

SIN, HEALING, AND HEALTH AS THE SUBJECT OF A MOROCCAN PIYYUT

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The story of *piyyut* (religious poetry meant to be sung or chanted in the synagogue) has a long history in the annals of the Jewish written word. More accurately, *piyyutim* describe the relationship between Israel, or, in many cases, an individual of the family Israel, and the One God they believe in, pray to, and devote their spiritual lives in search of. The word, *piyyut*, derives from the Greek word for poetry and can be traced back to the corpus of Talmudic literature.¹ The development of *piyyut*, over the centuries, is the fascinating and oftentimes controversial subject of heated debate.² To recount the historical journey here, in any great detail, would be well beyond the scope or intention of this paper; suffice to say, then, that the literature is fascinating for the picture it paints of the ongoing development of Judaism's system of law and custom as regards public worship.

Were it not for the particular way that the Jewish prayer service developed – an aural tradition that elevated both the idea of individual prayer and the position of *hazzan* who not only led prayer but had the flexibility to develop its content – *piyyutim* might not have expanded into the art form it did. A *piyyut* is not merely a poem. It is, specifically, a poem whose aim is the expression of a religious idea. Moreso, *piyyutim* were made to be heard, not

¹ Hayyim Herman Kieval has an excellent chapter on *piyyutim* in his book, *The High Holy Days: A Commentary on the Prayerbook of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur*, The Schechter Institute, Jerusalem, 2004, edited by David Golinkin and Monique Susskind Goldberg, chapter 2, pp.22-37. See his footnote no.1, pp.192-93, in which he lists several sources (Pesikta 28, Leviticus Rabbah 30, Song of Songs Rabbah on 3:6, Ecclesiastes Rabbah on 1:13) that offer the Hebrew root of the word, *piyyut*.

² The history of *piyyut* can be found in several important accounts, two of which are: Ismar Elbogen's *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, translated by Raymond P. Scheindlin, originally published in German, 1913, but recently republished by The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, and The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, 1993, pp. 219-295; M. Wallenstein's chapter on *The Nature and Composition of Piyyut*, in his book, *Some Unpublished Piyyutim from the Cairo Geniza*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1956

simply read. The *payyetan* (poet) composed his poem to either take the place of an existing prayer, to explicate a religious idea, or to express a sentiment in religious terms. These poems were generally made to be chanted or sung in the synagogue but in some cases they became popular enough to make their way into the homes of their admirers.

If we were to go back and read the history of piyyut, especially if we were to concentrate on the rabbinic debates regarding its adherence (or non-adherence) to *halakhah* (system of Jewish law) we would find virulently partisan debates regarding the usefulness of liturgical poetry. Piyyutim invariably make use of confounding or obscure source material and *midrash* (a genre of Rabbinic literature whose aim is to investigate and interpret Biblical text) and we would find that the clergy and the *kahal* (community) have been at some odds over the past fifteen-hundred years or so.³ The public record clearly indicates that the ‘people’ have been involved with the public recitation of *piyyutim* as if they were in a love affair with a beautiful and exotic creature they might not be able to approach easily but with whom they, nevertheless, cannot take their eyes off of. The Rabbis, on the other hand, have been at much more pains to focus their eyes on the beauty they behold. “Too long,” they might say, or “too difficult,” they might complain. Or, “too intrusive,” were they to speak about the *keva* (fixed part) of the statutory prayer service. To follow the unfolding story of *piyyut* and its history is to be engrossed in a soap opera that includes love, honor, jealousy, rule-breaking, rule-bending, loyalty to tradition and the re-writing of that very framework. However, in the end, of the virtually thousands of poems written as fixed prayer alternatives, thanksgiving

³ Shalom Spiegel, *On Medieval Hebrew Poetry*, in *The Jews: Their History, Culture, and Religion*, Vol.II, edited by Louis Finkelstein, JPS, Philadelphia, 1949, pp.528-566 is a stunning and important article.

pronouncements, worship enhancements, and vehicles for musical interludes, the best of the poetry has been retained and incorporated in the various *siddurim* (prayerbooks) or *mahzorim* (special prayerbooks for the High Holy Days) of the Jewish people, no matter what their geographic location or denominational background. The early *Geonim* (heads of the Babylonian academies), many of whom passionately felt that *piyyutim* were taking the place of the established order of prayer, argued and debated the merits and legitimacy of religious poetry and poetic insertions into the fixed prayer service. “The earliest extant geonic responses to *piyyut*,” writes Ruth Langer, “come from the school of the mid-eighth-century Rav Yehudai Gaon.”⁴ Regarding the daily *shaharit* (morning) service Rav Yehudah argued that one should never petition for one’s own needs in the first or last three blessings of the *Amidah*, but only in the intermediate blessings. The *piyyutim* of the day made a mockery of that understanding, averred Rav Yehudah. His student, Pirkoi ben Baboi, went further in his condemnation. Four centuries later the 12th century French sage, Rabbenu Tam, roundly criticized the critics and defended *piyyutim* and their widespread use. And so it goes. Nevertheless, liked or not, poetic insertions into the fixed statutory prayer service became the rule and it is virtually impossible to find a prayerbook that does not include poetry.

One way to view religious poetry is through the lens of *midrash*. Midrash, traditionally, is a Talmudic investigation of a Biblical word, verse, or narrative which expands our understanding

⁴ Ruth Langer, *The Language of Prayer: The Challenge of Piyyut*, in: *To Worship God Properly: Tensions Between Liturgical Custom and Halakhah in Judaism*, Monographs of the Hebrew Union College, Hebrew Union College Press, 2005, pp.110-187. Langer goes on to quote from the two sources which have recorded the Babylonian Rabbinic response to piyyutim: Sefer Halakhot Gedolot and a letter written by Pirkoi ben Baboi addressed to the Jews of Kairouan, circa 800.

of the word or words in question.⁵ The poet relies on her unique vision to transform the known into a new version of the known. Gershom Scholem⁶ calls our attention to the place of *midrash* in Jewish writing and thinking. The *midrashist's* contribution, in traditional terms, is to lend her intellect and writing to the tradition which began with revelation on Mt. Sinai. It is as if everything that was, is, or will be known, regarding the religious situation, was revealed to Moses in his encounter with God and Torah. As the centuries moved forward into modernity, the term, *midrash*, has come to mean most any investigation, interpretation, or study related to a religious theme. That religious poetry is a kind of *midrash* seems self evident in that its aim is to further a new and deeper appreciation for the point at hand. It has been said that the true purpose of prayer is to free the space between man and God so that unencumbered by the detritus of our earthly concerns unification to the Creator might be better realized.⁷ I will hope to show how a modern (19th century) *piyyut*, ***Aromimkha Yah***, has, at its core, the intention of making the language of a **Psalm** real and personal for the contemporary reader. To understand *Aromimkha Yah* better, and to place it in some context, I will include another liturgical poem written in either the late 19th or early 20th century by a famous Moroccan Rabbi - Hayyim Pinto ha-Katan of Casablanca. Pinto ha-Katan is the grandson of Rabbi Hayyim Pinto ha-Gadol,

⁵ Rabbi Neil Gillman makes use of just this point in the introduction to his book, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew*, JPS, 1990. Although writing about theology, in general, Gillman's premise is that the theology of any particular time reflects a "plateau of understanding...a temporary consolidation," of the state of thinking and resolution of the tradition's struggles with belief and law as regards the relationship between humans and the Divine (see his introduction, especially pages xxv–xxvii). He will go on to say that midrash can also be understood as a process and not an outcome. This idea is important to our investigation of piyyutim, in general, and to the Psalm and piyyut I have chosen, in particular, because it helps us to locate the differences between them not only temporally but also as expressions of a person in his or her social context.

⁶ From "*Tradition and Commentary as Religious Categories in Judaism*," by Gershom G. Scholem, *Judaism*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Winter 1966, pp. 23-39. Reprinted in *Understanding Jewish Theology: Classical Issues and Modern Perspectives*, ed., Jacob Neusner, KTAV Publishing, New York & Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith, New York, 1973, p. 47.

⁷ See Elliot Wolfson's Afterword in: Aubrey L. Glazer, *Mystical Vertigo: Contemporary Kabbalistic Hebrew Poetry Dancing Over the Divide*, Academic Studies Press, Boston, 2013, pp. 270-271.

of Mogador (now Essaouira), a luminary of the Moroccan Rabbinate, and I will devote some amount of time to his biography because he may be the author of the *piyyut* I am interested in discussing.

There is a new wealth of poetry by Israeli poets which makes use of Jewish religious text and references for its source material⁸ but these are not examples of *piyyutim*. They are mostly secular poems whose authors make ample use of their considerable Jewish education, learned formally in school or yeshiva, within modern Israeli culture, or both. And these poems are not necessarily all from the land of Israel; there is modern Jewish poetry and *piyyutim* being written in all the world's corners where Jews live. *Aromimkha Yah*, however, is very much a *piyyut*...a religious poem. It was written to speak to a religious audience and takes its place in the vibrant world of modern (here I am using the word, *modern*, to denote the period from the 18th century to the present) "Oriental" (more specifically Moroccan) *piyyutim*.

Morocco, in particular, has an ongoing and rich poetic and religious tradition which finds expression in the *Payyetan's* chanting in the synagogue⁹, the *piyyutim* sung at home, and the *hillulah*, the mass visitation to the gravesite of a revered saint. In the Moroccan culture many Rabbis have attained the status of sainthood and they might be revered by Jew and Muslim

⁸ I am referring to the poetry that has come out of the modern state of Israel and even the Zionist century leading up to the 1948 UN vote. A sampling of these authors might include Zelda Mishkovsky, Yehuda Amichai, Asher Reich, Rivka Miriam, Hava Pinhas-Cohen, and Admiel Kosman. David C. Jacobson has edited and written commentary for a book surveying modern Israeli poets which is well worth investigating: *Creator, are You Listening? Israeli Poets on God and Prayer*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2007.

⁹ Payyetan in this context means *Cantor* in the Moroccan tradition.

alike.¹⁰ One part of the visitation ritual is to recite a *piyyut* (or *piyyutim*) associated with the saint. Here is a very brief history of one such *saint*, Rabbi Hayyim Pinto ha-Gadol.¹¹ The elder Pinto's *yartzheit* has become the occasion for a huge *hillulah* to his gravesite, a mausoleum that towers over the other burial sites in the cemetery. As is the custom when making a pilgrimage to a saint's grave, the assembled crowd sings and recites *piyyutim* associated with the particular person they are venerating. Rabbi Pinto ha-Gadol (not to be confused with his grandson, Rabbi Pinto ha-Katan of Casablanca) is associated with miracles and acts of healing and many of the legends associated with him have that as their theme. Jewish Moroccan history has recorded the ritual of making pilgrimage to the Rabbi's home, in Mogador, taking oil from a jug there and giving it to women, presumably to help with fertility. Another custom associated with R. Pinto was, and still is, to take oil from the *ner tamid* (the eternal light) from the synagogue that also housed R. Pinto's living quarters and rub it on an affected part of one's body. So, for instance, if your hand was injured you would take the lamp oil and rub it on the hand, praying for healing. On the night of the *hillulah* the crowd would be enormous and the custom would be to light candles at the tomb. The smoke would ascend to heaven and parents would take the soot from the spent candles and rub it on the foreheads of their children – echoing the Christian

¹⁰ An excellent source for information about Moroccan Saints is Issachar Ben-Ami, *Saint Veneration Among the Jews in Morocco*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1998. Raphael David Elmaleh and George Ricketts have written a guide to Jewish Morocco, *Jews Under Moroccan Skies: Two Thousand Years of Jewish Life*, Gaon Books, Santa Fe, 2012. See, in particular, pp. 243-255. Gil Daryn has published a wonderful account of Moroccan Saint Veneration as it applies to Moroccan sites in Israel and their similarity to Hassidism's veneration of their own Rabbis and Tzadikim. See: Gil Daryn, *Moroccan Hassidism: The Chavrei Habakuk Community and Its Veneration of Saints*, *Ethnology*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Autumn 1998) pp. 351-372. The paper can be found online at <http://courses.umass.edu/juda373/outlines/documents/Daryn.pdf>

¹¹ This description of Rabbi Hayyim Pinto ha-Gadol is a compilation of material gleaned from: Issachar Ben-Ami, *ibid*, pp. 242-243, Raphael Elmaleh and George Ricketts, *ibid*, pp. 242-250 and p.254., and a website dedicated to preserving the memory of many Moroccan Saints: http://www.hevratpinto.org/tzadikim_eng/001_rabbi_chaim_pinto_hagadol.html

custom for Ash Wednesday. Another custom would be to pour water on the tomb and then collect and drink it; the water was medicine. Finally, parents would bring their children to the *hillulah* and cut the child's hair there, asking the saint to pray for him or her.

Turning our attention back to the *piyyut*, *Aromimkha Yah*, we can see how the themes of healing and sickness are central to the poem's message. The subject of sin, however, is not nearly as explicit within the poem's verses. *Sin*, in Judaism is of more than a little interest. It is a centerpiece for the Days of Awe (*Yamim Noraim*), a ubiquitous theme in scripture (*Tanakh*), and a lightning rod in the rabbinic writing that has dominated Jewish thought since the 3rd century C.E. when the oral law (*Torah she'b'al peh*) was codified and written down as the *Mishnah*. Prior to the destruction of Jerusalem's Temples, and Israel's diasporic sojourns in Babylonia and beyond, animal and grain sacrifice acted as the agents of penitent humans desperately trying to find favor with a God who understood the differences between pure and impure, sin and righteousness. Removed from Israel, the Rabbis formulated prayer as the place-holder for ritual slaughter, a practice they surely planned on reconstituting once the Temple was rebuilt and the altar ready for the work of animal sacrifice. As time wore on and the years turned into decades and then centuries, the rabbinic conversation, formalized in the *mishnah*, *gemara*, *midrashim*, and *siddurim* debated, argued over, and came to consensus on the needs, merits, and, ultimately, on the laws regarding the ubiquity of sin and ways of handling it. Confession, acts of loving-kindness, and *t'shuvah* (turning or returning to God), became the subject of so much of rabbinic writing in its attempt to instruct and chasten the

populace. In fact, one could make the claim that sin is the contextual through-line for fully one half of humankind's greatest and most enduring relationship – the relationship between human and God – the other half being penitence.¹²

Healing, as a theme in the life of a Jew, is everywhere, it would seem. The Psalms are replete with cries for healing and songs of thanksgiving. The prophets exhort Israel to heal herself and the *Tanakh* is peppered throughout with examples of individuals in need of healing help.¹³ We daily pray for the healing (*refuah shleimah*) of those we know and care about and we have healing prayers (*mi sheberakh*) said at special times.

Health exists on a continuum and is, therefore, in some ways harder to think about than healing, because implied in the word, *health*, is a state of being; hard to put one's finger on, whereas *healing* implies action – the business of doing the healing. The Jewish way is to go for broke, *refuah shleimah* (complete healing), but this wish is more aptly expressed when understood in the context of life's vagaries: what is possible and what does health look like?

When we pray for complete or perfect healing what we really mean is, "what does *better* look

¹² Of course, God is one of the two most important *actors* in this relationship. Certainly the most enduring and long-lived, but here I am referring to the non-actor elements in the struggle to understand the religious experience.

¹³ The story of Miriam (Num. 12:10-13) as an example as is the story of Abraham and Abimelech (Genesis 20: 1-18). This chapter, almost at the very beginning of the Torah, ties the theme of sin and its physical manifestation (the closing of every womb of the household of Abimelech) to prayer and its anodynic consequence – restored health. I Samuel 1:9-20 tells the story of Hannah receiving healing from barrenness following her prayer and the priest, Eli's, declaration that the God of Israel should grant her the unborn child she had poured her heart out for. I Kings 13:4-6 describes the healing of King Jeroboam's rigid hand following his encounter with the 'man of God' who interceded on his behalf...restoring the wounded hand. Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great warrior and a leper (II Kings 5:1-14); the prophet, Elisha had him cured by simply immersing himself in the Jordan River seven times. This, alone, is an example of an instance of healing in the *Tanakh's* pages. Reading further, we come to the part of the story where Elisha's attendant, Gehazi, tricks Naaman into giving a gift of silver and clothing (II Kings 5:20-27). Without saying or using the word, *sin*, explicitly, the end of the chapter has the villain, Gehazi, inflicted with leprosy...physical punishment for sinning, I believe. These are a few of the various instances of healing recorded in the *Tanakh*. Other examples would include Hezekiah, Job, Nebuchadnezzar, David, and Elijah.

like given the reality of the situation? What is the best we can actually hope for”? Another way to think about our prayers for healing is to ask the question, “does prayer actually cure or does prayer open a door to some version of healing”? In other words, when we pray for someone’s complete healing, are we asking God to intervene and personally cure the individual or are we hoping that God will make the connection between the sick person and something that brings relief (a new doctor, a better spiritual outlook)?

Lastly, it is impossible to think about Jewish ideas of health without noting two extremely important ideas. First, Jewish ideas of health have changed over the millennia, even over the centuries. In the 12th century B.C.E., health, as opposed to a lack of health, existed on a continuum in an interesting way. Life and death were not opposites in the way we have come to think about them. Death was not the end of life; death was simply a version of life marked by a lack of energy and motility in the absolute extreme. The idea of a soul existing separately from the corporeal body was not yet formulated. *Sheol* (the underworld; the depths; the pit) did not yet carry with it, in the 12th century B.C.E., the idea of a place where one went for punishment. *Sheol* was simply the home of the dead, beyond the control of God.¹⁴ Second, from the time of the Greeks, up to and including the 19th century C.E., there existed an idea of health that was philosophical but which yielded practical medical technique. The Greeks formulated an idea of the four humours which, when in harmony, resulted in good physical health.¹⁵ When out of balance, one became ill. The remedy was a technique known as

¹⁴ Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 2nd ed, Rowman and Littlefield, UK and USA, 2009, pp. 51-75.

¹⁵ The four humours, blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile, corresponded to the four elements, earth, air, water, and fire. The system is based on an idea of balance not inconsistent with modern medicine. For example, taking an antibiotic is simply a modern way of restoring bodily harmony. However, in ancient times a first level

bloodletting, a process that exists even to this day.¹⁶ In this treatment an ill person would be lanced with a needle or sharp object of some sort (leaches have also been used) and the blood would be released from the body and collected in a receptacle. Although this technique has been known to produce cures there is no question as to its many hazards, from infection to death.

The two subjects, sin and *piyyutim*, intersect in a liturgical poem written by a 19th century Moroccan rabbi. It takes its title from the poem's first line, *Aromimkha Yah*, and is based on Psalm Thirty, *Mizmor Shir Hanukkat haBayit L'David (A Psalm, a song of the dedication of the Temple, by David)*.¹⁷ One of the fascinating, if not confounding, questions about this poem is the difficulty in affixing a correct attribution of authorship. In various places it is claimed by two different writers. – Rabbi Hayyim Pinto and Rabbi Shlomo ha-Kohen.¹⁸ Whoever the author, he

remedy might be a prescription for changes in diet, exercise, and activity. Should these fail the healer might prescribe a resort to drugs: oftentimes the poison, hellebore, would be drunk. The patient might experience vomiting or diarrhea, "signs" that the imbalanced humour was eliminated. See N.S. Gill, *Hippocratic Method and the Four Humours in Medicine*, <http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/hippocrates/a/hippocraticmeds.htm> This practice has a correlate in Jewish history with the practice of requiring a woman, accused of sexual relations with a man other than her husband to drink bitter water in order to induce a physical reaction from her – should she be "guilty."

¹⁶ A quick internet survey will find that bloodletting is a current treatment for the reduction of cardiovascular risk.

¹⁷ This particular translation of the Hebrew is Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's, (The Psalms, 2 vols, Feldheim Publishers, 1976, p.211). Hirsch's translation seems, to me, closer to the original Hebrew than the often used, 'A Psalm of David, a song for the dedication of the Temple'. Robert Alter (The Book of Psalms, WW Norton & Co, 2007, p.102) has interesting language as well: *Psalm, song for the dedication of the house, for David*.

¹⁸ My source for attributing this piyyut to R. Shlomo ha-Kohen is from the archives of <http://www.piyut.org.il/> and from the liner notes to a cd recording by the musical group Tafillalt: *Tafillalt*, Tzadik Label, A Project of Hips Road, New York, 2009. Attribution of the same poem by R. Hayyim Pinto is found in Israel Davidson, *Thesaurus of Medieval Hebrew Poetry*, KTAV Publishing, 4 vols., 1970 and in a collection of poems and reminiscences by the Moroccan Jew, David Zagori, *L'David L'Hazkir*, 1891, p.154. An online version of the book can be found at: <http://hebrewbooks.org/32967>. Rabbi Hayyim Pinto lived from 1749-1845. Rabbi Shlomo ha-Kohen's dates are uncertain although he is referred to as a 19th century payyetan.

seems to have written his *piyyut* after being healed¹⁹ from some form of sickness.

Traditionally, *Aromimkha Yah* is sung in a rhythmic and cheerful style and its melody is Andalusian-Moroccan.²⁰ One of the things that make this particular poem interesting is the way in which the *payyetan* has taken the language of Psalm Thirty and used it as a reference point, a touchstone for all who are familiar with the language of the original. But, it is also easy to see that *Aromimkha Yah* does not rely on Psalm Thirty, alone. For instance, we will see in the *piyyut* by Rabbi Pinto's grandson, Hayyim the Younger, that it begins with the words: *Aromimkha ha-El* (Exalted are You, God), and so we can infer that both of these poems (the two versions of *Aromimkha Yah* and the poem beginning *Aromimkha ha-El*) are part of a larger tradition that uses the tried and true language of exalting or praising God in the first verse, and with the same word. These poems are the poets' very personal attempts at taking a poem mostly understood as David's (Psalm Thirty) and making the experience their own, away from the awe, grandeur, and weight of this magisterial poetry...and experienced in this world.

Here, then, are both versions of *Aromimkha Yah*; the first attributed to Rabbi Shlomo ha-Kohen and the second attributed to Rabbi Hayyim Pinto ha-Gadol. Clearly, these are the same

¹⁹ We have no idea what sort of healing R. Shlomo or R. Hayyim underwent nor do we know if the malady was life-threatening. In fact, I have been able to come up with virtually no biographical information about Rabbi Shlomo ha-Kohen beyond what I have already written. My research indicates that his full name might be Shlomo ben Messaoud Kohen although even this little piece of R. Shlomo's history is unclear. I offer two sites that seem to indicate the good possibility that R. Shlomo ha-Kohen is R. Shlomo ben Messaoud Kohen (d. 1857) <http://www.piyut.org.il/articles/402.html> and <http://artengine.ca/elianny/html/biodictionaryfiles/rabbinsh.html> See the artengine site for an alphabetical listing of influential rabbis and which is part of the artist, Marc Eliany's, comprehensive site devoted to Morocco's Jewish heritage.

²⁰ Typical of the Andalusian-Moroccan style of singing is the repeatable syllable or short phrase (Yah-la-lan). This particular *piyyut* utilizes this style. It can be heard in two versions that I am aware of. The first was recorded in a modern treatment of the *piyyut* by the Israeli group Tafillalt <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1rY3HLddiY> and the second is a more traditional sounding (in terms of instrumentation) version recorded by the Israeli singer Maimon Cohen <http://www.piyut.org.il/tradition/93.html?currPerformance=291>

poem. However, the first version is shorter and the date of attribution can only be fixed at “19th century.” The second version is longer in its ending, was printed in 1891, and contains errors which I will discuss later, in more detail. As a matter of preference we can say that having an actual date of publication is preferable to an attribution from oral tradition. Finally, the last line of Rabbi Shlomo’s version does not make sense without the three lines that follow it, as they do in Rabbi Pinto’s version.

אָרוממך יֵה²¹

ר. שלמה הכהן

שׁוּעֵתִי לָךְ וַתִּרְפְּאֵנִי	אָרוממך יֵה כִּי דַלְתִּנִּי
וְכִצְרָךְ כְּסֹף צְרָפְתִּנִּי	מִמְצוּלוֹת מְכָאוֹב הוֹצֵאתִנִּי
עַד הִנֵּה חֲסִדֶיךָ עֲזָרְנִי	בִּימִין עֲזָךְ תִּמְכֹּתִנִּי
הַלֵּל וְזַמְרָה שִׁיר וּשְׁבָחָה	אֲשִׁירָה כְּשִׁיר מוֹשֵׁי וּמַחְלֵי
וַתֵּאֲזָרְנִי שְׂמֹחָה	הַפְּכֶת מִסְפְּדֵי לְמַחֹל לִי
עַל עֲרֵשׁ דְּוֵי יִסְעָדְנוּ	נוֹתֵן לְיַעֲף כַּח וְעֲצָמָה
וְאֵת תִּפְקִידֶם לֹא שָׁנוּ	אֲרַבֵּעַ יְסוּדוֹת מִנְהִיג בְּחֻכְמָה

²¹ The Hebrew text of this version of Aromimkha Yah, attributed to R. Shlomo ha-Kohen, comes from the website: <http://www.piyut.org.il/>.

ארוממך יה²²

ר. חיים פינטו

ארוממך יה, כי זליתני, שועתי לך ותרפאני, ובימין עוזך תמכתני,

עד הנה חסדך עזרני, ממצולות מכאוב הוצאתני

וכצרוף כסף צרפתני, אשורר כשיר מושי ומחלי

הלל וזמרה, שיר ושבחה, הפכת מספדי למחול לי,

ותאזרני שמחה נותן ליעף כח ועצמה, על ראש דוי יסעדנו:

ארבע יסודות מנהיג בחכמה. ואת תפקידם לא ישנו,

ואם יתגבר אחד מהם יפסד הגוף מתקונו,

ואף גם זאת אל פודה ומציל ומוציא מצרה לרוחה.

הפכת מספדי למחול לי ותאזרני שמחה.

²² This version of Aromimkha Yah, attributed to Rabbi Hayyim Pinto ha-Gadol, was found with the great aid of Dr. Joseph Davis. It appears in an 1891 volume containing the history and reminiscences of the Moroccan Jew, David Zagori, who tells us that he grew up sitting on the knee of his teacher, Rabbi Hayyim Pinto. Its title is L'David L'Hazkir (לדוד להזכיר) and can be found on p. 154 of the online version at <http://hebrewbooks.org/32967>. The reader will note several errors in the printed text: דליתני should be דליתני (collected me and brought me up); ערש דוי should be ערש דוי (sickbed/deathbed). Finally, the original 1891 text has printed the word, ומוציא (and takes out) in a flawed way. The vav within the word seems to be cut in half so that it looks more like a yod, ומיציא. I have taken the liberty of correcting the text and it appears as ומוציא.

Aromimkha Yah (I will Raise Thee)

Attributed to R. Shlomo ha-Kohen²³

I praise You, Lord, for You have collected me and brought me up

I poured myself into You, I pleaded to You - and You healed me

From the depths of pain You pulled me up

As the purification of silver, You purified me

With Your mighty right hand You supported me

Until this very day, Your kindness has helped me

I will sing songs like the songs of Mushi and Maḥli²⁴

Praise and music, a song of praise

You have turned my lament into a dance for me

Opened my sackcloth and girded me with joy

Give strength and power to the weary

On a deathbed, God will support and sustain us

We are created of the four elements; He leads us in wisdom, the roles will not change

²³ Translation is my own.

²⁴ Mushi and Maḥli are the names of two Levites. Exodus 6:16-19 gives the lineage of the clans; Levi had three sons (Gershon, Kohath, and Merari). Maḥli and Mushi were the sons of Merari. Although little can be gleaned about the brothers from the Torah they are mentioned several times in Chronicles, in each instance as part of a longer listing of Levites and their duties. At the beginning of I Chronicles 23 we are told that an aged King David, following the installation of his son, Solomon, on the throne, assembled all the officers of Israel, the priests, and the Levites. His census revealed 38,000 male Levites and he would choose 4,000 to praise the Lord “with instruments [I] devised for singing praises” (translation: *JPS Hebrew English Tanakh*, Philadelphia, 1999, pp.1935-1937). The chapter goes on to say (vs.30) that Mushi and Maḥli were part of the 4,000 and that they and their Levite brethren were to be present each morning to praise and extol the Lord – and at evening, also. It is reasonable to understand that by *praising and extolling* the text is saying that the Levites would sing praises to the Lord...with the instruments David had fashioned for just that purpose. To further enrich an understanding of why our author chose Mushi and Maḥli, from among all the Levite names he might have chosen, we can turn to *Gesinius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Numerically Coded to Strong's Numbers*, Baker Books, Michigan, 1979. Gesinius (with Strong's #4249) renders Mahli as *sick* and Mushi (Strong's #4187) as *yielding*, as in tested and surrendered. Both names lend themselves perfectly to the theme of *Aromimkha Yah*.

Aromimkha Yah
Attributed to R. Hayyim Pinto ha-Gadol

I praise Yah, for you have collected me and brought me up, I poured myself into You, I pleaded to You-

And You healed me

With Your mighty right hand You supported me, until now, here, Your kindness has helped me,

From the depths of pain You pulled me up, as the purification of silver, You purified me,

Putting songs together, like the songs of Mushi and Maḥli,

Praise and music, a song of praise, You have turned my lament into a dance for me,

Opened my sackcloth and girded me with joy, give strength and power to the weary, over sorrow God
will support us

We are created of the four elements; He leads us in wisdom. The roles will not change,

And if one overpowers the others, the body will lose its structure and stability.

Even then God redeems and saves and takes us out from troubled situations - to openness

You have turned my lament into a dance for me, opened my sackcloth and girded me with joy.

A quick look will reveal several discrepancies between the two versions. Most notably the ending of Rabbi Shlomo's is several verses shorter. Additionally, a few words in Rabbi Pinto's are either spelled differently or are misprints, especially the word ראש (head) in the fifth line, which I assume ought to be ערש (cradle, but when put with דוי makes the word sickbed or, as I have translated it, deathbed). Both versions of the *piyyut* leave out the famous introductory line of Psalm Thirty: *A Psalm, a song of the dedication of the Temple, by David*. Clearly, whatever those words mean, whether to be taken literally or as metaphor, whether they were

part of the original poetry or a superscription which evolved over time, as Sarna suggests,²⁵ this Moroccan spin-off is focused squarely on the author's personal experience. He begins with the word, אָרוּמִימְךָ (I praise You) exactly as Psalm Thirty does. He then uses a shortened form of God's personal four letter name, YHWH (*Adonai*). This shorter form, יְהִי (*Yah*), not only connotes the lovingkindness and mercy associated with YHWH but does so in an intimate way – in a way one might expect comrades or lovers to express their devotion toward each other. Here, the author of *Aromimkha Yah* has clearly decided that the more formal YHWH of Psalm Thirty does not impart the message he wants his listeners to take from his poetry, that God has been a close, awesome, and intimate presence in his life.²⁶

It is interesting to think about the way that the poems are laid out on the page. R. Shlomo's version, shorter than R. Pinto's in the last few verses, reads clearly and with ease. The first two

²⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Songs of the Heart: An introduction to the book of Psalms*, Schocken Books, 1993, p.149. Sarna argues that the introduction is strange for several reasons. First, in order to understand it clearly one must translate the Hebrew in the reverse. In other words, "A Psalm of David" at the beginning rather than at the end where the Hebrew original has placed it. Furthermore, in only one other place does a Psalm begin by giving information about the occasion of its composition, in Psalm 92, "A Psalm, a song for the Sabbath Day". But, Psalm 92 enjoys the preposition "for" which is not included in Psalm 30. Finally, the designation, "a song" does not appear in any other Psalm of the first book of the Psalter. Sarna notes (in a footnote) that the word, *Shir*, in Psalm 33:3 and 40:4 are not titles. He then theorizes that the original title was, simply, "A Psalm of David", reinterpreted at some later date to make the worshiper the entire community, a collective community, while the sickness written about was understood as a national calamity. The recovery was experienced as a great national deliverance followed by a rededication of the Temple. It would have been in honor of the rededication that the superscription was expanded to include the additions of "A Song" and "Dedication of the Temple". Sarna offers three possible events that might have occasioned the reinterpretation. The dedication of the Second Temple in the spring of 515 B.C.E., (told in Ezra 6:15-18), the purification and rededication of the Temple following the victory of the Maccabees over the Syro-Greeks in the autumn of 164 B.C.E. (told in 1 Maccabees 4:36-59), and during the pilgrimage festival for celebrating the first fruits, *Hag haBikkurim* (Shavuot) (Mishnah Bikkurim 3:4). At that time the Levitical choir would greet the pilgrims with the singing of Psalm 30.

²⁶ *Aromimkha Yah* uses Psalm Thirty as its main wellspring of source material. There are, however, several verses that make use of material or themes from other texts. Giving *strength and power to the weary* (vs. 11) comes from *Birkhot ha-Shahar* while the theme of purifying silver (vs. 4) can be found in the Ashkenazi piyyut *Ki Hinei KaHomer*, said in the Evening Service of Yom Kippur and , also in Psalm 12:7, *The words of the Lord are pure words, silver purged in an earthen crucible, refined sevenfold. From the depths of pain you rescued me* (vs. 3) echoes the same themes found both, in Psalm 40:3, *He lifted me out of the miry pit, the slimy clay...* and Psalm 130, *Mi-ma'amakim K'ratikha, Out of the depths I called you, O Lord*. The first word of the piyyut's title, *Aromimkha*, begins not only Psalm 145 but the piyyut written by R. Hayyim Pinto ha-Katan, in this paper.

lines are in the first person while the bulk of the remaining lines are in the second. However, in trying to reproduce the visual layout of the version attributed to R. Pinto, as faithfully as possible, given the limitations of technology, it has the feel of a much more complicated piece of poetry. The verses have an endless quality; it can be hard to know where a thought begins and ends. Also, the order of verses has some variation between the two examples. Of course, the way the poems are laid out and have come to us is, at least in our case, is completely a function of the way they were typeset or entered into a computer formatting system by someone far removed from the original author. We have no idea how Rabbi Shlomo ha-Kohen or Rabbi Hayyim Pinto actually penned the original. Still, it is quite instructive to stop and think about the differences in feeling when the visual is taken into consideration.

Printed, below, is the *piyyut* written by Rabbi Pinto's grandson, Rabbi Hayyim Pinto the Younger, from Casablanca. This poem is sung on the occasion of his own *hillulah*. For our purposes there are three things that make it particularly interesting. First is the fact that Rabbi Pinto is the author. His is an illustrious name in Morocco and his grandfather might well be the author of *Aromimkha Yah*, the *piyyut* that is the main subject of this paper. Second is the first word of the poem, *Aromimkha!* It is commonly translated as *I extol You*, or, *I praise You*. It can, however, be translated as *I raise You up*, and it is this translation that is preferable, as we shall see that *Aromimkha Yah* begins exactly the same but adds the parallel thought, in the second

half of the first verse, that God has raised up the author from the depths. Third, this poem ends with a voice still plaintive, not at all the poem of thanksgiving that its literary cousin is.

סימן אני חיים חזק²⁷

ארוממך האל אלקי ישראל
המציל הגואל מדחי את רגלי
נבהלתי מיראה מצור גאה גאה
נענתי כי אמרתי מטה רגלי
ידך עשוני והם כוננוני
הי חנני והיה נא עוזר לי
חי מלא בחיבה אומתך הקריבה
אודך ואברך אותך לרגלי
יצאת לישועה ברוך גדול דעה
כי עניתני במישור עמדה רגלי
ישמע קול שירי לפניך סתרי
אתה תאיר נרי צורי וגואלי
מול קדשי אתחנן בצלו אתלונן
בביתו אשתונן וחסיד כל חולי
חלותי זה כמה זך ישר באימה
קולי תשמע למה עזבתני אל

Exalted are You, God of Israel
Who rescues and keeps my foot from falling

I was frightened with awe of the Rock, refulgent with His glory
I was answered when I said: "My foot is unsteady"

Your hands made me and they shaped me

²⁷ The Hebrew text is taken from the online diary of Daniel Pinto, a relative of the Rabbi. It can be found at the following website: <http://www.angelfire.com/al4/danielpinto/>.htm

The English translation is taken from Issachar Ben-Ami, *Ibid*, pp.122-123. Typically, a piyyut in Hebrew would be sung only by men; piyyutim partially in Judeo-Arabic might include women's voices; the qasida is a poem form composed entirely in Judeo-Arabic and sung by women.

God, pity me and help me!

Living God, full of love, You approached your nation
Yet I shall continue to praise and to bless You, in my footsteps

You came forward for my salvation, blessed is Your great wisdom!
For mercy's sake, hear my prayers: May my foot rest solidly in uprightness.

Let the sound of my song be heard before you, my sanctuary!
May you light my candle, my Rock and my Redeemer!

Before His sanctuary I shall plead for mercy; in its shadow I shall find shelter
Bruised and battered I shall come to His house, but He will heal my sickness

I implore You, with fear and trembling, O Pure and Righteous One!
Hear my voice, why have you abandoned me, my God?

In contrasting either version of *Aromimkha Yah* to the *piyyut* of Rabbi Pinto's grandson we can see that although there are similarities (the first word, the sense of reliance on the Creator for salvation) there are differences as well (the tone of thanksgiving is missing in the Younger Pinto's as well as any mention of the postscript from *Aromimkha Yah*). We understand our *piyyut* better by contrasting it to one that is similar but not the same.

At this point it will be useful to reproduce the full text of Psalm Thirty so that we can compare the language and themes from the two versions of *Aromimkha Yah* to their older relation.²⁸

מְזִמּוֹר שִׁיר הַנְּחִיבֵת הַבַּיִת לְדָוִד

אַרְוִמְמָךְ ה' כִּי דָלִיתָנִי וְלֹא שִׁמַּחְתָּ אֵיבֵי לִי

²⁸ Translation and Hebrew text is from the JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1999, pp.1444-1445.

ה' אֱלֹהֵי שׁוֹעֲתֵי אֱלֹהֵי וְתַרְפָּאֲנִי
ה' הַעֲלִיתָ מִן שְׂאוֹל נַפְשִׁי חַיִּיתָנִי מִיַּרְדֵּי בּוֹר
זָמְרוּ לֵה' חֲסִידָיו וְהוֹדוּ לְזִכָּר קִדְשׁוֹ
כִּי רָגַע בְּאִפּוֹ חַיִּים בְּרִצּוֹנוֹ בְּעָרֵב יָלִין בְּכִי וּלְבַקֵּר רָנָה
וְאֲנִי אֶמְרָתִי בְּשִׁלּוֹי בַּל אֶמוֹט לְעוֹלָם
ה' בְּרִצּוֹנְךָ הֶעֱמַדְתָּה לְהַרְרִי עַל הַסִּתְרֹת פְּנֵיךָ הַיִּיתִי נִבְהַל
אֱלֹהֵי ה' אֶקְרָא וְאֶל אֲדָנָי אֶתְחַנֵּן
מֵה בָצַע בְּדַמִּי בְּרִדְתִּי אֶל שְׁחַת הַיּוֹדֶךָ עֲפָר הַנִּגִּיד אֶמְתֶּךָ
שְׁמַע ה' וְחַנּוּנֵי ה' הֵיחָה עֲזָר לִי
הַפְּכֶת מִסִּפְדֵי לְמַחֹל לִי פִתְחֶת שְׂקֵי וּתְאֲזַרְנֵי שְׂמֹחָה
לְמַעַן יִזְמְרֶךָ כְּבוֹד וְלֹא יָדָם ה' אֱלֹהֵי לְעוֹלָם אֲוֹדְךָ

A psalm of David. A song for the dedication of the House.

I extol You, O Lord, for You have lifted me up,
and not let my enemies rejoice over me.

O Lord, my God, I cried out to You,
and You healed me.

O Lord, you brought me up from Sheol,
preserved me from going down into the Pit.

O you faithful of the Lord, sing to Him,
and praise His holy name.

For He is angry but a moment,
and when He is pleased there is life.

One may lie down weeping at nightfall;
but at dawn there are shouts of joy.

When I was untroubled,
I thought, "I shall never be shaken,"
for You, O Lord, when You were pleased,
made [me] firm as a mighty mountain.
When You hid Your face,
I was terrified.
I called to You, O Lord;
to my Lord I made appeal.
"What is to be gained from my death, from my descent into the Pit?
Can dust praise You? Can it declare Your faithfulness?
Hear, O Lord, and have mercy on me;
O Lord, be my help!"
You turned my lament into dancing,
You undid my sackcloth and girded me with joy,
That [my] whole being might sing hymns to
You endlessly;
O Lord my god, I will praise You forever.

Most striking is the fact that *Aromimkha Yah* makes no reference to enemies rejoicing over the poet. The modern *piyyut* tells us that the author has been healed and pulled from the depths of pain.²⁹ King David, on the other hand, seems healed in the sense of being delivered out of the hands of his enemies. Why does David find himself in this place and what is the

²⁹ The reference here is clearly to having been healed from a physical ailment.

meaning of his sin? Did he, in fact, commit a sin? Much ink has been spilled trying to decipher the answer.³⁰

Both Rashi and Nachmanides point to Exodus: 30:12 in which God instructs Moses to take a census of the people but only in conjunction with a half shekel ransom offering that each person will pay upon being counted, lest a plague be brought down.³¹ The commentators' idea was that the evil eye had power over numbers – especially if used to count people. Avoiding the direct use of numbers could render the evil eye ineffective. Of course, there are several other acts, committed by David, which might count as sins in most anyone's understanding: David's relationship with Bathsheba and his accountability in Uriah's death. In Psalm Thirty I believe the author is concerned with, and reacts to, an understanding of God's wrath and the plague He brought down on Israel resulting in the deaths of seventy thousand Israelites.³² This

³⁰ The question arises: Is Psalm Thirty about sin? Might it simply be about healing and thanksgiving for being healed? Or, a poem that looks toward a possible healing in the future? The answer to both is, "of course". But, there is ample reason to look to sin as the motivation for the Psalm. II Samuel 24 is full of David's admission of sin. We can debate the meaning: past sins, taking the census, causing the deaths of 70,000, but there is no ambiguity in David's admission. In verse 10 and verse 17 David says he has sinned (חטאתי). In fact, he says, in vs. 10, that he had sinned greatly in what he had done. And what had he done in the first half of verse 10? He had counted the people. Artscroll offers commentary by R. Reuven Margulies in their Schottenstein Edition, *Tehillim*, ed. Rabbi Menachem Davis, Mesorah Publications, Brooklyn, 2001, p.73. R. Margulies suggests that Psalm Thirty is a response to the census described in II Samuel 24. Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz, *ibid.* p.73 also notes that David speaks as if he has already died and descended to the lower world where sinners are punished after death. In another source: Benjamin Segal, *A New Psalm: The Psalms as Literature*, Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies and Gefen Publishing House, Israel, 2013, pp.134-139, Segal offers wonderful insights into the form and language of Psalm Thirty. Referring to vs. 7 Segal translates: *I, when untroubled, said, 'I shall not ever be shaken.'* His commentary to the verse does not assume that David is the actual author (as Artscroll does). Segal is comfortable reading the Psalm from the point of view that the speaker is anonymous even though the Psalm's attribution is to David. Nevertheless, in decoding verse 7 Segal says that the author once saw himself as invulnerable to harm/or to the sin that would bring punishment.

³¹ The idea here is that the very act of taking a census puts each individual person at risk. Each life is placed in jeopardy and the payment of a half-shekel redeems that life. The Hebrew word כפר (kofer) is variously translated as *ransom* (see the JPS translation) or *atonement* (see the Artscroll translation).

³² Rabbi David Golinkin has produced a very useful compilation of the source material related to taking a census in Jewish law. It can be found online at: <http://www.schechter.edu/responsa.aspx?ID=39> Included in his listing is the explanation (given by Rashi in his commentary to Exodus 30, by Rabbeinu Bahya in his commentary to Exodus 30:12, and by Rabbi Yitzhak Abarbanel in his own commentary to II Samuel 24) that the evil

act, described in II Samuel 24, is possibly an animating reason for David's Psalm 30, and this plague may only be the least severe of the three punishment choices that God offered David through Gad, the prophet most closely associated with his monarchy. And so we are not completely surprised that King David would experience the pit, *sheol*, in such a personally close and terrifying way.³³

When we examine Psalm Thirty in the context of all that David had lived through – his ongoing struggle to either indulge or tame the proclivities which made up his complicated personality – we are left with no choice but to view his words, “I cried out to You, and You healed me” (vs.3) as some sort of acknowledgment of the seriousness of his actions. The descent into *sheol*, which is most often understood as *gehinnom* (the Jewish idea of purgatory) is a place of the deepest misery, the darkest depression, the lowest and most absolute resignation and the expression of abject frustration and aloneness, in the Jewish psyche.

That is a place one can relate to – even descend to - while alive. To feel oneself cradled and pulled out (דליתני) by an unseen force would be a profound experience of healing.³⁴ What are

eye is in control of something that is counted. This idea is presented earlier in several Talmudic passages (Ta'anit 8b and Bava Metzia 42a) which point to the idea that God only sends His blessing to something hidden, not to something counted or weighed. Three additional sources (Tosefta Pesahim 4:15, ed. Lieberman, p. 166; Pesahim 64b; and Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, VI, 9, 3, ed. Simhoni, p. 370) can be read in conjunction with the above named sources.

³³ II Samuel 23:12-15 describes God's offer of three different punishments for David's sin in accomplishing the census. It is not at all clear what David's sin actually was: counting by number, including men too young in age, taking the census only for his own pleasure (since the military engagements had already been won), or because the census did not serve any real purpose. There is no authoritative consensus on this point. What we do know, from the text, is that God, through the prophet, Gad, gave David a choice of three punishments: famine, defeat in battle, or plague. David chose the latter and 70,000 Israelites fell.

³⁴ I am indebted to a friend and congregant, Jacob Wasserman, for bringing a richer understanding of the Hebrew (דליתני) to my attention. The word is generally translated *as drawn me up* but Wasserman insists that drawing water, from a well, for instance, is too unstable an act to convey the real meaning of the word. *Drawing up* leaves open the possibility that water might spill over the sides of the pail as it is hauled upward. Rather, the root letters .ה.ל.ד convey more than simply drawing up. They convey absolute security, being collected or scooped up in an

we to make of David's descent? Was it the result of his utterly human life, replete with lust, imperfection, jealousy, and rage? Or, was it, more simply, the result of some particular illness, physical and without the baggage of psychological investigation?³⁵ Of course, we don't know, will probably never know, and are therefore left to the best interpretations of our own minds. My own feeling is informed both by my training as a psychoanalyst and my experience at the bedsides of people gripped by the cancers that knock on most every family's doors. David's experience in *Sheol* was probably more like the un-mitigated pain of the unmedicated than the dreamy and hallucinatory state of his modern heir who has the benefit of chemical pain relief (morphine or a variant). He must have felt quite saved when all around him succumbed to the same sort of illness.³⁶ It was fortuitous for Israel, then, that the meaning of Psalm Thirty came to express a nationalistic longing.³⁷ Israel, exiled to Babylon and beyond, could see themselves in David; mighty and righteous Israel living under the rule of an enemy who scorned them. They would wait for redemption and hope, and like David, God would deliver them from the laughter and taunts of their enemies.

unflappable vessel – God's hands. Hirsch, *ibid*, pp. 212-213 points to this very point although he comes to it from the opposite direction. Hirsch relates to *draw up* (his translation) to the root letters .ה.ל.א *to allow to be suspended* and feels that this hanging suspension over the depth (*sheol*) is exactly the relationship between God and man. I like his metaphor but disagree with his interpretation.

³⁵ See, for instance, Soncino's, *The Psalms: Hebrew Text and English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary by The Rev. Dr. A. Cohen, M.A., Ph.D., D.H.L.*, The Soncino Press, originally published in 1945 and republished for the 12th time in 1977, p.85. The Soncino's editors clearly understand verse 3 as meaning that a physical illness, "which almost proved fatal" was the literal meaning for the verse's use of the word, *heal*. The editors also point out the similarities, in most every way, between Psalm 30 and Psalm 6. David, as an angry and vexed man is much more apparent in the earlier Psalm. Sarna, *ibid*, pp.140-142, interprets the healing as being related to a physical illness - and notes that the ancient world suffered from over-crowding, private grudges, and the like as easily and as much as ours, today. He sees David's enemies as, perhaps, living in the neighborhood, so to speak, and not the enemies of the battlefield.

³⁶ This comment refers back to the conjectured relationship between the plague we read about in II Samuel 24 and David's ability to not fall sick or die.

³⁷ See footnote #21 which describes Nahum Sarna's point of view about the nationalistic meaning of Psalm Thirty.

Rabbis Shlomo or Hayyim, on the other hand, at least from the text they have left us, seem to be simply thankful for their returned health. Perhaps their illnesses were exactly the same as King David's, we will never know. Perhaps their pain was equal to David's. Again, we will never know. What we can say, I think, is that the Moroccan Rabbis' poem is unencumbered by the weight of David's history. This is a poem of gratitude for coming through some very serious mishap or illness. The author credits his Creator for being present in his life, for shaping his life, and, ultimately, for saving his life. *Aromimkha Yah* is simple because it does not twist and turn in the psychological windstorm of a human ego torn between the struggle to win and the desire to be succored. Psalm Thirty's David feels tortured in the way he must be ever attuned to God's mood swings: God as caretaker; God as angry; God as capricious, (angry one moment and pleased the next); hiding His face until he is convinced of David's genuineness. In its simplicity, *Aromimkha Yah* is perfect the way it is, a prayer of thanks.

There are, however, other jewels to mine in the *piyyut*. For instance, it is well worth noting that the poem, written in the 19th century, modern by any comparison to the Bible, takes its form from the untold number of *piyyutim* written in the centuries that preceded it. The *piyyut* follows a style of writing that has each line composed of two phrases and with a roughly equivalent meter based on a word rhythm. So, for example, the first verse, in two halves, reads: **Aromimkha Yah Ki Dilitani** and **Shivati L'kha Vatirpaeni**. Four words in the first phrase and three in the second (4:3). The second verse: **Mimtsulot Makhov Hotseitani** and **V'khitsrof Kesef Tseraftani** each have three words (3:3) but the third verse: **Vimin Uzkh**
Temakhtani and **Ad Heina Hasdekha Azarani** goes back to the 3:4 / 4:3 pattern. The word

meter, oftentimes a reliable clue as to how a poem was constructed, seems not to be the main factor here. Looking at the number of syllables in each phrase might be a better resource.

Again, looking at the first line: **A-ro-mim-kha Yah Ki Di-li-ta-ni** has ten syllables and its counterpart, **Shi-va-ti L'-kha Va-tir-pa-ei-ni** has ten also (10:10). But, just when a reliable pattern seems imminent, the poem proves not entirely reliable. The second verse is 9:9, the third is 9:10, the fourth is 10:10, the fifth is 10:9, the sixth is 10:9 and the seventh is 10:8. All in all, though, except for the last half-verse which has eight syllables, every half-line has either nine or ten syllables.

As important, especially since *piyyutim* were generally meant to be sung or chanted aloud, there is a definite rhyming scheme. The two halves of verse one end **Ah/Ni and Ei/Ni**; line two ends **Ah/Ni and Ah/Ni**; line three ends **Ah/Ni and Ah/Ni**; line four ends **Ah/EE and Ah/Ah**; line five ends **Oh/EE and Eh/Ah**; line six ends **Oh/Ah and Oo/Ei**, while line seven finishes with **Oh/Ah and EE/Oo**. All these endings, when sung by an accomplished singer, have a sort of malleability that keeps them sounding like they blend and flow into each other easily and musically.

This point, that *piyyutim* can come rushing from the heart and, therefore are not always as prudent as poetry of another sort is well made over and over again in the literature. Kieval, in his book, [The High Holy Days](#), quotes from Solomon Schechter and it is worth noting here. Schechter, who writes following the mammoth discovery of the *Cairo Genizah* and its treasure

trove of *piyyutim*³⁸ is discussing the less than flawless literary state of many *piyyutim* by saying that just as a love letter is judged by its ardent state and not its grammatical precision, *piyyutim* must be judged in a like fashion.

One likes to think of the old days when devotion was not yet procurable ready-made from hymn-books run by the theological syndicates...You can see by their abruptness and their unfinished state that they were not the product of elaborate literary art, but were penned down in the excitement of the moment in a “fit of love,” so to speak, to express the religious aspirations of the writer. Their meter may be faulty, their diction crude, and their grammar questionable, but love letters are not, as a rule, distinguished by perfection of style. They are sublime stammering at best though they are intelligible enough to two souls absorbed in each other.³⁹

This, then, puts *Aromimkha Yah*, in context for us. The poetry and grammar are not at issue. In fact, as the poem takes its form from Psalm Thirty and weaves in material from other Psalms or parts of *Tanakh* it is quite beautiful in its message of thanks and devotion. What we do know is that *Aromimkha Yah* is sung often, in Morocco and in Israel by Moroccan Jews, after someone has recovered from serious illness or in the hope of a recovery. It is mostly sung now in the home but its history claims usage as an addition to the traditional *mi sheberakh* prayer for healing, said in synagogue.⁴⁰ Of course, in synagogue there would be no musical accompaniment; the poem would be chanted to the tune we know from the modern recordings cited in this paper and the *hazzan* might very well improvise on the musical motifs in much the

³⁸ Mark Glickman, *Sacred Treasure of the Cairo Genizah*, Jewish Lights, Vermont, 2012, p.211. Glickman reports that some 291,793 documents or fragments were found. This figure does not include the uncounted Cairo Genizah documents that found their way to Moscow, Kiev, and St. Petersburg.

³⁹ Solomon Schechter, *Studies in Judaism*, Second Series, Philadelphia, JPS 1908, pp.18-19.

⁴⁰ Personal communication from a Moroccan Jew living in Israel.

same way as cantors from the Ashkenazi tradition improvise on the *nusah* of the day.⁴¹

Coincidentally, *hazzan* is the Berber word for healer, and so it is part of the Moroccan Jewish tradition that the music of the *hazzanim* is associated with healing acts.⁴² The tune follows the Andalusian style in which a syllable is repeated, between verses, in order to keep the metered flow going and to indicate continuity. In this case the repeated sounds are *ya-la-lan, ya-la-lan*, typical in this part of Andalusian-Morocco. Also, and in an odd way, *Aromimkha Yah* is sung as an upbeat song; one might imagine relief and sadness as animating forces but whoever set the poem to music felt the joy and giddy happiness that comes with new found life. Because both the poetic and musical forms of the religious music of Morocco's Jews are oftentimes based on Arabic poetic meter and the musical system of *maqamot* (*maqamot* is the plural form of *maqam*, the system of Arabic musical motifs which corresponds roughly to the Jewish system of *nusah*). *Aromimkha Yah* is set to the meter called *ramal* which calls forth the notion of walking hastily by taking shorter steps, lifting the legs forcefully, and pushing the chest out. It is written in 2/4 time which might indicate a quick and regular tempo, exactly like the several recordings of *Aromimkha Yah* in the public domain.⁴³

⁴¹ Personal communication, *ibid.*

⁴² See: *Jews under Moroccan Skies*, *Ibid.*, p.253.

⁴³ For basic information about Arabic musical forms, in general, and written from the context of Jewish music which has been influenced by Arabic forms, see: A.Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music in Its Historical Development*, 1929, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, pp.110-116. Marsha Bryan Edelman has an excellent description of the Arabic *maqamot* which parallel the Jewish *Nushaot*. Although she doesn't speak directly about the *ramal* meter the chapter is a very good introduction to the subject. See: Marsha Bryan Edelman, *Discovering Jewish Music*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 2003, pp. 30-35. A description of the *Ramal* meter can be found at the following website: <http://www.inter-islam.org/Actions/Part14.html#RAMAL>. Finally, Amnon Shiloah, in his book *Jewish Musical Traditions*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, MI, 1992, pp. 17-33, offers a wonderful introduction to the subject of Jewish and Arabic musical cross pollination. This book is a shortened translation (from the original Hebrew) of his *Ha-moreshet ha-musaqalit shel qehillot Yisrael* (The Musical Heritage of the Jewish Communities) which was previously published in Israel.

If we move from the formal and stylistic elements of the *piyyut* and consider several of its literary references we can speculate further about its meaning and thought process. For instance: Psalm Thirty says (verse 10) ...**הַיּוֹדֵךְ עִפָּר** ...which can be translated as *will the dust/slime acknowledge/praise You?* This is in the context of the verse's beginning which poses the question: *What gain is there in my death, in my descent to the pit?*⁴⁴ Turning to *Aromimkha Yah* we find the phrase: *From the depths of pain You rescued me; and like a silversmith You purified me.* Is the *payyetan* adding the silversmith character in some random or unconscious fashion –or- is he making a thoughtful and interesting allusion to the word dust (or slime) which appears in the original Psalm? Because, although it would be easy to give the word *silversmith* no more than a passing glance and assume that *Aromimkha Yah* was simply using Psalm Thirty as a jumping off vehicle for his own creative purposes I believe that one of its intents was to draw a parallelism between the insubstantiveness of dust and the comparative permanence of silver.

Why would the poet take the time or be interested in such a thin or veiled literary association? The answer, I think, lies in the complicated history of *piyyutim* going back to Kallir and Yannai and the earliest generations of *payyetanim*; to the Palestinian poets of the 4th or 5th centuries C.E. These authors wrote in a style that was so dependent on, and steeped in, *Torah*, *Mishnah*, and whatever other sources existed in their time, that even a sizable portion of the Rabbis came to the decision that the poems were too richly reliant on a scholar's intimate

⁴⁴ *The Anchor Yale Bible Commentary, Psalms I 1-50*, Mitchell Dahood, Doubleday, NY, NY, 1965, pp. 181-184. In a footnote to Verse 10 of Psalm 30 the author cites Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, p. 128, whose own scholarship translates the Hebrew, *afar*, as slime, in this context. His translation is based on the Northwest Semitic motifs which describe the nether world as a place of mud and filth. He goes on to say that in Sheol, no praise of God exists and he cites Psalm 6:6 *For there is no praise of You among the dead; in Sheol, who can acclaim You?*

knowledge of the original works.⁴⁵ Rabbi Shlomo ha-Kohen or Rabbi Hayyim Pinto, writing almost fifteen hundred years after the first poets of their tradition, was certainly aware of this history. And so, into this literary conflict they jumped, I believe. Wanting to honor the tradition of connecting the poem with scripture, but not wanting to make the *piyyut* so obscure that it could not stand alone as a piece of poetry to be sung and appreciated by the community, it was written in a style that accomplished both ends. With that in mind I offer the following sources as reason enough to believe that the author had more on his mind than a good and simple poem.

First, is the special *piyyut* recited during the Ashkenazic rite for the *Ma'ariv of Yom Kippur*, **כי הנה כחמר** (Ki Hinei Kahomer) *Like Clay in the Potter's Hands*. This is an anonymous *pizmon* (refrain) which probably dates back to the twelfth century C.E.⁴⁶ Its first stanza sounds a theme similar to verse ten (*can dust praise you?*) from Psalm Thirty.⁴⁷ It begins: *As clay in the hand of the potter, who thickens or thins it at will, so are we in Your hand, Guardian of love.*⁴⁸ Clay comes from the earth and easily returns to it; a form of dust. Embedded in its final stanza are the words: *Like silver in the silversmith's hands; adulterated or purified at will; so are we in*

⁴⁵ Almost any description of *piyyutim* will bear this out. I would offer any of the several sources I have already cited in this paper: Kieval, *Ibid*, chapter two *The Piyyutim*; Elbogen, *Ibid*, Part 2, Chapter 2, *The Period of the Piyyut*; and Ruth Langer's, *The Language of Prayer: The Challenge of Piyyut*, in *To Worship God Properly: Tensions Between Liturgical Custom and Halakhah in Judaism*, Hebrew Union College Press, Cincinnati, 1998, pp. 110-187.

⁴⁶ Macy Nulman, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Prayer*, Jason Aronson Press, NJ, 1996, p. 197.

⁴⁷ Genesis 3:19 (*For dust you are, and to dust you shall return*) begins the chain of references to which "dust - afar" belongs. Psalm 22:30 (*all those who go down to the dust...will kneel before him*) is a reference either to death or sheol. And King Hezekiah's prayer (Isaiah 38:18): (*For the underworld cannot thank You, death cannot praise You. Those who go down into the pit cannot hope for Your truth*). Translations from, Amos Hakham, *The Bible: Psalms: with the Jerusalem Commentary*, Vol. One, Mosad HaRav Kook, Jerusalem, p.225.

⁴⁸ Translation from *Maḥzor Lev Shalem*, The Rabbinical Assembly, New York, 2010, p.227

*Your hand, Provider of healing to the sick; look to the covenant, and disregard our inclination.*⁴⁹

And so, behold, some seven centuries later we find the same thought and almost the same words in our nineteenth century poem – *and like a silversmith You purified me. Aromimkha Yah* is an Oriental-Sephardic *piyyut* and *Ki Hinei Kahomer*, an Ashkenazic one, so the claim cannot be made that the 19th century poem is a logical descendent of the 12th century forerunner. But it is fair to speculate, I think, that the Moroccan Rabbis were aware, and quite possibly, familiar with, the western poem.

More likely, though, is the fact that the idea of silver being purified was a rather common theme in *Tanakh*. Psalm 12:7 (*The sayings of the Lord are pure sayings, silver purged in an earthen crucible, refined sevenfold*), Psalm 66:10 (*Indeed, You have tested us, O God, refined us as silver is refined*). The Hebrew root for *refining* .פ.ר.צ is used as a metaphor for *testing* in other writings: Psalm 17:3 (*You have probed my heart, visited me at night; You have tested me and found nothing amiss; I resolved that my mouth should not transgress*), Zechariah 13:9 (*I will smelt them as one smelts silver, And test them as one tests gold*).⁵⁰

There are two themes here that deserve looking into. The larger picture painted by *Ki Hinei* and the other Psalms and Writings I have referred to is a request for forgiveness; we are made in God's image and, therefore, deserve God's understanding and mercy; especially so in the

⁴⁹ The Koren Yom Kippur *Maḥzor*, Translation and Commentary by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Koren Publishers, Jerusalem, 2006, pp. 150-151.

⁵⁰ The translations of Psalms 12, 66, and 17 are from Benjamin Segal, *ibid*, and the translation of Zecharia is from the JPS Hebrew-English *Tanakh*, *ibid*.

face of our inclination...to do wrong.⁵¹ The connection here, to David's pleas in Psalm Thirty, is striking. Moreover, the specific language of the final verse from *Ki Hinei Kahomer*

Like silver in the silversmith's hands
adulterated or purified at will
so are we in Your hand, Provider of healing to the sick

speaks directly to *Aromimkha's* theme: healing.

Dust and silver; silver and dust. Certainly in the nineteenth century the Rabbis would have the idea of gold or silver dust in their lexicon of words. Certainly they were aware of the use of silver, and its purification, in Hebrew literature, and certainly they, as wordsmiths could make plenty out of the pair of opposites. Of course, there is no way of knowing, but it would be well within the tradition of this sort of religious poetry to take the dust found in Psalm Thirty and the silver found in *Ki Hinei Kahomer* and Psalms, and fashion the pair as a poetic couple.

Another source that bears directly on this interpretation of *Aromimkha Yah* is *Parashat Ki Tissa* (Ex. 30:13-15). This section of Torah describes the census that Moses took of the Israelites and the *half-shekel* each man gave as a raised up atonement offering for his soul. This offering, **תרומה** (*terumah*), is mentioned three times (verses 13, 14, and 15) and the Sages have written

⁵¹ R. Jonathan Sacks has a wonderful essay about *Ki Hinei Kahomer* in the introduction to his translation of the Yom Kippur *Maḥzor*, *ibid*, lx – lxiii. Here he cites the relevant sources in Tanakh: Genesis 6:5-6, Genesis 8:21, Jeremiah 18:6, and Isaiah 64:7-8, all of which combine to reveal, in Sacks' understanding, a clarification to the oftentimes misunderstood meaning of exactly which covenant the payyetan is speaking about in the refrain to *Ki Hinei Kahomer* – not the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy which the Talmud (Rosh HaShana 17b) speaks about but, rather, the earlier Noahide covenant. Out of this Sacks weaves a cogent interpretation based on the closeness of the two words *yetzer* and *yotzer* (inclination and potter). His conclusion, then, is that the poem dramatizes man's pleading with his Maker to give ear and consider this question: "How can I punish them for their *yetzer* if I am their *Yotzer*?"

that there were three separate gifts of silver, each based on a lunar calculation.⁵² Silver was the currency of choice in matters of atonement gifts which might encourage and help bring God's favor and, perhaps, engender a healing. My contention is that *Aromimkha Yah's* author certainly knew his Torah, and knowing this he might very well have thought to use these reference points as source material for his beautiful poem of thanksgiving. At the very least his awareness of the meaning of silver in scriptural writing, even if that awareness was unconscious (to use a modern idea – but not an unheard of one in the 19th century)⁵³ might have helped facilitate the inclusion of the idea in our poem.

One more idea about the connection between silver and health: At the heart of this *piyyut* is the idea, a simple idea, that God has the power to save a person who has fallen ill, has sunk to a low place, or is at death's door. We have seen that sin can be punished by the introduction of disease.⁵⁴ Furthermore, we have read that offerings of silver, by the community, serve as shields to communal misfortune. The equality achieved by contributing exactly the same, no matter whether rich or poor, is connected to the need to atone, in advance, against the possibility of future catastrophe. In actuality, this was a popularly held belief, not only among the Israelites but in the greater region, that the taking of a census might expose the individual

⁵² See: Yerushalmi Talmud, Shekalim 1:1 which separates out the three offerings of silver based on concerns of the lunar based calendar system and various times of sacrifice.

⁵³ Friedrich von Schilling, 1775-1854, was first to coin the term, 'the unconscious mind.' As early as 1800, "*System of Transcendental Idealism*," he was writing about his belief that the conscious and unconscious were united in artistic creation.

⁵⁴ II Samuel 24:1-15 and the story of David's repentance in I Chronicles 21:14-19

or group to supernatural danger which could be avoided by paying a ransom, in advance of the census, to inoculate the subject(s) from potential harm.⁵⁵

And it is this idea, that by joining together in common purpose the community is greater than the sum of its constituent parts, that we can see *Aromimkha Yah's* developing theme embedded in the root letters .ך.ר.צ which form the words *join, purify, and silversmith* which we have seen before.⁵⁶ Here, in the theme of joining, we find the elements of the *piyyut* come together: sin, healing, health, and atonement. *Aromimkha Yah* exists in two realms, at least. It lives as a poem of thanks following healing from some sort of illness and it lives as a statement of theology based on the foundational sources of our tradition. And, the specialness of the poem is that its popularity does not depend on any particular knowledge or education; it can be appreciated greatly at its simplest level.

The last four lines of the poem merit analysis. To begin with I call our attention to the fact that Rabbi Pinto's *piyyut* ends with four verses while Rabbi Shlomo ha-Kohen's ends with only the first. The full text reads:

We are created of the four elements; He leads us in wisdom. The roles will not change.

And if one overpowers the others, the body will lose its structure and stability.

Even then God redeems and saves and takes us out from troubled situations - to openness.

You have turned my lament into a dance for me, opened my sackcloth and girded me with joy.

⁵⁵ Rashi explains that the half-shekels are counted, instead of people, and that unless each one paid the same exact amount it would be impossible to determine a proper count. See also: *The Jewish Study Bible*, JPS Translation, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp.179-181.

⁵⁶ *Pirke Avot* 2:2 develops this idea. The merit of the community is made greater when all members engage in Torah study. The more that people do to raise their merit the better their chances of being pardoned from sin.

What does *Aromimkha Yah* have in mind when it mentions the four elements? The lines seem to be a postscript of sorts. They don't seem to fit into the rest of the poem in the same way as the other verses. In *midrashic* literature the world is viewed as being constructed of four elements: earth, water, air, and fire.⁵⁷ This idea extends downward to the human body which is understood as created out of the same four elements. The *piyyut* points out that God, in His wisdom directs the elements which, by themselves, have an assumed wisdom that cannot be changed – their roles or tasks are fixed and should one become stronger than the other three the entire structure would be thrown out of balance.⁵⁸ But even then God would intervene and balance them all. Much in the same way that a chair rests easily on its four legs so does our world. But, lengthen just one leg and the other three become wobbly and unstable; all four must be equal.

If we look more closely at *Midrash Rabbah for Bamidbar*, 14:7 and then 14:12, we will be well rewarded.⁵⁹ These two sections of the *midrashic* collection for *Bamidbar* relate to *Parashat Naso* in which Moses has been instructed to take a second census, this time of the Levites. The census's purpose is to determine the proper performance of tasks or roles in the Holy Tent of Meeting. The Hebrew root for task/role, תפקד, is familiar from our four verse postscript. The *midrash* records the presentation of offerings and time and time again records

⁵⁷ Many midrashic sources list and discuss this idea. Here are a few: *Bamidbar Rabbah* 14:12; *Zohar* 1:27a, 2:23b-24b; *Sefer Yetzirah* Ch, 3; *Ibn Ezra Tehillim* 66:12; and others.

⁵⁸ The idea that the roles of the four elements are fixed and can't be changed is an idea earlier expressed in the Blessing of the New Moon, *Kiddush L'vanah*. In the New Moon Service it is the heavens – the sun and moon and other heavenly bodies that are fixed. *Aromimkha Yah* has used this text to refer to the four elements.

⁵⁹ *Midrash Rabbah Numbers II*, Translated by Judah Slotki, Translated into English by Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, The Soncino Press, London, 1939. *Parashat Naso* 14:7, p.599 and 14:12, p.623.

the offering of a silver dish which bore the citation: *The tongue of the righteous is as choice silver* (Prov. 10:20).

Further on, when we arrive at the *midrashic* commentary on a later portion of Naso (14:12) we see the references to the four elements. The *midrash* explains that the world was created out of four elements...which relate to the three burnt offerings and one sin offering. Further discussion of the offerings and their relation to the four elements reveals that the preparations and offerings were being made to inaugurate the altar of the *ohel moed* (tent of meeting), to dedicate it – זאת חנכת המזבח – This was the Dedication Offering of the Altar. The *midrashic* text tells us that the precise discussion about each family's offering is to impress on us that all the tribes were equal and loved by the Holy One equally, confirming the text from Song of Songs (4:7) *Thou art all fair, my love; and there is no spot in thee.*⁶⁰

Now we can go back and look at II Samuel 24 again, only this time we can read on all the way to the end: David is guilty at having caused the pestilence which took the 70,000 lives. He pleads with God saying, *I alone am guilty, I alone have done wrong; but these poor sheep, what have they done? Let Your hand fall upon me and my father's house!* Gad delivers the Lord's message to David and tells him to set up an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite (vs. 18). David buys the threshing floor and oxen from Araunah, for the price of fifty shekels of silver, builds the altar and makes the proper sacrifices. God responds by staying the plague against Israel.

⁶⁰ Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar, *ibid*, p.624

Sometime in the Moroccan 19th century a rabbi fell ill. Fearing and loving God he prayed and meditated, paced and trembled. He remembered the story of David's decision to take the census that caused such destruction but he remembered, also, that the offerings, the altar, and the contrition were the right tonic to counterbalance the calamity caused by the sin. The rabbi prayed the morning prayers and poured his heart into Psalm Thirty; struck by the interesting title and its reference to a dedication he could think of no other Psalm to recite. In a flash he connected the dedication of the Temple in the Psalm to the altar that the prophet Samuel told about. That Shabbat he prepared to speak about Parashat Naso in his beautiful white and blue synagogue at the end of a winding street in the Jewish Melleh (quarter) of his town. The sun was hot and blistered his forehead as he walked, in worn but comfortable sandals, from his residence to the sanctuary's front door, only a few meters away. On the white crushed stone path in his courtyard he remembered reading the *midrash* about Naso and he remembered the part about the four elements and how crucial their harmony was. The world relied on that harmony as did his ailing body. He thought about that for a long while and sometime in the hours between his evening meal and Shabbat morning he began to feel better. Waking after a final hour's sleep he knew what he would say to his community. It didn't need writing down; the Rabbi knew his own heart. Joining together, echoed in the Hebrew root for refining, keeps the world, and our bodies, stable. It is the idea of balance as it relates to health. The Greeks had a similar philosophy which said essentially the same thing – a body living in balance and harmony is a healthy body, a body at ease. Dis-ease is its nemesis. In the modern world of the 21st century that idea still has merit which is why the aphorism, "all things in moderation" resonates to this day.

Finally, regarding the question of attribution: Two different pieces of the puzzle convince me that it was Rabbi Hayyim Pinto ha-Gadol who authored *Aromimkha Yah*. First, his version is longer, meaning it is, perhaps, more thoroughly thought out and; published in a bound volume that someone else says is a faithful representation of a poem he knows to have been written by his teacher, Rabbi Pinto. Second, in the notes to *Aromimkha Yah*, provided by the website, www.piyut.org.il, Shlomo ha-Kohen is described as one of the most active musician-poets of Morocco in the 19th century. Although the language is imprecise (is he a poet? A musician? Both, equally?) and even though the website credits him with writing the poem, I think that the evidence favors R. Pinto as the author while R. Shlomo most likely set the *piyyut* to music and popularized it in doing so.

But – perhaps our inability to absolutely and definitively resolve the question fits into the historical record of much, maybe all, of the *midrashic* writing in Jewish history that dates from antiquity and right up through the Middle Ages. Jacob Neusner poses the question: Where are the documents of biography in our tradition?⁶¹ Where are the documents of sustained collections of sayings and stories about named sages? His answer is that these sorts of documents are collected into compilations that bear the author’s name....anonymous. “Personality and individuality stood for schism, and rabbinic literature in its very definition and character aims at the opposite...”⁶²

⁶¹ Jacob Neusner, *Introduction to Rabbinic Literature*, Doubleday, New York, 1994, pp.549-552.

⁶² Jacob Neusner, *ibid.*, p.550.

The religious poem that is the subject of this paper does not fall under the category of rabbinic literature as Neusner is describing it. The 19th century is not a period anyone associates with rabbinic literature and it is not a period anyone associates with an outpouring of *piyyutim*. Nevertheless, here we are and here it is; a beautiful poem written in a somewhat mysterious time by a somewhat mysterious author. Perhaps Neusner's point, that personality and individualism make for schism, and not equality, ought to guide us in an appreciation of this Moroccan poem of thanks. Perhaps the half-shekel silver offering against calamity, and for the sanctuary, with its promise of equality within congregation really is the beginning of a line that moves through Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar's silver bowls signifying that the tongues of the righteous are as choice silver and right up to our author's decision to include a verse about the purification of silver in his *piyyut*.

So what exactly did *Aromimkha Yah's* author have in mind when he penned his poem? What was on the tip of his tongue? Perhaps we will never know and perhaps that is what makes poetry an art and not just an exercise. Either way, we are warned not to fiddle with the elemental balance that holds up the world and it is my belief that his ending postscript is a formula for health and healing: make community a priority; increase the kahal's merit always; know that the connection between sin and illness rests on a thin line; and know that the way back from the depths of the pit are through atonement.