

Haim Sabato

ADJUSTING
SIGHTS

TRANSLATED BY

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Chapter one

A pure moon shone overhead. Not a cloud hid it from sight. It was waiting to be blessed by the People of Israel, as shy as a bride who waits to be veiled by her bridegroom before stepping under the wedding canopy. Ever since the moon said to God long ago, *The sun and I cannot rule as equals and share the same crown*, and the Creator rebuked it, saying, *Then wane and be the lesser light*, the moon has humbly accepted its fate. Whenever it shines, humbleness shines with it and gives it grace.

Row after row of *Hasidim* danced before it. The younger ones wore black gabardines, the older ones, white gowns. The gowns looked like shrouds. They reminded a man of the day of his death, that he might observe the counsel of Rabbi Akavia ben Mehalalel, who said: “Think of three things and thou will not come to sin: from where you have come, to where you will go and to Whom you owe a reckoning.”

Gabardined and gowned, the *Hasidim* shut their eyes and swayed, aiming their hearts at heaven and chanting, “As I dance before

Thee but cannot touch Thee, so may our enemies dance before us and neither touch nor harm us. May dread and fear befall them!”

And they repeated:

“May dread and fear befall them!”

And a third time:

“May dread and fear befall them!”

It was the end of *Yom Kippur*. It is the custom at the end of this day for the People of Israel to sanctify the moon with a special blessing. Cleansed of all their sins, they are supposed to perform a commandment at once, before Satan, envious of their purity, could find a way to entrap them. And all the more is this so because sanctifying the moon is like playing host to God, for it is written in the sayings of the Sages, *Were Israel to do no more than greet their Father in heaven once a month at the sanctification of the moon, this would suffice*. Hence the moon is sanctified standing, as if in the presence of a king. Moreover, as God is present in joy, and joy comes from purity, and the People of Israel are pure at the end of *Yom Kippur*, having stood all day in prayer and confessed their sins and abstained from food and denied themselves the pleasures of the flesh and cast off all material things until they are likened to angels, a herald voice declares, “Go, eat your bread in joy, and drink your wine gladly, for the Lord is pleased with you.”

In most synagogues, so as not to prolong the ordeal of all those fasting, especially the elderly, the ill, and women with child, the evening service is said immediately after the blast of the *shofar* that marks the end of *Yom Kippur*. As soon as the day is over, the congregants sanctify the moon and hurry home.

This was the practice in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Bayit ve-Gan. Though many of its inhabitants were pious Jews who prolonged their Sabbaths and holidays according to the strict ruling of Rabbenu Tam, they too had long been at home, the hour being close to midnight. Who, then, were the *Hasidim* awaited by the moon? They were the disciples of the Rabbi of Amshinov. Loath to part with the rapture of prayer, the Amshinov *Hasidim* lingered over it even on *Yom Kippur*, extending the holiness of the fast day into ordinary time.

I was glad to see them still dancing. I had begun to think I would have to sanctify the new moon by myself, without a *minyan*, a prayer group of ten. Where was I going to find ten men at such an hour? And most of all I was glad because the Sages had said that whoever sanctifies the new moon in joy would come to no harm in the month ahead. I was about to mention this to my friend, Dov, walking at my side, so that he could put himself in a joyous mood, when the *Hasidim* pulled us into their ranks.

“Soldiers!” they cried. “Soldiers! Go to the rabbi and he’ll bless you.”

They parted to make a path and we were led to the rabbi, the old Amshinover *Rebbe*. His *Hasidim* crowded around us.

We were two young soldiers, Dov and I. Our packs on our shoulders, we made our way to the rabbi. We had been together since coming to Israel, Dov from Rumania and I from Egypt. Each day we had walked from Beit Mazmil to the *Talmud Torah* in Bayit ve-Gan, Dov in his black beret and I in the brightly colored cap I was given by a woman who worked for the Jewish Agency in Milan. My family had been in transit there from Cairo, waiting for the night train to Genoa, from where we would sail to Haifa on the *Artza*.

The *Talmud Torah* in Bayit ve-Gan was next to the Amshinov synagogue—outside of which, thirteen years later, we now stood near the buses parked at our assembly point. As soon as our bus was full, an officer would take charge and we would head north to our unit.

We had studied together at the same religious high school, Dov and I. We had gone together to the same *yeshiva*, whose students divided their time between their studies and the army. We had trained in the same tank at an armored corps base in Sinai. I was the gunner. Dov was the loader.

“Crew, prepare to mount the tank! Crew, mount! Driver, sharp left! Gunner, hollow charge, two thousand meters, fire! Down a hundred, fire! Up fifty, fire! Direct hit! Direct hit, hold your fire! Loader, reload! Faster, Dov! Stop dreaming! There’s no time to dream in a real war. You’re already in the enemy’s sights.”

“Yes, sir. I’m doing my best.”

The loader opened the breach.

We stood watch together on a roof in Ras Sudar. We manned its southern position, looking out over the Gulf of Suez, Dov and I.

It was a Sabbath eve. Dov had finished his watch and I had come up to relieve him. It was pitch dark. There were no stars or moon. We had just finished our basic training the month before. Every splash of a fish in the water made me jump. Dov said, “I’ll stay up with you. I can’t sleep anyway. We can sing Sabbath hymns. Or go over a bit of *Mishnah* by heart.” I knew he knew I was afraid. He stayed with me.

In theology class we had argued together about faith, and belief in God, and Redemption. Together we had studied Rabbi Nissim of Gerona’s commentary on the second chapter of *Ketubot*. Together we had read The *Maharal* of Prague’s *Eternity of Israel*. And together we had parted from Dov’s mother on Brazil Street in Beit Mazmil an hour before.

“War,” she had said. “War! What do you know about it? *I* know. And I know no one knows when you’ll be home again. No one.”

As she spoke she filled a tin with homemade cookies and another with cheese pastries wrapped in foil. I knew the taste of both.

“*Ima!*” Dov said. “This isn’t Rumania or World War II. Think of it as a school outing—we’ll be back in a few days.”

To me he said softly, “I understand how she feels. She’s worried. Her whole family was killed in Europe. And she’s a mother. But this is just one more glorified company maneuver. We’ll be back in no time. I heard on the radio that we’re already counter-attacking. The air force is knocking out the Egyptian bridgeheads on the Canal. I’m only afraid that by the time we reservists get to the Golan, the regular army will have finished the job for us.”

His father put down the little book of Psalms that he was reading. He kissed it and kissed his son.

At the end of *Yom Kippur*, together we walked to the assembly point. Close to midnight we were brought to the Rabbi of Amshinov by his *Hasidim*, who were sanctifying the moon. Their rabbi, they confided, could work wonders. His blessing was worth a great deal. They stood around us, straining to hear what he would say.

The Rabbi of Amshinov clasped my hand warmly between his own two and said, looking directly at me:

“May dread and fear befall them. May dread and fear befall them. Them and not you.”

We parted from him and boarded the bus. We thought we’d be back soon. During the three terrible days that followed, I kept seeing the Rabbi of Amshinov before me. I kept hearing his words. Each time fear threatened to overcome me, I pictured him saying, “Them and not you. Them and not you.” That calmed me.

Until I heard of Dov’s death.

After that the old man stopped appearing.

The months went by. In late spring we hosed down our tanks a last time, handed in our gear, took off our uniforms, and returned to the Talmud—to the tractate of Bava Batra and the property laws of pits, cisterns, caves, olive presses, and fields. I kept meaning to go to the Rabbi of Amshinov and tell him what had happened to us after he blessed us. I wanted to tell him how our tanks were knocked out in Nafah quarry on the second day of the war, and how they burst into flames one by one, and how the blackened loader of 2-B hit the ground with his leg on fire and rolled there dowsing it with a jerry can of water. And how our tank commander, Gidi, shouted, “Gunner, fire!” and I shouted back, “I don’t know what to aim at!”

“Fire, gunner! Fire at anything! We’re being shot at! We’re hit! Abandon tank!”

And how Roni, the driver, said quietly, “I can’t get out, the gun’s blocking the hatch,” and I crawled back in to free him, and the four

of us ran over terraces of black earth with the bullets flying around us, and Eli said, “I can’t go on,” and we forced him to. And how Syrian commandos jumped out of a helicopter right ahead of us. There was even more I wanted to tell him—of the thoughts I had, and the prayers I said, and the things I shouted to God and promised Him.

It was just that, each time, I thought: When I’m done the rabbi will ask in his gentle voice, “What happened to the friend who was with you that night?” And I would have to lower my eyes and tell him, “Dov is dead.”

It would have made the old man sad. And so I never went to see him. I stuck to my *Talmud* with its laws of houses, cisterns, pits, and caves. The years went by. I couldn’t put it off any longer. I’ll go see him, I thought. Whatever will be, will be. I went to Bayit ve-Gan and found some Amshinov *Hasidim*.

“How is your rabbi?” I asked.

“Just a few hours ago,” they told me, “his soul departed this world.”