

# FINDING YOURSELF IN THE SIDUR: A Reconstructionist Approach to Prayer

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A new learning is about to be born - rather it has been born. It is a learning in reverse order. A learning that no longer starts from the Torah and leads into life, but the other way round: from life, from a world that knows nothing of the Law, or pretends to know nothing, back to the Torah. That is the sign of the time. ...There is no one today who is not alienated or who does not contain within himself some small fraction of alienation. All of us to whom Judaism, to whom being a Jew, has again become the pivot of our lives...we all know that in being Jews we must not give up anything, not renounce anything, but lead everything back to Judaism. From the periphery back to the center, from the outside in. **Franz Rosenzweig, 1886-1929 (at the opening of the Lehrhaus, the Free Jewish House of Learning, which he founded in Frankfurt in 1919)**

## I. TORAH/P'SHAT/NARRATIVE

- יא** וַיֹּאמְרוּ, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, הַמִּבְּלִי אֵין-קִבְרִים  
בְּמִצְרַיִם, לְקַחְתָּנוּ לָמוּת בַּמִּדְבָּר: מַה-זֹּאת  
עָשִׂיתָ לָּנוּ, לְהוֹצִיאָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם.
- יב** הֲלֹא-זֶה הַדְּבָר, אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְנוּ אֵלֶיךָ  
בְּמִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר, חַדְל מִמָּנוּ, וְנַעֲבֹדָה  
אֶת-מִצְרַיִם: כִּי טוֹב לָנוּ עֲבַד אֶת-מִצְרַיִם,  
מִמָּוְתוֹ בַּמִּדְבָּר.
- יג** וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָעָם,  
אֶל-תִּירְאוּ--הַתִּיַצְבוּ וּרְאוּ אֶת-יְשׁוּעַת ה',  
אֲשֶׁר-יַעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם הַיּוֹם: כִּי, אֲשֶׁר רָאִיתֶם  
אֶת-מִצְרַיִם הַיּוֹם--לֹא תִסְפוּ לִרְאֹתָם עוֹד,  
עַד-עוֹלָם.
- יד** ה' יִלָּחֵם לָכֶם; וְאַתֶּם, תִּחְרְשׁוּן.
- טו** וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, מַה-תִּצְעַק אֵלַי;  
דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְיִסְעוּ.
- טז** וְאַתָּה הָרִם אֶת-מַטְּךָ, וְנִטְהַ אֶת-יָדְךָ  
עַל-הַיָּם וּבִקְעָהוּ; וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ  
הַיָּם, בַּיַּבָּשָׁה.
- 11** They said to Moses: Was it for lack of graves in Egypt that you have taken us to die in the wilderness? What is this that you have done to us, to bring us forth out of Egypt?
- 12** Is not what we said to you in Egypt, saying: Leave us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it would be better for us to serve the Egyptians than that to die in the wilderness.'
- 13** Moses said to the people: 'Fear not, stand still, and see the salvation of the HOLY ONE which God will do for you today; as you have seen the Egyptians today, you shall never see them again.'
- 14** The HOLY ONE will fight for you, and you, hold your peace.'
- 15** The HOLY ONE said to Moses: "Why do you cry out to Me? Speak unto the children of Israel, and let them go forward."
- As for you -- lift your staff, stretch your hand over the sea, and divide it; let the children of Israel go into the midst of the sea on dry ground.**

**כא** וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יָדוֹ, עַל-הַיָּם, וַיּוֹלֶךְ ה' אֶת-הַיָּם בְּרוּחַ קָדִים עֲזָה כָּל-הַלַּיְלָה, וַיִּשָּׂם אֶת-הַיָּם לַחֲרָבָה; וַיִּבְקְעוּ, הַמַּיִם.

**21** Moses stretched his hand over the sea; the HOLY ONE caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all the night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided.

**כב** וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם, בַּיַּבֵּשָׁה; וְהַמַּיִם לֵהֶם חוֹמָה, מִיְמִינָם וּמִשְׂמָאלָם.

**22** And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground; and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left.

## II. *MIDRASH: FICTION*

When the Israelites stood by the Red Sea, the tribes strove with one another, each wishing to descend into the sea first. Then sprang forward the tribe of Benjamin and descended first into the sea...

That is not what happened; but each tribe was unwilling to be the first to enter the sea. Then sprang forward Nachshon the son of Amminadav and descended first into the sea [and it appeared he would drown]...

At that time Moses was standing and lengthening his prayer before the Holy One, blessed be He. God said to him: "Moses! My beloved one (i.e., Nachshon) is sinking in the water and the sea is closing [over him], the hated one (i.e., the Egyptians) is in pursuit and you stand and lengthen your prayer before Me?!?"

He said before God: "Master of the World, what am I able to do to help him?" God said to him: "Raise up your staff [and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it so that the children of Israel may pass through the sea on dry ground (Exodus 14:16)

**Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael Beshalach, BT Sotah 36b-37a**

## III. *SIDDUR/POETRY*

מִמְצָרִים גָּאֲלָתָנוּ, ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וּמִבֵּית עֲבָדִים פָּדִיתָנוּ. כָּל בְּכוֹרֵיהֶם הִרְגָתָ וּבְכוֹרְךָ גָּאֲלָתָ וַיִּם סוּף בְּקַעַת וַזְּדִים טִבְעֵתָ, וַיִּדְדִים הֶעֱבַרְתָּ, וַיִּכְסּוּ מֵיִם צָרִיחֶם, אַחַד מֵהֶם לֹא נוֹתַר.

From the Narrow Places  
You redeemed us, Holy One our God;  
from the house of bondage  
You rescued us.  
All of their first-born You destroyed;  
Your first-born You redeemed.  
You split the Sea of Reeds:  
the wicked sank  
while Your beloveds  
crossed with Your help.

The waters smothered their troublers;  
not one of them survived.

על זאת שבחו אֱהוּבִים וְרוֹמְמוֹ אֵל, וְנִתְּנוּ יְדִידִים זְמֵרוֹת שִׁירֹת וְתִשְׁבְּחוֹת,  
בְּרָכוֹת וְהוֹדָאוֹת, לְמֶלֶךְ אֵל חַי וְקַיִם, רַם וְנֹשֵׂא, גְדוֹל וְנוֹרָא, מְשַׁפִּיל גְּאִים,  
וּמְגַבֵּיהַ שְׁפָלִים, מוֹצִיא אֲסִירִים, וּפּוֹדֵה עֲנּוּיִם, וְעוֹזֵר דָּלִים, וְעוֹנֶה לְעַמּוֹ בְּעֵת  
שׁוֹעֵם אֱלֹו.

Therefore the beloveds praised and exalted God;  
they offered song and praise, blessing, thanks  
to the One Beyond, Eternal Source of Life,  
Far Beyond, Awesome, Who humbles the proud  
lifts the fallen, releases the bound  
redeems the downtrodden, helps the poor --  
Who answers n the moment  
when they cry out

תְּהִלּוֹת לְאֵל עֲלִיוֹן, בְּרוּךְ הוּא וּמְבָרָךְ. מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָךְ עָנוּ שִׁירָה בְּשִׂמְחָה  
רַבָּה, וְאָמְרוּ כֻלָּם:

Praises to the One Beyond  
Who is blessed!  
Moses and Miriam and the Children of Israel  
offered you song, with enormous joy,  
bursting out in union:

מִי כְמוֹכָה בָּאֵלִים יְיָ, מִי כְמוֹכָה נֶאֱדָר בְּקִדְשׁ, נוֹרָא תְּהִלַּת, עֹשֶׂה פֶּלֶא.

Who is like You, Source of Holiness?  
Who is like You --  
magnificent in holiness,  
awesome in praises --  
doing wonders.

שִׁירָה חֲדָשָׁה שִׁבְּחוּ גְּאוּלִּים לְשִׁמְךָ עַל שְׁפַת הַיָּם,  
יַחַד כֻּלָּם הוֹדוּ וְהִמְלִיכוּ וְאָמְרוּ:

The redeemed sang a new song to You  
at the shore of the Sea  
Together they acknowledged  
and witnessed to Your power, saying:

יְיָ יִמְלֹךְ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.

The Holy One will rule  
for all time!

### **"At the Border, 1979" (Choman Hardi)**

*Choman Hardi the seventh and youngest child of Kurdish poet Ahmed Hardi. She was born in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1974, but her family fled to Iran a year later after the Algiers Accord. The amnesty of 1979 enabled them to return home, only to be driven away nine years later during Anfal, when Saddam's forces attacked the Kurds with chemical weapons. In 1993, Hardi was granted refugee status in England where she went on to complete doctoral research on the mental health of Kurdish women refugees. Her research has seen her return to Kurdistan to document the plight of women survivors of Anfal.*

'It is your last check-in point in this country!'  
We grabbed a drink –  
soon everything would taste different.  
The land divided by our feet continued  
divided by a thick iron chain.  
My sister put her leg across it.  
'Look over here,' she said to us,  
'my right leg is in this country  
and my left leg is in the other.'  
The border guards told her off.  
My mother informed me: We are going home.  
She said that the roads are much cleaner  
the landscape is more beautiful  
and people are much kinder.  
Dozens of families waited in the rain.  
'I can inhale home,' somebody said.  
Now our mothers were crying. I was five years old  
standing by the check-in point  
comparing both sides of the border.  
The autumn soil continued on the other side  
with the same colour, the same texture.  
It rained on both sides of the chain.  
We waited while our papers were checked,  
our faces thoroughly inspected.  
Then the chain was removed to let us through.  
A man bent down and kissed his muddy homeland.  
The same chain of mountains encompassed all of us.

### **"For a New Beginning" (John O'Donohue)**

In out-of-the-way places of the heart,  
Where your thoughts  
never think to wander,  
This beginning has been quietly forming,  
Waiting until you were ready to emerge.

For a long time it has watched your desire,  
Feeling the emptiness growing inside you,

Noticing how you willed yourself on,  
Still unable to leave  
what you had outgrown.

It watched you play  
with the seduction of safety  
And the gray promises  
that sameness whispered,  
Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent,  
Wondered would you always live like this.  
Then the delight,  
when your courage kindled,  
And out you stepped onto new ground,  
Your eyes young again  
with energy and dream,  
A path of plenitude opening before you.

Though your destination is not yet clear  
You can trust the promise of this opening;  
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning  
That is at one with your life's desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;  
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;  
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,  
For your soul senses the world  
that awaits you.