

## PREFACE

### *The Story of Biblical Poetry*

Open the Bible. It is an old book, compiled over hundreds of years, composed in vast deserts and along raging river beds, recited on slate-capped mountain tops and in cities built of white stone gleaming in the hot red Mediterranean sunset. It tells the story of families, deceits and pleasures, of simple men and women, heroes, villains, and kings, terrible battles and astonishing miracles. It paints the portrait of a wrathful, punishing God, a loving, nurturing God. And of God's relationship to individuals – personal, poignant, perplexing. It tells the story of human experience.

Human beings are creatures of habit; one of our most consistent habits is storytelling. How do we tell our stories? Orally, and in writing. The history of written language is rife with myths, legends, tales – and poems. Indeed, one of the oldest forms of storytelling is the poem. It is a compact, compressed form of expression. Every word has a precise weight and measure. The poem, whatever its length, shows an economy of literary expression. It has texture, tone, image, rhythm, meter, and sometimes rhyme.

Open the Bible. Its poems show you the anguish of Lamentations, bewailing the devastation of Jerusalem by Babylon; the playful eroticism and luscious imagery of Solomon in Song of Songs; the humor and wit of the Wisdom Writings; the joy and devotion of praising God in song; the fantastic imagery of kingly dreams and visions; the tender approach of the psalmist to healing, death, parenting, the presence of the divine in day-to-day human life. *Hills of Spices* is not intended as a comprehensive

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representation of all the poems appearing in the Tanakh texts. Here, you'll find a rich sampling of the lush terrain of this biblical poetry in all its various forms.

The poems included here were selected on the merit of their literary value—evocative phrasing and imagery, compelling themes and variations; their ability to evoke a powerful emotional response; their fanciful wordplay and rhythmic balances. Some will be familiar because they are found in contemporary Jewish liturgy, such as Psalms 113, 114, 115, and 117, which are part of the Hallel service, recited for the new moon, festivals, and Hanukkah. Others are famous or beloved poems, such as the entire text of the Song of Songs, and the 23rd Psalm, recited for the sick, at a funeral, or at the unveiling of a tombstone. Psalms 1, 16, 23, and 103 are psalms of comfort, often recited at funerals, or in a house of mourning. Proverbs 31 is traditionally recited at Sabbath dinner by a husband to his wife, and Psalm 126 is sung at the opening of birkat hamazon (grace), after Sabbath or holiday meals.

The poems are organized into nine broad sections to provide a sense of the many poetic genres and topics appearing in the Bible: Blessings, Prayers and Songs of Praise, Poetic Moments (short verses on a variety of topics), Testaments and Pronouncements, Laments, Judgment Oracles, Prophecies of Salvation and Consolation, Wisdom Writings, and Love Songs. There is a scriptural index at the end of the book, to help identify specific poems and their location in this volume.

## *Cantillation Marks*

*Hills of Spices* has been set to look like a modern bilingual poetry edition. The cantillation marks have been removed from the original Hebrew Bible text to bring the biblical Hebrew into a modern setting. In the Jewish tradition, when biblical poetry is used in prayer—in siddurim and mahzorim (daily, Sabbath, and festival prayer books)—it appears without cantillation, as modern poetry. Leaving these marks in the text would be akin to printing dictionary pronunciation marks in a bilingual edition of poetry by Baudelaire or Rilke.

## *Translation*

All the translations here are from the 1985 New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS) translation, with one exception: the Old Jewish Publication Society (OJPS) translation of the 23rd Psalm, which possesses stronger cadences and poetic meter than the NJPS translation. It is also more familiar; it is the commonly cited version of that famous and oft-used psalm. But to give this psalm a similar feel to the rest of the volume, “Thou” was changed to “You,” “wouldst” was changed to “would,” and so on.

## *Acknowledgements*

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advice on the content, structure, and organization of this volume. Her lucid, cogent introduction sheds light on the question of how to read and identify biblical poetry and its many literary components. Rebecca Fischman, assistant editor at The Jewish Publication Society, was instrumental in shaping this book from its inception. Her gentle and incisive input was as productive as it is invaluable.

The poems in this volume are as vibrant and vital today as on the day they were created. Read them aloud. Let them rise up to you from the deep, fertile soil of our cultural heritage. Let the magic and power of generations wash over you through these ancient words, for these are the roots of modern civilization. Immerse yourself in the beauty and power of these verses, their abundant joy and quivering terror, their pathos and hubris, the sexual desire and literary passion cascading from the lips of the poet, king, patriarch, warrior. The desolate mother. The ecstatic prophet. Words attributed to the Creator of the Universe. Words of love. Punishing words of disappointment and rage. Words of consolation and acceptance.

Immerse yourself. You can almost hear the beating of timbrels, the gentle plucking of the harp or lyre. You can almost feel the desert heat rising from the earth, smell the tantalizing aroma of spices intoxicating your senses.

*Rena Potok*  
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