

Egypt: An Israelite Returns

Karen Alkalay-Gut



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for Ezi

who kissed me by the pyramids



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Counting, multiplying, dividing

Not every Hebrew
Set off with the Exodus –
Who knows
who remained
in the fleshpots
of Egypt
who returned
who escaped
to other lands,
who wed into the race.

So familiar the faces,
like ancient cousins woven
into the threads of racial chromosomes
The people as intimate as at home,
as comfortable with strangers
as easy with time as we
used to be – long ago

I walk the streets
speak to statues
doors, walls
finding kin
everywhere

What Remains

The streets of Cairo
are filled with remnants
of other times

The residents
live full lives
in the present



Streets of Cairo

How long do you have to sit
in a traffic jam
before you become friends
with your neighbor?



Egyptianized

Sometimes I see someone on the street
who looks to me like he never left
after Ramses gave in to Moses,
who looks like whatever his share
of the fleshpots, it was better
than the desert and that crazy troupe
that would rather wander
than work for their bread.

Of course it must be my imagination,
my longing so great to place myself here
to fit into this magnificent land
that I refuse to connect even
as a *Mutamassirun*, an Egyptianized
foreigner.

What a joke. I don't even know
enough of Arabic to do more
than buy myself a hamburger
at McDonald's.

And the ancient Coptic tongue
whispers all about us and I respond
with “What? What?”

How will I learn
when we left Egypt,
when we first returned?

How far back
will I have to go?

Hospitality

Even the camel
goes along with me
Even the camel
joins me in the tourist game,
whispers “Relax, smile.
I’ve been through thousands
of these photo shoots,
as have my ancestors.

“So let’s just sally cautiously
around the pyramids
looking as if we belong,
and we’ll get through
this jaunt together.

“But for next time
you really must take care
not to show your teeth,

“And remember
to stop gobbling
so many of those
heavy matzo balls...”





I met a traveler

According to the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, Ozymandias was apparently a poeticized name Ramses II gave to himself. 90 foot tall sculpture, carved by sculptor Memnon, in 1st c. BC.

Poor Percy. He could only rely
on tales from strangers
to relate a greatness
that in the sheltering sands
almost disappears

You have to be here
to really see
it never ends –
History is here.





Ramses II

Here he is in Memphis
scaring people with his power.
You may have heard of this image
once in a poem, where he's known
by his Greek name, Ozymandias.
See – his legs have been rejoined
with his body, and he's frowning again.

This guy is all over the land, standing,
lying down, sitting on his throne
with his slaves as footstools.
Makes you think, doesn't it
how long one can rule
before he is forgotten
and another rises up,
vain and cruel.

From Sakara
to Abu Simbel

His greatness
Cannot be denied





Greatness

One thing for sure –
They get things done
these leaders of the world.
With enough slaves underfoot
you can build
almost anything





Footstool

See how each slave is unique –
But Sudanese, Philistinian, or Jew
they're all tied in one unyielding queue
and you know they've been brought
from all over the world,
together on one footstool
under the heel of the Pharaoh
who will never let
these people go





Joseph

It was just another grandiose Jewish scheme,
predicting when the Nile would not flood
when drought would devour the fat cows,
just a project only grand Egypt could construct,
wild as the Aswan dam, the pyramids, the Suez canal.

Imagine the granaries in their enormity,
controlled by one man, a foreigner,
no longer of use when the river returns,
the clouds gather over the lands.

The silos and barn fade from neglect,
the people of Goshen no longer required.
How can they be of use to the world,
If not to build testaments of eternity?



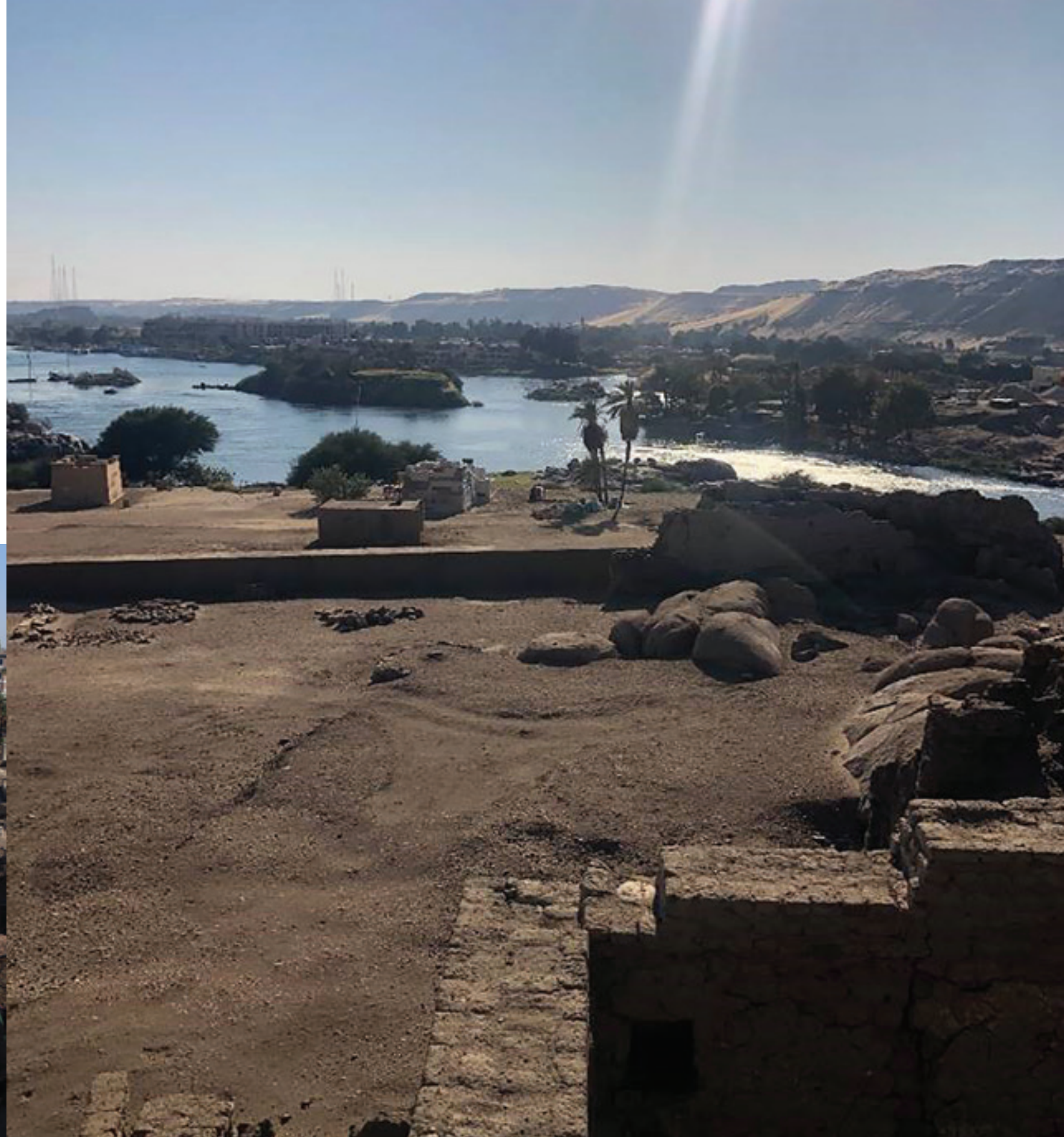


Elephantine Island – Yev

Little left alive here:
Ruins layers deep
prove how vital
this island was
once.

On the threshold of Africa,
the ideal place
for the defense of Egypt
for the center of commerce:
The ivory, the gold,
The slaves...





The sun
Reversing direction
at noon

Green brush and blue sea
bound by desert

Jews
sent there
to protect
the Pharaoh
from Africa

And there they create
a world of their own
around the temple
identical to Jerusalem
as it is written

In that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the heart of
Egypt, and a monument to the LORD at its border.

Isaiah 19:19

What do they say,
the stones the rocks the walls
of Elephantine island?
Here there is a labyrinth
of ruined houses and temples
and somewhere inside, people
who want to be heard



You can feel the god of the Nile
spreading the joy of fertility
You can see the ruins of the Jewish Temple

read the words of a world that says
once we were great and now
silent – waiting for the universe
to return

Mibtahiah, Jedaniah, Ananiah,
their God hiding in their names
waiting for us
to bind and broker
the connections
between worlds.

But although no marble
nor gilded monuments
remain whole
life is preserved in words,
marriages, divorces, rules,
even the Passover
recorded in papyrus

All is equal
In these documents
women and men
gods and idols
side by side.

Monuments destroyed
over and over:
shards unknown in origin
brought from one god,
from one temple to another,
the puzzle forever jumbled.



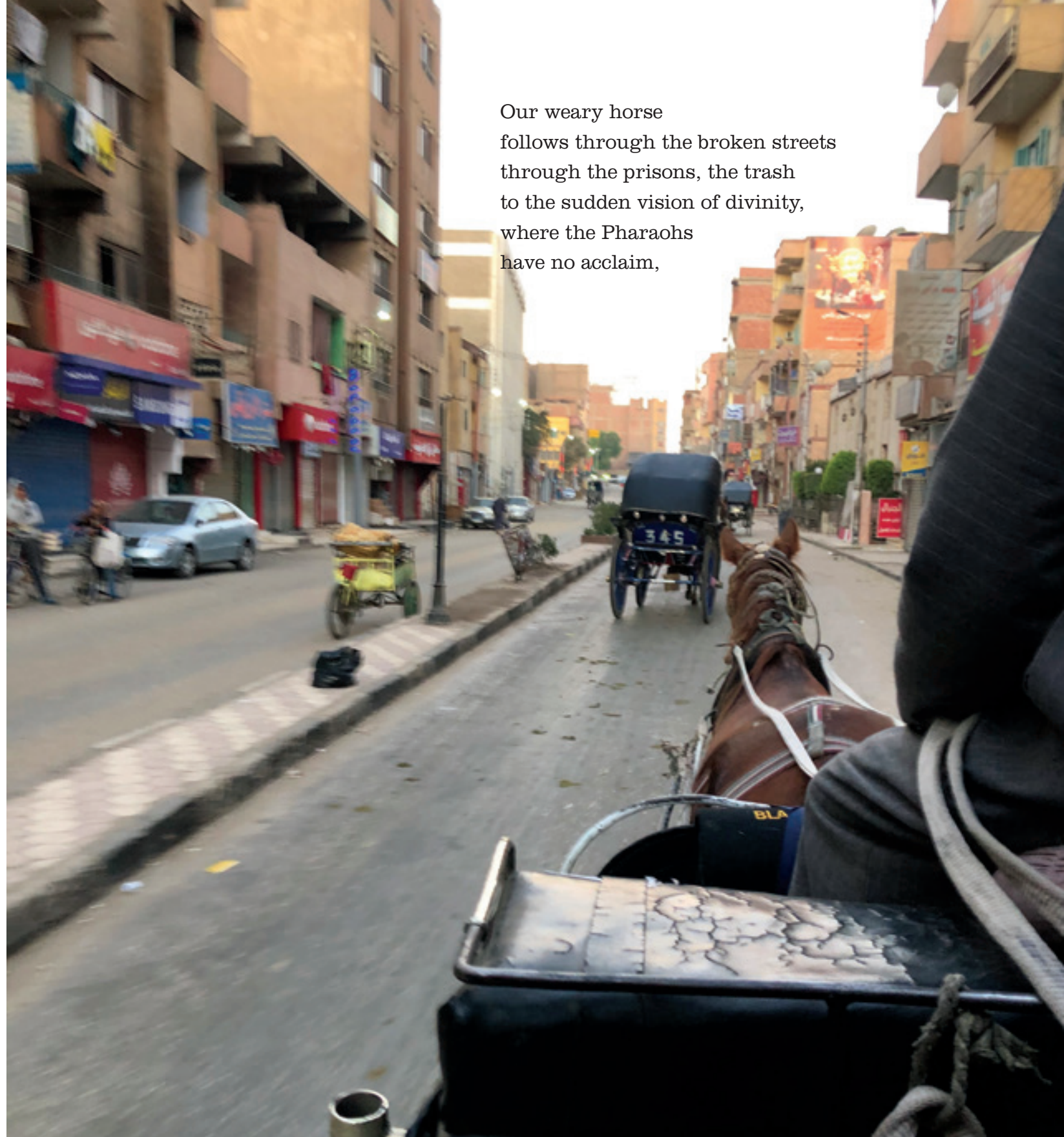
Edfu Temple

At four in the morning I wake with a start.
We are meant to meet on the deck at six
but I am so energized
by the confusion of gods that by five
I can no longer think of anything
but seeing whatever is on the shore
and traveling somewhere in the night.

Another bloody temple, we murmur,
wondering whether it was worth
rising in the darkness
for a civilization long gone,
for faiths that disappeared
when the manifold beauty of the world
was coordinated in a single being.

But when we disembark
we fall into a jumble of carriage drivers
all in tea-dyed galabia – fighting over
whose teams will transport which tourists
to the site. The manager and police
confer and miraculously every pair
is placed in an ancient diligence,
the government scribe recording
each group by number
in a student's copybook.

Our weary horse
follows through the broken streets
through the prisons, the trash
to the sudden vision of divinity,
where the Pharaohs
have no acclaim,



the temple of Horus.









As the sun rises we see it
evolving in its magnificence –
the walls coming to light

with all their images, their messages,
so much to tell
in heaven and hell

as we approach the holy of holies
always at the end of long rows of rooms,
of writings explaining
what it all means
and why we should follow.

How the god Horus
of the sun
defeats Set
the god of darkness.

Standing there,
in this temple
at this time
in this place
it becomes so clear
why the idea
of many gods
feels more right
than one





Philae

What do you have to offer me?
We have all the gods could give us,
and here, on this mutable island
we, servants of Isis,
are far
more holy
than thou



Moses Emerges from Legend

Between the Synagogue and the Coptic Church
where the riverbank was once high and reedy
there is a place where every Egyptian will say
Moses was drawn from the Nile.

Come see, come see the well,
the security guard says, holding my elbow
and tucking his submachine gun under his coat.
I think he is just conning a tourist

And showing me a sewer, but the story
becomes truer with every fact I learn –
from the Sphinx which too was on the brink
of the magical river in days long ago.

Somehow you learn to believe
that history could have taken place,
right here, now, a baby fished from the Nile
to save his nation from shame and slavery.



A Poem by the Rambam

(Note: this translation is spread across two pages in emulation of the original found in the Geniza of the Synagogue of Ben Ezra in Cairo)

On Beginning His Interpretation of the Mishnah

A book composed in the faith of Moses
In the faith emulated by his fathers
A friend who is humble and young
To the Lord to improve his Torah writing
To know to plan ropes not to fall from the cliff
So that the Lord may see the goodness

To elucidate its principles and its religious validations
And his sons who emulated and supported
Moses ben Maimon to whom they shouted
To make his only desire to be engrossed
To have wisdom's fruits dropped to his side
And Moshe may rejoice in his share of the gift

The Synagogue of Ben Ezra

What is no longer there
calls out to me. We sit
humbly in the synagogue,
listen to the past, look at the space
behind which was the *Geniza*,
the storage of hundreds of thousands of papyri,
and view the remodeled present.

“No photos,” I am warned at the entrance.
But I have learned
That what is not documented
In today’s world,
disappears.



זכרה ארים לשובה
ליולבני ולבב אניעה משתח בן
אברהם ומאנוני אשר נרבה רחמי

Moses Maimonides

After days of wandering
the magnificent city of Cairo,
even anonymous passages
replete with wonders,
we turn into an alleyway
and pause with our guard and guide,
for permission to proceed.

The neighborhood policeman
knows his quarter well,
sweeps away local interference
like constables from long ago,
breaking up a friendly fight
between rowdy teenagers,





as we Jews perambulate
toward some unknown mission
through streets littered
with cats, dogs
and other relics
Of centuries

Then we turn a corner and here it is
The synagogue of Maimonides

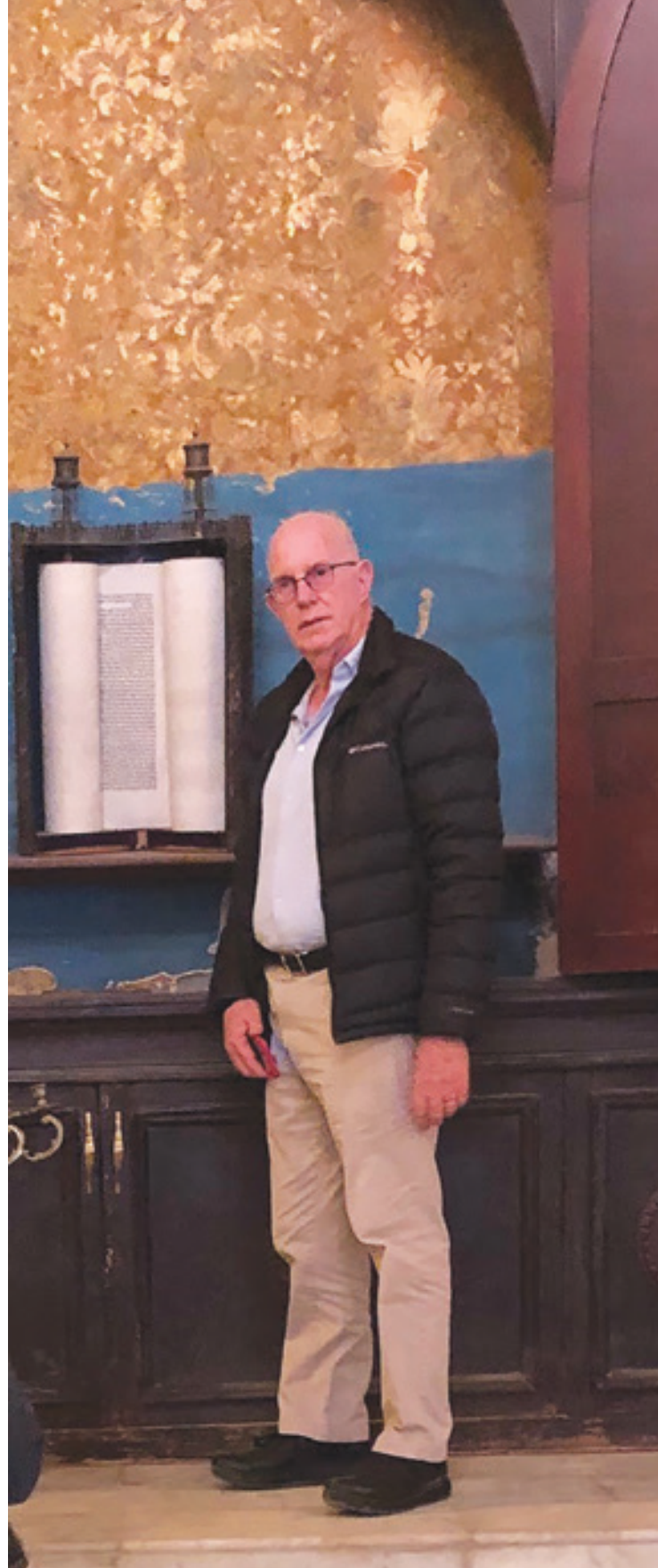
shocking in its sudden presence,
renewed in recent years –
unannounced
unpraised
almost
unnoticeable



The arc restored
with menorah and scroll,
untouchable as a piece
in a museum of
the extinct.



Yet
moving
the heart
even today



the lamps reconceived
to suit an ancient motif
to enlighten a forgotten world
that may never have been



Then we descend to the school,
where he learned, studied, taught
when released by the king
from his ministerial duties,
the dark remains of a place
that continues to enlighten our world.
I shudder, repeat the *shma*,
Shehechyanu,
feel the presence of his 13 precepts
in my bones



But there is no one here now
to bring this world to life.
The congregation is long gone,
Pilgrims no longer sleep in this cellar
To dream of Maimonides and be cured

And we are mere tourists,
who have hours ago been presented
to the only remaining wonder
of the ancient world,
the concrete pyramids.



And this hidden marvel
is just another wonder
of government renewal
that proves the enlightenment
of this country, this time.



On the way out
through the *Khan el-Khalili*
the raucous bazaar



Where the great Naguib Mahfouz
is memorialized
for his literary role
in eternalizing the city



where alluring costumes
hang just above

the women who pass,
veiled and gloved.

I am reminded – this is today.
What I saw just before
has now been enshrined,
like the culture of the pyramids
as a curiosity of history.



Eliyahu HaNavi Synagogue – Alexandria

The ancient edifice
has been restored
and is now complete and beautiful.
Even the names
on the pews
burnished
renewed



Who knows from where the people came?
So many echoes of distant places
that these high spacious walls contain.
The refuge the Nebi Daniel synagogue
must have given to Jews around the world
– Ventura, Roditi, Green, James –
brought them all together. A sanctuary
restored, for a time.



Exodus and return

As soon as we leave
I regret the exodus
and want to return to Egypt,

to sit in a bookstore,
the Alexandria library,
a café in *Khan el-Khalili*

to eat *ful* on the street
and meet a friend
to ride a *felucca* on the Nile

It's like home
but not quite





A Note from the Author

In February, 2020, we travelled to Egypt from Israel with a small group and a guide. It was like walking through a mirror, not to an opposite world, but to one that was similar, mysterious, strange, awe-inspiring, and comfortable at the same time. We took little notice of the heavy security typical of tourism, but spent every waking moment reacting to our astounding environment.

When we returned home, the COVID-19 virus hit both our countries, and instead of sharing our experiences with family and friends, we concentrated on survival and protection. The sense of openness we had been feeling – in the desert, on the Nile, in the markets – all disappeared, and it was months before we could even begin to bring together the rich fragments of our voyage.

From all the varied experiences, Ezi's many photographs and the many poems I had written, I have culled one subject – the sense of a Jewish identity and connection with the much-discussed history of Egypt. I felt it all over – the strange concept of monotheism in the face of the confusing multitudes of deities, the relationships between peoples, slavery, mastery, influence and usurpation, invisibility and presence, alienation and connection. Everything I had known in the past, seem to have been brought to the fore – every question and every answer. In this collection I bring up a few of the questions, a few of the answers.

This collection seems to me parallel to the seder of Passover, something to think about and hopefully enjoy when we retell these stories.

Karen Alkalay-Gut

Karen Alkalay-Gut's most recent works include *Yerusha (Yiddish/Hebrew)* (Leyvik House Press, 2018), *A Word in Edgewise: Ladies from the Bible Tell Their Tales* (Simple Conundrum 2021), and *Survivre à son Histoire/Surviving Her Story*, translation: *Sabine Huynh* (Courlevour 2021).

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Although there are many better known wonders in Egypt's amazing landscape, and many greater moments in the history of the relationships between the countries, this book concentrates on a single visit from Israel to Egypt in February-March, 2020, and a single theme among the many poems and photographs that emerged.

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