Bottom of Form

Yom Kippur: Afflicted but Angelic

Self-affliction and fasting heightens awareness of our bodies; at the same time, it helps us to transcend our immanent selves. This tension was embraced by the 6th century poet Yannai in his *qerova*, who beseaches God to forgive Israel both out of pity for their wretchedness and on account of their resemblance to angels.

[Prof. Rabbi Laura Lieber](https://www.thetorah.com/author/laura-lieber)

*The Praying Jew,*Aleksander Grodzicki, *1893.*National Museum in Warsaw

A Day of Bodily Affliction

Yom Kippur observance is a uniquely body conscious. Many holidays embody rituals: eating the ritualized meal of the Passover seder; building the sukkah and shaking the four species, etc. Yom Kippur, however, stands out for its intense self-reflection on abstention.[1]

Four times, the Torah writes that וְעִנִּיתֶם אֶת נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם “you shall afflict your souls” (Lev 16:31, 23:27, 32; Num 29:7). Mishnah Yoma 8:1 understands this requirement as prohibiting adults[2] from engaging in several pleasurable bodily activities:

יום הכיפורים אסור באכילה ובשתייה וברחיצה וביסיכה ובינעילת הסנדל ובתשמיש המיטה.[3]

On Yom Kippur one is prohibited from eating, drinking, bathing, anointing, wearing sandals, and engaging in sexual intercourse.

As framed by the Mishnah, the cessation from bodily pleasures constitutes a physical manifestation of the interior processes of repentance and atonement, and they align closely with ritual practices expressing grief and manifesting otherwise existential pain.[4]

Yannai’s Yom Kippur *Qerova*

A *qerova* by the 6th c. C.E. liturgical poet Yannai highlights the centrality of the body and its experiences of self-affliction on Yom Kippur. The *qerova*—from the root ק.ר.ב, “come close”—is a form of *piyyut* that embellishes the *Amidah* (the core prayer of the Jewish prayer service), during which the prayer leader “draws near” (*qarev*) to the ark.

Yannai’s *qerova* is divided into fifteen parts, making it significantly longer than a standard nine-unit Shabbat *qerova*.[5] Each half of the *qerova* has a poem focused on the body:

**Unit Eight** prefaces the *Qedushah* and occupies what would be the penultimate space in a standard *qerova*.

**Unit Fifteen** concludes the entire work in its most complete form.[[6]](https://www.thetorah.com/article/yom-kippur-afflicted-but-angelic%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn6)

These two units share an interest in the physical experience of Yom Kippur and the ways in which ritual affects the body.[7]

Unit Eight: “See How We Stand”

In the section immediately before this poem (unit 7), the poet asserts the presence and attentiveness of God, and expansively imagines the nature of heavenly reality for his human listeners. Imbued with confidence in divine attentiveness to his own world, Yannai petitions God directly.

The opening word, “See!” (ראה), an imperative addressed to the deity, sets the tone of urgent engagement. This line establishes the two voices in the poem, “You” (God), as the subject and the people (“our”) as the object.[8]

Speaking as a member of the community, the poet catalogues the human experience of the Day of Atonement for his divine audience, by constructing a kind of penitential *waṣf* (وصف)—a term borrowed from the world of Arabic poetry in which a lover describes a beloved from head to toe—as he leads God’s eyes from the feet upward, expressing how every limb and organ suffers.[9] The poem moves, quite literally, from the soles of human feet to the heights of heaven.

Stylistically, the poem is composed of rhymed bicola, almost all of which are governed by the rhyming ending –ֵנוּ (“-*einu*”), the first-person plural possessive suffix “our” (as is the case in the Torah’s injunction to “afflict ourselves”) which stresses the communal nature of the day’s rituals. For the congregation, the experience of saying this poem would inherently stress the collective nature of the rhetoric: “our…our… / our…our…”[10]

רְאֵה עֲמִידָתֵינוּ מִכַּף וְעַד קָדְקוֺד // מִיגִּיד וְעַד עֶצֶם, מִנֶּפֶשׁ וְעַד בָּשָׂר

See how we stand, from feet to head // from sinew to bone, from soul to flesh

יָחֵף כַּפֵּינוּ נִיגּוֹף אֶצְבְּעוֹתֵינוּ // נָדוּ רַגְלֵינוּ וְהָלְמוּ עֲקֵיבֵינוּ

Our soles are bare, our toes, wounded // our feet wander and our heels are raw[[11]](https://www.thetorah.com/article/yom-kippur-afflicted-but-angelic%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn11)

מָעֲדוּ קַרְסֻולֵּינוּ וְדַליוּ שׁוֹקֵינוּ // כָּשְׁלוּ בִּירְכֵּינוּ וְקָטְנוּ יְרֵיכֵינוּ

Our ankles wobble and our calves are frail // our knees are weak and our thighs are thin

חֻולְחֲלוּ מָתְנֵינוּ וְנֶעֶצְבוּ כְסָלֵינוּ // הָמוּ מֵיעֵינוּ וְנִיתַּר לִבֵּינוּ

Our loins quiver and our kidneys labor // our innards churn and our hearts lurch

מָטָה זְרוֹעֵינוּ וְלֹא הִישִׂיגָה יָדֵינוּ // הֻוכְחַשׁ שִׁיכְמֵינוּ בְּעוֹל צַוָּארֵינוּ

Our arms give out and our hands cannot reach // our shoulders flinch at the yoke upon our necks[12]

נִיסְקַד גְּרוֹנֵינוּ בְּמַכַּת לְחָיֵינוּ // יָבְשׁוּ שְׂפָתֵינוּ וְקֵיהוּ שִׁינֵּינוּ

Our throats sting at the smiting of our palates // our lips blanch and our teeth are blunted –

וְתִיפְאַרְתָּךְ בְּפִינוּ וְצִידְקָךְ בִּילְשׁוֹנֵינוּ // קָצַר נֶשֶׁם אַפֵּינוּ וְצָלוּ אָזְנֵינוּ

[Despite this] Your splendor is within us and Your justice upon our tongues![13] // our breath is short in our nostrils and our ears ring

נִיכְלַם מִיצְחֵינוּ וְחָוְורוּ פָנֵינוּ // כָּלוּ עֵינֵינוּ וְנֶעֶצְבוּ רַקּוֹתֵינוּ

Our visages flush and our faces pale // our eyes dim and our brows crease

אַגְמַן רֹאשֵׁינוּ וְסָמַר שַׂעֲרֵינוּ // נִיבְהֲלוּ עֲצָמֵינוּ וְצָפַד עוֹרֵינוּ

Our heads bow low and our hair stands on end // our bones quake and our skin tightens

נָקְטָה נַפְשֵׁינוּ קָפְדָה רוּחֵינוּ // נִיצְרַפְנוּ בָאֵשׁ נִיבְחַנְנוּ בַמַּיִם

Our souls recoil and our spirits shrivel // we are smelted in fire, and tested by water

בְּשִׂימְחָה בְּצָרָה בַּבַּיִת וּבַגָּלוּת הַשְׁכֵּם וְהַעֲרֵב

In joy and in sorrow, at home and in exile, [at] sunrise and sunset

The Experience of Self-Affliction

The poet describes the bodily sensations of fasting, standing, and praying on an awesome day, but does not explain why one afflicts her or his body on Yom Kippur, focusing instead on the comprehensive nature of the affliction.[14]

The piyyut’s power derives in part from how it engages the senses, not only vision but the more diffuse sense of corporeality. Tracking slowly upward (“from feet to head”) and outward (“from soul to flesh”), the congregants do not just hear the poem but feel and experience it, attending to their own bodies and bodily sensations, interior and exterior. Their bare feet feel the floor and their faces sense the furrowing of the brow, even as the soul feels the need to repent.[15] Foregrounding the sensory processes by which an individual becomes aware of his or her bodily sensation and inward feelings, the poet appeals to God’s ability to see both what is external and, unlike God’s human counterparts, to perceive what is internal.

As Above, So Below: The Angelic Body in Stanza 15

The final unit of Yanai’s *qerova*, a full alphabetical acrostic with rhymed bicola, also takes up the theme of the body, but instead of focusing on suffering, it highlights the bodily similarity between angels and Jews on Yom Kippur, when the gulf between heaven and earth fades and the differences between heavenly creatures and mortals blurs.

To be sure, what comes naturally to the angelic hosts requires tremendous effort for humans and the affinity can only be sustained temporarily, but the resemblance nonetheless is real (line 1):

אָז עֶלְיוֹנִים עִם תַּחְתּוֹנִים // בְּיוֹם זֶה שָׁוִוים שְׁלֵימִים וְנָוִוים.

Then those on high join with those below[16] // on this day, they are alike, perfect and pleasing

גִּיל קְדֻושַּׁת הַיּוֹם בְּשָׂפָה בְרוּרה // דֵּי מַעְלָה וּמַטָּה קְדֻושָּׁה בְחוּרָה.

Rejoicing in the holiness of this day with clear speech // Sufficient for those above and below is this chosen holiness

Hovering over the conceit of this poem—its governing theme and imagery—might be Psalm 8’s wondering at humans having been created just a little bit lesser than divinities:

תהלים ח:ה מָה אֱנוֹשׁ כִּי תִזְכְּרֶנּוּ וּבֶן אָדָם כִּי תִפְקְדֶנּוּ. ח:ו וַתְּחַסְּרֵהוּ מְּעַט מֵאֱלֹהִים וְכָבוֹד וְהָדָר תְּעַטְּרֵהוּ.

Ps 8:5 What is man that You have been mindful of him, mortal man that You have taken note of him, 8:6 that You have made him little less than divine, and adorned him with glory and majesty.

Standing rhetorically at some remove from the scene,[17] the poet speaks directly to God, describing the practices of the day not in penitential terms or even as a kind of physical challenge—in strong contrast to Unit 8. Instead, taking an almost rapturous tone, Unit 15 suggests that the people, by behaving like angels, make their own best appearance before God on Yom Kippur.[18]

Focusing on Israel’s Heavenly Traits

Yannai’s depiction of Yom Kippur ritual practices in this poem stands out and is even more interesting than its theology. Even more important is the meaningfulness he ascribes to the rituals: They are not penitential, not reflective of self-denial or affliction, not acts of atonement; instead, they indicate the human potential for angelic mimesis.

The poem’s catalogue differs from the Mishnah’s list.

**Fasting**—Abstention from eating and drinking, of course, holds pride of place:

הֲמוֹן קְדוֹשֵׁי מַעְלָה כְּעֶרְכָּךְ קִידַּשְׁתָּה // וַועַד אֲשֶׁר אֵין שָׁם אֲכִילָה וּשְׁתִייָּה בְּפִימוֹ.

The holy multitudes above: You hallowed as You saw fit // a community in which neither food not drink passes the lips

זֶרַע קְדוֹשֵׁי מַטָּה בְּיוֹם זֶה יְקֻודָּשׁוּ // חֲדֵילֵי אוֹכֵל וּמַשְׁקֶה וְיוֹם עָשׂוֹר בְּפִימוֹ.

The holy seed below: let it be hallowed on this day // as it ceases to let food or drink pass its lips on the tenth day (=10th of Tishrei, Yom Kippur).[19]

**Peacemaking**—The positive act of making peace with one’s fellows suggests the practices that emerged out of m. Yoma 8:9, and illustrates the potential for peace to reign below as it does above:

טַפְסְרֵי מַעְלָה שָׁלוֹם מֻותְוָוךְ בֵּינֵימוֹ // יַחַד כִּירְצוֹן צוּר רְצוּיִים זֶה לָזֶה

Peace reigns among the dignitaries above // unified, each with the other, seeking the Rock’s goodwill

כָּל אִישׁ יְרַצֶּה חֲבֵירוֹ בְּיוֹם זֶה // לְמַעַן יוּטַל שָׁלוֹם בֵּין זֶה לָזֶה.

Let each person seek out his fellow on this day // in order to make peace, each with the other

**White Clothes**—Wearing white echoes the custom (one ongoing to the present) of wearing a *kittel*—a burial shroud—on Yom Kippur, but here it is not taken as a sign of mortality or, as in the end of m. Ta’anit, democratization, but rather of heavenly purity:

מַעֲטֵה לְבוּשׁ מַעְלָה בַּדִים לְבָנִים // נְקִיֵּי כָל שֶׁימֶץ וּמֵחֵט מְלֻובָּנִים.

The mantle of white linen worn by those above // is pure of all filth and cleansed of sins

סוּת עַם זוּ בְּמַטָּה הַיֹּום לְבָנִים // עֲבוּר כִּי מֵחֲטָאֵימוֹ הֵם מִיתְלַבְּנִים.

Today the garb of this people down below is [also] white // as they purify themselves of their sins

**Barefoot with Feet Together**—Standing barefoot does appear, and suggests a specific understanding of (or variant on) the Mishnaic prohibition on wearing sandals.[20] At the same time, the poem combines this with the mystical view of angels as having one straight leg (Ezek 1:7), with no knees, and hopping when they speak:

פְּלִיאֵי מַעְלָה אֵין לָמוֹ קְפִיצַת רֶגֶל // צְעִידָתָם יְשָׁרָה יְחֵיפֵי כַּף רֶגֶל.

The wondrous beings above are unbending of leg // they stand (with legs) straight, and barefoot

קְהָלֵינוּ הַיּוֹם בּיוֹשֶׁר מַצַּב רֶגֶל // רְעָדָה בְּצְעָדָה מִיּוֹחֲפֵי רֶגֶל.

Our congregation today stands upright, firm of leg // trembling with every barefoot step

This is the only other Mishnaic prohibition listed; neither intercourse, bathing, nor anointing are mentioned, perhaps because they are intimate or domestic activities.

**Prayer**—Hallowing and unifying God’s name underscores the importance of prayer throughout the Day of Atonement that aligns with what angels are said to do continually, as quoted in the first line of the *Qedushah*:

שְׁמָךְ בְּשָׁוֵוי כּאֶחָת יַקְדִישׁוּ // בְּיוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַחַת הִיא בְּרוּם וּבְתָחַת.

Your name, in parallel, they hallow as one // on the day when above and below are as one

תֶּעֱרַב וְתִנְעַם כְּקוֹרְאֵי זֶה אֶל זֶה // קְדֻוּשַׁת עַם זֶה בְּקִידּוּשׁ יוֹם זֶה.

May You find it sweet and pleasing when they call out, the one to the other // the holiness of this people with the hallowing of this day.[21]

Connection to Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer

As Zvi Meir Rabinovitz notes in his critical edition of Yannai’s piyyutim, this unit strongly recalls a tradition recorded in Pirqe deRabbi Eliezer 46 [45 in Higger ed], a text which (in its final form) postdates Yannai. The midrash describes how the angel Samael (some texts actually the *satan*), whose job it is to critique Israel, sees how sin free they are on Yom Kippur and describes them as angelic:

גּוֹרָלוֹ שֶׁל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא קָרְבַּן עוֹלָה, וְגוֹרָלוֹ שֶׁל עֲזָאזֵל שְׂעִיר חַטָּאת. וְכָל עֲוֹנוֹתֵיהֶם שֶׁל יִשְׂרָאֵל הָיָה עָלָיו, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר [שם כב] וְנָשָׂא הַשָׂעִיר עָלָיו אֶת כָּל עֲוֹנוֹתָם.

The lot for the Holy Blessed One was the offering of a burnt offering, and the lot for Azazel was the goat as a sin offering, for all the iniquities of Israel were upon it, as it is said, “And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities” (Lev. 16:22).

רָאָה סַמָּאֵל שֶׁלֹּא נִמְצָא בָהֶם חֵטְא בְּיוֹם הַכִּפֻּרִים, אָמַר לְפָנָיו רִבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, יֵשׁ לְךָ עַם אֶחָד בָּאָרֶץ כְּמַלְאֲכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת בַּשָּׁמָיִם.

Samael saw that sin was not to be found among them (i.e., the Israelites) on the Day of Atonement. He said before the Holy Blessed One: Sovereign of all the universe! You (already) have a people (on earth) like the ministering angels who are in heaven.

מַה מַּלְאֲכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת אֵין לָהֶם קְפִיצִין, כָּךְ הֵם יִשְׂרָאֵל עוֹמְדִים עַל רַגְלֵיהֶם בְּיוֹם הַכִּפֻּרִים.

Just as the ministering angels have no joints, so, too, the Israelites stand upon their feet (i.e., with knees locked).[22]

מַה מַּלְאֲכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת אֵין לָהֶם אֲכִילָה וּשְׁתִיָּה, כָּךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵין לָהֶם אֲכִילָה וּשְׁתִיָּה בְּיוֹם הַכִּפֻּרִים.

Just as the ministering angels have neither food nor drink, so, too, the Israelites have neither food nor drink on the Day of Atonement.

מַה מַּלְאֲכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת יָחֲפֵי רֶגֶל בְּיוֹם הַכִּפֻּרִים, כָּךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל יָחֲפֵי רֶגֶל בְּיוֹם הַכִּפֻּרִים.[23]

Just as the ministering angels have bare feet, so, too, the Israelites have bare feet on the Day of Atonement.

מַה מַּלְאֲכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת שָׁלוֹם מְתַוֵּךְ בֵּינֵיהֶם, כָּךְ הֵם יִשְׂרָאֵל שָׁלוֹם מְתַוֵּךְ בֵּינֵיהֶם בְּיוֹם הַכִּפֻּרִים.

Just as peace reigns among the ministering angels, so, too, does peace reign among the Israelites on the Day of Atonement.

מַה מַּלְאֲכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת נְקִיִּם מִכָּל חֵטְא, כָּךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל נְקִיִּם מִכָּל חֵטְא בְּיוֹם הַכִּפֻּרִים.

Just as the ministering angels are innocent of all sin on the Day of Atonement, so, too, are the Israelites innocent of all sin on the Day of Atonement.

וְהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא שׁוֹמֵעַ עֲתִירָתָן שֶׁל יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן הַקַּטֵּגוֹר שֶׁלָּהֶם, וּמְכַפֵּר עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְעַל הַכֹּהֲנִים וְעַל כָּל עַם הַקָּהָל לְמִגָּדוֹל וְעַד קָטֹן, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר [ויקרא טז, לג] וְכִפֵּר אֶת מִקְדַּשׁ הַקֹּדֶשׁ:

The Holy Blessed One listens to the prayers of Israel rather than their accuser, and He makes atonement for the altar, and for the sanctuary, and for the priests, and for all the people of the congregation, both great and small; as it is said, “And he shall make atonement for the holy place” (Lev. 16:16).

The two texts, poetry and prose, share the motif of parallelism between the heavenly and earthly hosts. In the midrashic crystallization of the tradition (which may reflect a knowledge of the poetic composition), scriptural quotations describing the ritual of the scapegoat and priestly rites frame the more general description of parity between angels and Israel.

In contrast to the midrash, Yannai’s poem lacks any reference to the atoning rituals of Leviticus, or the priestly acts of atonement from when the Temple stood; nor does he credit the figure of Samael, the accuser, with observing the affinities between Israel and angels. Rather the poem describes the angelic actions and attributes of the people directly, claiming that on Yom Kippur, the children of Israel become, quite literally, “angelic”: they eat no food, dwell in peace, dress in white, have unbending legs and bare feet, and in hallowing God make themselves holy. [24]

We Are Like Angels, So Forgive Us

With this poem, Yannai offers the human congregation a tremendous affirmation: in their actions and even their appearance on this day, they resemble the angels. Nevertheless, he does not ignore the gravity of the Yom Kippur context as a day of atonement.

The poem’s opening phrase, presumably recited as a refrain, explicitly seeks pardon:

אָנָא סְלַח נָא[25]

Please, forgive, please (*ana selach na*)!

As with the refrain in the previous unit (“You are our God,” in Unit 14), this easy-to-recall phrase would lend itself to communal recitation, and the doubled particle of entreaty (*ana…na*) underscores its beseeching quality. If repeated five (or even ten) times during the recitation of this unit, this refrain constitutes the most intensively penitential litany of the entire *qerova*.

How are we to understand the poet’s rapturous affirmation of humanity’s near-angelic status with his almost desperate pleading for forgiveness? This juxtaposition captures in writing the fundamental tension at the core of the day: deep recognition of the need to repent juxtaposed with confidence in the efficacy of the day’s rites.

Physical Affliction: Wretched and Heavenly at the Same Time

In the two units examined here, Yannai embraces the tensions that emerge from the stress on physical denial. The same ritual acts are imbued with different meanings, from affliction to aspiration. Yannai acknowledges the body, the most supple instrument of human expression in the world: It is the means by which a person sins, atones, and—for a moment—perhaps touches heaven.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/yom-kippur-afflicted-but-angelic)

1. Even the fast of the Ninth of Av, which aligns with Yom Kippur in terms of self-denial, does not stress physical experience of abstention to the same extent as the Day of Atonement, for which self-denial is central.
2. According to rabbinic Judaism, minors are exempt (m. Yoma 8:4). In Samaritan tradition, however, even minors (once they are past nursing age) are required to fast. See discussion in Benyamim Tsedaka, [“Afflicting the Soul: A Day When Even Children Must Fast,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/afflicting-the-soul-a-day-when-even-children-must-fast) *TheTorah* (2016).
3. Hebrew text is from the Kaufmann MS. English translation is mine.
4. On the development of these associations between pietistic practices and atonement, see David Lambert, [“Yom Kippur and the Nature of Fasting,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/yom-kippur-and-the-nature-of-fasting) *TheTorah* (2016).
5. It is possible that the entire composition was performed, as befits the expansive nature of the High Holy Day liturgy in general. But it is also possible that Poems Ten through Fifteen were understood as a menu of performance options rather than a specific script for performance; the *hazzan* may have selected which units he wished to include in the service, much as cantors today exercise their own discretion and preferences and adapt performances to the needs and preferences of their congregations.
6. The full text of the Qerova can be found in Zvi M. Rabinowitz, *מחזור פיוטי רבי יניי לתורה ולמועדים*[*The Liturgical Poems of Rabbi Yannai according to the Triennial Cycle of the Pentateuch and the Holidays*] (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1985-87), 2.210–227. This text, the standard critical edition, is read in consultation with the two volumes of annotations by Nachum M. Bronznick: *The* *Liturgical Poetry of Yannai* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 2000); and *The Liturgical Poetry of Yannai, Supplementary Volume* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 2005). It is also checked against the version available via the Ma’agarim database ([https://maagarim.hebrew-academy.org.il](https://maagarim.hebrew-academy.org.il/)). Where manuscripts were consulted, they are cited. The analysis recognizes that the poem is likely the work of more than one author but accepts that the entire work is dated to Late Antiquity. Reference is also made to the magisterial edition of Menachem Zulay, *פיוטי יניי* [*Piyyute Yannai*] (Berlin: Schocken, 1938), 328-342, 382.
7. As such, they manifest what Kathryn Reklis describes as “kinesthetic theology”—that is, physical expression and embodied experiences not only reflect but shape belief. Kathryn Reklis, *Theology and the Kinesthetic Imagination: Jonathan Edwards and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
8. The seventh adds the second person singular suffix (“Your”) to the first word, but otherwise maintains the pattern; and the final line lacks any pronominal suffixes whatsoever, offering instead three merismatic pairs: joy-sorrow, home-exile, sunrise-sunset.
9. Song 7:2–7 contains a biblical example of a “reverse” (toe-to-head) *waṣf*. That passage describes the female beloved, understood by later exegetes (including Yannai) to be Israel—and so it is akin to this passage in that regard as well. Editor’s note: For a look this poem and similar ones in the Song of Songs, see Elaine James, [“The Poetry of Beauty: What Does it Mean to See the Beloved?”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-poetry-of-beauty-what-does-it-mean-to-see-the-beloved) *TheTorah* (2020).
10. Lines 1 and 11 deviate slightly from the overall pattern, perhaps because they transition the congregation into and out of the unit
11. See Jud. 5:22. The translation attempts to capture both the conventional meaning of the root (“smite, hit”) and traditional Jewish understandings of the verse (which include meanings such as “stomp,” “trip,” “be battered”). It bears noting that Yannai’s congregation did not simply avoid wearing leather shoes; avoiding the wearing of sandals, as in the Mishnah, meant going barefoot.
12. See especially Isa. 10:27, but also Deut. 28:48 and Lam. 1:14.
13. The contrast between lowly people and exalted God in Hebrew poetry appears as early as the Psalm 8 (discussed below), and works particularly well in the piyyutim which, like the psalms, are so grounded in structures of juxtaposed binaries and resonant puns (e.g., “exalted [עליון]” and “lowly [אביון]”.
14. His depiction of physical sensations may suggest the close alignment of an individual’s exterior actions (affliction of the body) with interior experiences (affliction of the soul). Alternatively, he may wish to underscore the connection between the experience of self-affliction and that of encounter with the divine, both of which can lead limbs to tremble and give out, face to flush, and hairs to prickle.
15. Furthermore, it is possible that the performer’s body physically drew attention through performance to the progress of the poem as it moved up the body: that his own stances, gestures, and embodiment as a prayer-leader amplified awareness of the physicality of inward experiences.
16. That is, the angelic hosts and the human congregation come together in praise of God.
17. He speaks of the people and angels alike in the third person.
18. Contrast this with the previous poem (Unit 14), which asks God to manifest in all His splendor on behalf of the people.
19. Moreover, standing in parity with the angels, the community also resembles their own revered ancestors, who, it happens, are depicted in the opening three poems of the *qerova*: Unit One focuses on Abraham, and his recognition of God; Unit Two on Isaac and his willing sacrifice upon Mount Moriah; and Unit Three on Jacob and his vision of the angels at Bethel.
20. This in turn recalls Moses’ removal of shoes in Exodus 3:5 and Joshua’s in Joshua 5:15.
21. The poem ends with biblical quotes that refer back to the sacrifices on Yom Kippur, the aspect of the day’s worship that is no longer performed by the people.

ככתוב בתורתך: "אַךְ בֶּעָשׂוֹר לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי הַזֶּה יוֹם הַכִּפֻּרִים הוּא מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם וְעִנִּיתֶם אֶת נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם אִשֶּׁה לַי־הוָה."

As it is written in Your Torah*: “Yea, the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement; it shall be a sacred occasion for you: you shall practice self-affliction, and you shall bring an offering by fire to YHWH” (Lev. 23:27)*

כִּי בוֹ תּישְׁעֶה מִיַד עֲמוּסֶיךָ תְּמִידֵי יוֹם וְקָרְבַּן מוּסָף.

For on it, You shall welcome from the hand of those carried by You the daytime *tamid*-offerings and the additional sacrifice

ככתוב בתורתך: "וּבֶעָשׂוֹר לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי הַזֶּה מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם וְעִנִּיתֶם אֶת נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם כָּל מְלָאכָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ."

As it is written in Your Torah:*“On the tenth day of this seventh month you shall observe a sacred occasion when you shall practice self-affliction; you shall do no work” (Num. 29:7)*

1. This body language reflects the physical posture in which the Qedushah itself is recited, but here may also anticipate the custom of standing throughout the concluding service of Yom Kippur (Neilah). See Uri Ehrlich, *The Nonverbal Language of Prayer: A New Approach of Jewish Liturgy*. Transl. by Dena Ordan. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).
2. This line appears in the Higger edition but not in the standard printing.
3. In the poem *Unetaneh* *Toqef*—also possibly a composition by Yannai, and certainly from his time period—angels, like humans, quake in fear of judgment. For the argument that Unetaneh Tokef not only dates to Yannai’s time period, but was authored by our poet, see Yaakov S. Spiegel, “Clarification of the Words of the Piyyut, ‘But Repentence, Prayer, and Charity Avert the Evil Decree,’ and the Payyetanic Commitment to Halakhah” (Hebrew), Netu’im 8 (2001) 23-42.
4. The phrase, “Forgive, please” (סלח נא) occurs in Num. 14:19 and Amos 7:2. Yannai prefaces the phrase with the additional particle of entreaty, אנא.