

MY *F*ATHER'S
PARADISE



A SON'S SEARCH *for* HIS
JEWISH PAST *in* KURDISH IRAQ

ARIEL SABAR

“I am the keeper of my family’s stories. I am the guardian of its honor. I am the defender of its traditions. As the first-born son of a Kurdish father, these, they tell me, are my duties. And yet even before my birth I resisted.”

So begins Ariel Sabar’s true tale of a father and a son, and the two worlds that kept them apart and finally brought them together: ancient Iraq and modern America.

IN A REMOTE CORNER of the world, forgotten for nearly three thousand years, lived an enclave of Kurdish Jews so isolated that they still spoke Aramaic, the language of Jesus. Mostly illiterate, they were self-made mystics and gifted storytellers, humble peddlers and rugged loggers who dwelt in harmony with their Muslim and Christian neighbors in the mountains of northern Iraq. To these descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel, Yona Sabar was born.

Caught unawares by growing ethnic tensions in the Middle East after World War II, the Jews of Zakho were airlifted to the new state of Israel in the 1950s with the mass exodus of 120,000 Jews from Iraq—one of the world’s largest and least-known diasporas. Almost overnight, the Kurdish Jews’ exotic culture and language were doomed to extinction.

Yona’s son Ariel knew little of his father’s history. Growing up in Los Angeles, where Yona had become an esteemed professor at UCLA and had dedicated his career to preserving his people’s traditions, Ariel wanted nothing to do with his father’s strange immigrant heritage. Until he had a son of his own.

My Father’s Paradise is Ariel Sabar’s quest to reconcile present and past. As Ariel and his father travel together into today’s postwar Iraq to find what’s left of Yona’s birthplace, Sabar brings to life the ancient town of Zakho, telling his family’s story and discovering their place in the sweeping saga of the Sephardic Jews’ millennia-long survival in Islamic lands. He introduces us to his spiritual great-grandfather, the village cloth dyer by day whose true passion is praying through the night in Zakho’s tiny mud-brick

(continued on back flap)

INTRODUCTION

I AM THE KEEPER of my family's stories. I am the guardian of its honor. I am the defender of its traditions. As the first-born son of a Kurdish father, these, they tell me, are my duties. And yet even before my birth I resisted.

Our first clash — really more of a proxy battle — was over my name. My father wanted to call me Aram, after the swath of ancient Syria where the first Aramaic-speaking tribes dwelt in the second millennium B.C. A son named Aram would be a thread through three thousand years of history, uncoiling through Israel and Kurdistan back to a patch of land between the Habur and Euphrates rivers where my father's native language first graced the lips of man. A son named Aram would pass this awesome birthright to his own son, and that son to his, on and on down the line, like princes in a fairy tale.

This may have been my father's reasoning. But it was not my mother's. She seemed to understand me even before I was born, because she didn't much care for Aram. As an American she knew the cruelty of children to kids with weird names. Aram, she told my father, was a nonstarter.

And so even before I drew a breath, I had landed my first blow.

OURS WAS A CLASH of civilizations, writ small. He was ancient Kurdistan. I was 1980s L.A.

He grew up in a dusty town in northern Iraq, in a crowded mud-brick shack without electricity or plumbing. I grew up in a white stucco ranch house in West Los Angeles, on a leafy street guarded by private police cruisers marked BEL-AIR PATROL.

Our move to Los Angeles in 1972, when I was a year old and he was hired as a professor at UCLA, did not discernibly increase my father's awareness of modernity. He bought suits off the bargain rack at J. C. Penney, in pastel plaids that designers had intended for the golf course, then wore them cluelessly to campus faculty meetings. I bought bermudas and T-shirts at Santa Monica surf shops and wore them like a uniform, even on winter visits to my mother's family in Connecticut.

His hair was a froth of curls that he cut himself with a 50-cent razor comb. I had my mom take me to Beverly Hills salons and sculpted my hair with gobs of KMS gel. My father listened to Kurdish dirges on an off-brand tape recorder whose batteries he lashed in place with rubber bands. I got behind my rock drum set and kept time with bootleg recordings of the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

My father spent the day in his home office in a threadbare bathrobe, inscribing index cards with cryptic notations in Aramaic. I spent the day in the backyard with my skateboarder friends, hammering together a quarter-pipe. His accented English was a five-car pileup of malapropisms and mispronunciations. Mine, a smooth California vernacular, tinkling with grace notes like "rad," "lame," and "mellow." ("Mellow," the verb, as in, "Mellow, dude.")

When we collided, it wasn't pretty. I threw tantrums and unleashed hailstorms of four-letter words. He stewed privately over how any son could behave that way toward his father, then consoled himself with the hypothesis that this was how children were in America.

Mostly, though, I kept my distance. He lived in his world, I in mine.

I can't remember the timing exactly, but at some point, as a teenager, I even stopped calling him *Abba* or Dad. He was just "Yona." He was the odd-looking, funny-talking man with strange grooming habits who lived with us and who may or may not have been my father, depending on who was asking.

Soon enough it didn't matter. I went away to New England for college and got a job with a daily newspaper. I lived for the big story — nerve-jangling, caffeine-fueled pieces about cops shot in the streets, lawmakers caught with their hands in the till, factories spewing illegal waste into rivers.

My father holed up in his home office and, with his sons off to college, burrowed deeper into his studies of the language and folklore of his own obscure tribe: the Jews of Kurdistan. There were days when I wondered whether there had been a mix-up in the hospital's delivery room. Maybe a real Aram, one worthy of the name, anyway, was out there somewhere, being raised by a Porsche-driving Hollywood-agent dad who wished he could get through to his quiet son, if only he could pry the boy from that dog-eared copy of *Linguistic Peculiarities in Aramaic Magic Bowl Texts*.

The sense that I might have gotten my father wrong — and that I might actually be his son — came slowly. A turning point was a chilly night in December 2002, when my wife gave birth to our first child, a boy with fine dark hair and eyes like softly burning lanterns. Would Seth break with me as I had with my own father? Would he, too, think he had nothing to learn and his father, nothing to teach?

“Who are you?” Seth, with those eyes, seemed to be asking, as his mother deposited him into my arms that cold night.

I was thirty-one years old, but I had no answer.

Making things right with my father, and my son, would take work. I lacked the big-heartedness of, say, Barney the Dinosaur or even Dr. Phil. I was defensive. I didn't have it in me to just go home, ask my father's forgiveness, and then embrace through tears as some studio audience burst into applause.

So I did the thing that felt most natural: I reached for a reporter's notepad. If I dug far enough, asked enough questions, I thought I might find the girders that linked his world to mine.

My father had staked his life on the notion that the past mattered more than anything. His people, the Jews of Kurdistan, were the world's oldest Jewish diaspora. Earthy, hardworking, and deeply superstitious, they had lived in isolated mountain villages alongside Muslim Kurds for nearly 2,700 years but never abandoned their ancient tongue: Aramaic. Aramaic had been the lingua franca, or common language, of the Near East for two thousand years. Jesus spoke it. Parts of the Bible were inked in it. Three Mesopotamian empires used it as their official language. But by the time of my father's birth, in 1938, it was all but dead. After Islamic armies conquered the region in the seventh century, Middle Eastern Jews

switched to the Arabic of their Muslim neighbors. Aramaic clung to life in just one place: on the lips of Jews, and some Christians, in Kurdistan.

And so the past lived in and through my father's people. Language was their lifeline to a time and place that no longer was.

My father believed that his past anchored him. Without a tether to our ancestors, we were lost, particularly there in L.A.'s suburban desert. That belief helped vault him to the top of his field as a professor of Neo-Aramaic, the fancy name for his language's terminal phase, its death rattle. His efforts to save his mother tongue won him promotions into the highest tier of professors at UCLA, a level reserved for those with international reputations for major advances in their field. His life's work was a Jewish Neo-Aramaic-to-English dictionary, published in 2002, the first of its kind, a gilded graveyard for dying words.

The journal *Mediterranean Language Review* called the dictionary "the culminating point of more than three decades of uninterrupted linguistic activity. . . . Considering that the Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialects are on the verge of extinction, as a result of massive emigration of the Kurdistan Jews to Israel at the beginning of the 1950s, the author's activity becomes crucial for recording a linguistic and cultural reality which will soon disappear from the face of the earth," the reviewer wrote. "How wonderful it would be if all the endangered languages of the world could boast such a devoted and so highly qualified native to preserve them from oblivion." Over the years, Harvard, Yale, Cambridge, and the Sorbonne, among other elite universities the world over, invited him to lecture.

Academics weren't his only admirers. Because we lived near Hollywood, film and television producers sometimes dropped a line. They were looking, they often said, for a man who spoke the language of Jesus. My father tried to help. When the makers of the movie *The Celestine Prophecy* asked him to translate "nuclear fusion" into Aramaic, my father responded, a little apologetically, that Aramaic's linguistic development preceded nuclear science.

"Make something up," the producer nudged.

So my father approximated. "How about 'seed mix'?" he said. *Seed*, like nucleus, he explained. *Mix*, for fusion.

“That’s a take,” the producer said.

For the 1977 movie *Oh, God!* he inked the Aramaic quiz with which George Burns, in the title role, proves His bona fides to a panel of skeptical clergy. More recently, for an episode of the HBO comedy series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, he helped an actor learn the Aramaic for “My foot! My foot!”

“Recite it slowly,” the producer coached. “Like you’ve stepped on, say, a nail and are in pain.”

The Hollywood callers never offered my father much money, and in his innocent way, he never bargained for more. He was mostly just happy that here, in Los Angeles, light years from his hometown in Kurdistan, someone — anyone — wanted to speak his language.

WHO IS MY FATHER? How did he wind up so far from home? I wrote this book in part to answer those questions. I wanted to conjure the gulfs of geography and language he crossed on his way from the hills of Kurdistan to the highways of Los Angeles. But I also had other, bigger questions: What is the value of our past? When we carry our languages and stories from one generation to the next, from one country to another, what exactly do we gain?

For many Jewish Kurds of my father’s generation, the answer was little. Stigmatized in Israel as back-country rubes, many lost touch with their culture, seeing no use in passing it to their children. Who could blame them? Israel was forging a new national identity on European ideals, and the old country was a millstone best left behind. For complicated reasons, however, my father couldn’t let go. For him, the past felt safe, like a hiding place. He found that if handled carefully, if studied in the right angle of light, the past could carry you to new worlds.

Shunning my father and his strange looks and funny accent seemed smart when I was a boy. But what if I had been wrong? What if the past could remake you? What if it could redeem?

In my father’s obsession with his mother tongue, I had already glimpsed this: If you knew which levers to pull, you could stop time just long enough to save the things you loved most.

ZAKHO

MIDDLE EAST CENTRE ARCHIVE, ST. ANTONY'S COLLEGE, OXFORD.
FREYA STARK COLLECTION. ALBUM IRAQ NORTH NO. 119, "ZAKHO 1957."



Road above Zakho, 1957.

1 ♦ What's in a Name

Which are you, Ariel Sabar or Ariel Sabagha?" the fat man asked, sizing me up with his one good eye. "Which?"

It was a crisp February evening in 2005 in Jerusalem's gritty Katamonim neighborhood. The Katamonim is the heart of Kurdish Jerusalem, rows of tumbledown Soviet-style apartment blocks where Israel had deposited its poorest immigrants in the 1950s and where most stayed until their bodies were carted off by the bearded undertakers of the Kurdish Burial Society. Floral-print house dresses dangled from balcony laundry lines, and courtyard grapevines withered in the unusually cold air. I had come here to learn more about my family. I was particularly keen on stories about my great-grandfather. Ephraim Beh Sabagha had been the only fabric dyer in Zakho, a dusty northern Iraqi town just south of the Turkish border. But he was famous less for the vats of dye in his market stall than for the strange cries that pierced the stone walls of Zakho's synagogue during his nightly prayer vigils. "He spoke," people told me, usually in hushed tones, "to angels."

A few days earlier I had found his only surviving photograph, fastened with rusting staples to a water-stained ID booklet from the Israeli Interior Ministry. The picture was from 1951, the year he came from Iraq. His face has a beatific animation: the mirthful eyes, drooping a little at the corners, as if in rapture at the world's wonders; the faint smile on his lips, as though he possesses some private knowledge he burns to share; the ears pressed out at odd angles by the *poshiya* turban around his head; the unkempt beard, a black tangle made striking by the shock of silver that flares under his chin like a flame. The face is so arresting that it wasn't until much later that I noticed his body, which is pictured only from the chest up. It is a pixie's, with sloping shoulders and a sunken chest. It seemed altogether too small to carry around that extravagant head.

All the Kurds I had spoken to in Israel said that if I wanted to know more about my great-grandfather, I should talk to Zaki Levi. A Zakho native who had helped organize the Jewish exodus from that town, he became a Kurdish *macher* in Israel, a swaggering operator with a roly-poly frame, who liked to drop the names of the Israeli generals and politicians he had dined with over the years. More important, he was said to have an encyclopedic memory of the Jews' last days in Zakho.

So one chilly February evening I walked up the dimly lit steps of Levi's Katamonim apartment.

"Which are you, Sabar or Sabagha?" he repeated, with a dubious glance. He wouldn't let me through the door until I answered. I saw now what he was asking: Are you the great-grandson of Ephraim Beh Sabagha, Ephraim the Dyer of Zakho, or a son of America whose father had seen fit to clean up the family name?

"Sabar," I said.

Levi looked away, and I felt suddenly ashamed.

"Well, okay," he said. "Come in. I'll tell you about *me*."

He led me on a tour of his apartment, pointing out photographs of himself with Moshe Dayan, Chaim Weizmann, and other Israeli dignitaries. When he saw me staring at his clouded-over left eye, he explained that he was getting ready to give a speech at a Socialist rally in one of Israel's immigrant camps in the 1950s when angry Communists began hurling rocks. "Ben-Gurion was speaking first," Levi said gravely. "I stepped between him and the rock."

There was a knock at the door, and in came a parade of prominent Israeli Kurds — a businessman, a poet, a lawyer, the chairman of the National Organization of Kurdish Jews in Israel. Levi bid us sit at a long table his wife had covered with delicacies: golden fried *kubeh*, spiced *ur-jeh* kabobs, a pile of pita, garlic-eggplant dip, chopped beets, shredded lemon peels dusted with curry. "This feast is like the sultan of Baghdad's!" Levi declared, slapping the table so hard the dishes rattled. "A thousand and one nights!"

I wanted to start in on a long list of questions, but this man with the barrel chest, small nose, and pencil-thin mustache seemed to have other priorities. He sank into a high-backed chair at the head of the ta-

ble and clicked the TV to the KurdSat satellite channel, broadcast from Sulaymānīyah in the heart of Kurdish Iraq. The screen flashed with Kurdish music videos: a woman in a shimmering dress swaying in the tall grass of a lush mountainside. The words *Kurd Live*, in English, scrolled across the screen.

The photographs, the food, the Kurdish machers, the music. Was this some kind of crash course on my heritage, on the side of me that was Sabagha? All I had come for were a few family stories.

It was two hours later, after we had stuffed ourselves and listened to dozens of Levi's jokes, that he finally leveled his good eye at me.

"Ephraim, your great-grandfather, was a genius," he began suddenly.

I pulled out my notebook.

"He went to Zakho's big synagogue every night. It was big, six *dunams*. It had a courtyard with a *mikveh*. The ark took up an entire room, with the Torah and a place for holy water."

Levi tore a piece of paper from my notebook. He sketched a diagram of the synagogue's layout, drew a square representing a fine Persian rug, and put an X on the spot where my great-grandfather sat. Ephraim whiled away the night there, by turns reading books, napping, and conversing aloud with spirits only he could see. "He'd come at two A.M. and stay until morning," Levi told me. "When people started filtering in for prayer at five A.M., they'd hear him all of a sudden start screaming, '*Elohim, baruch, baruch, shmo!*'" Oh, God! How Blessed His Name!

"Did people think he was pious or off his rocker?"

"No!" Levi said. "Pious! He carried himself like a holy man. But he was also a simple man, a working man."

Everyone, it seemed, knew which prayer book was his: The margins were dappled with smudges, from fingers that had spent the day soaking in dyes.

"Please, Mr. Levi," I said, at the edge of my seat now. "What else do you remember?"

But Levi pulled away. He patted the air in front of him in slow motion, as though applying brakes. His point was clear: It was Zaki Levi, and Zaki Levi alone, who would decide when stories about Zakho would begin and when stories about Zakho would end.

“*Leaht, leaht,*” he counseled. Slowly, slowly.

Later that evening he leaned over his ample stomach toward a tray of decanters filled with brightly hued liquids.

“What you like?” he said, turning to me. “Wine? Cocktail? Arak?” I had never tried the anise-flavored liqueur, but I remembered reading that it was a favorite after-dinner drink among the Kurds, some of whom also drank it during and before dinner.

“Arak,” I replied.

Levi smiled at me for the first time. Then he poured the liquid into a row of hourglass-shaped snifters, dropping in ice cubes and a splash of water, which turned the drink a cloudy pear color.

The liquor burned my throat and I winced.

Levi was beaming. “Hah!” he said. “Now, you are Sabagha.”

If only it were that easy.

2 ◊ An Island in a River

“The appearance of Zakhu in the present day coincides in a remarkable manner with what it was described to be in the time of Xenophon.”

—WILLIAM FRANCIS AINSWORTH,

Travels in the Track of the Ten Thousand Greeks, 1844

It is tempting to look out across my father’s hometown and see a landscape of fairy tale: an ancient island in a river, in a broad plain, walled by snow-fringed mountains. The Jews lived on the island, a crescent of rock spanning four hundred by eight hundred yards, in a region so isolated that Western visitors (and there weren’t many) often fancied they had discovered a tribe of lost Israelites.

“Such Jews!” the Jewish-American professor Walter Fischel wrote after visiting Kurdistan in the 1940s. “Men virile and wild-looking; women wearing embroidered turbans, earrings, bracelets, even nose-rings, and with symbols tattooed into their faces — our brethren and sisters!”

Their language was just as intoxicating, mostly because people had

written it off as long dead. Aramaic had been the English of its day, a lingua franca across what was then the world's center of civilization. Its first inscriptions — mostly on stone monuments to gods and kings found near Aleppo, Syria — stretch back to around 1000 B.C., when an obscure tribe of Semitic nomads, the Arameans, began drifting from Syria across the Fertile Crescent. The Arameans' trump wasn't their wealth or power — they never had much. It was their tendency to wander.

As nomads, they had dispersed so widely across ancient Mesopotamia that their language became a de facto common tongue, the world's first esperanto. It was the language on the ground. And no one, it seemed, wanted to mess with it. By the eighth century B.C., a practical decision had been made throughout the Assyrian Empire to adopt the Aramean tongue as the official language of administration. When the Assyrians fell, the Babylonians embraced Aramaic as the official language of their Mesopotamian empire; when the Babylonians fell, the Persians took it up.

That no fewer than three empires came and went without imposing their own language upends a linguistic verity: that language follows power. Aramaic survived precisely because its native speakers lacked political ambition. The Arameans were no-account drifters — “uncouth Bedouins,” one historian called them. They were everywhere. But they were so badly organized, so poor, and so powerless that the new emperors saw no threat in their language. Here is what made Aramaic irresistible: It was high-tech. Before it, the closest thing to a Near Eastern lingua franca was Akkadian, which was etched in cuneiform, wedge-shaped characters pressed into clay. Aramaic could be written on papyrus. For an Assyrian or Babylonian bureaucrat with a sprawling empire to administer, it was simply easier to push paper than rock.

The miracle of Aramaic was not lost on Assyrian king Sargon II, who claimed credit for its rapid spread in a stone inscription found near Mosul: “Peoples of the four regions of the world, of foreign tongue and divergent speech, dwellers of mountain and lowland . . . I carried off [and] made them of one mouth.”

People were soon speaking and writing Aramaic over wide bands of Asia and northern Africa, from the Caucasus to southern Egypt, from

western Turkey to southern India and western China. It crossed borders and bridged faiths as no prior language had. Not only did Jews and Christians speak it as an everyday tongue, but so, at various times, did Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Muslims, Mandeans, Manicheans, and pagans.

For a while, Aramaic appeared destined for immortality. As the common language of the formative years of Christianity and diaspora Judaism, it embedded itself in seminal liturgical texts. An Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible was expanded into a landmark work of interpretation known as the Targum, or Translation. The Books of Ezra and Daniel were partly composed in Aramaic. Babylonian Jews wrote the Talmud, the book of commentary and law, in Aramaic. A medieval Spanish poet drafted the Zohar, the chief text of Jewish Kabbalah, in it. The original “writing on the wall” that prophesied the fall of Babylon was in Aramaic. And Jesus Christ himself cried out in the same lilting tongue as he died on the cross: “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*” My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

The death of Aramaic as one of the world’s great languages came suddenly. In the seventh century, Muslim armies from Arabia conquered Mesopotamia and Aramaic was steamrolled by Arabic, which is still the Middle East’s dominant tongue. That is why when other Jews, even those from elsewhere in Iraq, first met their Kurdish brethren in the twentieth century, they could scarcely believe their ears. “Though neither Arabic nor Farsi — not Hebrew, either — something in the language struck a chord,” the Baghdadi doctor Heskell M. Haddad wrote in his memoir, recalling his first encounter with Kurdish Jews. “Single words were understandable, or almost, and all at once I knew their source. This motley ragged mass was speaking a derivative of Aramaic, the language I’d encountered in the Zohar! Impure, admixed, distorted, but unmistakably the ancient tongue!”

Hearing Aramaic in the twentieth century tended to induce giddiness in otherwise temperate men. “In my view, the history of Aramaic represents the purest triumph of the human spirit as embodied in language,” wrote the eminent Yale Arabist Franz Rosenthal, a buttoned-down German Jew normally given to softer pronouncements. “Great empires were conquered by the Aramaic language, and when they disappeared and were submerged in the flow of history, that language persisted and con-

tinued to live a life of its own. . . . The total sweep of Aramaic history . . . teaches us that the underdog may in fact have the opportunity to play a decisive role, that it is possible for the word pure and simple to dominate empires and survive their dissolution, that it is possible for the true achievements of the human spirit to live on. . . .”

Aramaic’s longevity owes much to the isolation of places like Zakho: the island in the river in plains ringed by mountains, a fortress against the world. More than twelve hundred years after the arrival of Arabic, Aramaic was still hanging on, thanks in large part to Kurdistan’s twenty-five thousand Jews, a forgotten race of peasants and peddlers who saw themselves as the direct descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel.

BY 1930, AT AROUND the time this story begins, Zakho had replaced Arbil and Amadiya as the center of Jewish activity in Iraqi Kurdistan. But that wasn’t saying much. In a town of 27,000 souls, most of them Muslim Kurds, Jews numbered just 1,471.

The Jews lived on Zakho’s island, its oldest district and commercial heart. Their mud-brick houses lined narrow alleys that zigzagged down to the Habur River. On the riverbanks, packs of children scampered, loggers tied up rafts, and men at the *chaykhana* sipped glasses of tea while cooling their toes in the frothing currents. Beyond the Jewish quarter were a cramped open-air market and an ancient castle housing a small jail and the offices of the provincial administrator. Stone and suspension bridges linked the island to Muslim neighborhoods, a small Christian quarter, and the boys’ primary school.

The jumble of low, flat-roofed buildings still gives way to an unremitting flatness. Golden fields of wheat and barley roll across the plains for miles until they dissolve into an angry terrain of steep gorges and ravines. Hemming the valley like fortress walls are the Bekher and White mountains, whose peaks tower thousands of feet above the town.

“As a stranger approaches, he is struck with its bold and isolated appearance,” the British traveler William Francis Ainsworth, one of the few Western visitors, wrote of a trip through Zakho in the mid-1800s. “It is not like Mosul, a town in a partially civilized country; but is an outpost of warlike Kurdistan.”

For a long time Zakho was just a lonely speck of rock on the fringe

of the Ottoman Empire, an afterthought some sixty miles northwest of Mosul. When European powers redrew the map of the Middle East after the defeat of the Ottomans in World War I, Zakho found itself within spitting distance of two borders: five miles south of Turkey, twelve miles east of Syria. Its rebirth as a border town only added to its rugged spirit. As it prospered from international trade — much of it illegal — the town had even less of a need for ties with any central government. But isolation had its price: With few exceptions, its people were consigned to lives of mercilessly hard work, ill health, and wild superstition.

Some say *Zakho* is Aramaic for “House of Victory,” some, Kurdish for “River of Blood.” Both allude to its possible role as the site of some decisive battle in antiquity. The Greek warrior and historian Xenophon is thought to have passed through Zakho with his army of ten thousand mercenaries in 401 B.C., coming under savage attack by the Kurds, or “Carduchians,” as he called them.

Others have glimpsed a simpler, more timeless meaning, one better suited to a fairy tale. *Zakho*, they say, is Kurdish for “Bend in the River.”

3 ♦ A Book with Shining Pages

The little boy liked roofs. And from the rooftops of his town in Iraqi Kurdistan, the eight-year-old boy with dark hair — his name was Yona — could look down on the whole world. Down there was the store where his father sold the bolts of wool. Over there was the market stall where his grandfather dipped *sherwals* and *shalla u-shappiksas* into drums of dye, brightening the pants and jackets with new colors. And there, doddering in the courtyard of the house by the main road, was one of Yona’s favorite men: the storyteller with his pitchfork beard, who lit the boy’s imagination with fables of ghouls and beggars and heroes.

Just below, between the stone synagogue and the mulberry tree, stood his own house. A column of steam rose from the courtyard. Though he couldn’t see his mother from this angle, he could picture her there, beside a cauldron of boiling burghul, her dress sopping from the heat.

A few yards beyond the house was the edge of the boy's universe: The Habur River. Rivers didn't normally go in circles, but he could see that the one in Zakho did. The Habur peeled in two at one end of town and, precisely at other end, rejoined: Zakho was an island in a river. When the boy peered at the roiling currents, he saw its two branches as arms embracing the town. The river was ruled by the Yimid Maya, the Water Mother. She was a capricious siren who surfaced at night to comb her long, dark hair. The rabbis warned Zakho's boys and girls that violations of Jewish law displeased Yimid Maya. In her fury, she curled icy fingers around the legs of swimmers and dragged them through darkness to their deaths. One day he saw a friend, a blacksmith's apprentice, lose his footing as he reached for a piece of driftwood. Three days later, the boy's bloated body washed up on the banks of a downstream village.

The rooftops were Yona's sanctuary and kingdom. Yimid Maya couldn't touch him here, and some days, high above the town, he felt like a boy aga, a tribal chieftain. The houses were so close together that he could cross the entire Jewish quarter without ever touching ground. He took running starts and, a whisker's breadth before the ledge, sprang up and out. Beneath him, as he flew, the pedestrian goings-on of Zakho's world blurred: the squawking chickens in the courtyards, the peddlers pushing carts of dates, the women scrubbing laundry. Then, in a cloud of dust from his skidding feet, he thumped down on the next rooftop.

You had to be careful. One roof jumper he knew had tripped and snapped his neck. Another boy plunged through uneven thatching and crushed both legs. But in all those years Yona fell only once. It was the day his friend Zacharia showed him the book with the shining pages. The two boys had sat on the riverbank, cooling their feet in the water, and had studied the pictures inside: golden-haired men and women in the strangest costumes. Look at the lips of the women! Look at how tall the men are! Like giants! The boys could make no sense of the words but knew they were English; a teacher had begun showing them the alphabet. Never before had either boy seen photographs of human beings, let alone such splendid ones in such glorious colors, on pages that flashed the sunlight back at your face.

"Give it to me," Yona said, tugging at one of the pages. "Let me see that."

"No, it's mine," Zacharia said. "I found it."

"Where?"

"An Arab gave it to me."

"Please," Yona said, pleading now. "I'll let you play with my bouncing ball later." His father had bought the tennis ball, the only one in Zakho, on a trading trip to Baghdad, inspiring envy in all the other boys.

"I'll trade you," Zacharia said. "You can have the book if I can have the ball."

"Okay, okay," Yona said, reaching out. "Just let me have a turn."

But then Zacharia reconsidered. He loved having something that Yona wanted. It was all too often the other way round. Yona's father was always returning from Mosul and Baghdad with new toys, jackets, and rubber shoes for his son. Now it was Zacharia's turn to inspire envy. "Who cares about a stupid ball," Zacharia yelled, getting up and sprinting down the riverbank, the pages fluttering. "I've got the book with shining pages."

Yona stewed, furious that the other boy had gotten the upper hand. Then, that evening, like a miracle, he heard the news: Zacharia had scaled the roof of his own house and hidden the book under a *makabbeh*, an overturned wicker basket for keeping cats away from fresh food. When Zacharia came back to check on it an hour later, the book was gone. Rumors were circulating that Salim Judo, the bully, had swiped it.

Yona laughed. He climbed the courtyard steps to the roof, cupped his hands at the sides of his mouth, and broadcast the happy tidings. "Zacharia lost his shining book! Did you hear, everyone?"

But Yona had to see for himself that the book was gone: It would feel good to lift up that *makabbeh* and look at the nothingness underneath. He hurtled across a few more rooftops and landed with light feet on Zacharia's. The basket was in the corner. But before he reached it, something in the courtyard below caught his eye. Just below the crude gutter was Zacharia's mother, Sabria, fat, naked, and astride a pail of steaming water. He tiptoed closer, watching as she ladled hot water onto her ample frame. It cascaded down the ripples of coffee-colored flesh. He had never before seen a woman like this — without clothes, that is. What a curious sight! The folds of soft skin reminded him of an accordion that one of the town's musicians had shown him. He could not tear his eyes away. She

ran a sponge over her arms and breasts. She splashed her feet about like one of those jolly sea monsters the town's storyteller had told him about. Or maybe this was Yimid Maya herself?

Then came an awful groaning sound: twisting metal. Yona felt something give way beneath his feet. The rusted-out gutter was collapsing. He felt a prickle of heat as something hard pierced his jaw. Sabria's figure grew larger and larger. He blacked out too soon to hear her scream.

HE OPENED HIS EYES to the hazy sight of a man in a long coat hooking a needle and thread through his chin. "He was lucky," he overheard the man tell his father, who was slouched in the corner of the candlelit room. "If he had fallen on a skinny one, he might have been dead."

"God saved my son," Yona's father said.

"By sacrificing a cow," the man in the coat said, and the men laughed.

What did they mean exactly? Yona wondered, as he closed his eyes against the pain. Did he mean Sabria? Had he fallen on top of her? Did everyone in Zakho know the story?

The man in the white coat let out a weary sigh as he tied off the last stitch. "His jaw will take time to heal, so give him small things to eat that need little chewing, like yogurt, bread crumbs, and *kaimach*," sour buffalo cheese.

"And," he added, as he turned to go. "Tell the boy to keep his mouth shut for at least a month."

4 ♦ Rotten Corn

If Yona was spoiled or felt a little superior, it was not his fault. He had succeeded at something that had eluded nearly everyone else his mother had ever cared about: He lived. For this simple reason, Miryam and her husband, Rahamim, pampered him. They led him to believe he could fly where others faltered.

The Jewish cemetery in Zakho was checkered with freshly turned earth where babies had been buried in unmarked graves. So many infants died

in Zakho that the Kurdish Jews fashioned elaborate rituals to boost fertility. Some women ornamented their necks with silver and copper amulets inscribed with magic incantations. Some took part in exotic rites, melting bullets or tying snake skins around their stomachs. In a few cases, a mother would sell her newborn to a female relative for a nominal sum. The relative would then hire the mother to nurse and raise the baby, a ruse to confound the *jinne* — the demons — and protect the child.

But the trials of motherhood in Kurdistan seemed to cut Miryam more deeply than it did other women. Birth and death had always gone hand in hand, ever since the day she watched her mother die.

July 1928 was so hot that the people of Zakho hoisted bed frames onto the roofs. Miryam Beh Nazé was three years old, a dark-eyed beauty even then, with hair the color of mahogany. When she walked toward her mother's wails in the next room, she saw a circle of women on their knees, mumbling prayers and dabbing at somebody with wet rags. The women were her aunts, Miryam saw now. And between them, writhing on a sheet on the hard-packed dirt floor, was her mother, Rifqa. It was the Fast of Tisha B'Av, a day of mourning for the destroyed temples of Jerusalem, and the men were at synagogue.

"Bless this boy," a midwife said, lifting the newborn baby, Yusef, from between her mother's legs and tying an amulet made of cow's fetus to his ankles. The aunts nodded their amens. "Keep him from evil."

But the blood kept trickling, and Rifqa's chest jerked. A stain spread like spilled wine across the white sheet. The midwife looked at the ceiling and asked God for mercy.

"Mommy?" Miryam said, sobbing now.

The aunts turned together, noticing their niece in the shadows. "Come here, *kurbanokh*, hold your mother's hand," one said.

"It is not clean, she mustn't," the midwife said. "Go from here, girl, go outside! Pray!"

But Miryam could not move. Her older brother, Shmuel, dashed in, soaked in sweat — someone had summoned him from his game of knucklebones. He clasped Miryam's arm. "Mommy? Mommy?" he said. "We're here, Mommy, me and Miryam. Can you see us?"

As the long afternoon shadows spread across the room, Rifqa's eyes

went blank. Her sisters' screams carried all the way to the courtyard of the synagogue, where men in worship were chanting the Book of Lamentations.

The baby Yusef, born moments before his mother died, was fair-skinned and fine-featured, like his father. Miryam took to pretending that she was his mother, spoon-feeding him boiled wheat and calling him "my little baby."

When he turned three, a rash bloomed on Yusef's forehead. His breathing grew shallow and he started to cough. Miryam's father, Menashe, had to leave town for week-long spells to load logs onto rafts upriver, so a neighbor was paid to look after Yusef. Shmuel walked Miryam over to the house in the afternoons, so she could stroke Yusef's hair and make him laugh with a funny noise she made squeezing air through her teeth.

She dreamed sometimes that her father had come back with a beautiful new wife and that they were again a family.

"He'll be back soon," Shmuel told his younger sister. "A few more days."

But their father stayed away and Yusef got sicker. The rash crept from his forehead to his legs. A few weeks later, he was all ribs and knees. One morning, when the neighbor woman left his cradle to boil tea, the boy died.

FOR MIRYAM, STILL a young girl, the world was not the cascade of wonders it was for some children. She awoke in a sweat some mornings, looking around the house to check that everything was still in its place. Forces beyond her understanding had already spirited away her mother and her little brother. She worried that her father might be next, and his long absences suspended her in a state of fear. She gazed up at the Bekher mountains that edged the plains, searching for the tallest peak and imagining that the evil eye reigned there in a glistening castle of ice. Up so high, it had a clear view of Zakho's townspeople as they bustled through their daily rounds. Up so high, it could choose victims at will. There was nothing anyone could do but wait her turn.

A few years after her mother's death, Miryam's father married a razor-tongued woman with high cheekbones and a cleft chin. Her name was Arabe, and she walked with an almost military bearing, chest forward,

shoulders back. Some townspeople saw in it a posture of pride, but most saw hostility, which was fine with Arabe. When Arabe gave birth to a line of four healthy boys, it only adding to her hauteur.

"How is your daughter?" a neighbor once had the temerity to ask.

"I don't have one."

"The girl you send to wash the clothes in the river, the one who cooks for you?"

"She came with my husband."

Arabe had taught Miryam to cook for one reason: So she wouldn't have to. The more housework she could unload onto her compliant step-daughter, the better. Miryam needed to learn that she was a guest in Arabe's house. She would have to pull her weight.

On many afternoons Miryam waited by the doorway for her half brothers to return from the Jewish school in Zakho's synagogue.

"*Yaprach, Yaprach,*" they would chant, demanding stuffed grape leaves as they filed through the door and tossed their book bags onto the dirt floor. Arabe was occasionally out of the house at this hour. And when she was, Miryam set out the plates and then bargained with the boys. She'd cook if they told her something they'd learned in school that day.

Even when she was a girl, the kitchen was a source of pride and power. A separate vestibule off the main room, it cocooned her in glorious aromas. She had proven herself a skillful and painstaking chef, famous in the family for yaprach that tickled the tongue with notes of tomato, lemon, and dried sumac. Shmuel and her half brothers teased that Miryam's date-size yaprach were tiny, like her. Miryam didn't mind the ribbing; she rolled grape leaves at half their usual size precisely so that her family would recognize them as hers, rather than her stepmother's or her aunts'.

Fridays brought the week's most elaborate meal, a Byzantine interlacing of ingredients that turned the kitchen into an alchemist's lair. As long as there were Fridays in Jewish Kurdistan, there was *hamusta*. The tart brew of dense meat dumplings in a light citrus soup of turnips, leeks, and beetroot was the traditional pre-Sabbath meal. Miryam slipped into a reverie amid the glazed spice jars and wood-burning clay stove. She took

pride in the precision with which she cut the leeks into halves, snipped off the roots, and softened the brittle leaves in cold water. She shaped the beef into cubes, rolled in specks of finely diced celery and garlic, fried them in oil. Then she folded the chewy bulgur dough around the seasoned meat to form saucerlike dumplings called *kubeh*. When the soup simmered, sending a bouquet of lemon through the house, Miryam dropped in the *kubeh* and smiled to herself as she watched the dough turn to gold.

“First, you have to tell me what your teacher said today,” Miryam would tell her half brothers.

“We don’t have to do anything until we eat,” one boy said.

“Do you want a bloody nose?” Shmuel said, leaning over the younger boy and watching the bravado seep away. “Then tell her.”

And so by dribs and drabs, the boys unwound tales of good and evil, of kings and slaves, of wars and famine, and of God.

ONE THURSDAY MORNING in the spring, not long after she turned twelve, Miryam walked to the river to scrub the family’s laundry. Her back ached as she shouldered the sopping load up the riverbank and past the market to the house. Why was her stepmother treating her like this? If Miryam’s father weren’t away so often on his logging trips, he could protect her. His temper, she knew, was the only thing Arabe feared.

Blessedly, her stepmother was out, probably at the market. Miryam drew a breath of warm air and let the laundry sack slide off her back onto the floor of the courtyard. And then a thought overtook her. She stepped on a stool to reach the shelf where Arabe kept a jar of henna. She grabbed it, hid it under a fold in her dress, and retreated to the secluded bend in the river where women bathed. Miryam untied the white scarf from her head. She combed her index finger through her tightly braided hair and tugged downward until the coils peeled free. The thick mahogany strands reached her waist.

Something about her reflection startled her. She was still tiny, yes. But her chest and hips were beginning to take on a rounder form; her mouth seemed fuller, her chin stronger. *Maybe I will look like my mother*, she

thought. She had remembered the leathery texture of her mother's hands at bath time, but was never able to conjure more than a gauzy picture of her face. Maybe by becoming a woman, she would also in some way find her.

Miryam removed the jar of henna and sprinkled the paste with a handful of river water. She stuck her finger in the moist dye, turning her nose away from the smell. Then she streaked it through her hair, pinching the strands between greasy fingers until they turned a coppery orange.

A rustling at the top of the bank made her jump, and when she turned, she saw a boy turn and run. He must have been watching her. She hurriedly covered the jar, knotted her hair back into a crude braid, and re-fastened the scarf. But when she stepped into her courtyard, she noticed that the jar of henna she thought she'd tucked into her dress was missing. Arabe was in the main room, glowering over the wet pile of clothes Miryam had left by the door.

"You stupid girl," Arabe said, turning around. "Where have you been? Your father will need those clothes tomorrow for work, and your brother has no clean diapers. Everything is still here, as wet as a mop. How dare you leave without my permission?"

"I just went to the river for a rest," Miryam said. "I'm sorry. I'll hang the clothes now."

"A rest?"

When she looked up at her stepmother's face, the woman's features twisted into a mockery of a pleading child. Miryam felt suddenly paralyzed. There was a world outside the house — books and boys and flowers and mountains — and the only plan this woman had for her was housework.

"Don't look at me like that," Arabe said. "How dare you look at me like that." Then she slapped Miryam across the cheek so hard that the girl, a waif who weighed no more than the brother half her age, spun around and crumpled to the ground. Her henna-stained braid slipped out from under her scarf.

"And what did you do to your hair, you silly girl? Where did you get that henna!" Arabe stalked over to the shelf and found the jar missing.

"Thief!" Arabe shouted, her voice a wolf's growl. "Henna won't make

you pretty, idiot girl. It didn't make your mother pretty either. Get up! Get up!"

But Miryam couldn't move. "So full of tears, this one is," Arabe said. "Maybe we'll just hang you up to dry instead of the laundry."

Arabe bent down and coiled Miryam's hair around a forearm built like a cedar log. She dragged the girl by the hair to the courtyard and pinned the tip of her braid to the laundry line. "See, I told you hanging laundry wasn't hard."

Just then Miryam's father materialized in the doorway and saw his sobbing daughter in the humiliating pose. "Arabe, you crazy witch," Menashe growled. He dug his nails into his wife's shoulders and slammed her against the wall. "You won't disrespect me this way."

The fracas had brought a knot of neighbors to the courtyard. Miryam, sprawled in the dirt and humiliated, buried her face in her arms.

"If you touch my children again," her father said, "I'll throw you into the streets."

"You thought you planted wheat," Arabe said. "But what you got was rotten corn."

Menashe wore the stunned expression of a man in disbelief at an underling's temerity. He slammed the back of his hand into the sharp ledge of his wife's cheekbones.

"Just rotten corn," she said, spitting out blood. Miryam noticed she was staring right at her, her eyes boring into the girl like a pair of awls.

5 ♦ A Surprise

A few weeks later Miryam's stepmother asked her to plug holes in the roof. When she returned home with two pails of tar, her father called to her.

"Set those by the house," he said. "We're going to take a walk."

"Tomorrow," he told his daughter after a few steps, "I am taking you to your uncle Ephraim and aunt Hazale."

"Yes, father," she said. She swallowed back the bile in her throat. "But what have I done?"

"Nothing, my daughter."

"Then why . . ."

"It is a surprise," he said, squeezing her shoulder.

"You have heard of Ephraim Beh Sabagha, yes?" It was a fair question. Her father wasn't close to his sister, Hazale, and had spoken of her even less after she married Ephraim, the fabric dyer who had moved to Zakho from the village of Atrush after his first wife, a Mosul woman, had died.

"He is a good man, one of Zakho's most pious," he said, his voice cracking as though something were stuck in his throat. "And his sons, they're hard workers. His eldest is turning into a successful merchant. His father sends him to Turkey for all those fancy textiles he dyes in his shop. You must have seen his eldest boy, Rahamim, on your errands in the market?"

A hazy image of a runtish man with a moonlike face and thin mustache flashed before her. Perhaps, yes, she thought, she had seen him unloading goods once or twice. But he hadn't made much of an impression.

"I don't know," she said.

"You will enjoy it there," her father said. "It may be easier for you."

"But . . ."

"Enough," he said, his gruffness back. "You have chores today. Didn't your stepmother tell you yesterday that the crack in the roof needs tar?"

Miryam scarcely knew this Ephraim. Sure, everyone had heard stories about the crazy old man with the wooly beard who claimed to speak to angels. But she had never so much as set foot in his house. And what was so great about his sons? She had dozens of first cousins, and these, no one ever talked about or even visited.

And then came a bout of breathlessness, like a donkey's buck to the stomach. *My stepmother is behind this*, she thought. *She convinced my father to throw his own daughter out of his house. I wasn't a good enough servant for her. So she is putting me to work as a maid.*

A sob erupted inside her chest. Her father was several paces ahead of her now, but well within earshot.

"Daddy," she gasped. She looked searchingly after him, waiting for him to turn around, to see her tears. His head twitched as though at nothing

more vexing than a fly's buzz. Then he vanished through the crooked timber door frame.

The next morning a mottled white mare was waiting for the journey to the Beh Sabagha house. Miryam, clad in her best *sudra*, a dress with red embroidery that had belonged to her mother, pressed a couple of lesser shifts into the saddlebags and hoisted herself astride the huffing animal. She did not look at her father.

Maybe this would be a fresh start, she had told herself when she got up that morning. She wanted this aunt and uncle to like her. The horse, she thought, was a promising sign. It would have been easy enough to walk to the Beh Sabagha house, just a few paces down their own street. But these relatives had seen fit to dispatch a horse — perhaps not the prettiest in Kurdistan, but a horse nonetheless.

A few doors past Zakho's big synagogue, her father helped her off. She straightened her dress with her palms as she took in the house, which was bigger than her own family's. When her father led her over the threshold, she started. Spread before her on a low table in the courtyard was the biggest feast she had ever laid eyes on: heaping plates of roasted chicken and seasoned lamb, bowls of steaming hamusta and sliced watermelon, knee-high stacks of freshly baked flat bread. Around the table, smiling, stood more aunts, uncles, and cousins than she had ever seen gathered in one place.

At the sight of the thirteen-year-old, the women raised a ululation that could be heard half way down the street. "Klililililili, klililililili!" they cried. "Klilililililili!" The crowd parted suddenly, and shuffling to the front with an uneasy smile was a short man in a shalla u-shappiksa of such brightly colored stripes that Miryam had to resist twin impulses — the first to giggle, the second to flee. The traditional billowy trousers and short sheep's-wool jacket radiated every color of the rainbow. Someone, it seemed, had gotten a little carried away in Mr. Beh Sabagha's dye shop.

The man met her gaze for a moment as he advanced, then dropped his eyes to the dirt floor. Miryam recognized him now as the moon-faced man with the thin mustache she had seen at the market. Then, from a seat at the head of the table, a wiry older man with kind eyes and a square beard rose to his feet.

“Miryam, I am Ephraim Beh Sabagha, the head of this house,” he said. “Your father and I have reached an agreement. Yes, we have! We are very happy that you will be joining our household — and our family. I am told you are a good cook and a hard worker. Before you,” he continued, sweeping his hand toward the squat man in the rainbow suit, “is someone whom you will be happy to serve for the rest of your life. May I present my eldest son, Rahamim.”

The short man — perhaps a decade older than she but not much taller, Miryam saw — tilted forward in a mincing bow.

And then the women raised their cries and the room rang with a song Miryam had heard at her cousin's betrothal ceremony.

*Why does the girl go hide
Alone beneath the rock?
Why is she shy?
Why are you running to the mountains?
Don't hide — it won't help.
Why are you standing against the wall in tears?
Go with the parents of the groom,
That will be best for you.*

Miryam felt sick at the dawning reality of what was happening. She had been summoned here not as a servant but as a bride.

“Hallelujah, yes!” Ephraim said when the women finished their song, “In six months, Miryam, you will move in with us and become Rahamim's wife.”

6 ♦ The Dyer's Son

When Rahamim was a newborn, his parents had waited too long to stitch an amulet into his blanket. The evil eye had crept into his crib and cast a spell. Why else, Rahamim mused during the dull stretches of his mule trips into Turkey, would he, the eldest of Ephraim and Hazale's three sons, be the shortest? His younger brothers towered over

him. In a needless stroke of cruelty, the evil eye had given Eliyahu a baritone voice that turned heads a kilometer away, and to Israel brooding good looks that . . . well, did the same. These facts, one could not argue. But industry and wiles, these Rahamim believed were his province. He had plans for the Beh Sabagha family. He believed he could lead his family out of Zakho's middle class and into the ranks of the town's wealthiest and most honored Jews. Men like Moshe Gabbay, who owned the land and the storefronts where lesser men peddled their goods. Men like Beh Avo and Beh Hoja, who were so well respected that the alleys they lived on were known as *Makhalit Beh Avo* and *Makhalit Beh Hoja*.

The Beh Sabaghas were not nobodies. Their reputation, if you could call it that, was for spirituality. Not piety, mind you. But spirituality, a self-styled mysticism that derived from Ephraim's overnight prayer vigils at the synagogue. Some townspeople claimed to overhear him conversing with angels. Others — Rahamim laughed when he thought about it — just shook their heads at the blue smudges on the pages of the prayer books and wondered why the man didn't scrub his hands harder after his long days in the dye shop. His father was perhaps the only merchant in Kurdistan who stuffed books into his donkey's saddlebags on peddling trips through the mountain villages. His business partner complained bitterly about the waste of precious cargo space.

"The only wasted cargo space on this journey, my friend," Ephraim would snap back, tapping a forefinger against his partner's temple, "is in a head too empty to read."

Rahamim liked his father's independent streak and belief in self-improvement, but spirituality, virtuous as it was, had to be balanced against pragmatism. This business of accepting one's father's trade — and identity — as one's own did not sit right. Rahamim *Beh Sabagha* — Rahamim, of the Dyer's House. As if no other destiny were possible. Rahamim had learned math so well in school that by the time he was a teenager, he was helping manage his father's accounts. He could read and write well enough that illiterate people from across the Jewish quarter sought his help composing letters. And to be called no more than an occupant of the Dyer's House?

Yet in Zakho, if you weren't careful, names stuck. And once townspeople

had latched on, you could find yourself going nowhere, like a rooster in mud. Just look at the sorry lives of Mordechai *Bkah'ena*, Mordechai the One-Eyed, Nachum *Jojo*, Nachum the Pants Wetter, and Faho *M'arto*, Faho the Farter.

The worst, though, was Shlomo. He had been a respected woollens merchant and called The Weaver. Then, one day, while drying a patch of wool on his roof, a powerful gust swept it up into the mountains. Afterward, if you had told Zakho's townspeople that you were looking for Shlomo the Weaver, you would get a blank expression. That was no longer a name anyone recognized. "Ah-hah," the townspeople would eventually reply, "Ah, yes. You must mean Shlomo *Poha*," Shlomo the Wind.

Shlomo's business was never the same.

Recalling the story one blustery afternoon while returning by mule from a trading trip to Turkey, Rahamim shook his head and laughed. *Fool*, he huffed to himself.

Suddenly the bark of a man's voice jolted Rahamim out of his day-dream.

"Hey, you, Kurd! Where do you think you're going?"

A Turkish soldier on horseback, a bandolier across his shoulder, was racing toward him from the other side of the dusty ravine.

Customs.

Rahamim ground his teeth. How could he have been so careless this close to the border? He tugged on the mule's reins, slumped forward in the saddle, and let his jaw hang slack in his best imitation of the dumb village Kurd.

"What do you have in those bags?" said the soldier, a young man with fair skin and hair slicked back and parted.

"Nothing, sir," Rahamim said. "Just walnuts and garbanzo beans."

"And where are you going?"

"Zakho," Rahamim said, waving a limp hand south.

"Open the bags."

The soldier dismounted and plunged his hands into the bulging saddle bags; the nuts and beans were so densely packed that the officer withdrew his hands almost instantly.

“You penny-pinching Kurds don’t waste any space, do you?” the soldier said.

“No, sir.”

No, sir, indeed, Rahamim thought as the soldier waved him across the border. Had the soldier reached any deeper, he would have discovered a wardrobe’s worth of fine Turkish silk scarves, a bundle of delicately woven funeral shrouds, and a set of heavy wool blankets embroidered with the likeness of the handsome Ataturk. Had the officer asked Rahamim to disrobe, he would have found his chest wrapped like a giant kubeh in layers of mink and fox pelt.

Smuggling could land you in jail. But only if you were caught. That is why Ephraim put his eldest and shrewdest son — and not his brothers, however tall and handsome — in charge of such risky international transactions. Yes, every day, he was, by hard work and ingenuity, muscling his family closer to the loftier perch he felt was their due. As Zakho’s patchwork of low-slung houses appeared on the horizon, ringed by the glistening river, his thoughts turned to his new wife. And he was reminded of another reason for financial prudence: A baby was on the way.

7 ◊ Little Thumb Girl

If her father and stepmother’s house felt at times like a slave quarters ruled by a madwoman, Miryam’s new house was like a rowdy, cluttered bazaar ruled by no one. Her in-laws were merchants, black-market peddlers, and textile dyers. Miryam glimpsed no separation between market and home. Sheep’s and goat’s wool was waiting to be combed; hens and chicks crisscrossed the floors. A procession of customers tramped through the house, dickering over the price of nuts, wool, animal skins.

The many visitors made her feel part of an important enterprise. She had found an ally in her new husband’s only sister, Rachel. The two girls were the same age and the recipients, both felt, of more than their share

of housework. When Rahamim was away on trading trips or in Mosul for army training, they would slide their sleeping rugs together and swap stories about the trials of a girl's life in a house full of boys.

"Maybe I will find a husband with many young sisters," Rachel said, one night.

"Yes," Miryam said, giggling, the candlelight glinting in her eyes. "Make them your slaves while you sleep until noon."

"It must be nice to have a husband," Rachel said, after a while. (With the unrelenting housework and without her sister-in-law's more refined features, it would be another dozen years before Rachel would marry, and then to a widower fifteen years her senior.)

"Yes," Miryam said, as if considering the idea for the first time. "It is nice sometimes." Miryam had slowly warmed to her husband. He was not the most handsome or the tallest. But he was earnest and wanted to better himself. And no man in her life besides her brother Shmuel had been as kind.

Their marriage was not an hour old when the women of Zakho, seeing the couple in their wedding clothes, started in with a familiar blessing. "May you have seven boys!" they said, because more boys meant more workers for the family business. Miryam waited for the day when she could give her husband the thing he wanted most. And when her belly finally curved, at fifteen years old, some two years after their wedding day, she wept.

In the fading light of the room the family had built for the newlyweds, Rahamim threaded his arms under his wife's and pressed her forehead to his lips. "Please, God, grant us a boy," he said, looking up. "Big, healthy, strong. A real Sabagha."

For a moment, safe in her husband's arms, Miryam thought she could hear a baby's cry. The keening sounded like wind swirling down from the snowy mountains beyond the river. Was it her unborn child trying to reach out to her? When Rahamim let go, her face was wet with tears.

On a late spring morning, Miryam awoke to two equally unpleasant sensations: pain like a fist kneading the insides of her abdomen, and the idiotic rantings of her portly neighbor.

“Oh goodness, it’s *gurgur* day! It’s *gurgur* day!” came Sabria’s singular squeal. Sabria was a woman who saw the making of *gurgur*, a couscous-like cracked wheat, as a community project. But why, Miryam wondered, did Sabria always feel the need to shout her every thought?

“Look at that,” Sabria continued, her voice slicing through the hot, thick air. “Haha! Looks like we’ll be able to parboil enough wheat to feed the entire Jewish quarter.”

“If there’s any left after you serve yourself,” Miryam grumbled to herself, as she steered her throbbing belly out from under the covers. Then she flushed, embarrassed at her intemperance.

From the rooftop, where the family had set up their beds to escape the house’s heat, Miryam now saw the reason for Sabria’s stridency.

Waddling toward them in the street below were two sturdy matrons bearing an empty iron cauldron the size of a calf. The *qaqibe* was suspended by rings from a wooden pole that rested on the women’s shoulders like a yoke on oxen.

“We got it from Abd al-Karim Agha,” one of the matrons huffed, beads of moisture on her forehead.

Miryam recognized the name: Abd al-Karim was a big man in the family of Muslim agas who for more than a century had ruled the rugged patch of Kurdistan anchored by Zakho. The advent of an Iraqi state after World War I had sent a couple of unlucky Baghdadi bureaucrats to a small government outpost, or *qichla*, at Zakho’s periphery, but it did little to upset the supreme power of the region’s Sindi, Gulli, and Slivani tribes.

“‘A gift for my Jews,’ al-Karim Agha told us,” the other cauldron bearer announced. “May God grant our Muslim friend life in Heaven. But he says we must have the *qaqibe* back tomorrow by sundown.”

“Oh, my!”

“Let’s go.”

“Ladies, work is the salt of life.”

The women of the street were whipping themselves into a lather. Their fevered mutterings and puff-chested bustle seemed to mock the pain spreading into Miryam’s legs.

She reached behind with one hand to settle back into bed, but felt someone smack her on the side of the neck.

“Move, girl!” It was her mother-in-law, Hazale. “We’ve got a day to boil a month’s worth of wheat. No time for sleep. Move! Today we boil!”

In the sunburned streets below, Miryam joined the procession of women advancing with brass jugs toward the river. From behind, Miryam thought, they all looked the same: the thick ankles, the duck walk, the sacklike dresses draping stout frames. In her enlarged state, she imagined herself indistinguishable from the other women of the town. Burning bands of pain streaked across her belly and back, as if from the lash of a whip. To make the feeling go away, she imagined herself a link in a chain, towing the links behind it and being towed by those in front. A link does work but has no feeling and no will. Miryam held on to this thought for the next hour, as her dress grew sticky with sweat. One jug hung by curled fingers at her side, the other was slung over her shoulder. When she came back from the river for the sixth time, the women told her she was done. The cauldron was full.

Rachel measured wheat with the other women and emptied it into the water. Someone set fire to the logs. The giant iron vessel soon reached a noisy boil. The women stood in a circle around it, cheered, and exchanged satisfied looks.

“Rachel! Rachel!” Miryam finally said, breaking into a sob. “My belly!”

Their neighbor Rima stepped away from the cauldron and elbowed Rachel aside, asserting her authority as the eldest female present. “Someone run for the midwife,” Rima shouted, turning her attention just as quickly back to the cauldron, which by now was giving off an awful heat. “Sit, Miryam, don’t worry. We will take care of the gurgur.”

At noon a baby girl was born. She was so beautiful, with such long legs and such milky skin that Miryam could not stop looking at her. She strung an amulet of silver bells around the baby’s ankle that rang with each little kick. She was so pretty, and so helpless. But when Rahamim returned from his donkey trip at sundown, he turned his eyes away.

“Please, just look at her,” Miryam said. “She’s ours.”

“She’s a beauty, like you,” Rahamim replied, without really looking. He kissed his wife on the cheek.

The three of them slept on the roof that night, beside the pasty sheets of gurgur drying out after the day’s boiling. The sky was a velvety dome of jewels. Miryam looked into her daughter’s dark eyes, pressed the baby’s lips to her breast, and suddenly remembered one of her own mother’s lullabies.

“Nursing baby, nursing baby, so fresh and young and pretty,” Miryam sang. “To the market of Mosul we’ll take her, to buy her clothes and jewelry. Nose just like a hazelnut, lips as fine as paper. To keep her far away from harm, would I be sacrificed to her Creator.”

She clasped her husband’s arm with her free hand and gave him a look of such vulnerability that he thought she might cry.

“My love,” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“Can we name her after my mother?”

“Arabe? I thought you hated her.”

“Not her, for shame. My real mother.”

“I’ve never heard you speak of her.”

“Rifqa,” she said, her eyes moistening. “Her name was Rifqa.”

RAHAMIM KEPT HIS HEAD low that week, avoiding the market and taking less traveled routes across town. Shame greeted the birth of girls. Not long ago he had watched children bait one of his poorer customers after a daughter’s birth. “*Tuha, tuha, khiryeh bilihyet abuha!*” the boys had chanted. “A daughter, a daughter, dirt in her father’s beard!”

Zakho’s prejudices were far from Miryam’s mind that first week. Every day, she saw proof of her daughter’s all-consuming need for her. Rifqa sucked so fiercely that Miryam wondered how so small a creature could have so great a thirst. But eight days after her birth, the girl looked smaller. Miryam’s nipples had been sore for a couple of days, and when she examined them, she saw dark splotches and cracks in the skin. She squeezed, but the milk couldn’t get through. She wondered how long her baby had been sucking in vain.

“‘Split,’ they call it,” her mother-in-law said, seeing Rifqa struggle at Miryam’s breast. “You’re not the first.”

Neighbors recommended hen’s fat, sesame paste, and curses against the evil eye, but nothing restored Miryam’s milk. Ephraim had looked in the Jewish neighborhood for a wet nurse. But mothers who had hired themselves out in years past had not recently had children and were no longer with milk.

The family then resorted to what they saw as the last recourse: reaching beyond the Jewish quarter for a Muslim wet nurse. Gentiles in the outlying villages had nursed a number of Jewish babies from Zakho, returning them to their parents once they were old enough for solid food. It was hard to know whom to trust sometimes, and travel beyond Zakho was risky, so the idea made many Jews uneasy.

But Miryam saw a stark choice: give up her baby for a few months or watch her die. Ephraim asked a Jewish peddler with contacts in the Muslim villages to put out word. The next day a woman with a deeply lined face and blank eyes appeared at their door, with a toddler in her arms.

“I am Gamra,” the woman said. She seemed to be wearing every stitch in her wardrobe: canvas blouses and dresses were layered atop one another. As the woman’s hems dragged across the floor, like a mop, Miryam and her mother-in-law traded a look of disgust. The heap of clothes was giving off the smell of sour milk.

“You are from Tusani?” Hazale inquired, after sitting in the courtyard and serving her tea.

“We are nomads,” Gamra replied. “But we have been with our buffalos, working the pastures in Tusani for many months.”

“Miryam, give her Rifqa,” Hazale said, switching from her broken Arabic to Aramaic, so the wet nurse wouldn’t understand. “Let’s see if she can take this woman’s milk.”

Miryam, holding back tears, passed her squirming daughter to Gamra. She fixed the older woman with a beseeching look, but Gamra’s expression was blank.

Gamra tugged a breast from beneath the sour-smelling clothes and stuck it in Rifqa’s mouth. The girl sucked greedily. But after a minute

Gamra's own boy, who wore an odd hat with a chin strap and a goat-hair suit studded with white sea shells, squinted at the intruding child. Soon he was pounding with little fists, trying to dislodge Rifqa from his mother's breast. Gamra elbowed her son aside.

When Hazale went inside to fetch more tea, Miryam followed.

"Auntie," Miryam said. "I'm scared."

"I know," Hazale laughed. "They sent us a real stinker. The woman smells like she hasn't bathed since Creation."

"She says she's a new mother, but her face . . . She looks like a *taplapa*," a walking corpse, Miryam said. "We shouldn't even let her spend the night here."

The next morning Ephraim handed Gamra two months' pay, a small barrel of dates, and a sack of the hand-sewn clothes and gifts the townspeople had given Rahamim and Miryam to welcome their firstborn.

The family — it seemed like a dozen uncles and aunts had joined the procession — all marched with Gamra to the Habur River. Ephraim told her to bring Rifqa back in two months or the family would come looking for her.

An *abra* made of inflated sheepskin lashed to a set of logs docked at the river's edge. Gamra stepped aboard the raft, with Rifqa asleep in a shoulder sling.

As her baby disappeared with the stranger down the long river, Miryam heard herself laugh. For so many sleepless nights, she had been up, feeling the ache in her breasts, listening helplessly to her daughter cry in hunger. *Now I can rest*, she thought. *Now I have help. Now my breasts will heal and soon I can have my baby back.*

Like her namesake in the Book of Exodus, Miryam had sent her baby down the river and into Gentile hands so that it might live. She giggled at the thought of Rifqa as a girl Moses. She was already picturing the day of her triumphant return.

A MONTH PASSED with no news from Gamra. Then another. Zakho's peddlers returned from their summer trading trips, and the leaves of the poplars were turning crimson.

In the courtyard, on the last day of the cheerful harvest festival of Sukkot, Ephraim rose from his carpet and stamped his feet. He was shaking.

"All this celebration, all this food, it is not right," the old man thundered to his sons. "We made a deal with that stinking Bedouin, and her time is up."

The urgency in Ephraim's voice worried his eldest son. Rahamim had planned to meet a black-market textiles dealer in Turkey later that week, a man who could help him enter the lucrative trade in carpets and rugs. To stand up this man, who was making the trip to the mountains just for this meeting, could kill the deal and sully Rahamim's reputation among his Turkish business contacts. He would be happy to set aside a few days to retrieve Rifqa afterward. But he could not ignore business. His father and brothers didn't seem to realize that he worked hard not for himself, but for them, for the family's good name. But he sensed that now was not the ripest time for that argument.

"But, Babba," Rahamim said. "Miryam is only now starting to heal. Wouldn't it be better to wait a little longer, until Miryam's all better, before bringing back that sick girl?"

"That nomad has broken her contract with us," Ephraim said. "You say you want to be a great businessman with a big store and a house with three rooms. Maybe one day you will be. But if you don't hold people to their word, you'll be riding that ass of yours the rest of your life."

"Babba, I . . ."

"Enough! You will go tomorrow."

The next morning, the peaks of the mountains on the Turkish border were frosted with a light snow. Rahamim pulled on a new wool shalla u-shappiksa, folded a wad of dinars into his vest pocket, and walked to the house of his cousin Murdakh. Murdakh's combed-back blond hair, neatly trimmed mustache, and twinkling blue eyes drew the approval of many of Zakho's women, who said he looked like a British soldier. But Rahamim was there for other reasons: the man was built like an oak, owned a bandoleer, and had one of the town's most powerful mules. All would come in handy, Rahamim thought, on the twenty-mile journey to Tusani, which lay in the dangerous tribal lands near the intersection of the Iraqi, Turkish, and Syrian borders.

The men traveled for four hours along iced-over streambeds and ravines before stumbling onto a cluster of tumbledown mud shacks at the edge of a river.

“Do you know where we can find Gamra, the nomad, the wife of Hsen?” Murdakh asked at one doorway.

An old man pointed across to the rolling pastures beyond the settlement. “You’ll find the Bedouin up there,” he said. “But few are left. It’s winter in the mountains here. They’ve taken their stinking buffalo south, thank God.”

As they trekked up a steep hill to the pastures, the men made out a single black tent through the veil of snow. Murdakh reached over his shoulder and touched his rifle. Yes, it was there.

They parted the heavy tent flaps, and when their eyes adjusted to the darkness, they noticed a woman in the corner with gray streaks in her hair. She started at the sound of their footsteps, and looked up with unseeing eyes the color of milky tea. “Who’s there?” she asked, her head swiveling from side to side. She patted the ground until her hand settled on a pair of rusted wool shears. “Who’s there?”

“We are from Zakho,” Rahamim said, his voice coming out thinner than he had hoped. He turned a pleading glance toward Murdakh, one that begged him to take over speaking duties, but Murdakh only nodded for Rahamim to continue. “We are looking for Gamra, the wife of Hsen.”

The woman made a *tih-tih-tih* sound as though spitting out watermelon seeds. “Gamra is gone. Acchh, she was barely here.”

“Where did she go?” Rahamim said.

“I don’t know her business. She had a sick girl with her, a baby Jewess. Her tent was just across from ours. But she left this pasture before the last moon.”

“That girl was my daughter,” Rahamim said. “Please, if you can help us . . .”

There was a long silence. “The baby dried up as soon as Gamra brought her here,” the old woman said. “Or maybe a month after. I don’t remember. But the baby girl dried up and died. That’s what people said. Then Gamra ran away. In shame, they said. In shame, she ran away.”

Rahamim thought of his wife and felt something grind in the pit of his

stomach. "We have to go back," he said to Murdakh, shivering suddenly. "It's cold and getting dark."

"Yes, yes, go. Go back to Zakho," the old woman said. "My sons will be back soon, and they are not nice like me."

Something exploded inside Murdakh. He lunged toward the woman and grabbed her hair. "Don't tell us lies, woman," he said, twisting the oily strands, which gave off a sour smell. "Where is Gamra? You tell me where she is or I'll shear you like a sheep."

The woman clenched up. "I don't know," she said. "She said she was going south, to another pasture, where her husband was. I don't know any more."

"We're going to find her," Murdakh said. He clasped his cousin by the arm and headed for the opening in the tent. But they were stopped by the woman's voice.

"I will warn you not to look any further," she said. "The way I hear people talk, it's not safe here for Jews. Nowadays, they tell me, you have not so many friends as before."

Was she just angry at Murdakh? Or had this simple shepherdess here in no-man's-land actually heard of the Arab riots in Palestine, the protests against the influx of European Jews? Rahamim, though he considered himself a worldly man, wouldn't have heard if not for his recent trip to Mosul, where it was the talk of the Jewish teahouses.

"Murdakh, the world is not well," Rahamim said. "What would they say in Zakho if two big men like us, men with families, got killed looking for this little thumb girl? Which would be the bigger shame? Didn't you hear the woman? The girl died. Now let's go."

"But how could we look at your father without turning over every stone? If it were my daughter . . ."

"But it isn't," Rahamim interrupted.

They were standing in the pasture, and the winds were picking up, driving whorls of snow across the sloping fields. Rahamim reached into the mule's saddlebags and pulled out a sack of stuffed grape leaves Miryam had packed for their trip. They were nearly frozen now.

Rahamim extended a handful to his cousin, but Murdakh turned away.

BACK HOME IN ZAKHO the women had stayed up late by the fire, eating apples and drinking raisin juice, giddy at the prospect of the baby's homecoming. Was she much bigger? they wondered. Whom did she look like?

Hazale made jokes about scrubbing Rifqa with a *xarota*, a loofa sponge, soaked in tallow to rid her of Gamra's stench. Rachel was picking stray bits of yarn out of a wool suit she had woven to keep Rifqa warm through the winter.

Miryam tittered at her in-laws' jokes. She couldn't sit still. Every few minutes, she peeked outside at the dark, snowy road, impatient for the first sight of her husband and their baby girl atop that handsome Murdakh's mule.

God or sesame paste or time — she did not know which — had rid her breasts of the swelling. And the three months of good sleep had strengthened her body. Her childhood with Arabe had taught her that a daughter must make sacrifices for her mother's comfort. But giving away Rifqa for Miryam's comfort had come to feel wrong. She realized that Arabe had it exactly backward: A mother had to sacrifice for her child. This was what sixteen-year-old Miryam vowed to do, from the minute her husband laid Rifqa in her arms to the day Rifqa left home to marry some kind man. Maybe even a man the girl would choose for herself, Miryam thought, smiling and cradling the *kallota*, the doll she had made a month earlier by braiding scraps of cloth into the crude likeness of a baby girl. It was to be her gift to Rifqa, something the girl could hold when her mother was busy, so she would never feel alone.

At around midnight Miryam heard a thump and the faint clapping of hooves. She dropped the doll and dashed into the courtyard. The clouds over Zakho were cleaving apart in a few places, and rays of moonlight danced a silent fugue across the snow-blanching rooftops. Then, there he was. Her husband's chest looked shrunken, collapsed on itself like a kicked dog. There was nothing in his hands, she saw now, except for the empty sack she'd used to pack his lunch.

"Where?" Miryam said, her chest heaving. "Where is she? Please. Where?"

“Go inside,” Rahamim barked, his breath turning to steam. “You’ll freeze to death.”

The other women crowded into the doorway. “He’s right, Miryam,” Hazale said, timidly. “Come in now.”

“No,” Miryam shrieked, glowering at her husband. “I will stand here until Rahamim tells me everything. Everything.”

Rahamim reached out sheepishly to touch his wife’s cheek. But she swatted his hand away, then crumpled into the knee-deep snow, shaking.

8 ◊ A Woman’s Purpose

For the next few days Miryam and her husband scarcely spoke. At night she lay on her mat, unable to sleep, with the kallota held tight to her chest. She silently asked its forgiveness and pleaded with God for some sign that Rifqa was still alive, that Gamra was on her way to Zakho at that very moment, that there had been a mistake. As her husband snored on a mat across the room, the image of the wet nurse’s face swam before her in the darkness. Miryam searched it for meaning. Would this woman hurt her baby? She already had a boy, so what would she want with a “little thumb girl”? Or was it just some unspeakable accident? But what kind? Perhaps the woman rolled over on the little girl in her sleep and smothered her, the layers of foul rags so thick that she could not hear the baby’s screams. The scene grew vivid in Miryam’s imagination — the baby invisible beneath the nomad’s heap of clothes, her kicks soft, useless under Gamra’s weight, the nomad’s look of surprise the next morning at the sight of the blue-lipped, lifeless form wedged between two cushions.

In these dark days she thought of how her brother Shmuel had protected her as a girl, and one day went to see him at her old house. When she told him about Rifqa, he pulled her into his arms.

“This place is cursed,” he said. “We don’t belong here.”

“Why?” she said, startled, clutching his arm. “What do you mean?”

He said that a *shaliach*, an emissary from Palestine, had come with

(continued from front flap)

synagogue; his quietly heroic grandmother, who never recovers from the kidnapping of her first-born child; his grandfather, defeated by the prejudice and poverty Kurds faced in the Promised Land of Israel; and young Yona, Ariel's father, a footloose boy who swims in the Habur river, leaps across rooftops, and becomes the last bar mitzvah in Zakho before being ousted from paradise.

Populated by Kurdish chieftains, trailblazing linguists, Arab nomads, and devout believers, this intimate yet powerful book is an improbable story of tolerance and hope set in what today is the very center of the world's attention. In retelling his father's story, Ariel Sabar has found his own.

ANDY NELSON



ARIEL SABAR is an award-winning former staff writer for the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Providence (RI) Journal*. His work has also appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Washington Monthly*, *Mother Jones* magazine, and other publications. He lives with his wife and two children in Washington, D.C. Please visit his Web site: www.arielsabar.com.

Jacket design: Evan Gaffney

Jacket art: photograph—Man on the Road to Zakho, Iraq, 1934 (donated from the collection of the late Abraham Jacob Braver to the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center); border—Kelim carpet, Mersida, Iraqi Kurdistan (lent by Itzhak Itzhak and his wife, the weaver, Ruhama, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem)

ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL

a division of Workman Publishing

225 Varick Street, New York, NY 10014

www.algonquin.com

A mysterious corner of Iraq. An ancient language.
A tribe of mystics and magic men, peasants and storytellers.
A vanished history. And a son's epic journey back
to his father's lost homeland.

Advance Praise for *MY FATHER'S PARADISE*

"Something rare and precious—a tale of hope and continuity that can be passed on for generations." —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"Taut and extravagant. A sweeping saga with the cadence of a Biblical tale." —DANIEL ASA ROSE, author of *Hiding Places: A Father and His Sons Retrace Their Family's Escape from the Holocaust*

"Touching and brilliantly written . . . It is an incredible story of a man divided among three cultures. The striking discontinuities in Yona Sabar's journey reveal the transformations of an immigrant's life as much as its trials and heartbreak." —SAMMY SMOOHA, Ph.D., winner of the 2008 Israel Prize for sociology and author of *Arabs and Jews in Israel*

"An enchanting combination of history, family, and discovery—Ariel Sabar's chronicle of his journey is flat-out wonderful." —RABBI DAVID WOLPE, author of *Why Faith Matters*

"With the novelistic skill of a Levantine storyteller . . . Sabar explores the conflicting demands of love and tradition, the burdens and blessings of an ancient culture encountering the 21st century. A well-researched text falling somewhere between journalism and memoir, sustained by Mesopotamian imagination." —*Kirkus Reviews*

ISBN-13: 978-1-56512-490-5
Bookland EAN



9 781565 124905

5 2 5 9 5 >