

EREL SHALIT

REQUIEM

a tale of exile and return



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A TALE OF EXILE & RETURN

Erel Shalit

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REQUIEM: A TALE OF EXILE & RETURN

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This account is entirely fictitious. However, in spite of its fictitious nature, the identities of the characters in this story are real. Professor Eli Shimeoni has agreed to have his story told, on the condition that his real name be disclosed.



Galuth, by Samuel Hirszenberg, 1904.



If anyone would have been present in that clean and tiny room in the small hostel in the heart of New York the day Professor Shimeoni arrived, watching him as he sat almost catatonically on the bed, his legs barely touching the floor, his cap awkwardly sitting on his head as if put there by a caring nurse on a schoolboy rather than a man in his mid-fifties, his small unopened suitcase next to him as if he needed to protect it with strengths he no longer possessed, or as if the suitcase somehow squeezed itself quietly to his side so that it could protect him – if anyone had seen Professor Shimeoni sitting on the simple bed in the warm but alien room, they would have seen a picture of resigned defeat.

But no one was present. Nobody was there to observe that bitter smile that held back his emotions, when he thought, “how ironic, this bed is hardly better than those furnished by the Jewish Agency once upon a time to immigrant hostels that had been scattered around the country.” “Once upon a time,” he repeated to himself, not sure if it was a dream or a nightmare, a fantasy or an anxiety attack.

No, there were no witnesses. The defeat remained the private failure of Eli Shimeoni.

Incidentally, Eli was short for Eliezer. However, since he had never managed to figure out if the meaning of the letters that made up this given name of his was that God would be helpful to him, or if he was to be God's servant in a scheme of contradictions that his philosophical mind could not grasp, he had formally shortened it to Eli.

Professor Shimeoni felt lonely and abandoned, like a redundant survivor. At fifty-six, he looked like an old man. Even when he was a child, people had told him he was an old man, but now, not a trace of doubt remained. He profoundly experienced himself as the last survivor. It seemed to him that everybody had already left before him. He came to think of that abandoned town he had once visited, driving down there into the desert, driven primarily by an obsession to see and sense an external manifestation of his own feelings of abandonment, of being left behind. He had always believed that the barren land of the desert was better suited for expelling the scapegoat and abandoning the unfortunate than for the dreamers of divine prophecies and the growth of oases. The *fata morganas* were, indeed, fairy mirages, inverted illusions, unrelated to desert reality.

The young had left the desert town as soon

as they could, leaving their unemployed and worn-out parents behind. Once the little kiosk at the small piazza at the center of town, with coffee, chairs and a lottery machine, had been like a Persian Palace of Hope, a real kůšk.

But the feathers of hope no longer circled the air, as if impatiently waiting to be followed by the lucky and daring ones, departing for the dream of a new life, a better future. No, the feathers had all fallen to the ground, the shaft had lost its barbs. Even the feathers had lost their hope. No longer projected into the future, hope had merely become a relic of Professor Shimeoni's favorite tense, which he cynically ascribed the negligible value of a threepenny, the PPP, past perfect progressive – “they had had hope – had they not had?”

No one in town could any longer define that thing called hope. Unemployment pay had run out with the rusty water in the taps, wasted, dripping into the sand. On the pavement outside the kiosk, the formerly white, now turned gray chairs of aging plastic, had become orphaned. As weeds sprouted up between the cracks, it became clear that the sidewalks were no longer made for walking. Days of decay no longer took turns with nights of despair, because in despair, there is still some voice trying to call out, how-

ever futile. No, even despair had now become orphaned, replaced by an empty void of apathy. Among those who managed to escape, the void was often filled to the brink with restless guilt.

Yes, it was sad, he had thought at the time, as he felt the relief of getting out of the godforsaken town, hastily escaping north. Yet, it was part of global depopulation trends. But now, his sense that everybody had left was different. It felt total, and like desertification, it had crawled in from the periphery to consume the very center of life, people like him, the pillars of society, the salt of the land – those that may not be immune to tragedy, but who conquer the desert rather than surrender to nature.

True, not everyone had left. There were those who remained behind – he thought of the many poor who had no means to get away, and *the baalei teshuvah*, those Masters of Repentance who had returned to the fold of the orthodox fathers. It seemed to Eli Shimeoni that their return to the straight path of God had given them the freedom not to ask any questions. They always knew the answer so well, claiming that “in the War of the End of Days, the War of Gog and Magog, total defeat would precede the ultimate victory over evil,” as they knew to repeat by heart.

He had been fascinated by the fanatic ob-

session with the graves of holy men, whether those scattered over the country, prominently Shimon Bar Yochai at Meron, or those orgiastic journeys by the Bratslav Hassidim to visit the grave of Rabbi Nahman in Uman, or Uriah the Hittite in Iraq – what a thrill! Coming himself from a somewhat religious background, he often wondered about the fundamentalist need of doomsday fantasies, their need to split the world in good and evil, a “pure” world in which the “impurity” of the “evil other” will be persecuted and exterminated, without the simple realization that this means that if I succeed in my crusade, I will remain trapped as the evil exterminator. On the other hand, he found it almost as difficult to accept the post-modern credo of “everything goes,” as if everything is of equal value and there is no Truth – except, that is, beyond the absolute truth that there is absolutely no truth above other truths. In fact, there must be no other truths besides the one truth of many truths.

His head turned, as it often did when he tried to understand matters that probably were much more complicated than he thought.





First his children had left, gone abroad to study. One had taken up a prominent position at the University of Stamville, while the other was doing gender research at the Institute of Harback. Then his wife had followed, accusing him of being a fanatic and an archaic idealist, or derogatively calling him silly and stubborn, an obsolete Zionist. Friends and colleagues had discreetly taken farewell. Initially they would apologetically say, "if things ever change, you can be sure I will be the first one to return home. After all, there is nothing like Israel, and you can not really extract Israel from an Israeli." But then, people became increasingly forceful and determined as they said goodbye. The cultured ones would say with bleeding hearts, "this is not the country we prayed for," and the self-proclaimed prophets would plainly tell him, "everything is collapsing, there is no future here." Some would reinforce their doomsday prediction, relying on historical evidence that an independent Jewish nation could not survive more than a hundred years.

But what struck him the most was, that everything was so everyday-like. Nothing special, nothing particular to notice. So similar to Elie

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