

## When God Is Your Favorite Writer

It was during the presidential election of 2000 that I finally discovered what kind of Jew I was. Asked to name his favorite political philosopher, George W. Bush thought a moment, and then replied "Jesus." An uproarious laugh erupted in my living room, as it did in living rooms across the Democratic swaths of the country – we would continue laughing for weeks, egged on by the media – but I felt my first kinship with the candidate. I thought to myself, "What's so funny about that? My favorite author is God." That was when I first struck on the idea of a writerly Jew.

Though the term 'writerly Jew' is clearly just the old familiar 'Jewish writer' with the words reversed, a writerly Jew is something altogether different from a Jewish writer; 'writerly Jew' is not a literary category at all. A writerly Jew is simply someone whose entire sense of herself *as* Jewish consists in stories. When a writerly Jew thinks of her Jewishness she thinks of these stories, and when she thinks of these stories she feels very Jewish. You might say that she is only Jewish when she's inside these stories, but chances are, if they mean enough to her to form her religious identity, she is, in a sense, in them always. This is certainly the case with me and my stories, the tales of the Hebrew Bible. That timeworn anthology will always saturate my thoughts, so that hardly anything passes through them without picking up a faint biblical scent, no matter how far I travel from the fold.

I was born as a writerly Jew only a few years ago. I used to be an Orthodox Jew, and had an overpowering sense of myself as Jewish, one that obviated my need to cast around for my connection to Judaism: I was a Jew because I believed that God had dictated His sacred texts to Moses in the desert; because my daily life was guided by millenia-old rituals; because half my school day was conducted in an archaic form

of Hebrew that hasn't been spoken in thousands of years; because I wore ill-fitting, long jean skirts, and believed my shins and elbows to be taboo. When I arrived at college I ceased being an Orthodox Jew about as quickly as it took me to unpack, but I picked up another off-the-rack Jewish identity, becoming a social Jew. As a social Jew there wasn't much identity-mulling to be done either. I was a Jew because on Friday nights I sometimes went to the Hillel, because I understood why the word "pheh" was funny, because all the other former Jewish Day School students knew me. I could do absolutely nothing Jewish for months at a time and still be a peripheral part of the Jewish "scene", occupying a place as one of the resident heretics, an enviable position I wish I could have held onto forever.

It was only after college that I ceased to be any sort of Jew with a label. I wasn't a practicing Jew because I didn't practice, nor a social Jew because my Jewish community was gone. I wasn't even a socially-conscious or political Jew because I occupy a murky, ill-defined place between the Jewish liberal and the Jewish neo-con. Yet I felt very Jewish and the fact that I couldn't say quite what made me so Jewish bothered me a great deal. When friends said, "You're so unJewish" – I don't think this was meant as a compliment exactly, but it was only uttered by other "non-Jewish Jews" – and I replied "Are you nuts?" I had no follow-up retort to prove their deep, deep wrongness. (Though I suspect that the desire to prove the deep, deep wrongness of people holding false positions is very Jewish.)

And then came the presidential election of 2000, and the thought that maybe what makes me so Jewish is that my favorite author is God.

I say my favorite author is God – and not the J, P, D, x, y, z biblical authorship conglomerate – and I have a good reason for putting it this way, a reason that has nothing to do with religious faith (my Orthodox upbringing notwithstanding.)

The interlocking jumble of myths, truths, and rules known as the Old Testament is hopelessly enmeshed in my mind with the voice of a narrator--sonorous, all-knowing, all-powerful, unpredictable, and fierce--whom I no longer believe in as a deity, but whom I still believe in as something else: as a dead grandparent, perhaps, someone who used to be around a lot, whom I used to love, and who used to enchant me with tales of my ancestors. It's not only the stories, but that narrator too – rattling around in my head, scolding or comforting from the grave – that makes me feel my Jewishness. In fact, I'd say it's the narrator – as much in his death as an object of my faith, as in his lingering life as an object of my fond and intimate memory – that single-handedly makes me a writerly Jew.

I first fell in love with the voice of God and the stories it told on the juice-splattered floor of Mrs. Shlussel's nursery school classroom, between the yellow-painted cinderblock walls half-heartedly enlivened by dancing members of the English and Hebrew alphabets. On Friday afternoons we broke from the regular grind of learning how to count and how to share and celebrated the impending Sabbath. We would sing for a while, and then the two children chosen as that week's Mother and Father would preside over our mock Sabbath meal, handing out paper cups filled with grape juice and little bits of challah. (Due to what I must generously interpret as an oversight, I was never made the kerchief-covered Shabbos Mother, a painful slight that may or may not have had something to do with my eventual alienation from religion.) And then Mrs. Shlussel would sit us down and tell us the fabulous story that comprised that week's parsha, or portion, of the Torah.

I cannot possibly overstate how riveted I was by these weekly exploits of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and those star-crossed lovers Jacob and Rachel, or adequately describe the strange, loving intimacy I harbored toward the

characters. All I can say is that I felt the breath of God descend around me in the stuffy room along with Mrs. Shlusell's tobacco-addled voice, and all those characters along with it. For me the Sabbath would begin then, and not hours later when my mother lit the candles and covered her eyes in prayer: time would slow and become more fluid, so that millenia lapped up against each other, and the biblical world entered into our own. Our worlds would remain fused throughout the slow and quiet hours of the Sabbath – truly a timeless time for an Orthodox Jew, when most amenities of modern life become taboo: electricity, cars, even pen and paper – and would only separate on Saturday night when I held the twisted strands of wax in my hand for the havdalah, and my father pronounced the magic words – "hamavdil ben kodesh lichol", "to separate between the sacred and the profane." For a few seconds then the air around me would feel empty and thin: the holy had fled, and the holy, in my mind, was that God-filled, sand-soaked era hovering near.

For the sake of honesty, I should probably mention that the Bible wasn't the only set of stories that had this grip on me. *D'Auliere's Book of Greek Myths* was just as holy in my eyes, and Cinderella-worship was my first religion. I loved Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah, for much the same reason that I loved Apollo, Athena, and Cinderella: because they were grand and larger than life, but also so rich and alive, so full of pathos and ambiguity, that they often felt more familiar to me than many of my classmates, whose inner minds and characters were remote and mysterious in contrast. (Fighting over the building blocks I could not understand; killing your sibling out of jealousy I could.) At that point, then, I suppose, I could have just as easily become a writerly pagan, or a writerly agnostic, or a writerly Disney employee.

But it was only the biblical stories that were told to me again and again, year after year; only the biblical stories that I soon began to study line by line, delving

deeper and deeper into the characters and parsing each God-given phrase as if it held the meaning of everything. While the boys moved on to Talmud, we girls remained right where we had started, in Genesis and Exodus, with brief, sketchy forays into Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. The gendered curriculum was an affront to my feminist mother who wanted my mind to be challenged by the rigors of Talmudic thought, but I couldn't have been happier. Why would I want to spend my days wondering who should pay for a gored ox, when I could instead spend my days trying to further unravel the mystery of what it had felt like to be Leah, living in the shadow of lovely Rachel?

People tell me that it's remarkable to feel intimate with something as august as the Bible, but I can't even manage to think of those familiar pages as august. Those pages are family. I grew up *inside* of them. I measured my maturation through my understanding of them, because the more I learned about life, the deeper I could delve into the elliptical phrases of that sonorous, all-knowing, but not at all all-telling narrator; subtle tensions became apparent where none had been before, pathos turned up in unexpected places, villains suddenly aroused my sympathy, and heroes my suspicion.

Home from a miserable summer at camp, having known loneliness and homesickness for the first time, shadowy Rebecca, stealing from one son to give to the other, suddenly jumped off the page at me: I sensed her deep isolation so far away from her family in Haran, living among the barbarians of Canaan. I sensed her clinging to her son Jacob, with his nice, soft ways, his civility, as the only thing in that wild land that signified home, and the painful alienation she must have felt from his twin Essau, symbol of all that had gone wrong in her life: her own flesh and blood had become a wild, barbaric man, a native of that alien land and not really her own. Was

she supposed to suffer silently and in isolation forever because of just one mistake at a well, she would have wondered as she plotted her anguished betrayal.

Of course, the inverse was also true: that the more I studied the stories, the more I came to understand about life. Going over these plot lines again and again, each time with a teacher who wanted us to read them differently from the last, I began to get the sense of just how multi-layered and complex even the most seemingly straight-forward situation can be. The *pshat* – the simple story (as opposed to the moral lessons we were supposed to read in, or the bizarre midrashim that attempted to fill in the Bible's backstory) – was always presented as a challenge, not a given. And learning our moral lessons by putting ourselves day after day in the sandals of these ancient people and agonizing over their intentions, their choices, their sins and their foibles meant that the moral principles my classmates and I soaked up were all deeply tinged, first and foremost, by empathy.

I think it's fair to say that even then – at a time when I believed fully in a God who cared about the state of my soul, and believed moreover that my soul's state depended heavily on following arcane and obscure rules of conduct, such as waiting six hours between meat and dairy meals – that the sacred, for me, remained synonymous with the divine narrator and His stories. The highly ritualized life felt forced and impersonal, prayer fell flat on my ears. But I loved God, and I wanted to do what was right in His eyes, because He was the narrator of the stories I lived in.

Perhaps, given that the Bible *was* my faith, it was inevitable that the Bible would be the thing to ultimately challenge it. In fact, this happened very early on. In third grade we added a new subject to our mornings. In addition to studying *Humas* (the five books of Moses) we began to study *Navi* (the three latter books of the Deuteronomic histories, plus the prophecies.) We began at the beginning, which

meant with the book of *Joshua* and the brutal conquest of Canaan by the Israelites. Reading *Joshua* was much like learning that the beloved grandparent who bounced you on his knee, stuck that same knee in thousands of unsuspecting groins. Gone was God the protector, the teacher, the vanquisher of evil, the occasionally peevish. In his place was God the bloodthirsty. As the warrior-Jews made their way through their promised land, God had one simple rule for them: kill every living thing. Every man, woman, and child. Every animal. I thought at first that this was a test, much like God's test of Abraham at Moriah: just as God didn't really want Abraham to kill his son Isaac, He didn't really want the Jews to kill newborn babies. But it was no test. Failure to fully comply brought on His wrath.

I was devastated by the account, naturally, and asked my teacher how this mayhem could be God's desire. My teacher was a bewigged eighteen-year-old in her ninth month of pregnancy who had no time for moral subtleties. (The boys were taught by rabbis, and we were taught by their young wives. Sometimes these young wives were very intelligent and effective teachers, but this one was not.) With a sigh of impatience she explained that every single person inhabiting Canaan when the Israelites invaded was evil. Even the newborn babies were evil. They were born evil. Something struck me as odd about this, but being in third grade I couldn't quite put my finger on the problem of free will and moral determinism. Instead of an objection, I found an image that wouldn't leave me alone: I saw myself standing in ill-fated Jericho, watching in awe-struck horror as Joshua's army lifted up their voices in a shout and brought the walls down with the sound of God's name. I'd love to say that it was because of this moral revulsion that I began to feel alienated from my faith, but it wasn't really. I was angry at God for his surprisingly inhumane ways, and I was ashamed. But I still loved Him.

It was because of an altogether amoral slip-up that I began to doubt the reliability of my favorite narrator. In my freshman year of high school we studied *Deuteronomy* for the second or third time. Reading through Moses's final blessings of the twelve tribes before his death a line suddenly struck me: "Of Rueben he said, May Rueben live and not die out, but may he be few in number." What kind of crazy blessing was this, I wondered? I wondered for days before it began to dawn on me that this was not a deathbed blessing at all, but a politico-historical piece of writing, composed at a time when the tribe of Rueben seemed poised to vanish (a time considerably later, necessarily, than the portrayed scene suggested). I was devastated by this realization because until then I had believed that the Bible was dictated by God to Moses in the desert and had remained unaltered since that time. Perhaps if I had been raised as a Conservative Jew or a Reform Jew or any sort of Jew other than Orthodox my faith would not have been rocked by the discovery of this blatantly late and blatantly political piece of writing within a sacred text. But I was raised Orthodox and had no idea that one could believe in Judaism without believing that God had written the Torah through Moses. I had been raised thinking that these books were so sacred that you had to kiss them every time you closed them, that you could never place another object on top of them (there was even an order in which they had to be placed on top of each other), that if you dropped one on the ground you had to do penance. I was in no position, therefore, to calmly accept that they were anything other than infallible and perfectly honest.

And yet once I suspected they weren't, I needed to know. Painful as this was, I began to gather the evidence to prove that my hunch was right: that the entire Hebrew Bible was nothing but a motley collection of an ancient peoples' writings. I went to the library and read about the naturalized theories of biblical authorship, about

how Israel had sprung out from the Canaanite tribes and how their practices (still my practices) reflected their pagan origin; how the politically-motivated rules of a struggling new people (don't eat pig because the seductive Philistines love it; don't eat milk and meat together because a kid in its mother's milk is the ritual food of a certain cultic practice) had become the supposedly God-given rules I'd been living by.

On a Sabbath afternoon not long after I began these treacherous researches, I decided to confide in my mother, who had always been (and still is) my chief sounding board and advisor. As we strolled through the local park, I poured out my doubts to her, but rather than greet them with a stricken look, her face was calm and encouraging, as if she'd been waiting a long time to hear me voice these thoughts. As it turned out, she had been, having come to them herself decades earlier. I think a part of me knew this all along. In fact, during my first crisis of faith, the one in the third grade, when I asked my mother what she made of God's immoral dicta, and she looked at me quite seriously and said, "Do you really want to know what I think?" I must have already suspected strongly, because my response then was a hasty, "Not yet." As I seem to have understood even back then, tacitly knowing and explicitly hearing are worlds apart, and that Sabbath afternoon, learning that my mother only went through the motions of belief for my sake and the sake of her other Orthodox family members, I felt the last vestiges of belief slip away from me.

Being an adolescent there must have been a brief period when I felt angry and resentful to be so brusquely de-faithed, but what I remember feeling is emptied and abandoned. The worst of it was that I began to feel alienated from the stories I loved. I bided my time until I could escape to college and leave the unsacred texts behind.

The only problem was that I couldn't leave them behind. I tried very hard to create a new mental family for myself at college, one based on rational, objective

choice, rather than blind faith and the accidents of my birth. (Although I've often wondered, with a physicist father and a philosopher mother, were these purely intellectual affiliations any less the accidents of my birth?) My new Adam was supposed to be Thales, the world's first scientist, my Abraham Socrates, my Moses Descartes. But when I read Plato, I found my thoughts wandering eastward, wondering what was going on in the Kingdom of Judah while Plato contemplated the Forms; when I read Hobbes I thought of the anarchy that had reigned in Israel in the years before kingship. Each time my mind presented me with one of these old familiar stories I welcomed it with an acute sense of loss: *that one was mine too*, I'd think, and rather than pursue whatever thought I'd meant to think (what *was* happening in Judah at the time of Plato?) I pushed it away.

At the beginning of this essay I made a point of distinguishing between the writerly Jew and the Jewish writer, and I still want to hold that distinction firmly in place. But these very distinct qualities can easily come together in one person -- in fact, I'd be willing to bet the confluence is common -- and, in my case, I think the worst thing about losing my writerly Jewish faith, was the way it affected me as a Jewish writer. As my favorite works of literature, the stories of the Bible had always functioned as the standard of depth and largeness I longed to reach when I wrote. They were my Platonic Forms of narrative excellence, and they hovered in the back of my mind from the moment I struck on an idea until the moment I tweaked the final word. Now, since I was dead-set on avoiding any thoughts about the Bible, I had to avoid writing fiction as well. Not writing fiction wasn't nearly as big a sacrifice then as it would be now, when it's pretty much all I do with my time, but it was not exactly pleasant to stifle my ideas. Eventually I started to do something even worse than not write at all: I started to write *wrong*. I seized on plots and themes and settings that

could not possibly use the Bible as their archetype: small stories of modern, everyday life, heavy on close observations of manner, light on heady, tangled drama. For a girl whose great young passions were the Bible, the Olympians, and Cinderella, this was not a fruitful genre. My stories were consistently terrible, and writing them was never satisfying. I was aching to do something grander, messier, and more *me*, but the pain of my loss always threatened from the sidelines.

I think it's fair to say that I would have had to choose another career path if my alienation from the Bible had persisted. (Whether this inevitability would have been entirely bad remains to be seen.) As it happened, though, my irreligiosity slowly ceased to function as a positive part of my identity, and became a simple absence, and somewhere in this transformation my favorite stories were given back to me. Surely, this all must have happened gradually, but I became aware of the change quite suddenly. One day in lecture a professor made a passing reference to the prophecies of Jeremiah. Warily and wearily, I went through the mental translation in my head – "Who is that? What would that sound like in Hebrew or Aramaic? Oh yes, Yirmiyahu." I was certain that once I'd hit on the old familiar name in the old familiar language hovering in the Godless air, I'd feel the typical sadness, desolation, vulnerability. But I didn't. In fact, I felt happy to roll the sounds over in my mind: Yir-mi-ya-hu. It was like catching the whiff of home-cooking after years abroad.

I rushed back to my dorm room afterward, and straight to the bookshelf, where all the old, sacred books languished, unopened, between well-thumbed Homer and Hume. (I always kept them between Homer and Hume from room change to room change, my old favorites surrounded by my new ones.) I opened them one after the other, looking lovingly at their weathered, geometrically fascinating pages – the archaic Hebrew swallowing the archaic English hovering above the pithy commentary

of the medieval exegete Rashi. I became lost in Jeremiah's prophecies of doom, then in Absalom's treachery against his father David, then in Leah living in the shadow of the lovely Rachel. I hopped from favorite to favorite all afternoon, and when I finally emerged it was with the realization that I hadn't ever been abandoned. I found myself kissing the leather covers, the way I'd done back when I believed that they were alive with the spirit of divine authorship, and that night I scribbled out a convoluted, biblical sort of story that was not particularly good but was absolutely mine.

With or without divine inspiration, I learned that afternoon, there was still Jeremiah calling out his dire predictions. There was David too, forging a kingdom out of an unruly confederation; Jonathan, torn between his father and his dearest friend; Saul driven mad by insecurity; Abraham following an idea into the unknown. And there was a God too, a sonorous, all-knowing, fierce and unpredictable old grandfather narrating the stories I loved.