

Leviticus: 13-14/Covid19

Two years ago, I read my poetry at a conference in Itta Bena, Mississippi, at a Historically Black University. The call and response – *Amen, praised be* – to my poem about Hagar was gratifying. We were in the Bible Belt, so Hagar’s life was well-known. In the Q and A, a professor from a Baptist university asked, “Have you written poetry about Leviticus?”

–I avoid it like the plague.

That got the laughs I hoped for, and I wriggled out of his query aimed squarely, I felt, at the heart of Jewish ethical practice and at a core difference between Judaism and Christianity. In Leviticus our ancestors do not practice love and forgiveness but stone adulterers and blasphemers. Aaron’s sons are incinerated for offering “strange” fire. I did not tell my questioner that I have always rebelled against such harsh laws, not to mention the homophobia. As a writer, I miss the drama of Genesis and Exodus.

Everything changed for me early in the pandemic, when our Artist Beit Midrash studied chapters thirteen and fourteen. Here we read a guide for the high priests dealing with a contagious skin disease. This time instead of being disgusted by the graphic descriptions of skin lesions, I was drawn into the text. At this point in the Biblical narrative, the Jews were living in close quarters, and their most authoritative leaders were called upon to risk their safety to ensure the survival of the community. Suddenly, quarantine, testing, and attention to hygiene did not seem intrusive, superstitious, nor repellent. It was instructive. Leviticus 13:45 requires covering the mouth!

We learned about a highly choreographed eight-day ritual allowing those cured of skin disease to be reintegrated into the community. First, the quarantined person was reexamined in an area outside the camp. If the high priest determined she was cured, he held two live birds over clear water. One bird would be slaughtered, its blood falling into the clear water. Then the patient and the wings of the live bird were sprinkled with the blood of the sacrificed one. The surviving bird would be released to fly into the “open field.” Reading that passage, I related to the bird who was spared. I could feel myself wriggling in the priest’s bloody hand with an urgent desire to live.

Leviticus also hit home because I’d lost four close friends to cancer and a dear colleague to an AIDS related illness in the previous five months. My husband and I saw them suffer at home and in intensive care units. Before the pandemic, I’d begun to come out of a place of sadness. Now my disquiet stemmed from lack of human contact. On a conscious level I might not have felt endangered because I am an active septuagenarian who dances, hikes and bikes. There’s no denying, however, I identified with the bird that had faced fifty-fifty odds and gotten out alive.

In the final part of the class, we examined rituals for those who had been cured. They were performed inside the camp but outside the patient’s home: a second cleansing which included shaving off all body hair, bathing and laundering clothing, anointment with oil and a burnt offering as atonement. In the course of the last ritual, the individual is daubed with the blood of a sacrificed sheep on the right earlobe, the right thumb and the right big toe. Then, and only then, can the recovered patient reenter his tent. Blood, oil, fire and water. High drama makes Purell and face masks seem the flimsy barriers they are.

This part of Leviticus reenacts the horror and helplessness we experience when illness attacks. It also prefigures how we will feel when, like the bird, we are released, bloodied and shaken, but free to return to our flock. What modern rituals will we devise to allow us to return to communal life free of fear? How will we relinquish our current boundaries? What new boundaries will we set to feel safe? Leviticus made me feel intimately tied to the Jews living in the desert – vulnerable, frightened and wayward.

Retirement gave me time to participate in the Artist Beit Midrash. The quarantine has given me time to sit down and read Leviticus in one sitting. Most important for me now, this book reminded me that humanity has faced catastrophes like Covid19 and survived. We've been here before.

Lois Baer Barr is a literacy tutor and an emerita professor of Spanish at Lake Forest College. Her publications include *Patriarchal Traditions in the Latin American Jewish Novel* (ASU Press), a chapbook of poetry *Biopoesis*, which won *Poetica Magazine's* first prize, and a chapbook of extremely short stories, *Lope de Vega's Daughter*, (Red Bird Press). She has studied and exhibited with the Artist Beit Midrash since 2013. She was a finalist for the Rita Dove Poetry Prize in 2019 for her poem "Hagar" (ABM 2018). Her story "The Substitution" was recently published by *The Jewish Literary Journal*. Her poetry for the ABM has been published at *POMPA* (Proceedings of the Mississippi Philological Association), *East on Central* and "Ark of Colors" (ABM 2015) was chosen for the *National Flash Fiction 2020 Anthology* (Great Britain) and was published online in Spanish at *Letralia*.

The Border

What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes? (*Isaiah 5:3-4*)

From the other side of the fence

I see you.

Neatly lined up,

your fruit is full, unblemished, juicy.

A tangled snarl is on my side,

sour little grapes.

A stink arises from deep within my roots.

Your grapes look alike,

Like fingertips in rubber gloves.

Servile and uniform.

I envy their rectitude;

I revel in my riot.

Judith Joseph is a Chicago based visual artist. She works in several media: woodblock prints, calligraphy, painting and installation. She has had numerous solo exhibitions and her art is in many private and public collections, including the Chicago Public Library, the Milwaukee Museum, Archives of MOMA, the Musée de la Poste in Paris and ARTPOOL in Budapest, Hungary. She exhibits widely, including solo and group exhibitions across the U.S. and recently in Amsterdam, Berlin, Vancouver and Douro, Portugal. She is on the faculty of the Chicago Botanic Garden, The Art Center, Highland Park and Orot Center for New Jewish Learning. With Jane Shapiro, she has taught the Artists' Beit Midrash for seven years. Her work may be seen at www.judithjosephstudio.com.

Drink water from your own cistern

— Rashi

Chosen. We were chosen to be different.

Rejecting others' customs, the patriarch
smashed his father's idols
and chose Hashem.

When Abraham ascended Moriah
to bring his son to sacrifice;
did we think he'd do it?

Were we chosen, or did we choose?
Did we build walls,
did we give others reason ... to hate us?

Digging our own wells
hamakor -- the source --
taught us the paths to take.

But success is short-lived,
and so my question is:
Do our walls and wells make us

a light unto the nations?

Judith MK Kaufman is a transplanted New Yorker who has lived in Highland Park since 1976. A poet and memoirist, she believes her late-in-life pursuit of creative writing was the result of living in this town, where the arts are an integral part of the community. She holds a bachelor's degree in Hebraic Studies from Rutgers University and a masters in Jewish Communal Service from Spertus College of Judaica. Judith is a founding member and Editor-in-Chief of Highland Park's journal of literature and art, *East on Central*, now in its 20th year. Her own work has been published in *Poetica*, *Collage*, *the Journal of Modern Poetry* and online at *Pirene's Fountain* and *Highland Park Poetry*. A memoir about her parents, *Caught Laughing: the Esther and Bernie Story*, was published in 2017, and she is currently working on a book of poems about her grandchildren, tentatively titled *All My Cookies*.

Crossing Borders

Crossing borders then
No different from now.
The borders are different and the skin tones-
The hearts and minds are the same.
Searching for a better life, beseeched in a multitude of languages
Taking days or weeks.

How dare I now, in my chutzpah - in the 'time of COVID'
decry my sorrow at not seeing my beloved daughters and grandchildren
in person, with my phone in hand for Facetime, or my computer ready for Zoom.
Even as the weeks stretch on into months.

As I think back at what my grandparents had the courage to do!
Leave their parents and siblings!
Leave their aunts and uncles, nieces, nephews, their grandparents.
Taking so little- a few photos, a rolling pin, a favored table cloth,
Two feather pillows,
And baynkes -
in case of illness, healing might be possible.

The totality of life they knew- changed!
To cross a sea and realize...
They'd most likely never see their loved ones again.
And never did.
Malka and Reuven.
From their shtetels of Siedlce and Lukow
To the shores of NYC- to America, the 'goldene medineh.'

To embark on a life in a new land,
With a new language,
To learn to live with 'others' who also sought the same new opportunity,
But left behind so much
And lost so much.

Which now- a hundred years later,
Six generations later...
we are just realizing that loss.
Sarah Feigah, Malka, Breindel, Sarah Feigah, Malka, Yael Breindel.

My Grandmother's Noodles

My grandmother Malka's gnarled hands
Encircle the mound of flour in the center of the enamel table
As my five year old face peers over the table's edge.
A puff of flour floats over that mound
As she presses into its center with two fingers, creating a well
Into which I can't see
Though I know it's there from the many previous times I watched this,
The younger me, then standing on a chair, looking down.

Crack! Deftly her hands break an egg, which she guides into the well,
Then another.
Two jiggling yellows gliding into their place in the well,
with a pinch of Kosher salt thrown in.

Her hands then gather it all together - the flour and the eggs,
No longer dry, no longer white, no longer a puffy mound.

She presses and twists, pounds and stretches.
The eggs magically gone.
I imitate the motions from my vantage point beside the table.
I am prepared, and wait patiently for my turn.

Soon a large ball of dough emerges, ready- and patted down.
Deftly, she adds a bit of dry flour to her rolling pin,
The very one that accompanied her on her journey from 'der alte heim.'
The old country-
so that noodles in 'de goldene medineh' might be as perfect as in her Polish shtetl.

As the dough is flattened and rolled, turned and flattened again and then again,
It thins out and thins out, the rolling pin pressing and gliding
so that the entire ball of dough has transformed.
Wielding a sharp knife, she slices through and ribbons emerge-
Ribbons of noodles, all one width, no measuring needed.
Long strands, which then lie gathered across the fingers of one of her hands-
Hanging strands of pearls.

Soon it's my turn, and my butter knife is ready with my own small ball of dough.
I imitate, using her rolling pin and graze and press across the flat, lumpy, doughy surface.
Creating a few short strands of pearls that join the other, longer ribbons drying...

Hanging from the three pull out bars of the kitchen towel rack
Until it's their turn to gently glide into the chicken soup.
I smell the soup now; I remember the flour mound. And the eggs. ... I can never forget.

My husband Mel and I often visit Highland Park, and NSSBE where we enjoy spending time with our family, Michelle Wasserman and David Smith and our precious grandchildren, Yael Smith and Ari Smith. I'm a retired teacher. My maternal grandparents left Poland, 'der alter heim'/ the old country, and immigrated to New York at the beginning of the 20th Century, leaving their parents and siblings behind. Forever. Just as today's immigrants do. Immigrants of all ethnicities live part of some of their lives on the margins, as did my grandparents, speaking Yiddish at home in the Bronx for their entire lives here, even to me. Their lives consisted of love for their family, and yet maintaining connection to the family they left behind, in their times, via HIAS... They took with them on the boat they boarded in Hamburg, what was the most important: the small square colorful tablecloth made in Warsaw, a smooth and well used rolling pin for making 'lukshen'/noodles, and a tin box containing 'baynkas' [glass cups]. Should they fall ill in the new land, my grandmother could handle it! I often joke and say that she was the start of my interest in alternative medicine!

I very much enjoyed participating 'virtually' in the Artists Beit Midrash in the summer of 2020, during the pandemic, where it seems, all of us were and remain, 'living on the margins.' ~ **Sandy Wasserman**

Vocal Chords

A poem about an Inferno.
In Hebrew?
In Hebrew my fluency declares, "Look!
I belong here
in this language!"
But I don't.
My accent betrays me:
Brashly American,
pronouncing me in-between.
People cross over,
called "Resident Aliens."
But they're neither.
Like my three aunts,
--greenhorns, all,
clotheslines pulled tight between tenements.
Three blessed women,
none named *Mary*.
Green cards call out "See us!
We live in this place!"
But they don't really.
Tired, poor, huddled
suspended
between part
and apart.
*But I, why should I go? Who gives permission?
I am not Aeneas, nor am I Paul!
Not I nor anyone else would judge me worthy.*
When I was eleven,
I spoke Hebrew *and* English with a Queens accent
--the borough, not the monarch--
And a foreign man,
yelled "I'm up here!"
and walked a tightrope
stretched between New Colossal Towers
that, heavenward, besought *Lucia*.
Some say that made Philippe Petit
an honorary citizen.
But even so.
Io era tra color che son sospesi
I say in a vulgar intonation.

I don't even belong in this poem.

And yet...

I am Beatrice who urges you to journey,

Come from a place to which I long to return.

Love moved me to speak my heart to you.

Writes Dante.

There is a Paradiso, I've heard,

unpronounceable

in any accent.

– Inspired by *Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy, Inferno: Canto 2—Three Blessed Women: Virgine Maria, Beatrice and Santa Lucia*

: שלוש נשים ברוכות: מרים הבתולה, ביאטריצ'ה, ולוצ'יה הקדושה || מזמור

מיתרי קול

שיר על תופת

בעברית?

שטף דיבורי בעברית מצהיר: "ראה!

אני שייכת לכאן

בשפה הזאת!"

אך איני.

מבטאי מסגירני:

אמריקאי פזיז,

להסגירני "בין".

אנשים שמגיעים לכאן

נקראים "תושבים זרים".

אך הם לא זה ולא זה.

כמו שלוש דודותיי

מהגרות כולן,

חבלי כביסה מתוחים בין השיכונים.

שלוש נשים ברוכות

אך אף אחת אינה מריה.

"גרין קארד" זועק: "הסתכלו בנו!

אנו גרות כאן!

אך בעצם לא.

עניות, עייפות, מצטופפות
תלויות
בין שייך ללא שייך.
אך אני, מדוע עלי ללכת? מי מתיר לי?
אינני איניאס וגם אינני פאולוס!
לא אני ולא אחר יכיר בערכי
כשהייתי בת אחת עשרה,
דיברתי עברית ואנגלית במבטא של Queens
(הרובע, לא המלכות)
וגבר זר
צעק: אני פה למעלה!"
וצעד על חבל דק
מתוח בין מגדלים עצומים
אשר פנו השמימה אל לוצ'יה.
אמרו שזה הפך את פיליף לאמריקאי.
אך...אף על פי כן.
lo era tra color che son sospesi
אני אומרת בהגייה זולה.
איני אפילו שייכת לשיר הזה.
בכל זאת...
אני ביאטריצ'ה הדוחקת בכך למסע,
באה ממקום אליו אני מייחלת לחזור
האהבה משפיעה עלי לשפוך לפניך את ליבי.
כותב דנטה.
יש גן עדן, כך שמעתי.
שאינו ניתן לביטוי
בשום מבטא.

Chana Zelig integrates her religious scholarship and spirituality to bring an engaging perspective on Judaism and Jewish art. Her work ranges broadly from paintings and custom Judaica pieces to large installations at synagogues and schools across the US. Chana was raised strictly Orthodox, attended Michlala Jerusalem Seminary for Women and is a graduate of the Wexner Heritage Foundation. Chana resides in Chicago and has her studio in a converted barn in southwestern Michigan. She is a member of the Jewish Arts Salon and joined the Artists Beit Midrash in the spring of 2020.