The Return of Noah-Anshel
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N
oah-Anshel, the local kabbalist, lived by himself on Maran Hill, between Shalin and Ignalina, in the province of Vilna. He ate the fruit of the trees in his grove, storing pears and apples in his step-down cellar for the bleak Lithuanian winters. He drank from the clear waters of the brook that flowed down the hill, first to the Christian village Maran, and then on to Jewish Palush some two viertos down the road.

The Christians in Maran used to bring Noah-Anshel bundles of logs to burn in his oven, kindle-sticks to light up his hut at night, and once in a while, milk and honey. Nobody knew with what he paid them. At any rate, these were no ordinary Lithuanian peasants. Friday evening they lit candles; true, long after sundown, but something to marvel at nonetheless. It was said in those parts that they were Marranos who had forcibly been converted to Christianity five hundred years earlier back in Spain. They wandered through Europe until they reached Lithuania, where they set up their huts at the foot of this hill. It wasn’t long before their settlement became known as Maran.

In the summer months, the kws of Palush bathed in Lake Lusha and Lake Drings, on the road to Antalkun. Maran was en route. From time to time they would look up onto the hill and spot Noah-Anshel. He wore a “Jewish cap” with a wide visor and gently rounded top, and a blue-checked shirt of flannel. His white beard was not overly long. As if in compensation, it was cottony and dense, and fell into three overlapping circles, like a train of three clouds in the Lithuanian sky.

But nobody lives forever. On a frosty day in the month of Shvat (which is after all the Angel of Death’s favorite month), one of the Christians from Maran came running to Palush. He made for the studyhouse and in a hushed, choked voice, told the old Jews huddled over their huge tomes of the Talmud—they were immersed in a difficult passage in tractate Hagigo—that the “rabbit on the hill,” as he called Noah-Anshel, had died. Yesterday he walked around and today he lies a corpse. So among...
Everyone forgot about Noah Anchiel. A Christian family took his books and manuscripts to the studyhouse in Pahou and moved into his hut up on the hill above Maran. But it wasn't long before the hut collapsed in an early spring windstorm, the one that also took with it the ancient beaver dam for which Maran had been known in those parts. Bui Kalmenezer, the scribe of Pahou, who kept the record books in the studyhouse, made a note of the day Noah Anchiel died.

Seven years later, also on a winter day, a stranger appeared in the Pahou studyhouse at midday. His appearance was like that of Noah Anchiel. His walk was like that of Noah Anchiel. The Talmudists started whispering audibly.

"We used to see him up high on the hill. Everyone looks a bit alike from a great distance. All stars have the same face. And what do you think? An ascetic who died let himself down from heaven into the studyhouse, and we simply lack have to wait for Messiah! That wouldn't be very fair, now, would it?"

"Who wouldn't know that things aren't fair in this world, ah? Hey, and maybe Mestiah finally got sick of delaying his appearance forever?"

"Get out of here!"

"What's the point of yawning when we can just ask this fellow?"

"Hey there! Hello, welcome! Where are you from?"

"From Maran! Don't you know Maran Hill? It's not at all far from here."

All the bearded heads looked up in unison. Some smirked, some gasped for air, and one man giggled.

"And how do people call you?" one of them finally asked the stranger.

"Noah Anchiel, son of Leyzrother. Say there, can a visitor here in your parts have a peak at a book of Talmud? I gather that my old books were brought here from Maran."

Kalmenezer the scribe, mastering all his human strength to mask his fright, answered in a high-pitched voice that shifted to gritter before he finished his sentence.

"Sure, by all means, you go right ahead there, Reb Noah Anchiel, son of Reb Leyzrother. Enjoy!"

He went on to explain to the mysterious guest why everyone was in shock.

"Look, it's like this, Reb Noah Anchiel. Around seven years ago, he started, slowly turning pages backwards in his pinkie, the record book, then fixing sharply on one entry, "no, not around seven years ago, but exactly, yes, today is the yiftsharot, oh my God, seven years ago today, a few died around here, maybe, now, live to be a hundred and twenty years. He looked very much like you. In fact, he couldn't look any more like you! Or should I say, you couldn't look any more like him? Maybe a close relative? He lived in the hut on the top of Maran Hill. He was also called Noah Anchiel, but we didn't know his father's name, he was an ascetic and kept to himself. Maybe a cousin? We gave him a burial at the nearest cemetery, in Igudina, may he intercede for us in all Heaven."

"Oh, actually, that's me," Noah Anchiel replied, matter-of-factly, "I've taken a break from the Other World."

A shuddler ran through every spine in the studyhouse. The old bearded scholars scurried outside and started to tell people on the street what had happened. A market woman started to shout.

"A ghost! There's a ghost in town! Find a shofer and drive him away!"

Chaya-Sorza the seamstress was known as the wisest person in Palash. She picked up a few female friends on the way to the studyhouse and marched right in with her coterie to confront the newcomer.

"Not a corpse nor a ghost. A charlatan is what the man is, a prankster. Could be a cousin, or even a twin brother. Now if this man wants to dance with corpses, let him go to Glubok! Even the cats in Glubok believe anything! And if Glubok won't do there's always Warsaw. They're even more gullible in Warsaw, Incredible, easy it is to get everybody excited. He didn't die and he didn't rise from the dead!"

Noah Anchiel answered in a still small voice.

"My dear woman! Of thee and of all Palash do I beg forgiveness if pereavdenev I have anyone wronged. I was asked whence I came and verily I did reply. All that is now left to me to ask is that which Samuel the Prophet did ask in Gilgah: 'Here I am: witness against me before God and before his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I defrauded? Whom have I expressed? Of whose hand have I taken a bribe to blind my eyes therewith? Tell me, and I will restore it to you!'"

The finest scholar in Pahou was thought to be Shmaya the Judge. Everyone started looking at him for guidance. Shmaya became angry, but not at Noah Anchiel.

"Look, a few rides into town, sits himself down in the studyhouse, wants to look at a book, and you all start harassing him about his resemblance to a dead man. What did you expect him to answer after such a question, ah! Open up your books, people, ah! This is a studyhouse, not..."
the town market! And you women, go outside where you can say what you like."

They obeyed Shmayya. There were sighs of relief. Someone had managed to keep his head. The men opened their large books, but soon their eyes became cross-eyed from the strain. Everyone was looking down into the Talmud and across at Noah-Anshel all at once. But Noah-Anshel was immersed in his book.

Shmayya the judge was "a certified Litvak" through-and-through. He asks what a commotion is all about and even while he's asking he's working out in his mind how to get to the bottom of the thing. He calmly walked out of the study house and hopped on a sleigh heading for Igalina. The local waggons, who all shifted to their sleighs in the snowy months, Jews and Christians alike, felt honored to give him a ride into town. Once in Igalina, he rushed to the old Jewish cemetery and walked about until he came upon the village undertaker, and bluntly asked him to come back with him to Palash.

"Oh, my dear Shmayya, but alas, for all our sins, people are dying and there is work to be done here! What will happen if I come with you to Palash, ah?"

"It's life and death."

"There you have it, I work with death but everyone tells me that it's his problem that is life and death. But if Shmayya the judge says go, you go, I guess. Let's go!"

By the time they returned to Palash, just about the whole village had gathered into the synagogue courtyard. Shmayya strode into the study house. The Talmudic tomes lay limply upon the tables as their owners cheered airlessly into the air. Only Noah-Anshel was actually studying, with the air of a man who knows all too well how rapidly the clock ticks-tocks our life away, how idiotic it is to waste even a minute.

With a measured, judge-like motion of his hand, Shmayya called Noah-Anshel over to him. With eyes dancing in veneration, the rest of them followed Noah-Anshel's every move.

Noah-Anshel told Shmayya that he now wanted to walk up to Maran, to see his old hilltop. So the three of them started walking in the direction of Maran: the judge from Palash, Rab Shmayya; the undertaker from Igalina; and Noah-Anshel from "Mount Maran," which was how he himself referred to the hill above Maran. All of the Palashites followed. "Exodus from Palash," they started joking, being a little lighter of heart by then. But it was a nervous parody, repeated more to calm nerves than to be clever.

Only Chaya-Sorra the seamstress spoke loudly and clearly, on the road to Maran.

"Fools! People can't see through a charlatan! What are we going to find in Maran among those peasants, ah? Just get a hold of this: If they really think this man got up out of his grave, why are they so nervous? They should be thrilled that Messiah is finally on his way. But this is as fake as Shabbatai Zvi was a fake messiah."

The winter sun warmed the Maran-bound trekkers from Palash. When they approached Maran, the locals mobbed them from all sides. They had caught sight of Noah-Anshel and started screaming in ecstasy:

"Jesus, Maran! Jesus, Maran!"

People were tearing at their own hair, crossing their chests, weeping. They took turns grabbing Noah-Anshel and kissing him powerfully, as if to accede to a Kiss of Redemption. A second Jew had risen from the grave, not three days but seven years after his death. Not in Jerusalem, but in Maran.

The undertaker from the Igalina cemetery, who had all along been quietly scanning his memory of scores of ritual cleanings of corpses, suddenly remembered the day, seven years before, when they brought him Noah-Anshel of Maran Hill. There was a red-and-blue scar, in the shape of three twigs from a common stem, under his left elbow. He gently asked the lookalike standing beside him to please not take offense and roll up his left sleeve.

Noah-Anshel took off his coat and rolled up his left sleeve of his checkered flannel shirt. When the undertaker saw the red-and-blue scar of three twigs, he began to howl like a wolf.

"Oh no! Oh my God! It's the dead man I buried! He's walking around. A ghost! A devil! Agil!"

He fainted and dropped like a telegraph post struck by lightning onto the soft clean snow. His hair stood erect, like freshly mowed grass. The Maranite peasants rushed over with dead-horn smelling salt and vodka. As he began to move very slowly, they opened his mouth wide and forced down a swing of the spirits. They lifted him onto a sleigh and rushed him back to Palash to the "feldsher," or medical man.

The feldsher began to laugh. "All his life this man is busy with dead people and today he decides to faint from fright. Ta-ta-ta! Well, he's got to be smoked out. My wife runs that side of the practice."

The undertaker was placed on the sickbed. After a short while, the feldsher appeared with a pot of boiling water which was turned green from the medicinal herbs in the compound. She placed the smoking pot beside the patient on a little table, so that its steam would penetrate his nostrils. Quick as a bolt she ignited several chunks of caked sugar in a tin tray on the floor underneath him. She proceeded to lay out a huge white sheet over everything: the patient, the boiling green solution, the sugary tray on the floor. In a split second, the patient pushed the sheet away from himself. He had been smoked out of the fright. He paid the feldsher her fee and they brought him back on a sleigh to his cabin by the Igalina cemetery.

In the meantime, messianic frenzy swept Maran, enveloping both the Christian Maranites and their midwinter day guests, the Jews of nearby Palash. Whether they were beholding the
advent of Messiah son of Joseph, or the real one, the son of David, or the return of Jesus Christ, everybody assembled was gripped with an eschatology of the End of Days.

Noah-Amshel climbed up Marim Hill. The crowd followed him part of the way up until he indicated with a wave of his hand that he wanted them to go no further.

As if for the sake of days gone by, he stood by himself, deep in snow, in the cluster of trees where he used to communicate with God, in solitude, all those years. He started softly to chant the afternoon prayer, oblivious to the crowd of Jews and Christians below, who remained so quiet that every word of the prayer could be heard. After each "Ami" of the Jews, the Christians of Maran offered their own "amus" as if they were saying amen to the amens of the Jews of the next village, as if they had gone back five hundred years.

Noah-Amshel came down the hill and said good-bye to the Christians of Maran. They kissed him and tried to bow to him, but he started back toward Pahalh. An afternoon frost was taking hold. Without meaning to, the Pahalhites formed a circle around Noah-Amshel on the road back home, as if it were forbidden to stand too closely to someone who returned from the world to come.

A secret studyhouse began to speak. He was dark-complexioned and his beard was black as coal.

"Reb Noah-Amshel! So what do you do there all day, in the Other World?"

"There are no days and there are no nights!"

"So what do you do there without days and without nights?"

"Ay-ay, what do you do, what do you do? The soul does not do anything. It is, it knows that it is, it understands, it contemplates, Pure understanding and tranquil contemplation. What happiness!"

An old man who used to study the kabbalah by candlelight by himself, late at night in the studyhouse, wanted to know just one thing.

"Are there reincarnations of souls of erstwhile people?"

"Yes."

Shayna the judge started racing through his own questions. It was as though he felt that he was talking through a window that would not long remain open.

"Noah-Amshel son of Leyzroscher! You have borne witness to us that the soul in the Other World knows, understands, and contemplates. Fine. Does that mean that the soul cannot have an impact for good, here in the Lower World?"

"Can have, cannot have! It doesn't care! Except maybe once in a Jewish Diaspora! What does it need when it is content, ahh? Let me give you an example in your language. When someone rescues himself from a filthy, dark pit where all sorts of ugly things swarm, and survives to live a happy life in the free air, will he go back to the filthy, dark pit, ahh?"

"I see, so there is no pity in the Other World. Are all the tribulations here in the Lower World?"

"The point is that there is no point in continuing to concern ourselves with you lot! Everything in your world comes to nothing in the end anyhow. Vanity of vanities," said Kahlea, and right he was. When something is put right in your world, it is only to be spoiled again even more later?"

"But Reb Noah-Amshel, doesn't the Mishna say that all the people of Israel have a portion of the World to Come All Jews?—Stop talking in generalities. What it means is that the possibility is there for a soul to develop. But of a hundred people that die, ninety-nine remain rotting corpses in the ground. Only the higher souls make it to the Other World."

"Reb Noah-Amshel son of Leyzroscher! Of all the Pahalhites who have died, surely the souls of some carry on in the Other World!"

"Some."
Our old town rabbi, Reb Avrom-Meir, no doubt?

"No, he’s not there.

"The great scholar Reb Yehuda-Benjamin of blessed...

"Not there.

"The master of the studyhouse, Reb Lifsken-Meyshle of ble ...

"Not there.

"All right. So who is there from Palash?

"From the day Palash was founded until this very day, there have been three. (Myself, I'm from Maran, I don’t count as a Palashite, of course.) The kabbalist Reb Arza Lelya. The rabbi's wife Gita who ran the girls' school here. And Chaltka the pauper who used to go around healing the sick chickens of poor people.

"That’s all?

"That’s all.

"And what is the common denominator? Were they all exceptionally good people?

"What's exceptionally good? They spent their lives on any loving good things.

They reached the two heavens known as Tiferes (beauty) and Hod (splendor). They didn’t let a single ugly stain impact upon their souls.

"And they too have no desire to come down now and again, and do something good over here?

"What for? It’s so boring here and useless. That is why the Lower World is, at best, for one in a hundred, a passageway, A way station.

The townspeople started to shuffle into the studyhouse for the evening prayers. They prayed with extraordinary concentration, as if in recognition of a heavenly sign, the first ever in Palash. But immediately after the sacred silent prayer, 18 Blessings, a communion broke out and everybody stopped praying. There was no Noah-Anshel! It was a moonlit night. People searched in every corner of Palash. A few headed out to Maran and climbed the hill there. Some took a sleigh with a lantern to the Igalina cemetery. The small gravestone marked "Noah-Anshel" seemed now to tilt a little bit to the left. So they took the lantern off the sleigh and stone it upon the stone and the surrounding earth. Nothing has been disturbed.

But three long icicles jutted down from the slanted peak of the gravestone, in the shape of three twigs from a common stem.

For many years to come, the Jews of Palash and the Christians of Maran spoke about Noah-Anshel.

On the anniversary of his death each year, a group of Palashite Jews went out to the cemetery in Igalina to say the kaddish prayer for the dead.

A group of Maranite Christians also went to the Jewish cemetery in Igalina to pray each year, on the day when the anniversary of Noah-Anshel's death fell according to their own calendar.

The regulars in the Palash studyhouse were certain that the ascetic kabbalist of Mount Maran verily descended down unto them for a winterday's visit.

But others thought the stranger to be a demon, an evil spirit whose real intention was to shake the belief of the devout.

And some agreed with Chasy-Sorah the seamstress that he was a charlatan, maybe a twin brother, or even just a skilful praiser who made himself a scar like the dead man's, in order to fool people. "Not enough fakers in the world to make you think?" she would ask. And she provided the people of Palash with her reasoning:

"If this world is so boring for him, like the big-shot said there in the studyhouse, and no one up there is interested in what's going on down here, then why in the world—this world or that world—did he himself come down here to bang on our teaselites?

There were differing theories within Chasy's crowd. Some suspected the Igalina undertaker of having planned the whole thing as a big joke, a once-in-a-lifetime hoax. "What, an undertaker doesn't know how to make it look real like, ah believe you me," they would say; "an undertaker knows how to make hair stand on the left, to the right, to the center!"

Only one Palashite, Shmamu the judge, believed to the end of his days that the whole story, which he did not pretend to understand, had something to do with the very unusual Christians of Maran who light candles on Friday nights, a remnant of a remnant of their once-upon-a-time Jewishness. He was afraid to confide his thoughts to anyone, even to his wife.

Blue-checkered shirts of flannel became popular among both Maran Christians and Palashite Jews, and can be seen in both villages to this day.

And they were all sad that it might be the case, that only a tiny select few have souls worthy of the Other World, and even worse, that those tiny few might not care about what goes on here in the Lower World.

But they all tried to spend their time on beautiful things, to aim for the tiny select few.

And the rest of the tales of Noah-Anshel, and of all that happened around him and because of him in Maran, in Palash, and in Igalina, were fully recorded by Kalumeneer the scribe in the large record book of the Palash studyhouse. There the story is called "The Kabbalist of Mount Maran."