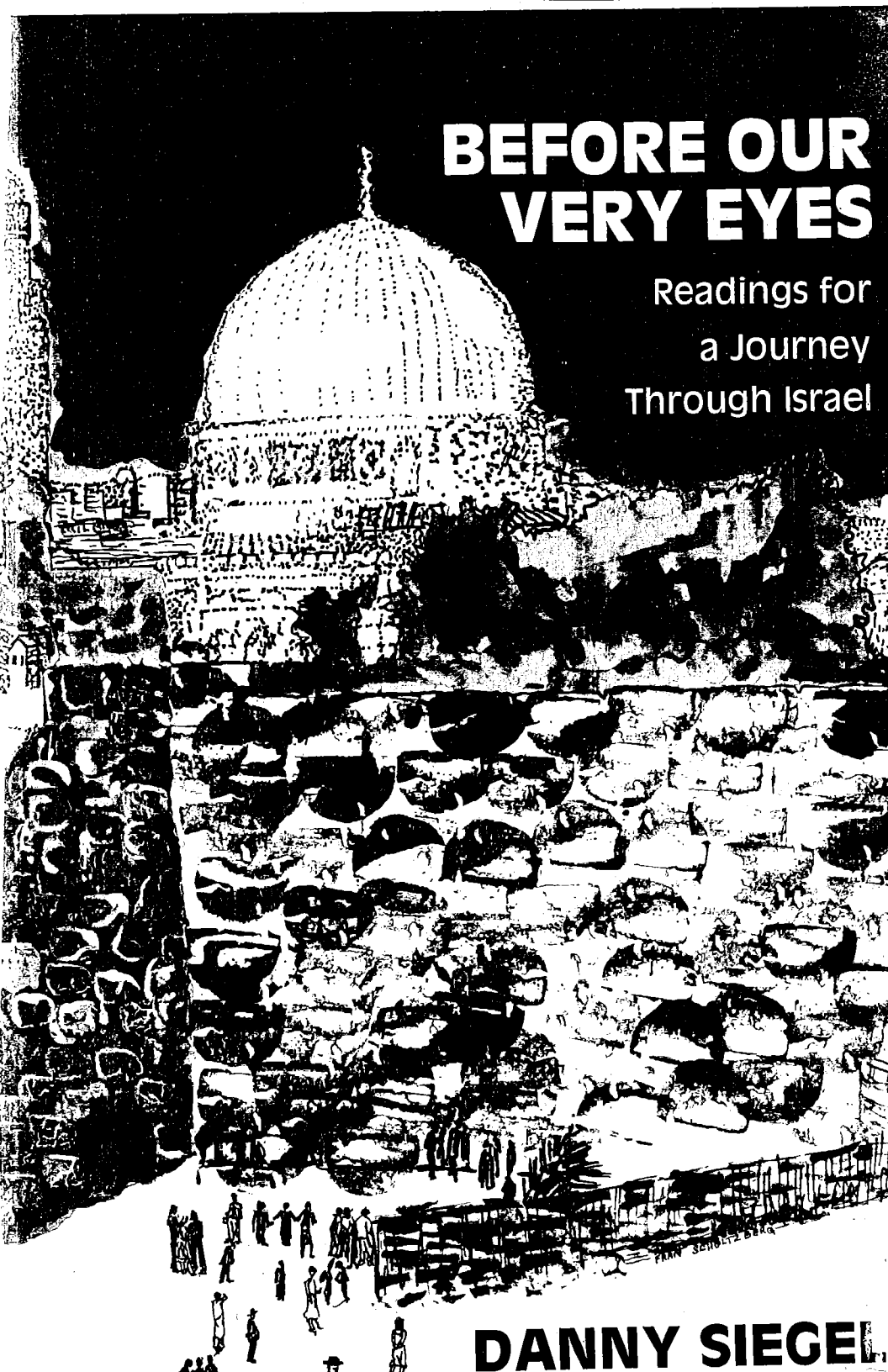


BEFORE OUR VERY EYES

Readings for
a Journey
Through Israel



DANNY SIEGEL

BEFORE OUR VERY EYES

BOOKS BY DANNY SIEGEL

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Readings for a Journey Through Israel

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BEFORE OUR VERY EYES

Readings for a Journey
Through Israel

by

DANNY SIEGEL

THE TOWN HOUSE PRESS

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I am grateful to Leslie Simon for her help in making the selection for this volume and for giving me the title for this anthology.

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INTRODUCTION

The idea that led to this volume is very simple: people travelling to Israel, either alone or in groups, are always looking for appropriate readings for various events in the course of the trip. Or at times, during a leisure moment, perhaps sitting on a balcony surveying the scenery of revived landscape and revived Jews, they would want to leaf through a selection of thoughts about Israel, the Jewish people, the history of the Jews, and how dreams do indeed become reality.

It is my hope that this anthology will help the Lover of Israel to express some of his or her own feelings while walking the Land. The poems and prose represent more than a decade of work on my part, ideas and glimpses, images and metaphors that struck me casually and not-so-casually, moving me to write them down.

My deepest gratitude goes to Rabbi Ron Hoffberg of Temple Beth El, Cranford, New Jersey, my longtime good friend. It was he who suggested to me that I prepare this work, asking me for appropriate pieces he would need for reading while taking a congregational tour to Israel. I am most thankful for his suggestion, for his kind friendship and for the sharing of his Menschlich soul, and it is to him that I dedicate this book with love and respect.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. <i>Before leaving for Israel, to set the mood:</i>	
Personal Preference	1
II. <i>For the plane ride, or before:</i>	
The Cinnamon Trees of Jerusalem and Other Tales	2
III. <i>On arriving at Ben Gurion Airport:</i>	
Some People Kiss Runways	9
IV. <i>Leaving the Airport and first gazing upon the landscape and the people:</i>	
Psalm 26—Blessed Be Your Negev	10
V. <i>The Land, the People, Jewish History</i>	
<i>When moved by the glorious nature of Israel as a homeland:</i>	
Surveying the Jewish Multitudes	11
<i>When amazed at the rebuilding of the Land:</i>	
Psalm 28—Lift Up Your Eyes to the Mountains	12
<i>Considering the security needs of Israel:</i>	
Psalm 25—Tanks and Planes are Not the True Salvation ...	13
<i>Considering the events of recent Jewish history in Israel:</i>	
Summer, 1976, Wine in the Streets	14
<i>A light note, when overwhelmed by so many things happening to your Jewish soul:</i>	
Simile	15
IV. <i>Jerusalem</i>	
<i>When your senses are overwhelmed in Jerusalem:</i>	
Return to Jerusalem	16
<i>Realizing Jerusalem's uniqueness:</i>	
My 9,000 Poem about Jerusalem	18
<i>Surveying the variety of Jews in Jerusalem:</i>	
Sunflower Seeds and Name-Brand Shirts	19
<i>Jerusalem's higher meanings:</i>	
A Song of Jerusalem	20
<i>Waking at dawn, too excited to sleep:</i>	
Dawn	23
<i>Watching a sunrise</i>	
Modeh Ani	24
<i>Daytime:</i>	
A Certain Holiness	25
<i>Midnight:</i>	
Sublimity in Jerusalem	26
<i>Through the nighttime hours:</i>	
Baby Cradle Moon	27

<i>Jerusalem in the rain:</i>	
The Rainy Season	28
<i>Jerusalem in the snow:</i>	
Snow in The City	29
<i>On leaving Jerusalem:</i>	
There is a Pleasant Burden	30
VII. <i>The Wall</i>	
<i>When writing your message to be placed in the Wall:</i>	
Breeze at the Wall	31
<i>Standing at the Wall:</i>	
Symbol	32
VIII. <i>Hebrew</i>	
<i>Upon falling in love with Hebrew:</i>	
Hebrew	33
<i>Promising yourself to learn more Hebrew:</i>	
There Are Many Roads to the Holiness of Hebrew	34
<i>Realizing the holiness of Hebrew:</i>	
The Legacy of the Aleph-Bet Teachers	35
IX. <i>Tree planting</i>	
<i>Background of Jews, Judaism, and trees:</i>	
Trees—A Jewish Obsession	36
<i>At tree planting:</i>	
The Tree and the Mashiach	42
X. <i>Visiting the Holy City of Tzefat:</i>	
Tzefat	43
XI. <i>At the grave of David Ben Gurion:</i>	
Ben Gurion's Grave at Sdeh Boker Overlooking the Negev	44
XII. <i>Reflecting on Israel, Torah, and God's place in Jewish history:</i>	
Climbing Mt. Sinai	45
XIII. <i>While preparing for the Messiah:</i>	
Mashiachtzeit or Davidson from Egged	47
Glossary	49

Before leaving for Israel . . . to set the mood:

PERSONAL PREFERENCE

I think
(now that I look back)
I'd rather drive a taxi
in Jerusalem
than be the King
of all of South Dakota
or the Cantor
in the Great and Ancient Synagogue
of West Rangoon.

I don't know why.

Here the sun sets red,
and there the suns set red.

Here the trees sway with infinite grace,
and there the breeze moves the leaves
with equally gentle fingers.

I don't know why
I'd rather drive a taxi in Jerusalem,

but neither have I come to know
just why the seed becomes a daffodil
and not a rose.

THE CINNAMON TREES OF JERUSALEM AND OTHER TALES

The “real” Israel is neither exclusively nor necessarily the Israel of the newspapers and international debates. It would be unfair to our spirit and an inauthentic understanding of our history to speak of our corner of the Middle East as only a package of security and defense problems, crises in the state’s economy, and social unrest.

It is time to review another aspect of Israel in order to restore our sense of grandeur and holiness which is the Land’s emanating gift to us. We have always had our share of visionaries and madmen who considered Israel in another light; Herzl and Ben Yehuda and the swamp-drainers of this and the last century, and prophets and generations of Jews from Turkey and Persia to ghetto-Poland who turned their hearts in prayer towards some place they might never live to see. But they knew it existed, and would assume its full reality because of them, their uncrushable hopes, their obstinate yearnings. There was, indeed, an entire span of some five hundred years of Jewish history where people such as these stood defiantly against the reality of the real world and shouted and wept and danced their dream into being. This was the Era of the Talmud. In Israel itself and in Babylonia, over the first five centuries of the secular calendar they insisted that Israel was different, a place unique, living in untimeable presences, a locale that contained Heaven and Creation and Now and All Eternity within its borders.

The Names, Images and Phrases

Imagine: the world is divided — no, the entire universe — is divided into two parts — Aretz and Chutz LaAretz, Israel and Outside Israel. And were we to ask the Masters which was the more important of the two, who would doubt their answer?—Eretz Yisrael.

To the Rabbis, Israel was the center of the world, the highest land, the light of the world, the holiest of all countries, though they would not have called it merely a country. And Jerusalem — there could never be a holier city anywhere. They called it “Menuchah”—rest and peace of mind for God and human beings.

They said: the world is like the human eyeball — the white is the ocean that surrounds the earth; the iris, with its multifarious colors and characters, is the inhabited world. But the pupil, the power and source of seeing, that is Yerushalayim. To them, it was the city that made all Jews friends with one another.

Nine-tenths of all the world’s wisdom is in Israel, they said. Nine-tenths of all the world’s beauty is in Jerusalem. Rabbi Nathan said: There is no wisdom anywhere like that of Israel, nor any beauty like that of Jerusalem.

In quantity and in quality, Israel-and-Jerusalem was the fair genius of the earth.

So fruitful was the Land, Resh Lakish said, that, if the Garden of Eden were in Israel (and it was surely there, somewhere), then the Bet She'an Valley was the door to the Garden. Shimon bar Tachlifa reported: My father once left me a cabbage stalk so tall we had to use a ladder to get to the top. Rabbi Ya'akov bar Dostai waded in fig-honey up to his ankles from Lod to Ono, a distance of 3 ancient miles. And an eye-witness account from Resh Lakish: I saw the milk and honey of Tzippori, and it covered an area of sixteen miles square. Rabbi Zeira, an immigrant from Babylonia and passionate lover of the Land, said that the air itself makes you wise. He added: there is so much wisdom everywhere, you must consider even the casual conversation of its inhabitants as a form of Torah, brimming with meanings and meanings upon meanings. One must listen carefully even to their talk of the weather and the price of barley. Rabbi Zeira was saying that if you listen carefully enough, you will hear eternal words, a something more than syllables and sounds.

And Rabbi Yochanan reported with authority (he was the leader of our people 1750 years ago—he should know): God Himself will not return to the Heavenly Jerusalem until He returns to the Jerusalem on earth. Our Jerusalem is a model of God's Jerusalem! God, too, must have a Holy City in Heaven!

Israel and Jerusalem are absolutely singular realities, they said, the Rabbis said. Nothing is the same, and the Land and the City must be treated with the awe and infinite care that holiness demands.

Attitudes from the Yeshiva

The Rabbis did not speak of Torah as we speak of university educations. When a someone said, "I am going to Bnai Brak to study with Rabbi Akiva!" he meant, "I am going to share life and dreams and mysteries with the greatest Student of Life since Moses." Moses himself, they taught, would have preferred that God give the Torah through Akiva. Moses—was he not the greatest Jew in our history?—Moses, willing to step aside for Akiva.

The schools were everywhere: Rabban Gamliel in Yavneh, Yehudah the Prince in Bet Shearim, Yehoshua in Peki'in, Yochanan ben Zakkai in Bror Chayil, and so many others. Rabbi Eliezer was in Lod, birthplace of Akiva. Tourists and immigrants in our twentieth century should remember that Lod is more than an airport, more than passport control and customs and duty free shops. It is a present built on a majestic past.

In Lod and Sichni and Tzippori they taught: When you pray, pray for Jerusalem. Turn yourselves towards the Land and the City. And when you thank God for food, thank Him for the food, yes—but pray for Yerushalayim.

They taught: When you arrive in the Land, plant trees. Did not God set Himself to planting when He created the world—starting with Israel (for Israel was created first, of course). So too, you must plant when you come to the Land. Treeplanting is a Mitzvah, they said. It is a true imitation of God's ways.

In those days they prohibited lime-furnaces in the City. Eighteen hundred years ago they decreed: No! the smoke blackens the city's walls. It is *genai*—a disgrace. One does not treat the Holy City in such fashion.

And they taught: the hot springs of Tiberias are in Tiberias and not in Jerusalem so that people should not come to the City of Cities for the sake of the baths. A Jew should come as a pilgrim to Yerushalayim—not simply for refreshment or for the taste of the fruits from around the Sea of Galilee, fruits so sweet people swooned from the taste. Neither for the fruits, nor for the baths, nor for any other reason than that Jerusalem is Jerusalem.

There were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem, says Rabbi Pinchas. Each had a school for Bible and for Mishna.

The trees of Jerusalem were cinnamon trees, and whenever fires were lit with them, the fragrance floated through the land.

While the Temple still stood, no bride needed perfume on her wedding day. The incense from the altar was so everpresent, perfumes would have added nothing. The goats of Jericho, miles away to the northeast, would sneeze from the scent!

No one was ever hurt by a snake or scorpion in Jerusalem.

No one ever had to say to his companion, "There is no room for me to spend the night in Jerusalem."

It was a custom in the Holy City that hosts would hang a cloth on their doors. Whenever the cloth was out, all who wished to join in the meal were welcome to come in and eat.

Nearly two thousand years later, a Jew need not bend his imagination too much to feel the passion of the words: Whoever did not see Jerusalem in Her glory, never saw a beautiful city.

Jerusalem and Her people. Israel and Her Jews.

Crazy people, twisted visions! But there is more:

A letter was sent to Yehudah ben Tabbai in Egypt, "From Jerusalem the Great to Little Alexandria!"

Yehudah the Prince II, grandson of the codifier of the Mishna, sent Rabbi Ammi and Rabbi Assi to study the Torah-school systems of Israel. In one place they asked to see the guardians of the city. The townspeople brought out the chief of the city guard. Disturbed by what had happened, they said, "these are not the guardians of the city. They are the destroyers of the city!" "And who," asked the citizens, "are the guardians of the city?" "The teachers of the Written and Oral Torah—they are the guardians," they answered. "The Psalms tell us, 'Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman keeps vigil in vain.'"

Swords and scrolls, guns and the books of tradition. Which is the true source of our strength and security? They asked, and they answered.

Comings and Goings and Goings-On

When Rabbi Zeira reached the Jordan after his long pilgrimage from Babylonia, he found no suitable bridge or ferry. Some shaky boards with a rope overhead were all that were there to help him enter the Land. Without hesitation he crossed right there, despite the danger—so great was his yearning for the Now of being home in Aretz. Had not Moses and Aaron died outside the Land? How was he to be certain that he would merit entry? Better Here and Now than some amorphous Later, which might never be—even an hour later. He then fasted a hundred fasts to forget his Babylonian learning. He wanted to immerse himself in that nine-tenths of the world's wisdom which was in Aretz.

Rabbi Chanina would remove rocks from the roads and take care of anything that might cause unkind words to be spoken of the Land. It must be a pleasant place to live, he insisted.

Rabbi Abba would kiss the stones of Akko, which in his day was a border settlement. Immigrants from Yemen and so many other countries (and some unembarrassed tourists from North America, too) have similarly kissed the runway at Lod and the docks at Haifa. Kissing ground, even asphalt, has a precedent. It's all right—even recommended. It's nothing to be ashamed of.

And Rabbi Chiya bar Gamda would roll in the dust. Did not the Psalms say, "For Your servants love its stones and cherish its dust"?

Who could think of leaving the Land? Even in times of distress and persecution, who would abandon Israel? We are told that Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua and Rabbi Yochanan HaSandlar were on their way to Netzivin in Babylonia to study Torah with Rabbi Yehudah ben Betayrah. Now, to leave the Land in order to study Torah with certain Masters was within the Law. And yet, when they reached the border, they looked back, tore their clothes, and began to weep. They wept deeply, and returned to the Land. They simply could not leave—no matter how good the reason.

Greatness, Unique Greatness

In this madness-of-love for Israel, the Rabbis and the students lived a life where wonders could be made common, and the simplest-of-simple-things contained miracles waiting to be revealed.

When the Land needed rain, Choni Circle Maker would draw a circle in Jerusalem and say, "God, I shall not move from this place until You send rain for your people." A few drops fell. "Not sprinklings," demanded Choni, like a child who knows his father will give in to his every whim. Then there were buckets of rain. "Not that, either," he insisted. And then rain, soothing to the Land, providing food for the people, rain fell in just the right, blessed quantities.

Once Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa was walking home. It began to rain. He said to God, "The whole world is sitting at home in comfort, and I am here getting soaked!?" God stopped the rain. When Chanina ben Dosa

reached home, he said, "The whole world is suffering for lack of rain, and I should sit here dry, warm, at ease?" And the rain began to come down again.

Hillel was too poor to pay for tuition. He nearly froze to death, perched on the skylight of some Yeshiva, covered with snow. Here Hillel taught the pagan, "What is hateful to you, do not do to others. This is the entire Torah. The rest is commentary—now, go study." Here, too, one day a once-rich man who had become impoverished asked for help. Hillel knew he must be provided for according to his custom, which included a horse upon which to ride, and a servant to run before the horse as it went through the streets. A horse was found, but no servant. So Hillel performed the Mitzvah himself. This, when he was already Hillel HaZaken—Hillel the Elder.

Considering their lives, a Rabbi eulogized the passing of the Great Rabbis: When Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai died, the Splendor of Wisdom left the world. The Dignity of Torah died with Akiva, and Purity and Self-control passed with Rabban Gamliel the Elder. When Yehudah, the Prince, died, there no longer was a man who embodied True Humility and the Fear of Sin. Yossi Katanta died, and there were no more Chassidim to be found, people of loving, gentle acts.

And despite two devastations of the Land, they retained their dignity, their nobility. They persisted in their view of the world, and held to their understanding of the happenings of things. Thus, the Temple was destroyed not because the Romans were such wonderful warriors, but because of senseless hatred between two Jews at a banquet. The host humiliated a guest, and one event pushed into another and on and on until Jerusalem was in ruins.

Sixty-five years later Akiva, Chanina ben Tradyon, Yishmael, and their colleagues, and thousands of their students met their deaths in the Bar Kochba Revolt. Seven years the Romans harvested their vineyards without need of fertilizer, so much blood had been spilled. Rabbi Meir tried to save his sister-in-law from the house of prostitution the Romans had forced her to enter. Pursued, he fled the land, dying on foreign soil. He was buried by the seashore, having said, "These waters that wash-the shore also wash the shores of Israel." To the last he yearned for Aretz.

The Bones and the Mourning

Somehow they foresaw that there would be a centuries-long stretch of history before Israel would again be settled and flourishing under the loving, sympathetic hands of the Jews. They instructed the future generations: Whoever mourns for Jerusalem shall merit seeing Her again in Her Simcha, in Her joy and glory.

And they voiced a warning for that time, whenever it would be. It was in the form of a story that would be handed down by word of mouth and through manuscripts for hundreds of years after the Talmud's academies closed down. They recalled a promise made to Joseph by his offspring, and transformed that promise into a memory-in-waiting, a latent remembering waiting for the right moment.

Joseph had made his offspring swear that they would take his bones with them to Israel. They promised solemnly to do so, and though the misery of Egyptian enslavement dragged them down for centuries, the promise was kept. The night before they left Egypt, Moses himself searched out Joseph's bones, placed them in an Aron, a coffin, and carried them with the Ark of the Covenant through the desert wanderings. When Joshua brought the Children of Israel into the Land, Joseph was properly buried in its holy soil.

The Rabbis were telling us now, so many generations later, that on our own journeys and pilgrimages to Eretz Yisrael, we must take the bones of our past with us. How many generations have passed since the time of Shimon ben Gamliel and Hillel? Even five generations ago, would our greatgreatgrandparents ever have conceived of free access to a reborn Israel? An essence of our people lies somewhere in the foresight of the Rabbis and the passing of generations. They insisted on a continuity, and the interrelationship between Anywhere and Israel, Anytime and First Times, Last Times, and Eternity.

The End Times

The time will come, says the Talmud, when the Mashiah will come and establish himself in Yerushalayim, the City of cinnamon trees and friends and light. At that time, the Worthy Ones who died outside the Land will be brought back to the Holy City, some say on clouds, some say in tunnels under the earth. There, in Jerusalem, they will be brought back to life. There will be a great banquet of Leviathan, with God Himself presiding.

But which Jerusalem will that be? The Zohar, extending the images of the Talmud, says that God will renew the world and bring down to earth a wholly rebuilt Jerusalem which He has prepared in Heaven—a city never to be destroyed again.

A thousand years before, a similar striking image was expounded by Rabbi Yochanan. According to one version of his words, God will make the entire East Gate of the City out of one pearl. Another explains that God has diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and pearls, forty-five feet square exquisitely engraved, which He will set in the gates of Jerusalem.

A dream? A vision? A glimpse of a madman?

One student could not tolerate such foolishness. Storming out of the Yeshivah, he went on a boat trip, and, looking up, saw angels engraving gigantic jewels. Asking what they were for, he was told, "God Himself will set them in the Gates of Jerusalem." The student returned to the Yeshivah

and praised Rabbi Yochanan's teaching, saying, "Teach, Master, your teaching is magnificent! I saw just what you described!" Rabbi Yochanan was enraged, and shouted, "Empty one! Had you not seen it, you would not have believed it?"

Let us not be like the student, viewing the Land and the City with stunted vision. When we walk the streets of Yerushalayim and the fields of Eretz Yisrael, let us be faithful to the words of Rabbi Yochanan. It is but one of a hundred variations on a Talmudic theme. Eretz Yisrael and Yerushalayim *are* different. Jews live and change the world by its glow.

On arrival at Ben Gurion Airport:

SOME PEOPLE KISS RUNWAYS

Give me 5 more years
 away from Israel
I will go back "home"
 to make and save my money
So that when I come back home again
 life will be uncomplicated
And I can spend
 as many as my days
Will be at Lod
 with a barrel of honey
And a vat of milk
 to sprinkle on the runway
I want those who kiss
 the holy concrete
To taste
 how very sweet
 the Homeland has become.

*Leaving the Airport and first gazing upon
the landscape and the people:*

PSALM 26 — BLESSED BE YOUR NEGEV

Blessed be Your Negev,
for it shall bring forth sesame and apples.
Blessed be Your Galilee,
for it shall be a rest for Exiles coming home.
Blessed be the rocks, the buses,
the grocery stores and balconies,
for they are holy, too;
the parrot in Eilat quotes the Prophets,
and the grinding of the gears are melodies
to Your discerning listeners.

O my God,
I could list forever
all the sacred things of Israel:
the jets with their Star of David wings,
the pomegranates and sunflowers,
the accents of a thousand lands,
the beards, gold-domed vistas,
the way the people carry their freedom,
the history in the air,
the wisdom in the streets,
the fishponds and alfalfa fields,
the awesomeness of Hebrew.

Glorified, magnified,
sanctified and praised be You
for all these wonders.

When moved by the glorious nature of Israel as a homeland:

SURVEYING THE JEWISH MULTITUDES

Rejoice, O Jerusalem,
your streets are filled again
with children! Proud children.
Be joyous, Mother Rachel,
your children have come home!

Home. Such a foreign word
to the refugee from Argentina,
the Vizhnitzer chossid,
the Jew from Bulgarian cities.
That you are home,
and there is no more need to hide
and steal across the border,
is the stuff of Jewish lullabies.
When the planes at Lod
crowd with long lost sons
and daughters,
truth and freedom blur
near disbelief.

Tiberias and Yavneh,
raise your voices!
Massada burst your rocks
with song,
for we are home!

When amazed at the rebuilding of the Land:

PSALM 28 — LIFT UP YOUR EYES TO THE MOUNTAINS

Lord,

Lift up Your eyes to the mountains
and see our glorious forests.
Look from the heights and see
how we love You with our palms and psalms and promises.

Gaze upon our hospitals and Torah homes
and know:

We have taken Your sands
and built our kibbutzim;
Your desert wastes are now the residence
of immigrants from Exile lands.

See how we love You

with our dancing in the Purim streets,
our hope restored, our vision sharp
with clear Metzada resolution.

Considering the security needs of Israel:

PSALM 25 — TANKS AND PLANES ARE NOT THE TRUE SALVATION

O Lord,
remind us
that tanks and planes
are not the true salvation
of our People.

Show us the meaning
of the scrolls and manuscripts
that all humanity may sit together
in Jerusalem, the city named for peace.

We are chosen,
but weary of the tear soaked pages
of our history.

We ask nothing of You, Lord,
but opportunities to raise
carnations in the Negev
and a crop of cinnamon
in Galilee.

Considering the events of recent Jewish history in Israel:

SUMMER, 1976,
WINE IN THE STREETS

Either it's me and my *Mazal*
or Jewish History is always happening
in Israel.

Every time I go,
something larger than myself
is going on.

I try to sidestep it,
cutting my time to a month
or twenty-one days,
but still:

 The Eichmann Trial,
 Nasser drops dead,
 A quiet Yom Kippur in shul
 with two many citizens
 in fatigues
 instead of *kittels*,

And now

Entebbe.

I arrived as the Yeshivahs began
their Psalms and fasting,
and July Fourth we were drinking *Lechayyim*
in the streets
and interjecting God's Name
and the word "miracle"
into every other sentence.

Sometimes I do not feel worthy
of these cosmic junctures.
I am too confused
by the living through of Great Events
and the meanings of the aftermaths.
And the questions of
"What next?"

*A light note, when overwhelmed by so many things
happening to your Jewish soul:*

SIMILE

A summer in Israel
is like a whole felafel
you buy at your favorite kiosk:
textures and shapes
abundantly packed
to the breadtearing rim;
tastes and combinations,
filling,
ultimately digestible.

When your senses are overwhelmed in Jerusalem:

RETURN TO JERUSALEM

There are occasional poems in my repertoire,
and topicals and cyclicals, annuals and perennials.
I have Spring themes and birthday reflections,
love sadnesses, snow-filled romps with sleds . . .
they're all here in the folder.

Now it's the annual
longing-for-Jerusalem pursuit of words and images
to say: soon, back again.

My feet say it: soon, back again,
turning into that street,
twivelling to see some Jew I met in Kansas City,
descending, descending to the Wall,
its plaza and tourists, its pray-ers and soldiers and doves.

My eyes say it:
I look out over Washington
but I see a distant Mount of Olives,
hills and stone shades changing always with the sun's angle.

My ears:
Gear shifts, languages,
a city waking up and going back to sleep like no other
in the world
(and I have seen London, Zurich, Copenhagen,
and listened, hearing nothing quite like Jerusalem)
yawning to shake off sleep
or sighing or weeping
(what weeping city, after all, can you hear in Bern
or Paris at midnight?)

Smell:

The cooks of the world in one city!
Exhausts—too many—
of buses and scooters,
indescribable mixes of centuries of odors and aromas
in the Old City,
unlike the Bazaar in Teheran,
worlds away from the malls of Dayton and Seattle.
Who can begin to tell what happens to the soul
when a Jew smells a sweet Shabbas meal in the air everywhere?

And my arms and hands?
It is two full months before I leave
and this is still the first poem of this cycle—
but my arms keep reaching again, again
to great distances, 7,000 miles,
as if, by some Heaven-opening miracle
I could stretch and stretch with my soul in my palms
and hug a city in all its borders and centuries
and rest my head on its shoulder for newer joys,
deeper comforts, and a certain warmth in the veins.

Realizing Jerusalem's uniqueness:

MY 9,000TH POEM ABOUT JERUSALEM

It must be that time of year:
I'm overweight and sick of airports
and annually aware of the junk on TV.

It must be time to limber up my passport,
buy more summery shorts
and get my eyes checked for sharper lenses
so I can see every speck and turn and Jew and sunset
I can in Jerusalem.

To all my friends living outside
the realm of Yerushalayim—
my apologies.

To all those worthy Tzedakah projects and Tzaddikim
doing wonders for the Jews
in the Negev and the North—
my regrets.

For all the Holy Sites outside The City—
be they graves of the sages,
be they the rise of new kibbutzim,
be they the markers to brave Israeli soldiers
in War after War that I might be free—
I am sorry—

but my heart and soul belong to Jerusalem.

Between June whatever
and August whatever
if you want to see me
just stand on any corner
or sit in some café
and I'll find you—I cover them all—
so just wait.
I'll find you.

If you're in Jerusalem,
I'll find you.

Surveying the variety of Jews in Jerusalem:

SUNFLOWER SEEDS AND NAME-BRAND SHIRTS

Sunflower seeds and name-brand shirts,
milk from Jewish cows.

It's here and it's all ours.

Even the stones taste good
when you rub your fingers against them
and touch your tongue.

You can get cinnamon pastries
flavored by refugees from Budapest.

The downtown triangle of streets is seething with Jews—
loud chattering geniuses, drivers, merchants, and kids,
pharmacists from Germany, scholars,
kibbutzniks on a spree, saints,
men shaking in yarmulkas over a Coke,
the round and the blind, the muscle-bulging
of our people, foaming beggars,
and open-shirted name-brand macho Sabra men.

This is us.

This is me, ours, *my* own, *our* own;
it belongs, and *I* belong.

Jerusalem.

Jerusalem's higher meanings:

A SONG OF JERUSALEM,
by DAVID BEN CHASSIN
CHAZAK BAR AHARON,
A MOROCCAN JEW,
(TRANSLATED BY THIS POET)

A song

a holy song

A Psalm

by another David:

Take drums and harps and cymbal-sounds
and sitting on an aromatic hill
sing the Holy City's praises—
delicate and graceful as a fawn—

Jerusalem.

The chosen home of holiness
fantastic source of Torah-light
delightful, lovely,
source of mystery,

Jerusalem.

God Almighty of the sun and stars,
the jungles and the riverstreams,
has taken you
to be His own, unique in magic grandeur,
Yerushalayim.

Speak to Him, this choosing God,
pray and ask,
how fares the Queen,
Yerushalayim?

Strange God who talks to us
in storms and desert bushes.
Use Your holy hands
to build again

Jerusalem.

O wonderworking God,
make miracles and gather up
the broken Jews
to the focus of their exiled eyes—
Jerusalem.

Centuries of righteous wise,
people steeped in wisdom-words
and awesome human acts,
lived hopefully within
Jerusalem.

The Great Sanhedrin,
community of character
made everything for Life,
Lechayim,
in the timeless palace
of the Everpresent King—
Yerushalayim.

We await Your ultimate help, O God,
soon may the sounds of Salvation
be heard in the land;
in anticipation
the ruins sing
in Jerusalem.

Let David's promised grandson
King-Messiah come and cry,
Awake! Arise!
Let your warming, flaming light
blaze forth,
Jerusalem!

Heal, give strength,
Divine Physician,
to your wasted people Israel;
bring us your Redeemer
to restore your worn and weakened daughter,
Jerusalem.

May we live to be a joyous witness
to the crowded moving streets
of thriving
once-again alive
Yerushalayim.

Overwhelmed and awestruck,
we, our very selves,
 shall stand
within the gates,
drawing forth revivifying waters
 from the wellsprings of
Jerusalem.

Do not forget Her enemies,
O Red Sea God,
the ones who scorched
 her regal robes,
The Babylonians, the Romans,
of those days, and ours,
who tortured her,
 the Queen in agony,
Jerusalem.

His Presence rests in timelessness
on His Holy Temple Mount,
 pleasant, panoramic,
on the heights of old
Yerushalayim.

Sing! Shout! Proclaim aloud
and join the hills
in bringing forth the call to peace
for the soul
 of our
Jerusalem.

Remove our adversaries
as in Pharaoh's time,
and bring our scattered refugees
 to rest
and build with You
 a new
Yerushalayim.

Waking at dawn . . . too excited to sleep:

DAWN

Dawn in Jerusalem
depends at times on the night before.
If the moon was out
for Sukkot or Tu BiShvat,
and the day before it drizzled,
and now the stars are enough
to offer Abraham's children
a hope made of mystery and grace —
then Jews have visions
of lambs and lions together,
and the streams of Eden,
and peacocks in the lush of the Garden,
Adam and Eve turning their eyes
to wispgrey then whitegrey
threaded with gold, O so many colors.
Like this morning,
settling on the sanctity of Life
like a big wool Tallis
you pull around your shoulders.

Thank you, Lord, for having me awaken
to become a witness to the flaming of the sun.
Someone gently shook me from my bed
as I was somewhere in a dream
of visiting Jerusalem again.
And I walked (still half asleep) to watch
the city shake its dusty head awake,
wrapped in a royal cape
of orange and swirling mist.
From my lookout on the roof
I saw a Jewish flag
wave in the distant wind,
bathed in a cloudy red of early morning sunshine.
How the panorama called to mind
David, a poet-king with burning hair,
rising at this hour to sing Psalms
for the very ears of God!
And I was full-alive above the new Yerushalayim.

My God! The sun beyond the hills of Moav
a million million miles away!

Daytime:

A CERTAIN HOLINESS

It was that time of Jerusalem day
when the sun chooses
any one of many hills
to wash in gold,
the time of day
the City assumes
a touch of the romantic's magic.
The religious said blessings.
The eloquent called to mind
lines memorized in school
for moments such as these
and wrote new songs
from notes made of beams.
Others still, held hands
and kissed
for all this beauty
whose truest words
are whispers and sighs and half-sounds,
hints of interjections
no one can put to a rhythm—
not Shelley, nor Wordsworth,
nor the grand-sweeping Lord Byron.
And Mozart and Schumann deceive us,
trying to make keys and oboes and strings
say things
only a Jewish heart
in love with the Holiest of Places
can say.

Midnight:

SUBLIMITY IN JERUSALEM

We are disappointed
we have not been everywhere at once.
Rising at midnight to watch the lights play
in window patterns,
we stay awake through dawn,
awed by the way the sun changes the face
of walls and shutters, the narrow alleyways.
Through a full year's cycle
of holiday, breeze, the burn of the sun,
we have said a thousand times,
"Her secret is at hand tonight,"
searching the streets for chuppahs
and the whispers of a voice.

Through the nighttime hours:

BABY CRADLE MOON

I lay in bed all night,
reciting Psalms at the open window.

These are the same stars David saw,
the selfsame baby cradle moon,
one week past the trees' new year.

Three thousand years ago, the king,
his hair sprinkled with pine needles,
wrote poetry
to make words worthy of the hills' holiness.

Many nights I lay in bed all night,
listening to the resonance of lute strings,
expecting the Mashiach.

Jerusalem in the rain:

THE RAINY SEASON

Jerusalem has changed
with the drizzle of the rain
before Sukkot.

Robed in a regal raincoat,
She sits wet and majestic
on her Judean throne,
reigning in slippery peace.
The drops dazzle the streetlamps,
and the headlights
of an Egged bus
announce that Torah
once again goes forth
from Zion.

Come, let us now go up
to the Mountain of God
and dance in the Holy Rain.

The roads were jammed.
Then they were closed,
and the last train from Tel Aviv
was packed with Israelis
coming to Jerusalem to see.
As we climbed the hills,
there were children of every age
rolling their hands in it
and throwing snowballs at the windows.
It was dark as we arrived,
mystical,
and we were slow and nearly knee-deep
tracking from the station to our home.
No traffic, no sound,
other than the flakes
and the buzz of the streetlamps.
In the distance, the mosques
looked like holiday yarmulkas,
and the miracle of JNF was multiplied
by millions of glistening branches—
trees from Hebrew Schools
in Texas and London and Johannesburg
standing in *kittels* of snow,
like a wedding
of Heaven and Earth.

On leaving Jerusalem:

THERE IS A PLEASANT BURDEN

There is a pleasant burden of longing
you carry when you leave Jerusalem.

There is a summons in the air, turning away to Exile,
a decree: yearn for Mitzvahs,
know preciousness, be gentle.

Yearning itself is redefined.

When writing your message to be placed in the Wall:

BREEZE AT THE WALL

Bits of Paper—

people's simple story-notes to God
stuffed in the cracks of the Wall
on anything worth writing on
El Al stationery
backs of envelopes tickets to a show
 pencil ballpoint pen
 tears
 anything
 to tell Him how it is
 down here between the dust and dances
Falling to the ground
 in an inauspicious breeze.

Ten years and more
since the war won it back for us,
the Wall has slid from stone-reality
to symbol.

We speak of it too much,
draw it, sing of it,
and less and less bother ourselves
to walk the twenty-minute walk
to have our problems heard,
our hearts re-strung,
our dumbstruck lips on rock-cold
massive hope.

I'll tell you how much I love Hebrew:

Read me anything—

Genesis

or an ad in an Israeli paper

and watch my face.

I will make half-sounds of ecstasy

and my smile will be so enormously sweet

you would think some angels were singing Psalms

or God Himself was reciting to me.

I am crazy for her Holiness

and each restaurant's menu in Yerushalayim

or Bialik poem

gives me peace no Dante or Milton or Goethe

could give.

I have heard Iliads of poetry,

Omar Khayyam in Farsi,

and Virgil sung as if the poet himself

were coaching the reader.

And they move me—

but not like

the train schedule from Haifa to Tel Aviv

or a choppy unsyntaxed note

from a student who got half the grammar I taught him

all wrong

but remembered to write

with Alefs and Zayins and Shins.

That's the way I am.

I'd rather hear the weather report

on Kol Yisrael

than all the rhythms and music of Shakespeare.

Promising yourself to learn more Hebrew:

THERE ARE MANY ROADS TO THE HOLINESS OF HEBREW

The day I discovered
Aryeh's dog
understood more Hebrew
than all the phrases
I had memorized
through years of Hebrew school—
that day I bought
the books and records
I would need to read, speak,
understand, and write
everything my heart desired
in the words of Moses.
That day I began
with *Aleph* in the dictionary,
through the Fall to *Mem*,
and finally in June to *Tav*.
One lexicon in the john,
one on the bedstead, and
one in the kitchen, and
five thousand scattered notecards
in my dresser, desk, and pockets.
All because of Kushi the Kelev,
late of Jerusalem.

THE LEGACY OF THE ALEPH-BET TEACHERS

The other languages were different:
we learned them as an exercise for doctorates,
toys, making conversations in our minds
with non-existent foreigners
and the famous, like Plato or Molière,
people we would never meet.
Or, at best, we might sound out
a hesitant "Bonjour" while travelling
once in our lifetimes through Europe.
From our first days in Hebrew school, though,
we were told *this* language was holy.
Our teachers said, "Treat it with respect."
They said, "Caress it, revere it,
love it as a shepherdess her shepherd
in the Song of Songs.
Listen to the howls and eloquence of prophecy,
the lamenting tears of many destructions.
Shout it and sing it with the shout and song
of chalutzim bending low in the downswing
of scythes, dancing horas by a campfire."
They wanted us to take the words
of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
and polish them to a dazzling, golden luster,
remembering their sanctity
even as we transformed them to say
"refrigerator," "taxicab," and "stethoscope."
It was our own language, they said.
It was a dove, newborn,
and we were to feed the growing power
of Jewish speech with love,
to give it the strength to recite
magnificent truths,
to do the tenderest of Mitzvah-acts,
to inflame, make poetry,
and reinvest our People's soul with dignity.

TREES — A JEWISH OBSESSION

Any article on Jews and trees should begin with the word, "Wow!" One single fact will explain: since its inception, the Jewish National Fund — through the agency of Jews throughout the world — has planted over 150,000,000 trees in Israel. ONE HUNDRED FIFTY MILLION (plus a few) (I planted six more this summer)!

Jews everywhere remember Tu Bishvat in Hebrew school, a celebration once a year in honor of trees. The New Year for Trees was celebrated with plantings. Then, and every other day of the year, tree certificates would make the rounds for births, brisses, baby-namings, birthdays, yohrtzeits, significant family events, graduations — any occasion Jews could think of that might be made more joyous by the planting of a tree in Israel.

And when Jews found themselves in sandals walking the holy soil, they would inevitably trek to some JNF forest, plant their own tree, have their picture taken, and return home to rave about their specific tree in Row Nine, fourth from the right, overlooking Hadassah Hospital out in the Judean Hills. And rightfully so. Reclamation of the Land so much depended and depends on trees to hold the soil. Groves of oranges, cedars, lemons, pines, grapefruits. And shade. And they wanted to be a part of it.

In this act of placing a sapling in the soil and giving it its first water, the Jews are expressing their appreciation for God's gift of life itself. At Creation, the Lord filled the world with so many trees, so many kinds of trees, so many fragrances of blossoms and fruits and barks, they, too, would do the same. They would be His partners, affirming that the world is not only habitable, but a delightful place to live.

So they celebrate a New Year for Trees, with more trees, and fruits of every kind, songs, recitations from Jewish texts, poems, blessings — all in a gesture of respect and thankfulness for trees.

And they take names and give names to their offspring that are tree-names. There's Erez and Arza (cedar), Hadas and Hadassah (myrtle), Tamar-Tamara (date-palm), Oren-Ornah (pine), Tirzah (linden), Armon-Armona (plane-tree), Alon (oak), Eshel (tamarisk), Brosh (cypress), and Shikmah (sycamore), to name but a few. And not counting the hundreds of Ilans and Ilanas, whose meaning is simply, "tree." And not counting the parts of trees, the flowers and the fruits: Netzer, Shoshana, Varda, Rakefet, and so many others.

They even formulate blessings for trees: for the first days of Spring when there is an outburst of blooming, for the sight of magnificent trees, for the smell of blossoms, fruits, and bark, such as cinnamon.

Obsessed. The Jews are obsessed with trees.

What is the source of this preoccupation with trees? How did the Jews come to be so conscious of the glories and wonders of towering cedars, the grandeur of pines, the awesomeness of the oak? If they are so much the People of the Book, when did they have time to raise their eyes from the print to notice the foliage around them?

One clear answer is that they found abundant sources in the classical Jewish texts, particularly the Bible, Talmud, and Midrash. One secondary

source (A Topical Concordance to the Bible by Eliezer Katz), lists over 700 references to trees and parts of trees in the Bible alone. Talmudic indices provide long lists of references to the growth and care of trees, trees in the lives of the Righteous, the paganism in tree-worship, and hundreds of other items.

The following will be a much-abbreviated list, to help offer some insight into the enthusiasm and wonder of the Jewish people for trees.

The Bible:

The Bible is replete with images, metaphors, laws, hope, care — all expressed in the language of trees. So much begins, of course, with the Garden of Eden:

1. The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there a human being whom He had formed. And from the ground, the Lord God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. (*Genesis 2:8-9*)

2. It is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it, and all those who uphold it are happy. (*Proverbs 3:18*). (Referring to the wisdom of the Torah.)

3. The righteous shall bloom like a date-palm;
they thrive like a cedar in Lebanon;
planted in the house of the Lord,
they flourish in the courts of our God.
In old age they still produce fruit,
they are full of sap and freshness (*Psalms 92:13-15*)

4. Like a tree planted beside streams of water,
that yields its fruit in season,
whose foliage never fades,
and whatever it produces thrives. (*Psalms 1:3*)
(Referring to the person whose "concern is the teaching of the Lord.")

5. But a shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse,
A twig shall sprout from his stock.
The spirit of the Lord shall alight upon him:
A spirit of wisdom and insight,
A spirit of counsel and valor,
A spirit of devotion and reverence for the Lord. (*Isaiah 11:1-2*)
(Referring to the Messiah.)

6. I will plant cedars in the wilderness, [says the Lord,]
Acacias and myrtles and oleasters;
I will set cypresses in the desert,
Box trees and elms as well —

That people may see and know,
Consider and comprehend
That the Lord's hand has done this,
The Holy One of Israel has wrought it. (*Isaiah 41:19-20*)

7. When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? Only trees which you know do not yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for constructing siegeworks against the city that is waging war on you, until it has been reduced. (*Deuteronomy 20:19-20*)

8. Mark, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month [Sukkot], when you have gathered in the yield of your land, you shall observe the festival of the Lord [to last] seven days: a complete rest on the first day, and a complete rest on the eighth day. On the first day you shall take the product of the hadar trees [the Etrog], branches of palm trees [the Lulav], boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. You shall observe it as a festival of the Lord for seven days in the year; you shall observe it in the seventh month as a law for all time, throughout the ages. (*Leviticus 23:39-41*)

And finally — the proverbial wisdom of Solomon. The First Book of Kings (5:10-14) records, "The Lord endowed Solomon with wisdom and discernment in great measure, with understanding as vast as the sands on the seashore. . . . He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered one thousand and five. He discoursed about trees, from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall; he discoursed about beasts, birds, creeping things and fishes."

It appears that, throughout the ages, the Jews have taken on some of the wisdom of Solomon, discoursing on trees, studying them, planting, touching them now with gentleness, now with vigor, and being touched, in turn, by them. The Talmud continues in this tradition, giving greater scope to Biblical ideas, concepts, metaphors, spinning tales of trees, and learning from them, for the Sake of Heaven and the benefit of the human race.

The Talmud and Midrash

Two different stories illustrate how trees and plants serve as central symbols for the building and uprooting of life —

BUILDING: One day, Choni the Circle Maker was walking along when he saw a man who was planting a carob tree. He said to the man, "How long does it take for this tree to bear fruit?" "Seventy years," he replied. Choni said, "And are you certain that you will live another seventy years?" The man replied, "In my life I have seen many carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, so shall I plant for my descendants." (*Ta'anit 23a*) The story is common to many cultures, told simply and powerfully here in the Talmud. Choni is one of the most beloved of Talmudic personalities, and it is altogether appropriate that this particular tale of continuity and hope should be attributed to him.

DESTRUCTION: Four entered the Orchard [of Mystical Knowledge]. . . . Ben Azzai gazed and died. . . . Ben Zoma gazed and went mad. . . . Acher [Elisha ben Abuya] hacked away at the vegetation. Rabbi Akiva left safely. (*Chagiga 14b*). There, in the realm of Essences, the profoundest mysteries of life, the symbols of trees predominate. Secret knowledge is described as a grove of trees, and Elisha goes berserk, expressed metaphorically by his slashing at the branches of the trees. It is a powerful, thought-provoking tale that has been studied for generations, a striking attempt to grasp the exhilarations and dangers of the study of the very root-meaning of life.

Other references and stories do not always have such cosmic range, but the following selection should provide a suitable, limited cross-section of statements concerning trees in that flourishing time of Jewish learning, the period of the Talmud and Midrash. The literature covers many centuries, and the extent of the material is staggering. This sample serves only as an introduction:

1. There are a number of references to Torah-study sessions being held outdoors, under trees: It once happened that . . . Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues were studying Torah under a certain fig-tree . . . (*Jerusalem Talmud, Berachot 2:8*)

2. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was reputed to have understood the language of palm-trees. (*Bava Batra 134a*) The tradition is a long one — Solomon speaking of cedars and the hyssop in the wall, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai listening to trees and speaking with them, and, centuries later, the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Chassidic movement, taking his children-students out into the forest, to raise their awareness of God's presence in the world.

3. A reminiscence of the glories of Jerusalem before the destruction of the Second Temple: The trees of Jerusalem were cinnamon trees. When fires were made using their logs, the fragrance would float throughout the entire Land of Israel. (*Shabbat 63a*)

4. An ancient, lovely practice from the town of Bethar: It was the custom when a boy was born to plant a cedar, and when a girl was born, to plant a pine. When they married, the trees were cut down and a Chuppah (canopy) was made of the branches for the wedding. (*Gittin 57a*)

5. A moralistic note: Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah used to say, "He whose wisdom exceeds his good deeds, to what may he be compared? To a tree of many branches and few roots. The wind comes and uproots it and turns it on its side. . . . But he whose good deeds exceed his wisdom, what does he resemble? A tree of few branches and many roots, so that even if all the winds of the world blow upon it, they will not move it from its place. (*Pirke Avot 3:22*)

6. A blessing, couched in the language of trees: Rabbi Nahman and Rabbi Yitzchak dined together. At the end of the meal, Rabbi Nachman said, "Master, bless me." Rabbi Yitzchak replied, "Let me tell you a parable. to what may this be compared? To a man who was journeying in

the desert; he was hungry, weary and thirsty, and he happened upon a tree, the fruits of which were sweet, its shade pleasant, and a stream of water flowed beneath it. He ate of its fruits, drank of the water, and rested under its shade. When he was about to continue on his way, he said, 'Tree, O Tree, with what shall I bless you? Shall I say to you? May your fruits be sweet? — They are sweet already. That your shade be pleasant? — It is already pleasant. That a stream of water should flow beneath you? — A stream of water already flows beneath you. Therefore I say: May it be God's will that all the shoots taken from you be like you.' So also with you, [Rabbi Nachman.] How shall I bless you? With the knowledge of Torah? — You already possess the knowledge of Torah. With riches? — You have riches already. With children? — You already have children. Thus, I say, 'May it be God's will that your offspring be like you.' " (*Ta'anit* 5b-6a)

7. Another delicately told tale: The prophet Elijah discovered that a certain Rabbah bar Abbuha was poor. Elijah took him to the Garden of Eden and told him he should remove his robe and gather some of the leaves. He did so, but as they were leaving, Rabbah bar Abbuha heard a disapproving voice that said it were better for him not to take a part of his future portion in Paradise. Rabbah bar Abbuha scattered the leaves, and returned home with Elijah. As he was walking, a man offered him 12,000 dinars for his robe — the exquisite fragrance of the leaves had remained on the cloth. He sold the cloth to him, and, righteous man that he was, then gave the money to his two sons-in-law who were also in dire financial straits. (*Bava Metzia* 114a-b)

8. In the time of the Messiah, trees will be different: In the Future, trees will produce fruit every day. (*Shabbat* 30b)

9. Fabulous accounts of trees in ancient days, and predictions for the time of the Messiah: There will be a time when wheat will grow as tall as a palm tree. Rabbi Jacob ben Dostai said, "From Lod to Ono is a distance of about three Roman miles [actually seven by our measure of miles]. Once I rose early in the morning and waded all that way up to my ankles in the honey of figs. (*Ketubot* 112a). Besides those accounts, there are tales of mammoth peaches, gigantic grapes yielding barrels of juice, a grain of wheat that would grow to the size of two kidneys of a large bull.

10. The carob tree and its fruit is featured in many tales. Here are three: Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son hid from the Romans for years in a cave. They were kept alive by a carob tree and a spring of water that miraculously appeared to save them. (*Shabbat* 33b) The righteous man, Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, was so poor, he sustained himself on two quarts of carob a week. (*Ta'anit* 24b) There is even mention of a carob tree uprooting itself and walking one hundred cubits (some report it was four hundred cubits), at the command of Rabbi Eliezer. (*Bava Metzia* 59b)

Two final Midrashim will appropriately conclude this article on trees — one, a love story, the other, about the Messiah:

THE LOVE STORY: Rabbi Tanhuma said, "Once upon a time there was a certain palm tree in Emmaus that bore no fruit. They grafted it again

and again, but still it bore no fruit. The palm-gardener explained, "This palm tree sees another certain palm-tree in Jericho and longs for him with all her heart.' So they brought a branch from that palm tree in Jericho and grafted it on the one in Emmaus, and it immediately bore fruit." (*Numbers Rabbah 3:1*)

THE MESSIAH AND THE TREE: If you are holding a sapling in your hand, and someone tells you, "The Messiah is here!" — finish planting the tree, and then go greet the Messiah. (*Avot deRabbi Natan B, Chapter 31*)

The Jews' passion for trees stretches over a long history — from the Biblical account of God's planting, and the extraordinary trees in the Garden of Eden, to the wariness over the ages of this Messiah or another, all those who promise immediate and universal salvation. The Jewish message remains, "Plant!" 150,000,000+ trees in Israel appear to be just the beginning.

At tree planting:

THE TREE AND THE MASHIACH

*(Avot de Rabbi Natan B,
Chapter 31)*

“If you are planting a tree,
and someone comes and says,
‘The Mashiach is coming!’—
then plant!”

No matter what reasonable people
or foaming enthusiastic youths tell you:
this this messiah or that messiah
is imminent—
plant!

The Mashiach is in no rush.

When you have patted down the last clods of dirt,
and watered your pines, your cedars,
your gum trees and cypresses,
he will still be wherever he is supposed to be,
and more than happy to admire the sapling with you.
Messiahs don't come to uproot things.

If he wanted to,
he could bundle Eretz Yisrael into a package
and bring it to you,
so you would not have to go wandering again
through many lands.

If he really is the Mashiach,
this One everyone pesters you about,
he can bring you Abraham,
who will sit by your tree
and dispense dates
and the flat bread of hospitality,
as in ancient days.

So plant it now, firmly,
water it well,
whether or not there is a Messiah
today or tomorrow.

Now I understand why the mystics came here:
To settle questions that caused
a great trembling for their generation
(and our generation, and others to come.)
It is the nights,
spread like a midnight blue comforter
throughout the Galilee,
stretched at your feet.
It is the endless display of stars,
and a mid-month moon, and orchestrated sounds
full of mysteries.
The mountains are lush with patterns.
The sea, at a distance, near dusk,
is the color of primeval tzitzis.
Here, on the hill, the world is a veil
of lyrics, stunning your senses;
upper and lower spheres merge at every glance.
Four hundred years ago
they made note of secrets in secret language,
and laws, and walked through the fields
to greet the Sabbath Bride,
so real they circled her in dance.
Now they are painters.
The touch of brushes
makes new fires to enchant us.
Here, too, are the graves
of the Ma'alot children.
Surely, when the footsteps of the Messiah
will be heard in the Land,
the resurrection of the dead
will begin here.
Strolling the summer hillsides,
I see a great rebirth is at hand.

At the grave of David Ben Gurion:

BEN GURION'S GRAVE AT SDEH BOKER OVERLOOKING THE WASTELAND

It's the battle of the century,
the Jews against the sand and rocks.
Little Davids against the Earth Goliath.
Their best gardens are still
gaps of grass and bushes
bounded by the brown soil,
fit, if left alone,
mostly for lizards and desert monsters.

This plot is the pioneer's monument.
The Old Man, lying in his bones,
still directs the sprinklers even in death.
No obstreperous sand is going to stop dreams
from becoming salads and glorious bowls of fruit.
His fingers push them out of bed before dawn,
and,
as they strap on their sandals,
he reads them quotes from Herzl.
"One more dunam of peppers today, Chaim.
One more patch of tomatoes."
That is the stuff of Jewish dreams
dreamed in the haze
of a hundred-degree noon.
That is the vision of a dead old man.

CLIMBING MT. SINAI

There are four kinds of Jews who climb Mt. Sinai:

The religious, though they suspect that the true meeting place of God and the Jews is on some other peak.

Those who go because everyone is doing it. They go in groups and enjoy the desolate view, and speak of the vigors of the ascent. How their legs ache and lungs heave.

The Lovers of the Land, who find this to be one more piece of earth not yet explored, and therefore in no sense real, until they themselves have explored it.

And those who have no particular reason. Of these, some are caught by surprise, and find themselves weeping in the presence of new silences. Others come down unaware of any change, though, as they tell their friends of it in Tel Aviv, Melbourne, Chicago, they notice a certain shift of emphasis in their voice, a new vocabulary. They may journey to Fuji and Nepal and even Mt. Suribachi, but, somehow, in their descent, they will wonder why mountains in general do nothing for them anymore.

A year ago I joined the surge of Jews to the wilderness. Word was out that we would soon give it back to Egypt, and we could never be certain when and how we would return. As I review my thoughts on the climb, I can no longer see which category applied to me, though I sense now that the plague of so many Jews of my generation — ambivalence — has dulled the grandeur that could have been mine.

These are a recollection of my thoughts:

Once at the top, I wondered whether or not I should remove my shoes, and whether there might be a unique blessing for the moment. My friend and I had packed food, but I was hesitant to eat on what might be sacred ground. But I ate. Because I was hungry.

Up there, quiet became the topic of conversation. How does a human being live with silence? How do we adjust to it when it thrusts itself so forcefully into our lives? How long will it take to feel at peace with it, if ever? I feared that it would come to haunt and terrify me, tearing at my complacencies, the comfortable feeling of noise and chatter. I was afraid the silence would urge me to new decisions, which I did not want.

I felt no exuberance, no mantic visions in the offing. I sank, for a moment, into brooding contemplation about nothing in particular, though the texture of that mood still hurts, so heavy it was weighing on my thoughts. Then I turned angry. Surely, I thought, surely here I would be graced with a minute's prophecy. At that moment, perhaps because the wind was so strong and my feet shaky, I sensed how close life and death were to each other. I know now they are not years apart, but juxtaposed, touching.

Moses had been up here with God, and I was afraid to be alone. I felt washed empty of faith — here at the place where it should have burst out into warmth, comfort. With horror I considered the possibility that — through the sum-acts of my life, the opportunities for answering a voice I had missed — that here, even here, I would feel no intimacy.

The wind was beating against my ears, but I could not make sense of

the sounds. The more I tried to understand the whispers, the more angry I became at myself, realizing I was no longer worthy of the meaning. I could no longer differentiate between the still small voice Elijah heard and the shriek of banshees I had imagined in my childhood.

Preparing for Shabbat down at the base, I felt no great need to sing Kiddush any louder than usual. The words "a reminder of Creation" and "a remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt" did not seem any more powerful than the week before in New York.

You would have thought — I would have thought — after the flight down from Beer Sheva when I had surveyed the great, empty distances of the wilderness, that some change would have happened. It is like the last few Yom Kippurs: going to shul with a hope that I, like Franz Rosenzweig, would find a thundering chance at a new life. The fasts would end, though, and I would pinch my arm to see if it was the same me. I would mutter in disappointment, "Yes, so it is." So, too, now descending the steps of the plane back in Tel Aviv — nothing has changed, except that I have a new quantity of words at my disposal with which to speak of failure and frustration.

I should have known at the beginning of the climb. At the base, before dawn, I had thought like a mere geologist how the Earth Itself forms mountains, when I should have considered the wonders of God, the Master Creator. I had even admitted to myself, with a crushing cynicism how, even if I see no great metamorphosis, at least I will work out a half-dozen good poems from the climb.

And there was the other issue — the final one. I had been to Auschwitz seven years before. I had told myself that it was necessary to go to Sinai, because. . . . But I don't think I will ever understand that "because".

Who am I, pintele yid that I am, one small Jew, to dare to make connections?

While preparing for the Messiah:

MASHIACHTZEIT OR DAVIDSON FROM EGGED*

Right while I was sitting on the balcony
watching the city wake itself
a jag cut in the dirty sky
over the Pentagon complex
and a Golden Hand holding a Glittering Dishrag
began scrubbing the Heavens
until they sparkled
like the glasses in an Ivory commercial.
The glare was tremendous
and traffic stopped for a moment
so the drivers could adjust their eyes.
The hearts of many hardened people
unwound so easily
some began to whistle
and everyone felt Just Good
all over.
In the meanwhile
the Hand withdrew
and disappeared into the sawed-out
piece of sky
and a jumbling confused sound
came from behind the Cheerblue screen
as the people below
paused in confusion.
Then the Hand emerged again
holding a White Bus
and a Well-Dressed Gentleman.
The Fingers placed them
on Independence Avenue
near George's Monument
and the city-folks
began to converge
on this one point.

**My good friend, Rabbi Jonathan Porath, explained to me the little-known tradition that, when the Messiah comes, all the Jews living outside of Israel will be picked up in a wondrous Egged Israeli bus and taken to Jerusalem to enjoy the Messianic Times. This poem is a vision of that Great Day.*

I followed
though the crowds were immense
and in a chilly frenzy
reminiscent of a Tel Aviv soccer mob.
Slowly
slowly
I worked my way downtown
and stood in line
until I was close enough to see
it really was
the J-18
for Yerushalayim.
I took the 40 shekels
from my pocket
smiled at the driver
as I boarded
then took a seat
next to my brother
waiting now only
for the Man
to let out the clutch
and begin the Last Run.

GLOSSARY

(H = Hebrew,
Y = Yiddish)

Alef, Zayin, Mem, Shin, Tav (H): Letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Bris-Brit (H): Circumcision.

Chalutzim (H): Pioneers in Israel, specifically in the early days of settlement in the late 19th-early 20th centuries.

Chassid, Chossid (H): A follower of the Baal Shem Tov in the 18th Century.

Chassidim are known for their sense of joy and ecstasy, particularly manifested in prayer, song, and dance.

Chuppah (H): The wedding canopy.

Eged (H): The major Israeli bus company.

Eretz Yisrael (H): The Land of Israel.

Hora (H): Israeli folk dance.

JNF: The Jewish National Fund, an organization for the reclamation of the land of Israel. JNF has planted over 150,000,000 trees since its inception.

Kelev (H): A dog.

Kittel (Y): Simple white robe worn by Jews on Yom Kippur, Passover and by Jews at their wedding.

Kol Yisrael (H): The Israel Broadcasting Company.

Lod (H): Suburb of Tel Aviv where Ben Gurion airport is located.

Ma'alot (H): Town in northern Israel where a PLO terrorist massacre of schoolchildren took place in 1974.

Mashiach (H): The Messiah.

Mashiachtzeit (Y): The time of a coming of the Messiah.

Mazal (H): Luck.

Modeh Ani (H): Literally "I thank You." Opening words of a morning prayer that continues, "... O living King, Who has returned my soul to me most graciously and faithfully."

Tallis (H, plural: Tallaysim): A prayershawl, four-cornered cloth with specially-tied fringes worn during morning prayers.

Tfillin (H): A set of two leather straps with boxes attached, containing certain portions of the Torah, worn by Jews on their arms and foreheads during morning prayers.

Tzaddik (H, plus: Tzaddikim): A righteous person.

Tzedakah (H): The Jewish mode of charity, from the root TzDK, meaning "justice".

Yeshiva (H): School of Torah study.

Yohrtzeit (Y, var.: Yahrtzeit): Anniversary of someone's death.

IMPRESSIONS OF ISRAEL

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BEFORE OUR VERY EYES

Readings for a Journey Through Israel

"When you have reached the Land and you begin to climb the hills leading to Jerusalem, reach for Danny Siegel's latest collection and read a poem or two. In language both old and new, Danny puts into words what you feel in your heart. Whether you are part of a Synagogue tour, a UJA National Mission, a teen-age group, there is something in this book for you, words which capture the eternity of the moment."

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Director, UJA Rabbinic Cabinet

Danny Siegel's poems are widely read for private enjoyment and have been introduced into life-important occasions throughout North America. . . weddings, baby-namings, graduations, religious services. Widely acclaimed, frequently quoted, his poetry ranges from high lyricism to humor to thought-provoking verse.

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