

PAYBACK

Twelve New Stories by Elisha Porat * Coming in August, 2002 * <http://www.windriverpress.com>

THE LOST SON

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY ALAN SACKS

1.

One day on my way to Jerusalem, three years after the Yom Kippur War, I dropped by the newspaper in Tel Aviv and invited myself into the literary editor's office. The editor, who knew me from my prior advertising in his section, warmly welcomed me with a cup of coffee and his usual, well-worn protests about the changing times. "What's to become of Hebrew literature?" he asked with genuine distress. "Who's going to create it the way the founders did? How many true lovers of literature do we have today?" Leaning back in my chair, I sighed deeply in agreement. Through the large window behind him, I saw new skyscrapers capped by crenelated roofs. The entire right bank of Nahal Ayalon was in a frenzy of construction. How did this beehive of activity concern my

conversation with the literary editor?

"It's precisely because of lovers of literature like my father that I've come to see you," I said. From my brief case, I pulled several pages and spread them on his desk. I told him that this week had marked the tenth anniversary of my father's death and how I still missed him. "You have nothing to complain about," he said to my surprise. "You're a lucky man if you can say that. I don't even know where my father's buried. Our village in Latvia was destroyed during the war." His emotions momentarily overcame him. "Relatives in America tell me that they've visited the town and nothing's left of the Jewish cemetery," the editor went on. He paused again. "Well, well, this isn't why you're here. Let's get back to business.

We went over the pages I'd brought. I showed him the selections I had made from my father's writings and articles about him. I recall bringing a short list of landmark dates including his late immigration to Israel and his untimely death. I also had taxed my meager strength preparing an amateur bibliography of all his published works. It listed the books he had translated for others, the engaging articles on local events published in our kibbutz journal and several pieces of his that had appeared in the newspaper Davar. I told the editor that my father all his life had sought to evade writing. I told him, as my mother had told me, that the leaders of the MAPAI party had requested that he join Davar's staff but that he had put them off indefinitely, dodging them and sidestepping the heavy yoke they meant to lay on him, until he finally gave in. He loved working in the vineyards more than anything else, my mother had said, but I told the editor I didn't know whether it was so much that he enjoyed farm work as that he hated to write. For he considered writing a perpetuation of the diaspora, which embodied the worst of everything. What I do know is that he was destined for another life, a life of the intellect, an unceasing life of writing books.

We sat at the editorial offices for several hours. In the end, we chose several articles and a short story, a memoir of his childhood written in memory of his parents. Actually, he wrote it in honor of his mother, the exact



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circumstances of whose death he'd never known. Had she been strangled to death while fleeing through the forest with her young daughter and son-in-law, frantically hoping to reach the Russian border ahead of the Germans? Had she suddenly died during the days of privation as they wandered through the forest? Or perhaps she'd returned alone to the city bearing the body of her young granddaughter. Had both of them been buried nearby in the Jewish cemetery when Jews still received burial there?

The editor excitedly read the childhood memoir. I even saw tears in the corner of his eye. "If he weren't quite so terse," he said, "he could write an excellent short story. What a succinct style he had, what a marvelous instinct for hitting the important points." I agreed entirely. Dad's articles in the kibbutz journal in fact had served as rich mines to be worked into brilliant short stories. What a shame he hadn't turned back to finish his writing.

When we were done, we rose and the editor invited me for a light lunch in the editorial commissary at his expense. I thanked him but I couldn't stay. I was en route to Jerusalem where I had pressing business. As we shook hands on parting, he said, "Don't worry, we'll bring out the retrospective on your father next week. Even from a distance, I admired your father's writing. I'd also heard about the quality of his translations. A pity he didn't write more of his own work." Before descending the steps, I heard him calling the archives for a fitting photo of my late father. I'd utterly forgotten to bring any pictures and I didn't care for the photos in the memorial book. Well, it was fortunate that the newspaper kept photos on file. And as I galloped down the stairs to the street, I thought: I really must make some free time to find out once and for all how my grandmother died.

After finishing my business in Tel Aviv, I hopped on the bus for Jerusalem. It was already early winter and Jerusalem was cold. I enjoyed walking on such days. My dormitory, where I lived in a small room, wasn't very far, I told myself. So I went for a brisk walk from the central bus station through the streets of the new neighborhood near the Israel Museum. From there, from Givat Ram and the national library and the Jewish studies reading room, my life took on an entirely different cast. My father's sudden death, which had hit me hard, for some reason felt less painful there. Perhaps it was due to the distance, perhaps because of the high mountains encircling the city. Or maybe it was because I still hadn't recovered from the long war that had ended three years earlier. Striding briskly in the chilly Jerusalem air, I pondered whether I was another victim of shell shock. Perhaps not the same sort of shell shock that recently had gained attention, but a form of shell shock nonetheless. My case is more chronic and less acute, I told myself. I was grateful that it hadn't silenced my memories.

It was bright and cheerful in the dormitory. The young students were noisy as usual. I went up to my room on the third floor. Just as I was about to go inside, the door facing mine suddenly opened and an elderly man whom I didn't recognize came out. He had fair hair and carried a large, black book bag. For a moment an old pain pierced me, for he resembled my father so much.

"Hello," he said. "So, it's you, my mysterious neighbor. I'm Me'ir. Nice to meet you."

We shook hands. I later realized that he'd gazed at me with curiosity. I'm ashamed to admit it but, whatever the reason, I had no interest in meeting him just then. He was only another of the amiable retirees who had made time for a short year of courses and taken a small room to be near the university halls.

"So, are you in the Jewish studies department? Who are you studying with?" he asked, in no apparent hurry.

"That's a long story," I cut him short. "I can't tell you the whole thing in two seconds."

The long hours of travel had made me quite jittery. All I wanted was to enter my room, shut the door behind me, take a shower, treat myself to some things I'd bought on the way and get to sleep as early as possible.

"All right," Me'ir said. "I particularly like long stories. You intrigue me. I've asked about you in the dormitory offices. When can we talk?"

I mumbled something, we separated and he went down the dark hallway. Even after closing my door, I heard his steps echoing on the stairs.

2.

Me'ir, however, neither forgot nor let things slide. Several days later, he accosted me in the dorm cafeteria. I realized then that he was well-known, perhaps even famous, for the kibbutz classes on Judaism he taught up north. The students, who seemed to know him well, behaved respectfully towards him. What sort of dilettante pensioner was this? I wondered. My short fuse again had led me into error. The kitchen staff pampered him, serving him double portions of whatever he liked. What had become of that discerning eye on which I prided myself? I thought of him as a visitor, and I a student on scholarship, for he was only a guest while I in my dorm room was no stranger here. I was angry with myself over my impatience. A sense of inferiority still not easily overcome. There was, indeed, no basis for my vanity, which more than once had led me astray. I felt perplexed, sensing that things weren't working out as anticipated. As usual, I had overlooked both the real truth and the most interesting people.

"Say," said Me'ir, "let's continue what we started. What's a middle-aged Jew like you doing here? Don't tell me you're a full-time student."

I told him how difficult it had been for me coming home from the war. Although I said nothing of chronic shell shock, I think he knew exactly what I meant. I also told him about my meeting with the literary editor in Tel Aviv, the retrospective on my father the newspaper had published and, of a sudden, my feeling that I was now in the crisis of my life. If I returned to the fields and crops, I'd sink into them forever. I'd realized during the war that I had to do something different with the rest of my life.

"Don't talk like that," Me'ir interjected. "You're still a young man."

Writing gives me no satisfaction, I said. In fact, everything I'd published thus far had been merely a beginner's experiments, the scribbling of a novice. But if I didn't make time for writing now, I'd be lost. I told him about my late father; although he'd honed his short articles to a keen edge, the cognoscenti knew that these were only fine pearls rolling off the desk of someone who had given up on writing. Me'ir listened to me, I recall, as no one had listened to me for years. His wise eyes fixed on me, he said nothing as I sat there at the table in the dormitory dining hall. Under his encouraging gaze, I rambled quite a bit that dinner.

"You're soup's getting cold, gentlemen," I suddenly heard the cook's good-natured voice. "Let me get you fresh bowls." I abruptly came out of my unexpected reverie. Oh yes, I'd spoken far more than I should have. I went back to my warm dinner. Me'ir still sat there looking pensive.

"Yes, that was a terrible war," he said, sighing deeply. Over his face darted a shadow so gloomy that I stabbed myself with the soup spoon. Turning from me at last, Me'ir resumed his dinner. We ate in silence. The racket raised by the young students around us bounced off the bubble enveloping us. From time to time, students would approach Me'ir to ask his advice which, to their thanks, he expertly gave in but a few short words. As I began to listen to his comments, I realized that this old fellow interested me. When he again turned to the table, I saw from the corner of my eye that his face was shrouded in some dark veil while his eyes conveyed an expression that I can describe only as "unhinged."

We met the next day on the grounds outside the building. It was a brisk, early winter morning. Me'ir asked where I was going. "To the library, as usual," I replied. "The Jewish studies reading room." As if I had anyplace else to go. With Me'ir at my side, I took the short cut, a steep eastern path. When we arrived at the copse of large pines, breathing hard, we stopped to catch our breath. Me'ir leaned against the trunk of a broad pine. He had something to tell me, he said, and wanted to say it now. Actually, he'd meant to tell me after dinner the night before, but, too distracted by the clamor of the students, hadn't found the words and the moment had passed. He'd considered knocking on my door but had dropped the idea because the hour was late and he hadn't felt he could bother me. It simply wasn't right, he'd thought, to enter a room and start a personal conversation with someone he'd just met. He

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inhaled, steadying his breathing.

"I lost," he started, then stopped. After a pause he went on, "We lost our son three years ago at the end of the Yom Kippur War." I was too startled to know what to do. After all, he was nearly old enough to be my father.

"It was important to me to tell you that," Me'ir added. "And I wanted it said straight out."

I said nothing. I felt uneasy. Should I console him? Put my arm around him? Perhaps mutter something and clasp his hand? I froze, mutely rooted to my spot. It was such a surprise.

"He was a top helicopter pilot," Me'ir continued. "He went down in the Great Bitter Lake, you know, at the Suez Canal."

I was still too flabbergasted to say anything. Unconsciously, I picked up some pine needles and started kneaded them.

"This month makes exactly three years," he went on. I took a good look at him. I couldn't tear my gaze from his eyes. That great shadow, a pall of profound grief whose source I couldn't guess the night before, crossed his face again. "He was a terrific boy," Me'ir said. "I still remember the last time he visited us before the fighting started. I doubt I'll ever forget it." He breathed deeply in the pause that followed. Glancing up at the sunlight glinting through the heavy canopy of pine boughs, he said, "All right, let's go on. I have several appointments today. They're waiting for me at the library."

Now I was ashamed that I'd burdened him with my own troubles in the dormitory dining hall the night before. What a dolt I'd been not to understand the man facing me. How dull must my wits have been, how imperceptive had my battle fatigue made me, that I was unable to discern a grieving father? What had become of my famous sensitivity, where had it suddenly fled?

"Please forgive me, Me'ir," I said as we resumed walking. "I was a real idiot last night." Why had I babbled away at him about my meeting with the editor in Tel Aviv? And what about all those ridiculous things I'd said to him about the "short article genre?" What gall of me to confound him with my waffling after the war over returning to the kibbutz. Who the hell would be interested in all that mindless trivia? This man sitting next to me, who for three years had counted the hours and minutes his son had been gone? Why, during a department social at the restored home of one of my colleagues just a few weeks ago, I'd boasted that I can't be fooled, no one can put anything past me.

We went the rest of the way in silence. He kept switching his big, heavy book bag from shoulder to shoulder. "Can I help?" I asked. But he silently refused. When the dirt path ended and merged into a narrow concrete lane, we stopped again for a short rest. From here, we now could see the library's roof and large glass windows. We entered the coatroom together but he no longer had time for talk. Keeping only a handful of books, he deposited the large bag and his jacket in the cloakroom. "We'll meet in the dorm," he said before leaving. "Maybe tonight, maybe next week."

I was upset. What awaited me at my table in the reading room? A discourse by the Rambam, which I'd begun to study with one of the teachers, or an anthology of prayer and poetics I was studying on my own? Or dozens of dark volumes from the defunct journal Gilyonot, which I'd inexplicably remembered during my first leave after the war. That had been about three years ago, and still I'll never forget the pain that jolted me when I saw the bare legs of the Scandinavian girls who had volunteered to pick early ripening grapefruit. The agonizing realization that life went on here on the ground; that life must go on; that the world, the little of it visible to me riding back on that first pass and the portion I might never see, keeps on moving, keeps on living, keeps on flowing, continues to exist, cut through me like a sharp knife. What shell shock victim's false pride did I harbor to think even for a moment that the world would stop and fall silent? Why should it? Simply because of my damned war?

I went down to the cafeteria and ordered a light breakfast with coffee. The tables around me hummed with the congenial, soothing drone of quiet conversation. Real life sometimes broke in, as when a young, lost soldier, who had

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wrested time for an arduous day of registration, appeared at the door. I thought of Me'ir taking courses so late in life. I thought of his dead son and the tangible life abruptly torn from him and the proxy life in memory that he was just beginning. I thought of the comrades I'd left on the smoking basalt hills of the Golan Heights. I thought of the young, wounded men I'd evacuated from the battalion aid stations. I thought of the war's cruel arbitrariness and the torture it still inflicts on those who cannot forget. Particularly at such times, as in the cafeteria that morning, I promised myself I'd never forget. I'll never madly rush back into my previous life. I'll never shut out the memories. Quite the contrary, I'll find some way never to surrender to forgetting. To anyone who agrees to listen until he's so bored and exasperated he plugs his ears, I'll tell again and again what happened one night three years ago at the Great Bitter Lake or on the basalt hills. I finished my coffee and left.

3.

I started writing several memorial poems that winter in Jerusalem. They were crude beginner's works, suffused with sentiment. Me'ir asked me several times what I intended to do after my courses. I didn't know what to say. I was afraid I wouldn't know what to do. I feared confusion and silence and the need to go back to my earlier life. Here, in Jerusalem, in my dormitory and at the library, I could submerge my sorrow in a host of words, books, illuminating exchanges and dazzling lecturers. But when all this ended, what then? I didn't know what to say to him. He tried to convince me to be more practical. I'd given enough of myself to my chronic shell shock. Now I needed to plunge back into ordinary life, absorb the blows, heal my wounds, bury the gruesome memories. He strove to draw me into teaching Jewish studies for only in this, he felt sure, would we find balm for our scars.

"What a queer bird you are," he said to me one time on our way back to the dorm from the library. "A mixed-up boy from a Hashomer Hatzair kibbutz, pushing forty, finally comes to Jerusalem to study Judaism. And what interests him the most? Sitting down at night to write memorial poems. For what? Isn't it time to grow up?"

But I wasn't convinced. True, my studies were fascinating and exerted a seductive, powerful attraction. More than once, I felt that this was my last opportunity not only to change careers but to start a new life, if one can put it that way, to recognize that all my life until then had been squandered. Perhaps my severe case of shell shock had been to my benefit, for now I could no longer go on hiding. I had to decide. I had to reveal what I was, if not to the world then at least to myself. But the obligation to teach others, to hold their interest and follow their progress—that wasn't for me. It scared me, actually. Was I to give myself entirely to others again? When was I look after myself? No, I wasn't born to be a teacher, no matter how much I enjoyed leading hikes and giving talks on "the heritage of combat" and touring remote sites with young enthusiasts. No, teaching as a profession for the rest of my life, I couldn't take that.

Me'ir, however, wouldn't give in. "It's people like you, who have grown stronger from their crises in war, who must step up to teach Jewish studies," he badgered me.

A heavy snow fell that winter in Jerusalem. All the roads were impassable and it was hard going even on foot. Shut up in our dorm, we waited for the weather to improve. Our building, with the heat at full blast, was warm and cozy. We felt nothing of the bitter cold outside and could even shed our heavy coats to walk the hallways in open shirts. I invited Me'ir to join me in my room for a cup of the fine tea I'd brought from home. As usual, he showed me the latest book on Judaism. "Anything you can imagine is in these books," he said. We sat at the little table, drinking tea and gorging on the small cookies my wife had baked before I returned to Jerusalem. Despite the frigid draft blowing through the window seams, I opened the shutter and pulled aside the curtains. The view of the city blanketed in snow was spellbinding.

"We had a snow like this that winter during the war," I said to Me'ir. "Some mornings, we couldn't find our huts in the snow." A friend in my platoon, an artist, had been stirred by the melting snow. "Take a look," he'd said. "The

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snow is exposing the fox holes and the old gear, even the corpses. It's like a bandage has been removed." On the slopes of the basalt hills, and in the trenches of the Syrian fortifications, we saw terrible things, like open wounds from which the healing dressings had been stripped.

From his seat, Me'ir stared entranced at the coat of snow deposited on Jerusalem. "For you, the snow brings back memories of the basalt on the Golan Heights. It reminds me of the best days of my life." Some years earlier, he told me, a heavy snow had fallen on the city while he served full-time on a Jewish education committee. By chance, all his family had been in his small apartment—his wife, his older daughter and his young son, the lost son. He'd been only a lad then, a promising pilot trainee there with his girlfriend. While the city was at a stand-still for two days, the entire family was stuck in the apartment. They had felt themselves back in their modest home on the kibbutz, warm, pleasant days unlike any they'd ever enjoyed together. Tearing his gaze from the window, Me'ir pressed his palms to his face. So he sat several seconds, his head bent into his hands. Only the howling of the wind seeping through the cracks broke the silence in my apartment. "We were happy then," he said, raising his head. "We were so happy, maybe we made someone angry."

My courses in Jerusalem lasted only a short time. I went home and rarely saw Me'ir after that. From friends I heard that he had done well in finishing the degree he'd begun more than thirty years earlier at the outbreak of the War of Independence. Later, I saw newspaper announcements of books he'd published through a reputable house. Occasionally, I also saw short interviews of him and once even heard his familiar voice on a television broadcast. I didn't transform my life the way I'd dreamed. I went back to hard farming on the kibbutz while my shell shock continued to plague me at night. When the haunting memories threatened to overwhelm me en masse, I would imagine the copse of broad pines and the steep path we climbed to the library. "Don't feel sorry for yourself," I chided myself. "Others paid a far greater price." I heard Me'ir catching his breath and saying, "I lost...," then stopping, peering above the pine tree and going on, "We lost our son three years ago at the end of the Yom Kippur War."

Then, when I could no longer restrain myself, my memorial poems burst from me with a will of their own. Sights that had assailed me for years leapt from my eyes. Sounds that long had tormented me poured from my ears. The groans and cries I couldn't forget, and that threatened to crush my spirit, surged to the paper on my desk. As much as I sought to be unlike my father, I failed. I found myself doing almost the same things he had done. Like him, secretly fuming, I would shove my papers, of no use to anyone, into the wooden trunk to molder and yellow. Just as he had, I too developed a rare talent for the superfluous and transitory. I rebuked myself for choosing this life. I was angry with my father for letting his life take this path. And I was angry with Me'ir, who correctly had pushed me to "change lives" at the right moment, when my post-war crisis came to a head. But even Me'ir failed to make a Jewish studies teacher of me. Even he couldn't persuade me to join the small, select band that gathered around him at the institute where he taught.

Among the memorial poems I wrote was one I called, "The Lost Son." This was a poem so unlike any other that I truly don't know how it took seed, sprouted and bloomed. I was unconscious when I wrote it. The instant I finished, I saw that it had a life of its own. It didn't belong to any earlier poem and had no connection to any that followed. It wasn't even written in Hebrew but rather in an ancient Canaanite, semitic language. I labored over it for months, copying it from the page to the computer and then back. Something in it, like a naughty child disobeying his father, struck me as off-key. Finally, one autumn night when the wind died in the pine boughs outside, I suddenly seized its inner melody. It was the voice of Me'ir's dead son in the Great Bitter Lake at the end of the Yom Kippur War. And it was the sound of Me'ir in Jerusalem, gasping beneath the pines outside the library on Givat Ram.

With trepidation, I sent the poem to Me'ir. I had no idea what he would think of it so many years later. In the margin of the page, I wrote that if I published the poem, I would dedicate it to him in memory of our days together at school and of his lost son. I did publish the poem, in one of the newspaper literary supplements. From the spotty

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response I received that weekend, I realized that the strange Canaanite language I'd used had touched my readers' hearts. Then, one evening, he called me. I was so thrilled, my wife began to worry about me. In my excitement, I failed to grasp what he was saying but I detected in his voice the same melody I'd heard when he stopped to recover at the end of the path. When I finally calmed down and could answer him, he told me that he was mounting the poem in a glass frame to hang above the desk in his office. Now he had done what was necessary to revive the memory of his son, whose photos adorned the corners of his desk. Whenever he looked up and read the lines of the poem, he felt his dead son talking with him again across the span of years.

Several times I wanted to tell him exactly what had happened, that is, when I went up the steps to the newspaper's editorial offices on the tenth anniversary of my father's death, three years after the ghastly '73 war. I wanted to ask the literary editor to put out a special page devoted to my late father. I couldn't imagine that the memorial poems were already gathering, lurking beyond my thoughts. Nor could I imagine that they one day would erupt from me in a powerful, all-engulfing flood. That one of them would be written not in Hebrew but in an ancient forgotten tongue, the sum of all the voices I'd heard—of bereaved fathers wailing their grief into the wind among the pines and of sons lost forever, sunk within the bitter lakes of memory—never occurred to me. But I never managed to tell him how all this had happened. And so I tell that story now.