

S. Y. AGNON

From Foe to Friend:

A very short story

Translated from Hebrew

by Reuven Morgan

Before the Jerusalem neighborhood of Talpiot

was ever built, the King of the Winds ruled over all the land: all his princes and all his slaves were stormy winds who dwelt on the mountains and in the valleys, on the hills and in the dales, each doing as he wished as if the whole land was his own possession.

One day I went there by chance; and perceiving this to be a pleasant place with pure, fresh air, clear blue skies and wide open spaces, I enjoyed walking around.

Then the Wind touched me and said:

"What are you doing here?"

"Walking around," I replied.

"Walking around?" said the Wind, whipping my hat off my head. As I bent down to pick up my hat, the Wind blew my clothes over my head, thus making a laughing-stock of me. As I re-adjusted my clothing, the Wind, howling with wild laughter, knocked me down. When I got up, the Wind screamed at me:

"Get out of here, go, go, go!"

Since I could see I stood no chance against an adversary who was much more aggressive than myself, I left.

I went back to my home in town. But I was restless, and went out again. Consciously or unconsciously my feet led me back to Talpiot.

Recalling what the Wind had done to me, I took with me canvas and pegs, and pitched myself a tent as a shelter from the stormy wind.

As I sat there one night the light suddenly went out. I left the tent to see who had doused my light; I found the Wind. I asked him:

"What do you want?"

The Wind lashed at my face and howled in my ears, and I retreated into my tent. The Wind uprooted my pegs and severed my ropes, upended my tent and scattered my canvas. Once again he raised his hand against me, and almost knocked me down.

Seeing that I could not stand up against him, I trudged back into town.

Back in town, seated within the city walls, I became restless, and longed to go somewhere where the air was pleasant. Nowhere in the country is the air as pleasant as in Talpiot, so there I went. And in order that the winds should not torment me, I took with me some boards and built myself a hut. I was convinced that I had found a place of rest, but the Wind had decided otherwise. Before the day was out, he was rapping on my roof and rattling the walls. Then one night he blew the whole hut away.

With my hut blown away, and lacking any shelter, I trudged back into town.

What had befallen me once, then twice, had befallen me yet again. Back in town I became restless and my heart, my heart, drew me back to the place from which I had been forced to flee. I asked my heart:

"Can't you see that it is impossible to return to a place which we have been expelled? And that what is impossible is impossible?"

But my heart saw things otherwise. And when I said a thousand times "impossible," my heart said two thousand times "possible."

I brought timber and stones and built myself a house.

I will not praise my house, for it was small; but I will not be ashamed of it either just because there may be others grander and better. My house may have been small: but it had sufficient room

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for someone like me who does not aspire to greatness.

The Wind saw that I had built myself a house and asked:

"What's this?"

"A house," I replied. The Wind laughed and said:

"Upon your soul, I have never seen such a joke as this thing you call a house." I laughed too, and said:

"What you have never seen, you will yet see." The Wind laughed, and replied:

"What kind of house is this?"

I laughed and said: "A house is just that."

He laughed and said to me: "I'll go and see about that." The Wind struck out against to the door, the door collapsed; the Wind struck out against the windows, the windows shattered; the Wind rose up to the roof, and the roof caved in.

"Where is this house you built?", the Wind laughed at me. I was asking myself the same question — but I wasn't laughing.

At first, when the Wind forced me to leave, I would return to town. Then there were events that took place in our land which prevented this. I was trapped in a dilemma: to return to the city was now impossible, because of the events there. To return to Talpiot was equally inconceivable, since the Wind had banished me from there. Pitch a tent or build a hut? These would not last. Build a small house? Even that could not stand against the Wind.

But maybe it had not been able to stand against the Wind because it had been small and poorly built. Had it been big and strong, would it have stood?

I took strong timber and beams, and big-hewn stones, plaster and cement; I hired good labourers and stood over them day and night. My wisdom also ruled over my judgement as I dug the deep foundations.

The house was built, and it stood strong.

Once the house was standing, the Wind came and rapped against its shutters.

"Who is that rapping on my windows?" I asked.

"A neighbour," the Wind sniggered.

"What does a neighbour want from a neighbour on a stormy night?" I asked. Again the Wind sniggered:

"A neighbour comes to a neighbour for a house-warming."

"And does a neighbour come in through the windows, like a thief in the night?"

The Wind then rapped on the door.

"Who's that knocking on my door?" I asked.

"It's me, your neighbour," the Wind replied.

"If you're my neighbour, then please come in," I said.

"But the door is locked," said the Wind.

"If the door is locked," I replied, "it would seem that it was I who locked it."

"Open it," the Wind responded, and I replied:

"I fear the cold. Wait for me till sunrise and then I'll open it."

Once the sun had risen I went to open the door but could not find the Wind. I stood on the threshold of my house and could see that all the land was desert: no tree, not even shrub; just soil and rock. I said to myself:

"I shall plant a garden."

I took a hoe and tilled the soil, and once the land was ploughed I brought saplings and shoots. The rains came and watered them, the dew came and made them grow, the sun came and they sprouted. It was not long before the saplings I had planted became branching trees.

I built myself a bench and sat in their shade.

One night the Wind returned and attacked those trees. And what did the trees do? They in turn attacked the Wind. The Wind returned to the attack, the trees retaliated. Flagging in spirit, the Wind backed off.

From then on the Wind became moderate, learning the ways of the world.

And since the Wind deals civilly with me, I deal civilly with him. When he comes by, I go outside and invite him to share my garden bench under the trees. And so he comes and sits with me. When he comes, he brings with him sweet aromas from the hills and valleys and blows gently on me like a fan. Since he acts like a penitent, I refrain from reminding him of his former acts. When he takes leave of me, I invite him to come back again, as one does with a good neighbour. And indeed we are good neighbours: I love him with all my heart. And maybe he, too, loves me.

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