אשיר לאל עליון, Ashir Le’el ‘Elyon

**Introduction:** This poem for the Sabbath begins by describing the six days of creation, culminating in God’s resting on the seventh day. The observant ones will receive rewards, and those who violate the Sabbath will be punished. While commerce is forbidden, the study of the Torah is recommended. The poem ends with praises for the day of rest, addressed to God.

**Category:** Zemirot (Songs)  
  
**Genre:** Zemer for the Sabbath  
  
**Occasion:** Sabbath  
  
**Name:** אשיר לאל עליון, Ashir Le’el ‘Elyon  
  
**Composer**: Yehuda ben Zerubbavel  
  
**Location:** Troki, Lithuania

**Date:** 16th–17th century  
  
**Acrostic:** יהודה “Yehuda”  
  
**Source:** Vilna Siddur, Volume 4, page 111  
  
**Visual Representation of Meter:** – – v – – – / – – v – –   
  
**Description of Meter:** Each line consists of two half-lines: the first half-line contains two full vowels, followed by a vocal sheva and a full vowel, followed by two more full vowels. The second half-line consists of two full vowels, followed by a vocal sheva and a full vowel, followed by one more full vowel.  
  
**Davidson number:** א 7951  
  
**Karaite origin:** Yes

**About the Author:** Yosef ben Yitsḥaḳ Itson was born in Kronie (Lith. Kruonis) in the district of Kowno (Lith. Kaunas). Some of his letters survive in the Firkovich archives in Saint Petersburg. In 1704, Itson’s daughter married Mordochai ben Abraham Kaplanowski, and a fragment of their *ketubba* mentions Yosef’s son, Abraham, among friends of the bridegroom*.* Abraham’s name is encoded in the acrostic of Yosef’s poem *Ekkon Lemul Shabbat.*

Like many Karaites and Rabbanites of the time in Lithuania, Itson worked as a leaseholder, but his livelihood became increasingly precarious during the Great Northern War (1700–1721). In autumn of 1705, Itson moved from Kronie to Troki, where Swedish soldiers extorted money from the local Karaites. Later, he relocated to Szaty (Lith. Šėta), fifty miles north of Kowno.

Several of Itson’s Hebrew poems were published in the Karaite Siddur. He was a religious authority in his community, and in 1709, he authored a *haskama* (approbation) for *Ma’amar Mordochai* by Mordochai ben Nisan (d. c. 1709), a supercommentary on Aharon ben Yosef’s *Sefer ha-mivḥar*.

**Sources**: Mann, *Texts and Studies*.

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| Ashir le’el ‘elyon shir ba‘adato  Bayyom, bayyom asher shavat mikkol melachto. | אָֹשִיר לְאֵל עֶלְיוֹן שִׁיר בַּעֲדָתוֹ  בַּיּוֹם : בַּיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר שָׁבַת מִכָּל מְלַאכְתּוֹ: |
| I shall sing to the most exalted God a song in His congregation,  On the day / on the day He ceased from all His work. | |
| Bayyom, bayyom asher shavat mikkol melachto. | בַּיּוֹם : בַּיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר שָׁבַת מִכָּל מְלַאכְתּוֹ: |
| On the day / on the day He ceased from all His work. | |
| Yamim veḡam lelot yatsar beḥochma  Aḥar bero erets yammim veruma  Kol ‘ets vechol ‘esev ‘of uvhema  Yatsar betsalmo ish la‘mod leshareto. | יָ֒מִים וְגַם לֵילוֹת יָצַר בְּחָכְמָה  אַחַר בְּרוֹא אֶרֶץ יַמִּים וְרוּמָה  כָּל עֵץ וְכָל עֵשֶׂב עוֹף וּבְהֵמָה  יָצַר בְּצַלְמוֹ אִישׁ לַעְמֹד לְשָׁרְתוֹ: |
| He formed with wisdom days and nights.  After creating the earth, the seas, and the heavens,  All the trees, plants, birds, and beasts,  He formed man in His image to stand in attendance upon Him. | |
| Bayyom, bayyom asher shavat mikkol melachto. | בַּיּוֹם : בַּיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר שָׁבַת מִכָּל מְלַאכְתּוֹ: |
| On the day / on the day He ceased from all His work. | |
| Ha’el betorato amar leyom zé  Lishmor velishbot bo navi veḥozé  Lo ya‘asu ma‘sé kazo vechazé  Banav benotav ‘im ‘avdo amato. | הָ֒אֵל בְּתוֹרָתוֹ אָמַר לְיוֹם זֶה  לִשְׁמֹר וְלִשְׁבֹּת בּוֹ נָבִיא וְחוֹזֶה  לֹא יַעֲשֹוּ מַעְשֶֹה כָּזוֹ וְכָזֶה  בָּנָיו בְּנוֹתָיו עִם עַבְדּוֹ אֲמָתוֹ: |
| In His Torah, God said of the Sabbath day:  Observe it and cease work. The Prophet and the Seer [continued]:  They shall not do any work, of either this type or that,  Neither their sons or daughters nor their male or female slaves. | |
| Bayyom, bayyom asher shavat mikkol melachto. | בַּיּוֹם : בַּיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר שָׁבַת מִכָּל מְלַאכְתּוֹ: |
| On the day / on the day He ceased from all His work. | |
| Umḳaddeshé hayyom lihyot besimḥa  Nafsham beḡan ‘eden gam bammenuḥa  Tiḥyu vetit‘adna achen leshuḥa  Yippol veyovad kol ‘osé melachto. | וּ֒מְקַדְּשֵׁי הַיּוֹם לִהְיוֹת בְּשִֹמְחָה  נַפְשָׁם בְּגַן עֵדֶן גַּם בַּמְּנוּחָה  תִּחְיוּ וְתִתְעַדְנָה אָכֵן לְשׁוּחָה  יִפֹּל וְיאֹבַד כָּל עוֹשֶׂה מְלַאכְתּוֹ: |
| Those who hallow the day to be joyful on it,  Their souls [will be] in a state of rest in the Garden of Eden!  You will live [again], and [your souls] will delight. But into the pit of hell  Will fall and perish the one who labors! | |
| Bayyom, bayyom asher shavat mikkol melachto. | בַּיּוֹם : בַּיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר שָׁבַת מִכָּל מְלַאכְתּוֹ: |
| On the day / on the day He ceased from all His work. | |
| Divré seḥora ush- ar haddevarim  Asur ledabber bam af bassetarim  Achen betorat el gam bassefarim  Hoḡé beno‘am el yizké ḥazoto. | דִּ֒בְרֵי סְחוֹרָה וּשְׁ־ אָר הַדְּבָרִים  אָסוּר לְדַבֵּר בָּם אַף בַּסְּתָרִים  אָכֵן בְּתוֹרַת אֵל גַּם בַּסְּפָרִים  הוֹגֶה בְּנֹעַם אֵל יִזְכֶּה חֲזוֹתוֹ: |
| Business talk or other affairs  Are forbidden to be mentioned, even covertly—  Only the Torah of God and other [holy] books:  The one contemplating upon God’s delight will merit his countenance! | |
| Bayyom, bayyom asher shavat mikkol melachto. | בַּיּוֹם : בַּיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר שָׁבַת מִכָּל מְלַאכְתּוֹ: |
| On the day / on the day He ceased from all His work. | |
| Hallel veḡam hodot etten le’eli  Ḥanan venatan yom lishkaḥ ‘amali  Zé yom menuḥa gam ḥerut yetsav li  Ḳadosh veḡam nizké lishbot beveto. | הַ֒לֵּל וְגַם הוֹדוֹת אֶתֵּן לְאֵלִי  חָנַן וְנָתַן יוֹם לִשְׁכַּח עֲמָלִי  זֶה יוֹם מְנוּחָה, גַּם חֵרוּת יְצַו לִי  קָדוֹשׁ, וְגַם נִזְכֶּה לִשְׁבֹּת בְּבֵיתוֹ: |
| Praise and thanks I shall offer to my God  Who mercifully provided a day to forget my labors.  It is a day of rest; but He also proclaimed my freedom,  The Holy one! We shall merit resting in His Temple. | |
| Bayyom, bayyom asher shavat mikkol melachto. | בַּיּוֹם : בַּיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר שָׁבַת מִכָּל מְלַאכְתּוֹ: |
| On the day / on the day He ceased from all His work. | |