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Honey from the Poem: Teaching Ancient *T'fillah* through Contemporary Poetry

DAN ORNSTEIN

Introduction

Humans share almost all of our genes with the chimps, our closest evolutionary cousins.[1] One of the few things that make us distinctly human is our limitless ability to communicate thoughts and ideas through words and language, a power that has allowed us to build, sustain, and destroy entire civilizations. Critical and thoughtful engagement with the words that we speak and the ways that we speak them is obviously imperative. One way we can do this is by reconnecting with the spiritual insights and wisdom of two of the oldest artistic genres of the written and spoken word: *t'fillah* and poetry. I am currently writing a book that helps the reader to understand *t'fillah*, our unique genre of religious poetry, by comparing select contemporary poems with select prayers of the *siddur*. Though they are often vastly different from one another, secular poetry and prayer both offer great meaning to us personally and collectively, which is why they have persisted for millennia. They are meant to be read slowly, appreciated for their beauty and power, thought about carefully, shared generously, and applied wisely. They demand that we work hard at understanding them, but their

[1] *See Jared Diamond,* The Third Chimpanzee: The Evolution and Future of the Human Animal *(New York: HarperCollins, 2006), ch. 1.*

value to us is immeasurable. I hope my book will be one small effort to help the reader listen to their varied, substantive messages.

As I demonstrate in the sample chapter below, my approach is to use individual poems as "posterior" or back-looking mirrors that can reflect our thinking onto individual prayers of the *siddur*. In each chapter, I do an analysis of, or meditation upon, one poem, and I then explore how that poem sheds light on one prayer. My hope is that anyone reading this book—Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and atheist, reader of poetry and faithful worshipper—will obtain a deeper appreciation of what both genres of literature are saying to us, and will be inspired by both to live more deeply and hopefully. In addition to helping the reader to engage with words more generally in a thoughtful and respectful manner, my other major goal is for this book to be a modern form of *iyyun t'fillah* (literally, placing one's eye on prayer), the time-honored *mitzvah* of meditating upon the meaning of individual prayers, and their meaning for the individual in his or her relationship with God.[2] In this respect, my primary audience is the Jewish community, but hopefully non-Jewish spiritual seekers will benefit from my writings as well. I have been influenced by, among other books, the master work of *iyyun t'fillah* in the English language, the multivolume *My People's Prayer Book* from Jewish Lights Publishing; I wish to add my unique approach to it and other works of *iyyun t'fillah*. Additionally, I intend to re/acquaint the reader with a diverse selection of poems and poets of the English language and the important things they have to say. I focus mostly upon what an individual prayer is saying in light of the poem to which it is being compared. I look forward to *Conservative Judaism* readers' thoughtful responses and constructive critiques of the sample that I provide below.

The book of Proverbs teaches us that death and life are in the hands of the tongue (18:21). Similarly, the poet Emily Dickinson wrote:

> *A word is dead*
> *When it is said,*
> *Some say.*

[2] *See B. Shabbat 127a. See also Tosafot to B. Berakhot 32b, s.v.* kol ha-ma·arikh bit-fillato.

I say it just
Begins to live
That day.[3]

Words are never dead, though they have the power to bring life and death in their wake, depending upon how seriously and carefully we treat them. If the book I am writing can help our fellow Jews—and by extension all people—to grow in their relationship with God and others through a close and loving examination of the words of poetry and *t'fillah*, I will feel I have been successful. The sample chapter follows.

Challenging Oblivion

Celebrity often brings egomania in its wake. The behavior of ego-drenched celebrities is at times quite disturbing, yet it is just as often hilarious because it is so over-the-top. I remember when Ivan "Pudge" Rodriguez, the all-star catcher and power hitter, led the Florida Marlins to their 2003 World Series victory over the New York Yankees, four games to two. Though I have not followed baseball carefully since middle school, I was nonetheless fascinated by such an improbable upset: a relatively young National League team defeating what was the late George Steinbrenner's athletic monster machine, whose history of World Series wins is legendary in American sports. More fascinating to me was a story told to me by one of my Hebrew School students: that Rodriguez had built a bust of himself in his backyard, a monumental paean of glory to his athletic and financial prowess. At the time, I was shocked and intrigued that anyone could be that self-centered to feel he had carte blanche to engage in such Ozymandias-like arrogance.[4] I had put this story out of my mind until I decided to write this chapter. With the memory power of Google at my fingertips, I was able to confirm what that

[3]*Emily Dickinson, #1212 (untitled) in Thomas H. Johnson, ed.* The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson *(Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), pp. 534–535.*

[4]*Ozymandias is the mythical Egyptian king in Percy Bysse Shelley's sonnet by the same name. The poet meets a traveler from far away who tells him about a withering, broken statue of the king that is rotting obscurely in the desert. On the statue's pedestal the king—long gone and nearly forgotten—warns the world, "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings. // Look on my works ye Mighty, and despair!"*

student had told me. In 2004, Jo-Ann Barnas, a sports writer for the Detroit Free Press, wrote for the on-line *Encyclopedia of Baseball Catchers* that "Much has been made about Rodriguez's lavish lifestyle—of his nine-bedroom Miami Beach mansion and its eleven bathrooms; of the boats he owns, including a 118-foot yacht; of the one-ton bronze statue he commissioned of himself, in a Texas uniform [he was playing for the Rangers at that time] that stands tall in his backyard."[5] According to Barnas, rather than be embarrassed, Pudge was happy with the very good job that his sculptor had done. We laugh with scorn at such celebrity antics, partly because we secretly wish that we had the money, fame, and moxie to do the same things that celebs do. However, our scorn also comes from the sober recognition that all the bronze monuments, mansions, and money in the world will not stop time from largely burying the memory of even a famous ball player like Ivan Rodriguez, and even more so the memories of the rest of us.

John Robinson Jeffers (1887–1962) was a great modern American poet whose father gave him a rich education in the classics, and who taught himself stone masonry, his other trade besides writing. After marrying his wife, Una, in 1913, they moved to Carmel, California, where they lived with their twin sons in a stone cottage and tower by the Pacific Ocean that Jeffers built with his own hands. Jeffers' poem "To the Stone-Cutters"[6] is an incisive treatment of the often futile human struggle to achieve permanence and remembrance through the building of monuments and the writing of poetry. (The syllables in the poem below were bolded by me, not by Jeffers.)

[5]*See Barnas' article, "The Power of Pudge," at http://members.tripod.com/bb_catchers/catchers/rodriguezi3.htm.*

[6]*Tim Hunt, ed.* The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers *(Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 18. Many thanks to Sister Katherine Hanley, for introducing me to Jeffers and to this poem. Even greater thanks to Rabbi Martin Cohen, who inspired me to write this book and whose wisdom and insights have been invaluable. Thank you also to Professor Marilyn Francus for reading and commenting on this essay.*

Stone-cutters fighting time with marble, you foredefeated
Challengers of oblivion
Eat cynical earnings, knowing rock splits, records fall down,
The square-limbed Roman letters
Scale in the thaws, wear in the rain. The poet as well
Builds his monument mockingly;
For man will be blotted out, the blithe earth die, the brave sun
Die blind and blacken to the heart:
Yet stones have stood for a thousand years, and pained
thoughts found
The honey of peace in old poems.

Imagine Jeffers walking down to a quarry to haul back stones for the building of his family home. He stops to watch some stone engravers at work on a monument, perhaps a headstone for someone's burial site or a marble plaque commemorating some great event or local hero. Ever the poet who struggles to pierce through self-deception to consider deeper truths, Jeffers shares with them the cynicism that he imagines they possess about the meaning of what they are doing. Their work is futile, for no memorial, no monument to the past, no attempt at immortality etched in the hardest stone will last. They can fight time and challenge oblivion all they like by chiseling messages and memories of past lives, loves, and glory into stone. However, like Jeffers, they know perfectly well—as they cynically take their pay for work that they know is worthless—that they are all engaged in a sham: over time it will all wear away. Jeffers then intensifies this image of the futile ephemerality of life by turning his literary gun on himself and his fellow poets, comparing the poet's writing to a form of futile, cynical monument-building. Like the stone-cutters, the poet builds his own monument of words while simultaneously mocking both them and himself. He knows perfectly well that no matter how much he tries to preserve great ideas, images, and feelings in those words, they too, like the words on those stones, will wither away—because ultimately everything will wither away and die: humanity, the earth, even the brave sun whose permanence we take for granted. Admittedly, Jeffers makes this second point about impermanence in a highly exaggerated, perhaps overblown manner intended to shock the reader. From the impermanence of stone-etched memorials he jumps headlong into the impermanence of even the

greatest words of poetry. Jeffers is particularly adept at making these points through his use of the literary technique of alliteration: the constant repetition of certain sounds to create a rhythmic, emphatic effect. As I mentioned above, I bolded the consonant blend **bl**, that Jeffers uses a number of times, to emphasize the meaning of the sound I think he is trying to convey: all of our words on stones and in poems appear to be nothing but "blah-blah-blah" blather that bleeds out to nowhere.

At this point in the poem, you might feel sucker-punched with a kind of existential despair, all from what possibly started as a casual glance at some monument builders attempting to immortalize those who are, in the end, all too mortal. This is what makes the redemptive end of the poem even more shocking than the despondent tone that preceded it. Like us, Jeffers knows well that nothing and no one lasts forever, and that even the marble-etched and poetic memories of those who came before us will eventually fade away. Yet, paradoxically, those very same stones can and do last for a thousand years; and for millennia, people have been taking their pained thoughts—their suffering, their anguish, their troubles—back to those old poems that have indeed survived the tests of time, and have found within them the honey of peace, the sweetness of solace and wisdom. We human beings continue our quest for solace in words, even and especially in the shadow of oblivion, which is our inevitable fate. In other words, we perhaps aren't entirely the fore-defeated challengers of oblivion that Jeffers describes at the beginning of his poem when addressing his stone-cutter friends.

God, Full of Mercy

"To the Stone-Cutters" sheds some interesting, comparative light on a far older poem, the prayer El Malei Rahamim, "God Full Of Mercy." If you have ever attended a Jewish funeral, burial, Yizkor (holiday memorial service), Israel Memorial Day service, or Holocaust Memorial service, you have likely heard it sung solemnly by a rabbi or cantor. It is certainly a favorite prayer for comforting people who are observing a *yahrzeit*, the anniversary of a loved one's death. Because I want to show how this majestic prayer *as a religious poem* challenges oblivion without defeat, I will first transliterate the prayer, then render it into English. The poem's translation

below is my own, an attempt to capture its meaning in exalted, albeit somewhat archaic sounding English.

El malei raḥamim,
shokhein ba-m'romim;
haṃtzei m'nuḥah n'khonah
taḥat kanfei ha-sh'khinah,
b'ma·alot k'doshim u-t'horim
k'zohar ha-rakia mazhirim . . .
et nishmat _____ [Here, the name of the deceased person is inserted.]
she-halakh l'olamo,
b'gan eiden t'hei m'nuḥato.
Ah-na, Baal Ha-raḥamim
hastireihu b'seiter k'nafekha l'olamim,
u-tz'ror bi-tz'ror ha-ḥayyim et nishmato.
Adonai hu naḥalato,
v'yanu·aḥ b'shalom al mishkavo.
V'nomar: amen.

God, full of mercy,
Dwelling-on-high,
Grant rest-most-sure
Beneath Your winged Presence,
Among souls holy and pure,
Shining like the light of the sky . . .
To the soul of _____
Who's gone to his eternal place.
In Eden may he rest with grace.
O, Master eternally Kind
Grant him shelter forever under Your wings.
In the bond of eternity, his soul do bind.
You, Lord, are his holy ground,
On eternity's peace-bed may he rest, sound.
And we say, Amen.

Though I may be overreaching, for me the sounds of the Hebrew suffixes employed here (*-im*, *-ah*, and *-o*) convey a sense almost of airiness and lightness, as if when we recite this prayer commending the deceased person to God's eternal care, we are personally flying with that person's soul to God's heaven, bringing him or her to the Shekhinah,

God's most intimate presence, for protection. These sounds might be a kind of onomatopoeia, a word or sound used in literature that sounds like the thing or experience it is describing: in this case, our taking our own winged flight to heaven.

Yet, more important than its sounds are the prayer's rich metaphors for describing immortality that "challenge oblivion" in some very impactful ways. The person being remembered is never referred to as having died, only as resting peacefully under the wings of God's loving presence. In fact, variations of the Hebrew word *m'nuḥah*, "rest," are used three times in this poem: in connection with God, with the Garden of Eden, and with a heavenly bed. Also, whereas we would only describe a person who has died in the past tense, in this poem he or she continues to live in God's heavenly care. To paraphrase the great British poet John Donne, "death dies" because a person's soul achieves immortality.[7]

Further, the Garden of Eden is used in this poem as a crucial symbol of immortality. Think back to the story of the Garden in chapter 3 of the book of Genesis. Before then, God warns Adam and Eve that eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil will cause them to die. Eve is tempted by the serpent to eat the tree's fruit, which she shares with her husband; whereupon both people acquire the limitless potential for knowledge, thus making them too much like God. (God even says as much in Genesis 3:22.) They are banished from the Garden along with the childlike innocence that had been their life there, as well as their ability to eat from the Tree of Eternal Life which stands near the Tree of Knowledge. This story is telling us, albeit in poetic and not literal terms, that as the descendants of humanity's parents, we eventually have to leave the "edenic" garden of childhood, as we acquire that same limitless potential for knowledge and power that comes with maturity. As did Adam and Eve, we in fact do die: not because that is our punishment for growing up and challenging God, but because it is the reality of being human. We cannot ever eat from the Tree of Eternal Life; we cannot live forever. In trying to figure out where the Garden of Eden went to after humanity was banished from it, later Jew-

[7] *See Donne's sonnet, "Death Be Not Proud."*

ish legend "relocates" it to the afterlife. Good people are promised that they will enter Paradise, a word likely derived from the Persian loan-word *pairi daêza* (enclosed park or orchard) that found its way into Hebrew as *pardes*. What this legend and its use in our prayer are saying is that we do have an opportunity to return to the Garden of Eden and achieve eternal life, after we die physically. However, El Malei Raḥamim goes even further by positing, even demanding, that eternal life belongs to the specific person who has died, the one for whom we—the bereaved family and community—are struggling to create a perpetual monument of words, images, and memories. This concrete struggle to challenge oblivion at the level of one human being's life is at the heart of all these theological abstractions about death and afterlife.

Finally, the phrase *k'zohar ha-rakia mazhirim*, which I have translated as "shining like the light of the sky," is taken from the late biblical book of Daniel, 12:2–3. There, Daniel the prophet receives a vision from God of what will happen when God wreaks final judgment upon the entire earth, saving those who are good and destroying those who are evil. In what most scholars now view as the Jewish Bible's first mention of the dead being resurrected, God tells Daniel that good people will be resurrected so that they can live forever, while evil people will be resurrected so that they can be eternally punished. "The knowledgeable will **shine like the light of the sky,** and those who lead the many to righteousness will be like the stars forever and ever."[8] The author of El Malei Raḥamim quite consciously uses this phrase from Daniel to reinforce this belief that good people (including, of course, our loved ones whom we are remembering during the chanting of the prayer) never die, and are in fact given the promise of resurrection in a future time.

El Malei Raḥamim is an integral part of Jewish prayers known as Hazkarat Neshamot, literally, "remembrance of souls," what Jews commonly call Yizkor. As far back as the third or fourth centuries of the common era, there existed a quasi-mystical folk tradition that two things would allow a deceased person's less-than-perfect soul to leave *Gehenna* (the Jewish version of the netherworld, or perhaps hell) and to enjoy a

[8]*For more about this, see* Neil Gillman, The Death of Death *(Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997).*

blessed afterlife: interceding through prayer with God on behalf of that person, and giving money to the poor as expiation for the sins that person committed while alive. The Yizkor prayer gradually developed from these beliefs, in different forms throughout the Ashkenazic (German and East European) and Sephardic (Spanish-Portuguese) Jewish communities, first as a Yom Kippur ritual, then in the Eastern European Jewish rite for all the pilgrimage festivals. El Malei Raḥamim can actually be recited every Monday, Thursday, and Shabbat, since those are days on which we read from the Torah scroll, and they are considered to be times of great holiness. In my synagogue we recite it any morning of the week when someone is commemorating the anniversary of a loved one's death. This folk tradition also undergirds the Jewish practice of reciting the Mourner's Kaddish for a parent for a year-minus-one-month. The mourner seeks to move his or her parent's soul into the next world through year-long intercession, while simultaneously cutting that prayer period short so as not to insinuate that one's mother or father was a sinner in dire need of year-long, earthly intercession!

Jeffers refers to stone-cutters and to poets as people who challenge oblivion with monuments of stone and of words. If God has anything to do with this challenge, the poet is not telling us. The anonymous poet of El Malei Raḥamim uses his words to demand with deep faith that God challenge oblivion, specifically the utter erasure of a person's memory and existence, through the preservation of his or her soul. From this very traditional perspective, only God possesses the real power to hold onto the essence of a human being (the soul) as a part of God for all eternity. Judaism would take strong issue with Jeffers' contention that all of existence is fated to die; nonetheless, Jews quite realistically understand that in this life, an individual's death is the end, and that some death and loss is tragic and unjust. Yes, we do our best to remember, to carry on the legacies of the deceased, and to build all sorts of monuments to him or her, but death's finality cannot and should not be sugar-coated. That physical reality notwithstanding, El Malei Raḥamim and the Jewish traditions undergirding it hold out the genuine possibility for us to—as it were—"fly to heaven" and demand of the ever-living God to not only challenge, but to eradicate oblivion through endless divine protection of our loved one's soul, his or her spiritual essence that is indestructible.

What does all of this mean in practical, contemporary terms, especially for those of us who are not sure we even believe in God, let alone the existence of the soul? It is true that we can only keep our loved ones alive through the faulty faculties of human memory and legacy. But we can also take this powerful leap of faith that God keeps them alive in God's endless storehouse of life that forever enlivens the universe. To paraphrase our poem above, the words of our prayer offer our pained and bereaved thoughts the opportunity to find some comfort in the honey of an eternal, all-embracing God, to whom the "soul-energy" of those we love returns, living on unconditionally as a part of God's universe.

El Malei Raḥamim is transformative for those of us who believe—or want to believe—in the traditional, spiritual ideas that are its foundation: namely, that we can intercede with God to remember eternally our loved one's soul, and to grant that soul rest in a blessed afterlife. I suspect that for most of us its greatest power lies at an even more elemental level: it is a kind of "mantra" whose words we may not take literally, yet whose sacred setting allows us to utter a loved one's name "as part of eternity." This can comfort us tremendously in our personal dramas of loss, grief, and remembering.

What about those of us who, upon reading the words of this prayer, find ourselves unable to believe them, or find them to be morally and emotionally outrageous? Perhaps our grief and sense of loss are too great, and the death of our loved one(s) has been a tragic one. Or perhaps, paraphrasing Jeffers, we eat the *skeptical* earnings of agnosticism, having long since given up on a merciful God who puts our less-than-perfect souls into some kind of limbo until our living friends and relatives bargain us into the next world. I can think of no one who expresses this sense of outrage better than Israel's poet laureate, the late Yehudah Amichai. In his poem entitled, appropriately enough, "El Malei Raḥamim," he blasts the idea of the good God whose mercy is stored up within God's Self and in heaven, yet that is unavailable to our suffering world of the living:

El malei raḥmim:
Eel-malei Ha-Eil malei raḥamim
Hayu ha-raḥamim ba-olam
V'lo rak bo.

God full of mercy . . .
If only God was not so full of mercy,
Mercy would have been in the world,
Not just in Him.[9]

Notice from the line that I have bolded, that Amichai is doing a word and sound play on the words *Eil Malei*, "God full of [mercy]" and *eel-malei*, an ancient Hebrew word which means something like "if not" or "but for." Written and sounded out in Hebrew, the phrase and the word are almost homonyms ("sound-alike" words) with no relation to each other, but Amichai places them next to each other to flip the meaning of our prayer's opening line on its head. He is essentially saying, "God, You're so full of mercy? Maybe You could let some of that mercy out and send it to us. We could surely use it down here on earth." The poem continues as an anti-war poem.

Amichai's polemical point about God and suffering humanity captures how so many people feel about God and the picture of God being portrayed in our prayer. I want to suggest that, in fact, the author of El Malei Raḥamim understands this. However, the point of the El Malei Raḥamim prayer is not necessarily to rail against injustice and God's apparent complicity in it. As I wrote above, the point is to help those who grieve to "find peace in the honey of old poems," as Jeffers put it, by assuring mourners and their communities in highly personal poetry that their loved one still lives, even if not here on earth.

Yet I would take the message of El Malei Raḥamim one step further. It clearly addresses God and God's exclusive power to grant rest to the soul of someone, eternally and unconditionally. However, it (along with the practices of giving charity in memory of a loved one that I mentioned before) also addresses you and me. God's power cannot be activated without the power of human words and the human endeavors of compassion and justice rattling the heavenly throne. Whether you take this idea literally

[9]*My translation of this part of the poem is based largely, with some modifications, upon Benjamin and Barbara Harshav, trans.* Yehudah Amichai: A Life of Poetry 1948–1994 *(New York: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 31.*

or figuratively, Jewish tradition, and Jewish mysticism in particular, gets it right: God, as it were, is motivated to protect the souls of the deceased, or to do anything at all, because human beings motivate God, nothing more and nothing less. True, humanity might one day be blotted out, the blithe earth might one day die, and the brave sun might one day die blind and blacken to the heart if we stand around and do nothing with our words and deeds to help God keep the world alive. Yet, with the short time we have upon this earth, we have the unprecedented opportunity to make our loved ones' legacies eternal by helping God create a ripple effect of divine love and life: one that continues on long after they and we have been forgotten by an amnesia-ridden world too distracted to remember its own humanity.

Dan Ornstein is rabbi of Congregation Ohav Shalom and a writer in Albany, NY.

To Be or Not To Be: A Personal Understanding of an Enigmatic *Baraita*

HENRY GLAZER

The Rabbis taught: "For two and one half years, the Schools of Shammai and Hillel engaged in debate, the former declaring that it would have been better for humanity not to have been created than to have been created, and the latter maintaining that it was better for humanity to have been created rather than not created. They decided, upon voting, that it would have been better for humanity not to have been created—but now that humans have been created, let one examine one's [past] deeds; others say, let one consider one's [future] deeds."

—B. Eruvin 13b

"Retirement" corresponds to the final stages of life. As such, a great deal of time is spent in thinking, reflecting, and ruminating about the nature of life. No matter how occupied one may be in one kind of activity or another, the human psyche finds itself drifting to thoughts and considerations of what life means and has meant in the past. Our memory of distant events is sharpened and somehow more lucid; we review parts of our lives that we often find wanting. More often than not, our minds are beset by disappointments, failures, and losses, and we tend to focus more worriedly on the miseries of the world in general—famine, disease, war, poverty, violence—and on the intractable pervasiveness of human suffering. This does not suggest that we have given up on the belief that no part of life is with-