

Jewish Poetry For Tu B'Shivat (Celebration of the Trees)

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Jewish Poetry Writing Program Opportunity for 2025

12- week program (one 90-minute class per week) \$600 per person for the program (limit 10 people)

Goal:

1. To write 36 poems based on writing prompts from Jewish Poets.
2. Read and listen to the voices of Jewish Poets

Opportunity to publish poems / pieces in an anthology.

Available online adult education class or in-person as a three-day Scholar-in-residence program.

Contact Kimberly Burnham for information or to sign up nervewhisperer@gmail.com (860) 221-8510 (Spokane, Washington)

Presentation for JFS Tu b'Shivat Program (Feb, 2025 at Temple Beth Shalom, Spokane, Washington)

From the Lev Shalom prayer book “Seen through a religious lens, every change in nature is remarkable – each day and night, each season. The ideal of a religious consciousness is to see each of these moments afresh.”

Poetry does this also. Over the last couple of years as I read poetry, I have found that Jewish voices are coming forward. More Jews are writing poetry, perhaps as a way to understand the world and find ways to make it and us better.

To start today, I will read three poets and then we will see how much time there is left. For each of three poets I will give you a jump offline, a line to get the creative juices flowing. Then you will have 5-10 minutes to write whatever you want, whatever wells up in you, your response, your feelings, what happened this morning before you came here, whatever you want. It doesn't have to be good; it should be true.

I am a Wild Writing teacher and this is what we do. We read a poem and then take one of the lines as a jump offline and write. Sometimes we read aloud what we have written. Sometimes we edit and post our writing. Sometimes we submit it for publication.

Natan Zach, an Israeli Poet who writes in Hebrew

To Put It Differently by Natan Zach Translated By Peter Cole

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/50966/to-put-it-differently>

Poetry chooses choice things, carefully selecting
select words, arranging,
fabulously, things arranged. To put it differently
is hard, if not out of the question.

Poetry's like a clay plate. It's broken easily
under the weight of all those poems.

In the hands
of the poet, it sings.

[In those of others, not only
doesn't it sing, it's out of the question.]

NOTES: Read the translator's notes on this poem. Source: Poetry (April 2008)

The Tree In A Field by Natan Zach https://israelforever.org/israel/celebrating/tubshevat_readings/
[Ki Ha'adam Etz Hasadeh : The Human Is The Tree In A Field]

כִּי־תָצוּר אֶל־עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ לְתַפְשָׁהּ לֹא־תִשְׁחִית אֶת־עֵצֶיהָ לְגִדּוֹם עָלֶיהָ
גִּרְזֹן כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכְלוּ וְאַתֶּן לֹא תִכְרֹת כִּי הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה לְכֹא מִפְּנֵיהּ בַּמָּצוֹר:

<https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.20.19>

When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?

For the human is like the tree in a field,
like the human, the tree grows too;
like the tree, the human is chopped down,
and I don't know
where I've been and where I'll be,
like the tree in a field!

For the human is like the tree in a field,
like the tree he strives upwards;
like the human, it burns in fire,
and I don't know
where I've been and where I'll be,
like the tree in a field!

I loved, and I hated too,
I tasted this and that;
I was buried in a plot of dust,
and I feel sour - sour in my mouth,
like the tree in a field! (x2)

For the human is like the tree in a field,
like the tree he's thirsty for water;
like the human, it stays thirsty,
and I don't know
where I've been and where I'll be,
like the tree in a field!

I loved...

**Jump Off Line: "For the human is like the tree in a field ...," For I am like a tree in the field,
"Where I'll be, like the tree in a field" Alternative: "It is Thursday, this is what I know ...,"**

NOTES: Jewish, Tu B'shivat, nature, "Regardless of what interpretation of the holiday is in vogue, the biblical phrase (Deuteronomy 20:19), ki ha'adam etz hasadeh (For the human is like the tree of the field) is at the core of Tu B'Shevat's message. The Hebrew poet Natan Zach captured this beautifully in a poem, which was set to music and popularized by Israeli singer Shalom Chanoch (the Hebrew is far more eloquent and the song loses a lot in translation)

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/natan-zach>

https://israelforever.org/israel/celebrating/tubshevat_readings/

Etz Hasadeh <https://www.hebrewsongs.com/?song=etzhasadeh>

Ki Ha'adam Etz Hasadeh

Ki ha'adam - etz hasadeh,
k'mo ha'adam gam ha'etz tzome'ach;
k'mo ha'etz, ha'adam nigd'a,
Va'ani lo yode'a
efo hayiti ve'efo ehyeh,
k'mo etz hasadeh!

Ki ha'adam - etz hasadeh,
k'mo ha'etz hu sho'ef lemalah;
k'mo ha'adam, hu nisraf ba'esh,
va'ani lo yode'a
efo hayiti ve'efo ehyeh,
k'mo etz hasadeh!

Ahavi, vegam saneti,
ta'amti mizeh umizeh;
kavru oti bechelkah shel afar,
umar li - mar li bapeh,
k'mo etz hasadeh, k'mo etz hasadeh!

Ki ha'adam - etz hasadeh,
k'mo ha'etz hu tzame lemayim;
k'mo ha'adam, hu nish'ar tzame,
va'ani lo yode'a
efo hayiti ve'efo ehyeh
k'mo etz hasadeh!

Ahavi...

Three Poems That Weren't Written by Natan Zach <http://fictionaut.com/stories/tsipi-keller/two-poems-by-natan-zach--translated-from-the-hebrew>

Two Poems by Natan Zach translated from the Hebrew by tsipi keller

1.

I wrote greetings for a friend's wedding.
My lover peeked over my shoulder and said:
Thank God, you're writing lyrical poetry again.

I met my friend after his wedding
and he said: Even the dishes I love the most
she can't cook.

This, too, I included in the poem.
My lover read and said: You persist in writing
such everyday stuff, you do it only
to annoy me.

I went to visit Israel who was wounded.
We had to make an effort so he wouldn't notice
how hard it was to look at his face:
it was as if the odor of burning still stood
in the room and the odor of charred flesh,
and the only eye left seemed as if
it had moved from its place, if such a thing is possible,
I'm no doctor.

When we came home my lover said:
Now, for sure, you'll write a political poem.
I told her: No, it's still the same poem.
And she asked: What's it about?
I said: About the times gone mad,
except that we've learned to live with it,
which is a great evil;
and a man's life is as hard as ever,
we've seen it all before,
but we mustn't announce it so as not
to disseminate fear and confusion.

She said: And that's a poem?

And I said: No, indeed, it didn't come out too well,
you're right, I've decided to scrap it.
I'll only publish this
so at least they'll know what it contained.

2.

The second poem came to me in a dream,
and I spoke to it: Welcome, you're so beautiful,
it's been a while since you came to me,
such a beautiful poem.

But when I awoke I couldn't remember a thing,
which made it all the more frustrating.

But perhaps this is the price one has to pay
for waking up.

3.

The third song is sung and played on a luxury liner.

A luxury liner, all lit up, sails from Haifa Harbor.

You can't hear the song from where I stand.

O sail away ship of my youth, to remind me
that nothing begins nor ends here.

Hila Ratzabi

Eco poetry: One definition of Jewish ecopoetry would be poetry that is grounded in the sacred reciprocal relationship between humans and the environment.

<https://www.terrain.org/2024/interviews/hila-ratzabi/>

Hila Ratzabi was selected by Adrienne Rich as a recipient of a National Writers Union Poetry Prize and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is the author of the chapbook *The Apparatus of Visible Things*. Her poetry is published in *Narrative*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Drunken Boat*, *Linebreak*, *The Nervous Breakdown*, *Leveler*, and other literary journals, and in the anthologies *Ghost Fishing: An Eco-Justice Poetry Anthology* and *The Bloomsbury Anthology of Contemporary Jewish American Poetry*. She is the former editor-in-chief and poetry editor of *Storyscape*. She holds an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and lives outside Philadelphia.

Prayer Before Turning on the News by Hila Ratzabi (Spring, 2020)

<https://www.narrativemagazine.com/issues/spring-2020/poetry/prayer-turning-news-hila-ratzabi>

I sit before the TV screen
with remote control in hand.
I want it to stay this way.
This dark, quiet room
without a world in it.

This nothing, this sweet
nothing. The fire truck
toy on the shelf beneath the TV,
look how it saves
no one. In this room
there is nothing
burning. Dear God, it is
possible. You are the one
with wings. Shelter us.
Let something have been fixed today:
The deal among the nations signed,
the guns, all of them, taken away,
a woman believed,
a man contrite. A border
covered in dust. God,
I need to know what happened
to those who tried to cross.
What happened after the storm
and earthquake and fire.
I can't be everywhere at once,
but you can. How can I convince you
we are worthy of miracles?
How much longer can I delay
the inevitable knowing,
the daily ritual of witness?
At least bear it with me,
dear God. Come sit
on the couch, put your feet up,
I'm making tea. Tell me
how this will end.
Tell me if there is a chance.
Or maybe we can bargain for peace?

Trade for redemption?
Give me something,
anything, before I let
the messengers into my room.
I will not look away.
Promise me
you won't either.

Imaginary Arctic by Hila Ratzabi <https://www.glass-poetry.com/journal/2017/november/atzabi-imaginary.html> Tundras November 2017 edited by Rosebud Ben-Oni

On the trip I didn't take to the Arctic Circle
I was eaten by a polar bear.
I was pregnant and fell into the icy sea
and the embryo froze.
I was stuck on a ship
with a bunch of arrogant artists for two weeks.
I saw icebergs the size of God's head.
I wrote letters on frosted paper.
I ate Cliff bars and sweated under layers
of polyester and fleece.
My eyebrows hardened.
Everything melted
in time lapse speed
and the ship rose
by inches each day.
The sun never set.
All that daylight did nothing
but brighten the surface
of loss. Where there were shadows
photographs were taken.
Sketches drafted in snow,
music sifted from silence.
On that trip I wrote poems
to the disappearing planet.
I saw the poles meld together,
houses float on united seas.
It was a new earth, a wet one.
Some of us were left
bewildered, hands pressed
to glass. We waved
at each other from windows
in our flooded living rooms.
It was a trip I'll never forget.
I took glaciers home
as souvenirs. I planted
my face in the snow.
I'm so glad before everything
happened I got to go.

Jump Off Line: “On the trip I didn't take to ...,”

How to Pray While the World Burns by Hila Ratzabi

<https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/article/a-poem-for-tu-bshvat/> **A Video Poem for Your Tu B'Shvat Seder January 17, 2023** “How To Pray While The World Burns” was published in Hila’s 2022 poetry collection, *There Are Still Woods*, a radiant appraisal of life at the precipice of climate crisis and a haunting elegy for all we stand to lose. Through alternating lenses, from the speculative to the spiritual, from motherhood to science to mythology, Hila looks out at our wounded but vibrant planet and the animal experience of living on it.

Go outside. Find a patch of grass, sand, dirt.
Sit, kneel, place a hand or just
A finger to the soft earth.
Feel its pulse back.
Open your palms and divine
The words creased between.
Rub the specks of dirt
Between your fingers,
See how they cling to skin,
How they listen in their soft-rough way.
The earth will hold you better
Than God can.
God could not stop the bullets
Or the sale of weapons.
God could not block the open
Synagogue doors.
Our God is trapped
In the poisoned grass,
Where the blood of our brothers cries out,
Where the ants heave centuries on their backs.
Pray to the God who sharpened the tiger’s teeth,
Who stored the roar in its throat.
Pray to the God who gave you lungs and tongue
To sing and groan and hum.
I swear to you
When the leaf shivers in the wind
You have given it chills
From all its listening.
The earth hears your prayer.
There is nowhere for God to hide.
Get down on your knees and let
This precious earth soften for the weight of you.
You are held.

You are heard.
The wind pulls its blanket over your back,
Smooths the hair from your face,
Touches your cheek
With its cool, trembling hands.

NOTES: How to ...poems or List poems.

Jumping Off Lines: How to ...," "How to Pray While the World Burns ...," "How to go to the synagoue, the day after the election ...," How to love a child ...," "How to breath ..."

Kimberly Burnham

Fear by Kahlil Gibran (not Jewish) <https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poem/fear-by-kahlil-gibran>

It is said that before entering the sea
a river trembles with fear.

She looks back at the path she has traveled,
from the peaks of the mountains,
the long winding road crossing forests and villages.

And in front of her,
she sees an ocean so vast,
that to enter
there seems nothing more than to disappear forever.

But there is no other way.
The river can not go back.

Nobody can go back.
To go back is impossible in existence.

The river needs to take the risk
of entering the ocean
because only then will fear disappear,
because that's where the river will know
it's not about disappearing into the ocean,
but of becoming the ocean.

Dendrophobia: The Fear of Trees by Kimberly Burnham

after Fear, Kahlil Gibran, written in response to the LA fires 2025

I am afraid of trees
of fire
snow laden branches breaking
downed power lines

Does a Japanese maple tree fear losing her leaves
is she jealous of pines' all winter green
looking down as the colors fade
from bright reds, oranges and yellows
to a muddy brown

Does the pine fear the fire
wishing instead he had been cut down
cleared away before the dry winds
blew in hungry sparks seeking wood

Do the winds regret their part in fires
wishing instead they could pick up moisture
from the ocean, from lakes and rivers
carrying it to parched lands
a blessing desired by all

Like me does the water try to find its way
to all parts of the land and the forests
or does it play favorites
watching from a far as trees lose their leaves
kindling for the fires' rage

Like me does the fire regret avarice
a greedy obsession gobbling more and
more till all is consumed
as the barren land draws speculators
profiteers looking for ways to benefit
from destruction

Causing dendrophobia

the fear of trees in homeowners
stuck in one location able only to move
what fits in their cars wishing
they had cut down all the trees
cleared the land, created a desert
around their house leaving the flames
nothing to burn

Jump Off Line: “I am afraid ...”, “Like me does the water try to find its way ...”, “Like me does the fire regret avarice ...”

Malala Fund Remembering the Future by Kimberly Burnham from Year of The Poet October 2023

Remember when we were worried about healing
from gun shots and hate
how we survived
then thrived by eliminating conflicts
tackling poverty, discrimination and climate crisis
all the things preventing our girls
from rising within amazing educations

Remember how the girls rose up
supported and cherished
earning places around the world
addressing problems with creative solutions

Remember how we believed in local
educators and activists are the best
how the whole world came
investing in our collective power
driving positive change

Remember when world leaders advocated.
for women and women for themselves
raised into leaders

Remember the world we created together

Jacqueline Suskin

Poem Forest by Jacqueline Suskin talking about her craft

<https://www.onecommune.com/blog/commusings-poem-forest-jacqueline-suskin>

For twelve years, I focused on my project Poem Store, writing spontaneous verse for patrons in public spaces, lugging my typewriter around, asking people to name a subject and a price in exchange for a unique poem. I watched as listeners cried and transformed in response to this improvisational writing, these channeled pieces that seemed to hold their secrets and deepest emotions. Now, I'm focused on Poem Forest, a project that lives in the realm of education and allows me to go into schools around the city where I teach nature poetry and witness students express their ideas about the natural world. At the end of our five weeks together, their Poem Forest starts to take shape as they read their writings aloud and plant trees together. InsideOut Literary Arts, a renowned creative writing organization, supports my curriculum and places me in urban classrooms. It seems like an obvious transition to me, from store to forest, the magic of poetry teaching me where and how to offer up my earth-loving attention. My aim is the same as it was with Poem Store: if I can get people to remember who they are, that they are the earth itself, perhaps they'll treat it better.

Connecting to the earth can be complicated for people in urban spaces, especially here in Detroit. What looks like a rural landscape to an outsider, fields full of blooming sweet peas and towering sycamores, is actually a stretch of lots that used to be houses full of rich human life. How do we lean into loving the natural world when it touches our grief? When you're someone who is historically excluded from the land, how can your oppression blend with your awe?

Found Poetry

Haiku 5-7-5 syllables <https://www.haikusyllablecounter.com/>

Found Poetry Using the words of others.

Blend With Awe by Kimberly Burnham

urban space blooming

connecting complicated

full rich human life

There is No Nature Without You by Jacqueline Suskin

<https://www.onecommune.com/blog/commusings-poem-forest-jacqueline-suskin>

How we disregard the sycamore,
the oak, the elm and the maple,
is synonymous with the way we
forget each other. Remember,
there is no nature without you.
So if seeds scorch, if soil and rain turn poison,
how can we envision future growth?
Hollow is the land without our helping hands.
Hands harnessed in hustle, clasping steering wheels,
phones and foreheads, asking why and what and who
is always trying to cut us down?
Trunks weathered and whipped by wind, branches
hung with a history of darkness, cracked
by the frigid neglect that rides with greed.
An unholy thirst shook this urban space,
made it rural-like, cut open and cited as blank property—
an empty place that couldn't be anyone's home.
We know nothing new arrives
without the inherent pause for germination,
or without our howling demand for shade,
and our oldest need to be renewed
by color, by every hue of green.

Jump Off Line: “The way we forget each other ...”, “Remember, there is no nature without you ...”

How I Fell in Love with the Earth by Jacqueline Suskin

<https://www.onecommune.com/blog/commusings-poem-forest-jacqueline-suskin>

I don't remember being born,
but I did choose to come here.
A master in the dark,
my burning light.
I shot forth, hungry
for the ground and body.
I memorized my first moment of awe.
Standing above an overturned flagstone,
I stared at long nightcrawlers
worming in black soil. Inhaling
each color, mesmerized by the chance
that brought these pink lengths to life.
Their tenderness against
a thick crust that welcomed
them into fissures, into fine versions
of string sucked toward the core,
roaming blind, becoming and becoming.
Everything else was unlit space,
green grass moving in the void.
What perfection to break my heart.

-from Help in the Dark Season