

# Point-Blank Prayer: On Haim Sabato's *Adjusting Sights*

*And when halakhic man stands up and prays, "May it be Thy will . . . that Thou wilt replenish the deficiency of the moon and it will no longer be diminished" [in the prayer following the blessing over the new moon], he refers to the replenishing of the deficiency of the real cosmos which does not correspond to the ideal image of reality. Halakhic man's yearnings for the national redemption . . . draw upon his hidden longings for the full and complete realization of the ideal world in the very nub of concrete reality.<sup>1</sup>*

One is hard pressed to imagine the longings for national redemption crashing up against the "nub of concrete reality" in a more fraught way than for a young, idealistic, *hesdernik* returning weary from the battles of the Yom Kippur War. Israeli society, and the Religious Zionist community in its own particularistic way, felt the deficiencies and diminishments of the redemptive aspects of Zionism's promises following the traumatic and near calamitous conflict. Literature, in ways that rival and at times surpass history or philosophy, can often serve as the keenest prism to explore such themes. As Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein observed, this is because "great writers are preeminent" among

[t]hose who have at least attained and revealed some measure of knowledge. . . . In reading them, we can confront the human spirit doubly, as creation and as creator. . . . [I]maginative artists have been more illuminating than theoreticians—not only because they have described more powerfully but because they have also probed more deeply. . . . [The author] melds precision and sensitivity, intuition and acuity, to perceive and portray concrete personal and social reality.<sup>2</sup>

A quarter century following the events of Yom Kippur 1973 one such treatment was offered by Rabbi Haim Sabato in his autobiographically

1 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (JPS, 1983), 28–29.

2 Aharon Lichtenstein, "Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict," in *Judaism's Encounter With Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?*, edited by Jacob J. Schacter (Jason Aronson, 1997), 248. For more on this theme in the thought of R. Lichtenstein, see my, "The Best That Has Been Thought and Said by Rabbi Lichtenstein About the Role of Literature in Religious Life," *TRADITION* 47:4 (2015), 240–249.

inspired novel, *Ti'um Kavvanot (Adjusting Sights)*.<sup>3</sup> The imagery of sanctifying the waxing moon, and the implicit fear of darkness and waning, alongside the themes of *kiddush levana* in which the moon's phases are compared to the Jewish nation and the vagaries of our history, are not in any way out of place in this literary masterpiece penned by a "halakhic man": "[T]he moon, the Sages said . . . was like the People of Israel. For as the moon's light reflects the sun, so does Israel reflect God's presence, and as the moon wanes and waxes, so the destiny of Israel fades and grows bright" (137).

The book opens as "a pure moon shone overhead . . . not a cloud hid it from sight" on the night following Yom Kippur, as the narrator (I will call him Haim to distinguish him from the author, Sabato) and his oldest and dearest friend Dov make their way to the assembly point from which they will be whisked off to battle the Syrian advance on the Golan Heights. Traversing Jerusalem's Bayit VaGan neighborhood just after the day's fast has ended, they encounter a group of Amshinov Hasidim, reciting the blessing on the New Moon customarily said with joy and dancing upon the close of the holy and awesome day. The soldiers are pulled into the circle of dancing as the Hasidim sing, "As I dance before Thee but cannot touch Thee, so may our enemies dance before us and neither touch nor harm us. May dread and fear befall them!"—repeating that malediction against "our enemies" three times. Could there be any doubt at that moment on whom the prayer, recited as they were "aiming their hearts at heaven," was directed? The Hasidim insist that Haim and Dov receive a blessing from their Rebbe. The Amshinover prays that the words of *kiddush levana* would be fulfilled in them.

The Rabbi of Amshinov clasped my hand warmly between his own two and said, looking directly at me: "May dread and fear befall them. Them and not you." We parted from him and boarded the bus. We thought we'd be back soon. During the three terrible days that followed, I kept seeing the Rabbi of Amshinov before me. I kept hearing his words. Each time fear threatened to overcome me, I pictured him saying, "Them and not you. Them and not you." That calmed me (5).

It calmed him, until the tragic "spoiler" that arrives right here in the novel's opening scene: "That calmed me. Until I heard of Dov's death. After that the old man stopped appearing."

3 Haim Sabato, *Ti'um Kavvanot* (Yediot Aharonot, 1999), in English as *Adjusting Sights*, translated by Hillel Halkin (The Toby Press, 2003). Parenthetical page references are to this English edition.

The reader immediately understands that this is no conventional war story, but something with elements of a bildungsroman *cum* guide to the perplexed, or perhaps more precisely, guide to the inner life of a perplexed yeshiva student. If, as we are told and the narrator seems to believe, the blessing of the Rebbe “could work wonders” and “his blessing was worth a great deal,” what does it mean that Dov, along with upwards of 2,650 other soldiers, did not return, and nearly three times as many were wounded, many grievously so?

The Rebbe’s blessing has the potential to save and protect, something which the narrator seems to piously believe. The author, it becomes clear, acts with a good deal more nuance. This dual-frequency is artfully achieved through the narration’s shifting of time frames and its stream of consciousness. We transport instantly from the Hasidim to the thick of battle, then back to Haim’s childhood as a fresh, five-year-old immigrant from Egypt on the streets of Jerusalem’s Beit Mazmil absorption center, and ahead to an army intelligence debriefing session after the battles in which we hear, Rashomon-like, three soldiers attempt to make sense of what happened during the chaos of the first days of the war. The narration allows the reader to encounter young Haim’s simple faith simultaneously with the matured version with which he emerges.

Through the debriefing sessions we readers are transported to the thick of battle as the Syrian planes are dropping their paratroopers meters from the Israeli tanks, as Haim’s tank is hit and he somehow escapes the flames, and ultimately—as we come to learn—how Dov was killed by a shell that had narrowly missed Haim’s own position. The three debriefers (a historian, psychologist, and intelligence officer) attempt to make sense of the insensible and unexplainable. Two of the soldiers being debriefed are yeshiva students. While their narratives are framed from a perspective of faith, no rabbi sits on the panel to question them about their trauma and to help process the aftermath. *Adjusting Sights* is Haim’s attempt (and perhaps Sabato’s as well) to perform a “spiritual debriefing.”

So how does Haim wrestle with the questions which are raised by his experiences? How does he reconcile faith in the Amshinover’s blessing and the hard realities? How does he maintain belief in the promise that “whoever sanctifies the new moon in joy,” as they apparently did in Jerusalem before departing for battle, “would come to no harm in the month ahead” (3)? How can he balance the assurances of Providence with the threat to each soldier’s body and the nation of Israel as a whole? How can he navigate between the halakhic requirement not to fear the enemy in battle or the assurance that “the dread and fear” of death itself should not befall us, and the universal human emotional realities?

True, Haim struggles with the dissonance between the Rebbe's blessing and the harsh realities in which he knows the greatest hopes were not achieved. But the young soldier-student cannot go back to the Rebbe to seek an explanation. In time, when Haim considers he might be ready to question the Rebbe, the Amshinover has already died. But if the Rebbe's blessing had meaning, how then was it possible that "our enemies" succeeded to "touch and harm us," as happened to Dov and so many others even as it may have saved the State? Sabato, unlike S.Y. Agnon, to whom he is so often compared (more on this below), offers a harmonious response to these profound national and theological questions. The questions are never fully resolved, nor are they brushed under the rug, but he does not allow them to lead to a position of bitterness or rebellion. Quite the contrary, faith is deepened because it is no longer taken for granted, but is tested in the crucible of combat and loss and mourning.

On this point there is a regrettable error in Hillel Halkin's otherwise excellent English translation. The lengthy segment in which the three soldiers are debriefed by army intelligence is a brilliant piece of narrative exposition. Haim is joined by two comrades, among whom Elhanan is a fellow *hesdernik*, as piously devoted and faithful as our narrator. He tells the tribunal about parting from his young wife Malka following Yom Kippur. "I talked to her about faith and trust in God's *Providence* . . . I knew that *Providence* is for the Jewish People as a whole and not for any individual" (98). In the Hebrew the term is *bitahon* (not *hashgaha*); the translation should present Elhanan's *trust in God's Promise*—Sabato's meaning is God's *Promise* of victory extends to the entire Jewish People, even while an individual soldier may perish as is the way of war. God's *Providence* is never in question. Elhanan, Haim, Dov and the rest go off to war in trust that God will not allow the destruction of the collective Jewish people (here embodied by the State); no such guarantee stands for any individual soldier. Of course belief in individual Providence is a foundation of faith, and certainly something the character in the novel trusts.

If the Hasidic blessing presents a particular theological thorn, the mitnagdic sendoff Haim had received hours earlier as the *hesder* students rush out from Yom Kippur was no less problematic. At the conclusion of *havdala* their Rosh Yeshiva gathers those who will soon be tested in battle in order to part "with words of Torah, for in that way you will be remembered." He sends his *talmidim* off with a passage from Maimonides:

He who embarks on the path of war, let him put his trust in the Hope of Israel who will rescue him from all harm. And let him know that he is fighting for the unity of God's name. And let him risk what he must with no fear or thought for his wife and

children. . . . And may he clear his mind of all thoughts but those of war. . . . For he must know that the blood of Israel is upon his shoulders (25, quoting *Hilkhot Melakhim* 7:15).<sup>4</sup>

This teaching is recalled in a half-dream while Haim grabs a “tremper” home on his first 24-hour leave from the front. As his mind wanders he remembers his comrade Roni reading from the continuation in *Hilkhot Melakhim*, a section apparently elided by the Rosh Yeshiva: “For should he not be victorious because he failed to go to war with all his heart and soul, he has as though spilled the blood of Israel, for it is written, *Let him not melt his brother’s heart as his own.*” Roni had taught this to his tank-mates as they were driving past “dazed soldiers with bruises and bandages.” It only sharpens the crisis: Not only the lives of each of the soldiers, and those of their buddies, are at stake—but the very destiny of the nation, “the blood of Israel,” and the unity of God’s name rests on the emotional mindset of each young man. How does Haim maintain that faith and courage despite the dissonance of what he knows to be the reality around him, a reality which cannot be easily reconciled with the Amshinover’s promise?

These questions are rehearsed, experienced, and related through the exhausted, dreamlike/nightmarish fog of war, on that ride back to Jerusalem one month into the fighting. Haim arrives back at the place he and Dov had set out from with the new moon of Tishre shining upon them. Now the moon of Heshvan is engulfed by clouds and he stands alone, fearful of encountering people who will “want to know where I had been, and where I was going, and what I had been doing, and what did I think. What would I say? That I had been in the war? *That I had met my own self there?*” (30, emphasis added). This idea, and the omnipresence of dreams (simultaneously a surrealist literary ploy and a realistic narrative device—soldiers are both exhausted and prone to nightmares), recalls a scene in S.Y. Agnon’s wartime novel, *To This Day*, set in Berlin during World War I—one Sabato may very well have had in mind. Agnon’s narrator informs his readers:

Somehow I managed to fall asleep. The reason I know I did is that I had a dream. What did I dream? I dreamed that a great war had broken out and that I was called up to fight and took a solemn

4 I recently had the opportunity to discuss these matters with R. Sabato. It occurred to me that if he located this halakha from *Mishneh Torah*, and its themes, so centrally in his novel it would be instructive to read how he has analyzed it not as literary plot point but as *gufei Torah*—what did he say about it in the context of a shiur. Although he has by now spent a long career teaching and writing about Maimonides and his *Mishneh Torah*, I could find nothing by him on this in print or in the copious archives of his yeshiva’s recorded *shiraim*. When I questioned him about it he admitted that it is “a bit curious” that he’s never substantively addressed it in that manner.

oath that if God brought me home safe and sound, I would sacrifice to Him whatever came forth from my house to greet me. *I returned home safe and sound and behold, coming forth to greet me was myself.*<sup>5</sup>

Haim returns having “met himself” while away at war. Yet the loss of Dov recalls “*o havruta o mituta*” (“friendship or death!” in the evocative phrasing of *Ta’anit* 23a), meaning that he has lost part of himself.

The Agnonian undertones, which have been pointed to and often misidentified in Sabato’s writing from the time of his earliest publications, are interesting intertextual connections, but often distracting. Like Agnon’s Nobel-winning Hebrew literature, Sabato’s fiction is rooted in the world and language of the *beit midrash*. This has led Israeli critics to make what they believe to be the mandatory comparisons between the two. It should be noted, this is not always done to praise a Hebrew author, any more than a contemporary English writer would like to hear a back-handed compliment that his sentence structure is identical to Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Even when an author is inspired by a giant on whose shoulders he or she stands, this hopefully does not translate into a parrotting of style that would put them at a remove from their contemporary readers. Agnon’s Hebrew is a richly woven tapestry of allusions and word-plays to rabbinic literature. The intertextuality is almost the very subject of his writing itself.<sup>6</sup>

In depicting serious yeshiva students as his protagonists, Sabato all but invited the critics to misread his depiction of the inner speech of a community for whom Torah study is part of the warp and woof of daily life and language and presume he is putting on Agnonian airs. Uninitiated contemporary Hebrew readers may have been sadly unaware that there are people who actually speak like this! When the letters of Dov Indig, the model for the novel’s character of the same name, were posthumously published (in English as *Letters to Talia*), the world saw that Sabato wasn’t aiming for Agnon’s labyrinthine Hebrew—that’s how *benei yeshiva* speak! In fact, Sabato’s Hebrew, despite its many references to rabbinic sources and poetic flourishes is straightforward and simple while still elegant—not at all “ornamented” in Agnonian ways. When the soldiers are in the tank they speak in tank-talk, with all its contemporary slang.

5 S.Y. Agnon, *To This Day*, translated by Hillel Halkin (The Toby Press, 2009), 86. The reference is, of course, an allusion to the episode of Jephthah’s daughter in Judges 11. Earlier, Agnon’s narrator, while speculating about etymologies, considered the odd connection: “Little by little my eyes grew heavy until, thinking of *halom*, dream, I fell asleep and dreamed of war, *milhama*” (39).

6 I am borrowing here from ideas I first explored, in a different context, in “Unhappy Families: Elhanan Nir’s *Rak Shnenu*,” *TheLehrhaus.com* (February 14, 2018).

The dialogues of the non-religious soldiers are authentically crass, although what in all likelihood would have in reality been juicy swear words have been toned down or filtered out (a concession Sabato may be making in deference to his day-job as a Rosh Yeshiva). In Agnon, even characters representing simple, unlearned Jews who would have been speaking in Yiddish in real life are often “translated” into a type of baroque Agnonian pseudo-rabbinic Hebrew.

This confusion on the part of the critics has caused them to overlook much more constructive comparisons to Agnon, novelistic elements, such as that cited above, which Sabato earns through hard labor, and which pay off in the story-telling and aesthetic literary experience.<sup>7</sup> For example, in *Adjusting Sights* we are presented with the great Egyptian miscalculation: by launching a surprise attack on Yom Kippur it made the Israeli mobilization easier. Moreover, Sabato shifts focus from the larger, militaristic, international stage to the inner, spiritual dimension—the timing also, or primarily, fostered a *moral* mobilization. In this far more essential way, much deeper than peppering characters’ speech with the sayings of Abaye and Rava, he is lifting a page from Agnon’s playbook. His differs with war narratives of other Israeli writers who often question the need to kill the enemy; Sabato mourns the realities of war, but he is never conflicted. We do not encounter the secular Israeli military slogan of “*milhemet ein bereira*” (a war of “no choice”) but the halakhic framework of “*milhemet mitzva*.” This offers the moral rationale, and elevates the war from one of salvation of a political entity to one of national redemption.

The novel opens with the purification effected by the holy day of Yom Kippur, perhaps as a symbol of Israel’s “purity of arms,” and this contextualizes the framework of military engagement.<sup>8</sup> For Sabato we see this question taken up as an experiment in writing a modern novel from within a Talmudic tradition, rather than from within a literary tradition. In this regard he again differs from Agnon, who spent his long career reading the classics of western civilization in parallel with rabbinic texts, pulling on each to integrate the two. Sabato is more simplistic and direct—but

7 Another example might be found in the use of *tefillin* as a symbol in *Adjusting Sights*, comparing it with Agnon’s use of the same in his great novel *A Guest for the Night*, especially chapter 8 (where it plays a significant role in the depiction of the soldier’s life and faith in the trenches of World War I).

8 In the Israeli army “purity of arms” or *tohar ha-neshek* is a central ethical principle of the I.D.F. Doctrine: “The Israel Defense Forces servicemen and women will use their weapons and force only for the purpose of their mission, only to the necessary extent and will maintain their humanity even during combat. I.D.F. soldiers will not use their weapons and force to harm human beings who are not combatants or prisoners of war, and will do all in their power to avoid causing harm to their lives, bodies, dignity and property.”

that perfectly suits his purpose; his straightforward exposition underscores his moral straightforwardness, and in this he produces Haim—his fully-reliable narrator (who has not one iota of Agnonian irony and guile).

The frequent comparisons have also masked other elemental differences between their writing and artistic agendas. For Sabato there is a more harmonious reaction to the burning questions of modern Jewish life.<sup>9</sup> Consider, again, the Rebbe's blessing reported to "work wonders" but not for Dov and so many others. Haim's faith is deepened because it is no longer taken for granted, but tested against trauma and loss. Haim, like his author, suffers no crisis of doubt. His sights are adjusted where it matters, in standing before God, even as his firing scope is misaligned and his flaming tank is stuck in the mud. Haim finds a way through. In a short essay (published in this issue of *TRADITION* in an original translation), R. Sabato, speaking more clearly autobiographically, not through the gauze of a fictionalized memoir, discusses arriving at a mature understanding of the events that engulfed him as a young man (and offers a telling comparison to the experiences and worldview of Rav Shagar). Recalling events of 25 years ago, midway between the 1973 war and our own day, he describes his appearance at a memorial event where he was asked by the moderator, "What of the pain, the fear, the burned tanks around you, your good friends—what did it do to your faith?"

I answer him: Every moment my faith grew stronger. I can't explain to you why. Maybe because I saw with my own eyes what a person's life is, and I stood alone in front of my Creator. Perhaps from the power of a pure, simple prayer. Everything I learned all my life, everything I read and heard in yeshiva, concerned simple faith. These feelings of the heart burned in me to such an extent that I remember saying to myself then: I know the day will come when the heart will be numb. I know days will come when I will have forgotten everything. Such is the way of the world. New things sweep out the old, heartbreak gives way in the face of routine—and who knows what my faith will be then. Therefore, I said to myself during the war, I will write on a note what is inscribed in my heart. And every time I weaken in my faith, I will look at it and remember.

9 In Ruth R. Wisse's term, Sabato's "work is unencumbered by modern angst." See her recent essay, "The Sage and Scribe of Modern Israel," *MosaicMagazine.com* (December 5, 2022). Some of my thinking in this essay was influenced by Wisse's seminar on "Jews and Power" delivered at the Tikvah Advanced Institute in New York (December 2014), and in subsequent conversations over the years. For my take on Agnon's complex transactions with modernity see "Bridging the Unbridgeable Divide Between Religion and Secular Modernity," *MosaicMagazine.com* (December 10, 2018).



In the telling, the note is a poem, which also appears in *Adjusting Sights*. The poem is lost and preserved only in memory—but there’s a meta-literary turn at work.<sup>10</sup> Can we doubt that the act of writing “in his heart” as a buffer to doubt and a pillar to faith is none other than the literary works Sabato has been producing over the past quarter century? Through his writing we are witness to a variety of constructing “second simplicity.” The “power of pure simple prayer” which becomes the source of faith itself is depicted with great force in one of the most memorable scenes, one which supplies the novel’s title. Unable to maintain a steady prayer regime during the worst days of the war, and unable to properly concentrate (*le-ta'em kavvana*—the brilliant wordplay which carries the double entendre of the gunner’s need to calibrate, or adjust, the tank’s gun sights in order to hit its target, and the struggle to pray with proper intention), he finds prayer “hopeless.” Thoughts of Dov, who had gone missing, presumed K.I.A. on the first day of the war flood his mind when he tries to pray. But suddenly, he confesses, “the war had taught me what concentration in prayer was.”

[I]n the ambush in Nafah quarry, with no radio, with an auxiliary charger for ignition and unadjusted gun sights and the missiles coming closer and the tanks around us bursting into flames. Gidi had shouted: “Gunner, pray! We’re taking fire!” I prayed. There wasn’t a hair’s breadth then between my heart and my lips. I had never prayed like that before (22).

This is more than “pure, simple prayer,” it is *point blank prayer*. *Kavvana* is almost extraneous; there is no need to fiddle adjusting the “sights” to shoot one’s prayer to Heaven when one has direct access. In his essay, published now in *TRADITION*, Sabato admits what he bashfully omitted from *Adjusting Sights*: As he leapt from the burning tank he shouted, “I place the Lord before me always!” Until Sabato, no Jew had imagined Maimonides’ metaphor of standing in the palace of the king as escaping a burning tank.

*Adjusting Sights* opens and closes with *kiddush levana*, and the moon’s symbolism of the Jewish people, waxing and waning. It opens with the new moon of Tishre and its purity and potential. A month later the new moon of Heshvan (*Mar-Heshvan*, the “bitter” month), brings muddled, agonizing confusion and nightmares. Two months after the opening we

10 Compare this to Agnon’s cases of poetic works which, once composed, are lost yet obtain a metaphysical existence and force: S.Y. Agnon, “*Le-Fi ha-Tza’ar ha-Sakhar*” and “*Ha-Siman*” in *Ha-Esh ve-ha-Etzim* (Schocken, 1962), 5–19 and 283–312, the latter in English as “The Sign,” in *A Book That Was Lost* (Toby Press, 1995), 397–429.

arrive at the denouement, on a dark and cold night in Kislev, midwinter's dark nadir. Haim and Shlomo sit on a rock aside their tank, an impromptu *Melava Malka*, waiting for the moon to reveal herself from behind a cloud and receive their blessing. Dov's absence is omnipresent. The yeshiva student-soldiers sing the hymns of *Motza'ei Shabbat*, dine on a half-tin of sardines and a scrap of bread, and plumb the weighty matters of faith. Thinking back to the Amshinover, the Rosh Yeshiva, and Roni's teachings, Haim asks himself: "How could that be? How could Maimonides tell anyone not to fear war?"

We all knew it wasn't the cold of the Golan that made our hands shake and our teeth chatter. How could we not have been afraid? . . . But if we look closely at Maimonides' always impeccable language, we see that he forbade not the fear of war itself, but the yielding to it. A man must not weaken himself and his will to fight by thinking of the horrors of war: it is this that the Torah forbids (141).

And yet, he is still troubled by the Maimonidean assertion that "whoever goes to war without fear, with a pure mind and a whole heart, will come to no harm and return home safely." This simply does not correlate with Haim's experience, and he protests:

How could Maimonides say such a thing? Surely, no one is guaranteed against the Angel of Death. As we were debating this, we remembered a passage we had studied in yeshiva from *The Guide of the Perplexed* in which Maimonides writes that he himself was surprised by an "extraordinary speculation" which was revealed to him concerning the nature of the world and God's Providence which is extended to one who cleaves to Him with all his heart. I wondered who can attain such lofty a position?<sup>11</sup>

As the novel draws to its close, returning for the third appearance of *kid-dush levana*, which like the "third resolving verse" navigates the contradictions of the earlier dissonant uses of that symbol, the central question is turned around. We cannot understand why Dov and so many others perished; instead we question the arbitrary appearance of Providence for those who survive and go forward with a need to make meaning of their own lives.

"Sometimes," Shlomo said, "God is merciful even to the undeserving. The individual himself may not know why." "Yes,"

11 *Guide* III:51; see specifically the Shlomo Pines edition, vol. 2, pp. 624–625 ("A most extraordinary speculation . . ."). I have finessed Halkin's more figurative translation (compare p. 142 in the English to p. 164 in the Hebrew original).

I agreed. “That’s why David says in his Psalms, *Who remembers us in our low estate, for His mercy endures forever* [Psalms 136:23].”

Suddenly the moon peeks out from the enveloping darkness, from behind the clouds and the fog, they recite the blessing and wish each other “*Shalom Aleichem!* Peace be upon you!” It is not a greeting, but a prayer each extends to the other and to himself, offered without a hair’s breadth between heart and lips.