



UP CLOSE WITH ROSH YESHIVAH— TURNED-NOVELIST HAIM SABATO

BY SHIRA LEIBOWITZ SCHMIDT AND JESSICA SETBON

Photo courtesy of
The Toby Press

Haim Sabato, who descends from a long line of rabbis from Aleppo, Syria, was born in Cairo, but was forced to leave as a child in 1957. His family settled in Jerusalem, and he attended a hesder yeshivah and served in the army. Nearly three decades after Rabbi Sabato fought in the Yom Kippur War, his account of his experiences was published in the highly acclaimed novel Adjusting Sights, which was awarded the prestigious Sapir Prize. He has also written novels including Aleppo Tales and The Dawning of the Day. Rabbi Sabato, fifty-four, is the rabbi-teacher of first-year students at the hesder yeshivah in Ma'aleh Adumim, where he lives with his wife, Shoshana, and their two sons, aged twelve and thirteen.

“Publish or perish” is a concept familiar to most writers. But to Rabbi Haim Sabato it is more like publish and punish. “Publishing? For me it’s punishment,” says Rabbi Sabato.

Rabbi Sabato, who refers to himself as a teacher of Torah and not a professional writer, explains, “I always wanted to write. But publishing is a hardship due to the ensuing publicity. In the yeshivah we educate the students to find value in what is hidden.”¹

JA: Given your distaste for the hoopla, how did you come to publish your first book, *Aleppo Tales*?

Sabato: “As a student at Yeshivat Hakotel [which combines yeshivah studies and army service], I would write short stories and show them to my friends and family. Some of them were printed in the newspaper of the national religious sector, *HaZofeh*. After I participated in founding our *hesder yeshivah*, Birkat Moshe² in Ma’aleh Adumim, a graduate of the first class, Nachum Langenthal, showed them to the publisher of *Yedioth Ahronoth*, who then asked if he could publish them in book form.

“For me, writing is a refuge. It is a room of my own. Writing my first book brought me a certain inner peace.”

This sentiment reverberates in Rabbi Sabato’s books.

That same Jerusalem night, when Ezra arrived home, he sat at the table, took out a notebook and wrote down the story he had recounted to Rahamim. Ezra said to himself, “I will write just one story.” As he was writing he was reminded of another story, and then of another. Ezra was neither a writer nor the son of a writer, neither a man of letters nor an imaginative storyteller. He was a simple man. But he knew how to tell a tale. What he heard, what he saw, what he felt, so he wrote. He wrote in a simple style. In the language spoken by the people of Jerusalem in Mahane Yehudah and the Bukharian Quarter, the Syrian Synagogue, language filled with the grace of Jerusalem. The hour that he spent writing was very dear to him, and a particu-

*lar sweetness filled his entire being. Often he felt in his heart what he was writing. He sat and wrote, with Sarah at his side gazing at him. Sometimes she could see a ray of light illumine his face, that same light that filled his face when he returned from studying Talmud with Rahamim, and this gave her such pleasure. Slowly but surely the stories gathered and the entire notebook filled up. He went and purchased another notebook and before long, a pile of notebooks filled with his stories lay on the table (from *The Dawning of the Day*).*

JA: Two of your books reflect the Aleppo tradition, i.e., customs of the Jews of Aleppo. What is unique about that culture?

Sabato: “Many in my grandparents’

generation in Aleppo were pious scholars who were also merchants. My maternal grandfather, Haham Aharon Shweka, had tremendous influence on me.”

In keeping with the ways of many of the sages of Aleppo, my grandfather did not make a living from the Torah. He was a trader in fabrics, spending a few hours in his shop and the rest of the day at his studies. What would have been surprising in Eretz Israel was considered normal in Aleppo. Once a certain scholar came from Eretz Israel to Aleppo. He went into the Beit Midrash and asked the local scholars about a halakhic ruling that was the object of a dispute in Eretz Israel. They could not answer him. They told him: “We have no answer, but there is a sage among us; perhaps he can answer your question.” He asked them: “And where is he studying?” They told him: “In the textile market.” He went to the market and found him grappling with rolls of satin fabric. He asked him: “Is it possible you have knowledge of such-and-such a halakha?” The sage gave him the answer, then said, “Wait for me, I have a transaction to complete with this roll of fabric, and then I shall tell you the source.” He went to wherever he went, sold whatever he sold, and returned to his shop. He took the scholar from Israel by the hand, went with him to the Beit Midrash, climbed up, took from the bookcase a copy of Nehar Shalom, showed him the reference, and returned to his shop. The scholar said to the people in the Beit Midrash: “Have you taken leave of your senses? You have such a treasure in your midst, and yet you let him waste his time among spools of fabric?”

Our teaching has always been that it is a fine thing when Talmud Torah is combined with secular employment, since success in both fields discourages any inclination to defect from the straight and nar-

row. When he shut up his fabric shop each day, grandfather would return to his studies and sit among the sages of the Beit Midrash (from Aleppo Tales).

JA: But you were born in Egypt!?

Sabato: “Before World War I, my grandparents left for Egypt, where I was born. There my grandfather established a yeshivah where the youth would study early in the morning, and return to study after work. The yeshivah was a magnet that attracted young people and inculcated a love of Torah in them. My grandfather was the moving spirit behind it. When the war [the Sinai Campaign] broke out in 1956, my father was arrested and they would only release him on the condition that we leave Egypt. I was five when we fled to Israel, where relatives brought us to an immigrant camp near Kiryat Yovel, Jerusalem. When my grandfather rejoined us, I saw how this unique sage didn’t command respect among our new Israeli neighbors. It was painful.”

In Aleppo, after his sermon, grandfather would walk from the synagogue to his home, and would be treated with great respect. The entire congregation stood in two rows, bowing their heads deferentially and taking his hands to kiss them. In my childhood, when I read in the tractate Yoma of the respect accorded to the High Priest on Yom Kippur, this was how I saw grandfather, leaving the synagogue after a sermon. [In Jerusalem, in contrast, at the funeral for Rabbi Herzog in 1959] a dignitary said to me, “So you are the sage’s grandson? Your grandfather is a great man, and a phenomenal preacher, but here his merits are not recognized. There are so many famous rabbis that I can’t ask the organizers to allow one who is unknown to participate.” I went back to report to grandfather. When I told him

Fiction by Haim Sabato:

Adjusting Sights

Translated by Hillel Halkin
London, 2003
154 pages

Aleppo Tales

Translated by Philip Simpson
London, 2005
269 pages

The Dawning of the Day: The Story of Ezra Siman Tov

Translated by Yaacob Dweck
London, 2006
200 pages

All English translations of Haim Sabato’s books are published by The Toby Press:
www.tobypress.com.

what the dignitary had said, he was silent. I could see how hurt grandfather was, but he said nothing (from Aleppo Tales).

JA: Your grandfather Haham Aharon Shweka was your first teacher?

Sabato: “Yes. Also my father, when he would return to us from his work in the postal bank, he would teach Torah to the other immigrant children, along with my brothers and me. Even if I would complain of a headache, they never excused me from studying. Today I don’t let my boys off easily either.

“My mother was well-educated, especially in mathematics and French literature. My father emphasized religious studies but insisted that my brothers and I acquire a general education in addition to a deep grounding in Torah. Then afterward, we could decide what direction to take. Among my uncles are mathematicians and physicists; among

Shira Leibowitz Schmidt has six children and eight grandchildren. She is a lapsed engineer and co-authored Old Wine, New Flasks: Reflections on Science and Jewish Tradition (New York, 1997) with Nobel chemist Roald Hoffmann. She is currently affiliated with the Haredi College in Jerusalem and writes polemical articles on controversial issues for The Jerusalem Post.

Jessica Setbon, a native of San Antonio and a former member of the Harvard Sailing Team, is a mother of five who studied comparative religion in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Tel Aviv. She has lectured on translation challenges at Yad Vashem and the Israel Translators’ Association conference. Shira and Jessica run a translation center in Netanya called Mother Tongue, and are currently translating into English the autobiography of the former chief rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, which is a bestseller in Israel.

my brothers—one is *rosh yeshivah* of a high school and an advanced yeshivah, another has a doctorate in Talmud and another is a computer analyst. All are immersed in Torah culture.”

JA: Which other teachers influenced you?

Sabato: “After attending Talmud Torah in Bayit Vegan [Jerusalem], I went to the Bnei Akiva yeshivah high school, Netiv Meir, where the *rosh yeshivah*,

story so others would believe it; a debt I owed. I wrote it decades after the War, but as I wrote I felt as though I were wearing a helmet and entering the tank again. There were parts of the book where I trembled as I wrote. The book gushed out of me in a maelstrom of writing.”

JA: Where were you on Yom Kippur 1973?

Sabato: “I was twenty-two, in *hesder*,

“What did I see in those awful days? I saw true love between soldiers and commanders, religious and secular. After seeing the devotion of all the soldiers, I took it upon myself to always think well of other Jews. Who would believe that a young officer draped a wounded soldier over his shoulders and ran among the tanks under heavy fire looking for more wounded? A man who sees his life hanging by a thread, and cries out to God from the very bottom of his heart, will never live and pray as he did before. And a wondrous thing happened to us. The innocent religious belief of youth, which the sights and sounds of the Yom Kippur War lacerated so brutally, and filled with questions, did not shatter. True, it changed. It is filled with pain and sadness, but it’s more mature, deeper—and intact.”

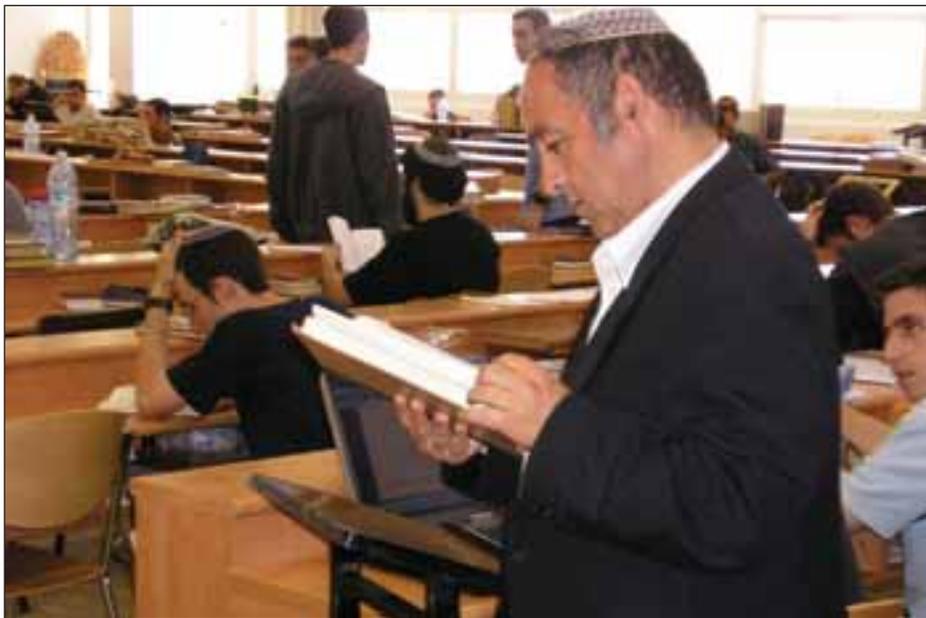
JA: And the reactions to the book?

Sabato: “After it was published, soldiers and officers told me, with tears in their eyes, that they were glad the experience had finally been recorded. There have been hundreds of responses from all sectors—secular, religious, army, civilian, literati, lay people—some of them especially moving. For example, I have learned that the Israeli Defense Forces uses the book. One highly ranked officer who was severely wounded said in an interview with the army magazine that *Adjusting Sights* encouraged him during his recovery.”

JA: What drove you to establish Birkat Moshe?

Sabato: “When our tank was hit, I decided that after the war I would work together with others to establish a yeshivah. I gained a new kind of strength when I saw that my world and my faith had grown stronger instead of collapsing. Rabbi Bina suggested some friends and I respond to the request of residents in Ma’aleh Adumim to build a yeshivah there, and we took up the gauntlet.”

JA: Protagonists in your newest novel, *The Dawning of the Day*, are



“For me, writing is a refuge. It is a room of my own,” says Rabbi Haim Sabato, a *rosh yeshivah* and fiction writer whose books have won acclaim in the secular market. “Writing my first book brought me a certain inner peace.” Photo: Ariel Naftali

Rabbi Arye Bina, *z”l*, had a decisive influence on me. I also learned to love Agnon, and medieval liturgical poetry and *piyyutim*. Shakespeare, Chekov, Shalom Aleichem all left their mark on me. Then I attended Yeshivat Hakotel, where the rabbis there molded other aspects of my personality. From the Sephardic tradition the rabbis who most influenced me were, in addition to my grandfather, Rabbis Ezra Attia and Yehuda Tzadka, *z”l*. Then there is Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, who also had an impact on me.”

JA: What brought you to write about the Yom Kippur War [in *Adjusting Sights*]?

Sabato: “I felt an urgency to tell the

and had finished basic training in the tank corps. We were young and innocent and dreamers. We were in the synagogue. We reverently awaited the blast of the shofar. Instead, the siren—undulating and piercing—sounded for an army call-up. Everything changed forever. Within hours we were in another world. Rapidly loading equipment on tanks, suddenly we were face to face with death. All around us long columns of Syrian tanks were approaching. And then I felt all that we had learned in books course through me. Verses and *derashot* seemed to come to life in front of my eyes: the Land of Israel and the people of Israel; protecting Israel from its enemies; Maimonides’ injunction against displaying fear in time of war.

**Jerusalemites from Aleppo (Halab).
When did you visit Syria?**

Sabato: “I have never been to Aleppo, but I have read an immense amount about it. I have spoken with Jews from Aleppo and sometimes from a sentence, a gesture, a slip of the tongue, I can write an entire story.

“Even after everything that I have written about Halab, I do not know if it is on a mountain or in a valley, crowded or spread out. I have no idea what it looks like. I don’t even know where it is. I do not read in encyclopedias about it, or study photographs or check the Internet. Instead, I tell what I feel, which is a composite of the stories I heard as a child, especially from my great aunt Victoria. From all these stories, my own story bursts out in writing from somewhere inside me to fill the page. This is a true story, the inner story that springs from within, which I think is like a heartfelt prayer. It is an expression of my inner self.

“One of my characters in *Aleppo Tales* is based on snippets of information that I gleaned from Aunt Victoria. But she did not tell me his story in words. Instead, she told it with a few sparing gestures. I went to her one day and begged, ‘Tell me a story.’ She knew I wanted to write stories about Aleppo, but she stubbornly refused. Finally she said one sentence, ‘We had some distant relative who became a communist.’ That one sentence was enough for me to go on. I went home and wrote three chapters about a character I called Max and how this could come about. A few years later I went to her and asked, ‘That one who became a communist, what’s with him?’ Silence. She made a hand motion—she flicked her arm aggressively away from her body. That meant he stopped being religious. So I took my fictitious Max to France and made him a secular communist. A few months later I asked her, ‘That communist? What happened to him?’ She responded with a different hand motion—extending her arm outward, then circling it toward her body, as if to say, ‘He came back to observance.’ From

this gesture I wrote the last third of the novella.

“After I published this novella people told me it coincided with the biography of a real Jew—Benny Levy—who had left Torah and *mitzvot*, led the Paris student riots and was Sartre’s assistant. But he left all that and eventually came to Israel where he returned to observance and set up a yeshivah. My uncle phoned one day and said, ‘He’s here.’ I didn’t know what he was talking about because I had made up a fictitious character. He wanted me to meet Levy, but I could not bring myself to do that. To me, he was a character I had invented. He was part of my story; he could not be real. So it was impossible for me to confront him in person. Then we were both invited to speak at an event. I read parts of my book, and he told his story. I wrote that [my character] had gone to *daven* at the Kotel, and he heard a certain melody that brought

“WHEN OUR TANK WAS HIT, I DECIDED I WOULD ESTABLISH A YESHIVAH. I GAINED A NEW KIND OF STRENGTH WHEN I SAW THAT MY WORLD AND MY FAITH HAD GROWN STRONGER INSTEAD OF COLLAPSING.”

back his childhood, and this was the beginning of his return to Judaism. When it was Levy’s turn to speak, I was astounded to hear him say, ‘I was in Paris, and I was asked to complete a minyan in one of the storefront Moroccan synagogues that are in every neighborhood. So I went in. Then they gave me an *aliyah*, and I found myself reciting the blessings over the Torah. Suddenly, it all returned to me.’ In other words, the experience I had invented in my story was not far from the truth of what had really happened. I am no prophet. A writer picks up on little tidbits of life that other people skip over, and from these, he can create a

Non-fiction by Haim Sabato:

Rest for the Dove

(on *parashat hashavua*)

Translated by Jessica Setbon and Shira Schmidt

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story that expresses a deep and essential truth.”

JA: Your books seem to weave together fiction and truth.

Sabato: “My mother, who knows Aleppo life and culture well, asked me, ‘Where is the line between what’s true and what’s fiction?’ It’s all a puzzle. Imagination is the secret of a writer. If I teach the midrash that Esav wore the clothes of Nimrod, students ask me whether this is ‘true.’ We aren’t dealing with historic facts; it is the deeper meaning, the imagery in the description and the religious truths that are significant. If a photographer and a painter are on a ship deck during a storm, who will best capture the truth of the experience? You might say the photograph has more verisimilitude, but that isn’t correct. The painter will express feelings, ruminations, emotions, fine distinctions that the eye cannot see. A literary description has more truth than reality. I love the magic of literary language.”

JA: Your books center on the confrontation of “Otherness,” i.e., Jewish tradition confronting secular Western culture.

Sabato: “Confronting ‘Otherness’ is part

of a larger question: What is my role, or the role of any rabbi or teacher? I will answer you with a parable, a *mashal*. Let's say there are two communities and each has a physician. In one *kehillah* there is a top-notch surgeon who is a brilliant diagnostician. All who come to him are healed. The second one has a physician who does not diagnose, does not operate and does not prescribe exotic medicines; rather he educates about proper hygiene, a healthy diet, exercise and emotional well-being. The first doctor is an impressive healer; the second doesn't heal as much, because 80 percent of his community is healthy. It is the same with rabbinic leadership. If a rabbi educates his community in belief in God, then he won't have to deal afterward with crises of *emunah* when the people's 'expectations of God' are not actualized. If a rabbi educates that prayer is '*avdut laShem*,' and not a means to obtain one's desires, then he won't have to deal with youth who are spiritually collapsing because they expected their *tefillot* to be automatically answered to their satisfaction. If he educates correctly, then he won't have to deal with misunderstandings regarding *Torah min Shamayim*; if he educates in the beauty of Torah and in having an emotional connection to God, then many of these problems won't arise; and if he educates students to respect women, then he won't have to deal with domestic conflicts day and night. I am not impressed when someone tells me a certain *rav* excels in solving domestic disputes; another rabbi educated the boys and girls correctly from the start, and most of these *shalom bayit* problems were

obviated. This is true in many areas of life—[as well as in] educating about the relationship between *chachmah*, culture, science and Torah. We have to be able to distinguish between the [non-Jewish] *chachmah* and culture that is worthwhile and that which is forbidden.

"I am in favor of being open to 'Otherness,' but I don't want to lose myself in a world that isn't mine, and this is becoming more and more problematic [since the secular world is becoming so permissive]. You have to allow for the existence of other worlds. I see that from my publisher and from some of my readers. We come from two totally different worlds. But we can all enjoy the enchantment of language, the well-chosen word."

JA: You mentioned the role of the rabbi, what about the role of an educator?

Sabato: "If we educate our students to have healthy attitudes, we won't have so many boys and girls who experience difficulties and crises. Once, an educator called and asked me to accept a certain student. This educator said that for nights on end he hadn't slept because he had been talking with the boy. I thought to myself, if this teacher had done his job properly during the day, he wouldn't have to engage in all-night soul talks. These kinds of problems would be reduced if we would educate students that there are difficulties in life, that not all problems can be resolved, not everything you want can be achieved, nothing can be achieved instantly, not everything you think is good is in fact good. 'I wanted....' Yes, you wanted. But not everything you want [is something] you can have. Students raised in a healthy environment will not break when there is a crisis. No one believes the illusion that preventive medicine solves all problems. The real task is not to solve crises but to educate correctly to prevent them."

JA: Your writing is composed of different layers, drawing heavily from Jewish tradition and sources and making your books challenging to translate. How do you relate to the translations of your books?

Sabato: "I was surprised at the success of the first book that was translated—*Adjusting Sights*—and pleased to be able to reach a certain sector of the English-speaking audience. In order for my books to influence a wider public, I am willing to take the risk that some of my writing will be lost in translation. Even if only 50 percent of what I have to say is transmitted successfully, the attempt is worthwhile." **IA**

Notes

1. This interview was supplemented with information from Talya Halkin, "The Believer," *Jerusalem Post*, 4 February 2005; Etrog, The Israel Teachers Union 17 (2003), <http://www.itu.org.il/Index.asp?ArticleID=995&CategoryID=512&Page=1> and Haim Sabato, "Days of Awe," *Jerusalem Post*, 8 October 2003.

2. www.birkatmoshe.org.il.

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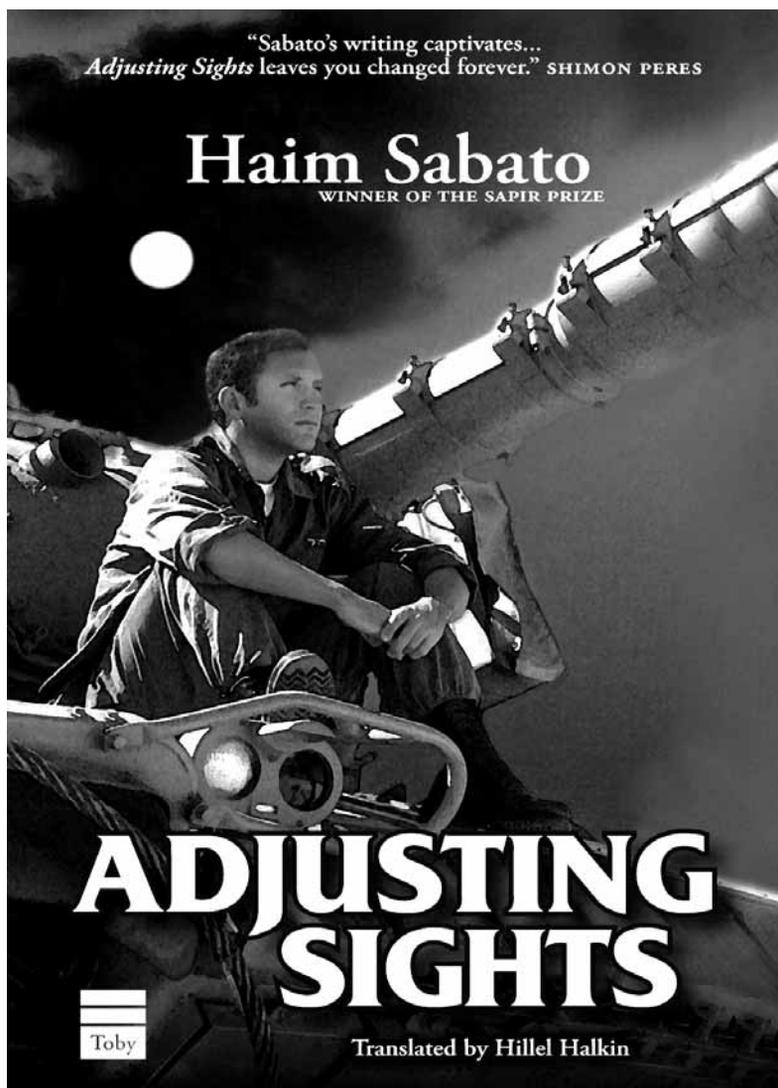
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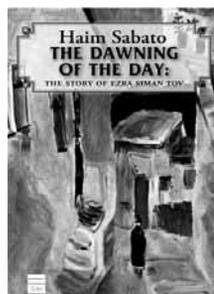
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