Akdamut: History, Folklore, and Meaning

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Akdamut is an Aramaic piyyut in the Ashkenazic rite which was composed as an introduction (reshut) to the Aramaic translation of the Torah reading (Targum) for the first day of Shavuot. Aside from a few Sabbath table hymns, Akdamut ("The Introduction of Words") is the most widely known Aramaic hymn in Ashkenazic liturgy. It has outlived all other introductory hymns to the Targum for the first day of Shavuot, and, it has outlived—by many centuries—the custom of chanting the Targum itself on Shavuot—it’s erstwhile raison d’etre! Ismar Elbogen, consistent with his inclination for reform of apparently outmoded passages of the liturgy, used strong language to suggest that Akdamut, and other poetic introductions of the Targum, for any holy day, be excised: “With the elimination of the translation that they were intended to introduce, they have completely lost their significance and their right to exist.” It is indeed curious that this liturgical poem has continued to persist in Ashkenazic liturgy. Why should such a lengthy (ninety lines) literary creation in a language foreign to most Jews, introducing a translation of the Torah reading not used for a millennium, continue to be so popular and widely recited?

The answer, I hope to show, is that the piyyut acquired a life of its own in the centuries following its composition, independent of the Targum or Shavuot. A sense of loss in the Rhineland, as well as among Ashkenazi Jewry in general, following the First Crusade’s violence prepared the ground for the poem taking on an enduring new significance. The piyyut’s major theme of Israel’s loyalty to the Covenant in the face of the nations’ enticements and persecutions undoubtedly helped to position the poem

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to address the needs of post-Crusade European Jewry. But a key role in securing its place in Jewish liturgy was played by a medieval Yiddish tale which portrayed the author of Akdamut, R. Meir b Isaac, as a savior of his people and Akdamut itself as a paean to a triumph over a demonic priest who had threatened thousands of Jews. In time, the Ashkenazic collective memory came to associate R. Meir with a miraculous anti-Christian victory, and Akdamut with a celebration of that salvation. The fact that its author lived in the Rhineland around the time of the First Crusade helped to lend a sense of vicarious vengeance to the local Jewish community in the following generations. As we will see, the study of a Yiddish folktale against its historical background helps to explain the surprising popularity and longevity of a lengthy Aramaic liturgical poem.

THE TALE

Because of the importance of the Yiddish tale in the history and meaning of Akdamut, I will sketch an outline of the story, including enough detail to bring out its drama. Discussion of editions and varying versions of the tale will be presented below.

In the year 5121 (1361), at the time of King Martin de Lance, adherents of magic and sorcery increased in the world. Some of these practitioners of the occult passed themselves off as monks with long cassocks. These monk-sorcerers built castles and lived in these strongholds. They grew very powerful and were able to bring to themselves the most beautiful women. The leader and teacher of them all was a master of black magic who was a cruel enemy of the Jews. Whenever he came upon a Jew, he would place him under a spell simply by touching him. When the Jew returned to his home, he would fall down and die. This “monk” murdered over thirty thousand Jews through his black magic. The Jews of Worms sent a delegation to the king to request protection. Since the monk and his followers presented a threat to the power of the king himself, the king then summoned the monk. The monk declared that he would desist from attacking the Jews for one year on the condition that at the end of the year the Jews present a member of their own community for a contest in sorcery. If the Jews succeeded in this contest, the monk promised that he would never again bother the Jews. If they failed, he would kill them all. The Jews felt that they had no choice but to agree. They immediately turned to tradition: they fasted and engaged in deeds of teshuvah, tefilah, and tzedakah, (repentance, prayer, and charity). They also dispatched letters throughout the Diaspora asking for help, but no one came forward who was willing to challenge the monk.

3. See Appendix I for a new annotated translation of Akdamut.
At this time of desperation, as the months of the allotted year were rolling by, a certain scholar in the community fell asleep while studying and in his dream saw that the rescuer would not come from the Diaspora or the Land of Israel, but rather from beyond the river Sambatyon, where the ten lost tribes of Israel dwelled. It was necessary to contact the Jews of the ten lost tribes for help. Everyone agreed to send R. Meir, who was a great scholar, known for his piety, and a leader of the Jews of Worms. They sent him with a letter explaining their situation signed by the rabbinic leadership of the community, supplies for the journey, and three accompanying rabbis. After many difficulties and much time, the party arrived at the banks of the river Sambatyon on a Tuesday, exactly eight days before the year’s time would run out.

Now, the Sambatyon River is impossible to traverse during the six days of the week, for it is too turbulent for any boat and the waters constantly fling dangerous rocks into the air. Only on the Sabbath do the waters calm enough for a boat to sail across, but, of course, embarking on a boat journey on the Sabbath is forbidden. Nevertheless, the group knew that the river would have to be crossed on the Sabbath for the sake of saving lives. When the Sabbath arrived, R. Meir instructed the accompanying rabbis to remain and that only he would take upon himself the burden of violating the Sabbath, crossing the river by boat. As soon as R. Meir arrived on the other side of the river, he was placed in prison and told that he would be stoned to death for violating the Sabbath. However, once the Jews of the ten lost tribes read the community’s letter explaining the dire circumstances, R. Meir was released from prison.

On that same Sabbath, the Jews of the ten lost tribes cast lots to see who would face the monk in order to save R. Meir’s imperiled community. The lot fell on a short, lame elder named Dan, who was pious, upright, and God-fearing. R. Meir was told to stay on this side of the river, for he had accomplished his mission and could not justify violating the Sabbath day a second time by crossing back over the Sambatyon. Rather, Dan sailed back alone. When R. Meir’s escorts encountered Dan on the far side of the river they lost heart, for how could their rescuer be such a little old man who walked with a limp? Nevertheless, they set out to return. Dan had the secret, mystical knowledge of how to use the recital of God’s names to effect miracles. Using such knowledge, the group of four traveled to Worms through a kefitsat ha-derekh (a miraculous short cut; lit., “a jumping of the way”) in just two days and arrived on the last day of the year-long reprieve that the monk had granted. It also happened to be two days before the holiday of Shavuot. When the Jewish community in Worms beheld the little old man walking with a limp who was to
be their redeemer, they were struck with terror, for how could he stand up to the fearsome monk who was a master of black magic? In the presence of the king and great crowds of Jews and gentiles in the town square, the contest took place. The monk used incantations to harm Dan, and Dan used recitations of mystical names of God to counteract the monk’s magic and to fight back. The monk recited some magic words and created two large millstones which hovered in the air. Then the monk was able to draw them down into his hands and grind them up as if they were merely made of sand. Dan then took the remains of these millstones and made a huge mountain of them. Then he kneaded the earth of the mountain like a woman kneads dough and made from it two millstones larger than the original ones, caused them to hover in the air, and challenged the monk to bring them down. But the monk could not.

After a number of other stages of the fight, with the monk losing each round, Dan finally attached the monk to the top of an aged, towering tree, brought the gigantic millstones down, and made them grind the monk into powder.

Dan then told the Jews that on the previous Sabbath, when R. Meir accompanied him to the boat, R. Meir had composed and recited to Dan the poem *Akdamut Milin*. R. Meir requested, through Dan, that the community recite the poem each *Shavuot* during their worship services “for the sake of his name,” for his name is signed in the acrostic.

**ANALYSIS OF THE TALE**

The tale connects R. Meir and the city of Worms with *Akdamut*, in such a way as to elevate R. Meir to the status of valiant hero and to elevate *Akdamut* above the status of merely one more prayer in the worship service of *Shavuot*. It is instead now an anthem that celebrates a miracle.

While the tale certainly has parallels to universal folklore themes such as the miraculous rescue of a seemingly doomed community by an apparently old, small, and weak “hero,” and the fight against evil sorcerers, among others, it also shares themes with other, specifically Jewish, stories. Among these are the David and Goliath story, the rescue of a threatened Jewish community by an emissary of the ten lost tribes who dwell on the other side of the Sambatyon, the overcoming of an enemy through the recitation or writing of secret, mystical names of God, and the defeat of an enemy in a public disputation that was forced upon the Jewish community.4

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4. For more on the connections to universal and Jewish folklore, see Dov Noy’s comments on the Yiddish tale of *Akdamut* in Moshe Attias, *The Golden Feather: Twenty Folktales Narrated by Greek Jews*, ed. D. Noy (Hebrew; Haifa, 1976), 191. Cf., as well, Eli Yassif’s analyses of similar themes in medieval He-
At the same time that the tale turns on several themes that are found in folk tales world-wide as well as themes that are found in Jewish stories in general, the particular coloring and detailing of these themes connects the story with R. Meir, his community, Worms (or the Worms/Mainz/Speyer/Cologne region), and with his composition, Akdamut. The tale’s conclusion makes it clear that the story was meant to provide an etiology of the piyyut and its connection to the Shavuot liturgy. In addition, through it, R. Meir is glorified. Though he is not the immediate agent of the redemption of the community, he is the one chosen by the community to represent them in the search for the rescuer from beyond the Sambatyon and is clearly a hero in the story. As in many tales of a would-be hero being given a nearly impossible task to fulfill, R. Meir in this tale does fulfill the task of finding the land beyond the Sambatyon and convincing the ten lost tribes to dispatch help, all within the limited amount of time despite natural, supernatural, and halakhic barriers. It is worth underscoring that because of the river and the Sabbath, R. Meir sacrifices his past life, including contact with his family, forever, for the sake of the community. In this way, he fulfills, in a most literal and impressive way, his honorific “Sheleiah Tsibur,” “Messenger of the Community.” In addition to “representing” them in prayer as the precentor, as he did in reality, in the tale he is a messenger of the community—going on a daring mission on their behalf.

The tale incorporates historical-sounding details, including a date and the names of actual personages and places in order to give the tale a tone of historical reality. Of course, many of the historical-sounding details work so well in the tale because they did, indeed, connect to paradigms of actual historical events that Jewish communities would know about in general over the centuries. One such feature is the turning to non-Jewish authorities, such as the king, for protection against an enemy.


5. Because of this, the tale is often called “Ma’aseh Akdamut.” See Howard Schwartz, Miriam’s Tambourine: Jewish Folktales from around the World (New York, 1986), 389. In at least one version, it is known as Megilat Akdamut (The Scroll of Akdamut), relating it, perhaps, to the biblical story of the rescue of the Jewish community of Persia from a cruel Jew-hater in the biblical book of Esther. See Isaac Rivkind, “Megilat R. Meir Shats (He’arot le-Ma’aseh Akdamut),” Ha-Doar 9.50.3 (1929): 508.

6. A similar event actually occurred in Mainz just a few days before Shavuot in 1096 as the Crusader army of Count Emicho was encamped just outside the city gates. The Jews of the city sought, and received, temporary safety behind the fortified walls of the archbishop’s palace in Mainz. Ultimately, the Crusaders
In the tale, the king’s ability to protect the endangered Jews proves to be limited, echoing the reality of many medieval Jewish communities in Europe. In having the Jews ultimately turn to the ten lost tribes of Israel for help, the tale expresses a feeling of helplessness on behalf of those who told the story and those who later identified with it. Generations of European Jews knew only too well the vulnerable position of their community because of its usual inability, in times of peril, to turn for truly dependable aid to any individual or group—Jewish or non-Jewish.

From a different perspective, the role of the messenger from the ten lost tribes also demonstrates faith in God, and the ultimate success of that messenger displays God’s faithfulness in protecting his beleaguered people. God’s role is hinted at through the revelation in a dream to a scholar of the community that the true savior will come from the ten lost tribes. After the Jews had fasted, repented, prayed, and given charity, a scholar received a dream vision—this was certainly understood by those who heard the tale, as a revelation from God.

For the Jews who knew the tale (and such knowledge was quite widespread among Ashkenazic Jewry over the centuries’), the chanting of Akdamut on Shavuot was inevitably understood through its lens. Even though the average Jew could likely not grasp the meaning of all of the Aramaic of the poem, there were many editions of the prayer book for Shavuot which included a Yiddish translation. The threatening aspect of the non-Jewish kingdoms in the piyyut (such as the words in verse 23: “for whose sake you die in the lion’s den”) would be tied to the challenge and threat of the monk-sorcerer in the tale.

entered the city, penetrated the palace walls, and massacred the Jews ensconced there. See Robert Chazan, In the Year 1096: The First Crusade and the Jews (Philadelphia, 1996), xvii.


8. For example, in a comment on the issue of when to recite Akdamut, R. Elijah ben Benjamin Wolf Shapira (1660–1712) expressly cites a version of the Yiddish tale: “There is also found (in) a long tale (ma’aseh) printed in old Yiddish that the reason it was ordained to chant Akdamut after ‘in the wilderness of Sinai’ [i.e., the last two words of the first verse of the Torah reading for Shavuot, Ex 19.1] is because this tale occurred in the wilderness, (and so, it is) a remembrance of the miracle.” See R. Elijah ben Benjamin Wolf Shapira, Sefer Eliyahu rabah, (Jerusalem, 1999), Hilkhot Pesah (the page is erroneously entitled Hilkhot Shabat), 494.5, p. 615.

9. References to verses of Akdamut throughout this essay are to my annotated translation in Appendix I.
Similarly, the vindication of the Jews along with the final disgrace of the non-Jewish enemy in the tale would be connected to any number of verses from the piyyut, such as:

When he shall bring light to me, but you will be covered in shame . . . He shall requite in kind to the haters and foes, but (he shall bring) righteousness to the nation that is beloved and abundantly meritorious . . . He shall cover (that nation) with his glory during the days and the nights, a canopy for (that nation) to adorn with praises (verses 27–28, 30).10

Similarly, too, at the very end of the poem (45b), the poet alludes directly to the holiday of Shavuot with the words “He desired and favored us and gave us the Torah.” This, too, brings to mind, structurally at least, the very end of the tale in which the community prepares to celebrate the holiday of Shavuot.

The cumulative effect of all the ways in which the piyyut was read in the light of the tale is to enhance the figure of R. Meir into one of a victorious champion of his people, and to boost the significance of Akdamut from a prayer offering open-ended encouragement and hope for future redemption to a celebratory hymn of a spectacular deliverance and liberation that already took place.

HISTORY OF THE FOLKTALE

In 1929, Yitzhak Rivkind published the tale according to what he believed to be the earliest printed edition available, namely, a 1694 edition in a mahzor from Fuerth (though he was convinced that it had probably been published before that), as well as according to an early manuscript deriving, most likely, from no later than the beginning of the sixteenth century.11 About a year later, Rivkind wrote a follow-up article reporting that since his earlier article had appeared, a scholar in Amsterdam sent to Rivkind photos of a copy of the tale published in 1660, thirty-four years earlier than Rivkind’s “first” edition. The publication information in this earlier copy recorded that a press in Amsterdam reprinted the tale

which had previously been released in Cremona. In that same article, Rivkind asserted that the only Hebrew versions of the tale appeared in 1902 and 1916; the former constituted only a summary, while the latter consisted was a full translation. Nevertheless, in 1976, Eli Yassif published a Hebrew version of the tale which not only predated these but also predated the earliest Yiddish printed version that Rivkind had identified. This Hebrew version is found in a manuscript located in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. The colophon states that it was copied in 1630. In fact, there are only superficial differences between this version and Rivkind’s versions. The copyist of the 1630 Hebrew edition, Yisrael Kohen, says in his introduction that he had known of this story, but that it was only available to those who understood Yiddish (leshon Ashkenazi), and even then, it was printed in only “one in a hundred old Ashkenazi mahzorim.” Even though his point was to emphasize the difficulty of obtaining a copy of the tale, his remark is testimony, if only anecdotally so, that the tale had been circulating in Yiddish even before 1630. He says that he desired to make this miraculous story more available to the Jewish community, and therefore he availed himself of another person who understood both Yiddish and Italian (leshon la’az) because he, Yisrael Kohen, did not understand Yiddish! In this way, he tells us, he translated the tale from a Yiddish written version, through an oral Italian translation, into a written Hebrew version. The Yiddish tale continues


15. Ibid., 218.

16. Leshon la’az, according to Yassif, ibid., 214. My thanks to the anonymous reader who points out that the manuscript was written in Italy and refers to Italian in several places.

17. Joseph Dan has identified what he described as a Hebrew story from the early thirteenth century which served as a skeletal framework for what later developed into the later Yiddish tale. See his “An Early Hebrew Source of the Yiddish Akdamoth’ Story,” Hebrew University Studies in Literature 1 (1973): 39–46. Whether or not Dan’s theory has merit, there is no doubt that the Yiddish tale’s oral origins predate any of the written versions we possess.
to enjoy a lively written and oral life. The tale also exists in two, abridged versions in English (in Rivkind’s edition, the Yiddish tale is about fifteen pages long).

R. MEIR BEN YITSHAŁK AND AKDAMUT

Akdamut was written by R. Meir ben Yitsḥak Nehorai Sheliaḥ Tsibur of Worms in the eleventh century. He functioned as not only rabbi but also cantor, hence the name “Messenger of the Community,” the common Hebrew term for one who leads the community in worship services. The name Nehorai (‘bright, illumined,” or “illuminator” in Aramaic; a translation of his Hebrew name Meir) is apparently an honorific bestowed upon him as an allusion to an epithet given to the talmudic R. Meir in b’Eruvin 13b. Not much is certain about his personal history beyond the following: The names of two of his sons are recorded as Jacob and Isaac, and his grandfather’s name was Shmuel. Isaac apparently perished at the hands of the Crusaders in Worms in 1096. It seems that R. Meir, himself died a short time before the Crusaders reached the Rhineland, although no definite information on how and when he died has reached us. If such information was lacking as well in the centuries immediately following his death, that would have provided the tale with an opportunity for relating the ending of his days in the mythical region beyond the Sambatyon. At least forty-eight of his piyutim are known to us in Hebrew and in Aramaic. Of them, his best-known work remains Akdamut. Fraenkel’s
critical apparatus notes that the first manuscripts we have which include Akdamut are from the mid-thirteenth century\textsuperscript{22} (though these may not be the first texts in which Akdamut is found).

In halakhic literature, the recital of Akdamut is first mentioned in Sefer ba-minhagim of R. Avraham Klausner (d. 1407/8), and in Sefer ba-Mabaril, by Klausner’s student and nephew, R. Jacob Moellin (1360?–1427).\textsuperscript{23} The poem was first published as part of a prayer book in the 1557 Mahzor mi-kol ba-shanah minbag ba-Ashkenazim ukbe-mahzor Saloniki.\textsuperscript{24} Its recital is mentioned in the Levush by R. Mordecai Jaffe (published in 1604), and in a comment of Ture zabav on Shulhan ‘arukh, Orah hayim by R. David ben Shemuel Ha-Levy (1586–1667).\textsuperscript{25} From then on, it is found in nearly all prayer books in the Ashkenazic rite.\textsuperscript{26}


\textsuperscript{22} The earliest manuscript that can be dated to a specific year in Fraenkel’s critical apparatus is from 1279. See Fraenkel, \textit{Mahzor Shavuot}, 385.


\textsuperscript{24} I. Davidson, \textit{Otsar ba-ibira vebah-piyut}, 1:7514.

\textsuperscript{25} Ture Zahav (Taz) is one of a number of commentators who object to the insertion of Akdamut after the blessing over the first aliyah of Torah reading has been pronounced. The objection is that the piyyut represents an impermissible interruption (hefsek) once the blessing has been recited. See his comment on Shulhan ‘Arukh, Orah Hayim 494:1. The Levush (d. ca. 1612), on the other hand, supported the recitation of Akdamut after the blessing has been said. See Levush, Orah Hayim 494:3. See also Fraenkel, \textit{Mahzor Shavuot}, xxviii, n. 167. Since Akdamut was meant as an introduction to the Targum, the natural place for the piyyut is, indeed, immediately after the first verse of the Torah reading and just before the reading of the Targum. This would, of course, place the piyyut after the recitation of the blessing which precedes the Torah reading. It seems that as time went on, and the Targum was read less and less on \textit{Shavuot}, support for retaining Akdamut in its natural place diminished. That ultimately led nearly all congregations that chant Akdamut do so before the blessing which precedes the Torah reading.

\textsuperscript{26} One curious exception is that for many centuries Akdamut has not been recited in Worms, the city which is so closely associated with the composer of the piyyut. The facts surrounding this circumstance are, to this day, not entirely
The year 1096 is a crucial year for the city of Worms, as well as for nearby Mainz and Cologne. That was the year that these towns (and, to a lesser extent, Speyer, and the surrounding area) suffered the First Crusade’s worst anti-Jewish violence in Europe. The confrontations occurred around the holiday of Shavuot. The events of that year, known in later Jewish sources as Gezerot tatnu, “The Decrees of (the year) 4856 (= 1096),” or, more importantly, the Jewish memory of those events, magnified the significance of the tale about R. Meir, and of Akdamut.

The severity of the losses in Worms, Mainz, and Cologne—the destruction of nearly the entire Jewish community there—was worse than anywhere else in the region. And although the Jewish communities rebounded and rebuilt, these killings—the very first outbreak of Christian anti-Jewish mass-murder in Europe—left a lasting impression on the Jewish consciousness of the region. The impact was expressed in the large number of rituals (including annual fasts) which arose and in prayers composed to memorialize the dead. The best-known elegy for the events of 1096 is the prayer Av ha-raḥamin, found to this day in nearly all traditional Ashkenazic prayer books. It memorializes the dead as “the pious, and the upright, and the pure” (ba-basidim veka-yeḥarim veka-
temimim) but mainly calls upon God to avenge the dead. There are many others. It is in the light of these kinds of rites and prayers that the significance of Akdamut and the tale should be understood. Chronicles of the events were certainly written and read, but these were not recited in any regular way, whether weekly or annually, on the anniversary of the events. The way the horrific events of 1096 were absorbed into Jewish memory was mainly through the incorporation of religious poetry which commemorated the losses.

As the Yiddish tale circulated and became known, R. Meir the author of Akdamut became inseparable in Ashkenazic Jewish consciousness from R. Meir the hero who saved Rhenish Jewry from the evil monk. Although Akdamut was probably not written in order to venerate the events and the losses of 1096, its association with R. Meir must have brought to mind Jewish vengeance and vindication for the Crusader attacks, especially as more and more time separated contemporary Jews from the late eleventh century.

This brings us back to our original question regarding Akdamut’s longevity. I believe that we approach an answer to the question when we view the poem the way its readers did in the centuries which followed its composition, namely, in the context of the Yiddish tale and with the memory of the attacks of the Crusaders. Later generations could not have missed the connections between the theme of Akdamut, the intersecting locales of its author, of the threatened-then-redeemed Jewish community in the tale, and of the true-to-life anti-Jewish mass murder

28. A number of other hymns as well as fasts to commemorate “The Decrees of 1096” can be found, e.g., in the same volume that contains one of the first mentions of reciting Akdamut in a halakhic compendium, Sefer Mabari: Minhagim, ed. S. J. Spitzer, ed., Hilkhot Shavuot 1, p. 459. See, too, Avraham David, “Historical Records of the Persecutions during the First Crusade in Hebrew Printed Works and Archives,” in Facing the Cross, ed. Y. T. Assis et al. (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2000), esp. 197–98. See also, Israel Jacob Yuval, Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages (Berkeley, Calif., 2006), 105–9. I express my gratitude to the anonymous reader for the previous two references. See, too, David Wachtel, “The Ritual and Liturgical Commemoration of Two Medieval Persecutions” (M.A. thesis, Columbia University, 1995).

29. Gerson Cohen took the approach that notwithstanding this fact, the Hebrew Crusade Chronicles ought to be understood from a liturgical perspective. See Gerson D. Cohen, “The Hebrew Crusade Chronicles and the Ashkenazic Tradition,” in Minḥaḥ le-Nabum: Biblical and Other Studies Presented to Nabum Sarna, ed. M. Brettler and M. Fishbane (Sheffield, 1993), 36–55.
that took place at the same historical time period of R. Meir at the same time of year as the climax of the tale. The theme of Akdamut is Israel’s great merit before God because of her loyalty in the face of persecutions and enticements by the nations.30 The location of the author of Akdamut is Worms. The location of the threatened-then-redeemed Jewish community of the tale is also Worms. The anti-Jewish attacks of the Crusades occurred in Worms and its environs. R. Meir lived until about 1096, and the attacks occurred in 1096. The time of year of the attacks surrounded the holiday of Shavuot. The piyyut was written for the holiday of Shavuot. The climax of the tale took place just prior to the holiday of Shavuot.

My conclusion is that all of these elements blended in the following manner: The Yiddish tale bound together R. Meir, his piyyut, and the essentials of the Crusader attacks in such a way as to provide succor to Jewish communities which suffered demoralizing defeat and bereavement in the wake of the First Crusade. The encouragement and hope offered by the piyyut on its own were reinforced and augmented by the retelling of the tale, so that the memory of defeat and death were softened and mollified (though not entirely relieved), in generation after generation, by the story of the defeat and death of the anti-Semitic black monk. That defeat was effected by the unlikely anti-hero of Dan, the old, limping, short Jew, who was the master of a spiritual wisdom which trumped the avenging monk. Dan was enlisted by the pious Sheliah Tsibur, the “messenger of the community” of Worms, the author of Akdamut. Jews in successive generations of medieval Europe took hope and courage from the poem. In this way, the tale and the memory of the Crusader violence bolstered and augmented the power of the main theme of Akdamut to offer consolation, faith, hope, and strength to Jewish communities over the centuries. All of this was encompassed in the annual recitation of Akdamut on the holiday of Shavuot. Akdamut would likely have fallen into desuetude not long after the Targum, which it was meant to introduce, was itself discontinued on Shavuot in Europe. However, the original theme of the poem, as seen through the lens of the Yiddish tale and as filtered through the memory of the losses of the First Crusade, has preserved this ninety-line Aramaic poem in the liturgy for nearly a thousand years since its composition.

30. Verses 16 through 45—more than half of the poem—emphasize the main point: Israel is beloved and preferred by God, over the angels, over the nations, and will be amply rewarded in the World to Come because of Israel’s steadfastness in the face of the nations’ abuse and temptations.
APPENDIX I: A NEW ANNOTATED TRANSLATION OF AKDAMUT

1. **Alef**
The introduction of words and the opening of speech: At the beginning I request authority and permission.

2. **Bet**
Trembling, I will begin with two or three entries, With the consent of (the one who) supports (us) through our old age.

3. **Gimel**
Eternal glory is his and cannot be described, (Even) if the heavens were parchment and all the forests pens;

4. **Dalet**
(And even) if all seas and gathered waters (were) ink, (and) earth’s inhabitants (were all) scribes and authors.

5. **Heh**
Splendid is the Master of the heavens and the ruler of the earth, He alone established the world and conquered it.

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31. The Hebrew translation and commentary of Akdamut by Jonah Fraenkel, Mahzor Shavuot, 385–95, stand head and shoulders above all other previous attempts, and I owe a debt of gratitude to his work. He, in turn, owes a debt to the translation and commentary of Akdamut by Wolf Heidenheim (1757–1832): Wolf ben Shimshon Heidenheim, Mahzor le-hag ba-Shavuot (Roedelheim, 1805). Heidenheim’s German translation of Akdamut was rendered into Hebrew and published, along with his Hebrew commentary, in a separate booklet in Seder Akdamut v-’Arkin im perush ve-targum (Tel Aviv, 1963).

32. An unprejudiced interpretation of the wording of this line is that the payetan is merely introducing the words of his poem and not the words of the Ten Commandments.

33. Based on Is 46.4: “Til you grow old, I will still be the same; When you turn gray, it is I who will carry.” Most biblical translations are from the New Jewish Publication Society edition (NJPS), JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh (Philadelphia, 1999). Occasionally, I have supplied my own translation.

34. Referring, perhaps, to those passages in the Bible wherein God is described as having to fight primordial forces for control of the world, e.g., Is 27.1, Ps 104.9, Job 38.8–11.
6. Vav
Without effort\(^{35}\) and weariness he completed it,
And through the use of an insignificant letter, one with no substance.\(^{36}\)

7. Zayin
He completed all of his work in those six days,
(After which), the radiance of his glory\(^{37}\) ascended upon his throne of
fire.

8. Het
A force of thousands upon thousands, a throng, serves (him),
They sprout forth anew each morning; with great faithfulness.\(^{38}\)

9. Tet
Six-winged Serafim, blazing greatly
Are silent until consent is given to them.\(^{39}\)

10. Yod
They receive (the consent) at once, without hesitation,
(Chanting) their three-fold Kedushah: “His glory fills all the earth.”

\(^{35}\) Le’u, in this sense, is used by Targum Onkelos on Gn 31.42.

\(^{36}\) See Midrash Bereishit Rabba, ed. J. Theodor, Ch. Albeck, (Jerusalem,
1965), §12.10; 1:107. The Midrash understands the word be-bibar’am (Gn 2.4) to
mean be-beb bara’am, “God created the heavens and the earth by using the letter
beb.” “Be-bibar’am—R. Abbahu in the name of R. Yoḥanan: With a beb he created
them. Just as all the letters (of the alphabet) make a sound and the beb does not,
so, too, did the Holy One, blessed be he, create his world without labor and
effort.”

\(^{37}\) Targum Yonatan translates minogah negdo in Ps 18.13 (“Out of the brilliance
before him”) with the words in this line: zehor yekare.

\(^{38}\) In bḤag 14a, Shemuel quotes to R. Hiyya bar Rav the “elevated words”
of R. Hiyya’s father, to the effect that angels are created daily, each morning. He
connects Dn 7.10 and Lam 3.25 as they are in this line. Dn 7.10: “Thousands
upon thousands served him; Myriads upon myriads attended him.” Lam 3.25:
“They are renewed every morning—Ample is your faithfulness!”

\(^{39}\) The angels themselves extend permission to each other, as in the next line,
and as in several forms of the prayer Kedushah. The image of the six-winged
angels comes from Is 6.2. See Mordecai Yitsḥaqi, “Ha-Piyut ‘Akdamut Milin’
11. Kaf
Like the sound of Shaddai, like the sound of many waters, Cherubs opposite Ofans rise up in a roar.

12. Lamed
To gaze upon the face, an appearance of the radiance of the rainbow. They rush quickly to every place they are sent.

13. Mem
They bless his glory in every kind of concealed chant, From the place of his Glory which requires no searching.

14. Nun
All the celestial force roars; (they all) extol in trembling, “May he reign for all generations, forever.”

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40. Ez 1.24 “When they moved, I could hear the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the sound of Shaddai.”

41. Ez 3.12: “The spirit carried me away, and behind me I heard a great roaring sound.” In the Book of Ezekiel (chapter 1 and 10.15–20), the many references to ofanim (gilgelein in the Aramaic of Akdamut) appear to mean “wheels” of the angelic apparatus. In later Jewish tradition, these were interpreted to denote a category of angel, as in Kedushah de-yotser, and in the many piyutim known as Ofanim. Apparently, that is the intention here as well.

42. Ez 1.28–29: “Like the appearance of the bow which shines in the clouds on a day of rain, such was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. That was the appearance of the semblance of the Presence of the Lord.”

43. Ez 3.12, interpreted, according to tradition, as relating the words that Ezekiel heard, “Then a spirit carried me away, and behind me I heard a great roaring sound: ‘Blessed is the Glory of the Lord in his place.’”

44. Lehiohta, means literally “whispering,” but it may not mean that here since the text referenced (Ez 3.12) says explicitly “a great roaring sound.” Cf. Fraenkel, Mahzor Shavuot, 388.

45. Targum to Ez 3.12.

46. Fraenkel, Mahzor Shavuot, 388, interprets “needs no searching in advance, because his place is not known.” This logic is forced. If the intention is that his place is not known, the poet wouldn’t say that it “requires no searching,” he would say that it cannot be searched. Fraenkel is, apparently, influenced by other sources such as the eighth-century Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, end of chapter 4, which says that even the angels do not know God’s place. That is the reason they say “Blessed is the presence of the Lord from his place” (Ez 3.12). What the poet means here is, perhaps, that his place needs no searching by the angels, because they do know its place, as the previous couplet (Lamed) says, they “gaze upon the face.” Heidenheim, Seder Akdamut v’Arkbin im perush v’targum, 6, interprets that his place needs no searching because “His presence fills all the earth” (Is 6.3, cited above, in verse 10).

47. The line begins in the singular and continues in the plural.

48. Ps 146.10. A verse found in many versions of the Kedushah.
15. **Samekh**  
His קֵדֶוָב is arranged with them, and when the time passes,  
It is the end forever; (they do not recite it) even once in seven years.⁴⁹

16. **‘Ayin**  
His own dear possession⁵⁰ are beloved because they regularly  
Set praise for him morning and evening.

17. **Peh**  
They are distinguished as his portion, to do his will,  
The wonders of his praise they declare and chant.

18. **Tsadi**  
He desires, craves and yearns (for them) because they exert much effort⁵¹  
in study,  
Their prayers, he therefore, accepts and their petition is effective.

19. **Kaf**  
(Their prayer) is attached to the crown of the Eternal One, through an oath,  
Next to the phylactery that is everlastingly set (there).⁵²

⁴⁹. This verse, along with the next one, is comprehensible only in the context of a talmudic discussion of Jacob’s encounter with the divine being in Gn 32.27, “Then he said, ‘Let me go, for dawn is breaking.’” bHul 91b comments that this angel asked to be released because his opportunity to recite “song” (שִירָה) had arrived for the first time since he was created. The Talmud goes on to say that Israel is favored by God over the angels, the basis for the next line, ‘Ayin, and a pivotal point in Akdamut, as the poem turns from a description of the angels to praise of Israel, favored over the angels, favored over the nations. While Israel chants every hour, the angels chant “only once a day, and some say, once a week, and some say once a month, and some say once a year, and some say once every seven years, and some say once in a Jubilee (50 years), and some say once in eternity (בָּעֵלָם).” The angels’ “song” is said to be the Isaiah verse from the קֵדֶוָב (Is 6.3), while Israel’s is שְׁמַע (Dt 6.4). Therefore, the meaning of this line is that Israel is favored by God even over the angels because the angels’ praise occurs only once in eternity, while Israel’s occurs several times a day.

⁵⁰. ‘אדָיו א’מָנְתֵךְ is the rendering of Targum Onkelos to Dt 32.9, הֶבֶל נַבָּלָת, “his own allotment,” i.e., Israel. Again, the verse begins in the singular and concludes in the plural.

⁵¹. דֶ-לָא’ע. Same root as in verse 6—לי’ע, “effort.”

⁵². The images are based on various rabbinic traditions. Exodus Rabbah 21.4 teaches that an angel is especially appointed to take the prayers of Israel (as in the previous line of our poem) and to form crowns which will adorn God’s head. In Pesikta rabati, paraobat Matan Torab, the angel “adjudes” (מַאִובִּי’א) the crown to sit upon God’s head. Cf. bḤag 13b and Hekhalot rabati in Peter Schäfer, ed.,
20. Resh
Inscribed in (the phylactery) is wisdom and discernment,
The greatness of Israel, who recite the Shema'.

21. Shin
Praise like this of God’s (for Israel)
Is proper for me to express before the kingdoms (of the world).

22. Tav
They come and gather like the appearance of waves,
They are amazed and ask about the miracles.

23. Mem/Alef
“From where and just who is your love, (you) who are beautiful to behold,
For whose sake you die in the lion’s den?”

Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur (Tübingen, 1982), p. 13, §25. The image of God wearing phylacteries is found in bBer 6a.

53. bBer 6a contains several suggestions as to which biblical verses are inscribed in God’s phylacteries. One is Dt 4.7, “For what great nation is there . . . .” Dt 4.6 contains the praise of Israel “Surely that great nation is a wise and discerning people.” Therefore, the sense of the verse is that God’s phylacteries contain a biblical verse which hints at the wisdom and discernment of Israel. And perhaps it is hinting at the fact that Israel’s phylacteries contain two paragraphs of the Shema’, as well.

54. The non-Jewish kingdoms.

55. The non-Jewish kingdoms address Israel. This couplet and the next several are based upon the following passage from Mekhiltta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Shir- ata 3. The following translation is from Jacob Z. Lauterbach, Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael (Philadelphia, 1935, 1961), 2:26–27: “R. Akiba says: I shall speak of the prophecies and the praises of Him by whose word the world came into being, before all the nations of the world. For all the nations of the world ask Israel, saying: ‘What is thy beloved more than another beloved, that thou dost so adjure us’ (Song 5.9), so that you are ready to die for Him, and so ready to let yourselves be killed for Him? —For it is said: ‘Therefore do the maidens love Thee’ (ibid. 1.3), meaning, they love Thee unto death. And it is also written: ‘Nay but for Thy sake are we killed all the day’ (Ps 44.23). —‘You are handsome, you are mighty, come intermingle with us.’ But the Israelites say to the nations of the world: ‘Do you know Him? Let us but tell you some of His praise: ‘My beloved is white and ruddy,’ etc. (Song 5.10). As soon as the nations of the world hear some of His praise, they say to the Israelites: ‘We will join you,’ as it is said: ‘Whither is thy beloved gone, O thou fairest among women? Whither hath thy beloved turned him, that we may seek him with thee’ (ibid. 6.1). The Israelites, however, say to the nations of the world: You can have no share in Him, but ‘My beloved is mine and I am his’ (Song 2.16), ‘I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine,’ etc. (ibid. 6.3).” The reference to the lion’s den alludes to Dn 6:17.
24. **Yod/Resh**
Honored and beautiful will you be if you intermingle with the realms,
Your will we will do everywhere.”

25. **Bet/Yod**
With wisdom she answers them; the (messianic) End (she) describes,
“If you only knew him in wisdom, in intimate knowledge.

26. **Reish/Reish**
What significance has the “greatness” (that you promise) compared to
that great praise,
Of what he will do for me when the Redemption shall come!

27. **Bet/Yod**
When he shall bring light to me, but you will be covered in shame.
When his glory shall be revealed in strength and pride.”

28. **Yod/Tsadi**
He shall requite in kind to the haters and foes,
But (he shall bring) vindication to the nation that is beloved and abundantly meritorious.

29. **Het/Kaf**
When he brings complete joy, (that nation shall be a) pure vessel
For the city of Jerusalem when he gathers in the exiled.

30. **Yod/Gimel**
He shall cover (that nation) with his glory during the day and night,
A canopy for (that nation) to adorn with praises.

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56. The nations entice Israel.
57. Israel answers the nations.
58. “When He shall bring light to me . . . When His glory . . .” is based upon Is 60.1: “your light has dawned; The glory of the Lord has shone upon you!”
59. Based upon Is 59.18, “He shall make requital to his enemies, requital to the distant lands.” The language of the poem is very close to that of the Targum to this verse.
60. Based upon Is 66.20: “And out of all the nations, said the Lord, they shall bring all your brothers . . . to Jerusalem My holy mountain as an offering to the Lord—just as the Israelites bring an offering in a pure vessel to the House of the Lord.”
61. This image is based upon Is 4.5–6 (and see Mekhilta, P’ribh 14, in Lauterbach, 1:108): “The Lord will create over the whole shrine and meeting place of Mount Zion cloud by day and smoke with a glow of flaming fire by night. Indeed, over all the glory shall hang a canopy, which shall serve as a pavilion for shade from heat by day and as a shelter for protection against drenching rain.”
31. **Dalet/Lamed**
For the glow of the clouds will beautify the canopies;
According to the effort, shall each shelter be made.62

32. **Bet/Tav**
In chairs of pure gold, in seven levels,
The places of the righteous, before the Master of (all) deeds.63

33. **Vav/Reish**
And their appearance will be of perfect joy,
(As) heaven in its splendor and the stars of light.64

34. **Heh/Vav**
Beauty which the lips cannot express,
Nor was heard or seen in prophetic visions.65

35. **Bet/Mem**
No eye (ever) held sway over the Garden of Eden,
(Yet) they (the righteous of Israel) will circle in a dance with the She bdinab.66

62. See bBB 75a where Is 4.5 is cited (see previous footnote) and interpreted
to mean that “The Holy One, blessed be he, will make for everyone a canopy
according to his honor.”

63. “In chairs of pure gold” may be based upon bKet 77b, “(In the World to
Come) R. Shimon bar Yoḥai was sitting upon thirteen chairs of gold.” “In seven
levels” is very close to the language of Bet ha-midrash, Seder gan eden 3, Adolph
Jellinek, Bet ha-midrash, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1967) 133, “The righteous are in seven
levels (obeva’ ma’alot) in the Garden of Eden.” See also Yalkut Shim’oni on Gn
2.8, §20, 7a: “. . . (In the Garden of Eden there will be) seven groupings (literally,
houses,” batim) of the righteous.”

64. Based upon Leviticus Rabbah, ed. Mordecai Margaliot (Hebrew; Jerusa-
lem, 1972), 40:2, 692: “‘In Your presence is perfect joy’ (Ps 16.11). Don’t read
sova’,” perfect,” rather obeva’,” seven.” These are the seven classes of the righteous
who, in the future, will be present with the Shebdinab, and their faces will resem-
ble the sun and the moon, the heaven and the stars.”

65. This refers to the beauty of the World to Come. Is 64.3 reads “Such things
had never been heard or noted. No eye has seen (them), O God, but you.”
(Fraenkel, Mahzor Shavuot, 393, cites, in what must be a typographical mistake,
Ps 64.3 instead of Is 64.3). This is interpreted in bBer 34b as follows: “R. Hyya
bar Abba also said in the name of R. Yoḥanan: All the prophets prophesied only
for the days of the Messiah (i.e., their predictions referred to this time period),
but as for the World to Come, ‘No eye has seen (them) O God, but you.’” (The
exegesis of Is 64.3 in bBer 34b figures in verse 42 below, as well).

66. “. . . no eye holds sway over the Garden of Eden” is based upon the continua-
tion of the statement in bBer 34b cited in the previous note: “R. Samuel ben Nab-
mani said: This is Eden, which has never been seen by the eye of any creature.”
36. ‘Ayin/Shin
They will point to him, although in trembling,
“We hoped for him in our captivity with great faith.”

37. ‘Yod/Mem
He will lead us eternally as robust youths,
(In) our portion, which has previously been set aside as a gift.

38. ‘Tet/Vav
The contest of Leviathan and the Ox of the tall mountain,
As they struggle one on one in battle,

“They (the righteous of Israel) circle” (metaile) is based upon Sifra, Beḥukotai, chapter 3.3, 120b: “In the future, the Holy One, blessed be he, will stroll (metayel) with the righteous in the Garden of Eden.”

“. . . in a dance with the Shekhinah” is based upon bTa’an 31a (the very end of the tractate), “In the future, the Holy One, blessed be he, will arrange a dance with the righteous and he will sit among them in the Garden of Eden, and every one of them will point (to God) with his finger as it is said ‘In that day they shall say: This is our God . . .’” (Is 25.9). The continuation of this verse is referred to in the next line of the poem. See Mordecai Yitshaqi, “Ha-Piyut ‘Akdamut Milin’ la-Shavuot: Hashlamah le-ma’amar ha-piyut ‘Akdamut Milin’ u-mivneh ha-Kedushah,” Mahut 18 (Fall 1996): 102–3.

67. “We hoped for him,” as in Is 25.9 (see previous note) “In that day they shall say: This is our God; we hoped for him and he delivered us. This is the Lord, for whom we hoped.”

68. “eternally as . . . youths,” is a translation of the poem’s almin alem. This phrase is based upon Leviticus Rabbah (ed. Margaliot), §11:9, 240–42:

R. Berekhiah and R. Helbo and Ulla Birah and R. Elazar (said) in the name of R. Hanina: In the future, the Holy one, blessed be he, will be at the head of a dance for the righteous . . . and they rise robustly and point to him with a finger and say “For this God, is our God forever, he will lead us eternally” (Ps 48.15). ‘Al mut—“eternally” (means) “robustly”; ‘al mut like those ‘ulemta (young maidens who dance). ‘Al mut—Aqilas translated “eternally,” a world that has no death (as if it were spelled almut with an ‘alef at the beginning instead of an ‘ayin, and as if it were two words: ‘al mut—“no death”). (Another interpretation:) ‘Al mut, (understood as ‘olamot) [two] “worlds”; He shall lead us in this world and he shall lead us in the World to Come.

This line of the poem ingeniously weaves both interpretations of ‘al mut into one line: “robustly” and “eternally.”

69. That is, our bliss in paradise.

70. The scene is found in Leviticus Rabbah (ed. Margaliot), §13:3, 1:277–78: “R. Yudan son of R. Shimon said Behemoth and Leviathan are the beasts of the contest for the righteous in the future to come, and anyone who has not seen the gentile nations’ beasts of the contest in this world will merit to see them in the
39. Bet/Yod
Behemoth will gore with its horns in strength,
The fish will leap to meet it using its fins with might.

40. Mem/Alef
Its maker draws his sword upon it with power,\(^71\)
A feast and a meal will he prepare for the righteous.

41. Mem/Nun
They will be seated at tables of rubies and precious stones;\(^72\)
Rivers of balsam flow before them.\(^73\)

42. Vav/Het
And they delight and refresh themselves with refreshing cups,
Grape wine from creation preserved in wine vats."\(^74\)

43. Zayin/Kaf
Righteous ones:
Just as you have heard this lyrical praise,
You will assuredly be among that assembly.

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World to Come. How are they slaughtered? Behemoth smites Leviathan with its horns and pierces it, and Leviathan smites at Behemoth with its fins and tears it." The "contest" described here is akin to the gladiatorial battles held in Roman amphitheaters. See the citations in Margalioth's commentary, \textit{ad locum}.

\(^71\) Jb 40–41 speaks at length of Behemoth and Leviathan. Job 40.19 reads (regarding Behemoth) "Only his maker can draw the sword against him." Parallelizing this verse, \textit{Akdamut} uses the singular: "Its maker draws his sword upon it." \textit{bBB} 75a contains an extended exegesis of some of these passages. While the verse explicitly says God will kill only Behemoth with the sword, Rashbam, commenting on the talmudic discussion (s.v. \textit{Ha'oso yagesh ha'varo}) glosses "In Job, this is written regarding Behemoth, but the same applies to Leviathan." Presumably, the poem's intention is the same.

\(^72\) Is 54.12 appears to be the basis for the image of "rubies . . . precious stones": "I will make your battlements of rubies, // Your gates of precious stones."

\(^73\) There are a number of references in rabbinic literature to rivers of balsam adorning the Garden of Eden for the righteous in the World to Come. See, for example, \textit{bTa'an} 25a, \textit{yAZ} 3:1, 42c.

\(^74\) Is 64.3 says of the time of Salvation, "No eye has seen (such things), O God, but you." Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, in \textit{bBer} 34b, interprets one of the miraculous rewards to the righteous in messianic times to be "wine preserved in its (very) grapes from the six days of Creation." In \textit{Akdamut}, the poet modifies this image to wine preserved from the time of creation in vats. (The exegesis of Is 64.3 in \textit{bBer} 34b figures in verses 34–36 above, as well).
44. **Vav/Alef**
And you shall sit in supernal rows,
If you hearken to his words which issue in majesty.\(^75\)

45. **Mem/Tsadii**
Exalted is our God first and last,
He desired and favored us and gave us the Torah.

\(^75\) “. . . His words which issue in majesty” may be a reference to the Ten Commandments, the scriptural reading for the first day of **Shavuot**. The poem’s *be-ha дерта*’ is cognate to the Hebrew *be-ha deber*. This term appears in Ps 29.4, *kol YHVH be-ha deber*, “the voice of the Lord is majesty,” and is interpreted as referring to the Ten Commandments in Mekhila, *Babodecot* 1 (ed. Lauterbach) 2:198.