

The Ram
By Benzion D. Yehoshua
A

It was twilight. Papa, a big man, sat cross-legged on the rug on the porch. Before him were a glass of pungent ouzo and a smoking hookah. The hookah bubbled and Papa watched the sinking city like a sphinx; the cool breezes ascending from the lowlands brought a new wind that swirled the basil, the geranium, the rosemary and rue, that dispersed strong incense fragrances.

I took care not to disturb Papa's silences, his dreams, and his reflections. I sat next to him for a long while trying to read his thoughts in the sunset. The hookah gave off altar smoke and Papa inhaled the evening deep into his lungs and said:

"Shlomo, my son".

"Yes, Papa", I responded to his call immediately.

"This, Jerusalem, is a crazy city. An inexplicable city. From any direction you approach it you'll find it suspended on the horizon, between heaven and earth. You walk toward this horizon that like an adder slips away in the path. Jerusalem strikes at you and then slips back between its secrets".

I nodded my head in surprise and he, like an ancestor who had seen a lot in his lifetime, continued:

"Jerusalem is used to bloody sunsets. Here we are looking at a big red hot ball and smelling, in the sunset's blush, the odors of blood from the binding of Isaac".

"Papa", I protested, "Why the binding of Isaac? Isaac was a test. He wasn't sacrificed. Isaac died after a full life when he was one hundred and eighty years old".

"Yes, my son", my father was defensive, "I say Isaac and mean the poor ram and maybe all the miserable rams, who pay the price of that binding only because they happen to be nearby. Jerusalem is full of fathers ready to sacrifice their only sons, just not themselves. One cannot sacrifice a victim without the innocent victim's willingness, as he will always believe that a ram will happen along and catch his horns in the brush, arriving at the right time to pay with his life. The victims are forgotten. Those who sacrifice them march proudly into the pages of history without losing a drop of blood", Papa inhaled smoke from the hookah that was red as fire.

Papa patted my head as if I were a young kid. We were silent. I liked my father's silences opposite the reddening

horizon. The gray skies filled with black ravens. The cold chilled us to the bone and we escaped into the warm house.

B

I used to walk in Jerusalem's cobblestone streets, examine the stone cornices and the Arabesque lintels, the framed windows of colored glass in cheap imitation of stained glass. Facing Jerusalem, I would blush like a virgin, afraid of a girl's shadow. My arteries gushed with flowing lava and I craved to embrace a girl and bury my lips in the abyss between her breasts, as though the right breast were the Mount of Olives and the left breast the Hill of Evil Counsel with Hinnom valley between them. The education that my forefathers had drilled into me quickly became a wedge between me and the cosmos and I would erase those sinful reflections for fear that the fires of Gehenna that surrounded me in this world would ultimately roast me like a skewer in the next world's steak restaurant.

I would run after my Zvia [gazelle], a Yemenite girl, who had twinkling black eyes like a gazelle's eyes and skin like

an ebony tree. The devil take her, an evasive gazelle like a fawn that left me breathless and empty-handed.

I loved her perky and defiant breasts that tried to break out of the fetters of her blouse. I loved to see her skipping up the winding steps of her parents' house and her twin buttocks, small and full, bouncing like two clappers in a church tower. I wanted to grab her narrow hips and leave her quivering with her rebellious legs swinging above. I had many dreams and in the morning chill accompanied by a cold shower I waited for the next night and new dreams.

We often met in the neighborhood and she, like an experienced violinist, plucked at my nerve endings until bursting point. I waited for her to turn to me, and say something. Zvia did not deny my existence, but she knew how to drive me crazy. Had she denied me she would quickly have been forgotten and drowned in my sadness. One day when I helped her carry the groceries to her parents' house, she said surprisingly: "Shlomo, on Saturday night pick me up and we'll go to a movie..."

I wasn't a baby in those days but a solid young man of twenty-one, who had fought in the Sinai desert. My heart

beat like a jackhammer. I calculated my expected conduct at every moment of the upcoming date, from the first minute until parting. I would stare at the shop window of the delicatessen on Jaffa Street and deliberate between the chocolates with the lovers, him smiling at her from ear to ear and a blood red rose on his lapel and a simple buttercup corsage. "She'll think me an even bigger fool", I gave up on the idea of the flowers and the bow that had impressed me in a romantic movie I had seen. I thought about topics that I would bring up in conversation that evening. I thought of jokes that would bring a smile to her lips but not make me a buffoon. I thought about our parting: Would Zvia offer me her cherry lips, or prefer to serve me her cheek, like the glazed apples that street vendors sold in Jerusalem. I also thought of the worst of all: that the evening might end with the metallic notes of a resounding slap that would force me to part with her forever.

The entire Sabbath I reflected on Zvia and wished that a miracle would take place and that the stars in the night sky that augur the new week's arrival would appear early and I could go to the gates of my Zvia's house. I didn't wait until

the stars twinkled between the wisps of cloud of Shevat. I hid in the shade of a tree, as if I were caught in the thicket, and awaited my soul mate and the whole time I heard the heartbeats that thundered in my chest like drums in a military ceremony.

C

The stars, three in number, were already twinkling and announced the new week. The sky dripped a damp, cold winter and Zvia was not to be seen on the horizon. The screening time was approaching and Zvia's tracks were lost. Had I not gathered my courage, that cost me dearly, and knocked on the door of her house, then I would still be standing in the shade of that tree until today, like a wet puppy, that raised its leg and forgot to lower it again. My clothes were soaked in winter and I don't know if it was from my red eyes or the open gates of heaven. I looked a mess and my white shirt and festive khaki pants, which I had pressed specially – the pants' pleat was straight as a ruler and the shirt's collar starched – now looked like a construction worker's overalls.

"Good week!" I called in a checked voice.

"Good week!" answered Mr. Ratzhabi in his Yemenite accent and in his voice there was a hint of anger that I had disturbed the peace of his home, in which wafted the fragrances of the spice-box and the Havdalah candle. I looked over the members of the household and looked for my soul mate but Zvia had abandoned me to sighing. The household members opened their eyes like a herd of lost deer and their eyes looked so much like my Zvia's eyes. Mr. Ratzhabi twirled his side locks and scratched the thin goatee that adorned his face and in a Shabazi melody asked "So?! What?!" and spread his hands as if to do a Yemenite dance step. It was then that I correctly understood the meaning of the verse "May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth". After a pregnant pause and an even longer clearing of my throat, I clucked out in an odd voice: "Zvia". There was a silence and Mr. Ratzhabi asked with impatience: "Zvia – what?!" as if he wanted to toss me down the winding steps.

Mrs. Ratzhabi did well, a heavy-set woman from whom the family members had inherited the gazelle-eyes, with a mother's intuition by saying:

"Zvia...Zvia went to the cinema. Good-bye".

I shut the door to the Ratzhabis' house and felt that millions of gazelle eyes were rolling after me like the marbles in a Jerusalem children's game. My eyes were red as blood and dripping with tears of insult, that were carried away by the dirty puddles.

"Zvia. That whore!" I said through my teeth and felt relief, "But God, I love her so much!"

From the Sephardic synagogues one could just hear the battle song from the psalms sung on Saturday evenings:

He is my loving God and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield, in whom I take refuge, who subdues peoples under me. O LORD, what is man that you care for him, the son of man that you think of him

...which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight...

Bow thy heavens and come down, touch the mountains and they shall smoke...

Cast forth lightning and scatter them, shoot out thine arrows and destroy them,

Whose mouth speaketh vanity, and their right hand is a right hand of falsehood...

I sang and identified with every word. My desire for sweet revenge brought a very tiny smile to my lips. I found myself covered by the heavy darkness in the synagogue. The pair of movie tickets in my pocket was testimony to my distress. The light of Yahrzeit candles skipped about on the high naked walls and like a horror movie drew frescoes of seraphs and incomprehensible addresses on the walls. The heavy odors of burnt oil hovered in the space, which raised the smells of sacrifice ashes mixed with the incense smell of the fragrant herbs. The synagogue was covered in deep sorrow.

D

Often, at moments of distress, I found comfort at my friend and fellow student Abram's house. His house was so different from ours. In the fifties people were considered well-to-do if they had a single electric lamp, a 'Butgas' burner, refrigerator, a black dial telephone and radio-record player the size of a wardrobe. In a wealthy

house the bookcases were protected by heavy glass for fear that someone might read the books, in an educated household there were wall to wall bookcases containing 'all the works' of forgotten authors. Established Israeli society was divided into classes by the morning paper that arrived at the doorstep during the last morning watch. The socialist leaders and members of the bus cooperative adorned themselves with *Davar* [the labor federation organ], the bourgeoisie read *Haboker*, the refined and Agnon fans read *Ha'aretz* and the proletariat would wait for the evening paper vendors with the blaring headlines. At Abram's place I saw all the required accessories to be a real bourgeois; they received *Ha'aretz* every morning due to Abram's grandmother's love and esteem for Agnon and his works. With the aid of a thick magnifying glass she read the *Ha'aretz* literary supplements, in which his stories were published. Abram's father often impressed Jerusalem's snobs with up-to-date quotations from the newspaper. Abram's father was one of Jerusalem's few rich who drove a company-owned Ford 45 pick-up.

On that Saturday night I left the synagogue and sought comfort at Abram's house. I boldly walked on the carpets

in their house and sank into a leather armchair and took pleasure in their softness. I browsed the pages of *Ha'aretz* to impress the people. Abram saw me in my misery but did not say a word. He handed me pants and a shirt and a towel to dry myself. The house was heated by olive wood planks that cast a glow of light and heat on my face and the strong burnt smell rose from the fire and the wood in the hearth, as if they required an evening meal-offering.

The household members surrounded me with a feeling of warmth that I did not comprehend. Nitzhia [Constance], Abram's sister, brewed steamy tea and served me packaged cookies. I drank down the tea in a gulp.

"In spite of it all, the holy one's world is beautiful, blessed be he", I concluded and sank into a good talk with Nitzhia. She, hazel-eyed, did not stop twirling the ends of her braids and expressed wonder at the war stories I recited as one speaking aimlessly.

"Shlomo, you know you have a charming voice. So deep. You describe so well. In my opinion, you're also handsome", Nitzhia complimented.

"God", I whispered to myself, "and I – unbelievable – flesh and blood in which a girl finds qualities and can speak like a person without long lists prepared in advance".

I went out into the wintry Jerusalem night. The first snowflakes melted when they touched the ground and punctured the puddles in the gutters. The cold was sharp as only Jerusalem can chill, but a good, pleasant heat still spread about inside me, flooding my body down to the toes.

E

The meeting in the grocery store did not take long in coming.

"Shlomo, maybe I should call you Shlomi, I'm really sorry...I simply forgot and went to the movie". As usual she handed me the basket of groceries, and like a beast of burden I carried it to her parents' house. Zvia didn't say a word, just sent me a coquettish look that melted my heart and pierced me with her bright doe eyes. She rolled the ends of her smooth black hair that hugged the edge of her breasts like a ripple; that I longed to fondle like a thirsty

babe. I became angry immediately and was already prepared for new attempts and new disappointments.

"Shlomo?!" Suddenly I hated my name, "What a failure of a name my parents chose for me. King Solomon, after whom I am named, won not one or two but a thousand wives and I am merely a living creature, a doormat, I didn't even win one Zvia.

"There's nothing to say, you're so beautiful", I stuttered.

"Shlomo, you're actually very nice. Like good. Tall. Athletic. Handsome face. Greek nose. It's a shame you don't have a beard. That's more masculine".

I kept quiet. I pulled in my sails and closed up within myself, as if I were a snail seeking refuge in its shell. Zvia knew how to give compliments when she wanted to, but they were always like honey coating a bee's sting.

Zvia climbed the winding steps and I followed her, carrying the heavy basket and counting the bounces of her bottom:

"One and one, one and two, one and three, one and four, one and five, one and six, one and seven". The rhythm matched the racing heartbeat in my chest perfectly, leaving me breathless.

"Thank you, Boy, that you help my Zvia. May God grant your wishes!" Mrs. Ratzhabi opened the door and took the basket from me. I gathered my courage and in a deep voice, somewhat manly, I said in defense of my honor:

"Mrs. Ratzhabi. I'm not a boy any more. I'm a man. I'm twenty-one years old. A sergeant in the paratroopers". I was proud of myself and the boldness of my spirit. Suddenly I sensed that Mrs. Ratzhabi's and her daughter's apologetic responses were no longer my concern.

"Shlomo. Don't be insulted by every little thing. I have to run. Bye", Zvia chirped decisively and Mrs. Ratzhabi added with delight through her asthma: "We Yemenites say 'boy' to a young man, a beloved man, a handsome man".

I remained silent as usual and said to myself:

"You see, Shlomo, the first rule in life: maintain your rights and people will treat you with respect. If you don't set borders, people will walk all over you without feeling they did anything wrong". To Mrs. Ratzhabi I said: "Mrs. Ratzhabi, among Sabras a boy is a boy. A boy is not a man.

"Come, Shlomo, have a cup of tea", she entreated, "I have fresh mint from the garden". Mrs. Ratzhabi knew the secret of Jerusalem tea. Dark steamy tea in a thin clear glass, a sugar cube for sucking and mint leaves floating happily, giving a warm cozy feeling.

"Shlomo, you should know that I know everything. Everything", Mrs. Ratzhabi said in her gasping, heavy voice. Mrs. Ratzhabi resembled a giant ball rolling slowly and heavily and only her big black eyes gave her away and reminded me of my Zvia. A wicked smile formed itself on my lips: "With God's help Zvia will be like that too", I greedily took another hot gulp of tea, as the sweet joy of revenge reverberated inside me. I was confused. A sense of powerful love and endless hate were tangled up inside me. "What do you know, Mrs. Ratzhabi?" I broke the silence.

"That you will be healthy. I know that you like Zvia. God will pardon me. You're too good for her. She's wild, ill-mannered. She needs rough treatment and you're so gentle. It's awful what I, her mother, say about my daughter Zvia. You're suffering, and it hurts me to see you suffer. You deserve a better wife".

Mrs. Ratzhabi's last words stunned me. I sensed that the big vase on the counter had smashed to bits and left my dream scattered on the floor. I didn't have the power and will to make the pieces into a new dream.

F

I went out into the Jerusalem evening. The blood red sunset that Papa adored as an evening gift was at its grandest. I went over to Abram's but didn't find him. Nitzhia received me with a steamy glass of tea and packaged cookies, the ones that melt in one's mouth. Nitzhia was happy that I came and gave me a manly feeling, not only as an attentive listener, but whose voice is heard.

I remembered Nitzhia. A little girl running barefoot on the smooth stone floor in the house's foyer. Blue gym pants with elastic around the calves, playing at jacks, paper-stone-scissors and hopscotch at which the little Jerusalemites so excelled. She was quiet and shy. Almost within herself. A few years passed and here she is at my side, a marriageable girl. A little pale, without the

enthusiasm lurking in Zvia's eyes and hips. She stuck me with olive eyes, as if she expected me to take the initiative. I reached toward her with a trembling hand and she took it with vigor and said:

"Shlomo, you have a nice hand. Masculine. A man's handshake. Such a warm hand. I like this touch".

I was embarrassed and sensed that my life was burning up. From a feeling of nothingness I was found to have attributes, but Zvia was an unattainable challenge. I didn't understand my confused soul.

"We'll go out for a walk this evening. The Jerusalem wind brings the dead out of their graves", she said.

We went out quietly and the wind struck our cheeks affectionately. I looked Nitzhia in the eye, searching for Zvia's dull eyes. I gave Nitzhia my arm and the two of us walked in the shade of the stone houses like two kindergarten children looking for their home.

G

I showed Nitzhia pictures that I had drawn secretly, most of them showing a small man and a long shadow

swallowed up in an evening sky amidst date palms, laurel, frankincense and thorny roses. Nitzhia took an expensive clarinet *buffé* and cut the space with Mozart's Magic Flute and went on with pieces by Haydn, Beethoven, Bach and Chopin. She played and wriggled like a snake in Hassidic music.

A dream recurred in which I found myself imprisoned with my arms bound by a two- ended rope as condors carry me upward and the condors pull the ends of the rope in opposite directions while I am somewhere between earth and sky. My arms separate from my body and I fall towards the open abyss expecting the parachute to open above me and I mumble: [Note: a play on the Hebrew words for "parachute...constant...Constance"].

I passed through the streets of Jerusalem, where there were Jews from one hundred countries and non-Jews from another ninety-nine; I examined faces as if I were looking for portraits of salvation. Only in the grocery did I find my soul mate, Zvia. The more I walked away from her the closer she became. Her pride bowed her and melancholy shown in her eyes. Softness drove her vocal chords like a train reaching its last stop. She showed

interest. She said a word of encouragement that was meant first and foremost for herself. More honey with less sting. I sensed that she was setting a trap for me until my emotions came back to life and just like that I would lose control. A cold sweat broke out on my forehead and palms. I became pale. Suddenly I looked into Zvia's face and eyes and remembered her mother, Mrs. Ratzhabi, who had turned into the round ball of the setting sun, giant and rolling, breathing in asthmatic gasps, sighing and saying: "Shlomo, God will forgive me..." Suddenly Zvia looked like her mother. The sweet feeling of revenge filled me. The blood returned to my face, but a little voice, so loving, grew and grew inside me. I felt my accelerated heartbeats. I ran off like a madman, leaving Zvia with two baskets in her hands behind me.

H

"Father and Mother would like to meet your parents", Nitzhia told me after a while. "Come and bring them on Tuesday. Father says it's a lucky day. Seven o'clock. Okay?"

I nodded my head and secretly thought that it would be a nice idea for my parents to meet Nitzhia and Abram's parents. My parents knew where I was spending my free time. I hadn't imagined that the time had come to "get serious". I still had to overcome my split soul and build my economic and spiritual future. Another few years of freedom wouldn't hurt. Maybe Zvia would come to her senses. So I thought.

Mama and Papa, lovers of society, were ashamed to admit their poverty. In those days we lived in one room with kerosene lamps, a noisy primus and smoky wick – without electricity, without a telephone and without a gas cooker. I read the morning paper in the netted frame at Eliahu's kiosk. We heard the din of the radio from our neighbors. The books in Papa's library were all holy books and Mapu's *Love of Zion* stood next to the Song of Songs, as Papa considered it a holy book that should be learned by heart. Papa said:

"I wouldn't miss it. We'll be happy to go to their house, but what if we are expected to return the invitation, as is customary", Papa rolled his eyes and they became tinged with sadness. "Papa, it is only a cup of tea", I said.

"Among Jerusalemites a cup of tea is a cup of tea and doesn't imply a return invitation". To make Papa happy I added, in the Sephardic tradition: "Go in peace and prosperity".

Mama and Papa wore festive Sabbath clothing that smelled of mothballs. Papa sat a long time polishing his shoes until they looked presentable. He took a pair of scissors and shaped his beard like Herzl, stuck a red rose in the lapel of his jacket and if he were a few years younger would have looked like Theodore Herzl on an embroidered carpet. Mama wore her expensive, well-guarded jewelry, as if she wanted to show off their strong financial situation.

I

We reported at seven o'clock on Tuesday. Mama, Papa and I were shocked. The trap set for us was perfect. A row of colored candles stood in the entrance to the house. The gate was decorated with arches of greenery like in a Sukkah. The house was full of people. The owner's uncles and other relatives. Nitzhia's father conducted the

festivities and looked pleased with himself. He derived pleasure like an effendi landowner who just received a big inheritance not meant for him. The small orchestra of zither, Arabic drum and recorder played tunes and a blind singer broke out in quarter-tone trills. The tables were set for a king and the neighborhood rabbi sat at the head, leaning on his cane, as he awaited the beginning of the ceremony. I was not completely sure which ceremony the rabbi awaited. My parents, who were more polite, understood immediately.

I looked in Mama and Papa's eyes and the three of us wanted to seek asylum. A whole city had come for the scapegoat ceremony. An innocent deer hunt. We wanted to escape the screen that held us like trapped flies, but the pace of events was ten times too fast for us. The guests produced ancient calls of joy with their tongues and whispered to each other: "God protect him, what a handsome groom. Such respectable parents".

Suddenly I discovered at Abram's a different house than the one I had known. It was no longer a house of pretense that imitated the snobbish German immigrants of the 1930s. It seemed that at times of joy the truth came out,

the Orient took control and my engagement party, to which I had come unwillingly, came together differently than I had hoped.

The neighborhood rabbi opened with Isaac's fraudulent benediction to Jacob: "Therefore God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine: Let people serve thee, and nations bow down to thee". I whispered to Nitzhia:

"Nitzhia, why this strange surprise?" and she, on the spur of the moment, gave me a merciful look and said:

"Shlomi, Father is like that. You'll get to know him. That's how he succeeds in business. He presents the interested parties with the *fait accompli* and they're eventually happy about it. There are many foundations of happiness in Father's doings".

I kept quiet and Nitzhia said: "Shlomi, don't worry. We'll be good together". There was no salvation from my friend Abram. He was tongue-tied in the presence of his all-powerful father, but as the evening wound down he whispered to me: "We'll be not only good friends, but family too".

Cinderella appeared to me and throughout the evening I saw Zvia's sad look in the guests' eyes and faces. For a moment I wanted swift gazelle's legs to run to the desert, out of bowshot; I repeated the story of the binding to myself.

The monotonous music cut the space and the blind man's voice sounded like the neighborhood's mourners going out to earn their wages. The rabbi handed a pearly white, silk handkerchief to Nitzhia and me and made an eternal covenant between us. He began, preaching:

"Shlomo and Nitzhia. Shlomo was king in Jerusalem. King Solomon's Jerusalem is eternal, constant. By law the woman is betrothed by a bill of marriage, with currency of value and before witnesses. The law is the same for a fiancée and married woman and the fiancé cannot cohabit with his fiancée before the wedding ceremony. You, Nitzhia, from a good family, will not marry another before receiving a proper get from your fiancé". I signed on the conditions without protest. Did I have any choice?

My hands shook and my mouth tasted of wormwood. The rabbi extended both his bony hands, laying them on our heads and prayed that our wishes would be fulfilled. I, in

my iniquity, thought at that moment of my soul mate. "How could I do this to Zvia?" I felt that the voices bursting from my heart were overtaking those from my head.

"Kiss, kiss", the photographer flashed and I, who all my life desired a woman's lips, felt that my mouth was shut with a padlock.

"You don't know that my Shlomo is shy?" Nitzhia rescued me from my embarrassment. I went to Papa and Mama. Mama's eyes were red and I knew that mothers know how to read their children's heartstrings.

Papa said: "Shlomo, my son, parents know their children. I know that you are sad. I think that you are lucky and a wondrous miracle has befallen you today that your father and mother did not experience. You've entered the fleshpots and improved your share more than your parents did. Business, the broadening of horizons, children, happiness".

"What do you say, Mama?" I asked.

"With God's help, with God's help", Mama said 'Amen' after Papa and wiped my cheeks with a trembling hand.

The orchestra continued to play until morning. The room was full of them and the odors of smoke and ouzo. Papa was drunk and stole the show with his dirty jokes. The guests closed around him from every direction and he, king for a day, joked, recited and sang to the guests' joy. I felt a choking sensation and suddenly did the unexpected. I took Nitzhia's hand and we left the noisy house. A Jerusalem chill pinched at our cheeks and Nitzhia got up close to me like a favorite little pet. Jerusalem sank into the darkness of the last patrol and we plodded along to Jumaa's abandoned sheep pen, a big pen which he had maintained until the War of Independence, supplying the neighborhood women with milk straight from the udder. There was an old odor of sour milk in the pen, on top of the hill, and bales of old hay were laid out like an abandoned altar. The verse flickered in my head: "he asked water and she gave him milk".

Nitzhia and I spread out on the straw mat and lost ourselves in a long kiss drunk from senselessness. Nitzhia gazed at me with a pair of cat's eyes. The rabbi's warning dissipated in the alcoholic vapors that spun our heads.

"Shlomo and Nitzhia are sinking in King Solomon's eternal city", I mumbled and for the first time we dove into the meaning of "that created a nut tree in the Garden of Eden", the groom's blessing before consummating his marriage. At dawn we soaked in the blood of our virginity. Jerusalem's skies were a clear light blue. The Judean desert began to take over the city. Flock upon flock of crows besieged the blue sky creating ugly stains. The crows cawed as if they smelled the blood of dead prey. With a glance they circled the Mount of Olives, touching the Hill of Evil Counsel and descended straight for the valley of Hinnom, in the cleft, between the pieces, as if they wanted the flesh of the binding.

Translated by Jonathan Spector