



# GASHMIUS MAGAZINE

Towards a Progressive neo-Hasidism

## Poetry Selection

February 26, 2024

VOLUME  
III



## MAYA BERNSTEIN

### Beneath This Ache Is Prayer

*A Duplex*

My body pines for you. Or is the yearning  
my soul's? Is it my soul's longing for God?

*Now, the soul generates itself through the longing and the  
yearning, Rebbe Nachman says. I wonder*

if yearning streams through time, Rebbe Nachman's soul momentarily  
in my body, my body's hunger for you

momentarily something holy, a hungry soul's  
restless search for a feasting ground. My soul cannot

find rest. It's like Noah's raven, sent from the dry ark into the wet sky  
above the pine forest only to return,

pining for a ledge on which to land, circling, returning – now my feet  
are running to escape this soul's gurgling –

I'm running from this burbling soul that's trying to escape – no, I'm running  
from you, from my body's yearning, its longing.

## Jonah in Analysis

### Chapter 1

No one        said *Get up and go*  
I didn't      pay the fare  
I'm not       the son of truth  
I'm full       of doubt

No one        called me

There is no sea     but the past  
There is no ship    but the night  
There is no wind    but my limbs  
There is no storm   but my flight

There is no great fish

### Chapter 2

It is so            dark  
    Who            broke me?  
Who flung me    in    to    the    deep?  
    Who            are            You?  
          Are            You?        Where?  
Can I look        in            Your            eyes?  
          Are    You    in    the            swell, the    wave?  
          I want            to            move        but        stay  
Please        speak            to            me  
          I don't            know how    to            pray

### *Chapter 3*

If I were	to face	my Fear
If I could	get up	and go
If I called	the call	call, If
I could	talk, If	I could
rise up	and graze	and drink
and turn	and back	and fast
and	will	I
do it	or	not do it?

### *Chapter 4*

Though I say I want to  
die still I try  
to tie my-  
self to some  
thing that can grow

How else can I learn to tell  
my right hand from my left?

# JUDITH CHALMER

## psalm

i saw you the other day but i didn't speak.  
who was i, after all? and what would it mean,

your looking back? every day i repeat this  
path, walking along the water. across the lake,

clouds nestle beneath the peaks and the peaks  
break over the clouds like powder,

as if it weren't the gloom or a mist there,  
but the mountains themselves thinning, becoming

transparent. why does this comfort me?  
i wouldn't mind my disappearance

if it were something like this gentle tempering—  
boulders, mountains with names, whole ranges softened.

peach and vermillion stream across the sky  
and are gone in minutes. who am i,

to hope you would console me? i, who want  
only to melt into your world, not leave it.

## Is This Prayer?

*What makes me think, though, that the region of my soul in which all  
this activity's occurring  
is a site which God might consider an engaging or even acceptable  
spiritual location?*

*C.K. Williams, "The Vessel"*

But is the soul so divided? And are we doomed to the usual template, one region getting prayer and the others a substandard amount of whatever matters?

Or could prayer move around the way my dog does here on the second-most traveled path in Red Rocks Park just before the overlook with the skinny railing

(where thank God the dog didn't fall all the way down that time I didn't see him behind me and when I went back, there he was, on a ledge beneath the overhang,

out of reach with no way to get him back up)? Or, what if a region of the soul could get a false negative result for spiritual activity on God's test probe

just because of the time, for instance now, on this gloomy, un-soulful day? There was a patch, just now, of blue sky and it lifted my spirits.

Putting aside, for now, C.K.'s thoughts about God's thought, what throws me off, and now that patch of blue sky is gone, by the way, is, if I still want a way to say

I am (or was) grateful, then do I say the blue patch was given to all of us or just to me? How presumptuous is it to claim to be an "us"? If I lived on a dry plain,

my farm soil cracked, would a blue sky elevate my soul? What about the many, some even here in the gloom, who wouldn't want any part of my prayer?

I'm a little baffled by who, when I pray, I am. But, putting aside that consideration as well, if I just start and let God figure it out, is it the blue

or the light that's given me a lift? (It's the blue.) But if I'm grateful for a clear sky, what about the rest? Shouldn't I be grateful for the gloom? I'm not that good

at thinking alone (and thank God I've still got my dog— I tried to climb down at the side, where there wasn't a guardrail, but it was too steep. I couldn't get close

and that's when he started to cry and the neighbor who climbed down and back up with me said I'd have to call the Fire Department, so I got out my phone and

started to dial when suddenly the dog was at my side and the neighbor gently suggested maybe next time I should follow the law and keep my dog on a leash)

so it kind of feels empty to say I'm grateful for anything, sun, rain, or safekeeping that sustains only me. But not to ignore him for too long, I wonder if C.K. would say

God enters his soul to get to the region of prayer, or does God, in C.K.'s mind, just put a straw into the soul and suck the prayer out? All of which brings me

to the physical body and how we're stuck here inside our separate skins (no wonder C.K. longs for God, who's a big one for getting under the skin) and it's lonely for us

but we can at least understand each other through some magic of receptors and nerves,

and I'm not talking about sex, by the way, so that's comforting, and now we know

how trees converse so maybe we're not as separate as it seems and someday someone will find little filaments that connect us, though that would be too bad

because it's way more poetic (and better exercise) if our souls can jump through our skins like God and that's how we agree on budgets and sewage systems.

It's lucky, given we're each an "I," that we can even perceive each other, and that's just the start. There's more to it, but once you go down that path you get to everyone

you miss, and even if you forget about love and death, there's so much on the side like trees and the sky and the way, if you like them, if you even start in

on being thankful for this world, it breaks your poor heart. I worked this out once, how to form a prayer, with my wife, who would really rather be called my partner

but that would take too long to explain, and now I can't remember what I decided. That's the trouble with personal prayer. My wife (if I may, with her permission,

use, again, a problematic shorthand for a relationship that is deeply nuanced), who is more spiritual than I (also more efficient with words) says she likes to get

her prayers from the book. They're catchy - almost like the tune for Kaufman's Rye Bread (of the highest qua-li-ty). For her, being agreeably spiritual,

some of the words pop out and she takes them aside for a private romp. No surprise the dog likes her better than he likes me. Every day she plunks down on the couch

and says to him, "Come here, come here and talk to me." She's so cozy and lovable. I should go home and nuzzle her, and as for God, see problematic, above.



# ALICIA OSTRIKER

## THESE BE THE WORDS...

--Deuteronomy 1, KJV

The words of an old woman shuffling the cards of her own decline the decline  
of her husband the decline of her nation her plague-smitten world

virus that has slain its millions rage and despair driving the body politic  
into violent writhings knotted upheavings drama I watch from the wings

telling myself: These too are the wings of the Shekhinah beneath which I arise  
and shower dress in the morning undress at night in my house of many doors

many windows little sky  
song reversed to clanging alarm alarm

Write if you can find words I tell myself write what you are afraid to write  
lay down your cards step over the lintel through that door: *Write or die.*

---

## PRAYER TO THE SHEKHINAH

In my prayers night and day  
is the hope that you will visit me  
which possibly you have been doing  
all the while inside my skin  
producing hymnodies of birth of lamentation  
lifted from every mass grave in the world  
scratching me pinching me from inside  
calling me an idiot  
since I do not know how to reach you

by myself in the carapace of this body  
struggling like the turtle  
to move as fast as I can  
and not get run over crossing the street

you at a distance beloved my mother my daughter  
you at a distance my soul who remains at a distance  
they say you will travel to meet me  
if I travel to meet you pity I am so slow  
but am grateful for the handful of past  
moments you have spoken with me the fool  
who hoped to be counted among the poets  
weeping along the path to her own soul

\*

---

## **THE WINGS OF THE SHEKHINAH (THIS AFTERNOON WHILE I WORK AT MY DESK)**

She is standing there  
at my painted door

whenever I glance over she seems  
at ease unagitated patient

she looks back at me  
affectionately smiling

the way grownups smile  
at a child learning to walk

or aim a spoon at its mouth  
or hold a crayon

:

Years ago at times  
while trying to meditate  
or to improve a poem I sensed  
a trio of young women who seemed  
to belong to the spirit world  
standing behind my chair  
giggling a little  
I guessed they were her daughters  
I never saw them but I knew  
they were there  
gently laughing at me

:

the dress she wears is green  
and loose her hair is white

her wings are invisible  
like my wound

# LEVI MORROW

## Know These Bones

### Introduction

This crown of poems is a collaboration, but one where my coauthor, Maimonides (Rambam), died over 800 years ago. As a collaborative project, the poems are not guided solely by my own language or concerns, but by Rambam's as well. "Foundation of foundations and pillar of all knowledge," begins his masterful code of law, the Mishneh Torah. At the start of my poems, I have given pride of place and priority to Rambam, but perhaps given the most important word to myself: "Foundation of foundations and pillar of all *faith*." The poems are marked by medieval language, concerns, and categories such as the binaries of faith and knowledge, body and mind, matter and form, as well as the cosmology of the spheres. Some of these medieval elements are subverted, others simply rejected, and others poetically re-expressed.

Each of the ten poems in the crown corresponds to a chapter in ["Laws of the Foundations of the Torah,"](#) the scientific-philosophical-theological treatise with which Rambam begins his massive legal compendium. I've learned, taught, and lived with this text for years, and it has on occasion carried me off on medieval flights of syllogism. In these poems, I have dragged Rambam along on a poetic journey down this path he himself paved. "Laws of the Foundations of the Torah" comprises those ideas and beliefs which Rambam sees as constituting the basis for all of Jewish law. These poems aim to do something similar, exploring foundational elements of life as a (modern, Orthodox) Jew as I experience it.

Thematically, "Laws of the Foundations of the Torah" breaks down into three sections: 1. God and the Universe (ch. 1–4), 2. Sanctifying and Desecrating the Divine Name (Ch. 5–6), 3. Prophecy and Torah (ch. 7–10). The poems in the crown break down similarly, though Rambam's medieval metaphysics have been replaced by modern existential, psychoanalytic, and poetic tendencies. If I have done my work properly, the result bears witness to and reflects on a theological experience at once very modern and very

committed to the medieval and the strange. Reading the poems will hopefully be a gratifying experience no matter what, but a reader familiar with “Laws of the Foundations of the Torah”—or who chooses to read the poems alongside it—will certainly have a richer experience.

## I.

Foundation of foundations

And pillar of all faith—

I desire you

In my bones not

Bow before your empty

throne before

The law the word

I pray

That you are burning

And becoming solid: you

My tendons turn: you

My muscles burn: you

More solid than

Words humming more

Nimble than tongues running

Like deer along a page

Praying

That absent burning

I cannot do without

## II.

I cannot do without the form you see

The body baked of mud that's me

The ultimate opacity of God and

Bodies with their scars  
Their lines meridians  
On little worlds are  
Paths away from awe  
From fact from powerglory  
To life pathological

To me—this  
Immanent ferment—Me  
Right here

### III.

Right here  
In the center  
Of circling spheres  
My body takes shape

My face is wound from  
Threads of my people  
Circling round

Tying and binding  
Muscles to bones  
Meaning to matter to  
Deeds I have done

Right here  
In the center  
I cannot see  
What makes me me  
I think I see

All there is

**IV.**

All there is calls for  
Form to matter but it  
Falls afoul of the matter  
Which desires

To know

The bodiless imagined  
From within the flesh  
That yearns not to be  
All there is

Silence—don't  
Say—all there is  
Is not one

**V.**

Not one but more  
We become when we carve  
The letters in our skin

From outside in  
Down to the core  
We cut your lore your  
Law you ancient of days

We say your names: We cry  
For you to tell us  
To die for you  
Into the limbs of

Your letters of your names  
We say we pray

We profane

What we call  
Truth: to live  
With you on our lips

**VI.**

With you on my lips  
I breathe your name: don't  
Blame the one who speaks  
Your name profane—not mundane  
No never mundane: I am

Your suffix—your name  
Affixed behind my I  
Where eyes betray  
Just what I think I mean.

I don't know you to  
Profess you but I know you  
In my bones most biblical: don't  
Break the bones inscribed  
with your name—  
Wood for your altar—  
Just know these bones

**VII.**

These bones without spirit  
Never once called to transcend  
And feel the spirit that



Descends down and down  
And down.

Little empty hollows pock  
The surface of my stony  
Heart, tiny letters graven where  
Your name should be

What it should be

For me  
You run like sap  
In the world to my gaps  
A darkened glimmer  
A glow that echoes in

This thing itself,  
A sign.

### **VIII.**

A sign cannot see  
To what it bears witness,  
The absent event that  
Marks the horizon

The lingering dark and  
Doubting unknown  
Of what and why  
I must do.

How am I to know  
What of the past  
Withers or lasts

What names are written  
In the blood I cannot see

Veins on fire, this  
Ritual pyre demands  
I witness  
Everything

**IX.**

Everything moves  
In place: sap in my  
Bones transcending  
In, in, in

And yet I never succeed  
To transcend, to be

What I should be

The only rule is to repeat  
The sins of days gone by  
To try and fail to live  
As if I heard your name  
Your law and word

**X.**

Law and word  
Are their own events—

The force of their validity  
An empty infinity that  
Resounds and  
Resounds and

Resounds—

Echoes without voices  
Smoke without flame

We don't test  
We don't we blame  
We trust in the name which  
We find in our bones

I speak what is given and  
In speaking am riven  
In two: word and fire both  
Law and desire: the  
Being that burns down  
To my foundation

# CALEB HOROWITZ

## Son of Amittai

“Are you so deeply grieved?”

—G-d, to Jonah

The first ant appears on a tangled arm hair, pinched out  
of life between thumb and forefinger like a wick of flame, and  
in the morning, the bedsheets are dotted with black pinprick travelers.  
The ant trap on the windowsill is like a tiny synagogue,  
congregants coming and going.

I sleep on the couch while the ants religiously infect one another.

My friends tell me my loneliness  
is too large; it liquidly fills rooms before  
I enter.

I cannot fasten drains fast enough; the corners grow moldy.

And when I weep into the throw pillow after a disastrous  
night of speed-dating, G—d says, “If you were a prophet, you would be Jonah.”  
He means it as an insult.

I remind G—d of the story of the oven of Akhnai: “Remember  
that time the rabbis ignored you and threw out your opinion entirely?”

But G—d is only amused; things roll  
off His back these days.

The ants in death are curled slightly over themselves.

Slumped exoskeletons: I count a minyan of them.

And the G—d who leveled cities with His gaze  
grows quiet.

“You once drowned your own creation,” I tell Him.

He says, “Those were different times.

I was young.”