CHAPTER TWO

THE SECULAR HEBREW POET AS CULTURE HERO
IN THE MIDDLE AGES

I. Preface

Secular Hebrew poetry in the Middle Ages constituted but one aspect—although a very important one—of the new Jewish culture that was created in the Muslim-Arab world in the 10th century. The focal point of this meeting of two cultures, Judaism and Islam, was Baghdad. The beginning of Hebrew poetry goes back to ancient times, as attested to in the prophetic literature, the Book of Psalms, Job, and others. Poetry also played a central role in the religious life of the Jewish people in the period of the Talmudic sages and the Geonim, for the text of public prayer was written in the form of poetry, the well-known liturgical poem. Thousands of these liturgical poems were composed during this period, all of them to be recited in the framework of public prayer. The immense importance accorded to the liturgical poem in the life of the Jewish people is evidenced by the fact that this literary genre captures first place, as it were, among the Cairo Geniza, which documents the societal life and the spirit of Jewish communities in the early and mid-Middle Ages.¹

Surprisingly, or so it seemed, the figure of the liturgical poet became completely anonymous. In the course of the first five hundred years of the school of liturgical poetry, or until the 5th century, the names of these poets were unknown, and this period in the history of liturgical poetry has been known as “the period of the anonymous poets.” The first liturgical poet whose name became known was Yose b. Yose, who is thought to have lived in the 5th century. Only from the 6th century, though, were the names of these poets known; however, this was due, not to any documentation external to the poems themselves, but to the poets’ method of signing their names in the poems, beginning with the 6th-century Yannai. However, nothing more could be learned about the poets.² The clear implication is that the liturgical poets did not have

² Mirsky 1990, pp. 77–81.
the status of culture heroes. The true culture heroes of the period up to the 10th century were the learned of the *yeshivot*; in other words, the *Tannaim* and *Ammoraim*, Torah sages who are well documented in the literature of the Miṣna, the Talmud, and the Midraš, for every religious law and exegesis is quoted in the name of one of these scholars, whereas the authors of the liturgical poems are anonymous. The accepted opinion in the research literature is that the poem that was meant to be liturgical would be recited in public prayer; it was not intended to be a vehicle for expressing the spirit of the author, but the murmurings of the heart and emotions of the nation, and therefore any awareness of its author was hidden. However, there is nothing in this reasoning that explains the matter fully, for the names of the liturgical poets were hardly documented in the literature of the Jewish people of that time; that is, except for their poems, they were not perceived in their respective generations as figures of importance. Only after hundreds of years did an appreciation, at times mythological, develop toward the first liturgical poets, such as that among German Jewry toward El'azar Ha-Qilliri.4

The first poets who were certainly culture heroes of the Jewish people, both in their own generation and in later generations, were Saʿadia Gaon (892–942) and Hāye Gaon (939–1038). However, their being culture heroes was due, not to their liturgical poems, but to their role as spiritual *Geonim*; in other words, as standing at the top of the pyramid of Torah learning in the nation. It was also due to their varied spiritual-literary activity as evidenced by the fact that their liturgical creations have almost completely vanished and are unknown except for pages from the Geniza.5 Moreover, it seems that even they themselves did not attribute any great importance to their liturgical works, for generally they hid their names and signed their poems with other names, apparently those of cantors who performed the poems in

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3 Not a few publications, among them the epistle of Šerira Gaon and Maimonides’ introduction to the commentary on the Miṣna, detail the chain of instruction of the Jewish tradition and list hundreds of names of sages from the time of the Great Assembly to the Gaonic figures, but do not relate at all to the liturgical poets. It appears that the absence of biographical details on the ancient liturgical poets and of the reaction of the community to their works and the fact that modern scholarship avoids the philosophical content of the ancient liturgical poetry have prevented scholars from forming the personal, philosophical, and social image of the ancient liturgical poet.

4 Habermann 1970/2, I, p. 42.

5 On Saʿadia as a liturgical poet, see Tobi 1982; on Hāye see Brody 1937; Fleischer 1996.