

One Hundred Philistine Foreskins

This new novel by Tova Reich (Counterpoint, \$25) is a shockingly daring and cuttily brilliant portrait of a fictional Bible scholar known as Ha'Rav Ima Temima Ba'alat Ov of Brooklyn. She is accompanied by her wry prophetess the Kol-Isha-Erva (who lifts her "woman's naked voice"—a literal translation of her name—to record the teachings of Ima Temima), and her priestess the Aish Zara (formerly known as Essie Rapoport, whose "strange fire" burns fiercely by Temima's side and who wears "the tall white mitre of the high priestess with an Urim and Tumim jewel-encrusted breastplate.... ordered on the internet from the Yale University website"). The names of the characters alone attest to Reich's dazzlingly allusive prose style, which frequently echoes, invokes and puns on Biblical verses and classical rabbinic interpretation.

Ima Temima, who grew up as Tema Bavli, daughter of an abusive rabbinical father and a well-intentioned but sickly mother in Boro Park, moved to Jerusalem as a young woman along with the Zionist calligrapher and erstwhile kosher deli waiter Howie Stern of Queens, whom Temima marries solely to escape her father's grasp. Once in Israel, Howie re-invents himself first as the scribe Haim Ba'al Teshuva (a name signifying the new life he finds when he "returns" to Jewish religious tradition) and then as Go'el HaDam, the fanatical "blood avenger" who makes his home in Hebron, violently persecuting "Muslim extremists and latent jihadists....Christian proselytizers, Mormon baptizers of dead Jews, Jews for Jesus, Jewish left-wing intellectuals, homosexuals, Israeli historical revisionists, women rabbis...."

It is this latter category Ima Temima joins when she refuses to join her husband. After a brief stint as one of the many wives of Abba Kadosh, the black cult leader of a patriarchal commune in the Judean Desert, she amasses a group of devoted followers. Ima Temima, who had the privilege of learning Torah as a child by listening in through the walls of a converted outhouse adjacent to a boys' yeshiva, teaches her followers her own radical feminist "mother Torah." Literally, she teaches from a small scroll she wrote herself and which accompanies her even when she is bedridden, "the two wooden rollers of its scroll poking out from the covers like rabbit ears perked up at attention alert to danger."

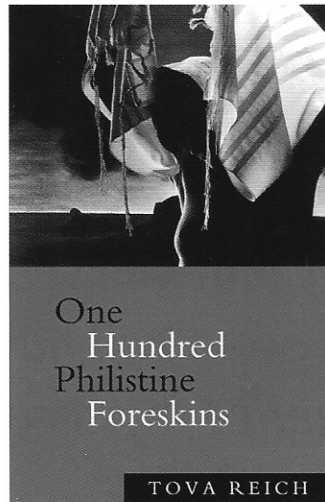
Reich, like her heroine, is steeped in the cadences of Biblical language. She treats us to (or scandalizes us with) many of Ima Temima's teachings, such as the notion that it was God who impregnated Sarah with Isaac (an ingeniously irreverent parody of the conventions of rabbinic interpretation, whereby one can read the Biblical word "pakad" as "dafak," which is contemporary Hebrew slang for "knocked up")—which would explain why Abraham was so reluctant to banish Ishmael, and so amenable to sacrificing Isaac. Her political critique, too, could not be more timely—in an era when women are still being arrested for wearing prayer shawls at the Kotel, Reich's novel features a feminist Bible scholar with "friends in high places" parading through the Haredi neighborhoods of Jerusalem trailed by hundreds

of devoted followers, herself avoiding the "mosh pit" that is the Western Wall because of the "flabbergasting idolatry of praying to stones."

Then there is the unforgettable moment when Temima, working as part of a Hevra Kadisha to prepare the dead for burial, recognizes the body of her stepmother, a consciously twisted allusion to the gravedigger scene in Hamlet. Reich does not wear her erudition lightly; she does not seem to mind that this book—which is a marvelous read for all—will have a core audience of readers suf-

ficiently learned but not too traditionally minded to appreciate her unique blend of midrash and chutzpah—provided, of course, that they are not too faint of heart.

ILANA KURSHAN



The opening of the novel will give you a sense of what awaits in the pages to follow:

It is a matter of record that certain living creatures, feeling the end of life squeezing them in, make one last desperate attempt to break free and do exactly what they want to do and express themselves exactly as they wish to be understood, on their own

terms, without consideration of the desires or pressures or disapproval of family and other enemies, or of any being at all who claims ownership over them.

As she readied herself to carry out such an action, HaRav Temima Ba'alat Ov, the renowned Jerusalem Bible teacher and beloved guru revered as Ima Temima by thousands of disciples, called to mind the case of the most godlike of all mortal creators, the writer Lev Tolstoy, who in a grand final gesture took flight from the unbearable materialism and vulgarity of wife and other hangers-on and bolted from his estate Yasnaya Polyana in search of the purity he preached and needed—yes, he had to have it right now, he could not put it off another minute, this was his last chance, his final statement—only to be reduced by an old man's illness in the once insignificant train station of Astapovo, where he died the ignoble but fitting death of a holy fool.

Tolstoy was a Russian, as everyone knows, but under the same heading of striking out at the last moment in a pure gesture of unrestrained, desperate fidelity to self, as Temima was preparing to make her own radical statement on this order, she also called to mind a German—a German Shepherd to be precise, her gentile neighbor's dog known as Gemy from the earli-