

Tefillah: Poetry of the Sublime

■ by **ELLIOTT RABIN**

The author encourages schools to refine students' lenses for reading tefillah as poetry. Just as a person can turn to poetry for meaning and inspiration at different levels throughout their lives, so too with tefillah.

Tefillah is, first and foremost, a form of poetry. The words of tefillot are arranged with the kind of intense care for words and their relationships, for intentional repetitions and rhythms, for recurring sounds and overall structure that are typical of poems. Tefillot reward the kind of close study that poems do; we can dive into them to find layers of meaning that surprise us and can resonate throughout our lives. The fact that they are so easy and pleasing to sing to arises from their fine verbal patterning.

Unfortunately, many times it happens that Jews don't get beyond the singing. To them, the tefillot always remain little more than children's songs. They may know the words by heart and enjoy chanting them, but the actual meaning of the words lies fossilized in the amber of the unchanging melody, inaccessible to thought or spiritual encounter. The fact that the words are in Hebrew, rabbinic Hebrew at that, is only a small part of the problem. They have never been exposed to the words themselves, to weigh them and digest them as poetry.

To the limited extent that these Jews look at the translation, the problem is only exacerbated: they see the repetition of similar ideas that sound remote from their lives; they treat the words as propositional statements—God is true, God is kind—that, whether or not one agrees with them, seem bland and boring when restated in so many ways. In short, without access to the prayers as poetry, Jewish prayer is especially vulnerable to irrelevance. I doubt that any other prayer corpus is equally invested in the poetry

of its utterance. One reason why Jews more than all other faith communities have great trouble attracting its adherents to prayer, I would argue, is that we have forgotten to approach tefillah as the poems that they were written to be.

Let's focus on one section of the Amidah, “Mechalkel chayyim bechesed,” to discover some of the rewards for close attention to the words of tefillah and the way that those words are structured to give them meaning.

- 1 מְכַלְכֵּל חַיִּים בְּחֶסֶד, / מְחַיֶּה מֵתִים בְּרַחֲמִים רַבִּים.
- 2 סוֹמֵךְ נוֹפְלִים / וְרוֹפֵא חוֹלִים / וּמְחַיֶּה אֲסוּרִים.
- א2 וּמְקִים אֲמוֹנָתוֹ לִישְׁנֵי עָפָר.
- 3 מִי כְמוֹךָ בַּעַל גְּבוּרֹת / וּמִי דוֹמֶה לָךְ?
- 4 מְלֶכֶךְ מַמְיָת / וּמְחַיֶּה / וּמְצַמִּיחַ יְשׁוּעָה:

Before we launch into analysis, some general words about the poetry of prayer can help orient us. This passage and many like it aim to convey something that by definition cannot be expressed in language, the notion of God as Incommensurable. God's nature—God's greatness, the enormity of God's being and might—are beyond the ability of the human mind to grasp. People require ways of measuring, comparing something to something else, in order to understand things. In literary terms, this act of comparing is usually performed through metaphor or simile, although metaphor

extends far beyond poetry and is basic to the way humans think. A couple of examples: a ruler measures “feet”; sticks holding up a table are “legs.” But God cannot be grasped by human language or measurement because nothing can be compared to God. God exists beyond measurement, above comparisons; people, *basar va-dam* (flesh and blood), are limited beings who can only understand anything through measurement and comparison.



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In Jewish sources, the classic expression of language's inadequacy is found in the Talmud Brachot 33b, where Rabbi Chaninah reproves a prayer leader for elaborating praises of his own to God. (See Elie Kaunfer's discussion of this passage in this issue.) Those praises that are in the tefillah we are permitted to say only because they appear in the Torah; without that license, we could say nothing. The very act of praising God is presumptuous precisely because God is beyond our ability to express anything in language.

And yet: language is the vehicle by which Jews understand and approach God. Other religious traditions confront this conundrum by adopting silence and meditation; with some exceptions, that is not the mainstream Jewish way, and it is certainly not the way of tefillah and the siddur. Instead, rabbinic tradition generally takes the opposite tack, piling language up into a vast, expansive heap. (As an exercise, a

teacher might compare the catalogue poems of Whitman, such as “I Hear America Singing,” where a list of examples gives a sense of a greater whole.) Sometimes this strategy takes the form of the alphabet, an aleph to tav catalogue of God’s praises found in Psalms such as the Ashrei and prayers such as “El barukh gedol de’ah” in the weekday Shacharit, and on Shabbat “El Adon” and “Tikanta Shabbat ratzita korbanoteha” in the Mussaf Amidah.

The idea is not that the prayer contains the “A to Z” of God; rather, the alphabetic poem conveys the sense that God is inexhaustible, that no matter how many words you use to describe God you can never possibly come close to fathoming God. Ashrei is like a ladder whose rungs collapse behind you after you run up them. Sometimes teachers ask their students to “focus on the words” of Ashrei and other prayers, and for sure it is important for people to understand what they are saying. However, it is just as important for the teacher to acknowledge that a person cannot possibly “focus on the words” of the Ashrei, by design! There are too many synonyms, too many verses expressing the same thought. The poem is meant to give the impression that God is far beyond human comprehension; the daveners begin to say everything about God so that they realize that they can say nothing, that words are inadequate.

The strategy of Jewish prayer-poetry is to explode the mind with an overabundance of words to the point where the person senses what is beyond language. The daveners is not meant to understand, visualize, internalize every word of tefillah; that scenario is rendered impossible by the sheer verbosity in a Jewish service. (Davening Shacharit means reading a hundred page anthology of Hebrew poems every morning!) Especially during passages where the words pile up (think of the repetition in the Kaddish: *Yitbarakh veyishtabach veyitpa’ar veyitromam veyitnaseh* etc.), and where something similar is repeated again and again, it’s critical for teachers not to have students read the words in the normal way. To do so invites boredom, frustration and ultimately resistance.

Instead, teachers should encourage students to recite the words with a differ-



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ent modality: to allow the rhythms and sounds, statements and images to wash over them, to convey an impression of God’s awesomeness. In artistic terms this effect is called the sublime, when an experience takes your breath away by conveying something that your ordinary rational mind cannot grasp. Wordsworth considers the sublime as an experience wherein the “mind [tries] to grasp at something towards which it can make approaches but which it is incapable of attaining ... [or] of being conscious of external Power at once awful [i.e., awesome] & immeasurable.” Others consider the sublime primarily in experiences that evoke some mixture of terror, awe, pleasure and pain. Examples include the feelings evoked by standing near a high mountain, or looking down at the earth from a great height. Imagine each verse of the Ashrei as toeholds up Mount Everest, or waves lapping on the shore from an immense sea—how would that change our experience of it?

Nevertheless, just like the verses of poetry, there is great reward in close reading of the lines of tefillah. Let’s return to our passage above. This section is from the second brakhah of the Amidah, which praises God’s might, a theme that frames the majority of the brakhot, which re-

quest God’s intervention in a variety of ways. Even though God’s holiness, God’s awe is unfathomable and God’s might is beyond measure, nonetheless we humans are granted the capacity to have a relationship with God, to speak with God and request that God’s power be channeled for human betterment. This paradox is at the heart of the very act of prayer itself.

The first thing to notice about this passage is that each line has a rhythm that is carefully crafted; the second thing is that the rhythm is constantly tweaked or changed, both within and between lines. This kind of rhythmic variety is typical of rabbinic prayer and diverges from biblical prayer, which is somewhat more uniform.

1 מְכַלְכֵּל חַיִּים בְּחַסֵּד, / מְחַיֶּה מֵתִים בְּרַחֲמִים רַבִּים.

He who sustains life with lovingkindness, / who revives the dead with abundant compassion,

Notice how the two parts are exactly symmetrical: sustains – revives, life – dead, lovingkindness – abundant compassion. In Hebrew, the form is pi’el participle, object, adverbial phrase with בְּ. (Note as well: this is

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not a complete sentence; it should not end with a period.) The word “life” in the first verset (partial verse) is picked up by “revives” (same Hebrew root) in the second: God supports life for the living, and brings life back to the dead! The two versets clearly go together as two parts of a whole, describing God’s actions in the world.

Yet they are also starkly different. To sustain the living is a gentle, behind-the-scenes activity that would easily go unnoticed or attributed to the natural flow of the world; it takes great effort to see God’s work there. Reviving the dead, by contrast, is an apocalyptic event that reveals God’s awesome might. By yoking the two together, this verse suggests that the daily, ongoing sustenance of life is a miracle on the same level as something as sudden and spectacular as the dead returning to life. A powerful statement indeed!

2 סומך נופלים / ורופא חולים / ומחיה
/ אסורים,
24 ומקים אמונתו לישני עפר,

*Who lifts up the fallen / and heals the sick
/ and releases the bound /*

*And preserves His faithfulness to those who
sleep in the dust—*

This second verse elaborates upon the first, translating its abstractness into concrete images. Through short, vivid snapshots we understand God as active everywhere, always, the force of healing, hope and help to the living and even the dead. The first three illustrate God’s actions as “sustainer of life”; there is a progression of seriousness, from a fall to illness to captivity. As usual in tefillah, the verse shows great attention to rhythm and sound: verb – object of two syllables each, with assonance (o – ei – im). The verset showing God’s care for the dead is only one part though longer; perhaps there’s just less to say about the dead, or less that we can know. “Those who sleep in the dust” is not merely a poetic way of saying the dead; it portrays the dead as ready to wake up and shake themselves off after a night’s sleep.

3 מי כמוך בעל גבורות / ומי דומה לך?

*Who is like You, Possessor of might? / And
who resembles You?*

These rhetorical questions get to the heart of this prayer and all Jewish prayer. The verse borrows from the Song at the Sea—Who is like You, among the mighty?—and this idea is expressed non-rhetorically in the Shabbat Torah reading: אין כמוך ... There is none like You ... and nothing like Your works. The questions here powerfully remind us of the limits of the human mind and our need for humility. We cannot understand You; our language refers to our reality, not God’s reality. These questions make us feel that we are in the presence of God’s majesty, in touch with a reality other than what we know and are familiar with. The words of tefillah lead us to a realm above language. Without this sense of awe, there is no prayer. The entire prayer depicts God’s triumph over death as the highest expression of God’s might.

4 מלך ממית / ומחיה / ומצמיח ישועה:

*O King, who brings death / and raises life
/ and causes redemption to flourish.*

The series of mem-words, the string of causative verbs (requiring two words in English for one in Hebrew) all reinforce the impression that God is the active force behind all things, the cause of life and a refuge beyond death. Note how the verbal phrases have been pared down over the verses, from three (מכלכל) to two (סומך נופלים) to one (ממית), in a process of intensification: we are meant to feel God’s power ever more strongly as the passage progresses. Most significantly, this line reverses the word order. In verses 1 and 2 life precedes death; here God brings death and then life, making us aware of God’s power to overturn the natural order.

The word *melech*, King, is the first noun attributed to God in the passage; it is the pivot of the paragraph, the word that everything before leads up to. We should register a certain shock over it: the previous sentence suggests that God cannot be compared to anything, anyone—and now, a comparison, to a king! A king who accomplishes things that no human king

can. Perhaps then the previous sentence was not so rhetorical after all. We might choose to translate as follows: *Who resembles You? A king! One who brings death ...* Here we are plunged back into language and metaphor. The verse returns to us a sense that words are adequate to enable us to relate to and communicate with God.

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Day schools are uniquely poised to cultivate a mature engagement with prayer among Jewish students. They are places where prayer can be joyously recited regularly; where students learn Hebrew and can understand the meaning of what they are saying; where curricula can allot the time to explore tefillah in depth; where from one year to the next, students can be given the tools and creative space to grow in tefillah; where the words and concepts of tefillah can be brought into dialogue with all elements of the Jewish and general studies; where through study of tefillah and Jewish sources, students can take the time to develop their own theological understanding, to grow a deep and profound relationship to God; where students can experience tefillah as a powerful force for personal inspiration and communal bonding; and where the ancient poetry of tefillah can be translated into the fiber of students’ lives. When tefillah misfires, however, these paths for growth and connection are shut off, potentially forever. Tefillah comes to appear as part of a rigid system of commands or a childish store of fables that do not speak to the kinds of questions and thoughts of a mature, creative person in the 21st century.

Tefillah, rabbinic prayer, was written in a heightened language that must be approached on its own terms. We cannot make much sense of tefillot if we read them in the same way we read stories, essays, or other forms of writing; that effort is akin to watching a 3D movie without the glasses and wondering why the images are flat and out of focus. We need to teach our students to read tefillot, understand them and internalize them in the rich manner that they were written. Only in that way can the words of tefillah accompany children throughout their lives as they themselves mature in wisdom and spirit. ■