

# **The Book of Noah**

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## **ספר נח**

הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת  
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## **Introduction**

The biblical account of Noah and the destruction of the world by flood is a foundational story in the Jewish tradition. Containing themes such as the roles of God and people in the world, the nature of good and evil, the cycles of destruction and salvation, the preservation of nature, and the restoration of society, the story of Noah has also influenced many other religions and cultures through the centuries. The story remains particularly relevant in present times of global climate change. Like most passages and characters in the Bible, the story of Noah resists a simple reading, provoking far more questions than answers.

This project is made possible by the many gifts of living in Israel in the twenty-first century. I am thankful for the gift of Hebrew language and Jewish culture being a basic assumption of how life is lived. This organic sense of integration is a significant reason why I moved to Israel almost 25 years ago, and in my mind answers Judah Leib Gordon's exhortation to be "a Jew at home and a man in the world." Through my writing, I hope to be a Jew at home *and a Jew in the world*, embracing all aspects of self together with tradition.

## **Aims and General Description**

*The Book of Noah* will be a manuscript of 48-60 pages comprised of three chapters. The first chapter is structured mainly around persona poems in the voices of the characters in the story of Noah and will engage with biblical and midrashic sources. The second chapter is a personal meditation on the story's key terms and dynamics, such as *ark*, *flood*, *righteousness*, *sheltering*, and *recovery*. It will employ a lyric voice. The third section will employ documentary poetry to explore broader societal issues such as climate change, social justice, and the Covid pandemic, finding contemporary relevance in the story's themes.

## Conceptual Background

In recent decades, as climate change and related problems have continued to worsen, nature, pastoral, and even post-pastoral poetry have become subsumed within the overall category of “ecopoetry.” This is a broad term with fluid boundaries but is nevertheless helpful for considering poetry shaped by and responding to contemporary environmental issues. As Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street explain in their introduction to *The Eco-poetry Anthology*, it includes three main groupings of poetry, nature, environmental, and ecological:

If the weakness of some nature poetry is sentimentalized anthropomorphism and the danger of some environmental poetry is that it becomes agenda-driven propaganda, the risks for ecological poetry include hyperintellectualism and emotional distance or detachment. But...there is great power in poetry informed by a biocentric perspective and by ecological interrelatedness and entanglement (Fisher-Wirth and Street, xxix).

Taken as a whole, eco-poetry reflects a profound movement from an anthropocentric to ecocentric point of view, which even if it can't solve all (or even just a few) of our current problems, might shift the focus to a greater awareness of and connection with the natural world. I find this approach helpful with my own writing, especially for keeping poems from becoming too political or preachy, and staying more in a lyrical mode.

Another way of describing the narrative structure in *The Book of Noah* might be tension between (pro-)creation within a very rigidly defined form (the arc). Thus, I find it helpful to describe the content of my work through the traditional forms in which the narratives unfold. The traditional sonnet helps me appreciate how formal rules are not a limitation, but a generative aspect of a poem's overall experience. A Shakespearean sonnet's form, with its alternating rhyming lines and ending couplet, promotes a sense

of extended consideration and elaboration, whereas a Petrarchan sonnet's rhyme package and point-counterpoint create a heightened sense of tension and release. In stark contrast, deconstructed sonnets such as Wanda Coleman's "American Sonnets" or Bernadette Mayer's "Sonnets" derive their literary power from exploding past constraints. Yet as fluid and associative as modern sonnets might be, they are still in dialogue with, if not haunted by the traditional sonnet – 14 lines (or not), couplets that rhyme (or not), and a volta signaling a turn in tone or introspection within the overall sonic leaping. Poet Rachel Richardson elaborates:

With such strict requirements, and such a small amount of space within which to work, the sonnet often gets compared to a box; fourteen lines of iambic pentameter end up looking rather dense and square on the page as well. In her poem "Bop: The North Star," Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon refers to teaching prison inmates about poetry: "teach the sonnet's a cell," her speaker says. But then she advises, in the next breath, "now try to escape." The best sonnets do perform this "escape"—somehow, by working within such a strict enclosure, they transcend it.

Perhaps the only thing more compelling than thinking of a sonnet as a box, is the idea of somehow escaping that box via the poem. And by extension, I appreciate how this dynamic tension between form and variation (or, tradition and experimentation) helps power modern poetry in general.

Like the traditional sonnet, one might expect other highly patterned forms such as the villanelle and the ghazal to depend on staying within their respective boxes. With both of these forms, the repetition of lines and words are utilized to evoke a heightened sense of emotion or place. Yet it's also variation within the expected – that is, pushing outwards against the form's box – that powers these types of poems. See Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art" for how slight changes in the refrain lines create a conversational tone while reflecting the underlying detachment and grief of the poem's speaker.

And even more than the villanelle, the ghazal practically demands play between repetition and variation. As Agha Shaid Ali points out, this stems in part from the oral roots of the ghazal, where an audience would repeat lines after the poet: “This back and forth creates an immensely seductive tension because everyone is waiting to see how the suspense will be resolved in terms of the scheme established in the opening couplet” (Shahid Ali 213). And even when a ghazal’s “performance” is simply on a page, there’s a wonderful frisson of seeing contemporary poets work through surprising possibilities of words and associations, as in Aimee Nezhukumatathil’s “Red Ghazal” which cycles through end-words of red, read, dread, bred, reddened, unread. Part of the challenge for me in writing a villanelle or ghazal is striking a balance between pattern and change, so that the language feels natural while still carrying the power of being grounded in form.

A different kind of formal box exists in the case of the litany, or list poem. Rather than rhythm or rhyme providing a pre-determined structure, it is the expansive collection itself that becomes both box and content of the poem. Part of what makes this form exciting for me is the tension between the infinite possibilities of what might be “inside” the box and seeing how those items or ideas resolve into something more specific, often revealing a portrait of a person or relationship. Mathew Olzman’s “Mountain Dew Commercial Disguised as a Love Poem” is a particularly remarkable example of this revelation taking place through details.

And if exploring a relationship is just one possibility of the litany, it takes center-stage in epistolary poems. As a reader, one of the things I find so appealing about this form is how it promotes a sense of intimacy with the “I” and “you” of the poem. This works when the relationship is between people, as with Li Bai’s “River Merchant Wife,”

but is almost more profound when that dialogue takes place with an object one wouldn't normally address, such as Mathew Olzman's "For a Recently Discovered Shipwreck at the Bottom of Lake Michigan." The address to an unusual "you" helps open up unexpected directions in the rest of the poem.

Another group of poetic forms I'd like to highlight are the ode, elegy, and pastoral, what Eavan Boland and Mark Strand call "Shaping Forms" (165). In contrast to poems structured by specific meter and rhyme, these forms emerge out of more general impulses of praise, mourning, and relation to place. If there is a formal box to speak of here, it's literary tradition itself, and the many public and private ways in which these forms have been written and read. Like epistolary poems, I appreciate odes and elegies in that they allow me to explore and engage in a relationship with a person, thing, or idea, and in doing so, learn about the poem's speaker too. I also know that when I write an ode, I'm in dialogue with odes of antiquity, or with John Keats's "To Autumn," or with Joy Harjo's "Perhaps the World Ends Here."

The pastoral tradition is another broad form that has evolved over centuries, from praising place and singing of harmony with nature, to reflecting modern society's alienation from it. Certainly not all modern poetry is nature poetry or written in the pastoral tradition, but many contemporary poets highlight in their work a sense of self mediated vis-à-vis the natural world. Just a few examples of poets with a strong presence of self and nature that I find particularly inspiring and influential include William Carlos Williams, W.S. Merwin, Mary Oliver, Jane Kenyon, James Wright, Gary Snyder, Robert Hass, Ross Gay, Judy Halebsky, and Jane Hirshfield.



## Shape of the Project

*The Book of Noah* will be divided into three sections: “Tevah,” “Tzohar,” and “Keshet b’Anan” corresponding to different words from the Noah story and reflecting textual, personal, and universal modes of poetic exploration. It will feature 48-60 pages of poetry, written in a wide range of forms, including free verse, epistolary, persona, sonnets, odes, litanies, ghazals, prose poetry, and ecopoetry.

“Tevah” is the Hebrew word for ark and will include persona and epistolary poems of text-based exploration, giving voice to Noah and his family. Persona poems have the advantage of pretending to speak in the voice of a historical character, while, at the same time, participating in the confessional mode of poetry. Epistolary poems flip this dynamic in order to address a character directly, further expanding the scope of interplay between a poem’s subject and speaker.

“Tzohar” is the Hebrew word for opening and comes from the passage “Make an opening for daylight in the ark” (Genesis 6:16). There is also a midrashic tradition that understands tzohar as referring to a large precious stone emanating light. The poems in this section will focus on personal explorations, reflecting both inward and outward facing sources of light alluded to in the meaning of tzohar. The lyric “I” will be used to resonate with my own thoughts and feelings, but voices of “you” and “we” will also be essential in representing interior and exterior relationships between myself, family, and others. A wide range poetic forms will be utilized to meditate on themes such as *ark*, *flood*, *righteousness*, *sheltering*, and *recovery*.

Finally, “Keshet b’Anan” is the Hebrew phrase for rainbow, based on the passage “I have set My bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth” (Genesis 9:13). This section will employ documentary poetry to explore broader societal issues such as climate change, social justice, and the Covid pandemic, finding contemporary relevance in the story’s themes. Ecopoetry will serve as a model of poetics that incorporates personal, political, and natural spheres. The overall tone of this section will strive for a balance between the pessimism of living in a time of crisis and the optimism of potential change, as embodied in the image of a rainbow stretching across dark storm clouds.

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