

# *A New Song*

Poems Inspired by the  
Weekly Torah Portion

Roberta Chester



Mazo Publishers

**A New Song:  
Poems Inspired by the Weekly Torah Portion**

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It is with humility and gratitude  
that I dedicate this collection  
to the memory of

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan *zt"l*

whose philosophy has been to treat the Torah as a living document, and who has been meticulously faithful to the belief of our rabbinic Sages, who, he wrote, “teach that every day the Torah should be as new.”



*The Living Torah*\* has inspired and enlivened these poems so beholden to the strength of Rabbi Kaplan’s spirit and the power of his breath.

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\* *The Living Torah: The Five Books of Moses and the Haftarat* (1981), New York and Jerusalem: Maznaim Publishing.

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Above all, I am grateful to Hashem for the experience of what Samuel Taylor Coleridge described as the “willing suspension of disbelief,” igniting that sublime pleasure of believing and creating another reality that becomes the poem.

R.C.

“‘Every single day, the words of Torah must be new in your eyes,’ so teach our Sages. On the one hand, the Torah is immutable, unchanging, literally etched in stone. On the other hand, we must endeavor to approach the sacred text with the enthusiasm of an explorer, the wonder of a child, the passion of the novice seeing something infinitely deep and beautiful for the first time. Roberta Chester has done exactly this. Her ‘new song’ reflects the beauty of her *neshama*, the uniqueness of her life experiences, her exquisite sensitivity to subtle nuances of language, her understanding of how the text speaks to her — coupled with her ultimate commitment to God’s will. This work is not intended to be a verse-by-verse commentary to the Torah, but by sharing her reactions to the biblical text in beautiful and evocative poetry, Roberta invites the reader to engage in their own voyage of discovery, to find the meaning of the Torah as it applies to their lives and experiences. May Hashem bless her efforts with much success.”

— With admiration and *bracha*,  
Yitzchak A. Breitowitz  
Rav, Kehillat Ohr Somayach

*Praise the Lord with the lyre;  
with the ten-stringed harp sing to Him;  
sing Him a new song;  
play sweetly with shouts of joy.*

BOOK OF PSALMS 33:2-3





## Introduction

King David enjoins us, in multiple psalms, to exalt and glorify God with a new song, “for He has worked wonders,”\* the most wondrous of which is the Torah — our foundational document, eternal frame of reference, and instruction manual for actualizing our most God-like attributes. That the Hebrew term for both “song” and “poem” is *shir* implies a shared passionate emotional intensity, inspiring us to engage with the biblical text by internalizing its narrative, thus testifying to the Torah’s enduring relevance in every generation.

Continuing a long tradition, these poems are “new songs,” in which I have chosen a particular detail from each *parashah*, or weekly Torah portion, entertaining a possibility in the biblical text that illuminates and animates the past with the sensibility of the present. Each of these poems is in essence a *midrash*, whose root meaning is “to search out, to seek, to inquire.”

Composing *midrashim* has been practiced for many hundreds of years, through which writers have responded to the biblical text by entering a terse, very concise narrative, imagining and expanding upon a detail or idea — something that may not be there, but that *could* be there, among the myriad possibilities that are there.

Although every Torah scroll must be identical — the writing of which is an ancient and sacred craft and cannot vary in even the most minuscule detail — everywhere, and for all time, we are not only allowed, but compelled, to sing new songs, adding more *midrashim* to the existing canon of this ancient genre.

By so doing, we continually demonstrate that ours is indeed a living Torah, because, although it is

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\* Psalms 98:1; and 33:2–3, on facing page, both from *The Jewish Publication Society TANAKH Translation*.

written — both literally and figuratively — in stone, it is consistently the subject of our devoted scrutiny and resulting interpretation.

Our greatest commentators have provided us with insights that resonate with a universal authenticity, but we are not allowed to rest on their laurels. In every generation we are still obligated to internalize the Torah, to plumb its infinite depths, and to live our lives according to its moral and ethical precepts.

Each of these poems on the *parashah* is informed by my own subjective perspective, a kaleidoscopic reflection of values, perceptions, and countless other variables influencing the possibilities I have chosen to entertain.

And so, I have wondered about Noah's thoughts as he stood below the skylight of the ark — his feelings upon entering a world in which, besides those in the ark, there were no other human beings — and have envisioned the consequence of Esau's scream when he realized that Jacob had stolen his blessing. I have suggested a different narrative about Dinah, rather than the one dominated by her brothers' revenge. I have imagined the source of Joseph's tears when he saw his brother Benjamin, and Moses' anxiety as he waited for Joseph's sarcophagus to surface from the Nile. As one reads Shemoth, it only requires a chronological leap from ancient Egypt — that earliest attempt to annihilate us — to the Holocaust, to identify Yokheved as the archetypal mother forced to make a life-and-death decision to save her child. And, in the Shof'tim poem, I question whether we are violating the prohibition against putting our faith in oracles, when we seek out those who might rid us of our human dread of uncertainty?

Had I remained in my home on an island off the coast of Maine, I might not have connected to the Torah on a personal level. Only in Israel, where Shabbat songs are being sung on a distant balcony, where I walk among biblical place names, and where our history is a constant presence, could I have imagined myself an incarnation of

a soul who was present at Mount Sinai. Only here could I have imagined participating in that seminal experience in our history, an event so profound, it defines our DNA in perpetuity. As I looked at the stark desert landscape, the towering mountains of sand, it seemed to me that here in this awesome environment we forged our consciousness of God and were primed to receive the Torah.

We have only to look around us to verify that God is the ultimate “Entertainer of possibilities,” always surprising us. All of nature, in which we are challenged to find any duplication, is a reflection of His inimitable and endless capacity for new songs.

Every leaf and snowflake, every sunrise and sunset, every imprint of a wave on the sand, is totally unique, as is every human voice. *Our* new songs testify to our eternal connection to the Torah, as all the while we are becoming God’s new song.

The writing of *midrashim* has been described as “an old and serious pleasure,”\*\* through which we, created in His image, delight in surprise. All these *midrashim* throughout the centuries indicate that it was, and continues to be, a great pleasure for us; perhaps it has also been a great entertainment for God?

Jerusalem  
January 2023 | Tevet 5783

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\*\* David Curzon, ed., *Modern Poems on the Bible: An Anthology* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 3.

*God had formed every wild beast and every bird of heaven out of the ground. He [now] brought [them] to the man to see what he would name each one. Whatever the man called each living thing [would] remain its name. The man named every livestock animal and bird of the sky, as well as all the wild beasts. But the man did not find a helper who was compatible for him.*

*God then made the man fall into a deep state of unconsciousness, and he slept. He took one of his ribs and closed the flesh in its place. God built the rib that He took from the man into a woman, and He brought her to the man. The man said, “Now this is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh. She shall be called Woman (Ishah) because she was taken from man (ish).”*

GENESIS 2:19–23



## Bereshith | בראשית

EDEN EAVESDROP

**I**n the garden of infinite contentment  
the quiet is thick enough to touch,  
for the animals have not yet begun to sing  
their particular song, calling each to each.  
Suddenly, I hear a cacophony in the wind,  
bringing the sounds that assemble  
on the tip of your tongue  
to be configured into speech,  
while the creatures wait with bated breath  
for you to call them by name.  
You study feathers and fur, quills, beaks, and bills  
for each essence and the perfect vocal analogue,  
while He Who has given you  
this power is without complaint  
and lets you know it is good.

Torn between envy and astonishment,  
I question why your voice speaks the first words.  
I feel the weight of my heavy heart,  
the longing of my tongue, equally as deft, and ask  
why even my own name is not my choice  
and why you have been given the power to dominate,  
when I can intuit with my special gift  
that, throughout our as yet unwritten history,  
it will prove to be a mistake.

In the garden of infinite enchantment,  
as you penetrate my secrets and applaud your mastery,  
know there will always be more to confound and mystify,  
fathoms deep and beyond your reach . . .  
and for all your words,  
you will never read me.  
Even though I am clear as a stream to my own ears,  
for you I am the babble of this brook  
chattering over stones.

Though your clay is delicious to me,  
and mine to you,  
it is the blessing and the curse . . .  
and though we deliberate long and late,  
study the signs in leaves, the lines in our palms,  
the configuration of the stars,  
and eternally debate His designs,  
we will forever be each other's mystery.

*The waters surged and increased very much, and the ark began to drift on the surface of the water.*

GENESIS 7:18



## Noah | נח

And so it was that Noah  
 stood beside the skylight of the ark,  
 counting the days as heaven's floodgates burst  
 and the waters surged and swelled  
 from above and below,  
 till even the tops of the mountains submerged.  
 And Noah looked into the darkness,  
 into sheets of rain slapping the skylight,  
 but all he heard was the mournful dirge of the sea  
 and the howl of a drowning world.  
 The waters raged and tossed the ark like a cork  
 and the wind moaned with the sound of humanity,  
 while all within were fast asleep.  
 And again, Noah was a silent witness and alone  
 as he had always been,  
 and he could not help but weep  
 and wonder why God had chosen him to live.

As Noah gazed across the rolling deep, he recalled  
 how playfully the rain began,  
 innocent drops that started and stopped in the sunshine.  
 And how his neighbors came to prod and poke  
 with stick and staff, the endless source  
 of mirth and jokes, the curiosity  
 that grew cubit by cubit,  
 year after year, in his back yard.  
 Oh, how they laughed, even as the rain began,  
 even as it soaked them through,

even when Noah and all his entourage  
walked inside, the crowds that gathered  
laughed until they cried and waved goodbye  
to Noah's family and their zoo.  
They were sure it was just a passing shower,  
and they would soon be dry.

But as the rain increased while the ark was still aground,  
again they came from all around  
but this time they swam, their little ones held high,  
they screamed and begged to come inside,  
and pounded on the walls  
till the gopher wood threatened to give way.  
But Noah, keeping faith with God's decree,  
his knuckles turning white, his mouth clenched tight,  
his shoulders sore from pressing with all his might  
against the door,  
restrained his impulse to let them in,  
even as their strength ebbed  
and their voices, muffled by the storm, were no more.

Now he knew that soon the rain would end,  
the waters would subside, the sun would shine,  
the ark would come to rest  
atop Mount Ararat, and he would see far and wide  
across a pristine countryside  
where nothing that had once breathed the air remained.

With the precious remnant in his care,  
he would send a raven, then a dove,  
to test whether it was safe to step outside.  
He had been prepared to find nothing  
that he'd left behind . . . that no one, neither man,  
nor beast, nor bird would welcome them  
when they touched down on solid ground.

And all the words, the laughter and the tears  
and every heart that beat and footstep  
would be theirs.

Throughout the years,  
when the flood receded in each memory  
leaving only myth and legend to persist,  
and those within the ark had multiplied and thrived,  
Noah was haunted by the sound of what he heard  
when all the earth became an open grave,  
and even when he stopped his ears  
he heard the pounding of the waves,  
and even when God's palette spanned the sky  
reminding Noah of the promise He would keep,  
and even when he drowned himself in wine  
and fell into the deepest dreamless sleep.