

Tehilah

Shmuel Yosef Agnon was born in 1888 in Galicia, the southernmost district of Poland, then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. He received a traditional religious education and, at the age of twenty, left home for Palestine. In 1912 Agnon was back in Europe; the rootless, restless years that followed, spent mostly in Germany, saw him living in Berlin, Munich, Leipzig, Wiesbaden and Homburg. With his return to Palestine in 1925 his period of mature creativity began. Now in his seventies, he continues to live and write in Jerusalem, a city whose religious and mystical associations provide endless grist for his imagination.

Agnon's novels, stories and

novellas, which have appeared so far in eleven volumes, have become classics of Hebrew literature in his lifetime. Three of his books have been translated into English: the novel The Bridal Canopy (1935); the novella In the Heart of the Seas (1948); and Days of Awe, a collection of oral and written legends pertaining to the Jewish High Holy Days. "Tehilah," which in addition to being a proper name is the Hebrew word meaning "praise" or "psalm," is one of Agnon's Jerusalem tales. The poverty-stricken Jewish community of the old walled city, with its remote otherworldliness, is no longer in existence; it was destroyed in the Arab-Israeli war of 1948.

Now there used to be in Jerusalem a certain old woman, as comely an old woman as you have seen in your days. Righteous she was, and wise she was, and gracious and humble: for kindness and pity were the light of her eyes, and every wrinkle in her face told of blessing and peace. I know that women should not be likened to angels: yet her would I liken to an angel of God. She had in her, besides, the vigor of youth; so that she wore old age like a mantle, while in herself there was seen no trace of her years.

Until I had left Jerusalem she was quite unknown to me; only upon my return did I come to know her. If you ask why I never heard of her before, I shall answer: Why have you not heard of her until now? It is appointed for every man to meet whom he shall meet, and the time for this, and the fitting occasion. It happened that I had gone to visit one of Jerusalem's noted men of learning, who lived near the Wailing Wall. Having failed to find his house, I came upon a woman who was going by with a pail of water, and I asked her the way.

She said, "Come with me, I will show you."

I replied, "Do not trouble yourself. Tell me the way, and I shall go on alone."

She answered, smiling, "What is it to you if an old woman should earn herself a *mitzvah*?*"

"If it be a *mitzvah*," said I, "then do so; but give me this pail that you carry."

She smiled again and said, "If I do as you ask, it will make the *mitzvah* but a small one."

"It is only the trouble I wish to be small, and not the merit of your deed," I said.

She answered, "This is no trouble at all, but a privi-

* *Mitzvah*: Literally, a commandment; a moral duty that confers spiritual reward.

lege; since the Holy One has furnished his creatures with hands that they may supply all their needs."

We made our way amongst the stones and through the alleys, avoiding the camels and the asses, the drawers of water and the idlers and the gossip-mongers, until she halted and said, "Here is the house of him you seek."

I found the man of learning at home at his desk. Whether he recognized me at all is doubtful; for he had just made an important discovery, which he at once began to relate. As I took my leave I thought to ask him who that woman might be, whose face shone with such peace and whose voice was so gentle and calm. But there is no interrupting a scholar when he speaks of his latest discovery.

Some days later I went again to the Old City, this time to visit the aged widow of a rabbi; for I had promised her grandson before my return that I would attend to her welfare.

That day marked the beginning of the rainy season. Already the rain was falling, and the sun was obscured by clouds. In other lands this would have seemed like a normal day of spring; but here in Jerusalem, which is pampered with constant sunshine through seven or eight months of the year, we think it is winter should the sun once fail to shine with all its strength, and we hide ourselves in houses and courtyards, or in any place that affords a sheltering roof.

I walked alone and free, smelling the good smell of the rain as it fell exultantly, wrapping itself in mist, and heightening the tints of the stones, and beating at the walls of houses, and dancing on roofs, and making great pools beneath that were sometimes turbid and sometimes gleamed in the sunbeams that intermittently broke through the clouds to view the work of the waters—

for in Jerusalem even on a rainy day the sun yet seeks to perform its task.

Turning in between the shops with their arched doorways at the street of the smiths, I went on past the shoemakers, and the blanket-weavers, and the little stalls that sell hot broths, till I came to the Street of the Jews. Huddled in their tattered rags sat the beggars, not caring even to reach a hand from their cloaks, and glowering sullenly at each man who passed without giving them money. I had with me a purse of small coins, and went from beggar to beggar distributing them. Finally I asked for the house of the *rabbanit*,* and they told me the way.

I entered a courtyard, one of those which to a casual passer-by seems entirely deserted, and after mounting six or seven broken flights of stairs, came to a warped door. Outside I stumbled against a cat, and within a heap of rubbish stood in my way. Because of the mist I could not see anyone, but I heard a faint, apprehensive voice calling, "Who is there?" Looking up, I now made out a kind of iron bed submerged in a wave of pillows and bolsters, and in the depths of the wave an alarmed and agitated old woman.

I introduced myself, saying that I was recently come from abroad with greetings from her grandson. She put out a hand from under the bedding to draw the coverlet up to her chin, saying, "Tell me now, does he own many houses, and does he keep a maidservant, and has he fine carpets in every room?" Then she sighed, "This cold will be the death of me."

Seeing that she was so irked with the cold, it occurred to me that a kerosene stove might give her some ease: so I thought of a little stratagem.

"Your grandson," I said, "has entrusted me with a

* *Rabbanit*: A form of address meaning "rabbi's wife."

small sum of money to buy you a stove: a portable stove that one fills with kerosene, with a wick that burns and gives off much heat." I took out my wallet and said, "See, here is the money."

In a vexed tone she answered, "And shall I go now to buy a stove, with these feet that are on me? Feet did I say? Blocks of ice I mean. This cold will drive me out of my wits if it won't drive me first to my grave, to the Mount of Olives.* And look you, abroad they say that the Land of Israel is a hot land. Hot it is, yes, for the souls in Gehenna."

"Tomorrow," I said, "the sun will shine out and make the cold pass away."

"'Ere comfort comes, the soul succumbs.'"

"In an hour or two," I said, "I shall have sent you the stove."

She crouched down among her coverlets and bolsters, as if to show that she did not trust me as her benefactor.

I left her and walked out to the Jaffa Road. There I went to a shop that sold household goods, bought a portable stove of the best make in stock, and sent it on to the old *rabbanit*. An hour later I returned to her, thinking that, if she was unfamiliar with stoves of this kind, it would be as well to show her the method of lighting it. On the way, I said to myself: Not a word of thanks, to be sure, will I get for my pains. How different is one old woman from another! For she who showed me the way to the scholar's house is evidently kind to all comers; and this other woman will not even show kindness to those who are prompt to seek her comfort.

But here I must insert a brief apology. My aim is

* Before 1948, the Mount of Olives was the traditional burying ground for Jerusalem's Jews.

not to praise one woman to the detriment of others; nor, indeed, do I aspire to tell the story of Jerusalem and all its inhabitants. The range of man's vision is narrow: shall it comprehend the City of the Holy One, blessed be He? If I speak of the *rabbanit*, it is for this reason only, that at the entrance to her house it was again appointed for me to encounter the other old woman.

I bowed and made way for her; but she stood still and greeted me as warmly as one might greet one's nearest kinsman. Momentarily I was puzzled as to who she might be. Could this be one of the old women I had known in Jerusalem before leaving the country? Yet most of these, if not all, had perished of hunger in the time of the war. Even if one or two survived, I myself was much changed; for I was only a lad when I left Jerusalem, and the years spent abroad had left their mark.

She saw that I was surprised, and smiled, saying, "It seems you do not recognize me. Are you not the man who wished to carry my pail on the way to your friend's house?"

"And you are the woman," said I, "who showed me the way. Yet now I stand here bewildered, and seem not to know you."

Again she smiled. "Are you obliged, then, to remember every old woman who lives in the Old City?"

"Yet," I said, "you recognized me."

She answered, "Because the eyes of Jerusalem look out upon all Israel, each man who comes to us is engraved on our heart; thus we never forget him."

"It is a cold day," I said, "a day of wind and rain, and here I stand, keeping you out of doors."

She answered, with love in her voice, "I have seen worse cold than any we have in Jerusalem. As for wind and rain, are we not thankful? For daily we bless God,

saying, 'Who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall.' You have done a great *mitzvah*: you have put new life into old bones. The stove which you sent to the *rabbanit* is warming her, body and soul."

I hung my head, as a man does who is abashed at hearing his own praise. Perceiving this, she said:

"The doing of a *mitzvah* need not make a man bashful. Our fathers, it is true, performed so many that it was needless to publish their deeds. But we, who do less, perform a *mitzvah* even by letting the *mitzvah* be known: then others will hear, and learn from our deeds what they too must do. Now, my son, go to the *rabbanit*, and see how much warmth your *mitzvah* has brought."

I went inside and found the stove lit, and the *rabbanit* seated beside it. Light flickered from the perforated holes, and the room was full of warmth. A lean cat lay in her lap, and she was gazing at the stove and talking to the cat, saying to it, "It seems that you like this heat more than I do."

I said, "I see that the stove burns well and gives off a fine heat. Are you satisfied?"

"And if I am satisfied," said the *rabbanit*, "will that make it smell the less or warm me the more? A stove there was in my old home, that would burn from the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles to the first night of the Passover, and give off heat like the sun in the dog-days of the month of Tammuz; a lasting joy it was, not like these bits of stove which burn for a short while. But nowadays one cannot expect good workmanship. Enough it is if folk make a show of working. Yes, that is what I said to the people of our town when my dear husband, the Rabbi, passed away: may he speak for me in the world to come! When they got themselves a new rabbi, I said to them, What can you expect? Do you

expect that he will be like your old rabbi? Enough it is if he starts no troubles. And so I said to the neighbors just now, when they came to see the stove that my grandson sent me through you. I said to them, 'This stove is like the times, and these times are like the stove.' What did he write to you, this grandson? Didn't write at all? Nor does he write to me. No doubt he thinks that by sending me this bit of a stove he has done his duty."

After leaving the *rabbanit*, I said to myself: I too think that by sending her this bit of a stove I have done my duty: surely there is no need to go again. Yet in the end I returned, and all because of that same gracious old woman; for this was not the last occasion that was appointed for me to see her.

Again I must say that I have no intention of recounting all that happened to me in those days. A man does many things, and if he were to describe them all he would never make an end to his story. Yet all that relates to that old woman deserves to be told.

On the eve of new moon I walked to the Wailing Wall, as we in Jerusalem are accustomed to do, to pray at the Wailing Wall at the rising of each moon.

Already most of the winter had passed, and spring blossoms had begun to appear. Up above, the heavens were pure, and the earth had put off her grief. The sun smiled in the sky; the Old City shone in its light. And we too rejoiced, despite the troubles that beset us; for these troubles were many and evil, and before we had reckoned with one, yet another came in its wake.

From Jaffa Gate as far as the Wailing Wall, men and women from all the communities of Jerusalem moved in a steady stream, together with those newcomers whom the Place* had restored to their space, albeit their space had not yet been found. But in the open space before

* The Place: the Cabalistic name for God.

the Wall, at the booth of the Mandatory Police, sat the police of the Mandate, whose function it was to see that none guarded the worshippers save only they. Our adversaries, wishing to provoke us, perceived this and set about their provocations. Those who had come to pray were herded together and driven to seek shelter close up against the stones of the Wall, some weeping and some as if dazed. And still we say, How long, O Lord? How long? For we have trodden the lowest stair of degradation, yet You tarry to redeem us.

I found a place for myself at the Wall, standing at times amongst the worshippers, at times amongst the bewildered bystanders. I was amazed at the peoples of the world: as if it were not enough that they oppressed us in all lands, yet they must also oppress us in our home.

As I stood there I was driven from my place by one of the police who carried a baton. This man was in a great rage, on account of some ailing old woman who had brought a stool with her to the Wall. The policeman sprang forward and kicked the stool, throwing the woman to the ground and confiscating the stool: for she had infringed the law enacted by the legislators of the Mandate, which forbade worshippers to bring seats to the Wall. And those who had come to pray saw this, yet held their peace: for how can right dispute against might? Then came forward the same old woman whom I knew, and looked the policeman straight in the eyes. And the policeman averted his gaze, and returned the stool to its owner.

I went up to her and said, "Your eyes have more effect than all the pledges of England. For England, which gave us the Balfour Declaration, sends her officers to annul it; while you only looked upon that wicked one, and frustrated his evil intent."

She replied, "Do not speak of him so, for he is a good gentile, who saw that I was grieved and gave back her stool to that poor woman. . . . But have you said your afternoon prayer? I ask because, if you are free, I can put in your way the *mitzvah* of visiting the sick. The *rabbanit* is now really and truly ill. If you wish, come with me and I shall take you by a short route." I joined her and we went together.

From alley to alley, from courtyard to courtyard, we made our way down, and at each step she took she would pause to give a piece of candy to a child, or a coin to a beggar, or to ask the health of a man's wife or, if it were a woman, the health of her husband. I said, "Since you are concerned with everyone's welfare, let me ask after yours."

She answered, "Blessed be the Name, for I lack nothing at his hand. The Holy One has given to each of his creatures according to its need; and I too am one of these. But today I have special cause for thanking him, for he has doubled my portion."

"How is this?" I asked.

She replied, "Each day I read the psalms appointed for the day, but today I read the psalms for two days together." Even as she spoke, her face clouded over with grief.

"Your joy has passed away," I said.

She was silent for a moment. Then she said, "Yes, my son, I was joyful, and now it is not so." Yet even as she spoke, the light shone out again from her face. She raised her eyes and said, "Blessed be He, who has turned away my sorrow."

"Why," I asked, "were you joyful, yet afterwards sad, and now, joyful again?"

She said, very gently, "Since your words are not chosen with care, I must tell you, this was not the way

to ask. Rather should you have said, 'How have you deserved it, that God should turn away your sorrow?' For in his blessed eyes, all is one, whether sorrow or joy."

"Perhaps in future," said I, "my words will be chosen with care, since you teach me how one must speak. 'Happy is the man who does not forget Thee.' It is a text of much meaning."

She said, "You are a good man, and it is a good text you have told me; so I too shall not withhold good words. You asked why I was joyful, and why I was sad, and why I now rejoice. Assuredly you know as I do, that all a man's deeds are appointed, from the hour of his birth to the hour of his death; and accordingly, the number of times he shall say his psalms. But the choice is free how many psalms he will say on any one day. This man may complete the whole book in a day, and that man may say one section a day, or the psalms for each day according to the day. I have made it my custom to say each day the psalms for that day; but this morning I went on and said the psalms for two days together. When I became aware of this I was sad, lest it meant that there were no more need for me in the world, and that I was disposed of and made to finish my portion in haste. For 'it is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord'; and when I am dead I shall not be able to say one psalm, or even one word. Then the Holy One saw my grief, and showed his marvellous kindness by allowing me to know that such is his own very will. If it pleases the Name to take my life, who am I that I should grieve? Thus He at once turned away my sorrow. Blessed be He and blessed be his name."

I glanced at her, wondering to myself by what path one might come to a like submission. I thought of the men of ancient times, and their virtuous ways; I spoke

to her of past generations. Then I said, "You have seen with your own eyes more than I can describe in words."

She answered, "When a person's life is prolonged for many days and years, it is granted him to see many things; good things, and yet better things."

"Tell me," I said to her, "of these same good things."

She was silent for a while; then she said, "How shall I begin? Let me start with my childhood. When I was a little girl, I was a great chatterbox. Really, from the time I stood up in the morning till the time I lay down at night, words never ceased pouring from my lips. There was an old man in our neighborhood, who said to those delighting in my chatter: 'A pity it is for this little girl; if she wastes all her words in childhood, what will be left for her old age?' I became terribly frightened, thinking this meant that I might die the very next day. But in time I came to fathom the old man's meaning, which was that a person must not use up in a short while what is allotted him for a whole lifetime. I made a habit of testing each word to see if there was real need for it to be said, and practiced a strict economy of speech. Through this economy, I saved up a great store of words, and my life has been prolonged until they are all used up. Now that only a few words remain, you ask me to speak them. If I do so it will hasten my end."

"Upon such terms," said I, "I would certainly not ask you to speak. But how is it that we keep walking and walking, yet we have still not come to the house of the *rabbanit*?"

She said, "You still have in mind those courtyards we used to take for a short cut. But now that most of the Old City has been settled by the Arabs, we must go by a roundabout way."

We approached one of these courtyards. She said, "Do you see this courtyard? Forty families of Israel

once lived here, and here were two synagogues, and here in the daytime and nighttime there were study and prayer. But they left this place, and Arabs came and occupied it."

We approached a tumble-down house. She said, "Do you see this house? Here was a great academy where the scholars of the Torah lived and studied. But they left this house, and Arabs came and occupied it."

We came to the asses' stalls. She said, "Do you see these stalls? Here stood a soup-kitchen, and the virtuous poor would enter in hungry and go forth satisfied. But they abandoned this place, and Arabs came and occupied it. Houses from which prayer and charity and study of the Torah never ceased, now belong to the Arabs and their asses. . . . My son, we have reached the courtyard of the *rabbanit*'s house. Go in, and I shall follow you later. This unhappy woman, because of the seeming good she has known abroad, does not see the true good at home."

"What is the true good?" I asked.

She laughed, saying, "My son, you should not need to ask. Have you not read the verse, 'Happy the man thou chooseth to dwell in thy courtyards?' For these same courtyards are the royal courts of the Holy One, the courts of our God, in the midst of Jerusalem. When men say 'Jerusalem,' their way is to add the words, 'Holy City.' But when I say 'Jerusalem,' I add nothing more, since the holiness is contained in the name; yes, in the very name itself. . . . Go up, my son, and do not trip on the stairs. Many a time have I said to the keeper of the community funds that these stairs are in need of repair; and what answer did he give me? That this building is old and due to be demolished, therefore it is not worth while spending a penny on its upkeep. So the houses of Israel fall into disuse until they are

abandoned, and the sons of Ishmael enter and take possession. Houses that were built with the tears of their fathers—and now they abandon them. But again I have become a chatterer, and hasten my end."

I entered, and found the *rabbanit* lying in bed. Her head was bandaged and a poultice had been laid upon her throat. She coughed loudly, so that the medicine bottles placed by her bedside would shake at each cough. I said to her, "*Rabbanit*, are you ill?" She sighed and her eyes filled with tears. I sought for words of comfort, but the words would not come. All I could say, with my eyes downcast, was, "So you are ill and deserted."

She sighed again and replied, "Yes, I am ill as ill can be. In the whole world there is no one so ill as I am. All the same, I am not deserted. Even here in Jerusalem, where nobody knows me, and nobody knows the honors done to me in my own town, even here there is one woman who waits on me, who comes to my room and fetches a drop of soup for my royal feast. What do you hear from my grandson? He is angry with me, to be sure, because I have not written to thank him for the stove. Now I ask you, how shall I go out to buy ink and pen and paper for the writing of letters? It is hard enough even to fetch a spoonful of soup to my lips. . . . I am surprised that Tilli has not come."

"If you are speaking," said I, "of that gracious old woman who brought me here, she told me that she would come very soon."

"I cannot tell whether she is gracious," said the *rabbanit*; "at least she makes herself useful. Look you, how many holy, holy women there are about Jerusalem, who go buzzing like bees with their incantations and supplications, yet not one of them has come to me and said, '*Rabbanit*, do you need help?' . . . My head, my head.

If the pains in my heart won't take me off soon, the pains in my head will take me off first."

I said to her, "I can see that speech is a burden to you."

She answered, "You say that speech is a burden to me; and I say that my whole existence is a burden to me. Even the cat knows this, and keeps away from his home. Yet people say that cats are home-loving creatures. He finds my neighbor's mice more tasty, to be sure, than all the dainties I feed him. What was I meaning to say? I forget all I mean to say. Now Tilli is different. There she goes, with the bundles of years heaped up on her shoulders, bundle on bundle; yet all her wits serve her, although she must be twice my age. If my father—God bless his pious memory—were alive this day, he would be thought of as a child beside her."

I urged the *rabbanit* to tell me about this Tilli.

"And did you not mention her yourself? Nowadays people don't know Tilli; but there was a time when everyone did, for then she was a great, rich woman with all kinds of business concerns. And when she gave up all these and came to Jerusalem, she brought along with her I can't say how many barrels of gold, or if not barrels, there is no doubt that she brought a chest full of gold. My neighbors remember their mothers telling them how, when Tilli came to Jerusalem, all the best men here came courting, either for themselves or for their sons. But she sent them packing and stayed a widow. At first she was a very rich widow, and then a quite well-to-do widow, until at last she became just an old woman."

"Judging from Tilli's appearance," said I, "one would think that she had never seen hard times in her life."

The *rabbanit* replied with scorn, "You say that she has never seen hard times in her life, and I say that she

has never seen good times in her life. There is no enemy of mine whom I would bless with the afflictions that Tilli has borne. You suppose that, because she is not reduced to living off the public funds, she has enjoyed a happy life, but I believe that there is not a beggar knocking on the doors who would exchange his sorrows for hers. . . . Oh, my aches and my pains. I try to forget them, but they will not forget me."

I perceived that the *rabbanit* knew more than she cared to disclose. Since I felt that no good would come of further questioning, I showed myself ready to leave by rising from my chair.

"The sweep hadn't stepped into the chimney, but his face was already black," said she. "You have scarcely sat down in your chair, and already you are up and away. Why all this haste?"

I said, "If you wish me to stay, I will stay."

She made no answer; so I began speaking of Tilli again, and asked if I might be told her story.

"And if I tell you," said the *rabbanit*, "will it benefit you, or benefit her? I have no liking for tale-bearers: they spin out their cobwebs, and call it fine tapestry. I will only say this, that the Lord did a mercy to that good man when He put the evil spirit into that apostate, may her name be blotted out. Why are you gaping at me? Don't you understand Yiddish?"

"I understand Yiddish quite well," said I, "but I cannot understand what you are saying, *rabbanit*. Who is the good man, and who is the apostate you have cursed?"

"Perhaps I should bless her then, perhaps I should say, 'Well done, Mistress Apostate, you who have changed the gold coin for the brass farthing.' See, again you are staring at me as if I were speaking Turkish. You have heard that my husband of blessed memory was a

rabbi, wherefore they call me *rabbanit*; and have you not heard that my father too was a rabbi? Such a rabbi, that in comparison with him, all other rabbis might rank as pupils in a school for infants: and I speak of real rabbis, look you, not of those who wear the mantle and give themselves airs. . . . What a world, what a world it is! A deceitful world, and all it contains is deceit and vanity. But my father, of blessed and pious memory, was a rabbi from his childhood, and all the matchmakers in the province bustled about to find him a wife. Now there was a certain rich widow, and when I say rich, you know that I mean it. This widow had only one daughter—would she had never been born. She took a barrel full of gold dinars, and said to the matchmakers, 'If you wed that man to my daughter, this barrel full of gold will be his; and if it is not sufficient, I shall add to it!' But her daughter was not a fit match for that holy man; for she was already tainted with the spirit of perverseness, as is shown by her end, and she fled away from her home, and entered the house of the nuns, and deserted her faith. Yes, at the very hour when she was to be led to her bridal, she ran away. That poor stricken mother wasted half her fortune in trying to reclaim her. Her appeal went up to the Emperor himself; and even the Emperor was powerless to help. For they who have once entered the house of the nuns may never go out alive. You know now who that apostate was; the daughter of . . . hush, for here she comes."

Tilli entered the room. She was carrying a bowl of soup, and seeing me she said:

"Ah, you are still here! But stay, my friend, stay. It is a great *mitzvah* to visit the sick. *Rabbanit*, how much better you look! Truly, salvation comes in the wink of an eye; for the Name is healing you every minute. I

have brought a little soup to moisten your lips, now, my dear, raise your head and I shall prop up your pillow. There, my dear, that's better. My son, I am sorry that you do not live in the City, for then you would see for yourself how the *rabbanit*'s health is improving day by day."

"And do I not live in Jerusalem?" I said. "Surely Nachlat Shivah is Jerusalem?"

"It is indeed," answered Tilli. "God forbid that it should be otherwise. Rather may the day come when Jerusalem extends as far as Damascus, and in every direction. But the eye that has seen all Jerusalem enclosed within her walls cannot accustom itself to viewing what is built beyond the walls as the City itself. It is true that all the Land of Israel is holy and, I need hardly say, the surroundings of Jerusalem: yet the holiness that is within the walls of the City surpasses all else. My son, there is nothing I have said which you do not know better than I. Why then have I said it? Only that I might speak the praise of Jerusalem."

I could read in the eyes of the *rabbanit* a certain resentment, because Tilli was speaking to me rather than to her. So I took my leave and went away.

Various preoccupations kept me for a while from going to the Old City; and after that came the nuisance of the tourists. How well we know these tourists, who descend upon us and upon the land, all because the Place has made a little space for us here! They come now to see what has happened; and having come, they regard us as if we were created solely to serve them. Yet one good thing may be said for the tourists: in showing them "the sights," we see them ourselves. Once or twice, having brought them to the City to show them the Wailing Wall, I met Tilli there. It seemed to me that a change had come over her. Although she had

always walked without support, I noticed that she now leaned on a stick. Because of the visitors, I was unable to linger. For they had come to spy out the whole land, not to spend time upon an old woman not even mentioned in their itineraries.

When the tourists had left Jerusalem, I felt restless in myself. After trying without success to resume work, I bestirred myself and walked to the City, where I visited of my own accord all the places I had shown to the visitors. How can I describe what I saw? He who in his goodness daily renews the works of creation, perpetually renews his own City. New houses may not have been built, nor new trees planted, yet Jerusalem herself is ever new. I cannot explain the secret of her eternal variety. We must wait, all of us, for those great sages who will one day enlighten us.

I came upon that same man of learning whom I had visited earlier, and he drew me to his house, where he set before me all his recent findings. We sat together in deep contentment, while I asked my questions, and he replied; or spoke of problems, which he resolved; or mentioned obscure matters which he made clear. How good it is, how satisfying, to sit at the feet of one of the scholars of Jerusalem, and to learn the Law from his lips! His home is simple, his furnishings austere, yet his wisdom ranges far, like the great hill ranges of Jerusalem which are seen from the windows. Bare are the hills of Jerusalem; no temples or palaces crown them. Since the time of our exile, nation after nation has come and laid them waste. But the hills spread their glory like banners to the sky; they are resplendent in ever-changing hues; and not least in glory is the Mount of Olives, which bears no forest of trees, but a forest of tombs of the righteous, who in life and in death gave their thoughts to the Land.

As I stood up to go, the mistress of the house entered and said to her husband, "You have forgotten your promise." He was much perturbed at this, and said, "Wonder of wonders: all the time I have known Tehilah she has never asked a favor. And now she wants me to say that she wishes to see you."

"Are you speaking," said I, "of Tilli, the old woman who showed me the way to your house? For it seems to me that you call her by another name."

"Tehilah," he answered, "is Tilli's true name, that was given to her in the synagogue. From this you may learn that even four or five generations ago our forebears would give their daughters names that sound as though they had been recently coined. For this reason my wife's name is Tehiyah, or Reborn, which one might suppose to have been devised in our own age of rebirth. Yet in fact it belongs to the time of the great Gaon,* who required my wife's great-grandfather to call his daughter Tehiyah; and my wife bears her name."

I said, "You speak now of the custom four or five generations ago. Can it be that this Tehilah is so old?"

He smiled, saying, "Her years are not written upon her face, and she is not in the habit of telling her age. We only know it because of what she once let slip. It happened that Tehilah came to congratulate us at the wedding of our son; and the blessing she gave to our son and his bride was that it might be granted for them to live to her age. My son asked, 'What is this blessing with which you have blessed us?' And she answered him, 'It is ninety years since I was eleven years old.' This happened three years ago; so that now her age is, as she might express it, ninety years and fourteen: that is to say, a hundred and four."

I asked him, since he was already speaking of her,

* Literally, "genius," a title given to pre-eminent rabbinical scholars.

to tell me what manner of woman she was. He answered:

"What is there to say? She is a saint; yes, in the true meaning of the word. And if you have this opportunity of seeing her, you must take it. But I doubt if you will find her at home; for she is either visiting the sick, or bringing comforts to the poor, or doing some other unsolicited *mitzvah*. Yet you may perhaps find her, for between *mitzvah* and *mitzvah* she goes home to knit garments or stockings for poor orphans. In the days when she was rich, she spent her wealth upon deeds of charity, and now that nothing is left her but a meagre pittance to pay for her own few needs, she does her charities in person."

The scholar accompanied me as far as Tehilah's door. As we walked together he discoursed on his theories; but realizing that I was not attending to his words, he smiled and said, "From the moment I spoke of Tehilah, no other thought has entered your mind."

"I would beg to know more of her," I replied. He said:

"I have already spoken of her as she is today. How she was before she came to our land I do not know, beyond what everyone knows; that is to say, that she was a very wealthy woman, the owner of vast concerns, who gave up all when her sons and her husband died, and came here to Jerusalem. My late mother used to say, 'When I see Tehilah, I know that there is retribution worse than widowhood and the loss of sons.' What form of retribution this was, my mother never said; and neither I, nor anyone else alive, knows; for all that generation which knew Tehilah abroad is now dead, and she herself says but little. Even now, when she is beginning to change, and speaks more than she did, it is not of herself. . . . We have come to her house; but it

is unlikely that you will find her at home; for towards sunset she makes the rounds of the schoolrooms, distributing sweets to the younger children."

A few moments later, however, I stood in the home of Tehilah. She was seated at the table, expecting me, so it seemed, with all her being. Her room was small, with the thick stone walls and arched ceiling that were universal in the Jerusalem of bygone days. Had it not been for the little bed in a corner, and a clay jar upon the table, I would have likened her room to a place of worship. Even its few ornaments—the hand-lamp of burnished copper, a copper pitcher and a lamp of the same metal that hung from the ceiling—even these, together with the look of the table, on which were laid a prayer-book, a Bible, and some third book of study, gave to the room the grace and simplicity of a house of prayer.

I bowed my head saying, "Blessed be my hostess."

She answered, "And blessed be my guest."

"You live here," said I, "like a princess."

"Every daughter of Israel," she said, "is a princess; and, praised be the living God, I too am a daughter of Israel. It is good that you have come. I asked to see you; and not only to see you, but to speak with you also. Would you consent to do me a favor?"

"'Even to the half of my kingdom,'" I replied. She said:

"It is right that you should speak of your kingdom; for every man of Israel is the son of kings, and his deeds are royal deeds. When a man of Israel does good to his neighbor, this is a royal deed. Sit down, my son: it makes conversation more easy. Am I not intruding upon your time? You are a busy man, I am sure, and need the whole day for gaining your livelihood. Those times have gone when we had leisure enough and were glad to

spend an hour in talk. Now everyone is in constant bustle and haste. People think that if they run fast enough it will speed the coming of Messiah. You see, my son, how I have become a chatterer. I have forgotten the advice of that old man who warned me not to waste words."

I was still waiting to learn the reason for her summons. But now, as if she had indeed taken to heart the old man's warning, she said nothing. After a while she glanced at me, and then looked away; then glanced at me again, as one might who is scrutinizing a messenger to decide if he is worthy of trust. At last she began to tell me of the death of the *rabbanit*, who had passed away during the night, while her stove was burning, and her cat lay warming itself at the flame—till the hearse-bearers came and carried her away, and someone unknown had taken the stove.

"You see, my son," said Tehilah, "a man performs a *mitzvah*, and one *mitzvah* begets another. Your deed was done for the sake of that poor woman, and now a second person is the gainer, who seeks to warm his bones against the cold." Again she looked me up and down; then she said, "I am sure you are surprised that I have troubled you to come."

"On the contrary," I said, "I am pleased."

"If you are pleased, so am I. But my pleasure is at finding a man who will do me a kindness; as for you, I do not know why you should be pleased."

For a moment she was silent. Then she said, "I have heard that you are skilful at handling a pen—since you are, as they nowadays call it, an author. So perhaps you will place your pen at my service for a short letter."

I took out my fountain pen. She looked at it with interest, and said, "You carry your pen about with you, like those who carry a spoon wherever they go, so that

if they chance upon a meal, the spoon is ready to hand."

I replied, "For my part, I carry the meal inside the spoon." And I explained to her the working of my fountain pen.

She picked it up in her hand and objected, "You say there is ink inside, but I cannot see one drop."

I explained the principle more fully, and she said:

"If it is so, they slander your generation in saying that its inventions are only for evil. See, they have invented a portable stove, and invented this new kind of pen: it may happen that they will yet invent more things for the good of mankind. True it is that the longer one lives, the more one sees. All the same, take this quill that I have myself made ready, and dip it in this ink. It is not that I question the usefulness of your pen; but I would have my letter written in my own way. And here is a sheet of paper; it is crown-paper, which I have kept from days gone by, when they knew how good paper was made. Upwards of seventy years I have kept it by me, and still it is as good as new. . . . One thing more I would ask of you: I want you to write, not in the ordinary cursive hand, but in the capital letters of the prayer book and the Torah. I assume that as a writer you must at some time have transcribed, if not the Torah itself, at least the Scroll of Esther that we read on Purim.

"As a boy," I answered, "I copied such a scroll exactly in the manner prescribed; and, believe this or not, everyone who saw that scroll praised it."

"Although I have not seen it," said Tehilah, "I am sure you know how to write the characters as is required, without a single flaw. Now I shall make ready for you a glass of herb-tea, while you proceed with your writing."

"Please do not trouble," I said, "for I have already taken something to drink."

"If so, how shall I show hospitality? I know: I shall cut you a piece of sugar-loaf; then you can say a blessing, and I can add, Amen."

She gave me some of the sugar. Then, after a short silence, she said:

"Take up the quill and write. I shall speak in the vernacular, but you will write in the holy tongue. I have heard that now they teach the girls both to write and to speak the holy language: you see, my son, how the good Lord is constantly improving his world from age to age. When I was a child, this was not their way. But at least I understand my Hebrew prayer book, and can read from the Torah, and the Psalms, and the Ethics of the Fathers. . . . Oh dear, oh dear, today I have not finished my day."

I knew that she meant the day's portion of the Psalms, and said to her, "Instead of grieving you should rather be glad."

"Glad?"

"Yes," I said, "for the delay is from heaven, that one day more might be added to your sum of days." She sighed, and said:

"If I knew that tomorrow our Redeemer would come, gladly would I drag out another day in this world. But as day follows day, and still our true Redeemer tarries and comes not, what is my life? And what is my joy? God forbid that I should complain of my years: if it pleases Him to keep me in life, it pleases me also. Yet I cannot help but ask how much longer these bones must carry their burden. So many younger women have been privileged to set up their rest on the Mount of Olives, while I remain to walk on my feet, till I think I shall wear them away. And is it not better to present oneself in the Higher World while one's limbs are all whole, and return the loan of the body intact? I do not speak of

putting on flesh, which is only an extra burden for the hearse-bearers. But at least it is good to die with whole limbs. . . . Again I am speaking too much: but now what does it matter a word less, or a word more. I am fully prepared to return the deposit of my body, earth back to earth. . . . Take up your quill, my son, and write."

I dipped the quill-pen in the ink, made ready the paper and waited for Tehilah to speak. But she was lost in her thoughts and seemed unaware of my presence. I sat there and gazed at her, my eyes taking in every wrinkle and furrow of her face. How many experiences she had known! She was in the habit of saying that she had seen good things, and yet better things. From what I had been told, these things seemed far from good. The adage was true of her, that the righteous wear mourning in their hearts, and joy upon their faces.

Tehilah became aware of me and, turning her head, said, "Have you begun?"

"You have not told me what I am to write."

She said, "The beginning does not need to be told. We commence by giving praise to God. Write: *With the help of the Holy Name, blessed be He.*"

I smoothed the paper, shook the quill, and wrote, *With the help of the Holy Name, blessed be He.*

She sat up, looked at what I had written, and said:

"Good; very good. And now what next? Write as follows: *From the Holy City, Jerusalem, may she be built and established, speedily and in our days, Amen.* In speech I only say 'Jerusalem,' without additions. But in writing, it is proper that we should bring to mind the holiness of Jerusalem, and add a plea for her to be rebuilt; that the reader may take Jerusalem to his heart, and know that she is in need of mercy, and say a prayer for her. Now, my son, write the day of the week, and

the portion of the Torah for the week, and the number of years since the creation."

When I had set down the full date, she continued:

"Now write, in a bold hand, and as carefully as you can, the letter *Lamed*. . . . Have you done this? Show me how it looks. . . . There is no denying that it is a good *Lamed*, though perhaps it could have been a trifle larger. Now, my son, continue with *Khaf*, and after the *Khaf* write *Bet*, and after it *Vav*. . . . *Vav*, I was saying, and now comes *Dalet*. Show me now the whole word, *Likhvod*, 'In honor of.' Very fine indeed. It is only right that the respectful address should be suitably written. Now add to that, 'the esteemed Rabbi' . . . ah, you have already done so! You write faster than I think: while I am collecting my thoughts, you have already set them down. Truly your father—may the light of God shine on him—did not waste the cost of your education. . . . My son, forgive me, for I am so tired. Let us leave the writing of the letter till another day. When is it convenient for you to come?"

"Shall I come tomorrow?" I said.

"Tomorrow? Do you wish it? What day is tomorrow?"

"It is the day before new moon."

"That is a good day for this thing. Then let it be tomorrow."

I saw that she was inwardly grieved, and thought to myself: The day before new moon is a time for prayer and supplication, a time for visits to the tomb of Rachel our Mother; surely she will not be able to attend to her letter. Aloud I said to her, "If you are not free tomorrow I shall come on some other day."

"And why not tomorrow?"

"Just because it is the day before the new moon."

She said, "My son, you bring my sorrow before me,

that on such a day I should be unable to go to Rachel our Mother."

I asked why she could not go.

"Because my feet cannot carry me there."

"There are carriages," I said, "and buses as well."

"When I first came to Jerusalem," said Tehilah, "there were none of these buses, as they call them now, and a foolish word it is, too. There were not even carriages; so we used to walk. And since I have gone on foot for so long, it is now hardly worth changing my ways. Did you not say you are able to come tomorrow? If it pleases the Name to grant my wish, my life will be prolonged for yet a day more."

I left her and went on my way; and the following day I returned. I do not know if there was any real need to return so soon. Possibly if I had waited longer, it would have extended her life.

As soon as I saw her, I perceived a change. Tehilah's face, that always had about it a certain radiance, was doubly radiant. Her room shone out too. The stone floor was newly polished, and so were all the articles in the room. A white coverlet was spread over the little bed in the corner, and the skirtings of the walls were freshly color-washed blue. On the table stood the jar, with its parchment cover, and a lamp and sealing wax were placed at its side. When had she found time to color-wash the walls, and to clean the floor, and to polish all her utensils? Unless angels did her work, she must have toiled the night long.

She rose to welcome me, and said in a whisper, "I am glad that you have come. I was afraid you might forget, and I have a little business matter to attend to."

"If you have somewhere to go," I said, "I shall come back later."

"I have to go and confirm my lease. But since you

are here, sit down, and let us proceed with the letter. Then afterwards I shall go about my lease."

She set the paper before me and fetched the ink and the quill pen. I took up the pen and dipped it in the ink and waited for her to dictate her message.

"Are you ready?" she said. "Then I am ready too!"

As she spoke the word "ready," her face seemed to light up and a faint smile came to her lips. Again I prepared to write, and waited for her next words.

"Where did we leave off?" she said. "Was it not with the phrase, *In honor of the esteemed rabbi?* Now you shall write his name."

Still I sat waiting.

She said in a whisper, "His name is Shraga. . . . Have you written it?"

"I have written."

She half-closed her eyes as if dozing. After some time she raised herself from her chair to look at the letter, and whispered again, "His name is Shraga. His name is Shraga." And again she sat silent. Then she seemed to bestir herself, saying, "I shall tell you in a general way what you are to write." But again she lapsed back into silence, letting her eyelids droop.

"I see," she said at last, "that I shall have to tell you all that happened, so that you will understand these things and know how to write. It is an old story, of something which happened many years ago; yes, three and ninety years ago."

She reached for her walking stick and let her head sink down upon it. Then again she looked up, with an expression of surprise, as a man might who thinks he is sitting alone and discovers a stranger in his room. Her face was no longer calm, but showed grief and disquiet as she felt for her stick, then put it by, and again took

it up to lean upon, passing her hand over her brow to smooth out her wrinkles.

Finally she said, "If I tell you the whole story, it will make it easier for you to write. . . . His name is Shraga. . . . Now I shall start from the very beginning."

She raised her eyes and peered about her; then, reassured that no one else could be listening, she began:

"I was eleven years old at the time. I know this, because Father, of blessed memory, used to write in his Bible the names of his children and the dates of their births, his daughters as well as his sons. You will find the names in that Bible you see before you; for when I came to Jerusalem, my late brothers renounced their right to my father's holy books and gave them to me. As I said before, it is an old story, three and ninety years old; yet I remember it well. I shall relate it to you, and little by little you will understand. Now, are you listening?"

I inclined my head and said, "Speak."

"So you see, I was eleven years old. One night, Father came home from the synagogue, bringing with him some relative of ours, and with them Petachya Mordechai, the father of Shraga. When she saw them enter, my dear mother—peace be upon her soul—called me and told me to wash my face well and put on my Sabbath dress. She too put on her Sabbath clothes and bound her silk kerchief round her head and, taking my hand, led me into the best room to meet Father and his guests. Shraga's father looked at me and said, 'Heaven shield you, you are a pretty child.' Father stroked my cheek and said, 'Tehilah, do you know who spoke to you? The father of your bridegroom-to-be spoke to you. May the influences be happy, my child: tonight you are betrothed.' At once all the visitors blessed me with happy influ-

ences, and called me 'the bride.' Mother quickly bundled me back to her room to shield me from any evil eye, and kissed me, and said, 'Now and henceforth, you are Shraga's betrothed; and God willing, next year, when your bridegroom comes of age at thirteen for wearing the phylacteries, we shall make your wedding.'

"I knew Shraga already, for we used to play with nuts and at hide-and-seek, until he grew too old and began to study the Gemara. After our betrothal I saw him every Sabbath, when he would come to Father's house and repeat to him all he had learned through the week. Mother would give me a dish of sweets which I would take and offer to Shraga, and Father would stroke my cheek and beam upon my bridegroom.

"And now they began to prepare for the wedding. Shraga's father wrote out the phylacteries, and my father bought him a prayer shawl, while I sewed a bag for the phylacteries and another bag for the prayer shawl that is worn on a Sabbath. Who made the large outer bag for both prayer shawl and phylacteries I cannot remember.

"One Sabbath, four full weeks before the day fixed for the wedding, Shraga failed to come to our house. During the afternoon service, Father enquired at the house of study, and was told that he had gone on a journey. Now this journey was made to one of the leaders of the Hasidim, and Shraga had been taken by his father in order that he might receive a direct blessing on the occasion of his first wearing of the prayer shawl and phylacteries. When my father learned this, his soul nearly parted from his body; for he had not known until then that Shraga's father was of the Sect. He had kept his beliefs a secret, for in those days the Hasidim were despised and persecuted, and Father was at the head of the persecutors; so that he looked upon members of the

Sect as if (God forbid) they had ceased to belong to our people. After the Havdalah ceremony at the close of the Sabbath, Father tore up my marriage contract and sent the pieces to the house of my intended father-in-law. On the Monday, Shraga returned with his father, and they came to our house. My father drove them out with abuse; whereupon Shraga himself swore an oath that he would never forgive us the insult. Now Father knew well that he who cancels a betrothal must seek pardon from the injured party; yet he took no steps to obtain this. And when my mother implored him to appease Shraga, he made light of her entreaties, saying, 'You have nothing to fear: he is only of the Sect.' So contemptible were the Hasidim in my father's eyes that he took no heed in this thing wherein all men take heed.

"Preparations for the wedding had been made. The poultry was ordered, and the house was cluttered with sacks of flour and casks of honey for the making of loaves and cakes. In short, all was ready, and there lacked nothing but a bridegroom. My father summoned a matchmaker; another bridegroom was found for me; and with him I went to my bridal.

"What became of Shraga, I do not know, for Father forbade any of our household to mention his name. Later I heard that he and all his people had moved to another town. Indeed they were in fear for their very lives, since, from the day when Father ended my betrothal, they were not called to the Law in synagogue—not even at the Rejoicing of the Law, when every man is called. They could not even come together for worship, for my father as head of the community would not let them assemble outside the fixed houses of prayer; and had they not moved to another town where they might be called to the Torah, they could not have gone through the year.

"Three years after the wedding, I was granted the birth of a son. And two years later, another son was born to me. And two years after that, I gave birth to a daughter.

"Time passed uneventfully, and we lived at our ease. The children grew and prospered, while I and my husband watched them grow and were glad. I forgot about Shraga, and forgot that I had never received a note of pardon at his hand.

"Mother and Father departed this life. Before his death, my father of blessed memory committed his affairs to his sons and his sons-in-law, enjoining them all to work together as one. Our business flourished, and we lived in high repute. We engaged good tutors for our sons, and a foreign governess for our daughter; for in those days pious folk would have nothing to do with the local teachers, who were suspected of being free-thinkers.

"My husband would bring these tutors from other towns; and whereas the local teachers were obliged to admit any student who came, even if he was not suitably qualified, tutors who had been brought from elsewhere were dependent upon those who engaged them and under no such obligation. Coming, as they did, alone, they would dine at our table on Sabbath days. Now my husband, who because of the pressure of his affairs could not make set times for study of the Torah, was especially glad of one such guest and his learned discourses. And I and the children delighted in the tuneful table chant he would sing us. We did not know that this tutor was a Hasid, and his discourses the doctrines of Hasidism, and the airs that he sang us, Hasidic airs; for in all other respects he conducted himself like any other true believer of Israel. One Sabbath eve, having discoursed of the Torah, he closed his eyes and sang a

hymn of such heavenly bliss that our very souls went forth at its sweetness. At the end, my husband asked him, 'How may a man come to this experience of the divine?' The tutor whispered to him, 'Let your honor make a journey to my *rebbe*,* and he will know this and much more.'

"Some days later, my husband found himself in the city of the tutor's *rebbe*. On his return, he brought with him new customs, the like of which I had not seen in my father's house; and I perceived that these were the customs of the Hasidim. And I thought to myself, who can now wipe the dust from your eyes, Father, that you may see what you have done, you who banished Shraga for being a Hasid, and now the husband you gave me in his stead does exactly as he did? If this thing does not come about as atonement for sin, I know not why it has come about.

"My brothers and brothers-in-law saw what was happening, but they said not a word. For already the times had changed, and people were no longer ashamed to have Hasidim in the family. Men of wealth and position had come from other towns and married amongst us; they followed the customs of Hasidim, and even set up a house of prayer for their sect, and would travel openly to visit their *rebbe*s. My husband did not attend their services, but in other respects he observed Hasidic customs and educated his sons in their ways, and from time to time would make journeys to his *rebbe*.

"A year before our first-born son came of age, there was plague in the world, and many fell sick. There was not a house without its victims, and when the plague reached us, it struck our son. In the end the Lord spared him—but not for long. When he rose from his sickbed,

* Yiddish for rabbi; usually applied to Hasidic leaders in Eastern Europe.

he began to study the practice of the phylacteries from the great code of the Shulhan Aruch. And I saw this and was glad, that for all his Hasidic training, his devotion to the Law was not lessened.

"One morning our son rose up very early to go to the house of study. As he was about to enter, he saw there a man dressed in grave clothes, resembling a corpse. It was not a dead man he had seen, but some demented creature who did many strange things. The child was overcome with terror and his senses left him. With difficulty was he restored to life. Restored to life he was indeed, but not to a long life. From that day on, his soul flickered and wavered like a candle flame, like the soul of a man at the closing prayer of the Day of Atonement, when his fate is about to be sealed. He had not come of age for wearing phylacteries when he gave up his ghost and died.

"Through the seven days of mourning I sat and meditated. My son had died after the Havdalah at the ending of Sabbath, thirty days before he came of age for phylacteries. And at the end of a Sabbath, after the Havdalah, thirty days before I was to go to my bridal with Shraga, Father had torn up the marriage contract. Counting the days I found to my horror that the two evils had come about on the same day, at the same hour. Even if this were no more than chance, yet it was a matter for serious reflection.

"Two years later, the boy's brother came of age—came, and did not come. He happened to go with his playfellows to the woods outside our town to fetch branches for the Pentecost. He left his comrades in the woods, intending to call on the scribe who was preparing his phylacteries; but he never returned. We thought at first that he had been stolen by gypsies, for a troop of them had been seen passing the town. After some days

his body was found in the great marsh beside the woods; then we knew he must have missed his way and fallen in.

"When we stood up from our mourning, I said to my husband, 'Nothing remains to us now but our one daughter. If we do not seek forgiveness from Shraga, her fate will be as the fate of her brothers.'

"Throughout all those years we had heard nothing of Shraga. When he and his people left our town, they were forgotten, and their whereabouts remained unknown. My husband said, 'Shraga is the Hasid of such and such a *rebbe*: I shall make a journey to this man, and find out where he lives.'

"Now my husband was not the Hasid of this same *rebbe*: on the contrary, he was opposed to him, because of the great dispute that had broken out between the *rebbe*s, on account of a cattle slaughterer, whom one had appointed and the other had dismissed. In the course of that quarrel a man of Israel was killed, and several families were uprooted, and several owners of property lost their possessions, and several persons ended their days in prison.

"Nevertheless, my husband made the journey to the town where this *rebbe* lived. Before he arrived there, the *rebbe* died, after dividing his ministry amongst his sons, who went away each to a different town. My husband journeyed from town to town, from son to son, inquiring of each son where Shraga might be. Finally he was told, 'If you are asking after Shraga, Shraga has become a renegade and joined our opponents.' But no one knew where Shraga now lived.

"When a man is a Hasid, you may trace him without difficulty. If he is not the disciple of one *rebbe*, he is the disciple of another. But with any ordinary unattached Jew, unless you know where he lives, how may he be found? My husband, peace be upon his soul,

was accustomed to making journeys, for his business took him to many places. He made journey after journey inquiring for Shraga. On account of these travels his strength in time began to fail and his blood grew thin. At last, having traveled to a certain place, he fell sick there and died.

"After I had set up his tombstone, I went back to my town and entered into business. While my husband was still alive, I had helped him in his affairs: now that he was dead, I speeded them with all my might. And the Lord doubled my powers until it was said of me, 'She has the strength of a man.' It would have been well, perhaps, had wisdom been granted me in place of strength, but the Lord knows what he intends and does not require his own creatures to tell him what is good. I thought in my heart: all this toil is for my daughter's sake. If I add to my wealth, I shall add to her welfare. As my responsibilities became ever greater, I found I had no leisure to spend at home, except on Sabbaths and holy days, and even these days were apportioned, half to the service in synagogue, and the other half to the reception of guests. My daughter, so it seemed, was in no need of my company, for I had engaged governesses, and she was devoted to her studies. I received much praise on account of my daughter, and even the gentiles, who deride our accent, would say that she spoke their language as well as the best of their people. Furthermore, these governesses would ingratiate themselves with my daughter, and invite her to their homes. In due course, I called the matchmakers, who found her a husband distinguished for his learning, and already qualified for the rabbinate. But I was not to enjoy a parent's privilege of leading my daughter to her bridal, for the evil spirit took possession of her, so that her right reason was perverted.

"And now, my son, this is what I ask of you: Write to Shraga for me, and say that I have forgiven him for all the sorrows that befell me at his hand. And say that I think he should forgive me, too, for I have been stricken enough."

For a long, long time I sat in silence, unable to speak a word. At last, secretly wiping a tear from my eye, I said to Tehilah:

"Allow me to ask a question. Since the day when your father tore up the marriage contract, ninety years and more have passed. Do you really believe that Shraga is still alive? And if so, has anyone informed you where he may be found?"

Tehilah answered, "Shraga is not alive. Shraga has now been dead for thirty years. I know the year of his death, for in that year, on the seventh day of Adar, I went to a synagogue for the afternoon service. Following the week's reading from the Prophets, they said the memorial prayer for the dead, and I heard them pray for the soul of Shraga. After the service, I spoke to the beadle of the synagogue, and asked him who this Shraga might be. He mentioned the name of a certain kinsman of the dead man, who had given instructions for his soul to be remembered. I went to this kinsman, and heard what I heard."

"If Shraga is dead, then, how do you propose to send him a letter?"

Tehilah answered, "I suppose you are thinking that this old woman's wits are beginning to fail her, after so many years; and that she is relying upon the post office to deliver a letter to a dead man."

I said, "Then tell me, what will you do?"

She rose, and picking up the clay jar that stood on the table, raised it high above her head, intoning in a kind of ritual chant:

"I shall take this letter—and set it in this jar; I shall take this wax—and seal up this jar; and I shall take them with me—this letter and this jar."

I thought to myself, and even if you take the jar and the letter with you, I still do not see how your message will come to Shraga. Aloud I said to her, "Where will you take your jar with its letter?"

Tehilah smiled and said softly, "Where will I take it? I will take it to the grave, my son. Yes, I shall take this jar, and the letter inside it, straight to my grave. For up in the High World they know Shraga well and will know where to find him. And the postmen of the Holy One are dependable, you may be sure; they will see that the letter is delivered."

Tehilah smiled again. It was a little smile of triumph, as of a precocious child who has got the better of an argument with her elders. After a while she let her head sink upon her walking stick and seemed again to be half asleep. But soon she glanced up and said, "Now that you understand the whole matter, you can write of your own accord." And again her head dropped over her stick.

I took up the pen and wrote the letter. When I had finished, Tehilah raised her head and inquired, "Is it done now?" I began to read the letter aloud, while she sat with her eyes closed, as if she had lost interest in the whole matter and no longer desired very greatly to hear. When the reading was over, she opened her eyes and said:

"Good, my son, good and to the point. Perhaps it might have been phrased rather differently, but even so, the meaning is clear. Now, my son, hand me the pen and I shall sign my name. Then I can put the letter in the jar; and after that I shall go about my lease."

I dipped the pen in the ink and handed it to her, and

she took it and signed her name. She passed the pen over certain of the characters to make them more clear. Then she folded the letter and placed it inside the jar, and bound the piece of parchment over the top. Then she kindled the lamp, and took wax for sealing, and held it against the flame until the wax became soft; then she sealed the jar with the wax. Having done these things, she rose from her place and went towards her bed. She lifted up the coverlet and placed the jar under the pillow of the bed. Then she looked at me fairly, and said in a quiet voice:

"I must make haste to confirm my lease. Bless you, my son, for the pains you have taken. Now and henceforth I shall not trouble you more."

So saying, she made smooth the coverlet of her bed, and took up her stick, and went to the door, and reached up that she might lay her lips to the mezuzah, and waited for me to follow. She locked the door behind us and walked ahead with brisk steps; and I overtook her and continued at her side.

As she walked, she looked kindly upon every place that she passed and every person she met. Suddenly she stopped and said, "My son, how can they abandon these holy places and these faithful Jews?"

At that time, I still did not comprehend all she meant by these words. When we reached the parting of the ways, she stopped again and said, "Peace with you." But when she saw that I was resolved not to leave her, she said no more. She went up the wide steps that lead to the courtyard of the Communal Center, and entered, and I followed.

We went into the Communal Center, which administers the affairs of the living and the dead. Two of the clerks sat there at a desk, their ledgers before them and their pens in their hands, writing and taking sips of their

Turkish coffee as they wrote. When they saw Tehilah, they set down their pens and stood up in respect. They spoke their welcome, and hastened to bring her a chair.

"What brings you here?" asked the elder of the clerks.

She answered, "I have come to confirm my lease."

He said, "You have come to confirm your lease: and we are of opinion that the time has come to annul it."

Tehilah was amazed. "What is all this?" she cried.

He said, "Surely you have already joined the immortals?"

Laughing at his own joke, the clerk turned to me, saying, "Tehilah, bless her, and may she live for many, many years, is in the habit of coming every year to confirm the bill of sale on the plot for her grave on the Mount of Olives. So it was last year, and the year before that, and three years ago, and ten and twenty and thirty years ago, and so will she go on till the coming of the Redeemer."

Said Tehilah, "May he come, the Redeemer: may he come, the Redeemer. Would to God he would hasten and come. But as for me, I shall trouble you no more."

The clerk asked, assuming a tone of surprise, "Are you going to a kibbutz, then, like these young girls they call 'pioneers'?"

Tehilah said, "I am not going to a kibbutz, I am going to my own place."

"What," said the clerk, "are you returning to your home country?"

Tehilah said, "I am not returning to my home country, but I am returning to the place whence I came: as it is written, *'And to the dust thou shalt return.'*"

"Tut-tut," said the clerk, "do you think that the Burial Society has nothing to do? Take my advice, and wait for twenty or thirty years more. Why all this haste?"

She said quietly, "I have already ordered the corpse-

washers and the layers-out, and it would be ill-mannered to make sport of these good women."

The clerk's expression changed, and it was evident that he regretted his light words. He then said:

"It is good for us to see you here, for so long as we see you, we have before us the example of a long life; and should you desert us—God forbid—it is as if you take away from us this precedent."

Tehilah said, "Had I more years to live, I would give them gladly to you, and to all who delight in life. Here is the lease for you to sign."

When the clerk had endorsed the bill of sale, Tehilah took it and placed it in the fold of her dress.

"Now and henceforth I shall trouble you no more," she said. "May the Name be with you, dear countrymen; for I go to my place."

She rose from her chair, and walked to the door and reached up to lay her lips to the mezuzah, and kissed the mezuzah, and so went away.

When she saw that I still went with her, she said, "Return to your own life, my son."

"I thought," said I, "that when you spoke of confirming the lease, you meant the lease of your house; but instead . . ."

She took me up in the midst of my words. "But instead," said she, "I confirmed the lease of my long home. Yet may the Holy One grant that I have no need to dwell there for long, before I rise again, with all the dead of Israel. Peace be upon you, my son. I must make haste and return to my house, for I am sure that the corpse-washers and the layers-out already await me."

I stood there in silence and watched her go, until she passed out of sight among the courts and the alleys.

Next morning I went to the Old City to enquire how

she fared. On my way, I was stopped by the man of learning to whose house Tehilah had led me. For some while he kept me in conversation, and when I wished to take my leave, he offered to accompany me.

"I am not going home yet," I said. "I am going to see Tehilah."

He said, "Go only after a hundred and twenty years."

Seeing my surprise, he added, "You will live. But that saint has now left us."

I parted from him and went on alone. As I walked, I thought again and again: Tehilah has left us, she has gone on alone; she has left us, and gone on alone. I found that my feet had carried me to the house of Tehilah, and I opened her door and entered.

Still and calm was the room, like a house of prayer after the prayer has been said. There, on the stone floor, flowed the last tiny rivulets of the waters in which Tehilah had been cleansed.

—Translated by Walter Lever

HAIM HAZAZ

The Sermon

*Haim Hazaz was born in the Ukraine in 1898 and has lived in Israel since 1931. He began to write in the nineteen-twenties while in Constantinople and Paris, during the course of a protracted emigration from post-war Russia to Palestine, and has published prolifically since then. His works include three novels (an English translation of one appeared in 1956 under the title *Mori Said*); a tetralogy; a four-act play; and numerous short stories.*

Hazaz's choice of subject matter has been far-ranging, extending from reminiscences of his native Ukrainian Jewry to the life of the Yemenite Jews in Israel, a community in which he has taken a special interest. "The Sermon" is essentially a soliloquy on the nature of Jewish history, but the setting for this—a meeting of the central committee of a kibbutz or communal farm—provides the story with an added satirical dimension.