



BADERECH

RABBI JUDAH MISCHEL

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Foe & Friend

Beloved Israeli author, Shmuel Yosef "Shai" Agnon wrote extensively on themes and topics revolving around his Jewish identity, relationship to Torah and love for Yiddishkeit. His subjects and work capture the authentic, *heimish* nuances of the European *shtetl* culture, while dealing with the tension between traditional Jewish life and values in the modern world. Ultimately, these gifts earned him the Nobel Prize for literature.

Penned in 1941 from his home in Talpiot, Yerushalayim, מאויב לאוהב, *From Foe to Friend*, is a short story that explores the human struggle to tame nature and establish a home in the Land of Israel, specifically in the Holy City. The story follows a narrator's attempts to build a house on a hill despite the destructive force of the wind, which is personified as a powerful enemy. Through this allegory, Agnon examines themes of

resilience, the relationship between humanity and nature, and the challenges of settling in a new land while yearning for rootedness, permanence, and a basic sense of security.

The powerful winds that once dominated the open areas around Jerusalem are portrayed as a "king" and his "ministers", constantly blowing down anything in their path. Despite the wind's destructive power, the narrator is determined to build a house on a hill. He attempts all sorts of different methods that fail to withstand the wind's force, until he finally adapts by building a more resilient structure that respects the wind's strength rather than trying to defeat it. It brings a sense of peace and *shleimus* when he accepts the challenges and reality of his struggle.

This tale is an allegory of the eternal longing of the Jewish people to dwell securely in our homeland. As the protagonist struggles to tame the wind so that he can build his home, the Jewish People continuously struggle to overcome adversity and adversaries, and root themselves in their true home.

כִּי־תֵצֵא לְמִלְחָמָה עַל־אֹיְבֶיךָ...

"When you go out to war against your enemies..." (Devarim 21:10)

The harshness of the Land of Israel — its dryness, thorns, and resistance — appears at first as an enemy to the pioneer. But over time, the protagonist sees that the Land was never the enemy. The real battle was actually with internal reactions to his own mindset, his lack of patience and his inherited fears of exile. The enemy, it turns out, was how he

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viewed the Land. Through this awakening, the imaginary “foe” becomes a friend, and peace and wholeness descend.

This process reflects a powerful teaching of the Talmidei haBaal Shem Tov: the *yetzer ha-ra* is our greatest teacher, concealed in a disguise of enmity and negativity.

The difference in spelling between אויב, ‘enemy’ and אהוב, ‘friend’, is the inclusion of the letter *yud* or the letter *hei*. *Yud*, as the smallest letter, represents concealment. It is a symbol of *chochmah*, the most elusive form of divine insight. *Hei*, on the other hand, is like a *yud* that has spread out laterally and vertically, revealing itself fully. *Hei* is a symbol of *binah*, understanding. When we truly reveal and understand the divine intent concealed in our ‘enemy’, the *yetzer ha-ra*, we can see through its disguise. We can convert its *yud* into a *hei*, and destructive behavior into friendly, beneficial action. This is how to approach an internal enemy; an external enemy can be an entirely different matter....

And yet, the Baal Shem Tov also reveals that our external challenges and adversaries are in some ways reflections of our own inner states.

In the wake of the ‘globalized intifada’, the worldwide tidal wave of Jew hatred and the extended war we have lived through in Eretz Yisrael, we have been witness to ‘strong winds’ that threaten our national home and safety. The sense of rootedness and stability we yearn for is further shaken by moral confusion and dangerous *sinas chinam*. Most devastatingly, fallen, failed leaders devoid of Torah values and a healthy Jewish identity have poisoned our national wells, to the point of making reprehensible comments vilifying our precious *chayalim* and seeking to undermine traditional Jewish values. Whether acting through former

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prime ministers, heads of our military and judges, it often seems our national *yetzer ha-ra* is out of control and we are behaving as our worst enemy. However, this is where we need to seek the concealed *Yud* and find the *nikudah tovah* in even the self-destructive or insensitive actions of our brethren. Sometimes it is merely misguided *hashkafa* and philosophical differences that are at play, and behind their appearances, the people are actually friends and family, not enemies.

Agnon wrote his short story against the painful backdrop of the unfolding Shoah in Eastern Europe as well as his experience of

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his home being ransacked by jihadists years earlier, during the pogroms of *Tarpat* (1929) which had swept across Eretz Yisrael. These facts underscore the message that our ongoing struggle with our jihadist neighbors, and our ongoing efforts to secure our homeland, must be built on the foundations of inner work, *achdus* and love for our fellow Jews. When we rectify our yetzer and love others unconditionally, the behavior of those ‘others’ will shift toward positivity on their own. When we “go out to war”, we need to go inside to make *tikunim*.

As part of the *kriyas haTorah* on Mondays and Thursdays, many congregations add a number of tefillos, a series of requests beginning with *Yehi Ratzon*, “May it be Your will....” As the *aron kodesh* is opened, and the community gathers close to the Torah in reverence and respect, there is an ‘*eis ratzon*’, auspicious opportunity to daven and ask for compassion and blessings from the Ribbono shel Olam. The last tefillah, a request on behalf of our Nation, “*Acheinu Kol Beis Yisrael*,” does not begin with “*Yehi ratzon*”, however. The Sar Shalom of Belz tells us this is because there is no greater ‘*eis ratzon*’ than when Jews gather together and daven for one another. There isn’t even any reason to ask that it be an auspicious time, for the *eis ratzon*

is already manifest in the fact that we are standing together, in *achdus*, focused on our inner growth and upon loving one another.

Preparing for a new year, we are instructed to ‘go out’ to battle our enemy, knowing that our means of victory is in making *teshuvah*, converting our yetzer ha-ra and negative *midos* into allies - and B’ezrat Hashem, loving friends. ■

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