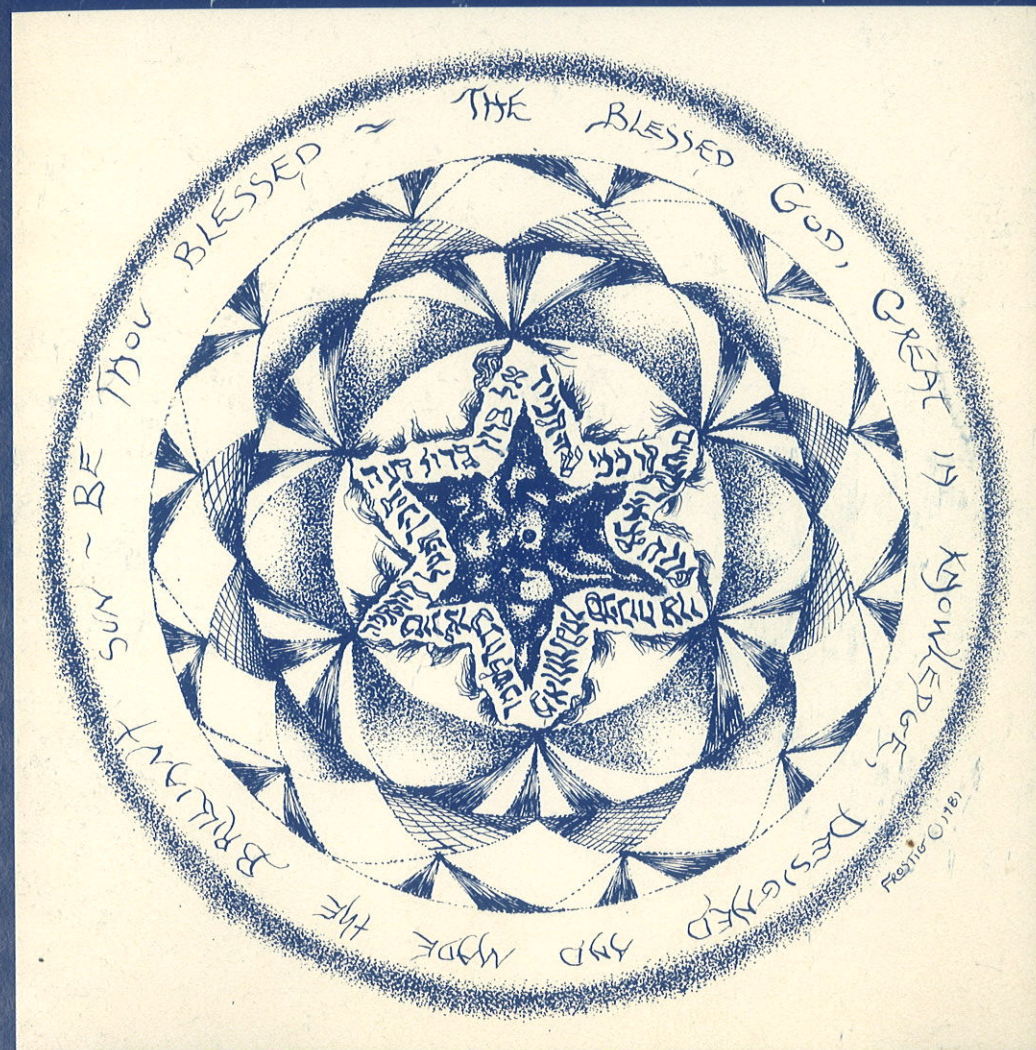




RESPONSE

A CONTEMPORARY JEWISH REVIEW

Special Issue on Prayer



Psalm 122

A Pilgrim Song by David. I was glad when they said to me: "Let us go to the house of the Lord." Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem; Jerusalem that is rebuilt like a city that is compact altogether; whither the tribes went on pilgrimage, the tribes of the Lord, as a testimony of Israel, to offer praise to the name of the Lord. There, indeed, were set the seats of justice, the thrones of the house of David. Pray for the welfare of Jerusalem; they will prosper who love you. May all go well within your walls, within your palaces. For the sake of my brethren and friends I pray: "May all be well with you!" For the sake of the house of the Lord our God I seek your good.

In making up our *Simchat Bat*, we strove to preserve the tradition by embracing it, expanding it, and opening up the possibility for our daughter's full entry into it. By performing this ritual, we hope that we have launched Michal into a life in which she will always be dedicated to her heritage and alert to opportunities to make it relevant to increasing numbers of people.

"turn, turn, turn . . ."

EVERETT GENDLER

"To everything (turn, turn, turn)
there is a season (turn, turn, turn). . ."

So here it is, early spring. I'm fantasizing about the Birchat Ha-Chamah (Blessing of the Sun) ceremony soon to be celebrated, and these words and the popular tune that accompanies them keep sounding in my mind's ear.

"Wait a minute, these are out-of-season! Verses from Ecclesiastes? They're part of autumn's ritual, not spring's."

Though out-of-season, they persist, and no amount of my attempting to think them away has any effect. "You can't beat 'em? Join 'em." And that is what I did. I "entered" those words, turned with them, and then realized that the forthcoming Blessing of the Sun ceremony indeed needed something "turning" as well. What might that be?

Well, why not a round disc rather like the sun, whose rotation and completion of a Great Circle we were soon to celebrate? Hmmm, interesting.

But what should it look like? Clearly it should be round, and large, and able to rotate. It should also carry on it words from the tradition that accurately expressed what this special celebration was about. But which words?

Well, why not the fine acrostic "El Adon al kol ha-ma-a-sim" from the Shabbat morning service? After all, it celebrates God as Creator of the Luminaries, and is, in fact, traditionally associated with this once-every-28-years ceremony. Why not? Because beautiful though it is, it is also somewhat too long and somewhat too wordy for this particular purpose.

But it has an abbreviated counterpart in the daily morning service, also alphabetical, celebrating God as Creator of the Luminaries, powerfully rhythmic, and terse—only one word for each letter of the aleph-bet:

אל ברוך גדול דעה, הבין ופעל זהרי חמה, טוב יצר
 כבוד לשמו, מאורות נחן סביבות עזו, בנות צבאיו קדושים,
 רוממי שדי, תמיד מספרים כבוד אל וקדשתו.

EL BA-RUCH G'DOL DE-A,
 HE-CHIN U-FA-AL ZO-HO-RE CHA-MA
 TOV YA-TZAR KA-VOD LISH-MO;
 M'O-ROT NA-TAN S'VI-VOT U-ZO.
 PI-NOT TZ'VA-AV K'DO-SHIM, RO-M'ME SHA-DAI,
 TA-MID M'SAP-RIM K'VOD EL U-K'DU-SHA-TO.

The Blessed God, great in knowledge
 designed and shaped the brilliant sun.
 The Beneficent One thereby glorified The Name,
 The Ever-Caring-One placed luminaries round The Cosmic Majesty.
 The chief hosts are holy beings that extol the Almighty.
 They constantly recount God's glory and holiness.

Not only does it stand on its own merits, but a most intriguing legend of origins accompanies it:

When R. Eleazar Kallir wanted to write piyuttim, he ascended to heaven by means of the Divine Name, there to ask Michael in what manner the Angels sang God's praises and what shape their songs assumed. And Michael replied, "They sing in order of aleph-bet." And so R. Eleazar Kallir also wrote acrostics in praise of God. Thus here (in El Baruch) one finds both the acrostic form and, where the acrostic ends, *M'saprim K-vod EL*, *MIKaEL*, alluding to Michael.

(Commentary of "Etz Yosef" in *Sidur Otzar Ha-tefilot*)

An Eleazar Kallir acrostic celebrating God as Light-Giver, written under the influence of a heavenly consultation with the Archangel Michael; could there be a more fitting inscription for an authentic Hebrew Sun Wheel?

But between inspiration and execution there is sometimes a chasm. How traverse it? Fortunately, an exceptionally gifted liturgical artist, Karen Frostig, picked up the cues and designed a perfectly stunning Sun Wheel.* The disc itself, four feet in diameter, I had cut at a precision machine shop from white birch plywood. The edges are quite smooth, the shape quite circular. The center hole was drilled just enough larger than the 1-5/16 inch closet pole that I purchased so that, after carefully sanding, waxing, and polishing the pole, the disc would just slip on and rotate smoothly. Two doughnut-shaped small pieces of plywood, 2-1/2 inches in diameter, slipped on at either end of the pole, helped keep the disc upright for its numerous spinings during the ceremony.

As for the design itself, here Karen can speak with greater authority than I.

On the Fourth Day

Sun
 Sun Wheel
 Round Center
 Center of the Universe
 Center of the Spirit Self
 Infinite Home.
 Watersrushing Landbeing
 Airknowing Firespeaking;
 Sun
 Sun Wheel
 Round Round Center.

*See front and back covers.

Needless to say, the Sun Wheel was a wonderful energy focus at the sunrise ceremony on the beach. Its gold-green-yellow-orange-red-blue-purple-white colors shimmered undulatingly before the eyes. During singing and dancing, chanting and movement, how it turned, how it spun, how it glistened in the sun! Besides the sheer aesthetic enjoyment, its energy reflected and augmented our own.

Small wonder that the Prayer Wheel is highly esteemed in some cultures. Might there not be a place for authentic Hebraic designs on such wheels as part of our own traditional celebrations today? Wheels, after all, have an honorable history in Jewish religious life through the ages, and are intimately associated with the numinous experience. From Elijah's chariot through Ezekiel's, and from the circular sun-centered Zodiac mosaic of Bet Alpha through the circular Signs of the Zodiac in Polish wooden synagogues, such wheels function as powerfully evocative symbols of the nonrational. My own experience leads me to believe that the time is ripe and the spirit ready for a re-institution of such aids to Kavannah at our services, especially as we seek fuller expression in prayer for the numinous-seeking parts of ourselves.

Meanwhile, now that the Birchat Ha-Chamah is over for another 28 years, what happens to this Sun Wheel? Well, since at Temple Emanuel we celebrate each change of season with some special addition to the service, four times each year the Sun Wheel will spin again, God willing, on the Bimah of our Temple, celebrating the never-ceasing cycle of "seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night," so long as our earth exists.

Mysticism and divine worship

