

Haim Sabato

**THE DAWNING
OF THE DAY:**

A JERUSALEM TALE

TRANSLATED BY

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Chapter one

In which we recount Ezra's tale.

Ezra Siman Tov was a man of Jerusalem who lived by the labor of his own hands, like those of whom it is said, "Greater is the man who lives by the sweat of his own brow than the man who fears heaven." No title preceded his name. People did not call him Haham Ezra or Señor Ezra. He was simply Ezra. Day after day Ezra Siman Tov rose early, happily going to work and returning home. He was not like those of whom it was said, "When he has a hundred, he wants two hundred," but rather, "Who is rich? He who is content with his lot."

He was early to rise, and early to bed. He had heard a wonderful homily by Haham Yosef Pinto one Sabbath on the verse: *How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep?* How long will a sluggard lie in bed? And should you ask, "What does it matter?" Scripture responds, *When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep?* Ezra was not one of the lazy ones, one who turned his days into nights and nights into days, rising from his slumber like a prince at nine o'clock, three hours after the day had dawned, not going to sleep until midnight; one who complains that the Holy One, Blessed

be He, orders the world incorrectly, because not only does He cause the sun to set at the height of the day, but He also causes it to rise three hours before one should awaken, thus squandering three hours of sunlight. If the world were in their hands, the sun would set at midnight and rise at nine o'clock. Ezra was not one to complain. He was happy in the world of the Holy One, Blessed be He, very happy. One of those about whom they said, "good for Heaven, good for the creatures." Were his name not already Siman Tov*, it would have been fitting to call him so.

This was his habit. He rose at dawn. Readied himself, drank a cup of tea, wrapped himself in a fringed prayer shawl, donned tefillin, and walked at a slow measured pace on the path to the synagogue. Outside, morning dew settled on the ground, and he inhaled the pure air of Jerusalem. Sweet was the air; he would not have exchanged it for anywhere else in the world. As he walked, the morning blessings surfaced on his lips, each one vying to be his first utterance. Were Ezra not restrained by nature, all the blessings would have emerged at the same time: *Blessed is He who gives strength to the weak, Blessed is He who sets the crooked straight, Blessed is He who has provided for all my needs.* It was obvious that each blessing gave him great joy. As he stretched his limbs he recited: *He who gives sight to the blind may His name be blessed. He who frees the imprisoned may His name be blessed.* In his mind he remembered Haham Pinto's interpretation of the verse, *Wherefore doth a living man complain?* It is enough that he is alive. He hummed the verses composed by the poet for the blessing, *He who restores the souls of the dead,* to the tune of the dawn hymns sung on the Sabbath: *You have found it renewed, with additions, and improved, like a bride adorned, morning after morning; in His promise ever loyal, restore me to my toil, man expires not in his sin, it was evening and it was morning.* After the morning blessings, he used to say, "Now I intend to fulfill the precept to love my neighbor as myself and shall love each member of the house of Israel as my own flesh." This tradition he had received from his father, Nissim Melamed Siman Tov,

* Lit. Good Omen; Good Symbol

who had received it from his father, Haham Ya'akob Bava Melamed Siman Tov Ghurni.

Usually, Ezra had not finished reciting the blessings when he arrived at the synagogue. He prayed with the dawn minyan of the Zoharei Hamah Synagogue in Mahane Yehudah in Jerusalem. There were about twenty men who regularly attended the service. They had an extraordinary cantor, Haham Elijah Raful. He was called Elijah HaMekhaven, Elijah the Diviner, for two reasons: he knew how to divine the names and how to ascertain the time. Divining the names I cannot explain to you, for I do not engage in the mystical secrets; but I can explain what it means to discover the time. He timed the blessings so that the *Shema* coincided exactly with sunrise, in order to fulfill the verse in Scripture, *They shall fear thee as long as the sun endures*. Elijah HaMekhaven was not one of those cantors about whom it was said, *It crieth out against me: therefore have I hated it*, but rather, *let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely*. His voice was deep but pleasing. Very pleasing for the dawn services in the Zoharei Hamah Synagogue in Mahane Yehudah in Jerusalem. Their dawn service was not like the dawn service held on Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, when congregations stay awake the entire night in order to repair the sin of our biblical ancestors who were sleeping in their tents when the Holy One, Blessed be He, wanted to give them the Torah at Sinai. Such congregations want to pray at dawn, but they are not accustomed to it, and are unable to decipher the precise time. Their cantor ascends to the pulpit, watch in hand, sets it down before him and prays, one eye on the prayer book, the other on his watch. At first the congregants hurry him along, then they slow him down; he draws out the passages he should shorten and shortens those he should lengthen; and nevertheless, he misses the precise moment of sunrise. This was not the way of Elijah HaMekhaven. At Zoharei Hamah they were accustomed to praying at dawn, and Elijah HaMekhaven prayed as he usually did without so much as a glance at his watch. When he recited the blessing, *He who redeemed Israel*, immediately before the silent prayer, they would rise just as the sun appeared on the horizon.

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It seemed as if the sun had already spread its red canopy over the east and was ready to appear in all its glory, but was waiting for Elijah HaMekhaven to finish reciting *He who redeemed Israel*.

At this hour Ezra used to open the Synagogue window and gaze at the sunrise, his lips reciting the prayer, *Creator of light, creator of darkness, maker of peace, maker of all things*. Thus it was every day. His prayer was never rushed, but steady and measured. He was not one of those who waited with bated breath to hear the cantor recite, *And the Redeemer shall come to Zion*, immediately removing his tefillin and folding his prayer shawl, standing before God stripped naked of His mitzvot, one foot in the synagogue, the other in the street, quickly mumbling, *They Shall Bless Him* and *We Shall Praise Him*, the final two passages of the morning service, on their way out, as if they were the traveler's prayer. Ezra was not one of the hasty ones. He stood wrapped in his prayer shawl, crowned with his tefillin until the end of the service, lingering, reciting *Surely the righteous shall give thanks unto thy name* or other verses that attest to God's mercy, then he would sit down next to the long table, a volume of the *Hok L'Yisrael* open before him, reading the daily portion. Always he read the daily selection from that Sabbath's scriptural reading, its Aramaic translation, one Mishnah with Ovadiah of Bertinoro's commentary, two short paragraphs of Maimonides' code, and a few ethical teachings from *The Pele Yo'etz*. He understood whatever he could, and what he could not, he felt in his heart.

This study of the *Hok L'Yisrael*, while wrapped in his prayer shawl and crowned with his tefillin, drew a thread of grace over Ezra Siman Tov that he would not have exchanged for all the wealth in the world. The days he did not finish his reading did not count for him as genuine days. In his volume he placed little slips of paper with the names of the sick in need of prayer; on the inside cover he recorded the names of his children and the times of their births:

My son Nissan born amid great joy on Tuesday, a day doubly blessed by God at Creation, the first day of the glorious month of Adar.

At dawn the morning following Gedaliah's Fast, my daughter Rebecca was born, under a good omen, shining like the sun.

My son Raphael, may he live under God's protection, was born at twilight, on the Sabbath eve, at an auspicious hour, on the week whose portion contained, *'I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the Lord that healeth thee.'* And he fell ill but was saved by the Doctor Yeshiah Matiyah, a messenger of God, may his name be remembered for the good.

Next to these inscriptions was an image of the Menorah formed by the words of the sixty-seventh Psalm, a charm against wicked forces. In the verses he read in the *Hok L'Yisrael*, he discovered allusions to his affairs for the coming day, perhaps a sign for his success. If he had committed a sin, he discerned an allusion to it in one of the verses he read, and immediately his thoughts turned to repentance.

During this hour, while reading, Ezra would be approached by the charity collectors of Jerusalem. Not the collectors that you know. There are charity collectors in Jerusalem not known to all. They neither approach everyone nor appeal on behalf of just anybody. They are modest collectors who approach humble folk on behalf of the deserving poor. The old Jerusalem scholars know who these are, and send them to those in genuine need. When they approach their particular donors, they speak briefly and allusively without urgency or argument. So too with Ezra. They would greet him briefly, "Good morning Ezra. An unassuming orphaned bride. A learned scholarly groom. Your share is twenty lira." Or they would say, "Good morning Ezra. Can we offer you a share in one of God's precepts? A business man has lost his fortune. It is better to leave his name unsaid. Your Honor's portion is fifty lira." And he would reach into his wallet without a word, take out money and give it to them. "May you be worthy to fulfill the precepts, Ezra."

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“May you be worthy to fulfill them as well,” he would respond, returning to his reading.

Each day when he finished his reading he went home. Jaffa Road on his return from prayer was nothing like on his way to prayer. The same road that had accompanied his steps to the synagogue in silence and listened to his recitation of the morning blessings in tranquility was bustling with activity. People hurrying to work, rushing and running. The morning warmth had replaced the coolness of dawn, and the world in which Ezra had walked alone was now filled with people. At his home, breakfast was already waiting. In the winter, a cup of warm *Sahlep*, the milk frothing on top and decorated with fine-smelling cinnamon, and a cheese *boreka* beside it. In the summer a cup of mint tea, and several *ka'ak* topped with yellow sesame seeds. His wife Madame Sarah sitting at his side reminding him as he ate where they had to go that evening; to the *Zohar* feast for her niece's newborn son, held on the eve of his circumcision, or the memorial service marking the one-year anniversary of their uncle's passing, or the *pidyon haben*, redemption of the firstborn, for Haham Bechor Atiah's grandson. Ezra did not tarry long at his house, but hurried to work. Madame Sarah watched him from the doorway of the house, kissing the mezuzah and mumbling to herself as well as to Ezra her husband, “May the Lord be with you.”

Ezra worked in Yehezkel Kaduri's laundry, next to the Mahane Yehudah market. Ironing clothes was his craft. Hot vapor filled Kaduri's laundry. Ezra would take a wrinkled garment in his hand straight from the laundry, smooth it out, and look upon it, as if to say: You have seen better days, days when you were purchased for a young woman's engagement or for Passover Eve. Slowly you descended from your place of the highest honor. At first they began to wear you on the Sabbath. When your beauty had faded you began to be worn on a regular weekday with pants that did not match. As he was looking at it he would smooth out the folds on the jacket and stroke it soothingly, as if to say: Such is the way of the world. A verse from Ecclesiastes he had once heard in Haham Pinto's Sabbath sermon would occur to him: *In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day*

of adversity consider: God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him. He who recognizes that the riches in his life are not his own shall not be defiant a single day longer. The earth is the Lord's and He governs it thus, may His name be blessed. Day after day, from the morning prayers until the afternoon prayers Ezra stood on his feet, flattening pleats, straightening creases, and ironing them so the garment would be smooth.

Ezra was not numbered among those whose craft was easy, or among those whose craft was shameful. His craft allowed him to earn his keep. People respected him as they saw fit. Ezra did not pursue glory, nor did glory tire itself out chasing after him. On days when people paid him too much respect, he worried. It was a tradition that if a person received greater respect than his due, the day would come when he received greater shame than his due. He had once received good advice from Haham Yosef Pinto: If people give a man too much honor he should not resist but store up the spare honor; at another time, when he thinks they are not giving him his due, he should turn to the treasury of honor to restore his peace of mind.

An hour before sunset he would finish his work and take his leave of the owner. "Peace, blessing, and goodness, Yehezkel. Sleep in peace." Always this same formulation. There are many greetings in Jerusalem; each one has its specific time and place. The greeting upon meeting a friend differs from the one recited upon departure; the one in the morning differs from the one in the evening; those on festivals differ from those offered during a normal weekday. The one greeted also knows the proper response. If someone wishes him, "sleep in peace" he responds "awake in great mercy"; if someone blesses him on a festival by saying, "may you merit many years," he replies, "may you merit a long life, may your days extend." To the blessing, "A peaceful Sabbath," he responds, "Peace and good blessing"; to "Good morning," he says, "to the master as well"; to "Bless Him who heals the sick," "may He and His name be blessed"; to "Welcome," "welcome to those who greet us." In short, from the way a man greets his fellow man, one can tell if he is a native of Jerusalem. Where Ezra and his fellow residents of Jerusalem learned all these different greetings

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I do not know. Some they certainly learned from their teachers, of blessed memory; as for those that were silent, their faces indicated if they were Jerusalem natives.

After he took his leave from work, Ezra took two baskets and went to the Mahane Yehudah market. Ezra Siman Tov purchased all his fruits and vegetables in the Mahane Yehudah market, according to Jerusalem custom. Some people love to ramble through forests and streams in the wilderness, others in great towns and ancient cities. Ezra Siman Tov loved to stroll through the Mahane Yehudah market among the stands for fruits and vegetable, chickens and spices. The stall owners all knew him and he knew them as well, natives of Jerusalem like him. “Peace be upon you, Ezra.” “Peace, blessing, and goodness.” The big market and the little market, the Iraqi alley and the Kurdish alley, he knew them all. The colorful array of the red tomatoes and the green peppers, the black eggplants and yellowish pears laid out on the stalls in heaps or in towers; the Arab peddler women in their black dresses embroidered with colorful patches next to mounds of fresh onions that were still covered with the soil of the field; the narrow baskets of figs, plucked from the tree at dawn and stewing in their sweetness; the pungent odors of coriander and black pepper; the coffee grinder releasing the intoxicating smell of ground coffee beans; the shelf filled with sweets made by Havilio, sparkling in all their different colors; the red heads of the cocks butting out of giant crates and screaming for salvation; small stalls with brown beans, yellowish chickpeas, red lentils next to rolls of rope whose use no one knows; the deep voices of the stall owners hawking their wares in the tune used to recite the Mishnah—all this entranced Ezra. Every day he went shopping in the market, whether or not he needed anything. Such was his custom, the custom of Jerusalem.

Several moments before sunset Ezra would arrive at the Zoharei Hamah Synagogue for the afternoon service. He would put down his overflowing baskets underneath the bench and wash his hands, and open with the Psalm, *How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts! My soul longeth, yea even fainteth for the courts of the Lord: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God.* Slowly, slowly he would recite

them. Following the afternoon service he would remain in the synagogue, joining Haham Menashe Kahanof's class on *The Ben Ish Hai*, the great book of laws by the Baghdadi rabbi, Yosef Haim. Occasionally his head drooped down from the day's exhaustion and he dozed off. Such was his custom from Sundays through Thursdays.