VII. THE LANGUAGE OF POETRY

The Hebrew language continued to flourish in literature without interruption at the very time (about 200 C.E.) when it ceased to be spoken. A Jerusalem scholar, Prof. H. Schirmann of the Hebrew University, showed in 1953 that the type of religious poetry which we call Piyyut began in the 3rd century in Palestine. Formerly it had been thought that the earliest Paytanim (composers of Piyyut) lived much later. The great scholar, L. Zunz, who wrote a hundred years ago two books on this poetry that are still considered the most important available, even dated them as late as the end of the 8th century, and believed their chief centre to have been Italy. According to Schirmann's view, now generally accepted, the first great Paytanim, Yose ben Yose, Yannai, and Kalir, were contemporary with the latest Tannaim.[1]

Everyone who prays on the Days of Awe (New Year and Day of Atonement) from the Ashkenazi *Maḥzor* (Festival Prayer Book), must know the Piyyut well, for he has to rise and remain standing innumerable times while cantor and congregation intone one of those Piyyutim in front of the open Ark of the Law. And those who pay some attention to the prayers in their *Maḥzor* must have wondered how difficult the language of many of these poems is. In actual fact the difficulty is a double one. Even where there are no difficult words, it is often not easy to understand the poems because of the numerous allusions to Bible passages and to Midrashic interpreta-

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[1] Jewish Quarterly Review 44 (1953) 141, etc. E. Fleischer, *Tarbiz* 40 (1970–71) 41, etc., dates the earliest Piyyut to the 5th century, thus still before the Arab conquest.

tions interspersed in them. Let us take a Piyyut which contains practically no linguistic difficulty:

טוֹבִים הַשְׁנַיִם כְּתוּבִים מְשֻׁנִּים
כְּעֵדִים שְׁנַיִם מֵאֶחָד וְלֹא מִשְׁנַיִם
יָדוּעַ כְּתָבָם חֲמִשָּׁה חֲמִשָּׁה
לְאָרֵשׂ חֲמִשִּׁים בַּחֲמִשָּׁה לְבַל יִמְשְׁלוּ בָּם חֲמִשָּׁה

> The two that are written on two (sides) are as good
> as two witnesses from one and not from two;
> it is well known that their writing, five upon five,
> is to betroth the "fived" to the five, lest the five get power
>   over them.

This Piyyut is by Yannai, the second of the series of great Paytanim. To us it reads like something from the puzzle section of a newspaper. In fact, nothing simpler, if we only remember:

1. That the two Tablets of the Law were written on both sides, front and back (Exodus 32:15), hence the reference here is to the Tablets Moses brought down.

2. That in the same verse they are called "Tablets of Witness," and that therefore they are good, as two witnesses are better than one—for in Jewish law the evidence of one witness is no evidence at all.[2]

3. However, the word *one* has here a double sense. It also means that the Tablets came from the One God, and that they bear express witness that God is One, and that there are no two Gods (a good god and an evil god)), as the Sectarians in Tannaitic times believed.

4. According to the opinion of Rabbi Hananiah ben Gamaliel, which is the one popularly accepted (Palestinian Talmud, Shekalim VI), five of the Ten Commandments were written on the one Tablet, and five on the other, and this is alluded to by saying "five upon five."

5. This way of writing the Commandments, however, had

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[2] Hebrew *min* means both "from" and "than."

a symbolic meaning: to betroth (to join for ever, cf. Hosea 2:21) those of whom it is said "they went up *hamushim* from Egypt" (Exodus 13:18) to the five Books of the Law. (The Midrash discusses various ways in which *hamushim* might have a meaning derived from *hamishah*, "five," though in fact its probable meaning is "armed".)

6. As against the five Good Books of the Law, the Passover Haggadah mentions five plagues sent against the Egyptians, for Rabbi Akiba says there: "Each plague God brought upon the Egyptians in Egypt consisted of five plagues" (Mekhilta R. Ishmael, Beshallah VI, and elsewhere), and in popular belief these five "plagues" were identified as five Angels of Destruction.

We can hardly be astonished that later some Jewish medieval historians thought that these Piyyutim were written during the religious persecutions by the Byzantine emperors, when it was forbidden to teach the Oral Law (Mishnah and Talmud), but permitted to pray, and that for this reason the Paytanim introduced Midrashic and Halakhic (legal) matter into the prayers, and thus the congregants learnt the Oral Law surreptitiously in spite of the prohibition. It is correct that a large proportion of known Midrashim is incorporated in the Piyyutim, but only a small amount of Halakhah. Had the Piyyut been a planned effort of the Rabbis to teach the Law, surely they would have stressed Halakhah. However, the example we discussed proves in any case that one had to know the content of the Midrash before being able to understand the Piyyut, not that the Midrash could have been learnt from listening to the Piyyut.

Still, let us assume that the purpose of the Paytanim was to teach the people. How would they have set about it? Doubtlessly they would have phrased their teaching in an easy style, immediately intelligible to everyone, so that he could grasp the contents. This is not the case. Quite apart from the involved allusions, the Piyyut mostly also employs a difficult vocabulary. The Paytanim were enamoured of rare Biblical words, employed in their poems Aramaic words, and on top of it all invented thousands of new words. They did this by shortening

existing words, such as *tefesh* from *tipshut* "foolishness," *bukh* for *mevukhah* "confusion," *yof* for *yofi* "beauty," *ev* for *ta'avah* "lust"; by lengthening words, such as *pahadon* for *pahad* "fear," or *miflal* for *tefillah* "prayer." They freely formed verbs from nouns or other words, e.g. *libe* "make to be like a lion" from *lavi* "lion," *hitrafsed* "to be flat" from *rafsodah* "a float," *bil'ed* "to say there is no one but (*bil'ade*) He." They also shortened down verbs, e.g. *bat* for *hibit* "he looked," *gash* for *nigash* "he approached." There are some Piyyutim, especially among the later ones, which read as if they were couched in some other language, not in Hebrew.

Since these Piyyutim were approved of by the public, brought fame to their authors, and were made part of the prayer for future generations, until the present day, we cannot but assume that the public of the time enjoyed these linguistic acrobatics. As a matter of fact, we could easily collect similar linguistic innovations in equal numbers from the works of contemporary Israeli poets. The Paytanim created new words because they had a feeling that the existing language was insufficient to express what they wanted to say, and that only by breaking through the boundaries of the language would they be enabled to express themselves adequately, in all respects like modern poets. The recondite allusions to the Midrash can be paralleled by the daring and recondite similes in modern poetry.

So far these treasures have only been very little exploited for enriching living Hebrew. We might mention some words, though, which come from the Piyyut and are in common use today: *vetek,* now "seniority," in the Piyyut "great age" (from *vatik* "old"); *nofesh* "recreation" (from *hinafesh* "to take a breather"); *ihel* "to wish" (from *ahalay* "would that"); *bises* "to establish" (from the Greek noun *basis*); *pi'anah* "to decipher, to solve," from the name the Egyptians gave, according to Genesis 41:45, to Joseph, Tzofnat Paaneah. The Midrash (Genesis Rabba XC) explains this, using the above-mentioned method of shortening-down verbs, as composed of three Hebrew words:

1. *Tzofnat = tzefunot* "hidden things"

2. *pa'* = *hofia'* "threw light upon" (the hidden things)
3. *neah* = *heniah* "put at rest" (the minds of the people).

Out of the two words *pa'* and *neah* of the Midrash, the Paytan made one verb. Of course we no longer are conscious of the complex Midrashic origin of the word when we use it to say that Israeli diplomats "unravel" Sadat's intentions from his speeches, or that someone "deciphers" a code.

The composition of Piyyutim continued also outside Palestine until the 11th century C.E. The later Paytanim outbid the first ones in complexity of language and allusions. One of the most abstruse of all Paytanim was Rav Saadiah Gaon. He was born in Egypt about 880, and lived in Palestine and Babylonia (Iraq). In the latter country he was director of the Yeshivah of Sura, hence his title Gaon, short for "Director of the Yeshiva *Pride (Gaon) of Jacob.*" He died in 942. Many of his Piyyutim were included in his *Siddur,* which is one of the most important sources for the history of Jewish liturgy. But besides Piyyutim, Saadiah also wrote works in prose and in rhymed prose (an Arab fashion) in almost pure Biblical Hebrew. He even provided his writings not merely with vowel signs, but also with Biblical cantillation accents ("Trop").

The reason for this innovation is connected with the imitation of Arabic literary models. The Arabs ruled the region from 630, and they were excessively proud of their poetry and the purity of their language, which they cultivated assiduously. For an educated Arab, the only language that deserved to be called good Arabic was the language of the desert Bedouin of the time before the advent of the Islamic religion. Following in the wake of this language-worship, the Jews, too, began to value their own ancient language, Biblical Hebrew, as a model for artistic writing. There were some attempts to do this before Saadiah, but it was he who showed the way to write Biblical Hebrew, and also composed a dictionary and a grammar to aid those who endeavoured to write in this language.

Shortly after Saadiah, people succeeded in adapting also the complicated Arabic metres to Hebrew. This was difficult, because the Arabic poetical metre is based on the difference between

long and short vowels, while at that time Jews no longer distinguished in Hebrew pronounciation between those vowels which formerly had been long and those which were short. It was necessary to use the *Sheva mobile* and the *Hataphs* as a substitute for the Arabic short vowels.

By the second half of the 10th century, poetry in Arabic metres and Biblical Hebrew became common in all Jewish communities in Arabic-speaking countries: Babylonia, Syria, Egypt, North Africa, and especially in Muslim Spain, which became the principal centre for this new poetry. Also the style of the poems was adopted from Arabic poetic style, as were the themes: drinking songs, love songs, poems of friendship, and even hunting and war poems. For the first time since Biblical days, Hebrew again had a secular poetry. At first religious poems went on being written in Piyyut style, but in course of time the Arabic fashion also penetrated this genre, and poets like Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Moses Ibn Ezra and Judah Halevi excelled both in secular and in religious poetry. In the end the religious poems displaced the Piyyutim from the Sephardic *Mahzor;* and the poet Abraham Ibn Ezra spoke contemptuously of the language used by the Paytanim, considering their very innovations in vocabulary objectionable.

The Spanish Hebrew poets wrote for a public with highly-developed taste, though restricted in numbers. There was literary criticism, and the grammarians, too, kept a sharp look-out lest any poet be guilty of violating the rules of Biblical grammar. The fidelity to Biblical Hebrew was such that poets refrained from using words in forms which by chance were not found in the Bible (e.g. the plural of a noun, if only the singular was attested). The tendency to exploit the treasures of Biblical Hebrew while remaining absolutely faithful to its character, with writers of such outstanding poetical power and wealth of ideas, led to a profound interest in the Hebrew language, both in its scholarly investigation and in its inherent possibilities of expression.

At the very same time when the Biblical-Hebrew poetry, so rich in modes and in means of expression, was developed in

Spain, the Piyyut developed among the Jews of Germany and France into a popular poetry that did away with most of the vocabulary innovations of the Paytanim, and in few and simple words and naive rhythms succeeded in expressing deep feeling. Rashi was a poet of stature, and there were many others besides him. Also the production of those Ashkenazi poets found a place in the Ashkenazi *Maḥzor*.

The language of these poems was almost pure Mishnaic Hebrew. Only in the 13th century did German and French Jews begin to use the Spanish metres.