**Poetics in a Medieval *Piyyut*: R. Yosef Bekhor Shor’s “*Ori Ve-yish‘i*”**

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**I. Introduction**

**I.1. Liturgical Poetry in Ashkenaz**

*Piyyut* (Jewish liturgical poetry) in Germany (Ashkenaz) and Northern France continued the Italian tradition of liturgical composition, which had its own source in the Palestinian *piyyut* traditions.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Hebrew poetry of the early Ashkenazi sages was adopted by the liturgical rite common in Ashkenaz, Italy, and France and earned popular approval. R. Moshe bar Kalonymus and his relative R. Meshulam bar Kalonymus (approximately 10th century) are the earliest liturgical poets (*payyetanim*) of Ashkenazi Jewry known to us by name. Among those who followed them in the years before the Crusades, Shim‘on bar Yitzḥaq (late 10th–early 11th centuries) and Meir bar Yitzḥaq (second half of the 11th century) stand out.[[2]](#footnote-2)

During the 12th century, changes occured in Ashkenazi poetry (whose outstanding representative is R. Ephraim of Regensburg), expressed in the absorption of influences from Hebrew poetry in Spain.[[3]](#footnote-3) Ashkenazi poetry did retain its restrained character. In comparison to the Jewish communities of the Near East, too, in the classic period of *piyyut* composition, Central European Jewry was notable for its conservatism, choosing to reject any influence of an outside culture. The *payyetanim* of Central Europe identified completely with the world of the Rabbis of classical rabbinic Judaism, just like any classic *payyetan* in Eretz Yisrael who lived in the orbit of those Rabbis.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Central European Jewry’s humility led it to sanctify the forms of standard prayers and even the *piyyutim* of earlier periods. Their compositions did not change the formulas of the liturgy and even refrained from replacing older Palestinian liturgical poems. Instead they only filled in gaps left by their predecessors.[[5]](#footnote-5) From the late 11th century on, the Jewish communities of Germany and northern France frequently experienced times of tragedy. About those tragedies the sages of those Jewish communities composed elegies (*kinot*) and penitential poems (*seliḥot*), written with their very blood.[[6]](#footnote-6) The profile of liturgical poetic creativity in Germany and in France in the Middle Ages that emerges is one of lamentation.

**I.2. R. Joseph of Orleans – Bekhor Shor**

R. Joseph of Orleans, a student of Rabbenu Tam known also as “Bekhor Shor,” was one of the commentators on the Pentateuch and one of the talmudic scholars known as “Ba‘alei Ha-tosafot,” those whose Talmudic interpretations are included in the “Tosafot” (“additions”) to the classic commentary of Rashi. (In the Tosafot, R. Joseph is generally referred to as “R. Joseph of Orleans.”)[[7]](#footnote-7) He was born during the first half of the 12th century.[[8]](#footnote-8) As a Bible commentator, R. Joseph Bekhor Shor forged his own unique path, marked by originality as he sought to bring miracles in line with nature, to offer rationales for Pentateuchal commandments, and to fill in gaps in the narrative. His signature contribution was in his quest to offer *peshat* interpretations. M.Z. Segal called him “the last of the great French *peshat* commentators known to us by name” and stated that despite his freedom of thought, Bekhor Shor remained true to the tradition of the French school. His rationalism is based on simple clear thinking and not—as distinct from the Sephardic commentators—on a philosophical outlook. Great poetic sensitivity can be seen in several aspects of his commentaries: (1) In his explanations, the words of Scripture are woven seamlessly into his writing.[[9]](#footnote-9) (2) His tendency to lyricism is evident in his commentaries, expressed through psychological distinctions and expressive language.[[10]](#footnote-10) (3) At the close of his commentaries to each weekly *parasha* in Genesis and Exodus, along with his commentaries to two other weekly *parashiyyot*, *Balak* and *Devarim*, are passages of rhymed lines.

Five *seliḥot* poems were published in A. M. Habermann’s article on “The *Piyyutim* of R. Joseph.” In Daniel Goldschmidt and Avraham Fraenkel’s anthology of *seliḥot* poems from Ashkenaz and France, two more are added: “י״י אֵלֶיךָ עֵינַי יְשַֹבֵּרוּ”, which was apparently written about the martyrdom of the Jews of Blois in 1171 and signed by “Joseph Bekhor Shor,” and the *‘aqeda* poem “י״י אוֹרִי וְיִֹשְעִי”, signed “Joseph.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The latter poem is the subject of this article.[[12]](#footnote-12)

We will attempt to chart the poetic characteristics of of the liturgical poem “י״י אוֹרִי וְיִֹשְעִי”. We will examine the extent to which R. Joseph Bekhor Shor’s artistic approach was close to the laconic, ascetic world of the Hebrew Bible, and to what extent it resembles the world of rabbinic *aggadah*, which expands and enriches the story with details not to be found in the biblical *‘Aqeda* account.

**I.3. ‘Akeda Poems**

*‘Akeda* poems are a sub-genre of *selihot* poems, addressing the biblical story of the near-sacrifice (or, in some midrashic traditions the actual sacrifice) of Isaac. In such poems, the *payyetan* attempts to arouse God’s compassion for his people Israel by bringing to mind ancestral merit, as it appears in the Midrash (Gen Rab 56,14): “May it be Your will, Lord our God, whenever the sons of Isaac are in difficulty, that You bring to mind on their behalf the *‘Akeda* and be filled with compassion for them.” This idea is realized in the Mishnah, “May He who answered Abraham at Mt. Moriah answer you and hear the sound of your cries this very day. Blessed be… the Redeemer of Israel” (m. Ta‘anit 2:4). The earliest *‘Akeda* poem is איתן למד דעת / בטרם ידעך כול, a work that was known to the sages of the Talmud.[[13]](#footnote-13) This genre had not flowered during the period of classical *piyyut* (in the 6th–8th centuries).[[14]](#footnote-14) It was brought to life again in Italy in the first half of the 11th century by R. Yeḥi’el bar Avraham of Rome and R. Binyamin bar Zeraḥ, and in the 2nd half of that century in Ashkenaz by R. Meir bar Yitzḥak Shatz.

The *‘Akeda* genre achieved its full efflorescence in the wake of the disastrous attacks on Jewish communities at the time of the First Crusade (1096) and subsequent disasters. The Hebrew poets of Ashkenaz and northern France saw in the idea of the Binding of Isaac a reflection of the mass killings perpetrated by the Crusaders against their communities. As Bekhor Shor expressed it:

מֵעֲבָדֶיךָ אַל תִּרְחַק

עֲקֵידַת מַקְדִּישֵׁי בְּרוֹב דּוֹחַק

תִּזְכּוֹר הַיּוֹם עִם עֲקֵדַת יִצְחַק

Do not distance yourself from your servants.

The sacrifice of those who sanctify me under great duress

Recall today [together] with the sacrifice of Isaac

(These are the final lines of the poem ה׳ אֵלֶיךָ עֵינַי יְשַֹבֵּרוּ.).[[15]](#footnote-15)

**II.** [[16]](#footnote-16)**יְיֳ אוֹרִי וְיִשְׁעִי וְגַאֲוַת חַרְבִּי**

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| יְיֳ **א**וֹרִי וְיִשְׁעִי וְגַאֲוַת חַרְבִּי  קוּמָה וְהוֹשִׁיעָה וְרִיבָה רִיבִי  **בְּ**ךָ עַמְּךָ שָׂם כִּסְלוֹ מַלְכִּי וּמִשְׂגַּבִּי  וַיֵּבְךְּ עַל-פָּנָיו וַיֹּאמַר אָבִי אָבִי  5  **גָּ**עוּ בִּבְכִיָּה תְּחִנָּה וּצְעָקָה  וְאִם אֵין בָּהֶם מַעֲשִׂים וּצְדָקָה  **דָּ**גוּל לְפָנֶיךָ שָׁפְכוּ בְּכִי וַאַנָחָה  וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל אֱלֹהִים בְּחָזְקָה  **הֵ**ן עַמְּךָ וְנַחֲלָתְךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ נָהוּ  10 וְסָמְכוּ בְּנָם לוֹ אֵל קַח בִּנְךָ וְהַעֲלֵהוּ  **וְ**זֶה יִהְיֶה מִשְׁפַּט הַנַּעַר וּמַעֲשֵׂהוּ  שָׁם שָׂם לוֹ חֹק וּמִשְׁפָּט וְשָׁם נִסָּהוּ  **זָ**רִיז וְנִשְׂכַּר שָׂם בֹּקֶר לְבָקְרוֹ צָלַח וְרָכַב לִכְבוֹד אֵל וַהֲדָרוֹ  15 **חָ**רֵד וְיָרֵא וְשָׂשׂ עַל דְּבָרוֹ  וַיַּשְׁכֵּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַחֲבֹשׁ אֶת חֲמֹרוֹ  **טָ**עַן אֶת בְּנוֹ כְּאִישׁ זָהִיר וְנִזְהָר  לַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹן מַלְכּוֹ שָׁקַד וּמִהַר **י**וֹם הַשְּׁלִשִׁי נִרְאָה לוֹ זֹהַר  20 דְּמוּת כְּבוֹד יְיֳ כְּאֵשׁ אֹכֶלֶת בְּרֹאשׁ הָהָר | The Lord is my light and my salvation  and the pride of my sword,  Arise, work salvation, fight for my cause,  In You does Your people place its trust,  my king and my high haven.  He wept over him and cried, “Father, father!”  *5* They broke out in weeping, supplication, and  shouts,  And if they have no [good] deeds and [acts of]  charity,  O Preeminent One, they spilled out before You  weeping and moaning  And called out mightily to God.  Yes, Your very own people yearned for You  *10* And relied on the one to whom God said  “Take your son and offer him up,  and this will be the rule for the lad and his  fate.”  There He made rules for him and tested him.  The man of alacrity and reward rose at dawn,  won success and rode off for the honor and  glory of God.  *15* Trembling in reverence and rejoicing in His  message,  Abraham role early and the morning and  saddled his ass.  He set his son upon it as a man who is cautious  and careful,  To do the will of his King he took care to be  quick.  On the third day the splendor appeared to him.  *20* The form of the Divine Glory appeared as a  consuming fire at the top of the mountain. |

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| **כָּ**בַשׁ רַחֲמָיו וְהֵכִין לִבְנוֹ מַטְבֵּחַ  לְכַהֵן לְאֵל עֶלְיוֹן וְזִכְרוֹ לְשַׁבֵּחַ **לָ**קַח אֵשׁ וְעֵצִים וּמַאֲכֶלֶת לְזַבֵּחַ וְהִקְרִיבוֹ לִפְנֵי יְיֳ וְהִגִּישׁוֹ לִפְנֵי יְיֳ אֶל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ  25  **מִ**דֵּי עֲלוֹתָם יַחַד לְהַר הַמּוֹרִיָּה  שָׁאַל נִין לְהוֹרוֹ אַיֵּה הַשֶׂה לִרְאִיָּה  **נָ**ם לוֹ בְּנִי עָרֵב וְנִבְחַר לְשׁוֹכֵן עֲלִיָּה  גְּדוֹל הָעֵצָה וְרַב הָעֲלִילִיָּה  **סָ**מַךְ בְּצִיוֻיָּךְ וְעָרַךְ מַעֲרֶכֶת  30 וּבָנָה מִזְבֵּחַ כְּאִישׁ מָהִיר בִּמְלֶאכֶת  **עָ**קַד יְחִידוֹ אִישׁ יְשַׁר לֶכֶת  וַיִּתֵּן אוֹתוֹ עַל הַמִּתְהַפֶּכֶת  **פָּ**שַׁט בֵּן גָּרוֹן לִישָּׁחֵט לִכְבוֹדֶךָ בְּשׂוּם אָב חֶרֶב לְצַוָּאר נִכְמְרוּ רַחֲמֶיךָ וַחֲסָדֶיךָ  35 **צִ**יר נֶאֱמָן שָׁלַחְתָּ לְאִישׁ חֲסִידֶךָ  וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הַמַּלְאָךְ הֶרֶף יָדֶיךָ  **קָ**ם אֶזְרָחִי וְנָשָׂא אֶת עֵינָיו וְהִנֵּה אַיִל נֶאֱחַז בְּקַרְנָיו  **רָ**ץ וּזְבָחוֹ תְּמוּרַת בְּנוֹ לְפָנָיו  40 מִתְהַלֵּך בְּתֻמּוֹ אַשְׁרֵי בָנָיו | He squelched his compassion and prepared to  slaughter his son  to act as priest to the Supreme God and to praise  His name.  He took up fire and wood and slaughtering  knife to offer a sacrifice,  And he brought him near before the Lord and  presented him before the Lord on the altar.  *25* As they went up together to Mt. Moriah,  The son asked his father, “Where is the sheep  for the pilgrimage-offering?”  He said to him, “My son, pleasant and chosen  by the One who dwells above,  wondrous in purpose and mighty in deed.”  He put his trust in Your commandment and set  the wood in place  *30* and built an altar as one quick to do the  work.  He straightaway bound his only son  And set him upon the twirling [sword].  The son extended his throat to be slaughtered  for Your glory.  When the father placed the sword at his throat,  Your compassion and kindness were aroused.  *35* A faithful delegate You dispatched to Your  faithful follower,  and the angel said to him, “Stay your hand.”  Abraham stood up and lifted his eyes,  And behold, a ram was caught by its horns.  He ran and slaughtered it before him in place of  his son.  *40* The one who walks in innocence—happy are  his sons. |

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| **שָׁ**ם נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ אֹיְבָיו לְכַתֵּשׁ וּלְהַדֵּשׁ  וְזַרְעוֹ בְּאוֹר פָּנֶיךָ לְבָרֵךְ וּלְקַדֵּשׁ **תָ**מִיד אֶפְרוֹ צָבוּר לְפָנֶיךָ בְּגוֹדֶשׁ וְהָיָה הוּא וּתְמוּרָתוֹ יִהְיֶה-קֹדֶשׁ  45 **יָ**הּ זְכוֹר לָנוּ הַיּוֹם יוֹשֶׁר פְּעֻלָּתוֹ  וְעֶשֶׂר נִסְיוֹנוֹת אֲשֶׁר נִסִּיתוֹ  **וְ**לֶכְתּוֹ אַחֲרֶיך וּמִילַת עָרְלָתוֹ  וְכָל-מַעֲשֶׂה תָקְפּוֹ וּגְבוּרָתוֹ    **סֶ**לָה יָלִיץ בַּעֲדֵינוּ זְכוּת מִפְעָלָיו  50 לְכַפֵּר לְעַמְּךָ רוֹעַ מַעֲלָלָיו  **פִּ**י סוֹטֵן יִסָּכֵר וְאִם רַע יָלִיץ עָלָיו לֹא תֹאבֶה לוֹ וְלֹא תִשְׁמַע אֵלָיו  **חַ**י עוֹבֵר עַל פֶּשַׁע וְעָוֹן נוֹשֵׂא  **זְ**כוֹר חֶסֶד אִישׁ תָּם וְחֵטְא עַמְּךָ כַּסֵּה  55 **קָ**דוֹשׁ לִהְיוֹת לוֹ לְמִסְתּוֹר וּלְמַחְסֶה  יְיֳ יִרְאֶה לוֹ הַשֶּׂה | There You swore to crush and stomp upon his  foes  and to bless and sanctify his descendants by the  light of Your face.  At all time his ashes are gathered before You in  ample measure,  and he and his substitute are [always]  sacrosanct.  *45* Lord, bring to mind for us today the  righteousness of his actions  and the ten tests to which you subjected him  and his following you and the circumcision of  his foreskin  and all of his powerful and mighty deeds.  O Rock, may the merit of his actions speak on  our behalf  *50* To atone for Your people’s evil misdeeds.  The mouth of the accuser will be dammed up, and if he speaks ill of him,  You will not favor him and You will not heed  him  Living One, who forgives transgression and  bears away evildoing,  remember the kindness of the mild-mannered  one and blot out Your people’s sin,  *55* Holy One, to be his hiding place and refuge,  The Lord will provide the ram. |

**III. On the Author’s Artistic Approach**

The reserved, laconic character of biblical narrative was pointed out by Erich Auerbach, who demonstrates these characteristics by reference to the story of the *‘Akeda* in Genesis 22. That story leaves gaps, some of which Auerbach noted: Where was Sarah? What did Abraham tell her, and how did she react? What happened to the three featured protagonists during the three days of their journey? What did they talk about over those three days? These questions and more are unaddressed and unanswered.

In contrast to the biblical story stands the world of *midrash* and *aggadah* (legend and lore), which enrich the biblical narrative and fill in its gaps. *Aggadah* expanded the cast of characters, added descriptions expression feelings, and placed words into characters’ mouths—speeches, conversation, and disputation.[[17]](#footnote-17)

At the basis of the biblical *‘Akeda* narrative, Abraham is the main protagonist, for it is he who maintains the interaction with the all characters who appear in the tale. On the religious level is the central triad of the story: God, Abraham as central protagonist, and Isaac. The key word representing this triangle, the word הִנֵּנִי (“here I am”).[[18]](#footnote-18) On the human level, there is an additional triad of characters: the main protagonist is Abraham, and the secondary characters are Isaac and the lads who accompany them on their journey. They are represented by the words וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָיו*,* “They went together.”[[19]](#footnote-19) The biblical narrative of the ‘Akeda includes two uses of *inclusio*. One is the going together of Abraham and Isaac (Gen 22:6, 8), which sets their brief dialogue off parenthetically from the rest of the narrative, and the other is “to the place which God had told him” (Gen 22: 3, 9), which sets off from the rest of the narrative the five verses at the center of which are the personal, human relations among the characters: Abraham’s conversations with the lads and with his son.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The filling-in of gaps and the expansions are, in the nature of artistic intent, subject to interpretation by the artist and determined by the horizon of the baggage in his consciousness and according to his belief. The poets arrogated to themselves artistic freedom in describing the story of the *‘Akeda*, mainly by integrating midrashim and exegetical perceptions into their works R. Joseph Bekhor Shor, a contemporary of Rabbenu Tam, a Torah commentator among the group known as Tosafists (*Ba’ale Ha-tosafot*), was familiar with the Hebrew Bible, *midrash*, and classical rabbinic *aggadah*. It is therefore interested to examine how close his artistic approach is to the laconic world of the Bible and to what extent he emulates the world of *aggadah* and enriches the narrative with many details.

As noted above, the characters in the biblical *‘Akeda* narrative are: God, Abraham, Isaac, the lads, and the angel. To that list we should add two animals: the ass and the ram (which, from the time its presence is revealed, fulfills the role of “the sheep for the burnt-offering” mentioned in the conversation along the way). Aggadic literature added into the tale other characters. One is Sarah (at home before the departure, in Isaac’s speech shortly before his intended sacrifice, and in her death as a tragic epilogue).

Another is the *Satan*, who plays a number of roles—advancing the plot with accusations in the exposition, attempting to dissuade Abraham and Isaac from fulfilling the command while disguised as any of several invented figures, taking on the form of a river trying to drown both father and son. In the binding scene, the *Satan* attempts to prevent the sacrifice of the ram. In some *midrashim*, the *Satan* is involved in Sarah’s death.

The authors of *aggadah* identified the lads with Eliezer and Ishmael, told about their conversation en route, and found amusement in their being left behind with the ass at the foot of the mountain. Those authors also added angels that serve in some retold versions as plot motivators, as is the *Satan* in embellishments mentioned above, and as seekers of mercy at the moment of the intended slaughter.

Not only does the poem אוֹרִי וְיִשְׁעִי refrain from adding characters to the *‘Akeda* narrative (unlike the aggadah, here Sarah and the *Satan* are not mentioned), he even leaves out the two lads, and he reduces the role of the angel. Bekhor Shor assigns the angel only his first biblical role (Gen 22:11–12), the command to “Stay your hand” (line 6). The blessings offered before Abraham’s return to the lads are attributed in the poem directly to God: “There You swore to crush and stomp upon his foes / and to bless and sanctify his descendants by the light of Your face” (lines 41–42).

Another change created by the *aggadot* relating to the theme of the *‘Akeda* is related to Isaac’s age. The Bible does not specify when the ‘*Akeda* occurred, so Isaac’s age is left in obscurity. R. Abraham ibn Ezra devoted attention to that question, and in his commentary he cites two opinions: one is that “our Sages said that Isaac was bound at the age of 37.” Ibn Ezra dismisses that opinion: “… and careful thought shows that this is not correct, since it would have been appropriate [were he actually 37 years old] that Isaac’s righteousness be evident and his reward double that of his father, for he willingly submitted to being slaughtered.” In the biblical text, however—notes ibn Ezra—“there is nothing about Isaac[‘s righteousness].” Another opinion that he cites is what “other say: that he was 5 years old.” Ibn Ezra negates that possibility as well: “This too cannot be, because he carried the wood for the sacrifice.” If we accept ibn Ezra’s analysis, we will conclude that Isaac, at the time of the *‘Akeda*, was at the end of his first decade of life or in his early teens, or as ibn Ezra puts it: “around 13 years old” (ibn Ezra on Gen 22:5).[[21]](#footnote-21)

The image of Isaac at the *‘Akeda* “grew up” over the course of Jewish writing during Second Temple times and the era of the Tannaim: according to Jubilees, Isaac was almost 16 years old at the *‘Aked*a, while Josephus writes, “And Isaac was 25 years old when the altar was built.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Seder Olam Rabba states, “Our father Isaac was, at the time he was bound, 26 years old.”[[23]](#footnote-23) In the midrashic works of the Palestinian Amora’im, Isaac was 37 years old when he was placed on the altar. Heinemann summarizes the Rabbis’ view: “In their opinion, Isaac was 37 when he went to Mt. Moriah. Obviously, if so, the merit of the ‘*Akeda* is dependent upon him more than his elderly father, in contrast to the Torah’s conception.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Although it is generally accepted by modern scholars that the understanding that Isaac’s age was 37 is demanded by the biblical narrative, the view that he was a small child continued to make itself known in aggadic circles.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The poem אוֹרִי וְיִשְׁעִי does not make Isaac’s age explicit, but his youth emerges from the poetic line, “He set his son upon it as a man quick to act” (line 17)—Abraham lifts Isaac onto the ass (reading “And he took… and Isaac in Gen 22:3 as literally taking up in his arms).

This *‘Akeda* does not give Isaac a role in seeing the destination from afar, assigning the revelation of God’s Presence (*shekhinah*) solely to Abraham: **י**וֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי נִרְאָה **לוֹ** זֹהַר / דְּמוּת כְּבוֹד יְיֳ כְּאֵשׁ אֹכֶלֶת בְּרֹאשׁ הָהָר (“On the third day the splendor appeared to **him**. / The Divine Glory appeared as a consuming fire at the top of the mountain,” lines 19–20). In the midrashic sources we read that Abraham sees the vision of God’s Presence and turns to Isaac and ascertains that he is a partner to this vision.

In addition, Bekhor Shor does not make Isaac a participant in the ritual aspects of the event. The Aggadic literature’s presentation of Isaac asking Abraham to tie him down to the altar is absent from this *piyyut*. Isaac, if this poem, is not a partner in the construction of the altar or the arranging of the wood pile. Moreover, it is quite surprising to find the poet describing Abraham as having taken on the burden not only of the fire and the slaughtering knife but the wood for the burnt offering as well: לָקַח אֵשׁ וְעֵצִים וּמַאֲכֶלֶת לְזַבֵּחַ (“He took up firestone and wood and slaughtering knife to offer a sacrifice,” line 23), in contrast to what is written in Genesis 22:6. It would appear that keeping Isaac’s role in the ritual to a minimum, keeping him out of the mystical experience, and his liberation from carrying the wood were intended to project an image of a very young Isaac. The poem ends with these lines: קָדוֹשׁ לִהְיוֹת לוֹ לְמִסְתּוֹר וּלְמַחְסֶה / יְיֳ יִרְאֶה לוֹ הַשֶּׂה (“Holy One, to be his hiding place and refuge, / The Lord will provide the ram,” lines 55–56). Isaac’s merit accruing to his descendants preserves the portrait of him as a sheep for a burn-offering.

The presentation of Isaac as a youngster at the time of the ‘Akeda is consonant with the hierarchy of characters—God, Abraham, and Isaac—that emerges from counting the epithets for them in the poem. God’s status stand out, since God earns all these sobriquets: אוֹרִי וְיִשְׁעִי, גַאֲוַת חַרְבִּי, מַלְכִּי וּמִשְׂגַּבִּי, אָבִי אָבִי, דָּגוּל, אֵל עֶלְיוֹן, שׁוֹכֵן עֲלִיָּה, גְּדוֹל הָעֵצָה, רַב הָעֲלִילִיָּה, חַי, עוֹבֵר עַל פֶּשַׁע, עָוֹן נוֹשֵׂא, and קָדוֹשׁ. Next in the rankings is Avraham, who is called זָרִיז וְנִשְכָּר; חָרֵד וְיָרֵא; שָׂשׂ עַל דְּבָרוֹ; אִיֹש זָהִיר וְנִזְהָר; אִיֹש מָהִיר בִּמְלֶאכֶת; אִיֹש יְֹשַר לֶכֶת; איש חסידך; and מִתְהַלֵּך בְּתֻמּוֹ. Isaac, for his part, is given no epithets at all in this poem (other than, perhaps, the term הַשֶּׂה, “the sheep,” which might be referring to him). The placement of Isaac in last place in the ranking of characters in this *‘Akeda* story, similar to his position in the biblical original, free of all descriptors, aligns well with the view that Isaac was a very young boy at the time of the events, not a full partner in the great test and without a share in the praise for the one put to that test.

Isaac’s tender age is also evident in Bekhor Shor’s commentary to Gen 22:8:

“God will provide for Himself the sheep for a burnt offering, my son”: i.e., ‘you, my son.’ He told him something that is ambiguous, telling him the truth as he understood it, saying ‘My son, the Holy One, blessed be He, will provide for Himself [as] the sheep!’ And our Sages said (Gen Rab 56, 4) that Isaac understood, and nevertheless the two of them “went on together” of one mind to do the will of the Creator.

Bekhor Shor distinguishes between Abraham’s perception (“Isaac, you are the sheep”) and the son’s perception (“God will find a sheep”). The idea that “Isaac understood” that he was to be the sacrifice is attributed to the Rabbis, and it is evident that he does not accept it as the *peshat* meaning.

The difference between the the imagine of Isaac in the Hebrew Bible and that found in *aggadah* and liturgical poetry is expressed by by Shulamit Elitzur: “Isaac—the passive victim—becomes, in the *midrashim*, the central character who willingly gives up his life.”[[26]](#footnote-26) In this poem, Bekhor Shor shapes Isaac in the mold of his biblical image. He does adopt two aggadic images in the poem, though, in relation to Isaac: פָּשַׁט בֵּן גָּרוֹן לִישָּׁחֵט לִכְבוֹדֶךָ (“The son extended his throat to be slaughtered for Your glory,” line 33) and תָמִיד אֶפְרוֹ צָבוּר לְפָנֶיךָ בְּגוֹדֶשׁ (“At all times his ashes are gathered before You in ample measure,” line 43), neither of which clashes with the portrayal of Isaac as passive. Isaac’s submissive character finds expression in the term “the sheep,” with which the poem closes: יְיֳ יִרְאֶה לוֹ הַשֶּׂה (“The Lord will provide for himself the sheep,” line 56(.

In addition to the two aggadic motifs mentioned above, the poem comprises another midrashic plot element as well: the vision of God’s Presence, the *Shekhina*, at the top of the mountain.

**IV. The Poetics of the *‘Akeda* Narrative in Bekhor Shor’s Torah Commentary and in His Poem אוֹרִי וְיִשְׁעִי**

As demonstrated above, thebound Isaac’s young age is seen both in Bekhor Shor’s biblical commentary and his poem .אוֹרִי וְיִשְׁעִי The author was familiar with the commentary of Rashbam (Samuel b. Meir) to Gen 22:2, according to which the test to which God put Abraham was the infliction of anguish, which Abraham experiences as a punishment for the pact he had made with Abimelech:

“And it came to pass after these events…” – Here also, “After these events,” that Abraham made a pact—obligating himself, his children, and his grandchildren—with Abimelech and gave him the seven ewes of the flock; and God became angry about this, since the land of the Philistines is included in the Israelite borders, within which God commanded, “You shall not let a soul stay alive” (Deut 20:16). […] Accordingly, “God tested Abraham,” i.e., He provoked him and caused him pain.: [*nissah* (usually translated “tested”) means to provoke], as it is written, “Since he provoked you with suffering [*ha-nissah*] you are unable” (Job 4:2); [and it is written:] “because they provoked [*nassotam*] the Lord [—hence the name] Massah and Meribah” [“Provocation and Quarrelsomeness”] (Ex 17:7); [and it is written] “Test me, O Lord, and provoke me [*ve-nasseni*]” (Ps. 26:2).”[[27]](#footnote-27)

Bekhor Shor, in his own Torah commentary (at Gen 22:1) refers to Rashbam’s commentary without mentioning him by name. He adopts the idea of seeing a connection between the consecutive passages in Genesis, but he rejects Rashbam’s judgmental stance. Bekhor Shor returns to the original interpretation of the verb נִסָּה as “test” and argues that the purpose of the test was to refute the *Satan*’s claim, which includes Rashbam’s phrasing:

“After these events” – Abraham became a prominent personage, and the kings make a pact with him. “Tested Abraham” – Put him to a test, so that the *Satan*, the accuser, and disputant, could not say of him, “Does Abraham not have good reason to revere God? Why, have You not fenced him round, him and his household and all that he has? And the kings make a treaty with him, as well,” along the lines of what he said to Job (Job 1:9). He asked of him the thing most precious to him, more than his own person and wealth, and since he did not hold that back and did not become enraged… but put his trust in [סָמַךְ עַל] the Blessed Holy One’s commandment.

Rashbam concludes his commentary to Gen 22:1, cited above, with a long passage from Midrash Samuel that argues that many defeats suffered by Israel came as a result of this sin:

Later I found a similar interpretation in Midrash Samuel: […] God said to him, “You gave [Abimelech] seven ewes; I swear that his descendants will wave seven successful wars against your descendants.” Another interpretation: “I swear that his descendants will kill the following seven righteous men from among your descendants. […] Another interpretation: “I swear that his descendants will destroy seven sanctuaries. […] Another interpretation: “The ark will remain in Philistine territory for seven months.”

In lines 41–42 of his poem, Bekhor Shor offers a poetic paraphrase of God’s oath to Abraham (Gen 16–l8). He introduces that oath with the words שָׁם נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ (“There you swore”). The use of the adverb שָׁם with a conjugated form of the verb נִשְׁבַּע occurs only once in the Hebrew Bible, in the narrative of Abraham’s covenant with Abimelech: שָׁם נִשְׁבְּעוּ (Gen. 21:37). In this way, Bekhor Shor expresses in his poem the view that God’s oath to Abraham at the end of the *‘Akeda* cancels out the shortcoming in Abraham’s oath, since the *‘Akeda* overshadows his pact with his neighbors.

Particular emphasis is placed by Bekhor Shor in his commentary on Abraham’s alacrity in rising on the morning of the ‘Akeda: “‘Abraham arose early in the morning’ to saddle his ass—he himself, because he showed alacrity and drive [זָרִיז וְרָדוּף] to do the will of his Creator” (Bekhor Shor on Gen 22:3). In the poem too, Bekhor Shor lingers over this motif, using almost identical phrasing:

**זָרִיז וְ**נִשְׂכַּר שָׂם בֹּקֶר לְבָקְרוֹ / צָלַח וְרָכַב לִכְבוֹד אֵל וַהֲדָרוֹ

חָרֵד וְיָרֵא וְשָׂשׂ עַל דְּבָרוֹ / **וַיַּשְׁכֵּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַחֲבֹשׁ אֶת חֲמֹרוֹ**

The man of alacrity and reward rose at dawn,

won success and rode off for the honor and glory of God.

Trembling in reverence and rejoicing in His message,

Abraham role early and the morning and saddle his ass. (lines 13-16)

The expression -**זָרִיז וְ** followed by a participle form is shared by Bekhor Shor’s Bible commentary and the lines of his poem dedicated to Abraham’s early start. Moreover, in both places the same line from Genesis is quoted: וַיַּשְׁכֵּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַחֲבֹשׁ אֶת חֲמֹרוֹ (although the infinitive is substituted for the conjugated verb וַיַחֲבֹשׁ in the poem).

The words “to do the will of his Creator” in the commentary are reflected in another place in the poem, following closely on the lines just cited:

טָעַן אֶת בְּנוֹ כְּאִישׁ זָהִיר וְנִזְהָר / **לַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹן** מַלְכּוֹ שָׁקַד וּמִהַר.

He set his son upon it as a man who is cautious and careful.

To do the will of his King he took care to be quick. (lines 17–18)

Here Bekhot Shor gives us a description of the saddling the ass similar to that of placing the son on it in his poem. The phrase זָהִיר וְנִזְהָר in line 17 of the poem are assonant with the phrase זָרִיז וְרָדוּף in the commentary, and the words שָׁקַד וּמִהַר in the poem are connected by semantic content to those very words. The expressions לעשות רצון בוראו (“to do the will of his Creator”) in the commentary and לַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹן מַלְכּוֹ (“to do the will of his King”) in the poem (line 18) are almost identical.

In his commentary, Bekhor Shor emphazises that the command “Do not extend your hand against the lad” comes from the mouth of the angel (Gen 22:11), and so it is in the poem, in contrast to a longstanding tradition among *payyetanim* that attributed the command rescuing Isaac directly to God. (So it is, for example, in the ancient poem אֵיתָן לִמֵּד דַּעַת:

**שַׁדַּי הִצְרִיחַ** לוֹ / תֶּרֶף יָדְךָ מְהֵרָה

**תְּמוּר בִּנְךָ רָצִיתִי** / תָּפוּר בַּסְּבַךְ בַּקֶּרֶן

The Almighty shouted out to him / Loosen your hand right away!

A substitute for your son is what I want / Tied up in the thicket by its horn.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Sometimes *[נושא המשפט חסר במקור]* obscures the source of the command. (That is the case, for example, in Binyamin bar Zeraḥ’s poem אַהֲבַת עֶזֶז וְתֹקֶף חִבָּה , where we read “נַעַר אַל תִּשְׁחֹט קוֹל אֵלָיו בָּא” (“‘Do not slaughter the lad,’ a voice came to him.”)[[29]](#footnote-29) Bekhor Shor makes the angel present with doubled emphasis by the use of rhyme and poetic language: צִיר נֶאֱמָן שָׁלַחְתָּ לְאִישׁ חֲסִידֶךָ (line 35, “A faithful delegate You dispatched to Your faithful follower”), followed by a biblical citation *[Translator’s note: the Hebrew is a bit obscure here: שונה הוראה]*: וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הַמַּלְאָךְ הֶרֶף יָדֶיךָ (line 36, “and the angel said to him, ‘Stay your hand’”).

There are differences as well in the poetics of the *‘Akeda* tale between Bekhor Shor’s commentary and his poem אוֹרִי וְיִשְׁעִי. Those differences stem from the difference in genre between the two works, because along with his aspiration to penetrate to the *peshat* meaning of the biblical text, he had great respect for *aggadah*.[[30]](#footnote-30) Therefore he did not refrain from including in his poem distinctly aggadic motifs. Thus in contrast to his commentary to Gen 22:2, where he states that Abraham identified his destination by being spoken to by God (“to the place which I will tell you”), in the poem Bekhor Shor includes what is told in the midrash about Abraham receiving a vision, a revelation of the divine presence (*shekhina*) by means of which he identified the holy mountain:

יוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי נִרְאָה לוֹ זֹהַר / דְּמוּת כְּבוֹד יְיֳ כְּאֵשׁ אֹכֶלֶת בְּרֹאשׁ הָהָר

On the third day the splendor appeared to him. /

The Divine Glory appeared as a consuming fire at the top of the mountain.

(lines 19–20)

Prosaic information in the Bible, “On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar” (Gen 22:4), left a void for the Rabbis to fill: how did Abraham know that that was “the place”? A midrash tells us: “And what did he see? A pillar of fire rising from the earth to the heavens” (*Pirke de-R. Eliezer*, 31). In Bekhor Shor’s poem, the vision is transformed from a means of navigation to an ecstatic religious experience that Abraham has earned as a reward for his piety.

**V. The Use of Biblical Language in Bekhor Shor’s Commentary and the Integration of His Language into Biblical Quotations in the Poem**

In the poem אוֹרִי וְיִשְׁעִי we encounter Bekhor Shor’s tendency to graft his own wording onto that of the Hebrew Bible. This phenomenon is particularly prominent in the biblical quotations at the end of each rhymed quatrain, where Bekhor Shor gives himself free rein. Among nine such quatrains describing the events of the *‘Akeda*, four “biblical endings” cite the Bible with changes to the original text. Three combine parts of biblical passages into a new “verse” and one introduces minor changes, and in that way Bekhor Shor introduces changes into the meaning of the biblical story:

1. “דְּמוּת כְּבוֹד יְיֳ כְּאֵשׁ אֹכֶלֶת בְּרֹאשׁ הָהָר” (line 20, “The form of the Divine Glory appeared as a consuming fire at the top of the mountain”) grafts together “מַרְאֵה דְּמוּת כְּבוֹד יי” (Ezekiel 1:28, “A vision of form of the Divine Glory”) and “וּמַרְאֵה כְּבוֹד יי כְּאֵשׁ אֹכֶלֶת בְּרֹאשׁ הָהָר” (Ex 24:17, “A vision of the Divine Glory appeared as a consuming fire at the top of the mountain” ).

2. “וְהִקְרִיבוֹ לִפְנֵי יְיֳ וְהִגִּישׁוֹ לִפְנֵי יְיֳ אֶל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ” (line 24, “And he brought him near before the Lord and presented him before the Lord on the altar”) grafts together “וְהִקְרִיבוֹ לִפְנֵי יי” (Lev 3:12, 12:7, he shall bring him near before the Lord) and “וְהִגִּישׁוֹ אֲדֹנָיו אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים וְהִגִּישׁוֹ [...] וַעֲבָדוֹ לְעֹלָם” (Ex 21:6, “His master shall present him to the Lord and present him […] And he shall serve him in perpetuity”). Here, Bekhor Shor combines verses taken from the ritual law of sacrifice with a verse from the legal passage about Israelite servants. This juxtaposition of everyday terms enable Bekhor Shor to link the *‘Akeda* to the Israelite servant’s willingness to give himself over to his master (“I love my master” – Ex 21:5), which is complete subjugation (“… and he will serve him in perpetuity” – Ex 21: 6). This is a daring statement, because commonplace language from the pericope in Exodus about Israelite servants undergoes elevation and becomes epithets for God.

3. “וַיִּתֵּן אוֹתוֹ עַל הַמִּתְהַפֶּכֶת” (line 32, “And set him upon the twirling [sword]”) draws on “וַיִּתֵּן אֹתוֹ עַל הַמַּהְפֶּכֶת” (Jer 20:2, “he had him put in a cell [JPS translators note: ‘meaning of Hebrew uncertain’]”) and “"לַהַט הַחֶרֶב הַמִּתְהַפֶּכֶת” (Gen 3:24, “the fiery ever-turning sword”). The word הַמִּתְהַפֶּכֶת is a hapax legomenon whose meaning in the poem, by association, is “sword.” Bekhor Shor inserts the verse from Jeremiah into his poem in its original form, adding only the letter ת into מהפּכת to refashion it as a sword, another term for what appears in the biblical *‘Akeda* narrative as a מַאֲכֶלֶת.

4. “וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הַמַּלְאָךְ הֶרֶף יָדֶיךָ” (line 36, “And the angel said to him, ‘Stay your hand’”) is constructed on the basis of “וַיֹּאמֶר לַמַּלְאָךְ הַמַּשְׁחִית רַב עַתָּה הֶרֶף יָדֶךָ” (2 Sam 24:16 and 1 Chr 21:15, “And He said to the destroying angel, ‘Enough! Stay your hand’”). In the verse from Samuel and Chronicles, God, regretting the harm He had intended to inflict, orders the angel doing the people in to set down the sword of plague that he had extended against Jerusalem. In the poem, the angel beseeches Abraham to take back the sword brandished over the neck of his beloved son. Bekhor Shor does not hesitate to intervene and change Scripture and put his own imprint on the biblical quotation.

In summary, some of the poetic characteristics of Bekhor Shor’s Torah commentary made their way into his *piyyut*. He integrated his own words into those of Scripture. Expressions appear in the poem that are very close to the language of his Torah commentary in the section on the *‘Akeda*. In contrast to biblical poetics, Bekhor Shor enriches his *piyyut* with many statements *[? – חיוויים]*, while on the other hand, in a move that is the opposite of what the midrashic tradition does, Bekhor Shor actually reduces the number of secondary characters~~.~~ Like the Hebrew Bible, Bekhor Shor too minimizes Isaac’s role in the plot, but he does not refrain from inserting midrashic motifs into the story of the *‘Akeda* as told in his poem, including descriptions of Isaac’s self-abnegating readiness to offer himself up as a sacrifice. Abraham’s readiness to act immediately and quickly on the morning of the *‘Akeda*, which emerges from between the lines of the biblical telling, is described in אוֹרִי וְיִשְׁעִי at great length.

1. . Habermann, *Toledot Ha-piyyut Ve-ha-shira*, I(Ramat Gan, 1970), 165; Binyamin Bar-Tikva, *Liturgical poems of Rabbi Yitzhak Hasniri* (Hebrew; Ramat Gan, 1996), 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . Habermann, *Toledot Ha-piyyut Ve-ha-shira*, I, 172–184. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. . Fleischer, *Hebrew Liturgical Poetry in the Middle Ages* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1975), 431. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. . Fleischer, *Hebrew Liturgical Poetry*, 477. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. . Schmeltzer, *Studies in Jewish Bibliography and Medieval Hebrew Poetry* (Hebrew; New York–Jerusalem, 1996), 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. . Habermann, “Rabbenu Ephraim,” 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. . See Efraim Elimelech Urbach, *The Tosaphists: Their History, Writings and Methods* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1956/7), 134–140. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. . Jonathan Jacobs, Bekhor Shoro Hadar Lo: *R. Joseph Bekhor Shor between Continuity and Innovation* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2017),1. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. . Jacobs, *Bekhor Shoro*, 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. . Abraham Geiger, *Parshandata: ʻAl Ḥakhme Tsarefat Mefarshe Ha-mikra* (Leipzig, 1855; reprinted Jerusalem, 1971), 45; Yosef Priel, *Darko Ha-parshanit shel R. Ḥizkiyah ben Manoaḥ [Ḥizzekuni] Be-ferusho La-torah* (Diss.; Ramat Gan, 2010), 53, 57–63. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. . Daniel Goldschmidt and Avraham Fraenkel, *Leket Piyyute Seliḥot me’et Payyetane Ashkenaz Va-Tsarefat* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1993), pp. 263–265, 271–275 respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. . See Ben-Zion Eshel and Tamar Lavi, “On the Identity of ‘Joseph,’ Author of the *Piyyut* ‘*Adonai Ori Ve-yish‘i*,’” *Ḥemda‘at* 10 (2017/18), 141–175. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. . This emerges from the Epistle of Rav Sherira Gaon and Rav Hai on the laws of fast days (Albeck, *Ha-Eshkol*) 51b; BT Sanh 89b; Bernard Septimus, “*Ḥananto le-me’a peri*: From Early Piyyut to the Babylonian Talmud,” *Lešonenu*71 (2009): 79–95 (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. . Fleischer, *Hebrew Liturgical Poetry*, 470. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. . Daniel Goldschmidt and Avraham Fraenkel, *Leket Piyyute* *Seliḥot Me’et Payyetane Ashkenaz Va-Tzarefat* (Jerusalem, 1993), I, 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. . The poem appears, with rich annotation, in Goldschmidt and Fraenkel, *Seliḥot*, I, 271–274. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. . Shulamit Elizur, *A Poem for Every* Parasha*: Torah Readings Reflected in the* Piyyutim (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1999), 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. . At the beginning of the pericope (Gen 22:1), Abraham replies to God with the word *hinneni*, a response that expresses complete responsiveness to the divine command. Along the way to Mt. Moriah (Gen 22:7), Abraham answers Isaac with *hinneni*. The dramatic tension is resolved with Abraham’s second response to God when replies to the angel’s call (Gen 22:11) with *hinneni*. See Arieh Simon, “*He‘arot le-farashat ‘akedat yitzḥak*” in *Reflections on the Bible: Selected Studies of the Bible Circle in Memory of Yishai Ron*, Vol. 1 (Hebrew; Tel Aviv, 1974), 163–170 [reference here to p. 167]. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. . See the commentary of R. Samson Raphael Hirsch to Gen 22:3, 6–8, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. . On repetition in biblical narrative as a way of setting off a passage from the continuum, see Aharon Mirsky, *The Punctuation of Hebrew Style* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1978), 51-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. . See Uriel Simon on “*‘Akedat yitzḥak*”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uqUAMPbhl8 at 43:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. . Cana Verman, *Book of Jubilees: Introduction, Translation, and Interpretation* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2015), 16:15 (p. 298), 17:15 (p. 308). Josephus Flavius, *Antiquities*, Book I, p. 25, column 228 *[Translator’s note: Authors should check Loeb Classical Library (Harvard U. Press) edition and cite volume and page no. there rather than the Hebrew translation.]* [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. . Chaim Joseph Milikowsky, *Seder ‘Olam: Mahadurah Madaʻit, Perush U-mavo*

    (Jerusalem, 2013) I, 220, and see his commentary (II, 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. . Isaak Heinemann, *Darkhe Ha-aggadah* (Jerusalem, 1949), p. xxx *[חסר במקור העברי]* [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. . Septimus, “*Ḥananto*,” 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. . Elizur, *A Poem for Every* Parasha, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. . Martin I. Lockshin, *Rabbi Samuel ben Meir’s Commentary on Genesis: An Annotated Translation* (Lewiston, Maine–Lampeter, Wales–Queenston, Ontario, 1989), 95–96. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. . Septimus, “*Ḥananto*,” 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. . Daniel Goldschmidt, ed., *Mahzor La-yamim Ha-nora’im*, vol. 2: *Yom Kippur* (Jerusalem, 1970), 523. And see the ‘Akeda poem by Yehi’el bar Avraham bar Yo’av, אוֹרַח מִשְּׁפָּטֶיך קִוִּינוּךָ לְמִשְׁפָּט in Avraham Frankel, *Piyyute R. Yeḥiʼel bar Avraham me-Roma* (Jerusalem, 2006/7), 157, l. 31, and see comments, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. . See Jonah Fraenkel, *Midrash Ve-aggada* (Tel Aviv, 1996), 881 and notes there. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)