

G-tt fun Avrohom. A Yiddish prayer for Havdalah



Shoshannah Brombacher. 24 X 36 inches, pastel and ink on paper

The language that Jews all over the world have in common when they pray is Hebrew, the ancient language of our people from biblical times. It has been revived as an everyday language in the twentieth century in our country, Israel. But it is inevitable, that Jews living outside of Israel have been influenced by the culture and languages of the countries where we landed during our long Diaspora, which started two millennia ago. People who had no time or opportunity to learn and comprehend Hebrew pray in their own spoken language as well. HaShem understands all languages. The Ashkenazy ArtScroll siddur, which is used by many Orthodox American Jews, offers an English translation of the Hebrew (and some Aramaic) prayers, which makes sense. It caught my eye, that it includes one Chassidic Yiddish prayer, *G'tt fun Avrohom*, as well, for the havdalah ceremony to conclude the Shabbat. Immigrants from Eastern Europe, the generation of the (great-)grandparents of many American Ashkenazy Jews, spoke Yiddish. Their children often understood Yiddish, but they spoke English among themselves. Their (great-)grandchildren don't know Yiddish anymore, except for a few words and expressions. Some young people are interested nowadays to study this language of their ancestors with its rich flavor and vivid culture, but does that explain a Yiddish prayer in a modern American siddur? Is it a tribute to our (great-)grandparents, who piously mumbled *G'tt fun Avrohom* every Saturday evening? Maybe. But there are no other Yiddish prayers in the ArtScroll siddur, and the Yiddish *Tz'eno uR'eno*, a collection of Torah wisdom, midrashim, etc., that was extremely popular among Eastern European Jewish women, together with similar Yiddish works for people unable to read Hebrew, are unknown to the majority of modern American Jews. Has *G'tt fun Avrohom* been included, perhaps, because the text is very powerful and comes from the heart, and would it have been a shame too leave it out, even though it's written in vernacular Yiddish instead of the official Hebrew of other prayers? *G'tt fun Avrohom* has been ascribed to the eighteenth century Chassidic Master Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, a follower of the Baal Shem Tov, although there are older versions of the prayer, containing slight variations of the text. The Berditchever recited *G-tt fun Avrohom* during episodes of great distress, which in his time and age were much more common than easy situations. The prayer sounds *haymish*, a Yiddish word that means something like, "feels like at home, familiar." My Western European community spoke Dutch, no Yiddish, but my father taught me to read it. It's our *memme-loshon*, our "mother tongue," and I love it. According to an anecdote, somebody once asked a great Yiddish writer why he wrote in Yiddish and not in, let's say, Russian, which would have increased his fame and his audience. Answered the author: "Because in Yiddish one understands every word." If you don't understand the anecdote, I advice you to read more about the culture of Yiddish.

The Yiddish prayer *G-tt fun Avrohom* is not included in the Dutch and German siddurim I am familiar with. I was so pleasingly surprised to find it here in the ArtScroll edition, that I decided to illustrate it on the spot. See for yourself why.

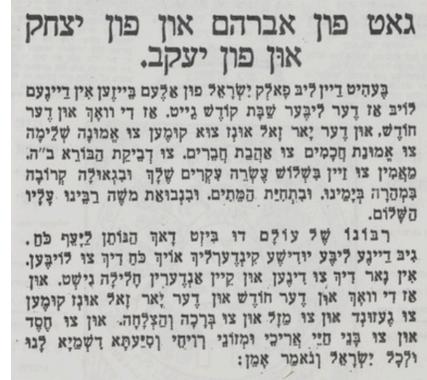
In translation it loses some of the flavor of the Yiddish, but it's still beautiful:

*G-d of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob,
protect your beloved People of Israel from all
bad things in Your love
as the beloved holy Shabbos departs.
May the week, and the month, and the year come to us with perfect faith,
with faith in the Sages, with love for friends,
with clinging to the Creator, blessed be He,
to be a believer in Your thirteen Principles of Faith,
and in the ultimate Redemption, may it be soon in our days,
and in the resurrection of the dead,
and in the prophecy of Moses, our teacher, peace be upon him.
Master of the world! You are the One who gives strength to the tired,
give also your beloved Jewish children strength to praise You
and to serve only You, and, beware, not anybody else.
May the week, and the month, and the year come to us with health,
and good fortune, and blessing, and success,
and mercy, and a long life, and ample sustenance,
and assistance from Heaven,
for us and all of Israel, and let us say, Amen.*

These are no lofty words, no complicated phrases or special requests, but a simple and honest wish straight from the heart of simple people who are living in difficult times. They humbly ask for spiritual and physical support.

Therefore, I chose to write this prayer in a *cirkel*, to express that such requests have no beginning and no end, but are intrinsically connected to the life of ordinary people from the beginning of time. The imagery reflects the time of Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev and displays life in a little Chassidic shtetl, a Jewish town in Eastern Europe.

The top of the drawing shows a Shabbos table basking in the golden glow of a *Judenstern*, a traditional hanging Shabbos lamp with a ratchet, in modest households usually made of brass, with star-shaped oil receptacles with wicks, and a drip pan underneath. I am fortunate to have such a lamp in



my studio. It is a great joy to look at it and imagine the women who lit it every Friday evening. Because the ceiling in my old basement studio is very low I don't dare to light it, but in my mind I see the little golden flames in the "star" on Shabbos. To the left of the table stands the *eshet chayil*, the "woman of valor" who is the mother of the house, holding her fresh-baked challot. To the left is the sleeping shtetl. The horse is resting and the geese are silent on Shabbos.

The couple in the middle of the borders is making havdalah. The father takes the kiddush cup with wine and hands the braided candle with many wicks to one of his children. The mother holds the box with fragrant spices. Their delicate smell lingers in the room. It reminds us of Shabbos long after Shabbos is over. I prefer a spice-mix containing rosemary.

The bottom of the drawing show a beis midrash, a study hall, where Chassidim draw out Shabbos a little longer on Saturday night by studying and telling stories about their Rebbes. In the bottom right corner, men are leaving the shul to go home, but first they will stop to *bensch levonah*, to "bless the moon" on the last Shabbat of the month. This has nothing to do with blessing the physical moon, with would be idolatry. It is a reminder for the calendar and the Festivals, for which purpose the moon was instated in the first chapter of Bereshit (Genesis).

The circle with the prayer contains a large blue letter *shin*, a symbol of HaShem and His protection, under the first words of havdalah:

"Who makes a distinction between holy [Shabbos] and mundane [the week]."

I wish everybody a good and creative week, and stay safe.

Shoshannah Brombacher, Ph.D. vice-president of the AGJA,

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