

## **A Burnt Offering – a fable**

by Daniel C. Melnick

This compelling and thought-provoking novel unites a version of the biblical fable, the Sacrifice of Isaac, with a tale about Israeli Intelligence when the country seems on the verge of being attacked by nuclear-armed Iranian missiles. Ari Schneider, the head of Special Operations, believes that he must act, even if as a maverick, to warn world leaders that they must act to stop the movement toward nuclear war. He discloses to them that his operatives in foreign capitals have received weapons of warning which he alone knows how to recall – ‘small’ tactical nuclear bombs from the Israeli arsenal.

His father, Rami, a retired diplomat and elderly survivor of the Holocaust, struggles to confront Ari’s actions. There is also a clandestine group of Palestinians whose leader plots to assault an Israeli installation in Jerusalem. And finally, in this moral fable, there is the Schneiders’ adolescent son, Moshe, who courageously confronts his father with knowledge he has gleaned from his scientist cousin in America about the horror of nuclear war. The unfolding fable advances in tandem with Ari’s undercover operations to create a unique and disturbing short novel.

As the action of the ‘special operation’ heightens, the parable becomes more terrifying and develops in mystery, complexity, and tragic intensity. In a series of confrontations with his wife, his son, and his father, Ari still resists despite the tension of self-doubt in him, and in the climactic encounter between father and son, Rami argues that the ages-old struggle marking the past of the Jews must also mark their future, and that nuclear weapons can never be used in a just cause. Ari holds fast, and in an ultimate attack on his son, echoing the Sacrifice of Isaac, Rami compels himself to tell Ari something about his origins that invalidates all his assumptions about his identity. The double bind of his fate collapses in on him, and with nothing more to hold him up, he suffers a suicidal breakdown.

Rami’s final monologue reveals his lie to his son. The old man is harrowed by the responsibility of how to act for peace in a world of extreme and pervasive violence; such are the conditions that Ari tried to face with his desperate acts and which now the world at large confronts.

This nuclear fable is dedicated to Tamar, Ora, Rami, Gaby, and as always to Jeanette.

From Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* – "If anybody had ever struggled with a soul, I am the man. And I wasn't arguing with a lunatic either. Believe me or not, his intelligence was perfectly clear—concentrated, it is true, upon himself with horrible intensity, yet clear; and therein was my only chance."

From Wiesel's "The Sacrifice of Isaac" – Every passion and obsession that make Judaism the adventure it is, can be traced back to it: man's anguish when he finds himself face to face with God, his quest of purity and purpose, the conflict of having to choose between dreams of the past and dreams of the future, between absolute faith and absolute justice.

## Part One

### Wednesday

Ari did not exercise his prerogative to leave early on these High Holiday evenings. Not that the autumn holidays signified to him; they were rituals honored more by silence than observation. And the Iranian situation required his full attention. Two weeks ago, the American President threatened Iran with war. Now all sides teetered on the edge of unspeakable violence, and these first ten days of the New Year signaled only the inevitability of war.

It had been during these same high holy days more than a decade ago that the West Bank had exploded once more before his eyes. It was in these same days following Rosh Hashanah; he had been stationed there and seen the hundreds of bloodied bodies.

The dead Palestinians had gravel stuck to their wet red faces, or sometimes they were torn to pieces, without heads or hands, or with their inner organs blown out. Ari and a few fellow operatives were assigned to watch. Soldiers would dodge into the doorways and look at the watchers not for approval but for recognition.

Blood was appropriate to such New Year's rites, the pagan mixed with the sacred. Shed blood was a sort of terrible harvest and renewal and a harbinger. The New Year just dawning promised to be bloodier than ever. So the generic rituals were celebrated silently by Ari, without orthodox fanfare; they were a mere ornament. Always, for him, it was fact more than form that compelled attention, and his mind amassed fact after fact, always finding interest in their divergences from the expected. The fact that today the Russian Foreign Minister had adopted the words Americans were using to describe their own plans for global domination: "We will fight fire with fire when horrible acts of terror are committed against the forces of law and order." The fact that Islamic terrorists had staged another suicide attack in Europe. And there was the fact that six state-of-the-art American combat aircraft had arrived this morning in Saudi Arabia. Not Israel.

"Not Israel," he said to two aides sitting on the black vinyl couch before his desk.

"Who needs those planes more than we?" Simon said. He held an unlit cigarette, dangling it between his fingers as he spoke. He was a tall man with unsuccessfully combed dark hair.

“The Saudis need them more than we,” Rachel said. “America will mount its war against Iran from Saudi Arabia. Not Israel. This morning the UN is deliberating about Iran’s belligerence, and tomorrow will come war—or if not tomorrow, next month. Soon.”

“We need new jets and missiles all the more,” Simon spoke directly to the woman, with her short blonde hair and small sinewy hands. “We need them because the Iranians say it is Israel that will pay with blood if the Security Council acts against it. Again they declare holy war on us! When they send their missiles against us, we will need to intercept the bombs and respond with missiles of our own.”

““The fire will eat up half of Israel,”” Ari quoted a now-dead adversary. “Can you tell me why always they say ‘fire’?”

The autumn sun glowed now above Jerusalem. The city stretched before Ari, who gazed out his office window. With his two younger colleagues, the Chief of Special Operations sat in the top story of a steel and glass building rooted in the ancient soil which David and Solomon had trod. A fortified lot with low reinforced walls circled the building like a mote; on the roof were shielded weapons to maintain the integrity of Ari’s fortress.

“Always they keep saying the same thing: ‘We will attack Israel, and we will burn its cities to the ground,’” Rachel said, mocking and bitter: ““The whole region will not

see light for decades. Neither the land of oil nor Israel will ever be the same.” She placed a hand on the classified report resting by her on the vinyl couch. “For decades, Iran has threatened Israel with words and surrogates. Now it plans to wage nuclear war against us.”

“It must not be,” Ari said quietly, with his habitual air of ironic distraction, as if he were no longer addressing his two aides: “There have been enough burnt offerings this century to fill the belly of the hungriest god.” The big man drew his hand through his ash blond hair; he wore a short-sleeved white shirt and black pants, and he rose now from his chair to have them leave so that in isolation he would sort through the facts and possibilities.

Rachel stared at him as she and Simon stood. “Nobody could have foreseen how things are coming together,” she said.

Ari turned calmly to Simon: “We should have foreseen. Keep me informed about anything you notice out of the ordinary, any unexplained movement, any ambiguous detail. At once. No business as usual. Reach me at home later, at any time.”

The man and woman left to join the functionaries who filled Ari’s building. In college, Rachel had been a brilliant student of his years ago, standing out also because she was a striking blonde with a deep mahogany tan from life on a kibbutz. In her early teens, she had escaped from the small community of German-Jews in Frankfurt. And

Simon had been one of her university friends, born in Tel Aviv, a Sabra, sharp and remarkably intense.

They were people Ari trusted, part of the cell he developed at Intelligence. As young men and women, they had fought together under his command, and when he had joined Mossad Special Operations and finally became head, he surrounded himself with them, assigning them key roles here and around the globe. Each was invaluable for his ruthless courage. Such courage was at the core for him, a solitary and spontaneous strength, apart from all common want or any need to be wanted.

He did not know what the roots of such courage were, but he honored it when it arose. And he found it in Simon and Rachel, in Ezra and Dan and a half dozen others, including his mentors Issam and Baruch, who had been assassinated. Ari noted his dispassion at the thought of their deaths. It was a chasm of detachment into which he would march without hesitation. He sat back heavily in his leather chair. His ash blond hair was almost completely grey now, and he had grown stout, but his intensity and the force of his body still had an immediate impact on people. He wondered, though, whether he was on the verge of becoming a complacent bureaucrat, old and fat. It was a repellent thought: he would not allow it.

His sun-drenched office was lined with gray metal cabinets and tables laden with stacks of files; in one corner by the wall of windows were his chair and desk and a computer with its cable plunging through the floor and down the four stories to the

basement. In the middle of the blue carpet were the vinyl couch and chrome chairs that seemed out of place in the cluttered setting. The office did not look new despite the furniture and the contemporary expanse of window by his steel desk. The room's modernity had been tamed by Ari's intense will, transforming everything he touched.

In one locked drawer he kept personal papers, a letter his mother had written to him decades ago, just before she died of wounds from a bomb launched from southern Lebanon and falling on the city center in Nahariyah. It was one more of those unrecorded acts of terror or contrition or heroic endurance which constituted daily life in Israel. Next to the letter was the only weapon Ari kept with him in his office, a souvenir of the concentration camp from which his parents had been liberated before he was born. His father had given him the German officer's silver Luger, so he would not forget. Before he stood to leave, he opened the envelope and reread the ending of her letter.

*"This fog thickens. I don't know where my legs are sometimes; this paper and pen sometimes disappear. I remember the rocket whooshing in. The sun was baking my back. I saw the crystal blue of the Mediterranean stretching beyond the town. Then I heard it rushing in, cracking the air closer. Not all your Intelligence could keep that Palestinian rocket from finding its way to me walking in the burning Nahariyah sun. I felt spun into the sky, wheeling, and then slowly circling. Now when you and the others visit, I see you revolve slowly before me. We are all weightless and irradiated with a special light. Not*

*like Mediterranean light at all. Now it turns to fog which closes in on my hand as I write, on my mouth when I speak."*

It was five o'clock on Wednesday, the seventh evening of the Jewish New Year. Rosh Hashanah had passed; Friday night and Saturday was the Sabbath, and Saturday night would bring Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the holiest of the calendar.

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These streets did not shelter, the early autumn sun did not warm, and the elegant buildings did not bear ancient witness. The Avenue Foch swept by Ezra, from the Etoile toward the Bois de Boulogne, its mile-long lines of chestnut trees sheltering gilded houses. It was early October, and the leaves of some trees turned red and pale gold. With his Renault parked two blocks from the Arc de Triomphe, he walked to the Etoile on the wide avenue designed by Baron Haussmann. Was Haussmann a Jew?

He rounded the ring of the Etoile, plunging into the crowd flowing over the Champs Élysées this Wednesday afternoon near a tourist restaurant, a hangout of Americans in Paris. It was an American whom he would meet here in the crowd. This morning the phone had rung in the basement office of the Israeli Embassy; the anonymous caller spoke the blank and slouching English of an American, stony, mumbling through the receiver.

“Please speak up.”

“I have some information for you.”

“Who are you?”

“I have something for you.”

“Who are you?”

“Jaeger.”

There was silence.

“About Iran.”

“Naturally, about Iran,” Ezra said skeptically.

“I have some information. About missiles targeting Israel. I want to meet.”

“I suppose so. In St. Séverin, there’s a café at...”

“The Arc of Triumph. Inside the northeast corner at noon. I’ll know you.” The stony voice stopped. The phone had clicked off.

Ezra crossed the wide boulevard of the Champs Élysées and descended into the underground. Traffic rumbled over his head, and a memory of the Chief suddenly came to him, of Ari recounting his first assignment as a Mossad operative: *Baghdad is a distant blankness down the highway. He sits in a battered Fiat two miles from Osirak. A*

*tide of slick mirages sweeps over the baked asphalt. He has infiltrated Abu Ibrahim's cell in Baghdad, and he is Mossad's primary contact on the ground. He watches the F-16 draw an invisible line across the slate-blue sky and instantly release its load of bombs. The domed head of the nuclear installation juts out of the desert, and when the bombs hit, the bowels of the building rumble and burst. A direct hit. Ezra turns the car ignition, and slowly the wheels turn over the burning highway, heading south. He sees a great cloud of fire and sand billow up and out, with flecks of debris—bits of metal, stone, and flesh—reeling in the air all about the compound.*

Wind and music swept through the walkway beneath the Étoile, and a group of rock musicians filled the passage with their blaze of rhythm. Ezra's face stiffened. When he passed musicians with their cases open playing Mozart or Vivaldi, his soul soared into the region of solace and forgetting.

He lumbered up the steps to join the tourists by the massive legs of the Arc de Triomphe. The cement island swelled with the crowd as he stood waiting.

The Champs Élysées swept past into the body of Paris, down to the Place de la Concorde, the Tuileries, the Louvre. How fragile the city was, its brilliant vista subject to the compass of a man's gaze. As he waited, he walked toward the flame of the Unknown Soldier, and his feet slapped over the pavement stones commemorating the dead in each world war. All a city offered was its past, its accumulation of deaths.

Finally, he moved back toward the stairs to the underground passage. He passed the

American rockers again, and he re-emerged on the avenue, crossing to the entrance of a café.

Ezra sat at the bar in back of the restaurant, elevated above the diners eating their Wednesday lunches, and he ordered a cognac. His fingers warmed the oval of glass from which he slowly sipped. Ari would insist that the truth be unearthed. No fact or rumor was too trivial to be ignored, the chief of Special Operations always said. Agent and head had met first as part-time instructor and student in a history class at Hebrew University. Then, a few years later, he had been recruited by him to join Mossad, long before Ari became chief of special operations. Such was his will. He had risen to become Chief while Ezra had roved from one operation to another, chief of none.

He walked back through the noisy café, took out his cellphone, and called Haim at the Embassy.

“Our man didn’t show up. Any word there?”

“Nothing.”

Haim was a decade younger than Ezra. His brilliance and temperament gave the younger man’s voice a taciturn purity. He would go far. Haim looked like the photos Ezra recalled of the Mossad hero Baruch Cohen, who had exposed the terrorist Carlos the Jackal. The PLO murdered him in retribution.

“Brilliant!” Ezra mumbled, and he imagined his colleague sitting patient and cool

behind the steel door of their shared office at the Embassy.

Ezra emerged into the autumn air on the Etoile. He left his black leather coat unbuttoned, fluttering behind him as he walked back down the Avenue Foch and unlocked the door to his blue car. Safely in, Ezra turned the key to the ignition.

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Loyalty was the key to each operation he conducted. His comrades—the vanguard of the loyal—followed him with a fervor born of the terrible conjunction of despair and hope. Inside the book-lined study of his second-story apartment, this handful of young Palestinians stood to say goodbye. They were leaving to have dinner with their parents, their brothers, their friends, while he would sit in his apartment reading and thinking and eating his customary portion for dinner—yogurt cheese, olives, and a circle of sesame-crust-ed bread. Ascetic, disciplined by anger and isolation, Sameer abjured eating with friends or relatives here in East Jerusalem, even with his mother, who lived twenty minutes away, and yet he could hardly bare to speak with her; she was a fine homemaker, a skilled cook, a refined temperament, yet forced by poverty and her husband’s death to serve an Israeli household, to bow and scrape before less-than-human beings, with their false superiority and cruel power. He looked out the window of his study at the busy avenue below. Scattered vendors sold stacks of sesame rounds

and sandwiches as pedestrians hurried home in the darkening dusk through the imprisoning net of Israeli checkpoints spread over their portion of the city.

His four followers planned to meet him surreptitiously at midnight when they would become five vigilantes patrolling the Temple Mount, so that no Israeli could desecrate with impunity the Arab holy place. Ishmael, Ghosh, Mohammed, and Gamel were bound to him by their respect for his learning—his cerebral appreciation of Islam and of revolutionary thought—as well as for his pragmatic imagination, his capacity to conceive and plan actions that could help end Israel’s grip on their lives. But the five of them were also joined together by their desperation at that grip of oppression, at the Israelis turning the state into a machine of terror, whose sought-for order was the mad order of apartheid and deportation. Above all, Sameer’s friends were bound to him by a shared faith in the vision he, a stocky and diminutive servant of God, offered of glorious transcendence: not simply the beautiful reward in heaven, but the possibility of transforming life on earth into a new-born state of grace, free of both Israeli oppression and Western materialism.

“How can Palestine escape from the Israeli dictatorship?” he had asked them this afternoon. “Our souls are dying because of these vicious dogs. Israel must be given a decisive warning so it will end their evil ‘ethnic cleansing.’”

His listeners murmured their assent, curious what warning Sameer planned.

“They want to destroy us, to create a genocide, and we must strike the fear of God into

those who aim to obliterate us.” He had found this loyal cadre of desperate young men, willing to dedicate their lives, even unto death, to ending the Israeli dictatorship. They were neither dissatisfied PLO soldiers nor Hamas hangers-on. These were educated, unemployed Muslims at the end of their patience. He had found them in coffee houses and in the adult education courses he taught, and he had drawn them into his private study group. He had taught them about the dead souls of Western culture, for example how the racists Conrad and Eliot had identified the horror of the wasteland in the West, the hollow man, the papier-mâché Mephistopheles. Anything, Sameer told them, was better than the soulless malignancy of Western imperialism. And he had initiated these men—his former students, now his comrades—into a vision of the life of action, taking arms against the sea of struggle. When he was young, he had heard about Abu Ganayem, the first suicide martyr. His exemplary operation was, many years ago, to have taken over Bus 405 on its way from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and driven it off a cliff above Quyat Ye-Arin; the explosion killed fifteen Israelis and himself and injured scores of others. His comrades sat rapt and asked him what he planned now, what final warning was he engineering. He had refused to answer.

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Haim’s Fiat swerved into the ring of the Étoile, then slowed as it turned onto the Avenue Haussmann. Two blocks ahead there were a cordon of French police and a ring

of rope. He nodded to a man about twenty-five, leaning nonchalantly against the trunk of a chestnut tree near where he parked. Like Haim, the man had close-cropped black hair, and both had the olive skin of Sephardic Jews, though the young man by the tree was darker. He was a Tunisian, not a mixture like Haim, whose mother was Sephardic and father Ashkenazi.

“Anything?” Haim asked.

“Nothing.”

The two slowly strolled to the police blockade. A uniformed Frenchman eyed them and then turned to scan the other passers-by.

The windows of the nearby mansions were shattered. Bits of glass and metal were strewn over the gardens, the sidewalk, the road. Their fences had fallen into gardens, and the iron-railings had twisted into concave skeletons. The ivy on the toppled fences was ashen, and the chestnut trees were blackened next to the hole where Ezra had been. The rear of a Mercedes and the front of a Ferrari were burned and torn hulks.

Haim turned abruptly, walking back along the police barrier on the edge of the wide Avenue. Nissim hurried to catch up amid the lunchtime strollers.

Beneath the chestnut tree shedding its leaves in the October breeze, Haim turned to speak to him, and the young man slammed suddenly up against the tree trunk, a hole sliced silently into the brown forehead. Haim, flattening himself on the

sidewalk, crawled in the pool of blood, which covered his face and clothes. Noontime pedestrians screamed and gesticulated above him. Police grabbed him and lifted him from the pavement.

“Name. Identification.”

His mumble hardly audible, Haim handed the officer his papers. Beneath his blank staring face, he seethed at what had happened. Wailing police cars began spreading another net of surveillance. Ambulance attendants came to cover Nissim’s head and body with a sheet and bore him away on a stretcher. Haim leaned by his Fiat and spit the gall gathering in his mouth into the Avenue Haussmann.

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“Father.”

“How are you?”

“You’re coming tonight.”

“Elena said, seven-thirty.”

“I’ve called you on impulse.” Ari had the line continually sanitized; nothing was left to chance. “I want to tell you about something here.”

“About Iran?”

Rami was still vigorous even at his advanced age, with a full and plangent voice, just like when Ari was a child and his father joined the Foreign Service. As a diplomat, his voice was always warm and pliant, willing to change a word here, a point there, until his opponents found themselves agreeing to what Rami all along had sought.

“One of my men in Paris was murdered in a bombing this afternoon. I just heard. There was an attempt on the life of another. An American is involved. It’s possible someone in the CIA.”

“So, it’s happening.”

“It’s happened.” Ari said grimly. “Now it’s more than an academic question: Who serves whom? What are they trying to tell us?”

“You’ll clear it up. I’m sure it’s some confusion. Who was killed?” Over the years, he had watched his son create a hierarchy of agents and play the role of brilliant warlord over Mossad’s Special Operations.

“Ezra. Haim Lipsky is in Paris too. He was nearly killed.”

“I know you consider them fine men, but...”

“There are no buts, father. These men and women are more than fine; to protect our nation, they must be absolutely vigilant and firm.”

“Vigilant and firm? Israel can’t live inside an iron curtain, Ari; a nation is not

something to be hoarded. We're a living, growing organism. It's a matter of overcoming, of becoming. You know your task is to help—and to understand.”

“For God’s sake!” Ari shouted over the phone. “Don’t use these clichés on me. And German ones, at that! ‘Overcoming!’”

“Yes, that’s echt Deutsche, isn’t it?” Rami said; “but what about ‘vigilant and firm’?”

Always there was the old man’s teasing, his lecturing, and his crippled faith. The son felt no contempt but only opposition for his elderly father, who always thought of exceptions and contradictions; for him, there was still one more point, another angle not to be ignored. Finally, Ari’s quiet voice broke the silence. “Whatever you say, father. We’ll see you at seven-thirty, no?”

“It will work out, Ari.”

Rami put his phone down and sat quietly in his apartment near the Old City. From the side table he lifted a small pot of thick dark oriental coffee to pour himself a cup. When his son first entered the intelligence service, Ari had been all vigor and confidence, having already risen to the top of the Interior Ministry. Over the years at Mossad, he had helped plan many a successful, often unrecorded operation. Rami recalled the day Ari told him of his first clandestine assignment as a young Mossad

operative: "Everyone, including the Arabs, is glad we took out the reactor."

"It's ironic," Rami had replied, "The fertile crescent is the site of Eden: Samaria. The Hebrews emigrated from there, of course. So too did the Palestinians."

Now Rami lifted a cup of the sweet, black liquid and sipped. He looked out the barred windows of his apartment to the narrow, sunny passageway outside. His son disagreed with him about Israel, for Ari was prepared to give up on the open, imperfect process of politics. His son believed in the purity of hierarchy, in the small cell of chosen individuals, each of whom would protect and defend the integrity of the state. Born less than a year after his parents' liberation from Auschwitz, Ari was an issue of the camp itself, and the white haired survivor felt deeply implicated.

He felt the need to walk, to breathe the air outside. Locking the door, Rami left in short sleeves without a sweater, and ventured onto Jaffa Road toward the city center. Tanned pedestrians in khakis and bright skirts streamed through the neighborhood of Nachalat Shiva. Among the afternoon passersby were occasional soldiers, alone or in pairs, walking with carbines or with guns in holsters. The pedestrians seemed oblivious to the presence of these fit, alert, and very young men and women in military fatigues. His fellow citizens were simultaneously blind to them and, it was likely, reassured by the military presence.

Walking toward Heleni Street, heading for the main thoroughfare north, he

stopped at a café he liked. Nearly all the tables were occupied, and several of the people he knew gestured for the elderly, distinguished man to join them, but with polite greetings, he made his way to an unoccupied table and ordered a glass of milk from the child-like, raven-haired waitress. He wanted to be soothed now after his earlier cups of intense espresso. All around him was argument, urgent but without contention for its own sake. The stream of talk was about politics and food and everything else – Europe and Russia, Iran, the United States, and Israel itself. One of the two couples at the next table were friends, who greeted him warmly, introduced the others, but immediately resumed their conversation. Marcus was an engineer, who had made wonderful contributions to the desalination project, making potable the coastal water from the Mediterranean Sea. Renny was a producer for the Voice of Israel. Without looking at them, Rami listened.

“They are animals, always ready to pounce,” the other man said. “You can’t give them a meter of the West Bank, a centimeter of land.”

“But it’s conquered land,” Marcus said.

“Yes, we conquered it, so it’s ours.”

“Not so fast. Who are this ‘we,’ this ‘ours?’”

“What do you mean? You don’t support the settlements? They are for our own protection. I support them 100%.”

“Well, Mister One-Hundred-Percent,” Renny said, “you’re not ultra-orthodox, David, are you? But thanks to you, ultra-orthodox settlers are taking over the Palestinian West Bank. Let’s face it, no matter how many children the settlers give birth to, they’ll not catch up with the Palestinians.”

“We have to make a stand,” David said hotly, and his wife shot a worried glance at Renny. “Don’t you want your country to survive!”

“Look at the demographics, David,” Marcus said calmly. “If you consider the West Bank our land, then there are more Arabs than Jews in Israel. We have to give them their own state. It’s just a matter of time. That’s the only way we can survive.”

Rami rose and nodded goodbye to his friends, waving in a peaceful gesture which seemed to acknowledge the complexity and intensity of what he had heard. Outside, he walked steadily up busy Shivtei Israel and toward Mea Shearim, the ultra-orthodox neighborhood. It was a clear and pleasant 70-degree day, and thank god he was still spry and mobile. Most of the city center was what people absurdly called clean, with few sightings of figures who seemed to have stepped out of the centuries-old Polish shtetl. But as he turned onto Mea Shearim Road, he saw more and more men clad in formal black gabardine suits, wide-brimmed black hats, and prayer shawls showing below their suit jackets. Women wore ankle-length dresses, in black but also some in colors, with shawls and wigs, all according to their rabbis’ strictures and beliefs.

Posted at the first intersection were the usual signs prohibiting immodesty in dress. Congregating on the corner next to a few cypresses and a eucalyptus was a group of bearded, devout men. A tall man with a full beard walked toward him.

“May I help you?” There was the hint of a Brooklyn accent in the man’s Hebrew.

“No. I’m just taking a walk and enjoying the city.”

“At your age, Mister, you could contribute a lot to this community. You should become one of us, the Orthodox, the truly righteous Jews. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain.”

“That is kind of you,” Rami said, placing his hand on his chest. “I understand what you are saying, what you want, but...” The tall man in black abruptly interrupted as another ultra-orthodox, also in shtetl outfit, approached.

“I know you. You are Mr. Schneider. If you help us, Israel will triumph – in both this life and the next!”

“Just don’t bother with him! He’s not on our side,” the other man shouted. He bumped his shoulder into Rami as he dragged the bearded proselytizer away.

Distressed and dismayed, he turned to walk back the way he had come. His dismay with Ari an hour ago came back to him, and he wondered at what was happening to this stony ancient land. No language existed to tell its need, its fissures and divisions, its struggle – in Ari and everywhere. Words belied and cheapened, yet he

must try to speak, to tell his son once more. He walked back through Jerusalem in the benign October afternoon air.