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## Psalm 121 and 121f: Reimagining the Guardian of Israel

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**A**S A CHILD, I MEMORIZED PSALM 121 AND CARRIED IT WITH ME. I LOVED THE POETRY OF ITS LANGUAGE AND THE SECURITY CONVEYED BY THE GUARDIAN OF ISRAEL WHO NEITHER SLEEPS nor slumbers. At the same time I felt put off by the psalm's militaristic imagery. The vigilant sentinel keeping watch created a heavy metaphoric door for me to push open.

In writing a feminized version, what I refer to as "Psalm 121f," I redefined the search for security and comfort, not through the figure of a Guardian/Protector but through a supernal Mother, Shekhinah. Consider this reimagined psalm as recounting the stages of child development in relation to Mother. Verse 1 represents the suckling baby; verse 3, the toddler; verse 4, the fearful child; verse 7, the adolescent; and verse 8, the young adult. Seen in this light, verse 3 moves us from dependent infancy to a child, a toddler, seeking limited free movement. However, unlike the original Guardian imagery which imagines God clearing the path before us of obstacles [121:3]; here, God motions us forward, guiding us to walk alone.

From the Zohar I find support for interpreting this psalm as a journey toward physical and spiritual growth. I have reinterpreted the last verse as describing the ambivalence we feel when our children grow up and become independent, needing us less, and then, when they return, needing us differently. I express this ambivalence in the image of God as Mother

shedding tears for Her child's departure and simultaneous tears of joy for the child's growing maturity and independence. However nerve-wracking it is to watch from afar, good parents know that the journey is a critical rite of passage, which makes possible return and reunion.

Here, side-by-side, are a new translation of Psalm 121 and a reimagined Psalm 121f.

*Psalm 121*

I lift up my eyes to the mountains  
From where will my help come?

My help comes from the Lord,  
Maker of heaven and earth

He will not let your foot give way  
Your Guardian will not slumber

See! Neither slumbering nor  
sleeping  
—the Guardian of Israel

The Lord is your Guardian  
The Lord protects you at your right  
hand

By day the sun will not strike you,  
Nor the moon by night

The Lord will guard you from  
mishap  
He will guard your very being

The Lord will guard your going out  
and coming in  
From this time forth and forever.

*Psalm 121f: a re-imagined psalm*

I am lifted by my Mother's embrace  
Cared for by her soft breasts  
How will She comfort me?

Her Womb protects me  
Nourishes me  
She is my Maker.

She encourages my every step  
She is always there.  
Mother! My cries rouse Her from  
sleep.

—She watches over me  
stroking my hair with Her gentle  
hand  
when I need Her touch.

Her brightness lights my day  
Her glow my night.

Nothing can sever Her love for me.  
My very being is in Her care.  
Mother weeps when I leave  
weeps for sadness at our parting  
weeps for joy at my journey  
Mother waits  
Knowing I will return.

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