

A Guide to Golden Age Hebrew Prosody
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I. Patterns of Standard Hebrew Quantitative Versification

A. Meter:

1. Quantity:

Stress does not figure in the metrical patterns. Only vowel length counts, so we need to learn and internalize the distinction between vowels considered metrically short and those considered metrically long. This distinction is not the same as the distinction between the long and short vowels in the Tiberian vocalization system and that you have studied with such pleasure in grammar courses. For metrical purposes, the following vowels are short:

1. וַיִּנְעוּ and therefore also the three ḥaṭaf vowels ֶּ ֵּ ִּ which are nothing more than a sheva na' with a bit of color
2. וְ (meaning “and” or “but”) at the beginning of a word. It was probably pronounced “wa,” very short, like a ḥaṭaf vowel.

All other vowels are long.

2. Metrical Feet:

The meters are composed of feet, i.e., groups of syllables. The recognized feet are (reading left to right):

˘ - (only theoretically a foot, as it never appears alone; known as יִתְּ)

- - (has an independent existence as a foot, but also appears as a shortened variant of a three-syllable foot)

˘ - - (sometimes varied to ˘ - ˘)

- - -

- - - (only appears as a shortened variant of a four-syllable foot)

˘ - - - (sometimes varied to ˘ - ˘ -)

- - ˘ - (sometimes varied to ˘ - ˘ -)

3. Poetic Licence:

Poets will sometimes arbitrarily treat a sheva na' as a sheva naḥ or a sheva naḥ as a sheva na'. They take this liberty most lightly with the sheva na' in verbs, 3 fem. perfect (e.g., כָּתְּבָהּ, treating it as in spoken modern Hebrew—katva instead of biblical katəva)—and with the ḥaṭaf vowels, by reducing them to sheva nah..

4. The Individual Meters:

The line of verse is composed of two (usually equal) halves called דלת and סוגר. The foot-pattern is the same in both halves, except that in some meters the last foot of the soger is one syllable shorter than the last foot of the delet.

Once a meter or a variant of the meter has been chosen, it remains unvarying through the entire length of the poem.

A fairly complete list of the ways in which the feet are combined to form the recognized meters is found in Schirmann, השירה העברית בספרד ובפרובנס (2nd edition), 2:722-30. Here is a list of the basic meters, with their (modern) Hebrew names and the names of the corresponding Arabic meters. Most of these meters have variant forms usually affecting the number of feet in the line or the number of syllables in the last foot of the line. *The scansion symbols below read from right to left.*

1. מרובה/wāfir (by far the most common meter in Heb.):

2. המרנין/hazaj

3. השלם/kāmil

The last foot of the סוגר is usually shortened, as above, to three longs. In that case, the דלת of the first verse will also be shortened, because in serious poetry it was customary to give both hemistichs of the first verse exactly the same pattern. But in the remaining verses of the poem, the scansion is as outlined above, with the last feet of the two hemistichs being slightly different from each other.

4. המהיר/sarīʿ

Note that in the first verse of a poem, the last foot of the first hemistich is shortened to - - so that it is the same as the last foot of the second hemistich. In the remaining verses of the poem, the above pattern is maintained.

5. המתקרב/mutaqarrib

This meter is often used with the internal rhyme pattern aaax, bbbx, etc., where x is the rhyme of the whole poem and the other letters represent a rhyme that changes from verse to verse. To ears accustomed to English, this pattern creates the impression that each verse is actually a quatrain. For more on this, see the discussion of rhyme, below.

6. הארוך/tawīl

7. המתפשט/basīt.

8. משקל התנועות/no Arabic equivalent/syllabic-quantitative meter

9. syllabic semi-quantitative meter

Any fixed number of longs (most frequently, six) to a line; if any shorts appear in the line, they simply do not count. Found only in liturgical poetry.

The meters listed above are only the basic patterns; they each has several variations. Some meters that normally have four feet to a hemistich have three-foot variations that go by the same name. The most common variations on the standard feet are described in the appendix to Schirmann mentioned above. Even more variations are found in the discussion of metrics in Jarden's edition of the Diwan of Shemuel Hanagid. In Arabic, some of the meters have variant forms that can change from verse to verse, but most of these optional forms are not possible in Hebrew. The Hebrew names of the meters are of twentieth-century origin; medieval poets sometimes used the Arabic names, sometimes merely described them; e.g., יתד ושתי תנועות, יתד ותנועה, יתד ושתי תנועות, יתד ושתי תנועות, יתד ושתי תנועות is the way a medieval poet would describe the meter we generally call מרובה. Another common way was to use forms of the root פעל; the same meter would have been described as מפאעילן פעולן מפאעילן פעולן.

B. Rhyme:

The rhyme ordinarily consists of a whole syllable; i.e., the last consonant and its vowel if the word ends with an open syllable (e.g. אַני—עִיני); or the last two consonants and the vowel between them, if the word ends with a closed syllable (e.g. לשמור—יגמור). Stress plays no role in rhyme; thus a stressed syllable may rhyme with an unstressed syllable.

Other possibilities, less common, are:

1. a vowel and a final consonant (אבד—נהמד). This is considered a poor rhyme, as was wittily expressed by Abraham Ibn Ezra in this maxim: לא תחרוז בשור והמור \ כי: ואת החמור העלה להר המור עם השור חרוש במישור \ (cf. Dt. 22:10);
2. consonant, vowel, consonant, vowel, consonant (e.g. דברים—גברים—קברים). This is difficult and very limiting and therefore uncommon in Golden Age poetry, though it was normal in the heyday of Byzantine piyyut.

The rhyme appears normally only in the soger, and is the same in all the verses of the poem, whether a two-line epigram or a 150-line qaṣīda. In long, formal poems it usually occurs also in the first delet; this may happen also in short poems. When this happens, any deviation from the basic metrical pattern in the final foot of the soger is also found in the first delet of the poem, as noted above.

Sometimes a two-hemistich line is broken up into four rhyming units. In this case, the rhyme is nearly always of the pattern a a x, b b x, etc., where x is the rhyme of the poem as a whole. This is not one of the more common meters (one senses that it was not taken seriously), but there are some important poems that use it, including the famous poem by Dunash that appears as no. 2 in *Wine, Women, and Death*:

ואומר אל תישן \ שתה יין ישן \ עלי מור עם שושן \ וכפר ואהלים

Such poems may legitimately be interpreted by modern readers as quatrains:

ואומר אל תישן
שתה יין ישן
עלי מור עם שושן
וכפר ואהלים

But the theory of the age did not recognize strophic poetry except for the muwashshah

C. An Exercise

To help you get the hang of quantitative meters, here are some poems from the liturgy that use these meters. Write the scansion markings in pencil above these. Here's a tip: first write in the shva na's and put a short mark over each. Then put in the long marks. Finally, identify the metrical feet using the list that appears above and make a vertical stroke separating the feet. (This may sometimes occur within a word.) When you have identified the feet, you should be able to identify the meter of the whole line using the list of meters above.

אדון עולם אשר מלך בטרם כל יציר נברא לעת נעשה בחפצו כל אזי מלך שמו נקרא

יגדל אלהים חי וישתבח נמצא ואין עת אל מציאותו

דרור יקרא לבן עם בת וינצרכם כמו בבת נעים שמכם ולא ישבת שבו נוהו ביום שבת

דוי הסר וגם חרון ואז אלם בשיר ירון נחנו מעגלי צדק שעה ברכת בני ישורן

ציון הלא תשאלי לשלום אסריך דורשי שלומך והם יתר עדריך

אלוה אל תדינני כמעלי ואל תמוד אלי חיקי כפעלי

שחר אבקשך צורי ומשגבי אערך לפניך שחרי וגם ערבי

D. Bibliography:

Hrushovsky, "Prosody, Hebrew" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*
Schirmann, השירה העברית בספרד ובפרובנס, 2:719-25; 734-36.

N. Allony, תורת המשקלים (not for beginners)

There is a very patient and clear explanation in a textbook intended for Israeli high school students by Shulamit Elizur, בספרד מהוסלמית, שירת החול העברית vol. 3, pp. 13-115.

Meters of the muwashshah

The meters observe the quantitative principle of classical verse, but not usually in accordance with the standard patterns in which those feet are deployed in classical poetry (such as like ṭawīl/ha-arakh or merube/wāfir); more often, the poet devises his own patterns, though it is often possible to interpret these as variations of the standard feet.

In the basic muwashshah pattern, the lines are about the length of a hemistich of classical verse. When they are subdivided into “hemistichs,” the hemistichs are ordinarily about half the length of a hemistich of classical verse.

Bibliography:

S. M. Stern, *Hispano-Arabic Strophic Poetry* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 12-41. This chapter makes full use of the Hebrew evidence for the form of the Arabic muwashshah, so it is a good guide for students of Hebrew.

Tova Rosen, “The Muwashshah” in *The Literature of Al-Andalus*, ed. M. R. Menocal et al (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 165-89.