

THE SAGE AND SCRIBE OF MODERN ISRAEL

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The novelist and rabbi Haim Sabato infuses tradition into fiction as well as any of the Yiddish greats. The difference? His work is unencumbered by modern angst.

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Aleppo was a city of sages and scribes, and its sages are distinguished by the depth of their genius and the sharpness of their intellect. A sage of Aleppo hates meaningless ostentation or affection and loves clear judgment. He is sparing in speech and makes a virtue of silence. . . . It is not in [his] nature to follow the crowd; he stands by his opinions, and knows his own value. Forthright and making no pretenses to anyone, he enjoys a jest, and his talk, even on non-religious subjects, is worthy of study.



Mahane Yehudah market. *Chalffy/iStock.*

Jews have always been lucky in their sages and scribes. So dynamic was the religious-national civilization forged by the God-inspired Hebrew Bible that some of its most creative thinkers and writers continued to develop and interpret its teachings even, when necessary, in other languages and outside the land of Israel. Living among Gentile nations, Jews met and overcame every kind of challenge, nourishing in their literature the record of an ever adaptive and strengthened people.

Today, the finest of Hebrew writers continue spinning that story, and one of the very finest is the Israeli Haim Sabato, born 70 years ago in Cairo, Egypt but descended from a long line of rabbis whose home was in Aleppo, Syria: a city identified by its Jews with the Bible's Aram Tsova (one of David's conquests).

Ḥaim Sabato's own characterization of his Aleppo ancestry tells us how fortunate we are to have *him* among the sages and scribes of modern Israel. Although he himself never saw the city, he would become as familiar with its topography and traditions as the great Hebrew novelist [S.Y. Agnon](#) (1888-1970) was with his own native Buczacz (once Austro-Hungarian, now in western Ukraine).

And here, early on, I might as well cite the similarity-cum-comparison between these two writers—since Agnon, the elder, is the writer to whom Sabato, may he have long life, was instantly likened upon his first appearance. Both men write as the heirs and legatees of their distinguished ancestries, eager to bring their extinguished communities back to literary life. And both are steeped enough in traditional Jewish learning to draw effortlessly in their work upon tales and teachings that reach all the way back through the generations to Sinai where the Israelites received the Torah. They are thus sages and novelists in one.

But the likeness also discloses the differences, for each embodies a distinctive and dissimilar ancestry. For example: no one would describe Shmuel Czaczkes, the Hebrew writer who in 1908 would adopt the pen-name S.Y. Agnon, as “forthright and making no pretenses to anyone.” Rather, he took this pseudonym from the title of his first published story, “Agunot,” plural of *agunah*: the abandoned but neither widowed nor divorced wife whose unresolved halakhic status leaves her unqualified to remarry. The very name thereby symbolically represented both the fatally unsettled condition of once-traditional Jews and the permanent disquiet of this modern Jewish author. As for the city of Buczacz—whose transfigured name in Agnon's fiction is *Shibush*, or “muddle”—it was real enough, a part of Galicia, and the *Galitzyaner*, the Galician Jew, was a type renowned for cleverness, with connotations of cunning and guile.

In truth, reading Sabato made me realize that, in my decades of studying the Yiddish and Hebrew literature of Europe, I had never once thought or been reminded of adjectives like *serene*, let alone the aura of Sabbath-restfulness invoked by the very name *Sabato*. The European Enlightenment had struck Agnon's Jews like a comet, creating tremors that were variously absorbed or subdued but could never be circumvented or elided. That comet did not hit Sabato's Arab Middle East in the same way. Later on, I will say a little more about it and the difference it made to these writers.

Not that Sabato's personal history was any the less ruptured. The anti-Jewish fervor that overtook Syria by the latter part of the 19th century closely resembled the rise of “scientific” anti-Semitism in Western Europe, prompting Ḥaim's grandparents to flee Aleppo before World War I. In Cairo, where the family resettled, his esteemed maternal grandfather, Rabbi Aharon Shweka, established a yeshiva, and there the family remained in dignity until, after the establishment of Israel in 1948, they were again forced to flee when Ḥaim's father was denounced as a Zionist spy for living as an observant Jew.

In 1957, the five-year-old Ḥaim and his family joined the hundreds of thousands of Jews driven from Arab lands who would find refuge in Israel. He spent his boyhood in one of the public housing projects near Jerusalem that had been built for two inrushing immigrant communities: Holocaust survivors from Europe, and Middle Eastern and North African refugees. The project became the setting of his later work *From the Four Winds* (2008, English translation 2010), whose portraits of the project's Ashkenazi residents are rendered with a

composure quite foreign to the originals. Clearly, the young Sabato experienced this mixed neighborhood as an immigrant's wholesome introduction to a homeland he now had to learn to share.

Sabato's rigorous Torah education began at home with his grandfather and father and continued uninterrupted at Jerusalem's Bnei Akiva yeshiva high school. During the course of his studies, he was exposed to both the Mizrahi and Ashkenazi traditions of learning. His mother encouraged his reading of French literature, and he cites among his literary influences—in addition of course to Agnon—no lesser figures than Shakespeare, Chekhov, and Sholem Aleichem. But by far the stronger influences were the biblical, talmudic, liturgical, and folk sources of the educated Aleppo Jews who, like the towering medieval philosopher Moses Maimonides, integrated the teachings of others into *their* tradition. He then attended a post-high-school *hesder* yeshiva: an institution (also under the auspices of Bnei Akiva) that combined Torah learning with army service. Later, he himself would co-found a yeshiva in the religiously diverse community of Ma'aleh Adumim.

It was as a yeshiva student that Sabato began publishing his fiction, adapting the style of stories he had been hearing all his life, some of which he then wove into a tapestry in his first published book, *Aleppo Tales* (Hebrew 1997, English translation 2004):

The people of Aram Tsova are proud of their city and unstinting in its praise. They are as proud of its air and its fountains as of the acumen of its tradesmen; proud of the poets and the cantors, proud of the lyrical supplications and the Book of Hymns that they wrote, with their melodic scales. The people of Aleppo extol the food of their city and its delicacies. . . .

Through gnarled family and community stories that reach back to their biblical origins, and ahead to settlement in Israel, Sabato cuts through exotica to the common core of Jewish teachings. In showing us the path to that luminous goal, the rabbi is never far behind the writer.

I. Adjusting Sights

His second book was everything the first was not. Urgent and disturbing, *Adjusting Sights* (*Tey'um kavanot*, 2000; English translation 2003) reverberates from the shock that made him write it. Haim had just finished basic training in Israel's tank corps when, on Yom Kippur 1973, Jews praying in their synagogues heard the sirens sounding an army call-up. Although Israeli intelligence had identified military maneuvers on both the Egyptian and the Syrian fronts, it was mistakenly thought that Arab armies were not yet ready for a major assault following their so recent defeat in the Six-Day War of 1967.

The brunt of this terrible miscalculation would be borne by tank units like Sabato's that mobilized instantaneously but without battle-ready equipment—in stark contrast to the three Syrian divisions that moved into the Golan with 1,400 tanks to Israel's fewer than 200,

with even greater disparity in infantry and artillery. After initially losing ground, the Israelis regrouped and drove the Syrians back, but with heavy losses.

Greater even than the number of casualties was the loss in morale, as the debacle dealt the greatest blow to national self-confidence that the young Jewish state had yet experienced. In the words of the archaeologist and military commander Yigal Yadin, no one had ever imagined that such a war, the first in which fathers and sons were in action together, could happen. “We—the fathers—fought in order that our sons would not have to go to war.” So deep was the country’s demoralization, it was hard to appreciate that Israel had decisively won.

By now a great deal of Jewish war fiction based on the October 1973 war has variously exposed incidents of cruelty, mourned losses, argued historical rights and wrongs, extolled bravery, and celebrated victory, but I know of nothing like Sabato’s attempt to heal a wounded nation. He wrote this book more than a dozen years after the war, when he felt able to plunge back into its trauma and, like everyone else in the country, wanted to make sense of what had happened. With this book he brought his special imprint into Israeli literature.

The Agranat Commission of Inquiry had been set up immediately after the war to investigate what Israelis called *ha-Meḥdal*, “the Blunder.” More than a response to postwar civic protests or calls for resignations was the need to determine what had gone wrong: an existential priority for a country that would exist for only so long as it never lost a war. In this work of fiction based on his own experience, Sabato parallels the work of the commission by pursuing a personal inquiry into the fate of his friend Dov, with whom he had gone into battle but who never returned. Separated from his buddy, the narrator (the fictional Ḥaim whom I will call by that name) must learn Dov’s fate. The search for this information reveals just how chaotic, improvisational, and truly threatening the war was and what a toll it took beyond the 770 Israeli dead and more than 2,400 wounded. But through the telling of these soldiers’ stories, Sabato does what the Commission could not, by demonstrating how the various parts of Israeli society come together in the integrated nation. The secret lies in the telling.

Thus, war footing or not, the book opens with the Amshinov Ḥasidim dancing at the close of that fateful day in sanctification of the new moon. Ḥaim and Dov are drawn into the circle, singing: “As I dance before Thee but cannot touch Thee, so may our enemies dance before us and neither touch nor harm us. *May dread and fear befall them!*” In that mixed neighborhood of Ashkenazi and Mizraḥi Jews, Ḥaim’s friendship with Dov, child of Romanian immigrants, seems as natural as their neighbors’ insistence that the two boys receive their rabbi’s blessing before leaving for battle. To the words, “May dread and fear befall them,” the Amshinov rabbi adds, “*Them* and not you.”

These are the words Ḥaim keeps hearing during the first terrible days that followed—and stops hearing when he learns of Dov’s death. Once the fighting has ended, he is afraid the rabbi will ask, “Where is your friend?” But by the time he learns how Dov was killed (by a shell that had narrowly missed Ḥaim’s unit), the Amshinov rabbi has himself died. Such healing as there is comes, not from the power of the blessing, but from the soldiering that was done in its aura.

Because these boys are so freshly out of basic training and untested in battle, they feel the war's shock at full force. Haim is a gunner. When he realizes that he has no hope of finding a calibrator he needs for his gunsight, he looks for some thread since he had been taught that one can improvise by crossing two threads, dipped in grease, over the muzzle. But officers are yelling, "You should be on the Golan Heights already!" and the frantic rush gives him no time to get it done. Adjusting sights, Haim's imperative, is the task Sabato set himself in this book, whose readers will never have to be reminded again that Israel has no sustainable distance between the home front and the fighting.

With that same sense of responsibility, Haim later tells of a reservist freshly called up who failed to volunteer for an action, leaving it to the men who had already been embattled for days. "Years later when I sometimes ran into him, he still couldn't look me in the eye. I knew he wanted me to forgive him. It wasn't something I could do." This country can maintain no distinction between moral and military duty. Haim, who usually speaks in Jewish moral terms, speaks here as a citizen soldier.

Yet, on an opposite note, there is this: on his first leave, when the yeshiva teachers and students ask Haim what he experienced, he tells them that Gidi, their colonel, put the men on four-hour night shifts to guard against the surrounding Syrian commandos, but took the first watch himself and only woke them in the morning. Asked what happened, Gidi had said shyly, "You looked so tired and you're so young. You're babies, all of you. How was I going to wake you?"

In Sabato's telling, indeed, the war cements the interdependence between religious and secular. "Gunner, pray! We're taking fire!" the irreligious Gidi shouts during battle. The narrator says, "I prayed. There wasn't a hair's breadth then between my heart and my lips. I had never prayed like that before." Neither of these two men expects prayer to save him from the Syrian attack; prayer is no longer an investment in their common security but the strongest expression of their national imperative.

The religious context of this book, as of all Sabato's fiction, is always in danger of being misunderstood by those who identify faith with certitude. Hillel Halkin, the book's superb translator and himself both a scholar and a novelist, observed that Sabato may have missed an opportunity by not having his narrator undergo a crisis of doubt. Agnon, Halkin, and every Jewish writer in the European literary tradition would undoubtedly have exposed the pious Jewish narrator to the kind of challenges that the Enlightenment bequeathed to Ashkenazim. Where is God when history seems to be crushing His people? Where is Haim's disbelief?

As if anticipating such reactions, Sabato builds them into his work. Here a team of investigators—an intelligence debriefer, a military historian, and an army psychologist—arrives from Tel Aviv to document the experiences of Haim's unit during the war. The trio records every military mistake and psychological breakdown during the deadly Syrian ambush, including the horrors of friendly fire. But in their ensuing private discussion, one of the soldiers remembers that, when reciting the evening prayer, Haim had related what he had learned in the yeshiva about God's promise: "The people of Israel will triumph, even if there is no telling what will happen to any one of us." Looking back, Haim as the book's narrator now explains his thinking:

Ḥanan and Rami stood listening. I don't know if I convinced them intellectually. I wasn't trying to. I was speaking from the heart to encourage them. To encourage myself too. Ḥanan looked at me and said, "I hope you're right." After the war he said to me, "I envied you then for your belief. It must have made things easier for you." "I'm not so sure," I told him.

We are "not so sure," either, because the demands of Jewish faith may be even heavier than the onerous burdens of citizenship. After the war, Ḥanan and Rami did not feel personally obliged, as the actual Ḥaim did, to establish a yeshiva that would train others like themselves. In addition to truthfully reporting on the war, Sabato's book, like Ḥaim in that passage, situates it in the eternity of Israel.

II. From the Four Winds

The Yom Kippur War figures very differently in the 2008 novel *From the Four Winds (Bo'i ha-Ruah)*, which is written as fictional autobiography by a narrator who this time openly identifies as Ḥaim. Situated in the immigrant neighborhood where he lived as a child, the novel is a unique work of cultural appropriation. For years, Israelis of European background had been incorporating and "mainstreaming" Sephardi and Mizraḥi influences in music, dance, food, popular culture, and religious customs. This time, Sabato probes the "sadness" of the Ashkenazim he meets, and takes over their story.

Without changing his narrative style or raising his voice, Sabato adjusts his sights to focus on the Hungarian fellow-immigrants in the housing project who had arrived about a decade earlier than his family, many of them survivors of the war in Europe. He singles out Farkash, whom we might call a community organizer, who befriends Ḥaim as a child and, as he gradually recognizes the boy's leadership potential, entrusts him bit by bit with the stories of his life.

As Ḥaim learns about this neighbor, his retold tales are interwoven into a Mizraḥi novel of the Shoah. Since Sabato gleaned such information from other sources, well-informed readers may know before Ḥaim does what horrors in her past may account for the strange behavior of the woman whom the children chase as a "witch." They may have read elsewhere stories like the one Farkash heard from his father, a soldier in World War I, who on his deathbed told about having bayoneted a German enemy soldier only to hear him cry, "*Shma Yisroel*, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One!"

When Farkash unburdens himself of this memory, he says, "Father's story wounded my heart for my entire life. I have never recounted it to anyone. Even my children don't know. . . ." Ḥaim's assigned task is to be the intermediary who truthfully relays the unspeakable story to the next generation of Israelis, extracting some of the horror, guilt, and pain.

Can such knowledge really console? Can Sabato help heal the fresh wounds by reminding us of what Jews have already endured and by ensuring us that the losses of the Shoah are being absorbed? Strength comes in this book with the transfusion of these stories into the

bloodstream of an integrated people. In *Adjusting Sights*, Mizrahi Haim and Ashkenazi Dov are joined through their faith in God and in mutual defense. Here Farkash gradually unburdens himself to Haim of memories and agonies he would not directly impart to his children lest it poison their lives. As a story-telling conduit between the generations, Haim in the novel serves for the connections that Sabato supplies through the novel. (Indeed I can attest that it was easier to encounter the horrors of the European Jewish past through Sabato's gentle filter than in the dozens of first-hand accounts I have read.)

III. The Dawning of the Day

Sabato apparently had one literary ambition even greater than his beloved Agnon's, which was to write a novel about a genuinely good man.

The modern European novel was born of the conflict between the individual who suddenly emerges in history and the society that had heretofore been indifferent to his or her personal desires. The more fallible the hero and heroine, the greater the writer's opportunity to probe all of the aspects of their lives and fates. Who could possibly be interested in a novel with the motto, "The integrity of the upright will guide them" (Proverbs 11:3)? Yet it is impossible not to be interested in *The Dawning of the Day* (English translation 2006), Sabato's novel about an upright Jerusalem Jew named Ezra Siman Tov. For with it, Sabato, inspired by Agnon's marriage of Jewish religious language to modern storytelling, manages to write liturgical literature in modern storytelling form.

In *The Dawning of the Day*, Sabato returns to his original pattern, stringing tales like pearls to form a narrative chain. His great-uncle, "one of the most pure-minded men of old Jerusalem," was especially fond of stories about Ezra Siman Tov, another Jerusalemite who loved to tell stories that others loved to hear. Ezra works in a laundry that specializes in washable religious fabrics. His loving marriage, his daily recitation of prayers and psalms, his generous disposition convey the profound pleasure of living as a Jew. The purpose of Judaism is said to be the good life, and Ezra is its literary demonstration.

But Sabato must have worried that this was too much of a good thing. He warns, "If you were to think Ezra had only good days, you would be greatly mistaken." Some of Ezra's trials arise from those with higher credentials, who suffer from their own fragilities. His brother-in-law, a scholar of their common Sephardi literary heritage, doesn't think that Ezra can truly appreciate the work of the great medieval poet Shlomo ibn Gabirol that he has been reciting all his life. But when this man is awarded a prize for a truly original work, the university president praises him in terms that arouse suspicion: "It seemed to him as if they were saying, if you want to win an award these days, all you have to do is to be a Sephardi or write on the Sephardi cultural legacy." Similarly, the Talmud scholar Moishe Dovid, who spends his days immersed in the difficulties of a single passage, is disturbed by Ezra's soft singing of the psalms in another corner of their study house. Both of these men, in their bouts of despair, are nurtured by Ezra's tales and Ezra's presence. And then there is the unnamed famous local

writer—everything points to Agnon—who hangs around Ezra when he is stuck for a subject, hoping to pick up a story.

Literacy figures so prominently in the Jewish tradition that its folklore often compensates by contrasting the clever man adversely with the simple one. Here, Ezra's way of life is accorded ever more authority as each of these cultural "betters" recognizes the simpler man's importance to them.

This brings us back, however briefly, to the relation of Sabato to Agnon, whose similarity lies in their infusion of traditional sources into modern fiction, but who differ in the way they combine those elements. Because European Jews discovered "enlightenment" or Haskalah in what seemed to them the more highly developed surrounding cultures, the Yiddish and Hebrew writers felt they were entering what I.L.Peretz called "their *beys medrish*," their house of study. Their literature was a response to the rupture, the estrangement caused by that disturbance. Agnon is a modernist writer who integrates religious texts and elements into his work. Like the unnamed great writer in this novel, he loves Ezra's traditional story telling as inspiration for his more complicated stuff.

The Jewish writer in the Arab world experienced no such inferiority. Sabato is delighted to include modern fiction as a new supplementary form of Jewish writing. His work integrates what was broken; he works under the sign not of the agunah but of the wife in the ideal Jewish marriage. He makes us believe in the reality of what we have been raised to believe in.

Meanwhile, however, Ezra Siman Tov, the hero of this novel, suffers some of the same losses as those recorded in Diaspora fiction. At the end of the book, we finally learn the story of his daughter, who causes her father the same unmentionable agony that Chava does her father, Sholem Aleichem's Tevye the Dairyman. (Ezra's had followed Christian missionaries to a presumably higher calling.) And although Ezra is a Jerusalem native, he also suffers on a smaller scale a displacement like the one confronting many other Jews of his generation when the neighborhood with his home and workplace are torn up for "development." To rouse him when he succumbs to grief, his wife says, "Don't you always tell me, *generations come and generations go, but the earth endureth forever?*" (Ecclesiastes 1:4) His wife's citation does not immediately soothe him, but this is how they endure whatever life brings.

In other words, Ezra continues to live in joy not because fate has spared him the experiences of his fellow Jews but because he carries within himself the words and the melody of the Psalms, the wisdom of Maimonides, the beauties of the liturgy, supplemented by the regenerative teachings of the local rabbi. Sabato shows us through his cumulative repertoire how the faithful Jew can continue to greet the dawning of each new day.

When I mentioned to my son Billy that reading Sabato had exposed me to the calming wisdom of Aleppo Jewry, he reminded me that this is also how the classicist and biblical scholar James Kugel, in his primer *On Being a Jew* (1990), uses as his pseudonymous figure of authority one Albert Abbad, a wise Aleppo banker. In the book, a young American about to intermarry asks this friend of the family to intercede with his disapproving parents, and is treated instead to the man's explanations of why he will not do such a thing and why the boy should change course. Looking for such wise instruction in a Jewish framework, Kugel found it in the Sephardi and Mizrahi heritage.

Syrian Jews may roll their eyes, thinking of less complimentary attributes associated with their tribe, but these are persuasive characters in whom we trust. Ezra Siman Tov, the Jerusalem launderer, like Albert Abbadi the Syrian banker, offers the anxious modern Jew a place of refuge. In Sabato's fiction, that blessed place is to be found physically in the integrated Jewish nation-state of Israel.