TOWARD A DICTIONARY OF MEDIEVAL PIYYUT:
METHODS, MOTIFS, AND MATERIALS

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I

The language of Hebrew liturgical poetry has always been a matter of debate and dissent. Over the course of many centuries, commentators of liturgical poetry or Piyyut have criticised the nature of the language as well as the incomprehensibility of its lexicon. Until the discovery of the Cairo Genizah, not much was understood about the world of the synagogue composer who is called in Hebrew a paytan. The Genizah discovery made clear that a complete cultural and literary world was preserved in the manuscript collections, almost totally forgotten or ignored. The obsolete style and language of liturgical hymns was considered unfavourable in terms of the broader framework of the true characteristics of the Hebrew language. Famous critical voices were heard in the past: Saadiah Gaon, Dunash ibn Labrat or Abraham ibn Ezra. All these great poets from the Islamic and Hispanic period showed a negative attitude towards the language of the Piyyut from the classical, Byzantine era by attacking the “extreme” character of elements of its grammar, syntax, and lexicon.

The advent of the modern period caused a deterioration in traditional Jewish liturgy according to European or Ashkenazi rites. However, scientific research in Germany attempted to demonstrate the value of a process of historical development within liturgy and poetry by assembling and comparing hymns from all times. In particular, the German movement of Wissenschaft des Judentums and its propagator Leopold Zunz did pioneering research leading to a better understanding of the language and lexicon of the Piyyut. This type of poetry received much attention in the past decades because of many new discoveries in manuscript collections throughout Europe, the United States, and Russia. Many editions of large poem collections and diwans have been published; however, a more general and comprehensive database for poetic words and expressions in medieval Hebrew poetry is lacking. The question why it is a desideratum to
have a new or another database for piyyutic words and phrases is justified, because we already have the *Historical Dictionary*, recently materialised and made accessible by the Academy of the Hebrew Language in Jerusalem through *Ma'agarim*. Or couldn’t we even just rely on the vast insights of Leopold Zunz, whose *Synagogale Poesie* and *Literaturgeschichte* contain long lists of names and expressions particular for Jewish liturgical poetry? Perhaps it is sufficient to have Sokoloff’s *Dictionaries of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic* where many items can be found with occurrences in late antiquity and medieval Piyyut. We could also just refer to Sokoloff and Yahalom’s book *Shirat Bney Ma’arava* from 1999, where we encounter many remarkable words and expressions which are likewise listed in Sokoloff’s *Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*. We will return to this book later below when we examine a few lexical examples specific for medieval Piyyut.

However, one cannot argue that the research field of medieval Piyyut is equipped with sufficient tools for the understanding of the broad lexical scope of both the classical and late eastern hymnists who composed liturgical poems for the embellishment of Jewish prayer in the late antique and medieval synagogues. A great deal has been written about piyyutic lexicon and grammar, for instance, in some path-breaking articles by Menahem Zulay, published in *Studies of the Research Institute for Hebrew Poetry* in the 1930s and 40s, but these articles focus almost exclusively on the Byzantine hymnist Yanai. However, Zulay’s methodology and approach is worth keeping in mind for our objectives.

In 1985, Joseph Yahalom published his book *Poetic Language in the Early Piyyut*, analyzing characteristic features of piyyutic vocabulary, describing stylistic preferences, morphological phenomena and literary calques. Yahalom’s approach is encompassing and includes arguments of a codicological, syntactic, and linguistic nature in the discussion of piyyutic items, with a keen eye for poetical and prosodical effects of such items within a given context. It is in this work that the reader gains an understanding of the multilingual and multicultural echoes of the environment in which Piyyut developed, without losing track of the fact that Piyyut was an artistic-literary expression of Diaspora Judaism for the sake of true worship and pure religion.

The latter comes to the fore in Yahalom-Sokoloff’s joint edition of Aramaic poetry from an early date, mostly fourth to sixth centuries CE. Aramaic hymns of a popular character contain many