

Winner of this year's Charlotte Newberger Poetry Prize

This was an amazing year. There were so many excellent poems, of so many different sorts. The winner I have chosen is "The Fifteenth of Av." In Israel, the Fifteenth of Av has become a sort of Valentine's day. This rich poem crosses so many boundaries in its capturing what this Jewish holy day might mean to a woman in our time. Is it a secular poem, is it a religious poem? It is really both. It shows how an ordinary surface life can be deepened by letting Jewish meanings in—Judaism of present and past, earth and heaven, nature and spirituality, war and peace, girlhood and womanhood speak to each other in this poem. The voice of the Lord and the voice of the Shekhinah are both made real. This is a woman's poem celebrating life—two good hands in the good dirt of it.

—Alicia Ostriker

THE FIFTEENTH OF AV

by JANE SEITEL

1 The Farmer's Market

Noontime, the market heats up. August wilts field greens.
Sunflowers tuck their heads. Listless, I pick peaches, peppers,
silver queen corn. On the pavement, small trees in earthen pots—
trees with five-fingered leaves flag me down. Come here.

Touching their smooth hands, I ask their name. Fig Trees. Desert
Kings under the scorch lit sky: A blaze of Israel in East Baltimore.
The Rabbis once argued if the Eden Tree was Fig or Pomegranate.
They said Figs were fruits of wisdom to be picked, one

by one through summer to fall. The Rabbis said God gave us this:
The Fifteenth of Av, a feast day after the three weeks sorrow season—
a day when mourners rose from their low stools, and in Jerusalem
maidens danced vineyards, harmonizing their songs with honeybees.

Today is that holy day. I watch the youthful figs being watered,
settled in their temporary dwellings. Small green fruit hangs limbs
lightly, a blush of pink brushes their skin. Tasteless fruit waits
to sweeten the earth. In my yard, earth waits to welcome me.

2 The Lord speaks:

David will not himself build my temple,
Though the heron provide his quill;
Though pure olivewood furnish his staff
and lapis inlay his rosewood harp.

Although his hands may be clean now, forever
The invective sword marks them.
The indelible blood stains them;
A monarch's dagger conjoins his hip.

David shall not place the cornerstones, but Solomon.
Let my temple arise from the hands of masons.
Let the stones be carried by strong backed boys
Whose tools are forged in the pure fire hearth.

And each year on the Fifteenth of Av,
You shall break their ax handles:
Smelt down the iron of their blades —
Dissolve their elements into my molten word.

3 The Voice of the Shekhinah:

I am mist rolling down the parched hills.
I am moisture settling the vineyard
and down-traveling the silent vines.
Pour my nectar into their congregation.

Today I come to sweeten their fruit.
Today the maidens dance between rows
As they flirt with root and with berry.
Barefoot, their soles are turned amaranthine.

Oh daughters, reach down and gather clusters.
Reach up and snap brightly your cymbals.
Today I will feel the quiver of joyful lips.
Today my juices will run down the open throat.

4 Planting a Fig Tree

On the Fifteenth of Av, I empty my purse gladly.
Eighteen dollars for a young fig, started slowly
which will grow high in time. The leaves of polished
malachite will cover my small garden and mark

my seasons. I dig into the crusty knoll. I shake out
the root ball, inhaling its peat. My hands are brown
with earth: My dark eyes lit with sky. Beads
of sweat speckle my arms: water pools around freed

roots. The Fifteen of Av comes by spade-full. The day
arrives unpotted and replanted on leased land. It pulses
veins of Chlorophyll and the slow growth of fruit:
figs ripen into visions of maidens dancing arbors.

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