

Why I Wrote Asher's Command

by Marilyn Felt

In December of 1987, my first play *Acts of Faith* was in rehearsal at New York's 92nd Street Y for a production by the small, new, experimental Mosaic Theater. Since this was a play about an Arab terrorist and his Jewish-American captive, there was an underlying anxiety that the theme might alienate the audience, primarily Jewish subscribers with traditional tastes. As opening night neared, we followed the news vigilantly, hoping no clash in the occupied territories would occur to heighten anti-Arab sentiment.

This Israeli news watch became an addiction, so that several months later, when the first *intifada* broke out, I absorbed every detail. Most intriguing was the emergence of a young general appointed commander of the West Bank occupation, who showed a surprising regard for the human dignity of the "locals" (as they were called then).

The general was treading a narrow path between security and humanity, and in the third month of his command, an incident erupted that forced his hand. A Jewish settlement on the West Bank sent its children on the traditional Passover walk of "the length and breadth of the land" in the midst of the *intifada*. They obeyed no security precautions, as if tempting an incident to happen. The result was a clash in an Arab village that caused the death of a girl from the settlement, as well as the deaths of village youths, and gave the commanding general no choice but to punish the villagers, using the method, established in British times, demolition of homes.

As news reports brought out the details, a second character emerged, a village man who had protected some Jewish youths from the rage of his village. His explanation was, "They were children." The next day it was reported that his home had been among those demolished, a tragic mistake of the army.

The events unfolded like a Greek tragedy. Weighed down by history, feuds, and prophecies, the nature of the Middle East conflict seemed epitomized in this incident and in the downfall of its central character, the humane young general.

The incident and fates of these two men brought me to Israel and the West Bank for six weeks. I interviewed people at the Jewish settlement and the Arab village; I met the young General, but I never did meet the villager who protected the young settlers. People in the village said frankly that acknowledging that some villagers protected the settlers was tantamount to admitting that others wanted to harm them.

The two men became the characters Asher and Samir for whom I created an early friendship and constructed fictional details of their lives. In successive drafts the actual incident came to occupy less and less time as the relationship took precedence. Both are men of noble intentions, both are "protagonist" and "antagonist." I have been surprised to find little precedent in political theater in which there is not a hero and a villain.

To my sorrow, this play makes some Jewish audiences angry. I think it likely that the anger and sense of threat come from seeing Jews on stage who do not fit the image of the underdog. The Jews in this play are in power and face the same moral dilemmas faced by all people in power-- how to protect one's own without oppressing others. The protagonists face the timeless dilemma that emerges when care for "the other" conflicts with loyalty to the tribe. Jewish moral sense is at the base of both these loyalties, deeply rooted in the soul of the general. At the end he finds himself torn apart, a commander with no choices.

Not surprisingly, both Jews and Arabs often think the other is portrayed more favorably in the play. A more serious concern is that Jews worry that the play will reinforce anti-Semitism, a possibility that freezes my heart. Personally, I have not found the raising of controversy to be either an artistic triumph or even a public relations boost.

When reading *Asher's Command*, it is important to remember that it is written about earlier times, 1988, and though less than twenty years ago, those times were very different. Few Israelis used the word "Palestinian"; even saying it was to take a forbidden position. The word does not appear in the play because it did not appear in the daily dialogue. Also different is the fact that the weapons available to the "locals" in the territories were much less lethal than today.

I think that what I want the play to say, as Asher does, is that all life needs to find a place between extremes. While adversity may improve the human spirit by bringing out courage, resourcefulness, protectiveness, and so on, continual threat and hatred can destroy even the most noble spirits that humankind can produce.

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