

# Open Closed Open

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TRANSLATED BY CHANA BLOCH AND CHANA KRONFELD

27

אֶתְרֵי אוֹשְׁוִיץ אֵין תּאֻלֹּגְיָה:  
מֵאַרְבּוֹת הַנְּתִיחַן עוֹלָה עֵשׂוֹ לָבוֹ,  
סִימָן שֶׁהַקְּרָדִינִלִים בָּתְרוּ לָהֶם אֶפִּיפִיּוֹר.  
מִמְשָׁרְפוֹת אוֹשְׁוִיץ עוֹלָה עֵשׂוֹן שׁוֹחַר  
סִימָן שֶׁהָאֱלֹהִים טָרַם הַחֲלִיטוֹ עַל בְּחִירַת  
הָעָם הַנִּבְחָר.

אֶתְרֵי אוֹשְׁוִיץ אֵין תּאֻלֹּגְיָה:  
הַמִּסְפָּרִים עַל אֲמוֹת אֶסִּירֵי הַהִשְׁמָדָה  
הֵם מִסְפָּרֵי הַטֵּלְפוֹן שֶׁל הָאֱלֹהִים  
מִסְפָּרִים שְׂאִין מִקֵּם תְּשׁוּבָה  
וְעֵכְשׁוֹ הֵם מִגְמָקִים, אֶחָד, אֶחָד.

אֶתְרֵי אוֹשְׁוִיץ יֵשׁ תּאֻלֹּגְיָה חֲדָשָׁה:  
הַיְּהוּדִים שָׂמְתוּ בְּשׂוֹאָה  
בַּעֲשׂוֹ עֵכְשׁוֹ דּוֹמִים לֵאלֹהֵיהֶם  
שְׂאִין לוֹ דְּמוּת הַגּוֹרֵף וְאֵין לוֹ גּוֹרֵף.  
אֵין לָהֶם דְּמוּת הַגּוֹרֵף וְאֵין לָהֶם גּוֹרֵף.

(TRANSLATION ON PAGE 418)

# The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai

Edited by ROBERT ALTER

## Gods Change, Prayers Are Here to Stay

1

In the street on a summer evening, I saw a woman writing  
on a piece of paper spread out against a locked wooden door.  
She folded it, tucked it between door and doorpost, and went  
on her way.

And I didn't see her face, nor the face of the man  
who would read what she had written  
and I didn't see the words.

On my desk lies a stone with the word "Amen" on it,  
a fragment of a tombstone, a remnant from a Jewish graveyard  
destroyed a thousand years ago in the town where I was born.  
One word, "Amen," carved deep into the stone,  
a final hard amen for all that was and never will return,  
a soft singing amen, as in prayer:  
Amen and amen, may it come to pass.

Tombstones crumble, they say, words tumble, words fade away,  
the tongues that spoke them turn to dust,  
languages die as people do,  
some languages rise again,  
gods change up in heaven, gods get replaced,  
prayers are here to stay.

2

Jewish theology, Theo, Theo. When I was young I knew a boy  
named Theodore, as in Herzl, but his mother called him  
home from the playground: Theo, Theo, come home, Theo,  
don't stay there with the bad boys,  
Theo, Theo, lo! Gee.

I don't want an invisible god. I want a god who is seen  
but doesn't see, so I can lead him around

and tell him what he doesn't see. And I want  
a god who sees and is seen. I want to see  
how he covers his eyes, like a child playing blindman's bluff.

I want a god who is like a window I can open  
so I'll see the sky even when I'm inside.  
I want a god who is like a door that opens out, not in,  
but God is like a revolving door, which turns, turns on its hinges  
in and out, whirling and turning  
without a beginning, without an end.

3  
I declare with perfect faith  
that prayer preceded God.  
Prayer created God,  
God created human beings,  
human beings create prayers  
that create the God that creates human beings.

4  
God is a staircase that ascends  
to a place that is no longer there, or isn't there yet.  
The stairs are my faith, my downfall.  
Our father Jacob knew it in his dream.  
The angels were just adorning the steps of his ladder  
like a fir tree decked out for Christmas,  
and the Song of Ascents is a song of praise  
to the God of the Stairs.

5  
When God packed up and left the country, He left the Torah  
with the Jews. They have been looking for Him ever since,  
shouting, "Hey, you forgot something, you forgot,"  
and other people think shouting is the prayer of the Jews.  
Since then, they've been combing the Bible for hints of His  
whereabouts,  
as it says: "Seek ye the Lord while He may be found,  
call ye upon Him while He is near." But He is far away.

6  
Bird tracks in the sand on the seashore  
like the handwriting of someone who jotted down  
words, names, numbers and places, so he would remember.  
Bird tracks in the sand at night  
are still there in the daytime, though I've never seen  
the bird that left them. That's the way it is  
with God.

7  
"Our Father, Our King." What does a father do  
when his children are orphans and he  
is still alive? What will a father do  
when his children have died and he becomes  
a bereaved father for all eternity? Cry  
and not cry, not forget and not remember.  
"Our Father, Our King." What does a king do  
in the republic of pain? Give them  
bread and circuses like any king,  
the bread of memory and the circuses of forgetting,  
bread and nostalgia. Nostalgia for God-  
and-a-better-world. "Our Father, Our King."

8  
The God of the Christians is a Jew, a bit of a whiner,  
and the God of the Muslims is an Arab Jew from the desert, a  
bit hoarse.  
Only the God of the Jews isn't Jewish.  
The way Herod the Edomite was brought in to be king of the Jews,  
so God was brought back from the infinite future,  
an abstract God: neither painting nor graven image nor tree nor stone.

9  
The Jewish people read Torah aloud to God  
all year long, a portion a week,  
like Scheherazade who told stories to save her life.  
By the time Simchat Torah rolls around,  
God forgets and they can begin again.

God is like a tour guide  
describing our life and explaining to visitors  
and tourists and the sons of God: That's how we live.

## 11

*Eyn ke-loheynu, Eyn ka-adoneynu,*  
"There is none like our God, There is none like our Lord,"  
thus we pray.  
*Eyn ke-loheynu, Eyn ka-adoneynu,* in a loud voice  
—no reaction from him. So we amp up our voices and sing,  
*Mi ke-loheynu, mi ka-adoneynu?*  
"Who is like our God, who is like our Lord," and he won't budge,  
won't turn toward us. And again we redouble the force of our  
pleading,  
*Atah hu eloheynu, atah hu adoneynu,* "Thou art our God, Thou art  
our Lord."  
Maybe now he'll remember  
us? But he remains unmoved, even  
turns to us with cold and alien eyes.  
So we stop singing and yelling, and in a whisper  
we remind him of something personal, something small:  
*Atah hu she-hikrivu avoteynu le-fanekha*  
*et ketoret ha-samim.* "Thou art the one before whom our forefathers  
offered sweet incense"—maybe now he'll remember?  
(Like a man who reminds a woman of their old love affair:  
Don't you remember how we were buying shoes  
in that little shop on the corner, and it poured and poured  
outside, and we laughed and laughed?)  
And it seems as if something begins to wake up in him, maybe  
he'll forget not his own,  
but too late: the Jewish people is gone.

## 12

Even solitary prayer takes two:  
one to sway back and forth  
and the one who doesn't move is God.  
But when my father prayed, he would stand in his place,

erect, motionless, and force God  
to sway like a reed and pray to him.

## 13

Communal prayer: Is it better to ask "Give us peace"  
with cries of woe, or to ask calmly, quietly?  
But if we ask calmly, God will think  
we don't really need peace and quiet.

## 14

Morning Psalms. Innocence rises from human beings  
like steam from hot food ascending on high, a steam  
that turns into God and sometimes into other gods.

## 15

A collection of ritual objects in the museum: spice boxes  
with little flags on top like festive troops  
and many fragrant generations of sacrifice,  
and the memory of many Sabbath nights that did not end in death.  
And happy menorahs and weepy menorahs and oil lamps  
with the pouting beaks of chicks like children singing,  
their mouths wide open in desire and love.  
And long metal hands to point out everything  
that is no more. The human hands that held them—  
long since underground, severed from the bodies.  
Seder plates that rotate at the speed of time  
so it seems they are standing still, and kiddush cups  
in a row on the shelf like soccer trophies  
or victory cups from the track and field of generations.  
All is gold of grief, silver of longing,  
copper of calamity. A collection of ritual objects  
like the gaudy toys of a baby god, the gift  
of an aged nation, like the strange instruments  
of a ghost orchestra, like some odd motionless  
bottom fish deep in the waters of time.  
A collection of ritual objects donated by Dr. Feuchtwanger,  
Jerusalem dentist. And whoever hears this will assume  
a delicate smile on his lips, like well-wrought filigree.

God is like a magician who performs sleight of hand:  
 causes Himself to appear, makes doves fly out of His pockets,  
 pulls rabbits out of His sleeve, saws a woman in two,  
 splits the Red Sea in two, produces ten plagues  
 and ten commandments with fire and pillars of smoke,  
 hovers over the waters and vanishes into the wall.  
 Everyone wants to catch Him in an off moment  
 and discover how He does it without really doing it.  
 And everyone wants not to know, not to discover  
 how He does it, they would like to believe,  
 each against each. Nothing to nothing.

I believe with perfect faith in the resurrection of the dead.  
 Just as a man who wishes to return to a place he loves  
 leaves behind a book, a shopping bag, a snapshot, his glasses,  
 on purpose, so he has to return, that's how the dead leave  
 the living behind, and they will return.  
 Once I stood in the mists of a long-ago autumn  
 in a Jewish cemetery that was abandoned, though not by its dead.  
 The groundskeeper was an expert on flowers and seasons of the year  
 but no expert on buried Jews. And he too said: Night after night  
 they are training for the resurrection of the dead.

The ways of my life are tangled and entangled. I am a knot that cannot  
 be undone. Like a knot one makes in a handkerchief to remember  
 something. I don't know of what I'm a reminder, and whom I'm  
 reminding  
 not to forget. Maybe I need to remind God  
 to make a better world, I don't know.  
 I am the knot in the handkerchief. That's all there is, and that is  
 my life.

Whoever put on a tallis when he was young will never forget:  
 taking it out of the soft velvet bag, opening the folded shawl,

spreading it out, kissing the length of the neckband (embroidered  
 or trimmed in gold). Then swinging it in a great swoop overhead  
 like a sky, a wedding canopy, a parachute. And then winding it  
 around his head as in hide-and-seek, wrapping  
 his whole body in it, close and slow, snuggling into it like the  
 cocoon

of a butterfly, then opening would-be wings to fly.  
 And why is the tallis striped and not checkered black-and-white  
 like a chessboard? Because squares are finite and hopeless.  
 Stripes come from infinity and to infinity they go  
 like airport runways where angels land and take off.  
 Whoever has put on a tallis will never forget.  
 When he comes out of a swimming pool or the sea,  
 he wraps himself in a large towel, spreads it out again  
 over his head, and again snuggles into it close and slow,  
 still shivering a little, and he laughs and blesses.

I'm kosher. I chew my soul-cud  
 from the enclosed dark of every little thing that happened,  
 so as not to forget it, not to lose it. Yet again "Renew  
 our days as of old," yet again adding  
 one more day to make the holiday last.  
 If you have ever seen cows in a meadow  
 chewing their cud, ease and delight on their faces  
 and a memory of green grass on eye and tongue,  
 you know what true pleasure is.  
 I am cleft. I have no hoofs but my soul is  
 split. That split, that cleft, gives me the strength to stand it all,  
 and I beat myself up as if beating my breast for my sins  
 on Rosh Hashana, or like a man looking for something  
 he has lost, poking in his jacket or his pockets to find it.  
 Maybe I've forgotten what sin I'm beating my breast for.  
 To the confession "We have sinned, we have betrayed" I  
 would add  
 the words "We have forgotten, we have remembered"—two sins  
 that cannot be atoned for. They ought to cancel each other out  
 but instead they reinforce one another. Yes, I'm kosher.

21

Reflections on Seder night, *Mah nishtanah*, we asked,  
 “How is this night different from all other nights?” “How changed?”  
 Most of us are grown up now and have stopped asking, but some  
 go on asking all their lives, the way one asks  
 How are you, or What time is it, and keep on walking  
 without waiting for an answer. *Mah nishtanah kol layla*, “How  
 changed is every night,”  
 like an alarm clock whose ticking is soothing and soporific.  
*Mah nishtanah, ha-kol yishtaneh*, “What has changed, all shall be  
 changed.” Change is God.  
 Reflections on Seder night. Of four sons does the Torah  
 speak: one wise, one wicked, one simple, and one  
 who knows not how to ask. But nothing is said there  
 about a good one, or a loving one.  
 And that’s a question that has no answer, and if there were an answer  
 I wouldn’t want to know. I who have passed through all the phases  
 of the sons  
 in their changing constellations, I’ve lived my life, the moon shed  
 its light  
 on me for no reason, the sun went on its way, the Passovers  
 passed without an answer. *Mah nishtanah*. “What has changed?”  
 Change is God, Death is his prophet.

22

God’s love for His people Israel is an upside-down love.  
 First crude and physical, with a strong hand and an outstretched arm:  
 miracles, ten plagues and ten commandments,  
 almost violent, on a no-name basis.  
 Then more: more emotion, more soul  
 but no body, an unrequited ever-longing love  
 for an invisible god in the high heavens. A hopeless love.

23

We are all children of Abraham  
 but also the grandchildren of Terah, Abraham’s father.  
 And maybe it’s high time the grandchildren  
 did unto their father as he did unto his

when he shattered his idols and images, his religion, his faith.  
 That too would be the beginning of a new religion.

24

The sound of a drawer closing—the voice of God,  
 the sound of a drawer opening—the voice of love,  
 but it could also be the other way around.  
 Footsteps approaching—the voice of love,  
 footsteps retreating—the voice of God  
 who left the country without notice, temporarily forever.  
 A book that stays open on the table beside a pair of glasses—  
 God. A closed book and a lamp that stays lit—  
 love. A key turning in the door without a sound—  
 God. A key hesitating—love and hope.  
 But it could also be the other way around.  
 A sacrifice of a fragrant scent to God,  
 a sacrifice of the other senses to love:  
 a sacrifice of touch and caress, of sight and of sound,  
 a sacrifice of taste.  
 But it could also be the other way around.

25

I studied love in my childhood in my childhood synagogue  
 in the women’s section with the help of the women behind  
 the partition  
 that locked up my mother with all the other women and girls.  
 But the partition that locked them up locked me up  
 on the other side. They were free in their love while I remained  
 locked up with all the men and boys in my love, my longing.  
 I wanted to be there with them and to know their secrets  
 and say with them, “Blessed be He who has made me  
 according to His will.” And the partition—  
 a lace curtain white and soft as summer dresses, swaying  
 on its rings and loops of wish and would,  
*lu-lu* loops, lullings of love in the locked room.  
 And the faces of women like the face of the moon behind the clouds  
 or the full moon when the curtain parts: an enchanted  
 cosmic order. At night we said the blessing

over the moon outside, and I  
thought about the women.

26

I studied love in the synagogue of my childhood,  
I sang "Come, O Sabbath bride" on Friday nights  
with a bridegroom's fever, I practiced longing for the days  
of the Messiah,  
I conducted yearning drills for the days of yore that will not return.  
The cantor serenades his love out of the depths,  
Kaddish is recited over lovers who remain together,  
the male bird dresses up in a blaze of color.  
And we dress the rolled-up Torah scrolls in silken petticoats  
and gowns of embroidered velvet  
held up by narrow shoulder straps.  
And we kiss them as they are passed around the synagogue,  
stroking them as they pass, as they pass,  
as we pass.

27

After Auschwitz, no theology:  
From the chimneys of the Vatican, white smoke rises—  
a sign the cardinals have chosen themselves a pope.  
From the crematoria of Auschwitz, black smoke rises—  
a sign the conclave of Gods has not yet chosen  
the Chosen People.  
After Auschwitz, no theology:  
the numbers on the forearms  
of the inmates of extermination  
are the telephone numbers of God,  
numbers that do not answer  
and now are disconnected, one by one.

After Auschwitz, a new theology:  
the Jews who died in the Shoah  
have now come to be like their God,  
who has no likeness of a body and has no body.  
They have no likeness of a body and they have no body