

**ALEPH**  
**by Psycho Kanev**

translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel

I was walking down the street and the sun was angrily hammering through my eyelids. I wasn't thinking about anything. Well, actually a great little story a friend of mine told me recently popped into my head. It went like this:

On a chichi street, in a posh and trendy bar, two friends met up. Businessmen, yuppies, stock-brokers. Obscenely rich. One of them was wearing the perfect jacket. The cloth, the colour, the length. An absolute gem. One-of-a-kind. His friend gazed at it admiringly and asked:

"Where did you get that jacket? It's amazing!"

"Oh, don't think I just bought it off the rack! I had it made-to-order."

"Who made it for you?"

"What do you mean, 'who?' The best tailor in the city, that's who. Master Moshe, of course."

"Well, I want one, too. Give me the address of that wizard with a needle and thread!"

He took down the address and found himself in front of the tailor's shop the next day. He stepped inside slowly, as if entering a church. A white-haired old man with a hooked nose and thin, delicate hands rose to meet him.

"How can I help you?" The old man asked.

"Are you Master Moshe?"

"Yes, I am."

"A few days ago you made a magnificent jacket for my friend. I want one like it."

"Ah, yes, I remember. Well, of course I'll make you one. It will be ready in three weeks. Come back then, but not a day earlier."

The elderly Jew took his measurements and the businessman left with a smile on his face and a sigh in his wallet. The three weeks passed quickly. Once again he found himself in front of the tailor's shop, trembling as he stepped over the threshold.

"Oh, I'm sorry, my dear sir, but your jacket isn't ready. An important order for a French diplomat simply took far longer than I expected. I beg you, come back in a week."

Crestfallen, the businessman left. He stopped telling his co-workers about the fantastic jacket he had ordered, how its colour would perfectly match his MasterCard Gold or how striking the silver trim on his business cards would be as they peeked out of his jacket pocket.

A week later the tailor gave him the same answer:

"Please forgive me, most kind sir, but I really had no time whatsoever. I had to fill an urgent order from a minister. I beg you, come back in a week. I promise it will be ready."

The businessman left, crushed yet again.

Exactly seven days later the rich man swept into the tailor's shop. Master Moshe looked up in astonishment from behind his glasses, recognised him, and his face lit up.

"It's ready!"

He slipped behind large cloth curtains and opened them a few moments later. The jacket was in his hands, he held it gingerly, approaching slowly, as if carrying the original manuscript of the Torah. The businessman saw that it was even more fantastic than he had imagined and his eyes misted over traitorously. Master Moshe handed it to him.

"Well now, Master Moshe," he said, "it takes you five weeks to make a jacket, while it only took your Lord God six days to make the whole world."

The Jew looked at him, gave a barely audible sigh and replied: "Yes, but look what has become of it."

I kept wandering. I was going somewhere, I just didn't know where. I didn't want to admit I was just roaming around. I noticed the weathered blue paint of the soda-water stall. The elderly Itzhak was surely there, the good man. I always stop to chat whenever I can. There is a lot of wisdom behind his greyed brow. I approached the wire-mesh window and again glanced at the white plastic sign, which read: "If you can live without my soda water, then buy some, so that I, too, may live."

He was inside, of course. Sometimes his 17-year-old daughter Sara would stop by when I was there, but he always quickly sent her home. I didn't take it personally.

"Oh, my dear poet, when did you return from the Great Continent?" He asked me, meaning the United States.

"A few weeks ago," I replied.

"And you only now remembered the old Jew?" I sensed the reproach in his voice.

"Well, you know how it is. This and that, things come up."

He nodded understandingly. He got up without saying a word, disappeared into the back of the stall and came back clutching a bottle of brand-name vodka. He took two glasses out from under the counter and with a fluid gesture filled my glass up to the top, while pouring himself only a finger. He raised his glass and said: "*L'chaim*."

"*L'chaim*," I answered and gulped down the shot.

Itzhak took a tiny sip from his glass. Then he again filled mine to the brim and opened a bottle of soda water.

"Well, come on, what are you waiting for? Tell me how it was," Itzhak urged me.

"Well, fine, I guess, as long as you like working around the clock with no breaks and not having your loved ones nearby. If that's your thing, then it's great."

"Eh, you little whippersnapper. Even if they put you up in King Solomon's palace you'd still find something to gripe about," the old man said, giving me a friendly slap on the thigh.

I smiled and told him about my life in America. About the work, the prices, my travels, my poetry. He listened carefully, but I could tell from his watery eyes that words were stuck in his throat. And I knew exactly which words. The story of the Levy family. I stopped talking and he mumbled: "Come sit down here, let me tell you a story. The story of my family."

I'd already heard it several times, but didn't say anything because it was always pleasant to listen to how his soft voice trembled as he told it.

"The earliest information we have about our family goes back 200 years. The country was Poland, the city – Krakow. My great-great-grandfather Jacob lived there, he settled there during very troubled times. But he survived. Back then people were strong, they clung to life. He took up cloth-trading and his business flourished. He and his wife had many children. They were among the most important and prominent Ashkenazi in Poland, respected by all the major families. Even by the distant Mizrahi and Sephardim.

After that the trail goes cold, until we rediscover them in Russia. The reason they emigrated there, just as the pogroms were beginning, remains a mystery. Yet once again they withstood these trials. Thus many years passed in wandering. In 1941 my father Chaim and his wife were caught trying to cross the border into Hungary; they wanted to reach Bulgaria. But we children made it – first to Ruse, then to Sofia. My parents were sent to Dachau. That was the last we heard of them."

At this point the old man got choked up and sat down on the chair. He took a linen handkerchief out of his inside coat pocket, took off his glasses and wiped away the streaming tears. He always burst out crying when he told me this story. I was silent – what could I say? I didn't want him to go on, so I asked: "Should I tell you the story of Master Moshe?"

The old man looked at me in surprise. "Moshe?"

"The best tailor in the world," I replied.

"That's true, no tailors can beat us."

The old man carefully listened to my story and smiled.

"Yes," he concluded. "Moshe is right. What has become of this world!"

He fell silent for a few minutes before starting in again: "Now here's a fable for you. About a young Jew. You can interpret it however you want: Many years ago, a young Jew named Sabbatai was crossing a huge desert with 30 mules loaded with all his wealth and worldly belongings. But he lost his way. He tried to find the right path, but only kept going deeper and deeper into the desert. After several weeks of wandering, just when all his water supplies were nearly gone, an oasis appeared before him. Sabbatai looked at all that greenery, the spring, the lake with its crystal clear water, and decided to stay there. There was no point in continuing to look for tracks left by other caravans. So he settled at the oasis. And to show that the land was his, he started building... Many years later an army crossing the desert to attack the neighbouring country's army discovered the oasis. Just imagine their astonishment when in this wild place they came upon a small adobe hut on one side of the oasis, and on the other – two large synagogues. The general, followed by his officers, entered one of the synagogues – the one with human footprints in the sand leading up to it. Inside they caught sight of a white-haired man praying. The general waited for him to finish his prayers, which seemed to last for hours, then gently nudged him on the shoulder and asked: 'Hello, my good man, what are you doing here?'

'Praying to God, sir.'

'Yes, I can see that, but why have you built two synagogues?'

'One to pray in and one to never set foot in,' Sabbatai replied."

Itzhak fell silent. I didn't say anything either. His wise eyes again misted over and he wiped them with the linen handkerchief. He put his glasses back on and glanced up at the sky through the dirty window, as if looking for something up there, and asked: "So tell me, what's the sky like above America?"

"Well, just like everywhere else, blue and infinite. But the nights in New York are beautiful because the smog from car exhaust and smokestacks forms a bluish-grey cloud that falls slowly over the city at night, painting the sky with purplish tinges."

"My whole life I've been hearing about the sky over Jerusalem from relatives and friends, but I've never seen it. I hope I'll manage to catch a glimpse of it before God calls me home," he said and fell silent.

"Yesterday something very bad happened," Itzhak said when he finally began speaking again. "Right before closing a young kid about your age came and said: 'Hey old man, gimme five bottles of soda water, 'cause our vodka's getting warm.' I gave them to him and the kid was about to pay when he looked up and saw the star painted above the stall. He hissed at me hatefully: 'Are you a Jew?' 'Yes,' I replied. 'You Jews are to blame for the world's

misery! Over the last century, what have your contributions to mankind been?! Your best minds: Einstein, Marx, Freud – nuclear bombs, communism and infantile sexuality. That's the truth. We'll meet again, old man!' And with that he smashed the bottles on the ground and left."

Dusk was falling outside. I finished off my vodka and got up. I put my hand on his trembling shoulder.

"Don't worry, Itzhak. There are idiots everywhere. Just forget about it as soon as you can. That's what I do."

The old man once again looked up at the sky. I mumbled a soft *Shalom* and went out into the night. In the hours that followed I couldn't get Itzhak and his stories out of my head.

A few days later I woke up with a terrible hangover, so I decided to buy two beers and stop by to see the old man. I went out and headed for his stall. It was cordoned off with yellow tape. Two policemen were inspecting it. A plainclothes officer was speaking with a girl dressed in black – Sara, his daughter. The policeman patted her on the shoulder, she turned to leave. She recognised me in the crowd and came towards me, crying.

"What happened?" I asked her.

She looked at me with huge, dark eyes and said: "Last night just before closing some kids came and started pounding on the windows and kicking the door, yelling racial slurs the whole time. People from the bar next door called the police, but the kids ran off in the darkness – they only glimpsed their silhouettes. They found dad inside, slumped over the bottles. His heart had given out. He had a heart attack."

I hardly heard the last word, because I hugged her tightly and she sobbed uncontrollably on my chest. I didn't know what to say. I looked up at the sky. I had never seen it looking so ugly!