**Where Prayers Go**

Miriam Mandel Levi

At night, the men come with sticks. Their rumbling voices and heavy footsteps draw near. Wheels clatter across the plaza. On the wall a lizard scuttles out of sight, a dove takes flight.

We huddle in crevices of ancient stone, holding fast like the scraggly plants. From here we ascend, our voices are heard: *A long life, a life of goodness, a life of blessing.*

The men pace the length of the wall sweeping its surface with gloved hands. The last prayers to arrive, exposed in the clefts, tumble from cracks and ledges like first flurries. There goes *Give her sight*. *A healthy baby* falls next. Then *Spare him further pain*.

The men raise their sticks, probe the crevices, drag us from the recesses. *Safe passage. An easy death. Bring my son home.*

Standing on chairs, the men pierce the high cracks where worshippers stood on tiptoe to wedge us safely out of reach. *A soulmate. Freedom from debt. From torment.* Behind the thorny caper drops *Rebecca,* *let her live*.

Now we fall in a shower on the shoulders of the men, on each other. Now we lie in snowdrifts on the ground. *Rain in its season. Do not forsake him in his old age. Bring us back; draw us near.* Now we are swept into bags and rolled away on a trolley by men in shirts embroidered *genizah*, hidden.

And from there? We claw at the earth and howl from the grave. Or unfold softly to acceptance. Some of us understand we’ve been answered in unexpected ways. Others weep: *Will you forsake me forever*?

\* Twice a year, the Western Wall Heritage Foundation dispatches workers to clear out over a million notes placed in the wall. The prayers are buried on the Mount of Olives.