**What Is a *Shir Sheva@h* (“Praise-Poem”)?**

**The Character of the Genre in Light of its Categorization**

**by a Hebrew Poet from North Africa—A Case Study**

In scholarly editions of collections of Hebrew poetry from North Africa, it is common to classify the poems according to their content, the circumstances under which they were written, and their liturgical setting. This kind of classification generally matches the internal classification formulated by the poets themselves, but not always. It is principally in the area of personal poetry that the scholarly classification and that of the poet do not correspond. The question of characterization and classification of personal poetry has already arisen in the study of Hebrew poetry from Spain, primarily because that poetry deviates from the accepted dichotomy between sacred and secular poetry,[[1]](#footnote-1) and, as Albaz and Hazan conclude, a personal poem is a poem directly connected to the spiritual world of the poet and to his personal experiences. These experiences construct it in such a way that it stands on its own, even when it fits into one of the traditional genres. [[2]](#footnote-2) One of the genres of personal poetry is the *shir ha-sheva@h* or “praise-poem.”

Evidence of the praise-poem can be found already in late Eastern piyyut, and Fleischer proposes—in light of Genizah manuscripts from this era—that praise-poems (also called *tishba@hot*) are introductory piyyutim for various liturgical occasions.[[3]](#footnote-3) This late Eastern poetry, though it reached Spain, did not reside there for long; its borders were breached, and themes from outside halakhah and liturgy made their way into it as well.[[4]](#footnote-4) In this way a new genre of praise-poetry, which was essentially secular, blossomed.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The praise-poems that developed later in North Africa are a metamorphosis of the Sephardic praise-poem—one that began with the incursion of the praise genre “within the walls of the synagogue” (to use Hazan’s expression), where they were sung in praise of one being honored by being called up to the Torah.[[6]](#footnote-6) Two facts arise from this metamorphosis of the praise-poem: with regard to its content it speaks, like the Sephardic praise-poem, in praise of a human being; but with regard to its setting it returns to being an introductory poem for a liturgical occasion.

As Kabbalah gained influence in North Africa, there developed a cult of saints, which served as fertile ground for poetry in praise of *tsadikim* (prominent religious figures, usually rabbis). Even the grave of a *tsadik* acquired holiness by virtue of the holiness of the one buried there, so the places in which prophets, *tana’im* (sages of early rabbinic Judaism), and other *tsadikim* were buried became sanctified for the ages and were established as pilgrimage sites. From this grew the institution of *ziara*, the custom of visiting holy sites. A pilgrimage to the grave of a *tsadik* involved the formulation of special prayers, taking vows, and giving charity.[[7]](#footnote-7) Poetry also plays its part in this religious framework. In these poems one finds the life story of the *tsadik* and tales of his generosity as well as his being there for the needy person who had appealed to him. The models for this ideal righteous person are R. Shim‘on bar Yo@hai[[8]](#footnote-8) and R. Me’ir Ba‘al Ha-nes.[[9]](#footnote-9)

From the headings[[10]](#footnote-10) with which the poets of North Africa labeled their praise-poems, one learns that they include poems of gratitude for recovery from illness, poems in praise of emissaries from the Land of Israel (called *shadarim*, that is, *shlu@he d’rabbanan* or “emissaries of the rabbis”), poems in praise of *tsadikim*, and poems written in praise of specific personalities in the poet’s generation. So we find, for example, with R. David ben @Hassin, who composed a poem in praise of R. Shlomo Shalem,[[11]](#footnote-11) and with R. Shelomo @Haliwa, who composed poems in praise of R. David ben @Hayim Serero and R. Yekuti’el Birdugo.[[12]](#footnote-12) Poems of this kind speak about the virtues and unique qualities of the dedicatee. As was customary, R. Raphael Aharon Monsoñego, too, labeled his poems, identifying their intended use (the circumstances or liturgical occasion) and the poetic genre.[[13]](#footnote-13) Yet, as we shall see, Monsoñego’s classification sharpens our question: What is a praise-poem?

Among the poems of R. Raphael Aharon Monsoñego are 21 classified by him as praise-poems, primarily in the headings that label the poems. With regard to their settings or the circumstances for which they were written, they fall into three groups: (1) poems in praise of God (these are the majority); (2) allegorical poems (on God’s love for the people Israel); and (3) poems in praise of *tsadikim* and other distinguished individuals.

There are 13 poems in the first group: five for festivals (@Hanukkah, Tu Bi-Shvat, Purim, Shavu‘ot, and the Sabbath; these are numbers 1–5 on the list of poems in the appendix); two are prayers for rain (poems 6–7); two are poems of thanks for deliverance from catastrophe (nos. 8–9); three are poems about personal welfare (one for the recovery of his son, one for his own recovery, and one for the cessation of a fast, poems 10–12); and one is for the dedication of a synagogue (poem 13).

In the second group are two poems: an allegorical poem for redemption (poem 14) and a poem for an engagement, an implicit allegory for the beloved Israel (poem 15).

The third group consists of six poems: two for *tsadikim*, R. Shim‘on bar Yo@hai (Rashbi) and R. David ben Baruch (poems 16–17), and four for other honored individuals (poems 18–21).

In the poems praising God and in the allegorical poems, the genre of the poem is noted in the headings; if it were not, their classification as praise-poems would not be self-evident. These poems are indeed labeled as “praise-poem” (*shir sheva@h*), or variants of the name such as: “poems and praise” (*shirot ve-tishba@hot),* “praise and glorification” (*sheva@h u-tehilah*). By contrast, with the poems in praise of individuals, the genre may be noted in the opening line rather than in the heading.

Among the poems in praise of God, poems devoted to festivals that are not sacred days—Hanukkah, Tu Bi-Shvat, and Purim—are prominently represented. To these we may perhaps add the poem in honor of R. Shim‘on bar Yo@hai, since the opening stanza there says, “I shall set forth praise in sacred melody for the holiday (*hilula*) of the Holy King” [*e‘erokh tehilah bi-ne‘ima kedosha yoma de-hilula de-malka kadisha*]. In this stanza the poet notes the occasion—the *Hilula* (that is, the day of *ziara*, of pilgrimage to the tomb of Rashbi). On the one hand, this is a poem in praise of a *tsadik*; on the other hand, it is devoted to a specific occasion, the *Hilula*. This dual nature would seem to classify it also among the poems in praise of special occasions that are not holy days.

Monsoñego wrote many poems for actual Torah festivals, but he classified just one of them as a praise-poem (with the expression *shirot ve*-*tishba@hot*), and that one was for Shavuot. Perhaps the poem for Shavuot earned this special status as a praise-poem on account of Israel’s love for the Torah and the connection between the giving of the Torah and taking the Torah out of the ark during synagogue services; perhaps for the same reason, he gave the same classification to the poem that he composed for the dedication of a synagogue. As for the Sabbath, Monsoñego composed just one poem in its honor, and he classified it as a praise-poem. The poems of supplication for rain, for deliverance from catastrophe, and for personal welfare can be organized as a single unit under the heading “relief and deliverance.”

It seems that the classification of the poems for festivals and those for relief and deliverance together in a single group of poems in praise of God resembles to some extent that used by R. David ben @Hassin, who linked national, historical deliverance to contemporary communal deliverance and personal deliverance, while putting poems for Hanukkah and Purim with poems about personal and communal deliverance together in a section called “Miracles.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

In what follows, we shall examine the design of these praise-poems and discuss the similarities and differences among them. In doing so, we shall also try to situate the poem in praise of R. Shim‘on bar Yo@hai.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**The Design of the Praise-Poem**

In examining the design of the praise-poem, we have focused on three characteristics: (1) the use of poetic epithets (*kinuyim*, which is one of the most prominent hallmarks of Hebrew poetry in North Africa, a usage that falls into the realm of socio-poetics);[[16]](#footnote-16) (2) the use of *calembour* (see below), characteristic of the poetry of R. Raphael Aharon Monsoñego (which, being almost unknown in other contemporary poetic texts, is in the realm of individual stylistics marker); and (3) the presence of “the poet’s ‘I’,” that is, the first-person voice of the poet-narrator (which is a hallmark of the genre of individual poetry).

**I. The Shaping of Praise Directed to the Lord**

As noted, Monsoñigo classified as praise-poems (*shire sheva@h*) thirteen songs that speak in praise of God, offering thanks to Him. .

The Use of *Kinuyim* (Poetic Epithets)[[17]](#footnote-17)

In those poems in which the praise is directed at the Holy One, the use of *kinuyim* for God that are common (being mostly taken from the Bible), even hackneyed, is quite noticeable. Some such *kinuyim* actually became synonymous with God, having essentially turned into divine names, e.g. *@hasin* “Mighty One”; *kadosh* “Holy One”; *ne’eman* “Faithful One” [i.e., to be relied on to rescue someone in trouble]; *el @hai* “The Living God”; *kadosh u-varukh* “Holy and Blessed One” [in the poem for Purim]; *shokhen gevohim* “Dweller on High”; *adon ‘olam* “Lord of the World” [in the poem for Tu Bishvat]; ‘*oteh orah* “Clothed in Light”; *temim de‘im* “Perfect in Knowledge”; *shokhen me‘onah* “Heaven Dweller”; *shokhen erets* “Earth Dweller [in the poem for Shavu‘ot]; *ram ‘al-ramim* “Highest of the High”; *me@hayeh metim* “Reviver of the Dead” [in the prayer for rain]; ‘*oseh nifla’ot* “Wonder Worker”; *rofe’ @holim* “Healer of the Sick” [in the poem for curing illness]. There are likewise many *kinuyim* throughout the poems playing on the word *tsur* “Rock”: *tsurenu* “Our Rock”, *tsur ‘olamim* “Rock of Ages”, *tsur nora’* “Awesome Rock”, *tsur na‘alah* “Exalted Rock”, *tsur koni* “My Rock and Possessor” [in the poem for the Sabbath]. Some such *kinuyim* may consist of an entire string of designations: *ro‘eh yisra*’*el kadosh shokhen ‘al* “Shepherd of Israel, Holy Dweller on High”; *el @hai dar shokhen me‘onah* “Living God, Heaven Dweller”; *@hanun ra@hum shokhen sheme shamayim* “Gracious and Merciful, Dweller in Highest Heaven” [in the poem for Hanukkah].

The Use of *Calembour*

*Calembour*, meaning “pun,” is a “figure of speech which involves a play upon words.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Usually it rests on an acoustic-semantic play of words, that is, a phrase characterized by small phonetic or orthographic changes and semantic changes involving polysemy or homonomy. As with other poetic insertions, it is based on an encounter between two texts, one hidden away in the reader’s or listener’s consciousness and memory, the other present and revealed—that is, the text that is in front of us. In an insertion of the *calembour* type, though, the author assumes that the reader is able to identify the original text even after changes have been introduced, and to enjoy and appreciate the wordplay. In the manuscripts, *calembour* tends to be noted by a symbol like the Arabic *tanwīn*, and in printed editions an apostrophe (*geresh*) or double apostrophe (*gershayim*) appears instead.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The use of *calembour* is very widespread in Monseñego’s writing. In his full *oevre*, about 150 different *calembours* have been found that the author indicated, and over 600 more in his rhymed epistles. However, while the use of *calembour* in artful epistolary writing in North Africa in his time is a recognized phenomenon, its use in poetry is rare, and from this perspective we seem to be witnessing a stylistic feature almost unique to Monseñego.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Examining the poems in which praise is directed toward the Lord, the relative paucity of *calembour* stands out. In all, eight *calembour* allusions have been found. Five of those occur in poems of praise for personal or communal rescue and salvation, such as:

לֹא עָשָׂנוּ כְּגוֹ"יֵ הָאֲרָצוֹת *lo ‘asanu ke-goye ha-’aratsot* (“He has not made us like the [other] nations of the earth”), citing the *Alenu le-shabea@h* liturgy, which borrows a phrase from 2 Chr 32:17 (in a poem for rainfall). Here, the term *goy* serves in its regular biblical sense, “nation” or “ethnic group,” but also hints as the word *geviya*, “corpse,” indicating that He saves us from death.

שֶׁבַ״ח שְׁלָמִים *sheva@h shelamim* – a *calembour* reference to *zeva@h shelamim* (“sacrifice of well-being”) in Lev 3:1-17. Here, the poet tells us that his poem is a praise-offering to the Lord (in a poem for the end of a fast).

The other three instances occur in a poem of praise on the occasion of the dedication of a synagogue, such as:

חִישׁ יִשָּׁמַע קוֹל בֶּשֶׂ״ר בַּמִּדְבָּר *@hish yishama‘ kol beser ba-midbar* plays on *‘od yishama‘ … kol* (Jer 33:10–11), a reference to weddings and joy, and also on *kol kore ba-midbar* (Isa 40:3), and *betser ba-midbar* (Dt 4:43, where Betser is a toponym) (in a poem for a synagogue dedication). In Deuteronomy, Betser is one of the cities of refuge; here *beser* is a term for welcome news (whose more familiar form is *besorah*).

As stated above, aside from these no *calembour* wordplays have been found in praise-poems directed toward the Lord.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The Presence of the First-Person Speaker

The presence of a speaking “I” in the praise poems addressed to God is reserved for the openings or, on occasion, for shaping a framework for a poem by appearing in both the opening and the conclusion. Those statements are most often centered on the semantic field of speech, and at their center stand first-person verbs, as, e.g., אֶפְתַּח פִּי הַיּוֹם בְּשָׂפָה בְּרוּרָה *efta@h pi ha-yom be-safah berurah* (“I open my mouth today with clear speech,” in a poem for Shavu‘ot), אֲנִי הַיּוֹם לָאֵל אַעְתִּיר וְאֶת חַסְדּוֹ אַזְכִּירָה *ani ha-yom la-’el a‘atir ve-’et @hasdo azkirah* (“I appeal today to God and speak of His kindness,” in a poem for Purim), אוֹדֶה אֲזַמֵּר לְשׁוֹכֵן שָׁמַיִם *odeh azamer le-shokhen shamayim* (“I give thanks and sing out to the One who dwells in the heavens,” in a poem about rainfall), אֲרוֹמִמְךָ אוֹדֶה שְׁמֶךָ *aromimkha odeh shemekha* (“I exalt You, I give thanks to Your name,” in a poem about rescue from disaster). Monsoñego provided an enhanced opening for a poem for Tu Bi-Shvat:

אֶפְתַּח פִּי הַיּוֹם בְּשִׁירֵי רְנָנוֹת I will open my mouth today in songs of joy.

*efta@h pi ha-yom be-shire renanot*

[...] [...]

נְהַלֵּל לָאֵל וְשִׁירִים אֲחַבֵּר We will praise God, and I will compose poems.[[22]](#footnote-22)

*nehalel la-’el ve-shirim a@haber*

בְּשִׁיר שֶׁבַח וְתוֹדָה מִלִּין אַכְבִּיר In a poem of praise and thanks I will multiply words.

*be-shir sheva@h ve-todah milin akhbir*

עוֹז עֲצוּמוֹ שֶׁל יוֹם זֶה פִּי יְדַבֵּר

*‘oz ‘atsumo shel yom ze pi yedaber* The great force of this day shall my mouth express.

Only infrequently does the speaker’s first-person voice appear unexpectedly outside the opening and closing lines of a poem. Exceptions to this are the poem Monsoñego composed on being cured of illness when he was still quite young and the poem of supplication he wrote for the conclusion of a six-day fast. In those poems the “I” stands at the center. The practice of asceticism and the memory of his illness apparently aroused in him a sense of insignificance as a human being given over to divine beneficence, and he expressed it there. Here is an example from the praise poem on his own healing:

אֶכְרַע וְאֶקּוֹד לָאָרֶץ I will genuflect and bow to the ground

*ekhra‘ ve-’ekod la-’arets*

וְאֶשְׁפּוֹךְ לְפָנָיו נַפְשִׁיand pour out my heart before Him

*ve-’eshpokh le-fanav nafshi*

[…]

נַעֲוֵיתִי גַּם שַׁחוֹתִי I am bent and bowed.

*na‘aveti gam sha@hoti*

לֹא שָׁקַטְתִּי וְלֹא נָחְתִּי I have not been tranquil or rested.

*lo shakateti ve-lo na@hti*

בּוֹשְׁתִּי מְאֹד וְנִכְלַמְתִּי I am ashamed and mortified.

*boshti me’od ve-nikhlamti*

[…]

צָעַקְתִּי אֵלֶיךָ אָבִי I called out to You, My Father,

*tsa‘akti elekha avi*

הוֹצִיאָה מִמַּסְגֵּר נַפְשִׁי “Free me from prison.”

*hotsi’ah mi-masger nafshi*

In the quotations above we see a transition from speaking about the Lord in the third person to the direct, second-person address that is not unusual in the speech situation of prayer.[[23]](#footnote-25) It is noteworthy that in the praise-poem written on the occasion of his son’s recovery from illness, the presence of the speaker’s first-person voice is almost not at all felt.

It seems, then, that in poems in which praise is directed to the Lord, Monsoñego takes a medial path. The design of the praise is mostly banal and does not reflect the creativity characteristic of the praise-poems dedicated to *tsadikim* or other honored persons.

**II. The Design of Praise in Allegorical Poems**

R. Raphael Aharon Monsoñego wrote two poems based on allegory: יוֹנָה תַמָּה עַד מָה *yonah tamah ‘ad mah* (“How unblemished a dove”), a redemption poem, and רַעְיָה נָאוָה אֲיֻומָּה תְּמִימָה *ra‘yah navah ayumah temimah* (“comely, powerful, pure [female] beloved”), poem for a wedding, and he categorized both as poems of praise.

The Use of *Kinuyim*

The two allegorical poems are built on the concept of the Lord’s love for the people Israel, whether openly (in the redemption poem) or only obliquely (as in the the wedding poem), and in any case, as is accepted in allegorical poems, they are constructed on the use of poetic epithets. The *kinuyim* that stand for the people Israel are taken from the Bible, for the most part, and most are in wide use: יוֹנָה תַמָּה *yonah tamah* (“unblemished dove”), צֹאן *tson* (“flock”), הַבַּת הַיְּקָרָה *ha-bat ha-yekarah* (“dear daughter”), שׁוֹשַׁנַּת הָעֲמָקִים *shoshanat ha-‘amakim* (“lily of the valley”), and תִּרְצָה *tirtsah* (Tirzah, a biblical city referred to as a paragon of beauty in Song of Songs 6:4). The Lord, in turn, is כּוֹנֵס צֹאן לַדִּיר *kones tson la-dir* (“[he who] gathers the flock into the fold” as Israel’s shepherd), the enemy is שׁוֹר נוֹגֵחַ *shor nogea@h* (“goring ox”), and the Temple is בֵּית הָעֲלִיָּה *bet ha-‘aliyah* (“house of ascent”). In the wedding poem, the *kinuyim* are all common ones: the bride is נָאוָה אֲיֻומָּה תְּמִימָה *navah ayumah temimah* (“powerful, pure beauty”), אֲחוֹתִי *a@hoti* (“my sister”), בִּתִּי *biti* (“my daughter”); the Lord is דּוֹדֵךְ *dodekh* (“your beloved”); Jerusalem is עִיר תְּהִלָּה *‘ir tehilah* (“city of praise”), נָוֶה *naveh* (“oasis”), and גַּן בִּיתָן *gan bitan* (“pavilion garden”).

*The Use of Calembour*

In these poems, no uses of *calembour* have been found other than one in the heading of the poem *yonah tamah ‘ad mah*: ועד השלושה ל״ו בא *ve-‘ad ha-sheloshah lo ba* (“he did not attain to the three”), echoing 2 Sam 23:19, where the subject is David’s three warriors, while here the reference is to the third redemption, to the advent of which the poet looks forward in anticipation.[[24]](#footnote-26)

As for the first-person voice, in these two poems it is not present at all. The speaker is to be found, as it were, as a listener or observer.

It seems, then, that these allegorical poems are closer to the poems in which praise is directed to the Lord, and in these as well one cannot point to unique and original characteristics in the shaping of the praise.

**III. The Shaping of Praise of *Tsadikim* and Honored Persons**

While the status of honored persons is tangible and this-worldly (in complete contrast to God), the *tsadikim* are in a liminal status, between heaven and earth. For purposes of identifying and focusing on the characteristics of this group, we will begin with poems in praise of honored individuals.

**III/1. The Shaping of Praise of Honored Persons**

The poems in praise of personages include the poem אַקְרִיב שִׁיר שְׁבָחַי *akriv shir sheva@hay* for the Land of Israel emissary Rabbi Yehuda Ne@hmad of Tiberias (poem 18) [[25]](#footnote-27) and three poems in praise of notables not specified by name: לְאֵל צוּר מִשְׂגַּבִּי אֶעֱרוֹךְ מַהֲלָלִי le’el tsur misgabi e‘erokh mahalali (“To God, my exalted Rock, I offer my praise”), אֶעֱרוֹךְ שִׁיר וְהִלּוּלִים e‘erokh shir ve-hilulim (“I recite song and praises”), and אֲנָא יוֹמָא דְּנָא קָא מְחַוֶּינָא *ana’ yoma’ de-na’ ka me@havena’* (“I indicate this day”) (poems 19–21).

In the heading of the poem in honor of Rabbi Yehuda Ne@hmad, the emissary from Tiberias, we read: יָסַדְתִּי לִכְבוֹד שד״ר הֶחָכָם הַשָּׁלֵם הַכּוֹלֵל כהה״ר יְהוּדָה נֶחְמָד נ״י שֶׁבְּשִׁפְלֵנוּ זָכַר לָנוּ וְחֵן חֵן שָׂם לְעָבְדוֹ וַיַּעַל עוֹלוֹת כַּמִּשְׁבֵּ״חַ *yasadti li-khvod sh.d.r he-@hakham ha-shalem ha-kolel k.h.h.r. Yehuda ne@hmad n.y. shebe-shiflenu zakhar lanu ve-@hen @hen sam le-‘ovdo va-ya‘al ‘olot ka-mishbea@h* (“I have established this in honor of the emissary of the rabbis, the compleat sage, the honorable great Rabbi Yehuda Ne@hmad, may his light shine, who took note of us in our degradation, to serve him with praises and offer up accolades.” The last phrase plays on וַיַּעַל עֹלֹת בַּמִּזְבֵּחַ *va-ya‘al ‘olot ba-mizbea@h* (“he offered burnt offerings on the altar”) in Gn 8:20. The reworked line indicates that the poem is a gift of praise to the emissary.

Among the other three poems, one individual who is praised is called רַב עָצוּם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל גָּדוֹל *rav ve-‘atsum be-yisra’el gadol* (“great and magnificent [rabbi] among [the people] Israel,” in poem 21) and two others are named as רַב אַחַאי *Rav A@hay* and רַב רְחוּמַאי *Rav Re@huamay* (“Rabbi Brother” and “Rabbi Beloved,” poems 19–20).[[26]](#footnote-28) A clue to the identity of one of the objects of praise who is not identified may possibly be found in the poemלָאֵל צוּר מִשְׂגַּבִּי אֶעֱרוֹך מַהֲלָלַי *la-’el tsur misgabi e‘erokh mahalalay* (poem 18). We suggest that this poem is about R. Yehuda Elbaz of Sefrou, who was Monsoñego’s good friend and was in close contact with him. That contact was maintained over years through a continuous, extended correspondence about matters of current interest, and it finds expression in rhymed epistles as well, which he dedicated to his friend on special occasions. In the poem under consideration here, Monsoñego uses the repeating word כְּרֵיע *ke-rea‘* (“as/like a friend”) at the head of each stanza. He addresses the object of his praise with the words חֶמְדַּת לִבִּי, כְּרֵיעַ כְּאָח לִי *@hemdat libi,* *ke-rea‘ ke-’a@h li* and later adds כְּרֵיעַ רִיבּוּי אַחַר רִיבּוּי / אֵשׁ אַהֲבָתוֹ תִּבְעַר וְאֵין לָהּ שׁוּם כִּיבּוּי *ke-rea‘ ribuy a@har ribuy / esh ahavato tiv‘ar ve-’en lah shum kibuy* (“like a friend, multiplied and multiplied again~~[[27]](#footnote-29)~~ / the fire of his love burns and cannot be extinguished”). He also cleverly refers to the person as אַ״חְאָב, אַ״חַדְבּוֹ״י *a@h’av*, *a@hadboy*, names borrowed from the biblical King Ahab, whose name means “father-brother,” and the fourth-generation Babylonian amora A@hadboy. All these expressions testify to an unusual closeness to the person whom the poem comes to praise.

The Use of *Kinuyim*

The epithets employed for honored persons are mostly from the earthly, human realm. In a poem written in honor of emissary R. Yehuda Ne@hmad, the *kinuyim* focus on the subject’s excellent qualities and his role. He is outstanding in integrity, and even though he is a leader, רֹאשׁ מִבְחַר קְהִלָּה *rosh miv@har kehillah* (“head of the community’s select”), he remains humble and modest, blushing in embarrassment: עָנָיו סַבְלָן שַׁתְקָן / פָּנָיו מְסַמְּקָן / מְרַמְּצָן וּבָהֲקָן *‘anav savlan shatkan / panav mesamekan / merametsan u-vahakan* (“modest, patient, laconic, / his face is [that of] one who blushes, / glows, and glistens”). His face, like the stones in the biblical Breastplate of Judgment (Ex 28:15–30), is shiny and bright.

In the poem in honor of an unnamed *rav ve-‘atsum be-yisra’el gadol*, earthly epithets are employed that emphasize the dedicatee’s elevated rabbinic status. The *kinuyim* are in part prosaic and common ones that glorify his exalted qualities and his activity, referring obliquely to his status as a rabbi: רַב פְּעָלִים *rav pe‘alim* (“who does many things”), רַב טוּב *rav tuv* (“[who does] much good,”), and רַב חֶסֶד *rav @hesed* (“[who performs] many [acts of] kindness”), זֶרַע רַב *zera‘ rav* (“offspring of rabbis”). Some of the *kinuyim* use metaphor to speak about the dedicatee’s rabbinic role and his great scholarship, such as צִי אַדִּיר *tsi adir* (“mighty fleet”), נֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל *ner yisra’el* (“lamp of Israel”), מְאוֹר גּוֹלָה *me’or golah* (“light of [the] Exile”), and עִיר וְקַדִּישׁ *‘ir ve-kadish* (“angelic and holy being”). Yet others praise him using wordplays based on historical names and details, such as אֶחָד מִן הָרָמָתַיִ״ם *e@had min ha-ramatayim* (“one from Ramataim,” which is the home of Elkana, father of the biblical Samuel [1 Sm 1:1], the place name, meaning “dual heights,” hinting at the subject’s status among the rabbinic elite), זֶרַע רַב מִשְׁפַּחַת הַדָּנִ״י *zera‘ rav mishpa@hat ha-dani* (“great seed of the family of Dan,” referring to the origins Mano@h, father of Samson, mentioning a tribe whose eponymous progenitor’s name means “one who judges,” hinting at the dedicatee’s lineage of distinguished rabbinic judges), עֲדִינוֹ הָעֶצְנִי יוֹשֵׁב שֶׁבֶת תַּחְכְּמוֹנִי *‘adino ha-‘etsni yoshev shevet ta@hkemoni* (“Adino the Eznite, who dwells among the tribe of the Tahchemonites”). Adino the Eznitewas among King David’s warriors, identified as a Tahchemonite (2 Sm 23:8), a term from the root חכ״ם @h-k-m (“wise,” “wisdom”), which our author uses to praise the wisdom of the poem’s dedicatee.

One of the two poems dedicated to *Rav a@hay ve-rav re@huamay* is in Aramaic (poem 19). Composing in Aramaic is a testament to the dedicatee’s high rabbinic status.[[28]](#footnote-30) The *kinuyim* applied to him also focus on his erudition and his rabbinic role. The dedicatee is called אוֹרְיָה בַּר אוֹרְיָה *oreyah bar oreyah* (“sage, son of a sage”), בַּר אֲבָהָן *bar abahan* (“son of the Patriarchs”), בַּר אוֹרְיָין *bar oreyan* (“son of sages”), מָארֵי אוּלְפָנָא *mare ulpana* (master of the yeshiva), רַב חַכִּימָא דִּיהוּדָאֵי *rav @hakima di-huda’e* (wise rabbi of the Jews), רַעְיָיא מְהֵמְנָא *ra’aya mehemana* (“faithful shepherd”), מָארֵי מַתְנִיתָא *mare matnita* (“master of the Mishnah”).

In contrast to those, the *kinuyim* found in the poem that we think is dedicated to R. Yehuda Elbaz feature some that ascribe a supernal status to the dedicatee alongside others that express personal closeness. The *kinuyim* of exalted status are based on great natural phenomena or hint at unusual sanctity*,* such asרוּחַ מְצוּיָ״ה *rua@h metsuyah* (“mild breeze”), hinting at his pleasant demeanor); רוּחַ קָדִי״ם עַזָּה *rua@h kadim ‘azah* (“strong east wind”) like the one that split the sea before the Israelites (Ex 14:21), a nod to his sharp mind and ability to issue sharply defined rulings in the spirit (*rua@h*) of Babylonian rabbis; אוֹר שׁוֹאֵף זוֹרֵעַ *or sho’ef zorea‘* (“blowing, sowing light”), indicating the brilliance of his enlightening rulings; and דֶּשֶׁ״ן הַמִּשְׁבֵּ״חַ *deshen ha-mishbea@h* (“the ashes of the altar” [cf. Lv 6:3]), conveying the idea that his teachings are derived directly from the holiest place. The *kinuyim* that express a close personal connection are built on the names of biblical and talmudic characters, playing off their literal meanings: צָפְנַת פַּעְנֵחַ *tsafenat pa‘nea@h* (the biblical Joseph’s Egyptian name, taken by Jewish tradition to mean “uncovers the hidden”) and מַצְפּוּנִים מְגַלֶּה *matspunim megaleh* (“reveals hidden things”) praise the dedicatee for his Joseph-like quality of uncovering what has been kept secret. To show particular closeness, the poem draws on the literal meanings of the names אַ״חְאָב *a@h’av* andאַ״חַדְבּוֹ״י *a@hadboy*, which indicate a strong, almost fraternal connection between the author and his subject. He also employs the epithets עֶזְרִי וּמְפַלְטִי *‘ezri u-mfaleti* (“my help and my refuge,” terms usually employed as epithets for the Lord; see, e.g., Ps 121:1-3 ,2 Sm 22:3, Ps 18:3) and חֶמְדַּת לִבִּי *@hemdat libi* (“my heart’s favored one”), in which the intimacy of the relationship is underscored by the use of the first-person singular possessive adjective suffix. This collection of *kinuyim* points both to great admiration for the dedicatee and a sense of affection closeness to him.

*Use of Calembour*

Unlike the poems in which praise is directed to the Lord, the poems in praise of individuals are replete with *calembour* wordplays.[[29]](#footnote-31) In a poem honoring the emissary Yehuda Ne@hmad (poem 18), the poet employs every part of speech in praising his subject: לוֹ אֲהַלְלָה בְּשֵׁ״ם פּוֹעַ״ל מִלָּ״ה *lo ahalelah be-shem po‘al milah* (“I will praise him with noun, verb, [and] word”)—that is, full-throated praise in every manner of expression. The poet also cleverly addresses his subject’s character and erudition. His integrity is like סֵדֶר טָהֳרוֹת *seder tahorot* (the section of the Mishnah known as “Ritual Purities”). His sharp-wittedness in Torah learning is כְּחַרְבָּ״א שִׁנְנָ״א *ke-@harba shinena* (“like a sharp sword,” a term that recurs in the Zohar). His pleasant manner of speech is אֶרֶ״שׁ עֲרֵבָה *eresh ‘arevah* (“pleasant expression”), a play on אֶרֶץ עֲרָבָה *erets ‘areva* (“a land of deserts,” Jer 2:6). He is a person whose reputation precedes him like a שׁוֹפַ״ר הוֹלֵ״ךְ *shofar holekh* (literally “a walking *shofar*,” the name of one of the biblical cantillation marks in the Sephardic tradition). In the poem for a רַב עָצוּם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל גָּדוֹל *rav ‘atsum be-Yisra’el* gadol (poem 21), the calembour wordplays are reserved primarily for the subject’s outstanding stature in Torah. Some are cited above as *kinuyim*; here we will list some others:

* אִישׁ הַבֵּינַיִ״ם *ish ha-benayim* (“champion warrior” in 1 Sm 17:4), literally “a man of the space between”—praise for the subject as someone of proper character who takes the straight path, which Maimonides teaches is one of moderation (see Laws of Moral Dispositions and Ethical Content [*De‘ot*] 1:4 in his *Mishneh Torah*). The dedicatee is praised as one whose rulings locate a path of compromise.
* מִשְׁבַּ״ח הָעוֹלָ״ה *mishba@h ha-‘olah* (“praise of the ‘rising offering’”), a play on מִזְבַּח הָעוֹלָה *mizba@h ha-‘olah* (“the altar of the burnt [literally, ‘rising’] offering”). The author praises his subject as the finest among the rabbinic elite, the *bene ha-‘aliyah*.
* מִשְׁכַּן שִׁל״וֹ *mishkan shilo*, “the Tabernacle at Shiloh” with orthography (cf. Ps 78:60) that allows it to be read as “his Tabernacle.”—The dedicatee is depicted as one of the basic institutions of his generation.
* עִיר וְקַדִּישׁ [...] עִי״ר וָאֵם *‘ir ve-kadish* […] *‘ir va-’em* (“angelic and holy being… mother city”), borrowing from Dan 4:10 and 2 Sam 20:19. Our author portrays the dedicatee as angelic and awake (*‘er*) to the world.

The *calembour* lines also mention the exalted qualities of humility and integrity:

* מִשְׂרַ״ת עֲנָוִי״ם עַל שִׁכְמוֹ *misrat ‘anavim ‘al shikhmo* (“the office of the humble is on his shoulder”), a play on מִשְׁרַת עֲנָבִים *mishrat ‘anavim* (“wine vinegar,” Nm 6:3) praising the dedicatee for bearing his high office with humility.
* יָדָיו כְּאַחַת זוֹכוֹ״ת לוֹ *yadav ke-’a@hat zokhot lo* (“his hands, as one, credit him,” cf. mGit 6.2). In the Mishnah the verb, from the root זכ״י, means “create value/credit,” but our author is playing with the near-cognate root זכ״כ, meaning “pure, unadulterated.”

He too is said by the poet to be praised בְּשֵׁ״ם פּוֹעַ״ל מִלָּ״ה *be-shem po‘al milah* (“with noun, verb, [and] word”). In a poem dedicated to a close friend (poem 20, which we believe to be for R. Yehuda Elbaz), the poet employs a great deal of wordplay, constructing complex daisy-chains of *calembours*. He strings the calembours throughout the entire poem, embedding them in every stanza, beginning with a stanza built entirely of *calembour* phrases:

###### כְּרֵיעַ אֶל רוּ״חַ מְצוּיָ״ה Like a friend to a mild wind,

*ke-rea‘ el rua@h metsuyah*

###### אֲשַלֵּ״ם בְּמֵיטַב אֶרֶ״שׂ מִן עֲלִיָ״ה I will pay with the finest language from above

*ashalem be-metav eres min ‘aliyah*

###### אַ״חְאָ״ב שָׁקוּל הָיָה / עֶזְרִי וּמְפַלְטִי לִי [Like] a brother-father was his value / My help

a@*h’av shakul hayah / ‘ezri u-mfalti li* and my refuge

The verb אֲשַלֵּ״ם *ashalem* is reminiscent of the first category of זבח השלמים *zeva@h ha-shelamim*, the well-being offering in the Torah (Lv 7:11), one type of which was specifically a thanksgiving offering (Lv 7:12–15). The phrase בְּמֵיטַב אֶרֶ״שׂ *be-metav eres* (“with the best words”) is a play on the words בְּמֵיטַב הָאָרֶץ *be-metav ha-’arets* (“in the best part of the land,” Gn 47:6), with the reworked phrase referring to prayer and pleasant speech. The prepositional phrase מִן הָעֲלִיָּ"ה *min ha-‘aliyah* (“from the best,” bBK 42b); combined with the previous phrase, the intent is: “the finest of the fine.” Taken altogether, the line is reminiscent of the statement in Ex 22:4: מֵיטַב שָׂדֵהוּ וּמֵיטַב כַּרְמוֹ יְשַׁלֵּם *metav sadehu u-metav karmo yeshalem* (“the best of his field and the best of his vineyard”).

In the Aramaic poem (poem 19), dedicated to an anonymous individual, we find the *calembour* reference שֵׂיבָ״ה מִכְּשׁוּרָ״א *sevah mi-keshura*. The source for this *calembour* is in a talmudic story about Rav Huna (bSan 7b), who used to gather ten sages in order to deliberate with them about various issues, in order, as he put it, that “each of them might carry a chip (ֹשיבא) from the log (מִכְּשׁוּרָא)”—that is, responsibility for the decision would be shared. In the poem, the poet blesses the dedicatee with a wish that he live into old age (שֵׂיבָה *sevah*,which brings with it stature and honor) and enjoy the approbation of the line (ֹשוּרָה shura) of sages who sit in judgment.

The lavish use of *kinuyim* in these praise-poems and, even more so, the use of *calembour*, serve to underscore the message, uplifting the text and, simultaneously, creating a celebratory atmosphere.[[30]](#footnote-33) It appears that *calembour* allusion serves to glorify, exalt, and praise the dedicatees in their presence, bringing satisfaction to them and to those around them.

**The Presence of the First-Person Speaker**

The presence of the first-person speaker in this group of poems varies among the works. In the anonymously-addressed Aramaic poem, the “I” who speaks is present in almost every stanza of the poem (six out of eight), from the opening to the conclusion, and he speaks in the first person: “I bow,” “I speak his praises,” “my soul has decided… my hands are spread [in prayer],” “I thankfully acknowledge and say,” “for you I pray,” “I am prayerful.” He gives voice to his feelings toward the dedicatee and offers a personal prayer for him, in that way expressing closeness to that person.

Significant presence of the speaker also recurs over and over in the poem we think is dedicated to R. Yehuda Elbaz (where it occurs in four of the poem’s eight stanzas), such as: יוֹם אַקְרִיב תְּשׁוּרָה [...] אֲנִי תְּפִלָּתִי בְּשֶׁבַע כְּפוּלוֹת *yom akriv teshurah [...]ani tefilati be-sheva‘ kefulot* (“On the day when I offer a gift […] as for me, my prayer is multiplied sevenfold”). Here too, the repeated presence of the speaker expresses and emphasizes the closeness he feels.

In contrast to that, in the poem for a *rav ‘atsum be-yisra’el gadol*, the presence of the first-person speaker is limited. That voice appears in the opening words, אֶעֱרוֹךְ שִׁיר וְהִלּוּלִים *e‘erokh shir ve-hilulim* (“I will [or: Let me] set out song and praises”), and in the middle, with the words אוֹדֶה תּוֹךְ עֲדַת יִשְׂרָאֵל *odeh tokh ‘adat yisra’el* (“I give thanks in the midst of the community of Israel”). Similarly, in the poem he composed in honor of the emissary R. Yehuda Ne@hmad, the poet’s voice is made present twice in short statements: one in the poem’s opening words, אַקְרִיב שִׁיר שְׁבָחַי *akriv shir sheva@hay* (“I offer up my song of praises”), and one in the middle of the poem, with the words לוֹ אֲהַלְּלָה *lo ahalelah* (“I praise him” or “Let me praise him”). If the presence of the speaking “I” is a means to express closeness, then perhaps we can suggest an explanation for its limited presence in two poems, that in the poem in honor of the emissary we are speaking of a foreigner who happens to come to town, and in the poem in honor of the anonymous rabbi who is *‘atsum ve-gadol be-yisra’el*, the limited use of first-person speech indicates the maintenance of a respectful social distance from that exalted personage.

**III/2. The Shaping of Praise of *Tsadikim***

The poems in praise of *tsadikim* include אֶעֱרוֹךְ תְּהִילָּה בִּנְעִימָה קְדוֹשָׁה *e‘erokh tehilah bi-n‘imah kedoshah* (“I will set out praise in holy melody,” poem 16), in honor of the talmudic sage R. Shim‘on bar Yo@hai, and אֲנִי שִׁיר שֶׁבַח אֶעֱרוֹךְ *ani shir sheva@h e‘erokh* (“I, a song of praise I shall set out,” poem 17), in honor of R. David ben Barukh. The heading in the poem for R. Shim‘on bar Yo@hai is especially brief, noting only that this is a poem honoring him (and he needs no introduction). The heading in the poem in praise of R. David ben Barukh, though, is long and detailed, and in it the poet testifies that he has heard about that the wonder-workings of that *tsadik*, and he confesses that he appealed to that *tsadik* for help on a number of occasions and was answered: “I am aware that at this time it is an established fact that many people pledge sums and offer gifts to honor the soul of the distinguished R. David ben Barukh, and he answers them in their travails. And I, the author, [myself] heard from the sages of Marrakesh (may the Supernal One sustain it) many of his wondrous feats that they had seen and that are written about. And I will not deny that several times I called out to him in distress and he answered me, and by chance this poem came to my tongue, the Lord knows.” That *tsadik* died on the 3rd of Tevet, AM 5521 (1761).[[31]](#footnote-34) That is, he passed away a short time after R. Raphael Aharon Monsoñego’s birth, but he was a recognized personality in his era, and accounts of his powers of blessing, during his lifetime and after his death, were still current, passed along by word of mouth. The heading serves to support those accounts and provide first-hand evidence that indeed the rabbi is able to perform miraculous kabbalistic acts of beneficence. Even during his lifetime, people came to Rabbi David with requests for assistance, advice, and blessing. Sometime after his death, his burial site underwent renovation, and even now many people visit his grave each year, and poems and hymns are written in his honor. As for his birthplace, there are two widely-held opinions: one that he was born in one of the villages in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, the other that he came as an emissary from the Jewish community of Jerusalem (and/or Tiberias) and was asked to remain and take up the position of community rabbi.[[32]](#footnote-35) Between the lines of the poem one can discern the name of the dedicatee, both plainly revealed and merely hinted at, and it may be that the statement לוֹ שֵׁם כְּשֵׁם הַגְּדוֹלִים / מַלְכִּי צֶדֶק מֶלֶךְ שָׁלֵם *lo shem ke-shem ha-gedolim* / *malki tsedek melekh shalem* (“He has a great renown like that of the greatest [cf. 2 Sm 7:9] / Melkizedek, king of Salem” [Gn 14:18–20], referring to the dedicatee and linking his name to that of King David, hints as well at Jerusalem origins, since “Salem” is Jerusalem).

The Use of *Kinuyim*

In the praise-poem to R. Shim‘on bar Yo@hai, who is a model for the ideal *tsadik*, the poet uses many superlative *kinuyim*, aggrandizing his name and his miraculous and heavenly greatness. The dedicatee is אֵשֶׁל בָּרָמָה *esh el ba-ramah* (“tamarisk tree on the height,” 1 Sm 22:6), נַחַל מְקוֹר חָכְמָה *na@hal mekor @hokhmah* (“stream of wisdom’s source”) רָאשֵׁי יוֹשְׁבֵי עַל מִדִּין *rashe yosheve ‘al midin* (“heads of those who sit in judgement” [or “…who sit on saddle rugs,” a crux in Jgs 5:10), and מְקוֹר בְּרָכוֹת *mekor berakhot* (“source of blessings”). Portraying the magnitude of his subject’s wisdom and the breadth of his knowledge, Monsoñego employs epithets taken from the cosmic realm: the *tsadik* has intercourse with the heavens, and he is יְסוֹד צַדִּיק עוֹלָם *yesod tsadik ‘olam* (“foundation of the world’s *tsadik*,” or “…of the everlasting *tsadik*,” in either case playing on Prv 10:25) and יָם גָּדוֹל *yam gadol* (“great sea,” cf. Nm 34:6). Such superlatives as יְסוֹד צַדִּיק עוֹלָם *yesod tsadik ‘olam*, מַרְעִישׁ אֶרֶץ *mar‘ish erets* (“one who makes the earth tremble”), מַרְגִּיז מַמְלָכוֹת *margiz mamlakhot* (“one who shakes realms” make reference to the heavenly abilities of Moses, and the epithet שַׂר בֵּית הַזּוֹהַ"ר *sar bet ha-zohar* (“chief of the house of splendor,” a play on “chief jailer” in Gn 39:21), brings to mind the biblical Joseph.[[33]](#footnote-36) In this way, Rashbi’s extraordinary powers and the essence of his uniqueness are brought to the fore. So lofty and exalted is he that his likeness is engraved in the divine throne like that of Jacob: במרום חק תוכות צורתו חרושה *b*a-*marom @hak tokhot tsurato @harushah* (“in the upper realm his inner form is engraved”; see Targum Yerushalmi and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Gen. 28:12; cf. Genesis Rabbah 68:12, b.@Hul 91b).

In the poem in honor of the *tsadik* R. David ben Barukh, by contrast, the *kinuyim* for the dedicatee are terrestrial and human: אִישׁ חַיִל וְרַב פְּעָלִים *ish @hayil ve-rav pe‘alim* (“a valiant man, doer of great deeds”) a reference to Benaiah son of Jehoiada, one of David’s three great warriors (1 Chr 11:22); תָּמִים וְיוֹשֵׁב אוֹהָלִים *tamim ve-yoshev ohalim* (“a mild man, dwelling in tents,” after Gn 25:27), a reference to Jacob. Note that while Jacob is mentioned in both poems, the reference in the poem for R. Shim‘on Bar Yo@hai locates his image near the divine throne, in the poem for Rabbi David, the Jacob connection is close to earth, not in the heavens.

The Use of Calembour

In the praise-poem dedicated to R. Shim‘on Bar Yo@hai, Monsoñego includes four *calembour* references in *kinuyim*, further enhancing the description of his greatness. These include:

* סוֹבֵ״ר הָרָזִי״ם *sover ha-razim* (“the one who understands secret things”), a play on a phrase familiar to Jews from the Sabbath liturgy: קוֹל ה׳ שֹׁבֵר אֲרָזִים *kol Adonai shover arazim* (“The voice of the Lord breaks cedars,” Ps 29:5a): the dedicatee cracks open mysteries and comprehends them.
* רַב אוֹכֶל נִ״ר רָאשִׁים *rav okhel nir rashim* (“much food [comes from] the tillage of the heads”), a reversal order of those two phrases in Prv 13:23a.

Unlike the behavior of the strong man, who usurps the field of the poor person in the Bible, these phrases describe something positive through a double meaning: a) the term *nir* (“a field”), i.e., R. Shim‘on bar Yo@hai, who is the provider of food and due to whom there is sustenance in the world, and b) he is a נֵר *ner*, “lamp,” (a homonym for *nir* in the author’s dialect of Hebrew) that enlights the path for the רָאשִׁים *rashim* (heads)— meaning the leaders of Israel..

There is *calembour* also in the call for a *hilula*. As is the accepted practice regarding a *hilula*, the poet invites the community to a feast, calling:

אִכְלוּ רֵיעִים שְׁתוּ הָבוּ עוֹז הִלּוּלִים בַּקֹּדֶש סוֹ"ד שְׁתוּ *ikhlu re‘im shetu havu ‘oz hilulim ba-kodesh sod shetu* (“Eat, beloved friends, [and] drink! Grant the power of praises! In sanctity drink up the secret [lore]!”), playing on Is. 60:16: שֹׁד מְלָכִים תִּינָקִי *shod melakhim tinaki* (“you suckle at royal breasts”), where the reference is to consuming fine milk.

Here, the call is to be understood not only as an invitation to physical eating and drinking, but also, through the wordplay, in a spiritual sense as well: to drink from the wellspring of esoteric lore (*sod*).

In the poem in praise of R. David ben Barukh there is one *calembour*, in the heading: ולא אכחד שכמה פעמים קראתי לו מצרה ויעננ״י *ve-lo akha@hed she-kamah pe‘amim karati lo mi-tsarah va-ya‘aneni* (“And I will not deny that several times I called out to him in distress and he answered me”). The word marked as bearing special valence, ויעננ״י, can be vocalized to mean either “he afflicted me” (וַיְעַנֵּנִי *va-ye‘aneni*) or “he answered me” (וַיַּעֲנֵנִי *va-ya‘aneni*): when the Lord afflicted me, he answered my prayer.”

**The Presence of the First-Person Speaker**

The speaker’s presence in the praise-poem for R. Shim‘on bar Yo@hai is minor and limited, reserved only for the opening and closing sections. In the opening, he says אֶעֱרוֹךְ תְּהִילָּה בִּנְעִימָה קְדוֹשָׁה *e‘erokh tehilah bi-n‘imah kedoshah* (“I will set out praise in holy melody”), while in the closing, he minimizes his own value and apologizes for speaking at all, saying it is a task he took on for lack of an alternative:

נְאוּם קָטָן וָרַךְ / יֹאמְרוּ לוֹ שְׁתִיקָה טוֹב מִדִּבּוּרָךְ The word of one small and tender, /

*ne’um katan va-rakh /* to whom it is said: silence is better than

*yomru lo shetikah tov mi-diburakh* your speech

זֶה שִׁבְחֵי מָרָךְ / גַּרְגֵּיר וַעֲדָשָׁה This praise of your master

*zeh shiv@hi marakh / garger va-‘adashah* is but a grain, a lentil.

יָדַעְתִּי בְּעַצְמִי / עֵרֶךְ עָנִי עָלַי אֶת קָרְבָּנִי לַחְמִי I know by myself [my sin]/

*yada‘ti be-‘atsmi /* the paltry value of my offering, my food

*‘erekh ‘ani ‘alay et korbani la@hmi*

וּמִי יַעֲרוֹךְ מִי / לְךָ שִׁירָה חֲדָשָׁה And who, who will arrange

*u-mi ya‘arokh mi / lekha shirah @hadashah* a new song for you?

Unlike this poem, the one dedicated to R. David ben Barukh features the first-person speaker in a central role. He is present in the opening stanza and in more than half the stanzas of the poem. The praise of that *tsadik* includes first-person speech:

אֲנִי שִׁיר שֶׁבַח אֶעֱרוֹך [...] I, a song of praise I shall set out,

*ani shir sheva@h e‘erokh*

פִּי יַגִּיד תְּהִלָּתֶיךָ My mouth shall speak your praise

*pi yagid tehilatekha* ~~[Ps. 51:17, usually spoken in praise of God]~~

שֶׁבַע בַּיּוֹם הִלַּלְתִּיךָ Seven times a day I praise you.

*sheva‘ ba-yom hilaltikha*

Doing so, he creates an intimate closeness and puts in a request for himself:

אֲדוֹנִי קוּם עַל עָמְדֶךָ / My lord, rise up and stand

*adoni kum ‘al ‘omdekha /*  [as befits your status in the heavens],

הִתְפַּלֵּל בְּעַד עַבְדֶּךָ [...] pray for your servant,

*hitpalel be‘ad ‘avdekha [...]*

/ הֱיֵה סִתְרִי וּמָגִינִּי be my hiding place and my shield

*heyeh sitri u-magini* /

בִּבְנֵי חַיֵּי וּמְזוֹנֵי [...] among the living and sustained […]

*bi-vne @haye u-mezone*

חָנֵּנִי כִּי עָנִי אָנִי / Be gracious toward me, for I am poor

*@honeni ki ‘ani ani*

עַבְדָּךְאָנִי הֲבִינֵנִי Your servant am I;

*‘avdakh ani havineni.*  show me understanding.

**Clarifying the Status of Praise-Poems for *Tsadikim***

A comparison, in light of the design criteria, of the poems in praise of the Lord and those in praise of persons shows that the poem of praise to R. Shim‘on bar Yo@hai stands in a medial position:

1. In its *kinuyim*, notable for their rich metaphor, the poem for Rashbi is closer to the praise-poems for people than those honoring the Lord, since the epithets for God are for the most part shopworn substitutes for the divine name.
2. In its use of *calembour* as well, the poem for R. Shim‘on bar Yo@hai is closer to those dedicated to individuals, which are replete with many *calembour* insertions. It thus differs from the praise directed to the Lord, in which the absence of *calembour* is striking.
3. With regard to the presence of the first-person speaker, by contrast, the poem for Rashbi is closer to the praise-poems for the Lord, where too the presence of the first-person speaker is limited, indicating a respectful distance.

If we compare the two poems dedicated to *tsadikim* with each other, that is, if we contrast the praise-poem for R. Shim‘on bar Yo@hai with the one for R. David ben Barukh, we find obvious differences in the use of figurative means. The status of R. Shim‘on bar Yo@hai, who has no competitor when it comes to saintliness and veneration, finds expression in metaphor immeasurably more rich and exalted than that in the poem for the *tsadik* R. David ben Barukh, both in *kinuyim* and in the use of the *calembour*. As Hazan points out, the words of praise for a *tsadik* gain in strength the further one gets from the time of his death.[[34]](#footnote-37) If so, it comes as no surprise that the superlatives ascribed to R. David (with whom Monsoñego’s local contemporaries had been familiar) are this-worldly and not especially powerful.

An examination of the presence of the first-person speaker further sharpens the gap between the dedicatees. We can discern that the more limited the poet’s presence in the poem, the higher the status of the dedicatee. That is to say, the poet’s minimal first-person presence in the praise-poem for R. Shim‘on bar Yo@hai points up the heavenly status of the dedicatee in the eyes of the entire community. The reverse is true of the repeated presence of the “I” voice in the poem of praise for R. David ben Barukh, which places the dedicatee closer to terrestrial reality. Moreover, in the praise-poem for R. David, it is the poet whose role is, supposedly, to make known the *tsadik* and his mystical powers: רַב טוּבְךָ אוֹתִי תַשְׂבִּיעַ זִיו הוֹדְךָ עָלַי תַּשְׁפִּיעַ אֲזַי עַבְדְּךָ יוֹדִיעַ לְכָל יָבוֹא גְּבוּרוֹתֶיךָ *rav tuvekha oti tasbia‘ ziv hodekha ‘alay tashpia‘ azay ‘avdekha yodia‘ le-khol yavo’ gevurotekha* (Your great bounty satisfies me. The radiance of your splendor will emanate upon me. Then your servant will announce to all that your might has arrived.) The differences that have been found between the two *tsadikim* along these three parameters are not surprising, since there is a wide gap between R. Shim‘on bar Yo@hai, one of the outstanding figures known from as far back as classic rabbinic legends, and R. David ben Barukh, a recently-deceased mystical wonder-worker to whom pleas were addressed in his own lifetime and to whom people appeal after his death as well.

To summarize, then: from Monsoñego’s classification, we can learn that praise-poems are not reserved for *tsadikim* or other outstanding personalities. On the contrary, most of the poems classified as praise-poems are dedicated to the Lord, and they act as an expression of thanks and appreciation to Him for all the good and all the bounty bestowed upon the people Israel.[[35]](#footnote-38) This includes thanks for holidays marking miracles and divine beneficence, for the Torah and the Sabbath that He gave to His people, for rescuing the community from drought or disaster, and for personal relief. Only a minority of the praise-poems are dedicated to outstanding individuals.

This division is reinforced by the difference in the shaping of the praise: the measurements of *kinuyim* and *calembour* insertions indicate that the praise of the Lord is commonplace and conventional, and the relative infrequency of the speaker’s first-person voice in those poems indicates a respectful distance. The praise of individual, however, is exalted and uplifting, and the presence of the speaker’s first-person voice generally indicates a closeness to the dedicatee. The praise-poem for R. Shim‘on bar Yo@hai stands between those two clusters; the praise in the poem is indeed lofty, like that in the poems in praise of other individuals, but the paucity of the speaker’s presence points to a respectful distance, as in the praise-poems to the Lord.

Is this classification unique to R.Raphael Aharon Monsoñego? At this stage, it is difficult to say. Further research on the classification of praise-poems by other poets and their figurative characteristics may help us answer that question.[[36]](#footnote-39) For now, our inquiry remains a case study, testifying to one author’s clearly defined concept regarding the definition and characteristics of the praise-poem, but not necessarily to any accepted practices in his time and place.

1. Ephraim Hazan, *The Poetics of the Sephardi Piyut* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1986), 15–23. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. André E. Albaz and Ephraim Hazan, *Tehila le-David – Poems de David Ben Hassine: Le Chantre du Judaisme Marocain* (French and Hebrew; Lod, 1999), 103–104 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ezra Fleischer, *Hebrew Liturgical Poetry in the Middle Ages* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1975), 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Fleischer, *Hebrew Liturgical Poetry*, 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. These poems were frequently epistolary, substituting for personal letters; see Shulamit Elizur, *Hebrew Poetry in Spain in the Middle Ages* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 2004), 277. On the characteristics of medieval epistolary poetry in Hebrew, see Rachel Hitin-Mashiah and Tamar Lavi, “Artistic Epistolary Formulae: Late Middle Ages,” in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* [*EHLL*], ed G. Khan (Leiden–Boston, 2013), 854a-57b. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ephraim Hazan, *Hebrew Poetry in North Africa* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1995), 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Hazan, *Hebrew Poetry*, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Many poems were written in honor of R. Shim‘on bar Yo@hai, enough that they constitute a genre of their own, which grew out of the world of Kabbalah. The most famous of these is the one by R. Shim‘on Lavi beginning *nimsha@hta ashrekha* (“you are anointed, how fortunate are you”). Many similar poems followed this one, sometimes even written to the same tune and rhyme scheme. As examples, see the poems “*Bar Yo@hai butsina kadisha*” and “*Bar Yo@hai na‘amu imrotekha*,” in Ephraim Hazan, *The Poems of Fraji Shawat* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1976), 237–41. For more poems in this genre, traditional among the Jews of North Africa, see Moshe Halamish, “*Shire ha-Rashbi bi-tsefon Afrika*,” in *Me@hkarim be-tarbutam shel yehude tsefon Afrika*, ed. I. Ben Ami (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1991), 47–63. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Poems in praise of the righteous may sometimes take note of the location where the righteous person was buried. For example, R. David ben @Hassin wrote a poem in praise of Tiberias, where he notes the many holy places in the city; see Albaz and Hazan, *Tehila le-David*, 708–11, poem 240. R. Shlomo @Haliwa wrote eleven poems in praise of righteous men, from Israel and from Morocco; see Joseph Chetrit, *Shirah u-fiyut be-yahadut Marocco*, (Hebrew; Jerusalem and Ashkelon, 1999), 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The heading may contain information related to every aspect of the poem and its composition, from the author’s identity and the poem’s intended use and musical performance to biographical and historical details, its genre, and its prosodic pattern. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Albaz and Hazan, *Tehila le-David*, 597, poem 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Chetrit, *Shirah u-fiyut*, 173–74. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. R. Raphael Aharon Moñsonego (1760–1840) was the son of R. Yedidyah Moses, lived in Fez in Morocco and served there as rabbi and judge, halakhic decisor and preacher until the day of his death. He left behind a number of compositions, among them the collection *Ne’ot midbar*. The collection contains 86 poems and *piyyutim* and 21 rhymed epistles. For more on Moñsonego, see Joseph Ben Na’em, *Malkhe Rabanan* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1931), 105b; Jacob M. Toledano, *Ner ha-ma‘arav* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1911), 195; Moshe Amar, *Sefer me ha-shiloa@h u-maskyiot levav* (Hebrew; Lod, 1992), 4–5; Moshe Amar, *Hagada de Pessa@h: Chioure mitsva* (Hebrew and French; Lod, 1993), 9–13; Moshe Amar, “Rabane Fez ve-@hakhameha,” (Hebrew) in *Faz ve-@hakhameha*, ed. David Ovadia (Jerusalem, 1979), 310–11; Tamar Lavi, “Rabbi Rafael Aharon Moñsonego and his Poetical Work” (Hebrew), *Pe‘amim* 104 (2005): 97–111. The collection *Ne’ot midbar*, which contains his epistolary rhymes and his poetry, was published in two parts. The first part deals with his epistolary writing; see Rachel Hitin-Mashiah and Tamar Lavi, *From Neot midbar: Rhymed Epistles by Rabbi Raphael Aharon Monsoñego* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2010). The second part deals with his poems and piyyutim; see Tamar Lavi, *In Neot midbar: Liturgical Poems of Rabbi Raphael Aharon Monsoñego* (Hebrew; Lod, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Albaz and Hazan, *Tehila le-David*, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The texts of the poems being used for this study are in the edition *Poems of R. Raphael Aaron Monsoñego: With an Introduction, Commentary, and Sources*. See Lavi, *In Ne’ot midbar,* 148–315. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For a definition of sociopoetics, see Ingrid D. Becker, *Socio/Poetics* (dissertation, U. of Chicago, 2019), 6–7, https://knowledge.uchicago.edu/record/2104. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Kinuyim*, poetic epithets, are usually terms borrowed from Bible or midrash to refer to God or to persons and places better known by more commonly used names. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. John A. Cuddon, *Dictionary of literary terms and literary theory* (London, 1992), 757. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. On the rise of *calembour* in Hebrew poetry, see Shulamit Elizur, “The Rise and Development of the Resignified and Allosemic Appropriations: From Piyyut in Eretz Israel to the Mahbarot of Imannuel of Rome,” (Hebrew) in *Shirat Dvora: Essays in Honor of Professor Dvora Bregman*, ed. H. Ishay (Beer Sheva, 2019), 1–28. On the use *calembour* in Hebrew poetry in North Africa, see, *inter* alia, Rachel Hitin-Mashiah and Tamar Lavi, “The Calembour in Hebrew Artistic Condolence Epistles by Moroccan Rabbis—A Comic Device?” (Hebrew) Pe’amim 133-34 (2013):77–91. In the writing of North African Hebrew poets, the calembour frequently reflects their pronunciation, in which the distinctions between the vowels *a/e, o/u* and between the consonants *s/ś/š/ṣ*, *b/ḇ* have been lost. See Irena Garbel, “Quelques observations sur le phonemèes de l'hebreu biblique et traditionnel,” Bulletin de la Société de Linguistique de Paris, 50 (1954): 231-43; Norman A. Stillman, The Language and Culture of the Jews of Sefrou, Morocco An Ethnolingustic Study (Manchester, 1988), 54–5; Natali Akun, “Morocco, Pronunciation Tradition,” in EHLL: <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopedia-of-hebrew-language-and-linguistics/morocco-pronunciation-traditions-EHLL_COM_00000843>, retrieved 28.2.2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Monseñego even constructed whole poems around *calembour*. See, e.g., Rachel Mashiah, “Names of Accents and Diacritical Punctuation Signs in Poems by North-African Jewish Poets,” *Sefarad 62* (2002): 349–68. For more on *calembour* inMonseñego’s poems, see Tamar Lavi, “The *calembour* in Rabbi Raphael Aharon Monsoñego’s *Neot midbar*,” *Sefarad* 75 (2015): 79–102. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. These form 0.2% of the words in those poems and about 4.5% of the wordplays in Monsoñego’s poems. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The first person plural *nehalel* is necessary for the acrostic. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Shulamit Elizur, “Speech-situation in *Tokhe@ha piyyutim*: From Early *Piyyut* to Provence”(Hebrew), *Piyyut in Tradition* 5-6 (2017): 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
24. The first redemption was the Exodus from Egypt, and second was the Return to Zion in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (as depicted in the widely-known liturgical poem for Hanukkah, *Ma’oz tsur yeshu‘ati*). The third redemption, which has in our time already come to fruition but had not in the poet’s lifetime, is the revival of the people Israel in its own country, and this is his request. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
25. On the mission of Rabbi Yehuda Ne@hmad, see A. Yaari, *Shelu@he eretz Yisra’el* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1977), 639–40; David Ovadia, *The Community of Sefrou*, 5 (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1992), 321–28. Emissaries from the Land of Israel had been coming to Morocco since the beginning of the 17th century; see Yaari, *Shelu@he eretz Yisra’el*, 229. For Jews in the Diaspora, including North Africa, those emissaries represented the Land of Israel and the holy city of Jerusalem, and from that came the poets’ desire to sing their praises and glorify them. So, for example, Rabbi David ben @Hasin wrote poems of praise to the emissaries Rabbi Ya‘akov ‘Iyash and Rabbi Moshe Shapira: Albaz and Hazan, *Tehila le-David*, 691–702, poems 232–39. Later, @Haliwa wrote a praise-poem for Rabbu Uri Shapira, Rabbi Moshe Shapira’s son, who was also an emissary: Chetrit, *Shirah u-fiyut*, 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
26. Monsoñego employs these epithets in his epistolary writing as well. Thus we find in the heading of a letter of reconciliation, “This I have written to *Rav A@hai* and *Rav Re@humay*, may his light shine.” The addressee of this letter is his close friend Rabbi Yehudah Elbaz. See Rachel Hitin-Mashiah, “Two versions of a rhymed appeasement letter by Rabbi Refael Aharon Monsonyego” (Hebrew), *Criticism and Interpretation* 39 (2007): 205–20. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
27. ~~The phrase~~ *~~ribuy a@har ribuy~~* ~~(“multiplicity after multiplicity”) is a term in Talmudic rhetoric. Cf., e.g., b. Pesa@him 23a.~~ [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
28. Albaz and Hazan, *Tehila le-David*, 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
29. אלה מהווים כ-4% ממילות השירים, וכ-20% מכלל שימושי הקלמבור בשיריו של מונסוניגו. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
30. It is generally accepted that *calembour* creates a comic effect and adds a feeling of humoristic lightness to a work that employs it. As we have demonstrated, though, in our article, Hitin-Mashiah and Lavi, *The Calembour*, its use in contexts that are not comedic serves as evidence for a change in the perception of its role in the Hebrew poetry of North Africa. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
31. Ben Na’em, *Malkhe Rabanan*, 26a. Some report the date of his death as 3rd of Tevet, AM 5545 (December 16, 1784). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
32. See “David Ben Barukh” (Hebrew), Wikipedia, last modified December 28 2020, https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%93%D7%95%D7%93\_%D7%91%D7%9F\_%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%9A. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
33. Yehudah Liebes, “*Mar‘ish ha-arets*” (Heb.) in *Judaism: Topics, Fragments, Faces, Identities: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Rivka* (Hebrew; ed. Haviva Pedaya and Ephraim Meir, Be’er Sheva, 2007), 9.Retrieved from https://liebes.huji.ac.il/files/rashbi.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
34. Hazan, *Hebrew Poetry,* 123–24. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
35. In fact, in the headings of some praise-poems we find the expression of thanksgiving חן חן (לו) *@hen @hen (lo).* [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
36. As we have noted above, Rabbi David ben @Hasin (1727–1792, earlier than Monsoñego) treated as one category both poems for holidays of miracles and divine beneficence (Hanukkah, Purim) and poems marking personal and communal rescue. Nonetheless, only one of those was categorized as a “praise-poem,” and that one was about his own healing. See Albaz and Hazan, *Tehila le-David*, 217, poem 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)