

Eli Eli

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P'shat- פשט

Hannah Szenes - (1921–1944) was a playwright and poet, writing both in Hungarian and Hebrew. She was one of 37 Jews from Mandatory Palestine who parachuted for the British Army into Yugoslavia during the Second World War to assist in the rescue of Hungarian Jews about to be deported to Auschwitz. At the Hungarian border Szenes was arrested, imprisoned and tortured, but refused to reveal details of her mission. She was

**Hannah Szenes,
Eli, Eli**

*My God, My God, I pray
that these things never
end,*

*The sand and the sea,
The crash of the waters,
Lightning of the Heavens,
The prayer of Man.*

eventually executed by firing squad. Her poetry is widely known in Israel where she is regarded as a heroine. Is there something in this poem that speaks to her perseverance? **My God, My God**- Szenes echoes the words of Psalms, “My God, my God, why have You abandoned me, why so far from delivering me and from my anguished cry? My God, I call by day, but You answer not; by night, and have no respite.” (Psalms 22:2-3) While Psalms seems to have abandoned hope, Szenes seems optimistic that God will still listen to the “prayer of Man”. **sand and the sea**- Avraham is blessed that his descendents will be as “the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore” (Genesis 22:17). It seems that Szenes is praying that God keeps God’s promise of the eternity of the Jewish people. In this way the Jewish people might be seen as a manifestation of the prayer of humanity. **crash** - In Hebrew the word *rishrush* (reesh-ROOSH), which refers to a murmur or a rustle, is an onomatopoeia, sounding like the sea. The neologism was created by Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873–1934). About this he wrote, “the verb '*rishrush*' – I am the criminal who invented it. I just made it up, may god forgive me.” **prayer of Man**- In Scripture the word *tefillah* (Isaiah 1:15) means to interpose, judge, or hope. The biblical conception of prayer as intercession and self-scrutiny leading to hope.

for help... So mankind has a connection, a very strong connection to God which the snake does not have. It needs nothing, it asks for nothing. And that is truly a curse. But we, we are like children with our father. God is our father, the one to whom we turn countless times a day to provide for us and protect us...” When we devote time to our collective need, like on a communal fast day, it is easier to connect to this idea of the “prayer of Adam”.

D'rash- דרש

Eli Eli- Drawing on biblical themes and motifs this poem seems to speak for all of humanity for all of time. The actual title of the poem was *Halikha LaKesariya, The Walk to Caesarea*. Does the song lose its universal

אלי, אלי
אלי, אלי, שלא
יגמר לעולם
החול והים
שרוש של המים
ברק השמים
תפילת האדם

meaning when it is limited to one woman’s experience in one place at one time? At what point does the *D'rash*-interpretation become the *P'shat* - simple meaning? **Eli Eli**- While the *P'shat* is that this poem is a prayer from a

human being to God, is it also possible that Szenes is writing a poem from God to Eli as in Eliyahu? About the prophet it is written, “ And God said: 'Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord' And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.” (Kings I 19:11-12) Like the prophecy of Eliyahu, Szenes’s God is telling Eliyahu and us that divinity is not just in the extraordinary phenomena of the “crash of the sea” or “lightening in heaven”, but also in the subtle small and finite voice of the “prayer of Man”. God wants all of these things to last. **prayer of Man**-What is the *tefillah* of Adam? The Torah relates that God cursed the snake to crawl on its belly and perpetually eat dust (Genesis 3:14). On this Rabbi Simchah Bunem of Pscyscha (1767-1827) pondered, “Is that such a terrible curse? Dust is everywhere, so the snake’s table is always full, no matter where he goes. Now look at the people in our shtetl and elsewhere: they earn their bread with difficulty, many families are poor, children go hungry and some never know where their next meal will come from. How convenient it would be for us if we could live on dust! But life as a human being, means that we are constantly crying out to God