

## "A Daytime Prayer"

by Yisroel Shtern

Translated by Jon Levitow (2007, 2013)

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,<sup>1</sup> 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 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?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (Trans.) This image may be derived from the motif of the "metzakh haratzon" or "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 nekhusa," or "forehead of brass" (Is. 48:4) which denotes impudence and shamelessness.

<sup>2</sup> (Trans.) Cf. "Avot deRabi Natan," the end of ch. 26, where Rabbi Eliezer HaKapar says, "...Be like the lower threshold of the door on which every treads..." etc. ("Hevey ke'iskupa takhtona shehakol dashin ba...")

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.

See, I've opened wide my eyes with the window of my house.  
And when a woman threw her chainlike arms around my threshold,  
I said: "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 thoughts<sup>3</sup>  
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 gardeners 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...

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<sup>3</sup> (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 prayer or contemplation.

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,  
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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