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A Place Nowhere

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Golem

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Hostage

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The Researcher

The translation has been made with the support of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports / Hellenic Foundation for Culture (HFC) within the framework of the GreekLit Sample Translation Grant Programme. This excerpt is from the novel *The Researcher*, originally published in Greek by Patakis Publishers in November 2020 and awarded the prize for best novel by the highly respected literary magazine *O Anagnostis* (The Reader).

The Washerwoman's Daughter

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Where Were You When Darkness Fell

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Foreword

By Dr. Josh Lambert

You could easily read the story of the Tower of Babel as telling us that multilingualism is a bad thing: after all, the linguistically unified people who challenge God in that story are punished by having their speech “confounded,” mixed-up. But I prefer to think about this a little differently, focusing not on the punishment but on why this story gets told, and the pride of place it receives, in the eleventh chapter of *Bereshit* (Genesis). Why would whoever put the Torah together consider it necessary to explain multilingualism, right up there with the account that book gives of the origins of the sky and the sea, of animals and people?

The answer, I suspect, is that the authors of the Torah knew that multilingualism was as much a part of their world as light and dark, heavens and earth. They believed that every reader of the Torah, in their time and after, would live in a multilingual situation, and just as kids would inevitably ask where the sky comes from, they would also wonder about the linguistic profusion around them. The authors of the Torah turned out to be prescient on that topic: multilingualism has been a major facet of Jews’ experiences throughout history. Even more so, it has been fundamental to the development of Jewish literature.

That’s why I’m grateful for Nora Gold’s *18: Jewish Stories Translated from 18 Languages*. This anthology presents fascinating modern and contemporary Jewish literature translated from Russian, Ladino, Portuguese, Turkish, Danish, Yiddish, Hebrew, Greek, Romanian, French, Spanish, Hungarian, Italian, Croatian, Czech, German, Albanian, and Polish. In a few cases, the authors are already well-known in English—including the Nobel Prize laureates S. Y. Agnon and Elie Wiesel, and the incomparable Russian story writer, Isaac Babel—but many of the authors gathered here came as news to me. In a few cases they were the first Jewish writers writing in a particular language I had *ever* read, despite decades of reading Jewish literature voraciously. In fact, I’d venture to say that rarely in Jewish literary history has such a linguistically

wide net been cast. The resulting anthology matters both because of the literature it introduces and because of the editorial model it offers.

The creation of such an anthology was no small feat. It's difficult enough to read through magazines and journals and pick out excellent writing in a language in which one is fluent, but to do so in languages one doesn't read or speak is very challenging. Gold has succeeded by planting a flag with her journal *Jewish Fiction .net*, where all the stories in this book were originally published. For over a decade, it has been one of the only places on the internet one can go to reliably encounter contemporary Jewish literature in translation. People around the world, discovering *Jewish Fiction .net* and its mission, seek Gold out, while she also searches actively for works translated from languages she's never published before.

The 18 stories in this book reflect a wide range of styles and themes, as one would expect, given the diversity of places and time periods in which they were written, as well as the idiosyncrasies of individual authors. That variety is entirely the point here. As Gold rightly says in her introduction, the stories in this anthology cannot be understood as representative of languages or communities. To get a real feeling for modern and contemporary Hungarian-Jewish or Croatian-Jewish literature, you would need to read quite a bit more than one translated story in one collection.

For that reason, the most urgent reaction that I had, reading through these stories, was to feel how crucial it is that Gold and her colleagues acquire the support they need, and the enthusiastic readership, to go on and continue their work. There's always more translation to be done from the languages covered here, and surely there are also modern or contemporary Jewish short stories we haven't read yet in Arabic, Persian, Mandarin, Swedish, and Hindi, let alone in other Jewish languages like Juhuri and Judeo-Arabic. Before too long, we can hope, we'll see stories from those languages in *Jewish Fiction .net*, and in another book like this one.

In the meantime, I hope you will enjoy the treasures prepared and gathered for you in this collection. You will, without a doubt, encounter Jewish voices you've never heard before, and expand your vision of what Jewish literature can be and where it can come from.

Josh Lambert is the Sophia Moses Robison Associate Professor of Jewish Studies and English, and director of Jewish Studies, at Wellesley College.

Introduction

By Dr. Nora Gold

This book owes its existence in part to an arrogant, ignorant, American Jewish man, a writer, who told a group of Jewish authors from around the world (all writing in languages other than English) that at that time there was no Jewish fiction of any significance being written anywhere other than in the United States (and perhaps in Israel, where there were one or two writers worth reading). This happened twelve years ago in Jerusalem, during a coffee break at an international conference of Jewish writers, and the listeners to this comment were some of the most illustrious writers of Jewish fiction in their own languages and countries. By this point, I had begun *Jewish Fiction .net*, the online literary journal, which was then, and still is, the only English-language journal, either print or online, devoted exclusively to Jewish fiction. Envisioned from the outset as an international, multilingual journal, *Jewish Fiction .net* was soon to publish the work of some of the writers present at this incident: stories or novel excerpts translated into English that had never before been published in English. These eminent writers listened politely while they were insulted by their colleague. I was appalled by his obliviousness and rudeness.

Unfortunately, however, this man was, and is, not alone in his lack of awareness of the amazing Jewish fiction being written around the world. Generally speaking, when native English-speakers hear the phrase “Jewish fiction,” they think only of American Jewish fiction. Not of other English-language Jewish fiction, such as Canadian, British, Australian, or South African, and certainly not of fiction written in other languages. Some people may have read literature translated into English from Hebrew, Yiddish, or Judeo-Spanish (or Ladino, as it is usually called), but are unaware of most of what exists in Jewish fiction. This is especially regrettable since one of the unique features of Jewish fiction is its multilingualism. Because Jews have lived for two thousand years scattered among other nations, Jewish literature has been written in the languages of virtually every country where Jews have dwelled. Unlike other peoples that typically write in their own language (for instance, Italians

in Italian, the French in French, etc.), Jews have written their stories in dozens of languages. There are currently some specifically Jewish languages, for example Hebrew,¹ Yiddish, and Ladino, but the fiction written in these languages constitutes just part of the Jewish writing that exists globally.

One reason that so few people are aware of the extent of multilingual Jewish fiction is that only a small percentage of this treasure trove has been translated into English.² Furthermore, much of what has been translated is not easily accessible. Even with Google, it can be challenging for anyone other than scholars in this field to learn about, and locate, these works. Whether you, reading this now, are among those who have wondered about Jewish fiction written in other languages but did not know how to track it down, or never even knew that it existed, now it is available to you. In this anthology you'll find eighteen (*chai!*) brilliant works of Jewish fiction translated from Albanian, Croatian, Czech, Danish, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hungarian, Italian, Ladino, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Turkish, and Yiddish. Here you'll discover stories and authors you've never heard of before and will want to meet again.

This anthology is the first of its kind in twenty-five years. Two anthologies of multilingual Jewish fiction came out in 1998,³ and since then no others. This book, created to fill this lacuna, differs from the previous ones in three ways: it features significantly more languages, it contains only translations (no works originally written in English), and it is the first one to be conceptualized and structured by language.

This book is a natural outgrowth of the thirteen years—the bar mitzvah, if you will—of *Jewish Fiction .net*, the online literary journal that I founded in 2010 and have edited ever since. *Jewish Fiction .net*, which has readers in 140 countries, publishes first-rate Jewish fiction from around the world that was either written in English or translated into English, but never before

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- 1 The transliterated words in this anthology follow the Encyclopedia Judaica system for Hebrew and the YIVO one for Yiddish, with the exception of words currently included in the English lexicon.
 - 2 One laudable initiative to rectify this situation was the Contemporary Jewish Writing series: nine books published by University of Nebraska Press between 1998 and 2010.
 - 3 Marsha Lee Berkman and Elaine Marcus Starkman, eds. *Here I Am: Contemporary Jewish Stories From Around the World* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998); Ilan Stavans, ed., *The Oxford Book of Jewish Stories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

published in English. All the works included in this anthology appeared for the first time in English in *Jewish Fiction .net*.⁴ I started this journal because the publishing crisis triggered by the advent of digital publishing resulted in many fine writers, including Jewish ones, suddenly being unable to find places to publish their work. *Jewish Fiction .net*, a donor-supported journal that is free of charge, was founded to create a publishing space for this first-rate Jewish fiction that couldn't find a home.⁵ Alongside these works by emerging writers, *Jewish Fiction .net* has published stories or novel excerpts by some of the most eminent Jewish authors, including Elie Wiesel, Chava Rosenfarb, Aharon Appelfeld, Nava Semel, A. B. Yehoshua, and Steve Stern, to name just a few. *Jewish Fiction .net* publishes not only new stories and novel excerpts, but also classic works that have never before been published in English and new translations of classic works, for example stories by Shmuel Yosef Agnon, Isaac Babel, Dvora Baron, Eliya Karmona, Mendelev Mokher Seforim, and Lili Berger.

Among the jewels in the crown of *Jewish Fiction .net* are its translations. Out of the 575 works published so far in *Jewish Fiction .net*, nearly 30 percent have been translations from other languages. Discovering these translations from around the world⁶ and connecting with the fascinating, evolving field of translation⁷ has been one of the joys of publishing this journal—indeed, of

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- 4 Boris Dralyuk's translated excerpt from "Red Cavalry" was published for the first time in English in *Jewish Fiction .net*. Prior to this, other translators had translated "Red Cavalry" into English, but Dralyuk's was a new, original translation.
 - 5 I chose the name "Jewish Fiction .net" not only because this journal owned that web address (it also owned, and still owns, jewishfiction.com), but because the image of a net resonated with me and matched the goals I had for this journal. To act as a safety net positioned under high-wire writer-acrobats. And a net, like one that catches fish, so all these great stories wouldn't get lost.
 - 6 Discovering these translations usually occurs in one of two ways: either through a story arriving over the transom at *Jewish Fiction .net* or by an active search on my part for a translation in a specific language. In both cases, the relationship that has developed over the years between *Jewish Fiction .net* and an international network of translators, authors, and publishers often plays a part.
 - 7 As an example of the evolution of this field, translations were once perceived as "copies" of "original" creative works, but now they are recognized by many as creative works unto themselves, as new works of art (Yaakov Herskovitz, "The Origins of National Culture: Self Translation, Originals, and Split Authors," Webinar hosted by YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, October 25, 2022, Video, 10:32–11:34. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQINdqSYcVY>). Consistent with this, some translators are now demanding to have their names on the front covers of the books they translate ("Translators' Names

the four decades I've spent in the field of Jewish fiction as a writer, editor, and publisher. So it is a great pleasure to share the marvelous works in this anthology. The main purpose of this book is to showcase the rich multilingualism of Jewish fiction, and thus change the way people think about Jewish fiction and its parameters. By presenting in one volume a sampling of eighteen magnificent works, each originally written in a different language, this anthology offers readers the opportunity to experience the diversity that exists within Jewish fiction, as well as its common elements. It is also a useful resource for introducing non-Jewish readers to Jewish fiction, thereby facilitating the inclusion of Jewish fiction in conversations in the international literary community about translation and world literature.



Crouching at the heart of this book is a question: What is Jewish fiction? To some people, this question is merely a theoretical one; for me, running a literary journal devoted to publishing Jewish fiction, it is essential to our decision-making process. The question, What is Jewish fiction?, has been much written about,⁸ struggled with, reflected on, debated, and, in some cases, skirted.

Must Be on the Cover," Interview in the Frankfurt Buchmesse newsletter, Issue 1, January 2023. https://www.buchmesse.de/en/news/translators-names-must-be-cover?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=january).

- 8 For example: Victoria Aarons, Mark Shechner, Avinoam J. Patt, eds., *The New Diaspora: The Changing Landscape of American Jewish Fiction* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015); Marsha Lee Berkman and Elaine Marcus Starkman, eds. *Here I Am: Contemporary Jewish Stories From Around the World* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998); Melvin Jules Bukiet and David G. Roskies, ed., *Scribblers on the Roof: Contemporary American Jewish Fiction* (New York: Persea Books, 2006); Justin Cammy, Dara Horn, Alyssa Quint, and Rachel Rubinstein, eds., *Arguing the Modern Jewish Canon* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Leah Garrett, "The Kvetcher in the Rye: J. D. Salinger and Challenges to the Modern Jewish Canon," in *Arguing the Modern Jewish Canon*, ed. Justin Cammy et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 645–660; Ruth Gilbert, *Writing Jewish: Contemporary British-Jewish Literature* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan/Arts & Humanities Research Council, 2013); Dara Horn, "The Eicha Problem," in *Arguing the Modern Jewish Canon*, ed. Justin Cammy et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 687–700; Sheila E. Jelen, Michael P. Kramer, and L. Scott Lerner, eds., "Intersections and Boundaries in Modern Jewish Literary Study," in *Modern Jewish Literatures: Intersections and Boundaries*, ed. Sheila E. Jelen et al. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 1–23; Ray Keenoy, Mark Axelrod, and Saskia Brown, *The Babel Guide To Jewish Fiction* (London: Boulevard, in association with the European Jewish Publications Society, 1998); Adam Kirsch, *Who*

Out of all the definitions of Jewish fiction I have encountered over the years, the one I consider most comprehensive and persuasive is that of Ruth Wisse, presented in her book *The Modern Jewish Canon*.⁹ Wisse's definition, like any definition, inevitably has its limitations, some of which she herself acknowledges, such as her including in her proposed canon only works by Ashkenazi authors. Additional limitations of her perspective have been articulated by other scholars, as well, including contributors to the book *Arguing The Modern Jewish Canon* which was dedicated to Wisse herself.¹⁰ Still, I agree with her definition that Jewish literature is literature that is "centrally Jewish," a phrase

Wants To Be A Jewish Writer? (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); Josh Lambert, *American Jewish Fiction* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009); Josh Lambert, *The Literary Mafia: Jews, Publishing, and Postwar American Literature* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022); Julian Levinson, "Is There a Jewish Text in This Class?: Jewish Modernism in the Multicultural Academy," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 42, no. 1, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?cc=mqr;c=mqr;c=mqrarchive;idno=act2080.0042.122;view=text;rgn=main;xc=1;g=mqrq#end-of-header>; Vivian Liska and Thomas Nolden, *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Europe: A Guide* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008); Alan Mintz, "Knocking on Heaven's Gate: Hebrew Literature and Wisse's Canon," in *Arguing the Modern Jewish Canon*, ed. Justin Cammy et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 23–34; Dan Miron, *From Continuity To Contiguity: Toward A New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Cynthia Ozick, "America: Toward Yavneh," *Judaism* (Summer 1970), 264–282; Cynthia Ozick, *Art and Ardor* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983); Antony Polonsky and Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, eds., *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Poland: An Anthology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001); David G. Roskies, "Gimpel the Simple and on Reading from Right to Left," in *Arguing the Modern Jewish Canon*, ed. Justin Cammy et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 319–340; Derek Rubin, ed., *On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer* (New York: Schocken, 2005); Maxim Shrayer (ed.), *Voices of Jewish-Russian Literature: An anthology* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2018); Ted Solotaroff and Nessa Rapoport, eds., *The Schocken Book of Contemporary Jewish Fiction* (New York: Schocken, 1996), previously published as Ted Solotaroff and Nessa Rapoport, eds., *Writing Our Way Home: Contemporary Stories by American Jewish Writers*, New York: Schocken, 1992; Ilan Stavans, *Jewish Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Ilan Stavans, ed., *The Oxford Book of Jewish Stories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); David Stern, *The Anthology in Jewish Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Hana Wirth-Nesher, ed., *What Is Jewish Literature?* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994); Ruth Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon* (New York: The Free Press, 2000).

9 Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon*.

10 Cammy et al., *Arguing The Modern Jewish Canon*.

originally coined by Cynthia Ozick that Wisse borrows.¹¹ To Wisse, “centrally Jewish” means reflective in some way of Jewish experience, Jewish consciousness, or the Jewish condition. She offers as an example of Jewish experience a novel by Isaac Bashevis Singer describing a seventeenth-century Polish town in the grip of messianic fever that “plunges us into the Jewish condition.”¹² Her examples of “fiction [that] yokes us to a Jewish consciousness”¹³ are Isaac Babel’s *Red Cavalry* (an excerpt of which, in an original translation, is included in this anthology), and the writing of Shmuel Yosef Agnon (also represented in this anthology), where “all the layers of Jewish civilization and learning surface through quotations, allusions, and stylistic imitation in the richly intertextual Hebrew.”¹⁴ To Wisse, in a work of Jewish fiction, “the authors or characters know, and let the reader know, that they are Jews,”¹⁵ and the characters not only have Jewish ancestry or affiliation, but share in the fate of the Jewish people.

Of course, what it means for a work of fiction to reflect Jewish experience, Jewish consciousness, or the Jewish condition can be complex to define. From my perspective, a story¹⁶ that is Jewish expresses Jewish identity on either a religious or cultural dimension, and it relates in a fundamental way to Jewish experience, whether in the past, present, or future. Sometimes at *Jewish Fiction .net* we receive a story that is very good, but when we consider it in terms of the above criteria, we are unable, try as we might, to find anything Jewish about it,¹⁷ so that is not a story we publish.

11 Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon*, 11; Cynthia Ozick, “Toward A New Yiddish,” in *Art and Ardor* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 168–169. Previously published as Cynthia Ozick, “America: Toward Yavneh,” *Judaism* (Summer 1970): 264–282.

12 Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon*, 14.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 14–15.

15 Ibid., 15.

16 For simplicity’s sake, in the title of this book and sometimes in this introduction, I use the word “story” to refer to both stories and novel excerpts, given that the novel excerpts in this anthology all stand on their own like self-contained stories.

17 Someone else might react differently to this story, of course—inevitably there is subjectivity in this process. But at *Jewish Fiction .net*, we always have at least two, and often three, readers evaluate each submission we receive, and we engage deeply, seriously, and open-mindedly with every one of them. So all the submissions that come to us get a very fair reading.

The stories and novel excerpts in this anthology touch on many themes, including the Jewish family; antisemitism; morality; outsider identity; relationships (both positive and negative) with non-Jews; the Holocaust; pride in, and love of, Jewish tradition; and critique of this tradition and of the Jewish community (for example, because of its sexism). Among these stories there are various commonalities, as well as great diversity. Each of these works is a world unto itself, and there is no implication here that any of them are representative of the literature or the language in which they were originally written, thematically, stylistically, or otherwise. For instance, the story translated from Czech should not be viewed as “typical,” or representative, of Czech, or Czech Jewish, or Jewish, fiction in general. Furthermore, the writers of the stories in this book—like other writers of Jewish fiction—are diverse not only linguistically and culturally, but in multiple other ways: in political outlook, sexual orientation, birth religion, skin color, and more. So it is worthwhile, when reading these works, to remain cognizant that Jewish fiction and its authors are far from monolithic.



So far, in using the phrase “Jewish fiction,” I have been focusing on the first word in it: “Jewish.” But now let’s pause on the second word. Since this is an anthology of fiction, a few comments about fiction as a genre are in order. In my view, fiction has a special kind of power. This is because when we read a story or a novel, our defenses drop, our boundaries relax, and we enter the inner life of the main character. Once we decide to keep reading a book, even if the protagonist is a serial killer, we enter this person’s reality and see the world through his or her eyes. Through fiction we are introduced to different kinds of people than we usually meet, as well as to places, cultures, and experiences distant from our own. So fiction brings us into intimate emotional contact with differentness and otherness—and this changes us. There is actually psychological research showing that reading literary fiction increases our capacity for empathy, and consequently our behavior, in real life.¹⁸ Fiction-reading is a transformative experience, one that can alter us for the better.

18 Raymond A. Mar, Keith Oatley, and Jordan Peterson, “Exploring the Link Between Reading Fiction and Empathy: Ruling Out Individual Differences and Examining Outcomes,” *Communications (Sankt Augustin)* 34, no. 4 (2009): 407–428; Raymond A. Mar, Keith Oatley, Jacob Hirsh, Jennifer dela Paz, and Jordan Peterson, “Bookworms Versus Nerds:

This, of course, is not the only reason, or even the main reason, for reading, or writing, fiction. But it is why fiction in general, and Jewish fiction in particular, gives me hope. We are living now in a fearsome time—a period, under the shadow of a pandemic, of enormous global upheaval and uncertainty, politically, socially, economically, and environmentally. For Jews, this is also a time of skyrocketing antisemitism and a worldwide Jewish community that is extremely divided and polarized. Many people, I among them, are concerned about the growing chasm between different groups of Jews—between left/right, Orthodox/non-Orthodox, Ashkenazi/Mizrahi, Israel/Diaspora, and more. In this challenging context, I envision Jewish fiction as a place of meeting. A bridge, arching over the many fissures below, where, sharing in the beauty of our literature, Jews can discover some empathy and mutual understanding. It has happened many times that, after publishing a new issue of *Jewish Fiction .net*, I received emails from readers saying that, until then, they'd never read a story by (for example) a Turkish Jew, or an Argentinian Jew, or a Croatian Jew, and had never thought about these Jews' particular perspective or experience of life. Yet reading these stories changed their feeling about people from these places, made them think more deeply about what it means to be Jewish, and broadened the parameters of the Jewish world as they knew it.

This gives me hope. Since fiction has the ability to alter how people think, feel, and act, perhaps this anthology can help bring Jews closer together and make us more knowledgeable about, and accepting of, each other. Like a water hole where many diverse, colorful species of wildlife assemble to refresh themselves, I see this book as a gathering place where, despite our differences, we can all drink from the nearly inexhaustible richness and strength of our people's stories. There is also room, of course, at this water hole for non-Jewish friends and readers. So they can sip from our waters and share with us theirs.

Now, onto these wonderful stories! They will speak for themselves. *L'chaim*—Drink deeply and enjoy!

Exposure to Fiction Versus Non-fiction, Divergent Associations with Social Ability, and the Simulation of Fictional Social Worlds," *Journal of Research in Personality*, 40, no. 5 (2006): 694–712; Megan Schmidt, "How Reading Fiction Increases Empathy and Encourages Understanding," *Discover*, August 28, 2020, <https://www.discovermagazine.com/mind/how-reading-fiction-increases-empathy-and-encourages-understanding>.

18

JEWISH STORIES

Hostage

By *Elie Wiesel*

Excerpt from a Novel

Translated from French by *Catherine Temerson*

So from one day to the next, Shaltiel Feigenberg and his family became famous. Their names and faces appeared on the front pages of newspapers. *The Mysterious Disappearance of a Jewish Storyteller* was one headline. They were discussed on television. President Gerald Ford, when brought up to speed, made his concern publicly known. His secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, followed developments closely. The prospective presidential, senatorial, and congressional candidates published statements condemning “all forms of terrorism and proclaiming their solidarity with the Jewish people.” Blanca and her nieces reluctantly submitted to the journalists’ questions to assuage them.

Time magazine quoted Malka saying that the investigations should focus on antisemitic groups: “It’s simple. They’re everywhere. They won’t forgive us for having survived and for having children.” (The magazine pointed out that the hostage had no children.)

The *New York Times* published excerpts of a short story that Blanca had found in the jumble of her husband’s desk drawers. A literary agent contacted her and asked whether she wouldn’t consider publishing his short stories in a book that could be produced in a matter of weeks.

An Israeli evening daily printed Shaltiel’s Israeli short story in its entirety. It was hardly characteristic of his oeuvre, if oeuvre is the right word. It lacked the intellectual, let alone mystical, preoccupations of his other writings. This one was an action narrative.

Brooklyn was in turmoil. Some young Hasidim created a small self-defense group and offered to protect the Feigenberg family. Their elders announced a day of fasting and invited the entire community to join them in reciting the appropriate psalms: Heaven will help the Jews when men prove to be powerless or indifferent. A great mystic spent the entire night in silence, in strict reverent meditation, trying to locate and protect Shaltiel.

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In Israel, for understandable reasons, official circles and the public were following the Feigenberg episode with ever-greater interest. Are people more interested in the fate of a writer, no matter how modest, than in the fate of an anonymous person? Possibly.

The special adviser to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, General Peleg Har-Even, summoned Dan Ramati. Tall, elegant, taut with an angular face, looking perpetually curious and vigilant, he was feared, dreaded, and admired.

Ramati, who had been nicknamed “the great,” had had a legendary life. In his youth, before the creation of the Jewish state, in the years 1942 to 1948, he had been a member of the famous Berger Group, whose members were called terrorists by their opponents and resistance fighters by their supporters. The number two man on the English security services’ most-wanted list, he was reputed for carrying out bomb attacks. In the official structure of the state of Israel, as the director of the Mossad, he had exceptional authority, both professional and moral. His opinions were sought after and respected.

“What do you think of the Feigenberg case?” asked the prime minister.

“I don’t know yet. I’ve sent two of our best people to New York. We have excellent relations with the FBI and the CIA, so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“I want you to make this affair a priority. And to take charge of it personally.”

“Why? Is there something here I’m unaware of?”

“No. But there *is* something that seems important to me, an intimate connection that has to exist between the Jewish state and the Jewish people—I mean, the Jewish Diaspora. This may be taking place in America, but I think we have a role to play in it. In my mind, wherever a Jew is threatened or persecuted just because he’s Jewish, we’re responsible for his fate. Keep me posted.”

Dan Ramati nodded his head approvingly.

~

They are in a dilapidated, foul-smelling basement with a few odd chairs and overturned benches. A small window near the ceiling is full of dust and produces a cloudy beam of light. A smell of acrid smoke causes occasional sneezing. Huge cobwebs hang from the ceiling and fill the corners.

There are two men and their hostage. An Arab, Ahmed, is impatient and speaks with a guttural, nervous voice. An Italian, Luigi, seems more easygoing. His voice can be gentle, almost warm at times.

“What do you want from me?” Shaltiel asks. “What have I done to you? Why did you bring me here? Who are you? What am I to you?”

“We can be whatever you want us to be, your salvation or your death,” says Ahmed. “Don’t have any illusions: You can yell until hell freezes over; no one will hear you. And even if they do, no one will care about your fate. They’ll write about you in the newspapers for a few days, then they’ll forget all about you. We have three days left. If our demands aren’t met, too bad for you.”

Shaltiel can vaguely make them out through his ill-adjusted black blindfold. They’re looking hard at him, as if they expect to see him change in some way. He can see their silhouettes. Odd, it’s not like in the crime films where the prisoner can’t see a thing. Is he dealing with amateurs or professionals?

He can distinguish half their faces, like masks. He sees huge eyes. I’m speaking to eyes, not human beings, Shaltiel thinks.

Somewhere in his subconscious, a voice keeps whispering: This must be a case of mistaken identity, a monumental, stupid mistake. These things happen. They must somehow think I’m a dangerous person. But I’m not a danger to anyone. He had been on his way to Srulik Silber’s, an old collector friend, whose house, near the ocean, was crammed with books and esoteric manuscripts. It was an unplanned visit. Shaltiel was going home and suddenly felt like seeing Srulik, especially since he had to return an eighteenth-century Sabbatean pamphlet that he had borrowed the week before. He liked Srulik. Last month, Shaltiel was telling him that his erstwhile dreams had evaporated a long time ago. The Messiah would not be coming. The world, cursed through its own fault, would not be saved; the Messiah would arrive too late, or, as Kafka said, on the day after. Srulik smiled when Shaltiel said that. “Do you really think I don’t know?” he asked.

He never got to meet Srulik again because Satan meddled. Footsteps came up behind him, someone was suddenly rushing, shadows were approaching. Shaltiel walked on, heedless. He was struck on the back of his neck and collapsed, his head on fire. As he regained consciousness, everything was swirling around. The stars were falling with a thunderous noise.

And what about the book he was going to return to Srulik, full of calculations sketched out in concentric circles? It was meant for the initiated and was particularly interesting. Why was everything being sabotaged by some curse plunging him into this makeshift prison?

There is an unpleasant half-light. He is *clinging*. At first, to pass the time, he plays mental chess against an imaginary opponent. If he wins, he

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