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The GENIZAH *at the* HOUSE *of* SHEPHER

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Part One:
Shalom Shepher and the Ten Lost Tribes

Chapter one

The week following his bar mitzvah, in the spring of 1853, my great-grandfather, Shalom Shepher of Skidel, got married. He took up residence with his father-in-law, the Rabbi of Bielsk.

In those days he studied a lot and ate a lot. Eighteen hours were spent with the holy books, one hour was for walking and four hours were for sleeping. That left a whole hour in which to eat, and a great deal of food can be consumed in that time.

The marriage room contained a chest, a chair and a bed. Shalom Shepher instructed his wife in the rites of marriage. She crept out at night to sleep with her sisters.

Shalom Shepher told the Rabbi of Bielsk: "If you have married me to a child who neglects her husband and prefers to sleep with her sisters, I will divorce her and marry a woman instead."

From that time the Rabbi forbade his daughter to sleep with her sisters any longer.

Shalom Shepher ate a lot and studied a lot. He read the commentaries and the commentaries on the commentaries. He read Talmud, both Mishnah and Gemara, and above all he read Torah, until, were you to commit the sacrilege of sticking a pin through the

pages of that holy book, our hero could have told you every word through which the pin had passed.

Two maxims from the sages were carved upon his soul. One was:

> It is not your duty to complete the work;
> Neither are you free to desist from it.

He loved this paradoxical epigram, with its eternal invitation to feelings of guilt and inadequacy.

The other was:

> Do not say: When I have leisure I will study.
> Perhaps you will have no leisure.

In Bielsk he perfected the skills he had begun to develop in Skidel. He learnt to split hairs and chop logic. He learnt to filibuster and digress, to draw out the sweetness of an argument. He developed the art of pilpul, that scholarly tug-of-war beloved of the rabbis, and fostered the ability to take every side at once in order to prevent a debate from reaching any conclusions.

As he spoke he had a habit of twisting one sidelock round his finger, which reminded the others of his extreme youth and also irritated his opponents beyond expression. He became known for his learning and his good looks. The latter were a little exaggerated in legend. He was short in the leg and broad in the chest, and like many members of my family had a tendency to flatulence and high blood pressure in later life. But he had large quantities of red-gold hair, which were taken to denote kinship to King David and also generosity.

He made life hard for the Rabbi of Bielsk. At the age of sixteen, Shepher was the greater scholar. He also had a superior sense of humour, which is essential if one is to understand the writings of the sages. The Rabbi would declare something kosher, and Shepher would contradict him; the Rabbi, unnerved by his brilliant protégé, conceded; whereupon Shepher would dig up another precedent and

once more pronounce it kosher. One might say that he ran rings round the Rabbi of Bielsk.

Before he reached his eighteenth year he had established himself as a corrector of scrolls. From that time, because of his great diligence, there was an increase in the number of parchments consigned to the genizah of the local synagogue, where because of their errors they could not be used, and because they bore the name of God they could not be destroyed; and where they would remain until they were buried, or crumbled into dust, or, as sometimes happened, were lost in a fire.

It was his particular pleasure to sit in the attic genizah of the synagogue at Bielsk. There, with a five-rung ladder between himself and the world, he studied the texts and documents which had been placed there when they became too dilapidated for further use. Although he was only eighteen, the beadle of the synagogue referred to him as Reb Shalom. My great-grandfather accepted the title of respect. He was the greatest corrector of scrolls in Lithuania.

Chapter two

When he was eighteen years old Reb Shalom became ill. Despite the consumption of a whole chicken cooked daily for him by his wife, he grew thinner and thinner. Eventually, for the first time, he lost his appetite.

After a while, seeing that he did not get any better, he decided to visit a great doctor in Vilna, the Jerusalem of Lithuania.

The great doctor examined him and noticed that he was spitting blood. He said to him: "I can't do anything for you, but if you can manage to go to Italy you might get better."

Reb Shalom pondered for a few moments. At last he said: "How would it be if I went to the Land of Israel?"

The doctor did not know what he was talking about. "Do you mean Palestine?" he said.

Reb Shalom did not know what the doctor was talking about.

"What is the name of the city you have in mind?" the doctor asked.

Reb Shalom replied: "Jerusalem."

"Oh, yes," said the great doctor. "Jerusalem will do just as well as Italy."

Shalom Shepher returned to Bielsk and told his wife that he was going to live in Jerusalem. Immediately she burst into tears.

"How can I leave Mummy and Daddy?" she sobbed.

He said: "If that's how you feel about it, we can get a divorce. We haven't any children so it will be an easy break for us."

He went to his father-in-law and told him: "I am going to live in Jerusalem and my wife doesn't want to come with me. Since that's how she feels, I shall give her a divorce. We haven't any children so it should be easy on her. I will send her some money every month until she finds another husband."

And he divorced her.

Then he made a small bundle of his prayer-shawl, phylacteries and psalter, and set off on foot for the Black Sea.

It took him two years to reach the Black Sea. He was ill on the journey and wherever there were Jews they took him in to convalesce. He never recovered his appetite and his appearance was that of a dying man, but he knew it was not death, but great spiritual yearning that possessed his body.

Wherever there were Jews and they discovered who he was, they brought him their scrolls to correct. He lingered in many communities examining the holy parchments. For this reason it took him a long time to reach his destination.

And when my great-grandfather reached the Black Sea he boarded a small Greek ship for the coast of Palestine; and it was another six months before his ship came within sight of the port of Jaffa.

Chapter three

In November 1938 my father boarded the vessel 'Methuselah' at the port of Jaffa and sailed for Southampton. He was possessed by a great spiritual yearning to leave Palestine and go to England.

Like his forbear he was short and stocky, with the same tendency to heartburn and painful wind which plagued him all his life. Indeed, I wonder whether there is not some connection between great spiritual yearning and the inability to digest food. Some people never yearn spiritually their whole lives and always enjoy excellent digestion. I, on the other hand, feel my yearning as a hard obstructive lump somewhere under the sternum, and to eat means to suffer. In that respect I am my great-grandfather's spiritual heir.

"My heart is in the East and I am in the farthest West," sang the poet Judah Halevy. "How can I taste what I eat, how can I have appetite?" My great-grandfather stepped on a boat to the East, and my father stepped on a boat to the West, and I am in England with chronic indigestion.

The act of climbing on a boat is in fact no cure for this type of malady. Nor is taking a ship or an aeroplane. When my father reaches Southampton he will yearn for Palestine; when Shalom Shepher enters

the gates of Jerusalem he will be possessed by other dreams. Such men father anxious children.

This much I know about that fateful departure of 1938. He wore a white shirt and no tie. He smoked a cigarette. Across his forehead was one long, angry eyebrow. On his lip was a scar where the lip split open every winter. He was twenty-three years old and he felt as though he had lived for centuries and was sick of life as only a twenty-three-year-old can be. On the quayside below, the woman he loved was waving him goodbye.

No photograph was taken of the occasion. No-one described it to me. Yet the image stands in my mind of this decisive moment.

There are certain choices from which all things flow. My great-grandfather travelled east and begot my grandfather. My father travelled west and met my mother. The line of tension between choice and chance is the thread by which the miracle of existence hangs.

Chapter four

I came to Jerusalem at night, in darkness, after a long absence, rain streaking the windows of the taxi as we rode from the plain to the hills. Outside, at first, there were bright signs, a golden egg, a drive-thru takeaway, a giant smile surrounded by flashing lights. We might have been in America. We might have been anywhere. Then we were on the highway. We were nowhere. Darkness, hunched trees. A change in the air. A whiff of petrol and bitumen, a hint of the sea or the desert. Strangeness. Rain.

Then as we began to climb I closed my eyes and thought I recognised the old route, its rises and turns inscribed on my memory. But the road had changed. It had flattened, uncoiled and stretched itself into something unfamiliar. And when I opened my eyes, instead of the darkness of the hills there were masses of lights, strings and clusters of lights as far as the eye could see.

"What's that?" I asked.

The driver answered: "That's Jerusalem."

The engine strained and the windscreen was flooded with rain. And then we were on the road I recognised: a steep curve, a petrol station, ruins, and, hanging from the edge of the deep valley,

a shanty which had clung there, perhaps, for more than a hundred years and still not fallen off. Of all the cities of the world Jerusalem has one of the shabbiest gates of arrival, and coming or going one is greeted by graves.

My driver had the address: Kiriat Shoshan; and sliding from lane to lane he rushed the lights, pulled up at the next red, crackled his radio. Did I know this stretch? I was already lost again, in a labyrinth of traffic and asphalt and hotels and shopping malls, at sea in a changed city. Yet this road I did remember, as we turned into a quiet boulevard lined with apartment blocks, a long straight road with a regiment of trees, opening at its far end into a small square containing a children's playground, a sandpit and a synagogue. And there on the corner of the square was the house itself, older than ever, more worn and weather-beaten, with one of its shutters hanging half off and, darker and denser than I recalled, the line of five cypresses my father planted.

Thin clouds blew over; a toenail of moon hung in a ragged sky. I stood with my suitcase on a well-known patch of ground, as if on a small disc in the middle of a strange universe.

And sitting in the window was my uncle Saul, just as I had imagined him, hunched at the kitchen table in my grandfather's caftan, huddled over the paraffin heater, listening to the radio. He rose to his feet and peered at me through his round glasses.

"Hello Saul," I said. "It's me, Shulamit."

Twenty years had not made much difference to him. He was old before and he was older now. His hair was silver then and it was silver still. He walked as he always had, with a shuffling stoop, hampered now by the folds of my grandfather's caftan, which hung on him limply, tattered by moth and wear, and gave off a morbid, rotten odour. God knows where he had dug it up. From the bottom drawer of the pot-bellied walnut dresser, maybe, or the camphor-smelling wardrobe in the back bedroom. He wore it, I suppose, because it was warm, and possibly also for another reason: imagining, perhaps, that by some act of transubstantiation he had become my grandfather.

He was as I remembered him, a man of few phrases and a few very pungent gestures, able to express with one eyebrow the whole

significance of twenty years' silence and absence punctuated only by a cheap New Year card. "Shulamit," he said. And he welcomed me into the house with a reverent motion, like the curator of a museum which was soon to close.

I dropped my bag and stepped forward, to take in the full squalor of that house which had once been the living heart of the family and was now a slum. Furniture stood piled in obscure corners. There were towers of boxes and stacks of bedlinen, fragile pyramids of kitchenware; domestic rubble swept into untidy heaps. Torn strings of tatting decorated the windows. The walls were bare, but a dusty mobile of blue-green Hebron glass still hung from the doorframe where I remembered it.

I turned to my uncle, who gazed across the sea of memory with the same inward stare, magnified by the lenses of his ancient spectacles; and who looked up at me now as though I were nothing more than a ghost, come back to haunt his already haunted solitude. I managed a smile.

"I've come for a visit," I said.