

Song Prayer Writing with the Rabbis

Prayer is one of the hardest things a Jew is ever asked to do.
We struggle to find the words to say, the methods to use, to express our
gratitude for the wonder of our own existence.

Our liturgists wrote:

“אלו פינו מלא שירה בים ולשוננו רנה כהמון גליו...
אין אנחנו יכולים להודות לך ה' אלוקינו על אחת מאף
אף אלפי אלפים שעשית עם אבותינו ועמנו”

*Were our mouths filled with song as the waters fill the sea;
were our tongues filled with joy as the ocean with waves; we
still would not be able to thank You, God, for the thousands of
thousands upon thousands of things that You have done for us
and for those who came before us.*

- Shabbat Shacharit service, Sim Shalom, pg. 336

So what is the role of words in prayer if words can never be enough?
If we can begin to understand the depth of meaning layered in the
words, perhaps the words will begin to soften our hearts, guide us,
change us, and inspire us.

...And perhaps that is the ultimate goal of prayer.

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Personal Prayers of the Rabbis from Berachot 16b-17a

רבי חייה בַּת דְּמַצְלֵי אָמַר הָכִי: "יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ, שֶׁתְּהֵא תּוֹרַתְךָ אוֹמְנוֹתֵנוּ, וְאַל יִדְוֶה לְבָנוּ, וְאַל יִחְשְׁכוּ עֵינֵינוּ".

After Rabbi Hiyya prayed he said the following: May it be Your will, Lord our God, that Your Torah should be our vocation, and may our heart not become faint nor our eyes dim.

רַב בַּתֵּר צְלוֹתֶיהָ אָמַר הָכִי: "יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ שֶׁתִּתֵּן לָנוּ חַיִּים אַרוּכִים, חַיִּים שֶׁל שְׁלוֹם, חַיִּים שֶׁל טוֹבָה, חַיִּים שֶׁל בְּרָכָה, חַיִּים שֶׁל פְּרֻנְסָה, חַיִּים שֶׁל חִלּוּץ עֲצָמוֹת, חַיִּים שֶׁיֵּשׁ בָּהֶם יִרְאֵת חֹטֵא, חַיִּים שֶׁאֵין בָּהֶם בּוֹשָׁה וּכְלִימָה, חַיִּים שֶׁל עוֹשֶׁר וְכָבוֹד, חַיִּים שֶׁתְּהֵא בָּנוּ אֶהְבֵּת תּוֹרָה וְיִרְאֵת שָׁמַיִם, חַיִּים שֶׁתְּמַלֵּא לָנוּ אֵת כָּל מִשְׁאַלוֹת לְבָנוּ לְטוֹבָה".

After his prayer, Rav said this: May it be Your will, Lord our God, that You grant us long life, a life of peace, a life of goodness, a life of blessing, a life of sustenance, a life of freedom of movement from place to place, where we are not tied to one place, a life of dread of sin, a life without shame and disgrace, a life of wealth and honor, a life in which we have love of Torah and reverence for Heaven, a life in which You fulfill all the desires of our heart for good.

רַבָּא בַּתֵּר צְלוֹתֶיהָ אָמַר הָכִי: "אֱלֹהֵי, עַד שֶׁלֹּא נּוֹצַרְתִּי אֵינִי כְּדָאִי, וְעַכְשָׁיו שֶׁנוֹצַרְתִּי כְּאֵלוּ לֹא נּוֹצַרְתִּי. עֶפֶר אֲנִי בַּחַיִּי, קַל וְחוֹמֵר בְּמִיתַתִּי, הֲרִי אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ כְּכֹלִי מְלֵא בּוֹשָׁה וּכְלִימָה. יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵי, שֶׁלֹּא אֶחְטֵא עוֹד, וַיְמָה שֶׁחֲטָאתִי לְפָנֶיךָ מֵרַק בְּרַחֲמֶיךָ הַרְבִּים, אֲבָל לֹא עַל יְדֵי יִסּוּרִין וְחֻלָּאִים רָעִים". וְהֵינּוּ וִידוּי דְּרַב הַמְּנוּנָא זוּטִי בְּיוֹמָא דְּכַפּוּרִי.

After his prayer, Rava said the following: My God, before I was created I was worthless, and now that I have been created it is as if I had not been created, I am no more significant. I am dust in life, all the more so in my death. I am before You as a vessel filled with shame and humiliation. Therefore, may it be Your will, Lord my God, that I will sin no more, and that those transgressions that I have committed, cleanse in Your abundant mercy; but may this cleansing not be by means of suffering and serious illness, but rather in a manner I will be able to easily endure. And this is the confession of Rav Hamnuna Zuti on Yom Kippur.

מַר בְּרִיה דְּרַבִּינָא כִּי הִנֵּה מְסִיִּים צְלוֹתֶיהָ אָמַר הָכִי: "אֱלֹהֵי, נְצוּר לְשׁוֹנֵי מַרְע וְשִׁפְתוֹתַי מִדְּבַר מְרָמָה, וְלִמְקַלְלֵי נַפְשִׁי תַדּוּם, וְנַפְשִׁי כְּעֶפֶר לְכֹל תַּהֲיֶה. פֶּתַח לְבִי בְּתוֹרַתְךָ, וּבְמִצְוֹתֶיךָ תִּרְדּוּף נַפְשִׁי. וְתַצִּילֵנִי מִפְּגַע רָע, מִיִּצְרָה רָעָה, וּמִכָּל רָעוֹת הַמִּתְרַגְּשׁוֹת לְבָא בְּעוֹלָם. וְכֹל הַחוֹשְׁבִים עָלַי רָעָה מִהֲרָה הֲפֹר עֲצָתָם וְסַלְקַל מִחֲשָׁבוֹתָם. יְהִיוּ לְרְצוֹן אֲמָרֵי פִי וְהִגִּיוֹן לְבִי לְפָנֶיךָ ה' צוּרִי וְגוֹאֲלִי".

When Mar, son of Ravina, would conclude his prayer, he said the following: My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceit. To those who curse me let my soul be silent and may my soul be like dust to all. Open my heart to Your Torah, and may my soul pursue your mitzvot. And save me from a bad mishap, from the evil inclination, and from all evils that suddenly come upon the world. And all who plan evil against me, swiftly thwart their counsel, and frustrate their plans. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart find favor before You, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer

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Questions for Prayer Writers

WHO

- Who is this for?
 - Is it just for me?
 - For children?
 - Adults?
 - Jews? Jews and others?
- Do the people I am engaging with this song need prior Jewish and prayer experiences in order to understand or participate?
- Is this a solo piece? A piece for a group to sing together? A piece just to listen to?

WHAT

- What are we saying?
- Are we using words? If so,
 - What words are we using?
 - Where do the words come from?
 - What emotions are these words trying to evoke?
 - Am I starting with the melody or the lyrics?
- What language are the words in?
- Are we using a text directly?
- Are we using our own original words?

WHEN/WHERE/HOW

- When do we use this piece?
 - During prayer?
 - During some other pastoral moment?
- Is there a specific time of day when we'd sing it?
- How do we play it? With instruments? A cappella?

WHY

- Why is this piece necessary?
- Why did we choose these particular words?
- Is there an emotion we are hoping to evoke or goal we are hoping to achieve when we sing this melody?
- Why am I writing this piece?

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Come to Light

When the moonlight hits your eyes,
And the stars begin to glow, 1 by 1.
And the flame that shines below,
From 1000 points of light, brighter than the sun

And you can taste it, You can smell it in the air,
You can see it, on my fingertips,
and you can wish it, Like a whisper on your lips,
Count the stars like 1, 2, 3, and say goodbye.

Give me the wisdom to behold,
What's dark and what is light.
I believe, and in belief is love,
And when I'm in your arms, I'm unafraid.

Hinei el yeshuati evtach v'lo efchad.

Ki ozi v'zimrat Yah Adonai vayehi li lishua.

*Ushavtem mayim (**ushavtem mayim**) b'sason (**b'sason**)*

*Mimaynei (**mimaynei**) hayeshua (**hayeshua**).*

*LaAdonai (**laAdonai**) hayeshua (**hayeshua**)*

Al amcha birchatecha selah.

Adonai tzeva'ot imanu misgav lanu elohei ya'akov selah.

*Adonai (**Adonai**) tzeva'ot (**tzeva'ot**),*

*Ashrei adam (**ashrei adam**) boteach bach (**boteach bach**).*

*Adonai (**Adonai**) hoshia (**hoshia**), Hamelech ya'aneinu b'yom koreinu.*

*Layehudim (**layehudim**) haytah orah (**haytah orah**)*

v'simchah v'sason vikar.

Ken tihyeh lanu, kos yeshu'ot esah,

u'vsheim Adonai ekrah.

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Prayer Exercise: V'ahavta

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ
בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדֶךָ:
וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִּי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם עַל-לִבְבְּךָ:
וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם לְבְנֶיךָ וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָּם
בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלִכְתְּךָ בַּדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ:
וּקְשַׁרְתָּם לְאוֹת עַל-יָדְךָ וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ:
וְכָתַבְתָּם עַל-מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ:

And you shall love your God
with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.
And these words which I command you today shall be upon your heart.
And you shall teach them diligently to your children.
And you shall speak of them when you sit in your house,
and when you travel on the road, and when you lie down and when you rise.
And you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand,
and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes.
And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house
and upon your gateways

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Wonder.

Asher Yatzar is the prayer that Jews say after we go to the bathroom. Why do we say a prayer after we go to the bathroom? The Hebrew words in this prayer are all about the small miracles in our lives. Miracles that we might not even notice, but that happen every single day. So many things in our bodies have to work properly in order for us to live each day, so many parts have to open and close at the right times. The brachah that we say at the end of this prayer is, "Rofe kol basar u'mafli la'asot," "Healer of flesh and Doer of miracles/wonders." Our rabbis explain that the miracle in our bodies is that each one of us is like a container with holes in it. Normally a container with holes in it wouldn't be able to hold something within it, yet even though our bodies have so many holes in them, they can contain this holy spirit (our soul) inside of us that is kept safe and nurtured throughout our entire lives.

אָמַר רַבִּי סִימּוֹן אֵין לָךְ כָּל עֵשֶׁב וְעֵשֶׂב, שְׂאִין לוֹ מִזֵּל בְּרַקִּיעַ שְׂמִכָּה אוֹתוֹ,
וְאוֹמֵר לוֹ "גִּדְל". (מדרש רבה, בראשית י:ז)

"Rabbi Simon said, "There is no plant without an angel in Heaven tending it and telling it, 'Grow!'" - Midrash Rabba, Bereshit 10:7.

Wonder

Today for me is a new day on earth.
I live it in awe,
And wonder how everything works
Should the trees cease to grow,
Should the sun cease to glow,
Should my heart cease to beat...
I thank you again and again,
That my body's complete.
I can think, I can breathe,
I can hope, I can sneeze,
I can laugh, I can cry, I can pray...
For the wonder each day,
For the strength come what may,
For the power to say:

אֲשֶׁר יָצַר
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'
אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִלְּךָ הַעוֹלָם
אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶת הָאָדָם בְּחֶכְמָה,
וּבְרָא בוֹ נִקְבִים וְנִקְבִים,
חֲלָלִים וְחֲלָלִים,
גְּלוּי וְיָדוּעַ לִפְנֵי כֹסֵא כְבוֹדְךָ שְׂאֵם
יִפְתַּח אֶחָד מֵהֶם
אוֹ אִם יִסְתַּם אֶחָד מֵהֶם
אִי אֶפְשֶׁר לַעֲמוֹד לְפָנֶיךָ
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'
רוּפֵא כָּל בֶּשֶׂר וּמַפְלִיא לַעֲשׂוֹת