

# Something to READ

By Sarah Shapiro



Illustration by Caryl Herzfeld

One day last spring, when suicide bombings and shootings and other assorted acts of satanic cruelty were at their height and staying home for weeks on end had settled into a seamless cycle of cooking, eating, and cleaning up; when boarding a bus to the Old City's Moriah Bookstore would have constituted a reckless act of self-endangerment and going downtown to the Pomerantz, or my favorite second-hand place, Sefer ve Sefel, was out of the question, and the only excursion into the great outdoors that I could reasonably justify taking was the exciting elevator ride down four flights to the mailbox, followed by the two-minute walk to the neighborhood

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supermarket...when that's what life was like, last spring, I was standing absent-mindedly before a bookshelf one afternoon, looking for something to read.

I urgently wanted...something or other. Something relevant to what was going on, or maybe...something irrelevant would be better. Something to help me understand, or enable me to forget.

The particular shelf I was looking at, just then, occupied less a spot in the

room than a place in my heart. Souvenirs from the vanished land of childhood, reliable standbys, old and new favorites...and having them all lined up together like this—the way they stayed put obediently on the fringe of my life—had always given me a tidy, if only half-conscious, sensation of autobiographical coherence and continuity, as if all the disparate, non-sequential fragments of my past actually shared some invisible underlying theme and internal historical logic, and had fallen

inadvertently into a sensible progression of chapters adding up to one grand story in itself. Each of the books on this shelf had served me well at one point or another in my journey through time, as entertainment when I was bored or inspiration when down; as food for thought when my mind was running on empty or when nothing else was available (which was certainly the case nowadays). They'd put

me to sleep when insomnia loomed, kept me company when I was lost, and had comforted me, again and again, with evidence that whatever might be happening to me “in the real world” at any given juncture, somebody, somewhere had not only gone through it but had lived to tell the tale.

But the real world had become unreal. My brain strained in vain to either absorb it or ignore it. If there was something about being scared out of my mind that was wreaking havoc with my parenting (“No, you're not taking the bus to school!”) and my household schedule (“OK! It must be dinnertime!”), perhaps there was also something—*je ne sais quoi*—about murder that was robbing me of the written word.

Outside, terror was crossing and recrossing the land. In the house, in limbo, we waited for it to go away. Back and forth, back and forth, the shadow kept passing over, like the darkness cast by a fiendishly spinning tornado. Breakfast was merging with lunch, lunch was becoming dinner, and I'd been turning behind my own back into somebody I didn't know. There I stood, gazing at the familiar titles like a vaguely hungry person holding the refrigerator door ajar, waiting for something to ring true.

*To make a prairie it takes a clover  
and a bee,  
One clover, and a bee,  
And reverie.  
The reverie alone will do,  
If bees are few.*

Since my first encounter with Emily Dickinson in Miss Sherry's ninth grade English class, those lines had come to mind a thousand times. I'd be living somewhere in California or Manhattan, pining for just one measly tree to call my own (such as those with which my spoiled hometown had been so overgenerously endowed) when the thought of that little poem would remind me that to peer out a window

at a rectangle of blue sky and cloud is to possess the whole sky. Decades later in Jerusalem, half a world away, the enduring lesson gleaned from those few words had, on countless occasions through the years, exponentially increased my enjoyment of the potted pink geraniums out on our own small porch.

So by all rights, it should come in handy especially nowadays, when we were stuck at home.

But with her collected poetry open in my hands, the poem stayed uselessly inert and flat upon the page. How pitifully detached she was from real life (meaning: our lives.) Emily Dickinson was no stranger to suffering—she who had taken me on guided tours of my own heart—but I felt a jab of envy and resentment towards the ghostly image, filed away in my mind, of the nineteenth-century Protestant dreamer in her long white dress, in a garden, probably, in Amherst, Massachusetts, longing for reverie.

That should be my biggest worry! Maybe one of her death poems would suit me better. She had lots of those. In the index of first lines, I spotted the one that had articulated for me my own experience when my parents died.

*The distance that the dead have gone  
Does not at first appear.  
Their coming back seems possible  
For many an ardent year...*

No echo, no mirror for me now in this one, either. Emily, *bubbale*, you should never know from evil. Back she went to her place on the shelf.

Merwin, Auden...too difficult. Maybe it was Edna St. Vincent Millay who could transport me magically right out of the Middle East.

*All I could see from where I stood  
Was three long mountains and a wood;  
I turned and looked another way,  
And saw three islands in a bay...*

The incongruity of those elegant and exquisite cadences mocked my

anxiety with sharp little knives.

Maybe e.e. cummings?

*I thank you God for most this amazing day:*

*for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky.*

These lines didn't come sailing towards me now like a lifeline in a long loop of joy, as in times gone by. How utterly oblivious all these poets were to what was happening! They were ignoring us Jews completely! They wrote what they wrote on the other side of the moon, engaged in personal struggles that bore not even the faintest resemblance to the sort of blood-soaked war for survival against real, live enemies (make that anti-Semitic enemies) that we ourselves are forced to wage.

My eyes skimmed over into the shelf's Torah district. *Lehavdil*, there was *Path of The Just*, mutely offering its ancient services. *The Two-Way Channel*, *Living Inspired*. *Man Is Not Alone*.

*The Palm Tree of Deborah.*

*There are people who are unworthy  
and yet the Holy One, Blessed Be He,  
has mercy upon them. The Gemara  
explains the verse: "I will be gracious to  
whom I will be gracious."*

If a few seconds ago, I couldn't stomach anything too far, then too near wasn't good, either. I had no interest in looking at myself this afternoon, didn't feel like being told that I should work on my *middot*, that the answer lay within. How about the world working on itself, for a change!

Their titles emanated silent reproach as my gaze passed by.

*The Thinking Jewish Teenager's Guide to Life*. Akiva Tatz's misnamed masterpiece that I had bought for my children and ended up consuming myself.

*At the end of a lifetime, in the transition from this world to the next, three angels come to greet a person. One of these angels comes to search out: "Where is this person's Torah, and is it complete in his hand?" In other words, have you achieved what you were meant to achieve during your life?*

No...no...It was definitely escape I

wanted. If only our neighbors were the type to have *People Magazine* on hand! That would surely provide an hour or two of lowly distraction. My eyes wandered back over to *Best Short Stories of 1992, Little House in the Big Woods, The Penguin Book of Interviews, Patrimony, Stoptime, Personality Traits, When We Were Very Young, Our Town, Due North...*

How dare those books speak their petty names!

*Call it Sleep, Angela's Ashes.* Their utter irrelevance was so irritating.

*The Denial of Death.* There was Ernest Becker, still fretting about mankind's universal denial of mortality. Ha! Nobody around here had that problem.

But I paused. My heart softened. Taking it into my hands, the book opened of itself to an earmarked page, much worn and underlined.

*Most of us—by the time we leave childhood—have repressed our vision of the primary miraculousness of Creation.*

There...the dear phrase that had served me once upon a time as a north star. He was discussing the description by a medieval poet, from three centuries earlier, of a moment of epiphany in which "the world," as Becker put it, had appeared to him as it does "to the [pristine] perceptions of the child before he has been able to fashion automatic responses." He quoted from the poet's account:

*All appeared new, and strange at first, inexpressibly rare and delightful and beautiful. The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor ever was sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold.... The green trees...transported and ravished me, their sweetness and beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things.... Boys and girls tumbling in the street, and playing, were moving jewels. I knew not that they were born or should die....The city seemed to stand in Eden....*

**“T**he primary miraculousness of Creation.” In his last years, Ernest Becker, with his intensely Jewish sensibility, had embarked upon a more explicit search for God; I'd read somewhere that not long before he died, he had started exploring Judaism. But in the harsh light of *hamatzav*, "the situation," Becker's whole quest for truth and authenticity seemed now to turn its back on us, his people. *The Denial of Jewishness*, how about that for a title? And the quoted passage, that I had reread and savored so many times, suddenly rankled for resembling some kind of pagan wor-

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ship of Creation, rather than of the Creator, as if all that worldly magnificence and wondrousness and perfection were a lucky fluke of nature in an impersonal and neutral void. I, too, longed to perceive the magnificent, wondrous, perfect world which was right before my eyes, longed as much as I ever had for the sheer miracle of existence to make itself visible in my sight. But the portrait of a beautiful Creation I embraced would have to include and lend meaning to the evil that figured in it so prominently.

At least *Escape from Evil*—another one by Becker, written in 1975—referred to the issue at hand.

*...most of the evil that man has visited on his world is the result precisely of the greater passion of his denials and his historical drivenness. This leads us directly from problems of psychoanalysis and history right up to the problems of*

*the science of man itself: what is the nature of evil in human affairs, and how can we come to grips with it as thoughtful men trying to take back some control over our own destiny, trying to fish ourselves out of the whirlpool of...*

Oh, Dr. Becker, get with it. You're a few decades, a few centuries, behind the times. Islam's not even listed in your index, much less Esav.

At James Agee's *A Death in the Family*, I stopped short. This was the book whose tender prose had imparted to me, as a teenager, a hint of what life, and death, had in store. Certainly it would have some bearing on our current catastrophes. But what was happening to me? What should I hear, upon glimpsing its beloved opening line (*We are talking of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child*) but a disgusted inner complaint: "Tennessee? Spare me!"

What a self-centered reader I'd become! Since when did the religion of Literary Criticism stipulate that a work of literature had to be specifically about your own life in order to have relevance for you? Since when did a work of art have to be precisely congruent with your own experience in order for it to have meaning? When it came to art, universal truths had always succeeded in transcending the gaps between me and other cultures, other peoples, but now that the chips were down, there was a bitterness in me like heartburn, over the vast chasm.

**O**ut of respect for all that this novel had given me since first coming back to Judaism in the nineteen sixties, I gave it another try, and opened the dear, frayed, fragile paperback to the passage in which a father is speaking to his newly widowed daughter.

*It's bad enough right now, but it's going to take a while to sink in. When it really sinks in it's going to be any amount worse. It'll be so much worse that you'll think it's more than you can bear.... And worse than that, you'll have*

*to go through it alone, because there isn't a thing on earth any of us can do to help, beyond blind animal sympathy.... [So] bear it in mind that nobody that ever lived is specially privileged; the ax can fall at any moment, on any neck, without any warning or with regard for justice.... You've got to remember that things as bad as this and...a lot worse have happened to millions of people before and they've come through it and that you will, too. You'll bear it because there isn't any choice—except to go to pieces. You've got two children to take care of and you owe it to him.... It's a kind of test, Mary, and it's the only kind that amounts to anything. When something...like this happens. Then you have your choice. You start to really be alive, or you start to die...."*

*Et tu, Agee. So close, and...so far. Far, like all of them, in both time and space, from Netanya and Tel Aviv, Haifa and Afula, removed as if by veils behind veils behind veils from the mad, mad Middle East on this magnificent spring day in the first years of the twenty-first century. For it wasn't general truths about death, or loss, or pain, or grief, or on the other hand, the evasion of the same, but rather, our truth that I needed. Our Jewish truth. The Jewish belief that there is indeed such a thing as Divine justice and kindness, that, indeed, the fabric of the universe is composed of it, and that everything is meant to be. That neither justice nor kindness is random. I needed a truth that would endure amidst flames, as people ran between bombs as if between the raindrops, when fingers and hands and feet were being severed and parents and children were being separated, murdered in each other's sight, and there were people consciously aiming to maximize our suffering, because we were Jews. It was a mystery. It was what I'd read about in Holocaust books, yet the Holocaust had always seemed like such a weird, unbelievable phenomenon.*

My eyes sought out something farther along the shelf.

*When the second guard's chance came, he grasped the club with an expression of combined reverence and joy—such as a Jew exhibits in taking the four species on Sukkos. He flailed with such ardor that the first guard was jealous. After the twentieth blow, he demanded to take over again, but the second guard refused to relinquish the honor. The interesting thing was that long before they reached twenty, I no longer felt anything and was able to regard the guard with detachment, as if he were*

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*striking someone else or pounding a wooden board and not even touching me. But when the time came to get up, my feet simply would not obey. Unable to straighten up, I could not help thinking of the axiom coined by our Sages: "You live despite yourself."*

It was *Slingshot of Hell* by Rav Yechezkel Harfenes. I turned at random to another page.

*It was by now late afternoon and the heavenly gates were about to be sealed shut. I did not return to my minyan for the Neilah service. I did not have the strength. This had been my most difficult day in Auschwitz, not because of*

*the fast but because of the constant running back and forth. I had not sat down all day. I now turned my face to the wall and said the closing prayer. I muttered the few words from the liturgy that I could remember, but those were garbled and confused. I skipped other parts out of restlessness. How empty, cold, and worthless it was! I can only compare my prayer to the gasping of fish on land; they open and close their mouths—in the hope of wetting them—while their very life escapes.*

I sat down upon my bed. It was late afternoon here, too. If it was relevance I was after, and incongruity that offended, this should be my cup of tea. How could I have guessed, just a few short years ago—I never imagined such a possibility—that I'd soon be looking in this book's darkness for a mirror of our own circumstances. This beautifully written, wonderfully truthful, searing memoir had always struck me as so bizarre, unfathomable, and nightmarish that it had belonged to a different world; I always had to remind myself: this happened. It really happened, to real people, like us, my brethren, because they were Jews.

**I***did not lift my gaze from my son who lay there like a bundle of rags. I saw that he was still breathing, though laboriously. ...The block elder reported the number of prisoners in the line-up, pointing to my son who lay at the side, dying from his injuries. With this, the roll call ended.*

*...I went over to my son. His eyes were closed, as if he wanted to sleep. I didn't know whether to disturb him or not, but finally, unable to contain myself, I blurted out a question asking how he felt. He opened his eyes and looked pityingly at me, like one sorry that I had to suffer for his sake. I asked him if he wanted anything. He didn't. He summoned up his strength and said, "Father, you must soon go to work.... Give me your parting blessing before you go. Kiss me once more. Who knows if we will meet again?" His condition*

was critical. I looked at his eyes whose light was already half-extinguished. His cold, dry lips sought mine. It was the last physical contact I had with my cherished, beloved son. I wished him a speedy recovery and an *au revoir*.

With heavy heart and eyes lowered with shame, I left. I cannot recall if he shed any tears when he uttered that last sentence of farewell, but I do clearly remember that I did not weep. My heart screams out at the animal indifference and callousness that blurred my senses and feelings on that terrible day... Now, years later... I am shocked at this inexplicable emotional treachery. I am stunned. I can only say that even this was a product of Divine Providence. For had I allowed my heart free expression of its grief over this horrible misfortune, I would not have survived.

I stopped. It was getting too dark to continue. Outside my window, the light had dwindled.

I needed...

Hope.

*Slingshot of Hell* went back to the shelf, with my love.

It must be somewhere...

Where could it be?

I hadn't actually used it in years. Other editions, less archaic; other translations, not as awkward, had taken its place. The last time I could recall—it must have been that time in my sister's house on Leroy Street, in Berkeley, California.

It must have been the early seventies.

I was visiting. I remember the blue corduroy shirtwaist I was wearing. I couldn't have moved to Israel yet.

We'd been sitting in her kitchen after dinner, or I was sitting and she was cleaning up. We were talking, laughing... when suddenly we both fell silent, and were looking into each other's eyes. From far off a sound was approaching that I'd never heard before, an unfamiliar roaring, like an echo spreading underground, under the world, and then.... The floor was unbelievably rocking under us, as were the walls and the ceiling and the strange sound was getting louder, like a hundred or a thousand subway cars

coming at us. It was also silent. We were clutching each other and probably screaming, or maybe uttering not a sound, but the next thing I knew, my book of Psalms was gripped in our four hands.

**T**he earthquake in that kitchen turned our lives upside down and inside out, and the sisters—both daughters of the American suburbs (it was just recently that one of them had heard, for the first time, that God had a Jewish Name)—clung to each other and to that book as if the survival of Berkeley depended on it. The universe as we knew it had in a few seconds been transformed into a thing we could no longer trust. The aftershocks rumbled and rocked in the ground beneath our feet and outside in the starry sky, murmuring in the walls, trembling up and down our bones. The book didn't shut and our eyes didn't close; that life raft kept us afloat until the break of day. No matter what page we turned to, the words were precisely our own, articulating in our own voices what was hidden in the crevices of our own minds. The words took us up, up, up in an infinite lifeline, crying perfectly for us to God in that moment and that moment alone, as if no other moment and no two other girls had ever existed in history.

It took about a minute. There it was—a beat-up, old, black volume, pushed over into the corner. *The Psalms: Translation and Commentary by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch*. Feldheim Publishers, 1973.

*I called Thee, O save me.... Early at dawn I stood and implored; I hoped for Thy word. My eyes forestalled the night watches.... Hear my voice according to Thy loving-kindness, give me life, O Lord, as is Thy way to do.... I will not give sleep to my eyes nor slumber to my eyelids, until I shall have found the place for the Lord.... We found it in the field of the forest.... That He will deliver you from the snare that is laid, from deadly pestilence... and you will take refuge beneath His wings. His truth is a*

*barbed shield and an armor.... The trees of the Lord also have their fill; the cedars of Lebanon which He has planted.*

*Where the birds make their nests; where the stork builds his nest upon the trees.... My enemies taunt me all the time... for I have eaten ashes like bread, and mingled my drink with weeping...*

*For I am poor and defenseless and my heart is dead within me... Help me O Lord my God, save me in keeping with Thy loving-kindness, That they may know that this is Thy hand, that Thou, O Lord, hast done it.*

Something relevant to what was going on, but out of this world.

*To Him Who divides the Sea of Reeds into parts that His loving-kindness endures forever.... To Him Who leads His people through the wilderness that His loving-kindness endures forever:*

...to help me understand, and enable me to forget...

*Who remembered us in our lowly state, because His loving-kindness endures forever....*

...to keep me company when I was lost, remind me that no matter what might be happening, the poet had gone through it and had not only lived to tell the tale, but had prevailed, because evil and goodness are given in kindness by one and the same Hand. Neither too near, nor too far. Neither easy, nor difficult. Precisely congruent. Designed uniquely for "the real world" at this unique moment in history, for this modern era, and the sweetness and beauty made my heart to leap.

*The nations will fear the Name of the Lord, and all the kings of earth Thy glory.... He has turned to the prayer of the solitary, and has not despised their prayer....*

The lifeline came sailing towards me now in a long loop of joy.

*Then our mouth will fill with laughter and our tongue with exultation; then they will say among the nations: "The Lord has done great things with these."*

Suddenly it dawned upon me: it must be dinnertime! I had to go get dinner ready!

Well. At least I'd found something to read. **JA**