



Mishpatim

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Lost and Found

Devorah Talia Gordon's stories, poetry and essays have been featured in numerous print and online magazines, including Mishpacha Magazine, and Aish.com.

Editor's Note: The following piece was the 1st place winner of The Lehrhaus' 2024 Short Story Contest.

Tatty reaches for my hand as we walk up the steps to the peeling yellow door. I resist pulling away; I can't remember the last time I held his hand. With his other hand he knocks so hard against the wood that it feels like it's pounding inside my head.

"Come on, come on." Tatty shakes his head, knocks again. "We gotta get moving. *Just answer, Ta.*"

I squint down the tree-lined street for a sign of Zaidy. It's quiet and still; everyone's gone to work or school by now. I should be there, too,

whispering to Rikki about what we're wearing for the tenth-grade retreat. But instead I'm here, bags packed and stuffed into the back of Tatty's jeep.

I slump down onto the step. My metallic gold sneakers stare back up at me, way too shiny for today. But they're shoes Aunt Estee would have liked. I squeeze my eyes closed.

"Drinking coffee with Sheldon," Tatty mutters to himself. He knocks again, harder. "We ought to go, I guess. Our flight's in an hour."

"We can't just go, Ta."

Tatty kneels until his face is level with mine. He pulls the bill of his Yosemite baseball cap down, looks at me through teary eyes. "Your Aunt Esther was a good soul. I want to be there for her. Trust me, your Zaidy's not coming anyway."

With a sigh, Tatty drags down the steps and heads toward the jeep.

“Try his phone again, please Ta. Please?” He puts the phone to his ear and is almost in the jeep when Zaidy appears from nowhere, holding a paper cup of coffee in one hand, *tallis* bag in the other. He’s wearing the black suit jacket he wears to *shul* every morning that’s at least two sizes too big. Today he’s forgotten to button up his shirt, so his undershirt peeks out at the top.

His voice booms, “Yonason? Muffin?” His wispy grey hair floats around his head, a halo of sorts. “What are you doing here?”

Tatty walks toward Zaidy, lips pressed into a tight, thin line. “Ta...”

Zaidy lifts his chin in my direction, winks as he comes close to me. “Prettier each time I see you.” He gives me a light kiss on the cheek with damp lips. The smell of stale coffee turns my empty stomach. “Muffin, the chicken soup you made last week, ahhh. A perfect replica of my Rosie’s.”

“Ta.” My father lets out a funny sound, somewhere between a sigh and a moan. “Vijay called this morning. Early. Said he tried you, phone went to voicemail. I also tried a half-dozen times.”

Zaidy shakes his head. “Having to carry it around with me all the time like I’m Trump or something. See – if you need me, you know where to find me.” He takes a sip of his coffee. “What’s the Duke have to say for himself?”

Tatty reaches out, closing the distance between himself and Zaidy, and brushes something invisible off his suit jacket. He takes a shaky breath and

rests his hand on Zaidy’s shoulder.

Zaidy jerks back, then brings his hand up to his head, straightens out his faded yarmulke.

“It’s Estee.”

I feel that no-breath feeling as I push the tears back into my eyes.

“Ta, she was... was... she’s gone.” My father says, “Apparently an aneurysm.”

“What?” The cup slips from Zaidy’s hand. Black liquid stretches out its tentacles into murky streams in the dirt. Tatty grips Zaidy by the shoulders.

“Estee?” Zaidy’s voice is a raspy whisper. “Esther Chava? Estee?”

“Come. We’ll pack your bag with you. Mindy, please.”

I take a step toward the front door but can’t take my eyes off Zaidy. He stares at the ground, tears slipping down his sunken cheeks. If Bubby was still here, she’d hold his hand, lead him inside. Just her sweet smile and soft hands would be enough.

Tatty shoves his hands in his pockets and stares up at the sky, moving his lips silently. I creep closer to Zaidy and ease the *tallis* bag out from under his arm. He unfolds his arm by his side, loses his balance for a moment, totters.

“The funeral ceremony is tomorrow.” I say. “We bought you a ticket to Ann Arbor.”

Zaidy’s blue eyes are steady on me. “She’ll have a

levaya, Mindel. A proper *levaya*.”

It is what it is, Tatty said on the way here. *They’ll do their ceremony-thing, but he agreed to bury her.*

“Get the Duke on for me.” With a shaky hand, he gives me his phone.

“Ta, leave it alone. He’s not going to use the Chevra Kadisha. But... they’re burying her. No cremation.”

Zaidy turns his head to the side and looks at me closely. “Call him up!”

“Zaidy.” I force myself to look at him. His cheeks are deep red, and there’s a madness in his eyes I’ve never seen. “He told Tatty, ‘it wasn’t her religion.’”

Wasn’t? I can hardly say the word.

“I’m going to kill him,” Zaidy hisses. “And spit on his grave. Who does he think he is? Some kind of real duke? Some ruler of the universe? You know who the Ruler of the Universe is? You know what He’s going *to do to him?*”

“Please, Ta. Let’s get your things. Please.”

But I see by Zaidy’s tight lips, as he turns from my father and looks to the house, that he’s not coming. “Rosie, my Rosie! Just thank the Almighty you are gone. You wouldn’t be able to live after this.”

He shuffles toward the door, his back bent.

“Zaidy!” I yell. “Please. Please come!”

He doesn’t turn around.

I watch him climb the stairs before I let out a sob and sprint to the jeep.

*

Ta and I sit on two low-set folding chairs in one corner of the living room, eating hard-boiled eggs and corned beef sandwiches out of foil tins. The chairs are just like the ones we sat on when my mother died. Someone has also left a siddur and a tin tzedakah box with a big blue Jewish star. Maybe it was Barrie, a friend of Estee’s, who had pushed the bag of kosher take-out into Tatty’s hands on our way out of the ceremony.

I’ve already called Rikki and told her all about it: the casket surrounded with roses and tall white candles, the musty smell from rising in front of the brown Buddha statue. Then there was the huge photo, Estee laughing into the camera while holding a coconut. It must have been from one of their trips -- maybe Jamaica. The turquoise ocean stretched behind her, the same color of the choker around her neck.

Everyone had stood around the casket -- Vijay, his parents and brothers, and close friends – most of them in white dresses or white pants. A man in a long brown robe had stood at one end, head bowed, chanting the same words over and over.

Ta and I had watched from the doorway. I’d tried to sneak a video, but Tatty had given me the death stare.

Now, there's more chanting, this time the rise and fall of a recorded woman's voice, complete with screechy music.

People keep coming into the house, most of them leaving their shoes by the door. When they see Ta and me, they look away. They fill their plates with Indian curries and basmati rice, spicy chickpeas and cooked greens.

Every so often Ta sighs heavily and gives his head a sad little shake.

On a side table is a photograph of Estee with Bubby and Zaidy in her royal blue graduation gown. Her face was smoother then, and pale, framed by the same dark curls. Even though she's smiling, her eyes stare blankly into the camera. Maybe this is the last modest picture of her. Did she toss her uniform skirts and blouses into the garbage that same day? Or were they tucked away in a drawer in her room, saved lovingly by Bubby?

When she came to Teaneck last year, purple flip flops had peeked out from beneath her maxi skirt. She'd worn the skirt for my benefit, along with a long-sleeved, airy blouse with a black and gold Indian print. After all, she was taking me to the clothing store where all my friends' mothers took their daughters. She usually wore shorts and tees, her only adornment the diamond nose ring and her simple gold wedding band.

After shopping, we sat for a long time at the local café. Estee bought me the jumbo strawberry milkshake with whipped cream. She'd told me stories of Ta I'd never heard, like how he'd dressed

like a delivery boy and brought roses to my mother at work after their fifth date.

She'd looked fine. And radiant as always.

I squeeze my eyes tight and force myself to breathe. I take bite after bite of my sandwich because there's nothing else to do. The rye bread sticks to the back of my throat.

A woman with a scarf wrapped loosely over her grey hair bends down to us. She has a red dot in the middle of her forehead. "*Hamakom yenahem etkhem betokh she'ar aveilay tziyon v'Yerushalayim.*"

Tatty blinks several times, then mutters, "Amen."

"She was very special," the lady says to me, slowly, as if I'm a small child.. "May her *neshamah* have an *aliyah.*"

When she walks away, I give Tatty a confused look.

He shrugs. "Estee wasn't the only one, Mindy."

I look around the room and wonder how many other *yidden* are here in disguise.

Eklavya, one of Vijay's brothers, wears a tunic over his jeans and swigs from a bottle of Corona. At the service, he'd said that everyone who met Estee loved her. That she made everyone feel accepted. He spoke about her taking care of Arilah, Vijay's sister, when she was sick with cancer, insisting she stay with them.

My eyes float back to the graduation picture, Estee squeezed between Bubby and Zaidy.

My father shifts, his large frame too big for the rickety chair. "You think we paid our respects enough?" He wipes some dirt off his sneakers, checks his watch.

"To who? We didn't even have to come here. Zaidy didn't."

Ta looks at me with big, sad eyes.

His sister, I think. It's his sister.

"I've got to get out of this place." He stands and shakes out his legs.

I look around for Vijay amidst the saris and sandals. *Mindy, bring me my Rosie's jewelry box.* Zaidy's voice was a hoarse whisper on the phone this morning. *Don't let him have it, whatever you do. That jewelry stays in our family.*

Vijay leans against the wall and laughs with a red-haired man. He stops laughing when he sees me coming and elbows his friend. "Esther's favorite niece," he says. "Came all the way from Jersey." He finishes the last of his red wine.

The other man nods and puts on his sunglasses. "Vijay, court 27 at the Club."

"Good. See you, my friend."

Vijay turns to me and smiles widely. "Mindy, Arilah said you and your father could stay with her, if you'd rather that than Holiday Inn."

I shut my eyes and picture my grandmother's wrinkled hands. On her left hand, there is the diamond cluster that always turned the wrong way on her bony fingers. On her right wrist, the pearls she wore to the *Seder*. And then there was

my mother's favorite necklace, gold links set with emerald stones. They must be in the box, along with much more. Some were gifts from my great-grandparents, some were gifts from Zaidy. Whatever they were, with Estee gone, they were meant for me.

I open my eyes, and Vijay is already turning from me, his head bent toward a couple that just walked in.

I take a breath and blurt out the words before I can think anymore. "Vijay. My father's not going to make a fuss about this. My grandfather's never going to speak to you again. Give me the box." My voice sounds small and far away.

"The box?" He runs a hand through his thick, dark hair.

"Aunt Estee has my grandmother's jewelry box. The red one, gold knobs."

He gives a little shake of his head and stands straighter. "Esther and I, we deplored such things. Things of this world..."

"Well, we... we don't deplore them." I feel my back straighten and force myself to look him in the eye. "We care about our things. My grandmother's diamond, her wedding band. Lots of bracelets, an emerald necklace."

"Tomorrow morning," he smiles. "I have guests now, Mindy, I can't go looking around. We'll have tea and a breakfast dhal, go through the box together. Eight o'clock should work."

I hear my grandfather's voice in my head. *Some kind of real duke, some ruler of the universe.*

“Duke...” It slips out and I can’t help but crack a smile. “I mean...”

“Vijay *Dukmejian* is my name. Thank you for your respect.” He manages to give me a sarcastic grin before lowering his head and letting out a heavy sigh.

“Hey.” A short, bald man gives Vijay’s shoulder a squeeze. “I know it’s rough.”

Ta walks up, looks from Vijay to me. “Everything OK?”

“Your daughter here, a very outspoken child.” Then he holds out his hand. “You had a good sister.”

“She was gold,” Tatty says, as he gives Vijay’s hand a quick shake.

Gold. “Vijay, the box.”

“Tomorrow.” He bows, then turns and walks away.

*

On the way to the hotel, my father doesn’t say anything for what seems like forever. For once, I wish he’d make one of his silly jokes or tell me some random fact about Ann Arbor.

Finally, he shakes his head. “She didn’t care about that Buddhist *narishkeit*, you know.”

“No?” I turn towards him, hoping he’ll say more.

But Tatty just sighs and stares out the window, his eyes far away. Perhaps he’s picturing a long-ago Shabbos, when Tatty, Aunt Estee, and Uncle

Sender laughed with Bubby and Zaidy. Someone dumped too many soup nuts into their bowl, another splattered grape juice on a fresh white shirt. And the candles stood sentinel to the beauty of a normal Friday night.

We pull into the deserted parking lot. Light pink streaks break up the big, grey sky. The ground, as far as I can see, is just one big stretch of yellow.

It’s quiet, so quiet.

In our room, Tatty takes off his jacket and tie, pulls the cushions from the couch and slumps down onto the hard frame. I open up my bag and try to look busy getting out my pajamas and toothbrush. It’s easier than looking at him.

He’s done this before, I remember. For Bubby. For Mommy. I sat with him for Mommy, though all those people, with their horrible looks, were too much for me. After the first day, I hung out in the kitchen with Bubby and Estee.

When Tatty flew to Israel for Mommy’s burial, Estee stayed. She made me waffles every morning for breakfast and walked me to school. She wrapped her arms around me when I cried every night of those two weeks.

I dreamt of her staying for good, taking care of Tatty and me, maybe moving back in with Bubby and Zaidy.

But when Tatty came home, Estee explained to him what was in each of the aluminum pans packed in the freezer, gave me a tight hug, and walked out to her car. I watched her through the window, the way her dark curls hung gently around her bare shoulders.

When I was little, Bubby and Mommy spoke quietly about Estee over cups of tea on Shabbos afternoons. I knew she was different. It was more than the way she dressed, with colorful scarves, always smelling good. I never saw her *daven* or say a *bracha*, or do any of the regular things we did, but I didn't care. When she popped in, Bubby got busy making pasta and quiches. Estee had been a vegetarian since she was sixteen. My age.

Only three years later, she'd gone off to Japan, Thailand, and finally India.

To find herself, Bubby told me once, shaking her head. *But why did she have to look so far away, Mindy. She only has to look right here.* Bubby stabbed her chest with a thumb and looked at me with sad eyes. *Hashem yishmor.*

The sound of my father slamming his fist down against the couch armrest, over and over again, brings me back to the terrible present.

"Tatty?" I say. "Please."

He stops banging and shields his eyes with his hand. When I drop down beside him, his body starts to shake, and the whole couch shakes.

I bite my lip, I don't want to cry, not now. I look up at the hotel window, trying to see past the dirty glass to the purple-blue sunset. Soon it will be dark and this day will end.

Tatty's shaking morphs into a slow rock, back and forth, back and forth, his face scrunched up in a way I only saw once before. But I was so young then. Only nine. I'm sixteen now. I can do this.

He sobs so loud I wonder if whoever is in the next room can hear.

I reach for his hand. He squeezes it tight.

He sniffles, catches his breath, sucks in air in one big gulp. "She was just lost, Mindy. She was just so lost."

*

We pull up to the house at seven forty-five. The driveway is empty. All the cars from yesterday are gone.

Tatty rings the bell, then knocks hard on the door, shaking the little placard mounted on the wood that reads: *Breathe.*

"That idiot," Tatty leans close to the front window and cups his hands around his eyes. Through the glass I can see the empty table where the buffet had been.

He jiggles the doorknob. Gently at first, and then harder, the veins in his forearm bulging.

I picture us smashing the windows then scurrying upstairs, finding the box, and running back to the car. We'd be on the plane before anyone knew the difference.

Ta backs away, takes out his phone. "Voicemail." He pockets his phone, then shakes his head. "I think we need to catch the plane, Mind."

"We can't go, Ta. We'll never get it back. I

promised Zaidy.” What had the man told Vijay? He’d meet him at the courts. A country club? “How much time have we got?”

“We’ll have Eisenberg write him a letter on official letterhead. If he doesn’t give it back, we’ll sue.” Ta opens the passenger side door for me.

Inside, I put my hand on his. “One more try, Ta.”

“What does it matter, Mindy? Estee is... gone.” He leans his head back against the seat, shuts his eyes.

“Exactly,” I say.

*

Ten minutes later, Tatty pulls into a spot right in front of the doors of Monica Lakes Country Club. A man in a blazer swings the door open for us. His eyes linger on Tatty’s *yarmulke*.

“Can I help you?” A blond lady with a blue and white striped jacket smiles at us from behind the reception desk. “Are you, uh, at the right place? Members?”

“Where are the tennis courts?” I ask.

She points past the large room with a fireplace, overstuffed couches, bowls of fruit, and glass canisters of spa water. A grey-haired man looks up from his newspaper with raised eyebrows. “The courts are through the relaxation room. Out those doors to your right.” She points behind us with her

pencil. “Those are member-only parking spots.”

Without a word, I walk toward the glass doors on the other side of the room. I hear Tatty say something about needing to give someone a message.

Hurrying through the doors, I head to the right, down the long aisle between the tennis courts. I hear the *pong* of balls hitting rackets, a man’s voice *ah, yes, yes!* The row of courts goes on and on. I break into a run as I look up at the red numbers on the sides. Finally, I reach court 27.

I stop short, catch myself on the metal frame, and step into the court.

At the far end, Vijay dries his face with a white towel. He’s wearing white shorts and a white polo T-shirt with white knee socks. The man from yesterday stands next to him, shaking his head. Vijay says something to him, then looks up and squints in my direction.

“Mindy? Why on earth? What do you need?” The white of his dark eyes appear even whiter than his shirt, his irises black stones against their brightness.

I walk toward him, breathing hard.

Vijay’s friend folds his arm across his chest and takes a long drink from a water bottle.

“You know what I need.” I take a deep breath. Bubby was gone, my mother was gone, now Estee. It wasn’t just that the box was meant for me. But I needed to hold onto them. “Convenient that you

forgot to meet us.”

Vijay runs a hand through his hair. “Nothing of the sort. I waited for you, child. I had an appointment here.”

“We were even *early*.” It takes every ounce of strength I have not to strangle him. I think of the headline, “Girl Kills Late Aunt’s Husband in Fit of Rage.” I bite my lip. “We’ll follow you to the house now.”

His friend swings his bag over his shoulder, looks at me with amusement. “You lost something, miss?”

Vijay sighs. “She lost something, yes.”

“I hope you find it,” The man says over his shoulder. “See you, Vijay.”

“Get me the box, Duke, like you said.” It was bad enough her clothes will still be there, her scarves, the graduation picture. But at least this.

Vijay waits until his friend rounds the corner and then shakes a finger at me.

“You’re a tough cookie, girl.”

“We’ve got to catch a plane.”

He places his tennis racket, canister of balls, and towel into his bag, then zips it closed. *He’s leaving, he’s just leaving. What am I going to tell Zaidy?*

He takes a few steps toward the exit, then slumps down onto the bench. His back curved, he holds his head in his hands. He sits like that as the sun beats down on us, the perfect blue sky wasted on such a day. “I don’t know what you all want from

me,” Vijay finally says. “You want me to be Mr. Perfect, Mr. Wonderful Brother-in-Law? Mr. Good-Mourning Guy?” He looks up at me. His eyes have lost their dance.

“I just want what is ours,” I say.

“None of you understand.”

“Understand?”

“One minute we are having our noontime meal. She is talking about the book she is reading. How she would like to start knitting again...”

I swallow hard and feel the no-breath feeling. Dark curls and dimpled cheeks. He just saw her. She was right here.

“She has new yarn. Crimson, lavender, and this majestic teal. They are in a white bag on the table. Her eyes are shining. ‘See these. So good together. Right, Vijay, they’re beautiful?’”

He lets out a roaring laugh, stands up, digs his hand into his pockets. Then he bends at the waist, low, so very low, and screams to the asphalt, “Esther! Esther! *Estherrrrr!*”

Wrapping my arms around myself, I turn my gaze from him and remember my visit with Aunt Estee last year. After our lunch, she had given me a knitted scarf in three shades of green. *It matches your eyes.* I wrapped it around my neck. It smelled like her.

Tears drip down my cheeks. If she were here, she’d say, *It’s OK, Mindy. Let it go, let it go.* She’d rub my back, and I would lean into her softness and cry as hard as I needed to.

Vijay stands with his eyes closed and his face up to the sky as if the sun could burn away his pain.

Then I remember why I'm here. "Vijay?"

He keeps his head up that way, his hands gripping the back of the bench. A few moments pass. If I don't leave now, we'll miss the plane. But we've got to get back home to take care of Zaidy.

I'll tell him I tried. I'll tell him they are just things of this world.

Quietly, I make my way out of the court, then run all the way back to Tatty.

*

On an erev Shabbos, three months later, there's a soft knock on the door. "Yes, Ta?" I put my hairbrush down and study my reflection. It's not too frizzy, but I know that will only last until kiddush.

Tatty, in his suit and hat, is smiling; possibly the first real smile I've seen on his face since we got back from Michigan.

"Ari'lah was just here. Has some sort of conference in the city." He hands me a cardboard box with my name in the center. It's heavier than it looks. In the left-hand corner is written in small cursive *Vijay Dukmejian*.

Could it be? I shake my head and tear off the tape.

My father smiles down at me as I ease the red velvet box out of the cardboard one. A note is

taped across the top of the box, written in the same perfect lettering.

Mindy,

This is your family's. It belongs with you. I understand now how things of the world can also be things of the soul. I guess that is why it was hard for me to give them back. I am still missing Esther. Always will. As will you, and your father, and your grandfather. She was such a good, giving soul.

Be well,

Vijay

"Shockingly, the Duke came through. I'll tell Zaidy right after davening." He leans down and kisses the top of my head. "Good Shabbos, Mindy."

"Good Shabbos." I watch him walk out and wait until I hear him go down the stairs.

Then I open the box.

On one side, three thin gold bangles are tucked into individual slots. I remember how they jangled when Bubby picked up her Rosh Hashanah *machzor* in *shul*. On the right are smaller holders for rings – among the clunky turquoise one and the silver stacking rings is Bubby's simple gold wedding band. Under a tiny lid is Bubby's diamond – a large solitaire surrounded by tiny diamonds, an exploding firework.

I pull out the top drawer, and there are the

earrings: opal teardrops, gold studs, and a pair of sparkly purple stones set in little brass circles. In the bottom drawer is Bubby's tennis bracelet, the Pesach pearls, and the emerald necklace.

Everything is here.

I slip on the bangles and my grandmother's rings. But my wrist is much too thin to hold so much weight and my fingers are too skinny to keep the rings in place. One day.

I place everything back into its place and reach for the opal earrings, then stand in front of the mirror and put them on. I tilt my head to the side, watch the light catch the hint of fiery red in the center of the stone.

My pale face, brown hair, and green eyes stare back at me. The earrings help a bit, but I'm still the same me as always. Not radiant. Not Estee.

It's true. Estee was a good, giving soul. But there was so much more than Vijay, and their friends from Ann Arbor, would never know. The Estee who brought two plastic bowls with washing cups to Bubby and Zaidy's bedside each night since she turned twelve. The Estee who braided challah on Friday mornings and never forgot to drop one off at the elderly neighbor's house. Seventeen-year-old Estee with the buttoned-up blouse.

But did I, or Tatty, really know Aunt Estee? What made her leave the way she'd been raised? Whatever she was looking for, did she find it?

Yet her goodness was her goodness, her soul was her soul. Nothing could change that.

Combing my hair off my face, I stare into my eyes. *Could I be as giving, as full of life, as she?* I shake my head at myself; I'm not sure.

But I know I want to try.

The Healer of Midian

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Editor's Note: The following piece was the 2nd place winner of The Lehrhaus' 2024 Short Story Contest

In the years immediately after the Great Kingdom fell, it was said that a traveler could scarcely unhorse without being set upon by bandits. The land's good fortune had turned as a potter's wheel, with every storehouse from Thebes to Elephantine laid empty, their fallen keepers sprawled on the ground. The Nile had shrunk, the earth was parched, and ransacked secrets poured down the pyramids' limestone steps like bile. Anyone who could, abandoned Egypt altogether. The healer, it was presumed, had been among such fortunate exiles. Though reticent about his past, his accent and craft remained unambiguous. There were even rumors he'd practiced medicine in the *Per-Ankh*, the House of Life, during the last years of Usermaatre Setepenre, though others thought he had more likely served as a simple village physician. The old man in the robe had

heard these stories, first from a family of shepherds and then in more detail over beer and chickpea stew in the home of a kindly spice merchant. In both cases, the healer had been spoken of in reverential tones and his miracles attested to, though not firsthand. The old man in the robe was determined to meet the healer and, after ruminating on how exactly he'd make his approach, eventually set out with a band of frankincense and myrrh traders for his temple in northern Midian.

When the old man arrived shortly after nightfall, having made the final leg of the journey alone on a plump donkey gifted to him by the traders, the temple turned out to be a tiny and nearly shapeless stone structure propped up in the shadow of Mount Lauz. At the entryway, he was received by the healer's attendant, a tall Moabite, likely a slave, with a bumpy forehead and blank expression. The old man indicated his milky and infirm left eye and reached into his satchel to retrieve a small jug of frankincense oil, another gift from the traders (they had pitied him for his infirmity and evident poverty). The Moabite accepted the oil and led him inside and then into a dark, low-ceilinged chamber where candles illuminated healing objects in the carved-out shelving of the walls. Ointment jars, vases, and animal-shaped amulets took on mystical qualities in the flickering gleam. The Moabite directed him to a frayed wickerwork stool and, taking on the air of a palace guard, positioned himself rigidly beside one wall while they waited for the healer to join them.

He appeared several minutes later, tall and slightly

stooped with no hair at all, not even eyebrows, and wearing a haphazard-looking patchwork of skins. He didn't even glance at the old man as he moved to the front of the room, assumed his position behind his table, and began to light various incenses. Finally, amidst the mingled scents now wafting through the chamber, the healer looked up and peered through the smoke at his new patient. He tapped below each eye as a question and the old man tapped below his left in response. The healer removed a silver goblet from the shelf behind him and then reached beneath his table and produced two more objects: a linen pouch and a small blade. He set all three down in front of him and muttered what was evidently some kind of incantation, though the old man couldn't make it out. The healer then tilted one end of the pouch, allowing a lumpy fruit bat carcass to slide out onto the table. He lifted the dead bat with one hand and the blade with the other, and carefully slit the creature's throat over the goblet. As the dark, syrupy blood drained into the cup, the healer shut his eyes and uttered another incantation, slightly louder than before, though no clearer. The words this time seemed to emanate from deeper in his throat and his head bobbed hypnotically as he repeated the indecipherable phrase over and over again. As his intensity increased, the very walls seemed to throb with anticipation for whatever was about to come next.

But the old man had seen enough.

"Can it really be," he said in flawless Egyptian, "that a Sem priest who served in the great temples of Osiris now peddles the mysteries of *Hecka* for

profit?"

The healer opened his eyes and turned to his attendant. "Get out," he said. When the Moabite failed to move, he repeated the order much more loudly, and the attendant shuffled out of the room. The healer turned to the old man and squinted into the darkness. "Who are you?"

Receiving no reply, he waved his hand across his chest and several candles flared up theatrically, briefly lighting up the surrounding area. When he saw the old man's face, he involuntarily recoiled. He quickly recovered, however, and when he looked again, his fear was already transforming into wonder.

"It's not possible," he whispered. "It was I who presided over the Opening of the Mouth ceremony for Your Majesty's soul. It was I who identified Your Majesty's body on the shore of the Sea of Reeds!"

His patient gave the barest smile. "You probably shouldn't boast about that."

The healer fell silent. He lit several more candles so he could see more clearly and then he simply stared at the old man's face for a while. He seemed to be examining every crevice and shadow, while the old man just stared back at him, slowly getting annoyed.

"I don't understand," the healer finally said.

"You do," the old man replied. "But you don't *want* to. You guided someone else through the Underworld to enjoy *my* reward in the Field of Offerings. Meanwhile, I'm still here and quite sorry to see what the gods have made of you. Almost as pathetic as what they've done with me. If I still had faith in them, I would demand an explanation."

The healer looked surprised. "Have you lost your faith in the gods?"

The old man smiled and seemed to laugh, though without a sound. "Since I was told I was one," he said, "I've found divine power very disappointing. I disavowed it long ago and I challenge these other so-called gods to do the same. Look at our home! Savage invaders pillage our palaces and temples while our good citizens waste away or bleed out in the streets. Is that the order and balance, the *ma'at*, these gods mean to preserve? But then we learned long ago, didn't we, just how limited gods can be."

The healer did not immediately reply. These were words he'd never think to utter himself about the gods, but how could he argue? "Well," he finally said, "Except for One."

The old man gave no response, but simply looked at him. The healer, however, understood the man's silences as well as his words. "You were *there*," he protested. "You witnessed it all the same as me. Even now, His legend grows. They say He leads them under a cloud by day and a fiery pillar by night. That sweet cakes drop from the heavens to satiate them and water flows out of desert rocks. That those who try to curse them find their words transformed to blessings against their will!"

"Yes, I've heard these tales," replied the old man. "Do you know what else I've heard? That they've suffered repeated plagues and catastrophes in the wilderness. That nary a day goes by without some attempted revolt against the shepherd, now a pathetic and broken old man. That after all these years of wandering, they're no

closer to their 'promised land' than when they set out, and that their God, if such exists, if He's real, long ago abandoned them."

"If He's real! You were there! The rivers gushing with blood, the suffocating darkness, the...". The healer's voice broke off and then he finished the sentence more softly: "*the loss of our precious boys*. Your Majesty was there when the sea itself broke in two!"

"I was there," the old man replied, "But what did I actually see? I've learned a great deal since then. Take the River, for instance. Yes, its algae is usually blue or green, but did you know it can also be red? And that a big enough bloom might not only color the water, but also kill off the fish and send frogs leaping onto the riverbank to die? To rot and stink and attract vermin and disease?"

"And the Great Darkness?" challenged the healer. "If you recall, the eruption at Kallisti occurred not so long before. A very strong wind could probably have carried enough ash to cover all of Memphis and beyond."

"Your Majesty, you can't possibly believe—"

"Just as a strong enough wind can sometimes uncover a shallow sea bed."

The healer could scarcely believe what he was hearing. Though he never had nor ever would worship a Hebrew god, these words still seemed blasphemous. "And which gods," he demanded in as measured a tone as he could manage, "Do you suppose would have sent these strong winds at just those times?"

"The same gods who are protecting our people today: none. Just the shepherd and his brother and their artful trickery."

The healer looked at him with astonishment. "Does Your Majesty really think he can explain away all of the great wonders and terrors we experienced as 'artful trickery'?"

"No," the old man answered. "There is one I cannot."

"And which is that?"

The old man paused as a certain wistfulness came into his expression. "Do you remember the night that you and Jambre rushed into my chambers and pleaded with me to relent and release them?"

"Of course."

"I knew you were right; I had already concluded the same. But I couldn't do it."

"Well, Your Majesty's pride was—"

"Not my pride, you spouter of water; it was my *will*. It was as though it was totally frozen. I knew what must be done, yet I was utterly powerless to carry it out. This was not a reluctance, mind you, this was not a refusal; this was an overwhelming *force* the likes of which I had never experienced in my life. Forty years later, I still can't come to terms with it. I, ruler of a million subjects, could not rule my own self."

"Can anyone, Your Majesty?" the healer asked with a gentle smile. "Still, is it really such a great mystery that this should be the wonder you cannot dismiss? The other wonders damn you; this one *absolves* you. If the Hebrew God somehow prevented you from releasing the slaves, then you bear no responsibility for all the terrible consequences. You had no choice."

"If the Hebrew God is real," the old man shot back, "None of us have any choice about anything! Don't you see? If there is one deity who reigns

supreme, then there is one *will* that reigns supreme, and anyone who defies it is either a brute or a fool!”

“I suppose so. But on the other hand, if we can succeed at *discerning* that will, as the shepherd apparently could, it makes life very simple.”

“It makes life *suffocating*.”

At this, the healer smiled. “Perhaps you haven’t given up your divine claims, after all.”

The old man shook his head. “I don’t want to be a god. Only free.”

“And what does Your Majesty want of me?”

The old man approached him so that they stood facing one another, eye to eye. When the old man replied, his words were slow and deliberate: “I need you to tell me how the shepherd manipulated me. By what twisted sorcery did he paralyze my will?”

“Your Majesty, there is no such sorcery.”

“Of course there is! Do you take me for a fool?”

“There are trances used in the dream temples of Heliopolis—”

“This was no trance! Why do you hold back?”

“I don’t, Your Majesty.”

“Are you in league with the shepherd? Perhaps that’s the real reason you and Jambre couldn’t replicate his wonders. Why you won’t speak the truth now!”

“On the contrary, I will speak it loud and clear: Algae did not redden the river, wind did not part the sea, and sorcery did not stay your hand. Your Majesty, I cannot force you to believe in the Hebrew God’s power, but I will not give you a false excuse to deny it.”

“It is you who are being false!” exclaimed the old man, his anger finally boiling over. He quickly

tamped it back down. “You must lack motivation,” he said. “I can provide it.” He stepped closer and spoke conspiratorially: “I can offer you something extremely valuable to you.”

“Respectfully, the most precious jewels in the world won’t change my reply, Your Majesty.”

“Not jewels. Your *life*.”

Before the healer could respond, the old man’s khopesh was at his throat. The weapon, his sole remaining possession from his former life, had been carefully concealed in his cloak, and its swift reveal belied his age.

“I intend to slit your throat right now,” the old man said. “I am *determined* to carry this intention out. If you cry out for your slave, it will be too late. Your only chance at stopping me is to turn my very heart.”

The healer looked back at him, sadly. He whispered something too soft to hear.

“What?”

By the time the old man realized it had not been addressed to him, he could already feel his sword go limp in his hand and its handle begin to wrap around his wrist. He looked down and shared a brief second of eye contact with the slithering cobra his weapon had become before its hood opened and it sank its teeth into his forearm. He looked back up to the healer, but couldn’t see him clearly anymore, as his vision had already begun to blur.

In his youth, the healer had trained in the House of a Million Years, where he learned the secrets of embalming the royal dead and performing the sacred rituals to ensure their successful transitions to the underworld. Now, as he set out under a starry desert sky with two oxen pulling a covered

cart, the irony did not escape him. The Last Pharaoh of the Great Kingdom lay dying only feet away, and the best the healer could hope for was to find a patch of earth soft enough to absorb the corpse.

The dying man had also once been preoccupied with his soul's final journey to the *Duat*, but now such thoughts were far from his mind. As his chest continued to tighten while the rest of his body seemed to slowly come undone, he felt a profound sense of joy. The world would shortly go dim, but there was perhaps just enough time to right himself with God. This time, he prayed, there'd be nothing stopping him.

***Discourses on Destruction and Rebirth:
The Rav on the Shoah, Zionism and the
American Diaspora***

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Book Review of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, [*The Return to Zion: Addresses on Religious Zionism and American Orthodoxy*](#) (New York: OU Press and Ktav, 2023).

Rav Soloveitchik's new book, *The Return to Zion: Addresses on Religious Zionism and American Orthodoxy*, is a translation from Yiddish of ten oral discourses he gave from 1939 to 1958, mostly at conferences of the Mizrahi Organization of

America, of which he was the honorary President. His addresses were eagerly anticipated and, for many, were the highlight of the meetings—and they illustrate another aspect of his greatness. Besides being the leading talmudic scholar of his time, a communal rabbi in Boston, and the founder and leader of a local yeshiva, he was also a national leader, setting not only halakhic policy but also political policy for a large portion of American orthodoxy. This, despite the fact that he begins some of the discourses with the quote from Amos, “I am not a prophet and I am not a prophet's son” (7:14), and emphasizes that he is just a simple *rosh yeshiva*. As pointed out by Dr Hillel Seidman, the Rav, besides being the preeminent talmudic scholar of his generation, was also the greatest orator of his time, particularly in his native Yiddish.

The book also addresses the Shoah, as it tragically was occurring in real time. As Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter has noted, the Rav's thinking in this area has not been fully explicated. The Rav, like most American Jews, felt helpless and powerless as their families were being sadistically murdered before their very eyes. For whatever reason, the Rav wrote very little about the Shoah, and this book helps to fill that void. During those dark years, in addition to his communal and educational activities, he wrote [*Halakhic Man*](#), [*The Halakhic Mind*](#), and [*And From There You Shall Seek \(U-Vikkashtem mi-Sham\)*](#), which can in some sense be viewed as *hespeidim* for the Jewish world that was destroyed. And, clearly, his very active leadership in Mizrahi and vocal support for the

State are related to the historical tragedy of the Shoah and his personal response to it, as the Rav himself stated in a public lecture in 1977:

A layman once suggested to me that we should include another Al Het in our Yom Kippur confessional: 'for the sins we have committed in being unresponsive to the cries of our brethren in Europe who were being brutally slaughtered.' He was quite right! I am not blaming anybody. I am blaming myself. Why didn't I act like Mordecai when he heard the news about the evil decree issued by Haman and Ahasuerus? Why didn't I "go out into the center of the city and shout bitterly and loudly" [Esther 4:1]? Why didn't I shout, yell, and cry? Why didn't I tear my clothes like Mordecai? Why didn't I awaken the Jewish leaders? I am not blaming anybody. This was the punishment for our being idol worshipers. Our faith in Roosevelt bordered on idolatry.

In the first essay, entitled "We Take Refuge Exclusively under the Shadow of He Who Spoke and the World Came into Being," R. Soloveitchik does not primarily discuss the individual victims of the destruction. Instead, he bemoans the loss of the mythical Yisrael Saba figure and what that means for the future of the Jewish People. Many traits and markers of Yisrael Saba were preserved

among Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian Jews, with their thousand-year old histories and traditions, with their entire manner of living, thinking, and feeling. The seal of Israel was impressed upon all of their creations and accomplishments. They had the enthusiasm of Yisrael Saba, the strength of character in certain respects of our old-time Jacob, the image of whose countenance is engraved upon the throne of glory (*Bereishit Rabbah* 68:12). With the destruction of Eastern European Jewry, this type is largely gone. And this constitutes one of the greatest tragedies of modern Jewry.

In the second essay, the Rav deals more directly with the issues and differentiates between pain and suffering: "Pain is a physiological-psychological phenomenon. Suffering entails a spiritual ethical value assigning act." The pain cannot be explained, as the Rav teaches: "We have no explanation for these pains and no philosopher or metaphysician can solve this mystery—just like Job did not discover the secret of his pains." The suffering also cannot be explained, but entails a response from us, and, in this context, the response is building a Jewish State committed to the Torah. The messianic elements found in some of the writings of Rav Kook are missing for the most part from the Rav's discourse, but he does seem to be in favor of Rav Herzog's project to build a modern state based on *halakhah*.

In this oral discourse, many of the themes the Rav will further develop in his well-known essay *Kol Dodi Dofek* are first presented, such as the idea

that suffering can never be explained but entails a human response. Many of the famous “knocks” from *Kol Dodi Dofek* are also presented here for the first time. Interestingly, he does not use the *Shir Ha-Shirim* metaphor but instead gives a unique perspective on the *akeidah* to explain his ideas. According to the Rav, crucial to understanding the story is not the willingness to sacrifice, but the recording of the birth of sons to Nahor later in the *perek*:

This is the portrait of the binding. It is not the sacrifice that is at the center of the drama but rather that which is paradoxical, irrational, and incomprehensible—the torments of an illogical life that is full of contradictions. We dare not allow all of this to simply remain a paradoxical fate—an illogical and incomprehensible enigma—rather it must be transformed into destiny, self-determination, and free choice.

The Rav continues:

Is the building of the land paradoxical, enigmatic, and incomprehensible? Absolutely!

For this, he gives a number of reasons: our conflict with the Arabs; the struggle with the desert-like terrain of the land; the resurrection of the Hebrew language; the faith in the return to Zion; and

Zionism's challenge to Christian faith. Some of these incomprehensible challenges were surmounted and turned into the famous “knocks” from *Kol Dodi Dofek*.

He continues:

Should we leave the great work of building the land of Israel with all its historical complications and paradoxes, and with the immensely significant influence it will exert on the lives of Jews in the Diaspora in the hands of non religious youth? At a *harat olam* [creation of the world] hour in the most critical period of our history should we hide in caves and shadows? And later groan about the desecration of Shabbat in the land of Israel?

What seems to be missing is a stirring call to action to do whatever possible to save the remnant of European Jewry. Notwithstanding that, the Rav does demand from his listeners:

First, as the efforts to save the Jewish survivors are being organized on a mass scale and the question is especially relevant now given the establishment of the rescue committee [the war refugee board] by the president—Orthodoxy must ensure that it

occupies a prominent position.

But this almost seems like an afterthought and not the main thrust of the lectures. Perhaps the Rav himself gave the reason for the lack of action: the Jewish communities' almost-idolatrous faith in President Roosevelt. And that sin cannot be repeated in the fight to establish the State of Israel.

In the Rav's lectures to Mizrahi, he does not exclusively focus on Israel, but extensively discusses the situation of American Jewry. The lectures were given at the height of the popularity of the Conservative movement, and their message is remarkably consistent and prescient: Judaism without Torah and *halakhah* is doomed to failure and disappearance. Interestingly, already in 1944, he wrote:

Lubavitch has undertaken a task that could have a recognizable impact on the development of American Judaism throughout the country. It is still difficult to predict the results but the experiment is grandiose... the Rebbe sends out young men sporting beards and sidelocks, most of them Americans. They arrive in towns where no one has ever seen a Jew with a beard. They set up shop in a *shtibl* and pull children in from the street. After the children's school sessions, they bring them to the *beit midrash*, they ritually wash their hands, they

dress them in *tzitzit* and they teach them the axioms of Judaism.

But the Torah Judaism R. Soloveitchik advocates for is one that, while remaining steadfastly true to *halakhah*, is integrated professionally and academically into the secular or Christian world at large. Regarding isolation, he writes: "At the same time we cannot enclose ourselves within a Great Wall of China and break off all our connections with the surrounding culture." This is a position that does not seem to be born out by the reality of the world we live in and the growth and success of the Hareidi isolationist model.

One of the Rav's discourses, entitled "The letters of Creation" (1944), given at the time Jews were being wiped out in Eastern Europe, was devoted to Jewish education in America, which might also be a response to the Shoah:

Therefore we demand of the Mizrahi party that it become a Torah movement that introduces the *otiyot yetzirah*, the ABCs of Judaism, to American Jewry. Let it be understood that we do not mean organizing *Hevrot Shas* or student groups, printing sacred books, or publishing philosophical tracts but rather ...establishing Yeshiva day schools and hadarim for boys and girls and teaching small children the simple Hebrew alphabet, basic Hebrew reading skills and a plain understanding of the Hummash.

The Rav heroically did this himself, leaving the *beit midrash* to found a yeshiva day school in Boston and recognizing that Jewish survival in America depends on basic yeshiva education, not *Brisker lomdus* to which he was so devoted.

A similar message defines his Zionism. After the initial battle for the establishment of the State, many of the Rav's discourses deal with the battle for Torah in the nascent Jewish State. This was not a rejection of the State, as many of his ultra-orthodox rabbinical colleagues advocated, but rather a vision of a State based on Torah. For example, regarding a plea to integrate *halakhah* and Torah values into the State regarding such issues as Jewish education, national service for women, and who is a Jew, He teaches: "For if the Land of Israel is part of the madness of the dance of eternity, then a Land of Israel governed [based] on the Torah is certainly part of that dance."

The Rav had written previously about how lonely he felt, separated from not only his rabbinical colleagues but his extended family as well. I don't think enough has been written about how brave he was, and the personal sacrifices he made, in staking out these positions, not to mention the self-confidence he must have had.

As discussed above, in the establishment of the State, the Rav clearly saw the hand of God. Notwithstanding what he has written—that a Jewish theology can only come from *halakhah*—there is very little *halakhah* in these discourses, and many of them rely on biblical interpretations in developing their themes.

This original review was written before the tragic events of October 7th, but no one can write about Zionism now without relating to the current war in Israel. The feeling of powerfulness of American Jewry in the 1940s that pervades the book is certainly not present today, as modern Israel has the capacity to fight back and defeat its enemies. But the question of how a religious person should relate to the State does have new meaning after October 7th. The messianic vision of religious Zionism that the Rav was so opposed to is struggling with the meaning of the events and the fact that our military prowess is so tied to American armaments, power, and goodwill. The war has also brought to the forefront the relationship of the *hareidim* to the State. Can they continue to live an isolated existence apart from the rest of Israeli society, or is some form of integration crucial for the future of the State? This tension is, of course, most felt in the vociferous debate currently going on in Israel about *hareidim* serving in the army. The issue has always been simmering, but the war and the simple need for more soldiers, alongside the efforts of the government to legislate *hareidi* exemptions, has only highlighted the inequalities in the current system and the tremendous burden placed on other segments of the population.

For followers of the Rav's brand of religious Zionism, which has focused on the practical, historical, as well as religious aspect of the Jews returning to their ancestral homeland, the war raises questions such as the relationship of the State to the Diaspora and the international

community, the future of Diaspora Judaism in dealing with a recurrence of the ancient scourge of antisemitism, and how the State should deal with non-Jewish citizens who have fought alongside their Jewish brothers in arms. What is clear from all of the above is that we are sorely missing the Rav's wisdom and guidance in not only dealing with these difficult issues but placing them in a theological, religious, and moral context, as only he was uniquely able to do.

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