

Haim Sabato

**FROM THE FOUR
WINDS**

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Chapter one

The winter of 1959 was cold and blustery. Or maybe it just seemed that way to me. I was a small boy, a pupil in the second grade at the Talmud Torah in Bayit ve-Gan. Several months earlier we had emigrated from Egypt to the Beit Mazmil housing projects located near the asbestos transit camps. We were not accustomed to the Jerusalem chill. Every day I used to wake up early to wait for the number eighteen bus at the stop near Kadosh's kiosk. I'd clutch a cloth bag, holding a volume of the Mishnah, an arithmetic book, and several notebooks. Sometimes the bus came, sometimes it didn't. If it came it was usually packed and crowded. Sometimes it stopped, sometimes it didn't. The waiting area overflowed with people. Day laborers with tired faces, their reflections fragmented in the puddles on the pavement, gesticulated and shouted, beseeching the driver to stop so they could avoid being late for work. Several of them just might have earned their keep in the Promised Land. They were covering Mount Herzl with trees. The passengers on the bus stood packed, holding on to the leather straps that dropped down from the ceiling, swaying from side to side. The driver threw up his hands as if he were participating in the suffering of those standing in anxious anticipation

and screamed, "It's full, it's full." If he so much as cracked the door to let someone out, the heaving mass immediately hastened to pry it open. Several lucky ones and a few aggressive ones succeeded by brains or brawn to push themselves between the door and the driver, grabbing hold of whatever they could in order not to fall.

Such was the journey every morning. But I, to whom everything was new, stood staring, like a pleasure seeker swallowing every sight. Sometimes I ignored what was in front of me and stared at the wagtail perched on the wet branch of the tree. After an exhausting journey I alighted at the stop next to the old carob tree in Herzl square and marched up the hill on the Pisgah road in Bayit ve-Gan, along the marble quarry and the ordnance factory up to the Talmud Torah School. In those days Mount Herzl was bare, without trees or houses. In the winter, chilly winds gusted from the west, the direction of Ein Karem, and stormy rains continually lashed against my face with great force. I curled up inside of myself in order to become warm. Clutching the cloth bag which held my books and notebooks, my hands were always exposed and the tips of my fingers reddened from the cold and the rain. So it was every day that winter. Sometimes Rav Leuchter, the head of the Talmud Torah, would catch sight of me and lovingly wrap my shoulders in the kitchen towel used by the pupils to dry their hands at the ten o'clock break. "If you don't have a coat," he used to say, "you should at least have a scarf in this rain." Mother had been busily knitting scarves for all of us. My turn was yet to come.

Of all the teachers, Rav Leuchter was our favorite. He was tall, his beard meticulously kept, his voice clear, his eyes benevolent, and his heart filled with love for children. From time to time, on a nice day, he used to close his books and say to us, "Children, today we shall study in the valley," and he would take us all on an excursion through the valley below the neighborhood of Bayit ve-Gan. Eventually they built the Shaare Zedek Hospital in that valley, but in those days it was filled with poppies and cyclamen. More than once the rabbi sat us down in a circle, on grass wet with morning dew, leading us through exercises and instructing us to breathe deeply and fill our lungs with air. And he told us stories. I would stare at him, and it

seemed to me that a thread of sadness dangled before his playful eyes. Only two years later did I understand what I had sensed. He gathered us together when we were in the fourth grade, and said, "Today we are not going to study from books." He turned on the large radio he had brought to class and we listened. The Eichmann trial was being broadcast. At the end of that day he said almost in passing: "I was a child then, I passed through the inferno and returned to our small town. The only child to return."

On the first of the month of Adar in the year 1959, while I was in the second grade, I arrived at school as usual and was surprised by the festive atmosphere in the class. On the wall hung a large poster with four big fish in each of its four corners, and a tilted bottle of wine whose cork was half off. An ornamental scribal font read, "With the start of Adar, our joy increases." All the children were happy, banging joyfully on the tables, and singing.

Rav Leuchter informed us that on the holiday of Purim all children were to come in costume. I did not understand what it meant to come in costume. I looked around me and saw that everyone was excited and smiling, but I could not understand why. In those days I was not accustomed to ask questions about something I did not understand. What I did not understand, I filled in with my imagination. I tried to equate an unknown word to a word I knew from the prayers, or from Arabic, or from what my heart told me.

After a few days I understood without asking. The neighborhood was filled with the exploding sounds of cap guns and everyone was discussing Purim and their costumes. Kadosh tied a string around his kiosk and hung colorful hats and toy pistols from it.

What costumes did the children wear? In Beit Mazmil all the boys were either cowboys or Indians and all the girls Queen Esther or the Queen of the Night. I understood the reason for Queen Esther, as I knew the story of Purim. But why would they dress up on Purim as a cowboy or an Indian? And what was a cowboy anyway? Maybe he was one of the king's satraps mentioned in the book of Esther? In my mind I ruminated on the Hebrew word "cowboy" and tried to think of its origins. Of course I didn't dare ask. Who didn't know what a cowboy was? And what did a cowboy look like? The streets

of Beit Mazmil offered clarification. A black hat with a wide brim, colored stripes running down the trousers, a wide leather belt, and obviously, the most important accessory was a pistol. At the trousers' hip there was a holster with the pistol inside. "Cowboy, draw your gun." You could hear it from every direction. What was "draw," and what did this have to do with Purim? As usual, I tried to understand on my own. I thought to myself, how do the children in Beit Mazmil know all about this?

In those days Father came home from work quite late, having managed to obtain a few hours of overtime, and immediately ran to synagogue. I never used to see him in the morning either. I waited until Shabbat eve. Before the coming of Shabbat I lay waiting for him, and grabbed him during a spare moment. "Father," I said, "Principal Leuchter said that in two weeks everyone needs to come to school in costume." My father looked at me and said, "certainly, if the principal said so, you need to go in a costume," and hurried off to synagogue to recite the prayers welcoming Shabbat. I knew that in Egypt we did whatever the principal said, just like a soldier obeying an order. I hurried after him. "Father, I'm gonna be a cowboy."

"Yes, yes." My father answered me earnestly, but he pronounced the word differently than the children in Beit Mazmil. "You will be a coboy. You will be a coboy."

I was filled with joy, and a shudder of excitement passed through me, the same excitement I had observed in all of the other children in the class on the first day of the month of Adar. I was going to be a cowboy. My imagination took over and I saw myself wearing the same black hat with the wide brim, the leather trousers with colored fringed stripes, and, of course, a belt with a pistol.

The week went by and I waited for Father to tell me when we were to go to Kadosh's kiosk to purchase a pistol. I waited every day for his return from work and thought, maybe he will say something now, but he said nothing. I did not dare ask. There was still another full week before Purim.

A few days before Purim, Beit Mazmil was already filled with Indians in their colorful feathered headdresses, and would-be Queen

Esthers. I could no longer restrain myself and said, "Father, I need to be a cowboy."

"Certainly," my father replied, "you shall be a coboy." I fell silent and was happy.

The day before the class costume party, I could no longer wait, and, with a touch of worry, I said to my father, "Father, when will we go to Kadosh? Tomorrow I need to dress up."

"Don't worry," my father said, "I promised you that you would be a coboy." I believed him and was content.

The next morning, my father said to me, 'I will take you to the bus stop.' Together we went to Kadosh's kiosk and father asked for a cowboy hat. I shook with excitement. Kadosh showed him two types, one made from plastic and the other made from paper. Father chose the one made out of paper. It didn't matter to me. The important thing was to be a cowboy. My father put the hat on my head and said, "How nice, what a costume, you are a coboy. A true coboy." He laughed heartily. Clapping me on the shoulder and squeezing my hand, he said, "Draw!" It had been some time since I had seen him so happy. I was so happy myself that I didn't notice that I had no stripes on my shoulders, decorative bands on my trousers, or a pistol. It didn't matter to me at all. I was in costume. In the costume of a cowboy. Who could compare to me? I stood at the bus stop, this time actually happy that the bus was late, staring at all of the other costumes filling up the street and hoping that others could see me. A young cowboy.

I got off at the stop on Mount Herzl. Torrential rain was pouring and tempestuous wind howling. In one hand I clutched the cloth bag with my notebooks and in the other I grasped my hat with all my might so that it would not fly away, and I waved goodbye to the old carob tree. That morning it seemed as if the raging winds had sprung up to fight with me, the cowboy, but I gripped my hat tightly and was just barely able to hold on to it. Only once did it fly away, but I ran after it and grabbed it. I did not realize that the downpour had dissolved the paper hat so that by the time I arrived at the marble works all I held in my hand was a wet ball of paper. I did not notice.

I went up the length of the street singing Purim songs to myself, filled with joy. I was a cowboy.

Finally I arrived at the entrance to the schoolyard. It was filled with many different figures. Here was a boy dressed up as a Hasidic rebbe. A festive streimel crowned his head and a gartel belt gripped his cloak. Here was a Sephardic Hakham, a veritable Hakham Bashi, wearing a turban embroidered with threads of gold and silver. And there stood a child wearing the vestments of the High Priest, with bells and pomegranates fastened to his coat, a ceremonial miter, and an ephod with a breastplate that sparkled with precious stones, four stones to a row. The sight of all this impressed me. The costumes were so beautiful. And there I was with my paper hat on my head. The rain had turned it into a soggy circle of paper, but I was happy. I too was in costume. I was a cowboy.

The principal, Rav Leuchter, waved his hand and rang his metal bell. We all filed into the classroom. Rav Leuchter asked that each and every pupil exit the classroom and re-enter, one by one, so that we could guess who he was. "Rise up and come forth," Rav Leuchter said, and in walked the Hasidic rebbe hiding his face. "Who goes there?" asked Rav Leuchter. "It's impossible to recognize him. Who can possibly tell?" Everyone attempted to guess. And then the Hasidic rebbe revealed his face. "Oh!" We all gasped in surprise, "it's Isaac! What an incredible costume, he looks just like a Hasidic rebbe!"

"I knew it," cried out one of the students, who was dressed up like a judge, "because his grandfather is a Hasidic rebbe."

And so student after student exited the classroom and returned in a festive mood. Each time Rav Leuchter asked in a tone of surprise, as if he were King Ahasuerus in the book of Esther, "Who is he and where is he?" Everyone tried to guess. I was sitting in my place participating in the festivities. My turn grew near. I was filled with tension and excitement, standing on tiptoes and biting my fingernails. My turn came. I exited and came back with the soggy paper hat on my head. Rav Leuchter stared at me, making a great effort to identify me, and then he said, "Who is that? I can't possibly identify who it is."

"Who are you?" He turned to me without asking the other children.

I was filled with pride and joy.

“I am Haim,” I said, “But today I am a cowboy.”

“Oh!” Rav Leuchter answered with excitement, “A cowboy. What a beautiful costume, I couldn’t recognize you!”

I went back to my seat and sat down happy.

But then from the back of the class, the boy who was dressed up as a judge got up and called out in a loud voice: “Who didn’t know who that was? He doesn’t even have a costume!”