

# JEWISH LITERARY JOURNAL

## FIRST ANNUAL HIGH SCHOOL POETRY COMPETITION

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## About the Jewish Literary Journal

The Jewish Literary Journal aims to publish the best in creative writing that deals with Jewish themes and Jewish identity. Its purpose is to display works that would perhaps go unnoticed otherwise, that can deepen conversation, and continue the tradition of rich Jewish expression.

The Jewish Literary Journal was co-founded and is co-edited by Aaron Berkowitz and Ariel Stein. It is the only online venue that publishes all genres of Jewish creative writing on a regular basis. [www.jewishliteraryjournal.com](http://www.jewishliteraryjournal.com)

## The Competition

The high school competition was envisioned as an opportunity to showcase high school talent. There was no limit on structure, form, or content, aside from being related to Judaism or the Jewish experience. With submissions from across the United States – and even internationally – the judges were able to read a wide variety of poems that spoke to different aspects of Jewish life. Their selections of the standout poems are on the following pages.

## The Judges

### Aaron Berkowitz

Aaron obtained a B.A. in English Literature from Yeshiva University and is now an M.F.A. in Creative Writing in Poetry candidate at Sarah Lawrence College.

### Hillel Broder

Hillel Broder is a doctoral candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center, an adjunct professor at Fordham University, and a high school teacher at SAR HS.

### Aaron Roller

Aaron was an editor at *Mima'amakim: The Journal for Creative Expression of the Jewish Religious Experience*. He co-founded the Yeshiva Poetry League with Hillel Broder and Hillel Goldman.

### Ariel Stein

Ariel attended the University of Pennsylvania, where he helped edit *Kedma*, the journal of Jewish thought, Jewish culture, and Israel. He currently does research on the Jewish community.

## **Pantoum: A Conversation with G-d** *by Moses Bibi*

Since I was little  
G-d was there  
There for me to run to  
With him I could hide

G-d was always there  
When I was too sad to cry  
With him I could hide  
On days that I couldn't stand the world around me

When I was too sad to cry  
I would look up and close my eyes  
On days that I couldn't stand the world around me  
And pray for a clear mind

I would look up and close my eyes  
Collect the words to speak  
Praying for a clear mind  
And letting the words flow

“Don't let the words I have collected for you falter  
For I would like to speak  
And let my words flow  
And ask... Why?”

“I would like to speak  
And I would love to know  
Why?  
Why do I have the hardships?”

“I would love to know  
If you don't mind me asking  
Why do the hardships follow me  
And not someone else?”

“If you don't mind me asking  
I love life  
But for life to pick on me and not someone else  
Can it possibly be fair?”

I love life

But then I think of the good of the world  
And forget what is fair  
And then I feel answered

Ever since I was little

## **Witness Theater**

*by Merle Cohen*

On Wednesday evenings we sit in circles.

On Wednesday evenings we talk in squares.

On Wednesday evenings we listen to triangles of family. Of the would be mother, father, daughter. Of the once upon a yesteryear silhouette of family shuffling among the shadows of the same families. Because on Wednesday evenings we learn that a Jew is a Jew; when push comes to shove the second your head is shaved your shape becomes that of a thousand others packed into the same sardine can.

On Wednesday evenings we learn of small box windows shoved into corners of big boxcars.

On Wednesday evenings we follow the arrows of a thousand stalks of hay that hid your circle eyes from the black shadow boots.

On Wednesday evenings we pin stars to our coats, trace numbers curved across soft skin.

We are compiled of basic human shapes, we adopt the shapes of those sitting in our circle. Perhaps some shapes are rounder than others; perhaps we begin to resemble a certain likeness. The structures of our circle never change, the bonds tying our chairs together tighten with every Wednesday evening.

On Wednesday evenings we speak words aloud, convey thoughts through structures that mold shapes of the past.

On Wednesday evenings our mouths become circles, our eyes become tear drops—our lips become half moons, our irises light up like the sun.

On Wednesday evenings I envision Simon's Tzahal cap, Edith's pink sneakers. I see Sofiya's sprightly manner, Judith's winter hat. I smell the coffee I make for Harry during dinner, feel the soft skin of Lola's hand as I slip mine into hers.

I imagine the glint of Ruth's rings, taste Blanka's baking, embrace Golda's soft musical notes. By now the jigsaw of our shapes fits ever so nicely, our fingers intertwining ever so precisely; it's no wonder how the shapes of witness theater have become ever so important.

## Life: A Circular River

by Jonathan Frieden

*Thump.* The first sign of life. The slow rhythmic sound of the heartbeat is amplified in the room, bringing with it a new beauty, a new soul, to the world.

*Thump.* The first time ground is felt beneath feet. Limbs wobble as legs are extended, determined to embrace the comfort of the floor once more.

*Thump.* The knapsack hits the forest-green seat of the yellow bus. Waving to his mother, a twelve year journey is embarked upon; a quest for knowledge in a land unknown.

*Thump.* Pent up anger and rage explodes with the slamming of a door. Not knowing his place, his identity, he is lost in an in-between stage.

*Thump.* As the ball hits the floor he learns an art; a way to demonstrate his strengths and express his passion to the world.

*Thump.* The sound of knocking on a door. A moment of courage as, met by the twinkling eyes of a young lady, his heart skips a beat.

*Thump.* Knee connects with grass as a brilliant diamond is exposed to the air, reflecting its light among the star-lit sky.

*Thump.* The ceremonial glass is shattered underfoot, resulting in the cheers of the attendees and the tears of joy of a woman in white.

*Thump.* The woman sits down, her hands on her disproportionately large stomach as she feels a kick.

*Thump.* The first sign of life. The slow rhythmic sound of the heartbeat is amplified in the room, bringing with it a new beauty, a new soul, to the world. The cycle of life continues.

## **Zebras on the Moon**

*by Razi Hecker*

Dear god....

When I was a kid I wanted to be an astronaut,  
not to walk on the moon but to try to get closer to you  
when I was six

I built rocket ships, from tortilla chips  
seven

i built a model of Apollo eleven so maybe,  
one day I could talk to you,  
when, I grew up a bit more

I used to put on a black hat as I thought you would get closer to me if i wore it, and,  
are your like Tinkerbell and if enough people don't believe in you you'll cease to exist  
which is why you give us lists of things we must do  
food we can't eat, clothes we must wear, and you  
tell us we have to pray for you three times a day, and those prayers go right up, and  
in return,

the next day we read in the newspaper about someone being shot in the head,  
twenty men dead

thousands of people not being fed  
or a new brand of cool aid that turns the water red  
not from the powder but from the people's blood

I can't see you, anymore.

I can't see you

back in 1944 when thousands of people died every day from little black pieces of  
metal

metal frames

that have pictures of bones piled on each other to make railroad tracks  
tracks leading to concentration camps

foods stamps

men with lamps who marched others to their death, where they would be buried  
500 feet above the ground as ash

that mixed in with despair and covered everything within sight.

I tend

to think about these things when I'm sad, clutching my bed blankets, holding on for  
dear life, thinking I have Parkinson's because I can't stop shaking

those nights

that I couldn't see you I sweated out my tears

because my eyes were only able to cry so many out

And I used to hate you.

would hate you for never listening to me

those nights

where my mom would tuck me into bed wading through my tears to get to my face,

kiss me and tell me,  
That the reasons god has for never listening are not black and white  
as there were many shades of gray in between.  
As a kid  
I never knew what she was talking about  
so I just thought you were a zebra  
since they have both colors, and I always wanted to talk to one.  
When I grew up a bit more  
my mom told me the god is everywhere from the subway to local park benches so I  
though you walked around risking from a bottle in a paper bag,  
But  
those were foolish days, and I realized that you are more like a word that you just  
forgot  
not having it when you need it, but remembering it later on  
a word  
that I have started to lose faith in recently as it is thrown around carelessly and yes  
I do believe that you were once there, even though now you don't care  
as you don't listen to me when I need you the most, you kill millions of people  
without a second thought  
murder young children with gunshots  
blood clots  
pneumonia from sleeping on moldy cots  
suicide divers  
kitchen fires  
drunk drivers  
bombed church choirs  
I never told anyone.  
That I don't count sheep before I go to sleep but questions about you  
and when i do  
i always think back to what my mom once said, that god makes nothing black or  
white as he created TVs too  
I also never told anyone  
that when I finally stop shaking enough to shut my eyes, I dreamt of when I was  
young again  
back when I was an astronaut  
and you  
were a zebra.

## Take 3 Steps Forward

*by Zechariah Rosenthal*

Take 3 steps forward  
now open your eyes  
remember to breath this time

Stare intently like you've got  
some truth all bottled up  
and the public's been itching for a sip

Open your mouth  
and start the words flowing  
like a river crackling to life  
after a long winter

Finish strong  
like a waterfall  
but don't hide the rocks at the bottom

Because liking poetry  
in high school is a bit of  
an outspoken decision  
so speak loudly

Take 3 steps back.

Take 3 steps forward  
now open your eyes  
remember to believe this time

Stare internally  
like a mirror's been  
eyeing you all funny and  
you ain't blinkin first

Open your mouth  
and let the timeless songs  
seep heavily from your lips

Even though wearing  
tzitzit in high school  
is only a fringe movement

wear them proudly

Take 3 steps back.

All I can ask of you here  
is that you speak out  
with the same ferocity  
that you only wish  
you could pray with.

## Unscripted

*by Leah Scher*

He Who blessed our forefathers  
And the edges of those soldiers' hearts,  
And the creases of those warriors' palms,  
And the beggar's vernacular they called like pointed shots,  
For they knew their merits alone are not viscid enough to save

Their  
    Veiled  
        Souls

Covered Abraham's grit,  
Cloaked Isaac's credence,  
Shrouded Jacob's patience -  
The parts of them that enabled trust of their own bony shanks;  
The places in them which wailed prayers too solemn and frank  
To be confined to

The  
    Scripts  
        In  
            Those  
                Books

Said, bless the fighters!  
Shield the land!  
Save the tempest!  
Watch the storms!  
They add to remember Your people,  
The lowly, the small,  
The trivial troopers who bear not weapons of war,  
But are no less victims of plague,  
No less worthy of

Favor  
    And  
        Triumph

Is Your name,  
And Love and Tenderness,  
Which went to battle their enemies  
For them –

On the fields,  
In their homes –  
To gird their paltry power,  
To wipe their tears,  
To see their words genuine

From  
    Those  
        Scripts

To mine  
To Your cistern –  
I stand on their shoulders,  
And request in a hushed, ancestral vernacular  
That You hear

My  
    Inked  
        Words

Have been, like theirs  
And because of them,  
Infused with a wholehearted candor.

See their roars echoed in mine,  
And as You cherished theirs,  
Do bless these as divine.

Now respond:  
Amen.

## Privileged

by *Dasi Schneider*

I am a privileged white girl.  
I come from a middle class family.  
I have never known poverty,  
divorce, or abuse.  
The world tells me  
I have nothing to say because  
I have never felt pain.  
The blood of the *Nisei*  
does not flow through  
my veins.  
My skin is the same color  
as the conquerors,  
not oppressed.  
Yes, I am thankful  
but that does not make a good  
battle cry. It does not make  
for inspiring poetry.

I watch  
rockets fired on Israel,  
swastikas spray painted on *shuls*,  
riots in France,  
I remember:  
I am a Jewish girl.

My white skin does not protect me  
from my dark hair, crooked nose.  
The blood of those interned  
in concentration camps  
flows through my veins.  
I picture tattooed numbers  
on my great-grandmother's arm,  
the bruises and broken bones  
that disappeared from her body—  
never her mind.

The world tells me  
I am a privileged white girl,

and that I have nothing to say.  
The world forgets  
I am Jewish.  
The Star of David hangs  
around my neck  
paints a target  
on my back.  
The United Nations maintains  
my homeland has no right  
to exist.  
The *siddur* I carry  
sends a signal to the world  
that my blood is cheap.

I am a privileged white girl.  
I am a Jewish girl.  
Though the world tells me  
I have nothing to say  
I will speak up anyway.

## The Poets

Moses Bibi

*Junior*

*Rambam Mesivta*

*Lawrence, NY*

Merle Cohen

*Senior*

*Flatbush Yeshiva*

*Brooklyn, NY*

Jonathan Frieden

*Senior*

*Rambam Mesivta*

*Lawrence, NY*

Razi Hecker

*Junior*

*Kobelet Yeshiva High School*

*Merion Station, PA*

Zechariah Rosenthal

*Junior*

*Rambam Mesivta HS*

*Lawrence, NY*

Leah Scher

*Senior*

*Hebrew Academy of Nassau County*

*Uniondale, NY*

Dasi Schneider

*Senior*

*Midreshet Shalbevet High School for Girls*

*North Woodmere, NY*