

A Letter To Yitzhak
From Sarah
(The Poetics Of Incongruity)

By Elana Zaiman

Dear Mr. Manger,

Or shall I call you Iztik? I don't know the appropriate way to address someone in your time period. Perhaps, I shall call you Yitzhak, a name very dear to me, as you know, the name of my son, born in my old age.

I thought I would write to express my thoughts on your Humash Leider. When I told my husband of my intent, he thought the idea of writing to someone from such a different time in history ludicrous. "Besides," he added. "To write to someone who so changes the story of our lives. It's shameful."

"But dear Abraham," I said to him. "If this man can remove us from our context and place us in Eastern Europe, is it not fair that I, too, do the same, that I invite him into our world for a little bit?" My husband smiled at me and nodded.

Yitzhak. Oh Yitzhak. I don't know where to begin. There is so much I have to say to you. Your work, I find very interesting. Sometimes intriguing. Other times disturbing. You mention technological advances, and allude to political, social, and theological situations with which we are unfamiliar. You place expressions in our mouths from languages we do not speak: Yiddish, English, and French. You place worries upon us that are not our worries. Sometimes you present new insights and feelings that are quite accurate. Other times you change us so much that I have difficulty recognizing who we all are.

My husband thinks it is blasphemous, this Humash Leider of yours. He says you have attempted to create an Eastern European version of the Bible, and without much success. On the one hand,

Yes!
indeed!

I would agree. But, on the other hand, and please let this remain just between us, I think you have succeeded. I take it as a compliment that you think so highly of us to want us to join you in your Eastern European setting. Though it is somewhat incongruous for us to be there, it is nice to be so admired. As you can see, I am a much more liberal thinker than my husband.

I must admit that I rather enjoy the way I am portrayed in many of your poems. I feel as if my life has somehow become more meaningful in your recreation. It is I who question and plead with my dear "Avreimel" (as you so lovingly have me refer to him in what I have learned, in my study on Eastern Europe, to be a Yiddishized term of endearment) for a child, rather than Abraham who pleads with God. It is I who cry and weep bitterly to give birth to life ("eighteen"). You have given sympathy to my desires. And you cause me to express them with such pathos, such humanity. I cried when reading "Abraham and Sarah". I, who never interact with my husband on such a deep level in the Humash, suddenly interact with him in your Humash Leider. My voice, which is all too silent in the Humash, in your Humash Leider is suddenly heard.

I must say, though, that I was rather distressed at the portrayal of my husband in this poem. Such an important man, and you make fun of him. You remove from him the holiness that is his due, and make him too human, too plain, and frankly too uncaring. You have him smiling, sucking on his pipe, not listening to a word I say, and repeating the same ridiculous phrase over and over again: "Be sure, my partner, if God wants,

even a broom can shoot."

At least you continue to portray his belief in God. Though I must admit, in the Humash his belief comes across much more respectfully than it does in your Humash Leider where it seems somewhat laughable. Maybe being further away from direct contact with God allows you to make light of the human divine relationship in a way we consider unthinkable.

I must correct a few errors of yours. My husband doesn't smoke, nor for that matter does he whittle away at wood, as you have him doing in your poem, "Three Angels Come to Abraham Our Father." He has more important things to do. Furthermore, he has never ever called me "beast". My husband would never do such a thing. Though at times authoritative, he is not quite the bully you make him out to be. And, how is it that Turks become angels? Upon reading this line, my husband shook his head and muttered, "This man is a non-believer, poking fun at the angels of God." And yet, at the same time, I noticed that he chuckled. There is something humorous in what you do. Blasphemous, yet humorous.

Concerning your portrayal of me in that poem, I like the fact that you consider me smart enough to read. I am an avid reader, and no one has heard about that. The Humash did not record it. But the Tzenah U'renah? I've never heard of it before. I must again assume that this is part of your culture that you are imposing upon me.

I like that you continue to portray my pleadings for a son in this poem as well. You have me utter, "Without a son, my

bones will rot in vain." How true that is. But I wonder why you have to degrade my husband in order to uphold me? (And please don't mention the time my husband degraded me in Egypt with Pharaoh to uphold himself as that is between Abraham and me.)

But as I read on in your Humash Leider, I see that such honor to me is not even maintained. In your poem, "Hagar's Last Night In Abraham's House," both Abraham and I are far from honored, and Hagar, of all people, becomes a kind of heroin.^e I do admit that I am not perfect, and that I was jealous of Hagar, but I did not, nor could I have ever given my husband the ultimatum of divorce. I assume divorce is more frequent in your society, and that women can be so bold as to request divorces from their husbands, but in our times such behavior is unthinkable. Also, I have to admit that although my husband dismissed Hagar, he did not call her "bitch". That would be unfitting for a Patriarch, don't you think? How in a Humash, even a Humash Leider, can there be such profanity?

As you can imagine, I find your sensitivity to Hagar particularly disturbing. You portray her having a special relationship with my husband. That was my biggest fear. And to this day, I am still afraid of their meeting again. But, you suggest that he gave her gifts. I don't think so. At least none of which I am aware, though I haven't yet had the strength to verify your conjecture.

As I express this all to you, I now see what it is that you do in this Humash Leider of yours. You change all of us around. Those of us who are silent, weak, and powerless in the Humash,

very nice!

in your Humash Leider become verbal, strong, and powerful. Just as you gave me a voice, so too have you given Hagar a voice. In both this poem and in "Hagar Leaves Abraham's House" you try to understand what she might have been feeling as she left our house, as she left my husband, the man with whom she had a child, and a man who she quite possibly loves.

You mention the intimacy she shares with her mother.

"Dear mother, tell me, does he feel My heart's defeated pain?" I never heard her mention her mother. I can only imagine this sharing of feelings of unrequited love between mother and daughter is something that goes on in this Eastern European society of yours. I don't know how open you are with feelings in your society, but apparently it is more open than we are.

By transposing our story (mine, Abraham's, and Hagar's) onto Eastern Europe, you not only place us in your social situation, but also in your political situation, and in your state of theological questioning. The mass destruction of world Jewry is something not part of our time period at all. The question of faith in God which is assumed in our story is questioned in your retelling. "The smoke of the chimney, the smoke of a train.... God knows where we shall run to, Myself and his bastard child, Unless in some alien kitchen We are allowed to hide." ("Hagar's Last Night In Abraham's House").

And once again you express the irony of belief in God which we hold dear to our hearts, and of which we cannot make light. "She takes the earth and heaven To be her witnesses: This is the way of the Fathers With their long and reverend beards." ("Hagar

not intended by Minger who wrote this poem before the Holocaust

Leaves Abraham's House") That Hagar is running away from an enemy is understandable. That that enemy is compared to Hitler is especially difficult for me to bear, since my husband and I are the enemies from whom she runs. I have read about Hitler. Don't you think the analogy is a bit harsh? *But where did you get this from in the first place?*

I can't imagine what it is like to live during such a difficult political and social time period. The hardest thing I had to live through is the fact that my husband almost sacrificed our son, Yitzhak, to God. And that was hard enough. I see that you recognized this. In your poem, "Abraham Takes Isaac To The Sacrifice," you mention my voice. In the Humash my voice is all too absent.

I find it interesting that here and in several other places, your voice as narrator clearly emerges. You transcend your Humash Leider. God doesn't even transcend the Humash. God is part of the story. God can't step outside the story and transcend it.

But in your moment of transcendence you do something very interesting. You comment on the book which contains our story: "'Sad and lovely,' the poet says, 'Are the roads of the Holy Book.'" You do respect your ancestors. You do admire us. And yet, at the same time, you recognize the difficulties we experience in our daily lives. In order to understand yourselves in Eastern Europe, you have transposed our personages into your time period. I guess I admire that, and in a way am jealous of it. You are lucky to have a previous point in time to which to return to gain in self understanding. I don't, that is if we

Indeed!

understand the Humash to be one time period.

The earliest time period to which I could return would be creation itself, or the story of Adam and Eve. Speaking of which, I very much enjoyed your Humash Leider on "Eve and the Apple Tree," though I must admit once again that I found it somewhat disturbing. You have created a new story. This time you have even altered the characters. You remove the snake from the story. And you convert the tree of knowledge, of good and evil, into a tree of death.

But, even more than that, you have altered the story. In keeping with your conversion of the weak character into the powerful character, you place Eve, the weak woman, into a much more powerful role. Eve, urged on by the Tree, in your Humash Leider, plucks an apple (which she seems to pick more out of love for the tree than out of temptation by the tree), and does not eat it, yet merely dances around with apple in hand. (By the way, where did you get the idea it was an apple?) On the one hand it is quite charming how innocence still lives in this Eden of your creation.

✓ But what kind of innocence is it? Eve, though not having eaten of the tree, becomes in a certain way omnipotent. It is she who gives the tree life, who in essence becomes the tree's soul. "Lovely apple tree, don't weep, I am your melody. And know your word is stronger far Than the Word that's warning me," she says to the tree. Her love for the tree ends up surpassing her love for God. She hugs the tree. She becomes one with the tree.

In your Humash Leider, the tree has become an idolatrous symbol, a needed physical representation of a God whose presence in the garden is nowhere to be found. How ironic this new Eden of yours has become, and even more so at its conclusion. Your story ends with the words, "Then Eve enfolds the apple tree, She clasps it in her arms, While far above the pious stars Tremble with alarm." In your Humash Leider, it is God who ultimately fears humans rather than humans who fear God. I can only imagine that this questioning of faith and this wonder about God is indicative of your political and social situation in Eastern Europe.

They are interesting, these reversals of yours, these incongruities. I can't claim to understand all you are doing. But I must say I find your work intriguing. And, I imagine there is something to be said for incorporating our story (your history) into your life in order to live it. For how else is it possible to fully understand? I realize that this is what also happened in the rabbinic period, in the use of midrash. I'm sure you've heard of it, for it is the process in which you yourself are engaged. Persons in each time period have to recreate the stories of old to be able to make them live anew.

My dear Yizhak, I don't have time to comment on as much of your Humash Leider as I would like. But, before I go to make dinner for Abraham, I did want to express my dismay at the way you handled my grandchildren in your poem, "Jacob buys the Birthrite from Esav." You must know that a grandmother is always protective of her grandchildren. I am sure it works the same

way in your society as well. Some things never change. But you paint my dear little Jacob with such an inner sense of trickery and sneakiness, I am afraid you do not do him justice. Don't forget his mother was the one who put him up to the whole birthrite exchange. And, my grandson Esav, you make him appear like a buffon, asking for Hamentashen for the holiday of Purim, which we don't yet celebrate. And the drunkenness of their whole encounter is disgraceful. My grandsons are upstanding youths.

However the words that I find most disturbing are the words you put into Esav's mouth, "Maybe Jacob wants to trick me, this small Jewish crook?" They do fight, my grandchildren, as any siblings do. But, they do not use such derogatory language. Perhaps in your time, a time of anti-semitism, these stereotypes exist.... But, must you place these derogatory characteristics upon us in order to better understand yourselves? Perhaps there is some other way to go about all this?

I must finish. Abraham just came in to find me. Seeing that I was still writing, he asked if he could read this letter, but I would not let him. Though initially he took offense, when I reminded him of the time that he went off to sacrifice our son, Yitzhak, without telling me where he was going and what he was doing, he understood. "There are some things that are personal, my dear husband," I added. "And Abraham smiled and was silent."

With affection,

Sarah

Wonderful! May I have a copy for my files?

(A)