

Selected Readings

JERUSALEM, 1967

On Yom Kippur in 1967, the Year of Forgetting, I put on
My dark holiday suit and walked to the Old City of Jerusalem.
For a long time I stood in front of an Arab's hole-in-the-wall shop,
not far from the Damascus Gate, a shop with
buttons and zippers and spools of thread
in every color and snaps and buckles.
A rare light and many colors, like an open Ark.

I told him in my heart that my father too
had a shop like this, with thread and buttons.
I explained to him in my heart about all the decades
and the causes and the events, why I am now here
and my father's shop was burned there and he is buried here.

When I finished, it was time for Neilah, the closing of the gates.
He too lowered the shutters and locked the gate
and I returned, with all the worshippers, home.

- Yehuda Amichai

A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven.

A time for being born and a time for dying,
A time for planting and a time for uprooting the planted,
A time for slaying and a time for healing,
A time for tearing down and a time for building up,
A time for weeping and a time for laughing,
A time for wailing and a time for dancing,
A time for throwing stones and a time for gathering stones,
A time for embracing and a time for shunning embraces,
A time for seeking and a time for losing,
A time for keeping and a time for discarding,
A time for ripping and a time for sewing,
A time for silence and a time for speaking,
A time for loving and a time for hating,
A time for war and a time for peace.

- Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

We cannot expect You alone, God, to end all wars, for You have meant for us to seek and find our own path of peace.

*We cannot expect You alone to end starvation and ignorance,
For you have given us the tools with which to feed and educate ourselves
- if only we would use them wisely.*

We cannot expect You alone to root out the hatred within our cities,
for You have given us eyes to see the good in all people if we would
but open them.

*We cannot expect You alone to end all prejudice and conformity,
For You have given us the minds to outwit these evils
- if only we would give full vent to these efforts.*

We pray for the kind of faith that will never let us despair and
acquiesce to evil. We can pray that we have the courage to say:

*I believe in the sun when it is not shining.
I believe in love when not feeling it.
I believe in God even when God is silent.*

We pray, O Mentor of Israel, that Your Torah to which these,
Your children have borne witness in life and in death, shed a renewed light in the hearts of all people,
that all these martyrs - nameless to us but known to You - shall not have suffered in vain.

*May their memory be an enduring blessing to all humanity,
and may we prove worthy of their heroism and their sacrifice.*

-From *Tikunay Nefashot*, Sha'arei Am Synagogue,
Santa Monica, CA

AUTUMN IS NEAR AND MEMORY OF MY PARENTS

Autumn is near. The last fruit ripens
People walk on roads they never walked on.
The old house begins to forgive its tenants.
Trees darken with age and people whiten.
Rain will come. The smell of rust will be fresh
And pleasant like the smell of blossoming in the spring.

In the northern countries they say most leaves

Are still on the trees, and here we say
Most words are still on the people,
Our foliage loses other things.

Autumn is near. Time to remember my parents.
I remember them like the simple toys of my childhood
Revolving in the little circles,
Humming quietly, raising a leg
Lifting an arm, turning a head
From side to side, rhythmically, slowly,
A spring in their belly and the key in their back.

Suddenly, freezing, they remain
Forever in their last gesture.

That is how I remember my parents
And how they were.

-Yehuda Amichai

EACH PERSON HAS A NAME

Each person has a name,
Given him by God,
And given him by his father and mother.

Each person has a name,
Given him by his stature
And by his way of smiling,
And given him by his clothes.

Each person has a name
Given him by the mountains
And given him by his walls.

Each person has a name
Given him by the planets
And given him by his neighbors.

Each person has a name
Given him by his sins
And given him by his longing.

Each person has a name

Given him by his enemies
And given him by his love.

Each person has a name
Given him by his feast days
And given him by his craft.

Each person has a name
Given him by the seasons of the year
And given him by his blindness.

Each person has a name
Given him by the sea
And given him by his death.

-Zelda

BIRTH IS A BEGINNING

Birth is a beginning
And death a destination.
But life is a journey,
A going - a growing
From stage to stage.

From childhood to maturity
And youth to age.
From innocence to awareness
And ignorance to knowing;
From foolishness to discretion
And then perhaps to wisdom.

From weakness to strength
Or strength to weakness —
And, often, back again.
From health to sickness
And back, we pray, to health again.

From offense to forgiveness,
From loneliness to love,
From joy to gratitude,
From pain to compassion,
And grief to understanding —

From fear to faith.

From defeat to defeat to defeat—
Until, looking backward or ahead,
We see that victory lies
Not at some high place along the way,
But in having made the journey,
Stage by stage —
A sacred pilgrimage.

Birth is a beginning
And death a destination;
But life is a journey,
A sacred pilgrimage
Made stage by stage—
From birth to death
To life everlasting

-Rabbi Alvin Fine

We have mourned for the suffering of the martyrs of Israel.

Now we turn our thoughts to those members of our own family whose loss is now our loss.

The rabbis tell of Adam and Eve
How frightened they must have been
When for the first time they saw the sun disappear
Ending the light of day.

It was humanity's first darkness! And they trembled in despair.

Then people learned that after each dark night
A bright dawn will come.

*Adam and Eve's story is our story
There is much today that is dark in our world, and in ourselves.*

We too experience the loss of light and warmth.
We too fear that the darkness might never end.

*Let us remember that we are not alone,
And the light is never far away.*

The light of life is a finite flame. Like the yahrzeit candle, life is kindled, and it glows. But soon it fades; its substance is consumed, and it is no more.

In light we see; in light we are seen. The flame dances and our lives are full. But as night follows day, the candle of our life burns down and sputters. There is an end to the flame. We see no more, and are seen no more.

Yet we should not despair, for we are more than a memory slowly fading into the darkness. With our lives, we give life.

Something of us can never die; we move in the eternal cycle of darkness and death, of light and life.

-Tikunay Nefashot, Sha'arei Am Synagogue,
Santa Monica, CA

MEMORY

It is hard to love what death can take from us.
It is painful to cherish what can be lost forever!
It is sad to know that we cannot have what is loved for all our lives.
It is bittersweet to remember the pain and joy of what we have lost.
But now we recall those who are gone
To gain what was purest and best in their lives.

We will remember them when the seasons change.
They will come to mind at family celebrations.
When we are lonely or lost, we will think of them.
In the quiet of dusk they live, they walked these same pathways.

And we give thanks to God. Who has blessed us with the gift of their lives

HOPE IS THE THING WITH FEATHERS

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all.

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chilliest land
And on the strangest sea,
Yet never in extremity
It asked a crumb of me.

— Emily Dickinson

A CANDLE IN THE GLASS

When you died, it was time to light the first
candle of the eight. The dark tidal shifts
of the Jewish calendar of waters and the moon
that grows like a belly and starves like a rabbit
in winter have carried that holiday forward
and back since then. I light only your candle
at sunset, as the red wax of the sun melts
into the rumpled waters of the bay.

The ancient words pass like cold water
out of stone over my tongue as I say kaddish.
When I am silent and the twilight drifts
in on skeins of unraveling woolly snow
blowing over the hill dark with pitch pines,
I have a moment of missing that pierces
my brain like sugar stabbing a cavity
till the nerve lights its burning wire.

Grandmother Hannah comes to me at Pesach
and when I am lighting the Sabbath candles.
The sweet wine in the cup has her breath.
The challah is braided like her long, long hair.
She smiles vaguely, nods, is gone like a savor
passing. You come oftener when I am putting
up pears or tomatoes, baking apple cake.
You are in my throat laughing or in my eyes.

When someone dies, it is the unspoken words
that spoil in the mind and ferment to wine
and to vinegar. I obey you still, going
out in the saw toothed wind to feed the birds
you protected. When I lie in the arms of my love,
I know how you climbed like a peavine twining,

lush, grasping for the sun, toward love
and always you were pinched back, denied.

It's a little low light the yahrzeit candle
makes, you couldn't read by it or even warm
your hands. So the dead are with us only
as the scent of fresh coffee, of cinnamon,
of pansies excites the nose and then fades,
with us as the small candle burns in its glass.
We lose and we go on losing as long as we live,
a little winter no spring can melt.

— Marge Piercy

*“...we sense the eternal mystery of life and death.
We are alone-but not alone.”
In our loneliness, consolation comes from God.
In our bewilderment, strength is man's gift to man.”*

— Alfred Ronald