New Psalms for a Paradigm Shift in Judaism.

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Blessed are you, world—you appear before me each day as problems to solve and living visions to praise.

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In his book Paradigm Shift, Reb Zalman brought into Jewish discourse the Gaia hypothesis, formulated by biologists in the 1970s, which posits that biological organisms and the inorganic world form a unified, self-regulating system that preserves the conditions for continued life on Earth. Expressing this in evolutionary terms, humans are the embodiment of the cosmos becoming self-conscious, and, in moral terms, are therefore responsible for the future of that evolution. Gaia, Reb Zalman told us, was the living God, and we were Gaia’s vanguard.

With the human crisis on the planet (climate change, population size, food resources) becoming ever more pressing, our rabbi-theologians have been following Reb Zalman’s lead in giving us various versions of God as Gaia—most recently, Arthur Green’s Radical Judaism (2010) and Brad Artson’s Renewing the Process of Creation (2015). In the past two decades we have seen God presented as a verb, as the verbal phrase is—was—will-be, as a transformative, liberating movement toward justice, as the interdependence of humans and plants—all formulations welcome, it seems, except those that attribute to God the power of being in charge, which we post-Holocaust Jews cannot accept.

Over thirty years ago, I spoke to my teacher, Reb Zalman, about my difficulty with the traditional language of Jewish prayer. He asked me if I thought I could say “you” to the universe. As he did to so many others, he gave me permission to experiment—to use barukh ata olam, “blessed are you, world,” as an inner mantra, even as he urged me to continue to say the traditional words. After thirty years, I realized that I needed to go further, to claim Barukh ata olam as more than an inner mantra, by giving myself permission to say those words in prayer. That discovery led to the creation of these prayerful poems, which I think of as psalms for our time.

Marcia Falk’s Book of Blessings and The Days Between opened the way for bilingual, non-theistic Jewish poems. Many Jewish poets have similarly offered prayerful poems with no God-term as contemporary psalms, including Karl Shapiro, Irving Feldman, Allen Ginsberg, Paul Celan, and Yehuda Amichai, among others. I think especially of the exemplary God-discourse of Yehuda Amichai in his final book, Open Closed Open. There he claims “Change is god and death is its prophet,” suggesting that our only bedrock is change itself, the mutability of the visible world to which lyric poetry has always been devoted. Amichai, in turn, was building on the committed secularism and Jewish allusiveness of Chaim Nachman Bialik. These iconoclasts loom large as paradigm-changing Jewish forebears, just as I hope, in my small way, to continue their work.

HERBERT LEVINE’S forthcoming book is Words for Blessing the World: Poems in Hebrew and English (Ben Yehuda Press). He has previously published poems in Tikkun and is also the author of Sing Unto God a New Song: A Contemporary Reading of the Psalms.