penetrate the depths of meanings once Yosse ben Yosse can be read in English, and thus advance our collective understanding of Jewish history and Jewish religiosity.

This thesis cannot but touch upon the vast topic of early Hebrew Piyyutim, and only serves to partially illuminate the works of Yosse ben Yosse. The translation effort, complex and problematic as it is, nevertheless has resulted in a working version of seven Piyyutim, a spring board for further research. Having situated Yosse ben Yosse, even as it is merely an approximation and an educated guess, on the continuum of Jewish liturgy, I was able to read his poetry with greater appreciation for its historic relevance for Yosse ben Yosse's contemporaries. Given that his Piyyutim are drawn from the Bible, the omnirelevance of Scripture applies to the Piyyutim as well, and despite the chasm of time and space between myself, us, and the 5<sup>th</sup> century Paytan, his words seem relevant to contemporary Jewish concerns even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The longevity of these Piyyutim, even as they rest on the margins of our prayer books, is a testament to the keen insight of their composer, to his perspicacity and Midrashic erudition, to his understanding of the Jewish human condition. It is a timeless understanding and a timeless condition, as the Jewish People still yearns for full messianic redemption.

The twelfth of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith articulates this eternal "waiting game" that Jews through the millennia have embarked on, waiting for the redeemer as if he were coming today, knowing full well that he most probably will be delayed: *"I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he may tarry, nevertheless I anticipate every day that he will come"*. It is this yearning for a better tomorrow and the striving for making the morrow a better place, which defines so much of the Jewish experience through the ages. The Piyyutim penned by Yosse ben Yosse still appeal to us today, still seem relevant if not entirely "fresh" because of their elegance and "high Hebrew" style,<sup>69</sup> for they express this all but ineffable hope in gem-like beauty that has retained its sheen through time. Yosse ben Yosse therefore merits further study, not as an echo from the past, but as a voice to be heard, like a timeless prayer bridging past and present, today.

The chronological order of Yosse ben Yosse's Piyyutim cannot be determined solely on the basis of the few existing fragments and copies of his oeuvre.<sup>70</sup> I have chosen to discuss seven Piyyutim in this thesis pending a more detailed future study. This thesis represents but a preliminary effort to organize and contextualize the Yosse ben Yosse oeuvre. The selected poems and the selected theoretical lenses applied to the texts, do not in any way exhaust the subject matter, as 5<sup>th</sup> century Piyyutic literature is yet to be fully mapped and analyzed. A more comprehensive study would far exceed the confines of a single paper, but despite the relative brevity of my discussion, I hope that the theoretical signposts will serve as guide for a more detailed future study.

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<sup>69</sup> Yosef Yahalom, The Language of Poetry [Hebrew], p. 12

<sup>70</sup> Menachem Zulai, The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim [Hebrew], p. 127

I have constructed the thesis in a somewhat unorthodox manner. The thesis consists of two distinctive parts that interact with one another, better to establish the foundations of the many complex ideas introduced here. The nature of liturgical poetry suggests that verses were integrated into the fabric of social life, and in that vein I have endeavoured to create an interface between theory and poetry. I present the seven theoretical underpinnings of my research as the chapters of this thesis, which may form the scaffold of future investigative efforts. Each theoretical section or chapter serves as an introduction to an original Piyyut, selected from Aharon Mirsky's seminal collection, followed by the English translation I propose. Each Piyyut is then followed by direct commentary and a thematic discussion that rests upon the theoretical foundation, thus framing the Piyyutic analysis by theory. The commentary attached to each Piyyut endeavours to shed some light upon the particular theoretical vantage point that guided my translation and interpretation of the original text, but is in no way an exhaustive analysis thereof, given the parameters of this thesis.

The central concern of the thesis is to plumb the various aspects of the social function of Piyyutic literature in general and more specifically that of some of the existing Piyyutic creations of Yosse ben Yosse. The thesis examines seven Piyyutim and raises questions regarding their form and function, while positioning the writer and his audiences in 5<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine Palestine. The paper and the questions it raises, thereby broadening the scope of Yosse ben Yosse scholarship, will, I hope, form the basis for further research by myself and other scholars.

First, with the Piyyut אפתח שפתי, I preface all subsequent discussion of the Yosse ben Yosse oeuvre with an examination of the translation process itself. Translating

5<sup>th</sup> century Hebrew into modern English is laborious and complex, challenging the translator grammatically, technically and poetically. This thesis examines seven of the Yosse ben Yosse Piyyutim, and aims to deduce and extract as much information from them as possible in the context of this study. More work is required of course, before this vein of relevant historic data is fully mined. As Laura Lieber points out: “Translating Yannai... represented a profound challenge... Poetry is best translated by poets- a profession to which the present writer has no pretence”.<sup>71</sup> I too can claim no poetic feathers in my scholarly cap and cannot but preface my translations with the admission that all my translations are potential candidates for erudite and articulate re-translation by future Yosse ben Yosse scholars. Hebrew *wortspiele*, Biblical and Midrashic allusions, and specific cultural characteristics are notoriously difficult to communicate in foreign languages. Like Lieber, I too offer my translations as a bridge across language and time. The translations, by no means irreproachable, are a launch pad into the study of Yosse ben Yosse’s Piyyutim, and a potential basis for future research.<sup>72</sup>

The second gaze, using the Piyyut **אפתח פי ברנן** as the reference point for the analysis of the text, reveals linguistic specificity which is presented here as a point of departure for a future much more thorough study of language, linguistics, style, and allusions inherent in Yosse ben Yosse’s Piyyutim. A detailed grammatical study of the linguistic aspects of 5<sup>th</sup> century Palestinian Hebrew texts is required, not only for a better understanding of Piyyutic literature, but for a comprehensive review of linguistic influences and particularities evident in the Palestinian Talmud. This is an oft neglected area of linguistic research, because linguists have focused on spoken Hebrew rather than

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<sup>71</sup> Laura Lieber, Yannai on Genesis, p. 21

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22

on religious texts produced in an era that relegated Hebrew to the religious Academies of Babylon and the Galilee, as the masses had by the 5<sup>th</sup> century ceased speaking the language in their daily exchanges. A comprehensive linguistic study of religious texts may shed important light on the evolution of Hebrew as a written language and on the social intercourse that framed the spoken language.

The third theoretical discussion, centered around the Piyyut *אתן תהילה*, explores the intriguing rhythm and musicality of Yosse ben Yosse's works in the context of the little that is known about 5<sup>th</sup> century synagogue life. The discussion is an interpretive elaboration on the linguistic attributes of the Piyyutim under investigation in this thesis, as I attempt to imagine the real-life dramatic performance of these Piyyutim in the social religious setting of Yosse ben Yosse and his contemporaries. Little is known about synagogue life in the period under investigation, but an educated guess based on the vocal attributes of Piyyutic reading, suggests a possible description of what synagogue life may actually have been.

The fourth segment, which frames the discussion around the Piyyut *אהללה אלוהי*, begins with a brief introduction to the Cairo Geniza, and proceeds to discuss Jewish liturgy of the Byzantine period as a creative rabbinic innovation of the sovreinization of God in the first few centuries after the destruction. Ancient Jewish scholars did not engage in what we can recognize as historical record keeping. In the God-centric worldview of 5<sup>th</sup> century Jews, the sovereignty of God was the cornerstone of both religious and social life, as it provided a model for the perception of time and the attendant sense of history. The Piyyutic oeuvre examined here is but a small sample of

this particular vantage point, but it is worth noting in a preliminary study such as this as an important field yet to be fully researched.

The fifth segment examines the Piyyut אֵז לְרֹאשׁ תַּתְּנוּ, and follows the above discussion with an analysis of the historiographic understanding of Yosse ben Yosse and his contemporaries, on the backdrop of what we know about the actual history of 5<sup>th</sup> century Jews in Palestine. External sources, quite apart from the Piyyutic literature under examination, help paint a broader picture of 5<sup>th</sup> century life in Byzantine Palestine. Even as the Piyyutic literature sheds some light on the particular understanding of temporality of these Jewish communities, it is inevitable that cross referencing be appended to the Piyyutic study, better to contextualize and refine its observations.

In the sixth section, which introduces the Piyyut אֲנוּסָה לְעִזְרָה, I touch upon the themes of messianism and apocalypticism hidden in the Piyyutim in general, and the particular eschatological *weltanschauung* to which Yosse ben Yosse apparently subscribed. Messianic hope has suffused the spirit and literature of Jewish religious expressions since the destruction of the Second Temple. The hope for a national reconstitution, predicated on a Deuteronomic model of penance and salvation, has been a focal point of Jewish prayer and liturgy for millennia. The Yosse ben Yosse texts which express messianic hope are a by-product of the historiographic understanding discussed in the previous segment and as such they help complete the ontological picture of 5<sup>th</sup> century Jewish individual and communal self-perception. In an uncertain environment, bereft of their *axis mundi*, Jews sought comfort in eschatological visions that promised divine vindication for their trauma, a settling of accounts with their enemies, and direct

divine involvement in the national restoration. This was not a desire based on a simplistic world of black and white clarity, but a comingling of personal and collective responsibility, and a plan of concomitant comingling of personal, national, and divine “contributions” toward the longed for goal of messianic deliverance and repentance based redemption. Even as messianic times were imagined as being a distant future era of supernatural pacific coexistence of the proverbial lions and lambs, each generation shouldered its responsibility of making nearer the promised peace, harmony, and concord under God.

The seventh and final theoretical essay, which concludes with the seventh and most poignant poem of my selection of Yosse ben Yosse Piyyutim, אִפְחָד בְּמַעֲשֵׂי, seeks to explain the social function of Piyyutic liturgy in view of Emile Durkheim’s theory regarding the social dimensions of religious life. It also examines Piyyut as a sub-genre of prayer and considers the social function of both. What was the social function of the Piyyutim under investigation here, in the post-destruction dispersal of the People and the loss of sovereignty? What role did prayer and ritual play in the communal life of 5<sup>th</sup> century Jews in Byzantine Palestine? Durkheim’s theory serves as the lens through which one may study the religious life of people, based solely on the texts their leaders left behind.

Before delving into the presentation of my research, however, I must caution the reader about the inevitable distortions apparent in my analysis, which are the product of my attitudinal prism. Historiographic research is able to inform us about history, but it teaches us more about the authors who gave, in ink on parchment, form to the historic narrative. This thesis, it must be stated at the outset, has a strong ontological focus. It is

concerned with the nature of being Jewish, and with defining Jewish identity in its historic context. My own attitudinal prism and scholarly interest in Jewish history and in the literary products of the Jews over time are reflected here. This thesis represents my effort to extract meaning from liturgical poetry penned by the Paytan Yosse ben Yosse in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Given the “I of the beholder”, the information has been gathered, gleaned, and analyzed through my own particular lens, and is therefore inflected, refracted, and materially affected by my own proverbial ocular idiosyncrasies.

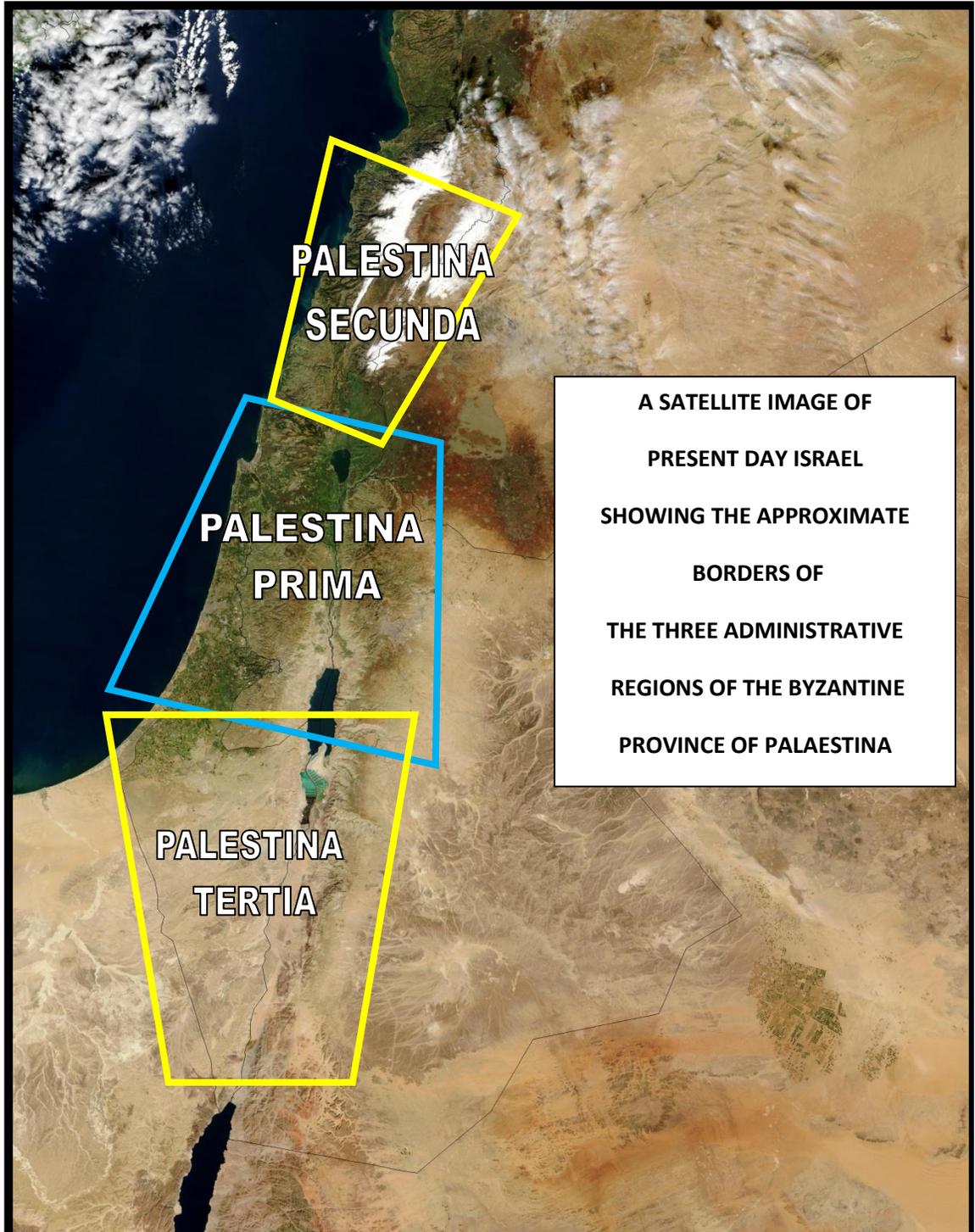
An Israeli and Zionist woman living in Canada, I am Jewish and religiously observant. My world view has been shaped and buffed by life and circumstance, and inevitably affects my writing. As Yael Zerubavel writes: “Cultural texts serve different groups and political purposes at one and the same time or at different points in history,”<sup>73</sup> a particular reading and interpretation of historic artefacts is shaped and modified by the researcher’s particular array of perceptions of the past and views regarding the present. Given the bi-directionality of this impact, my own views regarding the present have influenced my perception of the past. Texts cannot be decoupled from their authors, nor can they be disengaged from the readers.<sup>74</sup> It is imperative therefore that my attitudinal prism be thus stated as a preface to this thesis.

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<sup>73</sup> Yael Zerubavel, “*The Politics of Interpretation: Tel Hai in Israel’s Collective Memory*”, *AJS Review* 16 (1991), p. 134

<sup>74</sup> Yael Zerubavel, “*The Politics of Interpretation: Tel Hai in Israel’s Collective Memory*”, p. 160

\* Addendum to footnote 37



## Chapter 1: Translation Issues and the Piyyutic Genre

Translating Piyyutic literature from Hebrew to English is a challenging complex endeavour. First, it requires an exegetical understanding of the poetic verses, as well as familiarity with the Biblical allusion from which these verses were drawn. I have relied heavily on Aharon Mirsky for such references. He is the foremost expert scholar on Yosse ben Yosse and produced a singularly exhaustive forensic analysis of the entire array of Yosse ben Yosse Piyyutim. In his seminal 1977 book titled “Yosse ben Yosse Poems”,<sup>75</sup> Mirsky points to the precise Biblical and Midrashic sources of each verse, each couplet, and each allusion. At times, however, his understanding of obscure verses can be speculative, derivative, and exegetical in its own right. One may agree or disagree with Mirsky’s interpretation in citing Biblical and Midrashic sources, as this can lead to potentially different avenues of translation. In this thesis, however, I have more often than not relied on Mirsky for the translation of polyvalent verses, and I have for the most part sided with his inimitable scholarship.

For example, in the verse from his Piyyut **אספר גדולות** the Hebrew word **זה** appears in the couplet:

חיבר פושעים / לחי עולמים

וניסהו **זה** בעשר / עשות בן שי ולא אט

This Piyyutic verse speaks of Abraham who invited his neighbours, the polytheistic pagans, to the belief in the One God. The line **וניסהו זה בעשר** can be translated as “And He has tried him tenfold”, referring to the ten trials which God

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<sup>75</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1977 [I made use of the second edition of the book, dated 1991, for copying the original Hebrew text of the Piyyutim].

imposed on Abraham, the tenth of which was the offering of Isaac at the altar on Moriah. The word **זה** does not in this instance mean “this”, but refers directly to God, drawing on the Biblical verse **זה אלי ואנוהו** – “*This is my God and I will glorify Him*” [Exodus 15:2].<sup>76</sup>

The second factor which complicates the task of Piyyut translation pertains to the evolution of Hebrew over time. Hebrew of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is quite a different language from the Hebrew written in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Even as they both often sound or appear the same, the meaning of words may occasionally differ and has different significations. This feature of linguistic evolution is particularly important in the verb-saturated poetry of Yosse ben Yosse. His dynamic flow of verbs can easily be misunderstood by a 21<sup>st</sup> century reader, as the verbs have evolved more than any other aspect of the language, and contemporary verbs no longer indicate the same actions as they did in antiquity. This affects the translation materially. For example, the root **זר"ז** in modern Hebrew refers to actions verbs which denote an urging on, an expedition of processes. Yosse ben Yosse however, employs this root in describing the High Priest's bonnet:<sup>77</sup>

**זורזה בראשו / בחוטי תכלת**

In this instance, the verb **זורזה** refers to the Aramaic origin of the root **זר"ז** which denotes a tying of a belt (equivalent to the contemporary Hebrew words **להגור**, **לקשור**, **לאזור**). Given this reading, the word **זריז** which in Modern Hebrew describes a nimble person, for Yosse ben Yosse meant a person who girded himself and is prepared to labour.<sup>78</sup> Any translator of ancient manuscripts from Hebrew to English must labour under this understanding that words and combinations of words are culturally inflected.

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<sup>76</sup> Menachem Zulai, The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim [Hebrew], p. 431

<sup>77</sup> Fragment H-6/81 (Cambridge), cited in: Menachem Zulai, The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim [Hebrew], p. 423

<sup>78</sup> Menachem Zulai, The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim [Hebrew], p. 424

Words are indicators of a specific historic period, as they don particular linguistic markers, and therefore ancient texts cannot be understood through modern Hebrew but must be contextualized and understood in the vein they were intended to be understood in antiquity.

What is Piyyut? The simple answer is that it means liturgical poetry. But there is no easy answer, and so we much delve into the anatomy of Piyyut, better to examine its social function in 5<sup>th</sup> century Palestine. Poetry is a universal human means of self expression. As a literary genre, poetry crosses cultures and history, geography and fashion. Jewish poetry rested in antiquity on a foundation of Scriptural and Biblical allusions, and served as an accompaniment to prayer, expressing contemporary communal concerns. The broad function of Piyyutic liturgies was to assist Jewish communities, in the Land of Israel, later to be called Palestine by its Roman conquerors, and in the various Diasporas, in cementing the Jewish identity, and in solidifying religious fundamentals.<sup>79</sup> Each community was influenced by the ambient cultural milieu in which it thrived. Thus poetic products of the various communities vary from one community to the next, displaying unique morphological and stylistic characteristics, even as the function of the Piyyutic genre itself remained a common denominator.<sup>80</sup>

The genre of Piyyutic poetry evolved over time, in form and language suited to the ever changing aesthetic preferences of each age. In 5<sup>th</sup> century Palestine, most Piyyutim with the exception of תהינות were composed with a performative element in

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<sup>79</sup> Chapter 7 of this thesis examines the particular social function of 5th century Piyyutim in light of Emile Durkheim's theory.

<sup>80</sup> Yehuda Ratzaby, Texts and Studies in Oriental Liturgical Poetry [Hebrew], pp. 1-9

mind, which facilitated singing and dancing,<sup>81</sup> as I shall explain in greater detail in Chapter 6 of this thesis. Poetry and song were favoured homiletic vehicles, as they brought heaven and earth closer together, making palatable complex sacred themes and imbuing them with musicality and words that are accessible to the masses.<sup>82</sup> The emotive quality of poetry is almost universally felt by people of varied cultures: “And you don’t forget their songs, the women said. You feel them right here. They tapped their chests.”<sup>83</sup>

The liturgical poetry of Jewish Palestine in the 5<sup>th</sup> century was based on philosophical and ethical ideas, drawn chiefly from the Talmud and the Midrash. The wisdom of the Sages was poeticized, forging an irrevocable link with Oral Torah. Until the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the *weltanschauung* of the Sages was, for all intents and purposes, synonymous with the worldview evident in Piyyutic literature. Piyyutic liturgy in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, influenced by Byzantine aesthetics, was in essence cerebral and opinionated.<sup>84</sup> From the 11<sup>th</sup> century to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, as Byzantium sank into irrelevance for the Jews, and under the growing influence of Arabic culture and its new science of grammar, the Piyyutic oeuvre began to deal with both sacred and secular topics, whereas hitherto the only subject was the sacred reality and its relationship to the People of Israel. The earlier Piyyutim, penned in the first few centuries after the destruction, deal mostly with religious themes as a continuation of the inherited Biblical tradition.<sup>85</sup>

The Piyyutim under examination here were written in Hebrew. Yosse ben Yosse, like many other Paytanim between the 5<sup>th</sup> century and the 14<sup>th</sup> century, was a jealous

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<sup>81</sup> Yehuda Ratzaby, Texts and Studies in Oriental Liturgical Poetry [Hebrew], p. 10

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11

<sup>83</sup> Lilian Nattel, The River Midnight, p. 62

<sup>84</sup> Aharon Mirsky, From Duties of the Heart to Songs of the Heart: Jewish Philosophy and Ethics and their Influence on Hebrew Poetry in Medieval Spain [Hebrew], p. 11

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12

guardian of Hebrew.<sup>86</sup> He abhorred foreign semantic infiltrators into the Holy Language, that linguistic bond between the God of Israel and the People of Israel, and so he fought tooth and nail to create Hebrew words where none existed to express contemporary concepts. His grammar, which predates the codification of Hebrew grammar under the later influence of Arabic culture and science, takes liberties with Hebrew which today seem impossible albeit artistically ornate.

To make these intricate creations accessible for English speakers, one must translate them and transform their inner workings into familiar shapes that contemporary scholars can negotiate. It is not a simple task. First, the Hebrew *Yosse ben Yosse* employs is archaic, heavy with Biblical verses that have been spliced masterfully into the fabric of the *Piyyut*. One must literally pry apart each couplet, and each stanza, and tease out each Biblical reference, and each quote, before one is able to translate the text into comprehensible modern English. Secondly, the *Piyyut* genre is inherently obscure, it is cryptic, it requires its own Midrashic exegesis if one is to delve beneath the rhymes and understand the hidden meaning enveloped therein. Thirdly, the cadence and playful rhymes of Hebrew cannot be transported into English unless one sacrifices elegance for clarity. The *wortspielerei*,<sup>87</sup> and the tight encapsulation of ideas that work so well in Hebrew, turn into flat footed dancers in English, into cumbersome and often tiresome redundant verses that sound out of step with our modern sensibilities, whereas in traditional societies this very repetitiveness was revered for its meditative quality, for its ability to make the spirit soar while forcing the body to exert its physicality.<sup>88</sup> This is akin

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<sup>86</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poetry* [Hebrew], pp. 71-73

<sup>87</sup> German: Playing with words, making word-plays

<sup>88</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad*, p. 68

to translating Shakespeare into other languages- the results are often a banal tone-deaf rendition of heavy handed prose. The resulting artificiality of the translated text brings to mind the adage: *Traduttore- Traitore*. Every translation betrays the original, through borrowing and adaptation, through calque<sup>89</sup> and compensation, through paraphrasing and artifice. Word for word translation inevitably results in comic caricatures of the original text and yet, the translator must strive to preserve the cadence, the flavour, the style of the original, and that is an art form in its own right, and one that is not easily mastered.

Moreover, Hebrew for the Jews was and remains a holy language, the language in which God communicated with His chosen ones, the language of the Torah, the language that makes the immanent present. Reading the Torah, for instance, is not merely an exercise in data retrieval. It is a multi-sensorial and spiritual experience; one revels in the beauty of the language, in its antiquity and concomitant authority, in its ability to transmit instantly complex images of traditions past and Biblical context, all absent from an English reconstitution.<sup>90</sup> At times, the repetitions, the apparently redundant phrasing, can seem boring, particularly in the English version of a translation; whereas the original, meant for liturgical study and for worshipful meditation, employs images, symbols, key words, and short cuts that convey the nuanced understanding of the faith's world view and moral codes.<sup>91</sup>

Despite those and many other challenges, the task of translating the Piyyutim is, I maintain, valid, valuable, important, and interesting.<sup>92</sup> It is valid because these Piyyutim

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<sup>89</sup> Calque is a term which, in linguistics indicates a compound, derivative, or phrase that is introduced into a language through translation of the constituents of a term in another language (as *superman* from German *Übermensch*). [Webster Dictionary].

<sup>90</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad*, p. 54

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55

<sup>92</sup> Menachem Zulai, *The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim* [Hebrew], p. 3

are part of the patrimony, the inheritance, the legacy of Jews past given to us for safekeeping. It is valuable because there is a great deal of information hidden in and between the lines of each verse. Written allusions to the Biblical past, made in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, are signposts and indicators for the mind set of 5<sup>th</sup> century Jews. If one reads what they wrote, one can begin to unravel where they lived, what cultures influenced them, how they negotiated their exile, what sorrows afflicted them, what were their hopes and dreams. Each Piyyut is literally a treasure trove of historiographic information; each composer, or Paytan, is a signpost and may be compared to other Paytanim, opening yet another avenue for historiographic study of the past.

Piyyut 1:<sup>93</sup> אפתח שפתי

אֶפְתַּח שְׁפָתַי 1  
לְבוֹרָא נִיב שְׁפָתַיִם  
בְּרִנָּן אֶהְלֵנוּ 2  
בְּרוֹב תּוֹשְׁבָחוֹת.  
גַּם בְּפִי נְרוּמִים 3  
לְמִי שֵׁם פֶּה  
דְּבָרֵי רְנָנוֹת 4  
לְנֹאֵה בְתֵה־לוֹת.  
הֵלֵא לְשׁוּנֵי יַמְלִל 5  
לְנוֹתָן מַעֲנֵה לְשׁוֹן  
וּמִי יַעֲצוּ כֶחַךְ 6  
לְלַמֵּד לוֹ תוֹרוֹת.  
זְמִירוֹת נְשׁוּרָר 7  
לְמֶלֶךְ בְּגֵרוֹנֵי  
חֲנוּן סוֹלֵחַ 8  
וּמְכַפֵּר — — —

<sup>93</sup> The Hebrew text is copied from: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], 1991 Edition, p. 218

## **I OPEN MY LIPS**

- 1 I open my lips  
To Him, who created utterance
- 2 I glorify Him in joyous song  
With praises unending.
- 3 My mouth exalts  
Him, who hath fashioned the mouth
- 4 Words of great joy  
For Him, who is worthy of so much acclaim.
- 5 Even my tongue proclaims  
Him, who hath formed the tongue's retort
- 6 And pays tribute to Him, who hath counselled Man,  
Giving [him] strength,  
By teaching him His laws.
- 7 I compose hymns  
For the King, in my throat,
- 8 He is Gracious and Compassionate  
And He pardons ---

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## COMMENTARY

Given the translation challenges inherent in the present endeavour, I have chosen this short and fragmentary Piyyut as a means of illustrating the archaeological aspects of the translation processes. I bring the Piyyut as a preliminary example of Yosse ben Yosse's work, and examine it only for its morphology, citing the Biblical allusions. No theoretical lens other than the mechanical translation lens is brought to bear on this Piyyut, better to maintain clarity with regard to the process.

This Piyyut adopts the human body as a scaffold upon which the Paytan can hang his liturgy. Each limb and every organ in the human body is deemed to sing God's praises, a literary device designed to illustrate the profundity of the Paytan's adoration of God. Each couplet touches upon a body part which perceives the world or interacts with it, the mouth and the eyes, the tongue and the throat. God, the creator of each limb is praised by that very limb, and facilitates the human bond with the Creator.

1        I open my lips  
          To Him, who created utterance

*"Death and life are in the power of the tongue"* says Proverbs 18:21. The tongue is the organ that can decide the fate of an individual, it is the vehicle for verbal interaction with the world, and the organ chosen by the Paytan to open this Piyyut through a reference to Job *"Let me speak and I will feel relieved, I shall open my lips and speak up"* [Job 32:20]. In the depths of his despair, in the nadir of his suffering, Job seeks closeness with God through the power of speech. Yosse ben Yosse identifies with the sorrows, and so he ties the national despair, which seems unfathomable and without hope of resolution. But

even as despair threatens to overcome the People, Yosse ben Yosse enjoins the People to seek the same remedy as did Job, and open their lips, in direct reference to the Psalm “*Oh LORD, open my lips that my mouth may declare Your praise*” [Psalm 51:17].

2 I glorify Him in joyous song  
With praises unending

It is through the active praise of God that one may find solace. And better, reiterates Yosse ben Yosse further, to do so in joyous song, for “*God of my salvation, let my tongue sing joyously of Your righteousness*” [Psalm 51:16]. Yosse ben Yosse is not merely placating the People. His understanding of the dynamic interaction between God and His People is firmly anchored in Biblical promises for national reconstitution and for the vanquishing of Israel’s enemies. “*As soon as they began their exuberant song and praise, God set up ambushers against the Children of Ammon, Moab and Mount Seir who were attacking Judah, and they were struck down*” [II Chronicles 20:22]. Praising God in song is a weapon against the tyranny and oppression suffered by God’s People. Sing and be saved, says Yosse ben Yosse, praise God and He will come to your rescue against your current enemies and foes, just as He did for King Jehoshaphat “*... do not fear and do not be intimidated before this great multitude, for the battle is not yours but God’s*” [II Chronicles 20:15].

In Yosse ben Yosse’s understanding the oppression suffered by Israel is God’s worldly way of punishing His flock for their sin “*And God’s anger was kindled against His people ... So He delivered them to the hands of the nations and their enemies ruled over them*” [Psalms 106:40-41]. The past is prologue, for Yosse ben Yosse, and the pattern of God’s wrath at His people and His salvation as well, is set out in the Bible for Israel to see, learn, internalize and emulate if they indeed desire salvation and national reconstitution.

Indeed God “took note of their distress when He heard their outcry” [Psalms 106:44]. The Hebrew text of this verse, however **וירא בצר להם בשמעו את רינתם** alludes to the power of joyous song [רינה] as a means of accessing God’s merciful intervention on behalf of Israel. It is, says Yosse ben Yosse, through song and prayer to Israel’s God that Israel may be saved. The power of the word is magnified by musical praises and so prayers are amplified and God appeased of His anger.

3 My mouth exalts  
Him, who hath fashioned the mouth

The Biblical prayer “*May the expressions of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart find favour before You, God, my Rock and my Redeemer*” [Psalms 19:15] resonates in Yosse ben Yosse’s verse. God who fashioned the human mouth [Exodus 4:11], God who created the faculty of speech, is the most appropriate object of veneration for a human, for an Israelite, through the power of speech itself.

4 Words of great joy  
For Him, who is worthy of so much acclaim.

It is not mere sycophancy to praise God just because He has created the human ability to speak. It is a means to access the ultimate reality, the sacred wave lengths and energies of Creation itself, and thus a means of harnessing its power in order to change reality for the faithful. “...*my mouth doth praise Thee with joyful lips*” [Psalms 63:6]. What the lips form, the mouth utters “...*for it is good to sing praises unto our God*” [Psalms 147:1], it is the right thing to do, says Yosse ben Yosse, and once again reiterates the physicality of the contact between heaven and earth, between God and His People “*My mouth shall speak the praise of the LORD; and let all flesh bless His holy name forever and ever*” [Psalms 145:21].

Yosse ben Yosse's propensity for *wortspielerei* appears here in the fourth couplet: **דברי רננות** translated as “words of great joy” may be understood not merely as a reference to the power of words in prayer, but to things, to objects such as this poem itself, as a human-made instrument applied in the act of praising God. Yosse ben Yosse alludes to the ability of humans to take a measure of the creative energy released by God at Creation, and to fashion devices, to creatively enhance the potency of words in the service of praising God the Creator, both in gratitude and in supplication. The root **דב"ר** can be inflected to describe words and speech, but it can also be a reference to things, to created objects, such as this very poem, in the service of God.

5 Even my tongue proclaims  
Him, who hath formed the tongue's retort

In order to express the mighty acts of God [Psalms 106:2], Yosse ben Yosse, like the poet of Proverbs [Proverbs 16:1] explains that an individual may think his or her praises to God, but the tongue's retort, the ability to fully articulate this sentiment and belief, is a God given ability which resides in the tongue. The Aramaic translation of “the tongue's retort” is perhaps more poetic in form, even as it expresses the same sentiment: **ממללא בלשנא** my tongue praises, forms words of prayer to Him,<sup>94</sup> and thus in Yosse ben Yosse's poem the word he chooses to illustrate the tongue's retort is “**ימלל**” and not any other possible verb that denotes the formation of prayerful words in the service of God. Yosse ben Yosse echoes the verse: **מי ימלל גבורות ה' ישמיע קול תהילתו** [Psalms 106:2] with the same choice of root **מל"ל** here employed in the verse.

6 And pays tribute to Him, who hath counselled Man,  
Giving [him] strength,

<sup>94</sup> Note the onomatopoeic use of the Hebrew/Aramaic letter **ל**. the word **ממללא** which means to utter, is cleaved to an additional **ל** which refers to “him”, resulting in a compound word **ממללא** that virtually sings the word with a “la la la”.

By teaching him His laws.

God, who has counselled humanity to follow His path, and who has given the Torah to humanity for guidance, is the most suitable subject for prayer. *“I will bless the LORD, who hath given me counsel; yea, in the night seasons my reins instruct me”* [Psalms 16:7]. This Piyyut is unique in Yosse ben Yosse’s allusion to a Midrash on Psalms [1:13]. It is a rare allusion to the Midrashic literature, as Yosse ben Yosse usually refrains from such direct references and anchors his oeuvre in Biblical texts alone. Here, however, Yosse ben Yosse alludes to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who explained the Psalmist’s verse by positing that the human kidney is the amphora-like vessel in which Torah resides, having been poured there into by God, so that a person may learn and study Torah even unawares, while sleeping.<sup>95</sup> This is a surprising allusion to the two strands of Torah that obligate Israel, the text based Pentateuchal Torah, and the Oral Torah which is the site for Rabbinic interpretation and jurisprudence. Yosse ben Yosse in fact points to a new body of Talmudic texts which in the 5<sup>th</sup> century had just been codified into the canon of Rabbinic teachings. In other words, the Torah, a more complex entity that although bifurcated is a singular unity, remains the sole determining factor in Jewish life, past, present and future. Yosse ben Yosse here asserts the authority of Rabbinic law as a guiding force for the People of Israel. It is not clear where Yosse ben Yosse derived the idea from. He may have been familiar with the oral text attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, but he may have derived the idea from other sources that as yet remain unspecified.

7        I compose hymns  
          For the King, in my throat,

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<sup>95</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], p. 214

The King, the arbiter of Israel's fate given their faithfulness to His Law, both Pentateuchal and Oral, is the object of Yosse ben Yosse's liturgy and ought to be the object of the nation's prayers and joyful praises as well. Yosse ben Yosse refers to a verse in Nehemiah :*"...they and our fathers dealt proudly, and hardened their neck, and hearkened not to Thy commandments, and refused to hearken, neither were mindful of Thy wonders that Thou didst among them; but hardened their neck, and in their rebellion appointed a captain to return to their bondage; but Thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy, and forsookest them not"* [Nehemiah 9:16-17]. The Paytan reminds his audience that their present oppression is a proverbial whip hurled at their backs by God in punishment of misdeeds, but at the same time he reminds the congregation that God has a merciful nature and is inherently biased in favour of His chosen. Repentance, even for the gravest sin, will come, as promised in the Psalm: *"The tale of iniquities is too heavy for me; as for our transgressions, Thou wilt pardon them"* [Psalm 65:4].

8        He is Gracious and Compassionate  
           And He pardons ---

This Piyyut is incomplete. It stands as a truncated Piyyut among the works of Yosse ben Yosse and one can assume, based on the acrostic structure of the first words in each couplet, that the mere eight lines found here [from **ס** to **ח**] were part of a more complete Hebrew Alphabetic acrostic that would have, but for the vicissitudes of time, reached the twenty second and last letter **ח** in the original form. No record has yet been found of the lost verses. It remains for future researchers to mine the archives and Geniza documents for the possible remains of this poem and others by Yosse ben Yosse, and to thus bring them out from obscurity and into the light of scholarly redemption.

## Chapter 2: Language, Linguistics, Style, and Allusions

The Jerusalem Talmud, also known as the Yerushalmi, or Palestinian Talmud, was written and “sealed” between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries in Tiberias,<sup>96</sup> then the centre of Jewish life in Byzantine Palestine. Its language is a blend of Hebrew, Western Aramaic, and loaned Greek words. Its literary sources are the Mishna, the Braitot and the Tosefta. It comprises redacted Amoraic discussions, Halachas, and Aggadic texts.<sup>97</sup> It stands to reason that Yosse ben Yosse would have been familiar with the state of the art rabbinic scholarship of his time. There are however two important questions in this regard. First, was the text already fixed at the time of its redaction, and was Yosse ben Yosse aware of its completed format? Secondly, was Yosse ben Yosse and were his contemporaries in possession of written texts, or were these texts transmitted and “consumed” orally? “Unfortunately”, explains Leib Moscovitz, “we lack explicit evidence which might shed light on these questions”,<sup>98</sup> and I might add, we lack evidence now but may yet uncover some in the future. In all likelihood, most scholars seem to agree that Yosse ben Yosse and his contemporaries received the texts of the Palestinian Talmud orally.<sup>99</sup>

Piyyut liturgy and Midrash literature both arose from the Oral Torah. Both are literary siblings, drawing intertextual authority from the same proverbial wells of Jewish learning, the Torah and the Talmud. Aharon Mirsky, the preeminent Yosse ben Yosse scholar, holds that other than structural, phenomenological and morphological differences between the two, the ancient Piyyut is nothing less than Midrash in a different form of

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<sup>96</sup> Leib Moscovitz, “*The Formation and Character of the Jerusalem Talmud*”, in: Steven Katz, *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, p. 663

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 665-670

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 672

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 673

packaging.<sup>100</sup> The ancient Piyyut as a genre, of which the Yosse ben Yosse oeuvre is a salient part, did not evolve overnight and cannot be attributed to any single individual. It took generations. Yosse ben Yosse, Yannai, and the Kalir, none of them invented the genre, and not one of them gave it its characteristic shape.<sup>101</sup> The vagaries of time have alas left us with fragmentary evidence and to date we cannot determine with any measure of confidence the full evolutionary arc of the Piyyut. Mirsky confirms that current scholarship on the subject is inconclusive as to the original authority behind the literary form and genre of the Piyyut. In addition to that, there is currently scant information regarding the manner in which this literary and Midrashic creature was received by the Jewish public in 5<sup>th</sup> century Palestine.<sup>102</sup>

Mirsky points us to a potential avenue of research by saying that “the Piyyutim were the offspring of prayer”,<sup>103</sup> and he cites the prayer **עלינו לשבה** as an example of morphological similarity between Piyyutim and prayers. He concludes rather logically therefore that the morphological similarity suggests that the two genres were created during the same historical period. Certain Midrashic and Aggadic texts which we know to have been composed at approximately the same time, also display similar morphological markers as Piyyut liturgies, and scholars such as Zulai and Mirsky therefore maintain that they were the cultural and religious products of a single age.<sup>104</sup> Even as the similar morphologies have been described, the common point of origin is as yet veiled behind the mists of time. Given that Oral Torah was the cornerstone of Piyyutic content, it is indeed possible that oral tradition influenced the shape and form of Piyyutic literature. It is not

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<sup>100</sup> Aharon Mirsky, The Origins of Forms of Early Hebrew Poetry [Hebrew], p. 4

<sup>101</sup> J. Yahalom, Poetic Language in Early Piyyut [Hebrew], p. 32

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5

<sup>104</sup> Aharon Mirsky, The Origins of Forms of Early Hebrew Poetry [Hebrew], p. 5

clear what precisely inspired or prompted Amoraic sages to create this distinctive genre in addition to their more sober texts.<sup>105</sup>

Tannaitic Midrash follows specific exegetical systems for elucidating Scripture and for drawing Halacha therefrom. Ancient Midrash drew no barrier between Halacha and Aggada, allowing the cerebral to blend easily and seamlessly with the emotional and imaginative. This, I believe, permitted lay people who were less erudite and learned than the religious scholars, to access Scripture exegetically. Assisted by imagery and imagination, as well as by musicality, lay people could meet Scripture at eye level and feel enriched by the encounter. Midrash and Halacha grew broader in scope constantly, and they had to be made accessible and relevant for the people regardless of their familiarity and understanding of complex rabbinic scholarship.<sup>106</sup>

One of the characteristics of Yosse ben Yosse's work is the acrostic structure of his verses. It is usually alphabetic, at times doubling and tripling the verses for each letter, but always striving to portray wholeness through the Hebrew alphabet. The acrostic form was a stylistic "beauty mark", an aesthetic elaboration on Psalmic and Pentateuchal poetic traditions. The Tannaim employed this ornamental literary device in the Toseftas and in the Mishna, sensitive as they were to the aesthetic beauty of their texts.<sup>107</sup>

The transmission of Oral Torah was, for the most part in this period, oral and aural, focused mainly in rabbinic academies and study centres. Exegetical insights, interpretations of Scripture and intertextual wisdom were passed from generation to

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<sup>105</sup> Aharon Mirsky, The Origins of Forms of Early Hebrew Poetry [Hebrew], p. 6

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8

generation, each adding its own gloss, a new layer on the ever-growing edifice of learning. Piyyutim in general were part of this oral tradition in a two-fold manner. First, they were communicated orally from one congregation to another, from one generation to another, across time and geographic space. Secondly, their content, tenor, and authority were drawn from Oral Torah and from its rabbinic champions. The collective effort of many sages and poets gave shape to the genre, just as Amoraic sages stood on the shoulders of their Tannaitic predecessors, so did Piyyut evolve from Tannaitic to Amoraic and to Savoraic and later elaborations in form.<sup>108</sup> The Piyyut genre was buffed by a long process of refinement and elaboration which eventually gave rise to its rhymed and rhythmic morphology we recognize in Hebrew poetry, but gave the Piyyut an extra varnish of Midrashic and exegetical content as well.<sup>109</sup>

The Tannaim were so engaged with Piyyut that they, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century already, found it necessary to mint a special word which described Piyyutic authors as a distinct group. The word Piyyut [פיוט] was drawn from the Greek word ποιητής which refers to a creative work [יצירה in Hebrew], and the profession of composing such poetry (the English derivative word from the same Greek source) was then called a Paytan [פייטן].<sup>110</sup> His vocation was positioned somewhere between Tanna and Darshan, whose homiletic sermonizing was the most common teaching method. The Paytan preceded the Darshan historically, suggesting that his was a novel genre of Midrash, and an innovative method of education in the Tannaitic period.<sup>111</sup> Homiletic sermons and Piyyutim can therefore be linked in their religious exegetical function as well as in their social function as vehicles

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<sup>108</sup> Aharon Mirsky, The Origins of Forms of Early Hebrew Poetry [Hebrew],. 7-8

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 9

<sup>110</sup> Aharon Mirsky, The Beginnings of Piyyut [Hebrew], <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/sifrut/maamarim/reshit6-2.htm>

<sup>111</sup> Aharon Mirsky, The Origins of Forms of Early Hebrew Poetry [Hebrew], p. 9

for public education, inspiration, and Halachic instruction.<sup>112</sup> Scripture provides both homily and Piyyut an infrastructure and a scaffold on which to construct the edifice of knowledge and observance. Biblical verses are the nuclei around which Piyyutic stanzas and couplets are formed, much like in homiletic sermons. This characteristic remained a morphological feature of Piyyutim well into the Spanish Golden Age liturgies of luminaries such as Even Gevirol, Yehuda Alcharizi, Yossi Even Avitur, Yossef Even Zadik, and many others.<sup>113</sup>

Since the history of the Jewish people in Palestine after the destruction is incomplete, the study of its evolution “requires dealing with rabbinic literature as a historical source”.<sup>114</sup> Rabbinic literature is a vast body of knowledge, and must therefore be unpacked with care. For the purposes of this investigation, I have chosen to describe this body of knowledge as Oral Torah. The concept of Oral Torah was an innovation of the Sages. Shmuel Safrai provides a working definition of the term, as follows:

“... the term Oral Torah... (describes) the diffuse body of oral tradition literature of the Sages, which was gradually created during the Second Temple period and the period of Tannaim and Amoraim, and which was finally preserved in the written form in which we know it: rabbinic literature.”<sup>115</sup>

Thousands of unnamed Sages made contributions to Oral Torah, and numerous sayings and teachings have been completely forgotten. But those sayings and teachings which were eventually redacted and committed to parchment, remain as historical signposts of the evolution of Oral Torah in all its facets.<sup>116</sup> “These texts”, writes Safrai, “resulted from generations of collective creation and redaction. They are the written

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<sup>112</sup> Aharon Mirsky, The Origins of Forms of Early Hebrew Poetry [Hebrew], p. 10

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 130

<sup>114</sup> Abraham Godberg, “*The Palestinian Talmud*”, in: Shmuel Safrai (ed.), The Literature of the Sages, p. 34

<sup>115</sup> Shmuel Safrai (ed.), “*Oral Torah*”, in: The Literature of the Sages, p. 35

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 70

(record) of an oral tradition”.<sup>117</sup> Historically speaking, Oral Torah dealt with all aspects of Jewish life, both theological and practical, and was the product of continued creativity. Its basic antipathy to foreign rule reflects a pervasive popular and rabbinic resistance to environmental influences, and this sense of particularity and otherness find echoes in Midrash, in Halacha, in Aggada literature,<sup>118</sup> and I wish to maintain here, to Piyyut literature as well. The primary social and religious function of rabbinic literature and Oral Torah in general was to teach the people, all the people, Torah. In this effort, “both prayer and Targum (translation of scripture and Sages’ teachings) functioned in public liturgy”,<sup>119</sup> where stylistic and material uniformity was not only tolerated but actively and enthusiastically encouraged. Public recitation, aided by specialized reciters,<sup>120</sup> was intended to reach and teach both men and women<sup>121</sup> in synagogues and in other public gathering places,<sup>122</sup> and thus create a “learning nation”.<sup>123</sup> Since there was no formal notation of vocalizations and cantillations at the time, as those were transmitted orally and there exist no direct testimonies in this regard,<sup>124</sup> the participatory nature and the musical accompaniment of Piyyut liturgies must be determined on the basis of literary analysis of preserved texts alone.

The Sages insisted on the oral transmission of their teachings for a great many reasons whose scope is well beyond this particular investigation.<sup>125</sup> The term Oral Torah was applied liberally to all the religious and spiritual literary products that were different

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<sup>117</sup> Shmuel Safrai (ed.), “*Oral Torah*”, in: *The Literature of the Sages*, p. 73

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. p. 37

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. p. 38

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. p. 61

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. p. 106

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. p. 72

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. pp. 40-45

from the Written Torah, which were continuously taught and continuously re-created by generations upon successive generation in a variety of genres and formats, many of which have, because of their ephemeral nature as aural and oral artefacts, been irrevocably lost in the mists of time.<sup>126</sup> The Sages encouraged creative fluidity and flexible pluriformity in prayer, which after the destruction had become the most accessible form of worship. The Sages sought to imbue the prayer tradition with openness to change and to development, as long as the foundation upon which the new structures were built remained the Hebrew Bible. Scripture was un-varying and un-variable, but Oral Torah in all its permutations was allowed, even expected, to be a fruitful and ever changing endeavour, never ‘cut and dry’, always lively, always participatory in nature, always innovative, and always responsive to the spirit of the time.<sup>127</sup> Torah was considered a living and growing reality, and like the proverbial shark, it must swim or sink, the Sages taught, it must continuously provide expressive room for innovation and change in response to life.

Torah was taught and studied, Safrai explains, in three main forums: in small groups, in homiletic sermons in synagogues, and at public gatherings for meals, at the marketplace, or on festive occasions.<sup>128</sup> To Safrai’s three categories I wish to add the category of Piyut as a forum and form of teaching and learning Torah, which I believe may be part of the continuum of creative innovation in rabbinic literature whereas it is part of the dialogical interface with the community and is naturally not monolithic and stale because of its musical overtones, even in the absence of musical accompaniment. Liturgical prayer, sung in Hebrew, which was no longer a spoken language in the 5<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Abraham Goldberg, “*The Palestinian Talmud*”, in: Shmuel Safrai (ed.), *The Literature of the Sages*, p. 308

<sup>127</sup> Shmuel Safrai (ed.), *The Literature of the Sages*, p. 50

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. pp. 60-61

century but solidified the covenantal bond with the Written Torah, and facilitated the organic process of authoritative Oral Torah teachings over time.<sup>129</sup> Responding to public needs, required rabbinic responsiveness to outside influences from the ambient culture, and an openness to the expansion and development of Oral Torah through gradual and cogitated absorption of external cultural impulses.<sup>130</sup> Chief among these forces was art, visual and aural art alike. Music, I maintain, was one of these artistic external influences which was absorbed into Jewish liturgy from the Greek culture, first as a rabbinic concession to alluring cultural fashion and therefore a bulwark against assimilation (see later), and secondly because of music's ability to serve as a mnemonic device which is so paramount a requirement of Oral Torah transmission.<sup>131</sup> The Sages encouraged innovation as a fundamental tenet in the development of Jewish culture and society on the basis of Torah. Piyut, as a literary genre, is linked to Midrashic teaching; its musicality is linked to rabbinic efforts to stem assimilation and to cement the people's connection to the foundational source of their singular collective identity.

During the long process of Oral Torah production and redaction, specific terminologies had to be coined by the Sages in response to innovations of form and substance in the creation and in the transmission of Oral Torah. This fecundity of linguistics produced hundreds of terms relating to Halachic legal matters, religious concepts, exegetical processes, administrative categories, and finally to literary genres and literary units.<sup>132</sup> Yosse ben Yosse was one of the newly minted specialists of Oral Torah, a Paytan. His craft was poetry, and poetry's parentage was Greek. He had

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<sup>129</sup> Shmuel Safrai (ed.), The Literature of the Sages, p. 68

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. p. 74

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. pp. 76-83

<sup>132</sup> Shmuel Safrai (ed.), "Oral Torah", in: The Literature of the Sages, 89

absorbed Tannaic and Amoraic tradition and he gave expression to the rabbinic requirement to preserve the ancient wisdom creatively, which he did in Piyyut form. He wrote in unadulterated Hebrew, he harked back to scripture as his foundational source for allusions, and he designed the Piyyut liturgies as prayerful recitations that required some public participation as well. Tannaic teachings, already considered ancient in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and therefore more authentic, display a high level of linguistic and literary quality both in form and in substance. They were exclusively Hebrew, unlike later Ammoraic teachings which absorbed Aramaic and Greek. Furthermore, prayer was exclusively Hebrew as well, by rabbinic diktat,<sup>133</sup> and as a Paytan, Yosse ben Yosse could satisfy both through his Piyyutim.

If during the First Temple period religious rites and prayers were not a normative concern of the people;<sup>134</sup> and given the tendency during the Second Temple period to ascribe religiosity to Kohannite representation through the sacrificial cult and consider it spiritually satisfying and sufficient for the maintenance of the covenantal bond; after the 70 CE destruction of the Temple, participatory religious worship became a paramount normative requirement which the Sages designed from the ground up, so to speak, as a bulwark against the dissolution of the People of Israel as a national and spiritual entity. Oral Torah itself was a revolutionary innovation in that it claimed authority from Sinai, and in that it fostered an ever-expanding self as a prerequisite for the people's interface with reality in view of the Written Torah;<sup>135</sup> its revolutionary nature extended beyond the hallowed halls of study, as Oral Torah became a feature of public and popular culture for

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<sup>133</sup> Shmuel Safrai (ed.), "Oral Torah", in: The Literature of the Sages, p. 85

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. p. 101

<sup>135</sup> Shmuel Safrai (ed.), The Literature of the Sages, p. 102

the nation as a whole.<sup>136</sup> I think, on the basis of this historical rabbinic innovation, and after analysis of the Piyyut literature produced by Yosse ben Yosse, that Piyyut liturgy was one of the vehicles of this type of teaching and transmission of Oral Torah. He selected the same themes as did the Sages, adding in his Piyyut contributions to the ever expanding body of Oral Torah. The study of Torah as a means for cementing the covenantal bond with God,<sup>137</sup> the observance of God's Laws (Mitzvot) as a national and spiritual mark of distinction as an act of identity formation,<sup>138</sup> repentance for sin as an act of prayerful atonement and therefore a bulwark against further suffering,<sup>139</sup> and the intrinsic partnership between Man and God in the creation of the world as a cosmic partnership and collective responsibility of Israel<sup>140</sup>- all are themes which find echo in "regular" rabbinic literature and in Piyyut literature as penned by Yosse ben Yosse. Rabbinic tradition created the framework within which oral tradition flourished; Piyyut was a creative means for directing the people's hearts toward heaven both for individuals and communities, all seeking to bring closer God's promised redemption.

The aim of prayer during Byzantine times was thought to be the leading of the congregation toward a cathartic cleaving of each individual's soul, while eliminating spiritual negativity.<sup>141</sup> Byzantine society sought to portray manifestations of God through visual art, and Jewish communities absorbed this artistic tendency toward theophany in synagogue mosaics<sup>142</sup> which survive to this day. The ambient environment in which

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<sup>136</sup> Shmuel Safrai (ed.), *"Oral Torah"*, in: *The Literature of the Sages*, p. 104

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113

<sup>141</sup> Sandro Sproccati, *A Guide to Art*, [Translated], p. 282

<sup>142</sup> Meir Ben-Dov and Yoel Rappel, *Mosaics of the Holy Land*, 1987 ; Steven Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World- Toward a New Jewish Archaeology*, 2005 ; Steven Fine, *Jews, Christians, and Polytheists in the*

Yosse ben Yosse lived was suffused with this artistic intent and this in turn inevitably seeped into his own artistry as a liturgical wordsmith. Byzantine art was concerned with the ritualization of art, its incorporation into the rites and rituals, through the symbolic value accrued to each aspect of artistic expression. Yosse ben Yosse absorbed the cultural focus on symbolism in the literary creation of Piyyutim, seeking as did Byzantine visual artists, to give form to the ephemeral, to give shape to something greater than natural reality. The Paytan used iconic language as a mosaic artist would use iconic images, separating the sacred from the profane. Poetic language, by artistic convention, had to stand apart from spoken language, and each of its utterances had to convey deeper and wider meanings through allegory and through allusion to scripture, the only accepted and authoritative description and voice of the divine.<sup>143</sup>

Poetry in general, and Piyyut in particular, may be analyzed for their culturally specific semiotic language. Words and images are not merely signs *for* living things but act *as* living things<sup>144</sup> that interact with the author of words as well as with his audience. The prevailing Byzantine belief in the potency of words for their ability to materially affect reality and to take a life of their own regardless of the purposes of their authors,<sup>145</sup> became the raw material for the creative and spiritual impulses of the Paytan. Words, however, are powerless without the full cooperation of the audience, and the Piyyutim would have been rendered meaningless if not for popular support, demand, and love thereof.<sup>146</sup> Piyyut as a literary genre, and a powerful communication device, was a

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Ancient Synagogue- Cultural Interaction During the Greco-Roman period, 1999; See also: <http://www.ancient-synagogues.com/>

<sup>143</sup> Sandro Sproccati, *A Guide to Art*, [Translated], p. 280

<sup>144</sup> W.J.T, Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, p. 6

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15

participant in the lives of people, it was not merely a trope as its value was made greater for its ability to stand for and act as the cultural symptoms it signified and addressed. Through rhythm and musicality, as well as through well crafted allusions to scripture, Piyyut was able to entice and shape public emotions and behaviour.<sup>147</sup> As an organic part of the rabbinic Oral Torah in all its depth and breadth, Piyyut as a literary and religious genre is a worthy artefact through which to examine the interiority and external aspects of Jewish life.

The Yosse ben Yosse Piyyutim speak to us directly, even as they look at us across a gulf un-bridged by everyday language, and despite their age. Although each Piyyut seems to be a prayerful ornamentation that does not “want” anything from us or from the audiences that first heard it in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, each Piyyut has a specific social function, because the Paytan was one of the congregants, one with the congregation, and not indifferent to their concerns.<sup>148</sup> The ontological importance of the Piyyut genre in general hovers over the rhetoric, at once drawing from and projecting on the community their historic and historiographic ideology, as well as their messianic hopes for redemption and national reconstitution.<sup>149</sup>

There may have been scores of Paytanim in Palestine at the time of Yosse ben Yosse.<sup>150</sup> The language they employed characterises a distinctive literary genre typical of the Byzantine flowering of Jewish art in its twin forms of poetry and mosaic.<sup>151</sup> Piyyutic

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<sup>147</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, p. 28

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. p. 42

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47

<sup>150</sup> J. Yahalom, *Poetic Language in Early Piyyut* [Hebrew], p. 32; See also: Avigdor Shinan, “*The Late Midrashic Paytanic and Targumic Literature*”, in Steven Katz (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, p. 679

<sup>151</sup> For some striking pictorial records of synagogue mosaics, such as the 5<sup>th</sup> century built synagogues in **Susya** and **Katzrin**, the Tiberias synagogue in what was then the capital of Palestina Secunda, the synagogue in **Bar’am**, the **Bet**

art does not feature spoken language which relies on Aramaic and Greek, the *lingua franca* of the period, but it is elaborated and ornamented by “high Hebrew” and with linguistic innovations<sup>152</sup> of the yet grammatically unsystematized language.<sup>153</sup> Piyyutic language is emotive, it employs enigmatic nuances and pseudonymity,<sup>154</sup> but it is always under Yosse ben Yosse’s hand, pure and unadulterated Hebrew.<sup>155</sup> The cryptic stylizations appeared in the Bible already, in such prophetic texts in Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Daniel to name but a few.<sup>156</sup> There was a problem however for the audiences who were the didactic target of these Piyyutic homilies.

מפני התמד הגלות ואורך שמן היותה, הלכה הלשון העברית הלוך ואבוד, ונכרתה או כמעט נכרתה, „ ולא נשאר מן השפה העברית שריד לבד מעשרים וארבעה הספרים הכתובים... מהם לקחה האומה את כל החומר לתפילות ולבקשות ולתוכחות ולשבחות לשירות ולקינות ולהספדים ולשאר מיני השפה הכתובה ואופני ההרצאה... (לשון המשנה) הוא דבור עברי טהור (גם אם אינו מדקדק בדקדוק) כי תקופתם היתה קרובה מאוד לשפה<sup>157</sup>

Assimilation, both linguistic and cultural, and a general decline in religious observance, contributed to the deterioration of Hebrew as a spoken language in Palestine. In other words, no one understood Hebrew any longer. It was the language of Scripture, and as such it was memorized, but who spoke it? Rabbinic power resided in no small measure in the ability of the learned to convey the message inherent in Hebrew verses from the Bible. Words are potent symbols of the divine messages. Hebrew was the language of Torah reading, of prayer, and even if the common people did not speak

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Alpha mosaic, the Capernaum ruins, the ruins in Zephoris, in Nevoraia and in Khirbet Shema, and the Gush Chalav synagogue which the Mishna already referred to, see: <http://www.ancient-synagogues.com/>

<sup>152</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *The Beginnings of Piyyut* [Hebrew], <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/sifrut/maamarim/reshit6-2.htm>

<sup>153</sup> J. Yahalom, *Poetic Language in Early Piyyut* [Hebrew], pp. 32-40

<sup>154</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *The Beginnings of Piyyut* [Hebrew], <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/sifrut/maamarim/reshit6-2.htm>

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189

<sup>156</sup> Binyamin Lau, *Jeremiah* [Hebrew], p. 142: citing the example of Jeremiah 25:26 where the Babylonian king is referred to as מלך ששך instead of מלך בבל, replacing the א with ת, in the א"ב system of cryptic writing typical of the age.

<sup>157</sup> Avraham S. Halkin (ed.), *ספר העיונים והדיונים על השירה העברית*, p. 53

Hebrew, the very recitation of Hebrew words was rabbinically determined to be an efficacious method for reaching the divine and accessing its mercy and a means for salvation.<sup>158</sup>

These are the traditional words spoken at this very moment in a thousand places. Yarush did not understand them. But he knows they are important. Soon the Old Rabbi will speak on his behalf.<sup>159</sup>

The *sitz im Leben* nature of Yosse ben Yosse's Hebrew poetry made his Piyyutim one of the means by which Torah was spread among the Jewish inhabitants of Byzantine Palestine.<sup>160</sup> Rabbinic scholars in Palestine and Babylon created texts, Aggadas, Targumic literature and Halachic literature, and needed these texts to be transmitted to the People. Even as Babylonian academies eventually eclipsed their Palestinian counterparts, the literary products of both centres of learning were shared among Jewish communities across the Jewish commonwealth. Synagogues were the sites where Jews gathered to pray and study, and to listen to sermons as well. Avigdor Shinan describes the social importance of synagogues: "All sectors of the society gathered, young and old, scholars and laymen, men and women... (lending the synagogue a) diverse communal character".<sup>161</sup> The oral nature of much of this didactic transmission enhanced the role of Piyyutic liturgy in the weekly prayers and on Shabbat and festival occasions, as well as in life cycle events such as weddings and funerals. Oral texts were memorized and learned by heart, they were performed orally and handed down from one generation to the next, with inevitable adaptations.

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<sup>158</sup> Binyamin Lau, *Jeremiah* [Hebrew], p. 62

<sup>159</sup> Lilian Nattel, *The River Midnight*, p. 292

<sup>160</sup> Avigdor Shinan, "The Late Midrashic Paytanic and Targumic Literature", p. 695

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 680

The Piyyutic genre, with its mnemonic riches of musicality and rhymed rhythmic verses, relied on familiar Scriptural readings that the audience would have recognized from the public reading cycle of the Torah. This made Piyyutim quite popular with Jewish folk who no longer spoke Hebrew but still yearned for contact with the divine through its religiously potent words.<sup>162</sup> Moreover, the Piyyutim of the period reflected the ideas and concerns of the public and of its rabbinic leadership, addressing the “hot button” issues of the day. The Paytan therefore shared some of the power reserved for the Rabbis, as Shinan explains: “The poets and the translators, many of whom are anonymous, held an established position in rabbinic circles as the conveyers of the Rabbis’ teachings to the public attending the synagogue”.<sup>163</sup> Piyyutic liturgies were a pithy mode for packaging rabbinic exegeses, theological insights, Halachic rulings and ethical mores. Their “easy on the eye and easy on the ear” quality made Piyyutim an integral part of communal worship, often substituting for public sermons, but always enhancing the prayer experience. This held true at least until the crystallization and codification of the Jewish prayer book, the Siddur.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Avigdor Shinan, “*The Late Midrashic Paytanic and Targumic Literature*”, p. 694

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 692

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 691-694

<p>טַעַם אֲמַתִּיק לוֹ בְּחִיד וְגֵרוֹן</p>	3	<p>אֲפַתַח פֶּה בְּרֵנָן אֶהְלֵל לְשֵׁם פֶּה</p>	1
<p>יִהְיֶה לְשׁוֹנֵי צַדִּיק תְּהִילֹת מֶלֶךְ.</p>		<p>בְּשַׁפְּתַי רַעְוֹת גֹּדֵל אֲתֵן לְמֶלֶךְ.</p>	
<p>כָּל עֲצָמוֹתַי וְחִדְרֵי קִרְבִּי</p>		<p>גֹּדְלוֹ אֲשַׁנֵּן בְּקֶהֱל וְעִידָה</p>	
<p>לְשֵׁם קְדוֹשׁ אֶהְלֵל כִּי הוּא לְעוֹלָם מֶלֶךְ.</p>		<p>דְּבָרָיו אֶמְנֶה וְהוּא לְעוֹלָם מֶלֶךְ.</p>	
<p>מַעֲנֶה אֲשַׁאלָה מִנּוֹ וְלֹא מֵאֵל אֲחֵר</p>	4	<p>הֲלֹא הוּא גֹמֵן מַעֲנֶה לְשׁוֹן</p>	2
<p>נַפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבֵב בְּנַחַת לְגֵדֵל מֶלֶךְ.</p>		<p>וְלִכְּל אֲשֶׁר יִחַפֹּץ יֵטֶה לִּבּוֹ מֶלֶךְ.</p>	
<p>שַׁפְּתַי תִּבְעֶנָה חַן וְתַחֲנוּנִים</p>		<p>זִיכְרוֹ לְדוֹר דוֹר שְׁנוֹתָיו לְאוֹרֵךְ יָמִים</p>	
<p>עֲנוֹת סִיחַ בְּפִי בְּסוֹד גִּזְעִים מֶלֶךְ.</p>		<p>חֵי הוּא לְעוֹלָם וְאֵין כְּנֶגְדּוֹ מֶלֶךְ.</p>	

<sup>165</sup> The Hebrew text is copied from: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], 1991 Edition, pp. 239-242

## I OPEN MY MOUTH IN PRAYERFUL SONG

- 1 I open my mouth in prayerful song,  
I extol Him, who gave us a mouth,  
My lips are abundant with praise  
As I glorify the King.
- 1B I recite His grandeur  
Among congregations and multitudes,  
His everlasting truth,  
And His everlasting reign as King.
- 2 For it is He who gives  
The tongue's retort,  
And for whomever He desires  
He will turn that man's heart, for He is King.
- 2B He shall be remembered for all generations,  
His years endure for all time,  
He is, and shall live forever,  
And none but Him is King.
- 3 I recount His Word, with sweetness  
Upon my palate and in my throat,  
My tongue speaks of His justice,  
In praises of the King.
- 3B All my limbs,  
All the chambers of my bowels,  
I do consecrate to praises of the Holy Name  
For He is the eternal King.
- 4 I seek only His counsel,  
Not from any other god,  
He shall revive my soul in joy,  
As He leads me to glorify the King.

סוּעֵלוּ אֲשַׁנּוּ

5

בַּפֶּה וּבַלְשׁוֹן

צִדִּיקוֹ אָנִיד

כִּי הוּא לְבַדּוֹ מְלֵךְ.

קָרְבֵי וְקִלְיָתַי

זָמַר יִפְּיעוּ

רִנּוֹן יִתְנוּ

כִּי אֵין זולָתוֹ מְלֵךְ.

שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ אֲשִׁיר

6

לְיוֹצֵר בְּרֵאשִׁית

תְּהִלָּה אֲמַתִּיק לוֹ

כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ מַעֲנֶה לְשׁוֹן.

כֹּל בֶּקַע לְאָדָם מֵעֵרְכֵי לֵב.

- 4B My lips express  
Grace and supplication,  
My mouth utters prayer  
To the mystery kindness of the King.
- 5 I recount His great deeds  
With my mouth and tongue,  
I declare His righteousness,  
For He alone is King.
- 5B My innards and my limbs  
Resonate with song,  
They intone with music,  
That none but Him is King.
- 6 I sing a new song  
To the Creator of the Beginning,  
I make sweet my adoration of His glory  
For He hath granted me voice.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *"To man belongs the arrangements [thoughts in] his heart, but from God comes the tongue's replay."* [Proverbs 16:1]

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## COMMENTARY

Aharon Mirsky, the preeminent Yosse ben Yosse scholar, has collected all the known poems of the Paytan, and published them in his volume, entitled “*Yosse ben Yosse Poems*” (1977). He has gathered fifteen poems, of which twelve<sup>166</sup> are attributed to Yosse ben Yosse with a measure of scholarly certainty. Three poems, however, remain in doubt with regards to their precise authorship.<sup>167</sup> There are several factors which cast a measure of scepticism with regards to the parentage of certain Yosse ben Yosse poems.

First, the Yosse ben Yosse poems have reached us in varying degrees of physical integrity. Some of them are complete<sup>168</sup> and display the typical alphabetic acrostic in full,<sup>169</sup> while others are truncated and fragmentary.<sup>170</sup> Yosse ben Yosse wrote his oeuvre in the fifth century. Since then his poems have been copied and transcribed many a time by many a scribe, making it difficult for scholars to know with absolute certainty that the texts that have reached us are indeed true to the original. This is particularly problematic with regards to fragmentary poems, and with regards to the poems whose authorship is not fully determined.<sup>171</sup>

Secondly, unlike subsequent Paytanim, such as Yannai,<sup>172</sup> Yosse ben Yosse did not weave his name into the fabric of his Piyyutim, and he did not sign his work. Yosse

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<sup>166</sup> "אהללה אלוהי", "אפחד במעשי", "אנוסה לעזרה", "אמנם אשמנו", "אזכור גבורות אלוה", "אתן תהילה", "אתה כוננת עולם ברוב חסד", "אספר גדולות", "אין לנו כהן גדול", "אור עולם", "אפתח שפתי", "אז לראש נתנו", "אז בדעת חקר", "אפתח פה ברנן", "אכרעה ואברכה"

<sup>167</sup> "אז בדעת חקר", "אפתח פה ברנן", "אכרעה ואברכה"

<sup>168</sup> Of the poems under investigation in this thesis, the ones that are more or less complete are: "אנוסה", "אפחד במעשי", "אנוסה לעזרה", "אתן תהילה", "אפתח פה ברנן", "אהללה אלוהי". In each poem, the alphabetic acrostic reaches the letter ת suggesting that the poem is complete and full.

<sup>169</sup> Michael Swartz and J. Yahalom, *Avodah: An Anthology*, p. 20

<sup>170</sup> Of the poems under investigation in this thesis, the truncated ones are: "אז נתנו לראש", "אפתח שפתי", "אז נתנו לראש". The alphabetic acrostic in these poems is truncated, suggesting the poems are incomplete. It remains for future scholars to mine the Geniza and other archives for possible fragments that would complete the oeuvre.

<sup>171</sup> The poem "אור עולם" for example, is but one line long.

<sup>172</sup> Laura Lieber, *Yannai on Genesis*, (2010)

ben Yosse is the first Paytan to be identified by name, writing as he did at the end of the Anonymous Period. Little is known about him. It is generally assumed that he lived at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century or in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, in the Land of Israel which was then under Byzantine rule and named Palestine. Certain researchers identify Yosse ben Yosse with an Amora, Rabbi Yossi ben Yossi, who is mentioned in the Palestinian Talmud. This however is just speculation at this point and there is little source material to corroborate this identification.<sup>173</sup> Yosse ben Yosse's liturgies do not bear mention of his name in the acrostic form he did adopt. Later Paytanim inserted their name in the acrostic, but Yosse ben Yosse harked back to Biblical liturgies and songs that were structured around the Alphabetic acrostic. This complicates the task of scholars who seek to determine the precise parentage of several Piyyutim. Mirsky has therefore analyzed the existing materials, studying the rhyming system, the meter, the tenor, the grammatical idiosyncrasies, the *wortspiele*, the neologism, the allusions to Talmudic and Midrashic scholarship, and the subject matter of all the potential Yosse ben Yosse Piyyutim,<sup>174</sup> and he has suggested that these three "suspect" poems included in his volume may be attributed to Yosse ben Yosse. Mirsky attributes these works to Yosse ben Yosse on the basis of a detailed review of their stylistic, grammatical, and literary aspects, as well as on the basis of careful analysis of their content and subject matter which appear to suggest that indeed Yosse ben Yosse penned them.<sup>175</sup> Mirsky, however, does not sweep all uncertainty under the proverbial rug, and has devoted a separate chapter in his book to these poems, leaving the door open for further scholarship that may, in time, verify the provenance of the three.

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<sup>173</sup> Adin Steinzaltz, *The Siddur and Prayer* [Hebrew], p. 185

<sup>174</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], pp. 7-84

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74-84

The Piyyut **אפתה פה ברנן** is among the complete poems, but also among the three poems regarding whose authorship some lingering doubts remain. Given Mirsky's conclusions, however, and bowing to his scholarship, I have included this Piyyut here and will therefore treat it as a Yosse ben Yosse Piyyut. In addition to the alphabetic acrostic in this Piyyut, it is interesting to note that, like the Piyyut **אהללה אלוהי**<sup>176</sup>, here too Yosse ben Yosse employs a literary stylistic flourish if ending each stanza with a repetitive word, here "King", thus adorning the verses with a cadence and an accent which fifth century audiences found appealing.

1 I open my mouth in prayerful song,  
I extol Him, who gave us a mouth,  
My lips are abundant with praise  
As I glorify the King.

Yosse ben Yosse begins with an evocation of Daniel, the prophet who found himself in a lion's den and sought God's succour with a true heart, and thus won his salvation: *"And, behold, one like the similitude of the sons of men touched my lips; then I opened my mouth, and spoke and said unto him that stood before me: 'O my LORD, by reason of the vision my pains are come upon me, and I retain no strength'"* [Daniel 10:16]. The Paytan could thus be hinting to his audience, for whom scripture is the familiar fabric of life, that even as they too find themselves in dire straits, even as they consider themselves in a proverbial lion's den, they too should seek God's succour if they desire redemption.

Yosse ben Yosse invokes the Psalmist gesture of opening his Piyyut with an allusion to the lips as the site of adoration: *"my mouth doth praise Thee with joyful lips"*

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<sup>176</sup> See page 125

[Psalms 63:6], as he did previously. Here, like in the Piyyut **אפתה שפתי**<sup>177</sup>, Yosse ben Yosse repeats the theme of song as a means of accessing the ultimate reality of God.

Similarly, in the second stanza of this Piyyut:

2 For it is He who gives  
The tongue's retort,  
And for whomever He desires  
He will turn that man's heart, for He is King.

Yosse ben Yosse returns to the theme of speech as a God-given faculty: *"The preparations of the heart are man's, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD"* [Proverbs 16:1]. As he did in the Piyyut **אפתה שפתי** Yosse ben Yosse again uses the human body as canvas, upon which God's adoration may be writ. The very same faculty granted humans by God, is to be employed in the service of God, better so He may hearken humanity's pleas. *"The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD as the watercourses: He turneth it whithersoever He will"* [Proverbs 21:1]. It is God's choice whom He listens to, it is God's Law He had given to Israel, and it is in obeisance to this Law that Israel will be heard. These stylistic preferences and these choices of scriptural anchors are some of the clues Mirsky followed in determining the Yosse ben Yosse authorship for this particular Piyyut.<sup>178</sup>

The Paytan invokes the power of communal song, of communal prayer, of uttering God's praises in assembly, which is palpable to any community of congregants: *"I will give Thee thanks in the great congregation; I will praise Thee among a numerous people"* [Psalms 35:18]. This is at the core of the Halachic convention of legitimating prayers by praying in a quorum of ten men, in assembly, based on the verse: *"I will be*

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<sup>177</sup> See page 32

<sup>178</sup> Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew ], p. 76

*hallowed among the children of Israel*" [Leviticus 22:32]. It is in assembly that Judaism is practiced, not as an individual act of worship, but as a community, as a group. The scripture says: "*In the multitude of people is the king's glory*" [Proverbs 14:28] and the Sages had mandated that a multitude comprises at least ten men, the quorum, which is the preferred mode of prayer and observance for practicing Judaism.<sup>179</sup>

1B     I recite His grandeur  
       Among congregations and multitudes,  
       His everlasting truth,  
       And His everlasting reign as King.

Singing as one, the individuals who comprise the group can sense a certain togetherness, an erasure of singularity and a sense of unity with something greater than the self, imbuing the experience of prayer with a formidable identity-forging aspect.<sup>180</sup> The resulting ontological construct is, I propose, one of the goals of the Yosse ben Yosse oeuvre. An awareness of the shared identity of all Jews, regardless of their geographical location or linguistic and cultural particularities, is one of the Paytan's motivations and objectives in writing his poetry. Yosse ben Yosse seeks to reinforce the group identity, to assure the People that dispersion and exile have not erased their chosenness or modified their eventual shared destiny. In fact, Yosse ben Yosse suggests that in order to reach that salubrious destiny, the People must endeavour to remain a People, to remain, despite dispersion, united in their service of God, so that the prophecies which foretell their redemption will be realized in full.

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<sup>179</sup> See: the Shulchan Aruch, 12:7-9

<sup>180</sup> William Austin, Stephen Worchel, *Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, pp. 94-109; Drury, J. & Reicher, S.D. (2009) Collective psychological empowerment as a model of social change: Researching crowds and power. *Journal of Social Issues*, **65**, pp. 707-725; Drury, J., & Reicher, S. (2000). "Collective action and psychological change: The emergence of new social identities", *British Journal of Social Psychology*, **39**, pp. 579-604

The Paytan urges the prayerful congregants to: “ *...proclaim the name of the LORD; ascribe ye greatness unto our God*” [Deuteronomy 32:3] and in the process solidify and legitimate their own identity as His chosen, His nation, as a group with a distinct history in which God is a participant, and with a unique history which unfolds according to His plan. The chaos of their lives, Yosse ben Yosse suggests, is but a passing episode in that eternal continuum, and is symptomatic of the consequences of sin, but not indicative of a broken covenantal bond with God. On the contrary, if the People would reaffirm the covenantal bond, their eventual redemption, as promised, will materialize in full. The Paytan suggests that if the People recite God’s greatness, they will begin to sense its power, and He will be their King, meaning they will be His nation, and they will reconstitute themselves nationally.

2B     He shall be remembered for all generations,  
          His years endure for all time,  
          He is, and shall live forever,  
          And none but Him is King.

Yosse ben Yosse invokes the singing of God’s praises as a marker of faith, alluding to the verse: “*Then believed they His words; they sang His praise*” [Psalms 106:12], reiterating the rabbinic injunction to practice the faith in deed, not merely to harbour it in one’s heart. It is the acting out of God’s Law, of the commandments and their rabbinic elaborations, which constitutes the mark of membership among His People. The handing down of traditions and customs pertaining to this “Avodah” , this work, this effort-full endeavour in the service of God, is the patrimony of Jewish life: “*I will sing of the mercies of the LORD for ever; to all generations will I make known Thy faithfulness with my mouth*” [Psalms 89:2]. Yosse ben Yosse here tells his audience that in order for God to be their King forever [Psalms 10:16], they must forever serve Him in good and

full faithfulness. This, the Paytan suggests, is the means for the People to reach their national reconstitution as prophesied.

Moreover, it is incumbent on Israel to remember the Law, remember the history, the scripture and the covenantal relationship with God, for all time, and to hand to generations yet unborn these remembrances as patrimony: *“O LORD, Thy name endureth for ever; thy memorial, O LORD, throughout all generations”* [Psalms 135:13]. In order to be a nation under God, the People must teach their children to remember God and to sanctify Him forever more [Psalms 93:5]. If Israel remembers God for all time, God will remain Israel’s king for all time *“He is the living God, and the everlasting King”* [Jeremiah 10:10], and His reign will endure for them as His chosen. Yosse ben Yosse invokes the prophet Samuel’s words, reiterating to the audience that there is no other God but the God of Israel, that regardless of the ambient environment under Byzantine rule, regardless of the budding religious innovations all around Palestine, none of the innovative quests lead to truth, and that the God of Israel is the only Truth. Do not be tempted, the Paytan reminds the People, the covenantal bond endures since Sinai and since Abraham before: *“Therefore Thou art great, O LORD God; for there is none like Thee, neither is there any God beside Thee, according to all that we have heard with our ears”* [II Samuel 7:22].

3        I recount His Word, with sweetness  
          Upon my palate and in my throat,  
          My tongue speaks of His justice,  
          In praises of the King.

Yosse ben Yosse does not entreat his audience to sing and pray reflexively. He is an artist, he seeks beauty, he seeks harmony and he expresses this personal, if Biblically derived, desire in this stanza. The Torah, God’s word, is sweet *“As an apple-tree among*

*the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. Under its shadow I delighted to sit, and its fruit was sweet to my taste*” [Song of Songs 2:3]. Therefore, says the Paytan, humans should take a cue from God and create as He did, seek perfection and beauty, an aesthetic expression of adoration. His Piyyutim are an indication of Yosse ben Yosse’s effort to beautify his praises of the LORD, to imbue his didactic message with an appealing aesthetic which elevates the expression of prayer to a higher plane that will inspire his audience. Not only will *“And my tongue shall speak of Thy righteousness, and of Thy praise all the day”* [Psalms 35:28], but it will do so sweetly, it will do so aesthetically, as befits the King of Kings. Yosse ben Yosse inspires people to seek and create beauty, to see it and find it in the quotidian, as an expression of faith and an exercise in heightened awareness to the evidence of God’s great wonders.

3B     All my limbs,  
           All the chambers of my bowels,  
           I do consecrate to praises of the Holy Name  
           For He is the eternal King.

The Paytan tells his audience that he personally feels that trembling awareness in his physical being, that his entire being is moved by the evidence of God’s might *“All my bones shall say: ‘LORD, who is like unto Thee”* [Psalms 35:10]. It is a personal confession of an artist who has been moved to compose verses by his faith. He alludes to the verse: *“The spirit of man is the lamp of the LORD, searching all the inward parts”* [Proverbs 20:27] and presents himself as proof that such emotions can be felt, that such inspiration can be expressed in full, and that employing one’s entire body and soul [Psalms 103:1] in the service of God can and should be the goal and aim of the faithful.

4        I seek only His counsel,  
           Not from any other god,  
           He shall revive my soul in joy,

As He leads me to glorify the King.

And then God will answer. Then He will restore one's soul [Psalms 23:3], and then, once the People will praise God as one, in togetherness [Psalms 34:4], none other but the God of Israel will respond favourably, at His leisure, to their plight.

4B     My lips express  
        Grace and supplication,  
        My mouth utters prayer  
        To the mystery kindness of the King.

Even as the Paytan's lips express God's grandeur, as the Psalmist does in Psalm 119:171: *"Let my lips utter praise: because Thou teachest me Thy statutes"*, Yosse ben Yosse tells his audience, remember I and you ought to express these supplications with grace [Zechariah 12:10], for only *when "grace is poured upon thy lips"* he reminds them, *"God hath blessed thee for ever"* [Psalms 45:3]. Yosse ben Yosse urges the people to speak to God, to pray to Him, to pour their hearts to God, in order to establish a personal relationship with Him, and strengthen the national bond in the process as well.

5       I recount His great deeds  
        With my mouth and tongue,  
        I declare His righteousness,  
        For He alone is King.

Extolling God with lips and mouth and tongue is one way to access the ultimate reality *"I cried unto Him with my mouth, and He was extolled with my tongue"* [Psalms 66:17], and in their hour of direst need, Israel should not forget to praise God for the wonders He had done for them in the past. Do not merely pour your heart in supplication, the Paytan here seems to say, remember to remember God's wonders. God does not require these remembrances for His "ego", so to speak, but Israel needs these remembrances in order to be mindful of the wonders that occur around them all the time, and to have faith in the wonders yet to come. Remembering the past makes Israel part of

the past and therefore part of the future that God's prophets had promised the People. Linking hands with a glorious past, in other words, assures the People that their future will also be glorious, even though their present is rife with worldly expressions of God's wrath. For even as the punishments are meted out on Israel, they must remember that God is just, that He is righteous *"I will declare thy righteousness; thy works also--they shall not profit thee"* [Isaiah 57:12].

By acknowledging this righteousness, the People are made to realize the Deuteronomic dynamic of sin and punishment, and thus impose order on the chaos of their contemporary lives. There is, the Paytan reminds them, a good reason for their suffering, and that God would not breach His covenant for naught, and that if the People are mindful of God's righteousness, they will accept His reprimands with love and with hope that once exhausted, their penalties will give way to reward and restitution. And then, Yosse ben Yosse assures the audience, not only will Israel be saved and reinstated as a sovereign nation, all other nations of the world will realize that none but the God of Israel reigns: *"Now therefore, O LORD our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that Thou art the LORD, even Thou only"* [Isaiah 37:20]. Even the ruling Byzantines, and those kingdoms who will surely replace them in due course, even the mighty will fall and come to realize God's singularity and truth. Even though Israel is now derided by these nations, these very nations will one day gather around the God of Israel in resignation. Yosse ben Yosse helps his audience balance their current powerlessness with the promise of redemption, by reiterating the eschatological promise and by alluding to the chosenness and unique historical experience of God's people. Patience, the Paytan tells them, will bring the anticipated

rewards; and in the mean time, we pray, we wait, we serve God and praise Him, knowing that all the efforts will bear fruit, knowing the inevitability of redemption for the faithful.

5B     My innards and my limbs  
          Resonate with song,  
          They intone with music,  
          That none but Him is King.

6        I sing a new song  
          To the Creator of the Beginning,  
          I make sweet my adoration of His glory  
          For He hath granted me voice.

Sing to God, employ your physical and spiritual entirety to the faithful service of God. Each individual can cement the covenantal bond, with beauty and with faith, with confidence in God's true promise, and then, when it pleases God, the collective, the nation, will be redeemed.

### Chapter 3: Rhythm and Rhyme in Synagogue Life

Shmuel Safrai writes that: “Tannaic tradition presents us with the possibility that the dynamic, oral tradition of teaching which was later to be called Oral Torah operated as a conscious process of creation already at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century”.<sup>181</sup> One therefore must assume that Yosse ben Yosse, who lived in or around the 5<sup>th</sup> century, was keenly aware of this dynamism and was aware of the teachings of the Sages in general, even in its unwritten form. Synagogue worship and communal gatherings were among the forums of public readings and teaching of Written and Oral Torah to men and women alike. Their participation was actively encouraged. Moreover, this participation was expected to be joyful.<sup>182</sup> We cannot determine with any degree of certainty that music was one of the vehicles for generating this joy, but we cannot rule the possibility out. Music has, since the dawn of human civilization, been an avenue for generating, expressing, and echoing human emotions. There is a distinct possibility therefore that devotional teaching sessions in public gatherings of all types, was accompanied by music as a means of expanding the consciousness of the people, particularly because of the Sages’ insistence that hearing and testimony [שמיעה ועדות] were both necessary aspects of learning and teaching, making room for continuous innovation either purposefully or spontaneously.<sup>183</sup> It is therefore my opinion that music, as an accompaniment to Piyyut recitations, may well have been a feature of public worship during the first few centuries after the destruction. The Sages, ever careful to resist assimilation impulses born of the temptations of the ambient cultural environment, had to respond to the people, the

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<sup>181</sup> Shmuel Safrai (ed.), The Literature of the Sages, p. 53

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59

participant audiences and recipients of Oral Torah teachings in all their multiplicity of forms. Music facilitated a revelation of deep spirituality in seemingly dry Halachic teachings,<sup>184</sup> it has revivalist properties,<sup>185</sup> and is able to package more palatably such weighty themes as theology, ethics, religion, philosophy, folk lore, history, and even science and medicine, making them accessible to all the people regardless of their level of erudition. Rituals are powerful social vehicles that are grounded in the creation and communication of meaning. Meaning is always culturally specific and requires decoding by the participants who must be trained, acculturated, and prepared to receive and internalize the messages that rituals transmit. Rituals are always informative and often transformative, and in order to achieve efficacy, they must communicate meaning in accordance with social conventions. Rituals are also performative, in that they must be led by authoritative and authorized persons, who have been duly trained to follow the formal, coded, meaning-generating acts. The more closely these ritual leaders follow the prescribed procedures, the more they enhance their performance, and the more successfully they transmit the meaning encoded in the act.

Because rituals are dramatic, they in effect specify the response to the performance and thus become constitutive to the receivers of ritual performances. In ritual, the transmitter and receiver of the dramatic performance can be the same person. By performing the ritual, the performer becomes part of the order that is being realized through and by the ritual, and he or she becomes fused with the message enveloped within the coded actions. Through acceptance of the ritual, and participation in the ritual, the individual agrees to become part of the order, to abide by the social conventions of

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<sup>184</sup> Abraham Godberg, "*The Palestinian Talmud*", in: Shmuel Safrai (ed.), *The Literature of the Sages*, p. 306

<sup>185</sup> Shmuel Safrai (ed.), *The Literature of the Sages*, p. 110

the community, to ascribe legitimacy to its terms and oblige the individual to abide by them, and to agree to the application of standards against which all actions are judged. In a word, accepting the social order means legitimizing the social order. Participation is a choice to make publically visible one's adherence to socially constitutive moral boundaries of the community. Participation is a public act and is therefore morally binding.<sup>186</sup> Participation, therefore, is a vehicle for sustaining, substantiating, and accepting the social order. The act of performing a ritual is essentially an acceptance of the normative moral codes of a community, as defined by the constitutive ritual. Rituals therefore must be conventions, they must be predictable, known, and constant. They cannot be ad hoc idiosyncratic recitals, and must follow presentation and participation routines which may be inflected by local custom, but must at all times maintain their normative adherence to the solemn codes and social conventions of the rituals.<sup>187</sup>

All culture is mediated interpretation, all facts are mediated interpretations, they are all multivalent constructs that shift, change, and meander through the interpretive efforts of scholars, who collect, assess, analyze, and finally write about the culture and its artefacts. Facts are continuously being made and remade and cast into webs of signification in cross-cultural and self-reflective hybrids that are always partial and are therefore never absolute.<sup>188</sup> Ethnographers and anthropologists, who investigate the cultures of living peoples, cannot and do not see their subjects as they truly are, nor do they hear what they say or experience them socially as they truly are. All observation involves translation, interpretation, construction, and contextualization. This is all the

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<sup>186</sup> Menachem Zulai, *The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim* [Hebrew], pp. 66-72, 91

<sup>187</sup> Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999), pp. 411-426

<sup>188</sup> Paul Rainbow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1997), p. 138

more true of scholarship that seeks to gauge social customs and cultural norms of communities that lived 1500 years ago, whose only remaining echoes are the written artefacts they and their kin left behind. An ethnographer cannot fully understand others, for she does not know the subjects well enough even after spending several months with them. This is even truer of a scholar poring over 5<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts, seeking to tease out socially relevant information therefrom. Moreover, the oral nature of the Piyutic tradition made it part of participatory synagogue rituals, making the members of the community the custodians of the literary works. As communities moved, changed their social and political affiliations, or were scattered due to political and religious persecution, the oral works tended to morph as well. The boundaries between remembered texts and re-created texts are blurred and can no longer permit scholarly scrutiny into the “really original” form of the texts.<sup>189</sup> One must therefore maintain a certain humility and recognize the indivisibility of the human experience, while trying to decipher the abstract theoretical scaffolding upon which social interactions hang.

Doing ethnography of living subjects never produces a complete or totally accurate picture of reality. Ethnography approximates reality and a successful ethnographer can hope for no more than achieving a close approximation, but never perfection.<sup>190</sup> Doing ethnography, therefore, involves turning lives into text. It is a process of re-presentation of an aspect of reality as it is filtered through the attitudinal prism of the ethnographer.

Ancient art was intellectual, it was meant to express ideas rather than to entertain viewers or audiences. Every visual motif, every rhyme or musical flourish, every design

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<sup>189</sup> Menachem Zulai, *The Land of Israel and its Piyutim* [Hebrew], p. 91

<sup>190</sup> Gerald D. Berreman(ed.), *Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change* (1972), p. 124

element in any expressive medium which we might call Art, held greater spiritual meaning and related to religious life. Ancient art abhorred a vacuum in the creative media. Artists filled the visual plane to capacity with objects and images in mosaics for example,<sup>191</sup> lest an empty space lessen the spiritual magical impact of the work. In similar fashion, poetry in the ancient world was a dense medium whose every utterance was filled to capacity with allusions and hints, with signposts of coded secret meanings, with religious, cultural, and ethnically inflected aesthetic gestures. The audiences expected this dense delivery. The poets and authors and thinkers behind the poetry chose the medium for its didactic flexibility, particularly for important religious messages they thought needed to be conveyed to the masses.<sup>192</sup> The didactic aspect of Piyyutic liturgy was debated among rabbinic scholars before and after the period under discussion here. Avraham Halkin brings a quote from Moshe ben Yaakob Even Ezra,<sup>193</sup> who wrote in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>194</sup> It is a telling quote which I bring in its original wonderfully rhyming and musical Hebrew version:

קבוצות של אמני הלשון נחלקו בעניין הדרשות והשירים: איזה מהם עדיף.  
רוב גדוליהם אומרים: לא כירח השמש! השירה לאוזן קצובה ולטבע יותר קרובה,  
לעניין נשגב יותר יאה, וקשורה יותר למליצה הנאה... והשיר לשמירה יותר קל,  
ולאזניים ביתר רצון מקובל.

Rabbinic scholars sought to teach the People Midrash and Halacha through Piyyut and musical performances, because of the mnemonic advantage that musical patterns offer, and because of the heightened sense of occasion<sup>195</sup> that music confers upon communal participation in prayers. In the case of aesthetics, the tendency of Jews under Byzantine

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<sup>191</sup> Zeev Safrai, The Jewish Community in the Talmudic Period [Hebrew], pp. 270-271, 341-346; See also:

<http://www.ancient-synagogues.com/>

<sup>192</sup> Adam Zartal, Sisera's Secret [Hebrew], p. 90

<sup>193</sup> Avraham Halkin, עיונים ודיונים על השירה העברית, p. 27

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13

<sup>195</sup> Yehuda Ratzaby, Texts and Studies in Oriental Liturgical Poetry [Hebrew], p. 12

rule was to lean toward Greek aesthetics and to distance themselves from pure Jewish themes. The Sages therefore, even as they fought assimilation with their every means, permitted an exception to be made in the case of Piyyutim. They allowed Jewish themes to be expressed by the cultural vehicles of the Nations. The music and dance, the decorative arts, and the poetic fashions of the day were used as means of attracting Jews to the venue wherein didactic lessons were to be conveyed in popular methods. Composing Jewish verse to foreign music, the Sages successfully managed to bridge the otherwise contradictory solitudes of Jewish philosophy and Greek aesthetics, better to keep the Jews engaged, better to preserve the national ontological building blocks despite the relentless and pervasive influence of the Nations.<sup>196</sup>

The endeavour of finding ethnographic clues within the liturgy is further complicated when one attempts to conduct a virtual archaeological ethnographic analysis on the basis of Piyyutim and fragments thereof. Some of the Piyyutim and the fragments have yet to be fully ascribed to Yosse ben Yosse. He laboured in a cultural milieu typified by dualism. Greek and Jewish artistic and poetic conventions lived simultaneously and were experienced simultaneously in the same land and for the same people. The Greeks liked to sing their poetry;<sup>197</sup> tribes of the so-called Fertile Crescent preferred recitations with the accompaniment of drums. Which tradition was practiced by Yosse ben Yosse and his fellow congregants? Which pronunciation did they favour? Was the poetry recited in **מילעיל** or in **מילרע**? Did the poems have recitation guides akin to the **טעמי המקרא** used for public Torah readings? The Piyyutim, on their own, provide no clues to these queries.

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<sup>196</sup> Yehuda Ratzaby, *Texts and Studies in Oriental Liturgical Poetry* [Hebrew], p. 11

<sup>197</sup> See: Margaret J. Kartomi *On Concepts and Classifications of Musical Instruments* (1990)

Aharon Mirsky maintains that Yosse ben Yosse lived in the Land of Israel, known as Palestine after the Roman conquest,<sup>198</sup> and that he wrote his verses in the Tiberian dialect of Hebrew. This dialect, Mirsky says, was closest to the Hebrew pronunciation in antiquity and employed the Sefarad rhythm.<sup>199</sup> Indeed, it is through a recitation of the Piyyutim in **מילרע** that this rhythm is most apparent. Further evidence of the **מילרע** pronunciation and intonation may be extrapolated from Ilan Eldar's analysis<sup>200</sup> of the correct musical system required for public readings of the Bible.

Since every word in the Torah and every word spoken in the service of God is both potent and important, the Rabbis deliberated on the subject of pronunciation and decreed<sup>201</sup> that cantors and the congregations who pray with them be meticulous in their every utterance. Over the centuries various communities developed their own idiosyncratic pronunciation of the Hebrew vowel marks, and no uniform tradition survived the pressures of exilic cross fertilization with host cultures. Hebrew was no longer a spoken language,<sup>202</sup> even in the time of Yosse ben Yosse,<sup>203</sup> and it was reserved for Torah reading and prayer almost exclusively. Each community preserved the pronunciation tradition it had inherited, but made meticulous the reading and elocution of each holy word in accordance therewith. Even the tunes of public Torah reading have not come down the generations untainted by local particularities. The system of musical notations called **טעמי המקרא** facilitates correct reading, with regards to the syntax and

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<sup>198</sup> Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 13

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54

<sup>200</sup> Ilan Eldar, How to Read Scripture [Hebrew], 1994

<sup>201</sup> Brachot Tractate (15-2), cited in: Adin Steinzaltz, The Siddur and Prayer, [Hebrew], p. 38

<sup>202</sup> Avraham, Halkin, עיונים ודיונים על השירה העברית, [Hebrew], p. 27

<sup>203</sup> Conversation (November 4, 2010) with: Dr. Raphael Nir, Professor Emeritus in Communication and Education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and at the School of Communications at the Netanya Academy, author of numerous books and encyclopaedic entries on Hebrew linguistics, lexicography, and semantics. See his book:

מבחר טקסטים במדעי היהדות (1979) במאה החמישית לספירה כבר לא דיברו עברית בארץ ישראל. עברית הייתה רק לשון כתובה. לכן השאלה אם דיברו עברית בהברה ספרדית (מלרע) או אשכנזית אינה רלבנטית.

structure, of Torah texts. The musical notations also accrue a musicality to the texts but the melodic interpretation of these markers, were also inflected by local cultural styles and preferences.<sup>204</sup> There is therefore no record, be it aural or textual, of the manner in which prayers and Torah readings were pronounced in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and no way to determine with any degree of certainty the mode of pronunciation of spoken poetry and sung poetry. We cannot as yet determine whether the Yosse ben Yosse oeuvre was pronounced in Hebrew as מילעיל (with the emphasis on the first syllable of a word, as in the contemporary Ashkenaz pronunciation) or as מילרע (with the emphasis on the second syllable of a word, as in the Sefarad pronunciation now commonly understood as modern Hebrew).

Public readings of Scripture in synagogues<sup>205</sup> became systematized and regulated, so that there developed a more or less uniform standard for those readings in all communities.<sup>206</sup> Whereas pre-Islamic Arabs preferred idiosyncratic recitations, Jews in Palestine preferred uniform musicality. Standardization was codified as the rabbinically preferred mode of public recitation performances, coded in the טעמי המקרא , the cantillation marks and notations accompanying the holy texts. Communities in all regions of a particular Diaspora region read the same verses in the same tune.<sup>207</sup> The tune became the normative standard and helped create a sense of unity among disparate groups of Jewish communities.

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<sup>204</sup> Adin Steinsaltz, The Siddur and Prayer, [Hebrew], pp. 68-69

<sup>205</sup> Zeev Safrai, The Jewish Community in the Talmudic Period [Hebrew], pp. 255-261, 344-347

<sup>206</sup> Standards later became modified in various Diaspora centres such as Yemen, and Italy, each having its own geo-specific uniform style which diverged from other communities' standards.

<sup>207</sup> Ilan Eldar, How to Read Scripture [Hebrew], pp. 78, 162

Furthermore, the musical notations clarified the syntax structure of verses and phrases, indicating where sentences pause and break, and perforce this impacted the exegetical understanding of particular words. For example, in the verse: **דִּבַּרְתִּי עַל הַנְּבִיאִים** [*Hosea 12:11*], the emphasis must be on the letter **ב** which implies, given the unique vagaries of the Hebrew language whose tenses may be implied by syllabic emphasis and not by different morphology, that the verb is to be read in the past tense: “I have also spoken unto the prophets”, whereas “spoken” is in the past tense. In another case, the verse: **וְדִבַּרְתִּי עַל לִיבָה** [*Hosea 2:16*], the emphasis is on the letter **ת** which indicates that the verb is to be read in the future tense: “Therefore I will... speak unto her”, whereas the verb now is in the future tense. If one were to read either of these two verses solely on the basis of the written text and regardless of cantillation marks, one would be remiss in understanding the prophet’s words.<sup>208</sup> Eldar suggests, on the basis of exhaustive analysis of grammar manuscripts written in Judeo-Arabic a few centuries after Yosse ben Yosse, that the Tiberian inflection or dialect of Hebrew<sup>209</sup> was in fact the **מִילְרַע** pronunciation.<sup>210</sup> On the strength of the scholarship of both Mirsky and Eldar, I am making an educated guess here and assume, for the purposes of my own research, that Yosse ben Yosse’s poems are not to be read in **מִילְעִיל** , but in **מִילְרַע** inflected Hebrew.

There is yet another aspect of linguistic refinements of our reading which must be clarified. The Hebrew word **שִׁירָה** is not synonymous with the word **פְּיוּט**. The word **שִׁירָה** denotes poetry that is intended for secular and religious purposes regardless of time and place. The word **פְּיוּט** on the other hand, is specifically indicative of poetry composes for

<sup>208</sup> Ilan Eldar, *How to Read Scripture* [Hebrew], pp. 161-164

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115 (Comment No. 51)

liturgical purposes, intended for synagogue practice. The post Sa'adia Ga'on poetry of such Spanish Golden Age luminaries as Rabbi Yehuda Halevi featured a mix of secular and religious content. Earlier Piyyutic poetry has been alas neglected by scholars, relegated to a secondary position in the study of Jewish literary texts from antiquity and from the Middle Ages. The recent publication of Laura Lieber's "*Yannai on Genesis*" (2010) seeks to address this very tendency and thereby restore Piyyut as a genre to its rightful place in Jewish literary and spiritual history.<sup>211</sup>

Scholars have identified three periods of Piyyutic creation, bearing in mind that these periods were more fluid than the periodization implies, and that the transition from one to the next was not abrupt or clear, especially to the Paytanim of the time. The first period is called the Anonymous Period, which began with the formulation of prayer texts and ended with the oeuvre of Yosse ben Yosse. The second period is called the Kaliric Period, which began in the 6<sup>th</sup> century with Yannai and ended in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The third distinctive Piyyutic period is the Sa'adyanic Period, which began with Sa'adia Ga'on and culminated with the poetry of the Spanish Golden Age.<sup>212</sup> Each such period is typified by its own linguistic and stylistic particularities and propensities. During the Anonymous Period, Piyyutim displayed no or few rhymes, their authors rarely identified themselves, and their poetry usually harks back to Biblical literary traditions with cryptic and pseudonymic allusions.<sup>213</sup> The acrostic structure and rhythmic verses employed by these Paytanim recalls Psalms and poetry of the Pentateuch. The Kaliric Period is identified with rhyming, flamboyant *wortspielerei*, and by the authors' name signatures.

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<sup>211</sup> Menachem Zulai, *The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim* [Hebrew], p. 32

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34

<sup>213</sup> Binyamin Lau, *Jeremiah* [Hebrew], p. 142

Piyyutim of the Sa'adic Period are crafted and stylized formally with increasingly strict rules governing the verses.<sup>214</sup> My own interest in the Yosse ben Yosse Piyyutim, positions this thesis in the Anonymous Period.

Piyyut literature may be regarded as a mirror image of the spiritual and cultural life of Jewish communities, for it reflects the concerns, the *weltanschauung*, and ontological understanding of Jews during the second millennium of Jewish history as a whole.<sup>215</sup> Each Paytan echoes in his works the particular time and place of his Jewish experience and life. Piyyutim therefore can be useful objects of study in the effort to examine Jewish values, ideas, opinions, and concerns over time. Each Piyyut can indeed stand on its own as a distinct literary object; a comprehensive and comparative study of the existing Piyyutic works of various poets and of the various periods and traditions over time, may yet reveal hitherto neglected aspects of lived history. The cumulative totality of Piyyutic literature may thereby help scholars illuminate new facets of Rabbinic Judaism and its evolution over time.<sup>216</sup>

The Piyyutic genre was a long-held tradition in the Land of Israel. It was orally transmitted for the most part, invigorating Jewish liturgy for millennia. The following citation from the Palestinian Talmud, and the added comments by Menachem Zulai,<sup>217</sup> illustrate the fecundity of liturgical literature during the second millennium of Jewish history, focused as it was mainly on the Land of Israel:

בירושלמי ברכות (פ"ד ה"ד) נאמר: ר' אחא בשם ר' יוסי (אומר) צריך לחדש בה (בתפילה) דבר בכל יום. אחיתופל היה מתפלל שלוש תפילות חדשות בכל יום... ר' אליעזר היה מתפלל תפילה חדשה בכל יום, ר' אבהו היה מברך ברכה חדשה בכל יום. ובמדרש תהילים

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<sup>214</sup> Menachem Zulai, *The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim* [Hebrew], p. 91

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-56

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65

(בובר, סוף פרק פ"ז) אומר ר' יהודה בר' סימון בשם ר' מאיר: כשם שהבאר נובע מים חדשים בכל שעה כך ישראל אומרים שירה חדשה בכל שעה.

The Sages feared that prayer would become automatic and therefore empty of meaning for the people who uttered them daily. They tried to invoke stories of prayerful renewal in order to help the praying public focus on the meaning of prayer and to make the act thoughtful and transformative<sup>218</sup>. People came to know the prayers by heart, and yet they had to find significance every day, to make prayer matter to their lives. On special occasions, the Rabbis told their congregants, nature itself took part in the prayer of Jews. In literature, as in Piyutic liturgy, the popular imagination is ignited by this idea and image of Nature in the service of God, and of prayer as the means to affect change in the natural world itself. For example (my own emphasis):

The eve of Yom Kippur. Fathers and mothers cup their children's heads and bless them. *The stones tremble*. At this very moment their life is under scrutiny, their fate written. Who among them can be sure to live another day? The Holy One sits on His throne in judgment over all the worlds. *The stars hold their breath...on Yom Kippur there is no night...* The men and women... walk to the synagogue... *Birds sit on the roof silently waiting*. The Holy One lifts the seal of the Heavenly Court.<sup>219</sup>

When studying the artefact texts left behind by a 5<sup>th</sup> century liturgical poet, one must be mindful of the inescapable fact that his poetry, his Piyutim, was penned for real people. The Yosse ben Yosse texts are not just well crafted words with didactic and historiographic intent. They are much more than literature; they are part of the fabric of Judaic ritual. The Piyutim are texts which were enmeshed in synagogue rituals, and were, one may argue, constitutive not only in their content<sup>220</sup> but in their form as well. While the content of the Yosse ben Yosse Piyutim is often didactic, Rabbinically

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<sup>218</sup> Yehuda Ratzaby, Texts and Studies in Oriental Liturgical Poetry [Hebrew], pp. 12-13

<sup>219</sup> Lilian Nattel, The River Midnight, pp. 59-60

<sup>220</sup> Adin Steinzaltz, The Siddur and Prayer, [Hebrew], p. 115

inclined, exegetical, and messianic; the form of these liturgical products is also telling and must be explored if one is to draw conclusions about the social function of Piyyutim in general and of the Yosse ben Yosse oeuvre specifically. Yosse ben Yosse has been called **יפה הניב ואציל הסגנון**,<sup>221</sup> he whose expression is beautiful and whose style is noble. His Piyyutim are meticulous, although not in rhyming but rather in their rhythm and allusion to Biblical verses. The breadth of his subjects suggests too that his Piyyutim were an important part of Jewish lived religion in 5<sup>th</sup> century Palestine.<sup>222</sup>

External events influenced Piyyutic literature as well. The draconian edicts of Emperor Justinian against the study of Midrash and Halacha, certainly impacted the content of Piyyutim written at the time. They did not however create the necessity for this specific liturgical vehicle of Midrashic content. The Jews of Byzantine Palestine abhorred uniformity and immutable textuality (even as they preferred uniform musicality).<sup>223</sup> Prayer was for them an integral part of daily life, and an important religious and spiritual route, in the absence of the Temple, to reach and access the divine. Being part of lived religion, prayer in the early centuries after the destruction, underwent constant revision, innovation, growth, and change. Paytanim who wrote their verse at the time intended their poems not only for Shabbat and festivals, but for daily worship. Every day of the week and every day of the Jewish calendar became the subject of Piyyutic verse. There were of course Piyyutim which were composed for Jewish holidays and important days

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<sup>221</sup> Menachem Zulai, *The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim* [Hebrew], p. 93

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> For an interesting discussion of Greek Byzantine music composed to Greek texts as ceremonial, festival, or church music, see: Margaret Kartomi, *On Concepts and Classifications of Musical Instruments*, (Studies in Ethnomusicology), 1990. Kartomi suggests that Byzantine music drew authority from ancient Greek music, much like Jewish Paytanim drew authority from the Hebrew ancients. The texts were usually performed in religious gatherings of all sorts. Interestingly, the composers of the music are not known by their name before the 5<sup>th</sup> century, which parallels the evolution of the Piyyutic genre for Jews who lived under Byzantine rule.

such as the Days of Awe, but this was not exclusive by any means.<sup>224</sup> It would therefore be a mistake to ascribe contemporary synagogue practices to all Piyyutic oeuvres, especially the Yosse ben Yosse liturgy which today is relegated to the back pages of the High Holiday prayer books. His complex Piyyutic output was meant to be recited in synagogue, on “regular” days and holy days alike, and as such his poems were given to the community of worshippers to do with the Piyyutim as they willed.

Given the paucity of accurate information regarding synagogue practices in the 5<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>225</sup> we cannot but extrapolate and use conjecture in our attempt to describe the lived experience of the Yosse ben Yosse Piyyutim. We know that he favoured the Yom Kippur service of the “Avodah”, because of the 15 surviving poems penned by him, six Piyyutim deal with the Avodah, earning him the moniker **כהן גדול** or High Priest in later rabbinic literature on the subject. But he did write other Piyyutim as well. How many were there, how his audiences reacted to them, how they incorporated the Piyyutim into their worship customs, we do not know with any measure of certainty. We do not even know if among the yet unexamined fragments from the Cairo Geniza there lurk yet more Yosse ben Yosse Piyyutim.

The history of public prayer and the study of synagogue practices in the first few centuries after the destruction, have yet to be fully described by scholars. The Geniza documents may yield some surprises, as well as fragmentary prayer-books which have yet to garner the attention they merit from researchers. The form and function of the

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<sup>224</sup> Menachem Zulai, The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim [Hebrew], pp. 66-72

<sup>225</sup> The history of public prayer customs and synagogue traditions is yet to be fully investigated by scholars. The Geniza may yield some information, but scholarly attention first has to make it a priority to close this information gap. Just as the Dead Sea Scrolls reinvigorated the field of Scripture studies, so perhaps will a systematic survey of the Geniza documents reinvigorate the study of Jewish prayer customs and ritual life over time. See: Menachem Zulai, The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim [Hebrew], p. 17

Jewish prayer book in the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot be the template for understanding 5<sup>th</sup> century practices, for it is the product of centuries upon centuries of rabbinic revisions, translations, redaction efforts, copying, and such endeavours which are subject to cultural and traditional inflections by the people involved in the endeavour.<sup>226</sup>

For example, reading the Piyyut **אתן תהילה**<sup>227</sup> out loud, one begins to sense a drumbeat pulsing through the text. A toe-tapping beat begins to take shape as the recitation moves from phrase to phrase, and out of the seemingly silent texts a heartbeat appears, a rhythmic meter which suggests that the verses beaded together by Yosse ben Yosse had a performative aspect in addition to their literary artistry. Meyer Howard Abrams defines the term ‘meter’ as the “recurrence, in regular units, of a prominent feature in the sequence of speech sounds of a language”.<sup>228</sup> The rhythm of a literary piece is sensed as a pattern of stresses and accents becomes clear. He explains:

The meter is determined by the pattern of stronger and weaker stresses on the syllables composing the words in the verse line; the stronger is called “stressed” syllable and all the weaker ones the “unstressed” syllables... (The) prevailing ‘metrical accent’ ... is the beat that (the audience) come to expect, in accordance with the stress pattern (is) established earlier in the metrical composition.<sup>229</sup>

There is a great variety of metrical accents and metric traditions in every language, of course. Each is distinguished by ‘metric feet’, or the combination of strong stresses and weak stresses, as well as the pauses within the line, which make up the recurrent metric unit of a line.<sup>230</sup> All describe a specific pace and rhythm of a metrical template which the audience learns and comes to expect. In the actual reading of a poem,

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<sup>226</sup> Menachem Zulai, The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim [Hebrew], pp. 3-4 ; Aharon Mirsky, The Piyyut [Hebrew], p. 55; Ilan Eldar, How to Read Scripture [Hebrew], p. 17

<sup>227</sup> See page 91 of the thesis.

<sup>228</sup> Meyer H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 9th Edition (2009), p. 194

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., pp. 195-197

if it is skilful and thoughtful and not mechanical, the metrical signature of the poem becomes an expressive vehicle in a performance based rendition. The interplay of expressive performance and the underlying structural pattern gives “tension and vitality to our experience of verse”.<sup>231</sup>

Yosse ben Yosse’s poetry was written in Hebrew, a language which gives two meanings to the word שִׁיר : one meaning is equivalent to the English word “poem”, or literary composition in verse and often in rhyme as well; the second is equivalent to the English word “song” which denotes a musical rendition of verses.<sup>232</sup> Hebrew is a language whose musical signature, much like English and Portuguese for example, puts emphasis on the last syllable of a word rather than on the first syllable as in Italian for instance. This inner musicality of Hebrew interacts with a poet’s intention of creating a specific meter in his or her verse, to create a signature-like inner tune for poetic work which can, with time and effort, be discovered. Translation from one language to another often silences this inner musicality and therefore masks the poetic signature as well.<sup>233</sup> It is therefore necessary to discuss the Yosse ben Yosse works not only in relation to the English translations thereof, but in relation to the inner metrical accents discernable in the original Hebrew text.

One of the characteristics of Piyyutim that have reached us from the Anonymous Period is their distinctive rhythm. It is a four beat rhythm, or “square rhythm” in which

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<sup>231</sup> Meyer H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 9th Edition (2009), p. 198

<sup>232</sup> It is interesting to observe that Song and Piyyut, albeit separate literary categories in their own right, were blended in the poetry of the Spanish Golden Era. Traditionally, Piyyut has been relegated to a secondary, more lowly position on the literary scale than poetic songs. The aim of scholars such as Laura Lieber is to restore the rank of Piyyutic literary works to their rightful station. Only a small fraction of all Piyyutim were preserved over time, perhaps because of the scant literary attention they received. The field however is largely neglected and I think ought to be revitalized by more research. See: Menachem Zulai, *The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim* [Hebrew], p. 32

<sup>233</sup> Daniel Shalev, *Translating Poems* [Hebrew]: [www.safa-ivrit.org/writers/shalev/transl.php](http://www.safa-ivrit.org/writers/shalev/transl.php)

the Piyyut is divided into four parts, each comprising two or three words. An example from our Piyyut will illustrate this morphology:

אלוהי	אהללה	1
עוזו	אשירה	2
כבודו	אספרה	3
מלוכה	אאפדהו	4

The “square” form revisits Biblical poetry such as **שירת הבאר** [Exodus 15], **שירת האזינו** [Numbers 21], **שירת דבורה** [Deuteronomy 32], and **שירת דבורה** [Judges 5]. This was a favoured form in antiquity and in order to imbue his poetry with the authority of antiquity, and in order to sound familiar to his audiences, Yosse ben Yosse chose to adopt the form in his own work.<sup>234</sup>

Interestingly, the morphology so favoured by Paytanim of the Anonymous Period disappeared from Jewish liturgy with the seemingly abrupt transition to the Kaliric Period. It appears that Yosse ben Yosse was “suddenly” eclipsed by Yannai and by the Kalir whose rhyming rules and *wortspielerei* remained in fashion until the Ga’onic Period. This apparent quick transition of Piyyutic style is not typical of literary evolution in general. One must conclude that there are gaps in our understanding and in our knowledge of the period, corresponding to the gaps in documentation and artefacts. For example, Mirsky brings a fragment of a Piyyut which he attributes to Yosse ben Yosse<sup>235</sup> on the strength of its “square” morphology:

<sup>234</sup> Menachem Zulai, *The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim* [Hebrew], p. 280

<sup>235</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems*[Hebrew], p. 200

But this identification is hotly contested by Menachem Zulai, because there is no corroborating evidence beyond Mirsky's hunch that this Piyyut was indeed penned by Yosse ben Yosse and not another of his many possible Paytanic contemporaries. One may assume, as does Zulai, that the literary style developed in Byzantine Palestine was preserved among the Eastern Jewish communities in North Africa for longer periods than in the other centres of Jewish life in the West, and when the Moorish invasion brought, along with it Jewish immigrants to Europe, the stylistic love of "square" Piyyutim, and this tradition was revived in the Sa'adyanic Period thanks to them.<sup>236</sup>

Local culture affected Piyyutic liturgies throughout the centuries, in all the locations where Jewish communities lived. The tenor and texture of Piyyutic literature were always influenced by the ambient cultural and religious milieu of its time and place. The modern concept of national borders, such as the borders between the State of Israel and its Arab neighbours, cannot be a gauge for life in the 5<sup>th</sup> century in the very same region. Borders then were porous.<sup>237</sup> Populations moved with ease between friendly realms of friendly rulers. Less restrictive travel conventions were at play, and cultural baggage was freely shared between communities and peoples.<sup>238</sup> Jewish tradition said to be either Babylonian or Palestinian does not refer to geographic or political boundaries between the two centres of Jewish life. the terminology does not describe an iron clad division between the two. Both centres extended to Syria in the north, to Egypt in the west, to Babylon in the east, and to Palestine itself. Cultural tendencies and traditions

<sup>236</sup> Menachem Zulai, *The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim* [Hebrew], p. 280

<sup>237</sup> Yehuda Ratzaby, *Texts and Studies in Oriental Liturgical Poetry* [Hebrew], p. 12

<sup>238</sup> Benyamin Lau, *Jeremiah*, p. 109

were traded between communities in those and other neighbouring realms, and willy-nilly affected literature, language, syntax, and habit as well.<sup>239</sup> Yosse ben Yosse's Piyyutim are considered Palestinian in origin by Mirsky and others; the operative word here must be "considered". We cannot be certain given the state of scholarship on the subject to date.

The inner musicality and pulsing beat appear to suggest, as I have pointed out above, that the performance of Piyyutim in synagogues may have been accompanied by drums, or by some other percussive instrument, which would have increased the dramatic effect of the rendition, and would have lent an air of ritual to the reading as well. Musical accompaniment would have aided the people mnemonically, it would have made easier the sharing of Piyyutim across time and space, and it would have allowed for emotive expression in prayer as well.<sup>240</sup> The inclusion of Piyyutim in prayer books further appears to suggest that these reading performances were interactive, that the audience was engaged in the drama that certain verses were read by the congregation and other verses by the performing authority, be it the cantor or the Paytan himself. Yosse ben Yosse typically weaves scriptural readings toward the end of his Piyyutim; combined with the rhythmic and apparently percussive metrical signature of his verses, there appears to be some merit to the hypothesis that indeed these Piyyutim were part of the evolution of Judaic ritual that was constitutive, informative, and full of meaning to the audiences who heard them and participated in their rendition.

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<sup>239</sup> Menachem Zulai, *The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim* [Hebrew], p. 127

<sup>240</sup> Yehuda Ratzaby, *Texts and Studies in Oriental Liturgical Poetry* [Hebrew], p. 11

The following segment from the Piyyut **אתן תהילה** will demonstrate the metrical signature of the poem which appears to suggest that the Yosse ben Yosse Piyyutim were, or could have been, ritually performed publically:<sup>241</sup>

+ - ## + - / + - - + ##	+ - - + - / + - - + -
אספּרה ביראה מעט ממעשיו	אתן תהילה לאל המהולל
.....	
+ - - + ## / + - - + ##	+ - - + ## / + - - + ##
לפניו ואחריו לא נוצר אל	אלוה מעולם ועד לא לעולם
.....	
+ - - + ## / + - - +	- + - - + - / + - - + ##
אומר ועושה ואיש לא נעדר	בלבדו הוא ואין איתו זר
.....	
+ - - + ## / + - - +	- + - - + - / + - - + ##
אמת אמרתו ועל שפתיו חסד	באחד ישפוט ואין בו עוולה
.....	

The metrical signature can also be described phonetically as:

ta **TA** ta ta **TA** ... ta **TA** ta ta **TA**

This pulse is discernable, with but minor variations, through the entire Piyyut. It is a rhythm which, when repeated, soon becomes captivating, musically ecstatic, and suggestive of a drumbeat:

ta **TA** ta ta **TA** ... ta **TA** ta ta **TA** / ta **TA** ta ta **TA** ... ta **TA** ta ta **TA**  
 ta **TA** ta ta **TA** ... ta **TA** ta ta **TA** / ta **TA** ta ta **TA** ... ta **TA** ta ta **TA**

It is the unwritten but spoken musicality that accompanies the verses which suggests a ritualized reading of the verses, a participatory, responsive engagement with

<sup>241</sup> A note to the reader: The metrical information is conveyed in symbols above the Hebrew text, such that the rhythmic information appears on top of the verses, as follows: (-) denotes a single beat [1], (+) denotes a stronger stress, an emphatic syllable, (##) denotes a rapid rendition of two half beats [1/2] which comprise a single weaker stress, (/) denotes a syncopated space, an 'Etnachta' of a single beat, and (-+) denotes a longer rendition of an emphatic syllable that carries a beta and a half.

the text, by both audience and performers who may have used only their voices, but could also have accompanied the performance with percussive musical instruments, which was and still remains, after all, the aesthetic norm of many Middle Eastern cultures.<sup>242</sup> It is an intriguing and tantalizing question, which merits further study by literary students, religious scholars, and musicologists alike. The answers may reveal much of what still remains unknown about synagogue culture in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>242</sup> Intriguingly, Arabic poetry and its veneration of poetic culture, remains a performative art form to this day. The following example is illustrative. This is a poem called “Sout Safer Al-Bulbuli” (The Sound of the Whistling Bird) written in 786-809 C.E by Al-Asma'i: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9AJudEUMhg>

Sawtu Saferil Bulbuli ---- Hayyaja Qalbi-Thamili  
 'Alma'u Wazzahru Maã --- Maã Zahri Lah 'š Il Muqali  
 Wa'anta Ya Sayyidali --- Wasayyidi Wamawlali  
 Fakam Fakam Tayamuni --- Ghuzayyilun Āqayqali  
 Qataftahu Min Wajnatin --- Min Lah 'š I Wardil Khajali  
 Fqal La La Lalala --- Waqad Ghada Muharwili  
 Walkhudhu Malat TaRabbahn --- Min Fiãli Hadhar-Rajuli  
 Fawalwalat Wawalwalat --- Wali Wali Ya Waylali

*Reading the transliteration:*

<i>S = Saad = Tsadi</i>	ã = 'Ayin
<i>s = Seen</i>	'š = Tsadi with a dot above it
<i>T = Taa' = Tet</i>	th = thaa' = Tav without Dagesh (like three)
<i>H = Haa' = Chet</i>	dh = Dhal = Dalet without Dagesh (like the)
<i>h = haa' = Hey</i>	gh = Ghayin = Gimmel without Dagesh (French R)
<i>Q,q = Qaaf = Qof</i>	kh = Khaa' = Khaf

See also: The poem “Aya man yada'i alfahm” (O You, Who claim Wisdom)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=in805rVyDlq>

; and the poetic tome called “The Mu'alaqa of Al-Harith ben Chillizah Al-Yashkuri (Pre-Islam)”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Va5ZL2HFBw>

Other examples may be examined as well, such as this Andalusian poem, written by a father to his son advising him to ignore the ignorant materialistic world and focus on knowledge and wisdom because (it is the treasure that you will never afraid of losing, and no thief can steal it, and it is the only treasure that increases when you spend it (teaching it) and decreases when you tighten you hands on it (refraining from teaching it).

Poet: Abu Ishaq Al-Albeeri أبو إسحاق الألبيري

Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uf8fNfCTLmk> (starts from 00:35)

Part 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Nv6GkMqTz8>

Piyyut 3:<sup>243</sup> אתן תהילה

לֵאלֹהֵי הַמְּהוּלָל	אֶתְּנֶנּוּ תְהִלָּה	1
מֵעַט מִמַּעֲשָׂיו:	אֲסַפְּרָה בִּירְאָה	
וְעַד לֹא עוֹלָם	אֱלֹהֵי מַעֲוָלָם	
לֹא נוֹצֵר אֵל.	לְפָנָיו וְאַחֲרָיו	
וְאֵין אִתּוֹ זֶר	בְּלִבּוֹ הוּא	2
וְאִישׁ לֹא נִעְדָּר	אוֹמֵר וְעוֹשֶׂה	
וְאֵין בּוֹ עוֹלָה,	בְּאַחַד יִשְׁפּוֹט	
וְעַל שְׁפָתָיו חֶסֶד.	אֵמֶת אֲמַרְתּוֹ	
נִשְׂאָ עֵין	גְּבוּר בְּכַח	3
וְעוֹבֵר עַל פֶּשַׁע	גְּדוֹל הַעֲצָה	
מִזֵּי חֶשֶׁךְ,	טוֹלָה עֲמוּקוֹת	
וְרוֹאֶה כָּל סֵתֵר.	יּוֹשֵׁב בְּסֵתֵר	
יוֹצְאוֹת מִפִּי	דַּעַת וְתַבּוּנָה	4
וְעֵין לֹא תִשְׁרַע	וְעֵינָיו מְשׁוֹטְטוֹת	
וּמִמְשַׁלְתּוֹ סֵלָה,	דְּבָרוֹ הַמְּשַׁל	
וְרוֹם לֹא יִכְלֶנּוּ.	מִלֵּא כָּל-הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ	

<sup>243</sup> The Hebrew text is copied from: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], 1991 Edition, pp. 173-178

## I GIVE PRAISE

- 1 I give praise  
To the venerable<sup>244</sup> God,  
I recount with reverence  
A few of His deeds:
- 1B God, who preceded Creation,  
God, who will for all eternity be,  
Neither before nor after Him  
Shall any other god exist<sup>245</sup>.
- 2 He is alone,  
And none be with Him,  
He speaks and thus creates ,  
And nothing tarries before His word
- 2B The sole judge,  
His justice unblemished,  
His word is Truth,  
And grace is an ornament upon His lips.
- 3 He is mighty and strong,  
He pardons iniquity,  
His counsel is Wisdom<sup>246</sup>,  
And He overlooks transgression
- 3B He reveals deep mysteries,  
And extracts them from darkness,  
He dwells in concealment,  
And yet He sees all that we hide.
- 4 Knowledge and wisdom  
Come forth from His mouth,  
And His eyes see all<sup>247</sup>,  
Yet no eye can perceive Him
- 4B His word creates Law  
And His reign is eternal,  
The world entire is filled with His glory,  
And He cannot be contained by the firmament.

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<sup>244</sup> Alternatively translated: *praise worthy*

<sup>245</sup> Isaiah 43:10

<sup>246</sup> Alternatively translated: *He is great in counsel*

<sup>247</sup> Alternatively translated: *His eyes survey the deeds of men*

הָדוֹר בְּלִבּוֹשׁוֹ	הוֹד תִּסְאָרְתוּ	5
הָדָר עוֹזֵא	כְּשֵׁמוֹ גְּבוּרְתוֹ	
הָאֵל תָּמִים	צוֹר עוֹלָמִים;	
הַכֹּל יַעֲבוֹרֶךָ	וְהוּא לְכֹד יַעֲמוֹד.	
וְעַד לֹא דָקַע	תִּבֵּל עַל תְּהִי	6
וּמְקוּלוֹת מַיִם	אֶדָר יִשְׁמִיעוּ	
וּמְרוֹם שְׁבָתוֹ	וְהוּא רֵם עַל כָּל	
וּמִבֵּית אֵל עֹנֵי	וְנִכַח רוּחַ.	
זֶרְתוֹ תִּכְנֶה	שָׁמַיִם בְּתִבּוּנָה	7
מְאוֹרוֹת וְכוֹכָבִים	מַעֲשֵׂה אֲצִבְעוֹתָיו	
זָמַם בְּמַחְשָׁבָת	וַתִּקַּם וַתַּעַשׂ	
יֹעֵץ בְּלִבּוֹ	וַתַּעֲמֹד עֲצָתוֹ.	
חָסִיד בְּמַעֲשָׂיו	וְרַחוּם לְמִנּוּסָיו	8
צָדִיק בְּדַרְכָּיו	וְקָרוֹב לְקוֹרְאָיו	
חָפֵץ לְהַצְדִּיק	יִצְוֵנוּ כְּפִיו,	
תָּמִיד יִשְׁקוֹד	בְּמִלֵּכַת בְּחִירָיו.	

- 5 He dons glory,  
Adorned by His Majesty,  
His might is magnificent,  
And His Name is His strength
- 5B God is perfect in His ways  
Everlasting and eternal;  
All shall pass,  
But He alone will forever remain.
- 6 Even before He formed  
The world upon the void,  
The roar of waters  
Marvelled at His sway
- 6B From the very pinnacle of His abode  
He reigns over all from above,  
And gazes upon the humble,  
And upon the meek.
- 7 His smallest of His fingers hath  
Fashioned the firmament with astuteness,  
The sun, the moon, and the stars,  
Are the creatures of His fingers
- 7B With forethought and wisdom  
Creation became, and was completed,  
As He devised in His heart,  
So it came about.
- 8 Benevolent in all His deeds,  
And merciful to all who fear Him,  
Righteous in all His ways,  
And close to His seekers
- 8B He desires to find innocent  
His creations and all creatures,  
Always striving  
For the welfare of His chosen ones.

9	<p>טְהוֹר עֵינַיִם      רוֹצֵה בְּתִשׁוּבָה, מְרַבֵּה לְזִכּוֹת      לְהָשִׁיב אִפּוֹ</p>
	<p>טוֹבוּ בְּכָל־דּוֹר      מְדַבֵּר בְּצַדִּיקָה פֶּאֶר רֵאשׁוּ      כּוֹכֵעַ יְשׁוּעָה.</p>
10	<p>יְמֵינוּ פְּתוּחָה      לְכָל שְׂבִי פֶשַׁע, אוֹמֵר בְּכָל־עֵת:      שׁוּבוּ אֵלַי וְאֲשׁוּבָה</p>
	<p>יַצַּר מְחֹמֵר      צָלַם דְּמוּתוֹ רַחֲמָיו עַל כָּל־מַעֲשָׂיו יוֹדֵעַ יַצְרָגוּ.</p>
11	<p>כָּלוּ כְבוֹד      מְשֻׁחַ בְּדָכָא מֵאֲזִין כָּל־לַחֵשׁ      רַנַּת לְשׁוֹן</p>
	<p>כָּל־צְבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם      מִשְׁתַּחֲוִיִּים לוֹ שָׁמֵשׁ וִירַח      יִכְרְעוּ לְפָנָיו.</p>
12	<p>לֹא יִנָּטֶה קוֹ      כְּנֶגֶד יִצְוֵרָיו בְּשִׁבְתוֹ לְמִשְׁפָּט      בְּרִיב לֹא יַעֲמִיק</p>
	<p>לְמַעַן פָּעַל      מִפְּעֻלוֹת עוֹלָם קוֹרֵא דוֹרוֹת      מִי יַעְרוֹךְ אֵלָיו.</p>

- 9 Clear and pure of eyesight,  
He yearns for repentance,  
Fond of acquittal,  
He is quick to withdraw His anger
- 9B Compassionate to each succeeding generation  
He speaks justice,  
And crowns His head  
With a diadem of salvation.
- 10 His right hand is always open  
To those who repent of iniquity,  
Always saying:  
Return unto Me, and I will return unto you
- 10B Out of clay did He form  
A person in His image,  
His mercy therefore rains upon His creatures,  
And He knows and understands our nature.
- 11 He is the epitome of Glory,  
Yet He watches over the meek,  
He listens to our every murmur,  
And to our every joyous prayerful utterance
- 11B The legions of the heavens  
All bow before Him,  
The sun and the moon,  
Kneel before Him.
- 12 Never will He measure a line of chaos  
Against His creations,  
When He sits in judgment,  
He does not dwell on differences and disputes
- 12B He hath created, for His pleasure,  
The world in all its complexity,  
And proclaimed the generations for all time,  
Who can possibly take His measure.

13 מִמַּעַמְקֵי לֵב וְסִתְרֵי כְלִיּוֹת  
מִבֶּן מַחְשְׁבוֹת כָּל-בְּנֵי אָדָם

מֵאָחַז וּמֵעָמַל יִסְתִּיר פָּנָיו  
מֵרְאוֹת בְּרָע יַעֲלִים עֵינָיו.

14 נוֹגַהּ סְבִיבֵי וְשֵׁת סִתְרוּ חֹשֶׁךְ  
כִּי לֹא יֵרְאֶהוּ הָאָדָם וְתִי

נֹרָא עֲלִילָה! הָשֵׁב אָנֹשׁ עַד דָּכָא  
עַד כִּי יֵשֵׁב וְאַרְיֵךְ יָמִים.

15 שׁוּיָא כַחַּ לּוֹבֵשׁ צְדָקָה  
מִי אֵל כָּמֶהוּ אַרְךְ אַפִּים

שׁוּיָא וּמִתְעַב נֹל בְּעוֹלָה  
אוֹהֵב סְהוֹר לֵב שְׁמוֹעַ מְזַבַּח טוֹב.

16 עוֹצֵר בְּנִעְרָתוֹ וּמִחְרִיב יָמִים  
צוֹרֵר כְּשִׁמְלָה כָּל-מִי כְרָאשִׁית

עוֹנָה בְּתַסְדּוֹ מִקְרָנֵי רְאָמִים  
מוֹחָה עוֹנוֹת כָּעֵב וּכְעָנָן.

- 13 From the depths of the heart,  
And from the secrets of conscience,  
He sees and understands all thoughts  
Of all human beings
- 13B Evil and futility  
Are hidden from His countenance,  
For He does not look upon wickedness,  
As He averts His eyes there from.
- 14 He is encircled by glowing radiance  
And is concealed in darkness,  
For none can gaze upon Him  
And live
- 14B Awesome in His deeds!  
He can reduce a man to dust,  
Until he repents,  
So that long may he live.
- 15 His strength is exalted  
And He dons Righteousness,  
None is like our God,  
So patient and forgiving
- 15B He despises and abhors  
Offerings borne of larceny,  
He adores and loves the pure of heart  
Who obey Him, rather than those who offer Him even the choicest sacrifice.
- 16 He arrests the world with His rebuke,  
And dries up the oceans,  
He gathers, as a cloak,  
All the waters of Creation
- 16B He answers, with His grace,  
The call of rams' horns<sup>248</sup>,  
And wipes clean all iniquities  
As the wind doth blow clean the mists and the clouds.

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<sup>248</sup> An allusion to the Shofar, and thereby to Rosh Hashanah

17	פֶּעַל וְעָשָׂה הַלֵּל כִּי כָל־דַּרְכָּיו	בְּדַבּוֹר פִּי צַדִּיק וּמִשְׁפָּט
	פִּי יֹאמֶר: כִּי לֹא אֶחְפוֹץ	זֹאת עָשׂוּ וְחָיו בְּמֹת הַרְשָׁע.
18	צוֹפֵה רְחוּקוֹת מְרוֹמֵם כְּסֹאֵו	נִשְׂא וְנוֹרָא וְשָׁפֵל יִרְאֶה.
	צוֹעָה בְּרוֹב פֶּחוֹ בוֹחֵן לְבוֹת	וְדוֹאָה בְּכַנְסֵי רוּחַ, וְאֵץ לְפָנָיו שְׂכָחָה.
19	קוֹרָא בְּקוֹל רָם: שׁוּבוּ עָדִי	אֲנִי אֶל שְׂדֵי, וְאֶשׁוּבָה אֲלֵיכֶם
	קָרְבוּ עָדָיו וְאֲזַנָּיו קָשׁוּבוֹת	בְּכַחַת הַתְּשׁוּבָה, לְקוֹל זַעֲקַת דָּל.
20	רְחוּם וְחַנּוּן, צַדִּיקֵנוּ בַּמִּשְׁפָּט	שֹׁפֵטֵינוּ בְּרַחֲמִים כִּי אֲנַחֵנוּ עִפּוֹר וְאֶפֶר
	רָם בְּעֲלִיּוֹנִים שׁוֹמֵעַ מִמְרוֹמִים	מֶלֶךְ בַּשְּׁחָקִים זַעֲקַת אֲבִיּוֹנִים.

- 17 He endeavoured and created everything  
With the word of His mouth,  
In all His ways  
He seeks justice and judgment
- 17B His mouth says:  
Do this and live,  
For I do not desire  
The death of the iniquitous.
- 18 He gazes into the future,  
He soars in His awesomeness,  
His throne is elevated  
Yet He sees every humble creature,
- 18B Girded with abundant power  
He rides astride the wind,  
He examines hearts  
And forgets naught.
- 19 He stridently calls out:  
I am God, El-Shadai,  
Return unto Me,  
And I will return unto you
- 19B Come closer to Him,  
With the force of repentance,  
For His ears are keen  
To hear the cries of the lowly.
- 20 Merciful and compassionate,  
Please judge us with kindness,  
Acquit us in judgment  
For we are but dust and ashes
- 20B Revered in the heavens,  
The King of the firmament,  
He hears from up above  
The cries of the destitute.

21 שָׁמַיִם כָּסְאוֹ וְהָאָרֶץ הַדּוֹם  
צְדָקָה שְׁרִיוֹנוֹ וּמְאוֹר שְׁמֵלְתוֹ

שְׁמוֹ נוֹרָא מְאֹד תַּעֲזֹב וְרַחוּם  
בְּכָל דּוֹר וְדוֹר הִיא צְדָקְתוֹ.

22 תָּמִים דְּרָכֹו וְאֵת לְפָנָיו עָוֶל  
בְּכָל־בְּקָר יָמֵן לְאוֹר מְשַׁפֵּטוֹ

תּוֹכֵן לְבוֹת רַב הָעֲלִילָה  
מִי יִמְלֵל גְּבוּרוֹת יי.

ככתוב בדברי קדשך: מי ימלל גבורות יי ישמיע כל-תהלתו.

21 The sky is His throne  
And the earth but a foot rest for His feet,  
His armour is Justice,  
And His garment is radiance

21B His Name is most awesome,  
He is merciful and compassionate,  
To every generation  
This is His righteousness.

22 His is perfect is all His ways  
And brooks no evil,  
Every morning He dispenses  
His justice for all to see

22B He lives in men's hearts,  
He is mighty in His every deed,  
Who can express  
The mighty acts of God.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *"Who can express the mighty acts of God, who can make all of His praise heard."* [Psalms 106:2]

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## COMMENTARY

Yosse ben Yosse wrote this Piyyut<sup>249</sup> so it would be part of the prayerful praises sung about God's attributes which are so unlike the attributes of human beings. God's features may often appear to conflict with one another, His aspects are many, varied, and complex, rendering any comparison to human qualities and traits but myopic renditions of an ineffable whole. Apart from the structural form of the Piyyut, which appears to suggest a constitutive ritual connected with the performance of the Piyyut, Yosse ben Yosse expresses a collective yearning in the verses as well, which also allude to the constitutive nature of the text. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, a short few centuries after the destruction of the Temple, the People's mind was desperate for a narrative, a storyline, which would ease the pain of their national dissolution and dispersion in exile. Responding to this grassroots level public anxiety, Yosse ben Yosse offered a timely response to elemental public concerns about national identity and survival, and his message was Rabbinic at core, placing contemporary events on the wide arc of Jewish destiny as spelled out in scripture. Prayers replaced the sacrificial rites, and prayers, those inimitable constitutive religious rituals, followed routinized conventions, one of which is the doubled alphabetic acrostic of the verses, another is the metrical signature discussed above, and yet a third convention is the subject matter of praising God in verse and song.

1        I give praise  
          To the venerable God,  
          I recount with reverence  
          A few of His deeds:

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<sup>249</sup> Although Aharon Mirsky included this Piyyut in the section of his book which deals with Piyyutim that are attributed to Yosse ben Yosse but whose authorship is not without some doubt, I refer to the Piyyut as a Yosse ben Yosse poem, because it fits into the stylistic and subject signatures of Yosse ben Yosse, based on Mirsky's detailed analysis thereof. See: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], pp. 236-241

In praising God [as in Psalms 29 for example], prayerful individuals were reaffirming His supremacy, therefore His involvement in their lives, His Presence in history and in their destiny yet to be unfurled, and at the same time they were reaffirming their participation in His community. Praises of God are part of the social boundaries of the community, in that they provide meaning, purpose, and a hope horizon for individuals in the community. As stated above, through acceptance of the ritual, and participation in the ritual, the individual agrees to become part of the order, to abide by the social conventions of the community, to abide by them, and to agree to the application of Rabbinic standards against which all the People's actions are judged.

1B     God, who preceded Creation,  
       God, who will for all eternity be,  
       Neither before nor after Him  
       Shall any other god exist.

Yosse ben Yosse begins with Creation, drawing the arc of Jewish time as synonymous with universal time. God, who preceded the very universe He created, the material or experiential universe perceived by humans as real, is the God of Israel; therefore Israel shares some of His eternal qualities as well. This would be comforting to an exiled disempowered People whose existence was thrown into question by the destruction of the Temple. If God is everlasting [Isaiah 43:10], and since his promises are forever true [Psalms 93:2-5], the house of Israel is assured of its eventual reconstitution.

2       He is alone,  
       And none be with Him,  
       He speaks and thus creates ,  
       And nothing tarries before His word

The ambient cultural environment of the 5<sup>th</sup> century was rife with religious innovation. Christianity was gradually winning over polytheistic faiths, and Judaism was

called into question by the Christian claim to have supplanted the “Old Testament” with a “New Testament”, the old verities with a new overriding and seductive truth. But Yosse ben Yosse reiterates the prophets’ and the Sanhedrin’s and the general Rabbinic injunction that the God of Israel has no equal, that He is alone, single and singular, without peer and without substitute. It serves well the community to be mindful of this feature of God’s eternal covenant with them. Moreover, God’s eternal nature means that His actions through history have meaning and purpose, which may be a mystery to the human eye, but are part of the divine plan for the created universe and the people therein. This once again gives comfort to the People who appear to think their fate has been an arbitrary affliction. But the Paytan continues:

2B     The sole judge,  
          His justice unblemished,  
          His word is Truth,  
          And grace is an ornament upon His lips.

God’s judgement is the ultimate form of justice in the world:<sup>250</sup> *“But He is at one with Himself, and who can turn Him?”* [Job 23:13], and the manifestations of His rulings cannot be undone, that is, history has a deterministic thread that runs through it and which is fashioned by God without human agency or human recourse. His word is unbridled truth *“The beginning of Thy word is truth; and all Thy righteous ordinance endureth for ever”* [Psalms 119:160] and kindness graces His every utterance [Proverbs 31:26], meaning that even the harsh utterances, the harsh conditions in which the People find themselves, are ultimately God’s gift to His People, whether they can perceive this or not.

3       He is mighty and strong,  
          He pardons iniquity,

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<sup>250</sup> Avot Tractate 84, cited in: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 237

His counsel is Wisdom,  
And He overlooks transgression

Yosse ben Yosse speaks of God's attributes by citing scriptural references to these aspects of His nature. God is strong [Psalms 103:20]; God is forgiving: "*Who is a God like unto Thee, that pardoneth the iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He retaineth not His anger for ever, because He delighteth in mercy*" [Micah 7:18]; and God is great of counsel [Jeremiah 32:19]. The audience with whom Yosse ben Yosse engages would be familiar with the scriptural references, and would have found comfort in the realization that they are part of God's plan, part of God's People, and never bereft of counsel as long as they are mindful of God's word, the Torah. Moreover, God is able to perceive every detail of His universe, even the most veiled and elusive details of the humblest of creatures:

3B     He reveals deep mysteries,  
       And extracts them from darkness,  
       He dwells in concealment,  
       And yet He sees all that we hide.

*"He uncovereth deep things out of darkness"* [Job 12:22], and even though he is ineffable, even though He cannot be perceived by the senses alone, "*Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the LORD. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the LORD*" [Jeremiah 23:24]. God is apprehended through His actions and recognized through the manifestations of His will in the material world.

4       Knowledge and wisdom  
       Come forth from His mouth,  
       And His eyes see all,  
       Yet no eye can perceive Him

The human mind cannot fully comprehend God [proverbs 2:6], yet God is watching every creature and every deed at all times: "*For the eyes of the LORD run to and*

*fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is whole toward Him” [II Chronicles 16:9]. Yosse ben Yosse tells the community here to see the evidence of God through faith, seeing that which the eye cannot see [Job 34:16], because:*

4B     His word creates Law  
          And His reign is eternal,  
          The world entire is filled with His glory,  
          And He cannot be contained by the firmament.

God creates with the power of His word, and destroys with the power of His word. His word is a force of nature, a feature of the natural world which may be perceived for its effects. *“But who is able to build Him a house, seeing the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain Him? who am I then, that I should build Him a house, save only to offer before Him?” [II Chronicles 2:5].* God’s immanence is ineffable but material at the same time, He cannot be measured neither can He be contained, yet His Presence is palpable and real. The People’s present condition speaks of God’s involvement in the narrative of their past and their future alike.

5       He dons glory,  
          Adorned by His Majesty,  
          His might is magnificent,  
          And His Name is His strength

Nature and history and the destiny of Israel all combine to weave a proverbial garment that robes God and makes His essence perceptible: *“Thou art clothed with glory and majesty” [Psalms 104:1].* The visible world is testimony to the invisible Presence: *“Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is Thine; Thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and Thou art exalted as head above all” [I Chronicles 29:11].*

The mighty God is the God of Israel, the God that has never abandoned the People and never will desert them, even if His punishments may appear to be evidence of God's averted countenance.<sup>251</sup> The inability to discern purpose in events, and therefore the inclination to regard misfortune as evidence to the absence of God, is, says Yosse ben Yosse, a failing of the human heart. One must believe in the omnipresence of God and in the omnipotence of His hand. The People seek clarity, the People seek an explanation for their plight, because such an explanation is akin to the benefit of knowing the nature and purpose of a bitter medicine. Once a person understands the purpose of such bitter herbs, once the individual understands the benefit accrued to his or her health, then the suffering becomes more manageable and the load appears lighter on the person's shoulder.

That is the essence of the hope with which Yosse ben Yosse seeks to imbue his congregation through his verse. He tells them that their pain is not arbitrary but that it is part of the divine plan, part of the Deuteronomic balance and dance of sin and punishment, good deeds and rewards. The human condition entails the imperative of moral choice; were God's intention clear as rain, this choice would have been obviated, and the service of God would have become but a superficial rite, rather than a labour of faith. It is this very labour of faith which the Paytan revels in here, given God's mystery and the demand that humans serve Him despite the apparent ambiguities in their lives.

5B     God is perfect in His ways  
        Everlasting and eternal;  
        All shall pass,  
        But He alone will forever remain.

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<sup>251</sup> In Hebrew: הסתר פנים

6        Even before He formed  
          The world upon the void,  
          The roar of waters  
          Marvelled at His sway

Alluding to Psalms 18:31, Yosse ben Yosse tells the community that God is perfect and infallible. The punishments they now suffer are not a mistake. The eternal God [psalms 102:27-28] decreed the arc of history before He created time itself. Thus, the Paytan reiterates his theme, there are no mistakes in history, no accidents or arbitrary developments, and therefore the People must find the meaning behind their sorrows, and reveal God's veiled purposes which lie at the core of their condition.

6B       From the very pinnacle of His abode  
          He reigns over all from above,  
          And gazes upon the humble,  
          And upon the meek.

Even though God reigns supreme, He is 'in touch' with the meekest and humblest of His creatures.

7        His smallest of His fingers hath  
          Fashioned the firmament with astuteness,  
          The sun, the moon, and the stars,  
          Are the creatures of His fingers

The Paytan reminds the congregation the prophet Isaiah's rhetorical question: "*Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance?*" [Isaiah 40:12]. God snaps His fingers and worlds become created.

7B       With forethought and wisdom  
          Creation became, and was completed,  
          As He devised in His heart,  
          So it came about.

But these creations are neither whim nor arbitrary manifestations of caprice, rather they are evidence of great wisdom and forethought and they stand forever: “*The counsel of the LORD standeth for ever, the thoughts of His heart to all generations*” [Psalms 33:11]. All, including the destruction of the Temple, and the exile of Israel, has come to pass as the result of God’s thoughts [Isaiah 14:24]. Every feature of history has rhyme and reason, purpose and instructive information for the People to learn from and grow from in accordance with god’s will. And Yosse ben Yosse knows this because:

8 Benevolent in all His deeds,  
And merciful to all who fear Him,  
Righteous in all His ways,  
And close to His seekers

8B He desires to find innocent  
His creations and all creatures,  
Always striving  
For the welfare of His chosen ones.

“*The LORD is righteous in all His ways, and gracious in all His works*” [Psalms 145:17] and He is “*is nigh unto all them that call upon Him*” [Psalms 145:18]. Therefore, says the Paytan, seek god: “is nigh unto all them that call upon Him” [Deuteronomy 8:2], that He may bless the People and grace them with His benevolence. Israel, His chosen People [Psalms 105:6] are particularly near and dear to God, he reminds the congregation, and even the hardships He showers upon the People are indicative of His love, affection, and concern for Israel.

9 Clear and pure of eyesight,  
He yearns for repentance,  
Fond of acquittal,  
He is quick to withdraw His anger

9B Compassionate to each succeeding generation  
He speaks justice,

And crowns His head  
With a diadem of salvation.

10 His right hand is always open  
To those who repent of iniquity,  
Always saying:  
Return unto Me, and I will return unto you

The stratagem for the people, explains Yosse ben Yosse, must be repentance. God desires the contrition of the sinful [Habakkuk 1:13]. God will avert the disastrous effects of His vengeance from his flock if they but repent [Psalms 78:38] because God's essential nature is justice and mercy [Isaiah 59:17], and moreover, God desires such penitence particularly from Israel, His chosen: *"And He said unto me: 'Thou art My servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'"* [Isaiah 49:3] because it is through their salvation that God's name will be glorified. In a sense, the People are made responsible for the glory of God- their deeds shame or glorify God. They are partners in the divine drama as it plays out in history, and this responsibility requires that they regret their past misdeeds and return to the path of God anon: *"From the days of your fathers ye have turned aside from Mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto Me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts"* [Malachi 3:7].

10B Out of clay did He form  
A person in His image,  
His mercy therefore rains upon His creatures,  
And He knows and understands our nature.

God who had fashioned Man out of clay [Psalms 103:14], God in whose image Man and Woman were created [Genesis 1:27], certainly understands the failings inherent in humanity and the weaknesses of the human heart, and therefore: *"The LORD is good to all; and His tender mercies are over all His works"* [Psalms 145:9].

11 He is the epitome of Glory,  
Yet He watches over the meek,  
He listens to our every murmur,  
And to our every joyous prayerful utterance

11B The legions of the heavens  
All bow before Him,  
The sun and the moon,  
Kneel before Him.

Citing Psalm 29, Yosse ben Yosse reiterates the grandeur of God and His ability to seek the wellbeing of the humblest and mightiest of His creations at once. God hears the softest of whispered prayers just as he heeds loud cries:<sup>252</sup> *“Yet have Thou respect unto the prayer of Thy servant, and to his supplication, O LORD my God, to hearken unto the cry and to the prayer which Thy servant prayeth before Thee this day”* [I Kings 8:28] and as the Psalmist intimates, the God of salvation attends to the singing tongues of His faithful as well [psalms 51:16]. Yosse ben Yosse cites Nehemiah’s glorification of God: *“Thou art the LORD, even Thou alone; Thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all things that are thereon, the seas and all that is in them, and Thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth Thee”* [Nehemiah 9:6] by way of illustrating the miraculous reality of God’s might and His forgiveness of the humble penitents amongst His People.

12 Never will He measure a line of chaos  
Against His creations,  
When He sits in judgment,  
He does not dwell on differences and disputes

12B He hath created, for His pleasure,  
The world in all its complexity,  
And proclaimed the generations for all time,  
Who can possibly take His measure.

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<sup>252</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sotah, 32:2, cited in: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 239

Yosse ben Yosse explains that God does not desire the chaos of utter devastation, desolation, confusion, and emptiness. Citing Isaiah 34:11, the Paytan implies that when God sits in judgment, even though the sinners may deserve annihilation, He will never resort to the full measure of the “law” and will spare His faithful. God will do so, explains the Paytan, not for the sinners’ sake but for His. God created the world and all within it for His pleasure [Proverbs 15:4] and such might is unparalleled in the heavens as it is on earth [Psalms 89:7], and yet:

13 From the depths of the heart,  
And from the secrets of conscience,  
He sees and understands all thoughts  
Of all human beings

13B Evil and futility  
Are hidden from His countenance,  
For He does not look upon wickedness,  
As He averts His eyes there from.

God understands the frailty of the human heart: *“for the LORD searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts; if thou seek Him, He will be found of thee; but if thou forsake Him, He will cast thee off for ever”* [I Chronicles 28:9]. God regularly averts His eye from iniquity He undoubtedly sees [Numbers 23:21] because of His love for the children of Jacob: *“Thou that art of eyes too pure to behold evil, and that canst not look on mischief, wherefore lookest Thou, when they deal treacherously, and holdest Thy peace, when the wicked swalloweth up the man that is more righteous than he”* [Habakkuk 1:13] and prefers not to see evil [Isaiah 33:15], and not to consider in judgment the sins of His People, unless they avert their eyes from Him [Leviticus 20:4-5]. Through scriptural allusions and pulsing verse, Yosse ben Yosse tells the congregation, open your eyes, see God and recognize His might as well as His mercy, stay true to the community

of Israel and to the Law of God which binds the People to God and to one another for all time.

14 He is encircled by glowing radiance  
And is concealed in darkness,  
For none can gaze upon Him  
And live

14B Awesome in His deeds!  
He can reduce a man to dust,  
Until he repents,  
So that long may he live.

15 His strength is exalted  
And He dons Righteousness  
None is like our God,  
So patient and forgiving

The dual image of God as bright fire [Ezekiel 1:4] and as a mystery incarnate in darkness [psalms 18:12] makes human perspicacity appear feeble and the eye an inadequate tool for seeing God's real countenance in full [Exodus 33:20]. The only way to perceive God, says the Paytan, is through the awesome deeds in which God's immanence is indisputable and real: "*Come, and see the works of God*" [Psalms 66:5]. In Man's direst condition God implies a call to return unto Him [Psalms 90:3] in full contrition. God takes no pleasure in inflicting sorrows on His children [Ezekiel 18:32], but subjects them to hardship in order to turn their hearts unto Him in faith. That, says Yosse ben Yosse, is the meaning of and reason for the People's current dissolution and suffering. God would not inflict punishment upon Israel wantonly, because He is just [Micah 7:18] and He is kind [Isaiah 59:17], and "*The LORD, the LORD, God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth*" [Exodus 34:6].

15B     He despises and abhors  
          Offerings borne of larceny,  
          He adores and loves the pure of heart  
          Who obey Him, rather than those who offer Him even the choicest sacrifice.

As the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and the People were left to wonder how to worship God, how to stay true to Him, there came the Rabbinic injunction to replace sacrifices with true prayer and with the broken heart of contrition, which to God are as appealing, if not more, than the offerings at the altar: *“And Samuel said: 'Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in hearkening to the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams”* [I Samuel 15:22]. This is a theme repeated often by Yosse ben Yosse in his Piyyutim, and a feature of his didactic message that seeks to affirm the power of prayer for the still ambivalent People who yearn for the olden days of burnt offerings and regard with some suspicion the new mode of worship.

16       He arrests the world with His rebuke,  
          And dries up the oceans,  
          He gathers, as a cloak,  
          All the waters of Creation

16B     He answers, with His grace,  
          The call of rams’ horns,  
          And wipes clean all iniquities  
          As the wind doth blow clean the mists and the clouds.

Even though the voice of God can grind mountains to dust [Job 12:15], even though the sound of His roar can dry up the seas [Isaiah 50:2], the gentle touch of God’s mercy and grace responds to repentant hearts and wipes away the tears of the People who

are in distress, as He wipes clean the slate of their sin in judgment [Isaiah 44:22]. God, says Yosse ben Yosse, is hard and soft, mighty and kind, He is everything and all at once.

17     He endeavoured and created everything  
       With the word of His mouth,  
       In all His ways  
       He seeks justice and judgment

17B    His mouth says:  
       Do this and live,  
       For I do not desire  
       The death of the iniquitous.

With a word God creates, with a word He can destroy, "*I, the LORD, who am the first, and with the last am the same*" [Isaiah 41:4], the infinite and eternal, whose every action is justice and truth. Therefore, the Paytan assures the congregation, the present is part of the entire arc of time, and it has purpose, it has meaning, and the meaning is God. Therefore, citing Joseph, he writes "Do this and live" [Genesis 42:18], "*For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD; wherefore turn yourselves, and live*" [Ezekiel 18:32].

18     He gazes into the future,  
       He soars in His awesomeness,  
       His throne is elevated  
       Yet He sees every humble creature,

The present is but a part of the arc of time, and God can see into the future. Here Yosse ben Yosse repeats the refrains about the grandeur of God and His elevated state, and assures the community that despite these attributes, He is able to see and forgive the smallest and humble-most creature upon His good earth [psalms 135:6].

18B    Girded with abundant power  
       He rides astride the wind,  
       He examines hearts  
       And forgets naught.

God, the mighty examiner of hearts [Psalms 7:10] who rides the storms and the winds [Psalms 18:11], forgets naught and can forgive all, as:

19 He stridently calls out:  
I am God, El-Shadai,  
Return unto Me,  
And I will return unto you

19B Come closer to Him,  
With the force of repentance,  
For His ears are keen  
To hear the cries of the lowly.

Citing Genesis 17:1 Yosse ben Yosse makes an appeal, with growing urgency that resounds through his mention of Joel [2:12] and Malachi [3:7], calling the People to return unto God without delay. Then, when God hears the cries of the sorrowful who presently labour in anguish under foreign oppression, He will forgive the sinners and bring them redemption as promised [Proverbs 21:13].

20 Merciful and compassionate,  
Please judge us with kindness,  
Acquit us in judgment  
For we are but dust and ashes

20B Revered in the heavens,  
The King of the firmament,  
He hears from up above  
The cries of the destitute.

Here Yosse ben Yosse positions himself among the prayerful People, as one of the community, imploring and pleading with God that He judge the congregation with mercy whereas, like Abraham, they can each say: *“Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the LORD, who am but dust and ashes”* [Genesis 18:27]. Because:

21 The sky is His throne  
And the earth but a foot rest for His feet,

His armour is Justice,  
And His garment is radiance

21B His Name is most awesome,  
He is merciful and compassionate,  
To every generation  
This is His righteousness.

Even though God is high above all the firmaments of the universe entire [Psalms 91:9], even though God is mightier than any and all forces [Psalms 668:35], He is keen to hear the plight of the meek [Psalms 69:34]. And even though He dons light for a garment [Psalms 104:2], He is merciful and kind, “*is gracious and full of compassion*” [Psalms 111:4] and His justice shall reign for all time [Isaiah 51:8].

22 His is perfect is all His ways  
And brooks no evil,  
Every morning He dispenses  
His justice for all to see

22B He lives in men’s hearts,  
He is mighty in His every deed,  
Who can express  
The mighty acts of God.

Yosse ben Yosse reminds the congregation finally that: “*As for God, His way is perfect; the word of the LORD is tried; He is a shield unto all them that take refuge in Him.*” [II Samuel 22:31], that all His deeds are purposeful and just, and even though humans cannot fully comprehend the full measure of the divine plan: “*The LORD who is righteous is in the midst of her, He will not do unrighteousness; every morning doth He bring His right to light, it faileth not*” [Zephaniah 3:5]. Yosse ben Yosse began his Piyyut with the aim of consoling the People that their present distress was a temporary situation, and he concludes with the last letter in the Hebrew acrostic reiterating the most salient of God’s

attributes- His perfection and infallibility. God is just and God is merciful, God has purpose in His acts, and He sees into the hearts of His flock [Proverbs 21:2] and He knows their contrition is true, and therefore, when the time comes and when God determines, then God will measure the deeds of His chosen [Jeremiah 32:19], and He will bring the final alleviation of all the People's sorrows, and He will bring redemption to Israel.

And the congregation remembers scripture and promise, and all recite, to the last throbbing beat of the drum: As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: "*Who can express the mighty acts of God, who can make all of His praise heard.*" [Psalms 106:2]

## Chapter 4: The Sovereignization of God

In 1896 the Cairo Geniza formally<sup>253</sup> revealed its treasures in the form of some estimated 250,000 documents and fragmentary documents that have been collected in the Ben Ezra Synagogue of Fustat since the 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>254</sup> The documents were removed and distributed to libraries and research facilities in Europe, North America, Cairo, and later, Israel as well. These extraordinary documents hold a record of Jewish life in the second millennium of Jewish history.<sup>255</sup> They have yet to be fully reconstructed, catalogued and digitized for the benefit of researchers across the globe. Some of the aspects of life during the first millennium of Jewish history are documented in Scripture, in the apocrypha, and in the Dead Sea Scrolls collection (1947). All these sources are widely available to researchers and scholars and have been the subject of unremitting study for many years.

The history and literary-spiritual products of the third millennium of Jewish life, also known as the European millennium, have also long been studied. It is the second millennium however, spanning the centuries between the 70 CE destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and the 10<sup>th</sup> Jewish revival, that has gotten short shift in scholarship terms. This was the period in which the Judaism of the East bequeathed to later generations the two Talmuds, this is the period during which the physiognomy of rabbinic Judaism was formed, but this is a period that produced few reliable historic artefacts and sources. The Cairo Geniza, once its riches are fully explored, may yet reveal valuable primary sources

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<sup>253</sup> Prior to its discovery by scholars, raiders of antiquities in Egypt (who braved the supposed ‘curse’ put on any person who dared enter the space, that within a year of entering the forbidden rooms, the person will die) were known to sell fragments looted from the Geniza to tourists and collectors of “oddities”. It is not known how many such fragments were irrevocably lost to researchers and historians in this manner. In 1896 Solomon Schechter of Cambridge University brought the fragments which remained in the Ben Ezra synagogue to scholars’ attention. The value of each fragment is to be found in the potential of the specific fragment to join other fragments in creating a larger body of text. The collection of as many Piyutim will, eventually, help shed light on the social function of this liturgical literary genre, and on its cultural and religious impact on Jewish life over time. See: Menachem Zulai, The Land of Israel and its Piyutim [Hebrew], pp. 17-27, 56; See also: <http://www.genizah.org/>

<sup>254</sup> Menachem Zulai, The Land of Israel and its Piyutim [Hebrew], p. 17

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31

which will, in time, help researchers re-examine and revitalize their insights into the evolution of Rabbinic Judaism.<sup>256</sup>

The artefacts that have reached us over the centuries, ensconced in the Jewish prayer book as *Piyyutim*, may, I believe, help scholars reveal some hitherto shrouded aspects of Jewish spiritual life in the first few centuries after the Destruction. The daily liturgy of Jews in the 5<sup>th</sup> century is presumed therefore to resemble closely the prayer books that have reached the 21<sup>st</sup> century and which are in use by contemporary orthodox communities. The real practices of Jewish worship, the sounds of prayer, the songs and the customs, descriptions of lived religion in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, cannot be as firmly anchored in scholarship, as we currently lack reliable historic sources on the subject. Further investigation of the only surviving documentary evidence in the Cairo Geniza may enhance our understanding of lived religion in 5<sup>th</sup> century Palestine.<sup>257</sup>

One of the revolutionary acts of Rabbinic Judaism was to come to terms with the destruction, recognizing that the Third Temple will not soon be built, and therefore to shift the site of worship to the synagogue.<sup>258</sup> The new locus of communal worship was not considered to be a surrogate for the Temple, but represented a liturgical shift. In other words, the shift was not ontological and it preserved the substance of the Temple within the synagogue based worship, so that cultic holiness was replaced with metaphorical holiness. The synagogue was “the next best thing around”, constructed by the Rabbis as

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<sup>256</sup> In order to facilitate a systematic research effort of all the Geniza documents, which are scattered between many venues from Leningrad to London and New York, an academic body must be created which will regulate and standardize the research effort and collect its fruit in a central “information bank”. An international effort must be made to catalogue the fragments according to their subject in order to facilitate an effective research environment based on international collaboration and cooperation. Barring such a body, all researchers can do is focus on the narrow field that disparate fragments shed light on, and the larger concern of Jewish studies is lost in the minutia of individual work. See: Menachem Zulai, *The Land of Israel and its Piyyutim* [Hebrew], pp. 27-31

<sup>257</sup> Reuven Kimmelman, “*Rabbinic Prayer in Late Antiquity*”, in: Steven Katz (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, p. 573

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 580-586

an interim measure, an accommodation, until the Third Temple will be built.<sup>259</sup> In effect they seem to have been saying: “In the absence of the Temple and its accoutrements for atonement, (we have) no recourse save prayer”.<sup>260</sup> As the living memory of the real Temple faded, the site of worship in the synagogue took on an aura of Temple-like holiness, and the sacrificial cult was replaced with prayer. This mechanism, in turn, became progressively more standardized and regulated in terms of texts and in terms of temporal regulation of communal worship.

By the 5<sup>th</sup> century, in Byzantine Palestine, Christianity and pagan beliefs competed intensively with Judaism with claims that their gods were the true rulers of the world. The Roman cult of divine Emperors, Christianity’s valorization of Jesus, made necessary a further Rabbinic innovation in response to the environmental assault on Jewish principles of faith. The liturgical innovation was motivated by politics as much as it was stimulated by internal religious enquiries. Rabbinic responses to the loss of the Temple required the creation of a “mobile Temple unit” that could be transported with Jews to the ends of the earth in their peregrinations and exile; thus the site of worship moved to the synagogue. The enthusiastic and later legal proselytizing efforts of Christians directed at Jews in Byzantium was perceived as a threat to the Jewish Commonwealth and therefore to the Jewish national institutions. Given the rabbinic takeover of worship and textuality in Judaism, rabbinic representatives claimed increased political power among Jewish communities.<sup>261</sup> They became the witnesses of God’s sovereignty on earth, God’s interpreters to the People, the conduits of God’s word to the

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<sup>259</sup> Zeev Safrai, The Jewish Community in the Talmudic Period [Hebrew], pp. 255-261

<sup>260</sup> Reuven Kimmelman, “*Rabbinic Prayer in Late Antiquity*”, in: Steven Katz (ed.), The Cambridge History of Judaism, p. 578

<sup>261</sup> Zeev Safrai, The Jewish Community in the Talmudic Period [Hebrew], pp. 27, 183, 299-301, 341

Jews. The claims to divinity made by human rulers in the ambient environment were countered with a greater emphasis on the sovereignty of Israel's God. As Reuven Kimmelman explains: "Under rabbinic auspices, Biblical covenant imagery was translated into a monarchical imagery",<sup>262</sup> in prayers such as *עלינו לשבה* or the *שלום עליכם* verses: "Peace upon you, O ministering angels, angels of the Eternal One, - from the King who reigns over kings, the Holy One, Blessed is He".<sup>263</sup> This type of prayer engineering, in which God's majesty is reiterated graphically, may be termed the sovereignization of God<sup>264</sup> for our purposes here.

Yosse ben Yosse, a denizen of 5<sup>th</sup> century Palestine, living among the Jewish communities of Byzantium, was exposed, like his kin, to the twin environmental pressures of political power and religious authority. A learned man, the Paytan reflected in his works the new rabbinic insights. The sovereignization of God received in Yosse ben Yosse's compositions its liturgical adornments and ornamentations as due a real King. The Piyyut *אהללה אלוהי* which we now turn to has reached the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a testament to the rabbinic innovation that took root in virtually all Judaic prayers since that period. It is an ode to the King, a song for the Sovereign, and a majestic poetization of the monarchical imagery promoted by the Rabbis, and the epitome in majestic verse of the sovereignization of God. Central to the theme of sovereignization is the relationship between God and Israel. If God is King, then perforce His children are a princely people; if God reigns supreme and sees into the hearts of men, then all individual deeds are registered in His ledger of sin and merit, eventually to be tallied and acted upon by the

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<sup>262</sup> Reuven Kimmelman, "Rabbinic Prayer in Late Antiquity", in: Steven Katz (ed.), The Cambridge History of Judaism, p. 606

<sup>263</sup> The Artscroll Siddur, p. 354

<sup>264</sup> Aharon Mirsky, The Beginnings of Piyyut [Hebrew], <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/sifrut/maamarim/reshit6-2.htm>

Lord; if God is King and if He can see the temporal horizons and contours of eternity, then present suffering could be but a temporary condition, as humanity progresses to the end of Time with God's guidance. The relationship bears upon ontological rabbinic teachings, which in turn give voice to a particular historiographic understanding of time, space, and the role of the Jews in both time and space. The following chapters raise some such ideas by way of suggesting avenues for further research.

אֲשִׁירָה עֲרוֹז אֲאִפְדֶּנּוּ מְלוֹכָה	אֶהְלֵלָה אֱלֹהֵי אִסְפָּרָה כְּבוֹדוֹ	1
אֲשֶׁר שָׁח וּפָעַל יֵאֲתָת מְלוֹכָה.	אֲשַׁנֵּב לְפוֹעֵל יֵאֲנִיְהוּ כִּי לוֹ	
כִּי צָבֵאוֹ אָנִי גֹּדֵל הַמְּלוֹכָה	בְּעִזּוֹ נִצַּח אֲשַׁנֵּן וְלוֹ נִאָּה שִׁיחַ	2
בְּרֹב עַם אֶהְלֵל וְלִמִּי הַמְּלוֹכָה.	בְּקָהֶל אֲבֹשֶׁר לִמִּי שָׁאת וַיִּתֶּר עֲזוֹ	
וּבֹאוֹ מִמְּלָכוֹת בְּמִזַּח הַמְּלוֹכָה	גִּשּׁוֹ גִּרִּים רָאוּ מֵה גִּהְדָּר	3
וַיִּרְוּמְנָהוּ יָחַד בְּגִנּוֹר הַמְּלוֹכָה.	גִּדְּלוּהוּ אֲתִי וְאֵל תִּתְנָאוּ	
וַעֲשִׂתָה מְצוּלָה לִמִּי גִזְרָקָה מְלוֹכָה	דְּרָכִים בְּעֵת הַתְּבוֹנְנוֹ יָחַד	4
כְּנֶגֶד שְׁלֹשׁ מְאוֹת רֶכֶב עֲזוֹ בְּמְלוֹכָה.	דְּרֶךְ סוֹס בַּיָּם וּמֵה־יִוְעִיל גָּבֵר	

<sup>265</sup> The Hebrew text is copied from: Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], 1991 Edition, pp. 93-101

## I PRAISE MY GOD

- 1 I praise my God,  
I sing of His glory,  
I speak of His grace,  
I robe Him with Majesty
- 1B I extol the Creator,  
Whose Word became deed,  
I shall glorify Him to all, for He  
Is most worthy of Majesty.
- 2 I shall forever reiterate His might,  
For I am His legion,  
And He merits tale  
Of His grand Majesty
- 2B I proclaim in assembly  
And exalt among the multitudes,  
Him, who is foremost in rank and great might,  
And He, who is our Majesty.
- 3 Come hither, oh nations,  
Come forth, all you kingdoms,  
See how magnificent He is  
In His girded belt of Majesty
- 3B Declare His greatness with me  
And let us exalt His name together,  
And do not adorn yourselves  
With a crown of Majesty.
- 4 The paths found while  
Traversing the depths of the sea,  
Look forth and consider  
He who is foremost in Majesty

הָאֲזִינוּ רִוְזִים 5  
הַבִּיטוּ חַתַּת  
אֹז רִוְזִו  
וּמָאָסוּ מְלוֹכָה

הַגִּידוּ כֹחַו  
לְזֶה יִכְתַּב  
לְאֻמִּים וּדְבַרוּ  
שֵׁם הַמְּלוֹכָה.

וְנִלְחַם רֵאשִׁית 6  
כִּי נִשְׁבַּע חַי  
גֹּיִם וְאָבָד  
בְּכֶסֶף מְלוֹכָה

וַיִּזְלַעַג בְּכָל־דֹּר  
מִי נִלְחַם בָּיָם  
כִּי לֹא לָמַד  
וַעֲזָה מְלוֹכָה.

וְדַע אֲדֹנָיו 7  
בְּזֹאת תִּרְזֶה אֶרֶץ  
עֶבֶד יֵשֵׁב נָגַב  
בְּשֵׂאת עֶבֶד מְלוֹכָה

זֶרַע בְּרוּכִים  
כִּי נָתַט קוֹל  
הַחֲרִימוּ אֲרוּרִים  
לְאֲדִיר בְּמְלוֹכָה.

חֲשַׁבּוֹן וּבִשָּׁן 8  
בְּלִי לְתַת דְּרָךְ  
עוֹרְרוּ מִלְחָמַת  
לְצַבָּאוֹת מְלוֹכָה

חֵילָם וְשִׁמְד  
וּמַעַל זְרוּעַם  
וְאֶרְצָם חוֹלְקָה  
נִפְלָה מְלוֹכָה.

- 4B He hath trampled their horses in the deep,  
All six hundred chariots,  
What use a man's effort  
Given the might of Majesty.
- 5 The noblemen listened  
And then were agitated,  
They watched the destruction  
And forsook all Majesty
- 5B They spoke of His strength,  
All the nations declared  
This is the God, who shall be rightfully writ  
In the name of Majesty.
- 6 He hath battled the foremost  
Of the nations, and they perished,  
For Moses swore  
By the throne of Majesty
- 6B And the enemy will be derided in every generation,  
For he had not realized  
Who had done battle at the Sea  
And donned Majesty.
- 7 He had sinned wilfully against his Master,  
That slave who dwells in the south,  
Because of that, the earth trembles  
Because of a slave, who seeks Majesty
- 7B The blessed seed  
Have vanquished the cursed,  
Because they raised their voices [in prayer]  
To the Mighty in Majesty.
- 8 Heshbon and Bashan  
Instigated a war,  
Blocking the path  
Of the legions of Majesty

9 טָפְּשׁוּ בְּנֵי כּוֹעֵן      כִּי נֹכְרִים הֵם  
בְּאֲדַמַּת בְּנֵי שֵׁם      זֶרַע הַמְּלוּכָה

טִבְחָם בְּנֶגֶן      עַד יִפְּנֶה אֶרֶץ  
לִפְנֵי אֲרוֹן הַבְּרִית      אֲדוֹן הַמְּלוּכָה.

10 יוֹשְׁבֵי חֲרוֹשֶׁת      אִו הַקֶּשֶׁה לְחַץ  
עֲזָרוּהוּ בְּלִי בַצַּע      אֶפְסֵי מְלוּכָה

יְהִי הַלְחִים בָּם      צָבָא בְּלִי בַצַּע  
כֵּן יֵאבְדוּ שְׂאֵר      וְלֹאֵל הַמְּלוּכָה.

11 כְּאֲרוֹ בַלְבָּנוֹן      אֲשׁוּר גָּדַל  
וְחִירָף: אֲוִרִיד      כְּבִיר מְלוּכָה

כְּלִיל אֵשׁ הַמָּמֵם      בְּלִיל שְׁמוּרִים  
וְאִז יִדְעוּ הַכֹּל      כִּי לֹאֵל הַמְּלוּכָה.

12 לְשַׁחַת כָּרַע בַּל      כְּחֹשְׁבוֹ עֲלוֹת לְשַׁחַק  
וְסָר מִנּוֹ לִבָּב אָנוּשׁ      וְרָד מִמְּלוּכָה

לְכַנּוֹ הוֹשֵׁב      וְכַח אֵל הַכִּיר  
לְמֵרִים וּמִשְׁפִּיל      הַשְּׁלִים מְלוּכָה.

- 8B     Their armies were destroyed,  
       And their land was partitioned,  
       And despite their strength  
       Thus fell their Majesty.
- 9       The Canaanites were obtuse,  
       For they are strangers  
       In the land of Shem,  
       The seed of Majesty
- 9B     Bin Nun did slay them,  
       Until the Land was cleared  
       For the Ark of the Covenant  
       Of the Lord of Majesty.
- 10     The denizens of Harosheth  
       Did tyrannize and oppress,  
       And aided the enemy without seeking reward,  
       Thus to naught came their Majesty
- 10B    The war was fought through God's intercession,  
       With His own armies, who seek no reward,  
       So may His enemies all be smashed,  
       And to God His Majesty.
- 11     Like a cedar in Lebanon  
       Assyria had grown,  
       And hurled abuse: I shall remove  
       This giant Majesty
- 11B    A fiery angel stunned them  
       In a sleepless night,  
       And then all and sundry did know  
       That only to God is this Majesty.
- 12     He kneeled before Bel in vain  
       Thinking he would ascend to the heavens,  
       But his heart was changed from that of a man  
       And he lost his Majesty

13 מוֹצֵרָה צֹאן לְטֹבָח וְנִתְכַנְּנוּ עַל־לֵילוֹת  
בְּלִבוֹשׁ צָעִיר רֹדֵם הַמְּלוּכָה

מְכוּרֵי בְּלֵא הוֹן פְּדוּנֵי בְּלֵא כֶסֶף  
סוֹלוּ לְמִטָּה כַּמִּים לֵב הַמְּלוּכָה.

14 נִמְכְּרוּ יוֹנִים לְבְנֵי יוֹנִים  
וְרִיחֵקוֹם מֵעַל גְּבוּל מְלוּכָה

נִיאָרוּ בְּרִית וְדַת וְהִמְרוּ עִם בְּאֵל  
וּמִיגְרוּם בְּלֵא כֶחַ מְכַתְּנֵי מְלוּכָה.

15 שָׁעִיר הַחֲנִיף לְהוֹרִיחוֹ בְּצִידוֹ  
חִירֵשׁ בְּקוֹל בְּכִי חָרַב וּמְלוּכָה

סוֹבֵב תָּלַק הָיֹת גָּבִיר לְאֲחִים  
וְעוֹד תִּיסוֹב לִישׁוּרֹן מְלוּכָה.

כַּכְת' בַּתו' וַיְהִי בִישׁוּרֹן מֶלֶךְ בַּהֲתַאסְפָּה רֵאשִׁי עִם יַחַד שְׁבִטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

- 12B     And he was returned to his senses and kingdom,  
          And then he acknowledged the might of God,  
          He who elevates, and who humbles,  
          In His Jerusalem abode of Majesty.
- 13       Topped like lambs to the slaughter  
          But through stratagems and plots,  
          He who is clothed in youthfulness  
          The ruler over Majesty
- 13B     Those who were sold for no treasure,  
          And those redeemed with no funds,  
          Glorify Him, who directs the flow of water  
          The very heart of Majesty.
- 14       The Israelite doves were sold  
          To the sons of Greece,  
          And they removed them  
          From the boundaries of the land of Majesty
- 14B     They bedevilled the Covenant and the Laws  
          And caused the People to barter their God,  
          And they vanquished them without force,  
          These Priests of Majesty.
- 15       The hirsute one [Esau] flattered  
          His father by hunting  
          And, because of his tears, he inherited  
          A sword and Majesty
- 15B     The smooth-skinned one [Jacob] was exalted,  
          To lord over his kin,  
          And thus will return  
          To Jeshurun [the People of Israel] their Majesty.

As it is written in Your Torah: *“He became King over Jeshurun when the numbers of the nations gathered- the tribes of Israel in unity.”* [Deuteronomy 23:5]

שם נוראות	עשה לך בציון	16
בכסא מלוכה	כאז תצליחנה	
משוש כל הארץ	עורר והקץ	
בקריית מלוכה.	וכונן כסאך	

ככת' בד' קד' יפה נוף משוש כל הארץ הר ציון ירכתי צפון קריית מלך רב.

וחמה תתפיר	פני מאור לבנה	17
בשאתך מלוכה	ויבשו עובדימו	

לכרה כחמה	פאר עיר יופי	
כבוד המלוכה.	וגלה לנגדינו	

ככת' עי'נ' וחפרה הלבנה ובושה החמה כי מלך יי צבאות בהר ציון ובירושל'  
ונגד זקיניו כבוד.

שוררו בליל תג	צבאות גאולי צען	18
לסחף מלוכה	והוא לילה נשמר	

צפו ברוח טכל	צעדו במי שעל	
ויקבלו מלוכה.	אנה יונטעו	

ככת' בתו' תביאמו ותטעמו בהר וחלתך מכות לשבתך פעלת יי מקדש יי כוננו  
ידיך. יי ימלוך לעולם ועד.

16 In Zion You shall proclaim  
Your name in awesome wonders,  
And as You succeeded in the past so shall You again  
Return Israel's reign of Majesty

16B Arise and awaken,  
You, Joy of all the earth,  
And establish Your throne  
In the City of Majesty.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *"Fairest of sites, joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, by the northern side of the great king's city."* [Psalms 48:3]

17 The face and light of the moon  
And the sun, You shall humble,  
And their worshippers will be shamed,  
As you bear Your Majesty

17B Adorn the City of Perfect Beauty  
For the sake of Israel, the People pure as the sun,  
And reveal to us  
The glory of Majesty.

As it is written by Your Prophets: *"The moon will be humiliated and the sun will be shamed, for God, Master of Legions, will have reigned in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and there will be honour or His elders."* [Isaiah 24:23]

18 The legions of those who were redeemed from Zoan [Egypt]  
Sang on the eve of the festival,  
That night of sleepless remembrance,  
Of the shattered [Egyptian] Majesty

18B Those who marched in the shallow measured waters  
And witnessed the Holy Spirit,  
Where will they be settled  
To establish their Majesty.

As it is written in Your Torah: *"You will bring them and implant them on the mount of Your heritage, the foundation of Your dwelling place, that You, God, have made- the Sanctuary, my Lord, that Your hands established. God will reign for all eternity."* [Exodus 15:17-18]

19 קוּמְטוּ שְׁעָרֵי זְבוּל      בֵּית עוֹלָמִים  
כִּי מִבִּינָיֵנו      שַׁבְּתָה מְלוּכָה

קְדוֹשׁ יְבוֹא      בָּם לְעוֹלָמִים  
וְאֵז יִשְׂאוּ רֹאשׁ      בְּחֻדְשׁ מְלוּכָה.

כַּכְתּוּב 'בד' ק' שְׂאוּ שַׁעֲרֵי רֵאשִׁיכֶם וְהִנְשִׂאוּ פִתְחֵי עוֹלָם וַיָּבֵא מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבוֹד. מִי זֶה מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבוֹד יי עָזוּ וְגִבּוֹר יי גִּבּוֹר מִלְחָמָה. וַיְנִי שְׂאוּ שַׁעֲרֵי רֵאשִׁיכֶם וְשִׂאוּ פִתְחֵי עוֹלָם וַיָּבֵא מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבוֹד. מִי הוּא זֶה מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבוֹד יי צְבָאוֹת הוּא מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבוֹד סְלָה.

20 רְבֻצָה עֲדִינָה      שְׁקֵטָה מְאֻלָּמֹן  
כִּי אָרְךָ לָהּ      קֶץ וּמְלוּכָה

רִיבוּ מוֹשִׁיעִים      שְׂאוּ אֶדְרֵךְ מְאֻדוּם  
וְשִׂיתוּ עַל אֶדְרֵךְ      הוֹד הַמְּלוּכָה.

כַּכְתּוּב 'ע'ו' ו'ע'לוּ מוֹשִׁיעִים בְּהֵרַץ צִיּוֹן לְשִׁפּוֹט אֶת הָרַע עֲשׂוּ וְהִיִּתְהוּ לַיְיִ הַמְּלוּכָה.

21 שְׂוֹא שְׂוֹא אֵל      וְהוּא עַל לְשׁוֹנֵינוּ  
בְּקֶשׁ אֱמֶת וְאֵין      וְרִיחֻקָּה מְלוּכָה

שְׂדֵי הַסֵּר      אֵין מִצְבָּאָיָךְ  
וְרִיעוּ לָךְ      תְּרוּעַת מְלוּכָה.

כַּכְתּוּב 'בתו' לא הביט און ביעקב ולא ראה עמל בישר' יי אלהיו שמו ותרועת מלך בו.

19       The gates of the abode have been rent,  
          The eternal dwelling place,  
          Because in the midst of its walls  
          There remains no Majesty

19B       The Holy One will return  
          To those walls for eternity,  
          And then they shall raise their heads up  
          As You renew Your Majesty.

*As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: "Raise up your heads, Oh gates, and be uplifted, you everlasting entrances, so that the King of Glory may enter. Who is this King of Glory? God, the mighty and strong, God the strong in battle. Raise up your heads, Oh gates, so that the King of Glory may enter. Who is this King of Glory? God, master of Legions, He is the King of Glory, Selah." [Psalms 24:7-10]*

20       The pampered one lay down,  
          Confident that she will not be widowed,  
          That her days have been extended,  
          And long was her Majesty

20B       Fight for her, the redeemers,  
          Remove the mantle of kingship from Edom,  
          And place the greatcoat on the Lord,  
          The splendour of Majesty.

*As it is written by Your Prophets: "And saviours will ascend Mount Zion to judge the Mountain of Esau, and the kingdom will be God's." [Obadiah 1:21]*

21       God despises falsehood,  
          And He sought on our tongues  
          But the truth, but none was found,  
          And thus distanced His Majesty

21B       Almighty God remove  
          All iniquity from Your legions,  
          And they will call out and proclaim You  
          With the acclaim of Majesty.

*As it is written in Your Torah: "He perceived no iniquity in Jacob, and saw no perversity in Israel. God his God is with him and the acclaim of the King is in him." [Numbers 23:21]*

22 תַּחְגֹּר גַּאוֹת      תַּתְאָזֵר עֹז  
לְבַל יִשְׁתַּרֵּר      זֶר בְּמְלוּכָה

תִּיכּוֹן תִּבֵּל      כִּי יִנְעַר רָשָׁע  
וְשֵׁם צַדִּיק לְרַגְלָיו      וַיִּוָּצֵף מְלוּכָה.

ככת' בדב'ק' יי מלך גאות לבש לבש יי עוז התאזר אף תכון תבל בל תמוט.

23 תִּיקוֹם גֹּיִם      תּוֹכִיחַ לְאוֹמִים  
תִּשְׁבוֹר מִטָּה רָשָׁע      מוֹשֵׁל בְּמְלוּכָה

תַּחֲלִיף אֱלִילִים      תּוֹשֵׁב לְבִדָּה  
תִּקְרָא נֶצַח      יְחִיד בְּמְלוּכָה.

ככת' ע'י'נ והיה יי למלך על כל הארץ ביום ההוא יהיה יי אחד ושמו אחד.  
ובתורתך כת' לאמ' שמע ישראל' יי אלהינו יי אחד.

22      Don Your grandeur,  
          Gird Yourself with might,  
          Lest a stranger will  
          Take the reins of Majesty

22B     The universe will be sustained  
          When evil will be shirked,  
          And righteousness will attend His footsteps  
          And He will be crowned with Majesty.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *“God has reigned, He has donned grandeur, God has donned strength and girded Himself, even the world of men is firm, it shall not falter.”* [Psalms 93:1]

23      Execute vengeance upon the nations,  
          Rebuke the peoples,  
          Break the staff of the wicked,  
          You, who rule with Majesty

23B     Replace the false gods,  
          You alone shall be glorified,  
          You will forever be called  
          The only One of Majesty.

As it is written by Your Prophets: *“God will be the King over all the land, on that day God will be One and His Name will be One.”* [Zechariah 14:9]

As it is written in Your Torah: *“Hear Oh Israel, God is our God, God is the One and Only.”* [Deuteronomy 6:4]

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## COMMENTARY

The Paytan opens this Piyyut by humbly preparing himself for the sacred task of praising God. Citing Psalms 69:30: “I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify Him with thanksgiving”, Yosse ben Yosse not only borrows words from the verse, but alludes to other Psalms thus evoking, with choice couplets, the awe he feels upon setting on this journey in praise of God. *“Declare his glory among the nations, His marvellous works among all the peoples”* [Psalms 96:3].

1        I praise my God,  
          I sing of His glory,  
          I speak of His grace,  
          I robe Him with Majesty

1B       I extol the Creator,  
          Whose Word became deed,  
          I shall glorify Him to all, for He  
          Is most worthy of Majesty.

The Paytan opens this Piyyut by humbly preparing himself for the sacred task of praising God. Citing Psalms 69:30: *“I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify Him with thanksgiving”*, Yosse ben Yosse not only borrows words from the verse, but alludes to other Psalms thus evoking, with choice couplets, the awe he feels upon setting on this journey in praise of God. *“Declare his glory among the nations, His marvellous works among all the peoples”* [Psalms 96:3]. He also alludes to the vestments of the High Priest as described in Exodus 29:5, to tie the endeavour of the Piyyut to the beauty of the Kohen, to the very Temple service itself. The Piyyut becomes a vehicle for the service of God, in the virtual and mobile Temple of the heart.

The particular flavour of this Piyyut is its insistence on ending each line in its 60-line poem with a single word: **Majesty**,<sup>266</sup> as a celebration of God's reign, as part of the Rosh Hashanah service which concerns itself with **זכרונות, ושופרות**, that is with God's majesty, with His remembrance of men's deeds, and with the Shofar as a symbol of redemption. The Piyyut becomes a self-standing unit of prayer, citing scripture, and behaving like liturgy inspired by the Temple service.

Furthermore, each verb, such as **אשגב** [speak of His glory], is mined from the Bible. **אשגב** is drawn from Psalms 96:4, **לפועל** derives from Proverbs 16:4. Even adjectives associated with God's Nature stem from scripture **שה ופעל** refers to the creation of the world affected by God's Word as it became deed: "*For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast*" [Psalms 33:9]. None is like God [Jeremiah 10:7], concludes the Paytan, none like God is worthy of the magnificence of Majesty.

2 I shall forever reiterate His might,  
For I am His legion,  
And He merits tale  
Of His grand Majesty

2B I proclaim in assembly  
And exalt among the multitudes,  
Him, who is foremost in rank and great might,  
And He, who is our Majesty.

The Paytan takes "permission" from the Bible to speak of God's Glory. I am His legion, I am His army, I am one of His people, [Proverbs 21:28, and Exodus 7:4] and as such I can and must speak of God to the Nations, to the assembly of Israel, to the world

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<sup>266</sup> Translating the word **מלוכה** from Hebrew can lead to several English words, each denoting a different aspect of a King's reign. In certain places the English words **reign, sovereignty, monarchy, rule, throne, power, or kingdom** may be better suited to the particular nuance of the intended meaning, but in the interest of preserving the stylistic cadence of the Piyyut, I have taken a translator's prerogative to force the English to behave as does the Hebrew in this Piyyut, ending each line with the same word: **Majesty**, rather than aiming to capture the precise meaning of **מלוכה** intended as a *wortspiel* by the poet. The word Majesty encapsulates the glory of the king, his reign, his dominion and loftiness, hence it was chosen over other English words to be the last word in each stanza, as Yosse ben Yosse's Piyyut calls for in this case.

entire. Just as Miriam sang at the Red Sea, just as Deborah sang in glory of God, so will I, says the Paytan: *“I have not hid thy righteousness within my heart; I have declared thy faithfulness and thy salvation; I have not concealed thy loving-kindness and thy truth from the great assembly”* [Psalms 40:10].

Here too, each couplet is a direct citation from the Bible. **עַם בְּרוּיָה עִם** harks to Proverbs 14:28 *“In the multitude of people is the king's glory...”* Genesis 49:3 and Job 13:11 are co-opted next: *“Shall not His majesty make you afraid, And his dread fall upon you?”* both speak of God’s Majesty and set the tone for the entire Piyyut, adorning it visually and in the musicality of repetition, with the mantra-like word Majesty. Yosse ben Yosse is masterful in his ability to tie together Midrashically and in his verse, all the Books of the Bible, from Genesis to Chronicles II, weaving them all into a single fabric of sacred text, and as the very scaffold of the poem.

3        Come hither, oh nations,  
          Come forth, all you kingdoms,  
          See how magnificent He is  
          In His girded belt of Majesty

3B       Declare His greatness with me  
          And let us exalt His name together,  
          And do not adorn yourselves  
          With a crown of Majesty.

Now the Paytan calls the Nations, the multitudes, all of humanity, to pay homage to God and see with their own eyes just how marvellous He is: *“Let it be unto Him as the raiment wherewith He covereth Himself, And for the girdle wherewith He is girded continually”* [Psalms 109:19]. *“Declare the greatness of God with me, and let us exalt His name together”* [Psalms 34:4]. Glorifying God together, says Yosse ben Yosse, is the path to unity of all humanity, it is a fundamental cornerstone for the good of the world. Earthly kings need

not with vanity presume to rule the world, for only God is King of all. See the truth, and serve God.

Yosse ben Yosse creates an interesting neologism next in the couplet **במזה המלוכה** which harks to Job 12:21 *“He poureth contempt upon princes, And looseth the belt of the strong”* to capture God’s forcefulness and firmness. A single word, which in the modern Hebrew denotes something entirely different [a pier] is moulded like clay to serve the purposes of the Paytan, relying on a verse from Job for authority.

4       The paths found while  
          Traversing the depths of the sea,  
          Look forth and consider  
          He who is foremost in Majesty

4B       He hath trampled their horses in the deep,  
          All six hundred chariots,  
          What use a man’s effort  
          Given the might of Majesty.

From here onward, Yosse ben Yosse proceeds to list God’s marvels as they were done for the sake of Israel, saving the Jews from their foes and in the process proving God’s majestic command of the world and of history. The stanza regarding paths in the sea alludes to a Midrash written about the traversing of the Red Sea, which in the Mechilta of the Beshalach Tractate, Chapter 4, describes the twelve paths miraculously opened on the now dry sea bed, allowing each tribe to cross the sea on its own dedicated path, twelve paths for twelve tribes. Citing Habakkuk 3:15, *“Thou didst tread the sea with thy horses, The heap of mighty waters”* Yosse ben Yosse uses the images of the drowning legions and horses of the Pharaoh [Exodus 14:7] to illustrate God’s might during the exodus, in evocative imagery that his audience must have been able to visualize clearly and thus

understand the point Yosse ben Yosse is making. God's might was so patently evident, it must be evoked and witnessed by every person past, present and future.

5       The noblemen listened  
          And then were agitated,  
          They watched the destruction  
          And forsook all Majesty

5B       They spoke of His strength,  
          All the nations declared  
          This is the God, who shall be rightfully writ  
          In the name of Majesty.

The miracle, the wonder of the splitting of the red Sea impressed the nations as well: *"The peoples have heard, they tremble: Pangs have taken hold on the inhabitants of Philistia"* [Exodus 15:14], and they were afraid, as says Job 6:21, attesting to the might of God and the meekness inherent in the human condition even of human kings on earth. Jethro knew this to be true: *"Now I know that God is greater than all gods"* [Exodus 18:11], Rahab knew it [Joshua 2:11], and the nations who sang His praises at the shores of the red Sea and who heard about the wonder [according to the Mechilta of the Beshalach Tractate, in the Section on Shira, Chapter 8], and therefore, says Yosse ben Yosse, one must conclude that none but God can have sovereignty.

6        He hath battled the foremost  
          Of the nations, and they perished,  
          For Moses swore  
          By the throne of Majesty

6B       And the enemy will be derided in every generation,  
          For he had not realized  
          Who had done battle at the Sea  
          And donned Majesty.

Numbers 24:20: *"And he looked on Amalek, and took up his parable, and said, Amalek was the first of the nations; But his latter end shall come to destruction"* [Exodus 17:8-15]. The

foremost enemy was Amalek. Yosse ben Yosse begins his recitation of historical proofs of God's war with the enemies of Israel. Amalek has become synonymous with the eternal opposition of the nations of the world to Israel, and the symbol of Israel's special status at the same time, because God is Amalek's most zealous foe on behalf of His people, Israel. Yosse ben Yosse's audience will have understood the allusion and its message would have resonated with them, for it promised that their current oppression under Byzantium will end through the Grace of divine intervention, and as Isaiah 61:10 says God will avenge His people, just as He did at the crossing of the Red Sea, for all the nations of the world to behold.

7        He had sinned wilfully against his Master,  
          That slave who dwells in the south,  
          Because of that, the earth trembles  
          Because of a slave, who seeks Majesty

7B       The blessed seed  
          Have vanquished the cursed,  
          Because they raised their voices [in prayer]  
          To the Mighty in Majesty.

The Deuteronomic model had become part of the popular imagination for Jews, becoming over centuries a pillar of faith for many:

“Why did the Holy One above send us a plague? They asked. What did we do? If we set it right, then maybe the Holy One will forgive us and our children will get better”<sup>267</sup>.

Yosse ben Yosse articulates this type of popular understanding of the sin and punishment dynamics at play in the world. This understanding is here stated most clearly. Israel, the one who “sinned against his Master” has sinned against God and He used the Canaanites as an instrument of censure against the errant Israel: *“And the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who dwelt in the South, heard tell that Israel came by the way of Atharim; and he fought against*

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<sup>267</sup> Lilian Nattel, The River Midnight, p. 225

*Israel, and took some of them captive*” [Numbers 21:1]. In Genesis God names Canaan a servant, a lowly slave: *“And he said, Cursed be Canaan; A servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren”* [Genesis 9:25] and Yosse ben Yosse alludes to Canaan by way of explaining to his audiences that dynamics of the Deuteronomic model which brings meaning to the people’s current condition of servitude which, Yosse ben Yosse explains, is a punishment for their sins which must, for deliverance to take place, be atoned for [see also Proverbs 30: 21-22].

“The blessed seed” are Israel, as in Isaiah: *“And their seed shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all that see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the seed which God hath blessed”* [Isaiah 61:9], and Israel will vanquish their enemies, just as they vanquished the cursed Canaanites [see Numbers 21:3], aided as they were by the power of prayer. Because, as the verse in Numbers 21:3 indicates, God listens to His people: *“And God hearkened to the voice of Israel, and delivered up the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed them and their cities: and the name of the place was called Hormah”*, and what was once true for Israel will, given the historical blueprint embedded in the Bible, happen again for the people, with God’s help.

8        Heshbon and Bashan  
          Instigated a war,  
          Blocking the path  
          Of the legions of Majesty

8B       Their armies were destroyed,  
          And their land was partitioned,  
          And despite their strength  
          Thus fell their Majesty.

Heshbon the Amorite [Numbers 21:26, 33, 23], and Bashan, both enemies who set upon Israel, were destroyed by the LORD of Hosts [Exodus 7:4] who fights for Israel:

*“Yet destroyed I the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars, and he was strong as the oaks; yet I destroyed his fruit from above, and his roots from beneath”* [Amos 2:9]. Yosse ben Yosse tells his audience- fear not, for God will summon His armies in your defence, as He did before. Even the most seemingly insurmountable obstacle will vanish before God’s might, when He comes to the rescue of His people, once they repent and are once again worthy of His mercy. Despite the strength of the earthly oppressors of Israel, God’s Majesty, His incomparable power, will ride to the rescue and save His people.

9       The Canaanites were obtuse,  
          For they are strangers  
          In the land of Shem,  
          The seed of Majesty

9B       Bin Nun did slay them,  
          Until the Land was cleared  
          For the Ark of the Covenant  
          Of the LORD of Majesty.

The Canaanites were obtuse. They did not internalize the facts. *“And the sons of Ham: Cush, and Mizraim, and Put, and Canaan”* [Genesis 10:6]. Canaan is a descendent of Ham, and therefore has no share in the Promised Land. Only the Holy Seed, Israel: *“and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation”* [Exodus 19:6] will inherit God’s land. The people, says Yosse ben Yosse will be repatriated. Israel, the land, is theirs, and no matter who currently has sovereignty over the land and the people, this sovereignty is but a passing phase, and the true sovereigns of the land will be restored to their rightful ownership, because that is the way God willed it in the beginning and therefore thus it shall be in the future. Yosse ben Yosse gives his audience hope that soon, as God promised, they shall be delivered. It is written and so it shall be done.

Remember, Yosse ben Yosse tells the congregants, how Joshua slew the seven nations who dwelled in the land? Remember, he tells them, how Joshua cleared the land of idols in order to make the Ark of the Covenant dwell in purity in God's land? "*Behold, the ark of the covenant of the LORD of all the earth passeth over before you into the Jordan*" [Joshua 3:11], this will happen for you as well. God moves nations across the board to suit His plans for the world order He created and continues to fashion. Have faith and wait for His deliverance.

10     The denizens of Harosheth  
       Did tyrannize and oppress,  
       And aided the enemy without seeking reward,  
       Thus to naught came their Majesty

10B    The war was fought through God's intercession,  
       With His own armies, who seek no reward,  
       So may His enemies all be smashed,  
       And to God His Majesty.

Yosse ben Yosse imparts a sense of historic movement, a deterministic march through time, each episode evoked to underscore the assertion that God acts in defence of His people through history. From the earlier Canaanite foe, Yosse ben Yosse moves through time to Sisera. The verb-intensive syntax gives the reader/audience a sense of this movement, this inexorable voyage through time that is dynamic and ongoing. It is a doubly effective element: history is movement, it is determined by God, and God acts in it and through it for His people.

Sisera dwelled in Haroshet [Judges 4:2], and he oppressed the people of Israel, "*And the children of Israel cried unto God: for he had nine hundred chariots of iron; and twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel*" [Judges 4:3], and the people cried to God. The enemy kings fought Israel as a coalition bent not on profit but on hatred "*The kings*

*came and fought; Then fought the kings of Canaan. In Taanach by the waters of Megiddo: They took no gain of money*" [Judges 5:19]. The Gentile nations seek no profit from their war with Israel, as Israel is too weak and destitute. They are, says Yosse ben Yosse, mercenaries of hate, but they were in the end lost, their kingdom [here stylistically referred to as Majesty] was reduced to naught. This took place because God's own mercenaries, the stars of heaven who seek no profit in service of God, came to the rescue of Israel against Sisera, and once more will ride to the rescue of the people of Israel in their need: *"From heaven fought the stars, From their courses they fought against Sisera"* [Judges 5:20]. Yosse ben Yosse reminds his audience of the verse: *"So let all thine enemies perish"* [Judges 5:31], and reassures them that God's help is nigh.

11     Like a cedar in Lebanon  
           Assyria had grown,  
           And hurled abuse: I shall remove  
           This giant Majesty

11B    A fiery angel stunned them  
           In a sleepless night,  
           And then all and sundry did know  
           That only to God is this Majesty.

History keeps moving. The "cedar of Lebanon" alludes to the Assyrian king Sennacherib [Ezekiel 31:3] who rose and became mighty and presumed his might was his own doing: *"For he hath said, By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom; for I have understanding: and I have removed the bounds of the peoples, and have robbed their treasures, and like a valiant man I have brought down them that sit on thrones"* [Isaiah 10:13]. The allusion to past hubris reminds the audience that the contemporary mighty agents of their distress have not earned their position due to their own efforts, but are merely vehicles in the hand of God who chastises His people through them, but will in time

avenge His people and save them: *“shall I not, as I have done unto Samaria and her idols”* [Isaiah 10:11], has not God removed the Samaritan idols once? He will again, in defence of His people.

*“And it came to pass that night, that the angel of God went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians a hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when men arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies”* [Kings II 19:35]. Fiery angels fight in God’s legions. They are unseen by human eyes, but their effects are patently clear. Yosse ben Yosse employs Midrash here, to allude to God’s help in that sleepless night of Passover [Exodus Rabbah, Chapter 18, Section 5], when God helped the righteous in Egypt, and God helped Hezekiah in his hour of need, so He shall help His people too. *“Thus saith God, The labour of Egypt, and the merchandise of Ethiopia, and the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over unto thee, and they shall be thine: they shall go after thee, in chains they shall come over; and they shall fall down unto thee, they shall make supplication unto thee, saying, Surely God is in thee; and there is none else, there is no God”* [Isaiah 45:14]. So it was, so it will be, concludes Yosse ben Yosse. The march of history goes on, God acts through history, and the cyclical nature of history is such that the current ebb in Israel’s fortunes will be reversed by God’s hand.

12     He kneeled before Bel in vain  
       Thinking he would ascend to the heavens,  
       But his heart was changed from that of a man  
       And he lost his Majesty

12B    And he was returned to his senses and kingdom,  
       And then he acknowledged the might of God,  
       He who elevates, and who humbles,  
       In His Jerusalem abode of Majesty.

Yosse ben Yosse moves to Nebuchadnezzar, the king who worshipped the idol Bel: *“Bel boweth down, Nebo stoopeth; their idols are upon the beasts, and upon the cattle: the things that ye carried about are made a load, a burden to the weary beast”* [Isaiah 46:1]. The king’s hubris and vanity were crushed by God, in a most dramatic manner. The king cast himself as the greatest of all: *“Nebuchadnezzar the king, unto all the peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth”* [Daniel 4:1], and yet he was debased like a beast and the humanity of his being was excised by God’s decree: *“That thou shalt be driven from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and thou shalt be made to eat grass as oxen, and shalt be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over thee; till thou know that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will”* [Daniel 4:25].

The mortal king was restored to his position only after he realized and recognized God’s immortal and majestic might. Yosse ben Yosse reminds his audience to do the same, for if the most evil were restored to their position after they repented of their hubris and sin, all the more so will the righteous people of Israel be restored to their former glory once they atone for their sins.

- 13      Toppled like lambs to the slaughter  
          But through stratagems and plots,  
          He who is clothed in youthfulness  
          The ruler over Majesty
  
- 13B     Those who were sold for no treasure,  
          And those redeemed with no funds,  
          Glorify Him, who directs the flow of water  
          The very heart of Majesty.

The Psalmist calls the Children of Israel lambs [Psalm 44:23] and enjoined the people to wake up, to realize that God is their shepherd: *“And ye my sheep, the sheep of my*

*pasture, are men, and I am your God, saith the LORD God*" [Ezekiel 34:31]. Here Yosse ben Yosse alludes to Haman, to the oppressor who was crushed by Mordecai, the scion to the tribe of Benjamin [Psalms 68:28] and emerged respected by all: *"And Mordecai went forth from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a robe of fine linen and purple"* [Esther 8:15]. History's tale proceeds to the evils wrought by Hamman, the arch-enemy of Israel, who thanks to Esther and Mordecai's faith and devotion to God, was reduced to naught, as will, implies Yosse ben Yosse, the current enemies of the people.

*"For thus saith God, Ye were sold for nought; and ye shall be redeemed without money"* [Isaiah 52:3]. Yosse ben Yosse returns to the theme of irrational hatred. The nations oppress Israel for no gain, just because of hatred. The people of Israel were "sold" for no money, given to their foes because thus God willed it as punishment for their sins. But they will also be redeemed for no money, God will save the people when they return to Him wholeheartedly. God can do what He wills because it is God who makes history happen as it does, for His purposes: *"The king's heart is in the hand of God as the watercourses: He turneth it whithersoever he will"* [Proverbs 21:1]. He can change the world order. He makes the world order. He, who turned the heart of Ahasuerus the Persian king as one would turn a channel of water, can once again turn history at will and save His people. There is great hope in this sentiment.

- 14     The Israelite doves were sold  
          To the sons of Greece,  
          And they removed them  
          From the boundaries of the land of Majesty
- 14B    They bedevilled the Covenant and the Laws  
          And caused the People to barter their God,  
          And they vanquished them without force,

These Priests of Majesty.

In the Song of Songs the people of Israel are likened to doves. This is a fine example of a translator's liberty to interpret rather than translate, to seek the meaning of words under the surface, for otherwise, if a literal translation were employed, the result would be nonsensical. "*O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, In the covert of the steep place, Let me see thy countenance, Let me hear thy voice; For sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely*" [Song of Songs 2:14]. Here the poet is not in love with a bird, but with a beloved bride, and the bride is Israel.

The Israelites, the doves, the beloved of God, were sold to the Greek: "*And you sold the children of Judah and the children of Jerusalem to the children of the Greeks in order to distance them from their border*" [Joel 4:6]. The *wortspiel* of dove and Greek cannot be transported to English. In Hebrew both nouns have the same root [י"ו] and the poet can dazzle his audience with the playfulness of his pen, and at the same time move the narrative through history again. God sold His people to the Greeks, He did so for His purposes, He manipulated history and used the vehicle of the Greeks to chastise His erring people, but in the same vein He will re-manipulate history to save His people.

Yosse ben Yosse employs a rare verb, his *wortspielerei*<sup>268</sup> in full swing again, to allude to the Greek decrees that forbade the Jews from worshipping God and keeping their God-mandated yearly calendar, as well as from performing circumcisions and observing the Sabbath. He uses a verb from Psalms נִיָּאָר in the verse: "נִיָּאָרַת בְּרִית עַבְדְּךָ" "*You have destroyed the covenant of Your servant*" [Psalms 89:40] and massages the verb to allude to the Greeks who destroyed the people's covenant with God with their decrees.

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<sup>268</sup> Michael Swartz & Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah*, p. 349

Yosse ben Yosse moves through history, from Persia to Greece, along the continuum of history. History has reason, it is purposeful, deterministic, it can be understood and meaning can be mined from its annals, if one has eyes to see God's deed through history, in the Deuteronomic dynamics of sin and punishment, repentance and deliverance. Israel sinned, God sold them to the Greek armies, but the Kohanite seeds, the Hasmonean heroes, delivered Israel from the mighty elephantine war machines thanks to God's intercession on their behalf, because they were worthy. So can you, says Yosse ben Yosse to his audience, be delivered if you return to God.

15     The hirsute one [Esau] flattered  
       His father by hunting  
       And, because of his tears, he inherited  
       A sword and Majesty

15B    The smooth-skinned one [Jacob] was exalted,  
       To LORD over his kin,  
       And thus will return  
       To Jeshurun [the People of Israel] their Majesty.

As it is written in Your Torah: "*He became King over Jeshurun when the numbers of the nations gathered- the tribes of Israel in unity.*" [Deuteronomy 23:5]

Yosse ben Yosse, as noted earlier, likes to use the alias of his characters, to mention Esau as a.k.a. "the hirsute one", and Jacob "the smooth skinned one", and with one stroke of his pen to evoke the entire story of the two brothers and their contest for primacy before their father, to recall the images so evocatively told in Genesis, to virtually see Esau and Jacob before their eyes. Once the image is illustrated, Yosse ben Yosse can proceed to make his historic sweep move on along the continuum he has began to draw for his audience, and allude through the image of Esau to Rome and through Jacob to the people of Israel, the Jews. The conclusion is clear. Esau flattered his father

Isaac and brought him food and meat [Genesis 27:11], and Isaac was moved to bless his son. Through Rebecca's foresight and her divine inspiration, Jacob received the blessing.

But then Esau cried: *"And Esau said to his father: Have you but one blessing Father? Bless me too Father. And Esau raised his voice and wept"* [Genesis 27:38]. Yosse ben Yosse refers to a Midrash in which the Sages said that thanks to these tears God has made Esau in the person of Rome, become ruler of the world, an empire [Midrash for Psalms 80]. But not all hope is lost for the Jews, because, Yosse ben Yosse quotes directly from the Torah, Jacob was blessed and as prophesied his offspring will reign over all the people in the land of Israel and the Jews will be restored, through God, to their sovereignty and independence.

Yosse ben Yosse now turns his attention to the future, to consoling his audience, now that the sweep of history has reached their era, now that history and its Deuteronomic dynamics applies to them directly and specifically, personally. This turning point, the watershed event in this Piyyut, makes the liturgy particularly suited for the Rosh Hashanah service, wherein the **מלכויות** portion of the prayers can be adorned with this poem, in all its historic "proof texts" that illustrate dramatically the ability of the people to change their misfortune into redemption through repentance and atonement.

16      In Zion You shall proclaim  
          Your name in awesome wonders,  
          And as You succeeded in the past so shall You again  
          Return Israel's reign of Majesty

16B     Arise and awaken,  
          You, Joy of all the earth,  
          And establish Your throne  
          In the City of Majesty.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *“Fairest of sites, joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, by the northern side of the great king’s city.”* [Psalms 48:3]

Just as God had restored Israel in the past through wonders that could melt mountains [Isaiah 64:1-2], so will He save Israel again and restore the sovereignty of the Jews in the future. He promised, through His prophets, that He would, not because the people deserve it, as much as for His name to be recognized by the whole world and His reign established: *“to make thy name known to thine adversaries, that the nations may tremble at thy presence!”* [Isaiah 64:2]. Yosse ben Yosse invokes the Psalm: *“Stir up thyself, and awake to the justice due unto me, Even unto my cause, my God and my LORD”* [Psalm 35:23] and tells his audience- wake up. Smell the coffee. Look around you and see reality for what it is. Recognize the workings of God in your lives, in history, and do as He had asked you to. Turn your hearts to Him and He will stand by you. He will restore Jerusalem, the apple of His eye [Psalm 48] to her former magnificence and will re-establish the kingdom of David in Jerusalem, because He is the one eternal true King.

Yosse ben Yosse reminds his audience of the prophecies, and having established that prophecy is God’s truth by illustrating its dynamic march through history and the battles God had done for His people in the past against the mighty, Yosse ben Yosse tells them, all the other prophecies will come true in history as well. The future of the people has been foretold in the Bible, and just as the past was fully prophesied and had come true, so will the future as the prophets saw it.

17     The face and light of the moon  
          And the sun, You shall humble,  
          And their worshippers will be shamed,  
          As you bear Your Majesty

17B Adorn the City of Perfect Beauty  
For the sake of Israel, the People pure as the sun,  
And reveal to us  
The glory of Majesty.

As it is written by Your Prophets: *“The moon will be humiliated and the sun will be shamed, for God, Master of Legions, will have reigned in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and there will be honour or His elders.”* [Isaiah 24:23]

Nature itself bows to God. God created nature, and can manipulate its workings as He sees fit, to advance His plan for humanity and for His people: *“Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed; for God of hosts will reign in mount Zion, and in Jerusalem; and before his elders shall be glory”* [Isaiah 24:23]. Yosse ben Yosse assures the Jews that even when it seems unfathomable that the current state of affairs will be reversed, it will be. God can stop the moon in its track, and surely He can humble the might of Byzantium as well. Jerusalem, which Lamentations calls the city of perfect beauty: *“All that pass by clap their hands at thee; They hiss and wag their head at the daughter of Jerusalem, saying, Is this the city that men called The perfection of beauty, The joy of the whole earth?”* [Lamentations 2:15], will once again be restored as the Song of Song says: *“Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, Fair as the moon, Clear as the sun, Terrible as an army with banners?”* [Song of Songs 6:10]. Israel will be restored and once again be “clear as the sun”, resplendent and pure in the service of God: *“for the God of Hosts will reign in mount Zion, and in Jerusalem; and before his elders shall be glory”* [Isaiah 24:23].

18 The legions of those who were redeemed from Zoan [Egypt]  
Sang on the eve of the festival,  
That night of sleepless remembrance,  
Of the shattered [Egyptian] Majesty

18B Those who marched in the shallow measured waters  
And witnessed the Holy Spirit,  
Where will they be settled  
To establish their Majesty.

As it is written in Your Torah: *“You will bring them and implant them on the mount of Your heritage, the foundation of Your dwelling place, that You, God, have made- the Sanctuary, my LORD, that Your hands established. God will reign for all eternity.”* [Exodus 15:17-18]

God has redeemed His people from Zoan, the name with which the Psalmist calls Egypt: *“Marvellous things did he in the sight of their fathers, In the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan”* [Psalms 78:12]. Once again Yosse ben Yosse makes his audience ‘work’ to derive meaning, and asks them to recall the verse and understand the meaning encapsulated therein.

Just as the Israelites sang to God on the eve of the festival [Isaiah 30:29], just as they sing God’s glory on the Passover, that sleepless night of remembrance of the wonder of the Exodus and the defeat of mighty Egypt [Exodus 12:42], Israel must know that these are wonders that attest to the might of God who works through history to defeat the enemies of His people: *“Why are thy strong ones swept away? they stood not, because God did drive them”* [Jeremiah 46:15]. The people of Israel, who walked on the sea bed as the sea was parted for them by God, must recognize God through His works: *“Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance?”* [Isaiah 40:12]. They must know, intones Yosse ben Yosse, that in the future similar miracles and wonders will be wrought by God, as prophesied and promised by Moses: *“Thou wilt bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance, The place, O God, which thou hast made for thee to dwell in, The sanctuary, O LORD, which thy hands have established”* [Exodus 15:17]. They will be restored by God to their land, and that is where they will finally accept God’s Majesty as everlasting and *“God shall reign for ever and ever”* [Exodus 15:18].

Regardless of the current monarch who rules over the Jews, Yosse ben Yosse tells his audience, the God of Israel is the true King, the real King, the one who rules the world despite human vanity to presume to rule the earth, and this portable mobile God, is the one God whom the Jews should obey and trust, the one God who promised them their land and sovereignty therein. There is hope in spite of present adversity. The future belongs to the righteous faithful.

19     The gates of the abode have been rent,  
          The eternal dwelling place,  
          Because in the midst of its walls  
          There remains no Majesty

19B    The Holy One will return  
          To those walls for eternity,  
          And then they shall raise their heads up  
          As You renew Your Majesty.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *“Raise up your heads, Oh gates, and be uplifted, you everlasting entrances, so that the King of Glory may enter. Who is this King of Glory? God, the mighty and strong, God the strong in battle. Raise up your heads, Oh gates, so that the King of Glory may enter. Who is this King of Glory? God, master of Legions, He is the King of Glory, Selah.”* [Psalms 24:7-10]

Yosse ben Yosse reminds the people that indeed the Temple has been destroyed [Kings I 8:13] and that God’s dwelling place, the Sanctuary, stands no longer in Jerusalem as it once did. God’s Presence has been exiled, along with His people, but the King will be restored in His abode once more, as the Bible prophesied and as God promised His people. The Temple, now residing in the hearts of the people, stands in a virtual space, but will, in the future, be rebuilt and the service therein restored to its former glory. Yosse ben Yosse enjoins his audience to take heart and remember the details of the Avodah, to serve in this ultimate sublime vehicle of perfect worship even in its transformed constitution, now as a virtual Temple, until such time as the physical

Temple will be rebuilt and the people will no longer be humbled and will be able to hold their heads up high. Connect the dots, Yosse ben Yosse says, I have shown you the march of history, and if you read its record carefully, you must have faith in the future as well.

20 The pampered one lay down,  
Confident that she will not be widowed,  
That her days have been extended,  
And long was her Majesty

20B Fight for her, the redeemers,  
Remove the mantle of kingship from Edom,  
And place the greatcoat on the LORD,  
The splendour of Majesty.

As it is written by Your Prophets: *“And saviours will ascend Mount Zion to judge the Mountain of Esau, and the kingdom will be God’s.”* [Obadiah 1:21]

Isaiah calls Babylon pampered: *“Now therefore hear this, thou that art given to pleasures, that sittest securely, that sayest in thy heart, I am, and there is none else besides me; I shall not sit as a widow, neither shall I know the loss of children”* [Isaiah 47:8]. Yosse ben Yosse continues the theme of this Piyyut- just as Babylon the mighty, that kingdom which reigned unmolested for so long, was humbled and defeated by God, so will the Edomite oppressors of Israel, Rome and Byzantium, be judged: *“And saviours will ascend Mount Zion to judge the Mountain of Esau and the kingdom will be God’s”* [Obadiah 21]. Roman might will pass as well, for everything passes and only God is eternal, and God’s people are chosen to be protected by Him. They will, in the future, disrobe of the garments of Rome they will no longer have to be under the influence of Rome.

Here Yosse ben Yosse employs his trademark *wortspielerei* once more. He takes the word **אדרת** which is mentioned in Jonah [3:6] and denotes the garment of the king, and shortens it, changing the vowel markings as well, to denote not only the garment but the might [**אדיר**] of the oppressor, both of which will be shirked with God’s intervention.

The innovative and creative use of the word here helps the cadence of the Piyyut remain “tight” and energetic. This is emblematic of the literary creativity that had full rein before the codification of Hebrew grammar in the following centuries.

21      God despises falsehood,  
          And He sought on our tongues  
          But the truth, but none was found,  
          And thus distanced His Majesty

21B     Almighty God remove  
          All iniquity from Your legions,  
          And they will call out and proclaim You  
          With the acclaim of Majesty.

As it is written in Your Torah: *“He perceived no iniquity in Jacob, and saw no perversity in Israel. God his God is with him and the acclaim of the King is in him.”* [Numbers 23:21]

The author of Proverbs declares that God abhors seven abominations, falsehood being foremost among these [Proverbs 6:16-17]. When the people of Israel lie and conduct themselves mendaciously *“For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue muttereth wickedness”* [Isaiah 59:3], when none among them speaks up for truth and justice *“None sueth in righteousness, and none pleadeth in truth: they trust in vanity, and speak lies; they conceive mischief, and bring forth iniquity”* [Isaiah 59:4], God responds by removing His Presence from His people. The Deuteronomic model of deed and consequence is illustrated clearly and in no uncertain terms: *“Therefore is justice far from us, neither doth righteousness overtake us: we look for light, but, behold, darkness; for brightness, but we walk in obscurity”* [Isaiah 59:9].

Here Yosse ben Yosse prays, along with his audience, begging God to remove iniquity from the people’s hearts. He asks, begs God, to cleanse the people’s hearts so that once more they will be able to *“With trumpets and sound of cornet Make a joyful noise before the King, God”* [Psalms 98:6]. It is recognition that atonement is complete not when

the people's hearts are broken in repentance, but when God bestows His Grace upon the people and forgives them, enabling them to glorify Him and serve Him once again. The covenantal partnership between God and His people requires this dynamic from both parties, as a condition for Messianic redemption.

22     Don Your grandeur,  
       Gird Yourself with might,  
       Lest a stranger will  
       Take the reins of Majesty

22B    The universe will be sustained  
       When evil will be shirked,  
       And righteousness will attend His footsteps  
       And He will be crowned with Majesty.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *“God has reigned, He has donned grandeur, God has donned strength and girded Himself, even the world of men is firm, it shall not falter.”* [Psalms 93:1]

God is the King of the Jews. But the whole world lives by His mercy, the whole world depends on God's grace and kindness, it is God which sustains all life. The God-centric world cannot exist without God. The Psalmist prophesied that God will be restored as King, as ultimate Sovereign of the world entire. After the wicked will be shaken off [Job 38:13], and when the Messiah will come, righteousness will be the only path to salvation [Isaiah 41:2], for all humanity and all of Creation. This is a cry to God, Yosse ben Yosse says, that He work His wonders on behalf of Israel for the glory of His name and for the sustenance of the entire world.

23     Execute vengeance upon the nations,  
       Rebuke the peoples,  
       Break the staff of the wicked,  
       You, who rule with Majesty

23B    Replace the false gods,  
       You alone shall be glorified,  
       You will forever be called  
       The only One of Majesty.

As it is written by Your Prophets: *“God will be the King over all the land, on that day God will be One and His Name will be One.”* [Zechariah 14:9]

Now, concluding his Piyyut, Yosse ben Yosse does not mince words. He asks God for revenge. He tells his audience that help is on the way and all their oppressors will soon suffer the wrath of God: *“To execute vengeance upon the nations, And punishments upon the peoples”* [Psalms 149:7]. God will break the staff of the wicked nations [Isaiah 14:5] and the reign of the idols shall pass from the world stage [Isaiah 2:18], and God will be King over all the land. Yosse ben Yosse once again reminds his audience that given that all prophecies had come true in the past, so shall prophecies regarding their future come true. The only thing required of the people, to assure the fulfillment of God’s promise to their forefathers and prophets, is that they declare and believe that God is One, the only One, and act accordingly and keep His Law.

As it is written in Your Torah: *“Hear Oh Israel, God is our God, God is the One and Only.”* [Deuteronomy 6:4]

This very brief analysis illustrates the genius of Yosse ben Yosse, and at the same time explains why his brand of liturgy lost out, over the centuries, to less complex and less sophisticated liturgy in the standardized Jewish prayer book. Yosse ben Yosse, while his Piyyutim are impressive, demands too much of the average praying person, and has therefore been relegated to the back of the prayer service books, and saved for special occasions such as Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. Given the paucity of reliable historical sources regarding Jewish life in Palestine after the destruction and before the Arab conquest, one must use rabbinic literature to plug the considerable holes in our

understanding of Jewish history.<sup>269</sup> Piyyut literature, in its reliance on Midrashic sources from the Mishna and the Talmud, weaves Halacha and Aggada contents into verses, offering its own brand of exegetical interpretation of Scripture. It also offers a glimpse into the political, social, economic and religious conditions of Jewish life in the period under investigation.<sup>270</sup> Piyyut is a literary device that promotes a variation on the more cerebral Halachic discussion favoured by the learned and the sage, and so it appeals to a large cross section of Jewry, encompassing both the learned and the unschooled. Piyyutic liturgy includes allusions and references to theology, religious philosophy, folk lore, history, science, and angelology, in an accessible form. The literary creation of Piyyut as a liturgical genre and as an element of lived religious life was contemporaneous with Tannaitic literature created in Palestine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and in Babylonian rabbinic academies in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>271</sup> The next chapter explores this historic evolution in greater detail and relates historiography to the Piyyut liturgy, in effect continuing the chain of contributions formed through generations of Jewish study from the inception of Rabbinic Judaism until the hoped for Jewish redemption.

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<sup>269</sup> Isaiah Gafni, "The Historical Background", in: Shmuel Safrai (ed.), The Literature of the Sages, p. 34

<sup>270</sup> Abraham Goldberg, "The Palestinian Talmud", in: Shmuel Safrai (ed.), The Literature of the Sages, pp. 306-308

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304

## Chapter 5: History and Historiography of 5<sup>th</sup> Century Jews in Palestine

Myths connected to the rituals and liturgy neatly expressed the human experience of being Jewish in pre-modern Jewish history. The myths and stories woven by Jewish custodians of memory were the means through which meaning was derived from events, and served as a link with the ultimate reality of the covenantal relationship with the God of Israel, thus cementing the special relationship perceived as fundamental to the covenant. Ritualized memory was an avenue for personal expression, for personal contemplation of individuals' place within the community as part of the transcendent trajectory of Jewish time, and thus helped forge an integrated community, and preserved sacred texts and sacred rituals despite the vicissitudes of time and space that so often impacted directly the Jewish experience of being.<sup>272</sup> Ritualized re-enactments of the drama of Jewish memory, around the Seder table for example, connect individuals with their ancestors and bind them with the shared legacy of Jewish memory. By following a script, they identify with characters in the drama, and through constitutive symbols thus create a new reality of nationhood which can be, and indeed often is, a-historical.<sup>273</sup>

Ritualized Jewish memory is a historiographic lens whereas it explains the meaning of contemporary history, at any juncture, as being part of a cyclical re-experiencing of paradigmatic historical templates. The present is rendered meaningful through reference to parallel ancient situations, primarily from the Hebrew Bible, through a 'back to the future' kind of emotional and mental gymnastics. The past is selectively remembered in order to make sense of the present and the future.

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<sup>272</sup> Frederick Streng, "Creation of Community through Sacred Symbols", in: Understanding Religious Life, pp. 43-45

<sup>273</sup> Frederick Bird, "Ritual as Communicative Action", in: Ritual and Ethnic Identity, pp. 23-38

Despite possessing a deep concern for the transcendent trajectory of time, Jews until the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>274</sup> had little if any interest in historiography, or in systematically recording historical events. Jewish historical consciousness was liturgical and interpretive, and did not walk hand in hand with the actual recording historical events with a demythologized distancing required in modern historiography. Historiography was not central to the socio-political and religious evolution of the people, while Jewish memory was central to the Jewish experience for it served as a unifying factor for dispersed Jewish communities. They were geographically disparate but connected through shared common memories.<sup>275</sup> Traditionally, the historian has not been the custodian of Jewish memory. The Jewish prayer book became the repository of memory, stored in ritualized and liturgical formats which supported the Jewish *weltanschauung* by finding evidence of a premeditated divine design of history,<sup>276</sup> and forging a Jewish identity in the process.<sup>277</sup> Traumatic events precipitated self-examination and forced Jews to redefine their identity in relation to history rather than to traditional memory tradition.<sup>278</sup>

History is a narrative written by people, for people, wherein its image of the past is constructed of details that are carefully selected in order to advance a certain purpose. History is a kind of story which tells people why things are the way they are, and helps these people answer such questions such as who they are, where they come from, how the world works, and where they are going. History does not describe the full complexity of events, but selects out of the unfathomable complexity of fact, those facts it deems significant. That selective process of historiography is subject to the changing standards of evidence over time, as well as to the subjective lens of the historian. Even if history is “more about the present than about events which took place in the past”- the

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<sup>274</sup> Note: All historical data in this paper pertain to the time after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and is indicated as centuries of the Common Era.

<sup>275</sup> Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, p. 6

<sup>276</sup> Moshe Idel, “Yosef H. Yerushalmi’s *Zakhor: Some Observations*”, *Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 97, No. 4, Fall 2007, p. 493

<sup>277</sup> Robert Chazan, “*The Timebound and the Timeless: Medieval Jewish Narration of Events*”, *History and Memory* -6, 1994, p. 18

<sup>278</sup> Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, p. 98

historiographer cannot engage with the present directly, but engage with the past through the attitudinal prism of the present.<sup>279</sup>

It is customary for scholars and lay people to paint the Roman and Byzantine periods as uniformly prosecutorial vis-à-vis Jews in the Land of Israel who remained there after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.<sup>280</sup> That is a common fallacy, and one would be remiss if in a discussion about the social function of Piyyut this historical inaccuracy were ignored. A nuanced historical review is therefore required as a preface to the discussion on hand concerning the historiographic elements found in the liturgy of Yosse ben Yosse.

Under Roman rule, following the extreme violence in the 1<sup>st</sup> century of the Common Era, Jews who had remained in the Palestine province of the Roman Empire, settled mainly in the Galilee, and were Roman citizens by decree. Judaism was a *Religio Licita*, a permitted religion in an empire that increasingly worshipped its emperors as divine beings.<sup>281</sup> After the 135 CE revolt and the attendant instability in the land, Jewish communities in the Galilee flourished economically and religiously. They had become part of a larger empire, with Jewish communities scattered throughout. The Patriarchate in Palestine was in the early centuries the authoritative centre of Jewish life, whereas its Sages interpreted the Torah and arbitrated complaints both locally and from abroad. The loss of the Temple and its sacrificial cult made necessary the transfer of religious authority to the Sages whose power base remained solid as long as there was no persecution of Jews in the empire and as long as Judaism remained a *Religio Licita*. Emperor's Constantine's conversion changed much of, but not the entire, situation.

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<sup>279</sup> Yael Zerubavel, *Tel Hai in Israel's Collective Memory*, p. 138

<sup>280</sup> Isaiah Gafni, "The Historical Background", in: Shmuel Safrai, *The Literature of the Sages*, p. 25

<sup>281</sup> Steven Bowman, "Jews in Byzantium", in: Steven Katz, *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, pp. 1035-1038

Following the 325 CE Council at Nicaea, a freshly Christianized empire demanded a social segregation of Jews. The conditions for Judaic practice began a process of decline as the competition between Judaism and Christianity became more aggressive.<sup>282</sup> Discriminatory laws against Jews, such as the Theodosian code of 429 CE and the forced baptisms of 525 CE, were applied ad hoc and were not yet uniformly applied through the empire. Under these ambivalent social conditions, Jews in Palestine flourished economically, developing a solid economic presence in such industries as garment making, gold and silver smithing, glass making, medicine and long distance trading. Moreover, there were no laws restricting land ownership by Jews and so urban real estate and agricultural real estate produced considerable revenues for Jewish denizens of Palestine.<sup>283</sup> Eventually, by the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Jews were demoted to second class citizenship, as Christianity became entrenched religiously, socially and legally through the empire. The condition of Jews in Palestine remained secondary yet tolerable until the Islamic conquest in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, but given this thesis's focus on Jewish life in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the Islamic period will not be covered here.<sup>284</sup>

It bears repetition to state the historic fact that there were no extensive deportations of Jews after the 70 CE destruction of the Temple, and even though the suppression of the 135 CE revolt ended the Jewish majority and hegemony in the Land of Israel, Jewish communities continued to thrive in the Galilee where their population reached a high density<sup>285</sup> thanks to their economic success. After the destruction of the

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<sup>282</sup> Steven Bowman, "Jews in Byzantium", in: Steven Katz, The Cambridge History of Judaism, pp. 1041-1042

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1044

<sup>284</sup> David Goodblatt, "The Political and Social History of the Jewish Community in the Land of Israel", in: Steven Katz, The Cambridge History of Judaism, p. 404

<sup>285</sup> For a map of synagogues in Roman Palestine, see: David Goodblatt, "The Political and Social History of the Jewish Community in the Land of Israel", p. 426

second Temple in Jerusalem, the Jewish sovereign entity met its demise. Several attempts to reconstitute a Jewish “state” were unceremoniously crushed, and many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and its environs were exiled. It would be an error however to assume that the exile affected all the people of Israel, or all the people of the Land of Israel. Jewish settlement in the land now called Palestine continued and thrived for several centuries, at least until the Muslim conquest and the subsequent Crusade wars. Indeed, archaeological evidence indicates that the Jews in Palestine enjoyed unprecedented prosperity thanks to the new markets that had opened with the Roman conquest for their olive oil and wine products.

During the Late Roman period [70-330 CE] and the Byzantine period [330-632 CE], Jews began to cultivate hitherto neglected plots of land, by importing fertile soil to mountainous regions better to grow vines and olive trees and increase production.<sup>286</sup> Jews under Byzantium cultivated their land, they tended to their cemeteries with liberty, they enjoyed economic wealth and dressed in fine silk clothes, they produced abundant literary compositions and unprecedented complex and complicated religious works, they lived in relative prosperity and peace on their ancestral land (even though they were no longer sovereign), in calm and under the pacific order imposed by their rulers, they enjoyed the freedom to practice their religion and to study its ethics and laws with few restrictions and with periodic persecutory interruptions, until the advent of the Islamic period in 632 CE.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Adam Zartal, Sisera's Secret [Hebrew], pp. 33-45

<sup>287</sup> Yehuda Even-Shmuel, Midrashey Ge'ula- Jewish Apocalypticism [Hebrew], p. 170

Hundreds of *mausolea* stone structures, averaging 4m x 4m in size and 2m in height, are scattered in the mountainous regions of the Land of Israel. Initially, researchers assumed these *mausolea* were ritual sites or burial sites, but current archaeological science has determined that these stone structures were in fact simple refrigeration and storage devices designed to keep agricultural produce from spoiling before taking them to market.<sup>288</sup> The *mausolea* give eloquent testimony to the thriving agricultural activity of the native population, especially in view of the rich archaeological remains of Jewish habitation sites in the vicinity of these *mausolea*, including synagogues, towns, villages, and the like. It is an indisputable historic fact that during the Byzantine period the Jewish population in Palestine grew, thrived, and reached a zenith, both numerically and culturally, unequalled until the modern era and the establishment of the modern State of Israel.<sup>289</sup>



A map of Byzantium<sup>290</sup>

<sup>288</sup> Adam Zartal, *Sisera's Secret* [Hebrew], p. 59

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50

<sup>290</sup> <http://www.carpenterinternational.com/ages/pics/byzantine.gif>

The 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries were formative periods in the history of the Jewish people and of Judaism.<sup>291</sup> Rabbinic Judaism began its revolutionary Judaic re-invention, cultural winds blowing from Europe enriched the ambient environment with new aesthetic standards and new sciences, the desert to the east, now pacified and porous to the easy exchange of populations and ideas, invaded ethnic and spiritual customs and brought musicality and meditative contemplation practices to Palestine,<sup>292</sup> in a word, those were fecund years. The Byzantine period was a bridge between sovereignty and exile, but it was not a uniformly sorrowful time as many are wont to assume. This was a profoundly important period for Judaism and for the Jewish communities in and outside of Palestine. The tribal nature of Jewish life no longer held; the traditional lack of centralized military organization was recognized to have been a contributing factor in the demise of Jewish self government in the Land of Israel; towns and cities, haphazardly fortified gave way to stronger battlements and planned architecture. Things were in flux. Everything was changing.

There is scant evidence of the thoughts and feelings which the denizens of Palestine no doubt had entertained,<sup>293</sup> but the architectural and agricultural evidence, combined with the fragmentary written evidence, of which Yosse ben Yosse's Piyutim are a striking example, must serve as the only sources of information. This is not an ideal situation for historiographic research,<sup>294</sup> but it is a given and one must work around the problem rather than ignore it. Religious artefacts are particularly eloquent in the search

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<sup>291</sup> Adam Zartal, Sisera's Secret [Hebrew], p. 19

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27

for evidence regarding the thoughts and concerns of Byzantine Palestinian Jews. Individual ethnicity was tied to religious identity, indeed ethnicity and religiosity were considered a single unit for both individuals and communities. It is therefore through a combination of archaeological and textual analysis that we could glean relevant information regarding this formative period in Jewish life and in the religious transformation from a sacrificial cult to rabbinical Judaism. Naturally, remains of cooking pots, layers of imported fertile *terra-rosa* sites, mausolea, town squares, dietary evidence (such as the absence of porcine bone fragments in Jewish dwelling sites),<sup>295</sup> and other archaeological remains are outside the scope of this particular research effort, but they stand nevertheless as supportive elements on the scaffold of interpretation here undertaken. Historical research cannot be assumed to be concerned with facts, as every fact is interpretive in its nature and given that no fact can stand alone without explanation. Every fact is an opinion and every opinion is a potential locus for argument and interpretation. Historical research is essentially a mediated brain-storming endeavour, in which facts are repeatedly questioned given contemporary understanding and contemporary ideas regarding time, religion, society, and culture.<sup>296</sup> The scholarship regarding Yosse ben Yosse, as part of the endeavour to conjure the concerns and thoughts of people<sup>297</sup> now gone for two millennia, must therefore be undertaken in the spirit of its historical underpinnings, as a work in progress, subject to subjectivity and therefore to scholarly re-evaluation and questioning.

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<sup>295</sup> Adam Zartal, *Sisera's Secret* [Hebrew], p. 78

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68

Between 400 CE and 600 CE, in rough terms, Jews suffered most severely from a decline in numbers because of the relentless Christian proselytizing effort, and because of cultural assimilation. Estimates of Jewish populations are that in the 1<sup>st</sup> century there were approximately 10-12 million Jews in the world; by the 12<sup>th</sup> century there were merely 2 million Jews, and by the 15<sup>th</sup> only one million. The leadership of Jews, consisting primarily of rabbinic persons and institutions, faced this gradual dissolution of the nation as a matter of vital urgency. The Justinian code restricted the practice of Judaism thus crippling the Jewish communities that were under constant assault in the *kulturkampf* between Greek and Jewish cultures.<sup>298</sup>

We are not only concerned here with the history of the Empire and its tax-paying Jewish citizens, but with the history of Judaism itself. The literary formulation of Oral Torah as the corpus of Tannaitic literature culminated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, ushering 250 years of specialized commentary on Tannaitic literature in the period of the Talmud, also known as the Amoraic period.<sup>299</sup> The transition between the two periods was not clearly marked and was rather fluid. The Talmud developed in two Jewish centres, namely Babylon and the Galilee,<sup>300</sup> whereas in both centres of learning the Tannaitic literature was studied and elaborated upon. It was a parallel process, much affected by temporal and political-geographic factors. The Palestinian Talmud compiled a record of discussion and Halachic decisions made by the Sages in their Galilee and Caesarean academies, and was edited and sealed by the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century; the Babylonian Talmud, with its

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<sup>298</sup> Steven Bowman, "*Jews in Byzantium*", p. 1050

<sup>299</sup> Abraham Goldberg, "*The Palestinian Talmud*", in: Shmuel Safrai, *The Literature of the Sages*, p. 303

<sup>300</sup> The term "Jerusalem Talmud" is misleading, for Jerusalem was not the site where the Yerushalmi developed. Rabbinic academies in the Galilee and in Caesarea were the generators of this seminal Talmudic literature. It is out of respect and awe for the centrality of Jerusalem for Jewish national and religious principles, that the Palestinian Talmud was named Yerushalmi. See: Abraham Goldberg, "*The Palestinian Talmud*", in: Shmuel Safrai, *The Literature of the Sages*, p. 319

record of rabbinic discussions and rulings, was edited by the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The two Talmuds are the products of two independent teaching traditions, but were each enhanced by a cross fertilization between Palestinian and Babylonian scholars.<sup>301</sup> For a time, Babylonian scholars came to study in Palestine influencing Palestinian teaching, and Palestinian scholars went to Babylon in a mutual exchange of scholarship. There are significant differences between the two Talmuds,<sup>302</sup> but once again, we would be distracted if we were to elaborate on these differences here. Suffice it to note that each rabbinic academy developed its own tradition of interpretation, affected by the political, cultural, and economic conditions in Palestine and Babylon.

The Galilean city of Tiberias was the greatest centre of rabbinic learning in Palestine, and the seat of the Patriarchate as well, where leading Sages taught and studied. Eventually however, the Babylonian academy eclipsed the Palestinian one in importance and the Galilean academy began its decline, under the changing political landscape that forced rabbinic scholars to emigrate to Babylon. By 425 CE the Patriarchate was extinguished and a void was felt by Jews who remained in Tiberias, Sephoris, Lydda, and Caesarea.<sup>303</sup> After the anarchic years of 235-324 CE, the Byzantine period ushered a period of relative calm, as we have pointed out above. The growing prominence of Christianity influenced the social fabric and legal status of Jews who

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<sup>301</sup> For more information on the two communities of Babylon and the Land of Israel, see: Zeev Safrai, The Jewish Community in the Talmudic Period [Hebrew], pp. 52, 82, 92-95, 313-350

<sup>302</sup> The Palestinian Talmud is written in a Western Aramaic dialect, with some borrowed Greek terminology. It has a simpler structure (some of the Tractates are “missing” in the Palestinian Talmud, such as the Zra’im Tractate; but some are to be found only in the Babylonian Talmud, such as the Kodashim Tractate) than the Babylonian Talmud which is written in the Eastern Aramaic dialects, with some borrowed Persian words. The Babylonian Talmud, even after its 5<sup>th</sup> century editing, continued to be re-edited in post-Talmudic discussions up to the Gaonic period. The Palestinian Talmud is closest in literary tradition to the Tannaitic literature created in the Land of Israel. It therefore received historic priority, especially for 5<sup>th</sup> century rabbinic scholars such as Yosse ben Yosse and his contemporaries. See: Abraham Goldberg, “*The Palestinian Talmud*”, in: Shmuel Safrai, The Literature of the Sages, pp. 304-308

<sup>303</sup> Abraham Goldberg, “*The Palestinian Talmud*”, in: Shmuel Safrai, The Literature of the Sages, pp. 309-313

laboured under increasingly prejudicial taxation and religious repression.<sup>304</sup> The confrontation between Christianity and Judaism ceased to be an internal affair, and it spilled over to the entire Byzantine Empire. The confrontation became religious and international, requiring the emperor's direct intervention. New legislation circumscribed the legal status of Jews, and no major public role was permitted for Jews. Some Jews, wishing to remain devoted to their tradition, began to abandon their fields and homes, fleeing to the relative safety of Babylon; others preferred to benefit from the legal protection given to Jewish converts to Christianity, having learned their bitter lesson in the 351 CE suppression of their rebellion against Rome, and remained in Palestine to tend their fields and homesteads.<sup>305</sup>

It is in this climate that Yosse ben Yosse responded to the shifting positions of Jews in the Land of Israel. As the synagogue became the target of repressive legislation, as Jews were assimilating in appalling numbers, as the Land of Israel became desolate of its Jewish inhabitants, no matter was more urgent than the buttressing of Jewish life from within. Yosse ben Yosse's contribution to the wider rabbinic effort to stem assimilation and to rekindle hope in the hearts of Jews who were now marginalized in the public domain, was Piyyutic in nature. As Steven Bowman explains:

Jews developed the Piyyut... to versify the oral tradition whose teaching was now interdicted... The continuously developing Piyyut (enriched) synagogue rites... (and) allowed the survival of Judaism, (because Piyyutic liturgy) had not been outlawed by the Emperor".<sup>306</sup>

After the dissolution of the Patriarchate, and following a brief messianic movement in the mid 5<sup>th</sup> century (448 CE), after the sack of Rome in 455 CE and

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<sup>304</sup> Isaiah Gafni, "The Historical Background", in Shmuel Safrai, The Literature of the Sages, pp. 24-25

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27

<sup>306</sup> Steven Bowman, "*Jews in Byzantium*", p. 1050

upheavals in the east generated by invading Vandals and Visigoths,<sup>307</sup> Palestine became a more hostile environment to its remaining Jewish residents. Yosse ben Yosse's Piyyutim, inspired and enriched by the Talmudic and Midrashic literary ferment that produced the Palestinian Talmud and the Babylonian scholarship, was in the front lines of the rabbinic battle against a complete dissolution of the Nation through assimilation and migration. Piyyut therefore was a literary device whose task cannot be overstated. It was a weapon and a relatively non-cerebral popular means<sup>308</sup> for the self-preservation of Judaism and a religion and the Jewish Nation as a Peoplehood reliant and founded on its religion.

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<sup>307</sup> Steven Bowman, *Jews in Byzantium*, p. 1045

<sup>308</sup> Abraham Goldberg, *The Palestinian Talmud*, p. 306

אז לראש תתנו ונמנו: נתנה ראש

עד [לא] נכון בראש רינו מי ראש

בנו טעתה און וכל און הטינו

עד לא שמועה תצלינה אוננו. חטאנו

גם עין הרמנו מול יוצר ע[ן]

ע[ד] לא נשש בקיר באין עינים

דמנו [בגובה] לארך אפים

אפים

עד לא אנה ועלה בנו אף. חטאנו

הקשינו עורף לעורף קמינו

עד לא הראנו ערף ולא פנים

וסררנו כתף לחפף כתף

[עד לא] כתיפנו משכמה תפול. חטאנו

זרוע [רמה] בחרנו לנו

עד לא [אזרענו] מקנה תשבר

<sup>309</sup> The Hebrew text is copied from: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], 1991 Edition, pp. 219-2228

## IN THE EARLY DAYS YOU HAD MADE US THE HEAD

1 In the early days You had made us the head  
And we said, somnambulant: Let us return to Egypt,  
And then the Temple was rent from the mountaintop  
And we were punished with poisonous waters

1B You bestowed us with ears  
But we had not listened,  
And then the calamity was heard  
And our ears rang.

*We have sinned*

2 We also raised our eye in rebellion  
Before Him, who hath fashioned the eye  
And then we were left blindly groping the wall  
With no eyes to see

2B We presumed to be haughty, raising our noses,  
At Him, who is so Patient  
And then He became wrathful  
And was infuriated with us.

*We have sinned*

3 We were stiff necked and rebellious  
At Him, who decapitated our enemies,  
And then He no longer showed us  
Neither the back of his neck nor His countenance

3B And we turned our shoulder away  
From Him, who hovers protectively over our shoulders,  
And so our shoulder  
Fell off from its blade.

*We have sinned*

4 A raised arm  
We had chosen for us,  
And then our forearm  
Was broken off its mooring

חִיפֵינוּ כַּפֶּה      דְּבָרִים לֹא כֵן  
עַד לֹא נִחַשְׁב      כָּאֵלִם וְאִין פֶּה. חסאנו

טַפְלָנוּ שְׁקָר      וְדַרְכֵנוּ לְשׁוֹן  
עַד לֹא הוֹכִינוּ      בְּשׁוֹד וְשׁוֹט לְשׁוֹן

י[א]סְפָנוּ כָּזָב      בְּשַׁפְתֵי מִרְמָה  
עַד לֹא נִפְלָנוּ      בְּשַׁפְתֵי קִמְיָנוּ. חסאנו

כִּיבְדָנוּ לְכַב      לְבוֹחֵן לְכַבּוֹת  
עַד לֹא נִחַשְׁבָנוּ      כְּפוֹתָה וְאִין לֵב

לֹא כִפְסָנוּ יֶצֶר      לְיוֹצֵר הַכֹּל  
עַד לֹא צָרְחָנוּ      רַבַּת צָרְרוֹנוּ. חסאנו

מֵר לְכִלְיוֹת      בּוֹ לֹא ...  
עַד לֹא בְּכִלְיוֹתֵינוּ      בְּנֵי אֲשָׁפָה בָאוּ

נִמְלָאוּ מִיַּעֲיָנוּ      חֶמְס וְגוֹל  
עַד לֹא [צ]עֲקָנוּ      מַעֲי אוֹחִילָה. חסאנו

4B Our mouths imputed  
Things that were not so,  
And then we heard our shame  
And could say nothing, like a mute, who is without a mouth.  
*We have sinned*

5 We composed mendacities  
And we drew our tongues in falsehood like a bow,  
And then we were struck  
By violence, and scourged by the lashings of tongues

5B We added untruth  
With lips of deceit,  
And then we were felled and were humbled  
By the lips of our foes.  
*We have sinned*

6 We made heavy our hearts  
Before Him, who examines all hearts,  
And the we were measured as  
Foolish and without understanding

6B We did not bend our will  
To Him, who hath created all,  
And so we howled in agony,  
For our enemies distressed us so gravely.  
*We have sinned*

7 In the bitterness of our remorse  
We had not –  
And then our vitals  
Were pierced with His arrows

7B Our innards were filled  
With stolen booty,  
And then we cried out,  
Oh, my innards, I shudder.  
*We have sinned*

טַרְרָנוּ בְּרִיךְ (ד) מְכָרוּעַ בְּרִכְיֵנוּ

עַד לֹא מִצּוֹם כְּשָׁלוֹ בְּרִכְיֵנוּ

עֵין הַכְּבֹדֵנוּ בְּטַמְאֵינוּ יִרְךְ

עַד לֹא יוֹצֵאֵנוּ יִרְךְ נָדוּ לִירְכֵתִי אֶרֶץ--

חטאנו

8 We stubbornly stiffened our knee  
And failed to kneel,  
And then, not from fasting,  
Our knees did buckle

8B We dulled our eye  
By defiling our loins,  
And so those who emerged from Jacob's loin  
Were exiled to the ends of the earth –

*We have sinned*

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## COMMENTARY

The Jewish understanding of history was that the experiences of the Patriarchs foreshadowed the future history of their descendants, was until the Age of Enlightenment, the basis for Jewish historiography and for Jewish understanding of the meaning of events, present past and future. Nachmanides, in his commentary to Genesis 26:1, for instance, says the following:

ולדעתי נכלל עוד בענין רמיזה בעתיד, כי גלות אברהם אל מצרים מפני הרעב רמז שיגלו בניו שם... ירידתו של יצחק שם מפני הרעב ירמוז... לגלות בבל.<sup>310</sup>

In Genesis Rabbah (48) the Sages lay the foundation for the belief that the experiences of the Fathers are coded prophecies for the events that will in future transpire for Israel, the descendants of the Fathers. Nachmanides reiterates this principle in his commentary for Genesis 12:6: **כל מה שאירע לאבות – סימן לבנים**. The historiographic template, he explains, gives meaning and coherence to adversity as a temporary measure, which will inevitably end with a return of Israel to their ancestral land as promised by God to the Fathers.<sup>311</sup>

ויש במדרש כי מה שאמ' מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך רמז לשלשה גליות מצרים ובבל ואדום והבטיחו בכלם ואעשך לגוי גדול וגו', ואחר הנסיון הזה התחיל נסיון הרעב. ואמרו ז"ל כל מה שאירע לאבות סימן לבנים. כי כמו שבאו אברהם וסיעתו למצרים עתה מפני הרעב, כן ירדו בניו למצרים, וכמו שנגע את פרעה בנגעים כן באו המכות במצרים, וכמו שכתב הרב רבינו משה בר נחמן ז"ל. וכן הליכת יצחק לגרר מפני הרעב רמז לגלות [בבל והליכת יעקב לפדן ארם רמז לגלות] אדום. ועל זה נאמר במדרש נתת ליראיך נס להתנוסס נסיון אחר נסיון.<sup>312</sup>

Nachmanides did not conceive the idea that the scriptural narrative concerning the lives of the Fathers foretell the events in the entire sweep of Jewish history. In Midrash Tanchuma<sup>313</sup> R. Yehoshua puts the Fathers and the nation of Israel on the same historic plane, exegetically explaining the dynamics of this principle. Nachmanides, in his

<sup>310</sup> Nachmanides, Genesis 26:1

<sup>311</sup> [http://www.mikragesher.org.il/titles/encyclopedia/40/maasei\\_avot.html](http://www.mikragesher.org.il/titles/encyclopedia/40/maasei_avot.html)

<sup>312</sup> R. Zeev Metzger, *Even Shou'eib Writings* [Hebrew], on Genesis 12-17 (פרשת לך-לך)

<sup>313</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, לך לך and Bereshit Rabbah 40:6

commentary on Genesis 26:1-12, writes that Isaac's sojourn in Philistia portended the Babylonian exile, just as Abraham's earlier descent to Egypt portended the Egyptian enslavement of the People of Israel. Jewish history was understood to mirror the signposts of the Patriarchs' lives. Exegetical reading of such texts as Genesis 26:13-22 understand the narrative, which describes Isaac's well-digging exploits and the Philistine efforts to dam them thrice, as a reference to the three Temples, the two that were destroyed and the third one, the eternal Temple, yet to be rebuilt in Jerusalem in Messianic times.<sup>314</sup>

The Babylonian Talmud in Tractate Megillah (16b) questions Joseph's preferential treatment of Benjamin over the other sons of Jacob [Genesis 45:22], wondering how Joseph, himself a victim of jealousy, could have incited envy among his brothers. The sages respond with an exegetical explanation. They conclude that Joseph's gifts alluded to the future success of Benjamin's descendent Mordechai, who was garbed in King Ahasuerus's royal garments [Esther 8:15]. The explanation articulates the historiographic perception of reality wherein events in the lives of the Patriarchs allude to future events in Israel's history. This perception that the past is prologue, is rooted in the Bible itself. Among the many examples in the Pentateuch, the case of Joseph is quite instructive. Joseph, upon confessing his true identity to his stunned and no shamed brothers, tells them: *"I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. And now be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither; for God did send me before you to preserve life... So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God."* [Genesis 45: 4-8] Joseph

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<sup>314</sup> ArtScroll Chumash, pp. 128-131 ; Yehoshafat Nevo, Historiosophic Ideas in Nachmanides [Hebrew], pp. 1-2  
Nachmanides employs intertextuality to allegorically explain the names of Isaac's three wells as coded references to the two Temples which were destroyed, and to the third Temple which will be built in Messianic times.

literally understands himself to be a tool in God's hands. He tells his brothers not to be distressed that they have sold him to the Ishmaelites, for that was the original divine plan. Now, he says, we see the purpose and the reason for this seemingly inhumane and unbrotherly act, which is to save the Children of Israel from hunger, and to set in motion the historic process which would culminate in nationhood and in the Ten Commandments given to Israel at Sinai, just as God had promised Abraham: *"And He said unto Abram: 'Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years'"* [Genesis 15:13]. In essence, the Bible-based Jewish historiographic understanding was that God's master plan is the cause of history and is revealed in history.<sup>315</sup>

Another example may be found in the Haphtarah reading for the New Month celebration of Rosh Chodesh. The Rabbinic exegesis on the story of David and Jonathan, whose friendship became legend [I Samuel 20:18-42], adds a layer of understanding which would escape a casual examination of the text, but was clear to the Sages:

The celebration of the New Moon on the event of a New Month, alludes to the history of Israel and the Davidic dynasty, they determined. The moon grows to fullness over a period of fifteen days and then declines for the next fifteen until it disappears. So, too, there were fifteen generations from Abraham to Solomon, while the Jewish People grew spiritually and physically. Then began the decline, until, fifteen generations later, the monarchy came to an end, with the destruction of the Temple and the Babylonian exile. But the heavens do not remain dark; the moon reappears. So, too, there will be a time of redemption, and the Davidic family will reign again.<sup>316</sup>

The Piyyut **אז לראש תתנו** articulates the underlying historiographic understanding which prevailed in Yosse ben Yosse's time. It is also the epitome of the Deuteronomic

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<sup>315</sup> See: Mois Navon, *"Yosef is still alive: A lesson in divine providence"*, *Jewish Thought*, 5, 1 (1998) pp. 61-72; See also: Tanchumah, "Lekach Tov".

<sup>316</sup> ArtScroll Chumash, pp. 1207-1208

dynamics writ in verse. Yosse ben Yosse employs a literary propensity to equate physicality with ethics, and uses the human body as a site wherein and with which sin is manifest. The Paytan illustrates in vivid images his foundational historiographic understanding of Israel's deterministic history, by attributing contemporary suffering to the collective sin-quotient of the nation. The human body is the locus of sin, the human body therefore suffers the results of sin, whereas each organ is made to suffer tribulations that pertain to this organ's function. These organs, however, are not necessarily the organs of the flesh, but rather symbols for spiritual and moral regions of the human soul, as well as short-hand references to a veritable taxonomy of sins and their consequences.

The structure of the Piyyut is Midrashic in essence. In the Eicha Rabbah [1:57]<sup>317</sup> Midrash, the author alludes to the tripartite nature of the contract between God and His People. The site of sin is also the site of punishment, but the eventual site of redemption as well. An example will illustrate this Midrash revealing its internal logic and structure, which is alluded to in this particular Yosse ben Yosse Piyyut. If the site of sin were the head, as was the sin of the wandering People in their desert sojourn out of Egypt when they said *"And they said one to another: 'Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt'"* [Numbers 14:4] which in the Hebrew original refers to the head more poetically than the English by saying "נתנה ראש" meaning we will make us a captain, a leader who will help us head back to Egypt; then the site of punishment will also be visited upon the head as Isaiah intones: *"On what part will ye yet be stricken, seeing ye stray away more and more? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint"* [Isaiah 1:5]; but so will solace emanate from the head, or in the words of Micah: *"The breaker is gone up before*

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<sup>317</sup> <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/toshba/eyha/1g-2.htm>

*them; they have broken forth and passed on, by the gate, and are gone out thereat; and their king is passed on before them, and the LORD at the head of them” [Micah 2:13].*

Eicha Rabbah proceeds to illustrate this dynamic, as follows: They, the People of Israel, sinned with the ear [Zechariah 7:11], they therefore suffered in the ear [I Samuel 3:11], and they will be redeemed through the ear [Isaiah 30:21]. The Midrash mentions in similar fashion the eye, the nose, the mouth, the tongue, the heart, the hand, and the foot. The Midrash then follows with sins attributed to behavioural choices and to physical objects such as fire, maintaining the Deuteronomic dynamic of sin and punishment residing in the same site, and reiterating the interpretive conclusion that in similar fashion redemption will follow in the site of punishment in due course.

Yosse ben Yosse composed this Piyyut along a similar vein, although his choice of limbs and organs is more liberal than Eicha Rabbah. He maintains the same Deuteronomic idea throughout the Piyyut, that sin and suffering are bound to specific sites and ethical situations, and one would assume that given this adherence to the Eicha Rabbah Midrash, Yosse ben Yosse would have concluded this Piyyut with the message of forthcoming solace which will also reside in the same loci of pain. This Piyyut, however, is truncated, and its alphabetic acrostic<sup>318</sup> ends with the letter **ו**. It is missing the verses between **ב** and **ו** and thus one cannot in fact verify that Yosse ben Yosse would have included the redemptive consolations in this Piyyut. One can extrapolate with a measure of confidence that because Yosse ben Yosse chose the Eicha Rabbah structure of bodily sites of sin that become the sites for punishment, that at the end of his Piyyut he would have returned to the Eicha Rabbah structure and would have concluded with the

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<sup>318</sup> Michael Swartz and J. Yahalom, *Avodah: An Anthology*, (2004), p. 20

corresponding bodily sites of redemption. These presumed last verses, like the verses of the Piyyut **אפתה שפתי**<sup>319</sup> are missing. No record has yet been found of the lost verses. It remains a tantalizing objective for future researchers to mine the archives and Geniza documents for the remaining Yosse ben Yosse poems, and for the remaining verses of this particular Piyyut as well.<sup>320</sup>

1 In the early days You had made us the head  
And we said, somnambulant: Let us return to Egypt,  
And then the Temple was rent from the mountaintop  
And we were punished with poisonous waters

The Piyyut begins with a reference to the nation's past, with the Hebrew word **אז** which is often translated as "back then" colloquially. This stepping stone into liturgy is a Biblical convention considered elegant.<sup>321</sup> Psalm 126, in its Hebrew original, makes use of this form of **אז** "*Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing; then said they among the nations: 'The LORD hath done great things with these.'*" [Psalm 126:2] **אז יימלא שחוק פינו ולשונונו רינה, אז יאמרו בגוים הגדיל ה' לעשות עם אלה**. Yosse ben Yosse chooses to open this Piyyut with a similar reference to the **אז** of the Psalmist, tying his audience to the ancient text, and to its historiographic relevance as a template for a future yet to come. The theological importance of this historiographic vision rests with a rabbinic review of previously written material in order to present it in a new light, subjectively and interpretively thus linking the past of Israel to its future.

Yosse ben Yosse urges his audience to realize that the past is explicable, that events in the past were caused by specific past events and that history has a pattern which, once discerned, can be used to explain the present and predict the future. God,

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<sup>319</sup> See page 32

<sup>320</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], p. 215

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215

according to this historiographic understanding of time, acts in history and determines the fate of Israel through mechanisms of reward and punishment. In today's terms perhaps, Yosse ben Yosse casts himself as a teacher of his nation's history, who is able to demonstrate the ordered causality in history. In this Piyyut the past is made intelligible, the foundations of the faith are reiterated, the present is given authority because it is based on an authentic past, and continuity is underscored for the People over time, along with God's immanence, thus bringing them hope in their dire hour of need.<sup>322</sup> Yosse ben Yosse reframes the social memory of the Jews and reformulates it as a linear social memory that is coherent. Human actions and divine responses are coherently linked so that their effects are manifest in the human realm, both for individuals and for the nation as a collective.

Yosse ben Yosse's Piyyut is constructed in a sophisticated manner, affording an intellectual reading for the educated readership, and a more visceral understanding of the dynamic interactions of bodily parts and their historic references, for the less educated. Prayerful meditation on the sorrowful present that afflicts the Jews under foreign rule, becomes an affirmation of the legitimacy of the past, as it is written in the Bible, and a reiteration of the authenticity of the rabbinic reading of this past as a continuum upon a Jewish person may find him or her self at any time. His is a modern voice for his time, it is made valid by its reliance on the Mosaic canon, it is made scientific by its insistence on the patterns discernible in the rational unfolding of time, and it is made authoritative by its structural base that is rooted in rabbinic learning.<sup>323</sup> Yosse ben Yosse imitates and differentiates, he co-opts the past to explain the present and to predict the future

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<sup>322</sup> Ehud Ben-Zvi, *The Book of Chronicles- Another Look*, *Studies in Religion* 31 (2002), pp. 261-281

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269

didactically, enjoining his audience to abide by the rules of linear history. He leads his audience to the inescapable conclusion that redemption depends on them, on their individual deeds, on their personal adherence to the Law and in the process Yosse ben Yosse instructs his audience not only in theology, but in their identity formation. By reshaping the social identity and memory of the People, Yosse ben Yosse avails Jews with lenses through which to see and understand events as they unfold, given certain paradigmatic events in their collective past that have meaning and relevance to their lives.

Rabbinic and Midrashic interpretations, of which Yosse ben Yosse appears to be part, subordinate history to didactic interests and to extract meaning that posits a linear progression of cause and effect dynamics in time in order to derive prescriptive instruction from observable events.<sup>324</sup> The destruction of the Temple, its removal from the mountain which Yosse ben Yosse refers to in the opening verse of this Piyyut, is the crux of the matter for all the exiles. They now understand the predicament of their present situation in light of their personal failings. They had each failed to act in accordance with the Law and have brought disaster upon themselves. Their historical moment is made explicable through an interpretation of scripture, but at the same time their future salvation is also cast in the same metal. The future welfare of the community, indeed of the world entire, depends on each individual's adherence to the Law, and on a continued faith in the scriptural promise. Yosse ben Yosse's rabbinic perception is that Israel is part of history but is not subject to the natural laws that govern historical processes, because of its unique position, because of Israel's chosenness, because of the protective umbrella of an immanent God who acts through history for His People's benefit. This didactic

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<sup>324</sup> Jeffrey Rubenstein, Talmudic Stories: Narrative, Art, Composition and Culture, (1999), p. 140

approach permeates the Piyyut in its insistence on a didactic reading of scripture<sup>325</sup> in order to extract meaning for the present and hope for a future of restoration as well.

The Paytan begins this complex discussion with the image of the Temple now rent from its resting on the mountain top. He alludes not only to the geography of the destruction, but to multiple prophecies that speak of its reconstruction and the attendant national reconstruction of the People in some eschatological future yet to be unveiled: *“And it shall come to pass in the end of days, that the mountain of the LORD’S house shall be established as the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it”* [Isaiah 2:2]. Know, says the Paytan, that our sins have brought us all to our present condition, and that there is a rational reason for our punishment. We sinned by turning our heads away from God, and God has punished us with bitter water, the same bitter water that Jeremiah speaks of: *“...the LORD our God hath cut us off, and given us water of gall to drink, because we have sinned against the LORD”* [Jeremiah 8:14]. And he continues:

1B     You bestowed us with ears  
       But we had not listened,  
       And then the calamity was heard  
       And our ears rang.

God, whom the Psalmist credits with creating the human ear [Psalms 94:9], implicitly asks His People why they have turned a deaf ear to His words. Yosse ben Yosse reiterates the verse from Proverbs: *“Neither have I hearkened to the voice of my teachers, nor inclined mine ear to them that instructed me!”* [Proverbs 5:13] to demonstrate to his audience the severity of the sin, and to preface the subsequent iteration

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<sup>325</sup> Isaiah Gafni, Concepts of Periodization and Causality in Talmudic Literature, *Jewish History* 10, 1, (1996), p. 30

of the punishment as directly derivative of this sin, so harsh it was that one's ears ring with horror [I Samuel 3: 11].

2        We also raised our eye in rebellion  
          Before Him, who hath fashioned the eye  
          And then we were left blindly groping the wall  
          With no eyes to see

Moreover, we raised our eyes in rebellion, says the Paytan. God, who created eyes and the faculty of sight [Psalms 94:9], has been transgressed against by His People who now, in punishment, are left groping in the dark, *“We grope for the wall like the blind, yea, as they that have no eyes do we grope; we stumble at noonday as in the twilight; we are in dark places like the dead”* [Isaiah 59:10]. Yosse ben Yosse explains the inability of the nation to regroup and reconstitute itself after the destruction of the Temple and the dispersal of its constituencies, by referring to the Deuteronomic exhortation to follow God's Law or risk failure: *“And thou shalt grope at noonday, as the blind gropeth in darkness, and thou shalt not make thy ways prosperous; and thou shalt be only oppressed and robbed always, and there shall be none to save thee”* [Deuteronomy 28:29].

Yosse ben Yosse continues to press his point, structurally and contextually, in the next verse, referring to the nose as the site of sin and punishment:

2B        We presumed to be haughty, raising our noses,  
          At Him, who is so Patient  
          And then He became wrathful  
          And was infuriated with us.

The wicked have challenged God in a rude manner [Psalms 10:4] the measure of which sin is as large as God's forbearance, explains the Paytan. The current miserable condition of Israel, a dispersed and weakened nation, is no historic anomaly, but a rational outcome of Israel's defiance. Personal and collective failure to abide by God's

Law have resulted in contemporary desolation, and therefore this misery is not an indication of any arbitrary misfortune, but it is part of the Jewish continuum, part of the rhyme and reason of Jewish existence in the world in which God plays an active role. Yosse ben Yosse makes playful use of the Hebrew word for nose, **אף** in order to refer to God's wrath. The verb **אָפַן** is derived from **אף** and is often employed to describe God's anger, as in the Psalm: "*Therefore the LORD heard, and was wroth, and a fire was kindled against Jacob, and anger also went up against Israel*" [Psalms 78:21]. It is a verb that is used to describe God's anger specifically, not the human emotion of anger. It is the divine link between human failure to act in accordance with the moral and theological directives of the Law, and the subsequent justified punishment meted out upon the sinners. The current sorrow is a measure of the sin, and as grave as the current situation, says the Paytan, it is indicative of the measure of the sin.

3        We were stiff necked and rebellious  
           At Him, who decapitated our enemies,  
           And then He no longer showed us  
           Neither the back of his neck nor His countenance

The prophet said of the sinful Israel "*...they dealt proudly, and hearkened not unto Thy commandments, but sinned against Thine ordinances, which if a man do, he shall live by them, and presented a stubborn shoulder, and hardened their neck, and would not hear*" [Nehemiah 9:29] and Yosse ben Yosse concurs. In the patterns of history, the People have done this and suffered before: "*notwithstanding they would not hear, but hardened their neck, like to the neck of their fathers, who believed not in the LORD their God*" [II Kings 17:14]. But, turning their back to God, the same God who vanquished the enemies so that only their backs were visible to the Israelite armies [Deuteronomy 28:7], the God who promised that "*I will scatter them as with an east*

wind before the enemy; I will look upon their back, and not their face, in the day of their calamity” [Jeremiah 18:17], the People have imperilled their very existence, as God, in the destruction and national dispersal, has also turned His countenance away from them. Repent, says the Paytan, or perish, repent and flourish.

The alphabetic acrostic continues with the letter ׀, and now employs the shoulder as the figurative image for the verse:

3B      And we turned our shoulder away  
          From Him, who hovers protectively over our shoulders,  
          And so our shoulder  
          Fell off from its blade.

In each couplet the theme of the shoulder returns, to reiterate the didactic message and illustrate its historiographic context through scripture. The sin is that the People have “*presented a stubborn shoulder*” [Nehemiah 9:29]. The shoulder has been the traditional site in scripture for God’s protective presence, the Biblical “lean on me” site: “*Of Benjamin he said: The beloved of the LORD shall dwell in safety by Him; He covereth him all the day, and He dwelleth between his shoulders*” [Deuteronomy 33:12], and now the People of Israel, by turning away from God, have absolved themselves of this protection, of God’s very presence in their midst. Yosse ben Yosse warns his audience by referring to the quintessential sufferer in scripture, Job, whose pain had become emblematic of ultimate agony: “*Then let my shoulder fall from the shoulder-blade, and mine arm be broken from the bone*” [Job 31:22]. Yosse ben Yosse knows his audience, and they know Scripture, they know what the Paytan means when he invokes Job. Their present agonies are Job-like. Indeed, they have put the very existence of Israel in extreme peril. This, he reminds the audience, is a measure for measure, it is part of the rhythm of

the Jewish historic continuum, and is part of the Deuteronomic dynamics of sin and punishment. Job here illustrates the present, Job explains it to the people who find themselves in extremis, Job is the literary device employed by Yosse ben Yosse to teach the audience right from wrong and to lead them to the inescapable conclusion that national salvation depends on the deeds of each individual and the conduct of the collective community entire.

Job remains in Yosse ben Yosse's thoughts in the following verse, alluding to the arm, the site of sin and punishment, the continuation of the morality play in verse:

4       A raised arm  
          We had chosen for us,  
          And then our forearm  
          Was broken off its mooring

*"But from the wicked their light is withholden, and the high arm is broken"* [Job 38:15]. A raised arm is broken, human vanity is crushed, the People's rebellion and foolish belief in their ability to fashion their own destiny unaided by God's guidance, are all snapped like twigs before God's wrath. It is a justified wrathful reaction to the nation's misdeeds, and it is not an arbitrary whim of destruction, but a retribution, the logical result of sin in the form of manifest divine punishment. *"... the children of Israel did impute things that were not right unto the LORD their God"* [II Kings 17:9], and with untruth they covered up their faith in the One God, and therefore they have been struck mute, forced to listen to the litany of their sins and unable to respond.

4B       Our mouths imputed  
          Things that were not so,  
          And then we heard our shame  
          And could say nothing, like a mute, who is without a mouth.

Yosse ben Yosse includes himself among the nation's sinners by referencing the Psalmist: "*But I am as a deaf man, I hear not; and I am as a dumb man that openeth not his mouth*" [Psalms 38:14]. The learned and the unschooled are both subject to the same dynamic rules of history. Referring to scripture, the Paytan, even as he composes these verses, even in this exquisite articulation of the theology of Jewish time, considers himself inadequate to express the full measure of repentance in view of the enormity of his nation's oppression. He proceeds in the next verse to try to break the coin of sin into smaller denominations, the first of which is mendacity:

5        We composed mendacities  
          And we drew our tongues in falsehood like a bow,  
          And then we were struck  
          By violence, and scourged by the lashings of tongues

*"The proud have forged a lie against me"* [Psalms 119:69], Yosse ben Yosse reminds the audience, "*And they bend their tongue, their bow of falsehood*" [Jeremiah 9:2]. The People have shot arrows of falsehood at the firmament, in defiance of God who is Truth, and they have been punished with a tongue lashing, a whip of divine retribution, as were all sinners said to be punished [Job 5:21]. Yosse ben Yosse reinforces the theme of falsehood in the next verse, adding to mendacity the element of deceit:

5B       We added untruth  
          With lips of deceit,  
          And then we were felled and were humbled  
          By the lips of our foes.

The sin for deceitful conduct has garnered the opprobrium and disgrace of the nation, in divine retribution for the sin. Yosse ben Yosse never addresses his audience as 'you', but includes himself in the 'we', saying we have sinned, we have lied, we have suffered, and we will be the authors of our future salvation if we abide by God's Law and

if we remain a distinctive unity, a nation whose denizens choose to be chosen. Yosse ben Yosse refers to prayer, to the truth-full expression of yearning and repentance, by referencing the verse from scripture: *“Hear the right, O LORD, attend unto my cry; give ear unto my prayer from lips without deceit”* [Psalms 17:1]. The verse speaks of individual prayer, and the Paytan thus reiterates his didactic message that each individual is responsible for the nation’s destiny, that salvation and restitution is within an individual’s realm of action. *We*, the collective, have sinned, he seems to say, *and we* as a dispersed nation still suffer; but if *I*, the individual, pray, and if each individual repents and mends his or her ways, then *we*, as a collective, shall be redeemed again.

6        We made heavy our hearts  
          Before Him, who examines all hearts,  
          And the we were measured as  
          Foolish and without understanding

Even though the People, as a community and as individuals, know right from wrong, given the Torah and its teachings, they have mulishly refused to abide by the Law. God, who sees into and reads the human heart [I Chronicles 29:17], can see that His People have sealed their spiritual hearts in an obdurate manner: *“And Ephraim is become like a silly dove, without understanding; they call unto Egypt, they go to Assyria”* [Hosea 7:11]. The Paytan suggests that the People do not realize what is good for them, they have acted wilfully and obstinately and have therefore been punished for refusing to abide by the Law:

6B       We did not bend our will  
          To Him, who hath created all,  
          And so we howled in agony,  
          For our enemies distressed us so gravely.

Rather than bending their will to the Creator, the People have been vain and delusional [Jeremiah 10:15] and have gone astray, following this desire to its inevitable end. Yosse ben Yosse masterfully manipulates the musical aspect of these verses with onomatopoeias and *wortspiele* by repeating the ‘TS’ sound in the verbs: **יִצַר**, **יוֹצַר**, **צִרְחָנוּ**, **צִרְרוּנוּ** are all words that describe the dynamic sin and retribution structure well, but musically repeat the screeching sound **צ** as the constant musical accompaniment to the verse, thus intensifying its subliminal message of discord.

7        In the bitterness of our remorse  
           We had not –  
           And then our vitals  
           Were pierced with His arrows

The original text here begins to show its instability, before the Piyyut becomes truncated. The second line in the verse has succumbed to the ravages of time. And yet, the verse maintains its form and content sufficiently. The kidneys, or rather all internal organs, other than the heart, are traditionally considered to be the site of ethics, of moral mores and the source of proper conduct. They are also the site of regret, of the torments of conscience: *“I will bless the LORD, who hath given me counsel; yea, in the night seasons my reins instruct me”* [Psalms 16:7]. It is the locus of regret, of the torments felt by a penitent sinner: *“He hath caused the arrows of His quiver to enter into my reins”* [Lamentations 3:13], the site wherein God’s punishment is felt most acutely. The sinful nation has abandoned the dietary laws:

7B        Our innards were filled  
           With stolen booty,

And they were consequently punished by afflictions wrought upon their innards, vividly here referencing the prophet’s cry: *“My bowels, my bowels! I writhe in pain! The*

*chambers of my heart! My heart moaneth within me! I cannot hold my peace! because thou hast heard, O my soul, the sound of the horn, the alarm of war” [Jeremiah 4:19].*

And then we cried out,  
Oh, my innards, I shudder.

Yosse ben Yosse now moves down the human body to the knee, the site of reverence, of bending one’s knee before the King.

8 We stubbornly stiffened our knee  
And failed to kneel,  
And then, not from fasting,  
Our knees did buckle

God had said “*unto Me every knee shall bow*” [Isaiah 45:23], but the People ignored Him. Now, fallen down and downtrodden, the People realize that their iniquity is at the root of their suffering, that they have not fasted nor prayed for God’s forgiveness, that they have been remiss and therefore punished, as a community, destined to fall on their knees before other oppressive nations in humiliating supplication.

Yosse ben Yosse reminds his audience that their sins have been odious. We, he says, have even sinned sexually, we have transgressed in the most shocking and defiling manner against the foundational precepts of a moral civilization.

8B We dulled our eye  
By defiling our loins,  
And so those who emerged from Jacob’s loin  
Were exiled to the ends of the earth –

The People, born of Jacob’s loins [Exodus 1:5], have defiled their own loins and have therefore been dispersed into the merciless exile, just as Leviticus had warned them: “*the land was defiled, therefore I did visit the iniquity thereof upon it, and the land vomited out her inhabitants*” [Leviticus 18:28]. They have been cast out, expelled,

expectorated, vomited from their land, from the protective umbrella of God's mercy because they defiled themselves thus [Leviticus 18:28]. Therein lies the reason for the Exile, therein lies the historical and theological cause for the destruction. The present is made intelligible in view of past transgression.

Alas, the Piyyut ends at this point, and the much anticipated dramatic conclusion, for which the rising tenor of the Piyyut prepares its audience, is lost to us. It is, as I indicated above, probable that Yosse ben Yosse ended his Piyyut with verses that offered a way out of the national predicament, with verses that offered a wider hope-horizon to the People, and with the didactic exhortation to learn from past mistakes and employ the human body, its physical and spiritual components, in the service of God and thus be redeemed.

## Chapter 6: Messianic Aspects of the Yosse ben Yosse's Texts

The messianic idea was central to post-Biblical Judaism. It was not a monolithic idea however, and as Gershom Scholem explained,<sup>326</sup> messianism can be imagined as a continuum, the two opposite poles of which are Restorative messianism and Utopian messianism respectively. Restorative messianism was anchored in earthly life, and expected the eventual arrival of a redeemer, a descendant of the House of David, who would bring back to Israel its ancient glory. As the prophet says: “...*the days come, saith the LORD, that I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man, and with the seed of beast. And it shall come to pass, that like as I have watched over them to pluck up and to break down, and to overthrow and to destroy, and to afflict; so will I watch over them to build and to plant, saith the LORD*” [Jeremiah 31:25-27], and elsewhere: “*For, lo, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will turn the captivity of My people Israel and Judah, saith the LORD; and I will cause them to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall possess it*” [Jeremiah 30:3], this brand of messianic expectation was a rationally articulated expectation of a world improved and perfected for the prosperity and restitution of the House of David in an undefined future time.

Utopian messianism, at the other end of the messianic continuum, anticipated the eventual arrival of a redeemer from the House of David who will overturn the natural order of things on earth. The future this brand of messianism surpassed everything that came before it. As Isaiah prophesied: “*And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little*

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<sup>326</sup> Cited in the seminal article by Lawrence H. Schiffman, “Messianism and Apocalypticism in Rabbinic Texts”, in: Steven Katz (ed.), The Cambridge History of Judaism, p. 1054

*child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the basilisk's den*" [Isaiah 11:6-8]. In that fantastical supernatural future, all evil will be banished, misfortune will be ended, and peace will reign throughout the world for the Nations who will come to recognize God as the One and the only divinity. This future would be heralded by apocalyptic catastrophes that will change the natural order and will usher the messianic age.

Tannaitic eschatology favoured the Restorative brand of messianism, whereas Amoraic eschatology leaned toward the Utopian brand of messianic expectations.<sup>327</sup> Yosse ben Yosse, living in the Byzantine province of Palestine in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, subscribed to the Tannaitic eschatology and its messianic ideas that were rooted in the natural world. Utopian messianism, which was rather popular among the Bar Kochba rebels,<sup>328</sup> lost its favour among the people,<sup>329</sup> who blamed the violence inherent in the apocalyptic idea, as it no longer fit the historical context of the period. There was no longer a Temple in Jerusalem. There was no longer a High Priest to conduct the expiatory rituals of perfect Biblical Judaism. In the absence of the two social institutions, the primary Tannaitic concern was to provide a measure of stability for and continuity of the Jewish People as a whole. The Palestinian Talmud therefore did not promote apocalypticism, but focused on this-worldly messianic expectations centred around the Davidic dynasty. This Restorative Messianic idea was born, for all intents and purposes,

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<sup>327</sup> Lawrence Schiffman, *"Messianism and Apocalypticism in Rabbinic Texts"*, p. 1062

<sup>328</sup> Adin Steinsaltz, *The Essential Talmud*, pp. 29-30 : Rabbi Akiva supported the uprising which began in 132 CE, and named its leader Bar Kochba, meaning "son of a star" on the basis of Numbers 24:17 "There shall come a star out of Jacob".

<sup>329</sup> Professor Yeshaayahu Leibovitz discussed the apocalyptic strand in Jewish messianism at length. For example see: <http://www.tpeople.co.il/leibowitz/ebook.asp?id=29>

upon the destruction of the Temple. A restoration of Jewish sovereignty heralded by a Davidic redeemer was predicated on repentance and on the merit of Israel. The future, a hotly discussed eventuality in the period, would be the result of divine intervention in response to human and Jewish self improvement. Unlike the Utopian messiah,<sup>330</sup> the restorative messiah was only a descendent of the House of David, not a reincarnated David,<sup>331</sup> and so messianic ferment found an occasional foothold in the popular imagination, seeing “evidence” of messianic times in the quotidian experience: “Can it be that the Messiah is indeed on his way, as some people claim? No, my friend, I cannot believe that the messianic age is at hand. But perhaps there are islands of time when we have a taste”.<sup>332</sup>

Oral tradition, redacted in the Mishna, paid little mind to the messianic idea. It did however emphasize the rabbinic understanding that the footsteps of the messiah would be manifest in a religious decline and moral corruption of a desolate Israel.<sup>333</sup> Messianic expectations were tempered by reality and the sober realization that the Temple was not about to be rebuilt and that the Roman Empire’s might was an irrevocable force in the world, and that under Roman rule there was no chance for the restoration of Jewish sovereignty in Jerusalem. Given that no one knew the precise identity of the redeemer, nor did anyone know when he will come, the means for hastening his arrival was, by rabbinic injunction, a return to Jewish religious observance of such basic and foundational commandments as the observance of the Sabbath. Restorative messianism

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<sup>330</sup> The Babylonian Talmud subscribed to the Utopian messianic idea whereby the messianic age would be heralded miraculously. See: Lawrence Schiffman, “*Messianism and Apocalypticism in Rabbinic Texts*”, pp. 165-1070

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1064

<sup>332</sup> Lilian Nattel, *The River Midnight*, p. 326

<sup>333</sup> Sotah Tractate (9.15) cited in: Lawrence Schiffman, “*Messianism and Apocalypticism in Rabbinic Texts*”, p. 1062

was tempered by reality. The rabbis knew that redemption would not be imminent and they were now concerned with the establishment of Halacha as the purpose and fulfillment of Jewish life. The Jews in Palestine around the 5<sup>th</sup> century were less preoccupied by theological issues and more concerned with prescribing a new way of life for Jews in the absence of the Temple cult. History for the Rabbis was seen as an ongoing process of sanctification rather than a one-time future event of salvation. They opted to mute the utopian and violent apocalypticism of earlier periods which, in their understanding causally contributed to the destruction, and found more meaning in Restorative messianism for its ability to inspire generations of Jews to better their moral and religious standing as a preparation for an indeterminate arrival of the messiah.<sup>334</sup>

The promise of redemption and national reconstitution, delayed though it was understood to be because of *réal politique* considerations, nevertheless imbued the Judaic experience with enormous hope, joy, excitement and a sense that the messianic prophecies are, at any given moment, about to be fulfilled.<sup>335</sup> Indeed, the social function of messianism itself may be said to have been a way for explicating the Jewish national dissolution, while helping individuals make sense of events and processes so that they could fit into a neat encapsulation of God's promise to His children, thereby preserving the edicts of the Jewish way of life through the millennia. The 12<sup>th</sup> Principle of Faith according to Maimonides is: "*I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he may delay, nevertheless I anticipate every day that he will come*".<sup>336</sup> This succinct articulation of the Restorative Messianic idea, gave generations of Jews a focus

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<sup>334</sup> Lawrence Schiffman, "*Messianism and Apocalypticism in Rabbinic Texts*", pp. 1063-1064

<sup>335</sup> Benjamin Lau, *Jeremiah* [Hebrew], pp. 54-55

<sup>336</sup> ArtScroll Siddur, pp. 178-180 See: Maimonides's commentary on "Perek Chelek" of the Sanhedrin Tractate of the Mishna <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/mahshevt/rambam/hakdamat-2.htm#6>

around which to construct their personal and collective identity. It was both an ontological boon, and a warrant against assimilation, for at any minute one's chosenness may bear fruit, with every just action one brings closer the realization of prophesy. As the prophet said: *"Is Ephraim a darling son unto Me? Is he a child that is dandled? For as often as I speak of him, I do earnestly remember him still; therefore My heart yearneth for him, I will surely have compassion upon him, saith the LORD"* [Jeremiah 31:19]. Individual responsibility and national identity were, through a single ingenious idea, a rabbinic measure aimed at securing a future for the Nation of Israel. The cyclical nature of history, from the rabbinic perspective, saw in the fall and rise of empires evidence that Israel will soon be redeemed. God had actually gone into exile with His People [Jeremiah 30:4-11], God suffered with His Chosen, and therefore God desired their redemption dearly, He pined for His Children's return unto Him [Jeremiah 31:17-19]. The promise that soon the days of alienation and separation from God will come to an end, the hope that they were the means for bringing about a new era of the Jewish Nation as a whole, inspired individual Jews the millennia and continues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to stir and motivate Jews to observe God's Laws and obey His moral codes as articulated by the Rabbis.

אֲמָצָא נִגְדִי	אֲנוּסָה לְעִזְרָה	1
בְּעַת קוֹרְאֵי בְּקוֹל	אֶל קְרוֹב לִי	
בְּקָרְבִי נֶצֶב	אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵדֶת אֵל	
אֲצַפְצֵף לוֹ בְּקוֹל.	וּפֹה בְּמִקְדָּשׁ מֵעַט	
שֶׁה פְּזוּרָה אָנִי	בְּקִרְנֵי דְוָרְשִׁינִי	2
בְּלִי לְהָרִים קוֹל	נִגְזוֹתַי וְנֶאֱלַמְתִּי	
נִדְחָה הִיא	בְּאִמּוֹר גּוֹזֵזִי:	
לֹא יִשְׁאֵג קוֹל.	שׁוֹמְרָה וְצִיֵּלָה	
וְחִיכֵי עָרַב	גִּלְתִּי שִׁיחַ בְּחֻקֶּיךָ	3
הַשְּׁמִיעֵנִי קוֹל.	הִטָּה אֹזֶן וְשָׁח:	
כְּעוֹסֵף עַל הָרֵי בְּתָר	גַּז וּבְרַח מְנִי	
בְּמִשְׁכְּנוֹתַי וְאֵין קוֹל.	בְּבִקְשׁוֹ דַת וְאוֹת	
הַשִּׁיבֵהוּ אֵלַי	דִּלְג מִבְּתָר לְבְּתָר	4
עֵקֵב שְׁמַעְתָּה בְּקוֹל	אוֹלֵי יִשָּׂא פְּנֵיהָ	
וּרְאֵה שֶׁה מוֹרְתָהּ	דְּרוֹשׁ טוֹבָה לְמוֹ	
לֹא שְׁמַעְתָּה בְּקוֹל.	אֲלֵם פִּיהוּ יְהִי צַדִּיק	

<sup>337</sup> The Hebrew text is copied from: Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], 1991 Edition, pp. 109-118

## I RUN FOR HELP

- 1 I run for help  
And, there, next to me, I find  
God, who stands by me  
When I call out with my Voice
- 1B He who, in Divine Assembly  
Resides within me,  
And here, in this Temple Minor,<sup>338</sup>  
I chant to Him with my Voice.
- 2 Seek me out, gather me unto You,  
For I am like a lamb astray,  
I have been shorn and silenced,  
Without protest in my Voice
- 2B As my shearers said:  
Oh, she<sup>339</sup> is banished,  
Her Protector and Companion  
Will not roar with His Voice.
- 3 I exult in His Laws,  
So pleasing to my palate are they,  
He lends His ear to me and whispers:  
Let Me hear your Voice.
- 3B But He has vanished and forsaken me,  
Like a fawn on distant mountains,  
For He hath sought a signal and a sign  
In my dwellings, but He heard no Voice.
- 4 He, who rushed from one cut up offering to the next,  
Please return him to me  
Perhaps he will appease You,  
For once You did heed his Voice

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<sup>338</sup> Where a quorum prays. NOTE: All notations and explanatory allusions in the text of the Piyyut are based on Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], pp. 102-111

<sup>339</sup> Meaning Israel

יָדַיִם שְׁעִירוֹת כִּי לָךְ הַקּוֹל	הַסֵּר מִחֶלֶק הוֹנָה בְּתַחֲנוּנַיִם	5
תִּשְׁכַּח עֲדוֹת לֹא יִסּוּף קוֹל.	הוֹשֵׁעַ כִּי לֹא מִפִּי וְרַעוּ	
הֵם בְּנֵי אִמִּי לְמַעַן אֲשַׁמַּע קוֹל	וְחֹזֵי וּמְלִיצֵי וְאֹז נִיחָרוּ כִּי	6
יַעֲמְדוּ וַיִּזְעַקוּ וְהוּא יַעֲנֵם בְּקוֹל.	וְעַל מִשְׁמֵרְתָם וְגַל לָהֶם סוֹד	
אֶסוּבֵךְ וְאֶבְקֶשְׁנִי אָנָּה אֲשָׂא קוֹל	זֶה חֶמֶק מִנִּי בְּכָל־מָקוֹם הוּא	7
אֲדִיר בַּמְרוֹם לְמַעַל קוֹרְאִים קוֹל.	זְכַר דּוֹדֵי לְמַטָּה מִלֹּא כָל־הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ	
אֲשֶׁר בָּם שָׁבִילוֹ וַעֲלֵתִי קוֹל	חֲיִלֵי מַיִם דִּבְרוּ: תִּמְוָנָה לֹא רָאִינוּ	8
הַיֵּשׁ, וְאָמַר: אֵין. בִּיעֲמַתְנִי בְּקוֹל.	חִפְּשֵׁתִי יִשְׁמֹן קָדָם תִּתּוּ עוֹז	

- 4B Bring goodness unto him,  
And gaze upon the lamb-offering bound at Moriah,  
He, whose silent complicity at the altar will advocate  
For those who did not heed Your Voice.<sup>340</sup>
- 5 Remove from the smooth-skinned one  
Those menacing hirsute hands,  
For his supplication still echoes,  
And unto You he turns his Voice
- 5B Deliver us, for  
The Torah will not be forgotten  
From his offspring,  
Who will not cease to sound their Voice.
- 6 And my seers and prophets  
Are the sons of my mother,  
And in yesteryears they roused and chastised me  
To heed Your Voice
- 6B As they stood upon their watch  
And called out,  
So the mystery be revealed to them,  
And He rejoined them with His Voice.
- 7 He has eluded me  
And I roamed and did seek Him,  
For He is omnipresent,  
Hither and yon I still cry with my Voice<sup>341</sup>
- 7B The memory of my Beloved on earth,  
And His grandeur in the heavens,  
The whole world is filled with His awesome glory,  
And the legions of heaven raise up their Voice.
- 8 Colossal waves are His armies  
Wherein His paths stretch forth,  
And they have spoken: We did not perceive a likeness,  
Nothing but a Voice

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<sup>340</sup> See: Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], p. 105

<sup>341</sup> Alternatively, this line could be translated as : Where shall I raise my Voice.

9	טְהוֹר דָּלַג וּמְעוֹן הַר מוֹר	הָרִים וְעֵבֶר אִזְנַן קוֹל
	טִימְאֵתֵי יְדִידוֹת לְיוֹם כֶּסֶף יָבֹא	שִׁכְנוּ וְעָלָה בְּאֲזֵנַי קוֹל.
10	יִקְרָתִי בְעֵינָיו עֲמוּ אֲנֹכִי	וְנִלְוָה לִי בַשָּׁבִי אִזְ הַבְּטִיחֵנִי בְקוֹל
	יָרַד בְּשֹׁנֶעַר וְהִשְׁמִיעַ כְּאָרִי	וְשֵׁם כֶּסֶף בְּעֵלָם וְכִנְחָשׁ קוֹל.
11	כָּלָה מְנֵי דוֹב חֶק בְּמִכְתָּב	כֶּהֱתַרְפָּא מִמְּלֹאכֶת וַיַּעֲבֵר קוֹל
	כָּבֵשׁ לִי וְגַם אֲנִי בְהוֹדִיֹת	אֲרַבְּעָה רָאשֵׁי גִמְר סָלָה אֲשֶׁמִיעַ לוֹ בְּקוֹל.
12	לְחֵית קִנְיָה וּמִי לִי בַשָּׁמַיִם	אִזְ מִכַּר אֲרָץ אִזְ הִרִימָה קוֹל
	לְאֵלֵהֵי יִשְׁעֵי וּמִרְגֵּל עַב טִיט	מִשִּׁינֵי בְרוּז שְׂוֹעֲתֵי הִצְרַחְתִּי קוֹל.

- 8B I searched in the wilderness  
Is it there, and He said: It is not here,  
Before He bestowed upon us His might,<sup>342</sup>  
He terrified me with His Voice.
- 9 The Pure One has bounded  
Over mountains and went onward,  
And from His abode at Moriah  
He gave sound to His Voice
- 9B I have sullied His dwelling,  
And He removed His Presence from me,  
But on the Appointed Day<sup>343</sup>  
My ears will ring with His Voice.
- 10 I am dear to Him,  
And He has come with me into captivity,  
I am wholeheartedly with Him,  
He has given me assurance with His Voice
- 10B He went [with me] down to Shin'ar,  
And settled [with me] in Eilam,  
Then He gathered us with His leonine Roar  
With His colubrine hissing Voice.
- 11 He destroyed the bear that had set upon me,  
And restored the Holy Rites,  
Once the decree was written,  
And averted disaster with His Voice
- 11B He has helped me vanquish  
The four headed beast,<sup>344</sup>  
And I, with everlasting gratitude,  
Do thank Him with my Voice.

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<sup>342</sup> Mirsky explains that the word “might” ought to be understood as a reference to the Torah.

<sup>343</sup> A reference to Rosh Hashanah, according to Mirsky.

<sup>344</sup> An allusion to the Book of Daniel

13 מִדַּת קִיּוּץ      לֹא הוֹדִיעֵנִי  
מָתִי בְּאַרְצִי      תֹּר שְׁמִיעַ קוֹל

מִיּוֹדְעֵי סֵפֶר      סֵתֶם קִיּוּץ  
לְבַל דַּעַת צוֹפֵי      עַת יִשְׂאוּ קוֹל.

14 נָא הִבֵּט וּרְאֵה      עֲוֹנָי וּמַרְוֵדִי  
אֵין לִי מִכִּיר      לְמִי אֶשָּׂא קוֹל

וַיִּצַח אֲקוּנָה      כִּי לֹא יִפּוֹל דְּבָר  
מִמֶּקְשֵׁי בִי      דְמָמָה וְקוֹל.

15 שׁוֹשׁ יִשִּׁישׁ      לְבִי בְקִרְבִּי  
בְשׁוֹמְעֵי דוֹדֵי דוֹפֵק      עַל סִתְחֵי קוֹל

סָלָה יְשִׁימֵנִי      כַּחֲוֹתֶם עַל לֵב  
כָּאֵן תַּחַת הַמַּפּוֹחַ      עוֹרְרֵנִי בְקוֹל.

ככת' בת' ויהי ביום השלישי בהיות הבקר ויהי קולות וברקים וענן כבד על  
ההר, וקול שופר חזק מאד ויתרד כל העם אשר במחנה.

- 12      Then to the beast of the reeds  
Did He trade<sup>345</sup> the Land,  
The doubter of heaven,  
Whose impudence rang out in one Voice
- 12B     To God, who is my saviour,  
From within the iron trap I implored,  
As my legs sank in mire,  
I shouted with my Voice.
- 13      The eschaton  
He did not reveal to me,  
When, in my Land,  
Will the saviour, like a dove, sound his Voice
- 13B     Even from prophets and sages  
He hid the mystery of the End of Days,  
Even my seers know not  
When redemption will ring out in His Voice.
- 14      I entreat You to gaze upon me and see  
My destitution and my hardship,  
No one recognizes me,  
And to whom shall I appeal with my Voice
- 14B     I shall forever hope  
That all prophesies will come true to a word,  
For those who heard  
In the silence and stillness- Your Voice.
- 15      My heart will gladden  
And rejoice within me,  
When I shall hear my Beloved knocking  
On my door with His Voice
- 15B     He will for all eternity  
Be etched upon my heart,  
As at the foot of Sinai  
He aroused me with His Voice.

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<sup>345</sup> Handed over

עִלִּיתָנִי אֵל  
כִּי בַעֲבוּרֵי  
עַל כָּל-בְּנוֹת  
בְּחֹרֵב תָּתֶה קוֹל

עַל כָּל-אֱלֹהִים  
נִצַּח תִּתְעַלֶּה  
מְאֹד נִעַלְיָתָה  
בְּתַרְוַעַת קוֹל.

ככת' בד' ק' עלה אלהים בתרועה יי בקול שופר.

סָפָה מִמְדַּבֵּר  
יְיוֹנָה הַשְּׁמִיעָה  
צָפוֹר מִמְצָרִים  
מֵאֲשׁוֹר קוֹל

סָקוֹד צָפוֹר בֵּית  
תִּקַּע לָמוֹ בְּשׁוֹפֵר  
דְּרוֹשׁ יוֹנָת אֱלֹם  
אֲשֶׁרוֹק לָמוֹ בְּקוֹל.

ככת' ע'י'נ' והיה ביום ההוא יתקע בשופר גדול ובאו האובדים בארץ אשור והנודחים בארץ מצרים, והשתחוו ליי בהר הקודש ובירושלם.

צוֹר חֻקִּים, מָנִי  
וּבַל יִכְנָפוּ  
לְבַל יַעֲסֹפוּ כְנָשָׁר,  
מִשְׁמִיעֵי קוֹל

צְרוּפָה אֶלְמֵד  
כָּאֲזִיר מְדַבֵּר  
וְעֵינָי לְמוֹרֵי  
וְאֵל מְשִׁיבוֹ בְּקוֹל.

ככת' בתו' ויהי קול השופר הולך וחוק מאד, משה ידבר והאלהים יענו בקול.

s it is written in Your Torah: *“On the third day when it was morning, there was thunder and lightning and a heavy cloud on the mountain, and the sound of the Shofar was very powerful, and the entire people that was in the camp shuddered.”* [Exodus 19:16]

16     You have elevated me, God,  
       Above all nations,  
       It was for me  
       That at Sinai You sounded Your Voice

16B    You are supreme above all others,  
       Exceedingly exalted,  
       And for all time You will be preeminent,  
       Like the trumpeting sound of Your Voice.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *“God has ascended midst acclamation, God with the blasts of the Shofar.”*  
[Psalms 47:6]

17     He bleated and cried in the wilderness  
       When he took wing and flight from Egypt,  
       Like a cooing dove  
       From the Assyrian cage he gave Voice

17B    Remember the bird of Your Land,  
       Protect Your bird of silence,  
       Sound out Your Shofar,  
       And sing to it with Your Voice.

As it is written by Your Prophets: *“It shall be on that day that a great Shofar will be blown, and those who are lost in the land of Assyria and those cast away in the land of Egypt will come together, and they will prostrate themselves to God on the holy mountain in Jerusalem.”* [Isaiah 27:13]

18     Bind Your Laws unto me,  
       Lest they fly away like an eagle,  
       Lest they flutter,  
       Like songbirds giving Voice

18B    I study Your flawless Torah,  
       And look up to my teachers,  
       As when in Sinai our envoy [Moses] did speak  
       And God did respond to him with His Voice.

As it is written in Your Torah: *“The sound of the Shofar grew continuously much stronger, Moses would speak and God would respond to him with a voice.”* [Exodus 19:19]

19 קָרַב קָץ  
כָּא עַת מְשַׁפֵּט  
קָם מְלִיץ יוֹשֵׁר  
לְהַתְּחַן קוֹל

קוֹדֵשׁ חוֹדֵשׁ  
וְהוֹכֵן מוֹעֵד  
אֶתְקַע בְּשׁוֹפָר  
וַיַּעֲנֶה לִי בְּקוֹל.

ככת' בד' ק' תקעו בחודש שופר בכסא ליום חגיגו. כי חוק לישר' הוא ומשפט לאלהי יעקב.

20 רָגַשׁ מִקֶּבֶר  
צוֹתָה מִסֵּלַע  
בְּתַת יְבִישׁי עֲצָם  
מִעֶפֶר קוֹל

רָאוּ נֹס בְּהָרִים  
וְקוֹל שׁוֹפָר בְּאֶרֶץ  
לְהַשְׁמִיעַ רֶגֶן  
מִדְּמוּמֵי קוֹל.

ככת' ע'רנ' כל יושבי תבל ושוכני ארץ כנשוא נס הרים תראו וכתקוע שופר תשמעו.

21 שָׁגַג לֵב הוֹתֵל  
עוֹד בֶּל יִטּוּ  
בְּלִי לְתַכְבִּיד אֵזֶן  
מִשְׁמוֹעַ בְּקוֹל

שׁוֹבֵב לִי כְּקָדָם  
דָּת מוֹרְשָׁה  
אֲשֶׁר בָּהּ עֵלְסוֹנִי  
בְּלִפְיָדַיִם וְקוֹל.

ככת' בתו' וכל העם רואים את הקולות ואת הלפידים ואת קול השופר ואת ההר עשן. וירא כל העם ויניעו ויעמדו מרחוק.

19 The year ebbs,<sup>346</sup>  
And a Day of Judgment is upon us in the New Year,  
An advocate shall rise to speak of our merit  
And to implore with his Voice

19B As the month of Tishre is consecrated,  
And the Holy Day is appointed,  
I shall sound out the Shofar  
And He will answer me with His Voice.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *“Blow the Shofar at the moon’s renewal, and the time appointed for our festive day. Because it is a decree for Israel, a judgment day for the God of Jacob.”* [Psalms 81: 4-5]

20 Passions will spring from the tombs,  
The rocks will set forth with a howling,  
As the dry bones will rise  
From the dust and give Voice

20B The mountains will be crowned with Your banners,  
And the Shofar will ring out in the Land,  
To sing Your praises  
By those who had hitherto had no Voice.

As it is written by Your Prophets: *“All you inhabitants of the world and dwellers of the earth- you will see when the banner is hoisted up upon the mountains, and when the Shofar sounds you will hear.”* [Isaiah 18:3]

21 Doubt shall be cleaved from the heart,  
Lest it divert us,  
Lest our ears be blocked  
To the sound of Your Voice

21B Answer me,<sup>347</sup> as You did in the past,  
So that I will be able to fulfil the Law You bequeathed us  
Which, at Sinai made me shudder,  
Before the flames and Your Voice.

As it is written in Your Torah: *“The entire people saw the thunder and the flames, the sound of the Shofar and the smoking mountain; the people saw and trembled and stood from afar.”* [Exodus 20:15]

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<sup>346</sup> This phrase could be understood as the end of the calendar year at Rosh Hashanah, or an eschatological reference to the End of Days.

<sup>347</sup> An alternative translation here could be: Return to me

תְּבוּנָה הַפִּיק      אִישׁ נָבוֹן דָּבַר  
וְחָק נִעַם וְמִירוֹת      בְּנִעִימַת קוֹל

תְּהִלָּה יִתְנוּ      אֶזְלָל הַשְּׁמִיעוּ  
לְאֵל מֹשֶׁל בְּכָל      יִמְתִּיקוּ בְּקוֹל.

ככת' בד' ק' הללו יה הללו אל בקדשו הללוהו ברקיע עוזו הללוהו בגבורותיו  
הללוהו כרוב גדלו הללוהו בתקע שופר הללוהו בנבל וכנור הללוהו בתוף  
ומחול הללוהו במינים ועוגב הללוהו בצלצלי שמע הללוהו בצלצלי תרועה כל  
הנשמה תהלל יה' הללו יה'.

תַּחַת בְּנֵי צִיּוֹן      בְּנֵי יִתְן שָׁחוּ  
הַבְּרָקָה תִּיָּצִי      וְתִהְיוּם בְּקוֹל

תִּרְעַם לְבוֹזוֹי      תִּתְקַע בְּשׁוֹפֵר  
בְּסַעֲרוֹת תִּיָּמֵן      אֶזְזִלְךָ קוֹל.

ככת' עי'נ' וי עליהם יראה ויצא כברק תיצו וי אלהים בשופר יתקע והלך  
בסערות תימן. יי צבאות יג עליהם. כן תק על עמך ישר' בשלומך.

22 He, who derives perspicacity,  
Is a wise and praiseworthy man,  
He, who composed songs of splendoured praise,  
And sings them with his Voice

22B All will give adoration,  
And let everyone hear,  
While, unto God the Almighty,  
They sweeten their Voice.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *"Halleluiah. Praise God in His Sanctuary, praise Him in the firmament of His power. Praise Him for His mighty acts, praise Him as befits His abundant greatness. Praise Him with the blast of the Shofar, praise Him with lyre and harp. Praise Him with drum and dance, praise Him with organ and flute. Praise Him with clanging cymbals, praise Him with resonant trumpets. Let all souls praise God, Halleluiah."* [Psalms 150:1-6]

23 The Children of Zion prevailed,  
And the people of Greece did succumb,  
As You flashed Your bolts of lightning,  
And You stunned them with Your Voice

23B Do please daze my oppressors,  
And sound once again Your Shofar,  
To sweep, like a thundering storm, the southern nations all,<sup>348</sup>  
With naught but Your Voice.

As it is written by Your Prophets: *"God will appear to them and His arrow will go forth like the lightning, and God the Lord will blow with a Shofar and go forth in southern tempests. God, Lord of Legions, will protect them.."* [Zechariah 10:14-15]

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<sup>348</sup> An alternative translation here could be: Like a thundering storm from the south/ Then will come forth Your Voice.

## COMMENTARY

This Piyyut follows in both its style and form all the known Yosse ben Yosse Piyyutim. In clean and simple language, free of foreign stylistic or substance influences, the Piyyutim in general and this one as well, are organized in the alphabetic acrostic form drawn from the Psalms and Lamentation literary tradition, and each verse ends with a flourish, seen in other Piyyutim,<sup>349</sup> that repeats the word **Voice**, in effect stringing a constant colour bead on the colourful and image-full alphabetic chain of the Piyyut. The poetry is epic. The Paytan draws an arc through history beginning with the Creation itself, and concerns himself with the broad sweep of time wherein evidence of God's immanence may be found. The reference to God as King, based on scriptural sources such as: *"Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors; that the King of glory may come in"* [Psalms 24:7], was understood at the time not as mere lip service or embellishment of praise, but as a fact. Talmudic sages and Paytanim, as well as the laity, regarded God as the literal King of the world and they sought to give a material expression to this strongly held belief through such religious rituals as the blowing of the Shofar as a crowning of God re-enacted yearly by His People, for the sake of maintaining the world order, of ensuring the world would remain intact for Israel and for the Nations alike.<sup>350</sup>

In this Piyyut Yosse ben Yosse theologizes history becoming in effect an apocalyptic historiographer whose aim it is to articulate the People's expectation for their individual and national future based on their present lamentable conditions in exile,

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<sup>349</sup> Such as: **אפתד במעשי** and **אהללה אלוהי** for example.

<sup>350</sup> Aharon Mirsky: "The Beginnings of Piyyut: Yosse ben Yosse" [Hebrew], [www.daat.ac.il/daat/sifrut/maamarim/reshit6-2.htm](http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/sifrut/maamarim/reshit6-2.htm)

which “in turn is meaningful only in terms of past history.”<sup>351</sup> One of the prime concerns of Yosse ben Yosse in this Piyyut is to present past events, referring to specific historical data, in such a way as to denote their place in a deliberate theologized historiography. The events are conveyed in allusive language, a literary device Yosse ben Yosse often employs when referring to people and objects, creating a visual lexicon which readily resonated with the community and which was designed to be understood by the audiences who interacted with the Piyyut. The concern however is not only with the eschaton, not only in the end of history, for in that case there would be no need to iterate the detailed ebb and flow of human history, and there would be no need to elaborate on the particular vicissitudes visited by specific rulers. According to Lorenzo DiTommaso, “the historical data in these texts operate as elements of an underlying and pervasive *apocalyptic historiography*... (referring) to the intellectual construct characteristic to historical apocalypica by which data about the past, present, and future are selected and arranged.”<sup>352</sup>

This Piyyut is part of the body of Jewish messianic literature in that it promotes a particularly theological approach to history, whose function is to “identify the significant events in the historical record by which the author’s present situation and expected end-time events are understood.”<sup>353</sup> The present is only made intelligible in its grand historical context, through reflecting on what had already taken place in the past and in anticipation of a promised, prophesied future yet to come. “Past, present, and future are inextricably linked (and)... the arrow of time is linear...history is a one-way road and the

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<sup>351</sup> Lorenzo DiTommaso, “History and Apocalyptic Eschatology: A Replay to J.Y. Jindo”, *Vetus Testamentum* LVI, (2006), p. 416

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 414

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 415

selection of historical events and figures serve as mileposts along its length.”<sup>354</sup> The epic, panoramic quality of this Piyyut outlines, through reference to the past, God’s overarching plan for His People, and for humanity at large. Yosse ben Yosse proposes to his audience that “just as past events have transpired exactly according to plan, so too will those events yet to happen occur as foretold... (Intimating that) past history is the warrant for future expectation.”<sup>355</sup> The messianic concern with history is at the heart of this particular Piyyut, serving as a salve for the veritable existential angst the People suffered when their world seemed to prompt a re-evaluation of the Deuteronomic theology of reward and punishment, at this 5<sup>th</sup> century intersection of faith and history.<sup>356</sup>

The social function of a Piyyut such as this, part of what John Collins calls the “literature of the oppressed”,<sup>357</sup> was to illustrate the accuracy of the worldview which regards the problems of the contemporary world through a specific lens, namely Scripture. The authoritative nature of Scripture, the guidance it provides, and its underlying foundation in theodicy, help focus the mind of the audience on what really matters in their present, with an eye to their personal and collective future. Such a worldview is didactically woven into the cloth of the Piyyut, and its underpinning in scripturally based periodization is used and reused in this and other Piyyutim, in order to emphasize the veracity, credibility, immutability, and coherence of the deterministic worldview.<sup>358</sup> The present alienation sensed by the People, from God and from the promises delivered through His emissaries in the past, and the subsequent frustration with

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<sup>354</sup> Lorenzo DiTommaso, “*History and Apocalyptic Eschatology: A Replay to J.Y. Jindo*”, Vetus Testamentum LVI, (2006), p. 415

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 415-416

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 418

<sup>357</sup> John Joseph Collins, The Apocalyptic Imagination, (1998), p. 10

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23

the present order of the world, find a neat resolution in a future where divine intervention will set things right again and re-create a world in balance.<sup>359</sup> All that is required of the People is that they repent, remain faithful to the Law, and wait for divine restoration. Their fate, and indeed the fate of the world entire, depends on this right action.

God is a historical agent, according to this messianic historiography, and He is literally all-mighty. Mortal kings, nations, peoples, and individuals are all in the hands of the one immortal and eternal God, all tools in service of the furtherance of God's aims through and in cosmic history. Through symbolic images, which require decoding and interpretation and are thus proactively engaging of the audience, Yosse ben Yosse illustrates the linear progression of history, the predetermined march through time in the direction it has been ordained to flow. According to this worldview, messianic deliverance is not a utopian dream but a definite restorative process whose signposts may be seen by those who seek such knowledge, in the unfolding of historical events both past and present. In the absence of political and religious stability, the dispersed exiles were more inclined toward an ideological interpretation of history, which focused on personal observance as a means for personal and national reconstitution.

The drama of Israel's history, as it is retold by Yosse ben Yosse, falls within the definition of messianic eschatology, not so much for its concern with the end of history, but for its insistence that retribution is divine and cosmic, that it stretches beyond the bounds of natural history.<sup>360</sup> Yosse ben Yosse's Piyyut is tailored, as it were, to a specific historical circumstance, even as it is woven from old materials composed in new verses

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<sup>359</sup> John Joseph Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, (1998), p. 40

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11

that enhance the People's understanding and interpretation of their present condition.<sup>361</sup> The themes, as the following discussion will reveal in greater detail, are, in part, messianic and apocalyptic to a degree as well: Yosse ben Yosse reviews the periods in history in which the natural order had been upturned in such a manner that the mighty had fallen before Israel, the few and the meek whose wars had been won by God. The Paytan reiterates the concept of judgment of the nations and the eventual restoration of Israel; he further intimates that good will eventually triumph over evil, that evil powers will again be defeated through God's agency. But Yosse ben Yosse is not a fully formed apocalyptic writer. He does not report visions, he does not refer to an angelic interlocutor, and he does not give specific information regarding the Davidic messiah or concerning the appearance of Elijah. His is an intellectualized apocalypticism, much as his description of the Avodah. He writes not about things he had seen with his own eyes, but about abstract ideas he had studied<sup>362</sup> in the Mishna and the Jerusalem Talmud, whose existence is entirely in the realm of the ratio, the mind, and the fruit of informed study.<sup>363</sup>

It is through the apocalyptic/messianic "flavour" of his writing that Yosse ben Yosse lays the foundation for right action<sup>364</sup> by individuals, which will, it is claimed, help restore the world order to its homeostatic balance. The Paytan thus imbues his message with a perfumed scent of hope and optimism, even as he narrates and makes palpable the acrid smoke of past sorrows. Thus he maintains everything happens for a reason,

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<sup>361</sup> Lorenzo DiTommaso, "Apocalypses and Apocalypticism III: Rabbinic and Medieval Judaism", In: H.J. Klauck, B. McGinn, C.L. Seow, H. Spieckermann, B.D. Walfish, E. Ziolkowski (eds.), Encyclopaedia of the Bible and Its Reception (EBR), Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Publishing, 2009

<sup>362</sup> Texts in Yosse ben Yosse's time were not necessarily written down. Rabbinic academies studied oral versions of the texts, both in Babylon and in Palestine. There is no concrete evidence of the particular texts, be they written or oral, with which Yosse ben Yosse was familiar. There is however evidence that he was familiar with the content of those texts, given the allusions he makes to them in his poetry.

<sup>363</sup> Aharon Mirsky: "The Beginnings of Piyyut: Yosse ben Yosse" [Hebrew]: [www.daat.ac.il/daat/sifrut/maamarim/reshit6-2.htm](http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/sifrut/maamarim/reshit6-2.htm)

<sup>364</sup> John Joseph Collins, The Apocalyptic Imagination, (1998), p. 42

everything happens at the right time and in accordance with God's plan that has been conceived by a wisdom superior to that of Man.<sup>365</sup> The current predicaments are therefore assimilated into a cosmic pattern whose inevitable outcome will be the vanquishing of evil forces and the restoration of Israel. Reality, Yosse ben Yosse says in fact, is but the surface of things. Another reality, of cosmic importance, is afoot, and by reviewing the actions of God in past history one may be able to discern and access this pattern and reach the predestined deliverance given a more salubrious adherence to God's Law.<sup>366</sup>

It is interesting to note that Yosse ben Yosse was not influenced in this messianic historiography poem by the ambient Byzantine understanding of the end of time. The contemporary Byzantine aspects of apocalyptic literature, such as the grotesque orgy of violence, the concentration on the Devil as an immanent evil force, the pessimistic insistence on crisis and vile images of doom,<sup>367</sup> are all absent from Yosse ben Yosse's composition. Even as in the large scheme of history the fate of Israel has more often than not been mournful, the Paytan sees meaning in this lachrymose account of the past and present, regarding the future with faith and positivity, which he transmits in verse to his community, better to give them hope in their present distress. Despite the cultural pressure from without, from Christian proselytizers and Byzantine ruling classes, and despite the variety of cultures interacting extensively and relentlessly with the now virtually pulverized Israel, Yosse ben Yosse maintains an aloof position and a cogitated adherence to a coherently Jewish world view, resisting the creative urge to appropriate symbols and themes from his environment.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> John Joseph Collins, The Apocalyptic Imagination, (1998), p. 97

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103

<sup>367</sup> Bernard McGinn, Visions of the End, (1998), pp. 57-70

<sup>368</sup> Bernard McGinn, Encyclopaedia of Apocalypticism, Vol. 2, Part 1, (1998), pp. 49-61

1 I run for help  
And, there, next to me, I find  
God, who stands by me  
When I call out with my Voice

Yosse ben Yosse begins his Piyyut with a reference to the prophet who said: “*And what will ye do in the day of visitation, and in the ruin which shall come from far? To whom will ye flee for help? And where will ye leave your glory?*” [Isaiah 10:3]. The Paytan refers to the prophetic injunction to seek God’s help through right action and faith as the route for the alleviation of the People’s present disquiet. He find, right next to him, he says, even in exile and even in the post destruction desolation, God who is close to him, as He is to all His People [Deuteronomy 4:7], but only when he calls out to God with his Voice, his prayer. In every era, in every period of history, God walks with His People, and He has even gone into exile with them, to see them through the torment until they prove themselves worthy of His mercy and deliverance.

1B He who, in Divine Assembly  
Resides within me,  
And here, in this Temple Minor,  
I chant to Him with my Voice.

Citing Psalms 82, and referring to the Talmudic interpretation thereof,<sup>369</sup> the *Divine Assembly* constitutes ten men in prayer at the synagogue. Yosse ben Yosse reminds the congregation that their presence at synagogue is akin to their kinfolk’s presence at the Temple in Jerusalem, for the synagogue had been rendered a ‘*temple minor*’ through Rabbinic exegesis of verses such as: “*Thus saith the Lord GOD: Although I have removed them far off among the nations, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet have I been to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they are come*”

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<sup>369</sup> Brachot Tractate 6:1, cited in: Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], p. 104

[Ezekiel 11:16]. This allusion lends greater gravitas to the Piyyut, its recitation in public, and its meaning for the community at large. If God's Presence went into exile with the People, and if their service of God at the synagogue is akin to service at the Temple, then what they do and what they say has redemptive qualities for themselves, for the nation of Israel, and indeed for the world.

2        Seek me out, gather me unto You,  
          For I am like a lamb astray,  
          I have been shorn and silenced,  
          Without protest in my Voice

2B        As my shearers said:  
          Oh, she is banished,  
          Her Protector and Companion  
          Will not roar with His Voice.

“*Israel is a scattered sheep*”, says the prophet Jeremiah [Jeremiah 50:17]. Israel has been scattered among the nations of the world, and its redemption depends on the shepherd. In the Rosh Hashanah prayer the congregation sings: כְּבַקְרָת רוּעָה עֲדָרוּ, מֵעֵבִיר צֹאֲנוּ תַּחַת שִׁבְטוֹ , like a shepherd inspecting his flock, making sheep pass under his staff,<sup>370</sup> referring to God as the shepherd of His creations and particularly of Israel. This verse suggests that prayer was already canonized to a large degree by the time Yosse ben Yosse was writing his liturgical poetry, and that both he and his audience were familiar with the texts. Moreover, they were familiar with the eschatological prophesy, quoted here in detail, which promised a complete restitution and restoration of the People:

*“For thus saith the Lord GOD: Behold, here am I, and I will search for My sheep, and seek them out. As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are separated, so will I seek out My sheep; and I will deliver them out of all places whither they have been scattered in the day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring*

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<sup>370</sup> Rosh Hashanah prayer book, ArtScroll Machzor, Mesorah Publications, (2008), p. 540

*them into their own land; and I will feed them upon the mountains of Israel, by the streams, and in all the habitable places of the country. I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be; there shall they lie down in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel. I will feed My sheep, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord GOD. I will seek that which was lost, and will bring back that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick; and the fat and the strong I will destroy, I will feed them in justice”.*<sup>371</sup>

This is the very definition of the hope horizon which the Paytan and his community relies on for the definition of their predestined future, whose realization depends on their right action and faith. Ezekiel’s prophesy speaks about a scattered nation, to a scattered nation, and Yosse ben Yosse assures the People that since this scattering had happened to them, affirming the accuracy of the vision, and therefore affirming its conclusion as well. The present exile confirms Ezekiel’s words beyond a reasonable doubt, therefore his vision about the future must perforce be true as well, and doubtlessly too, the present will give way to the promised salvation. The prophet Isaiah also alluded to the dispersal in animal husbandry terms which would have been immediately evocative for the agrarian society in which he walked, and which was still highly evocative to the exiles in the 5<sup>th</sup> century when 8 cited him: *“He was oppressed, though he humbled himself and opened not his mouth; as a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and as a sheep that before her shearers is dumb; yea, he opened not his mouth”* [Isaiah 53:7]. The Paytan establishes the credentials of the arc of his Piyyut, by referring the present conditions to situations foreseen in scripture. His essay thus establishes a bona fide for its ultimate conclusion which aims to substantiate the eschatological promises of a sunny future for the People, and to reassure the congregation of the truth of such a vision and its historical inevitability.

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<sup>371</sup> Ezekiel 34:11-16

The nations of the world have oppressed and still oppress Israel, they have sheared Israel of the Temple, and of their wool-coat of sovereignty. The nations of the world believe that Israel is without divine protection, given the dispersal and the present disempowered status of the People [Jeremiah 30:17]. The apocalyptic vision would however be incomplete were the Paytan not concerned with the dynamics of reconstitution. The prophets spoke extensively about the eschatological reversal of Israel's misfortune: *"Therefore prophesy thou against them all these words, and say unto them: The LORD doth roar from on high, and utter His voice from His holy habitation; He doth mightily roar because of His fold; He giveth a shout, as they that tread the grapes, against all the inhabitants of the earth"* [Jeremiah 25:30], and Yosse ben Yosse here hints to the congregation that this reversal of fortunes, and the vengeance that will be meted out against the oppressive nations, will materialize when God so chooses.

Interestingly, the Paytan evokes the roaring sound of God's salvation as it will sweep the land of evil, in the literary flourish that repeats the word **Voice**, and in the citation of scriptural verses that speak of the noise, the cry, the holler, the roar of God's fury and the sound of His Presence made real in the end of time. The twofold emphasis on the soundscape of redemption is artfully mastered in the verses through multiple stylistic layers. The literary pace of the composition is augmented by the large number of verbs that crowd each stanza, lending movement and urgency to the verses; and the meter with which the Paytan imbues his lines drums a heart beat in the background, lending an air of marching through time for the audience. This Piyyut is auditory in nature and in form. It is loud. It speaks of voices and ears, of cries and their reception. Its imagery and nuance are tuned to the sense of hearing, to the necessity of voicing one's pains, and of

the effectiveness of prayer. It proclaims, like a proverbial Shofar, that the end is nigh and that salvation will follow, in accordance with God's grand plan for humanity and for Israel.

3 I exult in His Laws,  
So pleasing to my palate are they,  
He lends His ear to me and whispers:  
Let Me hear your Voice.

3B But He has vanished and forsaken me,  
Like a fawn on distant mountains,  
For He hath sought a signal and a sign  
In my dwellings, but He heard no Voice.

The reason for the current sorrows and troubles, says the Paytan, is clear for all who wish to see it. While I, meaning Israel at large, followed God's Law, willingly and with joy and in song [Song of Songs 2:14], God had listened to my prayers, and turned His ear to my entreaties. But once I neglected the Law, God had visited devastation upon me, and turned and ran from me like a fawn in flight [Song of Songs 2:17]. The Deuteronomic dynamic of reward and punishment is the foundation for the theologized historiography: as long as Israel studies and follows the Torah, God listens; as soon as they sin, He forsakes them.<sup>372</sup> Therefore, given the present downfall of Israel, the subtext suggests, one must recognize that God's hand is involved in history and that if the People repent of their sins and return unto Him, history will break from its present course and will reverse the destruction and restore the People once more.

4 He, who rushed from one cut up offering to the next,  
Please return him to me  
Perhaps he will appease You,  
For once You did heed his Voice

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<sup>372</sup> Song of Songs Rabbah [8:12] cited in: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 105

Yosse ben Yosse sets in motion the account of the history of the People's relationship with God and evokes the covenantal bond which is unbreakable and eternal. He naturally begins with Abraham, to whom he refers obliquely as the champion of the covenant itself, the progenitor of Israel, the first and foremost of their forefathers, to whom the covenant was first given [Genesis 15]. The Paytan, true to form, does not name Abraham but makes an allusion to the covenantal treaty thus informing his Piyyut not only with the historical arrow of time, but with the particular flavour of his message. He helps focus the mind not only on the firstness of Abraham in the chain of ancestors and forefathers and leaders, but establishes the theme of the covenant that lies at the foundation of history itself. Given God's promise to Abraham, given the fulfillment of prophesy, regarding the dispersal, all prophesies as to the restoration of Israel will perforce come true as well.

By appealing to God in prayer to remember Abraham, the Paytan in fact appeals to the community to remark upon the dynamics of the covenant through history. Rather than indicating abandonment by God of His People, the present affliction is in fact a confirmation of the historiographic arc as foretold by God. Yosse ben Yosse ties Abraham to the auditory theme of the Piyyut, by alluding to the verse: *"because that Abraham hearkened to My voice, and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws"* [Genesis 26:5]. Abraham listened to the voice of God, once again an allusion to the auditory nature of this verse, and Abraham obeyed Him to the fullest, even to the point of agreeing to sacrifice Isaac at Moriah, and God rewarded him with the eternal promise: *"I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven, and will give unto thy seed all these lands; and by thy seed shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves"* [Genesis 26:4]. Right action and

right faith, prayer to a listening God, bring salvation, says the Paytan, and the end of time will prove this verity, just as the present circumstances do.

4B     Bring goodness unto him,  
       And gaze upon the lamb-offering bound at Moriah,  
       He, whose silent complicity at the altar will advocate  
       For those who did not heed Your Voice.

Isaac, the lamb of Moriah, was silent at the altar. He did not raise his voice in protest.<sup>373</sup> But, even silence speaks loudly, and even Isaac's calm fits into this auditory poem. There is an instructive Midrash concerning this aspect to Isaac's silence. Isaac agreed to walk on with Abraham, even though he understood that he was the intended sacrifice to be offered to God. He was bound to the altar, his eyes wide open, not in vain, but to facilitate a smooth execution of the sacrifice, lest he move instinctively and prevent Abraham from carrying out his duty. He wanted to display his filial respect for Abraham, and enable a proper and full fulfillment of the commandment. The apocalyptic drama depends on both the negative and the eventual positive events in history. Isaac, according to this exegetical reflection, was willing to let the offering be completed, because God had ordained it. Yosse ben Yosse alludes to this Midrashic notion by telling the People that they need to accept with love the punishments of God, that these punishments are required for the materialization of the full eschatological vision.<sup>374</sup> The exile and destruction are part of God's grand plan. Ease into it, accept with love the afflictions and oppression, and know that God will keep His word and will redeem you when the full

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<sup>373</sup> See Rashi for Genesis 22:8 "*And Abraham said: 'God will provide Himself the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.' So they went both of them together.*" Isaac understood that he would be the offering and yet he did not protest and he walked on together, with a single mind, with Abraham.

<sup>374</sup> Midrash, Genesis 22:9, cited in the ArtScroll Chumash, p. 103

measure of His fury had been spent, and when you prove yourselves worthy of His mercy.

5 Remove from the smooth-skinned one  
Those menacing hirsute hands,  
For his supplication still echoes,  
And unto You he turns his Voice

5B Deliver us, for  
The Torah will not be forgotten  
From his offspring,  
Who will not cease to sound their Voice.

From Abraham to Isaac, the Paytan proceeds with his historical account and mentions the “smooth skinned” Jacob, who stands in opposition to the “hirsute” Esau [Genesis 27:11]. Not only does the Paytan call to mind the chain of ancestry, but he evokes the particular moment when Isaac had given his blessing to his sons, in effect bequeathing the covenant to them and their descendents for all time. Yosse ben Yosse thus fully establishes the scaffold of his eschatological essay, which is the covenantal bond and promise that despite all vicissitudes visited upon the children of Israel, they will in time be restored and respected universally: *“Let peoples serve thee, and nations bow down to thee. Be lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother's sons bow down to thee. Cursed be every one that curseth thee, and blessed be every one that blesseth thee”* [Genesis 27:29]. Genesis Rabbah<sup>375</sup> adds to the auditory theme of this Piyyut, by stating the Rabbinic exegetical injunction that as long as the voice of the children of Jacob, Israel, will sound in synagogues throughout the lands of their exile, the pitfalls of an Esau-like existence, void of Torah and study, will not be met by the People. The Paytan homiletically and didactically reiterates the idea that prayer will be the means for the community’s

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<sup>375</sup> Genesis Rabbah [65:20], cited in: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 105

salvation, and that prayers will be the vehicle for realizing the covenantal promise as well, harking to the Deuteronomy verse: *“then it shall come to pass, when many evils and troubles are come upon them, that this song shall testify before them as a witness; for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed; for I know their imagination how they do even now, before I have brought them into the land which I swore”* [Deuteronomy 31:21]. As long as Israel observes the Law and studies God’s Law, as long as the community members remember the covenant and speak of it, they are assured that the prophesies of their redemption will materialize in full.

6       And my seers and prophets  
          Are the sons of my mother,  
          And in yesteryears they roused and chastised me  
          To heed Your Voice

6B       As they stood upon their watch  
          And called out,  
          So the mystery be revealed to them,  
          And He rejoined them with His Voice.

The prophets and seers who have risen from among the People<sup>376</sup> have oft been incensed by the sinful abandonment of the Law, and repeatedly strove to correct the course upon the People chose to walk. They stood watch [Habakkuk 2:1] and have endeavoured to reveal the full arc of history as it had been revealed to them directly by God, in His voice: *“And the LORD answered me, and said: 'Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that a man may read it swiftly. For the vision is yet for the appointed time, and it declareth of the end, and doth not lie; though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not delay”* [Habakkuk 2:2-3]. The prophets heard the very voice of God. They have told the People what their history will look like, to the end of time, and yet the People

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<sup>376</sup> Song of Songs Rabbah [1:6], cited in: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 105

have made heavy their hearing and refused to abide by the Law. God's punishment is part of His plan, and so is salvation which will not tarry and will appear at the right moment, when God sounds the eschatological Shofar of redemption. Until then, the conversation must continue and the dialog between Israel and God kept flowing.

7       He has eluded me  
          And I roamed and did seek Him,  
          For He is omnipresent,  
          Hither and yon I still cry with my Voice

Even in exile, says Yosse ben Yosse, God hears the community's cries and their prayers. Invoking the Song of Songs verse [Song of Songs 3:2], the Paytan tells the congregation that wherever there rings the sound of their prayer, there will God be present. Hither and yon though they may have been scattered, God still walks among them, His ears keen to hear their pleas.

7B       The memory of my Beloved on earth,  
          And His grandeur in the heavens,  
          The whole world is filled with His awesome glory,  
          And the legions of heaven raise up their Voice.

God had created the earth, He had created time itself and acts through history in accordance with His own plan. He will remember His promise if Israel praises Him in their hearts, if they recognize and remember His acts on their behalf which are proof of His immanence and His material involvement in the arrow of history. The people of the earth will say: "*Above the voices of many waters, the mighty breakers of the sea, the LORD on high is mighty*" [Psalms 93:4], and the angels above say: "*Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory*" [Isaiah 6:3], and together, the sounds of these prayers, both of which allude to an auditory exchange in keeping with the theme of the Piyyut, then will God's redemption shine forth.

8 Colossal waves are His armies  
Wherein His paths stretch forth,  
And they have spoken: We did not perceive a likeness,  
Nothing but a Voice

The exodus from Egypt forged the tribal collective into a nation. The decisive symbol of this transformation and the creation of a new national identity is the crossing of the Red Sea, the seemingly un-navigable depths which were traversed through faith and with the miraculous interference by God in the natural order of the world. The waves were heavy with water [Psalms 77:20] and they rose, as so many soldiers, to help the multitude of Egyptian soldiers who gave chase to Israel. The invisible yet effective and forceful hand of God nullified the laws of nature and parted the sea, and it nullified the might of armies and their weapons and thus vanquished the mighty before Him, with the mere sounding of His voice: *“The voice of the LORD is upon the waters”* [Psalms 29:3]. Yosse ben Yosse wants the congregation to turn their ears inside, and hear the voice of God through their hearts, as they study and observe His law.

8B I searched in the wilderness  
Is it there, and He said: It is not here,  
Before He bestowed upon us His might,  
He terrified me with His Voice.

At Sinai the People trembled before God’s voice: *“The voice of the LORD shaketh the wilderness; the LORD shaketh the wilderness of Kadesh.”* [Psalms 29:8] and even though they did not see His countenance, they recognized His Presence. The Torah, Yosse ben Yosse reminds the community, is the record of God’s voice, and must therefore continue to be heard and harkened, so that God’s plan be fulfilled on earth. The sound and fury at Sinai are neatly evoked with a tight two words: **ביעתתני בקול** you had terrified me with Your voice. The Paytan knows that his audience understands this allusion and needs no

further elaboration, and he proceeds with his auditory theme now bolstered by this common understanding.

9       The Pure One has bounded  
          Over mountains and went onward,  
          And from His abode at Moriah  
          He gave sound to His Voice

The prophet Habakkuk called God *“Thou that art of eyes too pure to behold evil, and that canst not look on mischief,”* [Habakkuk 1:13]. The Paytan chose this attribute of God, spoken by this particular messenger, because the scriptural reference continues with a question that was doubtlessly on the minds of the People as well: *“wherefore lookest Thou, when they deal treacherously, and holdest Thy peace, when the wicked swalloweth up the man that is more righteous than he”* [Habakkuk 1:13]. The theodicy and Deuteronomic dynamic traditions of Israel are seemingly cast for the community as falsehoods, given their present afflictions. But the Paytan assures them that God will bound over the mountains of their iniquity<sup>377</sup> and will, when the time will come, once more reign from the mountain at Moriah. Yosse ben Yosse makes use of the same image of **הר** to describe both the present and the future, based on the Presence of God on that mountain in the past, and given His promise regarding the conclusion of history, when His voice will sound forth from Jerusalem restored [Jeremiah 25:30].

9B       I have sullied His dwelling,  
          And He removed His Presence from me,  
          But on the Appointed Day  
          My ears will ring with His Voice.

The destruction of the Temple [Psalms 84:2] was the People’s fault. It was not arbitrary and unreasonable, given the covenantal responsibilities of Israel. On the

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<sup>377</sup> Song of Songs Rabbah [2:8], cited in: Song of Songs Rabbah [1:6], cited in: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 107

“appointed day”, when the divine plan will reach its eschatological climax, the sound of God will ring forth for all to hear.

10 I am dear to Him,  
And He has come with me into captivity,  
I am wholeheartedly with Him,  
He has given me assurance with His Voice

Yosse ben Yosse introduces the revolutionary Rabbinic idea that God has in effect gone into exile too with his People.<sup>378</sup> Citing Isaiah Ch. 43, Yosse ben Yosse invokes the prophesy of the gathering of the exiles, suggesting that God will return to the Land of Israel with the People of Israel, and that until the return, He will reside with them in exile. One would be tempted to imagine that God has left His flock, but the Paytan invokes scripture to imagine a different march through history, a march through time in which God walks side by side with His People and never abandons them. Their exile is His punishment of them for their sins, but He never leaves their side even in their darkest afflictions. The congregation will thus remember Psalms 91 and its imagery of a nation protected by God in all its tribulations: *“Of the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor of the destruction that wasteth at noonday. A thousand may fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; it shall not come nigh thee”* [Psalms 91:6-7]. The human response to catastrophe can be on the one hand a negation of God, but on the other hand it can be a realization that human destiny is part of God’s plan and a manifestation of His displeasure or pleasure with His creatures. Both are reasonable responses, both are rational and can be understood by an observer. While none can judge another person’s response unless he or she walks in their shoes, the Paytan seems to favour the faithful response to cataclysmic events as the proper choice, the choice that will guarantee the eschatological conclusion

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<sup>378</sup> Mechilta Bo, Pessach Tractate, Chapter 14, cited in: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 107

of the People's march through their predetermined history.<sup>379</sup> As proof of this assertion, Yosse ben Yosse cites historical examples that point to the Presence of God amidst His People even in exile:

10B He went [with me] down to Shin'ar,  
And settled [with me] in Eilam,  
Then He gathered us with His leonine Roar  
With His colubrine hissing Voice.

Samuel spoke of God's descent into Egypt with the tribes of Israel [I Samuel 2:27], and Isaiah of God's accompaniment of Israel in Babylon [Isaiah 43:14], and Jeremiah went further to allude to a future wherein God will set up His throne in exile at Eilam in order to visit His wrath upon the oppressors of Israel [Jeremiah 49:38]. There is Scriptural precedence therefore to the assertion that God went into exile with Israel, and thus there is a certitude wrapped in the belief of a sudden reversal of fortune. Yosse ben Yosse resorts to the sounds of salvation, buttressing the thematic core of the Piyyut in its auditory allusions and qualities, with the onomatopoeias of the lion's roar [that is God's voice]<sup>380</sup> and the serpent's hiss [that is Babylon]<sup>381</sup>, the voice of God in all its manifest might that will herald the redemption and will make happy the nation of Israel, while the nations of the world will tremble in fear of the apocalypse.

11 He destroyed the bear that had set upon me,  
And restored the Holy Rites,  
Once the decree was written,  
And averted disaster with His Voice

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<sup>379</sup> For a fuller discussion on this issue, with regards to the Holocaust, see: Eliezer Berkowitz, I am With Him in Affliction- Judaism in the Ghettos and in the Annihilation Camps, HEBREW, Jerusalem: Yad Vashem Publications, 2006

<sup>380</sup> Hosea 11:10

<sup>381</sup> Jeremiah 46:22

God has in the past protected Israel from the beasts that had set upon it, such as the bear [which is Persia]<sup>382</sup> and as proof the Paytan cites the Cyrus the Great's Edict of Restoration [538 BCE] that saw a return to the Land of Israel by the Jews and the rebuilding of the second Temple in Jerusalem: *"Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying: 'Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth hath the LORD, the God of heaven, given me; and He hath charged me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah'"* [Ezra 1: 1-2] It was, Yosse ben Yosse reminds the congregation, a pivotal turn of events in their nation's history as a manifestation of God's immanence therein. Therefore, he seems to suggest, just as God intervened in the past, just as he had preordained both the exile and its reversal, so shall He redeem Israel of their present dispersion. Whereas pre-destruction exile is referred to through the symbol of Babylon, the subsequent historical dispersal is referred to through the iconic Greece and Rome.

11B     He has helped me vanquish  
           The four headed beast,  
           And I, with everlasting gratitude,  
           Do thank Him with my Voice.

Daniel's vision [Daniel 7:6] cast Greece in the image of a four-headed beast, whom Rabbinic exegetes understood to be a reference to the Hasmonean revolt in 167-160 BCE an event celebrated for all time since in the festival of Hanukah, in gratitude for the salvation of the few from the armies of the multitudes.<sup>383</sup> It happened before, says Yosse ben Yosse, and it will happen again. The allusion to Daniel here is one of the

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<sup>382</sup> Daniel 7:5

<sup>383</sup> Tractate Shabbat [21:2], cited in: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 108

signposts of the apocalyptic tone of this Piyyut, for the Daniel literature is at the core of Jewish apocalypticism and the subject of many a Midrashic exegesis as to its mystery and message.

12       Then to the beast of the reeds  
          Did He trade the Land,  
          The doubter of heaven,  
          Whose impudence rang out in one Voice

The apocalyptic/messianic theme continues with an invocation of Daniel's mystery and vision. The fourth beast in Daniel's vision was a horrific beast indeed: "*After this I saw in the night visions, and behold a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, and strong exceedingly; and it had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces, and stamped the residue with its feet; and it was diverse from all the beasts that were before it; and it had ten horns*" [Daniel 7:7]. Rome, the mightiest of empires in the ancient world, was the quintessential oppressor to whom God had given Israel in punishment for Israel's sins [Ezekiel 30:12]. Rome challenged God's existence, it raised a haughty eye to the heavens and proclaimed them empty and void [Psalms 73:25].

12B       To God, who is my saviour,  
          From within the iron trap I implored,  
          As my legs sank in mire,  
          I shouted with my Voice.

But the People, Yosse ben Yosse instructs and reminds the congregation, did not see the alleged void but realized God's Presence in their midst and called unto Him, and were thus saved. Even the iron teeth of the mighty empire [Daniel 7:7] turned out to be sitting atop a clay foundation that could not withstand the onslaught of God's vengeance on behalf of His People. Continued faith is the ticket to salvation, the right action that

will, in the end of time, help restore Israel to its rightful glory through God's involvement in the progress of history through time.

13     The eschaton  
       He did not reveal to me,  
       When, in my Land,  
       Will the saviour, like a dove, sound his Voice

13B    Even from prophets and sages  
       He hid the mystery of the End of Days,  
       Even my seers know not  
       When redemption will ring out in His Voice.

Every person thrust into exile, every individual banished from good fortune, pleads with God: "*LORD, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; let me know how short-lived I am*" [Psalms 39:5]. The natural inclination of even the most faithful of God's servants is to ask for clarity. Accepting the Restorative messianic understanding of theologized historiography, accepting the underlying Deuteronomic rationale for events in history, accepting the foundational belief in the dynamics of God's immanence in history, still leaves open the question of when. When will the end times begin? When will messianic deliverance dawn? But God, in His wisdom, has not revealed the calendar of hope, and He left eternally open this question so that His People will remain faithful and adhere to His Law for all time. Hope in the messianic deliverance is the engine of Jewish survival, and it must be sustained forever.

Even the wise men of the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah who were granted wisdom and perspicacity, even the seer Daniel who saw the eschaton in its full detail, even they did not know the answer to the question of when the end will materialize: "*And he said: 'Go thy way, Daniel; for the words are shut up and sealed till the time of the end.'*" [Daniel 12:9]. The end of time will be revealed at the end of time,

and not sooner, because this mystery is part of God's plan for humanity and His gift to humanity, for the mystery entails faithfulness despite contrary evidence in the material world. Such faithfulness is a choice, and those who choose right, as each person is free to do at all times, will be rewarded in due course. That is the promise Yosse ben Yosse reiterates here, to a congregation whose material world appears to be a negation of redemptive hope, but whose inner theological scaffold speaks of this eternal faith nonetheless.

14 I entreat You to gaze upon me and see  
My destitution and my hardship,  
No one recognizes me,  
And to whom shall I appeal with my Voice

14B I shall forever hope  
That all prophesies will come true to a word,  
For those who heard  
In the silence and stillness- Your Voice.

Yosse ben Yosse now begins the prayerful section of his Piyyut, one in which the congregation may have participated responsively in reading the full verses that punctuate the poem. He maintains the theme of sound and hearing as he hitherto had in the Piyyut. I, says the Paytan, turn to God in my hour of need. Prayer is the vehicle for reaching God's ear: *"With my voice I cry unto the LORD; with my voice I make supplication unto the LORD. I pour out my complaint before Him, I declare before Him my trouble"* [Psalms 142:2-3] and once heard, the People's voice will remind God of their affliction [Lamentation 3:19]. For as the first part of the Piyyut exegetically informed them, the community would do well to remember that all prophesies are true and that all will come true as foretold. God has chosen the bears of His messages, the prophets, and had revealed to them His plan in silent imagery and in words, with His voice. Just as the afflictions had

taken place as foreseen by the prophets, so shall redemption and solace be true for Israel, and they will once again rejoice in God:

15 My heart will gladden  
And rejoice within me,  
When I shall hear my Beloved knocking  
On my door with His Voice

15B He will for all eternity  
Be etched upon my heart,  
As at the foot of Sinai  
He aroused me with His Voice.

*“I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, He hath covered me with the robe of victory, as a bridegroom putteth on a priestly diadem, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels” [Isaiah 61:10].* Yosse ben Yosse invokes the hope and expectation for salvation and instructs the People to daily anticipate the arrival of the messianic knock on the door that will spell their redemption [Song of Songs 5:2]. Centuries later, Maimonides defined the Thirteen Principles of Faith in his Commentary to Mishna [Sanhedrin, Ch. 10], the twelfth Principle of which reads: *“I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he may delay, nevertheless I anticipate every day that he will come”*.<sup>384</sup> The Paytan invokes the historical Rabbinic authoritative injunction that the community of Israel conduct their lives according to God’s law and to remain faithful that the Messianic salvation will come when God deems it to be proper and timely. If Israel sets God like a seal upon their heart [Song of Songs 8:6], they will be revived by the love of God who

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<sup>384</sup> ArtScroll Siddur, New York: Messorah Publications, (2008), pp. 178-180

will care for them and awaken them under His verdant apple-tree [Song of Songs 8:5] which alludes to the Torah given at Sinai.<sup>385</sup>

As it is written in Your Torah: *“On the third day when it was morning, there was thunder and lightning and a heavy cloud on the mountain, and the sound of the Shofar was very powerful, and the entire people that was in the camp shuddered.”* [Exodus 19:16]

The sound of the Shofar begins to make its presence felt for the audience, the sound of redemption and solace. It will ring through in all the citations brought henceforth by Yosse ben Yosse for the congregation to recite and ponder.

16     You have elevated me, God,  
       Above all nations,  
       It was for me  
       That at Sinai You sounded Your Voice

16B    You are supreme above all others,  
       Exceedingly exalted,  
       And for all time You will be preeminent,  
       Like the trumpeting sound of Your Voice.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *“God has ascended midst acclamation, God with the blasts of the Shofar.”* [Psalms 47:6]

Israel feels a sense of electedness, chosenness, a sense that the nation has been singled out by God as particularly beloved and dear: *“Many daughters have done valiantly, but thou excellest them all.”* [Proverbs 31:29]. They were given the Torah because God loved them so much, and their response to His gift was to glorify Him and on every occasion to say: *“For Thou, LORD, art most high above all the earth; Thou art exalted far above all gods”* [Psalms 97:9]. The fulfillment of God’s plan depends on a partnership with Israel. He will do His share of the bargain, if they do theirs, if they remain loyal and faithful to Him and praise Him with every fibre of their being at all times [Deuteronomy

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<sup>385</sup> Midrash cited in: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 109

6:5]. Then the scriptural vision of God's triumphant return, heralded by the blowing of Shofars, will be realized.

17     He bleated and cried in the wilderness  
       When he took wing and flight from Egypt,  
       Like a cooing dove  
       From the Assyrian cage he gave Voice

17B    Remember the bird of Your Land,  
       Protect Your bird of silence,  
       Sound out Your Shofar,  
       And sing to it with Your Voice.

As it is written by Your Prophets: *"It shall be on that day that a great Shofar will be blown, and those who are lost in the land of Assyria and those cast away in the land of Egypt will come together, and they will prostrate themselves to God on the holy mountain in Jerusalem."* [Isaiah 27:13]

When Israel cried unto God in pain of bondage in Egypt, like a woman delivering her baby [Isaiah 242:14], God responded. When the dove Israel cried to God from the Assyrian exile [Hosea 11:11] God responded. Now, in their isolation and solitude, Israel stands; *"like a sparrow that is alone upon the housetop"* [Psalms 102:8], praying to god for similar redemption. Once redeemed, the People will live in the House of God again, as described in the Psalm: *"Yea, the sparrow hath found a house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young; Thine altars, O LORD of hosts, my King, and my God. Happy are they that dwell in Thy house, they are ever praising Thee. Selah"* [Psalm 84:4-5]. At the end of their term of castigation, God will gather his flock into the Land of Israel. In keeping with the auditory theme of his Piyyut, Yosse ben Yosse cites Zechariah's verse: *"I will hiss for them, and gather them, for I have redeemed them; and they shall increase as they have increased"* [Zechariah 10:8] invoking dramatically for the congregation the sounds of messianic deliverance.

18     Bind Your Laws unto me,  
       Lest they fly away like an eagle,

Lest they flutter,  
Like songbirds giving Voice

18B I study Your flawless Torah,  
And look up to my teachers,  
As when in Sinai our envoy [Moses] did speak  
And God did respond to him with His Voice.

As it is written in Your Torah: *“The sound of the Shofar grew continuously much stronger, Moses would speak and God would respond to him with a voice.”* [Exodus 19:19]

As a representative of the community, Yosse ben Yosse assumes the voice of Knesset Israel, the community at large, and expresses the communal desire that God will bind His Laws to their hearts and that they cleave to Him at all times. The Torah is the wings which will help Israel soar over adversity [Isaiah 30:20]. The Torah, says the Paytan, is the means made available to Israel to obtain God’s mercy: *“As for God, His way is perfect; the word of the LORD is tried; He is a shield unto all them that take refuge in Him”* [II Samuel 22:31]. As the children of Israel raised their eyes unto God at Sinai, on the occasion of their constitution as a nation under God, so should all their descendents raise their eyes unto God, with the same fear and the same awe, and with the same hope for redemption. The sound of the Shofar at Sinai amplifies this message, as the congregation recites the verse from Exodus, while re-constituting themselves, despite their exile, as a nation under God.

19 The year ebbs,  
And a Day of Judgment is upon us in the New Year,  
An advocate shall rise to speak of our merit  
And to implore with his Voice

19B As the month of Tishre is consecrated,  
And the Holy Day is appointed,  
I shall sound out the Shofar  
And He will answer me with His Voice.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *“Blow the Shofar at the moon’s renewal, and the time appointed for our festive day. Because it is a decree for Israel, a judgment day for the God of Jacob.”* [Psalms 81: 4-5]

There are two possible interpretations for this verse. First, that the Piyut refers to the Rosh Hashanah service at synagogue, and secondly that the Paytan refers symbolically to the end of time, to the imminent salvation of Israel. Combining these two explanations provides a multi-layered understanding of Yosse ben Yosse. He writes for the synagogue service, and describes the ebb and flow of time, the passage of years and the consequent cyclical return to the judgment dock before God and the blowing of the Shofar on the Day of Judgment.<sup>386</sup> But the Paytan, having spoken of an eschatological reading of history thus far, may be alluding to the messianic sound of the Shofar that will herald the end of time, the end of tribulations, and the redemption of Israel when they are deemed worthy of God’s mercy. One may read the verse as an appeal to individuals to repent of their sins on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and as an appeal to the nation as a whole to make itself worthy of national salvation by the collective merit accrued by individuals for the benefit of all Israel and of the world entire.

20      Passions will spring from the tombs,  
          The rocks will set forth with a howling,  
          As the dry bones will rise  
          From the dust and give Voice

20B     The mountains will be crowned with Your banners,  
          And the Shofar will ring out in the Land,  
          To sing Your praises  
          By those who had hitherto had no Voice.

As it is written by Your Prophets: *“All you inhabitants of the world and dwellers of the earth- you will see when the banner is hoisted up upon the mountains, and when the Shofar sounds you will hear.”* [Isaiah 18:3]

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<sup>386</sup> Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 111

No apocalyptic text can ignore the dead. Ezekiel's iconic prophecy that speaks of the concept of the resuscitation of the dead, a victory of God's will over death itself, over the course of nature, for the deliverance of Israel [Ezekiel 37:1-14]. The Paytan alludes to this individual physical resuscitation promised by the prophet, and to the national reconstitution in Israel during the messianic end of time. God can hear the still voice of the heart [Job 4:16], and the cries of a broken heart of each person, and He will sound the horn of vengeance to the nations [Jeremiah 51:27] so His People will once again rejoice in Him, both the living and the revived, as individuals and as a reconstituted nation, for all to marvel in awe at the equally super-natural feats.

21     Doubt shall be cleaved from the heart,  
       Lest it divert us,  
       Lest our ears be blocked  
       To the sound of Your Voice

21B    Answer me, as You did in the past,  
       So that I will be able to fulfil the Law You bequeathed us  
       Which, at Sinai made me shudder,  
       Before the flames and Your Voice.

As it is written in Your Torah: *"The entire people saw the thunder and the flames, the sound of the Shofar and the smoking mountain; the people saw and trembled and stood from afar."* [Exodus 20:15]

Being led astray by wanton desire and unwise temptations, the People have come to doubt the verity of prophecies. Their present conditions appear to be anathema to the promise of a world in balance, where in the righteous prosper and the iniquitous suffer. Seeds of doubt may have germinated in the hearts of many given the apparent upside-down-ness of this model evident in their lives. Yosse ben Yosse here prays that such meanderings of the heart be stopped with God's mercy and with the community's resolution to listen, to hear, to hark the sound of the Shofar, the sound of the Torah and God's Law. He expresses the communal hope that God will return His illumination to

Israel, that the heritage of Judaic Law be continued from generation to generation, for all time with God's help and sustenance, and that individuals and the nation entire will be reminded of the awe with which they beheld God's countenance at Sinai, as a way of carrying this awe in their hearts through their journey through history toward their predestined salvation.

22     He, who derives perspicacity,  
       Is a wise and praiseworthy man,  
       He, who composed songs of splendoured praise,  
       And sings them with his Voice

22B    All will give adoration,  
       And let everyone hear,  
       While, unto God the Almighty,  
       They sweeten their Voice.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *"Halleluiah. Praise God in His Sanctuary, praise Him in the firmament of His power. Praise Him for His mighty acts, praise Him as befits His abundant greatness. Praise Him with the blast of the Shofar, praise Him with lyre and harp. Praise Him with drum and dance, praise Him with organ and flute. Praise Him with clanging cymbals, praise Him with resonant trumpets. Let all souls praise God, Halleluiah."* [Psalms 150:1-6]

Yosse ben Yosse is reaching a crescendo of sound and images in his Piyyut toward its conclusion with the quadruple repetition of א, the last letter in his acrostic composition, offering an emphatic end to the recitation of this Piyyut. The tension seems to mount in the very stylistic cap of this poem and its auditory tenor. *"Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that obtaineth understanding"* [Proverbs 3:13], happy are those who will heed the word of God and His signposts on the historic march to redemption. David, Solomon and the Messiah yet to come are described in scriptures as men who sought God's wisdom,<sup>387</sup> and Yosse ben Yosse invokes them as the luminous milestones in Israel's march through time and history. Much as David and Solomon dedicated their poetry and prose to God, so should Israel henceforth and for ever,

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<sup>387</sup> Midrash Psalms [119:16], cited in: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 112

dedicate their creations, both material and spiritual, to God.<sup>388</sup> Praise God and remember His grace, remember that He walks with you in your exile, that He never abandoned His People and never again will, and that He promised redemption and it will come to pass in the time and manner He will decree.

23     The Children of Zion prevailed,  
       And the people of Greece did succumb,  
       As You flashed Your bolts of lightning,  
       And You stunned them with Your Voice

23B    Do please daze my oppressors,  
       And sound once again Your Shofar,  
       To sweep, like a thundering storm, the southern nations all,  
       With naught but Your Voice.

The mighty Greece was vanquished, the many laid to waste by the few with whom God fought [Zechariah 9:13-14]. Stunned by the might of God, the empire retreated and Israel prevailed. This, says Yosse ben Yosse, will happen again. Our current oppressors, he tells the community, are now a mighty empire. But soon, like all those empires that rose and fell before them, they too shall collapse because God will fight for and with His People.<sup>389</sup> God's divine armies will sweep the oppressors like a storm, as the congregation recites the concluding verse of the Piyyut.

As it is written by Your Prophets: *"God will appear to them and His arrow will go forth like the lightning, and God the Lord will blow with a Shofar and go forth in southern tempests. God, Lord of Legions, will protect them.."* [Zechariah 10:14-15]

The Piyyut ends, fittingly, with the verse from Zechariah invoking sound of the Shofar and the trumpets that herald salvation. One can well imagine a real Shofar blowing in the synagogue as the full effect of the Piyyut is made whole and as the

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<sup>388</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], p. 112

<sup>389</sup> Genesis Rabbah [56:9], cited by: Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], p. 112

congregation departs to mull the Paytan's words and etch them upon their hearts until the end of time and the fulfillment of the promised redemption.

## Chapter 7: The Social Function of Piyyutic Literature

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) wrote about the centrality of society, and of social structures and institutions, in understanding human thought and behaviour.<sup>390</sup> The social dimension of religious life was the prism through which Durkheim refracted his analysis of the artefacts created and shaped by various societies, such as laws, moral codes, ethics, family, labour, creation, personality, society, art, and religion. In other words, Durkheim saw greater significance in the social environment than that which may be ascribed to individuals, because according to Durkheim, individuals are not solitary actors but are members of social structures which imbue their thoughts and deeds, indeed their existence, with meaning.<sup>391</sup> Individuals, born as they are into groups (family, clan, tribe, nations) are shaped and buffeted by the language, habits, faith, and the normative behaviour codes of their kin. These influences are codified in a virtual social contract that is enforced by the vested interest the community has in the maintenance of these contracts. The contractual dynamic between individuals and groups endows the members of the group with a sense of social solidarity with their community. This gives individuals a sense of membership in a group, for the social contract embodies their moral obligations and creates, especially in ancient societies, a broad collective conscience that is inseparable from religion.

Durkheim studied the sociology of religion, focusing on its centrality in human affairs and its significant contribution to the lives of individuals and groups. Society, which for Durkheim was an object itself, represented the accumulated body of facts (such

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<sup>390</sup> Daniel Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, pp. 85-117

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91

as language, laws, customs, ideas, and traditions) that are interconnected and external to the individual. They predate the individual's birth, they survive his or her demise, and they are imposed on the individual upon birth, moulding individuality and animating the person. It is imperative therefore to note that all behaviour is contextual and that normative behaviour is neither coded nor determined by external forces. Behaviour is shaped internally, within the group and within its individual members.

Piyyutic liturgy is a social institution, a creature of Jewish communities that date back three millennia. The social function of this literary and religious artefact may be understood through the role Jewish society coded for the Paytan. For the ancients there was no real distinction between the natural and the supernatural worlds, or rather between the profane and the sacred realms. For them, the profane described practical quotidian life, and the sacred reigned from above, superior and apart. There were few mechanisms for contact between humans and their gods, who deserved great respect because of their ability to regulate and impact materially the lives of people in the profane realm. Religion and religious practice presented a uniform system of belief and practices that united individuals into a single moral community, which was the central and most important social institution for all adherents to its directives. Since the sacred reality was believed to embody a deep concern for the interests and welfare of the entire group, religious rituals were significantly important whenever group concerns were foremost in the mind of community members. Religious practices bound individuals within the group with deep abiding loyalty.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>392</sup> Daniel Pals, Eight Theories of Religion, pp. 91-100

Prayer was, for the post-destruction Jewish communities in Palestine and beyond, the proverbial social glue that bound individuals to their local community, and their community to the larger social structure- the Nation of Israel. Devotion to God was the normative vehicle for expressing devotion to the Nation. Committed persons, such as Yosse ben Yosse in our case, were the engines that drove group consciousness forward toward the greater goal. Through rites and ceremonies, through prayer and song, individuals' commitment to the Nation was sealed. In communal prayer, the profane self is subsumed in the higher order of sacred togetherness. Indeed, it may be stated, with the full expectation of some readers' ire, that Jewish prayer is the worship of Jewish society itself, rather than worship of God. God becomes a totemic present, rendering the group, or the Nation of Israel, the real and concrete institution that influences every aspect of Jewish life, and which is fixed, permanent, and inspirational.<sup>393</sup>

Reading the poetry of Yosse ben Yosse in this light, I gradually came to understand his Biblical allusions and ritualized verse, as emotional and ceremonial religious artefacts that, even as they were reserved for worship in specific sacred loci, were at the core of communal life. The poems promoted a sacralised affiliation with the National consciousness of Israel. The social function of the Piyyutim under investigation here was to make people feel that they were part of the Nation of Israel, despite the post-destruction dispersal of the People and the loss of sovereignty. Religious rituals, such as communal prayers, of which Piyyutim were part, provided occasions for individuals to renew their commitment to the group, serving as a reminder that each person depends on the group, and that the group depends on each and every individual for its sustenance.

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<sup>393</sup> Daniel Pals, Eight Theories of Religion, p. 101

Prayer intimates that the Nation matters more than the individual self, and persons are called to act in specific “contractual” ways in order to maintain this link and fortify it. This is especially relevant and pertinent when one examines piacular<sup>394</sup> mourning rituals of mourning in the immediate post-destruction period.

On the eve of Tishah-b’Av, the boy sat with Hershel in the first row of the synagogue. The Holy Art was draped in black while the village mourned for the destruction of the Holy Temple. They mourned their old losses, and they grieved because there was typhus in the village.<sup>395</sup>

Tragedy, it was believed, befell the Nation because, through divine retribution, they had sinned. Atonement for those sins, therefore, was the means through which the present trials and tribulations suffered by the people may be reversed, through divine grace and forgiveness. Prayerful repentance required formal gestures and had to be performed by the entire group, making the group a distinctive social organ akin to the family and as powerful as the family.

We workers lament on the Day of Atonement not because we are Jews but because we are workers. The factory owners have their own God. **Our God is unity.** This is what we mean when we recite the morning prayer: ‘Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one’.<sup>396</sup>

The Yosse ben Yosse Piyyutim often speak of atonement. They give voice to the plight of many individuals who mourned the loss of the Temple, the loss of Jewish sovereignty, and the loss of a religious core. Prayer turned the individuals in the synagogue into a cohesive group of mourners, whose personal tragedies were the single stones that made up the larger mosaic of Jewish history.<sup>397</sup> Employing Durkheim’s methodological assay, we can explain the need of individual worshippers in the 5<sup>th</sup> century to be comforted by the notion of their National affiliation, and by the Biblical

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<sup>394</sup> The word PIACULAR means: making expiation for a sacrilege, or something requiring expiation

<sup>395</sup> Lilian Nattel, *The River Midnight*, p. 57

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123 (my own emphasis)

<sup>397</sup> Daniel Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, p. 106

promise that this Nation will, in time, be restored. Yosse ben Yosse is a voice that constantly calls on members of Jewish society to think first of the collective before thinking of their personal woes. He urges individuals in the community to sense the Nation's cosmic importance and to feel its power, even to sacrifice personal pleasure for the sake of the group's enduring wellbeing and longevity so that it, and therefore the individual persons within, will be saved by God as prophesied.

The purpose of prayer in general and of Piyyutim within the larger category, is therefore social. The Piyyutim are carriers of social sentiments. Their symbols express the deep emotions which anchor and bind individual Jews to the Nation of Israel itself. Whereas some Piyyutim and prayers have been marginalized over the millennia, due to the ebb and flow of cultural styles and preferences,<sup>398</sup> the ritual of prayer remained constant because the social function of prayer remained constant. Prayer still animates Jewish religious life, expressing the eternal Jewish anticipation of messianic deliverance.<sup>399</sup> While it is important to focus on the content of Yosse ben Yosse's Piyyutim and to decipher their Biblical allusions and Midrashic references, it is imperative, I think, that the social function of these Piyyutim be the subject of functionalist analysis, not only of the Piyyutim's claims about the world, but for determining what prayer in general and Piyyutim in particular do for those who live with and by them. Society can neither exist nor survive in the absence of rituals. Religion persists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because of its ability to bridge the divide between the natural and the supernatural worlds in meaningful ways. Similarly, the 5<sup>th</sup> century rites, of which Piyyutic liturgy was a significant fixture, ought to be understood as social artefacts that

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<sup>398</sup> R. Adin Steinzaltz, *The Siddur and Prayer* [Hebrew], pp. 115-116

<sup>399</sup> Daniel Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, p. 110

are able to bridge the divide between the experiential world of exile and disempowerment, and the supernatural world where God reigns and where His grace may grant the People absolution, deliverance, and redemption. Religion is the expression of social needs, according to Durkheim, and even though his functionalist approach may seem somewhat reductionist, I think it offers a novel and important way of reading Yosse ben Yosse. More rigorous examination of the function of prayer in view of Durkheim's functionalist approach is still required, and it will, I am certain, materially contribute to our understanding of Jewish prayer as a social institution, and to our appreciation of its contribution to the edifice of Judaism.

It must be stated, however, that functionality cannot be equated with causality. The function of religious rituals pertains to the social reasons for the group; causes of religious rituals that inflect the performance thereof, refers to individual variations on the larger theme. Often individuals are unaware of the social function and purpose of rituals, concerned as individuals are with their own beliefs and feelings. Scholars must however rise above sentimentality and investigate the social function of rituals as social artefacts, for their service of group interests. Prayer and Piyutic liturgy can be understood as intermediary forces that exert powerful influence on individuals within these persons' moral and religious community.

Of course, no religion can be pried away from the individuals who experience the collectivity of their moral community. The function of religious rituals is not constant, as it mutates according to the changing social concerns of the individuals and of the group itself. Each period in history, every culture and every community, impact the variations of functionality, but they do not impact functionality as a significant factor. Religious

symbols and rituals are both contagious and porous. They draw inspiration from the effervescent and ever changing environment, they draw in the individual interiority, sweeping people up in their ability to sanctify the quotidian and give it meaning. Worshippers, it must be understood, are not deluded by the unseen functionality of prayer, because they derive real power from their social affiliation that is cemented through prayer. Participants in prayerful rituals feel bound to their group, sensing an ineffable link to their fellow kin, to their community, and to their Nation through the dynamic acting out of religious sentiments. The birthplace of individual and communal identity is linked to the religious experience and has over time proven to be a mobilizing factor for ethnic societies.<sup>400</sup>

The difference between prayer and Piyyut has remained constant from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Prayer was and still is a religious obligation,<sup>401</sup> whereas Piyyut is an option, seen as an ornament and an embellishment of prayer. Furthermore, prayer has become over time more or less canonized, whereas local specificity of Piyyutic styles often rendered the poetry exclusive to one community and not transferable to others. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the cantor at a given synagogue may choose to recite certain Piyyutim and ignore others, depending on the preferred style and tastes of his congregation. Ancient prayer books and Geniza documents have yet to be mined more exhaustively for their Piyyutic treasures which may reveal the great variability of Jewish prayer in the process of its evolution.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> Daniel Pals, Eight Theories of Religion, pp. 113-114

<sup>401</sup> Such as the prayer said after a meal ברכת המזון for instance. See: Yehuda Ratzaby, Texts and Studies in Oriental Liturgical Poetry [Hebrew], p. 87

<sup>402</sup> Yehuda Ratzaby, Texts and Studies in Oriental Liturgical Poetry [Hebrew], p. 13

Rabbinical Judaism links the practice of rituals to Biblical texts for authority, even as it tolerates some innovation. The 5<sup>th</sup> century was a formative period for Rabbinic Judaism and its codification of prayers and festivals on the basis of Tannaitic and Amoraic learning.<sup>403</sup> A Paytan, such as Yosse ben Yosse, was part of the rabbinic establishment, as I will later explain, and he was seen to be labouring under God's light rather than as a poet mining his own heart and personal experience for inspiration. There was a prophetic element to the charismatic figure of the Paytan, as Moshe ben Yaakov Even Ezra so eloquently said in his "ספר יצירה":<sup>404</sup>

יש שהנביא יהיה שליח, כגון משה וישעיהו וירמיהו ואחרים, ויש שיהיה נביא, לא שליח, כגון אברהם ויצחק ויעקב. הרי שכל שליח נביא גם אם לא כל נביא שליח. ושם המשורר בלשונו נביא וקוסם ונביא אצטגנין ומשורר...

The poet was regarded in the Ga'onic period and possibly prior to that as well, as part prophet, for his articulation of God's directives to the People. Like the prophet, a Paytan loved his People and even in his most caustic critique of the People's sin, he felt his role was to be a messenger whose job it was to heal society<sup>405</sup> and not stand by and watch it fall. In the popular imagination, such an emissary as the prophet or the poet, was a carrier of God's message:

A dream is a letter from God. It says so in the Talmud. It would be a terrible thing not to open a letter from God.<sup>406</sup>

Isaiah, who believed in the People's future, brought prophecies of reconstitution and consolation on the heel of his recriminations. Amos brought prophecies of social reform. Jeremiah foresaw both the doom of Israel and its national reconstitution which

<sup>403</sup> Joseph Tabory: "Jewish Festivals in Late Antiquity", in: Steven Katz (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, pp. 556-570

<sup>404</sup> Avraham S. Halkin (ed.), *Moshe ben Yaakov Even Ezra: Discussion on Hebrew Poetry* [Hebrew], p. 25

<sup>405</sup> Binyamin Lau, *Jeremiah* [Hebrew], p. 20

<sup>406</sup> Lilian Nattel, *The River Midnight*, p. 163

depended on social reform.<sup>407</sup> Rarely however was there a prophet who succeeded in correcting the social order or in breaking through to the consciousness of individuals. Prophets were usually reviled for their criticism of the religious, political, and social status quo, and they were pushed to the outer edges of society.<sup>408</sup> As publicists, however, their words have retained relevance for generations upon generations who studied these words to extract meaning pertaining to each generation's contemporary situation. The Paytan, drawing on these words, strove to return Jewish culture to the centre stage of his community's life. His poetry reinvigorated the present and attempted to awaken the People to be faithful to God and thereby to the Nation as a social ideal.

In the pivotal 5<sup>th</sup> century, there were no more prophets in Israel. The *zeitgeist* of 5<sup>th</sup> century Palestine, with the People of Israel dispersed, disempowered, and lorded over in what was hitherto their own land, was a *zeitgeist* of unrelenting cultural assaults on the Jewish community.<sup>409</sup> The ambient environment was saturated with religious and aesthetic attractions, threatening the social institution of the Jewish Nation. The Paytan remained as an important messenger to the People of God's words which were originally delivered by the prophets. Braced by his knowledge of Biblical and rabbinic sources, the Paytan was a messenger not of God but of Rabbinic Judaism itself, whose social function was to preserve the National unit through ensuring the loyalty of individual Jewish faithful. In his unique *sitz im Leben* position, the Paytan was able to both articulate the diagnosis of the national crisis as a product of sin,<sup>410</sup> and to encourage the People that redemption as promised will come when they mend their ways and when God's anger is

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<sup>407</sup> Binyamin Lau, *Jeremiah* [Hebrew], pp. 21-24

<sup>408</sup> Jeremiah 20:7-10 See also: Binyamin Lau, *Jeremiah* [Hebrew], p. 40

<sup>409</sup> Binyamin Lau, *Jeremiah* [Hebrew], p. 59

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96 citing the Ta'anit Tractate in the Babylonian Talmud 22:2

sated. His goal was to encourage the People and strengthen their adherence to their national identity, by promising them that their deeds and faithfulness will help remove the yoke of foreign rule and lead them toward national reconstitution.

If Mirsky is correct in his assertion that Yosse ben Yosse was a Kohen,<sup>411</sup> then this particular Paytan saw himself as an agent of preservation of Temple rites in their new textualized garb, but also as a Kohen-teacher, a person mandated by God to travel the land and teach the People God's Torah.<sup>412</sup> Let us illustrate this through a Biblical example. The narrator of Genesis describes Joseph's agrarian policy in Pharaoh's Egypt: "*Joseph acquired all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh... Only the land of the priests he did not buy*" [Genesis 47: 20-22]. The Midrash by Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky adds that: "Joseph prophetically established a precedent that would later benefit Israel... By giving a privileged status to the clergy... (he) made it possible for the tribe of Levi, the Jewish "clerics" to be exempt... so that there would be a strong nucleus of people who kept alive the teachings of the Patriarch".<sup>413</sup> For generations untold, the Kohanim regarded themselves as keepers of the faith, and as educators, even mentors to the People of Israel. If indeed Yosse ben Yosse was a Kohen, it is a plausible assumption that he was heir to that self-perception and that he regarded his Piyyutic/didactic mission in terms of the religious obligation he had inherited.

In his commentary to Genesis 47:22, Yosse ben Yosse taught through his Piyyutic verse the lessons he deemed most important at the time, basing his words on Scripture and repackaging them for the benefit of his contemporaries. Bear in mind that what is

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<sup>411</sup> Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poetry [Hebrew], p. 15

<sup>412</sup> Deuteronomy 33:10

<sup>413</sup> ArtScroll Chumash, Genesis 47:20-22 commentary citing Rabbi Kamenetzky [Note: I was unable to find the original source for the quoted Midrash cited in the ArtScroll Chumash].

clear to a 21<sup>st</sup> century Jew may not have been necessarily as clear or obvious to a 5<sup>th</sup> century Jew for a variety of complex reasons.<sup>414</sup> Yosse ben Yosse, using the words of prophets, urged the congregations in the Galilee to restore their faith in God, to maintain their national identity and their language despite the cultural assault wrought by Byzantine society, and to maintain hope in a messianic deliverance that was sure to come.<sup>415</sup> *“And it shall come to pass in that day, saith the LORD of hosts, that I will break his yoke from off thy neck, and will burst thy bands; and strangers shall no more make him their bondman... Therefore fear thou not, O Jacob My servant, saith the LORD; neither be dismayed, O Israel; for, lo, I will save thee from afar, and thy seed from the land of their captivity; and Jacob shall again be quiet and at ease, and none shall make him afraid. For I am with thee, saith the LORD, to save thee; for I will make a full end of all the nations whither I have scattered thee, but I will not make a full end of thee; for I will correct thee in measure, and will not utterly destroy thee”* [Jeremiah 30:8-11].

The principle laid out in Leviticus [26:3-4] connecting faith in God and the fulfillment of His Law to the experience of bounty retained its didactic power for the people through the centuries:

Where should I find offense, who should I blame? My mother?... The angels...? No, they fulfilled their roles. It's me. Only me. It is God's will that I should have empty arms because of my many sins. I turn to You my creator, with my hot tears. Deliver me from the harsh decree and shelter me under Your wings.<sup>416</sup>

The Paytan saw himself as a transmitter of God's directives, promises and warnings, to the People, as he endeavoured to help them correct the tide of history in their favour.<sup>417</sup> As a Kohen, Yosse ben Yosse helped preserve the sacrificial cult through his

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<sup>414</sup> Binyamin Lau, *Jeremiah* [Hebrew], p. 37

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60

<sup>416</sup> Lilian Nattel, *The River Midnight*, p. 42

<sup>417</sup> Binyamin Lau, *Jeremiah* [Hebrew], p. 116

Piyyutim, but his main concern was to reach and touch the hearts of men and women and to teach them both the prophets' warnings and their consolations. Operating within the realm of reality, the Paytan had to explain God's involvement in this reality, and to illuminate the consequences of human choice as materially significant to the fate of the Nation: "*The LORD is righteous; for I have rebelled against His word; hear, I pray you, all ye peoples, and behold my pain: my virgins and my young men are gone into captivity*" [Lamentations 1:18]. His message remained the same as the prophets' message, reiterating the idea that reality is a reflection and the embodiment of God's will on earth.<sup>418</sup> As a teacher, buttressed by rabbinic learning, Yosse ben Yosse regarded himself as an intermediary<sup>419</sup> between heaven and earth, whose mission was to preserve the Nation as a distinctive social entity by urging the members of this social group to maintain their rituals of prayer and observance as markers of their social religious identity, and as the means for their own personal redemption.

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<sup>418</sup> Binyamin Lau, *Jeremiah* [Hebrew], pp. 122-141

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 116-117

Piyyut 7:<sup>420</sup> אפחד במעשי

אֶפְחַד בְּמַעֲשֵׁי אֶדְאָג בְּכָל־עַת  
אִירָא בְּיוֹם דִּין בְּבוֹאֵי לְזִכְרוֹן.

אֶדְרוֹשׁ לְחַנּוּן אֶחְלֶה לְרַחוּם  
אֶחַנּוּן לְחַק לִי יוֹם לְזִכְרוֹן.

בְּבוֹאֵי לְמִשְׁפָּט בְּמִי אֶשְׁעֶן?  
וּמִי יַחֲפֹשׂ־לִי צַדִּיק לְזִכְרוֹן?

בְּאֲמוֹת בְּטַחְתִּי וּפְעָלָם אֶכְלָתִי  
הֵם הָיוּ לִי קִדְּם לְזִכְרוֹן.

גְּבִרָה זְרוּעֵי כְּשָׁח: מְחִינֵי נָא,  
לְבַל יִמַּח מְנִי שֵׁם זִכְרוֹת

גְּבַר אִם יַעֲמוּד לְפָנָיו הַיּוֹעִיל  
בְּעַת יְבוֹקֵשׁ מְנִי זְכוֹת לְזִכְרוֹן.

דְּצַתִּי בְּלוּבֵשׁ אֶסוּד וְחוֹשֵׁן הַמִּשְׁפָּט  
אֲשֶׁר בָּם הַיּוֹחֵק שְׁמִי לְזִכְרוֹן

דִּלְג בְּמַחְתָּה עַד יוֹעֲצֵר גִּיף  
בְּגִשְׁת זֶר מְכַחֵן יִקְוֶה לְזִכְרוֹן.

<sup>420</sup> The Hebrew text is copied from: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], 1991 Edition, pp. 101-109

## I AM IN DREAD BECAUSE OF MY DEEDS

- 1 I am in dread because of my deeds,  
I am troubled all the time,  
I tremble in fear of the Day of Judgment  
When I confront Remembrance.
- 1B I supplicate before the Compassionate One,  
I pray to the Merciful One,  
I implore the One, who hath mandated for me  
A Day of Remembrance.
- 2 When I appear at Court  
Who shall I lean on?  
And who shall seek for me  
Justice on the Day of Remembrance?
- 2B I had faith in our forefathers,  
And I have benefited from their good deeds,  
They have stood by me and protected me,  
In the past of Remembrance.
- 3 I became strong  
As if to say: Expunge me,  
Lest there be erased from my heart  
Thy name and Your Remembrance
- 3B A mere man, should he stand  
Before Him, will he be effective,  
When I am asked if I have any  
Merit for Remembrance.
- 4 I rejoiced in the High Priest and his vestments  
And in his Breastplate of judgment,  
In which there were etched  
My people's name for all Remembrance

בְּעוֹמְדֵי לְפָנֶיךָ	הַבֵּיטָה אֶל	5
תּוֹי לְזִכְרוֹן	אֵין בְּקֶרְבִי אָנוּשׁ	
וְיָשִׁיב חִימָה	הַיֵּשׁ מִי יִפְלֹל	
שְׁמוֹ לְזִכְרוֹן.	וַיַּחַק לְדוֹרוֹת	
יְדַבֵּר: עֲנוּ בִי,	וּמִי שׁוֹנֵא בְּצַע	6
אֲדוֹן לְזִכְרוֹן	וַיַּעַן וַיֹּאמֶר: עַד	
יִכְפַּר בְּעַדֵינוּ	וּבִטְלַת חֶלֶב	
יַעַל לְזִכְרוֹן.	וּכְנֶגֶד שְׁנֵי עֶפְרַיִם	
תְּהִי יָדְךָ בִּי,	זַעֲף וַיֵּרָא, וַיֹּאמֶר:	7
חָשׁוּב לְזִכְרוֹן	אֲשֶׁר כָּלֵב אֱלֹהִיו	
חָרַב אֶל גְּדוּהָ	זַעַק וְהָשִׁיב	
כֶּסֶל לְזִכְרוֹן.	וְהִגִּישָׁתָּ לּוֹ כִּשְׁמֶשׁ	
לְסוֹתַח וּמִמָּטִיר	חֲכִיתִי בְּעַת עֶצֶר	8
אֲבוֹד מִזְכְּרוֹן	כְּמֹשִׁיב רוּחַ לַיֵּלֶד	
בְּדַבְּרוֹ: קָנֹאתִי,	חִי לְרֵאוֹת בְּרִית	
בְּרִית לְזִכְרוֹן.	כִּי עֲזָבוּ עָם	

- 4B He hurried to take the fire-pan  
Until the contagion was arrested,  
When an un-consecrated man approached Him  
And was set ablaze for all Remembrance.
- 5 Gaze upon me, God,  
As I stand before Thee,  
I am not as righteous a man  
Whose deeds deserve Remembrance
- 5B Will a Phineas rise and intercede on my behalf  
To avert the fury  
And seal a pact for all generations  
In His name for all Remembrance.
- 6 And who disdains all lucre,  
And who can say: I stand as a witness,  
And could even add: My witness  
Is the Lord, in His Remembrance
- 6B Who could, with a suckling lamb,  
Atone for us,  
And who, for the merit of the Two Fawns  
Could advocate for us favourably in Remembrance.
- 7 Who among us can witness His fury and can say:  
Punish me in their stead,  
A man who is favoured by God  
And can be effective at the time of Remembrance
- 7B He who called out to God, and returned  
His sword into its sheath,  
Was placed on a sun-like glowing  
Throne for Remembrance.
- 8 I waited during the draught  
For Him, who can open the clouds and bring rain,  
As a child awaits resuscitation,  
Lest he be lost from Remembrance

9 טָרַם הָיָה לִי מִנְחָה הוֹלֵכֶת  
מְכַסֵּר פָּנִים פִּשְׁוֹחַד לְזִכְרוֹן

טָרַף גֵּרָד וְסָמִים דָּם וְחֵלֶב לְנִיחַח  
לְמִיֶּסֶב חֲדָרָיו וְלַחֵם לְזִכְרוֹן.

10 יוֹצֵגְתִּי עַל כִּי לֹא אֶלְמָן  
גָּחֲלִי רִיקָה שְׁתִּי לְזִכְרוֹן

יָה אֶבְטַח בָּךְ כִּי הֵם בְּקִבְר  
וְלֹא בְּגִדִיכִים וְלִגְצַח שְׁמֶךָ לְזִכְרוֹן.

11 כָּל אֱלֹהֵי סְמִכוֹנִי לִדְלִי הֵם תִּמְתִּי  
וְרַחֲמֶיךָ בְּקִשְׁתִּי וְאֵינִי לְזִכְרוֹן

כִּי הֵם בְּזִרוּעַ רוּמְמַתֶּיךָ בְּסִיָּהֶם  
עָדֶיךָ לֹא בָאוּ שְׁמוֹ לְזִכְרוֹן.

12 לְיוֹם זֶה נִכְמָס תַּחֲלָה לְיָמִים  
סָכַם חֲשִׁבוֹנוֹת וְרֹאשׁ לְזִכְרוֹן

לְהִיקְרָא בּוֹ גְלוֹי וּבְאֵר  
כָּתַב עֵיט וְשָׁמִיר וַיְדוּעַ לְזִכְרוֹן.

- 8B He lives forever to see the Covenant fulfilled,  
And he says: I have acted in great zeal,  
But the people have forsaken  
The Covenant of Remembrance.
- 9 I used to have a priest  
To atone for my sins,  
With a burned offering,  
To mitigate the wrath of Remembrance
- 9B With a mixture of herbs and aromatics  
For Him, who dwells in His abode,  
Blood and fat for the fragrance,  
And bread for Remembrance.
- 10 I now represent myself  
On a bed of cold embers,  
Because Israel is not widowed from its God  
And I am committed to Remembrance
- 10B God, I trust in You  
And not in nobles,  
For they are mortal [lie in their graves],  
And Your Name lives for all eternity in Remembrance.
- 11 All the righteous of Israel supported me,  
And I have begged for Your mercy,  
Without them I would have perished  
And would not be part of Remembrance
- 11B For they did not lay claim to their merit  
And they did not return unto You,  
But they came with praises for You in their mouths  
Which they cherish in Remembrance.
- 12 It is for this day that was preserved  
The sum of all deeds' reckonings,  
For the Beginning of all days,  
Each person is part of Remembrance

13 מוֹת וְחַיִּים צַחְצָחוֹת וְשׁוֹבַע  
שְׁלוֹם וּמְלַחֶמֶת בָּאוּ לְזִכְרוֹן

מַעֲלֵי גִבּוֹר וּמְסַפְּרֵי צַעֲדָיו  
וְשִׁכְחוּ מֵאֲנוּשׁ וְלֹא לְזִכְרוֹן.

14 נִסְתָּרָה דְרָכָי, מִי יוֹכַל שִׁיחַ,  
לְשׂוֹא נִכְתָּב לִי חֶטָּא לְזִכְרוֹן

נֶגֶד פְּנֵי גִבּוֹר מַעֲשֵׂיו יוֹכִיחוּ  
וַיַּעֲנֶה כַחֲשׂוֹ עַד לְזִכְרוֹן.

15 שִׁיחוּ מְוִימוֹת אֵל יַחַד כָּל בְּנֵי אִישׁ  
עוֹבְרֵי תַחַת שֶׁבֶט כְּצֹאן לְזִכְרוֹן

סוּגְרֵי דָלֶת בְּעַד תְּמִימִים בְּזַעַם  
עַד בּוֹא קִיּוֹץ צֵאת לְזִכְרוֹן.

ככת' בתו' ויזכור אלהים את נח ואת כל החיה ואת כל הבהמה אשר אתו בתכה  
ויעבר אלהים רוח על הארץ וישכו המים.

16 עֲשֵׂה פְלֵא לְחַיִּים לְבַל יְהוּ כַמְתִּים  
הַיֵּשׁ אֲמַתִּיךָ בְּקִבְרֵי לְזִכְרוֹן

עוֹרְרָתָה אֲזוּ בְּפוֹעֵל עוֹרְרָנִי בְּלֹא פוֹעֵל  
הֲלֹא לְנִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ תַעֲשֵׂ לְזִכְרוֹן.

ככת' בד' ק' זכר עשה לנפלאותיו חנון ורחום יי.

- 12B To be read,  
As upon it the sins were inscribed with an iron pen,  
To be unveiled and revealed,  
And known in Remembrance.
- 13 Death and life,  
Peace and war,  
In satiation and in plenty,  
Always brought up in Remembrance
- 13B The deeds of a man,  
And the measure of his steps,  
Are forgotten by humans,  
But are part of God's Remembrance.
- 14 My path had deviated,  
Who could recount,  
It is for naught that my deeds were recorded,  
My sins writ for Remembrance
- 14B A man will be faced  
With his deeds as proof,  
And much as he try to deny,  
His deeds are witnesses in Remembrance.
- 15 Declare the cogitations of God,  
All humanity as one,  
All who pass under His staff,  
As sheep before the shepherd for Remembrance
- 15B He, who seals the door  
For the innocent during times of affliction and fury,  
Until the wrath ebbs  
And they can emerge back in Remembrance.

As it is written in Your Torah: *"God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the animals that were with him in the Ark, and God caused a spirit to pass over the earth, and the waters subsided."* [Genesis 8:1]

17 פָּנֵה אֱלֹהִים בְּיֹשְׁבֵי גֵיִם

מִקְשִׁיב לְנֹד בְּרִי בְּדַת לְזִכְרוֹן

פַּעֲלָם לְפָנֶיךָ וּשְׁכָרָם אֶתְךָ

אֲכָלִי לֶחֶם הָעֲצָבִים בְּסִפּוֹר וּזְכוֹן.

ככת' עי'נ' או נדברו יראי יי איש אל רעהו ויקשב יי וישמע ויכתב בספר זכרון ליראי יי ולחושבי שמו.

18 צָצוּ שׁוֹעָלִים מִתְּבָלִים כְּרָמִים

לְהַכְרִית מִנֶּפֶן שׁוֹרֵשׁ חֲכָרוֹן

צָרְרוּם בְּפָרְךָ נֶאֱקוּ וְנֹשְׁעוּ

בְּכֹשֶׁר הַרְרֵי קָדָם הוֹחֵק לְזִכְרוֹן.

ככת' בתו' וישמע אלהים את נאקתם ויזכר אלהים את בריתו את אברהם את יצחק ואת יעקב.

19 קָדָם בְּנִתָּה לְדוֹרוֹת וְאֵין בָּהֶם חֶסֶךְ

חֵילִפְתָּם וְאֵיבַדְתָּם מִתְּיוֹת לְזִכְרוֹן

קָחְתָּה דוֹר מֵאֶלְךָ אֲמַרְיָה הַגְּזֵלְתָם

לְמַעַנִם בְּכָל דוֹר חָקְתָה לְזִכְרוֹן.

ככת' בד' קד' זכר לעולם בריתו דבר צוה לאלף דור.

16      Work Your miracle and judge us to life,  
          Lest we be considered dead,  
          For will Your truth be told  
          In tombs, will there be Remembrance

16B     You once arose to redeem us with Your might  
          Please redeem us again, even though we are not worthy,  
          Not for our sake but for Your glory,  
          Your great wonders for all Remembrance.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *“He made a memorial for His wonders, Gracious and Compassionate is God.”* [Psalms 111:4]

17      Fix Your eyes, God,  
          Upon those who dwell in your Gardens of Torah,  
          Hark to those who speak  
          Of your Law in rapt Remembrance

17B     Their deeds are before You,  
          And their reward is from You,  
          Those who eek out their meagre living,  
          And who are written before you in Remembrance.

As it is written by Your Prophets: *“Then those who fear God spoke to one another, and God listened and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear God and those who give thought to His Name.”* [Malachi 3:16]

18      There appeared feral foxes,  
          Who spoiled the vineyards,  
          To cut off from the vine of the nation  
          The root of Remembrance

18B     They oppressed the people with hard labour,  
          And the people cried out and were saved,  
          For the mountains of merit earned by their forefathers,  
          Whose deeds were etched into Remembrance.

As it is written in Your Torah: *“God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.”* [Exodus 2:24]

רָם תִּשְׁקֵם מְאֹד      בְּכֹלֹת נְעוּרִים  
הֲרוּגִיה וְעֲנִיָּה      בָּאוּ לְזִכְרוֹן

20

רָצָה אַחֲרֶיךָ      בְּנִיא צִיָּה וְצִלְמוֹת  
אֲהַבֵּת כָּל־לֹוֹתֶיהָ      תַּעֲשֵׂ לְזִכְרוֹן.

ככת' עיי' הלוך וקראת באוני ירושלם לאמר כה אמר יי וזכרתי לך חסד  
נעוריך אהבת כלולותייך לכתך אחרי במדבר בארץ לא זרועה.

שִׁיתָתוּ עִם אֵל      שָׂאת שְׂמֵצָה  
שֵׁם פֶּסֶל וְלֹא אֵל      שָׂתוּ לְזִכְרוֹן  
בְּקִמְיָהֶם

21

שׁוֹכְלוּ כְּמַעַט רִנֵּעַ      לֹוִי קָם בְּפָרֶץ  
מְעוֹרָר שְׁבוּעוֹת      בְּרִית זִכְרוֹן.

ככת' בתו' זכור לאברהם ליצחק ולישר' עבדיך אשר נשבעת להם בכ ותדבר  
אליהם ארבה את זרעכם ככוכבי השמים וכל הארץ הזאת אשר אמרתי אתן  
לזרעכם ונחלו לעולם.

תִּיעַבְתָּהּ מְאֹד      עֲדַת כָּל־אוֹמִים  
תִּשְׁקָתֶנּוּ מֵהֶם      עֲדוֹת לְזִכְרוֹן

22

תָּמוּר כְּסָף וְנֶמָס      דוֹר וְשָׁכַח קִחְתָּהּ  
קָנִיעוּ שְׁנִית      כִּי שׁוֹכְתֶנּוּ מִזִּכְרוֹן.

ככת' בד' ק' זכור עדתך קנית קדם גאלת שבט נחלתיך הר ציון זה שכנת בו.

19 Before the world was even created You looked well into the future  
And You found them wanting,  
So You replaced them and effaced them  
From Remembrance

19B You chose the thousandth generation  
And You bequeathed them Your word,  
For their sake and the sake of every generation yet to come,  
Your Law is an eternal legacy of Remembrance.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *“He remembered His covenant forever- the Word He commanded for a thousand generations.”* [Psalms 105:8]

20 The Lofty One desired  
A young bride as His nation,  
Her dead and her poor  
Come forth in Remembrance

20B She hastened to followed You  
In the valley of wilderness and in the shadow of death,  
The love of her betrothal  
Is a monument to Remembrance.

As it is written by Your Prophets: *“Go and call out in the ears of Jerusalem, saying: Thus said God: I recall you the kindness of your youth, the love of your nuptials, your following Me into the Wilderness, into an unsown land.”* [Jeremiah 2:2]

21 The people have become corrupt  
And they bear their disgrace before their foes,  
For they bore the name of a golden statue,  
And did not bear God’s Name in Remembrance

21B In an instant they were all lost,  
But for the one who stood in the breach before Him,  
And reminded Him of His  
Covenant of Remembrance.

As it is written in Your Torah: *“Remember for the sake of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Yourself and You told them, ‘I shall increase your offspring like the stars of heaven, and this entire land of which I spoke, I shall give to your offspring and it shall be their heritage forever.’”* [Exodus 32:13]

תָּרַ אִישׁ תָּם      בְּמִי זָרְעוּ יְכוּנָה  
שָׁכַל יָדָיו      לְאוֹת לְזָכְרוֹן

תִּרְפַּק מְשׁוּל אֶפְרַיִם      בְּשַׁעֲשׂוּעַ יָלֵד  
הֲלֵא בְכוֹרֵי הוּא      חֲקָתָה לְזָכְרוֹן.

ככת' עיי'נ' הבן יקיר לי אפרים אם ילד שעשועים כי מדי דברי בו זכור אזכרנו  
עוד, על כן המו מעי לו רחם ארחמנו גאם יי.

22      You despised the nations from the Beginning,  
          The multitude of peoples,  
          You chose and desired us above them,  
          As a testament to Remembrance

22B     In place of the Israelites of the First Temple  
          You took a forgotten generation,  
          And You betrothed us once more  
          Before we were cast off from all Remembrance.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *“Remember Your congregation, which You acquired long ago, You redeemed the Tribe of Your heritage; the Mountain of Zion, the one where You rested Your Presence.”* [Psalms 74:2]

23      The Wholesome Jacob sought  
          The offspring who will be named for him,  
          He crossed his hands overhead  
          As a sign of Remembrance

24B     Remember with fondness the people who, like Ephraim,  
          Are Your delightful child,  
          For he is my firstborn,  
          As You have mandated for all Remembrance.

As it is written by Your Prophets: *“Is Ephraim My favourite son or a delightful child, that whenever I speak of him I remember him more and more? Therefore My inner self yearns for him, I will surely take pity on him- the Word of God.”* [Jeremiah 31:19]

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## COMMENTARY

This Piyyut may be considered a bridge between the Avodah poetry of Yosse ben Yosse, which is not the main subject of this thesis,<sup>421</sup> and the rousing, more identity forging ontological Piyyutim whose tenor is the focus here. The Avodah services are prayers and Piyyutim recited on Yom Kippur, in which the word of the High Priest at the Temple is repeated in word rather than in deed.<sup>422</sup> The lamentations associated with the loss of the Temple are a prayerful rendition of the sacrificial cult. There are many Avodah texts and they vary between the various Judaic traditions of Ashkenaz, Sefarad, Yemen, and Italy for example. The earliest version recited in French communities in the early Middle Ages,<sup>423</sup> was based on the Yosse ben Yosse Piyyut **אתה כוונת**<sup>424</sup> which was brought over from the Galilee to French shores with the exiles. The Piyyut before us here, **אפקד במעשי**, straddles both genres and is therefore an interesting example of Yosse ben Yosse's dual concern. Through his work, the Paytan seeks to transform the Temple-centred worship which had hitherto dominated Judaic practice, into the rabbinic, post destruction variant of observance, which emphasizes prayer rather than sacrificial rites.

The Avodah service goes back to the early days of the synagogue, to the first few centuries after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. It is an integral part of the lost literature of the ancient synagogue known as *piyyut*. This complex and fascinating poetry was once sung in synagogues in Palestine during the classical age of the Talmuds and Midrash, from the fourth and seventh centuries.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>421</sup> As I had indicated in the introduction to this thesis, my choice of Piyyutim singled out for translation and analysis was guided by the difference between Avodah poetry, with its detailed rendition of the High Priest's service on Yom Kippur, and the remaining poems which deal with more general themes. Those more general poems were more suited for a discussion of the social function of the Piyyut as a genre. Future research must encompass the Avodah poetry as well, if we are to strive for a more complete understanding of Yosse ben Yosse's oeuvre.

<sup>422</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *The Beginnings of Piyyut* [Hebrew], <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/sifrut/maamarim/reshit6-2.htm>

<sup>423</sup> Adin Steinzaltz, *The Siddur and Prayer* [Hebrew], p. 101

<sup>424</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems* [Hebrew], pp. 172-199

<sup>425</sup> Michael Swartz and Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah: An Anthology*, (2004), p. 2

The Jerusalem Temple was the *axis mundi* for Judaic practice and belief. This was the locus of God's Presence, where atonement for sin was made possible through priestly mediation, most importantly during the Yom Kippur service led by the High Priest on behalf of the People entire. The destruction of the Temple left a void in the world. God's Presence no longer had an earthly abode, and it could therefore no longer be accessed directly or indirectly, even by the priests who had hitherto served in the Temple.

It was a rabbinic innovation to replace Temple sacrificial rituals with prayer and study of the Torah, as well as by performance of the Commandments. This coping strategy was anchored both in the necessity for innovation and creative Rabbinic reorganization of the faith system, and in scripture itself. The pagan belief that sacrifices can atone for immoral conduct was decried by the prophets as insalubrious to the human spirit and as unsatisfactory in the eyes of God: *"To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me? saith the LORD; I am full of the burnt-offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats"* [Isaiah 1:11]. Even as the prophets maintained the necessity of sacrificial rites, they railed against the iniquity hidden behind the veil of ritual. In the post destruction period, however, when sacrifices could no longer be performed, Rabbinic leaders, who sought to preserve the integrity of observance and to revitalize Judaic culture, found the words of Hosea inspiring: *"Take with you words, and return unto the LORD; say unto Him: 'Forgive all iniquity, and accept that which is good; so will we render for bullocks the offering of our lips"* [Hosea 14:3], and adapted observance to the new political reality by replacing sacrificial rites with prayer. Prayer now became a substitute for sacrifice, it no longer depended on a specific location of God's Presence, for now the Presence became mobile, accessible in every synagogue,

and atonement no longer required priestly mediation, as it became through prayer accessible to every praying individual, at all times. Now a dispersed People could attain atonement through prayerful communion with God's Presence at any locale throughout the Diaspora. It was an eminently creative solution to the problem of religious and national reconstitution, to which the Rabbis added an eschatological event horizon that anticipated the resumption of Leviticus-based commandments pertaining to the sacrificial rites, once the Messiah returns and the Temple is rebuilt in Jerusalem at the end of time.<sup>426</sup> The Avodah genre of Piyyutim sought to describe and recreate in verse the dynamics of the sacrificial cult.

They describe in lavish detail the process by which the high priest prepares for the sacrifice, dons his ceremonial vestments, and offers up the bull and goat, a sacrifice whose culmination is the triumphant news that Israel has been forgiven.<sup>427</sup>

Yosse ben Yosse wrote a Piyyut titled **אין לנו כהן גדול**<sup>428</sup> concerning this very problem, and several Piyyutim in the genre of Avodah compositions which are excluded from this particular thesis. This thesis, however, does include the Piyyut **אפחד במעשי** under investigation here, and the Piyyut **אנוסה לעזרה**<sup>429</sup> both of which speak of the rabbinic prayer device and its merit, both as a means of attaining atonement and redemption, and as a means for national reconstitution as the People of Israel under God. Sacred space gave way to sacred actions, study of sacrificial law was made equivalent to the performance of the sacrifices, and prayer itself was recast as a form of sacrifice of the

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<sup>426</sup> Michael Swartz and Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah: An Anthology*, (2004), pp. 4-5

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3

<sup>428</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems*, [Hebrew], pp. 207-213

<sup>429</sup> See Chapter 6

heart.<sup>430</sup> The synagogue became the locus of prayer and study, a ‘minor sanctuary’ of a sort wherein holiness could be experienced and atonement sought.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, when Yosse ben Yosse wrote his Piyutim, the aesthetic preference was for synagogues to be adorned, in keeping with their status as sacred spaces, and in conformity with the prevailing artistic currents of the time. It was a “period of great activity in the building of grand synagogues in basilica form and the development of art for them. These (archaeological) sites include magnificent mosaic floors decorated with models of the Holy Ark, menorahs, incense shovels, and other accoutrements”.<sup>431</sup> The flora and fauna of the Land of Israel, from pomegranates to fish, from birds to lions, from olives to wheat and lambs and dates, alongside trumpets and ceremonial vessels, adorned synagogues<sup>432</sup> in order to glorify the sacred space they had become, and to remind the congregants within of the new, transformed reality and materiality of the Temple. Ornamentation was a prized aesthetic during the reign of Byzantium in Palestine, and poetry became the soundscape of contemporary artists whose lavish literary style corresponded to the colourful mosaics fashioned by stone artisans.<sup>433</sup>

... in that period, the goal of the arts was to dazzle the reader or viewer with the interplay of details rather than to express an elegant whole... Late Antiquity did not tolerate the plain and the unadorned; brilliance of effect, the play of contrasting colors, is all.<sup>434</sup>

The synagogues of the 5<sup>th</sup> century in Palestine became cultural centres wherein rabbis taught, teachers preached their sermons, and liturgical poets sang their Piyutim.<sup>435</sup>

There is some evidence that some of these Piyutim were sang out loud by cantors and

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<sup>430</sup> Michael Swartz and Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah: An Anthology*, (2004), p. 5

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6; See also: <http://www.ancient-synagogues.com/>

<sup>432</sup> See some exquisite examples in: David Arnon, *Israel: 2000 Years*, (1999), p. 24, 35, 47, 58, 73, 108

<sup>433</sup> Michael Swartz and Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah: An Anthology*, (2004), p. 11

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7

choirs,<sup>436</sup> and that the congregation sang responsively and prayerfully with them. In other words, just as the structural aspects of the synagogues became adorned with stonework, so did prayer become a domain for ornamental liturgy.

This poetry, called Piyyut, a term derived from the Greek *poiētēs*, sought to impress the listener with its deep knowledge of Biblical and Midrashic exegesis, its innovative use of language, and its rhythm and assonance.<sup>437</sup>

Yosse ben Yosse rode the crest of this new stylistic and theological-social wave,<sup>438</sup> and scribed his Piyyutim in the popular genre of his era to both educated audiences, who could appreciate the Paytan's clever allusions, and to less educated audiences, who could marvel at his erudite and skilful renditions and perhaps even memorise some of them, a task made easier by the alphabetic structure of the Piyyutim and the mnemonic devices pertaining to the flow of ideas within the poems themselves. Some audiences, unable to access the overwhelming complexity of the Piyyutim, may have revelled in the beauty of the craft itself. The Yom Kippur Avodah became the subject of precisely such admiration, whereas it was deemed theologically important and yet conceptually too complex for the average person. Seeking redemption and forgiveness, the People did as the Rabbis had instructed them, reciting the Avodah, but could not unravel all the mysteries of the service, be it the cultic elements now lost to post-destruction believers and practitioners, and the subtext of God's mystery that underlies the ritual in deed and prayer alike. The role of the Paytan was to make accessible and interesting this inscrutable yet necessary mystery, and help the community practice the newly minted procedures of atonement.

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<sup>436</sup> Michael Swartz and Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah: An Anthology*, (2004), p. 10

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12

1 I am in dread because of my deeds,  
I am troubled all the time,  
I tremble in fear of the Day of Judgment  
When I confront Remembrance.

Yosse ben Yosse begins the Piyyut with a personal and rather intimate self-revealing confession. I too am troubled, he tells his audience. I, like you, have sinned, and I know God is displeased with me, as evidenced by His chastisement in the form of exile, destruction, and national dissolution we all suffer under, and yet I seek God's forgiveness. We all do. Especially when we come before God on the Day of Atonement, we are fearful, for we have lost the means to attain exculpating mercy from God, having lost the Temple. Therefore, in accordance with Rabbinic Law,

1B I supplicate before the Compassionate One,  
I pray to the Merciful One,  
I implore the One, who hath mandated for me  
A Day of Remembrance.

Prayer is the means, Yosse ben Yosse tells the congregation, and God is here among us, in this synagogue, right now, as the prophets says: "*Seek ye the LORD while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near*" [Isaiah 55:6]. There is a way to access the Compassionate God who is "*abundant in goodness and truth*" [Exodus 34:6], and we can all thus act in accordance with His Law regarding the instruments of atonement as given to us in Leviticus [23-24]. Yosse ben Yosse employs the rabbinic reference to Rosh Hashanah as the Day of Remembrance, as the day when God remembers the sin of his creatures big and small, and this word becomes the repeated flourish at the end of every stanza in this Piyyut, a responsive incantation. With his inimitable elegance of verse,<sup>439</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> Michael Swartz and Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah: An Anthology*, (2004), p. 18

Yosse ben Yosse repeats the word Remembrance at the end of each stanza, employing the same literary device as he did in the Piyyut **אהללה אלוהי** <sup>440</sup>.

This stylistic choice suggests, rather tantalizingly, that the congregation may have been urged to take an active part in the recitation of this poem, perhaps reciting it responsively.<sup>441</sup> In many of the complete Yosse ben Yosse Piyyutim, these “public recitation verses” appear midway through the alphabetic acrostic. It is as if the Paytan introduces the particular Piyyut to the congregation, he then riles them up, and prepares them for the responsive readings. When the congregation is “emotionally ready” to participate, the Paytan introduces the familiar verses, so that by the end of the Piyyut the congregation will have become partners with him in the oral composition and its drama. Each time the repetitive word is repeated, in this case the word **זכרון**, the audience would be entranced by the rhythmic cadence created by the meter of the verse, and by the mesmerising and meditative repetition of a single word at the end of the drum-beat of words. The refrains which begin at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> stanza, magnify the emotive quotient of the recitation, and make the Paytan one with his audience, who in turn become united as a single praying body. The artistry of the poet, his choice of allusions and elegant use of such flourishes, became some of the most salient the hallmarks of Yosse ben Yosse’s liturgy.<sup>442</sup>

2        When I appear at Court  
          Who shall I lean on?  
          And who shall seek for me  
          Justice on the Day of Remembrance?

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<sup>440</sup> See Chapter 4

<sup>441</sup> Michael Swartz and Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah: An Anthology*, (2004), p. 21

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18

2B I had faith in our forefathers,  
And I have benefited from their good deeds,  
They have stood by me and protected me,  
In the past of Remembrance.

In keeping with the form and function of Avodah liturgy,<sup>443</sup> Yosse ben Yosse begins the didactic process by making reference to the past. He invokes the Heavenly Court of Justice wherein the mediation of the just and exemplary and righteous forefathers of the People can speak on behalf of the sinners before God, supplicating, asking for His mercy. Yosse ben Yosse uses the oft repeated Biblical invocation of such assistance, emblematically mentioned in Exodus 34:13 as Moses appeals to God on behalf of the People who had worshipped the golden calf: *“Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Thy servants, to whom Thou didst swear by Thine own self, and saidst unto them: I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it for ever.”*

Here however, the Paytan formats the protective role of the righteous in a question, saying: “Who shall I lean on?” suggesting that the 5<sup>th</sup> century generation has been tested by Providence and found wanting, that no such advocates are available to the People, and that they must therefore rely solely on God for His grace. The People, Yosse ben Yosse tells his audience, have exhausted all appeals through the mediation of the forefathers, and no such advocacy is available henceforth. He proceeds through the forthcoming stanzas to remind the congregation of past intercessions by Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah and Ezekiel, the righteous who stood up in the Heavenly Court in defence of their contemporaries. This reminder of Elijah’s protective intercession and messianic role as the herald of redemption, has become part of the

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<sup>443</sup> Michael Swartz and Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah: An Anthology*, (2004), pp. 17-18

national popular imagination, most particularly evident in the Passover Haggada (which cements the idea of nationhood for the Jews and is the cornerstone of their national identity) to this day:

Now children, listen carefully and you might hear the footsteps of Elijah  
the prophet coming to have a drink of wine at our table.<sup>444</sup>

Yosse ben Yosse is didactically telling his 5<sup>th</sup> century audience that it is up to them to change the course of their own history, that their deeds will “make or break” the covenantal bond, that salvation and pardon and a national reconstitution all hinge on their right actions and prayers.

3        I became strong  
          As if to say: Expunge me,  
          Lest there be erased from my heart  
          Thy name and Your Remembrance

Moses intervened with God on behalf of His sinful flock, when God threatened to wipe them out: *“Now therefore let Me alone, that My wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them; and I will make of thee a great nation.”* [Exodus 32:10], and thanks to his prayers the People were spared.

3B       A mere man, should he stand  
          Before Him, will he be effective,  
          When I am asked if I have any  
          Merit for Remembrance.

Would a mere man equal the meritorious position of Moses before God? Would ‘regular’ prayer suffice? Would the decidedly unmeritorious generation of the destruction and dispersal be able to avert the wrathful punishment planned for them by God?

4        I rejoiced in the High Priest and his vestments  
          And in his Breastplate of judgment,  
          In which there were etched  
          My people’s name for all Remembrance

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<sup>444</sup> Lilian Nattel, The River Midnight, p. 79

When the High Priest interceded on behalf of the nation, when the Temple still stood, when God's name was etched on the breastplate of the High Priest [Exodus 29:5, 12], such prayer on behalf of the sinful congregation was both possible and effective. In the absence of the Temple, with the loss of the Priestly cleansing rituals and sacrificial cults, Yosse ben Yosse wonders what means are left for the People to appeal for God's redemptive pardon. This is where the Paytan segues into the Avodah liturgy, by describing the sacrificial drama<sup>445</sup> in all its grandeur, vigour and gore.

4B     He hurried to take the fire-pan  
       Until the contagion was arrested,  
       When an un-consecrated man approached Him  
       And was set ablaze for all Remembrance.

Aaron, the prototypical High Priest rushed in performing the rituals mandated by God: "*And Moses said unto Aaron: 'Take thy fire-pan, and put fire therein from off the altar, and lay incense thereon, and carry it quickly unto the congregation, and make atonement for them; for there is wrath gone out from the LORD: the plague is begun.'* And Aaron took as Moses spoke, and ran into the midst of the assembly; and, behold, the plague was begun among the people; and he put on the incense, and made atonement for the people" [Numbers 17:11-12]. The dangerous contagion stopped in the desert, would prayer stop the symbolic contagion of exile? The Paytan remembers the story of Korach who presumed to act as a Priest unto God even though he was not thus anointed, and Yosse ben Yosse remembers Korach's demise [Numbers 17:5], in fact echoing a possible popular concern that may have been articulated; what if 'simple folk' prayed their invocation of the sacrificial cult, would they too meet a similar end? And he continues:

5       Gaze upon me, God,  
       As I stand before Thee,

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<sup>445</sup> Michael Swartz and Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah: An Anthology*, (2004), p. 19

I am not as righteous a man  
Whose deeds deserve Remembrance

5B Will a Phineas rise and intercede on my behalf  
To avert the fury  
And seal a pact for all generations  
In His name for all Remembrance.

Asking the same rhetorical question, the Paytan states and restates the sense the People have that no one can intercede on their behalf as did Ezekiel, for example [Ezekiel 9:4], or Phineas [Psalms 106:30] who prayed and stayed the plague. What, Yosse ben Yosse asks, can possibly turn God's wrath away from the children of Israel [Numbers 25:11] and who can remind God of His covenant with His People [Numbers 25:12] so He may atone the sins of the People?

6 And who disdains all lucre,  
And who can say: I stand as a witness,  
And could even add: My witness  
Is the Lord, in His Remembrance

Who amongst us, Yosse ben Yosse asks, is like Samuel who despised personal gain [I Samuel 12:3-5] and who could convince both the People and God of the purity of his prayer? Avarice and self interest may contaminate the intercession prayers of a mediator on the People's behalf. Modern times have, the Paytan suggests, contaminated the act of advocacy and supplication.

6B Who could, with a suckling lamb,  
Atone for us,  
And who, for the merit of the Two Fawns  
Could advocate for us favourably in Remembrance.

Who amongst us, he goes on, can walk in the footsteps of righteous men like Samuel, whose sacrifices appeased God: *“And Samuel took a sucking lamb, and offered it for a whole burnt-offering unto the LORD; and Samuel cried unto the LORD for Israel; and the*

*LORD answered him*” [I Samuel 7:9]. Yosse ben Yosse seems to say- none of us could. None, he continues can be measured against Moses and Aaron, the two “fawns” [Song of Songs Rabbah 4:5],<sup>446</sup> none could achieve what the three men could, as the Psalmist recounts: “*Moses and Aaron among His priests, and Samuel among them that call upon His name, did call upon the LORD, and He answered them*” [Psalms 99:6]. So what is a sinner to do?

7       Who among us can witness His fury and can say:  
          Punish me in their stead,  
          A man who is favoured by God  
          And can be effective at the time of Remembrance

No one in the pulverized community of Israel can possibly stand as did David before God when he saw the angel of God exacting God’s wrath upon the People: “*And David spoke unto the LORD when he saw the angel that smote the people, and said: 'Lo, I have sinned, and I have done iniquitously; but these sheep, what have they done? let Thy hand, I pray Thee, be against me, and against my father's house*” [II Samuel 24:17]. No one can take the blame for the sins of the People, no one can say ‘take me in their stead’, for the sins are too grave, and none among Israel is righteous enough, no one is “*a man after His own heart*” [I Samuel 13:14] who pleases God and follows His Law faultlessly, accruing merit on his own and the People’s behalf. So what is a nation to do?

7B       He who called out to God, and returned  
          His sword into its sheath,  
          Was placed on a sun-like glowing  
          Throne for Remembrance.

There are no more Davids who could call out to God through prayer and sacrifice and have his prayers answered: “*And David built there an altar unto the LORD, and offered*

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<sup>446</sup> Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 97

*burnt-offerings and peace-offerings, and called upon the LORD; and He answered him from heaven by fire upon the altar of burnt-offering*” [I Chronicles 21:26], for no one is as meritorious as David, and there is no longer a Temple wherein such sacrifices may be made. The angel of God’s wrath may have sheathed his sword thanks to David’s intercession, but no one can repeat the feat for the People now. No one among the descendents of David, the heirs to his eternal kingdom, can stand before God and remind Him of the aroma of atonement offerings in the hope of being forgiven.

The anxiety sensed by the dispersed Israel is clearly palpable, and is evoked and expressed in this Piyyut. Indeed, what is a People to do? How can the sacrificial cult be effectively replaced? We have no meritorious advocates, we have no Temple, and how are we possibly going to avert God’s wrath under these conditions? Yosse ben Yosse echoes a reasonable concern by a nation of believers that has lost its *axis mundi*, and who now must be convinced to adapt to the new theological conditions with newly minted synagogue-based rituals of prayer. Will they suffice? And what if they do not? The Paytan gives voice to the unspoken fear of the audience, articulating in verse their inner most doubts in the rabbinic injunction for prayer, as if to say- What if it doesn’t do the job? Are we doomed?

8     I waited during the draught  
      For Him, who can open the clouds and bring rain,  
      As a child awaits resuscitation,  
      Lest he be lost from Remembrance

When draught hit the Land of Israel and no rains fell, it was Elijah the prophet who reminded the People that only God can determine the ebb and flow of bounty, and that His benevolence depends on the People’s adherence to God’s Law: “*And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said unto Ahab: 'As the LORD, the God of Israel,*

*liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word*" [I Kings 17:1]. This, Yosse ben Yosse's verse proposes, is true for the greening of the land through rainwater, but, alluding to the Jerusalem Talmud, this is also true for the revival of the dead in the end of days.

This is an interesting allusion on two levels. First, it recalls the Talmudic sages who said that just as the rainwater is an eternal feature of the material world, so the revival of the dead at the end of days is an eternal feature of the spiritual world.<sup>447</sup> But, as Aharon Mirsky points out, this particular allusion is indicative of Yosse ben Yosse's erudition and Talmudic scholarship, but it suggests that Yosse ben Yosse was living in Palestine and was not as familiar with the Babylonian Talmud as he was with the Yerushalmi.<sup>448</sup> Yosse ben Yosse alluded to the Jerusalem Talmud often in his Piyutim, a fact that helped scholars situate him geographically in the Land of Israel.<sup>449</sup>

8B     He lives forever to see the Covenant fulfilled,  
       And he says: I have acted in great zeal,  
       But the people have forsaken  
       The Covenant of Remembrance.

Elijah had said: "*And he said: 'I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, thrown down Thine altars, and slain Thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away'*" [I Kings 19:10]. At times Elijah advocated for Israel, appealing for God's mercy, but at other times he was an angry prophet who railed against Israel before God, and it was God Himself who sought to speak of the potential good that is engrained in Israel and will one day flourish again. Yosse ben Yosse reminds his audience here that even in the absence

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<sup>447</sup> Tractate Brachot, Ch. 5, Mishna 9, (9:1), cited in: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 97

<sup>448</sup> Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 29

<sup>449</sup> See Chapter 5

of eternal presences such as Elijah's, even in the anxious realization that they are bereft of representation before the supreme judge, God, it is indeed God Himself who stands by the People and seeks their redemption. Yosse ben Yosse is opening a hope horizon for the congregation in this verse, and he continues to press his point:

- 9        I used to have a priest  
          To atone for my sins,  
          With a burned offering,  
          To mitigate the wrath of Remembrance
- 9B       With a mixture of herbs and aromatics  
          For Him, who dwells in His abode,  
          Blood and fat for the fragrance,  
          And bread for Remembrance.
- 10       I now represent myself  
          On a bed of cold embers,  
          Because Israel is not widowed from its God  
          And I am committed to Remembrance

Yes, the Paytan here preaches, we used to have a High Priest who proffered burnt offerings at the Temple on our behalf, and who, through the sacrificial rituals, atoned for our sins. We remember. But things have changed. I now stand as an empty vessel, as spoken by Ezekiel [Ezekiel 24:11], upon a bed of embers and coals until all impurity shall be burned from myself. The nation has been dispersed. It has been sent to exile, bereft of a Temple, empty of priestly intercession. Israel now suffers the torments of this exile so that their sins be 'burned off', so that God's punishment will take its full measure and eradicate impurity from their hearts. But at the same time "*For Israel is not widowed, nor Judah, of his God, of the LORD of hosts*" [Jeremiah 51:5], God stands with His People. They are never really alone, never truly bereft, and they therefore must have full faith that God will, in due course, come to their salvation.

10B God, I trust in You  
And not in nobles,  
For they are mortal [lie in their graves],  
And Your Name lives for all eternity in Remembrance.

Trust in God, Yosse ben Yosse tells the congregation, not in human agency: *“Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help”* [Psalms 146:3], because humans are mortal and God is eternal. God remains by His Chosen always and for all time: *“O LORD, Thy name endureth for ever; thy memorial, O LORD, throughout all generations”* [Psalms 135:13]. Remember that, the Paytan seems to propound.

11 All the righteous of Israel supported me,  
And I have begged for Your mercy,  
Without them I would have perished  
And would not be part of Remembrance

11B For they did not lay claim to their merit  
And they did not return unto You,  
But they came with praises for You in their mouths  
Which they cherish in Remembrance.

Indeed, the righteous forefathers who came to the aid of a sinful Israel did ensure the People’s survival despite and through adversity. Without these advocates there would be no trace of Israel remaining. The righteous prophets and seers appealed to God for mercy, not to gain any furtherance of their personal gains, but for the sake of God Himself. They came with high praises of God in their mouth [Psalms 149:6], they came to glorify God, asking Him to save His People not for the sake of the sinners but for the glory of His name in the world. That, Yosse ben Yosse tells the congregants, is the essence of their hope horizon, therein lies their redemption.

12 It is for this day that was preserved  
The sum of all deeds’ reckonings,  
For the Beginning of all days,  
Each person is part of Remembrance

Referring to the Jerusalem Talmud,<sup>450</sup> Yosse ben Yosse teaches that on Rosh Hashanah, the first day of the New Year which recalls Creation, the day when God is reminded of His re-creation of the world which happens anew every year, all remembrance is brought before God.

12B To be read,  
As upon it the sins were inscribed with an iron pen,  
To be unveiled and revealed,  
And known in Remembrance.

13 Death and life,  
Peace and war,  
In satiation and in plenty,  
Always brought up in Remembrance

13B The deeds of a man,  
And the measure of his steps,  
Are forgotten by humans,  
But are part of God's Remembrance.

Regardless of human agency, regardless of the advocates that may or may not stand up for Israel, God remembers all and determines the fate of all His creatures. He can read the sins of Israel, for: *"The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond; it is graven upon the tablet of their heart"* [Jeremiah 17:1] and on the basis of this infallible knowledge God determines the fate of all. The prayer of Rosh Hashanah evokes this sentiment:

*On Rosh Hashanah will be inscribed and on Yom Kippur will be sealed how many will pass from the earth and how many will be created; who will live and who will die; who will die at his predestined time and who before his time; who by water and who by fire, who by sword, who by beast, who by famine, who by thirst, who by storm, who by plague, who by strangulation, and who by stoning, Who will rest and who will wander, who will live in harmony and who will be harried, who will enjoy tranquility and who will suffer, who will be impoverished and who will be enriched, who will be degraded and who will be exalted.<sup>451</sup>*

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<sup>450</sup> Tractate Rosh Hashanah, Ch. 1, Mishna 3, (51:1), cited in: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 99

<sup>451</sup> Rosh Hashanah prayer book, ArtScroll Machzor, Mesorah Publications, 2008, p. 540

Whereas humans may forget their own sins, God remembers all, and determines the fate of the living according to their deeds. Interestingly, this stanza suggests that prayer was not an *ex nihilo* invention.<sup>452</sup> The Piyyut ונתנה תוקף is an example of a prayer that has reached the 21<sup>st</sup> century and is part of the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services to this day. It was once thought to have been composed by Rabbi Amnon of Mainz in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but the Cairo Geniza yielded a copy of the Piyyut dating it as a much earlier liturgy, possibly originating in the Land of Israel in the first few centuries after the destruction of the Temple.<sup>453</sup> Yosse ben Yosse was familiar with the Rosh Hashanah prayer, as were his audience, and its inclusion in the Piyyut serves to emphasize the value of prayer as it now stands as the only means of accessing God, in the post destruction era.

14 My path had deviated,  
Who could recount,  
It is for naught that my deeds were recorded,  
My sins writ for Remembrance

14B A man will be faced  
With his deeds as proof,  
And much as he try to deny,  
His deeds are witnesses in Remembrance.

Even as the People's deeds had deviated from the path of God [Isaiah 40:27], even as the trace of sin is clearly visible on their countenance [Job 16:8], it matters not to God. Only one's deeds may serve as testimony before Him, and He alone determines the fate of Man.

15 Declare the cogitations of God,  
All humanity as one,  
All who pass under His staff,  
As sheep before the shepherd for Remembrance

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<sup>452</sup> Aharon Mirsky, *Yosse ben Yosse Poems*, [Hebrew], p. 15

<sup>453</sup> Adin Steinzaltz, *The Siddur and Prayer* [Hebrew], p. 57

Pray to God, therefore, speak of His might and appeal to His thoughts and considerations as to your fate, says Yosse ben Yosse. We are all but sheep under His gaze, the Paytan recalls the Rosh Hashanah entreaty : *“Like a shepherd inspecting his flock, making sheep pass under his staff, so shall You cause to pass, count, calculate, and consider the soul of all the living; and You shall apportion the fixed deeds of all Your creatures and inscribe their verdict”*.<sup>454</sup>

15B     He, who seals the door  
          For the innocent during times of affliction and fury,  
          Until the wrath ebbs  
          And they can emerge back in Remembrance.

Just as Noah was saved when God sealed the door of the ark lest the flood inundate and wipe out the meritorious along with the iniquitous [Genesis 7:16], so will Israel be saved if they follow the prophet’s guidance: *“Come, my people, enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee; hide thyself for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast”* [Isaiah 26:20], if the People seal themselves in the proverbial ark of the Covenant with God and follow His law. When the time comes, Israel will be released from their enclosure, set free from exile, and God will remember them all, if they do well to remember Him.

As it is written in Your Torah: *“God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the animals that were with him in the Ark, and God caused a spirit to pass over the earth, and the waters subsided.”* [Genesis 8:1]

The Piyut offers the congregations an opportunity to engage with scripture the verse from Genesis may or may not have been read out loud and responsively at the synagogue in the time of Yosse ben Yosse, but it would certainly have resonated with the

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<sup>454</sup> Rosh Hashanah prayer book, ArtScroll Machzor, Mesorah Publications, 2008, p. 540

audience and would have been familiar; evoking the miraculous salvation of Noah and his kin, in the hope that Israel too will thus be remembered before God when the time of their affliction reaches its end. The waters of exile will, in due course, subside as well.

16     Work Your miracle and judge us to life,  
       Lest we be considered dead,  
       For will Your truth be told  
       In tombs, will there be Remembrance

16B    You once arose to redeem us with Your might  
       Please redeem us again, even though we are not worthy,  
       Not for our sake but for Your glory,  
       Your great wonders for all Remembrance.

Now, at last, Yosse ben Yosse prays. He shows the People how. He shows them it can work. He uses his verse to entreat God directly for mercy. He is showing the doubtful amongst his audience that such prayer can be effective. In the absence of an advocate for Israel, Israel themselves become their own advocates. They can pray to God, even in the absence of the Temple, even in the absence of the sacrificial rites, even in exile, if they but *“open their lips to declare His praises”* [Psalms 51:17]. Then, the Paytan suggests, as does the Rosh Hashanah prayer book,<sup>455</sup> God will remember the deeds of His People, and recall all His creatures as He judges them with mercy. We are still alive, says the Paytan, and God still expects us to be faithful, and He can hear our prayers [Psalms 88:11-13], He can and will show us mercy, not because of our merit, but: *“Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto Thy name give glory, for Thy mercy, and for Thy truth's sake”* [Psalms 115:1].

And the congregation remembers scripture and promise, and all recite: As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *“He made a memorial for His wonders, Gracious and Compassionate is God.”* [Psalms 111:4]

17     Fix Your eyes, God,  
       Upon those who dwell in your Gardens of Torah,  
       Hark to those who speak

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<sup>455</sup> Rosh Hashanah prayer book, ArtScroll Machzor, Mesorah Publications, 2008, p. 510

Of your Law in rapt Remembrance

17B Their deeds are before You,  
And their reward is from You,  
Those who eek out their meagre living,  
And who are written before you in Remembrance.  
The prayer continues in verse and poetry.

Yosse ben Yosse implores God to look upon His creatures, at His People, and at their deeds and their suffering, and judge them favourably and with compassion. God will hark the prayers and learning of “those who dwell in the gardens of Torah”, those who study the Law, those who pray.<sup>456</sup> Even as the People are dispersed in exile, even as the Temple is no more and the sacrificial rites are gone, the People still have recourse by following the rabbinic injunction to replace sacrifices with learning, to exchange burnt offerings with prayer. The pious, the learned, the righteous who study the word of God, even though meagre in their possessions and wealth, even as they find themselves destitute [Psalms 127:2], still have merit before God. And God will hear their prayers and answer them.

And the congregation remembers scripture and promise, and all recite: As it is written by Your Prophets: *“Then those who fear God spoke to one another, and God listened and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear God and those who give thought to His Name.”* [Malachi 3:16]

Yosse ben Yosse explains the current desolation of Israel in terms the audience can relate to, both because they naturally are familiar with their own plight, and because Yosse ben Yosse draws his images and phraseology from scripture:

18 There appeared feral foxes,  
Who spoiled the vineyards,  
To cut off from the vine of the nation  
The root of Remembrance

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<sup>456</sup> Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 101

18B They oppressed the people with hard labour,  
And the people cried out and were saved,  
For the mountains of merit earned by their forefathers,  
Whose deeds were etched into Remembrance.

Remember the foxes spoken of in the Sing of Songs? *“Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vineyards; for our vineyards are in blossom”* [Song of Songs 2:15], the Paytan says, remember the Egyptians, here likened to foxes,<sup>457</sup> who oppressed Israel, likened to vineyards by Isaiah [5:7], remember the miraculous Exodus [Psalms 80:9]? Yosse ben Yosse reminds the congregation of the People’s past deliverance, the Exodus, that which forged the twelve tribes into a nation. He reminds the audience that just as the Egyptians oppressed Israel [Exodus 1:13], and Israel were delivered from this oppression because the People prayed to God: *“And God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob”* [Exodus 2:24], so will contemporary oppression cease if the People pray to God.

19 Before the world was even created You looked well into the future  
And You found them wanting,  
So You replaced them and effaced them  
From Remembrance

19B You chose the thousandth generation  
And You bequeathed them Your word,  
For their sake and the sake of every generation yet to come,  
Your Law is an eternal legacy of Remembrance.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *“He remembered His covenant forever- the Word He commanded for a thousand generations.”* [Psalms 105:8]

In keeping with the Avodah epic genre, Yosse ben Yosse harks back to Creation itself, as a kind of mythical-historical reference that anchors contemporary Israelites in

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<sup>457</sup> Song of Songs Rabbah, cited in: Aharon Mirsky, Yosse ben Yosse Poems [Hebrew], p. 101

the Judaic arc of time<sup>458</sup> and therefore subjects the specific congregation and prayerful individuals to the same destiny promised by God for His people, part and parcel of which is the eternal assurance of redemption.

20     The Lofty One desired  
       A young bride as His nation,  
       Her dead and her poor  
       Come forth in Remembrance

20B    She hastened to followed You  
       In the valley of wilderness and in the shadow of death,  
       The love of her betrothal  
       Is a monument to Remembrance.

As it is written by Your Prophets: *“Go and call out in the ears of Jerusalem, saying: Thus said God: I recall you the kindness of your youth, the love of your nuptials, your following Me into the Wilderness, into an unsown land.”* [Jeremiah 2:2]

God’s bounty and benevolence will meet His People not because of their merit, but because of God’s own calculations and desire, for His own sake. This will come to be, indeed it is coming, the Paytan assures the audience. The prophets have seen this redemption in the future revealed to them by God [Isaiah 57:15] and they have spoken of this redemption. All that the People have to do in the mean time is remember God and His Law, learn it and pray, and then God will remember them: *“Go, and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying: Thus saith the LORD: I remember for thee the affection of thy youth, the love of thine espousals; how thou wentest after Me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown”* [Jeremiah 2:2]. Just as God remembered the People who ran for His help in the desert [Jeremiah 2:6] so will God remember them in their current affliction and sorrow, if they too run to God for help.

21     The people have become corrupt  
       And they bear their disgrace before their foes,

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<sup>458</sup> Michael Swartz and Joseph Yahalom, *Avodah: An Anthology*, (2004), p. 18

For they bore the name of a golden statue,  
And did not bear God's Name in Remembrance

21B In an instant they were all lost,  
But for the one who stood in the breach before Him,  
And reminded Him of His  
Covenant of Remembrance.

As it is written in Your Torah: *"Remember for the sake of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Yourself and You told them, 'I shall increase your offspring like the stars of heaven, and this entire land of which I spoke, I shall give to your offspring and it shall be their heritage forever."* [Exodus 32:13]

The current affliction, explains Yosse ben Yosse, is a consequence of a sin which is at least as grave as the sin of the golden calf [Exodus 32:7-8]. The Paytan uses the same phraseology as scripture, to intimate the enormity of sin as an explication of the catastrophic disaster which has befallen the People of Israel with the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent exile. The People have turned away from God, they have forgotten the words in Joshua: *"Therefore be ye very courageous to keep and to do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, that ye turn not aside therefrom to the right hand or to the left; that ye come not among these nations, these that remain among you; neither make mention of the name of their gods, nor cause to swear by them, neither serve them, nor worship them; but cleave unto the LORD your God, as ye have done unto this day; wherefore the LORD hath driven out from before you great nations and mighty; but as for you, no man hath stood against you unto this day"* [Joshua 23:6-9]. The only remedy, therefore, Yosse ben Yosse reminds the People, is to do what the Israelites did, and return unto God, remember Him and His Law, pray to Him, and He will remember them as He remembered the Israel of old. As Moses reminded God of the merit of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in defence of the Children of Israel, so will prayer remind God of the forefathers' merit and of His covenant with them, and He will remember, and He will redeem His People.

22     You despised the nations from the Beginning,  
       The multitude of peoples,  
       You chose and desired us above them,  
       As a testament to Remembrance

22B    In place of the Israelites of the First Temple  
       You took a forgotten generation,  
       And You betrothed us once more  
       Before we were cast off from all Remembrance.

As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *“Remember Your congregation, which You acquired long ago, You redeemed the Tribe of Your heritage; the Mountain of Zion, the one where You rested Your Presence.”* [Psalms 74:2]

God has chosen Israel to give them His Torah [Deuteronomy 10:15] out of infinite love for Israel. The Torah, God’s Law, is perfect and eternal [Psalms 19:8] and stands as an eternal gift to the People of Israel, and as a guarantee that they will be delivered from exile as God had promised: *“And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord will set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people, that shall remain from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea”* [Isaiah 11:11]. God will ‘purchase’ the People of Israel for Himself again, as He is reminded of their plight and of His love for them when they pray. He will save them from their current afflictions under the reign of Byzantium, Yosse ben Yosse explains, just as He had saved them from Egypt and the Greek and the Persians in the past.

And the congregation remembers scripture and promise, and all recite: As it is written in Your Holy Scriptures: *“Remember Your congregation, which You acquired long ago, You redeemed the Tribe of Your heritage; the Mountain of Zion, the one where You rested Your Presence.”* [Psalms 74:2]

23     The Wholesome Jacob sought  
       The offspring who will be named for him,  
       He crossed his hands overhead  
       As a sign of Remembrance

24B Remember with fondness the people who, like Ephraim,  
Are Your delightful child,  
For he is my firstborn,  
As You have mandated for all Remembrance.

The merit of Jacob still stands [Genesis 25:27], and the prayers of Jacob's descendents, named for Ephraim will be heard: *"They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them; I will cause them to walk by rivers of waters, in a straight way wherein they shall not stumble; for I am become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is My first-born"* [Jeremiah 31:8]. Israel must pray to God, with broken hearts and with intent, and He will remember them.

And the congregation remembers scripture and promise, and all recite: As it is written by Your Prophets: *"Is Ephraim My favourite son or a delightful child, that whenever I speak of him I remember him more and more? Therefore My inner self yearns for him, I will surely take pity on him- the Word of God."* [Jeremiah 31:19]

The Piyyut has come to its conclusion with the last letter of the alphabetic acrostic completing the cycle. Now, thanks to rabbinic teachings repeated in poetic meter and graceful verse by the Paytan, the People are able to pray, they are now able to understand the value and method of prayer, and the congregation is able at last to imagine possible and attainable the path to redemption.

## CONCLUSION

My goal in this thesis was to contribute materially to the establishment of a solid foundation for a systematic scholarly investigation of 5th century religious poetry produced, in all likelihood, in Byzantine controlled Palestine. The primary objective of studying Yosse ben Yosse was to tease out evidence regarding Jewish lived religion in post destruction Palestine, and to find clues regarding synagogue practices in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Using seven of the fifteen known Yosse ben Yosse Piyyutim, here translated into English, I have laboured to examine the subject of Jewish liturgical poetry from several angles. The chapters of this thesis have identified salient elements in the social function of Piyyut liturgy in general, and in the Yosse ben Yosse works specifically. This however is a preliminary investigation of a vast body of knowledge that is yet to be fully explored. What we know is far overshadowed by what we still do not know, as I repeatedly demonstrate and point out in the thesis. Using Durkheim's methodology, I have tried to prove that Piyyutim are a reflection of their social time and place and are therefore appropriate syncretic vehicles for historiographic and ethnographic research. My research extrapolates the social function of Piyyutic liturgy from the structure and content of known Yosse ben Yosse Piyyutim. This I think is an important effort at illuminating a period in Jewish history of which we know very little.

It would be a mistake to regard the work of Yosse ben Yosse as mere doxology. This thesis aims to have demonstrated that the form and content of his Piyyutim contains a complex and instructive worldview “that will be a source of consolation in the face of distress and a support and authorization for... (the recommended course of action, and invests) this worldview with the status of supernatural revelation. The worldview (serves)

as the ideology (of and for) the... group".<sup>459</sup> It must be stated that Piyyutic liturgy is more complex than being merely liturgical praises and fanciful flights of a literary and poetic mind. The text can be viewed statically or dynamically, as poetry or as a means of worship, as a musical score to be read or as a musical score to be performed interactively. This thesis has shown that Piyyut as a genre and the specific Piyyutim of Yosse ben Yosse, act upon the social matrix, but are part of the dynamics of social intercourse as well.<sup>460</sup> Piyyutim are both the result of social systems at play, and the shapers of social realities as well. They are both object and modifier of Jewish society in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and are part of the social flow, as far as we can determine. This thesis represents, as I have stated, a plausible reconstruction of the social history of 5<sup>th</sup> century Palestinian Jews based on critical reading of primary linguistic evidence, but it is not immune to alternative reconstructions on issues great and small.<sup>461</sup>

The point of departure, and the axiomatic truth for the Paytan, is that the world is God centric. This for him is an axiomatic truth, and the cornerstone for the world he draws up for and with his audience. Yosse ben Yosse places God in the inner-most circle of his spatial cosmology, he proceeds to place Israel in the nearest circle, and all other Nations in the periphery of reality. His Piyyutim provide the People with a sense of singularity with regards to the nation's unique place on the spatial plane of the world. They also create a sense of one-ness and brotherhood among the people, transcribing their personal experiences onto a larger collective reality wherein they are each responsible for and responsive to the individual experience of one another. Moreover, the

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<sup>459</sup> John Collins, Daniel with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature, p. 22

<sup>460</sup> Leonard Thompson, The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire, p. 30

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95

transcendent structure of God's cosmos is mirrored in the this-worldly reality of the material world, within whose contours the Jews are the most important of Nations politically, morally, and religiously.

Yosse ben Yosse then establishes as fact that God sees and experiences the past, present, and future simultaneously, placing him above the temporal plane of the world. God for the Paytan, and for his audiences, has a bird's eye view of time, God is above the human experiential temporal plane which is linear and deterministic. For God the past is present and the eschatological horizon is clearly contemporaneous, visible, and real. This draws on the third axiomatic truth that God is the creator of everything and therefore has plans for everything in His universe. The human eye can only perceive reality at the material plane and can thus create despair and a chaotic understanding of events. For God, however, it all makes sense. God, according to this worldview, is materially involved in history and acts through history in order to enact His will on the world. His chastisements of Israel experienced by them as historical events, are the disciplinary actions a father takes with His beloved albeit errant child; His enduring love for His chosen people is parent-like. Israel are His children; God is Israel's father; and the dynamic interactions between heaven and earth become a family matter. Seen thus, the world is not chaotic, it is in fact ordered and predictable, there is a plan and purpose for events despite the superficial evidence to the contrary.

Yosse ben Yosse, as a rabbinic scholar and through his poetic teachings also creates a perception of crisis. The basic values of the nation are regarded by him as being under threat, and this threat of complete dissolution and removal from the inner sanctum of God's love and nearness to Israel, is an imminent threat. The antagonism between

Israel and the Nations is eternal, and Jewish history as it was written in the bible, repeats itself in a pattern that is discernible to the astute observer. Despite material and economic comforts enjoyed by Jews of the Galilee, the eternal dynamic of threats from without will soon spell disasters untold for Israel unless they know how to navigate the present and thus they will be better able to reach the eschatological horizon individually and collectively intact. The perception of crisis must supersede the easier option open to Jews who, through assimilation and conversion will guarantee for themselves a peaceful and prosperous present. This easier option is always held up before Jews by the non-Jewish Nations as a logical escape hatch that will at once free them from persecution and misery. Yosse ben Yosse had to convince the Jews that such an option, although tempting now, will in fact cost them their chosenness, their unique spatial closeness to God, and their ultimate redemption. In other words, the antagonistic relationship between Jews and the Nations is a necessary feature in the Jewish worldview, just as the perception of crisis and the threat of dissolution must be the necessary features of the redemptive prescription espoused by rabbinical Judaism. Both factors form the unspoken backdrop of the messianic message in Yosse ben Yosse's Piyyutim. Through perceived threat, and through a constant perception of antagonism, Jews are called to maintain their Jewishness and to imbue their lives with observance of God's Law. Jewish messianic sentiments, draped as they are on this scaffold of fear (of individual and collection dissolution) and pride (in the unique spatial and temporal position of Jews in their eternal relationship with God), are regarded as the salve that renders the present meaningful and history ordered.

From his privileged position as a learned man, Yosse ben Yosse provides his audiences a glimpse into the future, claiming authority from his exemplary understanding of Israel's past which he has access to as a rabbinic scholar. The religious perspective through which one may view all of human activity offers a particular understanding of political and social realities of the whole universe, not just of the present private experience which is but an element in the greater social reality and transcendent reality. The perception of crisis in the face of international pressure to convert the Jews, to disperse them, to take over their ancestral land, to destroy their future as an elect nation and displace them from their patrimony, is part of God's plan, part of God's test of His people's mettle. It is not however an exhortation to regard as God given the vicissitudes of Jewish history which therefore must be endured; but an exhortation to be proactive in removing the root cause of misfortune by repenting of Jews' laxity in observance of God's Law. Yosse ben Yosse implicitly recalls Jeremiah's comforting words: *"But fear not thou, O Jacob My servant, neither be dismayed, O Israel; for, lo, I will save thee from afar, and thy seed from the land of their captivity; and Jacob shall again be quiet and at ease, and none shall make him afraid. Fear not thou, O Jacob My servant, saith the LORD, for I am with thee; for I will make a full end of all the nations whither I have driven thee, but I will not make a full end of thee; and I will correct thee in measure, but will not utterly destroy thee"* [Jeremiah 46:27-28]. Even as He chastises Israel and visits untold suffering upon them so they may atone for their iniquities, God has vowed never to destroy Israel and to allow His love for His children to temper His fury. Though Israel's fortunes wax and wane, though at times their history appears all but to invite their annihilation, Israel will rise again, and rise stronger than ever if, and only if, they return unto God. Their destiny is shaped by their service of God and if they serve Him they will be assured salvation and redemption. The

didactic message emphasizes a return to holiness as the guiding principle of Jewish life, and a moving away from this-worldly considerations in favour of reaching a transcendent future as a nation under God.

Yosse ben Yosse, living in the economically thriving Galilee,<sup>462</sup> impresses upon his audiences that their pacific present is but a passing phase or worse yet, part of a nefarious plan to destroy Israel. The present is misleading, he implied. The real truth lies in a correct reading of history, wherein God has acted and continues to act with purpose. The privileged and authoritative perspective of a rabbinic scholar assures the Jews that the correct response to imminent danger is faith in God, adherence to tradition, and fulfillment of all the commandments. That course of action will, the Paytan assures his audiences, have a salubrious outcome for Jews as individuals and as a collective, a nation beloved by God. The wrong response, it is perforce implied, will as it did in the past, result in punishments meted out against the sinners, much to God's chagrin but as part of His paternal education of His people elect. Like a father, God suffers torments of pain when His people suffer, and God's heart rejoices when His people are well. The only means to reverse present hardships is to apply God's plan to the lives of Jews in practice. Right action will result in right outcome; a Deuteronomic dynamic which has existed before, still animates the present and will continue to shape reality until the End of Time itself. Time is of the essence, the Paytan appears to suggest between the lines of his rhythmic stanzas. Salvation and redemption can be near at hand if right actions will mollify God and will bring redemption to the world.

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<sup>462</sup> Leonard Thompson, The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire, pp. 133-145

In other words, in the midst of economic prosperity Yosse ben Yosse paints a perception of crisis for the people, emphasizing that time pressure makes urgent a right response, given the high probability that the future life and fortune of Jews depends on their choices and actions. Yosse ben Yosse repeatedly teaches his audiences that God is materially involved in history, He cares about His creatures, He sits atop the temporal plane seeing the outcomes dictated by His people's behaviour, and He knows what will transpire if they follow His word or if they disregard it. What better way then, than for the People to take up the means of redemption as a life plan. The means for attaining the right positive outcome is available to the People at present. They can access the divine, they can be inspired by God and feel as a unified collective under His staff, they can gain emotional transcendence and benefit therefrom, if they follow the life plan outlined for them by a loving God. Crying out to God, singing to God, worshipping God in the correct manner, will link heaven and earth and establish what is truly real, what is true in the world.<sup>463</sup>

The reiteration of the need for religious observance as the only means for national reconstitution and personal salvation offers eschatological hope that is founded on the privileged understanding of the spatial and temporal attributes of the cosmos and of the unique place of Israel therein. Painting an ordered world, wherein events are part of God's extra-temporal plan, imbues reality with purpose and meaning and offers a perception of nationhood and electedness that would have otherwise been devoid of sense or import. The Piyyutim teach that linear time and a deterministic history lead to an eschaton that depends on right action, right faith, and right worship. This is the essential

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<sup>463</sup> Leonard Thompson, The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire, pp. 69-70

core of Yosse ben Yosse's message of hope to his people. This is the very eschatological hope horizon he offers Jews, and the scaffold upon which they can construct their future edifice of redemption. The Paytan provide his audiences, whom he painted as powerless victims of a larger cosmic plan, with the extraordinary power to change the cosmos and their own fate as well. The future is in their hands, and redemption depends on them and could materialize at any time if they bring it about through their deeds and faith.

The liturgical quality of the Yosse ben Yosse exhortations makes them communal rather than individual, and thus the poet himself can be hidden from view. Pseudonymity may not be accidental or a matter of the fashion of the times, for it flows from the very social purpose of the Piyyutim. He, the Paytan, is not the point; the point is his teaching. His "liturgical cries, the first-person acclamation, the doxology, and even the (guidance to live Jewishly) 'occur' in a nonspecific space (and in) a more universal space and time... (His) liturgy... is centered on the divine"<sup>464</sup> and draws a clear how-to manual and path to better the human situation. Furthermore, repetition of his teachings as part of the worship life of Jews has a cumulative effect as images and truths are iterated and reiterated, gaining substance and verity by the layers of Jewish experience throughout history and over time, leading to the prophesied redemption.

Worship, the means of bringing closer heaven and earth and of strengthening the bond between God and Israel, establishes the boundary between Israel and the Nations, and establishes the truth inherent in experiential reality, revealing the way things really are, and offering a way out of despair and a way toward eschatological redemption.<sup>465</sup>

The all encompassing worldview has an equally all encompassing prescription for right

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<sup>464</sup> Leonard Thompson, The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire, p. 56

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71

action, leading to a universal messianic time of deliverance that will not only affect Jews but the world entire thanks to their adherence to God's Laws. Thus visualized, the spatial cosmology and the temporal verities of the rabbinically inflected worldview remain solid and may be relied upon by individuals who now have come to see themselves as a collective, and not just any collective, but a collective in whose empowered and informed hands the welfare of all creation rests.

The ontological "baggage" of Piyyut, both in its mission to solidify Jewish identity and in its use of Jewish pillars of identity, helps us better understand Rabbinic Judaism in this formative age, and relate its early evolutionary stages to its later morphological manifestations. Midrashic and Biblical allusions are the life blood of Piyyut, and I argue, the life blood of Jewish individual and national identity as well. The post-destruction threat of assimilation and the overwhelming desire for Jewish national reconstitution in the historic Land of Israel, eventually came to characterize Jewish worship and Jewish national political aspirations for the next millennium and a half. Prayer, of which Piyyut was a popular part in the 5<sup>th</sup> century at least, was constructed by the Rabbis as the means to access the divine in the absence of the Temple, and as a vehicle to foster a sense of kinship between disparate communities who could coalesce their understanding of the Jewish national entity despite being scattered in the Diaspora and despite the loss of geographic base. The strong messianic lens through which Jews regarded their history, served to reaffirm Biblical prophecies and to telescope into the future with a hopeful attitude, even as the lachrymose record of persecutions and assimilatory pressures threatened the possibility of even having a Jewish future.

The translations I propose here are obviously subject to re-translation by future scholars, and my conclusions and findings are open to academic critique and improvement. I do hope however, that this preliminary translation will open the field to English speaking scholars hitherto barred by unfamiliarity with the nuances of pre-mediaeval Hebrew. The literary and linguistic comments made here are only an opening into a field of study which begs attention. I do hope that hitherto unexamined Geniza documents will help this endeavour by revealing more Piyyutim and subjecting them to learned analysis. The field of early Piyyutic literature is now gathering steam, with Laura Lieber's seminal book on Yannai, which has reinvigorated discussions on the topic.

Thanks to their unique structure and rhythmic musicality, and thanks to their insistence on the purity of the Hebrew language, Piyyutim served as vehicles for transmitting religious, political, and social didactic messages which were so important to the Rabbis. Through Biblical and Midrashic allusions, Piyyutim such as Yosse ben Yosse penned in the 5<sup>th</sup> century Land of Israel under Byzantine rule, contributed to identity construction. They articulate communal yearning for national and religious reconstitution, and they gave voice to a collective wish for redemption.

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רְנוּ שָׁמַיִם כִּי-עָשָׂה יְהוָה, הָרִיעוּ תַּחְתִּיּוֹת אֲרֶץ, פִּצְחוּ הָרִים רִנָּה, יַעַר וְכָל-עֵץ בּוֹ:  
כִּי-גָאֵל יְהוָה יַעֲקֹב, וַיִּשְׁרָאֵל יִתְפָּאֵר.

(ישעיה מ"ד, כ"ג)



Sing, O ye heavens, for the LORD hath done it;  
shout, ye lowest parts of the earth;  
break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein;  
for the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and doth glorify Himself in  
Israel.

(Isaiah 44:23)

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