

Shelter Me in a Leaf

A Dvar Torah on Sukkot

Kathryn Hellerstein

...And Moses our teacher says:
 We will dwell in booths seven days
 And keep a feast unto the Lord seven days
 So that our generation may remember.
 We must make an offering by fire with a sweet savor
 In the house of God that always stands.

When the clock radio goes on, I hear
 How the earthquake in Pakistan has flattened
 Whole cities, killing nineteen thousand people,
 Thirty-eight thousand people. A month ago,
 Hurricane winds blew towns on the Gulf
 Into rubble. The lake above one city
 Swelled. As it broke through its levees,
 Rooftops floated like folded paper boats.
 People left their shattered cities empty.

Shelter me in a leaf.

...One thing I ask of the Lord, for this I yearn:
 To dwell in the House of the Lord
 All the days of my life.

The psalmist sang this verse
 Before God had a house.
 Long after God's hilltop house
 Has crumbled, we sing the psalmist's words.

Opening the aluminum ladder
 Into its "A" shape, we plug in the drill
 And drive screws into the "L" brackets
 To hold warped boards in place.
 We match up last year's marks, "A" to "B,"
 "C" to "D," spelling out the top beam, the front lintel.
 We staple treated paper around the uprights.
 A breeze snaps these walls like a flag, ruffles
 Pages of a book lying in the grass.
 Willow branches droop over the driveway.
 Clipped and tossed up, they become
 The roof. Shelter me in leaves.

Lights like tiny flames reflect
 From the tinsel and foil chandelier
 We bought in the Kings of Israel Square
 In Tel Aviv, before Rabin was killed there
 And it became Rabin Square, before the Towers
 Crumbled in front of our eyes, before the tsunami,
 The hurricanes, the flood, the earthquake.

The stories in the book of our lives:
 One year, someone knocked over our sukkah.
 It lay flat on the grass. The picnic table
 And plastic chairs poked up from the splinters.
 Repaired, rebuilt, our sukkah tilts slightly to the right.
 But we forget that it tilts. We forget:
 Its walls are paper. Leaves shelter us.
 We sit inside and feast.

... Our invited guests laugh and eat and sing.
 On the walls, the holy fathers and mothers in shadow —
 Abraham holds Isaac's feet in his palms; Isaac grasps
 One ankle of Jacob, who tickles the toes of Joseph,
 On whose head stands Moses on tiptoe, offering
 King David a chin to perch on. Sarah's hands
 Cradle Rebecca, whose elbow touches Rachel's
 Flying skirts, which Leah grasps in one hand,
 Esther's crown in the other. In my son's drawing,
 The acrobats of our foundation balance —
 An antic, babbling tower.

The bones in my body dissolve
 With every moment of my life.

The other day, the giant plane tree down the street
 Lost its leaves and fell.

... *One thing I ask is to dwell
 In the house that I build
 Every day of my life.*

... Shelter me in your peace.

Katryn Hellerstein is poetry editor of Kerem, and the Ruth Meltzer Senior Lecturer in Yiddish and Jewish Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Her books include a translation and study of Mayshe-Leyb Halpern's poems, In New York: A Selection (Jewish Publication Society, 1982); Paper Bridges: Selected Poems of Kadya Molodowsky (Wayne State University Press 1999); and Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology, of which she is co-editor (W. W. Norton 2001).