

worn away and now it's impossible to make out the names. The records of the burial society were destroyed in the third fire, and no one can remember whether it was Uncle Shakhne who was buried on the right and Aunt Yakhne on the left, or whether it was the other way around.

My former wife Chavele and I will not be lying in the same cemetery—but again that's not part of the story.

1895 (translated by Golda Werman)

IF NOT HIGHER

▼

Early every Friday morning, at the time of the Penitential Prayers, the rabbi of Nemirov would vanish.

He was nowhere to be seen—neither in the synagogue nor in the two study houses nor at a minyan. And he was certainly not at home. His door stood open: whoever wished could go in and out; no one would steal from the rabbi. But not a living creature was within.

Where could the rabbi be? Where should he be? In heaven, no doubt. A rabbi has plenty of business to take care of just before the Days of Awe. Jews, God bless them, need livelihood, peace, health, and good matches. They want to be pious and good, but our sins are so great, and Satan of the thousand eyes watches the whole earth from one end to the other. What he sees, he reports; he denounces, informs. Who can help us if not the rabbi!

That's what the people thought.

But once a Litvak came, and he laughed. You know the Litvaks. They think little of the holy books but stuff themselves with Talmud and law. So this Litvak points to a passage in the Gemara—it sticks in your eyes—where it is written that even Moses our Teacher did not ascend to heaven during his lifetime but remained suspended two and a half feet below. Go argue with a Litvak!

So where can the rabbi be?

"That's not my business," said the Litvak, shrugging. Yet all the while—what a Litvak can do!—he is scheming to find out.

That same night, right after the evening prayers, the Litvak steals into the rabbi's room, slides under the rabbi's bed, and waits. He'll

watch all night and discover where the rabbi vanishes and what he does during the Penitential Prayers.

Someone else might have gotten drowsy and fallen asleep, but a Litvak is never at a loss; he recites a whole tractate of the Talmud by heart.

At dawn he hears the call to prayers.

The rabbi has already been awake for a long time. The Litvak has heard him groaning for a whole hour.

Whoever has heard the rabbi of Nemirov groan knows how much sorrow for all Israel, how much suffering, lies in each groan. A man's heart might break, hearing it. But a Litvak is made of iron; he listens and remains where he is. The rabbi—long life to him!—lies on the bed, and the Litvak under the bed.

Then the Litvak hears the beds in the house begin to creak; he hears people jumping out of their beds, mumbling a few Jewish words, pouring water on their fingernails, banging doors. Everyone has left. It is again quiet and dark; a bit of light from the moon shines through the shutters.

(Afterward, the Litvak admitted that when he found himself alone with the rabbi a great fear took hold of him. Goose pimples spread across his skin, and the roots of his sidelocks pricked him like needles. A trifle: to be alone with the rabbi at the time of the Penitential Prayers! But a Litvak is stubborn. So he quivered like a fish in water and remained where he was.)

Finally the rabbi—long life to him!—arises. First, he does what befits a Jew. Then he goes to the clothes closet and takes out a bundle of peasant clothes: linen trousers, high boots, a coat, a big felt hat, and a long, wide leather belt studded with brass nails. The rabbi gets dressed. From his coat pocket dangles the end of a heavy peasant rope.

The rabbi goes out, and the Litvak follows him.

On the way the rabbi stops in the kitchen, bends down, takes an ax from under the bed, puts it into his belt, and leaves the house. The Litvak trembles but continues to follow.

The hushed dread of the Days of Awe hangs over the dark streets. Every once in a while a cry rises from some minyan reciting the Penitential Prayers, or from a sickbed. The rabbi hugs the sides of the streets, keeping to the shade of the houses. He glides from house to house, and the Litvak after him. The Litvak hears the sound of his heartbeats mingling with the sound of the rabbi's heavy steps. But he keeps on going and follows the rabbi to the outskirts of the town.

A small wood stands just outside the town.

The rabbi—long life to him!—enters the wood. He takes thirty or forty steps and stops by a small tree. The Litvak, overcome with amazement, watches the rabbi take the ax out of his belt and strike the tree. He hears the tree creak and fall. The rabbi chops the tree into logs and the logs into sticks. Then he makes a bundle of the wood and ties it with the rope in his pocket. He puts the bundle of wood on his back, shoves the ax back into his belt, and returns to the town.

He stops at a back street beside a small, broken-down shack and knocks at the window.

"Who is there?" asks a frightened voice. The Litvak recognizes it as the voice of a sick Jewish woman.

"I," answers the rabbi in the accent of a peasant.

"Who is I?"

Again the rabbi answers in Russian. "Vassil."

"Who is Vassil, and what do you want?"

"I have wood to sell, very cheap." And not waiting for the woman's reply, he goes into the house.

The Litvak steals in after him. In the gray light of early morning he sees a poor room with broken, miserable furnishings. A sick woman, wrapped in rags, lies on the bed. She complains bitterly, "Buy? How can I buy? Where will a poor widow get money?"

"I'll lend it to you," answers the supposed Vassil. "It's only six cents."

"And how will I ever pay you back?" asks the poor woman, groaning.

"Foolish one," says the rabbi reproachfully. "See, you are a poor, sick Jew, and I am ready to trust you with a little wood. I am sure you'll pay. While you, you have such a great and mighty God and you don't trust him for six cents."

"And who will kindle the fire?" asks the widow. "Have I the strength to get up? My son is at work."

"I'll kindle the fire," answers the rabbi.

As the rabbi put the wood into the oven he recited, in a groan, the first portion of the Penitential Prayers.

As he kindled the fire and the wood burned brightly, he recited, a bit more joyously, the second portion of the Penitential Prayers. When the fire was set, he recited the third portion, and then he shut the stove.

The Litvak who saw all this became a disciple of the rabbi. And ever after, when another disciple tells how the rabbi of

Nemirov ascends to heaven at the time of the Penitential Prayers, the Litvak does not laugh. He only adds quietly, "If not higher."

1900 (translated by Marie Syrkin)

A CONVERSATION

The day was warm, as befitting a holiday, and two men set out for a walk outside the town—Shakhne, tall and lean, among the last of the old followers of the rebbe of Kotsk, and Zerakh, also lean, but short, a relic of the old Hasidim of Belz.¹ As young men they had been sworn enemies. Shakhne had led the Kotsk Hasidim in their fight against the Belzers; Zerakh, the Belz Hasidim against the followers of Kotsk. Now that the dynasty of Kotsk was no longer in its glory and Belz too had lost its fire, the two old men had quit their factions, leaving their study houses to younger men, stronger in body but punier in spirit.

They had made peace beside the study-house stove, in winter. Now, on the first of the intermediate days of Passover, they were taking a stroll together.

The sun shone in the distant blue sky. Flocks of birds flew about looking for their last year's nests. Grass sprouted from the ground, the attendant angel almost visible in his presence, encouraging each new blade to shoot up and grow!

Shakhne opened the conversation: "The Hasidim of Kotsk—I mean the Hasidim of old, there's no point talking about today's—authentic Kotsk Hasidim don't put much stock in the Haggadah."

"They don't care much for the Haggadah, only for the *kneydlakh*, the matza balls in the soup," Zerakh smiled.

"Don't joke about the *kneydlakh*," said Shakhne earnestly. "Do you know the relevance of the text 'You shall not return a runaway slave to his master'?"²

"For me," said the Belzer with proud humility, "it's enough to know the intention of the prayers."

Shakhne pretended not to hear. "The plain meaning of the text is clear: When a slave, a servant, a serf, runs away, the Torah forbids us to catch him, tie him up, and return him to the nobleman, to his

"But if it was only a midrash that he was repeating, what is his great accomplishment?"

Shakhne halted and turned earnestly to his companion:

"First of all, you Belz fool, no one is obliged to be original. 'There is no anterior and posterior in the Torah.' The old is new and the new is old. Second, he revealed why it is that we recite the Haggadah, even the catalogue of plagues, in a mournful, melancholy chant. And third, he explained the verse 'Israel does not rejoice in the manner of the nations.'⁷ Don't engage in vulgar celebration like a barbarian. You are not a peasant! Vengeance is not Jewish!"

1900 (translated by Ruth R. Wisse)

BETWEEN TWO MOUNTAINS

▼

You have certainly heard of the Brisker rov and the Bialer rebbe.¹ But not everyone knows that the saintly rebbe of Biala, Reb Noahke, had originally been a distinguished pupil of the Brisker rov, and only after studying with the rov for many years had he disappeared, remaining in self-imposed exile for several years before surfacing again in Biala.²

Reb Noahke had left for the following reason: At the yeshiva of Brisk, they had studied Torah, but the rebbe felt that the Torah they studied was sterile. For instance, they learned the laws governing the conduct of women, or the regulations for meat and dairy, or those pertaining to commerce. Very good. Comes X or Y for a ruling, or a servant to ask a question, or a woman with a problem—in that moment Scripture comes alive. It bursts into life and has authority in the world. But without these questioners, the Torah—that is, the revealed part of the Law—is arid. This was not, the Bialer rebbe felt, the living Torah. And Torah must live!

In Brisk it was forbidden to study any kabbalistic texts. The Brisker rov was a misnaged, and by nature as vengeful as a snake. If anyone was found with a Zohar or a Pardes, the rov would curse, and threaten the miscreant with excommunication. Once, when a student was caught with a book of kabbalah, the rov allowed Gentiles to shave off his beard. What do you think happened? The man lost

his mind and fell into the blackest despondency. And what was more amazing, no miracle worker could help him! There was no monkeying with the Brisker rov! On the other hand, how could anyone leave the Brisker rov's yeshiva?

In fact, for a long time Reb Noahke could not make up his mind to go, until one night he had a dream. He dreamed that the Brisker rov came to him and said, "Come, Noahke, I will lead you to the earthly paradise." He took him by the hand and led the way. They came to an enormous palace. In the palace there were no doors and no windows, except for the door by which they entered. In spite of this, the palace was full of light, because the walls were made of crystal—or so it seemed to Reb Noahke—and gave off a luminous gleam.

The two men walked on and on, endlessly.

"Hold on to my caftan," said the Brisker rov. "In this place there are so many chambers that should you break away from me you will be lost forever."

The rebbe did as he was told and they walked farther and farther, but nowhere along the way did the rebbe see a single piece of furniture, not even a bench.

"This is not a place for sitting," explained the Brisker rov. "Here you must keep walking forward." Each chamber they passed was larger and brighter than the one before; and the walls gleamed here with one color, there with another; some rooms were multicolored, others were all the colors of the rainbow. But they encountered no living person on their way.

The rebbe grew weary of walking. He broke out in a cold sweat and felt a chill in every limb. His eyes began to ache from the constant glare. He was overcome by a powerful longing, a yearning for his fellow Jews, for friends, for the people of Israel. This unpeopled world was no laughing matter!

"Do not wish for anyone," said the Brisker rov. "This palace is only for me and you. One day you too will be the Brisker rov."

The rebbe grew even more frightened and grasped at the wall in order not to fall. But the wall scalded him—not like fire, but like ice.

"Rabbi!" he cried. "The walls are not crystal, but ice, plain ice."

The Brisker rov did not answer.

Again the rebbe cried: "Master, lead me out of here! I don't want to be alone with you. I want to be with the people of Israel."

No sooner had he uttered these words than the Brisker rov disappeared, and Reb Noahke was left all alone in the palace.

He had no idea in which direction to go. A cold fear came at him from the walls. And the yearning to see another Jew, even if he were a cobbler or a tailor, grew ever more intense, until he burst into tears.

"Master of the Universe," he pleaded. "Take me away from here. I would rather be in hell with the rest of Israel than remain here all by myself."

At that very moment there appeared before him an ordinary little Jew with a coachman's red belt tied around his hips and a long whip in his hand. Silently, the little Jew took hold of the rebbe's sleeve and led him out of the palace. Then he disappeared.

This was the dream that had appeared to Reb Noahke.

When he awoke before dawn, just as the sky was turning gray, he understood that this had been no ordinary dream. He dressed quickly, intending to run to the study house to have his dream explained by the scholars who lodged there. As he passed through the marketplace, he noticed a covered wagon standing in the square. It was a large, old-fashioned, horse-drawn covered wagon, and next to it stood the driver, wearing a red belt around his hips and with a long whip in his hand—just like the little Jew in his dream.

The rebbe realized that something lay behind this. So he approached the driver and asked, "In which direction are you headed?"

"Not in yours," the driver answered quite brusquely.

"Even so," entreated the rebbe, "perhaps I could come along?"

The driver hesitated a moment before answering. "Why couldn't a young fellow like you go on foot?" he asked. "Do your own traveling."

"And where would I go?"

"Wherever your eyes lead," the driver answered, turning away.

"It's no concern of mine."

The rebbe understood, and set out on his self-imposed banishment.

As I have said, he surfaced again several years later in Biala. (The story of how this happened has been passed down by word of mouth, so I won't retell it here, although it would set your ears on fire.) About a year, more or less, after the rebbe's reappearance, Reb Yekhiel, a prominent citizen of Biala, hired me as a tutor for his children.

At first, I did not want to take up the position. Reb Yekhiel, you must understand, was one of those old-fashioned, wealthy Jews. He endowed each of his daughters with a dowry of a thousand gold

pieces, and he married them into the most distinguished rabbinical families. In fact, his last daughter-in-law was the Brisker rov's daughter.

From this you may conclude that if the Brisker rov and the other in-laws were enemies of Hasidism, so Reb Yekhiel must of necessity be an enemy too; whereas I was a Hasid, a disciple of the Bialer rebbe. How, then, could I have dealings with such a house?

Nevertheless, I was drawn to Eiala. To be able to live in the same town as the rebbe was not a small consideration. I turned the matter over in my mind—and I went.

Reb Yekhiel turned out to be a truly unassuming and decent man. I would even vouch for the fact that his own heart was powerfully drawn to the rebbe. Because, to tell the truth, he was not much of a scholar. He looked at the Brisker rov, as they say, with the blank eye of a rooster contemplating a human being. So he did not forbid me to follow the Bialer rebbe, but he himself kept his distance. Whenever I brought up the subject of my rebbe, he pretended to yawn, although it was obvious to me that he was listening with both ears. But his son, the Brisker rov's son-in-law, frowned and gave me a look of anger and derision. He did not argue with me, however, being by nature a man of few words.

The day came when Reb Yekhiel's daughter-in-law, the Brisker rov's daughter, was about to give birth. Certainly, there is nothing out of the ordinary about a woman giving birth; but that was not the whole story. It was known that because the Brisker rov had once ordered a Hasid to be shaved—that is, to have his beard and sidelocks shorn by Gentiles—the rov's good name had been tarnished in the eyes of the saintly men of his generation. Both his sons died within five to six years after the event—may God protect you from such a fate! And none of his three daughters had male offspring. In addition, all three of his daughters, poor souls, were prone to painful labor, during which they were each time closer to the next world than to this one. But since it was the will of heaven that there should be disputes between misnagdim and Hasidim, everyone knew that this was a punishment imposed by the holy men of his generation on the Brisker rov. But the Brisker rov himself, despite his luminous eyes, did not see it! And perhaps he did not want to see it. He continued to carry on his campaign of opposition to the Hasidim with an iron fist, with excommunications and denunciations, just as in former times.

I felt very sorry for Gitele (that was the name of the Brisker rov's

daughter)—first, because she had a Jewish soul, and second, because her Jewish soul was virtuous. Not a single poverty-stricken bride got married without her assistance—that was how generous she was.

To think that such a saintly being should have to pay for her father's severity! That was why, as soon I noticed that the midwife had begun to hurry about the house in preparation for the delivery, I set about moving heaven and earth to persuade the family to send for the Bialer rebbe. Let them send a note without a fee—as if he wanted or needed the money! The Bialer rebbe did not believe in fees.

I tried first to talk to the Brisker rov's son-in-law. I knew that his soul was bound up with Gitele's, since no matter how they tried to conceal it, the harmony between husband and wife radiated from every corner of the house and from all their gestures and expressions. Nevertheless, he was the Brisker rov's son-in-law! He spat and walked away, leaving me standing with my mouth open.

So I approached Reb Yekhiel himself. He answered: "She is the Brisker rov's daughter! I would not do such a thing to the Brisker rov, not even if her life depended on it, Heaven forbid."

I tried Reb Yekhiel's wife—a good woman, but common. She answered me as follows: "If my husband told me to, I would instantly send the rebbe my best holiday headscarf and my earrings, both of them treasures that cost a mint. But without his say-so, I wouldn't send even half a penny; not even a crumb."

"But just a note. What harm can it do?"

"Without my husband's knowledge, I do nothing!" she responded, exactly as a decent Jewish wife ought to answer. She turned her back on me, but I noticed that it was only to hide her tears. A mother's heart knows, and her heart had already sensed the danger.

So it was that as soon as I heard the first scream, I myself ran for the rebbe.

"Shmyeh," he said to me. "What can I do? I will pray for her."

"Give me something, Rebbe," I pleaded, "anything to help the woman in her labor. A charm, a coin, a talisman . . . something with your blessing."

"God forbid! It will only make things worse," he replied. "Without faith such things can do harm. And she has no faith in these things."

What could I do? These were the first days of the Sukkot holiday. Gitele was having a difficult childbirth, but I could be of no help. I might as well stay in the rebbe's house. I was quite at home there; so I thought that if I spent every moment of my time gazing imploringly at the rebbe, perhaps he would take pity and relent.

Word came that things were bad. Gitele's pains had already lasted three days. Everything that could be done had been done: there were prayers in the synagogue; they had measured the graves in the cemetery; they had burned a hundred pounds of candles in the synagogue and in the study house, not to mention collecting a fortune in charity!¹³ What more is there to say? All the clothes closets stood open, a mountain of coins of all kinds lay on the table. The poor came in and helped themselves to as much as they wanted.

I took the whole thing very much to heart.

"Rebbe," I said. "After all, it is written, 'Charity saves from death.'"

He answered as if he had not understood: "Perhaps the Brisker rov will come."

At that very instant Reb Yekhiel entered the room. He ignored the rebbe, as if he did not see him, but turned instead to me. "Shmyeh," he said, catching hold of my lapel. "There is a wagon waiting out back. Get in and drive to the Brisker rov. Tell him to come." Obviously, he already sensed what was at stake, because he added: "Let him see for himself what is going on. Let him decide what to do!"

His face bore such a look—how else to describe it? Corpses have been known to look better.

So I set off, thinking to myself that since the rebbe knew that the Brisker rov was returning with me, something was bound to come of it, perhaps a reconciliation. That is to say, a reconciliation not between the Brisker rov and the Bialer rebbe, since the two of them had never fought each other, but between their two factions. Because, after all, when the Brisker rov came to Biala, he would see for himself how things were. He had eyes, after all.

But, obviously, Heaven does not encourage easy solutions. We had no sooner driven out of Biala than a large cloud suddenly surged across the sky, a cloud as heavy and black as pitch! Suddenly, there arose such a gust of wind as if demons were flying in every direction at once. A peasant like my driver understands such things, so he crossed himself and, pointing his whip at the sky, announced that we were going to have a difficult journey, Heaven help us. Even as he spoke, the wind increased, piercing the cloud as if it were tearing apart a sheet of paper. The wind began to chase one piece of cloud into and over another, as if herding ice floes on a river. Clouds, two and three stories high, were already hovering over my head.

At first, I was not even afraid. Getting drenched was nothing new

to me and I am not afraid of thunder. First, because it never thunders at Sukkot time, and second, what evil could befall me so soon after Rosh Hashana? We Hasidim of Biala knew that for an entire year after the rebbe had blown the ram's horn for the New Year, thunder could do us no harm. But suddenly I felt a smack across my face, as if I had been struck with a whip. Once, twice, three times, and the color drained from my face. It was clear to me that the heavens were slapping my face, that they were driving me back.

And the driver added his plea: "Let's turn back."

I knew, however, that I had been sent on a matter of life and death. Sitting on the wagon in the thundering storm, I could hear the groans of the woman in labor and the cracking knuckles of the Brisker rov's son-in-law as he wrung his hands; and I saw before me Reb Yekhiel's dark face with its sunken, burning eyes. "Drive on," he pleaded. "Drive!" So on we drove.

Still it continued to pour. The water streamed down from above and splashed from beneath the wagon wheels and the horses' hoofs. The road flooded, until it was entirely submerged, and a foam hovered over the water. It seemed as if the wagon were beginning to float. And as if this were not enough, we had also lost our way. But I made it through!

I returned with the Brisker rov on Hoshana Raba, the seventh day of Sukkot.

If truth be told, as soon as the Brisker rov climbed on the wagon, the storm subsided. The clouds split apart and the sun shone through the crack, so that we drove into Biala hale and dry. Even the driver noticed the change in the weather and remarked in his language, "A mighty rabbi." Or perhaps he said, "A great rabbi." I don't remember which.

But the main thing was our arrival at Reb Yekhiel's house.

The women fell on the Brisker rov like a swarm of locusts. They virtually prostrated themselves before him and wept. There was no sound from the next room, where the woman in labor lay, either because she could not be heard above the lamentations of the others, or—I suspected the worst—because, Heaven forbid, she no longer had the strength to groan. Reb Yekhiel did not even notice us. He stood with his forehead pressed against a windowpane, apparently to cool his burning head. Nor did the Brisker rov's son-in-law turn around to greet us. He had his face to the wall, and I could clearly make out his body and his head trembling against it.

I thought I would collapse with tears and sorrow. All my limbs, my very soul, seemed to shiver with cold.

But we are dealing here with the Brisker rov! Here was a pillar of steel, I tell you! He was very-tall, with stature "from the shoulder and up," as they once said of King Saul.⁴ He could inspire the awe of a king. His beard was long and white. I remember as if it were yesterday how one tip of his beard was tucked under his belt, while the other quivered above it. His eyebrows—white, thick, and long—hid half his face. When he raised his brows—God in heaven!—the women fell back as if they were retreating from thunder. Such eyes he had! Knives, naked butcher knives, glinted in his eyes. He roared like a lion: "Women, out of the way!" Then more softly: "And where is my daughter?"

He was shown to her room, and I was left utterly overcome. Such eyes! Such a look! Such a voice! He was altogether different from anything I was used to. The Bialer rebbe's eyes shone with such kindness and such mildness that they brought joy into your heart. When the rebbe looked at you, it was as if you were being showered with gold. And his sweet voice—God in heaven!—it caught at your heart and caressed it so tenderly, so soothingly. No one was afraid of him—Heaven forbid. Instead, he melted your soul with the sweetness of love, so that it yearned to leave your body and unite with the rebbe's soul, like a butterfly drawn to bright flame. But the Brisker rov was fear and trepidation. The majesty of ancient times. That such a man should enter the room of a woman in labor!

I was terrified. "He will reduce her to a pile of bones," I thought. So I ran to the rebbe.

The rebbe greeted me at the door with a smile. "Did you see?" he asked. "Did you see the glory of the Torah?"

I calmed down. If the rebbe is smiling, I thought, then all must be well.

And, in fact, all was well. Gitele delivered her child on the eighth day of Sukkot. And the day after that, Simkhat Torah, found the Brisker rov expounding the Torah at the table. I would actually have preferred to have been elsewhere, at someone else's table, but I was afraid to leave, especially since I was needed for the quorum. They were about to recite the blessing *Nivrahk Aleynu*.⁵

How can I describe for you the Brisker rov's commentary on the Torah? If the Torah is a sea, then the Brisker rov was the leviathan in that sea. With one plunge he swam through ten tractates; with one sweep he encompassed the Talmud and the Commentaries. His words resounded and surged, sizzled and boiled, just as the real sea

is said to do. He made my head swim. But it is written, "The heart knows the bitterness of the soul."⁶ My heart did not rejoice in the holiday. That was when I remembered the rebbe's dream, and I froze. The sun shone through the window and there was no lack of wine on the table; I saw that the entire company was perspiring. And I? I was as cold as ice. I knew that over there, at the rebbe's table, they were expounding another kind of Torah. There it was bright and warm. Every word was interwoven with love and steeped in ecstasy. One could sense the angels fluttering around the room; one could almost hear the rustle of their large white wings. O God of the Universe! But it was not possible to leave.

Suddenly, the Brisker rov interrupted himself and asked: "What kind of Hasidic rebbe do you have here?"

"A certain Noah," someone answered.

It cut me to the quick to hear this "a certain Noah." Ah, the fawning flattery of such a response!

"A miracle worker?" the rov asked again.

"Very few miracles. We don't hear of them. The women say he performs wonders, but who listens to them?"

"He just takes money and performs no miracles?"

So they told him the truth, that the rebbe seldom took money and gave a lot of it away.

The Brisker rov grew thoughtful. "Is he a scholar?"

"They say a great one."

"Where is he from, this Noah?"

No one knew, so I was obliged to answer. This led to a conversation between me and the Brisker rov.

"Was this Noah, by any chance, ever in Brisk?" he asked.

"Was the rebbe ever in Brisk?" I stammered. "I think he was."

"Aha!" the rov exclaimed. "One of his followers." And I had the impression that he looked at me as if I were a spider.

He turned back to the company. "I once had a student," he said, "whose name was Noah. He even had a good mind. But he was drawn to the other side. If I told him once, I told him twice. . . . And I would have told him a third time. I would have warned him, but he disappeared. Could this be the same man?"

"Who knows?"

So the rov began to describe his student: a thin man, small, with a black beard, curly black sidelocks, a dreamy type with a soft voice, and so on.

The company answered that it was possible that this was he; it was very likely.

I thanked God that at that moment they began the blessing. But after the blessing something happened that I would never have dreamed possible.

The Brisker rov rose from his chair, took me aside, and whispered: "Take me to my former student, your rebbe. But take care! No one must know."

Obviously, I obeyed. But on the way I asked with trepidation, "Brisker Rov, with what intention do you pay this visit?"

He answered me plainly: "It occurred to me during the blessing that up to now I have judged him behind his back. I want to see—I want to see with my own eyes. And maybe," he added after a while, "God will help me and I will be able to rescue my pupil."

"You know," he continued jestingly, "if your rebbe is the same Noah who once studied with me, he could become one of the great men of Israel. He might even one day become the rov of Brisk."

Then I knew for certain that my rebbe was the same man, and my heart began to pound.

So the two mountains converged. And the fact that I was not crushed between them I consider to be a miracle from heaven.

It was the habit of the Bialer rebbe—may his memory be blessed—to send his Hasidim out for a walk around the city on Simkhat Torah, while he himself sat on his balcony and looked on with pleasure.

Biala was not then as it is today. It was, at that time, still a little town. All the houses were small and built low to the ground, with the exception of the synagogue and the rebbe's study house. The rebbe's balcony was on the second floor, and from there he could see everything as clearly as if it were on the palm of his hand—the hills to the east, and to the west the river.

The rebbe would sit on the balcony, surveying the scene. When he noticed that a few of the Hasidim were strolling about silently, he threw them the beginning of a melody. They caught it up and walked away singing. One group after another would then pass before the balcony on their way out of the town, singing with true joy, with genuine delight in the Torah. And the rebbe never moved away from the balcony.

This time, however, the rebbe apparently heard a different kind of step; so he arose and went out to meet the Brisker rov.

"Greetings, Rabbi," he saluted him humbly in his sweet voice.

"Greetings to you, Noah," the Brisker rov responded.

"Please sit down, Rabbi."

The Brisker rov sat and the Bialer rebbe stood before him.

"Tell me, Noah," the Brisker rov said, raising his eyebrows, "why did you run away from my yeshiva? What did you lack there?"

"What I lacked, Rabbi," Noahke answered with composure, "was air. I could never catch my breath."

"What do you mean? What are you talking about, Noah?"

"It was not I," explained the rebbe in a soft voice, "but my soul that lacked air."

"Why, Noah?"

"Your Torah, Rabbi, is nothing but law. It is without pity. Your Torah contains not a spark of compassion. And that is why it is without joy, without air to breathe. It is nothing but steel and iron—iron commandments, copper laws. It is a very refined Torah, suitable for scholars, for the select few."

The Brisker rov was silent, so the rebbe continued: "Tell me, Rabbi, what have you got for ordinary people? For the woodchopper, the butcher, the tradesman, the simple man? And, most especially, for the sinful man? What do you have to offer those who are *not* scholars?"

The Brisker rov maintained his silence, as if he had not understood what was being said. Still the Bialer rebbe stood before him and continued speaking in his mild voice.

"Forgive me, Rabbi, but I must speak the truth. Your teaching was rigid and dry, because it dealt only with the body, not with the soul of the Torah."

"The soul?" asked the Brisker rov, rubbing his high forehead.

"Certainly. Your Torah, as I have said, is only for the privileged few, for the learned, not for the ordinary man. But the Torah must be for all. God's emanation must rest on everyone, because the Torah is the soul of all the people of Israel."

"And your Torah, Noah?"

"Would you like to see it, Rabbi?"

"See the Torah?" The Brisker rov was astonished.

"Come, I will show you. I will show you the glory and the joy that radiate from it and touch all of Israel."

The Brisker rov remained motionless.

"Rabbi, I beseech you. Come. It is not far." He led him out on the balcony. I followed silently.

Nevertheless, the rebbe sensed my presence. "You may come along, Shmyeh," he said. "Today, you too shall see. And the Brisker rov will see. You will both witness Simkhat Torah, a true rejoicing in the Torah."

And I saw the same thing that I saw every Simkhat Torah, but this time I saw it differently, as if a curtain had fallen from my eyes.

The sky stretched above us, enormous, infinite, and of such a brilliant blue that it was a delight for the eye to behold. Across the sky floated white silvery clouds. When you looked closely at them, the clouds actually seemed to be trembling, as if they were dancing in joy at Simkhat Torah. Below, a broad green belt girded the town. Its color was a dark green, but so vibrant that the breath of life itself seemed to waft from the blades of grass. Now and again, little flames appeared to dance among the tufts of grass, each time in a different spot, as if embracing and caressing them.

Across the meadow with its many little flames strolled group after group of Hasidim. Their satin caftans, even those caftans made of cheaper cotton, glittered like mirrors, the tattered ones as well as the whole. The flames between the blades of grass flickered up around the shining holiday coats, so that they seemed to be dancing around each Hasid with love and ecstasy. And all the groups of Hasidim looked up at the rebbe with an extraordinary passion. I saw clearly how their thirsty eyes sucked in the light that shone from the rebbe's face as he stood on the balcony. The more light they absorbed, the louder they sang, ever louder and louder, ever more joyful, more holy.

Each group sang its own melody. But in the air, all the melodies and all the voices merged, so that only one tune reached the rebbe's balcony, as if they were all singing one song. Everything sang—the sky, the constellations above, and the earth below. The soul of the world sang. Everything sang!

God in heaven! I seemed to be dissolving in sweetness.

But it was not to be.

"We must say the afternoon prayer," the Brisker rov suddenly announced in his harsh voice—and everything vanished.

Silence fell. The curtain closed again before my eyes. Above me, an ordinary sky, and below, ordinary pasture; ordinary Hasidim in torn caftans murmuring old tattered fragments of song. The flames were extinguished. I looked at the rebbe. His face too was somber.

They did not reach an understanding. The Brisker rov remained a misnaged, just as before. And that was how he left Biala.

Yet their meeting did have some effect. The rov never again persecuted Hasidim.

Their hearts in their throats, they went back home. The magician was gone. The table, though, was just as they had left it. They fingered the cushions, poured the wine, and broke the matza—and only then, realizing that their guest had been the Prophet Elijah, did they sit down to have a merry seder.

1904 (translated by Hillel Halkin)

THREE GIFTS

THE SCALES OF HEAVEN

Once, long ago, a Jew died somewhere in this world.

Well, when a Jew dies, he dies. No ones lives forever. He was given a proper funeral and buried with all the honors.

The gravestone was laid in place, a son said the Mourner's Prayer, and the dead man's soul flew up to heaven to be tried by a tribunal of angels.

It arrived to find the balance used for weighing good and bad deeds already waiting for it.

The counsel for the defense, who was none other than the dead man's former conscience, stepped up with a snow-white bag in his hand and stood by the right-hand scale.

The counsel for the prosecution, who was none other than the dead man's evil urges, stepped up with a bag smeared with dirt and stood by the left-hand scale.

The white bag contained the man's good deeds, the dirty bag his bad ones. When the defense counsel poured the good deeds onto the right-hand scale, they smelled like the finest fragrance and shone like the stars in the sky. When the prosecutor poured the bad deeds onto the left-hand scale, they were, God help us, as black as coal and smelled like a barrel of pitch.

The poor soul stood gaping. It never had dreamed that there could be such a difference between "good" and "bad." Down below,

in the world it had come from, it often couldn't tell them apart and confused one with the other.

The scales floated slowly up and down. One moment one was higher, the next the other. The needle of the balance shifted back and forth, now a hairsbreadth to the left, now a hairsbreadth to the right.

Never more than a hairsbreadth; the scales swayed imperceptibly. The man was an ordinary Jew—not much of a sinner and certainly no saint. His good deeds were as small as his bad ones: little crumbs, little bits of things, so tiny you hardly could see them.

Still, each time the needle moved a hair to the right, there was rejoicing in the heavens; each time it moved back to the left, there was such a sigh of sorrow that it reached all the way to the mercy seat.

Slowly, single-mindedly, the two angels emptied their bags, bit by bit and crumb by crumb, like Jews on Simkhat Torah bidding penny by penny for the right to carry the first Torah.¹

But sooner or later every well must run dry. The two bags were finally empty.

"Finished?" asked the bailiff of the court, an angel himself.

The counsel for the defense and the counsel for the prosecution both turned their bags inside out: nothing was left. The bailiff stepped up to look at the balance.

He looked and he looked, and the longer he looked, the clearer it became that he was looking at something that had never happened before since the day the world was created.

"What's taking you so long?" asked the chief judge.

"It's a tie! The needle is right in the middle."

The good and bad deeds weighed exactly the same amount.

"Are you sure?" asked the chief judge of the Heavenly Court.

"Absolutely!"

The court recessed to consult and returned with the following verdict:

"Since its bad deeds do not outweigh its good ones, this soul cannot be condemned to hell.

"On the other hand, since its good deeds do not outweigh its bad ones, it cannot be admitted to heaven either.

"We therefore sentence it to be homeless.

"Let it wander back and forth between the heavens and the earth until God remembers it and calls it to Him in His mercy."

The soul was led out of court by the bailiff, bitterly bewailing its fate.

"What are you crying for?" asked the bailiff. "You may never know the joys of paradise, but you won't have to suffer the torments of Gehenna either. Fair is fair!"

But the soul was not comforted. "Better the greatest tortures," it replied, "than nothing at all. There's nothing more awful than nothing!"

The bailiff felt sorry for the soul and gave it a piece of advice.

"Go, my little soul," he said, "and return to the world of living men. Don't bother to look back, because what can you see from down there? Nothing but the stars—and the stars are bright but cold creatures that have no pity. You mustn't expect them to intercede with God for anyone.

"Only the saints in paradise will put in a word for a poor, lost soul like you. And they—do you hear me, my little soul?—like to be brought gifts. That's what the saints are like these days," confided the bailiff ruefully. And he went on:

"Fly down to the world of living men, my little soul, and take a good look around you. If you see any deed that is perfectly good, take it and bring it back to heaven; it will make a fine gift for the saints. Just knock on the gate and tell the angel on duty that I asked for it.

"Once you've brought them three gifts, the saints will see to it that the gates of paradise are opened to you. They won't hold your past against you. They don't like aristocrats. There's nothing they like more than a common soul that's managed to work its way up."

THE FIRST GIFT

And so the poor little soul flew back down to the world of living men to seek gifts for the saints in paradise. It flew hither and thither, over cities, towns, and hamlets; through brilliant sunshine, torrid heat, and foul weather with needle-sharp rain; in and out of cloudless summers that ended in showers of gossamers and winters with their endless snows—looking and looking until it felt that its eyes would pop out.

Most of all, it looked for Jews. And as soon as it saw one, it flew down to look even more closely. Could it perhaps be about to witness some act of great devotion to God?

Sometimes, at night, it even peered through the slats of shutters

in the hope of finding one of God's fragrant flowers—that rare bloom, a perfect good deed—in the quiet room of some town.

In vain! Often it sprang away from the window with a shudder or in a state of shock.

Thus, the seasons and the years went by and the soul grew melancholy. It had seen whole cities turned into graveyards; graveyards plowed into fields; forests cut down by the ax; stones ground by water into sand; riverbeds moved from their place; stars fall by the thousands from the sky; souls fly by the millions up to heaven—and yet never once did God remember it, nor did it find a good deed that was perfect.

"This world," thought the soul, "is such a poor place; human beings are so mediocre; their souls are so gray and their deeds are so petty: where is one to find anything special? I might as well have been condemned to wander about homeless forever."

It was in the middle of this thought when something flared red in the night. The soul looked down and saw that the light came from the window of a house.

Inside the house masked robbers were holding up a wealthy Jew. One of them held a burning torch while another pressed a gleaming knife to the man's breast and exclaimed: "Don't make a move, Jew, or this blade will come out your back." The rest of the gang was busy ransacking chests and closets and taking everything of value.

The Jew stood regarding the knife with perfect calm. Not an eyebrow flickered, not a hair stirred in the white beard that came nearly down to his waist. It was as though the whole matter failed to concern him. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh, he thought; praised be the Lord's Holy Name! And his pale lips seemed to murmur, "I wasn't born with any of this and I can't take it with me when I die."

He remained untroubled even when the last drawer of the last chest was yanked open and out came bags of silver, gold, precious stones, and other valuables. Indifferent to parting with it all, he simply looked on in silence.

Yet all of a sudden, as the robbers were taking one last little bag from its hiding place, he gave a start. Eyes ablaze, he raised his right arm protectively and opened his mouth to cry out.

"Don't move!"

A hot jet of red blood spurted out in place of a cry, spraying the little bag. The knife had done its work.

The robbers fell on the bag and ripped it open, certain that it held the most precious, the most valuable possession of all.

They were wrong. The Jew's blood had been shed for nothing. The bag contained no gold, no silver, no jewels—nothing, indeed, that had the slightest worth in this world. Its only contents were a bit of earth from the Holy Land that the rich Jew had wished to be buried with when he died. It was this he had laid down his life for.

The soul seized a handful of the bloody earth and flew straight to the gates of heaven with it.

The first gift had been brought.

THE SECOND GIFT

"Remember," the angel called after the soul as the gates of heaven swung shut again, "you still have to bring two more gifts."

"With God's help I'll find them," thought the soul cheerfully as it flew back down to earth.

Its good cheer did not last forever, though. Once more the years went by without its sighting a perfect good deed, and once more the soul thought sadly:

"Like a live spring of water, the world sprang forth from God and ran off into Time. Yet the further it runs, the muddier and dirtier it grows. Gifts fit for heaven are far and few between. Men have become diminished, their good deeds plainer, their bad ones drabber; you can look all over and not find a single one that is special.

"If God were to weigh in one weighing all the good and bad deeds of this world," thought the soul, "the needle of the balance would hardly move at all.

"The world is too weak to rise any higher or plunge any lower. Like me it is trapped between the starry heavens and the black depths, while the prosecutors and defense counsels go on endlessly feuding, just as light feuds with darkness, heat with cold, life with death.

"The world teeters this way and that, unable to go up or down. Human beings are born and die, marry and divorce, rejoice and sorrow, love and hate, hate and love, on and on and on. . . ."

A blare of horns and trumpets roused the soul from its thoughts.

Looking down, it saw a city in Germany. (All this happened long ago, of course.) Oddly sloped roofs surrounded a town square, which was filled with a colorfully dressed crowd. Other townsmen

pressed their faces to the windows or straddled the railings of the packed balconies that projected beneath the roofs.

In front of the town hall stood a table covered by a green cloth trimmed with fringes and tassels of gold. The town magistrates sat around it in sable robes with gold clasps and white-feathered hats with gleaming badges. Beneath a seal of a taloned eagle, the burgomaster presided over them.

To one side stood a Jewish girl in shackles. Not far from her, ten vassals restrained a wild horse. The burgomaster rose to his feet, faced the square, and read the verdict from a sheet of paper:

"This Jewish damsel has committed a grave sin—a sin so heinous, indeed, that God Himself in all His mercy could not possibly forgive her for it.

"Stealing out of the ghetto on our holy day, she polluted our pure streets. Her shameless eyes stained our sacred procession and the holy icons that we carried through our town with music and hymns. Her accursed ears heard our drums and the songs of our innocent children dressed in white. Who knows if the filthy devil himself, in the guise of this accursed rabbi's daughter, did not touch and defile our holy relics?

"Why did he, the devil, wish to inhabit such a beautiful creature? For I cannot deny that she is beautiful, beautiful as only the devil could make her! Just look at those brazenly bright eyes beneath their silken lashes; look at that alabaster complexion, which only grew paler and purer during her long imprisonment; look at those fingers, so fine and thin it is as though light passes right through them.

"Why did Satan inhabit her? Because he wished to tear your souls away from the rapture of our procession—and he did! 'Just look at that beauty!' he caused a young knight from one of our most distinguished families to cry out.

"Worse yet, it happened during the mass. Yet when the parade officials saw her and caught her, the devil put up no resistance. And why not? Because you, God's flock, were without sin, having just been shriven by confession, so that he had no power over you.

"We therefore sentence the devil, in the guise of this Jewess, to the following:

"Let her hair be bound by its long, devilish braid to the tail of a wild horse, which shall drag her until she is dead through the streets that her feet trod on in violation of our laws!

"Let her unstaunched blood wash the cobblestones that those feet polluted!"

A wild cry of joy resounded from every mouth. When it had subsided, the condemned was asked if she had a last wish.

"Yes," she replied calmly. "I would like to be given a few needles."

"She's gone out of her mind with fear," the magistrates remarked to one another.

"Not at all," said the girl in a cold, tranquil voice. "It is my last wish and I ask to have it granted."

She was given her request.

"And now," ordered the burgomaster, "tie her to the horse!"

With trembling hands the vassals tied the rabbi's daughter's long black braid to the tail of the rearing wild horse.

"Stand back!" the burgomaster ordered the crowd in the square.

The crowd parted noisily and pressed itself against the walls of the houses. Each hand gripped something—a whip, a rod, even a plain kerchief—to spur on the horse. All breaths were held, all eyes glittered, all faces were aflame; no one noticed in the excitement how the condemned girl bent over and thrust the needles through the hem of her dress and deep into her flesh to keep her body from being exposed as it was dragged through the streets.

No one but the wandering soul.

"Free the horse!" ordered the burgomaster. The vassals jumped back and the animal broke loose. A cry from the crowd broke loose too, and all the whips, rods, and kerchiefs slashed the air. In a wild frenzy the horse galloped out of the marketplace and through all the streets of the town.

The soul did not wait to see the end of it. Seizing a bloody needle from the leg of the rabbi's daughter, it flew straight up to heaven.

"That's your second gift!" cheered the angel at the gate.

THE THIRD GIFT

Back down to earth flew the soul in search of one last gift.

Once more long years went by, and once more the melancholy soul thought what a petty world it was, pettier than ever, full of little people and little deeds, the bad ones no less than the good.

Once it thought:

"If God, may His name be praised, ever visits His Last Judgment on the world, and if the counsel for the defense stands on one side shaking out the bits and crumbs from the white bag, and the counsel for the prosecution stands on the other side shaking out the grit

and grime from the black bag, it would take forever to empty both—that's how tiny everything is in them!

"But when the bags are finally empty—what will happen then?"

"The needle will stop in the middle once more!"

"When all things are so small, nothing can outweigh anything. What difference can one more feather, one more wisp of straw, one more flake of chaff, one more particle of dust, possibly make?"

"And what will God do then? What will His verdict be?"

"To turn the world back into chaos? No, the sins will not outweigh the good deeds.

"To bring the Redemption? But the good deeds will not outweigh the sins either.

"What then?"

"'Carry on!' he will tell the world. 'Fly on between heaven and hell, between love and hate, between tears of compassion and rivers of blood—fly on forever and ever!'"

The sound of a drum awoke the soul from this oppressive thought.

Where was it coming from?

The soul had lost all sense of time and place.

Down below it saw a prison. Sunshine glanced off the bars of its small windows and glittered on the bayonets of the rifles stacked against one of its walls. The soldiers who had put them there now held knouts in their hands.

They were arranged in two rows, with a narrow passageway between them. Someone was about to run the gauntlet.

But who?

It was a Jew, his meager body dressed in a torn cloak, a skullcap on his half-shaven head. The soul watched as he was led out from the prison.

What had he done to deserve such punishment? God knows. It was long ago. Perhaps he was a thief, perhaps a burglar or a murderer. Perhaps he had even been framed. After all, it was all so long ago.

The soldiers smiled and wondered why there were so many of them. Their victim wouldn't make it halfway down the line!

Yet as the Jew started down the gauntlet, he walked steadily without stumbling or missing a step, taking blow after blow in his stride.

The soldiers were enraged. Who did he think he was, staying on his feet like that!

The knouts whistled through the air and lashed the thin body like snakes. The blood spurting out, more and more of it.

Halfway down the line a soldier aimed too high and knocked the Jew's skullcap off his head. A few steps farther on, the victim noticed it. He halted as though deliberating, and then, unwilling to continue bareheaded, turned around to retrieve the fallen cap. Bending over, he picked it up, turned around again, and started back down the line, soaked in blood but serene, his skullcap on his head. He kept walking until he collapsed.

As soon as he fell, the soul seized the skullcap and flew with it straight to heaven.

The third gift was accepted too. The saints interceded for the wandering soul and it was admitted to paradise.

And when the three gifts were displayed there, a connoisseur's voice was heard to say:

"Ah, what beautiful gifts! Of course, they're totally useless—but to look at, why, they're perfection itself!"

1904 (translated by Hillel Halkin)

DOWNCAST EYES



1

A very long time ago in a village a few miles from Prague, there lived a Jew, a certain Yekhiel-Mikhl, who kept the local tavern.

The landlord of the village was not an ordinary nobleman, but rather a count of great repute, so that Yekhiel-Mikhl made a plentiful living, as they say, "with something to spare." He became a great personage, a man who dispensed both charity and hospitality. On the High Holy Days, Yekhiel-Mikhl would journey to Prague and there spend money with a free hand. Nor was Yekhiel-Mikhl an ignorant man. While in Prague he became something of a regular at the house of the rabbi, who was also the head of the yeshiva. From him Yekhiel-Mikhl would buy such necessities as the etrog for Sukkot and the ground matza for Passover. He asked as well for the

rabbi's intercession with Heaven that he might be granted male offspring.

But through the assistance of the Holy Spirit the head of the yeshiva divined that Yekhiel-Mikhl was not destined to derive pleasure from his children; and sons who give their parents no pleasure might just as well not set foot on this earth. So he bluntly refused to intercede for him. This plunged Yekhiel-Mikhl into great sorrow. The rabbi consoled him by saying: "When the time comes, if with God's help you have collected a handsome dowry, and you come to me with the request, I will find you such a son-in-law that you will not have any regrets."

Yekhiel-Mikhl returned home somewhat comforted. Since he had two daughters, he began to set aside a sum of money toward a dowry, first for the elder daughter and then for the younger. After all, a learned son-in-law was nothing to sneeze at.

So he saved money and God helped him. When he had amassed the first five hundred thaler, he said to his wife, Dvoshe, "The time has come to marry off our elder daughter, Nekhama."

Dvoshe answered that this was an excellent idea. If they calculated three hundred talers for the dowry, two hundred for the trousseau, presents for the bride and groom, assorted wedding expenses, fees for the rabbi, cantor, and sexton, etc., as well as a feast for the paupers, they would have a wedding that Prague would long remember.

But things are more readily said than done; unforeseen obstacles arise. The count of the village sent Yekhiel-Mikhl here and there on business. Snow fell, making the roads impassable; in the summer it rained. When there was a Christian holiday, the tavern could not be left unattended. In a word, things did not proceed so rapidly. And in the meantime, as often happens, man proposes, but God disposes. . . .

2

Nekhama, the tavern keeper's elder daughter, certainly merited a bridegroom from the yeshiva in Prague. She was a quiet, golden-hearted girl, a kind soul. The goodness shone from her eyes, and she was docile. Whatever her father bid, or her mother asked, whatever all the pious people who stopped at the tavern requested, that she did. With great fervor she performed the ceremony of

AVROM (having heard, stands quickly up, with an outstretched hand):
Desecrate the Sabbath!

Before *havdole!**

(Local Chassid runs out into the woman's section where it becomes still and yet stiller. Avrom remains standing thus, till the end of the act, as if frozen.)

MIRIAM (clothed in light-blue. Steps like a sleepwalker. Enters from the front door. Walks to the window, with a voice sorrowfully weak—):

Why does no-one

Perform the *havdole?*

(The crowd is silent. Elders lower their heads. Older Chassidim and relatives back away with frightened respectfulness. Chassidim want to remove themselves from the presence of the "female"; one already places his hand on the door-knob, but nevertheless remains standing there.)

MOYSHE:

How are the children,
Miriam?

MIRIAM (seating herself at the window):

They've fallen asleep ...
Children don't know ...
Children don't feel ...
Playing on the floor,
They fell asleep ...
Their hands entwined ...
Under their heads
I placed some pillows,
They smile in their sleep
And blush ...
Terrible are the smiles
Of children....

(Pauses, staring out the window.)

MIRIAM:

The snow is turning to mud ...
Wintery ...

*Ceremony ending the Sabbath

From I. L. Peretz,
"The Golden Chain"

Saplings rock,
Snow-laden branches
Tremble,

As if shaken by fear ...

And bleak and dismal

The sky becomes ...

From the West

A cloud lowers ...

And comes ... approaches

Our house ...

Children don't know ...

Children don't feel ...

(Into the room, somewhat louder than before.)

Why does no-one

Perform the *havdole?*

(The synagogue door opens; a new and louder uproar.)

MOYSHE (standing):

Fear envelopes ...

How the crowd roars ...

MIRIAM:

The crowd ...

The haggard faces,

The hungry eyes ...

VOICES IN THE ROOM:

The rabbi!

The rabbi, long may he live!

The rabbi!

SHLOYME (a very tall, gray, pale Jew, except for the black pointed skull-cap on his head—clothed in pure white. An unusually high forehead, exceptionally large, wide-open eyes, with a childlike-naive smile over his shrunken face, congealed by sadness. Israel, who had opened the door for him, and Pinkhes—and behind them, the crowd—remain standing at the door. Shloyme, moving to the middle of the room, when they all remain standing, looks around and turns to the synagogue door):

To no avail all talk

All pleadings, useless ... (firm)

I perform no *havdole!*

ISRAEL (moving in somewhat):

Rabbi, the congregation demands . . .

OTHERS (from the synagogue and in the room):

—The congregation begs!

—The congregation prostates itself out of fright . . .

—Have pity . . .

—Have pity, rabbi, on the people . . .

SHLOYME (whom MIRIAM provides with an armchair; without sitting
and leaning on it with one hand):

The people . . .

Two . . . three . . . four . . .

Five little congregations . . .

Tiny, tiny, little Jews . . .

Starved

Shriveled

Little Jews . . .

Hunchbacked, they come,

Knocking at the Rabbi's door . . .

(Tone shift: sadness.)

Frozen souls . . . hearts . . .

To the eternal light they come,

Present their hands:

A spark! A spark!

Alms,

A sign . . .

A miracle, a signal

From the Other World . . .

And each wants

Something for himself,

For himself,

For his own wife and child,

For his own household . . .

(Pauses.)

And here,

Between life and death,

The world balances!

A world sinks in

Deep despair,

A world!

(Pauses.)

(Into the stillness, staring out the window.)

It spreads,

The black cloud spreads apart . . .

Like a black bird

Spreading its black wings . . .

SHLOYME

Dressed in black,

Enveloped in black,

The soul of the world—

The Divine Presence rumbles.

And cries, mourns,

And trembles,

Drowned in its own blood,

The heart of the world!

(Straightening himself with outstretched arm.)

Delivered from pain and fear

Must be—

The world!

(Tone changes.)

I perform no *havdole!*

MIRIAM:

Angrily the cloud darkens . . .

An angry-dark sky looks down,

And they smile there—

Children see not!

SHLOYME (bitterly):

The heavens rage!

“Why does he not,

My little Shloyme,

Perform the *havdole!?*”

Little souls

Have flocked together,

Sureties that have been recalled . . .

Have the little doves

Besmirched themselves below?

Is, perhaps, one of them

Missing a wing?
 Or perhaps had
 Its little feather plucked?—
 It must be examined!
 And to judge the matter
 The Heavenly Court stands ready,
 With its throne of gold
 And its crown of flawless diamonds;
 And they want to be seated
 To judge and to sentence . . .
 (Compassionately.)
 And the little souls—
 Flutter . . .
 The little sureties flutter . . .
 For fear of the Day of Judgement!
 For fear of the Day of Judgement! (change of tone)
 Do not tremble,
 Do not flutter!
 Shloyme will not perform the *havdole* . . .
 There will be no judgment!
 (People are frightened. Pause. Winds are heard.)

MIRIAM:

Winds blow,
 Hurry, drive . . .
 Around the house,
 Around the house.
 How they blow
 How they howl . . .

SHLOYME:

Hell, then, is raging,
 Sends his messengers abroad!
 Black birds flutter in the wind.
 That black dog there
 Strains at his chain!
 The holy Sabbath is over
 The Sambatyon* is active again

*A legendary river, impassable, because it hurls rocks every day but on the Sabbath, when it is forbidden to journey. According to some folk beliefs, the ten lost tribes of Israel live beyond its other shore.

And Shloyme remains stubborn:
 Perform the *havdole*!
 He will not.
 Kettles—fired up,
 Boil,
 Seethe . . .
 Smoky flames lift, curl,
 Oily, burning clouds . . .
 “Return, evil ones!
 “For fear and torment,
 “For heavy agonies,
 “For severe woes . . .
 “Why don’t you return?”
 And the poor little souls,
 The besmirched, the sinful—
 When the holy Sabbath is extinguished,
 They know,
 and tremble . . .
 And cling,
 and hold onto,
 With their black little wings
 With their burnished feathers
 To the mists,
 And grasp, grasp
 With trembling little hearts
 To the little clouds,
 And tremble . . .
 Tremble! (change of tone.)
 Do not tremble!
 Do not flutter . . .
 Fly around, free and easy,
 Wherever you want,
 Wherever a little breeze
 May carry you—
 I will not perform the *havdole*!

PEOPLE (in fright):

And what will be?
 Rabbi, what will be?

SHLOYME:

Sabbath—let there be Sabbath!
With iron pincers do I hold the Sabbath back!
No judging, no punishing! (pause)
A scale hangs there on high
In front of the heavenly throne . . .
Balances up and down, this scale . . .
The pointer wavers, wavers . . .
A Jew performs a small good deed
And—a small sin . . .
The pointer cannot rest . . .
Not entirely guilty
Not entirely innocent—
So it wavers . . .
And God, merciful and forgiving, looks;
Help he cannot . . . (pause)
And so he sits, the Messiah,
At the gates of the heavens
And waits.
Leave he cannot . . .
His wounds do not heal . . .
He unbinds them,
He binds them up—
And redeem the world
He cannot!
And there is no strength to wait . . .
Into deep despair sinks the world
(Standing up; speaking forcefully.)
The world must be redeemed!
(Out of the house come Leah and Jonathan, holding hands;
no-one notices them. Bewildered and somewhat frightened,
they remain standing in the door.)

QUIET VOICES IN THE ROOM:

How? How?

SHLOYME (even more forcefully):

Let the Sabbath reign!
Sabbath!
No plowing,
No sowing,

No building and no repairing . . .
No business nor trade . . .

LOCAL CHASSID:

And shall the world go to waste?

SHLOYME:

Let the world go to waste!
And we—
We, Sabbath,
We, festive,
We, spiritual Jews,
Will stride over its wastes . . .

MIRIAM:

Where to?
Rabbi, where to?

SHLOYME:

To Him, to Him!
Singing and dancing we will go
To him!
(Pause, ecstasy.)
Sing with me!
Dance with me!

(It grows very still. SHLOYME begins to dance in a circle around himself. In the stillness is heard the tinkling of the chandelier. The ELDERS dance singly. JONATHAN and LEAH—swept along, push aside the table and chairs from the windows, take their mother's hands, and dance. Opposite the ELDERS, two half circles. MOYSHE looks at all of them as if they were not there—CHASSIDIM sidle quietly out of the room into the synagogue. MIRIAM lets go of her children's hands, catches hold of one end of SHLOYMES prayer belt and dances around him dreamily, somewhat shamefacedly happy, modest, joyful, like a bridal-dance. The children, in turn, take each other's hands and dance by themselves. The chandelier's tinkling grows louder and louder.)

LEAH:

Look, look—Mother is radiant,
As if the Divine Spirit were upon her.

JONATHAN:

Look at great-grandfather,
Like an angel—
Enveloped in holiness—

SHLOYME (not noticing, stops by himself):

And thus!
Thus we go,
Singing and dancing . . .
We great-big Jews,
Sabbath-festive Jews,
With souls blazing!
For us—clouds part!
Heaven's gates—open wide!
We float into the cloud
Of the Divine Presence!
Up to the Divine Throne,
To the Divine Throne!
We stand on the
Pure marble stone!
And we do not plead,
And we do not beg,
Big, proud Jews are we—
Seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob!

SHLOYME:

We could wait no longer!
The Song of Songs we sing,
Singing and dancing we go!

MIRIAM (lets go the belt, places her hands under her head, bows it slightly; with radiant eyes, clarinet-clear, sings, cantillating):

“Let him kiss me with the
Kisses of his mouth.”
(Pause. Silent, unmoving ecstasy.)

ISRAEL (with sudden swiftness opens the synagogue door directly across the stage. A streak of light floods in, slicing across):

A good week, Jews!

SHLOYME (falling back into his chair):

It was not permitted!

AVROM:

Who rebelled?

ISRAEL:

Pinkhas performed the *havdole*.
(Emphasizing)
Reb* Pinkhes!

SHLOYME (rising):

My son, my dark son . . .
(Pinkhas appears in the synagogue door; behind him, the crowd.)

ISRAEL (stepping to one side so that Shloyme should see the crowd.)

The congregation requested it!
The congregation demanded it,
Commanded it did the congregation—
(Pause. Shloyme, very slowly retreats. At the same moment, Pinkhes enters.)

ELDERS and OLDER CHASIDIM (murmuring)

Reb Pinkhes, Reb Pinkhes . . .
(Miriam leads Shloyme offstage to his room. ELDERS darkly, silently, with sunken heads, follow. LEAH and JONATHAN, holding hands, follow behind the ELDERS. JONATHAN, as he walks, looks around, sees PINKHAS, suddenly tears his hand away from LEAH, and goes back into the room. The OLDER CHASSIDS stop at both sides of the door and turn around facing the room. PINKHES goes to the armchair. Behind him ISRAEL and the other beadle. The CROWD begins to move, with hope and fear, into the room.)

ISRAEL (to Pinkhes who is considering whether to sit in the armchair):

Be seated, please, Rabbi . . .
(All shudder. Pinkhes slowly sits.)

DEBORAH (from the front door, entering hastily):

The young doctor wants
To see his father-in-law!
(General consternation. Curtain.)

*In this context, rabbi.