

Deborah Wolf

Deborah Wolf, Ph.D. is an integrative cognitive therapist in private practice, with a background in Folklore and Anthropology and post-doctoral research in Medical Anthropology. She has worked with indigenous healers and spiritual leaders for over twenty-five years.

I want to thank Rabbi Koster for inviting me to be a part of the Prayer Project and helping me understand this prayer and Julie Salamon for further conversations.

You who love my soul

Sweet source of tenderness

Take my inner nature
And shape it to your will

Like a darting deer
I will flee to you
Before your glorious presence
Humbly do I bow.

Let your sweet love
Delight me with its thrill
For nothing else
Will my hunger still.

(flute accompaniment)

This beautiful sixteenth century prayer was channeled by Rabbi Elazar Azikri in a state of ecstasy. Yedid Nefesh is part of the ancient tradition in Judaism of using fasting, meditating, singing and dancing to merge with the Divine. Though we Jews are always earnestly trying to be better people, this use of joyous altered states for worship has also long been a part of our heritage. Miriam, Moses's sister, danced and sang with timbril and drum in celebration of God. King David is famous for dancing perhaps a little too enthusiastically in front of the Temple in Jerusalem. And in Sefad in the 16th century

among the Luric Kabbalist, the air fairly quivered with ecstatic yearning to merge with the Shekinah, the Female, indwelling aspect of god. Yedid Nefesh is one of such lyric prayers celebrating this union. The kabbalists believed that the well-being of the Divine and earthly worlds could only be achieved by their efforts to arouse the Shekinah's love and bring down her blessings. They would go out on the road outside of Sefad on erev Shabbat, rejoicing and singing: "Come Oh Bride, Oh Bride" to welcome her in. They saw this union with the Divine Beloved as "more wonderful than the love for women."

Rabbi Azikri was a prominent part of this community. Among the iconic images in Jewish lore is Azikri standing motionless for many hours focusing on the four letters of God's holy name—Yud, Heh, Vav, Heh—when suddenly he saw the holy letters themselves rise and burst into flame. At the same time, as he was almost fainting with the effort of sustaining the divine connection, the words of Yedid Nefesh came to him in their entirety. For the last four centuries this prayer has been a cherished part of Shabbat services all over the world.

My experience with the Divine Feminine as a young girl in our reform temple in Stockton, California in the San Joaquin Valley was quieter but no less meaningful—at least to me. She wasn't necessarily the Shekinah with whom I would merge in wordless ecstatic union—after all I was eight years old! She was the Sabbath Queen who brought the blessed peace of Shabbat to all of us at dusk. I believed she literally arrived and we were changed, more peaceful, closer to God somehow.

In preparing for tonight's presentation, the Rabbi and I discussed the underlying theme of Yedid Nefesh as calling for the sacred union of the male and female principle which gives us guidance and for which we are thankful. I told the Rabbi about the Shoshone

medicine pipe that I have prayed with every morning for the past 15 years. I was drawn to Native American spiritual practices because they honored the earth and all living things and they emphasized our relationship to the Creator, right action and giveback. Native Americans, for millennia, have celebrated and given thanks to the Creator through prayer, song and dance.

For many years, I was part of a community in New York who gathered at the full moon and prayed with a medicine pipe. The pipe is used to call in the Creator and the Earth Mother and pray for our ancestors, our families, the community, and the earth. As the stem, representing the male principle and the bowl, representing the female principle are joined together, a universe is created, as it is when the Shekhinah unites with the soul. The pipe becomes a hollow reed for prayers, as does the one who smokes the pipe. I became a pipe carrier in the Shoshone tradition many years ago.

Since this pipe ceremony is a sacred ritual from another culture, I was a little reluctant to bring it into the sanctuary but the Rabbi had never seen an American Indian medicine pipe and convinced me it was kosher. My teacher, Clyde Hall, the Shoshone Elder, also gave it his blessing.

This combination of Native American and Jewish traditions reminded me of when I visited a Blackfoot reservation in Montana. When some Elders there found out I was Jewish, they told me that, as Indians, it was widely believed that they were descended from the ten lost tribes. Therefore, we were relatives.

Please be respectful as I call in the directions to create sacred space. Each of the directions has elements of a totemic animal or bird. I will not smoke the pipe but you can get an idea of what the ceremony is like.

(Rattling. Calling in the directions with my pipe) I send a call to the East, the place of the Eagle, new beginnings to come and pray with us, I send a call to the South, the place of the Hawk, expansion, to come and pray to us, I send a call to the West, the Bear nation, the place of introspection to come and pray with us, I send a call to the North, the great Buffalo, the place of strength and wisdom, purity and renewal, generosity of spirit, to the Grandfather, the grandmothers and the Great Mystery. (put the pipe together) I thank you for all your blessings and ask for health, healing and abundance and guidance for the people of this community. They come with good heart. (Release the directions, take the pipe apart)

(pause)

You who love my soul

Sweet source of tenderness

Take my inner nature

And shape it to your will.

And so I came back to the joy and community of my childhood, which I found in the Village Temple. For many years, I followed other paths, never having found a spiritual home in New York that spoke to me in the religious tradition in which I was raised.

One day, my friend, Lilly Rivlin told me that if Rabbi Koster came to the Village Temple, I should join it. I've been here ever since, joyfully taking part in our Friday night services and feeling the sense of union through song, dance, prayer and guidance and a community that I've looked for all my life.

I also want to thank Cynthia Weber, Ph.D. a Jewish scholar, my sister, Rabbi Judith Goleman and my son, Professor Aaron Wolf for their help with this offering.