

Building Belonging & Breaking (Down) Beginnings

[LABA](#) on September 7, 2023 at 9:08 am



By Layla Zami

“ ‘Baruch she’amar vehayah ha’olam’

Blessed be the One who speaks the world into being
each day through the twenty-two letters.

Their shapes represent the paths of creation.”

Irene Reti, Kabbalah of Stone, 2010

in reference to the prayer בְּרוּךְ שֶׁאָמַר

In a friendly way, we were reminded that
the new country would become a new home;

and after four weeks in France
or six weeks in America,
we pretended to be Frenchmen or Americans.
The more optimistic among us would even add
that their whole former life had been passed
in a kind of unconscious exile
and only their new country now taught them
what a home really looks like.

Hannah Arendt, *We Refugees*, 1943

How does a life (un)fold into a home? How does a home house a life? With these questions in mind I set out to develop my short play *Broken Bet*. The work is the second section of a tragicomic trilogy I started creating during the pandemic to reflect on the effects of the pandemic on our sense of belonging, our relations to others, and the fissured fabric of our society.

The trilogy moves along the thread of the Hebrew alphabet, at the intersection of Jewish Kabbalah theology, Black poetry oral traditions, and theatrical Dada absurdity. My writing and performance emphasize the tragicomic aspects of our human existence. Sometimes people who heard my spoken words poems told me that they hesitated between crying and laughing out loud, and were not sure which reaction was appropriate. That's what tragicomic performance is about: how we navigate the crazy world we inherited from prior generations by constantly oscillating between emotions. As Maya Angelou said, "my great hope is to laugh as much as I cry." In theater, im/possibility becomes a reality, and maybe you no longer have to choose, everything can co-exist all at once... as we experience a change in consciousness, and a renewed perception of our surroundings and our own role in all of this unmeasurable mess. Beyond the pandemic, the trilogy is an invitation to think and feel, a reflection of my individual perception of present times as informed by our pasts, and a question about the intentions we set to shape our collective futures.

Memory is at the core of the work, and as often in my writing, the story interweaves granular memories of the quotidian as they intersect with larger

cultural and historical memory. Without prior notice, my Jewish grandparents who left Germany in 1933 propped up my play by propping into the script. My grandmother (1912-2010) suddenly showed up in the first text, while my grandfather (1918-1998) appears in the second part. I wrote the first iteration of the trilogy in German, and premiered it on August 18, 2021 at *Transitions – Festival for Jewish Contemporary Arts in Berlin*. It was a commissioned work for the Festival initiated by the Dagesh program of the Leo Baeck Foundation (LBF New York/Berlin) (see Note *1 at the end of the text). The short performance, called *aleph miteinander*, opened an evening of performances curated by Oxana Chi and I on behalf of the festival.



Layla Zami in aleph miteinander – Photo by Allegra Kortlang

The second installment, *Broken Bet*, written and performed in English, will premiere on September 14 at the 14th Street Y Theater for the opening of the LABAlive season, shortly before Rosh Hashana. Next, it will travel back

to Germany for a premiere planned temporally near the historically fateful November 9 (*2). *Broken Bet* was developed as part of my 2022-2023 LABA Fellowship in New York City (*3). During that year, I enjoyed studying under the guidance of Jewish-Iranian author Ruby Namdar, and rehearsing with my wife, dancer-choreographer Oxana Chi who is of Eastern Nigerian and Eastern European and who has been a mentor to me in many ways. I also benefited from weekly dance fitness classes with the Senegalese-American instructor Adja whose wide-spreading musical taste connected many diasporic dots. Towards the end of the residency, Oxana introduced me to costume designer Claire Fleury who designed part of the costume.



Oxana Chi and Layla Zami in Broken Bet – Photo by Philip Trevino

To gain inspiration for this piece, I deep dived in Kabbalah not only through religious texts, but also through my passion for finding theory and spirituality in literary texts. I was particularly moved by Irene Reti's dramatic *Kabbalah of Stone*, set in 15th century Spain at the time of the Inquisition. The author infuses a historical situation and questions of exile with a feminist interpretation of Judaism, and the story of a female prophet, queer love, and the quest for spiritual, cultural, and ecological identities, with an attention to our sense of listening. (*4) Reti's writing is suffused with references to Kabbalah and diffuses a beautiful interpretation of the Hebrew

alphabet, its shapes and sounds. Another novel I read was Rabbi Lawrence Kushner's *Kabbalah: A Love Story*. I appreciated his humor, and the blurring of time and space, with a blend of multiple histories and geographies.

" – I mean, do we think that light has always been the same, or has it changed?"

– It is a wonderful question, but I am afraid, sir, that my answer will probably be disappointing.

It's both." (*5)

The annual topic guiding our LABA Fellowship in 2022 was "Broken". One of the theological references that comes up in Judaism is the story of the shattered vessels. A succinct version of *Shevirat ha-Kelim* says that when God sent light meant to create the world, the ten vessels that were meant to contain the light were shattered (*6). As always in Jewish theology, interpretations abound and contradictions are allowed. While some understand this as a symbol for the disharmonious state of the world, a world where evil has entered, others view in the myth the possibility for light to reflect everywhere, and emphasize the diversity and multiplicity made possible by this primordial shattering (*7). Regardless of the interpretations, it is clear that Jewish theology and culture are filled with broken fragments and forces, be it a tower, temples, or tablets, a sea splitting open, up until the ongoing breaking of the glass at wedding ceremonies. Genesis, the very act of creation is an act of breaking, dividing upper and lower waters to create the sky, splitting time to create days and nights, and separating what we call humans from other animals, amongst others (*8). Ruby Namdar invited the LABA participants to reflect upon the aspiration to wholeness that we may feel inside and around ourselves as a result, and to explore the cracks as creative minds and bodies. In France, Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur from the Mouvement Juif Libéral de France (MJLF) where I did my bat-mitswa, offers her own interpretation of the cosmic catastrophe: humans have the ability and potentially duty to live with/in the broken state of the world (*9). Yet, fragility sometimes can or must be fixed, and therefore a key principle that sustains Judaism is *tikkun olam* or the duty to repair the world. When it comes to Kabbalah, a foundational text is the Zohar, meaning radiance,

which circles back to the meaningfulness of light.

בֵּית יַעֲקֹב לְכוּ וְנִלְכֶה בְּאוֹר יְהוָה:

O House of Jacob!

Come, let us walk

By the light of G'D.

Isaiah, 2:5

On the other, not always sunny side of my cultural heritage, Caribbean identity is also connected to what Martinican author Patrick Chamoiseau calls a "moment-catastrophe", and Black artists have repaired their own and others' worlds by creatively overcoming the catastrophe through imaginative poetry, music, dance, theater, and other forms of art (*10). Words can play an important role here too, as Fania Oz-Salzberger and her father Amos Oz remind us in *Jews and Words*.

With a love for words, I enjoy grounding myself in poetry. New bricks were now added to my play. I built an imaginary inspiration room where Langston Hughes meets Kurt Tucholsky. Hughes with the simplicity of bare truth, and the critical self-reflexivity of the author in his *Theme for English B* (1951) and Tucholsky with the sensorial nostalgia housed in the emigrant's suitcase in *Koffer auspacken* (1927). Tucholsky's (un)folding of memories in turn resonated with Gilles Deleuze thinking on the fold (le pli) and its infinite multidimensionality. As a child, I grew up thinking Deleuze was part of my *mispuche* when I read the inscription about breathing he had handwritten in a book given to my mother, who was his lung doctor.



Layla Zami preparing for the LABA performance – Photo by Oxana Chi

“The holier the event, the more ways it can be retold (*11).” The Covid pandemic went on, and the ability to breathe became a matter for all. As restrictions softened in 2022, I started with LABA and meditated on beginnings, writing new ideas for my script, and resorting to earlier ideas gathered since 2020. Draft after draft, I refined the text, and started to inhabit it like a home, polishing each corner. I knew that the second part of my trilogy was bound to revolve around the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Bet. Suddenly, scrolling the news and the streets, I became surrounded by B-words or images displayed on screens: bombs, basements, borders, and the BLM movement, Black Lives Matter. Next, mediatic attention rushed over to what seemed and sounded like a burgeoning world war, while I observed plenty of broken beings right here in New York City. As usual, my attention sticks with paradoxes in all their forms. Here, home-less people are being asked to leave the subway for shelters, while over there in Europe, people rush to the subway as a shelter. I read that during the pandemic, some homeless people were housed in neat hotels on the Upper West Side. But as soon the pandemic was declared over, they had to leave, of course. Back to normal? So much brokenness that needs to be fixed, not only buildings, people and their leaders,

institutions, relations...

Broken Bet takes the audience on a tragicomic search for the foldable meanings of home, on an individual quest for collective traditions in times of societal transition. As I kept developing this piece about the foldable meanings of home, a life change came about in our lives, and new beginnings required my wife Oxana Chi and I to postpone the premiere... Sometimes the universe moves differently than planned. The script is already written but we don't have it printed out, otherwise life would just be theater. Eventually, this play is about being, belonging, and believing. It invites you to wonder about creation: the large, mystical one, or what's the story behind our universe? And the human, artistic one, or how do we fill our life with light, how do we shape small worlds where we can breathe?

Layla Zami, Written in Brooklyn and Berlin, 2022-2023

Layla's piece will be performed in **LABA Live I: Homeland Taboos** on September 14, the first of three LABALives in the 14Y Theater this fall. Learn more and [purchase tickets here.](#)

1. A dagesh is a dot sometimes found in Hebrew letters such as in the second letter, Bet.
2. The German premiere will happen as part of the annual conference on "Dynamics of the Intransitive" at the Institute of Cultural Inquiry in Berlin.
3. LABA is a Jewish House of study and culture laboratory with hubs in cities across the world. The aim is to gather a group of artists to study Judaism's rich intellectual tradition in a free setting in order to spark new creative work and ideas that "push the boundaries of what Jewish culture can be and what Jewish texts can teach."
LABA Website <https://labajournal.com/about/>
4. Irene Reti, *Kabbalah of Stone*, Santa Cruz, Juniper Lake Press, 2010, p.

21.

5. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, *Kabbalah: A Love Story*, Broadway Books, New York, 2006, p. 28.
6. <https://www.jmberlin.de/en/core-exhibition-13-objects-shevirat-ha-kelim>
7. Thanks to Rabbi Maximilian Feldhacker (ELES Future Forum) for sharing this insight during the workshop I facilitated at the 1014 for students from the Ernst-Ludwig-Ehrlich-Scholarship Fund.
8. Here I refer to Genesis as discussed in our LABA Session #3 with Ruby Namdar, 14th Street Y, March 07, 2022.
9. Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur, "The Jewish Art of Reparation with", ELES Future Forum Series on "Resilience in Times of Crisis", Aug 12, 2021 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3StN1SOFU0M> Last accessed on Sep 03, 2023
Horvilleur is at the Head of the Liberal Jewish Movement of France, a liberal community affiliated with the World Union for Progressive Judaism, as well as rabbi of one of its two Parisian synagogues.
10. Patrick Chamoiseau, *Le conteur, la nuit, et le panier*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 2021, pp. 178-179.
"La force qui nous sort de nous-même – Ce passage par la catastrophe suscite une émotion tout autant que l'émotion le suscite. [...] le jaillissement émotionnel, cette forge créatrice à laquelle ont recours les artistes, est autant une ouverture de l'esprit qu'une ouverture du corps..."
11. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, *Kabbalah: A Love Story*, p. 106.