

**A CITY IN ITS
FULLNESS**

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TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW

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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 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 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. Myriads 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

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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 that 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 exchange 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 as 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 lovingkindness, 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

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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 that 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.

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 Maariv 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 Minḥah and it was not yet time for Maariv, 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 piyyutim 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.” Afterward 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 ḥallot 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 over with our own hands and watered with our own lips. When we came here we found parched earth, for 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.

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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 Passover 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 that 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, carnations, 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 sukkah, 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 the 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 the entire 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 bridal canopy after the holiday. The sound of the barber's scissors could be heard in the

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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 Passover we can't eat *whatever* we want; on Sukkot 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 that I know from those walks on the first day of Shavuot, I know well. The animals and beasts and birds that 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 that Count Potocki 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 kloyz, 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 kloyz. 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 kloyz 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 mouth uttered no word that did not come from their heart. 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 that 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

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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 that 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 prayer book every year from the fair. Once Father brought me a prayer book 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 prayer book, 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 tzaddik 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 grownup, 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 Passover, I got up and went to the great house of study. I found the old cantor 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 cantor would go up to the platform after Musaf and recite the hymns of redemption. I turned my ear and listened to him intone: “O 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 cantor. 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 prayer book in my grandfather's house, and I found those same words written in the prayer book. I noticed that every line started with a large letter. I joined the letters together, and they formed the name “Solomon.” My heart leaped for joy, for I knew it was Rabbi Solomon from my prayer book. But I felt sorry for that Tzaddik. As though he didn't have enough troubles

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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 prayer book, 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

hometown 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 a 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 any place 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

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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 that, 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.