

***Going Out With Knots; My Two Kaddish / COVID Years with Hebrew Poetry***  
**Study Guide for a Yearlong Adult Education Class**  
**Session One: Introduction, Part 1**

*Going Out With Knots: My Two Kaddish/COVID Years with Hebrew Poetry* follows my two consecutive years of Kaddish recitation for my parents, which coincided with the COVID pandemic and the 2020 U.S. Presidential election, through a blend of (feminist) memoir and Hebrew poem translation, analysis and teaching thereof.

The Introduction of the book begins with a summary and analysis of a Hebrew short story by Israeli writer [Etgar Keret \(b. 1967\)](#), entitled "[Intention.](#)" which was written in the aftermath of the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023.

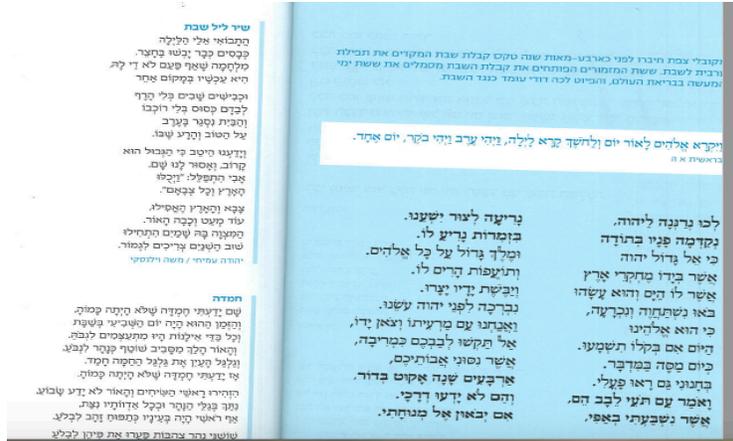
**Activity:**

- Read this story together
- Consider the meaning of the protagonist's name in relation to the themes of the story.
- How does the story present and problematize the idea of "Kavanah" (Intention) in prayer?
- Discuss it as both a response to tragedy and bereavement, in general, and as a meditation on the ideas of "Kavanah" (intention in prayer) and of "healing" as "wholeness."
- How does this story serve as a commentary on the purpose and efficacy of prayer in a time of tragedy and loss?
- Read my commentary on the story, which includes Keret's own reflection on the origin of the story and discuss its relevance to a book that uses short evocative works of Hebrew literature (poems) as a form of pedagogical response to death and bereavement in the context of public prayer.

The Introduction lays out the unique methodology of the book, presenting its distinctive features against the backdrop of previous Kaddish or Jewish mourning books and bilingual poetry anthologies, and making an argument for Modern Hebrew poetry as a source of liturgy and healing.

**Activity:**

Consider this page from *Siddur Erev Shabbat U'Moed*—and the way in which the juxtaposition of traditional prayers with modern Hebrew poetry and song illuminates new meanings and "kavanot."



**Psalm 95, “Lekhu Neranenuh” (Let Us Rejoice): the beginning of Kabbalat Shabbat**

<p>Come, let us sing joyously to GOD, raise a shout for our rock and deliverer; let us come into the divine presence with praise; let us shout out in song! For the ETERNAL is a great God, the great ruler of all divine beings. In God’s hand are the depths of the earth; the peaks of the mountains are God’s. The sea is God’s—the One who made it; and the land, fashioned by God’s hands. Come, let us bow down and kneel, bend the knee before the ETERNAL our maker, for this One is our God, and we are the people being cared for—the tended flock. O, if you would but heed God’s charge this day: Do not be stubborn as at Meribah [place of strife], as on the day of Massah, in the wilderness, when your ancestors put Me to the test, tried Me, though they had seen My deeds. Forty years I was provoked by that generation; I thought, “They are a senseless people; they would not know My ways.” Concerning them I swore in anger, “They shall never come to My resting-place!”</p>	<p>לכו בְּרִנְנָה לַה' נְרִיעָה לְצִוֹר יִשְׁעֵנו: נְקַדְמָה פְּנֵי בְּתוּדָה. בְּזִמְרוֹת נְרִיעַ לוֹ: כִּי אֵל גָּדוֹל ה'. וּמִלְךָ גָּדוֹל עַל כָּל אֱלֹהִים: אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדוֹ מַחְקְרֵי אָרֶץ. וְתוֹעֲפוֹת הָרִים לוֹ: אֲשֶׁר לוֹ הַיָּם וְהוּא עָשָׂהוּ. וַיִּבְשַׁת יְדָיו יָצְרוּ: בָּאוּ נִשְׁתַּחֲוּהוּ וְנִכְרַעְהוּ. נִבְרַכָה לִפְנֵי ה' עֲשׂונו: כִּי הוּא אֱלֹהֵינוּ. וְאֶנְחֵנוּ עִם מַרְעִיתוֹ וְצֵאן יְדוֹ. הַיּוֹם אִם בְּמַלּוֹ תִשְׁמְעוּ: אֵל תִּקְשׁוּ לְבַבְכֶם כַּמְרִיבָה. כִּיּוֹם מִסָּה בַּמִּדְבָּר: אֲשֶׁר נִסּוּנֵי אַבּוֹתֵיכֶם. בְּחַנּוּנֵי גַם רָאוּ פְעָלַי: אֲרַבְעִים שָׁנָה אָקוּט בְּדוֹר. וְאָמַר עִם תַּעֲי לִבְבִּי הֵם. וְהֵם לֹא יָדְעוּ דְרָכַי: אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי בְּאַפִּי. אִם יָבֹאוּ אֵל מְנוּחָתִי:</p>
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**Juxtaposed with Yehuda Amichai, “Shir Leil Shabbat” (Sabbath Eve Song)**

<p><b>Sabbath Eve Song</b> Will you come to me tonight The laundry’s already dried on the line. War that never gets enough</p>	<p><b>שיר ליל שבת</b> התבואי אלי הלילה כבסים כבר יבשו בחצר מלחמה שאף פעם לא די לה</p>
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For now is out of mind.	היא עכשיו במקום אחר
And the roads return alone nonstop Like a horse without a rider bestride And the house is sealed up at evening With the good and the evil inside.	וכבישים שבים בלי הרף לבדם כסוס בלי רוכבו והבית נסגר בערב על הטוב והרע שבו
And we know well that the border is Near, and for us it is barred away. My father prayed, "Thus the heavens and the earth Were completed in their vast array."	וידענו היטב כי הגבול הוא קרוב ואסור לנו שם אבי התפלל ויכולו הארץ וכל צבאם
The earth and array have darkened Before long the light will be through. Again the commandment that the heavens got started Must be finished by the other two.	צבא והארץ האפילו עוד מעט יכבה האור המצווה בה שמיים התחילו שוב השניים צריכים לגמור

#### Questions:

- How can literature, in general, and poetry, in particular, heal?
- Consider the etymological roots of the English word "heal" in the Old English hāl, meaning, "whole," and analogously, the connection between the Hebrew words "leshalem" (to pay pack), "shalem" (whole), and "shalom" (peace). What forms of un-wholeness or non-peace do you discern in Psalm 95 as well as in Amichai's "Sabbath Eve Song"?
- How does Amichai's poem attempt to heal or redress these issues?
- What role (if any) does God play in either of these poems?
- Listen to [Chava Alberstein's evocative musical setting of Amichai's poem](#) and consider the difference it makes to hear the poem sung by a woman?
- Who are the speaker(s) and addressee(s) of Psalm 95?
- Who are the speaker(s) and (possible) addressees of Amichai's "Sabbath Eve Song"?

The Introduction also considers Hebrew poem translation in the book as proceeding in the following directions and vice versa:

- From mourning to consolation
- From the personal to the dialogical and the communal
- From Hebrew to English, with accompanying annotation of classical source material
- From fixed liturgy to "Open Siddur" (calling attention to the fluidity inherent even in "fixed" liturgy)
- From secular to sacred
- From literary to liturgical
- From words to feeling
- And from static ritual to transformation.

#### Question:

- Consider these directions in relation to the "translation" of Psalm 95 from the original to the alternative text of Amichai's "Sabbath Eve Song."

## Session Two, Introduction Part 2: So Much Has Been Severed

### 1. Learning to Mourn: Going Out with Knots

Chapter 1 tells the story of the story of my bereavement as it unfolded first for my father, then my mother. It describes my often frustrating experience of Kaddish recitation within various Orthodox prayer frameworks, and my shocked discovery, while wearing my father's tallit for the very first time, and studying Mishnah in his memory, a mishnah in Tractate Shabbat which negated the very idea of a bereaved daughter longing for her father – the Mishnah that furnished the title for this book.

#### Activity: Mishnah Study as a Ritual of Mourning

The reason most commonly given for the practice of studying Mishnah in memory of a departed loved one is that the Hebrew word mishnah מִשְׁנָה, a unit of talmudic study, shares the same Hebrew letters as the word neshama נִשְׁמָה, meaning soul. Together with the recitation of Kaddish, daily Mishnah study is traditionally seen as a way of elevating the soul of the departed.

For my father, who made great sacrifices to observe Shabbat, I chose to study Tractate Shabbat, but did not expect, on the very morning that I wore his tallit for the first time, to stumble upon this [Mishnah from Tractate Shabbat 6:9](#), dealing with items of clothing that sons (not daughters) are allowed to wear outside on Shabbat):

<p>Sons may go out on Shabbat with knots and princes with bells. And any person; however, the Sages spoke in the present.</p>	<p>הַבָּנִים יוֹצְאִין בְּקִשְׁרִים, וּבְנֵי מְלָכִים בְּזוּגִין. וְכָל אָדָם, אֵלֶּא שְׂדֵדְרֵי חֲכָמִים בְּהִנְהוּ:</p>
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Questions:

- What are these knots that sons are allowed to go out wearing on shabbat (in other words, that are considered, for the son, clothing, and not something separate being carried, hence forbidden. See the commentaries below:

#### [BT Shabbat 66b](#)

<p><b>GEMARA:</b> What are these knots? Adda Mari said that Rav Nahman bar Barukh said that Rav Ashi bar Avin said that Rav Yehuda said: They are medicinal garlands of the madder... But why specifically sons? Daughters, too can benefit. And why specifically children? Adults too can benefit. Rather, what are these knots? Like that which Avin bar Huna said that Rav Hama bar Gurya said: A son who has longings for his father, [the father] takes a strap from the right shoe and ties it on the left. Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak said: And your mnemonic [for where to tie the strap] is phylacteries.</p>	<p>גַּמְי' מֵאֵי קִשְׁרִים? אָמַר אַדָּא מְרִי אָמַר רַב נַחְמָן בַּר בְּרוּךְ אָמַר רַב אֲשִׁי בַר אַבִּין אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה: קִשְׁוֵי פּוּאָה... מֵאֵי אִירְיָא בָּנִים? אֲפִילוּ בְּנוֹת נְמִי! מֵאֵי אִירְיָא קִטְצִים? אֲפִילוּ גְדוּלִים נְמִי! אֵלֶּא מֵאֵי קִשְׁרִים — כִּי הָא דְאָמַר אַבִּין בַּר הוּנָא אָמַר רַבִּי חָמָא בַּר גּוּרְיָא: בּוֹן שְׂיֵשׁ לוֹ גַּעְגּוּעִין עַל אָבִיו — נוֹטֵל רְצוּעָה מִמִּנְעַל שֶׁל יְמִין וְקוֹשֵׁר לוֹ בְּשִׂמְאַלּוֹ/ אָמַר רַב נַחְמָן בַּר יִצְחָק: וְסִימְנִיד — תְּפִילִין.</p>
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**Bartenura** (R' Ovadiah ben Abraham of Bartenura, c.1445-c.1515, based on discussions in the Gemara and Maimonides's Mishnah commentary:

בְּקִשְׁרִים – a son who has longings for his father, the father takes a strap of the right shoe and ties it to the child with his left [arm] and all the while that this tie is upon him, the longings become feeble from him as an heirloom/treasure and as such it is taught that sons, in contrast to daughters, have longings for their fathers as children.

**Rashi** (Rabbi Solomon Yitzhaki of Troyes, 1040-1105)

גֶּעְגּוּעִין – Longings. The son yearns for his father and cannot separate from him. This remedy does not pertain to females for the father doesn't endear himself to them enough from the beginning that they would come to long for him.

- What impediments might this Mishnah and these commentaries pose for a female mourner?
- What is the relationship between the knots and the bells in the Mishnah? How might the dispensation, allowing for everyone, regardless of social class, to go out with bells, and the rabbis' reference to "parlance of the day" be used as a way of being able to historicize the Mishnah and dispel the distinction, for our contemporary purposes, between sons and daughters?
- What does it mean for us to reconfigure our prayers and mourning practices to speak in the parlance of our own day?

Chapter 1 describes some of the features of my home, Orthodox minyan, which include providing a forum for those who are commemorating a *yahrzeit* to offer reflections on their departed loved one. It also details some of the (admittedly modest, non-egalitarian) innovations that our minyan has undertaken to give the women in the community some means of ritual participation.

**Activity**

- If there are people in the class who are currently in their form year of mourning, invite them to reflect on their lost loved one and some of the challenges they have experienced in saying Kaddish.
- If this is an Orthodox group, invite them to consider what innovations they might want to implement to make all mourners feel welcome and heard.

Finally, the chapter provides an account of my decision, early on in my Kaddish journey, to undertake the spiritual regimen of the *Shir Hadash shel Yom* (New Poem of the Day), where every week I selected and translated a different Hebrew poem, and taught it at the end of Tuesday morning service in my home synagogue in relation to mourning, prayer or other matters of the day, and includes the following poem 1905 by Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873-1934), that I taught on the day that our synagogue shut down due to COVID:

Take me under your wing, Be my mother and sister. Let your bosom be a haven for my head, A nest for my far-flung prayers.	הַכְּנִיסֵנִי תַּחַת כְּנָפֶךָ וְהִי לִי אִם וְאָחוֹת, וְיִהְיֶה חִיקְךָ מְקַלֵּט רִאשִׁי, קַן-תְּפִלוֹתַי הַנִּדְחָהּ.
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<p>And at that merciful twilight hour, Bow and I'll share my secret distress. They say in the world there's youth— Where's my youth?</p> <p>And another secret I confess: My soul has been seared by a flame. They say there is love in the world— What is love?</p> <p>The stars deceived me. There was a dream; it too has passed. Now I have nothing at all in the world, Nothing at all.</p> <p>Take me under your wing, Be my mother and a sister. Let your bosom be a haven for my head A nest for my far-flung prayers.</p>	<p>ובבעת רחמים, בין-השמשות, שחי ואגל לך סוד יסורי: אומרים, יש בעולם נעורים – היכן נעורי?</p> <p>ועוד רז אחד לך אתגדה: נפשי נשרפה בלהבה. אומרים, אהבה יש בעולם – מה-זאת אהבה?</p> <p>הכוכבים רמו אותי היה חלום – אף גם הוא עבר; עתה אין לי כלום בעולם – אין לי דבר.</p> <p>הכניסיני תחת כנפיך והי לי אם ואחות, ויהי חיקך מקלט ראשי, קן-תפלותי הנדחות.</p>
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### Activity

- Read the poem together.
- Listen to / watch [Arik Einstein's famous setting of the poem](#).

### Questions:

- Who is the addressee of the poem?
- How do you understand the reference to the “nest of farflung prayers?”
- How do you understand the bitterness of the poem, its skepticism about love, the world, the stars?
- Can this poem be considered a prayer?
- How can it be read in our times (the COVID era and thereafter) as a reflection of some of our own struggles?

## Part 2. Transitions and Translations

### Chapter 2: Picturing God in Grief and Prayer: Beginning to Mourn with Lea Goldberg

The memoir sections of the Chapter 2 track my mourning for my mother, which coincided early on with the COVID pandemic. It thus marks the moment in the Shir Hadash project where I began writing up my weekly teachings in the form of mini-essays for those who could not attend synagogue in person or by Zoom.

The poet that I studied during this period was Lea Goldberg (1911-1970).

## Session 1: Introduction to Lea Goldberg

**Activity:**

- Read together [Goldberg's impressive biography](#), which encompasses work as a poet, prose writer, playwright, professor, translator, editor, children's book editor, and visual artist.
- Consider watching this film about her life: [https://mediaspace.msu.edu/media/The+5+houses+of+Lea+Goldberg/1\\_vnuotsym](https://mediaspace.msu.edu/media/The+5+houses+of+Lea+Goldberg/1_vnuotsym)
- Look at this iconic photo of Goldberg, and consider what image is conveys, especially:



- Read the following early poem from her first collection (and listen to Ahinoam Nini's musical setting thereof and consider how it might read as a form of theological memoir like Going Out With Knots:

**“My God.” From Taba‘ot ‘ashan (Palestine, 1935), first published in Turim 1:18 (Kislev / November 1934)**

<p><b>My God</b> I saw my God in the café He was revealed to me in the smoke of cigarettes Downcast, apologetic and faint He hinted: One can still live! He was nothing like my lover: He was closer than he, and wretched, Like a see-through shadow of starlight He didn't fill the space. In the pale and reddish light of sunset Like a confessor before death</p>	<p><b>אלוהי</b> את אלהי ראיתי בקפה הוא נתגלה לי בעשן סיגריזות. נכה-רוח, מסתלח ורפה רמז לי: "עוד אפשר להיות!" הוא לא היה דומה לאהובי: קרוב ממנו, ואמלל, כצל שקוף של אור הפוככים הוא לא מלא את החלל. לאור שקיעה חור ואדמדם</p>
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He sunk down to kiss mankind's feet  
And to beg forgiveness

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hy4H5TeJrv4>

כמתנדדה על חטאי מותו,  
ירד למטה לנשק רגלי אדם  
ולבקש את סליחתו.

## Leah Goldberg Session 2

### “To My Mother’s Portrait” (1933)

I taught this poem after moving my mother from Toronto to New York in the aftermath of my father’s death. Goldberg wrote it when she was a student in Germany, living apart from her mother. She was extremely close to her mother, though, living with her for almost of all of her adult life, and while the poem reflects some of the challenges of mother-daughter relationships when a daughter reaches adulthood, it also expresses much adoration.



Lea Goldberg with her mother, Celia.

### Activity / Questions

- Read the poem as it appears in the book.
- What does the mother know?
- What does the mother willingly refrain from saying or asking?
- How might the poem be read not just theologically or even as a prayer?
- What are the recurrent words in the poem and how might they point to traditional Jewish prayer, or a revision thereof?

### “By Three Things” (1949)

This poem originally appeared as part of a book of children’s poems entitled *Mah ‘Osot Ha-Ayalot*, and it is commonly taught in Israeli schools. But I read it seriously, as an adult poem, that offers a new (feminist) take Mishnah Avot 1:2 and 18, and as such on the activity of enumerating core values for our time. I also see it offering a model of morning prayers.

### Activity

- Read the poem as it appears in the book, and listen to one of the available musical settings, by [The Dudaim](#) and by [a class of Israeli schoolkids](#).

- Read Avot 1:2 and 18, where Shimon the Righteous and R. Shimon Ben Gamliel each offer their own takes of the three things that sustain the world:

<p>2. Shimon the Righteous was one of the last of the men of the great assembly. He used to say: the world stands upon three things: the Torah, the Temple service, and the practice of acts of piety.</p>	<p>ב. שְׁמֵעוֹן הַצְּדִיק הָיָה מְשִׁירֵי כְּנֻסַת הַגְּדוּלָה. הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל הָעֲבוּדָה וְעַל גְּמִילוּת הַחַסְדִּים:</p>
<p>18. Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel used to say: on three things does the world stand: On justice, on truth and on peace, as it is said: “execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates” (Zechariah 8:16)</p>	<p>יח. רַבֵּן שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר, עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל הַדִּין וְעַל הָאֱמֶת וְעַל הַשְּׁלוֹם, שְׁנֹאֹמֵר (זְכַרְיָה ח) אֱמֶת וּמִשְׁפָּט שְׁלוֹם שִׁפְטוּ בְּשַׁעְרֵיכֶם:</p>

### Questions

- What is the cultural significance of the number three? In general culture? In Jewish tradition?
- Why the need for two different takes on the cardinal Three?
- Compare the three things that sustain the world for these two rabbis and for Goldberg’s fisherman, farmer and artist?
- What is the Jewish significance of the number four?
- How does the figure in the fourth stanza, “Ha-Adam” (the human being) upend the idea that there are three things that sustain the world?
- How do the things that Ha-adam highlights combine elements of the three previous stanzas?
- How do these things allude to the biblical creation story and to the practice of morning prayer?

### Lea Goldberg, Session 3

#### “In My Siddur” (1940)

I taught this poem in the context of my struggle with the fact that there are a lot of things in the traditional siddur that I find hard to recite, and a lot of things I wish I could include.

#### Activity

- Read the poem as it appears in the book
- Read this rabbinic midrash on the giving of the Torah from BT Shabbat 88a

<p>“And they stood at the lowermost part of the mount” (Exodus 19:17). Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: this teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above the Jews like a tub, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial.</p>	<p>“וַיִּתְצַבּוּ בְּתַחְתִּית הַהָר” אָמַר רַב אַבְדִּימִי בַר חַמָּא בַר חַסָּא: מְלַמֵּד שְׁכַפְּהָה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עָלֵיהֶם אֶת הָהָר כְּגִיגִית, וְאָמַר לָהֶם: אִם אָתֶם מְקַבְּלִים הַתּוֹרָה מוֹטֵב, וְאִם לֹא — שֵׁם תְּהֵא קְבוּרַתְכֶם.</p>
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### Questions

- Why does Goldberg choose to allude to this midrash?

- What is the quid pro quo that she proposes in the poem?
- How can this poem be read as a prayer?
- Goldberg proposes the idea of “my siddur”? In your own siddur what would you include, exclude, or add?

### “Let Winter be Blessed” (1927/28)

I taught this poem in early winter, during a promising phase of my mother’s hospitalization, when it seemed she was on the mend and would soon be discharged. The positive tone of the poem and its language of blessing seemed to directly capture my mood at that moment and offer a prayer language for it, too.

#### Activity:

- Read the poem as it appears in the book.
- Take note of its rhyme scheme and its pattern of reiterated sounds.

#### Questions

- How do these sounds mimic various emotional states?
- How does the poem comport with or challenge our associations with winter?
- How does the poem use the language of blessing, and as such, how does it qualify itself as a prayer?

## Goldberg Session 4

### “Blessing” (1945)

I taught this poem, which Goldberg wrote after the defeat of Nazi Germany, after my mother’s passing and the conclusion of our *shiva* in her memory.

#### Activity:

- Read the poem as it appears in the book
- Take note of some of its recurrent words and motifs

#### Questions:

- What is the significance of the number seven in Jewish tradition?
- How is the symbolism of seven, in both its positive and negative iterations, mobilized in the poem?
- How might the poem be fitting to mark the end of a traumatic period or a shiva?

### “One Spring” (1939)

This fifth poem in a cycle entitled “One Spring” was the first *Shir Hadash* I presented to my Bayit prayer community on Zoom —marking the pivotal moment when my private mourning melded with the communal trauma of COVID.

#### Activity:

- Read the poem as it appears in the book
- Look for references in the poem to traditional blessings or prayers
- Read this midrash from BT Makkot 23b

<p>Rabbi Simlai taught: There were 613 mitzvot stated to Moses in the Torah, consisting of 365 prohibitions corresponding to the number of days in the solar year, and 248 positive mitzvot corresponding to the number of a person's limbs.</p>	<p>דַּרְשׁ רַבִּי שִׁמְלַי: יֵשׁ מֵאוֹת וּשְׁלֹשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה מִצְוֹת נֶאֱמְרוּ לוֹ לְמֹשֶׁה, שְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת וְשִׁשִּׁים וְחֲמִשׁ לָאוֹיִן כְּמִגְנֵן יְמוֹת הַחֲמָה, וּמֵאֲתֵימ וְאַרְבָּעִים וּשְׁמוֹנֶה עֶשְׂרֵה כְּנֶגֶד אֵיבָרָיו שֶׁל אָדָם.</p>
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**Questions:**

- How does Goldberg revise R. Simlai's teaching?
- How does she rewrite other canonical blessings or prayers?
- What is she praying for and how does the substance of this prayer accord with or differ from the content of rabbinic statutory prayer
- What is she apologizing for in the poem?
- How is she challenging God?
- How does Goldberg's request for one small spring accord with what you remember of your experiences of COVID in Spring 2020?

**Goldberg Session 5**

**“My Silences” (1938)**

I taught this poem as a way of grappling with the silence of death, and that which had overtaken the streets as a result of COVID, but also as a way of framing the significance of silence in daily prayer.

**Activity:**

- Read [1 Kings 19:1-14](#)
- Read Goldberg's “My Silences”

**Questions:**

- What is the lesson that God aims to impart to Elijah in 1 Kings 19?
- Does he learn this lesson?
- How does Goldberg's poem build on the lessons of this prophetic chapter?
- What are the virtues of silence as explicated in the poem?
- What is the value of silence in poetry and public prayer?
- What were your experiences of silence during COVID?

**“Night Psalm” (1952)**

I taught this poem as a response to a sense of personal and collective darkness as a mourner during COVID.

**Activity**

- Read the poem as it appears in the book
- Identify some of the central poetic techniques or figures of speech in the poem.
- Listen to [Achinoam Nini's evocative musical setting](#) and consider how it adds to your sense of the meaning and setting of the poem.

**Questions**

- How does Goldberg convey a sense of total darkness?
- What might the poem be read as a night or “mourning” psalm as well as a “morning” one?
- How does the poem engage both a physical and an emotional geography?

## Goldberg Session 6

### “He Passed Over Our Door And There Was Light” (1959)

I taught this poem before our first COVID Passover, which was also my first Passover without either of my parents. In this poem, Goldberg reflects on having averted the fate of so many of her European Jewish compatriots with the attendant feelings of guilt. In my teaching I also highlighted the feelings of gratitude we felt at that time, if we had managed to remain COVID free, but also our sense of guilt over the danger faced by medical personnel and frontline workers

#### Activity:

- Read the following passage from the Passover Haggadah attributed to Rabban Gamliel:

<p>The PESAH is what our ancestors would eat while the Temple stood: and what does it recall? It recalls the Holy One’s passing over (Pasah) the houses of our ancestors in Egypt, as it is said: “You shall say: ‘It is a Pesah offering for the LORD, for He passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt while He struck the Egyptians, but saved those in our homes’ – and the people bowed and prostrated themselves.”</p>	<p>פֶּסַח שֶׁהָיוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ אוֹכְלִים בְּזִמְנֵי שְׁבִית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ הָיָה קָיָם, עַל שׁוֹם מָה? עַל שׁוֹם שֶׁפֶּסַח הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עַל בְּתֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ בְּמִצְרַיִם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וְאִמְרַתֶּם זָבַח־פֶּסַח הוּא לַיְי, אֲשֶׁר פָּסַח עַל־בְּתֵי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּנִגְפוֹ אֶת־מִצְרַיִם, וְאֶת־בְּתֵינוּ הִצִּיל, וַיִּקַּד הָעָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ.</p>
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#### Questions:

- How does the poem engage with and revise the traditional understanding of the word “Pesach” as presented by Rabban Gamliel in the Haggadah?
- What allusions to biblical stories or other classical sources can you spot?
- What do you make of the various contradictory impulses and directives in the poem?

### “Ending” (1948)

Lea Goldberg’s “Siyyum” was originally published in the socialist Hebrew women’s paper Davar Po’elet on 4 Iyyar / May 13, 1948, the day before the Declaration of the establishment of the State of Israel, and in the midst of the Israeli War of Independence

I taught this poem during the spring season of 2020 COVID graduations.

#### Activity

- Read the poem as it appears in the book
- Read [Genesis 1](#) and track the uses of the express “ki tov” (And it was good).
- Read the following alternative Kibbutz Kaddish.

<p><b>Kaddish from Beit Keshet, by Oved Sadeh</b></p> <p>Magnified and sanctified          Be the clod of earth          That falls apart          In the plough segmenting          The hard earth.          Glorious and exalted be-- the leaf          that sprouted, turned green, reddened-- and fell off.          Glorified and exalted          Be the bearer of the burden          In squatting on his path          My path, too, is beaten.          Blessed and praised          Be the voice of the individual          Together with the voice of the many.          Magnified and exalted          Be the individual and in his uniqueness.</p>	<p>קדיש מבית קשת / עובד          שדה (1925–2008)</p> <p>תגדל ויתקדש          הרגב שקרס          בפלח מחרשה          האדמה הקשה          תהדר ויתעלה – העלה          שלקלב, והוריק, האדים – ונשר.          תרוים ויתנשא          הנושא במשא          ובכרע דרכו          גם דרפי נרמסה.          תברד וישתבח          קול היחיד          עם קול הרבים.          תגדל ויתקדש          היחיד ביחודו.</p>
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**Questions:**

- What the various ways to understand the Hebrew word “aleh”?
- How does the poem alternate between a positive and negative understanding of human beginnings and ends?
- How might the alternative Kaddish text above shape your reading of the Goldberg poem?

**Chapter 3 Facing an Absent God: Grief and God Struggle in the Poetry of Avraham Ḥalfi  
 Session 1: Introduction to Avraham Ḥalfi (1904-1980)**

**Biography**

Avraham Ḥalfi is a lesser-known in the U.S. than Lea Goldberg. His work has received mainstream popularity in Israel, though, having been set to music by Israeli rock-star Arik Einstein and his various musical collaborators. He was born in Lodz, Poland in 1904 and died in Israel in 1980. During WWI his family moved to Uman, Ukraine. There, in Uman, Ḥalfi continued his studies, learned about Breslover Hassidism, and discovered an interest in theater and acting. In 1924, he immigrated to Palestine, where he worked as a farmer and road builder, and joined the “Ohel” Theater Troupe, which had just been founded. In 1953, he joined the Cameri Theater troupe, where he originated some 60 different roles. At the same time, he became a member of the circle of modern poets and prose writers associated with the journal Ketuvim (Writings, a play on the third section of the Hebrew Bible), which included Lea Goldberg. Other poets in his family include his younger brother Shimon Ḥalfi and his niece Rachel Ḥalfi. Several of his poems have made their way into Liberal Israeli prayerbooks such as Siddur Erev Shabbat U-Mo‘ed of Beit Tefilah Israeli and T’filat

Ha-Adam, the new Israeli Reform siddur. Critic Tzvi Luz refers to Ḥalfi as a modern mystic, insofar as a hoped-for image of God stands at the center of the quest that is his work. But this quest occurs in a modern, skeptical world, characterized by heresy and the absence of revelation.<sup>1</sup> His poetry thus serves the goal of God-searching and God-wrestling for our modern, Post-Holocaust, skeptical, and strife-ridden age.



*Avraham Ḥalfi*

### “Dream of Your Footsteps” (1939)

I taught Avraham Ḥalfi’s “Dream of Your Footsteps” against the backdrop of the fading tangible memory of my parents and amidst the general anxiety and concern of the COVID pandemic. The poem is a prime example of Ḥalfi’s poetry of skeptical God-searching.

#### Activity

- Read the poem as it appears in the book.
- Listen to the Arik Einstein / Yitzhak Klepter setting of the poem.
- Read the following dream as recounted by Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810), whose Hassidic teachings were a major influence on Ḥalfi and discuss what you think it means.

I heard from one of ours that the Rebbe told him this story on Erev Kippur after the *Kapparot* ceremony. He saw himself walking in a forest, and the forest was huge and thick, seemingly without end. And he wanted to retrace his steps [but couldn’t], but just then [some]one came and told him that this forest indeed had no end, and that all the tools in the world were made from this forest. And he showed him the way out of the forest. After this he came to a river, and he wanted to reach its end [but could not] And once again [some]one came to him and told him that it’s impossible to get to the end of this river, for this river has no beginning or end. And everyone in the world drinks from the waters of this river, and he showed him the way, and so forth. And then he came to a mill that stood on that same river. And [some]one came to him and said that these millstones grind the flour for the entire world. And then he returned to the woods and

שמעתי מאיש אחד מאנשי שלומינו שסיפר לו רבינו ז"ל בערב יום הכיפורים, לאחר כפרות מעשה: שראה שהלך ביער אחד, והיער היה גדול בלי קץ וסוף. ורצה לשוב אל עקיבו. ובא אליו אחד ואמר לו שבזה היער אי אפשר לבוא לסופו וקצו, כי היער הזה הוא בלי קץ וסוף, וכל הכלים שבעולם כולם נעשו מזה היער. והראו דרך איך שיצא מזה היער. אחר-כך בא לנהר אחד, ורצה להגיע לסוף הנהר. ושוב בא אליו אחד ואמר לו שבזה הנהר אי אפשר לבוא לסופו, כי זה הנהר אין לו קצה וסוף, וכל בני-העולם שותים מן המים של זה הנהר והראה לו גם כן את הדרך וכו'. ואחר-כך בא אל ריחיים שהיו עומדות על אותו הנהר. ובא אליו גם כן אחד ואמר לו שאלו הריחיים טוחנות טחינה לכל העולם כולו. ואחר-כך חזר ובא אל היער הנ"ל וראה שם נפח אחד, שישב שם

<sup>1</sup> See Tzvi Luz, *Shirat Avraham Ḥalfi* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1994), 43.

<p>there he saw a blacksmith sitting in this forest and working at his craft. And he was told that this blacksmith was forging tools for the entire world. And these words are very obscure and closed off to us.</p>	<p>ביער ועשה מלאכתו. ואמר לו שזה הנפח עושה כלים בשביל כל העולם כולו. והדברים סתומים מאד.</p>
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**Questions**

- What is the meaning of the title/motif “Dream of Your Footsteps”?
- What elements from Rebbe Naḥman’s dream can you identify in Ḥalfi’s poem?
- What is the significance of the dating of the poem?
- What is its theological message?

**“I Don’t Know the Words”**

**Activity**

- Read the poem as it appears in the book.
- Read the following biblical verses:

**Genesis 2:9, 16-17**

<p>And from the ground the ETERNAL God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad. [...] And the ETERNAL God commanded the Human, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die.”</p>	<p>וַיִּצְמַח ה' אֱלֹהִים מִן־הָאֲדָמָה כָּל־עֵץ  נֹחַמַד לְמַרְאֵה וְטוֹב לְמֵאֲכָל וְעֵץ הַחַיִּים  בְּתוֹךְ הַגֶּן וְעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע:  [...] וַיִּצַּו יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים עַל־הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר  מִכָּל עֵץ־הַגֶּן אָכַל תֹּאכַל: וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת  טוֹב וְרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בְיוֹם אֲכַלְךָ  מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת:</p>
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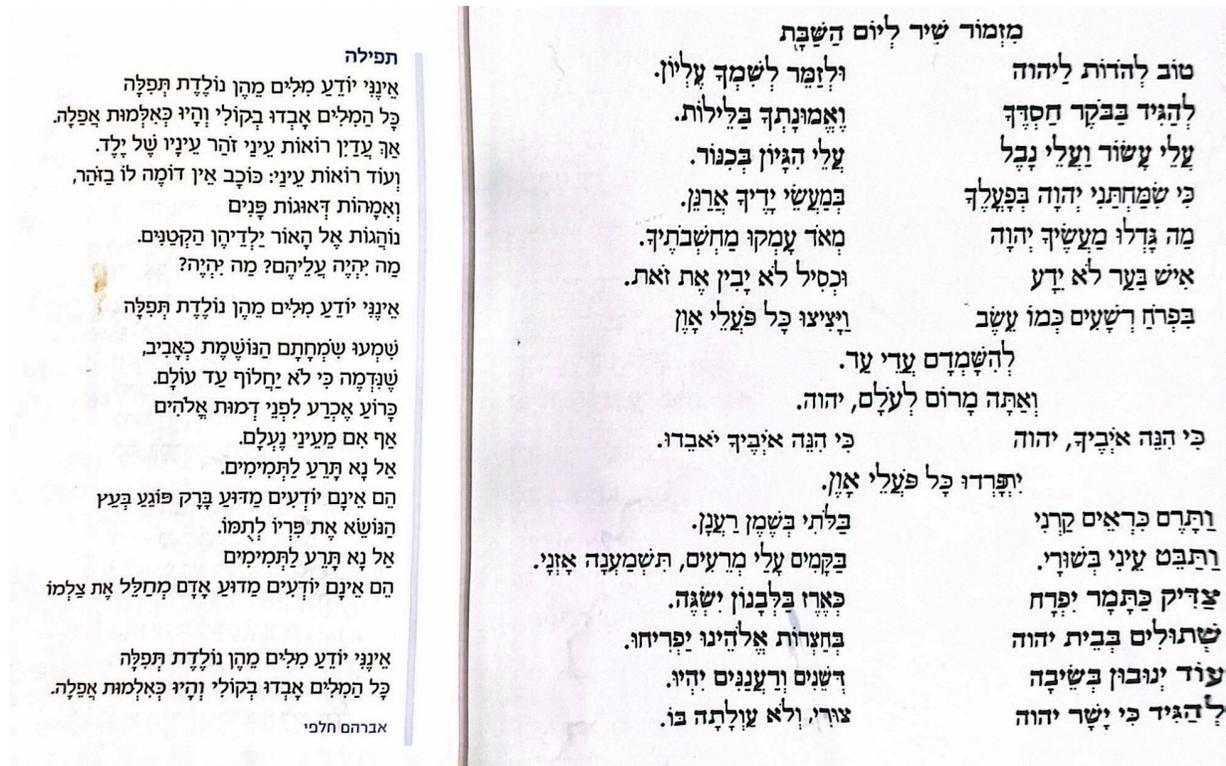
**Genesis 18:1-11**

<p>The two angels arrived in Sodom in the evening, as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to greet them and, bowing low with his face to the ground, he said, “Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant’s house to spend the night, and bathe your feet; then you may be on your way early.” But they said, “No, we will spend the night in the square.” But he urged them strongly, so they turned his way and entered his house. He prepared a feast for them and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. They had not yet lain down, when the townsmen, the men of Sodom—young and old, the whole entire body—gathered about the house. And they shouted to Lot and said to him, “Where are the ones who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them.” So Lot went out to them to the entrance, shut the door behind him,</p>	<p>וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׁנֵי הַמַּלְאָכִים סָדְמָה בְּעֶרְב  וְלוֹט יָשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר־סֹדֶם וַיֵּרְאֵה לֹט  וַיָּקָם לְקַרְאֵתָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אַפָּיִם אַרְצָה:  וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה נָא־אֲדֹנָי סוּרוּ נָא אֶל־בַּיִת  עִבְדְּכֶם וְלִינֹו וְרַחֲצוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם  וְהִשְׁכַּמְתֶּם וְהִלַּכְתֶּם לְדַרְכְּכֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ  לֹא כִי בְרַחֲבֵי גִלְיוֹן:  וַיִּפְצְצוּם מֵאֵד וַיִּסְרוּ אֵלָיו וַיָּבֹאוּ  אֶל־בַּיִתֹו וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם מִשְׁתֶּה וּמִצּוֹת  אֶפֶס וַיֹּאכְלוּ:  טָרְם יִשְׁכְּבוּ וְאֲנָשֵׁי הָעִיר אֲנָשֵׁי סֹדֶם  נִקְבּוּ עַל־הַבַּיִת מִנֶּעַר וְעַד־גֹּזֵן  כָּל־הָעָם מִקְּצָה:  וַיִּקְרָאוּ אֶל־לֹט וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ אַיֵּה  הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־בָּאוּ אֵלֶיךָ הַלַּיְלָה  הַצִּיאָם אֵלֵינוּ וַנְדַעְךָ אֹתָם:  וַיֵּצֵא אֲלֵהֶם לֹט הַפֶּתַח וְהִדְלִת סָגַר  אֲחֵרָיו:  וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־גַּא אַחֵי תַרְעוּ:</p>
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<p>and said, “I beg you, my friends, do not commit such a wrong.          Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you please; but do not do anything to the others, since they have come under the shelter of my roof.”          But they said, “Stand back! The fellow,” they said, “came here as an alien, and already he acts the ruler! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.” And they pressed hard against the man—against Lot—and moved forward to break the door.          But the others reached out and pulled Lot into the house with them, and shut the door.          And those who were at the entrance of the house, low and high alike, they struck with blinding light, so that they were helpless to find the entrance.</p>	<p>הִנֵּה-נָא לִי שְׁתֵּי בָנוֹת אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדְעוּ  אִישׁ אוֹצְיָאָה-נָא אֶתְהוֹן אֲלֵיכֶם וְעָשׂוּ  לָהֶן כַּטּוֹב בְּעֵינֵיכֶם רַק לְאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּ  אֶל-תַּעֲשׂוּ דָבָר כִּי-עַל-יָכוֹן בָּאוּ בְּצִל  קַרְתִּי:  וַיֹּאמְרוּ   גִּשְׁתְּהֶלְאָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָאֶחָד  בְּאֵל-לְגוֹר וַיִּשְׁפֹּט שְׁפוֹט עֲתָה נִרְעֵ לָךְ  מֵהֵם וַיִּפְצְרוּ בְּאִישׁ בְּלוֹט מְאֹד וַיִּגְשׂוּ  לְשֹׁבֵר הַדְּלָת:  וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים אֶת-יָדָם וַיִּבְיֵאוּ  אֶת-לוֹט אֲלֵיהֶם הַבַּיְתָה וְאֶת-הַדְּלָת  סָגְרוּ:  וְאֶת-הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר-פָּתַח הַבַּיִת הַכֹּהֵן  בְּסַנְגֹּרִים מְקֻטָּן וְעַד-גָּדוֹל וַיִּלְאוּ  לְמַצָּא הַפֶּתַח:</p>
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**Questions:**

- How do the allusions to these biblical sources affect the meaning of these poems?
- Does Ḥalfi’s speaker know the words of prayer and where they come from or not? If so, what does he pray for?
- Consider the juxtaposition of this book with the daily Psalm 92 (the daily Psalm for Shabbat) for Shabbat in *Siddur ‘Erev Shabbat U-Mo‘ed* (the Siddur of Beit Tefilah Israeli).



**Halfi, Session Two**

**“Crowned is Your Forehead With Black Gold”**

**Activity:**

- Read the poem and listen to the setting of the poem by Yoni Rechter, with vocals by Arik Einstein and backup vocals by Corinne El-Al, Yehudit Ravitz, and pianist Avraham Kenner. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcaYUsa9yvw>.

**Questions:**

- Note the extraordinary syntax and imagery in the poem. How do these poetic elements add to the poem’s meaning?
- How might this poem be read as a (feminist) prayer?

**“Here a Person Believed”**

I taught this poem when outdoor in-person services resumed at our synagogue during the COVID pandemic.

**Activity:**

- Read the poem as it appears in the book and listen to Arik Einstein and Shem Tov Levi’s musical setting at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4o1YN65FFdU>.
- Read Mishnah Berakhot 9:2, which outlines the various blessings to be recited over extraordinary natural phenomena.

<p>For <i>zikin</i> and <i>zeva’ot</i>, for lightning, thunder, and winds, one recites: Blessed... Whose strength and power fill the world. For mountains, hills, seas,</p>	<p>על הזיקין, ועל הזועות, ועל הברקים, ועל הרעמים, ועל הרוחות, אומר ברוך שפכו וגבורתו מלא עולם. על ההרים, ועל הגבעות,</p>
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<p>rivers, and deserts, one recites: Blessed... Author of creation. Rabbi Yehuda says: One who sees the great sea recites: Blessed... Who made the great sea, when he sees the sea intermittently. For rain and other good tidings, one recites: Blessed... Who is good and Who does good. Even for bad tidings, one recites: Blessed... the true Judge.</p>	<p>ועל הימים, ועל הנהרות, ועל המדברות, אומר ברוך עושה מעשה בראשית. רבי יהודה אומר, הרואה את הים הגדול אומר ברוך שעשה את הים הגדול, בזמן שרואה אותו לפרקים. על הגשמים ועל הבשורות הטובות אומר ברוך הטוב והמטיב, ועל שמועות רעות אומר ברוך דין האמת:</p>
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**Questions:**

- How does Halfi’s poem rewrite the idea of reciting these kinds of blessings?
- What picture does it offer of faith in the face of shock or disruption?

**Halfi, Session Three**

**“And Songs are the Dust of Antiquities”**

I taught this poem against the backdrop of the COVID prohibition against singing indoors, as a way of examining the history of the Psalm/Song of the day and the role of song in prayer.

**Activity:**

- Read the poem as it appears in the book.
- Read BT Rosh Hashanah 31a, which goes through the various psalms of the day recited in Temple times.

<p>It is taught in a <i>baraita</i> that Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Rabbi Akiva: On the first, what psalm would the Levites recite? “The earth is the Lord’s, and its fullness” (Psalms 24:1), because He acquired the world and transferred it to man, and He was the only ruler in His world. On the second what psalm would the Levites recite? “Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised” because He separated His works, and ruled over them” (Psalms 48:3). On the third day of the week they would recite, “God stands in the congregation of God” (Psalms 82:1), because He revealed the land in His wisdom and thereby prepared the world for His assembly. On the fourth day of the week they would recite: “O Lord God, to Whom vengeance belongs” (Psalms 94:1), because He created the sun and the moon, and in the future He will punish those who worship them. On the fifth the Levites would recite the psalm beginning: “Sing aloud to God our strength” (Psalms 81:2), because He created birds and fish to praise His name. On the sixth they would recite: “The Lord reigns, He is clothed with majesty” (Psalms 93:1), because on that day He completed His labor and ruled. On the seventh, they would recite the psalm beginning: “A psalm, a song for the day of Shabbat” (Psalms 92:1), as the future world will be a day that is all Shabbat.</p>	<p>תנא, רבי יהודה אומר משום רבי עקיבא: בראשון מה היו אומרים — “לה' הארץ ומלואה”, על שם שקנה והקנה ושליט בעולמו. בשני מה היו אומרים — “גדול ה' ומהוילל מאד”, על שם שחילק מעשיו ומלך עליהן. בשלישי היו אומרים: “אלהים נצב בעדת אל”, על שם שגילה ארץ בחקמתו, והכין תבל לעדתו. ברביעי היו אומרים: “אל נקמות ה'”, על שם שברא חמה ולבנה, ועתיד ליפרע מעובדיהן. בחמישי היו אומרים: “הרנינו לאלהים עזנו”, על שם שברא עופות ודגים לשבח לשמו. בששי היו אומרים: “ה' מלך גאות לבש”, על שם שגמר מלאכתו ומלך עליהן. בשביעי היו אומרים: “מזמור שיר ליום השבת”, ליום שכולו שבת.</p>
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**Questions:**

- How do you understand the first line of the poem?
- What relation does the poem propose between modern Hebrew poems/songs and the stuff and memories of antiquity?
- What is the relationship I the poem between “avak” (dust) and “avukot” (torches)?

**“Heretic’s Prayer 2”**

I taught this poem during the week of Tisha B’Av 2020.

**Activity:**

- Read the poem as it appears in the book.
- Read Psalm 122:

<p>A song of ascents. Of David. I rejoiced when they said to me, “We are going to the House of GOD.”</p> <p>Our feet stood inside your gates, O Jerusalem, Jerusalem built up, a city knit together, to which tribes would make pilgrimage, the tribes of Yah, as was enjoined upon Israel—to praise GOD’s name.</p> <p>There the thrones of judgment stood, thrones of the house of David.</p> <p>Pray for the well-being of Jerusalem; “May those who love you be at peace.</p> <p>May there be well-being within your ramparts, peace in your citadels.”</p> <p>For the sake of my kin and friends, I pray for your well-being; for the sake of the house of the ETERNAL our God, I seek your good.</p>	<p>שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת לְדָוִד שָׂמַחְתִּי בְּאֵמָרִים  לִי בַּיַּת ה' גִּלְיָה:  עָמְדוֹת הָיוּ רַגְלֵינוּ בְּשַׁעְרֵיךָ יְרוּשָׁלַם:  יְרוּשָׁלַם הַבְּנוּיָה כְּעִיר שֶׁחִבְרָה-לָהּ  יַחְדָּו:  שִׁשִּׁים עָלוּ שְׂבֻטִים שְׂבֻטֵי-הָ עַדוֹת  לְיִשְׂרָאֵל לְהִדּוֹת לְשֵׁם ה':  כִּי נִשְׁמָה וּ יְשָׁבוּ כִסְאוֹת לְמִשְׁפַּט  כִּסְאוֹת לְבַיִת דָּוִד:  שְׁאַלוּ שְׁלוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם יְשֻׁלְיוֹ אֶהְבֵּיךָ:  יְהִי-שְׁלוֹם בְּחִילֶךָ שְׁלוֹהָ בְּאַרְמְנוֹתֶיךָ:  לְמַעַן אַחֲזִי וְרַעֲי אֲדַבְּרָה-נָא שְׁלוֹם  בְּךָ:  לְמַעַן בֵּית-ה' אֶלְקֵינוּ אֲבַקֶּשֶׁה טוֹב  לְךָ:</p>
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**Questions:**

- How does Halfi’s poem revise Psalm 122?
- What does it mean for a heretic to pray?
- What does the poem strive to make God know?
- How might this poem be read as a Tisha B’Av poem.

**Halfi, Session Four**

**“At Night Birds Fell”**

I taught this poem in August, 2020 in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Isaiah. I used it as an occasion to discuss the theological implications of death as a result of natural disaster or accident.

**Activity**

- Read the poem as it appears in the book.

- Listen to the musical setting of the poem by Shem Tov Levi: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCNauA2uSII>.
- Read these verses from Deuteronomy 22:6-7:

<p>If, along the road, you chance upon a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother together with her young. Let the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life.</p>	<p>כִּי יִקְרָא קוֹרֵצְפוֹר וּלְפִנֵּיךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּכַל-עֵץ וְאִוְעַל-הָאָרֶץ אֶפְרָחִים אִו בִּיָּצִים וְהָאֵם רֹבֶצֶת עַל-הָאֶפְרָחִים אִו עַל-הַבִּיָּצִים לֹא-תִקַּח הָאֵם עִלְיֵהֶנּוּ: שְׁלַח תְּשַׁלַּח אֶת-הָאֵם וְאֶת-הַבָּנִים תִּקַּח-לָךְ לְמַעַן יֵיטֵב לָךְ וְהָאֲרָבָה יָמִים:</p>
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**Questions:**

- How does Halfi's poem engage with and revise the Deuteronomic directive?
- How might it be read as a poem of mourning over accidental death?
- How might the poem be read as a critique of parents sending their children to war?

**“Jewish Autumn”**

I taught this poem in the lead up to autumn and the High Holidays 2020.

**Activity:**

- Read the poem as it appears in the book.
- Listen to the musical setting by Arik Einstein and Yoni Rechter: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2PjQdbGVj4>.
- Read the following Yom Kippur Ne'ilah piyyut

<p>Open for us the gate [of prayer] at the time of closing the gate for the day has declined. The day declines, the sun goes down and declines, let us [yet] enter Your gates. Please Almighty, we beseech You, please bear [with] us, please pardon us, please forgive us, please have pity, please have compassion, please atone, suppress [our] sin and iniquity.</p>	<p>פֶּתַח לְנוּ שְׁעָרַי. בְּעֵת נִעְלֵית שְׁעָרַי. כִּי פָּנָה יוֹם: הַיּוֹם יִפְנֶה. הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ יָבֵא וְיִפְנֶה. נִבְוֵאָה שְׁעָרֶיךָ: אָנָּה א-ל נָא. שְׂא נָא. סְלַח נָא. מְחַל נָא. חַמְּלֵ-נָא. רַחֵם-נָא. כִּפְרֵ-נָא. כְּבוֹשׁ חַטָּא וְעוֹן.</p>
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**Questions:**

- How does the poem engage the imagery of the piyyut above?
- What characterizes a Jewish autumn?
- How does the poem contrast Jewish autumn in Israel and in the Diaspora?
- What is the role of nostalgia in the poem and in high holiday prayer?

**Chapter 4: Living with a Lesser, Closer God: Yehuda Amichai's Secular Theology of Everyday Life**  
**Introduction to Yehuda Amichai, Session 1**

**Biography:**

From the early fall of 2020, coincident with that first COVID Rosh Hashanah and the beginning of the Jewish year of 5781, through the end of the Kaddish for my mother, the winter of 2021 and the arrival of Passover, Yehuda Amichai was the featured poet of the *Shir Hadash*.

Amichai's juxtaposition of childhood teachings with adult realities, also facilitated new forms of hybrid, theological imagining and notions of intimacy with God based on everyday images and experiences.

Of all the poets in this book, Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000) is the best known to English readers, considered the most important Israeli poet of his generation, on the short list for the Nobel Prize before his death in 2000, lauded the world over, and widely translated. He was born Ludwig Pfeuffer in Wurzburg, Germany, in 1924, and immigrated with his family to Palestine in 1936. He grew up Orthodox but left the religious ways of his family as a young man. Written in beautiful, spare language belying deep complexity, his poetry often refers to and plays with biblical and liturgical sources and rituals. Amichai served as a soldier in the 1948 War where he lost treasured comrades; and his best childhood friend in Germany, a girl named Ruth, was murdered in the Holocaust. These experiences of major loss, too, color and shape his work. A major poetic influence was his Hebrew University professor, the poet Lea Goldberg, the first poet presented in this volume. Indeed, some of the poems elected here refer directly to poems by Goldberg, furnishing another form of affective and literary connection. They also took us into that singular Tishrei season, 2020 / 5781.

**“And That is Your Glory” (1958)**

This is was the first Amichai poem that I taught in the *Shir Hadash*, right before that first COVID Rosh Hashanah.

**Activity**

- Read the poem in the book.
- Read the two High Holiday piyyutim that are the basis of the title.

**Yom Kippur Evening Service**

<p>It's Your way, our God, to defer your anger, both for the wicked and the good, and this is Your glory. Act for Your own sake, our God, and not for ours. Look at our condition, how destitute and empty we are.</p>	<p>דַּרְכֶּךָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְהַאֲרִיךְ אַפֶּיךָ. לְרַעִים וְלְטוֹבִים וְהִיא תְהִלָּתְךָ: לְמַעַנְךָ אֱלֹקֵינוּ עֲשֵׂה וְלֹא לָנוּ. רְאֵה עֲמִידָתְנוּ דְלִים וְרַקִּים:</p>
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**Yom Kippur Mussaf (Additional) Service (See highlighted elements)**

<p>Though Your dread is*          א upon the faithful angels,          א who are mightily powerful          ב who are intermingled with ice,          ב who are unique in their fieriness — and Your awe is upon them!          Yet You desire praise          ג from clods of earth,          ג who dwell in a valley*          ד whose accomplishment is meager,          ד whose works are poor — and this is Your praise!</p>	<p>בְּאַרְצֵי אֱמֹן בְּאַבְרִי אֶמְצָא          בְּבִלְוֵי קָרַח בְּבִדְוֵי קֶדְח          וּמִוִּרְאָה עֲלֵיהֶם          וְאַבִּיֶת תְּהִלָּה          מִגְלוּמֵי גֹשׁ מִצְרֵי גֵיא          מִדְּלוּלֵי פֶעַל מִדְּלֵי מַעַשׁ          וְהִיא תְהִלָּתְךָ          אֲשֶׁר אֵימָתֶךָ          בְּהַמּוֹן מִלְּאָכִים בְּהִלּוּךְ מִתְּנֹת          בְּרֹעַד אֲלֵפִים בְּנֹכַח רִבְבוֹת</p>
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Though Your dread is  
 א among the multitude of angels,  
 א in the movement of their camps,  
 ו in the assembly of thousands,  
 ו in the discussion of myriads – and Your awe is upon them!

Yet You desire praise  
 ז from [man] whose glowing countenance changes,\*  
 ז whose splendor becomes extinguished,  
 א who is of limited intelligence,  
 א who contemplates wickedness – and this is Your praise!

Though Your dread is  
 ט in the lofty heavens that You measured out,  
 ט in the well-ordered celestial realm,  
 ו in those who dwell in the dark cloud,  
 ו in the curtains of Your abode – and Your awe is upon them!

Yet You desire praise  
 ב from those stained by sin,  
 ב whose stain is imbedded,  
 ל who are ensnared in a trap,  
 ל whose [livelihood] is bitter as gall – and this is Your praise!

Though Your dread is  
 מ in the pathways of Your dwelling place,  
 מ in the beautiful heights,  
 נ in the heavenly tent,  
 נ in those who guide the clouds – and Your awe is upon them!

Yet You desire praise  
 ט from those of putrid deeds,  
 ט who are sated with rage,  
 ע who are devoid of truth,  
 ע who are borne [by God] from the womb – and this is Your praise!

Though Your dread is  
 פ upon those who open their mouths to say 'Holy,'  
 פ who burst forth with 'Blessed,'\*  
 צ who have four faces,  
 צ who are covered with six wings – and Your awe is upon them!

Yet You desire praise  
 ק from those who are called nothings,  
 ק who call to You with duplicity,  
 ר who are far from the truth,  
 ר who are devoid of righteousness – and this is Your praise!

Though Your dread is  
 ש upon those who are fiery flames,  
 ש who guide the paths of water,  
 א who are in exalted heavens,  
 א who are in lofty heights – and Your awe is upon them!

Yet You desire praise  
 from flesh and blood, from vanity and nothingness, from withering  
 grass, from a passing shadow; from a fading blossom; from those whose  
 soul\* becomes terminated, whose spirit floats off, whose life flies away,  
 whose soul flits away, whose unique soul is removed; who are heard in  
 court, who die in judgment, who live through mercy, who give glory to  
 You, O Life-Giver of the world – and Your glory is upon them!

THE ARK IS CLOSED.

וּמוֹרָאָה עֲלֵיהֶם  
 וְאֲבִיֹת תְהִלָּה  
 מִזֵּינֵי שׁוֹנֵה מִזְהָר כִּכָּה  
 מְחַסְרֵי שְׂכָל מִחוּרְשֵׁי רָשָׁע  
 וְהִיא תְהִלָּתָהּ  
 אֲשֶׁר אֵימָתָהּ  
 בְּטַפּוֹת עֲרֵבוֹת בְּטַכּוּס שְׂחָקִים  
 בְּיִקְרַת עֲרָפֶל בִּירֵיעַת מְעוֹנָה  
 וּמוֹרָאָה עֲלֵיהֶם  
 וְאֲבִיֹת תְהִלָּה  
 מִכְתוּמֵי שְׁמֶץ מִכְמוּסֵי כְתָם  
 מִלְכוּדֵי פַח מִלְעוֹנֵי מָר  
 וְהִיא תְהִלָּתָהּ  
 אֲשֶׁר אֵימָתָהּ  
 בְּמִסְלּוּלֵי זְבוּל בְּמְרוֹמֵי שְׁפָר  
 בְּנִטְיֹת דֶק בְּנִחְיֹת עֵבִים  
 וּמוֹרָאָה עֲלֵיהֶם  
 וְאֲבִיֹת תְהִלָּה  
 מִסְרוּחֵי מַעַשׂ מִשְׁבְּעֵי רִגְזָה  
 מִעֲדוּרֵי אֲמַת מִעֲמוּסֵי בָטָן  
 וְהִיא תְהִלָּתָהּ  
 אֲשֶׁר אֵימָתָהּ  
 בְּפוֹתְחֵי קְדוּשׁ בְּפוֹצְחֵי כְרוֹךְ  
 בְּצִדּוּדֵי אֲרֻבַע בְּצִנּוּפֵי יֵשׁ יֵשׁ  
 וּמוֹרָאָה עֲלֵיהֶם  
 וְאֲבִיֹת תְהִלָּה  
 מִקְרוּאֵי עֵינֵי מִקְוֵאֵי בְהִנּוּף  
 מִרַחֲקֵי אֲמַת מִרִיזֵי צֶדֶק  
 וְהִיא תְהִלָּתָהּ  
 אֲשֶׁר אֵימָתָהּ  
 בְּשִׁבְיֵי אֵשׁ בְּשִׁבְלֵי מַיִם  
 בְּתַלְוֵי רוּם בְּתַלְתְּלֵי גְבוּהָה  
 וּמוֹרָאָה עֲלֵיהֶם  
 וְאֲבִיֹת תְהִלָּה  
 מִבְּשָׂר וְדָם מִהֶבֶל וְתַהוֹ  
 מִחֲצִיר יָבֵשׁ מִצֶּל עוֹבֵר  
 וּמִצִּיץ נוֹבֵל מִשְׁלֵימֵי נֶפֶשׁ  
 מִפְרִיחֵי רוּחַ וּמְעִיפֵי חַיָּה  
 וְחֲנִיטֵי נֶשְׁמָה וּמוֹצִיאֵי יְהִידָה  
 וְנִשְׁמָעִים בְּדִין וּמְתִים בְּמִשְׁפָּט  
 וְחַיִּים בְּרַחֲמִים וְנוֹתְנִים לָהּ פָּאָר חַי  
 עוֹלָמִים וְתַפְאֲרָתָהּ עֲלֵיהֶם

From "Unetanah Tokef," Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur Service:

<p>On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed - how many shall pass away and how many shall be born, who shall live and who shall die, who in good time, and who by an untimely death, who by water and who by fire, who by sword and who by wild beast, who by famine and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague, who by strangulation and who by lapidation, who shall have rest and who wander, who shall be at peace and who pursued, who shall be serene and who tormented, who shall become impoverished and who wealthy, who shall be debased, and who exalted. But repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severity of the decree.</p>	<p>בראש השנה יכתובון, וביום צום  כפור יחתמון. כמה יעברון, וכמה  יבראו, מי יחיה, ומי ימות, מי  יבצע, ומי לא יבצע, מי במים, ומי  באש, מי בחרב, ומי בחיה, מי  ברעב, ומי בצמא, מי ברעש, ומי  במגפה, מי בחניקה, ומי בסקילה, מי  בניח, ומי ינוע, מי ישקט, ומי יטרף,  מי ישלו, ומי יתסר, מי יעני, ומי  יעשיר, מי ישפל, ומי ירום. ותשובה  ותפלה וצדקה מעבירין את רע  הגזרה.</p>
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**Question:**

- How does Amichai’s poem comment on and revise these traditional liturgical texts?
- What is the significance of the images of hybridity in this poem?
- How is God depicted in the poem?
- Whose glory is in the poem?

**Amichai, Session 2**

**“In the Morning I Shall Stand By Your Bed” (1971)**

I taught this poem after Sukkot in 2021, as a reflection of getting up early in the morning to go to shul and on the idea of love and prayer as forms of addiction.

**Activity:**

- Read the poem and listen to the musical setting of the poem at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scOhhhhfqWE>.
- Read the “Ve’Ahavta” prayer from Deuteronomy 6 and Zechariah 3:1-5

<p>I was further shown Joshua, the high priest, standing before the angel of GOD, and the Accuser standing at his right to accuse him.  But [the angel of] GOD said to the Accuser, “GOD rebukes you, O Accuser; GOD who has chosen Jerusalem rebukes you! For this is a brand plucked from the fire.”  Now Joshua was clothed in filthy garments when he stood before the angel.  The latter spoke up and said to his attendants, “Take the filthy garments off him!” And he said to him, “See, I have removed your guilt from you, and you shall be clothed in [priestly] robes.”  Then he gave the order, “Let a pure diadem be placed on his head.” And they placed the pure diadem on his head and clothed him in [priestly] garments, as the angel of GOD stood by.</p>	<p>ויראני את־יהושע־הַגָּדוֹל עֹמֵד  לְפָנַי מִלְאָכָה הִיא וְהַשָּׂטָן עֹמֵד עַל־יְמִינִי  לְשֹׁטְנוֹ:  וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־הַשָּׂטָן יִגְעַר יְהוָה בְּךָ  הַשָּׂטָן וַיִּגְעַר הִיא בְּךָ הַבְּחֵר בִּירוּשָׁלַם  הַלּוֹא זֶה אֱוִד מִצֵּל מֵאֵשׁ:  וַיְהוֹשֶׁעַ הָיָה לְבָשׁ בְּגָדִים צוּאִים וְעֹמֵד  לְפָנַי הַמִּלְאָכָה:  וַיַּעַן וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־הַעֹמְדִים לְפָנָיו לֵאמֹר  הֲסִירוּ הַבְּגָדִים הַצּוּאִים מֵעַלָּיו וַיֹּאמֶר  אֵלָיו רְאֵה הַעֲבַרְתִּי מֵעֲלֶיךָ עוֹנֶיךָ  וְהִלְבַּשׁ אֶתְךָ מִתְּלֻצוֹת:  וַאֲמַר יְעִימוּ צִנּוּף טְהוֹר עַל־רֹאשׁוֹ  וַיִּשְׂימוּ הַצִּנּוּף הַטְּהוֹר עַל־רֹאשׁוֹ  וַיִּלְבְּשׁוּהוּ בְּגָדִים וּמִלְאָכָה הִיא עֹמֵד:</p>
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**Questions:**

- How does Amichai’s poem engage and reinterpret these biblical / liturgical sources?
- How might it be read as a prayer?
- What is the relationship in the poem (and in your view) between love, daily prayer, and addiction?

**“Half the People in the World” (1958)**

I taught this poem in the aftermath of the 2020 Presidential election as a way of engaging with issues of social and political polarization.

**Activity:**

- Read the poem as it appears in the book and listen to the musical setting: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPXC1M7nqkU>.
- Read the biblical verses pertaining to the giving of *maḥatzit hashekel*.

**Exodus 30: 11-15.**

<p>GOD spoke to Moses, saying:          When you take a census of the Israelites according to their army enrollment, each shall pay GOD a ransom for himself on being enrolled, that no plague may come upon them through their being enrolled.          This is what everyone who is entered in the records shall pay: a half-shekel by the sanctuary weight—twenty gerahs to the shekel—a half-shekel as an offering to GOD.          Everyone who is entered in the records, from the age of twenty years up, shall give GOD’s offering: the rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than half a shekel when giving GOD’s offering as expiation for your persons.</p>	<p>וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:          כִּי תִשָּׂא אֶת־רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְפָקְדֵיהֶם וְנִתְּנוּ          אִישׁ כְּפָר נַפְשׁוֹ לַיהוָה בְּפָקֹד אֹתָם וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה          בָּהֶם נֶגֶף בְּפָקֹד אֹתָם:          זֶה   יִתְּנוּ כָל־הָעֶבֶר עַל־הַפְּקֻדִים מִחֻצֵי הַשֶּׁקֶל          בַּשֶּׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ עֶשְׂרִים גֵּרָה הַשֶּׁקֶל מִחֻצֵי הַשֶּׁקֶל          תְּרוּמָה לַיהוָה:          כָּל הָעֶבֶר עַל־הַפְּקֻדִים מִבְּנֵי עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעְלָה          יִתְּנוּ תְּרוּמַת ה':          הָעֶשְׂרִי לֹא־יִרְבֶּה וְהַדֹּל לֹא יִמְעֹט מִמִּחֻצֵי          הַשֶּׁקֶל לְתַת אֶת־תְּרוּמַת יְהוָה לְכַפֵּר          עַל־נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם:          וְלִקְחֹתֶיךָ אֶת־כֶּסֶף הַכֶּפָּרִים מֵאֵת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנָתַתָּ          אֹתוֹ עַל־עֲבֹדַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְהָיָה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל          לְזִכְרוֹן לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לְכַפֵּר עַל־נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם: {פ}</p>
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A White Housing Project in Tel Aviv

**Questions:**

- What was the purpose of the Biblical levying of *maḥatzit hashekel*?

- What is the significance of Amichai's use of the term maḥatzit as opposed to the more typical ḥatzi?
- What are the problems with social polarization as seen in the poem?
- What is the significance of the image of the white housing project?

### Amichai Session 3

#### “God’s Hand in the World” (1958)

I taught this poem, which refers to the poet’s pain being “a grandfather,” and having “birthed two generations” on the day that we re-interred the remains of my father and grandmother so that they could rest next to my mother. The poem, which compares God’s hand in the world to the hands of the poet’s mother in “the guts of a slaughtered chicken on Sabbath eve” provided a vehicle for remembering my mother and grandmother, but also to consider a view of God’s working in the world.

#### Activity:

- For those observing their year of mourning, especially for a mother, invite them to share memories of their mothers, their cooking, or other significant acts of maternal care.
- Ask the group to create their own simile for God based on the signature acts of their mothers and fathers.

#### “A Sort of an End of Days” (1958)

#### Activity:

- Read the following biblical texts:

Micah 4:1-4

<p>In the days to come, the Mount of GOD’s House shall stand firm above the mountains; and it shall tower above the hills. The peoples shall gaze on it with joy, and the many nations shall go and shall say: “Come, Let us go up to the Mount of GOD, to the House of the God of Jacob; that we may be instructed in God’s ways, and that we may walk in godly paths.” For instruction shall come forth from Zion, The word of GOD from Jerusalem. Thus [God] will judge among the many peoples, And arbitrate for the multitude of nations, However distant; And they shall beat their swords into plowshares And their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up sword against nation; They shall never again know war; but every family shall sit under its own vine and fig tree With no one to disturb them.</p>	<p>וְהָיָה אִי בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים יְהִיָּה הָר בֵּית־ה' נִכּוֹן כְּרֹאשׁ הַהָרִים וְנִשְׂאָ הוּא מִגְבְּעוֹת וְנִהְרֹו עֲלָיו עַמִּים: וְהָלְכוּ גוֹיִם רַבִּים וְאָמְרוּ לְכוּ וְנִעֲלֶה אֶל־הַר־ה' וְאֶל־בֵּית אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב וְיִזְרְנוּ מִדְרָגָתוֹ וְנִלְמַד בְּאַחֲרֵיתוֹ כִּי מִצִּיּוֹן תֵּצֵא תוֹרָה וְדִבְרֵי־ה' מִירוּשָׁלַם: וְשֹׁפֵט בֵּין עַמִּים רַבִּים וְהוֹכִיחַ לְגוֹיִם עֲצָמִים עַד־רִחֹק וְכַתְּמוּ חַרְבֹתֵיהֶם לְאַתִּים וְחַנְיֹתֵיהֶם לְמִזְמָרוֹת לֹא־יִשְׂאוּ גוֹי אֶל־גוֹי חֶרֶב וְלֹא־יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד מִלְחָמָה: וְיָשְׁבוּ אִישׁ תַּחַת תַּחַת גִּפְנוֹ וְתַחַת תַּאֲנָתוֹ וְאִין מִחֲרִיד כִּי־פִי ה' צְבָאוֹת דִּבֶּר:</p>
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Isaiah 2:4

<p>The word that Isaiah son of Amoz prophesied concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In the days to come the Mount of GOD’s House shall stand firm above the mountains and tower above the hills; and all the nations shall gaze on it with joy. And the many peoples shall go and say: “Come, let us go up to the</p>	<p>הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר חָזָה יִשְׁעִיָּהוּ בֶן־אֲמוּץ עַל־יְהוּדָה וְיִירוּשָׁלַם: וְהָיָה אִי בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים נִכּוֹן יְהִיָּה הָר בֵּית־ה' כְּרֹאשׁ הַהָרִים וְנִשְׂאָ מִגְבְּעוֹת וְנִהְרֹו אֲלָיו כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם: וְהָלְכוּ עַמִּים רַבִּים וְאָמְרוּ</p>
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<p>Mount of GOD, to the House of the God of Jacob; that we may be instructed in God's ways, and that we may walk in God's paths." For instruction shall come forth from Zion, the word of GOD from Jerusalem. Thus [God] will judge among the nations and arbitrate for the many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war.</p>	<p>לְכוּ וּנְעֻלָה אֶל־הַר־יְהוָה אֶל־בַּיִת אֱלֹהֵי  יְעֻקֵּב וְיִרְנֹנוּ מִדְרָכָיו וְנִלְכֶה בְּאַרְחֵיהֶם  כִּי מִצִּיּוֹן תֵּצֵא תוֹרָה וְדִבְרֵי־יְהוָה  מִירוּשָׁלַם: וְשִׁפְטוּ בֵּין הַגּוֹיִם וְהוֹכִיחַ  לְעַמִּים רַבִּים וְכַתְּתוּ חַרְבוֹתֵם לְאַתְּיִם  וְחַנְיֹתוֹתֵיהֶם לְמִזְמֵרוֹת לֹא־יִשָּׂא גּוֹי  אֶל־גּוֹי תָּרֵב וְלֹא־יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד מִלְחָמָה:</p>
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**Questions:**

- How does the Amichai re-imagine the “end of days” prophecies?
- What is the role of humor and irony in this poem?
- Identify and discuss the various metaphors in the poem?

**Amichai, Session 4**

**“My Mother Baked Me the Whole World” (1955)**

I taught this poem on the morning of the last Kaddish for my mother, which also coincided with Hanukkah.

**Activity**

- Read the poem as found in the book.
- Read this section from the Shulhan Arukh that deals with Hanukkah customs, especially pertaining to women:

**Shulhan Arukh, Oraḥ Hayyim, 670:1-2**

<p>On the 25th of Kislev (start) the eight days of Hanukkah, and they are prohibited for eulogizing and fasting, but are permitted for doing work. The women have made it a custom not to do work while the candles are burning. And there is [an opinion] that says that we may not be lenient for them.</p> <p>The many meals which we add on [these days] are voluntary meals, since [the Sages] did not establish them as [days of] feasting and joy. Rem"a: But some say that there is somewhat of a mitzvah in adding meals, because during those days was the Dedication of the Altar (Abraham Kara of Prague). It is the custom to recite hymns and songs of praise during the feasts added on them, and then they are mitzvah meals (Book of Customs). Some say that cheese should be eaten during Hanukkah, because a miracle was done though milk which Yehudit fed the enemy.</p>	<p><b>דברים האסורים והמותרים בחנוכה ובו ג"ס:</b>  בכ"ה בכסליו (מתחילים) שמונת ימי חנוכה ואסורים בהספד ותענית אבל מותרין בעשיית מלאכה ונוהגות הנשים שלא לעשות מלאכה בעוד שהנרות דולקות ויש מי שאומר שאין להקל להם: ריבוי הסעודות שמרבים בהם הם סעודות הרשות שלא קבעום למשה ושמה: הגה וי"א שיש קצת מצוה בריבוי הסעודות משום דבאותן הימים היה חנוכת המזבח [מהר"א מפראג] ונוהגין לומר זמירות ושבחות בסעודות שמרבים בהם ואז הוי סעודת מצוה [מנהגים] י"א שיש לאכול גבינה בחנוכה לפי שהנס נעשה בחלב שהאכילה יהודית את האויב [כל בו ור"ן]:</p>
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- Read [this summary](#) of the story of Judith giving cheese to Holfernes.
- Read / listen to Bialik's classic Hanukkah song, "[In Honor of Hanukkah](#)," which includes a description of a mother giving her child (potato or perhaps, cheese) levivot.

**Hayyim Nahman Bialik, “In Honor of Hanukkah” (1916)**

In Honor of Hanukkah	לכבוד החנוכה
<p>My father lit some candles for me            And a Shamash that looks like a torch.            Do you know why he did so?            To celebrate Chanukah!</p>	<p>אָבִי הִדְלִיק נְרוֹת לִי            וְשָׁמֶשׁ לוֹ אֲבוּקָה –            יוֹדְעִים אַתֶּם לְכַבּוֹד מִי?            לְכַבּוֹד הַחֲנֻכָּה!</p>
<p>My teacher gave me a dreidel            Cast in lead.            Do you know why he did so?            To celebrate Chanukah!</p>	<p>מוֹרֵי הֵבִיא פְּרָפֶר לִי            כָּו-עוֹפְרֵת יְצוּקָה –            יוֹדְעִים אַתֶּם לְכַבּוֹד מִי?            לְכַבּוֹד הַחֲנֻכָּה!</p>
<p>My mother gave me a doughnut,            A warm, sweet doughnut to eat.            Do you know why she did so?            To celebrate Chanukah!</p>	<p>אִמִּי נָתַנָּה לְבִיבָה לִי,            לְבִיבָה חֲמֵה, מְתוּקָה –            יוֹדְעִים אַתֶּם לְכַבּוֹד מִי?            לְכַבּוֹד הַחֲנֻכָּה!</p>
<p>My uncle gave me a small gift,            A coin solitary and worn.            Do you know why he did so?            To celebrate Chanukah!</p>	<p>דוּדֵי נָתַן תְּשׁוּרָה לִי:            פְּרוּטָה אַחַת שְׁחוּקָה –            יוֹדְעִים אַתֶּם לְכַבּוֹד מִי?            לְכַבּוֹד הַחֲנֻכָּה!</p>

**Questions:**

- Do you see any connections between the Bialik children’s song and the Amichai poem and the Judith story?
- How might the poem be read as a eulogy / elegy for the poet’s mother?
- Contrast the world of the poet’s mother’s making and the “real world” and the challenges occasioned by the latter.

**“Whoever Wrapped in a Tallit” (1998)**

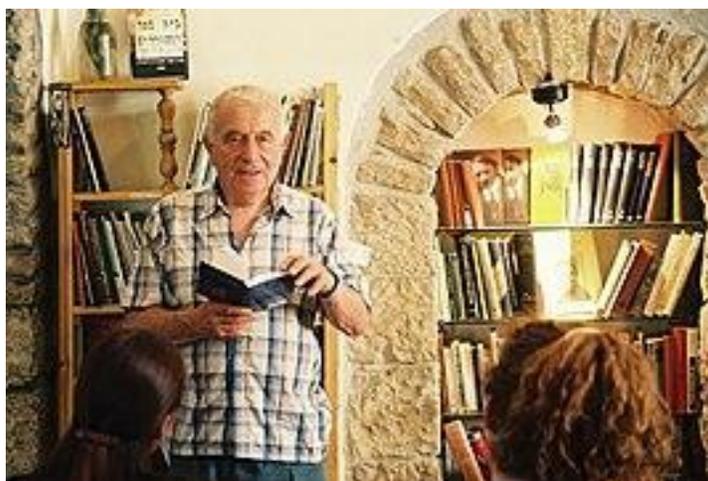
I taught this poem after the conclusion of the Kaddish for my mother, that is, after twenty-two straight months of Kaddish recitation. It this became an occasion to meditate on habits that are hard to break.

**Activity:**

- Take out a tallit, and demonstrate the various ritual moments of donning it, as you read the poem.
- Enumerate (or write on a board) all the various metaphors offered in the poem for the donning of a tallit.

**Questions:**

- How do these various metaphors demonstrate continuity in the face of disruption?
- How do they dramatize the activities of translation as well as religious renewal and adaptation?



*Yehuda Amichai Reading at Temol Shilshom in Jerusalem*

### **Amichai Session 5**

#### **“Men, Women and Children” (1980)**

This is a poem about value triads, recalling Lea Goldberg’s “By Three Things. In teaching the poem I reflected on the relationship between Goldberg and Amichai, and the historic paradigm shift that it represented, that of a female poet mentoring a male poet. And I reconsidered the activity of enumerating core values (often in groups of three.

#### **Activity:**

- Reread the Goldberg poem from earlier on in the book/class.
- Read the Amichai poem, and count the number of triads.

#### **Questions:**

- Compare Goldberg and Amichai’s treatment of the idea of three core values.
- What do these various groups of three signify and why does Amichai want to belong so much to one of them, especially the negative ones?
- What do you make of the ending of the poem (the invocation of “Holy, holy, holy,” and “Quiet, quiet, quiet?”)
- How might this poem be read as a prayer?

#### **“God Has Mercy on Kindergarten Children” (1955)**

I taught this poem while doing the back-breaking work of cleaning out my mother-in-law’s house in Florida. The poem considers the idea of divine mercy and why it seems operative for children and not adults.

#### **Activity:**

- Read the poem in the book.
- Read / listen to Amichai’s other famous poem about divine mercy, “El Male Raḥamim” (Barbara and inyamin Harshav: **“God Full of Mercy,” *Bemerḥak Shtei Tikvot* (1959)**

<p>God full of mercy.  Were it not for the God full of mercy  there would be mercy in the world,  And not just in Him.  I, who picked flowers on the mountain  and looked out on all the valleys,  I, who carried corpses from copses<sup>2</sup>  know to say that the world is empty of mercy.  I who was Salt Sultan by the sea,”  who stood undecided by my window,  who counted angels’ steps,  Whose heart lifted weights of pain  in terrible tournaments,  I, who uses just a small part  of the words in the dictionary.  I, who must solve riddles against my will,  know that were God not full of mercy,  there would be mercy in the world  and not just in Him.</p>	<p style="text-align: right;"><b>אל מלא רחמים</b></p> <p style="text-align: right;">אל מלא רחמים,  אלמלא האל מלא רחמים  היו הרחמים בעולם ולא רק בו.  אני, שקטפתי פרחים בהר  והסתכלתי אל כל העמקים,  אני, שהבאתי גויות מן הגבעות,  יודע לספר שהעולם ריק מרחמים.  אני שהייתי מלך המלח ליד הים,  שעמדתי בלי החלטה ליד חלונני,  שספרתי צעדי מלאכים,  שלבתי הרים משקלות כאב  בתחריות הנוראות.  אני שמשתמש רק בחלק קטן  מן המלים שבמלון.  אני, שמכרח לפתור חידות בעל כרחי  יודע כי אלמלא האל מלא רחמים  היו הרחמים בעולם  ולא רק בו.</p>
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Questions:

- How do each of these poems challenge the notion of divine mercy?
- What sources of comfort or strategies of mercy are suggested in each of these poems to compensate for what seems to be a lack of divine mercy?

**Amichai Session Six**

**“I’ve Filtered from the Book of Esther” (1977)**

I taught this poem in the lead up to the second COVID Purim.

**Activity**

- Invite members of the group to recall their experiences of commemorating Purim during the pandemic.
- Have them consider the analogy between COVID restrictions and the idea of a filtered bible.

**Question**

- What is the purpose of filtering the Bible?
- What is the common denominator between the various filtered biblical elements enumerated in this poem?
- What is the connection between the filtering of the Bible and the way the poet answers the question about the women who recently died young?

<sup>2</sup> Lit. corpses from hills. Copse chosen for wordplay between “geviot” and “geva’ot”

- What are the risks of this kind of filtering? How might these risks be compared to our shared experience of COVID lockdown?

### **“My Father on Passover Eve” (1968)**

I taught this poem, which describe the poet’s father doing the “search for Leaven” ritual, in the lead-up to the second COVID Passover, and my second without either of my parents.

#### **Activity**

- Invite members of the group to share recollections, if they have them, of doing the “Search for Leaven” with their parents, family members or teachers.
- Read the poem as it appears in the book.

#### **Questions:**

- Whom do you think the speaker is speaking to in the poem?
- What is the “last night” referred to in the poem?
- What is the example ( or parable) of the poet’s father and what does it mean?
- What does it mean to be a “director of duplicity” and how can that be seen as a good thing or as a model of a certain kind of modern, reconstituted faith?

## **Chapter 5 Searching for Female Liturgical Voices: Mourning and Studying with Rachel Morpurgo**

### **Introduction to Rachel Morpurgo (1790-1871), Session 1**

#### **Biography:**

Since 2018, I had been studying toward rabbinic ordination at Yeshivat Maharat, one of the first Orthodox seminaries to ordain women. The combination of my rabbinical studies, my more than two consecutive years of thrice-daily Tefillah attendance, frequently with few (if any) other women there with me, and the ongoing COVID crisis sent me looking for a role-model-poet to present in the next unit of the *Shir Hadash*.

For me, that model was Rachel Morpurgo of Trieste, a devout, Orthodox woman scholar and the first modern Hebrew woman poet. Morpurgo was born Rachel Luzzatto in 1790 in Trieste, Italy, and was a descendant of an eminent line of rabbis, among them the Kabbalist and Philosopher Rabbi Moses Hayyim Luzzato (1797-1746), author of *Mesilat Yesharim* (The Path of the Just), a famous ethical tract. Rachel had an especially close relationship with her younger cousin and study partner, the philosopher and maskil, Samuel David Luzzatto (1800–1865). It was this cousin who sent Rachel’s Hebrew poems to the maskilic journal *Kokhvei Yitzhak*, where she became the only female contributor to its pages and something of a celebrity among male Jewish Enlightenment scholars. I decided to translate Morpurgo’s poetry, despite the great challenge it poses to the translator, because it represented a rare early example of female-authored religious poetry in Hebrew.

Morpurgo was a woman both ahead of and behind her time, who began studying Talmud as a teenager, and the Zohar as a young adult, and who remained deeply devout despite the secularizing trends that began to sweep through Europe over the course of her long lifetime. Some of her poems were explicitly liturgical. Others were written for communal events, weddings or funerals or as greetings to family and community members, and as such had historical or life-cycle significance. Still others were written in (sardonic) response to the

inordinate and inadvertently insulting praise that was heaped upon her as an “exceptional woman” by her male colleagues. As such, her work speaks to the ongoing questions of the place of women in the world of Hebrew letters, Torah scholarship and leadership, issues near and dear to me and my community, which has given rise to the first Orthodox women rabbis in North America.



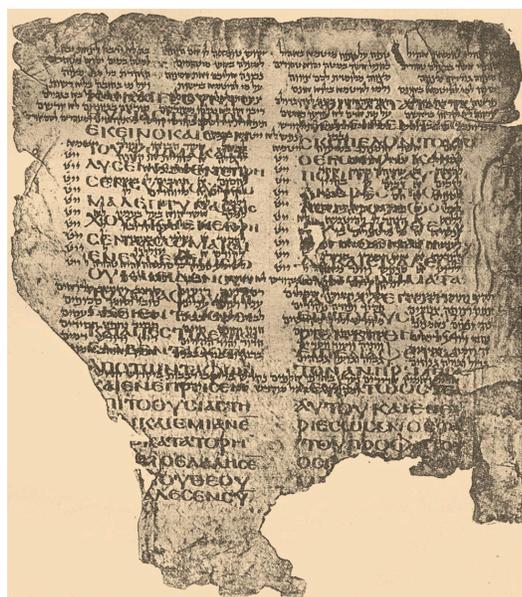
*The only extant photo of Rachel Morpurgo*

### “Behold the Letter” (1851)

I taught this poem, a letter of regret over not being able to spend Passover with her family in Padua, as a way of responding to the reality of the second COVID Passover, with many of us still not able to spend the holiday with our close relatives and friends.

#### Activity:

- Invite the group to reflect on their COVID Passovers and who they weren’t able to spend the holiday with.
- See this image of a Hebrew palimpsest:



- Explain Tova Cohen's idea of Morpurgo's poetry as a kind of palimpsest, written as if upon layers of prior writings.
- See this article about Maskilot (Enlightened female Hebraists) and about their letter writing: <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/maskilot-nineteenth-century>.
- Read the poem and consider the significance of its structure and rhyme scheme.

**Questions:**

- The poem is presented as a letter. What other biblical or rabbinic letters can you think of and what might it mean for Morpurgo to be inserting herself into that tradition?
- How does the poem alternate from conventional feminine images to those that shatter or challenge convention?
- What poetic figures of speech are used to depict the transgression of limitations?

**“And Thus Sang Rachel About Her Wedding” (1819)**

Morpurgo wrote this poem after finally being allowed by her parents to marry her chosen mate, Jacob Morpurgo. I taught it as a path-breaking example of a maskilah (female Enlightened woman) challenging the system of arranged marriage and as a possible additional to Jewish wedding liturgy.

**Activity:**

- Discuss the components of the traditional wedding ceremony and the lack of female voices therein.
- Read Morpurgo's poem and identify the various allusions to classical sources.

**Questions:**

- How does the poem alternate between a personal and a communal focus?
- How the poem both conform to and challenge the traditional wedding liturgy?

**Rachel Morpurgo, Session Two**

**“See This is New” (1860)**

I taught this poem that considers the idea of newness in Judaism as a way of considering the so-called novelty of feminism and Orthodox feminist leadership. The poem includes a very dense network of allusions of classical sources and it requires at least one full session to be unpacked.

**Activity:**

- Read this verse from Ecclesiastes 1:10, which furnishes the poem's title

<p><b>10</b> Is there a thing about which it can be said: 'See, this is new'?--It has always and already been this way for eons, before any of us.</p>	<p>יִישׁ דְּבַר שִׁיאֲמַר רְאֵה-זֶה, הַדָּשׁ הוּא: כְּבָר הָיָה לְעֹלָמִים, אֲשֶׁר הָיָה מִלְפָּנָיו.</p>
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- Read these verses from the book Judges about the prophet Deborah:

**a) Judges 4**

<p><b>4</b> Now Deborah, a prophetess, a woman of torches, she judged Israel at that time.  <b>5</b> And she sat under the palm-tree of Deborah between Ramah and Beth-el in the hill-country of Ephraim; and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment.</p>	<p>ד. ודבורה אשה נביאה, אשת  לפידות--היא שפטה את-ישראל, בעת  ההיא.  ה. והיא יושבת תחת-תמר דבורה, בין  הרמה ובין בית-אל--בהר אפרים; ויעלו  אליה בני ישראל, למשפט.</p>
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**b) Judges 5**

<p><b>1</b> And Deborah sang, and Barak the son of Abinoam with her on that day, saying: [...]  <b>7</b> Rulers ceased in Israel, they ceased, until I arose, Deborah, until I arose, mother in Israel.  <b>24</b> Blessed above women shall Jael be, the wife of Heber the Kenite, above women in the tent shall she be blessed.</p>	<p><b>א</b> ותשר דבורה, וברק בן-אבינעם, ביום  ההוא, לאמר. [...]  <b>ז</b> חדלו פרזון בישראל, חדלו-- עד שקמתי  דבורה, שקמתי אם בישראל. [...]  <b>כד</b> תברך, מנשים--יעל, אשת חקר הקיני:  מנשים באהל, תברך.</p>
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- Read this tribute poem to Morpurgo by Leopold Winkler, which was part of the impetus for her writing “See This is New.”

תהלה לדלל. \*

von Joseph Winkler.

אחת לנו קטנה \*\* ושדך כנפילות  
ללך מסכן שמת עבר הארוב תלפוח שקלות  
תעקרו רבש וחלב כאם נאמנה.  
במרת פיה תעוררו תקיץ הנער  
מפרי דיה ילפש עוז לא יבוש בשער  
ובן העשה לוח שמי שנה בשנה.

בנשים באהל הקרן רחל הקנה  
כי סבל בנות חיל עדי הנה העקרה  
לא ראיתי כדלה. את אשת סלאות!  
יען כי תרל תולת לך אנה כנשים \*\*\*  
לדת ילדי שעשועים ורע אנשים  
חמת לא תאמנה עדה גם בסלאבי זכאות.

רבה לעת צאת השואבות גם היא יצאה  
וכנה לשאוב טמ על שכמה נשאח  
מן הבאר אשר יאפו שקה כל העדרים.  
אך את לבדו עלית בין לבבי טמנים  
לחשקות כל חכמי לב טמור השמים  
סבאר לך שאבת טמ חיים קרים.

רחל בקשה מאישה לתת לה זרע  
כנשי הטון עם קצרי שקל וגדלי פרע  
בקשה קחרי את גם את נפשה לקחת:  
ואף תרית וולדך ואין איש אהך בקית  
לדת נשעי נעקנים כנפון הנית  
וערבו לך חך קשפון העוקמת.

\* היה חסדו המלכותי של רחל לזמאמן חסד המלכותה של חסד חסדו של  
חיים פשלי וזמר גודו המדות מדי חסדים למיר במקלות וחמון חסדו של  
קודם לסלל והחנה ולא יסח.  
\*\* כ"ט וחס קטנות חס.  
\*\*\* וזך חסד לנגות עיון כנזרי סלל והחנה חס.

עניי לשה רבות לא ראו אור קחרי  
ועיניך כלינים לשונך עם סופר קחרי  
שואשנים קסמת ולא יעלה בידך כל חס. \*  
היא כמד טשכב אהבים היראי כנה נהנה  
במבור תמנת נפשה היו לאחזקה לטנה  
ואת חלקה היראוי לכל איש לרית הנעים

אז תשייר ישיי גאון פרים הנביאה  
כסחלת טמנים הנה כדה הנביאה  
אך ישיי חרש קפה לא חשטיעו  
אך כחור חרים כסיה דכבי אחיה יעט  
ישיי לוי כי נאהי שחנים וי שפעט  
וכנוד לשונך חרשים לבקרים יודיע.

ורבנה אשת נביאה אשת לשדות  
גם כסיה שפעט ישיי ירירות  
אך כי כנאון רוחה היא סאר התגשאות:  
עד שפמתי רבירה' הישטיקה כנאני  
שנקה יסללך ור' דכבי חכס סלכינו  
והתלחף רחל דכל קעות ארץ טרעה.

וחנה גם היא אלהים ישיי חוד שרתה  
בישמת אשת הישכילת חנה שפעטת באחרתה  
אך כי היא כרשטי כנאה חכעודה שיעית:  
זס נקם בלכה לקראת פנינה צרתה  
אך אליה דרקה כשתת שמה לספרתה  
לרבת כנים אוסללה כננו סיערתי.

אך כך כנאה הקמת לא נראו כשירמך  
כי את מי תקנאי וסי היא כת צרתך?  
בין לבכים קננה לכה נגדה חסרת!  
ועתה כית יעקב לנו גא הנברים  
סה לכם לשמות טבורות נשברים  
שתו כבאר שמת עבר. באר יד אשה חסרת

\* ללות כי טיעע ללות.

Select translated passages:

[...] Blessed among women in the tent shall be dear Rachel  
For among the daughters of valor in the company of barren Hannah  
I've seen none like you! Woman of wonders!  
For you have ceased to be in the manner of women.

[...] Rachel asked her husband to give her a child  
Like so many other women short in intelligence and long in temper  
She sought in anger and also to take her own life  
But you were with child, without a man with you in the house  
You birthed delightful poems like grapevines and olives  
Pleasing to the palate like healing oil.

[...] And then Miriam sang a song of exaltation  
[...] but her timbrel played **no new song**.

[...] Deborah was a prophet and a woman of torches  
 And from her we heard a prayer poem  
 But in the exultation of her song she raised herself up arrogantly  
 In sounding “Until I arose Deborah” in our ears  
 Her praise should have been that of our wise God King  
 But your praise, Rachel, is known all over the land.

[...] She [Hannah] aroused the sparks of envy with her songs  
 [...] But no envy or revenge are seen in your poems  
 Who is there for you to envy, who after all is your rival?

- Read this Talmudic passage that Morpurgo alludes to in the first line of the poem  
**BT Moed Katan 25b**

<p>When the soul of Rabina went into repose, a certain orator opened [his funerary oration] thus:          ‘Ye Palms, sway your heads [and deplore]          A Saint, a noble Palm that is no more          Who days and nights in meditation spent;          For him, day and night, let us lament.’          Said R. Ashi to Bar-Kipok, What would you have said /          on such a day [about me]? He responded thus:          ‘If upon Cedars a flame should fall          What becomes of the moss on the wall?          If Leviathan by hook be hauled to land,          What hope have fishes of a shallow strand?          If fish in rushing stream by hook be caught          What death may in marshy ponds be wrought!’          Said Bar Abin to him: ‘God forbid that I should talk of          "hook" or "flame" in connection with the righteous.’          Then what would you say? — I would say:          ‘Weep for the mourners          Not for what is lost:          He found him rest;          ‘Tis we who are left distressed’.          R. Ashi was’ offended by them, and their feet were          turned. On that day [of R. Ashi’s demise] they did not          come to make a lament for him, and that is what R. Ashi          had said: ‘Neither shall Bar-Kipok nor shall Bar-Abin          take his shoes off [for me]’.</p>	<p>כי נח נפשיה דרבינא פתח עליה ההוא          ספדנא תמרים הניעו ראש על צדיק כתמר          נשים לילות כימים [על משים לילות כימים]          א"ל רב אשי לבר קיפוק ההוא יומא מאי          אמרת אמר ליה אמינא:          אם בארזים נפלה שלהבת          מה יעשו איזובי קיר?          לויתן בחכה הועלה          מה יעשו דגי רקק?          בנחל שוטף נפלה חכה          מה יעשו מי גבים?          א"ל בר אבין חס ושלום דחכה ושלהבת          בצדיקי אמינא. ומאי אמרת? אמינא:          בכו לאבלים ולא לאבידה          שהיא למנוחה ואנו לאנחה.          חלש דעתיה עלייהו ואתהפוך כרעייהו.          ההוא יומא לא אתו לאספודיה והיינו דאמר          רב אשי לא בר קיפוק חליץ ולא בר אבין          חליץ.</p>
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- Read this biblical passages from 2 Kings 12: 7-9 about the failure of King Jehoash’s advisors to repair the breach in the Temple:

<p>But in the twenty-third year of King Jehoash, [it was found that] the priests had not made the repairs on the House.</p>	<p>וַיְהִי בְשָׁנַת עֶשְׂרִים וּשְׁלֹשׁ שָׁנָה לְמֶלֶךְ יְהוֹאָשׁ          לֹא־חִזְקוּ הַכֹּהֲנִים אֶת־בְּדֵק הַבַּיִת:          וַיִּקְרָא הַמֶּלֶךְ יְהוֹאָשׁ לַיהוֹדָע הַכֹּהֵן וְלַכֹּהֲנִים          וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מִדְּוַע אֵינְכֶם מְחַזְּקִים אֶת־בְּדֵק</p>
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<p>So King Jehoash summoned the priest Jehoiada and the other priests and said to them, “Why have you not kept the House in repair? Now do not accept money from your benefactors anymore, but have it donated for the repair of the House.” The priests agreed that they would neither accept money from the people nor make repairs on the House.</p>	<p>הַבַּיִת וְעֵתָה אֲלֵי־תְקוּחוֹ־כִסֶּה מֵאֵת מְכַרְיָכֶם כִּי־לְבַדְק הַבַּיִת תִּתְנַהֲגוּ: וַיֵּאָתוּ הַכֹּהֲנִים לְבַלְתִּי קַחַת־כֶּסֶף מֵאֵת הָעָם וּלְבַלְתִּי תִזְקַ אֶת־לְבַדְק הַבַּיִת:</p>
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**Questions:**

- What is the central idea or concern of the poem?
- How does it respond to Winkler’s supposed poem of praise?
- What argument does it make about the supposed newness of female leadership? And about male poets and leaders of the past?
- What do you make of Morpurgo’s statements of self-diminution at the end of the poem?

**Rachel Morpurgo, Session Three**

**“On Those Fleeing the Cholera Epidemic” (1855)**

Morpurgo wrote this poem in response to the 1855 cholera epidemic as well as to a prior prayer for the end of cholera written by the Chief Rabbi of Trieste, R. Shabetai Elhanan Treves. The poem became a very apt vehicle for reflecting on the COVID reality of that time.

**Activity:**

- Invite the group to reflect on their experiences of medical care and guidance during COVID and on their theology of illness.
- Read R. Treves’ prayer

<p>This prayer was composed by R. Shabbetai Elhanan Treves for the cessation of the plague of 1836, whose recitation became the practice of the Jews of Trieste to pray in the time of plague. Hope of Israel, Savior in troubled times, who heals the broken hearted, and binds their wounds, look upon us with your compassionate eye for our hearts have grown faint. Pangs and shudders have gripped us, in <b>your pouring out your wrath</b> on this city and in the plague striking Your close people Israel. We come before you because You merciful God, who is close to all who call out to Him in truth, to beseech you wholeheartedly to look down Your holy habitation in heaven, protect Your people Israel and save them from extreme pain and noisome pestilence. In Your anger mercifully remember Your kinship with Your people together with all of the people of the world and the inhabitants of this earth, particularly the residents of this town. Let them not die an evil sickly death, stop the plague and save those</p>	
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taken to death, bring a healing and a cure to all their illnesses. Please, Lord God, God of Israel, take pity on Your people and Your portion. Though our iniquities testify against us, be not a ruin to us, forgive us in Your great lovingkindness, hide not Your face from us, poor, pained, and weeping for our families, for death has risen in our windows to swallow up and destroy. Please compassionate and merciful God, comfort our broken and contrite hearts, disdain us not, hear our voices of our supplication as we cry out to you, have mercy on the pains of Your treasured children, and all the people under the reign of the Kaiser, the beneficent, providential king, may he be exalted. Let the destroyer infiltrate their borders and ours, and enter their houses and ours to infect. Tell the angel who is destroying nations to stay his hand, for You are good to all and Your tender mercies are over all Your works. Remember, God, for our sakes Your thirteen attributes written in Your Torah, “The LORD, the LORD, God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth; keeping mercy unto the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity.” Save us, please, distance the fear of death from upon us. Let us not fear evil rumors, rescue us from every tragedy and bad sickness and let plague not come close to our tents. Fulfill for us what was written

העל לקחים למוט. וארוכה וטרפא העלה לכל  
 מדוהם: אנא יי אלהי ישראל חוסה על עמך  
 ונחלחך. ואם ענינו ענו בנו, אל יהו לנו למחלה.  
 סלה נא כגודל חסדך, ואל תסתר פניך ממנו  
 עניים וכואבים כוכים למשפחותינו. כי עלה מות  
 בהלוננו לבלע ולהשחית: אנא אל רחום וחנן.  
 לבנו הנשבר והנרכה ונחם על רעתנו אל תבוז.  
 שמוע קול תחנונו בשוענו אלקי. ורחם כאב על  
 בניך עם סגולתך. ועל כל העמים אשר תחת ממשלת  
 הקיסר והמלך המיטיב והמשגיח ירום הודו, לבלתי  
 תת המשחית לעבור בגבולם ובגבולנו. ולבוא אל  
 בתנו ואל בתיהם לנשף. ותאמר למלאך המשחית  
 בעמים. רב עתה הרף ידך. כי אתה יי טוב לכל  
 ורחמך על כל מעשך: וזכרה לנו אלהינו שלש  
 עשרה מדותך הכתובות בתורתך. כמו שנאמר יי  
 אל רחום וחנן ארך אפים ורבה חסד ואמת:  
 נצר חסד לאלפים נושא עין וששע וחמאה ונקח:  
 אנא רושעיה נא אימרת מרת הרחק מעלנו.  
 משמועה רעה לא נירא, והצילנו מכלאסון ומכל  
 מדוה רע ונגע לא יקרב באהלנו. וקייסכנו מקרא

And the LORD will take away from you all sickness; and He will put upon you none of the evil diseases of Egypt, which you know, but will lay them upon all those who hate you. And as written, and He said: 'If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD your God, and will do that which is right in His eyes, and wilt give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon thee, which I have put upon the Egyptians; for I am the LORD your healer.'

שכתוב. וחסיר יי מנך כלחלי, וכל מדוי מערים  
 הרעים אשר ידעת לא ישימם בך. ונתנם בכל  
 שונאך: ומקרא שכתוב, ויאמר אם שמוע תשמע  
 לקול יי אלהיך ורוישך בעינו תעשה והאונת  
 למצותיו, ושמרת כלחקי כלחמחלה אשר שמת  
 במצרים לא אשים עליך כי אני יי רופאך:

**Questions:**

- What are the primary differences between Treves’ prayer and Morpurgo’s poem? Are they praying for the same things?
- What did you pray for during COVID? Might this poem have been a positive addition to your prayers?

**“A Voice is Heard in the Heights” (1856)**

I taught this poem as an example of a female-authored poem about the biblical Rachel that could be considered for incorporation in an traditional Jewish prayer book.

**Activity:**

- Read Jeremiah 31:15-17

<p>Thus said GOD: A cry is heard in Ramah—Wailing, bitter weeping—Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted For her children, who are gone. Thus said GOD: Restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from shedding tears; for there is a reward for your labor—declares GOD: They shall return from the enemy’s land. And there is hope for your future—declares GOD: your children shall return to their country.</p>	<p>כֹּה אָמַר ה' קוֹל בְּרָמָה נִשְׁמָע נְהִי בְּכִי תַמְרוּרִים רַחֵל מִבְּכָה עַל-בְּנֵיהָ מֵאַנְהָה לְהַנְחֵם עַל-בְּנֵיהָ כִּי אֵינָנּוּ: {ס} כֹּה אָמַר ה' מִנְעֵי קוֹלֶךָ מִכְּבִי וְעֵינֶיךָ מִדְּמָעָה כִּי לֹא שָׂכָר לְפַעֲלֹתֶיךָ נִאֲסִי-הַיְהוָה וְשָׁבוּ מֵאֶרֶץ אוֹיְבֵי: וַיִּשְׁתַּקְּנָה לְאַחֲרֵיתֶךָ נִאֲסִי-ה' וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגְבוּלָם:</p>
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- Read this excerpt from *Petihthah* to Lamentations Rabbah, which follows the various male patriarchs and prophets entreating God to end the Jewish exile:

<p>At that moment, Rachel our matriarch interjected before the Holy One blessed be He and said: ‘Master of the universe, it is revealed before You that Your servant Jacob loved me abundantly and worked for my father seven years for me. When those seven years were completed and the time for my marriage to my husband arrived, my father plotted to exchange me with my sister for my husband. The matter was extremely difficult for me when I became aware of that plot, and I informed my husband and gave him a signal to distinguish between my sister and me so that my father would be unable to exchange me. Afterward, I regretted what I had done and suppressed my desire. I had mercy on my sister, so that she would not be led to humiliation. In the evening they exchanged me with my sister for my husband, and I transmitted to my sister all the signals that I had given to my husband, so that he would think that she is Rachel. Moreover, I entered beneath the bed on which he was lying with my sister. He would speak with her and she would be silent, and I would respond to each and every matter that he said, so that he would not identify my sister’s voice. I performed an act of kindness for her, I was not jealous of her, and I did not lead her to humiliation. If I, who is flesh and blood, was not jealous of my rival, and I did not lead her to humiliation and shame, You who are a living and eternal merciful King, why were You jealous of idol worship that has no substance, and You exiled my descendants, and they were killed by sword, and the enemies did to them as they pleased?’ Immediately, the mercy of the Holy One blessed be He was aroused and He said: ‘For you, Rachel, I will restore Israel to its place.’ That is what is written: “So said the Lord: A voice is heard in Rama, wailing, bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be consoled for her children, as they are not” (Jeremiah 31:14). And it is written:</p>	<p>בְּאוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה קִפְצָה רַחֵל אֲמָנוּ לְפָנֵי הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא וְאָמְרָה רְבוּנוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, גְּלוּי לְפָנֶיךָ שְׂעִיבָה עֲבָדֶךָ אֶהְבֵּנִי אֶהְבָּה יִתְרָה וְעָבַד בְּשָׂבִילִי לְאָבָא שְׂבַע שָׁנִים, וּכְשֶׁהִשְׁלִימוּ אוֹתָן שְׂבַע שָׁנִים וְהִגִּיעַ זְמַן נִשְׂוָאֵי לְבַעֲלִי, יַעֲז אָבִי לְהַחֲלִיפָנִי לְבַעֲלִי בְּשָׂבִיל אַחֹתִי, וְהִקְשָׁה עָלַי הַדְּבָר עַד מְאֹד כִּי נוֹדַעָה לִּי הַעֲצָה, וְהוֹדַעְתִּי לְבַעֲלִי וּמִסְרַתִּי לוֹ סִימָן שְׂפִירָה בִּינִי וּבֵין אַחֹתִי כְּדֵי שֶׁלֹּא יֻכַל אָבִי לְהַחֲלִיפָנִי, וְלֹאֲחַר כֵּן נִחַמְתִּי בְּעֲצָמִי וּסְבַלְתִּי אֶת תַּאֲוֹתַי וְרַחַמְתִּי עַל אַחֹתִי שֶׁלֹּא תִצָּא לְחַרְפָּה, וְלֹעֲרֵב חֶלְפוֹ אַחֹתִי לְבַעֲלִי בְּשָׂבִילִי, וּמִסְרַתִּי לְאַחֹתִי כֹל הַסִּימָנִין שֶׁמִּסְרַתִּי לְבַעֲלִי, כְּדֵי שֶׁיִּהְיֶה סְבוּר שֶׁהִיא רַחֵל. וְלֹא עוֹד אֵלָּא שֶׁנִּכְנַסְתִּי תַּחַת הַמִּטָּה שֶׁהִיא שׁוֹכֵב עִם אַחֹתִי וְהִיא מְדַבֵּר עִמָּה וְהִיא שׁוֹתֶקֶת וְאֲנִי מְשִׁיבָתוּ עַל כָּל דְּבָר וְדַבֵּר, כְּדֵי שֶׁלֹּא יִפִּיר לְקוֹל אַחֹתִי וְגַמְלֵתִי חֶסֶד עִמָּה, וְלֹא קִנְאָתִי בָּהּ וְלֹא הוֹצֵאתִיהָ לְחַרְפָּה. וְמָה אֲנִי שְׂאֲנִי בְּשֵׁר וְדָם עֶפְרָא וְאֶפְרָא לֹא קִנְאָתִי לְצָרָה שְׂלִי וְלֹא הוֹצֵאתִיהָ לְבוֹשָׁה וְלְחַרְפָּה, וְאַתָּה מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם, רַחֲמֵנוּ, מִפָּנֵי מָה קִנְאָתְךָ לְעַבֹּדֶת כּוֹכָבִים שְׂאִין בָּהּ מִמֶּשֶׁה, וְהִגְלִית בְּנֵי וְנַהֲרֵגוּ בְּחֶרֶב וְעָשׂוּ אוֹיְבִים בָּם כְּרָצוֹנָם. מִיָּד נִתְגַּלְגְּלוּ רַחֲמֵיךָ שֶׁל הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא וְאָמַר, בְּשָׂבִילֶךָ רַחֵל אֲנִי מִחְזִיר אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִקְוָמוֹ, הֲדָא הוּא דְקָתִיב (ירמיה לא, ט): כֹּה אָמַר ה' קוֹל בְּרָמָה נִשְׁמָע נְהִי בְּכִי תַמְרוּרִים רַחֵל מִבְּכָה עַל בְּנֵיהָ מֵאַנְהָה לְהַנְחֵם עַל</p>
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<p>“So said the Lord: Restrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, as there is reward for your actions.... And there is hope for your future, the utterance of the Lord, and your children will return to their borders” (Jeremiah 31:15–16).</p>	<p>בְּנִיָּהּ כִּי אֵינָנּוּ. וּכְתִיב (ירמיה לא, טז):  כֹּה אָמַר ה' מְנַעֵי קוֹלְךָ מִבְּכִי וְעֵינֶיךָ  מִדְּמֹעַה כִּי יֵשׁ שְׂכָר לְפַעֲלֹתֶיךָ וְגו',  וּכְתִיב (ירמיה לא, יז): וַיֵּשׁ תִּקְוָה  לְאַחֲרֵיתֶךָ נְאֻם ה' וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגְבוּלָם.</p>
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- How does Morpurgo’s poem build on these prior sources?
- What are the traditional and the modern elements of the poem?
- What is the meaning of the final line referring to Rachel singing a new song?

### Morpurgo Session Four

#### “And This Poem is for the Bride” (1847)

Morpurgo wrote this poem for her cousin Rachel Luzzatto Sulam, on the occasion of her marriage and her moving away from Trieste. It is first Hebrew poem written by a woman for another woman.

#### Activity:

- Invite the members of the group to think of any instances in the Bible of female to female dialogue of relationship.
- Read the poem together.
- Read these verses from Isaiah 62:4-5

<p>Nevermore shall you be called “Forsaken,”  Nor shall your land be called “Desolate”;  But you shall be called “I delight in her,”  And your land “Espoused.” For GOD takes delight in you, and your land shall be espoused.  As a youth espouses a maiden, your sons shall espouse you;  and as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.</p>	<p>לֹא-יֵאמָר לְךָ עוֹד עֲזוּבָה וְלֹא-רֵצָה  לֹא-יֵאמָר עוֹד שְׁמָמָה כִּי לְךָ קָרָא  סִפְּצֵי-בָהּ וְלֹא-רֵצָה בְּעוֹלָהּ  כִּי-תִפְצֵן ה' לְךָ וְאַרְצְךָ תִּבְעַל:  כִּי-יִבְעַל בְּחֹר בְּתוּלָהּ יִבְעַלְךָ  בְּנִיָּהּ וּמִשׁוֹשׁ חֲתָן עַל-כַּלָּה יִשְׂשֵׂי  עַלְיֶךָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ:</p>
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#### Questions:

- How does Morpurgo repurpose these verses from Isaiah in her poem to Rachel?
- Consider the ways in which Morpurgo suggests their relationship will endure even though her cousin is marrying and moving away.

#### “I, Leah, Was So Very Tired” (1861)

This poem was written as a dialogue between God and the departed Leah, wife of Avraham Cohen, and expands Morpurgo’s interest in biblical women from Rachel to Leah.

#### Activity:

- Read the poem as it appears in the book.
- Read the description of Rachel and Leah in Genesis 29: 16-18

<p>Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older one was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel.  Leah had weak eyes; Rachel was shapely and beautiful.</p>	<p>וּלְלֵבָנוּ שְׁתֵּי בָנוֹת יָשָׁם הַגְּדֹלָה לְאָה וְיָשָׁם  הַקְּטָנָה רָחֵל:  וְעֵינֵי לְאָה רַבּוֹת וְרָחֵל הֵיחָתָה יִפְתַּח-תְּאֵר  וְיִפְתַּח מְרָאָה:</p>
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Jacob loved Rachel; so he answered, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel."	וַיֵּאָתֵב יַעֲקֹב אֶת־רַחֵל וַיֹּאמֶר אֶעֱבֹדְךָ שִׁבְעַ שָׁנִים בְּרַחֵל בְּתוּלָה הַקְטָנָה:
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- Read Isaiah 60:1

Arise, shine, for your light has dawned; The Presence of GOD has shone upon you!	קוֹמִי אוֹרִי כִּי בָּא אֹנֶה וּכְבוֹד ה' עָלֶיךָ זָרַח:
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**Questions:**

- How does the poem gloss the meaning of the biblical Leah's name and add texture to her story?
- Who is doing the talking in Isaiah and to whom? Is the female addressee in Isaiah a person or a feminine allegory? How about in the poem?
- How does it add to the tradition of God's dialogue with the matriarchs that we saw in the *Petihta to Eikha Rabbah*?

**Morpurgo Session Five**

**“Fount of Wisdom from a Flowing Stream”**

I taught this poem, a tribute to Bernhard Beer (1801-1861), a community leader and maskil from Dresden on the eve of my ordination from Yeshivat Maharat.

**Activity:**

- Read this entry [about Beer in the Jewish Encyclopedia](#).
- Read about the [Araba'ah Turim](#) (otherwise known as the “Tur”) and the [Shulhan Arukh](#) and their organization into four sections.

**Questions:**

- What might have motivated Morpurgo to write this poem for this individual who wasn't a member of her family and didn't live in her community?
- What elements of character or knowledge does she praise?
- How does the poem reflect on her own self-perception and ambitions?

**“The Burial Monument,” “The Monument is a Witness,” “This is the Burial Monument”**

I spoke about these three poetic epitaphs at the triple unveiling of the tombstones for my father, mother, and grandmother.

**Activity:**

- Invite people in the group who have put up headstones for their relatives to reflect on that process? How did they decide what to include?
- Read the epitaphs and note what they each highlight

**Questions:**

- It used to be more common for poems to appear on tombstones. What do you all think about that genre of poem?
- What do you make of the epitaph that Morpurgo wrote for herself, as it was the first Hebrew poem she ever wrote?

## Chapter 6: Retying the Knots: Learning and Relearning with Ruhama Weiss Introduction to Ruhama Weiss, b. 1966, Session 1

### Biography

Ruhama Weiss is a poet, novelist, Talmud scholar and a professor of pastoral counseling at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in Jerusalem. I had the privilege of studying with Ruhama as part of my rabbinical studies, in a course called *Sugyot Hayyim* (Life Topics), which plays on the notion of the Talmudic *sugya* (unit of study, or topic) and on the idea of central, pivotal life experiences. In this one-on-one course, Ruhama and I looked at various *sugyot* from my rabbinic studies to probe them for their emotional, in some cases, hurtful content, searching for ways to transform the experience of these painful texts into the form of usable, living Torah. Ruhama Weiss' poetry, too, reflects this commitment to honest, unflinching feminist encounter with classical Jewish texts. The poems by Weiss that were chosen for this section also directly engage with themes and classical texts treated elsewhere in the book, including the Talmudic discussion of “going out with knots,” the formulation of core Jewish values and the experience of the High Holidays.



### “I Throw Down My Supplication”

This poem expresses a certain exasperation with the supplicatory mode in prayer, and resolves to take a break from it all.

### Activity:

- Read Weiss' poem as it appears in the book.
- Read [Daniel 9](#), particularly verses 18 and 20

### Questions

- How does Weiss revise the idea of “throwing down one’s supplications?”
- How does this poem serve as a resource for people experiencing impediments or a sense of burdensomeness in prayer?
- Can you think of specific examples when you wanted to do the same?

### “Lament for Rashi’s Daughters”

This poem responds to the [Mishnah from Tractate Shabbat 6:9](#) that furnishes the title of this book, more specifically to Rashi’s commentary on BT Shabbat 66b. (See the introductory session to this study guide.)

### Activity:

- Read the poem
- Review the Talmudic source and Rashi’s commentary thereon.

### Rashi (Rabbi Solomon Yitzhaki of Troyes, 1040-1105)

געגורען – Longings. The son yearns for his father and cannot separate from him. This remedy does not pertain to females for the father doesn’t endear himself to them enough from the beginning that they would come to long for him.

- Read this historical information about [Rashi’s daughters](#).

### Questions:

- What might it have been like for Rashi’s daughters to transcribe their father’s work, given the attitude reflected in this commentary?
- In light of this, what do you make of the legend that Rashi’s daughters themselves prayed wearing tallit and tefillin?
- Rashi’s grandsons, Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir (Rashbam, 1085-1158) and Rabbeinu (Yaakov) Tam (1100-1171), together with other Tosafists (medieval Ashkenazic rabbinic commentators on the Talmud), helped continue their grandfather’s exegetical work. These same grandsons disputed several of their grandfather’s rulings. What do you make of that in light of this poem and source?

### Ruhama Weiss, Session Two

### “And Once Again, I’ll Sin and Return”

This poem is a contemporary poetic midrash on Mishnah Yoma 8:9.

### Activity:

- Read the poem.
- Study the Mishnah

<p>One who says: I will sin and then I will repent, I will sin and I will repent, is not provided with the opportunity to repent, One who says: I will sin and Yom Kippur will atone for my sins, Yom Kippur does not atone. Transgressions between a person and God, Yom Kippur</p>	<p>הָאֹמֵר, אֶחָטָא וְאָשׁוּב, אֶחָטָא וְאָשׁוּב, אֵין מְסַפִּיקוֹן בְּיָדוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת תְּשׁוּבָה. אֶחָטָא וְיוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר, אֵין יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר. עֲבֵרוֹת שְׁבִין אָדָם לְמָקוֹם, יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר. עֲבֵרוֹת</p>
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atones; however, for transgressions between a person and another, Yom Kippur does not atone until he appeases the other person. Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya taught “From all your sins you shall be cleansed before the Lord” (Leviticus 16:30). For transgressions between a person and God, Yom Kippur atones; transgressions between a person and another, Yom Kippur does not atone until he appeases the other person. Rabbi Akiva said: How fortunate are you, Israel; before Whom are you purified, and Who purifies you? It is your Father in Heaven, as it is stated: “And I will sprinkle purifying water upon you, and you shall be purified” (Ezekiel 36:25). And it says: “The ritual bath of Israel is God” (Jeremiah 17:13). Just as a ritual bath purifies the impure, so too, the Holy One, Blessed be He, purifies Israel.

שְׁבִין אָדָם לְחֵבְרוֹ, אִין יוֹם הַכְּפוּרִים  
 מְכַפֵּר, עַד שְׁיִרְצֶה אֶת חֵבְרוֹ. אֶת זֶה  
 דָּרַשׁ רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֲזַרְיָה, מְכַל  
 חַטָּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי יְיָ תִטְהַרוּ (וַיִּקְרָא טז),  
 עֲבֵרוֹת שְׁבִין אָדָם לְמָקוֹם, יוֹם  
 הַכְּפוּרִים מְכַפֵּר. עֲבֵרוֹת שְׁבִין אָדָם  
 לְחֵבְרוֹ, אִין יוֹם הַכְּפוּרִים מְכַפֵּר, עַד  
 שְׁיִרְצֶה אֶת חֵבְרוֹ. אָמַר רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא,  
 אֲשֶׁרִיכֶם יִשְׂרָאֵל, לִפְנֵי מִי אַתֶּם  
 מִטְהַרִּין, וּמִי מְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם, אֲבִיכֶם  
 שְׁבַשְׁמַיִם, שְׁנֹאמֵר (יחזקאל לו),  
 וְנִרְקָתִי עֲלֵיכֶם מִיַּם טְהוֹרִים וּטְהַרְתֶּם.  
 וְאוֹמֵר (ירמיה יז), מְקַנֶּה יִשְׂרָאֵל יְיָ,  
 מִה מְקַנֶּה מְטַהֵר אֶת הַטְּמֵאִים, אִף  
 הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְטַהֵר אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל:

**Question:**

- How does Weiss revision the teaching of the Mishnah?
- What are the various ways to understand the verb “lashuv” (return)?
- What relationship is constructed in the poem between taking a break or vacationing and repentance?

**“Chapters of the Mothers”**

Recalling Lea Goldberg’s re-imagining of the three things that sustain the world from Pirkei Avot 1 (2, 18), this poem by Ruhama Weiss suggesting a supplementary Pirkei Imahot, replete with teachings from the various biblical mothers.

**Activity:**

- Invite the group to write down a list of teachings that they personally have gleaned from the biblical mothers.
- Read Weiss’s poem, looking up the various biblical figures to see how she has distilled each of their teachings.

**Questions:**

- Are you surprised by her choices, or what she highlights?
- How many positive or affirmative teachings can you identify in the poem and what do you make of that?
- What is *Sefer Hayashar* and what is its significance to the ending of the poem?

**Chapter 7: Penning Pandemic Torah: Rachel Bluwstein’s Feminist / Illness Poetry  
 Introduction to Rachel Bluwstein (1890-1931), Session One**

**Biography:**

Perhaps the most beloved modern Hebrew women poet, Rachel Bluwstein, known by most by her first name Rachel, was born in Saratov, Russia in 1890. In 1909, she moved to Palestine with her two sisters, initially to Rehovot, and then in 1911 to Hannah Meisel’s training farm for young women on Kevutzat Kinneret, where she stayed for two years. In 1913, she left Palestine for

Toulouse, France, to study agronomy, hoping to put this knowledge to use in agricultural work in the Land of Israel. The eruption of World War I made it impossible for her either to complete her studies or return to Palestine, leading her instead to Odessa where she worked in a children's refugee home and became newly ill with tuberculosis, a disease with which she had first been afflicted as a child. In 1919, she returned to Palestine as part of the Third Aliyah, hoping to settle in Kevutzat Deganiah, but her illness made kibbutz life impossible, leading her to spend the rest of her life in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and to direct her attention to translation and the writing of poetry. Bluwstein's poetry was thus the direct result of her experience with a world-wide infectious disease. She eventually succumbed to the illness in 1931 at the young age of 41. I taught her poems in late fall of 2021 and the winter of 2022, coinciding with the second year of the COVID pandemic.



Rachel Bluwstein

### “Soul Walking” (1920)

This was Bluwstein's first published poem and the first poem by a woman ever to be published in the famed journal *Hashiloah*

#### Activity:

- Read the poem and listen to this [musical setting](#).
- The title is based on the following biblical verse (Eccl. 6:9):

Is the feasting of the eyes more important than the pursuit of desire? That, too, is futility and pursuit of wind.	טוב מראַה עינים ממהלך-גִּנְפֶשׁ גַּם-זֶה הַבָּל וּרְעוּת רֵיחַ:
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- What is the central message of the poem in relation to this verse from Ecclesiastes?
- Rachel dedicated the poem to her mentor, the [Zionist philosopher A.D. Gordon](#). Do you see any sign of his name or influence in the poem?

### “Barren Woman”

I taught this poem about Bluwstein's yearning for a son at the last day of the shiva for the mother of a close friend.

**Activity:**

- Read the poem and listen to the [musical setting by Ahinoam Nini](#).
- Read the following poem by Bialik about the source of his poetic inspiration:

**Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873-1934), “I Didn’t Win Light in a Windfall” (1902)**

I didn't gain light in a windfall, Nor through inherited will. I hewed it from rock and granite, Quarrying my heart every still. One spark hides in my heart – <b>A small spark – wholly my own, Neither borrowed, nor stolen -- But from me and within me alone.</b>	לֹא זָכִיתִי בְּאוֹר מִן-הַהֶפְקֵר, אֶף לֹא-בָא לִי בִירֶשֶׁה מֵאָבִי, כִּי מִסְלָעֵי וְצוּרֵי נִקְרַתִּיו וְחִצְבָתִיו מִלְּבָבִי. נִיּוֹצֵץ אֶחָד בְּצוּר לִבִּי מִסְתַּתֵּר, נִיּוֹצֵץ קָטָן – אֶף כִּלּוֹ שְׁלִי הוּא, לֹא נִשְׁאֲלָתִיו מֵאִישׁ, לֹא גָנַבְתִּיו – כִּי מִמְּנִי וּבִי הוּא.
When great sorrow wields its hammer, exploding my heart sublime; This one spark flies, splashes my eye, and from my eye, drips as rhyme	וְתַחַת פְּטִישׁ צְרוּתִי הַגְּדוֹלוֹת כִּי יִתְפּוֹצֵץ לְבָבִי, צוּר-עֵזִי, זֶה הַנִּיּוֹצֵץ עָף, נָתַז אֶל-עֵינַי, וּמֵעֵינַי – לְחֵרוֹזֵי.
And then flees my rhyme to your hearts to vanish in your burning pyre. While I, with blood and candle pay the price of the fire.	וּמְחֵרוֹזַי יִתְמַלֵּט לְלִבְבְּכֶם, וּבְאוֹר אֲשֶׁכֶם הִצַּתִּיו, יְתַעַלֵּם, וְאֲנִכִּי בְּחֶלְבִי וּבְדַמִּי אֶת-הַבְּעֵרָה אֲשַׁלֵּם.

**Questions:**

- Bluwstein focuses, in terms of biblical precedents for barrenness, on two biblical women: Rachel and Hannah. Do you see any references to Rachel or Hannah in the Bialik poem?
- How might this poem be read as a retort to Bialik?
- What is the significance of the name she chooses for her yearned-for son?
- Bluwstein describe the child she yearns for as having black curly hair? How else might this be interpreted aside from being a physical description of a boy?
- What is the double meaning of the ending of the poem?

**Rachel Bluwstein, Session Two**

**“In the Hospital Part 1” and “Or Maybe”**

Both of these poems deal with the loneliness of illness, the second suggesting that illness wipes out the memory or dream of former wellness.

**Activity:**

- Divine the group in two. Have one group read and reflect on the illness experience “In the Hospital” and the other on “Or Maybe.”

- Invite the group to use these poems as an opportunity to reflect on their own personal illness experiences or those of close family members. Did COVID prevent any of them from being able to take care or accompany of their loved ones in their time of illness?
- Listen to the musical setting for [“Or Maybe” \(Ve’ulai\)](#).
- The expression “Lo Hayu Vedarim Me’olam” appears in various places in the Talmud to refer to a claim that has no basis in history or reality. How does this reflect the desperation of illness?
- What is the meaning of a “dream” in Jewish tradition? Does it signify something delusional or something more serious and perhaps, hyperreal?

**“Honi the Circle Maker”**

In this poem, Bluwstein uses the Talmudic story of Honi the Circle Maker as a metaphor for her personal illness experience.

**Activity:** Read the story of Honi HaMe’aggel from BT Ta’anit 23a:

<p>The Sages taught: Once, most of Adar had passed but rain had still not fallen. They sent this message to Honi HaMe’aggel: Pray, and rain will fall. He prayed, but no rain fell. He drew a circle in the dust and stood inside it, in the manner that the prophet Habakkuk did, as it is stated: “And I will stand upon my watch and set myself upon the tower” (Habakkuk 2:1). Honi said before God: Master of the Universe, Your children have turned their faces toward me, as I am like a member of Your household. I take an oath by Your great name that I will not move from here until you have mercy upon Your children... Shimon ben Shetaḥ relayed to Honi HaMe’aggel: If you were not Honi, I would have decreed ostracism upon you. For were these years like the years of Elijah, when the keys of rain were entrusted in Elijah’s hands, wouldn’t the name of Heaven have been desecrated by your? However, what can I do to you, as you nag God and He does your bidding, like a son who nags his father and his father does his bidding... Rabbi Yoḥanan said: All the days of the life of that righteous man, Honi, he was distressed over the meaning of this verse: “A song of Ascents: When the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like those who dream” (Psalms 126:1). He said: Is there really a person who can sleep and dream for seventy years? One day, he was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Honi said to him: This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Honi said to him: Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree? He said to him: That man himself found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors</p>	<p>תנו רבנן: פעם אחת יצא רוב אדר ולא ירדו גשמים, שָׁלַחוּ לְחֹנִי הַמְּעַגֵּל: הַתְּפִלָּל וְיִרְדּוּ גְשָׁמִים! הַתְּפִלָּל, וְלֹא יִרְדּוּ גְשָׁמִים. עַג עֹנֶה וְעָמַד בְּתוֹכָהּ, כְּדָרָךְ שְׁעֵשֶׂה חֶבְקוֹק הַנְּבִיא, שְׁנָאָמַר: “עַל מִשְׁמַרְתִּי אֶעֱמְדָה וְאֶתְיַצְּבָה עַל מְצוֹר וְגו’”. אָמַר לְפָנָיו: רַבּוֹנוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם! בְּנִיךָ שָׁמוּ פְּנֵיהֶם עָלַי, שְׁאֲנִי כְּבֵן בֵּית לְפָנֶיךָ. גִּשְׁבַּע אֲנִי בְּשֵׁמֶךָ הַגָּדוֹל שְׁאֲנִי זֶז מִכָּאֵן עַד שֶׁתִּרְחַם עַל בְּנִיךָ... שְׁלַח לּוֹ שְׁמֵעוֹן בֶּן שִׁטָּח: אֲלֶמְלֵא חֹנִי אֶתָּה, גּוֹזְרֵנִי עֲלֶיךָ נִידוּי. שְׁאִילוֹ שְׁנַיִם פְּשָׁנֵי אֱלֹהֵי שְׁמִפְתָּחוֹת גְּשָׁמִים בְּיָדוֹ שֶׁל אֱלֹהֵי, לֹא נִמְצָא שֶׁ שְׁמַיִם מִתְחַלְלִים עַל יָדֶךָ, אֲבָל מָה אֶעֱשֶׂה לָּךְ, שְׁאֶתָּה מִתְחַטֵּא לְפָנָי הַמְּקוֹם וְעוֹשֶׂה לָּךְ רְצוֹנָךְ, כְּבֵן שְׁמִתְחַטֵּא עַל אָבִיו וְעוֹשֶׂה לּוֹ רְצוֹנוֹ... אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: כָּל יָמָיו שֶׁל אוֹתוֹ צָדִיק, הָיָה מְצַטְעֵר עַל מִקְרָא זֶה: “שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלֹת בְּשׁוֹב ה’ אֶת שִׁיבַת צִיּוֹן הֵינּוּ כְּחֹלְמִים”, אָמַר: מִי אֵיכָּא דְנִיִּים שְׁבָעִין שָׁנָיו בְּחֶלְמָא? יוֹמָא חַד הָוָה אֲזַל בְּאוֹרְחָא, חֲזַיִיה לְהֵהוּא גְבַרָא דְהָוָה נִטַּע חֲרוּבָא, אָמַר לֵיה: הָאִי, עַד כַּמָּה שָׁנָיו טַעֲוִין? אָמַר לֵיה: עַד שְׁבָעִין שָׁנָיו. אָמַר לֵיה: פְּשִׁטָּא לָךְ דְחֵיַת שְׁבָעִין שָׁנָיו? אָמַר לֵיה הָאִי גְבַרָא: עֲלֵמָא בְּחֲרוּבָא אֲשַׁכְחַתִּיה. כִּי הֵיכִי דְשַׁתְּלוּ לִי אֲבָתַי — שְׁתַּלִּי נְמִי לְבָרְאִי. יְתִיב, קָא פְּרִיָה רִיפְתָּא, אֶתְאִי לֵיה שִׁנְתָּא, נִים. אֶהְדְּרָא לֵיה</p>
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planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants. Honi sat and ate bread. Sleep overcame him and he slept. A cliff formed around him, and he disappeared from sight and slept for seventy years. When he awoke, he saw a certain man gathering carobs from that tree. Honi said to him: Are you the one who planted this tree? The man said to him: I am his son's son. Honi said to him: I can learn from this that I have slept for seventy years, he saw that his donkey had sired several herds. Honi went home and said to: Is the son of Honi HaMe'aggel alive? They said to him: His son is no longer with us, but his son's son is alive. He said to them: I am Honi HaMe'aggel. They did not believe him. He went to the study hall, where he heard the Sages say about one scholar: His *halakhot* are as enlightening and as clear as in the years of Honi HaMe'aggel, for when Honi HaMe'aggel would enter the study hall he would resolve for the Sages any difficulty they had. Honi said to them: I am he, but they did not believe him and did not pay him proper respect. Honi became very upset, prayed for mercy, and died. Rava said: This explains the folk saying that people say: Either friendship or death.

משוויצתא, איפסי מעינא, ונים שבועין  
 שנין. כי קם, חזייה ליהוא גברא דהוא  
 קא מלקט מינייהו, אמר ליה: אתה הוא  
 דשלתתיה? אמר ליה: בר בריתא אנא.  
 אמר ליה: שמע מינה דנימי שבועין  
 שנין. חזא לחמר[ת]יה דאתיילידא ליה  
 רמכי רמכי. אזל לבייתה אמר להו:  
 בריתא דחוני המעגל מי קנים? אמרו  
 ליה: בריתא ליתא, בר בריתא איתא. אמר  
 להו: אנא חוני המעגל. לא הימנוהו.  
 אזל לביית המדרש, שמעיהו לרבנן  
 דקאמרי: נהירו שמעתתין כבשני חוני  
 המעגל, דכי הוי עייל לביית מדרשא —  
 כל קושיא דהווי להו לרבנן הוה מפרק  
 להו. אמר להו: אנא ניהו, ולא  
 הימנוהו, ולא עבדי ליה יקרא כדמבעי  
 ליה. חלש דעתיה, בעא רחמי, ומית.  
 אמר רבא: היינו דאמרי אינשי: או  
 חברותא או מיתותא.

**Questions:**

- How does Bluwstein’s poem interpret and personalize the Honi story?
- How does it reinterpret the idea of the circle for her modern Zionist context?

**Rachel Bluwstein, Session Three**

**“Day of Tidings”**

This poem reflects personally on the story of the *Metsora im* outside the gates of Shomron from 2 Kings 7:3-16.

**Activity:**

- Read the biblical account and then read Bluwstein’s poem.

There were four men, lepers, outside the gate. They said to one another, “Why should we sit here waiting for death? If we decide to go into the town, what with the famine in the town, we shall die there; and if we just sit here, still we die. Come, let us desert to the Aramean camp. If they let us live, we shall live; and if they put us to death, we shall but die.” They set out at twilight for the Aramean camp; but when they came to the edge of the Aramean camp, there was no one there. For [God] had caused the Aramean camp to hear a sound of chariots, a sound of horses—the din of a huge army. They said to one another, “The king of Israel must have hired the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Mizraim to attack us!”

וארבעה אנשים היו מצרעים פתח  
 השער ויאמרו איש אל-רעהו מה אנחנו  
 יושבים פה עד-מתנו: אם-אמרנו לבוא  
 העיר והרעב בעיר ומתנו שם  
 ואם-ישבנו פה ומתנו ועתה לכו ונפלה  
 אל-מתנה ארם אם-יחינו נחיה  
 ואם-ימתנו ומתנו: ויקמו בלשף לבוא  
 אל-מתנה ארם ויבאו עד-קצה מתנה  
 ארם והנה איו-שם איש: ואדני השמיע  
 את-מתנה ארם קול רכב קול סוס קול  
 תל גדול ויאמרו איש אל-אחיו הנה  
 שוכר-עלינו מלך ישראל את-מלכי  
 החתים ואת-מלכי מצרים לבוא עלינו:

And they fled headlong in the twilight, abandoning their tents and horses and donkeys—the [entire] camp just as it was—as they fled for their lives. When those lepers came to the edge of the camp, they went into one of the tents and ate and drank; then they carried off silver and gold and clothing from there and buried it. They came back and went into another tent, and they carried off what was there and buried it. Then they said to one another, “We are not doing right. This is a day of good news, and we are keeping silent! If we wait until the light of morning, we shall incur guilt. Come, let us go and inform the king’s palace.” They went and called out to the gatekeepers of the city and told them, “We have been to the Aramean camp. There is not a soul there, nor any human sound; but the horses are tethered and the donkeys are tethered and the tents are undisturbed.” The gatekeepers called out, and the news was passed on into the king’s palace. The king rose in the night and said to his courtiers, “I will tell you what the Arameans have done to us. They know that we are starving, so they have gone out of camp and hidden in the fields, thinking: When they come out of the town, we will take them alive and get into the town.” But one of the courtiers spoke up, “Let a few of the remaining horses that are still here be taken—they are like those that are left here of the whole multitude of Israel, out of the whole multitude of Israel that have perished—and let us send and find out.” They took two teams of horses and the king sent them after the Aramean army, saying, “Go and find out.” They followed them as far as the Jordan, and found the entire road full of clothing and gear that the Arameans had thrown away in their haste; and the messengers returned and told the king. The people then went out and plundered the Aramean camp.

וַיִּקְוּמוּ וַיָּנוּסוּ בְּצֹפֵף וַיַּעַזְבוּ אֶת־הַהֲלִיָּהִם  
וְאֶת־סוּסֵיהֶם וְאֶת־חֲמֹרֵיהֶם הַמִּתְחַנֵּה  
כַּאֲשֶׁר־הָיָא וַיָּנוּסוּ אֶל־נַפְשָׁם: וַיָּבֹאוּ  
הַמִּצְרָעִים הָאֵלֶּה עַד־חֻצֵּה הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיָּבֹאוּ  
אֶל־אֶהֱל אֶחָד וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּשְׁתּוּ וַיִּשְׂאוּ מִשָּׁם  
כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב וּבְגָדִים וַיִּלְכוּ וַיִּטְמְנוּ וַיָּשׁוּבוּ  
וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל־אֶהֱל אֲחֵר וַיִּשְׂאוּ מִשָּׁם וַיִּלְכוּ  
וַיִּטְמְנוּ: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ לֹא־כֵן אֲנִי  
אֲנַחְנוּ עֹשִׂים הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יוֹם־בְּשׂוּרָה הוּא  
וְאֲנַחְנוּ מְחֻשִׁים וְחַפְּיָנוּ עַד־אֹר הַבֶּקֶר  
וּמִצְאָנוּ עֹזֵן וְעַתָּה לָכוּ וְנִבְאֶה וְנִגִּידָה  
בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיָּבֹאוּ וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֶל־שַׁעֲרֵי  
הָעִיר וַיִּגִּידוּ לָהֶם לֵאמֹר בָּאנוּ אֶל־מִתְחַנֵּה  
אָרָם וְהִנֵּה אִי־שָׁם אִישׁ וְקוֹל אָדָם כִּי  
אִם־הַסּוּס אֲסוּר וְהַחֲמֹר אֲסוּר וְהָאֶהֱלִים  
כַּאֲשֶׁר־הִמְחָה: וַיִּקְרָא הַשַּׁעֲרִים וַיִּגִּידוּ בֵּית  
הַמֶּלֶךְ כְּנִימָה:  
וַיִּקֶם הַמֶּלֶךְ לַיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־עַבְדָּיו  
אֲנִידָה־נָא לָכֶם אֶת אֲשֶׁר־עָשׂוּ לָנוּ אָרָם  
קִדְעוּ כִּי־רַעֲבִים אֲנַחְנוּ וַיִּצְאוּ מִן־הַמִּתְחַנֵּה  
לְהַחֲבֶה (בַּשָּׂדֶה) לֵאמֹר  
כִּי־יִצְאוּ מִן־הָעִיר וְנִתְפָּשׂוּ חַיִּים  
וְאֶל־הָעִיר נָבֵא: וַיַּעַן אֶחָד מֵעַבְדָּיו וַיֹּאמֶר  
וַיִּחַח־נָא חֲמִשָּׁה מִן־הַסּוּסִים הַנִּשְׁאָרִים  
אֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאָרוּ־כֶּה הֵנָּה כָּל־[הַמּוֹן]  
(הַהַמּוֹן) יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאָרוּ־כֶּה הֵנָּה  
כָּל־הַמּוֹן יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר־תָּמוּ וְנִשְׁלַחַה  
וְנִרְאָה: וַיִּקְחֻוּ שְׁנֵי רֶכֶב סוּסִים וַיִּשְׁלַח  
הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲרֵי מַחֲנֵה־אָרָם לֵאמֹר לָכוּ  
וּרְאוּ: וַיִּלְכוּ אַחֲרֵיהֶם עַד־הַיַּרְדֵּן וְהִנֵּה  
כָּל־הַיַּרְדֵּן מְלֹאָה בְּגָדִים וּכְלִים  
אֲשֶׁר־הִשְׁלִיכוּ אָרָם (בַּהַחֲפֹז) [בְּחַפְזָם]  
וַיָּשׁוּבוּ הַמַּלְאָכִים וַיִּגִּדוּ לַמֶּלֶךְ: וַיִּצַּא הָעָם  
וַיִּזְבוּ אֶת מִתְחַנֵּה אָרָם ...

**Question:**

- How does the poet recognize her own experience in this biblical narrative?
- Why do you think the poet rejects the idea of good tidings coming from *Metsora im*?

**“Sorrow Song”**

I taught this poem after hearing about the tragic death of a cousin. It is typically read as a love poem, but I also tried to consider it in theological and prayer terms.

**Activity:**

- Read the poem and listen / sing along to the famous musical setting by Arik Einstein’s group, [“The High Windows.”](#)

**Question:**

- Who is the addressee of this poem?
- What do you make of the expression “commanding blessing”?
- Might there be a way to see this poem as a prayer, or as a dialogue between a pray-er and God?

**Afterword: Still in Knots**

**Amir Gilboa (1917-1984), “A Ball Out of Pain”**

This is the last poem I read in this book, as it provides a kind of summary of the whole enterprise of reading poems as a form of personal and communal healing.

**Biography:**

Born Berl Feldman, in Radziwillow (now Radyvyliv), Ukraine, Gilboa left his family behind in 1937 to immigrate to Mandate Palestine. He went on to fight with the British Brigade in WWII, while most of his family back in Ukraine was killed in the Holocaust, and then to fight again in Israel’s 1948 War of Independence. His first book of poems was published a year later. Many of these poems reflect on this experience of war and loss. This poem, in particular, sees this pain as the origin and inspiration for poetry.



*Amir Gilboa (Wikimedia Commons)*

**Question:**

- What are the various meanings of the Hebrew word “kadur.”
- How do these meanings provide a template for the aims of poetry?
- Why will the spectators watching the speaker play/create with this ball assume that it has to be the work of a young boy?
- How might this poem be seen as summing up this entire project?

