

## *The Redeemer of Little Jerusalem*

The setting was immaculate – Sunday, summer, a still shimmering sea, comely bodies bronzing, tanning lotion glistening, rippled young men, long-limbed girls, albino men in striped bermudas, triple-chinned women in last century's hats, and children squealing, clambering, leaping, and dogs chasing, chasing beach-balls, chasing shadows, chasing sticks.

This was Little Jerusalem, shrine of our pilgrimage, that stretch of magnetic green between the kiosks, the St. Kilda marina to the left, the South Pacific baths to the right, and across the bay, milky mist crowning the immobile cranes and pylons and refineries of Port Melbourne, scene of arrival of so many of us to these securer firmer Antipodean shores. Day after day, we gathered at our place of worship, boys and girls of the higher forms, fifteen, twenty of us, showing off, admiring – ourselves and one another –, and talking (oh, God, no, not of philosophy or physics or medieval history, subjects of nine-to-four captivity in chalk-choked classrooms), but of last night's barbecue, tonight's poolside party and tomorrow's rock concert at the Myer Music Bowl. Here, Abe Belfer wrestled with Maxie Greenberg, Micky Schleifer flirted with Hannah Podemski. Here, too, we outleapt one another in pursuit of high-flying rubber balls, and when Arthur Kirschenboim sought a partner for a game of chess, boldly laughing we kicked the wooden pieces off the board, gaily tickled Arthur's resisting, writhing, contracting ribs, and spiritedly sprinkled grass in his face and filled his ears with sand.

Poets – the Romantics among them – might have called the

air golden, radiant, and luminous, and prattled about twittering birds, gay hearts, blitheness of spirit and juvenile innocence. Ours, however, is a less mawkish age. Our pens flow not with honey but with Royal Blue or Indian ink. Our words are more temperate, suited to the harder, more sober temper of the times. And yet, truth compels us to adhere to the very descriptions of those we chide; for the air *was* luminous, birds – sparrows and seagulls – *did* twitter and sometimes caw around us; and we *would*, if pressed, have admitted to gaiety and blitheness, and, as for innocence, yes, that we still possessed, though, Lord knew, with summer and vacations scarcely begun, that was a state not destined for long to be preserved by all.

Others, barely a short call away, were well on the other side of innocence. Gurewicz, Shuster, Postnick and Lilienblum – a quartet of bare-backed men sitting around a square collapsible felt-topped table, biting their lips or whistling monotonously behind their fans of playing-cards, while their wives ate cream-puffs and chocolate cake and poured coffee from thermos flasks as they sat spread out on mohair rugs and shrilly traded the news of the week as though that week had been a year and the next two hours were to be a mere minute. Sometimes, Mrs. Postnick, capacious in the seat and endowed with arms of plucked chicken-flesh, stood up. Hands on hips, she arched her back out of its stiffness, winced sharply on straightening, and said 'Mine enemies should so suffer from old bones,' to which Mrs. Gurewicz, Mrs. Shuster and Mrs. Lilienblum in unison murmured a solemn 'Amen,' their faces transforming, however fleetingly, to a nobility and passion born of nothing less than suffering. But allowance must be made for other possibilities: that such manifest nobility and passion were, for instance, merely a trick of sunlight and flitting shadow – say, of a seagull flying across the sun; that they were perhaps but fanciful interpretations of mine, endowed as I was with intimate knowledge of those people; or that – a man is capable of any deception – I am deliberately misleading the

reader in pretending to depth where, in truth, none exists but only surface and shallows. Little Jerusalem, after all, was ever a place for games and good humour and light-hearted teasing, and my taste for these even as I remember those adolescent days, all the intervening years of work, debt, thinning hair and domestic wranglings notwithstanding, has not wholly waned. So may the reader forgive me my private, however unsubtle, amusement, pleasure and tilt at a little humbug.

But I digress.

That Sunday, then, was immaculate, the single minor aberration apart – the clock on the Upper Esplanade above us. Were we to trust it wholly, beguiled might we have been into believing that time stood still. Five-to-eight did it register to all who cared to look. But so had it the year before and the year before that. Besides, go, stop time, real time, and stop movement that can only take place within time! But there was no stopping of movement. The sun itself stirred it, its warm magnetic emanations drawing towards it the unresisting pleasure-tickled masses. Cars humming in the shimmer of entangled traffic inched somnolently over glowing asphalt. Sweating, laden with blankets, bags and beach umbrellas, the people wove serpentine paths through the narrow spaces between the cars while would-be comedians – or would-be corpses – clambered harum-scarum over their burning bonnets. At this, drivers hooted, shook fists, and sprinkled lush words into the surrounding glaze, while drowning these were whoops of delirium straddling the iridescent blueness over the Stardust and the Palais that came from the coasters that clattered and scuttled around the neck-jarring bends of the Scenic Railway a stone's throw-and-a-half away in Luna Park.

Our group were past such whoop-inspiring pleasures; those coasters had been the delight of an earlier day. But neither had we, mercy be, yet settled into the composed twilight of card-playing or of cream-puffs and chocolate cake and the matching of story against story of grand-children, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, nephews, nieces, and neighbours, or of

grocers, doctors, plumbers and landlords, or of Surfers Paradise and Hayman Island, and indigestion and constipation and piles and Lord knows what other sunset talk.

Ah, blessed, blessed generation that we were!

Who saw or heard him first, our nemesis, I no longer know. Perhaps all of us looked towards him in unison, as at a sudden thunderclap or towards a startled shout of 'Fire!' He betrayed, that lean spare haunted haunting trespasser, no hint of sun ever having touched his face. Of flesh, only the hard curved buttress of his nose, the milk-white brow, and his waxen spindle-fingered hands ventured to meet the light. For the rest, he wore, pulled down firm, a porter's cap, wore too a black roll-neck sweater and, over this, the heat notwithstanding, a tatty black suit, too tight, too short, on which blobs of grease had melted darkly into confluent lagoons. And as for his face – yes, I must return to his face – his lips, his cheeks, his chin, even his ears, all so shrivelled and so sere, were lost in a straggly black beard that might have been a hand-me-down from some ancient pious ancestor laid to rest in the distant Carpathians, while as for his eyes . . . one could well wonder whether they were truly his own, so stark, so black and so dartingly avian were they in their cavernous sockets.

By the time I looked up, he stood perched just midway along the parapet that separated sand behind from plantation in front. From there, raising a finger that was spare and scrawny as though he were setting to cleave the very air, he cried out in a voice that was at once shrill and riveting and intense: 'Who among you shall listen to what I have to say! Who will listen here to what I have to say?'

How could we *not* listen? Or, if not consciously listen, then not *hear* that wizened graceless scarecrow so suddenly landed in our midst.

Conversations instantly gelled and hung suspended on overhead wires; the card-players, having skewed themselves

towards him, were transfixed in sculptor's stone; while their wives, on looking around, each became Lot's wife, all except Mrs. Shuster who, more severe than the rest, said, 'Ach, another one such, *shoin*.'

The other-one-such-shoin, bird-eyed and beaked, leaned forward precariously and asked again:

'Who among you shall listen to what I have to say? When I have come here to direct you, to show you purpose, to redeem your lives?!'

Lisa Firestone, copper-toned and lush, every visible bit of her a calendar model, giggled. Ivan Moss, in his hirsute darkness an advertisement for masculinity all-vanquishing, nibbled at her ear and said, 'Beware, evil sinner, thy Maker prepare to meet!' Lisa laughed, a tantalising shoulder quivering in the hold of her mirth.

'Five minutes give me, ten even, no more,' the newly-alighted visitor appealed. 'I come out of love for you, out of pity for you, and out of hope for your salvation!'

Abe Belfer who wore leopard-spotted trunks snorted and thrust a firm cleft chin towards him. His thighs, his arms, his chest were corded warps. He was of the species that no Nadia, Debbie, Ruth or Tanya could resist.

'And who are you, mate?' he leered, assuming as if by ordained right the role of spokesman on our behalf.

'My name, my name is Yehoshua Rachamim,' our visitor from Sheol said vehemently. 'I am, I am a poet and a watchmaker come to speak to you, my brothers, to you, my sisters, to you, God's Almighty's holy chosen people!'

'*Vos is?*<sup>1</sup> said Mrs. Lilienblum, liberated from her salty pillar. 'No *parnosseh*<sup>2</sup> in poetry? Or in fixing vatches? A missionary you become?'

The poet-cum-watchmaker impaled Mrs. Lilienblum on the shaft of his glare. He turned up a cupped knobbly hand. He could have been thirty-five, forty, forty-five, fifty; there was nothing to give his age away.

(1) 'What is?!'

(2) Business

‘A missionary, no. But a mission I have, yes!’ he said, prodding at air.

A reedy little man with mottled scaphoid belly and cracked leathery cheeks spat on the ground and rubbed the spittle into the asphalt with a foot.

‘An’ I thought ’e was another o’ them Bible-bashers,’ he said, ‘an’ turns out ’e’s a bloomin’ Jew.’

‘You’re no brother o’ mine, mister,’ said a red-haired fellow covered in tattoos before moving on.

These, he ignored. They were not, it seemed, the fish he sought to fry. It was us, pilgrims gathered at the Little Jerusalem shrine, that he looked at most concertedly. To the yachts behind him, the liner, the people swimming, floating, throwing balls – to these he was totally oblivious.

‘It is no sent message, however, that I come to deliver,’ he said, vigorously shaking his head. ‘I haven’t the tongue, nor the eminence of Moses or of Isaiah or Jeremiah. I am but lowly even among the low. But one question, my people, one question do I wish to ask. But of whom . . . of whom here . . . of whom shall I ask it?’

He scoured the faces of those gathered there – the card-players, their wives, and the Weiners, Wisemans, Gordons, Gotts spread on blankets across the lawn. It was upon Jacob Gurewicz on whose back one could fry an egg that his gaze came to rest.

‘You!’ he said then, pointing at his quarry. ‘Friend! Hold out your arm! Your left one!’

Jacob Gurewicz, scarcely impressed, merely shrugged a shoulder.

‘A crazy!’ he said, looking at his playing hand and throwing down a card.

Shuster tapped his temple. ‘A *meshugene*,<sup>3</sup> he said. ‘A *shkizophrenic*.’

Our would-be-redeemer must surely have heard, but betrayed no sign of having done so. Instead, he tugged at his

(3) A crazy one

cap, drew himself up still higher so that his very shadow across the plantation lengthened in proportion, breathed in, held his breath, and then released it, the release attended by a hard sharp crisp explosion.

'This is my question!' he burst forth raspily. 'This! That number on your arm, mister. You, mister, who shrugged your shoulder. What does it mean to you? What does it mean to *any* of you here?'

Bella Gurewicz rose to her knees. She looked as if she had swallowed a can of nails.

'Anti-Semit!' she yelped. 'Vot do you vant from mine husband? He's had enough trouble from vun life. Vy do you persecute him again?!

Other voices rose in a babel – those of Solly Weiner, Moshe Gordon, Hannah Gott.

'Vot he vont from us in our old age?'

'Vot madness is dis?'

'It is de devil or de *maalach-ha-mavet*<sup>4</sup> dat sent him here?'

Jacob Gurewicz, on the other hand, object of our visitor's focus, shrugged a dismissive shoulder.

'Let de donkey bray,' he said drily. 'He's *fardreit*.<sup>5</sup> He threw down another card with an emphatic thrust and drew towards himself the centre pile.

'Persecute? Me?!' cried out the grim-visaged emissary Rachamin poised above us. 'I have no wish to persecute. You have suffered enough. That I know. As God is my witness, that I know. But you survived. *Survived!* While many there were who didn't, who didn't, who died!

'Now vot is he saying?' asked Mina Shuster, laying a hand on Bella Gurewicz's arm.

'He's unreal,' said Sharon Weinrib beside me, turning up her eyes, then crossing them.

Our unheralded guest again leaned forward. A squawking sea-gull winged low, just over his head.

(4) Angel of death

(5) 'He's screwed up.'

'Watch the bird shit on him,' Maxie Greenberg said. I couldn't help but smile.

'But why?! *Why?*' he called out more forcefully still, pounding a fist into the opposite palm. 'Why did you survive when others died? *Why?*'

'*Nu?*' cried Abe Belfer, hand on hips. 'Why?! Tell us! *Why?!*' He winked at me, at Maxie, at Sharon, at Sarah.

'Was it that you may spend the rest of your lives playing cards?' our inquisitor kept on, lowering at the men. 'Or that you may bow to idolatry in worshipping the sun?' he said, glowering at us. 'Or that you may stuff yourselves with cream puffs, eclairs and chocolate cake, ha?' he added, frowning at the women. 'Was *that* what for?'

Jacob Gurewicz, bare-backed and burnt, the hair on his chest grey and curly, now lay down his cards and turned to the man who had come to be our interrogator, deliverer, saviour. He narrowed his eyes, their whites disappearing in the dusky periorbital folds around them.

'Vot do *you* know about vy?' he said, his tone soft but resolute. 'You can crow, mister, sure. But vere you there? In Auschwitz? In Treblinka? In hell?'

'My parents were, may their memories be blessed,' Yehoshua Rachamim the man on the parapet returned. 'And my grandparents, who became soap, smoke, ashes.'

'And dat makes you an expert, ha, and a *Got-geshikt mashiach?*<sup>6</sup> said Jacob Gurewicz, again quietly.

'I did not say that!' the man in black, that devil's advocate of ours protested. 'Not for a moment, no! But, think, think, all of you, *did* they die so that you could play cards? Did *you* survive that you might stuff your faces? I ask again, was *that* what for?'

He paused, briefly, purposely, the better to let his question filter into our awareness; but it gave time to Mickey Schleifer to call out, 'If not that, then what for, mate, eh? Tell us, mister!' drawing a giggling Hannah Podemsky towards him.

(6) God-sent Messiah.



The poet-watchmaker-prophet-advocate-redeemer pounced at opportunity. He had clearly tossed the bait and Mickey Schleifer had bitten.

'To create!' he thundered at Mickey, at Gurewicz, at Abe Belfer. 'That's what for. To create! Poetry, music, art. To write histories, memoirs, books. To tell what was and tell what is, and tell of the greatness, of *our* greatness, that may yet come to be, and through our works to honour our martyrs and give meaning to their deaths and worship God, and through culture, too, and through knowledge, and through art, to ensure our survival, ensure our survival, as individuals, as a people, as a nation, and show that we are not destroyed and that by any outside force can never be destroyed, and prove that we may yet be that glorious light that we were bidden to be unto the nations? That, *that*, is what for!'

'Ra! shouted Abe Belfer, clapping. 'Encore!' he cried.

Lilienblum snorted and Postnick tapped his temple. Shuster was brushing away a fly. I felt Maxie prod me in the ribs. 'Screwball, isn't he?' he said. I smiled at him too as I had at Maxie Greenberg and pushed him away, he in turn jostling Lisa and Ivan who were as close to petting as propriety could allow.

Gurewicz, sitting back in his chair studying his cards, huffed.

'Leave us, mister,' he said in the same soft tone as before. 'Ve are tired. After vot has happened, after vot ve have been t'rough, ve have earned some peace. Ve don't need to keep living and re-living our pain.'

And he did seem tired, the way his cheeks sagged, his lips turned, and his hands lay, lying like shapeless white heavy clay in his lap. I felt sorry for the man.

But Rachamim for his parapet-pulpit-dais-soapbox did not let up. His eyes, hard and black, darted from face to face. For a brief, tremblingly brief moment, I felt their sharpness in mine. A tremor passed through my limbs and a flush rose to my cheeks as if my blood had been ignited.

'Not for us the luxury of being tired,' he continued with

heightened fervour, or of peace, of this kind of peace as you call it.' 'If we do not take the challenge of creativity upon our own shoulders and through such creativity the highest worship, of what value then the struggles, the heartaches and the sufferings of all our prophets and of all our heroes, zealots, martyrs, saints? Are we by retreat into the frivolous to give victory to our oppressors and offer satisfaction to every two-cent madman who would revel in our defeat? For is not such retreat, such inertia, and such emptiness, this preoccupation with things of no significance – cards, sunshine, rich food, idleness, vanity over bodies, suntans, muscle, physical strength – are not all these, in fact, for a Jew, the very substance of defeat? Are we to be – is this what you want? – to be like other people, when you are, when you are, in truth, a chosen nation? Are we, are we, *are we!*'

He had raised a shaking finger high. Another hubbub arose. Mrs. Shuster, Mrs. Postnick, Solly Weiner, Hannah Gott all had to have their say.

'Vy must ve Jews always be striving, driving ourselves?'

'Let us be like de other peoples. Den ve vill not be so killed.'

'Art, it never saved nobody. It has not stopped de peoples from murderers becoming.'

'And de prophets dey vas dreamers, and de saints dey vas misguided fanatics, and de martyrs dey vas victims like any oder.'

The poet-watchmaker, our redeemer come, fairly shook. He sought words; his countenance blazed; and he held out his arms and withdrew them, seeming then to find them fumblingly superfluous. His tone became suddenly less shrill, more pleading, and more petitioning.

'And you mister?' he said, confronting Jacob Gurewicz squarely again. 'You have a number. You have truly experienced. Is that what you, too, have to say? Mm? Is it? Is it? For if *you* have learnt nothing, how can anyone here, anyone anywhere begin to learn, to see, to understand, to accept the

message and the lessons in our trials? Mm? Have you said all you have to say?’

Gurewicz tossed a hand and once again shrugged a shoulder. He turned back to his companions around the felt-topped table, handed the cards to Lilienblum and said, ‘Here, Hersh, forget de *meshugene*; deal.’

Maxie Greenberg, meanwhile, had scaled the parapet to the other side and was now on the sand inching towards our deliverer Rachamim from behind. Abe Belfer on our side stepped forward, and Mickey, too, and Hannah and Ivan and Nadia and Sarah, along with others who had got up. They were laughing, they nudged one another, they tittered and they winked, and they beckoned to me to advance with them.

‘All right,’ said the poet, prickly before, but mellow now, in whose shadow we now stood. ‘If it’s too much for the older generation, all right, I understand. I do. But you, then, you . . .’ – he turned his long disconsolate importuning face upon us – ‘you, at least, are young still. In you lies the strength, in you are invested the gifts, would you but use them, of blessed creativity, and in you, too, the seeds of greatness and eminence and achievement of all that is good and is splendid and worthy of praise both human and divine.’

We had formed a half-circle about him, the fifteen, the twenty of us. Maxie, too, now behind, was close. I, for my part, held up my head, took deep breaths of a breeze that just then had risen across the bay and relished the cool play of the wind on my face.

‘If one thing there is that I can impart to you,’ I heard our would-be redeemer Yehoshua Rachamim say, ‘it is this. It is this. To avoid frivolity, to shun stagnation, and not to succumb to the easy, the empty, the wasted life. And if today a single soul have I redeemed, a single soul by what I have said, then . . . then, as is written in the Talmud, the very world shall I have redeemed.’

Searching our faces , his gaze sweeping, feverish and

imploing fell now directly upon me. As before, a wave of heat swept through me, surging, flaring, beginning to seethe. The sweat down my spine prickled, my brow burned, and my eyes stung as, riveting me with what seemed a desperate fervent glare, he cried out, 'Is there anyone here who has heard what I've had to say?! Is there anyone here who has heard what I . . .'

He was not permitted more. To the animated ecstatic whoops of those about me, Maxie, shouting 'I got him! I got him!' grasped his ankles, held them firm, and tugged; he must have tugged, for, the flaps of his black coat flying, his cap sent gliding, his spindly arms flailing, the poet Rachamim teetered above us, he rocked upon the stone and tottered there and swayed, and tumbled then heavily in a graceless ungainly curled-up heap upon the sand. The rest of us, fired, surged forward. Leaning over the parapet, and straddling it, and scaling it, we took to chanting, we beat out a clamour, screeching, shrieking, mocking, jeering, 'Who will listen to what I have to say?! Is there anyone here who hears what I say?!' when Abe Belfer, flushed and chortling, darted to a side, bent towards the pavement, and picked up a solid, flint-white, jagged stone.

Moving in, it was I who threw the second.