

Nasso

יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה וַיְשַׁמְרֶךָ . יֵאָר יְהוָה פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וַיַּחֲנֶנְךָ . יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם .

Numbers 6:24 *May Adonai bless you and protect you. May Adonai deal kindly and graciously with you. May Adonai bestow Divine favor upon you and grant you peace.*



The priestly benediction originates in this week's Torah portion as the blessing Moses and Aaron were instructed to recite to the Israelite people. The intricacies of the text, still used today as a blessing, are unique and remarkable for this ancient Biblical text. Though this is not considered an actual poem found in the Torah - the classic ones being *Song of the Sea*, *Song at the Spring*, and *Moses Final Song*<sup>1</sup> - the shape of this blessing points to the fact that indeed it is poetry at its best. The phrases

build one upon the other from 3 words in the first line, to 5 in the second and finally 7 in the third. The number of letters go from 15 to 20 to 25. Furthermore, parallelism, so frequently found throughout other Biblical poetry, is present from line to line, each intentionally expanding on the previous verse. Clearly, this is not ordinary narrative or prose, rather it is an intentionally crafted set of verses. To date, archaeologists and historians consider it to be the oldest pre-exilic text to be found within Israel (from around 6th C BCE). The verse has been found on amulets that would have been worn by or buried with early Israelites. These amulets can be viewed today at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

What role does poetry play in Israel today? Hebrew University Professor Ruth Kartun-Blum asserts that contemporary Israeli poets have tried to distance themselves from Biblical traditions. She calls their efforts a form of subversive *midrash*. Whereas rabbinic sages would write *midrash* to substantiate and endorse Biblical text, Kartun-Blum says, "The modern Hebrew poet uses a new *midrashic* method that seeks to neutralize the Bible's sway over modern Israeli life."

In spite of Kartun-Blum's assertions, the art of contemporary Israeli poets is rich and varied. In no particular order, the names Shaul Tchernichovsky, Yehudah Amichai, Aharon Applefeld, David Avidan, Zelda, Dan Pagis, Esther Raab, Abba Kovner, Rachel Bluwstein, Chaim Guri, Yona Wallach, and Dahlia Ravikovitch may be familiar to people who have merely scratched the surface of poetry emerging from Zionism and Israel over the past 100 years.

<sup>1</sup> *Song of the Sea* 15:1-19:21 (Ex 15:1-19:21); *Song at the Spring* (Num 21:17); *Moses Final Song* (Deut 32:1-43)

There are certainly poets who reference the Bible, but it reflects the complex relationship Israelis have with their religious heritage, substantiating Kartun-Blum's claims. Poets struggle with their Biblical and liturgical roots, cultural traditions, as well as the often contested land on which they live. Israeli poets toy with language, helping Hebrew grow from its ancient roots to the modern, spoken language of today.

From the earliest days of statehood, Israeli poetry has reflected an inner world that is often emblematic of the turmoil of the outer world navigated by the authors and artists. We offer three examples of Israeli poetry for study and discussion. For information on each of the poets, and recent articles see 'Additional References.'

**An Ode to Comradeship - Chaim Guri**

Translation: Roni Eshel

The eve of autumn descends on the Negev  
and lights the stars inaudibly  
while the wind crosses the threshold  
clouds hover above the road

For almost a year we hardly noticed  
how times lingered through our fields  
already one year passed, only a few of us are left  
so many are not amongst us any longer

But we shall reminisce about them all  
their rugged handsomeness and tussled forelocks  
because such comradeship will never  
let our hearts forget  
as love sanctified by blood  
you will return to us, and once again flourish

We carried you, comradeship without a word  
grey, determined and silent  
from the gory looming nights  
friendship remains bright and lit

Comradeship filled by your youthful adherents  
will smile again and move forward  
because those who fell, swords in their hands,  
left us with your vigor to be remembered

But we shall reminisce about them all

**שנת כתיבה: 1948 - חיים גורי**

עַל הַנֶּגֶב יוֹרֵד לַיִל הַסֶּתֶר  
וּמִצִּיַּת כּוֹכָבִים חָרַשׁ חָרַשׁ  
עֵת הָרוּחַ עוֹבֵר עַל הַסֶּף  
עֲנָנִים מְהַלְכִים עַל הַדֶּרֶךְ.

כָּבֵר שָׁנָה. לֹא הִרְגַּשְׁנוּ כְּמַעַט  
אֵיךְ עָבְרוּ הַזְּמַנִּים בְּשָׂדוֹתֵינוּ.  
כָּבֵר שָׁנָה, וְנוֹתַרְנוּ מְעַט  
מֵה רַבִּים שְׂאִינָם כָּבֵר בֵּינֵינוּ.

אֶךְ נִזְכֵּר אֶת כְּלָם:  
אֶת יְפֵי הַבְּלוּרִית וְהַתְּאֵר –  
כִּי רַעוּת שְׂכֹזֶאֶת לְעוֹלָם  
לֹא תִתֵּן אֶת לִבְנוֹ לְשִׁכְחָה.  
אֶהְיֶה מְקַדְּשֶׁת בְּדָם  
אֶת תְּשׁוּבֵי בֵּינֵינוּ לְפָרוֹחַ.

הִרְעוּת נִשְׂאֲנוֹךְ בְּלֵי מְלִים  
אֶפְרָה עֵקֶשׁנִית וְשׁוֹתְקָת  
מְלִילוֹת הָאֵימָה הַגְּדוֹלִים  
אֶת נוֹתֵרֶת בְּהִירָה וְדוֹלְקָת.

הִרְעוּת, כְּנִעְרִיךְ כְּלָם  
שׁוֹב בְּשִׁמְךְ נִחְיֶךְ וְנִלְכֶה  
כִּי רַעִים שְׂנֵפְלוּ עַל חֶרְבְּכֶם  
אֶת חֵינְךְ הוֹתִירוּ לְזִכֵּר.

וְנִזְכֵּר אֶת כְּלָם...

**HEART-TO-HEART PRAYER - David Avidan**

Translation: Lisa Katz

Lord our god lord you knew  
we didn't know a thing  
make us a miracle now so we'll know what you knew  
everything you'll know everything you'll think  
everything you'll feel

make us a miracle now so we can make miracles  
for ourselves and for others and for the lord our god  
and don't limit our possibilities lord our god

more than you limited your own possibilities  
and give us our own little world  
that we'll create in six days and won't rest  
on the seventh day more than a seventh of a day  
and don't pity us lord our god  
have pity on the little ones and the fools  
pity on the foolish of nations

and give us the strength to be ourselves  
lord our god the one who knew, didn't you  
lord our god the one who heard, didn't you  
lord our god you are the one, aren't you  
and the lord our god is the lord our god  
so give us the strength not to give up

and not to arouse pity unless needed  
and even if needed lord because there is no need  
lord our god who had no pity, did you  
lord our god who won't be pitied, will you  
give us a strong heart and an open mind  
and don't think about us too much

blessed are you lord creator-of-humankind  
you won't rest and you won't sleep my lord of hosts  
blessed are you lord ever vigilant  
blessed are you lord creator of humankind in his image  
blessed are you my lord blessed of the blest  
and the blessed mouth will bless and say amen

**תפילה מלב אל לב - דוד אבידן**

אֲדוֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲדוֹנָי אַתָּה יָדַעְתָּ  
שְׁאַנְחָנוּ לֹא יוֹדְעִים דְּבָר וַחֲצִי דְבָר  
עֲשֵׂה לָנוּ גַם עַכְשָׁו שְׂגִדַּע כָּל מָה שְׂיָדַעְתָּ  
כָּל מָה שְׂתִדַּע כָּל מָה שְׂתַחֲשָׁב  
כָּל מָה שְׂתִרְגִּישׁ

עֲשֵׂה לָנוּ גַם עַכְשָׁו שְׂנוּכַל לַעֲשׂוֹת נְסִים  
לְמַעַן עֲצַמְנוּ וּלְמַעַן זוּלָתָנוּ וּלְמַעַן אֲדוֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
וְאֵל תִּגְבִּיל אֲדוֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶת אִפְשָׁרוּיֹתֵינוּ  
יֹתֵר מֵאֲשֶׁר הִגְבַּלְתָּ אֶת אִפְשָׁרוּיֹתֶיךָ

וְתֵן לָנוּ עוֹלָם קָטָן מְשֻׁלָּנוּ  
שְׂנִבְרָא אוֹתוֹ בְּשֵׁשֶׁה יָמִים וְלֹא נִגְוַח  
בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי יֹתֵר מִשְׁבִּיעֵית הַיּוֹם

וְאֵל תִּרְחַם עָלֵינוּ אֲדוֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
רַחֵם עַל הַקְּטָנִים וְעַל הַשׁוֹטִים  
רַחֵם עַל הָעַמִּים וְעַל הָאֲרָצוֹת

וְתֵן בָּנוּ כּוֹחַ לְהִיּוֹת אֲנַחְנוּ עֲצַמְנוּ  
אֲדוֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ הֲלֹא אַתָּה יָדַעְתָּ  
אֲדוֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ הֲלֹא אַתָּה שְׂמַעְתָּ  
אֲדוֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ הֲלֹא אַתָּה אַתָּה

וְאֲדוֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ הוּא אֲדוֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ  
לָכֵן תֵּן בָּנוּ כּוֹחַ לֹא לְיֹתֵר  
וְלֹא לְעוֹרֵר רַחֲמִים שְׁלֹא לְצָרְךָ  
וְאִפְלוּ לְצָרְךָ כִּי אֵין אֲדוֹנָי צָרְךָ

אֲדוֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ הֲלֹא אַתָּה רַחֲמֶתָ  
אֲדוֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְלֹא אַתָּה תִּרְחַם  
תֵּן לָנוּ לֵב חֲזָק וּמוֹחַ פְּתוּחַ  
וְאֵל תַּחֲשׁוּב עָלֵינוּ יֹתֵר מִדִּי

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדוֹנָי בּוֹרְאֵדָם  
לֹא יָנוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן אֲדוֹנָי צְבָאוֹת  
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדוֹנָי עַר לְתַמִּיד  
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדוֹנָי בּוֹרְא אָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֲדוֹנָי מְבָרַךְ מְבָרְכוֹת  
וּפִי מְבָרַךְ יְבָרַךְ וְנֹאמֵר אָמֵן

**All That and Me** -Yona Wallach

Translation: Linda Zisquit

The house is standing, surrounded by...  
around it are trees.  
and I am not home,  
I am not inside  
(and so many days have passed  
accumulated to years  
all that and me are  
momentarily identified).

Later we sense  
as if being led  
soon we may enter there  
we shall feel pleasant  
(how have we done so,  
turning ourselves into fetuses?  
is it us that wish  
to be the ones who seek to reverse?  
all that and me  
momentarily identified).

We wish to be here  
filled with desire to be entwined  
we are close to all that  
even feeling familial  
(after all we have been the masters here  
for lengthy periods.  
Whatever was then, went by  
leaving our hearts – an island – when nonsense dissolved  
all that and me  
momentarily identified).

**כל זה ואני - יונה וולך**

הבית עומד ומסביבו יש...  
מסביבו יש עצים.  
ואני לא בבית,  
אני לא בפנים.  
(ככה חלפו הרבה ימים  
והצטברו לשנים.  
כל זה ואני היננו  
לרגעים מזוהים).

אחר כך אנחנו מרגישים  
כאילו מובלים.  
אנחנו עוד נכנס לשם,  
יהיה לנו נעים.  
(איך נתנו ככה  
לעשות מעצמנו עוברים?  
ובעצם אנחנו רוצים  
להיות אלה ששבים?  
כל זה ואני היננו לרגעים מזוהים).

אנחנו רוצים להיות פה,  
ממש להיות ארוגים.  
אנחנו לכל זה קרובים,  
אפילו משפחתיים.  
(הרי היינו אדונים פה  
לזמנים ארוכים.  
איך שלא היה הלך אז  
לבנו אי אחרי הבלים.  
כל זה ואני היננו  
לרגעים מזוהים).

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What is the central idea of the poem?
2. What is the tone being conveyed by the author? Do you share that sentiment?
3. How does the poet use figurative language (similes, metaphors, personification, metonymy)?
4. What kind of imagery is employed in the poem?

5. Where does the poet reference Israel's history - both ancient and modern?

**Additional References:**

[Parody in Israeli Prayer Poems](#)

[The Flourishing of Post-Amichai Poetry](#) - Tablet Magazine Jan. 10, 2012

[Chaim Guri](#)

[David Avidan](#)

[Yona Wallach](#)