

A BLACK RABBI IN JO'BURG

A story by Michael Picardie

MEETING HEIDEGGER.

My mother was once a cleaning lady. Before I could walk I clung to her back wrapped in a blanket tied around her waist and throat – yes – even in London whence we fled because the Special Branch were tormenting her and my father. I was an only child, and we were relative nobodies in the ANC.

Thabo Mbeki was the crown prince, ready and waiting to step into the next generation of leaders once Mandela, Thabo's father Govan Mbeki, Walter Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada and the others were released from Robben Island. The on-going negotiations with De Klerk's government were concluded and a new democratic constitution written.

After Mandela, Thabo Mbeki with a M.A in economics from a good British university, and long experience in diplomacy in exile would become the second president of the new, democratic South Africa, after Mandela, already an old man, had served a first and only term in office from 1994-1999.

When he became president, Thabo Mbeki developed a fixed idea. It was on the brink of madness. He maintained to the South African voters and the world at large that condoms and the new proven anti-retroviral drugs were not the essentially valid means of preventing and treating the AIDS epidemic which was killing tens of thousands all over Southern Africa. His minister of health, Dr. Manto Tshabalala-Msimang appeared on the SABC advocating high dosages of beetroot and garlic to build up vitamin C as a way of raising immunity levels. Thabo, being the "crown prince", beloved of his father Govan, his mother Epainette, respected by Tambo and Mandela, was chosen by the elite to follow Mandela, a man of great moral stature. The common people, millions of them, ignorant of medical science believed Mbeki's AIDS propaganda, believed a lie.

The syndrome, he said, was one of low immunity *caused* by neo-colonial poverty, created by poor material conditions – malnutrition, endemic infectious disease - brought about due to deprivation and consequent upon white supremacy. Good African nationalist Marxist stuff. The people swallowed it. It was a half-truth dressed up as absolute science. Tens of thousands of poor people died of AIDS related illnesses for want of anti-retroviral drugs *which were banned from all government health clinics and hospitals by Presidential dictat* Yes, some died sooner than others because they were malnourished and ill but the independent variable was contraction of the HIV/AIDS virus usually genitally through unprotected sex or *in utero* from the infected mother to the new-born child.

Mbeki knew very well that well-nourished white and black people, often gay men contracted and transmitted the disease through unprotected sex, by means of a virus. He was, in effect, guilty of mass manslaughter. In his defence, he said he was merely attacking a white ideological *paradigm!* As if the HIV virus gave a damn as to what paradigm was being tossed around the political arena! No doubt the prophylactic anti-HIV drugs would stand a greater chance of defeating the AIDS

syndrome if the patient was paradigmatically healthy and reliable in taking the medication at the right time and in time. In accordance with the paradigm of the reliable patient as object of medical science. Yes medical science was indeed a facilitating technology invented in laboratories financed by and profiting largely white, wealthy shareholders. But Mbeki didn't say that. He said the paradigm of "white" medical science was at fault in not taking into account as to why poor African patients had such difficulty in taking drugs correctly, attending clinics regularly. But that is no reason to ban the life-saving drug, no reason to stop trying to motivate the poor African patient to adhere to a life-saving regime of treatment.

Here was George Orwell's politically correct NEWSpeak. People had to die – in effect be sent to a Gulag – rather than contradict the party line. Mbeki and his generation of the ANC elite were trained by Soviet intelligence officers in the USSR and East Germany, the GDR. Members of the cabinet were forbidden to mention the issue in public. Health workers, hundreds of thousands of them, had to shut up about the whole issue of AIDS and the banning of the anti-retroviral drugs. If it hadn't been for the counter-actions of the Treatment Action Campaign, Mbeki would have been allowed to go on bringing the good name of the New South Africa into international disrepute.

The third president Jacob Zuma accepted billions in bribes and illegally acquired state funds to build a virtual fiefdom in Zululand. And the democratically elected parliament could not get rid of him because he already had an iron Zulu-tribal grip on the ANC.

So, this was the New South Africa for which tens of thousands were tortured, imprisoned, exiled, suffered and died in the course of the liberation struggle.

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Some of the week I commute to Hillbrow. Hillbrow is almost my nemesis. It is on the brow of the hill overlooking Jo'burg city centre. From Hillbrow you get to town via Claim Street or Hospital Hill or Twist Street. It's only lung is Joubert Park. There is Doornfontein to the east, the City Deep mine to the south, Kensington further east and Fordsburg to the west. Sandton, Saxonwold, Lower Houghton, Parktown, Parkwood, the affluent formerly white suburbs lie to the north. 10 to 20 miles away on the periphery of the Witwatersrand - Krugersdorp in the west and Springs and Brakpan and Boksburg to the east - are the largely black, Coloured and Asian townships out of which hundreds of thousands of previously ghettoised subjects of apartheid have spilled back into the previously glamorous, bohemian apartment blocks of Hillbrow, now partly a slum where the very poor live side by side with criminals and the beginnings of a black middle class and a respectable working class.

In the next-door flat here in Hillbrow where I have a *pied-a-terre* in Kirstenbosch Heights, one of the few apartment blocks still in private ownership which hasn't been vandalised, burned out and abandoned as beyond repair, my neighbour has become my friend. A brass plate advertises her in the lobby as "Nono Ndebele B.A. Honours (Psychology), Diploma in Psychiatric Social Work (Witwatersrand) Sex-Therapy and Counselling."

Rabbis are not supposed to have sex-lives, but my congregation certainly do. These are some of the people whom I feel I cannot handle who come to me with their problems and whom Nono helps:

The frankly deluded: one paranoid husband who was convinced his wife was being unfaithful. He had her followed. What Nono did was to ask him about his own infidelities. It turned out that he was replicating a childhood situation involving his own parents' marital problems and infidelity. She made him laugh. Becky Cohen comes home to find her husband in bed with her best friend. "Me", she said, "I have to. But you....?"

The depressed: an Afrikaans woman converted to Judaism. Till then she lived a quiet life in the Southern Suburbs with her Christian husband, a miner who was in despair about her sexual dysfunction, but thankfully didn't need to resort to threats and violence. He put his faith in the conventional Christ. She, in talking to Nono, discovered that she was really a lesbian. Men had become for her, sexually, if not emotionally, actually redundant. Nono put her in touch with a lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and trans-gender group in the northern suburbs. The impact on her hither-to conventional family life needed all Nono's social work skills. Mr Van V. appeared in Kirstenbosch Heights and a psychiatric crisis seemed imminent. A compromise was worked out. Modernity had hit the Afrikaners and it was not necessarily defined as wickedness.

The obsessional-compulsive fetishists. A Jewish man, a lonely bachelor, offered to scrub Nono in the bath, to bathe with her and be similarly cleansed. He then offered to do her weekly wash entailing numerous sheets, pillow-slips, duvet covers, night-wear and underwear. His family history involved being sucked into a highly religious, puritanical parental relationship. For his parents, cleanliness was next to Godliness. Nono helped him regress to the anal stage where he vividly remembered being seductively washed as a toddler by a mother who appeared to him in dreams to be an angel stroking him clean with detergent soaked wings.

And so on. A young man, part of a now affluent previously refugee family from Zimbabwe many of whose family were murdered in the early 1980s by Robert Mugabe in charge of the North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade, villagers actually descended from the royal house of the amaNdebele, in the middle of a degree at Witwatersrand University in anthropology and African languages, became intrigued by the old praise-songs of Mzilikazi and Lobengula. The spirits of the ancestors descended upon him and chose him as a kind of messiah who was to lead an apocalyptic spiritual war against Robert Gabriel Mugabe who had by means of the Fifth Brigade trained by North Korean officers in methods of dehumanisation and genocide in the 1980s murdered or caused the flight of 20,000 amaNdebele.: "He, the Shona snake-monster, will be decapitated and cut into sections as the Medusa is from the Gorgon. He who will be fed to the crocodiles of the Limpopo and the lions of the Zambezi." When his otherwise poetic discourse broke up into Greek, Hebrew and numerous African myth-systems, Nono coaxed him into letting his parents get him admitted to a private hospital where he calmed down under the influence of a sympathetic psychiatrist and anti-psychotic drugs. I wouldn't call him schizophrenic, more a spirit-medium who has no context of African religion within which to operate. I have taken him under my wing and showed him how through yoga and Kabbalah he can internalise the emanations of Adam Kadmon, the original mythical man made *b'tselem*, in the image of God.

The Chief Rabbi of the orthodox Jews a young man called Goldberg, even our own Liberal/Progressive rabbis are averse to the Hindu element which is "idolatrous" in my syncretic yoga-Kabbalah. This is why Alethia my wife hates all religions. But what are we to do, pushed by

the aggressive atheism of godless universes of discourse, if not retreat into the God of the philosophers?

I have given up looking for a nice, middle-class, largely white, congregation in Jo'burg, Pretoria, Durban, Port Elizabeth, East London or Cape Town to recover my faith in human nature - to let the Eternal enter the psyche of rabbi and synagogue-goer alike. Human nature is not nice, middle-class, largely white. Somehow the poor, white, mixed race, and African Jews at Beit Israel, decent people, already know that Marx was right when he said religion was the heart of a heartless world. I have to restrain my ethical atheism. One creates God, rather than the other way around. They have got over their shock that a clerical person dares to humanise religion.

I believe that if you really put your faith in even an imaginary God, you can make Him or Her (the Shekinah) real for you, as real as your conscience, your consciousness, your being-in-the world which will allow you to do *mitzvot* – good deeds.

But, fortunately, Aleithia my wife and I don't live full-time in South Africa, but in relatively benign Botswana. How much of Jo'burg one can stand is an open question.

So: I have studied and amended enough Kant, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, Lacan to know that we create God as Being and ethics. We overcome the death of God through the leap into faith, ontological understanding, *engagement*. Otherwise my empirical self – “Me” – this body which sticks out all around my mind-brain and senses and perceives the world, feeds off it, feeds it, is split off from the imagined “I” as transcendent self which in meditation enters the *Ayn Sof* – the without end.

Try it. Adam Kadmon or Chavva Kadmona is mythically portrayed as containing ten qualities including *Netzach* which as a noun is *splendour, glory, truth, power, firmness, confidence, duration, perpetuity*, and as an adverb is *always, for ever, eternally*. The Kabbalistic portrayal of this emanation is in the right leg. According to Moses Cordevero, Moses our Father, *Moshe Avinu*, was, (I say if he existed) a man of *Netzach*. Now, visualise Moses at the burning bush or on Mount Sinai amidst the thunder and the lightning receiving the whole Torah, written and unwritten and everything intelligible about Israelite and Jewish doctrine and philosophy directly from the mind of the hypothetical God, *Adonai, Elohim, YHVH* past present and even future. At the same time, in whatever yoga pose, grab hold of the right leg, breathe deeply, focus on the whole career of Moses from when he was drawn out of his basket by a servant of the Egyptian princess through his leadership of the children of Israel for the mythical Exodus and the 40 years in the desert, till his death outside the land of Israel. His death was brought by the kiss of God and then he was buried by God Himself.

And so on through the other nine emanations each connected with a Biblical figure or God. Any book or article on Kabbalah and Adam Kadmon as described in the *Sefer Ha Bahir* and the *Zohar* will show you how to internalise Jewish/Hellenic principles and biblical characters.

Only God is both all-I and all-Me. God is a ritualised *hypothesis* who “knows” the cosmos and each sentient and insentient being in it. God and biological evolution were perhaps coded in some way in the singularity that preceded the big bang not only in *this* universe – as far as we know - but perhaps in some other possible universes. God then is only a ritualised necessary hypothesis who is

totally conscious and omnipotent both for Himself / Herself and in Himself / Herself in all universes. I do not bother my congregations with this philosophical God. The Israelite God is however, a tribal God. That is enough for most Jews. But that is not all God is.

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So: I was actually born to South African exiles living in London. The good Londoners looked on us kindly as my mother had me clinging to her back wrapped in a blanket tied around her waist as if we were still living in Zululand.

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My wife is a white South African and after much travail, working and living in Botswana, we managed to obtain citizenship of this newly diamond-rich country where we work in and around the university in the capital city Gaborone.

Aleithia, when she is not freelancing as a psychiatrist and psychotherapist in Gaborone works at a private clinic and hospital in Jo'burg and I am in the department of religion and philosophy part-time in the university in Gaborone when not commuting to Jo'burg to fulfil my rabbinical duties. We earn enough to afford to be able to fly to and from South Africa and Botswana.

Aleithia is white, Anglo-Saxon, radical, a feminist. My parents and I are part Zulu and part San or Basarwa or Batwa, or colloquially, Bushman. My great-great-grandparents were San-speakers, the last still-aculturated descendants of the survivors of the 18th century genocide of the Cape Bushpeople, a mass-killing inflicted on us by the Dutch (Afrikaner) Boer farmers and their Griqua commandos. My great-grandparents married Zulus in Natal. My father was a book-keeper who became an academic philosopher, and my mother became a mid-wife when she graduated from cleaning white madams' houses. They had become middle-class. They made themselves into intellectuals. They got caught up in the agonising and terrifying struggles of the underground anti-apartheid movement and decided to emigrate to London after harassment by the Special Branch in the 1960s and 1970s. They were welcomed.

If you look at us you can see the apricot skin, the high cheekbones, the almond eyes, the peppercorn *boskop* hair of the San person, mixed with the tall, muscular athleticism of the Zulu.

Aleithia and I met in Oxford where after our bachelor degrees she was doing a psychiatry and psychotherapy-research doctorate and I was writing a thesis actually connected with my rabbinical college in London on existentialism and religion and turned it into a D.Phil: "The 'fallen-ness', 'facticity' 'finitude' 'anti-Semitism' and '*machenschaft*' of Martin Heidegger and its relevance to the moral crisis in Western theologies".

Heidegger. My father read Heidegger. When I was 7 in 1975 a year before Heidegger died, my father, a graduate in philosophy from Fort Hare University in the Transkei took my mother Alice and me to Freiburg to meet the 'great man'. The French occupying authorities had already punished him by banning him from teaching at Freiburg University for some years after the war.

My father was a language genius like many Africans and spoke 8 languages, 4 African and 4 European including German. No doubt the wonder and novelty of meeting a German-speaking

African who had read *Being and Time* in German and my father's fluent letter in German and photographs of us intrigued the notorious Nazi anti-Semite who had an affair with Hannah Arendt when she was his student in the 1920s – thus suggesting that his anti-Semitism was not visceral but merely reflected the tragic role of the Jews as supposed carriers of the “viruses” of both Bolshevism and capitalism which promoted his hatred of ‘*machenschaft*’ – *the mechanisation of the previously supposedly more human, rural world of peasant Bavarians. Though obviously quite ill and old, Heidegger was charming company and presented us with signed copies of Sein und Zeit and his books on metaphysics in which, as I later learned, he had returned Western philosophy to the question of Being – ontos - as no other had. He insisted on driving us from Freiburg to Todtnauberg where he had his famous hut on the mountain overlooking the forest. An old servant made us coffee and served us Black Forest cake. He stopped short of apologising for the Holocaust and Hitler's murder of thousands of black and brown Germans in the death camps. He had framed our photographs sent to him in my father's letter to Freiberg asking to meet him and had them hanging on the wall of the famous hut. In return, he allowed us to be photographed with him. And so, we felt we belonged in the wider European world after all, and our escape from the racist purgatory of South Africa was justified. And that white racism and anti-Semitism could co-exist as it did with Heidegger with genius.*

Old bastard! I had no illusions about what the cunning Bavarian peasant opportunist professor Heidegger believed. Yet, despite his Nazism and anti-Semitism, at the core of his work was indeed the transformation of Western religion and metaphysics into socio-psychological everyday events embedded in the taken-for-granted phenomenal world. I am free to transcend my facticity, my social and genetic situation; yes, I have fallen into what the world regards as sin, and, ethically, may be sin, but out of that fallen-ness, I can rise up again; yes, in choosing one path, I close off an infinite number of paths; one, the one I choose, finitude, can become my authenticity.

We went to Poland to see the death camps and it was at Auschwitz at the age of 7 that I first conceived of becoming a Jew in an act of solidarity with the people of God. I have nothing more to say about Auschwitz except that in a pre-figuration of Auschwitz, looking deep into the abyss of the human psyche, Nietzsche's madman a hundred and fifty years ago became “mad” in the sense of ecstatically inspired in the first place and told the truth that God was dead, and we have killed him!

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Alethia was born an Anglican and brought up as a Christian and had no interest in converting to Judaism having abandoned religion entirely for enlightened atheism. The only synagogue in South Africa which would have an African rabbi married to a non-Jew was Beit Israel in Hillbrow.

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In Botswana, we run literacy and numeracy classes for /Xam and other San (Bushpeople) who have been more or less evicted from their traditional hunting ground - the Kalahari. Alethia and I have been helping them use new skills to build up small businesses in factory units adjoining their villages: composed of allotments and common fields where they grow maize, tomatoes and spinach and collect cattle manure.

They, the original hunter-gatherers of Southern Africa who have been here for 55,000 years have to get a permit from a game warden to enter the Kalahari by lorry to gather elephant manure and other large deposits of game faeces which with other ingredients they turn into gardening compost selling these in plastic sacks on the South African garden-centre market.

They are allowed to hunt a restricted amount of game not with rifles and not with horses, but on foot using their traditional bows and poisoned arrows. The game they skin, season, dry in the sun, slice and packet, is marketed as *biltong* all over Southern and Central Africa. They distribute the profits to the directors and workers as wages. Israelis in Botswana who own retail shops including butcheries and supermarkets are good customers.

If I am not needed in Beit Israel in Johannesburg, the small community of mainly white and some Israeli Jews in Botswana asks me to help run their high holy days' makeshift services in local Jewish people's houses. They keep a Torah scroll in a fine old fashioned wooden clothes' wardrobe brought out of Germany by refugees from Nazism in the 1930s who settled as professionals and business people in what was then Bechuanaland Protectorate.

Botswana University runs seminars for religious ministers on syncretism in African religion. The local clergy get me to talk about San trance-dancing and spirit healing. Aleithia's and my servant in our Gaberone house in Otse Village rented out to expatriate academics, is //Kabbo /Xam. //Kabbo was named by his quite Westernised parents after a famous 19th century Cape San informant of W.H.I. Bleek and Lucy Lloyd, the first ethnographers and analysts of the Cape San language. His namesake was sentenced to years of hard labour on the Cape Town breakwater for shooting a giraffe with his poisoned arrows – for food when they were starving in the 1870s or thereabouts. //Kabbo means "Dream" in the /Xam dialect. Now the remnants of the Cape San, the /Xam, live in south western Botswana near Ghanzi.

//Kabbo /Xam conducts trance-healing sessions in the *rondavel* in the garden of our Otse Village house in Gaberone which is now actually his home – for the time being. He has professionalised what was tribal /Xam religion. The mainly African clients usually speaking Setswana are almost all nominal Christians who have syncretised Africa ancestral spirit religion. They tell //Kabbo about their unhappiness, which they attribute to vengeful persecution by ancestral spirits, who – if appeased - would sleep quietly in heaven under the protective aegis of God, Moses, the other prophets, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the four Evangelists, ancient tribal chiefs and kings or local Southern African charismatics and founders of African Christian religions like Isaac Shembe.

After years of exposure to Aleithia's psychiatry and psychotherapy I am able to teach //Kabbo how to recognise the universal syndromes treatable by medication and supportive Western-type

interventions – depression, bi-polar disorder, hypomania and mania, the neuroses, even schizophrenia, the pre-senile dementias and the dementias of old age, sub-normality of intelligence, addictions, and treatable and untreatable cases of psychopathic personality.

So the three of us, often working *pro bono* with poorer clients, have reported our findings in journal articles and chapters of books on trans-cultural psychiatry and indigenous psychological medicine.

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At the end of it all the big question is the Eternal. Why God? Obviously, God, or the Eternal is not Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist, Hindu - does not belong to any kind of human category or denomination.

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But one cannot undo 300,000 years of evolution as *homo sapiens* following 5 million years of being “human” descended as hominids who shared an ancestor with the chimpanzees those 5 million years ago. In us, naked apes, there is a relatively large and very complex brain with trillions of cells in the neo-cortex. One reason we have conquered the planet, for good or ill, is that this brain functioning as “mind” has a constant need to find meaning in existence.

So at last I come to the point: why did I become a Jew? Why did I follow in my father’s footsteps and become a philosopher? Why did I become a rabbi? Is there any meaning in life – and death?

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I had occasion to visit an old friend Hannah Isaacson who was dying of a carcinoma in one of the previously white suburbs, north of Sydenham and Linksfield. She had become a landscape gardener with her own firm, and ten African employees. She had two caring grown-up married children Julian and Sophie and grandchildren. She had looked forward to retiring to a quiet and contented life in old age when this terrible illness struck her down out of the blue.

She and I formed a good, caring relationship. She wanted to tell me and have me record her life-story.

She was haunted by poverty. She put herself through university by working part-time selling insurance. She couldn’t afford philosophy. She qualified as a chartered accountant. She would

move around the city and the suburbs auditing books for firms, office-based organisations, factories. Her parents, originally shopkeepers in Lithuania somehow never “made it” in Johannesburg – given bourgeois values. Her father was a transport lorry driver. All he had was his own lorry, a car, and a cheap house in Yeoville. He “had” ten “boys” (African men who in this white racism were perceived as never growing up into full adults) working for him as drivers, packers and house-movers, wholesale fruit and vegetable loaders, sometimes factory to shop transporters. Hannah’s mother against her sweet nature, had to become the disciplinarian. Hannah needed to support her parents and surviving grandparents in their old age.

She poured out her life to me as she lay dying. She was trying to get it in perspective. She could see how she had internalised her mother’s bitterness, chosen imperfect men, relied on material values which delusively segued into emotional empathy. She had chosen flawed men whom she perceived as having problems like her father. She had to become like her dominant mother, ruling the house not with a rod of iron, but laying out moral parameters all the time. Thank God, her children were good to her. As she weakened she told me of how she loved some of the heroes of the left in the liberation struggle. The whole family went to Pretoria to see Mandela inaugurated as the first president of the new South Africa in 1994. But now? In 2013? What with the crime and the corruption, the new South Africa was falling to pieces. Yet Sophie and Julian never lost their faith in the new South Africa.

Hannah begged me to tell her how I had come to Judaism.

I told her what it was like growing up as refugees from apartheid in Stoke Newington, Hackney, Bethnal Green, Whitechapel, wherever we could get accommodation and work. Being black in a white world, was different from the townships and the rural reserves where you with your own people. Yes, there was racism in London, but so many teachers, social workers, academics reached out to my parents, to me and Aleithia. And our mixed-race children. Britain became home. I told her about visiting Heidegger and Auschwitz and how at the age of 7 in Auschwitz in 1975 I had identified with the people of God. Of how God had become “God” - Real, but only Symbolic and Imaginary after I had gone to Paris and actually discovered that my French, learned from my father, was good enough to enable me to follow the writings of Jacques Lacan, reports of his famous verbal pyrotechnics at his seminars in or around the Sorbonne. Lacan had died in 1980 but he was still a legend in Paris.

My father had written a book on an African existentialist Christian religion. He extrapolated from Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* and *Concluding Unscientific Post-Script*, acknowledging Franz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* on the potentially violent formation of black African identity. Finally, my father was able to leave book-keeping and got a job lecturing in London at a theological college. My mother qualified further in midwifery and left off cleaning white madams’ floors.

Hannah had a faithful Zulu servant called Gracie who had worked for her for 40 years and was on the point of retiring on her generous pension. Sometimes Gracie would lie next to Hannah and hold her when the pain and the weakness became insupportable. In the foreground, there were Julian and Sophie unfailing in their love and kindness. Gracie and I would speak in Zulu. Gracie was the daughter of a famous Zulu praise-singer and to entertain Hannah we would chant the English and Zulu of the praise-poetry of the King Shaka Zulu.

I was in fact also trained as a praise-singer by an uncle who performed before the Zulu king Zwelithini.

In my smart rabbinical suit, to Hannah's delight, Gracie, and I would chant, and we would teach her the English and the Zulu till she memorised it:

You are a wild animal! A leopard! A lion! *UyiSilo! UniNgwe! UyiNgonyama!*

You are a horned viper! An elephant! *UyiNdlondlo! UyiNdlovu!*

You are as big as the great mountains! *Ungangezintab' ezinde*

You black one, *Wen' omnyama,*

You grew while others loitered. *Wena wakhula belibele,*

Snatcher of a staff! *Sidlukula-dlwedlwe!*

He attacks, he rages, *Sidladla, sidlondlobele!*

He puts a shield on his knees. *Sibek' isilang' emadolweni.*

Pile of firmly planted stones, *Isixhololo esingamatsh' ommbela.*

It was August 2013, a clear, blue, sunny late winter's day. There was a pause in our celebration. The front doorbell rang. We started, as if the angel of death, angel of mercy in this case, was at the front door which faced south, in this hemisphere and latitude below the tropic of Capricorn, away from the midday sun which was in the north. The front door was always in the shadow of the house itself and the acacia trees, the jacaranda, the poinsettia and hibiscus bushes only got the afternoon and evening sun. Our welcome visitor was Nono Ndebele who since coming to my "conversion" class to learn Hebrew and Judaism at Beit Israel had met Hannah Isaacson who helped the African teachers, Amelia and Julie, in the non-racial, secular pre-school playgroup next door in what was the old Hebrew school in Paul Nel Street. Here Nono and Hannah created little role-plays with the children.

As if, by some intuition, knowing Hannah's end was near, on her previous visits Nono had brought a Hebrew-English bible from which she had read the funny parts like Sarah getting pregnant at over 90, and Balaam's talking donkey, to cheer Hannah up.

Perhaps you can guess what Hannah wanted Nono to read. Perhaps the most inspiring and mysterious passage in the whole of the Torah.

Socrates discoursed on his possible continued existence in the afterlife as he drank the hemlock in accordance with the sentence of death pronounced upon him for the crime of impiety and corrupting the youth. Hannah "drank in" the passage describing Jacob wrestling with the angel which I suppose meant to her that God or rather being-in-the-world allows for redemption from spiritual death and sin even in the imminent presence of physical death. She wanted me to read the simple but powerful Hebrew and Nono to read the English. In her mind, no doubt, there were the shadows of her previous marriages, and the sheer struggle to provide for her children, her parents, her grandparents as immigrants from the poverty of eastern Europe, poverty which continued to eat away at them because the Isaacson parents simply couldn't get on top of the material heap that was early Johannesburg.

I can hardly write this for thinking about the quiet heroism of this woman and her children. Yet I must:

"And Jacob was left alone; *V'yi'va'ter Ya'a'kov l'va'do;*

And there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day..."

And so on. The outcome, if you remember is that Jacob prevails even though the mysterious wrestling man causes Jacob to strain a sinew at his hip-socket. The man asks Jacob his name and he tells him: Jacob, Ya'akov, was named as the second-born twin who grasped his brother's heel – *akev* – meaning heel, suggesting he tried to supplant the first-born Esau. Jacob asks the man *his* name, and *he* says he cannot tell him. Jacob is now named by the clearly divine stranger as Yis-ra-el – he that prevails with God, or champion of God. This is the same Jacob who cheated his first-born brother Esau of *his birth-right* and of their blind father Isaac's *final blessing* by impersonating Esau who was Isaac's favourite and, as the first born, *deserved* to inherit Isaac's wealth. Esau had threatened to kill Jacob when Jacob tricked him into selling *his birth-right* many years before "for a mess of pottage". When years later Jacob/Israel does encounter Esau at the head of 400 men the brothers weep in each other's arms and are reconciled whereas when he was cheated of his *final blessing* Esau's understandable rage and outrage concerning the *cheating of his birthright* make him swear to murder Jacob which prompts Rebecca their mother to send Jacob away to their original homeland to their kin in Babylonia to find a bride, in fact her cousins Rachel and Leah. However, a generation later, now Esau has his own "tribe". Esau kindly but proudly refuses Jacob/Israel's offer of a gift of a flock of livestock, because he has enough and then is persuaded to accept it. Then Jacob, clearly not fully trusting of Esau, goes his own way slowly with his wives,

concubines, sons and daughter, small grandchildren, flocks, whilst the ever-impulsive Esau rides ahead with 400 presumably armed men to another place. The site of the dream or vision or hallucination of the wrestling match is named by Jacob as Peniel which means – the face of God. Which of course he cannot see clearly except when dawn is about to break whereupon the man, the stranger, the angel perhaps, disappears.

Hannah wanted to talk to me alone. The others left the bedroom. She begged me to try to convince her that her life was meaningful, whether or not it had religious meaning. There she was, pale, haggard, shrunken into herself, drugged against pain, still beautiful with wide almond dark eyes, full lips, pert ears, elfin-like against her shaven skull the hair of which had dropped out because of the chemo-therapy which had, happily, delayed her final demise, giving us all more time to be with her.

I and Alethia and our daughters Joan and Rosie had prepared for this moment. For years Alethia had encouraged and involved herself in our own girls' talent for painting. They were doing art O and A levels in Gaberone High School and as a joint project were painting a large oil canvas, a portrait of Hannah based on photographs taken in her early 30s, and Julian and Sophie as children when they were still at primary school wearing maroon school blazers, white shirts and ties. I took the framed painting out of its brown paper wrappings and sat it on a chair.

The portraits were drawn and painted with a sense of freedom using complementary impressionist colours which mixed on the retina. The background was Hannah's north-facing garden's herbaceous border – alive with sub-tropical bushes and enormously tall sunflowers, vibrant with colour. There were even hadeda ibis birds walking on the grass in the background

“There,” I declared. “Could Joan and Rosie have painted you and Sophie and Julian in your garden, so that you and they will remain in our minds as eternally young if your lives were not meaningful? All the kind and unselfish things that you did for them and your parents and grandparents... It's all there....” If you looked very closely at the canvas you could see Jews in old-fashioned *shtetl* clothes painted very small holding hands in a kind of frieze going all round the margins of the painting.

She was so happy with the gift that she wanted to die then and there. She could easily have swallowed a huge dose of morphine tablets and swilled them down with a bottle of Van Der Hum liqueur, her favourite and drifted off into death. I had to deter her. I stroked her face, hair, arms, hands, decorously and sang her a synagogue tune: “Sim shalom, tova oov r'kha, chein v'hesed, v'rachamim....” Like a lullaby until she fell asleep.

Give us peace, goodness, grace, lovingkindness and compassion. Only she and the hadeda birds outside could hear me. She fell asleep and I joined the others, said my say, drove to the airport in time to catch a plane to Gaborone. Tomorrow we would drive to the Kalahari, Aleithia, Joan, Rosie and //Kabbo and camp amongst lions and elephants with a fire burning all night. We would take it in turns to be sentry till dawn broke. The creatures of the night having sheltered in the bush nearby streams and pools would wait for sunrise when it would be safe to drink again with predators in full view from which the prey would try to escape.

That was the answer to Hannah's question. Survival. Heidegger called it a sense of being-in-the-world. With the world. There was a world of difference in how you positioned yourself towards *ontos* – Greek "being". As thing. Or as living being like you. Even non-sentient being-things had an inscape, an internal landscape revealed under the microscope. It might all have been originally an accident – the big bang that succeeded might have failed an infinite number of times before. God may not play dice but S/he, some super-*ontos*, keeps track of what the laws of physics will be in what universe.

Rosie and Joan and their boy-friends, Aleithia and me, //Kabbo /Xam and his San friends whom we passed on the way into the Kalahari will have a trance-dance tonight under the Southern Cross and the Milky Way so crystalline and a moon so bright that the spirit of God whom they call //Gauna may very well have welcomed (only in our minds) Hannah Isaacson or I hope left her alone on her bed north of Linksfield and Sydenham dreaming of a painless passage into eternity. Well, 5 billion years from now when the sun exhausts its fuel, explodes and burns up the solar system.

We won't be there. But something will. Some tiny trace of the good Hannah Isaacson.

And the nefarious Heidegger. When he spoke of being-unto-death he meant finitude in a special sense. He meant that we could, sometimes, chose one way of dying, that is in accordance with our authentic potential, rather than be meaninglessly extinguished.

And so it was with her.