

## HOLD ON TO THE SUN

Some of the old neighborhoods of Jerusalem give me rather a strange feeling as I pass through them, as if they existed only for as long as I traverse them, springing up mysteriously from somewhere or other, my own imagination, perhaps, or even memories predating my birth, to stand there before I enter. Quickly the laundry is hung out on the long balconies, and children in black caftans come out to resume their games. The silence that always prevails after I pass has led me to the peculiar conclusion that behind my back, alley by alley, the neighborhood vanishes. This, too, is the reason for the habit which I have formed of never turning my head, and never looking back at these places.

For years I have refrained from expressing this feeling, even to myself, and when it sometimes awoke in me, even after I had emerged from these neighborhoods into other streets, I would reject it as firmly as a man dismissing the legends of some distant land and time. What finally led me to spend days on end examining it—without, however,

solving the riddle—was the following incident, which did not, apparently, happen by chance nor was it by chance that it happened where it did happen.

At the time I was busy working on my study of the history and sources of Jewish liturgy, comparing ancient versions of the daily evening prayer. I was vaguely aware of the existence of another old Prayer Book, which I had grounds to believe might contain, if not exactly a different version, at least a rare interpretation of the evening prayer and the time appointed for its recitation. The reference was hastily jotted down on an old index card, dating to a period before I undertook my study, which accounts for the slipshod nature of the notes. I may have copied them inaccurately from a manuscript, or taken them down during one of the lectures given by my late teacher who passed away many years ago.

According to my notes, this interpretation of the evening prayer refers to the light of the moon as it was before it was shrunk, and instructs believers to say the prayer with special rejoicing, “You should follow the sun in its sinking and the moon in its rising,” and say with devout intent: “With wisdom Thou openeth the gates of the heavens, and with understanding Thou altereth the seasons.” And when you say, “Thus hast Thou created day and night,” you should concentrate intently on the words ‘Day’ and ‘Night,’ and attach all your joy to *layla*, Night, which is a resorting of the Hebrew letters of *yahal*—“He will illuminate”—and

the extra letter “L.” And you should attach your joy chiefly to that “L” of layla, which has the numerical value of thirty and stands for the darkness in the moon on the thirtieth day of the lunar month. The above is the secret of the impregnation of darkness by yahal, which is the light of the Seven Days of Creation, the Everlasting Light.

And the interpretation states furthermore that a believer should perform this deed in great secrecy, so that nothing at all of it be divulged. And he should exert himself greatly in its performance, so that he gain the upper hand over others who conspire falsely and delay the opening of the gates of Heaven. Such ones give rise to dissension between the sun and the moon and seek in their sin to stop the seasons in their appointed rounds and to bring, God forbid, a different light into the world.

And at the end of these notes I found, to my great astonishment, the following: There are some who say that a believer should start right now combining the morning, afternoon, and evening prayers. As if the words of the Prophet had already come to be, “The sun shall be no more thy light by day, neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: But the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light.” And I do not know whether these words actually figured in the old Prayer Book or were no more than a supposition on the part of my late teacher, or perhaps even my own part in those distant days.

For a long time I postponed going into the matter, but as I approached the conclusion of my study I realized that I would betray the truth if I failed to track down that Prayer Book and quote the relevant passages. My search in the National Library came to naught. Neither there, nor among the microfilmed manuscripts did I find any trace of it. Nor did I succeed in eliciting from the few friends of my university days any further details regarding my teacher's lectures on the subject of "Interpretations of the Evening Prayer." In the end, I came to believe that I had not only made a mistake in copying down the title of the Prayer Book, its date of publication, and the place where it was printed, but that the whole business was no more than barren speculation which I had once entertained . . .

Nevertheless, one day after completing my daily quota of writing, I set out to search for the missing Prayer Book in the book shops of the city's old neighborhoods. I went from shop to shop and to my repeated questions the booksellers replied—whether out of laziness, resentment, or because they were too busy to be bothered—that they did not know if they had it in their stock. They went on to recommend, however, that I look for myself since it was always possible that an old, forgotten volume might turn up somewhere in the shop. In this way I searched through many a dark backroom, where books in black bindings climbed to the ceiling, without finding what I was looking for.

I walked on, down narrow alleys and under stone arch-

ways, distracted both by the vertigo which always grips me when I spend hours reading the titles of rows of books upside down—climbing up and down the ladders does not improve matters—and by my suspicion that all my efforts were in vain. In the meantime it grew late, and as always in these old neighborhoods, I was filled with anxiety lest I should not be able to find my way out. As I was trying to decide whether to continue my search or whether it might not be wiser to stop now and attempt to retrace my steps, I saw, near the place where I was standing, a gap between two houses leading to a narrow passage. A shaft of light from the sinking sun penetrated the entrance, and but for the fact that it was thus illuminated, I have little doubt I would not even have noticed it, let alone entered.

To my surprise the passage led to a rather long quadrangle, lined on both sides by one or two storied buildings, all of whose entrances, both upstairs and down, housed little shops and market stalls. Because of the large space opening up between the houses, a broad, white band of sky was suddenly revealed. At its edge, above the tin roofs of the balconies, the moon was already hanging, waiting lightless like a pale assassin for its appointed time.

I had almost given up hope of finding the Prayer Book. And it was only a sense of duty which impelled me to go into the shops selling secondhand articles and ritual artifacts to inquire if by any chance such and such a Prayer Book, printed at such and such a date, in such and such a place,

had not remained in their stock from times gone by. Finally, however I reached a cul-de-sac, with a synagogue wall on one side and various dilapidated objects, stools, cupboards, and sky-blue painted prayer stands on the other. At its bottom stood a little shop selling secondhand books, old brochures, and postcards with engravings of landscapes.

I could not see the bookseller and assumed that he must be busy arranging shelves in the inner rooms, which to judge by the confusion reigning in the front of the shop must have been totally chaotic. While I waited for him, I was happy to discover, after my wearisome search, the shop's engraved postcards and illustrated brochures. I leafed absentmindedly through some of them which I took from a shelf in one of the corners.

(When I think now, it is clear to me that I stood in precisely that corner only because the faint light entering from the cul-de-sac fell there, while the rest of the shop, apart from this narrow rectangle of light, was already in semi-darkness.)

I must confess that at first the album in question did not attract my attention. I was in the middle of perusing an illustrated pamphlet about road construction in the Ottoman Empire, when the gleaming spine of one of the books caught my eye. When I took it down, I saw that its cover, which must have been magnificent in its time, was made of red paper, and it was apparently the glistening of this red color which had attracted me.

It was an album of exquisitely beautiful photographs of landscapes at sunset. Although the old photographs had already faded, an almost dazzling light still emanated from them. It was obviously an artist's eye which had perceived and immortalized these sights. There was no word of explanation accompanying the pictures, yet at the same time it seemed to me, as I paged through them, that these many and varied sunsets were connected by some deliberate intention which would surely be revealed at the end.

The photographs at the end of the book showed, over and over again, with a particular kind of insistence, the same mountain looming out of a dense tangle of southern vegetation, like an oblong fruit, or the protruding breast of an island maiden, with the sea stretching flat and solid behind it. But it was only after looking at a number of pictures of this oblong mountain that I realized what it was that had aroused my astonishment: although all the surrounding landscape was covered by a luxuriant growth of palms, banana plants, and gigantic ferns of a species unfamiliar to me, the mountain itself was unnaturally bald, so that the light streaming from the low sun onto its slopes seemed brighter than ever.

The last photograph showed the same mountain again, with no change whatsoever. The album was finished, and I was left with the feeling that I still did not possess the key which was to have been revealed at the end. I went on paging disappointedly through the index of sites where the photographs had been taken, and as I glanced through it, a

number of pages which had been stuck into the index (and which apparently had been printed separately, since neither the paper nor the print resembled those of the rest of the album), slipped into my hands. As soon as I saw the title on top of the first page: "From the estate of P., Artist-Photographer," I began eagerly reading in the fading daylight which still illuminated the corner where I was standing what follows here:

"I was engaged upon the final preparation for publishing the album. I had already sent the material to the printers to make the impressions, and all that now remained was the last photograph, upon whose completion everything—yes, everything—depended. I was about to embark upon my seventh and last voyage to the island of G. in South Asia, and this time I was confident that I would be able to take the picture.

"In the meantime my affairs brought me to the little town of M. in the Midwest, where I was invited to a garden party on the lake. I was excited at the thought of my approaching journey, and since I knew none of the other guests, and my host was preoccupied by his duties, I seated myself on the lawn facing the lake and abandoned myself to my reflections. As I gazed at the white sailing boats, I busied myself with making a mental list of the things I'd still have to take care of when I stopped over in the city to pick up the filter I'd specially built for the last photograph.



“While I was enjoying the respite from the noisy party, someone suddenly bumped into me. It was a young man of about thirty in a state of such extreme agitation that he lost his balance and almost spilled the contents of the plate on me. I expected him to apologize and continue on his way, instead of which, to my astonishment, he addressed me by my name which he kept repeating incredulously, even after I’d more than once affirmed that I was indeed he, and that my peculiar profession was, indeed, that of photographer. Without so much as a by your leave, the young man sat down next to me, seized hold of my hand as if to prevent me from getting up, and speaking rapidly, with hardly a pause for breath, embarked upon the following story:

‘At that time, I was busy completing my studies on the West Coast, and all my hopes were pinned on the future. My wife, A., encouraged me during those long nights of burning the midnight oil and gladdened my heart with the happy details she kept adding to our castles in the air. One day we were strolling through the old quarter of the city, when we chanced upon a shop selling books and *objets d’art*, where a selection of your photographs of sunsets was exhibited.’

(When I heard this, my annoyance at the young intruder instantly melted away, and the old fears suddenly seized hold of me, the fears which had haunted me ever since I’d been tempted by my publisher to agree to holding an exhibition, even before the last picture was ready. However, I skillfully disguised this violent reaction, and the young man, who’d

noticed nothing, continued his story with the same agitation as before and without letting go of my hand.)

'A. and I had always loved the sunset, even more ardently since becoming acquainted with its hues in that city on the coast. But your photographs enchanted us anew, and when we discovered among them a picture of our favorite view, from the hills opposite the shore, we decided in our enthusiasm that I would take more time off from my studies and that leaving the exhibition, we would set out immediately for the hills. The sunset that evening was hazy, with the sun descending through a vaporous sky. But thanks to your picture, the view held us spellbound. A. was particularly affected by the sight, and she declared, with a firmness uncharacteristic of her that we would have to come back to see the sunset there on the longest day of the year.

'Since I was completely absorbed during those spring months in preparing my final exams, I paid no attention to the changes in the weather and failed to see to it that A. was properly dressed when she left the house. For ever since that day she'd been overcome by restlessness, and she'd spend hours on end walking, in order to quiet herself and refrain from disturbing me. And thus, when she was out walking one afternoon, she caught a chill and fell ill.

'I divided my days between my books and the preparation of her medicines and shared in the astonishment of the doctors at the strange stubbornness with which the illness took hold of her. In the middle of June she was still bed-

ridden, but this didn't stop her from reminding me of our decision to go out to the hills at sunset on the longest day of the year. When her fever rose, she'd become delirious and say strange things about *holding on to the sun*, which at the time I thought was a hallucination. When the longest day came, none of my pleas or the doctors' orders availed, and she insisted on going out to the hills facing the ocean.

'When we set out, she was more excited than I'd ever seen her, with the flush on her cheeks conspicuous against the pallor of her face. We stood on the hills and watched the great ball of light sinking slowly toward the horizon. I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary which might distinguish this sunset from the sunset on any other evening, although, as always, I marveled at the shades of purple, red, and yellow which suffused the sea and the sky. But A. was beside herself, and didn't take her eyes off the sun suspended in the sky. So frail was she after her prolonged illness, that the early summer wind pierced her like a freezing gale, and her whole body trembled. She held my hand with all her might. I can still feel the terrible force with which her slender fingers gripped me!

'At first she was ecstatic, but from the moment the sun touched the water line, her face fell. And with the same speed of the sun disappearing behind the horizon, A. darkened right before my eyes, and her fingers weakened their grip on my hand.

'I got her home as quickly as I could, and when I put

her to bed she kept repeating, “We came too late.” Once she even mentioned your name, angrily, and said that you’d understand. I called the doctors as soon as we got home, but by the time they arrived it was already over.

‘Ever since A.’s death, I’ve gone back to that hill on the longest day of every year, and I always stand there in the same confusion. I also went back to the old quarter, but I couldn’t find your photographs, and to tell the truth, I was no longer able to locate the shop where we first saw them. From the few people who were able to tell me something about you, I learnt that you’d gone to South Asia on a photography expedition, and hadn’t been back to our part of the world for several years. Nevertheless, my pain at the death of A. had always been connected with a sense of obligation to tell you about the circumstances of her dying. I felt that until I did so I would not have fulfilled her wish, even though she never expressed it explicitly.’

“The young man was so moved by his tale that he didn’t notice what I was going through, and by the time he looked at me, I’d already succeeded in controlling my emotions and in concealing them from him. I contended that I didn’t understand what he was talking about, and said I was sorry with all my heart (which was quite true) for the death of A., his wife, although I hadn’t had the honor of making her acquaintance. A silence fell, and both of us looked at the lake, where the sun was then sinking behind the ribbon of

mist encircling the horizon and the spots of light on the boats' sails were suddenly blotted out. After a prolonged moment of oppressive silence, the young man stood up and was swallowed up among the guests.

"I suffered pangs of conscience for the way I'd treated the young man, but I had had no choice. Even now, who knows what dire consequences might yet ensue from the old, newly awakened fears; who knows if it will still be possible to amend what his story has wrought.

"As I write these lines, our ship has already sailed past the coasts of Ceylon and Java, and in three days time it will let me off at the only port on the island of G . . . The album is already at the printers, all that is missing is the last photograph, in order . . . (and perhaps I'd better not write anything explicit down yet). On my previous six trips I've succeeded in establishing close ties with the people of the K. tribe, and this time I—the first foreigner—will take part in their endeavor. Yes, ever since I discovered their project on my first trip, a change has taken place in my whole attitude toward what I had up to then been doing unconsciously—thinking that it was only the beauty of the scenery which compelled me to photograph the sunset. Ever since then, I've been waiting with them, and preparing myself with the means at my disposal for the appointed day.

"Time and time again I've conjured up the ceremony from the stories I've heard, and each time I'm filled with new admiration for the people of the tribe of K. and their

ancient belief. How they learned to determine with their miraculous methods of measuring the longest day of the year, despite the minimal time changes in their region. How once in a generation—only thus could they persist in their efforts without being utterly annihilated—all the members of the tribe, from the age of puberty on, go up to the mountain before dawn. Oh, how well I know that ascending path, the view it affords of the South Sea, the wind which blows on its peak. How well I know the jealousy with which the tribe has guarded those slopes all these years, lest any alien stalk take root upon them and prevent the sun from holding on to the mountain.

“They say the excitement of the members of the tribe on that day is so great that the drumming and singing continue without a break from dawn. And my own humble experience can testify that the very thought of the light not stopping, the spark of a belief in the sun not setting, is enough for boundless joy to explode. All morning long the tribesmen devote themselves to impregnating the women with the souls of light, and at noon the women walk about in the warm breeze with bodies satiated as suns, while the men follow them drunk with hope, as if this longest day were already the beginning of an endless dawn.

“When the afternoon arrives, the people of the tribe stand on the top of the mountain, which shines like a round belly, and follow the movement of the sun as it begins to go down to the sea. When the sun stands still, not far from

the horizon at the edge of the ocean, they lift up their arms toward it and hold it with all their might. They pull it like a lever toward its reflection on the mountain, and add all their power to its own efforts to rise, full and strong, to the zenith of the sky, from where it will never move again.

“Their efforts then are so awesome, that when the sun slips from their grasp and sinks beneath the sea, they collapse like flies, too weak to hang onto the slippery slopes in order to break their downward slide. And thus, immediately after sunset on the longest day of the year, once in every generation, the people of the tribe are dashed to pieces against the dense vegetation at the bottom of the mountain.

“There is no need to dwell here on the way in which I’ve been waiting with them, for the past seven years, for the month of June in the year 192 . . . Six times I’ve returned to the mountain on that particular day. I’ve checked whatever lies within my power to check. And all, I may say, is now ready.

“There are two days to go before we anchor at the island of G., and another five before the next effort. In the meantime I spend my days on the deck, watching the Asian sailors who speak in their own tongues and leave me alone with my thoughts. And in the evening I wage lengthy campaigns of card games against the Dutch captain. Yet I cannot silence the old fears. What the young man told me about the death of his wife, A., in the city on the coast, confirmed in a most terrible way my apprehensions about the premature exhi-

bition of my photographs. Who knows if A. was the only one affected. And who can tell what threat now hangs over the K. tribe, once their endeavors were made public. Ah, my photographer's hubris, my insolent insistence on fixing with an iron eye that which seeks to sink in secrecy . . .

“Two days are left in which to live in hope, two more days until I share the prayers of the admired people of the K. tribe . . .”

I returned the interrupted text to its place between the pages of the index, and began leafing once more in great agitation through the photographs, in all of which the disk of the setting sun shone through the dimness of age. I began, my heart pounding, turning the pages rapidly in order to get another look at that mountain rising in its fullness to face the sea, when I thought I heard the sound of footsteps in the inner room. Only then did I become conscious of the darkening shop, which I had completely forgotten as I heatedly devoured the photographer's words. And I quickly put the album down on the wooden stand. Its cover glowed in the sparse light and was reflected like a dull shadow of rubies on the wooden boxes containing the engraved post-cards. Once more I was drawn to its radiance and I was just about to stretch out my hand to pick it up again, when the book seller appeared in the dark doorway, thin and bearded, with his black hat almost covering his face. Hardly aware of



what I was doing, I tried to hide the album but the man stopped me with a gesture of his hand, and asked me what I wanted.

I almost replied—to hold on to the sun, but controlled myself immediately and asked for the old Prayer Book.

“What do you need that book for?” the bookseller asked angrily.

I mumbled something about the research I had been conducting for years, but he cut me short and announced firmly, “You have no need of that book!”

“You’re right, sir,” I agreed in order to appease him, and with my heart beating, I inquired, “Is the gentleman himself familiar with the Prayer Book in question?”

Never before had I yearned so hungrily to read that marvelous interpretation of the evening prayer, never before had I believed so fervently in the possibility of penetrating its secret intentions, of grasping the meaning of the Everlasting Light. And from a vast distance, from beneath layers which seemed to me to have been deadened a long time ago, at that moment I felt a fierce excitement, perhaps hope awakening in me and piercing me like a burning ember. Me, the scholar of liturgical sources, who knew nothing all these years but notes and old manuscripts.

Making no attempt to conceal his hostility, the bookseller repeated, “You have no need of that book!”

“But are you familiar with it, sir, do you have it in your shop?”

“You have nothing to look for here!” he almost shouted. “We’ve been closed for hours.”

With one step he crossed the dark, paper-filled room and slammed the iron grill down over the door through which I’d entered. Then he returned, removed the album from the wooden stand, pushed it back hastily onto its place on the shelf, and pointed to the door to the inner room, “Through here, through here,” he said, hitting me roughly on the back to hurry me up, and disappearing through the dark doorway.

In the inner room, too, the stacks of books reached to the ceiling, and here, too, old brochures were scattered over high wooden stands.

“Through here, through here,” the bookseller scoldingly indicated the back door, and this time, too, he hurried through it before me.

In this way we passed through a number of inner rooms without stopping in any of them, all of whose walls were covered with rows and rows of black books, tightly crammed together. Finally we crossed a little paved courtyard at the far end of which the bookseller impatiently opened an iron gate.

Before I had time to ask the bookseller where we were and how to find my way out of the neighborhood, I heard the gate barred behind me. The long square on whose edge I was standing was already almost completely dark, and the full moon commanded it like a petrified monarch. In the

middle of the square a lamp suspended from a high wooden post cast a small circle of light around it. As I stood there wondering which direction to take, a few children in black caftans ran past me tugging a black cloth canopy, which flapped in heavy folds behind their heads. They rushed toward the lamp without noticing me as they ran.

I began walking, without turning my head to look back at the gate from which I had emerged. A man in a broad-brimmed hat passed me, his head bowed. I hurried after him to the far end of the square, where he disappeared into the depths of a dark alley. For some time I strayed through unfamiliar passageways and empty courtyards, until suddenly, without any change in the silence shrouding the houses, I found myself outside the neighborhood. A bus standing in the road started its engine. I hurried to climb on before it moved off, and was carried away by its swaying motion.

Once, and only once, I returned to that old neighborhood and tried to retrace the steps which had led me to the shop selling old books and engraved postcards. Despite all my efforts, I could not find the narrow, paved passage leading to the marketstalls, nor the stairs of the alley which led to the quadrangle. For hours I wandered through the alleys, but all in vain. A number of times I imagined that I was nearing my destination, only to realize my mistake. But at the bottom of my heart I was not in the least surprised at my failure to find what I was looking for. For I had always

been prone to the peculiar sensation that these old neighborhoods were nothing but figments of my imagination, memories which materialized only when I passed through them and then vanished behind my back.

In the deep night, darkness descended fully. And when I stood outside the neighborhood, I groped my way past the black hills of a region where I had never been before. I did not even know the number of the bus that took me through the labyrinth of crooked roads back to the street where I live.

In the days that followed, days which I spent at the printers correcting and recorrecting the proofs of my study, I felt like a guilty man whose days were numbered. I concluded the final preparations for the publication of my book with a heavy heart, and without saying a word to anyone about what was distressing my soul. Even in the book's preface, I did not mention the name of the old Prayer Book, nor the existence of another, different interpretation of the meaning of the evening prayer.

Many years have passed since then. My book came out long ago and its pages are bound and gray. The living memory has grown increasingly dimmer, and with it that unexpected hope, like a passionate dream, which I have never dared to call by its name. Only this tale is left to me. Buried among my notes.