

Here I Seek You

Jewish Poems

for

Shabbat, Holy Days, and Everyday

Henry Rasof

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Dedication

in memory of my maternal grandmother, Clara Leplin, and great-aunt Sarah Cohen,
who themselves could not pursue their education
when they were growing up in Russia
but who nevertheless loved
and were able to read literature in English, Yiddish, and Russian

"If song could fill our mouth as water fills the sea . . .

a new song . . . at the seashore

with abounding love You have loved us . . .

. . . love the Lord your God . . .

who is like You?"

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PREFACE

If anyone ever would have told me that in my sixties I would write a series of Jewish liturgical poems—*piyyutim*—I would have said they were *meshuga*—crazy.

Although I have been writing poetry since 1964 and became interested in eastern religion and mysticism starting about the same time, I had very little Jewish upbringing and only became seriously interested in Judaism in 1991, when I moved to Colorado. I must thank Rabbi Mordechai Twerski for indirectly inspiring my first "Jewish" poem ("Visitacion," which can be found on this Web site), which describes the strange, otherworldly experience I had during the first Torah study session I ever went to, at what was then his synagogue in Denver.

Over the years I occasionally wrote other poems with Jewish subjects and somewhere along the way became aware of the poetry of the great medieval Spanish-Jewish poets. In 2000 I traveled to Spain and looked for and sometimes found some of the monuments remembering them—a statue in Málaga of Solomon Ibn Gabirol, quotations from Moses Ibn Ezra in the courtyard of a restored synagogue in Toledo, a marker honoring Shmuel Hanagid in Granada.

In 2002 I enrolled in the Jewish studies MA program at Gratz College, in Elkins Park, PA, and, becoming even more interested in medieval Hebrew poetry, constructed, instead of a thesis, a Web site on the subject.

Around the same time, I found myself struggling with doubts and questions about my religion, the existence of God, and the authenticity of other people's and my own religious experiences, and began having trouble connecting with the prayers. I then decided to write poems in which I tried to address some of my concerns and pinpoint my own spirituality and beliefs. The poems that emerged seek to interpret—and sometimes challenge or question—the content and intent of traditional Jewish prayers and concepts, what Rabbi Arthur Waskow might call "Godwrestling." These poems form the bulk of *Here I Seek You*.

My project was inspired in part by Steven M. Brown's *Higher and Higher: Making Jewish Prayer Part of Us*, a book used in a class at Gratz College taught by Professor Saul Wachs, from whom I learned a lot about Jewish prayer and the siddur—the prayerbook. And the form of the project ended up comprising mostly the poetic forms of the traditional *yotzer* ("light") sequence of poems meant for Shacharit, the morning service, specifically the Shabbat morning service. Three poems are not part of the *yotzer*: two are meant for Ma'ariv, the evening service, specifically for Shabbat evening; one is a *kinah*, intended for a special service on Tishah b'Av, the day of lamentation, commemorating the destruction of the ancient Hebrew temples as well as other sad and painful events in Jewish history.

While the weekday service has poems embedded in a few of the prayers, Shabbat is when poetic opportunities blossom like fruit trees after a hard winter: The day is special, there is more time to pray, and more to give thanks for. And if on Shabbat the poetic opportunities blossom, on festivals and holy days those fruit trees bear poetic fruit to the breaking point.

You can read the poems straight through or skip around. They work, I hope, as poems that can be part of a prayer service or just stand on their own. Many Jewish poets have written liturgical poems that

became detached from the liturgy, or secular poems that became part of it. Prayerbooks may contain both kinds of poems.

This version of the book is set up with longer excerpts from the prayerbook so that you will know where the poems might go, although sometimes the placements are just suggested.

Poems—*piyyutim*—appear in italics. Prayer extracts have a transcription/transliteration of the Hebrew that leads into an English translation. Sometimes a word or phrase within a prayer extract is italicized to show the link between the prayer and the poem.

At the back of the book are notes that identify the poetic genres, add background, indicate their placement in the prayer service, and sometimes make suggestions for readers—like yourself, I hope—who want to write their own poems. My Web site www.medievalhebrewpoetry.org has English translations of religious and secular poems written by some of the great medieval Spanish-Jewish Hebrew poets (although the liturgical poems are not identified as such), as well as information on the poets and their poetry.

Teachers should have the basics here to go about incorporating some poetry into their school curriculum. I volunteer taught Jewish creative writing at the Boulder Jewish Day School for several years, and the children, grades one to five, loved any kind of "Jewish" writing we did, including, of course, poetry.

At one time, prayer services were so loaded with *piyyutim* that prominent rabbis like Maimonides argued against their inclusion; other critics complained that many of the *piyyutim* were unintelligible; and worshippers, as they often do today, complained of overly long services. But (congregational rabbis take note!), let's not blame the poets: Sermons, too (or congregants), were often the problem. Leone Modena, a famous homilist who drew Christian clergy to his sermons, complained of the short attention span of congregants in his fascinating *Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi*.

This checkered poetic history notwithstanding, I encourage you, whether a young student or a senior citizen, a rabbi or a congregant, a poet or poetry lover, to share your own poems with your fellow students, teachers, family, friends, rabbi, and congregation and of course with God. It would be great if the daring among you would get your spiritual leader to permanently include one or more of your poems in a prayer service; many congregations have their own prayerbooks, and your poem or poems could and should go there. Additionally, you might want to start a writing group and assemble a booklet of your original poems to share; a whole prayer service might be built around such a collection, in fact. Finally, ask your congregation's music director or a musician to set your poem(s) to music!

These days the religious tide is turning in favor of enhancements to the traditional liturgy, including new musical compositions, sometimes dance and theatre, and of course poetry.

Happy reading . . . and writing!

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Professor Saul Wachs, for his wise instruction on Jewish prayer in his classes at Gratz College.

T. Carmi, whom I never met, whose *Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* has been my bible of Jewish poetry, especially liturgical and medieval Hebrew poetry.

SHACHARIT: MORNING SERVICE

1 Here I Seek You (Piyyut: Reshut to Nishmat)

*Here I seek you in the early morning stillness—
The sun just beginning to rise,
The sky turning from black to pale blue,
All the colors in the world awaiting rebirth.*

*Ecstatic, I seek you not in the heavens
But instead in the sounds of falling leaves,
The chirp chirp of robins,
In the whoosh of the wind through the maple.*

*Now as the colors in the sky penetrate
The windows of my room with an unearthly softness
I open my eyes that have been shut all night
And sense the scent of your beauty.*

*Rested, I match your breathing,
Slowly feel for you
The way a husband feels for his bride
With an ethereal lightness of touch.*

*Yes, and in that early morning stillness
I turn toward you from the depths of sleep
And say I love you with every last
Atom of my breath.*

2 I Have Sought You (Piyyut: Reshut to Nishmat)

*Boy have I sought you
All the days of my life with an intensity
To outmatch the sun's
Yet till now have never found you*

*Even though I have studied the desert sands,
The ocean's waves and high mountain trails,
Although I thought I saw you
Among the prairie flowers and swampy rushes*

*And then one morning
Searching the airy atoms
That permeate the early-morning breeze
Flowing through the window and across my nostrils—*

*There I swear I found you
At long last in the very breath
Going in and out of my body
There at last I found you*

*Really, whom I have sought all my life
In earth's every faraway corner,
Near and far
In the heavens and beyond*

*I now watch you
Watching me in a simple
Artless way, propelled by something beyond,
Rising and falling on our own*

*Clouds high above
Lined with
Celestial visions
And lost music*

*Early, before the sun rises, listening
To the robins and jays,
You, my soul, you
My breath, just You. . . .*

NISHMAT (THE BREATH)

Nishmat kol chai. . . . The *breath* of every living being shall bless Your name, O Lord our God, and the spirit of all flesh shall continually glorify and exalt Your memorial, O our King; from everlasting to everlasting You are God; and beside You we have no King who redeems and saves, sets free and delivers, who supports and has mercy in all times of trouble and distress; yes, we have no King but You. . . . You alone do we acknowledge.

3 Everything That Breathes Praises You (Piyyut: Nishmat)

*Everything that breathes praises You, Lord God—
insects, from mites to moths, for making them the most numerous of all creatures.
plants, from clovers to redwoods, for making them food for all creatures.
animals, from mice to blue whales, for making them in unending diversity.
humans, fast and slow, male and female, for making them with a soul.
the oceans, oxygen for the world, for making them sustain life on the planet.
the magma, sand, dirt, rocks, and mountains for making them the foundation of Earth.
the universe, for making it the entirety of this existence.*

4 Could We Live? (Piyyut: Nishmat)

*Could we live without the body You have given us?
Could we love without the body You have given us?
Could we survive without the body You have given us?
Could we sing Your praises without the throat You have given us?
Could we recite Torah without the mouth You have given us?
Could we read poems without the eyes You have given us?
Could we paint nature without the hands You have given us?
Could we reach for the stars without the legs You have given us?
Could we imitate the birds without the imagination You have given us?
Could we see You without the inner eye You have given us?*

5 Nine Days of Breath (Piyyut: Nishmat)

*Nishmat b'riya, breath of a creation.
Nishmat rakia, breath of firmament.
Nishmat aretz vamayim, breath of earth and oceans.
Nishmat aisev, breath of plant life.
Nishmat me'orot, breath of sun and moon.
Nishmat nefesh haya, breath of animal kingdom.
Nishmat adam, breath of human.
Nishmat okhlah, breath of nourishment.
Nishmat shabbat, breath of rest.*

Elu Finu. . . . Could song fill our mouth as water fills the sea. . . .

CHATZI KADDISH (HALF-KADDISH)

Yitgadal v'yitkadash shemei rabba. . . . Magnified and sanctified may He be. . . .

K'RİYAT SHEMA AND ITS B'RAKHOT (RECITATION OF THE SHEMA—HEAR O ISRAEL—AND ITS BLESSINGS)

6 What or Who Is the Source of Blessing? (Piyyut: Reshut to K'riyat Shema)

*What or Who is the source of blessing?
Where is its source?*

*We wander aimlessly in desert dreams
Searching memories
Of ones we have loved
In embers of a long-forgotten
Yet all-too-near fire*

*What or Who is the source of blessing?
Where is its source?*

*In the mountains we purify
Ourselves in glacial tarns
Smear our fingers with bristlecone sap
Search out the elusive fairy primrose
Among the pika eskers*

*What or Who is the source of blessing?
Where is its source?*

*Daily we get up into routine
And nightly settle into sleep
We complain, rage, waste time;
Fall short and rise high
As if nothing else exists*

*What or Who is the source of blessing?
Where is its source?*

*At the ocean we scrape our feet
On wet sand and dance
Among seaweed bulbs we
Bury our toes in soft hot sand
While sandpipers poke for sandcrabs*

*What or Who is the source of blessing?
Where is its source?*

*In so many ways we destroy
One another, ignore our way
Through suffering forget ourselves
As we remember, only to forget again
As if nothing else mattered*

*What or Who is the source of blessing?
Where is its source?*

*In a forest we close our eyes in the fullness
Of the midday sun and stare into
Darkness lit by heavenly wheels
A landscape of bright starry angels
Surrounding an ancient face*

So that we no longer need to ask

*What or Who is the source of blessing?
Where is its source?*

Barkhu et Adonai hamevorakh: Praise the Lord, *Source of Blessing*.

Barukh Adonai hamevorakh l'olam va-ed. Praise the Lord, *Source of blessing* throughout all time. [Note: The following poem could go here or after the following blessing, the way it appears on this page.]

Barukh ata Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam. . . . Praised are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, *creating light* and fashioning *darkness*, ordaining the order of all creation.

7 You Who Creates Day and Night (Piyyut: Guf Hayotzer)

*You who creates day and night
Whose crown emanates light and dark
Good and bad*

*How are we to understand
The slaughter of young children
The madness of war?*

*What do we make of the power of dictators
On the one hand and the often surprising
Lovingkindness of strangers on the other?*

*Creation—sudden, slow, one of a kind
One of many, mystery
Beyond understanding, wholly holy*

*Our hearts seek beauty
Balance among wrathful winds
And calming breezes*

*In the vastness of the night sky
In the brightness of the sun
We seek strength*

*We must face ugly news
Endure to find tiny sparks
In seemingly endless darkness*

*Creation—sudden, slow, one of a kind
One of many, mystery
Within understanding, wholly holy*

*The foundation of our wisdom must lie
Somewhere between light and dark
Perhaps in the wisdom of the body*

*Desperate we want a king
To make it all better
Although earthly kings fail the test*

*You must be more than God
Of light
Or God of dark*

*Creation—sudden, slow, one of a kind
One of many, mystery
Beyond understanding, wholly holy*

*More than God of both
Light and dark
More perhaps than light and dark themselves*

*What are You
Whose names are myriad
Whose oneness appears*

*As multiplicity
And whose multiplicity
Appears as oneness*

*Creation—sudden, slow, one of a kind
One of many, mystery
Within understanding, wholly holy*

*We want to understand and know
Hold You away
And bring You near*

*Discover Your beauty while enduring pain
Forever stand on the foundation of Your guardianship
Make it through the long night's journey into day*

*Some say You have turned Your face
Or do not exist
Or are a vengeful God*

*Creation—sudden, slow, one of a kind
One of many, mystery
Beyond understanding, wholly holy*

*Some ignore You
Curse You or in Your name
Some say You are not the true God*

*Some say You have an evil twin
Who creates dark, night, evil:
How else explain the mysteries of life and death?*

*Now, what do You say
God of tradition, with whom
We have argued these thousands of years?*

*Creation—sudden, slow, one of a kind
One of many, mystery
Within understanding, wholly holy*

*I created the Big Bang
Something out of nothing
And nothing out of something*

*I made the stars, the planets, the sun and moon, galaxies
Novae, supernovae, the dark matter that composes
The bulk of the universe*

*I created the heavens and the earth,
The swimming, creeping, crawling, flying, and standing creatures,
Along with the trees, the shrubs, plants, algae, fungi, and all the rest*

*Creation—sudden, slow, one of a kind
One of many, mystery beyond
Within understanding, wholly holy*

*I set in course heavenly bodies
Whose laws govern
Human relationships*

*Hosted this universe
And all the others
Filled them with light*

*That your existence
Be lit by the glory
Of all that is holy*

Hakol yodukha . . . All creatures praise You and declare: None is as *holy* as the Lord. . . .

Titbarakh tsureinu . . . Be You blessed, O our Rock, our King and Redeemer, Creator of holy beings; praised be Your name forever, O our King, Creator of ministering spirits, all of whom stand in the heights of the universe and proclaim with awe in unison aloud the words of the living God and everlasting King. All of them are beloved, pure and mighty, and all of them in dread and awe do the will of their Master: and all of them open their mouths in holiness and purity, with song and psalm, while they bless and praise, glorify and revere, sanctify and ascribe sovereignty to the name of the Divine King, the great, mighty, and dreaded One, holy is He; and they all take upon themselves the yoke of the kingdom of heaven one from the other, and give sanction to one another to hallow their Creator: in tranquil joy of spirit, with pure speech and holy melody they all respond in unison and exclaim with awe:

Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, Adonai tzeva'ot. *Holy, holy, holy* is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of His glory.

8 All Is Beautiful and Holy (Piyyut: Ofan)

*from the primordial spinning of the Big Bang
to the spinning wheels of a toy train
everything in the universe is
turning in one way or another
and all is beautiful and holy*

*from the wheels of the chariot Ezekiel saw
in his vision by the waters of Babylon
to the wheels of the chariot
driven by Charlton Heston in Ben-Hur
all is miraculous and holy*

*from the thoughts in our heads when we obsess
about whether to do this or that
to the wheel of samsara as we contemplate
the meaning of birth and rebirth
everything is beautiful and holy*

*from the spinning wheels on a bicycle
traveling along the Platte River on a spring day in Colorado
to the spinning wheels on a car
driving through the Mojave desert on a scorching summer day
everything is lovely and holy*

*from the turbines in a hydroelectric plant turning
through the days of the year
to the gyroscope in the Space Station rotating
while orbiting the earth
everything is marvelous and holy*

*from watch gears revolving in the telling of time
to engines revolving on a cruise ship in the Caribbean
from blades rotating on a Black Hawk helicopter in Afghanistan
to eggs tumbling in a pot of boiling water
these can only be described as holy*

*from a monk spinning prayer wheels in a monastery in Tibet
to a rickshaw driver slowly pedaling through Kolkata
from the way we roll our eyes at bad jokes
to the way a dog rolls over when her belly is scratched
everything is mysterious and holy*

*now close your eyes and enter
the realm between waking and sleep
and tiny, supernaturally colored wheels
may appear that are sharp
as if viewed through a microscope*

*stare at those wheels
and they may multiply as if attached
to a rotating kaleidoscope
you just might see
an old man on a throne speak to you*

*you may not remember his words
but surely will know they are beautiful and holy
miraculous and holy
lovely and holy
magical and holy*

*ascetics and skeptics will know too
along with cynics and mystics
believers and unbelievers
atheists and deists—
all will stand on their tiptoes and shout once again:*

***Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, Adonai tzeva'ot.
Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.***

V'ha-ofanim . . . And the Ofanim and the holy Chayoth with a noise of great rushing, upraising themselves toward the Seraphim, thus over against them offer praise and say:

Barukh k'vod Adonai mi-m'komo. . . . Blessed be the glory of the Lord from His place.

L'el barukh . . . To the blessed God they offer pleasant melodies; to the King, the living and ever-enduring God, they utter hymns and make their praises heard, for He alone performs mighty deeds and makes new things. He is the Lord of battles, sows righteousness, causes salvation to spring forth, creates remedies, and is revered in praises. He is the Lord of wonders, who in his goodness renews the creation every day continually, as it is said, (O give thanks) to Him that makes great *lights*, for His lovingkindness endures forever. O cause a new *light* to shine upon Zion, and may we all be worthy soon to enjoy its brightness.

9 Come and See (Piyyut: Me'ora)

*Why did You
Create light and dark?*

*Come and see
We do not know.*

*And day and night:
Why not just one or the other?*

*Come and see
A mystery.*

*Why is light
Particle and wave?*

*Come and see
We do not know.*

*Why is the speed of light
Constant?*

*Come and see
A mystery.*

*Is there a light
Around the body?*

*Come and see
We do not know.*

*What causes our eyes
To light up?*

*Come and see
A mystery.*

*Why are fireflies
And lightning beautiful?*

*Come and see
We do not know.*

*What is the ultimate meaning
Of light?*

*Come and see
A mystery.*

*Is the Book of Radiance
Just a book?*

*Come and see
We do not know.*

*After the Creation
Did light-filled vessels really break?*

*Come and see
A mystery.*

*Is there really a Torah
Of white letters on black fire?*

*Come and see
We do not know.*

*How did You conceive of light
In the first place, and why?*

*Come and see
A mystery.*

*Come and see
We do not know.*

*A mystery
We do not know.*

10 Light of Lights (Piyyut: Me'ora)

*the light that is every day
what is it really
its true nature*

*there is light from the sun,
the moon, from stars
comets and meteors*

*lightning, auroras, and solar flares
rainbows, sprites
and of course ordinary sunsets and sunrises*

*from lantern fish
at the bottom of the sea—
an eerie green light—*

*glow worms
fireflies
and some mushrooms*

*light reflected
from between the eyes of spiders
so we can see them in the dark*

*phosphorescent diatoms that sparkle
in the waves and sand
during red tides*

*rocks that glow
green and purple
in the dark*

*watch dials, television sets
flashlights and fiber-optic cables
cell phones and computers*

*there also is light in the eyes of children
lovers' eyes
the unbearable lightness of being*

*and let us not forget spiritual lights
the guiding light of wisdom
light around the body, auras*

*enlightenment, the clear light
and who can forget the zohar
the radiant book of splendor*

*but however much we learn
from science, literature, philosophy
or personal experience*

*about the light we see
and the light concealed
in the places we do not see*

*however much we read
meditate or experiment
however much we think we know*

*light is still a mystery
for we really
do not know*

*the beauty of sight
the existence of light
in all its varieties*

*is a mystery
pure and simple
beyond understanding*

*and all we can do is be grateful
for this bounty and our ability
to perceive and distinguish it*

Barukh ata Adonai yotzer ha-me'orot. Praised are You, Lord, Creator of *lights*.

Ahava rabba . . . With abounding *love* have You loved us, O Lord our God, with great and exceeding pity have You pitied us. O our Father, our King, for our fathers' sake, who trusted in You, and whom You did teach the statutes of life, be also gracious unto us and teach us. O our Father, merciful Father, ever-compassionate, have mercy upon us: O put it into our hearts to understand and to discern, to mark, learn and teach, to heed, to do, and to fulfill in love all

the words of instruction in Your Law. Enlighten our eyes in Your Law, and let our hearts cleave to Your commandments, and unite our hearts to love and fear Your name, so that we be never put to shame. Because we have trusted in Your holy, great and revered name, we shall rejoice and be glad in Your salvation. O bring us in peace from the four corners of the earth, and make us go upright to our land; for You are a God who works salvation. You have chosen us from all peoples and tongues, and have brought us near unto Your great name forever in faithfulness, that we might in *love* give thanks unto You and proclaim Your unity.

11 Let's Thank the Mystery of Life (Piyyut: Ahava)

*Some of us do not quite know the meaning of love
Do not know the dreaming of how it is done.
Was the Torah given by God?
Believe, without seeing it done.*

*When we were younger, love like a meteor
Out of the blue, came running but was always underdone.*

*The Torah's arrival was a wonderful surprise
Keeping humankind from becoming done in.
As we grow older and our hormones grow weak
Love though no longer humming cannot be undone.*

*When Moses showed the Torah to the people
So many began sunning that nothing got done.*

*Let's thank the mystery of life—God, if You insist—for our few hints of love:
Although our emotions seem to be numbing, life and love are not yet done.*

Barukh ata Adonai ha-bohair b'mo Yisrael b'ahava. Blessed are You, O Lord, who has chosen Your people Israel in *love*.

K'RIYAT SHEMA (RECITATION OF THE SHEMA— HEAR O ISRAEL)

SHEMA ISRAEL . . . Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One.

Barukh shem k'vod malkhuto l'olam va-ed. Blessed be His name, whose glorious kingdom is forever and ever.

V'ahavta et Adonai elotekha . . . And you shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates.

V'haya im-shamiya . . . And it shall come to pass, if you shall hearken diligently unto my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, that I will give the rain of your land in its season. . . .

Vayomer Agonai el-Moshe . . . And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel and bid them that they make them a fringe upon the corners of their garments. . . .

Emet v'yatsiv v'nakhon . . . True and firm, established and enduring, right and faithful, beloved and precious. . . .

U-d'varav chayim . . . For the first and for the last ages Your word is good and endures forever and ever; it is true and trust, worthy, a statute which shall not pass away. True it is that You are indeed the Lord our God and the God of our fathers, our King, our fathers' King, our Redeemer, the Redeemer of our fathers, our Maker, the Rock of our salvation; our Deliverer and Rescuer from everlasting, such is Your name. [POEM COULD GO HERE OR AFTER THE NEXT LINE, WHERE IT NOW IS.] Ein Elohim zulatekha. There is no God but You.

12 Only You (Piyyut: Zulat)

*Only You could have created
The heavens and the earth*

*Brought order
To formlessness*

*Sprinkled seeds
That turned into prairies and forests*

*Arranged heavenly bodies
In endlessly diverse array*

*Placed an earth
Between two waters*

*Made an animal kingdom
From mite to whale*

*Infused it all
With the capacity to nourish*

*Man and woman
With the capacity to love*

*No god could have
Done this in the way You did*

*There is no God
But You come closest*

*In the mystery
You spin through*

*Each grain of sand
Each galaxy*

*Every thing that breathes
That looks alive but isn't*

*Some may have asked
Why You did it*

*No one understands how
We sort of know when*

*Were there previous worlds
Will there be subsequent ones*

*Is there another God
Or god somewhere else*

*Or are You the only one
Is there no God but You?*

13 I Think of You (Piyyut: Zulat)

*I think of You
Day and night*

*In my dreams
And deepest sleep*

*You are my beloved
And my lover*

*Thoughts of You
Crowd out all else*

*I cannot work
Eat or clean,*

*Talk to friends, fix the toilet
Or care for my health*

*Cannot write, read
Pay attention to the news*

*There is nothing
Else but You*

*You are everything
And everywhere in the universe*

*Nothing else exists
Not stars or planets*

*Sun or moon
Comets or meteors*

*Galaxies, nebulae
Nothing, I say*

*Nothing exists
But You*

*You are a cloud
Occluding everything*

*But no, that occluding
Is You too*

*There is nothing else
No one but You*

14 Without Saying Why (Piyyut: Zulat)

*You brought us into
A world You created
A magical world
Subtly so*

*On a trail in bear country
No bears, just bear poop
Red rocks everywhere
Asking to be climbed*

*White aster clusters
Fading at season's end
A nearly full moon
Awaiting harvest*

*None but You could
Turn the leaves at just
The right time, leaving
Some, though, for winter*

*And without saying why
So that we would require intelligence
To soften the cold blows
Awaiting Your approach*

*Who else but You
Could have made these things
Set in motion a creation
Heavenly with sensation*

*Given us choices
To make, determination
To succeed, will
To ask and receive*

*With a neatness
Of purpose, single-
Mindedness of design,
Brightness of presence*

*You are incomparable
In Your majesty, sweetness,
Wisdom and humor. No one
Can compare*

*But can we forget
The wars created
In Your holy name,
The children murdered?*

*Do we understand why
Children die before
Their parents and sometimes
Their grandparents?*

*Why people harbor grudges
For centuries, their blood
A basket of sad sour memories
Staining the earth indelibly red?*

*No, but You are this
Too, along with the sweetness,
The gladness and the
Gentle rain soaking that red red earth*

*The only One who could
Do both, create the suffering
And medicate it too,
An all-powerful band of one*

*So in spite of the doubters
You are still the one
Whatever people say
You are but one*

*There is none but You
No one else.
You are the one
And only*

*Nothing exists but You.
You are everything
And everyone, all
And nothing, one not many*

(THIS NEXT LINE GOES HERE OR BEFORE THE POEM.) Ein Elohim zulatekha. There is no God but You.
Ezrat avoteinu . . . You have been the help of our fathers from of old, a Shield and Savior. . . .
True it is that You are indeed the Lord of Your people, and a mighty King to plead their cause.
Moses and the children of Israel sang a song unto You with great joy, saying, all of them,

Mi khamokha ba-eilim Adonai. . . . *Who is like You*, O Lord, among the mighty ones? *Who is like You*, glorious in holiness, revered in praises, doing marvels? (The *piyyut* also could go before this passage.)

15 Who Is Like You? (Piyyut: Mi Kamokha)

*who is like you
who created heaven and earth
from the big bang to the smallest subatomic particle*

*who is like you
who set the planets in motion
and brought light to their moons*

*who is like you
who painted the sky blue
and gave us the means to appreciate it*

*who is like you
who rustled up the air we breathe
and the earth we walk on*

*who gave us legs to stand on
hands to touch
a face to love*

*who is like you
making yourself present
in our deepest conversations
giving us children to love and love us
parents, brothers, and sisters*

*who is like you
who has given us Torah
to delve into and argue about
a history to become part of
stories to tell and retell*

*who is like you
one and one only
indivisible, radiant and dark,
near and far, inside and everywhere
invisible to some, visible to others
spectacular in both mystery and obviousness*

*who and who else is like you
who Tikkunei Zohar says
is knowable and unknowable
appearing to permeate all of creation—
manifesting ten supernal qualities
yet remaining single and solitary
though not as we understand single and solitary*

*who indeed is like you
who allows dissent and disbelief
even as you command us in so many ways
who has plotted our destiny
yet given us the freedom to choose
who to a rare few displays glory in a continuous array of light
to others in an array of sparks
to still others in one spark that illuminates an entire lifetime
and to still others in darkness and death*

*who is like you
whom we seek from birth to death
from whom we take life
to whom we give our lives*

16 Blazing Stars (Piyyut: Mi Kamokha)

*None but You can create the mystery of life
And death that touches every blade of late-summer grass,
That spreads over the late-flowering fields of daisies and blazing stars
Through which we view the jagged rock formations in our hills.*

17 Hovering (Piyyut: Mi Kamokha)

***Hovering to
Every side in
Neverending mystery,
Rock of our
Yearning.***

Shirah chadasha . . . With a new song the redeemed people offered praise unto Your name at the seashore; they all gave thanks in unison, proclaimed Your sovereignty, and said,

Adonai yimlokh l'olam va-ed: The Lord shall reign forever and ever.

Tsur Yisrael . . . O Rock of Israel, arise to the help of Israel and *deliver*, according to Your promise, Judah and Israel. Our *Redeemer*, the Lord of hosts is His name, the Holy One of Israel.

18 Questions (Piyyut: Ge'ula)

*How does God redeem us
And what does this mean?*

*A hawk flies overhead and lands
In a cottonwood tree on the plains.*

*Two killdeer cry out
To distract three coyotes.*

*Wind winds through furrows
In a field that will be alfalfa.*

*This is how God redeems Himself
In the midst of earthly bloodshed.*

*Yet how does God redeem us
And what does this mean?*

*As our parents grow old
We care for them totally.*

*As our friends and their children die
Too often prematurely, we mourn, and mourn with them.*

*As the madness of tyrants everywhere threatens
The very sanctity of life, we rage and protest.*

*This is how we redeem ourselves
In the midst of death and destruction.*

*Yet how does God redeem us
And what does this mean?*

*As the beauty and light of religion seem to fade
Into a fixed and thorny darkness, we look at the dark clouds.*

*As the embers of fires everywhere cease
To throw off sparks, we strike our fingers on stones to start new fires.*

*As the mysteries of life are solved one after the other
We unsolve old ones and look for new ones.*

*This is how we redeem God
In the midst of a cloud of unknowing.*

*Yet when we ask God to redeem us
What exactly does this mean?*

*That we are redeemed
Like coupons at a supermarket?*

*Forgiven for straying
From the straight and true in ourselves?*

*Saved and rescued
From our enemies, inner and outer?*

*Invited up the ladder of self-knowledge
To join the angels in heaven?*

*A hawk flies overhead
Our parents grow old*

*The beauty and light of religion
Seem to fade*

*We ask questions without answers
Or whose answers we do not understand*

Blessed are You, O Lord, who has *redeemed* Israel.

XXXXXX

MA'ARIV: EVENING SERVICE

K'RİYAT SHEMA AND ITS B'RAKHOT (RECITATION OF THE SHEMA—HEAR O ISRAEL—AND ITS BLESSINGS)

Barukh et Adonai hamevorakh. Bless the Lord, who is to be blessed.

Barukh Adonai hamevorakh l'olam va-ed. Blessed is the Lord, who is to be blessed forever and ever.

Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha-olam. . . . Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who at Your word brings on the evening twilight, with wisdom opens the gates of the heavens, with understanding changes times and varies the seasons, and who arranges the stars in their watches in the sky, according to Your will. You creates day and night; You roll away the light from before the darkness and the darkness from before the light; You make the day pass and the night approach, and divide the day from the night. The Lord of hosts is Your name. A God living and enduring continually, may You reign over us forever and ever.

19 Strange Stillness (Piyyut: Ma'aravit)

*as day unwinds
wind often dies down
air becomes still as water
in a pond at dusk*

*sparrows disappear from feeders
fallen seed remains
exactly where it is until
blazing sun arises next day*

*it is strange stillness like moments
when two people discover they are in love
when you look at your aging parents
and see your face in their eyes*

*later, absolute stillness
descends from nowhere
when dusk can darken no more
Venus then Mars emerges*

*followed almost randomly
by the north star then
Orion the hunter and the Milky Way
lazily if at all*

*in this silent dark
anciently mysterious
sometimes frightening movement
from day to night*

*let us notice our breathing
hear our nervous system
sense air rustling hairs on our skin
allow imagination to wander*

*while overhead stars
fixed and wandering
merge into
Creation's fullness*

20 Yearning for More (Piyyut: Ma'aravit)

***Here you are once again watching the
Heavenly bodies swirl in the skies
Having the time of your life***

***Even with constant turmoil
Everywhere you turn, whether morning or
Evening, wherever you look***

***Nothing can stop you now,
Not the moon nor the
North star nor the midday sun***

***Respect your inner lights, dress in
Rags if you can, let yourself
Revolve around the only fixed star***

***Your whole life depends on
Yearning for more than you see, more than
You want at this moment***



TISHAH B'AV: LAMENTATION FOR THE NINTH OF THE MONTH OF AV

[Note: Placement of the poem in the prayer service is variable. See Notes on the Poems below and the Further Reading.]

21 You Sit Alone (Piyyut: Kinah)

ALAS!

*Alone you sit
In a field of stones
Asking why
You deserved this solitary confinement
Instead of the infinite expanse
Of oceans and air*

*Born you were
In a desert of poverty and fear
Yet over the years grew
Into the peerless teacher
You became
Of the world's children*

*Ceaselessly you loved birds and whales
Flowers and gardens
Fishes and spiders
In your magnanimity
Breathing in quietude
Equally with city noise*

*Directly overhead the constellations,
Moon, comets, and meteors
Spread over your head like a halo
Emanated from the upper worlds
Covering the lower worlds
Like a translucent net of kindness*

*Earth is empty now that you are gone
Leaving us bereft
Alone to wander in exile
Unsure where to draw nourishment
Afraid of the dark
Aware only of the intractable march toward the end*

ALAS!

*All around the world is exploding in death
Body parts fly everywhere
Illuminating the night
Darkening the day
From the tip of Africa
To the peaks of Kashmir*

*But you who spent your life
Teaching children peace
Who drew together a coterie
Of peacemakers
To drive the chariot of the world
Toward the pure land of harmony*

*Certain of success: Where are you now?
Your friends too are dead or dying.
Your children have grown up
And even if they spread your message
They are too few
To stop the bloodshed flooding the beach of innocence*

*Drenching every corner of the unhappy earth
Tears flow in unending rivers
Nowhere are eyes dry
Except in the fortresses of the wicked and cruel
Where the rich and heartless hide
From terrors launched in God's name in their false*

*Eden. And therein lies the crux:
Much of this is done in Your name.
How can you allow this? How
Can you allow your name to be ground
Into a powder of bones, hatred, blood, and death?
You who gave life to these same bones?*

ALAS!

*Are You telling me the mother of the world
Cannot overcome the intensity
Of destruction? It overwhelms her
As it overwhelms us all. She
Is not the savior we await, certainly not
The savior some think already has come or is here,*

*Because I have lived in darkness
Since she left this world.
My days are like sleepless nights
Infested with nightmares
So that I feel awake when asleep
And asleep when awake,*

*Cannot pray, cannot find
My center. The center
Does not hold. Around me
In the midst of the flames of grief:
Can You not relieve me
Of my grief and suffering?*

*Dead, I feel lost. My guts ache,
My head, my teeth. I
Have forgotten happiness
And sit or stand or walk
In continuous agitation: There is
No peace.*

*Even friends cannot console me,
Nor doctors heal me. Food
Is tasteless, music discordant.
Everything provokes me to tears
But catatonia and despair. My words
Do not rhyme and ring hollow.*

ALAS!

*Argentum and gold everywhere appear dull.
This is not your fault, nothing
You did, nor the result
Of any sins you created
During your long life, nor
Anything you can repair now.*

*But we wish you were still here
Or could come back, for even
A faint ghost of your goodness
Would inject into this sad life
A glimmer of hope, an anchor
To which the drowning could grasp.*

*Crazy we are not, and know it's too late. Yes,
We mourn for you, stagger about
Thinking you will just reappear*

*As if you had stepped away for just a moment,
But in our heart of hearts know
This is not to be.*

*Dull we are not, but saddest, hardest to grasp
Is that although we know you will not return
To save us from ourselves, provide us
With that tiny spark of hope,
We continue to think you will
And cannot leave the idea alone.*

*Empty we languish
By the edge of the sea
Unable to decide where to go next,
Where to turn for support: Even from those
Who might lend support
We can ask nothing.*

ALAS!

*As you remember, mother
Of the world, of all life,
Do not forget us, whom
You raised, who sat
By your feet soaking in
Your ancient and original wisdom*

*Because we are orphans
And must now care for ourselves.
We have learned from you
But are in danger of forgetting
In the barrage
Of negativity splattering the dimensions of our sight.*

*Crazy, maybe, we are hungry and will become
Hungrier as we strive to remember
How you taught us
To sustain ourselves in a hostile
Environment. Wicked forces
Ravish the forests, oceans, and watershed.*

*Do give us strength
To remember what you taught us
About withstanding
The tsunami of hatred and duplicity,
The avalanche of despair and sadism
That have engulfed the planet.*

*Earnestly some would pray for you
To take us with you, to abandon
The terrible world we live in,
But this is not your way, just as we cannot
Though we might want to
Renew our days as of old.*

ALAS!

*And she is like a city
Built in the ancient mists of time
By unknown hands,
Growing through the years
Through the lives of her citizens
And the inheritances of her children*

*Beautiful in her influence
Radiant in her dimensions
Permeated by an accumulation of wisdom
Gained through lifetimes
Of listening and dreaming
As if a bride awaiting her bridegroom. Yet*

*Coldness has descended also
On a black ray from You
Emanated from Your infinite Self
Clouding, then darkening, finally occluding
Her radiant glory in a shower of empty husks
Silent, surrounded by the ongoing party of life*

*Death is no beautiful embrace, no
Divine kiss, no prophet of anything real. No.
It is final. You have in your mysterious omniscience
Snapped the invisible thread connecting her life
To Yours riding the cosmic chariot
Across the universal sky*

*Elevating her perhaps
To the highest of levels yet leaving us
Bereft, without the one who gave us life,
Who guided us to this point in our lives,
Who now is but a ghost
Wandering her own eponymous city*

NOTES ON THE POEMS

These notes discuss the types of liturgical poems, or *piyyutim* (singular = *piyyut*), used in this book, indicate where they go in the prayer service, and sometimes elaborate on the poems.

Although the weekday nonfestival morning services contain some poems other than psalms, and some prayers that incorporate poetic features—for example, El Adon, which is an alphabetic acrostic (the first letter of the first line is a Hebrew aleph, the first letter of the second line is a Hebrew bet, and so on)—*piyyutim* are usually reserved for special occasions like Shabbat and holidays, partly because of weekday time constraints and partly because poets tend to write poems for special occasions. That said, and as discussed in the Preface to this book, *piyyutim* are not always written with a specific occasion in mind or might be appreciated separately from their liturgical context. I would like to think that these *piyyutim* fit with the prayer service and also can stand on their own.

Piyyutim often precede a *b'rakha*, or benediction, but sources and prayerbooks may or may not put poems meant to go with a specific prayer in the same place, so placements are somewhat flexible. That said, random placement may lead to a disconnect between a poem and its context. However, if your

prayer service is of the nontraditional kind, precise traditional placement (give or take) may be of secondary importance.

In the notes below, I indicate one or two poetic placements, based on information in the Elbogen or Carmi books (see the Further Reading). The version of *Here I Seek You* you are now reading also shows the poems with generally longer prayer excerpts than are used in these Notes.

My collection comprises a sequence of *piyyutim* called a *yotzer* ("light"), related to the benedictions surrounding the K'riyat Shema (the reading of the Shema, the main Jewish affirmation of faith) and are intended for the Shabbat morning or daily prayer service. Several poems are *ma'aravit*, intended to go with the Friday Ma'ariv (evening) service. The last poem is a *kinah*, intended for a special service on Tishah b'Av, the day of lamentation, commemorating the destruction of the ancient Hebrew temples as well as other sad and painful events in Jewish history. There are many other genres of *piyyutim*—but these will have to wait for another time.

My poems are skeletal when compared with the poems written by the traditional masters of *piyyutim*. For example, *piyyutim* written by the great early and medieval poets are much more elaborate, utilizing rhythmic and metric schemes as well as biblical allusions and quotations. I have chosen instead to focus on content and emotion. Additionally, the classic and medieval poets wrote for audiences many of whose members were—in the time before the advent of printed books—perhaps more familiar with the quotations and allusions than most of us are in our modern age.

The first poems in the collection comprise *reshuyot* [singular, *reshut* ("permission")] to nishmat ("breath," related to *neshama*, "soul"), which introduce the fixed nishmat prayer on Shabbat morning, and then several *nishmatim*, which follow the fixed nishmat prayer.

These are followed by a *reshut* to K'riyat Shema.

These in turn are followed by the *yotzer* (“light”) sequence of poems inserted into the morning prayers: the *guf hayotzer*, *ofan*, *ahava*, *me’ora*, *zulat*, *mi kamokha*, and *ge’ula*:

–the *guf hayotzer* (“body of the *yotzer*”) builds on our blessing God for creating light and dark.

–the *ofan* (“wheel”) is, to quote the brilliant poet and scholar T. Carmi, an “ecstatic angelical” poem.

–the *ahava* (“love”) expands on the love God feels for the Jewish people. Mine takes the form of a *ghazal*, a type of sacred love poem of pre-Islamic Arabic origin that still is popular in South Asia and the Middle East. The language plays on the duality of divine and human love.

–the *me’ora* (“light”) references God as the creator of lights.

–the *zulat* (“besides”) expands on the idea that there is no other God besides God.

–the *mi kamokha* (“who is like You?”) reinforces the prayer that asks who is as mighty as God and then reminds of His (or Her, if you will) eternal reign.

–the *ge’ula* (“redemption”) refers to God’s redemption of Israel.

Following these poems are two *ma’aravit*, which belong in the evening (Ma’ariv) service.

Finally, there is a long *kinah*, a dirge meant for the sad day of Tishah b’Av.

Notes on Individual Poems

English prayerbook quotations in these Notes are taken verbatim or modified from the free online Standard Prayerbook: Authorized English Translation, by Simeon Singer (New York, Bloch Publishing, 1915) (<http://sacred-texts.com/jud/spb/index.htm>)

1 Here I Seek You

This acrostic liturgical poem is a *reshut* to *nishmat*, intended to introduce the *nishmat* prayer in the Shabbat-morning service, which begins: "Nishmat . . . The breath of every living being shall bless Your name. . . ." The linking word between the poem and the prayer is the word *nishmat*, "breath" (related to *neshama*, soul). The poet asks permission—*reshut* means "permission"—to add his or her own words to the fixed prayer. The poem is in the tradition of such poems (in turn perhaps inspired by Psalm 63) in which the poet searches for God early in the morning, perhaps even before sunrise, when only birds are out and about. See, for example, the poem by Solomon Ibn Gabirol (1021/2-1055) beginning "Shahar avakshakha tsvuri umisgabi" ("At dawn I will seek You").

2 I Have Sought You

This is another *reshut* to *nishmat*, in which the poet asks permission (*reshut* = "permission") to add his or her own words to the fixed Shabbat morning *nishmat* prayer. See above note on ***Here I Seek You*** for the information. This poem is a name acrostic—the first letters of each stanza spell out a name, in this case that of my beloved late mother, Beatrice, who, though not conventionally religious, loved nature (especially birds) and was a poet in her own right and loved to read poetry.

By the way, the bird can be a symbol for the *shekhinah*, the divine feminine presence.

3 Everything That Breathes Praises You

This liturgical poem is a *nishmat* meant to *follow* the *nishmat* ("breath") prayer on Shabbat morning and precede "Ilu Finu . . . Even if our mouth could fill with song . . .," and help help you more fully appreciate the wonder of God and God's creation on Shabbat.

4 Could We Live

Another *nishmat* poem meant to *follow* the *nishmat* prayer and precede "Ilu Finu . . . Even if our mouth could fill with song . . ." Notice that this poem, the one above, and the one below *follow* the *nishmat* prayer, whereas the first two *reshut-to-nishmat* poems *precede* the prayer.

Can you create such a list of questions praising God, the source of all life, for creating all the miracles, small and large, in the world and in our lives?

5 Nine Days of Breath

Although this *nishmat* poem is intended to breathe new life into your Shabbat, I urge you to find room for it anywhere in your day. The poem is meant to *follow* the *nishmat* prayer (*nishmat* means "breath") and precede "Ilu Finu . . . Even if our mouth could fill with song . . ."

Try one of these yourself—Just start each line with the word *nishmat*.

Thanks to Gideon Weisz and Joseph Davis for helping to breathe life into my Hebrew.

6 What or Who Is the Source of Blessing?

This *reshut* (*reshut* = "permission," so the poet asks permission to recite the poem here and introduce the prayer) is meant to follow the *chatzi kaddish* and precede the K'riyat Shema section (which begins "Barukh et Adonai hamevorakh. Blessed is the Lord, the source of blessing.") in the traditional prayer service (and is more likely to be used on Shabbat, whose liturgy is enhanced). You are encouraged to look at the prayers, see if they evoke any thoughts or feelings in you, and if they do, express them in a poem (in any form you wish, with or without poetic devices such as rhyme, meter, and sound effects like alliteration). If you prefer, express yourself in prose (or in a combination of prose and poetry, as did some of the medieval Spanish-Jewish poets, who sometimes wrote in rhymed prose).

7 You Who Creates Day and Night

This poem is a *guf hayotzer*: *Guf* means "body," so literally this is the "body of the *yotzer*," the sequence of poems of which one or more (or none) are meant to be inserted into morning K'riyat Shema section before or after the *yotzer* or, the morning prayer blessing the creator of light (also called the *birkat yotzer*, the blessing of creation). Two possible placements are:

"Barkhu et Adonai hamevorakh. Blessed is the Lord, who is the Source of Blessing.

"Barukh Adonai hamevorakh l'olam va-ed. Blessed is the Lord, who is to be blessed for ever and ever. HERE.

"Barukh ata Adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam. . . . Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who formed light and created darkness, who made peace and created all things." OR HERE.

Other placements also might be possible. What do you think?

The ancient author or authors of the prayer understood very well the problem of evil in their own time and grappled with earlier in the Book of Job. They allude to it in the benediction, which, by a slight change in wording from the biblical reference (Is. 45:7), makes sure no one thinks (God forbid!) there might be two Gods—one of light and one of darkness (as in the Zoroastrian religion).

The poem is an attempt to grapple with the question of evil in the world today, and I feel that however unpleasant or disturbing the references, questions, and images, it fits in the Jewish tradition (of Godwrestling, for example) and with the prayer.

8 All Is Beautiful and Holy

This type of *piyyut*—Jewish liturgical poem—is an *ofan* (literally, "wheel") and is meant to be inserted into the *kedusha* blessing in the morning K'riyat Shema section of the daily and Shabbat morning prayer service (optionally, since normally you won't see one). (The *kedusha* appears in other parts of the service too, and can be very elaborate during high holidays, with elaborate *ofanim*, but this is another discussion.) In the *kedusha* (sanctification) the various celestial beings praise God.

"Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, Adonai tzeva'ot, melo kol ha-aretz kevodo. . . . Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory." The *ofan* goes HERE, just before the line beginning in Hebrew "V'ha-ofanim . . . And the *ofanim* and the holy Chayoth with a noise of great rushing . . . praise and say: Blessed be the glory of the Lord. . . ."

If you want to try writing a *piyyut* of your own, this might be a good one to try. It needn't be as long as mine. You might want to start with even just one sentence or a stanza or two.

9 Come and See

Called a *me'ora* ("light"), this poem can be read on its own or between the paragraph "L'el barukh . . . To the blessed God they offer pleasant melodies. . . . He is the Lord of wonders. . . . (O give thanks) to Him who makes great lights. . . . O cause a new light to shine. . . ." and the benediction preceding the Shema in the morning K'riyat Shema section: "Barukh ata Adonai, yotzer ha-me'orot. Blessed are You, O Lord, Creator of the luminaries." The *Book of Radiance* mentioned in the poem refers to the *Zohar*, the main work of Jewish mysticism. I hope the poem lights up your prayer experience, whenever you recite or read the poem.

10 Light of Lights

This *me'ora* ("light") poem is meant to be inserted before the benediction preceding the Shema in the morning K'riyat Shema section: "Barukh Adonai, yotzer ha-me'orot": "Praised are You, O Lord, Creator of the luminaries." The poem refers to the *Zohar*—the main work of Jewish mysticism—whose title is sometimes translated as *Book of Splendor*.

The poem, about the diversity and mystery of light, will, I hope, help illuminate your prayers and add a little more light to the whole spectrum of your day.

11 Let's Thank the Mystery of Life

Traditionally the *ahava* prayer thanks God for loving us. This *ahava* poem thanks God for giving us the capacity to love and can go before the benediction in the morning K'riyat Shema section: "Barukh ata Adonai . . . Blessed are You, Lord, who has chosen Your people Israel in love."

I have chosen to write the poem in the form of a *ghazal*, a poetic form popular in India, Pakistan, and Middle Eastern countries like Iran. Like the Song of Songs, poems by the medieval Hebrew poets, and many poems by mystic or devotional poets like St John of the Cross, Rumi, Hafiz, Kabir, and Mirabai, *ghazals* are love poems that may express godly love in the language of human love. The form seemed appropriate for this *ahava* poem. Many *ghazals* are set to music and sung; in India and Pakistan some singers specialize in these.

Ghazals begin with a pair of rhymed couplets and are followed by couplets whose second line is a refrain and rhymes with these couplets. The form is thus AA BA CA DA. I'm no expert on *ghazals*, so if you're interested, I encourage you to do additional research and reading.

12 Only You

This poem is a *zulat* ("besides," "except," "other than") and is part of the morning K'riyat Shema section. It precedes "Ein Elohim zulatekha. There is no God beside (but, except, other than) You" in the

second long paragraph after the biblical passages. The poem also could be read or recited on its own.

According to T. Carmi, poet, scholar, and editor of *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, "the *zulat* . . . is the second most important component of the [yotzer] sequence" (pp. 54-55). If you write a *zulat* of your own and want to get fancier, read what Carmi has to say about this type of poem (p. 55).

13 I Think of You

See note above on *Only You*.

14 Without Saying Why

This *zulat* (see note above to *Only You*) asks the reader to contemplate the uniqueness of God in a way that makes room for the whole kaboodle of life: the good, the bad, and the ugly. It is meant to be included in the Shabbat-morning service following the passages from Numbers following the Shema in the morning prayer service. As with some other of these poems, this one tries to help make sense of things like injustice that may trouble us.

15 Who Is Like You?

Mi Kamokha (Who is like You?!) is the familiar prayer that praises God's uniqueness. You probably already know how to belt it out like a Broadway star. Now you have the opportunity to extend that praise off-Broadway and help set your prayers in motion.

This *mi kamokha* poem goes in the morning K'riyat Shema section of the prayer service and decorates the traditional prayer "Mi khamokha ba-eilim Adonai. . . ? Who is like You, Lord." (Ex. 15:11) and could go just before or just after the prayer itself.

The passage referred to here is from *Tikkunei Zohar*, one of the books of the mystical *Zohar*, and can be found in some prayerbooks.

If you wish to write your own *mi kamokha*, you might start with a very short poem—say, four lines (or even just two, which could be a chant à la Rabbi Shefa Gold or song à la Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach). Or, try a name acrostic—the first letter of each line is a letter of your first or last name (or both). If you do this, you might better understand why the medieval Jewish poets put their name in their poems.

16 Blazing Stars

Who is like You, God, who could create everything and give us the ability to appreciate it?—that is the sentiment of this *mi kamokha* poem, meant to embellish the traditional prayer that you undoubtedly have sung during a prayer service. The previous note explains where the poem is to be placed.

Like the mocha beverage, the *mi kamokha* prayer and *mi kamokha* poem are meant to give you a jolt, in this case energizing your appreciation of the splendor and beauty of life throughout your day and maybe even into the evening.

Life is a beautiful mystery that is mysteriously beautiful!

17 Hovering

Mi kamokha—Who is like You?—is what we ask when we feel enthralled by the joys and wonders of life. This acrostic *mi kamokha* poem responds to that feeling in its own little way.

Notes on where to position this poem in the prayer service can be found in the note above for *Who Is Like You*. Careful readers will notice that the acrostic is on my first name. Pretty nifty, eh! Or silly and egotistical, if you prefer. However, in the days before printing and copyright, this was one way poets established authorship of their work. Another device used by some poets was to put their name in the last stanza, as the imaginary poet Isaac does in this made-up example:

Isaac says:

To draw near to God

You must dissolve your ego.

If you think name acrostics are nifty, I'm sure you can write one yourself using the letters of your first name, of your last name, or of your full name. You also could try a double acrostic, in which you use the letters twice (for example, HHEENRRYY).

18 Questions

This dark *ge'ula* ("redemption") encourages readers to ask their own tough questions and perhaps take a stab at some answers. The Jewish tradition demands no less!

The poem could go in the morning K'riyat Shema section after the *mi kamokha* prayer, following "Tzur Israel, kumah b'ezrat Yisrael. . . . Adonai tzeva'ot . . . Our Redeemer, the Lord of hosts is His name. . . ."

19 Strange Stillness

Dusk. Night. The transition can be magical. Sometimes there is a lovely stillness, which you may have experienced while sitting in your yard, or going for a walk, or attending a religious service. From this stillness wonders may arise, in particular a heightened awareness of yourself and your surroundings, of simply being alive. Sometimes this heightened awareness seems transcendent.

The poem at hand is a *ma'aravit*, intended to be read, recited, sung, or contemplated after the first blessing before the K'riyat Shema in the evening—Ma'ariv—service:

"Barukh ata Adonai, ha-ma'ariv aravim. . . . Blessed are You, Lord our God . . . whose word brings the evening twilight. . . ." POEM GOES HERE.

The word *ma'aravit* has the same Hebrew root as *erev* ["evening" (you've probably heard "erev Shabbat," meaning the whole day of Friday up to the beginning of Shabbat)]; as Ma'ariv (the name of the evening prayer service), and as *ma'arav* ["west" (the sun sets in the west)].

May this poem take your evening prayers to new heights.

20 Yearning for More

Evening signals a transition from day to night, bringing with it anticipation, excitement, and sometimes (or for many people, often, or even always) fear. This poem, however, celebrates light, in the form of celestial lights and inner lights. The reader is swept into the swirl of the cosmos in order to gain perspective on her or his life here on earth.

This *ma'aravit*, meant to enhance your evening prayers, can be sung, recited, silently read, or just contemplated during the evening service—Ma'ariv—either daily or on Shabbat. A good place for this poem is after the first blessing before K'riyat Shema:

"Barukh ata Adonai, ha-ma'ariv aravim. . . . Blessed are You, Lord our God . . . whose word brings the evening twilight. . . ." POEM GOES HERE.

21 You Sit Alone

Here is a *kinah* (plural, *kinot*), a poetic lamentation read on Tishah b'Av, the ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av, the day on which Jews remember the destruction of the ancient temples, the Holocaust, and other tragedies in the history of the Jewish people, like the edict ordering the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492.

Traditionally, it also is believed that the Messiah will appear on this day. On Tishah b'Av Jews mourn and follow customs similar to those on Yom Kippur, for example, by fasting, not wearing leather shoes, not bathing, and not working. Jews read Megillat Eikhah, the Book of Lamentations, in addition to *kinot* (also spelled *qinot* and *qina/qinah*), dirges expressing mourning, pain, sorrow, suffering, and

severe loss. Elbogen says that these are “a special genre of elegiac poems with descriptions of persecutions and martyrdom” and that “the name qina is biblical, denoting the lament for the dead” (p. 183) According to Idelsohn “the Sephardic ritual has sixty-five Kinoth [*kinot*]: thirteen for the evening and fifty-two for the morning service” (!) (p. 348). Idelsohn also says the Ashkenazi ritual has sixty-one kinot (p. 350). See the Further Reading for full source information.

Some of the many such poems express sorrow, while others express longing for Zion—the Land of Israel—for example, the *Zionides* by Yehudah Halevi, the famous Spanish-Jewish medieval rabbi, poet, and philosopher. There are whole collections of *kinot*, and *kinot* also can be found in the Bible, the Talmud, and some anthologies of Jewish poetry.

This *kinah* weaves together some of the themes of Tishah b’Av with grieving for the loss of my mother, Beatrice Rasof, who was not traditionally religious but had an ecstatic love of life.

My online “workshop” on writing your own *kinah* provides additional information on Tishah b’Av and on *kinot*, along with a reading list. It can be found on this Web site.

FURTHER READING

If you are going to buy just one collection of Jewish poems, T. Carmi, *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* (Penguin, 1981) is, in my opinion, the book to buy (it has the Hebrew along with prose translations that are better than many verse ones). Take it, along with your Chumash and a good bottle of wine (or grape juice), to that desert island. *Piyyutim* are included and sometimes identified as such.

An excellent, more recent anthology of medieval Jewish poetry is Peter Cole, *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain 950-1492* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

Two books in English that discuss *piyyutim* (along with the liturgy in general) are A. Z. Idlesohn, *Jewish Liturgy and Its Development* (reprint: Dover Publications, 1995), and Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (Jewish Publication Society, 1993), the latter translated by Raymond P. Scheindlin, himself a formidable scholar, translator, anthologist, and biographer.

A more specialized book that offers a short selection of *piyyutim* along with commentary is Jacob J. Petuchowski, *Theology and Poetry: Studies in Medieval Piyyut* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

A good prayer workbook and guide to understanding Jewish prayers and making them your own is Steven M. Brown, *Higher and Higher: Making Jewish Prayer Part of Us* (United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 1980).

An eye-opening account by a brilliant homilist who also had a sharp tongue (and gambling problem) is Leone Modena, *Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's Life of Judah*. Ed. Mark R. Cohen (Princeton University Press, 1988).

Internet sources and other relevant print resources (for example, the titles of Professor Scheindlin's books) can be found at www.medievalhebrewpoetry.org.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Henry Rasof has degrees in music (BA, UCLA), creative writing (MFA, Brooklyn College), and Jewish studies (MA, Gratz College); has been writing poetry since 1964; and has been publishing his work since 1968. After working in book publishing for thirty years, he taught composition at several community colleges and an online creative-nonfiction course at the University of Denver. He also taught "Jewish" creative writing at the Boulder Jewish Day School and has facilitated learn-and-do workshops on Jewish incantation bowls, ethical wills, and Tishah b'Av and its poetry. In addition he has edited literary magazines and a poetry chapbook series.

His work has appeared in print and online publications such as *Black Box*, *Jewish Currents*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Midstream*, *Numinous*, *Partisan Review*, and *Poetica*, and he has published two previous books: *The House* (2009) and *Chance Music: Prose Poems 1974 to 1982* (2012).

He also has two Web sites. One is www.medievalhebrewpoetry.org, which includes an anthology of other writers' English translations of medieval Hebrew poets like Yehudah Halevi; articles and original essays; a bibliography; photographs; and other relevant information. The other is www.henryrasof.com (where you found this version of the book you are now reading), which includes most of the poetry and prose he has written since 1964.

Henry Rasof lives in Colorado and frequently travels overseas. He has been to India three times and Japan twice, in addition to Latin America, Southeast Asia, Europe, and Israel. While traveling he often visits Jewish places of special interest (outside of Israel), and these have included synagogues in India, Ireland, Italy, and Sweden; Moiseville, a formerly all-Jewish agricultural colony in Argentina; and many cities on the Jewish heritage route in Spain.