

*On Both Sides
of the Midline*

Jacob Gindin

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Cover and Book Design: Liliya Lev Ari
Producer: Rinat Maya

Book (Hebrew) published in Israel by Zmora-Bitan, 1999

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ISBN: 978-965-550-493-4

International sole distributor: Contento
22 Isserles Street, 6701457 Tel Aviv, Israel
www.ContentoNow.com
Netanel@contento-publishing.com

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of the Midline*

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About the translator



Shalom Goldman is professor of religion at Middlebury College in the USA.

He is the author, editor and co-author of six books, including "Zeal for Zion: Christians, Jews and the Idea of the Promised Land". Among his arts projects is the libretto of Philip Glass's opera "Akhnaten". His most recent book is "Jewish-Christian Difference and Modern Jewish Identity". (2015)

Gindin thanks Topol



Chaim Topol is a world famous stage and cinema performer, and the ikon who was made by “Fiddler on the Roof” - one of the most successful films ever. Topol made over 25 films and produced 10. As a theatre actor appeared in the West end in

London and on Broadway in N.Y. among other stages in the U.S. and Canada, the U.K., Australia Japan and Israel. Topol - winner of many awards, among them: For **best actor** - the “Golden Gate”, Two Golden Globes, the Donatello - Italy, and San Sebastian, and so for stage awards in New York, London, Sidney, Tel Aviv etc.

Topol is a gifted illustrator who has been drawing mainly portraits. Topol has illustrated over 30 books including three written by himself. His illustrations keep being exhibited in galleries and institutions.

After reading the manuscript of on both sides of Midline Topol found it “a pleasure” to illustrate the book, to match some illustrations of his “Persons” to the spirit of the book. Chaim Topol is founder of the Society of Friends of interRAI, and supported the young interRAI scholars grants to which this book will contribute.

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CHAPTER I:

Weakness

*B*efore the anesthetist went into action, and while the surgeon was having his surgical gloves put on, Yitzhak thought of his sister, who never woke up from a chest operation.

“Goodbye, goodbye,” he whispered. No one heard him. His eyes got heavy. “Maybe we’ll see each other again.” Almost a month had passed since he was snared by God’s net and transformed into some other being. Someone was fiddling with his arm, with the green valve on the IV tubing that was stuck in his skin.

In the beginning, when it all happened, Yitzhak knew that it was morning. He woke up to the sound of dishes rattling as Malka worked in the kitchen to the left, along a small hallway—just three meters long and then a right into the kingdom of cooking pots and frying pans, a place always filled with a mix of sounds and sighs, the gurgling of running water, knives and forks clanging in the sink, the

slurping of tasting, the sound of the knife on the cutting board as vegetables were thinly sliced. He knew how to tell the difference between the creaking of the cabinet above the sink and that of the cabinet below it—and could distinguish between the sound of the milk silverware drawer and that of the meat silverware. Even the whisper of the door of the large refrigerator was different from that of the door of the freezer. He caught the smell of coffee and cardamom and saw in his mind's eye the foam on top of a cup of coffee, a cup whose octagonal base was narrower than its round mouth. He knew too that today was Sunday. Over the forty-four years they had been together, Malka woke him every Sunday with coffee in bed. Yitzhak returned the favor on Friday afternoons, at exactly five p.m., standing above her with a glass of lemonade when she woke up from her nap. Even on those Friday afternoons in which there arose in the arguments and whimpers in their spacious apartment—and Malka ran around to contain the shame with the plastic shutters on their aluminum frame so the neighbors wouldn't hear them in the courtyard— a haze of rest and quiet eventually settled over the house when Malka lay down for her Friday nap. It always ended with a lemonade awakening, Yitzhak standing over her with a glass saucer that held a rattling cup—the result of a slight tremor that he had developed since the bar mitzvah of Eitan, the grandson who grew up in America—and on the cup was a slice of lemon wedged on both sides of the glass.

“Malka,” he would whisper and at once she was awake and sitting up, the glass in her hand, and she was waiting to see the moistness in his eyes. Forty-four years. Sometimes she pretended that she was still asleep, offering him her left shoulder so that he would shake it and wake her up.

On the day it started, as she stood by his bed and clanged the spoon against the glass again, the sharp smell of Sunday assailing his nostrils, he understood that his eyes were closed. He always greeted Malka with his eyes open, sitting up in bed with the blanket pulled over his chest and the giant pillow supporting his back. Now he was on his back, his arms under the covers. He opened his mouth, closed it again, moved his lips and then did it again.

“What’s wrong with you, Itzhak?” Her voice trembled.

He tried to open his eyes and look at her. His arm jutted out of the cave of the covers toward her, and his hand touched her apron, then sank in a vertical motion. It stayed there limp, blocking half the distance between the bed and the closet. His hand, palm down, was sturdy and rough from fifty years of carpentry. The scar from his work accident—from when he was working for the Army—had turned white. Without thinking about it, Malka used to run her finger over the scar while they were watching television.

Now he opened his eyes, smiled, clutched her hand to his chest, and dropped his eyes again. “Another hour’s sleep won’t hurt me today,” he whispered. He turned over to his

left side—not all at once, but in stages—first his head, then his right arm. He stabbed his fingertips into the border of the mattress, beyond which everything descended to the cold floor below.

He tried bending arm and forearm against each other at the axis of his elbow. Somehow he managed to raise his shoulder slightly. A tremor ran across his back, between his shoulder blades, and his armpit stretched open, thin-haired—a seam was open along a line rising up from the waist. His shoulder rose for a moment, hesitant, afraid it would fall off onto the sheet. The pit of his arm closed again—almost. But no, the shoulder stopped in the middle of its journey, unable to complete its task, and back on the same route almost to the point from which it had started to rise, and Yitzhak was like a bystander watching it fall, but no, here it was, pulling itself up again, the shoulder wouldn't give up - if it drowned it would die, and the eyes sought help, crying out to this stupid left side, and then suddenly came the leg. His right leg, still underneath the covers, hadn't sensed the hopelessness of the shoulder on the same side.

On its own, through its own power, his leg pushed and came between the blanket and the left leg, the one stuck to the sheets. It moved a bit and fell back not far from where it had started. And now came his pelvis, pulling

along with it his butt and his waist, and it came down, collapsing with it that whole side of his body, the whole line from his shoulder and down through his ribs; all of his body came tumbling down without control or plan, and Yitzhak ended up turned over and twisted, with his face on the pillow, and the whole effort was too much. Who had declared this idiotic war and what for? And how is it that his body has collapsed? And how the hell did he find his corpse in the rubble? He pushed with the arm and leg whose importance he already recognized, straightened himself out, and smiled at Malka. "I can't get up." And before she put her hand under the covers to cup his heel with her palms, she placed the glass down on the dresser, bent her knees and her trunk and stretched sideways, like a trapeze artist, to the left and the right. Pulling his heel and rocking from side to side, she cried, "Alarm clock, alarm clock!" Yitzhak gave her a tight smile. He bit his lower lip, stretched his neck, raised his head a bit off the pillow, and gingerly let it fall back, as if it were a fragile object. "When was the last time you were my alarm clock?" he whispered.

She remembered that it had been at the Dead Sea, maybe three or four years ago. They went there with his sister and her husband. The holiday was a gift in honor of their golden wedding anniversary.

"Maybe if you took my blanket off first," he said. He made a chewing motion twice with his empty mouth. He looked paler than ever to her. Malka felt the blood leave her

face; she was sinking, sinking. She leaned back and felt the cool of the morning in the Formica paneling on the closet at her back. She searched, as if blind, for the edge of the bed, sat down on its edge with half of her thigh and butt perched there, and pushed against Yitzhak's knee, which she found under her. Realizing this she moved right, but then again fell against his knee with all her weight. She hesitated for a moment and then suddenly regained her strength. Straightening herself out she put her arms out to him, and Yitzhak, as if swept up by her determination, put out his right arm, grabbed on to her, and tried with all his might to sit up straight. At the end of that effort she had to pull him by the arm so that he could complete his rise. When he was two-thirds of the way up, she put her right hand on his neck and pulled him to her pelvis. Once he used to cling there on his own power and with tenderness. She had to hold him to her, so that he wouldn't drag her down with him. What if she lost her balance suddenly, while she was holding him? Overcome with the understanding that he was completely dependent on her, she trembled. For a moment he regained his balance and her grip loosened. She saw the fear in his eyes, saw his brow furrow. And while she gazed at him he slipped from her grip, and even though she let him fall she fell with him on to the covers, her breasts crushed painfully against his chest. Then came belly and thighs, and neck and head, and at the end all the weight. She was falling on him, falling

and falling, plummeting from the height of a mountain down to a dark abyss, falling endlessly.

As if possessed she yelled: “Idiot, enough already. Stop this stupidity. What can you be thinking?” Still lying down she pushed him off her. “Can’t you see that I’ve been on my feet since early this morning? Look at my veins, they are blue as grapes.” She got up heavily and turned away from him. “Go get your own coffee!” She stormed into the kitchen, bumping against the walls of the hallway, her slippers banging against the floor, as if her feet had forgotten how normal people walk. She grabbed the edge of the sink and dabbed her face with the yellow rag. It was still damp from when she had used it to sponge down the counter. She stuffed the rag in her mouth and choked her cries with it. She was breathing heavily through her nostrils (it sounded like a tired steam engine), and she knew that Yitzhak was listening to her and seeing her. A feeling that ants were crawling on her tingled up her fingers. The wall phone was watching her, right in front of her face. She hit the 6 key. After what seemed an eternity of rings, she heard a whirring sound and knew that he had already left for work. The answering machine picked up, goddammit. She slammed down the phone, took the rag out of her mouth, fished a slice of lemon out of a plastic container, and began to chew on it.

At the carpentry shop, Salim the Arab worker said that Herzl had not yet come in this morning. She left a message that he should get in touch.

Malka made herself a cup of hot lemonade and placed it on the tray with some low-fat cheese and thin crackers.

When the doorbell rang she was sitting on the recliner in the living room. She had almost finished the cheese but hadn't yet touched the hot drink. Her stare was fixed; not noticing the heavily framed tapestry that her sister had given her sixteen years ago, when they had moved into the house. In the picture a noble horse with an outstretched neck reared up on its legs against a background of delicate clouds. When she didn't hear any answer, Aviva, "the most hypocritical and audacious of daughters-in-laws" opened the door and pushed Guy into the apartment, knocking the metal door behind her. "Malka, the nose-drops are in his pocket." Guy ran into the apartment and disappeared from her sight.

In front of her she saw the red light of the hot water heater. "Hello, what's going on? Anyone home?"

Aviva closed the door silently and went into the kitchen. She noted the dirty yellow rag on the kitchen floor yellow. and stopped. "Guy, come right away to mommy, sweetie." Her voice rose, broke, and shook. On the sink there was a large economy bottle of cleaning fluid, a white swan sailing on its blue label. From the street she could hear the prolonged honking of a hoarse car. The sound of running water from a neighboring apartment came to her. She heard the voice of her eldest child: "Grandma, see how I can wipe my nose. Here, in the handkerchief, see." The whoosh of

his nostrils went into the tissue paper. In the living room she found Malka hiding a mute cry, trembling powerfully into Guy's shoulder while the child was still puffing into the snot-filled Kleenex.

The routine appearance of Guy and Aviva brought Malka back. To Aviva she said: "Go see Grandpa, in the bedroom." She pointed her chin in his direction. She got up from her chair. "Come," she stood up, "let's go together," she said, smiling. "I don't know what happened to me, why I'm acting like a robot. Look how I gobbled down all of this cheese, like a slob." She couldn't believe that she could be so happy to see Aviva; she always took Herzl to her own parent's house on the night of the Seder and she joked about Malka's hot lemonade: "Grandma's coffee," she called it. Her work always came before the children—she never missed a day. Malka knew, but never told anyone, that Herzl, "the best-looking" of her children, deserved a better wife. And the stupid one got angry when she tried to tell him, before the kids were born, that Aviva was no Penina Rosenblum. Since then she hadn't raised the subject, and Herzl seemed less and less like himself, like when he came back from the army during the war in Lebanon. It was then that Yitzhak quipped, "Goodbye (Shalom) to Herzl, instead of Peace (Shalom) to the Galilee."

Yitzhak was sitting up in their bed on her side. The blanket from his side of the bed lay defeated on the floor, on top of the hairy throw rug. The coffee was far away

and untasted; it had moved away from the saucer. The cup's journey to the edge of the night table was marked by coffee stains. Aviva smelled something odd. She still hadn't understood what had happened to Yitzhak and laughed at him from a distance. "Say good morning to grandpa!" she said to Guy. That way she didn't have to look directly at Yitzhak. She always spoke to him by way of the children, and now she continued to stare at Guy intently even after he spoke to his grandfather.

"I'm late, see you later. Bye, Guy sweetie, be a good boy." She went out into the kitchen, and Malka could hear her as she dialed the phone. The line was silent for a moment. "Salim, give me Herzl, quickly." Again there was silence. Guy moved closer to Yitzhak, stood facing him, and scrutinized him. Aviva's voice could be heard from the kitchen: "Herzl, come home to your Mama. Something bad happened this morning, and Guy is with her. Maybe you can take him to the carpentry shop. I'll be free by this afternoon." Then her tone softened and got sweeter. "Me too, Herzl." "Herzl will be here in about two hours." She tossed this remark over her shoulder as she walked out, her shoes making no sound on the floor.

Yitzhak sat bent over with the weight of twenty extra years. He was staring at Guy's belly. The white sheet was stained with the outlines of a new, spreading continent, something like the unbroken coastline of Africa; and his pajama pants in the front were also stained, down to mid-