
My Pocket Bible

Hillel Halkin

AT THE time, it seemed so imaginative an exegesis that I thought of doing something fictional with it. In the end, nothing came of it. The other night, though, I found myself reading the *parshah* of *Vayera*. That's the fourth Torah reading of Genesis, the one that tells about the binding of Isaac. Although I rarely go to synagogue, there was a time when I regularly kept up with the weekly Torah readings at home: on Saturday mornings I would sit down with my edition of *Mikra'ot G'dolot* and go through the week's *parshah* with the Aramaic of Onkelos and the medieval commentaries of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Nahmanides. In recent years the habit has lapsed, but I still keep a little Bible by my bed that I sometimes open before falling asleep.

It's the same Bible I was given at the ceremony that ended two months of basic training for new immigrants after my induction into the Israeli army in 1974. The ceremony was held at the Western Wall with floodlights, flags, and all the rest, but the part I remember best was the soldier standing next to me. He was a Russian who spoke little Hebrew, and when, asked to swear to defend the state of Israel, we raised our Bibles and exclaimed *ani nishba, ani nishba, ani nishba*, "I swear, I swear, I swear," he shouted *anyi nishbar, anyi nishbar, anyi*

nishbar—"I can't take it any more, I can't take it any more, I can't take it any more."

This Bible fit comfortably into the pocket of my army fatigue pants and had the insignia of the chaplaincy corps on its dark blue cover and those of the Israel Defense Force's other branches on its title page. At the back were maps of Palestine and the ancient Middle East, including one of the Promised Land from the Nile to the Euphrates and two or three of Joshua's military conquest of Canaan. I liked my little Bible that I had sworn allegiance to a Jewish state on and used to take it with me when I traveled as a good-luck charm. Once, it almost brought me bad luck.

This happened on an Air France flight from Djibouti to Jedda. I hadn't planned to be in Djibouti. I was sailing from Muscat, the capital of Oman, to Eilat on a yacht owned by a Dutch shipping magnate whose autobiography I was ghost-writing. This Dutchman was a madman who liked, so he claimed, to swim with sharks, and as we approached the Red Sea from the Gulf of Aden he let me know that he intended to do some illegal coral-reef diving off the coast of Sudan. The Sudanese government then was no better than it is now and I told him I wanted to get off.

He dumped me in Djibouti, a hellish place. I was so desperate to get out of it that, told by a travel agent in Place Rimbaud that the only available seat in the days ahead was on a flight to Jedda, from which I could get a connection to Istanbul and from there to Tel Aviv, I took it. Now, as we began

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our descent, I was given a Saudi Arabian landing card to fill out. It had a line asking for my religion. I flagged a stewardess, explained that I was Jewish and traveling on a U.S. passport issued in Tel Aviv, and asked her what I should do.

"Write Christian," she advised.

The passenger next to me, a Lebanese who did business with the Saudis, overheard the conversation. "Don't worry," he said. "The worst they'll do is search your bags and question you. You'll make your flight to Istanbul."

It was only as we were touching down that I remembered my little Bible. It was in my suitcase in the baggage hold. The Lebanese businessman said: "Don't get off the plane."

I called for the stewardess again. Fortunately, the flight was continuing to Paris; unfortunately, it was full. After some hurried consultations, a purser came aboard, bumped a boarding passenger, and issued me a new ticket. It said "Jedda-Paris-Tel Aviv" and was among my prized curios until I accidentally threw it out one day while cleaning my desk.

THE RESERVE unit I was assigned to after finishing basic training was a 90-millimeter anti-tank gun company. Towed by a command car, the 90-millimeter was a World War II American weapon. It made a huge bang and had a savage kick, and since, despite its kilometer range, it wasn't very accurate at over six or seven hundred meters, the idea was to camouflage your position well and let the enemy come as close as possible before firing. The unofficial wisdom was that if your first round missed it would be best not to stick around for a second, because, against an Egyptian or Syrian Soviet-made T-72, there wasn't likely to be one.

Although the 90 millimeter was being phased out of the IDF, to be replaced by TOW missiles, the process was incomplete. Once, on a visit to New York, I came across a shop that sold antique toy soldiers and stepped in to look for a present for a friend in Jerusalem who collected them. Amid the display of Greek hoplites, Roman legionnaires, Persian archers, Crusader knights, Turkish janissaries, Russian hussars, and Napoleonic grenadiers, I spied a familiar sight: four helmeted GI's, a gunner, loader, server, and crew captain, crouched behind a 90 millimeter anti-tank gun. The owner was so impressed by my expertise that he kept me in his shop for half an hour.

We trained on our antique cannon one week a year, firing at metal barrels in the Negev. The rest of our annual month of duty was spent in the occupied territories or manning a line on the border.

We belonged to the 300th Infantry Brigade, whose headquarters were in the north, and so were the borders we were sent to.

My first long stint of reserve duty came exactly a year after the Yom Kippur War. It was on the border with Lebanon, the other side of which was controlled in those days by the Palestine Liberation Organization. Our company was responsible for ten kilometers of it. I was in a platoon stationed in a hilltop outpost facing the Lebanese village of Maroun-e-Ras. That name may ring a bell, because three summers ago there was heavy fighting there with Hizballah. But Hizballah did not exist in 1974 and Maroun-e-Ras was a sleepy place whose residents shared the streets with donkeys and beat-up old cars. I could once have told you the numbers of their license plates, since one of our jobs was to peer at the village through a small telescope, report on anything unusual, and record it in a log. The only things that were of any interest never made it into the log. *The young man living in the house next to the Maronite priest's was flirting again today with the girl from around the corner. This morning the owner of the circa 1955 Chevrolet slapped his son as the boy left for school.* It was like bird watching, except that you were always looking at the same species.

The nights were often lit by flares. Beyond the electrified fence that marked the border was a jungle full of nocturnal life: Israeli ambushes for PLO infiltrators, PLO ambushes for the ambushers, Lebanese informers rendezvousing with their Israeli handlers, drug smugglers who tossed bags of cocaine or heroin over the fence for pick-up by accomplices. Now and then, the headlights of a patrol swept the macadam road that paralleled the dirt security path beyond the outpost. The path was checked every morning for footprints by Bedouin trackers and smoothed again for the next night.

Several nights a week, I had guard duty. The outpost consisted of a concrete bunker in which we slept, washed, cooked, ate, and sat around watching TV or playing cards, a double perimeter fence of barbed concertina wire, connecting trenches, and two watchtowers, each equipped with a .50-caliber heavy machine gun; for four hours you made the rounds with a partner. The bad shift was the twelve-to-four. By the time you fell asleep before midnight, it was almost time to get up, and by the time you fell asleep again before dawn, it was almost time to get up again.

ONE NIGHT I drew the twelve-to-four with someone I hardly knew. He didn't belong to our company and had been posted to it temporarily. My only contact with him, if you could call it

that, had come a day or two earlier. I was reading the week's *parshah* in my little Bible when he passed behind my chair, paused for a moment, and moved on. I didn't look up. I'm that way myself. If someone is reading something, I like to know what it is.

October nights are cold in the Upper Galilee. We both wore our army windbreakers, bulky beneath our M-16 rifles and battle harnesses with their magazines and grenades. The sky was bright with stars. Cassiopeia, Perseus, the Swan—I got to know them in the army.

He had on a stocking cap pulled down over his ears in place of the skullcap I had seen him wear in the bunker. He was the only soldier in the outpost who went around with one; there weren't many religiously observant men in our company. This was one of the few things you could tell at a glance about someone in uniform. The rest—who was a spiffy dresser and who wore jeans and sandals, who liked loud colors and who preferred quiet ones—had to wait for the day of your discharge. That's what uniforms are for, of course. But their consequence is that you talk more than you might otherwise. One look at most people and you know you have nothing to say to them or they to you. In the army, it took a while to find that out.

I don't remember his name and won't bother making one up. His Hebrew had a French accent. He and his wife had come to Israel from Strasbourg soon after their marriage. He had fought in the 1967 war as the driver of a halftrack on the Golan Heights and was wounded when it hit a mine, after which the two of them went back to France; they had a baby there and split up. His wife was now living with their son in the countryside—in Quercy, I think it was. I gathered she was with another man. She wanted a divorce and he didn't.

He took out his wallet and showed me a frayed photograph. Beneath the beam of a pocket flashlight, the woman was pretty, with large, dark eyes. The boy on whose shoulder her bare arm rested looked just like her. Behind them was the mossy stone wall of an old house or chateau.

He'd returned to Israel after the Yom Kippur war. His old unit no longer needed him and the army hadn't decided where to place him. Meanwhile, he was doing his reserve duty with us.

We had made several rounds of the outpost and were standing by the entrance to the bunker. "I'll make us coffee," I said.

He wanted his strong and unsweetened.

I brought the coffees and we gulped them quickly before the cold air drained their heat.

"So what made him do it?" he asked. "Who?" I had been looking up at the sky and must have missed something.

"Abraham."

"Avi Rahat?" There was an Abraham in our outpost.

"Avi in *Vayera*. You were reading it."

So I was. "I suppose he was desperate," I said. I assumed he was asking about the binding of Isaac. It's a difficult story. As I see it, God was desperate, too.

"Too desperate to care who screwed his wife?"

It took me a moment to follow him. "That's not quite what the Bible says," I said.

"It isn't?"

"Not in *Vayera*. Avimelech is said not to have touched her."

"I'll bet he didn't. And Pharaoh?"

"That's more ambiguous."

"Ambiguous, my eye! What do you think they were doing while he was giving Abraham all those he-asses and she-asses?"

You had to grant he knew his Bible. The story about Pharaoh wasn't in *Vayera*. It was in the chapter before it, in the *parshah* of *Lekh-Lekha*, the one that begins with God's telling Abraham to "get thee out of thy land." He's called Abram then, and he leaves Ur of the Chaldees with his wife Sarai, eventually makes it to Canaan, and then heads for Egypt when famine breaks out. According to *Lekh-Lekha*:

And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said unto Sarai his wife, "Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon. Therefore, it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they shall say, 'This is his wife,' and they will kill me, but they will save thee alive. Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister; that it may be well with me for thy sake; and my soul shall live because of thee."

And it came to pass that, when Abram was come into Egypt, the Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very fair. The princes also of Pharaoh saw her, and commended her before Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And he treated Abram well for her sake; and he had sheep, and oxen, and he-asses, and menservants, and maidservants, and she-asses, and camels. And the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. And Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this that thou hast done unto me? Why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife? Why saidst thou, 'She is my sister'? I might have taken her to me to wife. And now behold thy wife, and take her, and go thy way."

THE STORY in *Vayera* is similar. Now Abraham and his wife are back in Canaan. He decides to try his luck in “the south country,” in the little kingdom of Gerar. The Bible says:

And Abraham said of his wife, “She is my sister,” and Avimelech king of Gerar sent and took her. But God came to Avimelech in a dream by night and said to him, “Behold thou art as good as dead for the woman which thou hast taken, for she is a man’s wife.” But Avimelech had not come near her. Then Avimelech called Abraham and said unto him, “What hast thou done unto us? And what have I offended thee, that thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? Thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done.”

You had to wonder. *Twice?* Once should have been more than enough. Nahmanides certainly thought so. To rationalize Abraham’s behavior, he turned the biblical sequence of events around and proposed that, on both occasions, Sarah was first snatched on royal command because of her beauty. Only then, when she was already a prisoner in Pharaoh or Avimelech’s palace, did Abraham claim she was his sister to save his neck.

“Nahmanides,” said my partner, “is full of it.”

“He tried.”

“He shouldn’t have. You still haven’t answered my question.”

“What made him do it? The Bible says. He was afraid to be killed.”

“By who? As soon as they find out who she is, they apologize and hand her back. And he wasn’t a coward.”

“You think sacrificing Isaac makes him brave?”

“Forget about Isaac. Think of the four kings.”

That was in *Lekh-Lekha*:

And it came to pass in the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedarlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of Goyim that these made war with Bera king of Sodom and with Birsha king of Gomorrah. And they took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their victuals, and went their way. And they took Lot, Abram’s brother’s son, who dwelt in Sodom, and his goods, and departed. And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his trained servants, born in his own house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued them unto Dan. And he divided his forces against them, he and his servants, by night, and smote them, and pursued them unto Hobah, which is on the left hand of Damascus. And he brought back all the goods,

and also brought again his brother Lot, and his goods, and the women also, and the people.

“Three-hundred-and eighteen men and he chases them to Damascus! Is that a man afraid to protect his wife?”

“You tell me, then,” I said. “What made him do it?”

“No, you tell me. Who gave her the clap?”

“What?”

“Whatever it was that he caught from her. ‘And the Lord plagued Pharaoh great plagues because of Sarah.’ It wasn’t the chicken pox.”

A mortar whumped in the distance. We fell silent, waiting for the flare. It ignited beyond Maroun-e-Ras, out toward Bint J’beil, a midnight sun drifting slowly earthward beneath its invisible parachute. It vanished before hitting the ground, leaving behind a briefly struggling spark, like the tip of a candle wick that goes out.

“She didn’t get it from Abraham, either.”

HE WAS a very angry religious Jew. But I was beginning to get the picture. “All right,” I said. “For the sake of argument, let’s say you’re right. Our mother Sarah was not who we’ve been taught she was. She slept around. Abraham doesn’t know what to do. He’s a cuckold. He can’t control her. He’s brave, but he’s no wife-beater. And so he says, ‘Look, just do me one favor. Don’t tell anyone we’re married. At least spare me that. Wherever we go, you’re my sister.’ Have I gotten it right?”

“So far.”

“But why does he stay with her? Why not leave her?”

“He can’t.”

“Why not?”

“He’s been promised her son.”

He was right about that, too:

And God said unto Abraham, “As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her. Yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations. Kings of people shall be of her.”

“And maybe he’s enough of a schmuck to still love her,” he added.

“So he’s stuck with her.”

“Forever,” he said bitterly.

I was touched by him.

“You know,” I said, “you should try seeing Sarah’s side of it.”

He said nothing.

“After all, she’s just a girl from Ur of the

Chaldees. She marries Abraham. He's ten years older than her. The Bible says he's a hundred and she's ninety when Isaac is born."

"If he's a hundred, so am I."

"I agree. Their ages in the story don't make sense. They would, though, if they were divided in half."

I had a theory about that. Jewish tradition tells us there were once two New Year's days, one in autumn and one in spring. Count every year in the story of Abraham as half of one, from autumn to spring and back again, and it worked out perfectly.

"She's seventeen, say, and he's twenty-two. She's young and pretty, and she comes from a good home, and she loves her handsome new husband who has wonderful thoughts that he talks about in words she pretends to understand, and she wants to be a good wife, and have lots of children, and go on being the darling of her family and friends.

"A year or two go by and she's still not pregnant. And then, one day, her husband comes and tells her that they're leaving Ur and moving to a faraway place called Haran. Why? Because. This time she doesn't pretend to understand. She argues. She cries. It doesn't do any good. A wife does as she's told."

I was improvising on his theme now.

"They move to Haran. It's not a big city like Ur. It's a provincial capital, a hick town. No one knows how to speak or dress. She hates it. She misses her family and friends. Most of the women her age have more than one child. If she had one too, it would play with theirs and she would have friends; she wouldn't be so bored and jealous and miserable. She and Abraham quarrel all the time. *Why did you bring me to this place? But can't you see there's a purpose to it all? Then tell me what it is! I'll tell you when I know.* Much of the time, he's not home; he's busy accumulating the wealth the Bible says he gathered in Haran. Perhaps it's now that she has her first affair. At first she's frightened. But she's surprised how simple it is, how easy to conceal. It fills the days, dulls the pain of an empty womb.

"And then it happens. A voice speaks to Abraham. It tells him to leave Haran for a land he will be shown. 'I will make of thee a great nation,' it says. 'I will bless thee and make thy name great.' It is what he has been waiting for. Sarah doesn't know what to think. Half of her no longer believes a word he says. Half is full of new hope.

"They set out for Canaan. Her hopes don't last long. It's worse than she could have imagined. They live in tents, they wander from place to place, today here, tomorrow there. Haran was heaven by

comparison. One morning she wakes up with lice in her hair. Lice! And Abraham doesn't even notice. He's listening to his voice. *Sarai, it said to me, 'Unto thy seed will I give this land!'* What land? What seed? She is almost forty. No seed can sprout in barren soil. When she sleeps with other men, she imagines they are tilling her, not like the rocky earth of Canaan, but like the deep loam of Ur. She no longer bothers to hide it from Abraham. He hears voices? Let him hear them talking about her.

"There is famine in Canaan. They set out again, this time for Egypt. Abraham is silent most of the way. When they are almost there, he says to her—"

"Say thou art my sister." He said it so softly I could hardly hear.

"It's your turn to make the coffee," I said.

I STOOD OUTSIDE the bunker, looking up at the sky. Orion had risen in the east, his sword glittering with diamonds.

And Abraham said, "Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless?" And He brought him forth abroad, and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars, if thou be able to number them." And He said unto him, "So shall thy seed be." And he believed in the Lord, and He counted it to him for righteousness.

People have trouble with the binding of Isaac. It makes Abraham a monster in their eyes. And maybe he really becomes one. Who can imagine killing his own child?

But you have to imagine harder than that.

When does he first hear the voice?

He is in his twenties when he leaves Ur. Fifty when Isaac is born. Fifty-seven or fifty-eight, give or take a year or two, when he puts a knife to the boy's throat. And all those years, it speaks to him.

A voice of his own! He has never known anyone else who had one. For it, he has gambled away everything, caused the woman he loves to hate him. For years she has been convinced he is mad. *A mother of nations!* What nations? Ishmael? She'd have strangled Ishmael with her own two hands if he hadn't driven the boy and his mother away.

His whole life has been a delusion. He has kept faith with a voice that has lied to him.

And then the miracle takes place and Isaac is born. This doesn't win Sarah back. It's too late for that; a wary peace now reigns between them. Their son is hostage to it. Still! Thirty-five years. Now every one of them is justified—if, that is, it was worth losing a woman for a voice.

For a long while, he doesn't hear from it. It doesn't matter. He knows it will be there when he needs it. And indeed, one day it speaks again. "Abraham!" it says. "Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah. And offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of."

What does he do now? What would *you* do? Not what Abraham does, of course. But that's why he's in the Bible and you aren't.

The coffee was good. "How many times did you boil it?" I asked.

"Twice," he said.

We laughed. There was an army superstition that you had to bring Turkish coffee to a boil an odd number of times. Some said three, some five or seven, but it had to be odd.

The night was getting colder. The warmth of the coffee wore off quickly.

We resumed our rounds, walking from watchtower to watchtower. The subject of *Vayera* was exhausted. We talked about our leaves. Each of us had forty-eight hours. There was a certain amount of negotiating. Most men preferred a weekend, but if someone wanted Wednesday to Friday because his business needed him on Thursday, someone else was sure to have a daughter who had a birthday the same day. My partner didn't care. He lived by himself and had no one to go home to.

"When will you see your son?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Maybe next summer. If I go to France."

Something was on his mind and I waited for it.

"He's not even his, you know."

"Who's not whose?"

HE LOOKED at me as though I were a particularly slow pupil. "How many years did you say Sarah spent trying to have a child?"

"Twenty-five," I said. "More or less."

"And after twenty-five years with Abraham she suddenly gets pregnant from him? She's not even living with him when it happens. She's with Avimelech. They've been shackled up for months."

It was in the little Bible in the pocket of my fatigue pants:

And Avimelech took sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and womenservants, and gave them unto Abraham, and restored him Sarah his wife. So Abraham prayed unto God, and God healed Avimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants, and they bore children. For the Lord had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Avimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife. And the Lord remembered Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as he had spoken. For Sarah conceived, and bore Abraham a son in his old age.

"He's Avimelech's," he said. "Sometimes Abraham feels he could kill him."

We trudged in silence, our M-16's slung over our shoulders. *For we shall think of them by day and by night.* That was from the evening prayer. *Therefore, O Lord our God, when we lie down and when we rise, may we converse about Thy laws and rejoice in the words of Thy Torah, for we shall think of them by day and by night.* It was only two-thirty.