
Poem for Jonah's Bar Mitzvah

Parashat Noah • Genesis 6:9-9:17
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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*.