

וְכָל-אֵלֶּיךָ שֹׁמֵר



## Adon Olam

I have found written that [regarding] one who recites *Adon Olam* with proper intention (*kavanah*), Rav Yehudah HeChassid, Rav Hai Gaon, and Rav Sherira Gaon are guarantors that their prayers will be heard, the Satan will not challenge their prayers, and there will be no Satan and evil done to his prayers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

(*Sefer Mateh Moshe, Amud HaAvodah, Dinei Hanhagos  
Beis HaKenesses V'Dinei Berachos V'Pesukei d'Zimrah* 31)

## Introduction

IN THE OPENING pages of any siddur, one of the first *tefillos* one finds is *Adon Olam*. Its placement at the beginning of the siddur certainly indicates its heightened importance and prominence. *Adon Olam* addresses the fundamentals and tenets of our faith: God's creation of the world, His sovereignty, His Oneness, His protection over each of us, and our faith and trust in Him. It is critical to reflect on and concretize our belief in these tenets and constantly review them. This is the goal of the recitation of *Adon Olam*.

This chapter will primarily focus on why *Adon Olam* is front and center in the day's prayers, whether or not it was accepted

as a standard *tefillah*, when it should be recited, and what is the message of this awe-inspiring piece of poetry.

## Authorship

ONE OF THE more challenging elements in researching *Adon Olam* is pinning down who its author was. Although there is no definitive information regarding its authorship, several possibilities exist. One suggestion is that *Adon Olam* dates back to sometime around the Geonic period (600–1000 CE).<sup>1</sup> This presumption is based on the fact that Rav Yehudah HeChassid, Rav Hai Gaon, and Rav Sherira Gaon are quoted as saying that they “guarantee that one who recites *Adon Olam* with proper intention (*kavanah*) will have his prayers heard, and the Satan will not challenge his prayers.”<sup>2</sup> Although this suggestion quotes the guarantee of the *Geonim*, we are still left wondering if *Adon Olam* was authored during the Geonic period or even earlier. We don’t find any Geonic literature or statements of the *Rishonim* that indicate who the author of *Adon Olam* was.<sup>3</sup>

An alternative suggestion is found in the *Siddur Otzar HaTefillos*, which states that *Adon Olam* was authored by the well-known Jewish poet Shlomo Ibn Gabirol. Gabirol, whose poetry is quoted by the Ibn Ezra, died toward the end of the eleventh century, which puts him in the range of the Geonic period. While we are aware of the multiple poems which Shlomo Ibn Gabirol

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1. *Likkutei Maharich, Seder HaTefillah*, s.v. *Adon Olam*.

2. *Sefer Mateh Moshe, Amud HaAvodah — Dinei Hanhagos Beis HaKenesses V'Dinei Berachos V'Pesukei d'Zimrah* 31.

3. See *Responsa Mevaseret Tzion* of Rabbi Ben Tzion Mutzafi 20, who addresses the question regarding the authorship of *Adon Olam*.

authored, there is no tracing his pen directly to *Adon Olam*. In the words of the *Siddur Otzar HaTefillos*: “The author of this song (*Adon Olam*) is not known to us with certainty; there are those who ascribe its authorship to Shlomo Ibn Gabirol, and it seems that is accurate.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, we are still left without definitively knowing who authored *Adon Olam*.<sup>5</sup>

## In the Beginning

ALTHOUGH WE DON'T know who the author of *Adon Olam* is, we do know that it is among the first prayers found in the siddur. The coveted placement of *Adon Olam* on the opening pages of the siddur is something which multiple commentaries have tried

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4. *Siddur Otzar HaTefillos*, *Tikkun HaTefillah*, s.v. *Adon Olam*.

5. Another suggestion put forth regarding the authorship of *Adon Olam* can be found in the *Sefer Likkutei Maharich*, *Seder HaTefillah*, p. 26b (original edition), citing the *Sefer HaTechiyah*, which states that *Adon Olam* was written by the great *Tanna* Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai. This suggestion was quoted by many commentaries on the siddur in the generations subsequent to the printing of *Likkutei Maharich*. This citation, however, is incorrect, because in the *Sefer HaTechiyah*, pp. 58–59, of Shneur Zachs it does not say that Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai authored *Adon Olam*, but that Shlomo Ibn Gabirol wrote it. Clearly this mistake spread beyond the printing of the *Likkutei Maharich* to many later works, which attributed *Adon Olam* to Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai. In the newly reprinted *Likkutei Maharich* (5773 edition), this sentence was removed. Rabbi Tzvi Yonason Martyn, who annotated and elucidated the new edition of the *Likkutei Maharich*, explained to this author that in the original manuscript of the *Likkutei Maharich* this sentence was scribbled over by the author of *Likkutei Maharich*, indicating that in subsequent printings this suggestion should be removed, possibly because of the above mistake in citation. Here then, we find yet another source attributing the authorship of *Adon Olam* to Shlomo Ibn Gabirol. The *Sefer HaTechiyah* brings several proofs from the words and language of the *Adon Olam* prayer that match the style and philosophy of Ibn Gabirol.

to understand. The following are three approaches that have been penned.

The Mateh Moshe writes:

[*Adon Olam*] is a beautiful and uplifting song. I have found written that [regarding] one who recites *Adon Olam* with proper *kavanah*, Rav Yehudah HeChassid, Rav Hai Gaon, and Rav Sherira Gaon are guarantors that his prayers will be heard, the Satan will not challenge his prayers, and there will be no Satan and evil done to his prayers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. His enemies will fall before him, and some say that his evil inclination will also make peace with him. Regarding this, Shlomo HaMelech said: “When Hashem favors a man’s ways, even his enemies will make peace with him” (*Mishlei* 16:7). This is possibly where the custom developed to recite [*Adon Olam*] prior to any blessing or praise.<sup>6</sup>

The Mateh Moshe’s understanding is that the reason that *Adon Olam* is found at the beginning of *tefillas Shacharis* is that its recitation is the gateway to one’s prayers being answered. The *Siddur Otzar HaTefillos* cites this statement of the Mateh Moshe and concludes, “*Im kabbalah hi, nekabel,*” meaning, “If this is an accepted tradition, we accept it.”<sup>7</sup>

A second approach to explain *Adon Olam*’s prominence at the beginning of the siddur brings us to another beginning: Avraham Avinu. Avraham was the initiator of prayer, instituting *Shacharis*. Avraham was also the first person to refer to God as *Adon*, Master. Thus, we begin the *tefillah* of *Shacharis*, the first

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6. *Sefer Mateh Moshe, Amud HaAvodah — Dinei Hanhagos Beis HaKenesses V'Dinei Berachos V'Pesukei d'Zimrah* 31, cited by Elyah Rabbah, *Orach Chaim* 46:15; *Siddur Sha'ar HaShamayim* of the Shelah; *Likkutei Maharich, Seder HaTefillah*, s.v. *Adon Olam*; *Elef HaMagen* on *Mateh Ephraim* 584:12.

7. *Siddur Otzar HaTefillos* in the commentary *Tikkun HaTefillah* on *Adon Olam*.

*tefillah* of the day, the prayer of Avraham, by reciting the words “*Adon Olam*, Master of the World,” in order that our prayers be accepted in the merit of Avraham.

This is also the reason why we introduce Shemoneh Esrei with the *pasuk* that begins “*Adonoy sefasai tiftach*, Master [of the universe], open my lips to praise You.”<sup>8</sup> Simply stated, before we start davening, we explicitly recognize that it is to *Adon Olam* that our *tefillas* are directed.

There is an interesting anecdote related to this explanation. A new commentary on the siddur was brought to the Vilna Gaon for his review. The Gra noticed that the author explained that the reason why *Adon Olam* is found at the beginning of the siddur is based on the Talmudic statement of Rabbi Shimon Ben Yochai (*Berachos* 7b) that from the moment that God created the world nobody referred to God as *Adon*, master, until Avraham; thus, *Adon Olam* is found immediately at the beginning of the siddur in recognition of Avraham, who enacted *tefillas Shacharis* and called God by the name *Adon*. When the Gra saw this explanation, he praised it and said that the publication of this siddur is worthwhile for this explanation alone.<sup>9</sup>

A final approach to explain this phenomenon is based on the ruling of the *Shulchan Aruch*, which posits that when reciting *berachos* one should have proper intention when reciting the Name of God, and when saying “Hashem,” one should have in mind that

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8. *Siddur Ishei Yisrael*, commentary on *Adon Olam*, introduction to *Sefer Koheles Yitzchak*, citing *Sefer Kanfei Yonah*; *Siddur Otzar HaTefillos* in commentaries *Tikkun HaTefillah* and *Etz Yosef on Adon Olam*.

9. Introduction to *Sefer Koheles Yitzchak* on the Torah, citing the introduction to *Sefer Kanfei Yonah* and *Siddur Ishei Yisrael* in the commentary *Siach Yitzchak* on *Adon Olam*, citing *Sefer Maggid Tzedek*. See also *Sefer Uvdos V'Hanhagos L'Beis Brisk* 1:234.



God is *Adon hakol*, Master of all.<sup>10</sup> As such, immediately when beginning the prayers of Shacharis, before reciting any *berachos*, we say *Adon Olam*, in order to declare that we will be mindful of reciting God's Name with *kavanah*, and understanding that the meaning of the Name Hashem is *Adon hakol*.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, *Adon Olam* can be found at the beginning of almost all siddurim, from the earliest printed editions, and the custom similarly developed to recite *Adon Olam* before *tefillas Shacharis*.<sup>12</sup>

## In the End

WHILE THERE IS a very strong consensus for the placement and recitation of *Adon Olam* at the beginning of Shacharis, surprisingly, there seems to be another prevailing custom to recite *Adon Olam* at the conclusion of Shacharis as well. What is the basis of this custom in light of what we have discussed thus far?

The Mateh Moshe has an insight to explain this as well: he states that since we begin the prayers with *Adon Olam*, we conclude the prayers with *Adon Olam*, showing that we are prepared to start davening all over again. This is in order to prevent the Satan from acting as a prosecutor, saying that the people are done with their prayers and are ready to move on. The Mateh Moshe compares this to when we complete the reading of the *Chumash* with *Parashas Vezos HaBerachah* on Simchas Torah

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10. *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim* 5.

11. *Sefer Ta'amei HaMinhagim U'Mekorei HaDin* 29 and *Elef HaMateh* 584:12, citing the Apter Rav; *Yalkut Yosef*, *Yamim Nora'im* 582:20, citing *Imrei Pinchas*, *sha'ar* 3:91, and *Siddur Ohr Avraham* 3.

12. See *siddur Ezor Eliyahu* in notes to *Adon Olam* and *sefer Ishei Yisrael: Hilchos Tefillah* (Feufer) 5:30 and footnote 70, citing *Pesach HaDevir* 46:11, which states that *Adon Olam* should be recited immediately following *Birchos HaShachar*.

and immediately start reading the Torah again with *Parashas Bereishis*.<sup>13</sup> Thus, there really is no end, but only the completion of a cycle which begins yet again.

## Shabbos

WHILE *ADON OLAM*'S central placement at the beginning of the siddur indicates its importance, it is not often recited then, nor at the conclusion of davening. Many communities do, however, chant *Adon Olam* following davening on Friday night.<sup>14</sup> What is the source of this custom? Both *sefer Chemdas HaYamim* and *siddur Tzlosa D'Avraham*, two classic works on the siddur and *tefillah*, explain the reason for this custom.

The *Tzlosa D'Avraham* states that Shabbos is a declaration of three things: God's creation of the world, the Kingdom of God, and that there will ultimately come a day when God will reign for eternity. In *Adon Olam*, we find reference to each of these fundamentals. "Master of the Universe, Who reigned before any form was created" is a reference to God's creation of the world. "At the time when His will was brought into being, then as King was His Name proclaimed" is a reference to the Kingdom of God. "After all has ceased to be, He, the awesome One, will reign alone" is a reference to the ultimate day when God's reign and sovereignty

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13. *Mateh Moshe Amud HaAvodah* 216, cited by *Elyah Rabbah* 133:6. This explanation can be found as well in *siddur Tzlosa D'Avraham* in the commentary *Emek Berachah* on *Adon Olam*, p. 32, and *Elef HaMagen* on *Mateh Ephraim* 582:17. See also *Sefer Nefesh HaRav*, p. 164, which takes a similar approach to explain this phenomenon and elaborates upon it.

14. *Luach Ezras Yisrael* of Rabbi Yosef Eliyahu Henkin and *Luach HaHalachos V'HaMinhagim L'Chutz LaAretz* (5783) of Rabbi Eliyahu Asher Zelaznik, p. 14, footnote 27. *Aruch HaShulchan, Orach Chaim* 286:6, cites this custom as well.



will be known by all.<sup>15</sup> What better time to recite *Adon Olam* than Shabbos, when we celebrate those concepts which *Adon Olam* speaks of.

*Sefer Chemdas HaYamim* similarly notes that Shabbos bears witness to the principles of faith of the Jewish people: their belief in God, His sovereignty, and His continued dominion over the world. As such, following Shemoneh Esrei and the recitation of the paragraph of *Vayechulu*, in which we testify to God's creation of the world in six days and resting on the seventh, the custom is to recite *Adon Olam*, which is a continuation of the theme of *Vayechulu*.<sup>16</sup>

## Yamim Nora'im

WHILE THE RECITATION of *Adon Olam* before or after davening, and during the week or on Shabbos, is based on communal custom, reciting *Adon Olam* prior to Shacharis on both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur or following Ma'ariv on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is an almost universally accepted custom.<sup>17</sup> The basis of this is most likely the *sefer Mateh Moshe*, cited earlier, who quotes the *Geonim*, who state that reciting *Adon Olam* with proper intent is a guarantee for our *tefillos* to be accepted, and that there will be no Satan or evil done to one's prayers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.<sup>18</sup> Because of the heightened significance of the *tefillos* of the Yamim Nora'im, communities have adopted the recitation of *Adon Olam* to merit the fulfillment of this guarantee.

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15. *Siddur Tzlosa D'Avraham*, commentary on *Adon Olam*, citing *sefer Otzar Kol Minhagei Yeshurun*.

16. *Chemdas HaYamim*, *Shabbos*, end of chapter 6.

17. *Mateh Ephraim* 584:5; *Siddur Avodas Yisrael* on *Adon Olam*; *Sefer HaTechiyah*, p. 59.

18. *Sefer Mateh Moshe*, *Amud HaAvodah — Dinei Hanhagos Beis HaKenesses V'Dinei Berachos V'Pesukei d'Zimrah* 31.

## Acceptance of *Adon Olam*

WHILE THE AUTHORSHIP and origins of *Adon Olam* are not entirely clear, it does seem that its acceptance into the siddur and *seder ha-tefillah*, depending on community and custom, is quite entrenched. *Adon Olam* has been broadly accepted in both Ashkenazic and Sefardic siddurim and *tefillos*.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, even the Arizal, who was opposed to adding liturgy and prayers to the siddur besides that which the *Anshei Kenesses HaGedolah* sanctioned and Rabbi Yosef Kalir authored, never states that *Adon Olam* should not be recited, as opposed to other *tefillos*, which he most certainly does state should not be recited.<sup>20</sup> Thus, many Chassidim have also adopted the placement of *Adon Olam* in the siddur along with its recitation.<sup>21</sup> The Gra's position regarding the recitation of *Adon Olam* is not at all clear.<sup>22</sup>

## *Tefillah* Takeaway

RABBI SHIMSHON RAPHAEL Hirsch explains that the essence of *Adon Olam* is that “we recall to ourselves the independent nature

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19. See *Likkutei Maharich, Seder HaTefillah*, s.v. *v'da*; *siddur Otzar HaTefillos* and *siddur Avodas Yisrael*, which note that the Sefardic rendition of *Adon Olam* is longer and several stanzas were omitted that do not appear in Ashkenazic siddurim. See *Beit Oved: Seder Tefillah* and *Yalkut Yosef, Yamim Nora'im, siman 582:20*, regarding Sefardic practice and tradition.

20. *Siddur Tzlosa D'Avraham* in commentary *Emek Berachah. Magen Avraham* and *Mishnah Berurah* 68 cite the Arizal's opposition to *piyut* in general.

21. See *siddur Sha'ar HaShamayim* of the Shelah Hakadosh, *siddur Tzlosa D'Avraham*, *siddur Torah Ohr* of the Ba'al HaTanya and its subsequent *Siddur Tehillas Hashem*, and *sefer Ta'amei HaMinhagim U'Mekorei HaDin* 29, citing the Apter Rav, as well as many other siddurim of Chassidic circles.

22. See *siddur Ezor Eliyahu* in notes to *Adon Olam*.

of His essence and of His greatness (verses 1–3), His eternity, His uniqueness, His infinity, and His majesty (verses 4–6). Remembering all this, we are confident that this one and unique being, though His glory is infinite, is still so very near that each of us may call Him his own God, the sole source of his life and strength.”<sup>23</sup> This is the basis for opening and/or closing our *tefillot* by reciting these beautiful and uplifting stanzas with earnestness and sincerity.

In the merit of our acceptance, passion, and intention in the recitation of *Adon Olam* may all of our *tefillot* be answered with kindness.

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23. *Siddur Tefillas Yisrael; The Hirsch Siddur.*