Lighting the Sabbath Candles: Women's Prayers and Poems

Kathryn Hellerstein

NEARLY EVERY FRIDAY EVENING, AS THE SKY OUTSIDE MY WEST PHILADELPHIA ROW HOUSE DARKENS AND MY NEIGHBORS, COMING HOME FROM WORK, BANG THEIR CAR DOORS AND CALL OUT TO their dogs or their kids, I stand before a small table in our dining room and bless the Sabbath candles. My husband, David, is usually the one to place the stout, white candles in their holders—two tall brass candlesticks from my mother's mother, which make a slightly mismatched pair, a single silver candle holder that David received from a scholarly society he belongs to, and a copper saucer with a socket for an oil-wick that we found in a Jerusalem shop. Even when David secures them with a drop of melted wax, the candles don't fit snugly into their receptacles. They tilt a little, and I feel a twinge of anxiety—the house might burn down—as my children, ages five and three, vie for the privilege of reciting the blessing first.

Rebecca nudges Jonah. Jonah shoves her a little. There's a squeal, "No, me!" and a giggle. Eventually one voice rattles out the Hebrew words, and then, quickly as possible, the other. I cover my eyes and chant the blessing loudly. We all say, "*Gut shabes.*" The children slip out from under David's hands, as he reaches to bless them for a future like the Matriarchs, like Ephraim and Menashah, and run back to their toys. I stay there by the table luminous with four flames, each at a different level.

I am probably the first woman in at least three generations of my family to bless the candles nearly every Friday night. I never once saw my

mother light the candles when I was growing up. It struck her as an exotic custom when I first lit the candles in my parents' dining room during a visit home with my fiance. My mother's parents, both American-born, were resolutely secular Reform Jews, and I doubt that my grandmother ever even considered blessing the candles. She never knew her mother, who died soon after giving birth. Perhaps my great-great grandmother, who raised the motherless girl and who was previous owner of the candlesticks I have now, would recite the blessing in her Omaha home. I wish had thought to ask my grandmother when she was alive.

My father's mother, daughter of a famous rabbinical family in Brest Litovsk, was eager to shed the old ways when she ran away to America at age sixteen. She expressed her strong sense of *yidishkayt*, which she shared with my grandfather, a former *yeshiva bokher*, in social or political ways in her family and community. My father (of blessed memory), his brother, and three sisters did not light the candles in their own homes when they married in the 1940's. He, too, expressed his Jewishness through his work as a doctor and his love for Yiddish. And today, as far as I know, only one of my sisters and one of my many cousins light the candles now and then.

So why do I stand at dusk each week before the flames and say the old words? For one, I married a man who grew up in an Orthodox home, and his observance has become my observance, at first, for the curiosity of it, then for the sake of peace in the house, and now, for its own sake. I take the moment as my own to reflect, to ask blessings for my family, to remember, to hope.

My personal reasons for observing this ritual coincide with some of the traditional explanations I have found. Lighting the Sabbath candles may have originated as a protest against an old Babylonian superstition, or simply as the final chore to be done before the start of the Sabbath. This practical act may have eventually become associated with the ushering in of the Sabbath and thus taken on its religious meanings. The symbolism of the candles has ranged from a commemoration of the ancient rekindling of the Menorah in the Temple to the embodiment of domestic peace.[1] Although there is no mention of blessing the Sabbath candles in the Bible, the Rabbis made this act obligatory and decreed it one of the principal commandments for women (in the euphemistic words of the Encyclopaedia Judaica) "expressly for the purpose of promoting an atmosphere of warmth and peace on the holy day."[2]

Other rabbinic sources put it differently; according to Louis Ginzberg in his famous *Legends of the Jews,* this obligation is yet one more punishment for Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden: "And because woman extinguished the light of man's soul, she is bidden to kindle the Sabbath light."[3] Yet the rabbis also hold that Moses himself was expected to light the candles. Again, according to legend, God promised Moses, "if you will observe my command to light the Sabbath candles, I shall permit you to live to see Zion illuminated, when you will no longer require the light of the sun, but My glory will shine before you so that the nations will follow your light."[4] Moses was the exception. Lighting candles is a commandment primarily for women. (Although, if no woman is present at the onset of Sabbath, a man must light the candles.) Indeed, of the three positive commandments for women, according to Jewish Law—*likht bentshn, niddah, and khale* (lighting the candles, practicing the laws of family purity, and burning a tenth of the *khale* dough to symbolize the tithe paid the priests of the ancient Temple)[5]—lighting the candles is the one most readily accessible to women, regardless of their religious observance and belief.

For me, personally, lighting candles also has a unique meaning, which is connected to my work as a scholar and translator of Yiddish literature, especially of poetry written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by women. And it is to that meaning that I wish to turn.

YIDDISH POETRY BY MEN AND WOMEN, WITH ROOTS IN BOTH YIDDISH THEATER and the Labor Movement at the end of the nineteenth century, became an important part of modern Yiddish literature. This entire literature is usually thought of as worldly, political, and secular, rejecting or at best critically re-evaluating the traditional ways of previous generations of Jews. True as this generalization may be, there is also a current of devotion that runs through the secular stream of modern poetry, but it is an ambivalent crosscurrent, and one which I believe is truly significant religiously for its conflicts. For example, many Yiddish poems have the word, *tfile*, prayer, in their title, but these prayer-poems use the word and the form of prayer precisely in order to subvert the very act of prayer that they purport to embody. Sometimes a poet will assume the voice of a person praying deliberately to parody and blaspheme the very notion of prayer, as Moyshe-Leyb Halpern does in his *A tfile fun a lump [A Rogue's*

Prayer]. Even in other poems, where the poet sets out in good faith to explore the act of devotion, the peculiar situation of Jews living in modernity and writing poetry in Yiddish seems to skew the prayer so that the poem ends up being a story about somebody else praying, a pious person who is very different from the speaker, or about a prayer that does not reach its destination.[6]

For women poets in Yiddish, this ambivalence took a special form. There exists in Yiddish, outside the framework of the standard Jewish liturgy, a whole genre of prayers specifically for women and others assumed to be illiterate in Hebrew. Known in Yiddish as *tkhines*, these are supplicatory prayers. Some of them seem to have been written by women (Sore Bas Toyvim, from the seventeenth century Ukraine, is the most famous figure). These prayers were composed for women's private devotions at home, and their subjects are drawn from both the religious calendar and daily life. They were printed in Central and Eastern Europe as early as 1590, and some are still being printed today.[7] These prayers for women were often taken up by modern women poets writing in Yiddish who felt a deep if conflicted relationship to them as their literary and religious heritage. Together, the old *tkhines* and these more recent prayer-poems by women form a very special chapter in modern Jewish experience. Among all these prayers and poems are *tkhines* about lighting the *shabes* candles and poems that respond to that event.

Take, for example, a *Tkhine for Lighting Candles*, preserved anonymously in Old Yiddish and translated into English by Tracy Guren Klirs, Ida Cohen Selavan, and Gella Schweid Fishman, in *The Merit of Our Mothers: A Bilingual Anthology of Jewish Women's Prayers*.[8] The opening sentence contains instructions for the prayer; this translation, however, leaves out the assumption of a female devotee that is clear in the Yiddish:

> *Dos zogt zi ven zi tut likht tsindn shabes un yontev mit kavone.*
> This is to be said with complete *kavone* when lighting candles for *shabes* and *yontev*.

Literally, in my rendering, "This [prayer] *she* recites with sincere and pure devotion when *she* kindles the Sabbath and holiday candles" (my emphasis). That a woman is saying this prayer is important to note, because the prayer itself will allow her to transcend her sex by comparing herself to a bridegroom caring for his bride and speaking in a collective voice for the messianic hopes of

all the Jewish people. Moreover, the emphasis on the female worshipper underlines the fact that this prayer is prescriptive: when she recites it, a woman is acknowledging her obligation to the role she has been decreed by Jewish tradition, according to her gender. The published translation makes this directive less specific because it understandably seeks a more gracious style in English.

The Yiddish in this prayer is characterized by its repetitive concreteness, its breathless lack of punctuation, and its use of what are now obsolete Yiddish spellings, forms, and words, like *zeneftign* for "to bless" and *erhin* for "to honor." These features make me aware that I am reading something of an era and a life different from my own. The translators try to convey this quality by retaining in the English text such Hebraic Yiddish terms as *kavone, khosn*, and *kale* [devotional fervor, bridegroom, and bride], or even by inserting others, such as in the purely Hebraic *shabes koydesh*, which they use to translate the Old Yiddish, half-Germanic, half-Hebraic *heylikn shabes* (both of which mean, "holy Sabbath").

The prayer places its speaker in a respectful and grateful relation to God. She reminds Him that He has chosen the Jewish people as His servants and the Sabbath as the unique occasion for delighting in that service:

> *Got, du bist heylik un host geheylikt dayn folk yisroel un host geheylikt dem shabes. Du bist aleyn, un unzere eltern hostu oysdervaylt unter ale felker tsu dayn dinst aleyn. Un tsu ruen hostu dervaylt dem shabes aleyn tsu ern un zeneftikn zikh tsu laykhtn likht un tsu hobn freyd un lust in daynem dinst.*
> You, Holy God, have hallowed Your people *yisro'el* and the *shabes*. You are the only God, and You have chosen only our ancestors—from among all peoples—to serve You. And You have chosen the *shabes* alone for rest, for honor, and for blessing, for lighting candles and for joy and delight in Your service.

Addressing God in the familiar, intimate form, *du*, the prayer has a tone that is both public and intimate, combining a communal act with a private voice, a collective obligation with a personal sense of duty. The prayer continues:

> *Haynt iz daynem heylikn shabes velkhn mir zaynen shuldik tsu haltn mit ale zakhn az eyn khosn di kale. Nokh redn unzere*

khakhomim dos zey hobn gerufn dem shabes kale.
Today is Your *shabes koydesh*, which we are obliged to maintain with great care as a *khosn* cares for his *kale*. I repeat what our sages said when they called the *shabes* a *kale*.

The rabbis held that when God commanded Israel to keep the Sabbath (in the fourth of the Ten Commandments), He added, "Be mindful of the Sabbath, to make it holy; be mindful of the promise I made to the Sabbath on the seventh day of the creation of the world." For when the world was created, the seventh day came before God, and said to Him, "All that Thou hast created is in couples, why not I?" Whereupon God replied, "The community of Israel shall be thy spouse."[9] That the female speaker of this *tkhine* compares her collective obligation to observe the Sabbath with the responsibilities of a newly-wed man for his bride is interesting and complex. In this comparison, the woman identifies with the male personification of the Jewish people in a highly sexualized context of a man and a woman who have just been married. She quotes the rabbis or sages as the authorities for this identification. For a brief moment, the woman empowers herself with the words of the religious authorities—those learned men—to be "like a man" in the practice of Judaism. But she quickly and immediately moves from the notion of collective obligation to the female task of lighting the candles, by which act she fulfills her womanly obligation. Then she begins her list of requests:

Un ikh hob shoyn ongetsundn di likht nokh gebotn dayne khakhomim di do veysn dayn heylike toyre tsu lernen un tsu heylikn dayn nomen in dayn toyre. Du almakhtiker got gib mir un mayn man un mayne kinder un mayn hoyz gezint dem heylikn shabes tsu ruen, tsu heylikayt un zeniftikayt.
I have already lit the candles according to the requirements of Your sages who know Your holy *toyre* and who know how to study it and hallow Your name and Your *toyre*. Almighty God, give me and my husband and my children and my household this *shabes koydesh* for rest, for holiness, and for blessedness.

She asks first that God grant her and her family the pleasure and duty of resting and worshipping on the Sabbath. As her requests continue, they escalate

from the confines of her domestic domain to the difficulties of life in the greater world, which she blames on the astrological reading of the planets, and even further to the angels of Good and Evil:

Un bahit unz far ale beyze geshekhenesh di do flegn tsu kumen haynt fun vegn dos mazl fun dem beyzn shtern. Vi ikh tu ontsindn likht dem shabes tsu ern, her fun der gantser velt, gib mir kinder dos zey zoln laykhtin in der toyre. Un shik unz di brokhe mit dem gutn malakh der do geyt bay di rekhte hand fun dem mentshn, un der beyzer malakh zol deroyf omeyn zogn.
Protect us from all evil events which occur nowadays because of the unlucky conjunction of the planets. As I have lit the candles to honor the *shabes*, Lord of the whole universe, give me children who will shine in the light of the *toyre*. Send us a blessing with the good angel who walks at a person's right hand, and may the evil angel respond, "*omeyn*."

This litany of requests places the speaker in the center of a concentric universe where the evil and the good are ringed round by God. When she asks for protection and blessings, the speaker assumes that God's powerful response will change even the nature of the Evil Angel, who will, despite himself, acknowledge the blessing with "Amen." This suggests that God may even be able to change the nature of the world.

The *tkhine* ends with a request that transcends not only the speaker's place in that universe, but the time-frame of all existence:

Un mir zoln zokhe zayn dos du zolst unz makhn arbn dem tog vos iz gor shabes, dos iz gemeynt az mir zoln derlebn di tsayt fun tekhiyas hameysim. Geloybt bistu got der do lebt eybik. Omeyn.
May we merit that You cause us to inherit that day which is wholly *shabes*, which means: May we live until the time of the resurrection of the dead. Praised be You, God, who lives forever. *Omeyn.*

For the woman in this prayer, her small act of lighting the candles gives her access to the messianic era, a time that will be entirely, that is "wholly *shabes*" and the redemption of all the Jews. We can read this prayer like a pebble

dropped into still water, which ripples its presence in circles that expand to the outermost limits of the pond. Yet the expansiveness can be checked by a realization that the likening of *shabes* to the world-to-come, like the very obligation to light candles, also has a rabbinic source. Again, according to legend, God promised Israel "the future world" in return for their observance of His laws. Israel asked, "But even in this world should we have a foretaste of that other." God replied, "The Sabbath will give you this foretaste."[10] The rabbinic sources for both the messianic legend and the lighting of candles remind me that the woman reciting this *tkhine* in the ring of candlelight stands fully within a world that I cannot inhabit.

Such fullness and certainty of spirit—even in a time that we can surmise was difficult from the clause, "all evil events which occur nowadays"—stands in great contrast to a poem by my teacher and mentor, Malka Heifetz Tussman. I was privileged to work with her for many years, and often spent Friday evenings with her, reading Yiddish poems together. I don't recall ever seeing her light the *shabes* candles, although it had been a familiar and familial custom for her. She came from a Ukrainian Hasidic family. Her father and grandfather were learned, pious men who also managed a farm—an unusual occupation for Jews. Malka was a deeply spiritual person, and although she eschewed the formal observance of religion, many of her poems are addressed to God and are prayer-like. One of them is *Fargesn* [Forgotten]:

Har fun der velt!
Boyre-oylem,
ikh shtey far dir
mit opgedektn kop.
mit oygn nit farshtelt—
akshonesdik
breyt tseefent antkegn dayn likht.
Se tsitert nit
an eyntsik herele fun mayn brem
far dayn groyskayt.
Mayne bentshlikht
ikh shtel in laykhter arayn
hoykh un vire-glaykh
zey zoln flemlen tsu dir

Master of the world!
Creator,
I stand before You
with bared head,
With eyes uncovered,
Stubbornly
Facing Your light.
Not a single hair
Trembles on my brow
Before Your greatness.
I place my Sabbath candles
In candlesticks
Tall and straight as a ruler
So they may flicker toward You

on a tropele hakhnoe.
Ikh shtayg tsu dir
on mindstn pokhed in mayn nefesh.
Kh'hob lang geshlifn mayn gevagtkayt
tsu shteln zikh far dir
glaykh-af-glaykh, bashefer,
un lozn mayne taynes zikh efenen far dir
gerekhte
fun mayn moyl aroys.

Without a drop of humbleness.
I rise to You
Without the slightest fear.
For a long time I've sharpened my
daring
To stand before You
Face to face, Creator,
And to let my just complaints
Open out before You
From my mouth.

Vey mir, vey mir:
ikh hob fargesn!
Ikh ken zikh nit dermonen
vos ikh bin gekumen monen.
Ikh hob fargesn.
Vey mir.

Woe is me: I've forgotten!
I can't remember
What I came to demand.
I've forgotten.
Woe is me.[11]

Although, like the *tkhine*, this poem is addressed directly to God and opens with the conventional appellations, "Master of the World, Creator of the Universe," the speaker's stance is one not of supplication, but of bold confrontation. She bares her head, she refuses to cover her eyes in the traditional gesture that delays the enjoyment of the Sabbath lights until after the blessing.[12] Indeed, she stares directly at the candles, "Stubbornly/ Facing Your light." This stance is one of deliberate challenge to God's authority and, to underline that challenge, the speaker violates all the traditional symbols of female piety that center around the lighting of the candles. She even sets the candles straight in their holders, which, according to some customs, should lean a little, so as not to affront God.[13] What is her reason? She has a complaint to air to God. She wants to meet the Creator face-to-face, *glaykh-af-glaykh*, as equals, for she, a poet, regards herself as a creator, too. And, what is the difference, she seems to challenge, between the creation of the world and that of a poem?

But at the moment of uttering her complaint, she forgets, and all she can say is: "*Vey mir, vey mir:/ikh hob fargesn!/Ikh ken nit dermonen/vos ikh bin gekumen monen.*" "Woe is me: I've forgotten!/I can't remember/What I came to demand."

The play on the Yiddish words *dermonen* [remember] and *monen*

[demand] makes a statement about prayer: to remember is to demand, it calls forth responsibility. According to Jewish tradition, she who remembers the Sabbath and keeps it holy is obeying God's commandment, and in doing so, will be remembered by God in this world and the next. This speaker, lighting the candles, obeys the letter of the law, but violates its spirit and the entire culture that has perpetuated it. Regarding herself, a poet, as God's equal creator, she has brazenly broken this reciprocal exchange of the covenant—the human demand upon God and God's demand of humans. Her *khutspe* deserts her, and she finds herself at a loss for words, the material from which she creates. She is reduced to the empty sighs of "*Vey mir*," "Woe is me"—almost impossible to translate in tone.

Although the speaker in Malka's poem knows for certain that God is there to hear her counter-*tkhine*, she has lost both the traditional ways to approach the deity and her newly invented words. The self-mocking humor at the end of the poem bespeaks the emptiness of this double loss. What can we do to talk to God after we have put aside the traditions? Poetry, it seems, is only a partial answer. Yet the central irony of the poem—in the title and the last lines—provides a more hopeful answer: The very act of forgetting her rebellious, negating, and demanding words makes the poet remember her humbleness before God.

For this Yiddish poet of the modern world, who places herself, albeit resentfully, in a traditional stance before the *shabes* candles, a lapse of immediate memory can call up deeper remembrance. But when, for a generation or two, we neglect even to stand before the candles, the lapse becomes a habit, and we find that we have forgotten those constraints of law and custom that make rebellion so productive. Forgetting becomes a way of life that, perhaps, makes it harder to talk to God.

As I light the candles on Friday nights with my impatient and curious children, I think of both the *tkhine* and Malka's poem. They are both, in their contradictions, part of my consciously recovered heritage. I choose to acknowledge both the *tkhine's* outward-expanding piety and the poem's imploding irreverence. The foreign, familiar Yiddish voices of these women live in me. Even though I cannot talk to God with their intimacy, I learn from them how to ask this question: How I will be able to teach my daughter and my son to pray and to rebel, to remember and productively to forget? My candles tilt in their holders. I stand there and bless them, watching the flames flicker between my fingers.

Notes

Transliterations follow Uriel Weinreich's system (*Modern English-Yiddish Yiddish-English Dictionary*, New York: Schocken, 1977, p. xxi).

1. Abraham E. Millgram, *Sabbath, the Day of Delight* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1965), pp. 15-16.
2. *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1972), vol. 14, p. 1356.
3. Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1968), vol. 1, p. 67.
4. Ibid, vol. 3, p. 218.
5. Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law* (New York: Schocken, 1984), p. 40.
6. See Kathryn Hellerstein, "Fear of Faith: The Subordination of Prayer to Narrative in Modern Yiddish Poems," in *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity*, eds. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 205-236.
7. See Tracy Guren Klirs, "Introduction," in *The Merit of Our Mothers: A Bilingual Anthology of Jewish Women's Prayers*, ed. Tracy Guren Klirs (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1992), pp. 1-10.
8. "Tkhine for Lighting Candles," trans. Tracy Guren Klirs, Ida Cohen Selavan, and Gella Schweid Fishman, in *The Merit of Our Mothers: A Bilingual Anthology of Jewish Women's Prayers*, pp. 88-89. All quoted translations of this prayer are from this source, unless otherwise noted. Reprinted with permission, Hebrew Union College Press. I have standardized the transliteration and added punctuation for the sake of readability.
9. Ginzberg, vol. 3, p. 99.
10. Idem.
11. Malka Heifetz Tussman, "Fargesn" (Forgotten), trans. Kathryn Hellerstein, in *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, eds. Benjamin and Barbara Harshav (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 616-7. Reprinted with permission, University of California Press.
12. Millgram, pp. 15-16.
13. Malka Heifetz Tussman explained this to me in a conversation in Berkeley, California in 1979.

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