

Michal Govrin

Elijah's Sabbath Days

Translated by Dalya Bilu and Judith Graves Miller

Although Elijah returned to Jerusalem a few hours before sunset, he didn't get in touch with Hila before the Sabbath had begun. The sun was nearing the strip of haze above the ridge of buildings on the horizon; the bedspread on his couch was disappearing into the dark blue shades of its pattern, and he was still busy cleaning the dust that had accumulated during the week in his room which faced the valley. He quickly plumped the cushions on the couch, cleaned the sink, and gave thanks silently for the fact that the plants had survived without water until his return. As the west facing room settled into the deepening light, he hastily completed his washing up. And only when he emerged from the bathroom with his hair wet and combed did he feel some relief, as if the weight of the whole week had been lifted - his studies at the institute in Tel Aviv, his room in the south of that city, his textbooks and diagrams, and the jolting of the bus trip which had finally brought him back here again, at noon. When he turned to spread the white napkin, which served as the tablecloth, over the desk, he was struck by a ray of light piercing the curtains. He straightened up and quickly drew them open. Then he saw that the sun was already cutting through the red band above the rooftops, and in another moment it would sink behind the mountain.

He was late. In Hila's house they had already disconnected the telephone for the Sabbath.

From the low cupboard in the kitchen he removed two candles and the copper candlesticks. He could not go to dinner at her parents' house without letting them know beforehand. In other words, he wouldn't be able to see Hila this evening. He hadn't even finished readying himself. And he was glad that he had not yet arranged to see her.

He prepared his meal carefully, laid the table, and once again felt how these acts calmed him, brought him closer to her world, which was perhaps out of his reach, but was nevertheless there.

When Elijah emerged from the little synagogue in the Orthodox quarter, where he always went in order to protect himself from the danger of running into one of his many acquaintances and their mocking looks, he thought he saw Hila's silhouette in the street, emerging from the valley on her way back with her father from the big synagogue. He couldn't have said with any certainty that it was really her. The headlights of a passing car illuminated the two receding figures for only a moment – the man in the hat with the slightly stooped back, and the girl's pulled-back brown hair. But in any case, the time had not yet come to speak to her. And he hurried up the stairs to his room, as if she were sitting at the table and waiting for him there.

Later the same evening Elijah left his room again and went to the Institute for Modern Judaism to hear a lecture by the Diaspora scholar, Rabbi Stern, about apostasy and faith in Jewish thought today. He didn't consider himself a real disciple of Rabbi Stern, but in an earlier time, when he still aspired to devote himself to the study of philosophy, he never missed any of the Rabbi's lectures, given on his visits to Jerusalem.

It was hot in the wood-paneled auditorium, and the seats were mainly filled with organized Diaspora youth groups, who all burst out laughing at certain of the rabbi's remarks, as if they were the jokes of a paid entertainer. Elijah tried hard to concentrate and follow the speaker's train of thought, the cross-currents of ideas leading to opposing and contradictory conclusions, the controversies ensuing from certain of the hypotheses balanced against the superficial attempts to find compromise solutions, the retreat into general gloom, and within the darkness - the blazing trail of the speaker's comet, leading his audience beyond paradox to the power latent in us, yes! latent in spite of all the doubts! Elijah was bathed in sweat, both because of the heat and because of his inability, that evening, to follow with his usual enthusiasm the Rabbi's arguments. He tried to concentrate on the speaker's face, his neatly trimmed and squared beard and his upper lip rapidly parting from the lower one leading into his pruned bush; and his thoughts whirled about without his being able to bring them into line with the flood of words. For a moment Hila's image floated before him and again he stared blankly at the wagging beard. Once he even joined unconsciously in the general burst of laughter, without noticing this time to which of the Rabbi's remarks it related.

Elijah stood on the marble plaza at the exit in front of the steps; his back bent like a slender branch in the air of the early summer night. The groups of listeners swept into the street chattering loudly, and he bowed his head, as if he were listening to the warm touch of the air. For a moment he was tempted to approach Rabbi Stern and congratulate him as usual, but before taking the first step he changed his mind and stayed where he was.

In the street, Duvidel and Nehama, his friends from the youth movement, walked past. As always, Nehama's arm was linked in her husband's, who was no longer a clumsy, ginger-haired youth but a tall, solid man of substance. When they saw Elijah standing outside the Institute of Modern Judaism, Nehama nudged Duvidel, and he proclaimed:

"Look who's here!"

"Elijah, Elijah," Nehama chimed in.

Exactly as in the days of their youth, Elijah shrunk back in a panic like a slug whose tail had just been crushed; and there was an apologetic smile on his face.

"There's nothing to be surprised about," continued Duvidel, winking at Elijah, "Don't forget that philosophy was the love of Elijah's youth; and a man doesn't quickly abandon the crucible in which he was formed..."

When he saw Elijah shrinking into himself, an expression of pleasure crossed Duvidel's face, and he laid his hand authoritatively on his shoulder and continued in a familiar tone:

"I heard you're finishing this year. Good luck!"

Nehama, with the kerchief bound securely round her head as an unequivocal symbol of her married status, shifted her weight from one hip to the other; and tucking her hand more firmly into her husband's arm said in a musical voice:

"Why don't we ever see you?"

"You've lost touch with the old gang," complained Duvidel with affected regret.

Nehama said in an animated tone, without disguising her pity:

"Why don't you come and have lunch with us tomorrow?"

"Thank you very much, but I've already been invited elsewhere..."

Elijah laughed nervously and recoiled in embarrassment again.

"Drop in some time, when you come for the Sabbath. Just give us a ring beforehand to let us know," concluded Nehama; and as they moved off she stamped

the cork soles of her sandals, as if she were trying to crush something on the pavement, and pressed her head into her husband's broad armpit. She didn't turn her head to look at Elijah left standing on the plaza, and her resentment against him grew, precisely because of the effort which it cost her not to do so.

That night Elijah walked for hours without finding peace of mind. He roamed further and further away from the streets leading to his room, without being able to rid himself of the sensation that the dark sky was tightly sealed over the town. He walked as far as the southern ridges, looking back upon the clusters of light and heavy patches of darkness to the north, and still he felt no relief. He smiled to himself at the thought that perhaps the prayers of the inhabitants of the town welcoming the Sabbath were still wandering, like him, without ascending. A few of Rabbi Stern's words echoed in his head, but he was unable to follow the reasoning which would lead through hidden paths to the discovery of a new outlook. He walked along the trails disappearing into the valley and climbed the hill again. Twice he lost his way on the path on the dark hilltop. He retraced his steps along the deserted streets and at last he approached the first houses, lying on the slopes like dark spaces among the dense green bushes.

When he reached the shadowy, tree-lined street where Hila's house stood, he recovered his spirits a little. The stillness welling from the gardens of the narrow street arrested the vertigo of the sky between the mountain ridges. The whiteness of the jasmine penetrated the gentle breath of the other scents and touched Elijah. Next to her house he stopped for a moment - to clear his temples of the hammering of his footsteps - and rested his head on the hedge.

From where he stood in the street he couldn't tell if the dim light in the windows was coming from the interior rooms or if it was only the bulb left burning in the corridor after the automatic switch had turned off the rest of the lights. He wasn't used to looking at the house from the outside. He would only glance at it in passing as he left on Saturday night, carefully closing the front door behind him, while Hila's flute resumed its flight. And what if the light were still on in her room? And what if she were still reading the Rabbi's book which he'd given her as a gift? Even if the moon hadn't risen, the stars were shining tonight, and they would illuminate the room when she opened the blinds. And what would he say to her? He would be silent again, of course. And her brown hair...

His hand hung suspended between his body and the knob of the garden gate, and his fingers plucked at the silence in the street. But in the sleeping neighbourhoods of Jerusalem on the eve of the Sabbath people do not rise from their beds or pass down the streets. And that night, too, nobody saw him standing there, or moving from his place and walking away.

During the night Elijah traveled in sleep through contradictory scenes. When he arrived at the floating and covered dock he remembered that he had to wait there for the ship to pass. He made haste to look through the round porthole and saw the ship approaching soundlessly with its tall white masts. At that moment it collapsed, without breaking the silence, and continued on being pulled to the left. He hurried to the left porthole of the dock to see the wreckage which should be coming into view at any minute – the big, proud pieces of what had once been a magnificent ship. But all that appeared before the porthole was a black beam, with a filthy rag trailing behind it.

He cried out – it's only half the ship! – enraged at having allowed the other half to slip out of sight, apparently to the right side of the dock. There, at the entrance to the canal sat the director, heavy bodied and ginger-haired, who informed him that they'd received permission to close the canal for their own needs. He could look for himself if he liked – added the director – although in his humble opinion all that had entered there were a few insignificant remains.

He was too ashamed to go ahead and look, although he knew he'd never succeed in evading the inspectors who would not be long in calling him to account for his responsibility in all this.

After that, he was not sure if he'd really gotten out of bed in the dark, drawn the curtains, and gazed into the grayish apparition clinging to the window frame - because later on, when sitting with latecomers at a party in the room with arched windows, the same grey light stood in the frame.

Dawn must have begun to break over the valley, because the orb of red light rose rapidly and remained suspended over the ridges in the east. After a moment it disappeared without a trace, and everything was shrouded in darkness again. He was astonished, and then it was explained to him that it was a common phenomenon in the moments preceding sunrise, and that it was not really the sun that he'd seen but only

its potential light. Again and again the red sphere rose and flooded the east; and every time it disappeared, the darkness returned. The others, who were used to the sight, dismissed it with contempt and refused to look. They didn't stop their discussion, only echoes of which reached his ears, for he couldn't take his eyes off the multiple suns re-emerging and rising to different heights above the mountains on the horizon. He still didn't know whether dawn had come, because the darkness kept returning as thickly as before.

One of the times when one of the suns rose, a ray of light, apparently owing to the lowness of its angle, penetrated a crevice in the valley. There it hit a little lake, whose waters glittered for a moment, flashing as brilliantly as a sapphire. In the light, the blue of the lake stood out very clearly, as did the steep white banks enclosing it like a shell. The lake was surrounded by dense vegetation, and further away it was already dark.

Although he didn't stop looking, he couldn't tell if the sight revealed to him in the light of the chance ray came from the distant creek or from a valley in the mountain opposite; and a moment later the orb of light vanished, and everything faded into darkness.

Nobody in the room had paid any attention to what had been revealed through the windows, and thus nobody believed in the existence of the lake he described.

The visions accompanied Elijah throughout the morning prayers and his mind was distracted too from the reading of the Torah. Nevertheless, from time to time the warnings – "And if ye do not hearken unto me... And if in this ye do not hearken unto me..." broke into his reflections, increasing his inability to concentrate.

The congregation stood and cried "*Hazak*," and Elijah jumped up quickly after them, his long prayer shawl making his figure seem even more tremulous and insubstantial. The beadle invited him to lift the Torah, and watched as he approached the lectern and raised the handles, without much confidence, into the air. He hastened after him, just in time to support the weight of the scroll collapsing in Elijah's hands, and hurried him to the bench behind the pulpit. All the rest was taken care of by others. The scroll was rolled up, bound and covered, and Elijah's fingers quietly embraced the soft jacket separating him from the Torah.

On the way home, he avoided the members of the congregation who came up to shake his hand. The shimmering streets filled with festive, strolling groups,

meeting in the sounds of Sabbath greetings and children's gleeful shouts. He shrank to the side of the pavement and tried to bypass those members greeting one another, unable to face the invitations to go home with one of the families for a *Kiddush* meal.

In Hila's street the little house stood enveloped in almond and peach trees. The windows were open, draped with curtains. Their pale folds shook with every breath of midday air. It was hard to tell whether the members of the household had returned from the service or if each of them had already settled in his corner, while Hila perhaps helped her mother set the table for the meal. He felt the touch of the heat on his skin, the air murmuring with insects. He gave thanks in his heart that he couldn't go in and sit down at the table with them without having let them know beforehand; he would thus be able to prepare himself better before he saw her.

Although he did his best to steal away unnoticed, his uncle's widow, who was standing at her window and watching her acquaintances pass by, as was her habit on the Sabbath when she didn't attend synagogue service, caught sight of him. Even from the top story she could see that Elijah was swaying on his feet, and despite her pangs of conscience at having so long neglected the duty of hospitality she owed her late husband's nephew, she was not sorry to see him disappearing. She rested her folded arms on the window sill and looked at the group of people now coming up the street and taking his place.

When he left his room again, it was nearly four o'clock in the afternoon. He stepped lightly up the street and turned into the road following the contour of the ridge. On the westward slope, the sun beat down with all its might, but when the road turned and was swallowed up in the hidden alley to the east, the light suddenly softened, and a bluish haze lay between the houses. He remembered the images of light in the Rabbi's poems in the book he had given Hila, and with a feeling of relief he passed the shady gardens on the way to her house. The sun hasn't begun to set yet, he mused, wonderingly, and the stone houses are already turning almost red.

When he knocked on the front door, Hila was sitting in the dining room. The rest of the family was in their rooms resting, and her two little brothers had gone out to their youth movement activities and would not return until after dark. There was a book lying open on the table, but her eyes had been caught by the trembling of the patterns of light filtering through the fruit trees in the windows of the dining alcove, and through the windowpanes onto the tablecloth. She was not expecting anyone, and

she knew, too, that it would be a long time before her parents woke from their naps. She didn't think of Elijah. If he hadn't called on Friday, he surely had no intention of coming, and perhaps he hadn't even returned to Jerusalem for the Sabbath. His irregular visits had halted so long ago that she'd stopped looking forward to them, even if only for the sake of the curiosity they aroused in her. The shapes of light traveling across the tablecloth led her thoughts to the notes of the suite that she'd go back to playing after the end of the Sabbath, and to the transparent weaving of its passages.

The flow of music stopped and she went to the door, sure that it was one of her brothers' friends, arriving too late to walk to the clubhouse with them. She cried out in astonishment – "Oh, oh, it's you" – when she saw Elijah's slender form stooped in the doorway - he too smiling in astonishment. She motioned for him to come in on tiptoe, and closed the dining room door behind them.

Hila poured plum juice into the engraved glasses, and placed them with their blood- red shadows on the tablecloth, and Elijah had not yet uttered a word, only laughed from his place on the upholstered chair, and laughed again as if he were beside himself with excitement. Hila sat down opposite him, on the other side of the table, and asked what he had been doing with himself. After he hastily answered her, his replies still smothered in nervous laughter, she began telling him about her little brothers, and about the intertwining music of the suite for the flute which she was now learning.

She stood up, asked if he wanted another glass, and went to the refrigerator in the kitchen. Elijah swayed in his seat as if he were sailing towards a lonely island in the sea. He was careful not to disturb the currents leading towards it, endeavouring with all his might to set all the instruments inside him to correspond to the winds blowing on there. So close was he to the isle of his desire, that the certainty of its existence could no longer be taken from him. He lowered his eyes which caressed the tablecloth.

Hila placed a crystal dish of cookies next to the glass, and he was afraid that she was going to ask him about his life again, and then he would have to unfold his troubled world and disturb the calm of the still waters. His throat constricted, and he didn't take anything to eat or drink.

Hila suggested that they go for a walk. He was quick to agree, and hurried after her down the corridor, careful not to knock anything over with his lanky limbs as

he passed. When they shut the gate behind them, he recalled the rhyming lights in the Rabbi's poems again, and thought that he hadn't yet asked her if she had read the book. But in the meantime they started walking, and the scent of the jasmine through the foliage was too heavy for him to formulate his question.

In the park, the rocks cast low, distant shadows, and the tips of the clumps of grass glittered. On the main road the traffic had already started up again, and it was only in the heart of the park that they could hear the rustling of the grass which bent as they walked. When the low sun peeked out, their slender shadows were surrounded by red light, and when it disappeared behind trees or housetops, the shadows of Hila and Elijah were blotted out.

There was no one in the park at this hour. The light faded rapidly. When they stopped once or twice between the crossing paths, Elijah's body was jolted and lurched forward. But he tremblingly returned his hand to its place, as if away from a rare flower, whose transparent petals were so delicate they could be damaged by the hovering shadow of a butterfly's wing.

They left the park, and sat down on the low stone wall separating it from the street. He told her about his studies in Tel Aviv and the words came heavily and hollowly out of his mouth.

The street was suddenly filled with cinemagoers beginning to gather for the first show. Hila stood and said:

"Soon the Sabbath will be over."

And she immediately began walking back.

In the street, the people going out to enjoy themselves crowded in front of the snack bars and made walking difficult. Elijah and Hila were forced to the edge of the road whenever a bus passed and emitted a jet of hot soot, but he was still sheltered by her presence in an island of calm. For a moment they walked with their shoulders touching, and the tremor which passed through Elijah's body lasted no more than a second. Then, something made Hila burst into a long, clear peal of laughter. He, too, joined in, and was rocked back to his place.

Hila hurried, so as not to keep her family waiting for the *Havdala* ceremony, and Elijah hurried behind her. When they reached the little street sheltered from the noise of the city by its gardens and trees darkening against the starry sky, he said,

without waiting to be asked, that he would not come in now, but would first go to say the evening prayer.

He stayed outside next to the gate, and waved to Hila hurrying up the stairs, bathed in the light shining from the windows. His fingers accidentally came to rest on the gate's knob, and he closed it slowly. As he walked away, he thought he heard her voice, the beginning of the prayer. Then he was swallowed up in the darkness. He was no longer afraid of meeting any of his acquaintances – now he had a refuge from them, and all the way he took care not to emerge from the shadows of the gardens at the pavement's inner edge.

In his room, he groped towards the window in the dark and looked at the lights twinkling in the distance. And still he postponed his prayer. When he had finished and turned on the lamp, his eyes refused to adapt themselves to the light. Nevertheless, he went into the kitchen and reached into the cupboard to pull out the candles to join wick to wick. But it seemed to him that the paper package was empty. He took it out to examine its contents on the marble counter and found that he'd indeed used the last of the candles the day before, without leaving any for the *Havdala*.

It was late, and Elijah began to pack his canvas case with the things he would take back with him to Tel Aviv the next day. In a separate bag he sorted out his textbooks and looked for the copybooks he would need in order to begin preparing for his exam. Finally he removed the napkin and sat down at his desk. He began to study the diagrams and tables of calculations. For a moment, it seemed to him that this time he would not be able to last until the end of the week. He bent down close to the lamp, and his fingers hovered upon the desk, touching and not touching.