

CREATOR, ARE YOU LISTENING?

Israeli Poets on God and Prayer

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*Hava
pinkas-Cohen*

תפלה לאם בטרם שחרית

בשעה שאני עומדת לבשל דיסת סלת
חסר ממני כל מיני מחשבות זרות
וכשאני נוגעת בגו התינוק ומדה חמו
שילכו ממני כל מיני טרדות
שלא יבלבלו מחשבותי. 5
ותן לי אמן לזכך פני
שיוכל כל אחד מילדי
לראות פניו בתוך פני
כמו במראה רחוצה לקראת חג

10 ואת החשך המשקע מפנים
פני-כסה באור.
שלא תפקע סבלנותי ולא יחר גרוני
מצעקה מתחבטת ומתעבה
שלא יהיה לי רפיון ידים
15 מול הבלתי נודע
ושלא יפסק אף לא לרגע
מוגע בשר בשר ביני לבין ילדי

20 תן בי אהבתך שיהא בי די לעמד בפתח הבית ולחלקה
בפשטות בה פורסים לחם ומורחים חמאה כל בקר
מחדש נחוזה חלב רותח וגולש וריח הקפה מכסים
על קרבן תודה וקרבן תמיד
שאני יודעת איך נותנים.

A MOTHER'S PRAYER BEFORE DAWN

5 As I stand cooking fine-grained cereal
remove from me all manner of forbidden thoughts
and as I touch my baby's body to measure his fever
may all manner of cares leave me
and not trouble my thoughts.
And give me the courage to purify my face
so that all my children
can see their faces in my face
as a face washed for the holiday in a mirror.

- 10 And the darkness deep within
my face—cover with light.
So that I don't lose patience and my throat is never hoarse
from a struggling and thickening cry
so that I'm not helpless
- 15 before the unknown
and so that nothing will prevent even for a moment
the contact of flesh between me and my children.
- Instill in me Your love so that I can stand at the entrance of my home
and distribute it
as simply as one slices bread and spreads the butter each morning
20 anew, the aroma of boiling, flowing milk and the smell of coffee
covering over
the thanksgiving and daily sacrifices
that I know not how to offer.²⁴

The Hebrew term translated in the title as "Dawn," *shaḥarit*, is the name of the traditional daily morning prayer service. The title of the poem, "A Mother's Prayer Before Dawn," thus, could more literally be translated, "A Mother's Prayer Before the Morning Prayer." Outdoing her husband and the other men in the community in spiritual commitment, she begins to pray before the official synagogue morning service attended by the men begins. In her prayer, the speaker asks God for help in two areas that are interrelated: her inner being and her relationship with her children. She cannot be the kind of mother she wishes to be if she is troubled by "forbidden thoughts" (2) or "all manner of cares" (4). The "forbidden thoughts" (*maḥshavot zarot*) that concern her are not necessarily those thoughts that, according to Jewish tradition, interfere with one's concentration in prayer. They are more related to the anxiety of not knowing what the future will bring ("so that I'm not helpless / before the unknown," 14–15), which can create a sense of despair within her ("the darkness deep within," 10).

Along with her desire to avoid inner anguish, she wishes to be as positive a presence as she can in the lives of her children, so that her face will reflect back to her children a true knowledge of who they are at their best ("And give me the courage to purify my face / so that all my children / can see their faces in my face / as a face washed for the holiday in a mirror," 6–9), so that she is always calm and never shouts at them ("So that I don't lose patience and my throat is never hoarse / from a struggling and thickening cry," 12–13), and so that there is always a physical closeness between her children and herself ("as I touch my baby's body to measure his fever," 3; "the contact of flesh," 17).

Most importantly, the speaker yearns for the capacity to love her child. The ability to love is expressed in the final stanza by means of an image that recalls the opening image of the poem in which the mother rises early in the morning to cook cereal for her family (1). Here, the mother stands at the entrance to her home distributing to the members of her family the breakfast she has prepared ("as simply as one slices bread and spreads the butter each morning / anew, the aroma of boiling, flowing milk and the smell of coffee," 18–19). The speaker's preparation of the breakfast is analogous to the priest in ancient Israel presiding over a sacrifice. She prepares cereal from "fine grains" (*soleḥ* like the meal offerings of the Temple, the aromas of milk and coffee (*niḥ ḥalav . . . vereḥ haqafeh*, 20) serve here as the incense (*niḥoah*) whose smell (*reaḥ*) overpowers that of the sacrifice, and her breakfast is a thanksgiving sacrifice (*qorban todah*) and a daily sacrifice (*qorban tamid*) (21). As a woman who could never have been a priest in ancient Israel and as a person living generations after the abolition of sacrifices, she does not know how to offer the ritually ordained sacrifices (22). However, as a mother, she does know how to care for her family, and it is that caring that will be her offering to God. In a sense the speaker presents the mother as an alternative priest who perhaps can be a bearer of divine blessing to those for whom she cares, just like the priests who presided over the sacrifices in ancient times and their descendants who continue to bless the people to this day.