



Chasing the Ineffable: Israeli Poets on God

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Questions to Reflect on for Study of Poetry:

1. Share an image or phrase that stands out.
2. Share something you don't understand and want to know more about.
3. What is the feeling or feelings that the poem evokes?
4. What Jewish concepts or texts is the poet drawing on? How are they used in their original context and how are they used in the poem?

Part I: God, Where are You?

Excerpted <i>Piyyut</i> from Musaf Liturgy, Yom Kippur	
Though your dread is Upon the faithful angels, Who are mightily Powerful Who are intermingled with ice, Who are unique in their fieriness— And Your awe is upon them! Yet you desire praise From clods of earth, Who dwell in a valley Whose accomplishment is meager, Whose works are poor — and this is Your praise!	אֲשֶׁר אֵימָתְךָ בְּאַבְיֵרֵי אֲמָץ בְּבְדוּדֵי קֶדֶחַ וּמִרְאָךָ עֲלֵיהֶם וְאַבִּיתָ תְּהִלָּה מִגְרֵי גֵיאַ מִגְלֹמֵי גֹשׁ מִדְלֵי מַעַשׁ וְהִיא תְּהִלָּתְךָ
Though Your dread is From among the multitude of angels,	אֲשֶׁר אֵימָתְךָ בְּהִלּוֹךְ מַחֲנוֹת בְּהִמּוֹן מְלָאכִים



In the movement of their camps, In the assembly of thousands, In the discussion of myriads— And Your awe is upon them! Yet You desire praise From man whose glowing countenance changes, Whose splendor becomes extinguished, Who is of limited intelligence, Who contemplates wickedness— And this is Your praise!...	בְּכֹחַ רַבּוּבוֹת בְּעֵד אֲלֵפִים וּמִרְאָךְ עֲלֵיהֶם וְאַבִּיתָ תְּהִלָּה מִזֶּהָר כָּבֵה מִחֹרְשֵׁי רָשָׁע וְהִיא תְּהִלַּתְךָ מִזִּיּוֹ שׁוֹנֶה מִחֲסֵרֵי שָׂכֵל
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1. According to this piyut, why is God worthy of praise?
2. What's the relationship between dread and praise?

Judges 9:1-20 ¹Abimelech son of Jerubba'al went to his mother's brothers in Shechem and spoke to them and to the whole clan of his mother's family. He said, "Put this question to all the citizens of Shechem: Which is better for you, to be ruled by seventy men—by all the sons of Jerubba'al—or to be ruled by one man? And remember, I am your own flesh and blood." His mother's brothers said all this in his behalf to all the citizens of Shechem, and they were won over to Abimelech; for they thought, "He is our kinsman." They gave him seventy shekels from the temple of Baal-berith; and with this Abimelech hired some worthless and reckless fellows, and they followed him. ⁵Then he went to his father's house in Ophrah and killed his brothers, the sons of Jerubba'al, seventy men on one stone. Only Jotham, the youngest son of Jerubba'al, survived, because he went into hiding. All the citizens of Shechem and all Beth-millo convened, and they proclaimed Abimelech king at the terebinth of the pillar at Shechem.	¹וַיֵּלֶךְ אֲבִימֶלֶךְ בֶּן-יִרְבֵּעֵל שְׁכֵמָה, אֶל-אֶחָיו אִמּוֹ; וַיְדַבֵּר אֲלֵיהֶם, וְאֶל-כָּל-מִשְׁפַּחַת בֵּית-אָבִי אִמּוֹ לֵאמֹר. דְּבַרוּ-נָא בְּאָזְנִי כָל-בְּעָלֵי שְׁכֵם, מִה-טוֹב לָכֶם—הַמֶּשֶׁל בְּכֶם שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ כָּל בְּנֵי יִרְבֵּעֵל, אִם-מֶשֶׁל בְּכֶם אִישׁ אֶחָד; וּזְכַרְתֶּם, כִּי-עַצְמְכֶם וּבִשְׂרָכֶם אָנִי. וַיְדַבְּרוּ אֶחָי-אִמּוֹ עָלָיו, בְּאָזְנֵי כָל-בְּעָלֵי שְׁכֵם, אֶת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים, הָאֵלֶּה; וַיֵּט לִבָּם אַחֲרָיו אֲבִימֶלֶךְ, כִּי אָמְרוּ אֶחָיו הוּא. וַיִּתְּנוּ-לוֹ שִׁבְעִים כֶּסֶף, מִבֵּית בַּעַל בְּרִית; וַיִּשְׂכֹּר בָּהֶם אֲבִימֶלֶךְ, אַנְשִׁים רִיקִים וּפְחָזִים, וַיֵּלְכוּ, אַחֲרָיו. ⁵וַיָּבֹא בֵּית-אֲבִיו, עֹפְרָתָה, וַיַּהַרֵּג אֶת-אֶחָיו בְּנֵי-יִרְבֵּעֵל שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ, עַל-אֶבֶן אֶחָת; וַיִּתֵּר יוֹתָם בֶּן-יִרְבֵּעֵל, הַקָּטָן—כִּי נִחְבָּא. וַיֵּאָסְפוּ כָּל-בְּעָלֵי שְׁכֵם, וְכָל-בֵּית מִלּוֹא, וַיֵּלְכוּ, וַיִּמְלִיכוּ אֶת-אֲבִימֶלֶךְ לְמֶלֶךְ—עַם-אֵלּוֹן מִצֵּב, אֲשֶׁר בְּשֵׁכֶם.
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⁷When Jotham was informed, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim and called out to them in a loud voice. “Citizens of Shechem!” he cried, “listen to me, that God may listen to you. “Once the trees went to anoint a king over themselves. They said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us. But the olive tree replied, ‘Have I, through whom God and men are honored, stopped yielding my rich oil, that I should go and wave above the trees?’ So the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You come and reign over us.’ But the fig tree replied, ‘Have I stopped yielding my sweetness, my delicious fruit, that I should go and wave above the trees?’ So the trees said to the vine, ‘You come and reign over us.’ But the vine replied, ‘Have I stopped yielding my new wine, which gladdens God and men, that I should go and wave above the trees?’ Then all the trees said to the thornbush, ‘You come and reign over us.’ And the thornbush said to the trees, ‘If you are acting honorably in anointing me king over you, come and take shelter in my shade; but if not, may fire issue from the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!’

¹⁹“Now then, if you acted honorably and loyally in making Abimelech king, if you have done right by Jerubbaal and his house and have requited him according to his deserts—considering that my father fought for you and saved you from the Midianites at the risk of his life, and now you have turned on my father’s household, killed his sons, seventy men on one stone, and set up Abimelech, the son of his handmaid, as king over the citizens of Shechem just because he is your kinsman—if, I say, you have this day acted honorably and loyally toward Jerubbaal and his house, have joy in Abimelech and may he likewise have joy in you. But if not, may fire issue from Abimelech and consume the citizens of Shechem and Beth-millo, and may fire issue from the citizens of Shechem

⁷וַיִּגְדּוּ לְיוֹתָם, וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיַּעֲמֵד בְּרֹאשׁ הַר-גֶּרִיזִים, וַיִּשָּׂא קוֹלוֹ, וַיִּקְרָא; וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם, שְׁמְעוּ אֵלַי בְּעֵלֵי שָׁכֶם, וַיִּשְׁמַע אֲלֵיכֶם, אֱלֹהִים. הָלוֹךְ הָלְכוּ הָעֵצִים, לְמַשַּׁח עֲלֵיהֶם מֶלֶךְ; וַיֹּאמְרוּ לַזֵּיתָהּ, מְלוּכָה (מֶלֶכָה) עָלֵינוּ. וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם, הַזֵּיתָהּ, הִחְדַּלְתִּי אֶת-דִּשְׁנִי, אֲשֶׁר-בִּי יִכְבְּדוּ אֱלֹהִים וְאָנָשִׁים; וְהִלַּכְתִּי, לְנוֹעַ עַל-הָעֵצִים. וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָעֵצִים, לַתְּאֵנָה: לְכִי-אִתָּהּ, מֶלְכִי עָלֵינוּ. וַתֹּאמֶר לָהֶם, הִתְאַנְהָ, הִחְדַּלְתִּי אֶת-מִתְקִי, וְאֶת-תְּנוּבַתִּי הַטּוֹבָה; וְהִלַּכְתִּי, לְנוֹעַ עַל-הָעֵצִים. וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָעֵצִים, לְגִפְנוֹ: לְכִי-אִתָּהּ, מְלוּכִי (מֶלְכִי) עָלֵינוּ. וַתֹּאמֶר לָהֶם, הִגְפֹּן, הִחְדַּלְתִּי אֶת-תִּירוּשִׁי, הַמְשִׁימָה אֱלֹהִים וְאָנָשִׁים; וְהִלַּכְתִּי, לְנוֹעַ עַל-הָעֵצִים. וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָל-הָעֵצִים, אֶל-הָאֵטָד: לָךְ אַתָּה, מֶלֶךְ-עָלֵינוּ. וַיֹּאמֶר הָאֵטָד, אֶל-הָעֵצִים, אִם בְּאַמַּת אֲתֶם מְשָׁחִים אֹתִי לְמֶלֶךְ עֲלֵיכֶם, בָּאוּ חֹסוּ בְּצִלִּי; וְאִם-אֵין—תֵּצֵא אִשׁ מִן-הָאֵטָד, וְתֹאכַל אֶת-אַרְצִי הַלְבָּנוֹן. וְעַתָּה, אִם-בְּאַמַּת וּבִתְמִים עֲשִׂיתֶם, וְתִמְלִיכוּ, אֶת-אַבִּימֶלֶךְ; וְאִם-טוֹבָה עֲשִׂיתֶם עִם-יִרְבֶּעֵל וְעִם-בֵּיתוֹ, וְאִם-כְּגִמּוּל יִדְּיוֹ עֲשִׂיתֶם לוֹ. אֲשֶׁר-נִלְחַם אָבִי, עֲלֵיכֶם; וַיִּשְׁלַךְ אֶת-נַפְשׁוֹ מִנֶּגֶד, וַיִּצַּל אֶתְכֶם מִיַּד מִדְּיָן. וְאַתֶּם קִמַּתֶּם עַל-בֵּית אָבִי, הַיּוֹם, וַתַּהַרְגוּ אֶת-בָּנָיו שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ, עַל-אֶבֶן אַחַת; וְתִמְלִיכוּ אֶת-אַבִּימֶלֶךְ בֶּן-אֲמָתוֹ, עַל-בְּעָלֵי שָׁכֶם, כִּי אֲחִיכֶם, הוּא.

¹⁹וְאִם-בְּאַמַּת וּבִתְמִים עֲשִׂיתֶם עִם-יִרְבֶּעֵל וְעִם-בֵּיתוֹ, הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה—שְׁמַחוּ, בְּאַבִּימֶלֶךְ, וַיִּשְׁמַח גַּם-הוּא, בָּכֶם. וְאִם-אֵין—תֵּצֵא אִשׁ מֵאַבִּימֶלֶךְ, וְתֹאכַל אֶת-בְּעָלֵי שָׁכֶם וְאֶת-בֵּית מְלוֹא; וְתֵצֵא אִשׁ מִבְּעָלֵי שָׁכֶם, וּמִבֵּית מְלוֹא, וְתֹאכַל, אֶת-אַבִּימֶלֶךְ.

and Beth-millo and consume Abimelech!”

1. How do you understand Jotham’s parable about the trees seeking to find themselves a king? What does this parable teach about the trees? What does it teach about those the trees are seeking to elect?
2. How does Jotham’s story connect back to the situation with Avimelech and the people of Shechem?

Yehudah Amichai, “And For This You Merit Praise”

From a Piyyut for the Days of Awe

בְּשִׁתִּיקְתִּי הַגְדֹּלָה וּבִצְעָקָתִי הַקְטָנָה אֲנִי חוֹרֵשׁ
כָּל־אִיִּם. הֵייתִי בְּמִים וְהֵייתִי בְּאֵשׁ.
הֵייתִי בִירוּשָׁלַיִם וּבְרוֹמָא. אוֹלֵי אֶהְיָה בְּמִכָּה.
אֶךְ הַפֶּעַם אֱלֹהִים מִתְחַבֵּא וְאָדָם צוֹעֵק אֵיכָּה.
וְהִיא תִהְלֶתְךָ.

אֱלֹהִים שׁוֹכֵב עַל גִּבּוֹ מִתַּחַת לַתֵּבֵל,
תִּמְדִּיד עֶסוּק בְּתִקּוּן, תִּמְדִּיד מְשֻׁהוּ מִתְקַלְקֵל.
רְצִיתִי לִרְאוֹת כָּלוּ, אֶךְ אֲנִי רוֹאֶה
רַק אֶת סִלּוֹת נִעְלִיו וְאֲנִי בּוֹכָה.
וְהִיא תִהְלֶתוֹ.

אֲפִלוּ הַעֲצִים הִלְכוּ לִבְחֹר לָהֶם מֶלֶךְ.
אֲלֹף פְּעָמִים הִתְחַלֵּתִי אֶת חַיֵּי מִכָּאן וְאֵילָךְ.
בְּקִצָּה הָרְחוֹב עוֹמֵד אֶחָד וּמוֹנֶה:
אֶת זֶה וְאֶת זֶה וְאֶת זֶה וְאֶת זֶה.
וְהִיא תִהְלֶתְךָ.

אוֹלֵי כְמוֹ פֶּסֶל עֲתִיק שְׂאִין בּוֹ זְרוּעוֹת
גַּם חַיֵּינוּ יָפִים יוֹתֵר, בְּלִי מַעֲשִׂים וּגְבוּרוֹת.
פֶּרְקִי מִמֶּנִּי אֶת שְׁרִיוֹן גּוֹפִיתִי הַמִּצְהִיבָה,
נִלְחַמְתִּי בְּכָל הָאֲבִירִים, עַד הַחֲשָׁמַל כָּבֵה.
וְהִיא תִהְלֶתִי.

תִּנּוּחַ דַּעְתְּךָ, דַּעְתְּךָ רָצָה עָמִי בְּכָל הַדֶּרֶךְ,
וְעִכְשָׁו הִיא עֵיפָה וְאִין בָּה עוֹד עֶרֶךְ,
אֲנִי רוֹאֶה אוֹתְךָ מוֹצִיָּאָה דְּבָר מִן הַמִּקָּרָר,
מוֹאֲרֶת מִתּוֹכוֹ בָּאוֹר שְׁמֵעוֹלָם אַחֵר.



וְהִיא תְהִלָּתִי
וְהִיא תְהִלָּתוֹ
וְהִיא תְהִלָּתֶהּ.

In my great silence and in my meager cry I plough
Mixed seeds. I've been in water and I've been in fire.
I've been in Jerusalem and in Rome. Perhaps I'll be in Mecca.
But this time God hides and man cries, "Where are you?"
And for this You merit praise.

God lies on His back under the world,
Always busy fixing, something's always breaking.
I wanted to see Him whole, but I see
Only the soles of His shoes and I cry.
And for this He merits praise.

Even the trees went to choose themselves a king.
A thousand times I began my life from here on.
At the side of the road someone stands and counts:
This one and this one and this one and this one.
And for this You merit praise.

Perhaps like an ancient statue without arms
Our lives too are more beautiful without heroic deeds.
Remove from me the armor of my yellowing undershirt,
I've fought all the knights till the electricity went out.
And for this I merit praise.

Rest your mind, your* mind runs with me all the way,
And now it's tired and has no more worth,
I see you* taking something from the refrigerator,
Lit from within by light from another world.
And for this I merit praise
And for this He merits praise
And for this You merit praise.

*Second person address is in the feminine singular in these lines.



1. The subtitle of the poem indicates that it is a selection from a piyyut for the Days of Awe. What do you think the author means by this? What other images are used in the poem that reference the Days of Awe?
2. How is the language “For this You merit Praise” used here and how does it relate/differ to how it’s used in the piyut?
3. How do you understand the line “Even the trees went to choose themselves a King”?
4. How would you characterize the speaker’s relationship with God?
5. What image of God does it evoke?

Hava Pinchas-Cohen, “Plea”	
With a baby in my hand Human milk weaving his life, At night come rhythmic beats and sounds Trains— At a certain station on this earth, Barefoot and with limited strength, I stretched forth my arms Like the horns of a ram from a thicket A whisper of earth to heaven Listen, and make the tabernacle of Your mercy Like the shade of a vine and a fig tree Don’t test me, please. There is wood and a thicket and the smell of fire And the sight of smoke. With mothers one doesn’t play Hide and seek— With my limited strength I cover my eyes My voice is lost in a cry Beyond sound Where are You?	אֲשֶׁר תִּינוּק בְּיָדִי וְחָלַב אֲנוּשִׁי רוֹקֵם אֶת חַיִּיו בָּאִים בְּלִילוֹת פְּעִימוֹת וְקוֹלוֹת קְצוּבִים רַכְּבוֹת בְּתַחֲנָה מְסִימָה עַל הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת בְּרַגְלַיִם יְחִפּוֹת בְּקֶצֶר-יָד פִּשְׁטָתִי זְרוּעוֹת כְּמוֹ קַרְנֵי אֵיל מִתּוֹךְ סִבְךְ לְחִישַׁת הָאָרֶץ לְשָׁמַיִם שְׁמַע, וַעֲשֵׂה סֶכֶת רַחֲמֶיךָ כְּמוֹ צֶל הַגֶּפֶן וְהַתְּאֵנָה אֵל תִּנְסֵנִי, נָא. יֵשׁ עֵצִים וַיֵּשׁ סִבְךְ, רֵיחַ שֶׁל אֵשׁ וּמִרְאָה עָשָׁן. עִם אֲמָהוֹת לֹא מִשְׁחָקִים מִחֻבּוּאִים— בְּקֶצֶר יָדִי מִכֶּסֶה עַל עֵינֵי קוֹלִי אוֹבֵד בְּצַעֲקָה אֶל-קוֹלִית אֵיכָּה



1. How do you understand the title of the poem?
2. How would you characterize the speaker's relationship to God in this poem?
3. What are the Jewish concepts or texts in conversation with this poem? What do they mean in their original context and how are they being used here?
4. What feeling does the poem evoke?
5. In what manner does the speaker express her plea to God?

Yehuda Amichai, "El Malei Raḥamim"	
God-Full-of-Mercy, If God was not full of mercy, There'd be mercy in the world, Not just in Him. I, who plucked flowers in the hills And looked down into all the valleys, I, who brought corpses down from the hills, Can tell you that the world is empty of mercy. I, who was king of salt at the seashore, Who stood without a decision at my window, Who counted the steps of angels, Whose heart lifted weights of anguish In the horrible contests. I, who use only a small part Of the words in the dictionary. I, who must decipher riddles I don't want to decipher, Know that if God were not so full of mercy There would be mercy in the world, Not just in Him.	אל מלא רחמים, אלמלא האל מלא רחמים היו הרחמים בעולם ולא רק בו אני, שקטפתי פרחים בהר והסתכלתי אל כל העמקים אני, שהבאתי גוויות מן הגבעות יודע לספר שהעולם ריק מרחמים אני שהייתי מלך המלח ליד הים שעמדתי בלי החלטה מול חלוני שספרתי צעדי מלאכים שלבי הרים משקלות כאב בתחרויות הנוראות אני שמשתמש רק בחלק קטן מן המילים במלון אני, שמוכרח לפתור חידות בעל כורחי יודע כי אלמלא האל מלא רחמים היו הרחמים בעולם ולא רק בו

1. What are the Jewish concepts or texts in conversation with this poem? What do they mean in their original context and how are they being used here?
2. What feeling does the poem evoke?
3. How would you characterize the speaker's relationship with God?
4. How is God characterized in this poem?



Part II: I Stand to Pray

13 Principles of Faith, Maimonides	
1. Belief in the existence of the Creator, who is perfect in every manner of existence and is the Primary Cause of all that exists. 2. The belief in God's absolute and unparalleled unity...	א] אֲנִי מֵאֲמִין בְּאֵמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה, שֶׁהַבּוֹרָא יִתְבָּרַךְ שְׁמוֹ הוּא בּוֹרֵא וּמְנַהִיג לְכָל הַבְּרוּאִים, וְהוּא לְבִדּוֹ עֹשֶׂה וְעוֹשֶׂה וְיַעֲשֶׂה לְכָל הַמַּעֲשִׂים. ב] אֲנִי מֵאֲמִין בְּאֵמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה, שֶׁהַבּוֹרָא יִתְבָּרַךְ שְׁמוֹ הוּא יְחִיד וְאֵין יְחִידוֹת כְּמוֹהוּ בְּשׁוּם פְּנִים, וְהוּא לְבִדּוֹ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, הֵיחָד הוּא וְיִהְיֶה

Yehuda Amichai	
I say with perfect faith That prayers preceded God. Prayers created God, God created Man And Man creates prayers That create God who creates man.	אֲנִי אוֹמֵר בְּאֵמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה שֶׁהַתְּפִלוֹת קִדְּמוּ לְאֱלֹהִים הַתְּפִלוֹת יָצְרוּ אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים הָאֱלֹהִים יָצַר אֶת הָאָדָם וְהָאָדָם יוֹצֵר תְּפִלוֹת שִׂיוֹצְרוֹת אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים שִׂיוֹצֵר אֶת הָאָדָם

1. What does faith mean in the context of this poem?

Rivka Miriam	
In the beginning God created The heavens that actually are not And the earth that wants to touch them. In the beginning God created Threads stretched between them Between the heavens that actually are not And the earth that cries for help. And He created Man, For a person is a prayer and a thread Touching what is not With a soft and delicate touch.	בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם שֶׁבַעֲצָם אֵינָם וְאֶת הָאָדָמָה שְׂרוּצָה בָּם לִגְעַת. בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים חוּטִים מִתּוֹחִים בֵּינֵיהֶם בֵּין הַשָּׁמַיִם שֶׁבַעֲצָם אֵינָם וּבֵין הָאָדָמָה הַמְּשׁוּעֵת. וְאֶת הָאָדָם הוּא יָצַר שֶׁהָאִישׁ הוּא תְּפִלָּה וְהוּא חוּט נוֹגֵעַ בָּמָה שְׂאִינָנוּ בְּמַגָּע שֶׁל רֶךְ וְדִקּוּת.

1. What does the speaker mean when she says, “the heavens that actually are not”?
2. How is a person a prayer and a thread?



3. What is a prayer in this poem?