

Prayer and Poetry

A REVIEW ESSAY

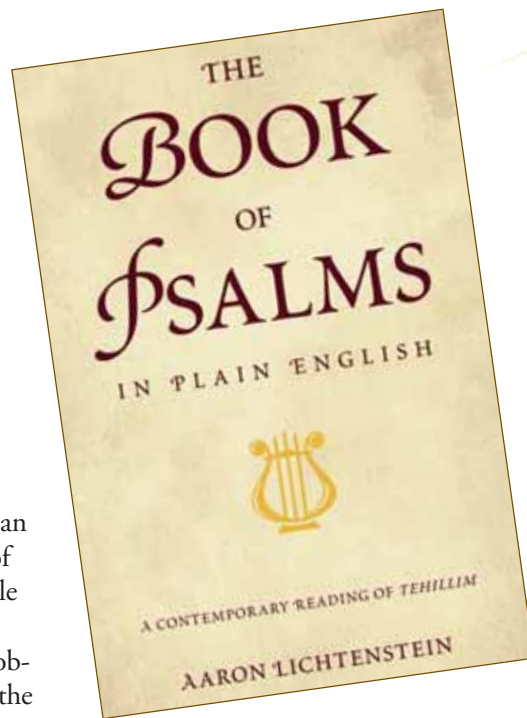
By David Ebner

Why do so many people seem to feel that *davening* begins somewhere around Barchu and actually being on time for it is the domain of insomniacs and Kaddish-sayers?

Why do educators wring their hands in despair about the low level of inspiration and *kavanah* that so many students attach to prayer?

These are just a few manifestations of what sometimes seems to be an almost insoluble malaise at the core of one of Judaism's pillars—prayer. While many suggestions and programs have been devised to contend with this problem, little attention has been paid to the literary issue involved. The root of the problem for the English-speaking public may partially be found in the very issue of language itself.

First, the most obvious manifestation of this problem is that many people are simply unable to make any reasonable sense of a good part of prayer. As an educator, I have long noted the phenomenon of people who regularly *daven* but cannot translate or explain in any reasonable way what they are saying. Unfortunately, the matter does not end there. Indeed, if it were so, the solution



would be fairly obvious.

Second, Maimonides explains that the formalization of the text of prayer (Amidah) was instituted by the Men of the Great Assembly because many people were unable to express themselves properly in Hebrew. They were, he tells us, “*ilgin*” who used a polyglot language.

So what? Why not simply pray in whatever language one uses, be it Hebrew, English, Chinese or whatever polyglot of these one employs?

Perhaps he was driving at a subtle, yet critical point—one abundantly clear to any student of his works. The style, intonation and precision of language are necessary conditions at all levels of dis-

course. This is obvious when one formulates law, philosophy and medicine. Yet it is equally true—nay, most true—when engaged in the composition and recitation of poetry!

Poetry? But what does that have to do with *davening*?

Now, I have often found that when I say the *P* word, students’ eyes glaze over. Long gone are the days when students actually studied poetry in a wider cultural environment in which poems were published in daily newspapers, or poetry readings were regular events attended by the general public.

The truth is, however, that Torah gives itself the name *Sefer Shirah*, Book of Poetry. In addition, we constantly recite the *shirei David* of Tehillim as the text of our prayers. In other words, prayer is expressed through the poetic mode. It may well be that poetry is the outer province of the quest to stretch language beyond the point “of that which one can not speak, one must remain silent.” Before *davening* the Amidah we ask God to give us the gift of speech. And His gift is the speech of poetry, the spirit of *ruach memallelah*, the form of Torah language itself. In standing before God, whose very name is unutterable and in whose presence we tremble and lose our tongue, how then can we find words of petition and praise, of loss and longing unless we resort to poetry?

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This was the gift of prayer that the Men of the Great Assembly gave us when they composed the Amidah. They wove the tapestry of Biblical poetry into language that would give shape to the deepest sensitivities of both the frailty and spirituality that comprise the core of the human condition. They sought to give voice to this animal called man, gathered from the dust of the earth but animated by the breath of God.

The ultimate model of this is found in Tehillim, in the words of the prophets, and in the very text of Torah itself, the ultimate *Sefer Shirah*—Book of Poetry.

This effort was further expanded over the generations by all the great *paytanim*, or poets, who composed their own prayer-poems, many of which entered our liturgy.

It is at this point that the crux of the problem becomes even more complicated. For even were we to successfully teach the translations of the words, the fundamental problem of poetic sensibility still remains. Granted, there are those who have a natural affinity to poetry just as there are those naturals in music, baseball, art, et cetera. The sad truth is that most people may not be blessed with an affinity to poetry.

However, while natural genius is the stuff of which Mozarts are made, education is the stuff of which those who *appreciate* Mozart are made. David and the Men of the Great Assembly created the poems and prayers, which we employ to beseech and glorify God; without them, we would be mute.

Thus, it is not merely the translation that is critical to a person who would seek to find his prayer modes in the words of others. Equally critical, and certainly much more difficult, is the development of a sense of the poetic spirit, a nurturing of the ability to read and recite language that is not reduced into simple sound bites or CliffsNotes. *This can only be developed by a good education* in which one is sensitized to the precision and passion of poetry by learning to enter poetry and find the

words that give expression to one's own inchoate longings and concerns.

Of course, those whose native language is not Hebrew are left with only two options: to improve their Hebrew to the point that they become sensitive to Hebrew poetic prayer, or to read the prayers in translation. Those who are serious about their *davening* often rely on translations, and these translations, as verbally accurate as they may be, rarely have any poetic quality to them. Nonetheless, Robert Frost's observation that it is precisely poetry that is lost in translation and William Mathews' contention that "it is because it is impossible that translation is so interesting" are, in fact, vitiated by many significant exceptions. Thus, we still hopefully await an English translation of the *siddur* that is poetically faithful to the original.

I have long noted the phenomenon of people who regularly *daven* but cannot translate or explain in any reasonable way what they are saying.

It is my contention that, aside from broader cultural contexts such as the disappearance of the sense of deprivation and dependence, the problem of prayer needs to be addressed in the basic education students receive in sensitivity to the poetic mode. Therefore, the appearance of Dr. Aaron Lichtenstein's translation of Psalms, *The Book of Psalms in Plain English: A Contemporary Reading of Tehillim* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2006), is a most welcome addition to the attempt to present the poetry of Tehillim in poetic idiom. Following Maimonides' advice to Samuel ibn Tibbon concerning the translation of his *Guide to the Perplexed* from Arabic to Hebrew, Dr.



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Lichtenstein seeks to translate the meaning and idea and not be a slave to the word. Furthermore, he is not afraid of departing from forms that preserve the majesty of monarchy, but unfortunately, a majesty that does not speak to the modern temperament. (Indeed, the constant reference to monarchy in prayer and the requirement of relating to God as King are problems to those for whom monarchy is an antiquated institution whose relevance is only for tourists. Educators who ignore this fact are not helping their students learn to pray.)

One has the sense, when reading Dr. Lichtenstein's translation, that it is the work of someone for whom the Psalms are prayers with which he has identified so fully that he is not afraid to employ figures of speech that others may find jarring or trivial.

Thus, Psalms 39:5, which reads in the standard Jewish Publication Society (1917) as:

Lord, make me to know mine end,
and the measure of my days, what it is; /
let me know how short-lived I am is rendered as:

O Lord, tell me the sum total of all
my years, / The bottom-line value of all
my life.

Or his translation of Psalms
126:1-2:

When the Lord restores Zion, it will
be like a dream, / Our mouths will be full
of laughter and tra-la-la. Rather than:

When the Lord brought back those
that returned to Zion, we were like unto
them that dream, / Then was our mouth
filled with laughter, and our tongue with
singing.

Yet, even should the reader disagree with issues of both interpretation and style (as this reviewer does in numerous instances), he will necessarily be moved to serious contemplation of how, as a result of these disagreements, the Hebrew speaks to him. In this respect, the lack of Hebrew-facing text is a major drawback, both for study and for using the text as a Tehillim from which one might actually pray. But it is quite clear that Dr. Lichtenstein's translation is reaching for the poetic, and that alone is most welcome.

I cannot imagine anyone seriously interested in prayer and in the constant use of Tehillim to express our deepest yearnings who will not find this translation of great interest. Yeats said, "Out of the quarrel we have with others we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel we have with ourselves we make poetry." For some, this translation will produce much rhetoric, but for others it will speak with the poetry of their selves. As such, it is worth serious consideration.

On the other hand, *In the Land of Prayer* (Jerusalem: Chaim Nissan Books, 2006) represents a collection of poems/prayers written at the time of the disengagement of Jewish settlements in Gaza. These poems/prayers reflect the powerful pain and longing of ordinary people, mostly residents of Gush Katif, for whom prayer is particularly important and who, in a time of crisis and abandonment, called out of the depths.

(The Hebrew title of the book is *Zir Kissufim*, which translates as "Route of Longing" and refers to the road that joined the Negev with the settlements of Gush Katif.) As Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz notes in his introduction to the book:

The uprooting from Gush Katif brought with it a great deal of sorrow and emotional pain, rage and bitterness— together with feelings of despair and loss of direction. Many of these feelings remained deeply hidden within the hearts or were transmitted from one person to another in a dialogue of affliction.

Some of these feelings, however, received expression in poetry—not all masterwork, yet honest poetry, expressions of deep feeling and inner experience. And when those elements were brought to the framework of poetry, they went through a certain degree of sublimation. The powerful and primary emotions were ripened; the strong feelings were distilled.

With but a few notable exceptions, the poems/prayers here are indeed far from "masterwork" and, yet, they reach out in poetic prayer forms that clearly spring from the hearts of torn souls of passionate faith. Aside from the importance of sensitizing ourselves to a dilemma that many have swept under the rug, the English reader may well be inspired in the realization that there are things we need to say to God in our own language; that this is woven into the language of prayers and texts that are part and parcel of the fabric of the Jewish people, and that all of this creates a language that the *siddur* itself may not contain for him. Some of the selections in this compilation have wonderful poetic voices, such as Ruchama Shapira's "Prayer for Strength to Sacrifice" and "Akedah" as well as Elkana Erlich's "The Soldier's Lekha Dodi." Emuna Elon's "Disengagement, a Short Story" is a powerful (and the only) prose entry.

The collection has been skillfully edited by Rabbi Daniel Gutmacher, who arranged the poems thematically and provided an introduction to each unit that is not only informative but also challenges the reader to internalize the poems/prayers intellectually and emotionally. It is further graced by a selection of artwork and photographs that generally illustrates and captures the mood of the prayers. Particularly moving is Boris Shapiro's painting "In Flight," which powerfully complements Elon's short story.


Toby Klein Greenwald translated the poems, and her translations reflect the panoply of emotions contained in the Hebrew without trying to transform the prayers into "better" poetry. Those

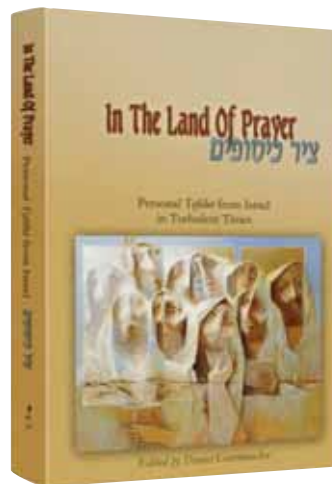
familiar with Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov's "translation" of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov's teachings into prayers in *Likkutei Tefillot* will appreciate Greenwald's decision to let the original voice be heard.

Readers who are fluent in Hebrew and familiar with modern-day Israeli

references will certainly appreciate the Hebrew-facing texts in the book. Finally, the superb graphic presentation of this volume bespeaks the serious attention it deserves.

In both Israel and America there is a resurgence of interest in reading and writing poetry on the part of young people, which is reflected in such publications and groups as Mima'amakim and Mashiv Haruach. Perhaps it is from their collective efforts that the *siddur* will one day be adorned with new *piyyutim*; perhaps out of these circles will emerge hundreds of poems and new translations into poetry of wonder and joy, of the gratitude and humility of Modeh Ani. And that would only be the first volume...

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