

Book of Prayers

By Judy Belsky

I inherit

a small gilt-edged
book of prayers from my grandmother
the one I am named for
the one I never knew

on Yom Kippur I get to know her
her prayers next to mine
faint prints of her hand
impressed in vellum
lead like land routes on an ancient map

the delicate lace of her breath
held over the words
because of our sins
we are captives from our land ...
gather our dispersed ...
bring us ... to Jerusalem ...
with everlasting joy

at Next Year in Jerusalem
traces of tears
one hundred years old

when this volume is new
her young husband dies
her dowry spent
she travels back to Oran
to sell parcels of land
to feed her children

now she lays claim to this palm-sized plot of land
crammed with blessing and request

in the flyleaf I run my finger
along the cursive of our name
Judith Benoliel
403 Cheetham Hill Road, Manchester
her address
emblem of exile
for every place we pretend is home
in seventy languages we mime
in air we imagine is familiar
we spin endless versions of home
Spain
Gibraltar
Manchester
Seattle

we leave behind cornerstones
headstones
genizah
prayers that burst from our lips
now cling to parchment

but that is before
we cross back over the ocean
routes converge
shadow play falls away

Jerusalem
ancient mother
reaches out to us
with sleeves of silk
her hills encircle us

in her fragrant embrace
we breathe deep
awaken and say:
I was asleep
I was asleep
but my heart was awake

Judy Belsky, PhD, is a psychologist in Jerusalem and Ramat Beit Shemesh. She is the director of MASK Jerusalem, a support network for parents of kids at risk. Her poetry has been published in numerous journals. She is the author of Thread of Blue (Jerusalem, 2002) and a recently completed memoir.

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