Akdamut

Recited on the first day of Shavuot, immediately after the introductory blessing over the first aliyah, before the first aliyah’s Torah reading is read:

Allow me to begin saying some words; I ask permission to speak and be heard. Apprehensive and in awe I’ll take note of two or three of the creator’s designs, who is with us at all times, whose might is everlasting and cannot be described—even were the heavens parchment and all the plants pens, the ocean’s waters gathered up as ink, and everyone on earth authors and scribes. Glorious is the master of heaven and the sovereign of the earth who rules it alone, having created this world, without effort, never tiring, with only the whoosh of a breath-like hei, accomplishing it all in six days, and in glory ascending the fiery throne.

Many piyyutim were written in Aramaic to introduce the Torah reading. The custom probably originated in those communities that read the Torah in Hebrew while a translator spoke in Aramaic, the common language of the Western Middle East. This particular piyyut became a favorite of European congregations and is often recited with a distinct tune. Jeffrey Hoffman argues that an important reason for its prominence is due to legends about its supposed authorship by a Jewish martyr. The poem’s end, with its promise of the reward of the righteous, fits this legendary authorship. Thus the Torah reading is preceded by an encomium to Israel for their devotion to God and a description of the reward to the righteous.

The poem is arranged with the initial letters of each line forming a double alphabetical acrostic, followed by an acrostic spelling out the author’s name with a concluding blessing of the author: Meir bar Rabbi yitzhak, yigdal ba-torah u-v’masim tovim, amen v’hazak ve-ematz, “Meir bar Rabbi Isaac, may he grow in Torah and good deeds, amen, may he be strengthened.” There is a consistent rhyme throughout: each line concludes with a word ending in tav-alef (the first and final letters of the alphabet), pronounced as ta. There is also a consistent meter. Akdamut is sung to a melody that is thought to be at least a thousand years old. The explanatory comments that follow are primarily based on the scholarly work of Jonah Frankel in Mahzor Shavuot. We have divided the poem into sections so that congregations can choose to recite only some parts of the piyyut.

At all times

With a breath-like "hei"

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Siddur Lev Shalem for Shabbat and Festivals
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Newly Born

According to an opinion in the Babylonian Talmud, angels are created anew each day, recite their praise of God, and then disappear (Hagigah 14a).

Threefold Holy Song

The words of the Kedushah—“Holy, holy, holy is Adonai Tz’va∙ot, the whole world is filled with God’s glory”—is recited by the angels closest to the divine throne each morning.

The Cherubim

This stanza is based on Ezekiel’s vision of the heavens: “When they moved, I could hear the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, or the sound of the Almighty, a tumult like the din of an army” (1:24). After the description of the angelic beings, Ezekiel sees God enthroned: “like the appearance of the bow that shines in the clouds on a day of rain, such was the appearance of the surrounding radiance” (1:28). This first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel is read as the haftarah on the first day of Shavuot.

The Heavenly Army

The poet now returns to the army of angels mentioned at the beginning of this section. They are the lowest level of angels and offer their praise last.
The sanctification is so ordered, that should an angel miss its singular time, it ceases to exist, never completing the task assigned.

But God’s congregation is held dear, for twice each day they offer praise when light dawns and when the sun goes away.

They are distinguished as God’s portion, to do God’s will, and describe God’s wonders with words they pray.

God wants and desires the effort expended; their prayers are accepted, their petition effected, forming a crown, as promised, for the giver of life to the world, near the precious tefillin, worn by their creator, and which—with true judgment and wisdom—is inscribed with the greatness of Israel who affirm God as one.

The Babylonian Talmud talks of angels having different times to say the Kedushah—some say it once a week, some once in seven years—but if they miss their appointed time, their purpose is ended.

Thus, the angel wrestling with Jacob insisted that he be let go, for his time to praise God had arrived.

While some angels may recite the Kedushah only once in their lifetime, Israel is distinguished in that it praises God twice each day, reciting the Sh’ma morning and evening. (Hullin 91b; Jeffrey Hoffman)

A CROWN, AS PROMISED עֲתָא בּוֹטַפְלָא קְטִירָא)

According to a midrash in the Babylonian Talmud, an angel takes the prayers of the people Israel and tie them together as a crown on God’s head (Hagigah 13b).

In the Babylonian Talmud (Berakhot 6a), Rabbi Hyya bar Abin describes the tefillin worn by God as containing the verse, “Who is like you among the nations, O Israel!” (1 Chronicles 17:21).

TO THE KINGDOMS WHO RULE ON EARTH יְבֵאלָלֵי הקָנִיִּים תבּוֹטַפְלָא)

This entire section is a poetic rendition of the description by Rabbi Akiva of the nations of the world coming to Israel and asking how they might be rewarded like Israel (Mekhilta Shirata 3).

YOU DIE IN THE LION’S DEN פָּרָה וּמִתְכַּנּשִין כּחֵזוּ אִדְוָתָא

Daniel was thrown into the lion’s den but was saved. Subsequent Jewish generations suffered actual martyrdom, but Daniel—living in exile and persecuted as a Jew, and willing to suffer the consequences—was a model for those who came after.
We would be honored and rewarded if you would join with us; we will fulfill your desires wherever you dwell."

Her wise response describes the end of days: “Would that you knew God in a genuine way! What is the worth of your greatness today, compared to what awaits me when God’s deliverance comes? On me and mine God’s light will shine, but you shall be covered with shame, as God’s glory is revealed in all its power and pride, for then God will repay haters and foes and vindicate this nation beloved as a bride.”

These pure vessels shall celebrate with joy, when ingathered exiles enter Jerusalem’s gates, where glory shall cover them day and night, a canopy for a wedding where blessings are sung. Radiant clouds of glory shall shine on each one according to the deeds that they have done.

On couches of pure gold, in seven rows, the righteous, seated, face the Master of deeds. Their appearance is that of satisfied delight, shining like the splendid heaven and stars burning bright, reflecting a beauty that lips can’t express, nor was ever heard or seen in a prophet’s dream.

The nations ask the Jewish people to leave their Judaism behind. Her wise response describes the end of days: "Would that you knew God in a genuine way! What is the worth of your greatness today, compared to what awaits me when God’s deliverance comes? On me and mine God’s light will shine, but you shall be covered with shame, as God’s glory is revealed in all its power and pride, for then God will repay haters and foes and vindicate this nation beloved as a bride.”

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In the Garden of Eden, which no eye has yet seen, they circle in dance with the Shekhinah herself.

Filled with awe, they point to the Divine, “In captivity, we lived with hope and great faith in the one who forever leads us as youths in our prime to the portion prepared for us from the beginning of time.”

Leviathan and the bull on the mountain high wrestle one another, in battle and war:

Behemoth, the bull goring deeply with great horns, Leviathan with mighty fins slicing the beast.

Their creator approaches them with sword unsheathed, serving them up to the righteous as a delicious feast.

The virtuous are seated at tables made of rubies and jewels, with floats of fragrant flowers flowing between them, and from cups overflowing they drink with satisfaction and elation the juice of the vines preserved since the time of creation.

O you upright, as the praise in this song has just expressed, your place is assured in this great congregation. To be seated in these rows on high, you shall be found worthy, for you obeyed the divine words uttered in glory.

Exalted is our God from first to last, who desired us, and gave us the Torah to hold fast.

Leviathan and the Bull

Leviathan is mentioned in various places in the Bible, including the conclusion of the Book of Job (40:19, 25), as a sea monster. The Book of Job also describes Behemoth, assumed to be a bull, who is “the first in creation,” and who is so strong that “only His Maker can draw the sword against him.” Jewish legend envisioned both creatures being slaughtered at the end of days, becoming the fish and meat delicacies to be consumed by the righteous.

To the Upright as a Delicious Feast

Earlier, the poet had described an other-worldly realm populated by angels; here, the promised reward in the world that is coming is populated by the righteous. There, the poem describes the angels serving God; here, the faithful are served a meal by God. Having confronted the challenge of the other nations and prevailed, the faithful now rise higher and closer to God than even the angels.

O you Upright. This section of the poem spirals back to its beginning. The poet opened with an address to the congregation and now concludes addressing them with words of comfort. The last line speaks of Torah, since the poem serves as an introduction to the reading of the Torah.
The Scroll of Ruth

CHAPTER I

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land; and a man of Bethlehem in Judah, with his wife and two sons, went to reside in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelekh, his wife's name was Naomi, and his two sons were named Mahlon and Chilion—Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. They came to the country of Moab and remained there. Elimelekh, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth, and they lived there about ten years. Then those two—Mahlon and Chilion—also died; so the woman was left without her two sons and without her husband.

She started out with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab; for in the country of Moab she had heard that ADONAI had taken note of the people and given them food. Accompanied by her two daughters-in-law, she left the place where she had been living; and they set out on the road back to the land of Judah.

But Naomi said to her daughters-in-law, “Turn back, each of you to her mother's house. May ADONAI grant that each of you find security in the house of a husband!” And she kissed them farewell. They broke into weeping, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and wept aloud. But Naomi replied, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods. Go follow your sister-in-law.”

So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and her gods. Go follow your sister-in-law.”

But Ruth replied, “Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may ADONAI do to me if anything but death parts me from you.” When [Naomi] saw how determined she was to go with her, she ceased to argue with her; and the two went on until they reached Bethlehem.

The Scroll of Ruth

The Scroll of Ruth. Each of the festivals is distinguished by the reading of one of the megalot, one of the five scrolls. There are many reasons for the association of the Scroll of Ruth with the Festival of Shavuot. Shavuot celebrates the receiving of the Torah at Sinai, and in Jewish tradition Ruth is considered to be the first convert. We, in celebrating the Torah, place ourselves in Ruth's shoes: on this day of Shavuot, it is as if we receive the Torah anew. The book is permeated with acts of kindness and love, beginning with Ruth's relationship with her mother-in-law and continuing with Boaz and Ruth and the kindness they show each other and the love they consummate. In this understanding, the Torah is ultimately about teaching us how to love both God and our fellow human beings. Further, the return to the Land of Israel takes place at the time of the harvest—and Shavuot is a harvest festival. The translation is taken from the Jewish Publication Society's Tanakh, as are the notes marked "JPS" (with slight adaptations to match the style of this volume).
When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole city buzzed with excitement over them. The women said, “Can this be Naomi?” Do not call me Naomi,” she replied. “Call me Mara, for Shaddai has made my lot very bitter. I went away full, and ADONAI has brought me back empty. How can you call me Naomi, when ADONAI has dealt harshly with me, when Shaddai has brought misfortune upon me!”

Thus Naomi returned from the country of Moab; she returned with her daughter-in-law Ruth the Moabite. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

CHAPTER 2

Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband’s side, a man of substance, of the family of Elimelekh, whose name was Boaz. Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “I would like to go to the fields and glean among the ears of grain, behind the reapers; and, as luck would have it, it was the piece of land belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelekh. Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “You are most kind, my lord, to comfort me and to speak gently to your maidservant—though I am not so much as one of your maidservants.”

She prostrated herself with her face to the ground, and said to him, “Why are you so kind as to single me out, when I am a foreigner?”

Boaz said in reply, “I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before. May ADONAI reward your deeds. May you have a full recompense from ADONAI, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge!”

She answered, “You are most kind, my lord, to comfort me and to speak gently to your maidservant—though I am not so much as one of your maidservants.”

Boaz said to Ruth, “Listen to me, daughter. Don’t go to glean in another field. Don’t go elsewhere, but stay here close to my girls. Keep your eyes on the field they are reaping, and follow them. I have ordered the men not to molest you. And when you are thirsty, go to the jars and drink some of [the water] that the men have drawn.”

She has been on her feet from the country of Moab. She said, ‘Please let me glean in your field, behind your reapers. You have been kind to your servants up to this point, you have looked after them while they glean, and I am not so much as one of your servants.’

Boaz said in reply, “I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before. May ADONAI reward your deeds. May you have a full recompense from ADONAI, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge!”

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She answered, “You are most kind, my lord, to comfort me and to speak gently to your maidservant—though I am not so much as one of your maidservants.”
At mealtime, Boaz said to her, “Come over here and partake of the meal, and dip your morsel in the vinegar.” So she sat down beside the reapers. He handed her roasted grain, and she ate her fill and had some left over. When she got up again to glean, Boaz gave orders to his workers, “You are not only to let her glean among the sheaves, without interference, but you must also pull some stalks out of the heaps and leave them for her to glean, and not scold her.”

She gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned—it was about an ephah of barley—and carried it back with her to the threshing floor. Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, “Daughter, I must seek a home for you, where you may be happy. Now there is our kinsman Boaz, whose girls were finished. Then she stayed at home with her mother-in-law. Naomi explained to her daughter-in-law, “the man is related to us; he is one of Adonai, who has not failed in kindness to the living or to the dead! For,”

"Who are you?” he asked. And she replied, “I am your handmaid Ruth. Spread your robe over your handmaid, for you are a redeeming kinsman.”

CHAPTER 3
Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, “Daughter, I must seek a home for you, where you may be happy. Now there is our kinsman Boaz, whose girls you were close to. He will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor tonight. So bathe, anoint yourself, dress up, and go down to the threshing floor. But do not disclose yourself to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he lies down, and go over and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what you are to do.”

She replied, “I will do everything you tell me.” She went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. Boaz ate and drank, in a cheerful mood went to lie down beside the grainpile. Then she went over stealthily and uncovered his feet and lay down. In the middle of the night, the man gave a start and pulled back—there was a woman lying at his feet!

"Who are you?” he asked. And she replied, “I am your handmaid Ruth. Spread your robe over your handmaid, for you are a redeeming kinsman.”
He exclaimed, "Be blessed of Adonai, daughter! Your latest deed of loyalty is greater than the first, in that you have not turned to younger men, whether poor or rich. And now, daughter, have no fear. I will do on your behalf whatever you ask, for all the elders of my town know what a fine woman you are. But while it is true that I am a redeeming kinsman, there is another redeemer closer than I. Stay for the night. Then in the morning, if he will act as a redeemer, good! let him redeem. But if he does not want to redeem, you acquire the property from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabite, you must also acquire the wife of the deceased, so as to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate." The redeemer replied, "Then I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own estate. You take over my right of redemption, for I am unable to exercise it."

Now this was formerly done in Israel in cases of redemption or exchange: to validate any transaction, one man would take off his sandal and hand it to the other. Such was the practice in Israel. So when the redeemer said to Boaz, "Acquire for yourself," he drew off his sandal.

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**Chapter 4**

Meanwhile, Boaz had gone to the gate and sat down there. And now the redeemer whom Boaz had mentioned passed by. He called, "Come over and sit down here, So-and-so!" And he came over and sat down.

Then [Boaz] took ten elders of the town and said, "Be seated here!" and they sat down. He said to the redeemer, "Naomi, now returned from the country of Moab, must sell the pieces of land which belonged to our kinsman Elimelek. I thought I should disclose the matter to you and say: Acquire it in the presence of those seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you are willing to redeem it, redeem! But if you will not redeem, tell me, that I may know. For there is no one to redeem but you, and I come after you." "I am willing to redeem it," he replied. Boaz continued, "When you acquire the property from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabite, you must also acquire the wife of the deceased, so as to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate." The redeemer replied, "Then I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own estate. You take over my right of redemption, for I am unable to exercise it."

Now this was formerly done in Israel in cases of redemption or exchange: to validate any transaction, one man would take off his sandal and hand it to the other. Such was the practice in Israel. So when the redeemer said to Boaz, "Acquire for yourself," he drew off his sandal.
And Boaz said to the elders and to the rest of the people, “You are witnesses today that I am acquiring from Naomi all that belonged to Elimelekh and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. I am also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, as my wife, so as to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate, that the name of the deceased may not disappear from among his kinsmen and from the gate of his home town. You are witnesses today.”

All the people at the gate and the elders answered, “We are. May ADONAI make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the house of Israel! Prosper in Ephrathah and perpetuate your name in Bethlehem! And may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah—through the offspring that ADONAI will give you by this young woman.” So Boaz married Ruth; she became his wife, and he cohabited with her. ADONAI let her conceive, and she bore a son.

And the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be ADONAI, who has not withheld a redeemer from you today! May his name be perpetuated in Israel! He will renew your life and sustain your old age; for he is born of your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons.”

Naomi took the child and held it to her bosom. She became its foster mother, and the women neighbors gave him a name, saying “A son is born to Naomi!” They named him Obed; he was the father of Jesse, father of David.

This is the line of Perez: Perez begot Hezron, Hezron begot Ram, Ram begot Amminadav, Amminadav begot Nahshon, Nahshon begot Salmon, Salmon begot Boaz, Boaz begot Oved, Oved begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David.

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