

## **A Midrash Approach to Writing Poems - Oct 2021 Caesura**

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### **Helpful Ideas**

**Midrash --- to see seek, seek with care, interpret text**

**Traditionally inspired by the Old Testament (Torah)- oral and written, compiled  
200 --1000 C.E.**

**For our purposes can begin with a work, phrase, verse ... or story**

**Links fixed text and our creativity**

## **Torah and Talmud**

**Torah** (Old Testament, Five Books of Moses) is full of incomplete stories, conflicting accounts, characters who don't speak for themselves. This has resulted in a vast literature of rabbinic interpretations.

One collection of interpretations is the **Talmud**

The body of Jewish civil and ceremonial law and legend comprising the Mishnah and the Gemara. There are two versions of the Talmud: the Babylonian Talmud (which dates from the 5th century AD but includes earlier material) and the earlier Palestinian or Jerusalem Talmud. (Oxford English Dictionary)

The page of the Talmud is shown below:



## Midrash in Translation Genesis 1:1 Bereshit

בְּרֵאשִׁית, בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים, אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

וְהָאָרֶץ, הָיְתָה תְהוֹ וּבְהוֹ, וְחֹשֶׁךְ, עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם; וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים, מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, יְהִי אוֹר; וַיְהִי-אוֹר.

**When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God’s breath hovering over the waters, God said, “Let there be light.”**

Alter, Robert. The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary

**When God began to create heaven and earth— The earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water— God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.**

Sefaria.com

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

<sup>3</sup>And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

King James Version

רוּחַ **Ruach** - wind, spirit, breath, soul

פְּנֵי **Panim** (panei) - surface, face

תְהוֹ וּבְהוֹ **Tohu ve bohu** –unformed and void



## Modern Midrash Poems

### **In the Beginning**

Shirley Kaufman

Genesis 2:18 – 24

When he wakes, he turns  
On his side. Something  
is missing.

Already she's out in the garden  
smelling the lilacs, naming  
the pterodactyls.

Already she's claiming  
the strange face, rippled  
in the pond,

a terrible eagerness, trying  
to scoop the pale shape  
into her hands.

It's only water.  
she wants it to tell her  
who she is, or  
what he lost.

## Eve Wakes Herself Up

She thinks  
of an energizing  
color like red,

takes in ten  
deep breaths,  
visualized breathing

red,  
sends it  
throughout her body.

Joanne Leva ( from *eve heads back*)

## Of Course She Looked Back

You would have, too.  
From that distance the shivering city  
fit in the palm of her hand  
like she owned it.

She could've blown the whole thing—  
markets, dancehalls, hookah bars—  
sent the city and its hundred harems  
tumbling across the desert  
like a kiss. She had to look back.

When she did, she saw  
pigeons glinting like debris above  
ruined rooftops. Towers swaying.  
Women in broken skirts  
strewn along burned-out streets  
like busted red bells.

The noise was something else—  
dogs wept, roosters howled, children  
and guitars popped like kernels of corn  
feeding the twisting blaze.

She wondered had she unplugged  
the coffee pot? The iron?  
Was the oven off?  
Her husband uttered *Keep going*.  
Whispered *Stay the course*, or  
*Baby, forget about it*. She couldn't.

Now a bursting garden of fire  
the city bloomed to flame after flame  
like hot fruit in a persimmon orchard.

Someone thirsty asked for water.  
Someone scared asked to pray.  
Her daughters or the crooked-legged angel,  
maybe. Dark thighs of smoke opened  
to the sky. She meant to look  
away, but the sting in her eyes,  
the taste devouring her tongue,  
and the neighbors begging her name.

**Natalie Diaz**

## Token Loss

To the dragon  
any loss is  
total. His rest  
is disrupted  
if a single  
jewel encrusted  
goblet has  
been stolen.

The circle  
of himself  
in the nest  
of his gold  
has been  
broken. No  
loss is token.

Kay Ryan

## Goodtime Jesus

Jesus got up one day a little later than usual. He had been dreaming so deep there was nothing left in his head. What was it? A nightmare, dead bodies walking all around him, eyes rolled back, skin falling off. But he wasn't afraid of that. It was a beautiful day. How 'bout some coffee? Don't mind if I do. Take a little ride on my donkey, I love that donkey. Hell, I love everybody.

James Tate

## Jesus Wept.

BY STANLEY PLUMLY

The shortest sentence, I believe, in the New Testament. Having to do with the raising of Lazarus, and no less the crucifixion of Jesus himself once the Pharisees realize the power of a voice that can call forth the dead. Jesus seems to be identifying with this brother of Martha and Mary, with in fact the whole weeping community. *Take away the stone, Lazarus come forth*, and he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes; and his face was bound about with a napkin. *Loose him and let him go.*

Then why am I now weeping all the time, who does not want to be called forth, let alone wrapped in white? I believe in death, I believe in the last tree I will ever see, perhaps with wind in it just as it's turning color. I believe in my friends' weeping and in the terrible sorrow of my wife, but why, on this side of things, with death still only a small secret moving inside me, am I so hurt with pity for myself, as if, one by one, anything I touch will disappear, whatever I see deeply will suddenly become invisible to me?

Is it the loneliness, the body gone, the table and the chair and the bowl that had the heartless flowers floating in it? So that all that is left is whatever a soul is as your stand-in? When I was alive I remember feeling myself beside myself sometimes, as if I'd already passed to somewhere else and for that moment was in two places at once, no place and a place without me: a moment, I suppose, so lonely it was enough to make you weep, though not so much then but later when the absence stayed with you and became you.

## A Short History of the Apple

The crunch is the thing, a certain joy in crashing through living tissue, a memory of Neanderthal days.

—Edward Bunyard, *The Anatomy of Dessert*, 1929

Teeth at the skin. Anticipation.  
Then flesh. Grain on the tongue.  
Eve's knees ground in the dirt  
of paradise. Newton watching  
gravity happen. The history  
of apples in each starry core,  
every papery chamber's bright  
bitter seed. Woody stem  
an infant tree. William Tell  
and his lucky arrow. Orchards  
of the Fertile Crescent. Bushels.  
Fire blight. Scab and powdery mildew.  
Cedar apple rust. The apple endures.  
Born of the wild rose, of crab ancestors.  
The first pip raised in Kazakhstan.  
Snow White with poison on her lips.  
The buried blades of Halloween.  
Budding and grafting. John Chapman  
in his tin pot hat. Oh Westward  
Expansion. Apple pie. American  
as. Hard cider. Winter banana.  
Melt-in-the-mouth made sweet  
by hives of Britain's honeybees:  
white man's flies. O eat. O eat.

Dorianne Laux

## Lot's Wife

And the just man trailed God's shining agent,  
over a black mountain, in his giant track,  
while a restless voice kept harrying his woman:  
"It's not too late, you can still look back

at the red towers of your native Sodom,  
the square where once you sang, the spinning-shed,  
at the empty windows set in the tall house  
where sons and daughters blessed your marriage-bed."

A single glance: a sudden dart of pain  
stitching her eyes before she made a sound . . .  
Her body flaked into transparent salt,  
and her swift legs rooted to the ground.

Who will grieve for this woman? Does she not seem  
too insignificant for our concern?  
Yet in my heart I never will deny her,  
who suffered death because she chose to turn.

Anna Ahkmatova

## Writing Prompt:

Pick a text: e.g., a bible story, myth, folktale, aphorism -some are below. Or a word or phrase that resonates with you or troubles you.

Fill in the spaces. Flesh it out. Change it. Challenge it.

Place yourself in the story. Relate it to personal experience. Or take different characters' points of view. Or a divine point of view.

Change the context -- setting, time period, etc.

Change the outcome, or the lesson it seeks to teach.

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## Aphorisms

*No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.- Eleanor Roosevelt*

*There is a crack in everything. It's how the light gets in.-Leonard Cohen*

*Solitude is better than a bad companion.- Muhammad Shems Al-Deen*

*The art of being a slave is to rule one's master.- Diogenes*