

Yoosef on Mount Ararat (1)

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Abstract

A small town by the name of Salmas to the north west of Iran sinks into the earth as the result of devastating earthquake in 1930. There remains only one young man on the outskirts of the city. His name is Yoosef. In his desolation he remembers a schoolmate and a close friend who lives in Yerevan of Armenia. Her name is Loosick. He goes and finds her and makes plans for a union and married life. But this is impossible since Loosick is Armenian (Christian) and he is Muslim. In a short time, her parents' decision leaves Loosick in the hands of an unwanted husband. Yoosef is therefore left once more alone and is nervous and anxious remembering the loss and the tremors of the lands. He decides to go and climb Mount Ararat and pay homage to the ark of Noah. He manages to climb but cannot reach to the peaks where the ark rests. Very tired, hungry and exhausted he falls down in the pitchy darkness of the night. He has a tulip in his hands, smile on his face and remains with splayed legs as a sign of infinite immensity and a victorious departure.

Key Words: Salmas. Yerevan. Ararat. Noah's Ark. Earthquake. Marriage.

On the borders of Turkey, Armenia and Iran there lies a mysterious land with mysterious stories. The people of these lands are mostly multilingual mountaineers. They are also farmers familiar with the farms and the lands and the hills and the mountains. They are kind and simple people, sometimes fortunate and sometimes unfortunate. They live closely in the lap of nature. But nature herself is sometimes fortunate and sometimes unfortunate. And what makes them much more unfortunate is that the lands sometimes shake and bring some shocks. The shocks and the shakes come unwontedly, and nobody knows when or where; but when they come, they leave these kind and simple people in the most sorry and destitute of conditions. And therefore they are sometimes fortunate and sometimes unfortunate. The earth and the earthquakes, and the shocks and the shakes, mix in such a way, and come with such power that they make these kind people powerless and homeless and moneyless therefore they remain in the most difficult and desperate conditions. The shocks and the shakes separate not only the lands, but also the people and the families and the fathers and the fates. There might remain one man from a family of five. There might remain one goat from the whole cattle and herd. There might remain one gate, standing as a sign of six buildings. There might remain one minaret, bending beautifully to one side, as a sign of six mosques. And you see cattle with no owner, or an owner with no cattle. And you see a shepherd with no sheep and the sheep with no shepherd. And you see a dog barking, a child crying and a mother screaming and tears trickling and falling. And you see people beating their breasts and bending and beating their heads for the ones who are gone and gone forever. And there remains nothing of the ones who lived once and are now no more.

Thus the shakes and the shocks move the hearts and the minds and bring

sad, sad stories to the simple and kind people of these lands. Tears are poured for the relatives torn to pieces and gone to an unknown land. A building, a village or a town was gone down to an unknown depth. The people, who lived and loved and suddenly were sent to the low levels of the lonely lands. No more of the family signs, left on the land. Mothers with no children and children with no mothers; sisters, brothers, fathers and mothers, children and all neighbors crumbled in great number and gone down to the heart of the land and there remains nothing, no one.

It is unfortunate to be born in an unfortunate land in an unfortunate time. And it is much more unfortunate to remain, to see and suffer the departure of your family who are gone and gone forever. It happened that the small city of Salmas, to the extreme north west of Iran to the left side of Urmia Lake (2) quite close to the borders of Turkey, Armenia and Iran sank with the land slides, shocks and the shakes and went down into the earth (3) and sat in the lap of the mother nature. And it became hidden and unknown to the world. Outside, on the outskirts of the city there remained one fortunate or unfortunate man, a young man and pleasant man, at the beginning of his life and career. He was from the city of Salmas and this is the story of that man. His name was Yoosef, the third child of a family, a poor family, with a kind and lovely mother and lovely sisters. They had little bit of school education but all of them worked for their bread. Mother had a good voice and a taste for songs, rhythm and music. The sisters had a taste for drama and dancing. The father had seen the world and was a serious and religious man with the discipline and doctrines for a good family life. Their only boy and the lonely boy Yoosef had little bit more education, reading and writing. And the land and the hand of the nature took all the members of the family and left him to a lonely life.

It happened that the earth shook herself and the land moved first horizontally and then vertically and then the whole city was swallowed deep down inside. Yoosef was so horrified and shocked that he remained dumb and dazed. They were at home, his mother was cooking in the kitchen, sisters busy in their everyday embroideries. Father was in the market and would come home in the late evening. He himself had come back from school and was getting ready for the evening prayers. The shakes and the shocks came and he ran out of the building and ran to the outskirts of the city for safety. More and more shakes came. He thought for a second that he was in the cradle of mother-nature with an unusual lullaby, coming from the heights and the heaven. It looked as if heaven and earth were hand in hand, handling and mixing and melting all in all. He was horrified by the moans and groans of the people, by the howling of the humans and animals left alive under pain. All a mixture, a tumult and turmoil, fire and color, echoes coming and covering completely the land and the sky. A flood of light, a flood of darkness, things in transition and changing, were losing their colors. Faint after faint, they were turning yellow and yellowish and no more, no more. He lost his sight and could see no more and the world turned and turned and came to be calm and quiet.

He opened his eyes and found himself in a lonely land. There was no sign of the city of Salmas. He was in strange and unknown land with no signs of humanity and life. A barren land and a wide and deserted land: Salmas was swallowed and had gone deep down into the heart of the earth. In all his desolation and hopelessness he remembered he had a friend from his childhood. She was an Armenian friend, with sweet soul and face. He decided to go and find her. He knew that she had gone to Armenia, to Yerevan. He said I must go and find her; I must go and find her.

A car was passing by. He stopped the car and asked for a ride. Would you take me to Yerevan, he said. I have no one; I have no one. I have a friend in Yerevan - a classmate from my sweet childhood. The driver was a nice man and gave him room and a ride in his car. They chatted all the way and after few hours Yoosef said good-bye to the driver and thanked him for the ride and the chat.

This is Yerevan, the city where I must find my friend, my sweet classmate, he said. This is the place that I must find my Loosick. He knew that she was from a religious family. Her father was a priest. It was Sunday morning he went to the great church of the city. He knew that his Loosick would be in the church, for Sunday morning was a time for praying and service. The bells of the church were tolling beautifully and inviting the Christians to the church. He went inside and suddenly saw his Loosick who was watering the beautiful and colorful garden of the church. He was amazed and couldn't believe his eyes. Could this be Loosick? He had seen her in the innocent childhood days in the school of Salmas. Could this be Loosick? I must go and ask, I must go and ask. He went to her, not knowing how to approach. He was hesitating about what to say. She was in her bloom. Being the daughter of a priest, she was in a simple and soft dress with all her piety and innocence. Her childhood face with beautiful eyes and eyebrows, the turning of her nose and the lips all had flourished to make her an alluring beauty, an angelic beauty, ready to talk, ready to help.

He went to her, with hesitation, holding his hands to his sides, he said: excuse me are you Loosick Petrosian from Salmas? This is Yoosef your classmate, from primary school days. I have come all the way to see you. Loosick got red on the face and stopped her watering and extended her hand for a shake. She was very excited about this meeting, after so many years

and in a breathless but pleasant voice said, how lovely to have you here. How nice of you to come and find me. How did you come? You have changed so much. You are a man now. How lovely, I can't believe it. Let's go home; let's go to my parents.

It was Sunday morning and people were coming for the service and her father was getting ready for his sermon, and there could be no chance for the meeting. Loosick herself went to her father and got permission to be with Yoosef for the day and give him a tour of the city. She came back in a short time, dressed like an enchanted doll. They had some refreshments in the church and chatted charmingly of past days. They went out to see the city. Yoosef said: take me to the best and most romantic parts of your Yerevan. He said he wanted to feel and share the sweet presence of her in the most beautiful spots of the city, on the outskirts, on the neighborhood fields and farms. He wanted to talk to her, in the beautiful nature: under the shade of the willow trees, among the hanging bushes, among the moving and trembling flowers. So they went and found the nicest spots, where the birds in nature were welcoming their arrival. They sat under a willow tree and had a panoramic view of the earth and the heaven and the trees and the bushes and the flowers in their colorful dances. Loosick had a sweet voice and after chatting pleasantly and romantically she started singing some enchanting songs for the enchanting evening.

Yoosef with his meager knowledge of Armenian was listening to the rhythm of the sweet voice and trying to understand more and more. They were feeling so near and dear to each other, as if they were one soul in two bodies. Yoosef had an eye to beauty: beauty in man and beauty in nature. Under the cool wind coming from the north and refreshing everything he tried to give way to his imagination and pour some of his feelings with

colorful pictures in the ear and the heart of Loosick. He said look, nature has been so generous this afternoon. Green farms, and colorful farmers are at work, cutting and collecting and moving with their beautiful baskets on their heads. It looks as if they are dancing. Look, they move and hum and go and come. They are bending on the farm, in the shadows, in the light, singing sweet songs. Loosick said, her uncle was also a farmer and being in their neighborhood she used to go to the farm and give a hand to her uncle in threshing and harvesting. She said they would sometimes sing sweet songs to nature.

Their chat and their close relationship were getting much closer, much sweeter. Yoosef had in his mind to have her for life. For Loosick was a world of love and life and prosperity and fulfillment. But there was a very great hindrance between them, they could not get married, they could not be one. They were believers of two different religions. Loosick was Armenian and dear daughter of a priest, meaning she was Christian and Yoosef was Muslim and a good believer. Thus the very strict doctrines of the religions would not let them love and live together. They could not be one unless one would sacrifice and convert to the other's religion. They both believed in God, the everlasting, Almighty God, the only creator of the universe and man. But men had divided themselves and separated themselves from the beginning. They could not be one. They went to Loosick's uncle and Loosick arranged a temporary job and a shelter for Yoosef in the farm. He was to pick apples, help the uncle and be a member of the family for the food and shelter. Yoosef welcomed the offer and settled down to a job. They embraced and Loosick went back to her parents. Life had changed Loosick was so close and kind. She would come to him everyday for a chat. Their visits and chats were usually in the evening sunset when the day's work and

responsibilities had come to the end. It was time to talk and watch the sunset and give way to the nicest feelings.

One day Loosick came to Yoosef in tears. Her lovely eyes covered with beautiful tears falling like pearls on to her face. She said, her parents had decided for her and the next day she would be in the hands of her husband, and she was horrified to be so. Yoosef looked into her eyes and found confirmation of the words. Was there any way to say no? She said none of this was her wish and poured more and more tears. Yoosef was helpless in the hands of fate. Was there any way for consolation and the share of pains? A short chance was left for them. They had to say farewell and depart. There was no other choice. They could be one in heart and mind but they had to go in two different directions. And Loosick, in the hands of her parents was to go to the hands and the house of the husband. Since there was no help they embraced once more and put their hearts and their minds in one vow and departed. Yoosef with heavy heart watched lovely Loosick to depart and the rhythm of her lovely footsteps brought tears to his eyes. In all his sincerity and love he appealed to his God and wished the best for his beloved. He turned to go, once more looked back and Loosick was gone. The next day the jet planes were to take Loosick, over lands and ocean to far, far lands where she had to go with her unwanted husband to live and learn.

He was once more lonely in the lap of mother-nature carrying all the sweet memories from the days and the lands and lovely Loosick. But this romantic world did not last long and after a while it turned into a mixture of confusion and conflict. Once it came to his mind to go and get Loosick back but this would possibly hurt the married life of his beloved and there was the religious bar. He went to the dear uncle of Loosick, thanked him for having him on the farm. He said he had to go, and with grateful thanks and gratitude

he departed. He went to places and farms and roamed in the memory of his Loosick. The beautiful nature was inviting him more and more. It was a common and shared interest, remaining as a legacy from the days, which were no more.

He had heard legends told of the outskirts of Ararat. He had once read in the Old Testament (Genesis 8:4) that Noah's ark landed on Mount Ararat. Loosick had poetically talked of Armenians, their fathers and their lands somewhere near Mount Ararat. Thus the whole of the mountain and the legends and the surrounding were wrapped in a lovely poetical language that they were poured into his ears by the sweet voice, coming from Loosick's lips. He made up his mind that he had to go to the nature. He made up his mind that he had to go to the mountains and the hills, and the farms and the fields. He made up his mind, that he had to go and discover the ark of the Noah, lying on the top of Mount Ararat. The thought and the decision brought him much more love. Love of the land, love of man, love of the beautiful sky, and blue and soft and deep sky, hovering over his head. With all his might and with tears in his eyes he cried: O Mount Ararat, O ark of Noah I will come to thee. O Noah the prophet your ark was to save humanity from the flood. O you powerful prophet, take my hand save me, save me. Save me from this shaking and shocking universe.

He started running, not knowing where to run. He ran to the right, then to the left, then to the back, then to the forth. He had lost all direction, east, west, south or north and did not know which way to go. He didn't know where he belonged. He didn't even know which language was his own: Persian, Kurdish, Turkish, Arabic or Armenian. Which one was his mother tongue and where was his motherland? Borders and languages had divided everything. Human beings could not be one. Fate had even taken all his

family down to the earth. He stopped and hesitated for a second and said: let me go nowhere. I'll be the guest of the nature. He could not wait it was getting late. He started walking to the place where three countries converge. He had in his mind to get to Ararat. He managed and after some time he was on the outskirts of Mount Ararat. He was still hesitating: If I go to the east I get to Azerbaijan and Baku. If I go to the west I get to Turkey and Erzurum. If I go to the south I get to Iran and Tabriz. And if I go to the north I return back to Armenia and Yerevan.

Eventually on the outskirts of the holy mountain, he looked up to the heavenly atmosphere surrounding the majestic mountain. He looked down to the beautiful lands and the villages all around him. There were people at work in the farms. Birds were flying in all directions welcoming the morning and the day. The cool wind was bringing the heavenly air permeated with the herbs of the heights. Cattle with the jingling sound of the bells of their nanny goats. Baby sheep and the goats were calling their mothers for food. Rivers, in their twisting and shiny routes were meandering right and left and extending their arms to the farms and the farmers. He crossed a valley and went to the bank of a river, clean and cold. It was Aras River (4), beautifully and smoothly moving and joining three countries together. He got ready for an ablution. To go to the ark he had to be clean and without sin. He went to the bank of the river, turned to the south in the direction of Mecca and held his face and hands up to the Heaven to confess and repent. He addressed the Creator. "O almighty and everlasting glorious God, forgive me for what I've done wrong. Let me be a true human being to you. O almighty God"! He sat at the side of the river and took his shoes and socks off and turned his sleeves up. He washed his hands and then his face, and then his arms and completed his ablution with praying to the Almighty God under this

heavenly view of the land and the sky and the holy mountain. He thanked his Creator for what was bestowed on him, wished even a blessing for his deceased parents and his sisters.

After this he took the shortest route to the mountain. The cool and heavenly air was coming and bringing messages of "welcome to the tops, to the ark and to the Noah". He thought it was a height that he could never reach. He climbed and climbed he was weak and hungry. He thought he could be the guest of the nature and helped himself and picked some wheat from the nature's gardens and chewed with delight. Not bad, he said, nature is generous and a kind hostess. Wheat, barley and sweet water of the gullies, were all available. He tried them and satisfied his hunger and prepared himself for more walks and more heights. He climbed more and more. He could watch the beautiful holy mountain with two tops, shouldering each other, under the snow. They were twin tops, namely Great Ararat and Little Ararat. Two together holding and keeping tightly the ark of Noah: a treasure for humanity. That is the ark (5) that was built by the prophet Noah at God's command. That is the ark that carried the Prophet, his wife, his three sons, their wives and the mated pairs of every species of animal. She carried them to safety and held them on the tops when flood of the water inundated the entire earth.

Will he be able to get to the top? Will he be able to get to the ark? Will he be able to appeal to the Prophet and remain in his protection when the earth would shake and shock again and again? These ideas were coming to him and shaking his heart, while he was progressing and mastering more and more of the heights, suddenly he felt some tremors. He was horrified to death. Is this my imagination he asked himself? Or is this the hand of the nature shaking the mighty mountain? He stopped and tried to satisfy himself.

He said: this mountain is a holy mountain. This mountain is a blessed mountain. Here resided the Prophet Noah. No shake can shake me. If it shakes and shocks again I will go directly to the ark, I will go directly to the ark.

Yoosef had changed and was different from what he was before. As if the holy heights had held his hand and had taken him to some spiritual elevations. He could hear sounds and echoes, which he had never heard before. He could see more and more of the glorious sky and the magnificent land. Minute after minute they were opening their hearts and offering themselves to his sight. Vegetation after vegetation, colors and flowers offering such a perfume which were permeating his soul and taking hold of his mind and the body. He bent down and picked a tulip in red and yellow. It had beautifully opened itself for the day. He said: I will take this beautiful tulip, with all my heart, to the ark. This will be a sign of life and prosperity.

While he was holding his tulip very close to himself and mastering more and more of the heights, he stopped for a second. The day was getting to the end and the sun was moving far, far ahead to the west. He turned back and looked down to see what was left behind. A panoramic view, a bird's eye view, the holy mountain was surrounded on all sides by the elevated plains, with green grasses, holding beautifully and colorfully the villages and the villagers, with their brilliant baskets on their heads. He looked up and he could see the beautiful sky, the blue and deep sky, with some white fluffy clouds running hurrying right and left. His mind soaked in his memories, he thought of the heights of the Heavens. Thinking of the seventh height where the holy ones reside. For a second he thought it would be so good for one to get to that height and to be in heaven. How good would be for one to be blessed to go to an angelic height and angelic life. He was holding his tulip

in his hand and climbing more and more. He had already been on the heights but this time he had mastered more and more. He suddenly stopped and watched groups of birds, flying in those heights. They were flying to and fro, keeping together and singing together. They were celebrating the sunset at the gate of the heaven. Watching them brought tears to Yoosef. He remembered sweet songs and tunes from his mother, his sisters and his beloved Loosick. Tears grew more and more.

The dusk of the evening fell and the world changed to be in gray darkness. He was hungry, weak and had lost weight from struggle, wandering and the climbing. He was all confused and dazed by the play of the fate. He still hesitated to say where he belonged. He still hesitated to know what his mother language was and where was his motherland. In his long struggles and climbing his clothes were tattered and torn. In his long climb even some parts of his body were bruised and were bleeding. He was becoming weaker and weaker, losing blood and all his strength. The darkness came and marred his sight. The darkness came in such a power and intensity that he could see no more. No more of the hills, no more of the shades and no more of the farms and the farmers. No more of the life, of the life.

He fell down, with the tulip in his hand. He couldn't go any further. He said with a thin and trembling but heavenly voice. O gracious God, is this the last fall? Is this the last shock and shake? Is this the end of the story? His face was raised to the gates of heaven. With two hands he was holding and offering his tulip and there was a smile on his face. His legs were splayed and widely opened as a sign of, infinite immensity and a victorious departure.

Historical details and notes

1. Ararat, Mount (Armenian Masis; Turkish Ağrı Dağı; Persian Koh-i-nuh), mountain in extreme eastern Turkey, near the border with Armenia and Iran. Except on the northwest, where a spur nearly 2,200 m (7,000 ft) high merges with a long ridge, the mountain is completely isolated, being surrounded on all other sides by elevated plains ranging from 800 to 1,400 m (2,500 to 4,500 ft) above sea level. From an elevation of 2,700 m (8,800 ft) Mount Ararat rises in two peaks, known as Great Ararat (5,165 m/16,945 ft) and Little Ararat (3,914 m/12,840 ft). Above the 4,300-m (14,000-ft) level, Great Ararat is perpetually covered with snow. Vegetation, consisting for the most part of grasses, is chiefly confined to the area between 1,500 and 3,350 m (5,000 and 11,000 ft). According to the Old Testament (see Genesis 8:4), Noah's ark landed on the "mountains of Ararat" after the deluge. Great Ararat was first climbed in modern times in 1829. On July 2, 1840, great masses of the mountain were torn loose by a violent earthquake. The resulting avalanche buried a village and a convent on its lower slopes. An American expedition ascended Mount Ararat in the summer of 1949 in an unsuccessful search for evidence of the existence of Noah's ark. Recent expeditions have reported finding timbers that members believe to have come from the ark. – Quoted from Microsoft Encarta 2003 Encyclopedia.

2. Urmia, Lake (Persian Orūmīyeh Daryācheh-ye), shallow lake in northwestern Iran, west of the Caspian Sea. It is 140 km (90 mi) long, with an average breadth of 48 km (about 30 mi), and occupies part of a level basin enclosed by mountains and lying at an altitude of 1,200 m (3,900 ft). The lake is fed by radial streams of considerable size, but it has no outlet. It is consequently too salty to nourish any life with the

exception of certain crustaceans. The lake has been shrinking for years, exposing wide tracts of slime. – Quoted from Microsoft Encarta 2003 Encyclopedia.

3. According to the existing records in the department of the seismology of the University of Tehran the devastating earthquake came in 1930 and destroyed Salmas and 60 villages. For further details refer to: Berberian, M. and Tchalenko, J.S. "Field study and documentation of the 1930 Salmas (Shahpur-Azerbaijan) earthquake." Geological Survey of Iran, Part II. Report No. 39, 1976 pp. 271-342

4. Aras or Araks, river, southwestern Asia, rising near Erzurum, Turkey, and flowing in a generally eastern direction through Armenia and Azerbaijan, where it joins the Kura, which empties into the Caspian Sea. The Aras forms parts of the borders between Armenia and Turkey, Armenia and Iran, and Azerbaijan and Iran. The chief tributaries of the Aras, which is 914 km (568 mi) long, are the Hrazdan and the Qareh rivers. The Verkhnekarabakhskiy Canal connects the Aras with the Mingäçevir Reservoir on the upper Kura River. The waters of the Aras are used extensively for irrigation in Azerbaijan. Traces of ancient canals and other evidence of the once dense population that inhabited the area have been discovered on the banks of the river. – Quoted from Microsoft Encarta 2003 Encyclopedia.

5. Deluge, in biblical history flood of water described in Genesis 6-9, which inundated the entire earth or a large part of it. The only survivors were the occupants of the ark, a vessel with a beam of 26.7 m (87.5 ft) and a length of 160 m (525 ft), built by Noah at God's command. On the ark besides Noah, were his wife, his three sons and their wives and mated pairs of every species of animal – Quoted from Microsoft Encarta 2003 Encyclopedia.