

S. Y. Agnon

# THE SIGN

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

*Agnon's story Ha-Siman, published in the eighth volume of his collected works (Ha-esh Veba-'ezim), here appears for the first time in English translation.*

*Various literary responses to the Holocaust have received much attention in the past few years. It has been claimed that the emerging Jewish theology of the latter half of the twentieth century is being written more by novelists and poets than by professional theologians. Surely S. Y. Agnon, the great master of twentieth century Hebrew fiction, is to be counted among such religiously concerned authors. It is thus surprising that Ha-Siman, the single piece in which Agnon most directly deals with his reactions to the Holocaust, has not yet been available to the English-reading public.*

*The story is a masterpiece of loving detail and of restraint. Agnon's two great loves, the East European shtetl and the Jerusalem of several decades ago, appear in juxtaposition to one another. The customs of Buczac and the flower-gardens of Talpjt, both seen as the gifts of God to Israel, interweave to create an almost eerie sense of lyrical beauty. Ever thankful that he lives in the Land of Israel, where the flowers "are from our own gardens" and we have "the strength to stand up for our lives," Agnon inevitably finds himself drawn back to his spiritual home in Eastern Europe. The struggle not to "dilute my wine with tears" is the struggle so many Jewish writers have faced in trying to tell the world that their home has been wiped off the map, the struggle for the restraint that will allow them to create something more than an outcry in response to the events of the Nazi era.*

*The ending of the story is perhaps surprising from Agnon. There is indeed, as others have since claimed, a kind of revelation that*

*proceeds from the Holocaust. But for Agnon it is a highly personal revelation, one vouchsafed to him alone. It is not God or an Angel who steps forth from between the Scrolls in the Ark, but rather poet—Agnon himself, perhaps—in the guise of Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol. And all the heaven-sent poet can do is to create a memorial for the city and its dead.*

*The Holocaust can be treated, Agnon tells his reader, only with restraint. We seek to build new lives, to discover the new loves of Jerusalem and her flowers, and to transplant the world of Eastern Europe to its old/new home in the Land of Israel. When we are alone in the synagogue, however, and the ark finally does open, as though to respond to our plight, the only voice that emerges is that of desolation and of tears.*

A.G.

1

In the year when the news reached us that all the Jews in my town had been killed, I was living in a certain section of Jerusalem, in a house which I had built for myself after the disturbances of 1929 (5629—which numerically is equal to 'The Eternity of Israel'). On the night when the Arabs had destroyed my home, I vowed that if God would save me from the hands of the enemy and I should live, I would build a house in this particular neighborhood which the Arabs had tried to destroy. By the grace of God, I was saved from the hands of our despoilers and my wife and children and I remained alive in Jerusalem. Thus I fulfilled my vow and there built a house and made a garden. I planted a tree, and lived in that place with my wife and children, by the will of our Rock and Creator. Sometimes we dwelt in quiet and rest, and sometimes in fear and trembling because of the desert sword that waved in fuming anger over all the inhabitants of our holy land. And even though many troubles and evils passed over my head, I accepted all with good humor and without complaint. On the contrary, with every sorrow I used to say how much better it was to live in the Land of Israel than outside the Land, for the Land of Israel has given us the strength to stand up for our lives, while outside the land we went to meet the enemy like sheep to the slaughter. Tens of thousands of Israel, none of whom the enemy was worthy even to touch, were killed and strangled and drowned and buried alive; among them my brothers and friends and family, who went through all kinds of great sufferings in their lives

and in their deaths, by the wickedness of our blasphemers and our desecrators, a filthy people, blasphemers of God, whose wickedness had not been matched since man was placed upon the earth.

## 2

I made no lament for my city and did not call for tears or for mourning over the congregation of God whom the enemy had wiped out. The day when we heard the news of the city and its dead was the afternoon before Shavuot, so I put aside my mourning for the dead because of the joy of the season when our Torah was given. It seemed to me that the two things came together, to show me that in God's love for His people, He still gives us some of that same power which He gave us as we stood before Sinai and received the Torah and commandments; it was that power which stood up within me so that I could pass off my sorrow over the dead of my city for the happiness of the holiday of Shavuot, when the Torah was given to us, and not to our blasphemers and desecrators who kill us because of it.

## 3

Our house was ready for the holiday. Everything about the house said "Shavuot."

The sun shone down on the outside of the house; inside, on the walls, we had hung cypress, pine and laurel branches, and flowers. Every beautiful flower and everything with a sweet smell had been brought in to decorate the house for the holiday of Shavuot. In all the days I had lived in the Land of Israel, our house had never been decorated so nicely as it was that day. All the flaws in the house had vanished, and not a crack was to be seen, either in the ceiling or in the walls. From the places where the cracks in the house used to gape with open mouths and laugh at the builders, there came instead the pleasant smell of branches and shrubs, and especially of the flowers we had brought from our garden. These humble creatures, which because of their great modesty don't raise themselves high above the ground except to give off their good smell, made the eye rejoice because of the many colors with which the Holy One, blessed be He, has decorated them, to glorify His land, which, in His loving-kindness, He has given to us.

## 4

Dressed in a new summer suit and new light shoes, I went to the House of Prayer. Thus my mother, may she rest in peace, taught me: if a man gets new clothes or new shoes, he wears them first to honor the holiday, and goes to the synagogue in them. I am thankful to my

body, which waited for me, and did not tempt me into wearing the new clothes and shoes before the holiday, even though the old ones were heavy, and hot desert winds ran through the country. And—if I haven't reached the heights of all my forefathers' deeds—in these matters I can do as well as my forefathers, for my body stands ready to fulfill most of those customs which depend upon it.

## 5

I walked to the House of Prayer. The two stores in the neighborhood were shut, and even the bus, which usually violates the Sabbath, was gone from the neighborhood. Not a man was seen in the streets, except for little errand boys delivering flowers. They too, by the time you could look at them, had disappeared. Nothing remained of them except the smell of the flowers they had brought, and this smell merged with the aroma of the gardens in our neighborhood.

The neighborhood was quietly at rest. No one stopped me on the street, and no one asked me for news of the world. Even if they had asked, I wouldn't have told them what had happened to my city. The days have come when every man keeps his sorrows to himself. What would it help if I told someone else what happened to my city? His city surely had also suffered that same fate.

## 6

I arrived at the House of Prayer and sat down in my place. I kept the events in my city, as they appeared to me, hidden in my heart. A few days later, when the true stories reached me, I saw that the deeds of the enemy were evil beyond the power of the imagination. The power of the imagination is stronger than the power of deeds, except for the evil of the nations, which goes beyond all imagination.

I opened a Mahzor and looked at the evening prayers for the first night of Shavuot. People outside the Land of Israel generally add many liturgical poems,\* especially in those ancient communities which follow the customs of their forefathers. Although I think of myself as a resident of the Land of Israel in every sense, I like these Piyyutim which prepare the soul for the theme of the day. Our teachers, the holy writers of the Piyyutim, are good intermediaries between the hearts of Israel and their Father in Heaven. They knew what we need to ask of God and what He demands of us, and they wrote hymns to open our lips before our Father in Heaven.

\*Heb.: Piyyutim.

The people who come to the House of Prayer began to gather. Even those whom one usually doesn't see in the synagogue came, to bring their children. As long as a child is a child, he is drawn after his father and draws his father with him. That is, he is drawn after his Father in Heaven, and draws with him the father who gave him birth. In my town, all the synagogues used to be filled with babes like these. They were good and sweet and healthy; now they are all dead. The hand of the enemy has finished them all. There is no remnant, no one left. And if a few of them do remain, they've been captured by Gentiles and are being educated by Gentiles. Let's hope that they too will not be added to our enemies. Those about whom it is written "I shall bear you on the wings of eagles and bring you unto Me" are given over to others, and are trampled under the feet of human filth.

## 7

Although on the Sabbath and Festivals one says the evening prayers early, on Shavuot we wait to say Ma'ariv until the stars are out. For if we were to pray early and receive the holiness of the festival, we would be shortening the days of the Omer, and the Torah said: "there shall be seven full weeks."

Since they had already finished Minhah, and it was not yet time for Ma'ariv, most of the congregation sat talking with one another, except for the children who stood about in wonder. I know that if I say this people will smile at me, but I'll say it anyway: The same thing happened to those children at this season of the giving of our Torah as happened to them when their souls stood before Mount Sinai, ready to receive the Torah the following day.

While the adults were sitting and talking, and the children were standing about in amazement, the time came for the Evening Prayer. The gabbai pounded on the table and the leader of the prayers went down before the ark. After a short order of prayers, including neither Piyutim nor "And Moses declared the festivals of the Lord," they greeted one another and went home in peace.

## 8

I came home and greeted my wife and children with the blessing of the holiday. I stood amazed to think that here I was celebrating our holiday in my home, in my land, with my wife and children, at a time when tens of thousands of Israel were being killed and slaughtered and burned and buried alive, and those who were still

alive were running about as though lost in the fields and forests, or were hidden in holes in the earth.

I bowed my head toward the earth, this earth of the land of Israel, upon which my house is built, and in which my garden grows with trees and flowers, and I said over it the verse "Because of you, the soul liveth." Afterwards I said Kiddush and the blessing "Who has given us life" and I took a sip of wine and passed my glass to my wife and children. I didn't even dilute the wine with tears. This says a lot for a man; his city is wiped out of the world, and he doesn't even dilute his drink with tears.

I washed my hands and recited the blessing over the bread, giving everyone a piece of the fine Challahs that were formed in the shape of the Tablets, to remember the Two Tablets of the Covenant that Moses brought down from Heaven. The custom of Israel is Torah: if the bread comes from the earth, its shape is from the Heavens.

We sat down to the festive meal of the first night of Shavuot. Part of the meal was the fruit of our soil, which we had turned with our own hands, and watered with our own lips. When we came here we found parched earth, as hands had not touched the land since her children had left her. But now she is a fruitful land, thankful to her masters, and giving us of her goodness.

The meal was good. All that was eaten was of the fruits of the land. Even the dairy dishes were from the milk of cows who grazed about our house. It is good when a man's food comes from close to him and not from far away, for that which is close to a man is close to his tastes. Yet Solomon, in praising the Woman of Valor, praises her because she "brings her bread from afar." But the days of Solomon were different, for Solomon ruled over all the lands and every man in Israel was a hero. And as a man's wife is like her husband, the Women of Valor in Israel left it for the weak to bring their bread from nearby, while they would go to the trouble of bringing it from afar. In these times, when the land has shrunk and we all have trouble making a living, bread from nearby is better than that which comes from afar.

## 9

The meal which the land had given us was good, and good too is the land itself, which gives life to its inhabitants. As the holiday began, Jerusalem was freed from the rough desert winds, which rule from Pesach to Shavuot, and a soft breeze blew from the desert and the sea. Two winds blow in our neighborhood, one from the sea and one from the desert, and between them blows another wind, from the little gardens which the people of the neighborhood have planted

around their houses. Our house too stands in the midst of a garden where there grow cypresses and pines, and, at their feet, lilies, dahlias, onychas, snapdragons, dandelions, chrysanthemums, and violets. It is the way of pines and cypresses not to let even grass grow between them; but the trees in our garden looked with favor upon our flowers and lived side by side with them, for they remembered how hard we had worked when they were first beginning to grow. We were stingy with our own bread and bought saplings; we drank less water, in order to water the gentle young trees, and we guarded them against the wicked herdsmen who used to send their cattle into our garden. Now they have become big trees, which shade us from the sun, giving us their branches as covering for the Succah, and greens for the holiday of Shavuot, to cover our walls in memory of the event at Sinai. They used to do the same in my town when I was a child, except that in my town most of the greens came from the gardens of the Gentiles, while here I took from my own garden, from the branches of my trees, and from the flowers between my trees. They gave off a good aroma and added flavor to our meal.

## 10

I sat inside my house with my wife and little children. The house and everything in it said "Holiday." So too we and our garments, for we were dressed in the new clothes we had made for the festival. The festival is for God and for us; we honor it in whatever way we can, with pleasant goods and new clothing. God in Heaven also honors the holiday, and gives us the strength to rejoice.

I looked around at my family, and I felt in the mood to tell them about what we used to do in my city. It was true that my city was dead, and those who were not dead were like the dead, but before the enemy had come and killed them all, my city used to be full of life and good and blessing. If I start telling tales of my city I never have enough. But let's tell just a few of the deeds of the town. And since we are in the midst of the holiday of Shavuot, I'll tell a little concerning this day.

## 11

From the Sabbath when we blessed the new month of Sivan, we emerged from the mourning of the days of Omer, and a spirit of rest passed through the town: especially on the New Moon, and especially with the saying of Hallel. When the leader of prayer said "The Heavens are the Heavens of God, but the earth hath He given to the children of men," we saw that the earth and even the river were smiling at us. I don't know whether we or the river first said: "It's all

right to swim." But even the Heavens agreed that the river was good for bathing, for the sun had already begun to break through its coldness; not only through the coldness of the river, but of all the world. A man could now open his window without fear of the cold. Some people turned their ears toward the sound of a bird, for the birds had already returned to their nests and were making themselves heard. In the houses arose the aroma of dairy foods being prepared for Shavuot, and the smell of the fresh-woven clothes of the brides and grooms who would enter under the Huppah after the holiday. The sound of the barber's scissors could be heard in the town, and every face was renewed. All were ready to welcome the holiday on which we received the Torah and Commandments. See how the holiday on which we received the Torah and Commandments is happier and easier than all the other holidays. On Pesach we can't eat *whatever* we want; on Succot, we can't eat *wherever* we want. But on Shavuot we can eat anything we want, wherever we want to eat it.

The world is also glad and rejoices with us. The lids of the skies are as bright as the sun, and glory and beauty cover the earth.

## 12

Now children, listen to me: I'll tell you something of my youth. Now your father is old, and if he let his beard grow as did Abraham, you'd see white hair in his beard. But I too was once a little boy who used to do the things children do. While the old men sat in the House of Study preparing themselves for the Time of the Giving of the Torah the following morning, my friends and I would stand outside looking upward, hoping to catch the moment when the sky splits open, and everything you ask for (even supernatural things!) is immediately given you by God—if you are worthy and you catch the right moment. In that case, why do I feel as though none of my wishes has ever been granted? Because I had so many things to ask for, that before I decided what to wish first, sleep came upon me, and I dozed off. When a man is young his wishes are many; before he gets around to asking for anything, he is overcome by sleep. When a man is old he has no desires; if he asks for anything, he asks for a little sleep.

Now let me remove the sleep from my eyes, and I'll tell a little bit about this day.

Nowadays a man is found outdoors more than in his house. In former times, if a man's business didn't bring him out, he sat either in his house or in the House of Study. But on the first day of Shavuot everybody would go to the gardens and forests outside the town in honor of the Torah, which was given outdoors. The trees and



bushes and shrubs and flowers which I know from those walks on the first day of Shavuot, I know well. The animals and beasts and birds which I know from those walks on the first day of Shavuot, I know well. How so? While we were walking, my father, of blessed memory, would show me a tree or a bush or a flower and say: "This is its name in the Holy Tongue." He would show me an animal or a beast or a bird and say to me, "This is its name in the Holy Tongue." For if they were worthy to have the Torah write their names, surely we must recognize them and know their names. In that case, why don't I list their names? Because of those who have turned upon the Torah and wrought havoc with the language.

## 13

I saw that my wife and children enjoyed the tales of my town. So I went on and told them more, especially about the great synagogue, the glory of the town, the beauty of which was mentioned even by the Gentile princes. Not a Shavuot went by, but Count Pototsky didn't send a wagon full of greens for the synagogue. There was one family in the town that had the special rights in arranging these branches.

I also told them about our little Kloiz, our Prayer-Room. People know me as one of the regulars in the Old House of Study, but before I pitched my tent in the Old House of Study, I was one of the young men of the Kloiz. I have so very very much to tell about those times—but here I'll tell only things that concern this day.

On the day before Shavuot Eve, I used to go out to the woods near town with a group of friends to gather green boughs. I would take a ball of cord from my mother, may she rest in peace, and I would string it up from the roof of our house in the shape of a Star of David, and on the cord I would hang the leaves we had pulled off the branches, one by one. I don't like to boast, but something like this it's all right for me to tell. Even the old men of the Kloiz used to say: "Fine, fine. The work of an artist, the work of an artist." These men were careful about what they said, and their mouths uttered no word which did not come from their hearts. I purposely didn't tell my wife and children about the poems I used to write after the festival; sad songs. When I saw the faded leaves falling from the Star of David I would be overcome by sadness, and I would compose sad poems.

Once my heart was aroused, my soul remembered other things about Shavuot. Among them were the paper roses which were stuck to the windowpanes. This was done by the simple folk at the edge of town. The respected heads of families in town did not do this, for

they clung carefully to the customs of their fathers, while the others did not. But since the enemy has destroyed them all together, I shall not distinguish between them here.

I told my wife and children many more things about the town and about the day. And to everything I said, I added: "This was in former days, when the town stood in peace." Nevertheless, I was able to tell the things calmly and not in sorrow, and one would not have known from my voice what had happened to my town, that all the Jews in it had been killed. The Holy One, blessed be He, has been gracious to Israel: even when we remember the greatness and glory of bygone days, our soul does not leave us out of sorrow and longing. Thus a man like me can talk about the past, and his soul doesn't pass out of him as he speaks.

#### 14

Following the Blessing after Meals I said to my wife and children, "You go to sleep, and I'll go to the synagogue for the vigil of Shavuot night." Now I was born in Buczacz, and grew up in the Old House of Study where the spirit of the great men of Israel pervaded. But I shall admit freely that I don't follow them in all their ways. They read the Order of Study for Shavuot night and I read the book of hymns which Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol, may his soul rest, composed on the six hundred thirteen commandments.

There have arisen many poets in Israel, who have graced the order of prayers with their poems and strengthened the hearts of Israel with their Piyyutim, serving as good intermediaries between the hearts of Israel and their Father in Heaven. And even I, when I humbly come to plead for my soul before my Rock and Creator, find expression in the words of our holy poets—especially in the poems of Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol, may his soul rest.

I have already told elsewhere how, when I was a small child, my father, of blessed memory, would bring me a new prayerbook every year from the fair. Once father brought me a prayerbook and I opened it to a plea of Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol. I read and was amazed: Was it possible that such a righteous man as this, whose name was written in the Siddur, did not find God before him at all times and in every hour, so that he had to write "At the dawn I seek Thee, my rock and tower." Not only did God make him seek Him, but even when the poet found Him, fear fell upon him and he stood confused. Thus he says: "Before Thy greatness I stand and am confounded."

As I lie down at night I see this saint rising from his bed on a stormy windblown night. The cold engulfs him and enters into his

bones, and a cold wind slaps at his face, ripping his cloak and struggling with its fringes. The Zaddik strengthens himself to call for God. When he finds Him, terror falls upon him out of the fear of God and the majesty of His presence.

For many days that saint wouldn't leave my sight. Sometimes he seemed to me like a baby asking for his father, and sometimes like a grown-up, exhausted from so much chasing after God. And when he finally does find Him, he's confused because of God's greatness.

After a time, sorrow came and added to sorrow.

## 15

Once, on the Sabbath after Pesach, I got up and went to the great House of Study. I found the old Hazzan raising his voice in song. There were men in Buczacz who would not allow the interruption of the prayers between the Blessing of Redemption and the Amidah for additional hymns. Thus the Hazzan would go up to the platform after Mussaf and recite the Hymns of Redemption. I turned my ear and listened to him intone: "Poor captive in a foreign land." I felt sorry for the poor captive girl, who must have been in great trouble, judging from the tone of the Hazzan. It was a little hard for me to understand why God didn't hurry and take her out of captivity, or why He didn't have mercy on the poor old man who stood, his head bowed, begging and praying for her. I also wondered at the men of my city, who were doing nothing to redeem her from captivity.

One day I was turning the pages of the big Siddur in my grandfather's house, and I found those same words written in the Siddur. I noticed that every line started with a large letter. I joined the letters together, and they formed the name "Solomon." My heart leapt for joy, for I knew it was Rabbi Solomon from my Siddur. But I felt sorry for that Zaddik. As though he didn't have enough troubles himself, searching for God and standing in confusion before Him, he also had to feel the sorrow of this captive girl who was taken as a slave to a foreign country. A few days later I came back and leafed through the Siddur, checking the first letters of the lines of every hymn. Whenever I found a hymn with the name Solomon Ibn Gabirol written in it, I didn't put it down until I had read it through.

## 16

I don't remember when I started the custom of reading the hymns of Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol on Shavuot Eve, but since I started this custom, I haven't skipped a year. It goes without saying that I did it while I lived in Germany, where they like Piyyutim, but even here in the Land of Israel where they don't say many of these poems,

I haven't done away with my custom. Even in times of danger, when the Arabs were besieging Jerusalem and machine-gun fire was flying over our heads; I didn't keep myself from the House of Study where I spent most of the night, as has been done everywhere, in all generations, in remembrance of our fathers who stood trembling all night in the third month after going out of Egypt, waiting to receive the Torah from God Himself.

### 17

My home is near the House of Prayer; it takes only a little while to get there. You walk down the narrow street on which my house stands, and you turn down the wide street at the end, till you come to a little wooden shack which serves as a House of Prayer. That night the way made itself longer. Or maybe it didn't make itself longer, but I made it longer. My thoughts had tired out my soul, and my soul my feet. I stopped and stood more than I walked.

### 18

The world and all within it rested in a kind of pleasant silence: the houses, the gardens, the woods; and above them the heavens, the moon and the stars. Heaven and earth know that if it weren't for Israel who accepted the Torah, they would not be standing. They stand and fulfill their tasks: the earth to bring forth bread, and the heavens to give light to the earth and those who dwell upon it. Could it be that even in my home town the heavens are giving light and the earth bringing forth its produce? In the Land of Israel, the Holy One, Blessed be He, judges the land Himself, whereas outside the Land, He has handed this supervision over to angels. The angels' first task is to turn their eyes aside from the deeds of the Gentiles who do evil to Israel, and therefore the heavens there give their light and the earth its produce—perhaps twice as much as in the land of Israel.

### 19

I stood among the little houses, each of which was surrounded by garden. Since the time we were exiled from our land, this area had given forth thorns and briars; now that we have returned, it is rebuilt with houses, trees, shrubs, and flowers.

Because I love the little houses and their blossoming gardens, I'll tell their story.

A young veterinarian from Constantinople was appointed to watch over the animals of the Sultan. One day he was working in a village in the midst of the desert sands. On his way home, he stopped to rest. He looked up and saw the Dead Sea on one side and the Temple

mount on the other. A fresh breeze was blowing, and the air was better and more pleasant than anyplace in the Land. He got down from his donkey and began to stroll about, until he found himself making a path among the thorn-bushes, briars and rocks. "If only I could live here with my wife and children," he thought. "But to live here is impossible, as the place is far from any settlement, and there's no sign that anyone lives here, nor is there any form of life, except for the birds of the sky and various creeping things." The doctor remained until it began to get dark, and the time came to return to the city. He mounted his ass and went back to the city. A few days later he came again. A few days after that he came once more. Thus he did several times.

It happened that a certain Arab's cow became sick. He brought her to the doctor. The doctor prepared some medicine for her, and she got well. After a while, another one got sick. She too was brought to the doctor. Again he prepared some medicine and she became well. The Arab heard that the doctor wanted to build a summer house outside of town. The Arab said to him, "I have a piece of land near the town. If you like it, it's yours." It turned out to be just the spot the doctor had wanted. He bought thirty dunams of land from the Arab, built a summer house, dug a well, and planted a garden and an almond grove. All the clever people in Jerusalem laughed at him and said, "He's buried his money in the desert." But he himself was happy with his lot, and whenever he was free from work he would ride out there on his ass and busy himself with planting. Sometimes he would take along his young wife and small children to share in his happiness.

The word got around. There was a group of people that worked for the settlement of the Land. They went and bought a piece of land near his. They divided their section up into lots, and sent messengers to other lands, to offer Zionists the purchase of a share in the inheritance of the Land of Israel. A few among them bought.

The Great War came, bringing death on all sides, and destroying in one hour that which had been built up over many generations. If one was not hurt bodily by the war, it hurt one financially. And if neither one's body nor one's money was hurt, it damaged one's soul. The War was harder for the Jews than for anyone else, as it affected their bodies, their money, and their souls. Thus it was in the place we are discussing. Turkey, which also entered the war, sent her legions to wherever she ruled. One legion came to Jerusalem and camped there, in this place, on the land of the doctor. The soldiers ripped out the almond trees to make fires to cook their food and to warm their bodies, and turned the garden into a lair for cannons.

From out of the storm of war and the thunder of cannons, a kind of heralding voice was heard;\* a voice which, if we interpreted it according to our wishes and desires, heralded the end of troubles and the beginning of good, salvation, and comfort. The war, however, was still going strong. Neither the end of the troubles nor the beginning of salvation could yet be seen.

Slowly the strength of those who had started the fighting wore out, the hands of war were broken, and they could fight no more. The bravery of the heroes had been drained, so they left the battlefronts. Behind them they left destruction and desolation, wailing and tears, forever.

## 20

After the war Jerusalem awoke, bit by bit, from her destruction. A few people began to think of expanding the city, for even if there were a few places left which had not been damaged by the war, they were crowded and overpopulated. Even before the war, when Jerusalem lay in peace, and her inhabitants were satisfied with little, the air had become stifling. How much more so after the war. Even before the war there was little room left in Jerusalem; after the war, when the city was filled with new immigrants, how much more so.

People formed little societies to buy land in and around Jerusalem, and began to build new neighborhoods. These were small and far from town, and the sums owed were always great. People ran from bank to bank, borrowing in one place to pay off in another, paying in one place and borrowing in another. If it weren't for the bit of peace a man finds in his home and garden, they would have fallen by the way.

## 21

That stretch of barren desert also had its turn. They remembered the lands the doctor had bought, and asked him to sell them part of his holdings. He liked the idea, sold them a section of his land, and helped them to buy from others. The news got around, and people began to flock. They bought twenty-one thousand dunams, each dunam equalling a thousand six hundred Turkish pik, at the price of a grush and a half a pik. Some bought in order to build, and some bought in order to sell.

Now I shall leave the real-estate agents who held back the building of Jerusalem. If a man wanted to build a house they asked so much money that he was taken aback and went away. And if he agreed to come the next day to sign away his wealth, it would happen that

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\*The Balfour Declaration

overnight the lot had been sold to someone else, who had more than doubled his bid. The agents used to conspire together. Someone would ask to have a house built, and either they wouldn't build it for him, or they'd build it in the wrong place. So his lot stood empty, without a house, along with the rest of the fields to which the same thing had happened.

The neighborhood was finally built, but its residents were not able to open a school or a post office branch or a pharmacy or any of the institutions that people from the city needed, except for two or three stores, each of which was superfluous because of the others. During the disturbances it was even worse. Since the population was small, they could not hold out against the enemy, either in the disturbance of 1929, or in the War of Independence. And between 1929 and the War of Independence, in the days of the riots and horrors that began in 1936 and lasted until the Second World War began, they were given over to the hands of the enemy, and a man wouldn't dare to go out alone.

Of the Zionists outside the Land who had bought plots before the war, some died in the war, and others wound up in various other places. When those who were fortunate enough to come to the Land saw what had happened to the section, they sold their lots and built homes in other places. Of those who bought them, perhaps one or two built houses, and the rest left them until a buyer would come their way, to fill their palms with money.

## 22

Now I shall leave those who did not build the neighborhood, and shall tell only about those who did build it.

Four men went out into the dusts of the desert, an hour's walking distance from the city, and built themselves houses, each in one spot, according to lots. The whole area was still a wilderness; there were neither roads nor any signs of habitation. They would go to work in the city every morning, and come back an hour or two before dark, bringing with them all that they needed. Then they would eat something, and rush out to their gardens to kill snakes and scorpions, weed out thorns, level off holes in the ground, prepare the soil, and plant, and water the gentle saplings, in the hope that these saplings would grow into great trees, and give their shade. As yet there were neither trees nor shrubs in the neighborhood, but only parched earth which gave rise to thorns and briars. When the desert storms came, they sometimes lasted as long as nine days, burning our skin and flesh, and drying out our bones. Even at night there was no rest. But when the storms passed, the land was like paradise once again. A man

would go out to his garden, water his gentle young trees, dig holes, and add two or three shrubs or flowers to his garden.

From the very beginning, one of the four founders took it upon himself to attend to community business: to see that the Arabs didn't send their beasts into the gardens, and that the garbage collector took the garbage from the houses; to speak with the governor and those in charge of the water so that water wouldn't be lacking in the pipes, and to see that the bus would come and go on schedule, four times a day. What would he do if he had to consult his neighbors? There was no telephone as yet. He would take a shofar, and go up on his roof and blow. His neighbors would hear him and come.

After a while, more people came and built homes and planted gardens. During the day they would work in the city, and an hour or two before dark they would come home to break earth, weed, pull up thorns, plant trees and gardens, and clear the place of snakes and scorpions. Soon more people came, and then still more. They too built houses and made gardens. Some of them would rent out a room or two to a young couple who wanted to raise their child in the clear air. Some of them rented out their whole houses and continued to live in the city until they paid off their mortgages. After a time I too came to live here, fleeing from the tremors of 1927, which shook the walls of the house where I was living, and forced me to leave my home. I came to this neighborhood with my wife and two children, and we rented an apartment. Roads had already been built, and the buses would come and go at regular times. We felt as though this place, which had been barren since the day of our exile from our land, was being built again.

## 23

Automobiles still came but rarely, and a man could walk in the streets without fear of being hit. At night there was a restful quiet. If you didn't hear the dew fall, it was because you were sleeping a good, sweet sleep. The Dead Sea would smile at us almost every day, its blue waters shining in graceful peace between the gray and blue hills of Moab. The Site of the Temple would look upon us. I don't know who longed for whom more; we for the Temple Mount, or the Temple Mount for us. The king of the winds, who dwelt in a mountain not far from us, used to stroll about the neighborhood, and his servants and slaves, the winds, would follow at his feet, brushing through the area. Fresh air filled the neighborhood. People from far and near would come to walk, saying, "No man knoweth its value." Old men used to come and say, "Here we would find length



of days." Sick people came and said, "Here we would be free from our illnesses." Arabs would pass through and say "Shalom"; they came to our doctor, who cured them of their ills. The doctor's wife would help their wives when they had difficulty in childbirth. The Arab women would come from their villages around us, bringing the fruits of their gardens and the eggs of their hens, giving praises to Allah, who, in His mercy upon them, had given the Jews the idea of building houses here, so that they would not have to bring their wares all the way into the city. As an Arab would go to work in the city, taking a short-cut through these streets, he would stand in wonder at the deeds of Allah, Who had given the Jewish lords wisdom to build roads, mend the ways, and so forth. Suddenly, one Sabbath after Tisha B'av, our neighbors rose up against us to make trouble for us. The people of the neighborhood could not believe that this was possible. Our neighbors, for whom we had provided help at every chance, for whom we had made life so much easier, buying their produce, having our doctor heal their sick, building roads to shorten the way for them, came upon these same roads to destroy us.

## 24

By the grace of God upon us, we rose up and were strong. As I said in the beginning, I built a house and planted a garden. In this place from which the enemy tried to rout us, I built my home. I built it facing the Temple Mount, to always keep upon my heart our beloved dwelling which was destroyed and has not yet been rebuilt. If "we cannot go up and be seen there, because of the hand which has cast itself into our Temple," we direct our hearts there in prayer.

Now I'll say something about the House of Prayer in our neighborhood.

Our forefathers, who saw their dwelling in this world as temporary, but the dwelling in the Synagogue and the House of Study as permanent, built great structures for prayer and study. We, whose minds are given over mainly to things of this world, build great and beautiful houses for ourselves, and suffice with little buildings and shacks for prayer. Thus our House of Prayer in this neighborhood is a wooden shack. This is one reason. Aside from this, they didn't get around to finishing the Synagogue before the first disturbance, the riots, or the War of Independence, and at each of those times the residents had to leave the neighborhood. It was also not completed because of the changes in its congregants, who changed after each disturbance. That's why, as I've explained, our place of prayer is a shack, and not a stone building.

Now I shall tell what happened in this shack on that Shavuot night when the rumor reached us that all the Jews in my town had been killed.

## 25

I entered the House of Prayer. No one else was in the place. Light and rest and a good smell filled the room. All kinds of shrubs and flowers with which our land is blessed gave off their aroma. Already at Ma'ariv I had taken note of the smell, and now every blossom and flower gave off the aroma with which God had blessed it. A young man, one who had come from a town where all the Jews had been killed, went out to the fields of the neighborhood with his wife, and picked and gathered every blossoming plant and decorated the synagogue for the Holiday of Shavuot, the time of the giving of our Torah, just as they used to do in their town, before all the Jews there had been killed. In addition to all the wild flowers they gathered in the nearby fields, they brought roses and zinnias and laurel boughs from their own garden.

## 26

I shall choose among the words of our Holy Tongue to make a crown of glory for our Prayer Room, its candelabra, and its ornaments.

The Eternal Light hangs down from the ceiling, facing the Holy Ark and the two tablets of the Law above it. The Light is wrapped in capers and thistles and bluebells, and it shines and gives off its light from between the green leaves of the capers' thorns and from its white flowers, from between the blue hues in the thistles, and from the grey leaves and purple flowers around it. All the wild flowers which grow in the fields of our neighborhood gather together in this month to beautify our House of Prayer for the holiday of Shavuot, along with the garden flowers which the gardens in our neighborhood give us. To the right of the Holy Ark stands the reader's table, and on the table a lamp with red roses around it. Six candles shine from among the roses. The candles have almost burned down to the end, yet they still give off light, for so long as the oil is not finished they gather their strength to light the way for the prayers of Israel until they reach the gates of Heaven. A time of trouble has come to Jacob, and we need much strength. Opposite them, to the south, stand the memorial candles, without number and without end. Six million Jews have been killed by the Gentiles; because of them a third of us are dead and two thirds of us are orphans. You won't find

a man in Israel who hasn't lost tens of his people. The memorial candles light them all up for us, and their light is equal, so that you can't tell the difference between the candle of a man who lived out his days, and one who was killed. But in Heaven they certainly distinguish between the candles, just as they distinguish between one soul and another. The Eternal had a great thought in mind when He chose us from all peoples and gave us His Torah of life. Nevertheless, it's a bit difficult to see why He created, as opposed to us, the kinds of people who take away our lives because we keep His Torah.

## 27

By the grace of God upon me, those thoughts left me. But the thought of my city did not take itself away from me. Is it possible that a city full of Torah and life is suddenly uprooted from the world, and all its people, old and young, men, women and children are killed, that now the city is silent, with not a soul of Israel left in it?

I stood facing the candles, and my eyes shone like them, except that those candles were surrounded with flowers, and my eyes had thorns upon them. I closed my eyes, so that I would not see the deaths of my brothers, the people of my town. It pains me to see my town and its slain, how they are tortured in the hands of their tormentors, the cruel and harsh deaths they suffer. And I closed my eyes for yet another reason. When I close my eyes I become, as it were, master of the world, and I see only that which I desire to see. So I closed my eyes and asked my city to rise before me, with all its inhabitants, and with all its Houses of Prayer. I put every man in the place where he used to sit and where he studied, along with his sons, sons-in-law, and grandsons—for in my town everyone came to prayer. The only difference was in the places. Some fixed their places for prayer in the old House of Study, and some in the other synagogues and Houses of Study, but every man had his fixed place in his own House of Prayer.

## 28

After I had arranged all the people in the old House of Study, with which I was more familiar than the other places in town, I turned to the other Houses of Prayer. As I had done with the old House of Study, so I did with them. I brought up every man before me. If he had sons or sons-in-law or grandsons, I brought them into view along with him. I didn't skip a single holy place in our town, or a single man. I did this not by the power of memory, but by the power of the synagogues and the Houses of Study. For once the synagogues

and Houses of Study stood before me, all their worshippers also came and stood before me. The places of prayer brought life to the people of my city in their deaths as in their lives. I too stood in the midst of the city among my people, as though the time of the resurrection of the dead had arrived. The day of the resurrection will indeed be great; I felt a taste of it that day as I stood among my brothers and townspeople who have gone to another world, and they stood about me, along with all the synagogues and Houses of Study in my town. And were it not difficult for me to speak, I would have asked them what Abraham, Isaac and Jacob say, and what Moses says, about all that has happened in this generation.

I stood in wonder, looking at my townspeople. They too looked at me, and there was not a trace of condemnation in their glances, that I was thus and they were thus. They just seemed covered with sadness, a great and frightening sadness, except for one old man who had a kind of smile on his lips, and seemed to say "*Ariber Geshpringen*"; that is, we have "jumped over" and left the world of sorrows. In the Conversations of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, of blessed memory, something like that can be found. He heard about a certain preacher in Lemberg who, in the hour of his death, gestured with his fingers and said that he would show them a trick. At that moment he passed from the world of sorrows. And the Zaddik enjoyed those words.

## 29

Bit by bit the people of my town began to disappear and go away. I didn't try to run after them, for I knew that a man's thoughts cannot reach the place where they were going. And even if I could reach there, why should I prevent them from going, and why should I confuse them with my thoughts?

I was left alone, and I wandered back to former days, when my town was alive, and all those who were now dead were alive and singing the praise of God in the synagogues and the Houses of Prayer, and the old Hazzan served in the Great Synagogue, while I, a small child, saw him standing on the platform intoning "O poor captive," with the old Siddur containing all the prayers and hymns open before him. He didn't turn the pages, for the print had been wiped out by the age of the book and the tears of former cantors, and not a letter could be made out. But he, may God give light to his lot in the world to come, knew all the hymns by heart, and the praise of God together with the sorrow of Israel would rise from his lips in hymns and in prayer.

## 30

Let me describe him. He was tall and straight-backed; his beard was white, and his eyes looked like the prayerbooks published in Slavita, that were printed on blue-tinged paper. His voice was sweet and his clothes were clean. Only his Tallis was covered with tears. He never took his Tallis down from his head during the prayers. But after every prayer of love or redemption he would take it down a little and look about, to see if there was yet a sign of the Redemption. For forty years he was our city's messenger before God. After forty years he went to see his relatives in Russia. The border patrol caught him and threw him into prison. He lamented and begged God to take him out of captivity and return him to his place. God did not let the governor sleep. The governor knew that as long as the voice of the Jew was to be heard in his prison, sleep would not return to him. He commanded that the Hazzan be set free and returned home. They released him and sent him to our town. He came bringing with him a new melody to which he would sing "O Poor Captive."

## 31

The first time I heard that hymn was the Sabbath after Pesach, when I was still a little boy. I woke up in the middle of the night, and there was a light shining into the house. I got out of bed and opened the window, so that the light could come in. I stood by the window, trying to see from where the light was coming. I washed my hands and face, put on my Sabbath clothes, and went outside. Nobody in the house saw or heard me go out. Even my mother and father, who never took their eyes off me, didn't see me go out. I went outside and there was no one there. The birds, singing the song of morning, were alone outside.

I stood still until the birds had finished their song. Then I walked to the well, for I heard the sound of the well's waters, and I said, "I'll go hear the water talking." For I had not yet seen the waters as they talked.

I came to the well and saw that the water was running, but there was no one there to drink. I filled my palms, recited the blessing, and drank. Then I went to walk wherever my legs would carry me. My legs took me to the Great Synagogue, and the place was filled with men at prayer. The old cantor stood on the platform and raised his voice in the hymn "O poor captive." Now that hymn of redemption began to rise from my lips and sing itself in the way I had heard it from the lips of the old cantor. The city then stood yet in peace, and all the many and honoured Jews who have been killed by the enemy were still alive.

The candles which had given light for the prayers had gone out; only their smoke remained to be seen. But the light of the memorial candles still shone, in memory of our brothers and sisters who were killed and slaughtered and drowned and burned and strangled and buried alive by the evil of our blasphemers, cursed of God, the Nazis and their helpers. I walked by the light of the candles until I came to my city, which my soul longed to see.

I came to my city and entered the Old House of Study, as I used to do when I came home to visit—I would enter the Old House of Study first.

I found Hayyim the Shammas standing on the platform and rolling a Torah scroll, for it was the Eve of the New Moon, and he was rolling the scroll to the reading for that day. Below him, in an alcove near the window, sat Shalom the shoemaker, his pipe in his mouth, reading the *Shevet Yehudah*, exactly as he did when I was a child; he used to sit there reading the *Shevet Yehudah*, pipe in mouth, puffing away like one who is breathing smoke. The pipe was burnt out and empty, and there wasn't a leaf of tobacco in it, but they said that just as long as he held it in his mouth it tasted as though he were smoking.

I said to him: "I hear that you now fast on the Eve of Rosh Hodesh" (something they didn't do before I left for the Land of Israel when they would say the prayers for the "Small Yom Kippur" but not fast). Hayyim said to Shalom, "Answer him." Shalom took his pipe out of his mouth and said, "So it is. Formerly we would pray and not fast, now we fast but don't say the prayers. Why? Because we don't have a Minyan; there aren't ten men to pray left in the city." I said to Hayyim and Shalom, "You say there's not a Minyan left for prayer. Does this mean that those who used to pray are not left, or that those who are left don't pray? In either case, why haven't I seen a living soul in the whole town?" They both answered me together and said, "That was the first destruction,\* and this is the last destruction. After the first destruction a few Jews were left; after the last destruction not a man of Israel remained." I said to them, "Permit me to ask you one more thing. You say that in the last destruction not a man from Israel was left in the whole city. Then how is it that you are alive?" Hayyim smiled at me the way the dead smile when they see that you think that they're alive. I picked myself up and went elsewhere.

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\*World War One

## 33

I saw a group of the sick and afflicted running by. I asked a man at the end of the line: "Where are you running?" He placed his hand on an oozing sore and answered: "We run to greet the Rebbe." "Who is he?" I asked. He moved his hand from one affliction to another and smiling, said: "A man has only two hands, and twice as many afflictions." Then he told me the name of his Rebbe. It was a little difficult for me to understand. Was it possible that this Rebbe who had left for the Land of Israel six or seven generations ago, and had been buried in the soil of the holy city of Safed, had returned? I decided to go and see. I ran along, and reached the Zaddik together with them. They began to cry out before him how they were stricken with afflictions and persecuted by the rulers and driven from one exile to another, with no sign of redemption in view. The Zaddik sighed and said: "What can I tell you, my children? 'May God give strength to His people; may God bless His people with peace'." Why did he quote that particular verse? He said it only about this generation: before God will bless His people with peace He must give strength to His people, so that the Gentiles will be afraid of them, and not make any more war upon them, because of that fear.

I said, "Let me go and make this known to the world." I walked over to the sink and dabbed some water onto my eyes. I awoke, and saw that the book lay open before me, and I hadn't yet finished reciting the order of the Commandments of the Lord. I went back and read the Commandments of the Lord as composed by Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol, may his soul rest.

## 34

There was nobody in the shack; I sat in the shack alone. It was pleasant and nicely fixed up. All kinds of flowers which the soil of our neighborhood gives us were hung from the wall between branches of pine and laurel; roses and zinnias crowned the Ark and the reader's table, the prayer stand, and the eternal light. A wind blew through the shack and caused the leaves and flowers and the blossoms to sway, and the house was filled with a goodly smell; the memorial candles gave their light to the building. I sat there and read the holy words which God put into the hands of the poet, to glorify the Commandments which He gave to His people Israel. How great is the love of the holy poets before God! He gives power to their lips to glorify the Laws and Commandments that He gave to us in His great Love.

## 35

The doors of the Holy Ark opened, and I saw a likeness of the form of a man standing there, his head resting between the scrolls of the Torah, and I heard a voice come forth from the Ark, from between the Trees of Life.\* I bowed my head and closed my eyes, for I feared to look at the Holy Ark. I looked into my prayerbook, and saw that the letters which the voice from among the scrolls was reciting were at the same time being written into my book. The letters were the letters of the Commandments of the Lord, in the order set for them by Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol, may his soul rest. Now the man whom I had first seen between the scrolls of the Torah stood before me, and his appearance was like the appearance of a king.

I made myself small, until I was as though I were not, so that he should not feel the presence of a man in the place. Is it right that a king enter one of his provinces, and he not find any of his officers and slaves, except for one little slave?

But my tricks didn't help any. I made myself small, and nevertheless he saw me. How do I know he saw me? Because he spoke to me. And how do I know that it was to me he spoke? Because I was alone in the House of Prayer; there was no one there with me. He did not speak to me by word of mouth, but his thought was engraved into mine, his holy thought into mine. Every word he said was carved into the forms of letters, and the letters joined together into words, and the words formed what he had to say. These are the things as I remember them, word for word.

## 36

I shall put down the things he said to me, the things he asked me, and the things I answered him, as I brought my soul out into my palm, daring to speak before him. (But before I say them, I must tell you that he did not speak to me with words. Only the thoughts which he thought were engraved before me, and these created the words.)

And now I shall tell you all he asked me, and everything I answered him. He asked me, "What are you doing here alone at night?" And I answered, "My lord must know that this is the Eve of Shavuot when one stays awake all night reading the Order of Shavuot Night. I too do this, except that I read the hymns of Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol, may his soul rest."

He turned his head toward me and toward the book that stood before me on the table. He looked at the book and said, "It is

\*Torah Scrolls



Solomon's." I heard him and was astonished that he mentioned Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol and did not affix some title of honour before his name. For I did not yet know that the man speaking to me was Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol himself.

### 37

Now I shall tell the things that transpired after these former things. The memorial candles lit up the shack; the thorned flowers which crowned the Eternal Light before the Holy Ark and the other flowers gave off their aromas, and one smell was mixed with another; the aroma of the House of Prayer with that of the roses and zinnias from the gardens. A restful quiet was felt on the earth below and in the heavens above. Neither the call of the heart's pleas on earth, nor the sound of the heavens as they opened could be heard.

I rested my head in my arm, and sat and thought about what was happening to me. It couldn't have been in a dream, because he specifically asked me what I was doing here alone at night, and I answered him, "Doesn't my lord know that this night is the Eve of Shavuot, when we stay awake all night and read the Order of Shavuot Eve?" In any case, it seems a little difficult. Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol is the greatest of the holy poets. Why did he see fit to descend from the Palace of Song to this shack in this neighborhood to talk with a man like me?

### 38

I took my soul out into the palms of my hands, and raised my head to see where I was; for it was a little hard to explain the things as they had happened, though their happening itself was witness to them, and there was no doubt that he was here. Not only did he speak to me, but I answered him. Maybe the thing happened when the heavens were open. But for how long do the heavens open? Only for a moment. Is it possible that so great a thing as this could happen in one brief moment?

I don't know just how long it was, but certainly not much time passed before he spoke to me again. He didn't speak with his voice, but his thought was impressed upon mine and created words. And God gave my heart the wisdom to understand. But to copy the things down—I cannot. I just know this; that he spoke to me, for I was sitting alone in the House of Prayer, reading the Commandments of the Lord, as composed by Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol. For ever since I was old enough to do so, I follow the custom, every Shavuot Eve, of reading the Commandments of the Lord by Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol, may his soul rest.

## 39

I was reminded of the sorrow I had felt for Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol because God made him search for Him, as he says, "At the dawn I seek Thee, my rock and my fortress," and when he finally found Him, awe fell upon him and he stood confused, as he says, "Before Thy greatness I stand and am confounded." And as if he didn't have enough troubles himself, he had to add the sorrow of that poor captive girl. I put my finger to my throat as the old Cantor used to do, and raised my voice to sing, "O Poor, Captive," in the melody he had written. I saw that Rabbi Solomon, may his soul rest, turned his ear and listened to the pleasant sound of this hymn of redemption. I got up my courage and said to him, "In our town, wherever they prayed in the Ashkenazic rite, they used to say a lot of Piyyutim. The beauty of each Piyyut has stayed in my heart, and especially this 'Poor Captive,' which was the first Hymn of Redemption I heard in my youth." I remembered that Sabbath morning when I had stood in the Great Synagogue in our city, which was now laid waste. My throat became stopped up and my voice choked, and I broke out in tears.

Rabbi Solomon saw this and asked me "Why are you crying?" I answered, "I cry for my city and all the Jews in it who have been killed." His eyes closed, and I saw that the sorrow of my city had drawn itself to him. I thought to myself, since the Rabbi doesn't know all of the people of my town, he'll weigh the glory of all of them by the likes of me. I bowed my head and lowered my eyes and said to him, "In my sorrow and in my humility, I am not worthy. I am not the man in whom the greatness of our city can be seen."

## 40

Rabbi Solomon saw my sorrow and my affliction and the lowness of my spirit, for my spirit was indeed very low. He came close to me, until I found myself standing next to him, and there was no distance between us except that created by the lowness of my spirit. I raised my eyes and saw his lips moving, I turned my ear and heard him mention the name of my city. I looked and saw him move his lips again. I heard him say, "I'll make a sign, so that I won't forget the name." My heart melted and I stood trembling, because he had mentioned the name of my city, and had drawn mercy to it, saying he would make a sign, so as not to forget its name.

I began to think about what sign Rabbi Solomon could make for my city. With ink? It was a holiday, so he wouldn't have his writer's inkwell in his pocket. With his clothes? The clothes with which the Holy One, blessed be He, clothes His Holy Ones, have no folds, and

don't take to any imprint made upon them from outside.

Once more he moved his lips. I turned my ear, and heard him recite a poem, each line of which began with one of the letters of the name of my town. And so I knew that the sign the poet made for my town was in beautiful and rhymed verse, in the holy tongue.

#### 41

The hairs of my flesh stood on end and my heart melted as I left my own being and I was as though I was not. Were it not for remembering the poem, I would have been like all my townsfolk, who were lost, who had died at the hand of a despicable people, those who trampled my people until they were no longer a nation. But it was because of the power of the poem that my soul went out of me. And if my town has been wiped out of the world, it remains alive in the poem that the poet wrote as a sign for my city. And if I don't remember the words of the poem, for my soul left me because of its greatness, the poem sings itself in the heavens above, among the poems of the holy poets, the beloved of God.

#### 42

Now to whom shall I turn who can tell me the words of the song? To the old cantor who knew all the hymns of the holy poets?—I am all that is left of all their tears. The old cantor rests in the shadow of the holy poets, who recite their hymns in the Great Synagogue of our city. And if he answers me, his voice will be as pleasant as it was when our city was yet alive, and all of its people were also still in life. But here—here there is only a song of mourning, lamentation, and wailing, for the city and its dead.

*Translated by Arthur Green*

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