

The Birth of *Israel*

By Jacob Berkowitz

Israel, the play, began life with another name and as a stand-up comedy routine. For anyone who knows the biblical story of Jacob/Israel that's funny, or at least intriguing. And this has been the real story of the genesis of the play - a series of serendipitous and wonderfully echoing occurrences that guided my muse to create Israel.

Writing Israel was an act of passion. I was part of a local Almonte theatre group that was working on a collective production of which my stand-up comedy routine was to be a part. Then at one troupe meeting the plans shifted to a single-authored play. I felt myself literally shaking in my seat. I left the meeting with a headache and in a foul mood. I had a story to tell and it would be told if it needed to flip me over and whack me on the head to make me see it needed to be written.

The original concept was a stand-up routine [link to excerpt] based on my observances of the quirky nature of Canadian secular Judaism, rooted in my personal experience. However, in the end, the play is much more likely to elicit tears than laughs.

As I workshopped bits of the initial writing with friends and the Almonte theatre group the feedback I received had one core theme: give us more of yourself. This, I soon realized, was exactly what I was trying to avoid with stand-up comedy - keep it funny and once removed. A veil of laughter and heady insight. I began the journey of editing the material to find that core storyline that listeners kept pointing to as the source of power.

It was at this time that I remembered I'd done an oral history interview with my grandfather in 1989 when he was 88-years-old. My grandmother had died months before, and with her passing and I was determined to get his story onto tape before he died. Listening to the two-and-a-half hours of reflection and personal history 14 years after his death is an amazing experience.

When I shared it with my uncle he called me after listening to it for 20 minutes, and crying, and said he'd learned so much about his dad. Then he added that the tape would make a Pulitzer Prize-winning play (a family trait that all action must achieve the highest acclaim) along the lines of *Death of a Salesman*. Funny you should say that, I said, it has inspired a play.

As I re-listened several times to my grandfather's story it elicited thoughts, memories and feelings about my relationship with him. This was the core of the narrative: my relationship with my grandfather and its role in shaping my sense of self and identity. Ironically, what started as an exploration of Judaism - the collective experience and spirit - became a journey into the individual spirit.

I edited, forced myself to hit the delete key and eventually removed almost all of the original material from the script. Israel was indeed born second, like the biblical character, a twin born holding on to the ankle of the first born Esau. Yet it is Israel that founds the nation; the play.

Having found the core narrative line around autobiographical material, I now needed to create a coherent piece of theatre. So I began to create fictional elements to fill-out the storyline. In the end, the play is about half autobiographical, and half fictional. At least in a literal sense. However, what I've found is that what I remembered, or thought of as "fact" was, in numerous cases, mistaken. And the elements of fiction that emerged from my subconscious, on reflection, capture the essence of the story, and the truth, often more succinctly than the historical facts. Thus, in the end, *Israel* is theatre. It's not about the facts of history or autobiography, but about the essential truths of human experience that we can all share.

Jacob Berkowitz *May, 2005*