

# HOLD ON TO THE SUN

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Some of the old neighborhoods of Jerusalem give me rather a strange feeling as I pass through them, as if they existed only for as long as I traverse them, springing up mysteriously from somewhere or other, my own imagination, perhaps, or even memories predating my birth, to stand there before I enter them. Quickly the laundry is hung out on the long balconies, and children in black caftans come out to resume their games. The silence that always prevails after I pass has led me to the peculiar conclusion that behind my back, alley by alley, the neighborhood vanishes. This, too, is the reason for the habit which I have formed of never turning my head, and never looking back at these places.

For years I have refrained from expressing this feeling, even to myself, and when it sometimes awoke in me, even after I had emerged from these neighborhoods into other streets, I would reject it as firmly as a man dismissing the legends of some distant land. What finally led me to spend days on end examining it—without, however, solving the riddle—was the following incident, which did not, apparently, occur by chance, nor was it by chance that it happened where it did happen.

I was then busy working on my study of the history and sources of the Jewish liturgy, comparing ancient versions of the daily evening prayer. I was vaguely aware of the existence of another, old, Prayer Book, which I had grounds to believe might contain, if not exactly a different version, at least a rare interpretation of the evening prayer and the time appointed for its recitation. The reference was hastily jotted down on an old index card, dating to a period before the commencement of my study, which accounts for the slipshod nature of the notes. I may have copied them inaccurately from a manuscript, or taken them down during one of the lectures given by my late teacher, who died many years ago.

According to what I found in my notes, this interpretation hinted at the light of the moon as it was before it was diminished, and instructed men to say the prayer with special rejoicing. A man should follow the sun in its sinking and the moon in its rising, and say with devout intent 'with wisdom thou openeth the gates of the heavens, and with understanding thou altereth the seasons.' And when he says 'Thus hast thou created day and night' he should concentrate with intention on the words Day and Night, and attach his joy rather to Night, *layla*, which is the combination of *yahel*—'he will illuminate'—and the letter 'l'. And he should attach his joy chiefly to that 'l' of *layla* which has the numerical value of 30, and is the darkness in the moon on the thirtieth day of the lunar month. And this is the secret of the impregnation of darkness by *yahel*, which is the light of the Seven Days of Creation, the Everlasting Light.

And it states furthermore, that a man should perform his deed in great secrecy, so that nothing at all of it be divulged. And he should exert himself greatly in its performance, so that he gain the upper hand over others, who conspire falsely, and delay the opening of the gates of Heaven, and give rise to dissension between the sun and the moon, and seek in their sin to stop the seasons in their appointed rounds, and to bring, God forbid, a different light into the worlds.

And at the end of these notes I found, to my great astonishment, the following: there are some who say that a man should combine the morning, afternoon, and evening prayers forthwith. As if the words of the prophet—‘The sun shall be no more thy light by day, neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light’—had already come to be. And I do not know whether they were no more than a supposition on the part of my late teacher, or perhaps even my own part in those distant days.

For a long time I postponed going into the matter, but as I approached the conclusion of my study I realized that I would be sinning against the truth if I failed to track down that Prayer Book and quote the relevant passages in my work. My search in the National Library came to naught. Neither there, nor among the micro-filmed manuscripts, did I find any trace of the book I was looking for. Nor did I succeed in eliciting any further details regarding the lectures my teacher dedicated to the subject of ‘Interpretations of the Evening Prayer’ from the few friends of my university days. In the end, I came to believe that I had not only made a mistake in copying down the title of the Prayer Book, its date of publication, and the name of the town where it was printed, but that the whole business was no more than a fruitless speculation which I had entertained many years.

Despite these misgivings, however, I set out the one day, after completing my daily quota of writing, to search for the missing Prayer Book in the book shops of the old quarters of the city. I went from shop to shop, and to my repeated questions the booksellers replied, whether out of laziness, resentment, or because they were too busy to be bothered, that they did not know if they had the book I was looking for in their stocks. They went on to recommend, however, that I look for myself, since it was always possible that an old, forgotten volume might turn up somewhere in the shop. In this way I searched through many a dark back-room, where books in black bindings climbed to the ceiling without finding what I was looking for.

I walked on, down the steps of narrow alleys and under the stone archways, distracted both by the vertigo which always attacks me when I have to spend hours reading the titles of rows of books upside down—and climbing up and down the ladder stools didn’t improve matters, and by the suspicion that all my efforts would prove to be in vain. In the meantime it grew late, and as always in these old quarters, I was filled with anxiety lest I should not be able to find my way out. As I was trying to make up my mind whether to continue my search or whether it might not be wiser to stop now and attempt to retrace my steps, I saw, near the place where I was standing, a gap between two houses leading to a narrow passage. A

shaft of light from the sinking sun penetrated the entrance, and but for the fact that it was thus illuminated, I have little doubt that I would not even have noticed the passage, let alone entered it.

To my surprise the passage led to a rather long quadrangle, lined on both sides by one or two storied buildings, all of whose entrances, both upstairs and down, housed little shops and market stalls. Because of the large space opening up between the houses, a broad, white band of sky was suddenly revealed. At its edge, above the tin roofs of the balconies, the moon was already hanging, waiting lightless, like a pale assassin, for its appointed time.

I had almost given up hope of finding the Prayer Book, and it was only a sense of duty which impelled me to go into the shops selling second-hand articles and ritual artifacts, in order to inquire if by any chance such and such a Prayer Book, printed at such and such a date, in such and such a place, had not remained in their stocks from times gone by. In the end I reached a cul-de-sac, with a synagogue wall on one side, and various dilapidated objects, stools, cupboards, and sky-blue painted prayer stands, on the other—at the bottom of which stood a little shop selling second-hand books, old brochures, and postcards with engravings of landscapes displayed in wooden boxes on a special stand in the middle of the shop.

I could not see the book seller, and assumed that he must be busy arranging the shelves in the inner rooms, which to judge by the confusion reigning in the front of the shop, must have been chaotic. While I waited for him to return, I was happy to discover, after my long and wearisome search, the engraved postcards and illustrated brochures in the shop, and began leafing absent-mindedly through some old brochures which I took from the corner of one of the shelves.

(When I think of it now, it is clear to me that I stood in precisely that corner of the shop only because the faint light entering from the cul-de-sac fell there, while the rest of the shop, apart from this narrow rectangle of light, was already in semi-darkness.)

I must confess that the album in question did not, at first, attract my attention at all. I was in the middle of perusing another illustrated pamphlet, about the methods of road construction in the Ottoman Empire, when my eye was caught by a gleam coming from the spine of one of the books on the shelf. When I took it down, I saw that the cover, which must have been magnificent in its time, was made of red paper, and it was apparently the glistening of this red color which had caught my eye.

It was an album of exquisitely beautiful photographs of landscapes at sunset. Although the old photographs had already dimmed, an almost dazzling light still emanated from them. It was obviously an artist's eye which had perceived and immortalized these sights. There was no word of explanation accompanying the pictures, and at the same time it seemed to me, as I paged through them, that these many and varied sunsets were connected by some deliberate intention, which would surely be revealed at the end.

The photographs at the end of the book showed, over and over again, with a particular kind of insistence, the same mountain looming out of a dense tangle of southern vegetation, like an oblong fruit, or the protruding breast of an island maiden, with the sea stretching flat and solid behind it. But it was only after looking at a number of pictures of this oblong mountain that I realized what it was that had aroused my astonishment: although all the surrounding landscape was covered by a luxuriant growth of palms, banana plants and gigantic ferns of a species unfamiliar to me, the mountain itself was unnaturally bald, so that the light streaming from the low sun onto its slopes seemed brighter than ever.

The last photograph showed the same mountain again, with no change whatsoever. The album was finished, and I was left with the feeling that I still did not possess the key which was to have been revealed at the end. I went on paging disappointedly through the index listing the sites where the photographs had been taken, and as I glanced through it, a number of pages which had been stuck into the index (and which apparently had been printed separately, since neither the paper nor the print resembled those of the rest of the album), slipped into my hands. As soon as I saw the title on top of the first page: 'From the remains of P., Artistic Photographer,' I began eagerly reading what follows here, in the fading daylight which still illuminated the corner where I was standing:

'I was engaged upon the final preparations for bringing the album out. I had already sent the material to the printers to make the blocks, and all that now remained was the last photograph, upon whose completion everything—yes, everything—depended. I was about to embark upon my seventh, and last voyage to the islands of G., in Southern Asia, and this time I was confident that I would be able to take the picture.

'In the meantime my affairs brought me to the little town of M. in the North, and thus it came about that I was invited to the garden party on the lake. I was excited at the thought of my approaching journey, and since I knew none of the other guests, and my host was in any case preoccupied by his duties, I seated myself on the lawn sloping down to the lake, and with the view before me which is so close to my heart, I abandoned myself to my reflections. As I gazed at the white sailing boats, I busied myself with making a mental list of the things I would still have to take care of when I stopped over in the city to pick up the filter I had specially prepared for the last photograph.

'While I was enjoying the respite, which had been afforded me in the midst of the noisy party proceeding in the distance, someone suddenly bumped into me. It was a young man of about thirty, in a state of such extreme agitation that he lost his balance and almost upset onto my lap the contents of the plate he was carrying. I expected him to apologize and continue on his way, instead of which, to my astonishment, he addressed me by my name, which he kept repeating incredulously, even after I had more than once affirmed that I was indeed he, and that my peculiar profession was, indeed, that of a photographer. Without so much as a by your leave, the young man sat down next to me on the lawn, seized hold of my

hand as if to prevent me from getting up and going away, and speaking rapidly, with hardly a pause for breath, embarked upon the following tale:

‘ “I was then busy completing my studies in the city on the shore, and all my hopes were pinned on what the future held in store. My wife, A., encouraged me during those long nights of burning the midnight oil, and gladdened my heart with the felicitous details she kept adding to our castles in the air. One day we were strolling through the old quarter of the city, when we chanced upon a shop selling books and objects of the city, when we chanced upon a shop selling books and objects d’art, where a selection of your photographs of sunsets were on exhibition.”

‘(When I heard this, my annoyance at the young man who had intruded on my repose with his tales instantly melted away, and the old fears suddenly seized hold of me again in all their terror, the fears which had haunted me ever since I had been tempted by my publisher to agree to holding the exhibition, even before the last picture was ready. However, I skillfully disguised this violent reaction, and the young man, who had noticed nothing, continued his story with the same agitation as before, and without letting go of my hand:)

‘ “A. and I had always loved the sunset, even more ardently since becoming acquainted with its hues in that city on the ocean shore. But your photographs enchanted us anew, and when we discovered among them a picture of our favorite view, from the hills opposite the shore, we decided in our enthusiasm that I should take a longer respite than usual from my studies, and that we would set out for the hills outside the city as soon as we left the shop. The sunset that evening was hazy, with the sun descending through a misty vaporous sky. But thanks to your picture, the view held us spellbound, with a special magic. A. was particularly affected by the sight, and she declared, with a firmness uncharacteristic of her, that we would have to come back to see the sunset there on the longest day of the year.

‘ “Since I was completely absorbed, during those spring months, in preparing for my final exams, I paid no attention to the changes in the weather, and failed to see to it that A. was properly dressed when she went out of the house. For ever since that day she had been overcome by restlessness, and she would spend hours on end walking, in order to quiet herself and refrain from disturbing me. And thus, when she was out walking one afternoon, she caught a chill, and fell ill.

‘ “I divided my days between my books and the preparation of her medicines, and shared in the astonishment of the doctors at the strange stubbornness with which the illness seemed to have taken hold of her. In the middle of June she was still bed-ridden, but this did not stop her from reminding me of our decision to go out to the hills at sunset on the longest day of the year. When her fever went up, she would become delirious and say strange things about holding onto the sun which at the time I thought were hallucinations. When the longest day came, none of my pleas or the doctors’ orders availed, and she insisted on going out to the hills facing the ocean.

‘ “When we set out, she was more excited than I had ever seen her before, with the flush on her cheeks conspicuous against the pallor of her face. We stood

on the hills, and watched the great ball of light sinking slowly towards the horizon. I did not notice anything out of the ordinary, which might distinguish this sunset from the sunset on any other evening, although, as always, I marveled at the shades of purple, red, and yellow which suffused the sea and the sky. But A. was beside herself, and did not take her eyes off the sun suspended in the sky. So frail was she after her prolonged illness, that the light, early summer wind pierced her like a freezing gale, and her whole body shivered. She held my hand with all her might. I can still feel the terrible force with which her slender fingers gripped me!

‘ “At first she was ecstatic, but from the moment the sun touched the water line, her face fell, and with the same speed that the sun disappeared behind the horizon, right before my eyes, A. darkened, and her fingers weakened their grip on my hand.

‘ “I got her home as quickly as I could, and when I put her to bed she kept repeating: —We came too late. Once she even mentioned your name, angrily, and said that you would understand. I called the doctors as soon as we got home, but by the time they arrived it was already too late.

‘ “Ever since A.’s death, I have gone back to that hill on the longest day of every year, and I always stand there in the same confusion. I even went back to the old quarter, but I could not find your photographs, and to tell the truth, I was even unable to locate the shop where we first saw them. From the few people who were able to tell me something about you, I learnt that you had gone to Southern Asia on a photography expedition, and had not been back to our part of the world for several years. Nevertheless, my pain at the death of A. continued to be connected in my mind with a sense of obligation to tell you about the circumstance of her death, and with the knowledge that until I did so I would not have fulfilled her wish, even though she never expressed it explicitly.”

‘The young man was so moved by the telling of his tale that he did not notice what I was going through, and by the time he looked up at me, I had already succeeded in controlling my emotions and in concealing them from him. I contend that I did not understand what he was talking about, and said that I was sorry with all my heart (which was quite true) for the death of A., his wife, although I had not had the honor of making her acquaintance. A silence fell, and both of us looked at the lake, where the sun was then sinking behind the ribbon of mist encircling the horizon, and the spots of light on the sails of the boats were suddenly blotted out. After a prolonged moment of oppressive silence, the young man stood up, and was swallowed up by among the guests without saying anything more.

‘I suffered pangs of conscience for the way I had treated the young man, but I had had no chance. Even now, who knows what dire consequences might yet ensue from the old, newly awakened, fears; who knows if it will still be possible to amend what his story has wrought.

‘As I write these lines, our ship has already sailed past the coasts of Ceylon and Java, and in three days time it will let me off at the only port on the islands of G.... The album is already at the printers, all that is missing is the last photograph, in order.. (and perhaps I had better not write anything explicit down yet). On

my previous six trips I have succeeded in establishing close ties with the people of the K. tribe, and this time I—the first stranger—will participate with them in the endeavor. Yes, ever since their project was revealed to me on my first trip, a change has taken place in my whole attitude towards what I had up to then been doing unconsciously, thinking that it was only the beauty of the scenery which compelled me to photograph the sunset. Ever since then, I have been waiting with them, and preparing myself, with the means at my disposal, for the appointed day.

‘Time and time again I have conjured up from the stories in my imagination, and each time I am filled with new admiration for the people of the tribe of K., and their ancient belief. How they learnt to determine, with their miraculous methods of measuring, the longest day of the year, despite the minimal time changes in their region. How once in a generation—only thus could they persist in their efforts without being utterly annihilated—all the members of the tribe, from the age of puberty on, go up to the mountain before dawn. Oh, how well I know that ascending path, the view it affords of the South sea, the wind which blows on its peak. How well I know the jealousy with which the tribe has guarded those slopes all these years, lest any alien stalk take root upon them, and prevent the sun from holding on to the mountain.

‘They say that the excitement of the members of the tribe on that day is so great, that the drumming and singing continue without a break from dawn. And my own humble experience can testify that the very thought of the light not stopping, the spark of a belief in the sun not setting, is enough for that boundless joy to burst forth. All morning long the tribesmen devote themselves to impregnating with the souls of light the women, and at noon the women walk about in the warm breeze with bodies satiated as suns, while the men follow them drunk with hope, as if the longest day were already the beginning of an endless dawn.

‘When the afternoon arrives, the people of the tribe stand on the top of the mountain, which shines like a round belly, and follow the movement of the sun as it goes down to the sea. When the sun stands still, not far from the horizon at the edge of the ocean, they lift up their arms towards it, and hold it with all their might. They pull it like a pivot towards its reflection on the mountain, and add all their power to its efforts to rise, full and strong, to the zenith of the sky, from where it will never move again.

‘Their efforts then are so terrible, that when the sun slips from their grasp and sinks behind the sea, they collapse like flies, too weak to hang onto the slippery slopes and break their downward slide. And thus, immediately after the sunset on the longest day of the year, once in every generation, the people of the tribe are dashed to pieces against the dense vegetation at the bottom of the mountain.

‘There is no need to dwell here on the way in which I have been waiting with them, for the past seven years, for the month of June in the year 192... Six times I have returned to the mountain on that particular day. I have checked whatever lies within my power to check. I have made all my preparations, and all, I may say, is now ready.

'There are two days to go before we anchor at the islands of G., and another five before the next attempt. In the meantime I spend my days on the deck, watching the Asian sailors, who speak to each other in their own tongues and leave me alone with my thoughts, and in the evenings I wage lengthy campaigns at cards against the Dutch captain. But I cannot silence the old fears. What the young man told me about the death of his wife, A., in the city on the ocean shore, confirmed, in a most terrible manner, my apprehensions about the premature exhibition of my photographs. Who knows if A. was the only one affected. And who can tell what threat now hangs over the K. tribe, owing to the publication of their endeavors. Ah, my photographer's pride, my little faith, my insolent insistence on fixing in a iron eye that which seeks to sink in secrecy....

'Two days are left to me in which to live in hope, two more days until I share the prayers of the esteemed people of the K. tribe....'

I returned the interrupted text to its place between the pages of the index, and began leafing once more, in great agitation, through the photographs, in all of which the disk of the setting sun shone through the dimness of age. My heart pounding, I began turning the pages rapidly in order to get another look at that mountain rising in its fullness from the vegetation to face the sea, when I thought I heard the sound of footsteps in the inner room. Only then did I become conscious once more of the darkening room, which I had completely forgotten as I eagerly devoured the photographer's words, and I quickly put the album down on the wooden stand. Its cover glowed in the dim light, and was reflected like the dull shadow of rubies on the wooden boxes containing the engraved postcards. Once more I was drawn to its radiance, and I was just about to stretch out my hand to pick it up again, when the book seller appeared in the dark doorway, thin and bearded, with his black hat almost covering his face. Hardly aware of what I was doing, I tried to hide the album, but the man stopped me with a gesture of his hand, and asked me what I wanted.

I almost replied—to hold on to the sun, but controlled myself immediately and asked for the old Prayer Book.

'What do you need that book for?' the bookseller asked angrily.

I mumbled something about the research I had been conducting for years, but he cut me short and announced firmly:

'You have no need of that book!'

'You're probably right, sir,' I agreed in order to appease him, and with my heart beating, I inquired, 'Is the gentleman himself familiar with the Prayer Book in question?'

Never before had I yearned so hungrily to read that marvelous interpretation of the evening prayer, never before had I believed so fervently in the possibility of penetrating its secret intentions, of grasping the meaning of the Everlasting Light, and from a vast distance, from beneath layers which seemed to me to have been deadened a long time ago, at that moment I felt a powerful emotion, perhaps hope, awakening in me, an piercing me like a burning ember. Me, the scholar of

liturgical sources, who had nothing all these years but his notes and his old manuscripts.

The bookseller repeated, making no attempt to conceal his hostility:

'You have no need of that book!'

'But are you familiar with it, sir, do you have it in your shop?'

'You have nothing to look for here!' he almost shouted. 'We've been closed for hours.'

With one step he crossed the dark, paper filled room, and slammed the iron grill down over the door through which I entered. Then he returned, removed the album from the wooden stand, pushed it back hastily into its place on the shelf, and pointed to the door to the inner room:

'Through here, through here,' he said, hitting me roughly on the back to hurry me up, and disappeared into the dark doorway.

In the inner room, too, the stack of books reached to the ceiling, and here too old brochures were scattered over high wooden stands.

'Through here, through here,' the bookseller scoldingly indicated the back door, and this time too he hurried through it before me.

In this way we passed through a number of inner rooms, all of whose walls were covered with rows and rows of black books, tightly crammed together, without stopping in any of them. Finally we crossed a little paved courtyard, at the far end of which the bookseller impatiently opened an iron gate.

Before I had time to ask the bookseller where we were, and how to find my way out, I heard the gate barred behind me. The long square on whose edge I was standing was already almost completely dark, and the full moon commanded it like a petrified monarch. In the middle of the square a lamp suspended from a high wooden pole cast a small circle of light around it. As I stood there wondering which direction to take, a few children in black caftans ran past me, tugging a black cloth canopy, which flapped in heavy folds behind their heads. They rushed towards the lamp, without noticing me as they ran.

I began walking, without turning my head to look back at the gate from which I had emerged. A man in a broad-brimmed hat passed me, his head bowed. I hurried after him to the far end of the square, where he disappeared into the depths of a dark alley. For some time I strayed through unfamiliar passageways and empty courtyards, until suddenly, without any change in the silence shrouding the houses, I found myself outside the quarter. A bus standing in the road started its engine. I hurried to climb on before it moved off, and was carried away by its swaying motion.

Once, and once only, I returned to the old quarter and tried to retrace the steps which had led me to the shop selling old books and engraved postcards. Despite all my efforts, I could not find the narrow, paved passage leading to the marketplace, nor the stairs of the alley which led to it. For hours I wandered through the alleys, but all in vain. On a number of occasions I imagined that I was nearing my destination, only to realize my mistake. But at the bottom of my heart I

was not in the least surprised at my failure to find what I was looking for. For I had always been prone to the peculiar sensation that these old neighborhoods were nothing but figments of my imagination, memories which materialized only when I passed through them, and vanished behind my back.

In the end darkness descended. And when I stood outside the quarter, I groped my way past the dark hills of a region in which I had never been before. I did not even know the number of the bus which took me through a labyrinth of crooked roads back to the street where I live. In the days that followed, days which I spent at the printers, correcting and recorrecting the proofs of my study, I felt like a condemned man awaiting execution. I concluded the final preparations for the publication of my book with a heavy heart, and without saying a word to anyone about what was agitating my soul. Even in the preface I composed for my book, I did not mention the name of the old Prayer Book, nor the existence of another, different interpretation of the intentions of the evening prayer.

Many years have passed since then. My book came out long ago, and its pages are bound and gray. The living memory has grown increasingly dimmer, and with it that unexpressed hope, like a passionate dream, which I have never dared to call by its name. Only these words are left to me. Buried among my notes.

Translated from the Hebrew by Dalia Bilu

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