

# In Nisan, the Month of Spring

Rena Lee

**T**hat spring, the moment she opened the door to her heart, in came Elijah.

She was in the process of assisting her father with his dusting and airing the books on the balcony, as he was wont to do every year in Nisan. "Making Pesach in the books," they called it. How is such a task performed? First, you remove each and every book from its place on the shelf, and while caressing it with a soft piece of cloth, you remove the dust off its face. Then, leafing through the pages, you peck a bit here and there with your duster. Finally, you leave it open to rest a while in the sun, letting the wind breeze in and out. On occasion, both she and her father would be lost at some paragraph, totally absorbed in reading. At which point mother, passing by, would inevitably comment with a smile, that if this was called working, they probably would not complete their labor until next Pesach. Alerted, Dad would then mumble apologetically that, no, no. here he was about to finish soon... Yes, very soon.

Precisely at such a time, when she was standing there on the sun-flooded balcony, the doorbell rang, and at the entrance appeared a tall, darkish, and quite handsome youth with a briefcase in his hand. "Do you know you left the door to your house open?" He asked in a deep friendly voice, and this was how she had first met Elijah. It turned out, he used to go from house to house selling, or trying to sell, sacred books, such as Bibles in silver jackets, prayer books, elaborate Haggadahs, etc., for "a small side income". His uncle, who owned a wholesale business of sacred books and all sorts of ritual objects, gladly agreed to help his nephew make some money.

Since her father tired from bending over the books for hours, he was happy for the opportunity to take a short break. Sitting down, he pointed at a chair, and invited Elijah to sit as well. They soon were deeply involved in conversation. First they talked about books, then shifted to politics, and gradually becoming closer, the conversation took on a more personal character. Elijah divulged that he was an orphan, that his uncle was like a father to him, that just recently he had completed his statutory military service, and wished to continue studying, but had not yet decided which field to

pursue. His current life was swinging between different inclinations; he felt somewhere in between, suspended in a "meanwhile."

All through the time of their discourse, she was sitting and listening. Elijah's words addressed her father, but his eyes never left her face. By and by, mother returned home. She was breathing heavily from climbing up the stairs hastily. "I ran to the grocery for fresh rolls. Coffee will be ready in a few minutes," She remarked, still on the run.

"Indeed, one can see you hurried. You forgot to close the door," father shouted after her, a note of reproach in his voice.

One evening, several days after she had met Elijah, she saw him again at Berakhah's home. Apparently, Berakhah had known him already for a number of years. "Imagine," she was thinking, "how surprising and wonderful it is! Until several days ago, I had no idea of Elijah's existence, and now, unexpectedly, I happen to stumble upon him like this." In truth, since she laid eyes on him, his image became imprinted in her mind, and all her thoughts kept revolving around him. She nurtured a hope to see him again, an indefinite, dreamy sort of hope. How could she even guess that here at Berakhah's home, her dreamy hope would shake hands with reality. They both smiled when their host "introduced" them, and when they left her house, they left together. From then on, they met every evening.

That spring was one the likes of which she had never known. As a person freed from the boundaries of self, she opened up, fell in love with the entire world. Suddenly she felt a sister to everything that lives or grows, be it even a flimsy stem, or a small creature, be it even the tiniest insect crawling slowly in the sand. Behind their house, there was an open lot, a kind of uncultivated field, where she used to escape. There she could immerse herself in fantasy and dreams without any disturbance. It was a fairly large piece of land, bordering an orchard on one side with citrus trees, and on the other, a grove of pines. A rich world unto itself, it was replete with little mounds and valleys, splashes of sun and patches of shade. In the autumn it covered itself with fresh green grass and grew different kinds of plants. In the beginning of spring, already in the month of Adar, it donned a yellow mantle of dandelions. Sitting on a heated stone, or a sun-drenched cut trunk, she would pluck the leaves of a dandelion playing riddles with herself: "He loves me; he loves me not." Or else, she would take the flower's head and seed carrier,

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the one nicknamed by the children *Sabbaleh*, meaning, “little grandpa,” since it is bedecked with thin soft silvery threads, and blow on it forcefully. Thereby its thin threads disappeared in the wind, all the seeds dispersed, and she was left with a decapitated naked stem. At times, anemones would show up, lighting small red flames at various spots in the field.

It was Dr. Rosner, her parents’ friend, who told her that the Arabs call the anemone “Naaman’s flower”, after the pagan spring god. According to their legend, he was assassinated when very young, and his shed blood flowed into the anemones painting them red, and every spring, his blood returns to flow anew in the flower’s leaves. “Of course,” Dr. Rosner was telling her, “this is one more example of miscellaneous legends different nations have, all of which concern a pagan spring god who dies and is resurrected. Take, for instance the Greek Adonis, or the Sumerian-Babylonian Tammuz. Yes, yes, the same Tammuz about whose cult of dirges, we learn in the Biblical book of *Ezekiel*.”

She loved to amuse herself with “The Stork’s Bill,” a plant whose leaves could change from pale-blue to purple between morning and noon. Her curiosity was raised especially by its fruit, shaped as a stork’s bill, which had the capability of stretching itself to a length of about ten centimeters. When the weather was dry and hot, the upper bill would bend into a shape of a sickle, pointing in a certain direction like the hand of a clock. When it rained, it would straighten, inserting, in a drilling motion, the fruit’s seeds into the body of earth. The adaptability and premeditation of this plant surprised and puzzled her to no end: A plant as practical and pragmatic as a human being!

Really, in those days she felt confined at home. All the regular mundane talks and actions seemed matters that ought to be put in brackets. A widespread field of bliss rose within her, and she thirsted for vast open spaces. Every day was like a ladder heading towards evening, its apex, the time when she would see Elijah. Only surrounded by nature was she able to relax a little that gnawing tense expectation she felt. There, plunging into a sea of sky, becoming intoxicated with scents of blossom, she would recall, yea, regurgitate bits and pieces of conversation from the previous night. Time, spread-eagled over the plains, was all at once both moving and standing still. Like the sky, like the distances between one heartbeat and another. And while butterflies were dancing from bud to bud; a caravan of ants dragged along slowly, rolling and pulling at its end a tiny grain, which in an ant’s eye probably seemed a huge stone; a hairy worm crawled and hid in a leaf; and white clouds went sailing in the blue. While all these, and countless other things about which she had not the faintest idea, happened in the world, troops of minutes kept marching on in the clock’s direction, as it was upon them to do.

Usually, when Elijah called on her in the evening, he would not come up, but would remain standing on the sidewalk, or sitting on the fence next to her home, right under her window. He would be whistling the

tune of “Eliahu Ha-navi, Eliahu Ha-tishbi,” which was played on the radio by “Kol Yisrael” every Shabbat night, after the broadcast of “*Ha-mavdil beyn kodesh le-chol*.” Her mother wasn’t pleased with this habit. “What sort of behavior is this?” she would comment angrily, “and at whom does he think he is whistling?” She went on nagging her daughter, preaching about the etiquette of courtship since time immemorial. However, father would laugh, hinting to his spouse that apparently she had forgotten that her mother too had not been pleased at his way of courting. Nu, each generation and its own tastes and manners. All the while this went on, she would be standing there waiting to go, her soles burning underneath. There was nothing she could do but listen to these two as they kept discussing the differences - indeed the great “*Mah Nishtanah*” - in the ways of courtship between generation and generation. In the end, Dad would become aware of her plight, and noticing how she stood there on pins and needles, would smile at mother and say: “Nu, let her go already. After all, isn’t Elijah awaiting her downstairs? Aren’t you aware you delay redemption?” And if she did not sprain a foot racing as she went down the steps, this too was nothing short of a miracle.

She found him sitting at ease on the fence under the Ficus, watching the stars. Sometimes, he would not notice her arrival being so absorbed in thought. She would touch his shoulder lightly, and awakened, he would begin teaching her about the stars. Not once had it crossed her mind that he appeared to be much more at home strolling amongst the celestial bodies, than amongst people on earth. He would point out to her this or that star, and together they would go a roving in heaven’s thicket, between the Great Bear and the Little Bear, guided by the North Star. On occasion, they would take flight to Mars, and at times they were able to locate Jupiter, whose Hebrew name *Tzedek* (meaning justice), gave rise to her comment that perhaps it was easier to find it in heaven than on earth. Walking thus beside him in the lofty highways, she felt that both of them were but bitsy grains amid the endless celestial circling spools. That their moment was extremely fragile, touch and go. Because of this, it grew ever so more precious, causing her to squeeze lightly his palm, as if trying to hold on to this moment, prevent it from slipping away. The street was still and dark, studded with golden squares of windows and lit only by a pale moon. From the small pool hidden in the backyard, one could hear the croaking of frogs.

Truly, that spring was one the likes of which she had never known.

She was totally captivated by the mysteries of nature. The secret of growth bewitched her: You see a bud—then a flower; brown bald earth—then green sprouts; and you wonder when and how has all this happened. What sort of movement has taken place here secretly? This was why she liked to join her parents on their visits to Dr. Rosner. In his garden, he grew white lilies, and watching these lilies at the right time, one could capture distinctly the moment they

turned from bud into flower. It used to occur exactly at four o'clock in the afternoon.

Dr. Rosner held on to his private one-family home in the city. (Quite a rarity in Tel Aviv where most private home owners succumbed to sell out to developers who demolished the existing structures in order to put up large apartment houses.) In his little garden, encircled with a green fence, he was growing a variety of plants. "Crazy" about flowers, Dr. Rosner would be almost ready to hit a child if he caught the child picking a rare wild flower. Her visit with Dr. Rosner was always a joyful, perfumed experience. However, the most exciting for her were those white lilies. She would stare with fascination how each leaf disentangles itself from the closed bud, taking its place in the flower's head. At that instant, the flower seemed to her like a white bird spreading its wings, getting ready to fly. Once, she chanced to read about plants that moved like living creatures. How astounded was she to discover that precisely those "animated" plants, which she had considered superior, were actually the inferior ones, like, for instance, certain types of algae. Subsisting on muddy and dungy waters, they would jump and dance around. Since that disclosure, she often pondered what was more amazing, movement, or perhaps the ability to remain positioned in the same place—

Nevertheless, the time for these questions came only after many years. After Elijah left for Switzerland to study medicine. After his letters were afflicted with a terrible drought, and but for a few greeting cards, ceased altogether. After she moved out from her parents' home and went to live in a modest apartment near the roof in one of Tel Aviv's suburbs. After she

managed to dance at a number of weddings of her friends, and attended several *Brit* ceremonies for their first-born sons.

Meantime, she gets up early every day to work at one of the public libraries, and returns late in the evening to her tiny apartment near the roof. From time to time, she joins friends going to a movie, or a party. In the beginning her friends and acquaintances tried to "fix her up" with a man, but because she never showed any interest, stopped altogether. On Shabbat mornings she sleeps late. Then, after showering, washing her hair, and dressing up, she goes and visits her parents. In springtime, she spends a while in the field behind her parents' house. In the passing years, a couple of edifices were built there, and the pine grove was entirely uprooted. Still, she could always find there more than four cubits of green and golden threads of sun, and various insects, and butterflies in a multitude of colors—and time would seem as spacious as the sky—

Every holiday she dines with her parents at their home, and every Pesach she helps with preparations for the holiday, assisting her father with dusting and airing the books on the balcony. Every *Seder*, when father fills Elijah's Cup, she rushes to open the door for him. There would be no spring, no Passover, to pass her over. And still, yes still, her palate perseveres, preserving a taste of *afikoman* as if it were the taste of beginning. This is how she lives her life in the meantime—until—the coming of Elijah. •

*Translated by the author from her collection of stories Far From Home (Od Rachok Min Ha-bayit), Israel: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 2001. The story is entitled in Hebrew "Bechodesh Ha-aviv."*