What Happens When We Use Poetry in Our Prayer Books—and Why?

Sheldon Marder

In memory of Rabbi Scott Corngold (1962–2011)

One of my teachers, West African writer Kofi Awoonor, always began his poetry workshops with an enthusiastic pronouncement like this one: “Poetry is life! I could not live without it.” Kofi knew better than to use the word “spirituality” in a college classroom in 1969; but thirty years later Edward Hirsch could give full expression to the true motivation behind Kofi’s exuberance:

Reading poetry is a way of connecting—through the medium of language—more deeply with yourself even as you connect more deeply with another. The poem delivers on our spiritual lives precisely because it simultaneously gives us the gift of intimacy and interiority, privacy and participation . . . I understand the relationship between the poet, the poem, and the reader not as a static entity but as a dynamic unfolding. An emerging sacramental event. A relation between an I and a You. A relational process.1

Hirsch unlocks my teacher’s enigmatic pronouncement: poetry is life because it is “a way of connecting . . . a relational process.” And, for a number of reasons, which we will explore in this essay, poetry is uniquely suited to the task of bringing the gifts of connection and “dynamic unfolding” into the Jewish worship experience.

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Current discussion on the use of poetry in the prayer book is indebted to years of public discourse on the subject. In 1981 Herbert Bronstein wrote a proposal entitled “Suggested Program for T. Carmi on Prayer Book Enhancement/Revision.” T. Carmi (whose major anthology, The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse, appeared in print that year) would be given the task of providing the CCAR with liturgical and nonliturgical Hebrew poetry—evocative texts to encourage “engagement, aspiration, quest, searching, [and] affirmation.” T. Carmi’s extant files include Hebrew poems related to all of the major rubrics and themes of the Shabbat liturgy, as well as some translations by members of the CCAR. The project was meant to be didactic (informing liberal Jews of our “spiritual treasury”), preservationist (saving the pisqatim of modern Hebrew writers), and, most of all, liturgically creative (using Hebrew poems in translation to “open up or develop” the siddur’s motifs and themes). T. Carmi’s contribution would be noted posthumously twenty-six years later on the Acknowledgments page of Mishkan T'filah.2

Early examples of modern poetry in Reform prayer books can be seen in the CCAR’s A Passover Haggadah (1974) and in Gates of Prayer (1975); in Gates of Repentance (1978) Chaim Stern placed the poems most prominently in Avodah—for example, Jacob Glatshteyn, Avraham Shlonsky, Haim Lensky, Chaim Nachman Bialik—though several poems appear elsewhere (e.g., Rainer Maria Rilke, Anthony Hecht). IMPJ’s 1982 Ha’Avodah Shebalev made significant use of modern poetry (both Hebrew and Yiddish), inspiring a generation of creative liturgists, and laid the groundwork for the recent Siddur Erev Shabbat of the Tel Aviv community Beit T’filah Yisraeli (2011).

The Reconstructionist Movement made a strong statement about the value of poetry by choosing a professional poet (Joel Rosenberg) to translate the liturgy for its Kol Haneshamah series (1996, 1998, and 1999), which included poems by non-Jewish as well as Jewish writers.

The CCAR’s On the Doorposts of Your House (1994) also includes non-Jewish works in its nearly forty pages of poems: pillars of English and American literature like Wordsworth, Shelley, Dickinson, and Stevens are side by side with superb Hebrew and Yiddish writers such as Abba Kovner and Kadya Molodovsky. The editorial
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team for Doorposts envisioned Reform Jews enhancing their home rituals and personal spiritual practices with world-class poetry.

By the time Elyse Frishman led the CCAR’s creation of Mishkan T’filah, decades of discourse and experimentation had laid a strong foundation for the pervasiveness of modern piyutim in Reform prayer books. With MT’s publication in 2007, the poetry of Bialik, Lea Goldberg, and Yehuda Amichai was now fully at home among the works of Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Yehuda Halevi, and the Psalmists. Some rabbis expressed the fear that worshipers would prefer the twentieth-century Yehuda to his Spanish namesake.

When the Rabbinical Assembly published Mahzor Lea Shalem in 2010—with an A to Z (Amichai to Zelda) thoroughness, including poets as varied as Admiel Kosman and Denise Levertov—the Conservative Movement completed a trajectory that began with Jules Harlow’s inclusion of poems by Nelly Sachs, Hillel Zeitlin, and other modernists in his groundbreaking 1972 machzor.

It is clear that all three major liberal movements have advanced the use of modern piyutim to reframe and reinvigorate worship along the lines foreseen by the Carmi Project. A box of T. Carmi’s files now resides (temporarily) in my office: a symbol, for me, of modern poetry’s importance in our spiritual lives. Further, those files encourage us to ask what kind of public dialogue should precede liturgical innovation.

Innovation is one of the core ideas in Jewish prayer—from the concept of chiddush bit’filah to the religious creativity of the great medieval poets. Why did the payetanim innovate in the ways they did? How does one explain the impulse to incorporate their poems in the prayer books of our people? Although these questions are beyond the scope of this essay, a few words on this subject by Jakob Petuchowski are most useful as we begin:

Theology is compelled to rely on intimations. When we speak of something of which we only have hints and intimations, we can speak of it likewise only in hints and intimations. We can allude to it, and we can suggest it; but we can hardly formulate it in propositions which will pass muster before the bar of logical rigor. We had, therefore, best express it in the images and the nuances of poetry.

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Guided by the idea that poetry—the genre of image and nuance—is the literary mode best suited to theology, I will take an essentially literary approach to the question I have posed in the title: “What happens when we use poetry in our prayer books—and why?”

Let’s turn first to metaphor, one of the most compelling reasons why poetry “works” in a prayer book. Jorge Luis Borges provides our first example:

There is a Persian metaphor which says that the moon is the mirror of time. In that phrase, mirror of time is the fragility of the moon and also its eternity. It is the contradiction of the moon, so nearly [translucent], so nearly nothing, but whose measure is eternity. To say moon or to say mirror of time are two aesthetic events, except that the latter is the work of a second stage, because mirror of time is composed of two unities, while moon give us, perhaps more effectively, the word, the concept of the moon. Each word is a poetic work.

Think of the word “moon” as the faithful translation of a Hebrew prayer in our machzor. And think of the beautiful Persian metaphor “mirror of time” as a poem on the opposite page. How does the poetic “mirror of time” function in relation to the original prayer, “moon”? What does it accomplish?

For the sake of argument, imagine that, inexplicably, we have lost all reason to pay attention to the moon—the way Jews sometimes lose their appetite for God, angels, and messiah. The metaphor “mirror of time” invites us to reconsider the moon and ponder its place in our lives from a fresh, new perspective: its dynamic and visible relationship to time. So, too, evocative poetry, with interesting and surprising metaphors for God, can wake up our theological reflection.

Or consider a metaphor spoken by novelist David Grossman in a newspaper interview in 2010:

[Grossman’s] younger son, Uri, was killed in combat in the final hours of the 2006 Lebanon War . . . “You have to understand,” he said, a photo of Uri—uniformed, eyes laughing behind glasses—on a shelf to his right, “that when something like this happens to you, you feel exiled from every part of your life. Nothing is home again, not even your body.”
Grossman's metaphor says that losing a child is an extreme form of galut in which feeling “at home” is no longer possible; for this bereaved father, the emotional reality of home no longer exists as it did before his son's death. Could a Jewish writer have chosen a more poignant, transformational metaphor to describe the death of a son? Metaphor has worked its mysterious alchemy: since the death of his son Grossman is not the same anymore; and, having read his words, neither are we.

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Philosopher Ted Cohen presents metaphor as an effective way to cultivate and achieve intimacy. Cohen’s insight is remarkable and eye-opening. Let's use Grossman’s metaphor to illustrate Cohen’s idea. Notice, for example, how the metaphor instantly draws us into Grossman’s inner life and shows us how it feels to be a grief-striken father. Through one word, “exile,” we feel close to a man we have met only through a newspaper interview. How does this happen? Edward Hirsch, excited by the poetic implications of Cohen’s idea, describes it this way:

Cohen argues that the maker and the appreciator of a metaphor are brought into deeper relationship with one another. That’s because the speaker issues a concealed invitation through metaphor which the listener makes a special effort to accept and interpret. Such a “transaction constitutes the acknowledgment of a community.” This notion perfectly describes how the poet enlists the reader’s intellectual and emotive involvement and how the reader actively participates in making meaning in poetry. Through this dynamic and creative exchange the poem ultimately engages us in something deeper than intellect and emotion. And through this ongoing process the reader becomes more deeply initiated into the sacred mysteries of poetry.

Nothing proves Ted Cohen’s point better than the poetry of Yehuda Amichai. In “My Mother on Her Sickbed” Amichai invites us into his mother’s room, where we find ourselves face to face with a dying woman he loves. She has “the lightness and hollowness of a person/Who has already said goodbye at the airport/In the beautiful and quiet area/Between parting and takeoff.”

Now consider the following words, which the poet spoke to an interviewer: “The impulse to compare your inner world to the world around you is very natural, and this is how a metaphor is born... The right metaphor is the core of my poem.” Following his impulse, Amichai discovers in his mother’s illness a connection between the airport’s “quiet area” (where the passengers have stepped beyond our reach) and the liminal state of a loved one who is actively dying— in transition and inaccessible to her family. The two things linked in this metaphor resonate like notes in a musical chord; and, in the making of metaphor, Amichai had perfect pitch.

Again, we hear the resonance when the poet likens his tallis to a wedding canopy, a parachute, the cocoon of a butterfly—and, in the end, in Hirsch’s words, “engages us in something deeper than intellect and emotion”:

Whoever has put on a tallis will never forget. When he comes out of a swimming pool or the sea, he wraps himself in a large towel, spreads it out again over his head and again snuggles into it close and slow, still shivering a little, and he laughs and blesses.

That “something deeper” is the spiritual core of our lives. And I suggest that the poet gives us a spiritual thrill in this poem by means of a complex metaphor in which he invites us to join him not only in the act of wrapping a tallis, but also in the religious experience of immersion (nikvei). I think, perhaps, Amichai laughs between the shiver and the blessing because of the dizzying beauty of the image he has wrought.

Our tradition is rich in beautiful metaphors for God. The use of modern poetry does not trump the value of an arresting phrase like Atik Yomin or the High Holy Days’ defining metaphor, Avinu Malkenu. Tradition is the heartbeat of our liturgy. At the same time, the metaphors we discover in nonliturgical sources matter a great deal for reasons we have now put forth: metaphor awakens and refreshes perception; it cultivates intimacy by encouraging connection, community and “a relational process”; it opens the door to a poet’s inner world—and therefore can encourage us to open the doors to our inner worlds.

But those doors do not open easily. Religious language—prayer language—can be a barrier. For Diaspora Jews, that includes the
additional barrier posed by Hebrew. As we think about offering the Reform Movement a new mizmor that speaks to our many constituencies at once (including those who do not know Hebrew, and especially those who struggle—or worse, have stopped struggling—with belief in God), we need to build bridges across the many streams of twenty-first-century liberal Judaism. Poetry can be a bridge.

In making a case for the use of poems in pastoral care, theologian Donald Capps speaks of the affinity between poets and pastors:

The tendency of poets to be explorative, questioning, and tentative, though not spineless or without conviction and a passion for truth, has a natural fit with the kinds of human experience that have been of greatest concern to pastoral care, and with the ways that pastors, in confronting these situations, have found themselves responding to them.21

We learn from Capps that poems are helpful in pastoral settings because they raise more questions than they answer. Poems do not preach or dictate to us—they are not dogmatic; rather, they are suggestive, evocative, and open-ended. A poem can turn a statement of belief into a question for our consideration. Writing about one of Robert Frost’s most evocative lines ("And miles to go before I sleep"), Jorge Luis Borges writes:

Anything suggested is far more effective than anything laid down. Perhaps the human mind has a tendency to deny a statement . . . But when something is merely said or—better still—hinted at, there is a kind of hospitality in our imagination. We are ready to accept it.22

These qualities, which make poetry useful to the pastoral caregiver, also make it a bridge between traditional liturgical language and a worshiper for whom that language is a barrier to prayer because it has the sound of unyielding, dogmatic truth. Poetry in the prayer book can make our liturgies more pastoral, more inviting, and more intimate.

In her poem "Panim" Israeli poet Sivan Har-Shefi shows us how modern verse can function as modern piyyut: a bridge between a challenging biblical/liturgical image and contemporary life.
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In Donald Capps’s terms, this is a poem for a pastoral encounter: “explorative though not without conviction.” It is, as well, a poem for our liturgy because, in the right circumstances, the pastoral texture and ambiance of a modern poem can give theological language a human face, as it were.

A seeker of God’s face, Har-Shefi knows well the Psalmist’s cry, “How long will You hide Your face from me?” (Ps. 13:2). Here she first describes the experience of seeing God’s face almost everywhere: in fine clothing and acts of kindness, in the ordinary “miracles” of daily life, in her husband’s embrace, and in her daughter nursing at her breast. She gathers these “sightings” together as though creating a composite sketch of God’s multifaceted presence. But then we hear urgent echoes of Psalm 13 as the poet notes the places where she has felt threats to God and perhaps even God’s absence: the face of war, the face of a parent no longer available to her, her own face (that is, vanity and the modern cult of self-worship). In the end, like the author of Psalm 13, the poet affirms the truth of her experience: God exists and God’s face exists—both the idea of God and, more important, the living reality of God in the world: source of protection, grace, and peace.

What’s more, by exploring the word panecha in a very personal way, and with disarming simplicity and honesty, Har-Shefi (an Orthodox Israeli) might even make non-Hebrew readers curious about the wording of the original prayer and pry open the Hebrew text to those for whom it would otherwise be a barrier or, at least, a mystery.

Is a poem like “Face” too confusing for worshipers? Writes Yo- chanan Muffs:

Every poem is a challenge to our total being: our senses, our intelligence, and our soul. We are afraid to confront the poem head-on (or at all) because we may be found lacking in the balance. Poems are written in a special language, and even though we instinctively know this, to defend ourselves, we dismiss poems as “only poetry.” Thus, most people act in one of two ways: they either reject poems as silly or they read them literally. However, to read them literally is to overlook the fact that every poetic statement is a compromise between what is seen and what can be said in the

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“Face” may well be a challenging poem for many worshipers. But is it any harder to decode than, say, the familiar words “ya-eir Adonai panavo eilecha vichuneka”? What does that sentence actually mean? There are a great many things in our prayer books that require enormous effort to explain or defend; but often we allow the claims and assertions of our liturgy to wash over us without giving them the thought they deserve.

I suggest that poetry in the prayer book is an invitation to greater mindfulness—thought, reflection, and contemplation. But, most of all, a poem invites us to join the poet in the act of imagining and wondering. For example, what might the image “God’s face” mean? What does it suggest to us, as a Jewish idea or on a personal level? “Every poem,” says Muffs, “is a challenge to our total being.” Instead of fearing that our interpretation of a poem will be wrong or inadequate, we can learn from poets to be playful and inventive—discovering in metaphor, rhyme, and alliteration ways to expand the territory between what we see and what we are able to say with words. That territory, it seems to me, is the very place where we experience what we call spirituality and God.

I can look
At my body
As an old friend
Who needs my help,
Or an enemy
Who frustrates me
In every way
With its frailty
And inability to cope.
Old friend,
I shall try
To be of comfort to you
To the end.15

I think about the prayer Asher Yatzar as I read these lines by May Sarton. Their brevity encourages us to slow down and focus closely on each word or phrase: the sweetness of “old friend”; the harshness of “enemy”; the soft, slant rhyme of “help” and “cope”; the modesty of “I shall try”; the poignancy of “to the end.” The prayer, too, is a “close reading” of the body, suggesting that we focus and
reflect on every wondrous detail of our physicality: the openings, the arteries, the organs.\textsuperscript{15} The prayer \textit{Asher Yatzar} views the human body with wonder, appreciation, and gratitude. The poet sets forth a view of the aging body that is marked by tenderness, compassion, and forgiveness. Each work, in its own way, presents a countercultural perspective that challenges the message we receive from the secular world—that beauty resides only in the youthful and “perfect” body.

The poem, of course, differs from the prayer in a most significant way: the poet addresses her body, not God. And yet Sarton’s poem strikes a deeply spiritual chord as she considers the choice that is entirely hers to make—and then makes it with humility and dignity. The prayer attributes the body’s grandeur to its Divine Maker. The poem emphasizes, instead, the crucial function of human attitudes and perceptions in determining our view of the body. Thus it honors the idea of human adequacy and initiative that is a counterweight to the traditional theology of Jewish prayer.\textsuperscript{17} Both \textit{Asher Yatzar} and the poem offer, in the words of poet Seamus Heaney, “a glimpse alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances.”\textsuperscript{18}

Sarton’s poem puts human flesh on the theological bones of \textit{Asher Yatzar}. In a sense, this is a central task of all poetry in the prayer book: to help us make the language of prayer, which can be abstract, alienating, and remote, into something concrete, inviting, and deeply personal. The Torah promises that God’s teaching is “not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach … No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it” (Deut. 30:11, 14). Poetry can bring the teachings of Jewish tradition close to us. Through compelling, evocative language that is “experience-near,” the right poem helps us open our hearts to the ineffable.\textsuperscript{19}

What’s more, poetry offers us an opportunity for \textit{tikkun} (an act of healing, repair, and perhaps even transformation). May Sarton’s words show us a woman, entering her ninth decade of life, who is powerfully resisting the social forces that tell her that old age is an enemy and her body a source of frustration. Here she beautifully exemplifies Wallace Stevens’s famous definition of poetry as “a violence from within that protects us from a violence without.” Seamus Heaney elaborates: “It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality.” It is the power of the imagination, says Heaney, that provides the “redress of poetry”—its ability to heal and make whole, “to place a counter-reality in the scales—a reality which may only be imagined, but which nevertheless has weight.”\textsuperscript{20}

Writers like Sarton, Amichai, Har- SHEIFI, and Grossman show us how \textit{tikkun} happens in real life—not suddenly and not perfectly, but as a result of thoughtful reflection, choice, the force of imagination, and will. At its best, poetry celebrates the gift that allows human beings to see things differently, to remake the world and reinterpret received ideas and traditions. This “glimpsed alternative” can be poetry’s greatest contribution to our Jewish books of prayer.

Notes

Prayer book reform was always one of the most significant and defining features of Reform Judaism in both Europe and America. While some reforms of the liturgy were driven by practical concerns, such as abbreviating the service or removing passages that were deemed to be inconsistent with the practice of most Reform Jews, most major reforms of traditional Jewish liturgy were ideologically based. Liturgical reform overwhelmingly was grounded in the notion that our prayers should be consistent with our theology. Reforms of this type are reflected in the deletion of phrases that reference a return to Zion, the resurrection of the dead, and the desire to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem (and even phrases recalling that we once did offer sacrifices there). As Jakob Petuchowski wrote, "Prayer, it was argued, demands absolute honesty; and the corollary was understood to imply that the prayerbook can contain only such statements as are factually correct, literally true, and historically verifiable."

Such criteria seem out of place in twenty-first-century religious life. Does our prayer book really need to be consistent with our theology? Must we believe literally the words we recite? Is our prayer book intended to be a catechism of Jewish belief? A new generation's answers to these questions may differ sharply from those who wrote or edited The Union Prayer Book, Gates of Prayer, and even Mishkan T'filah.

Our Reform forbearers had a posture of certainty, both about what God is and what God is not, about what God can do and what God cannot. In contrast, our theological perspective tends