

WEEKEND

Maya Guez

"Shlishi" ("The Third"), by Yishai Sarid, 259 pages, Am Oved Publishers, 58 shekels (Hebrew)

The story of the sacrifice of Isaac opens with a spoiler: "And God put Abraham on the test." The biblical author asserts from the outset that the events to follow merely constitute a test for Abraham and nothing ill will ensue. Still, the reader of the first 19 verses of Genesis 22 is seized by an overpowering dread, particularly if he is a parent, in light of God's injunction to a father to sacrifice his son.

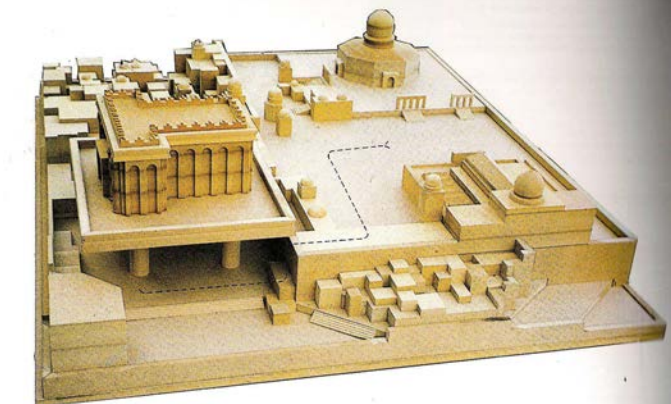
"The Third," the new and fourth book by Yishai Sarid, also opens with a warning, of one page, signed by the "Scientific Council." As with the first verse of the Isaac story, this brief preface informs the reader that the end lies in the beginning: Everything he is about to read has already happened and is done. The danger has passed, it's as though nothing happened. Yet, even so, as in the above-mentioned biblical story, which crops up in Sarid's book both covertly and overtly — the reader is trapped, appalled, within the story, and finds himself taking an active part in the fate lurking for him in a history that hasn't yet come to pass.

"The Third" is set in a future time. The author presents a vision of the End of Days in the most apocalyptic, futuristic, historical and perhaps also most realistic novel published in Israel in recent years. If we are attentive to the prophetic logic, the End of Days seems to be just around the corner. So realistic is it that it seems as though within a few years its plot will become our reality, when we become part of the futuristic history of the chronicles of the People of Israel and the Kingdom of Judah.

The story unfolds through the notes of Prince Jonathan (Yehonatan), published 50 years after the destruction of the futuristic Kingdom of Judah. Jonathan wrote during his incarceration in a Jaffa fortress after his capture at the hands of a modern version of the biblical Amalekites, Israel's perennial nemesis.

Jonathan paints a romantic picture, tinged with glory and sanctity, of the new-old kingdom that arose in the Land of Israel and lasted 23 years. He is both precise and calculatedly cautious in describing the events that brought about the kingdom's fall. Amalek sets the story in motion by dropping a lethal bomb on Israel, destroying buildings and killing residents of coastal cities, a king who paraded about in revealing barding attire and forsook the path of the Lord.

As Amalek proceeds to lay siege to Israel, Yehozah, an astronomer and a formerly religious reservist, grasps that a divine revelation he had is about to be realized. He organizes creates a military force and drives out the Amalekites in a war of redemption. The international community demands that Yehozah be handed over for not allowing the Amalekites to remain in Israel and imposes a boycott on the country, but the people crown him



Amos Orkan's vision of the Third Temple, from a 1993 exhibition, "Dreamscapes," at the Tower of David Museum, Jerusalem.

Future shock

In a new novel, the magnificent Third Temple wreaks devastation on an imaginary Kingdom of Judah. The vision Yishai Sarid presents is so vivid that it seems as if it is about to come true

their savior king.

With the use of advanced equipment developed during the War of the Tunnels, Yehozah finds the Ark of the Covenant and in it the Tablets of the Law received by Moses. His religious faith restored, he builds the Third Temple. Though the Bible is his guideline in the process, he feels omnipotent and freely interprets it. And quiet reigns in the land.

That's the frame story of "The Third." Sarid holds the reader in thrall, as if he were possessed by the Shekhinah, the Divine Presence, just as Jonathan was possessed by this sacred female figure, in prison, when he wrote the pages that survived for generations.

At times, it seems that the plot of this book was devised by some sort of divine entity, and that Sarid is but an instrument of this supreme power — a king who composed the work as a kind of sequel to the Hebrew Bible. Sarid's deft hand draws a perfectly reasonable vision, utterly logical and realistic.

Literary glue

The novel is relatively short, but Sarid assembles the story's mosaic with infinite patience and precision, injecting literary glue into the crevices created between the stones. The small details spawn deep meanings, layers of history, politics, relations between people, that

take shape gradually and burrow their way deep into the reader's psyche.

The story is historical but at the same time futuristic, modern and even comic. King Yehozah's children are the stout-hearted and admired David, the crown prince, who leads the kingdom's army into a bitter war; the redheaded Yoel, who has charge of the Temple but tends more to himself and his family; the beautiful Yifat, who co-hosts a television program aimed at strengthening the nation; and Jonathan, the youngest, who tells the story from prison.

He also conducts the animal sacrifices in the Temple, which sounds like a round-the-clock abattoir. Whereas the other priests enjoy the leftover meat in gluttonous feasts that follow the sacrifices, his service in the Temple turns Jonathan into a vegetarian — as might happen to carnivorous readers of the book them-

selves. The sacrificial rituals are one of the novel's most fascinating themes; Sarid has clearly researched the subject thoroughly, describing them in elaborate but not oppressive biblical language and grammar.

Jonathan recreates the Temple in all its splendor and holiness. The reader feels the coolness of the marble, is dazzled by the gold decorations, smells the incense, hears the mumbling of the priests' prayers, senses the sacred nature of the shrine containing the Tablets of the Law. We join those who come to the Temple, thrilled beyond measure, bearing an atonement sacrifice. Only supplicants who had an electronic chip implanted in the back of their neck in their first year of life — identifying them as descendants of Judah — are allowed to pass through the gates of the Temple.

The shrine becomes the book's protagonist, the object of the desire of both the people of Judah and the people of Amalek. The former stream into it, blinded by holiness; the latter wish to eradicate the ultimate symbol of Judaism and conquer the land.

The novel's characters revolve around the edifice in star-like orbits, drawing closer and then hurtling away from the place where God resides. But the moment comes when Jonathan grasps the inherent dilemma and raises one of the book's most intriguing theological questions: If

God resides behind the curtain, how can he also be everywhere? If everyone prays in the direction of the Temple, what happens to the prayers that are shouted to the heavens?

Indeed, about halfway through the novel, a series of questions are posed: "Who are we actually holding here, between the stones of the shrine, within the Holy of Holies? Who did father trap inside when he built the Temple, and if God is actually here, why did he agree to confine himself within four walls? ... If God dwells here among us, to whom does the smoke of the sacrifices rise, and what is the connection between Jehovah below and God above?"

Biblical Quasimodo

As he writes, Jonathan becomes increasingly disillusioned. He sets out to record events for future generations, but the more he writes, the more questions and doubts he himself has. Guilt and self-justification arise as well, relentlessly, as if he were trying to atone for a terrible wrong — one that is revealed only in the last pages of the book.

Jonathan portrays himself as a victim, a simple person who is doing what he is obliged to do, as the one who was victimized by the grenade intended for his father and who thereby saved the life of the king. That fateful incident robbed him of the possibility of attaining the glory of a monarch's son. Instead, he lives like an ordinary priest.

In many senses, "The Third" resembles Victor Hugo's "The Hunchback of Notre Dame." Both novels are set in holy shrines, the one in the Temple, the other in Notre Dame Cathedral. Jonathan is a kind of biblical Quasimodo, a lame hunchback who serves God and does work that all others shun.

In Hugo, the object of forbidden love is Esmeralda, while in Sarid's work it is Efrat, Jonathan's beautiful childhood friend. She was his intended, but is taken from him cruelly, forbidden to him. Jonathan also conducts a distorted albeit glorious relationship of passion with the Shekhinah. Her erotic image makes her the object of his stunted craving. He is in a love-hate relationship with himself over his forbidden feelings for the Divine Presence, who is revealed to him, panting and perspiring, during repeated visits to the shrine of God behind the crimson curtain of the ark.

There is also a political element common to both "The Third" and "The Hunchback of Notre Dame." Hugo paid a steep price in exile and imprisonment for his critique of the French leadership. "Hunchback" is a political manifesto about the need for preservation of France's architectural tradition. Sarid describes the Temple as a "white elephant" — magnificent and spectacular, an object of pilgrimage that is cultivated, scrubbed and served, but unable to burden about the benefit it was intended for.

The Third Temple splits the kingdom: The forces active both within and outside the structure wish to make it serve their ends. King Yehozah develops a proprietary sense toward the Temple and

its laws, which he makes up. The members of the Sanhedrin flaunt the king's requests and take an overbearingly patronizing approach toward the Temple. The people bring wretched sacrifices, gentle visitors enter the site contrary to the rules, and the priests rear in the perks that accrue to their status.

Of the variety of relationships depicted in the book — between spouses, between siblings, and so on — the father-son relations stand out. In Jonathan's case, there are two fathers: the biological one, in the person of King Yehozah; and the spiritual father — namely, God himself — who becomes material when the Temple is built. His relations with both are ingratiating and fear-ridden. He tries to please them by means of his service in the Temple, in the hope that they will embrace and accept him, the damaged son who is otherwise all but ignored.

Jonathan's expectation gives rise to the novel's great philosophical question: Does one observe the precepts and worship God only in order to be rewarded by him? To feel that there is someone who will provide protection in time of need?

Jonathan writes about a god who is confined within a magnificent shrine, in

Only supplicants who have had an electronic chip implanted in their neck are allowed to pass through the gates of the Temple.

the Holy of Holies — a god who has been drugged with the aromas of incense, blood and burned flesh, and by the singing of the Levites; a god who is angry at a megalomaniac king who acted contrary to the religious laws that were vouchsafed him, a king who believes he has become a god himself. And yet Sarid intimates that in fact, God has no interest in being worshipped but rather wants to be free, to escape the ostentatious Temple that was built for him.

Perhaps what Jonathan writes is a deception, intended to blind the reader and twist reality. The fact is that he lacks the courage to breach the boundaries of his own beliefs or to admit that God might be fed up with the believers' barter approach. In his prison cell, too, Jonathan thinks his father-God will rescue him. He believes God is omnipotent, and persists in appealing to him.

Sarid succeeds in packing his short novel with a multitude of themes, conflicts, metaphors and allegories. "The Third" is a work that will generate extensive and deep literary, theological, cultural and political discussion. It is a work that continues to hold the reader in its grip long after he or she finishes it.

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