

DREAMERS OF THE GHETTO

By I. ZANGWILL, *Author of "Children of the Ghetto"*
"The Master" "The King of Schnorrers"

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PREFACE

[ToC](#)

This is a Chronicle of Dreamers, who have arisen in the Ghetto

from its establishment in the sixteenth century to its slow breaking-up in our own day. Some have become historic in Jewry, others have penetrated to the ken of the greater world and afforded models to illustrious artists in letters, and but for the exigencies of my theme and the faint hope of throwing some new light upon them, I should not have ventured to treat them afresh; the rest are personally known to me or are, like "Joseph the Dreamer," the artistic typification of many souls through which the great Ghetto dream has passed. Artistic truth is for me literally the highest truth: art may seize the essence of persons and movements no less truly, and certainly far more vitally, than a scientific generalization unifies a chaos of phenomena. Time and Space are only the conditions through which spiritual facts straggle. Hence I have here and there permitted myself liberties with these categories. Have I, for instance, misplaced the moment of Spinoza's obscure love-episode—I have only followed his own principle, to see things *sub specie æternitatis*, and even were his latest Dutch editor correct in denying the episode altogether, I should still hold it true as summarizing the emotions with which even the philosopher must reckon. Of Heine I have attempted a sort of composite conversation-photograph, blending, too, the real heroine of the little episode with "La Mouche." His own words will be recognized by all students of him—I can only hope the joins with mine are not too obvious. My other sources, too, lie sometimes as plainly on the surface, but I have often delved at less accessible quarries. For instance, I owe the celestial vision of "The Master of the Name" to a Hebrew original kindly shown me by my friend Dr. S. Schechter, Reader in Talmudic at Cambridge, to whose luminous essay on the Chassidim, in his *Studies in Judaism*, I have a further indebtedness. My account of "Maimon the Fool" is based on his own (not always reliable) autobiography, of which I have extracted the dramatic essence, though in the supplementary part of the story I have had to antedate slightly the publication of Mendelssohn's "Jerusalem" and the fame of Kant. In fine, I have never hesitated to take as an historian or to focus and interpret as

an imaginative artist.

I have placed "A Child of the Ghetto" first, not only because the Venetian Jewry first bore the name of Ghetto, but because this chapter may be regarded as a prelude to all the others. Though the Dream pass through Smyrna or Amsterdam, through Rome or Cairo, through Jerusalem or the Carpathians, through London or Berlin or New York, almost all the Dreamers had some such childhood, and it may serve to explain them. It is the early environment from which they all more or less emerged.

And there is a sense in which the stories all lead on to that which I have placed last. The "Child of the Ghetto" may be considered "father to the man" of "Chad Gadya" in that same city of the sea.

For this book is the story of a Dream that has not come true.

I.Z.

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DREAMERS OF THE GHETTO

MOSES AND JESUS

[ToC](#)

In dream I saw two Jews that met by chance,

*One old, stern-eyed, deep-browed, yet garlanded
With living light of love around his head,
The other young, with sweet seraphic glance.
Around went on the Town's satanic dance,
Hunger a-piping while at heart he bled.
Shalom Aleichem mournfully each said,
Nor eyed the other straight but looked askance.
Sudden from Church out rolled an organ hymn,
From Synagogue a loudly chaunted air,
Each with its Prophet's high acclaim instinct.
Then for the first time met their eyes, swift-linked
In one strange, silent, piteous gaze, and dim
With bitter tears of agonized despair.*

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A CHILD OF THE GHETTO

I

The first thing the child remembered was looking down from a window and seeing, ever so far below, green water flowing, and on it gondolas plying, and fishing-boats with colored sails, the men in them looking as small as children. For he was born in the Ghetto of Venice, on the seventh story of an ancient house. There were two more stories, up which he never went, and which remained strange regions, leading towards the blue sky. A dusky staircase, with gaunt whitewashed walls, led down and down—past doors whose lintels all bore little tin cases containing holy Hebrew words—into

the narrow court of the oldest Ghetto in the world. A few yards to the right was a portico leading to the bank of a canal, but a grim iron gate barred the way. The water of another canal came right up to the back of the Ghetto, and cut off all egress that way; and the other porticoes leading to the outer world were likewise provided with gates, guarded by Venetian watchmen. These gates were closed at midnight and opened in the morning, unless it was the Sabbath or a Christian holiday, when they remained shut all day, so that no Jew could go in or out of the court, the street, the big and little square, and the one or two tiny alleys that made up the Ghetto. There were no roads in the Ghetto, any more than in the rest of Venice;

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nothing but pavements ever echoing the tramp of feet. At night the watchmen rowed round and round its canals in large barcas, which the Jews had to pay for. But the child did not feel a prisoner. As he had no wish to go outside the gates, he did not feel the chain that would have drawn him back again, like a dog to a kennel; and although all the men and women he knew wore yellow hats and large O's on their breasts when they went into the world beyond, yet for a long time the child scarcely realized that there were people in the world who were not Jews, still less that these hats and these rounds of yellow cloth were badges of shame to mark off the Jews from the other people. He did not even know that all little boys did not wear under their waistcoats "Four-corners," colored shoulder-straps with squares of stuff at each end, and white fringes at each corner, and that they did not say, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One," as they kissed the fringes. No, the Ghetto was all his world, and a mighty universe it was, full of everything that the heart of a child could desire. What an eager swarm of life in the great sunny square where the Venetian mast towered skywards, and pigeons sometimes strutted among the crowd that hovered about the countless shops under the encircling colonnade—pawnshops, old-clo' shops, butcher-shops, wherein

black-bearded men with yellow turbans bargained in Hebrew! What a fascination in the tall, many-windowed houses, with their peeling plastered fronts and patches of bald red brick, their green and brown shutters, their rusty balconies, their splashes of many-colored washing! In the morning and evening, when the padlocked well was opened, what delight to watch the women drawing water, or even to help tug at the chain that turned the axle. And on the bridge that led from the Old Ghetto to the New, where the canal, though the view was brief, disappeared round two corners, how absorbing to

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stand and speculate on what might be coming round either corner, and which would yield a vision first! Perhaps there would come along a sandolo rowed by a man standing at the back, his two oars crossed gracefully; perhaps a floating raft with barefooted boys bestriding it; perhaps a barca punted by men in blue blouses, one at front and two at the back, with a load of golden hay, or with provisions for the Ghetto—glowing fruit and picturesque vegetables, or bleating sheep and bellowing bulls, coming to be killed by the Jewish method. The canal that bounded the Ghetto at the back offered a much more extended view, but one hardly dared to stand there, because the other shore was foreign, and the strange folk called Venetians lived there, and some of these heathen roughs might throw stones across if they saw you. Still, at night one could creep there and look along the moonlit water and up at the stars. Of the world that lay on the other side of the water, he only knew that it was large and hostile and cruel, though from his high window he loved to look out towards its great unknown spaces, mysterious with the domes and spires of mighty buildings, or towards those strange mountains that rose seawards, white and misty, like the hills of dream, and which he thought must be like Mount Sinai, where God spake to Moses. He never thought that fairies might live in them, or gnomes or pixies, for he had never heard of such creatures. There were good spirits and bad spirits in

the world, but they floated invisibly in the air, trying to make little boys good or sinful. They were always fighting with one another for little boys' souls. But on the Sabbath your bad angel had no power, and your guardian Sabbath angel hovered triumphantly around, assisting your every-day good angel, as you might tell by noticing how you cast two shadows instead of one when the two Sabbath candles were lighted. How beautiful were those

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Friday evenings, how snowy the table-cloth, how sweet everything tasted, and how restful the atmosphere! Such delicious peace for father and mother after the labors of the week!

It was the Sabbath Fire-woman who forced clearly upon the child's understanding—what was long but a dim idea in the background of his mind—that the world was not all Jews. For while the people who lived inside the gates had been chosen and consecrated to the service of the God of Israel, who had brought them out of Egyptian bondage and made them slaves to Himself, outside the gates were people who were not expected to obey the law of Moses; so that while he might not touch the fire—nor even the candlesticks which had held fire—from Friday evening to Saturday night, the Fire-woman could poke and poke at the logs to her heart's content. She poked her way up from the ground-floor through all the seven stories, and went on higher, a sort of fire-spirit poking her way skywards. She had other strange privileges, this little old woman with the shawl over her head, as the child discovered gradually. For she could eat pig-flesh or shell-fish or fowls or cattle killed anyhow; she could even eat butter directly after meat, instead of having to wait six hours—nay, she could have butter and meat on the same plate, whereas the child's mother had quite a different set of pots and dishes for meat things or butter things. Yes, the Fire-woman was indeed an inferior creature, existing mainly to boil the Ghetto's tea-kettles and snuff its candles, and was well rewarded by the copper coin which she gathered from every hearth as soon as one might touch money. For

when three stars appeared in the sky the Fire-woman sank back into her primitive insignificance, and the child's father made the *Habdalah*, or ceremony of division between week-day and Sabbath, thanking God who divideth holiday from working-day, and light

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from darkness. Over a brimming wine-cup he made the blessing, holding his bent fingers to a wax taper to make a symbolical appearance of shine and shadow, and passing round a box of sweet-smelling spices. And, when the chanting was over, the child was given to sip of the wine. Many delicious mouthfuls of wine were associated in his mind with religion. He had them in the synagogue itself on Friday nights and on Festival nights, and at home as well, particularly at Passover, on the first two evenings of which his little wine-glass was replenished no less than four times with mild, sweet liquid. A large glass also stood ready for Elijah the Prophet, which the invisible visitor drank, though the wine never got any lower. It was a delightful period altogether, this feast of Passover, from the day before it, when the last crumbs of bread and leavened matter were solemnly burnt (for no one might eat bread for eight days) till the very last moment of the eighth day, when the long-forbidden bread tasted as sweet and strange as cake. The mere change of kitchen vessels had a charm: new saucepans, new plates, new dishes, new spoons, new everything, in harmony with the Passover cakes that took the place of bread—large thick biscuits, baked without yeast, full of holes, or speckled and spotted. And when the evening table was laid for the *Seder* service, looking oh! so quaint and picturesque, with wine-cups and strange dishes, the roasted shank-bone of a lamb, bitter herbs, sweet spices, and what not, and with everybody lolling around it on white pillows, the child's soul was full of a tender poetry, and it was a joy to him to ask in Hebrew:—"Wherein doth this night differ from all other nights? For on all other nights we may eat leavened and unleavened, but to-night only unleavened?" He asked the question

out of a large thin book, gay with pictures of the Ten Plagues of Egypt and the wicked Pharaoh sitting with a hard heart

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on a hard throne. His father's reply, which was also in Hebrew, lasted some two or three hours, being mixed up with eating and drinking the nice things and the strange dishes; which was the only part of the reply the child really understood, for the Hebrew itself was very difficult. But he knew generally what the Feast was about, and his question was only a matter of form, for he grew up asking it year after year, with a feigned surprise. Nor, though he learned to understand Hebrew well, and could even translate his daily prayers into bad Italian, a corruption of the Venetian dialect finding its way into the Ghetto through the mouths of the people who did business with the outside world, did he ever really think of the sense of his prayers as he gabbled them off, morning, noon, and night. There was so much to say—whole books full. It was a great temptation to skip the driest pages, but he never yielded to it, conscientiously scampering even through the passages in the tiniest type that had a diffident air of expecting attention from only able-bodied adults. Part of the joy of Sabbaths and Festivals was the change of prayer-diet. Even the Grace—that long prayer chanted after bodily diet—had refreshing little variations. For, just as the child put on his best clothes for Festivals, so did his prayers seem to clothe themselves in more beautiful words, and to be said out of more beautiful books, and with more beautiful tunes to them. Melody played a large part in the synagogue services, so that, although he did not think of the meaning of the prayers, they lived in his mind as music, and, sorrowful or joyous, they often sang themselves in his brain in after years. There were three consecutive "Amens" in the afternoon service of the three Festivals—Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles—that had a quaint charm for him. The first two were sounded staccato, the last rounded off the theme, and died away, slow and lingering. Nor, though

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there were double prayers to say on these occasions, did they weigh upon him as a burden, for the extra bits were insinuated between the familiar bits, like hills or flowers suddenly sprung up in unexpected places to relieve the monotony of a much-travelled road. And then these extra prayers were printed so prettily, they rhymed so profusely. Many were clever acrostics, going right through the alphabet from Aleph, which is A, to Tau, which is T, for Z comes near the beginning of the Hebrew alphabet. These acrostics, written in the Middle Ages by pious rabbis, permeated the Festival prayer-books, and even when the child had to confess his sins—or rather those of the whole community, for each member of the brotherhood of Israel was responsible for the rest—he sinned his sin with an "A," he sinned his sin with a "B," and so on till he could sin no longer. And, when the prayers rhymed, how exhilarating it was to lay stress on each rhyme and double rhyme, shouting them fervidly. And sometimes, instead of rhyming, they ended with the same phrase, like the refrain of a ballad, or the chorus of a song, and then what a joyful relief, after a long breathless helter-skelter through a strange stanza, to come out on the old familiar ground, and to shout exultantly, "For His mercy endureth for ever," or "The appearance of the priest!" Sometimes the run was briefer—through one line only—and ended on a single word like "water" or "fire." And what pious fun it was to come down sharp upon *fire* or *water*! They stood out friendly and simple, the rest was such curious and involved Hebrew that sometimes, in an audacious moment, the child wondered whether even his father understood it all, despite that he wept freely and bitterly over certain acrostics, especially on the Judgment Days. It was awe-inspiring to think that the angels, who were listening up in heaven, understood every word of it. And he inclined to think that the Cantor,

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or minister who led the praying, also understood; he sang with such feeling and such fervid roulades. Many solos did the Cantor

troll forth, to which the congregation listened in silent rapture. The only time the public prayers bored the child was on the Sabbath, when the minister read the Portion of the Week; the Five Books of Moses being read through once a year, week by week, in a strange sing-song with only occasional flights of melody. The chant was determined by curious signs printed under the words, and the signs that made nice music were rather rare, and the nicest sign of all, which spun out the word with endless turns and trills, like the carol of a bird, occurred only a few times in the whole Pentateuch. The child, as he listened to the interminable incantation, thought he would have sprinkled the Code with bird-songs, and made the Scroll of the Law warble. But he knew this could not be. For the Scroll was stern and severe and dignified, like the high members of the congregation who bore it aloft, or furled it, and adjusted its wrapper and its tinkling silver bells. Even the soberest musical signs were not marked on it, nay, it was bare of punctuation, and even of vowels. Only the Hebrew consonants were to be seen on the sacred parchment, and they were written, not printed, for the printing-press is not like the reverent hand of the scribe. The child thought it was a marvellous feat to read it, much less know precisely how to chant it. Seven men—first a man of the tribe of Aaron the High Priest, then a Levite, and then five ordinary Israelites—were called up to the platform to stand by while the Scroll was being intoned, and their arrivals and departures broke the monotony of the recitative. After the Law came the Prophets, which revived the child's interest, for they had another and a quainter melody, in the minor mode, full of half tones and delicious

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sadness that ended in a peal of exultation. For the Prophets, though they thundered against the iniquities of Israel, and preached "Woe, woe," also foretold comfort when the period of captivity and contempt should be over, and the Messiah would come and gather His people from the four corners of the earth, and the

Temple should be rebuilt in Jerusalem, and all the nations would worship the God who had given His law to the Jews on Mount Sinai. In the meantime, only Israel was bound to obey it in every letter, because only the Jews—born or unborn—had agreed to do so amid the thunders and lightnings of Sinai. Even the child's unborn soul had been present and accepted the yoke of the Torah. He often tried to recall the episode, but although he could picture the scene quite well, and see the souls curling over the mountains like white clouds, he could not remember being among them. No doubt he had forgotten it, with his other pre-natal experiences—like the two Angels who had taught him Torah and shown him Paradise of a morning and Hell every evening—when at the moment of his birth the Angel's finger had struck him on the upper lip and sent him into the world crying at the pain, and with that dent under the nostrils which, in every human face, is the seal of oblivion of the celestial spheres. But on the anniversary of the great Day of the Decalogue—on the Feast of Pentecost—the synagogue was dressed with flowers. Flowers were not easy to get in Venice—that city of stones and the sea—yet every synagogue (and there were seven of them in that narrow Ghetto, some old and beautiful, some poor and humble) had its pillars or its balconies twined with roses, narcissi, lilies, and pansies. Prettier still were the customs of "Tabernacles," when the wooden booths were erected in the square or the courtyards of the synagogues in commemoration of the days when the Children of Israel lived

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in tents in the wilderness. The child's father, being particularly pious, had a booth all to himself, thatched with green boughs, and hung with fruit, and furnished with chairs and a table at which the child sat, with the blue sky playing peep-bo through the leaves, and the white table-cloth astir with quivering shadows and glinting sunbeams. And towards the last days of the Festival he began to eat away the roof, consuming the dangling apples and oranges, and the tempting grapes. And throughout this beautiful Festival the

synagogue rustled with palm branches, tied with boughs of willows of the brook and branches of other pleasant trees—as commanded in Leviticus—which the men waved and shook, pointing them east and west and north and south, and then heavenwards, and smelling also of citron kept in boxes lined with white wool. As one could not breakfast before blessing the branches and the citron, a man carried them round to such of the women-folk as household duties kept at home—and indeed, home was a woman's first place, and to light the Sabbath lamp a woman's holiest duty, and even at synagogue she sat in a grated gallery away from the men downstairs. On the seventh day of Tabernacles the child had a little bundle of leafy boughs styled "Hosannas," which he whipped on the synagogue bench, his sins falling away with the leaves that flew to the ground as he cried, "Hosanna, save us now!" All through the night his father prayed in the synagogue, but the child went home to bed, after a gallant struggle with his closing eyelids, hoping not to see his headless shadow on the stones, for that was a sign of death. But the ninth day of Tabernacles was the best, "The Rejoicing of the Law," when the fifty-second portion of the Pentateuch was finished and the first portion begun immediately all over again, to show that the "rejoicing" was not because the congregation was glad to be done

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with it. The man called up to the last portion was termed "The Bridegroom of the Law," and to the first portion "The Bridegroom of the Beginning," and they made a wedding-feast to which everybody was invited. The boys scrambled for sweets on the synagogue floor. The Scrolls of the Law were carried round and round seven times, and the boys were in the procession with flags and wax tapers in candlesticks of hollow carrots, joining lustily in the poem with its alternative refrain of "Save us, we pray Thee," "Prosper us, we pray Thee." So gay was the minister that he could scarcely refrain from dancing, and certainly his voice danced as it sang. There was no other time so gay, except it was Purim—the

feast to celebrate Queen Esther's redemption of her people from the wicked Haman—when everybody sent presents to everybody else, and the men wore comic masks or dressed up as women and performed little plays. The child went about with a great false nose, and when the name of "Haman" came up in the reading of the Book of Esther, which was intoned in a refreshingly new way, he tapped vengefully with a little hammer or turned the handle of a little toy that made a grinding noise. The other feast in celebration of a Jewish redemption—Chanukah, or Dedication—was almost as impressive, for in memory of the miracle of the oil that kept the perpetual light burning in the Temple when Judas Maccabæus reconquered it from the Greek gods, the Ghetto lighted candles, one on the first night and two on the second, and so on till there were eight burning in a row, to say nothing of the candle that kindled the others and was called "The Beadle," and the child sang hymns of praise to the Rock of Salvation as he watched the serried flames. And so, in this inner world of dreams the child lived and grew, his vision turned back towards ancient Palestine and forwards towards some vague Restoration, his days engirdled with prayer and ceremony,

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his very games of ball or nuts sanctified by Sandalphon, the boy-angel, to whom he prayed: "O Sandalphon, Lord of the Forest, protect us from pain."

II

There were two things in the Ghetto that had a strange attraction for the child: one was a large marble slab on the wall near his house, which he gradually made out to be a decree that Jews converted to Christianity should never return to the Ghetto nor consort with its inhabitants, under penalty of the cord, the gallows, the prison, the scourge, or the pillory; the other was a marble figure of a beautiful girl with falling draperies that lay on the extreme

wall of the Ghetto, surveying it with serene eyes.

Relic and emblem of an earlier era, she co-operated with the slab to remind the child of the strange vague world outside, where people of forbidden faith carved forbidden images. But he never went outside; at least never more than a few streets, for what should he do in Venice? As he grew old enough to be useful, his father employed him in his pawn-shop, and for recreation there was always the synagogue and the study of the Bible with its commentaries, and the endless volumes of the Talmud, that chaos of Rabbinical lore and legislation. And when he approached his thirteenth year, he began to prepare to become a "Son of the Commandment." For at thirteen the child was considered a man. His sins, the responsibility of which had hitherto been upon his father's shoulders, would now fall upon his own, and from counting for as little as a woman in the congregation, he would become a full unit in making up the minimum of ten men, without which public worship could not be held. And so, not only did he come

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to own a man's blue-striped praying-shawl to wrap himself in, but he began to "lay phylacteries," winding the first leather strap round his left arm and its fingers, so that the little cubical case containing the holy words sat upon the fleshy part of the upper arm, and binding the second strap round his forehead with the black cube in the centre like the stump of a unicorn's horn, and thinking the while of God's Unity and the Exodus from Egypt, according to the words of Deuteronomy xi. 18, "And these my words ... ye shall bind for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes." Also he began to study his "Portion," for on the first Sabbath of his thirteenth year he would be summoned, as a man, to the recitation of the Sacred Scroll, only instead of listening, he would have to intone a section from the parchment manuscript, bare of vowels and musical signs. The boy was shy, and the thought of appearing brazenly on the platform

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