

*IN THE GATES
OF ISRAEL*

Stories of the Jews

BY

Herman Bernstein



NEW YORK
J. F. Taylor & Company
MCMII

In the Gates of Israel

Herman Bernstein

For Orthodox Jews in particular, the New World constituted a formidable challenge. What Abraham Cahan spoke of as the “absolutely inflexible” Judaism of “the old Ghetto towns” in Eastern Europe seemed ill suited to the American environment.¹ Lithuanian-born Herman Bernstein (1876–1935) understood the problem very well. Arriving on American shores in his teens, he soon entered on an active literary and journalistic career. The American Jewish Committee under the leadership of Louis Marshall enabled Bernstein in 1914 to found the Yiddish daily Tog, which for a generation addressed itself to immigrants of Orthodox sympathies; Bernstein also edited the conservative English-language American Hebrew and, during the 1920’s, brought suit against Henry Ford in an effort to discredit the industrialist’s advocacy of the anti-Semitic Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Bernstein served the Hoover Administration as ambassador to Albania in the early 1930’s.

In 1902 at New York Bernstein had published his collected “Stories of the Jews” in a volume entitled In the Gates of Israel. The literary historian Meyer Waxman found in them “little psychology or art,”² but the reader of the 1980’s may be inclined to see Bernstein’s offering more charitably.

1. Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (New York, 1917), bk. 5, chap. 4.

2. Waxman, *A History of Jewish Literature* (New York, 1960), 4:969.

Reb Naphtoli, the writer of Sacred Scrolls, stood on the deck of a trans-Atlantic steamer and fervently offered to God the Eighteen Blessings of the afternoon prayer. He firmly clung to the railing with both hands, and swayed his thin, somewhat stooping body back and forth in quick, rhythmic movement. A brisk wind was blowing into his face; his earlocks—"the corners of his head"—protruded from beneath his velvet cap, quivering upon his sunken, wrinkled cheeks; his eyes were closed, and his lips moved unceasingly. Now and then he would open his large black eyes and turn his head abruptly, as though suddenly seized with fright, but he would immediately close his eyes again and, tenderly stroking his earlocks, resume his prayer.

As he stood there it seemed to him—in spite of his endeavor to brush the thought aside—that certain wicked enemies were lurking behind him, ready to spring upon him and rob him of all his possessions.

The loud, many-toned murmuring of the waves, seething and wrestling at the side of the steamer, and the dark gray, massive clouds, solemnly hastening southward, seemed to be singing the praises of the Lord in their own peculiar ways, and Naphtoli prayed with greater zeal and fervor.

Toward the end of the Eighteenth Blessing, he pressed his right hand close to his eyes and slowly implored God that his tongue be guarded from wicked calumny and his lips from utterances of falsehood, that his soul be as dumb as dust in the face of his slanderers, that his heart be open to God's teachings, that his soul should crave His Commandments, that the Lord interfere with all those who bear him malice and plot against him;—all of which Naphtoli wished the Lord to do, "for the sake of His name, for the sake of His right arm, for the sake of His holiness, for the sake of His Torah—"

Naphtoli swayed his head to the right, then to the left, made three steps backward, and turned around. His eyes fell on a group of men who stood a few paces away from him. Suddenly an expression of intense fright crept over the features of his face. Mechanically he clutched his long black, curly earlocks and, as though to shield them from grave danger, held them in a firm grasp.

"Reb Naphtoli, make haste! Take my advice, Reb Naphtoli," said a dark-eyed, red-headed young man, twisting his mustache. "The

steamer will probably make fast before dawn to-morrow! You had better make haste!" he added, as he tapped Naphtoli on the shoulder.

"Hurry up, or it will be too late," interposed another, in a convincing tone.

"Yes, yes, it will be too late—you'll surely feel sorry, but then you'll not be able to help it," said the red-headed young man, with mock seriousness.

Naphtoli, with downcast eyes, stood amidst the crowd, and, slightly shuddering, held his earlocks with all his strength. His eyes were wet with tears. He lifted his head and gazed at the crowd, surveying them with a piteous, haunted look.

"Wait awhile, wait, I beseech you, have pity on me!" he blurted out plaintively, in a voice choking with emotion.

"You are not doing us any favor," ejaculated the red-headed mischief-maker, "but look out! It will be too late!" and he smiled roguishly.

"Murderers, you heartless murderers!" muttered Naphtoli, unable to restrain himself, and he quickly turned away from the crowd.

The crowd burst into laughter.

"He will rather jump overboard than part with his earlocks," remarked a hook-nosed, curly-haired, spectacled man. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"But his are indeed extraordinary earlocks! They're worthy of exhibition."

"They seem to have grown at the expense of his beard!" roared the spectacled man, laughing. "Wouldn't he feel funny, though, without them!"

"He must have raised them on yeast!"

The jolly crowd giggled light-heartedly for a long time, but Naphtoli heard not their laughter. He hastened away to his steerage berth, and threw himself down upon it, weeping bitterly.

Ever since Naphtoli remembered himself, he felt he had been like Samson, dedicated as a Nazarite, as it were, unto the Lord and unto his brethren. It is true, he had not fought Israel's battles, as Samson of yore, but then, Naphtoli's was rather a spiritual strength. His life-labors lay in quite another direction. For nearly half a century he had been writing Sacred Scrolls for Israel's synagogues, phylacteries for Israel's daily prayers, and *mezuzohs* for the protection of Israel's homes from the influence of evil spirits.

Never did a razor or a scissors touch his long black, curly earlocks, or the scanty growth upon his lips or chin. To him "the corners of his head" have ever seemed as something symbolic, constantly reminding him of most that is noble in the Books of Moses—of the highest and wisest form of charity. "The corners of the head" reminded him of "the corners of the field," which the Bible had prescribed to be left uncut, that the poor of the community might come and get the grain with their own hands, and depart, with nothing to wound their self-respect, and nothing to bleed their hearts.

Thus, when some of his fellow-passengers, bent on mischief, told Naphtoli that he must cut his earlocks or the authorities at Ellis Island would not permit him to land, he shuddered and hung his head in despair. In his simplicity, it never for a moment occurred to him to doubt their word. Since he had never done them any wrong, he reasoned, why should they seek to injure him? Indeed, he had never in his life consciously wronged any one save himself, nor had he ever been offended by any of his countrymen in the little town by the Dniepr. God, the Omnipotent Judge, too, was merciful to him, and only once, many years ago, had He poured His wrath upon his head for some sin or other. Naphtoli's youngest son Samuel, who had been the pride of his father and the glory of the whole community, and who had been steadily forging towards the Chair of Teacher in Israel, had suddenly disappeared. Many years had passed. Naphtoli survived his wife and his elder sons, and it looked as though the stem of his forefathers was to end with Naphtoli. But God had willed it otherwise.

One day a letter came to Naphtoli from a countryman of his in America. It said that Naphtoli's son, Samuel, was alive; that he was in New York, and that he was a reformed Rabbi; that there was an organ in his temple, which was playing during the Sabbath service; that the men and the women were sitting together during prayer in the temple; that the men were bare-headed, and that the choir consisted of girl singers.

Naphtoli wept, tore the hair of his head in anguish, and for many days went about "without a head." Finally, he decided to pack his "bit of poverty" and go to reform his beloved son Samuel,—to bring him back to the "road of the righteous." With the community's blessings showered upon his head, Naphtoli who had never before left the boundaries of his native town, started hopefully on his long journey to

the New World.

All went well on the way, when suddenly—the sin and the shame and the pity of it!—now towards the end of his journey on earth, he had to part with the long black, curly companions of a lifetime, the features which, for their size and beauty, had singled out their possessor even among his long-locked and long-bearded, pious coreligionists.

Naphtoli lay upon his berth, quivering in every limb, choking with sobs. Suddenly he straightened himself, wiped his tears away and uttered emotionally:

“Yes, the Lord will help me—He knows Naphtoli needs His help now!”

Naphtoli came out on the deck. The sun was now setting, a globe of fire, sinking beyond the tempestuous waves, near the horizon. With rapid strides Naphtoli walked up to the railing, and firmly clinging to it with both hands, began to say the evening prayer, swaying his body back and forth.

A group of merry, loud-talking men drew near him with buoyant steps.

“Reb Naphtoli, it will be too late, you’ll regret it!” said the red-headed, touching Naphtoli by the arm.

Naphtoli shuddered. He turned his head—there was an expression of terror on his face.

“Nu—Oh!” he uttered, waved his hand, and resumed his prayer.

Naphtoli’s heart beat violently, his lips kept moving, and tears coursed down his cheeks. The crowd waited behind him. A few steps away from them, a group of Russians were jesting and laughing. Now one of them started in a deep baritone the “Dubinushka,” the song of the Russian workmen, and all sorts of voices joined in the popular chorus. Opposite them two Poles were patriotically humming, “*Poland is not yet forlorn*,” and, farther away, a dark-eyed Jewish lass sang mournfully in Russian:

*“But death is nigh, my sepulchre is nigh!
When, like the rustling grass, I die—”*

The voices mingled, the sounds were wafted in every direction. When the singers became silent, some one was heard talking with

enthusiasm:

“Yes, in bygone days they used to have music on the ocean-liners,—you know—the Sirens, half women and half fish, used to sing such strange, melancholy melodies that the passengers fainted when they heard them, so they had to have music to drown the voices of the Sirens.”

“And now?”

“Now the Sirens sing no more!” replied the narrator, authoritatively.

Naphtoli shuddered convulsively. He felt he was already becoming a sinner. During prayer his thoughts wandered hither and thither, and though he firmly believed that the people behind him were not his enemies, yet he feared them.

“Thou art my rock and my fortress, O Lord!” he muttered at the end of his prayer.

“Make haste, make haste!” the red-headed mischief-maker urged him on. “Here’s a chair, be seated!”

Naphtoli seated himself mechanically. In a moment a big crowd assembled around him. He stared at the ground, with drooping head, with his thin hands resting upon his knees.

“Here’s the scissors, Reb Naphtoli! Shall I do it, or will you do it yourself?” asked the red-headed softly.

Naphtoli was silent—his soul was too full for utterance. He struggled with himself as to whether he should lead another man to sin by letting him cut “the corners of his head” or whether he should commit the sin with his own hands. But Naphtoli lacked courage to lay his hands on his own locks.

He kept staring at the ground in silence.

Then the muscles of his face began to quiver.

“You may cut!” he finally uttered in a tone of resignation. His voice trembled with emotion, and he covered his eyes with his hand.

Open-mouthed, the crowd drew nearer.

The red-headed seized one of Naphtoli’s earlocks, and lifting the scissors high in the air, began in a sing-song, mockingly: “Blessed art Thou, O Lord—”

Turning pale, Naphtoli jumped to his feet.

“Be silent, heathen, do not bear the name of the Lord in vain!” he cried, defiantly. His teeth were firmly set together, his eyes, wide open,

flashed with rage, his fists were tightly clenched—only now it dawned upon him that it was all a conspiracy—the work of men who did not have God within their hearts. For a moment his defiant attitude and the piteous expression of his intense suffering awed the crowd into silence. Soon, however, the crowd burst into ringing laughter. The red-headed had already done his work, he had cut one earlock off, and now held it up with an air of triumph. Naphtoli sank back in his chair mutely, submissively, “like a lamb on the way to the slaughter-house.”

“Save me, O God, for the waters are come unto my soul,” mumbled Naphtoli, faintly, and the tears trickled down his face.

The crowd laughed on. Naphtoli feared to lift his eyes to face the people, lest they might be stung with shame. Each moment was to him an endless torture. Time, it seemed to him, slackened its pace to prolong his sufferings.

“Now you may pass for a reformed Rabbi, Reb Naphtoli!” remarked the red-headed conspirator, with an ill-concealed smile, handing him the two long tufts of hair.

With trembling hands Naphtoli seized the locks, and, not heeding the noise about him, silently and carefully wrapped them in his handkerchief and hid them away in his upper vest pocket—next to his heart.

Soon one by one the crowd dispersed; the roaring and the chatter died away. But the laughter was still ringing in Naphtoli’s ears like the crash of thunder. He felt as though the laughter, gaining entrance through his ears, sought to tear his heart asunder. Naphtoli rose from his chair; his eyes were red from tears, his frame was shrunken, enfeebled, bent; he shook his head and directed his steps toward his berth.

A half an hour later his eyelids closed little by little, and, curled together in his narrow bed, crushed by the sin and the disgrace, he slept.

In his sleep Naphtoli’s restless mind wandered away to his native town by the Dniepr. It is Friday evening, Voronzov is at rest, peacefully awaiting the coming of the bride—Sabbath. The market-stands, the stores, the bathhouses, the mill—all are being closed. Solemn quiet and peace fill the air. After dinner Naphtoli had slept for about an hour, and sleep being, according to an old commentary, one-sixtieth part of death, he thus had the taste of death; then he had taken a hot bath, which is equal to one-sixtieth part of the taste of the everlasting

flames of hell; returning home, he had eaten a piece of fish, which had been prepared for the Sabbath, and which had given him a sixtieth part of the taste of the Leviathan. Thus Naphtoli had become purified to meet Sabbath, the Messenger of Peace, which was to bring to him an additional soul, and, double-souled, he was to get a taste of the sixtieth part of the ease and comfort of paradise. There, the Rabbi of Voron-zov, tall, thin and gray, is slowly walking towards Naphtoli. Now the Rabbi stops. He is staring at Naphtoli, wide-eyed.

“Reb Naphtoli, what has befallen you?” he asks in a tremulous voice,—“Reb Naphtoli, where—are—your—earlocks?”

Naphtoli clasps his head with his hands and exclaims in a heart-rending tone:

“God is my witness—I have them—I have them!”

“Eh, hold your peace there!” grumbled some one on the upper berth. “Keep quiet!”

Naphtoli tossed about in his steerage berth, perplexed, crestfallen. There was an acute, burning pain in his temples. His suffering was so intense that there were moments when he doubted he was Naphtoli, he who had ever braved blessings and afflictions alike. He felt ashamed before himself, before God.

It was three o’clock in the morning. Naphtoli could not sleep. He came out on the deck, and, pacing back and forth, reflected upon his dream. Gazing into the distance, he recalled the Dniepr, and he shuddered. The splashing of the black waves frightened him now. The stars overhead looked cold and melancholy and the wind blew angrily into his face.

Year in and year out, on New Year’s day, Naphtoli used to go, together with the entire community, to shake off his sins into the Dniepr. For man, be he ever so pure, is after all but “flesh and blood,” susceptible to sin. Knowing from Ecclesiastes that “all the rivers run into the sea,” it now seemed to Naphtoli that all the sins he had ever committed, even though unconsciously, and then shaken off into the Dniepr, stared at him from the depth of the sea—stared—and laughed wildly, maliciously.

“My son, Samuel—what can I say to him now?” he asked himself despondently. “God knows, perhaps Samuel had been led astray even as I was led astray!”

Yet Naphtoli did not seek to defend himself.

“God knows best what He is doing. Evidently I have deserved my fate—I must have sinned.”

Naphtoli gazed at the water beside the steamer, and trembled. He clasped his aching head with his hands, and drew back. In the hissing and roaring of the black waves poor Naphtoli heard the peals of mocking laughter:

“Ha, ha, ha!—in-fi-del, in-fi-del, in-fi-del!”

He could not control himself any longer, and lifting his eyes heavenward, with his arms outstretched, he cried, solemnly, the tears flooding his cheeks:

“God is my witness—God is my witness!”