

Gate of Mercy

Family Secrets and the History of Modern Israel

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PART ONE

SHARAYIM

(1936)

Prologue

Just when I'm starting to like him, he goes away. I'm almost a Muslim like him, and all of a sudden he and his mother are leaving us. All of a sudden, they pack their things and get ready to go. I ask A'atef, "Why are you leaving?"

"I don't know," he says, "my mother won't tell me."

I'm hurt. I'm ashamed to ask A'atef's mother, but the pain is bigger than the shame. So I go over to Hoda and ask, "Why are you leaving?"

Hoda doesn't answer. She doesn't even turn around. I keep talking to her black dress. "Are you mad at me?"

Now she spins around as if someone had let go of a spring she's hanging from.

"No, *ya habibi*."

"But A'atef is like my big brother."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Please don't go. I love you and A'atef."

"Your father told us to go."

"My father?" I'm shocked. I know it's no use talking to him. He chokes me with that look of his and doesn't say a word.

My father says A'atef is a wild one. I always think he means it affectionately. But maybe not?

Mama's sleeping in a corner of the room. As if she doesn't care. Last night, I heard her say something to Papa that I don't understand: God will judge between us. Can it be? Is he really sending Hoda away? Mama called her Hagar once or twice. But she knows very well that her name is Hoda. Papa works, but I don't know

where. Maybe it's hard for them to watch Hoda and A'atef leave. It's hard for me too. Why doesn't anyone tell me?! Maybe I want to sleep too? Or go out? Hoda gets as hard as the bark of a tree. But before they leave, I see that A'atef's cheek is wet.

I run after them, crying. They keep walking. Hoda speeds up and A'atef lags behind. I run after them and fall. Right on my face in the sand. In the rising dust I almost catch A'atef by the foot, well yes, at about the place Jacob was injured after he fought with the angel, and I get up and run, but they're walking faster and I can't go that far away from the gate of our neighborhood, Sharayim. So I just stand there as if I'm being held back by ropes and shout, "Come back. I'm sure you can work it out..."

"The path is wiser than the people walking on it," my father says. I don't understand that, but I'm sure it's very smart. My father says it's an Arab saying. I walk to school and try to see if the path is wiser than the people walking on it. The path is made of sand. So many people have walked on the sand that it's a little hard now. The sand on the sides is softer. People made the path with their feet.

It's a long way to school. Where the neighborhood ends, you walk through a gate and a big field, and then you're there. I'm planning to go to school with Talia and Amos. They're my new neighbors. Mama can't come with me, that I know already. It's a long way to school and I still don't know how to get there. But Papa surprises me in the morning when he says that on the first day of school, he'll come with me. I ask him if the gate at the end of our neighborhood is the Gate of Mercy. He says no, the Gate of Mercy is in Jerusalem.

“But it’s in a song too,” I tell him.

“That’s no ordinary song. What you heard is the singing from the synagogue on Shabbat, the *zmirot*, ‘And through the Gate of Mercy the Messiah will come,’” Papa says and takes my hand. It gets lost in his. Papa sings Shalom Shabazi’s song in a loud voice: “When in Babylon, the Children of Zion will see Yavneh, Zippori, Sharayim and Yerushalayim.”

I ask, “Papa? Is Petah Tikva (door of hope) on the way to Jerusalem?”

“No, from our house, the city of Petah Tikva is in the opposite direction from Jerusalem. Why do you ask?”

I shake the sand out of my sandals. “Because it should be on the way to Jerusalem,” I answer him tersely. “We should go into Jerusalem through the Door of Hope and come out through the Gate of Mercy.”

On my way back from school, even before I get home, the neighbors tell me to run for help. My father’s in trouble.

“Come right away, my father’s not breathing,” I yell at the top of my lungs to the people in the Magen David Adom ambulance station on Menuha and Nahala Street.

“The burial society is on Ezra Street,” a medic answers me. He has a potato nose and a black mustache. My chest hurts. I ran out of Sharayim as fast as I could. I’m the fastest kid on my block, and there’s only one ambulance in all Rehovot. That’s why they sent me to get help.

“Their number is 222, maybe you should call them?” another medic says to the one with the mustache.

“No, 222 is the fire department.”

I feel like they don't really want to help.

“My father's buried!” I tell them between the breaths whistling through my throat. I'm not sure they hear me.

“Kid, if your father isn't breathing and your father is buried, so what's the emergency?” one of them says, trying to joke. But Mr. Mustache understands me.

They get into the ambulance and take off, forgetting me. I run after them. The siren is deafening. The ambulance stops near a deep pit. “It's an avalanche,” I hear a voice yell. I know that my father's inside. That he's the one who was shoveling the earth out of that pit. Now the earth has fallen back in. I push my way through the crowd to look. All I see is earth.

Papa and Angel dig cesspools. They dig a deep pit, build round cages, put them deep down in the pit and cover it with concrete. They leave an opening to clean out the pit. The deeper they dig the pit, the smaller they get until they're like two puppies in their cages down there. They look up and see the earth pouring down from the sky. Angel panics and bends over. Papa stays upright to welcome the earth. It pours in quickly and covers them completely. People start digging. Everyone there is digging. The ambulance siren wails. My breath is all bunched up around my heart, and now I'm digging like crazy too. But they move me away because I'm digging with my hands and my nails and it's not helping. Slowly they uncover my father's face. Bits of soil are hanging from the hair in his nostrils and his mustache. He doesn't open his mouth and he doesn't move.

The people dig down to his waist and free his hands. He moves one hand and waves it over his head like a flag. His face stays frozen. Now they start to uncover the cages on the sides of the pit and the concrete covering them. They reach the knees of the statue

that was once my father and I see Angel's back. All of a sudden, everyone around me is yelling. They dig faster and faster. They shout "Angel! Angel!" but it doesn't sound the same as it does when my mother calls me angel. The people pound the earth and smack their heads. Angel is completely broken, his body folded in two. The people say that the breath of life has gone out of him. Even though we can see my father's body, we can't see whether he still has his breath of life. But when the diggers reach his ankles, he bends his left knee to shake off his loose khaki pants and heavy shoes with the earth-colored laces. Then everyone pulls and his right leg is freed too. I try to catch a glimpse of him through the crowd, convinced that he's not alive even when they carry him to the mouth of the ambulance. He refuses to go in. He shakes them off the sleeves of his shirt the way he shook off the bits of earth. He says, "I can't help Angel, so I'm taking Avram home." Avram is me, his son. Even though he gives me his hand and walks with me, I can't believe he's alive.

At night, my own crying wakes me up. I yell, "Papa! Papa!" I want him to show me his breath of life. He went to bed early after his rescue. Later, in the dark, he's a concrete statue.

My bed has iron springs. Its frame is iron too. All our beds are made of iron. These are beds to last your whole life, that's what Amrani tells us. My mattress is filled with straw. My body sinks into the middle of it and it turns into a nest. I'm a small, yellow chick, that's what Mama always tells me. My voice is like a bird's too. The kids in the neighborhood call me Chirpy. They laugh at me because of my voice. If I chirp at night, I pull the blanket all the way up to my

nose to hide the chirps so they won't escape to the outside. I hide from Arabs who go into houses and slaughter whole families. Tonight I can't fall asleep because if they come, Papa won't get up. He's lying there like Angel, except that Angel is lying under the ground and my father is lying on top of it.

“Papa, Papa, I want Papa.”

“Ssh... ssh... *shrei nisht.*”

That's my mother's voice. We all sleep in the same room – Mama, Papa and me. Mama's sick. She's been sick for years. She's been sick for as long as I know her. The doctor says her heart is fluttering inside her. Maybe her heart wants to come out.

My mother's heart is like a caged bird.

We all squeak on the springs of our iron beds when we turn from side to side in our sleep. Now they're still. Silent. I turn much more than they do. I turn like a top on a string. My white sheet is pulled out from under the edges of the mattress and wound around me like a bandage. The chick is wounded tonight and not even a toy will make it all right.

I lie in bed all night and don't fall asleep. Tired and blazing hot. My eyes burn like coals. The water of my tears doesn't spill over to put out the fire. In the end, I fall asleep on my back, my eyes facing up, and that's how I find myself in the morning too.

I dream that God is speaking to me from far away: “It's okay! It's okay!” The voice comes closer, grows stronger, until I hear it under our window. I want to ask him what's okay and did it have anything to do with Angel and what kind of name is Angel, because my mother calls me angel sometimes too. But she says they're not the

same. Angel, who works with Papa, was born with that name in Spain, and she calls me Angel because I'm an angel. Mama says I'm her *nochtish*. That means I'm sweet, like dessert.

I'm scared and say the Morning Prayer. Maybe that'll help. *I offer thanks before you, living and eternal King, for You have mercifully restored my soul within me; Your compassion is great.*

I get up and look out the window. I see a man in a wagon with a donkey in front of it, and the back of it is full of watermelons. He's yelling: "It's okay," or maybe he's yelling, "Fresh today!"

We wake up early in the morning. It's a long walk to school. Mama gets up. Her hair is loose and reaches all the way to her waist. Black and shiny and straight. You can only see my mother's hair in the morning. And in the morning, I'm the only one who sees it. Correction: Papa sees her hair too, and that's because she lets it down late at night. She pulls out all the hairpins and lets it fall down her back. I love to see her like that, before the day's troubles attack her. Nothing hurts her now. The bird inside her must be sleeping. So I'm her chick. She puts a thick piece of sticky, sweet, melt-in-the-mouth halvah between two slices of black bread and gives it to me. Mama buys milk from Etul's father's wagon. She buys half a liter and mixes it with water and chocolate powder, so we all have cocoa every morning. My mother's a magician: she knows how to turn two glasses of milk into five glasses of cocoa.

I get another piece of the black bread and halvah and two oranges to take to school. Papa buys a sack of one hundred oranges for a *grush*. Rehovot is full of orange groves and you can get them cheap when they're in season, that's what he tells Mama when she

sighs and asks, “Where will I put this sack?” Later she tells me or maybe only herself something I don’t understand: “He went to see her again.” Or sometimes, when he brings oranges, she says, “Hoda, may her name be cursed, again?” But that he doesn’t hear. She says it very quietly. Then Mama smiles to show him that she’s happy. I manage all day with the morning cocoa, with the halvah, the black bread and the oranges. I’m not hungry. I’m not hungry at all. I play soccer with a rag ball whenever I can and forget to eat.

I play for two hours on the way to school and two hours after I come home. In the afternoon, I play with Busi and Shalom and my friends, who are all much older than me. We play in the sand, and then I’m barefoot and my shoes don’t hurt me. I’m even better barefoot than I am with my shoes on. Whenever I have time, I look for books or magazines about soccer. Or something in the newspaper. I know everything about soccer. I don’t even think about being hungry, not even once. Only at night, after Mama puts water into a tub and adds boiling water from the kettle and washes me thoroughly, even behind my ears and between the folds of my neck so potatoes won’t grow there, and I put on one of Papa’s undershirts that reaches my knees and I get very quietly into bed, I never grumble – and only then do I hear my stomach rumble.

When my mother calls me angel, I melt like butter on a frying pan. I’ve never seen butter, but that’s what she tells Papa about me. Butter is something only rich people have.

Today Mama and Papa are going with all the rich people to the cemetery for Angel’s funeral. We live in Sharayim. Sharayim is the Yemenite neighborhood. Ashkenazim from Poland live in the

rich people's neighborhoods. Mama says that Angel took Papa to work with him because Papa is Ashkenazi too.

I ask Mama, "If we're Ashkenazi, why don't we live where Angel lives?"

Mama answers, "We're so poor that the only neighborhood we can rent a room in is where the Yemenites live. They're the poorest people in the country." The room doesn't have a kitchen or a shower and our toilet is in the yard.

I ask Mama, "If Angel is rich and we're poor, how come Papa and Angel do exactly the same work?"

Mama says that it's not the same work at all because Angel is the boss and his earnings are bigger. Papa earns less, he's Angel's builder.

My father limps a little now, since he was buried. He'll always limp. He walks slower. He stands straight. He's a man. I'm afraid of my father. If he looks at me angrily, my throat burns and I feel like I'm choking. My father is tall; his head is in the clouds. That's how he walks through the gate and into our neighborhood. Stones are strewn around on both sides of the iron gate and you can close it and block the road, the only road cars can use to get into Sharayim. Angel is someone my father can't forget. He walks in the street, dragging Angel's memory on his leg like a debt.

Our toilet is a small wooden shed in the yard. You open the door and step onto a wooden floor that has a hole in the middle. I stand with my feet on either side of the hole, bend my knees and