

Ten Midrashim

David Curzon

I

After God created light on the first day, He realized the earth was “without form, and void.” It was only then the idea of filling this void occurred to Him. And it was only several days later, after creating land, and grasses, and fruit trees, that He conceived the brilliant idea of creatures who could see with the aid of light.

II

The fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil wasn't an “apple,” which is, of course, a mistranslation. And a very misleading mistranslation since (it can now be revealed) the real fruit was a pomegranate, which requires its inedible skin to be broken before the edible interior can be reached. It was this act of breaking into the fruit that constituted the sin. Had the fruit been an apple, which can be eaten impulsively skin and all without any prior deliberative act, God would not have been so offended.

III

Why was God so precise in His instructions on building the Ark? Why “gopher” wood? Surely teak or mahogany could have done the job? But those skilled at their craft know the importance of the exact materials. If an inspiration is to take the form of a poem, it cannot be properly realized as prose. Had there been no gopher wood available, God would have conceived of something other than the Flood.

David Curzon is an Australian who works in the United Nations and lives in Manhattan. He has published one book of poetry, Midrashim (Cross Cultural Communications, 1991). His anthology of 20th century poetry based on biblical texts is due out from the Jewish Publication Society in Summer 1993.

IV

There was one building supervisor at the Tower of Babel who spoke all languages, and he urged the other supervisors to allow him to coordinate the completion of the project. And he could have accomplished the task had the others agreed. So in the end the problem wasn't language, even there.

V

It is clear from the text that the original call was to Abraham's father, Terah. And Terah responded to the call, and left his country, and his kindred and his father's house and departed from Ur of the Chaldees to go to the Promised Land, to Canaan. “But when they came to Haran they settled there” (GENESIS 11:31). What happened? As one of Terah's descendants explained in another context: A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed some fell on the path, some fell on rocks, some fell among thorns, and some fell on good soil (LUKE 8:5-8).

VI

When God told Abraham that Sarah, who was almost 100 at the time, would have a child, she laughed. When He asked why she laughed at Him, she became frightened and denied it. But she needn't have worried; God doesn't mind people disbelieving Him. He only gets annoyed if they don't listen, and Sarah was listening intently.

VII

Abraham was being disingenuous when he argued with God. His concern wasn't to save righteous people he didn't know—he didn't even know if these suppositions existed—but to save his nephew. It turned out that ten righteous people didn't in fact exist in Sodom, and this was where the bargaining had stopped. But since God knew Abraham wasn't concerned with abstractions, He saved Lot anyhow.

VIII

Why on earth hadn't Hagar seen the well before God pointed it out? Because her eyes were filled with tears. It was only after God had assured her Ishmael would be saved that she dried her tears and saw the well.

IX

After sacrificing the ram, Abraham and Isaac descended from Mount Moriah. On the way down Isaac, still surprised, remarked, "So you really did intend to sacrifice me." Abraham considered denying it but decided to remain silent. After all, he wasn't being asked a question. He had, however, misunderstood Isaac. The echo of that mountain pass returned the faint response of a shy offer—"sacrifice me"—but Abraham was too preoccupied to hear it.

X

A few days after Aaron arrived in Midian, Moses took him out to the wilderness near Mount Horeb to show the thornbush from which the Voice had spoken. He understood it would no longer be burning without being consumed but still somehow he expected to recognize the bush that had been chosen. Perhaps he thought a halo would surround it, an afterglow of the Presence. Perhaps it was some residual idolatry from his Egyptian upbringing. In any case, of course, no such sign was evident and he couldn't distinguish that particular bush from all the others.

