

Teach me, oh God, how to praise you and pray,
 Of the secret of withering fruit
 Of the shining bright fruit
 Of this freedom
 To see, to feel, to breathe,
 To know, to hope, and to fail.

Teach my lips a blessing and song of praise,
 Renew your times with morning and night,
 Lest this day be the day, like today and the day before,
 Lest this day be like all those that came before it.

You may recognize this passage as one from our prayerbook, *Mishkan T'filah*. Much like any prayer, the narrator is asking God for help – help in how to understand this amazing world around us. The author uses pleas and petitions to try to grasp both the nature around us as well as our own human nature. It ends with a hope – that life not be so monotonous that each day blends into the next.

As far as prayers go, this one doesn't seem too far-fetched. An individual is struggling with something in this world, and turns to God for help. There is so much we do not understand about our lives and our existence – who else could we turn to for guidance?

Would it surprise you to know that this piece was written in the 20th century? Does that, somehow, make it less of a prayer? Is it merely a poem? Why does it merit inclusion in our *siddur*?

When we open up a prayerbook we expect to see ancient words written in a world that looks very different from our own: a world in which those reciting the prayers knew the meaning of every word; were fluent in the language in which it was written, saw no deviation from a traditional text; and felt confident in the veracity of what they were reciting. This could be no further from the truth – our prayerbooks are not comprised of set-in-stone language with unmovable theology – in fact, the books in front of us are a beautiful anthology of the Jewish people's poetic endeavor to understand the world around us.

Prayer is not meant to scare us – it is merely another's attempt to reach out to God – whether it be for help, in gratitude, or times of sorrow.

The poem I just recited was written by an Israeli poet, Lea Goldberg, in the middle of the 20th century. Goldberg was part of a group of poets who wanted to believe in God's existence and God's presence in our world, but were skeptical of a divine being who had an immanent presence in their lives. The narrator asks God to teach him how to pray – clearly, the prayers in the prayerbook wasn't working for him. The narrator is amazed at the marvels in the world around him – how fruits and trees change with the seasons, the abilities we have as humans to explore – to enjoy successes as well as learn from failures. The narrator's ultimate plea is that each day be different – the monotony of life is something he cannot handle. This person is

frightened, amazed, and skeptical all at the same time. He seeks someone, or something, higher than himself for help and guidance.

While Goldberg's narrator may have felt that standardized prayerbook did not fit his needs, the author was far from ignorant of its contents. The line "To see, to feel, to breathe, To know, to hope, and to fail" mimics a line from *Ahavah Rabah*, a prayer we recite in the mornings after *Barchu*. A translation reads, "Instill in our hearts the desire to understand and discern, to listen, learn, and teach, to observe, perform, and fulfill all of the teachings of your Torah in love."

Are these two petitions all that different? In each case the speaker truly desires to understand the world around him, realizes that he can't do it on his own, and reaches to the heavens for help and guidance. While *Ahavah Rabah* is a plea for help, it ends with a sense of hope – hope that God hears the prayer and grants the petitioner the guidance he seeks.

Another time when many of us seek answers is when we are sad, especially in mourning. Jewish tradition would send us to the book of psalms in order to read words of comfort about how God is with us, even in the most difficult of times. Instead, I want to direct our attention to something a bit more timely – a text we read especially on these High Holy Days.

Tomorrow morning we will read from our *sefer torah* the story of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. Even though we have heard this tale year after year, we still sit in suspense, wondering, "Will Abraham really kill his son?" Suspense builds as the two walk silently for three days, ascend Mount Moriah, Abraham raises the knife, and finally the angel stops him. The angel instructs Abraham instead to direct his attention to a ram whose horns are stuck in a brush, and sacrifice the ram to God instead of killing his own son. We are all relieved that Abraham did not go through with this horrible act, and he and his son return home.

The fear of losing one's child grips each of us as we hear this two and a half millennia-old story. In the wake of the Yom Kippur War, the American-Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai wrote a poem entitled "The True Hero of the Akedah" in the latter part of the twentieth century. Permit me to read just the final two stanzas here tonight:

Behind them, [Abraham and Isaac] as a colorful background, the ram
caught in the thicket before the slaughter.
And the thicket is his last friend.

The angel went home.
Isaac went home.
Abraham and God left a long time ago.

But the true hero of the *akedah*
is the ram.

Poetry can change our perspective on the world – a story that we thought ended so triumphantly now speaks to us in an entirely different manner. Even when we see the world

around us as black and white, our eternal questioning and seeking of perspective can change our viewpoint entirely. As we read the *Akedah* each year and laud Abraham for his true and profound faith in God, we do not think of the ram, the one character who actually lost his life in this narrative. The whole poem is Amicahi's lament at the loss of young lives in war – he chose to express his anguish not through the recitation of psalms, but through a modern reinterpretation of an ancient text.

While it is certainly poetry, could we call this prayer? Perhaps it is a lament, a cry of sadness and despair at events beyond our control. It is descriptive rather than petitionary, but causes us to think. What if things had been different, what if *we* could have made things different? If something inspires us to gain new perspective or take action, does it matter what we call it?

Perhaps it is all relative – our ancient rabbis argued about what should not be included in standardized prayer – should we be any different?

Lea Goldberg's poem appears in *Mishkan T'filah*; its first connection with the Reform movement was in the first Israeli Reform prayerbook, *HaAvodah Shbalev*, published in 1982. While there it is in an index in the back, we find it in our siddur as one of the options in our two page spread. Goldberg's published words clearly spoke to many, and her private diaries have also been rife for interpretation. One line she wrote later in life reads: "How happy is the person who has his God; he does not have to look for God" – lamenting how easily faith and belief come to others, whereas she struggles with its most basic tenets.

Each time we come together to pray and recite the words in our siddur, whether these words come from Torah, our sages, or even our contemporaries, we join in the age-old attempt to understand the world around us. While the ancient may have marveled in the consistency of the sun rising in the east and setting in the west each day, we know how our solar system works and the way the earth rotates around the sun. Based on our understanding of modern medicine a *mi sheberach*, a prayer for healing, may serve more as a comfort to us and our loved ones as opposed to a catalyst for a cure. We've got some of these things figured out.

But those we can't understand, and perhaps never will understand, continue to inspire our creativity. Pondering how life changes as we age, or grappling with why someone was taken from our lives way too soon, or simply marveling in gratitude at the world around us are all reasons to look outside ourselves for answers. Often we do not receive a verbal response, but perhaps the next time you look into the siddur you will not be intimidated by a jumble of Hebrew words, but rather be inspired by the gift we have been given – you are holding thousands of years of questioning the basics of human existence in your two hands. Don't fear it – embrace it – perhaps through the experience you will learn a new way to praise, or to pray, to marvel at the world around us, and bring something new to each day, lest each one becomes like the one before it.