

Divinity School: Reading the Bible with Ilona Karmel

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By Bernard Avishai

Ilona Karmel died on December 13, 2000. She was supposed to have died in the Krakow ghetto, or in the Plashow death camp, or when a retreating *Wehrmacht* half-track ran her down, crushing her legs and killing her mother; but instead she lived, came to Radcliffe, graduated and wrote a novel, then married and, as fate would have it, wound up working in a Munich orphanage, where she began another novel, which she published back in Boston in 1969, eventually teaching longer fiction in the MIT Writing Program, which is where I met her in 1980. To say this was love at first sight is not to say much. Ila had a heart like a street-car—so I was told by the guarded (and somewhat envious) colleague who introduced us—and I was new to Boston and an orphan to boot. Ila was also the most immediately inviting person I had ever encountered, probing and candid and big-sisterly. She seemed to say, “I have no patience for mere acquaintances, so this first talk is actually an audition for a life-long friendship,” and I left her home raw and exhilarated. I would soon learn that Ila had no patience either for any great show of admiration for her, so writing now about how she helped some of us with God, of all things, feels pretty reckless. “*Nu, come on!*,” Ila would scoff, implying self-effacement, but not really meaning it, wanting, not less honor, but more *scrutiny*, which no human being could stand too much of, let alone God. Only children were perfect—and not past 18.

Ila enjoyed telling the story, which I always took to be the first class of her little divinity school, that when she was interviewed for the MIT position, one member of the search committee, a celebrated political columnist, noticed she had taught most recently at a day care center. “Why don’t you apply for another job teaching toddlers?” he challenged her. “Because I am not good enough,” she replied. But this was no joke, actually. The premise that she was not good enough, not *innocent*, was always just beneath the surface of her conversation. She loved Dostoyevsky, she loved Robin Williams, she loved *anybody*, in whom she detected the kind of self-doubt that could lead somewhere. This made her a natural teacher of writing; and she was notorious among Program faculty for spending hours in private conferences with students on days she was not teaching, especially black and Asian students, whom she called, simply, “de stoodents,” pronouncing the word with a reverence I found a little affected at first, suspecting (since she had published almost nothing since 1969, her great and then neglected novel, *An Estate of Memory*) that her devotion to them might be something of a cover for frustrated literary ambition. But her talent for self-doubt went, perversely, in another direction.

During the many hours we spoke on the phone about our drafts, or moved from course to creamy course at one of her dinner parties, or rode home in my car, gossiping about my (failing) tenure case, I can hardly recall a moment with Ila that did not entail some kind of religious perception. I do not mean religious dogma, though the literature of Judaism and Christianity formed some kind of boundary around her. Nor do I mean a *transcendental* perception, which was the closest her

husband Hans (the physicist, Francis Zucker) would ever let himself get to religion; for him, homage was compelled by abstract perception, formal and faultless, like Goethe's theory of color, whose mathematical expression fit, thrillingly, with sensuous nature. Ila cherished this world of his, but when she used the word God, something less sublime and more personal was at stake.

Rather, Ila had what William James called, with great awe and greater irony, a “sick soul.” She had questions that, if you outlast their driving you crazy, leave you shaken and grateful. Why be good? What is death? Does matter *matter*? A part of what made being with Ila so compelling was the sense you had that nobody had a greater reason to ask such questions or a greater purchase on the claim not to have been defeated by them. She loved the mystery of her own hope. She loved your faults if you were brave about them. Her fascination with things was rarely scholastic, her wry wit rarely cynical, her generosity rarely forced. It wasn't that such impulses—scholasticism, cynicism, cunning—were beneath her. They just weren't as interesting as a world going wrong because of sincerity.

Initially, I was somewhat perplexed, I admit, by her unwillingness to join me in any kind of regular worship. In the early years of our friendship, after I had left Israel in some despair, it comforted me to think that she might join me in *shul*, on Shabbat or on a Jewish holiday—that we could go to services, impiously but together, and perhaps feel something in common neither of us could feel alone. She was

after all, a fierce Jew, and not only for the purpose of spiting anti-Semites. She had learned the rudiments of Hebrew in Krakow, and was terribly proud of a certain familial connection to one Polish Hasidic court. She spoke of the Rabbinic tradition with a kind of veneration, though she could be highly selective on this point. She particularly loved Martin Buber's *Hasidic Tales*, which, I confess, mostly seemed so cryptic that they were good only to confirm one as a *bona fide* "searcher"—though Ila could always home in on one or two stories where Hasidic masters show how observance of commandment, or law, may be trumped by an absolute generosity. Jews, she made clear, did not need lectures from Portia about mercy.

There were *some* Jewish rites and skills she enjoyed. It was a delight for Ila to grasp the root meaning of this or that Hebrew word. "Sacrifice, *korban*, is from *karov*, to draw close," I once reminded her, and I still see her eyes widening: "Yah, Yah...", then, that introspective smile that lasted for several seconds, the glasses coming off, the stutter, the rubbing of eyes. She'd smile at the Shabbat table if my children sang *Shalom Aleichem*, though she would never join in, resisting most musical things, since she was not, as she put it, "feely-touchy." She came, year in year out, to my Seder, and spoke with particular authority to my children about slavery and freedom and the implications for all of us, especially people who worked for an hourly wage. You would not have wanted to be Ronald Reagan at such times.

But synagogue prayer was another matter. "I have a *heshbon*, an account, to settle with God," she said, as if she were speaking about a powerful, nasty uncle, whom she felt absolutely no need to forgive. She

proved her sense of affiliation with the American Jewish people by confessing her irritation with American Jewish people—chief among whose failures was the suburban synagogue, which seemed over-eager for speeches by holocaust survivors. She once scolded a local Jewish writer, who had been lecturing around the synagogues to promote a book of holocaust testimonies, “you have scars, but no wounds.” If these were *real* congregations of Jews—Ila would imply, but never just say—they would have, among other things, begged *her* to come, not to detail her misery in the camps, but to ask if beautiful ideas could be possible in the face of terrifying cruelties, which one didn't need camps to wonder about; begged her to read her poetry, or talk about literature, or interpret texts, begged her for an alternative to faked prayer. She had once experienced such a congregation. (“And what did this Rabbi say when the guards forced him into the lineup? He sang: *Ma Tovv Ohalecha, Yaacov!* How Goodly Are Your Tents, Jacob!”) Early on, in the early 1980s, I took her with me to the Harvard Hillel services on the high holidays. She came once, twice. Then she tired of making me happy. The third year she said no. “I have a *heshbon*, an account to settle with God,” she insisted. She wasn't going to give Him the satisfaction.

It was just around this time, during the winter of 1984, that two other friends and I, the writer, James Carroll, and the broadcaster, Christopher Lydon, hit on the idea that we might start an interfaith Bible study group. We were not all that sure ourselves, it must be said. We had become close in the way men in mid-life do. We were restless in our

own questions, in our marriages, humbled by fatherhood, and we often chafed each other's tender skin when words like 'salvation' and 'commandment' cupped into our conversations. We were now sure enough of one another to try to come up with a common framing for such words. But something else was going on. We were, the three of us, lapsed something-or-other and embarrassed by a need we could barely name. My youngest daughter had just been born, for instance, and I had told Chris how I had been haunted by the night of her birth, when I had tried to come up with words of welcome, and could only think in biological platitudes, something like "the great chain of being," which—it suddenly dawned on me—couldn't make *anybody* feel welcome. There was also, for the three of us, I think, an underlying desire to create some American newness, a free dialogue between Christians and Jews. This was, after all, *fin de siecle* Cambridge, democratic New England. There hadn't been anything like it since Toledo in the middle ages, and *they* never had the Constitution or Updike or Bellow.

Ila, to be sure, was not a party to this *hubris*. She was the first person I thought of inviting to join us. Now, when we look back on the group, we talk about it as if it had *all* been done for her. She agreed to join almost immediately, though she wasn't sure about interlocutors who were also "tall men." In fact, she had been planning just such a group with her friend, and my MIT colleague, Fanny Howe, who was then drawing close to Catholic teaching. Anyway, we soon figured out that—armed with her annotated essays of Von Rath and Scholem, Buber and Rahner—Ila had, in a way, been waiting all along for just such an opening. She had worked through nothing that could be called a stance;

but her response off the bat insinuated pretty clearly that none of us, not Jews nor Christians, could grasp what was our own if we could not explain this to "the other." Her response accorded with our impulses. In the presence of her crutches, those impulses took on a kind of dignity.

Not long after her death, I found Ila's dog-eared copy of Karl Rahner's essays on Christ, full of marginal comments like "lovely" and "beautiful," but also spiky rebuttals of any condescending claims about Judaism. Another comment is imprinted on my memory: Rahner writes somewhere that Christ is the foundation of, among other things, "absolute good and absolute mystery." Ila wrote in the margins, as if suddenly allergic to him, "absolute good and absolute mystery *are not* the same thing." Somehow that marginal note more than any other token caught the spirit of how we began to study Bible with her. There might be a love of Christian love, an awe before Jewish awe, but absolute claims and sleights of hand were for evangelists. *Our* group would make distinctions. No testament would be thought old.

And so the group grew: after about five meetings, there was a core of about twelve people, which included Howe, Bernie Campbell, MIT's Catholic chaplain, Paula Waters, a deacon of the Twelfth Baptist Church, the novelist Luke Salisbury—also a lawyer, a therapist, a dancer, but (we could not help but notice) none of our spouses. Many others came and went, fed up either with our personal abstractions, our pace, our impudence—Jews who were not-yet-Unitarians, Catholics who cared or did not care if the bones of Jesus might be found, Baptists whose grace seemed, at times, a little too amazing for cerebral Jews and Catholics. From the start, we determined to do the whole Oxford Bible, from

Genesis to John, The Revelation. Eventually, over six years, we muddled through twice. But perhaps the most fateful early decision we made was to meet regularly at Ila's home, which we did, as often as every two weeks when we were building momentum.

Meeting at Ila's was the obvious thing: it was hard for her to travel, there was easy parking in Belmont, the poppy seed cakes. But I think these reasons became largely irrelevant after a while. We met at Ila's because she was the soul of our conversation, and her home became a kind of temple for it. If she couldn't make the next meeting it would not take place; that was not true of anybody else. I can still conjure so easily walking up to her door, the bell, the barking, the smells of stale dinner meat and fresh cakes, the murmuring of early comers in Ila's kitchen, taking a moment to chat with her about a personal confession, the details of which we would not speak about in the group, but the emotional content of which almost always came out. I can also see and hear the touches of her conversation, the warm "I thank you" (pronounced, "I *senk* you") which followed an interpretation, and which was most conspicuously warm when the speaker was new to the group and said something simple-minded; "I thank you" followed by a short stammering that indicated she was thinking, begging for time ("Please, no, no, this will just take moment"), formulating an idea of what you said that was usually subtler than the way you put it, and therefore more naked. You continued the conversation in your mind, brushing off the cat hair before bed at night, catching the smell of her cigarettes on your sweater. You could hardly say anything that surprised Ila completely, or that Von Rath had not written a treatise on. She had seen and thought

so much that was valuable ("Nu, come on!"). The "I thank you" was most genuine when you said something that budged her own complex formulation a small degree to the left or right; you could almost feel something move in her chest, and you had drawn close.

The smallest mystery, perhaps, was what Ila loved so much about the Bible. Nevertheless I hesitate to speculate about this alone. I like to think there could be a group conversation about this love, with each of her interlocutors contributing a part, which would probably wind up as much a debate revealing our own individual hearts as a body of thinking about hers. But that is precisely the point about the Bible, is it not?, its cragginess and grittiness, its many voices, its stories and projections, its mixture of sublime vision and everyday observation, a chronicle inhabited by unmistakably true human beings, which lends itself to the kind of conversation we were having and was *itself* that kind of conversation. The books were a first chronicle of other people's efforts, so obviously failed, to think themselves into greater certainty than they had any right to. Ila loved how earthy and flawed the characters of *Genesis* were, how God was Himself like that (she hated political corrections of that particular hegemonism). She loved God's rebuke to Jonah, and aloofness from Job. She loved watching God mature along with His creation, and then have the good sense to pretty much get lost. She loved reading accounts of the Lurianic *Kabala*, where God collapses and limits himself as an act of compassion. She loved Moses' charisma, the kings' tragedies, the prophets poetic daring. She loved Jesus' teaching skill. She

resisted any kind of orthodoxy, but quoted often from the codes and chants that became orthodox, from the *Shulchan Aruch*, or from Dante. The orthodox *also* had writers, and they deserved a kind of honor on that account. Most of all, I think, she loved the Psalms. *Esa eniei, el heharim, meayim yavoh ezri*. “My eyes look to the hills, from where comes my help?” She loved Jesus’s example, especially in Gethsemane: “If this cup can be passed let it be passed, but if not Thy will be done.” Hope from nothing. Later, when the Bible group moved naturally to Shakespeare, the echo of this love was for Lear on the heath, and she spoke about the great storm, where one strips oneself to the skin, and saves one soul by throwing the trappings of power to the wind.

Perhaps the most terrible confession she made to me during those early years was that there were times she *missed the camp*. “Things were simple in the camp...” she said, and her voice trailed off into memory, of unimaginable horror, I inferred, but also—or so she clarified soon enough—of unimaginable moral certainty, something Biblical characters could never have, something *we* could never have, not in our bourgeois opportunities and, at best, sincere struggle with our faults. It was in this conversation, I recall (or is my memory just putting things together?), that she told me how the last words she said to her father were words of anger, that he was weak or stupid or some such thing, which she could not forgive herself for. Sometime at the start of 1986, I wrote a closing line of an essay about the *Book of Exodus*, about the children of Israel, standing at the openings of their tents and, as it is recorded, watching Moses’ face glowing from his encounters with God in the sanctuary. I

wondered if they envied him. Is envy a secularist's faith?, I asked. Ila really liked that line.

I stayed with her in the hospital to about 4 AM one night in December of 2000, watching her fight to breathe, rousing herself every few minutes to meet my eyes, gripped (so she said) by the vividness of what she was seeing, images of principles which seemed purer, almost colorful, against a darkening frame, and I was struck how little different this moment felt from all the moments of Bible study with her. Now I was one of "de stoo-dents," too, and I felt a twinge of shame for having once suspected her of trying to cover-up a wish for literary fame, that is, for having so *underestimated* her ambition. Authors—even the authors of the Bible, God knows—come and go. The truthfulness of a conversation is forever. After a little more talking, Ila made it clear that she had become more interested in what she was thinking and seeing when she closed her eyes than in speaking with me, or acknowledging any physical fact. So I sat there reading through her copy of Yosef Haim Yerushalmi's *Zachor ("Remember")*, a book she had brought with her, and in which she bothered to write a marginal note in only one place.

Jews, Yerushalmi writes, are famous for caring about history, but that is a misperception. What Jews cared about when they chronicled the past was evidence for whether or not they were at any given moment justified in God's eyes. For example, during the Crusades, in Mainz, in the Rhineland, a community of Jews killed themselves and their children rather than face brutal conversion, and—so Yerushalmi writes—Rabbis

immediately began to interpret this event in the language of the binding of Isaac, the *akeda*. One such Rabbi, Shelomo Bar Shimshom, wrote:

“Did eleven hundred *akedot* take place in a single day, all of them comparable to the Binding of Isaac, son of Abraham? Yet for the one bound on Moriah, the world shook.... Will thou remain silent for these, O Lord?”

Yerushalmi continues: “But ... on a deeper level, the appeal to the binding of Isaac also provided a desperately needed understanding to what had occurred...”—and Yerushalmi goes on to explain that Jews subsequently took pride in how some of their generation had passed Abraham’s test of faith. Next to the words, “provided a desperately needed understanding to what had occurred,” Ila wrote: “Does it?”
