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## Poem for Jonah's Bar Mitzvah

Parashat Noah • Genesis 6:9-9:17  
6 Heshvan, 5764 • November 1, 2003

*Kathryn Hellerstein*

Small boy, your slantwise glance appraised the ark,  
Its wooden animals in glossy reds  
And blues, with yellow lines for smiles, and dots  
For eyes and buttons. One by one, you took  
Out Noah, his wife, each son, each wife, dogs, cows,  
Two lions, a giraffe, paired elephants,  
A dove, and stacked them in a tower. It fell.  
The clatter startled you. You built again  
And again, unstoppable with puzzles, words,  
And images, until today, you chant  
The story of the tower that rose too high  
Because the builders were afraid they'd lose  
Their name. Ambitious, they affronted God.  
Their tongue unraveled into languages  
You learn. You build a skyline for your life.

Noah stands on deck—his hand outstretched  
Toward the silent waters that erased  
The landscape, all the landmarks that might set  
The ark on course, beneath a sky without a sign.  
He lets the raven fly, the dove flap free  
To be his eyes. The blackbird goes and comes,  
Sated with stink—world's dead. The dove returns  
With an olive leaf, restored to its gray-green

By blessed air, by soil revealed again.  
The clay, the mud—no wonder Noah sinks  
His fingers into it to plant the vineyard—  
Landlubber, like any sailor from a flood.  
The mud lasts years. Belly of olives and wine,  
He can't forget relinquishing the dove,  
His *yonah*, over a sea without horizons,  
Before he'd heard the promise and the voice,  
Or seen the colors span the clouds, as sure  
As memories arched across the mind,  
Which dissolve for generations and return.  
May memory and colors serve you well,  
Dear Jonah Aaron. May you make a name  
For yourself of kindness, generosity,  
And love from all your blessed given names.



Kathryn Hellerstein *teaches Yiddish at the University of Pennsylvania. Her poems have appeared in Kerem, Poetry, Tikkun, Reading Ruth, and Four Hundred Years of Jewish Women's Spirituality. She is the translator and editor of Paper Bridges: Selected Poems of Kadya Molodowsky.*

