A Love Song to the Torah:  
Anonymous, Qedushta Shir ha-Shirim

Anonymous (ca. fifth century, Galilee)

Qedushta Shir ha-Shirim (Davidson: ψ 943)¹
In the history of Hebrew poetry, this poem, a qedushta shel sheva ( qedushta of seven [blessings]), holds a small but important place: it is significant both generally because of the light it sheds on the development of the qedushta genre and specifically because it is the earliest known Hebrew Song of Songs poem and may even predate the Aramaic piyyut discussed in the preceding introduction. Furthermore, it is also the only poem included in this volume that was preserved in the liturgy of Ashkenazi Jewish communities.

Formally, this poem presents an unusual shivata-like structure (see chapter 6, for an example of a shivata). Like the shivata, this piyyut embellishes all seven blessings of the Festival Amidah rather than merely the first three benedictions, as in a standard, classical qedushta (see chapter 7). This unusual structure suggests the poem’s antiquity, and may offer clues as to how the classical qedushta acquired its truncated form. It is not surprising, perhaps, that while this poem survived in the Passover liturgy of Mainz and in a peculiar northern Italian rite,² even then it was abbreviated so that it more closely conformed to standard qedushta patterns. Only the recovery of Genizah fragments permitted the reconstruction of the entire work.

It is not, however, only form that makes this poem worthy of attention. In terms of its content, this poem places unusual emphasis on the figure of the messianic herald, Elijah, who becomes a Moses-like figure—not only a

¹ The translation is based on the text presented in this volume, which is itself based on the Ma’agarim version. Two earlier editions are cited in the notes: Yonah Fraenkel, ed., Machzor Pesach: According to Ashkenazi Traditions from All Their Branches (Jerusalem: Academon, 1999), 139–152; and Ezra Fleischer, “Towards a Solution of Some Fundamental Problems in the Structure of the Classical ‘Qedushta’” [in Hebrew], Henoch Yalon Memorial Volume, ed. E.Y. Kutscher, S. Lieberman, and M.Z. Kaddari (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sepher, 1974), 454–467.

redeemer, but a revealer of the divine. And just as Elijah merges the biblical past into the future redemption, this poem also regards the Song of Songs as a kind of eternal song—one song that spans all of Jewish history. In its mythos of the Song, this piyyut blends eroticism and revealed legislation in a striking manner: while the Song is often interpreted as describing metaphorically the love between God and Israel, this poem sings a love song to Torah.