

SAMPLE

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BECOME A BLESSING **A Book of Intentions**

Magidah Khulda bat Sarah
Rabbi Moshe ben Asher

All etchings by Saul Raskin (1886-1966). Raskin was born in Russia, trained as an artist in Europe, and came to the U.S. in 1904. These etchings were originally published in The Book of Psalms (New York: Saul Raskin, 1942) and Pirke Aboth (New York: Saul Raskin, 1940).



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INTRODUCTION

WHY PRAY?

This is the cynic's question, but sometimes it's ours too. Most of us can acknowledge that in times of trouble we find hope and solace by praying with a congregation, and that such prayer may even allow us to reach the deepest parts of ourselves, to feel deeply our connection to God.

And yet . . . such moments, for most of us, are few and far between.

What about the rest of the time? What about those times when the cynic in us asks: "Why are you praying? Don't you have anything better to do?"

That would be our point exactly! That's why we're praying. We're trying to find something better to do—with our lives! And we're relying on the prayer to show us the way.

For if we don't also commit to transform ourselves and the world in the image of God, then what is our prayer?

To paraphrase Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch's equation, prayer minus the intention to do better in life equals lip service. Or as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehood." And of course, prayer that's not connected to doing better in life often *feels* empty—it feels like lip service. It can leave us wondering: "Why isn't this working? I don't feel blessed. What am I doing here?"

According to Rabbi Hirsch, "The People of Abraham are, in private and public life, to follow one calling: *להיה ברכה* to become a blessing. To dedicate themselves with all devotion to the Divine purpose of bringing happiness to the world and mankind. . . ." (Genesis 12:2)

Is that possible? Do we dare to believe such a thing—that we can make God present in the world, nurturing and sustaining all life, by sanctifying our own day-to-day action?

Not without preparation, we can't; not without time, even if it is only momentary, to reflect on what we've done and what we will do; not without time to recharge our spirits to go back out into the world.

We understand the purpose of prayer to be not an end in itself, but rather a preparation for life. Prayer can be the time when we choose to renew our intention to become a blessing and save our lives from meaninglessness.

How are we to instill this admittedly extraordinary, even grandiose meaning and purpose into our prayer?

We begin by questioning: What is this prayer asking us to do? How is it prompting us to act in the image of God such that we may become a blessing?

We explore these questions in this *sefer kavanot* (book of intentions) in two ways:

- With the *drashot*, the interpretations, we dive into the prayer, as if it were a pool. Our sages have used the word "siakh" (literally, plant growth) for prayer, comparing human spiritual growth to the growth of a plant. Prayer from this point of view, according to Rabbi Hirsch, is "simply drinking from the source of all spiritual life, accordingly, watering all the fibres and filaments of our inner being to produce new blossoms." Through the *drashot*, we wanted to immerse ourselves in the prayer at length, to sound its depths, and to emerge "saturated" and prepared to flourish—that is, with a better understanding of the creation and what would be required of us to be in harmony with it, to become a blessing.
- Of course, at some point we have to climb out of the pool and go back to the real world. We have to stop soaking and start blooming! In the *iyun tefillot*, the poetic meditations, we explore how the prayer might inspire us to action in the image of God, first unseen within ourselves and then conspicuously out in the world of others. We understand the prayer as intending to send us back into the world to do a *mitzvah*, so that we can become a blessing.

It is said that when we humans do a *mitzvah*, we unite the two halves of the name of God—recreating and unifying justice and love in the world by acting in the image of God—filling our prayer and our life with *כוונה* (focused intention) and finally achieving *נחת רוח* (satisfaction of the spirit).

May we all find satisfaction of spirit by becoming a blessing!

NOTES ON USAGE

This book is meant to be used with our CD or cassette album, *Become A Blessing*, which is why we have included transliterations and special typography, as explained below. In both the album and book, we have focused on those parts of the liturgy that are commonly sung by the congregation. Each section of the book is organized in the following order: Hebrew tefilla, transliteration, translation, d'rash, and iyun tefilla. Footnotes are included at the end of each section.

Personal Pronouns

Both Torah and Siddur in many instances use personal pronouns, particularly the male “He,” when referring to God—as if God is a *male person*. Similarly, the tradition makes wide use of anthropomorphic representations of God, such as God’s hand or nose or anger.

The rabbis have unequivocally taught that the pronouns and anthropomorphisms are not to be taken literally. That is, although God’s qualities may usefully be described with such language, it is employed only to facilitate understanding of the Ein Sof.*

In this book we have respected the mitzvah neither to add nor take away from the Hebrew Scriptures or, in the same spirit, from traditional siddur Hebrew. We have, however, used interpretive translations of pronouns to be more inclusive, relying on terms that are neuter gender.

*Transliteration Pronunciation Guide***

Pronunciation follows Sephardic conventions. All consonants are pronounced as they normally would be in American English, with the exception of the *kh* combination, which does not have an English counterpart. It is pronounced as a hard “h” sound. An apostrophe following a consonant is equivalent to a short “ih” sound (e.g., l' = “lih”). Vowel sounds are pronounced as follows:

a = ah, like f <u>a</u> ther	e = eh, like b <u>e</u> t	ei = ay, like d <u>a</u> y	ai = aye, like l <u>i</u> e
i = ee, like s <u>ee</u>	o = oh, like v <u>o</u> te	u = oo, like f <u>oo</u> d	

Key to Special Typography

Brackets [] are used to show material that has been included to accommodate our musical arrangements; they denote text excerpted or added, and which does not correspond to the traditional siddur. Parentheses () are used to indicate that the original text is not sung. Arrows < > are used in transliterations and translations to indicate material that is sung two or more times.

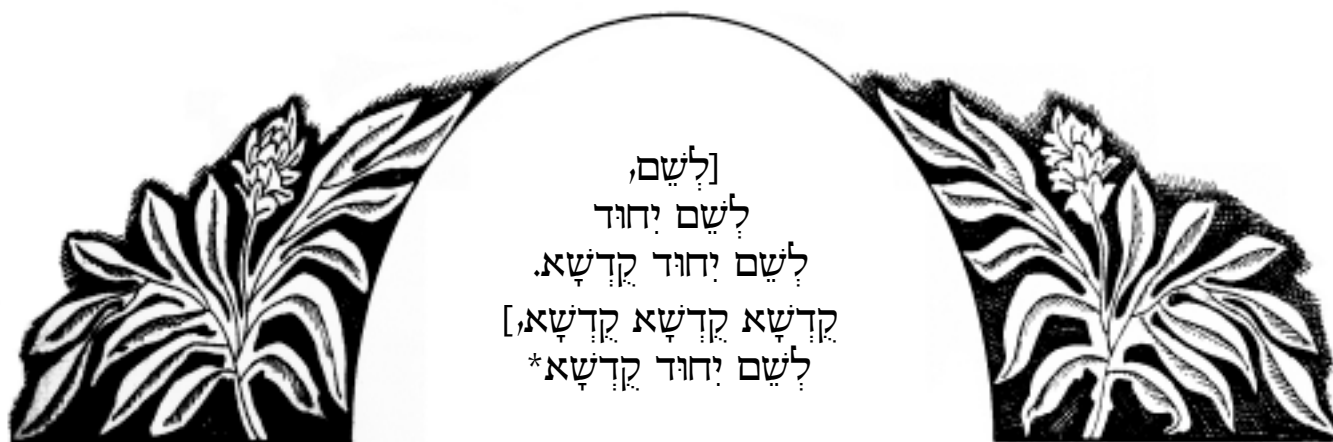
Translations

While we appreciate poetic and interpretive translations, virtually all of the translations are literal as an aid to learning Hebrew. On occasion, however, we have taken the liberty of also offering an interpretive translation, which is marked with an asterisk and noted at the end of the section.

* Kabbalistic mystical reference to the pure essence of God, that which is beyond any revealed characteristic and which remains beyond all forms of human perception and cognition.

** With thanks to Jeremy Lipton.

SHIRIM



L'sheim,
l'sheim y i-khud,
l'sheim y i-khud ku-d'sha.
<Ku-d'sha, ku-d'sha, ku-d'sha,
l'sheim y i-khud ku-d'sha.>

For the sake of the unification of the Holy One
[I am ready to fulfill the Torah's commandments].

D'rash

For the sake of the unification of the Holy One—יְחִוּד (yikhud) refers to unification of Hakadosh (the Holy One) and the Shekhina (the Dwelling One), the male and female aspects of God, which are said to reflect the external male sexuality, apropos to God's presence when revealed outside of ourselves (as at the Sea of Reeds), and the internal female sexuality, apropos to the Shekhina's presence within us (as when we show kindness to another). We "exile the Shekhina" by alienating ourselves from the presence of God within us, and we hasten that alienation by blinding ourselves to the holiness of our physical world, no longer seeing its divine minding by God. When the Shekhina is alive within us, our physical world reflects the Divine Presence. We unify Hakadosh and Shekhina by our action, when the soul of every other person becomes the preoccupation of the spirit within each of us. Tzedek is one visible manifestation of the Shekhina's presence. When we act as a kahal poalei tzedek (a congregational community of doers of righteousness and justice) to alter our physical world, we unify God through the mitzvah to love your fellow like yourself because, as Hillel said, the rest is only commentary to guide us in the realization of that love in God's creation.

* Excerpted from the traditional weekday siddur (prayerbook), to focus intention before doing mitzvot, but often not included in contemporary siddurim.

Iyun Tefilla

THE MITZVAH DIMENSION

Did you think it was going to be easy
Living in the fourth dimension,
Mastering another reality
While others live only
With length and breadth
And height?
You have to be patient.
You have to watch
For the moment
To bloom
Right at your doorstep.
Now! There! See!
The window opens
Onto the secret garden.
You turn.
You catch a shimmer
In the tree.
Opportunity
Has landed like a bird
Of rare plumage
In your garden.
What are you waiting for?
Seize the moment!
Become the bird!
Rise on healing wings
And give
The broken world
One soul!

מה טוב אהליה יעקב, משכנותיה ישראל. ואני ברב חסדך אבוא ביתך, אשתחווה
אל היכל קדשך ביראתך. יי אהבתי מעון ביתך, ומקום משכן כבודך. ואני
אשתחווה ואכרעה, אברכה לפני יי עשי. ואני תפילתי לך יי, עת רצון, אלהים
ברב חסדך, ענני באמת ישעך [אלהים ברב חסדך, ענני באמת ישעך].

Ma to-vu o-ha-le-kha ya-a-kov mish-k'no-te-kha yis-ra-el. Va-ani b'rov khas-
d'kha a-vo vei-te-kha esh-ta-kha-veh el hei-khal kod-sh'kha b'yir-a-te-kha
a-do-nai a-hav-ti m'on bei-te-kha u-m'kom mish-kan k'vo-de-kha va-a'ni esh-ta-
kha-veh v'ekh-ra'ah ev-ra-kha lif-nei a-do-nai o-si va-a'ni t'fi-la-ti l'kha a-do-
nai eit ra-tzon e-lo-him b'rov khas-de-kha a-nei-ni b'e-met yish-e-kha.

How good are your tents, Jacob, your dwellings, Israel. As for me, through Your abundant kindness I will enter Your house; I will prostrate myself toward Your Holy Sanctuary in awe of You. Adonai, I love the sanctuary of Your house, and the place where Your glory resides. I shall prostrate myself and bow, I shall bend the knee before Adonai, my Maker. As for me, may my prayer to You, Adonai, be at an opportune time; God, in Your abundant kindness, answer me with the truth of Your salvation.



D'rash

How good are your tents—Tent symbolizes the committed relationship that is the foundation of family life. To be outside the tent is to be away from one's mate—physically, intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually. Our families approach the perfection of unity and harmony when we love our partners as ourselves, and when we personally assume the burden of our children's moral and ethical education in the face of ubiquitous corruption. **Jacob**—Because of its commitment to the moral purity of the family, which is the underpinning of community and nationhood, Israel was destined to survive and succeed. **Your dwellings, Israel**—This is confirmed in the description of Israel's tents not as beautiful but "good." **As for me, through Your abundant kindness I will enter Your house**—Your gift of free will has given me the choice to make my home a sanctuary, a place of prayer and study dedicated to Kiddush Hashem (the Sanctification of Your Name). **I will prostrate myself toward Your Holy Sanctuary in awe of You**—In reverence and wonder at the canvas You have created, I will use in Your service all of the energy and spirit I can muster, reaching within and without, going beyond what is familiar and comfortable, to help shape Your creation as a work of art. **Adonai, I love the sanctuary of Your house, and the place where Your glory resides**—There is no greater joy than to be in the presence of Your righteousness, Your truth, Your justice, Your freedom, Your peace, and Your kindness. **I shall prostrate myself and bow, I shall bend the knee before Adonai my Maker**—I shall use up my life's time and energy to dwell where Your glory resides. I shall transform my own selfish appetites and desires *l'sheim yikhud* (for the sake of the unification). **As for me, may my prayer to You, Adonai, be at an opportune time; God, in Your abundant kindness, answer me with the truth of Your salvation**—May it be Your will that I have not delayed too long in choosing life over death, in committing myself to jettison that which is deathly and dead within me for that which is alive and life-giving, so that I may—through the compassionate healing power of Your creation—be redeemed and saved.

Iyun Tefilla

MEETING PLACE

Climb to the top
Of a hill.

And like Balaam,
Look down,
At Israel's camps.
Open your mouth.
Allow the blessing
To fall from your lips.
Mah tovu ohalekha, Yaakov!
How good are your tents, Jacob!
Then look there,
On the east
And if your tribe is
Judah, Yisakhar or Zevulun,
You have found
Your place.
Your tent is there.
And if you are
Reuvein, Shimon or Gad,
Then you are on the south.
And if
Ephraim, M'nashe or Binyamin,
Then you and yours
Are on the west,
Or on the north,
If you are
Dan, Asher or Naphtali.
And if you are a Levite,
Then you are
In their midst.
And in your midst
A tent and an ark,
A place to meet with God.
And yet,
A meeting place is not
What makes for being good
Or getting near.
So do not cry:
Heikhal Hashem
The Temple of God,
The Temple of God!
As if it were a place
To hide.
But rather Jeremiah-like
Declare:
Let me
Become the place
Your Name
Shall touch
The earth!
Let me become
Your dwelling place!
Your tent!