

The Day is Short
Jo Milgrom



The Day is Short

Words and Pictures

by

Jo Milgrom

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Photography, Design, and Production by Ricki Rosen

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Dedication

To my mother Ruth August Berman (1900-1992)



With the publishing of this book I am now the age of my mother's life.

I owe my love of learning to her. She graduated from the University of Miami at age 71, the eldest student in her class. A single parent, her courage and creativity put bread on the table.

The Jewishness of my childhood home is due to her. I read Yiddish and Hebrew with her. I recited the sensory brachot which centered me in an ordered universe.

Her name is now memorialized with the birth of my 19th great grandchild, Livia Ruby Buchsbaum. I dedicate my blessings to my vast family, my siblings Sam and Rose, my late husband Jacob, our four children, fourteen grandchildren, their mates and to nineteen great grandchildren.

Pirkei Avot 2:15

Rabbi Tarfon taught: The Day is Short
The Work is Much
The Workers are Lazy
The Reward is Great
And the Master is Demanding

רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן אוֹמֵר: הַיּוֹם קָצֵר
וְהַמְּלָאכָה מְרֻבָּה
וְהַפּוֹעֲלִים עֲצֵלִים
וְהַשָּׂכָר הַרְבֵּה
וּבֵעַל הַבַּיִת דּוֹחֵק

Thinking about how to write an introduction to my newest catalog, I chanced on a talk by Ruth Calderon, scholar and educator, on the above passage. She related the passage to the psychological categories of Id, Ego, Super Ego. What caught my attention was her openness about the complexities of getting to work, how the conditions are just right, the children are out of the house, the work space is ready, the kitchen is in order but she just couldn't get started, she just couldn't work: the workers are lazy in the words of Pirke Avot. I thought she connected that to the Id, the need for immediate satisfaction. I tried to match Pirke Avot to the psychological categories. I thought that the short day and the much work were the super ego, the conscience; the great reward must be ego satisfaction. So who is the demanding Master? Is the Master also the much work and the short day? Maybe that's Life.

Categories and definitions notwithstanding, the passage spoke to me at the right time. My limited mobility is a factor with or without the corona lockdowns. Age-related macular degeneration is more distressing to a visual artist. But kvetching aside, my partnership with artist Moris Lasry has produced some sixty new assemblage works. As fabricator, Moris is unique to my work. I have the idea, and I have the material, the reservoir of found forms (read junk) that crowds my workroom. But Moris makes it happen. He is the midwife, the birther. These works are then skillfully photographed by Ricki Rosen who has also done all my previous catalogues. Ricki then critiques, edits and designs the final book.

The subjects are not very different from earlier catalogues: The Many Faces of Torah, Israel and the Diaspora Dilemma, "Idle" Worship, Earthly and Celestial Jerusalem, Visual Midrash on selected Biblical narratives. But there are differences. Among the materials I used, mirrors play a role perhaps emphasizing an inward focus. Several

works deal with the "Exile from The Garden of Eden" as "Birth into Time and Aging". I was taken with the obsessive appearance of luxury watches in the New York Times, and Time is the daily gift to a person almost 93. Regarding current issues Ruth Bader Ginsberg has a place in my work as a model for women, her morality, honesty, earthy openness, persistence and clarity of vision.

Something else is new. Many of the images are accompanied by short poems rather than just titles. These poems address the process and the meaning of the works to me. During the year I have also written other poems, perhaps equal in number to the visual works. I thought it entirely appropriate to unify both aspects of my creativity, the verbal with the visual. The final section of the book is reserved for the poems that are independent.

The day is short and the work is much. I am better at sitting down to work. The reward is ... what can I say at age ninety two ... the reward is incalculable. And the demanding Master has been kind to me.

I'd like to conclude this introduction with a personal bracha:

Of late I've been meditating on the morning brachot, though oddly at night when I settle into bed. I recite the bracha and then reread Magonet and Blue's (The Reform Service of Great Britain) hyper translation which is a kind of preface to the bracha: The first bracha reads "baruch ata...who has not made me a stranger (to you)". The pivotal word is "nochri". The root is "nun chof resh" which gives us both to recognize and the opposite - to be alien to, to be alienated. M&B introduce it: "When I doubt your existence (when I don't recognize you) or make a god of my desires let me find you again."

That is so powerful I can stop right there and just stay with the first bracha. When I doubt your existence, in this fearful time of corona, or make a god of my desire, to stay creative, to write, to make art ... yes, let me find you again in the burgeoning mulberry leaves and the pinpoint new green fruit and the expanding daylight 'shelo asani nochri', who has not made me alien to you; who does not let me lose my focus in trivia.

Biblical Narratives



Baby Furniture

a maturing embryo
gazes
at the cord

its tree
of
life

s/he also feels
an embracing and
protective arm

the inside outside
shape of parental
love



Let There Be Light

a circular skirt
girdles
the universe

from the
surprising
center

fragments
of a gleaming
ostrich egg

anticipate
the light and fertility
of planet earth



I Envy that Bird

Daven -- etymology unknown

Divinar -- to interpret the will of God

*I'm jealous of that bird out there
I don't know her name,
just a bird let's say, she.
I don't envy her freedom,
I envy her davening
the inborn pattern, its rhythm,
its roundness, its repetitions
its unfailing perfection and predictability.*

*it's the home for her young
when they've grown and gone
what they leave is her post-partem
nest. Its roundness, its
predictability
her unfailing perfect prayer*

*would that I could daven like that
where the routine is inspired
could you divine a nest like that?*





The Firmament “Raqia”

*raqia (hammered metal)
imagines a lid on the pot of the sky*

*a biblical image of the covered heavens
curbing the upper waters (rain, snow) from
overwhelming the lower waters*

*a colorful umbrella, the raqia
protects the lower inverted umbrella
and its future population
from the excesses of climate change*

The Gardens of Eden

*the garden is the eternal womb
birth is expulsion into time
the garden is also the after- life womb
where there is no time*

*two Eves stand in relief
in a velvet garden
one leaves in haste*

*the other turns away
deciding
not to decide*



First Lady

if you want to know what
the very first lady really looked like
check the art of the renaissance
she's everywhere sexy young thing

sliding naked out of a slit in Adam's side
as if the poor chap
was designed with a
thoracic vagina envy of his species

wait wait
there's chapter two
rib also means side: Adam's feminine side
which the celestial architect built into a woman

enthralled by the bone of his bone and the flesh of his flesh
when he recognized her Self
he understood at once his own Self
only then could the two become one again

wait wait
there's not simply a first lady in every man ,
or an Adam in every Eve?
we're not one or even two

we are actually engendering
gender ambiguity
the gene god alone knows
the recipe that makes us

"O Lord Our Lord
how excellent is thy name!"

*Eve is in a garden of cactus. Cactus?
carefully she picks her way out*



Re/creation

*it's true
the earth
is the Lord's*

*but don't expect
an absentee landlord,
to do anything*

*hey wait a minute
he has just signed a treaty
with Demeter*

*captive goddess
of the earth
to recreate*

*the garden
of earthly
delights where*

*corona has died
strangled in the knots
of the last available
single use plastic bag*

*believing
is
seeing*

*the serpent
the mythic god who plots the expulsion
presents the gift apple of consciousness*



It is Common Knowledge

that there were two trees in the Garden
at the navel of the earth
the tree of knowledge and the tree of life

only in the ninth century did a scholar discern the truth
that they are really one
at the root
and then branch out as they grow up and out

but did you know that the tree of knowledge
grows like a hedge
encircling the garden and enclosing
the tree of life at the center?

if and when you dare to push into the hedge
and pluck and taste the forbidden fruit of knowledge
you will have won the lottery
Instructions:

how to reach the tree of life

"recover your lost wholeness by
repeatedly eating the fruits of consciousness"

so much for the delicious sin of being

"In paradise stand the tree of life and tree of knowledge, the latter forming a hedge about the former. Only he who has cleared a path for himself through the tree of knowledge can come close to the tree of life..." -- Edward Edinger, Ego and Archetype, from L. Ginsberg, Legends of the Jews

*An old face emerges into time
from the Garden womb*

*(a reference to the film Shangrila
where the young heroine is
persuaded to leave the
Garden of Eternal Spring
and instantly in the dark storm
of ice and snow, becomes an old
wrinkled wraith, her true age in time)*



The Bush Burns But Is Not Consumed

*Chagall has arrived
he knows to take off his shoes
because this ground is holy*

*but the commitment
to God's presence
whatever that means is...*

*the big bare feet
have decided
on flight*





The Burning Bush in Person

branches
bandaged white
divine healings

within the branches
a treatment mask
for cancer patients

Jacob is in the mask
God is also
in the mask

Moses Did Not Know That His Face Beamed (Exodus 34:29)

he did not know
that the skin of his face
had burned

victorious over an initial
encounter with melanoma
the fair rabbi professor was
chastened by the sun god

the only brim broad
enough to vanquish his fear
was to be found
in women's fashions

that's him you see
on his
quotidian route

with a yoke
and a pair of
buckets

he could pass
for a Chinese
coolee

but for the
crochet
kippah



“Idle” the Golden Calf

*three flashy bodices
remaineder luxury fabric
shaped like heads of
oxen*

*particularly the one
in the center
a bejewelled breastplate
with horns like a neckpiece*



these fabrics hang near
a print of the Kotel
onto which is collaged
the transparency of an ox

these two works go together
the golden calf is a convenient logo
for any single thing that
captures your whole life

idolatry (to make
a long
theological
tract short)

is mistaking
a part
for the
whole



Fabrics by Ron Ramon

Transparency by Elizabeth Oppenheim

Hagar Driven Out

*flesh colored transparency
laid over a hostile
wilderness*

*Hagar looks back
to an unwelcoming home,
but a home after all*

*Ishmael, a curious child
holding her hand,
faces forward*



Hagar image by Abel Pann

Wilderness image by Elizabeth Oppenheim

Surrogate Mother

lifting her head
the young mother
gazes on the miracle of birth
resting on her belly

in the Bible Hagar
is a concubine
today she is a
surrogate mother

for the matriarch Sarah
whose entire adult
life was barren
frustration

the placement of baby Ishmael
("God hears") is perfect:
Sarah can easily imagine
he was really inside her womb

Hagar sculpture by Ron Mueck
Sarah by Leonard Baskin



Two Isaacs

did Michelangelo
want to show
Isaac's hesitation

about this whole
"Take Your Son" business
or

maybe Michelangelo
himself
had doubts

look carefully
one Isaac looks down(cast)
in submission? defeat? obedience?

the other Isaac looks up
with relief
in the direction of his salvation

the large softly
smiling
woman/angel

is it his mom
finally a mother
challenging

her
God-obsessed
husband?

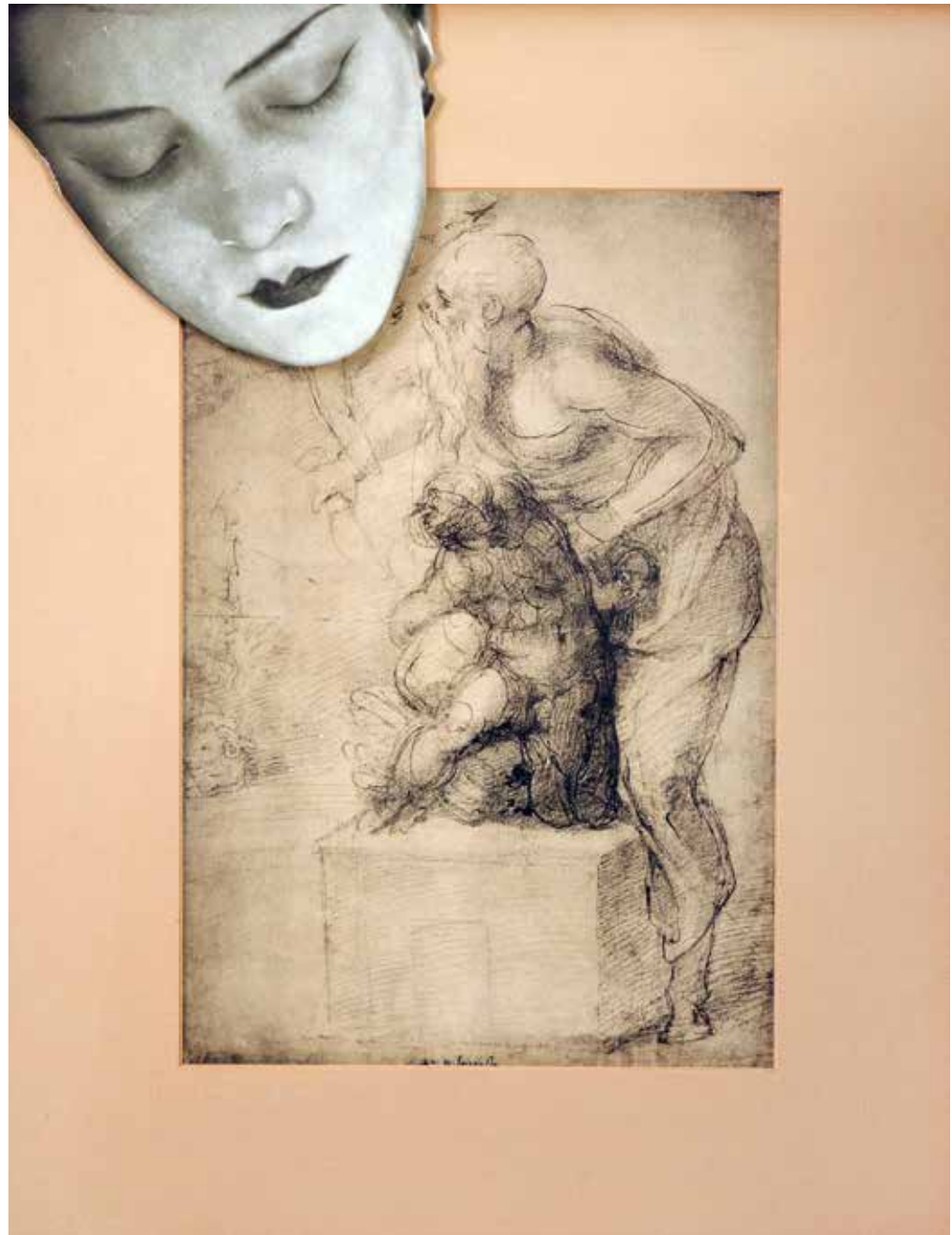


Photo by Man Ray

Job Description

some say the biblical God
is a God of justice
others say he is a God
of compassion

nobody dares call him a tactful God
take the well-known sacrificial tale
it takes God three phrases
to get to the point

"take your son
your only one
the one you love"

midrash ever-ready to defend its beloved

inserts Abraham's delaying arguments

1. I have two sons
2. each is only to his mother
3. do I have separate places in my guts for the love of each?

far from staying the sword
the unfathomable deity
who commands "Listen up O Israel"
does not himself listen up O Israel

and prepares to turn the blade



Illusion and Grief

*the child in the center belongs in the crib
in the background,
attached and overlaid Batsheva
embraces the illusion, her newborn
whose death is the punishment,*

*hers and David's for her seduction and his murder
of her innocent husband sent to the front
to assure his death
and thus legitimize their union*

*painfully falling out of the frame,
the lower transparency David
is the sinner, the womanizer
but still a grieving father*

Crib print by Avigdor Arikha

Transparencies by Eleanor Dickenson

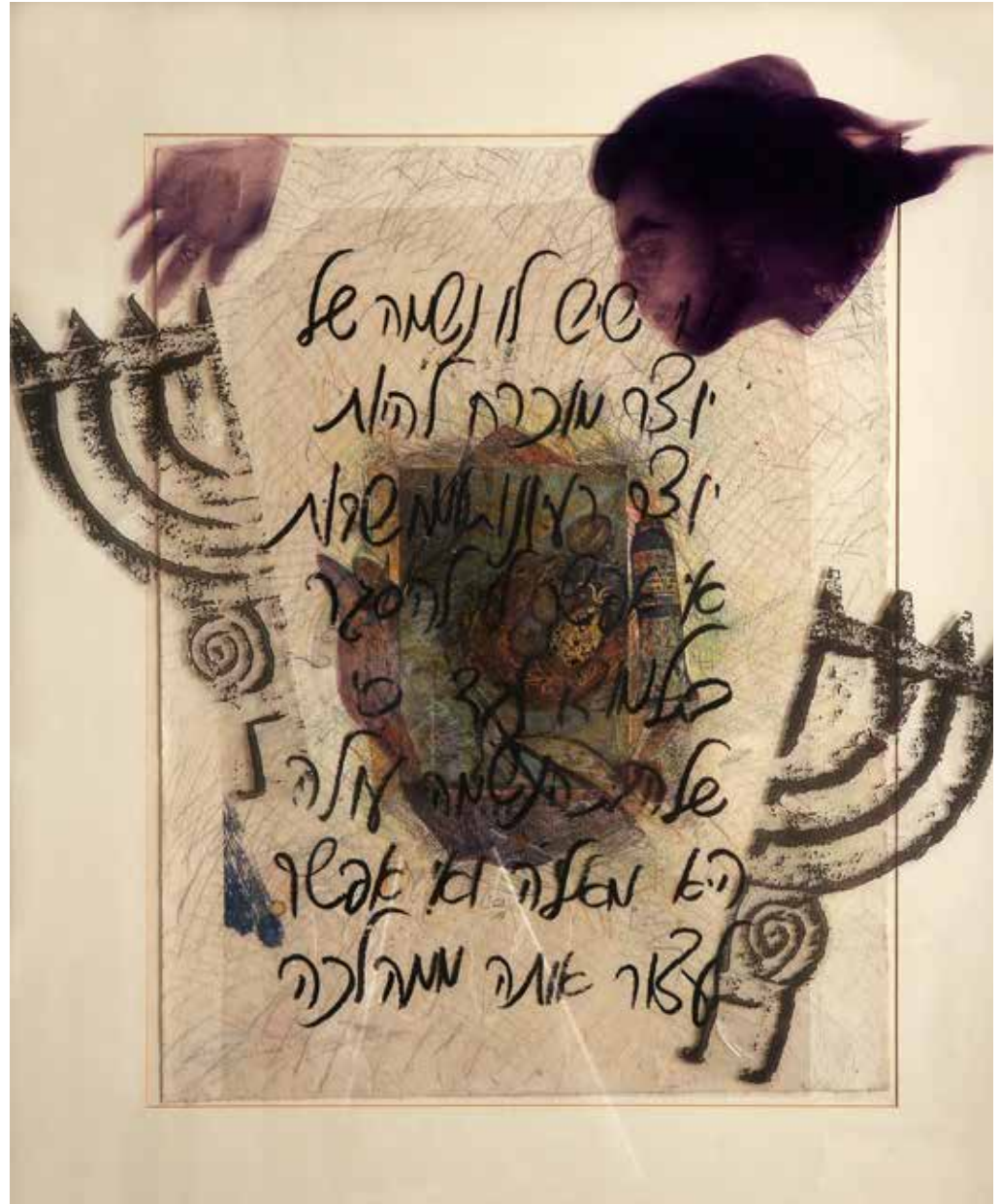
The Law Giver vs. the Artist

with uncharacteristic patience
God repeats instructions
to the lawgiver:
how to sculpt the menorah

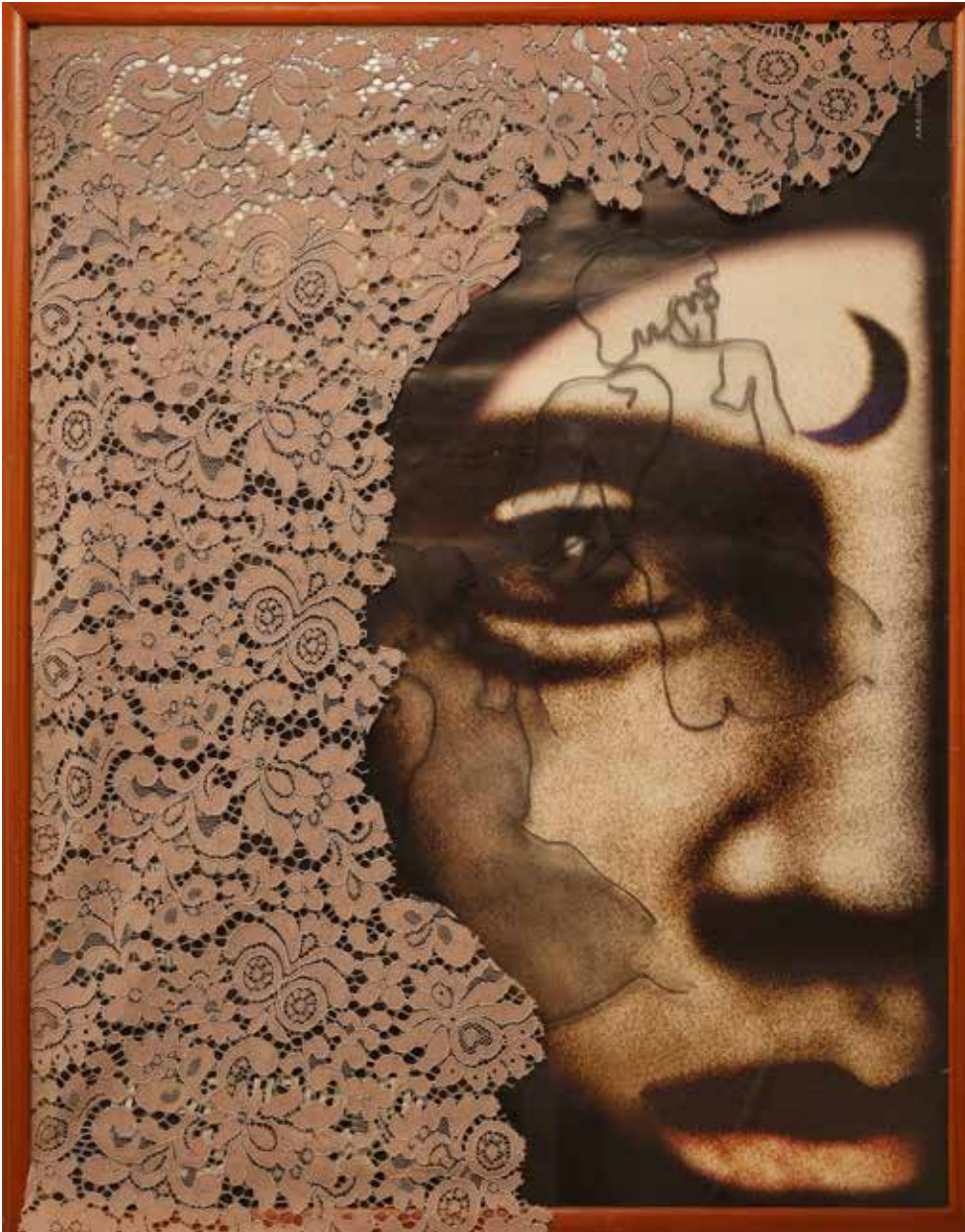
Moses in a panic, repeatedly
fails to get it and begs for a repeat
exasperated,
God finally dismisses the famed lawgiver

and commissions the artist Bezalel
whose name pointedly means
"bzel-el" in the shadow of God
(notice divine pleasure in right brain)

surrounding the central text,
a paean to human creativity,
are images of a frustrated Moses
and a fragmented menorah



Tamar and Yehudah (Genesis 38)



unwilling to wait for an arranged marriage
to a youth not yet mature
Tamar plots to seduce his father
wholly indifferent to her needs

the figures within her strong face
(collaged transparencies)
convey her emotional state
and hint of her bold plan

a lace curtain and black moon
embody
the nocturnal encounter

the critical coverup
the eventual disclosure
and the final vindication

Deborah's Eye

prophetess
wildly coiffed
masked for privacy

she holds court
in public
en masse they climb

seeking that eye
her judgment
beneath the palm tree

a biblical heroine
heralded by an
unheralding culture

she chooses the general
to lead the army
she leads

her vision
vanquishes
the chariots of Sisera



The Two Lives of Sarah (Genesis 23:1)

larger than life behind the ankh*
Sarah age 27 and Sarah age 100
two lives on her collaged faces

inside the ankh
two imagined images
hover between breast and womb

hands tightly bound by the useless
cord emerging from her navel
waiting years of monthly periods

waiting to embrace the lad
asleep upon her bosom
of the not-yet-almost- mother

below the ankh old and young
Sarah's hands reach a tattered IDF beret
from which dimly appear the eyes

of the father who sacrifices sons
alien to each other and to him
they come together only to bury the old man

the true sacrifice of the Akedah
is Sarah whose death opens the next chapter
there is no happy end





Commentary:

This entire visual midrash emerges from two possible readings of "Years of Sarah's Life" and "Two Lives of Sarah" (sh'nai haye Sarah). Hence the young and old Sarah, the barren and fruitful mother, the old and young hands holding the tattered beret. Abraham is also a double. The public patriarch is a God-obsessed giant; the private Abraham compromises his wife and destroys his sons. He barely appears in this sculpture -- at the very bottom a profile with piercing eyes emerge from the edge of the deceased son's beret.

**ankh -- the Egyptian sign meaning life*

Torah, Singular & Plural



Religious Clothing

*father and son wear the garment
tallit katan just his size
big tallit just his size*

*each corner of each tallit
bears numbered knots and twists
that spell out the gematria code*

*7, 8, 11, 13 the sequence of twists
that translate into
God is One*

*in prayer you can climb
the twists and leap the knots
concentrating on being in the Presence*





*these days there is an awakening
mother and daughter
also wear the garment*

*with the twists and knots
they too climb the twists and leap the knots
concentrating
on being in the present Presence*

Jewish Wedding

*Israel and Torah
join under
the huppah*

*statistically
one of every two
marriages*

fails

*how is this
one doing?*

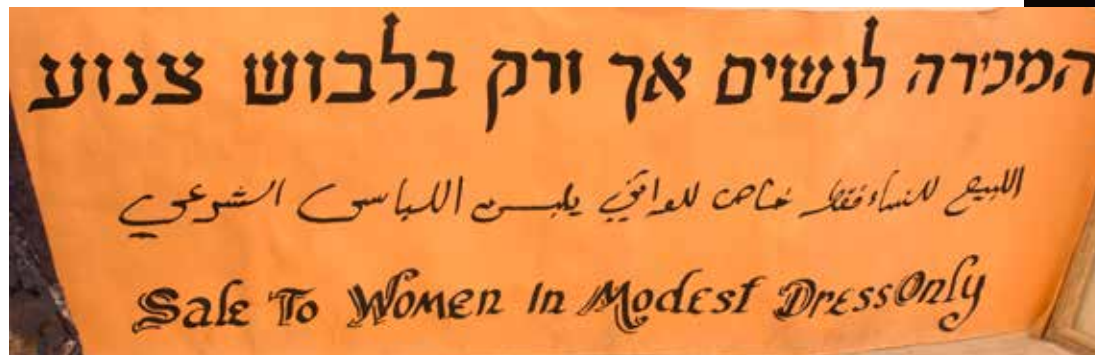


Fence Around the Torah, a New One

a woman, oh so modestly dressed
lifts the Torah after the reading and
before returning it to the ark

this is a new honor for women
whose former absence "protected"
the Torah from its fear of women

her present presence
is the new protection
it is the long awaited vaccine



Shrouds

*fragment remainders
of muslin used to sew shrouds
don't go to waste.*

*they become stuffing in the
ornate embroidery
of Torah curtains*

*thus the mystery of death
and the burial fabric
are linked to the living Torah.*

*in this collage
fragments are suspended
from the dark forms of loss*

*representing "kriah"
the torn garment worn
during the first week of mourning*



How Yad v'Shem

how does the most vile
and detestable thing
become acceptable
even desirable

(in a whisper)

Yad v'Shem

has

a

gift

shop

shall I gift wrap
your box of ashes

then I remembered
a line from Yeats

'Love has pitched her tent
in the place of excrement'

birth happens together with feces
Yeats says it better

so they sell books there
about the holocaust
and a new-old mezuzah
commemorating
the Warsaw Ghetto

there must be a better name

The Upside -Down Tree of Life



Who is to say
that the Tree of Life
is rooted down here

Maybe its roots are
in the heavens and its
flowering is down here with us

This inverted kabbalistic work
is the tree of sefirot
divine qualities emerging

from the crown above and
descending on both sides of the trunk
an abstract roughly human form

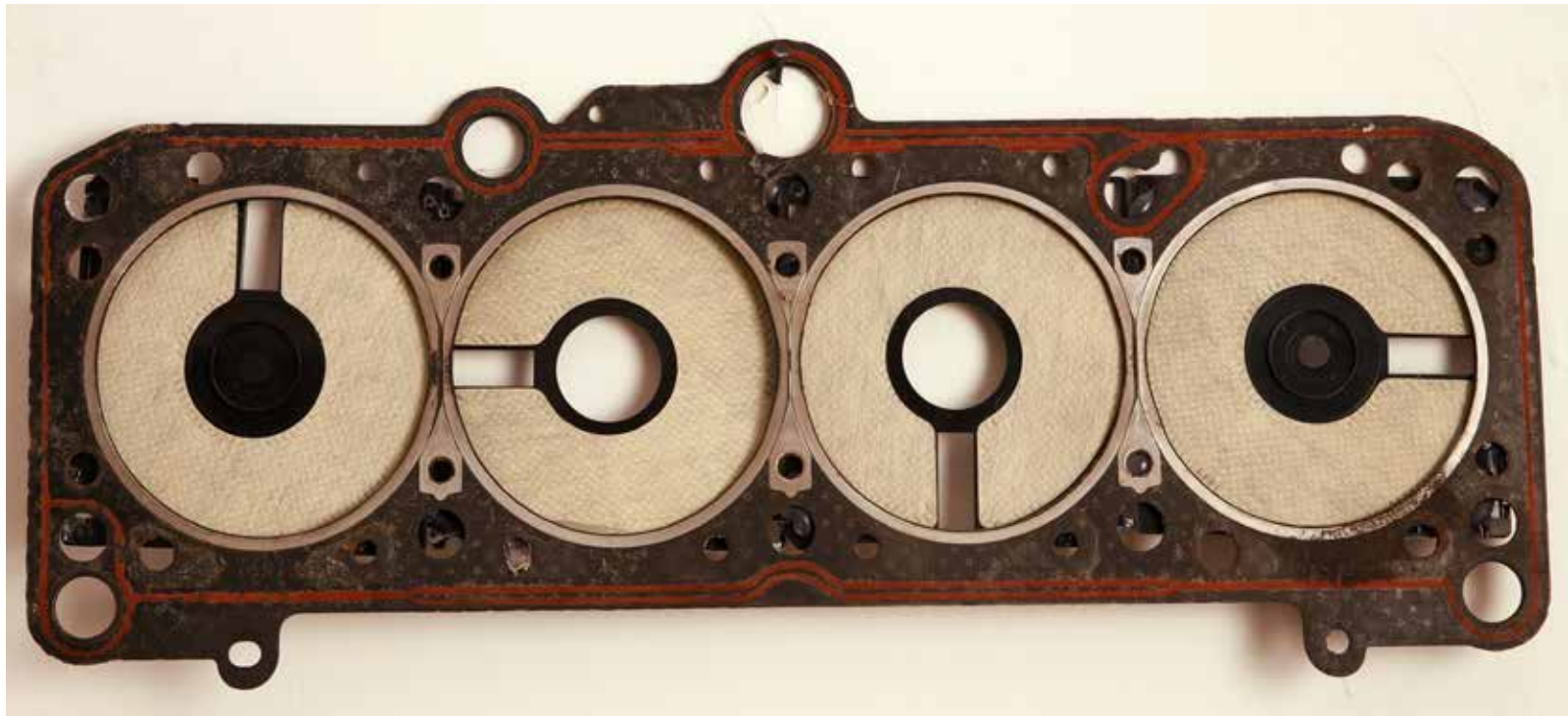
one might simply say
that God and humans
are symbolic trees



Rítual Dírection

*A mizrah (east) adorns a wall
that faces Jerusalem
THE source
of spiritual light*

*m z r h is a Hebrew acronym
mitzad zeh ruah hayyim
"From this direction
the spirit of life"*



*This mizrah is composed of four disks
Each marking one of four directions
The viewer can invite spiritual light
From any and all directions*

Tablets of the Law: Double Exposure

the same two tablets
are photographed twice
one moment click
a second moment click

the light changed;
the time changed

See! They are exactly the same
See! They are NOT exactly the same



*so the giving of Torah
each of us is different
every succeeding minute*

*therefore our personal Torah
is different
every succeeding moment*

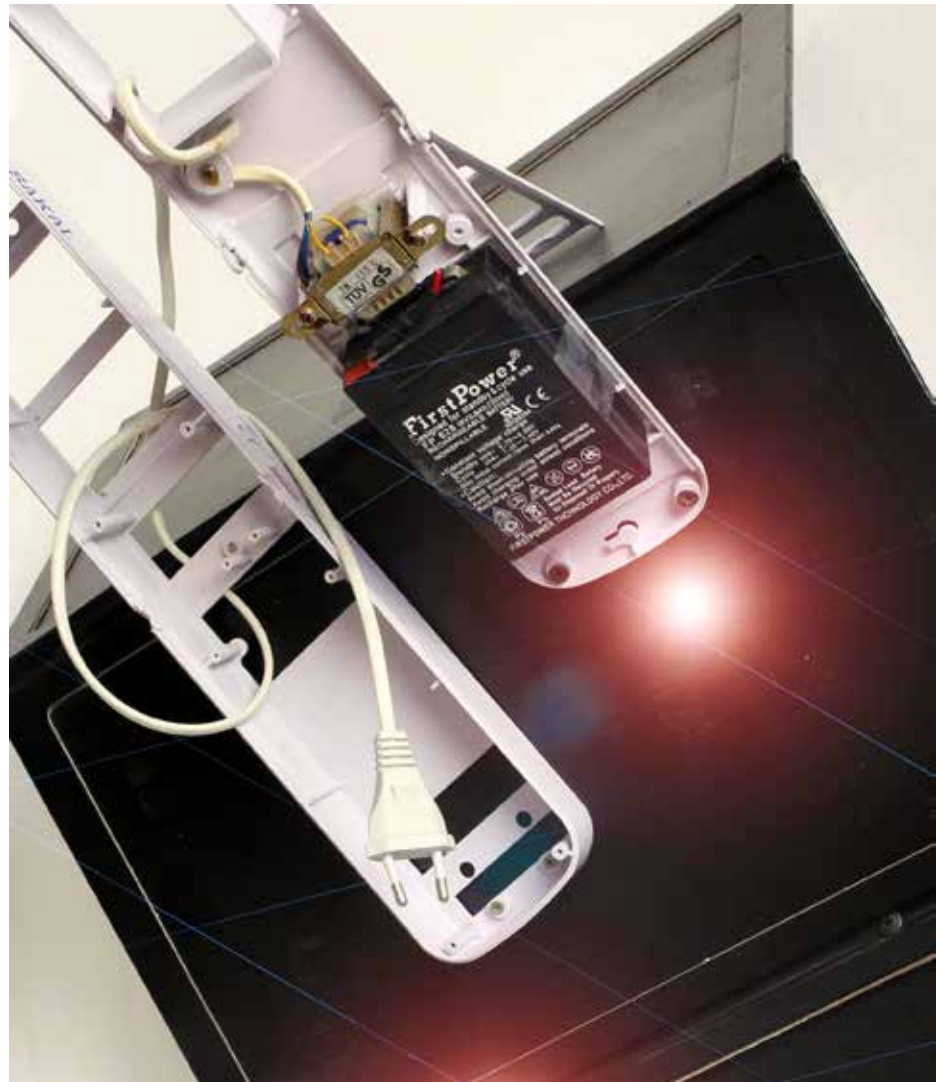


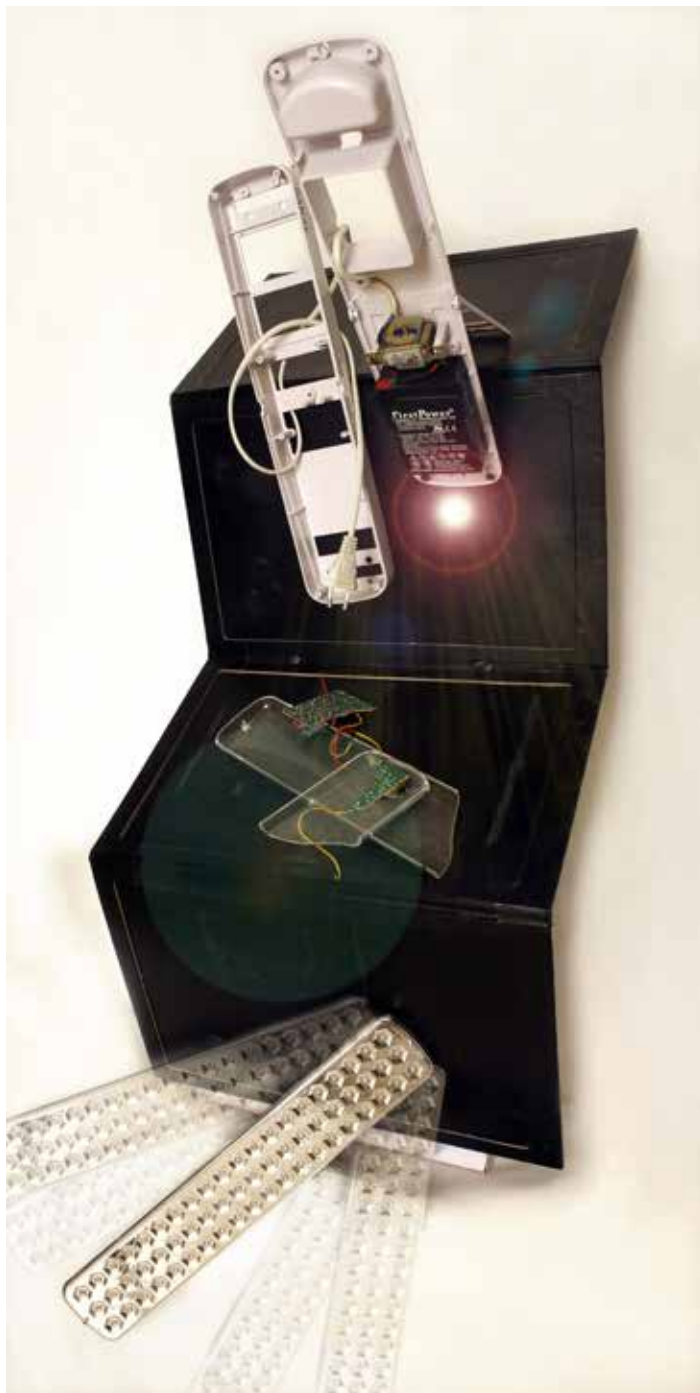
First Power Begets Midrash

*the mortality of
an emergency lamp
that fell and fell
apart*

*begat three new lives:
the giving of Torah
the broken tablets and
the arrival of midrash*

*upper level: the original two tablets
with rechargeable battery of divine power
His name inscribed "First Power"
plus the cord to plug into his congregation*





*middle level: the scraps
the broken tablets
barely visible
defying authority*

*lower level: a shiny embossed tablet
clearly the offspring
of the parental tablets
above*

*cleverly attached
it swings
freely
In all directions*

*true midrash, reflective
offspring of the Torah
yet free of
its burdens*

*is the swinging
designer of
Torah's continual
rebirthing as midrash*

Metaphoric Torah -- Living Water

*Four large water bottles
Split open become vessels
For navigating the protean seas
Of Torah interpretation*



*An open unwritten scroll
the Torah of the future
dare it confront the past*



*Secret mystical meaning
unraveling of the traditional text
to explore the esoteric*



*Torah as inverted tree of life
its roots in the heavens
its flowering down here with us*

*The sermon
the letters as
source of many teachings*



The Silent Letter, a Pronunciation Guide

how do you pronounce that silent letter
why do you ask
because I want to talk to God

and the first letter of his name
is a silent letter that
keeps getting stuck
in my throat

that's perfect, make your throat like
you're about to pronounce an alef
do you feel your throat closing
and getting tight

that's it, that's the unmeasurable interval
the instant between nothing
specific and everything
potential

hold it there
for an instant
feel it think it hold it
still

now open your throat
let the air
through

that's God's breath

pouring out all the vowels
that speak the human speech
that creates the now and
future human worlds



Prayer Boxes

prayer boxes

bind them

ON your hand

IN your heart

WITH your soul





Transparent Torah

how far have we come from the
embroidered velvet Torah mantle
its rampant lions, embossed satin tablets

the Ten Words
first etched in stone,
by God's finger much later

calligraphed on parchment
rolled onto ornate staves, trees of life
weighty regal triumphant

now see what has evolved
a traveler's prayer on a transparency
encased in a transparent cloak

opaque hands flank the text
behind these hands lies a
pair of electronic transparencies

brainy typing fingers collude with
electronic patterns
hidden under the keyboard

how awesome is the giving of this Torah
can we lift it, learn it, love it
this ghostly all inclusive plastic entity?



Clairvoyance on Sinai

*the guys who wrote the Torah could not decide
what really happened on Sinai
so they kept rewriting the story
which came out different every time
who in heaven's name could
know what a meeting with God is like
or even possible*

*sometimes artists show a hand emerging from the cloud
an eye might be ok too
but the version I like is when God makes Sinai transparent
and we are standing under this glass
looking out to meet the master of the universe*

*the glass is transparent like an "aspaklaria"
delicious ambiguity
if it's a window, God is out there but
what if it's a mirror
clairvoyance on Sinai*

Imagine: Face to Face

a large parochet
(ark curtain)
hangs before
the Torah ark

two large tablets of the Law
fill the embroidered center,
one side of the tablets is semi-detached
like a slightly open door

Instructions to the viewer:
IF YOU WANT TO EXPERIENCE
THE DIVINE PRESENCE ...

what do you see?
that's you in the glass large as life





539 Pages

*if any word could focus me
on the approaching holiday
what is my purpose, my intention*

preachy, here it comes

*it is the seasonal
arithmetic of the soul
"heshbon hanefesh"*

another sermon sigh

*how my intentions
have gone astray
maybe ill-defined*

it's simply not in words

*not the myriad pages
of the prayerbook
not even the cry of the shofar*

*just look into a mirror
stay there
for a while*

Chance

*is the random meeting
of an obscure event
with clairvoyant design*

*is God the clairvoyant
designer?
chance is the god
beyond God*

*such a believer
is an idolator!*

yes, she said

bowing

Israel & Díaspora



If the Kotel Could Speak

it's really weird how some folks idolize me
someone called me like a dance hall
Diskotel

troubled, my left eye seems to look out,
but it is really looking inward
not exactly pleasuring
my past role in Jewish history

but my right eye
bulging and burning
is fearful raging
about the future

a young woman is climbing
out of an old book
looking resolutely straight ahead
whatever she learned she is already gone
no Diskotel for her

as for all those notes
people stick between my stones
the cloud will answer
emails?

recently I saw this
city worker
sweeping them all up
he's not a theologian

a stone is
a stone is
a stone

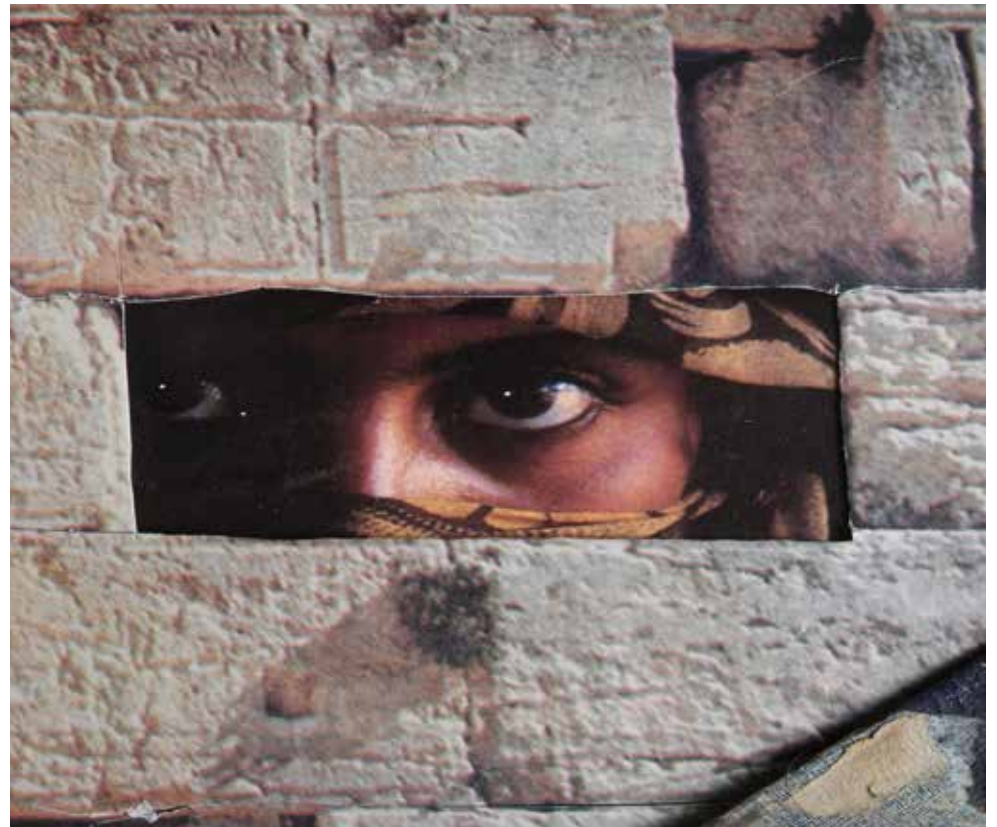


I and Thou, small "i"

once on Ben Yehudah a beggar hollered at me
something about Jews being compassionate people
I had approached without handy small money
I thought I could escape him
I looked past him and passed him
but not before our eyes met
that was a long time ago
when I walked to town all the time
it won't go away, it was because our eyes met

it's different in the newspaper and the radio and tv
or is it
once out of Eden
their bloods holler at me from the earth
but I just look past them and pass them

what if "I", WE
what if our eyes meet
the messiah would have come



There Are Always Two Jerusalems

routes in the Jerusalem Marathon
guide the runners,
walkers and baby carriages

on the ups and downs
of the holy
hills

the down arrows,
that's us rooted
in the earthly

the up arrows,
route us
to the celestial





Moriah

*mori-ya: my teacher is God
how perfect that moriah
is landscaped*

*in warning stripes
the climber hesitates
the shofar sentinel*

*trumpets salvation
the climber listens
free to choose*

Two Faces Head the State

a discarded painted sign
advertises a shark
entangled in a steel net

its bold obverse
his other ID:
Rosh Ha-Memshalah

Head of State dignified
by olive branches flanking
the iconic menorah





*the head
of state
is blindfolded*

*his diplomacy is half
zipped up
without closure*

*a crown
and a corona mask
are fallen into disuse*

Lamentations Chapter and Verse 2019

nervous about the election
restless marking
time

I was rereading an old article
about the origin
of the death certificate
and its mute nature

there's a quote from Bernard Malamud
about an impatient census taker
regarding an acquaintance's death.

"How did he die
say in one word
from what he died
he died that's all

answer please
this question
broke in him
something

that's how
broke what
broke what breaks"

that's when I got scared
about the election

something
is breaking
what breaks.



No Honor

two Torah mantles
hang inside out
their embroidered letters
create a language not a
language

their background is
an old torn Israeli flag
that was once a tallit

the merger
does no honor
to either

Torah In a Hot Pad

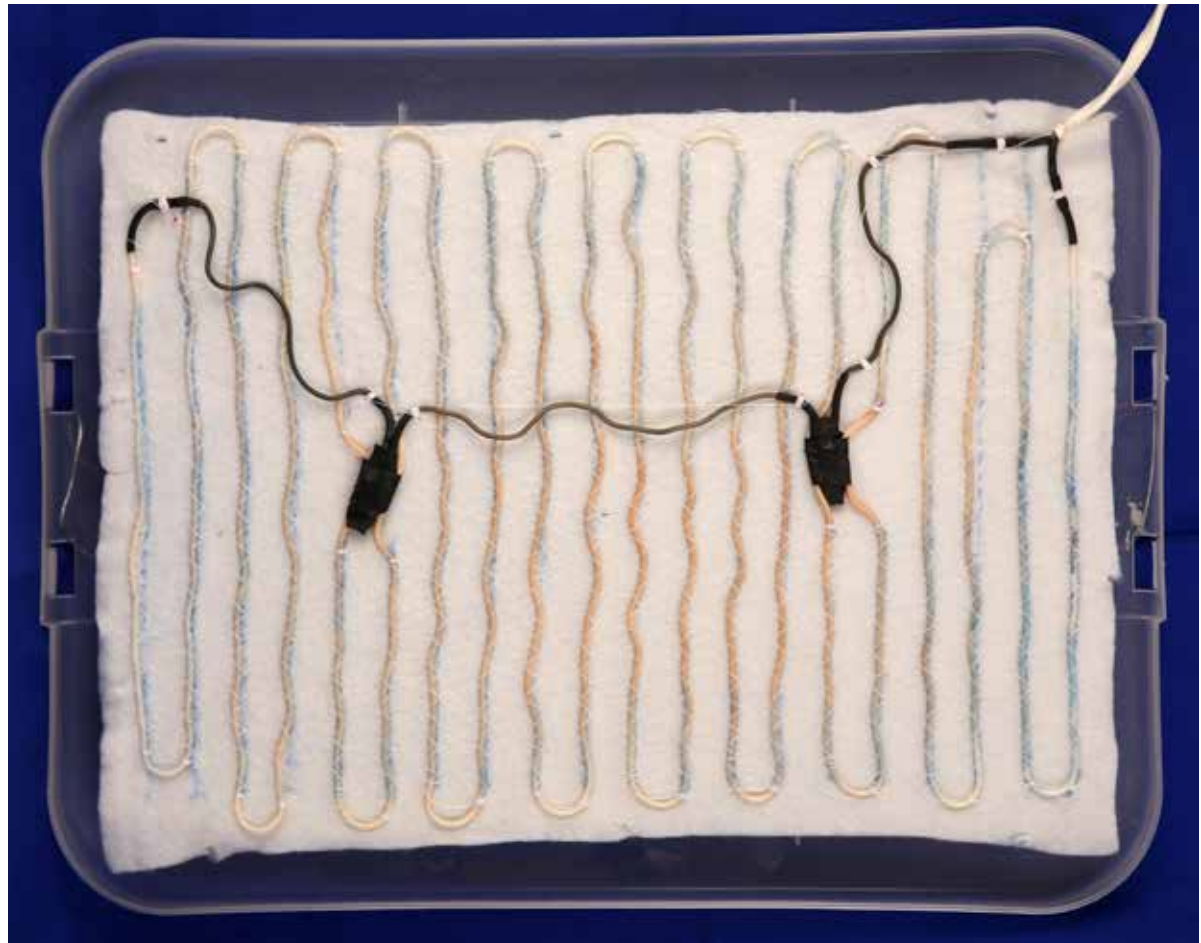
two Jews in the world:
you can count tribes or
desert roads

in Sinai, paths
through
the Red Sea

whatever you
remember
from midrash or
heder

they are not alone
what do you think
connects them?

the cord
the cord
that cord



Horizontal

*lucky person basking in the sun
at the sea contemplating the horizon
if I sat at the city dump*

*could I contemplate the horizon there?
is the horizon only outdoors?
perplexed and sterile I finally gave up*

*yes and no to all the above
horizon is the line,
horizontal obviously*

*but mostly never straight
it meanders, circles, tangles, breaks ,
reforms, clouds and once again returns*

*but the bottom line: horizon is
where up
meets down*

*do take care on days
when earth
is flat*

*when you hit
the edgy horizon
hold on for dear life*

*speedily turn back
best not to
question*

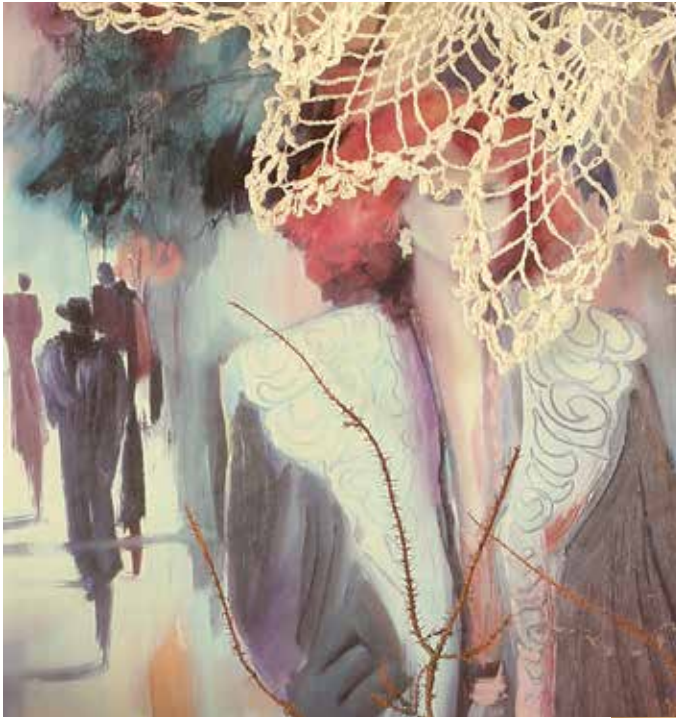
*endings
or
beginnings*

Packing Up

*Tevye is leaving the shtetl
whatever evil is there
it is his enclosed world
(notice the protective circle)*

*outside
who knows what calamity
will come crashing from above
and what treacherous roads
twist and turn before him*





Hesitation

a lace huppah
and a boot
create a third dimension

outside the painting
passersby
pass her by

on a busy street
decisions internal and
external

pre
occupy
her



I Will Wipe Him Out -- Genesis 6:5

there's a midrash:
before He began to create
the world
God had serious doubts

so He created and
destroyed several
before settling
on the one we know

the creation of
humanity,
however
was another matter

after the killing of Cain,
and the
challenge
to his authority

God (apparently
unable or unwilling
to heal this rebellious
creature) declared:

"The creative thoughts
in his heart are evil all day long...
I regret that I created him...
I will wipe him from the earth"

God's flashing anger
strikes lightning
over
Jerusalem

the figures entangled
in perpetual conflict
are US, then and now,
the corona generation



Outcry (Genesis 18:24)

*God had come down to Sodom
to check whether the cries he heard
matched what he would see*

*alarmed he cried
the staccato question
"ha k tsa a ka ta" ?*

*King James, meeting with
his translation committee
hit upon*

*the seven words
that would do justice
to that one*

*scary biblical word,
is it "altogether
according to the cry of it"?*

*then God went to Washington
he looked around
he listened carefully*

*he took out his notes
and asked the same
question*

*HA K
TSA A
KA TA ?*

*will the
punishment
be the same?*

Homage to Philippe Petit

it was 1974
oblivious to gravity
and the void below
he ambled with the clouds

on a steel cable between the twin towers
as if testing his mortality, not the towers'
the eyes of Manhattan
wide with fear and disbelief

I wrote about him in 2012
I have his book I have his film
am I a postmenopausal groupie
the landing on Mars ... eh

it is 2021 today I am writing about him again
as a beautiful stringed instrument
tuning each string in perfect tension
for music of the earthy spheres

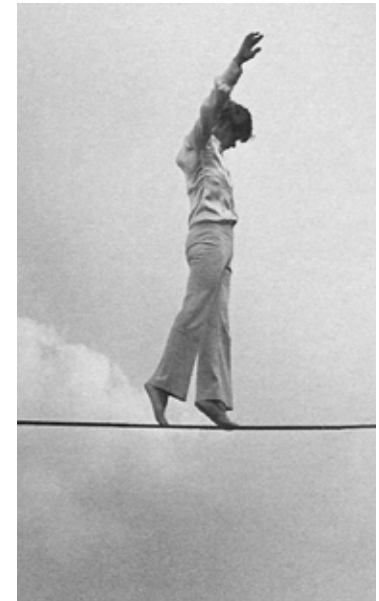
in truth we are the wire walkers
bonding with our towered lives
ambling in the clouds with
faith skill fear naivete

at least
the balancing pole
is our margin
of error

"love affects the measure
hate affects the measure"

אַהֲבָה מְקַלְקֶלֶת אֶת הַשׁוּרָה
שִׂנְאָה מְקַלְקֶלֶת אֶת הַשׁוּרָה

(Breshit Rabbah 55.8)





Old Carry-On

the old carry-on was ready for the show
true, one corner was slightly frayed
exposing the steel frame next to the wheels
most of the zippers worked

but standing upright the lined interior
was perfect for the repurposed menorah
its spreading branches declared
“a light unto the nations”

that night I had a dream
airport
I was leaving Israel
my only luggage was the old carry-on

but the menorah was gone
the spreading branches
“a light unto the nations”
Netanyahu showed up to check my stuff
for security?

I'm Here Still

expired passports adorn
an upside down
map of Israel

chronology
of seventy years of coming
and going

how young and beautiful
we were
and innocent

Israel is still
upside down
but I'm still here



Afrayed

these two frayed ropes,
live here in my Jerusalem home
Palestinians built it, lived here
before the Israel war of independence

four meter high ceilings, floral tiled floors,
windows open at the top to let the hot air out,
sure sign of desert Arab smarts

stone walls a foot thick
great in summer yes, we bought it
we occupy an Arab house much to the
dismay of my post Zionist son

now about the frayed ropes
one of them holds in balance
two torn black fragments
from a trashed suitcase

the base is a chunk of concrete
enclosing a bend of rusty iron
the symbolism is in your face
Jew and Arab



*held in delicate balance by a frayed thread
mounted on the contested land
near where I live*

*the other frayed thread rests
on an antique plate, a century old
called depression glass
(how contemporary)*

*reflecting my face in its mirrored base
my nerves, my land, my world, ours
held in tender balance by a thread*

*before we tear apart
unless we tear and heal together
and heal with love*



Currents



Corona

what irony
corona means
crown

enthroned everywhere
even in this discarded
packing material

artfully shaped
with colossal
hutzpah

or maybe
a humble
prayer

enclosing
divine
presence

Psalms 119:74
...because I have hoped
for your word

Calligraphy by H. Sandberg



Leave Cleave: A Corona Poem

*nearness is first invoked
when man is ordained
to leave his father and mother
and cleave unto his wife*

*but look now
in this time of plague
how we are thirsting,
dying, for nearness*

*two meters
is just enough
for throwing
kisses*

*how grotesque
that same nearness
brings the kiss
of death*

*nearness is
the clock's pendulum
nearness is
the curse of the blessing*

Now the Serpent was Shrewder (Genesis 3:1)

*fancy watches appear with a serpent
in full page New York Times ads
somewhat resembling our poster*

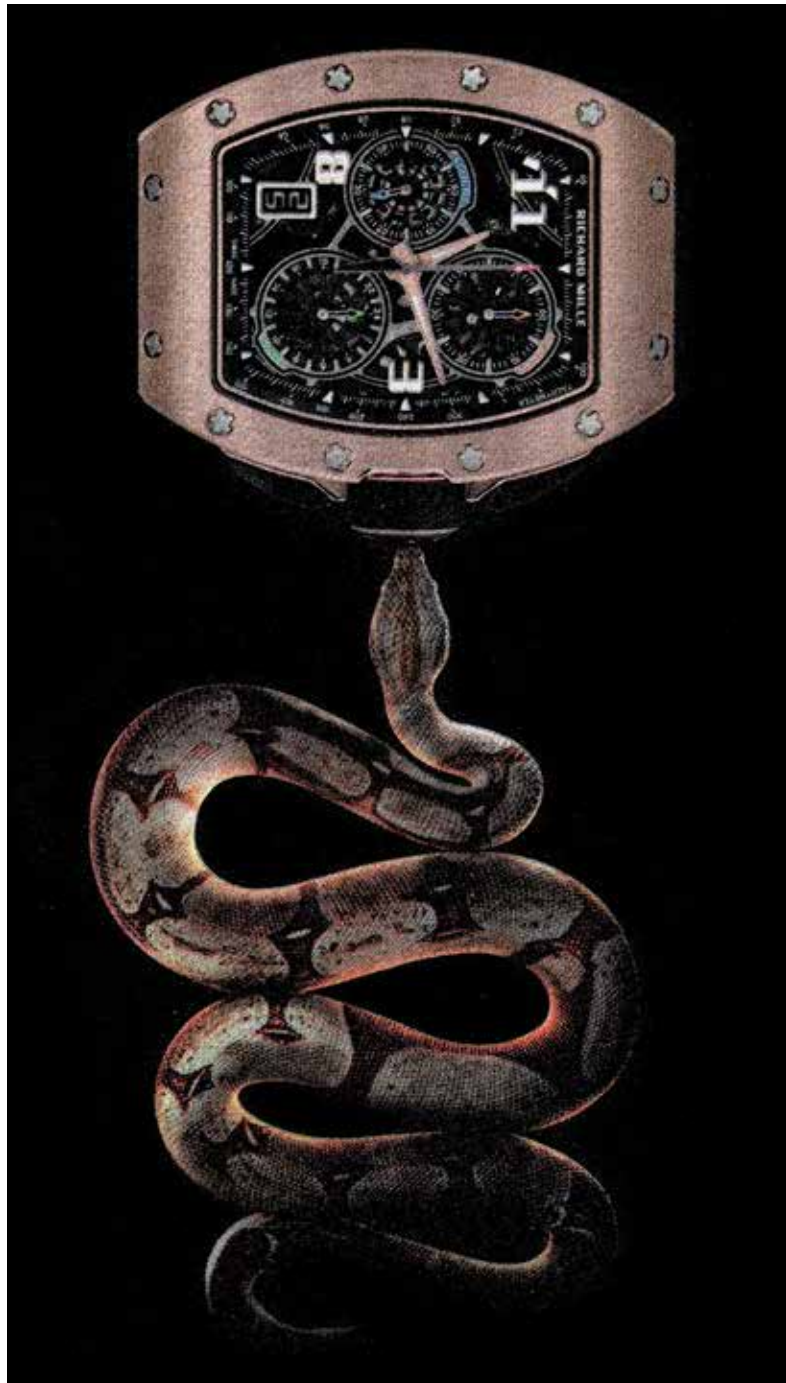
*in the ancient Near East
a god/king's throne was made of snakes
what have gods and snakes in common?
power and longevity*

*power: it appears out of nowhere and kills
longevity: it sloughs its skin and is renewed*

*power and longevity
endow the serpent with wisdom;
thus an Egyptian painting shows
a serpent feeding the young Pharaoh*

*the Times ad tempts us
with mythic (and expensive) power
on the other hand that awesome pair
might be mortal enemies ironically representing
the limits of power and mortality*

*our poster differs
from the Times ad:
another power
defines, defies the clock*



Time is a Witness 2020

In this worst of years, the New York Times continues to publish full page ads featuring luxury watches. At first I thought what outrageous parading of big money in a time of plague, poverty and death. Then I thought more kindly: maybe it is a warning that time is running out...so buy a fancy watch before you die? Still uncomprehending, I present the witnesses --

*four clock faces
swivel
to expose
a timely issue*



*an infant and his savage father
among millions of innocents sacrificed
by the ills and evils of the world, by us*



*an Afghani mother's agony
waiting for the missing son's return
war, a solution?*

*a mother reaches for the hand
of the child washed ashore by the tsunami
nature and climate challenge the human heart and head*



*the famous Sistine hands
of an assertive God reaching out
to a weak and indifferent Adam*



*there are no mysteries here
we know what to do
Time the witness
is running out*

It's September 11th Again

*the Times honoring 9/11 writes on the front page
that eleven hundred people
have never been identified in those ruins.
a journalist broke down when he saw an ultrasound
tacked up in a subway car with the note
"where is the father of this baby?"*



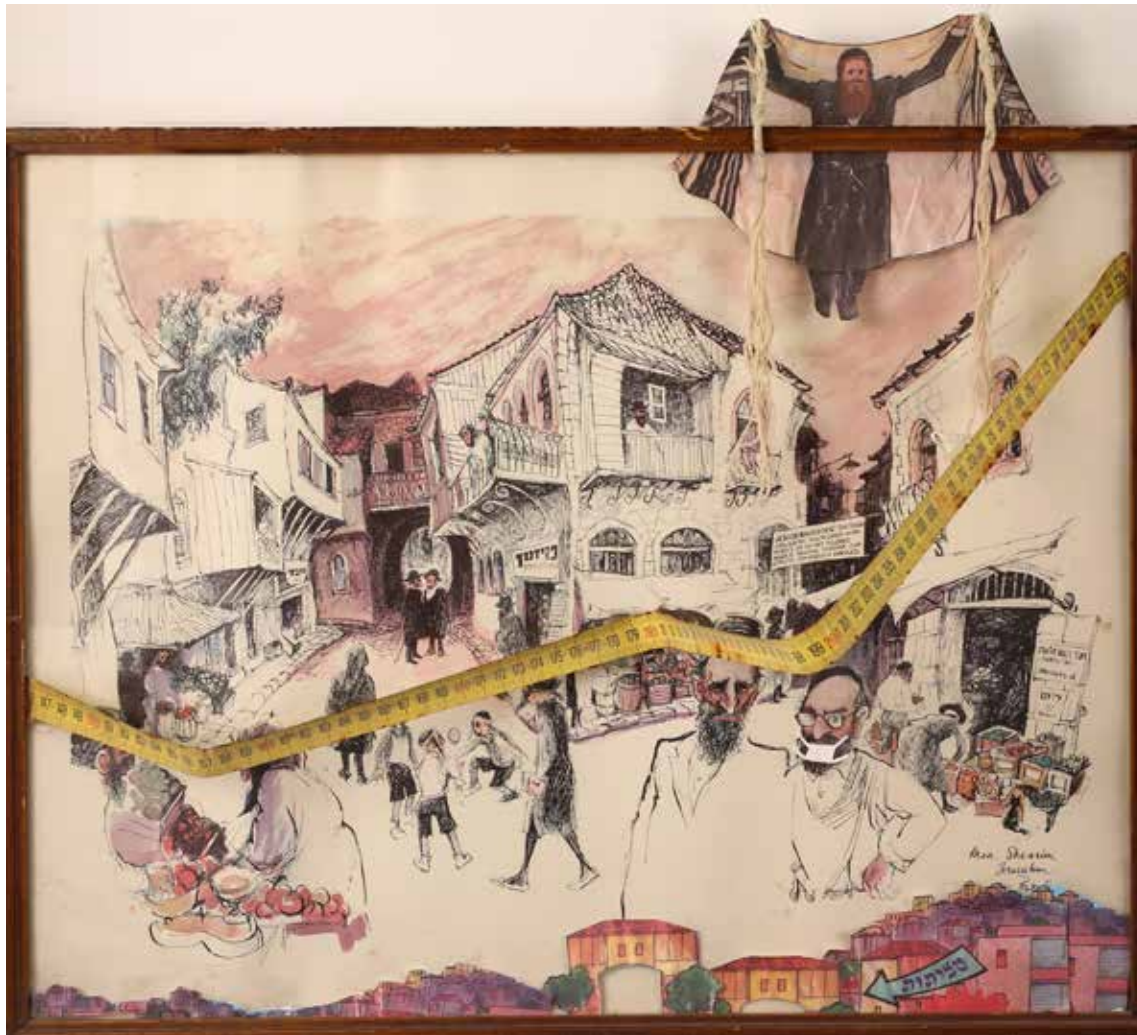
Trembling

"hared" means tremble or shake
both nature (the mountain)
and people trembled at Sinai

haredim here
might shake in prayer
but not before a threatening virus

the tape measure in this print
does not safely distance
people from each other

if anything
it might symbolize
the presumed nearness
of heavenly salvation



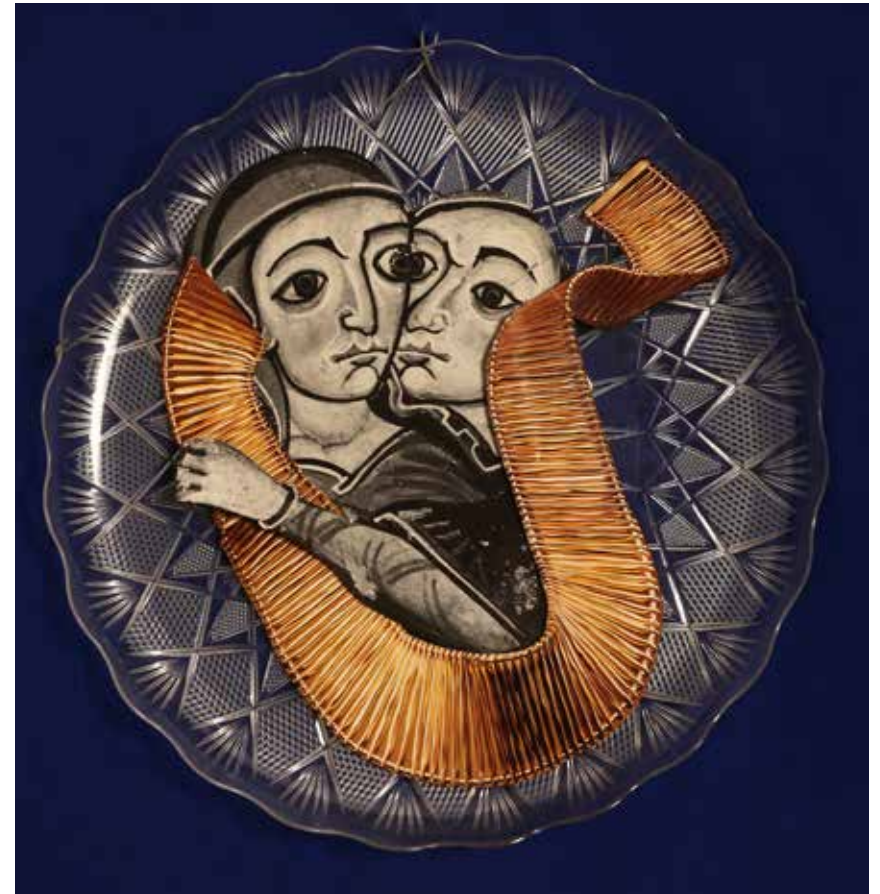
Judge Ruth Bader Ginsberg 1933-2020: Four Faces

justice
outweighs
fine gold



her gift her
image reflected
in us

cancer
shadowed
her life



collar becomes halo
loving
the other

Reflective & Elusive



Celestial Jerusalem

*in an oval mirror
jagged plywood marks
the skyline of an earthly city*

*heavenly Jerusalem
more delicate and airy
is the cloud of crochet lace*



Reflective and Illusive

it is neither opaque nor transparent .
the shapes and colors of the distant
gallery have entered the mirror
another gallery now lives in the mirror

attached to the mirror itself
is a row of dried sculptural kalanchoe leaves
like a series of guests invited
to enter and visit the mirrored gallery

the mirror doubles the illusive 'now'
which at best is a flicker
between yesterday
and tomorrow

the mirror doubles the gallery's workroom
it has distance vision and near vision,
entering the works in progress
to seed and grow the inner life of new creations



Shabbat Lights

in the beginning
two or three "holey" stones
received the candles

with weeks and wax
they became
mountains

their landscape mirrors
and magnifies
Shabbat light



Symbol: Why I Work With Broken Stuff

*I'd like to think that whole means healed
thus nothing is whole that
has not first been broken*

*so declared the Kotsker rebbi
there's nothing more whole
than a broken heart*

*a different kindred spirit
Hokusai, taught his students
not to toss a broken vessel*

*but to outline the crack
with a tracery of gold
to honor the workings of chance
in their creation*

*we are all cracked pots
(or vessels of light as the mystics
more politely claim)*

*half of each of us
(whether consciously or not)
is in search of*

*the other the missing half
to heal the crack,
to heal us whole*

*but is wholeness (not)
Tantalus mythically symbolic
just
out of reach*

*SYM-BOL: Two halves of a coin in the hands of buyer and seller,
thrown together, proof of a transaction*



Dressing for Shabbat

*before
blessing
the candles*

*the woman wraps...
covers her
head*

*silvery light above
crowns
mirrored light
below*



Time Gift-Wrapped

*a hand-held mirror
in its teak frame
a gift from Jack
to his slim and sexy bride*

*its old cracked twin
reflects her bony hand
holding the tiny great grandchild
soft and velvety*

Looking Out the Window While Writing the Sermon

*it's the perfect window
no luscious landscape
no cottony clouds
no windy trees and falling leaves*

*the window is opaque
his glasses rest on his chest
his Torah is within
soon he will be writing*



At-one-ment

it's a heavy day for me
I don't need the formal list of al-hets
to weigh on me from alef to tav
I can easily chart my own

apathy, aloofness, absence, anger, aloneness, ambivalence

by late afternoon I am listening to the trees
attending the softening playful shadows
just staying with "A" is a perfect confessional
...drowsing...

all at once my day of at-one-ment
lightens with surprising mail:
click the link below and
send a yom kippur e-card for free

the divine voice of Sinai
has entered the cloud
my heart pounding
I thought only the thirty six
righteous ones could hear the voice

this e-card updates the al-het
from now on it is e-het
for the sin I have erred before you

effortlessly, egregiously, effusively, egotistically
enough I get the point

if you do not want to receive this type of mail
click on the do not reply
this mail is autogenerated
by our resident yom kippur drowser

confessing an e-het
has never been so easy
never has this heavy day
been so enlightening

Transparent and Opaque

*place a thin airy veil over the glass
it becomes opaque
looking deeply into your interior
without the background noise*

*we are like the Temple windows
about which Scripture records
at once both
transparent and opaque*



The Shadow Knows

*there are three kinds of shadow
not including the painter's chart
with fifty shades (read shadows) of gray*

*all three appear
within its fifty-three occurrences
in my concordance*

*the winged shadow
of divine protection
comfort, rescue*

*the second is nature's shadow
often benign and exquisite aloft
over earth's life whether rooted or in motion*

*in truth both divine and nature's
shadows are arbitrary
bearers of life and death*

*the third, what shadow is that one?
it is the fleeting mix of
shadow/light that is human life*

*my shadows are two
one with insight and daring
I might dispel*

*the other one partners
with God and nature
demanding no less insight*

*to accept with difficulty
that shadow and light are
flip sides of the same being*



Eden Picture Imperfect

*from my kitchen window
I spotted a large exotic fruit
caught in the branches of a
neighbor's tree*

*dangling suspended
waiting to be buffeted
again and again by the wind*

*light fed
mysterious tones
and shapes to its interior*

*my camera laughed
it was an old
single use plastic bag*

*rescued by the click
and the lens
it became*

*the fruit of temptation
in the cracked
garden of pseudo paradise*

So God Won't Leave

once upon a time when a person sinned
they would bring a purification offering
to the sanctuary
this would not clean up the sinner
only right acts could do that

this was because their sins
were stinking up the sanctuary
only their purification offering
plus redeeming acts would
clean up the sanctuary
so God wouldn't leave

that's not unlike the tale
where love awakened the princess
whose world had died because
she had eaten the poisoned fruit

look! our sanctuary is orbiting
encrusted in our filth
where is the purifying
love we must bring
so God won't leave

inspired by "The Priestly Picture of Dorian Gray",
Leviticus by Jacob Milgrom

The Day is Short



There Are Two Kinds of Clocks

my sister and I speak daily
when it is 8 a.m. in LA it is 6 p.m. here
I can hear the clock in her home office

such a comfort its regularity, predictability,
its absolute rhythmic dependability
but lurking behind that clock of certainty
is a distant cloud of uncertainty.
Rose is 81 and I am 92

my least favorite clock of certainty
shows big red digital numbers at the foot of my bed:
2 a.m. or 3 or 4 a.m.
it has no uncertainty

my favorite clock of certainty
is my big face/big numbers stop watch
I use it when I teach to monitor the development of my lesson
and I use it when I travel, subjecting myself
to the unexplained and capricious times of departure
it used to be when the wheels touched down
passengers would break into generous applause
whatever time it was

yes, I did say there are two kinds of clocks
the other one is the clock of eternity
it also has no uncertainty

its blank face has no hands either
it is mounted on the ticket stubs
of our last date together
it is battery operated by memory

I'm not sure it has a future
that is my uncertainty

Fear of Empty

"horror vacui": abhorring empty space, the appearance of all-over calligraphy or geometric patterns that characterized Islamic art.

picture your brand new bookshelf, you've arranged your books by subject, by author or whatever other category makes sense

*I once had a cleaning person
who after conscientiously dusting,
arranged the books by color or maybe it was by size*

*now in most cases there is a space
above that vertical lineup
before the next shelf presents itself
this is now virginally immaculate, what astonishing order*

*but since empty space is an abomination
things are drawn like magnets
into that vacuum above the books and below the next shelf*

*a book that was left out oh yes, that one too,
books newly acquired yes, for sure there's room for those ones too
a magazine whose subject matter really belongs right there
and finally I confess
a stack of my calendar diaries from the year 2000*

*the scene shifts it is fifty years ago
we are visiting an elderly colleague
cheerfully wrapped in a blanket in his wheelchair
we are in his library
I notice the many shelves of his academic volumes
and of course there's that horizontal stuff
lying on the books between the shelves
scattered notes fragments of yellowing pages
hanging out like hems unraveling*

*I thought, casually, well this is how it is when you're old
why bother about order who cares*

was it then?

My Jewelry of Choice

*yesterday at Yad Sarah
I got a new bracelet
white and shiny it came in a flimsy cutesy
cardboard box
it has a brand name: Joy*

*if I invoke it help will come
but what if it's not connected
isn't every clock an alarm clock?*

Death Will Have to Wait

*it's no secret. a committee of immortalists
at Silicon Valley is working to make death optional
death would no longer
be a metaphysical problem
just a technical one*

*an old mouse is surgically connected
to a young mouse,
shares its blood and
within weeks becomes younger
ageing is plastic*

*it is encoded
if something is encoded
you can crack the code
if you can crack the code
you can hack the code*

*thermodynamically
defer entropy indefinitely
find the master key to youth
fix seven types of physical damage
and live a thousand years.*

*we won't make the mistake of Eos
he
begged Zeus to grant him eternal life*

but

*forgot to specify
eternal youth*

hmm ...

Nobody Leaves This World Even Half Fulfilled (Kohelet Rabba)

*I have a mishigas (really, only one?)
English, an obsession,
but Yiddish is robust, delicious
so what's my mishigas?*

*licking the bottom of the jam jar, the honey pot
when there's only a spare spoonful left
I add a little yogurt, stir it*

*stir it again
and begin extracting the blended
flavors, sometimes on a knife's edge
if the square bottle
doesn't easily surrender its goodness*

*is it frugality?
I remember Maxwell House coffee
"good to the last drop"*

*mostly it is the exquisite pleasure
in the richness of my material life,
that micro corner of sweetness
not to be lost*

*how perverse that I am writing this
before lighting the yahrzeit candle
on the ninth anniversary of his passing*

*the very evening of our would-have-been
71st wedding anniversary
shall I smash a glass
to the sobering irony of the calendars?*

אין אדם יוצא מן העולם
וחצי תאוותו בידו

Watch

watch, write about watch, she said

*watch see look
there must be hundreds of synonyms
in this rich English language*

*one thing they have in common
even the “so-called” physical words
don’t need eyes to
watch see look*

*I thought at first
during the coffee
and hard boiled recess that
I couldn’t write about watch*

nothing came to mind

*then at once
it came clear to me
that my vision
is more and more internal*

*because my watch
reads “low battery”*

Chaos

*chaos frightens me
and comforts me at once*

*fright is what engulfs me in my work room
on surfaces that have not been exposed
for unrecorded time*

*when I classify copies of the same stuff
again
and don't remember that I did it
or where I put it*

*desperate when I survey boxes
stuffed wealth
stacked high
waiting for curious fingers to
play and spark ideas*

*frightened when
I have not one
single new idea*

but comfort arrives

*backing out of
that room
leaning on that verse*

*in scripture: evidence
that God did not create ex nihilo
out of nothing*

*chaos is the stuff of
his cosmic workroom
out of which comes all*

Jewish Stuff Not Only

forever I have been enamored of my material life
my Jewish stuff the reservoir of my assemblage sculptures
frayed tefillin, detached mezuzah parchments, moth-eaten tallitot
retired ritual synagogue cloths
just waiting for my itchy fingers to make some statement
some Jewish statement water damaged art paper held up to the light
exposes luminous back-lit clouds the giving of Torah, of course, what else

for weeks luxuriating in my sister's hospitality in LA
I yearned for my Jewish junk. Well, I'm back. No more freeways,
no more fun with Rose and I am swimming
not in Rose's pool, but in my beloved Jewish stuff.
jagged profiles of scrap wood, peaks and valleys naturally
that is the skyline of earthly Jerusalem
the half moon of crocheted lace above obviously heavenly Jerusalem

truth is ... not just swimming maybe drowning
because along with the Jewish stuff is the familiar balagan the disorder
boxes of bobbins, assorted needles, various feet for my sewing machine
ribbon fragments, unemployed zippers, buttons, snaps, hooks, fabric remnants
oh that would be such a lovely placemat
and the basket of threads, my mother's legendary wooden spools
(yes! my mother's, and I am 91)

can love go sour? I began to dread going into the work room
my helper laughed when I said softly well, I could throw that out
she knows I won't or if I do she guesses I'll fish it out when she's not looking
I keep thinking what I could make with that
if I lived to the ideal and horrible thought, 120

so I fled the work room I wasn't swimming or even drowning
I was choking and then I got scared about leaving this material world
I remembered the Oakland fire of 1991
people left their homes to hike in the hills and returned to
smoldering ash I also remembered the fall of '69 in Jerusalem
we had just moved into a shabby four room closet, the beginning of a sabbatical stay
I lay down on a straw filled mattress suddenly overcome by a strange feeling of relief
I was free of things
I am always there in that place holding on and letting go



Why Memory

I remember my shock my first visit
to the Oakland Home for Jewish Parents
a row of wheelchairs lined up on the porch
every one warmed by a vacant person
dozing, drooling or just staring
a memory in permanent ink

here waiting at the doctor's office
I often read an article in Hebrew
to keep my language active
or reviewed the Braille alphabet
another memory exercise

that was the recent then
now I just sit
there or there

counting blossoms
on the shower curtain
staring down
the shrinking roll of toilet paper

still sitting there
empty of content
remembering Oakland

remembering why



Etchings by Sol Nodel

“Nostos Algia”

why count sheep when you can count kids
and their mates
and their kids my grand kids
and their mates
and their kids my great grandkids
all their faces and all their names

I should be asleep by now
sometimes I creep from the warm covers
and fixate on the big picture on the dining room table
all ... all of them on the steps of the kitchen porch

I'm really ok in this house
till about four or five in the afternoon
when daylight weak as it is
sinks into the pavement
and a chill grabs me
and the quiet gets too quiet

that's when I hear them calling
come back savta jo
come home s a v t a j o o o

home?
nostalgia do you remember the Greek root?
“nostos” to return home
“algia” pain
is it the pain of returning
or the pain of not returning

the split
that is my self portrait



Roots and Sinews

*what really bothered me about the theft of my
wallet and ID
was the little note folded there
with the location of Jack's grave.*

*not that I couldn't call in for it
but the idea that I always had it handy and
knew exactly where to visit him*

knowing full well that's not where he is

*the butterfly soul had long since flown
unbound
by the sinewy roots of earth*

on its second round

The Lighter Your Soul the Better Your Chances

applying for entry into
the world of eternity
requires weighing in

whose procedure is painted
on the walls of an ancient
Egyptian shrine

the soul of the deceased
is judged on a balance scale
against the weight of ... a feather

I'll be ninety-two soon
desperate to lose weight

I Owe Him One: Debtor Poem

tradition says when you escape danger
you orbit quickly to the altar to thank God
who is generous to you, to me, the debtor
undeserving of his kindness, "gmilat hasadim"*

I've never loved that status, me, undeserving?
I need to explore that word "ligmol" -- to ripen, to wean
the breast weans the baby
the almond tree weans the almonds
God weans his kindness?

something gets ripe enough, mature enough to be released
so when God does it, it must mean his deed
his divine act of kindness is ripe enough to be released
to be released to me?

whatever you believe about a non corporeal deity
there's something comforting about breasts
the absolute nature of their performance
the perfect closure of flesh upon flesh
independent of God's inscrutable judgment
unimpressed by the weight of my indebtedness
they're just there, there
for us.

*gml , to wean, is the same root as God's generous kindness.

Apropos of breasts: a road accident the weekend of the fiftieth anniversary of the Six Day War, left a Palestinian father dead, his widow in a coma and a screaming infant who rejected any bottle, until a Hadassah nurse unbuttoned her shirt and many Jewish moms lined up in facebook to process the peace.



Egyptian Tree Goddess nurses young Pharaoh

A final word (for now):

"The very day that Abraham weaned his son Isaac he threw a big party" (Bava Metziah p.87). The verb is written in the masculine, "gamal". The father weaned his son! Here's to the androgynous ripeness of that verb and to the Talmud's unabashed recognition of the wo/man in each of us.

I wanted to close this book with the classic Jewish "thank you" bracha, for my long days, my immense family, my health, clarity, creativity; it is absolutely true, the bracha is right, I am a debtor, I owe him one.



Ended, done. Praise the Lord, the eternal one

ת"ו שלב"ע: תם ונשלם שבח לאל בורא עולם

This book was completed on Jo's 93rd birthday, July 18th 2021, Tish'a B'Av 5781

