

Claiming Our Place in Prayer

Spiritual Poetry by Jewish Women

We at RTFH are fortunate in that women are freely and fully engaged in every aspect of Temple life – administrative, social, and, of course, religious. Ascending to the bimah, chanting Torah, and leading prayers were not always considered women’s prerogatives, and are not everywhere thought so even today. But here women take on all these roles throughout the year, and nothing seems more natural.

In this context, the Women’s Connection Shabbat is an opportunity to look directly at - and to celebrate - something that we may take for granted the rest of the year. It is an occasion for asking the question: What do women gain, and what does the community gain, when women are full partners in the religious and spiritual life of the synagogue? As we prepared for this year’s WoCo Shabbat, we started by looking for expressions of Jewish women’s spirituality in poetry and prayer. And we found them in abundance - too many, in fact, to fit into one service, so we are making all of them available here.

In the first section below, you will find the readings that we were actually able to find room for in our WoCo service. But please continue beyond those; there is much more. We hope you will enjoy exploring!

Poems and Prayers from the WoCo Shabbat, March 29, 2024

Our One Touch of Sabbath Light

By Ricki Oleon, Women of Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA

Our one touch of Sabbath light
 Begins at the edge of time
 Honoring the women who came before us, connecting us to a rich tradition.
 It gently moves from woman to woman, sister to sister
 We are one humanity, the strength of many women
 We begin with one pair of candles, which ignite the next.

Our one touch of Sabbath light
 Energizes us with the power of its glow
 Drawing our hopes together, empowering us to speak out for justice.
 It gently moves from woman to woman, sister to sister
 Gradually illuminating the world.

Our one touch of Sabbath light
 Invites us to a day of reflection

Rejuvenating our souls and gathering our strength.
It gently moves from woman to woman, sister to sister
Inspired to live deeper and stronger.

Our one touch of Sabbath light
Glow on diverse faces
Stretching across the globe, some of us born, all of us choosing.
It gently moves from woman to woman, sister to sister
We come together to make light.

Our one touch of Shabbat light
Connects, empowers, rejuvenates, and inspires us.
Respecting the past, excited for the future, we continue our work.
Gently moving from woman to woman, sister to sister,
Each with her light.

The Voice of a Woman

By Elaine Levine, East End Temple, New York, NY

The voice of a woman is immodest
The voice of a woman chants Torah
The voice of a woman demands justice
The voice of a woman comforts a child
The voice of a woman sings with joy
The voice of a woman teaches the ignorant
The voice of a woman prays with devotion
What should be forbidden is silence.

Sh'ma

By Kate Royston, Congregation Beth Israel, Portland, OR

Shhh...listen.
Shhh...you have to listen to hear.
Shhh...can you hear?
...can you hear the surprise and delight in Sarah's laughter?
...can you hear the joy and pride in Miriam's song?
...can you hear the strength and wisdom in Deborah's clear judgments?
...can you hear warmth in your grandmother's voice calling you to the Shabbos table? ...can you hear your mother's love as she recites the Sabbath blessings?
...can you hear your daughter's clear, high voice chanting as she joins the circle of women?
...can you hear your sisters' earnest prayers as they share their goodness and courage? ...can you hear your granddaughter's newborn cry as she joins the Jewish chorus?

...can you hear your own heart beating, reaching to join the song of praise for Adonai?
 Shhh...can you hear?
 ...can you hear the women who came before you? ...can you hear the women yet to come?
 ...can you hear us all as one?
 Shhh...listen...hear...

Sh'ma...

Prayer Before Turning on the News

By Hila Ratzabi, There Are Still Woods, June Road Press

I sit before the TV screen
 with remote control in hand.
 I want it to stay this way.
 This dark, quiet room
 without a world in it.
 This nothing, this sweet
 nothing. The fire truck
 toy on the shelf beneath the TV,
 look how it saves
 no one. In this room
 there is nothing
 burning. Dear God, it is
 possible. You are the one
 with wings. Shelter us.
 Let something have been fixed today:
 The deal among the nations signed,
 the guns, all of them, taken away,
 a woman believed,
 a man contrite. A border
 covered in dust. God,
 I need to know what happened
 to those who tried to cross.
 What happened after the storm
 and earthquake and fire.
 I can't be everywhere at once,
 but you can. How can I convince you
 we are worthy of miracles?
 How much longer can I delay
 the inevitable knowing,
 the daily ritual of witness?
 At least bear it with me,
 dear God. Come sit

on the couch, put your feet up,
 I'm making tea. Tell me
 how this will end.
 Tell me if there is a chance.
 Or maybe we can bargain for peace?
 Trade for redemption?
 Give me something,
 anything, before I let
 the messengers into my room.
 I will not look away.
 Promise me
 you won't either.

Mitzvah

By Maggie Mohr, Sarah's Daughters Sing: A Sampler of Poems by Jewish Women, Abe Books

It is said that Abraham's tent
 had four flaps that were always open
 So that all in need could freely enter.
 She kept a broomstick lodged in her door,
 holding it open to neighbors and friends.
 A sign that whatever was to be shared
 was to be shared, her coffee, a simple roll,
 an ear deep and quiet as a cave into which
 they could stow their hearts and minds.

Sarah baked bread from her finest flour,
 and washed the feet of the three strangers.
 This tenement wife, dispensing her cakes,
 cleansed a different sediment,
 walking silently in the path of her ancestors.

I Am a Jew

By Stephanie Siegel, Congregation Beth Israel, Portland, Oregon

I am a Jew,
 who is a woman And I pray.

I braid the dough for the challah,
 and bless the Shabbat candles,
 and wrap myself in the tallit I have woven.
 And I pray.

I am a link between those who stood at Sinai
 and those who survived the Shoah;
 those who would dream and build futures
 and those who will gather the shattered shards of glass to heal the world.
 And I pray.
 I am a woman,
 Who is a Jew.

Kaddish

By Marge Piercy, The Art of Blessing the Day, Knopf

Look around us, search above us, below, behind,
 We stand in a great web of being joined together,
 Let us praise, let us love the life we are lent
 passing through us in the body of Israel
 and our own bodies, let's say amein.

Time flows through us like water.
 The past and the dead speak through us.
 We breathe out our children's children, blessing.

Blessed is the earth from which we grow,
 blessed the life we are lent,
 blessed the ones who teach us,
 blessed the ones we teach,
 blessed is the word that cannot say the glory
 that shines through us and remains to shine
 flowing past distant suns on the way to forever.
 Let's say amein.

Blessed is light, blessed is darkness,
 but blessed above all else is peace
 which bears the fruits of knowledge
 on strong branches, let's say amein.

Peace that bears joy into the world,
 peace that enables love, peace over Israel
 everywhere, blessed and holy is peace, let's say amein.

Other Prayers

Giver of Peace

By Barbara D. Holender, Temple Beth Zion, Buffalo, NY

Giver of peace, teach us to see ourselves in the face of the Other, that we may learn to be patient with fault generous in love sparing with anger.

Help us to understand
that our little lives
are potent with great good, that we are healers in your image, that reaching out in need of You
to others more in need
we find You near.
Give us the grace simply to be kind.

Then peace must surely come to dwell among us

Under His Wings

By Tianna Martinez, Chabad

Where is the place,
Where no fears arise,
or doubts dismay?

Where can I run to,
where I can be fully
loved and protected?

When enemies arise,
and I want to hide,
where can I flee?

Creator, Protector,
and Lover of my soul,
I will depend on You,
and You alone.

For it is only by you
that I live and breathe,
and only under the wings
of G-d, am I
truly at home...

Esa Einai

By Rabbi Tsurah August, Ritual Well

Esa einai el heharim, me'ayin me'ayin yavo ezri

I lift my eyes to the mountains. From where does my help come? (Psalm 121)

ESA EINAI

I am washing the sweaters
I am wiping up the spilled coffee
I am cleaning the kitchen counter

ESA EINAI

I should feed the cat
I should refill the bird-feeder
I should take out the garbage

ME'AYIN YAVO EZRI

I see the young mother
I see the nursing baby
I see the hopeful father

ME'AYIN EZRI

I write these words
I hold my breath
I am on hold

ESA EINAI

ME'AYIN

ME'AYIN

AYIN

Seasons of Torah

By Nancy Lee Gossels, Sarah's Daughters Sing, Abe Books

Pale moon
ever coming and going
lighting and fading
rhythmic flowing
signal of new time and changing seasons,
Awaken in us
The mystery of beginnings and endings,
Of lived renewed.
Awaken us to the beauty of endless cycles
Visible signs of God's eternal love.

Respite in Darkness

By Merle Feld, Longing: Poems of a Life, CCAR Press

The rising joy in the morning
When I wake with little pain,
My spirit peacefully coming
To consciousness. I wake with
The rising light, warm
Under comforter and rising
Hissing steam.

Beside me I hear beloved
Soft breathing. I have come
Through the darkness intact.
I rise on new calf's legs,
Wobble to the bathroom.

Blessed is the One who
Returns me to my life, who
Rises me back to life

Tekhine for Planned Parenthood

By Ariana Katz, Ritual Well

Ribono shel olam ruler of the universe,
Who planted the tree of knowledge in the garden,
to know between good and evil,
Who granted human beings free choice.
Be with me in this time.
Holder, Guard, keep us safe.

Ribono shel olam, Rachel is weeping for her children,
She pours out her grief.
I am awash in her tears.
Lift up the neshamot, the souls, of our fallen,
Comfort their families.
Memory, Eternal, remember us.

Ribono shel olam,
who knows of birth and death and the life that exists between,
Bless our healers,
Bless our health,
Bless our hands as we work to heal this brokenness.
Bless our treatments as they bring chayyim tovim, good life, on us all.

Shield our caregivers from harm
 For our rabbis teach us, that one on their way to perform one of your holy commandments is
 themselves shielded from harm.
 Healer, Soother, treat us.

Ribono shel olam,
 Our Well, our source, who brings renewal and sustenance.
 You are the deep well I draw from.
 The well where Rebecca stood,
 The waters that Miriam caused to pour forth.
 The waters of the Nile that Yocheved trusted.
Ribono shel olam,
 bless these sacred spaces of decision.

Israel: My Prayer

By Miriam Jaskierowicz Arman, Chabad

There is a place, my own I call it,
 Where fiery winds blow messages –
 Spirits of old -
 Where graves of sages tell the tale, History of our people...
 Their trials, tribulations, pain and loss, Written in fiery letters on tablets of stone,
 Universal law, cherished by generations,
 Eternal concepts,
 Treasured, accepted, acknowledged,
 Forever.

Shots!
 In the cool breeze of night
 Cramp my heart,
 Knowing that peace is but a dream,
 A seed, firmly planted in hope,
 Not quite ready to flower and bloom,
 Yet deeply rooted in the essence of my nation.
 I walk on byways carved through mountains,
 In awe of trees that reach the sky,
 Singing psalms of a king, Believing in the power of a G-d,
 Who watches and protects this land.
 I cry for sons, who gave their lives for freedom,
 Shedding their blood,

So it may grow,

Expand, increase, cultivate, nurture, and flourish.

Souls who came from far to kiss its soil
Faces of children shining with liberty and pride...

Basking sun-glow,

Light of Independence,

Fleeing from tyranny and tears.

This is my land, my home, my garden

And though I am far, it beckons me-

This earth, abundant, fertile, rich....

Enlightens my spirit, calls to my soul,

Nourishes my being, feeds my better nature.

My heart longs, is bound, protected, sheltered In the radiance of its walls. Inheritance - innate knowing!

Bring me home O G-d, in Your time...

To the beloved bosom of your earth,

That I too may bloom in harmony and joy

Opening the blossom that is I.

Poems that Affirm the Voices of Jewish Women

We Are

By Elaine Starkman, Coming Together, Sheer Press

We are not tintypes of great-grandmothers
who served men and bore sons
to sit at their feet in heaven

We are not portraits of grandmothers
who fled pogroms to make myths
in American sweatshops

We are not snapshots of mothers
doting in despair forcing us
into pink formals and mrs. degrees

We are a generation seeking tradition
transforming symbols
Jewish women not yet ourselves.

Prayer Evokes

By Shelley Radbel, Women's Connection, Reform Temple of Forest Hills

Peace
Rationalization
Action
Yearning
Earnestness
Release

Empathy
Veracity
Observance
Kindness
Enlightenment
Sympathy

Women of Inspiration

By Talia Weisberg, Chabad

I close my eyes and fall back
 rejoining the strong women of my history
 I change my name with Sarai as she becomes Sarah
 I pass goatskins to Rebecca to disguise Jacob as Esau
 I stand behind the marriage canopy with Rachel as Jacob unknowingly marries Leah
 I strum a harp with Search as she tells Jacob that Isaac is still alive
 I sing with Miriam as she leads the Jewish women through the parted Sea of Reeds
 I protest with the daughters of Tzelafchad as they ask Moses for their inheritance
 I sit with Deborah under her date tree as she judges the Jewish people
 I hand Yael the tent peg to kill Sisera and save her nation
 I pray with Chana in the Tabernacle at Shiloh as she beseeches Hashem for a child
 I fast with Esther as she prepares to approach Achashverosh and try to save her people
 I cry tears of joy as Shelomtzion reinstates the Sanhedrin and rule of the Perushim
 I hold the basket for Judith to place Holofernes' severed head
 I commentate on Jewish law and Torah with Bruriah among the Talmudic sages
 I practice my religion in secret, the price of discovery death, with Gracia Mendes Nasi
 I establish the first Bais Yaakov school for girls with Sarah Schenirer and help save Jewish
 observance and education
 I write about the Torah portion with Nechama Leibowitz and bring Israeli Jews back to Torah
 I chronicle life in captivity in the cramped Annex with Anne Frank
 I walk alongside Chana Senesh to death by Nazi gunshot
 I learn Jewish studies in a yeshiva classroom with my fellow classmates
 These women paved the way
 for me, my daughters, my granddaughters
 for Jewish women of every generation
 to blossom into the strong women we have the potential to be.
 After all, it's in our history.

Other Poems on Jewish Themes by Jewish Women

Once More With You

By Helen Papell, Sarah's Daughters Sing, Abe Books

These days of love are lollipops
Dropped free to a child

A woman's shoulder-flutter
Is sister
to a crane's wing in a field of corn,
The crane hovers over its mate startled with moon

I know that love is witch's brew and
witches were the ones who burned,

And my ancestor Ruth who rounded
her apron with grains
comes to warn me of her fate:
fill the eyes of a he
And you will grandmother a king.

I am not a child; and though I hear
years hungry as jaws
stalk behind the coupling and the corn,

I'm once more with you wind-stunned.

The first time we made Shabbos together

By Merle Field, Longing: Poems of a Life, CCAR Press

The first time we made Shabbos together
In our own home
(It wasn't really "our home"
It was your third floor walk-up
and we weren't even engaged yet)
I had cooked chicken
my first chicken
with a whole bulb of garlic
(my mother never used garlic)
and we sat down at that second-hand chrome table
In the kitchen.
It was so ugly that we turned out the lights.

Only the Shabbos candles flickered.

And then you made kiddish.

I sat there in wept —

Oh God, you have been so good to me!

Finally, for the first time in my life,
you gave me something I wanted.

This man, whose soul is the soul of Ein Gedi.

We will be silent together

We will open our flowers in each other's presence.

And indeed we have bloomed through the years.

My Sleeve (Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6)

By Pamela Wax, Walking the Labyrinth, Main Street Rag Press

I roll it up when it's too long

To show my wrists, my bangles,

Or to check the time.

It's a place to store my tissues,

Used, or not yet.

I hire a tailor for pants, not sleeves,

I like the unkempt look, rise and shine,

Ready on a dime.

Don't wear your heart on your sleeve,

My father said, afraid for me,

as if exposed, it might catch a cold.

No other adage I recall, but that,

And still I wonder why?

I hide it there in the folds,

half in, half out, both my father's daughter

and my own self, leaving God

to cut the straightjacket from my heart,

not trusting myself

With a knife up my sleeve.

Deer, Rabbit, Robin

By Pamela Wax, Walking the Labyrinth, Main Street Rag Press

Don't think me woo-woo for believing
I see loved ones - the dead ones - alive,
even if not in human form.
My brother shows up as a rabbit.
His Hebrew name was Tzvi,
but he never comes as a deer,
as my mother – Hinda Chaya
in Yiddish – does. She gave me
a brass doe once, its head
stooped low to the ground, grazing, neck unguarded,
the epitome of faith.

You'd think my father, Hershel,
would also come as a stag
or a deer, the Yiddish version
of my brother's name,
the masculine form of my mother's.
But he shows up as a robin,
exposing his belly like the red-diaper
baby he was. All those years
of his binocular gazes at feathered friends
feeding on his suet all winter
into early signs of spring, and now
he's perched on the other side of the lens.

I never see them all together
As a menagerie. There are bunny sightings,
Or deer sightings, or robin sightings
(or sometimes sky-blue shells that I treat
with as much wonder as I had
as a child, carrying them home
in my palm like a fledgling itself).

But it happened last week
on a woodsy trail,
riverside.
A doe so close, unafraid, I knew
she was my mother. We stood unblinking
for heartbeats and quantum leaps,
until she turned and left
without haste or ceremony.

Mere yards later I met my brother
on the path, waiting on his haunches
long enough to hear me say,
Hi, Howard, before he, too,
skipped off, too bashful
to lock eyes, though I tried -
always try - to hold the stare.

Just beyond that spot, a robin,
three for three, in a span
of two minutes and twenty yards -
a seance with my dead
at dusk, that liminal time
where heaven and earth brush.

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