

"A Daytime Prayer"

by Yisroel Shtern (1928)

Translated by Jon Levitow (2007)

Day – a day so bright, that out of you emerges
every color – and the streets stand open,
like the opened purses of extravagant philanthropists,
all the creatures and their garments,
all the people and the walls, which have gone to sleep
while standing, and the signs, which speak in colors
and want to turn the clerks to poets...
in them all, in every stone and straw, in all things
sits your goodness, warm and shining, Day,
as in a lamp of silver lives a flame. —
I'm a thing as well and want to feel your shining face on me;
I want your forehead smooth to wipe away from every crease of mine
all secrets,¹ so I also will be blessed with openness,
like the driver who holds his horse's reins while standing in the street,
or the Jew who freely chalks the day's accounts on his front door.

Let every hidden thing fade from my mind,
as blackness dies away from glowing iron.
Let me be refined in burning radiance
and see what no one else sees, or see more of how it happened,
or at least, without sin or boundary let me be seen.

Why is every post and roof
sovereign over its own shape
while my gaze is on the ground?
Am I worse than the sidewalk,
which lies content and without shame can look
straight into Heaven?...

Let every covert in me cease to be
so I don't lock away my life in secrecy.
I want to find myself in your hands, Day –
help me be like you and not deceive.

¹ (Trans.) This image may be derived from the motif of the "metzakh haratzon" or the "forehead of the will" which appears in the anthropomorphic schema of spiritual energy found in the Kabbalah, the level of "will" standing above that of conscious reflection and intelligence. Also comparable although perhaps not directly relevant is the Hebrew expression, "metzakh nekhusha," or "forehead of brass," (Is. 48:4), which denotes impudence and shamelessness.

See, I've opened wide my eyes with the windows of my house.
And when a woman threw her chainlike arms around my threshold,
I told her: "Don't come back; I just can't stand you."
And I'll say today, or tomorrow at the latest, to another,
"Oh, how much lovelier this world would be if standing on your legs!"

I don't want strange thoughts²
to disturb my fervent prayer.
Can't I be happy purely, like an ear of corn,
expecting your arrival and caress?

I'm part of creation, too, so why does night
chase me all over with its awful cry?
Am I worse than the dog, that laughing runs around
and holds you in its coat, bright Day?

Maybe darkness clings to me,
and through the web of circumstance
my glances wander, lost,
like you, Day, when you lose yourself in storms...

But now you stand defended by a thousand bands of white,
the gardens watch over you and guard you.
You are the crown of every village; the cities belong to you.
You drive the produce from the earth and the reaper from his home.
Strike me with your golden staff, or
force me out of the blue, tangled net of veins
until all things can see me, too,
illuminated, by their side...

Do you see? I've forgotten all the incantations of the night,
and when I pray, it's not from fear.
I don't want the darkness
to weigh down the hand
that I stretch forth in prayer.
No, when I hear your step, high Day,
when joy unrolls in every corner like a flag,
and others do not pray in order not to fear,

² (Trans.) "Strange thoughts" is the literal translation of Shtern's "fremde gedanken," which is itself a Yiddish translation of the Hebrew expression, "makhshavot zarot," used in Hasidic literature to refer to inappropriate thoughts which enter the mind during religious devotion or contemplation.

when, mighty Day, I hear your stride,
let my prayer be profound and without flaw,
like the children's laughter in the yard.

I want to make my prayer
comforting, devout,
like my neighbor's singing at his work.

I want to make my prayer
full of holiness and tears,
like a poet's pacing through his room,
having reached in work some truth.

I want to make my prayer
our love letter,
so, bright Day, you'll fall upon my neck,
and I'll melt away in you entirely, bright Day!

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