

Alef א

אל  
el

ת Tav

*א פאָעמע פון שפרה מבית משה וצפרה*

*a poem by shel raphen*

Moss overcomes me  
My sequins glisten  
Vines wrap over ancient whispers  
and offer old greetings

A hand of heather flower on my shoulder  
Comforting but firm, the angels grasp

Hay fever comes upon me  
My throat of beans ferments  
For I am unprepared

Elul is a blanket on a cold morning  
    After nights of ceaseless turning  
Tishrei, my alarm clock

Elul, my hand as I hit snooze  
Tishrei, the birds outside my window  
    Holding hostage my dreams

Elul, my eyelids warm and deep  
Tishrei, the sun bright red and  
    Opening

Like a recording  
Like I imagined it exactly  
Easy to sit and wait  
as though my soul were not returned this morning

Last year I longed for here  
And I am not here now

A solid strike  
A single note  
    Me  
I am harmonized

Yirah  
    I am am a part of something larger  
    I have a heavy weight to carry  
But I am an ant  
And we are strong

And we are starting  
And hineini, I am here

I have carried this melody in all my journeys  
Sitting hungry in folding chairs  
Watching the sun set completely  
Darker, surely over  
    And yet  
    Still setting

As it returns, I see it all so fast

Ufros aleinu sukkat sh'lomecha

I sang it as I sat hungry in the shower  
The drain swirling as I spiralled  
I prayed for survival

How far I've come  
And now this melody has returned to me

We were shattered many times  
All the shards are in our skull  
Somewhere  
Longing

We share one continuous  
    Knotted and twisting  
    Strange and divergent  
Living brain and body

This divine dialectic  
We are many,  
                    and one  
We change,  
                    we are the same  
We are distinct,  
                    and gestalt

Hineinu, somewhere new  
Who will we be?  
At our righteous crybaby core  
Somehow: "me"

The warm embrace of tallis

Shroud, A canopy of peace

Care comes from unexpected places

And always from the eternally familiar



I have been teruah

I am shevarim

I long to be tekiah

Whole

Practice (k)now  
Feel it in your body  
What does it feel like

Fruit flies in your knees  
Molten feet and earthquake hips

Longing to be there  
    Dancing in the crowd  
Unrequited love of movement

Let it go

As the book of memories open  
That lonely child returns to me

Concerned only with very specific satisfying  
sensations

I remember that satisfaction now

I remember how it smelled

I feel it in my arms

However simple and senseless

It means I have become more whole again

I stand in awe before the judge  
Source of life, sovereign of the world  
The ever-present eternal witness  
What case is there to plead  
What could be said that is not known

I will accept what I am dealt  
All charges, all blessings, all curses,  
All vows



Here is my vow  
Consider me Ḥannāh

If you heal me  
I will dedicate my body to you

If you give me strength  
It is yours

I will fight to fix this broken world

So long as you continue  
to have one-sided conversations  
All of your endeavors will fail.

Listen  
They are speaking to you  
But you don't know their language yet  
What are they saying?  
What do they want and why?

G-d did not make us perfect  
Like clay, we were formed into pottery  
On even a master potter's bowl  
You can trace the uneven curves of her fingers

G-d made us in her image  
    Flawed, weak, and lonely  
Perhaps we are the mug in which she pours hot tea  
She holds it to feel warmth,  
    for there are no hands like hers to hold

Ein od.

Separation is as sacred as wholeness is holy  
Can I be whole when this hole dwells between my ribs?

She separates the waters from the earth  
Dig and you may find water

Does this separation allow life to grow from my surface  
Daisies from my hair?

Or am I cracked dirt.

Am I longing for rain?

Will I ever be mud?





Is it possible to do tzedakah  
When all that is paid in this land is reparations?

Reparations are not charity, surely,  
For they are owed

If I may defer my payments for just this year,  
I will pay you back with interest

No, it's too late for that, isn't it  
It's time this debt went into collections, isn't it

And so Beit Shammai said:

Raze down the palace, all of it.

The presence of those who have transgressed.  
Invisible walls of space and air  
The queen, on her throne of stars, says: "Rest.  
For there are no perfect people there."

And so it is we who declare  
By court of the earth and the sky  
Together we sing and give prayer  
Wherever transgressions may lie

False thrones of empire disagree, say  
No crime may be forgiven, ever  
Transitive sins will rot you  
Quarantine crimes and sickness  
Now, do it now, you must, now

We are ignoring them  
The true sovereign commands us:  
Tzdek Tzedek Tirdof, she says  
We have realized now  
That this requires another pursuit:  
Tzedek Tzedek Neshane  
Justice justice, we shall change

Who shall live and who shall die

Perhaps I

Bad will come to me this year

I will fail to be good

I am fragile

Reveal to me

Teach me

What do I do

How do I hit that mark

I feel lost, my shoes sink into the mud

And again I strike a tree.

And so I cried  
For the death of Rabbi Akiva  
The violence of Rome

This man, this patriarch,  
who would surely find me abhorrent,  
defective, mutant,  
rebellious, heretic

And yet  
Knowing or not  
He died so I may live

L'dor v'dor  
Over many years,  
One man comes to have ten thousand offspring  
And I, uncountable ancestors  
So the blood of Akiva flows through me

We work to heal the world  
Our afterlife is still but this world  
Healed, in-tact, revived

So Akiva waits for me  
Thirty spears in his chest:

“Do the work  
so I may be revived.  
I died so you may live  
So you can continue the work.  
What will you do so others may live?”

And so I

Sterile child, mutant child,  
disabled, weak, estranged

Hold the weight of all those who died

From Rome to Pogrom  
From Shoah to Nakba  
From bashing to shooting  
And war,  
And illness

Tree of life

And so I

Sterile, mutant, toevah  
Disabled, weak, estranged

Hold the weight of ensuring the lives of future  
generations

So when the world is healed, life is revived  
So that there is a world for them

How can I do a thing when I cannot stand

Cannot run from Roman soldiers  
Cannot bear children  
Cannot dance

But I know I must

“Love your G-d with all your soul  
Even should that soul be taken”  
The fire of pogroms is in my bones

So like Noah, do we now build an ark?  
So like Abraham, do we bargain with fate?  
Like Jonah, do we run from our duty?  
Like Jonah, do we rally the ninevites?  
Like Isaiah, do we describe a better world?  
Like Micah, do we denounce the corrupt?

But I know words are not enough  
I can barely grip the pen  
    Which is surely weaker than a gun

Am I content only to push others to do this work for me?  
To say:  
    “No, Akiva, it is she who is your child”

O’G-d, give me time  
    That precious finite jewel  
So I may grow strong and serve you

All that I ask for  
Is but one more year  
Before you deem me unwilling to work  
A year to become capable

Inscribe this for me and on my body it shall be inscribed

I long for comfort from a mother I never had

We are all G-d's children  
but is G-d our mother?  
It feels wrong to say  
Offensive to my real mother  
    Offensive to G-d

Could G-d truly fill that role?  
It will always be an aching longing  
    A scab I pick and pick

O'G-d, heal this scar

If I heal this scar, will I be whole?  
Or am I only whole in the whole of me  
    Scar and all  
Whole in hurt and healing

Hold me, all of me  
I will hold this and be held  
It is a part of me

Care-seeking, love-seeking, attention-seeking,  
family-seeking, G-d-seeking  
I just need to stop my guts from leaking  
To keep my hands dry as I draw back the string  
Tension building, I try to relax as I  
Let go  
And hope I hit the mark



And then a divine voice came to me

V'amru elohim:

“Shut the fuck up and listen

Your disability is not an excuse

to avoid doing my work

It is only a barrier because you keep

knowingly hurting yourself

Doing things you know you cannot do

Straddling half-assed

tikkun olam and tikkun ha'guf

That is your excuse

to do avoid doing either of what I have commanded

One who is laying on the ground

cannot save the world

First, you must work on standing

So hineini

here I am commanding you:

Do your duty.

Work on your health.

You must.



So okay  
I accept your vow  
    Or whatever  
I give you this year  
    Build yourself up  
And then I will have you  
    As though I did not already  
Then you will do tzedakah how others do  
For now,  
    You must do step one.

And so it is inscribed.”

And for a fleeting moment  
When the gates closed  
We were all perfect and good

Until soon,  
as the fourth star appeared in the sky  
We were normal,  
It was chill  
But back to work

The gates have closed and another year begins  
We are already making mistakes  
Already apologizing anew

But,  
Let us wait a little while  
Before we dig in much more

## *Special Thanks*

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