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Fate and Judgement

My father, Mordechai Shalev, was a literary critic. By the time he was twenty he had already published a number of scathing reviews of the new Israeli literature, claiming it suffered from a poverty of ideas, confusion and vacuity because it had broken away from the cultural heritage of ancient Jewish literature. He was an ambitious critic who strove to shape public opinion rather than simply judge it.

For this reason, it is of no surprise that when he became a parent, my father took extreme care when choosing bedtime stories to read to his children. He regarded conventional children's stories as inferior in quality. By the time I was three years old, he was already introducing me to the heights of world literature. He read us biblical stories, as well as stories by S. Y. Agnon, the only Hebrew writer ever to win the Nobel Prize. He read us excerpts from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*; by the age of five I was already listening to Franz Kafka at bedtime.

I remember one particularly turbulent winter evening of rain and thunderstorms, when there was a power outage in the village where we lived. We lit candles and gathered together around the dining table and my father began reading to us in a clear voice, his face illuminated by the candles and the lightening. He was reading Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. I do not recall how far through the book we got, but by the time the power returned, I was a different person. The gates of consciousness had opened and a new guest had entered, ushering in a gloomy, threatening and confusing world.

Not long after this stormy evening I encountered Kafka's *Before the Law*, the disturbing paradox of the man from the country, who dared not break the rules in order to enter the gate of Law. I still recall how much I identified with this poor man and how concerned I was for his fate. What was his sin and why was he being punished? I wondered with fear in my heart, because he had

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acted in accordance with what the doorkeeper said at the entrance to the Law.

Occasionally our father would explain these literary masterpieces to us, not just the language, but also the hidden meanings. He regarded these literary works as riddles that must be solved, and he regarded the literary critic as someone able to read the hidden meanings, someone who knows better than the writer himself the underlying layers of the text.

I clearly remember visits of writers to our home, particularly Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua, whose works my father frequently critiqued. He interpreted their hidden intentions with jubilance, and they sat facing him, shocked by aspects of their work that had never occurred to them. A. B. Yehoshua even referred to this as "mini psychoanalysis".

I am not convinced it is a good idea for a writer to grow up in the home of a literary critic. Not that I regarded myself as a writer during those years, I simply wrote. As soon as I had mastered the Hebrew alphabet I began writing poems and short stories. It was as Kafka described in Max Brod's ear—a badger digging itself a burrow. Inside my own burrow of words I felt safe and protected. But outside of the burrow, literary criticism prevailed. From time to time I would copy my poems and short stories in legible handwriting on a clean page, so that another pair of eyes could read my words. Why exactly, I wonder now, could I not make do with the unadulterated pleasure of writing? With that transcendental feeling of inspiration, when words flow of their own accord, one after the other? I probably needed positive reinforcement. Despite the anxiety, I also needed recognition, or just a reality check. The hierarchy was clear—I first showed it to my mother, who was always quick to enthuse. If she liked it, I showed it to my brother and only then did I dare show it to my severe father. Sometimes, as I stood in front of him while he read my text, I felt like that man from the country who stood before the Law.

At the age of twenty-nine, I published my first book of poetry. It was a little late coming, considering I had already accumulated a vast number of poems, many of which had been published in newspapers and journals. Moreover, I had been awarded a literary prize some years earlier that was intended to fund publication of a book. But I hesitated, year after year. This was mostly due to my father's advice to wait awhile, to let my writing mature. He believed that each literary creation (including literary criticism, which he regarded as an artistic creation in and of itself), required breathing space, a hiding away to facilitate a moment of reacquaintance with the text. It took him months to write his critical essays, rewriting them over and again before they

were finally published in the newspaper, and indeed they were read with bated breath.

I followed his advice, I matured so much I began to feel I was rotting away. It was that same need, so familiar from my childhood, that won the upper hand: the need for recognition, for positive reinforcement, a reality check. Finally, after carefully selecting poems, I approached publishing houses. To my immense joy, the manuscript was accepted.

This first slender book of poetry won prizes and critical acclaim. Finally, I was satisfied, after years of hesitation and doubts standing before the Law. When I was offered the chance to move over to the other side—as a literary critic of a local newspaper in Jerusalem—I agreed with alacrity. I told myself that getting paid for reading a book could not be such a bad deal.

I failed to consider that reading four books a week might be too intensive and might well affect my appreciation of each book. Soon enough, I became a scathing critic; my eyes hunted down and invariably found weaknesses in literary works; I even took pride in exposing them.

Luckily for both the books and their writers, I quit this job after only a short while and began working as an editor in a publishing house. Every so often, when a literary magazine approached me, I wrote a review, enabling me to dedicate more time to the work and the words, experimenting with a psychoanalytical interpretation and revealing the motives hidden even from the writers.

For better or for worse, this is how I met my husband. I was asked to review his poetry collection. I read it with excitement and a deep sense of familiarity. My analysis of his hidden motives disturbed him, and he contacted me. That, in fact, was the last time I ever wrote a review.

From that time onward, I chose to apply my critical tools to editorial work, where improvements and corrections can still be made, not only to highlight weaknesses in the text but to address them. To this day, I prefer to read my writer friends' unpublished manuscripts rather than their finished books.

Soon after that, I penned what is likely to be my last poem. Surprisingly, what seemed to me to be a poem was, in fact, the beginning of a novel. The lines grew longer, and the pages multiplied. I dug a burrow, devoting myself to the protagonist who cried out from deep within me, a young and wild woman who dares to rebel against her maternal duties and challenges both herself and the readers in a kind of tragic stand-up comedy.

Two years later, when the novel was accepted for publication, my father asked to read it. It was a provocative novel, not the kind of

novel a daughter would want her father to read, and yet I couldn't give up hope. I procrastinated as long as possible, and just to be sure, I handed it over to him only after final editing and proofreading, when it was impossible to change anything or halt publication.

And yet, my father said it was a great pity the book had already been sent to press. He said I should have put the book away for a few months, returned to it, reacquainted myself, and worked on it some more. The book has potential, he said, but it needs to mature. If it is published in its present form, it will be a miscarriage, he said.

I panicked but did not follow his advice. My editor loved the book, my husband too. The publishing house had big hopes for it, and so did I. However, in August 1993, when the book saw the light of day, I had my fair share of darkness. The reviews focused on the protagonist's moral judgment, character, and choices. The protagonist's aggressive attitude triggered counter-aggression, and her lack of empathy alienated her from the critics. Unlike my poetry collection, this debut novel was received with antagonism and miscomprehension.

Back then, book reviews were reserved for weekend newspapers, and I remember the anxiety of waiting for those reviews. For months, I shuddered at the sight of newspapers stacked in local stores. In each of these newspapers, another public humiliation might be lurking, more mockery and insults for the book I wrote with such enthusiasm. Sometimes I thought of the reviews I myself once wrote, and felt shame.

One weekend, an incredibly humiliating review was published. This upset me so much that I went back to bed, and only the insistent ringing of the phone forced me out of bed a few hours later. To my surprise, it was my father. Don't despair, go on writing, he said, don't give them that power over you. Years later, my husband told me how he stood beside my father, begging him to give me encouragement.

This failure left me hurt and anxious. I was afraid the editors at the publishing house would no longer trust me and that I would be fired. I lost faith in my new book and lost faith in myself as a writer. I decided to write only poetry, but the words would not come. Occasionally, I tried my hand at short stories; most of them I never finished. I focused on editing other writer's books and tried to be content with that. Occasionally, readers told me how much they enjoyed my book, but this only deepened my sense of a missed opportunity.

More than two years passed before I felt another strong wave of inspiration, an alertness of words that gathered around me. Suddenly, my writing flowed again and, much to my surprise, I found myself liberated from the anxieties and expectations that had accompanied the writing of my first novel. I probably "breathed deep" the "vivifying

air" of failure, as Samuel Beckett so ingeniously put it. It had already happened; I had overcome it, I thought to myself. But most of the time, I did not think. I was simply happy that the words were back, that I had found my way back to my burrow.

It was precisely then, when I was not expecting anything, that I suddenly became popular again. Everything turned upside-down. Even my father, who received my book only after it was bound and printed, was almost satisfied. The dreaded newspapers overflowed with compliments. I was beside myself, although I still flicked through the reviews with suspicion. After all, if I let myself believe all their words of praise what would I do with the words of condemnation that would surely follow. Don't give them that power over you, I told myself.

Thirty years have since passed, and six more novels. I have yet to develop a Buddhistic attitude of temperance toward literary reviews, and I tend to shield myself from them, particularly during the first vulnerable months after a new book is released. I read these reviews long after they are published, when my feelings are less raw, by then I find them of interest irrespective of my own self-judgement. I have no cause to complain. Since my debut novel, all my books have been well received, but the trauma still stings. Whenever the time comes to exit the burrow with a new book, I always feel as if I am about to stand trial.

Meanwhile, my debut novel has been the subject of many academic research papers, but I remain alienated from it. Occasionally I come across it in the library, and I peek into the book and then close it abruptly, like a bad memory.

It was only earlier this year that I had the nerve to read it from beginning to end. For the first time, I felt able to see that this book is a part of me, to embrace the wild and confused protagonist, to feel compassion for her and to even marvel at her bravery. Having said this, it was easy for me to pinpoint sections of the book that had not fully ripened and, furthermore, the potential that lay between the lines. Almost imperceptibly, I began rewriting the book, giving it a motherly caress I had been unable to give it back then. Or perhaps it was a fatherly caress?

Is this what my father meant in that difficult conversation so long ago? I wondered, is this what I would have done back then, if I had taken his advice? At the end of the day, he was right for the most part. It was bitter and painful like a miscarriage. He wanted to save me from this. On the other hand, isn't failure sometimes a milestone on the way to success? Perhaps if I had listened to him I would have missed my chance?

As I rewrote the book, I came across a body of writing on Kafka's trial which my father completed before I was even born. In it, he points

out how Kafka annuls the notion of fate since the external progression of events depends entirely on the protagonist. The only judge exists in the protagonist's inner self; it is here that the power of judgement lies. The same thing applies to the doorkeeper — after all, the gate was wide open and this is why the sin of the man from the country was his very request for permission. Instead of listening to the doorkeeper he should have overcome the internal obstacle and continue on his way.

Is there consolation, or even redemption, or is it an insufferable existential journey? This is the question that will likely remain open, just like that gate of Law.