

# FOREVERMORE & OTHER STORIES

S.Y. AGNON

EDITED AND ANNOTATED BY  
JEFFREY SAKS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
YOSL BERGNER

*The Toby Press*

# Under the Tree

**O**NCE UPON A TIME I WAS FETCHING saplings to Degania. On the way I got off the donkey in order to rest. Looking round I saw a worthy old Arab lord sitting under an olive tree. I greeted him and he greeted me in return.

Where are you going? said the old pasha to me.

To plant a few trees on our land at Degania, said I to him.

The day, said he, is still long and the sun is hot, sit with me for a while and let us have a chat. I went and sat down beside him. The pasha looked at my sapling and asked: A fresh fruit?

With your permission, sir, said I to him.

The pasha nodded and said, you are training the country well, experiment after experiment, plant after plant, tree after tree, vegetable after vegetable. I shall be surprised if you come to lack anything at all in it.

We do what is possible, said I.

The pasha nodded and said, and the land repays you. It seems to me that the land obeys you alone.

Your kindness opens the heart, said I.

Thereupon the pasha began praising Israel who transform the wildernesses of *Eretz Yisrael* into gardens and groves, and multiply villages and dwelling-places in the country.

Now I nodded in agreement with him and said to myself: When Israel are on the land, even the other nations praise him. Happy is he

who devotes himself to the Land and engages in its settlement, for all who devote themselves to the Land and engage in its settlement devote themselves and declare the unity of His Great Name in Heaven and Earth and increase the honor of Israel, like a plant that is put into the ground and flourishes and mounts aloft.

I see, the pasha now said to me, that you are wise and He who made you gave you knowledge. So I shall ask you – tell me, to whom is this land appointed and who will take the ruling of it over in the future?

I considered to myself what answer I should give him. If I were to tell him “The Earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof,” meaning that the Lord had given it to whom He saw fit, then there is the other verse: “And He gave the Earth to humankind,” which could be taken to mean that the Lord had given it to those men who dwell therein. And if I were to tell him that he who seizes power therein would continue to be in power – that would be a deceitful answer, since this land is ours and the Holy One is going to return it to us in the future, and no other nation can rule therein save Israel. So I said to him: Do you need me to answer, sir? Why, surely you know to whom it was that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Land of Israel, and to whom He has promised to return it.

The pasha lowered his head between his knees and gave no reply. I thought that I might have annoyed him and said, It is not I who said it, but the Torah which declares it.

The pasha raised his head and said: I am one of the few remaining generals of our Lord and King, the Great Sultan, may he rest in peace and blessing. Many a city did I lay waste in his name, many people did I slay in his honor. I taxed whole provinces and earned myself a great name in the name of the pitiful and ever-merciful God, and Allah viewed me favorably and opened His hands and made me satisfied. But when I had come to think that the world was created only to rejoice therein, the sovereign powers attacked our Lord the Sultan and went to war against him. I remembered my victories, with the regiments of soldiers roaring and shouting and trampling. Thereupon my fate sped me to go out to war against the enemy, whether to win or be defeated. I left my home and kissed my children and went to our Lord the King and knelt down before him and entrusted my soul into his hands, saying: Peace be unto

you, my Lord King. May Allah's blessing rise about you. With your permission, O Ruler of the faithful, even a blunt sword in a weak hand can smite the enemy hip and thigh. The King looked at me and said: Ibrahim Bey, Take your hosts and go to wage war against the unbelievers, do not spare them and have no pity upon them and do not rest your head upon the pillow until you have destroyed them under the skies of my country. When I heard this, my heart began to sound like the voice of cornets while my eyes flashed like swords. I set my hand to my eyes and heart and fell to my knees again and said: Allah's shelter and Allah's messenger come to our Lord the King, as Allah hath said and His emissary and the emissary of His emissary, so shall Ibrahim your servant perform and do, O Ruler of all the Faithful. The King gave me his blessing, may Allah's blessing rest upon him, and suffered me to depart in peace. Ere the sun had reached the West all we valiant men had gathered together and set out to make war against the foe.

The battle-field was on the flanks of the desert. We had all that we required of water and food, horses and camels, asses and mules, swords and lances and bows, and all the other instruments of war, so that the desert gleamed with them; and we came to do battle against the foe.

The foe appeared before us with all kinds of weapons. All the instruments of Satan were in his hands. Now the foemen were stronger and now we held sway, and it was almost certain that they would fall into our hands.

But the unbelievers fought bravely for their lives. Some reeled and fell and some rose refreshed, and the war was great and bitter. Swords and lances flashed and iron clashed with iron, lopped heads went spinning while hacked arms flew far and wide, man and beast were trodden underfoot and the whole earth was flowing with blood. The legs of the beasts slipped and they fell away under their riders, they were blinded by the blood of the corpses and went crazy, while the instruments of Satan roared and shrieked and rent and slew. He who fell did not rise up, while he who crouched down was crushed. At the last only vestiges of all the hosts were left on either side.

But we did not turn away from the foes, nor did they turn away from us. They gathered the remains of their soldiers and came against us in a torrent of rage, while we leapt towards them in a fury of vengeance.

The cavalry flung themselves against them first, then came the infantry and all the other troops. There was a vast slaughter on that day. Many fell by the sword and many were swept away in that flood of fire and brimstone and lead. As for those who fled from the fighting, we destroyed them and closed the roads. In that way our armies became divided. Some remained to guard the prisoners and bury the dead while others went forth to destroy those who had fled to the mountains and the wilderness.

For three days we went on slaying. At length we reached a spot we did not know. Our camels and our horses fell and the earth began to give off a stench. The food and water-carriers were three days journey away from us. All we had with us were skins and canteens which did not contain much. The weapons of war were a burden on the men and the skins and canteens did not contain water. The day flamed like an oven and there was no shadow for any creature. Not in the heavens alone was the sun enkindled, but it made the whole earth below seethe likewise. If you raised your head you were burned. If you lowered your face you were scorched. Of the enemies of the faithful there was no vestige, some had been driven off stupefied while some lay as dead carcasses, and Allah alone knows their number, while their corpses and the carcasses of our beasts went on raising more and more of a stench.

As for us, our life was no life either. No food was left and our canteens contained only enough to moisten the mouth. We raised our eyes up. There were only sandhills and stonehills. We turned our faces to the ground. The whole earth was like white fire. There were no trees, there was no spring, no beast or bird. Apart from the desert thorns there was nothing that grew. These thorns are not fit to be eaten even by camels, but as for us, as soon as we saw them each one thrust his head into their midst and sucked at them as a Christian sucking at swine-flesh, until their thorns entered into our tongues which became like cactus leaves.

Then our spirits fell and we cursed the hour that had brought us thither, and we cried: Alas, whither have we come. If Allah does not provide us with water and food then we are lost. Let us pray before Him, for He may accept our prayer and deliver us from destruction. Thereupon we raised our eyes aloft and said: There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is the messenger of Allah. We removed the thorns from our

tongues and pressed and embraced the empty water-skins and canteens so that they might give us water, but none came out. We bit the skins with our teeth but there was only air. March we could not, for we had lost the way. We took counsel and climbed up a lofty hill, in case Allah might reveal a spring or tree or plant to us from there.

Yet all the places which we saw were like the place from which we came. No tree grew, no spring gurgled, no bird flew, no kid bleated, hill was entwined with hill and wilderness with wilderness. We flung away our weapons and sat down bitter of spirit. This sitting was worst of all. Our limbs grew rusty and our tongues shrivelled like a water-skin whose waters have dried.

Have we anything to eat? I asked my comrades. Shriveled water-skins, they answered. Cook them, said I, and we shall eat them. So we set the butts of our weapons on fire and roasted the water-skins.

When the water-skins were at an end we roasted our boots. As there was nothing left we went downhill. Yet all our descent was like a mall who leaves one desert for another. The sun reached the west and the day grew dark. We hoped for a refreshing breeze, night came but not refreshment or ease. The moon and stars stood weary in the firmament. The sand had not been cooled and an aimless wind was caught amid the hills. Nor was the night that followed any better. An aimless wind held sway all night long. There was no change whatsoever in the air. That night there was a great fury in our hearts. We had been hoping to moisten our lips at night with the dew and to cool our bones, yet it was as parched as the day. We gazed aloft, and it seemed as though the moon and the stars and the planets were suffering as we did.

The third watch came. Stars and planets sank down in the firmament and a light breeze began to blow. As soon as the sun came out this likewise heated up. At the last it partnered with the whirlwind. We hid our faces in the ground, wrapped up in our robes, and wept for ourselves because of the desert wind. I sat thus for as long as I sat, with my face to the ground and my eyes turned low. I, at whose glance, vast hosts of soldiers had trembled, feared to raise my head against a grain of sand. They had been fine, those days when I had headed my men and all had feared my word. The days had been fine when I had been at home and my men servants and maidservants had stood about to serve

me, one raising a glowing coal to light the nargila, and another fanning me, while the fountains in the garden sprayed their water round about like a crown of dew.

I shook myself at length, rose to my feet, removed my coat, raised my voice and said: Come on, stand up. But my words were like a voice falling in a graveyard. My companions all lay dead, and those who had not yet died were as good as dead.

Thereupon I also wished to die. I remembered all the treasures and delights of Time which had formerly assembled together on my behalf. Now all of a sudden I was deprived of everything and was giving up my soul in the heart of the desert where there was no water to purify my corpse nor attendants to bury me. I raised mine eyes aloft and said, There is no God save God, let Him do with me whatever has been decreed for me.

But the Angel of Death had no wish as yet to set his hands on this man who is now talking. While I was still mourning for my household who were left without a master and for my children whom I was rendering orphans, I heard a sigh and saw that several of my comrades were quivering and moving.

O my brethren, said I, Allah has left you so that you should hot perish in the desert. Hold out a little longer and let us mount yonder hill. If our descent serves no purpose, it may be that our ascent will have some purpose.

In this way I stood between the living and the dead, now raising my voice, and now whispering to myself, in order not to disturb my comrades for I had already despaired of their arising, but so that I should feel that I myself had not perished. At last I also grew silent. My tongue still moved convulsively, but my lips were silent.

Yet Allah brought the sound to the ears of my comrades. Little by little, slowly and swayingly, several of them rose to their feet in order to proceed.

Ere we departed we covered the dead with sand, may God's mercies and blessing rest upon them and all the faithful, and we said the prayer for the dead over them. We had no water to wash their bodies. May Allah cleanse them of their transgressions and make their judgment and our own more easy.

That hill was steep and smooth. Even a flea would have slipped and fallen. Ere we had reached the hill-top, my companions had fallen and rolled down and broke their limbs, so that nothing was left of us save myself and three companions.

When we had reached the hill-top we stood looking down at fields and vineyards, and date-palms, flocks and herds. Sweet breezes were blowing and bringing the fine scent and fragrance of spices and springs of water. I raised my eyes aloft and said: Blessed is He who counseled my heart to ascend, all lauds and praise to the Laudable and Praiseworthy who brought us hither. We have only to go down and we are saved.

Yet the descent was twice as hard as the ascent. Even a person who had not seen what befell our companions would have feared lest he became but a heap of bones – and this most assuredly we felt who had seen men rolling and falling down, some with broken heads and some with smashed and broken limbs. And yet those breezes bearing sweet scents restored our spirit for us until the desire of life returned to our soul.

Let us make ourselves legs, said I to my companions, and descend. If we get there alive it will be good, and if not, then better fall in an inhabited place than in a desert. For if we perish amid human beings they will bury us and if we perish in the desert then birds of prey will consume us like the idolaters, may God curse them, who leave their dead to the birds of the heavens. My companions at once agreed, saying, you have spoken well. If we die we shall die among human beings who will bury us, while if we live we shall return to our own places in order to comfort our households and kiss our children. So each one took his soul in his own hand, and we went down on our hands and feet. Within a few moments we found ourselves standing in an inhabited place of gardens and groves, amid date-palms and other good trees and waving grain and a countryside running with water. Yet it seemed as though all our toil had been only in order that we should fall below. For while we were standing there my comrades fell in their tracks, and I also fell without knowing whether I was alive or dead.

I lay there as long as I lay without the strength to move a limb, and assuredly unable to stand up. My eyes closed and my body began to make a hollow in the ground below like a man who digs himself a

pit and the earth receives him and holds him entrapped. If this is death, thought I to myself, then there is nothing better. I wished to ask my companions, what do you feel? Yet there was a weariness within me which caused me not to open my mouth.

While I was lying there I heard a little kid bleating from the pasture, not the blast of trumpets nor the sound of people roaring and trampling. My soul returned to me and I slept. It seemed to me that I had returned home from the war and found my household established and my children alive. I greeted them and they greeted me in return. I kissed them and said, All lauds and praises to the Most Laudable and Praiseworthy, here I am with you and I shall not depart from you again until my end comes and I arise to my fate. I sat tranquilly and comforted my household and begat children upon children, and Allah rejoiced my heart and satisfied my desires. Yet all my tranquility did not last long. I heard the sound of warfare and forgot what must not be forgotten and forsook my household to go forth against the enemy. And there I went on slaying until I had raised up a whole hill of dead. While I was standing up to my knees in blood, the earth trembled as though the ground were opening its mouth to swallow me up. I realized that I had departed from the world and was being led away to Gehenna, to be taken down to the lowest hells. I reminded Him on High of the wars that I had waged against the Unbelievers and how many of them I had slain in order that I might achieve merit on the Day of Judgment and ease my transgressions for me, and I cried, God is God...

Ere I had said "and Mohamed is His messenger," two men came who were tall as cedars and the lances in their hands were like date-palms that support the sky. And then I knew that the noise had come only from the sound of their feet. If they have come for peace, said I to myself, they have come only at the command of the Creator in order to deliver me from hunger and thirst. But if they have to do battle, then it is honor for a brave man to perish at the hands of these warriors.

Yet Allah found his believers worthy to have the secrets of the world revealed to them, and gave us strength and courage to remain alive until He His own Lofty Self resolves to take back our souls. I raised my eyes aloft in wonder at His creatures, may He be exalted, but they bent down to us and opened a water jar and moistened my lips and asked

me a question. When they saw that we had no strength they picked us up in their hands and took us to their places, a place of tents which was as large about as the expanses of the streets of Damascus and Istanbul. Then they asked us once more whatever they asked us in a tongue that was like your own language. I looked about and saw men wearing cut and dyed garments bearing all kinds of weapons. Then I knew that we were among the tribe of Khaybar, who rule in all those parts and have no sultan over them save from their own midst, and who fear no kingdom save the Kingdom of Heaven. I blessed the Blessed Allah who had brought us to them, since a covenant had once been made of old between Mohammed the messenger of Allah and this tribe of Khaybar. If our companions had held out a little while they would have come hither with us and would have rejoiced their souls with those things that Allah has created in this world. But Allah the Exalted does good to His creatures according to His own loving-kindness, decreeing thus for this one and thus for that one. He had decreed that our companions should fall in the desert, but for us we had decreed that we should live and enjoy His goodness in this world.

While we were sitting they brought us water to drink which tasted like the morning dew upon the mountains. After we had drunk and given thanks to Him who hath created good springs wherewith to restore the souls of His Believers, they set coffee before us. Much coffee had I drunk in my life, but never in all my days had I drunk coffee such as this, although I have often sat with great emirs and he who is set over them, our Lord and ruler the Sultan, may God show him all due mercy. After we had sat a while they brought us a broth, not of the flesh of beast or fowl nor of fish or vermin but of greenstuff – for during those years that they dwelt in the wilderness they did not put out their hands to slay any living animal but were sustained from the earth and the fruits thereof. At the last they prepared soft couches for us. We lay down to sleep and lay all that night and all the following day until the sun set and it became night and it was time to fall asleep again. Then they came and spread a table before us and set all kind of food upon it; today a little, tomorrow more, then after the morrow more and more till flesh grew about our bones and our strength returned. Likewise they clothed and shod us and gave each of us a headcloth and a girdle to set about our heads.

We spent two weeks with them in this way and I saw things beyond the telling of any tongue. Yet I wish to tell you a little of what I saw. They are as many as the sands of the desert, and are dressed in noble garments and wrapped in woolen shawls with fringes and ride upon horses as befits the noble. Their neighbors are subject to them and pay them taxes, yet they hold their neighbors only in the way that the awe of a man is felt within his household. And every one of them is a warrior that is worth ten warriors. There are some among them who can take an Arab in hand as he rides on horseback and fling them both aloft, flinging Arab and receiving horse, flinging the horse and receiving the Arab, without either of them touching the ground. When it is daytime each man goes to his field and vineyard and dates and cattle. When it is night he comes and sits down before the elders to hearken to the Torah of Moses your master. And their wives and daughters sit in their tents and cook and bake and milk the cattle and prepare buttermilk and cheese and spin and weave and sew and roll out bread and do not show their faces without, in order that men might not be led to ill thoughts on their account – for Allah has adorned appearance more than all women and has made them boundlessly beautiful and full of grace. There are women whose bodies are beautiful yet who have no charm and there are women with charm whose bodies are not beautiful. Yet among them the bodies are beautiful and the charm is also great. Some of them are like the sun in its radiance, for whosoever gazes at them is dazzled, and some are like the moon at its full, for whoever gazes at them becomes moonstruck. They do not cover their faces as our women do, for Allah has fashioned them a veil of honor and modesty, and no man looks upon them save their husbands. Each one of them rises early in the morning for prayer and they pray three times a day; and while they pray they turn their faces to Jerusalem. And on the Sabbath they do not leave their tents, but sit night and day praising His Lofty Name who has given them Sabbaths for rest. And they add part of the week-day to the Sabbath, both before and after. And ere the Sabbath begins they take off their weekly clothes and put down their weapons because the Sabbath protects them; and they put on golden array and light oil lamps, two for each; but in their tent of prayer they light twelve lamps, and they welcome the Sabbath as a man who welcomes the King to his home, and they make feasts in honor of

it, singing songs and praises at each of these feasts. At the first feast they mention the name of Abraham, may he rest in peace, at the second the name of Isaac, may he rest in peace, and at the third the name of Jacob, may he rest in peace. And at the Sabbath close they all gather together and eat and drink and rejoice, bringing a gold chair and a large golden crown set with jewels and precious stones; and on the seat they set an elder garbed in finest pure gold array with sixty warriors running before him and sixty warriors running behind. And they shout and blow their trumpets and play their musical instruments and cry, "David, King of Israel, lives forever." Thereupon all Israel come out of their tents at once and respond after them, "David, King of Israel, lives forever," while all the women peep out at them from the openings of the tents, and he claps his hands together and says "Kingship is the Lord's." At this two elders come forth, one fetching him a staff and another a pack. Then he descends from his throne and enters the sheepfolds where he feeds the kids and the goats. And he removes the royal robe from about him and the crown from on his head, and swathes himself in his shawl and goes to the elders and says: "My masters, I come but to learn." Thereupon the warriors put down their swords and put on their weekly clothes and go forth to their work. One goes to his field and one to his vineyard and dates, and one to his flocks and cattle, until God brings the Sabbath back to them.

In this way we dwelt with the tribe of Khaybar and saw their strength and bravery and righteousness and generosity and loving-kindness, so that I forgot the arrows of war and all my victories and honor and glory in the lands of the Believers, and rejoiced to have been brought to these noble ones of the people of the God of Abraham. May the Blessed One bless His blessed with His blessings.

Yet one can forget everything except the roof of the house which he saw for the first time when his mother gave birth to him. Ere long the Master of Dreams came and showed me my home and its chimney, and I smelt the scent of food cooked there and desired them with the longing of a pregnant woman.

What befell me also befell my companions. Day by day they desired more greatly to return to their places and drink the waters of their wells and eat the butter-milk of their flocks and teach their children the good qualities which they had learnt in the land of the Khaybar.

Allah looked into our hearts. One day He brought us to a certain tent more handsome than all the others, with three elders seated in it whose faces were bright and shining as the light that was created on the First Day. And their beards were like hanging clusters of dates. We were in awe of them at once, and fell on our faces and kissed the dust at their feet and said, We are your servants. I saw that they did not understand our tongue and I began to talk every language that I knew. The elders shook their beards and I knew that they would sooner hear the talk of beasts and animals and fowls than the tongues of the Unbelievers. Yet it could be seen from their faces that they had nothing against us at heart.

When we saw this, the souls within us were enlarged and we gave thanks to Him who is worthy of all thanksgiving and we kissed the dust at their feet again, and said, God's shelter to His warriors and honor to His elders.

Ere the day was out they set us on swift camels and returned us to our own places. It may be in three hours or in two hours or in one hour that we covered a journey of many weeks and many days. And they parted from us in peace. God's shelter and His peace be upon them.

I entered my home and said, Peace be with you, my children. But my greeting was orphaned. Ere I had come my children had departed and had not returned. Likewise my friends did not come to greet me. My sons and brothers had had the one fate. Both alike had perished in the war. Likewise our Lord the Sultan had returned his spirit to the God of Spirits. Likewise the kings who had waged war against him had died, some of them at their own hands and some at the hands of others. Time had not ended but kings had come to an end. Yet that cry "David, King of Israel, lives forever" still resounds within my ears. Sometimes it is like a flaming fire and sometimes it is as sweet as the shadow of a date palm.

I know for whom *Eretz Yisrael* is set in store. It is intended only for Israel. Yet for whom of Israel – those unto whom the Exalted Creator gave magnificence and honor and strength and bravery and generosity and loving-kindness and who do His Exalted Will out of love, they are the ones who will take over the rule therein in the future. And their rule and kingdom will continue forever and ever.

I rose to my feet and said: Blessed be the Lord God of Israel who permitted you to see what you have seen. Happy are we that you too know

for whom *Eretz Yisrael* is intended. It was good for Israel to safeguard their Torah, and esteem it above all things in the land of which it is written, "And ye shall inherit it and ye shall dwell therein and shall observe to do all the statutes," save that the day is short and the work is plentiful. The All-and Ever-Present has imposed many labors upon us. We must plough and sow and harvest and set up sheaves and thresh and winnow, and plant and hoe and pick the vintage and tread the grapes, and prune the tree and beat the olives, we must feed beasts and fowl and shear the sheep and watch over our soil and labor against the destroyers and the thieves. Yet dwelling in the land of Israel is a great deed, equivalent to all the commandments of the Torah. I am now going to take these plants on my shoulder in order to plant them in our land, as it is written, "And they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine and they shall make gardens and eat the fruits thereof and I shall plant them on their land and they shall never more be I plucked away from their land which I have given them, saith the Lord thy God." The Holy and Blessed One has made His planting dependent upon our planting. If we engage in our planting, then it is certain and sure that the planting of the Holy One will last and continue. The whole world belongs to God, and He has shared it out to His creatures according to His will. Esau and Ishmael have taken the fullness of the world and slay one another and destroy one another for the kingdom which they would seize. But we have received this little land from His blessed hand. We have not come to seize kingdom or to hold dominion in it, but to plough and sow and plant.

The pasha did not understand all I had said. He had spent but a little time with the Jews of Khaybar and had not had opportunity to learn much. Yet from his face it was plain that my words seemed reasonable to him.

And so we sat as long as we sat, until day declined and the evening breeze began to blow. The pasha rose and bade me farewell in peace.

As he was about to turn away from me he looked at my sapling and asked: In how many years will it bear fruit?

I told him. He sighed and said: I shall not eat of it, but you and your children and your children's children will eat of them.

By the grace of the Holy and Blessed One, said, I looking upwards.

– *Translated by I.M. Lask*