צדק כתמר יפרח

*The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree.*

Psalms, 92:12 — תהלים צב״ יג״

# THE LIVING PALM TREE

## Parables, Stories and Teachings from the Kabbalah

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referring to the vision in Zechariah 4

# The Aerialist, His Balancing Pole and the Blade of Grass

A Romanian-born gypsy called Dimitri Orlin, who used to earn his living as a highwire walker between Moldavia and Transylvania, stretching his wire from tree to tree and whistling lullabies sixty feet above the ground, would often take his long balancing birch pole to Rabbi Eli Shoshani of Turda, a cooper by profession, who knew how to balance the weights by cleverly inserting tiny lead pellets near the pole ends. These were happy moments for Dimitri, as he could share with the Jew the sweet sacramental wines and the pickled cucumbers, honey cakes in the winter and cherries in the summer. But they were also happy for Rabbi Eli Shoshani, who would leave whatever he was doing in his dark workshop, with one of his apprentices in charge of the forge, and come out to the courtyard to speak to Dimitri.

The Jew would invariably be nibbling a blade of grass, a stick of liquorice root or a twig from a rosebush, or any other woody plant he had at hand. He would even keep it in his mouth as he spoke, to the disgust of his wife and his many acquaintances. One spring day, the Jew offered the gypsy a twig of fennel, but this one declined:

"Thank you, I would rather have my old pipe."

"You don't know what you are missing," said the Jew. "God has more flavours than names, and He hides a scent in each herb, and a teaching in each scent."

"When I am up there," replied the gypsy pointing to the sky where he performed his acrobatic feats, the void space of his hoverings, "I neither smoke nor think, nor can I do anything but hum lullabies. I know that my mother's airy hands are near to

hold me if I fall, and I recall her smiling and loving as she was in an age where I did not even know she was blond."

"Have here," said Rabbi Eli Shoshani, holding out to him a stalk of grass. "You never know when a good flavour will protect you from a bitterness."

Years later, ninety feet high in Ploiesti, Dimitri the gypsy's counterbalance pole slipped from his hands, and he was left to his foot skills on a crosswinds afternoon, before the eyes of a thousand persons, unprotected, frightened, and with half a lullaby stuck at the root of his tongue. Remembering he still carried Shoshani the Jew's blade of grass in his corduroy waistcoat's pocket, he took it out and put it in his mouth. Its taste was like a peaceful morning in a mountain pasture, like a dark certitude, and like bright protection.

Upon reaching the end of the wire safe and sound, Dimitri let out a deep grateful sigh. A few months later, back at the workshop of Rabbi Eli Shoshani of Turda, after telling him what had happened, he heard the old cooper say:

"The secret of our support is a recurring point, an instant out of time—the light which between two breaths unveils its purposes within our lungs."

*Some Kabbalists hold that our life is always pending from a thread, a strand or* nimah נימה *so subtle that it could only be compared on earth to the finest, flimsiest blade of grass. Whoever is able, like the stalks and the stems, to bend without breaking, whoever sways without thus forsaking the clinging law of the soil, has his or her breath,* hei ה*, fully preserved by fate or good fortune, called in Hebrew* minei מניה. *Moreover, long before the Zoharic period—the 13th century—masters would consider the letter* yod י*, present in* nimah נימה*, or blade of grass, to be the smallest dot of the greatest mystery. In all certainty it is around this dot that we also find the delicious* manah מנה *or heavenly food.*

## The Five Secrets of Happiness

Rabbi Yosif Barionai of Belgrade used to say to his disciples:

"Happiness has five secrets in correspondence with the five senses.

"The first one is that, as happens to the fire of light within and from the eye, it is bestowed upon itself in the same measure it is given to others. The second, that it makes the surrounding air more breathable. The third, that when it manifests, no matter how brief its outbreak, it reconciles our feet to the ground they tread. The fourth, that at the peak of its intensity it weeps tears of joy; and the fifth, that when it listens to itself it discovers in its own expression the true lightness of life."

After some time, and meaning to endorse his master on this assertion, Rabbi Isaac of Sarajevo quoted the following passage of *Isaiah* 55:12: "Ye shall go out with happiness, and be led forth with peace," thereby making Rabbi Yosif smile with irony.

"Going out with happiness is harder than you would think," he commented.

"Why would you say that?" Rabbi Isaac inquired.

The study house was then wrapped in the darkest winter cold, and a pitiable electric bulb was shedding light on the shabby Talmud volumes, trying hard to outline its edges with flickering efforts.

"Because it requires being content *a priori*, before there is any cause for the emotion."

"Do you know of any method to achieve that?"

Rabbi Yosif Barionai rose to his feet, drew a small mirror from his pocket, placed it in front of his face, broad and entangled with a beard, and sticking his tongue out at himself he added:

"Every morning I wonder how is it possible that such an organ, the tongue, contains so many wonders, yet it dwells so lonely in its cave of teeth. But since there is no possible answer to this riddle, I start laughing so heartily that I forget where I come from and where I am going. Believe me, my friend, the Creator tied the tongue with the frenulum one instant before it drew our father Adam down to Hell, and He also planted happiness in his heart, so that overawed as he would be, he could still climb out from his depressions through the ascending steps of his senses wide opened."

*It has become a proverbial Hasidic idea that when happiness,* simḥah שׂמחה*, appears, it cleanses the five,* ḥamesh חמשׁ*, senses in which it is actually enveloped. For Rabbi Yosif Barionai, the gematric equivalence between the words tongue,* lashon לשׁון (*386*)*, and void, solitary,* shomem שׂומם (*386*)*, is a source of laughter, but for some people who lack the sense of humour it is a source of great anguish.*

# The Rock and the Creature

Intent on sharpening the minds of his best disciples, Rabbi Yisrael Yabani of Alexandropol gathered them on the eve of the Feast of the Tabernacles and questioned them:

"What do you think is the meaning of 'The Creator is my rock' in Psalms, 18:3?"

The first one to answer was the impulsive Rabbi Yochanan of Abdera:

"The substance of each passage of the Torah is inseparably linked to the numbers of its versets. Therefore, since 18:3 can be read as *ḥagai*, meaning 'my feast', 'my celebration', I understand that the delight of the Creator is His own permanence, the joyous constancy with which He is always present."

"Not bad," observed Rabbi Yisrael Yabani.

"In my opinion," quoted Chaim Joffe of Salonica, dubbed "the student" by everyone, "the rock of God is the firmness on which we rely, the pivot of all our actions."

"Why not think," began Rabbi Yosef Yabani, himself a cousin of Rabbi Yisrael, "that He is the rock against which we crash, the siege that presses our mind, the unflinching solid interrogation upon which is sharpened the edge of all our questions?"

"That is also true," approved Rabbi Yisrael.

Twice again consecutively did the master listen to his disciples opinions. Then, as he poured with his own hands for them a thick coffee, he continued:

"Initially the Creator is for us sheer remoteness, insuperable distance, hardness, and muteness; but when we take the rock in our hands, when we polish its edges, we discover its veins, and we partially intuit the way in which its crystals belong together;

then it becomes our creature, a child of our own understanding; and at that moment—without losing its firmness—it acquires the elasticity we just bestowed on it ourselves."

*The psalm in question literally says:* eli tsuri אלי צורי*, "God is my rock," translated in numerous versions as "God is my fortress," since this is also one of the meanings of* tsur צור*. However, availing himself of a curious permutation, the master seems to have transposed the letter* yod *within "my rock", placing it in the first place and thus changing* tsuri צורי *into* yitsur יצור*, which means creature.*

# Distances

Gathered at the house of Rabbi Yosef of Grodno, four of his most advanced disciples were awaiting the question posed to them every spring by the master. They belonged to the *ḥaburah*, or brotherhood, called *Pri Rimon*, *The Pomegranate Fruits*, and none of them was above thirty years old.

"Listen to me well," said the master, frowning, while in his eyes glittered that mischievous spark of someone about to set a subtle trap. "This year's question is as follows: What was, in Paradise, the distance between the Tree of Good and Evil, and the Tree of Life?"

The whispers died out, dispersing through the study hall. Birds were chirping outdoors, and the drops of recent rain were still dripping from the eaves.

One answer occurred to the boldest of them, Rabbi Naphtali:

"Four walking days and one entire night. Thickets grew between them both, and carnivorous flowers would blossom. All was danger and ambush."

"Ten *parasangs*," added Rabbi Ishmael the Tall, exhibiting his wide Zoharic knowledge and his vast Talmudic skills. The parasang is an old Persian unit of distance, and it was very likely no one else in the room had the slightest idea about it. It was mentioned in the Talmud, though, and this is why he brought it up. "Ten, like the ten plagues of Egypt."

"The blink of an eye," Rabbi Moshe ben Chaim of Almaty let drop with a triumphant smile, "since they ate with closed eyes, and only upon opening them did they discover the evil they had done."

"Even though there is no mention about this distance in the Book of *Genesis*," said Rabbi Ezekiel of Riga, "I imagine it must not have been long, since Rabbi Nachman ibn Nejmad of Damascus, in his opuscule *Shbilei Pardes*, *The Paths of Pardes*, said that there is room for the entire Paradise in the heart of the believer. Perhaps one heartbeat comes from the Tree of Good and Evil and the next one from the Tree of Life. After all, they have not ceased beating in our chests since the days of Adam."

Unlike previous occasions, the master did not wait to hear any other answers. He rose, and stretching the forefinger of his left hand, he placed it horizontally between his nostrils and his upper lip.

"The distance between the Tree of Good and Evil, and the Tree of Life is the distance between the nose and the mouth. Some travel it every day, but they ignore its beauties and mysteries, until the moment before their deaths; some others think they know it as they know their faces in the mirrors, but as they recall it they mistake it, and mistaking it they think there is no distance between the trees. Finally, the few know that the Tree of Good and Evil feeds upon the roots of the Tree of Life, but they are unable to calculate the space between both, because in the sweetest moment of their ecstasy they close their eyes to worldly distinctions. To these last, one can apply the teaching of Rabbi Mordecahi of Minsk, who upon his enlightenment sang:

> The musical tear asked to be heard
> by the hand playing the eyelid,
> but the caressing stroke forgot its name."

*It is known among many Kabbalists that the distance actually existing between the nose,* aph אף*, and the mouth,* peh פה*—given that both words share the letter* pe*—lies in the one spread between the* hei ה *for the mouth and the* alef א *for the nose. It is hence commonly quoted that "the nose is divine and the mouth is human." The Tree of Life does often grow beneath the wings of the air we breathe; the Tree of Good and Evil issues from the foods we eat every day.*

# On Energy

On a Warsaw summer's night, two classmates of the study house called *Or Ganuz*, Hidden Light, were discussing Ezekiel 1:4, a verset where the Hebrew word *ha-ḥashmal* החשמל names the substance animating the Chariot, a concept translated in some Bible versions as radiance, in others as energy.

"I suspect," said the youngest, Rabbi Eliezer, "that for the prophet this vision must have been like glancing at an erupting volcano: had he leant excessively towards it, he would not have lived to tell about it."

Looming and water-laden, a storm was brewing over the city, and a light yet pungent ozone smell spoke of imminent atmospheric feuds.

"What if," asked himself aloud Rabbi Mordechai as he nibbled a black cherry, "it referred after all to a joyous epiphany instead of an ominous spectre of disaster? When you turn the letters around, *ha-ḥashmal* החשמל is transformed into *le-simḥah* לשמחה, for happiness."

A flash of lightning ratified his words.

"In that case," Rabbi Eliezer smiled in bewilderment, "the main danger incurred by all those who 'descend in the Chariot' would lie in the difficulty of turning tragedy into comedy, and in knowing essentially which of these two expressive possibilities has more substance, as no prophet or master ever works for himself."

"Look at the light bulb," Rabbi Mordechai began, as he left aside the cherry pit, relishing the aftertaste of the bitter juice and pointing towards the ceiling. It was clear he was following his own line of thought. "It is thanks to its hermetic transparency, to

its fruit-like and crystal shape, that light comes down to us. If you placed your fingers directly between the electrodes it would give you some annoyance, and it would not add a whiff of light to your everyday opacity. The light bulb is the vehicle, that lucidity you need to reach in order to be visited, wings flapping, by the lion, the bull, the eagle and the angel."

"There were no light bulbs then, though," replied Rabbi Eliezer with irony.

The broken flashes of a new lightning criss-crossed the window by which the fellow students were talking.

"And yet the electricity or mysterious energy source was there from the beginning, like the lightning you just saw."

"Incidentally," said Rabbi Eliezer to his friend Mordechai, "what do you mean by 'being visited by the lion, the bull, the eagle and the angel'? Wouldn't that imply there are no differences between prophet Ezekiel and ourselves?"

"Names precede beings and objects," replied the cherry-eating one, "but if besides, as in this case, it is their fortune to outlive them, we should search them for the hidden message they originally conveyed. Thus, for instance, the lion was carrying a mirror, the bull a song, and the eagle a detachment."

"I don't follow you," sighed Rabbi Eliezer as he opened the window to let the words of the dripping rain enter the room with greater clarity.

"The lion brings a mirror for you to discern in it, more than your own strength, the art of doing nothing under the shade of the trees, for a single precise action is worth more than gushing and aimless agitation. The bull brings a song for you to dance to your own clumsiness, and for you to learn how to be an acrobat over your own abysses. And finally, the eagle teaches you that detachment from the one you have been is the most elementary requirement of flying, because traces in the sky do not abide in the air you traverse, but within the intrepid heart of him who knows himself a traveller; this is why, if you accept the visits of the lion, the bull and the eagle, and of that duplicate of yourself who is the man-angel in the Chariot, there is no way you can be lost. You can

never be lost. You will see a comedy in each tragedy, and in each comedy the shudder of a repressed sorrow."

*Because of its gematria, or numeric value, ha-ḥashmal* החשמל *(383) equals indeed* ga'ashi געשי *(383), volcanic; and even if it were only for the mention of fire and burning coals in the text ascribed to prophet Ezekiel, Rabbi Eliezer's interpretation should be deemed correct. Rabbi Mordechai's observation is however more acute: ha-ḥashmal* החשמל*, electricity or energy, is made, through alliteration, into le-simḥah* לשמחה*, towards or for happiness. As regards the lion or* arieh אריה *in the Tetramorph, there is no doubt it bears a* rei ראי*, or mirror, while the bull,* shor שור*, includes a song,* shar שר*, while the eagle,* nesher נשר*, is itself a sign of detachment—elevation, vision, remoteness.*

# The Bubble Laugher

Having shown little talent for studies, Itzi Faibl Strubel was sent by his father, soapmaker Leib Strubel, directly to the fat and perfume pans where they mixed the substances for the large cakes later to be sold across the Strasbourg region. Itzi was a calm and skinny boy whose breath had been shortened and whose chest had been oppressed by an early asthma. He had a rare skill for sculpting, and in his free time he would carve out zebras, horses, birds, monkeys, little trees and geese from the large cakes of soap. But as these soap shapes were not fashionable in those days in shops and fairs, it did not amuse Itzi's father in the least that he should continue to make them, and even though he did not openly oppose it, he turned a blind eye to it, considering his son little more than a dimwit, and only now and then would he chide him for his artistic hobby.

A rubella epidemic came spreading from Bohemia, a disease that crossed valleys and mountains, taking the children of Strasbourg by surprise in their little wooden beds, as they lay with the downcast countenance of those who do not understand, and the glassy eyes of extinction. Mothers would weep, fathers would come together with the few physicians in the region and, poultice here, emetic and ointments there, in the end some died of anaphylaxis, some went into endless delirium, and most dragged on sickly, without anyone knowing what to do or who to turn to. Safe from the illness, since he had already experienced it in his own body, Itzi Faibl heard the news, and he asked his father permission to visit his little cousin Franz Yosef. After the day's work was finished, he packed in his bag a soap giraffe and what was left of his great-grandfather's gold-framed spectacles, with only

one of the empty rims left. When he arrived in his uncle's house, his aunt was whimpering. Itzi Faibl stepped into the camphor-smelling room, a crackling noise made him aware he was stepping on rock salt. There, by the light of a very straight candle, shivering in his bed, was desolate Franz Yosef. Unafraid of contagion, the visitor kissed him and then introduced the giraffe's soap head in a glass of water on the night table, stirred the liquid and waited a few seconds.

"What are you doing?" Franz Yosef asked with a broken voice.

"I am preparing bubbles, creating rainbows."

He drew aside the heavy curtains of his uncle's room and asked his consent to open the window ajar. April's afternoon light streamed directly into Franz Yosef's blue eyes. The soap cake sculptor brought the solitary golden rim of his great-grandfather's spectacles near his mouth, and he burst loudly into laughter, thus moving the air and producing big cheerful bubbles that floated above the sick boy's bed. Bubbles born from the giraffe, and so transparent that they appeared to be huge weightless raindrops, came to hover around this Strasbourg house, where a child, as in many others, was suffering without knowing why. As he first saw them floating before his nose, Franz Yosef had a coughing bout, then an outburst of happiness. Both cousins laughed together, looking at each other without words. They laughed and laughed until the sick boy felt well enough to leave his bed, stand up, and start with ferocious joy chasing the bubble irises. The mess was so big that aunt Elke, Franz Yosef's mother, worriedly came by to see what was happening, wondering what silly business the cousins were up to.

But she froze in amazement as she spotted in Franz Yosef's blushing cheeks the incipient hue of recovery.

"How were you able to do this?" she asked, unaware that a big soap bubble was soaring behind her head. "What have you given to your cousin to make him so happy?"

"Soap bubbles with rainbow sparks, Auntie."

"Impossible," Franz Yosef's mother mumbled.

Once the fever had abated, with his high spirits verging on euphoria, the sick boy added:

"If you look well, Mama, you will see how in each of these bubbles is trapped one of my ailments and pains, all the itches and the annoyances; Itzi traps them and I destroy them."

"And since the rainbow cannot die," continued the smiling son of soapmaker Leib Strubel, "and it is once and again reborn from the water I stir, your son is feeling like Noah after the Flood: making a pact with life—coming to life again between giraffe soap bubbles."

When the townspeople got to know what had happened at Elke's house, fathers and mothers requested the presence of Itzi Faibl, who in one single week used up one soap camel, two rabbits and one squirrel he had kept with some bits and pieces in his father's workshop. He turned them into coloured air bubbles, producing with them translucent globes of laughter, spherical beings which would dissolve in mid-air the despondence of those attacked by rubella, leaving them cleaner than a linen handkerchief drying in the sun on a summer's day.

Years later, when the infamous Bohemian epidemic was but a bad dream in people's memory, if anyone insistently asked Itzi Faibl how he had managed to cure so many children, he used to answer:

"I really don't know, but I have the impression that miracles are as contagious, or even more so, than the illnesses and mishaps affecting us. It is often enough for just one to take place in order for everyone to benefit."

*Although young Itzi Faibl from Strasbourg may not have known, a single alliteration of the Hebrew word for soap,* savon סבון*, turns it into* be-nes בנס*, meaning* by *or* through a miracle*, and an additional letter* vav ו *representing man. Indeed, oftentimes the latter is healed more by the good intentions of those who love him than by the clever purposes of those who study him."*

## To Look and to See

Rabbi Noah Moshe of Antwerp, a diamond polisher, and in his spare time, like Spinoza, a polisher of optical crystals, used to say:

"To look and to see are converging verbs which by their subtle difference reveal when something we are observing is or is not understood."

"Could you give us an example?" he was asked one after the other by his disciples, Naphtali of Brussels and Ariel of Bruges.

The master took a small magnifier out of his pocket, rubbed it against his trousers, and said:

"When I was a child, magnifiers would fascinate me even more than my adult job does, the polishing of optical lenses. It is simply because when you see an object, an insect or a flower larger than it really is, when a sudden sharpness reveals the beauty of proximity, the tenderness of intimacy, then as you move from looking into seeing, your sense of delicacy is increased, and your appreciation of complexity grows. To look is an obvious fact; to see is a profound truth. Looking tends by nature to indolently slip into the homogeneous; seeing, instead, being heterogeneous, compromises the eye in the care of your own steps, and in the attention to your own gestures. The yellow lines in the violet's petal, or the number of scales in a butterfly's wing are, under the magnifier, when the intensity of looking becomes seeing, the best guarantee we can have of what variety and detail have to offer us."

"A guarantee?" asked Naphtali of Brussels, ironically.

"Which guarantee?" smiled Ariel of Bruges.

"The guarantee that we will not take advantage of the common-place or the tired phrase to turn a blind eye to the novelty of the exceptional; the guarantee that—as Hillel the Sage put it—we will

not say 'something is known until it has been known through and through,' and we do know that such thoroughness always demands one further look: seeing the one who looks from the relativity of his observation. Believe me: to look is an obvious fact; to see is a profound truth. Looking is an action that will not start without the involvement of the eye; seeing is beyond the eyelid and the eyelashes."

*Looking is in Hebrew* histakel הסתכל*, and seeing* ra'ah ראה*, both verbs which, although usually given as synonyms, will still let us discern each one's specific trait: in the first one,* histakel הסתכל*, the root* kol כל *indicates both the part and the whole, but in a general way.* Ra'ah ראה*, in contrast, can change into* arah ארה*, to pluck off, to gather, thus showing that seeing implies becoming part of what is seen and bearing fruits with it.*

# The Three Years and the Root

"When I was a young man," rose the voice of Rabbi Reuben of Bucharest, "and I knew nothing about nature, I read in the study house that phrase from *Leviticus* 19:23 which says: 'And when ye shall enter the land, and shall have planted all manner of trees for food, then ye shall count the fruit thereof as uncircumcised: three years shall it be as uncircumcised unto you: it shall not be eaten of.' A sentence," went on before his disciples he who was dubbed Big Heart in a Little Body, since he was short and of frail limbs, "a sentence which, in my opinion, displays much wisdom."

The master and his disciples were on board a train bound for Tirana. The landscape they were crossing was under snow, and the mass of dark trees was awaiting better signs from the sky.

"Those three years relate to the root, to the real affirmation of the tree in the ground fostering its development," said Rabbi Reuben of Bucharest.

"But why three and not two, three and not four?" observed Pinchas, the eldest disciple. "I often find all that numerology tiresome and arbitrary."

The master smiled as he looked through the train window, then pensively rolled his afternoon cigarette and replied:

"Every living thing has its pulse, its cycle, its rhythm of expansion and contraction. It thus happens that during those first three years all the tree's energy is polarised downwards, strongly throbbing towards the depths, the same as us, when we start our studies. In this way the root is looking for mineral love, for salts that will caress its beard until such a time when the certainty of absorption is greater than the consciousness of its place. Following a similar process we must wait months, and

even years, for the fertility of the depth to become the gift of the surface, for the spontaneous gesture of our best actions to be able to nourish the spiritual hunger of others. To be sure, sometimes more than three years come to pass before we are able to eat our own Torah fruits, instead of gathering the pieces or crumbs of knowledge handed us by others!"

"Are you suggesting," asked Simeon, another of the disciples of him who was dubbed Big Heart in a Little Body, "are you suggesting that the time consumed in that blind underground labour is inescapable? A human being is not a tree, but moves, is never fixed, travels as we do now. Shall we perhaps, in the manner of cherry trees or rowans, stay for three years in the same place in order for something edible to come out from us?"

Letting out a whiff of smoke, Reuben of Bucharest explained:

"I only know that on my thirtieth birthday I went to spend a summer at my uncle Samuel's farm. I had not seen him since my childhood, and it was he who taught me, recalling the Bible quotation, that the 'Ye shall enter the land' of the *Leviticus* passage has a double meaning: first, to observe what is *below the earth*, meaning the working of the root, the humble task usually neglected by most people; and then there is the application of this same idea to the page we study, for the written signs amount to vegetable seeds, since these too are writing in their lumpy furrows the tasty alphabet of pears and apples. We must time and again go from knowing how to eat to eating what we know; many times, so that for us entering the earth shall be like entering the most beautiful and profound paths of the Torah. What fruit and flower synthesise in the drinking cup has already been humbly analysed by the root, which needs three years to impel towards heaven the power it has been granted by the earth."

*The* Ye shall enter *from* Leviticus *19:23 is but an unhappy and bad translation of the Hebrew* tabou תבא*, ye shall come, ye shall arrive, since this expression—which can moreover be read as* be-ot באת*, in the letter, in the sign—echoes and confirms the Zoharic idea regarding the parallelism between farming rhythms and the reading methods propounded by the Kabbalah.*

# Changing Fear into a Mirror

Every time Lo-Yadua, the Unknown Rabbi, remembered the sentence in Proverbs 1:7: "The fear of the Creator is the beginning of knowledge," he would recall a walk with his master, the Ancient of Days, over the wall of Jerusalem's Old City, a walk in which the latter, outspoken as always, told him:

"It is useless to read in *yir'at Adonai* יראת יהוה our fear of the Creator; it seems to me instead that it is His fear. Observe carefully: the text speaks of 'fear *of* the Creator' meaning 'the Creator's fear', not necessarily implying fearing the Creator."

The tone in which he spoke was not sarcastic, but it was pungent, indeed even aggressive. There was no worse enemy for him than fear, and no advisor more selfish than dread. For this reason he had since his youth taken pains to examine the concept of *yir'at* יראת, or fear, finding in it, among the letters which compose it, a mirror or *re'i* ראי.

"The world is our mirror, and our seeing is the frame," he used to say, "the *tau* setting false limits to an effectively unlimited reality."

"What are you proposing?" asked Lo-Yadua, nibbling a thin branch of lavender. "There are no mirrors without frames or without sharp edges."

It was September, the month in which swifts prepare for their departure, and when figs burst ripe with the sweet pressure of their flesh.

"Everything we look at is looking at us, for there is no distance between the light of the world and the one shining in our eyes. Just as you expose your naked intimacy before the mirror, redressing your face and fearlessly cleaning up your looks, just so should the universe *become the correcting mirror of your actions*. Isn't

it true that if you show anger and scorn to the mirror, it will return it? The same is done by the universe, even if you do not notice; the same is done by reality, even if you do not perceive, between beings and things, and immediately, the exact aping of your gestures and thoughts."

"It may be so," replied Lo-Yadua, "but I still do not understand why our seeing is the frame."

"Neither do I!" laughed the old and crafty master. "But perhaps it may be made clearer by the light of this saying from our Sufi brethren: 'The soul is a mirror whose frame is the body. Turn it around and you will see.' "

> *The Ancient of Days is directly extracting the word* re'i ראי*, mirror, from* yir'at יראת*, fear, in order to weave his parable and bring his disciple to a more intimate and personal understanding of the Bible passage mentioned. The letter remaining after the extraction is* tau ת*, alluding to the world, matter; hence, if we can momentarily dispense with the frame,* the entire universe becomes a mirror.

# The Reverse of Grace

Orah the Plant, daughter of the Unknown Rabbi, had trouble understanding what her father meant by *the reverse of grace is repose; the obverse of repose is perceiving life*.

"But aren't we perceiving it all the time? Isn't it an obvious fact for us?"

"I am afraid most of the time," came Lo-Yadua's reply, "we wander through the world not knowing whence we come or whither we are going. Because of this we must, now and then, do as the masters of old said: stop praying in order to think of God. In other words, to see ourselves seeing, to make thoughts stop, and let our senses entirely open their corollas, without choosing anything or fixing sight or hearing, breath or touch, on anything."

"The concept of grace, though, has fallen into disuse, hasn't it?" said Ora.

"Only to our disgrace. Nowadays we only have left what is gracious, which is a comic version of it. A relief at times, but a poor remedy for the abundance of evils."

"Perhaps the word is no longer used because it is ineffective," Ora insisted.

"Grace ineffective?" the Unknown one smiled. "How can that be ineffective whereby we have the most radiant certainty of being, the most beautiful song of light throbbing between our shoulder blades?"

"Father, ellipsis is your speciality. None of your utterances is ever straightforward."

"It may be because the eye is curved, and the ear has its own labyrinth."

*The Kabbalah assigns several meanings to the word* ḥen חן*, grace. The first one, from which the Unknown One draws his observation on repose, derives from an alliteration: when we reverse the order of its letters,* ḥen חן *can be read* noaḥ*, repose, rest, quiet, an imperative condition for receiving from the world its loftiest gifts of meaning and transcendence. Now, if we follow the Talmudic commentary, and we read* ḥen חן *as the acrostic of* ḥochmah nisteret חוכמה נסתרת*, hidden wisdom, we can understand why the prize of grace comes to whomever knows how, when, and where to make his heart find repose. The Greeks used to call this quiet* ataraxia*, and the Japanese Buddhists find it through* zazen*, the art of learning how to sit still in contemplation.*

## The Law and the Kiss

They say Rabbi Jonah of Cyprus used to proudly hold that: "The Law is a dead kiss; and each kiss is in turn a living transgressor, since from the moment it gives itself with eyes closed it does not know what it is doing." Rabbi Me'ir Yuval of Peking commented, to the contrary: "The kiss is a dead statute if it ignores the living Law which gave it existence." Then the daughter of Me'ir Yuval of Peking came up to them and gave a kiss to Jonah of Cyprus.

"Do you see now?" said the advocate of the kiss. "She does not know yet how to read, and even so, without knowing the Law, she has kissed me."

"You are wrong," the legalist replied. "She has kissed you because I, her father, have taught her the Law which proposes love and respect to elders."

*According to Tradition, Moses died through, or because of, a divine kiss,* be-neshiqah בנשיקה*—probably a heart attack, a passing considered by masters to be the noblest of all possible deaths. During the Italian Renaissance, Bishop Aegidius of Viterbo, at the time under the influence of the Judeo-Spanish exiles, maintained that such a mystic kiss was, at the moment of dying or even before, proof that the Creator was drawing His Spirit with the same swiftness and diligence with which he had bestowed it at the moment of conception. Furthermore, the root* qen קן*, contained within the word for kiss, designates a refuge, a nest. Meanwhile,* shibah שׁיבה*, also included in the word in question, speaks of a return, a coming back, as well as suggesting old age—old age considered as a return, and thus favoured with the possibility that, in the moment of transit towards the future life, divine pity shall take care of its creature, starting with the lips. We must highlight*

*as well the profound significance of the syllable* yesh יש׳*, present in* be-neshiqah בנשיקה*, a root that signifies Being, the Existing One, thus justifying the fact that, according to* Genesis *2:27, life proceeds from a breath insufflated by the Creator from His mouth into our nostrils.*

# The Rabbi and the General

The Roman general Lucius Sextus came to see Rabbi Tzeba the dyer, and told him he wanted to study with him.

"I am very sorry," confessed the Jew while he moved a jar with his hands all rainbow-stained by his trade. "We do not teach."

"You should not react this way," said the general. "After all, we are the rulers of the earth, including this land of yours we occupy now, thus forcing you to pay taxes. Teach me the Torah, and I shall exempt you from it."

"You will pardon me," replied Tzeba, "but we do not teach."

"But I will pay you well, you will receive a great reward. I need to know what this wonderful book of yours, the Torah, says."

"I am sorry," the dyer said, "but we do not teach."

"Please!" broke out the general, seeing that he would get nothing by force. "I am a man who has travelled half the world searching knowledge, and respecting the sages. Come on, old man, teach me the Torah."

"I am truly sorry, we do not teach," once again replied Tzeba the dyer.

"I beg you," Lucius Sextus then implored, falling to his knees. "Knowing is for me a matter of life and death."

And then, finally moved, the old dyer turned to his people's oppressor, and with extraordinary abruptness he snapped:

"On a Sabbath day two Jews climb up on a roof and they jump down the chimney. One comes out white and the other black. Who is going to wash?"

Astonished, as well as excited by the rabbi's unexpected generosity, the general hesitantly answered:

"The one covered in black."

"No," answered the dyer. "The one who came out black looks at the other and thinks: 'I am clean too, why should I go and wash?' "

"That's right," said General Lucius Sextus.

"No," said Tzeba. "It is impossible for two men to jump down a chimney, and one to come out white and the other black."

"Indeed," agreed the Roman.

"No," the dyer said once more. "It is impossible that, being the Sabbath, two Jews will climb up on a roof and jump down the chimney."