Bible and Torah

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The first trip that I took with my grandfather was to Auschwitz. He served in World War II and that was, as he says, the single most important thing he has ever done. Grandfather was one of the first people at the concentration camp in Auschwitz, an event from which he never fully recovered, for he saw the mounds of shoes and glasses collected from the dead. We never spoke and I'm not sure if he even opened his eyes. As I held his hand and walked him, he felt the air and listened to the memories, learning, trying to understand the incomprehensible. After several hours of his quiet thinking in the early morning, the tourists began to arrive, father wondering if they'll make the train, mother worrying about lunch, and the children listening to Michael Jackson on their walkmans. But even after the return to that place, he could never fully recover: Grandfather was Jewish.

Our second and last trip together was a drive from San Francisco to Calgary to visit his brother, my great uncle. The trip was long and
I decided to make it longer by visiting one of the places that I had only heard about and never seen, the Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump in southern Alberta. When I was a child, I learned that the Indians would, after disguising themselves, lead the buffalo closer and closer to the edge of the cliff before finally stampeding them over it. That was the Buffalo Jump. As legend has it, one year, a young Indian wanted to see how the whole event looked from the bottom of the cliff. That was the Head-Smashed-In. Such buffalo jumps were common across the plains, but as far as I know, the interpretive center at the Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump is the only commemoration of the Indians' slaughtering methods.

In grade school on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving holiday, we spent the day learning about what life was like for the Pilgrims and for the Indians. We ate corn bread, made fresh butter from cream, and even tried salted meat one year. It was always Mrs. Horning who talked about the Indians—she would speak from inside a genuine teepee—and she would sometimes act out her fervent words, leaping around in her teepee, pounding her hand on her mouth to make her whoops vibrate, and making as though she were shooting buffalo with a bow and arrow. For a third grader, it was quite impressive. She held her body near to the ground as she painted the picture of the Indians herding the buffalo nearer to the cliff and she occasionally gave sharp calls like a shepherd controlling her dogs, except that her dogs were imaginary Indians. I can still remember my excitement when she started going crazy, screaming and yelling, to stampede the buffalo; I can remember falling on the floor laughing when she mimicked the buffalo flying through the open air and crashing onto the earth below. For a fifth grader, it was tremendous.

When I told Grandfather about the detour I had planned, he said, “Do you go there to learn or do you go there to gawk?”

“I’ve heard about this place my whole life. I just want to see it.”

“How long did Moses wait to see the promised land? And even then he was given only a glimpse of it before his death. He never set foot in it. Died on Mount Nebo overlooking the valley. But Moses died a wise man overlooking that valley.”
Since my mother abandoned her heritage and married a goy, a Mormon, Grandfather would always return to Moses, he being the only significant, common religious ground that we had. I know little of what transpired between my mother and Grandfather, for both sides were reticent, but I know that he refused to go to the wedding. And since I have no memory of Grandfather from before mother’s death, I suppose there was little talk, if any, between the two. After her death, though, Grandfather began inviting me down to California for vacations and I started receiving phone calls and birthday cards. At first I thought my father would be angry at Grandfather’s sudden resurrection into my life. I saw later that my father was happy with Grandfather’s change, for it was an attempt to pay for the harsh way in which he had treated Mother. I began to visit Grandfather frequently in my high school years, even spending an entire summer with him one year. Each night, to keep up my religious education, he would read to me from the Bible the stories about Moses and the Israelites; thus, he taught me as both Jew and Gentile.

Since Mother was an only child, I suppose that her leaving the Jewish faith would have been particularly hard on Grandfather. I asked him once about why he had turned so bitter against Mother and he told me another story about Moses. Moses gave up his inheritance to return to the religion of his birth. With the hand of God, he led his people out of Egypt and kept them safe from Pharaoh’s armies. Then he climbed up the mountain to receive from the Lord the commandments which would better guide his people, and when he returned, the people were melting their gold and building idols. After all Moses had done for them, they could still turn their backs on him. Even Moses got angry, throwing the stone tablets into the multitude. Then, after Grandfather told me that story, he said the only thing I have ever heard him say that was directly about my mother. He said, “The point I had to make was too costly. Your mother was gone, and there was nothing I could do about it. I do as I may, but there remains a gap. God is our hope that the gap will be crossed, that the pain may be healed.”

The cliff was cold and gray. The land was barren. The wind stormed across the plains. I saw a mound of buffalo skulls
collected from the area and standing firmly on a pinnacle of rock, a sullen-faced Indian in the full chieftain ceremonial clothes that would have been worn at a tribal council from an age now past, and I realized that it was far more complex than I could understand. But I understood that Mrs. Horning did not understand.

When I returned to the car, Grandfather was sitting on the hood, sipping from a can of pop, wind blowing across his face. Without looking at me, he said, “Disappointed?”

He handed me the soda and I tipped the can back.

“It was Joshua who finally led them into the land of Canaan. It used to trouble me that God could allow the Israelites to march in and conquer the people. But they were going to build a nation of righteous people where there used to be unrighteous. To build and grow after death, that’s what must be done. Anything else is disrespectful to the dead. So when the Israelites turned wicked, God allowed them to be conquered.”

“You’ve told all this to me before, Grandfather.”

“The lessons of God are worth repeating if they are lessons of God at all.” Taking the can from me, he added, I think for himself as well, “Especially when one does not understand them.”

When we at last arrived at my great uncle’s home in Calgary, the night had fallen and the dinner that had been prepared for us was cold. I sat quietly in the living room as my uncle prepared Grandfather for bed. The austerity of the hardwood floors, oak bookcases, and leather chairs filled the room with a heavy but warm silence. Picking up one of the oversized books on the coffee table, I thumbed through it absenty.

My uncle came into the room and sat in the leather chair next to me. “It’s good that you had the time to bring him up from California. He needs to be around family now.”

“I’m going to miss him.”

“We all will.”

I still turned the pages in the book, but now I was looking at my uncle. He said, “Your Grandfather’s been through a lot. The war. His wife. Your mother. I remember when he came back from the war, he only answered our questions with vague phrases and then tried to change the subject. It was hard enough for our people
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here in America; I can only imagine how it must have affected him. When his wife died, I was sitting with him at the hospital. He said to me then, ‘I can understand this because still a baby has come from it. But what has come from the deaths over there?’ He kept going, though. He kept going.”

I recalled the trip I had taken with my grandfather to Auschwitz. At the time, with my youth, I didn’t understand something Grandfather had said to me but which my uncle just helped me to understand. Closing the book I had been thumbing through and standing up to go to bed, I repeated to my uncle what Grandfather had said on the other side of the world. “For every man, there is a pain which only God may heal.”

I am thinking of healing. The accidents, the injuries, the abnormalities, they come and I am not sure how to stop them, as much as I may want to. When I was only a few years old, I went on a vacation with my parents to visit my paternal grandparents. We went to a city park for a picnic and, while the adults were at our picnic table a few hundred yards away, I was climbing on a tall slide when I fell off head first and broke both my arms on the pavement below. I didn’t regain consciousness until my mother took me in her arms. In the hospital that night, as I suffered from an allergic reaction to the painkiller, my mother held my limp hand and scratched my itching body. Gripped by the pain surging through me, I stole my hand away from my mother and demanded, “Why didn’t you catch me?” But now I, too, will do as I may, and that is what I have learned.

The spring rests easily upon Grandfather’s grave. High upon this hill, a cool breeze shakes the trees and puts me sometimes in the shade and sometimes out. Decorated randomly with fresh flowers, the tombstones quietly reach above the cut grass, and from a distance, I hear the birds sing as they take fallen twigs and dead grass to build a nest. I watch the birds as they create a home. I open up my Bible and turn to the Torah, and read aloud, “And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses.” And from this hilltop, I can watch over the valley below.