

**“ADON OLAM” PAST-PRESENT-FUTURE  
BY SAMUEL SCHUMAN**

Traditional melodies in an arrangement with words and incidental music  
by Samuel Schuman

When I was small I went to shul  
And every Friday night as a rule  
Before going home we'd sing and hum  
That sweet melody Adon Olom.

It used to lift my spirits high  
My childhood cares and troubles would fly  
When things would go wrong I could find some  
Renewed spirit in Adon Olom.

The years flew by as years will fly  
That sentimental kid became a hard-boiled guy  
And one day when I went to Shul  
It seemed that somehow they had changed the rule.

Adon Olom was not the same  
At first I thought it was a shame  
The words remained just as before  
But now it had a snappy and a modern score.

It took no time and pretty soon  
In fact before I knew it I could sing the tune  
Adon Olom was still OK  
Although they sang it in a different way.

The rhythm and the lively swing  
It was indeed a thrill to sing  
I liked it in the modern way  
And really I believed that it was here to stay.

Adon Olom asher malach  
B'terem kol y'tzir nivrah  
l'ayt na'ahsah v'cheftzo kol  
Ahzai melech sh'mo nikrah

*(The following Yiddish verses may be omitted;  
continue with “Another tune that's new to me...”)*

Noo vie fiel niggun darfen mir?  
Vos vil men hobben yetst fon dir  
Adon Olom?

Der chazen zingt a posik und tzvey  
Der oylom muz shveigen, vos denken zei?  
A voch noch a voch der niggun is nei  
Vie fiel is der shir, mir hobben shein drei!

Another tune that's new to me  
I think by 2023 ...

We'll be goin' some  
When we sing Adon Olom  
Its a sign of Kingdom Come  
It's the song of Israel on a plaintive chord  
The ancient glory of Praise the Lord  
Praise the Lord  
Praise the Lord  
Praise the Lord

When we sing Adon Olom  
Its a sign of Kingdom Come  
It's a major story on a minor chord  
The modern glory of Praise the Lord  
Praise the Lord  
Praise the Lord  
Praise the Lord

So we sing Adon Olom  
And we pray for Kingdom Come  
With a pen that's mightier than every sword  
And children learning to Praise the Lord  
Praise the Lord  
Praise the Lord  
Praise the Lord ...

So through the years by old and young  
This ancient song will always be sung  
Adon Olom will still go on  
When all tyrants of the world are gone.

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*Yiddish Translation*

*So how many melodies do we need?  
What do they want from you now  
Adon Olom?*

*The cantor sings a line or two,  
The people keep quiet; but what are they thinking?  
Week after week it's a new tune;  
How many do we need, we already have three!*

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Background and Introductory  
Notes by Sandy Schuman

*Adon Olom: Past-Present-Future* was written in 1944 by Samuel Schuman z”l, one of several songs he wrote for a home-grown show he produced at Temple Beth-El of Astoria, New York aptly entitled *Victory Variety* in hopeful anticipation of the end of World War II. The other songs -- *When Will Our Dream Come True*, *When We March into Palestina, Say Tihilim*, *How are Things in Monticello?*, *I Worship You!*, and later, *Was the World Worthwhile?*, -- all had Jewish themes, but *Adon Olom* was the favorite. In the ensuing years Cantor Paul Kavon included the song in his repertoire and it appeared among printed and mimeographed collections of songs for Jewish camps and religious schools. Indicative of its wide distribution, when we were kids, one of my sisters came home from Hebrew School all excited. Her teacher, who had no knowledge of the origins of the song, had handed out a mimeograph of it for the class to learn. The mimeograph had some errors: it had the wrong title (instead of the title my Father gave it, *Adon Olom: Past-Present-Future*, it was entitled, *When I Was Small*); some of the words were wrong (for example, instead of “When all tyrants ...” it had “When all Hitlers ...”); and to our collective disappointment, it gave no credits to its author. Since I started singing it in public in the late 70s, invariably, someone has come forward afterwards to say they heard it before, long ago. My Father used to introduce the song briefly, noting that “*Adon Olom*” had more tunes than “*Ave Maria*.” I have generally used more elaborate introductions, such as the following.

I have a difficult “act” to follow. We've read the Torah, we've heard a beautiful Musaf service with the Chazan and the Choir, we've sung songs and even heard the announcements. Anything more would be anticlimactic. And yet we insist on concluding the service with one more song. But from all of Jewish liturgy, which can fit the bill? Of course we all know we conclude the service with *Adon Olom*, but why? Surely the Rabbis sought to end the service on a high note, to conclude with a strong finish. From all of the possible prayers, poems, and songs, why did they select this one?

Some years ago we celebrated Israel's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and at each of the celebratory events we sang the Israeli National Anthem. I'll bet we sang *Hatikvah* more times that year than any other. It was at one of those events, while singing *Hatikvah*, that I took conscious note of the fact that at the beginning of each event we would sing the United States National Anthem, the *Star Spangled Banner*, and at the end we would always sing *Hatikvah*. And the question formed in my mind, we have a Jewish National Anthem, but shouldn't we also have a Jewish Spiritual Anthem? No sooner had I thought of this question than I knew the answer! We do have a Spiritual Anthem. The reason I'm so sure of it is that we sing it at the end. We sing it at the end of every Shabbat and Festival service. *Adon Olom*.

I remember a homework assignment I had in grade school on the United States National Anthem. It was very important that we knew the words to the *Star Spangled Banner*, but it was also important that we understood them. For homework we had to fold a piece of paper in half lengthwise, and on the left side of the paper we had to write out each word of the song and on the right side we had to define its meaning. It was while I was doing this assignment at home that I asked my Aunt Millie, “What does ‘dawnzrly’ mean; I can't find it in the dictionary.” She looked at me puzzled and asked, “What are you talking about?” I replied, “you know, in the *Star Spangled Banner*, ‘O say can you see, by the dawnzrly light.’”

Now while I know words to *Adon Olom*, I can't say as I've given any attention to what they mean. So if this is our Spiritual Anthem, I thought I should do a little research. This being the “Information Age” I turned on my computer, connected to the World Wide Web, and “googled” “*Adon Olom*.” As much to my surprise as my delight I found the “*Adon Olom Home Page!*”\* Surely here, I thought, I would find the answer to my questions about the meaning of *Adon Olom*, its history, its significance. Instead, what I found was a list of hundreds of tunes to which you can sing *Adon Olom*! Everything from “*Amazing Grace*” and “*Blowin' In The Wind*” to “*Yellow Submarine*” and “*Zip-a-dee-doo-dah!*” Oddly, we sing this song, perhaps our Spiritual Anthem, without asking ourselves what it means! In fact, when we do talk about it, the issue is, “Which tune should we sing?”

And remember, this was one of the first Hebrew songs you learned as a child. Can you remember how you felt when you first learned it, and then that delight of discovery when you learned a new tune! And now, it's tired and mundane. Let's explore the meaning of *Adon Olom* through the eyes of that child. Here is a song about *Adon Olom*, written in 1944 by my Father, Samuel Schuman.

\*Lynn Gold's “*Adon Olom: The Lyrics, The Legend, The List*™” web page can be found at [www.rahal.net/figmo/Olamni](http://www.rahal.net/figmo/Olamni)