

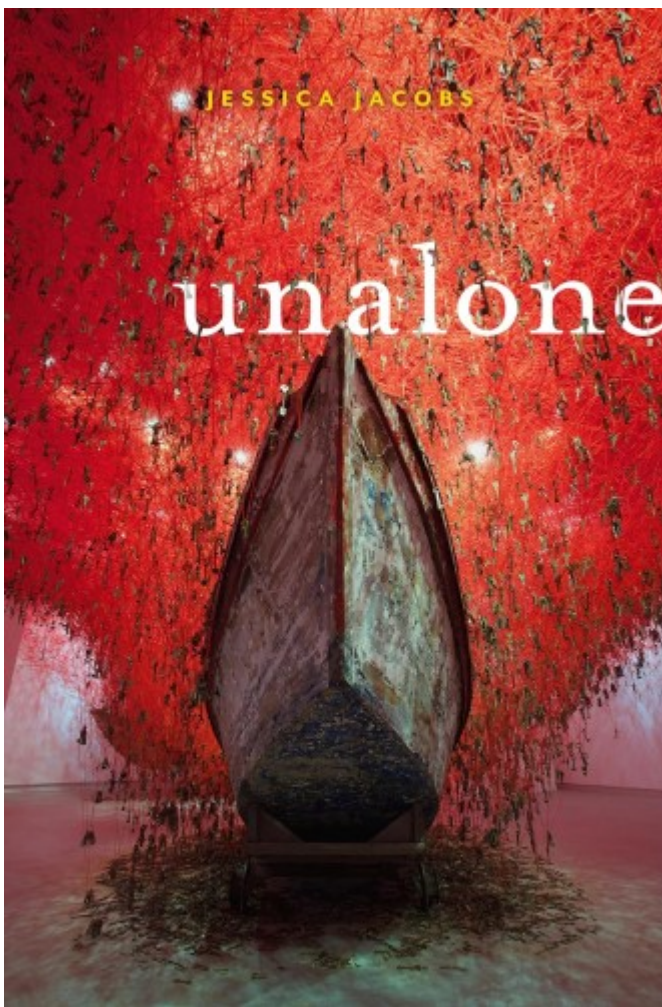
Unlocking the gates of Genesis through poetry

Jessica Jacobs breathes new life into ancient voices.

by [Julie L. Moore](#) in the [February 2025](#) issue

Published on February 6, 2025

In Review



Unalone

Poems in Conversation with the Book of Genesis

By Jessica Jacobs

Four Way Books

[Buy from Bookshop.org](http://Bookshop.org) >

RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

When Robert Alter's Hebrew Bible translation was published in 2018, I quickly became consumed by his poetic renderings of scripture. Before I knew it, I was writing persona poems of biblical prophetesses like Miriam, Abigail, and Huldah. Thus, when I learned about Jessica Jacobs's new poetry collection, which rescues biblical narratives from dogmatism and some of their women from obscurity, I was all in.

Jacobs, the founder of Yetzirah: A Hearth for Jewish Poetry, has written two previously acclaimed collections: *Pelvis with Distance*, a collection of biographical verses on Georgia O'Keeffe, and *Take Me with You, Wherever You're Going*, a memoir in verse about the poet's coming of age as a queer woman and marriage to her wife.

Like Serah (who, according to Jewish tradition, was tasked with telling Jacob that Joseph was alive because his brothers had sold him into slavery), Jacobs speaks with a lyrical and honest voice about the heart-wrenching stories and complex characters of Genesis, drawing parallels to her own life. Also through Serah, whose "songs / were her progeny" and whom the poet calls "Matriarch of my line," Jacobs finds a place for herself within the Jewish faith.

Following the chronology of Genesis, *Unalone* is divided into 12 sections, each named for a distinctive Hebrew word or phrase. Jacobs supplies a wealth of notes for readers unfamiliar with biblical narratives and Hebrew scholarship. The poems and notes show how deeply Jacobs has studied not only Hebrew (and Alter's translations) in the Torah but also the Talmud and myriad midrashes, including those by other notable Jewish poets like Alicia Ostriker. The poems, however, are most remarkable for their originality and their masterful musicality, precision, and lineation.

The book opens by taking a great risk: ignoring the traditional rabbinic advice to fence in the Torah. Instead, the poet writes, "Let every fence in my mind have a gate. / With an easy latch and well-oiled hinges." With gate swung wide, we begin at the beginning. Jacobs contemplates creation as a "ceremony / of separations—light / from dark, terebinths / from touch-me-nots" and, of course, Adam from clay. The separations leave their mark as the speaker laments, "we are left / with such need /

of connection, bereft / in all our lonesome splendor.” As Gerard Manley Hopkins might put it, creation is shadowtackled as darkness laces each layer of light in Jacobs’s poems. Darkness, in fact, is necessary, for as Jacobs writes, “when there is nothing but light, nothing / can be seen.”

The energy of Jacobs’s language and lines drives each poem, moving readers forward from one turn of phrase to another, until each conceit clicks in place splendidly. For instance, “Free Will” provides both delight and surprise as we learn, “*break is both // opportunity and fracture, as cleave / holds fast while it also splits apart, // our hands—those striving hymns / of contranymns.*” To echo Emily Dickinson, such exquisite, insightful language blew the top of my head off.

Through Jacobs’s persona poems, biblical characters share moving perspectives. When Eve speaks, she reveals, “Eden could have been [Adam’s] alone; / I am the paradise he chose.” Bilhah and Zilpah (Rachel’s and Leah’s handmaids) reveal how they were dehumanized, for they were just “two ovens to make / his sons,” then forgotten. Sarah, with whom God never speaks, elicits sympathy as she remarks, “Greatness, treasured in legends, / is seldom a comfort at the breakfast table.” She likewise shares a stunning revelation about her view of Abraham: “After me, his life was just summary.”

Jacobs traces the biblical lineage alongside her own, weaving in poignant poems about family members. Particularly moving are poems about her mother’s dementia, in which the poet wishes that “if it brings her peace, let her forget even me.” Jacobs also writes of her own great love. One such poem, “At First Sight, Many Seeings Later,” compares Rebecca’s reaction to first seeing Isaac (being so lovestruck that she falls off her camel!) to the poet’s initial meeting with her future wife. She writes, beautifully and whimsically, “Let me fall / from my camel again and again.”

At 165 pages, the book’s scope reaches to national and world politics. Jacobs imaginatively parallels the conditions of present climate refugees with the desperate trip Joseph’s estranged family makes to Egypt during the great famine. A poem called “In the Shadow of Babel” keenly explores language’s ability to both spread hatred (“Because a president praised / rabid men who chanted, *Blood and soil*”) and establish belonging. God’s command “to confound” the language can also mean “intermingle,” so we can live “together, mouths full / of words for our hunger and need.”

Another striking poem, “Why There Is No Hebrew Word for Obey,” wrestles with Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, comparing it to the “unquestioning belief” of the shooter who murdered worshipers in Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life synagogue. *Shema*, the Hebrew word often translated as “obey,” really means *listen*—it’s about paying attention, a loving response. Thus, the speaker turns toward humility, eschewing certainty and proposing that we “arm ourselves / instead with questions,” such as who we have hurt and why.

At the core of this book is a wanderer and wonderer, a seeker of meaning who doesn’t pretend to have cornered the market on truth. The poem “Godwrestling,” which depicts that famous passage of Jacob with the angel, asks, “But what is wrestling / if not an embrace?” Jacobs isn’t willing to yield to cynicism; instead, her skepticism leads to greater insights, both about God, whom she says she “want[s] / to believe in,” and about herself. She confesses that she has two competing selves warring within her, an Esau, hunger-mad, and a Jacob, “plucked / from darkness into darkness.” Her only hope seems to be the soft murmur of a “small Solomon” within, advising her, “*It feels better to be kind / than right.*”

Eight poems entitled “And God Speaks” are threaded throughout the collection, tethering Jacobs’s exegesis to ancient midrash. These poems serve as ekphrastic ruminations on Genesis—its narrative and its language, which “carries what it names inside / and, like a folded paper flower / blooming in water, finds its form / in the moment of its speaking.” These poems possess great range. Some depict divine encounters subtly, with squirrels “rustling up / the dusty cinnamon // of downed leaves” or with the familiar “still // small voice you’ve known / all your life” as a “sound beyond / sounding.” Others exhibit the sheer power of lines in which “all the gates inside you // open,” allowing horses to “stampede // their pastures” while “the sky alive with swoop / and dive, a murmuration’s quicksilver // shivers.” Most of all, they raise questions. The eighth of these poems asks how it feels to sense God’s voice. “Fear with a hinge / toward entrance:” is the answer. That colon at the end is both surprising and fitting, for it visually represents a hinge—one that moves the very gate Jacobs has placed in the fence around the Torah, allowing readers to open it for themselves.

As the collection draws to a close, Jacobs instructs us in “How to Pray.” This poem brought to my mind T. S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding,” in which our exploring leads us to “arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time. / Through the unknown, unremembered gate.” As it was in the beginning, when a young Jacobs

found herself in “the murky depths / of SeaWorld’s Tunnel of Terror: a massive glass / passage through a seawater tank,” so it is here, but deeper. “Forget ecstasy,” she advises, then proceeds to rehearse every sense that the body possesses, coaching readers to “be all skin: like a kid’s / face pressed to an aquarium window,” then dive down, deep, to find “not God” but instead one’s self “closer to the heeded, heedful world.”