

Rabbi Yosef Blau

Reciting Adon Olam and Yigdal: A Prelude to Prayer

Often linked together, *Adon Olam* and *Yigdal* are recited in the Ashkenazic rite before the morning blessings.¹⁵¹ In communal prayer, however, only the German community says *Adon Olam* or both publicly. In both Sephardic and Ashkenazic rites one or the other is recited at the conclusion of the Friday night and Shabbat morning services. *Adon Olam* also concludes the *Keriyat Shema al Ha-Mitah* which is said before going to sleep.

Both *Adon Olam* and *Yigdal* are not prayers in the traditional sense; they are statements in poetic form about the Jewish conception of God and His relationship to human beings. *Yigdal* is longer, as it is a poetic summary of Maimonides' thirteen articles of faith.

Adon Olam was most likely composed by R. Shlomo ibn Gabirol, an early Spanish poet and thinker. It focuses on the nature of God and the paradox that He is both transcendent and immanent. From the text itself it is clear that it is meant to be said before going to sleep and when awakening. The custom to recite it after *tefillah* is meant to reiterate that prayer is possible because an eternal and omnipotent God cares for individuals.

Yigdal was composed in Italy in the fourteenth century, with different traditions as to its authorship. Kabbalists have opposed its being included in the prayers because they disagree with the concept of a limited list of articles of faith. Maimonides' enumeration, now assumed by many Orthodox Jews to be binding, was questioned by many at the time of its formulation. R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik was a later thinker who also opposed saying *Yigdal* as part of the prayer service; however, not due to prior objections, but rather because he believed that reciting a catechism was too similar to Christianity.

The recital of articles of faith in the form of *Yigdal* is an important statement of commitment but is not directly connected to prayer. *Adon Olam*, however, is a necessary recital in order that our prayers make sense, theologically. The inclusion of these two pieces should thus remind us that the act of prayer for a Jew is predicated on a combination of the philosophic conception of God as first cause, and the particularly Jewish conception, as formulated by R. Yehuda Ha-Levi, of the God of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. We pray because *Hashem* hears our prayer, controls all, and protects us.

¹⁵¹. In the *Roedelheim siddur*, in contrast to the usual order, *Yigdal* is printed first, and *Adon Olam* second; in this *siddur* the phrase "the morning prayers begin" appears after *Yigdal* and before *Adon Olam*.