

## **YIGDAL יגדל: A MEDIEVAL LITURGICAL POEM (PIYYUT)**

**Prepared by Rabbi Leila Gal Berner, Ph.D.**

*Yigdal*, one of the most beloved of the medieval *piyyutim* (liturgical poems), appears as an opening hymn in the daily morning service. *Yigdal* summarizes the thirteen principles of the Jewish faith as formulated by Moses Maimonides (*RaMBaM*; late 12th century C.E.) in his Mishnah commentary on Sanhedrin 10:1.

The actual authorship of the *piyyut* itself is uncertain. Some believe that *RaMBaM* himself wrote it, though this is very unlikely. In the 19th century, Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto, one of the greatest Italian rabbis of the early modern era, concluded that the real author of *Yigdal* was Daniel ben Yehuda in Rome in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and to date, ben Yehuda's authorship seems to be generally accepted. The first known appearance of *Yigdal* in a *siddur* was in an Italian edition in 1486.

Through the words of *Yigdal*, the medieval Jew could sing a full articulation of the tenets of his<sup>1</sup> faith.

### **THE THIRTEEN PRINCIPLES OF FAITH WITH REFLECTIONS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

#### **A general reflection and question:**

Reconstructionists often proudly assert that when we pray with a Reconstructionist *siddur*, we feel that we can 'say what we mean and mean what we say,' because our liturgical language reflects Reconstructionist theology.

**How might a Reconstructionist interpret the words of *Yigdal* so that s/he can comfortably sing these words and 'say what s/he means and mean what s/he says?'**

—1—

---

1. "His" faith is mentioned here, because, for the most part, medieval women did not sing in synagogue, since there was a prohibition against hearing women's voices — this is known as the prohibition of *kol isha*. Today, of course, and certainly in a Reconstructionist community, both men and women sing *Yigdal* with great spirit.

## Specific questions on each principle of faith:

### 1. THE ETERNITY OF GOD

יִגְדַל אֱלֹהִים חַי וְיִשְׁתַּבַּח, נִמְצָא, וְאֵין עֵת אֶל מְצִיאֹתוֹ:  
*Yigdal Elohim Chai v'yishtabach, nimitza v'ein et el metziyuto*

*Let us raise up and praise the ever-living God whose reality and presence endure eternally.*

**From a Reconstructionist perspective, what does the 'eternity of God' mean? In a values-driven approach to faith like Reconstructionism, what is 'eternal' for us?**

### 2. THE ONENESS/UNITY OF GOD

אֶחָד וְאֵין יְחִיד בְּיַחְדּוֹ, נֶעְלָם, וְגַם אֵין סוּף לְאַחְדוּתוֹ:  
*Echad v'ein yachid k'yichudo ne'elam v'gam ein sof l'achduto*

*One Being, singular, unique in unity, whose measureless Oneness is a mystery.*

**From a Reconstructionist perspective, how and where does the oneness or unity of God manifest itself in our lives? In what situations might we most feel the oneness and unity of God? What does *Shma Yisra'el, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad* mean to us?**

### 3. GOD IS INCORPOREAL

אֵין לוֹ דְמוּת הַגּוּף וְאֵינוֹ גּוּף, לֹא נֶעְרַךְ אֵלָיו קְדוּשָׁתוֹ:  
*Ein lo d'mut ha-guf v'eino guf lo na'aroch alav kedushato*

*Without any likeness or corporeal form to see — Of God's holiness, no image can there be.*

**Unlike Christians, Jews do not believe that God has ever become incarnate. Reconstructionist Jews believe in a God who manifests 'transnaturally' rather than 'supernaturally.' In a transnatural sense, how is God 'incorporated' in our world?**

#### 4. GOD EXISTED BEFORE ALL CREATION

קְדָמוֹן לְכֹל דְבַר אֲשֶׁר נִבְרָא, רֵאשׁוֹן וְאֵין רֵאשִׁית לְרֵאשִׁיתוֹ:  
*Kadmon l'chol davar asher nivrah rishon v'ein raysheet l'rayshlto*  
More ancient than all created things, without origin, You were first to be.

**As Reconstructionists who believe in a kind of 'evolutionary creationism,' (i.e., that Darwinian evolution and faith in a divine Creator can exist together as complimentary concepts), how do we relate to the idea that God pre-existed Time as we understand it?**

#### 5. ONLY GOD IS TO BE WORSHIPPED

הֵנוּ אֲדוֹן עוֹלָם, לְכֹל נוֹצֵר. יוֹרֵה גְדֻלָּתוֹ וּמַלְכוּתוֹ:  
*Hinoh adon olam l'chol notzar yoreh gedulato u-malchuto*  
Crown of the world; to all your creatures You teach divine greatness and majesty.

**This principle of faith refers to our prayer lives.  
As Reconstructionists, what is the nature of our prayer?  
Why do we pray? To whom do we pray?  
What is the purpose of our prayers?  
Are we actually praying (i.e., worshipping) to God?**

#### 6. THE PROPHETS OF GOD SPOKE TRUTH

שֹׁפֵעַ נְבוּאָתוֹ נְתָנוּ, אֵל אֲנָשֵׁי סְגֻלָּתוֹ וְתַפְאָרָתוֹ:  
*Shefá n'vu-ato netano el anshay segulato v'tifarto*  
A Power that grants abundant prophecy through your treasured prophets, so gloriously

**As Reconstructionists, what is our relationship to the biblical prophetic tradition? Do we believe that the prophetic tradition ended with the closing of the biblical canon or do we see ourselves engaged with an ongoing prophetic tradition? Do we believe in modern-day prophets? If so, what are their attributes? Can we identify any contemporary prophets? What makes their work 'prophetic?'**

## 7. MOSES WAS THE GREATEST OF THE PROPHETS

לֹא קָם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה עוֹד, נָבִיא וּמַבִּיט אֶת תְּמוֹנָתוֹ:

*Lo kam b'Yisra'el k'Moshe od navi u-mabit et t'munato*

In all Israel there's been none like Moses, a prophet who alone beheld God's face.

**Reconstructionism offers specific ideas about communal models of leadership — for its clergy and for its laypeople. What do we learn from Moses' leadership that might be consistent with a Reconstructionist model, and what might conflict with Reconstructionist principles?**

## 8. THE WRITTEN AND ORAL TORAH WERE GIVEN TO MOSES BY GOD

תּוֹרַת אֱמֶת נָתַן לְעַמּוֹ, אֵל, עַל יַד נְבִיאָוּ נֶאֱמַן בֵּיתוֹ

*Torat emet natan l'amo El, al yad n'vee-oh ne'eman beito.*

A teaching of truth God gave to our people through the hands of God's faithful prophets.

**In an age replete with theories of biblical authorship, when many Jews (including most Reconstructionists) believe in the 'Documentary Hypothesis,' (i.e., that the Torah was written over many centuries by multiple human authors), can we accept this principle of faith? Is there still a way to affirm the eighth principle of faith while staying true to Reconstructionist belief? What does "given to Moses by God" mean to us?**

## 9. THE TORAH IS IMMUTABLE AND UNCHANGEABLE

לֹא יִחַלֶּיף הָאֵל וְלֹא יִמִּיר דָּתוֹ. לְעוֹלָמִים, לְזוֹלָתוֹ:

*Lo yachalif ha-El v'lo yamir dato, l'olamim l'zulato*

God's Teaching will never be voided or annulled, nor will its like again ever come to be.

**Understanding that we are heirs to a millennia-old tradition of *midrash* (legal and folkloristic interpretation of the biblical text), how can Reconstructionists relate to the unchangeable words of Torah? Do the immutable words of Torah provide obstacles or doorways for us as we explore Jewish wisdom, teachings, history and tradition?**

## 10. GOD KNOWS THE THOUGHTS AND DEEDS OF ALL HUMANKIND

צוֹפֵה וְיֹדֵעַ סְתֵרֵינוּ, מִבֵּיט לְסוֹף דְּבַר בְּקִדְמָתוֹ:  
*Tzofeh v'yodeya s'tareinu, mabit l'sof davarb'kadmato.*

Our secrets are beheld and known to the One who from the beginning,  
and the end [of earthly time] can foresee.

**What might be a Reconstructionist approach to divine omniscience?  
And if indeed, we believe that this tenth principle of faith is true,  
then how does omniscience affect our views of omnipotence and omnipresence?**

## 11. GOD WILL REWARD THE GOOD AND PUNISH THE WICKED.

גּוֹמֵל לְאִישׁ חֶסֶד כְּמִפְעָלוֹ, נוֹתֵן לְרָשָׁע רֵעַ כְּרִשְׁתּוֹ:  
*Gomel l'ish chesed k'mifalo yiten l'rasha rah k'rishato*

Rejoicing in God's love are those of loving deeds while the evil reap their harvest of iniquity.

**This principle of faith raises the complex issue of theodicy - the theological discipline that seeks to explain how the existence of evil in the world can be reconciled with the justice and goodness of God. The eleventh article of faith asserts that there is just and balanced divine retribution, that evil will be punished and that righteousness will be rewarded. What might a Reconstructionist response be to this assertion? How might Reconstructionists grapple with the question of divine justice?**

## 12. GOD WILL SEND MASHIACH (MESSIAH) TO REDEEM US.

יִשְׁלַח לְקֵץ הַיָּמִין מְשִׁיחֵנוּ, לְפָדוֹת מְחַבֵּי קֵץ יְשׁוּעָתוֹ:  
*Yishlach l'ketz yamin g'ulato lifdot m'chakay ketz yeshu-ato*

At the end of days God's deliverance will be for those awaiting healing for all eternity.

**Reconstructionists do not believe that there will be a Messiah-person who will come to redeem the world. However, we do believe in the world's redemption and perfectability, in a "Messiah-time," in *tikkun olam*, the healing of the world.**

**How do God and humans work in partnership  
for the redemption and healing of our broken world?**

### 13. GOD WILL RESURRECT THE DEAD.

מתים יחיה אל ברב חסדו, ברוך עדי עד שם תהלתו:

*Meytim y'chayeh El b'rov chasdo Baruch ahday ahd shem tehilato*

With abounding love, God resurrects the dead. May God's name be blessed forever in praise.

**Like many Jews, Reconstructionists do not believe in the physical resurrection of the dead. For this reason, we have changed our liturgy from using the term referring to God as "m'chayei ha-meytim" (the one who resurrects the dead) to "m'chayei kol chai" (the one who gives and renews all life). If we cannot literally accept the thirteenth principle of faith, can we still find spiritual value in it? What might "resurrection of the dead" (not the more generic "all life") mean to us in a compelling spiritual or metaphorical sense?**