



PROJECT MUSE®

Marge Piercy, Jewish Poet

Bonnie Lyons

Studies in American Jewish Literature, Volume 27, 2008, pp. 34-39
(Article)

Published by Penn State University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/265615>

Marge Piercy, Jewish Poet

Bonnie Lyons

Poetry has been a central aspect of Jewish writing since Biblical times; although Jewish poetry has flowered in this country during the last century, little critical attention has been paid. Poetry, in general, has nowhere near the popular or critical audience that fiction enjoys, and the same discrepancy exists between the attention given to Jewish American fiction as opposed to Jewish American poetry. Marge Piercy, one of America's major contemporary poets, has many devoted readers, however, her work has received relatively little critical attention, and the profoundly Jewish nature of much of her most important work is largely unrecognized. Thus, in his essay, I will celebrate her as a Jewish poet and argue that Jewish themes—particularly *tikkun olam*—as well as Jewish images and symbols are at the heart of her best work.

I will focus on Piercy's poetry collection, *The Art of Blessing the Day*, which has as its subtitle "Poems with a Jewish Theme." Many of the poems in the collection are from earlier Piercy collections, including *Hard Loving*, *Circles on the Water*, and *Available Light*. This is to say that Piercy has been writing Jewish poetry for more than forty years.

The Art of Blessing the Day is divided into six sections, each with a Hebrew title followed by the English translation in parenthesis: *Mishpocheh* (Family), *The Chuppah* (Marriage), *Tikkun Olam* (Repair of the World), *Toldot, Midrashim* (Of History and Interpretation), *Tefillah* (Prayer), and *Ha-Shanah* (The Year). Even that initial choice of putting the Hebrew before the English is significant in the same way that choosing to say American Jewish or Jewish American does. The title poem, which serves as a preface to the entire collection, recalls Piercy's urban Detroit childhood by celebrating trees as "bright as pushcart ices," and her uninhibited and frank celebration of sex: "every last lily opens its satin thighs." After blessing the first garden tomato and repudiating store-bought tomatoes as "wet chalk" and "tasteless acid," the poem moves from the world of nature to offer a blessing for political victory.

The most overt reference to Jewish themes in the poem are the lines "I am not sentimental/about old men mumbling the Hebrew by rote/with no more feeling than one says *gesundheit*." Less overt but in fact more central to the poem as a whole is

her stance of blessing as much and as deeply as possible “with eyes and hands and tongue, but then balancing that with a call to *tikkun olam*: ‘What we want to change we curse and then/ pick up a tool.’” Not a gun, a tool. The poem concludes, “If you/ can’t bless it get ready to make it new.” Ezra Pound’s famous injunction for would-be modernists was “make it new,” the “it” referring to literature; in direct contrast, Marge Piercy’s injunction is change the world.

The poem argues that the art of blessing the day “is in compressing attention/ to each big and little blossom of the tree/of life, to let the tongue sing each fruit/its savor, its aroma and its use.” Piercy’s focus on attention in this title poem is similar to Jane Hirshfield’s poetry, and Piercy’s comment about that shared focus again suggests how deeply Jewish her work is. During my interview with her in September 2006, she said, “I think that for both of us the focus on attention comes out of religious practice. She follows Zen, I follow Kabbalah” (331).

During that interview, she emphasized her Jewishness as well as her literary allegiance with Muriel Rukeyser. Piercy recalled reading with Rukeyser years ago and her pleasure in being able to tell Rukeyser what she and her work meant to her. Muriel Rukeyser’s most quoted poem, the sonnet Part 7 of “Letter to the Front,” offers Jews two stark choices. “To be a Jew in the twentieth century/Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse/Wishing to be invisible, you choose/Death of the spirit, the stone insanity./Accepting, take full life. Full agonies” (104). Piercy, like Rukeyser, more than accepts her Jewishness; she reaches out to it with both hands.

In recent years, Piercy has had serious eye problems and was legally blind for a year. At the close of the interview she admitted that for a committed writer and reader, eye problems are, in her succinct word, “terrifying,” but she chose to end the interview expressing gratitude. Her very last words in the interview were, “I am grateful that after 1980 I dug into my Jewishness and began to explore it deeply” (344). And like Rukeyser’s work, Marge Piercy’s poetry unites passionate commitment to social justice with pride in Jewish identity.

In *Telling and Remembering*, a recent anthology of American Jewish poetry, the editor, Steve J. Rubin, enumerates the many ways poetry can be categorized as Jewish: “treatment of such subjects as the Holocaust, Israel, ancient and modern Jewish history, the interpretation of sacred and mystical texts, the role of gender in Judaism, the loss of Yiddish language and culture, and the nature of religious faith and belief” (2). Piercy’s *The Art of Blessing the Day* includes almost all these themes as well as rich imagery and symbolism drawn from Jewish culture.

“The *Chuppah*,” one of Piercy’s most well-known poems, is an example of her brilliant use of a Jewish symbol. When I mentioned to her that I had read “The *Chuppah*” at our daughter’s wedding, she laughed and remarked that at a recent wedding reception some stranger had asked her if “The *Chuppah*” was part of every Jewish wedding service; he had heard it read at three other weddings that spring. Working from the canopy and poles, the poem embodies an entire vision of marriage and indeed of life. It is a poem as midrash about marriage. First, the poles: “the *chuppah* stands on four poles” and “the marriage stands on four legs” (55). Two equal people,

obviously. The *chuppah* has no sides and the marriage is not a closed unit, cut off from the world. The *chuppah* “is not a box./It is not a coffin.” Likewise, marriage is a “home together/open to the weather of our times” (56). The canopy also is developed symbolically. In turn, the canopy is both the cloth of the table where “our care of the earth/comes back and we take its body in ours” and the cover of the bed “where our bodies open their portals wide” and marriage partners “burn/in one furnace of joy.” The poem obviously celebrates sexual ecstasy, but both en route and in the last lines refuses to omit the political. This wonderful marriage poem insists the marriage partners are “mills that turn in the winds of struggle/converting fierce energy into bread.” Likewise, the *chuppah* is “like a tent under which we work/not safe but no longer solitary/in the searing heat of our time.” In “The *Chuppah*,” marriage does not offer a cocoon in which to hide, work is mandatory, and “searing heat” may reference global warming, but it is certainly not limited to it. This powerful and powerfully Jewish marriage poem links Jewishness to many of Piercy’s other major themes, including the environment, feminism, and social justice.

When I asked her if “The *Chuppah*” was her most popular poem, she said she thought “To Be of Use” was and explained that it was “often read at memorial services for radical lawyers, community activists, political dissidents” (329). Less obviously Jewish than “The *Chuppah*,” “To Be of Use” is one of the poems in the section entitled *Tikkun Olam* in the volume. This poem celebrates both work and those who work wholeheartedly, those who “harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,” those who “move in common rhythm/when the food must come in or the fire be put out” (73). Noting that Greek amphoras and Hopi vases are put in museums, but “you know they were meant to be used,” the poem concludes that “the pitcher cries for water to carry/a person for work that is real” (74). For Marge Piercy, work that is real is work that is part of *tikkun olam*, work that grows out of a vision of repairing the world, contributing to the general good, not just private gain.

Many of the modernist poets, including T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, wrote poetry for the elite, for the highly educated, allusion-loving few. Piercy and her poetry openly and defiantly address the many. What could be more opposite T. S. Eliot’s dedication of “The Waste Land” to Ezra Pound in Italian—via an allusion to Dante’s *Purgatorio* no less—than Marge Piercy’s dedication of *The Art of Blessing the Day*: “For all who may find poems here that speak to their identity, their history, their desire for ritual—ritual that may work for them—these poems are yours as well as mine.” Ritual that may work for people, poems that speak to the many.

One of the many ways that Jewishness permeates Piercy’s poetry derives from her commitment to Reconstructionist Judaism, which has led her to write new prayers and new translations. This section of *The Art of Blessing the Day*, written for Pnai Or Shabbat morning *siddur*, Or *Chadash*, fulfills Piercy’s admonition in the title poem. Since there she criticizes “old men mumbling the Hebrew by rote,” and concludes “If you/can’t bless it get ready to make it new,” this section of the volume does just that. She creates new translations and adaptations, including of the *kaddish* and the *s’hema*. In this kind of poetry, Marge Piercy, like Muriel Rukeyser, Chana Bloch, and Marcia Falk, grapples directly with Jewish texts. The purpose here is, as

Kathryn Hellerstein has argued, “in order to rework, subvert, and redefine Jewish religion, spirituality and culture in the American language” (446).

“Growing Up Haunted,” Piercy’s powerful poem about the Holocaust, approaches the *Shoah* autobiographically as she remembers her “grandmother’s cry/ when she learned the death of all she/remembered, girls she bathed with/young men with whom she shyly/flirted, wooden shul where/her father rocked and prayed/ red haired aunt plucking the/balalaika” (108-109). Entering “through the hatch of memory/those claustrophobic chambers/” of her adolescence in the 1950s, Piercy recalls that for her the unspoken “question every morning” was “why are you living and all those/mirror selves, sisters, gone/into smoke like stolen cigarettes.” But fear and horror and survivor guilt change her into a poet committed to remembering and telling. The annihilation of the six million, “a world/gone from gristle to smoke” becomes her imperative to write. The ghosts “gathered on the foot/of her bed each night” tell her “What you/carry in your blood is us/the books we did not write,/music we could not make,” a destroyed world that is “only as real now as words can make it.” The specific details of her grandmother’s annihilated world, for example the “red haired aunt plucking the balalaika” and the powerful poetic word choice, “from gristle to smoke,” ensure that this poem fulfills her ghosts’ injunction: that the destroyed world is “as real now as words can make it.” A great number of American Jewish poets have written about the Holocaust, and in these poems Marge Piercy joins a long, long tradition of Jewish poets who have felt the need to create in the face of destruction.

Pogroms and the Holocaust permeate several poems in the “Mishpocheh” section. In “Snowflakes, My Mother Called Them,” a poem about the papercuts she used to make with her mother and grandmother, she recalls that her grandmother often made animals, “always in pairs, the rabbits, the cats, always cats in pairs,/little mice, but never horses,/for horses meant pogroms” (9-10). That horses, arguably the most beautiful of all animals, meant pogroms underscores the lasting effects on her grandmother’s consciousness—and Piercy’s own memory. In “Unbuttoning,” she moves from typical memories (“Buttons stamped with an anchor/means my late grade-school pea coat” to a coral button that recalls her mother telling her in 1941 that in Europe “they’re/killing us and nobody cares./Remember always. Coral is built/of bodies of the dead piled up.” Killing us Jews.

“Growing Up Haunted,” Piercy’s Holocaust poem from the *Toldot, Midrashim* section, is particularly effective in part because her autobiographical, American angle, the movement in the poem from “the booming fifties/of General Eisenhower, General Foods and General Motors” and “armored, prefabricated bodies” to an assertion that “Fear was the underside of every leaf/we turned” and then to the Holocaust itself through witnessing her grandmother’s ghastly cry of loss. A general commitment to a stance as a fighter joins the imperative to remember. The ghosts tell her “Assume no future you may not have/ to fight for, to die for.” Throughout her life Piercy has certainly been a fighter in both her politics and her writing.

When I asked her about progress, she responded, “During my lifetime things have improved in certain areas, not in other areas. But I wouldn’t say things have

improved—they've been improved by people pushing...Positive change didn't just happen. People pushed...We have notions that progress just happens, but it doesn't. Like the so-called march of science. Science marches where people push it" (330). Piercy grew up in a family in which no one had attended college. Her teenage years were full of rebellion and sexual experimentation. It seems she was either born with a fighter's temperament or developed one early on. So I am not arguing that the Holocaust made her into a fighter. However, I do argue that the Holocaust affected her profoundly and personally, pushing her to see both her life and writing in ways atypical for the 1950s and a so-called "girl."

Like many Jewish poets, Piercy has found Biblical stories fertile sources for poems. "Apple Sauce for Eve," the first poem in the *Toldot, Midrashim* section, delightfully interprets the first woman anew: "Those old daddies cursed you and us in you," while for Piercy the docile Adam "waging his tail, good dog, good/dog" is boring. Eve "and the snake shimmy up the tree/lab partners in a dance of will and hunger/that thirst not of the flesh but of the brain." Celebrating Eve as "the mother of invention/the first scientist," Piercy concludes, "if death was the worm in that apple,/the seeds were freedom and the flowering of choice" (99-100).

Jewish symbols, Biblical characters, and images are everywhere in these poems, often in unexpected, poetically inventive ways. In "Havdalah," for example, she uses the twisted candle to affirm the variousness of Jews: "we are a varied people/braided into one." Calling Jews "a quilted people," she affirms all kinds of Jews: "Woman, man, whomever we love or live with/single or coupled, webbed in family or solitary,/born a Jew or choosing, pious or searching,/we bring our thread to the pattern./We are stronger for the weaving of our strands" (139). In "The Aunt I Wanted to Be," she celebrates her daring Aunt Ruth who offered Piercy a different kind of role model, a feminist before the feminist movement: "Behind every strong/woman my age someone like my aunt/stands like a signpost pointing/to a place she could only glimpse/like Moses on Mt. Pisgah, that land/of freedom we promised ourselves/and are still fighting to conquer" (42). Who else would compare her Aunt Ruth to Moses and call life beyond patriarchy the promised land?

The final poem of the collection, "The Ram's Horn Sounding," directly recalls the first poem, "The Art of Blessing the Day," in that it, too, speaks of blessing. And as the ram's horn signals the Jewish new year, the poem, like Rosh Ha Shanah and Yom Kippur, looks backward and forward. Early in the poem, addressing a friend, she observes, "My Jewishness seemed to you sentimental/perverse, planned obsolescence" (173) and then goes on to write about her first meeting in Paris with members of her extended family who were Holocaust survivors. Section three of the poem begins, "A woman and a Jew, sometimes more of a contradiction than I can sweat out,/yet finally the intersection that is both/ collision and fusion, stone and seed" (174). Reconstructionist Judaism, as I noted previously, has been the way for Piercy to live and write as a Jewish woman. While fury at the patriarchal nature of Orthodox Judaism has alienated many Jewish women and caused some to repudiate Judaism altogether, Piercy affirms the combination of tradition and sexual

equality she finds in Reconstructionist Judaism and proudly reminded me that “The Reconstructionists were the first to ordain lesbians and gay men” (332).

Later, in “The Ram’s Horn Sounding,” Piercy writes, “Like any poet I wrestle the holy name” and adds, “I serve the word/I cannot name, who moves me daily,/ who speaks me out by whispers and shouts” (174). Although Piercy insists she writes “like any poet,” her metaphors here are deeply Jewish. Surely wrestling recalls Jacob wrestling with God at Peniel and receiving the blessing of a new name, Israel. Likewise, the phrase the “word I cannot name” is a specifically Jewish reference as well. Piercy likens herself to the shofar saying, “Coming to the new year I am picked/up like the ancient ram’s horn. After the new year she is “dropped back into the factory of words/to turn my little wheels and grind/my edges, back to piece work again, knowing/there is no justice we don’t make daily/ like bread and love” (174-175).

The last sixteen lines of “The Ram’s Horn Sounding” are one long sentence full of gorgeous imagery addressed to the Shekinah. Here she asks Shekinah, “bless me and use me for telling and naming/the forever collapsing shades and shapes of life,” and the final lines speak of “blood kinship with all the green, hairy/and scaled folk born from the ancient warm sea.” Paradoxically, in this deeply Jewish poem in which she addresses Shekinah, Piercy’s prayer is similar to the stance and poems of Rumi, the Sufi mystic born in 1207, who begged “Please, Universal Soul, sing a song or something through me” (169). Both Rumi and Piercy ask to be instruments of the divine; Rumi begs God to sing through him; Piercy asks to be useful.

Piercy has said her work is “all of a piece,” and added, “I don’t make value judgments that one type of poetry is more important than another, neither my poems about Judaism, or poems about love, or poems about the war in Iraq or the environment” (333). Like the challah, which she compares to her grandmother’s hair in “A Candle in the Glass,” Piercy’s poetry is beautifully braided, but Jewishness is central to her most affecting and important work. Marge Piercy is an important Jewish poet.

Works Cited

- Hellerstein, Kathryn. “Jewish-American Writing: Poetry.” *The Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing in the United States*. Ed. Cathy N. Davidson and Linda Wagner-Martin. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. 443-446.
- Lyons, Bonnie. “Interview with Marge Piercy.” *Contemporary Literature*. 48, 3. (Fall 2007). 327-344.
- Piercy, Marge. *The Art of Blessing the Day*. New York: Knopf, 1999.
- Rubin, Steven J. Introduction. *Telling and Remembering: A Century of American Jewish Poetry*. Beacon P, 1998.1-12.
- Rukeyser, Muriel. “Letter to the Front, Part 7.” *A Muriel Rukeyser Reader*. Ed. Jan Heller Levi. New York: Norton, 1995.
- Rumi, Jalal al Din. *The Essential Rumi*. Tr. Coleman Barks. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.