

I was so amazed when I recited this Selichah. I had often found that kind of Eros in the Baul songs of India, the Kawwali of the Sufis, and the spousal mysticism of Theresa of Avila and Mechthild of Magdeburg. It should not have been such a surprise. The Song Of Songs preceeded the poem of Ibn Gayyat and even while it is much more explicit in its romantic Eros Rabbi Akiba pointed out that although many sacred songs are holy, the song of songs is the holy of holies. I felt urged to translate it for people who cannot read it in the original Hebrew. [All translation is necessarily an interpretation – – let me share with you mine]

S'lihah – Sorrow, How I missed You!

Isaac b'r Judah Ibn Gayyat. (b. 1038 - 1089)

I must return to my very first lover
Like an eye's pupil He kept me safe
Tall is my beloved like a cedar
I can't sleep when I think of Him

How he rescued me from vile hands
How He wed me in all new robes
Speaking to me in holy words
Honoring me with Sacred pact

Endowing me with ample boon
Amidst many joys, delights supreme
Our tryst He stocked for intimacy
Countless lasses in waiting He set to serve me
The choicest foods to fulfill His pledge

In His inner chambers He cleaved to me
While in the courtyards they spiced the air
My Royal Lover took me into His chambers.
And I, bathed to purity my scent arousing
He mounted our couch and between my breasts
He laid, embraced me and held me...

And in the wink of an eye it happened
All broken - betrayed - as I went off
With attitude defiant, mocking, and dazed.

My Lover, now disengaged, was gone.
My guts wrenched, keening for my Dear One
What was it that I upset? What drove Him away?
He is gone now and no comfort left me.

How I sought Him to no avail,
called Him to no response,

Do turn back My Lord, I wailed,
He had gone and I waited in vain hope.
While my heart cried like a sad violin.

My eyes in tears that do not dry
I lost my dignity, I felt degraded
Besmirched and defiled, foul and dirty
Thrown, tossed about and despised.

Like a young widow I hoped
for the day of comfort
My vulnerable need has turned to frustration
Flames of longing have become a wall
O Mercy, Please, for one not pitied.

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Come back, come back O Shulamit
Freed from your hurt, from Your desolation
I your Maker seek to behold you, come quick
Lift your feet and swiftly come from Lebanon
We are reconciled, arouse your love again
I your Lover will restore you,

You shall know clearly the face of Your flock
Zion, the glorious, do grant her
the goodness of Your desire
Your devotees will sing
and acclaim the adventure--
Yes, You heard my voice!
You did not avert Your Ear.