

The Outcast & Other Tales



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To This Day

Shira

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The Outcast & Other Tales

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A Graphic Novel by Shay Charka

THE OUTCAST & OTHER TALES

INCLUDING STORIES FROM
“THE BOOK OF DEEDS”

S.Y. AGNON

EDITED AND ANNOTATED BY
JEFFREY SAKS

The Toby Press

The Outcast & Other Tales
by S.Y. Agnon
Edited and Annotated by Jeffrey Saks
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The Outcast

*In memory of my father
Rabbi Shalom Mordechai HaLevi
of blessed memory*

Chapter One

Blossoms Have Appeared in the Land

AWAKENING

All that week heavy snow fell from the highest heavens to the lowly world. The black earth turned white, the sky remained murky, and the people huddled at home between fireplace and stove; not a soul ventured out into town. But on Thursday, as the Sabbath neared, the quality of mercy prevailed, the sun came out, and the snow began to melt. Women went to market to buy meat and fish, and carts and horses arrived from the villages around the town. Once again, life was flowing as if abundance had never ceased in the world.

The Outcast

As the day drew to an end, the devout began to assemble in the Study House. Scholars closed their books, and young men ceased their study. The beadle lit the candles and the congregants washed their hands and prayed.

Suddenly, two old women burst in, howling, pleading for the life of the virtuous, righteous Eidele. They opened the Holy Ark and embraced the Torah scrolls, and they called out to God with great fervor, Please, God, heal her for the sake of her innocent chicks! Thus they wept until their tears joined and flowed together.

Between the afternoon and evening prayers a rumor spread around the Study House that a Tzadik was coming to town. His handful of followers were much heartened by the news; they rejoiced that their Rabbi saw fit to spend the Sabbath in their town, and they prepared their hearts and souls to receive the holy man. The common folk assumed that the Rabbi was coming into town for the sole purpose of healing Eidele, the daughter of Rabbi Avigdor, the great pillar of the community. But those who knew how much the great man detested the “sect” also knew that he would move Heaven and Earth to stop the Tzadik from setting foot in Szybusz. Still, some doubt lingered; Rabbi Avigdor was burdened by grief, and he might find it difficult to keep the Tzadik out of town.

THE LIGHT OF LOVE

As soon as it was light, the handful of Hasidim went outside the town to welcome the Tzadik. Some Szybusz residents joined them to witness his arrival. They reasoned thus: if he is indeed a Tzadik, it is known that the arrival of holy men fosters piety. Those who still hesitated to believe in the powers of the righteous took heart and said: the fact that the man is so eagerly awaited is a sign that the Divine Presence hovers over him and, indeed, several Jews were already out to meet him. As they lifted their eyes to the road, the sound of approaching cartwheels was heard on the streets, and the place was filled with joy. The Rabbi is coming! The Rabbi is coming!

His acolytes hastened to approach the carriage, greeted their Rabbi, released the horses from their reins, and harnessed themselves to pull the carriage. The Rabbi immediately alighted and joined the welcoming crowd. They protested, Rabbi, why did you get down? We have come to greet you, and you get off the carriage? And he said, Since you

are fulfilling the commandment of hospitality with such enthusiasm, I came down to join you and be included in the good deed. His attendant ordered the people to clear the way, and they formed two rows, flanking the Rabbi on either side. Thus they walked, with him in the middle, until they reached a spot that had been prepared in his honor, where he stopped and people came to greet him. Even the women screwed up their courage and stood on tiptoe to steal a look at the Tzadik's face.

On Gold Street, where famous learned rabbis once resided, proper lodgings were found for the Rabbi. A local householder, a childless man, who had not yet crossed the threshold of Hasidism, made room for him in his house, hoping that the holy man's blessing would rub off on him. The lady of the house swept the floor in his honor, but she did not light the fireplace for fear of overheating her home with so many guests expected. They brought the Rabbi in and took off his mantle, but even though the house soon filled with people, the Rabbi suffered from a chill. They tried to put him in a small side room and to send away the visitors who came to bask in the glory of his holiness, but neither the visitors nor the Rabbi could part with one another's company. So he sat with them and warmed himself by the light of their love.

SO HE DROVE OUT THE MAN

At the moment Rabbi Avigdor was coming out of the room of his sick daughter Eidele, he heard the exultant voices of the Hasidim accompanying their Rabbi on his way. He was outraged and said, How long must I tolerate this iniquity? So Rabbi Avigdor put on his Sabbath attire, washed his hair, curled his side locks with beer, fixed up his fur hat, fastened his cloak and checked himself in the mirror. Why did he go to all this trouble? To impress the Polish nobleman so that he would listen and grant his request. When Eidele's children saw their grandfather dressed up like this, they thought he was going to a circumcision ceremony, and they started jumping up and down like goats, chanting

*Our Grandpa's off to a brit
Our hearts just skipped a beat
He'll bring us back a tasty treat
Our hearts just skipped a beat*

Rabbi Avigdor looked at Eidele's two small children and longed to embrace and caress them, to say words of comfort and consolation to them, but because of the anguish in his heart, he did not approach them; instead, he made his way to the seat of power, driven by the fury of vengeance.

The Tzadik's followers prepared white clothes, set aside all week-day affairs, and went to the bathhouse to cleanse themselves for the Sabbath so they could stand before their Rabbi in purity. And the daughters of Israel baked challahs and cooked meat and fish and made many kugels to celebrate the Sabbath that included such an honored guest. But "the hope of man is but a worm." Unfortunately, the nobleman acceded to the request, and he sent an officer to banish Rabbi Uriel from the town because Rabbi Avigdor had spoken slander against him.

As Rabbi Uriel stood wrapped in his tallit, adorned in his tefillin, his face aglow with prayer, the officer walked in; but, on noticing the Rabbi's radiant countenance, he recoiled and waited in apprehension until the rabbi finished his prayer. Then he told him, Rabbi, a decree has been issued for your expulsion. Please leave town. Rabbi Uriel removed his tefillin and tied their straps in the shape of a dove's wings. He was barely done when the officer grabbed him by the hand and said, Pack up and leave.

LET ONE OF HIS OWN BE CAST OUT

The Rabbi's followers protested loudly and clamored for the Rabbi to wreak vengeance on his enemies and punish them severely for profaning the name of God and for disrupting the celebration of the Sabbath. The holy man looked into his heart and said, Uriel, Uriel, is it really God's honor you care about or your own, and how can you discern which is the truth? But in the end, human nature prevailed, and he cursed the leader of the community. A harsh imprecation escaped from his lips: *One of Rabbi Avigdor's own should be cast out.* All who were present there nodded and said, Avigdor is like a snake which has bitten itself. Woe to him, he deserves what's coming!

BANISHED SONS

Rabbi Uriel left town, accompanied by his followers. The snow had melted and furious rains came down making the ground slippery and

treacherous. The Ḥasidim trudged and stumbled, reciting the Song of Songs as they walked. Rabbi Uriel chanted, "Don't stare at me with contempt because I am swarthy, it is only the sun that has tanned me. My mother's alien sons were angry with me." And his cohorts responded, "You, my beloved, are handsome and delightful." Rabbi Uriel kept walking and reciting, "Sustain me in exile with dainty cakes, comfort me with fragrant apples, for I am faint with love for God." And the Ḥasidim walked along and responded, "Hark, the voice of my beloved. Leaping over mountains, bounding over hills to redeem me." Rabbi Uriel called, "Arise, my darling, my fair one, and come away: for the winter of bondage is past, the deluge of suffering is over and gone, righteous blossoms have appeared in the land, the time of your song has arrived, the voice of your guide is heard in our land." And his followers countered, "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine," And Rabbi Uriel intoned, "They found me, the enemy watchmen patrolling the city, they struck me, bruised me, and stripped me of my mantle." And the Ḥasidim responded, "Come, my beloved, let us go into the countryside and spend the night in the villages, there I shall display my love." And Rabbi Uriel called, "Many waters cannot quench love," and the followers completed the verse, "Nor can the rivers drown it." Thus they walked and chanted until the holy Sabbath descended and they reached the village. They repaired to an inn where they were to spend the Sabbath.

The innkeeper saw them coming and his blood froze with fright. God forbid, there's trouble in town and they had to flee. He ran toward them, brought them into the house and asked, Why have you come here? They told him the whole story. Happiness filled the simple innkeeper's heart. To Avigdor, who would not let him form a minyan in the village, God has now sent woes to vex him. He beamed at his guests and said, Don't worry, gentlemen. Thank God, we have meat and fish, and plenty of wine too, so we can eat and drink, as God commanded us. He knelt before the Rabbi to greet him, but he was embarrassed by his clothes and by the leather pants he was wearing, and said, This Tzadik comes to my inn, and I greet him in such coarse attire. The Rabbi made an appeasing motion with his hand, but he emitted a deep sigh for God's children who greet the holy Sabbath in such ungainly clothes. And as the Rabbi sighed, so did his followers.

Today is God's Sabbath, and they are desolate and dejected, wandering, away from their families. Thus they sighed and moaned until the Rabbi scolded them, and they contained their sighs in their hearts and were silent.

The lady of the house then set the table, putting two regular loaves of bread next to the two challahs she had baked, covering them with a cloth, and then she lit the Sabbath candles. The glow of the holy day enveloped the house and they greeted the Sabbath with songs and prayers. The Rabbi led the prayer with holy fervor, and when he reached the hymn "Come my Beloved" he shed all corporeal attributes and began to dance in honor of the Sabbath Bride. All those present ascended with him step by step, until the end of the prayer.

But when they sat to dinner and realized that they were in a tavern and the loaves on the table were workaday breads, they remembered their own families and started to sigh again. Oh, Sara Leah, Rivka Devorah, Devorah Sushe, where are your challahs, each larger than the oven? Where are your spiced fish that we meant to eat at the Rabbi's celebration? Sarah Leah, Rivka Devorah, Devorah Sushe are shut in their homes, like abandoned wives. Who knows if they and their children were even allowed to hear the Kiddush recited in other Jewish homes. Thus, they all descended into another world, and the glow of the Sabbath dissipated. The only sign of life was the sound of horses in the barn. With his right hand, Rabbi Uriel grabbed his beard, and with his left, he covered his eyes and gently rebuked his followers, I am ashamed of you, Hasidim, both for God, blessed be He, and for the Sabbath Queen. Then, suddenly, his face lit up and shone as it often did when he was about to deliver a commentary on the Torah. Everyone around the table fell silent, and only the muttering of the candles could be heard.

REPOSE AND JUBILATION

Rabbi Uriel was not wont to deliver commentary on the Torah. He used to say that discussion of the Torah is not as important as maintaining the precepts of the Torah. But now Rabbi Uriel gave rein to his holy words, deliberately using plain language so that even the simplest of his followers could understand. He commented on the portion of the week, "And Jacob Left," opening with a parable about a prince who was sent

away from home to a remote and humble village. When he received a message from the King, his father, he wanted to rejoice in it, but he was afraid that the villagers would mock him and wonder at his unwonted cheerfulness. What did the prince do? He summoned the villagers and offered them wine and other intoxicating beverages. Thus, they were happy with the wine, and he was happy with the news from his father. And so it is with our sacred soul, which is reluctant to celebrate its additional Sabbath holiness, which is its epistle of greeting from its father, the Holy One, blessed be He, in front of the inferior body, which is like those lowly villagers. Hence the Torah's injunction to indulge and delight the body on the Sabbath and on holidays. When the body celebrates in contentment, the soul can rejoice in its Holy King, blessed be He. Thus all creatures are commanded to abolish gloom and despair, because the light of life can only reside with joy and Godly bliss. Heaven forbid you display sadness before God, because this is the Lord's holy day. Hearing this, his followers' hearts stirred and their spirits revived; they drank heartily and rejoiced in the blessings, and the singers among them chanted and regaled the listeners with mellifluous Sabbath hymns until the meal was over and they recited the grace.

After the meal, they stretched on long benches and colored crates, and the innkeeper and his wife went up to their room above the fireplace. The house fell silent, the candles dwindled, their shadows falling on the table, on the scraps of challah, bones and breadcrumbs. The flames rose and illuminated the clock, flickering over the rusty pendulum; the hours trickled away while Rabbi Uriel remained standing motionless by the candles, his hands tucked in his sleeves and his beard hanging down to his tzitzit fringes that seemed to sway with the vitality and spirit infused in them. Then the candles flickered, emitting a pillar of smoke, and the Rabbi standing immobile, inhaled the smoke of the Sabbath candles.

His followers lay with their eyes open, unable to savor the pleasure of slumber. They elaborated on every phrase that had come out of the Tzadik's mouth, imbuing each motion and gesture with mountains of meanings. Said one of them, Let me tell you, had I been living in the generation of the Baal Shem and the Maggid, and the Baal Shem was living in Yazlovicz and the Maggid in Potik, I would spend one Sabbath

with the Baal Shem and one Sabbath with the Maggid, but I would never cease to be a disciple of our Rabbi, may he live long.

Thus, the Ḥasidim lay all night telling stories of faith and devotion until daybreak. The innkeeper's wife brought a pitcher of hot tea from the stove. The Ḥasidim got up, said the morning blessings, drank tea, and prepared themselves for their prayers. Sadness filled their hearts when they realized that they were in a village with no Torah scroll, so they were unable to read the weekly portion of the Torah. They started whispering outside of their Rabbi's earshot, citing miraculous tales from Ḥasidic lore, such as the story of a merchant traveling with a caravan through a vast and terrible desert, who upon the arrival of the Sabbath refused to go on because he would not desecrate the holy day. The leader of the caravan told him, If you continue with us, fine; if not, we will leave you behind. The man replied, I will not budge and I will not desecrate the Sabbath. They departed, leaving him behind. Alone in the desert, the man turned east to pray. At that moment the gates of a great palace opened and abundant Heavenly light began to pour in. He saw human beings, tall as the cedars of Lebanon, resembling ministering angels with countenances bright as the sky and eyeballs like solar spheres; they welcomed the Sabbath with songs of praise and glory. In the morning the Seven Shepherds, past leaders of the nation, read from the Torah. Said the Ḥasidim, Our sages of blessed memory maintained that Heaven helps those who want to be pure, so where is our help? Everything had conspired to spoil their enjoyment of the Sabbath. They lost heart and could not bring themselves to pray to God. They just stood around silently clutching their prayer shawls in their hands.

An old childless Jew lived at the edge of the village. He had a Torah scroll written for the glory of God, and then put it for safekeeping in the synagogue in town. When the holidays came, the villagers assembled and told him, Go into town and bring back the Torah so we can form a minyan and conduct the High Holiday services here in the village. So he went into town and brought the Torah scroll back, and the villagers rejoiced, for they no longer had to leave their homes for the holidays. But their joy was short lived because Rabbi Avigdor would not allow public services to be conducted outside the town for fear of losing the charitable donations the villagers gave when they came to pray. The

minyan never convened, and the Torah scroll remained in the old man's house in the village for a long time. Now his servant came to him reporting that a holy man was staying at the inn. The old man wrapped the Torah in a cloak and went to the inn, where he found the townspeople standing with their prayer shawls in their hands.

He said, I heard that a Tzadik had come here, and I could not sit still, so God counseled me to take the Torah and come to the inn. I took the scroll and went out. Outside it was rainy and gloomy, as if the stars had ceased to shine for the whole week. My eyes grew dim and I almost gave up. But the Lord, blessed be He, braced my heart and restored my spirit and I was able to overcome all the obstacles and come here to the inn to join God's assembly. So they all prayed joyfully and read the Torah portion and enjoyed the Sabbath with food and drink until it was time for the third Sabbath meal. The Rabbi sat with his followers, eating and drinking and singing hymns and praises at length, while the special "Sabbath Soul" was about to leave the body.