

BLESS THE LORD, O MY SOUL

Viva Hammer on the gift of prayer

It is early still, and dark. Next to me my sister sleeps, but I wake with the sound of my father preparing for work. He is soft, so as not to disturb my mother. The window stirs, a ripple of white on the room. Then—there’s light on my eyes, morning light, and the sound of my father’s prayer delivers me into day.

Borkhi nafshi es Adonai. His voice sails out toward me. “Bless the Lord, O my soul!”

He pauses, and his voice rises. *Adonai elohai godalti meod. Hod vehodor lovoshto oteh ohr kasalmoh noteh shomayim kayrioh.* “O Lord

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my God, thou art very great; thou art clothed with honor and majesty. Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment: who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain.”

I translate for you, but what I understood was in his exuberant spirit: *Come! Come! The day is begun.*

Some mornings my father rides me to synagogue. A few men sit scattered, dank darkness shielding one from the other, the air thick with the decay of books. My father lifts me onto a pew and I look to the ladies' gallery, quiet and empty.

Mr. Eisen sits a row from us. He opens a siddur for me to a page of shimmering black letters, dancing shapes with thick limbs connected by slim sinews. He points to a letter and names it for me: *aleph*.

My father dons himself in the garments of prayer. From a velvet purse he takes a white shawl fringed with tassels and throws it over his head, whispering a blessing. From another purse he brings out a small black box with a strap around its sides. He loosens the strap and it writhes, streaming to the ground. He kisses the box and threads his left arm through a band attached to the box, and wraps the arm with the strap seven times. He takes out a second black box with a band that rests on his brow. His lips are moving constantly as he dresses himself thus. *V'erastikh li leolam*. “And I will betroth thee unto Me forever, I will betroth thee unto Me in righteousness and in judgment, and in loving kindness and in mercies, I will betroth thee unto Me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the Lord.”

We sit in gloom until the sun splits the windows above the ladies' gallery, thrusting its rays through swirls of dust to Zelig, the prayer leader, who is bathed in light. Zelig sings out, and the men respond: call and answer and call again, words bursting from their hearts, some louder, some softer, following, chasing one another's words, voices rising and falling. Even when my father prays at home, he sends forth his words to men gathering at prayer, and those callings and answerings are what I hear as I wake with the morning light.

The men in synagogue pursue one another to the last lap of words and pause to breathe, then remove their garments of prayer and chat with one another of politics and business. I slide off the pew. Mr. Eisen smiles and hands me a new letter from the *aleph bais*, as reward for my perfect goodness.

These are the hours with my father, early in the morning, before he goes to the factories, and to the shop, and to the university. When he comes home at night he is exhausted and short-tempered and I ache for his morning's grace.

Singing or sing-song, swaying back and forth, my school day began with prayer. The older children chanted, and we mimicked their words. Words gorged with myriad sounds bounced through the halls. We learned the *aleph bais* and pointed to the words as we chanted, until we became so fluent that they released us to pray on our own, only our lips moving, standing or sitting, bending and bowing. This was a time of wonder, of discovery. In other spheres I felt myself a child and incompetent, but at prayer I was expert as a grown man.

When I came into the hall where the older girls gathered to pray, many new parts were added to our repertoire. No one noticed that I wasn't reading the words as I pointed, that I recited them by heart as the letters danced for me. But a young master arrived who walked among us, watching and listening. He found out my illiteracy.

He had a long red beard and a gentle smile. While the girls chanted he took me aside, pointed to a page, and required me to read it aloud. Every word I misread he instructed me to circle in black and practice at home. Humiliation mingled with delight in his special attention. The black marks are in my siddur still, an inventory of the acquisition of prayer.

Prayer was passed to me for safekeeping, and I came to possess it.

What I was praying for or to, what to do with my mind while I moved my lips, or anything other than the technical skills, no one discussed. As long as I achieved mastery over the words, my thoughts were my affair.

That school ended and a new school began, where only boys were required to attend morning prayers. They did so under duress, making a show of detesting religious observance. So when the car from our street arrived at school, always late, the boys charged into the assembly hall for prayers, the girls dispersed to play or chat, and I hid in the library to pray. Each day I searched for a spot and moved around as other children intruded. Had I been discovered, I would have been made a laughingstock. But I was impelled to prayer by my body, by an emptiness in my mouth that longed to utter its daily portion. Prayer was indispensable, the gatekeeper delivering me into day.

The Sabbath after I turned twelve, my father and I walked to synagogue as usual, and at the threshold a yoke came over me. “I am a Jewish woman now,” I thought. “My deeds are on my own account, both good and ill.” And I turned to go up to the ladies' gallery.

Conspiratorially and with great gentleness, my father called, “Come with me!”

Indignant, I responded, “But I’m bat mitzvah!”

My father grimaced and beckoned to me. “Don’t be silly! How will they know?”

I kept walking up. At school we had been instructed that from age twelve, a girl may not enter the body of praying men. A younger girl mingles with the men as a boy does, neither counted in the quorum nor hindering their communion. At twelve a girl is banished, and at thirteen a boy is counted in the quorum as one of the men. It didn’t concern me that I would never again sit with my father, and would never lead the prayers, read the Torah, be counted for the quorum, or wear the garments of prayer. On the contrary! Upstairs I had a view of all corners of the men’s occupation, a better vantage point than I had with my father. Only this: The ladies in the gallery arrived late and spent the service chatting.

At school we were taught prayer, Bible, laws, and ethics—but not God. Teachers seemed loath to instruct on God. The God of the Song of the Sea melded with the God presiding over massacres: the Crusades, the Russian pogroms, the Jews of York. Periodically they reminded us that God is always and everywhere and that God can do all things: create the world, make miracles, know our pasts, and see our futures. God knows our innermost thoughts, takes care of us, gave us the laws, and forgives our sins. When I inquired why such a fabulous being would have the urge to create people (or have any urges at all), I was told, “We don’t ask questions of the will of God.”

One morning at school, after the boys finished prayers, we were called to the assembly hall. A screen was hoisted onto the stage, and onto the screen came giant images of naked, emaciated, disintegrated bodies piled high and bound by wire. I had never seen such things, and as if hit by a blow from behind, I staggered out of the hall to the latrines.

On slatted wooden benches enveloped in stench, girls held each other, shook, sobbed. The refuse on the screen, that was *our family*; we bore their names, their faces. My father and theirs had been ordered to collect that refuse, sorting the dying and the dead—grandparents, aunts, brothers, friends, teachers. What perversion of logic could reconcile those visions with the rule of a good God?

The sobbing ebbed; a space hollowed out. I opened the door to leave the latrines, and as I crossed the threshold, a certain desire was extinguished. I could not collude in the deception of belief in God.

Putting God away was a relief. The fragments I had caught and pieced together couldn’t withstand the blow from the Holocaust assembly. Our elders had cradled us till in due time we discovered the truth. Putting God away was an inevitability.

My religious life did not change: I kept the Sabbath and the kosher laws and recited my prayers hiding in the library, or over the chatter of women in the ladies’ gallery. But these practices could not sustain me over the years that followed, and I began a descent that ended in a house for addicts.

It was cold in there and damp, dark as midnight and thick with fumes. Figures in black gathered—the listless, degenerate ones I had stepped over on my way home from school. I grimaced and took a seat facing the Twelve Steps to Recovery. “We admitted we were powerless over our addiction,” I read. “We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.” I flinched. God? *God?*

Around a circle, the figures in black testified to their addictions. Then they turned to me, waited.

I began, hesitated.

And it was in that room of despair that I began a path back to God. It was not the revelation of the convert, with its power and clarity. I was forced to accept God against my reason, my judgment, my moral code. A battle raged between one part of me, which knew absolutely that God could not exist, and the other part, which knew absolutely that, without God, I could not exist.

My religious life did not change: Only in silent prayer did I expose the resurrection of my faith. Words I had let loose ten thousand times as a non-believer returned to my lips. As if from some outside source they arrived, long-familiar forms offering new meanings. The blatherings of prayer repeated by habit had made possible an encounter in the hour of need.

The last thing I do before leaving the family home for the last time is say the morning prayers. The rooms are bare. The furniture we lived in is gone; the kitchen I made so many meals in is vacuumed clean. All that is left is a small square of winter sun through the magnolia tree which is always bearing fruit.

I call my children and walk the parquet floor and talk and cry—and maybe they do, too; I can’t remember. We stop. I open my miniature siddur and begin the prayers that have accompanied me from one place to another, that usher me from this world to the next, that are my escorts and comforts.

The room echoes sound, the walls talking back at me the whispering of my voiceless lips, calling, answering.

Waiting for me in the room is a devoted neighbor. He grew up in a fanatically Orthodox home where his mother was always saying psalms in between having multiples of children whom she did not care for because she loved God more than she loved them.

“What are you *saying* there?” my neighbor asks.

“I don’t know,” I respond. “I don’t understand what I say.”

My neighbor raises his brows. “Aren’t you *curious*?”

Morning prayers extend for one hundred pages in my siddur, a store of texts from the entirety of Jewish history. Every generation of Jews has fastened something onto this daily gobble of words we consume before our daily bread. Philosophical poems are pasted next to legal texts. Dozens of blessings are heaped up, then spread thinly among fifteen chapters of psalms, the horror of the binding of Isaac, and the Song of the Sea. There’s a nod to the Exilarch of Babylon mixed with a rehearsal of the Temple sacrifices.

Those who have passed these texts on to us exhort us not to utter them as “a commandment of men learned by rote” (Isa. 29:13). The siddur is one hundred pages of high art, so varied and so beautiful—and so absolutely impossible to decode when I have to get to work, my parents and my children are calling for me, and I haven’t got the mind to focus.

Prayer hangs over me each morning like a debt, like a headache, like love. From earliest waking it hangs: Should I stop what I’m doing and get it done? My unprayered mouth is dry, unformed, unspeaking, unspoken. Prayer is the obligation that gives me permission to begin the day, but I play games with it, knowing that if I’m not careful, I will miss the moment when the debt is coming due, and it will pass, and never return; the debt will go unpaid and my day will be unprayered.

The comfort of prayer is its familiarity, that it comes every day with the light, and at night with the head on the pillow, as the last act before sleep. It is so familiar that my body and my mind have grown around the lattice of its sounds. Prayer is a moment in which my mind is free to rove. It hosts the opening thoughts, in which I send kites out to the possibilities of the day, and the late thoughts, in which I fold away those which have caught the wind.

Before beginning, I like to sit for a moment in repose, a pause, a breath before the rush of tenthousandwordsof.

Of what. A jumble, that’s the siddur. This, that, and the other, dancing through an encyclopedia of Jewish literature before breakfast. I have to get it all

in and swallowed down and digested, between waking and getting out.

A word has sound, sight, meaning, symbol, incantation. Words and their accumulations come down to us from all history, are loaded and tethered.

Their meaning is in the memory of my father’s voice rising and falling as I wake in the morning. Their meaning is in the air of the synagogue, dense with the decay of books. Their meaning is in the miniature siddur my mother found after I gave up searching, a siddur that is who-knows-how-old and perfect for my needs. That’s the meaning of prayer: searching through a whole city over a freezing winter to look for something that I will take with me for the rest of my life and from which I will utter prayers that have been said by all the fathers and those mothers who have time to dip into them and leave with the words that I got from my father when I was too young to know what meaning means.

Light on my eyes, morning light, the sound of my father’s prayer delivers me into day. His voice sails out toward me. *Borkhi nafshi es Adonai*. “Bless the Lord, O my soul!”

That is the translation, but the meaning is this: Father is almost finished now, and then he will boil the kettle in the kitchen and make a milky coffee with honey, sipping loudly, and pack his lunch.

Adonai elohai godalti meod. “O Lord my God, thou art very great.”

And then he will leave the flat, and close the door so quietly that even though it is right next to my room, I hardly hear.

Hod vehodor lovoshto. “Thou art clothed with honor and majesty.”

He will go to the factories and choose frocks for the frock shops.


Oteh ohr kasalmoh noteh shomayim kayrioh. “Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment, who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain.”

Then he will take a bus to the university and teach mathematics and talk to the students who pile up at his door and tell him they can’t take the examination because they broke up with their girlfriends and feel too sad.

His voice falls and I hear only mumbles, and then a burst of words. *Yaitzai odom lefoalo velavodoso adai orev*. “Man goeth forth unto his work and to his labor until the evening.”

After the university, he will take another bus down Broadway and the arcade in the city where we have the shop and talk to the assistants about what is selling and what is just sitting and must be returned if it’s on consignment and if it’s not, must be gotten

rid of at a discount, and the shop windows must be changed and the layaways must be checked to make sure the customers are bringing their deposits. Then he will go back to the university and teach a night class and we will pick him up in our pajamas and Mummy will bring him dinner because he will be so starving hungry late at night—

His voice picks up again. *Oshiro lAdonai behayay.* “I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live.” *Yitamu hatoim min ho’oretz.* “Let the sinners be consumed out of the earth, and let the wicked be no more.” *Borkhi nafshi es Adonai.* “Bless the Lord, O my soul!”
Father is done, the day is begun.
Hallelujah. 

LIFE OF THE ARTIST

It’s said that Caravaggio was a creep,
A pedophile to be precise, the kind
Who lurked near schoolyards, and one who assigned
Apprentices to bed for more than sleep,
A tavern brawler, too, who had to keep
Fleeing from enemy and legal bind.
(A fever, though, could not be left behind.)
Biographies with such an arc come cheap,

The mystery of his subsisting in
How one undone by drink and leaded paints
Could see in less than forty years—despite
His looking through a glass smudged thick with sin
And no less clearly than his pictured saints—
The piercing of the basest depths by light.

—John D. Smith

 VOWELS INTO COLORS

A mauve, *E* grey, *I* dark, *U* green, *O* . . . range.
 I do not see you, vowels, in color, so
 any paraphrase is clumsy, strange.
 But you bleed into one another. You
 adapt and melt. I feel the textures change.

Duffle coat, army blanket, green to brown:
 color's a garment taken off, put on.
 A coded sonnet brick by careful brick
 assembled or dismantled, layered thick
 as paint splotched on the Haitian artist's jeans,

the painter who was murdered in the street.
 Eloquent, wordless, slathered over vowels,
 color clumps and crackles, croons and howls.
 Into the bath of silence colors seep
 and saturate our sleep.

—*Rachel Hadas*