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# Writing the Tree of Life: Midrash and Mythology to Re-vision Our Lives

*Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg \* ESU \* March 21, 2019*

Midrash is the Hebrew tradition of re-interpreting and re-visioning our guiding myths and messages to foster greater meaning, freedom, and authenticity. This practice is rooted in the understanding that the Torah, a holy book in Judaism, "...is a tree of life, and a tree can stay alive only if it grows," explains writer Alicia Ostriker. Grow your own Midrash through writing prompts and meditations that lead you into poetry, fiction, songs, and more, and in the process, find new branches and blossoms into who you are, how you live, and how you can help your community re-vision their stories.

## *Ground Rules for Writing Workshops*

1. Don't worry about spelling, grammar, and most of all, making sense.
2. Write what you know as well as what you don't know.
3. Follow your writing, not the suggested exercise, the facilitator or what you think you should write. Write what wakes you up the most.
4. Feel free to experiment with poems, stories, dialogues, essays, letters, and whatever other form the writing wants to be.
5. Practice trust. Trust yourself to write what you need to write, how you need to write it.
6. Remember that all revealed in this workshop is confidential.
7. Treat all newborn writing with great respect and tenderness so that it can grow.
8. Reading your writing aloud is always optional.
9. No self-deprecating remarks allowed (especially when preparing to read your work).
10. Strive, as much as possible, not to compare your writing with the writing of others, and not to critique, interpret or analyze away what your writing is trying to show you.
11. Witness others. Listen carefully with your full attention. It will enhance your ability to listen to your own words.
12. Please share your responses to one another's work—what moves you, what stands out for you – but please refrain from critiquing or analyzing the work.
13. Treat all you do as a delicious and invigorating experiment. Play. Take chances. See what way leads to way, and what words lead to words.

## **What is Midrash?**

Midrash is the Hebrew tradition of re-interpreting and re-visioning our guiding myths and messages to foster greater meaning, freedom, and authenticity. This practice is rooted in the understanding that the Torah, a holy book in Judaism, "...is a tree of life, and a tree can stay alive only if it grows," explains writer Alicia Ostriker. Grow your own Midrash through writing prompts and meditations that lead you into poetry, fiction, songs, and more, and in the process, find new branches and blossoms into who you are, how you live, and how you can help your community re-vision their stories.

**Definition:** Midrash means "searching out," and although it usually applies to the bible, there is also a folk or narrative midrash based on one's personal theology, and experience living a life of faith. Folk or

narrative midrash is a form of interpretation. Alicia Ostriker, a poet and scholar who has written a great deal of contemporary Midrash, writes, “As with every writing process, midrash is a kind of diving deep and surfacing. You move from your ordinary analytical, rational mind into a more meditative state, then into the flow of creativity, and finally back to your ordinary consciousness.” Many also talk about how black letters in torah are the stories that have been told, and the white fire are the stories that have not been told and need to be uncovered, recovering, reclaimed, and often are the stories of women, girls, and others who've been marginalized.

***In a Nutshell:*** Midrash is an interpretative act in relation to sacred texts. As part of the Jewish tradition, this act weaves together seemingly stagnant texts with changing lives, places, and people to make new meanings or understand old ones in more relevant ways.

### ***Creative Writing Techniques & Approaches:***

- **Steal the Language:** Make tried and true language your own by changing tone, mixing syntax or various dictions to spark new meanings. Alicia Ostriker writes that using old phrases in new ways “...not only modernizes what is ancient, making us see the contemporary relevance of the past. It also reduces the verbal glow that we are trained to associate with mystic material. To invent a new language is not possible, but neither is it possible to use the old language without drawing attention to its limitations in exposing myths and articulating the self.” You might use phrases like “Let there be light!” or “Oh Lord! Why do you cast me off?” to reveal new ways of working with this language.
- **Change the Plot Beginning, Ending, or Sequence:** Take apart or recreate basic plot by recasting ending, changing sequence of narrative, or redistributing weight of certain elements of the narrative. You can do this by writing from the perspective of before the well-known myth begins (e.g. the queen's difficult childhood that led her to be so mean to Snow White), or after the standard story ends (e.g. Dinah's story in *The Red Tent*), or focus on another aspect of the story (e.g. give more weight to Hagar's experience in the biblical story of Moses casting her and their son Ishmael to the desert).
- **Change Space or Time:** to show direct impact ancient myth has on contemporary culture. Take a story from an ancient time, and place it in the context of contemporary American culture to illuminate new meanings. For example, you could rewrite the story of the Garden of Eden, the Exodus, or moving toward other traditions, Buddha and the Bodhi tree.
- **Change Point-of-View:** Write from another point-of-view, such as from the perspective of a character seldom seen or heard, or from an animal, an angel, or an object, or from far in the future looking back, or far back in the past looking forward. For example, write the biblical creation story from the point-of-view of an apple or the snake.
- **Employ Multiple Voices:** Challenge dominant way myths are conveyed in our culture by writing from the perspective of multiple voices, such as writing a dialogue in many voices, or having different people narrate a story. An example: you could bring together voices of women from the Old Testament to tell a new story about our situation in the world today.

## **Writing Midrash Prompts**

1. Alicia Ostriker includes this statement with her poem below: “et me quote from the great 1st century Rabbi Hillel: If I am not for myself, who is for me? And if I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, when? This simple statement tells us that we are meaningless creatures until we live for others

besides ourselves, and that the time to do so is now. Until the present moment, we have always thought “the other” just meant other people. We now know that the earth is a weave of connection, and that all of it depends on our care. And here is another ancient Jewish saying that I cherish: It is not incumbent on you to finish the task; neither are you free to give it up. It is incumbent on all of us to contribute whatever we can to the healing of the earth.” Take any part of what she's quoting here from Rabbi Hillel or the ancient Jewish saying about our responsibility to take on what we can of healing the world, and then write your response.

## **Dear God**

It used to be  
I would fall to the floor and press my forehead to it  
in moments of despair  
I would say help me  
help me  
but listen  
I am ok  
though I just now found myself pressing my forehead  
to the carpet of my stairs  
about the waters in the flooded cities  
poisoned by oil spill, chemicals, the dead  
about the survivors forever traumatized  
dear god  
I am alive I am alive  
help them  
~ Alicia Ostriker

2. The Kaddish is the mourner's prayer in Judaism, which basically praises the holy in many different ways. Write your own mourner's prayer and/or praise song.

## **Kaddish**

Look around us, search above us, below, behind.  
We stand in a great web of being joined together.  
Let us praise, let us love the life we are lent  
passing through us in the body of Israel  
and our own bodies, let's say amen.

Time flows through us like water.  
The past and the dead speak through us.  
We breathe out our children's children, blessing.

Blessed is the earth from which we grow,  
Blessed the life we are lent,  
blessed the ones who teach us,  
blessed the ones we teach,

blessed is the word that cannot say the glory  
that shines through us and remains to shine  
flowing past distant suns on the way to forever.  
Let's say amen.

Blessed is light, blessed is darkness,  
but blessed above all else is peace  
which bears the fruits of knowledge  
on strong branches, let's say amen.

Peace that bears joy into the world,  
peace that enables love, peace over Israel  
everywhere, blessed and holy is peace, let's say amen.  
~ Marge Piercy

3. Write a poem, story, or short play about a cycle of the moon, seasonal event (such as the first snow), or other natural phenomenon to create your own Midrash about how the natural world tells its stories.

### **Rosh Hodesh Poem**

The moon withers to nothing  
In the night sky  
As prayers for this new month  
Blossom with petals of hope.  
Every 29 or 30 days a new start.  
Freshly laundered days  
On which to place our marks:  
Tiptoeing, running, stepping forward.  
Songs of *Hallel*, praise  
To the Month Maker,  
Lead us on our first step forward  
Into the open spaces ahead.  
Subtle changes we anticipate  
As we unfold moment into week,  
Unwrapping the gift of new self  
To rewrap thirty days hence.  
Walk with me now,  
Step into the unknown,  
Sing with joy and wonder,  
Bless the path ahead.  
~ Rabbi Patti Haskell

4. Write about how we carry old stories with us such as how the speaker in this poem carries Egypt with her "in a drawstring pocket." You might lean into a story from your faith or childhood, and write how you ferry this story forward, or how you left this story behind.

## Leaving Egypt

I carry Egypt with me  
in a drawstring pocket  
that I keep close at my side,  
so that I can feel the nestled weight  
of its sand and stone  
and endless servitude.  
Sometimes i run my thumb  
along its gathered edge,  
wondering if I should -  
if maybe I could -  
open that pocket,  
just for a minute,  
quick-like and easy,  
so that I might feel  
those sharp-edged stones,  
sun-warmed and ancient  
and well-trodden  
by Pharaohs and asps.

But I don't. I think the  
stones might cut me,  
or perhaps spill out:  
All that sand and stone  
that hangs so heavy at my waist,  
that bows me just a bit  
and fits against me just so,  
it might scatter in a graceful arc  
as I imagine river once did,  
to escape the narrow banks  
that bound it  
and bent it,  
shedding its great crocodile tears  
of feast and famine  
in a sudden burst of freedom.  
And just like that,  
Egypt would lie strewn about,  
scattered by my stumbling feet  
in some trackless wilderness  
that has been trampled  
by the feet of a thousand generations since.  
And by the time I stop  
to do the math of  
all those feet  
and all that wilderness,  
there would be nothing

left of Egypt,  
and my drawstring pocket  
would be empty.  
~ Stacey Zisook Robinson

5. Write your own story of the first man, woman, or being beyond only two genders.

### **Eve**

*(The first woman)*

Eve knew what she was doing.  
She saw the knowledge—  
life, breath,  
and understood the love,  
that it was good.  
And there was evening  
and morning  
the seventh day.

On her way out of the garden,  
done picking fruit  
and naming things,  
she picked up a flaming sword  
of truth  
to crush a snake,  
realizing she'd never kick the habit  
of discovery  
or names.

Woman she was,  
she called the other, man,  
since he was part of her  
but not all.  
She learned to cover herself  
against the world's thorns  
and saw to the care of its creatures,  
its landscapes;  
she walked with Wisdom,  
she considered the universe  
and love,  
and saw that it was good.  
~ Elizabeth Mehl Greene

6. Take a largely invisible character in a sacred or mythic test, and tell of this character's story outside the frames of the story we usually see. Here are two poems about very minor characters.

### **Hagar on the Mountain**

I climb to the sound  
of javelinas eating cactus.  
In the path a kit fox stops,  
looks up, afraid I would try  
to touch. I bend slowly  
to lower our son to the rocks.  
No fox. Microscopic insects  
sleep in my sweat.

The boy wakes and asks why  
we do not build a fire big enough  
for Abraham to find us.  
I lift him and let his head  
weigh against the bone  
of my shoulder. At the top field  
wind rises. Our voices rust  
in the thinning air.

I will carry him all night  
if I must, my son's whisper songs  
telling me how the water  
falls over the side of rock,  
my hand on his forearm,  
promising something.

A place to stop, a well  
surrounded by animals  
where we'll learn to dream God's dream  
like all the others.  
~ Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

## **Leah**

You sit on the ridge alone at dusk watching  
the mist swim the valley in hush,  
occasional deer along the tree line.  
The night pours up from the earth in blue black.  
This is when you listen best,  
let fall a handful of dirt,  
a whole planet, back to itself.

Nothing is what it seems with Jacob, with Rachel  
but here, the center of each tree leads,  
ring by ring, back to an acorn,  
a handful of dirt orbiting  
in heat and dark and rain  
like your own life ringed



with pain, ringed with stories  
of falling or being pushed  
into the ground  
where the smell of god  
bears down on you.

Here, lie down, bury half your face  
in the earth, the other half  
in the bath of air. And when  
you are ready, turn completely  
into the dirt and let the first sound  
you make reach the stones  
hot underground from where  
the earth heats itself.  
~ Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg is the founder of Transformative Language Arts at Goddard College, where she teaches. She founded the Power of Words conference, and with others, the TLA Network. She leads community writing workshops widely throughout and beyond the Midwest. Her books include a novel, *Miriam's Well*, which is Midrash as well as *Lot's Wife*, a collection of poetry as Midrash. She also recently released *Everyday Magic: A Field Guide to the Mundane and the Miraculous*, based on her blog posts; and *Following the Curve*, yoga poems. Please check out her upcoming offerings through the TLA Network, including a self-paced class launching in January, Truth to Power: Poetry for Our Times With Poets Laureate; and with Laura Packer, the first TLA Right Livelihood Professional Training, starting in June; and the 13<sup>th</sup> annual Brave Voice: Writing and Singing for Your Life with Kelley Hunt. Learn more of Caryn's work at <http://CarynMirriamGoldberg.com>.