

`Aqdamut: History, Folklore, and Meaning

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(This article has been accepted for publication in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, and is expected to appear in late 2009.)

Please note that the substance of the article itself is followed, on p. 12, with Appendix I: A New Annotated Translation of `Aqdamut, and, on p. 21, with Appendix II: Literary Analysis of `Aqdamut.

This version of the article conforms to the style guide of *JQR* which requires that one indicate the Hebrew letter *het* by writing “@h,” the “@” indicating that the next letter should be printed with a dot under it. I apologize for the annoying recurring appearance of this symbol whenever the letter *het* is indicated).

`Aqdamut is an Aramaic *piyyut* in the Ashkenazic rite which was composed as an introduction (*reshut*) to the Aramaic translation of the Torah reading (*Targum*) for the first day of *Shavuot*.¹ Aside from a few Sabbath table hymns `Aqdamut is the most widely known Aramaic hymn in Ashkenazic liturgy.² It has outlived all other introductory hymns to the *Targum* for the first day of *Shavuot*, and, it has outlived – by many centuries – the custom of chanting the *Targum* itself on *Shavuot* – its erstwhile *raison d’etre*! Elbogen, consistent with his inclination for reform of apparently outmoded passages of the liturgy used strong language to suggest that `Aqdamut, and other poetic introductions of the *Targum*, for any holy day, be excised: “...with the elimination of the translation that they were intended to introduce, they have completely lost their significance and their right to exist.”³ It is indeed curious that this *piyyut* has continued to persist in Ashkenazic liturgy. Why should such a lengthy (90 lines) literary creation in a language not understood by most Jews, introducing a translation of the Torah reading not used by these Jews for a thousand years, continue to be so popular that it is included in all traditional versions of the Ashkenazic festival prayer book?

The answer, I hope to show, is that the *piyyut* acquired a life of its own, unrelated directly to the *Targum* or *Shavuot*, in the centuries following its composition. Regardless of the author’s original intention for this prayer, it came to be read in quite a different way as a result of circumstances that the author could not have foreseen. The sense of loss in the

¹ I want to express my gratitude to Professor Raymond Scheindlin, Professor Menahem Schmelzer, Professor Ismar Schorsch, Laurie Hoffman, Barry Mark, Nina Redl, and Dr. David Arnow who read an earlier version of this paper and made numerous helpful suggestions. Problems that remain are, of course, my responsibility.

² See Michael Sokoloff and Joseph Yahalom, “Aramaic Piyyutim From the Byzantine Period,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 125.3 (January, 1985), 309.

³ Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, trans. by Raymond P. Scheindlin, (New York, 1993), 154.

region of the Rhine, as well as in Ashkenaz in general, following the violence of the First Crusade prepared the ground for the new, long-term, significance of *`Aqdamut*. The *piyyut*'s major theme of the loyalty of Israel to the Covenant in the face of the nations' enticements and persecutions helped to position the poem to address the needs of European Jewry following the Crusades.⁴ But the key role in securing a new and enduring career in Jewish liturgy for this poem was played by a medieval Yiddish tale which portrayed the author of *`Aqdamut*, R. Meir ben Yits@haq, as a savior of his people and *`Aqdamut* itself as a paean to a triumph against a demonic priest who had threatened thousands of Jews. In this way, the Ashkenazic collective memory came to associate R. Meir ben Yits@haq with a miraculous anti-Christian victory, and *`Aqdamut* with a celebration of that salvation. The fact that R. Meir lived in the Rhineland around the time of the First Crusade helped to lend a sense of vicarious vengeance to the Jewish community in the generations following the Crusades. This is a case in which the study of a Yiddish folktale against the background of the history of Jewish history yields a resolution of the problem of the surprising popularity and persistence of a lengthy Aramaic liturgical poem.

The Tale

Because of the importance of the Yiddish tale in the history and meaning of *`Aqdamut*, I will sketch an outline of the story, including enough detail to bring out its drama. Details regarding editions and varying versions of the tale will be presented below.

In the year 5121 (1361), at the time of King Martin de Lance, adherents of magic and sorcery increased in the world. Some of these practitioners of the occult passed themselves off as monks with long cassocks. These monk-sorcerers built castles and lived in these strongholds. They grew very powerful and were able to bring to themselves the most beautiful women and maidens. The leader and teacher of them all was a master of black magic who was a cruel enemy of the Jews. Whenever he came upon a Jew, he would place him under a spell simply by touching him. When the Jew returned to his home, he would fall down and die. This "monk" murdered over thirty thousand Jews through his black magic. The Jews of Worms sent a delegation to the king to request protection. The king then called upon the monk and negotiated with him, for the monk and his followers presented a threat to the power of the king himself. The monk declared that he would desist from attacking the Jews for one year on the condition that at the end of the year, the Jews present a member of their own community who, in a contest, would prove to be the greater master of sorcery. If the Jews succeed in this contest, the monk promised that he would never again bother the Jews. If they fail, he will kill them all. The Jews felt that they had no choice but to agree. They immediately turned to tradition: they fasted and engaged in deeds of *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tsedakah*, "repentance, prayer, and

⁴ See Appendix I for a new annotated translation of *`Aqdamut* and Appendix II for a literary analysis.

charity.” They also dispatched letters throughout the Diaspora asking for help, but no one came forward who was willing to challenge the monk.

At this point of desperation, and with the months of the allotted year rolling by, a certain scholar in the community fell asleep while studying, and in his dream saw that the rescuer will not come from the Diaspora or the Land of Israel, but rather from beyond the river Sambatyon. There, the ten lost tribes of Israel dwelled. It was necessary to contact the Jews of the ten lost tribes for help. Everyone agreed to send R. Meir who was a great scholar, known for his piety, and a leader of the Jews of Worms. They sent him with a letter explaining their situation signed by the rabbinic leadership of the community, supplies for the journey, and three accompanying rabbis. After many difficulties and much time, they arrived at the banks of the river Sambatyon on a Tuesday, exactly eight days before the year’s time would run out.

Now, the Sambatyon is impossible to traverse during the six days of the week, for it is too turbulent for any boat, and in addition, the waters constantly fling dangerous rocks into the air. Only on the Sabbath do the waters calm enough for a boat to sail across, but, of course, embarking on a boat journey on the Sabbath is forbidden. Nevertheless, the group knew that the river would have to be crossed on the Sabbath for the sake of saving lives. When the Sabbath arrived, R. Meir instructed the accompanying rabbis to remain and that only he would take upon himself the burden of violating the Sabbath, crossing the river by boat. As soon as R. Meir arrived on the other side of the river, he was placed in prison, and told that he would be stoned to death for violating the Sabbath. However, once the Jews of the ten lost tribes read the community’s letter explaining the dire circumstances, R. Meir was released from prison.

On that same Sabbath, the Jews of the ten lost tribes cast lots to see who would face the monk in order to save R. Meir’s imperiled community. The lot fell on a short, lame elder named Dan, who was pious, upright, and God-fearing. R. Meir was told to stay on this side of the river, for he had accomplished his mission, and could not justify violating the Sabbath day a second time by crossing back over the Sambatyon. Rather, Dan, himself, sailed back over on that same Sabbath, and met R. Meir’s companions. When R. Meir’s escorts encountered Dan, as he disembarked from the boat on that Sabbath, they lost heart, for how could their rescuer be such a little old man who walked with a limp? Nevertheless, they set out to return. Dan had the secret, mystical knowledge of how to use the recital of God’s names to effect miracles. Using such knowledge, the group of four traveled to Worms through a *kefitsat ha-derekh*, a miraculous shortening of the way (lit., “a jumping of the way”), in just two days, and arrived on the last day of the year-long reprieve that the monk had granted them. It also happened to be two days before the holiday of *Shavuot*. When the Jewish community in Worms beheld the little old man walking with a limp who was supposed to be their redeemer, they were struck with terror, for how could he stand up to the fearsome, powerful monk who was the master of black magic? In the presence of the king and great crowds of Jews and gentiles in the town

square, the contest took place. Here, the tale includes many details of the match to heighten the drama, with the monk using incantations to harm Dan, and Dan using recitations of mystical names of God to counteract the monk's magic, and to fight back. Ultimately, Dan killed the monk in a most public and humiliating way, thus saving the entire Jewish community.

Dan then told the Jews that on the previous Sabbath, when R. Meir accompanied him to the boat, R. Meir had composed and recited to Dan the poem *`Aqdamut Millin*. R. Meir requested, through Dan, that the community recite the poem each *Shavuot* during their worship services "for the sake of his name," for his name is signed in the acrostic.

Analysis of the Tale

The tale connects with *`Aqdamut*, R. Meir, and the locale of Worms in such a way as to elevate R. Meir to the status of valiant hero, and to portray *`Aqdamut* as transcending the status of merely one more prayer in the worship service of *Shavuot*, but rather as an anthem which celebrates a miraculous saga which reached its conclusion just before *Shavuot* in a previous generation.

While the tale certainly has parallels to universal folklore themes such as the miraculous rescue of a seemingly doomed community by an apparently old, small, and weak "hero," and the fight against evil sorcerers, among others, it also shares themes with other, specifically Jewish, stories. Among these are the David and Goliath story, the rescue of a threatened Jewish community by an emissary of the ten lost tribes who dwell on the other side of the Sambatyon, the overcoming of an enemy through the recitation or writing of secret, mystical names of God, and the defeat of an enemy in a public disputation that was forced upon the Jewish community.⁵

At the same time that the tale turns on several themes that are found in world-wide folk tales as well as themes that are found in Jewish stories in general, the particular coloring and detailing of these themes connects the story with R. Meir, his community, Worms, (or the Worms/Mainz/ Speyer/Cologne region), and with his composition, *`Aqdamut*. The tale's conclusion makes it clear that the story was meant to provide the etiology of *`Aqdamut*. It is designed so that the hearer/reader would naturally respond by thinking,

⁵ For more on the connections to universal and Jewish folklore, see Dov Noy's comments on the Yiddish tale of *`Aqdamut* in Moshe Attias, (Dov Noy, ed.), *The Golden Feather: Twenty Folktales Narrated by Greek Jews* (Hebrew), Israel Folktale Archives 35 (Haifa, 1976), 191. Cf., as well, Eli Yassif's analyses of similar themes in medieval Hebrew literature in *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington, 1999), chapter 5, "The Middle Ages: External Perils and Internal Tensions," 245-370, especially, "The Saint's Legend," 321-342.

“ah, so this is the origin of *`Aqdamut* and this is the reason that we read it on the holiday of *Shavuot*.”⁶ Through the tale’s explanation of the origin of *`Aqdamut*, the image of R. Meir is glorified. Even though he is not the actual agent of the redemption of the community, he is one of the heroes of the story. He is the one chosen by the community to represent them in the search for the rescuer from beyond the Sambatyon. As in many tales of a would-be hero being given a nearly impossible task to fulfill, R. Meir in this tale does fulfill the task of finding the land beyond the Sambatyon and convincing the ten lost tribes to dispatch help, all within the limited amount of time allotted to him. Finally, he sacrifices his normal life, including contact with his family forever, for the sake of the community. In this way, he fulfills, in a most literal and impressive way, his honorific “*Sheli’a@h Tsibbur*,” “Messenger of the Community.” In addition to “representing” them in prayer as the precentor, as he did in reality, in the tale, he is a messenger of the community in the sense of going on a daring mission on their behalf.

The tale incorporates historical-sounding details, including a date, and the names of actual personages and places in order to give the story a tone of historical reality. Of course, many of the historical-sounding details work so well in the tale because they did, indeed, connect to paradigms of actual historical events that Jewish communities would know about in general over the centuries. One such feature is the turning to non-Jewish authorities, such as the king, for protection against an enemy.⁷

According to the tale, the king’s ability to protect the endangered Jews proved to be limited, again, not unlike the reality of many medieval Jewish communities in Europe. In having the Jews ultimately turn to the ten lost tribes of Israel for help, the tale indirectly expresses a feeling of helplessness on behalf of those who told the story and those who identified with it. This element of the story must have connected with generations of European Jews who knew only too well the vulnerable position of their community because of its usual inability, in times of peril, to turn for truly dependable aid to any individual or group, Jewish or non-Jewish.

From a different perspective, the role of the messenger from the ten lost tribes also demonstrates faith in God, and the ultimate success of that messenger displays God’s faithfulness in protecting His beleaguered people. God’s role is hinted at through the

⁶ Because of this, the tale is often called “*Ma’aseh `Aqdamut*.” See Howard Schwartz, *Miriam’s Tambourine: Jewish Folktales From Around the World*, (New York, 1986), 389. In at least one version, it is known as *Megillat `Aqdamut*, “The Scroll of *`Aqdamut*,” relating it, perhaps, to the biblical story of the rescue of the Jewish community of Persia from a cruel Jew-hater in *Megillat Esther*. See Yits@haq Rivkind, “*Megilat R. Meir Shats (He’arot Le-Ma’aseh `Aqdamut)*” *Ha-Doar*, 9, Issue #30, 3 *Sivan*, 5590/1929, 508, 2nd column.

⁷ A similar event actually occurred in Mainz just a few days before *Shavuot* in 1096 as the Crusader army of Count Emicho was encamped just outside the city gates. The Jews of the city sought, and received, temporary safety behind the fortified walls of the archbishop’s palace in Mainz. Ultimately, the Crusaders entered the city, penetrated the palace walls and massacred the Jews ensconced there. See Robert Chazan, *In the Year 1096: The First Crusade and the Jews*, (Philadelphia, 1996), xvii.

revelation in a dream to a scholar of the community that the true savior will come from the ten lost tribes. This was after the Jews had involved themselves in fasting, penitence, prayer, and charity. The dream, a biblical (and later) means of communication by God, especially under the circumstances that surround it in the tale, would certainly be understood by those who heard the tale, as a revelation from God.

For the Jews who knew the tale (and such knowledge was quite widespread among Ashkenazic Jewry over the centuries⁸), the chanting of *`Aqdamut* on *Shavuot* was understood through the lens of the tale.⁹ Even though the average Jew could likely not grasp the meaning of all of the Aramaic of the poem, there were many editions of the prayer book for *Shavuot* which included a Yiddish translation. The threatening aspect of the non-Jewish kingdoms in the *piyyut* (e.g., their words in verse 23: “for whose sake you die in the lion’s den”¹⁰) would be tied to the challenge and threat of the monk-sorcerer in the tale.

Similarly, the vindication of the Jews along with the final disgrace of the non-Jewish enemy in the tale would be connected to any number of verses from the *piyyut*, such as:

“When He shall bring light to me, but you will be covered in shame... He shall requite in kind to the haters and foes, but (He shall bring) righteousness to the nation that is beloved and abundantly meritorious... He shall cover (that nation) with His glory during the days and the nights, a canopy for (that nation) to adorn with praises” (verses 27-28, 30).¹¹

Similarly, too, at the very end of the poem (45b), the poet alludes directly to the holiday of *Shavuot* with the words “He desired and favored us and gave us the Torah.” This, too, brings to mind, structurally at least, the very end of the tale in which the community prepares to celebrate the holiday of *Shavuot*.

The cumulative effect of all the ways in which the *piyyut* was read in the light of the tale is to enhance the figure of R. Meir into one of a victorious champion of his people, and to

⁸ See Dov Noy’s commentary in Moshe Attias, *The Golden Feather*, 191; Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 258; Daniel Goldschmidt, “*`Aqdamut Millin*,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, (Jerusalem, 1972), 2:479.

⁹ For example, in a comment on the issue of when to recite *`Aqdamut*, R. Elijah ben Benjamin Wolf Shapira (1660-1712) expressly cites a version of the Yiddish tale: “There is also found (in) a long tale (“*ma’aseh*”) printed in old Yiddish that the reason it was ordained to chant *`Aqdamut* after “in the wilderness of Sinai” (i.e., the last two words of the first verse of the Torah reading for *Shavuot*, Exodus 19:1) is because this tale occurred in the wilderness, (and so, it is) a remembrance of the miracle.” See R. Elijah ben Benjamin Wolf Shapira, *Sefer Eliyah Rabbah*, (Jerusalem: 1999), *Hilkhhot Pesa@h* (the page is erroneously entitled *Hilkhhot Shabbat*), 494:5, p. 613.

¹⁰ References to verses of *`Aqdamut* throughout this paper are to my annotated translation in Appendix I.

¹¹ For a discussion of anti-Christian themes in Yiddish literature in a slightly later period, see Elisheva Carlebach, “The Anti-Christian Element in Early Modern Yiddish Culture,” published in the series *Braun Lectures in the History of the Jews of Prussia* of Bar-Ilan University 10, 2003.

boost the significance of *`Aqdamut* from a prayer offering mere encouragement and hope for future redemption to a celebratory hymn of a deliverance and liberation that already took place.

History of the Folktale

In 1929, Yits@haq Rivkind published the tale according to what he believed to be the earliest printed edition available, namely a 1694 edition in a *ma@hzor* from Fuerth (though he was convinced that it had probably been published before that), as well as according to an early manuscript deriving, most likely, from no later than the beginning of the sixteenth century.¹² About a year later, Rivkind wrote a follow-up article reporting that since his earlier article had appeared, a scholar in Amsterdam sent to Rivkind photos of a copy of the tale published 34 years earlier than Rivkind's "first" edition, namely, in 1660. The publication information in this earlier copy recorded that a press in Amsterdam reprinted the tale which had previously been released in Cremona.¹³ In that same follow-up article, Rivkind asserted that the only Hebrew versions of the tale appeared in 1902 and 1916; the former constituted only a summary, while the latter consisted of a full translation.¹⁴ Nevertheless, in 1976, Eli Yassif published a Hebrew version of the tale which not only predated these, but also predated the earliest Yiddish printed version that Rivkind had identified.¹⁵ This Hebrew version is found in a manuscript located in the Bibliotheque Nationale de France. The colophon states that it was copied in 1630. In point of fact, there are only superficial differences between this version and Rivkind's versions. The copiest of the 1630 Hebrew edition, Yisrael Kohen, says in his introduction that he had known of this story, but that it was only available to those who understood Yiddish ("*leshon `Ashkenazi*"), and even then, it was printed in only "one in a hundred old *`Ashkenazi ma@hzorim*."¹⁶ Even though his point was to emphasize the difficulty of obtaining a copy of the tale, his remark is testimony, if only anecdotally so, that the tale had been circulating in Yiddish even before 1630. He says that he desired to make this miraculous story more available to the Jewish community, and therefore, he availed

¹² Yits@haq Rivkind, "*Die Historische Allegoria Fun R. Meir Shats*," *Philologische Schriften Fun YIVO*, 3, Vilna, 1929, 1-42. He lists five editions of the Yiddish tale published since 1694 on pp. 13-15. See also Eli Yassif, "*Targum Kadmon V'Nusa@h Ivri Shel 'Ma'aseh `Aqdamut*," *Bikoret U'Farshanut*, 9-10, 1976, 214, n. 6.

¹³ Yits@haq Rivkind, "*Megillat R. Meir Shats (He'arot Le-Ma'aseih `Aqdamut)*," 508, second column. The Cremona edition – which is not extant – may have been published in 1566-1567. See Eli Yassif, "*Targum Kadmon*," 214, n. 7. See also C. Shmurek, "*Reishitah Shel Ha-Prozah Ha-Sippurit Be-Yiddish U'Merkazah B'Italia*," in Itiel Milano, Daniel Carpi, Alexander Rofei, eds., *Sefer Zikaron L'Aryeh Leone Carpi: Kovets Me@hkarim Le-Toldot Ha-Yehudim B'Italia*, (Milan and Jerusalem, 1967), 123-126.

¹⁴ Yits@haq Rivkind, "*Megillat R. Meir Shats*," 508, 2nd column. The summary version is *Sefer `Aqdamut*, with an interpretation by Moshe Bauman, (Warsaw, 1902), 41-42. The full version is Saul Mander, *Sefer Ma'aseh Gevurot Ha-Shem*, (Lemberg, 1916), with an introduction by Yehoshua Preminger HaKohen.

¹⁵ Eli Yassif, "*Targum Kadmon*," 214-228.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 218.

himself of another person who understood both Yiddish and Italian (“*leshon la’az*”)¹⁷ because he, Yisrael Kohen, did not understand Yiddish! In this way, he tells us, he translated the tale from a Yiddish written version, through an oral Italian translation, into a written Hebrew version.¹⁸

The Yiddish tale continues to enjoy a lively written and oral life.¹⁹ The tale also exists in two, abridged versions in English (in Rivkind’s edition, the Yiddish tale is about 15 pages long).²⁰

R. Meir ben Yits@haq and `Aqdamut

`Aqdamut was written by R. Meir ben Yits@haq Nehorai *Sheli’a@h Tsibbur* of Worms in the 11th century. He functioned not only as rabbi, but also as cantor. Hence, the name *Sheli’a@h Tsibbur*, “Messenger of the Community,” the common Hebrew term for one who leads the community in worship services. The name *Nehorai* (“bright, illumined,” or “illuminator” in Aramaic; a translation of his Hebrew name *Meir*) is apparently an honorific bestowed upon him as an allusion to an epithet given to the talmudic R. Meir in *b’Eruvin* 13b. Not much is certain about his personal history beyond the following: The names of two of his sons are recorded as Jacob and Isaac, and his grandfather’s name was Shemuel. Isaac apparently perished at the hands of the Crusaders in Worms in 1096. It seems that R. Meir, himself, died a short time before the Crusaders reached the Rhineland, although no definite information on how and when he died has reached us.²¹ If such information was lacking as well in the centuries immediately following his death,

¹⁷ *Leshon la’az*, according to Yassif, *Ibid*, 214. My thanks to the anonymous reader who points out that the manuscript was written in Italy and refers to Italian in several places.

¹⁸ Joseph Dan has identified what he described as a Hebrew story from the early 13th century which served as a skeletal framework for what later developed into the later Yiddish tale. See his “An Early Hebrew Source of the Yiddish ‘Aqdamoth’ Story,” *Hebrew University Studies in Literature*, 1 (1973), 39-46. Whether or not Dan’s theory has merit, there is no doubt that the Yiddish tale’s oral origins predate any of the written versions we possess.

¹⁹ It has been reprinted in Yiddish and Hebrew through contemporary times. Yiddish versions are found, among other places, in children’s booklets published by the Hasidic community on a near-annual basis. A recent Hebrew version is found toward the end of *Yalkut Mattan Torateinu: Shavuot, (Yagdil Torah, Jerusalem, 2007)* published by the Belzer Hasidic community. (This anthology is not paginated from the beginning, but only within each excerpt).

²⁰ A detailed English summary of the Yiddish tale is found in Israel Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, translated from the Yiddish (Vilna, 1929-37) by Bernard Martin, (H.U.C. and Ktav, 1975), 7:177-180. A more recent English version of the tale, with details woven in from several similar “miracle” stories, is found in “The Black Monk and the Master of the Name,” Howard Schwartz, *Miriam’s Tambourine*, 335-348; commentary, 388-390. The commentary on this story includes a list of what Schwartz calls “variants” of this tale. Some, indeed, seem to be based upon, and adapted from, the Yiddish tale. Others on the list simply reflect one or more of the general themes of the tale, and so, could not justifiably be called true “variants” of this story.

²¹ See Avraham Grossman, *@Hakhmei `Ashkenaz Ha-Rishonim*, (Jerusalem, 1981), 292, nn. 140-141, and 293, n. 148.

that would have provided the tale with an opportunity for telling of his ending of his days in the mythical region beyond the Sambatyon. At least 48 of his *piyyutim* are known to us, in Hebrew and in Aramaic. Of them, his best known work remains *`Aqdamut*.²² Fraenkel's critical apparatus notes that the first manuscripts we have which include *`Aqdamut* are from the mid-13th century²³ (though these may not be the first texts in which *`Aqdamut* is found).

In halakhic literature, the recital of *`Aqdamut* is first mentioned in *Sefer Ha-Minhagim* of R. Avraham Klausner, (d. 1407/8), and in *Sefer Ha-Maharil*, by Klausner's student and nephew, R. Jacob Moellin (1360?-1427).²⁴ The poem was first published as part of a prayer book in the 1557 *Mahzor Mikol Ha-Shanah KeMinhag Ha-`Ashkenazim U'KheMa@hzor Saloniki*.²⁵ Its recital is mentioned in the *Levush* by R. Mordecai Jaffe, (published in 1604), and in a comment of *Turei Zahav* on *Shul@han Arukh, Ora@h*

²² For general information on R. Meir ben Yits@haq and *`Aqdamut*, see: Avraham Grossman, *Hakhmei Ashkenaz Ha-Rishonim*, 292-296; Jonah Fraenkel, *Ma@hzor Shavuot* (Jerusalem/New York, 2000), xxviii f, 385-395; Israel Davidson, *Otsar Ha-Shira Veba-Piyyut*, (New York: 1924, 1929, 1930, 1933; Reissue, 1970), 1:7314, 4:274-5; Leon J. Weinberger, *Jewish Hymnography: A Literary History*, (London, 1998), 160-161; Daniel Goldschmidt, "*`Aqdamut Millin*," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2:479; Abraham David, "Meir ben Isaac Sheli'a@h @Zibbur," *Ibid*, 11:1255; Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 154, 258; Leopold Zunz, *Literaturgeschichte der synagogalen Poesie*, (Berlin, 1865), 252f., *Idem, Die synagogale Poesie des Mittelalters*, Vol. 1, *Die synagogale Poesie*, ed. by a. Freimann, (Berlin, 1855), Alan F. Lavin, "The Liturgical Poems of Meir bar Isaac," unpublished doctoral dissertation for The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1984; 181.

²³ The earliest manuscript that can be dated to a specific year in Fraenkel's critical apparatus is from 1279. See Fraenkel, *Ma@hzor Shavuot*, 385.

²⁴ *Sefer Ha-Minhagim LeRabeinu Avraham Klausner*, ed. Shelomo J. Spitzer, (Jerusalem, 2005), 121. *Sefer Maharil: Minhagim*, ed., Shelomo J. Spitzer, (Jerusalem, 1989), p. 161.

²⁵ Israel Davidson, *Ozar Ha-Shira Veba-Piyyut*, 1:7314.

@*Haim* by R. David ben Shemuel Ha-Levy (1586-1667).²⁶ From then on, it is found in nearly all prayer books in the Ashkenazic rite.²⁷

Accounting For The Longevity of *`Aqdamut*: History, Folklore, and Meaning

The year 1096 is a crucial year for the city of Worms, as well as for nearby Mainz and Cologne. That was the year that these towns (and, to a lesser extent, Speyer, and the surrounding area) suffered the First Crusade's worst anti-Jewish violence in Europe. The confrontations occurred around the holiday of *Shavuot*. The events of that year, known in later Jewish sources as *Gezeirot Tatnu*, "The Decrees of (the year) 4856 (= 1096)," or, more importantly, the Jewish memory of those events, magnified the significance of the tale about R. Meir, and of *`Aqdamut*.²⁸

The severity of the losses in Worms, Mainz, and Cologne – the destruction of nearly the entire Jewish community there – was worse than anywhere else in the region. And although the Jewish communities rebounded and rebuilt, these killings – the very first outbreak of Christian anti-Semitic mass-murder in Europe – left a lasting impression on the Jewish consciousness of the region. The impact was expressed in the large number of rituals (including annual fasts) which arose and prayers which were composed to memorialize the dead. The best known elegy for the events of 1096 is the prayer *Av Ha-*

²⁶ *Turei Zahav* ("TaZ") is one of a number of commentators who object to the insertion of *`Aqdamut* after the blessing over the first *aliyah* of Torah reading has been pronounced. The objection is that the *piyyut* represents an impermissible interruption (*hefsek*) once the blessing has been recited. See his comment on *Shul@han Arukh, Ora@h @Haim* 494:1. The *Levush*, on the other hand, supported the recitation of *`Aqdamut* after the blessing has been said. See *Levush, Ora@h @Haim* 494: 3. See also Fraenkel, *Ma@zor Shavuot*, xxviii, n. 167. Since *`Aqdamut* was meant as an introduction to the *Targum*, the natural place for the *piyyut* is, indeed, immediately after the first verse of the Torah reading and just before the reading of the *Targum*. This would, of course, place the *piyyut* after the recitation of the blessing which precedes the Torah reading. It seems that as time went on, and the *Targum* was read less and less on *Shavuot*, support for retaining *`Aqdamut* in its natural place diminished. That ultimately led nearly all congregations that chant *`Aqdamut* do so before the blessing which precedes the Torah reading.

²⁷ One curious exception is that for many centuries, *`Aqdamut* has not been recited in Worms, the city which is so closely associated with the composer of the *piyyut*. The facts surrounding this circumstance are, to this day, not entirely clear. Apparently, *`Aqdamut* had been recited in Worms until, perhaps, the 16th century. From then on, it has not been recited there. An early explanation contends that the recitation of *`Aqdamut* in Worms ceased because one year, in the middle of its recitation in Worms, the precentor who was chanting it, had been "taken by God," i.e., he died. Many other explanations, including political theories (i.e., a prayer with anti-gentile overtones was not recited in the author's home town so as not to arouse the ire of the gentiles) have been advanced, but there is little to support any of them. The record of the custom that the *piyyut* is not recited in Worms is found in the 17th century book of customs from Worms: Yits@haq Zimmer, ed., *Minhagim De-Kehillah Kedoshah Wormaiza Le-Rabbi Yuzpa Shamash*, (Jerusalem, 1988), *Siman* 104, p. 112. In n. 13, Zimmer cites the sources which attempt to explain this custom. See also, Jonah Fraenkel, *Ma@hzor Shavuot*, xxviii, n. 167 who is the source for the suggestion that the recitation of *`Aqdamut* in Worms may have ceased in the 16th century.

²⁸ I am grateful to Lucia Raspe who shared with me her paper "Vicarious Victories Over Christianity in Medieval Jewish Hagiography" from the International Medieval Congress sponsored by the Institute for Medieval Studies at the University of Leeds, England, July 10, 2006. It is being prepared for publication in the journal *Aschkenas* under the tentative title "*Zwischen Worms und Tiberias: Ein deutscher Wunderrabbi und sein Wandergrab.*"

Rahamim, found, to this day, in nearly all traditional Ashkenazic prayer books. It memorializes the dead as *ha-ḥasidim veḥa-yesharim veḥa-temimim*, “the pious, and the upright, and the pure” but mainly calls upon God to avenge the dead. There are many others.²⁹

It is in the light of these kinds of rites and prayers that the significance of *`Aqdamut* and the tale should be understood. Chronicles of the events were certainly written and read, but these were not recited in any regular way, whether weekly or annually, on the anniversary of the events.³⁰ The way the horrific events of 1096 were absorbed into Jewish memory was mainly through the incorporation of religious poetry which commemorated the losses.

As the Yiddish tale circulated and became known, the image of R. Meir, the author of *`Aqdamut* became inseparable, in Ashkenazic Jewish consciousness, from the image of R. Meir, the hero-rabbi who saved Rhenish Jewry from the evil monk. Although *`Aqdamut* was probably not written in order to venerate the events and the losses of 1096, its association with R. Meir must have brought to mind Jewish vengeance and vindication for the Crusader attacks, especially as more and more time separated contemporary Jews from the late 11th century.

This brings us back to our original question regarding *`Aqdamut*'s longevity. I believe that we approach an answer to the question when we view the poem the way its readers did in the centuries which followed its composition, namely, in the context of the Yiddish tale and with the memory of the attacks of the Crusaders. Later generations could not have missed the connections between the theme of *`Aqdamut*, the locale of the author of *`Aqdamut*, the locale of the threatened-then-redeemed Jewish community in the tale, and the locale of the true-to-life anti-Jewish mass murder that took place at the same historical time period of R. Meir at the same time of year as the climax of the tale.

The theme of *`Aqdamut* is Israel's great merit before God because of their loyalty in the face of persecutions and enticements by the nations. The location of the author of

²⁹ A number of other hymns as well as fasts to commemorate “The Decrees of 1096” can be found, e.g., in the same volume that contains one of the first mentions of reciting *`Aqdamut* in a Halakhic compendium, namely, *Sefer Maharil: Minhagim*, Shlomo J. Spitzer, ed., *Hilkhot Shavuot*, 1; p. 459. See, too, Avraham David, “Historical Records of the Persecutions During the First Crusade in Hebrew Printed Works and Archives,” in Y.T. Assis, et al, eds., *Facing the Cross* (Hebrew), (Magnes: Jerusalem, 2000), esp. 197-98. See also, Israel Jacob Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles: 2006), 103-109. I express my gratitude to the anonymous reader for the previous two references. See, too, David Wachtel, “The Ritual and Liturgical Commemoration of Two Medieval Persecutions,” unpublished M.A. Dissertation for Columbia University.

³⁰ Gerson Cohen took the approach that notwithstanding this fact, the Hebrew Crusade Chronicles ought to be understood from a liturgical perspective. See Gerson D. Cohen, “The Hebrew Crusade Chronicles and the Ashkenazic Tradition,” in Marc Brettler and Michael Fishbane, eds., *Min@hah le-Nahum: Biblical and Other Studies Presented to Nahum Sarna*, (Sheffield, 1993), 36-53.

`Aqdamut is Worms. The location of the threatened-then-redeemed Jewish community of the tale is also Worms. The anti-Jewish attacks of the Crusades occurred in Worms and its environs. R. Meir lived until about 1096, and the attacks occurred in 1096. The time of year of the attacks surrounded the holiday of *Shavuot*. The *piyyut* was written for the holiday of *Shavuot*. The climax of the tale took place just prior to the holiday of *Shavuot*.

My conclusion is that all of these elements blended in the following manner: The Yiddish tale bound together R. Meir, his *piyyut*, and the essentials of the Crusader attacks in such a way as to provide succor to Jewish communities which suffered demoralizing defeat and bereavement in the wake of the First Crusade. The encouragement and hope offered by the *piyyut* on its own, were reinforced and augmented by the retelling of the tale, so that the memory of defeat and death were softened and mollified (though not entirely relieved), in generation after generation, by the story of the defeat and death of the anti-Semitic black monk. That defeat was effected by the unlikely anti-hero of Dan, the old, limping, short Jew, who was the master of a spiritual wisdom which trumped the avenging monk. Dan was enlisted by the pious *Sheliah Zibbur*, the “messenger of the community” of Worms, the author of *`Aqdamut*. Jews in successive generations of medieval Europe took hope and courage from the *piyyut*. In this way, the tale and the memory of the Crusader violence bolstered and augmented the power of the main theme of *`Aqdamut* to offer consolation, faith, hope, and strength to Jewish communities over the centuries. All of this was encompassed in the annual recitation of *`Aqdamut* on the holiday of *Shavuot*. *`Aqdamut* would likely have fallen into desuetude not long after the *Targum*, which it was meant to introduce, was itself discontinued on *Shavuot* in Europe. However, the original theme of the poem, as seen through the lens of the Yiddish tale and as filtered through the memory of the losses of the First Crusade, has preserved this 90-line Aramaic poem in the liturgy for nearly a thousand years since its composition.

Appendix I: A New Annotated Translation of *`Aqdamut*³¹

1. *`Alef*

The introduction of words and the opening of speech:³²

At the beginning I request authority and permission.

2. *Bet*

Trembling, I will begin with two or three entries,

³¹ The Hebrew translation and commentary of *`Aqdamut* by Jonah Fraenkel, *Ma@hzor Shavuot*, 385-395, stand head and shoulders above all other previous attempts, and I owe a debt of gratitude to his work. He, in turn, owes a debt to the translation and commentary of *`Aqdamut* by Wolf Heidenheim, (1757-1832): Wolf ben Shimshon Heidenheim, *Ma@hzor Le-@Hag Ha-Shavuot*, (Roedelheim, 1805). Heidenheim’s German translation of *`Aqdamut* was rendered into Hebrew and published, along with his Hebrew commentary, in a separate booklet in *Seder `Aqdamut v`Arkhin Im Perush Vetargum*, (Tel Aviv, 1963).

³² An unprejudiced interpretation of the wording of this line is that the *payyeta*n is merely introducing the words of his poem and not the words of the Ten Commandments.

With the consent of (the One Who) supports (us) through our old age.³³

3. *Gimel*

Eternal glory is His and cannot be described,
(Even) if the heavens were parchment and all the forests pens;

4. *Dalet*

(And even) if all seas and gathered waters (were) ink,
(and) earth's inhabitants (were all) scribes and authors.

5. *Heh*

Splendid is the Master of the heavens and the ruler of the earth,
He alone established the world and conquered it.³⁴

6. *Vav*

Without effort³⁵ and weariness He completed it,
And through the use of an insignificant letter, one with no substance.³⁶

7. *Zayin*

He completed all of His work in those six days,
(After which), the radiance of His glory³⁷ ascended upon His throne of fire.

8. *@Het*

A force of thousands upon thousands, a throng, serves (Him),
They sprout forth anew each morning; with great faithfulness.³⁸

³³ Based on Is 46:4 – “Til you grow old, I will still be the same; When you turn gray, it is I who will carry.” Most biblical translations are from the New Jewish Publication Society edition (NJPS), *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, (Philadelphia, 1999). Occasionally, I have supplied my own translation.

³⁴ Referring, perhaps, to those passages in the Bible wherein God is described as having to fight primordial forces for control of the world, e.g., Is 27:1, Ps 104:9, Jb 38:8-11.

³⁵ *Le`u*, in this sense, is used by *Targum Onqelos* on Gn 31:42.

³⁶ See *Midrash Bereshit Rabba* ed. J. Theodor, Ch. Albeck, (Wahrmann Books, Jerusalem: 1965), 12:10; I: 107. The Midrash understands the word *be-hibar`am* (Gn 2:4) to mean *beheh bera`am*, “God created the heavens and the earth by using the letter *heh*.” “*Be-hibar`am* – R. Abbahu in the name of R. Yo@hanan: With a *heh* He created them. Just as all the letters (of the alphabet) make a sound and the *heh* does not, so, too, did the Holy One, Blessed be He, create His world without labor and effort.”

³⁷ *Targum Yonatan* translates *minogah negdo* in Ps 18:13 (“Out of the brilliance before Him”) with the words in this line: *zehor yekarei*.

³⁸ In *b@Hag* 14a, Shemuel quotes to R. @Hiyya bar Rav the “elevated words” of R. @Hiyya’s father, to the effect that angels are created daily, each morning. He connects Dn 7:10 and Lam 3:23 as they are in this line. Dn 7:10 – “...Thousands upon thousands served Him; Myriads upon myriads attended Him.” Lam 3:23 – “They are renewed every morning – Ample is Your faithfulness!”

9. *Tet*

Six-winged *Serafim*, blazing greatly
Are silent until consent is given to them.³⁹

10. *Yod*

They receive (the consent) at once, without hesitation,
(Chanting) their three-fold *Qedushah*: “His glory fills all the earth.”

11. *Kaf*

Like the sound of *Shaddai*, like the sound of many waters,⁴⁰
Cherubs opposite *Ofans* rise up in a roar.⁴¹

12. *Lamed*

To gaze upon the Face, an appearance of the radiance of the rainbow.⁴²
They rush quickly to every place they are sent.

13. *Mem*

They bless His glory⁴³ in every kind of concealed chant,⁴⁴

³⁹ The angels themselves extend permission to each other, as in the next line, and as in several forms of the prayer *Qedushah*. The image of the six-winged angels comes from Is 6:2. See Mordecai Yits@haqi, “*Ha-Piyyut ‘Aqdamut Millin’ U’Mivneh Ha-Qedushah*,” *Mahut*, 15, Winter, 1995, 61-65.

⁴⁰ Ez 1: 24 – “When they moved, I could hear the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the sound of Shaddai...”

⁴¹ Ez 3:12 – “The spirit carried me away, and behind me a I heard a great roaring sound...” In the Book of Ez (chapter 1 and 10:15-20), the many references to *ofanim* (*gilgelin* in the Aramaic of *Aqdamut*) appear to mean “wheels” of the angelic apparatus. In later Jewish tradition, these were interpreted to denote a category of angel, as in *Qedushah DeYotser*, and in the many *piyyutim* known as *Ofanim*. Apparently, that is the intention here as well.

⁴² Ez 1:28-29 – “Like the appearance of the bow which shines in the clouds on a day of rain, such was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. That was the appearance of the semblance of the Presence of the LORD.”

⁴³ Ez 3:12, interpreted, according to tradition, as relating the words that Ezekiel heard, “Then a spirit carried me away, and behind me I heard a great roaring sound: ‘Blessed is the Glory of the Lord in His place.’”

⁴⁴ *Le@hishta*, means literally “whispering,” but it may not mean that here since the text referenced (Ez 3:12) says explicitly “a great roaring sound.” Cf. Fraenkel, 388.

From the place of His Glory⁴⁵ which requires no searching.⁴⁶

14. *Nun*

All the celestial force roars; (they all) extol in trembling,⁴⁷
 “May He reign for all generations, forever.”⁴⁸

15. *Samekh*

His *Qedushah* is arranged with them, and when the time passes,
 It is the end forever; (they do not recite it) even once in seven years.⁴⁹

16. *‘Ayin*

His own dear possession⁵⁰ are beloved because they regularly
 Set praise for him morning and evening.

17. *Peh*

They are distinguished as His portion, to do His will,
 The wonders of His praise they declare and chant.

18. *Tsadi*

⁴⁵ *Targum* to Ez 3:12.

⁴⁶ Fraenkel, *ibid*, interprets “needs no searching in advance, because His place is not known.” This logic is forced. If the intention is that His place is not known, the poet wouldn’t say that it “requires no searching,” he would say that it cannot be searched. Fraenkel is, apparently, influenced by other sources such as the 8th century *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*, end of chapter 4, which says that even the angels do not know God’s place. That is the reason they say “Blessed is the Presence of the Lord *from His place*” (Ez 3:12). What the poet means here is, perhaps, that His place needs no searching by the angels, because they DO know its place, as the previous couplet (*Lammed*) says, they “gaze upon the Face.” Heidenheim, *Seder ‘Aqdamut v’Arkhin Im Peirush v’Targum*, 6, interprets that His place needs no searching because “His presence fills all the earth” (Is 6:3, cited above, in verse 10).

⁴⁷ The line begins in the singular and continues in the plural.

⁴⁸ Ps 146:10. A verse found in many versions of the *Qedushah*.

⁴⁹ This verse, along with the next one, is comprehensible only in the context of a talmudic discussion of Jacob’s encounter with the divine being in Gn 32:27, “Then he said, ‘Let me go, for dawn is breaking.’” *b@Hul* 91b comments that this angel asked to be released because his opportunity to recite “song” (*shirah*) had arrived for the first time since he was created. The Talmud goes on to say that Israel is favored by God over the angels, the basis for the next line, *‘Ayin*, and a pivotal point in *‘Aqdamut*, as the poem turns from a description of the angels to praise of Israel, favored over the angels, favored over the nations. While Israel chants every hour, the angels chant “only once a day, and some say, once a week, and some say once a month, and some say once a year, and some say once every seven years, and some say once in a Jubilee (50 years), and some say once in eternity (*ba-olam*).” The angels’ “song” is said to be the Isaiah verse from the *Qedushah* (Is 6:3), while Israel’s is *Shem’a* (Deuteronomy 6:4). Therefore, the meaning of this line is that Israel is favored by God even over the angels because the angels’ praise occurs only once in eternity, while Israel’s occurs several times a day.

⁵⁰ *‘Adav ‘a@hsanteh* is the rendering of *Targum Onkelos* to Dt 32:9, *@Hevel na@halato*, “his own allotment,” i.e., Israel. Again, the verse begins in the singular and concludes in the plural.

He desires, craves and yearns (for them) because they exert much effort⁵¹ in study,
Their prayers, He therefore, accepts and their petition is effective.

19. *Qaf*

(Their prayer) is attached to the crown of the Eternal One, through an oath,
Next to the phylactery that is everlastingly set (there).⁵²

20. *Resh*

Inscribed in (the phylactery) is wisdom and discernment,
The greatness of Israel, who recite the *Shem 'a*.⁵³

21. *Shin*

Praise like this of God's (for Israel)
Is proper for me to express before the kingdoms (of the world).

22. *Tav*

They⁵⁴ come and gather like the appearance of waves,
They are amazed and ask about the miracles.

23. *Mem/`Alef*

“From where and just who is your love, (you) who are beautiful to behold,

⁵¹ *Dela`un*. Same root as in verse 6 – *lei`u*, “effort.”

⁵² The images are based on various rabbinic traditions. *Shemot Rabba* 21:4 teaches that an angel is especially appointed to take the prayers of Israel (as in the previous line of our poem) and to form crowns which will adorn God's head. In *Pesiqta Rabbati, Parashat Mattan Torah*, the angel “adjures” (*mashbi'a*) the crown to sit upon God's head. Cf. @Hag 13b and *Heikhalot Rabbati* in Peter Schafer, ed., *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, (Tubingen, 1982), p. 13, #25. The image of God wearing phylacteries is found in *bBer* 6a.

⁵³ *bBer* 6a contains several suggestions as to which biblical verses are inscribed in God's phylacteries. One is Dt 4:7, “For what great nation is there...” Dt 4:6 contains the praise of Israel “Surely that great nation is a wise and discerning people.” Therefore, the sense of the verse is that God's phylacteries contain a biblical verse which hints at the wisdom and discernment of Israel. And perhaps it is hinting at the fact that Israel's phylacteries contain two paragraphs of the *Shem 'a*, as well.

⁵⁴ The non-Jewish kingdoms.

For whose sake you die in the lion's den?⁵⁵

24. *Yod/Resh*

Honored and beautiful will you be if you intermingle with the realms,
Your will we will do everywhere.”⁵⁶

25. *Bet/Yod*

With wisdom she answers them;⁵⁷ the (Messianic) End (she) describes,
“If you only knew Him in wisdom, in intimate knowledge.

26. *Resh/Resh*

What significance has the ‘greatness’ (that you promise) compared to that great praise,
Of what He will do for me when the Redemption shall come!

27. *Bet/Yod*

When He shall bring light to me, but you will be covered in shame.
When His glory shall be revealed in strength and pride.”⁵⁸

28. *Yod/Tsadi*

He shall requite in kind to the haters and foes,⁵⁹
But (He shall bring) vindication to the nation that is beloved and abundantly meritorious.

29. *@Het/Qaf*

⁵⁵ The non-Jewish kingdoms address Israel. This couplet and the next several are based upon the following passage from *Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael, Masekhta DeShirata*, 3. The following translation is from Jacob Z. Lauterbach, *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, (Philadelphia, 1935, 1961), 2:26-27: “R. Akiba says: I shall speak of the prophecies and the praises of Him by whose word the world came into being, before all the nations of the world. For all the nations of the world ask Israel, saying: ‘What is thy beloved more than another beloved, that thou dost so adjure us’ (Cant. 5.9), so that you are ready to die for Him, and so ready to let yourselves be killed for Him? – For it is said: ‘Therefore do the maidens love Thee’ (ibid 1.3), meaning, they love Thee unto death. And it is also written: ‘Nay but for Thy sake are we killed all the day’ (Ps. 44.23). – ‘You are handsome, you are mighty, come intermingle with us.’ But the Israelites say to the nations of the world: ‘Do you know Him? Let us but tell you some of His praise: ‘My beloved is white and ruddy,’ etc. (Cant. 5:10). As soon as the nations of the world hear some of His praise, they say to the Israelites: ‘We will join you,’ as it is said: ‘Whither is thy beloved gone, O thou fairest among women? Whither hath thy beloved turned him, that we may seek him with thee’ (ibid 6.1). The Israelites, however, say to the nations of the world: You can have no share in Him, but ‘My beloved is mine and I am his’ (Cant. 2.16), ‘I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine,’ etc. (ibid 6.3).” The reference to the lion’s den alludes to Dn 6:17.

⁵⁶ The nations entice Israel.

⁵⁷ Israel answers the nations.

⁵⁸ “When He shall bring light to me... When His glory...” is based upon Is 60:1 – “...your light has dawned; The Glory of the Lord has shone upon you!”

⁵⁹ Based upon Is 59:18, “...He shall make requital to His enemies, requital to the distant lands.” The language of the poem is very close to that of the *Targum* to this verse.

When He brings complete joy, (that nation shall be a) pure vessel⁶⁰
For the city of Jerusalem when He gathers in the exiled.

30. *Yod/Gimel*

He shall cover (that nation) with His glory during the day and night,
A canopy for (that nation) to adorn with praises.⁶¹

31. *Dalet/Lamed*

For the glow of the clouds will beautify the canopies;
According to the effort, shall each shelter be made.⁶²

32. *Bet/Tav*

In chairs of pure gold, in seven levels,
The places of the righteous, before the Master of (all) deeds.⁶³

33. *Vav/Resh*

And their appearance will be of perfect joy,
(As) heaven in its splendor and the stars of light.⁶⁴

34. *Heh/Vav*

Beauty which the lips cannot express,

⁶⁰ Based upon Is 66:20 – “And out of all the nations, said the Lord, they shall bring all your brothers... to Jerusalem My holy mountain as an offering to the Lord – just as the Israelites bring an offering in a pure vessel to the House of the Lord.”

⁶¹ This image is based upon Is 4:5-6 (and see *Mekhilta, Pis@ha* 14 – in Lauterbach, *Mekhilta*, p. 108) – “The Lord will create over the whole shrine and meeting place of Mount Zion cloud by day and smoke with a glow of flaming fire by night. Indeed, over all the glory shall hang a canopy, which shall serve as a pavilion for shade from heat by day and as a shelter for protection against drenching rain.”

⁶² See *bbb* 75a where Is 4:5 is cited (see previous footnote) and interpreted to mean that “The Holy One, blessed be He, will make for everyone a canopy according to his honor.”

⁶³ “In chairs of pure gold” may be based upon *bKet* 77b, “(In the World to Come) R. Shimon bar Yo@hai was sitting upon 13 chairs of gold.” “In seven levels” is very close to the language of *Beit Ha-Midrash, Seder Gan Eden*, 3, Adolph Jellinek, *Beit Ha-Midrash*, v. 2, (Jerusalem, 1967) 133, “The righteous are in seven levels (*shev’a ma’a lot*) in the Garden of Eden...” See also *Yalkut Shim’oni* on Gn 2:8, #20, 7a: “... (In the Garden of Eden there will be) seven groupings (literally, “houses,” *batim*) of the righteous...”

⁶⁴ Based upon *VaYikra Rabba*, ed. Mordecai Margalio, (Wahrmann Books, Jerusalem: 1972), 40:2, 692: “In Your presence is perfect joy...’ (Ps 16:11). Don’t read *sov’a*, ‘perfect,’ rather *shev’a*, ‘seven.’ These are the seven classes of the righteous who, in the future, will be present with the *Shekhinah*, and their faces will resemble the sun and the moon, the heaven and the stars.”

Nor was heard or seen in prophetic visions.⁶⁵

35. *Bet/Mem*

No eye (ever) held sway over the Garden of Eden,
(Yet) they (the righteous of Israel) will circle in a dance with the *Shekhinah*.⁶⁶

36. *‘Ayin/Shin*

They will point to Him, although in trembling,
“We hoped for him in our captivity with great faith.”⁶⁷

37. *Yod/Mem*

He will lead us eternally as robust youths,⁶⁸
(In) our portion,⁶⁹ which has previously been set aside as a gift.

⁶⁵ This refers to the beauty of the World to Come. Is 64:3 reads “Such things had never been heard or noted. No eye has seen (them), O God, but You...” (Fraenkel, 393, cites, in what must be a typographical mistake, Psalms 64:3 instead of Isaiah 64:3). This is interpreted in *Berakhot* 34b as follows: “R. @Hiyya bar Abba also said in the name of R. Yo@hanan: All the prophets prophesied only for the days of the Messiah (i.e., their predictions referred to this time period), but as for the World to Come, ‘No eye has seen (them) O God, but You.’” (The exegesis of Is 64:3 in *bBer* 34b figures in verse 42 below, as well).

⁶⁶ “...no eye holds sway over the Garden of Eden” is based upon the continuation of the statement in *bBer* 34b cited in the previous note: “R. Samuel ben Nahmani said: This is Eden, which has never been seen by the eye of any creature.”

“They (the righteous of Israel) circle” (*metailei*) is based upon *Sifr`a*, *Be@hukotai*, chapter 3:3, 120b: “In the future, the Holy One, blessed be He, will stroll (*metayel*) with the righteous in the Garden of Eden.”

“...in a dance with the *Shekhinah*” is based upon *bTa’an* 31a (the very end of the tractate), “In the future, the Holy One, blessed be He, will arrange a dance with the righteous and He will sit among them in the Garden of Eden, and every one of them will point (to God) with his finger as it is said ‘In that day they shall say: This is our God...’” (Is 25:9). The continuation of this verse is referred to in the next line of the poem. See Mordecai Yits@haqi, “*Ha-Piyyut ‘Aqdamut Millin’ La-Shavuot: Hashlamah Le-Ma’amar Ha-Piyyut ‘Aqdamut Millin’ Umivneh Ha-Qedushah*,” *Mahut*, 18, Fall, 1996, 102-103.

⁶⁷ “We hoped for Him,” as in Is 25:9 (see previous note) “In that day they shall say: This is our God; we hoped for Him and He delivered us. This is the Lord, for whom we hoped...”

⁶⁸ “...eternally as... youths,” is a translation of the poem’s *almin aleimin*. This phrase is based upon *VaYikra Rabba*, ed. Margalioth, 11:9, 240-242: “R. Berekhiah and R. Helbo and ‘Ulla Birah and R. ‘Elazar (said) in the name of R. @Hanina: In the future, the Holy one, Blessed be He, will be at the head of a dance for the righteous... and they rise robustly and point to him with a finger and say ‘For this God, is our God forever, He will lead us eternally’ (Ps 48:15). ‘*Al mut* – ‘eternally’ – (means) ‘robustly’; ‘*al mut* like those ‘*ulemta* (young maidens who dance)... ‘*Al mut* – Aqilas translated ‘eternally,’ a world that has no death (as if it were spelled *almut* with an ‘alef’ at the beginning instead of an ‘ayin, and as if it were two words: ‘*al mut* – “no death”). (Another interpretation: ‘*Al mut*, (understood as ‘*olamot*) ‘in two worlds’; He shall lead us in this world and He shall lead us in the World to Come.” This line of the poem ingeniously weaves both interpretations of ‘*al mut* into one line: “robustly” and “eternally.”

⁶⁹ That is, our bliss in paradise.

38. *Tet/Vav*.

The contest of Leviathan and the Ox of the tall mountain,
As they struggle one on one in battle,⁷⁰

39. *Bet/Yod*

Behemoth will gore with its horns in strength,
The fish will leap to meet it using its fins with might.

40. *Mem/Alef*

Its maker draws His sword upon it with power,⁷¹
A feast and a meal will He prepare for the righteous.

41. *Mem/Nun*

They will be seated at tables of rubies and precious stones;⁷²
Rivers of balsam flow before them.⁷³

42. *Vav/Het*

And they delight and refresh themselves with refreshing cups,
Grape wine from Creation preserved in wine vats.⁷⁴

43. *Zayin/Qaf*

Righteous ones:

⁷⁰ The scene is found in *VaYikra Rabba*, ed. Margalio, 13:3, 1:277f.: "...R. Yudan son of R. Shim'on said Behemoth and Leviathan are the beasts of the contest for the righteous in the future to come, and anyone who has not seen the gentile nations' beasts of the contest in this world will merit to see them in the World to Come. How are they slaughtered? Behemoth smites Leviathan with its horns and pierces it, and Leviathan smites at Behemoth with its fins and tears it." The "contest" described here is akin to the gladiatorial battles held in Roman amphitheaters. See the citations in Margalio's commentary, *ad locum*.

⁷¹ Jb 40-41 speaks at length of Behemoth and Leviathan. 40:19 reads (regarding Behemoth) "...Only his Maker can draw the sword against him." Paralleling this verse, *'Aqdamut* uses the singular: "It's maker draws His sword upon it..." *bBB* 75a contains an extended exegesis of some of these passages. While the verse explicitly says God will kill only Behemoth with the sword, Rashbam, commenting on the talmudic discussion (s.v. *Ha'oso yageish @harbo*) glosses "In Job, this is written regarding Behemoth, but the same applies to Leviathan." Presumably, the poem's intention is the same.

⁷² Is 54:12 appears to be the basis for the image of "rubies... precious stones":

"I will make your battlements of rubies,
Your gates of precious stones..."

⁷³ There are a number of references in rabbinic literature to rivers of balsam adorning the Garden of Eden for the righteous in the World to Come. See, for example, *Ta'anit* 25a, *yAZ* 3:1, 42c.

⁷⁴ Isaiah 64:3 says of the time of Salvation, "...*'ayin lo ra'atah 'Elohim zulat'kha...*," "...No eye has seen (such things), O God, but You..." Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, in *bBer* 34b, interprets one of the miraculous rewards to the righteous in messianic times to be "wine preserved in its (very) grapes from the six days of Creation." In *'Aqdamut*, the poet modifies this image to wine preserved from the time of Creation in vats. (The exegesis of Is 64:3 in *bBer* 34b figures in verses 34-36 above, as well).

Just as you have heard this lyrical praise,
You will assuredly be among that assembly.

44. *Vav/’Alef*

And you shall sit in supernal rows,
if you hearken to His words which issue in majesty.⁷⁵

45. *Mem/Tsadi*

Exalted is our God first and last,
He desired and favored us and gave us the Torah.

Appendix II: Literary Analysis of `Aqdamut

⁷⁵ “...His words which issue in majesty” may be a reference to the Ten Commandments, the scriptural reading for the first day of *Shavuot*. The poem’s *be-hadart`a* is cognate to the Hebrew *be-hadar*. This term appears in Ps 29:4, *kol YHVH be-hadar*, “the voice of the Lord is majesty,” and is interpreted as referring to the Ten Commandments in *Mekhilta, Ba-Hodesh*, ed. Lauterbach 2:198.

The following analysis will show that the theme of the poem is Israel's great merit before God because of their loyalty in the face of persecutions and enticements by the nations. The *piyyut* consists of 45 couplets, with the first letter of each line forming a 90-letter series of acrostics: A double alphabetic acrostic is followed by the author's name and a Hebrew concluding prayer: *Meir ben Rabbi Yits@haq, Yigdal beTorah uveMa'asim Tovim, `Amen ve@Hazak Ve`Amats* = "Meir the son of Rabbi Yits@haq, may he grow in Torah and in good deeds, amen, be strong and of good courage."

The following division of the poem into its literary units is based upon its content and structure:

- I. Verses 1-2 – The poet's introduction of the poem. (Two verses).
- II. Verses 3-7 – God's glory at Creation. (Five verses).
- III. Verses 8-15 – The Angels' praise of God. (Eight verses).
- IV. Verses 16-20 – God prefers Israel over the angels because Israel's praise exceeds that of the angels. (Five verses).
- V. Verses 21 – 45 – God prefers Israel over the nations and will reward them because of their loyalty in the face of persecutions and enticements by the nations. (Twenty five verses).

The first fifteen verses of the *piyyut* center around God. The last thirty verses center around Israel. The turning point, in which the poem turns from God to Israel is found in verses 15-16 between sections III-IV:

"His *Qedushah* is arranged with them, and when the time comes,
It is the end of the world; (they do not recite it) even once in seven years.

His own dear possession are beloved because they regularly
Set praise for him morning and evening."

Here, the angels' praise of God is compared with Israel's and Israel's is preferred by God. A passage in *bHul* 91b stands behind these lines. There, the request of the angel which was wrestling with Jacob to be freed "for dawn is breaking" (Gn 32:27) is interpreted. The reason given is that the time for this angel's praise of God, the moment that it had been anticipating since its creation, had finally arrived. The Talmud then takes the opportunity to explain that while Israel praises God "every hour," the angels praise, at most, once a day, and perhaps only once in eternity! Because of this, the Talmud asserts, *@havivin Yisrael lifnei haKadosh barukh hu yoteir mimal`akhei ha-sharet*, "Israel is more beloved before the Holy One, Blessed be He, than the ministering angels."

The praises by the angels which form the last eight verses of the initial fifteen celebrating God may be seen as setting up the main issue of the poem, namely, the superiority of

Israel: As exalted as the angels are, Israel's praise of God is more frequent, and, therefore, according to the Talmud, is considered superior by God. That leaves only the first seven verses out of the total of forty-five as unequivocally dealing with anything other than Israel.

While sections III-IV establish God's preference for Israel over the angels, section V celebrates God's preference for Israel over the nations. This section, at twenty five verses, is by far the longest passage within the *piyyut*, emphasizing the main point: Israel is beloved and preferred by God, over the angels, over the nations, and will be amply rewarded in the World to Come because of Israel's steadfastness in the face of the nations' abuse and temptations.

Toward the beginning of this section is a passage (verses 23-26) based upon an imagined dialogue in *Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael* between Israel and its more powerful adversaries in the Roman period. The difficult environment in which the Jews of 11th C. Worms found themselves made it tempting for R. Meir to fantasize such a dialogue in *'Aqdamut*. In this idealized world, the Jews ultimately have the upper hand in the midst of a threatening conversation with their adversaries.

The nations taunt in verse 23:

“From where and just who is your love, striking in beauty,
For whose sake you die in the lion's den?”

The first line, “From where and just who is your love?” alludes to several biblical passages. *Mekhilta* itself cites Song 5:9. It also recalls Ps 115:2 (chanted, as part of *Hallel* on *Shavuot*), “Let the nations not say, ‘Where, now is their God?’” It conjures the mocking of Pharaoh, “Who is the Lord that I should heed Him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go” (Ex 5:2). The not so subtle threat to Israel in this imagined question by the nations is underlined by its reference to the archetypical example of an Israelite's willingness to die for his allegiance to God in Dn 6:17, “For whose sake you die in the lion's den.”

Following this allusion to persecution in verse 23, an enticement is put into the mouths of the nations in verse 24:

“Honored and beautiful will you be if you intermingle with the realms,
Your will we will do everywhere.”

An impossibly exaggerated promise is expressed by the non-Jewish kingdoms here. Its assertion “Your will we will do everywhere” is a promise more appropriately said to God. This line may, in fact, be a veiled jibe at the nations whose fundamental misunderstanding of God leads them to senseless statements.

In contrast to the nations' ignorance, Israel, in verse 25 answers "with wisdom." Israel has "intimate knowledge" of God's kingdom – the intimacy between Israel and God hinted at in the many passages from Song of Songs cited in *Mekhilta's* basis for these lines. Israel's answer is the theme for rest of *'Aqdamut* is introduced in verse 26, namely, the Redemption. The Christian understanding of the ultimate reward is turned upside down: Neither the Redemption nor its Messiah has yet arrived, but when they shall come, Israel's reward will demonstrate that all of the nations' threats and promises are meaningless and empty. Not only that, but, according to *'Aqdamut*, the nations will be appropriately punished in the end of days "when He shall bring light to me, but you will be covered in shame."⁷⁶

In sum, the literary analysis of the poem yields the following conclusion: Israel's preferred status in the eyes of God, over the angels – because of its more frequent praise of God, and over the nations – because of its steadfast loyalty in face of persecution and temptation – is reinforced not only by the content of the poem, but also by the structure of the poem: the number of verses on this theme supersedes the number on any other topic. This theme was of a piece with the heroic image of its composer in folklore, and contributed to the important healing role the *piyyut* played in the communal psychology of European Jewry in the Middle Ages.

⁷⁶ Verse 27. The more severe approach in *Mekhilta*, the source for verses 23-26, is not directly alluded to in *'Aqdamut*. In *Mekhilta* (see note to verse 23 in the Appendix), when the nations are overwhelmed by Israel's loving relationship with God and express the desire to join with Israel, their request is denied: "The Israelites, however, say to the nations of the world: You can have no share in Him, but 'My beloved is mine and I am his' (Cant. 2.16), 'I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine,' etc. (ibid 6.3)." The nations here are denied "a share" in God, apparently meaning that even the nations' desire to convert and become Jews is refused.