

THE
Fountain
OF
Shiloah
A Tale of Deliverance

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HANNAH AMIT



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Foreword



The Fountain of Shiloah was written in the land of Israel and is rich with the imagery, traditions, and folktales of her people and the surrounding countryside. The story is a quest that carries the hero through three poetic books of the Bible: *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, *The Book of Proverbs*, and *The Song of Songs*. Its themes are mystical, pointing to those realms of heaven that only the lovers and prophets, the poets and best of friends catch glimpses of, in the bush that burns and is not consumed.

Dedication



*F*or the poets...the lovers...the friends,
For my children:
Rena, Shimon, Yochanan, Noga and Matty,
For the people of Israel

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Prologue



*N*ow, my children, day comes to an end. You have worked hard and studied and toiled through the heat of the morning and battled all the afternoon away.

I was waiting to sit with you in the shade, to refresh you with a verse or a tale. Ah, but there was more and more work to be done, more protests to be raised, newspapers, reports and quarterlies to be published, more money to be made.

Now the hour is late and you have forgotten the sound of the sea and the trail of the waves. You have laid aside the love story and the corridors are parched with silence. The stars have faded from your memory as well as the names of angels.

The Fountain of Shiloah

Are you ready, at last, for a parable and a poem to sustain you through the night, to point the way anew toward heaven?

There is a time when only a story will end a war, or heal an old wound, or bring a deliverer. There is an hour when only a tale will cause the children's tears to cease, or the wind to die down, or begin to stir, or bring rain, or put the stricken kingdom back in order again.

CHAPTER 1

The City



Once there was a young man who lived in a city where the buildings were all in-between sizes, neither high nor low, just sitting in a row up and down the streets. Drab colors of brown and gray coated them, if they wore any color at all.

It was a noisy city, battering and clanging from morning until midnight as though every steel bar, slab of asphalt and cement was determined to have its say at the same time. There were noises of children arguing, adults barking orders, voices that never learned a song, much less how to harmonize and blend with melodies around them. And it was a smelly city, abounding in pits, fumes and sewers.

Adam Hart lived behind a factory that specialized in manufacturing garbage cans and steel bed frames. He rented a room on the top floor of a three-story apartment building. The structure stood in the center of a small yard, which was filled with rusting scraps, screws, and debris tossed over the

fence by workers. No one in the building complained. No one cared. Here and there handfuls of faded flowers appeared and huddled along the sides of the building as if fearing to be discovered by the heartless elements among which they had been birthed. Every afternoon at four o'clock, Adam Hart walked a dozen flowerless, treeless streets from his place of work, climbed three flights of faded, gray-carpeted stairs, took the brass key ring out of his pocket and unlocked three locks on his door. He had nothing to steal, absolutely nothing. It was simply a custom in the city that each man should have three locks on his door.

At twenty-five minutes after four, Adam would enter his room, take off his heavy work boots and stretch out on the bed. With his hands under his neck, he would mull over the events of the day and contemplate writing a poem or a story.

After a while he would get up and fix himself a cup of coffee and supper. He always ate at a blue kitchen table painted long ago, when the desire to beautify his surroundings still existed. Now it and the pictures from nature magazines he had pasted haphazardly on the walls had long ceased to give him any pleasure. They had faded into the monotony of everything else in his life.

"Tonight," said Adam as he finished the last bite of bread, "I'm going to throw myself out the window."

He placed the dishes neatly in the sink and walked to the glass door. He pushed the latch aside and stepped onto the small balcony. The night was bitterly cold.

"Don't do it," snapped the wind in his ears.

Adam gazed at the broken bed frames below him, at the grotesque shadows they made in the yard, and lifted one foot onto the wrought-iron railing.

"Don't do it, Adam," sang the stars above him. "We cannot help you if you do."

He looked at the maze of streets stretching across the city, the endless factories belching blue and black smoke, and sobbed. A dark, imprisoned thing in Adam's soul, something between a groan and a scream, found a small door opened and fled into the night.

"Good," said the twisted old oak in the yard. "Go inside, Adam. Go to bed."

The next day he awoke just as the sun's rays began to penetrate his dusty, frayed room. This morning there was something different about them. For months he had ceased to think of the dawn as being anything other than an announcement to get out of bed, put on his boots, and start the day's activities. This morning, the light pressed gently into each corner, kissing every shadowed thing awake. At last it came and touched him. "Come, Adam, begin the day. There is hope."

He hopped out of bed, still dressed in his work clothes from the day before. He put on his boots, humming to himself. It was the first time he had felt like singing for as long as he could remember. Last night the wind had restrained him, the stars had spoken to him, and an old oak had been his friend. This morning the light had been kind, like his mother many years ago.

By afternoon, however, the shadows stretched out gray fingers across dingy hills and lengthened into Adam's heart. As he opened the gate to the yard, hunks of rusting metal bullied and mocked him. "We will always be here waiting for you," they sneered. "We will always be a part of your vision, taste, and breath."

"It's the truth," thought Adam, more depressed than before.

"Remember me," whispered the oak as he passed by.

"Remember us," whispered the dusty red flowers as he unlocked the door to his room.

The Fountain of Shiloah

After dinner he lay down on his bed, put his arms behind his neck, and thought about writing a poem. Once, he had felt it was what he most wanted to do in life. He'd taken a year off from university to free his mind, earn some money doing simple labor and discover what his poems were to be about. The year had passed, then two, then three. He never returned to his studies. Toil and monotony dulled his mind. Poems became impotent fantasies at the end of the day.

Once, he had composed verses about love. They were quite passionate, he'd thought at the time. After a few bewildering involvements, he ceased writing poems on the subject. He experienced attraction turn into obsessive craving for another person's presence. One girl with whom he was infatuated moved steadily into the inner chambers of his mind, consuming more and more of his thoughts, motivations, and energy until he had not a drop of concern for anything else in his life. (Once during this interval his older brother had gone into the hospital for a serious operation. He neglected to phone him until some weeks after the crisis had passed). He had longed for the encounter, the accidental meeting, and the appointment with his beloved, always imagining the conversations and outcomes. When such meetings did occur, he felt uninteresting and awkward. Simple conversation was strained and artificial. Understandably, he'd been refused countless times by the object of his fancy, sometimes kindly, sometimes forthrightly, sometimes politely, but for him, always painfully and embarrassingly rejected.

He determined, however, to win his Beatrice with friendship, constraint, and good manners, giving her time to awaken to his gentle and sensitive nature. This too was of no avail. His efforts passed unnoticed or ignored. Still, so deeply had the fancy ingrained itself that hope refused to wither until his adored one walked away, the bride of another man.

The City

At times attraction had been rather like the fascination of the hunter for the hunted, the pursuit of the shy, elegant, and illusive doe, the high soft bird, the dangerous and shaggy beast. Always there was the moment when the shot was fired, the hunted fallen, and the heart swelled with victory gone its pitiless way.

Once, a needy girl he was kind to in a brotherly manner, without romance, without commitment, came to him shyly and confessed her enduring love for him. It was a shock and a puzzle to learn he had awakened such ardor by mere casual warmth. In the end he resolved to avoid the subject of romance.

For some months he vented his social and political opinions in verse. Night after night he scribbled about injustice, suffering, the rotting skeletons of life all around him. It pleased him to strike responsive cords in the hearts of his readers. Actually, a few scattered acquaintances were his only readers. He had never had anything published. One day an old man with a straggly, gray beard said to him, "Adam, I'm an old bird about to die. I know of those things about which you have written. But tell me, can't you compose anything that will cheer an old man's soul and give him a little hope?"

Adam mused silently for some moments. "Don't think so," was his reply. "If I did, it would be a lie for I haven't seen or heard of anything profoundly cheering myself. If I ever do, I promise to look you up."

He ceased to write, though he continued to think about it a good deal. Once, he even ventured something close to a prayer, asking for help to find a worthwhile theme.

He thought again about the stars and the wind that had spoken to him the previous night and about the oak and the pathetic red flowers that grew along the side of the building. The stars were magnificent, and it was an honor that they

should even notice the speck called Adam and speak to him. Nevertheless, they were so remote, so high in supernal surroundings that he could hardly expect them to understand his condition. And the wind, how personal of him to rebuke so sharply, but the wind was not imprisoned and could come and go as he pleased. The flowers were commendable, living out their fragile days in dust and weeds, coloring the drabness with a few feeble notes of spring. Yet, even they knew their commission was for a brief season or two and that others would come to take their place.

It was the ancient oak Adam pondered most. What was it doing here? How had it survived the meanness around it for more than a hundred years? It had once been a member of the forest, and seen brothers hewn down, one by one, nearby meadows entombed in concrete and steel, and buildings mark the graves of autumn and spring. How long had it endured obscenities carved into its flesh? More importantly, why had it chosen to remain long after its brothers had disappeared? Why hadn't it drawn the attention of hatchets and saws and gone the way of its brethren?

His mind grew weary from musings and the toil of the day. It was hushed. No more words, no soliloquy, only curtains parting into realms of fantasy and vision.

In a dream he wandered through a mansion embellished in shades of green. The staircases were carpeted in gray-green. The hues in every tapestry were olive, sea green, and berylline. Ferns and leafy rubber plants that garnished every corner and stair landing were, of course, green as were the floor-length drapes, oriental carpets, and the upholstery on antique chairs and couches.

He descended to the cellar of the building. The floor was concrete. The room was dimly illuminated by a red glow from a hole in the floor about nine feet away from him. It came

from an eerie fire that was being stoked, matter-of-factly, by a robot made of steel nuts and bolts. It was very thin but had some kind of life of its own. Dread crept over him as the metal apparition revolved in his direction. He feared the creature, by some hypnotic power or will, would sway him to step into the hole and the sea of flames that he could hear raging below; but it made no move to approach him. It turned to stoke the fire again.

Adam sensed it had always been there, that it had never moved from the room, and that its only purpose was to tend the flame. Whatever else it might have been designed for, he had no urge to discover. He backed through the half-open door and made his way carefully up the pitch-black stairway. With a shudder he continued climbing until he could no longer hear the creature stoking the inferno.

He passed through luxurious, empty sitting rooms, and polished hallways. He sat in one large chair for a long time, waiting for someone or something. No one came, and nothing happened, so he found his way to another stairway and ascended.

When he reached the first landing, two people, a man and a woman, were waiting for him. Both were tall and straight, but elderly. The woman's hair was dark and streaked with gray. She wore it pulled back from her thin face and knotted into a bun at the nape of her neck. Her eyes were almost black. The old man reminded him of his father's uncle whom he had once seen in a faded, brown photograph. His hair was thin and combed straight across his forehead. His hands showed signs of toil and there was no hint of humor in his face.

Without speaking a word, they led him up one more flight of stairs and down a long, wood-paneled hallway into a bedroom. In the middle of the room was a platform like a small stage. Old blankets were hung around it, causing it to resemble

some child's make-believe tent. The blankets were faded pink and green and Adam could not determine what the original patterns in them had been. They were things one might find in a musty corner of a second-hand store.

The couple led him to the platform, and Adam understood he was to go into the tent. He climbed the steps, which were old wooden boxes nailed together, and pulled back one of the blankets. In the middle of the platform was a thin, bare mattress. On the mattress were a pad and a pencil.

"You may get in," said the woman.

"What a bleak corner," he thought to himself.

"You must get in," said the old man.

He did, like an obedient child. "And when may I come out?"

"Whenever you choose," said the old man. "Whenever you choose."

In spite of the austerity of his immediate surroundings, he was delighted to be alone and hidden away in this old house. Somehow, he knew that he was free from all responsibility and that he would be fed, clothed, and taken care of for as long as he desired and that his only commission was to write. "And under the circumstances," he thought, "it had better be something quite outstanding."

He settled in to wait for inspiration. An hour went by and then another. He began to feel frustrated and ashamed. After so much carrying on about being an artist if only given the right circumstances, it had taken him mere hours to become bored with the whole affair. He was also lonely, a sentiment he had not often known, and then there was the ever-pressing problem of the message. There was none!

Adam stepped out of his tent and went in search of his escorts, who seemed more like parents. In moments they were at his side, if in fact, they had ever left him. He enjoyed

the security of their presence as he continued to explore his surroundings.

In the room that housed his tent was a small, circular, stained-glass window, high in a corner of one wall. It was a brilliant blue against all the gray-green, which in the beginning had been restful but now had become tedious. There were small figures etched in the glass, but they were too far away and too minute for details to be discerned.

As he continued with his hosts, he noticed this same window in the corner of every room. As they journeyed higher, the window expanded until Adam could see angels and golden-winged beasts, children, men and women. He saw a fountain surrounded by flowers and dancing figures.

Ascending still higher, the window spread across an entire wall. Dawn colors—lavender, magenta, and gold—flowed through and from the blue. He could hear the songs of the children and the birds. In the last room they entered, there were no windows, no walls, only the flow of color and form with song reverberating all around him. Faces, ancient and yet familiar, faces of the present and faces unknown smiled down upon him. Light and beauty and love reached out to him.

“I’m coming,” he sobbed falling to his knees. He arose, eager to step into the vision, and fell back in horror as a loathsome beast bounded through the flawless scene and lurched out to devour him.

“No, Adam!” warned the voice beside him, “you mustn’t, not yet. It is a reflection, not a window. The Mirror would kill you!”

The next thing he knew, he was on the stairway where he had first encountered his hosts, but this time he was alone. He saw them for a brief moment standing on the flight above him, and then they were gone. He felt the apprehension of a

child left to himself in a strange place and the deeper ache of abandonment.

He had been asleep for about an hour when he awoke in terror. The entire apartment building was shaking. It swayed back and forth several times, and the walls began to crumble all about him. It occurred to him that he was still dreaming. The earth was swallowing him, the building, and the city. Even the stars rushed down at him and plunged with him into the darkness.

He knew he was going to die. It was happening to him—Adam Hart—and it was all the more terrifying because the very heavens were being swallowed up with him. It was more dreadful than he had ever thought. He had never really thought of it being like this. Why had he never thought of it? He should have been prepared. Darkness and chaos overwhelmed him.

After a period of unconsciousness, he revived to find himself in a waiting room crowded with people. Outside the room was a hallway lined with benches and more people smoking cigarettes and milling about. Others were talking in small groups, and several were making wild gestures as if to better illustrate their stories. Some folks were joking and wisecracking, while others occupied the benches up and down the halls, silent and weary. There were no children that Adam could see. In one wall of the waiting room was a huge door made entirely of brass, which rose almost to the ceiling. It was the most imposing door he had ever seen.

“What’s all of this?” he finally asked a nervous looking businessman who was standing next to him.

“Judgment,” said the businessman curtly.

“Judgment.” Adam repeated the word softly, feeling as though his bowels were turning to liquid as the word slid over his tongue. “I’m still dreaming,” he said to himself. “Dear God, please let this still be a dream.”

“So, what happens?” he asked the businessman again who was, by this time, gnawing the fingernail on his left thumb.”

“Don’t know,” he said. “Somebody just hears his name called and goes through that door.” He gestured to the brass door at the side of the room.

“Anybody ever come out again?” inquired Adam, continuing to feel his insides churn and dread work its way through his entire being.

“Haven’t seen anybody come out yet,” replied the businessman. He threw himself into an empty leather chair, leaned his head back, and closed his eyes.

“Listen,” said Adam, walking over to the chair. “I don’t mean to be a pest, but how long does it usually take until they call your name? How long have you been here?”

“Don’t know. It’s different with everyone. I’ve been here for four days. Came in about three in the morning last Friday. Those guys in the corner making the jokes came in about five minutes before you. I saw one young girl come in and her name was next on the list. She was here all of about three minutes. That old guy in the corner says he’s been waiting for almost ten years.”

Adam groaned. “You are absolutely the most stupid man that ever lived on the face of the earth,” he said to himself. “You knew all along this was going to happen. You knew! So why didn’t you think about it? Why didn’t you let it sink in? It’s God, Adam, that’s who’s behind the door, not some traffic court judge. And what are you going to tell him in your autobiography that he’s going to love to hear about? Where’s anyone or anything you’ve ever cherished or taken care of to present to him, anything you’ve ever done bravely or well? You are apathy and selfishness,” the voice ripped through his soul. “You are worthy of extermination.”

“Adam Hart,” said a voice over the loudspeaker. “You may proceed through the door.”

“I’m a dead man,” he muttered to himself as he stepped through the door into searing, dazzling sunlight. He took one step forward and experienced a sudden, sharp jolt, which brought him fully awake in the early morning coldness of his own bed and room.

His heart was thundering within his chest, and he lay there for a long time in a state of utter relief. His first act was to give thanks for a second chance; his next was to petition heaven for new direction.

He arose to a dawn that was gray and chilly. He threw icy water onto his face from the sink next to his bed. Then he lit a small gas heater, which warmed the room sufficiently on cold winter mornings, and fixed a cup of tea.

He wasn’t concerned about the mood of the dawn and hardly noticed that the sun was an iron disk on the horizon. This morning there was no sense of having awakened, as he had gone to bed, bored, oppressed.

Having finished his drink, Adam went over every piece of the events of the past two days as carefully as he could, including the dream. It didn’t matter if he was late for work. It would be the first time in three years. The last occasion had been a winter’s morning when a sudden blizzard had piled snow around the doors of the building, and it had been hours before machines had cleared a path.

“I am at the beginning of some kind of adventure. Someone or something divine has involved itself in my life. There is going to be a change in this tedious and meaningless existence from which I have not been able to extricate myself.”