
Reviewed by Andrea Pflaumer, San Francisco, CA

As the daughter of the labor editor for *Der Yidishe Tog*, Judith Goldhaber had a childhood devoid of reverential adherence to the canons and rituals of Jewish daily life. Her parents, both staunch atheists, were concerned with more pragmatic matters and tangible outcomes, and as such she was never bat mitzvoh’d. But when Judith was three years old and her sister five, the family packed up and left their home in Brooklyn, relocating to a farm in rural New Jersey, near Princeton. Her parents’ choice to provide her children with a ‘natural’ life on an organic farm - some thirty years before over-privileged suburban youth would eschew the comforts of their 1950’s homes to do the same - provided the context of Judith’s religious awakening.

In her latest book, *Sara Laughed: Sonnets from Genesis*, Goldhaber engages her love for the natural world while focusing a deeply human and humane eye on the eternal truths revealed in the stories of the Hebrew Bible. In doing so, she finally and lovingly exercises her Torah portion, offering a personal vision about the lives and relationships of the important personalities in Genesis.

Growing up in a pre-Revolutionary farmhouse with no running water, electricity nor indoor plumbing, Judith spent her daylight hours reading voraciously and cataloguing in poetry the flora and fauna that were the most intimate part of her world on that farm. By her early teens she was winning statewide poetry contests. Through her father’s work the family stayed informed about the unfolding events of the Second World War. In that paradoxical environment, she developed a social and political awareness steeped in Jewish ethical and cultural traditions, and a profound appreciation for nature.

The *Sara Laughed* project began as a 25th anniversary gift for her stepson and daughter-in-law, with a series of ten sonnets, illustrated by her husband, world-renown particle- and astrophysicist Dr. Gerson Goldhaber, who has been painting, sculpting and doing collage in addition to his ‘day gig’ for more than forty years. *Sara Laughed* is the second collaboration by the Goldhabers; their first, *Sonnets from Aesop* (Ribbonweed Press, 2005) won a 2006 IPPY award from the Independent Booksellers Association. Gerson’s childhood in Alexandria, Egypt, where his family immigrated just before WWII, informs and adds authenticity to the themes and colors in the drawings for the new book.

In the tradition of Midrash, the interpretation or re-telling, of biblical stories, *Sara Laughed* accomplishes several feats. According to biblical scholar, Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, professor at Vanderbilt University’s Divinity School, the Hebrew Bible is the result of evolving tales: “Good storytellers will change [the story,] make the hero unconventional or unexpected.” Goldhaber is a good storyteller, and in her vision, the eternal lessons emerge out of the narrative, and not the other way around. Rather than reiterating proclamations in arcane language, figuratively— and literally – set in stone, the truths here...

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are the result of deeply personal and human experiences. Inspired by Louis Ginzberg’s epic *The Legends of the Jews*, a compilation of pre- and post-Hebrew Bible folktales that likely have been woven into the fabric of the Bible over the centuries, Goldhaber’s sonnets begin with musings about Eve and her ‘rival’ Lilith. She uses an unexpected convention, having Eve speak directly to the reader in chatty, conversational language, to defend her position against centuries of calumny:

So why, you ask, did I commit the sin
I’m famous for? You know about the snake
and how all mankind suffers for my sake,
but over the centuries the facts have been
somewhat distorted, so let us begin
at the beginning...

One of Goldhaber’s skills is the ability to break down the barrier between the ancient and modern, cleverly transporting the reader to Biblical times and places, or is it perhaps that she finds those characters in us today? By opening with the story of Lilith, the oft-derided supposed ‘first’ wife of Adam, she reveals her own clearly feminist bent. But she mines the deeper truth of Eve’s jealousy, revealing complex emotions: envy, curiosity and even admiration. In doing so, she creates a touching and compassionate ‘second wives’ club’. In “Getting Acquainted,” she concludes:

She’s not as bad as she’s been painted –
neither of us is likely to be sainted
but we have lots in common, it appears.
We get together sometimes, reminisce
about the days we spent in Paradise –
we were so young, and none of us were wise –
we were not ready for a life of bliss.
but now we’re older, and I think there’s room
for both of us to lie in Adam’s tomb

In Noah and the Flood, it is likely her reverence for animals - harkening back to a childhood on the family farm - that accounts for the witty personalities she attributes to the non-human beings in the book. She starts by anthropomorphizing the snake in the Garden of Eden; (‘Ah’ signed the snake, ‘victims always get my sympathy’) and later amusingly describes Noah’s dilemma aboard the Ark, where hungry carnivores eye potential prey among their shipmates:

So Noah set about providing food
for all the beasts and coaxing them to try it.
There were transgressions: craving his old diet
of bugs, an aardvark hunted and pursued
and ate a termite, though all meat was tabooed.
In spite of the fact that the plot, story lines and personalities are known throughout the world and across the millennia, Goldhaber manages to make the book a page-turner. But perhaps it is the format itself that provides the impetus for riveting reading. “I love the sonnet form because it’s a short story with a twist at the end,” she explains. In some of the chapters, the ‘sonnet crown’ form, beginning the next poem with a reiteration of the last sentence from the previous one, creates the pacing and rhythm that makes the reader want more.

In fact, Goldhaber ends the book with a moving teaser about the ‘sequel’, an acknowledgement of the pending trials and tribulations of the Jewish people. In Visions of the Night” God tells Jacob not to fear his journey to Egypt:

I’ll bring you home again. So shed no tear
but take your families and all your gear –
load up the wagons, let your hearts be light
for I have plans to make a mighty nation
of Israel. Through there will be tough times
ahead for you, and slavery, and crimes
against your children, you will find salvation
and enter once again, with hope and glory
the promised land – but that’s another story.

This series of 100 iambic rhymes told in accessible language also make for a delightful introduction to the Hebrew Bible for young people or those unfamiliar with the Bible. Daniel Matt, author of the Essential Kabbalah and translator of the Pritzger edition of the Zohar describes Sara Laughed as: “A sparkling rendition of Genesis, filled with insight, pathos and humor.” The witty and lovely watercolor illustrations by Gerson Goldhaber, clearly informed by his childhood in Cairo Egypt, where his family emigrated before WWII, lend an authentic backdrop to each sonnet.