

The Night Before My Mother's Bat Mitzvah

Kathryn Hellerstein

*For Mary F. Hellerstein z"l (1922-2011)
Miryam Leyeh, bat Haim haKoheyn v'Naamah*

Every Monday since September
In a glass-walled classroom,
My mother relearned an alphabet
Changed from beginning to end
Since her Special Hebrew lessons
Beneath the golden dome on Ansel Road.
A lifetime ago, she recited,
Komets alef — “oh” and *pasekh alef* — “ah;”
Tof — “tah” and *sof* — “sah.”
Now the prayers and the Scroll
Speak a streamlined Hebrew:
Both *alefs* are “ah,” *tof* and *sof* are “tah.”

At home she sits in her usual spot
In the breakfast room, beneath
The map of the world and sings
The *trop* she's been practicing at the computer
And in the car on errands. The ancient verses
Command the Children of Israel
To count each day of the seven weeks
Between the escape from slavery
And the giving of the Torah.

In melody, her soft voice offers up perfectly
The wave sacrifice and the two leavened loaves
To the unpronounceable Name of God,

Until she stops herself: "What does this mean?"
For a tremulous instant, she is
The twelve year old girl
She must have been
Seventy-seven years ago,
Long before there were bat mitzvahs.
"Daughter of the commandment,"
She obeys it with her question.
Practicing, studying, chanting,
My mother learns to teach
The Law to her own daughter,
Not for perfection, but for love.



KATHRYN HELLERSTEIN, Kerem's Poetry Editor, is Associate Professor of Yiddish at the University of Pennsylvania. Her books include a translation and study of *Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's poems*, In New York: A Selection; *Paper Bridges: Selected Poems of Kadya Molodowsky*; and *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, of which she is co-editor. Her forthcoming book, *A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish*, will be published by Stanford University Press.