At the Water's Edge

View PDF



Janet R. Kirchheimer is the author of “How to Spot One of Us” (2007), and is a teaching fellow at Clal–The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. She conducts the monthly “Poetry Shmooze” at Congregation Shearith Israel. This article appears in issue 11 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

“All who are thirsty: come for water…”

—Isaiah 55:1

As a poet, I am often asked to explain poetry. Webster’s defines it as 1. the art or works of a poet, and 2. writing in metrical verse.[1] Although this may be true, it is like trying to define Torah as a book of sacred writing. Such definitions do not do justice to either poetry or Torah. Samuel Taylor Coleridge defines poetry as “best words, best order.” To paraphrase Yvor Winters, a poem is a statement in words about a human experience with particular attention paid to the emotional connotations of language. Edward Hirsch, in *Poet’s Choice,* says that “poetry puts us in touch with ourselves. It sends us messages from the interior and also connects us to others. It is intimate and secretive; it is generously collective.”[2] Robert Frost asserts that “like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting.”[3] And poetry is as simple and difficult as that.

We don’t speak poetry in our daily lives. Poetry is manipulated language. The poet leads the reader. The word choice, the resonance(s) each word conjures, the line and stanza breaks, whether the poem is written as formal or free verse, and how much information the poet chooses to reveal all go into making a poem.

In *Passwords – Teaching Wislawa Szymborska: In Praise of the “I Don’t Know,”* Sarah McCarthy writes,

Wislawa Szymborska believes poets pursue truth by engaging in what she calls the continuous and unutterable, ‘I don’t know.’ In her Nobel Prize speech, Szymborska declared, ‘Each poem marks an effort to answer this statement, but as soon as the final period hits the page, the poet begins to hesitate, starts to realize that this particular answer was absolutely inadequate.’ According to Szymborska this declaration of uncertainty ‘expands our lives to include the spaces within us as well as those outer expanses in which our tiny Earth hangs suspended.’ In this, she joins a long tradition of poets who engaged in what Keats called negative capability, or the state ‘when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.’ For students, this can be terrifyingly difficult to grasp. In fact, it can be so overwhelming that teachers, writers, and students alike prefer not to acknowledge it at all. We rarely teach our students to embrace what they don’t know.[4]

As soon as I’ve completed one poem and start the next, I do feel “wholly inadequate.” I have nothing to say. I have no faith in my writing, in my abilities. But once I allow myself to write something, anything, I begin to be filled with wonder, and that allows me to keep finding out what I don’t know and to keep writing. If, at the beginning of a poem, I know exactly where I am going, exactly what the poem should be, there is no discovery, nothing to be learned.

I am not equating poetry with Torah, but I think my writing and studying poetry is much the same as studying Torah. Torah is so vast, has so much to show us, that a lifetime of study would not yield all it has to teach. “Just as water stretches from one end of the world to the other, as it says, ‘To him that spread forth the earth above the waters’ (Psalms 136:6), so the Torah goes from one end of the world to the other, as it says, ‘The measure thereof is longer than the earth’ (Job 11:9). Just as water is a source of life for the world, as it says, ‘A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters’ (Song of Songs 4:15), so the Torah is a source of life for the world…” (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah,* 1:19).

Poetry, using metaphor and a variety of other literary techniques, gives the reader more than one way to view the text. Torah, with its seventy faces, gives us the opportunity to view the text from many different angles and points of view. Poetry and Torah employ some of the same literary techniques. They both invite us in, invite us to have that initial reading (*p’shat*) and then call us to dig deeper, to explore, and learn more (*d’rash*). Poetry has many definitions and so does Torah. Good poetry shows and doesn’t tell. Torah, even when it seems to tell, shows.

Martha Collins, in an interview in *The Writer's Chronicle*, states "I'm from a family of musicians; I played piano and violin. But I hated to practice because I could always hear in my mind what I was supposed to be playing before I could play it. That was not interesting to me. What I discovered when I began writing poetry—unlike a term paper where you plan and then write it, unlike a sonata where you know what it sounds like before you can play it—was that I never knew what was going to happen when I started. That was exciting."[5]

"Just as water is from heaven, as it says, 'At the sound of His giving, a multitude of waters in the heavens' (Jeremiah 10:13), so the Torah is from heaven….Just as [the downpour of] water is accompanied by loud thunderings, as it says, 'The voice of the Lord is upon the waters' (Psalms 24:3), so the Torah was given with loud thundering…" (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 1:19). When I study Torah, I try to keep in mind that all I know is that Torah, like water, is a source of life and I don't know what will happen, what I will discover. What an amazing gift Torah gives me—it folds and unfolds like origami before me and invites me to see more and more each time I engage with the text. Martha Collins continues, "I really believe that poetry is a dialogue between oneself and the poem….For me, it's the poem on the page–it's talking to me and I'm talking to it."[6] There are times when Torah comes to me with loud thunder, and I have moments of great clarity and think I definitely understand, but mostly I have these quiet moments, ice melting slowly on the page, that elucidate a word or if I am lucky, a *pasuk*. Torah is talking to me, and I am talking to it.

In her essay "The Pen Has Become the Character: How Creative Writing Creates Us," Sarah Porter writes,

To be a writer means, perhaps, exactly this: surrendering the defined, expressible self to the wider possibilities of the page. It means giving up the belief that you know who you are, in exchange for a chance at discovering who you are, again and again; after all, the self that jumps up at you from your writing might exceed anything you had previously imagined. For me, and I believe for most other writers, the exhilaration of writing comes exactly when the words pick me up and carry me with a will of their own: when I look back, dizzy with momentum, and can hardly believe that I'm the one who wrote the lines I'm reading….By giving us a new perspective on ourselves, a new point of view, the words we read are helping to create us: they promise to make us bigger, freer, more authentic human beings: What could be more truly loving than that?[7]

If I keep this in mind when I write, how much more so should I keep it in mind when studying Torah. Torah gives me the opportunity to discover myself over and

over again, to be dizzy with momentum from wrestling with the text, to gain new points of view, to grow in ways I had not previously imagined.

Netziv says in *Ha'amek Davar*, his commentary on the Torah, poetry is not simply characterized by meter, rhyme, alliteration, etc. The essence of poetry is that it contains many deeper allusions packed into fewer, more powerful words. One who treats poetry as prose will gain only the most superficial understanding of the material, and will not catch all of the allusions that the author intended us to find. Similarly, the Torah contains much depth—one who just understands the basic prose meanings, will miss much of the intended meaning.

My study of Torah has been enhanced by seeing its poetry, and my poetry has been informed by Torah. Torah is sacred, and I believe that all great poetry reaches toward the sacred.

“Let us remember…that in the end we go to poetry for one reason, so that we might more fully inhabit our lives and the world in which we live them, and that if we more fully inhabit these things, we might be less apt to destroy both.” (Christian Wiman).[8] I go to Torah for the same reason. I can still recall the exact moment I knew I wanted to join Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City. During the *kedushah* of Shabbat Musaf, I was listening to the hazzan sing *o’me’reem pa’a’mayim b’ahavah*. In Ashkenazi services, it is *o’m’reem pa’a’mayim b’ahavah shema o’m’reem*. The word *ahavah*, love, carried me into the Shema. Once I heard that shift in the order of the words, the poetry in the prayer, I knew I was in the right place.

Mary Kinzie in *A Poet’s Guide to Poetry* writes, “The best poems satisfy by surprise, either because they reject something more familiar, or because they teeter on the edge of confusion in knowing something else. Understanding the poem we are reading is a process that moves from ignorance through partial insights to higher levels of understanding.”[9] Torah surprises, it invites and challenges me to live a fuller, more holy life. Poetry gives me another way to live a fuller, more holy life.

When I began this piece, I knew two things: 1. I am committed to Torah and believe poetry has much to teach, and 2. I had absolutely no idea what I was going to write. It can be terrifying to be in a place of not knowing—it’s not how many of us are taught to navigate this world. But Torah and poetry are always there, inviting me to teeter at the water’s edge of knowing, of not knowing, and to be open to surprise, mysteries, and doubts, to stay in the not knowing for a while, and to be willing to listen to all Torah and poetry can show me. What could be more truly loving than that?

[1]Webster’s II New Riverside Dictionary, Revised Edition,1996.

[2]Edward Hirsch, “Poet’s Choice” Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006 (introduction).

[3]Frost, “The Figure a Poem Makes,” 1939.

[4]Sarah McCarthy, “Passwords – Teaching Wislawa Szymborska: In Praise of the ’I Don’t Know’.” *Teachers & Writers*, January–February 2003,Volume 34, Number 3.

[5] Martha Collins, *The Writer’s Chronicle*, May/Summer 2011, Volume 43, Number 6.

[6]*Ibid*.

[7]Sarah Porter, “The Pen Has Become the Character: How Creative Writing Creates Us.”

Teachers & Writers, Fall 2006, Volume 38, Number 1, 2006, Bechtel Prize Winning Essay.

[8] Christian Wiman, *Poetry*, April 2004.

[9]Mary Kinzie. *A Poet’s Guide to Poetry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.