

## Neglected Characters and Assorted Musings: *Songs from the Book of Genesis*

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During my first year as a cantorial student at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, I took a class with Rabbi Michael Marmur called *Parashat HaShavua*. We met virtually every week for two semesters, and each week we read the weekly portion from the Women's Commentary of the Torah. Rabbi Marmur encouraged all of us to engage with the Torah in a meaningful way, and to make the week's reading a regular part of our lives. During our second semester together, we were able to celebrate *Simchat Torah* and began the cycle anew. I took his words to heart, and began a project of writing a new song responding to the Torah each week. During the course of the week, I would read the portion, with all of its attendant notes, commentaries, and poetry from the Women's Commentary, and then would write an original narrative song inspired by what I had read. The following songs are a portion of the result.

These songs, from the Book of Genesis, follow the twelve weekly readings, which will be concluded in synagogue next week. They often take the point of view of a minor character in the story, or a perspective which I felt was deserving of exposition. This *midrashic* tradition is well-represented in Judaism; for centuries, sages and scholars have expounded upon the words of the Torah with descriptive tales and instructive lessons. Musically, I was inspired by the songs I grew up with, the cantorial repertoire I've been studying, and the symphony of influences with which we live our lives.

We begin our journey this evening where we so often start: at the very beginning...

### The Garden

Imagine of world of plenty:  
A garden where a river flows;  
And a tree—

Imagine a life of comfort,  
Contentment all you'll ever know.  
All is free—

Yet there are no books, and there is no art,  
And nobody learns from the pain in their heart;  
And the Tree of All Knowledge, it withers and dies,  
Deprived of the joy of the sound of our cries.

We look toward the garden, and say that we were  
cursed,  
Yet what would our lives be had we not been coerced?

Imagine a world of sameness:  
A garden grows forever more;  
Every year—

Imagine a life so quiet,  
No stories for you to explore;  
And you're here—

Is Chava a woman—a villain—a mom—  
To reach for the fruit without even a qualm?  
Yet as she left the garden, she still spoke to God,  
While Adam stayed silent, and trudged through the sod.

A world without music is no place to be,  
So Chava, I thank you, for singing to me.

I've often struggled with the idea of the Garden of Eden being a loss. Life is certainly more complicated outside of paradise, but it is a great deal more *interesting* as well. Additionally, I was inspired by the way in which Eve continues to engage with God in the Torah. After the expulsion from the Garden, Adam is silent as a character. Eve, even in the face of divine judgement, maintains a relationship with God. May we also be inspired to maintain the central relationships of our own lives, even in the face of hardship.

*As the world turns,  
The story moves on.  
Cain battled Abel,  
Whereupon  
A new generation  
Reached for the sky,  
The Tower of Babel...  
Another week gone by.*

### **The Flood**

As the rains come down,  
And the winds will roar,  
Pack your life inside a box;  
It's really gonna pour.

A box that's for the future,  
You've tied it up with rope;  
Placed inside it all your dreams,  
And filled it up with hope.

The heavens in their orbit—  
The seedlings that you grow;  
A time for autumn's harvest,  
A time for winter's snow.

God gave to us a promise,  
The flood would not return;  
And now it's time to ask ourselves:  
What is it that we've learned?

As the rains come down,  
And the storm begins:  
See the heavens writhe and dance,  
And pray the earth still spins.

Say goodbye to all you know—  
Each rock, each tree, each hill—  
The time has come for this to end,  
According to Your will.  
The heavens in their orbit—  
The seedlings that you grow;  
A time for autumn's harvest,  
A time for winter's snow.

God gave to us a promise,  
The flood would not return;  
And now it's time to ask ourselves:  
What is it that we've learned?

*Od kol-yimei haaretz  
zehra v'katzir  
v'kor vachom  
v'kaitz vachoref  
v'yom valailah  
lo yishbotu.*

*lai lai lai...*

God gave to us a promise,  
The flood would not return;  
And now it's time to ask ourselves:  
What is it that we've learned?

Within *Parashat Noach*, there is some lovely language about how everything in the heavens and the earth moves within its seasons. It is part of the covenant with promising Noah that the earth shall not be destroyed again. As the text is famously—and memorably—echoed in the Book of Ecclesiastes, “a purpose to everything under heaven,” so, too, does our reading progress with the seasons. As the Torah turns from Noah, a righteous man in his generation, to Abraham, one of the pivotal figures within Genesis, we enter a section of music which engages with his legacy. Abraham is a complicated figure who fully represents the breadth of the human experience. As presented in the Torah, Abraham is a famous, powerful, and important man who fights for justice, while simultaneously struggles to live up to his own titanic reputation. These next few songs invite you to engage with that dichotomy.

*As the world turns,  
The story moves on.  
God spoke to Abram,  
Whereupon  
Abram moved out  
To a strange, foreign land:  
He would be a great nation;  
It's all part of God's plan.*

### **The Child**

Waiting for a child as your life grows old;  
Holding onto hope, as it was foretold.  
Clinging to your wife, as her beauty fades—  
But only after dark, and you've gone to draw the  
shades.

And God made a promise—  
And God's words are true—  
If you just believe,  
God will follow through.

And one day you wake up, and your life's passed by  
Waiting for a child, and the sound of their cry.  
And one day she says to you, “Have you met my  
friend?  
She'll give to you a child for both of us to tend.”

But God made a promise—  
You prayed that it's true—  
And she's so unhappy;  
So what can you do?

And you met your son,  
And you're filled with pride,  
From this secret shame—  
And the God that you've denied.

When God heard his voice—  
And saw you rejoice—  
And knew you were faithless,  
And so gave you a choice:

Yes God gave a promise,  
And God's word is true.  
Now you will be tested,  
You're not just passing through.

You heard God command you,  
“Go forth from this land!”  
Yet you were shortsighted,  
Doubting what God planned.

Will life always be so hard?

## The Bargain

For fifty good men, you will die on this hill;  
 For fifty good men, you have infinite will.  
 And what if you only can find forty five?  
 Aren't they still worthy of being alive?

You argue and plead for these men you've not met,  
 For their lives have value, and you cannot let  
 Such destruction and mayhem continue its course.  
 The loss of one life you could never endorse.

And the world will end, unless you act.  
 And the world will end, it's a clear, simple fact.  
 And you cry for help, though you misbehave,  
 And you cry for help; there are lives to save.

But what of those with you, who stand by your side?  
 The sons you abandon, the brides set aside?  
 The strength of your pride means they will be denied  
 While all of your actions

will be justified.

The loss of a stranger left you mortified,  
 Yet you cast off your son, and won't even provide  
 The barest essentials for a life on the run.  
 They walked into the desert, they walked into the sun.

And their world will end, because you act.  
 And their world will end, as a matter of fact.  
 And they cry for help, while you misbehave:  
 Yes their cry's unheard; there are lives to save.

The men in your family, they learn from the best:  
 Stoic, accepting, prepared for the test.  
 When Lot welcomed strangers, the mob at his door,  
 He offered his daughters to silence their roar.

Did you even tell her you're taking her son?  
 Her Isaac, her only, her long promised one?  
 On top of the mountain,

And your world will end, it's the final act.  
 And your world will end, as a matter of fact.  
 When you cry for help, while you try to be brave,  
 Will the silence haunt you, when it's your life to save?

## The Burial

At the end of a life, what can you say?  
 As you bury your wife in the cool of the day;  
 A life filled with passion, lived in orange and red  
 Has faded to grey as she lies in your bed.  
 Your life is a picture you painted with pride,  
 Yet how can you finish now she's not by your side?  
 And it's funny...

As people still struggle to sum up her days,  
 They're filled with remembrance of her most profound ways;  
 Your mind's overtaken by things they can't know:  
 The sound of her laughter, the way her eyes glow.

As people insist on remembering your wife,  
 They calmly gloss over the best days of your life;  
 Your mind's overtaken by tasks still to come,  
 Uncomfortably busy keeps you comfortably numb.

It's the end of a life, what can you say?  
 While you bury your wife in the cool of the day;  
 Her life, filled with passion, lived in orange and red  
 Has faded to grey; she can't lie in your bed.  
 You look at this picture you painted with pride,  
 Yet how can you finish now she's not by your side?  
 And it's funny...

And sometimes you argued and sometimes you fought;  
 A life pinching pennies not quite what you sought.  
 And sometimes her actions left you feeling cold,  
 And sometimes her actions left you feeling old.

*Chayei Sarah, vatamot Sarah.*

As you sit at the grave, what can you say?  
 You can try to be brave in the cool of the day;  
 Your life once had passion, it was orange and red;  
 Your days turn to grey, and she's haunting your bed.  
 Should you give up this picture you painted with pride,  
 Is it worth it to finish now she's not by your side?  
 And it's funny...

*Chayei Sarah.*

Interestingly, Genesis jumps almost immediately from Abraham to Jacob. While Isaac remains an important character, he is often relegated to a supporting role in the stories of his father and sons. This next song addresses that directly: while Jacob is our hero, and receives his blessing, what does it mean for Esau, the one left behind?

*As the world turns,  
The story moves on.  
Isaac got married,  
Whereupon  
Rebekah had twins;  
They did not get along.  
They say Jacob's a trickster;  
What else could go wrong?*

### The Birthright

What does it mean to be first?  
What does it mean to know your life's been cursed?  
Paired with your brother from your very first day,  
Disdained by your mother; you're off hunting prey  
And her protege keeps you guessing,  
Plotting to steal your blessing.

Being born first should guarantee  
Your father's devotion and loyalty—  
No matter how often you disagree:  
    A birthright belongs to the elder son,  
    A birthright's not something that has to be won,  
*Barcheini gam-ani,*  
*Barcheini Avi!*

What does it mean to be cursed?  
Adrift in the desert, unquenchable thirst  
Your brother who sees you standing here destitute  
*Hinei anochi holeich lamut*  
Life often is so depressing  
Taking away your blessing.

Being born first should guarantee  
Your father's devotion and loyalty—  
No matter how often you disagree:  
    A birthright belongs to the elder son,  
    A birthright's not something that has to be won,  
*Barcheini gam-ani,*  
*Barcheini Avi!*

*Im-kein lama anochi?*

Being born first should guarantee  
Your father's devotion and loyalty—  
No matter how often you disagree:  
    A birthright belongs to the elder son,  
    A birthright's not something that has to be won,  
*Barcheini gam-ani,*  
*Barcheini Avi!*

*Barcheini gam-ani*, Esau cries: bless me, too! I think we can all relate to this idea, this need for blessing. Yet it is just as interesting to note that Esau lives a full, uncomplicated life with his family, in the land where he was born, while Jacob undergoes trial and struggle, and spends decades away from his birthplace, working for a man who mistreats him, and unable to find love on his own terms. Yet Leah is the other side of that coin; while Jacob never asked to marry her, so little is said about our matriarch, and the quiet desperation of a life loved second-best.

*As the world turns,  
The story moves on.  
Jacob got married,  
Whereupon  
He learned he'd been tricked,  
Leah was his new bride;  
So he worked for Rachel,  
His new wife at his side.*

### **The Dream**

Your head on a rock, cold ground below;  
Your mind churning, filled with things you don't know.  
A blessing is coming, now that you've grown,  
A blessing is coming, you're out on your own.

Who asked you to dream of a life by his side?  
Awaiting the love you will be denied:  
As bride he'll provide you with all that you need—  
Indeed, he'll concede that there's little to say:  
Though love costs him nothing,  
It's too much to pay.

Look up at the stars, and see the sky;  
And dream a new dream, as you wonder why  
A blessing is coming, your very first one,  
A blessing is coming, you'll soon meet your son.

When is a dream too rash?  
Hope is a fire that flickers and burns,  
The song of our heart as it quietly yearns,  
Til swiftly or slowly it fades away.  
Pray for the day you're left holding ash.

Who asked you to dream of a life by his side?  
Awaiting the love you will be denied:  
As bride he'll provide you with all that you need—  
Indeed, he'll concede that there's little to say:  
Though love costs him nothing,  
It's too much to pay.

Jacob's favoritism for his son, Joseph, is so well known it is easy to overlook the disregard he gives his daughters. The Torah tells us he has at least one, Dinah, who undergoes her own terrible tribulation. She is taken from her family and attacked. While her brothers vow revenge, she ultimately is married to her attacker in order to keep the peace between the tribal society in which she lives. Throughout the entirety of her ordeal, she is never given voice in the Torah.

*As the world turns,  
The story moves on.  
It's only too easy  
To be a pawn;  
When Jacob's your father  
And you're not a son  
You're treated like chattel,  
And shunned by everyone.*

## The Shame

As the world turns,  
The story moves on.  
It's only too easy  
To be a pawn;  
When Jacob's your father  
And you're not a son  
You're treated like chattel,  
And shunned by everyone.

Did I say yes?  
Did I concede?  
Did I acquiesce  
Or did I mislead?

A man's gaze may travel;  
A girl stays demure:  
After their encounter,  
She's labeled impure.

And no one asked me my story,  
When no one else feels the same.  
Caught in the game of ascribing the blame—  
Where will I carry my shame?

Should I have stopped him?  
Should I have screamed?  
If I had resisted  
Would I be redeemed?

A man feeds his hunger;  
A girl is his prize.  
After she's been silenced  
We don't hear her cries.

Still no one asks me my story,  
And no one else feels the same.  
Caught in the game of ascribing the blame—  
Where will I carry my shame?

You left me with him;  
Me, in his bed.  
You left me with him—  
What lies ahead?

Will no one ask me my story?  
Has no one else felt the same?  
Caught in the game of ascribing the blame—  
Where will I carry my shame?

Here we begin the final major narrative of Genesis: Joseph's descent into Egypt. Beloved by his father, he is sold into slavery by his brothers. Yet even from that lowly position, there is no disguising his exceptionalism. His first stop on his journey to ultimate success and fame is in the household of Potiphar, whose unnamed wife is smitten by Joseph.

*As the world turns,  
The story moves on.  
Jacob's sons felt mighty  
Put upon  
While Joseph's grand dreams  
Showed him stars in the sky,  
They sold him into slavery;  
Another week gone by.*

## The Lie

I see you, and you're so beautiful—  
 And I think and I dream,  
 As I sink in the stream;  
 Feel the waters flowing by.  
 And I reach out my hand  
 Toward the shore and the land,  
 And your eyes outshine the sky.

And I say:  
 Lie with me—  
 Can you imagine?  
 Lie with me—  
 Breathless I ponder this chance that I'm squandering:  
 Tongue tied and love sick,  
 Misguided, impolitic;  
 I cried beneath the tree.  
*Shichva imi.*

I need you, yes you're so beautiful—  
 My heart burns as I yearn  
 And await your return;  
 Any day now you'll succumb  
 To my whisper, my kiss,  
 And in bliss, reminisce  
 Of our days still yet to come.

And I say:  
 Lie with me—  
 Can you imagine?  
 Lie with me—  
 Breathless I ponder this chance that I'm squandering:  
 Tongue tied and love sick,  
 Misguided, impolitic;  
 I cried beneath the tree.  
*Shichva imi.*

You see me, and know you're beautiful—  
 And you turn me aside,  
 Spurn my pride, I'm denied,  
 And I cling to you, my dear;  
 And my eyes fill with tears  
 As this life disappears,  
 And you stand there, cavalier.

And I say:  
 He lied with me—  
 Can you imagine?  
 He lied with me—  
 Breathless I ponder this chance that I'm squandering:  
 Tongue tied and love sick,  
 Misguided, impolitic;  
 I cried beneath the tree.  
*Shichva imi.*

Joseph's rise to power is more-or-less uninterrupted by a stint in prison. Miraculously, he meets powerful, influential people there, who are able to introduce him to Pharaoh during his time of need. Joseph, due to his prescient interpretation of dreams, is placed in charge of the Egyptian government during a time of unprecedented prosperity, as well as through the following famine. While we hear of the struggles in Canaan as Jacob's family cannot find food, little is said of anyone else as they suffer, hungry.

*As the world turns,  
 The story moves on.  
 Joseph's at the highest  
 Echelon  
 Of wisdom and power,  
 Joseph's in charge.  
 The silos are bursting;  
 The storerooms are quite large.*



## The Miracle

I rise at dawn,  
I feed the cows,  
Scratch the dirt.

The food I grow,  
Is food I eat;  
Each day I hurt.

I rose at dawn,  
The cows are fed;  
The plants all thrive.

I grow more food,  
I make my bed;  
I'm thirty five.

And, "this life is a miracle!"  
I say to myself,  
As I wait in line with my grain and wine—  
As I stand each day to give them away;  
Each day is better than the one before,  
Each day my bounty grows more and more:  
Living in these best times.

The sun comes up,  
My wife in bed  
Kiss goodbye.

The dusty earth  
Still prays for rain;  
A cloudless sky.

My kids grow up—  
To fill their plates,  
My belt is loose.

I push the dirt,  
Refuse to think  
That there's no use.

For "this life is a miracle!"

I hear myself say,  
As I wait in line for my grain and wine—  
As I stand each day as they give them away;  
Each day is better than the one before,  
Each day my bounty grows more and more:  
Living in these best times.

I dream of the days when the sun led to rain,  
I dream of the days when my work led to gain;  
The streets show faces twisted in pain,  
Torn by the presence of hunger.

As each life is a miracle,  
I pass them my bread,  
Though I waited in line for this one share of wine—  
There's nothing to say as I give it away;  
Each day will be better than the one before,  
Each day the future burns bright ever more:  
Living in these best times.

As Jacob enters Egypt, the Torah includes one of my favorite moments of transformation. As a young man, Jacob wrestles with an unknown assailant, declaring, "I won't let you go until you bless me!" Through this struggle, he earns his new name, *Israel*, as well as a limp which follows him for the remainder of his days. Yet as an old man, Jacob meets Pharaoh, and quietly offers him a blessing. With the wisdom of age, Jacob learns that a blessing is not finite, nor is it to be hoarded. What are the blessings we're holding on to in our own lives?

*As the world turns,  
The story moves on.  
Jacob's in Egypt,  
Whereupon  
Reviewing his life,  
The ways he had changed,  
When bestowing a blessing,  
He found he felt quite strange.*

### **The Blessing**

When I was young,  
My life was at hand;  
The world opened each new day as I planned.  
I ran far from home,  
I worked for my wife,  
Transformed my tricks to a new way of life.

My fathers led lives that were second to none,  
Their story's immortal, its only begun;  
Still, all that I wanted was my favorite son.  
While nothing I say will impress you,  
I won't let you go 'til I bless you.

Yet now I'm old,  
Though my years are but few,  
My life isn't worth all this hullabaloo.  
Fresh grief at my age  
Bowed my head low,  
Watching my family continue to grow.

My fathers led lives that were second to none,  
Their story's immortal, its only begun;  
Still, all that I wanted was my favorite son.  
While nothing I say will impress you,  
I won't let you go 'til I bless you.

A blessing was such a rarity,  
A man only gave away one.  
A blessing ensured prosperity  
No matter the things that you've done.

My fathers led lives that were second to none,  
Their story's immortal, its only begun;  
Still, all that I wanted was my favorite son.  
While nothing I say will impress you,  
I won't let you go 'til I bless you.

Genesis ends with heartwarming optimism: Joseph is reunited with his brothers, after years of separation, and sees his father once more. Jacob offers his sons a blessing—each and every one. We are reminded of the power of family, and the joy of reconnecting with loved ones. May we each take whatever opportunity we have to celebrate togetherness.

## The Tears

Cast into a pit and sold,  
And still his eyes were dry;  
Thrown into a dungeon, cold,  
No more to see the sky.

Forgotten and abandoned there,  
They left him there to die;  
Yet all alone, afraid and scared,  
He'd never even cry.

But Joseph wept for his brothers,  
For the lives they had to live.  
He wept for the times they'd lost,  
And cleansing tears forgive  
The arguments, the petty strife,  
The words that cut you like a knife,  
Mistakes you've made, the ways you've strayed,  
In tears are washed away,  
As Joseph wept that day.

Raised above all others, see  
How Joseph's like a king;  
His words echo majesty,  
He wears a signet ring.

As farmland folds up, shriveling,  
Joseph sheds no tears;  
He hears their cries, dispassionate,  
He can't assuage their fears.

But Joseph wept for his brothers,  
For the lives they had to live.  
He wept for the times they'd lost,  
And cleansing tears forgive  
The arguments, the petty strife,  
The words that cut you like a knife,  
Mistakes you've made, the ways you've strayed,  
In tears are washed away,  
As Joseph wept that day.

Will the rains come down?  
Will the seedlings grow?  
How can you make sense of life?  
There's so much you don't know.

We tell ourselves these stories,  
We listen to these tails,  
History can be a gift  
When you're out blazing trails.

Remember Joseph and his brothers,  
And the lives they had to live.  
How Joseph cried for times they'd lost,  
How cleansing tears forgive  
The arguments, the petty strife,  
The words that cut you like a knife,  
Mistakes you've made, the ways you've strayed,  
In tears are washed away,  
When Joseph wept that day.