



BHPS LIKE CLAY

Study pack

KI HINEI KA-CHOMER

12th-century piyyut of unknown authorship^a

We are as clay in the hand of the potter, who expands it and contracts it at will, so are we in Your hand,^b O You who preserves deeds of lovingkindness; look to the covenant and do not regard our evil inclination.

כִּי הִנֵּה כַחֲמֵר בְּיַד הַיּוֹצֵר / בְּרִצּוֹתוֹ
מְרַחֵב וּבְרִצּוֹתוֹ מְקַצֵּר / כִּן אֲנַחְנוּ
בְּיַדְךָ חֶסֶד נּוֹצֵר / לְבְרִית הַבֵּט וְאֵל
תִּפְּן לַיֹּצֵר:

We are as stone in the hand of the mason, who retains it and crushes it at will, so are we in Your hand, O You who gives life and brings death; look to the covenant and do not regard our evil inclination.

כִּי הִנֵּה כְּאֶבֶן בְּיַד הַמְּסַתֵּת / בְּרִצּוֹתוֹ
אוֹחֵז וּבְרִצּוֹתוֹ מַכְתֵּת / כִּן אֲנַחְנוּ בְּיַדְךָ
מַחִיָּה וּמְמוֹתֵת / לְבְרִית הַבֵּט וְאֵל תִּפְּן
לַיֹּצֵר:

We are as iron^c in the hand of the smith, who thrusts it into fire and draws it out at will, so are we in Your hand, O You who supports the poor and the destitute; look to the covenant and do not regard our evil inclination.

כִּי הִנֵּה כְּגִרְזֵן בְּיַד הַחֹרֵשׁ / בְּרִצּוֹתוֹ
דֹּבֵק לְאוֹר וּבְרִצּוֹתוֹ פֹּרֵשׁ / כִּן אֲנַחְנוּ
בְּיַדְךָ תּוֹמֵךְ עֲנֵי וֹרֵשׁ / לְבְרִית הַבֵּט וְאֵל
תִּפְּן לַיֹּצֵר:

We are as the rudder in the hand of the sailor, who holds it back and throws it forth at will, so are we in Your hand, benevolent and forgiving God; look to the covenant and do not regard our evil inclination.

כִּי הִנֵּה כְּהֵגָה בְּיַד הַמֶּלֶךְ / בְּרִצּוֹתוֹ
אוֹחֵז וּבְרִצּוֹתוֹ שֹׁלַח / כִּן אֲנַחְנוּ בְּיַדְךָ
אֵל טוֹב וְסֹלַח / לְבְרִית הַבֵּט וְאֵל תִּפְּן
לַיֹּצֵר:

^a Translation adapted from Rabbi Nissen Mangel, *Machzor for Yom Kippur: annotated edition* (New York: Mekoros l'Inyonei Chinuch, 2006), page 53.

^b Derived from Jeremiah 18:6: הַכִּיּוֹצֵר הַזֶּה לֹא אוֹכֵל לַעֲשׂוֹת לְכֶם בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶאֱמַר יְהוָה הִנֵּה כַחֲמֵר בְּיַד הַיּוֹצֵר כִּן אַתֶּם בְּיַדִּי בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל – “O house of Israel, can I not deal with you as a potter?” says the Eternal One. “You are as clay in the hand of the potter; you are in My hand, O house of Israel.”

^c Literally ‘an axe’

We are as glass in the hand of the glazier, who turns it and melts it at will, so are we in Your hand, O You who forgives wilful sins and inadvertent errors; look to the covenant and do not regard our evil inclination.

We are as cloth in the hand of the draper, who, when he wishes works it straight and when he wishes twists it, so are we in Your hand, O You who are a stern God of retribution; look to the covenant and do not regard our evil inclination.

We are as silver in the hand of the silversmith, who adulterates it and refines it at will. So are we in Your hand, O You who provides a cure for our wound; look to the covenant and do not regard our evil inclination.

כִּי הִנֵּה כְּזִכּוּכִית בְּיַד הַמְּזַגֵּג /
בְּרָצוֹתָו חוּגֵג וּבְרָצוֹתָו מְמוּגֵג / כֵּן
אֲנַחְנוּ בְּיַדְךָ מְעִבִיר זְדוֹן וְשִׁגָּג /
לְבָרִית הַבֵּט וְאֵל תִּפְּן לִיִּצְר:

כִּי הִנֵּה כִּירִיעָה בְּיַד הַרוֹקֵם /
בְּרָצוֹתָו מִיֶּשֶׁר וּבְרָצוֹתָו מְעִקֵּם / כֵּן
אֲנַחְנוּ בְּיַדְךָ אֵל קֵנָא וְנוֹקֵם / לְבָרִית
הַבֵּט וְאֵל תִּפְּן לִיִּצְר:

כִּי הִנֵּה כְּכֶסֶף בְּיַד הַצּוֹרֵף / בְּרָצוֹתָו
מְסַגֵּסֵג וּבְרָצוֹתָו מְצָרֵף / כֵּן אֲנַחְנוּ
בְּיַדְךָ מִמְּצִיא לְמִזוֹר תָּרֵף / לְבָרִית
הַבֵּט וְאֵל תִּפְּן לִיִּצְר:

INTERPRETATIONS

Rabbi Abraham ben-Azriel^d

Every artist has warm feelings towards their tools and materials, and would not do anything to damage them. Thus, if a potter makes a pot of the desired size but with a mouth that is too narrow, they might adjust it – expanding or contracting it – in order to make it saleable. But even so, we find that the potter is beautifying their pot, and in no sense harming it.

כל אומן חומל על כלי אומנותו ואינו
משחיתו, שהרי אפי' יוצר שעושה כלי
חרס ברצותו מרחיב, כשרואה שהכלי רחב
יותר מדאי ופה קצר אז הוא מרחיב שרוצה
להשתכר בה יותר או מקצר אותו א"כ
מצינו יוצר שהוא מייפה כלי חרס שלו
וכ"ש שאינו משחיתו:

^d Published in 1234. Arugat ha-Bosem: Urbach edition vol 3, p 552.

Midrash Tanchuma, Vayikra 4

Let God's name be praised forever, for God left the upper sphere to dwell on earth. But is there really a potter who has such a yearning for pots? In fact, it is all down to love.

יהא שמיה מברך לעלם שמניח העליונים
ובחר בתחתונים לשכן...יש פוחר מתאוה
לכלי חרס כביכול כי יוצר הכל הוא, אלא
בשביל האהבה:

Genesis Rabbah 32:1

Rabbi Yonatan said: "A potter does not strength-test the cheap vessels, which they know would break if struck even a single time. Similarly, God does not test wicked people, but rather, the righteous."

אמר ר' יונתן היוצר הזה אינו בודק קנקנים
מרוערעים שאינו מספיק לקיש עליו אחת עד
ששיברו, כך אין הקב"ה מנסה את הרשעים
אלא את הצדיקים:

Mary Caroline Richards^e

The potter does everything that they can do. But they cannot burst into flame and reach a temperature of 2,300 degrees Fahrenheit for a period varying from eight hours to a week and harden plastic clay into rigid stone, and transform particles of silica and spar into flowing glaze. They can only surrender their ware to the fire, listen to it, talk to it, so that they and the fire respond to each other's power, and the fired pot is the child.

^e Mary Caroline Richards. *Centering in Pottery, Poetry and the Person* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1962; repr 1964): 27. Edited for gender-neutral language.

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson^f

This piyyut has been misunderstood more than almost any other poetic image in the machzor. The way most commentaries speak about it, we are completely inert and absolutely in God's control. God moulds us according to God's absolute will – untrammelled coercive power – and we are simply the passive recipients of God's might, omniscience, total knowledge, and force.

However ubiquitous it may be, this interpretation is wrong: it understates the extent to which we, the clay, contribute to our own shaping.

Anybody who has worked with clay knows there are things you can do with clay, and there are things the clay will not let you do. Anyone who has worked with cloth, or with metal, or with jewellery, knows that each material constrains the results you are able to achieve. The material has, if you will, its own wisdom, so it creates a partnership with you. How many of you can guarantee that your brisket turns out perfectly every time? Obviously, it has a mind of its own, as does the oven, as does whatever other material you work with. If the clay has its own property, which it embodies in the world uniquely, how much more so do human beings, or any of God's creatures?

What this amazing piyyut is telling us, then, is that God needs us, and works with each of us, and all of us, in our uniqueness, as we each are. This poem does not portray oppressive domination. It is not about an all-powerful God and wormlike human beings to be ruthlessly crushed at Divine will. We call God in this very poem a God of love. Love is when you know someone well enough that you know what it is they need highlighted; when you know how to coax them into something truly magnificent.

A great potter is not someone who crushes the clay; a great potter intuits the clay into magnificent art.

^f Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson. "Clay in the potter's hands: human evolution in a self-creating world", *Tikkun* (January 2009): <https://web.archive.org/web/20090403082918/https://www.tikkun.org/article.php/jan09_artson>

And so this poem is really a song about God's uncanny ability to know us from the inside; to know what we can bear and what we cannot; to know what are our strengths and what are our needs; and to urge us, to invite us, to take the next step into our own becoming, our own greatness. "Look to the covenant." What is the covenant if not a relationship between two responsive individuals? If one crushes the other, that is not a covenant, that is a war! Life is not about God attempting to conquer us. Life is about God calling us into relationship.

Rabbi Leila Gal Berner⁹

The image of God as potter and humans as unmoulded clay is problematic for some of us. We humans don't want to think of ourselves as so unformed, so susceptible to manipulation by an inscrutable and distant God. But if we consider this prayer as a metaphor for partnership, we note that any artisan, no matter how skilled, cannot produce a thing of beauty unless the raw material is good. If we think of God as helping us to make our lives a thing of beauty, we may joyfully offer the raw material that is ourselves to God.



⁹ Quoted in *Kol ha-Neshamah: prayerbook for the Days of Awe* (1999; repr Wyncote, Philadelphia: Wyncote Press, 2018): 802.

Notes

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