

## **Yigdal – Its Meaning and Melody**

By: Cantor Paul Kowarsky

The Introduction to each of the six chapters of the “Pirkei Avot” – The Ethics of our Fathers, which are excerpts from the Mishnah, is the following:

“ All Israel have a portion in the World to Come, as it is said (in Isaiah): ‘And Thy people shall all be righteous; shall inherit the Land for ever , the branch of My planting, the work of My Hands, that I may be glorified.’”

This appears to be a very comforting doctrine, which suggests that because we are Jews, we all possess, so to speak, reserved seats in the World to Come, and each of us can claim his/her seat.

However, the Mishnah goes on to say: “And these are the ones who will have no share in the World to Come” and enumerates those with certain heretical beliefs, which could deny the Jew the right to his/her place in the World to Come.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, Maimonides, also known as “The Rambam” wrote his Commentary on the Mishnah. He proposed that the Mishnah, when it stated that certain people would ‘lose their rightful place in the World to Come,’ he actually meant that such people would cease to be regarded as Jews. The Rambam is saying that there are certain principles of Judaism that are fundamental to the Faith, the non-acceptance of which deprive the born Jew of his right in the World to Come. In other words, he/she has by so doing renounced Judaism itself.

However, in contrast to this view, we have the belief that: “ Yisrael, af al pi sh-chatah, Yisrael Hu” – “ Even a Jew who has sinned remains a Jew.” This concept is so much part and parcel of Jewish Law that even an Apostate Jew is still regarded legally as a Jew.

The view of the Rambam has in fact come under much criticism and challenge. His 13 Principles of Faith are found in our Siddur in two separate forms:

1. The Prose Form; and
2. The Metrical Form which has 13 lines.

### **The Meaning**

The Metrical Form of the 13 Principles of Faith by the Rambam is the Hymn known as “Yigdal.” Each line is a poetic formulation of one of the Principles of Faith. According to some authorities, the poetic form was actually written by Daniel Ben Yehudah, the Dayan of Rome in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, completed in 1404.

It is interesting to note that the Cabbalists objected to Rambam’s 13 Principles of Faith because, according to them, all 613 mitzvot are important, and each one of them is an Article of Faith. Influenced by the Cabbalists, many Chassidic sects do not sing the Yigdal.

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### **The Melody**

I recently received a telephone call from a Church Minister in regard to the Yigdal Hymn. He asked me about its meaning and origin.

Y.L. Peretz, the great Yiddish author, wrote a story called “The Gilgul of a Niggun.” Which is translated as “The Transmigration of a Melody.” He described how a melody composed by a Chassidic Rabbi degenerated into a popular tune sung in public bars. The Gilgul of the Yigdal melody and how it found its way into the Hymn Book of the Church is a fascinating story rooted in truth.

In 1767 Chazen Myer Leon was appointed Chazan of the Great Synagogue of London, England. He had such a magnificent voice that Jews and non-Jews alike came from far and wide to hear him daven.

Under the name of Leoni, he became a well-known opera singer at Covent Garden Opera House in London, where he sang regularly except on Shabbat and Festivals. Myer Leoni is believed to be the one who composed the melody for Yigdal. That melody became the traditional melody which was sung in the English Shuls on Friday evenings at the conclusion of the service. From England the melody made its way to many other parts of the world.

In 1770, the Reverend Charles Wesley, the hymn-writer for the Wesleyan Church, together with the Reverend Thomas Olivers, went to a Friday Evening Service to hear the famous Chazen Myer Leon. The Reverend Olivers was so impressed by the Yigdal Melody that he asked Chazen Myer Leon for the music and permission to use it as a hymn in his church services. Leon agreed, and the rest is history.

Yigdal begins –

*The G-d of Abraham Praise*

*Who reigns enthroned above*

*Ancient of everlasting days*

*And G-d of Love*

The hymn became an immediate success. By 1779, the 30<sup>th</sup> Edition of the hymn had been published. It is noteworthy that the Rev. Olivers always gave credit to the composer of the music – Chazen Myer Leon so that the hymn is generally indexed: Leoni/Yigdal. Actually, the Reverend Olivers took the melody and the meter, and adapted it to his own words.

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In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century editions of the Methodist Hymn Book still contained a hymn called ‘Leoni’ sung to the same Yigdal melody but adapted to a translation of the Yigdal. The translation is ascribed to Rabbi Max Landsberg who died in Rochester, U.S.A. in 1928.

I wonder whether the Christians who sing this hymn are aware that they are giving expression to those principles which Maimonides formulated as the creed of loyalty to Judaism. It’s even more amazing when we consider that we have only 4 hymns in our entire Shabbat liturgy:

1. L’cha Dodi;
2. Yigdal;
3. Adon Olam; and
4. Ein Keloheinu

And one has found its way by two roads into a Church Hymnal.