

MOTHER TONGUES

This is the first contribution to a new feature in the Newsletter that will focus on offering a wide variety of insights into Hebrew and Yiddish language. We will hear from a number of Narayever members who have expertise in linguistics. Please let me know if you are interested in contributing. – Tama Soble

The Metrical Pattern of *Adon Olam*

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Adon Olam is one of the most familiar Jewish hymns. Many commentaries mention that it is written in a strict metre. However, the details of its metrical pattern are not widely known, and indeed are obscured by Modern Hebrew pronunciation.

A metre is a pattern of contrasting positions. English metres are typically based on stress: an iamb, for example, is a sequence of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. A line of iambic pentameter contains five iambs: | They AL- | so SERVE | who ON- | ly STAND | and WAIT |. Not all metres are based on stress. In Classical Arabic poetry, the contrasting metrical elements are based on vowel length. Classical Arabic has six vowels: three short vowels (*a*, *i*, *u*) and their long counterparts. Arabic metres consist of various sequences of long (–) and short (·) vowels.

Starting in the 10th century, Hebrew poets began adapting the Arabic system to Hebrew verse. They faced a major obstacle: Hebrew does not distinguish vowels by length in the Arabic manner. So they made use of a contrast that Hebrew does have, between ordinary vowels and a very short vowel called *shva* (in phonetic notation, ə); it's the sound represented by the apostrophe in *B'nai Brith*. For metrical purposes, Hebrew poets treated all ordinary vowels as long, and *shva* as short.

We can now describe the metre of *Adon Olam* as follows: each line consists of two sequences of four syllables; the first vowel of each sequence is short, and the following three are long (schematically, · – – –). This pattern is clearly exemplified by the second line, shown in example (1) below.

But what about the first line? The very words *adon olam* do not appear to conform to the pattern. As we pronounce it, the first vowel is not a *shva*. However, the transcription *adon* does not reflect the older pronunciation in two ways. First, every Hebrew syllable must begin with a consonant. In the Hebrew orthography, *adon* begins with an *aleph*, which at the beginning of a word represents a sound called a glottal stop, like the sound separating the syllables of *oh! oh!* I represent it as '.

Second, the first vowel is not a regular *a*, which would be written in Hebrew with a *pataḥ*; rather, it is written with a *ḥatef pataḥ*, which is a *pataḥ* combined with a *shva*. I will transcribe it as *ā*. *ḥatef* vowels are variants of *shva* that occur following an *aleph* and other consonants that are produced in the throat. For metrical purposes, they count as short. The same vowel occurs in the third word, *āsher*. We now see that the first line strictly adheres to the pattern: see example (2) below.

The Hebrew vowel sign for *shva* is also used to indicate the absence of a vowel, and this dual use can lead to ambiguity in pronunciation. Thus, the first line of the second stanza does not appear to scan properly: *və' aḥārey kikhloth hakkol* has the pattern · – · – · – – –. Evidently, the poet intended the line to scan with a different distribution of *shvas* as in (3); note that the line is divided in the middle of the second word.

Following the principles discussed here, plus one or two others you will have to discover, every line of *Adon Olam* fits the pattern. *Yigdal* is another hymn with a similar, but not identical, metre. Can you determine its metrical pattern?

(1) bāterem kol yātsir nīvra (2) 'ādon 'olam 'āsher malakh (3) və' aḥrey ki-khəloth hakkol