Passing through Water:
Poems from a Year of Conversion

Jo Radner
During the year I was studying with Rabbi Toba toward my conversion, I wrote several poems about that journey, many of them attempts to see my home world, the Maine woods, through an evolving Jewish lens. I post some of these poems here, but since they are still private, unpublished drafts, I ask that they not be shared beyond CDT. I would be glad to hear any comments or reactions.

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Morning Blessings 1

Before the blessings
I was blessed;
dawn a gift
magnificent,
opening the new
promise of day.

Now I greet the day
like a slow schoolchild:
Modah ani l’fanechach...
(Who are You?)
ruach chay v’kayam....
I feign fluency,
grope past words for light,
squeeze phrases
from a jumble of alphabets
in the teleprompter of my mind.

Be patient.
Learn the language
of a new dawn.

April 2016
Omer: Climbing Amos Mountain

The rains of last week had ended,  
so yesterday, released into the tender green of spring,  
I climbed Amos Mountain.

I didn't think of Amos,  
that chiding prophet,  
the Bernie Sanders of his time,  
trumpeting the nation’s sins  
and promising just punishment.

No, I was out for tremulous new growth,  
ferns unfurling,  
beech leaves bursting their buds,  
tiny green shoots through the brown leaf carpet –  
Hope! –  
hope come round again,  
poised between naked trees and blowsy summer woods.

I didn't think of black flies,  
persistent pellets  
blurring sight,  
blasting optimism,  
dooming revelation –  
Itching!

It’s a mix, Omer – like springtime.  
You can count on that.

May 2016
**Morning Blessings 2**

*Se’u marom eyneychem u’ru mi vara eyleh?*  
Lift up your eyes and see – who created all this?

*Se’u marom eyneychem u’ru…*

Even before I open my eyes I know the woods are full of life.  
Shrill squirrels  
sardonic jays  
a honking goose flies up the lake  
crows are discussing something nearby  
and that woodpecker, nature’s jackhammer,  
must have bored clear through that tree by now.

It’s when I open my eyes that I see the quiet ones, the waiting ones –  
the little birds,  
finches,  
nuthatches,  
chickadees,  
titmice –  
and I know it’s time for the new morning ritual:  
put out the bird feeder.

It’s a new ritual because of the bear.

She came late Sunday night darker than the dark  
a massive black shape  
even under the deck light  
a fluid, moving…nothing.  
Feeling ridiculous, I stood barefoot at the screen door.  
“Shoo!” “Go away!”  
“That’s bird food!”  
She forgave my insolence, strolled over,  
raised her huge head and studied me.  
I noticed that her chin was brown, not black;  
her dark eyes glinted under the light;  
hers teeth (was she smiling?) were white.
I mended my manners.
“Good evening,” I said.
She stood tall,
pivoted with astounding poise,
embraced the bird feeder,
glanced back at me once,
gracefully stepped off the deck
and rode the feeder to the ground
as its iron hanger bent into a new arc.

I have not seen her since.
But each night,
as I bring the tooth-dented feeder indoors,
I scan the dark for her darkness,
and apologize.

… mi vara eyleh?

May 2016
Morning Blessings 3

Oh God, dear God, this morning
you return my soul to me
in a miasma of Skunk.

Sudden, sharp, everywhere
the musk of rage.

Nearby
a small striped David
has stamped his feet
at Goliath
mooned the giant
and loosed his one projectile
to mark and banish
the looming dogbearfoxcoyote.

Across the lake
wisps of mist
rise
toward the clear, quiet mountains.

In silent ballet
two hummingbirds
pirouette through the pine branches.

8/9/16
The baby snapper was in the wrong place, hauling its tiny body across the scorching tennis court, atavistic memory driving it toward the river.

I lifted the determined, tender hatchling, perfect miniature of tough trouble down to infinitesimal razor-sharp claws, and carried it home to my beach.

On the sand, it raised its blunt beak of a head, surveyed, smelled, headed for water -- but stopped at the edge, turned, and walked swam tumbled along the margin where lake met land; wavelets touched lifted flipped but never diverted the baby from his path straight along the water’s edge not in, not out, feet reaching for the bottom.

Is this how a Jewish hatchling moves along? Feet not always on the ground? Able to take the tumbles and welcome the swim? Determined, yes.

8/29/16
Process Theology at the Beach

If God is Water
this little lake beach is the world.

One day the waves cast up watery weeds;
the next, a small dead minnow;
the next, nothing.

Every day the bottom changes.
Infinite ripples in smooth sand today;
tomorrow a scatter of little stones,
brown pink black gray white shiny;
then on windy days the waves banish all
but rocky hunks and chunks
unkind to feet;
then back to sand, untroubled ripples,
wandering trails of snails and mussels.

It never ends, this restless creation.
Rocks shatter to pebbles,
pebbles crumble to sand;
the questing, bobbing Least Sandpiper
finds invisible food.

Floating, entranced, I cherish this world
from when I was not
to when I will not be.
Stacking Wood Prayer

Often now,
as the days shorten
the full moon dwindles
the evenings freshen
and the gates will soon
stand open,
I daven in the woodshed,
down and up
in blessed gratitude
for the solid heft
of maple, beech, and oak.
Bending to wheelbarrow,
hoisting to stack,
fitting chunk to chink,
tapping the sawn ends even –
caught up in the ceremony
of autumn, I can bear
the raucous going of the geese,
the ferns’ shabby rust.

May this hoard
warm my world
keep it safe
till the dark
season wanes
till my heart
breaks and heals
till we all
can unfurl
to new day.

9/18/16
God Created the World in Hebrew

God’s home language is my mountain
and I an old woman
scrambling daily over the ledges
stumbling
scraping my knees
to come to the outcrop where it all spreads out before me
and I
breathe
hard
and feel
that overwhelming kindness

כומחר יבוא כאן
Easy Morning Blessings

So I bark my shins on Hebrew.
But before me is the salve,
God’s translation –

בראשית

new dawn
the mountains touched with fire
the clouds’ smoldering echo

נִיטַשׁ

light bursting everywhere
goldeneye ducks whistling up from the lake
a lone eagle, all business, gliding by
the bare trunks of winter trees lit to glory
in the golden blaze of day

אָוָּר תֹּעֵשָׁי!
Miracle

A flash of white across my living room.
I turned to see an ermine – a winter weasel –
glide under the sofa,
sinuous, sleek, alert – wild! –
and – in my home.

I was crystalline prayer,
distilled, pure love, watching,
as, soundless, eyes fixed on mine,
the ermine stalked behind the woodstove
and was gone.

Miracles arrive in all forms.
They do not come for my sake.
The bringer of the blessing
may be full of teeth and terror
while the gift of its presence
leaves me gobsmacked with awe.
Peoplehood 1

A desert island,
one Jew,
two synagogues;
that old joke.

My first time in *shul*:
a man on my left,
a man on my right,
each belting out the prayers
in a different tune.

*Nonsense!* hoots
my secular friend.

Everything is open to debate
except that we are Jews.
Peoplehood 2

All that history
is not mine.
I do not spring
from those clutching roots
of exiles, migrations, temple
built and destroyed,
rebuilt and destroyed,
dreams of Zion,
pogrom nightmares,
survivors – so few –
of the Final Solution,
and now the tenuous,
desperate, crushing
grasp of homeland.
Could I – can I –
must I step into
this stifling cloak
of history?

It's part of the gift,
that somber garment –
and do I not know
we all wear many cloaks?
I map my own dark history:
four centuries of Yankees,
middling, safe, but
rooted in dispossession,
propped up by enslavement.
No honest way to trade that mantle
for a tallit.

Why trade at all?
Why not collect the lot –
hoard up as well
the bouncing capes of mazel tov,
the swirling pine tree flounces?
Against the chill of death
I need all the wrappings,
dark and light,
all the layered truth.
This journey is a delicate act
of memory and metaphor.
We do not have to discover the world of faith; we only have to recover it.

--Abraham Joshua Heschel

Why is it so hard to say “God”?
Years ago
I dismissed that grizzled old guy,
yet he sits on the Name
like a vulgar old uncle,
the one you have to invite for the holidays
though he makes you cringe and blush.

Maybe this year he won’t come!
Maybe a grizzled-old-guy minyan
will finally lure him to mutter
among his own kind!
and as the whiff of cigar smoke clears,
as the ponderous darkness drifts away,

as light and waves and mountains,
the tiny flitter of feathers and the whooping howl of wind
– this perilous, glorious fragility –
swoops around in jamboree,
we will all bellow,
“GOD”!
Stepping into the Water

They knew, those old rabbis, 
that the rod of Moses did not part the sea. 
No magic wand could wrench generations 
from the narrow places, 
hauling Egyptian rocks, 
tilling Egyptian soil, 
pounding Egyptian laundry by the river.

Never mind the straggling, befuddled exiles, 
ever mind the hurtling chariots – 
That brimming sea required one man's move, 
Nachshon’s singular, improbable trust, 
alone, finding for himself 
the blessed step into the sea.

At this season of new birth 
I know Nachshon in my bones, 
as I too, step after step, 
will pass through water, 
pressed by sharp, clear longing 
to live freely as a Jew.

4/5/17