

Haim Sabato

**ALEPPO
TALES**

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY

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The Toby Press

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Hebrew words have been transliterated according to the Sepharadi pronunciation and italicized throughout.

Truth Shall Spring
From The Earth

Chapter one

The people of Aram Zova are proud of their city, and unstinting in its praise. They are as proud of its air and its fountains as of the acumen of its tradesmen; proud of the poets and the cantors of their city, proud of the lyrical supplications and the *Sefer HaPizmonim*, the Book of Hymns, which they wrote, with their melodic scales. They believe there is no cantor in the world to compare with their cantors, no hymn to compare with their hymns.

There is a saying that goes: He who has not seen the sons of Aram Zova in their joyful chanting does not know the meaning of true joy. It is characteristic of hymns that they seem pleasant to the ear only on Sabbaths and festival days, at betrothals, circumcisions and celebrations of mitzvot. The people of Aleppo extol the food of their city and its delicacies. They do not eat to excess, but they expend inordinate effort, and employ meticulous precision, in the preparation of dishes. The saying goes: *If you want to judge the quality of someone from Aleppo, uncover his pot and inspect his food.* They are even proud of the name of their city, calling it Aram Zova, as it is known in scriptural parlance, and in this historical allusion they add more than a veneer of grace to their locality.

But the essential pride of the sons of Aleppo is derived from their sages. Aleppo was a city of sages and scribes, and its sages are distinguished by the depth of their genius and the sharpness of their intellect. A sage of Aleppo hates meaningless ostentation or affectation and loves clear judgment. He is sparing in speech and makes a virtue of silence; his speech is brief. He is meticulous in his dress, and meticulous in his dignity; he strings pearls together in a sermon, and is bold in declarations of *Halacha*. Forthright and making no pretenses to anyone. It is not in the nature of a sage from Aleppo to follow the crowd; he stands by his opinions, and knows his own value. He disdains a saintly fool, and loves the intellectual. He enjoys a jest, and his talk, even on non-religious subjects, is worthy of study.

My grandfather of blessed memory was a sage in the classic mold of the sages of Aram Zoba, and all the qualities we have mentioned were present in him. He too was proud of his city. To him, "Aleppan" was a prestigious title. Whenever he mentioned one of the illustrious sages of Aleppo, he used to stand up as a mark of respect. And although he was nine when he went down to Egypt, and although he spent the final years of his life in Jerusalem, he associated himself with the sages of Aleppo and was counted among them. He was especially proud of his grandfather, considered one of the great scholars of Aleppo.

Even in us, his offspring, the same Aleppan pride was firmly fixed, even though neither our parents nor ourselves ever saw Aleppo or Tedef with our own eyes. We never saw them with our mortal eyes, but saw with the visions of the heart. In my imagination I stroll through the markets of the city, explore its alleyways, loiter in its courtyards and taste its delicacies. I read in its places of learning, hear its sages and their exposition of the Torah, and hear its cantors leading the worship. I sit down to write and my pen writes of Aram Zova, returning to Aleppo as if of its own accord. Who knows the way of the spirit?

This attachment of the heart led me to the discovery of a wondrous story from the annals of Aram Zova and its sages, some six or seven generations ago. It is a story diffused amid the lives of the entire community, its scholars and its leading townsfolk, its tradesmen and

printers of books. For several months, I have been engrossed in this story. Chapter by chapter it has been made known to me, sometimes revealed, sometimes obscured. Some portions of it were supplied to me by scholars knowing our history, others became known to me by chance, in haphazard fashion. One episode was explained to me in a dream. With every hint deciphered, my eyes have been opened further. As it has been revealed to me, so I shall tell it to you, chapter by chapter.

Chapter two

It was my grandfather of blessed memory who opened up the whole of this episode for me, without meaning to. This is how it happened. It was a source of great regret to me that grandfather never wrote a dissertation on a topic of Torah. I was studying at the *yeshiva*, and I knew that every scholar, even a *yeshiva* student, writes a dissertation. I used to think that a scholar is only recognized on the basis of his dissertations. I often asked him about this, and mostly, he used to brush me off. However, once he answered me: “If you had been fortunate enough to hear our teacher and our master, Hacham Ezra”—and on mentioning his name he stood as a mark of respect—“you would understand what clear judgment is. And if you had been fortunate enough to know my esteemed father, my guiding light, you would know the meaning of true innovation.”

By which he meant, if they did not write, then why should he?

Another time he answered me: “This is my understanding, as inherited from my ancestors. The Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah* is a dissertation. *Beit Yoseph*, by *Maran*, the illustrious Yoseph Caro, is a dissertation. Anything less than these, is not a dissertation.”

It was only toward the end of his life that he admitted to me that he was sorry he hadn't written a dissertation. At that time he was in great pain, his eyesight heavy, his memory failing and his loneliness overwhelming. He, who used to walk at the head of his students like a king with his army, issuing new interpretations of the Torah like an inexhaustible spring, impressing all who heard his sermons, sat alone. It was then that he tried, tried and tried again, to study the whole of the Talmud afresh, thus upholding the saying, *Blessed is he who comes hither with his Talmud in his hand; Gemara, Rashi, Tosafot, Maharsha, Maharam Schiff, Rambam and Beit Yoseph*. And analytically too. Analysis in the style of Aleppo. Study of the Talmud without analysis was no study at all in his opinion.

Sometimes, it seemed he had succeeded. He would dive into the depths of a problem and come up with jewels, as in his former days. Then he would wait until I returned from the *yeshiva*, and the moment I arrived he would tackle me with an abstruse question regarding the interpretation of the *Tosafot*, or of *Maharam Schiff*, a question to which it seemed there was no answer. And he was exultant, seeing that his power was undiminished, and he was as capable as ever of going forth and fighting the wars of the Torah. It was then that he plucked up the courage to enter into a discussion of *Halacha*, corresponding with the greatest scholars of the generation, as he used to do in his youth. And when the dialecticians answered him and rejected his arguments, he would gird on his weapons, beginning peaceably and in courteous terms, and setting out the issue in all its elements, analyzing the words of the commentators in meticulous detail and with acute logic, and then attacking with all his might.

If for some reason they were slow in replying to him, this made him very bitter, and he would write another letter, protesting at the insult to the dignity of the Torah, and adducing further proofs in support of his argument. The great men of the generation were aware of his power, even though he had not written a dissertation. But there was always a shadow of a suspicion in his mind that they were in no hurry to reply to him because his failure to write a dissertation had harmed his reputation as a scholar of the Torah.

After studying a few chapters of the Tractate *Berakhot*, he sub-

mitted to his infirmity and returned to his loneliness. At first he felt resentful, but then he regretted his resentment, and finally accepted Heaven's judgment. He clung to his prayers. It was his habit when at prayer to speak out the words as if counting gold coins, and he retained this habit, for it restored his spirits in old age.

This was the time he admitted to me that yes, it would have been appropriate to write a dissertation. And he even said: "With the help of the Almighty and by His grace, *you* will write a dissertation, for you are the seventh generation. The vow is annulled." My grandfather went on to say: "My grandfather, after whom I am named, was one of the greatest sages of Aleppo."

On hearing him mention Aleppo, I listened even more intently than usual, as I was always eager to hear about Aram Zova and its sages. And thus he related:

"The sages of Aleppo, when they used to sign books, always signed according to the order of their official stature, so when you see the sages of Aleppo listed anywhere, pay close attention to the order of their signing. On the endorsement of the book *HaEretz HaTovah* ["The Good Land"], my grandfather was the seventh to sign. And in the book *Eretz Zavat Halav* ["A Land Flowing with Milk"], he signed fifth. And don't be misled by what you find in the famous ban, where in signing he is ranked seventeenth out of thirty-six, as there is a reason for this, one that I cannot explain. And my grandfather wrote a great book of legal decisions which would have enlightened the whole world, but was not published for the familiar reason."

I thought grandfather was referring to a shortage of funds. How many wonderful theses, in which the greatest scholars of Israel have invested all their spirit, have remained in manuscript for this reason and been lost forever? But there was the hint of something mysterious in the tone of his voice, something slurred, and I realized that here there was a secret, of the kind to be revealed only to the meek. I tried to induce him to say more about the unpublished book, and the familiar reason that he had spoken of, but he cloaked himself in his silence. His big black eyes deepened in the void before him, as was his wont when he was contemplating. I knew that grandfather's silence was conversation, and deserved to be studied, and I listened

to it. After a few moments he looked at me and said: "I'm sure you know that his hymn was included in the *Sefer HaBakashot*."

From the tenor of his words I deduced that the inclusion of a poem in the *Sefer HaBakashot* was almost as prestigious as the publication of a dissertation. For the *Sefer HaBakashot* of the good people of Aram Zova was composed by the greatest of their sages. It is full of longings and yearnings for our Father who is in Heaven, and sorrow at the exile of the *Shekhinah* and the exile of Israel, and in every plea and poem there are allusions to the *Mishnah* and the Talmud based on both literal and arcane meanings. It was then that I knew that it was for some obscure reason that my grandfather hadn't written a dissertation, and my great-grandfather hadn't written a dissertation. It was on account of the large book of legal decisions written by our ancestor and not published. There was a mystery about this book, and its whereabouts. I took it upon myself to seek out the hidden book and bring it out into the light of day. I wanted to reveal the things that were concealed, and I didn't know how far my quest would take me.