

A. M. KLEIN  
**THE SECOND  
SCROLL**

Introduction by Sidney Feshbach

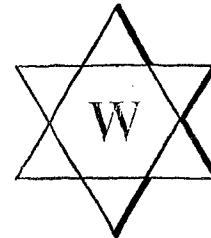
*... And ask a Talmudist what ails the  
modesty of his marginal Keri that Moses  
and all the prophets cannot persuade him  
to pronounce the textual Chetiv.*

—JOHN MILTON

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**E X O D U S**



WHEN as a young boy, the consolations and prophecies of Isaiah before me, I dreamed in the dingy Hebrew school the apocalyptic dream of a renewed Zion, always I imagined it as coming to pass thus: First I heard the roar and thunder of the battle of Gog and Magog; then, as silence fell, I saw through my mind's eye a great black aftermath cloud filling the heavens across the whole length of the humped horizon. The cloud then began to scatter, to be diminished, to subside, until revealed there shone the glory of a burnished dome—Hierosolyma the golden! Then lower it descended and lower, a mere breeze dispersed it, and clear was the horizon and before me there extended an undulating sunlit landscape.

My childhood vision, no doubt the result of a questionable amalgam between Hollywood and Holy Writ, was indeed fulfilled; but not in all its details and particularities. The cataclysmic war was there, the smoke, the thud and brunt of battle; but

no golden dome. What was to be seen instead on the fifth day of Iyar was a forgathered company of men hitherto obscure, as anonymous as the *Bnai Brak*, who too had spent a night expatiating upon the miracles of exodus, met in surroundings not palatial, in a city which forty years earlier had had neither being nor name, to announce to the world on behalf of a people for whom they were as yet *noms de plume*, hardly *noms de guerre*, that henceforward in the domain of their forefathers they, nullifying all hiatus, intended to be, beneath the sovereignty of the All-Sovereign, sovereign.

My life was, and is, bound to the country of my father's choice, to Canada; but this intelligence, issuing, as it did, from that quarter of the globe which had ever been to me the holiest of the map's bleeding stigmata, the Palestine whose geography was as intimately known as the lines of the palm of my hand, filled me with pride, with exaltation, with an afflatus odorous of the royal breath of Solomon. I was like one that dreamed. I, surely, had not been of the captivity; but when the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, I was like one that dreamed.

My dreaming was given a dream's authenticity when after the first year of the Stablishing my publisher invited me to undertake, for my spiritual advantage and his profit, a pilgrimage to Israel. It would be a good idea, he thought, if at this conjuncture in history I were to produce, after sojourn-

ing in the land, a volume of translations of the poems and songs of Israel's latest nest of singing birds. I was the only man, he flattered me, who could assume so difficult a task, I "whose translation from the Hebrew had ranged all the way"—he was already composing his blurb—"from the writings of the warbling *ibns* of the golden age of Spain to the pious stanzas of the convert Elisheva." Both his argument and his flattery were superfluous; on any excuse I was ready to make the journey.

Began, then, my hectic preparations, with visits to consulates, and cajolings of foreign-exchange bureaucrats, and submissions to the needles of doctors. One has to suffer to earn Jerusalem. Scarified I was, accordingly, against smallpox, punctured against typhus, pierced for tetanus, injected for typhoid, and needled with cholera; wounds and bruises were mine, and putrefying sores, which were not closed nor bound up nor mollified with ointment. The world, say the old liturgies, is full of "wild beasts that lie in wait"; these, my doctors thought, included not only the ravenous ones of the forest, the traveler's usual terror, but also the minute destroyers of the air: germs, viruses, microbes; against their encounter they pointillated upon my arms their prescribed prophylactic prayers.

My itinerary had already been arranged: I was to fly from New York, via Paris and Rome, to Lydda; and my passport had been duly visaed: it bore No. 9

of the records of the Israeli consul at Montreal—I was of the first *minyán*—when there arrived on my desk a fat heavily postmarked envelope. It had obviously been directed to my old address on the Avenue de l’Hôtel de Ville, whence we had removed not more than twenty years before, and was full of scrawled notations attesting to the blindman’s buff that the post office had played before it had finally stumbled upon my actual whereabouts. Its return address was indicated as *Bari, Italia*, and its sender was Melech Davidson, not designated Signor—Uncle Melech.

It was like a voice from the beyond.\* Eagerly I tore the envelope open and began reading the letter. I did not have to read very far to realize that this was not the Uncle Melech of my last imagining, the girded champion of the revolution. Even in its opening greetings, where I had expected to encounter the comradely salute, I noted the abandonment of the Marxist jargon. Instead Uncle Melech had reverted to the epistolary style of his Talmudic days and had addressed my mother, his sister, as “the virtuous woman prized above rubies,” and my father as “the keen blade of jurisprudence, familiar of the Law, mighty hammer of Torah.” The date he set down “with the help of God” as “the new moon of

\* Premonition there had been, for it was shortly before the reception of this letter that I had composed my kinsmen’s *Elegy*. See *Gloss Beth*, page 127.

Tammuz, five thousand seven hundred and nine, which in the reckoning of the ethnics is 1949.”

There came back to me, as I read the letter, the recollection of my father’s perusal of Uncle Melech’s last communication, and I could not prevent the tearfulness that threatened to blur my vision. My father had passed on to his reward many years ago; my mother, lingering awhile—to gather up the things my father had forgotten?—followed some time thereafter; and this letter, intended for them, now came to me as last asset of my inheritance.

The Hebrew greeting ended, the letter continued in Yiddish:

“I pray your forgiveness for not having written to you all these years; nor will I enter now into explanations for my silence. It is too late for explanations.” (Did Uncle Melech know?) “It is surely not because I haven’t thought of you, it is because—let us say that it is because, having taken upon myself the yoke of exile, I deemed it also my duty that I should sunder myself from kith and kin. As if that were ever possible. . . . In the light of all that has happened, I know now that I was in error, in grievous error. Forgive.

“Today I write as one who having fled from out a burning building runs up and down the street to seek, to find, to embrace the kinsmen who were with him in that conflagration and were saved. And we were all in that burning world, even you who

were separated from it by the Atlantic—that futile bucket.

“I bless the Heavenly One for my rescue. It is wonderful to be alive again; to know that the trouble, the astonishment, the hissing is over; to eat, not husks or calories, but food; to have a name; and be of this world. Even now I do not know how it happened or by what merit it was I who was chosen, out of the thousands who perished, to escape all of the strange deaths that swallowed up a generation. At times I feel—so bewildered and burdened is my gratitude—that the numbered dead run through my veins their plasma, that I must live their unexpired six million circuits, and that my body must be the bed of each of their nightmares. Then, sensing their death wish bubbling the channels of my blood, then do I grow bitter at my false felicity—the spared one!—and would almost add to theirs my own wish for the centigrade furnace and the cyanide flood. Those, too, are the occasions when I believe myself a man suspect, when I quail before the eyes of my rescuers wondering *Why? Why did this one escape? What treaty did he strike with the murderers? Whose was the blood that was his ransom?* I try to answer these questions, but my very innocence stutters, and I end up exculpating myself into a kind of guilt.

“I try—I look about me at the Jews of this camp, the net of our accounting, and try to compose backwards from these human indices the book of our

chronicles. I hear from the neighboring tent the voices of the castrati and evoke the images of the white-robed monsters who deprived them of race. I scan the tattooed arms—the man before me bears the number 12165—and wonder whether it is in gematria that there lies the secret of their engraving. I see them all about me, the men who cheated the chimney, those who by some divine antitoxin were preserved from the thirty-two fictitious diseases. Through the kindergartens of the orphans I proceed, and talk to children, and observe. I observe how it is that so many of them wear little locketts that break open, like cloven hearts, to reveal the picture of father or mother or brother lost, old-fashioned, poorly taken snapshots of the formal stance or the gay moment—they are everywhere—and I conceive the multitudinous portrait-gallery of our people: it hangs pendent from the throats of little children. Our small cenotaphs. And here in the secretariat of the camp I keep counting over and over again the puny alphabetical files to which we have been reduced. Yet from all of these studies and encounters I am not able to make me a chart of what actually happened; it is impossible. When the Lord turned again the captivity, I was like one that dreamed.

“All I can follow in clear sequence—and even here at the critical connectives it is only the hand of God that can explain—is what happened to me. It

## "DEUTERONOMY"

word, phrase by phrase, the total work that when completed would stand as epic revealed!

They were not members of literary societies, the men who were giving new life to the antique speech, but merchants, tradesmen, day laborers. In their daily activity, and without pose or flourish, they showed it to be alive again, the shaping Hebrew imagination. An insurance company, I observed as I lingered in Tel Aviv's commercial center, called itself *Sneh*—after Moses' burning bush, which had burned and burned but had not been consumed. Inspired metaphor, born not of the honored laureate, but of some actuary, a man of prose! A well-known brand of Israeli sausage was being advertised, it gladdened my heart to see, as *Bashan*—just tribute to its magnum size, royal compliment descended from Og, Bashan's giant king. A dry-cleaner called his firm *Kesheth*, the rainbow, symbol of cessation of floods! An ice-cream organization, *Kortov*, punned its way to custom fissioning *kortov*, a drop, to *kor-tov*, cold and good! In my student days I had been fascinated always by that word which put an end to the irreconcilable controversies of the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai: this House would maintain *Permitted*, that House would insist *Prohibited*; a deadlock would ensue. Came then the Talmud editor and wrote *taiku, stet*, the question abides. My teacher would then go on to explain that *taiku* was really a series of initials that stood for

*Tishbi yetaraitz kushioth v'abayoth*, the Tishbite would resolve all problems and difficulties. Now the magic cataleptic word was before me again, in a new context, in a newspaper, the report of a football game where the score had been tied. *Taiku!*

There were dozens, there were hundreds of instances of such metamorphosis and rejuvenation. Nameless authorship flourished in the streets. It was growth, its very principle, shown in prolific action! Twigs and branches that had been dry and sapless for generations, for millennia, now budded, blossomed—and with new flowers!

It was as if I was spectator to the healing of torn flesh, or *heard* a broken bone come together, set, and grow again.

Wonderful is the engrafting of skin, but more wonderful the million busy hushed cells, in secret planning, stitching, stretching, until—the wound is vanished, the blood courses normal, the cicatrice falls off.

I had at last discovered it, the great efflorescent impersonality.

My hopes of finding Uncle Melech revived.

And this discovered poetry, scattered though it was, had its one-obsessive theme. It was obsessed by the miraculous. These names and ingenuities and businesses, these artifacts of tradesmen and workers, they were but the elements, the gestures and abracadabra of the performed miracle. It was sensed

everywhere—among the Yemenites to whom the news of the State established had first come like some market rumor of the advent of the Messiah as well as among the European sophisticates who veiled their credulity with rationalization.

Little David had slain Goliath? The miracle had again been repeated; against great odds, the little struggling State had withstood the onslaught of combined might.

Jaffa had seen a whale regurgitate Jonah? A company of Jews had taken over this same city whence eighty thousand Arabs had fled: Jonah regurgitated the whale!

Deborah here had sung a victory the captains could not understand? The accents of her song echoed still. *They fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera.*

As in place after place I gathered examples of the recent marvelous, the realization grew upon me that I, too, had been the witness of a miracle—the miracle of the transformed stone. It had happened in Rome. I had been wandering up and down the hilly streets of that city and suddenly I had come upon the Via Sacra. All about me there stood, or leaned, or lay on the ground, the broken pillars of the pagan temples—the Temple of Cæsar, the Temple of Castor and Pollux, the Temple of Vesta. And then, without warning, I had found myself in front of the unspeakable arch, the Arch of Titus.

I had avoided, of course, walking under that arch. Bitter enough it had been that my ancestors, at lance-point, *sub jugum*, had had to cross beneath this yoke of stone. I had scanned it, therefore, from a distance. I had walked about it, "surrounded" it, thrown it the evil eye.

Approaching closer, I had examined the bas-relief, had looked at Titus imperial in his chariot, and had smiled to think of his miserable ending, as reported by the rabbis, of the insect that through an orifice of his face had entered his brain and there had kept buzzing, buzzing, buzzing until he had gone mad and had died.

The memory was gala in my own brain, which celebrated it: Titus troubled, Titus troubled by a gnat, Titus tortured tick by tick to death, Titus by the termite tutored: tête-à-tête. . . . A consolation.

The consolation, however, had been dissipated by the spectacle imaged on the other bas-relief, where the laureled legionaries of Rome, soldier and centurion, were shown carrying away in triumph the sacred trophies of the Temple. The seven-branched candelabrum, lifted arrogantly in the air, had burned seven wounds in my eyes. The two tablets—rather that they had been shattered! And the trumpets—out of the stone they had sounded, not as aforesaid the sound of jubilee, but the broken murmur, the *shvarim*, the tragic triad of wandering and suffering and exile.

Had there not glowed in my heart that fervor which had communicated itself to me from the letter that Uncle Melech had sent me from Bari, I should have been, I think, completely shattered by these sculptured taunts, this gloating in stone. I should myself have been brought to the humiliation of my forefathers. But Uncle Melech's words were with me; *When the years were ripened, and the years fulfilled, then was there fashioned Aught from Naught*. His words, his hopes, his intuition annulled and dispelled the captive spell that had held me bound. The Arch of Titus, from being a taunt, then, had become an irony, an irony directed against itself; the candelabrum, set against the new light that had been kindled across the Great Sea, had turned into satire; the trumpets, symbolic now of jubilee, really taunted Titus!

There had come then a haze before my eyes, and the miracle—Jericho's miracle—had taken place. The arch was not there! The stone had crumbled. I did not see the arch!

. . . And now in Israel the phenomenon was being made everywhere explicit. The fixed epithet wherewith I might designate Israel's poetry, the poetry of the recaptured time, was now evident. The password was heard everywhere—the miracle!

I had found the key image.

But Uncle Melech—I had just arrived at Safed, three days remained of my planned sojourn, Uncle