

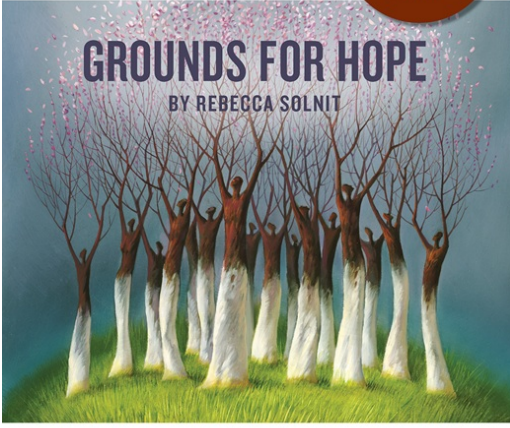


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New Psalms for a Paradigm Shift in Judaism

HERBERT J. LEVINE

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These verses of a contemporary psalm came to me in Hebrew, the language of Jewish continuity and the one I find best suited for enduring Jewish creativity. I wrote most of the poems in this essay first in Hebrew and then translated them into English. They offer alternatives to traditional forms of Jewish prayer and psalmody that do not require a leap of faith. Think of them as post-theistic—that is, their author has been deeply imbued with theism, maintained a lifelong quarrel with it, and emerged as an unconflicted non-theist.

My project of writing secular psalms was prompted by Shaul Magid's call in the 2015 Winter issue of *Tikkun* for forms of Jewish worship to embody Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's paradigm-changing approach to Jewish theology. In an accompanying sidebar approving Magid's message, Reb Zalman (z"l) admitted he had not been ready to initiate such...

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New Psalms for a Paradigm Shift in Judaism

BY HERBERT J. LEVINE

Blessed are you, world — you appear before me each day as problems to solve and living visions to praise.



THESE VERSES of a contemporary psalm came to me in Hebrew, the language of Jewish continuity and the one I find best suited for enduring Jewish creativity. I wrote most of the poems in this essay first in Hebrew and then translated them into English. They offer alternatives to traditional forms of Jewish prayer and psalmody that do not require a leap of faith. Think of them as post-theistic — that is, their author has been deeply imbued with theism, maintained a lifelong quarrel with it, and emerged as an unconflicted non-theist.

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In his book *Paradigm Shift*, Reb Zalman brought into Jewish discourse the Gaia hypothesis, formulated by biologists in the 1970s, which posits that biological organisms and the inorganic world form a unified, self-regulating system that preserves the conditions for continued life on Earth. Expressing this in evolutionary terms, humans are the embodiment of the cosmos becoming self-conscious, and, in moral terms, are therefore responsible for the future of that evolution. Gaia, Reb Zalman told us, was the living God, and we were Gaia's vanguard.

With the human crisis on the planet (climate change, population size, food resources) becoming ever more pressing, our rabbi-theologians have been following Reb Zalman's lead in giving us various versions of God as Gaia — most recently, Arthur Green's *Radical Judaism* (2010) and Brad Artson's

Renewing the Process of Creation (2015). In the past two decades we have seen God presented as a verb, as the verbal phrase is-was-will-be, as a transformative, liberating movement toward justice, as the interdependence of humans and plants — all formulations welcome, it seems, except those that attribute to God the power of being in charge, which we post-Holocaust Jews cannot accept.

Over thirty years ago, I spoke to my teacher, Reb Zalman, about my difficulty with the traditional language of Jewish prayer. He asked me if I thought I could say “you” to the universe. As he did to so many others, he gave me permission to experiment — to use *barukh ata olam*, “blessed are you, world,” as an inner mantra, even as he urged me to continue to say the traditional words. After thirty years, I realized that I needed to go further, to claim *Barukh ata olam* as more than an inner mantra, by giving myself permission to say those words in prayer. That discovery led to the creation of these prayerful poems, which I think of as psalms for our time.

Marcia Falk's *Book of Blessings* and *The Days Between* opened the way for bilingual, non-theistic Jewish poems. Many Jewish poets have similarly offered prayerful poems with no God-term as contemporary psalms, including Karl Shapiro, Irving Feldman, Allen Ginsberg, Paul Celan, and Yehuda Amichai, among others. I think especially of the exemplary God-discourse of Yehuda Amichai in his final book, *Open Closed Open*. There he claims “Change is god and death is its prophet,” suggesting that our only bedrock is change itself, the mutability of the visible world to which lyric poetry has always been devoted. Amichai, in turn, was building on the committed secularism and Jewish allusiveness of Chaim Nachman Bialik. These iconoclasts loom large as paradigm-changing Jewish forebears, just as I hope, in my small way, to continue their work.

HERBERT LEVINE'S forthcoming book is *Words for Blessing the World: Poems in Hebrew and English* (Ben Yehuda Press). He has previously published poems in *Tikkun* and is also the author of *Sing Unto God a New Song: A Contemporary Reading of the Psalms*.

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