





S/He Created Them



# S/HE CREATED THEM

FEMINIST RETELLINGS OF BIBLICAL STORIES

Naomi Graetz



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Printed and bound simultaneously in the United States of America  
and Great Britain.

This book is dedicated to my three children, their  
spouses  
and my two grandsons.

Ariella Graetz and Menash Bar-Tuv  
Zvi Yehuda Graetz and Shirley Ledermann  
Avigail Graetz  
Itamar Yehezkel Bar-Tuv  
Har-el Meir Bar-Tuv

יגיע כפיך כי תאכל אשריך וטוב לך  
בניך ובנותיך זיתים סביב לשולחנך  
יברכך הי מציון  
וראה בטוב ירושלים  
כל ימי חיידך  
וראה בנים לבנותיך  
שלום על ישראל

You shall enjoy the fruit of your labours.  
You shall be happy and prosper.  
Your children like olive saplings around your  
table.  
May the Lord bless you from Zion.  
May you share the prosperity of Jerusalem  
All the days of your life.  
And live to see your children's children.  
May all be well with Israel.

(Adapted from Psalm 128)



# CONTENTS

CREDITS .....	IX
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS TO THE FIRST EDITION .....	XI
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS TO THE SECOND EDITION .....	XIII
WHY I WRITE MIDRASH .....	1
BEGINNINGS .....	7
IN SEARCH OF LOST PARADISE .....	13
THE END OF THE LINE .....	17
NOAH, THE FIRST OF THE JUST.....	21
THE MOMENT OF INDECISION .....	27
SARAH'S THREE LIVES.....	35
IN THE SHADOW OF HIS FATHER.....	43
SISTERS .....	53
A DAUGHTER IN ISRAEL IS RAPED .....	69
THE OLD MAN AND HIS GRANDSONS .....	73
THE DISCREDITED PROPHETESS .....	83
THE DAUGHTERS OF YOCHAVED.....	89
WHEN WILL IT BE MY TIME? .....	105
'MOTHER' IN ISRAEL .....	111
ABOUT THE AUTHOR.....	115



## CREDITS

Several of the midrashim in this book have appeared in various versions in periodicals and edited collections.

Sarah's Three Lives:

"Sarah's Three Lives," *The Journal of Reform Judaism* (Summer 1986): 43-48.

In the Shadow of his Father:

"In the Shadow of His Father," *Response* 16 (Spring-Summer 1988): 83-90.

A Daughter in Israel is Raped:

"A Daughter in Israel is Raped," in Naomi M. Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash: A Sourcebook* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson 1997): 68-71.

The Old Man and his Grandsons:

"Jacob in Egypt," *The Jewish Spectator* (Fall 1986): 19-21.

The Discredited Prophetess:

"The Discredited Prophetess," *The Melton Journal* (Winter 1987): 10.

"The Discredited Prophetess," in Naomi M. Hyman, *Biblical Women in the Midrash: A Sourcebook* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson 1997): 68-71.

The Daughters of Yocheved:

"Yocheved's Daughters," in Rebecca Schwartz (editor), *All the Women Followed Her* (Mountain View CA: Rikudei Miriam Press 2001): 103-109.

When Will It Be My Time?:

"Wanneer Komt Mijn Tijd? Een joods-feministische midrasj," *Werk-schrift* 9/6 (Maart 1989): 15-18.

'Mother' in Israel:

"Deborah the Prophetess," in Jane Sprague Zones (editor), *Taking the Fruit: Modern Women's Tales of the Bible* (San Diego 1989): 81-84.

Appeared first in *The Jerusalem Post* (March 4, 1988): 10.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS TO THE FIRST EDITION

These retellings of biblical tales were conceived during my first sabbatical from Ben Gurion University in 1985. I publish these *midrashim* as closure to my enriching sabbatical at the Five College Women's Studies Research Center at Mount Holyoke College.

These stories would not have received shape were it not for my friend Fredi Kaddar who taught me to rewrite and rewrite and rewrite. I wish to record the contribution and love of my immediate family: my sister Menorah Lebowitz Rotenberg, her husband, Aubey and their three children, Josiah, Ethan and Elizabeth, who share home and heart with me during my extended visits in Teaneck; my three children, Ariella, Zvi Yehuda, and Avigail—now wonderful, responsible, young adults—who have always encouraged me to write; finally, my partner and friend in marriage, Rabbi Michael Graetz, who has lovingly enabled me to believe in myself.

This book would be impossible were it not for the solid Jewish education I received at Ramaz, Massad Camps and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. My parents, Edward Lebowitz and Charlotte Jaray Lebowitz, sacrificed much to secure the finest modern Jewish schooling for their two daughters. With love and gratitude, I dedicate this book to my parents.

Naomi Graetz,  
South Hadley, Massachusetts  
Teaneck, New Jersey  
February 1992/Shevat 5753



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS TO THE SECOND EDITION

It is the tenth anniversary of the publication of my collection of *midrashim*. Since its publication, many readers have written to me and asked me about the availability of the book, but since a limited edition was published then (and sold out) I could not supply the demand. So I am grateful to Gorgias Press for reissuing the *midrashim*. I would like to thank Lieve Teugels for her editorial suggestions for this new edition. The essay at the beginning has been completely revised. The *midrashim* are essentially the same, but a new one on “Yocheved” has been added and the original version of “The Discredited Prophetess” as it originally appeared in print is included.

Since 1993, our family has grown. I have welcomed to our family, my son in law Menash Bar-Tuv, my daughter in law Shirley Ledermann Graetz and my two grandsons Itamar Yehezkel and Harel Meir Bar-Tuv. My mother, Charlotte Lebowitz died recently followed by my father and mother in laws, Marion and Marjorie Graetz. As our family shrinks on one end, it grows on the other end and this has been a great comfort to me. That is why I am dedicating this new edition to my children and grandchildren.

Naomi Graetz,  
Omer, Israel  
April, 2003



## WHY I WRITE MIDRASH

The purpose of this brief introduction is to justify my attempt to continue writing in the literary genre known as Midrash Aggadah. Midrash is a process of exegesis. Although it uses primary text as its starting point, it seeks to reveal new meaning in the biblical text that can be applied to contemporary issues. This can be done through the retelling of the biblical tale in contemporary language, by adding dialogue and/or description to the original story, or by recovering or inventing other stories.

The new version should be more than a re-telling of the biblical tale. It should contribute new insights and/or perspectives to the original version. It may treat the tale from a new angle or draw a new or unusual conclusion from it. In short, its purpose is to make the biblical text relevant to us, so that it speaks to us in our idiom.

Midrash is a genre which was begun by the rabbis in antiquity. The classical period and “great flowering of [mainstream] midrash was roughly between the years 400 and 1200 C.E.”<sup>1</sup> Midrash flourishes today largely thanks to feminism.<sup>2</sup>

Why the need to update an existing genre? The problem is that the genre in its ancient form is fairly recondite and inaccessible to the average, non-Hebrew speaking reader. The creative philology used by the rabbis may even have been meant originally for in-house purposes, i.e. for professional rabbis writing for other professional rabbis, hence the “puns and wordplays, reversals of letters and convergence of sounds. This aspect of explication may be foreign to our sensibility and difficult to capture in translation.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the rabbis did not want or expect midrash to be read by

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Holtz, “Reading a Midrashic Text,” in *Back to the Sources* (Summit, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Lori Lefkowitz, “When Lilith Becomes a Heroine,” *Melton Journal* (Spring 1990):7.

<sup>3</sup> Barry Holtz, p. 189.

*amcha* or the ordinary laymen. Because the genre became recondite, the process withered.

For the Bible to be kept alive, it must be remolded on a regular basis. The midrashic process has to continue. In every generation there are those who feel the legitimate need to re-interpret the Bible, to demonstrate its relevance—a sort of renewing of the covenant. In this generation it is women who feel this need.

Judith Plaskow writes of the midrash's power to remember, to invent and receive the "hidden half of Torah, reshaping Jewish memory to let women speak."<sup>4</sup> Modern feminist midrash attempts to redress the misogynist tendencies of traditional mainstream midrash.

The mainstream of rabbinic tradition depicts biblical women positively only if they are willing to assume the enabling roles of wife and/or mother.<sup>5</sup> Since most mainstream midrashim present biblical women as being of marginal importance or in a negative light there is a need for contemporary feminist midrash to change this image, to create role models for the next generation of women.

Not everyone agrees with Plaskow that Jewish women should be writing midrash. There are those women who critique the use of midrashim by women since it "holds marginal authority in the economy of rabbinic texts." Secondly it may possibly obscure the processes by which midrash is produced. Finally, "midrash as the appeal to women's voices, risks essentializing women..."<sup>6</sup>

The midrashim I write are not only exegetical, they are also eisegetical, i.e. they reflect personal concerns which are read back into the biblical text. It is possible to criticize feminist readers like myself whose contemporary "midrashic solutions" run the risk of not being taken seriously, of being considered children's stories rather than an authentic genre.<sup>7</sup> The series of midrashim which I

<sup>4</sup> Judith Plaskow, "Standing Again at Sinai," *Tikkun*, I, 2 (1986): 32.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Kuzmack, "Aggadic Approaches to Biblical Women," in E. Koltun (ed.), *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives* (Schocken 1976): 248-56.

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Gubkin, "If Miriam Never Danced... A Question for Feminist Midrash," *Shofar* 14:1 (Fall 1995): 59. She is referring to Miriam Peskowitz's, "Engendering Religious History," in the same volume.

<sup>7</sup> Lefkowitz, p. 5.

have written attempt to strike an equal balance between men and women, following the biblical adage that “God created man in His image ... male and female He created them.”<sup>8</sup> Some of the stories deal with the typically feminine concerns of motherhood, barrenness, resentment about polygamy, the after-effects of being raped, the joys of shared gossip, the tribulations of the aging process, and the unique relationship of siblings.

I wrote about Miriam, Deborah and Elisheva (Aaron’s wife) after I had developed a strong sense of my need to find in the Bible role models with whom my daughter could readily identify “for reasons other than their power in domestic space or within the family romance.”<sup>9</sup> I have tried to depict the loneliness and ambiguities of women’s leadership in a patriarchal society. These three women of initiative are reproved when they assert themselves because women are not supposed to be leaders of men.

I try to be consciously feminist when I attempt to imaginatively rediscover a past in which biblical women were active participants. In the case of Elisheva I suggest that given the opportunity to be leaders, women’s form of leadership might lead to a better world. Although Elisheva is only a name in the Torah, I have fleshed out the gaps<sup>10</sup> in the text, by inventing a daughter, a lover and an independent role for her. I have suggested that her feminist vision no doubt amplified the male-bound Torah.

The consequences of a patriarchal world view for us are clear. Conventional attitudes toward Jewish women are still being transmitted to us as part of our heritage and we respond unquestioningly to these views as if they were given truths.

Since, in addition to being a feminist, I am a politically moderate Israeli, active in the Masorti movement, I am very concerned about the influence of the extreme Right. In the midrash about Elisheva, Pinchas typifies the religious right-wing zealot who

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<sup>8</sup> Genesis 1:27. Note the title of this monograph, “*S/He Created Them.*”

<sup>9</sup> Lefkowitz, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the subject of gaps, see Lieve M. Teugels, “Gap Filling and Linkage in the Midrash on the Rebekah Cycle”, in A. Wenin (ed.), *Studies in the Book of Genesis. Literature, Redaction and History* (BETL 155) (Leuven 2001): 585-598.

sticks to the letter of the religious law often in violation of the moral law. He is depicted as a dangerous model for us to emulate, in contrast to some macho mainstream midrashim which praise him for his act.

The woman who reads the Bible is expected to view this kind of male behavior as normative. She is asked to identify against herself and accept that woman has lost the power to express her own voice. Instead women must be revisers and revisionists, with new vision bringing new perspectives to the old text.

I don't want to rewrite the Bible; I want to make it ours by having it reflect women's reality as well as men's. In other words, our task in writing interpretative works, or midrash, is to put woman's voice back where it should have been in the first place. This kind of midrash does not detract from or undermine the Torah, rather it adds additional dimensions to the Torah by making it contemporaneous, relevant and religiously meaningful. By "imaginatively re-engaging with our sacred texts, by writing midrash, all voices, not only a few, can be part of the partnership."<sup>11</sup> However, one should be careful to make explicit that our woman's voice is not necessarily all women's voice.

Gubkin writes that the "interconnection of voice and partnership that Graetz presents deserves closer examination because it makes explicit the theoretical presuppositions which under gird many feminist midrashim. The 'demand for the women's voice' when heeded has led to new interpretations of the biblical text. Often feminists offer new readings by creating voices for the silent women in the Bible... By speaking in the voice of biblical women the contemporary writer places her own needs and concerns onto the biblical text without explicitly claiming them as her own."<sup>12</sup>

If the first theoretical construct that I have presented is that of voice then the second is the notion of partnership. I ask, "Can men and women who experience a conflict with those who continue to interpret the Biblical text in such a biased manner do anything

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<sup>11</sup> Naomi Graetz, "Miriam: Guilty or Not Guilty?" *Judaism* 40 (1991): 185. Gubkin (see note 6) quotes this and refers to it in her argumentation against the use of midrash by women.

<sup>12</sup> Gubkin, p. 61.

about it?” My answer has been: “Certainly. One can insist on the partnership model as the traditional Jewish midrashic approach to text.” Gubkin, however, sees danger in this since “this understanding of partnership continues the Enlightenment fallacy that we approach and read texts as autonomous individuals in equal positions of access, influence, and power... [U]nfortunately it does not provide a satisfactory solution [since women’s writings] belie the fact that it is the Torah given through Moses that is canonical today.”<sup>13</sup>

Gubkin then goes on to call into question the use of midrash as a tool. Since women are marginalized then we cannot simply add women’s voices and stir. Secondly “the authority of midrash within the traditional economy of rabbinic texts was marginal, as these texts were accorded lesser status than halakhic forms.”<sup>14</sup> Thus there is no libratory power, no gaining of partnership if women, who are marginal to begin with, latch on to a marginal activity that has no authority in the patriarchal community. She feels that by devoting our energies to this activity we are solidifying our position as the “other” within Judaism. Gubkin would prefer to deal with the meta-text rather than the content itself. Rather than empower the historical biblical women through imaginative creations, she would prefer to ask the question of how does silencing of a particular woman function in the text.

For me the purpose of contemporary Midrash is threefold. It addresses itself to the biblical text, which cries out *darsheni*, interpret me! Secondly, it makes the Bible relevant to an audience that does not overly care about its biblical roots. Finally, it serves my need to relate to a text, which I perceive as flowing over with hidden meanings. I feel that in writing midrash I am continuing to contribute to the work of revelation. If, in the process of my new representation of facts, I help to produce new “facts: or in writing about the text in a new way contribute to determining the text—so be it”. Unlike Gubkin, I see this as positive. However, I would agree with her that we must avoid speaking in universals in order to avoid committing violence against the particular. It is not one voice

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<sup>13</sup> Gubkin, p. 62

<sup>14</sup> Gubkin quoting Peskowitz, p. 62.

that can be transformative, only many voices. And if I play my little part in this then I have succeeded.

## BEGINNINGS

“Give us another chance. Let us back in. We’ll be good. We won’t do it again. Oh please, let us back in, please!”

The hapless couple stood outside the Garden of Eden wringing their hands, beseeching the angels.

“We have nowhere to go, no plans. Please let us in,” they implored.

They pleaded with the guards. Surely if they cried enough someone would take pity on them and let them return.

But their entreaties were in vain. The angels remained stiffly unmoving at their stations, swords in front of them. They had a job to do. They had their orders. No one was to be let through.

Eve and Adam finally gave up and started to walk away sadly from the Garden of Eden. Adam bitterly regretted that his need for another human being had led to this. *If only she had not been created! Because of her I have been punished and have lost my home.*”

Aloud he said, “It’s all your fault! Do something to get us out of this!”

Eve thought, *the greatest punishment is to have to hear his complaining.*

Aloud she said, “Let’s walk until we get tired and then rest under a tree.”

When they reached a stream beside a grove of trees, they stopped and refreshed themselves by drinking from a stream. They ate some figs, which they had salvaged from Eden, and rested.

They felt better when they awoke. Eve wanted to go back and reason with the angels.

“Perhaps if we behave with more dignity this time they will give us another chance. Let’s try! Maybe there is a second entrance.”

Adam, however, had resigned himself to the new reality and argued convincingly against her.

“I think we are expected to make it on our own from here on, without outside help. Let’s try to work together, to re-create an acceptable kind of life.”

Eve reluctantly agreed. “We must try to create a new life in the image of our old one. It won’t be easy since our life in Eden was idyllic, but I won’t be able to go on if we don’t at least try. I must have a future to look forward to.”

Privately, Adam thought it an impossible task. But what harm could it possibly do for Eve to dream? If she were happy, their life together would be more pleasant.

They began looking for a suitable site on which to build a home. Each time Adam thought he had found the place, Eve noticed some minor imperfection and refused to remain. After some months of wandering, however, she began to tire easily as her body became gross and clumsy. She appeared willing to compromise and Adam took advantage of this one afternoon, when they wandered into a shaded arbor with a source of water, animals, and lush vegetation.

“We are staying here,” he said forcefully.

Surprisingly, Eve agreed without argument. Within a short time they had built a rough house with mud and twigs and discovered which plants were edible. They learned to hunt and use animal skins for clothing. After several months Eve thought that maybe this new life would not be so bad after all.

She woke up early one morning with piercing pains in her lower back. As they got more frequent and closer together, she cried out and shook Adam, disturbing his sound sleep.

“Adam, wake up! It hurts! Help me. I can’t bear the pain!”

He noticed there was a rhythm to her pain and tried to comfort her. “Don’t worry, it will get better. I’ll help you. Try to push with the pain. Don’t fight it. See if that helps.”

Finally, with a terrible tear and a shriek, a baby was born. Instinctively, they both recognized what it was and what had to be done to take care of it.

“I’ve earned this. It is mine,” Eve proclaimed. “With my suffering I’ve paid for whatever wrong I’ve done.”

She named the baby “Cain” (I bought it), and vowed she would never willingly suffer such agony again. But she quickly

forgot the birth experience for she had to cope with the daily demands made by the new baby.

He was not an easy child. He cried a lot, and so did she. He was often sick, did not digest his food well and the smell of blood upset him. She discovered that singing to him and telling him stories calmed him.

She tried very hard to do what was expected, but it wasn't easy. Adam was no help for he blamed the existence of the child on her. His primary connection to their family unit was to provide them with food and shelter.

Adam's attitude annoyed Eve less as Cain grew older. She was very attached to the boy. She told him stories about the Garden of Eden, telling him that it was like Paradise.

"Where's Paradise?" Cain asked.

"It's a far away place where one day you and I will go, and if Father wants, he can come too. We spoke a special language which the animals understood. We didn't have to worry about foraging for food. All we had to do was sit under the trees and command the fruit to drop into our hand."

"Why did you leave such a wonderful place?" Cain asked.

"I'll tell you when you are older," she answered.

Eve was uncertain why they had been driven out. Surely the fruit which she had eaten wasn't a good enough reason. It must have been something Adam had done. The proof was that he was the one who was punished daily much more than she was. *Look how hard he has to work in this new world.* Her life wasn't so bad, for she had Cain to keep her company.

She and Adam argued a lot. "Why do I have to work to create a new Eden for you? You don't do anything except spend time with the boy. When I return you don't even have a fire going with hot food ready for me. I have to do everything myself."

She used Cain as her excuse. "I was so busy with him today. We looked for some goats in order to get milk. When we finished, we rested in the woods. We just got back."

Eve would tell Adam how busy she was teaching Cain the names of plants which were safe to eat. Adam realized that she was very good at keeping the child busy, but she was having fun while he was doing real work.

All this changed when their next son was born. This time Adam was ready for the responsibilities of fatherhood. He welcomed the infant with open arms. He even chose his name. He called him Hevel<sup>1</sup> (vanity), an indirect comment on his wife's vain hopes of finding her way back to Eden. Now with a second child, she would be too busy to dream.

This was true for a while. She was exhausted. Cain cried vainly for attention. He hated this new brother who took his mother away from him and when she wasn't looking, would pinch him. This would make the baby cry and then his mother would pay even more attention to Hevel, so he learned not to do that. He missed the old story times and the loving attention. Eve felt badly about Cain's unhappiness and promised she would find time alone with him, but she never did. Cain felt deserted. He hid his feelings, but never forgave his mother for abandoning him to take care of Hevel.

The children grew up and became independent. Cain took Hevel to explore their surroundings. While they were gone Eve had time for herself. She often thought about the Garden of Eden. She felt that she had been forced out of a life of luxury and now was doomed to continue as the servant of two sons and a husband. She had no real purpose in life. Cain seemed to need her, even though he tried to pretend that he did not. *I must find some time to spend with him.*

One fine morning, she watched the boys through the opening of their house.

Look at them! Cain's leading as usual. I wonder what they are doing. They look so intense. I hope they don't get into trouble. Sometimes Cain is so mean to Hevel.

She saw Cain signal Hevel to follow him. Cain took some cornmeal and Hevel took his pet sheep, the one he had raised himself. She wondered where they were going, but decided not to worry.

Oh, it's going to be so much easier, now that they're not dependent on me. I won't have to decide who is right in their endless disputes. She had never realized how draining it was to

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<sup>1</sup> This is the Hebrew name for Abel.

have more than one child. Fortunately they are almost mature. Soon we can all spend time together as a happy family.

In her day-dreaming, she didn't notice that the sky was now overcast with dark threatening clouds. Adam rushed home to avoid the downpour.

"Where are the two boys?" he asked.

"They went off in the direction of the mountain," Eve answered.

"How could you let them go in this weather?"

"It was beautiful this morning."

"And you let Hevel go with Cain! You know how rough Cain is when the two of them are alone."

"I thought it would be good for them to spend some time together. They have to be friends."

"Well, I'm going to search for them. I hope nothing's happened to Hevel."

"Hevel, Hevel. That's all I ever hear from you."

"What about you and your precious Cain? Ever since he was born, you had no time for me. I kill myself so you can pretend you are still in Eden and what thanks do I get for that!"

The battle of words only ceased when Adam strode off to search for his sons.

By night time the three of them had not returned. It was raining hard. Eve assumed that the three must have found shelter for the night. Her primary concern was for Cain. Adam would no doubt punish him severely for having disappeared with Hevel.

In the morning, Adam came back alone, soaked through and visibly upset.

"I searched all night for them. I looked in every cave, in every possible shelter. I don't know where they've gone to. They've both disappeared off the face of this earth," he sobbed.

Moaning, he tore his hair, rent his damp clothes and smeared them with ashes. With watery eyes he lowered himself to the ground to lament his favorite son, Hevel.

Eve sat hugging her body, rocking back and forth, keening to herself.

"I am alone. My children have left me! What has become of my first-born son? What will I do without Cain? Oh, the pain and

torment of bringing him into this world! How will I ever get back to Eden, alone, without his help?”

She was bereft and tired of life. If only she could persuade Adam to return to Eden. Then she would have a reason to live.

But he was adamant about not leaving. He was comfortable here. He blamed her for the loss of their sons. He clung to the belief that if they stayed here their sons would know where to find them on the day they came back. She, however, had no illusions about their return. They were gone forever.

She knew that without Adam’s cooperation she would not search for Eden. She was slowing down. She had no reason to get up in the morning. All day she would lie on her pallet, scheming how to get to Eden, but she lacked the will to proceed. She wanted the good things in life served to her, without having to work for them.

Adam had no sympathy for her. He had faced reality long ago, the day they had left Eden; he had accepted the fact that life was hard. He had put Eden behind him, fathered a family, and never looked back. *Why can’t she do the same? If only she would consider having another child. Perhaps that will give her a sense of purpose? Make her young again.* Adam was confident of almost everything, yet unsure of this.

Can I let the world end with us? I need a son to keep me company in my old age. But if we have another child and she neglects him? Or worse, if she spoils him and he turns out to be another Cain? I won’t know if I don’t try! Will I? What if she rejects my advances? I will have to risk that, won’t I? With that, he pushed aside the curtain separating her area from his.

## IN SEARCH OF LOST PARADISE

When their two children pressed Adam and Eve to explain why they were forced to leave the Garden of Eden, Cain and Hevel were told conflicting stories about why they had to leave Eden. The first tale concerned their good friend, the talking snake, who was always giving them advice. This tale was connected to a story about a tree whose fruit was so delicious and tempting that God put it there just to test Adam and Eve. It seems that God had forbidden man to eat fruit, but the snake convinced them otherwise.

The story that fascinated Cain most was about Adam and Eve's punishment for discovering the secret of childbirth. This apparently was why his parents had been made to leave the Garden of Eden. God had reasoned that with children, Adam and Eve could take over His world.

Cain rather thought he would have liked living in the Garden of Eden. His mother would have more time for him and he wouldn't have the daily chores of collecting wood for the fire, or of helping out with the harvest—two tasks which he detested. He wished he could have had the experience of snapping his fingers at the trees and commanding them to drop their fruit into his waiting hands, as his parents had done. But had his parents not left Eden he would not have been born.

Cain was a confused young man who angered easily. Until Hevel came along he had his mother to himself. Having a younger companion wasn't all that bad, especially since Hevel worshipped Cain and would do anything for him. There was no real reason for Cain to be so unhappy and dissatisfied. And indeed, when the harvest was good, he would have a sense of pride in his work and not think too much about the easy life that could have been his in Eden. But when it rained before he could get the harvest in, or when his younger brother, Hevel wasn't quick enough to serve him, he would brood about his fate.

*If I hadn't been born, I wouldn't have to work or suffer. I wouldn't have to look after Hevel or help out in the garden. I would be free, with nothing to*

*worry about.* These unsettling thoughts he kept to himself. If only I had someone to talk to! But there was no one.

Cain was too busy to brood for long. Sometimes he shot an animal with his bow and arrow, burying the evidence immediately for he had mixed feelings about killing animals: the smell of blood disgusted him, yet it was exciting to have the power to cause the pain and squirming that preceded the sudden end of all life.

One particular day everything Cain did turned out wrong. It was a windy hot day and sand was in everything. He was fencing a garden for his mother when a heavy stone dropped on his foot. He blamed Hevel.

*Where is he? He's always pestering me, asking me what he can do to help. And today, when I need him, he's off playing with that disgusting pet sheep of his.*

He cried out bitterly, "Oh that I was in the Garden of Eden, where the weather is always pleasant, where one doesn't have to tend the fields."

At times like this Cain had a place of refuge, a nearby mountain where he would go to calm his uncontrollable anger. He decided to place some corn meal on the sacrificial altar he'd built there, in hopes of settling his mood. Just then Hevel came by and he impulsively asked him to join him.

Hevel thought Cain would be pleased if he took one of his sheep. He and his big brother would eat roasted mutton after the sacrifice.

But this pleasant vision of brotherliness was not to be. The bleating of the sheep, the blood and the smells disturbed Cain and as they walked up the hilly path Cain's anger mounted.

"Can't you walk faster? Why are you dragging your feet?"

Hevel was used to his brother's moods. He was proud to have been invited on this expedition with his big brother so he explained without rancor, "My sheep is heavier than your grains. That's why I am walking slower than you."

"Who told you to kill a sheep? It is so bloody and messy! And you smell!"

And so it went, with Cain's anger becoming an overwhelming force.

They arrived at a clearing and gathered stones to build two simple altars with room at the center for the offering. Cain put his grains on his altar and Hevel placed his slaughtered sheep on his altar. There was a peaceful moment while they both concentrated on the meaning of their sacrificial offering.

Nothing happened to the corn meal! Cain put more energy into purifying his thoughts; still nothing happened. His grains did not burn. But Hevel's sheep offering did. Cain was amazed at the unfairness. Could the killing of an innocent creature be preferable to his own simple peace offering of corn meal?

Cain was furious. He yelled at God and grabbed a stone from the altar, "So it's shedding blood You want!"

In an outburst of anger he struck Hevel on the head. Hevel dropped to the ground. He lay still, unmoving. It was over. There was a long moment of silence.

Cain went over to inspect his deed. *Oh my God! What have I done? I've killed my brother!*

Cain's immediate reaction was to deny his responsibility for his brother's death. *It was an accident! I didn't mean to do this!*

He quickly cleaned up his brother's blood, looking around to see if any one had seen him. Then he dug a deep hole in which to bury his brother, just as he had done with the remains of the animals he had hunted.

Although he knew he had done something terrible, some part of him expressed pride at the cool and efficient manner in which he was disposing of the evidence.

When he was finished he sat down thinking, *Hevel is dead! I will be held responsible. What can I do to atone for my deed?* He couldn't face his parents. He couldn't explain to them what he had done. Rather than go home; he went out into the desert to think through his future course of action.

*It's their fault! They shouldn't have left the Garden!* He thought in confusion. *God didn't plan that I be born. He has been pushing me to this act. Should I finish the job and kill myself as well? There's no one left who cares about me. The best thing I can do is to disappear off the face of the earth.*

Cain put his face into his hands and wept. *If only I had someone to talk to!* But he was alone with his thoughts in the desert.

The vultures were flying in a circular pattern, waiting for his decision. Why make it easy! If I take my own life, it will all end with me. Perhaps this is what God planned? But is this what I want to happen?

He left the desert and began wandering around the world. He finally settled east of what he believed was Eden. He found a mate and had many children, grandchildren and great grand children. He remained an enigma to them. They always wondered about this restless, driven man who could not find contentment despite all that he possessed.

## THE END OF THE LINE

*Cain left the presence of the Lord and settled...east of Eden. Cain knew his wife and she conceived and bore Enoch. And he then founded a city...and Methusael begot Lamech [who] took to himself two wives... [who bore him] Javal...Juval...Tuval-Cain...and Naamah...Adam knew his wife again, and she bore...Seth, meaning, "God has provided me with another offspring in place of Hevel"...And to Seth...a son was born, and he named him Enosh. It was then that men began to invoke the Lord by name. (Genesis 4:16-26)*

All of humanity gathered to pay their last respects to Adam at his funeral. The two families of Adam, descended from his two sons, Cain and Seth, sat in the shade of the date tree groves, sipping hot mint tea. At first their voices were hushed and respectful as befitted the occasion. But later the tone became loud and recriminatory.

Both families were related by blood to Adam. But there the resemblance ended, for the two clans differed in both character and life style.

Cain's descendants were polished, and fastidious in their tastes. Since they did not believe in having many children, this last generation had remained childless.

In contrast, the descendants of the Seth-Enosh branch of the family were a pious and unpretentious group of shepherds whose main talent was in nurturing animals. They had many children and praised God for his bountifulness.

Inevitably the polite chatter of the two clans turned into a heated discussion. The topic: Which family deserved to continue Adam's line?

Tuval-Cain, son of Lamech, listened attentively to the attacks of his pious relatives. He found it difficult to sit silently while they besmirched all that his family stood for.

The Enosh side insisted they were a chosen people.

Tuval-Cain asked his cousin Jared, “Why do you consider yourself “chosen”?”

“We are the only ones worthy of this distinction,” Jared claimed. “When Adam decided to begin a new family, it was a way of punishing your ancestor Cain for having murdered Hevel. Since the curse of Cain is on you, we are clearly the ones chosen to carry on the line.”

“Yes,” Enoch son of Jared added, “When Adam had another child at the late age of 130 it was because he was dissatisfied with you. Our ancestral progenitor, Seth, was meant to replace his favorite son Hevel, murdered by your ancestor, Cain.”

“What nonsense!” Tuval-Cain countered. “You may not know this but my two brothers and I were named to commemorate Hevel.”

“That meant nothing to Adam,” Jared countered obstinately. “He didn’t think your father’s attempt at making amends was enough. That’s why he had Seth: to ensure that his family line would not die out.”

“We three ‘Hevels’ are substitute enough,” Tuval-Cain responded. “Each one of us is making his mark on society. Have you anyone in your branch who equals the four of us in talents? You know me! I am a master forger and builder, an artist. Yaval, my brother manages vast estates and the affairs of men. Yuval plays the horn and writes music which gives people much pleasure. Even our sister Naamah, who has a beautiful voice, does delicate sewing which gives pleasure to the eye.”

Mehalalel admitted appreciatively that they did enjoy listening to their music and seeing their artistry, but after a pause, he ridiculed these achievements. “You may be talented but you lack a purpose. None of you have children. You’ve been too intent on creating things.”

Tuval-Cain counter-attacked. “It is true that the four of us have decided against having children. But it is ridiculous to regard it as a curse. It is a decision which each one of us has made personally.”

“That may be, but how can you continue a family line without children,” pointed out Lamech.

Tuval-Cain had to admit that the debate over the “chosen” family was academic as long as his side remained childless. He listened some more to his simple, yet articulate, relatives in the hope of learning something from them.

Noah, son of Lamech was detailing the responsibilities involved in caring for animals, large and small. “We have a secluded oasis-like area which is ideal for grazing. Animals don’t fear us and we don’t harm them. We all live together in harmony.”

While Noah was describing his pastoral life, a young man with a straggly beard interrupted him. He cried out, pointing to Tuval-Cain, “The end is near for you, oh son of Cain. You are doomed. The ancient curse is about to be carried out. Even your name, Hevel, conjures up vanity, mourning, nothingness, evil and woe!”

Tuval-Cain was offended by this diatribe. “This is going too far!”

He started to leave but felt compelled to stop, for one of Noah’s daughters had just begun to speak. She was an unusually attractive young woman, almost as striking as his sister Naamah. Her speech was very persuasive as she talked rhapsodically about their pastoral existence.

“Our life style dates back to the Garden of Eden. In Adam and Eve’s time one didn’t have to work for one’s bread. In those days we were in partnership with the earth. People, animals and the land did not compete with each other. Life was better and simpler in those ancient times.”

“That may be, but today there are too many people in the world for us to wait for fruit to drop from trees. The world has progressed and become more complicated. There is no going back,” Tuval-Cain said.

“But look at the consequences of competition, the concomitant inequality and poverty that exist. Those who are responsible for this a state of affairs will be punished,” she insisted.

“Surely not our clan” countered Tuval-Cain, “for we are the purveyors of food, shelter and clothing to mankind. Society depends on our contribution.”

“But look at what you have done in the process: you have destroyed the natural resources around you by hunting and by uprooting trees and plant-life.”

This woman had hit a sore spot! *It's true! The trees are not replacing themselves as fast as they used to,* Tuval-Cain was forced to admit. *Is there any truth to her claim? Is she living closer to paradise than I am?* It was too complicated. He had no answer. He wondered about this forceful woman. She was more than his match.

The sun was about to set. Tuval-Cain reviewed the day's events. It had been an unusual day. Not one female member of the Enosh family had approached the Cain branch. Normally, at family gatherings such as these, the women and their young daughters would be after the three of them. Tuval-Cain and his brothers had much to offer on the marriage market; but, today, no one had shown the slightest interest in him. Maybe it was time for him to take the initiative.

*That attractive young woman speaker has possibilities,* he thought. *She is more intelligent than the rest of them. We might be compatible. Perhaps we could work out a compromise between our differing life styles.*

He walked over with the intention of introducing himself. Noah's daughter saw him coming and deliberately turned her back on him.

He was taken aback. *She is not interested in me!*

He faced a harsh truth. *She has given up on me. Does she have an intimation of my future that is denied me?*

Suddenly he was weary. Could it be that the vanity they had introduced to the world would erase the memory of their accomplishments?

Tuval-Cain prayed that it would not be; that future generations would remember the family of Cain.

## NOAH, THE FIRST OF THE JUST

Everything would have been perfect except for the bane of his existence, the city of Babel. Noah was raised in an oasis, east of Eden, where animals were free to roam and food was abundant. Despite the hard work, he enjoyed caring for the animals. His wife and three children agreed that their life was idyllic. Unfortunately they needed occasional supplies available only in Babel. The people dressed and talked differently there. Noah's family felt out of place. They didn't have anything in common with the city-dwellers. They worshipped progress, and in its name argued that anything was acceptable. This meant they would push people aside; cheat; kill; lie; destroy. They considered Noah's family uncivilized barbarians.

Noah would chat with shopkeepers in the marketplaces; they would laugh at him when he complained about their warped civilization, saying to him, "You are a simple *tzadik* with old-fashioned values."

Noah was proud of this nickname. But these encounters depressed him. He saw that with the passing of time, life in the city was getting worse. He worried that the depravity which existed outside his oasis might interfere with the education of his three sons. He was determined to keep his own immediate family together as an uncorrupted unit.

If I have to, I, my family and animal friends will leave the oasis, rather than be contaminated by these evil people. But where can we go? Who will want us? We will have to be self-sufficient. We will have to be housed and fed.

The possibility of transporting his mini-civilization preoccupied him, although he didn't seriously believe that they would ever have to actually move.

Life remained the same for Noah, but the pace of life in the city became frenzied. It was no longer safe to go to the marketplaces. The teasing and taunting had changed to stone-throwing and threats. Noah preferred doing without

supplies, rather than subject his family to the terror of visiting the city.

He visualized finding another oasis, one with friendlier neighbors. Noah had a vision of a new world without unpleasantness, one that would be peopled only by his own descendants. He dreamt that he would build a gigantic boat, an ark that could house all of his family and all of the animals in the oasis. Then they would go off on a voyage to discover a new world.

The only problem was that there was no sea around, so how could he transport his ark? It was too big to be put on wheels.

The vision of the ark obsessed him and he decided to build it.

Noah had good hands and all his three sons were carpenters. He drew up specifications and insisted on them. He braved the marketplaces and the taunting people to get the tools he needed. People heard about his boat and came out to see it. They mocked him and called him by the old nickname, “simple *tzadik*”.

When the ark was finished Noah walked through his oasis, counting the animals and planning ahead for their needs. Seeing that there were a great many, he decided to take only a male and female of each species. He calculated the amounts of grain needed. He gathered it all and put it into storage. Soon everything was ready.

One day it began to rain. When the rain didn't stop for a week, Noah decided that this was the sign. He loaded the animals and food on the ark and told his family to get on board. His mother and father didn't take him seriously and refused to go, so they were left behind. With a lot of complaining his wife, sons and grandchildren got on, each dragging their favorite possessions.

Once on the ark, the grumbling began in earnest. Outside where there was room, food, water in abundance everyone had been happy. But here on the boat, space and supplies and patience were limited.

Noah's wife was the first to complain. “I can barely breathe; it smells in here and there is so much cleaning and cooking to do.”

Next to complain were his three sons' wives: “The children are driving us crazy, running around, and begging us to invent new games to keep them busy.”

His sons were not used to disagreeing with Noah, so they took counsel among themselves.

Ham said, "The old man has gone too far. Let's get off this boat before it's too late."

Yafeth agreed. "Life may have been boring in the oasis, but this is much worse. If father wants to stay on board, it's his business."

They organized their families and invited their mother to join them. They packed their possessions and prepared to leave in the morning. Although it rained very hard that night, they didn't give it much thought.

In the morning, they readied themselves to disembark. Suddenly Shem shouted, "Look! You can't see a thing for miles around—no trees, no land, no houses, nothing. What can we do?"

Noah appeared at this point and, without referring to their mutinous plans, said, "I guess you can all stay and help with the animals. The cows must be milked, the hens have just laid some eggs, and we have to repair the damage caused by the rocking of the ship to the lions' and tigers' cages, otherwise they might get out."

It rained for forty days and forty nights. Noah wondered what was in store for them. *Would they have to stay in the ark forever?* He calculated how long the food on board could last and how long they could survive without killing any of the animals. *I wonder if our relatives in the big cities are making out any better with all this rain.*

On the fortieth night, the rain abruptly stopped. In the morning, the sun came out. The women washed all the dirty clothing and hung the clean laundry on lines in every available space. The fresh smell of soap inspired the men to clean up as well. When everything was spotless, they put on their best clothing and prepared to celebrate. But when they looked around them, they didn't see anything to celebrate for there was no land in sight. They were trapped on this boat, with each other and all the animals.

To take everyone's mind off their predicament and give them something to look forward to, Noah decided to send off one of the birds to see if it could find land. They placed bets on whether it would return. It came back in the evening. The next day he sent it out and again it returned. A few days later he sent out a dove, and

after two days the dove flew over them proudly bearing an olive branch in its beak. They all cheered the bird aware that in a few days they would be able to get off this god-forsaken boat.

The waters receded. There was a sudden bump and they landed. Despite the mud, they left the ark. They decided to hold the celebration that had been postponed on the ark. They planned to slaughter all the new-born animals and have a gigantic feast. They planned to invite all their old friends to this feast, but couldn't find any other human beings or animals.

Noah sadly realized that his awful vision of starting over was coming true. They were all alone in the world. He would have to be like Adam. He was overwhelmed, doubting whether he could handle the responsibility involved.

During the feast that followed, Noah fell into a drunken stupor. His sons saw him lying in the mud.

"Is this how we start off our new civilization?" Ham asked, pointing to his father in disgust.

The other two brothers, however, covered their father and defended him by saying that he was entitled to a night off to celebrate.

"Don't be so hard on Father, Ham!" Yafeth said.

"We can be proud of all father has accomplished. Because he kept us apart from the rest of civilization, we were not destroyed," Shem said, adding, "It is up to us to make the best of what we have, to have as many children as we can, and to start a new world."

Noah awoke during this discussion. He cursed Ham for letting him lie half-clothed in the mud. He vowed never to drink or eat that much again, since it wasn't good for him.

To show his sons that he could indeed lead them in this new world, he discussed with his sons a few practical and obvious rules. The first one concerned food. Adam and Eve's generation had been forbidden to eat meat. For Noah it was not so simple. He both loved animals and revered life, yet he also liked the taste of meat.

His first decision was therefore a compromise. It would be permissible to kill animals for food. But they must be careful to remember that what they ate was once alive. As a sign of respect to

all life, he ruled that eating the blood of any animal was prohibited, since blood is the symbol of life.

As they were making this and other decisions, they saw a bow-shaped spectrum of many colors arched over the sky. It seemed to cross the entire universe. They thought it augured well for their future. *This rainbow is nature's signature, its approval of our decisions.* They pondered the meaning of something so beautiful. It was exciting yet sobering to know that the future world depended on them.



## THE MOMENT OF INDECISION

She had no name of her own. She was known to the community as *esbet lot*, Lot's wife. This offended her because she had an identity of her own. She had sought appreciation for her own accomplishments. She had proved more than once that she was more than just a wife and mother.

From the time Lot's wife had arrived in Sodom, she had found that staying at home dissatisfied her. She had left the mundane details of keeping a house to her daughters and servants and involved herself in society. Life had been full of opportunity for someone like her in the land of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Most cultural activities existed in Sodom because she had initiated them. Sodom was on the crossroads of civilization and many visitors passed through, often staying to sample the therapeutic waters of the Dead Sea. She was the hostess and acknowledged leader of society and no social event was complete without her patronage. She had inaugurated the famous host-guest service system whereby visitors to Sodom would be matched by their size to the size of the bed.

She should have felt a sense of pride at her success in wiping out poverty in Sodom, yet she was tired and a bit afraid of the responsibilities involved in being a leader. Her friends had gone further than she had intended in eliminating undesirable social elements. They were now drawing up endless lists of people who constituted a threat to their homogeneous society. Comments were now being made about "outlanders", people who had not been born in Sodom. She thought it advisable to withdraw from active leadership while she was still nominally the leader.

Although technically Lot's wife qualified as a foreigner, her feelings about her primitive relatives who lived in the backward area of the Negev were so well-known that she had had honorary citizenship bestowed upon her. Sodom was her adopted homeland; nothing would induce her to leave it. Yet she felt it was time to step

down and enjoy the civilized pleasures and opportunities that she had helped create.

Their spacious home was lavishly decorated with tapestries and rugs. Artistic arrangements of wild flowers and thorns were displayed in her collection of burnished pottery. Her home was open to all. Food was plentiful. She made sure that the wines they stored came from the vineyards of Hebron; that their oils came from the olive groves of Northern Canaan; that the dates they grew themselves at Ein Gedi were not bruised, and that the grains, which were transported by oxen from the coastal area, were the best.

Their many slaves enabled her to entertain in style, yet her husband enjoyed cooking and on special occasions would dismiss the servants and prepare the meal himself. He especially liked to prepare a meal for Abraham and Sarah when they came down for their annual visit.

She, however, always dreaded their coming.

“I can’t stand the way she criticizes me, and tries to show how much better she is than me,” she would complain to Lot. “Who does she think she is?”

Lot would try to calm her, since Sarah was his step-sister, and he wanted them to be friends. But Lot’s wife was too busy thinking about how she could hold her own with Sarah. It was fairly easy. All she had to do was lead the conversation to her daughters and their accomplishments.

“Why, it’s amazing how they take after their father; how they always follow him around, and are willing to do his bidding. I have never seen such a close relationship between a father and his daughters.” Then she would add maliciously, “But then you wouldn’t know about that, would you?”

Sarah, who was unable to have a child of her own, would get upset. Lot didn’t like her to bait Sarah, so she did this infrequently. When the two women weren’t trading veiled insults they would talk, as all women do, about their husbands, their household problems, and their wealth.

Sarah was lonely and bitter, without female friends. Although she didn’t especially care for Lot’s wife, she tried to persuade her to come back to the Negev since she was better than nothing.

“I too am well-thought of by society,” Sarah said to convince her.

But Lot’s wife always refused. She was bored by Sarah and besides, she did not want to ever leave Sodom and play second fiddle to Sarah and Abraham, even if she and Lot would become Abraham’s heirs.

Messengers often came to Sodom from faraway places. Since Lot was usually to be found doing business near the gates of the city, the first place they would come to would be Lot’s home. Thus Lot’s household was the source of all news in Sodom. Whenever newcomers arrived, the citizens of Sodom would gather in front of his house to find out what was happening in the mid-eastern world.

During the Battle of the Kings, Lot aligned himself with the wrong side and was taken hostage with his whole family. They were held for ransom and had to be rescued by Abraham’s men. Lot’s wife found it humiliating to express gratitude to Abraham. Once home, she would have nothing to do with Sarah, and refused to send even greetings to her with Lot’s messengers.

Lot worried about his wife. She was alienating him from his family. He wasn’t ready to cut himself off from them. You never knew when you might need them. After all, Abraham was held in high esteem by the Sodomites for his part in the Battles of the Kings. Then too, Lot was his nephew and there was the tantalizing prospect of inheriting Abraham’s wealth. Were this to happen, he might want to leave Sodom. He did not agree with his wife that Sodom was the only possible place on earth for them, although it certainly was the most developed city of its time.

Lot was not sure if the notorious sophistication of the Sodomites was to his liking anymore. Degenerate people were coming from neighboring countries to partake of the excessive pleasures of Sodom. Life was fast becoming decadent. Lot closed his eyes to the unusual practices his friends engaged in and fervently prayed that his wife and daughters were not involved in anything which might later embarrass him in the eyes of Abraham.

One evening when Lot was sitting near the city-gates, two messengers from Abraham arrived breathlessly. They wanted to speak to him immediately as they had something urgent to tell him.

Lot suggested, “Why don’t you first come to my house and wash up, have something to eat and drink. When you are rested, we can talk.”

But the messengers did not want to enter the city and insisted that Lot talk to them on the spot.

Lot’s sense of hospitality was outraged. It was unthinkable for him to discuss family affairs at the gate with strangers, without inviting them to his home. He left them there and returned home.

When Lot related this to his wife, she reacted similarly, saying, “How ungrateful! No one has ever refused the hospitality of our house!”

The messengers remained waiting on the outskirts of town. The Sodomites assumed that these strangers were homeless outcasts. They tried to lure them into one of their homes with promises of “good times” and “fun”. The messengers had a good idea of what was being hinted at and signaled their disinterest. The Sodomites thereupon hounded them so much with their obscene gestures and comments that the hapless messengers decided to seek Lot out after all. They came in the dark, pursued by a mob of people yelling crude insults and making vulgar gestures.

After relating their narrow escape to Lot’s family, they drank water and ate the *matzah* bread that Lot had hastily baked for them. They accepted Lot’s hospitality just for the night. As they were preparing to go to sleep they heard terrible drunken shouting outside and banging at the door. Lot threw open the window and saw crowds of people young and old, waving torches.

They were clamoring for his guests. “We want the strangers, we want the strangers! Give them to us! They’re ours, not yours!”

Lot was appalled. Surely the mob outside didn’t think he had carnal intentions, that he wanted them. He went out to explain and tried to calm them.

“They are our guests, enjoying the protection of our roof and you cannot have them,” he said. The rabble outside refused to take no for an answer and continued to storm the house.

In desperation Lot offered them his daughters.

“They are virgins, take them and do with them what you will, just leave my guests alone.”

But the mob refused to be placated; they wanted the men inside.

The scene was rapidly turning ugly and they girded themselves for an attack by barring the shutters and preparing to bolt the heavy front doors. Suddenly one of the messengers pulled Lot back into the house. Simultaneously the group storming the door was temporarily blinded by a stabbing ray of light. The tenor of the mob now changed. Since they could no longer see, they attacked at random. After a while they lost interest and with difficulty felt their way home.

The inhabitants of Lot's house were recuperating from after-shock. One daughter exclaimed to the other, "Would he have really have handed us to the mob? What good is hospitality, if it means sacrificing your own family?"

Lot went outside to inspect the damage inflicted on the exterior of the house and locked the gates against any possible return of the mob.

Lot's wife found it difficult to deal with the ugly reality of her fellow citizen's behavior. "Don't they know who we are? I will complain about it tomorrow. They cannot go unpunished!"

The messengers interrupted their thoughts. "Listen to us! We have come to save you. The city is doomed. The people here have gone too far and are beyond redemption. Because of Abraham's intercession, only you and your immediate family will be allowed to escape punishment."

Lot was in a state of shock and unable to decide what to do. He gave each woman a chance to voice her opinion about this sudden turn of affairs. They spent what was left of the night arguing with each other and the messengers.

Lot's wife refused outright to leave Sodom. "What, give up all the comforts of home and go back to Abraham and Sarah in defeat!"

The daughters wailed, "If we leave we may never find suitable husbands! How can we give up our friends and comfortable life?"

Lot himself wasn't overjoyed at the prospect of leaving behind all his possessions and becoming dependent once again on Abraham's bounty.

The messengers sensed that they would not achieve their mission unless they took the four of them forcibly in hand. The messengers eventually convinced Lot and the girls that there would be a total annihilation of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. But Lot's wife was impossible to convince.

"I don't believe you. Abraham and Sarah are behind this. It's a plot to get us back in their power. I'm not going with you."

The two angels had to drag her out of the house and pull her down the street until her innate sense of dignity made her capitulate. Fortunately it was dawn and no one was up in Sodom to see them leave in this ignominious fashion.

When they were all safely on the outskirts of town, the messengers told them to start walking in the direction of Zoar and not to look back in the direction of Sodom. They all had thoughts which occupied them on the long walk. Each one regretted leaving the accumulations of a life time: their pottery, their clothing, their jewelry, and their rugs.

Although this pre-occupied the daughters, their overwhelming concern was the loss of their friends and admirers. They wept over their fate, "Will we ever have families of our own?"

Lot's thoughts on the other hand were of a practical nature. *Where is the nearest oasis? We must get there when the sun is at its zenith. How long can the women walk without tiring? Should we try to get to the Negev on our own? Should we wait for Abraham to send some men down to help us?*

Lot and his daughters walked ahead, trying to set a rapid pace. Lot's wife did not walk with them. She needed to think. She was distraught. Her thoughts were bitter.

*How dare they force me to give up the life I love? How will I ever recoup what I've lost? If Sarah and Abraham become our protectors, we will be their vassals. If Sodom is going to be destroyed because of its wickedness, no one will remember all my achievements. Surely I too am answerable in part for their crimes.*

*Why am I being spared? I should be punished with them! The decision has been taken out of my hands because I'm 'Lot's wife'? Already I am being pushed around as if I'm just chattel, without an identity of my own.*

She was torn between loyalty to her family and allegiance to her adopted home. *If I return, what will become of them? If I stay with my family, what will become of me?*

In an agony of indecision, she turned and took one single fatal step back in the direction of Sodom.



## SARAH'S THREE LIVES

Her beauty was renowned. Stories were told of the comeliness that had to be hidden from lusting eyes.

No one knew her real age or name. Her spirit was incandescent; her smile, balm to the weary.

Her life was marked by three distinct phases. Her formative years were dominated by the rumors of her magnificent beauty. Sarai, or Yiscah, was born in the kingdom of Ur Casdim to the notable family of Haran whose lineage could be traced back to the beginnings of time. Despite her extraordinary beauty she was a learned person with a mind of her own. She focused her attention on her step-uncle Abram, son of Terach, whose ideas she admired. Although there was a ten year's difference between them, she planned to marry him when she grew up.

They were like-minded individuals who regaled in each other's company and were always in rapport. He was handsome, thoughtful and full of initiative. Their relationship was one of mutual respect. She was entranced by his revolutionary approach to theology and he appreciated both her beauty and inquisitive mind.

They were a perfectly congenial couple. Soon after their marriage they shocked their family by announcing that they were leaving Ur to pursue a semi-nomadic existence. Abram had a sense of calling which beckoned him to go elsewhere, a mission which could not be fulfilled in an atmosphere of luxury and sophistication. Sarai full-heartedly had been converted to his beliefs and was as eager as he to experiment with a new form of worship.

Thus the beautiful and intellectual Sarai gave up the comforts of civilization for the primitive conditions of travel. To concretize the next phase of Sarai's life: transmigration in search of meaning and identity, she and Abram changed their names: she to Sarah (servant of God); he to Abraham<sup>1</sup>, to signify his allegiance to the One God.

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<sup>1</sup> God changes Abram's name to Abraham as part of the covenant in

They cut their ties with everyone, except for her brother Lot and his wife, who for reasons of their own joined them.

The four of them had no idea what awaited them. At first each day was an adventure. Then Lot and his wife took over the preparation of food and care of the livestock with Abraham and Sarah managing their large retinue of slaves and servants. Most of them had families and many children and since she didn't have a child of her own, Sarah pre-occupied herself with their personal problems.

Abraham was in charge of travel arrangements. He alone knew where they were going: to the Promised Land of Canaan which was in a southwesterly direction.

At night Abraham told Sarah of his dreams, of his concept of One God: a god of justice and mercy, who viewed all men as equal, and who would reward the good and punish the wicked. She listened to him and encouraged him. It did not occur to either of them that such a god might one day make demands on them. In this second stage of life, they were wandering towards a land which was promised to them, hoping to begin anew. There they would be free to worship in whatever form they pleased.

The only thorn in their idyllic nomadic life was Lot's wife, who resented living in such primitive conditions and kept talking about what they had left behind. All she wanted was to find a civilized place, and then she would leave them. Abraham and Sarah would gladly have deposited her in such a city, had they found one on the way.

Lot, to his credit, carried out his duties uncomplainingly. The livestock flourished and multiplied under his care. He oversaw the planning and preparing of food so that no one went hungry. Yet there was an uncomfortable tension between the couples, particularly between the two women. Sarah would refer any problem she had to Abraham or to Lot rather than deal directly with Lot's wife.

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the flesh (circumcision). "You shall no longer be called Abram; your name shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations" (Genesis 17:5-6). The expanded form of his name with the addition of the Hebrew letter *hey* hints at his close relationship with God.

The situation was unfortunate for Sarah needed a female companion to whom she could reveal her intimate feelings and personal observations.

It was hard to tell that Sarah was growing older during this second phase of her life, for her face was still as unwrinkled as that of a young woman. But Sarah noted the passage of time. She attended the deliveries of her servants' babies, yet was herself unblessed. She resented being thought the inferior of her servants. Her feelings about her barrenness remained unexpressed, however, for she had no one to talk to.

A major source of excitement for those who pursue nomadic lives is the sighting of another caravan. These meetings of caravans were festive events for both groups. They could exchange information and send messages to relatives and friends. They could find out whether there was peace or war or famine or disease awaiting them on the road ahead. There would be the inevitable ritual of sipping mint tea, and the baking and eating of fresh pita. They might even slaughter a sheep if there was time. Those who glimpsed Sarah's beauty at these gatherings were astounded.

It was on such an occasion, when a caravan coming from Egypt passed them, that Sarah acquired her bondswoman, Hagar the Egyptian. Sarah was intrigued by the regally attractive woman who walked by herself in the slave's quarters. She was attracted to this poised Egyptian woman and asked Abraham to purchase her.

Hagar was a perfect companion. Her inner refinement, sensitivity and good taste hinted at a former high status in Egypt. Sarah appreciated her virtues and overlooked her slave status. In Hagar she found a friend in whom she was able to confide her fear that she would never have children.

Hagar made herself so indispensable that Sarah could no longer imagine a life without her help. Abraham was pleased that Sarah had a friend for he knew the value of having a faithful servant.

When they crossed the border from Assyria into the Land of Canaan, they decided to pretend that Hagar was Abraham's wife and Sarah his sister, so that no one would try to kill Abraham on account of his wife's beauty. As a result, Abraham became better acquainted with Hagar and found that he, too, enjoyed her

company. Lot's wife resented the budding friendship and warned Sarah that it was unhealthy to be too dependent on a slave for friendship.

"Watch out for her, she's dangerous."

Sarah scoffed at this, saying to herself that Lot's wife was jealous of their relationship. But a worm had entered this new paradise and would resurface during the last phase of Sarah's life when she would be besieged with doubts in God, in her ability to have children, and in her husband's fidelity to her.

What was the source of all this doubt?

Hagar had exposed Sarah to the sophisticated religious ideas of the Egyptian upper class. She caused Sarah to question the existence of a God who demanded unwavering obedience without giving anything in return. Her mistress had given Abraham's god her allegiance yet she remained barren.

For the first time, Sarah mocked Abraham's belief that he would father a dynasty. "We are unable to have children, yet you persist in talking about descendants who are as many as the stars in the sky!" she taunted him. "The only way you will get a child out of me is through my bondswoman Hagar."

Abraham did not hear the malice and discontent underlying Sarah's outburst. Instead he chose to understand her literally and took Hagar to his tent.

After this Sarah was violently jealous of Hagar and sent her back to the servants' quarters. When Hagar was clearly with child, Sarah was so abusive that she fled to the desert. Abraham, however, intervened and insisted she take her back. The relationship between the two women was constrained after that.

Sarah felt old and impotent for the first time in her life. Seeing the woman she had adopted as a bondswoman nurse Ishmael, her husband's son, kindled her jealousy. During this phase of her life, she was full of doubts about herself and God. The only thing she knew for certain was that her own childbearing days were over.

Thirteen years went by. Abraham related to Sarah the idea of a covenant which would bind him and his people to the One God. His part of the covenant was to circumcise all of his male relatives and servants. In exchange for this tangible sign of faith, God had promised him another son, one that would come from Sarah's

womb. This son, not Hagar's son, would be the heir. When Sarah heard this she laughed until her sides ached. Abraham, however, took this seriously and, shortly after he had recovered from the circumcision, came to her tent.

It was a miracle! Sarah conceived, and the effect on her was therapeutic. Carrying the child rejuvenated her physically. She was high-spirited and content again. When the child was born she even named him Isaac (laughter) as an ironic reminder to herself of her former lack of faith, and vowed to raise her child as Abraham wanted. She even agreed to his circumcision, which was done when he was eight days old.

Now that she and Hagar had children in common, the two mothers became fast friends again. Ishmael felt very brotherly toward Isaac, and Isaac idolized Ishmael.

When Isaac was weaned at the age of three, Sarah noticed that he was always running off to Hagar's to play with Ishmael. She began to wonder whether Ishmael's influence on her son, the heir, was healthy.

She thought, why, now that I've stopped nursing him, he spends more time with Ishmael than he does with me. Why does he go over there so much? He's my son, not hers. Is she more fun than I am? What's the attraction? Will she take away my son, as she took away my husband?

At their evening meal, she discussed the problem with Abraham.

"I'm afraid that Hagar is teaching Isaac to believe in the gods of Egypt. She taught me about them a long time ago, but I have not encouraged her to teach our son about them."

Knowing how Abraham felt about pagan gods, she anticipated his reaction.

Abraham shouted, "You must do something about that woman! It is intolerable that she undermine us! Isaac is the one who will carry out the covenant. He is the heir. His thoughts must be pure! He must not be contaminated by being exposed to her lies."

"So you won't object if I send them away?" she asked softly.

"Would that you could dismiss her alone, without my son, Ishmael," he complained. "But do what you have to!"

Armed with this reluctant permission, she immediately contrived to create a scene that would give her an excuse to send both Hagar and Ishmael away.

She was too honest a person not to be disturbed by what she had done. After they were gone, she had time to reflect on her action. She knew it was wrong. She also missed Hagar. Isaac too was unhappy since he didn't understand why his extended family had suddenly deserted him. He no longer had an older companion at his beck and call.

When Isaac discovered Sarah's role in sending them away, he retaliated by seeking out his father for religious guidance—something which he had shunned until then. Abraham was delighted with this sudden resurgence in faith and began to instruct him in earnest about the nature of God, the meaning of the covenant, and the responsibilities of being a chosen people. They were always together discussing theology and excluded Sarah from their conversation.

Hagar was gone, but her legacy to Sarah was doubt. She now withdrew into herself completely. She had no one, for Abraham loved God more than he loved her. Moreover, it was a God she no longer believed in. That their views were no longer compatible became clear to her on the day that Abraham told her how God wanted to test his faith.

"He has asked me to take Isaac to a distant place. I will be gone for about three days," Abraham told her.

"You are too old to go on such a long trip!" she stated emphatically. She then asked, "When will Isaac return?"

"I don't know if Isaac will return," he lied. "God wants to see if I am willing to obey him, even if I do not understand His ways."

"But how can you? What if he asks you to push him off a mountain, or leave him alone in the desert?"

"I will do what I have to do."

She hated this God who demanded so much of His worshippers. He had turned her husband against her, influenced her to banish her companion unjustly, and now He wanted to take her son away.

She tried talking to Isaac. "Do you know what your father intends?"

“Yes, we are going on a trip in the direction of Mt. Moriah. Father said it will be just the two of us. We are to be tested by God. If we pass this test, then our destiny as a chosen people will be assured.”

Listening to him, she realized she had lost him. I won't be able to persuade them to change their plans. I will have to resign myself to this trip. Certainly Abraham will not do anything drastic. After all he loves his son as much as I do.

Three days later while anxiously awaiting their return, she saw Abraham in the distance. Abraham was alone, unaccompanied by her son, Isaac.

She groaned in disbelief, thinking, he has left him to die by himself on the mountain.

This was her last conscious thought as she collapsed. The third and last phase of her life had ended.

Thus Sarah was never to know that Abraham's God was a God of mercy who would never demand human sacrifice, though He had pushed Abraham to the ultimate test. The reason Isaac had not returned was that he needed some time by himself to recover from his brush with death.

Sarah died with her doubts intact. Neither Abraham nor Isaac knew that their faith in God was partly responsible for Sarah's death. Her lost faith was never regained; she took her grief and doubt with her to the grave.



## IN THE SHADOW OF HIS FATHER

*Sarah saw the son, whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham, playing. She said to Abraham, "Cast out that slave woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his. (Genesis 21:9-13)*

The matter distressed Isaac greatly too, for did it not concern the beloved brother of his?



His earliest memories were happy: the sounds of his mother's and Hagar's gossip; the freedom allowed him and his older brother Ishmael. His brother would point to the tamarisk tree outside the tent and he and Ishmael would tiptoe out of the tent to play. Isaac adored his older brother and would do anything for him.

Hagar's tent served as a place of refuge for him. Since his mother Sarah was very old and set in her ways, he tried to spend as much time in Hagar's tent as he could.

"My mother's tired again today, Aunt Hagar. Please tell me the story about the Egyptian gods Osiris and Isis," Isaac would beg. And she would wipe her hands on her apron and tell him the story.

Isaac loved her cooking. In the evening, they would sit outside eating *ful* and drinking *buḡ*, Egyptian treats, enjoying the balmy desert air. If encouraged, Hagar would teach them an Egyptian song she remembered from her childhood. Ishmael would then regale them with descriptions of the animals he hunted.

*Oh! If only I were old enough to go with him on one of his hunts,* Isaac would think as he fell asleep.

One day when he was four, Ishmael was teaching him to wrestle. Since it was a very hot day, both of them were barely

dressed. Ishmael's arm was wrapped around Isaac when suddenly Isaac's mother appeared.

"What are you doing?" she shouted at them. "Go back to your tent immediately," she said, adding something else which Isaac didn't understand, but which seemed to embarrass Ishmael. Isaac tried to follow Ishmael to his tent, but Sarah stopped him.

"No! I want you to come with me right now!" He fell asleep that night to his parents' arguing voices.

In the morning, he waited for Ishmael to come for him.

What's taking him so long? The sun has been up for hours. Soon it will be too hot. I'll go find him myself.

He went to Ishmael's tent. He wasn't there.

I'll go see if Hagar knows where he is.

He couldn't find her either.

Sarah saw Isaac wandering around.

"I can't find Ishmael, his bow and arrow are gone; and Hagar's not in her tent either. Do you know where they are?" he asked his mother.

"Yes! They left early this morning."

"Left? Where did they go? Why didn't Ishmael say anything to me? Why didn't he take me with him?" Isaac cried.

"They had to leave," she said stonily.

"Are they coming back soon? What will I do all day until they return?" he asked.

"They are never going to return," his mother told him.

"Well, I'll wait anyway," refusing to move. He sat by his tent to await their return.

When Sarah realized he couldn't understand the meaning of "never", she went to get his father.

Abraham found Isaac sitting in front of the tent, waiting.

Abraham put his arm around Isaac and explained, "Ishmael and Hagar did something bad and had to be punished. We couldn't allow them to stay here anymore. They had to leave."

"What did they do that was so bad?"

"You will understand when you grow up," Abraham said gently.

"Will you send me away if I also do something bad?"

“Of course not, you’re my son, my favorite son, little Isaac, whom I love. How could you think such a thing?” Abraham said tenderly. “Why don’t you spend the rest of the day with me,” he suggested.

Abraham took him to the fields to see the sheep and baby lambs. After a short time, Isaac was restless and whining and Abraham returned him to the tents. *By now Ishmael must be back and we can do something more exciting than watching baby lambs. Maybe he’ll take me out and we can pretend to hunt mountain leopards.*

But when he went to Ishmael’s tent, it was still empty. *They’re not back yet! I will wait.* Whenever he heard a noise he would run outside to see if they had returned.

Days passed with no sign of them. Isaac took no interest in what was going on around him.

“The shepherd children look like they are having a lot of fun,” Abraham said. “Why don’t you play with them?”

“They don’t like me. If I want something, they won’t give it to me. They make me take turns. Besides,” Isaac added, “I have to wait.”

Abraham began to spend more time with his son. “Let me tell you a story about how your mother and I left Mesopotamia for the promised land of Canaan.” His stories were not as interesting as Hagar’s, but at least they were stories.

Abraham made Isaac promise that when he grew up he would never leave the land of Canaan, even if there would be a famine. “I will see to it that you won’t even have to leave to find a wife, for I will send a message to Ur-Casdim when the time is right. She will be brought to you!” Abraham said, adding, “The women there are as beautiful as your mother.”

*Mother! Beautiful!* Isaac wondered. *Did she really outwit the Egyptians and Hittites by pretending to be Father’s sister? And Father, did he really save Uncle Lot from Sodom by arguing with God? That sounds brave, like Ishmael.* But then he concluded they’re too old for such a story to be true.

When Isaac was grown up, he asked his father’s senior servant, Dammesek Eliezer, about his father. He told him that Abraham was one of the most respected people in all the land,

from Beersheba to Hebron. “Everyone knows Sarah and Abraham. You should be proud that they are your parents.”

*Will I ever be full of energy like they used to be? He wondered. If Ishmael were here with me he would teach me how to be bold and adventurous like my parents, and I would grow up strong and brave.*

One day he was listening to his father who was teaching him about the nature of God.

Isaac’s attention wandered. He thought resentfully, *God is this, God is that. God, God!* Something snapped and suddenly Isaac realized, *Father is using God to make me forget Ishmael.*

That night Isaac had a very high fever. He dreamed that he was dying and going to God. Ishmael appeared to him in this dream, saying, “Your father is going to send you away too! Come to me now! Don’t wait! Leave while you can!” It took him a long time to recuperate.

He had been a quiet young man, but after the illness he became more contemplative; he had frequent visions. He went for long walks; he was always waiting, hoping.

*I don’t know what I want, but surely there must be something out there for me, something that will put meaning and laughter into my life.*



One morning his father announced to Isaac that the two of them would be going to Mt. Moriah. They would be gone about three days. On the way Abraham was unusually silent. As they climbed the mountain, Abraham’s pace slowed down. Isaac was concerned and suggested returning.

“Father, I think we should go back. You don’t look very well.”

“My son, I am not tired. I am simply not in a hurry to find out what awaits us there.”

Isaac thought, *whatever will be I will have to accept.*

They arrived at the peak of the mountain and built a sacrificial altar together. Abraham revealed to Isaac that he was to be the sacrifice. “God has asked me to sacrifice you, my son, my favored one, Isaac, whom I love so much,” he said sobbing uncontrollably.

In disbelief, Isaac allowed Abraham to tie him down. His mind whirled. *This is just like what Ishmael warned me about in the dream.*

*Soon I will be with Ishmael. We will be re-united.* Then he fainted. He awoke in bewilderment. He saw his father sacrificing a ram in stead of him.

“Where did it come from?” he asked.

“God sent it, my son. I now know that I was not mistaken in sending away your brother. You are going to be the father of a great nation. We must return immediately to find you a wife.”

It was too much for Isaac to take in. Having had the brush with death, he was now forced to choose life. “Father, you never shared your doubts with me about having sent Ishmael away. I thought you were sure that your decision was right.”

“Of course I had doubts; I’m human aren’t I. He was my son, my first-born son. And had I lost you, I would have had no one.”

“Would you have sacrificed me to God?”

“I honestly do not know. Let us be thankful that I was not required to complete God’s test. Let us go back now. Your mother has worried for too long; I must make my peace with her. She will have much to do in anticipation of your new bride.”

Isaac decided not to return with Abraham; he needed time to assimilate all that had happened to him.

He remained on the mountain top for many days. On his return, he discovered his mother had died of grief and had been buried in the Cave of Machpelah. Moreover, Abraham, without waiting to consult his son, had sent his servant Eliezer to Ur-Casdim to find Isaac a wife.

Isaac felt strangled. *Things are moving too fast! I am alone. I never said goodbye to my mother. She must have thought I was dead.*

Suddenly he had an urgent need to let her know that he was alive. He ran out to the fields and lay down, his face toward the sky. *Mother! I’m alive! Do you see me? I thought I was dead, but I was saved. I’ve been given the gift of life, born again. Mother, help me to understand the meaning of this gift.*

There was no answer. He went back. Once again he had to wait. Only this time it was for Eliezer’s return.

What will she be like? Will she be beautiful? Will she like me? If she is unhappy, because of all she has left behind, will I be able to comfort her? Will she take the place of Ishmael? Or of my mother?

This time Isaac did not sit passively beside his tent to await her arrival. He was too impatient to sit still. He went out to the fields to pray and think. He took long walks and surveyed his father's wealth.

The day arrived sooner than he expected. He saw Eliezer help the girl who was to be his bride down from her camel. She looked very slight from the distance. When she saw him, she stumbled.

*Why she is almost a child! Will she be able to bear children?* he thought as he ran towards her. When he saw her, he was overwhelmed by her beauty. They kissed shyly. Later after dinner he joined her and was comforted by her presence.

They talked and talked. He was entranced by her manner. She was a delightful story-teller and he found himself laughing at her amusing recital.

The sound of their laughter was music to the old men's ears. "I haven't heard a woman laugh since Sarah was alive," Abraham said. "We've done the right thing, haven't we Eliezer, sending for a wife from Ur-Casdim?"

"Yes, Master! Soon, no doubt, you will also hear the laughter of their children."



Abraham never did hear his grandchildren's laughter. At his funeral many neighboring dignitaries were present. Only Ishmael was missing, but no one really expected him to come, for they knew how shabbily he had been treated by Abraham. Suddenly there was a hush. Ishmael had arrived to pay his respects to his father. The people were both surprised and relieved by his presence for he had done the proper thing after all. "In spite of everything, Abraham was his father," they said.

When Isaac saw Ishmael his heart started to pound. Why am I so happy? My father has just died. I should be sad. But then he thought, we are together, free to be friends again. I will explode from joy. He ran to welcome Ishmael warmly.

But it was too late, too much time had elapsed. Ishmael had forgotten him. "What! You're little Isaac. The last time I saw you,

you were this high.” And then he looked past him, as if at a stranger; which Isaac indeed was.

Ishmael did not live in the past. He had severed his bonds and had missed only his father, not his brother. He was here to mourn his father, not his lost childhood.

Isaac was shattered, but soon after twin sons were born to him and Rebecca. Isaac named the first-born Esau. *He is so tiny, so hairy and wild-looking, just like Ishmael must have looked.* Isaac loved him immediately and barely noticed the second child who, a few seconds later, pulled himself into the world, by grasping his brother’s heel firmly.

Isaac only had capacity to love one person at a time. *Esau will be my son, my companion. He will be the one who will restore the laughter in my middle age.* When he was young, Esau was encouraged to be adventurous. Isaac told him stories about his Uncle Ishmael. If Esau grabbed something that wasn’t his or pushed his younger brother, Isaac would condone his behavior. Esau never had to do anything in an underhanded manner for if he wanted anything, he was encouraged to go out and take it.

Not so his younger brother Jacob. For him everything was a matter of wit and subterfuge. He held on tenaciously to what was his. Esau didn’t understand the workings of Jacob’s mind. Mentally and emotionally they lived in two different worlds.

Isaac would often invite Esau to his tent and show him how to prepare his favorite foods. After that he would send him off on some errand or another. While Esau would run off eagerly to do his bidding, Isaac would smile and doze off, dreaming he was talking to Ishmael.

*You would be happy to see this son of mine. I have raised him to be like you. He is quick, impulsive, a good hunter, afraid of no one. You would be proud of him. His mother doesn’t like him, just like my mother didn’t like you. We must protect him; make sure that he gets the inheritance; see that what happened to you doesn’t happen to him.*

Isaac had this dream very often. One day he sent Esau off and suddenly awoke from his usual reverie. It seemed as if it were no time at all. And here Esau was back, bustling around, arranging the table, making him comfortable. The food smelled delicious. As

usual it reminded him of Hagar's cooking. He realized he was very hungry.

This time, after eating, Isaac asked his son to draw near in order to bless him. "Come closer, I cannot see you. Let me touch you to make sure you are indeed Esau."

As he drew near, his son laughed and asked, "And whom do you think I might be, father?"

"I remember too well those games you and Jacob used to play. This is serious business; I have a right to be careful."

After hugging him and feeling his hairy arms, Isaac blessed him and his son left.

Isaac was getting ready to rest when Esau came rushing in again.

"Here I am father, grilled deer just like Aunt Hagar used to make."

"Don't play games with me, my son. You know I've just eaten. I want to rest now."

"What! You haven't blessed me yet. I've been in the fields until now."

"What have I done?" Isaac cried. "Jacob has fooled us! He again has grasped what is not his! I have given him your blessing."

"Oh Father, don't you have just a small, special blessing for me?" Esau pleaded.

Isaac considered his plea. Finally he said, "You are the son of my heart; but God apparently does not want you to be the heir, just as he did not want my brother Ishmael to inherit. I, however, love you the way you are. If you want something, take it, but be true to yourself, even if it means having less. After I die, go to my brother and take one of his daughters for your wife. Your children will be like you. Your life will not be complicated. Sometimes it is better not to be 'chosen'. That is my blessing."

After Esau left, Isaac could not sleep. He wondered if his "blessing" would help Esau.

Jacob had to leave home because Esau threatened to take revenge after his father was dead. Isaac did not know if he would ever see Jacob again. When Esau followed his suggestion and married Mahlat, the daughter of Ishmael, Rebecca hounded Isaac until he had to cut his ties with his beloved son. His favorite was

no longer his companion. He had no one to laugh with. Once again his life was one of waiting. But now, he had nothing to live for. He wondered if laughter would ever come back to his life.



## SISTERS

“It’s mine. Give it back to me.”

“I’m just borrowing yours.”

“You can’t have it. Return it, or else!”

“Why? You never even look at yourself in the mirror. I’m pretty! I need it!”

“Mother, Rachel took my mirror. Make her give it back, before she ruins it.”

“But she has two and doesn’t even need one.”

“Leah, why do you bother me with every little thing? You’re sisters! You should share. She’s old enough not to ruin it.”

*Just because she’s younger she gets away with everything,* Leah thought. *How dare she make fun of my looks!* But then she said, “Leah, if you return my mirror, we’ll go to the well and watch the shepherds water their flocks. Maybe there will be some new lambs.”

“Let’s take some bread and olives with us in case we come back late.”

“That’s a good idea. You and I can have a picnic.”

*Sometimes she isn’t too bad,* Leah thought. *Maybe Mishlag will come and talk to us.*

The shepherds at the well gathered around the two girls. One of them said, “Your little sister’s going to be a real beauty when she grows up.”

“Isn’t she cute? She’s been admiring herself in my mirror,” said Leah. “Hello Mishlag! We thought you might be hungry, so we brought you some bread and olives.”

“That’s very kind of you Leah.”

“It wasn’t her idea,” Rachel piped in. “We didn’t bring them for you. We brought them for ourselves. But you can have some of mine.”

“That’s very generous of you,” said Mishlag, winking at Leah. “Thank you, Rachel.”

Leah was visibly annoyed. On the way home she said to Rachel, “You made a fool of me with Mishlag! Don’t ever interrupt when I’m talking to him.”

“Leah likes Mishlag. Leah likes Mishlag. Wait until I tell.”

“Don’t you dare?”

Later Laban called Leah aside. “Rachel told me you were encouraging Mishlag today at the well.”

“What a tattle-tale!” she exclaimed. “He and I were just talking.”

“Don’t be angry. She was right to tell me. My sister Rebecca was about your age when she left us to marry someone in a strange land. Before that she didn’t talk to the local shepherds. She sent word that her two sons would be coming, as is our family custom, to ask for your hands in marriage. So that is why I don’t want you to encourage the local boys.”

Leah didn’t answer. She was only twelve. There was still time. The only boy she really liked, and who liked her, was Mishlag; and Laban wouldn’t hear of him. The two sons of Isaac were nothing to her. She was never going to leave home.



Two years passed. One day Rachel came running to Leah. “I have terrible news for you,” she stated dramatically. “I’m dying”.

“That’s awful! What makes you think that?”

“I can’t stop bleeding. I’m afraid to die. Hold me close.”

“Don’t be silly, Rachel. I am older than you. I will die before you. Show me where you’re bleeding.”

“It’s coming from a place I can’t show you.”

“Oh, is that it?” Leah started to laugh and hugged her. “Silly, you’re not going to die! What’s happening is natural. It happens to all girls. You’re now grown up, like me. Once a month it’s going to happen and you will have to stay near our tent for a few days until it stops. This means you can have babies.”

“Are you sure, I won’t die before you?”

“I promise you! Now let me show you how to keep the bleeding from dirtying your clothes. If you have any questions ask Mother or me, not Father; never talk about this in front of men.”

After her sister left, Leah reflected on the fact that Rachel was now a woman. *I wonder how that will affect our relationship.*

Now that she was mature, Rachel was given a small flock of her own. She went regularly to the well to water it. The well was their only source of water. It was covered by a heavy stone that could only be moved by several shepherds at once. When she would get there, the other shepherds would tease her. They excluded her from the male ritual of rolling off the heavy stone covering the well. When she wanted to water her sheep she had to get there before they were finished and then they acted as if they were doing her a favor by letting her use the communal water.

One day she came later than usual. The shepherds were just leaving. She asked them to help roll the stone off the well for her. Instead of helping they jeered. She began coming a little earlier than usual, so that she wouldn't have to worry about the stone.

One day she saw from the distance that there was someone new at the well. As she came closer she saw he was young and differently dressed than the men she knew.

*Who is he?* She wondered. *He looks familiar, almost as if I should know him.* He was talking to the other shepherds who had not removed the stone yet. They were gesticulating. Then they saw her and pointed her out to him. She walked self-consciously at the head of her sheep towards the well, wondering what this was all about.

Inspired by her beauty, he rolled the stone off the mouth of the well all by himself and began to water her flock, bucket by bucket.

She was overwhelmed. "Who are you? Why are you doing this for me?" she asked.

Instead of answering, he kissed her and began to cry. She was shocked by his reaction. When he was able to control himself he told her, "I am your cousin Jacob, your father's nephew, and Rebecca's son."

"Why are you crying? Has something happened to your brother?"

"No, it is just that I'm excited about seeing my family. I have traveled so far."

"I will run home and tell father you are here. It's thrilling that you are here!"

With that, she dashed off, leaving Jacob and her two little brothers to tend the sheep. Laban soon arrived, out of breath from having come so quickly.

Laban hugged and kissed Jacob. He took a good look at him and said, "My son! Is your brother Esau many days behind you?" Laban asked, continuing without waiting for an answer. "Were you both so laden with gifts that one of you decided to come ahead to announce your coming?" Laban joked. "For this eagerness, you will have first choice of my daughters."

"That won't be too hard for Rachel is very fetching."

"Who knows what may happen in time! For technically you are the younger son, and she is my younger daughter. Esau will of course have to marry Leah. That is only right!"

"Father, if I may already call you that," Jacob interjected, "I have something to tell you."

"Yes, my son, feel free to tell me anything."

"I hope this will not change your feeling towards me. I have come alone. Esau is not coming. But I am strong and willing. Put me to work at anything you choose."

With great difficulty Laban hid his true feelings and said, "Don't worry, my son. We will talk later. But now come to your new home and meet the rest of your family."

After a few days Jacob began to make himself useful. He helped Rachel tend the sheep and became better acquainted with her. She was the first young woman he had ever known. They exchanged confidences. She reminded him of his mother. She shared his ambitions and expressed sympathy for his plight in having to run away. He was smitten. Within a month he declared his love to her. They decided, however, to say nothing to Laban.

Rachel, who could never keep anything to herself felt she had to tell Leah. "He is wonderful, not like the men around here. He has told me all about his home, his mother and father, his twin brother. He is so strong, so different. Do you know his family believes in one god. He says that our belief in our household gods, the *terafim* is superstition. He plans to teach me about the God of Abraham and Isaac. That's how he calls his god."

“I hope Father gives you to him, and then I will be free to marry Mishlag. Once you’re gone he won’t make me wait for another husband from Canaan.”

A few days after this conversation, Laban called Jacob aside. “You are very useful to me, my son. It dishonors me that you work here like a slave. Name your wages and I will pay them.”

“I love your younger daughter. Pay me with her. I’m willing to wait seven years for her.”

“Fine, it is better that she marry you than a stranger. Stay with us and work.”

Time passed ever so slowly for Rachel. Jacob put a super-human effort into his work so that it seemed like seven days’ work to him. On the day when the seven years were completed, he went to Laban and asked for his wife to be sent to him.

“Of course, a bargain is a bargain! But first we must celebrate this momentous occasion. I will invite all of the local shepherds and their families to the ceremony. Then she will be yours.”

Laban went to his wife’s tent. Leah was there with her. He told them about the marriage ceremony. “You know we cannot allow Rachel to marry until Leah’s found a husband for herself.”

“I can solve that problem easily,” said Leah, “if you permit me to marry Mishlag.”

“How many times do I have to tell you that my daughter cannot marry an ordinary shepherd. You must marry someone with a future,” insisted her father.

“And what is so special about Jacob. He is an outcast, a homeless wanderer. Why is he acceptable as a husband for Rachel, and Mishlag, who lives nearby and has his own flock of sheep, is not good enough for me? It’s not fair. It’s just like when we were children. She’s getting what she wants and I can’t have what I want.”

“No, you are wrong, Leah. She is not getting what she wants now, and you cannot have what you want, because that is not what I have planned,” said Laban.

“What do you mean, Father?” asked Leah.

“I mean I want you to marry Jacob,” he answered.

“Never, how could I marry him? I don’t even like him. Besides, Rachel and Jacob are meant for each other. They would

hate me and would justifiably never forgive me for getting in the way of their love.”

“That may be, but you will do what I say without any further arguments. No daughter of mine will remain a spinster. With your looks, it will be hard to find you another suitable husband. You will be veiled and will go to Jacob tonight after the celebration.”

Laban then went to tell Rachel of the plan. She began to cry. “We’ve waited so long. How can you do this to us?”

Laban said, “You will get to marry Jacob. You will just have to wait a while. Anyway you’re still young.”

Rachel and Leah had no alternative but to accept their father’s decision. They spent the day of the wedding crying.

Their mother tried to comfort both of them. “Many sisters marry the same man and stay friends. They learn to share. They help raise each other’s children. You at least know each other, you won’t have to get used to a strange woman. I wish I had been that lucky. Your father’s second wife and I do not get on. Your step-brothers hate us. I am sure that Jacob will come to love you both, equally. Now stop crying or both of you will have red eyes.”

That night, after the wedding feast, Laban brought Leah to Jacob. She was veiled, as was the custom. “Here she is, just as I promised you. Take her! She is your wife.”

Leah was terribly afraid. How can father think I will fool Jacob. This is terrible. She was grateful that she was veiled and he couldn’t see her. If I keep quiet maybe he won’t realize it’s me. I hate this. I will never forgive father.

Jacob was gentle with her. “Oh Rachel, I’ve waited so long for you. I wish it were light so that I could see you. Why are you so quiet? Don’t be afraid, I won’t do anything to hurt you.”

When she heard this, Leah began to weep silently. *Oh Mishlag, if only this were you.*

“Come to me, my beloved, I will comfort you.” Jacob held her close and began to caress her gently.

Leah closed her eyes and pretended it was Mishlag. After he was through, she slept fitfully.

The next morning, Jacob awoke. He opened his eyes and turned towards her.

“What are you doing here? Where is Rachel?”

Leah, who was mortified by his obvious rejection of her, explained to him that her father forced her to pretend that she was Rachel.

“How could he do that to me? I’ve worked so hard these past seven years for Rachel. Everyone knows I love her. I’ve been deceived. Where is your father? He hasn’t kept his side of the bargain.” Jacob put his robe on and strode off to find Laban.

“What have you done to me?” Jacob shouted hysterically when he found Laban. “Our deal was that I would get Rachel and instead you substituted Leah.”

“It is not the custom in our land to have the younger marry before the older,” said Laban soothingly.

“Why didn’t you let me know when we made the bargain?”

“My son, you and Esau were destined to marry both my daughters. You have told me how you wanted to be the elder son. Good! So now you have the older son’s responsibility, and that is to marry my older daughter.”

“But I love Rachel and want her for my wife. I don’t want to wait!” he exclaimed passionately.

“You can still be husband to both. Work for me during this bridal week and Rachel will be yours as well. You can pay for her by working seven more years.”

Jacob had to agree to these new conditions since he was under Laban’s jurisdiction. Leah and Rachel, however, never forgave their father for his trickery.



Although Jacob loved Rachel more than he did Leah, it was Leah who succeeded in having one baby after another.

Rachel was miserable and complained to Jacob. “It’s your fault that I’ve not become pregnant. You must love her more than you love me; otherwise why does she have four children while I have none. Get me with child or I will die of shame.”

Jacob was furious. “I’ve been doing my best. I’ve been working hard all these years to pay for you and all you do is complain. Do you think I am god to give you a child? Go ask your sister how she manages. Maybe she will tell you her secret.”

Rachel went to Leah's tent. "Leah, I'm miserable," she began to cry. "What can I do to have a baby? I'm so desperate!"

"Stop thinking about it so much! You must force yourself to relax! Just as I no longer think of Mishlag when Jacob comes and have learned to enjoy his company, you must stop thinking about having babies. Just try to relax when it's your turn to be with him and you will see that you will soon get pregnant."

"That's easy for you to say. You have four children and don't care if you have more. I can't force myself to relax. You're right! I care too much!" she said and burst into tears.

After Rachel calmed down, Leah advised her to give her maid, Billhah, to Jacob. "If she has a child from him, it will be like your child."

That night when Jacob came to Rachel's tent he was surprised to find her dressed. "I've decided that I will try to have a child through Billhah. She is yours for this month; through her I will have a baby."

Jacob was disappointed. "I've been looking forward to this month with you Rachel."

She pleaded, "We can always be together. Please! Do me this favor! I am sure I will have a baby through her."

During her month off, Rachel decided to visit Rebecca's old nurse Deborah who was always ready to reminisce about her favorite child. "When your father was little he was close to his sister Rebecca. They were inseparable, until Abraham's servant came with all that gold. Laban was so impressed with the gold that he forgot all about her. In fact he encouraged her to leave in such a hurry that she didn't even take our household idols, the *terafim*, with her."

"I am curious about these household idols, the *terafim*? Father always speaks of them as his. Why do you say they were Rebecca's?"

"By rights they should belong to the daughter of the house but since Rebecca left us, Laban felt they were his and hid them from her."

"Isn't it bad luck not to have them?"

“Yes! I’m sure the enmity between her two boys stems from that. If she would have kept the *terafim*, her life would have been happier.”

Rachel returned to her tent and vowed that if she had a chance, she would take the *terafim* with her when Jacob took them back to Canaan.

A month passed and Bilhah conceived. Rachel was radiant with joy. “I will name the child Dan (judge), for the *terafim* have judged me and heard my voice.”

In this way Rachel, through Bilhah, had two children, Dan and Naphtali. And not to be outdone by Rachel, Leah decided to do the same. *I will give Jacob my maid Zilpah. She will have children instead of me.* And Zilpah had two children, Gad and Asher.

One day Reuven, Leah’s oldest, brought his mother some mandrakes that he found in the fields. “Maybe these will help Aunt Rachel to have a baby,” he joked. Rachel came into the tent just then and asked what the funny looking plants were. When she was told that there was an old wives’ tale that says they could help a barren woman become pregnant, she became excited and asked for them. Leah agreed providing she let her have Jacob for the week.

She readily agreed. After she left, Reuven asked, “Does Aunt Rachel really believe those funny looking plants will help her have a child?”

“She’s always been very superstitious. Who knows? It may help. Anyway, now I have your father back.”

Leah had two more sons and a daughter, Dinah. The mandrakes did not work, however, for Rachel. Many years passed until she conceived, and then she had a very difficult pregnancy and labor. When she gave birth to a son, she called him Joseph. “God has taken away (*asaf*) my shame; may he give me an additional (*yosef*) son as well.”

On hearing this Leah was upset. “You’ve just had a son and already you are talking about another one. You know how hard it was for you. Be satisfied with this one. Don’t tempt fate.”

“How can I be happy with only one son, when you have so many?”

“Oh Rachel, why do we always have to compete?”

“Because we are sisters!”



Now that Rachel finally had a son, Jacob insisted that it was time to return to his homeland.

“My family is complete, I am ready!” he told Laban. “What are your terms for letting us leave?”

“My son, why talk of ‘terms’? You have increased my flocks. I am a wealthy man thanks to you. It is I who should give you a farewell present.”

“I don’t want anything from you. I’ll take only what’s lawfully mine.”

One afternoon Jacob sent for Rachel and Leah. They came out to the fields where he was grazing his sheep. “I don’t trust your father, which is why I’ve asked you to come here where no one can overhear us. He is cheating me and I plan to leave soon. Will you come?”

“He has treated us worse than he has treated you. He has never been a proper father to us. He has stolen our marriage portion. Of course, we will go with you,” Leah answered.

Rachel added, “We should take what we can before we leave.”

As they returned to their tents Rachel told Leah that she planned to remove the *terafim* from her father’s tent. “Don’t tell Jacob,” she said.

It was the season for sheep-shearing. Laban was providentially gone for a few days to supervise the cutting of the wool. It was an opportune time for them to depart without being missed. They loaded their children and belongings onto the backs of their camels and left. Ten days later Laban caught up with them at the foot of Mt. Gilad and accused Jacob of sneaking off like a thief in the night with his daughters and grandchildren.

“My son, why have you crept away like this? You have disappeared like a thief in the night with my daughters and grandchildren. Had you told me the date of your departure, I would have bid you farewell with great pomp and ceremony as befit my heirs. Instead, you have disgraced me. Worse, you have stolen my heart: my daughters and my household gods.”

“Gods! What do we need your gods for? Search anywhere you please. If you find them, the thief will be punished. My curse will be on him!”

Laban made them unpack all their belongings. Only Rachel was uncooperative. She refused to get off her camel saying, “It is the time of the month when I’m not feeling well, father, so I cannot move from her.” She added, “Surely, you don’t suspect me of stealing your gods!”

When he had finished, Jacob exploded indignantly. “I hope you’re satisfied. You have never accepted me. You cheated me with your daughters, you exploited my labor. This has been the last straw! How dare you accuse me of theft, when you are the master of deception?”

“My son, you are taking everything of mine with you. Don’t leave with hard feelings. Let us make a pact of peace between us. This pile of stones will serve as a witness to the end of hostilities between us. Remember me well to Rebecca. Take care of my precious daughters and grandchildren.”

Jacob agreed for his children’s sake. They both swore by their gods. Jacob felt much better after all this was sealed. His conscience was clear.

Rachel, however, was uneasy. That night she revealed to Jacob that she had the *terafim*.

He was furious. “Didn’t you hear me curse the person who had them? What have you done?”

“But they are your mother’s!”

“They are not gods to us. Our God is invisible. He is everywhere. Have I taught you nothing?” Jacob added as he left in anger.

Rachel was seized with terror. Her *terafim* gave her no comfort. She had nightmares about the curse.

She ran to her sister. “Leah, what have I done? I feel something terrible is going to happen to me. Don’t leave me. I am afraid.”

Leah tried to stay with her as much as she could, but it was not easy. She was not mistress of her own time. Jacob needed her too. He was worried about the old enmity between him and his brother Esau.

“I’ve made peace with your father, and now I must settle accounts with my brother. I am going to send messengers to Esau.”

A week later Jacob told Leah, “He is on the way, coming to greet me. You must help me win him over. Help me with my plans.” After they discussed their course of action, she told the children what their part in this dramatic reunion was going to be.

“Listen to me children,” she said. “We are going to greet your Uncle Esau. I want you to behave yourselves with him. He is a big hairy man with a deep voice, but I don’t want him to think you are afraid of him. Boys, you will line up according to your age and introduce yourselves. Dinah, as the only girl, you will give him a bouquet of flowers and curtsy nicely. Reuven, Shimon and Levi, I want you to bring the best sheep from your flock and tell Uncle Esau that it is a gift from your father. You are all to stay near your mothers and keep clean.”

Listening to her, Jacob smiled to himself. She is a wonderful manager and helpmeet. I couldn’t manage without her. Perhaps together we can help Rachel learn to cope more.

The night before the reunion, Jacob slept fitfully. He dreamed that he and Esau were fighting. Esau struggled manfully, grabbing him by his ankle. In the end, Jacob managed to pull free and overpower his brother, but with great difficulty.

Jacob awoke with a sudden start. He had pulled a muscle. It was very painful and would not go away. In the morning he walked with a limp, yet he felt calm, prepared for whatever would come. In the distance he saw a cloud of dust and a large caravan.

“Children, remember what your mother taught you.”

Esau approached. The two brothers kissed and embraced each other. Jacob presented his wives to Esau. “This is Leah, Laban’s older daughter. These are her children. This pretty little one is our only daughter, Dinah.”

“Thank you for the flowers, Dinah, they are lovely. You are a beautiful young lady.”

“And this is Rachel and our youngest son Joseph.”

“I see that soon you will not be the youngest Joseph, it looks like you are to have a baby brother or sister,” Esau said.

And so he went, from family to family, making personal remarks to everyone. Slowly they began to relax. This kind gruff man was no threat to them. They all wondered why Jacob was in such a panic about this meeting.

Jacob, however, remained ill at ease, waiting for some hint of hostility. Esau had apparently forgotten the past. He was genuinely happy to see his brother after such a long time. Still, when they said goodbye, Jacob sighed with relief.

“Thank god that’s over with! Leah, Rachel, children, you were wonderful! I am proud of how you behaved. What did you think of your uncle?”

“We liked him, Father,” the boys said. “Can we visit him?”

“When you grow up, but now it’s time to go to sleep, for we are getting up very early tomorrow. I am ready to enter the land of Canaan.”

They traveled a few days and arrived at the River Jordan. They were all excited.

“Tomorrow, we cross the river.”

On the road to Bethel, Rebecca’s old nurse, Deborah, died and was buried under an oak tree. Rachel had encouraged her to come with them to see Rebecca once more before she died. Her death affected Rachel very much, for the old nurse had been the only one who had understood why she had taken the *terafim*. She had lost her ally.

They journeyed from Bethel towards Southern Canaan. They had to cross a wadi which was still full of water from a recent rain.

“Father, come quickly,” Joseph said. “Mother needs you.”

“What is it now, Rachel? I’m very busy.”

“Jacob, I’m not really up to traveling, I feel terrible.”

“If you want to stay behind, I can leave Judah and Asher with you.”

“No, I’ll manage, but I really don’t feel well.”

“We will make you a pallet and the servants will carry you across the wadi.”

They were on the road to Bethlehem two months later when Reuven came running to Leah.

“Mother, come quickly! Aunt Rachel says the baby is coming.”

“Is the midwife with her?”

“Yes, I sent for her.”

“Good, I’m coming. Go find Father and tell him.”

“Rachel, I’m here!” Leah said as she entered her sister’s tent.

“Leah, I’m in such terrible pain. Help me. Keep me company. I’m afraid that I am going to die.”

“Hush, don’t be silly. Remember when we were little and you said that to me.”

“Yes, when I got my first menstrual period.”

“What did I promise you then?”

“I remember, we were so happy then. You said you would die before me, because you were older and I believed you then. Leah, I am terrified. I won’t live through this birth. If I die I want you to promise me you will raise this baby as your own.”

“Rachel, don’t be silly, you’re not dying.”

“Swear to me that you take me seriously.”

“If it makes you happy, so be it. But you’re not dying, it cannot be, you are younger than I.”

“Leah, tell Jacob I love him. Love him for me when I am gone.”

“You will have plenty of time to tell him that yourself. I have sent for him. Now concentrate on having the baby.”

“I’m afraid.”

“Relax. Breathe deeply, push.”

“I can’t anymore, I don’t have the strength.”

“Rachel, push. Good girl. Keep it up. Keep trying. Push, push, it’s coming. Rachel, it’s a beautiful boy. He looks like Joseph did when he was born.”

“Let me see him. I’m so tired. Call him *Ben Oni*, son of my suffering. I can’t hold him, take him from me. Let me sleep, I’m so tired,” she said as she closed her eyes.

Jacob entered then and asked, “Rachel, my love, are you any better?”

“Sh! She’s resting,” Leah said. “Jacob, she thinks she’s dying, but that can’t be can it? She’s younger than me.”

“She can’t die. What will I do without her? Can’t we do anything? It’s my fault! Why did I curse her when she stole the idols?”

Rachel opened her eyes and whispered, "Leah, keep your promise."

"I will, Rachel."

"Jacob, hold me tight. Make Leah as happy as you made me. I love you both."

These were her last words. Just then the baby cried.

"Jacob, she called him *Ben-Oni*. That's not a name to give a child."

"We will call him *Ben-Yamin*, my right hand son. But to me he will always be *Ben-Yamim*, son of my old age. I feel my heart breaking, I feel old suddenly."

"I lied to you Rachel," Leah wept. "I really hoped you would die first. You were always so lovely. Now Jacob is mine. It is my turn to be beautiful. But I miss you so."

She turned to Jacob and they comforted each other. Together they buried Rachel on the road to Bethlehem. Leah raised Benyamin as her own son. He was her atonement for outliving her sister.



## A DAUGHTER IN ISRAEL IS RAPED

*Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land. Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her by force. Being strongly attracted to Dinah daughter of Jacob, and in love with her, he spoke to the maiden tenderly. Subsequently, Shechem said to his father Hamor, "I want this girl for my wife." (Genesis 34:1-4)*

They are tearing me apart. Will it never end?

When I was much younger than I am today, I was raped. I remember how the pain seared through me and how afterwards, I couldn't stop shaking.

For months I was in a constant state of fear that it might happen to me again and that was when I stopped going out to the fields for they were no longer safe. I still carefully check to see that no one suspicious is lurking around when I go out to tend the animals.

I wasn't always a coward. Once I was known as princess Dinah, daughter of Jacob's first wife, Leah. I had six adoring brothers who took me with them wherever they went and who confided their secrets to me. I had many friends who visited me and I in turn visited with them.

I was daughter, sister and friend, with an assured place on the land and in society. In the course of time a suitable match would be made for me, I would marry, have children, be wife and mother.

One morning I crossed the mountain pass to spend a few days with the girls in the neighboring village. I had plenty of time to pick some wild flowers, which I did. Shechem was out hunting and saw me alone. I had seen him before. I knew who he was. He greeted me. I wasn't afraid. Then suddenly he threw me down and abused me. Against my will, he forced me to lie with him. I screamed and screamed, "Help me!" "Save me!" "Stop!" "Don't do it!" "Leave me alone!" But no one heard. Afterwards he dragged me to his father's home, alleging that he loved me and wanted to marry me.

Why did he single me out? I didn't like him. I didn't lead him on. I was just there. And he thought I wanted him after what he did.

My mother Leah came to the town of Shechem to persuade me I had no choice but to marry him after he had carried me off. She tried to console me by saying, "It's not the end of the world. He wants to marry you. His father is the chieftain of his clan. You'll be comfortable here. You will learn to live with him and love him."

She went on and on. I felt only the throbbing pain inside me and a feeling of shame. "Take what you can get. No one else will want you now! Be happy he still loves you," she said.

How could my mother think of marriage? Didn't she remember her own loveless marriage?

I yearned for my old way of life. But my innocence had been stolen. The old me no longer existed and it took an eternity to make peace with the new me. I had become a soiled object, someone to be pitied, to be quickly disposed of in marriage. I was someone who had to be revenged, who was ruined and undesirable, hating my body for its remembrance of what was.

My father Jacob was furious. He blamed me. He railed at me, "Why were you out in the fields by yourself?" He kept probing me, "Are you sure you didn't lead him on?" He insulted me by insinuating that I was guilty. But when my brothers discussed revenge he remained conspicuously silent.

Why did Father blame me? I was as innocent as the virgin land we had settled. He had never warned me about the dangers awaiting young girls. How could he think I would invite anyone to forcibly enter my body!

After being raped my body no longer belonged to me. I was examined to see if I had really been penetrated. To ease the burning, the women smeared salve in my innermost recesses. They looked, they probed, they discussed. Although they wailed and commiserated with me, no one understood me.

My mother and Shechem wanted to solve everything with marriage. My father was impotent with his rage and accusations. My brothers wanted revenge. They all were tearing me apart. My privacy was invaded. I had no place to escape. There was no where

else to go. No one took my needs into account. I needed to be alone.

They wouldn't let it rest. It rankled and festered like an open wound that would not heal.

My two older brothers, Shimon and Levi, came to me full of plans. They explained their strategy. They were doing it for me. "The honor of the family is at stake," they proclaimed.

"Who cares?" I asked. "Will killing bring about absolution? Will it restore my innocence? Will it free me to love? Will it free me of the fear of being hurt again?"

My brothers set their plans in motion. They ordered me, "Agree to marry Shechem so that peace will be made. The bridal price will be his circumcision."

They plotted to kill Shechem's whole family while they were recovering from the circumcision. His family would be too weak to fight back. The marriage would not take place after all. They sought my approval for this plan.

How ironic! I thought. What a fitting punishment! Mutilate the weapon which ripped me apart. Kill the only person I could marry! Would it make me whole again? Would it erase the memory of the pain? I was young then, I had no power, I let them do what they did. My sentence<sup>1</sup> had been passed. My will to fight was gone. My last act of resistance had been in my cry "Don't do it!"

Their plan succeeded. They avenged my honor. It was over for them, but not for me. I lie awake at night. Was it the right thing to do? So many lives lost! For what! And the child that later they tore from my body—what became of her? They said they destroyed her—left her to die. She could have united our two families. Then at least my sacrifice would have had some value. We would have had peace in this wretched land.

I still dream about her. They go about their business as if I am invisible. They talk around me; don't look me in the eye. I no longer exist for them. When I walk out of my tent, there is a sudden silence. The topics are changed. I embarrass them. They are afraid to touch me, to draw near.

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<sup>1</sup> The meaning of *din* is sentence or judgment as in *gezur din mavet*, death sentence; thus Dinah can be understood as "her sentence".

I register every slight, every nuance of speech. I fear that they are planning some dreadful fate for me. I cringe and hope they will not notice me.

“Poor Dinah, what will become of her?”

## THE OLD MAN AND HIS GRANDSONS

*It's so humid and muggy here! Oh I ache! Why isn't he here when I need him? I'll have to ask Joseph for another servant, that is, if his majesty ever comes to visit. What good is it to me if my son is the most powerful person in Egypt if I never see him?*

As Jacob was struggling to get out of bed, Judah entered and greeted him. "Good morning, Father, I see you are awake. Did you sleep well?"

Jacob saw that Judah was dressed for travel and asked him where he was going so early.

"I have been commanded to restore several parcels of land to the people of Egypt."

"Isn't the Land of Goshen ours?"

"Yes, but the Egyptian people complained to Joseph after the last economic crisis. They questioned the propriety of his having given his family the richest grazing land in Egypt when they were suffering the after-effects of the great famine."

"That's how they thank my son for saving them from total ruin! I could tell Joseph a thing or two about how to handle rebellious subjects. Perhaps you can get me an audience with him for this week?" Jacob asked hopefully.

"Father, you must be patient," Judah said smoothly. "Soon it will be time for our bi-annual family gathering. You can advise him as much as you want then."

"He didn't come to the last two gatherings of our clan," complained Jacob.

"Father, Joseph must serve Egypt first, then his family. Anyway his boys' Menasseh and Ephraim are yours to enjoy for a few more days and here's your servant Hamid, bringing you your morning *nanna*."

As Judah prepared to leave, Hamid opened the shutters to air the room. He then helped Jacob outdoors.

"Are you comfortable, Master? Can I get you anything else?"

“No, that will be all. When the boys arrive, send them out here to the courtyard.”

*It's so lonely. I'm a useless old man who sits in the sun, dead for all they care! If not for my grandchildren I would be completely miserable. I hate being a foreigner in a strange land when I could be in Canaan, happy and respected. I gave up everything for Joseph!*

“You should know what it means to be exiled from one's country,” he imagined saying to Joseph. “You've given me a home, clothing, and food in exchange for my great sacrifice, but you hold yourself back from me. You don't care about me. Only your children take an interest in me.”

*Where are they?* He wondered. He dozed off in the sun while awaiting them and was awakened by the welcome sound of their cheerful voices.

“Grandfather, grandfather, good morning, we've come to visit you,” Ephraim said as he kissed Jacob's hand.

“We were designing a new pyramid,” Menasseh said to explain their lateness.

“Your father liked to invent new things too. He would make up stories with himself at the center. I remember designing him a multi-colored coat and he strutted around in it like a peacock.”

Both boys laughed. “We have peacocks at the palace,” Ephraim explained. “We like to chase them to see their feathers bristle.”

“Your father was only seventeen when he wore the garment for the last time.”

“Was that when our uncles threw him in a pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites?”

“My sons wanted me to believe a wild animal had attacked him. I should not have trusted them. But I didn't know they hated him that much!”

“People hate for no reason at all! Very often the boys at the palace make fun of us. They taunt us and call us names. They say we are strangers, dirty Israelites, not Egyptians. Why do people hate those who are different from them, Grandfather?”

“I'm not sure. I think everyone has it in them to hate. My own sons, Shimon and Levi, had so much hatred pent up inside that they razed an entire town to the ground.”

“Yet you taught all our uncles to be peace-loving, so it wasn’t your fault!” said Ephraim.

“But I blamed myself! Look what they did afterwards to your father!”

“What happened after Father disappeared?” Ephraim asked.

“Your uncles didn’t actually say your father was dead. They let me assume it by showing me his bloodied coat. I rinsed it out and still have it. If either of you wants it you can have it!”

“I’d like to have it for my collection if you don’t care, Menasseh?” Ephraim said.

“You with your collection of old things! What do I need an old coat for?” Menasseh answered.

“That ‘old coat’ caused a lot of trouble,” Jacob said. “Your uncles scattered in different directions after your father’s disappearance.”

“Were you very sad?” asked Ephraim.

“It was a relief! The atmosphere crackled with the suspense of their terrible secret.”

“Did you try to find out what it was?” asked Menasseh.

“I tried to speak to Reuben but I was afraid he might tell me that one of his brothers had killed your father. I couldn’t face knowing for sure, so I didn’t press him. Had I forced the issue, I might have been able to save Joseph.”

“But then he wouldn’t have come to Egypt and saved our nation from starvation.”

“Knowing the future would have been cold comfort in those days,” Jacob said and then was silent.

Ephraim wanted to hear more about the past. “Please go on, Grandfather.”

“Did Uncle Benjamin leave too?” Menasseh asked.

“No, he was too young. I see your father has chosen *him* to be his companion and treats him royally. What do you think of Benjamin?”

“Father likes having him around,” responded Ephraim. “He says he reminds him of his mother Rachel.”

“Uncle Benjamin is teaching us Hebrew. That’s why we understand you so well,” said Menasseh.

“He and Father talk in Hebrew when they don’t want the servants to understand,” added Ephraim.

“How did Hamid learn your language so well?” asked Menasseh.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it? Here he is. It must be time to eat!”

Hamid bowed low to the three of them, after placing the food in front of them.

“Jacob said angrily to Hamid, “I see you’ve brought me full! Bring me something else!”

“You don’t like *ful*! It’s our favorite food.”

“No doubt that’s why he made it. I’ll tell you why I dislike it while I wait for Hamid to bring me something else to eat.”

“Because of my father’s love of *ful* I secured his blessing. My mother convinced me that the only way I could get it was to pretend I was Esau. I told her that if he touched me he would immediately feel I wasn’t hairy like my brother, so I had to cover my arms with sheep’s skins to fool him. I remember feeling guilty and scared,” Jacob recalled.

“I always feel like throwing up when I’m scared,” Ephraim said.

“Not when we’re eating!” Menasseh said angrily.

“My stomach was churning too. I felt nauseous and my hands were shaking because I was afraid I would be caught in the act by either my father or my brother.”

“Was it after this you went to work for Laban?” asked Menasseh.

“Yes, my punishment for cheating my brother was that my uncle was to cheat me for twenty years.”

“You suffered as much as Father, didn’t you?” asked Ephraim.

“Yes, but your father doesn’t like to be reminded of that.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Menasseh.

“No son likes to think he resembles his father. Everyone thinks he is starting out on his own. I never thought I would grow up to be like my father. I always prided myself on how little I had in common with him. Yet now that I am old, I see that we behaved in the same pattern. I too preferred one son. Look at the trouble that caused!”

“Father doesn’t play favorites,” said Ephraim.

“But then, Father doesn’t know us that well,” Menasseh said cynically. “Days go by and we don’t see him.”

“Father says that it is not the quantity of time he spends with us but its quality that is important,” said Ephraim loyally.

“Did he teach you about the God of Abraham and Isaac?” inquired Jacob.

“Yes! He taught us that it was part of God’s grand design to send him to Egypt,” Ephraim said.

It was getting late. The boys exchanged glances and then Menasseh said politely, “Grandfather, we must go now. Thank you for the meal.”

After they left, Jacob thought, *I would like to see Joseph before I die. I know he wants me to bless his sons. Yes, that should do the trick. I will send him a message. He may have no use for me alive, but they are all interested in my blessing and in what I will bequeath to them.*



Three weeks later, Jacob was sitting up excitedly in his daybed in the courtyard. Only Judah and his son had arrived.

“What’s keeping them? What if he doesn’t come?” Jacob said anxiously.

“Father, relax! It is early yet,” Judah said reassuringly. He warned Jacob, “You must be careful how you speak to Joseph. He is a powerful figure and we will have no protection from him once you are dead.”

Just then they both heard the clanging noises of chariots and then a fanfare.

Judah helped his father up to a sitting position and went out to greet his brother. Judah bowed deeply and said, “Welcome to the Land of Goshen. Father awaits you.”

Joseph entered the courtyard and strode over to Jacob.

“Father, I thought you were dying! You look too healthy to be on your deathbed.”

“Appearances can be deceiving, my son.”

Jacob turned to Judah and told him that he wanted to be alone with Joseph.

Before leaving the courtyard, Judah said, “When you are ready, call me and I will bring my brothers in.”

When they were alone, Jacob said, “Joseph, your brothers are afraid you will take revenge on them after I die.”

“They need not fear me. I forgave them all long ago.”

“I hope that is true, however,” Jacob continued, “a more important matter is the future of our people. Since you are committed to Egypt’s future and your children are being raised, temporarily I hope, as Egyptians, Judah will be the leader after I die.”

“But what about our Law of Primogeniture?”

“My three oldest sons, Reuben, Shimon and Levi are not to be trusted with power,” said Jacob vehemently.

“Is that your final decision?”

“Yes! It has been ordained by God. And now the last thing we must discuss is my final resting place. I wish to be buried in the Cave of Machpelah, near Hebron.”

“You don’t wish to be buried next to my mother, Rachel?” Joseph asked incredulously.

Jacob nodded affirmatively.

“So you have rejected my mother! Why? Is it because she believed in the power of her household gods, the *terafim*?”

“No, my son, it is much simpler than that. There is only one burial ground in the promised land of Canaan that belongs to us by right of purchase. You know that my philosophy has always been to wrest power through peaceful means and not through violence. That is why I wish to be buried there. Swear to me in the traditional manner that you will uphold my will.”

“I am not pleased with this. I have no choice but to obey,” Joseph responded. Diplomat that he was he kept his angry thoughts inside, *when MY time comes to die I will asked to be buried in the plot of land Jacob purchased outside of Shechem since it belongs to our family.*

“Put your hand under my thigh as a sign of faith.”

“Why do you insist on this formality? Don’t you trust me? Are you reprimanding me for something I’ve done?”

“Not for anything you have *done!*” Jacob answered enigmatically. “Quickly, swear to me! The others are waiting

outside impatiently. You and I will have another private talk tomorrow. Now it is your brothers' turn."

When it was clear he had no choice, Joseph, with a great show of displeasure and resentment, swore in the proscribed manner to bury Jacob in the Cave of Machpelah.

The brothers entered and Jacob greeted them personally as they filed in gathering round his bed. He looked at each one slowly and carefully before speaking.

"My sons, you are here to receive my last wishes and blessings. Most of you will be disappointed, but that is fair. You too have disappointed me." Jacob then dispensed with his three older sons. His tone was warm and loving, however, when he spoke to Judah, who was standing on his right.

"Judah, you alone have behaved affectionately to me. Because of you my grandchildren have not been cut off from our tradition. Despite their Egyptian upbringing, Ephraim and Menasseh have learned compassion and respect for our ways. Therefore, from your seed will come the great leaders of our future nation."

Judah was overcome and thanked his father profusely.

Jacob then told Benjamin that he was disappointed in him for choosing to live with Joseph rather than with him. "You have learned the martial arts and a taste of royalty from the Egyptians. This will prove to be a dangerous combination in the future."

To Joseph he said, "Bring Menasseh and Ephraim to me that I may bless them directly. The rest of you may leave."



It was dusk when Joseph returned with his two children.

"I can't see too well in the dark," Jacob said. "Now I know how my father must have felt when he repeatedly asked me 'are you really Esau?' Are these really your sons?"

"Of course, Father! There is no duplicity *here!* I have placed Menasseh to your right and Ephraim to your left."

"Jacob deliberately crossed his hands so that his left hand was placed on Menasseh's head and his right on Ephraim's.

“Father,” Joseph exclaimed while attempting to move Jacob’s hands. “I told you that Menasseh is on your right! You have reversed the proper order.”

Jacob gently removed Joseph’s hands from his and said, “It is not a mistake. This is how it is done in my family.”

“But not in Egypt.”

“It has been ordained that Ephraim the younger will be the stronger one.”

“I cannot allow that. Menasseh is my heir.”

“My mother Rebecca forced me to wrest the blessing from Esau to accord with God’s will that the younger inherit. My grandmother Sarah chased away Ishmael from her tent for the same reason. Throughout our history this has always been the case.”

“According to this logic, why isn’t Benjamin your heir? He is the youngest and the son of your once favorite wife!” Joseph asked.

“Didn’t you hear me?” Jacob said in anger. With great effort he continued. “The people of Israel will also follow your mistaken logic in choosing a king from the stock of Benjamin before realizing their mistake. Afterwards, however, all kings will descend from the branch of Judah.” It was clearly an effort for Jacob to go on.

“Father, calm down and rest, you are tired!” Joseph said.

“But we have so much more to discuss.”

“I will return tomorrow and then we will talk.”

As Jacob was falling asleep, he thought, *Joseph, tomorrow I will teach you to be a better father to your sons than I was to mine.*

The next morning Hamid came to awaken his master, unsuccessfully, for he was dead.

He ran to get Judah who then told Joseph. As they crossed the path to Jacob’s home, Judah tore his garment and said, “I hope you will honor his memory.”

“You need not fear me!” Joseph said sadly. “You know, I had looked forward to talking to him tomorrow. I was so young when I was snatched away from him. I never told him how the thought of his surviving similar ordeals inspired me through difficult times.”

Judah said, “He would have liked knowing this.”

“It is too late now. I was too busy for him when he needed me. It is strange, but I always hated him for singling me out for special treatment. I knew that if not for that my brothers would not have picked on me. When I was younger I blamed him for what you did to me. But now, with the passage of time, I realize that it was precisely that feeling of being chosen by Father that prepared me for the role I was cast into.”

“Perhaps Father sensed this before he died,” Judah said tactfully.

At Jacob’s bedside Joseph tore his princely robe in the traditional manner of mourning. He shivered and was amazed at the strength of his feeling of loss. He felt naked. He was stripped of everything. Nothing stood between him and eternity. *Who would believe that after all I have achieved, I am again cast into the pit of darkness, screaming for my father.*



## THE DISCREDITED PROPHETESS

*When Aaron turned toward Miriam, he saw that she was stricken with snow-white scales. And Aaron said to Moses, "O my Lord, do not hold against us the sin which we unwittingly committed. Let her not be as one dead, who emerges from her mother's womb with half her flesh eaten away." So Moses cried out to God, saying, "O Lord, please heal her!" But the Lord said to Moses, "...Let her be shut out of camp for seven days, and then let her be readmitted." So Miriam was shut out of camp for seven days; and the people did not march on until Miriam was readmitted. (Numbers 12:10-15)*

*This is much worse than I thought! I must find something to do. It was the morning of her third day of banishment. How much longer? I've never been punished like this before.*

Before she was obliged to leave, Moses and Aaron had assured her that she would be outside the camp for *only* seven days. "Only seven days, indeed!" she thought.

There were no exceptions to the rule: Anyone who was diagnosed as having a skin disease had to go outside the camp for a week—alone—to simply wait for the disease to run its course. The priestly families could differentiate between various rashes, but chose to refer to each outbreak of the skin as *tzara'at* or leprosy. Despite its name, very few had the dreaded variety of illness called Egyptian leprosy.

Miriam was professionally interested in her own illness. She was a *bat-kohen*, a daughter of a priestly family and intimately acquainted with the diagnosis of disease. She was never consulted publicly, but her private opinions were highly valued because of her many years of experience.

The priests claimed the different categories of leprosy were all caused by sin. If the person's contagion stopped, he would be pronounced healthy and be required to bring a sacrifice in the form of a sin offering. If not pronounced healthy, he would remain alone

outside the camp for another seven days to seek out the source of his sin and engage in intensive soul-searching.

Miriam was beset by terrible doubts about the severity of her punishment. She thought it unfair that only she was being punished, and not her brother Aaron as well. After all, together, the two of them had voiced complaints about Moses. She bitterly criticized the fact that those who were diseased had to expiate their sin by spending the entire period of quarantine alone—separated from others similarly afflicted. *What kind of God demands that one endure this mental and physical pain in a state of loneliness!*

She had plenty of time to contemplate her “sin”. She still felt she and Aaron were right in criticizing their younger brother Moses for having married a black woman. *If this was a sin, why wasn't Aaron similarly afflicted? Is criticism of our brother now to be tabooed? After all, Moses is not God!*

Miriam felt that she or Aaron would have been better qualified to lead the people out of Egypt. She had never understood why God chose Moses. Even Moses knew his own limitations. That was why he had asked for a spokesperson.

Miriam had always blamed Moses for God's original choice of Aaron over her. This was his revenge! He resented my being the big sister, for having the gift of speech and for laughing at the way he spoke. His lisp was very precious to us. We treasured everything about this child that the astrologers feared, this one who was rescued from the waters.

Perhaps I wasn't chosen because I am a woman. Is it God who does not want women to worship Him? Or is it those who claim to speak in His name, who control the power, who do not want women to worship Him? She asked this because the leaders, who were all men, described God as an all-powerful and vengeful being. But women, she knew, thought God was caring and compassionate. Men had decreed that women be excluded from holy work and had elected priests to formulate laws which treated women with contempt. We are children in their eyes. I remember when it was different.

In Egypt, the women's nurturing talents were essential, because the men were physically exhausted and emotionally drained from their demeaning work as slaves. The women had

played musical instruments and worshipped the *terafim*, the household gods of their ancestresses in Ur.

The new form of religion was deliberately dry and abstract. Women were not allowed into the holy area, because their form of worship was too spontaneous and earthy in contrast to the new formal rituals. *No wonder our people needed a golden calf to worship. And who did they come to with their request, as usual? To me!* She then went to Aaron to see what could be done. They did their best to accommodate the people; but were rebuked for it!

Miriam felt it was wrong of God to command mankind not to make any graven images of Him. He had killed hundreds of His people simply for their needing a concretized version of Him in the form of a Golden Calf to feel and touch. *We were not ready to accede to His demand that we accept an intangible essence and call it God. We had not left the mental state of slavery. We needed compassion and understanding when we failed to observe the first commandment, but were expected instead to be satisfied with divine wrath and displays of power.*

Miriam's rebellious thoughts were interrupted by two people with skin diseases who hesitantly approached her for help.

*Even here, I am to have no peace!* She thought, but then relented. *They need me! I am their leader! They have the right to ask me for help.* She looked closely at one of them. It was Hur. "Who diagnosed you as having leprosy?" Miriam asked. "I've never seen this variety of the disease before."

"It was my son, Bezalel the painter. He observed a change in the color of my skin and told me to go to the priests. I wanted to avoid an open trial to determine what sin caused it so I asked your nephew, Nadav for a private opinion.

"That was unwise. Nadav is not as experienced in these matters as some of the others. Let me look at your back and see if I can find the tell-tale signs."

Hur removed his upper garment and Miriam inspected his skin. After a few moments, she said, "I have good news. It looks like it is just a temporary rash. So you will not have to make a confession of your sins after all. Between us," she added, "this place is atonement enough for any crime. As long as you are here, however, let us go and see who needs help."

Miriam made the rounds outside the camp. She met people with different skin diseases. Each person's major complaint was the loneliness. She suggested that the people congregate to take care of each other; that they put up makeshift huts for those who were really sick. The healthier people could care for the very sick.

She was pleased to be able to use her organizational abilities. She realized that she had re-interpreted the law of *badad yeshev*, "you shall remain in complete isolation" (Leviticus 13:46) and hoped she would not be punished for usurping the power of interpretation from Moses. She was aware of the danger of stepping out of line for she had witnessed what had happened to Aaron's sons.

She had given much to this people. She had raised and advised its leader. When their fledgling nation succeeded in fleeing Pharaoh's army, she had composed a song for the occasion. Moses insisted that it would be more seemly for him to sing God's praises, so she had organized the women and they had accompanied him in the background with timbrels and drums. Her feelings were tinged with bitterness when she looked back on that glorious occasion. She saw it as another example of Moses' exploitation of her: using what was hers for his own ends.

It was immediately after the singing of her Song of the Sea that the people started calling her *marah*, bitter, making puns of her name. She thought that one day they would no doubt call her song, *shirat mar-yam*, song of the bitter sea!

Was I bitter then? Or was it after we were unable to get sweet water, when Moses implied that it was my fault that the waters were bitter? I realized then, that he was totally incapable of gratitude. That is why he saw to it that I was punished. And God sided with him!

She felt that it was going to be difficult to worship a God who afflicted people with diseases for not agreeing with Him. *This is not the God we left Egypt to worship. I cannot accept that this is God's doing.*



It took a great deal of convincing and cajoling, but the entire nation of Israelites waited for her. Moses was powerful enough to convince them that it would be ungrateful and wrong to leave

Miriam behind after all she had done for them. After a great show of resentment they agreed. They would wait this time but if she sinned again they would not wait for her a second time. Who did she think she was? She would have to catch up to them just like anyone else.

*It is lonely here. Four more days to go.*



## THE DAUGHTERS OF YOCHEDVED

*A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman (Exodus 2:1).*

Yocheved sits in her *succah*, a booth with some palm leaves over it, to protect her from the intense sun of the desert. It is a hot day and she has put in a long day's work. This is her time and she is sipping a drink of brackish well-water, carefully boiled and rationed—disguised with nanna leaves, carefully dried and preserved taken from their garden in Goshen, Egypt. Besides her daily chores, she is expected to keep an eye on Moses and Zipporah's two sons Gershom and Eliezer, who are fairly easy—passive in fact, and neglected terribly by their father and their bewildered mother.

I remember the day they came here with Yitro, Moses' father-in-law. He brought Zipporah, Moses' abandoned wife, who had been sent home to her papa, because he had more important things to do and her, or rather I should say, their, two sons. Gershom was aptly named—I have been a stranger in a foreign land—which could refer to any member of that peculiar family. His younger brother was born after Moses discovered God and named him Eliezer—the God of my father was my help—not that this was of any help to the poor child, who was always being confused with his cousin, Aaron's son Eleazar. Anyway, Yitro brought the three of them to the wilderness and sent word to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Yitro, am coming to you, with your wife and her two sons." One would think that Yitro would have more tact and present them as HIS sons. Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed low and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent.

What a day that was—what confusion, what tears—not too much joy on our part, it added great complications to our lives. Miriam was furious with Moses, accusing him of all sorts of things. Until then, no one really knew anything about Zipporah; there had been all sorts of rumors—and now here she was—in the flesh—and

very dark flesh at that. Miriam tried to befriend her. I think it was a ploy on her part, to make her look like a victim, so that she could then portray Moses as an uncaring man, who neglected and abandoned his wife and children. Not that she was so wrong—but it was the way she exploited Zipporah. And no one really cared about those children; they don't speak our language; they are very shy; nothing will come of them. At least they are no bother to anyone. Not at all like her other grandchildren.

Later this day, there will be a meeting in the Tent and she will be expected to look after Aaron and Elisheva's four unruly sons: Eleazar, Itamar, Nadab and Abihu. All these boys! Where do they come from—she at least was blessed with Miriam—but her daughter does not seem to want to marry anyone—she enjoys being a leader too much.

At least Elisheva is expecting a girl which Zipporah, with her mysterious powers, has predicted by running her hands over her belly and Miriam, with her own gift of prophecy, has confirmed. What a family! How is it that each of her immediate family has been chosen to lead the people of Israel through the desert? What a long trip this is. She hopes she survives it and makes it into the Promised Land.

Yocheved is a woman with a long white mane of hair, flowing in all directions. Her eyesight is still pretty sharp for a woman of her indeterminable age, which is why her daughters-in-law trust her so much—as a caretaker, a marriage counselor and confidante. “Could I tell some tales,” she often says, “if I were so inclined.” She chuckles, “That would certainly change Moses and Aaron's claims to the authority of the books they are constantly scribbling, and insisting they are Yahweh inspired words. Too bad, she does not know how to write, though she might use one of Elisheva's scribes to jot down her reminiscences—so that HER story doesn't get lost, drowned out by Moses and Aaron's version of truth.

Which of her three daughters would she write about? Would it be her favorite: the impetuous Miriam, who could have been the leader of the people, had she not been a woman? As it is, the people come to her and look up to her and all her time is taken up listening to their complaints, serving as advisor and problem solver to her brothers. The three of them are engaged in a power struggle.

Some days Miriam and Aaron ally themselves against Moses—some days, it is Moses and Miriam against Aaron—and sometimes Miriam stands alone—against both of them. She worries about Miriam; she's too outspoken. Moses is clearly the reluctant leader of people, chosen by Yahweh and preferred over Miriam—she is resentful of her “little brother's” chosenness. After all it was she who saved him, watched over him in the bulrushes before Bithiah, Pharaoh's daughter, found him. She was the one who kept in touch over all those long years and brought Yochaved in, openly, at great risk to herself,<sup>1</sup> to nurse her son, who was an illegal alien and doomed to die by Pharaoh's decrees.

We never really acknowledged our debt to Bithiah—what a risk she took. Perhaps Elisheva will name her daughter Bat-yah in her honor. I will suggest it to her this evening. This will also acknowledge her closeness to Moses—one that is hard to overlook. The way she spends all her time with him, rather than with her own husband or children—but then with those boys, why would she want to stay at home—better off leaving them with me.

Where was I? I'm rambling in my thoughts—I guess, it's acceptable in an old woman, but then how will I ever organize my thoughts in order to dictate the history of my women folk.

Oh yes, I was musing about Miriam. Rather than work together with Moses and keep him in line, and help him to control his temper and impatience with the people, she has started to bother him with being a neglectful father and husband. It's not as if Moses doesn't have more important things to worry about. And he should never have married that Zipporah in the first place, imagine bringing a Cushite into our family—the Levites are supposed to be pure—that is why Moses' line will not be the priestly one. Had he married Elisheva, with her wonderful lineage, Moses could have been both prophet and priest and then we wouldn't have to put up with all of these strange purity laws that Aaron is proposing.

But he ruined everything, by marrying Yitro's daughter when he was in Midian—such a choice. True she is resourceful—she saved Moses and Gershom – they would be dead if not for her—the way she took a knife and circumcised him by her own hand. At

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Exodus 2:6ff.

a night encampment on the way, the LORD encountered Moses and sought to kill him for not having behaved responsibly as an Israelite. So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his legs with it, saying, "You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!" And when He let him alone, she added, "A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision." What could Moses have been thinking—had he gotten so Egyptianized that he didn't know this basic custom. But why did Zipporah have to symbolically circumcise Moses as well—what was SHE thinking!

He, of course, was circumcised—that always got him into trouble in Pharaoh's court—he always had to hide his penis from the other boys—the women, Bithiah's friends and maids, were all in on the secret. And when he was little, they would look at him and fondle him—it looked so cute and so different from the men they knew.

True she has a distinguished lineage among her own people—and Yitro has been of immense help to Moses in organizing the governing of our people. And I must admit she is beautiful—with her big eyes and face emitting intelligence and compassion. I know she cares about me, but I just can't get attached to her—she's so different from us—I know I should try harder—I certainly hear God's message of compassion, graciousness, and kindness often enough, I just find it hard to put into practice—but then I'm not perfect like God. And those two boys of hers—they've had a hard life—being forced first to leave Midian, then to leave Egypt with a people that was only half theirs, not knowing the language and looking the way they did, black, among our people, our tribe in particular, the Levites, on both Amram and my side. We have a history of not including outsiders, of even killing them when they get too close. Oh how I remember the tales of Dinah and how Levi and Shimon tracked down the people of Shechem. And I sense the same temperament in Pinchas, Eleazar's son. But that's another story; it is remembered in the annals of our history with great shame—and to think that I am a member of this murderous tribe.

Why do I keep getting sidetracked? Why am I so pre-occupied with Zipporah, I will never get organized enough to record my thoughts for posterity. It is Miriam's story I want to tell, and perhaps my favorite daughter-in-law, Elisheva's, whom Moses

should have married. Miriam keeps on going to Moses and telling him that he better find some time for Zipporah; that things cannot keep on the way they are. She hints that she knows something about him and Elisheva and is threatening to go to the Meeting Tent and confront him in the face of God and get him to change his ways.

Miriam is playing with fire—she has let her power get to her head and has no real sense of woman's place. I could never educate her—not since she became everyone's darling for her prophetic powers. She actually saved our people, and was given credit for it. She went to Amram and challenged him to procreate when all the other men were afraid to have intercourse with their wives, after Pharaoh's decrees to throw all the little baby boys into the Nile to annihilate us. Amram bragged about that while laying bricks and the other men emulated him. That act of boldness, magnified and retold, as one of the legends which saved us from dying out and which also provided us with our Moses, prince of Egypt, made her reputation.

She has her women's groups around her, she has her phenomenal insight into finding water for us, when we are thirsty—is it instinct, or is it Yahweh's gift of power to her, to compensate her for not choosing her to lead the people to the promised land. Actually, I never understood why it was Moses who was chosen, not Aaron, or Miriam. The first time he was away from anyone's restraining influence—actually from the influence of women, now that I think about it, he went and lost his temper and killed an Egyptian—in typical Levite fashion. Why? Because when he witnessed the labors of his relatives and saw an Egyptian beating one of his kinsmen, 'He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand' in true cowardly fashion. What could you expect of someone who was just a young, spoiled man, who had grown up in the palace among women? Our people reacted in typical fashion, rather than be grateful, one of them said: "Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" At this point Moses was frightened of the consequences of the deed, not the wrongness of it, but that he might get caught. Sure enough, when Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill him, but

Moses had already run away. He arrived in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well. And the rest we know; it is history. He went and got married—to you know who...no real good judgment—just because of that Levite quick temper, which he loses so easy—hitting the rocks to get water, instead of speaking soothingly and listening to the water flowing beneath the stones, like Miriam.

They thought my daughter had magical powers. To this day they sing this song whenever they look for water. She composed it, just as she composed the song of praise to God for successfully crossing the Sea of Reeds. She loved to sing and she taught all her songs to the women—and the men learned these songs from their wives and mothers.

*Spring up, O well—sing to it—  
The well which the chieftains dug,  
Which the nobles of the people started  
With maces, with their own staffs* (Numbers 21:8).

Miriam was a special child—she was born after Aaron, but she always acted the big sister and collected the other children around her the way a stone does moss—and then they always stayed faithful to her. She had this charm, this power, this talent—she never wanted to be married, like the other children—she wanted to do things—worse than that—she wanted to run the world, or if not that, to tell others how to run the world—that's the source of her conflict with Moses—her willfulness. If only they could cooperate—if only she could stop seeing herself as the big sister—she even bossed us around and told us what to do. I remember so well.

And that's why they call her a prophet—although no one usually acknowledges that about her—except God, when it suits him.<sup>2</sup> There is too much built in discrimination against women in our laws—Miriam is so frustrated about that—first, how it affects her and second, in how unfair it is. She rails against injustice; she hasn't learnt to moderate her tone. She will be punished for this—cast out. My husband, Amram, gave up on her a long time ago. He said, "What harm can her willfulness do—she'll outgrow it—let her enjoy herself while she can." So he encouraged her. I think he

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 15:20.

doesn't perceive how serious a problem it is. Aaron does—but he doesn't know what to do—and when he can he uses her, uses her disdain for injustice, so that both are temporarily allied against Moses, and then when HIS schemes don't work, Miriam gets the blame.

Underneath it all, they are still children—playing their little power games—but Moses was out of the loop when he was growing up, so he doesn't know the rules. Miriam used to come back from the palace where she played with Bithiah (who was not much older than she was) and saw to it that Bithiah didn't treat Moses like a little doll. Bithiah let her tell him tales of his people so that he wouldn't forget that he was an Ivri. It was important for him to know that he was a Levite, a descendant of Jacob, whose father Isaac, and great grand-father Avraham once lived in Canaan, the promised land—so that he wouldn't forget the tongue of his forefathers and the myths of his people, and the ONE God.

It was rumored that this God would reveal its presence to one of Yocheved's three children, but no one knew which of the three it would be. No one thought that it would be Moses, since he was being raised as an Egyptian—but it was Miriam's job to see to it that he would be nourished on the Israelite traditions just in case! Miriam, of course, hoped it would be her and strutted around the community as if she were the chosen—bossing Aaron around, who didn't strike anyone as a leader in those days. He was very good at crowd pleasing, not leading. Once a group of bullies got together and decided to stone an old man for gathering on the Sabbath—somehow they convinced Aaron to “lead” them and officiate at the casting out ceremony. They even got him to write a ritual and pompously pronounce: “The man shall be put to death: the whole community shall pelt him with stones outside the camp.” Everyone knew that Aaron wouldn't be chosen—but could Miriam, a girl, be God's choice? She certainly thought so and she had her followers—those who augmented the stories which they attributed to her supernatural skills.

Miriam was very jealous when Elisheva joined our family. She tried to undermine her from the start. Actually Miriam knew Elisheva very well—she was of the family of Judah, and she was

the sister of the famous Nahshon son of Amminadab. Thus she had a pretty good genealogy.

Miriam also knew that it was her mother's dream (in fact both mothers' dreams—since they were good friends) to have the son of Yocheved marry the daughter of Amminadab. However, when Moses came back to Egypt with that black woman—pretty as she was and those two half-breed sons—they started working on Elisheva to consider marrying Aaron, even though he wasn't as exotic a person as Moses. In fact, to avoid scandal, since Moses and Elisheva hit it off a bit too well—Elisheva and Aaron married very hastily. Miriam was disappointed that her childhood friend and sometime rival for leadership among the girls, was first of all, agreeing to marry anyone and second of all, to someone so set in his ways as Aaron. Miriam always considered Elisheva to be somewhat pretentious, full of ideas about social justice. She told Miriam that if she married into her family she could influence them to be more than just charismatic leaders who needed their persuasive powers to get the people of Israel to believe in them and let them be lead out of slavery. She told Miriam that with her ethical perspective, with Miriam's sense of compassion and care, the TWO of them could take over—either from the men or from behind the scenes.

Miriam was outraged, but kept her feelings (for once) to herself. How could she put herself on my level? Me, share with anyone? And why even think “from behind the scenes”? The ways to power was direct confrontation—build up alliances—get the people to love you and then they would support you.

Miriam felt that Elisheva had renounced all her rights to have a say in the leadership anyway, because she was marrying—and was going to have babies—and they would take up all her time. You stayed single like Miriam or you became a mother—there was no two ways about it. So whenever Elisheva came to her with ideas, Miriam shooed her off—how could this mother—she spit it out like a dirty word—have anything to teach her. Rather than make her an ally she made her an enemy.

“When will we ever learn,” thought Yocheved. “They are sisters in law, but not sisters in spirit—they only see their differences, not their sameness. It's like our ancestresses Sarah and

Hagar, Rachel and Leah, who were always fighting. Rather than join together to make a stand to improve women's conditions, they fought with each other over whose children were chosen. The enmity that exists between our peoples, between our tribes stems from this, I am certain. There must be a way to change this—it cannot be “human nature” that we are always to perceive each other as rivals, rather than to work in tandem, in coalition.

Perhaps I can do something about the next generation. Elisheva is going to have a baby girl. A daughter in our family—finally—perhaps a new start. I will dedicate my testament to her.



Elisheva came over to the Succah. She saw Yocheved, lying down in a reverie. She was alarmed. “Yocheved, are you all right,” she asked. I was just coming over to ask you if you can watch the boys, since I want to go to the meeting at the Tent—but if you don't feel up to it, I don't have to go. Can I bring you anything?” Elisheva had never seen Yocheved so contemplative before.

“What's bothering you?”

Yocheved's white mane was strewn all over the place—she was still in a prone position, having fallen asleep while in thought. She looked to Elisheva like a stranger—her eyes so intensely focused on her.

“What do I look like to her?” Elisheva wondered.

Elisheva was actually quite startling looking—her face was relatively pale for an Israelite and her long brown hair was light colored, streaked from exposure to the sun. She had been teased for this and for also being taller than most women in her tribe—the women of Judah were neither known for their height, nor for their light looks. She was closer to Yocheved than to her own birth mother. To see her standing next to Zipporah was quite a contrast. With her stomach protruding (she was about eight months into her pregnancy), slightly stooped with the burden, her face flushed, she looked like some of the ancient goddesses their ancestresses must have worshipped—Ashtoret or Ashera, or Rachel's famous *terafim*, the house gods of Laban.

Yocheved looked at her, hard and long, clearly deep in thought. “Elisheva, you know that I think of you as my daughter; that you are as dear to me, sometimes even dearer than Miriam (don’t let her ever know I said that). But I must know something—and if it is true, your secret is safe with me. For a long time, I have seen how you and Moses look at each other; I know that you had hoped to marry him when you were young and that I encouraged you—since it was my dearest wish then. Is the baby his?”

Elisheva was shocked. She didn’t know how to respond. She stammered, “Why would you think that?”

“You’re not answering me dear.”

“If it were so, would it make a difference? Would it change our relationship?”

“I’m not sure. But, I cannot stand not knowing. And if it is true, I am sure you will be relieved to tell someone with whom your secret is safe—you know that I would never allow the test of the bitter waters to be done in my tribe, and I hope to wipe it out completely in my generation. I’ve always known that women occasionally dally with other men and are not caught—but because men are so insecure about their paternity in the first place, they guard us, keep us under veil and even then, have to hope for the best. In our family—since the scandal over Dinah and the heartbreaking consequences of our forefather’s Levi and Shimon jealousy and fanaticism, it’s never been like that. Although I do worry about your grandson, Pinchas, who looks like he has the making of another zealot—blood after all will tell and come out in each generation.”

While Yocheved was talking, Elisheva had time to reflect on her answer. She debated how to phrase it, so that her relationship with Moses would not reflect badly on her. She tried to assess the sincerity of Yocheved. Could she be trusted with her secret? Even Moses did not know for sure. *Does she dislike Aaron so much that she does not care about him?* Despite her misgivings, she knew that Yocheved was right; that she would feel much better if she confided in her, in someone. That was why Yocheved knew so much, she inspired trust.

Elisheva blurted out the truth. “Mother, I throw myself on your mercy...you have guessed my secret—please help me—I have

agonized over what to do—to tell Moses, to tell Aaron, to tell Miriam—help me to decide.”

Yocheved’s response surprised Elisheva. “Arise my dear. Be true to yourself. Unless you really regret the occasion on which this child was conceived, never look back and raise your daughter to be proud of her heritage—she is a love child and she will lead the way. You will have a daughter who will take care of you in your old age—and you will trust her with the secret when she is old enough to appreciate it. Call her Bat-Yah. Not because Moses is the one who talks to Yahweh, but in remembrance of our friend, Bithiah who saved Moses so that you can now have your precious daughter. With Aaron you might have conceived more sons—and who knows what grief might come from these sons. I only wish you were MY daughter—for you are in some ways more precious to me than my own. You have my spirit and I hope you will pass this down.”

“Mother, I will be eternally grateful to you and will certainly name her Batya. Is there anything else I can do for you to show my gratitude?”

“Yes, my dear. You have something I do not.”

“What can that be? You have so much life experience and wisdom in your heart; how can there be something that you lack, that I have.”

“You have access to scribes—you know how to organize, how to write. I want to write a testament—I want to put my memories into some form of history that will parallel, not supplant, what Moses and Aaron are doing. I fear that they are not including women’s voices in their stories and retellings of our history.”

“We will have to sit for many days, discussing this, how shall we go about this?”

“You are shortly to give birth. Since you will have to separate yourself from Aaron for the eighty days of uncleanness<sup>3</sup> until you

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<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 12:2-7: “When a woman at childbirth bears... a female, she shall be unclean two weeks as during her menstruation, and she shall remain in a state of blood purification for sixty-six days. 6) On the completion of her period of purification, for either son or daughter, she shall bring to the priest, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin

bring a sacrifice—this will be a perfect time for us to sit in my tent. You can nurse; I can hold the baby, your children can visit you here, it will be good for them to hear my stories and the boys are old enough to be on their own.”

“Mother, this will be my greatest pleasure—I have no intentions of going back to my own tribe when I give birth—so this will be a perfect arrangement. We will use the time of Aaron’s scribes—or better yet, I will try and get some scribes permanently attached to us. I love you and I hope we will both succeed in doing this work.”

“Go back my dear—spend time with your children. I will not watch them for you tonight. Do not go to the Tent Meeting. Rest and think upon our project.”

Yocheved wanted so much to record the inside story of women in the Menstrual Compound. This was Zipporah’s contribution: She had organized it. She deserved the credit for it. As an outsider she had questioned the loneliness that the Israelite woman felt every month and thought that if they could all be together, like she and her six sisters were, the women would look forward to this time period rather than be outcasts. Thus began the tradition of Rosh Hodesh—the celebration of the new moon by women—who all seemed to menstruate around the same time. It became a holiday, an expression of womanliness, rather than a punishment.

I want to attack the Levites view of the menstruant woman as unclean. How dare they take our tradition away from us? Yocheved thought indignantly.

Another story that must be told is our friendship with the Egyptian women who sent us on our way with presents so that we would not go away empty-handed. Each woman gave us from their house a gift to remember her by; usually a goddess made of silver and gold, or a simple piece of jewelry or clothing for our sons and daughters that their children had outgrown, since they knew we would need it for the long trip. For some reason, rather than see it as an act of generosity and compassion by our friends, it was recorded by our scribes as an act of trickery—it was said that we

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offering. 7) He shall offer it before the Lord and make expiation on her behalf; she shall then be clean from her flow of blood”.

“borrowed” these items, implying that we stole them in lieu of the back pay owed us. The men never realized that we had good friends and allies among the Egyptian women, a relationship that goes back in time all the way to Sarah’s friendship with Hagar (before that went sour).

And what of our contribution to the Exodus itself? Who was it who stayed up all night preparing and baking unleavened cakes of the dough which we took out of Egypt? True we were “driven out of Egypt and could not delay” but not by the women, our Egyptian friends were there helping us to bake, crying tearfully with us about how much they would miss us—even Bithiah came over, sneaking away from her entourage to say a special goodbye to Moses. She knew we had no time to prepare any provisions for ourselves, so she brought us some special goodies.

This will set the record straight. Now I can get a good night’s sleep. In the morning there will be more to think about.



Elisheva went back to her tent—relieved to have confided in Yocheved and elated at the prospect of getting a chance to record her mother-in-law’s memoirs. This would be her contribution, her way of making history. Miriam is part of history, though not always mentioned by name. Nor am I for that matter. I will preserve the other side, the softer side. And then I will no longer be considered to be JUST a mother, a daughter, and a granddaughter.



That night, Yocheved died. A month later Elisheva gave birth to a girl as was foreordained. She wanted to call her Yocheved, after her beloved “mother” but decided to preserve her memory by calling her Batya. “It will be our secret,” she consoled herself.



Elisheva's name was preserved:

*Amram took to wife his father's sister Yocheved and she bore him Aaron and Moses...Aaron took to wife Elisheva, daughter of Amminadab, a sister of Nahshon, and she bore him Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar...And Aaron's son Eleazar took to wife one of Putiel's daughters, and she bore him Pinchas. These are the heads of the fathers's houses of the Levites by their families.*

(Exodus 6:20-25)

Her foreboding about her grandson Pinchas was all too true; he was a Levite for sure:

*While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women, <sup>2</sup>who invited the people to the sacrifices for their god. The people partook of them and worshiped that god. <sup>3</sup>Thus Israel attached itself to Baal-peor, and the LORD was incensed with Israel. <sup>4</sup>The LORD said to Moses, "Take all the ringleaders and have them publicly impaled before the LORD, so that the LORD's wrath may turn away from Israel." <sup>5</sup>So Moses said to Israel's officials, "Each of you slay those of his men who attached themselves to Baal-peor."*

*<sup>6</sup>Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman over to his companions, in the sight of Moses and of the whole Israelite community who were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. <sup>7</sup>When Pinchas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, saw this, he left the assembly and, taking a spear in his hand, <sup>8</sup>he followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. Then the plague against the Israelites was checked. <sup>9</sup>Those who died of the plague numbered twenty-four thousand.*

*<sup>10</sup>The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>11</sup>"Pinchas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the Israelites by displaying among them his passion for Me, so that I did not wipe out the Israelite people in My passion. <sup>12</sup>Say, therefore, "I grant him My pact of friendship. <sup>13</sup>It shall be for him and his descendants after him a pact of priesthood for all time, because he took impassioned action for his God, thus making expiation for the Israelites."*

*<sup>14</sup>The name of the Israelite who was killed, the one who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri son of Salu, chieftain of a*

*Simeonite ancestral house. <sup>15</sup>The name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cozbi daughter of Zur; he was the tribal head of an ancestral house in Midian.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Numbers 25



## WHEN WILL IT BE MY TIME?

*Amram took to wife his father's sister Yocheved and she bore him Aaron and Moses...Aaron took to wife Elisheva, daughter of Amminadab, a sister of Nahshon, and she bore him Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar... And Aaron's son Eleazar took to wife one of Putiel's daughters, and she bore him Pinchas. These are the heads of the fathers' houses of the Levites by their families (Exodus 6:20-25).*

Elisheva the daughter of Amminadab did not enjoy happiness in the world. True, she witnessed five crowns [attained by her relatives] in one day: her brother-in-law was a king, her brother was a prince, her husband was High Priest, her two sons were both Deputy High Priests, Pinchas her grandson was a Priest anointed for war. But when her sons entered to offer incense and were burnt, her joy was changed to mourning. Thus it is written, *After the death of the two sons of Aaron—Lev. 16:1'* (Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 22:2).

“Sometimes it bothers me that I am known solely as sister-in law to Moses, wife to Aaron, daughter of Amminadab, sister to Nahshon, mother of the deputy High Priests, grandmother of Pinchas.”

Elisheva pointed to the three men gathered around and continued talking. “All these scribes hang on to my every word. They interview me, ask me intimate questions, write my words down as if they are historical facts. Yet to them my significance rests in my family connections—as if I am not important.”

“But you don’t feel that way about yourself, do you?” her daughter asked.

Batya had come for her mother’s jewelry and felt obligated to spend some time with her mother. Elisheva signaled to her to sit and the three scribes to leave.

Once they had left, Elisheva answered her daughter. “I haven’t felt that way for a long time. I’m beginning to have more of a sense of who I am; who I am is not only in relation to others. I think I changed after the death of the two sons of Aaron”.<sup>1</sup>

“How can you say that? Nadab and Avihu were your sons as well!”

“It’s true I bore them, but were they my sons as you are my daughter?”

Elisheva recalled the acrimonious exchange of words she had with Aaron on the day of the boys’ funeral.

“Why aren’t you crying?” he had asked her through his own tears.

“I shed enough when they were growing up. You spoiled them. They could do no wrong. But I knew they were capable of great evil. Your sons wanted instant power and would have done anything for it. God took them from us before they could harm others. You, and the other priests, gave them everything, from the choice sacrificial leftovers to the scraps of costly priestly materials. They were delighted to lord it over everyone. It was natural for them to assume they could get away with taking the foreign fire to the altar. Only the Almighty could stop them, and God did.”

“I saw no wrong with their trying to wrest leadership from Moses.”

“You and your sister!” Elisheva had responded with spirit. “You both keep on confusing rebellion with leadership. First it was the Golden Calf. See, where that got you! Then Miriam incited Nadab and Avihu to expect that being ‘chosen’ meant special privileges. You and she conveniently forgot that “choseness” means responsibility and obligation.”

“You’re quoting Moses’ ‘journal’ to me again,” Aaron said, making ‘journal’ sound like a dirty word.

“At least his work has some moral and ethical value to it. It’s not just a trivial list of burnt offerings.”

“If that’s what you think of my life’s work, why haven’t you told me before?”

“You don’t make time to listen to me.”

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus (*Acharei Mot*) 16:1.

“That’s not true. I value your opinions but you never share them with me—you always go running to my brother.”

Aaron and she had argued in that vein for a long time and now Elisheva continued these reflections aloud. “Sometimes I think I married the wrong brother.”

“Mother, how could you even think that?”

“You once asked me about your name, *Bat yab*, daughter of God.”

“Yes, I did. When I was little, you told me you would tell me when I was older and could understand.”

“I named you after Bithiah, Moses’ foster-mother. You’ve always known how fond I am of your uncle and he, of you. What you don’t know is that Moses and I were supposed to be married. If not for Yitro’s daughter... Who knows! Just imagine the distinguished progeny we could have produced together.”

“Spoken like a true aristocrat, Mother.”

“I’ll overlook your *chutzpah* for now because of my immediate concern. It causes me great anguish to see your father making petty ritual decisions, while Moses arbitrates ethical and moral matters.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean your father spends too much time attempting to codify the laws concerning the minutiae of sacrifice.”

“Father is bothered by the fact that Moses’ main concern is dealing with ethical and moral issues rather than issues of sacrifice and purity.”

“It also reflects his resentment of my special relationship with Moses.”

“Don’t you think ritual purity is important?”

“It’s been my experience that people think they can replace moral obligations by fanatic observance of rituals.”

“What do you mean?”

“Pinchas is a perfect example of what I mean. Ever since God rewarded him with the priesthood because of his zealotry in slaying Zimri and Cosbi he has been saying that Moses is an ineffectual leader who should now be removed. Who does he think he is? Where is the man’s sense of morality? He should show some kindness, some gratitude towards Moses who led us all out of Egypt. Does he think one action of his cancels out a lifetime of

another's sacrifice? He is suffering from vainglorious pride. The rest of us are nothing to him. Yet to me Pinchas is no more than a murderer who, instead of being rewarded for his bloody deed, should be made to atone by bringing a sin offering. Moreover, he is an ungrateful grandson who doesn't show proper respect to his elders, yet speaks of stoning others."

"Does Father know all this?"

"Does it matter?"

"Maybe you are not alone with your dissatisfaction with what you call fanaticism. Don't cut yourself off from Father. He'll listen to you. He needs you more...now that he's lost his favorite sons."

"Moses has always listened to me. I've never had to convince him."

"That's because he's not your husband," Batya quipped. They both laughed. "Seriously," she continued, "it's because the two of you always see the broader picture."

"We do indeed, unlike your father who needed a Golden Calf because he couldn't accept Moses' vision of an intangible God."

"But it helped him to worship God."

"Because the people had little or no faith they substituted sacrifice for calf worship."

"Is that why Moses supports Father's efforts to institutionalize sacrifice?"

"I'm afraid so. He hopes the next generation's convictions will be strong enough to withstand the attraction of sacrifice."

"I doubt it, mother. Most people need the sanctuary, sacrifice, and fixed times of worship to sense God's spirit. Furthermore, Father's manual is going to be the seal that will make sacrifice respectable. Once sacrifice as a mode of worship is entrenched, it will be difficult to eradicate it."

"Perhaps you're right. It will take a major shock or catastrophe to force our people to give up sacrifice."

"How will you bear it until then?"

"I don't know. I will never agree with those who say that God's spirit rests in the sanctuary, yet I fear we are heading for a period of intolerance and ritualistic behaviorism because of our ignorance and lack of faith."

"Will you do anything about it?"

“I will continue to set a personal example and continue to attempt to influence behind the scenes.”

“It’s not enough. You must sit down with Father and get him to insert into his manual some of the compassionate rules you preach.”

Batya got up and said, “I must make a few more visits before dark. But first, I want you to promise me that you will make a list of some of those precepts you always refer to. I almost forgot what I came for. The other day you said you would give me the jewelry you brought with you from Egypt.”

“Of course you can have it. Why do you want it?”

“You will refuse to give it to me if I tell you.”

“You’re not the only one who visits me. I know you are collecting gold for the Sanctuary. If only it were for some purpose that I believe in. But I won’t stop you. It will be yours anyway.”

“Thank you, mother, I’m sure you will change your mind when the sanctuary is finished. I’ll come by for the jewelry—and your list—tomorrow.”

When her daughter was gone Elisheva thought, It is such a blessing to have a daughter with a mind of her own, who challenges me and emboldens me to express myself. Otherwise I will continue to be known solely in connection with people whose principles I don’t agree with.

I hope she wasn’t too shocked about Moses and me. Did I say anything compromising? Moses and I can’t afford to have rumors starting about us, even if we’re both past our prime. I remember the time when he came to my tent. Did Aaron ever guess why I chose the name Batya? I doubt it. Yet he dedicated the central chapter of his book<sup>2</sup> to the subject of adultery and incest—and showed it to me. Enough of that, my heart’s been divided long enough. If I want to make an impact it will have to be through Aaron, not Moses.

How should I organize my list? Respect for one’s parents...leaving gleanings for the poor...paying the wages of a laborer immediately...not insulting the deaf or placing a stumbling

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<sup>2</sup> Leviticus (*Acharei Mot*) 18:6-30.

block before the blind.<sup>3</sup> I'll never remember all the precepts I believe should be included. I'll ask one of my scribes to record my words. And then I will convince Aaron that it will add substance to his work if he includes these practices in his manual of sacrifices.

I have contributed my jewelry which will be melted down to make fine filigree for the sanctuary. I will contribute my ideas to Aaron's work as well. He will listen and will see to it that ethics and justice are an inseparable part of the sacrificial system. He will correct the popular notion that sacrifice atones for incorrect behavior by teaching that God forgives individuals only after they have begged forgiveness from each other.

If I improve Aaron's visions, I can accept them. My participation will forge a bond between us which may or may not compensate me for my lost love, but at least I will feel I have contributed directly to fulfilling God's vision.

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<sup>3</sup> Leviticus (*Kedoshim*) 19:13-14 etc.

## ‘MOTHER’ IN ISRAEL

*Deborah, wife of Lappidot, was a prophetess...and the Israelites would come to her for decisions...She summoned Barak, son of Abinoam...to fight Sisera. [When he insisted that she accompany him] she said, “There will be no glory for you in that...God will deliver Sisera into a woman’s hand. (Judges 4:4-9)*

Deborah sat under the date-palm tree hoping that no one would see her. The case she had just heard was exhausting and had tried her patience: the entire morning had been spent trying to convince a soldier who had killed a prisoner of war that he had sinned.

“How so?” he asked. “You said that Yael was the most blessed of women. And for what? For striking Sisera, crushing his head, smashing and piercing his temple with the tent pin when he was at her mercy. So what’s wrong with what I did?”

Finally she ordered him to bring a sacrifice and atone for his sin.

When he left he spat on the ground and said to the crowd gathered outside the tent, “Deborah’s become a pacifist.”

It was inconceivable to them that Deborah, who had once proudly led the people of Israel into battle, could now condemn soldiers for killing prisoners of war. Yet she was. The elders ignored the condemnations at first and continued to refer to her as The Conqueress. Yael, however, understood and avoided Deborah. At the same time, still proud of the bloody act which had won her fame in Israel, she declared in public that Deborah had turned into an “old woman”.

*I was young, once! To think that Barak and I were equals—at least at first; then he wouldn’t do a thing without consulting me. He said, “If you will go with me, I will go; if not, neither will I go.”(4:8) But he changed after our victory. Though he went reluctantly into battle, he quickly forgot who had dragged him to glory. He sang my song too well. I struck up the chant and Barak dealt with the captives and the division of booty. Later it became his*

*song—and hers! For Yael then decided to become a warrior. Did she think she was imitating me?*

Deborah, however, would never go to battle again, not even if Barak called. Barak had been irresolute about the necessity of war, but success had changed him and soldiering was today his major preoccupation. Now Deborah was the reluctant one. She had appropriated his earlier uncertainty and translated it into sensitivity about the wasting of life. She had a new cause: she was determined never again to be responsible for the shedding of blood.

This type of thinking did not endear her to tribal leaders who educated their troops to exteriorize evil and project it onto the enemy. Yael, the warrior, accepted their view. In becoming one of them, she denied her feminine life-sustaining instincts and substituted manly acts of destruction.

Lately, Deborah felt she had been regarded as an alien. She heard mumbling that it was unnatural for women to be leaders. *Is it that I'm getting old*, she wondered. Yet thinking back she realized that a scurrilous smear campaign had begun on the anniversary of her return from the war. She had gone, with a peace offering to one of the festivals celebrated by the people at Shiloh to commemorate their victory. Standing at the door of the Tent of Assembly was a self-appointed zealot; he refused her entry to the sanctuary, saying, "Woe unto the generation whose leader is a woman."

She replied, "When it suited you, you created legends about me. You said I was like a hind let loose to conquer Sisera and that I sang goodly words in my song of victory. Now you make puns about my name: 'hornet' you call me."

There was no bite in her alleged sting. She was convinced it was unnatural for women to lead men into battle; moreover she believed it was wrong to build a society which required men to waste their lives and talents leading others into battle.

*If Yael sets the tone for women, who will be left to point out the wasteful and destructive side of war?*

Her convictions did not sit well with the elders and they denounced her as an illegitimate prophet. Despite the fact that during Deborah's reign the land was peaceful, they said Israel could not afford "peace then".

Sitting under her date palm in the heat of the day Deborah wondered if history would treat her kindly.

*Will they write me out, as they did my ancestor Miriam? Or will they let it be known—for posterity—that I thought war was terrible; that it was a sin to revere heroism and that I learned the hard way that our enemies’ blood was also red?*



*So may all your enemies perish, O Lord!  
But those who love you shall be as the sun when it rises in its strength!  
And the land was tranquil forty years. (Judges 6:31)*



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Naomi Graetz (b. 1943, NYC) has been living in Israel since 1967 and in the Negev since 1974. She is the author of *Silence is Deadly: Judaism Confronts Wifebeating* (Jason Aronson, 1998).

Her many book reviews and articles on women and metaphor in the Bible and Midrash have appeared in such journals and edited books as *Conservative Judaism*, *Shofar*, *Nashim*, *Judaism*, *A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (ed. Atahyah Brenner), *Gender and Judaism* (ed. Tamar Rudavsky), *Jewish Mothers Tell Their Stories* (ed. Rachel Josefowitz Siegel et al), *All the Women Followed Her* (ed. Rebecca Schwartz), *Biblical Women in the Midrash* (ed. Naomi M. Hyman) *The Women's Seder Sourcebook* (ed. Tara Mohr), *Jewish Feminism in Israel: Some Contemporary Perspectives* (eds. Kalpana Misra and Melanie Rich).

Graetz has been teaching critical reading skills to a generation of students at Ben Gurion University and has integrated articles on feminist thought, pluralism, civil rights and Judaism into her courses. Her conscious use of these materials has greatly increased awareness of women's place in Jewish history, but also of the potential for women in Israeli society. For her course on "Women and Judaism from a Feminist Perspective" to the Overseas Students at Ben Gurion (1993-1996) she prepared a four volume anthology of readings.

Graetz is a feminist Jew and a Jewish feminist who is grounded both in Jewish tradition and feminist thought. She continues to grapple with problems of modernity while seeing the value of tradition.