

An Ex Rabbi Explains The Promised Land

i'm pouring a little milk and honey
into my coffee and a few drops of the honey spill
onto the table.

"Ooh, sticky," she says.

Sarah has just walked in, all
excited.
She has a story to tell.
Right in the middle of my coffee
and depression – a daily occurrence – I
find it difficult to muster up an equal amount of
energy to match hers.
But then I notice all the tiny clips
made from brushed copper and zinc
she has carefully placed around her head
to hold her hair in place. Geometric in design,
the clips, and the placement, complement
the pretty geometry of her face.
She is happy in the telling,
exuberance fills her days.

"I broke up a fight between two kids
at school." She says.
"One big kid was screaming obscenities
at a smaller, quiet child." She pauses and smiles.
"I praised the quiet one,
for handling the situation with such calm.
And said nothing
to the bully.
I rewarded the positive and ignored
the negative."

an ambitious fruit fly flutters over to the honey drops
but I shoo it away. It quickly doubles back.
Persistent little bugger –
only fifteen thousand neurons but every one of them
driven by pheromones for sugar and sex.
Fruit flies are gentle creatures.
I trap it under an empty wine glass,
cover the opening with a handy note pad, on which
Sarah has scribbled L.U.V. in red ink,
walk outside and release

the tiny critter.

on the radio, Breaking News:
using distant galaxies as magnifying lenses
to observe even further galaxies
at unimaginable distances
behind them, the Hubble telescope just zoomed
in on a Supercluster, five billion light years
across – an isolated shore dense with grain, and insignificant
in the night sky –
each twinkling pin of light its own singular
galaxy.

Who will ever read me?
Will my voice rise above the screaming?
Even if I'm famous for the blink of a generation,
"Look on my works ye Mighty, and despair!" Shelly wrote.
I will remain a sliver pricking at the finger of history,
a brief
irritation in eternity.
"Who reads Cicero any more?"
"Cicero?" Sarah says, "isn't that a skin rash?"
My First World problems overshadow the Syrian refugees,
baking in the hot sun, only a damp cloth moistens their lips.

I'm both fearful and willing to explore
my uncharted self.
Travel time for this journey is a hundred trips
around the Sun. Will I ever make it?
I feel unprepared
fragile and out of shape, I have been booted out of bootcamp
my thoughts and feelings
are the only vehicles for exploration – my Hubble, my electron
microscope. The darkness is immense.
Another billion mother-clusters of darkness before
the light kicks in – a wall-switch illuminating
loneliness.

"Our neighbor, Noah, thinks he's fat. And ugly." She says.
"It's all relative, I tell him. *'To me, you're perfect
and beautiful.'* And then I gave him a hug.
He resisted. But I held him harder.
He cried. And then he laughed."

Sarah means well, and for many,
her coddling does leave an effective pillow where sorrow

can bury its heavy head.
But her platitudes don't work for me.
My pain doesn't need a coat of galvanizing fluff.
what my delicate interior does need for survival
is the precision instrument of literature
and art. Music and self-discovery.

at the long end of any given day,
the fitful night only just begun,
whatever precious minutes of silence I may have left unused,
do not roll over to the following day.
only the clangor of petty dread and imaginary fear
reverberate consistently.

I am a battlefield unto myself.

during the Bronze Age, pride
in metallurgy was felt everywhere.
earrings, bracelets, medallions, goblets,
the clash of sword against shield
over the scuffle of sandaled feet,
across the desert floor, reached the ears
of citizens living in city states along the banks
of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers

Mysterious cities with magical names:
Lagash and Kish and Umma and Ur
Where domed cathedrals built into the cliffs
housed virgins and high-priestesses and wizards –
like the Wizard of Ur.

Statues of their gods stood tall and naked along the banks
facing the water, masturbating,
Gigantic erections made from sandstone and lapis lazuli
Spawned
those rivers of hatred and war

“Ooh, sticky,” she says.

the semites were nomads, from no mans land, who traded
throughout these city states and eventually kicked the gathering
dust off their feet and settled there
in great prosperity

they were illiterate

a nomadic culture has never invented writing.
how can it be otherwise?
sand and sun and recurring storm are not kind
to the scribbled word. Writing can only develop within.
It is an interior experience.
Stability is the key.
No wind. No dust.
No leaky roofs allowed.
Dry, enclosed structures with thick walls and vaulted ceilings
Sealed tight except for
small windows where shafts
of light illuminate
the page.

Over time the Semites got fat and comfortable
and their children
learned to read and write, in cuniform, the Sumerian alphabet,
etched onto clay tablets.
A favorite story was the Epic
of Gilgamesh. This badass Mesopotamian flood myth
was a Sumer blockbuster.

But Abraham woke up one morning with an itch.
His pocket god was burning in his pants.
Nomads can't build large stone gods to worship
on the banks of rivers. They need something more portable.
A household god they can stick in their trousers
when they're on the move.
A pocket god.

Abraham's pocket god spoke to him.
A muffled cry that slowly rose up from his pants
and screamed – obscenities!
“Get out of this city, Abe.
The Sumerians have no shame in their sex.
They fuck from behind. They sacrifice virgins to the god of grain.
And then they brew beer and praise every goddamn god
Under heaven except me. Fuckers.”
so Abe headed out, once again, for no mans land,
he and his people, their wealth on their backs –
camels would come later.
they loaded up a few copies of Gilgamesh on
their portable tablets
and scrambled into the wilderness
on the hearsay of a single man
with a whacky idea

(like Brigham Young 200 generations later)
who heard voices
from a god
in his pocket

Imagine a bunch of early Hollywood producers
twirling fat cigars
while churning fat ideas for their own blockbuster.
“Flood story? Brilliant idea, Noah.
all we need is a moral at the end –
and Russell Crowe.”

They ended up in some godforsaken place, Canaan maybe,
set up tent, and spawned their own civilization,
something from nothing out of the desert sand.
the pocket god, now inflated in size, needed a sacrifice.
so Abraham took his son, Isaac, up a local hill –
Mountains would come later –
but low and behold
just as he was about to slit his son’s throat
the God of Love declared:
“Uh, hold up a minute, Abe babe, I was just kidding. Just
testing your loyalty.”
“But Yahweh,” Abraham cried up,
“What about the psychological devastation?”
God shrugged, “Yours or mine?”
Father and son, no doubt, would have a healthy relationship after that.
did Abraham really hear the voice of God?
or was it only the voice of his inner conscience,
the first man to break the tradition of human sacrifice?
or was it another prick in the finger of history?

and guess what?
once a nomad ...
a few generations later Moses led his people out of Egypt
into no man’s land.
Moses is an Egyptian word meaning He-Who-Pulls-Out
(a code word Hebrew mothers might invoke
at the moment of climax
when they don’t want another child)
and He-Who-Pulls-Out was yet another guy
with whacky ideas
and persistent voices
grumbling in his head –
that no one else could hear.
but now the EGO of the pocket god had grown

considerably in size –
larger than a mountain – which Moses climbed
in terror.
an angry bush, nostrils flaming, barked orders
and scratched out the ground rules
on clay tablets (now in Hebrew).
by the time Moses descended from the Heights
his dark beard and hair had turned to
salt and pepper.
He gathered his generals.
“The pocket god has spoken. His name is Yahweh.
And he doesn’t mess around.
The Promised Land
Is down below.
There’s only one problem – it’s OCCUPIED!
Yahweh has settled people there to prepare the land – for us.
All we need to do, He said, is go down and KILL
Every man, woman, and child, and not leave anything breathing
Not even a mule or a blade of grass.”

“How wasteful! Not even a blade of grass?” Sarah says,
a staunch conservationist with a passion for recycling.

“But Moses,” the generals asked, “You just read us the riot act
straight off the tablet. Thou Shalt Not Kill.”
Moses frowned. “Never mind that. Do as I say
And not as I do.”
Yet the generals had a heart and returned
with captives: women and children, basically.
When Moses saw them approaching
he yelled obscenities as he yanked the salt from his hair,
“What the hell ... What’s the matter with you?
I thought I said, I mean Yahweh said,
To KILL every last one of them?”
the generals replied, “But Moses, they’re uh ...
WOMEN and CHILDREN!”
He-Who-Pulls-Out, pulled out the pepper from his beard,
“Hum ... all right then, kill all the male children.
But you can keep the women and the little girls for yourselves.”
nice. one more prick in the finger of history.

Why are we guided in our daily wisdom
by a Bronze Age people
who didn’t know where the sun slept at night
or that germs live under fingernails and foreskins?

I don't medicate my depression.
I ride it out. I wrestle with it like Jacob and his ladder.
I choose to be present to my pain, a witness to my existence
rather than numb out all sorrow and miss
the intermittent hiccups of joy
and life with Sarah.

every morning is a struggle to get out of bed.
I place a foot on the flat desert floor.
a hot wind blows in from Santa Ana.
I live in Hollywood
where another babble of voices constantly
dispute
ideas and money and differences
in studio lots or deserted parking lots where a
Lot of wives, whose husbands aren't worth their salt,
leave and never look back
where strange gods look down
from the sides of tall buildings and
Declare:
NIKE • LEVI • ABSOLUT • COKE
where horror, love, and sentiment
have a moral at the end:
The Ten Commandments
Samson and Delilah
The Wizard of Oz
where producers are always up your nose
and so is everything else
"Pharaoh, let my people blow!"
the Semites have settled here
in city states with mysterious names:
Sherman Oaks and Beverly Hills
I share my long history
I'm one of them.

Depression is not so different from drowning –
even though I live in a desert, during a seven year drought,
from the moment I open my eyes in the early morning
I tread water the entire day
my head barely above the water line
until the evening when I reach the shore of my bed
float onto its surface, close my eyes again and
dream of the promised land;
some days are worse than others
I swim in a sea that swells with unpredictable emotion
and just as I catch my breath

another tidal wave of disenchantment
hits me in the face
I swallow it in gulps and sink
to despair.

The only consolation is Sarah

my eyes never tire from looking at her
even though I may notice a small new wrinkle
at the sensual edge of her lips
or another grey hair among
the braided array of auburn ones
her smile and her boundless curiosity
keep her youthful and vibrant
the dresses she wears, bought in second hand stores,
adjusted and tailored
to fit the unique shape of her body,
make her sexy and leave me wanting
and able to swim up stream
if only temporarily
away from sorrow
she is infinite and accessible from all directions –
a pleasure sphere whose circumference is happiness
with an entrance around every curve
she whispers in my ear the sweet Word
that sets everything in motion
pulls me out from my dark eclipse into the Light
if it were possible to strip
the universe
of its content – every star to the last photon
removed –
so only the architecture of empty space remained
Sarah would fill it with her geometry

she takes me to art events
plays me obscure music or sings me endearing lyrics
in her funny voice
reads me articles from Psychology Today
and passages from Heart of Darkness
The Brothers Karamazov and
In Cold Blood
books that raise my spirits through
contrast and comparison
my petty problems are of no concern
she addresses my depression
strategizes my options

takes me to odd lectures
on First Fridays at the Natural History Museum
like the one on *The Emotions of Fruit Flies*
unexpectedly attended by adorable girls
in red lipstick, sipping from glasses of red wine.
Apparently, fruit flies have feelings too.

later that evening
we drive up the mountain to look at the stars
Sarah sits next to me in the car gently
placing my hand on her milky thighs
beneath her long flowing dress like one of the temple virgins
staring up along the river in awe of the Milky Way
as we climb to the Griffith Park Observatory
I look through the viewing lens of its mighty telescope
at the night sky – no different than the night sky of Mesopotamia
long ago – and realize my
insignificance.

Then we go home and make love.

our hearts begin to talk
we dispute our differences
reevaluate, put all things in perspective
our stubbornness slowly peels away and
drops to the floor
only a naked understanding is left between us
I would rather be happy than right

Sarah is always generous with her body
(because I please *her* in every way imaginable)
and on this special night,
it's not the smaller, quiet child she decides to reward,
but the big bully, after all, screaming obscenities
as her titties, nipples stiff and determined, like city states,
slide along the length of my stone-hard
pocket god – spawning
a river of love.

"Ooh, sticky!" She says.

*

* *Abraham is still considered, if not an actual historical figure, at least an important symbolic one, the*

Thirteen Rabbis (A tribute to Wallace Stevens)

Thirteen rabbis, in black coats and hats, flock
The corner of Angel and Zachariah –
The sun blasts overhead
From Aleph to Zion
Their letter-shaped shadows loom
Over their torahs in
Proclamation,
Filling the pages with black
Revelations.