

DEATH IN SINAI, LIFE IN YEZ'RE'EL

A fiction based on an historical fact

Israel.

Sipho Ngubane and his wife Bongile Ngakane wanted us to go to Israel together. We were all going to Oxford on scholarships and a Christian charity would pay for the two Africans to stay for a year to help teach Christian Arabs English on our way to England. In 1958 I was a 22 year old Jew interested in Zionism. I would be working for Kol Israel, actually its overseas service - Kol Zion Lagolah broadcasting the Israeli/Zionist news to South Africa every evening in English.

Sipho, Bongile and I were contemporaries at Witwatersrand University from 1954-1957. Before the Afrikaner Nationalist government banned Africans from what would become a "white" university. I have never thought of myself as a white Ashkenazi European. In origin I am an eastern European Jew with some Tatar and Slav genetic characteristics. Tatars and Slavs either intermarried with the Jews in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland over 800 years, or raped Jewish women who, according to Jewish religious law, conveyed their's, the mothers', not child's father's religion to the descendent. Besides there must have been illicit affairs short of rape.

Of course we also thought in terms of colour because in South Africa everybody did. In 1958 white Ashkenazi Jews in Jerusalem, Haifa, Tel Aviv, looked at black Africans in smart flannels or fashionable jeans, white shirts and a pretty blouse - as if they were from another planet, even though the Falashas were being, or would be, "magic carpeted" from Ethiopia to Israel. And then we soon learned about those who were called the Sabras, the "cacti", the native born Israelis, phlegmatic and tough, battle-hardened. Heroes of their liberation struggle.

Israel worried all three of us. Was Israel "colonised"? How could Theodor Herzl describe it as "a land without a people and [the Jews as] a people without a land" as if Arab Palestinians didn't exist as the indigenous people of the land: - after all they, as well as the original pre-Zionist Sephardi Jews originally from post-1492 Spain and some longstanding non-Zionist Oriental Jews (Mizrachim) were all part of the am ha'aretz, the people of the soil, the earth of Palestine, not in a pejorative sense - meaning uncultured people - a stigmatising label used by urban Jews to refer to Jewish and other peasants who did not speak and understand the Hebrew Bible in a scholarly way - but in a purely factual way: the Palestinian Muslim Arabs had tilled the soil of Palestine for at least 1,400 years. It had been colonised by white Jews - they looked mainly white to us - by Ashkenazi Jews who ran the Zionist organisations, the state and the leading economic and societal institutions, rather than power being in the hands of Sephardi Jews who had been there for hundreds of years, with no ambition for statehood. And then later a new kind of brown Oriental Jews - the evicted Mizrahim, who had been thrown out of the Arab countries in retaliation for the eviction of 700,000 Arab Palestinians after 1947-1948. But these, the Oriental Jews both old original inhabitants and the new wave of refugees spoke Arabic and looked like Arabs. But they, the new Mizrahim weren't indigenous to Palestine. They were Middle Easterners co-opted into Zionism at that time, a Zionism led mainly by white European Ashkenazis.

To the Palestinians identity and sheer loss of land and autonomy were the issues. And religion. Your faith and your actual tenure of the land that fed you, your parents, your children, the generations going back hundreds of years, over a thousand years, perhaps more. But were they actually all Arabs? The Zionist narrative was that they came from Arabia and Egypt. Or they were descended from pagan Canaanites. Perhaps some were Jews who were forcibly converted when Mahomet's armies conquered Palestine in the 7th century C.E.

We went into the Wits University library and read every newspaper available, highbrow, middle-brow, racist (Afrikaner papers like *Die Transvaler*, and *Die Vaderland*,) the *Rand Daily Mail* and the *Star*, the *Jewish Times* and the *Zionist Record* for news about Palestine and Israel.

We knew about the evicted 700,000 Arab Palestinians who became refugees during and after the Arab-Israeli War of Independence of 1947-1948. It was in *New Age* and *Fighting Talk* the propaganda papers of the South African Left. It couldn't all be propaganda because I, Mordechai, doing a Politics honours degree and Siphon doing Psychology and Bongile doing Anthropology came across serious Israeli books and articles about the Israeli war of independence admitting the eviction of the Palestinians. Realpolitik? To us, Africans and a white South African Marxist it was more complex than apartheid. Two cultures, one economically and ideologically more developed than the other. Certainly the Jews were a people without a land of their own. But so were the Kurds. So were millions of African Americans, Native Americans living in reservations, Aboriginal Australians on the very margins of society. Were the Palestinians now the Jews of the Middle East, metaphorically speaking? Besides there were the Palestinians who, quite obviously, since they were prepared to die for their cause, at least felt indigenous. Anyway did the Zionist Ashkenazis have validated genealogies that went back 2000 and more years? No. If they did they would be brown not white.

However to loyal Israeli Jews, however fraudulent their claim to be descended from the original Canaanite Israelite Semites, it seemed as if the other Arab states cared nothing for the Palestinian refugees, except to use them as a source of propaganda and recruits for terror. Or else the surrounding Arab countries would have assimilated the Palestinian refugees as Israel had absorbed an equal number of displaced Jews from Arab countries and more: also the many survivors of the death-camps and the Holocaust – and had welcomed idealistic Zionists from the liberal democracies.

Skilled and educated Jews were, said the Zionists, needed to build up the Jewish state – people who had not been persecuted in the Western democracies. They wanted to show common cause with other Jews sharing an identity. Developmentally, said the white Zionists, the Arabs had little or no culture of democracy, and no culture of liberal rights in the matter of gender equality. The Koran had not been superseded by a Reformation and a Renaissance which could more or less unite Shia and Sunni, bring to an end religious war, through sciences and technologies originally funded by the gold, silver, other minerals looted from central and South America and mined from Africa and Asia! Everyone with money and power had, it seemed to we three, to have dirty hands!

Head-on collision.

Still, as a would-be future academic I tried to take the point of view of the Other. This was the narrative of a Zionism that eventually transcended ethnicity: if you wanted a Jewish state you had to make it not only highly developed but geographically contiguous - thus you had to fight and if necessarily destroy the Arab Palestinian villages which, if allowed to block the roads with snipers -

which had already happened in pre-independence British Mandated Palestine - would make a contiguous Jewish state impossible. You had to practice what later became known as ethnic cleansing - to guarantee the geographical integrity of a Jewish state. That's what the protagonists of colonialism and apartheid or previously segregation did by means of the European empires in Africa. But the Israeli Arabs who, fortuitously weren't in the way of the contiguous Jewish state, had rights: the rule of law, an independent judiciary, votes for the Knesset, even though the majority of the Palestinians were eventually driven out. The fact was here were atrocities on both sides not only in the Zionist War of Independence of 1947-1948, but in pre-war Arab-Jewish conflict.

Was Zionism racism? Clearly not in the old apartheid South African sense. Israeli Arabs had equal rights in theory but not in practice. How could they? Israel actually called itself a Jewish state, the Jewish state! How could it possibly be a democracy and have universal liberal rights and be a Jewish state? We wanted to go and see for ourselves what was to us a conundrum, a contradiction in terms. We - the other two - Siphon and Bongile - also wanted to protect me, Mordechai from my temperament, from myself. I was always fighting, verbally or occasionally physically. I would psyche myself up into a state ready for a fight, usually win, often get badly hurt, then withdraw into misery. I thought I was fighting for a principle. Others found me a nuisance. When I, Mordechai was truly myself, every oppressed minority was part of what I called not-only-Being, not only being-in-the-world but fallen, thrown into adverse facticity. Can you imagine a nice Jewish boy reading, practically knowing Heidegger off by heart?

Post-1933 till 1945 Heidegger was a Nazi Party member. In 1926 when he finished his masterpiece *Being and Time* which transformed Western philosophy, Heidegger dedicated *Sein und Zeit* to his Jewish teacher, Edmund Husserl who vacated his chair at Freiburg University so as to retire and he nominated Heidegger as his successor.

I, Mordechai was obsessed with Heidegger as the philosopher who had transformed philosophy. Heidegger became rector of Freiburg University in 1933. He hailed Hitler as Germany's man of destiny. He only resigned his rectorship when he saw that people like Goebbels had already got the top spot in the Nazi hierarchy of "intellectuals". But he remained a Nazi Party member. He did nothing to stop the university banning Jews from working for the university - for all German and then for all Austrian universities. Heidegger did nothing to stop Husserl and his dismissed Jewish colleagues being prohibited from using the Freiburg University library: the Nazis eventually in some places threw out all "Jewish" books - like Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud! And then not only book-burning. The gas-chambers. Not even the Afrikaner nationalists murdered six million Africans, mixed race people, Asians. They moved them about the country. Their police tortured and killed hundreds, perhaps thousands of ANC and PAC and trade union supporters, but not six million.

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To cut a long story short, I, Mordechai, as a Jew had the right of return to Israel even though the Ashkenazi Jews from Germany, Poland and Lithuania had lived in Europe for probably 1500 to 2000 years and were not like traditional Israelites. Most - not all of them - looked like white Europeans, or east Europeans or Russians with just a few having dark typically Semitic features. They were mixed race. Or so it seemed to us as South Africans, just looking at them and relating to them intellectually and emotionally. The way they produced intellectuals and creative artists and the professionally skilled, and such successful business people...! Was it in the genes, or was it that they had to keep

their real wealth in their minds - in case they, the supposed Christ-killers, the allegedly greedy money-lenders, were thrown out of yet another country in which they were not allowed to own land, or enter certain professions?

The Sephardi Jews like the De Leons who were our liberal friends in Urania Street, Observatory, were thrown out of Spain in 1492 and lived in Holland and England for 450 years before coming to South Africa. They looked like Mediterraneans. Not really "Semitic" - whatever that was. Except for a "Jewish" nose here and there.

We knew enough anthropology, history and archaeology to know that the whole concept of "race" was dubious. And yet Siphon was a brown Zulu with partly San (Bush people's) ancestry and Bongile was a brown Xhosa speaker. And I, Mordechai looked like a Russian or a Slav and his family had lived for 800 years in Lithuania and Poland and before that in Germany from which they were evicted in the 13th century in a wave of pogroms instigated by Dominican friars and townspeople in towns like Speyer and Worms. They were called Pekarsky. Before that probably Becker - "Baker" which became Pekar with a Polish "ski" - "son of" added. Minna Fayga Pekarsky who owned the block of flats in which I lived, was originally Minna Fayga Sachs. She had studied music at the Royal Academy in Euston Road, London. Lewis Pekarsky was a teacher at the Indian High School in Johannesburg before the apartheid regime stopped "whites" from being employed in "black" education!

There were hundreds if not thousands of Jewish, and other English-speaking whites who were radicals in South Africa. Middle class or aspirant Africans' main aims in life were to study, graduate, or just get jobs which would help them and their families and their children be happy, live decent lives despite apartheid. It was only if and when blacks and whites joined the Communist Party and organised political action that they - and potentially we as ANC sympathisers - would be refused passports.

My family felt Jewish, celebrated Jewish festivals like Passover, got married in synagogues, were buried in Jewish cemeteries but as for Palestine, Siphon Ngubane, Bongile Ngakane were and still are Christians. However, we all three felt sympathy for the Palestinians. Siphon and Bongile felt close to the real or imaginary Jesus, as close as the Jews were to the historical or mythical Moses. We felt for the Palestinians because like them, black Africans had been partly or wholly displaced from our native land.

We studied the work of Israeli historians and archaeologists and we learned that actually some of the Palestinians were possibly descended from the original Jews of Judea and ancient Israel and had only converted to Islam when Mahomet's holy war arrived in the 7th century CE.

Bongile and Siphon applied for passports like other South Africans, but they were asked to call for an interview by the Special Branch in their offices in a building called The Greys in downtown Johannesburg. They were seen by a policeman in a safari suit called Sergeant Klaas Van Wyk. He was friendly. They told him they would be funded by scholarships given by a Christian charity and the Institute of Race Relations to go to Israel and work on Kibbutz Mishmar HaYez're'el with me, Mordechai, where we would also be taught Hebrew. But also they would teach English in a school for Christian Arabs in Haifa. I, Mordechai played rugby and cricket very well, got a first class pass in my honours degree in Politics and had won a Rhodes scholarship, which was at that time closed to Africans. All three of us were accepted by Oxford colleges.

Van Wyk warned Sipho and Bongile what they knew already: that if we got involved with the South African Communist Party or radical Palestinians or with the ANC in London and Oxford, our ultimate destinations, we would have our passports withdrawn and we would not be able to return to South Africa. I got my South African passport without any interview. Anyway the Israeli vice-consul in a house in Yeoville gave Bongile and Sipho and me, Mordechai, visas to go to Israel to a kibbutz to learn Hebrew, which would be useful to ardent Christians and for me to become, perhaps a prospective Israeli. I, Mordechai, had the right of return to Israel and the Special Branch didn't bother to interview me although I had been arrested twice before - for acting in a play in Orlando Township without a permit, and for canvassing in Doornfontein a poorer suburb of central Johannesburg on behalf of ANC-sponsored Congress of the People.

The South African Airways plane landed at Lod, Lydda airport. We were whisked through customs and immigration and into a jeep that drove us on a beautiful spring day in March 1958 along roads still littered with the burnt-out hulks of Arab and Israeli tanks and armoured cars, past exquisite olive-groves, date-palms, oleanders, citrus orchards, the majestic hills of Judea on the east side and a vista of rich farmlands and destroyed Arab villages, with only the mosques left standing on the west running down to the Mediterranean sea, into the environs of Haifa and into the valley of Yez're'el - in English Jezreel. And finally to our destination Kibbutz Mishmar HaYez're'el... "Guardian of the Yez're'el" in the Emek.

Exhausted but excited we were greeted by a warm and kind Sephardi woman Zipporah Maimon. Who actually was hidden from the Nazis during the Second World War as a child by Dutch people in Holland – like Anne Frank, but obviously, not betrayed. 450 years ago her family were expelled from Cordova along with all the Spanish (and Portuguese) Jews. We talked in English. She still spoke Ladino - medieval Spanish - and Dutch, and because of her Dutch she could understand our Afrikaans. Not that we needed to use Afrikaans except when we had something confidential to say to each other. Bongile and Sipho spoke Zulu and Xhosa to each other. Depending on who interrupted in the schoolroom, the Ulpan, if their newly acquired Hebrew wasn't up to it, Zipporah would speak her medieval Spanish Ladino to other Sephardim, and could switch to modern Spanish, Italian, French, even Turkish, certainly she could speak Arabic to the Oriental Jews still learning Hebrew, and to Arab builders, bricklayers and carpenters who were busy constructing new quarters and a factory for the chaverim - the comrades.

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Naively I asked Zipporah if the Arabs could become members of the kibbutz. She replied quietly: "No. This is the Jewish state and will remain the Jewish state. "How was it that these Arab Palestinians were still here whilst 700,000 had fled or had been driven out?" We wanted to ask that question but sensed it was a taboo subject. Asking around but through tactful questions and reading further research it soon it was obvious that in the chaos of the Zionist War of Independence of 1947-1948 Arab villages likely to be hostile or strategically placed to threaten a contiguous Jewish state were attacked and their Arab inhabitants driven out. Sometimes it just so happened that a Zionist (Haganah or Palmach) army commander was more aggressive or trigger happy or ideologically inflamed than others and just committed an unnecessary eviction or killed civilians who were unarmed. We assumed that a special relationship must have existed between this particular kibbutz and a nearby Arab village from which the Arab workers must have commuted into work. Or perhaps

their families had fled or moved elsewhere and they were trusted enough to live on the kibbutz itself. We visited their room. There was not the least bit of tension between us Ulpan students and the Arab workers of the kibbutz who were older men and perhaps had learned English in the days of British Mandated Palestine.

Perhaps the kibbutz had been employing Arab workers for years on condition that the Arab villagers did not join the Palestinian militias which had fought and killed members of the Jewish Defence Force. Perhaps that was the reason why the Haganah, later the IDF, did not attack or destroy their village. Such was the atmosphere of psychological repression - implicit and explicit silence around this explosive subject that we did not, could not, explore this question in detail.

We worked half a day doing kibbutz work and half a day learning Hebrew with Zipporah Maimon and the other Ulpan teachers. Our fellow students came from England, Holland, Italy, Spain, Turkey, talking about *onse land* Suid-Afrika. Some of them had been with me as soldiers called up for military service when they were 18 and who were in what was South West Africa (Namibia) and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) both then still under white rule. We all talked Afrikaans for another reason: to remind us of home. So there were what looked to us white Jewish soldiers from South Africa learning modern Hebrew with me and two black South Africans.

The kibbutz authorities gave Bongile and Sipho a double bedroom and me a single room. These were little more than wooden sheds which dated back to the first dwellings they built when they arrived in what was British-Mandated Palestine in the 1930s. The comrades of the kibbutz lived as couples with their children brought up collectively in peer-groups by child-minders and teachers. The *chaverim* - the comrades - now lived in beautiful brick ground-floor flatlets with kitchenettes, private bathrooms and shared gardens where they saw and played with their children as a normal nuclear family on Shabbat, and on festivals which they celebrated as secular holidays. Economic and political decisions and even some family decisions were taken collectively in the common dining hall or in kibbutz sub-committees - such as which teenagers should apply to go to university.

Because the young kibbutz children had never seen many or any Africans - Bongile and Sipho were sources of great wonder. To break the ice they told them San (Bushman) and Zulu and Xhosa folk-stories - *iinstomi* in English. Zipporah and the secretary of the kibbutz and the parents allowed me to record interviews using an English-Hebrew translator - one of the teachers - with the children as anonymous subjects in my political science/psychology research - part of my M.A. dissertation for Wits University. I wanted to compare the attitudes of the children and teenagers who had come from the death camps or at least had survived the Holocaust with, on the other hand, their native born Israeli age-mates - the Sabra'im. They all spoke some English which they learned in primary and high school on the kibbutz which shared its educational facilities with its sister kibbutz זיתים חורשת *Turshat Zai'tim*, Grove of Olives. My hypothesis was that there would be a correlation between ideology and these two background experiences. It all fitted in with the rest of my M.A. on urban and rural South African black children's political consciousness, including a group of African children who were homeless, severely deprived. I gave them all tests of cognitive development. The more secure the background of the children and the better the quality of their education, the higher they scored on Piagetian-type tests of abstract as compared with concrete operational learning.

Bongile wanted to do genealogical or kinship maps to trace back the family connections of the European settlers on the kibbutz compared with the family links of other Jews outside the kibbutz

living in the cities - contactable through municipalities. Her hypotheses were that the Jewish diaspora settlers felt more committed to Zionism in Israel than the Ashkenazi-Sephardi-Oriental Jews outside the kibbutz who were not immigrants. The hypothesis was that settlers would be more militant Zionists than the old Palestinian Jews who may have been in the country since ancient or early modern times. And then, even more controversially she wanted to know if, as had been said by scholars, some Palestinians who survived the Israeli war of independence were actually originally - Jews - who only converted to Islam in the 7th century CE under threat of execution by the armies of Mahomet who had invaded from Arabia. Of course no one could actually know this for sure. But did the Palestinians who were left in what became Israel, actually feel or know from tradition that they descended from Jews converted to Islam in the 7th century CE? Some revisionist historians, seemed to think so. Bongile found only a small minority of Israeli Arabs thought this. Most believed they were descended from what we would call Canaanite tribes, and other Arabs from the middle east and the old Palestine.

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Meanwhile my trouble re-surfaced. I was still the aggressive but vulnerable fighter. I fell for an English girl in the Ulpan - the language school - who was very shy. How do you get to know a very shy person? How would you know if the relationship would lead to a mutual attachment? As for her – perhaps she could see from my changing moods that I was a bit *meshugga*? I did fall into a depression. Then one thing led to another and before we knew what was happening we found ourselves in a crisis.

I, Bongile and Siphon were working in the hay and straw barns. The bales had been bundled up in the fields by the harvester and carted here by a tractor pulling wagon loads driven by a Herculean woman six feet tall and muscular with a weather-beaten originally delicate skin and bleached out red hair, called Shoshana bat Anat - Susan the daughter of Anat. Bongile had already been befriended by Shoshana. In fact Bongile wrote a special chapter on someone I name fictionally as Shoshana bat Anat a sort of anthropological biography relating to kinship, genealogy and ideology in her Master's dissertation. Shoshana was interested in the original pagan Canaanite cultures intermixed with Judaism for which there was archaeological evidence. As a young German-Jewish immigrant to pre-war Palestine she had been an archaeologist. She went on digs with Yigal Allon, the great soldier-archaeologist who had become an icon in Zionist ideology. Shoshana had distinctly dissident views on Zionism and the Palestinians.

We unloaded the hay and straw bales and packed them into the barns with the help of two Bulgarian immigrants, Ephraim and Manasseh, helped by two strong girls from Leeds - Shirley and Sybil - to whom the two young men had taken a fancy. In fact we had formed a chain handing on the bales till they reached the two kibbutzniks who organised the final stacking economically and efficiently. I was all bottled up because of the failure of a relationship with Yehudit Van Der Velde, now English, originally a Dutch Sephardi.

Whilst we were working, Ephraim and Manasseh, trying to impress Shirley and Sybil, told them what happened to them in Sinai in 1956 when Israel, France and Britain attacked President Abdul Nasser's regime in Egypt after he nationalised the Suez Canal. They were part of an armoured column which engaged a small fort on the road between the Negev and Egypt in the Sinai desert. Ephraim and Manasseh had fought during the war against Hitler for partisans in Bulgaria who were protecting the

hiding places the Bulgarians had found for Jews in danger of being transported to the death camps. They had seen war in all its horror. They had actually fought against the SS in military actions in which neither the SS or the Bulgarian and Jewish partisans took prisoners. Millions, tens of millions of Russians and East and West Europeans and British people and anti-Nazi Germans and Jews were killed in a war like no other, ended only finally with destruction or suicide of Hitler and some of the leading Nazis in the bunker in Berlin, the fall of Berlin and the rest of east Germany to the Russians, the Allies occupying the West and finally the atom-bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Ephraim and Manasseh immigrated to Israel from Bulgaria after the war and fought the Arab Palestinian militias and the armies of 5 invading Arab states. They had destroyed scores of Arab villages, encouraged 700,000 Arab civilians to leave Palestine peacefully or be killed in the ensuing conflict.

What did Ephraim and Manasseh do when the fort in Sinai surrendered to their armoured column in 1956 during the Suez or Sinai campaign? With or without orders, they shot the Egyptians in the fort in Sinai, every single one of them, taking no prisoners. I protested: "But these were probably conscripts from the peasant class - perhaps forced into military service. What had the average Egyptian done to the Jewish people to deserve this? The answer came back from Ephraim and Manasseh: "They tolerated a regime which evicted thousands of Jews who had lived in Egypt for a thousand years and longer". "The way you evicted Palestinian Arabs who have been in Israel for a thousand years and longer!" said I my voice trembling with rage. There was silence in the hay-barn.

That night it so happened that Ephraim and Manasseh were on sentry duty till midnight, patrolling the kibbutz with their sub-machine guns, checking that no Arab infiltrators were trying to get through the boundary fences to carry out a suicide assault. The moon was shining on a lovely summer's night which smelt of the sub-tropical flowers we were accustomed to in the hot lowlands of Natal and the exotic roses we admired in the gardens and parks of Johannesburg. At 18 I had been called up for military training by the South African Defence Force. I woke up at midnight and went to the kibbutz cemetery - such was my distress about the Bulgarian murderers.

We had been told about the security arrangements in the kibbutz - not to wander around at night: there was a guard room where a *chaver*, a comrade, was also on duty and in intercom communication with the sentries. On duty was none other than Shoshana, the tractor and harvester-driver. I left the cemetery and told her about my distress concerning Ephraim and Manasseh being, virtually, murderers. She immediately got onto the intercom and called up Ephraim and Manasseh. The two Bulgarian comrades arrived calmly in a few minutes. I told them how disturbed I was by what the two comrades had said in the hay-barn to Shirley and Sybil. Shoshana enquired as to what I was talking about. I told her. She hardly flickered an eye-lid. She had lived through the terrible War of Independence, had actually fought as a front line soldier in the Palmach the shock-troops of the Haganah - one of the few women who had done so. Ephraim and Manasseh did not hang their heads in shame. They stared her out. She unlocked a steel gate and grabbed a sub-machine gun from a rack and a torch, locked the gate again and told one of them to take control of the guard-room and the other to go on patrolling the fence, whilst she and I would go for a walk. She asked me where we should walk. I said: "The cemetery. I like it there. It's so quiet, such wonderful olive and cypress trees and the oleander, also the jasmine." Shoshana sat next to me on a bench with the full moon pouring down. She asked me to tell her what Ephraim and Manasseh had actually said. I told her. She remarked that I too was a trained soldier. I agreed and told her how the sergeant-major of my regiment had brutalised young men, during my training in South West Africa, calling me in

particular “die Jood, die Jood van Rhodes High met ’n eerste klas Matric, baie slim, die Jood wat a goeie musikale ma en ’n baie goeie pa het wie ’n held was in die oorlog, maar hulle is al kafferboeties so onse Boere moet a bietjie soos Hitler wees, omdat hulle moet hulle plek verstaan, en so moet ons gryp hulle in die balletjies om hulle ’n skok kan gee oor die hele vraag: wie sal, wie kan die beste baas wees in hiedie mooi maar God-verdomte land - ons of ’n klomp, mal swart-gatte..” which means...

She knew enough German and Dutch to know what this prelude meant before his pudgy hands which, I recalled, reminded me of oversized pigs’ trotters grabbed my testicles - without him having to translate and convey in terms of pain and the public insult: “the Jew, the Jew from Rhodes High [School] with a first class matriculation, very clever, the Jew who has a good, musical mother and a very good father who was a hero in the war, but they are brothers of the kaffirs so our Boers must become a little like Hitler, because they must know their place, so we have to grab them by the testicles to give them a shock over the whole question of who will, who can be the best boss in this lovely but God-damned country, us or a bunch of mad black shitholes.”

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Shoshana asked me what else I was thinking about. I told her about the time when my father Lewis Pekarsky was reported missing in action during the war in Libya. He and his pilot in their reconnaissance and photographing spy-plane had been attacked by a Luftwaffe fighter, a Messerschmidt, and set on fire. They turned back to get to the Allied lines but their plane was alight and they were in danger of being burnt alive if they didn’t bale out immediately, which they did. “It was agony. We were told he was missing in action. They didn’t tell us officially but we knew that he and his pilot were flying a reconnaissance plane taking photographs of Rommel’s front line and his troop deployment and equipment. They did bale out before they caught fire. They came down in no man’s land. They had a compass, maps, water and food in their kitbags. But the front lines were not clear, not straight. The Africa Korps and the Eighth Army were here, there and everywhere. As “spies” they might be shot not just taken prisoner. It took them days of hiding behind dunes and walking eastward before they found Tuaregs, Bedouins, wadis and villages not on the map, and nearly dead from exhaustion.”

“They survived on their emergency supplies, evaded the Africa Korps and finally found the Eighth Army, the Allies. Death followed them for actually a week. Why did the air force telegram us to the effect that my father Lewis was missing before giving them a chance to get back to their base? Why did they inflict terror on us?” Shoshana said: “So now you know what war is like. Not just brutal. Chaotic.” Me, Mordechai: “I want to report this to the Israel Defence Force! I want the minister of defence to know this! That Israeli Jews murdered surrendered Egyptian conscripts!” My voice was trembling with rage and fear. Shoshana: “And the kibbutz? You want us to be disgraced?” We went on talking till I calmed down.

I had another job coming up before all three of us were due to go to Oxford to go on with our studies in the autumn: we had to finish and send off our written up Master’s dissertations back to Johannesburg. I would ask my boss at the radio station in Jerusalem if I could compile a weekly talk in English about the Zionist heritage, “Becoming a Jew and Becoming an Ethical Human Being.” Of course, but naturally my boss would want to see what I had written.

I cheered up when Yehudit Van Der Velde invited me - and us! - to meet with her parents and stay with them in Great Missenden near London before we went to Oxford. We all three went to Jerusalem when the summer was over. We found a church at Ein Kerem the birthplace of John the Baptist within sight of the Hadassa Hospital. We just sat in the cool, high-roofed, Byzantine church, silent. There was, for the moment, nothing more to say. Being. Being-in-this-world.

Anyway, damn Heidegger. Aristotle and Plato and Maimonides had also understood the mystery of Being. Socrates was executed for asking awkward questions about the "knowledge" that underpinned being. We thought of the millions of our forefathers who projected a sense of being into every stone, mountain, river, tree, savannah, bird and animal of Africa and the Europe into which they penetrated 11,000 years ago.

Yehudit Van Der Velde brought wine, cheese and bread and we all uttered a silent prayer or some sort of secular hope which, by some, of course impossible magic, would reach the widows and fatherless families of Egyptian soldiers who could have been guarded in the fort in Sinai as prisoners of war - if only the Israelis could have spared the troops from what turned out to be an actually fruitless, dangerous invasion inspired by the obsession of Anthony Eden the British P.M. that Nasser was another Hitler.

A Greek Orthodox priest came into the church of John the Baptist in Ein Kerem and we explained ourselves in Hebrew and English. We asked if we could give charity to his parishioners. Christian Arabs. We collected all the money we could spare and gave it to him. Perhaps they came to the church from another part of Jerusalem untouched by the fighting of 1947-1948.

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And then a revelation, an epiphany, an apotheosis! We wandered into the graveyard with the priest and he showed us where Christian Arabs were buried outside the quiet, still, holiness of the church still smelling of incense - and now sage, thyme and lavender from a herb garden outside making us feel that some ghost of history was pressing down the herbs whilst walking in the precinct of the church... There was the sharp, enticing fragrance of cypresses and perhaps cedars of Lebanon and maybe blue-gum trees... But maybe I was smelling a memory of a South African mining timber plantation full of eucalyptus when Bongile and I had been visiting a relative who lived on the Witwatersrand 5000 miles away now in 1957....

The priest shared a little of our picnic meal on benches in the graveyard in the shade of the cypresses. Then Yehudit Van Der Velde brought an old, old, couple of rusty keys on a silver ring, cleaned and burnished up where the plating had not oxidised red. She slipped her right hand into mine as if now, at last, she had overcome her shyness and her anxiety about my uncertain temper, my ideological rages. She lifted up the keys with her left hand and said in Hebrew and then in English: "Do you know my family - who were also called Maimon - are related to Maimonides - and also came from Cordova before we were expelled in 1492? And these were the keys of our house in Cordova - 450 years ago. So that shows you how we felt we belonged in Spain and would go back one day! As if by magic - or God's will, the house and the lock on the front and back doors would be unchanged". The Orthodox priest smiled into his dark brown beard and asked us to come with him.

An old man lived in a cottage in the garden of the priest's house next to the church of John the Baptist in Ein Kerem. The priest asked us to follow him and called an old man in Arabic - his name was, I think, Dawood Darwish and from what happened next we gathered the priest asked him to bring out a basket with a lid with something important in it. He lifted the lid carefully and asked us to look in. To our horror there was a snake coiled up and apparently asleep or dozy resting on a large leather bag bursting with jagged metal objects which had, some of them, cut through the bag. He called the snake "Satan" and calmly lifted it and let it curl around his wrinkled, heavily veined neck and explore his head covered by a *kefia* - the traditional Arab headscarf of light woven wool or cotton protecting the face and skull from the intense heat and the eyes from the blinding light.

He spoke in Arabic to the priest and the priest replied and then the old man, perhaps the caretaker of the church spoke to us in English: "Look!" he opened the bag in the basket and poured its contents on the ground of the path alongside the graveyard. He put his pet snake Satan back in the basket. Out poured scores of household keys and then he gestured to the ruins of the village of Ein Kerem, much of it reduced to stone foundations and stone rubble. "The Arabs of Ein Kerem before they went away in 1948 gave me the keys of their houses which now aren't there anymore! Except for a few. Praised be to Allah they didn't see the bulldozers smash down the doors and the walls and the roofs.. What do you young Jews think? Will they come back and rebuild their houses and find the locks in the rubbish tip over there and install them in new doors? What does Adonai Elohim think about that?" Yehudit showed him her keys and told him the story of the evicted Jews of Cordova. The old Arab man had survived the eviction of the Arabs of Ein Kerem by hiding in the church of John the Baptist. He said to Yehudit in English: "Well, we are the same, you and I children of Allah, the all-merciful. Looking back over history." Why, we asked, whilst we helped him collect the keys of the lost village of Ein Kerem and replaced them in the old man's leather bag, resting drowsily around his neck, why his snake was called Satan? I knew: "In honour of Job, because Satan is the name of the Adversary who tempted Job - as his wife put it - to curse God and die. But Job only lamented his fate and retained his faith in - what? That despite everything Satan took away from him - it would all be returned...?" Like Wittgenstein we passed over what couldn't be said - it was too poignant, too questionable - in silence: if not God, here was what I called - using the terms of the pre-Nazi Heidegger - the very presence of Being, hanging in the fragrance of the autumn air of Ein Kerem.