

## 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 to the test." The biblical author asserts that the events to follow merely constitute a test for Abraham and nothing 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.

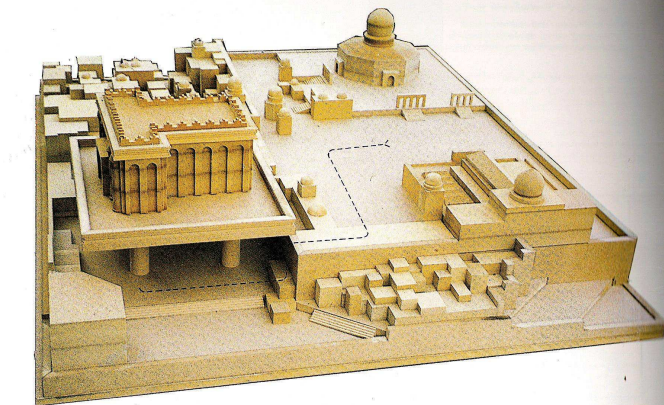
"The Third," the new and fourth book by Yishai Sarid, also opens with a warning, of one page, signed by the "Scientific Council." As with the first verse of the Isaac story, this brief preface informs the reader that the events to follow are warnings: "Everything he is about to read has already happened and is done. The danger has passed, it's as though nothing happened. Yet, even so, as in the abovementioned biblical story, which crops up in Sarid's book both covertly and overtly—the reader is trapped and appealed, 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, sinners who paraded about in revealing bathing attire and forsook the path of the Lord.

As Amalek proceeds to lay siege to Israel's Yehoz, an astronomer and 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 the Yehoz 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, Yehoz 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 omniscient 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 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 Yehoz'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.

As a boy, Jonathan was seriously wounded when a grenade, meant to kill his father, the king, exploded between his legs. Jonathan was left incapable of fathering children, but also free of the "evil inclination." Because of this his father makes him a priest in the Temple, which he is allowed to enter despite his physical deformity.

No one imagines how difficult it is for Jonathan to keep from peeping behind the ornamental curtain and looking at the Ark of the Covenant.

He also conducts the animal sacrifices in the Temple, which sounds like a around-the-clock abattoir. Whereas the other priests enjoy the leftover meat in glutinous 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-

self. 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 the shrine—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 to 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 in himself. 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 wronging what he is obliged to do for 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 of 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 bring 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 Yehoz 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 overbearing patronizing approach toward the Temple. The people bring revered sacrifices, gentle visitors enter the site contrary to the rules, and the priests revel 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 relationship stands out. In Jonathan's case, there are two fathers: the biological one, in the person of King Yehoz; 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 megalomaniacal 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 that perhaps God will rescue him. He believes God is omnipotent, and persists in appealing to him for salvation.

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.

Dr. Maya Guez, a post-doctoral fellow at Tel Aviv University, is a literature and history researcher who specializes in Jewish identity and the Holocaust in literature.

### Jonathan Ferrara, 72, lives in Jerusalem; flying to New York

Hello, can I ask where you're going? For a vacation, I'm tired.

Is it the heat? No. My wife stayed at home, sick; I've been looking after her for six and a half years, and I'm tired. My daughter has been living in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, for 10 years. I'm going to visit her for six weeks to recover.

What will you do there? Nothing. I don't want to do anything. Maybe wander around a little, the main thing is not to work hard. ... I'm an American citizen.

When did you immigrate to Israel? My wife and I settled here in 1969. We have five children; two live in the U.S., three here. All our children were born here. I was born in Italy.

So you went first to the U.S. and then to Israel? I was born in Italy in 1942, and the family moved to the U.S. in 1956. Fortunately, my mother went on cooking Italian food. As a boy, I had a tremendous desire to learn English and become part of American society, because in Italy people talked about the U.S. as though it was everyone's dream.

Were things bad in Italy after the war? Economically, yes. Ironically, things were better in the middle of the war than afterwards, because Italy, Italy in masses. We found it the Bronx. As a boy, I found it interesting. A different language, new friends. It was a serious challenge.

And as a young man? When I was in university, people were being drafted for Vietnam, and an ugly, unpopular war. At first they didn't draft the students... and I decided there was no way I would serve. Then the student exemption was canceled, and only married people were exempted. Then that exemption was canceled too, and only people who were married and had a child were exempt. Finally, I said that if I have to fight, I'll go to Israel—at least I'll be a good Jew and do a mitzvah.

Were you religiously observant? No, it developed later, under the influence of Israel and Jerusalem. The atmosphere in Jerusalem affected me

### Departures | Arrivals



deeply. We always lived in Jerusalem, at first in an absorption center.

What did you know about Israel before you immigrated? We'd first visited in 1966. I didn't know Hebrew, but I could read and I knew how to pray. In 1969, the flight with El Al was free. They were looking for immigrants and paid for the flight and for our rent. I was drafted in 1971 and served in Gush Etzion [a settlement bloc between Bethlehem and Hebron], but I did it willingly.

You didn't manage to avoid any wars? There was a different atmosphere, everyone wanted to be a soldier and enlist. I never imagined that in 1973, I'd be a soldier on the Golan Heights. There's a difference between basic training and the real thing. My whole battalion was mobilized in 1973, for the Yom Kippur War.

And after the war? I went back to university and did a Ph.D. in English literature.

What was that like? There isn't a lot of work in English literature in Israel. I taught English in a yeshiva and at the Hebrew Gymnasia high school in Jerusalem. But at first

I didn't teach well. I wasn't in tune with the mentality of the Israeli kids—they're used to authority and a strong teacher who will argue with them. But in the end it worked out. I started an English department in Givat Washington [a religious youth village in central Israel], which was successful. I worked at the college there for 27 years. I was the head of the department, and independent. It was by the grace of heaven, because I don't like being told what to do, how to teach. I also had a second job, training English teachers. One way or another, I made ends meet. I retired six-and-a-half years ago.

And then your wife became ill? And so did I. I thought I'd enjoy life after retirement, but within half a year I had a heart attack. It was a tough time but I recovered, thank God. To retire from work is not good; you hear about a lot of people who retired and then something happened. I thought I'd enjoy myself, but the accumulation of cholesterol in my blood thought otherwise.

I wish you good health and much happiness.

In the meantime, I have 12 grandchildren. There's no shortage of happy events.

### Liat Elkayam, Photos by Tomer Appelbaum



### Ron Zohar, 33, lives in Tel Aviv; arriving from Shanghai

Hello, can I ask where you're arriving from?

Yes. I went through 24 weird hours. I flew from Shanghai via Istanbul but missed the connection. When they finally found me a flight, I sat next to an elderly woman from Turkey wearing a head covering. In the end, I fell asleep and she woke me up with a croissant. Nice.

What was Shanghai like? There's a concept in Japan of "Shibuya girls"—pretty, off the wall, cool dressers. I had the feeling that Shanghai wants to be like those girls. The city is full of huge buildings—they want to be Tokyo, but they're not. But my meetings were very interesting.

Whom did you meet with? It was a business trip. I'm part of a startup that makes a medical product that allows people to do a urine test at home, without going to a lab. We met people from a company in Shanghai that we hope to cooperate with. For a small Israeli startup to talk business with a

company that has 900,000 employees is interesting.

We came to do a trial that would show them that we're very good. Ninety-two percent of the people who go to ER don't have to be there. Our tests will reduce the pressure on the health system. That's why the experiment was done in a Shanghai hospital, where ER is beyond belief, packed with people who have to wait for hours. On the other hand, young Shibuya girls, on the other, elderly villagers. I sent photos to my wife, who's a doctor, so she could see how many people were there. And we, the two foreigners, sat in the lab with masks and suits; everyone looked at us. In the end they said it was outstanding.

They used that word? They don't know English. We had interpreters. You get the feeling that nothing is conveyed properly.

Linguistic disparities, or cultural? They have this thing with presenting business cards. You have to present the card with two hands, look the recipient in the eyes and bow. And then I always get stuck—how do I hand him my card? But there are also things for us to learn there. They do amazing things. They're

trying to solve their difficult health-system problems by means of the Internet, phones and apps.

Are there apps for health? There's an app involving a doctor who is available all the time. Those are revolutions that the Western world has a hard time implementing because of regulations. Google, Facebook and Twitter don't work there. They have 900 million people who use WeChat instead of WhatsApp. They have search engines and perfect systems; they control the masses and control what gets out. The view in China is: "It's very nice to have a world out there, but it doesn't really interest us because we're so big and strong."

But they still want to meet with people from an Israeli startup.

We brought them the book "Start-Up Nation" as a present. They have high esteem for Israel technologically, but there is also the fear, the constant risk, that the reason it interests them is so they can steal the patents.

Where does the field of medical technology aspire to get to? A revolution is underway in the medical world, toward greater ability to control our health and to free people of dependence on the health system and on doctors. The analogy is that once there were wars with mercury, and only in hospitals, and today everyone has a thermometer at home. I believe the same process will occur with medical tests, with ultrasound and x-rays.

Sounds like something out of "Star Trek." There's actually a company that manufactures a product called Dr. Crusher Tricorder, and there's a competition with a prize of \$10 million for the first person who develops a small instrument that, when attached to the head, measures body temperature, oxygen, blood pressure and more.

So you're making your wife's job redundant. I don't think doctors will be unnecessary. There will always be too few doctors, because there is a great deal of knowledge and data, but they have to get to a doctor in the end. There are many subjects that are talked about in slogans: artificial intelligence, nanobots in the bloodstream, singularities. The future I foresee is close, 20 years ahead at most. Or maybe next year... I hope by then my son will know how to assemble a house from the new tools I bought him.