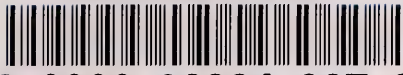


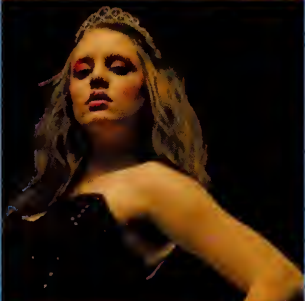
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LOOKING BACK

Four Plays



Reflections on suicide, child abuse, depression and murder

Judith Weinshall Liberman

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HOLOCAUST WALL HANGINGS (2002)

MY LIFE INTO ART (2007)

LOOKING BACK



Four Plays

Judith Weinshall Liberman

iUniverse, Inc.
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LOOKING BACK

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This book is dedicated

to the memory of

my husband, Prof. Robert Liberman

my father, Dr. Abraham Weinshall

my brother, Saul Weinshall

to my family

my son, Dr. David Liberman

my daughter, Dr. Laura Liberman

my grandchildren, Daniel, Nina, Cynthia and Deborah

to Samuel Harps

Artistic Director

of the

Shades Repertory Theater

in Haverstraw, New York, U.S.A.

who was the first to stage any of my plays

(GOOD OLD ABRAHAM)

and did so brilliantly

and

to the Reali School

in Haifa, Israel

for encouraging my quest

for knowledge

for accomplishment

and for excellence



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A NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

This book contains four of my plays, all written after I reached my eightieth birthday. Although I spent most of my adult life creating visual art (oils, acrylics, graphics, wall hangings, mixed media, mosaics, ceramics, stone sculptures etc.), I did, over the years, take time out to write. My published books were almost as diverse as my art, since they consisted of a textbook on international law (1955), a children's book (1976), a book about one of my most important series of artworks (2002), and an autobiography (2007). During this period, I wrote several plays, too, but never bothered to send them out.

My interest in playwriting dates back to my teen years in Israel - it was then called "Palestine" - where I was born and grew up. I remember spending a summer, while I was on vacation from high school, translating Arthur Koestler's newly published drama, TWILIGHT BAR, from English into Hebrew. Looking back, I cannot remember whether I spent all that time working on the translation because the play was particularly meaningful to me or because Arthur Koestler was a close friend of my parents' and I was eager to ingratiate myself to him. Since Mr. Koestler never learned Hebrew, however, I did not bother to show him my translation but only let him know that I was working on it.

I wrote my first play when I was in college in America in the late 1940s. The play was called VICTORY SONG and questioned the existence of justice either in this world or in the hereafter. During the ensuing few decades, several other plays followed. I took courses in playwriting at Harvard Extension, read books on playwriting, and joined a playwrights group. I also enjoyed reading and seeing plays.

My husband's interest in playwriting served to encourage me further, so it is not surprising that after he passed away in 1986, I stopped writing plays and immersed myself almost completely in visual art, creating several series of artworks through which I explored the Holocaust and other manifestations of the human condition.

It was not until I reached my eightieth birthday and my daughter, Dr. Laura Liberman, aware of my interest in playwriting, treated me to an excellent playwriting course on the internet, that the spark of playwriting was rekindled in me. By then I was living in a retirement community, with little space for creating visual art but plenty of time for creative work, so playwriting was the obvious activity for me to pursue.

The first play I wrote at this late stage of my life was EMPATHY. The play was inspired by an experience I had lived through some thirty years before, when my husband, Robert Liberman, who was a professor of law at Boston University and an excellent pianist, suffered a stroke at age 52, which rendered him unable to play the piano. Since playing the piano was vital to him, his loss of the ability to play plunged him into a severe depression and suicidal thoughts. Although I spoke about that experience in my autobiography, MY LIFE INTO ART, I felt that by making the experience the subject of a play, I could explore it in greater depth. Having changed the various personalities involved, I created characters who presented arguments from various points of view (medical, religious, legal, ethical, psychological, emotional) against the protagonist's suicidal plans, thus allowing me to delve into the effect of incapacity and depression not only on the direct victim but also on others.

The religious arguments against suicide brought forth by one of the characters in EMPATHY made me reflect upon Abraham the Patriarch, who, like the main character in EMPATHY, was “tested.” Before too long, I found myself reading and rereading the story of Abraham as told in the Old Testament book of Genesis. Since I grew up in Haifa, Israel, and attended the Reali School, where the Old Testament was an important part of our curriculum, I became acquainted with the story of Abraham when I was still in elementary school. The emphasis in our Bible classes at the Reali School was on the historical and literary aspects of the stories we read, rather than on their religious implications. What I took away from the biblical story about Abraham was that he was a man whose faith in God was so profound that he was willing to give up his two beloved sons if that was what God demanded of him.

Although at the time I did not question Abraham’s obedience to God, I felt compassion, even as a young girl, for Abraham’s two sons: Ishmael, whom, following God’s word, Abraham banished to the desert; and Isaac, whom Abraham was willing to sacrifice, seemingly without hesitation, as a burnt offering to God.

I was in my twenties when, with the advent of motherhood, I first began to seriously reflect upon both the moral soundness of Abraham’s behavior and the patriarch’s veneration in history. From the suicides of ancient Masada through the martyrdoms of the Middle Ages and all the way to more recent sacrifices made in war by fathers and mothers of their sons and daughters, Abraham’s binding of Isaac has served as an ideal worthy of emulation. Over the years, this admiration for Abraham increasingly appeared to me to be unjustifiable, so that when I sat down to write GOOD OLD ABRAHAM, my doubts about the patriarch and his adulation were the result of decades of reflection.

GOOD OLD ABRAHAM questions the rationality and morality of Abraham's behavior and his suitability for the positive symbolic role accorded to him by history. This questioning is done within the framework of father-son Bible study sessions, where the son, Joshua, an American teenager who is the play's main character, increasingly gains interest in the Abraham saga and, with mounting self-confidence and insight, dares to question old "truths." Needless to say, the implications of the play go far beyond the bounds of the story of Abraham. They extend to "truths" born in other times and places, "truths" which are still held, and even fought and died for, and which, having remained hitherto unquestioned, may need a Joshua to probe their worth.

My play MICHAL came next. It was inspired by the biblical story of Michal, daughter of King Saul, ancient Israel's first king, as told in two books of the Old Testament, Samuel I and Samuel II. As with the story of Abraham, I became familiar with Michal's story while I was still in elementary school. Although when we studied the Samuel books I was focused on the male characters in the story about the House of Saul, I did, even then, feel compassion for Michal, who lost her father, King Saul, and three of her brothers, in the war of Israel against the Philistines on Mount Gilboa. This kernel of empathy for Michal was reawakened in me years later, when my only brother, whose name happened to be "Saul," was killed in the Israeli War of Independence in 1948, so that, when I settled down to being a full time playwright, the story of Michal, tucked away deep in my memory, naturally suggested itself to me. In this play I portray Michal as a tragic figure caught up in forces beyond her control.

Last but not least came SISERA'S MOTHER, a play inspired by the story of Deborah as told in chapters 4-5 of the Book of Judges. Again, I studied the story of Deborah, the biblical

leader, judge and prophetess, when I was still in elementary school. Because our teachers at the Reali School presented the Old Testament as a source of knowledge about history and literature, rather than as a religious document, I paid particular attention to the characters in the stories we studied. In the chapters on Deborah, I made note of the two main characters, i.e., the judge-prophetess herself, who was the leader of Israel during its pre-monarchic period, and Barak, whom Deborah summoned to command the nation's forces in a war against the Canaanites.

At the time, I evaluated these two, as well as the other characters in the story of Deborah, by their stance vis-à-vis Israel. This was easy not only because it was the patriotic thing to do but also because the Canaanites had oppressed Israel for twenty years and it seemed to me that oppression should not be suffered by any nation. Therefore, when we read about Sisera, the Canaanites' military commander, and his mother, who awaited her son's return from battle, I felt no sympathy for either one of them when I learned that Yael, seemingly harboring pro-Israelite sentiments although not herself an Israelite, invited Sisera into her tent and played the kind hostess, only to kill him after he fell asleep. I agreed wholeheartedly with Deborah when she said, ***"Blessed above women shall Yael be..."***

Over the years, the balance of my sympathy shifted from Yael, the war heroine, to Sisera's mother. Whether because I lost my only brother in war and have known the pain endured by a family that lost a loved one, or because of increased maturity, I eventually saw Sisera's mother neither as an "enemy" nor as an evil woman, as the biblical tale implies and as many commentators have suggested, but rather as a victim of man's inhumanity to man. Therefore, when I wrote SISERA'S MOTHER, I portrayed the Canaanite

A NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

commander's mother, vainly awaiting the return of her beloved son from battle, as a woman worthy not of derision but of compassion. As in my other plays, the implications of SISERA'S MOTHER extend beyond the confines of the drama.

Although three of the plays included in this collection were inspired by biblical stories, I have taken the liberty of bestowing my own interpretation upon the original tales.

Judith Weinshall Liberman

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EMPATHY



A one act play

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