

**Contemporary Poems Illuminating Our Prayer**  
**Shabbat Morning, 26 Tevet / January 21**  
**Congregation Beth Israel**

**An opening poem**

**Here Today**

G-d is here  
today. She is  
a spectacular G-d,  
all good company  
and magnificence.  
She sings, barks,  
and is an able contortionist. (She  
learned this in India.)  
She does splits  
when you don't  
expect them.  
She has a big vocabulary.  
She is part Jewish  
part Buddhist  
part wind.  
She plays excellent piano,  
speaks Urdu, breathes  
deeply, and does  
the sun salute each day.  
This G-d knows the words  
to many songs. She bakes  
bread, and often makes  
strawberry shortcake.  
She turns these small mountains  
so green you want to eat them  
an then  
she just hands you  
a long light yellow porch  
where you can sit  
and sit and sit  
to watch her move  
so slowly you would miss her  
if you weren't watching closely.

—Esther Cohen, from *Shul*

**MODEH / MODAH ANI / prayer for gratitude** (Mishkan T'filah p. 170)

**Děkuji/Thanks**

God created, God created a sprig  
so I could weave wreaths.  
Thanks, thanks for pain,  
which teaches me to inquire.  
Thanks, thanks for failure,  
that will teach me diligence  
so that I could, so that I could bring a gift,  
though no strength might remain,  
thanks, thanks, thanks.

Thanks, thanks for my weakness,  
which teaches me humility.  
Humility, humility for joy,  
humility without oppression.  
For tears, thanks for tears,  
they will teach me emotion.  
For the living who, for the living who speak out  
and cry for sympathy.

Thanks, thanks for thirst,  
which revealed weakness.  
Thanks, thanks for the torment,  
which will bring deeds to perfection.  
Thanks that I do love,  
though fear might be gripping my heart.  
Lamb, thank you,  
you didn't die in vain,  
Thanks, thanks, thanks...

—Karel Kryl

## NISIM SHEB'CHOL YOM / Blessings for daily miracles (MT p. 175-178)

### Beatitude

Blessed be parts of my body I cannot reach in the shower—out of sight, out of mind.

Blessed be aluminum, without it we are all sadder and unadorned.

Blessed be infinity and its children, particles of stretched color and light moving through a pixelated sky.

Blessed, all blessed.

Blessed be the cats moving among cheap office furniture; theirs is the kingdom of smarty.

Blessed be the frangible, for they know not a thing about it, skipping as they do down streets strewn with bottle caps and pizza slices falling from the so blessed sky.

Bless us in the shopping center, cabbages and our carriage with the one stuck wheel.

Bless the electricians, for they shall know pivot and burst. Blessed the lemon cake, the beautiful nerve, the bedspring and the radio voice.

Blessed be emptiness and the severalness of what a day!

Blessed be the office furniture with the fake wood grain: some things come close and that's enough.

Blessed be the open window; let the late bees come on in.

Bless the fortuneteller and the barber; for they shall inherit the kingdom of downtown boogie-woogie.

Blessed be the extended family and the lightning rod and the butter softening in the ceramic dish on the counter.

Blessed be cyberskin and serranos.

Bless us in our verisimilitude; bless your best party dress, sybaritic blue.

Blessed be the lunch-makers, the sweepers and the stuffers.

Blessed the Tupperware filled with yesterday's Bolognese, the splintering wood and they who hesitate, for they shall be ratified, shall be outright expressed.

Blessed be the leopard print chaise and the women everywhere in purposed repose.

Blessed be the unruly hair and the mole in the middle of my back, unwashable!

Bless linen and silk and particleboard.

Blessed be the numerator's glorious variance; it tends to get the short end. Blessed be the radius and ulna and humorous elusive, for they shall move the meat of my arm.

Blessed be the arms.

Blessed the stomach and the sclera; they have ideas all their own.

Blessed be sparkle and sinew.

Blessed smarten and clutter and understudy.

Blessed be the compilers, for they shall know the nervous yellow bloom.

—Sheila Squillante (from the Worship issue of *Qarrtsiluni*)

**BARUCH SHE'AMAR / Blessed is the One Who Speaks (MT p. 183)**

Every sunrise and sunset, birth  
and death, storm and flood, blossom  
and snowfall. Every lip balm,  
paperback novel, beggar and bowl  
and hair salon. Every glass of water,  
muddy gorge, mother  
and market and corrugated roof.

Rhododendrons, dirty oil barrels  
filled with groundnut paste,  
filligreed teapots, emerald beetles,  
scrolls, wooden tulips, bottles of beer.  
Sequoias, crepemyrtle, dwarf birch.  
Every rubber band. Every paperclip.  
Every open sore and aching tooth.

How does Your mouth not tire  
of speaking the world into being?  
Almighty, Your creations cannot imagine  
infinity without growing weary.  
It's hard to remember  
Your mouth is purely metaphor  
though Your speech is real.

You speak every atom in the universe,  
a mighty chord resonating.  
Every fold of skin, every grain of sand,  
every iceberg and hibiscus come from you.  
If You ever chose silence, even for an instant,  
we would blink out of existence  
as though this experiment had never been.

—Rabbi Rachel Barenblat

**PSALM 150** (MT p. 188)

**Pied Beauty**

GLORY be to God for dappled things—  
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;  
And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
Praise him.

—Gerard Manley Hopkins

**150**

Praise to you in your holiness  
Praise throughout your expansive realm  
Praise for the power of your doing  
For your abundance and everywhere-ness  
All praise  
Praise with the blowing of trumpets  
Praise with the psaltery and harp  
Praise with timbrel and dance  
With stringed instrument and pipe  
Praise with clear-sounding cymbals  
And with crashing cymbals

Every breath is your praise

—Zen abbot Norman Fischer

## **YISHTABACH / Ending Psukei D'Zimrah with Praise (MT p. 193)**

### **A List of Praises**

Give praise with psalms that tell the trees to sing,  
Give praise with Gospel choirs in storefront churches,  
Mad with the joy of the Sabbath,  
Give praise with the babble of infants, who wake with the sun,  
Give praise with children chanting their skip-rope rhymes,  
A poetry not in books, a vagrant mischievous poetry  
living wild on the Streets through generations of children.

Give praise with the sound of the milk-train far away  
With its mutter of wheels and long-drawn-out sweet whistle  
As it speeds through the fields of sleep at three in the morning,  
Give praise with the immense and peaceful sigh  
Of the wind in the pinewoods,  
At night give praise with starry silences.

Give praise with the skirling of seagulls  
And the rattle and flap of sails  
And gongs of buoys rocked by the sea-swell  
Out in the shipping-lanes beyond the harbor.  
Give praise with the humpback whales,  
Huge in the ocean they sing to one another.

Give praise with the rasp and sizzle of crickets, katydids and cicadas,  
Give praise with hum of bees,  
Give praise with the little peepers who live near water.  
When they fill the marsh with a shimmer of bell-like cries  
We know that the winter is over.

Give praise with mockingbirds, day's nightingales.  
Hour by hour they sing in the crepe myrtle  
And glossy tulip trees  
On quiet side streets in southern towns.

Give praise with the rippling speech  
Of the eider-duck and her ducklings  
As they paddle their way downstream  
In the red-gold morning  
On Restiguche, their cold river,  
Salmon river,  
Wilderness river.

Give praise with the whitethroat sparrow.  
Far, far from the cities,  
Far even from the towns,  
With piercing innocence  
He sings in the spruce-tree tops,  
Always four notes  
And four notes only.

Give praise with water,  
With storms of rain and thunder  
And the small rains that sparkle as they dry,  
And the faint floating ocean roar  
That fills the seaside villages,  
And the clear brooks that travel down the mountains

And with this poem, a leaf on the vast flood,  
And with the angels in that other country.

—Anne Porter

**YOTZER OR / Blessing for Creation of Light** (MT p. 195)

**Morning Poem**

Every morning  
the world  
is created.  
Under the orange

sticks of the sun  
the heaped  
ashes of the night  
turn into leaves again

and fasten themselves to the high  
branches—  
and the ponds appear  
like black cloth  
on which are painted islands

of summer lilies.  
If it is your nature  
to be happy  
you will swim away along the soft trails

each pond with its blazing lilies  
is a prayer heard and answered  
lavishly,  
every morning

or hours, your imagination  
alighting everywhere.  
And if your spirit  
carries within it

the thorn  
that is heavier than lead—  
if it's all you can do  
to keep on trudging—

there is still  
somewhere deep within you  
a beast shouting that the earth  
is exactly what it wanted—

whether or not  
you have ever dared to be happy,  
whether or not  
you have ever dared to pray.

—Mary Oliver

**AHAVAH RABBAH / Blessing for God Who Expresses Love Through Torah**  
(MT p. 198)

**The Wild Rose**

Sometimes hidden from me  
in daily custom and in trust,  
so that I live by you unaware  
as by the beating of my heart,

Suddenly you flare in my sight,  
a wild rose blooming at the edge  
of thicket, grace and light  
where yesterday was only shade,

and once again I am blessed, choosing  
again what I chose before.

—Wendell Berry

**Scaffolding**

Masons, when they start upon a building  
Are careful to test out the scaffolding;

Make sure that planks won't slip at busy points,  
Secure all ladders, tighten bolted joints.

And yet all this comes down when the job's done  
Showing off walls of sure and solid stone.

So if, my dear, there sometimes seem to be  
Old bridges breaking between you and me

Never fear. We may let the scaffolds fall  
Confident that we have built our wall.

—Seamus Heaney

**GE'ULAH & MI CHAMOCHA/ Blessing for Redemption (MT p. 203-204)**

**Prospective Immigrants Please Note**

Either you will  
go through this door  
or you will not go through.

If you go through  
there is always the risk  
of remembering your name.

Things look at you doubly  
and you must look back  
and let them happen.

If you do not go through  
it is possible  
to live worthily

to maintain your attitudes  
to hold your position  
to die bravely

but much will blind you,  
much will evade you,  
at what cost who knows?

The door itself  
makes no promises.  
It is only a door.

— Adrienne Rich

## **Prelude to the AMIDAH**

### **You Reading This, Be Ready**

Starting here, what do you want to remember?  
How sunlight creeps along a shining floor?  
What scent of old wood hovers, what softened  
sound from outside fills the air?

Will you ever bring a better gift for the world  
than the breathing respect that you carry  
wherever you go right now? Are you waiting  
for time to show you some better thoughts?

When you turn around, starting here, lift this  
new glimpse that you found; carry into evening  
all that you want from this day. This interval  
you spent  
reading or hearing this, keep it for life -

What can anyone give you greater than now,  
starting here, right in this room, when you turn  
around?

—William Stafford

### **Without Ceasing**

The wash of dawn across the sky  
reveals your signature.

Cicadas drone your praise  
through the honey-slow afternoon.

The angular windmills on the ridge  
recite your name with every turn.

And I, who can barely focus on breath  
without drifting into story:

what can I say to you,  
author of wisteria and sorrel,

you who shaped these soft hills  
with glaciers' slow passage?

You fashioned me as a gong:  
your presence reverberates.

Help me to open my lips  
that I may sing your praise.

—Rabbi Rachel Barenblat

## **Prelude to the TORAH READING**

You are here to receive this prophecy,  
I am so certain of this I would wager life on it.

Get open, fast. Get to the highest point  
available, that hill, for example. Even better,

the tree on top of the hill. Clamber up,  
go on. Do what the branches do, reach up,

tilt your face to the clouds. Now you wait.  
Prepare to hear. You never know what the voice

will sound like, perhaps not a voice. Maybe  
like a current of electricity sizzling, sparking,

or the snap of knuckles cracking. A slide whistle  
or kazoo—don't laugh, it could happen.

How would that look, God talking to you,  
you laughing it up in a tree on a hilltop.

Be a lightning rod, an antenna. Reception  
can be active, you know. Think of a dancer

being lifted, all her muscles tightening  
around her bones. She is lighter for how she

lifts herself, gets smaller, more powerful.  
Call the message to you, show you can

be trusted to hear and hold it. Don't even think  
of coming down from there, you just wait.

You stay up in that tree, listening. The words  
will come to you, they will, they will.

—Hannah Stephenson (from the Worship issue of *Qarrtsiluni*)

**ALEINU/ We offer praise & hope for a perfected world (MT p. 282)**

**To Be of Use**

The people I love the best  
jump into work head first  
without dallying in the shallows  
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.  
They seem to become natives of that element,  
the sleek black heads of seals  
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,  
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,  
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,  
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge  
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest  
and work in a row and pass the bags along,  
who are not parlor generals and field deserters  
but move in a common rhythm  
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.  
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.  
But the thing worth doing well done  
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.  
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,  
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums  
but you know they were made to be used.  
The pitcher cries for water to carry  
and a person for work that is real.

—Marge Piercy

**MOURNER'S KADDISH** (MT p. 294)

**Otherwise**

I got out of bed  
on two strong legs.  
It might have been  
otherwise. I ate  
cereal, sweet  
milk, ripe, flawless  
peach. It might  
have been otherwise.  
I took the dog uphill  
to the birch wood.  
All morning I did  
the work I love.

At noon I lay down  
with my mate. It might  
have been otherwise.  
We ate dinner together  
at a table with silver  
candlesticks. It might  
have been otherwise.  
I slept in a bed  
in a room with paintings  
on the walls, and  
planned another day  
just like this day.  
But one day, I know,  
it will be otherwise.

—Jane Kenyon

## **A closing poem**

### **Lauds, Summer: An Antiphon**

It never grows old, this sun rising here  
every morning

As much as I ever wanted  
anything, listen:

birdsong, a dying language  
Practice

its rise and fall, its  
loss, familiar

as the body  
You can never

get close enough  
to the ground to pray

Long blue heron, sunslant  
on the underwing

armfuls of butterfly weed  
and orange

Holy, holy this morning, here  
and gone

—Jeannie Tomasko (from the Worship issue of *Qarrtsiluni*)