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- 1 “Startling Revelations from the Lost Book of Stan” is part of a collection of short stories entitled *Beware of God*, published in 2006 by contemporary American author Shalom Auslander. It is the story of poor and foolish Stanley Fisher scraping for a living and unwittingly unleashing a whole coalition of forces against him the world over after finding most embarrassing “Holy Scriptures” on a soul-searching trip to the Negev Desert. He has, in fact, come across the apparently genuine original version of the Old Testament. A paragraph that seems to have been dropped from the later editions simply reads: “*The following is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental*” (96). The message conveyed by this genuine document is subversive enough to alarm political, business and religious leaders of all persuasions and prompt them to react. Stanley’s findings are indeed too much of a potential threat to the established order and the dogmas on which it has always rested to leave matters unattended. Stanley’s Old Testament is soon unanimously declared a fake, and the embarrassing witness the poor wretch has come to be is eliminated, while his name, his birth certificate and all the information about him is forever deleted from official records.
- 2 Reading “Startling Revelations from the Lost Book of Stan,” one is struck by the similarity of tone and mood between this short story and other writings by Shalom Auslander. It is highly parodic, in every sense of the word.

## I. The trials and tribulations of a new-fangled schlemiel

Stanley Fisher—down on his luck, out of a job and with a baby on his way ...—took the last of his dwindling savings, kissed his wife Sharon goodbye [...] and journeyed to

Israel for a soul-searching expedition through the Negev Desert.  
 He sought meaning.  
 He sought guidance.  
 He sought purpose. (91)

- 3 The first words of the opening sentence immediately provide the audience with a somewhat familiar horizon of expectations, as they clearly mimic the style of old tales and stories, of old Yiddish tales in particular, in which the unlucky protagonist undertakes a journey away from kith and kin, from which he is supposed to return a rich man. The character of Stanley himself, though depicted in an ironical way at the end of the sentence as a new-fangled Abraham who sounds very much into schmaltzy psychology and "soul-searching," and leaves his wife to roam the desert in search of some kind of truth, in fact, bears a family resemblance to the old stock-character of the schlemiel, that born loser in Yiddish literature, who, however down on his luck he might be, keeps on foolishly hoping for a brighter future. Fisher is truly made of the same stuff as the kind of archetypal fools that Irving Howe describes as having "a positive gift for getting into trouble, for doing things the wrong way, for saying the inept word at the inappropriate moment—and always with the best of intentions" (23). He is very much like all those characters one comes across reading Sholem Aleichem. In fact, as he harbors wild dreams of turning into an instant multimillionaire after the discovery of the tablets, Stanley particularly reminds one of a typically foolish and naïve character under the name of Menakhem-Mendl in *The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl and Motl, the Cantor's Son*, as the latter writes to his "wise, esteemed, and virtuous" (3) but down-to earth and skeptical wife that he will come back to her a wealthy man:

"I'm dealing in Londons and not doing badly! You can clear 25 or 50 rubles at a go, and sometimes with a bit of luck, 100. On Londons you can make your fortune in a day. There was a fellow not long ago, a synagogue sexton, mind you, who walked away with 30,000 faster than you can say your bedtime prayers and now he cocks his snoot at the world." (3, 4)

- 4 But Menakhem-Mendl's dreams will never come true and neither will Stanley's. For, as onomastics suggests, Stanley Fisher is predestined to fish, to fish for trouble indeed. That he discovers thirteen tablets (an unlucky number according to popular belief and literary convention) in the desert is indeed no coincidence. It is, in fact, a sign of his being dogged by misfortune, when in his foolishness he believes that thanks to his "invaluable" discovery he is bound to see the end of his woes. Thus begins the long, long story of the many trials and tribulations of that little man with a particular knack for treading on dangerous ground.
- 5 The narrative is then made to go on and on, slowly unwinding and mimicking the conventions and the meandering, convoluted rhetoric of old tales and Biblical stories. Hence, among other devices, one cannot miss the constant use of a ternary rhythm—"They looked ancient. They looked important. They looked holy" (93), the repetition of the same formula over and over throughout the text—"In those days" (92, 97, 105) or "It was a dark and depressing place" (92, 97, 105), and the ternary pattern on which the whole narrative is based. The three encounters made by Stanley—the two experts and the Pope—are reminiscent of the three trials the protagonist has to go through before his quest or his initiation journey is completed.
- 6 But here, in a sudden departure from the set patterns of the genre, the tempo accelerates, and the reader is made to visualize a wild mock-thriller in which an

unlikely coalition of corporate, political and religious lobbies join forces to eliminate Stanley, together with his far too subversive discovery :

Two men in black suits and sunglasses appeared at his side. One man grabbed the suitcases containing the tablets, while the other led Stanley down the hallway into a small, secluded office. The door was closed, the lock was turned, and that was the end of Stanley Fisher and his troublesome non-fakes. (102)

- 7 What one might have thought to be the end of the story, however, is not. The narrator keeps us in suspense eventually to come up with a protracted surprise ending which sounds again more like a tale-like one than like a typical ending in a thriller. The narrative at this stage thus takes on a surreal quality, echoing with a mysterious voice on the phone, coming from nowhere, and claiming to be Stanley Fisher wanting to speak to his wife Sharon. But Sharon, who has hit the headlines as the new heroine of an "Immaculate Conception" story in Long Island, and the rest of the world are already doing without him.

## II. An extravaganza

- 8 Thus, as has been shown, old tales and stories serve as a main canvas for what might be appropriately described as an extravaganza. Giving free rein to his imagination, the author turns an old tale form into a wild mock-story in which the character of a poor, insecure fellow under the name of Stanley Fisher has suddenly become the Enemy Number One of an unlikely coalition made up, among others, of the Ayatollah Khamenei, of the Pope and the Bush government. The adventures of the main protagonist, who is desperately looking for the highest bidder to sell his merchandise to him and "make a pile" in the best tradition of folk-tales, is now giving way to a parody of a thriller showing the Pope grabbing "his Papal Staff" (97) (possibly an irreverent sexual innuendo) and "poking Stanley painfully in his stomach," (97) while "the Ayatollah Khameni sat down at his tangerine iMac, printed out one copy of "Fatwa.doc," and hastily filled it in" (99).
- 9 What is characteristic of the writer's style here is his particular talent for sketching a series of vignettes. His is a very visual art, which gives a trenchant impression of the characters and the scenes he depicts and makes them look like characters or scenes straight out of cartoons. One also gets the same impression as the narrator tells us the episode in which Stanley finds himself in contact with all kinds of e-bayers leaving messages on the Web: from the Jesus freak, writing "Fuck you, asshole" to the stereotypical religious fundamentalist fulminating against "the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah," as well as the BTW (short for "by the way"), the one-track minded bidder asking: "how much do you want for your wife's panties? " (98).
- 10 Parody in the form of amused and possibly sometimes satirical authorial or narratorial comments also stands out as a distinctive feature of "Startling Revelations from the Lost Book of Stan." Throughout the story, the narrator thus constantly pokes fun at the world of cliché-ridden stories, empty slogans and ludicrous formulas with which we, readers and writers alike, are bombarded day and night. Cheap popular media, which is all too prone to publish eye-catching stories, is a main target for the narrator's irony as well as commercials which are associated here with corny images and schmaltzy rhetoric: "But the baby cooed happily from inside the Graco Lite-Rider Stroller/ Cat Seat Combo" (105).

- 11 The narrator even casts an amused glance at himself, hinting at the cheap side to his trade, borrowing from others snatches of dialogues and scenes and trying to foist his story on us like a barker in a fair. While he is telling us the story of Stanley, he is splitting into two characters, that of the storyteller and that of the ironic and somewhat satanic commentator, prompting us to take what we hear with a grain of salt and laying bare before us the very literary devices used in the process. The narrative thus takes on a definitely metafictional and self-reflexive dimension, commenting upon the stereotypical and cliché-ridden representations, the hackneyed stories and the tricks of the trade it is based on.
- 12 Parody here serves to underline all that is trite, artificial, pompous, even corny about the stories we are told or we tell each other. One cannot miss, for example, the irony of the deliberately ponderous repetitions and alliterations used to depict the typically remote and secret place of Stanley's discovery: "Deep inside a dark cave on the dark side of a dark and desolate mountain range" (91); nor can one miss the irony when Sharon is provided with a stereotypical "Filipino nanny named Carmalita" (104).

### III. A philosophical tale in Voltaire's sense of the word

- 13 Under the guise of a joyful and free-style exercise in parody and impersonation, however, "Startling Revelations from the Lost Book of Stan" conveys a more bitter-sweet image of the world and of mankind than may seem at first sight. Stanley Fisher is, in fact, a new-fangled *eiron* whose task it is to explore the world around him, in the way Voltaire's *Candide* was meant to explore the world.
- 14 It is here today's world that is depicted throughout the story through a number of images associated with America and other places in the world; a world which appears in fact as a new Babylon, in which acronyms of all kinds vie with each other in a restless agitation and an endless battle for supremacy. Ironically enough, far from making the story sound more realistic, though they stand for real organizations in the U.S., the mere enumeration of these acronyms somewhat heightens the reader's impression that the world is going insane and that Man is becoming more and more inarticulate. All these acronyms sound nonsensical and make up a new Babel of tongues, each trying to cover the other, each claiming that "whatever they believed was unbelievably right, and what everybody believed was unbelievably wrong" (92). A strange impression of both a static and restless world emerges from the reading of Shalom Auslander's short story.
- 15 Merchants of the Temple seem to rule this world, together with bigots, fanatics, war-mongers of all kinds, every one of them distorting facts into the kind of fiction that best serves their interests or going so far as to endorse stories that best suit them, be they, like the essentially Roman Catholic dogma of The Immaculate Conception, compatible or not with their own faiths. Hence Stanley's voice is lost in the distance, while life is going on and everything is back to the kind of normalcy which sees men and women turned into good little soldiers and compulsive consumers. Sharon—the new unlikely heroine of an "Immaculate Conception Story" in Long Island—is being pampered by the Establishment and provided with all the creature comforts she and her baby are supposed to need, in exchange for her being part of a worldwide conspiracy against the Truth. A cross between Biblical Delilah and the archetypal character of the *femme fatale* in *film noir*, Sharon who had hitherto contented herself

with repeating "Mmm hmm" (93, 94, 96, 101) is now fully siding with the powerful, an unlikely icon of "purity" and a slave to a sordid consumer society.

- 16 In a very Voltairian way, the tale we are being told indicts Man's intolerance and bigotry, while religion is being shown at the end of the day as having not much to do with God, here an apparently absentee Landlord, but with men and vested interests, as is suggested by the recurrent image of "ecstatic" (103) leaders bent on selling their books or furthering their own causes at all costs.

O'Reilly thanked them all, and reminded his viewers that the one book they could buy that definitely wasn't a fake was his book, which was currently number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list. It made, he noted, a wonderful gift. (102-103)

- 17 At the end of the story, Stanley tries to reach Sharon. His voice heard in the distance on the phone may well be that of the writer in contemporary society trying in vain to make himself heard in a cacophonous world which is shown to be torn between conflicting views, warring tribes and a tight-knit coalition of vested interests.

- 18 The world as implicitly depicted by the narrator is a world in which articulacy and the art of conversation seem to have given way to strange noises, rumblings, shouts and rantings, in which the kind of reasoning process in which Man is engaged sounds more like a parody of Talmudic discussions that would have gone out of hand ... far-fetched, endless, warped and boring, as the narrator suggests:

Abraham Foxman called an emergency meeting of the ADL, who called an emergency meeting of JDL. They didn't really care what the BOOK of Stan claimed about the divinity of the Old Testament, much as they didn't really care what Jesus or Mohammed claimed about it. However, if The Book of Stan were true, then the Old Testament was not true, and if the Old Testament was not true, the whole idea of Jews as a chosen tribe was not true. Brass tacks: If there were no real tribe, then there were no real Jews, there could be no real anti-Semitism, and if there was no anti-Semitism, then Abe and his staff were shit out of a job... (99-100)

## Conclusion

- 19 "Startling Revelations from the Lost Book of Stan" definitely belongs to absurdist literature. The world itself, as implicitly depicted through the story, thus seems to have been forsaken by God while Mankind has been left alone to tear itself apart. Images of war, of death, of death in life abound in the story, but never does the audience feel oppressed listening to the storyteller. Quite the contrary in fact.
- 20 There emerges from the story as told by the narrator a sense of festive kinship between him and us, as we share for a moment the pleasures of subversive wit, humor and self-derision. "Startling Revelations from the Lost Book of Stan" typically appeals to the mind "that is rather accustomed to shuttling between the transcendent and the worldly and defining its relationship to reality in terms of the ironies generated by such travel" (Shechner 146).
- 21 Parody and self-parody are here more than a literary mode, they are a way of retrieving a sense of being for a moment, away from an oppressive and dull society. They are part of a literary game between chums not taking themselves too much in earnest, which might be the first step towards moments of innocence. Perhaps another version of the "Immaculate Conception."

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