

Poetical Functions of Flora in Hebrew Liturgical Poetry (Piyyut)

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In this paper, I will explore the subject of flora, that is, trees, fruits, and flowers, within the context of medieval Hebrew liturgical poetry, also known as *piyyut*, not only to determine whether it is real or imaginary but also to clarify its poetic functions. Several scholars of early *piyyut* composed in the Land of Israel during the Byzantine and early Islamic periods have investigated whether the descriptions of flora in *piyyut* accurately reflect the reality of the Land of Israel during that time. For instance, Menahem Zulay, followed by Israel Rosenson and Efraim Hazan, provide examples of such poetic descriptions, suggesting a possible reflection of the reality in which the *paytan* (the liturgical poet) lived.¹ However, Shulamit Elizur argues that nearly all the words and phrases about flora are borrowed from biblical and rabbinic literature, thereby negating the need to seek any form of reality in these poems in the first place. In her view, these descriptions are so general and hackneyed that any Jewish poet, regardless of his time or place of activity, could have employed them in exactly the same manner.²

Unfortunately, I do not have any definitive evidence to determine whether these descriptions of flora in early *piyyut* were real or imaginary. However, I believe that setting aside the question of reality versus imagination, it could be more intriguing and constructive to explore the liturgical occasions where descriptions of flora appear in *piyyut* and the poetic functions that the flora motifs serve. First, it is crucial to understand that the content that a *paytan* discusses in the *piyyut* is in many cases predetermined by the Torah portion (*parasha*) to be read on the same Sabbath. Thus, on the Sabbath of the first Torah portion of *bereshit*, the *paytan* is expected to discuss the creation of the world in general, and specifically the creation of flora, as per Genesis 1:12, which states, “The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds.” Similarly, when the *paytan* has to

¹ See references below.

² Shulamit Elizur, “Scenery of the Land of Israel or ‘Scenes’ from the House of Study: Descriptions of the Land of Israel in Early Liturgical Poetry,” in *The Poet and the World: Festschrift for Wout van Bekkum on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Joachim Yeshaya, Elisabeth Hollender and Naoya Katsumata, eds., Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), 92.

address the obligations of tithes and charity to the poor as per Deuteronomy 14:22, which states, “You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces year by year,” he is also encouraged to discuss the flora of the Land of Israel.

Other such liturgical occasions include the first day of Passover (*pesah*), when the prayer for dew (*tal*) is recited, and *shemini ‘azeret*, which immediately follows the seven-day Feast of Tabernacles (*sukkot*), when the prayer for rain (*geshem*) is recited. On these two occasions, the paytan often provides detailed descriptions of flora. The purpose of these descriptions is to illustrate the abundance and productivity of trees and fruit, serving as evidence of divine supervision or providence in our world. In the piyyut composed for these occasions, the paytan is, as it were, reminding God not to forget to care for the Jewish people and to provide them with sufficient dew or rain each year so that they can enjoy its bounty. I will now examine two such poems: one for the prayer for dew and the other for the prayer for rain.³ The first piyyut, penned by an early paytan from the Byzantine period in the Land of Israel, is well known among scholars. The second piyyut, as yet unpublished in a critical edition, was composed by a later paytan who was born in Spain and moved to Egypt during the Islamic period. Despite the differences in liturgical occasion (whether it be the prayer for dew or rain), the period of activity (Byzantine or Islamic), and the place of activity (the Land of Israel or Spain and Egypt), both poems share many similarities with regard to the poetic use of flora descriptions.

Example 1

What we have here are two parts (Parts 4 and 5) from a lengthy composition called *Shiv‘ata for Dew on the First Day of Pesah that Happens on Sabbath*, composed by El‘azar birabbi Qallir (6–7 centuries, Land of Israel).⁴ Each part comprises eight strophes, each with three lines. The first line of each strophe begins with a few opening words from the Song of Songs: 7:12–8:5 for Part 4 and 8:6–13 for Part 5. The second and third lines contain the fixed phrases “*tal menuḥa*” (a dew

³ The examples of piyyut discussed in this article are taken from the published editions and the website of ma‘agarim provided by the Academy of the Hebrew Language (<https://maagarim.hebrew-academy.org.il/Pages/PMain.aspx>). As these Hebrew texts are presented here solely for the sake of illustration of my argument and not as a critical edition, the spelling of some words has been changed for readability. The English translation of these piyyutic texts is entirely mine.

⁴ Menahem Zulay, *Haarez*, 20 April 1951 (Passover eve) [=Menahem Zulay, Shulamit Elizur (ed.), *From the Lips of Poets and Precentors* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 2004), 76–81]; Shalom Spiegel, Menahem H. Schmelzer (ed.), *The Fathers of Piyyut: Texts and Studies Toward a History of the Piyyut in Eretz Yisrael* (New York and Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1996), 160–162; Israel Rosenson and Ephraim Hazan, *Desired, Remembered, Measured: Eretz Israel through the Lens of Her Poetry* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2014), 84–93.

of rest) and “*u-tevarekh*” (and You will bless). Following these fixed phrases, each line features an acrostic letter, starting from the first Hebrew letter, *alef*, and ending with the last one, *tav* (in Piyyut 4), and then, in reverse order, from *tav* through *alef* (in Piyyut 5). In every third line, the paytan provides a detailed list of trees, fruits, and vegetables.

	[חלק ד]	
אמיץ שבתות מקדשים	לכה דודי	
בתיך לקוראי מקראי קדשים	טל מנוחה	
ותגדיש חישים ופעורים ועדשים	ותברך	
דלתיך לדפוק מחזיק תריסים	נשכימה	
הריק ממכון פרוסים	טל מנוחה	5
ותובה דוחן וכוסמים פרגים וגריסים	ותברך	
זימרוך ניצוח על שושנים	הדודאים	
חשור לשאננים	טל מנוחה	
ותטיב תורמוס ופלסלוס ופול לבן ופול מערי וכרשנים	ותברך	
יצמים צמח מקרן דרומית	מי יתנך	10
פליל לרחוקי תרמית	טל מנוחה	
ותלבב שיבולת שועל ורגילה ולפסן וקורמית	ותברך	
מביט במכוני בחום צח	אנהגך	
נובב מנעימי פצח	טל מנוחה	
ותסגיא שמשמין וחרדל וכמון וקצח	ותברך	15
עירכי למפקירי שביעית	השבעתי	
פארם בתבואת דשא להרעית	טל מנוחה	
ותצחצח תלתן ושהללים והשיפון וצנונות והשעועית	ותברך	
קידשה כחלה תלושים	שמאלו	
רעוף לרע קדושים	טל מנוחה	20
ותשמין תמכה ותזרת ומרור וחרתבינה ועולשים	ותברך	
תכלכל פיסת בר	מי זאת	

טל מנוחה
ותגבר
תניף לישע מחובר
ותתליל כרישים ולפת ושום ובצל ובסבך

[Part 4]

Come, my beloved (God) <Song 7:12> | Strengthen those who sanctify the Sabbaths (People of Israel)!

A dew of rest | When You give it to those who proclaim them (the Sabbaths) to be holy gatherings.⁵

And You will bless | And You will fill wheat, barley, and lentils.

Let us get up early <Song 7:13> | To beat at Your door, O One who takes hold of the shields (God)!⁶

5 A dew of rest | Pour it down from the spread foundation (heaven)!

And You will bless | And You will desire⁷ millet, spelt, poppy, and split beans.⁸

The mandrakes (People of Israel) <Song 7:14> | Have sung for You a song to the tune of Lilies.⁹

A dew of rest | Pour it forth toward those living tranquilly [on Sabbaths]!

And You will bless | And You will improve lupine, wild lupine, white beans, Egyptian beans, and vetches.¹⁰

⁵ Cf. Lev 23:2.

⁶ Cf. Ps. 35:2.

⁷ The Hebrew word in the manuscript appears as *וּתְרַבֶּה* *ve-tarbe*, meaning “and You will multiply,” in which case we have to regard the first letter of the word, *vav*, “and,” as participating in the acrostics: *וּתְרַבֶּה*. However, according to the prosodic rule that the poet has fixed for each third line of the strophe in this poem, what should be participating in the acrostics is the “third” letter of the word, namely, the first radical letter of the verb, following the first, prepositional letter *vav* “and,” and the second, personal prefixed letter *tav* “You will.” These first two letters *vav* and *tav* are common and fixed in all third lines, and what makes an acrostic letter unique to each third line is the third letter. Therefore, it should be *וּתוֹבֶה* *ve-tove*, which is a phonetic writing (*vav* instead of *alef*) of the verb with the same pronunciation *וּתוֹבֶה* *ve-tove*, meaning “and You will desire.” See *ma’agarim*.

⁸ Cf. Ezek. 4:9: “Take thou also wheat, and barley, and beans, and lentils, and millet (דָּחַן), and spelt (כֶּסְמִים);” Mishna Shevi’it 2:7: “Rice, millet (הַדּוּחָן), poppy (הַפְּרִיגִים) and sesame.”

⁹ Cf. Ps. 69:1.

¹⁰ Cf. Mishna Kilayim 1:3: “Garlic and small wild garlic, onion and small wild onion, lupine (הַתּוֹרְמוֹס) and wild lupine (הַפִּלְסוֹס) do not constitute kilayim one with the other.”

10 O that <Song 8:1> | You would make the plant sprout from the southern corner.¹¹

A dew of rest | Complete it for those staying away from deception (People of Israel)!

And You will bless | And You will strengthen oats, purslane, charlock mustard, and cow-wheat.

I would lead thee <Song 8:2> | One who looks on in My dwelling place in the clear heat (God).¹²

A dew of rest | Produce it for the sake of those making a pleasant prayer (People of Israel)!

15 And You will bless | And You will multiply sesame, mustard, cumin, and dill.¹³

I charge you <Song 8:4>¹⁴ | Your city (Jerusalem),¹⁵ for the sake of those (People of Israel) who abandon [the land] in the seventh (the sabbatical year).

A dew of rest | Glorify them¹⁶ with it to shepherd them with the produce of grass!

And You will bless | And You will illuminate clover, cress, rye, radish, and kidney beans.¹⁷

His left hand <Song 8:3> | Has sanctified those who are separated [from other nations] (People of Israel), like a challah bread [separated from the dough].

20 A dew of rest | Drop it down toward the seed of holies (People of Israel)!¹⁸

And You will bless | And You will fatten chervil, lettuce, maror, field eryngo, and endives.¹⁹

Who is that (People of Israel) <Song 8:5> | You will feed them with abundance of corn.²⁰

¹¹ Cf. Pirke de-Rabbi Eli'ezer 3: "Four quarters have been created in the world; ... From the quarter facing south the dews of blessing and the rains of blessing go forth to the world."

¹² Cf. Isa. 18:4.

¹³ Cf. Isa. 28:25: "Does he not then scatter the black seeds (קצח), and cast the cummin (כמון)."

¹⁴ For an unclear reason, the poet brings here the opening word of verse 4, השבעתי "I charge you," before that of verse 3, שמאלו "His left hand" in line 19.

¹⁵ According to another version: עירכתי "I have arranged," instead of עירכתי "your city." See ma'agarim.

¹⁶ According to another version: פקדתי "You have commanded," instead of פארם "glorify them." See ma'agarim.

¹⁷ Cf. Mishna Kilayim 1:1: "Barley and oats, spelt and rye (השיפון), or beans and sapir, or purkdan and tofah, or white beans and kidney beans (השעועית), do not constitute kilayim one with the other."

¹⁸ According to another version: תרוקים לגבר חלשים "You will sprinkle [the dew] to strengthen the weak." See ma'agarim. In this version (תרוקים), the acrostic letter *resh* comes as the second letter of the word, following the first, personal prefixed letter *tav* "You will," as opposed to the prosodical rule fixed by the poet.

¹⁹ Cf. Mishna Pesahim 2:6: "And these are the vegetables with which a person can fulfill his obligation to eat bitter herbs on Passover: One can fulfill his obligation with lettuce (חזרת), with endives (עולשים), with chervil (תמכה), and with field eryngo (חרחבונה), and with maror (מרור)."

²⁰ Cf. Ps. 72:16.

A dew of rest | Splash it for the realization of salvation!

And You will bless | And You will elevate leek, turnips, garlic, onion, and coriander.²¹

[חלק ה]	
25	שימיני
תהילה וכזון ארמון	טל מנוחה
שפע לפלח הרימון	ותברך
ותרבה ארץ וברוש ולבנה וליו וערמון	
מים	קדושים יצאו מירכתי בית
טל מנוחה	צחצח משמיר ושיית
30	ותברך
ותפריח גפן ותאינה ורימון וזית	
אחות	עמוסה כצאצאי טפוח
טל מנוחה	סבצה היום עד שיפוח
ותברך	ותגובב אגוז ושיקמה ותמר ותפוח
אם חומה היא	מיוחדת להורים
35	טל מנוחה
להגיל שלומה כנהרים	ותברך
ותכשיר בטנים ושקידים ואלונים ומלין הרים	
אני חומה	לאבתי ליפתוח שק
טל מנוחה	טללינו מבוער המוסק
ותברך	ותחיל טבילין וקרוסטמילין וחרוב ופרסק
כרם היה	זמורותיו תלית להסתור
40	טל מנוחה
וועדיהו מלהתפורר	ותברך
ותהדר אחריו ואגס והפירס והחזן	
כרמי שלי	דפוק והלן מחוג
טל מנוחה	גביר ונגלים לחוג

²¹ Cf. Mishna Kilayim 1:2-3: "Lettuce and wild lettuce, endives and wild endives, leek (כרישים) and wild leek, coriander (כוסבר) and wild coriander, or mustard and Egyptian mustard, Egyptian gourd and the bitter gourd, or Egyptian beans and carob shaped beans do not constitute kilayim one with the other. Turnips (הלפת) and the cabbage turnip, cabbage and cauliflower, beet and rumex do not constitute kilayim one with the other ... garlic (השום) and small wild garlic, onion (הבצל) and small wild onion, lupine and wild lupine do not constitute kilayim one with the other."

היושבת בננים אפרה רסיסים
טל מנוחה אמצה עומד בין ההרסים
ותבךרד ותאפיק עצי השדה ואילגי פרדיסים

[Part 5]

25 Set me <Song 8:6> | As a praise, and build a palace (Temple)!

A dew of rest | Produce it in abundance for the sake of a piece of a pomegranate (People of Israel)!²²

And You will bless | And You will multiply forest trees, cedars, poplars, almonds, and plane trees.²³

Waters <Song 8:7> | Which are holy, shall go out from the back of the house (Temple).

A dew of rest | Cleanse it from briers and thorns!²⁴

30 And You will bless | And You will make bloom vines, fig trees, pomegranates, and olive trees.²⁵

A sister <Song 8:8> | Borne [by Me]²⁶ as a cherished offspring (People of Israel).

A dew of rest | Satisfy her with it, until the day breaks (Salvation)!²⁷

And You will bless | And You will produce nuts, sycamores, palm trees, and apple trees.²⁸

If she be a wall <Song 8:9> | Special for the parents (Patriarchs),

35 A dew of rest | Cheer her up with it, so that her peace shall be like rivers!²⁹

²² Cf. Song 6:7.

²³ Cf. Gen. 30:37: "And Jacob took him rods of fresh poplar (לבנה), and of the almond (ליו) and of the plane-tree (ערמון)."

²⁴ Cf. Isa. 5:6.

²⁵ Cf. Deut. 8:8: "A land of wheat and barley, and vines (גפן) and fig-trees (תאנה) and pomegranates (רמון); a land of olive-trees (זית שמן) and honey."

²⁶ Cf. Isa. 46:3.

²⁷ Cf. Song 2:17.

²⁸ Cf. Joel 1:12: "The vine is withered, and the fig-tree languisheth; the pomegranate-tree, the palm-tree also (תמר), and the apple-tree (תפוח)."

²⁹ Cf. Isa. 48:18.

And You will bless | And You will prepare nuts, almonds, oaks, and ash trees of
mountains.³⁰

I was a wall <Song 8:10> | Yearning for loosing [my] sackcloth (Salvation).³¹

A dew of rest | Protect us by it from a burning and heated place (hell)!

And You will bless | And You will enrich oaks, crustumenian pear trees, carob trees, and
peach trees.³²

40 There was a vineyard <Song 8:11> | Whose branches You have elevated so that it would
prevail.

A dew of rest | Make it available for [the vineyard] lest it crumble!

And You will bless | And You will praise citrons, pears, medlars, and azarolus.³³

My vineyard, which is mine <Song 8:12> | Irrigate, and lay [the dew]³⁴ from the circuit
(heaven)!³⁵

A dew of rest | Strengthen it so that pilgrimages would be made!

45 And You will bless | And You will make strong asparagus, quinces, mulberries, and
sumacs.³⁶

The one who dwells in the gardens <Song 8:13> | Decorate her with the drops [of the dew]!

³⁰ Cf. Gen. 43:11: “And carry down the man a present, a little balm, and a little honey, spicery and ladanum, nuts (בטנים), and almonds (שקדים);” Tosefta Shevi’it 7:11: “A sign for ‘mountains’ (הרים) is ash trees (מילין).”

³¹ Cf. Ps. 30:12.

³² Cf. Tosefta Oholot 17:10: “And they do not keep an oak (מלין וטובלין) in it, and they do not plant in it cucumbers and pumpkins;” Mishna Kilayim 1:4: “As for trees: The pear and the crustumenian pear (הקרוסטמילין), the medlar and azarolus, do not constitute kilayim one with the other. The apple and the crab-apple, or the peach (הפרסקים) and almond, or the jujube and ramin, even though they are similar one to the other, they nevertheless constitute kilayim one with the other.”

³³ Cf. Mishna, Kilayim 1:4: “As for trees: the pear (האגסין) and the crustumenian pear, the medlar (הפרישים) and azarolus (העוזררים), do not constitute kilayim one with the other.”

³⁴ Cf. Job 29:19.

³⁵ The word *me-hug* “from the circuit” in this line rhymes with *la-hog* “to make a pilgrimage” in line 44 and *ve-ha-og* “and sumacs” in line 45. The rhyme of *u* and *o* is permitted in piyyut.

³⁶ Cf. Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 45a: “And you would say the same with regard to peaches, and quinces (חבושין), and all other types of fruit;” Mishna Ma’aserot 1:2: “When do fruits become liable for tithes? Figs from the time they begin to ripe. Grapes and wild grapes in the early stages of ripening. Sumac (האוג) and mulberries (והתותים) after they become red.”

A dew of rest | Strengthen her with it, O One standing among the myrtle bushes (God)!³⁷
And You will bless | And You will reinforce the trees of the field and the trees of the
orchard.

As I noted earlier, Menahem Zulai perceives this piyyut, which includes a lengthy list of trees and fruits, as a reflection of the reality of the Land of Israel during the time of the paytan, El'azar birabbi Qallir, who likely lived from the late sixth to the early seventh centuries. To an edition of the Hebrew newspaper, *Haareẓ*, published on the eve of Passover in 1942 in Palestine (the Land of Israel), Zulai contributed an article including the text of Part 4 of this piyyut, entitled "The Marketplace for Produce in the Land of Israel at the Time of Qalir." He claims emphatically:

Although all the names of the plants mentioned in the piece are known to us from the Mishnah and the Tosefta, one who would say that the poet just gleaned these names from written sources does not properly understand the creative spirit of early liturgical poetry and fails to feel the beating heart of this particular composition. What we have here is a piece of *realia* from the world of the poet, a sort of a partial photograph of a souk in the Land of Israel, just as seen by the poet, and just as called by the names by his people.

Nine years later, in an edition of the same *Haareẓ* newspaper on the eve of Passover in 1951, now after the declaration of Israel's Independence (1948), Zulai published Part 5 of this piyyut. In this piece of ancient poetry, he detects an instructive hint to the future of this young nation:

Researchers of botany of the Land of Israel will surely find interest in this list and in some of the names of trees. Moreover, those who are responsible for the afforestation of our land and the improvement of its landscape should pay attention to this piyyut and think about the possibility of returning the face of the land to its original state. To those readers who vowed not to enjoy the fruit of tree to the extent that they have forgotten its taste, I would say, "May we get to see the land full of fruits as it was before!"

However, Shulamit Elizur disagrees with Zulai on this point. She believes that this and other similar poems do not depict the poet's reality, nor do they provide a glimpse of a souk in the Land

³⁷ Cf. Zech. 1:8.

of Israel. Instead, she maintains that their source is not the firsthand observation of any specific souk but rather biblical and rabbinic literature.³⁸

Regardless, in this article, I am less concerned with the question of reality versus imagination and more interested in the potential poetic functions of these descriptions. Let us consider another example.

Example 2

The genre of this piyyut is *Hosha'na on Hosha'na Rabba*³⁹ for the Seventh Hakaḥfa,⁴⁰ which was composed by Yosef Ibn Abitur (10–11 centuries, from Spain to Egypt).⁴¹ This unpublished piyyut comprises 13 strophes, each with two lines. The first line of each strophe begins with the fixed phrase “*el na*” (please, God). Following this fixed phrase, each first line features an acrostic letter from the paytan’s name, “*ani Yosef bar Ishaq*” (I am Yosef bar Ishaq). The paytan lists various trees and fruits in the second line of each strophe.

אֵל נָא | אֲזַרְךָ הַטּוֹב תַּפְתַּח בְּרוֹם יְבוּלָה
וְהָאֶרֶץ תִּמְן יְבוּלָה

אֵל נָא | נִטְפִי נְדָבוֹת יְרוּדוֹ דְּשִׁאי חֲצִיר
וְהַשִּׁיג לָכֶם דִּישׁ אֶת בָּצִיר

אֵל נָא | יְבוּל הָאֶרֶץ לְבָרֵךְ הַעֲתֵר 5
אָכּוּל וְשָׁבוּעַ וְהוֹתֵר

אֵל נָא | יוֹם זֶה חֲתוּם נָא בְּטוֹב חוֹתָמָת
וּבְרֵךְ חֲטָה וְשַׁעוֹרָה וְכִסְמָת

³⁸ Elizur, “Scenery of the Land of Israel or ‘Scenes’ from the House of Study,” p. 89. n. 19.

³⁹ I.e., the seventh day of sukkot, a day before *shemini 'azeret*.

⁴⁰ I.e., the seventh circuit around the reading platform of the synagogue.

⁴¹ The research project of publishing all the extant poems of Ibn Abitur has been undertaken by Joseph Yahalom and myself, the first of the three volumes of which has just appeared. See Joseph Yahalom and Naoya Katsumata, *Ibn Al-Santos — The Yotserot Poetry of Rabbi Yosef Ben Ishaq the Spaniard alias Ibn Abitur* (Jerusalem: Carmel Publishing House, 2024). This poem will be included in our forthcoming second volume, *Ibn Al-Santos — The Selihot Poetry of Rabbi Yosef Ben Ishaq the Spaniard alias Ibn Abitur*.

אל נא | וְנָשַׁם נְדָבוֹת תְּחִלָּל רוּחַ צָפוֹן
וּבְרָךְ שְׂבִלָת שׁוּעָל וְשִׁיפּוֹן 10

אל נא | סֶפֶק סֶפֶק כָּל חֹדֶשׁ וְחֹדֶשׁ
וּבְרָךְ אֶרֶץ וְדוּחַן וּפּוֹל וְעֶדֶשׁ

אל נא | פִּצְחָה שָׁנָה זֶה מִשְׁמִיר וְשִׁית
וּבְרָךְ עֵץ שֶׁמֶן וְעֵץ זַיִת

אל נא | בְּמִטֶּר רִוְחָה חֲרָבְנִי וְשִׁמּוֹן 15
וּבְרָךְ גֶּפֶן וְחֵאנָה וְרִמּוֹן

אל נא | רוּמָם עֲצָרֶת עוֹלָלִי טְפוּחַ
וּבְרָךְ אֲגִיז וְתִמְרָה וְתַפּוּחַ

אל נא | יָדֶךָ הִרְחִיב וְרִבְּהָ תְּזִיזִי קְעוּנִים 20
וּבְרָךְ בְּטָנִים וְשִׁקְדִים וְעֶרְמוּנִים

אל נא | צִדְקָךָ לְעֵמֶךָ כֹּל יִפְסֹק
וּבְרָךְ קְרוֹסֶת־מֶלֶךְ וְחֵרוֹב וְאַפְרָסֶךָ

אל נא | חֲלִיץ קֹהֵלָה אֲשֶׁר סָבִיבְךָ תַּעֲרֹג
וּבְרָךְ הַתּוֹת וְהָאָנָס וְהָאֶתְרוֹג

אל נא | קָרָא שְׁנַת שׁוֹבֵעַ בְּמִטְרוֹת רִקִּיעִים 25
וּבְרָךְ כָּל מִינֵי יִרְקוֹת וְזֶרְעִים

Please, God | You shall open Your good treasure⁴² in high habitation (heaven).⁴³

And the earth shall yield her increase.⁴⁴

Please, God | Plentiful drops shall saturate the grass of hay.

⁴² Cf. Deut. 28:12.

⁴³ Cf. Hab. 3:11.

⁴⁴ Cf. Ezek. 34:27.

And your threshing shall reach to the vintage.⁴⁵

- 5 Please, God | Be entreated and bless the produce of the earth!⁴⁶
Enough to eat and plenty to spare.⁴⁷

Please, God | Seal this day with a choice seal!
And bless wheat, barley, and spelt!⁴⁸

- Please, God | The north wind shall bring in⁴⁹ a plentiful rain.⁵⁰
10 And bless oats and rye!⁵¹

Please, God | Supply needs of every month and month!
And bless rice, millet, beans, and lentils!⁵²

Please, God | Save this year from briers and thorns!⁵³
And bless wild olive trees and olive trees!⁵⁴

- 15 Please, God | With rain, saturate arid deserts!
And bless vines, fig trees, and pomegranates!⁵⁵

Please, God | Elevate an assembly of cherished babes!⁵⁶

⁴⁵ Cf. Lev. 26:5.

⁴⁶ Cf. Judg. 6:4.

⁴⁷ Cf. 2 Chron. 31:10.

⁴⁸ Isa. 28:25: “And put in the wheat (חטה) in rows and the barley (שערה) in the appointed place and the spelt (כסמת) in the border thereof;” Mishna Challah 1:1: “Five species [of grains] are subject to [the law of] hallah: wheat (החיטין), barley (השעירים), spelt (הכסמין), oats, and rye.”

⁴⁹ Cf. Prov 25:23.

⁵⁰ Cf. Ps. 68:10.

⁵¹ Cf. Mishna Challah 1:1: “Five species [of grains] are subject to [the law of] hallah: wheat, barley, spelt, oats (שבולת), and rye (השיפון).”

⁵² Cf. Ezek. 4:9: “Take thou also wheat, and barley, and beans (פיר), and lentils (עדשים), and millet (דחן), and spelt.”

⁵³ Cf. Isa. 5:6.

⁵⁴ Cf. Neh. 8:15.

⁵⁵ Cf. Deut. 8:8: “A land of wheat and barley, and vines (גפן) and fig-trees (תאנה) and pomegranates (רמון); a land of olive-trees and honey.”

⁵⁶ Cf. Lam. 2:20.

And bless nuts, palm trees, and apple trees!⁵⁷

Please, God | Expand Your hands and multiply lightnings of the dwelling place (heaven)!

20 And bless nuts, almonds, and plane trees!⁵⁸

Please, God | Your justice toward Your people shall not cease.

And bless crustumenian pear trees, carob trees, and peach trees!⁵⁹

Please, God | Save the congregation who pants for You!

And bless mulberries, pear trees, and citrons!

25 Please, God | Proclaim a year of satiety with the rains of firmaments!

And bless all sorts of vegetables and seeds!

Although these two poems (Examples 1 and 2) were penned by different poets in entirely different time periods and for distinct liturgical occasions (the prayer for dew and the prayer for rain),⁶⁰ they share many common expressions. For instance, among of the many trees, plants, and vegetables that are mentioned in common, exactly the same assortment of rabbinic trees and fruits, *qrostmil*, *haruv*, *afarseq* (pears, carobs, peaches), appear in both poems (line 39 in Example 1 and line 22 in Example 2). They also share a few similar phrases, such as *zāḥzāḥ mi-shamir va-shayit* “cleanse from briars and thorns” (line 29 in Example 1) and *peze ... mi-shamir va-shayit* “save

⁵⁷ Cf. Joel 1:12: “The vine is withered, and the fig-tree languisheth; the pomegranate-tree, the palm-tree also (תמר), and the apple-tree (תפוח).”

⁵⁸ Cf. Gen. 43:11: “And carry down the man a present, a little balm, and a little honey, spicery and ladanum, nuts (בטנים), and almonds (שקדים).” According to another version of the piyyut: [...] וְבָרַךְ פְּרִישִׁין וְהָרִימֶן “And bless medlars, pomegranates, [...]”

⁵⁹ Mishna Kilayim 1:4: “As for trees: the pear and the crustumenian pear (הקרוסטמילין), the medlar and azarolus, do not constitute kilayim one with the other. The apple and the crab-apple, or the peach (הפרסקים) and almond, or the jujube and ramin, even though they are similar one to the other, they nevertheless constitute kilayim one with the other.”

⁶⁰ The prayer for rain was officially to be recited only on the day of *shemini 'azeret*, because the rain during the festival of sukkot was considered a bad sign, as rainfall naturally forces Jews to leave their sukkot. See Mishna Ta'anit 1:1: “From which date does one begin to mention the might of the rains? Rabbi Eli'ezer says: ‘From the first festival day.’ Rabbi Yehoshua says: ‘From the last festival day.’ Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: ‘Since rain is nothing other than a sign of a curse during the festival, why should one mention the might of rain during this period?’” Some Jewish congregations seem to have started to mention the issue of rain within their Hoshana poems already on the preceding day, namely on *hosha'na rabba* (i.e., the seventh day of sukkot).

from briars and thorns” (line 13 in Example 2), or *ze’eza’e tipuah* “a cherished offspring” (line 31 in Example 1) and *’olele tipuah* “cherished babes” (line 17 in Example 2).

Thus far, we have encountered numerous trees and fruits in piyyut, but what about flowers? While it is true that flowers do not frequently appear in piyyut, they occasionally surface in other liturgical contexts, where poetic descriptions of flora serve to extol the beauty of the high priest or *kohen gadol*. When the Temple stood in Jerusalem, the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies in the Temple only once a year, specifically on the Day of Atonement, or *yom kippur*, to atone for the sins of the People of Israel. After the Temple’s destruction, a lengthy piyyut known as *seder ‘avoda*, which describes in detail the high priest’s holy service, was traditionally recited during the additional prayer, or *musaf*, of Yom Kippur each year. Following the *seder ‘avoda*, a unique genre of piyyut called *ma nehdar* is recited. Some scholars believe that this was inspired by Chapter 50 of Ecclesiasticus or the Book of Ben Sirah, which was originally written in Hebrew. In this genre, the paytan describes the high priest who has safely returned from his service in the Holy of Holies by comparing his beauty to all kinds of beautiful things in the world, such as precious stones and the stars. In this context, the high priest is sometimes likened to beautiful flowers.

Example 3

The genre of this anonymous piyyut is *Ma Nehdar for the Musaf Prayer of Yom Kippur*.⁶¹ It is written in a straightforward style, suggesting that it might have originated from an early period in the history of piyyut during Late Antiquity. Unlike the two poems discussed above, it lacks a strophic structure or a rhyming scheme. Each line, following the Hebrew letter *kaf* (which means “like”), begins with a regular acrostic letter, starting from the first Hebrew letter, *alef*, and ending with the last letter, *tav*. Notably, a list of beautiful flowers and trees appears in several of the opening and closing lines of the piyyut (lines 1–7, 21–22).

כְּאַרְזֵי יִפָּה בְּלִבְנוֹן
כְּבָרוֹשׁ שְׁתוּל עַל פְּלִי מִיָּם

⁶¹ Ophir Münz-Manor, “As the Apple Among Fruits, so the Priest When He Emerges: Poetic Similes in Pre-Classical Poems of the ‘How Lovely’ Genre,” *Ginzei Qedem: Genizah Research Annual* 5 (2009), 182–185; Ophir Münz-Manor, “Figurative Language in Early Piyyut,” in *Giving a Diamond: Essays in Honor of Joseph Yahalom on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday* (Wout van Bekkum and Naoya Katsumata, eds., Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 62–63; Rosenson and Hazan, *Desired, Remembered, Measured*, p. 78.

	כְּגִדְוִלֵי גֶפֶן פִּוּרִיָּה	
	כְּדָלִית טְעוּנָה אֲשֶׁכּוּלוֹת	
5	כְּחֹדֶס שְׂתוּל בְּגִנִּים	
	כְּנֹרֶד שׁוֹשֵׁן יִפְרִים	
	כְּזֵית רֹעֵנָן בְּבֵית אֱלֹהִים	
	כַּחַן... נְטוּי עַל מְלָכִים	
	כְּטַל חֶרְמוֹן בְּהָרִים	
10	כִּי קָבִים מִלְּאִים זֵין	
	כְּקֶתֶר נִתּוֹן בְּרֹאשׁ מְלָכִים	
	כְּלוּלָב מוֹכֵן לְכֶרֶךְ	
	כְּמִים יוֹצְאִים מִן הַמִּקְדָּשׁ	
	כְּנֶהֱר יוֹצֵא מַעַדָּן	
15	כְּסִסִּים [...] מִחֶתָּה	
	כְּעֶרְבִים עַל יְבִלֵי מַיִם	
	כְּפַלְגֵי מַיִם בְּנֶהֱר	
	כַּצַּן [...] לֶקֶן יִשִּׁי	
	כְּקֹמֶת בֶּן קִישׁ בְּבַחֲוִרִים	
20	כְּרִיחַ אִישׁ תָּם יוֹשֵׁב אֶהְלִים	
	כְּשׁוֹשָׁנָה בֵּין הַחֹחִים	
	כְּתַפּוּחַ נֶאֱהָ בַּפְּרוֹת	
	כֵּן כֹּהֵן בְּצִאתוֹ	

- Like a fair cedar in the Lebanon,⁶²
 Like a cypress tree planted by streams of water,⁶³
 Like crops of a fruitful vine,⁶⁴
 Like a tendril full of clusters,
 5 Like a myrtle tree planted in the gardens,
 Like a growing rose (*vered*), which is a rose (*shoshan*),⁶⁵
 Like a green olive tree in the house of God,⁶⁶
 Like [...] inclined toward the kings,

⁶² Cf. Ps. 92:13; Isa. 31:3.

⁶³ Cf. Ps. 1:3.

⁶⁴ Cf. Ps. 128:3.

⁶⁵ For a problematic identification of the name of the flower שושן *shoshan* throughout the history of medieval Hebrew literature, see Masha Itzhaki, "Towards the Garden Beds..." – *Hebrew Garden Poems in Medieval Spain* (Tel Aviv: Notsa Vakeset, 1988), 82–83.

⁶⁶ Cf. Ps. 52:10.

- Like the dew of Hermon upon the mountains,⁶⁷
- 10 Like the winepresses full of wine,⁶⁸
- Like a crown given on the head of kings,
- Like a lulav (ceremonial palm frond) bringing a blessing,
- Like water issuing from the Temple,⁶⁹
- Like a river going out of Eden,⁷⁰
- 15 Like sweet spices [...] a censer,
- Like willows by the water courses,⁷¹
- Like streams of water in the river,
- Like [...] the son of Yishay (David),⁷²
- Like the stature of the son of Qish (Saul)⁷³ among the young men,
- 20 Like the smell of a plain man dwelling in tents (Jacob),⁷⁴
- Like a lily among the thorns,⁷⁵
- Like a beautiful apple among the fruits,⁷⁶
- so is the priest when he comes out.

In summary, I have attempted to show that when flora is described in piyyut, trees and fruits typically serve as symbols of divine supervision and future salvation, whereas flowers occasionally function as metaphors for the beauty of a high priest. I have also highlighted that there are several specific liturgical occasions, such as weekly Torah reading portions on Sabbaths, or holidays such as *pesah*, *yom kippur*, and *sukkot*, that specifically encourage the paytan to describe the flora. Finally, regarding whether these descriptions are real or imaginary, I invite other researchers to continue exploring this topic.

⁶⁷ Cf. Ps. 133:3.

⁶⁸ Cf. Jer. 48:33.

⁶⁹ Cf. Ezek. 47:1.

⁷⁰ Cf. Gen. 2:10.

⁷¹ Cf. Isa. 44:4.

⁷² Cf. 1 Sam. 20:27.

⁷³ Cf. 1 Sam. 10:21.

⁷⁴ Cf. Gen. 25:27.

⁷⁵ Cf. Song 2:2.

⁷⁶ Cf. Song 2:3.