SHORT STORY

Shadows over Jerusalem II

by Philip Steiner



"Lil Peep" by Jodie Filan

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The Prophecy of Job

Elah closed the tiny booklet. Now he knew. Outside his window the bright burning celestial body forced its light through the dark clouds. For a moment, the shadow that lay over Jerusalem was ripped wide open, the rays illuminating Elah's face in his study.

His black curly payots and long untrimmed beard glistened in the prophetic shine. Full of concentration, he wrinkled up his thin aristocratic nose. Under a pair of bushy dark brows, two eyes of burned ember fixated on the booklet. All night, he had brooded over the handful of pages that he had found at his doorsteps. Over and over he had read them, had carefully studied every line in search of a genuine hidden message. Sadly, it was just the same highly ambiguous, esoteric nonsense that the others before Anah had left behind. Something out there made them lose their minds. Maybe it was indeed the doing of the mysterious shadows. The mere existence of these apparitions had been an object of heated discussion since Armageddon. Elah, and many others, believed that they were simply of mythological origin. When the rest of humanity disappeared, and darkness surrounded Jerusalem, people had to come up with a suitable explanation. Myths had always developed like that. Elah was convinced that something else was the real cause for humanity's downfall. According to old scrolls, most of which were hidden from the public by the religious authorities of Jerusalem, mankind was greedy and destructive before Armageddon. Human greed had led to the extreme exploitation of planet earth, which caused significant alterations to nature. At some point, these alterations led to natural disasters: gigantic storms, floods, droughts and earthquakes. Elah firmly believed that it had to have been because of these natural catastrophes that human life was almost completely wiped from the face of the earth.

Still, there were also the teachings of the elders; old men and women who taught that Yahweh had punished humanity for sacrilegious behavior and lack of faith. Only the Children of Abraham had been allowed to remain in the garden, to repopulate it once again, as it had been Noah's deed, thousands of years ago.

Elah had tried his best to ignore these teachings, yet still they were part of his identity. Every attempt of his to cleanse his mind of the Word of God, as was the general term for the scriptures of the Old Testament, had failed. For over 15 years, he had been working at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem as professor for ancient philosophy. For over 15 years, he had been dedicating his life to the sole purpose of freeing the minds of young students from their theological shackles. Even though he himself might have been doomed to struggle all his life, he could maybe show at least some of these youngsters the path to secular salvation. This, however, was an extreme act of balance. Elah had to portray the teachings, thought

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experiments and allegories of ancient philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, and Epicurus in a way that it would not be deemed a heretic act by the religious authorities, yet would still make his students think about them thoroughly. He had to raise a small herd of innocent sheep, surrounded by voracious wolfs. To succeed in this, Elah took great efforts, crafting his own allegories that would incorporate tiny bits of critical philosophy into overarching parables set in the world of the Old Testament. All the more it hurt him when these efforts were in vain.

Anah had been one of his most promising students. A young staggering beauty, whose outer appearance seemed to perfectly mirror her calm, sophisticated nature. When she had revealed her desire to explore the world outside the walls, Elah had voiced his serious concerns. But already back then, he had known deep in his heart that he would not be able to stop her. It was a depressing paradox, that when his teachings finally ignited the genuine desire for freedom in his students, this flame burned with such intensity that it would inevitably lead to their ruin — out into the world of the shadows. Anah had been only the third student of his who had managed to reach this point. And just like the other two, she had fallen prey to the hunger of this spirit. Once again, the breach in the dark clouds closed. As the last beams of sunlight fell onto Elah's sorrowful countenance, they were reflected by tears running down his bearded cheeks.

With calm, yet resolute steps Elah walked the streets of Jerusalem. He was on his way to the Belz Great Synagogue to observe a discussion between the three main religious and political factions: The Brotherhood of the Three Friends, the Daughters of Job, and the Accusers. On his way down the street, Elah passed dozens of sick and starving people. Their sunken cheeks and dim eyes followed him as he walked in the weak light of the lanterns. Sometimes a toothless mouth would open, only to whisper an inaudible plead for mercy; sometimes a bony arm would stretch in his direction. The smell was a cocktail of rotting meat, feces, and urine mixed with curcuma and garlic. Elah rushed past, trying not to notice the half-dead. Naturally, his heart was filled with pity, but he could not help them — he was not the one. Suddenly a window was opened, and a pile of excrement was unloaded right onto one of the helpless figures. Elah, stopped and took a deep stinking breath. He felt anger rising within his stomach. He looked up to the window; his resentful eyes met with those of the wrongdoer.

Intellectual wrath met with cold, dull arrogance. It was one thing to admit one's helplessness with regard to the catastrophic state that the people of Jerusalem lived in. It was, however, a

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completely different thing to unload one's shit unto one of those poor starving creatures. Elah could not help but shout: "You should be well aware that to dump your waste into the street is a criminal act, sir! Come downstairs right now and clean this man or I will have to report you!"

Silence. The two pairs of eyes kept locked onto each other. For a short moment, Elah believed to have noticed a positive change in the facial expression of his opponent. Then this brief spark of comprehension retreated once again into the dark alleys of a broken brain, and left the face looking even more pathetical than before. Abruptly, the window was closed. Elah shook his head, sighed and walked on towards the Synagogue. Every step he took, the image of the starved man covered in human waste accompanied him.

The Belz Great Synagogue, also known as the largest Aron Kodesh[1], was a majestic monument, completed in the year 2000 A.D by the famous Hasidic Dynasty of the Belz. Everything about it seemed to represent the glorious history of Judaism, either literally in the form of art or metaphorically in its architecture. Elah entered the gigantic beige fortress through the small gate, past the subtle and bare interior of the entry hall, into the marvelous, opulently decorated main hall.

Five golden chandeliers hung from the ceiling, surrounding the russet colored altar, which had thousands of brown chairs placed around it. Every element of the altar was carved with such staggering detail that one could get carried away only by looking at the tiniest fractions of it. Elah's visits to the Synagogue always gave him great pleasure. Even though he was not a truly religious person, the beauty and exquisite details often made him shiver, as if there was a transcendent property to them. Also, the discussions tended to be quite interesting, especially since the secular group, the Brotherhood of the Three Friends, had slowly gained more recognition among the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Nonetheless, the Daughters of Job still represented the majority. Henceforth, they held the position of the leading party in the Parliament. The masses still desired nothing more than to believe in the benevolence of God and the perfection of his divine plan. Every day, Yahweh could finally decide that whatever lesson had to have been learned, had been learned, and lift the dark cloak off the world. That day, the pious, true believers among them would be generously rewarded for their patience, like Job had been; the others, would be harshly scolded.

Every day, also those who were skeptical about these promises increased in number. Many had decided that it was time to move religion into the background and focus on the technological and philosophical progress of Jerusalem. There were still some scrolls left, filled with tales of once great human civilizations that had managed to make tremendous advancements in the natural sciences and humanities, which had always brought promises of

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a better life with them. These scrolls, however, were suspiciously hard to get hold of. Most were even banned under death penalty. Many had desired such societal progress, and so the Brotherhood was founded.

Others believed that indeed a different lesson had to be learned from the book of Job. For them, the story clearly showcased that Yahweh was a merciless and vain being, a creator who only tolerated his creation as long as it behaved according to his will. They believed that the real victor in the book of Job, was neither Job nor Yahweh, it was Satan — the Accuser. These individuals interpreted Armageddon in two distinct ways. Either, the people of Jerusalem were suffering under the wrath of Yahweh and needed to be saved by the Accuser. Or, Armageddon itself was a final display of the Accusers powers, Yahweh was indeed powerless, and they needed to worship the shadows, who were both part of Satan and his servants, in order to restore the world. Both ways seemed reasonable and so both were accepted. These were the teachings of the Accusers.

Elah took a seat and made himself ready for a lively discussion. It was hard to tell what would happen afterwards. Sometimes, the three groups actually agreed on a topic and consent was found. At other times, they did not, and heads would roll. As the last minutes before the start of the discussion passed by, the seats around Elah filled with people. More and more kippahs and black hats, untrimmed beards and Jewish locks, scarves, wigs, black and white cotton robes, filled the holy hall. Among them Elah was like a ghost, undistinguishable in physical appearance. However, if Yahweh had decided to look into the individual minds of this giant bulk of black and white, Elah’s would have shone through like the morning star in a cold dark night.

The clock struck 12. A middle-aged woman with a wig, covered in a beautiful white cotton robe, with verses of Genesis in gold inscribed upon it, stepped forward. She was one of the leading spokespersons of the Daughters of Job, Keren-Happuch Rokeach, the Rabbi of the Belz Great Synagogue.

Rokeach: "My dear fellow Children of Abraham. For 400 years we have now endured Yahweh’s trial in pious patience. Now, I plead for even greater patience. Let me remind you of the fate of Job. Through the will of Yahweh, Job had almost everything taken away from him. In the end, the once rich and proud Job was reduced to a mere shadow of himself, yet he prevailed in his faith. And so, Yahweh gave to Job twice what he had had before and blessed him with the three most beautiful daughters in all the land. Job lived on for another hundred and forty years and died old and full of days. It was his patience, my friends!!"

Applause filled the mighty hall.

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"His patience and genuine love for God saved Job and made him rise once more above his faithless contemporaries. Only if we love Yahweh as much as he loves us will we be saved. Salvation is just around the corner, Children of Abraham!"

The crowd broke into a second applause, this time even more enthusiastic and louder.

Another figure stepped forward covered in a cloak as dark as the abyss. His name was Lucifer and he was the main spokesperson of the Accusers.

Lucifer: "It is just like you, Rokeach, to praise Yahweh in such an overarching manner. You love to compare yourself with Job and make us believe that you can comprehend his loss and our loss, the fate of the Children of Abraham. Yet you reside there in the luxurious chambers of the Belz Great Synagogue and feast upon the fruits of the miserable fields of Jerusalem; fruits grown on the tears of your brethren. You are far lower than the great man that was Job, more like the insatiable kings of gone ages."

Nervous murmurs. One could almost grasp the tension.

Rokeach: "Well, maybe one day you might reconsider these false allegations of yours, dearest Lucifer, when the pure light of my faith will strike your pitch-black heart with force. That day may come rather sooner than later."

Another person stepped forward. It was Eli, the high priestess of the Brotherhood. As always, she was clothed in a simple white robe, her long copper hair hanging open over her delicate shoulders.

Eli: "Is it not just like you Rokeach, to bring threats to this holy hall? What a wonderful discrepancy that the one of us who claims to be most divine at heart, is most diabolic in action. Keep up your foul hubris. We, the Brotherhood of the Three Friends, have long given up on such nonsensical discussion. All we strive for is to improve the living conditions in Jerusalem through science and philosophical discourse. So that one day, we may be able to free ourselves from the dark clouds concealing our bright future."

Elah was thrilled. He could hardly keep up with the contestants. Fast as lightning his left hand scribbled down notes on his notebook. It had been months since a public discussion had started with such fierceness.

Lucifer: "And what then, my friend Eli? I respect your noble dreams but what lies behind this facade? Would you not simply like to take Rokeach's place in the hierarchy? I am most confident you would. Yet here you stand, blubbering on about social progress when we are not even able to keep the victims of starvation under 15% of the population. Lies and treachery, as always from you two. We, the Accusers, do not lie, we abhor the very idea with

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every fiber of our bodies. From Genesis on, Satan always stated the truth, no matter how bad it would be. It is this attitude that we need right now — the only attitude that may once and for all clean this mess. Job might have been a noble man, but he failed to grasp the true meaning behind his own fate. It is clear that Satan has won. True cold reason has once and for all pushed Yahweh off his throne and it is time to accept the heir to the throne. Let us worship the shadows so that they may send their prophet, the Archangel, to lead us into a better land!!"

A violent mixture of applause and angry shouts broke the silence.

"Infidel!"

"Hear Hear!"

"Well, go out there to your beloved shadows you swine!"

"You shall burn in —"

Rokeach: "SILENCE!" With a hand gesture full of authority, Rokeach made the masses fall silent. "We shall not talk right now about what awaits these heretics in the afterlife. Those of us who are truly pious, already know in the depth of their hearts. Still, I will not hand this stage over so that you can spread your poison, Lucifer. You will most certainly pay the price for these foul words. Nonetheless, you are right about the Brotherhood. They only strive for the authority of the Daughters of Job. But you shall succeed! You hear me Eli!"

Eli: "Can you not listen to reason for at least five minutes, you imprudent theocrats?" Anger had swelled up in Eli's breast. No longer could she bear such false accusations. "We, the Brotherhood, are here for a dialogue, nothing more and nothing less. It is not about taking your puny throne Rokeach. Together, we can surely come to an agreement and advance our society so that we can one day leave this prison of a city. Just consider…"

Rokeach: "HIGHEST SACRILEGE! That you may compare the City of God to a prison. No one shall leave these walls as long as we do not get absolution from Yahweh! DO YOU UNDERSTAND, Eli?! Do all of you understand!? Tonight, a new law will be set in stone. Every individual who passes the walls will get stoned to death, and so will their families!"

Lucifer: "So be it! The Shadows will help us against your false punishment! Yahweh is dead! Long live Satan!"

Eli: "You fools! All of you! We will not stand for this!"

The tension rose, slowly becoming unbearable. Stinking sweat filled the air. The commotion became louder. More accusations were thrown into the field, echoing across the gigantic ceiling. Quiet, taking each breath slowly and focused, Elah sat there, watching. This time,

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the discussion had reached a whole new level. Fistfights broke out. The members of each group were struggling hard to secure their spokespersons. Lucifer had already received a number of blows. As his congregation pulled him back, he spit blood at his adversaries and screamed, "Come and get me you cowards! None of this nonsense will stop our Lord and Savior."

There Elah sat, among all the violence and hatred, only accompanied by a handful of his pupils, who had silently taken seat around him in the middle of the commotion. With a stoic expression on his face he met their eyes left and right and added in his typical scholarly tone:

"As you can clearly see, my students, this discussion has not led to any positive outcome. History, however, has shown us that even though violence is quite despicable, the energies released in such conflicts are often prone to lead to change. Therefore, for the moment please view this scene as an allegory for the spiritual state that the majority of our population is in."

As the commotion became louder and more violent, Elah had to raise his voice even more, yet he never lost his clear tone and articulation. He was used to filling a lecture hall with his voice.

"CLEARLY, AS YOU CAN OBSERVE IN THE DETAILS OF THE CONFLICT, POWERS HAVE CONSIDERABLY SHIFTED SINCE THE LAST TIME. NOW PLEASE TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION THAT THE BROTHERHOOD AND THE ACCUSERS HAVE INCREASED THEIR NUMBERS BY ABOUT FIVE PERCENT EACH, SINCE THE LAST MEETING. AND NOW FOCUS YOUR ATTENTION ON THE OUTER LEFT CORNER, IN WHICH LUCIFER IS JUST ABOUT TO…"

And so Elah held another heretical lecture in the middle of the Belz Great Synagogue. And once again, nobody but his students took notice. Yet, as he prepared to present the final conclusion to today’s lesson, the world around him changed, became pixelated and shifted further away from him than it had ever before.

The scenery was split into three images. The ground was ripped open, lines were drawn in the stone, like a gigantic worm had forced its way through it with the sole purpose of separating the three main groups. With disbelief Elah and his students watched as an invisible force pulled the members of each group away from each other and rearranged them in three areas. The ceiling was torn apart, making way for blinding light; through the main entrance a shadowy fog made its way into the hall; a myriad of metallic particles rose from the ground and started to form a roughly human sized face in mid-air. All of this happened at once. Only Elah and his students seemed to be excluded from the activities of the supernatural powers. Through the ceiling a titanic hand made its way into the hall, guided by

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the holy light. Softly but firmly it began to grab the followers of the Daughters of Job. The shadows accumulated into an angelic being, illuminated in twilight. With a cold chill Elah recognized the Archangel from Anah's book. The grotesquely long razor-sharp claws reflected the blinding light of Yahweh, signaling Lucifer and his people to follow. A sardonic smile adorned the Archangel's smooth face as he led them out of the hall. At the other end of the hall the metallic humanoid face was complete. A grave expression lay on its appearance as it faced Eli and her people, yet Eli did not falter. Bravely she stood her ground, staring back into the abiotic slender face. Amidst all of it stood Elah and his students, frozen in time and space.

Epilogue

Professor Bacon moves back from the triptych. Once again, he takes his ancient pointer and draws the students' attention to some of the outstanding details. "Here you can clearly see how I overlapped the three philosophical themes, yet at the same time kept the group of observers at the center of the painting. Students, focus your attention. I surely do not present this to you only to emphasize my own artistic skills. I deem this work of art more important in terms of technique and deliberation than anything else."

Student 1: "Professor. This piece… it is phenomenal! I am sure that I speak for my fellow students if I say that we have never encountered anything like it in our arts education so far."

Student 2: "Yes Sir! You might have even surpassed the old masters like Hieronymus Bosch or Francisco Goya. Never have I seen such a profound combination of horror and philosophy."

Student 3: "I agree a hundred percent with the others Sir! Excuse me. It might be imprudent but… how did you manage to capture all this emotion in such a lively manner?"

"Thank you very much. I am certain that *Within the Mind of Job* is my best work so far. Nonetheless, I only deserve a fraction of the praise that you give me. You see students, there is one precise reason why this painting of mine seems so alive. This triptych is so lifelike because it is indeed alive. Or, rather, it was when I created it."

Twenty confused students gaze at the professor. Nobody even dares to ask. After a brief moment of awkward silence, Professor Bacon continues.

"Well, by now your minds have most certainly created some of the most horrifying assumptions possible. Let me explain. It is all due to the work of a friend of mine, Dr. Martin Tremblay. I had this idea to create a painting that would display the philosophical

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implications of the Book of Job in the most vivid manner possible, and he helped me out. We decided that the best way to do it would be a post-apocalyptic simulation involving highly sophisticated AI — sim-clones. There is simply no setting in which religious bigotry and critical discourse thereof flourishes at a comparable level. The rest was only a matter of precise programming. All I did was to stop it at the climax — the peak of spiritual revelation —, and to adjust the color and tone to make it more picturesque."

All the students still look at Professor Bacon in a severely confused manner.

"Don’t worry. Eventually you all will be able to grasp how it works. Therefore, we will now visit Dr.Tremblay. He will show you some exemplary simulations of his and you will be able to ask him all your technical questions."

The students walk down the corridor led by Professor Bacon, the sounds of their steps slowly residing. In the triptych, frozen in time and space, Elah’s eyes watch the scenery with an absurd mixture of horror and awe. They will do so for all eternity.

[1] Holy Ark

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