

## DECEMBER

### *Yigdal*

#### **Rabbi Chava Koster**

##### *Introduction*

Yigdal is the opening word of a piyyut – liturgical poem, based upon the Thirteen Articles of Faith by rabbi Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides). Its original authorship is attributed to Daniel ben Judah, a dayyan in Rome in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Other sources also ascribe it to Immanuel ben Solomon of Rome, the author of the Mahbarot. It is a metrically composed piyyut with a single rhyme throughout. Although other poetical and philosophical renditions of these principles of faith were composed during this same time period, only Yigdal was incorporated into the daily liturgy. In the Ashkenazi tradition, it is usually printed at the start of the daily morning – Shacharit – service, but is recited as in the Sephardic, Italian and Yemienite rituals only at the end of the Erev Shabbat, Friday night Shabbat services and festival evening services. Most versions of the Yigdal consist of 13 lines, one for each creed, the Sephardic version has 14 lines ending with: “These are the 13 principles of the Jewish faith and the tenets of God’s law.

Yigdal by far surpasses Adon Olam in the number of its traditional tunes and the length of the traditions in which it is customary to use.

A Piyyut is most commonly known to be a Jewish liturgical poem usually to sung, chanted or recited during religious services, as a poetic form, piyyutim have been written since temple times, and are either in Hebrew or Aramaic, and follow some poetic scheme, such as an acrostic, following the order of the Hebrew alphabet or spelling out the name of the author..

The earliest piyyutim were from Israel or Syria, both areas where Hebrew was sufficiently cultivated so that it could be managed stylistically and expressively.

Originally the word piyyut was used to designate every type of sacred poetry, but as it

became more sophisticated, the term later on was used to only describe poems with a hymn character.

[Based on Elbogen and Jacobson]

## **Esther Siegel**

### *Psychotherapist*

Yigdal – what does this prayer mean to me. I did some research and learned about Yigdal – that it goes back a long time to Maimonides many centuries ago. Yigdal means to be exalted, by the existence and influence of the Torah and the 13 influences of faith one of which is the coming of the Messiah.

All of this was interesting to me but what was even more significant for me was how the prayer resonated into my memory bank of reviving long lost, and oftentimes mixed feelings of my connections to Judaism. There is irony here – it's been so long since these feelings have emerged. Therefore my Yigdal assignment has been meaningful to me based on my early experiences with Judaism. I'll briefly describe why and I promise to be brief. And here is where the ironic factor echoes with more vibrancy and Yigdal has spoken to me loud and clear in a significant language.

I grew up in an ultra orthodox home on the lower east side of Manhattan. My zayde spent his days in shul studying Talmud and whatever else he did there. My Bobbi took care of everything including the small grocery store they owned. Withal, she still told me (in Yiddish – my grandparents and parents did not speak English nor did I until I started school) how lucky she was to have such a holy man as a husband and she wished the same good fortune for me – “you should be so lucky Esterrel” she would say lovingly.

We went to shul all the time or so it seemed to me. The women sat upstairs behind a small curtain; the men sat downstairs. I would at times ask my mother – “why do we have to sit up here – not down there?” and she would say “don't ask me these things – it is what it is”. As I think of it now I remember that it bothered me – even as a young girl. I went to Hebrew classes every day after school. Boys and girls were in

separate classes. Then the teen years happened and my rebellion against the restrictive regimen emerged.

I wanted nothing more to do with going to shul or the many requirements for being a good Jewish girl. And so it went. I lost my connection to Judaism so much so that later in life, as a family we joined Ethical Culture. But with the passage of time I started to miss not going to High Holy days services. I knew I had to come back to some parts of the connection but definitely not with what had been. And then about fifteen years ago I found the Village Temple –a new and welcoming door was opened for me and so here we are – we left the Greenwich Village neighborhood a few years ago but stayed with the Temple.

Now to return to the Yigdal prayer and how it relates to all I've talked about. It made me realize how important Judaism is to me. It brought me back to such a long time ago. In reflecting upon my rejection of what was and recognition of what is indeed possible was very significant for me. As I listened to the prayer and read the words, the whole idea of standing here and speaking to a Congregation, my Zayde popped into my thoughts as if by rote. But it was no longer with resentment but good will and kind thoughts. Isn't that what prayers ought to do.

Well Yigdal worked for me!. So thank you for the assignment.