Jewish Tales of REINCARNATION

YONASSAN GERSHOM

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"The world says that telling stories helps one to fall asleep.
But I say—telling stories wakes people up!"

(Rabbi Nachman of Breslov)

Dedicated to my beloved wife, Caryl Rachel, on our eighteenth wedding anniversary. In spite of howling blizzards and a collapsing roof that forced us to abandon our old house and beloved garden, she still found enough hope and joy in her heart to encourage me to finish this project. Without her steadfast love during those times of crisis, you would not now be reading this book.

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Introduction

Does Judaism really have teachings about reincarnation? The answer, surprisingly, is yes. Scattered throughout many kabbalistic and Hasidic texts, there are clear references to reincarnation and other psychical phenomena, as well as numerous teaching stories with reincarnation as their central theme. That being the case, why aren't these teachings better known today?

In previous decades, these stories were often written off by Westernized Jews as "Old World superstitions." Academic collections tended to focus on the moral and ethical tales while de-emphasizing the mystical elements. But with recent interest in parapsychology and past-life regression therapy, many Jews are now taking a second look at their own teachings about rebirth.

In 1992, I published a work entitled *Beyond the Ashes: Cases of Reincarnation from the Holocaust,* which included true stories of people who claim to have past-life memories of dying in the Nazi concentration camps, as well as chapters on reincarnation in Jewish theology. *Beyond the Ashes* was well-received in both Jewish and therapeutic circles. It was followed, four years later, by my second book on the same topic, *From Ashes to Healing: Mys-*

tical Encounters with the Holocaust, which presented fifteen first-person narratives. In October 1996, two reincarnation stories from the second book were featured on the national TV series *Sightings*, produced by Paramount Studios; and in November of that same year, my work was the subject of a major feature article in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*.

In both my books and numerous interviews, I made frequent references to the existence of Jewish teaching stories about reincarnation in classical Hebrew texts. Where, the readers and viewers now asked, could these stories be found in English?

Although *Beyond the Ashes* does contain a bibliography, there was not, until now, any single anthology that focused specifically on Jewish reincarnation tales. The stories were scattered throughout a plethora of works that are not easy to locate outside of specialized libraries. When and if the general reader finally managed to track them down, she often found the reincarnation references to be frustratingly obscure, because many of the original texts do not spell out the teachings. Some stories are detailed enough for the theme of rebirth to be obvious, but others never clearly state that they are talking about reincarnation at all. For example, consider this anecdote about the Kotzker Rebbe:

> It once happened that two prayer requests came before the Kotzker: One was about a man who was dying, heaven forbid, and one was about a woman having difficulty giving birth, and one was waiting for the other, and a word to the wise is sufficient. [*Siach Sarfei Kodesh*]

"A word to the wise is sufficient" is intended to clue us in that this is really a story about reincarnation, with the "wise" being those who are familiar with kabbalah. This anecdote is, in fact, a fragment of a longer story, included in this book as "The Difficult Decision," where the soul of the dying man was destined to enter the fetus about to be born. However, the average modern reader (presumably not among the "wise") is unlikely to pick up on such an obscure reference.

Even in works that do explain the stories more clearly, the indices are woefully incomplete on this topic, making it difficult to zero in on stories specifically about rebirth. The only way to find the reincarnation stories was to read entire anthologies from cover to cover—an overwhelming task for the casual seeker.

For example, Jiri Langer's classic work, *Nine Gates to the Hasidic Mysteries* (1937), has no index at all. The English edition of Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim* (1948) does have an index, but does not list "reincarnation." Louis I. Newman's *Hasidic Anthology* (1934) has an entry for "transmigration" in its 244–page topical index, but only cites one short reference, even though the work contains several others. To further complicate matters, not one of the rebirth stories in Newman's book is found in the chapter on the afterlife!

Most likely, these omissions occurred because the tales were perceived as focusing on some other theme, with reincarnation being a mere background detail. At the time when these anthologies were being compiled, there was very little interest in reincarnation—or mysticism in general—for its own sake. Martin Buber, in his introduction to *Tales of the Hasidim*, freely admits:

> This book contains less than a tenth of the material I collected. The first criterion for inclusion of a tale was, of course, significance *per se*, as well as special significance for the understanding of Hasidic life. But many passages which were suitable from this point of view had to be set aside because they did not serve to characterize one of the Zadikkim about which this book centers. And that was the deciding factor. [Buber, *Tales*, Vol. I, p. x]

It is my hope that the present volume will begin to fill this gap, by bringing together a broad spectrum of tales on the theme of reincarnation. My goal here is not to produce yet another academic work on Jewish folklore. Nor do I seek to compile every existing reference to reincarnation that might be found in Jewish sources. Rather, I have attempted to create an original literary work that will make a few representative tales more acces-

sible to the general public, as well as serve as a source book for Jewish storytellers. To that end, I freely admit that these renditions are my own adaptations, not translations of previous works.

In choosing my material, I looked for stories that illustrate some aspect of reincarnation teachings for the spiritually minded reader. For this reason, I did not include antireligious works, such as A. B. Gotlober's scathing nineteenth-century satire, "The Reincarnation," which uses this theme to ridicule the Orthodox Jewish world of his time. Nor did I include the fictional works of modern authors, such as "The Jewbird" by Bernard Malamud, or "Yachid and Yechida" and "The Warehouse" by I. B. Singer. We should note, however, that these fictional works do use authentic Jewish motifs about reincarnation, some of which appear in the more traditional stories in this book.

I first heard most of these tales orally (and was telling them myself) long before I finally located the written version(s) in a published text. If I tend to favor the oral renditions, it is because they are frequently much richer in detail than the ones found in books. Today's storytellers often improvise with modern language and imagery, in order to clarify certain concepts that are obscure in the original versions, as well as make them relevant to their audiences—a technique that I have also adopted here.

In past centuries, *gilgul*, as reincarnation is called in Hebrew, was usually taught through hints and allusions that are not easily recognized by the uninitiated. An emphasis on a certain word, a reference to a biblical verse, a subtle hand gesture—and "a word to the wise is sufficient." To the kabbalist or Hasidic master, the reference was crystal clear, but to the average listener, it was just a good story. In 1937, Jiri Langer wrote of the pre-Holocaust world:

> The [Hasidic] storyteller does not speak with words alone. If his vocabulary proves inadequate, he can help himself along with gestures, miming, or modulations of the voice. When relating something gloomy, he will lower his voice to a whisper. If he has a mystery to unfold, he will content himself with hinting, breaking off in the middle of a sentence with a meaningful

> wink or squint. If he has to describe some supernatural beauty he will close his eyes and roll his head in genuine ecstasy. In this way the listener can understand much more than if we were to paint everything in detail with the choicest and cleverest words. [Langer, *Nine Gates*, p. 22]

In the Hasidic world of today, Langer's description still applies, and a "meaningful wink or squint" is enough to convey that something mystical is meant by otherwise ordinary words. But when I tell these same tales to non-Hasidic audiences, I find it necessary to recast them in a different style for better drama and clarity. If I were to simply repeat them as told at the Rebbe's table, the mystical allusions would be completely lost on most listeners.

Part of the problem is that Jewish texts in general do not necessarily follow the Western narrative style. In order to follow their reasoning, one must develop a different way of "hearing" them. The Talmud and Zohar, for example, are constructed along the lines of what is now called "hypertext," where specific words or concepts are linked to a definition or teaching that is explained on another page, or even in another book altogether. The "computer" that links these textual "websites" is the brain of the scholar himself. A person who has memorized Torah materials has "random access" to many different commentaries on the same topic simultaneously. He can then mentally "surf" from one idea to another in the same thread, holding numerous "windows" open at once, and weaving the information together into one coherent whole. As Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan writes in his introduction to the *Sefer Ha-Bahir* (a twelfth-century text):

> The proper way to study any kabbalistic text is to take it as a whole, using every part to explain every other one. The student must find threads of ideas running through the text, and follow them back and forth, until the full meaning is ascertained . . . In larger texts such as the Zohar, this methodology assumes even greater importance, and without it, much of the writings of the Ari [Rabbi Isaac Luria] will appear like little more than gibberish. [Kaplan, *Bahir*, pp. xi-xii]

It was for this reason that the rabbis have long insisted that one must first master the nonmystical Torah texts before moving on to study mysticism. This was not, as some secularists now claim, to exercise authoritarian control over who had access to the teachings. Rather, it was to ensure that the student had the right "software" installed in the brain before attempting to "surf" the kabbalistic materials. Without this preliminary level of learning, the Zohar does indeed read as "little more than gibberish."

But even among nonkabbalists, the Jews of old had a far greater intuitive understanding of the subtle nuances in these tales than most of us today. Because these stories were originally told by one Orthodox Jew to another within the same milieu, many details were simply assumed to be common knowledge among the listeners.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, for example, frequently used mystical allusions in his tales, with no explanation other than "this is well-known in the kabbalah." Among his circle of disciples, who were steeped in Hasidic and kabbalistic lore, that was undoubtedly true. But for the modern reader, who often lacks even the most basic background about Jewish customs and beliefs, something "well-known in the kabbalah" requires further explanation.

As a storyteller myself, I have found that I can be relatively brief when telling Hasidic tales to Hasidim, because they are still living within the cultural milieu of the stories. One need only say "It was the eve of the Sabbath . . . " to set the familiar scene. On the other hand, the same tales must be greatly expanded if they are to make any sense to the non-Hasidic listener, who may or may not be familiar with what takes place around the Rebbe's Sabbath table. Yet even the most assimilated, secularized Jew still has more cultural background than the average gentile, who must be clearly told, for example, that the "eve of the Sabbath" is Friday night and not Sunday afternoon.

Over the years, as I have shared these tales with a wide variety of audiences, I have become adept at smoothly working the background material into the narratives, without interrupting the

flow of the performance. In writing this book, I chose to utilize this method of explanation, rather than burden the reader with footnotes. The resulting tales are longer than the originals, but the reader can now visualize exactly *what* is happening and *why* it is important to the plot.

Purists in the folklore field will no doubt argue that I have altered the tales by anachronistically projecting my own feelings and experiences into the original texts. From the standpoint of literary criticism, they are absolutely right! But as a storyteller, I am well aware that every bard affects the telling of the tale. "Oral tradition" is exactly that—oral. As such, it is constantly shifting, flowing, adapting old plots to new metaphors, explaining timeless themes in contemporary language.

This is not a new phenomenon, to be sure. The Brothers Grimm, in collecting their now-famous anthology of German fairy tales, used a similar redaction process to produce the versions we now know. In 1936, Wanda Gag wrote in her preface to *Tales from Grimm*:

> The Brothers Grimm were as much interested in collecting disjointed fragments as they were complete stories. Sometimes they presented a story as they found it, but more often they used two or more imperfect stories, adding and subtracting various units to make a well-rounded whole. [Gag, p. ix]

I, too, found many "disjointed fragments," both written and oral, while researching the Jewish reincarnation tales. In some cases, I have combined two or three short anecdotes into a longer epic, or drawn upon a story from an earlier century to clarify the theme of a later narrative. This is entirely consistent with how the stories are told around the table within the living tradition. Very often, there is a wandering, nonlinear flow of anecdotes, where one tale about a certain Rebbe leads to a series of loosely related stories about his life, his teachings, his miracles. Eventually, someone brings up reincarnation. The previous background material about the Rebbe's life sets the mood for understanding

and accepting the particular fragment that actually deals with his previous incarnations. To take that fragment alone—as secular ethnographers often do—is to lose the context.

For this very reason, Jewish storytellers have often resisted committing the tales to print, for fear of freezing the free-flowing narrative into a lifeless tome. When I was at Rabbi Chaim Kramer's table in Uman, Ukraine, a former student of the Bostoner Rebbe told how, when he was still in yeshiva, the Rebbe's wife had found him reading an academic work on Hasidic stories. "What do you need this book for?" she asked disapprovingly.

"I want to learn the stories," the student replied.

"But why do you need this *book*?" she repeated. "We already *know* these stories!"

She meant, of course, that the Hasidim know them orally. She also knew that once a story is printed, the voice with which it is told can easily become lost or distorted. Even worse, it can get relegated to the shelf, becoming a forgotten relic of the past. So great is this concern among Hasidim, that Reb Nosson of Nemirov, who edited the well-known collection of tales by Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, found it necessary to reassure his readers that "The words may be printed in a book but they are the same as if they had been proclaimed [orally] in a great congregation."

Reb Nosson's goal was to preserve the oral flavor of his master's stories in a written form. My current task is the opposite: to re-infuse the written texts with a living voice.

In addition to classical tales, I have also included several contemporary narratives that illustrate how the repertoire of reincarnation stories continues to grow in our own generation. Nowadays, there is a disturbing tendency to consider a Hasidic story "authentic" if it can be dated from before the Holocaust, while later stories are ignored as modern intrusions. Yet the Holocaust itself has produced a number of important reincarnation motifs, which are now incorporated into the oral tradition. In collecting material for this book, I found that the vast majority of new reincarnation stories are connected to the Holocaust in one way or

another. For this reason, I felt it was important to include some of them here.

In my opinion, what makes a story authentic is the fact that Jews tell it in a Jewish context, regardless of the date of origin. Today's "urban legends" are important, too, because they illustrate how reincarnation remains a viable option for explaining the deeper mysteries of the universe. When, for example, a Russian Jew regards terrorist bombers as reincarnations of Moscow rats ("The Vengeful Rat"), he is voicing the same theme as the classical medieval tales where informers against the Jews are reincarnated as dogs. In the same way, American gentiles who convert to Judaism because they believe they have Jewish souls ("The American Sparks") are echoing the words of Count Vladimir Pototzki, who converted to Judaism for similar reasons in eighteenth-century Poland ("The Ultimate Price").

My arrangement of the stories into chapters here is somewhat arbitrary. Most—if not all—of the tales could easily fit into more than one category. The chapter headings should not be regarded as hard-and-fast classifications, but merely a convenient way for me to divide the collection into more manageable units.

For each story in the collection, I provided a commentary that explains my redaction process, and the sources for any extra details that I incorporated into the telling. Wherever possible, I tried to give some indication of when and where the story is taking place. The dates are not intended to be a scholarly indication of the origins of the text itself. Rather, they are an aid for helping the casual reader place the characters on the map and timeline of Jewish history. Thus, for example, a story about an eighteenth-century Rebbe is identified as originating in "Eastern Europe," even if it was collected from Hasidim in New York City.

I have included some personal insights and anecdotes connected with these stories, in order to help the reader personalize his or her own relationship to the teachings. Where appropriate, I also cited references to modern parapsychological works that describe phenomena that are similar to those in the classical tales.

At times I have been amazed at how well the insights of a medieval rabbi can agree with modern reincarnation research!

Hopefully, I have succeeded here in sharing the way that these tales present themselves to my own understanding. Perhaps, a few centuries from now, some folklorist will stumble across my humble renditions and hail them as an "authentic twentieth-century text," which will then be further adapted by the storytellers of that era. And so the thread of oral tradition will continue, weaving tales from generation to generation and from incarnation to incarnation, as long as there are people who enjoy a good story.

Basic Themes

As explained in the Introduction, these stories are closely interwoven with the fabric of traditional Jewish life, religion, and culture. The overview for each chapter provides the necessary background for understanding the particular tales in that section. In addition, each story has explanatory notes in the back of the book. Nevertheless, there are some basic concepts that are so essential to understanding this material, that I have included a few brief explanations here. Space does not permit me to go into detail about the theological origins of these ideas, but these basic definitions should be adequate for understanding the tales themselves. The interested reader is encouraged to consult the bibliography for further study.

EVERY ACTION FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN

To begin, let's examine the concept of *mitzvah*—a Hebrew word that has no exact equivalent in English. Although *mitzvah* has been variously translated as "commandment," law," or "good

deed," none of these definitions adequately conveys what a mitzvah really is. Within the context of these stories, "doing a mitzvah" is far more than obeying a moral law or carrying out a good deed for your neighbor. A mitzvah is also an act of redemption, which not only affects the physical world, but the spiritual realms as well.

Conversely, violating a Torah law or failing to perform a mitzvah can seriously upset the spiritual worlds. In "The Wisdom of the Martyrs," a holy man's depression on the Sabbath (a time when it is forbidden to mourn) creates such an uproar in heaven, that the angels send messengers to inform him of the effect that his sadness is having on all of creation—and beg him to stop!

According to traditional Jewish reckoning, there are 613 *mitzvot* (plural of mitzvah) that were commanded by God to the Jewish people through Moses at Sinai. These *mitzvot* are divided into two basic categories: 365 "thou shalt nots," representing the days of the year, and 248 "thou shalts," representing the parts of the body as understood in medieval anatomy. Within each of these two categories are many subcategories, each of which applies to a particular aspect of the soul's development. Fulfilling the 613 *mitzvot* not only builds a person's character here on earth, it also perfects a "spiritual body" in the next world. When that "spiritual body" is completed by having performed all 613 *mitzvot*, then the soul remains in the spiritual realms and does not reincarnate again.

Although it might seem overwhelming to have 613 rules regulating one's life, in practice they are integrated into the daily routine of the Jewish community as a whole. Many *mitzvot* are things that the average person would do anyway, such as being honest, giving charity, and showing reverence for life. Others are tied to observing the Sabbaths, festivals, fasts, and other holy days. Still others are specific to certain occupations or classes of people, such as kings, priests, merchants, farmers, and parents. Therefore, although no person can do all 613 *mitzvot* at once, each Jew should

strive to do as many of them as possible when the opportunity presents itself.

Under certain circumstances, a mitzvah performed by one person can be an act of redemption for the soul of somebody else. A good example would be the Yom Kippur rituals performed by the High Priest of old in the Jerusalem Temple, which were done on behalf of the entire Jewish people. But similar acts of redemption on the part of one person for another also occur on a smaller scale. In the story of "The Grain of Wheat," for example, a Jew becomes reincarnated as a wheat seed, which, in turn, is fermented into whiskey. The soul, which is still attached to the wheat molecules in the whiskey, is relying upon a Jew to make the proper blessing before drinking. When the Jew forgets to say the blessing, he has not only broken the commandment for himself, but also failed to help redeem another human soul.

The same could be said for any mitzvah we might perform. Not only is it a law that we are commanded to do, it may also be the redemptive act needed to free somebody else's soul from further entanglement in the physical plane. This worldview accounts for the scrupulous observance of the Torah laws by traditional Jewish mystics. While the outside world tends to see such stringency as "letter-of-the-law" fanaticism, the kabbalists see it as a form of "karmic healing," whereby the energy of the entire planet is gradually being "elevated" to a higher level of spirituality. Even a seemingly minor mitzvah might be the key to a major act of redemption. Therefore, in the words of Rabbi Akiba, one must "be as careful with a minor mitzvah as with a major one, for you do not know the true value of a mitzvah" (*Pirkei Avot*, 2:1).

THE HEAVENLY COURT

In many of these stories, the soul of a deceased person appears before a Heavenly Court, which reviews the case and decides the next step in the soul's spiritual development. This Court is mod-

eled on the earthly *Bet Din*, or rabbinical court, which consists of a board of three or more rabbis. It is important to remember that, for many centuries, the role of the rabbi was more that of judge rather than synagogue preacher. When there were disputes between Jews, the litigants took them to the Rav, or chief rabbi of the town, who convened a Bet Din to hear the case. It is therefore quite logical that Jews would envision a Heavenly Court in the afterlife, which would also hear their case and decide their fate.

Although the idea of being judged is not very popular these days, modern parapsychology does seem to indicate that some sort of "life review" takes place. Accounts of near-death experiences (NDEs) often include a panoramic reliving of every detail of one's earthly life, complete with full awareness of the impact of each action. The effects of this "life review" on those who live to tell about it is, that they return to this world with a greater sense of moral and spiritual responsibility.

An interesting parallel to the Heavenly Court can be also found in the research of Dr. Joel Whitton, author of the best-selling book *Life Between Life*. Under hypnosis, Dr. Whitton regressed many of his clients to what he calls the *bardo* state, a Tibetan Buddhist term for where the soul spends its time between incarnations. A surprisingly high percentage of Whitton's subjects reported appearing before an etheric "board of judgement," often made up of *three judges*! Although Dr. Whitton lists many cultures that speak of a Heavenly Tribunal, Judaism is not among them. Apparently, when he first published his book in 1986, Dr. Whitton was completely unaware that Jews have such teachings.

The trial itself is also patterned on earthly courts, with Satan playing the role of district attorney! He arrives with a long list of sins committed by the soul while on earth, and tries to get it sentenced to Gehenna (purgatory). The soul may either defend itself or, as is often the case, appoint a defense attorney. Very often, this is a Hasidic Rebbe or other teacher, who defends the soul by citing its good deeds. In some cases, the deeds themselves come to testify, in the form of good and bad angels that were created at

the time when the actions were performed. After hearing all the evidence, the Court decides the fate of the soul: up to the Garden of Eden, down to Gehenna, or back to earth for reincarnation.

REPAIRING THE UNIVERSE

It is a "given" in Jewish theology that this earthly existence is not perfect, and each of us is responsible to make the world a better place to live in. Many of the reincarnation stories deal with various aspects of *tikkun olam,* which literally means "repairing the universe" in Hebrew. It refers to a spiritual process described in Lurianic kabbalah and later adopted by Hasidism, whereby the "holy sparks" hidden within the physical universe are elevated to a higher spiritual plane. In "new age" terms, *tikkun olam* might be called a form of "planetary healing."

Within a Jewish context, this process occurs through performing the *mitzvot* and other acts of kindness. The concept not only applies to reincarnation, but to human activity in general. Human beings were created, and the Torah was revealed, in order for us to help bring about the spiritual repair of the universe.

But what, exactly, is in need of repair? Lurianic kabbalah teaches that the Holy Light of God was intended to be evenly suffused throughout all of Creation. But, during the primal creation process, the "Vessels" (*sefirot*) that were intended to contain the Holy Light were "shattered," and "sparks" (*netzotzot*) of that Light "fell" into lower planes of consciousness, becoming entrapped in the darker, denser levels of the material world here below.

The *mitzvot* are intended as a method for elevating these "sparks" back to their proper places in the universe. When the *mitzvot* are done with focused intention (*kavannah*), then "spiritual energy" is freed from the material world and sent back to the Creator, which, in turn, affects the entire creation. This process is cumulative, gradually raising the total "vibrational level" of

the physical and spiritual realms. When *tikkun olam* is completed, the Messiah will come.

But, conversely, a sin can also cause a soul to become entrapped, which, in turn, causes the entire universe to fall back into darkness again. When this happens, it has serious effects on all of creation, because everything is mystically connected to everything else. In the story of "The Frog Scholar," the failure to perform a ritual handwashing properly leads to a downward spiral of events that eventually cause a Torah scholar to reincarnate as a frog. In "The Animals' Complaint," a false messiah misleads the Jews of his time into violating the Torah by eating nonkosher species. This, according to the story, has resulted in the near-extinction of many animals today.

THE COVENANT AT SINAI

A "covenant" is a treaty or agreement between two or more parties for mutual benefit. Jewish tradition recognizes three covenants that God has made with human beings on earth, all of which are mentioned in the Bible: 1) the Noah Covenant after the Great Flood, which includes all humankind; 2) the covenant between God and Abraham, which is binding on all descendants of Abraham; and 3) the Covenant at Sinai, between God and the Jews.

Although it is common for non-Jewish theologians to say that Judaism "began" at the time of Moses, thereby making a distinction between "the ancient Hebrews" and "the modern Jews," this is not the Torah perspective, nor is it the belief system of the people whose stories are told in this book. The Torah begins with the story of Genesis, not the story of Moses. So, from a Jewish standpoint, "the ancient Hebrews" and "the modern Jews" are the same people, descended from an unbroken genealogical line reaching all the way back to Adam and Eve. (Converts to Juda-

ism are adopted into the tribe through specific rituals, and thereby "grafted" onto the family tree.)

What happened at Sinai, according to Jewish teachings, is that God revealed the Cosmic Torah in an earthly form. Before that time, it was only accessible to holy sages who could "reach up" to its level in heaven and experience it as "black fire written on white fire." After the Sinai revelation, the Torah was available to everyone who could read it for themselves. Therefore, when Moses "brought down" the Torah, it was far more than physically carrying two stone tablets down a mountain path.

In addition to revealing the laws of God, the Covenant at Sinai had another purpose: to connect the individual Jews together as one people. This was not merely a social bond, but a spiritual one as well, which continues, through multiple generations and/or incarnations, down to our present time. All the souls of all of the Jews who ever were or would be born were present at Sinai, either in the flesh or in the spirit. Together they said as one voice, "We will do and we will hear!" With this declaration of faith, they accepted the Covenant at Sinai, not only for themselves, but for all future generations of Jews as well.

Several stories in this book deal with this theme. Although some Jewish souls may have become separated or "cut off" from their people by reincarnating into non-Jewish situations around the world, they do not lose their Jewishness in the process. Much of the work of redemption on the part of Hasidic Rebbes and others consists of finding these lost souls and bringing them back to Judaism. This is not seen as proselytizing, but as an act of repentance on the part of the Jewish soul in question. Such repentance—literally "returning" in Hebrew—can span many lifetimes. The stories about converts in the "Jews by Choice" chapter illustrate this basic belief that people who are attracted to Judaism were, in one way or another, present at Sinai when the Torah was given.

THE DEFINITION OF TORAH

We now come to one of the most important themes for understanding these stories on a spiritual level: the meaning of "Torah" in the Jewish worldview. Like the word *mitzvah*, the Hebrew word *Torah* is very difficult to translate. Although the Torah is often referred to as "The Law," this is an inaccurate rendition, based, in part, on the King James translation of the Bible. Unfortunately, many modern people, Jews and non-Jews alike, have absorbed this mistranslation from the surrounding culture. The result is, that they tend to see "Torah Judaism" as a legalistic system, rather than the living spiritual path that it really is.

A better translation of "Torah" would be "teachings," which is what the word really means in Hebrew. "Torah" includes not only rules and laws, but also stories, parables, and other teachings, both oral and written. Christians often assume that the Torah is limited to the Five Books of Moses—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. But when Jews speak of "learning Torah," they do *not* mean only the Five Books of Moses! "Learning Torah" means studying—and internalizing—*all* of Jewish teachings and practices over the 5000+ years of our history.

This habit of using the same word for multiple meanings can cause confusion for non-Jewish readers. Generally speaking, when a story speaks of "the Torah" it probably refers to the Five Books of Moses as a sacred text; "a Torah" refers to the physical scroll in the synagogue; and "Torah" without any qualifying article means the entire body of knowledge. When the usage is not clear, it is best to assume that the wider meaning of the word is meant, i.e., all of Jewish teachings and wisdom, both oral and written.

Along with the written Torah as received by Moses, there is also a vast body of teachings known as the Oral Torah, much of which is now written down in books. It is important to keep in mind that, until the twentieth century, the technology of writing did not allow for people to have their own pocket Bibles.

Scrolls were heavy and scribes were expensive, so "publishing" often meant reading a text in public, rather than distributing many copies. The usual mode of learning was to memorize the text, then memorize the commentary—both accomplished by repeated recitation with a qualified teacher. Moses (and the unbroken line of sages after him) would first read from the Torah scroll and then expound on the meaning. The students would then memorize the oral explanations by repeating them until they were letter-perfect.

The stories in this book can be considered part of the Oral Torah, even though many of them are now available in printed form. As explained in the Introduction, the textual versions of many stories are lacking in details, often resembling lecture notes rather than fully developed literary works. In the case of Hasidic stories from Eastern Europe, many of them remained completely oral until relatively recently, when they were collected by ethnographers in order to preserve something of the pre-Holocaust Jewish world.

THE COSMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF TORAH

In addition to being a set of written laws and teachings, the Torah is also regarded as the cosmic blueprint that God utilized for creating the universe. "God looked into the Torah and created the world," says the Midrash. This implies that God created the Torah before creating existence as we know it. Nor was this creative process a one-time event that was completed in the days of Genesis. Quite the contrary. From moment to moment—even as you are now reading these very words—God continues to create, emanating the life force that sustains our very existence. "In his great goodness," says the morning prayer service, "He continually renews the works of creation."

Torah is the vehicle that God uses to sustain the universe. "The Torah of God is perfect," says the Psalmist, "reviving the soul." As such, the Cosmic Torah also transcends space and time.

There is no "before" or "after" in Torah, because time as we know it does not exist in the mind of God. For this reason, Torah learning sometimes seems filled with anachronisms. Concepts from a "later" period are used to explain those from an "earlier" period in ways that are foreign to secular linear history. This same timelessness also appears in the stories in this book, which automatically assume that the insights of later generations were already known to the sages of earlier ones, even if they do not appear in the written texts of that time.

Because the Torah is the cosmic blueprint of the universe, every word contains layers of mystical significance. The Hebrew letters that make up the text are not mere ink on parchment, but specific creative energies that God uses to sustain our existence from moment to moment. In the higher spiritual realms, the Torah is written with energies called "black fire on white fire." As this Cosmic Torah radiates from the Mind of God toward the earth plane, it takes on denser and denser forms until it finally becomes the written letters in the scroll as we know them on earth.

Conversely, by learning to see beyond the written letters of the text, one can sometimes glimpse the "black fire on white fire" in the heavenly worlds above. Although the Torah appears to be a historical narrative, the entire text can also be regarded as one long mystical Name of God. Each letter has a unique place in this order, so that the *Aleph* in one word is not at all the same "energy" as the *Aleph* in another word. It is this understanding of Torah as a cosmic blueprint that enables us to comprehend a story like "The Soul of Ruth," where the proof of Ruth's reincarnation in a European rabbi is based upon specific letters in the Biblical text.

REINCARNATION OR POSSESSION?

Are these stories really cases of reincarnation, or has the subject become possessed by an earthbound spirit? In many of the medieval tales, especially those from the circle of Rabbi Isaac Luria

(mid-sixteenth century), a clear distinction between reincarnation and possession is seldom made.

This is further complicated by the fact that, in Luria's day, the same Hebrew term—*gilgul*—was used for both phenomena, even though he did recognize a difference between them. In the everyday speech of that time, an animal or person who "had a *gilgul*" could be a case of either possession or reincarnation—or both.

This use of the same term for two separate phenomena is not as strange as it may seem at first. Both reincarnation and spirit possession were viewed by Luria as "fallen" spiritual states, where souls that were supposed to go to the higher worlds have ended up trapped on the earth plane instead. Both states are similar, in that they require an act of reparation to be done on their behalf before they can leave permanently. Since the word *gilgul* is derived from the Hebrew root meaning "circle" or "cycle," Luria uses it to refer to both types of "returning"—rebirth and spirit possession. The cure for both was the same: making reparation for the sins that had caused the soul to remain on the earth plane.

Nowadays, Jews use a newer term, *dybbuk*, for a disembodied soul that possesses another person's body, and *gilgul* for reincarnation proper. A *dybbuk* is an earthbound spirit of a dead person, which is trapped in what today would be called the "lower astral plane." The *dybbuk* has not yet been to the Heavenly Court for judgment, and may, in fact, have decided to remain earthbound in order to avoid facing its "life review" and a possible stint in purgatory. For this reason, a *dybbuk* cannot properly reincarnate, because it has not completed its present life cycle. It remains trapped between two realities, fully aware of its previous life. But instead of moving on, the earthbound soul attempts to regain access to physical pleasures by entering the body of a living person or, in some cases, an animal.

A soul can end up as a *dybbuk* for any number of reasons, the most common being that its own sins have somehow tied it to the earthly plane of existence. Such a soul is unable to leave its earth-

bound state until that tie is broken. This is frequently (but not always) accomplished by repenting and confessing its sins to a holy person, who helps the soul to "let go" and proceed to the next step in its spiritual evolution. In Jewish terms, an exorcism is not merely a casting out of the invading spirit. Rather, it is a type of karmic healing, which enables the spirit to progress, so that it no longer desires to possess others.

On the other hand, a genuinely reincarnated soul is one that has already ascended to the Heavenly Court and squarely faced its "life review." It may even have spent considerable time in the higher spiritual planes. Then, for whatever reason, it was sent back to the earth plane to be reborn. This type of *gilgul* does not try to take over an already existing body. Rather, it joins with the embryo of a newly forming body, destined for that particular soul to inhabit. When the baby is born, the reincarnated soul has become a new person, although it may retain some memories of its previous life. (One of the explanations of child prodigies is that they are reincarnated souls who remember skills acquired in previous lives.)

Mention should also be made of yet another, less common phenomenon, known as *sod ha-ibbur* ("mystery of impregnation") or simply *ibbur*. Originally, *gilgul* and *ibbur* meant the same thing, i.e., reincarnation or possession. But by the end of the fourteenth century, *ibbur* had come to mean the entry of a holy soul into the body of a living person in order to do a mitzvah. An *ibbur* is a type of benign possession, where the soul of a deceased person temporarily shares the mind and body of someone on earth, in order to perform a specific deed. In most cases, this is one of the 613 *mitzvot* that it was unable to perform during its earthly life, but which it needs in order to complete its "spiritual body" in the other world. (Similarly, a soul can also share in the merit of a mitzvah that is specifically done on its behalf by someone alive on earth. This is the basis of the custom of dedicating the merit of a mitzvah to the memory of a deceased relative.)

An *ibbur* differs from a *dybbuk,* in that the *ibbur* co-exists peacefully with the body it enters, and does not attempt to coerce the mind or personality of its owner. When the specific task is finished, the *ibbur* leaves of its own accord, without any need for an exorcism. The *ibbur* phenomenon is one way to account for people who temporarily feel that they are tuned in to the vibrations of Moses, Abraham, or some other religious figure.

Distinguishing among all these phenomena is not always easy in the traditional Jewish stories, for reasons already explained. In some stories, where the soul is said to join with a new body at birth, the reincarnation theme is obvious. But in others, such as cases where human souls inhabit horses or frogs, it is not always clear whether they have been reborn into the eggs or embryos of these creatures, or are simply possessing the adult animal's body. Where more than one interpretation is possible, I have indicated this in the commentaries at the end of the book.

PUNISHMENT OR LEARNING EXPERIENCE?

In most of these stories, the purpose of reincarnation is to atone for a particular sin that was committed in a previous life. This is in sharp contrast to the more "new age" understanding of reincarnation as a voluntary process, where we enroll in rebirths like taking courses in a university. This "learning-experience" model is primarily a modern perception and, in my opinion, a result of the relative freedom in which Jews now live. But, during the centuries when most of these stories take place, the Jews were suffering terrible persecutions and hardships at the hands of brutal oppressors, and the last thing anybody wanted was to come back to earth again!

Even in the best of times, life can still be extremely difficult, and reincarnation is not necessarily something to be desired as a "learning experience." Rather, it is part of the atonement process

for redeeming one's soul. In many of these stories, the souls involved choose to avoid reincarnation at all costs, even if that means going to purgatory instead. This attitude is clearly illustrated by the tales in the "Rebirth or Gehenna?" chapter.

ARE THESE STORIES TRUE?

When reincarnation stories are told among traditional Jews, they are usually given as factual case histories, which illustrate a moral or spiritual principle. Very often, they are told in the third person about "somebody else," with the expectation that the listeners will see themselves in the characters and get the point.

Whether or not these stories are true in the scientific sense is a matter of perspective and personal belief. Some of them, such as "The Unwanted Guests" and "The Vengeful Rat," are clearly moral parables. Others concern well-known historical figures, and are probably as reliable as anything obtained through past-life regression therapy today. In fact, I have often been surprised at how closely these traditional Jewish anecdotes—generally unknown to modern parapsychology—coincide with current research.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, who told both factual anecdotes and original fairy tales, was once asked if all of his stories were true. "Not all of the stories are literally true," the rabbi replied, "but when the people tell them, they are holy." The same would apply here. Whether or not these stories are literally true, they still convey an important message. The individuals who told them sincerely believed themselves to be reincarnated souls, and they acted upon that belief to embrace Judaism in a more meaningful way. When we tell their stories, then we, too, can become holy, and are inspired to lead a better life in the here and now.

1
Heaven and Earth

"The Messiah will not come until all the souls which were created are born into this world." (Talmud, *Nidah* 13b)

The Gerer Rebbe said: "God has appointed a mission for every soul. If it does not fulfill that mission in one lifetime, then the soul is reborn on earth again until it does fulfill it. Do your best to give your soul eternal rest in heaven." (*Histapchut ha-Nefesh*)

OVERVIEW

Although the Written Torah has very little to say about the spiritual world or life after death, there is a great deal of material on these subjects in the oral tradition and the kabbalistic works. As I explained in my previous book, *Beyond the Ashes*, Jewish beliefs about the afterlife fall into four main categories:

1) survival through one's descendants;
2) physical resurrection;
3) an immortal soul in heaven; and
4) reincarnation.

These categories are not mutually exclusive, and many Jews believe in a combination of two or more. For example, a soul might ascend to heaven, leaving behind physical descendants on earth to carry on its name. The same soul may later reincarnate into another body in another family line. Or, it might return as one of its own descendants. It may also remain in the spiritual world,

awaiting the Final Resurrection. All of these stages are seen as steps along the path to the soul's redemption.

The question naturally arises: Where do all the souls come from in the first place? Judaism does not answer with one voice on this question. Multiple theories exist side-by-side, ranging from primordial pre-existence to the creation of new souls at the moment of conception. The traditional approach to these theories is to reconcile them, rather than focus on the contradictions.

The Bible speaks of the father's "seed" being "planted" in the mother's womb, where it grows into a child. In past centuries, it was commonly thought that this "seed" literally contained a miniature, fully formed human being, or *homunculus*. Although we now have a much better understanding of embryology, this does not change the fact that the child's body grows within the womb.

To some Jewish thinkers, the physical body is synonymous with the soul, with all consciousness and individuality residing in the brain itself. To others, the soul is a spiritual entity that joins with the body in the womb, either at conception or the moment of birth. Still others maintain that the spiritual body is literally created by the individual while on earth, through the *mitzvot* that he or she performs.

The stories in this chapter all assume that the soul is something more than mere biochemistry, but they present a broad spectrum of ideas about where it comes from and how it got here. In "The Treasury of Souls," a finite number of souls was created by God in the beginning, and these same individuals are being recycled through reincarnation. But in "Adam's Children," it appears that new souls were created with each sexual act by human beings in the dawn of history. Between these two extremes, one also finds a number of compromises, where the consciousness of the parents at the time of conception determines the nature of the pre-existent soul that is attracted to the new body in the womb.

Somewhat surprising is the recurring idea that there can be an element of randomness to the process. In "The Hall of Exchanges,"

we are actually told that souls can end up up in the wrong place! This is in sharp contrast to the "new age" theory that everything is carefully predestined before birth. However, it does agree with modern case histories of people who believe they have been born into the "wrong" family or culture. (See the "Jews by Choice" chapter for stories about "Jewish souls in gentile bodies.")

The idea that changelings (children who were switched at birth) do not follow in the path of their parents is very old and appears in many cultures, under many guises. It has often been used in folklore to explain individuals who pursue their own destinies apart from the expectations of their parents. Such children are often the "odd ones" in their families, with a strong sense that they simply do not fit in. In Jewish stories, the discrepancy comes about, not because somebody physically switched the babies at birth, but because the souls of the children are not from the same spiritual "roots" as their parents. What emerges is a twofold process, which includes both physical genealogy on earth below and a form of spiritual genealogy in the realms above.

Some of the stories in this section read more like study lessons than narrative tales. Partly this is because they come from older texts, which do not employ the usual storytelling style. These lesson/stories are important, however, because they lay the foundation for understanding the more anecdotal tales about the "soul roots" of individual saints and sinners.

THE HEAVENLY BODY OF ADAM

In the beginning, before Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden, his soul already existed in the mind of God, as a great cosmic being called Adam-Kadmon, the Primal Adam. The souls of humanity were like one, joined together through Adam-Kadmon's cosmic body.

While God was still forming Adam's earthly body from the dust, He showed him all the generations of Zaddikim—righteous

souls—that were destined to come from him. Adam saw them all, from the greatest to the smallest, and understood that he was to be the single origin of the family tree of humanity. Whenever a soul was ready to be born, it would leave the body of Adam-Kadmon and descend through the spiritual worlds, where it would join with a newly forming embryo in the womb of its earthly mother. And the same process continues to this very day.

Adam-Kadmon's cosmic body is made up of 248 bones and organs, held together by 365 sinews. Together, these body parts total 613, corresponding to the number of *mitzvot* (commandments) in the Torah. Each of these parts is also a "major soul root," which, in turn, subdivides into 613 "minor roots." These further divide into "great souls," who are the Zaddikim, the righteous leaders and teachers of each generation. The souls of the Zaddikim, in turn, are divided into "sparks," which are the ordinary souls.

If Adam and Eve had not sinned in the Garden, then these souls would have all incarnated in their proper places, with their intended families on earth. Everything would be in harmony, as it was intended. Each of us would live one life on earth, perfect ourselves through that experience, then return to our destined places in the heavenly realms.

But, because of Adam's sin in the Garden, everything is now mixed up on earth. Souls come into the world without awareness of their spiritual connections, feeling lost and bewildered. While on the earth plane, they make mistakes and sin, causing them to reincarnate again and again. Some manage to redeem themselves, and some even become Zaddikim. But others continue to spiral downward, becoming more entangled in the cycle of death and rebirth.

However, we are not left to flounder helplessly. The "great souls"—the holy Zaddikim—also incarnate on earth, to help guide us out of the tangle of sin and lead us toward redemption. Moses was such a Zaddik, as were Noah and Abraham and all the great

prophets. In every generation, there are also hidden Zaddikim—at least thirty-six of them—who work for the redemption of the world.

This is why, the Hasidic Rebbes taught, each of us must "search for the Zaddik" and find the righteous teacher that we are meant to follow, the one who is connected to the "sparks" of our souls. For some it will be one Rebbe, and for others a different Rebbe, each according to the roots of his or her soul in the body of Adam-Kadmon. Through their connections to these Zaddikim, all the souls can eventually reconnect with their spiritual roots, and find their way back to the heavenly realms.

(based on Midrash and Zohar)

WHY ADAM ATE THE FRUIT

Reb Zusya of Hanipol and Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk were brothers, who lived in Eastern Europe during the late eighteenth century. They often traveled together, disguised as simple beggars, but both were really Hasidic masters. However, their approach to serving God was very different. Reb Elimelech was a scholar, who wrote a number of books that are still studied today. Reb Zusya, on the other hand, was an ecstatic mystic. He was so immersed in the spiritual world that he never felt any pain or sorrow, even though he went through a great deal of hardship. They say that Reb Zusya was one of those rare "new souls" that sometimes come into the world, and are more connected to heaven than to daily life on earth.

Now, it once happened that Reb Zusya found himself thinking very deeply about the Garden of Eden. He had read in a book of kabbalah about how all the souls of humanity were originally together in Adam's soul when Adam ate the forbidden fruit, and he was puzzled by the story. So he asked his scholarly brother, Reb Elimelech, "If all the souls were present in Eden, then you

and I must have been there, too. How could I have just stood by and let him eat the fruit? How could you have let him eat it? How could we possibly have done such a thing?"

Reb Elimelech replied, "My dear Brother Zusya, we *had* to eat that forbidden fruit—we just had to. Because if we hadn't, then the poisonous deception of the snake would have remained in Adam's mind forever, and would have been passed down to his descendants for eternity. Adam would have kept saying to himself: All I need to do is eat of this tree and I can become God . . . all I need to do is eat of this tree . . . If Adam hadn't found out the truth, we would still be deceiving ourselves to this very day."

(early Hasidic)

THE HALL OF EXCHANGES

At the moment when Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the "Revolving Sword" also came into existence, which guards the passage between the Heavenly Garden and this earthly existence. Some people call this sword the "Flaming Sword"—because it whirls with such a brilliant, blinding light that it seems to be on fire. But it should more properly be called the "Sword of Transformations," because it changes one thing into another. The Revolving Sword slices both ways—good and evil, evil and good—but it also mixes them up.

In this earthly world, it is not always easy to tell what is evil and what is good, because when they pass the Revolving Sword, they are finely chopped together. Our job when we incarnate here is to sort the wheat from the chaff—the good from the evil—to set things right again. When this Great Work is finished, the universe will be in balance once again, and the Messiah will come.

But this work is not so easy, because our souls are also mixed up in this world. Between the Revolving Sword and this earth plane is the "Hall of Exchanges," where souls can become switched in their destinies. Some souls make it through the Hall and into

their properly designated bodies, but others do not. That's why it can happen, that the "garments of skin" we wear here might not reflect our true spiritual natures: "There are righteous men who are reached according to the deeds of the wicked, and wicked persons who are reached according to the deeds of the righteous" (Ecclesiastes 8:14).

It was because of this Hall of Exchanges, that our saintly father Abraham was born into a family of sinful idol worshippers. But he could not remain in his birthplace, the city of Ur, because his soul was driven to seek the One True God. He was born into a house of idolatry, but his soul did not really belong to it.

And so it has continued through history, among rich and poor, rulers and those who are ruled. A person like Napoleon, who was born a mere peasant, might really have the soul of a king. Or the crown prince could have the soul of an ignorant peasant. A Torah scholar can be born of illiterate parents, a sinner can give birth to a saint, a Jew can return as a gentile . . . Nothing on earth is really as it should be. And thus it will continue, until the Great Work is done and the Messiah comes, to set all things right again.

(Breslover Hasidic)

ROOTS OF THE SOUL

While God was still forming Adam's earthly body, which lay lifeless as a lump of clay, He showed him all the future generations of humanity. Adam saw clusters of souls clinging to every part of his spiritual body: the hair, the arms and legs, the eyes, ears, mouth, and nose. For every bone, muscle, organ, and sinew, there was a "soul root" leading to specific clusters of souls. Altogether, there were 613 major soul roots, each representing one of the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) in the Torah.

When a Jewish soul incarnates on earth, it remains connected to the specific mitzvah that it was originally attached to in the spiritual world. (Non-Jews are also connected in this way, through

the Seven Laws of Noah, which are included in the 613 *mitzvot*.) That's why each person feels drawn to a different part of the Torah. Some want to serve God primarily through giving charity, others through prayer, still others through observing the Sabbath and holy days with extra joy. Whatever mitzvah is connected to the root of a soul, that is the mitzvah it feels most called upon to do.

In the early generations of humanity, it was clear where each soul belonged, and what its root was, because it was still close to its origins in Adam's body. Thus we read in Genesis that Yubal was the father of all those who played the harp and flute, Tubal-Cain was the master of blacksmithing, and Nimrod was the great hunter. Each soul was born into the specific nation, family, and occupation best suited for its individual gifts and skills.

As time went on, and the souls reincarnated again and again, some of them became separated from their spiritual roots, and forgot their connections with each other. Nowadays, souls are often born into the wrong family or place. When that happens, they feel utterly lost and alienated. They sense that something is missing, but have no idea what it could be.

At the same time, these lost souls still feel a pull toward their original root in heaven, and the specific mitzvah attached to it. This is why, as the sages taught, every person should choose one mitzvah to be extra careful about. Not, heaven forbid, that we can neglect the rest of the *mitzvot* and do only one of them! We should always do as many as we can. But for that special mitzvah, we must go above and beyond the call of duty, using extra care, even when it becomes inconvenient. In this way, we can reconnect with our soul roots, and from there, to our place in the heavenly realms.

During Talmudic times, the sages in Jerusalem were sitting in the Great Academy, discussing their individual devotions. Each one

described the particular mitzvah that he was most careful about, and how he hoped that his reward in heaven would be among others who shared the same root.

Rabbi Nahman said: "I hope my heavenly reward will be with those who always observe the three meals of the Sabbath—Friday evening, Saturday noon, and the Third Meal just before sundown."

Rav Judah said, "May my portion be with those who pray with heartfelt devotion, and never say the service mechanically."

Rabbi Yossi said, "May my portion be with those who always pray with the red glow of the sun, promptly at dawn and dusk."

Rabbi Huna ben Joshua said, "May I be rewarded for never walking even four cubits with my head uncovered."

Rabbi Sheshet said, "May I be rewarded for always fulfilling the mitzvah of tefillin in the most precise manner."

Rabbi Nahman then added, in addition to his devotion to the Sabbath: "May I be rewarded for fulfilling the mitzvah of tzitzit, the ritual fringes."

Rabbi Yosef then asked Rabbi Joseph ben Rabbah, "And with what mitzvah is your father, Rabbah, most observant?"

"The mitzvah of fringes also," Rabbi Joseph replied. "Once, while he was climbing up a ladder, my father tore one of the threads of his tzitzit, so they were no longer kosher. Because it is forbidden to walk even four paces without wearing proper tzitzit, he absolutely refused to come down from the ladder, until another thread could be brought and the tzitzit repaired."

Although it may seen overly fanatical to be so strict about a mitzvah, Rabbah understood the spiritual principle behind the practice. No doubt he sensed his soul was connected to the mitzvah of wearing tzitzit. By keeping this one mitzvah so strictly, he not only helped to heal the root of his own soul, but every other soul that was also connected to that same root. In this way, his "portion" was "among those who fulfill the mitzvah of tzitzit."

In the late eighteenth century, at the time when Rebbe Nachman of Breslov was teaching in the Ukraine, it had become the custom among certain groups of Jews to try and do *all* the *mitzvot* with an equal measure of extra stringency. Rebbe Nachman was very much against this practice, and often reminded his followers that even the great sages of old were extra strict with *only one* of the 613 *mitzvot*, and did the rest of them with ordinary care.

"Extremism in any form is totally unnecessary," Rebbe Nachman explained. "To those who are overly strict in serving God, the Torah itself says, 'You shall live by them [the *mitzvot*] and not die by them.' These overly strict people are constantly depressed, because they never, ever feel they've properly fulfilled their obligations while performing the *mitzvot*. Because of their stringencies, they don't experience any vitality—*any life*—from their deeds."

"But what about devotion to God?" his disciples often asked.

"It is written," the Rebbe would reply, "that everyone should choose one mitzvah and keep it strictly, with all its fine points. But the other *mitzvot* need not be observed with unnecessary strictness at all. It would be enough if we could just keep all the Torah's commandments according to the law, without going beyond it. Pray, study, do many *mitzvot*—but don't invent new hardships. The Torah was given to human beings, not the ministering angels."

(based on Talmud, Midrash, and Breslov teachings)

THE TREASURY OF SOULS

In the beginning, when God created the Original Adam, He also created all the human souls who would ever be born from that Original Adam. God placed these souls in the Treasury of Souls, and held the key for safekeeping. There the millions of souls wait patiently, until it is their time to be born upon the earth. The soul of the Messiah also waits up there, but he cannot be born until all the other souls in the body of humanity have been on earth first.

Now, when the people are righteous and walk in the ways of God, then fresh new souls are born on earth in each generation. This causes the time of the Messiah to draw closer, because his soul will be able to be born with the other new souls. But if—heaven forbid!—the people are wicked, then those same wicked souls must be reincarnated again to atone for all their sins. This delays the coming of the Messiah, because no new souls can be born on earth until the old ones are purified.

What is this like? It is like a king who sent his soldiers good bread to eat while they were marching to battle. But the soldiers were lazy, and did not take proper care of their rations, so the bread became moldy and spoiled. They were too embarrassed to ask for fresh bread, because then they would have to admit their own carelessness. How could they say to the king, "We didn't bother to take care of what you gave us, so now we want more?"

But the king found out anyway, and he became very angry. He took the spoiled bread and ordered that it should be dried and scraped off and made as good as possible, then said to the soldiers, "Here is your bread back. You were careless with it, so I will not give you any more fresh bread until you eat all the moldy bread first." He then returned the bread to them and left.

What did the soldiers do? They divided up the bread, and each one took an equal portion. But some soldiers were wiser than others. The dutiful soldier put his rations in a dry place, eating a little bit every day to make them last for the whole march. But the careless one stuffed himself lustfully right away, trying to use up as much of the moldy bread as he could in one sitting. Of course, he was unable to finish the whole thing. He was so stuffed that he gave up on it and forgot to put it away. So it spoiled again. This time the bread got so moldy and disgusting, that he could not eat it at all. And so he eventually starved to death.

When the careless soldier's soul arrived at the Heavenly Court, he was charged with the sin of destroying his body. "Why did you kill yourself through starvation?" the Judge asked. "Was it

not enough that you ruined the bread the first time? But the king returned it to you anyway—and then you ruined it again."

"But what could I have done?" the lazy soldier asked. "How was I to make the bread last the whole time?"

"You should have taken care of it properly," the Judge replied. "And not stuffed yourself like a glutton. And if you claim that you did not know how to take care of the rations, then you should have watched and learned from your fellow soldiers. From them you could have learned how to take care of your rations so that you would not have starved to death."

And thus it is with the Treasury of Souls. In the beginning, God gave us fresh, pure souls, without any stain or blemish. But we were careless, and allowed them to become soiled with sin. Still, God gave us another chance, by sending us back down to earth once again. Now, some people are careful with their souls, but others are not and allow them to spoil again. And this is why we must be born over and over, until the old, blemished souls are purified. How do we purify these old souls? Through following the commandments and teachings of the Holy Torah.

(from the *Sefer Ha-Bahir*)

SOULMATES

Adam-Kadmon, the First Human Being, was both male and female in one being. Only later were Adam and Eve separated, so they could contemplate each other as individual entities. But in the beginning, they were one great soul, containing all the individual human souls that were destined to be born.

Each of those human souls, in turn, is also male and female in one. As they descend to be born into the physical world, they split into halves, becoming a male soul and a female soul. The two halves then enter separate bodies, as a boy and a girl.

These pairs of souls are the true soulmates, who are destined to find each other and marry on earth. As the Talmud says, forty days before someone is born, an angel cries out, "The daughter

of this one is destined for the son of that one." When they find each other and marry, their souls become connected again, and each shares in the *mitzvot* of the other. So, for example, the husband receives merit from his wife when she prepares kosher food, and the wife receives merit from the husband when he puts on tefillin. Each completes the other, so that, together, they create holiness in their home.

As the Baal Shem Tov said, "From every human being there arises a holy light that reaches straight to heaven. When two souls that are destined to be together find each other, then their streams of light flow together, and a single brighter light goes forth from their united being."

Or at least, that's how it's supposed to happen. But, unfortunately, there are also false soulmates, who try to distract us from our task of finding our destined mates. When the angel calls out the destinies of the true soulmates, these false soulmates are also aroused, and try to attach themselves to us. Then both true and false soulmates incarnate on earth in the same generation.

Later in life, if we meet one of these false soulmates face-to-face, there is a feeling of familiarity, and a strong physical attraction, but no real joining of the spirit.

Nevertheless, the false soulmates are difficult to get rid of. Sometimes, the attraction ends by talking to one another. Sometimes it goes as far as announcing an engagement or, heaven forbid, even a marriage. But such marriages do not work. Instead of helping each other toward wholeness, they create endless strife for each other. This is why there are so many divorces, because people are not marrying their true soulmates.

Nevertheless, even though the bride and groom were not really true soulmates, such a marriage creates a bond between the false soulmates. This connection then causes the two souls to have to reincarnate, in order to complete the "unfinished business" between them.

But there are some who say that the soul doesn't really split in half as it descends through the spiritual worlds. Rather, it remains androgynous on the highest levels, retaining both male and female aspects. When the time comes for it to enter this world, it simply takes on a role as male or female, in accordance with the body assigned to it. These soulmates are not really the "other half" of each other, but are complete individuals who choose to work together as a team, for the mutual benefit of both.

(based on Talmud, Zohar, and Hasidism)

OF MEN AND ANGELS

A certain man once came to the rabbinical court and asked for a divorce. The Rav (rabbinical judge) first tried to effect a reconciliation between the husband and wife, but it was of no use.

"She is an unbearable shrew!" the husband declared. "All she does is nag me all day! Yak-yak-yak! I simply can't bear to live with her nagging voice any longer!"

"I don't want to live with him either!" the wife shouted. "He tunes me out and never listens to a single word I say! I talk until I'm blue in the face, but it just goes in one ear and out the other!"

When the Rav saw that it would be impossible to make peace between these two, he convened the court and they granted the divorce. The scribe wrote out the bill of divorcement, and the man handed it to his wife. She accepted it according to the requirements of the law, then, smiling smugly, turned and left the room.

As the man was also preparing to leave the room, the Rav looked him straight in the eye and said solemnly, "Next time, keep your mouth shut!" The man nodded but said nothing, and left in peace.

One of the associate rabbis, who had taken part in the proceedings, was puzzled by that last remark. "With all due respect," he said to the Rav, "it's obvious that she really was a shrew. It

was *she* who nagged *him* day and night. Why, then, did you tell the *husband* to keep his mouth shut?"

"Let me explain what really happened here," the Rav replied. Then he told this story:

> Many years ago, there was a great Zaddik—a Jewish saint—who served God with sincere devotion. After a long and fruitful life, he died and went to the next world, where he stood before the Heavenly Court, to be judged according to his deeds. His life review showed that he had been a devout Jew, but the holy light that radiated from his deeds was somewhat clouded, as if it were shining through a bottle of tasty but murky wine.
>
> When the Court asked about this, the man replied, "This is probably due to the fact that I was married to a shrew. Day in and day out, she constantly nagged me, interrupting my prayers and disturbing my peace of mind in other countless ways. But I tried to take all of this as a trial from God. I reasoned that if I divorced her, I would only have to reincarnate and deal with her again in a future life. So, I figured I might as well put up with her now and get it over with."
>
> All the judges of the Heavenly Court were in agreement that the man had passed the test. Under such trying circumstances, if the light of his devotional service seemed a bit opaque, he should be forgiven and sent straight to the Garden of Eden. But then one of the angels spoke up and said, "No, that is no excuse! If he were really a holy man, he would not have felt anger and frustration because of her nagging. He would have borne it all with a cheerful heart."
>
> Once the angel had brought up this objection, it could not be ignored, and a great debate began in heaven. What were they to do? Perhaps the angel was right, and they shouldn't let the soul go directly to Eden without further purification. But was it really possible for someone to serve God with total purity of heart in such a situation?
>
> In the end, the Court decided on another test. This time, the *angel* who objected would be incarnated, and sent down to marry the shrew in her next incarnation. If he could serve God with the same level of brightness and lucidity that he demanded

of others, then he would win his point, and the soul of the Zaddik would not go directly to Eden. But if he could not stand living with her and filed for a divorce, then this would vindicate the soul of the Zaddik.

"Now," said the Rav to his associates, "that angel was incarnated in the man who came before us for a divorce. As you saw, he was unable to pass the test. When I said to him, 'Next time, keep your mouth shut,' I did not mean the next time he married. I meant meant next time at the Heavenly Court!"

(Hasidic oral tradition)

ADAM'S CHILDREN

As is well-known in the Torah, the very first death on earth was the murder of Abel by his jealous brother, Cain. The Midrash also tells us that, although there were no human witnesses to this act of violence, the soul of Abel itself bore witness in heaven, pointing out its murderer at the Heavenly Court. God then sentenced Cain to a life of wandering and exile.

"My punishment is more than I can bear!" Cain lamented. "Either I will be killed by others because I'm a stranger, or else I'll be attacked and eaten by wild beasts!"

But God had mercy on Cain and replied, "Nobody will murder you, because I will place my special mark upon you." So God inscribed one letter of His Holy Name on Cain's forehead as a sacred sign, and also gave him a dog for protection against the wild animals. And that's how it happened, that dogs became the domesticated companions of human beings.

Adam and Eve were so deeply grieved over all this, that they decided not to bring any more children into the world. Why not? Because Adam was afraid that their future sons might kill each other, too. Neither he nor Eve could bear the sorrow of that. So Adam decided to abstain from sexual relations with his wife Eve.

Unfortunately, Adam was not able to completely control his sexual desires, so he ended up spilling his seed by masturbating in secret. This had serious spiritual consequences, because each time he did this, new souls were created, which were tainted with Adam's impure thoughts. These souls came into the world expecting to enter Eve's womb for a life on earth. Instead, they found themselves lost and naked, with no bodies to clothe them. The poor souls then had to wait for a future time to be born.

Meanwhile, Cain married and had children who had children, down to the seventh generation. (Where did his wife come from? Adam and Eve also had daughters, so Cain married one of his own sisters. Nowadays the Torah forbids this, but in those days, they didn't know any better.) People lived much longer back then, so Cain was able to see seven generations of his own descendants.

Then it happened. One hundred and thirty years after Cain had killed Abel, he himself was killed by his grandson, Lamech, during a hunting accident. Lamech, who was blind, had gone hunting with his son, who would point him toward the game. They heard a rustle in the bushes, which they thought was an animal, and Lamech shot an arrow in that direction. The arrow struck true, but it turned out to be Cain instead. Lamech immediately realized what had happened and cried out, "I have killed a man for wounding!"

When news of this reached Adam, he knew that this was a matter of divine justice, and there is retribution for sins. Cain had not been put to death at the time when he murdered Abel, because there were no earthly witnesses. Nevertheless, he did eventually pay with his own life. Adam figured that the example of Cain's fate would deter any further violence, and decided to go back to Eve again.

Soon after that, Adam and Eve conceived a third son named Seth, who was really the reincarnation of the same soul that had been Abel. This is why we can speak of a soul being descended "from Cain or from Abel," even though Abel had no physical descendants. The souls that were destined to be born through Abel

were eventually born through Seth, because they had the same soul root.

However, the souls that had come down with Adam's semen during the time when he had separated himself from Eve were also waiting to be born. These poor souls were badly tainted by the lust and impure thoughts from Adam when he had misdirected his passions and spilled his seed on the ground. There were so many of these naked souls, that it was not until the time of Noah—ten generations from Adam—that they were all finally born on earth. God gave them free will like everyone else, and hoped they would be able to overcome the stain of their origins. But instead, they gave in to their own desires and sinned repeatedly with robbery, lust, and murder, until God could stand it no longer. So He brought the Great Flood upon the earth, and the wicked people who were those souls all drowned.

"A generation goes and a generation comes"—the same souls reincarnated a generation after the Flood. This time, the wicked souls rebelled against God Himself, and decided to build a tower up to heaven. Some say they did this because they did not want to face any more suffering on earth, and were trying to return to the heavenly realms. Others say that they built the tower in order to mount an attack against God and His angels. Either way, God was not happy with their plan. So He confused their speech, causing them to speak many different languages. Work on the tower stopped, and the people divided into various nations, according to their languages. Then they spread across the earth, and began to kill each other in wars and other conflicts.

Centuries later, these same souls were among the Jewish people who were enslaved in Egypt, as well as a mixed multitude of non-Jews who were also there. The time had come for God to redeem them all, so He decreed that the same soul that had been Abel and Seth should now reincarnate as Moses. His mother, Yocheved, was 130 years old when she gave birth to him—the same number of years that Adam had sinned between the death of Abel and the birth of Seth.

Because the wicked souls had failed to heed Noah's warnings to repent in the time of the Great Flood, they were destined to be drowned again, this time as the newborn babies that Pharoah, king of Egypt, ordered thrown into the Nile River. And, because the same souls had tried to rebel against God by building a tower to heaven, they were forced to make bricks for Pharoah's building projects.

After many confrontations with Pharoah, Moses finally led the Jewish people into the wilderness, where they stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai and prepared themselves to receive the Torah. But first God healed and purified all the souls, so they would be ready to receive it in purity. Then He spoke the words, "I am the Lord your God," and offered His Covenant to the Jewish people.

With one voice, they all replied, "*Naaseh v'nishmah*—we will do and we will hear!" At that moment, the wicked souls also accepted the Torah, and were finally healed of the stain of Adam's sin.

Now, if the people had not made the Golden Calf idol while they were waiting for Moses to come down from the mountain, they would have gone straight to the Promised Land, and there would have been no need to wander for forty years in the wilderness. Unfortunately, some of them were not strong enough to resist temptation. Although they had been cured of the taint of Adam's sexual sin, they now succumbed to the sin of idolatry, which they had seen practiced in Egypt. "We need a gilded god like the Egyptians worship!" they said, and built a statue of the sacred bull, in order to worship it.

Because of this new sin, God decreed that the generation that had come out of Egypt would have to die in the wilderness, and a new generation would enter the Promised Land. "A generation comes and a generation goes"—it was the same generation reborn, who followed Joshua into the Holy Land after the death of Moses. Many of them again fell into the sin of idolatry, and had to return in future incarnations. And so it continues to this day.

(based on Talmud, Midrash, and Zohar)

RABBI DEAD MAN

Reb Yisroel, the brother of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, was known in his town as "Rabbi Yisroel Met"—Rabbi Israel Dead Man. How did he ever get such a strange name? Some say that it was because Reb Yisroel had a stiff, golem-like way of walking, which caused people to remark that he looked like a living corpse. But others say that there were deeper reasons for the name, too.

Reb Yisroel was the son of Feiga, who was the granddaughter of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. Nobody today can say if he was her first or second child—most people didn't have birth certificates in those days, so the records are sketchy. According to one account, he was the first son and Nachman was the second. But others say that Nachman was the eldest. In any case, we do know that Feiga had to wait a long time before she finally conceived a child.

During her pregnancy with Yisroel, Feiga had a very vivid dream. Her saintly grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov, appeared to her, and prophesied that she would have a son. This child, he said, was to be named Yisroel (Israel), which had been his name, too.

When Feiga awoke from this dream, she was very puzzled by it. True, it is the custom among Jews to name a child after a deceased relative, in order to keep the name alive in the family. But Feiga also knew that her grandfather had explicitly requested that no one in his family should name a child after him. Why not? Nobody really knows for sure. Perhaps he already knew that his memory would live on without this gesture. Or maybe he simply did not want to burden a child with having to live up to the fame of his namesake.

Whatever the reason, her grandfather's instructions caused Feiga to ignore the dream at first. Only after the exact same dream repeated itself two more times, did she begin to take it seriously. After all, it is well-known that if a dream repeats itself three times, then it is no ordinary dream.

When her son was finally born, Feiga was filled with joy, and named him Yisroel as instructed. But when he was only two years

old, he fell seriously ill and died. Feiga was completely distraught with grief, and could not be consoled. She carried the boy to the Baal Shem Tov's grave in the cemetery at the edge of town. In despair she cried out to her grandfather's spirit, "Is this the child you promised me?" Then she gently laid little Yisroel's body on the grave and left, weeping.

Later that same day, some people came from town to pray at the Baal Shem Tov's grave. They were astounded to find a child there—alive and well! Joyfully they carried the boy back to town. Word of the miracle spread, and his mother came to get him.

Later the Baal Shem Tov appeared again to Feiga in a dream and said, "Why did you do this, to bring the baby to my grave like that? You caused me great difficulty—I could not bear the pain of your deep sorrow, so I had to help. But the soul of the child was already mingling with the millions of other souls in heaven, so it was very difficult for me to find it and bring it back to the body."

Thus it happened, that Reb Yisroel was literally raised from the dead. But he was never quite the same as before, and died rather young. And throughout his life, he always walked like a tired old man. Some say this was because he had once been dead, so his body continued to act like a corpse. Others say that the Baal Shem Tov retrieved the wrong soul, and accidentally brought the soul of an old man to Yisroel's body, and that's why he walked so old and stiff.

Whatever the reason for his fate, Reb Yisroel was known as "Rabbi Dead Man" until the day he when he finally went to the other world for good—may his soul rest in peace.

(Breslover Hasidic)

THE SHIP OF SOULS

Once there was a boy and girl, each from a different family, who got lost in the woods during a time of war. Thank heavens

they found each other, and kept each other company as they followed the trail out of the forest. Along the way, seven different beggars helped them out by giving them some bread and a blessing. "May you be like I am!" each beggar said. It was a very strange blessing indeed, because each of the beggars was deformed in some way. One was deaf, one was blind, one was a hunchback . . . What kind of a blessing was that, to be poor and handicapped like they were?

Time passed, and the two children grew up. They wanted to get married, and everyone thought it was a wonderful idea, because they were really soulmates. So all the beggars got together and decided to go to the king's birthday party, where there were always good handouts. From what they collected, they would make a wedding.

And so it happened. In the midst of all the festivities, the bride and groom began to remember the kindness that God had shown them in the forest, when He sent the seven beggars to give them food when they were little children. "I wonder where those beggars are now?" the bride said out loud. "If only the first beggar—the blind one—could be here with us tonight."

Just as they were sharing these memories, the blind beggar spoke up from the crowd and said, "Here I am! I've come to be at your wedding! Did you think I would forget you? Not at all. In fact, I am giving you a wedding present—that you should be old like me. When I first saw you in the woods many years ago, I gave you this as a blessing. But now I am giving it to you as an actual gift for your wedding—that you should have a long life like mine.

"You think that I am blind? Ha! I'm not really blind at all. It's only that the entire duration of the world's existence goes by so quickly, that to me it is no more than the merest blink of an eye. And so, to the outside world I seem blind, because I do not pay attention to the fleeting vanities of the world.

"But in reality, I am extremely old and extremely young at the same time. I have not yet begun to live, and yet I am very,

very old. This is not merely my own opinion, either. Even the Great Eagle agrees that I am both young and old."

The bride and groom were very puzzled by these words. How could somebody be both old and young at the same time? When they asked the beggar to explain what he meant, he answered with a story.

Once long ago, some people took to sea in many ships. Then a great storm came, and completely shattered the ships. The people survived, however, and came to a very high tower. When they climbed up into the tower, they found all kinds of wonderful food, drink, and clothing. Everything they needed was laid out there, as if somebody had known of their coming, and provided for it in advance.

After refreshing themselves, the shipwrecked people remained in the tower, and began talking with one another. In order to pass the time until they were rescued, they decided to have a storytelling contest. Everybody would tell a story about their first memories, from the very moment when their memories first began. The one with the oldest memory would win the contest.

Now there were both old and young people present, and so they honored the oldest man by asking him to tell his oldest memory first.

"What can I tell you?" he said, with a twinkle in his eye. "I am so old, that I remember when they cut the apple from the branch."

No one really understood what he meant by that. But the wise men who were there nodded and stroked their beards and said very sagely, "Hmm . . . This is obviously a very ancient story."

Next, they honored the second oldest person to tell his story. He was not as old as the first, but he said, "Ha! You call that an old story? I can remember that one, too! But in addition to the apple, I also remember when the lamp was still lit!"

"This story is even older than the first one!" exclaimed the sages. And they were quite surprised, because the second person was not as old as the first, and yet he remembered an older event.

Then they honored the third person to tell a story. She was younger than either of the first two, but she said, "I remember when the fruit began to take form—that is, when the fruit first began to be put together, atom by atom."

"Amazing! That story is even older," the sages responded.

Then the fourth one, who was younger yet, said, "I can remember back to when the seed was brought to plant the fruit."

And the fifth one, who was still younger, said, "And I remember when the wise men invented the seed."

The sixth one, who was even younger, said, "I remember the taste of the fruit before it even entered the fruit itself."

And the seventh one said, "I remember the fragrance of the fruit before it entered the fruit."

And the eighth one said, "I remember the thought-image of 'fruit' before it ever became 'fruit' at all."

The blind beggar was also there at the time, although he was just an infant. Still he spoke up and said, "I, too, remember all these things you are describing. But in addition to that, I can remember *absolutely nothing*!"

"This is the most ancient story of all!" the sages exclaimed. "He is the winner!" And they were amazed that such a tiny baby could remember such an exceedingly ancient event.

At that very moment, the Great Eagle came flying past the tower. He stopped and knocked on the door, then entered and said, "Stop acting as if you are in such poverty! Return to your treasures! Make use of your treasures!"

The Great Eagle then told the people to leave the tower in the order of their ages, with the oldest person going out first. So he brought out the blind beggar first, because even though he was an infant, he was really the oldest, since he had the longest memory. Then the rest of the people followed, each according to their ages.

When everyone was out of the tower, the Eagle said," I will now explain the mystery of the strange stories that you told.

"The first one said he remembered when they cut the apple

from the branch. He remembered the time of birth, when they cut the umbilical cord from his mother's placenta.

"The second one said that he remembered when the lamp was still burning. He remembered when he was in his mother's womb, and an angel taught him the entire Torah, while the eternal light burned over his head.

"The third one said that he could remember when the fruit began to form. He was remembering the formation of his body, as the egg developed into a fetus.

"The fourth one remembered when the seed was brought to be planted. He remembered the moment of conception.

"The fifth remembered the 'wise men' who invented the seed. He was remembering when his father's desires caused the semen to flow—those desires were the 'wise men who invented the seed.'

"The sixth one remembered the taste of the fruit—this was *nefesh*, the life-force level of the soul.

"The seventh remembered the fragrance—this was *ruach*, the emotional level of the soul.

"The eighth one remembered the thought-image—this was *neshamah*, the essence of the soul.

"Finally, there was the tiny child who remembered absolutely nothing. He really is on a higher level than all of you, because he remembered what was before the levels of *nefesh-ruach-neshamah*. He remembered the Great Nothingness, which preceded all that!"

What the Eagle meant by this, was that the other storytellers could remember various stages in the development of their souls and bodies, but the blind beggar's soul memory went all the way back to the very moment when God had created the universe out of nothing. At that moment, God had also created all the souls, and the blind beggar remembered this very first event, when his soul first came into existence. So, his remembering "nothing" was really the greatest memory of all!

"Now," said the Eagle, "Return to your ships, which are your physical bodies. They were shattered, but they have been rebuilt.

So go back to them!" With that, he blessed them all, and sent them on their way—except for the blind beggar. To him he said, "Come with me, since you are like me. You are very old, but at the same time, you are very young. You have not yet begun to live, yet still you are so extremely old. I am the same way, because I am both old and young at the same time."

"And so," said the blind beggar to the bride and groom at their wedding feast, "I have the word of the Great Eagle that I have lived a very long life indeed! And a good life it is, too! So this is my gift to you: that you should be like me—to live as long a life as I have!"

With that, everyone raised their glasses and toasted the bride and groom with shouts of "*L'chaim, l'chaim*—to life, to life!" And there was great rejoicing.

(adapted from "The Seven Beggars"
by Nachman of Breslov)

2
Redeeming Sparks

Rabbi Yaakov-Yosef of Polnoye, disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, said: "We needed the exile of Israel among all the seventy nations, where the holy sparks fell, and each individual of the people Israel must be exiled there, in that place which contains the root from his [or her] soul, to separate and uplift them [back to God]." (*Ketonet Passim*, 1866)

OVERVIEW

The world, says the Talmud, is like a set of scales: each mitzvah tips the world toward good, and each sin tips it toward evil. Therefore, every human action is of potentially cosmic significance.

In addition to the general task of *tikkun olam*—repairing the universe—which all human beings participate in, there are specific missions and tasks for individual souls to perform when they are reborn on earth. Sometimes these are "karmic" repairs of one's own soul, as in "One Less Death." In other cases, they are tasks that one individual must perform on behalf of another, as in "The Grain of Wheat." Still other *mitzvot* are connected to one's particular "soul group," as in the case of the rabbi and the farmers in "The Oxen-Men." Underlying the entire *tikkun* process is the will of God, which mysteriously guides the various souls to find each other at just the right moment. Sometimes this process results in frustrating detours, delays, and hardships along the road, which are, in themselves, an indication that the journey is for the purpose of *tikkun*.

A surprising number of these redemption stories focus on eating kosher food, which is why there is considerable overlap

between this chapter and a later chapter, "Animal and Human." Among Hasidim and other Jewish mystics today, there is still a strong belief that eating kosher food is an important form of *tikkun olam*. The Torah says: "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeeds from the mouth of God does Man live" (Deuteronomy 8:3). The "word of God" in this verse is not merely verbal sound, but a form of life-giving "energy." The Hebrew letters of the word *lechem*—bread—represent different cosmic "vibrations" that emanate from God, sustaining our existence from moment to moment.

In addition, eating kosher food (and making the proper blessing over it) can sometimes be a vehicle for the redemption of a human soul that has reincarnated in the plant or animal. Unfortunately, this theme is rarely spelled out clearly in the original versions of these stories. The storytellers simply assume that the listeners already know about the connection between kashrut and reincarnation. Modern readers, however, will miss this point completely if they think of the dietary laws as mere health regulations.

On the contrary. The contrast between kosher and nonkosher meat is central to stories like the "Bull of Castile," where the soul of a Jew is trapped in a bull that is destined for the arena. The very word for non-kosher, *trayfe*, literally means "torn by beasts," which is what would happen to it in a bullfight.

Without this crucial connection, the story does not make sense. If the mere death of the bull were enough to free the soul, why spend a fortune to buy the animal, when it will be killed in the arena anyway? The answer is, because the soul in the bull does not want a trayfe death; it wants to be kosher-slaughtered. Why? So that the bull's flesh can be eaten by pious yeshiva students—a redeeming act, which combines feeding the poor and supporting Torah learning. This double mitzvah will, in turn, offset whatever sin has caused the soul to reincarnate as a bull in the first place.

Common to all of these stories is the idea that a seemingly insignificant act can be the deciding factor in rescuing a soul that

has languished in exile for centuries. Because we do not always know precisely which grain of wheat or which drop of water holds the key to elevating a particular "spark," we are urged to take care with everything in creation. This type of mystical awareness transforms the ordinary activities of human beings into works of planetary healing and redemption. Each bite, each breath, each step we take along the road may be of cosmic significance.

THE GRAIN OF WHEAT

A man once brought a bottle of fine whiskey to Rabbi Levi-Yitzchak of Berditchev. The rabbi saved it for the Third Sabbath Meal. Before he poured the toasts for his Hasidim, he told this story:

There once was a Jew who had sinned a grievous sin and never repented of it. After he died and went before the Heavenly Court, it was decreed that, in order to atone for this sin, the man would have to be reincarnated into a grain of wheat. There his soul would wait until the time came for its rectification.

Now, when a human soul reincarnates as a human being, it usually does not remember its former lives on earth. But when a soul must return as a lower life form in order to atone for a sin, then it retains full memories of when it was in a human body, in order that it may reflect upon its deeds in that life and come to a state of repentance. Such was the case with the poor Jew who was destined to enter the grain of wheat. He descended to earth with full human awareness of everything that was happening to him.

First, the seed that would eventually produce the wheat was sown in the field by the farmer. As the seed fell on the plowed earth, the soul worried that it might not sprout, or that a bird would eat it before it had a chance to grow. But the little seed survived both of those dangers, and soon began to put a tiny white rootlet into the ground. This was followed by a green, grass-like stalk that reached upward toward the sunlight.

Now the poor soul became concerned that his newly sprouted plant might not get enough water and would shrivel up and die. Or maybe it would get too much water, and be washed away in a sudden downpour. The tiny wheat plant looked so small and vulnerable, that the soul began to pray fervently for its very survival. If it died, then he would have to start the reincarnation process all over again—and who knew how long that might take?

But with God's help, the little wheat plant survived those first perilous days. Soon it had grown strong and tall, and was eventually pollinated by the wind. Then the plump seeds began to form at the end of the stalk, including the specific grain of wheat that was destined to become the new earthly home for the man's soul. When the grain was fully formed, the soul entered into it, and remained there throughout the summer. Finally the wheat ripened into a golden brown, and was ready for harvest.

Now there were new perils threatening the little grain. The soul feared that it would be eaten by one of the big black crows that were flocking to the field—and what a tragedy that would be! If his grain of wheat were eaten by a chicken or other kosher bird, then at least there might be a chance that he could be elevated back to heaven when a Jew made the proper blessing over the meat. But if it were eaten by a wild bird, what then? Would he continue to come back as a crow? Or would he have to wait until next season to enter another grain of wheat?

Then again, what if the grain of wheat survived the birds, was bound into a sheaf, and then forgotten in the field? Perhaps that would not be so bad after all. Was it the soul's destiny to help fulfill the mitzvah of "the forgotten sheaf," which a farmer must then leave in the field for the poor? Would this act bring the redemption of the soul?

But no, the grain of wheat was not forgotten in the field. It was gathered up and taken to the threshing floor, where it was separated from the stalks of straw and other debris. Then it was put into a sack with fifty pounds of other wheat grains, and stored in a big, dark warehouse.

For what seemed like an eternity, the sack of wheat just sat there in the dark. The soul of the Jew incarnated in the wheat continued to speculate on its ultimate fate. Would it be baked into bread? Eaten by a mouse? Fed to cattle or horses?

Finally, the door to the warehouse was opened, and the sack of wheat was loaded onto a wagon. The soul assumed that it was being taken to the mill, to be ground into flour. But no, it was going to the brewery instead. "Aha!" thought the soul, "I am to become an ingredient in a bottle of whiskey! Well, at least there is still a chance that I might be redeemed through a mitzvah. Perhaps the whiskey will be drunk on Simchat Torah, when the Jews sing and dance with the Torah scrolls. Or maybe it will be lifted in a toast at a wedding, where I will help to bring joy to the bride and groom. Or maybe it will be used to honor the Holy Sabbath. . . ."

Throughout the brewing process, as the wheat fermented in the liquid, the soul continued to speculate about its ultimate fate. For ten long years it lay aging in a wooden barrel in the cellar until, at long last, the whiskey had mellowed and was ready for drinking. The soul watched as the atoms that had once been its grain of wheat were now poured into a bottle. The bottle was sealed, and loaded into a wagon with other bottles, where it was taken to a wholesale dealer. From there, it was eventually bought by an innkeeper, who put it on the shelf in the tavern.

Now the poor soul agonized over who would drink his bit of whiskey. Would it be guzzled by a drunken peasant who would then go home and beat his wife, heaven forbid? But no, each time a drink was poured for the regular customers, the shot of whiskey that contained his soul remained inside the bottle.

Then a weary traveler arrived at the inn. The soul saw immediately, from his manner of dress, that the stranger was a Jew. Now the soul was filled with hope. Perhaps this Jew would make a *brochah*—a ritual blessing—on the whiskey, and free the poor soul from its long exile. Sure enough, the Jew ordered a drink, and the exact shot of whiskey that contained the poor man's soul was poured into the glass. But then—horror of horrors!—the

thirsty Jew lifted the glass of whiskey to his lips and drank it down without making a *brochah.*

The soul in the whiskey was crushed with despair. After all those years of watching and waiting, when the moment of redemption finally came, this Jew had failed to make the blessing that would have freed the soul. All for nothing, all for nothing, the poor soul lamented. And so it happened, that the soul in the whiskey had to begin the process all over again, until, at long last, another Jew did remember to make the blessing, and the soul was free to become a human being once again.

When Rabbi Levi Yitzchak had finished this story, the Hasidim understood the deeper meaning of the statement in the Talmud: "A truly pious person is someone who is always careful to make the proper blessing before eating food." (*Bava Kama* 30a)

(Berditchever Hasidic)

THE FROG SCHOLAR

There once was a Torah scholar, whom we shall call Rav Yossi, who lived in the Holy Land many centuries ago. Rav Yossi was always very careful about performing the commandments in the proper way. In his entire life, he had never once failed to say the *Shema* in the morning and evening, nor eaten food that wasn't kosher. He was generous to the poor, kind to animals, and always loving toward his wife and children. From dawn until long after dark, he spent every possible moment learning Torah. Before he finally went to bed, he always said *tikkun chatzot,* the Midnight Prayer. In short, Rav Yossi was the epitome of a good Jew.

And then one day, it happened. Rav Yossi was traveling by horse and wagon during a time of severe drought. The natural springs along the way were all dried up, and water was difficult to find. When the time came for Rav Yossi to stop for lunch, he had only enough water for his horse, with not a drop to spare for

the ritual handwashing. Without water, he could not make the proper blessing on the bread.

"What shall I do now?" Rav Yossi asked himself. "I suppose I will just have to save my bread for later, and be content with smoked fish, dried fruit, and a bottle of wine. With those foods, there is no need for ritual handwashing." So Rav Yossi made the blessings for wine, fruit, and fish. He ate his fill and was content.

But the *yetzer hara*—that nagging little voice of temptation—soon began to whisper in his ear. "What difference does it make," the *yetzer hara* said, "if you skip the handwashing just this once? You're a good Jew, you're a Torah scholar, you have served God all your life. He knows your heart, he knows how many hours you have studied. Surely He will forgive you this one time."

Yes, God was forgiving, Rav Yossi agreed. But the very thought of purposely breaking a commandment . . . heaven forbid! Never in his life had Rav Yossi eaten bread without first making the blessing. But now he was getting hungry again. "This place is a desert," he said to himself. "Who knows when I can find water for handwashing? But then again, this is a commandment from God. How can I willingly break His commandments?" Rav Yossi wasn't *that* hungry—he could resist temptation for a while longer.

But the *yetzer hara* soon returned. "Your stomach is growling again," it chided, "and all you have left is bread. Sure, it's a sin to eat without washing—but you can always repent on Yom Kippur."

The more that Rav Yossi thought about the loaf of bread in the back of the wagon, the more his mouth began to water, and the more the *yetzer hara* continued to nag. "Go ahead, eat the bread, nothing will happen to you. In fact, it may even be a mitzvah to eat it now. It's a long way to the inn where there is water, and you might, heaven forbid, starve to death along the way."

And so it went, on and on, until the words of the *yetzer hara* fell into the rhythm of the horse's hoofbeats. Clippity clop, clippity clop, eat the bread, eat the bread . . . Finally, Rav Yossi could stand it no longer. Ravenous with hunger, he bit into the loaf.

Cautiously he chewed, then swallowed, and waited for heaven to strike him dead.

But nothing happened. Absolutely nothing! Everything seemed exactly the same as before. The sun was shining, a bird was singing, the horse was pulling the wagon as usual. "It must be OK after all," Rav Yossi said to himself. Breathing a sigh of relief, he devoured the entire loaf.

That one sin was the beginning of his downfall. Oh, the sin itself wasn't really that serious—lots of Jews have forgotten to make a blessing now and then. But Satan the Accuser seized upon it as an opportunity to claim Rav Yossi's soul. So he snatched the sin and flew away with it to the Heavenly Court, where souls are judged according to their deeds.

The three judges who sat on that Court were not very impressed. "We can't convict a man on the basis of a single sin," replied the Chief Judge. "You're going to have to bring us more evidence than that. If he does it again, then we'll consider the first time, too. But if he does not sin again, then the case will be dismissed."

Now, Satan knew that "like attracts like" in the spiritual world. As Ben-Azzai says in the Talmud: "Run to do even a minor mitzvah, and flee from transgression, because a mitzvah brings another mitzvah after it, and transgression brings more transgression." Once a person breaks a commandment, the second time is always easier. And so it was with Rav Yossi. When he ate bread without washing and nothing seemed to happen, he began to lose his fear of heaven. That, in turn, made it very easy for Satan to tempt him into breaking the other laws as well.

At first it was only the minor rules, the ones enacted by the rabbis in order to build a fence around the Torah. But once the fence had been breached, the rest of the laws were soon violated as well. One sin led to another and then another, until Rav Yossi had broken almost every law in the Torah. The very angels in heaven shuddered in fear for his soul.

Even then, if only Rav Yossi had knocked on the gates of repentance, the way would have opened for him to return. But the *yetzer hara* kept whispering in his ear, leading him further and further away from the Torah way of life. "It's impossible to do it perfectly anyway," it sneered," so why bother to try? Now that you have sinned so much, there's no hope for you anyway. So you might as well eat, drink, and be merry, because this is the only life you are going to get! Once you are dead, that's it!"

In the end, Rav Yossi the scholar degenerated into Yossi the drunkard, and became a common thief. When death finally came, as it does to all people, it was not the end at all. Yossi was called before the Heavenly Court, where Satan arrived with a huge scroll full of sins that Yossi had committed—a list that far outweighed the good deeds of his early years. As the details of Yossi's sordid life were read into the record, the three Judges who sat on the bench shook their heads sadly. Try as they might, they could find no way to avoid a guilty verdict. Poor Yossi would not be permitted to enter the Garden of Eden, but must return to earth and incarnate once again, to atone for all his sins.

Because his downfall had begun by eating bread without the ritual handwashing, it was decreed that Yossi would be reborn as a frog, who would live near a spring in a distant country. As a creature who spent his time near water all day, he would be reminded of the series of events that had brought him into this predicament. True, it would be a very difficult life for a human soul to endure, but it need not last forever. The Court also decreed that, if Yossi's son ever came to the pond, made the blessing for water, and drank from it, then Yossi's soul would be set free.

Now, Yossi the drunkard had died penniless, so he left no inheritance for his son, Shmuel, who was a very poor man. Shmuel had no money for traveling, even if he had known about the heav-

enly decree against his father's soul—which he did not. But God, in his mercy, provided a way.

Shmuel soon found work as the butler to a rich merchant, who traveled far and wide in search of fine cloth and other goods. The merchant and the butler took an immediate liking to each other and became close friends. Outwardly, Shmuel was still a hired servant, but the merchant regarded him as his closest confidant and his constant traveling companion.

Many years went by. On one of his buying trips, the merchant suddenly became very ill. The doctors recommended that he visit a certain spa in Tiberias, where the hot mineral springs were said to bring about miraculous cures. Naturally, Shmuel the butler went along, to attend to his master's needs.

After taking the treatment, the merchant did feel much better. He called to Shmuel to accompany him on a stroll, so he could listen to the birds and the rustle of the wind in the trees. "Isn't this beautiful!" he said to Shmuel. "The air is so healthy and pure here. I feel certain that I will be cured!"

But Shmuel the butler scarcely heard his master's words. From the moment they had begun the walk, he had been strangely thirsty. Now his thirst was growing unbearable. Of course, he had no idea that he was getting closer and closer to the spring where his father's soul languished as a frog. Shmuel only knew that his thirst was growing worse by the minute, until his mouth was so dry that he could hardly talk. Finally, he could stand it no longer.

"Master, I'm dying of thirst!" he moaned. "I must have a drink of water right now—let's go back to the inn."

But the merchant wanted to continue his walk and bask in the beauty of nature. "Maybe we'll find a spring along the way," he replied, "so let's keep going and see what happens."

Sure enough, a few yards further down the trail, they heard the familiar gurgling sound of water running over rocks. Around the bend was a small spring, which ran into a crystal-clear pool. There, on the bank of the pool, sat a huge frog—the very same frog that held the soul of Shmuel's father, Yossi.

"At last!" thought poor Yossi, "My son has come to set me free!" Yossi was so overjoyed that he tried to call out a greeting, but the only sound he could make was a pitiful croak.

As it turned out, Shmuel never noticed the frog at all. When he saw the clear, sparkling water, he was so overcome with his desire to drink it, that he ran directly to the edge of the pool and cupped the water in his hands. In his overwhelming thirst, he completely forgot to make the blessing. And so it was, that the soul of his father remained in the body of the frog, unredeemed.

Yossi the frog lived for many years by the pool in Tiberias. When his body grew old and tired, he was destined to be reborn, from egg to tadpole to frog again, over and over. Each time he was reborn as a frog, it was in a different place—sometimes in Israel, sometimes in Europe, sometimes across the ocean. But always it was somewhere remote, where there were no Jews to rescue him by doing a mitzvah. Even the great Isaac Luria, the Holy Ari of Safed, was unable to free him, because he never traveled so far away. Poor Yossi began to despair of ever being rescued, and sometimes thought it might be better to simply forget his former life as a Jew. Why not just succumb to his animal nature, and remain a frog forever?

Still, once a human, always a human—even in the body of a frog. Does not the Book of Genesis say that each species was created "according to its own kind"? So poor Yossi remained in exile, fully conscious of himself as a human being with a Jewish soul, trapped in the miserable body of a frog.

Five hundred years later, in the early eighteenth century, a very holy soul came to earth, one who would later be known as the Baal Shem Tov, or "Master of the Good Name." But at the time of this story, the Baal Shem Tov was still living as a hidden saint in the Carpathian Mountains, and had not yet revealed his knowl-

edge or his holy mission to the world. To the townsfolk in the valley below, he was just plain Srulik, "Little Israel," the strange Jewish orphan who seemed to prefer wandering alone in the woods instead of sitting in the house of study.

Yet even in those early days, there were some who recognized his secret holiness, and called him "Rebbe," or spiritual master. Rebbe Israel, it was said, knew the languages of the all the birds and animals. Once he had even bargained with a wolf! The wolf had been stealing sheep and frightening the children on their way to school. Rebbe Israel had convinced the wolf not to hunt there, in return for for food that the villagers left at the edge of town each day.

In the same mountains where Rebbe Israel lived, there was a band of Ukrainian thieves who had a hideout there. Although they were robbers by trade, they were not really bad men, and they respected Rebbe Israel as a holy saint. Whenever there were disputes among the thieves, they would come to him to judge their case—which he did, on the condition that they should never harm any of the Jews.

Now, these robbers traveled far and wide, and were very familar with all the caves and hiding places in even the most remote areas. One day, two of the thieves came to Rebbe Israel with some very exciting news. "We found a shortcut to Jerusalem!" they exclaimed. "There's a secret tunnel that leads underground through many caverns, and comes out right in the middle of the Holy Land! We can take you there if you want."

Rebbe Israel could hardly contain himself with joy. To travel to Jerusalem! He already knew that such tunnels existed, because they were described in the Talmud. On the Day of Judgment, it was said, the dead who were buried outside the land of Israel would come to life and use these secret tunnels to travel to the Holy Land. Now the entrance to one of the tunnels had actually been found! Was it possible, Rebbe Israel wondered, to use it now, and make a pilgrimage to the sacred places while he was still alive?

"Yes, yes! Please take me there at once!" he exclaimed.

So the two thieves led Rebbe Israel on a long journey, over the mountains and down into a deep valley, where they came to a wide, swampy ditch full of muck. In order to cross over, it was necessary to use a narrow, rickety bridge that stretched precariously over the water. To keep from falling in, they would have to steady themselves with a long pole that reached to the bottom of the swamp.

The two thieves crossed the bridge with ease, having done it many times before. But when Rebbe Israel's turn came, he suddenly had a vision of the Angel with the Flaming Sword, who guards the entrance to the Garden of Eden. This he took as a warning that there was mortal danger ahead. Suddenly he was afraid—were the thieves trying to trick him? He did not know. Maybe only the dead could enter the Garden of Eden through the secret tunnels . . . and he knew that his mission on earth was not yet completed. So he abandoned the quest and turned back.

Although Rebbe Israel was very disappointed at not being able to visit the Holy Land in this life, he still felt that the journey was not in vain. "There must be some spiritual reason that I was led to this remote swamp," he thought, and began to retrace his steps along the path. At the edge of the swamp he saw a frog that was so huge, he almost did not recognize it as a frog at all.

"Who are you?" Rebbe Israel asked.

"I once was Rav Yossi the scholar," the frog croaked sadly, "but I became a frog because of all my sins."

Now Rebbe Israel knew the language of the animals, so he could understand the long, sad story that the frog now told. Yossi poured out his heart to Rebbe Israel, and confessed every single sin that he had ever committed in all of his lives on earth.

"You are indeed a scholar," Rebbe Israel replied, "and your repentance is sincere. Rav Yossi, the time has come for your release."

With that, Rebbe Israel made a secret kabbalistic sign to raise up the scholar's soul out of the frog. Free at last, Rav Yossi's soul went straight to the Garden of Eden. At exactly the same moment, the enormous frog fell dead at Rebbe Israel's feet.

(adapted from *Shivchei Ha-Besht* and other sources)

THE STONE IN THE WALL

One day, when the Holy Ari and his disciples were walking through Tiberias in the Holy Land, they passed the synagogue of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. This was not so unusual in itself—they often went along that road. But on this particular day, the rabbi suddenly stopped in front of the wall, and pointed to a particular stone. "A soul has transmigrated here and become entrapped in this stone," he said. Then he quoted the prophet Habakkuk's words:

> The very stones will cry out from the wall,
> and from the timbers a beam will answer them.
> Woe betide you who have built a town on bloodshed,
> and founded a city on fraud,
> so that nations toil for a pittance!

"This is the meaning of that verse, 'The stone shall cry out from the wall,'" said the Ari. "I can hear the anguish of this poor soul right now—it is still crying out in such torment, yearning to be set free!"

Then the Ari and his disciples began to pray the Afternoon Service, with ecstasy and joy. As they finished, they heard the sound of fluttering wings. But when they looked around to see where the sound was coming from, there was no bird anywhere. Then they knew that they had heard the wings of the grateful soul, as it soared upward, on its way to heaven.

(from *Shivchei Ha-Ari*)

THE OXEN–MEN

It happened one day in Safed, that Rabbi Jacob Abulafia entered the study of Rabbi Isaac Luria, known as "the Holy Ari," in order to ask for a favor. But before Rabbi Jacob could even open his mouth, the Ari said to him, "I already know why you're here. You are planning a business trip to Egypt, and you want me to

write you a letter of recommendation to the Jewish community there."

"Yes," replied Rabbi Jacob, not the least bit surprised at the Ari's clairvoyance.

"Then go in peace, with my blessing," said the Ari. "There is an important spiritual need for you to travel there as well."

"What on earth can it be?" said Rabbi Jacob. "I am not going there for any charitable purposes—just my own business."

"When you return, you will know why," said the Ari. Then he wrote out the letter of endorsement, handed it to Rabbi Jacob, and said, "May this letter help to speed you on your journey."

So Rabbi Jacob traveled to Egypt where, in honor of the Holy Ari, the community treated him with great respect. His business went well, and he prospered. When he was ready to return to Safed, he planned to join a caravan, but one of his friends said, "Why should you go by camel, which is a difficult animal to ride? Why not buy yourself a horse and go more comfortably?" So he did exactly that, and began traveling with the horsemen.

Along the way, the horsemen stopped to rest at an oasis, and Rabbi Jacob rested there, too. Soon he fell into a deep sleep, and was accidentally left behind when the horsemen resumed their journey. A while later, the caravan also arrived at the oasis, and the camel drivers woke him up. Rabbi Jacob untied his horse, so it could follow the caravan, while he slept on its back for another two hours. But when he awoke again, the horse had been straggling behind, while the caravan went on ahead. He was now riding alone.

Rabbi Jacob became very frightened, and went galloping down the road, in a vain attempt to catch up with the caravan. The sun was getting low in the sky. He feared that he would have to spend the night alone in the wilderness, where he would be in danger of attack by robbers or wild animals.

Suddenly, up ahead, he saw a man with a team of oxen, plowing in a field, and was greatly relieved. "There must be a village nearby," the rabbi said to himself. "When he is done plowing, I'll ask to stay with him for the night."

So Rabbi Jacob got off his horse and sat down by the side of the road. While he was waiting there, he saw the plowman beating his oxen. Then an amazing thing happened. The plowman turned into an ox, and one of the oxen became a man—and they switched places! Now the man—who had been an ox before—began beating the ox that had been a man. This transformation took place several times, and Rabbi Jacob was terrified. Were these men or demons? But he could not run away, because it was getting dark, so he had no choice but to take his chances with the oxen-men.

When the sun set, all three of the creatures on the plow team—two oxen and a man—became human beings. When they saw Rabbi Jacob resting in the shade, they called out to him in tears, saying, "Are you from Safed, holy rabbi?"

"I am," said Rabbi Jacob.

"And does Rabbi Luria, the Holy Ari, still live there?" they asked.

"He does."

At that, the three men fell weeping at his feet. "For the love of God, have pity on us!" they cried. "We are not animals, we are Jews! When you get back to Safed, go at once to the Holy Ari and ask him to set a penance for our souls, because we can no longer endure our suffering here."

"I shall do as you ask," said Rabbi Jacob with compassion. "Now I know why this strange set of circumstances has brought me to your village." So he stayed there for the night.

When Rabbi Jacob later arrived in Safed, he did as the oxen-men had requested, and went straight to the Holy Ari, who greeted him with these words: "I know, I know—you have come to me about the oxen-men. Please come back again tomorrow."

On the next day, the Ari explained to Rabbi Jacob, "Now you understand why it was necessary for you to travel to Egypt in the first place. Your soul is connected with the souls of those men, because you all come from the same soul root. You had to go there, in order to help redeem them from their sin."

"What was their sin?" Rabbi Jacob asked,

The Ari replied, "They trimmed off their sidecurls and, in doing so, they violated the Torah commandment, 'you shall not mar the corners of your heads nor round the edges of your beards.'"

"But what connection does that have with becoming oxen?"

"Haven't you read the Torah?" the Ari asked.

"Of course I have!" said Rabbi Jacob. "But I don't recall anything about turning into oxen if you cut off your sidecurls."

"It is encoded in the first letters of the Hebrew text—the letters *peh* and *resh* spell *par*, which means 'ox.' Tomorrow you must fast on behalf of these oxen-men, and direct your meditation toward the redemption of their souls."

The Ari then prescribed all the penances and kabbalistic meditations to be performed on their behalf, and Rabbi Jacob carried them out to the letter. Then the oxen-men appeared to him in a dream and said, "Rest assured, holy rabbi—our souls have finally found rest because of you. With the first penance you performed on our behalf, we were freed from our hard labor as oxen, and brought to Gehenna. With each additional penance, our souls were freed from a heavier yoke to a lighter one, until, at long last, we have entered the Garden of Eden."

(from *Shivchei Ha-Ari*)

THE BULL OF CASTILE

It once happened in Castile, that the Spaniards were planning a huge summer fiesta. As usual, the celebration would include a bullfight, where brave matadors would pit their strength and cunning against enormous charging bulls.

"Bulfight tomorrow! Come one, come all!" shouted the barker in the market square. "See the huge bull we have chosen for the greatest of the matadors! On display now, near the arena! Never have you seen such a bull, it is the king of the bulls himself! Bullfight tomorrow, come one, come all. . . . "

Yosef ibn David shuddered. Bullfighting, he knew, was forbidden to Jews. Not by the Castilian rulers, but by the religious law of the Jews themselves. Already in Roman times, the wise rabbis had taught that killing animals for mere sport was both cruel and barbaric. *Tsaar baalei chayim,* the law was called in Hebrew. A Jew must never knowingly inflict pain or suffering on animals. For this reason, Yosef the Jew had never been to a bullfight, even though he had lived in Spain all his life.

Still, Yosef was curious to see the huge bull. The whole marketplace was buzzing with talk of this enormous animal, and Yosef wondered if the bull was really that big, or had simply grown larger with each telling of the tale. What harm could it do, he thought to himself, if I just walked past the pen to see with my own eyes? It would be on the way home, after all . . .

When Yosef arrived at the bullpen, he saw a crowd of ragged Spanish peasants leaning on the fence, taunting the animal and daring it to charge. The bull was indeed enormous, with huge, muscular shoulders and long, sharp horns. The neck was thick and powerful, the hide was black and shiny. In the bull's nose was a heavy brass ring, which glistened in the sunlight as the animal stomped its feet and lowered its massive head, shaking its horns from side to side.

Yosef pushed his way to the fence for a closer look. At just that moment, the bull looked up and stared straight at him. Surprisingly, the huge brown eyes seemed almost sad, as if to belie the fierce countenance of the animal, which resumed stomping and snorting, much to the delight of the crowd. But Yosef the Jew had seen enough. Quietly, he turned away and headed toward home.

That night, Yosef had a very strange dream. The spirit of his deceased father appeared and said, "My son, I must tell you something important. While I was alive on earth, I committed many sins, and it was decreed in the Heavenly Court that I must return to earth in the form of a bull—the very animal that you saw today. I had hoped that I would be slaughtered in a kosher manner

and my meat would be used by Jews for a holy purpose. But instead, I have been chosen for the bullfight. Tomorrow the Spaniards will tear me apart purely for sport, with no opportunity to use my flesh for a mitzvah. Instead, the *trayfe* carcass will be thrown to the dogs, and who knows where my wandering soul will go next?

"You, Yosef, my son—you alone, could see the sadness in the eyes of the bull today, because your *neshamah* sensed that the soul of your own father has transmigrated there. So now it is up to you. Redeem me from this terrible fate. Go to the owner of the bull, and spare no expense to buy it. Then have it slaughtered in a proper, kosher manner. Give the meat to poor Torah students, so they may celebrate the Sabbath with joy and feasting. In this way, my bull's body will be used for a mitzvah, and my soul will be free. With God's help, I can again return as a human being, and serve God as a Jew."

Yosef awoke in a cold sweat. What a strange dream that was! Like most Spanish Jews, he believed in the truth of prophetic dreams, although he had never expected to have one himself. What if it was only a dream, and nothing more? But on the other hand, what if it was really true? He could not afford to take a chance. He would have to redeem the bull at any cost.

All night long, Yosef thought about how to do this. Soon the birds outside began to chirp, and a rooster crowed in the distance. After washing his hands in the basin beside the bed and making the proper blessing, Yosef went to the window and pulled back the curtain. The sun was already rising—he would have to hurry. If the bullfight began at noon, they would be making preparations as soon as it was light. He must buy the bull before the crowds began to gather.

Quickly Yosef dressed and said the morning blessings, then headed for the arena, where the hired peasants were already putting up colorful flags and grooming the horses for the procession. The huge black bull was still in its pen, snorting and bellowing angrily at the peasants, who cursed in return.

Suddenly the animal spotted Yosef and stopped, standing perfectly still for what seemed an eternity. Once again, Yosef's eyes met those of the bull. The animal stared so pleadingly, so humanly, that there could no longer be any doubt. The dream was indeed true. Trapped inside that bovine body was the tormented soul of his father, longing to be free.

Yosef approached one of the peasant workers. "Tell me, señor," he asked, "who owns this bull?"

"Why, the master of the bullring, Don Martinez, of course."

"And how much does he want for it?"

The peasant looked at Yosef with disdain. "The bull? You want to buy this bull? Stupid Jew, it is not for sale. It's for the bullfight today, as all of Castile already knows."

"I also know that," Yosef said, ignoring the insult. "But I must have it anyway. So, how much?"

"I told you, it's not for me to sell. But maybe, if you talk to Don Martinez, he might sell, if the price is right. But I warn you, the price will be very high."

"Nevertheless, I must try," said Yosef. Thanking the peasant, he handed him a few copper coins, then turned toward the home of Don Martinez, the bullfight master.

Of course, Don Martinez did not want to sell the bull. Why should he? There were already many wagers resting on this bullfight, and he expected to make a lot of money from the show itself. To sell the main attraction would be sheer madness. How could this insolent Jew even think of suggesting such a thing? It was total arrogance, and Don Martinez said so. But Yosef the Jew was determined.

"Name your price," he insisted.

Almost as a jest, Don Martinez named an outrageous price, enough to buy ten such bulls. He fully expected the Jew to back down. But Yosef remembered the message in the dream: *spare no expense to buy this bull,* his father's spirit had said. The sum was indeed enormous, a king's ransom in gold. To pay it would reduce Yosef to utter poverty. But not to pay would be even worse,

because it would condemn his father's poor soul to yet another exile. Yosef did not waver. He would meet the price.

"Sold," said Yosef, and the bull was his.

That Friday morning, the bull was led to the slaughter. Calmly it raised its head to expose the throat, standing perfectly still while the *shochet* did his work. The blood was drained and the meat cut up. Already the word had spread, and a long line of poor Jews came to get a piece of fresh beef for their Sabbath meal. Pious housewives salted and soaked the meat in the proper manner, and prepared it according to their favorite recipes.

Throughout the Castilian ghetto that night, many families sang and learned Torah around the Sabbath table. They praised the generosity of Yosef the Jew, but also wondered why he had donated such an expensive bull to feed the poor. Even more puzzling, how could it be that the meat of this tough old animal was so tender, so juicy, so utterly delicious? It was, in fact, the very best meat that anyone could remember tasting . . .

And so it was, that Moshe's father was redeemed through the songs and praises of the poor on Shabbat. Free at last, his soul did not reincarnate again, but went straight to the Garden of Eden, where it remains to this day. And as for Yosef ibn David, he continued to give Sabbath food to the poor, and was blessed with prosperity.

(Sephardic, based on *Sefer Haredim*)

ONE LESS DEATH

A Hasid once came to Rabbi Schneur-Zalman of Liady, the first Lubovitcher Rebbe, for advice about his unhappy marriage. The man complained that his wife was an unbearable shrew, who nagged him constantly, and he was seriously considering a divorce. But first, he wanted to get his Rebbe's advice on the matter.

The Rebbe closed his eyes and concentrated deeply, until he entered a meditative state, where he could see the Hasid's past

lives, all the way back to biblical times. The Rebbe remained silent for a long time, then sighed a heavy sigh. Returning to waking consciousness again, he opened his eyes and looked at the Hasid with heartfelt compassion.

"As you already know," the Rebbe said gently, "the punishment prescribed by the Torah for idolatry is death. And as you also know, if a death sentence cannot be carried out by an earthly court, then heaven decrees for it to be fulfilled in some other way. The Torah also tells us about Jews who fell into the sin of idolatry many times in olden days. There are souls that have accumulated an enormous burden of debt from this grievous sin—enough to die a thousand deaths—because every time they worshipped an idol, another death sentence was decreed for them by the Heavenly Court.

"In your case," the Rebbe continued, "you have such a huge backlog of death penalties from previous lives, that there would not have been enough incarnations for you to atone before the coming of the Messiah. So heaven had mercy on you and gave you this wife instead, because, as King Solomon says in the Book of Ecclesiastes, a bad wife is more bitter than death. Each time you feel you simply cannot stand her for one second longer, you 'die another death.' In this way, you are coming closer and closer to redeeming your soul."

Upon hearing this, the Hasid decided not to divorce his wife after all. From then on, each time she started to nag him about something, he didn't answer her back. Instead, he would just smile to himself and say softly, "One less death, I have one less death." Finally, her curiosity got the best of her, and she asked him what he mean by saying "one less death." So he told her what the Rebbe had said about his previous incarnations.

Now, although the wife was a grouchy person and difficult to get along with, she was also a true Hasid of the Rebbe, and respected his wisdom completely. She got to thinking about "one less death," and decided that she did not like being the person to play that role. So she stopped nagging her husband, and they made

peace in the home. The two of them remained together for many more years, until death finally parted them.

(Lubovitcher Hasidic)

THE ANIMALS' COMPLAINT

During the mid-sixteenth century in Turkey, there lived a false messiah named Shabbetai Zevi, who caused many Jews to sin against God and his Holy Torah. How did he do this? He was able to arouse his followers to states of ecstasy, and used that power to convince them that the laws of the Torah were no longer valid. From this we know that he was not really the Messiah, because the true Messiah will uphold the Torah. But in Shabbetai's day, many people foolishly chose to follow him, because they craved those psychic experiences. So they accepted Shabbetai's twisted interpretations of Torah, and brought much suffering into the world because of it.

Now, there is a certain blessing in our prayerbooks that we say every morning, namely, *matir assurim*, which is usually translated as "Who releases the bound." This blessing refers to the human body, which is bound motionless while our souls leave the earthly plane to visit the heavenly worlds during sleep. So, when we wake up again, we must thank God for having returned our souls safely to our bodies, and for "releasing the bound" muscles into our control again.

The followers of Shabbetai Zevi, however, purposely twisted this verse by misreading it as, "Who permits the forbidden," because the word "bound" can also refer to Jewish law. In their misguided foolishness, they began to make the blessing *matir assurim* over all kinds of forbidden foods, declaring that the blessing made the foods permitted to be eaten. So, for example, they would take a piece of pork, make the blessing *matir assurim*, then eat it with lustful gusto. Or they would make the blessing over wild animals that had been shot with arrows, which everybody

knows are not kosher. In this way, they also caused the souls of the animals to sin, by using their flesh to violate the Torah. All of these sins lowered the spiritual level of the world, resulting in the materialism that we see today.

When Shabbetai Zevi died, his soul was called before the Heavenly Court, where he had to face his "life review." Satan the Accuser, who serves as the prosecuting attorney in that Court, entered with an enormous list of sins, which he ceremoniously placed upon the "guilty" side of the scale. Then he called for his witnesses to enter—all the souls of the animals whose flesh had been misused by Shabbetai's followers on earth. One by one, the animals offered their complaints to the Heavenly Court.

"By permitting Jews to eat me," the squirrel complained, "this man involved me in sins that I never could have committed as a squirrel. The man who ate me committed adultery—a sin that is unknown among squirrels, because we do not have such a commandment. Now my own soul is bound up in the sins of his soul."

"The same is true for me," said the wild goose, "because even though I am a kosher bird, the followers of Shabbetai Zevi shot me with arrows, so I was not slaughtered in the proper manner. I, too, was dragged down into many earthly sins."

"I was slaughtered properly," said the chicken, "but after this Shabbetai ate me, he used my energy to speak false teachings about God's Torah. Thus I became entangled in the sin of heresy—something I never could have done as a chicken!"

And so it went, as the representatives of each animal species lodged their complaints against the soul of Shabbetai Zevi. In the end, the Heavenly Court ruled that Shabbetai should be sent to the deepest levels of Gehenna. And so it happened.

As for the animals, they were granted full pardons, since they had no control over how they were misused. Still, many of them were so horrified at the way they had been forced to commit sins, that they asked never to reincarnate on the earth plane again. The Court listened to this plea, and ruled that those animal souls who did not wish to return to earth could remain in the Garden of Eden

forever. Many of them did—and that is why so many species of animals are endangered today. As long as Jews treated them properly, their souls returned and animals were plentiful. But when they were sinfully misused, they chose not to come back here anymore.

(twentieth-century Germany)

A DREAM OF EDEN

There once was a Hasid who found himself caught on the horns of a perplexing dilemma. On the one hand, he was well aware of the teaching that, when a Jew eats kosher meat and uses the energy for doing a mitzvah, then that act of goodness can help to elevate the soul within the animal up to the heavenly realms. According to kabbalah, eating meat is a form of *tikkun olam*—a mystical process for repairing the universe.

But on the other hand, the Hasid was now finding that he disliked meat. Although he had enjoyed it in his youth, as he grew older, it just didn't taste right anymore. He considered becoming a vegetarian, but his friends all argued against it.

"God intended for us to eat meat," one friend pointed out. "That's why He put the laws of slaughtering in the Torah."

"All of the prophets, sages, and holy Rebbes ate meat," a second friend said. "Do you think you are better than they are?"

"Meat-eating is an important part of *tikkun olam*," the third friend argued. "If you refuse to eat it, then you are denying the souls in those animals their spiritual right to be elevated into holiness. And that, in turn, could delay the coming of the Messiah. Surely you don't want to do that!"

Now, all of these arguments made perfect sense to the Hasid. He was a man who took the commandments of God very seriously, and he understood their mystical meanings, too. More than anything else, he wanted to do what was right in the eyes of his Creator. If God willed for him to eat meat, then he would obey and

eat it. But whenever he started to put a piece of meat in his mouth, he found it totally repugnant. It finally came to the point where he could not even bear to look at the roast chicken on the Sabbath table.

"I must have an answer to this dilemma," the Hasid said to himself. "I have asked everyone's opinion and have found no peace in their answers. So now I will make a dream request to God."

The Hasid carefully followed the procedure of the Jewish mystics for making such a request. First, he fasted for an entire day and long into the night. During this fast, he poured out his heart to his Creator in a spontaneous flow of words, revealing all his inner doubts and questions, and the anguish of his heart. Next, he wrote his questions on a piece of paper and carefully put it under his pillow. Then, still fasting, he went to sleep.

Sure enough, that night he had a lucid dream—a dream so beautiful, so powerful, so seemingly real, that he had no doubt it was an answer to his prayers.

In the dream, the Hasid left his body and was met by a shining angelic being, which took him to the upper levels of the Garden of Eden, where all the holy souls go after death. There he was shown all kinds of animals, as well as many, many sages from the past, all living together in perfect peace.

The angel then said to the Hasid, "Look, they are all here now. All the 'sparks' within meat that you were supposed to elevate have been redeemed."

"But what about the rest of the animals still on earth?" The Hasid asked.

"They are for others to redeem," the angel replied. "Each Jew comes to earth in order to elevate specific 'sparks' and not others. You have already freed the 'sparks' connected to your own soul. That's why meat no longer tastes good to you. Because now, when you eat it, there is no spiritual taste. You are left with nothing but the *klippot*—the empty shells—fleshpots without holiness."

"But what about the Messiah?" asked the Hasid.

"That process continues," the angel explained. "Our ancestors ate meat because of that process, and for some Jews today, it is still necessary. But the process is cumulative, and the goal is to finish the work, not continue it forever. As more and more 'sparks' are redeemed, the human world will lose its taste for meat, until, in the time of the Messiah, it will no longer be eaten. But for you, at this time, to become a vegetarian is to help bring the Messiah."

When the Hasid awoke from that dream, his meat-eating days were over. He felt as if his soul had become deathly allergic to all of that negative *klippah* energy. And so, he became a vegetarian.

(twentieth-century USA)

3
Rebirth or Gehenna?

If I ascend into heaven, Thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there . . .

(Psalm 139:8)

"This world is the lowest of all, and the highest of all."

(Rabbi Aharon of Karlin)

OVERVIEW

Although it is commonly said that "Jews do not believe in hell," this is not completely accurate. True, Judaism does not consign its sinners to eternal damnation like some sects of Christianity. However, there is a sort of purgatory described in Jewish literature, known as "Gehenna," derived from the Hebrew, *Geh Hinnom*, after the "Valley of Hinnom," which is located just outside Jerusalem. In biblical times, Geh Hinnom was a site where pagan Canaanites performed human sacrifices to their gods. When King David conquered Jerusalem, these horrible altars were destroyed. In later centuries, Geh Hinnom became a dumping ground where refuse was burned. This is probably the origin of the association between Gehenna and being "cast into the fire."

In the Talmud and later Jewish texts, Gehenna is a form of purgatory, where souls are cleansed or purged (the literal meaning of "purgatory") before moving up to the higher spiritual realms. According to the medieval text, *Maavar Yabok* ("Crossing the River Yabok"), the afterlife has many levels, with each

soul going to a place appropriate to its deeds on earth. There is a "Lower Gehenna," which purges the soul of physical and emotional sins, and an "Upper Gehenna," which purifies it of mental and intellectual sins. After that, it goes to the "Lower Garden of Eden," where it enjoys emotional pleasures; then to the "Upper Garden of Eden," where it is rewarded with the honor of learning Torah among the greatest sages. At any of these stages, the soul can also be sent back to earth again, if it has not progressed enough to merit the next spiritual level.

Most of the stories in this chapter deal with souls who are on the brink of Gehenna for one reason or another. In some cases, they are actually given a choice between reincarnation or Gehenna—and most of them choose Gehenna! The suffering of Gehenna, as terrible as it may be portrayed, is not to be feared as much as another whole lifetime spent here on earth. In "To Earth Again—or to Hell?" the first Lubovitcher Rebbe advises Reb Noah, his devoted disciple, to choose a half-hour in the fires of Gehenna over reincarnation.

The idea that suffering in purgatory is better than returning to this world is often startling to modern readers, who tend to see reincarnation as a "positive learning experience" rather than a form of punishment. But the Rebbe in the story saw the bigger picture. He understood that the ultimate goal is to remain in the spiritual world, not return here. He reasoned that a half-hour in hell was a small price to pay for the certainty of entering Paradise for all eternity. If Reb Noah served the painful sentence now, he would have his "karma" over and done with. But if he chose reincarnation, he would face new temptations. True, he might atone for the particular sin for which he was reincarnating. But would he be able to resist future sins and avoid more entanglement in endless "karma" on earth? Surely it was safer for Reb Noah to serve the time in purgatory!

These stories deal with Gehenna as a level in the spiritual world. But could hell also be right here on earth? Rabbi Nachman

of Breslov, who lived in what is now the Ukrainian Republic at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, once suggested that this temporal world is really nothing more than a form of Gehenna:

> Everyone says there is "This World" (*Olam Ha-Zeh*) and "The World to Come" (*Olam Ha-Ba*). We believe that the "World to Come" exists. It could also be that [something called] "This World" exists somewhere. But is it really *here* [where we are now]? From the amount of suffering everyone goes through the whole time [while on earth], it seems that this is Gehenna. [*Likutei Moharan* 11:119]

The statement that "this is Gehenna" can only make sense in the context of reincarnation. As we have seen, Gehenna is where human souls are sent in order to be purified of their sins. Unless we have lived a previous life, how could we have any sins to atone for by coming here? In the tale of "The Mouse," a soul is even told by Rabbi Luria that it is not yet *worthy* of entering Gehenna! This suggests that, in some cases at least, a second life on earth is considered a lower level than going to purgatory!

Rabbi Nachman was also of the opinion that most of the souls now on earth have already been here before. If that is the case, then maybe all of us are already in Gehenna . . .

THE WISDOM OF THE MARTYRS

In 1753, there was a terrible blood libel leveled against the Jewish community of Pavlysh in Eastern Europe. Twenty-four Jews were falsely accused of murdering a four-year-old boy and draining his blood to use in baking Passover matzohs.

How utterly ignorant was this horrible lie! Jews never eat blood of any kind, let alone human blood, heaven forbid. Matzohs are made from nothing but flour and water. Anybody can come to a matzoh bakery and see for himself that this is the abso-

lute truth. Yet throughout European history, Jews have suffered horrible deaths at the hands of Christians who believed such hateful propaganda.

In this particular case, a Jew named Rabbi David escaped from Pavlysh and fled to the town of Medzheboz, Ukraine, where the Baal Shem Tov was living at the time. The Baal Shem Tov reassured Rabbi David that the false charges would soon be dropped, and the innocent Jews of Pavlysh would be set free again.

But that's not what happened. Somehow, the great Hasidic master's inner sight had failed him in this particular case. Twelve of the Jews were horribly tortured and executed. The other twelve saved their lives by converting to Christianity.

Rabbi David, who was still in Medzheboz, received a letter describing the horrible tortures that the innocent Jews of Pavlysh had endured. He immediately brought it to the Baal Shem Tov. As soon as the master read the graphic description of this tragic news, he was stricken with inconsolable grief.

It was already Friday afternoon, and time to begin preparations for the Sabbath. But, when the Baal Shem Tov went to the mikveh to immerse himself as usual, he felt no joy at all. Instead, he wept bitterly. Then he returned to the synagogue and prayed the afternoon prayer with such a heavy heart, that his followers could scarcely lift up their heads.

"Surely he will pray with joy again when the Sabbath begins," the Hasidim said to each other. "He knows it is forbidden to mourn this way on the Sabbath."

But the master could not be consoled. He sang *Lecha Dodi*—the beautiful hymn to greet the Sabbath Queen—with a joyless voice and a heavy heart. When he made the kiddush blessing over the cup of wine, he broke down in tears. He washed his hands in the ritual way and sat down at the table, but he was too depressed to break the bread and begin the Sabbath meal. Without saying a word, he got up from the table and went to his room, where he stretched himself out on the floor and remained there in terrible silence.

The members of his household and the guests waited patiently for their teacher to return to the table and recite the blessing on the bread, so they could begin the meal. But the master did not come back. It was getting so late, that the candles were beginning to die out. So his wife, Hannah, went to his room and said, "The Sabbath candles are almost out. The guests are still waiting for you to come back to the table and conduct the meal."

Without even looking up from the floor, the Baal Shem Tov replied, "Go ahead and eat without me, then tell them all to go home."

After the meal was over, Hannah also went to the bedroom and lay down on her bed. Rabbi David did not go home, but remained in the house and stood outside the door to their room, to see what would happen next. He soon became weary of standing, so he got a bench and sat down by the door to continue his vigil. During all this time, the master lay motionless on the floor, with his arms and legs outstretched.

Around midnight, Rabbi David heard the master say to his wife, "Hannah, cover your eyes." At the same moment, the room suddenly became very bright, and the light shone through the cracks in the walls to where Rabbi David was sitting. He heard the Baal Shem Tov say, "Welcome, Rabbi Akiva, noblest of martyrs." He also welcomed other martyrs whose names Rabbi David did not recognize.

Then the Baal Shem Tov said to the martyrs, "I decree that you shall go and take revenge on the enemy who persecuted you!"

But the martyrs replied, "Don't let such words pass from your lips again—and may the words of revenge that you already uttered be nullified!"

"But why?" asked the Baal Shem Tov.

"Holy rabbi," they replied, "You don't know your own power. When you upset the Sabbath by grieving so deeply over our deaths, there was a great tumult in Paradise. Because on the Sabbath, the upper and lower worlds are perfectly united, so whatever happens below affects those of us who are in heaven

much more that it does on a weekday. Your sorrow caused such an uproar, that we fled from the Heavenly Halls as if we were being chased by the sword.

"When we reached the next higher palace, we saw that everyone there had to flee, too, even though they had no idea what they were running from. Finally we came to an even higher palace, where the angels understood the cause of this great disturbance. 'Hurry!' the angels said to us, 'Go down and quiet the Baal Shem Tov's tears, to restore the Sabbath peace!' And so we have come to you now."

"But you suffered so much!" the Baal Shem Tov lamented.

"Indeed it is true," one of the martyr continued. "All the ordinary suffering that human beings must endure is no more than the skin of a garlic clove compared to what martyrs must endure in order to sanctify the Holy Name of God. Yet we were glad to suffer *kiddush HaShem*—martyrdom for the sake of God's Name!

"Nevertheless, the Evil Urge confused us just a hair and caused us to weaken for a moment—and for this lapse, we had to spend a half-hour in purgatory before we could go on to Paradise. Which we did—and believe me, all the suffering of a lifetime is nothing compared to a half-hour in Gehenna!

"Later, after we entered Paradise, we began to argue that we wanted to take revenge upon our persecutors. But the angels answered, 'Since your enemies are still alive, if you want to take revenge on them, you must return to earth again.'

"Upon hearing that, we changed our minds and replied, 'Thank heavens we sanctified ourselves and became martyrs for His Name!' And thank heavens also, that we had to suffer that terrible half-hour in purgatory. Because that half-hour makes all of our suffering during the martyrdom pale to nothing in comparison! We are now purified of our sins and have inherited Paradise. But what would happen to us if were to seek revenge by being reincarnated again in the world? We might, heaven forbid, commit more sins, which might cause us to lose Paradise and re-

turn to Gehenna! Surely it is better for us to renounce revenge and not be reincarnated.

"So you can see," continued the martyrs, "how your actions here on earth have serious consequences in the worlds above. Believe me, your words are heard and your prayers are answered! For this very reason, we now ask you again: please take back your words of revenge, or we may be forced to reincarnate against our wills, in order to fulfill your prayers."

"Very well," said the Baal Shem Tov, "I hereby retract those words. But tell me: why did those who are in heaven mislead me into believing that you would be set free?"

"Because," the martyrs replied, "if you had known the true outcome in advance, you would have prayed a great deal to prevent it, and that might have canceled the heavenly decree. In the end, that could have caused even more trouble than our martyrdom. Therefore, the outcome was hidden from your inner sight."

The vision was ended, and the Baal Shem Tov stood up from the floor. The bitterness was entirely gone from his heart, and the joy of the Sabbath returned once more.

(from *Shivchei Ha-Besht*)

TO EARTH AGAIN—OR TO HELL?

Reb Noah was a devoted disciple of Rabbi Schneur-Zalman of Liady, who lived in eighteenth-century Russia. Among the Lubovitcher Hasidim, Reb Schneur-Zalman is known as the Alter Rebbe—the Elder Master—because he was the first in the line of seven Lubovitcher Rebbes. Reb Noah's son eventually married the Alter Rebbe's daughter and from that union came the Rebbe who was known as the Tzemach Tzedek. To this day, the memory of Reb Noah is well-honored among Lubovitchers, who tell this story about him.

After Reb Noah died and came before the Heavenly Court, they looked into his case and found that he had been a very good Jew.

All his life he had observed the commandments as best he could, and never missed any opportunity to perform an additional mitzvah.

Now, as is well-known among the Hasidim, when a Jew says the appropriate blessing before doing a mitzvah, then a holy angel is born from that very act. These angels, it is said, will come to testify on behalf of the soul after death. And so it happened, that when Reb Noah stood before the Heavenly Court, thousands upon thousands of luminous mitzvah angels came to his trial, saying, "I was born from such-and-such a good deed performed by Reb Noah when he was alive on earth."

The Heavenly Court was very impressed by the testimony of all these mitzvah angels, and was about to decide that Reb Noah should go immediately to Paradise. But suddenly another angel appeared, which was not very luminous at all. In fact, this angel was dull and lacking in light. The darkened angel stood before the Court and said, "I was born from a sin that Reb Noah committed during his life on earth." Then the angel revealed to the Court exactly what the sin had been.

The three judges who sit on the Heavenly Court deliberated long and hard. On the one hand, Reb Noah was a holy man who had led a basically righteous life, so he deserved to go to Paradise. But on the other hand, he *had* committed the sin. Just as no good deed ever goes unrewarded, so does no sin ever go unpunished. At long last, the Court decided to give Reb Noah two choices: He could spend a half-hour in Gehenna now, to atone for the sin, and then go straight to Paradise. Or, he could avoid the pain of purgatory by reincarnating on earth once again and atoning for the sin there.

Reb Noah answered, "With all due respect to this Court, I would like to consult with my Rebbe, Reb Schneur-Zalman, before I make a decision. All my life, I never did anything concerning my spiritual life without first asking the Rebbe's advice. And so, I would like permission to ask the Rebbe about this now."

The Court consulted the Heavenly Records and found that it was indeed true. Reb Noah never did anything important with-

out first asking the Rebbe's advice. "Very well," the Court replied, "You may return to earth in the spirit, and consult with the Alter Rebbe about your decision."

Back on earth, Rabbi Schneur-Zalman was sitting at the table as usual, learning Torah with his Hasidim. Then the soul of Reb Noah appeared to him in the spirit and posed the question: Earth or Gehenna? The Rebbe turned to his Hasidim and said, "Reb Noah is here right now, and he is asking what judgment he should choose: a half-hour in hell, or to be reborn in this world a second time."

The Hasidim said nothing. What could they say? If the Rebbe didn't know, how could they presume to decide for him? So they sat there in silence, waiting to hear what the Rebbe's answer would be.

Rabbi Schneur-Zalman put his hand on his forehead, then rested his elbow on the table and concentrated very deeply. For a long, long time he just sat there in silence, turning the question over in his mind, weighing all the consequences. Then came the answer: "Gehenna—to purgatory!"

As soon as the Rebbe had said the word "Gehenna," the Hasidim all heard a voice cry out, "Oy, Rebbe!" At the same moment they saw, burned into the wall by the door, the outline of a human hand. It had been made by Reb Noah's soul as it entered Gehenna.

From this the Hasidim understood what a burden it is to come to this world. Better to spend half an hour in the fires of purgatory, than a whole lifetime on earth once again!

(Lubovitcher Hasidic)

THE MOUSE

One day, when Rabbi Isaac Luria and his disciples were learning Torah in the town of Safed, the rabbi suddenly asked, "Do any of you remember Mr. So-and-so, the informer who turned fellow Jews over to the Inquisition?"

"Indeed we do remember him!" the disciples replied in disgust. "May his name be blotted out for all the suffering that he caused!"

Rabbi Luria then said, "Bring me a trap." A trap? Whatever for? The disciples were puzzled by this strange request, but they did as their master asked. The rabbi then set the trap, and a little mouse was immediately caught in it, alive and unharmed.

In the presence of everyone there, Rabbi Luria spoke to the captured mouse and said, "Did you think that when you acted as an informer and a slanderer, that there was, heaven forbid, neither Judge nor judgment in this universe?"

The little mouse began to weep and plead, "Holy rabbi, please spare me the great anguish of any more transmigrations. Killing me would not be enough, for I would just reincarnate into some other animal body. Please pray that I might end this wandering, and be sent to Gehenna instead!"

But the Master replied, "Be gone from here, you rogue! You are not yet worthy to enter Gehenna!" Then he opened the trap and set the little mouse free.

(from *Shivchei Ha-Ari*, mid-sixteenth century)

A SOUL BEFORE THE HEAVENLY COURT

This story happened in the little Hungarian town of Szigget, before the Holocaust. Nowadays there are no more Hasidim there, but in those days, it was the home of the Sziggeter Rav, who was also a Hasidic Rebbe. People would come from a thousand miles away sometimes, just to meet him. This puzzled his local followers, because, at the time, they didn't understand his greatness.

Once it happened, that a druggist from London spent the Sabbath in town. Although he was an observant Jew, the Londoner wore modern, Westernized clothing, and was obviously not a Hasid. Nevertheless, after the havdalah ceremony that ends the Sabbath, he decided to go to the synagogue to hear some Torah at the Rebbe's table. But as soon as he laid eyes on the Rebbe, the

Londoner cried out, "Oy vey—he's the one!" and fell to the floor unconscious.

When the man was examined, there appeared to be nothing seriously wrong with him. He soon regained consciousness, and, being a medical man, was able to reassure everyone that he was in no danger. But he flatly refused to explain why he had cried out like that. Instead, he went back to the house where he was staying, hurriedly packed his suitcase, and headed for the train station.

One of the Hasidim, who had witnessed the whole thing, was convinced that there must be more to the story. So he followed the man to the train station, sat down beside him on the bench, and struck up a conversation. It was three hours until the next train, so the conversation lasted a long time. Eventually the stranger opened his heart and explained, "My parents were completely assimilated Jews. I grew up without any knowledge of *mitzvot* or Yiddishkeit—not even the most basic teachings and practices. In fact, I was hardly even aware that we were Jews. Your Rebbe is the one who made me religious." Then he told this story.

Many years ago, while he was still a young man, the Londoner had become critically ill, and the doctors gave up any hope for his recovery. Eventually he slipped into a coma. Then his soul left his body and appeared before the three judges at the Heavenly Court.

As happens with everybody at the time of death, the Court began to weigh the *mitzvot* he had performed against the sins he had committed. True, he was kind to his fellow human beings, had honored his parents, given charity to the poor, and was basically a good person. But he had also violated all the Sabbaths and holy days, eaten nonkosher foods all his life, and failed to do many other *mitzvot* when he had the opportunity. The pile of sins far outweighed the few good deeds. So they decided that he should die in the coma, then go to Gehenna. After that, he would have to be born on earth again, in order to do the *mitzvot* he had failed to perform the first time around.

The gavel fell and sentence was passed. The poor man was filled with despair, when suddenly he hear a voice announcing, "Make way for the Rebbe of Szigget! Make way, make way!"

The Rebbe of Szigget entered the courtroom and asked, "What is going on here?"

"We have just heard the case of this man," replied one of the judges.

"What is his crime?" asked the Rebbe.

"He failed to do most of the *mitzvot* and committed many sins," the Chief Judge explained. "Because his sins far outweigh his good deeds, he has been judged guilty. He will have to spend some time in Gehenna, then reincarnate."

"This is not right!" argued the Rebbe. "This man grew up in total ignorance of Yiddishkeit. He didn't even know what the *mitzvot* were, because nobody ever taught him. So how could he do them properly? His parents failed in their duty, not him."

"But he has already been judged and sentenced!" objected the Chief Judge.

"Nevertheless, the verdict is not valid," replied the Rebbe. "We must keep him alive, and send him back to earth. Now that he knows how important the *mitzvot* are, he can make a real choice for himself. We can watch and see what he does. If he still refuses to accept the Torah way of life, then the verdict will stand. But if he becomes observant, then he deserves a new trial when he dies."

Meanwhile, the man's body still lay motionless in a coma, and his whole family was gathered around him. Suddenly he gasped and began to breathe deeper. He was starting to sweat, and the fever was breaking! A few minutes later he regained consciousness. Eventually he recovered, and began to adopt a religious life. He had never heard of any town called Szigget, but the dream—for such is what he assumed it to be—had shaken him to the core of his being.

"That was many years ago," the druggist concluded. "It was years since I had thought about that dream. Then I heard that there really was a place called Szigget in Hungary. I decided to come

here and find out more about it. When I walked in and saw your Rebbe, I immediately recognized him—and that's why I passed out. Now I know that the dream was true, and your Rebbe is a very great saint."

(Satmar Hasidic)

THE FIRE OF PURGATORY

Reb Arele Roth of Jerusalem used to tell this story: Many years ago, a pious Jew who had lived his whole life in obscurity died and went before the Heavenly Court. There, he was declared to be a true Zaddik—a genuine Jewish saint. The Court then suggested that he should reincarnate on earth again as a Hasidic Rebbe, in order to help others on their path to redemption. But the saintly soul did not want to go.

"Earthly life was very hard," he replied to the Court, "and especially hard for a Jew. I went through a lot of pain and suffering down there, and I have earned my reward in heaven. So now I want to stay up here and enjoy it."

The Heavenly Court was not pleased with this answer, because a Zaddik who does not share his wisdom with others is something of a spiritual failure. Such a person is called a *zaddik im peltz*—"saint in a fur coat," because he puts on a garment to warm himself, but doesn't build a fire to warm others.

Nevertheless, there was nothing the Court could do about this Zaddik's refusal to reincarnate again. The man had indeed earned his place in the World to Come, and nobody—not even the Heavenly Court—could force him to become a teacher against his will. So the Court decided to grant his request and send him straight to Paradise.

Now, when a soul is about to enter the Upper Garden of Eden, the Heavenly Court must examine the case very carefully, to be absolutely sure that there is no "unfinished business" left over from any of his previous lives on earth. In the case of this par-

ticular Zaddik, they found a few small sins that had been overlooked before, and were never properly atoned for. Until these negative marks against him were cleared up, he could not enter the Garden.

Because the Zaddik did not want to reincarnate, the Court decreed that he would have to spend an hour in Gehenna, to be purged of the sins before going to Paradise. The Zaddik readily agreed to this, thinking that he could bear anything for an hour. What was an hour of suffering in Gehenna, compared to an eternity in Eden?

But the angels felt that the Zaddik really should go back to earth and teach, so they heated up the fires of Gehenna three times hotter than usual. When the Zaddik was still three days' journey from the gates of Gehenna, the intense heat was already so unbearable, that he changed his mind and consented to reincarnate instead.

Now, there are some who say that the Rebbe's sin was lack of faith, because he did not have the courage to face the fire and be purified once and for all. Others say it was selfishness, because he failed to share his enlightenment with others. Still others say that neither is true—that Reb Arele was simply hinting at his own incarnation, because, on another occasion, he referred to himself as "a sinful Rebbe." And this is still debated to this day.

(based on *Shomer Emunim*, mid-twentieth century)

THE FUNERAL PROCESSION

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov and some of his followers were standing by the window one morning, when a funeral procession went by. As was the custom, the people in the procession were following the coffin, weeping and wailing for the loss of the deceased.

Rabbi Nachman turned to his followers and said, "More than likely, the soul of the dead man is laughing his heart out over the

big scene they are making out there. When somebody dies, everyone always weeps over him as if to say, 'How nice it would have been if you had remained in this world a little longer, so you could endure even more suffering and hardships here!'"

Reb Nosson, the rabbi's closest disciple, was deeply puzzled by this strange statement. "But what about Gehenna?" he asked. "Even in the next world, he won't be entirely free from suffering, because he was not righteous enough to escape the torments of Gehenna. So he will have to suffer in the afterlife also."

"But at least when he gets out of Gehenna, his suffering will be over forever!" Rabbi Nachman replied. "Once he has been purged of his sins in Gehenna, his soul will be purified, and he will enjoy the reward for the good deeds that he performed in this world."

"But what about reincarnation?" Reb Nosson asked. "If he has to be reincarnated again, then what is the point of leaving this world and its troubles behind, only to return here again and again?"

"When he gets to the Heavenly Court," Rabbi Nachman replied, "he can put up a stubborn argument on his own behalf, and refuse to be reincarnated in any way, shape, or form."

"Can he really do that?" Reb Nosson objected. "How can he refuse to accept the ruling of the Heavenly Court? Will it really help him if he refuses?"

"Of course it will help him," Rabbi Nachman replied. "He can stand before the Court and insist, 'Do whatever You want with me here in the heavenly realms—send me to Purgatory for every last detail of my sins if you must—but don't make me go back to the physical world again. Just get it over with here.' If he is very, very firm in this, if he remains stubborn and does not move from his position, then it certainly can help him."

Reb Nosson took this lesson very seriously, and made a special point of fixing it in his mind. He prayed that, when his time came to go to the Other World, he would be able to remember this teaching and make the same plea before the Heavenly Court,

in order to be saved from reincarnation. "No matter what might happen to me up there," he would say, "it would still be better than having to return to earth and be exposed to all of the dangers and temptations of material life again."

Nevertheless, after Rabbi Nachman died of tuberculosis in 1810, and it became the custom for Breslover Hasidim to gather at the Rebbe's grave in Uman on Rosh Hashanah, Reb Nosson also said, "If I knew for certain that I would merit to travel to my Rebbe's grave even once in a lifetime, then I would choose to reincarnate."

Since the fall of Communism in 1989, it has once again become possible for Jews to make the pilgrimage to Rabbi Nachman's grave in Uman, Ukraine. Not only Breslover Hasidim, but also Jews from other backgrounds, too, gather there by the thousands each year on Rosh Hashanah. Many believe that these are the souls of Jews who were Breslovers in another life, who longed to make the pilgrimage but were prevented for one reason or another reason at that time. Now they have returned in order to fulfill this mitzvah. Perhaps, some say, the soul of Reb Nosson is among them.

(Breslover Hasidic)

THE TWO FRIENDS

A rich man once decided to travel to meet the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. After journeying for more than a week by horse and carriage, he finally arrived at the master's door. Because he was such an important person, the rich man was immediately ushered in to see the great Hasidic master in a private audience.

"Why have you come to me?" the Baal Shem Tov asked.

"No particular reason," the man answered truthfully. "I don't need your blessing, and there are no particular problems in my

life right now. It's just that I've heard so many amazing stories about you and your followers, that I just had to meet you in person."

"Would you mind listening to yet another amazing story?" The Baal Shem Tov asked.

"Of course—I would be delighted!" the man replied. And so the master told this tale:

Once there were two boys who grew up together as friends in the same village. They were best friends all through school, but when they reached adulthood and went out to earn a living, they found themselves in very different circumstances. One of them, whom we shall call Aharon, soon prospered and became very rich. But the other man, whom we shall call Berel, was not nearly as lucky, and became so poverty-stricken that he had no food in the house for his family. So poor Berel went to rich Aharon and asked for some money to help tide him over until his business would improve. Without the slightest bit of hesitation, Aharon gave Berel half his fortune.

Soon the situation began to reverse itself. Now it was Berel who prospered, while Aharon lost his money and began to sink into poverty. Yet he remained hopeful, because he was certain that his old friend Berel, whom he had once helped out in a similar situation, would be willing to return the favor. But when Aharon sought him out and asked for some money, Berel flatly refused to part with any of his fortune. Aharon somehow survived, but it wasn't easy.

Time passed, and the situation reversed itself once more. Berel lost his entire fortune and became poor again, while Aharon prospered and became rich again. Now that Berel was feeling the hardship of his own struggle to survive, he began to feel guilty about having turned away his friend Aharon in his time of trouble. And he also needed more money. So he went to Aharon and said, "My dearest friend, I am deeply sorry that I was so hard-hearted toward you. Please forgive me."

"Of course I will forgive you," Aharon said, "and I will even give you some money to get back on your feet. But this time, I

want you to sign a legal note, agreeing to help me out if our fortunes should be reversed again."

Berel agreed to this, signed the note, and Aharon gave him the money. But, true to form, when their fortunes were reversed again and Aharon became poor, Berel refused to honor the note and left his friend completely penniless.

Eventually the two men died and came before the Heavenly Court. The Court reviewed the records of both their lives. Because of his kindness and generosity, Aharon would be sent to the Garden of Eden. But Berel, because of his sinfulness in refusing to help a poor man in need, would have to go to Gehenna.

Aharon, however, was not willing to accept this verdict. "It is true that he sinned against me," Aharon explained to the Court, "but I forgave him in my heart. I still love him like a brother, and I cannot bear the thought of him suffering in Gehenna."

"Very well," said the Chief Judge of the Heavenly Court. "In that case, there is only one thing to do. Both of you must reincarnate again on earth, so that Berel can have the opportunity to redeem his soul by repaying his debt to you."

And so it happened. Both souls returned to earth, where the soul that had been Aharon became a beggar, and the soul that had been Berel became a rich man. The day came when the beggar knocked on the door of the rich man and pleaded for some food—and the rich man failed the test. He refused to give the beggar anything at all, and slammed the door in his face. Because of this, the beggar died of starvation.

As the Baal Shem Tov was finishing this story, his rich guest suddenly became very pale and frightened. "Just before I left on this journey," he told the master, "a ragged beggar came to my door, and I rudely turned him away. Could he have been the beggar in your story? Am I the miserly rich man?"

The Baal Shem Tov nodded gravely.

"Woe is me!" the rich man cried out in anguish. "Is there any hope for my poor soul?"

The Baal Shem Tov nodded again. "That beggar left behind a widow and children," he said. "Return to your village, find that widow, and give her half your fortune. This will repay your debt to Aharon and atone for your sin."

So the rich man did exactly that.

(Lubovitcher Hasidic)

THE VALUE OF MUD

It was a very cold Ukrainian winter night. Reb Mottel of Chernobyl and his students were on the road, and had arrived in a certain town where there was no room at the inn. Somebody told them that there was a very rich man in town, who often had other rich people staying with him. But this man was also very stingy and a complete snob. He never let poor people into his house.

Nevertheless, Reb Mottel was desperate, so he decided to pay him a visit. At first, the rich man was delighted to have such a great rabbi as Reb Mottel of Chernobyl honoring him with his presence. But when the famous rabbi said that he was not traveling alone, and also needed accommodations for his students, the man changed his tune.

"Your students have muddy boots!" the rich man said. "How can I let them come tromping around the house? They'll track up the floor and ruin my fine carpets!"

"Let me tell you a story," Reb Mottel replied. And he told the following tale.

Once there was another man, who was the stingiest of misers. He, too, never allowed anyone into his fine house. But one time, when he was traveling on the road, he saw a poor Jewish family, whose wagon had gotten stuck in the mud. It was cold and wet, and he felt sorry for them, so he got down off his wagon and tried to help them. When their wagon would not budge, he unhitched

their horse and tied it to his own wagon, then took them with him to the next town.

Years later, the rich man died and went to the next world. When he stood before the Heavenly Court, they reviewed his case and found him guilty of many sins. Worst of all, he had refused to have poor people as guests. He was about to be sentenced to Gehenna for his selfishness, when one of the angels spoke up on his behalf.

"This man, although he is normally a snob, once helped some poor Jews who were stranded along the road," the angel said. "Even though those people were covered with mud, and would soil the upholstery in his fine carraige, he let them ride with him that day. By doing so, he undoubtedly saved their lives, because otherwise they would have caught pneumonia and died. As the Talmud says, whoever saves a single life, it is as if he saved a whole world. And this man saved a whole family! So, if it please the Court, take the mud from those people and put it on the side of righteousness. You will see that it outweighs all the other sins he has committed."

"What you say has merit," replied the Chief Judge of the Heavenly Court. "To save a human life is a very big mitzvah. Instead of sending him to Gehenna, I suggest we let him reincarnate again. If he still values the mud that is tracked in by poor Jews, then he will win his case."

When Reb Mottel finished this story, the rich man trembled with the fear of heaven. "Come in, come in!" he said, opening the door wide. "The more the merrier—every ounce of mud you track in here will be that much more to save my soul!"

(Lubovitcher Hasidic)

4
Recycled Souls

"A generation comes and a generation goes, but the earth endures forever . . . All streams run into the sea, yet the sea never overflows; back to the place from which the streams ran, they return to run again."

(Ecclesiastes 1:4–7)

"Some people have had to be born only in order that they should perform just one specific mitzvah in the course of their entire lives."

(Reb Pinchas of Koretz, eighteenth century)

OVERVIEW

Reincarnation is, by definition, a matter of souls returning again in new bodies, for any number of possible reasons. In that sense, all the stories in this book might fit into the category of "recycled souls." The tales in this chapter deal with some of the reasons those souls return, and how the cycle was finally completed.

There is a great deal of debate in esoteric circles as to how often, and how soon after death, a soul is supposed to reincarnate. Texts from the Far Eastern religions suggest that human souls return only once in a thousand years or so. On the other hand, the Druse of Lebanon believe that reincarnation takes place immediately after death. Between these two extremes there are many other theories concerning the waiting period between lives. The evidence of past-life regression research suggests that the length of time from one incarnation to the next is quite variable, depending on many factors.

In Jewish stories, as in those of the Druse, it is common for the soul of a deceased person to pass into a newborn child shortly after the moment of death. Three of the stories included here deal with cases where the soul of someone on the deathbed was destined to enter the body of a child about to be born. The lack of a longer waiting period between incarnations seems to account for the detailed memories of the previous life. In "Rich Man, Poor Man," we see a classic case of a child who not only remembers his previous life, but also reverts to behavior connected with that incarnation, much to the consternation of everyone present.

Similar cases exist in the annals of modern parapsychology. Dr. Ian Stevenson, a researcher at the University of Virginia, has spent four decades studying cases of children around the world who claim to remember details from a former incarnation. In many cases, these children were able to correctly identify family members from that life, as well as recognize streets and other landmarks. Concerning the possibilty of a familar house triggering past-life memories, Carol Bowman writes in her 1997 book, *Children's Past Lives*:

> It seems unlikely that, in such a big world, we would incarnate in the same locale to travel the same roads and see the same sites as in previous lives. But the cases give evidence that we do. In fact, the locations where we reincarnate are not as random as we might think. Both Stevenson and the Harrisons [past-life researchers] found that some children reincarnated within a hundred kilometers of their last life, often closer. If we are likely to be reborn in the same territory where we spent one or more past lives, then happening on a familiar landmark is not unlikely. We do, literally, travel the same roads again. [Bowman, p. 210]

It is widely believed among kabbalists (and others) that Jewish souls will tend to reincarnate within their own family lines, thus perpetuating their "seed" in the spiritual as well as the physical sense. The "generations of Adam" can become "the incarnations of Adam" and his progeny in future lifetimes. Some souls

return in similar circumstances, for better or for worse, in cycles that can last for many incarnations. In "The Long Dispute," two litigants were fighting the same court battle, in one form or another, for ninety-nine lifetimes. In "Good and Evil," we learn that new souls do not come down to earth until the older souls have completed their work here. In which case, most of us are probably recycled souls.

GOOD AND EVIL

During Roman times in the land of Israel, there lived a Jewish sage named Rabbi Rahumai, who was a great master of the mystical teachings known as *Merkavah*, or the "Work of the Chariot." One day, while Rabbi Rahumai and his colleagues were sitting in Tiberias learning Torah together, the subject turned to the workings of Good and Evil in the world.

Rabbi Rahumai said, "Here is what I have received on this: When Moses wanted to know the secrets of the most glorious and fearsome Name of God—may that Name be blessed!—he said, 'Please show me Your *kavod*—Your Glory.' Why did Moses ask for this? Because he wanted to understand why there are righteous people who have a good life and wicked people who have a bad life—as it should be!—but there are also righteous people who have a bad life, and wicked people who have a good life. Moses wanted to know why this is so. But the angels would not tell him."

The other rabbis contemplated this problem for a while, but offered no solution. Then Rabbi Rahumai stroked his beard thoughtfully and said, "Do you really think that they did not show him this? Can it possibly be that Moses didn't know this mystery? How could he not know the Glory of God? But this is what Moses really meant by his question: 'I know the ways of the mystical levels, but I do not know how Thought spreads through them. I know that Truth is contained within Thought, but I do not know its various parts.' This is what he wanted to know—how Truth

manifests itself on the different levels of existence, and in different circumstances. *This* is what the angels would not tell him."

Again his colleagues were silent, so Rabbi Rahumai continued, "All right, so what is the answer? Why is there one righteous person who has good experiences in the world, while another equally righteous person has bad experiences? Because the second person was wicked previously, and is now being punished for his previous deeds."

"But rabbi," one of his listeners objected, "Do you mean to say that a person is punished for his childhood deeds? Doesn't Rabbi Shimon say in the Talmud [*Shabbat* 89b], that the Heavenly Court does not mete out any punishment until a person is twenty years old? So how can he be punished for 'what he did previously'?"

"I'm not talking about this present lifetime," Rabbi Rahumai replied. "*I am talking about what he has previously been.*"

Still his colleagues did not understand. "What he has previously been? What on earth are you talking about? Tell us in plain language—exactly what do you mean by this?"

But Rabbi Rahumai replied in a parable instead. "What is this like? It is like a person who planted a vineyard, hoping to harvest some good, sweet grapes. But sour grapes came up instead. When he saw that his harvest was no good, he tore the vineyard out by the roots, and replanted it with new vines. But sour grapes grew up again. So he tore it up and planted it again and again . . . "

"How many times?" the students asked.

"For a thousand generations," Rahumai replied. "As it is written in Psalm 105: 'The word that God commanded for a thousand generations.'"

"We still don't understand you," his colleagues said. "What is the meaning of 'generations' as you are using it here?"

At this point, Rabbi Pappas spoke up and quoted Ecclesiastes 1:4, saying, "It refers to the verse, 'A generation goes and a generation comes.'"

Then Rabbi Akiva added, "'The generation came'—it already came. What is this like? A king had some servants, and he dressed them in the finest garments of silk and satin. But then the relationship with his servants broke down, and he was not pleased with them anymore, so he cast them out of the palace, first taking his garments away from them. And the servants went their own way.

"The king then took the garments, and thoroughly cleaned them until there was not a spot of dirt on them. He acquired other servants and dressed them in the newly washed garments. The king did not know whether or not the new servants would be good, but he knew that they were at least worthy of wearing the same garments that his previous servants had worn."

From this parable, everyone understood that Rabbi Rahumai and Rabbi Akiva were talking in riddles about reincarnation. Both parables were really the same story.

Rabbi Rahumai continued, "When the Jewish people are good, then new seeds—new souls—come into the world, souls that have never been on earth before. But when the Jewish people are wicked, then God brings old seed—old souls—that have already been in the world before. And this is the inner meaning of the verse, 'A generation goes and a generation comes.' The generation which goes comes back—it has already come here before."

(adapted from *Sefer Ha-Bahir*)

RICH MAN, POOR MAN

Rabbi Aharon, who was known as the Karliner Rebbe, died young. Reb Shlomo, who was his closest disciple and destined to become his successor, did not want the position of Rebbe. Why not? Because Reb Shlomo and Rabbi Aharon had once been fellow students who sat together as equals at the house of their teacher, the Great Maggid of Mezeritch. So it did not seem right to Shlomo now, that he should take his elder friend's place as

Rebbe of Karlin. Besides, Reb Shlomo had seen how the people flocked to a Rebbe day and night, so that he had no privacy or peace.

"I don't want such fame and responsibility," Shlomo said. "I just want to lead a private life as an ordinary Jew."

So the Karliner Hasidim were left without a Rebbe. That is, until the night when Rabbi Aharon himself appeared to Reb Shlomo in a dream and said, "Shlomo, my friend and dearest student, if you will take on the yoke of leadership, you will be granted the power of seeing all the wanderings of souls in their various incarnations."

Reb Shlomo could not resist the great temptation of this offer. To be able to read the past lives of all souls! Still in the dream, he gave Rabbi Aharon his word that he would assume the succession and become the next Karliner Rebbe.

As it was promised in the dream, so it became in the waking world. The next morning when Reb Shlomo awoke, he was able to see the destinies of all human beings on earth. He knew their past lives, their present accomplishments, and all the repairs they needed to make for their souls. It was indeed an awesome spiritual gift!

That very same day, a messenger brought Reb Sholom a *kvittel*—a written prayer request—along with a great sum of money as a donation. The sender was a prosperous merchant, whom we shall call Mr. Geltman. He lay dying and wanted the Rebbe to make a miracle and save his life.

No sooner had Reb Shlomo read the kvittel from Mr. Geltman, than a second messenger arrived with another prayer request, this time from the woman who supervised the homeless shelter near the edge of town. She had come on behalf of a pregnant woman, whom we shall call Mrs. Bettler, who was staying at the shelter. Mrs. Bettler had been laboring in childbirth for several days, but was unable to deliver her child. The midwife could do nothing for her. Could the Rebbe help?

With his newly acquired mystical insight, Reb Shlomo immediately saw that the soul of the dying Mr. Geltman was destined to be reborn into the body of Mrs. Bettler's unborn child. Alas, the poor child could not be born until the rich man had died!

"So be it," sighed the new Rebbe. "May the will of God be done." Within moments, word of the rich man's death and the beggar child's birth arrived, one upon the heels of the other.

The next day, Reb Shlomo also heard through the grapevine that there was no firewood left at the homeless shelter, and the young mother and her newborn son were in danger of freezing to death. So Reb Shlomo took some of the donation money that Mr. Geltman had sent and used it to buy more firewood. "It really is the boy's own money after all," he said to himself. "So he deserves to benefit from it." Not long after that, he gave the rest of the money to Mrs. Bettler, to be used for the boy's care.

When the boy and his mother were strong enough to travel, they went on their way with the other beggars, going from town to town. Six years later, the Bettlers happened to be passing through Karlin again. At the homeless shelter they heard that one of the sons of the deceased Mr. Geltman would be celebrating his son's bar mitzvah. As was the custom, the poor were all invited to the feast. So Mrs. Bettler and her son went along with the others.

As soon as they arrived at the Geltman house, the six-year-old boy's whole manner began to change completely. He took on an air of importance, and refused to sit at the pauper's table with the rest of the beggars. In a loud, arrogant voice, he demanded to be seated at the head of the guest table in a place of honor. The child made such a great disturbance that Reb Shlomo stepped in and said, "Let's just humor the boy, so we can continue the celebration in peace."

But the rabbi knew there was more to it, because he had recognized the boy as the reincarnated soul of Mr. Geltman. "He is really the master of the house, and those are his sons," thought Reb Shlomo to himself. "All he is doing is asking for his due."

When the meal was served, the same thing happened. The Bettler boy refused to take the plain foods offered to the poor, and insisted upon getting the best cuts of meat and the choicest morsels from the head table. Once again, Reb Shlomo said, "Let him have his way, so he doesn't disturb the feast."

But the other guests were getting upset with the boy. How dare he, a mere beggar's son, insult the Geltman brothers like that? So they asked his mother, "Does your son always behave like this?"

"Why no," replied Mrs. Bettler, as puzzled as they were. "He's always been such a good boy, very quiet and well-mannered. He's never done anything like this before—I just don't know what's gotten into him!"

At the end of the feast, after Reb Shlomo had already gone home, the Geltman brothers distributed money among the poor, as was the custom. When the Bettler boy's turn came, he looked disdainfully at the small coins and shouted, "How dare you offer me coppers! Bring me gold from the treasure chest!"

By now, the Geltman brothers had had enough of his insolence, and Reb Shlomo was not there to intervene. So the Geltmans told their servants to throw him out of the house. And they did.

When Reb Shlomo later learned how the Geltman brothers had unknowingly mistreated their reincarnated father, he was deeply saddened. He could not bear the thought of spending his life watching such tragic scenes, so he begged heaven to take away his miraculous powers.

(Karliner Hasidic)

THE DIFFICULT DECISION

Rabbi Menachem-Mendel, who was known as the Kotzker Rebbe, once called two of his closest disciples into his private study and posed the following problem:

"I am caught on the horns of a dilemma," the Kotzker Rebbe said. "Here are two prayer requests for my help, and I don't know which one to answer. One concerns a woman who is now in labor, and having difficult time delivering her child. The other is from a man who is deathly ill, and wants me to pray for his healing. The problem is, that the soul of the sick man is destined to go into the body of the baby about to be born. So which one should I pray for?"

One of the disciples was embarrassed at the question and kept silent, thinking to himself, "If the Rebbe doesn't know what to do in such a case, then who am I, a mere student, to be making suggestions to him?"

But Zev-Wolf Strikover, the other disciple, gathered up his courage and said to the Rebbe, "With all due respect, rabbi, I think you should pray for the recovery of the man. There are plenty of new souls up in heaven, waiting to be sent down. So you can also pray for the safety of the mother and child."

The Kotzker Rebbe was very pleased with this answer and said to Reb Wolf, "You have opened the door for me and given me strength!"

Rabbi Zev-Wolf eventually became a Rebbe himself.

(Kotsker Hasidic)

FROM LIFE TO LIFE

There once was a wealthy Polish Jew named Shalom, who was known as "Count Shalom" to the people in his town. Of course, he wasn't really a count, because Jews did not hold titles of royalty in Poland or anywhere else in Europe. But he was called this by his fellow townsmen as a mark of sincere respect, because of his great power and influence in the community.

Now, it happened that Count Shalom became seriously ill, almost to the point of death. His son immediately set out to see Rabbi Yaakov-Yitzchak, the Holy Seer of Lublin, who was known far and wide as a Hasidic Rebbe and miracle worker.

The journey took a few days by horse and carriage. When, at long last, Count Shalom's son stood in the presence of the Seer and relayed his father's request for healing prayers, the holy man shook his head sadly. "Help is no longer possible for him," the rabbi said. "His soul has already passed over from the Sphere of Ruling to the Sphere of Learning." From this, the son understood that his father was about to die and be reincarnated.

When the son reached home, he learned that his father had died within the very same hour that he had been talking with the Seer. Count Shalom's soul had indeed left the Sphere of Ruling, and his body was already lying in the grave.

But at the same time that Count Shalom was dying, his son's wife was giving birth to a child. As the grandfather died, the grandson was born. They named him Shalom after his deceased grandfather, and he grew up to be a Torah scholar. In this way, the soul of Count Shalom had passed into the Sphere of Learning.

(early Hasidic)

THE LONG DISPUTE

Rabbi Yaakov-Yitzchak, the Seer of Lublin, once said to his disciple, Rabbi Heshel of Komarno, "How come you never go to see the Rav of the city? It would be a good idea to go learn with him from time to time."

Reb Heshel was puzzled by these strange words, because the Rav, who was head of the rabbinical court and known as the "Iron Head" for his stubbornness, was a vehement opponent of Hasidism. Why on earth would the Seer think it a good idea to study with him? Nevertheless, Reb Heshel was a loyal Hasid who obeyed his teacher. So he began praying with the minyan at the Iron Head's house every afternoon, after which they would all study Talmud.

One day, a lawsuit between two Jews was brought for the Iron Head to settle. So he formed a rabbinical court with two other

rabbis who had come for the minyan, and heard the case right there. After hearing the testimony, the three rabbis sent the litigants out of the room and began their deliberations. One of the judges took the side of the plaintiff, and the other took the side of the defendant, but the Iron Head was still undecided.

Meanwhile, Reb Heshel was sitting quietly in the corner, seemingly engrossed in his Talmud studies. But, in fact, he was following the argument with close attention. As he was quite learned in Jewish law himself, he soon saw that the plaintiff was right, and the defendant was guilty. But—horror of horrors!—he also saw that the Iron Head was leaning toward the other opinion—that the defendant was innocent and the plaintiff had no case! If he voted that way, it would be a terrible miscarriage of justice.

How could he bring this to the Iron Head's attention in a way that he would listen? The Iron Head was the Rav of the city, and a renowned Talmudist—he would not take kindly to correction from a mere disciple of the Seer of Lublin! How could he present the correction without shaming the Rav in public? Then Reb Heshel remembered a passage in the Talmud that dealt with exactly such a case. He went to the bookshelf, took down the volume, and opened it to the right page. Book in hand, he went up to the Iron Head and humbly said, "Excuse me, rabbi—could you please explain this passage to me?"

"Not right now!" thundered the Iron Head. "Can't you see I'm in the middle of judging a case?"

But Reb Heshel calmly insisted, and was so humble and sincere about it, that the Iron Head finally agreed to look at the passage in question. When he read it, his face grew pale. He closed the book and said, "I don't have time to go into this now. Come back tomorrow and we will discuss it further." With that, Reb Heshel knew he had been dismissed, so he left the rabbi's house and went home.

The next day, when Reb Heshel returned to the Iron Head's minyan, he inquired about the outcome of the lawsuit. He learned

that the Rav had completely reversed his position, and the plaintiff had won. So justice was served after all.

That same evening, the Seer of Lublin told Reb Heshel, "Now you don't have to go to the Rav anymore."

"Why not?" the disciple asked in amazement.

"Because you have completed the mission I sent you to do. You see, those two men, the plaintiff and the defendant, have been reincarnated on earth ninety-nine times. Over and over they brought the same lawsuit, and over and over justice was miscarried, so that the plaintiff did not feel at peace with the decision, and the defendant got off free. And because of this, neither of their souls could be redeemed from the cycle of rebirth. So I had to send you to help set things straight!"

(Lubliner Hasidic)

THE INNKEEPER'S SON

It once happened that the Baal Shem Tov (Besht) was traveling through the countryside with several of his disciples. Suddenly, he ordered his wagon driver, Alexei, to turn down a side road and stop at a certain inn. The disciples were puzzled, because it was early in the day, and there was still time to travel. Why, then, were they stopping their journey here? But they also knew that their master never did anything without a deeper reason, even if his actions sometimes seemed a bit strange. So the Hasidim held their peace, and waited to see what would happen.

When they entered the inn, they saw that the innkeeper and his wife were pious Jews. "I wish to make a feast here tonight," said the Besht. "Can you roast some geese for us?"

"I'm sorry, Rebbe," said the innkeeper, "but I'm all out of slaughtered geese right now."

"In that case," said the Besht, "we will have to purchase some live ones and slaughter them ourselves. I am a *shochet*, a ritual slaughterer, so I can take care of it for you."

When the geese were bought and properly slaughtered, the innkeeper gave them to his wife to prepare them for roasting. But when she opened one of the geese, something inside raised a question about whether or not it would be kosher to eat. So she called the Besht to come and look at it.

While all this was happening, the innkeeper's severely retarded son was sitting in the corner of the kitchen as usual. Throughout his entire life, the boy had never spoken a single intelligible word, and was regarded as the village idiot. Now, suddenly, he got up, walked over to the table, and began carefully examining the goose. From the serious look of concentration on his face, it appeared that he knew exactly what he was doing. He looked up at the Besht and said quite clearly, "The goose is kosher," then dropped dead.

Understandably, the innkeeper and his wife were very upset, and asked the Besht to explain why this had happened to their son. The Besht replied, "In a previous generation there was a very learned rabbi who specialized in questions about kosher meat. He was asked about a case exactly like these geese, and he ruled that they were not kosher. But the rabbi had made a mistake. In fact, the goose was kosher and perfectly permissible to eat.

"Nevertheless, this rabbi's erroneous ruling set a precedent among his followers, and ever since that time, other rabbis have been declaring such geese to be unfit. This, in turn, has caused many poor Jewish families to needlessly go hungry.

"Now," continued the Besht, "when this rabbi's soul came before the Heavenly Court, it was decreed that he had to go back to earth and correct his mistake. But he didn't want to go, because he feared becoming entangled in worldly affairs again. What if he made more mistakes in the law? So it was decreed that he would come into the world as mentally impaired. That way, he could remain free of any scholarly responsibilities, and stay focused on the spiritual world.

"Now, when we came here with a question about the fitness of the geese, he saw the opportunity to correct his mistake. For

that one moment, his full intelligence was allowed to shine through, and he ruled the geese to be kosher. Having completed his task on earth, his soul immediately returned to the spiritual world."

(Lubovitcher Hasidic)

THE BRIDE'S DEBT

It once happened in Safed, that a disciple of the Holy Ari had to go on a long journey. Before departing, he came to his teacher for a letter of recommendation. The Ari wrote it for him, then blessed him and said, "May God be with you, and may you go in peace."

The disciple then asked, "Master, can you tell me anything about what will happen when I get there?"

"You will marry a beautiful woman," the Ari repled. "And she is your destined soulmate for this life. But after you have been happily married for only six months, she will suddenly die. And here is the reason: In another incarnation, this woman was a man, and you were also a man then. He was your dearest friend, but he also caused you some legal trouble for six months. Finally, he brought a lawsuit against you in the civil courts, which caused you to lose 600 gold coins, even though you were innocent of his charges.

"Now," continued the Ari, "this friend from another life is once again reincarnated—as the woman you will marry on your journey. His soul has come to make atonement for his sins against you. For the six months of trouble that he caused in that life, you will have six months of happiness in this life. The inheritance you will receive when she dies is to repay you for the 600 gold pieces you lost in the past life. But even though you now know this, you should be kind and patient to this woman, and grant her forgiveness for the trouble she caused you in the previous life."

And everything happened exactly as the Holy Ari said it would.

(from *Shivchei Ha-Ari*, mid-sixteenth century)

THE WEDDING

They say this happened during the sixteenth century, at a Sephardic wedding near Safed, Israel. The bride and groom had just pronounced the blessing over the bread at the reception meal. Then, as is the custom, each immediately took a bite. No sooner had they swallowed the bread, than—to the horror of everyone present—the newly wedded couple both choked to death.

Understandably, the parents were beyond themselves with grief, and wanted an explanation as to why such a terrible thing had happened to their families. So they traveled to Rabbi Isaac Luria, the great kabbalist who lived in Safed, to pour out their grief.

Rabbi Luria consoled them and then explained, "In their previous incarnations, these two had almost completed their spiritual work here on earth. Only one mitzvah remained for them to do: to eat a meal together in a sacrificial manner. For this reason, their souls came back to earth again.

"And so it happened," continued the Ari, "that when they made the blessing and ate the bread at the wedding reception, they had fulfilled the requirement of sharing a sacred meal. Their souls' task here on earth was then completed, and there was no other work for them to do. So it was an act of divine mercy for God to take them from this life immediately, before they could—heaven forbid!—commit any new sins and spoil the gains of their past lives."

The parents of the bride and groom listened to the master's explanation, and were finally consoled.

(from *Sippurei Ha-Ari*)

5
Animal and Human

When a young man wanted to become a *shochet* (ritual slaughterer), the Belzer Rebbe gave him his examination and awarded him his diploma. Then he took the young man to the window and opened the blinds. Outside, two dogs were barking. "Do you see those dogs?" the Rebbe said to the new *shochet*. "They used to be *shochtim* who abused their trade, and declared unfit meat to be kosher." (Mintz, *Legends*, pp. 300–301)

OVERVIEW

The stories in this section deal with human souls that have returned in animal bodies, but have retained their human awareness. According to Jewish teachings, this is not the normal course of events, because a soul usually reincarnates "after its kind," i.e., within the same species. Cases of human souls returning as animals only occur when the person has committed a sin for which he or she must atone in an animal body. Such animals act more "human" than usual, which is often the clue that they are human souls in exile.

This is in sharp contrast to the better-known doctrine of many Eastern religions, where souls naturally evolve from lower life forms to higher ones and eventually "earn" the right to be humans. More recently, many "new age" philosophies have also adopted this view, obviously influenced by the theory of evolution. Jewish tradition, however, says that there is a fundamental difference between animals and humans, which dates back to the time of Genesis.

The theme of people turning into animals is common in world folklore. However, there are some major differences between fairy tales and the stories told here. In most gentile stories, the transformation from human to animal is brought about through a magic spell or curse by a sorcerer, as in the well-known tale of "The Frog Prince." In Jewish stories, however, a person becomes an animal because of his or her own sins. Being demoted to animal status is not something "done to" the person by a malevolent outside force. Rather, it is a direct result of one's actions in a previous life. After death, the soul is judged by the Heavenly Court and becomes an animal through the transmigration of souls, not human sorcery. To use a familiar term from Eastern mysticism, the animal incarnation happens because of "negative karma."

Another significant difference is that Jewish stories are told as "case histories" and not fantasy. Rebirth as an animal was—and still is—regarded by many Jews as a very real possibility. As this book went to press, an Internet discussion on a Hasidic website was exploring how to tell if an animal has a human soul, while similar "threads" have appeared from time to time in other online newsgroups as well. These stories are not told to entertain, but to serve as warnings about the importance of religious observance.

In the gentile stories, a human-turned-animal is set free by breaking the magic spell. But in the Jewish stories, a soul that is trapped in a nonhuman body must be freed by the performance of a mitzvah, either by the animal itself or on its behalf. The animal body then dies—often quite suddenly—and the soul ascends to heaven. The sudden death of the animal serves as an affirmation that the human soul within it was successfully redeemed.

The species of animal also gives us a clue as to the nature of the sin. For example, butchers who sell trayfe (nonkosher) meat are said to return as dogs (which must then eat such meat). In the case of "The Little Horse," the soul was working off a monetary debt to its owner from a previous life. Coming back as a kosher species is preferable to a nonkosher one, because the animal might then be eaten by a Jew for a mitzvah. But conversely, the misuse

of animals can cause a person to be accused by the animals themselves in the next world. Nissim Mindel, a Lubovitcher Hasid, writes in *My Prayer*:

> To put it very simply: When a Jew has a kosher chicken dinner in the proper manner, he has enabled the chicken to serve G-d through him; and not only the chicken, but also the chicken feed upon which the chicken was reared. But if he uses the energy from his chicken dinner to cheat or steal, the chicken can justly demand, "By what right have you taken my life, and involved me in crime, which I could never have committed otherwise?" [*My Prayer*, p. 280]

Mindel's perspective is typical of Hasidic and kabbalistic thought in general. Far from being mere "health regulations," the kosher laws are intimately intertwined with our relationship to all of creation. The Torah perspective on "animal rights" is that human beings are permitted by the Creator to use animals for food and labor, but we are obligated not to abuse them in the process. The Holy Ari once told a disciple that he had lost his place in the World to Come for failing to feed his chickens on time, and the Lelever Rebbe rebuked a man for whipping his horse, saying: "After your demise, this horse will place your soul on trial before the Heavenly Tribunal. Do you want to have to engage in a lawsuit with a horse?"

In addition to addressing questions of "karma" from past lives, these stories also teach us to treat all living things with respect. The fish on the hook or dog on the street might not be what it seems. Even the bee that comes buzzing into the sukkah is on its own spiritual journey. All of creation contains mystical secrets, and every mitzvah can be an act of redemption.

THE LITTLE HORSE

As is well-known, the Baal Shem Tov (Besht) often traveled from place to place by horse and wagon. On some of these jour-

neys, he stopped at a certain inn at the top of a hill, where he would stable his horses and stay for the night. Although there were servants at the inn to take care of the horses, the Besht preferred to do it himself, in order to be sure that they were well cared for.

On one such occasion, when the Besht went to the stable, he noticed that the innkeeper had a new horse, which began to whinny. It almost seemed as if the horse were actually trying to tell him something. So the Besht went to the horse and began to converse with it, because he understood the languages of all the animals. Exactly what they said to each other, nobody really knows. Only the stable boy was there, and he didn't understand the languages of animals. In fact, he thought that the rabbi was a bit strange, to be whispering into the ear of a horse like that.

After the Besht made sure that his own horses were settled down for the night, he entered the inn, which was owned by a pious Jew who served only kosher food there. The rabbi ordered his meal, and began a friendly conversation with the innkeeper.

"So tell me," said the rabbi, "how's business lately?"

"Praise God, I can't complain," the innkeeper replied. "As you can see, I am doing quite well."

"So I see, so I see," replied the rabbi. "When I was in the stable, I noticed that you bought a new chestnut horse. Would you consider selling him to me?"

"Most honored rabbi," said the innkeeper, "you can have any other horse in my stable except that one. That horse is very dear to me. He has the strength of three horses, and is the only one that can pull the wagon up the hill by himself when it's loaded down with supplies. This has happened several times. Believe me, I really love that horse. He's a priceless treasure."

The rabbi seemed to accept that answer, and went back to discussing business. "Tell me," he asked the innkeeper, "do you have any outstanding bills from customers who haven't paid you?"

"Who doesn't?" sighed the innkeeper. "Every businessman has some of those. I try not to let people run up big tabs on credit,

but sometimes it's difficult to refuse a hungry man who's been on the road all day."

"May I look through the credit slips?" the rabbi asked.

"Of course, if it interests you."

The Besht began to leaf through the pile of unpaid bills, until he came to one particular sheet of paper and stopped. "May I have this one for myself?" he asked.

The innkeeper looked at the bill and burst out laughing. "Sure, rabbi—It's all yours! But don't expect to collect the money. That guy's been dead for three years!"

"Who was he?" the Baal Shem Tov asked.

"Oh, just a wagon driver who used to pass through here now and then. He would get out of his wagon at the bottom of the hill and push it from behind, so his horse could make it to the top. Then, while the horse rested and recovered its strength, the driver came in for a few drinks. He always swore he would pay me one day, but he never did."

"I see," said the Besht. "Nevertheless, I would like you to sign this bill over to me." And so it was done.

As soon as the bill was officially his, the rabbi crumpled it into a ball and threw it in the fire, where it quickly burned to ashes. Then he turned to the astonished innkeeper and said, "Let's go out to the stable and look at your horses."

When they arrived at the stable, the new chestnut horse was dead. The Baal Shem Tov then explained, "The soul of your customer, the wagon driver, was reincarnated in that horse. He had sworn to pay his bill to you, and that oath had followed him into the next world. When he stood before the Heavenly Court, it was decreed that he must return to earth as a horse, which would then be bought by you, so he could work off his debt. He worked very hard to please you, by doing the hardest jobs with all his strength. But when you signed his credit slip over to me and I destroyed it in the fire, the debt was forgiven and his obligation was canceled. Then his soul was freed to go to the next world, where it belongs."

(early Hasidic, from *Shivchei Ha-Besht*)

THE LIFE OF A DOG

In the town of Safed in the mid-sixteenth century, there lived a rich but childless man who prayed with all his heart that he and his wife might someday have a baby. "What good is all our money," he lamented to God, "if our home is empty of children's laughter?"

After many years, the man's prayer was finally answered, and his wife gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. Both parents were elated. So the father went to Rabbi Isaac Luria, the Holy Ari of Safed, to tell him about the miracle.

"We would like you to be the boy's godfather," the man said to the Ari. "And in your honor, we invite all of your disciples to the circumcision feast." The rabbi accepted, and the man returned home to begin preparing a huge banquet for the entire town.

Meanwhile, there was a second rich man in Safed who was not a disciple of Rabbi Luria, and who was extremely jealous of the first man. The two were business rivals, and the second man had gotten it into his head that the first man was stealing all his business. Of course it wasn't really true. It was just that the first man was more cheerful, so people preferred to go to his shop instead. But the second man didn't see it that way. Instead of changing his own behavior to attract more customers, he blamed everything on his competitor, and was soon filled with intense rage and hatred.

When this embittered man heard about the circumcision feast for his rival's newborn son—and the whole town was coming yet!—why, he was so consumed with jealousy, that he could think of nothing else. "I'll get even with him!" he swore. "Just you wait and see! His day of joy will become a day of mourning! I'll poison the pot where the gefilte fish is cooking, and everybody will die!" So he bribed a servant to do exactly that.

The time for the circumcision came, as usual, on the eighth day after the child's birth. Everything was ready and the guests had all arrived—everyone, that is, except for Rabbi Luria. "Don't

worry," the boy's father said, "he will be here shortly. Something must have detained him." But after a whole hour went by, the guests began to grumble. How could the rabbi be so rude?

More hours passed. Soon it was late afternoon, and getting close to sundown. The boy's parents were beside themselves with worry, because the Torah specifically commands that a circumcision must take place on the eighth day after birth. In another hour the sun would set, and the eighth day would be over. What should they do? The father did not want to take back the honor that he had given to the rabbi, but still, it was already so late . . .

Just as the parents were about to tell the mohel to go ahead with the circumcision without the rabbi's presence, he finally arrived. Everybody breathed a sigh of relief, and the circumcision was performed immediately. Then Rabbi Luria said to the family and guests, "My apologies for being so late, but please let me explain what happened." And he told the following story.

That morning, Rabbi Luria had just finished dressing for the circumcision feast, and was about to go out the door, when a big dog came along and started to bark. The rabbi opened the door and asked, "Whose dog are you, and why are you barking at my house?"

"I'm not really a dog," the animal replied. "I'm the soul of a human being, and I want you to set me free from this body."

The rabbi was not at all surprised to be talking to a dog, because he knew the secret language of all the animals. So he said to the dog, "What was your name in your last human lifetime?"

"I am the soul of Gehazi, servant of the prophet Elisha," the dog replied.

"You are Gehazi?" the rabbi exclaimed. "How amazing! So tell me, Gehazi—why were you reborn as a dog?"

"Do you mean to say that you, the greatest seer in Safed, don't know this already?" the dog replied. "Why, it's common knowledge! Everybody knows about the Shunamite woman, whose son

died suddenly while working in the field. In her grief, she went to my master, the prophet Elisha, who decided to restore the child to life with a miracle. So Elisha handed me his staff and said quite firmly: 'Gird up thy loins, and take my staff in thine hand, and go quickly: if thou dost meet any person on the road, greet him not; and if anyone greets thee, do not return the greeting; just place my staff upon the face of the child.' That much is in the Bible itself.

"But what is not in the Bible is this. Although I took the staff from my master Elisha and hurried to do as I was told, I didn't really believe that it could raise anybody from the dead. Who had ever heard of such a thing? Sure, Elisha was a prophet, but I was a skeptic. I was afraid that when I got there, the staff wouldn't work and I would look like a complete fool.

"Just as I was thinking these heretical thoughts, I saw a dead dog lying in the middle of the road. So I decided to test the staff on the dog first. I laid the staff on the dog's body—and presto! The dead dog came back to life again, just like that! It jumped up, shook itself off, and ran down the road, as healthy as could be. That staff really worked!

"But unfortunately, it didn't work so well when I finally got to the Shunamite woman's house. You see, I had wasted the prophet's holy blessing on the dead dog, so now the staff was just an ordinary stick again. It wouldn't do a thing for me or the boy. Like the Bible says, my master Elisha had to come in person to do the miracle.

"As for me, it was decreed in heaven that, since I had misused my master's staff on a dog, I must be reborn as a dog myself, so my punishment would fit my crime. And I've been reincarnating as a dog ever since. Only yesterday I heard that you are a holy man who can free trapped souls like mine. So I have come to you for my *tikkun*—the proper penance for my soul."

Rabbi Luria sighed with deep compassion. "Gehazi," he said, "the only fitting penance I know for you is this: Because you were supposed to carry life to the child with the staff, you must now lay down your own life to save others."

"I am perfectly willing to do that," said Gehazi the dog. "This wretched animal body means nothing to me. I would gladly give it up to be free! But whom shall I save?"

"That doesn't matter," the rabbi replied, "as long as you are ready to sacrifice your life for somebody else. Trust in God, and you will recognize the opportunity when it comes."

"And so," said Rabbi Luria to the guests at the circumcision feast, "that is why I was so late in coming here."

Just as the rabbi was finishing his strange story, the cook's assistant came running into the room. "Oy-veh, oy-veh, woe is me!" she wailed. "What am I going to do? It was so hot in the kitchen, that I left the back door open—and a great big dog just ran in! Before anybody could stop it, the dog jumped into the gefilte fish cauldron, and was scalded to death! Now the whole pot of fish is *trayfe*—ruined—and it's all my fault!"

"There is more to this than meets the eye," said Rabbi Luria. "Let's have a look." When he saw the body of the dog boiling in the cauldron, he exclaimed, "Why, this is the same dog that came to my doorstep this morning! There must be something wrong with the fish!"

Sure enough, when the pot was examined, the deadly poison was discovered. And that's how it happened that a whole town was saved by the life of a dog. As for the soul of Gehazi, some say that he went straight to the Garden of Eden. But others say that he walks among us, reincarnated as a human being once again.

(Sephardic)

THE FISH AND THE DOG #1

It was Rabbi Yudel of Chudnov's way never to accept favors from anyone on account of his being a scholar. He wanted to be

self-supporting and enjoy the fruit of his own labors, so as not become a burden on the community. So he decided to ply his own trade as well as being a rabbi, and went into the iron-ore business.

Once it happened, that Rabbi Yudel had to visit a certain mining operation that was quite a long distance away. Because the round trip would take several days by horse and wagon, he would have to spend the Sabbath there.

"But what will you eat, sir?" asked the owner of the mine. "I would gladly put you up at my house, but I don't have any fish on hand. I know you won't eat the meat here, because you did not examine the knife to see that it was kosher according to Hasidic standards. Perhaps it would be better if you travel to the next town, where there is a very wealthy man I know. He will certainly have fish for you to eat, and there is also a Hasidic slaughterer in that town. I respectfully suggest that you go there instead." Rabbi Yudel agreed, and started on his way.

Not far outside of town, there was a wide pond that sometimes overflowed onto the road. Normally the water was shallow, and it was easy to just drive the wagon through it. But when it rained or the snow melted in spring, the stream that flowed into the pond would swell, making the water on the road much deeper.

Rabbi Yudel was not aware that it was the flood season, so he planned to cross as usual. But when he arrived, he saw that the water completely covered the road. As he was standing there, wondering whether to attempt a crossing or not, a big dog ran down the bank of the pond and sank into the water. The poor dog began to drown, and was howling most pitifully. But although its agonized cries broke the heart of the gentle Hasid and brought flowing tears to his eyes, there was nothing he could do to save the dog. The water was rising too fast.

Rabbi Yudel realized that it would be impossible for him to continue his journey until the flood waters had receded. So he returned to the mine owner's house said, "Please, I cannot get across the water, and must stay here for the Sabbath. Do everything you can to get some fish for me to eat, and I will pay you for it."

His host agreed. He went to the local fishermen and urged them to try to catch something for the rabbi. Sure enough, they soon came back with an enormous pike. It was such a giant fish that the mine owner exclaimed, "I have lived in this village for years, and I've never seen such an enormous fish!" It was so huge, they were able to make several dishes from it.

That Friday night, after the Sabbath meal was over, Rabbi Yudel remained seated at the table, singing Hasidic songs far into the night. Eventually he became drowsy, rested his head on his arms, and fell fast asleep at the table.

Then the soul of his deceased father appeared to him in a dream and said, "My son, you should know that I was reincarnated in that big fish, and the soul of a wicked informer was reincarnated in the dog. His sin was that he had turned Jews over to their oppressors. His redemption was that he saved the life of a Jew—your life—by showing you that the water was too dangerous to cross.

"As for me, I was reincarnated as this fish because I had hated and persecuted the informer for many years during my life. The tears of compassion that you shed for the drowning dog saved me, and freed my soul. Be very, very careful how you eat this fish."

When Rabbi Yudel awoke, he looked at the fish dishes on the table with great respect. For the rest of the Sabbath, he was very careful to speak only words of Torah and praises of God at the Sabbath table.

When the Sabbath ended, Rabbi Yudel thanked his host and went home. Later, he told the story to his Rebbe, the Baal Shem Tov, who then replied, "I always used to say that you were a reincarnation of Samuel the Prophet."

(early Hasidic, from *Shivchei Ha-Besht*)

THE FISH AND THE DOG #2

A disciple of the holy Reb Yekhiel-Mikhel once traveled to his teacher's home in Zolochev to spend the Sabbath there. But as

soon as he arrived, Reb Yehiel told him to turn right around and go home immediately. The student was confused by this advice. Surely the Rebbe was not rejecting him! So why was he sending him home? "There must be some mystical reason," the Hasid said to himself, and started homeward as his Rebbe had advised him to do.

On the way back, a stray dog began to follow him. The little dog was cute and friendly, so the Hasid took him into the wagon, gave him something to eat, and played with him. Soon the dog and the Hasid had become very good friends.

When they came to the bridge across the river, the dog suddenly leaped from the wagon, dove into the water, and drowned. The Hasid was deeply saddened by this, because he had become very fond of the little dog. He stopped the wagon and got out, then stood on the river bank for a long time, deep in thought.

He was still standing there, grieving the loss of his new pet, when some fishermen caught a huge fish and hauled it from the river. Since it was Friday afternoon and the Sabbath was not far away, the Hasid decided to buy the fish for his family. So he struck a deal with the fishermen and bought the entire fish, which he took home for his wife to prepare for the Sabbath.

While the fish was cooking, the Hasid went to the mikveh, in order to immerse and purify himself for the Sabbath. When he returned home to change into his Sabbath clothes, he decided to sample a bit of the fish. No sooner had he tasted it, than his face was transformed and shone with a joyful radiance. That evening, his Sabbath prayers were like that of a holy man. And this wonderful feeling remained with him throughout the entire Sabbath.

On Sunday morning, the Hasid set out for his Rebbe's house once more, to ask him for an explanation of these strange events.

"Your father once committed a sin, for which he was punished by being born into the body of the little dog," Reb Yekhiel-Mikhel explained. "That is why you became attached to it so quickly, and why you were so deeply saddened when it drowned. Because of your love for the dog, your father's soul was able to enter

straight into a fish that was destined for the Sabbath table. This was the very same fish that you bought and ate. Your father's soul then attached itself to you temporarily, and you spoke with the wisdom of two souls instead of one. As soon as the Sabbath was over, your father's soul went up to heaven, and you became the same person you had been before."

(early Hasidic, from *Shivchei Ha-Besht*)

THE TWO RAVENS

It happened one day in Safed, that the Holy Ari was sitting outdoors with his disciples, discussing the mysteries of kabbalah. Suddenly, the Master turned his head and looked up into a nearby tree. There, sitting in the lower branches, were two large ravens. Their feathers were missing or broken, as if they had been harassed and pecked by other birds. The poor ravens couldn't even fly, and were cawing miserably.

The Ari, who understood the language of the birds, called out to them, "You evil ones! In this world you sought to destroy an entire people—and now, in your own distress, you come begging to me alone! Get out of here!"

With that, the ravens hastily fled. Unable to fly away because of their missing feathers, they hopped to the ground and ran into the bushes.

"What was that all about?" the disciples asked.

"Those two ravens are the reincarnated souls of Balaam and Balak," the Ari explained. "Balaam, as you know from the Torah, was a sorcerer hired by King Balak to curse the Jewish people as they came out of Egypt on their way to the Holy Land. In that way, those two evil souls tried to destroy all the Jews.

"As you also know from the Torah, God saved us from their hand by turning the curse into a blessing. But as for the souls of Balaam and Balak, they were sentenced to Gehenna. From Gehenna they were sent to a more terrible hell—to be reincar-

nated as those two ravens. Now they came to me, begging forgiveness for the humiliation they had put upon me in that lifetime, and asking that I would pray for them to be saved from this hell. But I spoke to them in that manner, because their penance is not yet finished."

The Ari did not explain further, but his disciples understood that it was not enough for Balaam and Balak to ask forgiveness from one token Jew, even if that Jew were as great a master as the Holy Ari. As Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said in the Talmud, "For transgressions that are between man and God, Yom Kippur atones. But for transgressions that are between a person and his fellow human beings, Yom Kippur only atones if he has first appeased his fellow human beings." If this is true on Yom Kippur, how much more on an ordinary weekday! Even the great Rabbi Luria could not free those ravens from their plight until they had made amends to all the souls whom they had harmed so long ago. So the rabbi sent them on their way, to finish atoning for their sins.

But why did they come back as ravens, of all things? The Master never said. Perhaps it was because ravens and crows are often harassed from place to place by other birds. Whenever a raven flies by, even if it is only passing through the area, the other birds will band together and drive it out of their territory.

That is exactly how Balaam and Balak had treated the Jews. The people were only passing through Balak's kingdom, with no intent to stay. But the king and the sorcerer tried to attack them with a curse. Now those two wicked souls were experiencing what it was like to be wandering strangers who were met with nothing but curses. Their plight was all the more helpless because they were unable to fly away—just as the Jews had been tired and vulnerable from their long trek across the wilderness.

(based on *Shivchei Ha-Ari* and oral sources)

THE PRAYING SHEEP

One Friday afternoon, the Baal Shem Tov was stranded along the road, and was unable to get to the next town before the Sabbath began. As any Jew knows, it is absolutely forbidden to travel on the Sabbath. So he resigned himself to staying where he was. Luckily it was summer, and he had plenty of food and other provisions, so it would not be too much of a hardship. He could sleep in the wagon, and say his prayers in the open field.

Nearby, a flock of sheep were grazing in the same field. They munched peacefully on the grass, paying no attention to the rabbi as he set up camp and prepared for the Sabbath to begin.

When the time came to sing *Lecha Dodi,* the beautiful hymn that welcomes the Sabbath Bride, the Baal Shem Tov raised his voice in ecstatic joy. Then all the sheep stopped grazing, and stood up on their hind legs just like human beings, listening intently. They remained standing that way for two whole hours, while the holy rabbi chanted the Sabbath prayers.

Some people say that this was miracle enough. But others say that the sheep were really the souls of Jews who had been sentenced to reincarnate there, and heaven decreed that it was time for them to be redeemed. That was why the Baal Shem Tov ended up spending the Sabbath in a field, so his prayers could help elevate those souls.

(early Hasidic, adapted from *Shivchei Ha-Besht*)

THE UNWANTED GUESTS

Five days after the solemn fast of Yom Kippur, when the Jewish people have repented of all their sins, there comes the harvest festival of Sukkot, the Feast of Booths. In preparation for this joyful celebration, each family builds a little hut in the backyard, according to the commandment given in the Torah, "You shall dwell in booths seven days."

While the parents erect the walls and cover the roof of the sukkah with natural plant materials, the children make decorations to brighten up the inside. When the structure is finished, everybody helps bring in the table, chairs, dishes, utensils, and other things needed for the holiday.

Just before sundown on the first and second nights of Sukkot, the matriarch of the house makes the proper blessings and lights the festival candles. In their soft glow, it's easy to imagine how the Jewish people lived in temporary shelters during the forty years when they were wandering with Moses in the wilderness.

Sukkot is one of Reb Gershom's favorite holidays, and he tries to spend as much time in the booth as possible. How pleasant it is on a warm Minnesota afternoon, when the leaves are turning to crimson and gold, the gentle breeze is rustling through the makeshift roof, and the smell of autumn is in the air. What a taste of Eden to learn Torah there, or tell stories with family and friends!

People say that the spirits of the Seven Shepherds—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, and David—will sometimes visit a sukkah, disguised as ordinary people. So, whenever a guest shows up at Reb Gershom's booth, he eagerly offers hospitality. Who knows? It could be an angel, or even the Prophet Elijah.

But sometimes other "guests" arrive, which are not welcome at all. On sunny days the bees come buzzing through the sukkah roof, attracted by the honey and other sweets on the table. Most people find these insects very annoying, to the point that the Code of Jewish law allows a person to leave the sukkah and eat in the house if the bugs become bothersome. But in the Great North Woods, where Reb Gershom lives, this could mean never eating in the sukkah at all, the bees are so numerous! So all kinds of tricks are used, to help keep bugs out of the food. At such times, a beer stein with a lid is very useful! So is a handy fly swatter.

Reb Gershom, however, refuses to harm the bees. In fact, he treats them with utmost respect. If his guests complain about the

buzzing insects, he always says, "They won't sting if you leave them alone. Bees only sting if you swat at them—and then only in self-defense. They are after food and honey, not humans. If we don't bother them, they won't bother us."

To help lure the bees away from the sukkah, Reb Gershom's wife, Rachel, carefully places little saucers of honey outside, where the bees can eat in peace. Sometimes she even talks to the insects, explaining that it would be better if they did not enter the booth. But the bees don't always listen, and they come in anyway.

Now, it once happened that a stranger from a faraway city arrived during Sukkot, and Reb Gershom invited him to have lunch in the sukkah. And, as usual, the bees came buzzing in. This particular stranger was deathly afraid of bees, and wanted to leave the sukkah. But Reb Gershom persuaded him to stay, while his wife set out the saucers of honey. "Just this once," Rachel begged the bees, "could you *please* remain outside?"

Whether it was the saucers of honey or Rachel's earnest pleading, most of the insects obeyed. But the guest remained unconvinced. "Okay, I'll trust you when you say they won't sting," the man said nervously, "but I don't understand, why are you so fond of bees in the first place."

"Because of the teaching of Rabbi Rafael, the Bershader Rebbe," Rachel replied. "Rabbi Rafael taught that the souls of egotistical people sometimes have to come back as bees."

"As bees?!!" the guest exclaimed. "Why *bees*, of all things?"

Reb Gershom stroked his beard and sighed. "Because such people are always buzzing around, constantly bragging about themselves. They are always saying 'I am a rabbi, I am a scholar, I am a very important person . . . ' In the Yiddish language, 'I am' is *'ich bin.'* But it sounds like they are saying "*Ich biene*—I am a bee.' So, because they are always proclaiming themselves to be bees, they must actually reincarnate as bees to atone for the sin of pride."

The guest relaxed and sat back, musing in silence. Then he said softly, "Maybe that's not the only reason they return as bees. There could be a deeper meaning to all this."

"And what might that be?" Rachel inquired.

"Well," the guest replied, "if the sin was pride, then they were also guilty of trying to raise themselves above the rest of the Jewish people. For humans, that is possible to do—and it happens all too often! But in a beehive, every individual is pretty much the same, and they all work together for the good of the colony. So maybe those people come back as bees in order to learn cooperation!"

"In that case," said Reb Gershom, "It's a very good thing they come to my sukkah. Here, they are reminded who they really are. So, hopefully, in the next life, they will be reborn again as good Jews!"

(twentieth century, USA)

THE VENGEFUL RAT

Shlomo and Grigori were sitting in a Jerusalem cafe, enjoying a drink together, when suddenly they heard a loud explosion.

"Oy vey!" said Shlomo. "Another terrorist bomb! Why do they do this to us?"

"I'm afraid it's all my fault," said Grigori.

"All *your* fault??" replied Shlomo. "Why should it be your fault? You think just because you are a Jew you have to claim all the troubles of the world?"

"Not because I'm a Jew," said Grigori. "Because of something I did back in Moscow."

"You were a spy maybe? In the KGB?"

"No, no," replied Grigori. "All I did was kill a rat."

"You? An assassin? I don't believe it."

"Not an assassin, dummy. An exterminator. You see, back when I was a chemistry student, I went to see my friend Ivan in his apartment in downtown Kiev. So he tells me that there's a big ugly rat living in the walls, and he wants to get rid of it, only he doesn't have any money for poison. So right there on the spot, I

mix up some household chemicals to make a little bomb. Then we smashed up an empty vodka bottle, put the crushed glass in the rat hole with the bomb, and waited.

"Well, the stuff I made takes a while to work, so we got out a bottle of good strong wine and drank a few *l'chaims* together. Soon we were drunk as skunks, laughing and singing and having a great time, when suddenly—bang! The bomb explodes, and the big rat is dead in the hole."

"An interesting story," said Shlomo, "but what does it have to do with Arab terrorists?"

"Well," said Grigori. "Maybe I shouldn't have blown up that rat after all. You see, those rats are really smart animals. While we were waiting for the bomb to go off, that big rat was sniffing around the concoction I made, and he memorized the formula. When he got to the Other World, he told all his relatives. And then two things happened: first, the rats all realized that death was not such a big deal. And second, they decided to seek revenge. So they all came back as suicide bombers!"

(twentieth century, Internet)

6
Who Was Who

"The spirit of Moses pervades all generations and all souls." Reb Pinchas of Koretz (Langer, p. 216)

"Some souls, when they wish to become incarnate even for a short time in the [mind] of a person, will begin by reducing him [or her] to tears. All the souls and all the worlds will help to make tears form in that person's eyes, for tears purify the [mind]." Reb Pinchas of Koretz (Langer, p. 215)

OVERVIEW

Perhaps no aspect of reincarnation fascinates us so much as the question: Who was I in my previous life? In one sense, we could say that all reincarnation stories deal with this question. But the tales I have chosen to include in this chapter belong to a specific genre of individuals who claimed—or were perceived by others—to be reincarnations of biblical characters or famous personages.

Admittedly, this type of case is problematical for both the storyteller and the past-life therapist. The biblical characters are so well-known in Western society, that it can be difficult to determine whether a person is literally a case of reincarnation or simply delusional. After all, the very epitome of insanity in popular culture is the man who thinks he's Napoleon! A modern psychologist would probably say that the people in this chapter were subconsciously identifying with universal archetypes.

This is further complicated by the fact that Jews frequently use biblical characters in symbolic ways that speak of "return-

ing," but are not necessarily about reincarnation per se. Consider, for example, the following statement by W. Gunter Plaut, a Reform scholar who, as far as I know, does not believe in reincarnation:

> The ancient Amalek has appeared and reappeared in Jewish history in many forms and guises; he wore the signet ring of the king as Haman; the royal crown as Antiochus; the general's uniform as Titus; the emperor's toga as Hadrian; the priestly robe as Torquemada; the Cossack's boots as Chmielnitzski; or the brown shirt as Hitler. All of them have in common their hatred of Jews and Judaism, and they all failed in their objective to crush the faith and the people of God. [Plaut, *The Torah*, p. 514]

Given the context from which this quote was taken—a Reform commentary on the Torah—it is clear that Plaut is not speaking of "reappearing" in the sense of reincarnation. He is using the biblical Amalek character as a metaphor for anti-Semitism, which has come "clothed" in the garb of many cultures throughout Jewish history. If Plaut were to say that "Hitler was Amalek," he would probably mean it symbolically. On the other hand, when a Hasidic rabbi, who functions within a more mystical worldview, claims that "Hitler was Amalek," it is more likely that he is speaking of the literal reincarnation of Amalek's soul. Thus we can see that Adolf Hitler is *both* a historical personage who might have reincarnated, and an archetypal or literary symbol. The same could be said for other famous people in history, whose biographies have become an integral part of our culture.

We must also take into account the kabbalistic concept of a "great soul," who is connected to many other souls as a guide or "oversoul." The soul of Adam, for example, is said to contain all the souls of humanity, and the soul of Moses is connected to all Jews for all time. In addition, there are lesser "great souls" and many subgroups, whose leaders and members have an affinity for each other. It is possible for more than one of the souls in these subgroups to descend to earth at the same time. When they do, they may feel a familiarity with the "great soul" who connects them.

For example, there are two stories in this chapter concerning the reincarnation of the biblical king, Manasseh. In both incidents, a Jew destroys a Christian religious statue to atone for the sin of idolatry that he committed in another life, when he was King Manasseh (who set up an idol in the Jerusalem Temple). Although the tales are similar in theme, the details are different enough to suggest that they do not necessarily describe the same incident. Which one is the *real* Manasseh?

Several possibilities emerge: they could be identifying with a biblical archetype; one could really be Manasseh and the other not; each could have a "spark" of Manasseh's soul; each could have experienced an *ibbur* (temporary possession) by the soul of Manasseh.

In his recent book, *Returning from the Light*, American author Brad Steiger, who has written extensively on paranormal phenomena, made the following suggestion concerning five people (including himself) who had believed they were reincarnations of Mark Twain:

> Perhaps, I suggested, there were a number of us who had somehow been born in the [vibrational] *frequency* of Mark Twain and were therefore destined to become writers. In like manner, potential physicists might now be born in the Einstein vibration, dancers in the Isadora Duncan or Fred Astaire vibration, a mystic on the Joan of Arc frequency, and so on. [Steiger, p. 61]

If we were to express this in Jewish terms, we might say that all five people described by Steiger had "a spark of the soul of Mark Twain." Because of that "spark," they were drawn to his writings and biography, to the point that they actually believed themselves to be Mark Twain returned.

The same could be said for the numerous people who are currently claiming to be the reincarnation of Anne Frank. As this book goes to press, there is a great deal of publicity in Europe surrounding the case of one Barbro Karlén, a Swedish woman who

claims to be Anne Frank returned. Her case sounds convincing, and I do not deny the possibility that she might be Anne Frank. At the same time, I must also point out that five other people have contacted me over the years with the same claim. Again, the story of Anne Frank is so well-known, that it has become archetypal.

The lines between reincarnation and archetypal identification are not always clear, even for parapsychologists. In choosing stories to include in this chapter, I looked for instances where the reincarnation theme was clearly spelled out by the text or oral tradition itself. In my opinion, it is not necessary to decide whether or not these people were literally historical figures reborn. The fact that they believed themselves to be such, and that this perception was accepted as valid by those around them, serves to illustrate that such a claim was not considered "crazy" within Jewish mystical circles. Such claims were made for the highest leaders of the community, and served to enhance their credibility as spiritual masters.

Nor is this acceptance limited to past centuries. In 1997, when I attended the Rosh Hashanah gathering at the gravesite of Rabbi Nachman in Uman, Ukraine, I was surprised to see quite a large number of Satmar Hasidim there also. When I asked about this, an elderly Satmarer explained that they hold Rabbi Nachman in very high esteem, because the previous Satmar Rebbe, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum ("Der Yoilish," d. 1979), was "a spark of Rebbe Nachman." And so the oral tradition concerning "who was who" continues to the present day.

IDOL AT THE CROSSROADS

In southern Germany, there once lived a Jew named Reb Moshe Stein. He was called this because he owned a tavern called the Foaming Stein, which stood at a crossroads along the trail at the foot of the mountain. In those days, being a tavern keeper was one of the very few occupations open to European Jews, which

is why so many of these stories take place in taverns. Of course the food was kosher—what self-respecting Jew would serve *trayfe* in his inn? And so it happened, that the Foaming Stein became a place where Jews and gentiles alike would gather to have a few drinks and hear the latest news from travelers passing through.

Now, Reb Moshe was a very pious man, who was known far and wide for his humility and deep wisdom. He observed all the commandments meticulously, but was most fond of observing Melavah Malkah, the festive gathering that took place every Saturday night, to bid farewell to the Queen Sabbath before beginning another long week of work. King David of old was the first to celebrate this feast, because it had been foretold that he would die on a Sabbath. Each week, when the Sabbath ended and King David found himself still alive, he would hold a celebration in honor of the Sabbath and in gratitude that he would live another week.

One Saturday night, Reb Moshe found himself without any firewood to heat the inn for Melavah Malkah. Nobody had arrived at the tavern yet, because the Sabbath ended very early in the wintertime, and most of the families were still eating the Third Sabbath Meal, even though the sun was already down. Nevertheless, Reb Moshe was quite worried. Where was he going to get firewood on such short notice?

Just then, he glanced out the window and saw the large wooden crucifix that was erected by the local Catholics as a shrine at the crossroads. Normally, Reb Moshe never looked at the statue, because he considered it to be an idol. But this time his eyes lingered on the thick wooden cross. With a smile on his face, he sharpened his axe and went to chop down the crucifix. Then he split the cross and the statue into firewood, and lit the stove for Melavah Malkah. The rest of the wood he put into the shed behind the tavern.

The next day, which was a Sunday, his gentile customers arrived after church, to eat and drink as usual. Suddenly, one of the peasants happened to look out the window, and noticed that the cross and statue were missing.

"Where is the big crucifix that used to be at the crossroads?" he asked Moshe.

"How should I know?" Moshe replied, going about his business of filling the glasses.

"Something is very suspicious here!" the peasant shouted, waving his fist in Moshe's face. "We must find the vile person who would dare to remove our holy shrine!"

With that, the Catholic customers began to search the tavern and Reb Moshe's house. Eventually they found the pieces of the statue that were still piled in the woodshed.

"This cursed Jew has dared to destroy a sacred image of our god!" they bellowed. "He must pay for this blasphemy!" Then they beat up Reb Moshe and his family, ransacked the house, and dragged the poor innkeeper to the local bishop, to decide what was to do with him next.

Reb Moshe was put on trial before the bishop, who served as Inquisitor in such cases. Throughout his trial, the innkeeper just sat in silence, making no attempt to refute the charges of sacrilege that were brought against him by the Church. He was, after all, guilty of destroying the crucifix, so there was no point in denying it. Besides, he was a Jew, so what justice could he get from this mockery of a court? He certainly did not expect the bishop to understand about Melavah Malkah. So Reb Moshe said nothing.

When the time came for sentencing, the bishop said in a stern voice, "You filthy Jew! What you have done is so blasphemous, so utterly contemptible, that you are deserving of death. But I will give you a chance to save your miserable hide: you can convert to Catholicism and thereby repent of this deed. Otherwise, your body will be drawn and quartered—torn apart by four horses like a cross. Measure for measure, because you destroyed our holy cross."

Moshe Stein said nothing. He had decided that it was better to die a horrible death than to become an idolator. There was a look of peace and serenity on his face as he was led to the town

square for execution. Four ropes were tied to four horses, then to each of his arms and legs. Still Reb Moshe said nothing. He appeared oblivious to his surroundings, and made no sound as the horses were whipped into a frenzy and his body was torn apart.

The news of Reb Moshe's brutal execution shocked the Jewish community, and it puzzled them as well. Why had he risked his life for such a minor custom as Melavah Malkah, which was not even a commandment of the Torah? And how can such a terrible thing have happened to such a righteous man in the first place? To be executed merely for vandalizing a lifeless statue! Was there no justice in the world?

The rabbi of a nearby town, who knew and respected Reb Moshe, decided to make a dream request in the manner of the kabbalists, to see if he could receive any answer to this mystery. He fasted all day in preparation, then wrote his questions on a small piece of paper, which he put under his pillow. Before going to sleep, he concentrated all of his thoughts on Reb Moshe, and prayed to God for an explanation of these puzzling events.

That night, Reb Moshe appeared to the rabbi in a dream. "Do not be upset about my death," he said. "It was indeed divine justice. In another life, I was King Manasseh, son of Hezekiah, who set up a pagan idol in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. For fifty-five years I reigned as king, and committed every kind of idolatry. My actions, in turn, misled the Jewish people to sin. That is why, in this life, I was so meticulous about celebrating Melavah Malkah. In my past life I had dishonored the Throne of David, so, in this life, I honored the feast that King David had established for all time. This became my special mitzvah, which I guarded with my very life."

"But what about the crucifix?" the rabbi asked, still in the dream. "Why did you risk your life for that? Surely you could have chopped down a tree instead!"

"Because I erected an idol in my past life," Reb Moshe replied. "So it was decreed on high that I must destroy an idol in this life. When the pieces of the crucifix were burned in the woodstove,

my soul completed its penance and was freed to go to the higher worlds. Therefore, when my gravestone is erected, please carve upon it these words: Here lies Moshe, alias Manasseh." And so it was done.

(Central Europe)

DESTROYER OF IDOLS

Reb Simchah-Bunem once told the following story about Reb Shmelke of Nikolsburg, Austria, who was both a Hasidic Rebbe and the official chief rabbi of the city.

In his capacity as chief rabbi, Reb Shmelke had to contend with local opponents of Hasidism, who did not feel he was a suitable representative of their community. Once it happened that the leading citizens of Nikolsburg formed a committee to look into the matter, and decided to fire him. Fearing a confrontation with the rabbi himself, they called the caretaker of the synagogue and told him to tell Reb Shmelke of their decision to dismiss him.

The caretaker, who was a simple, honest man, asked why they had suddenly turned against the rabbi who had served them so faithfully. "It's none of your business," the chairman of the committee replied curtly. "Just do as you are told and deliver the message."

The caretaker, however, was not satisfied with this answer. "If I am to be the messenger for bad news," he said, "then I at least deserve to know the reason for delivering it."

"Well, if you insist," the chairman said. "It's because of Reb Shmelke's odd Hasidic behavior. He makes up his own tunes to the liturgy, gesticulates wildly when he prays, and he doesn't maintain the proper decorum. In short, he is not fit to be rabbi in this town."

"How can you say such a thing?" the caretaker indignantly demanded. "I know for a fact that Reb Shmelke is not only fit to be our rabbi, he is a perfect Zaddik—a very holy man."

Now, the committee members knew the caretaker to be a pious and upright Jew, even if he was a bit simple. And, after all, he did see the rabbi on a daily basis, so maybe he knew something that they did not. The committee members became curious as to why the caretaker was so impressed with Reb Shmelke. "How do you know he's such a holy man?" they asked.

"Well," said the caretaker in his simple way, "you know that it is part of my duties to go around each morning and knock on the doors of all the Jews in our village, in order to wake them up for morning prayers. This I have done faithfully for many years. But whenever I would come to the rabbi's house, I always found that he was awake and studying Torah with a man I did not recognize. Each day it was the same, until finally my curiosity got the best of me, and I asked the rabbi who the stranger was. He told me it was Elijah the Prophet, who comes each morning to teach him the secrets of Torah.

"One morning I came around as usual, only this time there were two men studying with the rabbi—the one he said was Elijah, and a stranger who was wearing a golden crown. The rabbi escorted the two guests to the door, and they left together. Then the rabbi went back inside the house.

"Later I asked him who the man with the crown was, and he told me that it was Manasseh ben Hezekiah, a biblical king of Israel. Now I was *really* curious—what had brought an ancient king back from the dead to visit our rabbi's house? So I asked Reb Shmelke, and he explained that the spirit of King Manasseh had come because of his concern over a question of Jewish law that had been referred to Reb Shmelke by another rabbi on the day before.

"What was the question? A certain Hasid had gotten it into his head to go into the local church and smash all the statues there. He was arrested for this vandalism and sentenced to be hung for blasphemy against the Church. The sentence was carried out, and the poor Hasid was executed. Now his widow was left destitute, and had applied to the Jewish welfare brotherhood for financial assistance.

"The brotherhood, however, had a rule in their organization that they do not give money to the families of suicides. And surely her husband had committed a suicidal act, to go into a church and do what he had done. So, the welfare brotherhood concluded, it was not their responsibility to help the Hasid's widow.

"The dispute came before the court of the local rabbi, who did not know how to rule on it. So he decided to refer the question to Reb Shmelke in Nikolsburg for a second opinion.

"Now Reb Shmelke, too, was divided in his mind about the strange case. On the one hand, such a rash act could indeed be called suicidal. But on the other hand, it might simply be that the man was crazy and did not understand the consequences of what he was doing, in which case, he was innocent of suicide. In any case, it did not seem right to leave the poor widow destitute because of her husband's act of vandalism. But at the same time, if it was suicidal, then maybe the brotherhood was within its rights not to support her. . . .

"In the midst of these deliberations," the caretaker concluded, "Elijah the Prophet arrived as usual, only this time he was accompanied by the soul of Manasseh, who told him that he had been reincarnated in that very Hasid, in order to atone for the sin of setting up a forbidden image in the Holy Temple when he had been king. By smashing the statues in the church, he had set right the wrong that he committed. It was for this very act that he had come back to earth in the first place, in order to repair this defect in his own soul. So he appeared to Reb Shmelke in order to be sure that the poor widow not be left destitute."

Upon hearing this story, the committee decided not to fire their rabbi after all.

(early Hasidic)

THE SOUL OF SAMUEL

When Rabbi Shmelke of Nicholsburg, Austria, sensed that his death was near, he summoned his disciples. They entered the room

and found him sitting quite erect in his big chair, as usual. His face was radiant with holy light, and his eyes were as clear and brilliant as always. With calmness and complete clarity he said to his followers, "I am going to die today."

The disciples began to weep in sorrow, but Reb Shmelke told them to stop. Then he said, "You should also know that the soul of the prophet Samuel is incarnated in me. For this there are three signs: my Hebrew name is Samuel, I am a Levite like he was, and my life has lasted for fifty-two years, the same as his. He was a great prophet, and always always called by his full name, Samuel. But when I entered this life, I was a just little boy, so they called me by the nickname Shmelke—'dear little Samuel.' And I remained Reb Shmelke all my life."

Soon after this, he asked his disciples to leave him, then leaned back and died.

(Austrian Hasidic, eighteenth century)

THE SOUL OF RUTH

In the year 1570, a Jewish boy was born in Eastern Europe, who was said to have the soul of the biblical Ruth. The boy's parents named him Isaiah ben Avraham. And, because the family lived near Horovice in Poland, they were known by the surname of Horowitz.

Oy, how many Horowitzes there are in the world today! And so many different ways to spell it: Horowitz, Horovitz, Hurwitz, Horwitz, Hurvitz. But not every Horowitz or Hurvitz is really a descendant of this famous family. Only those Jews who are Levites and who also, when signing their names in Hebrew, put the word "ish" (man of) before the surname can claim this illustrious ancestry. So the child who had the soul of Ruth became known as Isaiah ben Avraham-Levi ish Horowitz—Isaiah Horowitz for short.

Isaiah was a good scholar and grew up to become a respected rabbi in Prague. During the Thirty Years' War, Rabbi Horowitz

moved to the Land of Israel, where he wrote a kabbalistic book called *Shenai Lukhot Ha-Brit,* which means "Two Tablets of the Covenant," about hidden meanings in the Torah. In those days, it was very common to refer to an author by the name of his book, so Rabbi Horowitz became known as the "Holy Shelo," from the first letters of the book title: SH-LO. He died in Tiberias around 1630, and his works are still studied today.

How do we know that the "Holy Shelo" had the soul of Ruth? Well, for one thing, their personalities were similar—equally loyal, equally forthright, and equally hard-working. But of course, that doesn't really prove anything about reincarnation, because those same attributes could apply to many different people. The real proof comes from *gematria,* the kabbalistic art of finding hidden meanings in the Hebrew letters of sacred texts. As it turns out, Rabbi Horowitz's Hebrew name—"Isaiah ben Avraham Levi"—is forever encoded in the Book of Ruth itself!

The Hebrew text of Ruth has an interesting peculiarity: all but eight verses begin with the letter vav, which is the equivalent of English "V" or "U." Of these eight exceptions, the first letters of five of them spell out the name "Isaiah." The remaining three letters are *Bet, Aleph,* and *Lamed*—B.A.L.—which stands for "Ben Avraham Levi"! So, according to this *gematria,* it was destined for the soul of Ruth to reincarnate as Isaiah ben Avraham Levi ish Horowitz. And this same Rabbi Horowitz was a direct ancestor of Reb Yaakov-Yitzchak ish Horowitz, the eighteenth-century Hasidic master who was known as the "Seer of Lublin."

A HUNDRED DEATHS

Rabbi Isaac-Eizik of Komarno related, in the name of the Baal Shem Tov, the following story about the reincarnation of the person who first struck the prophet Zachariah:

In a town in Germany, during the first half of the 1700s, there lived a saintly rabbi—a genuine Zaddik—who foretold that he would be cruelly murdered.

"What makes you so sure of this?" the people asked.

"Because," the man replied, "I have already been born into the world ninety-nine times, and each time I was murdered. This is my hundredth time on this earth, and with this death, my soul's repentance will be completed."

His listeners were amazed, for they could not have imagined that a Zaddik would have such a stain on his soul that he was deserving of a hundred deaths! "What was your sin?" they asked. "Why must you continue to be murdered over and over again?"

"In another life, I caused the death of a holy prophet," the Zaddik replied. "Back in the days of the Temple, I was head of the Sanhedrin, the highest court in the land of Israel. I was a very learned scholar in that life—with a sharp mind, wise insight, and an encyclopedic knowledge of Torah and Talmud. But I was also puffed up with pride in my accomplishments, and set myself up as inquisitor against anyone who claimed to prophesy with the inspiration of God. And so it happened, that when the prophet Zachariah came to deliver the word of God, I struck him on the cheek and said condescendingly, 'Who are you to claim to be a prophet, you ignoramus!' This aroused the mob against him, and they attacked and killed him. So you see, it was really my fault that the prophet Zachariah was murdered."

The rabbi then instructed his listeners to write on his tombstone: "Here lies the one who killed the prophet Zachariah." And everything happened as he had foretold.

(Hasidic, eighteenth century)

THE SOUL OF NAPOLEON

One Saturday night, after the Sabbath had ended, Reb Nosson and Reb Naftali went to visit their holy master, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov. But, to their total consternation, the Rebbe waved the two disciples away, indicating that they should both leave at once.

Reb Nosson and Reb Naftali were very surprised by their master's strange behavior. It was their custom to converse together every Saturday night, when Reb Nosson would write down any new teachings that the Rebbe had revealed on Shabbat. Why, then, was their master sending them away now?

It was very puzzling, to be sure, but everything happens for a reason. So the two Hasidim went instead to the home of Rabbi Aharon, who was the official Rav of Breslov. There they conversed for several hours, catching up on the latest news. The date was October 14, 1809—the very day when the Treaty of Schoenbrun was signed, giving Napoleon control over Austria and Poland.

Naturally, this was a topic of serious concern among the Jews of Poland. Some Jews supported Napoleon because he had promised to grant them full equality and citizenship. But others were not so sure about that, because Napoleon also wanted the Jews to forget the Torah and assimilate into French culture. We can well imagine how heated the debates were that night!

Suddenly, right in the middle of this political discussion, a message came for Reb Nosson and Reb Naftali, instructing them to return immediately to their Rebbe's house. When they arrived, Rabbi Nachman asked, "So, Reb Nosson—what is the latest news?"

Reb Nosson told him about Napoleon's treaty, then remarked how strange it was, that a man who was born a mere peasant could have risen to become such a brilliant general—an emperor even!

Rabbi Nachman replied, "Who knows what kind of soul Napoleon *really* has—that of a peasant, or that of a king? Maybe he was exchanged. You see, there is a place in the Other World called the 'Hall of Exchanges,' where souls sometimes switch roles. Once, long ago, there were two babies—a prince and a peasant—who were switched at birth. So the prince grew up thinking he was a peasant and the peasant grew up as a prince . . . "

What followed was a wonderful tale that is known today as "The Exchanged Children," an allegory about how the body is ruling over the soul, when it should be the other way around.

Reb Nosson once said that this story contained the whole Torah, so profound were its many layers of meaning.

(Breslov Hasidic)

AMALEK–HAMAN–HITLER

As is well-known, the biblical Jacob and Esau were twin brothers and bitter rivals, to the point that Esau wanted to murder Jacob. For this reason, Jacob fled the country, to stay with his uncle Laban in Haran.

Now, as soon as Jacob had left, Esau secretly called his thirteen-year-old son, Eliphaz, and instructed him to follow Jacob and kill him in the wilderness. Eliphaz left with ten armed men and caught up with Jacob, who then pleaded for his life. Had Eliphaz murdered him there, he would have destroyed the entire Jewish people, because Jacob was destined to sire the Twelve Tribes of Israel. As it turned out, Eliphaz spared Jacob's life, but robbed him of all that he had—which is why he arrived penniless in Haran.

Years later, when Jacob returned home, Esau came to meet him with 400 armed men, and it was only through the intervention of God that a battle was averted. Although the two brothers finally made peace with each other, it was an uneasy peace, with each going his own way. In the succeeding generations, the relationship between the descendants of Jacob and the descendants of Esau once again broke down into open hostilities.

Esau's son, Eliphaz, had a son named Amalek, who swore that he and his descendants would try to wipe out the descendants of Jacob for all future generations. Why did he make this hateful vow? Partially because of old family rivalries, but his mother Timna also fanned the flames. She had wanted to marry into the line of Abraham and, when Jacob refused her as a possible match for one of his sons, she married into Esau's family instead. But she never forgot how she had been snubbed. Before she died,

Timna made her son Amalek promise to seek revenge. So the rivalry between Jacob and Esau continued from generation to generation.

As is taught in the kabbalah, the word "generations" can also mean "incarnations." So the "generations" of Amalek are also the "incarnations" of Amalek, who continues to come back, along with his Amalekite henchmen. Some souls reincarnate in their own family lines, while others return together as groups, moving from nation to nation. Amalek has done both. He has worn many guises down through the centuries, but one characteristic always remains the same: his intense hatred of the Jews.

When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt to freedom, the Amalekites attacked them in the wilderness—without provocation. They did not fight honorably with Joshua's troops at the front of the Exodus, but hid in the bushes and attacked from the rear. Now, who is at the rear of a mass migration like that? The women, the children, the sick, and the elderly—in short, all those who are straggling behind. For this reason, "Amalek" became the archetype for oppressors who prey upon the weak and the helpless.

Once the open battle began, Moses stood on a nearby hill, raising his hands toward the heavens, as a signal for the Israelite people to trust in God. As long as he held his hands up like that, the Israelite soldiers were winning. But when Moses grew tired and lowered his hands, then the Amalekites began to win. So Moses' brother Aaron and a man named Hur each took one of his arms and helped him to hold them up, and the Amalekites were defeated.

The battle with Amalek has continued in this manner from generation to generation, and from incarnation to incarnation, right down to the present time. When the Jewish people trust in God and raise their hands in prayer, then Amalek is weakened and the Jews flourish. But when the Jews lose their faith and forget about God, then Amalek is strengthened and persecution enters the world.

In the time of the prophet Samuel, King Agag of the Amalekites attacked King Saul of the Jews, again intending to destroy them. Agag was defeated, but his family line continued, eventually producing Haman the Agagite, who plotted against the Jews in the time of Queen Esther. In the end, Haman's wicked plot was unmasked, and he was hanged with his ten sons on the very same gallows that he himself had built to hang the saintly Mordechai. Some say that Haman was a reincarnation of Amalek, and his ten sons were the same ten souls who went with Eliphaz to pursue Jacob.

After the Book of Esther, we hear no more of the Amalekites, and they seem to vanish from history. Or do they?

Right in our own century, they say, an incarnation of Amalek appeared in the form of Adolf Hitler, may his name be erased. His Nazi henchmen, too, were reincarnated souls of Amalekites from past centuries. Certainly Hitler's hatred of the Jews knew no bounds, and his goal was to utterly destroy them from the face of the earth. Thank heavens he did not succeed, and he, too, was defeated.

Now I ask you: Was it only coincidence that ten Nazi leaders were hanged after the Nuremberg Trials—the very same number as the sons of Amalek-Haman?

(Bible, Midrash, and modern oral tradition)

THE HIGH PRIEST'S PRAYER

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the most sacred time on the Jewish calendar. In former days, when the Holy Temple still stood in Jerusalem, the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies—the innermost sacred sanctuary where the Ark of the Covenant stood—and perform certain rituals that purified the Jew-

ish people from their sins. Through this ceremony on that most holy day, sacred space, sacred time, and sacred people would merge into one seamless reality, and atonement was made for all.

There was great personal risk for the High Priest himself when he did this ceremony on behalf of the people. If his heart was not completely pure, or his thoughts were not totally focused on the task at hand, then he might—heaven forbid!—drop dead on the spot. For this reason, a rope was tied to his ankle before he went in, so that if he died in there, his assistants could pull out the body.

Praise be to God, this never happened, and the High Priest always came out safely. But how his heart must have trembled as he faced his own mortality!

Alas, many centuries have passed since the Temple was destroyed, and this service can no longer be performed in the physical world. But all is not lost. When a Jew reads the section of the liturgy that describes the High Priest's service in the Temple, it is as if the sacrifices are still being offered. As the prophet Hosea taught: "Instead of bullocks, we will offer the prayers of our lips."

In the early nineteenth century, there lived a rabbi named Avraham-Yehoshua, who was a disciple of Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk. Reb Avraham-Yehoshua was known as the Apter Rebbe, after the town of Apt, where he served as a Hasidic leader and rabbinical judge.

The Apter Rebbe was a person for whom time had no meaning. During his childhood, he often heard the future in the rustling of the leaves and grasses, or in the footsteps of people walking in the streets. Even when he fled the world and retreated to the seclusion of his room, he could still feel the future vibrating in his very bones. This knowledge was so overwhelming that it filled him with dread. He prayed for the gift of precognition to be taken away, so he could be a normal boy. And God granted his prayer.

Still, when it came to Torah study, the Apter Rebbe seemed to be living in several centuries at once. For him, the saying that "in Torah there is no before or after" was not mere words. It was daily reality. "Every Jew should feel as if he or she is personally standing at Sinai to receive the Torah," he taught. "For human beings there are 'past' and 'future' events, but not for God, because in the realm of the Infinite, time does not exist. Day in and day out, God is constantly giving the Torah."

On Yom Kippur, when the Apter Rebbe recited the section about the High Priest's service in the Holy of Holies, he never read it in the third person as it was written. Instead of saying "and thus he spoke," he would always say "and thus I spoke." Why did he do this? Because he still remembered when his soul was incarnated in the body of a High Priest in Jerusalem. Therefore, he had no need to learn about the service from books, because he could clearly recall how he himself had once done it in the Temple.

"I have been in this world ten times," the Apter Rebbe once explained. "I was a High Priest, I was a prince, I was a king, I was a great leader during the Exile. . . . In ten different lifetimes I was some kind of dignitary, but I never learned how to love my fellow human beings with a perfect heart. And so I was sent back to earth again and again, in order to perfect my love of humanity. If I succeed this time, I will never have to come back."

Nevertheless, the Apter Rebbe sometimes missed the power and glory of his previous incarnations. Toward the end of his life, he he said to his Hasidim, "In all of my soul's other sojourns on earth, I occupied a post of honor among the Jewish people. But in this lifetime, I have no such post." At that very moment, a messenger arrived from the land of Israel, bringing the news that the Jewish emigrants from Volhynia had decided to appoint the Apter Rebbe as their leader. So once again, he had a prestigious title.

The Rebbe ordered a large feast to be prepared in honor of this event. Then he gave the messenger some money to take back to the Holy Land, with instructions to purchase a burial plot for

him in Tiberias, beside the grave of the prophet Hosea. The Rebbe himself, however, remained in Apt.

On the night when the Apter Rebbe died in Europe, the Volhynia Jews in Tiberias heard a knock at the door of the synagogue. When the caretaker opened the door, he saw a funeral bier being carried through the air by thousands upon thousands of angelic souls. He followed the bier to the cemetery, and watched the souls lower the body into the grave, next to the prophet Hosea.

Now, there are some who say that the Apter Rebbe succeeded in learning the lesson of love, and went straight to the Garden of Eden, where he now remains. But there are others who claim that he came back to earth one more time—as his twentieth-century namesake, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

In the European world where Rabbi Heschel was born, he might have become a twentieth-century Rebbe, so deep was his knowledge and wisdom. But fate took a different turn, as the Nazis rose to power and Heschel fled to America. Nevertheless, some good did come from these tragic events. After the war, Rabbi Heschel became active in the civil rights movement, and marched with Dr. Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama. When Rabbi Heschel spoke of this march he would say, "I felt as if my feet were praying."

Was he really the reincarnation of Reb Avraham-Yehoshua? Nobody knows for sure. The soul that became the Apter Rebbe of old had known joy and ecstasy in the Holy of Holies, but not true love for humanity. In many other incarnations, too, he sat on the throne of authority, but did not bond with the people. So maybe, this time around, he did return as Heschel the refugee, to learn about love among the downtrodden. And, in so doing, he lifted up their hearts to freedom, and his own soul to the Heavenly Realms.

(traditional Hasidic and modern oral sources)

HINTS AND GLIMPSES

There are hundreds of story fragments about "Who Was Who" in the Jewish tradition. Down through the centuries, a number of rabbis and mystics have even compiled lists, attempting to trace the spiritual geneaology of great scholars and saints. Most of these references were not detailed enough to be developed into complete stories for this book. Here are a few samples:

King Jeroboam was reincarnated in the body of Rabbi Isaiah Pinto, who corrected Jeroboam's soul by destroying an object used in idolatrous (presumably Christian) worship (*Sippurim Nehmadim*).

The Baal Shem Tov, the eighteenth-century founder of Hasidism, once said about himself that he was a reincarnation of Rabbi Saadia Gaon, who lived in the tenth century. When this was told to a rabbi who knew him well, the rabbi replied that the Baal Shem Tov had diligently studied the books of Rabbi Saadia Gaon (*Shivchei Ha-Besht*, pp. 106–7). (If this is true, then perhaps the Besht came back to make a karmic correction—because Saadia Gaon did not believe in reincarnation!)

The Baal Shem Tov once said that Rabbi Chaim Tsenzer of Brody was a spark of the soul of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, a major mystic in the Zohar, who lived during the Talmudic period.

Rabbi Yaakov-Yitzchak ish Horowitz, the Seer of Lublin, believed that his friend and schoolmate, Zalke, had been his father in a previous incarnation (Buber, *Tales*, Vol. I, p. 303).

The first Stoliner Rebbe, Rabbi Aaron, had the soul of Rashi (a tenth-century scholar). The Stoliner Rebbe's grandfather, Reb Asher, had the soul of King David (Stoliner oral tradition, reported by Mintz, *Legends*, p. 201).

Rabbi Aryeh-Leib, known as the "Shpoler Zayde" ("Grandfather of Shpola"), is said to have had the soul of Rabbi Loewe, the Maharal of Prague. Rabbi Loewe was the famous kabbalist who made the golem (Stoliner oral tradition, cited by Mintz, *Legends*, p. 183).

In the sixteenth century, The Holy Ari once hinted that he was the soul of Shimon bar Yochai, an important first-century mystic who lived for thirteen years in a cave near Meron, Israel. It was for this reason that the Ari was especially attracted to the cave in Meron on the holiday of Lag Baomer. On his deathbed, the Ari also said that he was the Messiah ben Joseph (*Shivchei Ha-Ari*).

Rabbi Chaim Vital, chief disciple of the Ari, claimed to be the soul of Rabbi Akiba. In the seventeenth century, Shalom Sharabi claimed to be the Ari returned (cf. Schwartz, *Gabriel's Palace*, p. 19).

Nathan of Gaza, the false prophet who accompanied the false messiah, Shabbetai Zevi, in the mid-sixteenth century, also claimed to be a reincarnation of the Ari (Sholem, *Shabbetai Zevi*, p. 280). But this is most likely not so, for Rabbi Petachyah dreamed, at the beginning of the twentieth century, that Nathan of Gaza was now reincarnated into a raven.

It was said of Rabbi Levi-Yitzchak of Berditchev (eighteenth century) that he also was the soul of Rabbi Akiba (Mintz, *Legends*, # T40).

Some people have claimed that Rabbi Nachman ben Feiga, the Breslover Rebbe, was a reincarnation of the Baal Shem Tov, because Nachman was his great-grandson, and souls often come back three generations later. His style of Hasidism was very similar to that of the Baal Shem Tov's. But many Breslovers refute this, saying that Rabbi Nachman was a "new soul."

Rav Abraham Isaac Kook (d. 1935), the first chief Ashkenazi rabbi of Israel, is reported to have once said, "I am the soul of Rabbi Nachman (of Breslov)." It is still debated—between the followers of Rav Kook and those of Rabbi Nachman—exactly what he meant by this. There are some who say that Rav Kook was a reincarnation of the Breslover Rebbe himself. But others say that Rav Kook was spiritually connected to the Rebbe's soul, which remained in heaven. (Oral sources; see also Schwartz, *Gabriel's Palace*, p. 19.)

Rabbi Yisroel Ber Odesser of Tiberias (d. 1994) said: "I am the mouth and spirit of Rabbi Nachman. I am the connection between Rabbi Nachman and the Jewish people." He taught his disciples to chant "Na nach nachma Nachman Me'Uman"—a kabbalistic "Song of Redemption," based on the name of Rabbi Nachman. On Rabbi Odesser's gravestone they wrote: "He said: I am Nachman from Uman" (the burial place of Rabbi Nachman) (Odesser, *Young Buds of the Stream*, intro.).

The Satmar Hasidim believe that their previous Rebbe, Yoel Teitelbaum ("Der Yoilish," d. 1979), was a spark of the soul of Rabbi Nachman. For this reason, the Satmar Hasidim also make the annual pilgrimage to Rabbi Nachman's grave in Uman for Rosh Hashanah.

The great-grandfather of the Satmarer Rebbe, also named Yoel Teitelbaum, was known as the "Yismach Moshe." He once said that he remembered where he was standing at Mt. Sinai when the Torah was given (in the time of Moses). He also remembered being one of the sheep in Jacob's flock, and his followers believed him to be the return of the prophet Jeremiah (Mintz, *Legends*, # T40).

Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk said, "Not only do I remember standing at Sinai—I even remember who was standing next to me!" (Buber)

The Baal Shem Tov said (in the mid-1700s): "If the Messiah does not come within the next sixty years, then I must return to this world. But I will not be as I am now" (*Shivchei Ha-Besht*, # 147).

7
The Hasidic Masters

Rabbi Mordechai of Lekovitz said to his disciples: "The Zaddik cannot say any words of the teachings unless he first links his soul to the soul of his dead teacher or that of his teacher's teacher. Only then is link joined to link, and the teachings flow from Moses to Joshua, from Joshua to the elders, and so on to the Zaddik's own teacher, and from his teacher to him." (Buber, *Tales*, Vol. II, p. 153)

OVERVIEW

Hasidism, which began in the first half of the eighteenth century and continues to the present day, was the first major Jewish movement to openly teach reincarnation to the masses. Prior to that time, the study of reincarnation—and kabbalah in general—was confined to a few circles of learned rabbis and scholars. Although stories about reincarnation were already circulating among the disciples of the Holy Ari and other kabbalists in previous centuries, it was the Hasidic Rebbes who began to speak openly about their own incarnations and those of their disciples.

The founder of Hasidism, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (1700–1762), also known as "the Besht," is a figure shrouded in mystery and legend. He is variously portrayed as a wandering mystic, a wonder worker, a spiritual healer, a great scholar, and the reincarnation of a hidden saint. Perhaps he was all these things combined. In "The Shoemaker of Safed," we learn about his previous life as a simple man who became a secret scholar because of his sincere desire to serve God without worldly honor or rewards.

In "The Sixty Heroes," we are told that the soul that became the Baal Shem Tov was accompanied by reincarnations of other saintly Jews from the past. And indeed, we do find that many of the Hasidic masters claimed to be biblical personages returned. (See the previous chapter, "Who Was Who.")

The role of a Hasidic Rebbe is somewhat different from that of an ordinary rabbi, or Rav. While the Rav is concerned with judging cases of Jewish law, and the pulpit rabbi is primarily a preacher, the Hasidic Rebbe is more like a guru or spiritual master, who guides the inner life of his disciples toward true enlightenment in the service of God. Many of the early Rebbes were not ordained rabbis, which caused their opponents to label them as ignoramuses. But the kind of knowledge that a Hasidic Rebbe possesses cannot be learned from books. It must be directly experienced.

Although the Hasidic master is a saintly figure, he is not considered a god, nor is he to be worshipped, heaven forbid. In reading the stories of the early Rebbes, one is struck by their human vulnerability and willingness to admit to personal struggles. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov always insisted that Rebbes are made, not born, and that he became who he was through his own efforts. "Every person can attain the highest level," he taught. "It depends on nothing but your own free choice . . . because everything depends on a multitude of *mitzvot*" (*Shevachay Haran* # 26).

Because it is widely believed that the souls of previous Rebbes can come back in the same family lines, the position of Rebbe is now hereditary in many Hasidic groups. At the same time, the Hasidim themselves have a role in accepting their leader, and the son of a Rebbe can be rejected if he is not worthy. In addition, a person from humble lineage can also become a Rebbe if he manifests the proper saintly qualities and the people choose to follow him.

A well-known story tells of a man who dreamed he should become a Hasidic Rebbe. When he shared this dream with his own Rebbe, the master replied, "The dream means nothing—it's just

your own ego. Now, if a hundred Hasidim dream that you are to become their Rebbe, then that will really mean something!"

The stories in this section deal with the personalities of some of the great Rebbes, and the ways in which they were able to read their own past lives and those of others. This knowledge, in turn, enabled them to help the seekers get beyond the cycle of "karma" and move toward true repentance. Psychic abilities per se are not the main goal in Hasidism, but many Hasidim do believe that a Rebbe can read the souls of his disciples. He is not, however, a "past-life reader" in the same sense as a secular consultant. The Hasidic Rebbe operates within a completely religious context, and his advice is intimately woven into the Jewish way of life. His goal is not to impress his disciples with supernatural powers, but, rather, to bring them to a state of sincere repentance. The greatest miracle, more than one Rebbe has said, is to turn a human heart toward Torah, *mitzvot*, and the service of God.

Unfortunately, there are few stories about Hasidic women's incarnations in the classical collections. During the course of this research, it was suggested to me that Hannah Rachel Werbemacher, the famous "Maid of Ludmir," had the soul of a great Rebbe, or that an *ibbur* of a past saint had connected himself to her. I was, however, unable to track down any reliable sources for this. On the other hand, the story of Rebbe Nachman's saintly mother, "Feiga the Prophetess," does demonstrate that the early Hasidim respected the spirituality of the women as well as that of the men. In fact, as we see in the story of "Poor Shmulik," it was often the women who believed most strongly in the Rebbe's powers, and who urged their husbands to seek his help.

THE SHOEMAKER OF SAFED

In the mid-1500s, in the city of Safed, Israel, there lived a simple Jewish shoemaker. Nobody really knows his name, but for

now, we'll call him Reb Schuster, which means "Mr. Shoemaker" in Yiddish.

Now, this Reb Schuster was not a learned man. He knew how to pray from the prayerbook, but barely understood the meaning of the words. To him, they were more like "mantras"—mysterious holy sounds in the Hebrew language, which God had used to speak to His people. Precisely because Reb Schuster did not understand the mundane meaning of the words, he was able to hear the deepest secrets of the universe in their holy sounds.

With every stroke of his shoemaker's hammer, Reb Schuster sang the verses of the prayers and Psalms with total joy, praising God from sunrise to sunset. When his customers arrived to pick up their orders, he would greet them with a smile, and share a bit of simple wisdom to take along with their shoes.

Every night at midnight, Reb Schuster would also rise to recite *Tikkun Chatzot*—the midnight lament that mourns the exile of the Jewish people. Again, he did not always understand the words, but he knew their deepest inner meaning. Oy, there are so many kinds of exile in the world—persecution, suffering, poverty, depression, loneliness, ignorance . . . Reb Schuster knew all of them well, because he and his family had fled their home in western Europe to escape the Inquisition, and had lived in poverty ever since.

But even greater than this physical exile—and that was enough already!—Reb Schuster felt the pain of spiritual exile because he was not learned in Torah. His soul thirsted for that knowledge, but his brain seemed incapable of learning it. Still, whenever he recited *Tikkun Chatzot*, tears would flow down his face, not just for himself, but for the pain of the entire world.

One night, during his midnight lament, Reb Schuster looked up to see Elijah the Prophet standing in the room! Usually Elijah comes in disguise, looking like an ordinary stranger. But on this night, he came exactly as in biblical times, dressed in a sheepskin and carrying a staff. "The holy angels in heaven have sent me here," Elijah announced, "to find out what it was that you

did on the day of your bar mitzvah that was so very pleasing to God."

Now, Reb Schuster was a truly humble man. He was deeply honored to be visited by the holy Prophet Elijah, but he did not want to brag about his service to God. So he replied, "What I did, I did for God alone. I didn't do it for angels, I didn't do it for prophets. And so, most honored sir, I'm not going to tell you."

Elijah was taken aback. "You will not tell me? *Me*—Elijah the Prophet, who holds the keys to the Torah? Suppose I were to tell you that in one blink of an eye, I could give you all the wisdom in every Torah book ever written? So great would be your knowledge, that you could put a pin through a volume of Talmud and tell exactly which words it had pierced. If I give you this great gift of knowledge, would you be willing to tell me what it was you did on the day of your bar mitzvah, that pleased God so much?"

But Reb Schuster stood firm. "What I did, I did for the love of God alone," he said. "I didn't do it for a reward. As tempting as it would be to have such knowledge, the price is too high. I do not want to tell you. And so, I shall remain a simple shoemaker."

With that, Elijah nodded. He bid Reb Schuster farewell, then went back up to heaven. There, the angels crowded around to find out what the shoemaker had done to please God.

"He wouldn't tell me," Elijah said.

"What!" the angels cried out. "You—Elijah the Prophet—he wouldn't tell *you*? Such audacity!"

"Not at all," replied Elijah. "He has taught you something far more important than whatever it was he did on the day of his bar mitzvah. He has taught you how to do a mitzvah completely *lishmah*—for the sake of God alone. That is a rare and beautiful gift!"

So, it was decided in heaven that Elijah should teach the shoemaker anyway. Every night after that, Elijah appeared to Reb Schuster and not only taught him the entire Torah and Talmud, but also the secrets of kabbalah. Reb Schuster became a great scholar—unique in his generation—but nobody knew

about him, because his learning, too, was only for the sake of God. To the outside world, he remained as he was—the simple shoemaker of Safed.

When Reb Schuster's pure soul finally went up to heaven, he was proclaimed a true Zaddik and a shining light in his generation. But it was also decided by the Heavenly Court that he must return to earth again in a future incarnation. Some say that this was a reward for his devotion, so he could have the joy of being able to teach his fellow Jews what he had learned from Elijah. Others say it was to repair his own soul because, although he had been a saintly man in his last life, he had done it all in total secrecy, without having to face the temptations of the world. And some say it was both of these things.

At the end of the 1600s, the Prophet Elijah descended to earth once more, in search of the proper family to give birth to the soul that had formerly been known as Reb Schuster. This time Elijah came in disguise, as one of the countless ragged beggars who tramped throughout the Ukrainian countryside. It was a very hard time and place for the Jews to be—not at all like the happy days with the Ari in Safed. In Eastern Europe, the Jews were severely oppressed and persecuted, and dark despair seemed to have gotten the upper hand.

As Elijah the Beggar trudged from town to town, he heard how, fifty years before, the Jews had been misled by a false messiah named Shabbetai Zevi, who promised them redemption but turned out to be a fraud. He also heard how the Cossacks had come thundering through the countryside, ransacking the villages and slaughtering tens of thousands of innocent men, women, and children.

Elijah saw how these events had affected the Torah scholars, who were no longer filled with mystical yearnings for the messianic age. Instead, they had retreated into their ivory towers, filling their hearts with intellectual pursuits and mind-numbing debates. Unable to cope with the persecutions and poverty heaped

upon the Jews around them, the rabbis often seemed out of touch with reality. In many cases, they had completely cut themselves off from the common people, spending all their days and nights alone in their studies.

Elijah now realized what the mission of Reb Schuster's soul would be in this incarnation. He would bring the joy of Torah down to the common people. But in order to do this, he would have to be raised in a home that was both religiously observant and tolerant of those who were less so.

To find such a set of parents, Elijah began secretly testing the prospective birth families by purposely violating a law of the Torah in their presence, to see what their reactions would be. On more than one occasion, he was loudly berated for his negligence, or written off as a totally worthless boor, or even thrown out of the house as a heretic. With great sadness in his heart, he went on his way in silence, and did not reveal himself as a prophet.

One Friday evening, after the sun had set and the Sabbath had begun, Elijah the Beggar knocked on the door of a small hut on the edge of the village of Okup. An elderly man, who looked to be a hundred years old, came slowly to the door. The old man looked him up and down, but did not say one word about the fact that this ragged stranger was carrying a staff and a backpack—something forbidden to do on the Sabbath. Instead, he opened the door wide and smiled as if to an honored guest. "Welcome, stranger!" he said. "Come in and spend the Sabbath with us!"

After the blessings were made over the wine and the bread, the old man and his wife, Sarah, served a simple but delicious meal, which they ate with great joy, constantly praising their Creator for giving them food. During the meal, Elijah learned that his host was named Rabbi Eliezer, and was a very learned Jew who had once been captured by pirates and sold into slavery in a distant land. There, he was purchased by the viceroy, who treated him well and put him in charge of the household. After many years, the viceroy died and Rabbi Eliezer was set free by the viceroy's daughter. She gave him gold and jewels to take home, but by the end of the long

journey they were all used up, and he arrived in Okup completely penniless. His beloved Sarah had remained faithful for all those years, but now she was too old to have any children.

Suddenly Elijah knew that this saintly couple would be the perfect parents for the soul of Reb Schuster. Rising to his feet, Elijah threw off his ragged beggar's coat and revealed himself in all his glory. "I am Elijah the Prophet," he said, "and I have come to tell you that you *will* have a son. In one year he shall be born, and he will be a great teacher and light to the Jewish people. He will comfort their downtrodden souls, and renew the joy in Jewish life. In him will be fulfilled the verse in Isaiah: *Israel, in whom I will be glorified.*"

And so the miracle happened. Elderly Sarah gave birth to a son in her old age, just like her namesake, the biblical Sarah. The boy was named "Yisroel," which is how "Israel" is pronounced in Hebrew, after the verse in Isaiah. As a child, he was known by the nickname of "Srulik," which means "little Yisroel."

Now, while Srulik's soul had been in the upper worlds, it had taken a vow with another soul to observe the commandment of honoring one's mother to the fullest extent while they were on earth. They decided to do this by never crying, in order to avoid causing their mothers any sorrow.

But life was very hard for a poor Jewish boy in eighteenth-century Ukraine. Srulik never cried in his mother Sarah's presence, but he could not hold back the tears when she wasn't around. The neighbors overheard his tears but never saw Sarah comforting the boy, so they remarked that she was hard-hearted and did not care about her child. Of course this wasn't true, and she could never understand the reason for these charges, because Srulik always seemed so happy to her. Therefore, Sarah suffered unjustly because of the town gossip.

Now, the other soul, the one who had also taken the same vow in heaven, was able to contain his tears even when his mother was not around. So he was allowed to remain a hidden saint for his entire life. But for Srulik's soul, it was declared that, when he

reached adulthood, he would have to teach publicly and travel from place to place, in order to face the daily pain and sorrow of the world.

A few years after Srulik's birth, Sarah died of old age, and Rabbi Eliezer became very ill. On his deathbed he told his son Yisroel, "I am leaving this world before I can properly train you to become a God-fearing man. But always remember this one thing: You are never alone. God is always at your side. He is always watching, and He alone is to be held in awe. Never fear anything else."

After his parents' deaths, Yisroel was left an orphan. He was raised by the people of the village and eventually supported himself with odd jobs, but was pretty much a loner. Perhaps this was because he was orphaned at such an early age. Or maybe it was because he had retained a pattern of secrecy from his previous life as Reb Schuster. Whatever the reason, he kept to himself, often wandering alone into the forest. There he came to understand how God sustains every blade of grass, every leaf on a tree, every feather on a bird. And he saw that the life force in God's holy words was to be found in all of creation.

Nobody really knew what he did out there, all alone in the woods. But strange stories soon began to circulate about him. In years to come, people would say that Ahiyah the Shilonite, the teacher of Elijah the Prophet, would descend from heaven to meet with Yisroel in a secret cave between the mountains outside of town. There, Ahiyah taught him the secrets of kabbalah. Because Yisroel had already studied with Elijah in his previous life, they said, he now merited to study with Elijah's teacher.

And indeed, that is exactly what happened. For the first thirty-six years of his life, all of this wisdom was secret, until, at last, Ahiyah said that the time had come when Yisroel must go public and reveal himself to the world. Thus it happened, that Srulik became Rabbi Yisroel, who is known today as the Baal Shem Tov—"Master of the Good Name"—the founder of Hasidism.

(early Hasidic)

THE SIXTY SOULS

They say that the soul of the Baal Shem Tov was one of those rare, pure souls that sometimes comes into the world when the Jewish community is worthy. In the beginning, when all the souls of humanity were still gathered in Adam's soul in the Garden of Eden, the Baal Shem Tov's soul was there, too. But when Adam stood beneath the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and reached for its forbidden fruit, the soul of the Baal Shem Tov went away, and did not eat of the fruit. And so he remained pure and unstained by sin.

When the time came for the Baal Shem Tov to incarnate in Eastern Europe, he did not want to go. For it is well-known that the human soul does not want to leave the bliss of the heavenly realms. Before birth, it begs and pleads to be spared the pain of incarnating in the physical world. The pure soul of the Baal Shem Tov also feared the "fiery serpents," which are the fierce oppositions to truth and the evil temptations that burn in every generation.

Nevertheless, he had a mission to fulfill on earth, and the time had now come for him to go. So it was decided in heaven, that he would be given an escort of sixty Jewish heroes—the souls of sixty holy Zaddikim—who would be like the sixty strong men who stood around the bed of King Solomon, to guard him from the dangers that lurk in the night. These sixty souls were the major disciples of the Baal Shem Tov.

POOR SHMULIK

In the mid-1700s, in the little Ukrainian town of Medzhboz, there lived a pious Jew named Shmulik. Throughout his entire life, Shmulik was completely unlucky with money. Even though he worked very hard from sunrise to sunset, the profit just seemed to slip through his fingers like water. Over the years, poor Shmulik

had tried every way he could think of to earn a living, but all of them had failed. It seemed that no matter what type of business Shmulik attempted, he simply could not make a profit.

Every Rosh Hashanah, when God writes the fate of the world for the coming year, Shmulik would plead with Him for a decent living. During the Ten Days of Repentance he would go out of his way to make amends to everyone he had ever harmed, and even some he had not. And on Yom Kippur he would pray to God, "Please, Master of the Universe, I know it's not very spiritual for me to be asking for money. But without money we can't eat, and without eating we can't live, and if I am dead, how can I praise You? So please, seal us for a good living this year!"

But in spite of his sincerity, all of Shmulik's prayers seemed in vain, because his luck never changed for the better. "Oy vey," he lamented to his wife Rivka. "Why am I so unlucky? If I decided to sell candles, the sun would never set! Why was I even born?"

"Maybe you should go see the Baal Shem Tov," Rivka suggested. "The one they call the Besht. I hear he is a very holy man who is blessed with second sight. They say he can read a person's soul all the way back to Adam and Eve. So maybe he can tell you the reason for our poverty."

Shmulik heeded Rivka's advice. Because the Besht also lived in Medzheboz, it was no big deal to see him—on the physical level, that is. But on the spiritual level, such a meeting required some serious preparation. Following the usual custom among Hasidim, Shmulik fasted the entire day, then went to the mikveh at sundown to purify himself. Continuing his fast, he put on his best Sabbath clothes and went to see the Besht after the midnight prayer.

The Besht, too, had preparations to make. First he lit two candles and carefully set them on either side of the table. Next, he opened a copy of the Zohar, and placed it between the two candles. He gazed into the open book in silence. As the flickering candles shed their dim light on the holy Hebrew letters, it seemed

to Shmulik as if the Besht were in a trance. After some time, the holy rabbi returned to normal consciousness, opened his eyes, and looked up at Shmulik.

"I cannot tell you the reason for your poverty now," the Besht said. "But if you travel to Kazhmir and find Yidel Goldberg, he can answer your question."

At first Shmulik was very disappointed in this answer, and wanted to forget the whole thing. Why should he have to travel to some faraway place? Couldn't the Rebbe just tell him the answer? But his wife Rivka urged him on. "When you go to a Rebbe," she said, "you must follow through on his instructions. The ways of a Rebbe are not the ways of ordinary people. So go to Kazhmir already—and find this Yidel Goldberg!"

Once again, Shmulik decided to follow Rivka's advice. He packed up his tallis, tefillin, and a change of clothes, took up his walking staff, and set out on foot for the town of Kazhmir.

It was a long journey, and although Shmulik did get a few wagon rides from peasants along the way, by the time he arrived in Kazhmir, he was thoroughly exhausted. After refreshing himself at the inn, he asked directions to the synagogue, where, he was certain, they would be able to help him find Yidel Goldberg.

But alas, nobody had ever heard of him. "He certainly doesn't pray here," one man said. "Maybe he goes to one of the other shuls."

"Or he could be one of those atheist freethinkers who never goes to shul at all," somebody else suggested. "At any rate, we never heard of him here."

For three whole days, poor Shmulik tramped from place to place throughout the entire town, asking for Yidel Goldberg. But the answer was always the same: nobody had ever heard of him. Shmulik even asked the Christian priest, thinking perhaps this Goldberg was an apostate, and that's why nobody would talk about him. But no, the priest had never heard of him, either.

Finally, having walked from one edge of town to the other, Shmulik came upon the Jewish cemetery. He was so bone tired,

and the cemetery seemed so quiet and peaceful, that he decided to enter and rest under a tree. As he sat there among the graves, he began to question the validity of this whole ridiculous quest.

"It's obvious that this Goldberg does not live here, if he even exists at all," he said to himself. "So why would the Rebbe send me on such a wild goose chase? What a fool I've been to follow his advice! This journey was all for nothing!"

With that, Shmulik decided to stretch out and take a short nap before beginning the long journey home. But he was so tired that he slept the entire night, and was awakened at dawn by the gravedigger, who had come to prepare for a funeral that day.

"I noticed you sitting here yesterday," the gravedigger said. "I thought maybe you had come to visit a grave. I figured you must have come a long way, you seemed so tired, so I let you sleep."

"Actually," said Shmulik, "I was just resting under the tree and I dozed off. What I really came to Kazhmir for was to find somebody named Yidel Goldberg."

"Yidel Goldberg?" the gravedigger replied, obviously puzzled. "What do you want with him?"

"You know him?" Shmulik replied in amazement. "I've been looking all over town for him. Can you take me there?"

"Sure," said the gravedigger. "Follow me."

As they walked through the cemetery, Shmulik told the gravedigger about his bad luck, his visit to the Besht, and the strange quest to find Goldberg. By the end of the story, they had come to a weedy, unkempt spot near the back fence. There, barely visible among the tall grasses and tangled brush, was a badly neglected grave. The inscription on the stone read:

Here lies
Yidel Goldberg
1573–1630

"But this is 1740!" cried Shmulik. "He's been dead for over a century! Why would the Besht send me all this way to visit

a stranger's grave? How can a dead man answer my questions anyway?"

"I have no idea why your master sent you here," the caretaker replied, "but even if Goldberg were alive today, I don't see how he could help you with a spiritual question. You see, this man was the worst miser who ever lived. Everyone in town owed him money, because he lent at exorbitant interest rates. And he took no pity on orphans and widows, either—in his whole life, he never gave one cent to charity. He never even married, because he was too cheap to support a wife and children. In short, he was a very wicked man."

"What finally happened to him?" Shmulik asked.

"He died alone in his house," the caretaker continued, "and was buried in this grave by the committee for indigents. Goldberg had no friends, and, as far as I can tell, no relatives to keep his name alive. As you can see, nobody ever comes here to tend the grave. Why should they? The only reason I know the story is because my great-grandfather was the gravedigger back then."

"An interesting tale," Shmulik replied, "but it seems I have come all this way for nothing." With that, he thanked the gravedigger for his time, picked up his staff, and began the long trek back to Medzheboz.

When he arrived, he went straight to the Besht and demanded an explanation. "Why did you send me on a fruitless journey to find a man who died over a hundred years ago?" Shmulik said angrily. "Don't you realize that you have cost me a lot of time and money with this ridiculous quest?"

The Besht just smiled. "And what was the death date on the gravestone?" he asked.

"1630," Shmulik replied.

"And when were you born?" The Besht asked.

"1690," Shmulik replied.

"Well?" said the Besht. "You are a scholar—surely you know about *gilgul*—reincarnation."

In that moment, Shmulik suddenly realized that he had been sent to visit his own grave from another life. He himself had once been Yidel Goldberg! In his past life he was rich and prosperous, but refused to share the bounty with others. As Goldberg, he had heartlessly turned away the poor, oppressed the widow and the stranger, and thought only of himself. Now, in this life, he was reaping the bitter fruit of his own actions. He was learning what life must have been like for the people he refused to help when he was Goldberg the Miser.

When he realized this, poor Shmulik broke down in tears of repentance. And from that moment on, his luck began to change. Soon his business prospered, and he became a very rich man. But this time around, he was careful to remember those who were less fortunate. Poor Shmulik—now known as "Reb Shmulik"—always gave generously to many charities and other worthy causes. After a long and happy life, he was buried with great honor.

(Hasidic, from *Maaseh Ha-Zaddikim*)

THE RABBI'S SON

The saintly Rabbi Yekhiel-Mikhel, who was known far and wide as the Preacher of Zolochev, once traveled to a city where he had never been before. He didn't know any of the people there, but his fame had gone ahead of him, so the prominent members of the congregation began coming to him for advice. One by one, Reb Yekhiel fixed his gaze upon their foreheads, meditated long and hard, then told each person the flaw in their soul, and how to heal it.

Word soon got around that there was a true saint in town, who could accurately read the whole history of a person's soul in all its incarnations—just by looking at the forehead. So the next group of visitors pulled their hats all the way down to their noses, so the rabbi could not see their foreheads. But he read their souls anyway.

"Did you really think that pulling your hats down that way could hide your deeds from me?" the rabbi asked with a grin. "Surely an eye that can see through the flesh to the depths of the soul can easily see through a hat!"

Such was the spiritual insight of Reb Yekhiel. It is said that he turned every day into Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement—but in a good way, because he was able to see into the depths of everyone's souls, and help the people to grow spiritually. He accurately described their past sins, told them how to correct them, and prayed for their forgiveness. If this was true on an ordinary weekday, how much more must it have been true when it really was the time of the High Holy Days.

Once, on Rosh Hashanah night, the soul of a dead man came to Reb Yekhiel. The apparition appeared exactly as the man had been on earth, and Reb Yekhiel immediately recognized him. He was the soul of the cantor who used to chant so beautifully from the Torah scroll during the Sabbath services in Reb Yekhiel's town.

"What are you doing here on this most holy of nights?" the rabbi asked the dead man.

"Surely the holy rabbi already knows," the soul replied. "On Rosh Hashanah, God himself opens the Book of Life, and judges the whole world. All of the deeds of everyone on earth are clearly written in that Book, in every tiny detail. God looks at our sins and our good deeds, and weighs them both in the balance. Who shall live and who shall die? Who shall be born—and to which family? During this night, souls are also judged to be reincarnated once again. I am just such a soul, about to be reborn."

"So tell me," the rabbi asked, "why are you being sent down into the physical world again?"

"It is written in the Zohar, that when God desires to take back a person's spirit, then all the days that he has lived in this world pass in review before him," the soul replied, "and this is exactly what happened to me. Just before my death, I recited the confessional, as every Jew is supposed to do, and I thought over everything that I had done. Then my entire life passed before me—and

I saw that in every instance, I had acted in exactly the right way. My whole life had been totally kosher and totally good. When I realized this, a great feeling of egotistical pride came over me. As luck would have it, right in the middle of this feeling, I died, with no time to repent of that sinful pride.

"When I arrived at the Heavenly Court, that sin of pride was still clinging to me like a soiled coat. And because of that sin, the Heavenly Court decreed that I must return to earth once more, in order to atone for my pride." With that, the apparition vanished.

That same year, a son was born to Reb Yekhiel and his wife. They named him Zev-Wolf. Little Zev soon grew to be a wild and willful child, whom nobody could control. But Reb Yekhiel knew that this was the very same soul that had come to him on Rosh Hashanah night. He also saw that his son's rebellious ways were connected to the sin of pride, which had caused him to reincarnate in the first place. However, the child himself did not remember this, and the boy was not about to listen to lectures about humility from his father! So Reb Yekhiel held his peace.

Time passed, and Zev-Wolf was nearing his thirteenth birthday, the age of bar mitzvah, when he would take on responsibility for his own actions. As is the usual custom, his father commissioned a set of tefillin to be made for him, because a boy must begin to wear them at prayer when he becomes a son of the commandments.

So Reb Yekhiel ordered the local scribe to write parchments with the proper verses from the Torah, which were to go into the little black rawhide boxes. Then he asked the scribe to bring him the boxes before putting in the parchments. Reb Yekhiel took the empty boxes into his hands and looked at them for a long, long time. As he thought about his son who would wear them, and the sin of that soul in its previous life, his tears began to flow, falling into the empty tefillin boxes. Then Reb Yehiel carefully dried the boxes and put in the parchments with the verses of Scripture.

From the moment that Zev-Wolf put on those holy tefillin, a spiritual transformation came over him. His rebelliousness left

him, and he was filled with tranquility and love. Eventually he became a Hasidic Rebbe—Zev-Wolf of Zbarash—and to this day he is remembered for his deep humility.

(Zbarasher Hasidic)

FEIGA THE PROPHETESS

Feiga, the saintly mother of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, was the granddaughter of the Baal Shem Tov, through his daughter, Adil. The match between Feiga and her husband, Reb Simcha, had been arranged by her saintly grandfather long before either of the children were born. Nowadays, a person might think that this was not fair, because the children should have the right to choose their marriage partners for themselves. But the Hasidim would answer that, in this particular case, the two souls had already chosen each other in heaven, and the Baal Shem Tov was just making sure that they found each other again when they incarnated here on earth.

Feiga was a deeply spiritual woman, who was widely known for her *ruach ha-kodesh* (spiritual enlightenment through God). Her two renowned brothers, Reb Ephraim of Sudlykov and Reb Baruch of Medzheboz, often called her "Feiga the Prophetess," because she could see into the future and describe events before they happened.

Three decades after her famous son, Rabbi Nachman, was born, Feiga overheard his disciples talking about the greatness of their Rebbe. Feiga then joined the conversation and said, "So, you think he is great? You have no idea how great he really is! Let me tell you what a wonderful Rebbe you have. From this story, you will realize the true holiness of his soul!" She then described the following events, which led to his birth.

Reb Simcha, Feiga's husband, often left home for long periods to make *hisboddidus*, a form of solitary retreat and contemplative prayer. Usually he did this in the forest, in order to be alone with God in the natural beauty of creation. On one such occasion,

Reb Simcha told Feiga that he was planning to be away for two weeks, but would be home on the following Friday in time for Shabbos.

The two weeks had passed, with no word from Reb Simcha. Now it was Friday morning, and Feiga planned to go to the mikveh in preparation for that night—provided that her husband would return on time. She knew the kabbalistic teaching that says that the very best time for Jewish parents to conceive a child is on the night of the Sabbath. Why? Because, when the most holy souls among the Jewish people look earthward for a place to incarnate, they want to be in a family where the Sabbath is loved and honored. So they choose the homes where the Shabbos candles are shining brightly.

That morning, when Feiga performed the mitzvah of "taking challah" by removing a portion of the dough and making the proper blessing, she also performed a kabbalistic meditation to "see at a distance" and find out where her husband was. But to her great dismay, she was shown absolutely nothing.

Later that day, when she lit the Sabbath candles, she again performed the same meditation for seeing at a distance. And once again, she was shown nothing. So Feiga could not decide—should she go to the mikveh today or not?

Now, although the Shabbos candles are normally lit eighteen minutes before sundown, it was Feiga's custom to light them a full two hours before the Sabbath began. On this particular Friday, after lighting the candles as usual, she lay down to rest for a moment, and quickly fell asleep. During this nap, the soul of her mother, Adil, appeared to her in a dream, accompanied by the Four Matriarchs: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. "Don't worry," they all reassured her. "Your husband will be home in time for Shabbos."

Still in the vision, they took Feiga to the "Treasury of Souls" in heaven. There Feiga noticed a particularly bright, shining soul, and was told that this was the soul of her grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov. A little further along the heavenly path, she saw an-

other luminous soul, whose brightness was even greater than the first. "Whose soul is that?" Feiga asked.

"This is the soul of the son who will be given to you," her mother's spirit replied. The Four Matriarchs nodded in agreement.

Feiga awoke to find that her husband had just come home. Reb Simcha explained that he became so immersed in his meditations that he gotten completely turned around in the forest, and was lost for days. But then, somehow, he found himself near their village just before Shabbos had arrived. So now, he was safely home.

Feiga went immediately to the mikveh. Later that night, she and Simcha conceived a child. This child was given the shining soul that she had seen in the Treasury of Souls in her vision.

"And this," said Feiga to the Hasidim, "is the soul of your Rebbe." From this, the followers of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov came to understand how truly great their teacher was.

(Breslover Hasidic)

TO PRAY WITH FEELING

Ever since he was a small child, Reb Ploni was unable to concentrate during the morning prayers. Although he joined the minyan every day at the synagogue, and resolved anew each morning to stay focused during the service, it was of no avail. Even before the congregation had finished saying the introductory Psalms that come before the main part of the service, his mind had already begun to wander. He simply could not say the prayers with feeling.

Of course, nobody else knew this was happening. To all outward appearances, Reb Ploni was saying his prayers along with everybody else in the minyan. But he knew what was really happening in his own heart and mind, and it troubled him greatly.

One morning, a stranger came into the synagogue. He was a disciple of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, and was on his way to see

his teacher. For some reason, the man who couldn't concentrate felt very comfortable with this Breslover Hasid, and decided to tell him about his frustrations during the prayers. The Hasid was very sympathetic, and suggested that Reb Ploni should accompany him to Breslov to see Rabbi Nachman.

"The Rebbe is truly a Master of Prayer," the Hasid explained. "In fact, he once said that his entire teaching centers on prayer. If anybody can help you solve this problem, it would be Reb Nachman."

Reb Ploni decided to take the Hasid's advice and travel to Breslov. When he explained his problem to Rabbi Nachman, the master replied, "All the different sections of the prayerbook correspond to different *tikkunim*—repairs—that are necessary for the soul. When you come to a section that corresponds to your own soul's needs, then you find it easy and natural to say it with feeling, because your soul resonates with the 'holy sparks' within the letters of that prayer.

"But," continued the Rebbe, "when you read other parts of the service, they don't move you in the same way, because they don't contain the 'sparks' that your soul needs at the moment. In fact, it is quite possible that you have already rectified your soul through most of the parts of the service when you were on earth in previous lives. So those parts don't inspire you as much now."

"But what should I do about my concentration?" Reb Ploni asked.

"Focus on the part that leads up to *Baruch Sheh-amar* (Blessed is the One who spoke), before the Psalms begin. Put your entire effort into saying this one section with full concentration and deepest feelings of the heart, because this is the part you must rectify for your soul in this incarnation. For the rest of the service, it is sufficient for you to simply be there with the minyan and read from the book as usual. Others in the minyan will carry it forward from there.

"In addition," said Rabbi Nachman, "you should spend an hour each day alone with God, talking out loud to Him in your

own spontaneous words. Tell him of your frustrations with the prayers, and ask Him to help you improve your concentration and inner feelings. Don't try to say these spontaneous prayers in Hebrew—just use your everyday language, and let the words flow naturally. If you do this every day, your formal prayers will also improve."

So that is what Reb Ploni did, and it worked. Eventually he became a Breslover Hasid.

(Breslover Hasidic)

REDEEMING LOST SOULS

Reb Urele of Strelisk was known among the Hasidim as "The Seraph." The prophet Ezekiel described the seraphim as fiery angels, with six wings and four faces: a human face in front, a lion's face on the right, an ox's face on the left, and an eagle's face in back. With two of the wings they flew, and with the other four they covered their bodies, which were like burning coals.

Of course, on the physical level, Reb Urele the Seraph looked just like any other Hasidic Jew, with a full beard, sidecurls, and a long black coat. But there are those who believe that he really did have the soul of a seraph instead of a human being, because he prayed with burning enthusiasm. And, because the Seraph prayed with such fire, so did the Hasidim who followed him. It has been said that the prayers of the Strelisker Hasidim were so intense, that they evoked the burning passion of gypsy violins.

Once, while the Seraph was leading prayers at the front of the synagogue, one of his disciples, Reb Avram-Simcha, beheld a wondrous vision. Instead of seeing his Rebbe standing at the pulpit, he saw a pillar of fire, which reached from the pulpit into the sky. Hundreds upon hundreds of souls were climbing up the flaming pillar into heaven. These were the wretched, scattered souls who had died without any merit, and remained earthbound for many years. From far and wide these poor, naked souls had

flown to Strelisk, where the holy Seraph washed them with his tears of prayer, dressed them in white raiments, and sent them on their way.

Of course, The Seraph himself rarely talked about his own spiritual experiences—most Hasidic Rebbes never do. "The rabbi who must praise himself," the old saying goes, "has a congregation of one." But once he did confide that he drew his inspiration from King David and his strength from Samson. "We don't just help our own generation with good deeds," he taught. "Generation after generation, King David continues to pour joy and inspiration into somber souls through his Psalms; generation after generation, Samson arms the weaker souls with the strength of heroes." The Seraph's soul was in touch with the souls of David and Samson in the heavenly realms, so he was able to draw upon their creativity and strength.

Among the disciples of the Seraph was a pious man named Judah Hirsch of Stretana, who was a kosher butcher by trade. But he was no ordinary butcher—no indeed! The animals had absolutely no fear of his knife. On the contrary, they actually longed for it. From far and wide, the wild doves flew of their own accord to Stretana, laid down their heads and cooed, begging Judah Hirsch to slaughter them with his gentle, loving hand.

The Holy Seer of Lublin recognized the saintliness of Judah Hirsch immediately, and urged the Seraph to ordain him as a rabbi. But the Seraph kept putting it off, even though Judah Hirsch was certainly qualified. Why? Because the Seraph knew that there were thousands of poor souls incarnate in the kosher species of animals, exiled human souls who retained their memories of what they had once been in previous lives. Like the earthbound souls who came to the Seraph for releasement during prayers, so did the souls who were incarnated in the animals come to Reb Judah the butcher in order to be set free. If Judah were to become a rabbi, then he would probably have to give up his butcher's business,

and who knows when another such saint might be born, who could free the souls with such gentle love?

Reb Judah remained in the kosher meat business for many years, until the day finally came when all the souls incarnated in the animals that were destined to come to him had been redeemed by his butcher's knife. After that, the flocks of doves came no more. Only then did Reb Urele the Seraph finally agree to him becoming a rabbi in Stretana. So Judah Hirsch gave up the butcher's trade.

One day Reb Urele the Seraph told his Hasidim a disturbing story. "At the gates of heaven," he said, "there sits the Heavenly Court, a permanent tribunal that decides who will be allowed to enter Paradise. Now, up to this time one of the judges who sits on that court has been a great Jewish saint from ancient times, who has long since forgotten the human temptations and frailties of life on earth. Because of that, he was an extremely strict judge, and hardly ever allowed anybody to enter Paradise. But now he has been called from that court to serve on a higher court in the spiritual realms, and his seat is vacant."

Three days later, Reb Urele the Seraph died. He had been called, the Hasidim said, to fill the vacancy on the Heavenly Court, to judge with mercy at the gates of heaven. For this reason, when his son Shlomo began to say kaddish at the grave, he stopped after reciting the first line and said, "An angel like my father needs no more for the raising up of his soul." And the Hasidim agreed. But Shlomo himself was so deeply stricken with grief over his father's death, that he passed away only four months later.

Now the Hasidim of Strelisk felt orphaned and lost—who would be their Rebbe? They wanted to find another saintly leader to take the place of Reb Urele, so they sent out emissaries, but they wandered the world in vain. There were many holy Zaddikim, to be sure, but none was right for their community.

Then somebody remembered Reb Judah Hirsch, the humble butcher who had become the rabbi of Stretana. So the Hasidim of

Strelisk became the Hasidim of Stretana. And with that change, their prayers changed, too. Gone was the fiery style they had learned from Reb Urele the Seraph. In its place, Reb Judah Hirsch now taught his Hasidim a newer, gentler song. Slowly, ever so slowly, the holy words flowed on and on, with deepest yearning, humility, and tenderness. And all who heard the contemplative songs of Reb Judah Hirsch, the Stretaner Rebbe, were moved to true piety and deepest love of God.

(Strelisker Hasidic)

THE PRAYER REQUEST

It is the custom—still practiced to this very day—that when a Hasidic Jew goes to the Rebbe for advice, he doesn't just drop by and knock on the door, or call him on the phone at the spur of the moment. No indeed! He must prepare himself for the encounter by fasting and prayer, then go to the mikveh for purification. After that, the Hasid puts on his best Sabbath clothes, then sits down to make his *kvittel*, which is a written prayer request. On the *kvittel* he explains why he is coming to the Rebbe, and writes his Hebrew name, the name of his mother, and the town where he is from. For example: Shlomo ben Sarah of Kiev.

So why does he use his mother's name and not his father's? True, the father's name is used when a Jew is called to the Torah. But when it comes to prayers for help and healing, the mother is much closer to her child and will plead more convincingly on his behalf at the Heavenly Court. Even God, it is said, cannot resist the tears of a Jewish mother pleading for her child. For this same reason, the *mi-sheh-berach*, the traditional prayer for Jewish healing, mentions both the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and the matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel).

At last, having fasted, gone to the mikveh, and prayerfully written out his kvittel, the Hasid is ready to go to the Rebbe. Upon arrival at the appointed place, the Hasid gives the kvittel to the

Rebbe's assistant, along with a donation to help support the Rebbe's household. The assistant takes the kvittel to the Rebbe first, while the Hasid waits humbly outside the door. Then the assistant returns to usher the seeker into the inner chamber. What happens next remains between the disciple and his master. . . .

In the eighteenth century there lived a Hasid named Reb Sholem, who was a disciple of the famed Seer of Lublin. Reb Sholem, who eventually became a Rebbe in his own right, was taught by his teacher that reading a kvittel entailed far more than simply looking at the words on the paper. To read a kvittel properly, one must look into the very roots of the person's soul.

"He taught me," Reb Sholem said, "to read the roots of each person's soul—whether he comes from Adam through Cain or Abel, how many times his soul has been reincarnated, what sins he has committed to bring about this or that incarnation, what vices have taken root in him, and what merit has been given to him."

Whenever Reb Sholem would receive the kvittel of a righteous man, he would gaze upon it for a long time in ecstasy. But if he was handed the kvittel of a wicked person, he did not look at it for very long, because he did not want to dwell upon the shame of a fellow human being.

Now, Reb Sholem himself came from a long line of famous ancestors, but was always careful not to become haughty over this. It is said among the kabbalists that the merit of one's ancestors might really be one's own merit, because souls tend to incarnate in the same family line. So, if Reb Sholem had been a different type of person, he might have exploited this teaching and claimed greatness based upon his previous incarnations. But he did not.

One day, Reb Sholem received a visit from a very learned Jew who was a true Zaddik—a holy man—but whose ancestors had been simple, unlearned people. There was really no shame in this. Does not the Talmud say that we should always be careful with

the children of ignorant people, because from them may come scholars? And does it not also say that all Jews—learned or not—can earn a place in the World to Come?

But somehow, this "self-made man" had gotten it into his head that Reb Sholem was slighting him because of his ancestry. Who knows? Maybe Reb Sholem did not look at the kvittel as long as the man thought he should. In reality, of course, this was not the case, because Reb Sholem regarded the man as a genuine saint.

Nevertheless, the self-made Zaddik continued to bear a grudge in his heart against Reb Sholem. With the intuition of the holy spirit, Reb Sholem immediately sensed this, but he did not want to ask about it directly, for fear of further compounding the problem. So he couched the message in a Torah lesson.

"In the Talmud," Reb Sholem began, "it says that we should always ask ourselves: 'When do my deeds approach the greatness of the deeds of my ancestors?' From this it is clear that a person whose ancestors were neither holy nor learned has a much easier time of it than a person with distinguished ancestors.

"How so? Because the first person never needs to feel ashamed in front of his unlearned ancestors—no matter what he does for Torah, it is going to be an improvement and a blessing. But in my case, oy vey, it is so much more difficult. Precisely because I do have ancestors of distinction, I must always feel humble before them. I know perfectly well that I'm still very far from even beginning to approach their level of perfection."

Upon hearing this story, the self-made Zaddik realized his error in misjudging Reb Sholom, and completely forgave him.

(Lubliner Hasidic)

WHY THE REBBE LAUGHED

A man once came to Rabbi Avraham-Yehoshua, the Apter Rebbe, to confess a sin. As he told what he had done, and all the strict penances that he had heaped upon himself to atone for it,

the poor man broke down in tears. On and on and on went the story—until suddenly the Apter Rebbe broke out in peals of roaring laughter! The sinner was completely shocked, and just stared at the Rebbe in horror. But the Rebbe took no notice of his discomfort—he just laughed and laughed.

At first the man was angry at the Rebbe. How dare he not take somebody else's suffering seriously! But then a change took place within him. It was as if his very soul became still and silent. For the first time, the penitent truly heard the endless stream of words that he had been saying, and realized how trivial all his penances and attempts at atonement had been. With that insight, he made a genuine turning to God.

After the man had left, the Hasidim gathered around their Rebbe and asked, "How could you laugh at the pain of a fellow Jew?"

The Apter Rebbe replied, "Two thousand years ago, in the life when I was a High Priest, I met this man before. Now, although I was born into the priesthood, I did not become a High Priest right away. I had to learn my trade step by step, just like everybody else. First I was accepted as a novice priest, where I learned the service and did some of the menial tasks. Finally I was deemed ready for some of the lesser duties of the Temple itself.

"I was put in charge of the animals that were kept available on the Temple grounds, to be used as sacrifices by people who could not bring their own animal with them. When a man came to choose his sacrifice, it was my duty as the priest in charge to ask what sin he had committed. That way, we could be sure that he got the appropriate type of offering. Well, I was still young and inexperienced at this, so I got too personally involved with everybody's sins and sorrows as if they were my own. And therein hangs the answer to your question about why I laughed today.

"The man who just left here was one of those who lived remote from the rest—a sort of hermit who spent his time contemplating in the desert. He was very stern with himself, and well-practiced in all the virtues of asceticism and self-control. But one

day he slipped up, and found himself marred by a very serious sin. So, in accordance with the laws of the Torah, he traveled to Jerusalem to bring the appropriate offering.

"When he came to me to choose his animal, I could see the deep anguish written all over his tear-stained face. So I took pity on him, and tried to comfort him, until he reached the point where his sin did not weigh so heavily on his heart anymore. I felt good that I had been able to help him, but my help proved to be a big mistake.

"You see, when he finally came to the High Priest to actually offer the sacrifice, he had regained his composure to the point that he no longer had a genuinely broken heart, so he did not experience the turning to God. Consequently, his sacrifice was not graciously accepted On High, so he did not experience a true feeling of atonement. He has felt guilty about this ever since.

"And so," concluded the Rebbe, "he had to reincarnate once more, and stand before me again. This time around, I avoided getting personally involved in his story. When he began telling me his sins and the harsh penances he was imposing on himself, I laughed—and by doing that, I broke the bonds of his past-life guilt. In this way, I loved him even more that if I had wept with him."

(Apter Hasidic)

THE GIFT OF SELF

In the city of Lizhensk, where Rabbi Elimelech taught, there is a steep rocky hill with a cliff known as "Rabbi Elimelech's Table." Yaakov-Yitzchak ish Horowitz, the famous Seer of Lublin, used to climb up there when he was young. He would sit alone and meditate for hours on the meaning of true humility, and how the nullification of the ego could be achieved.

One day, while he was deep in his meditations, Reb Yaakov came to the conclusion that the only way to give himself com-

pletely to God was to literally offer up his own life. So he went to the very brink of the ledge and looked down, intending to throw himself onto the rocks below.

But a friend named Zalke had secretly followed him up the trail from the village, and was hiding in the bushes, watching. When he realized that Reb Yaakov was about to commit suicide, Zalke ran toward him, grabbed him by the belt, and pulled him back from the ledge to safety. Then Zalke remained there with his friend for a long time, comforting and encouraging him to remain in this world, until he had finally talked his soul out of its grim purpose.

Years later, after Reb Yaakov had become known as the Seer of Lublin, his old friend Zalke—now Rabbi Zalke—went to visit him. As he entered the room, the Seer went up to him, took both of his hands in his, and gazed deeply into his eyes. Then the Seer said, "My dear, dear Zalke, my friend, my life—I truly love you like a brother. This is because, in my soul's first incarnation on this earth, you were my father. But when I think back to what you did to me in Lizhensk—how you talked me into remaining in this sorrowful world—then I find I cannot love you as much."

Nevertheless, the Seer of Lublin did remain in this world, and lived to a ripe old age. At the wedding of his granddaughter, Hinda, when the time came for the gifts to be announced, the aged Seer was sitting at the table with his head in his hands, and appeared to be asleep. Over and over the master of ceremonies kept announcing, "And now for the wedding gifts from the bride's family . . . " and waited for the Seer to answer. But the Seer remained motionless and did not seem to hear. Then everyone became silent, and waited respectfully for him to wake up.

A half-hour passed, and the crowd was getting restless. So his son leaned over and whispered in his ear, "Father, wake up—they are calling for you to announce the gifts from the bride's family."

The Seer looked up with a start and replied, "Then I give myself. After thirteen years, the gift will be brought."

The wedding guests were puzzled by this strange announcement. What on earth could it mean? Of course, there were other generous gifts from the bride's side, and the Seer's family hastened to announce them. But the strange incident remained in the minds of the people. A few years later, the Seer of Lublin passed away.

Thirteen years after the wedding announcement, Hinda bore a son, whom she named Yaakov-Yitzchak after her deceased grandfather. When the boy grew up, he looked exactly like his famous grandfather, right down to the fact that his right eye was a little bigger than his left. It is said that he was the very same soul, come back to fulfill his promise to "give himself" for a wedding present.

(Lubliner Hasidic)

8
Jews by Choice

"It is already known [in the sixteenth century] that most children [in a family] are not from the same [soul] root . . . Particularly among those who reincarnate, they have no relation to their fathers in most cases, and no spiritual relation to their parents at all." (Chaim Vital, *Shaarei Ha-Mitzvot* 15a)

"Sometimes the souls of pious Jews pass by metempsychosis [reincarnation] into gentiles . . . in order that they may plead on behalf of the Jewish people and treat them kindly." (Yalkut Reubeni # 63)

OVERVIEW

The question of converts—or "Jews by choice," as they sometimes call themselves—has fascinated storytellers down through the centuries, and produced a variety of possible explanations. Because Jewishness has a genealogical aspect as well as a religious one, the question naturally arises: Where do the souls of converts come from, and how are they connected to the "seed" of the Jewish people? There seem to be three main streams of thought about this, all of which are represented in the stories told here.

In "Children of Abraham and Sarah," we are told that the souls of converts stem from the childless years of our First Matriarch and Patriarch. Although no physical children were born during all those seemingly barren years, the sexual acts between Abraham and Sarah did have an effect in heaven, producing souls that were spiritually attached to the Jewish people. Whether these souls were "created" by the sexual unions or "brought down" from a

pre-existing "Treasury of Souls" is a matter of debate among various schools of thought.

A second theory for the origin of the souls of converts, presented here as "Choosing the Torah," is that they were originally incarnated among the various gentile nations at the time the Torah was given at Mt. Sinai. While the nations officially rejected the Torah on the collective level, some individuals accepted it in their hearts. These souls became Jewish on the higher spiritual levels, through a mystical connection with the revelation at Sinai. In later incarnations on earth, they are attracted to Jews and Judaism, and eventually convert.

The third school of thought is that converts are Jewish souls who were at Sinai and accepted the Torah at that time, but later became separated from the Jewish people. Such a soul then "wanders among the nations" until, in a future incarnation, it finds its way back to Judaism as a convert from a gentile family with a "lost" Jewish ancestor. "The American Sparks" and "Heirlooms in the Attic" are examples of this type of tale, as are many of the actual case histories in my previous books on reincarnation and the Holocaust.

The majority of the "lost ancestor" stories I have heard come from the United States and Canada, but not all. In 1965, the great-granddaughter of Heinrich Heine, the famous German poet, applied to the Israeli rabbinate for conversion to Judaism. She had recently learned that her famous ancestor was a Jew who had converted to Christianity. Now she felt drawn irresistibly to Judaism and wanted to reconnect her family line to the Jewish people. Although the article did not openly claim that she was the reincarnation of Heine himself, the story does fits this pattern.

In modern cases involving intermarriage, the Jewish soul often returns in its own family line, even though that family is no longer Jewish. "Heirlooms in the Attic" is an example of this. Most often, the "lost" ancestor was a Jewish man rather than a woman. This is not due to sexism, but, rather, because of the way that Jewish identity is transmitted from generation to generation.

According to Jewish religious law, if the mother is Jewish, then her children are automatically Jewish by birth and are usually raised as Jews. In such cases, the Jewish heritage is not forgotten, even if the family assimilates and is no longer religious.

However, when a Jewish man marries a gentile woman, their children are not considered Jewish by Jewish law. The children are often raised in the mother's religion, then marry gentiles, and are completely lost to the Jewish community. On the gentile end, the parents often hide the father's Jewish background, in order to avoid discrimination because of anti-Semitism. In some cases, the descendants completely deny having any Jews in the family tree, in order to "pass" for gentiles—until their great-grandchild is mysteriously "drawn" to Judaism and converts.

The idea that Jews often return as their own great-grandchildren is described in the fourteenth-century text, the *Sefer Ha-Pliyah* (Book of Marvels), and is widely accepted in Hasidic and kabbalistic circles to this day. According to the *Sefer Ha-Pliyah*, Jews normally return as Jews again within their own family tree. But in cases where an individual Jew was somehow "cut off" or separated from the Jewish people, that soul returns as a gentile with a very strong attraction to Judaism. For such souls, conversion to Judaism is not only a personal religious decision, but a way to reconnect their genetic line to the Jewish people once again.

Of special note is the modern tale, "Medicine from Sinai," which offers yet a fourth possibility for conversion. Certain Jewish souls have voluntarily *chosen* to incarnate as gentiles for a higher purpose. This idea is consistent with much of kabbalistic thought, where "exile among the nations" is regarded as an opportunity for Jews to bring about forms of *tikkun* (karmic healing) that might otherwise be impossible.

"Medicine from Sinai" is based on a teaching by Patricia (Rachel Brachah) O'Brian, an American convert to Conservative Judaism. I first met her in July of 1993, at a conference on reincarnation sponsored by the Association for Research and Enlightenment, Inc. (A.R.E.), in Virginia Beach, Virginia. During the

coffee break, she introduced herself to me and shared her original midrash about the "Keepers of the Joy."

It was one of those special times when you know a great story has just been born. I was so moved by this magnificent insight that I invited her to tell it from the podium during my speech on reincarnation that afternoon—which she did. For both of us, it was far more than just a fleeting moment on stage. The story stuck in my mind, and over the next three years I found myself telling it whenever "born Jews" would say to me that converts are "not really Jewish" or that they are "too enthusiastic" about religion.

Interestingly, I have noticed that many converts *do* have a direct connection with the revelation at Mt. Sinai, rather than relating to Judaism through the subsequent march of history. My own wife, Caryl Rachel, who converted to Orthodox Judaism before we were married, once had a powerful waking dream about Mt. Sinai. In this dream, she ascended the mountain to the very gates of heaven, where she felt a sense of absolute peace. This peace was so complete, that it stripped away all concerns of the everyday world, until there was nothing left but God's infinite love. She would have stayed there with God forever, she later explained, but she had the responsibility of children to care for, so she returned down the mountain.

Nevertheless, this dream of Sinai confirmed her decision to become Jewish. On many occasions, Caryl has remarked to me that precisely because she did not grow up being persecuted as a Jew, she has not become bogged down with pain on a personal level. Instead, she sees the truth of Torah in the pristine beauty of Sinai.

CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM AND SARAH

As is well-known from the biblical story, Abraham and Sarah were childless until their old age. "And Sarah was barren and had no child," the Book of Genesis tells us. At first glance, this seems

like a meaningless repetition of words, because, if she was barren, then obviously she had no child! But every word in the Torah has at least seventy meanings, and no word is ever superfluous. When the Torah repeats something, it is always for a deeper reason.

The Zohar explains that, although Sarah "had no child" on the physical plane, she was not "barren" in the higher spiritual realms. Each time that Abraham and Sarah came together, they did so in perfect harmony and in accordance with the laws of family purity, which they intuitively understood, even before the written Torah was revealed. With each act of love, they hoped and prayed that a child would be conceived.

Although no physical child came from these seemingly barren unions, every act of love drew down a pure soul on high, which became connected to the spiritual lineage of Abraham and Sarah, even though it did not physically incarnate through their seed at that time. These pure souls were destined to be born later, among the various non-Jewish nations. But because of their spiritual connection to Abraham and Sarah, they would feel inexplicably drawn to the Jewish people, and eventually become righteous converts to Judaism.

That is why, when a person converts to Judaism, he or she may choose to be called by any Hebrew name desired. But, in place of the names of the biological parents, the convert is always called "son or daughter of Abraham and Sarah." The souls of converts are the spiritual children of Abraham and Sarah, conceived by them before the birth of Isaac, many centuries ago.

(adapted from the Zohar)

THE RIGHTEOUS GENTILES

It is said that the soul of a convert to Judaism—a "Jew by choice"—is the reincarnation of a righteous gentile who would have accepted the Torah in the days of Sinai, if he or she had been

given the opportunity. Nowadays, people sometimes call Jews "God's Chosen People," but it would really be more accurate to say that we are "The People Who Have Chosen God."

As the Midrash tells us, when God was ready to reveal the Torah, he offered it to all the different peoples of the world before he offered it to the Jews. "If you will accept this Torah and agree to live by its laws," God said, "then I will be your God and you will be my people."

Nowadays, it seems obvious that accepting the Torah would be a great honor. But in those days, things were different. The Torah had not yet been revealed, so few people understood how truly wonderful it was going to be. So, for example, when God offered the Torah to the Edomites, the descendants of Esau, the first thing they did was ask Him, "What's in it?"

God replied, "Thou shalt not murder."

But the Edomites objected, "Master of the Universe! You know that the very blessing that Isaac gave to our ancestor, Esau, was for him to be a wild man who should live by the sword. How can we go against the heritage of our father Esau?"

And so it was with all the other nations of the world. Some did not want to give up stealing because they earned their living by robbing caravans along the trade routes. Others wanted to keep their gold and silver idols because they portrayed God in familiar images. Still others wanted to eat forbidden foods or work on Saturdays.

There was not a single nation on earth that God did not visit with His Torah, but they all turned Him down. Even the seven basic commandments of the Noah Covenant were rejected. Only the Jewish people truly understood the great honor that God was offering them. When He asked, "Will you accept my Torah?" the Jews replied in one voice, "*Naaseh v'nishmah*—we will do and we will hear!"

Because the Jews chose to accept God and His Torah without quibbling about the various laws, God also chose them as his special people for all generations to come. This is why the Jews be-

came the Chosen People—not because they were better than everybody else, but because they were willing to accept the responsibility of living according to the Torah.

Although the other nations turned the offer down, there were some individual souls among them who would have gladly accepted the Torah, if only they had had the opportunity. Their leaders may have rejected it, and most of their people probably agreed with that decision, but here and there were a few souls who felt personally attracted to God and His Torah.

These souls continue to reincarnate, and remain spiritually connected to the Jewish people throughout the centuries, waiting for an opportunity to convert to Judaism in a future life. On the soul level, they have long ago accepted the Torah. But they must also convert according to Jewish law, in order for their bodies to become adopted into the community here on earth. After that, they continue to reincarnate as Jews, the same as those souls that were in Jewish bodies at the time of Mt. Sinai, until they are ready to enter the Garden of Eden in heaven.

(adapted from the Midrash)

THE ULTIMATE PRICE

A woman once came to Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (also known as the "Besht"), and begged him to pray for her to have a child. At first the holy rabbi did not want to do it, but she kept returning and pleading so earnestly, that he finally relented and said, "There is a soul in the spiritual world that would like to be born to you, but are you strong enough?"

The woman thought he was talking about physical strength, so she said, "Yes, Rebbe, I am strong enough to bear a child. In fact, I'm in perfect health."

So the Besht blessed her, and, nine months later, she bore a healthy baby boy. She nursed the child herself, and lavished every kind of love and attention upon him. The mother and child were

very happy together. But on the boy's third birthday, when he received his first set of ritual fringes, he suddenly died for no apparent reason. The grieving mother traveled to the Besht again and asked, "Why did God give me a child, only to see him die in my arms?"

"Don't you remember," replied the Besht, "how I asked if you were strong enough? The strength I referred to was not the strength of the body, but the strength of the heart." Then he told the following story.

In the first half of the 1700s, a boy named Vladimir was born into a noble Polish family by the name of Pototzki. The boy had an excellent mind, and his father wanted him to have the best education possible. So the nobleman sought out tutors to teach his son Latin, Greek, Hebrew, mathematics, and all the known sciences.

As it turned out, the tutor who taught Old Testament and the Hebrew language was really Jewish. But the nobleman did not know this, because the teacher always dressed in Polish clothing like the non-Jews wore. If the father had known that the teacher was a Jew, he would never have hired him, because he hated the Jews.

The teacher, for his part, was reluctant to take the position, because it meant he would have to move into the castle, and it might be difficult to find enough privacy to say his prayers in peace. If the anti-Semitic father ever found out that he was a Jew, it could cost him his life. But the nobleman insisted until the teacher could find no more excuses to refuse. He agreed to come live in the castle, but only on one condition: that he would be given his own room, and be allowed one hour of total privacy every day. During that hour, nobody was to disturb him, not even the nobleman himself.

Vladimir's father agreed to these terms, and the teacher came to the palace. His young student soon grew very fond of him and followed him everywhere—except for that mysterious hour when he locked himself all alone in his room each day. The boy repeatedly begged his teacher to tell him what he did in there, but the

teacher did not want to say. He was reciting his prayers during that hour, and he knew that the boy's father would become enraged if he ever found out that his son was being taught by a Jew.

As Vladimir grew into his teens, he became more and more curious about that secret room. One day, he could stand it no longer. He decided to solve the mystery by hiding under the bed in his teacher's room, to find out what he did in there. When the time came for the hour of solitude, the teacher locked himself in as usual. Then he put on his prayer shawl, wrapped the leather straps of the tefillin around his arm and head, and began rocking back and forth in ecstasy, chanting rapidly in Hebrew.

Vladimir was so fascinated by this strange behavior, that he could not resist calling out, "What are you doing?"

The poor teacher paled in fright. "Who's there?" he said cautiously. "Is somebody here in my room?"

"It's me," Vladimir replied, crawling out from under the bed. "I'm sorry I frightened you, but I wanted to know what you do in here. So now you must tell me—what *are* you doing?"

"I'm saying my prayers," the boy's teacher explained. "I am a Jew, and my real name is Menachem. This is the way that Jews pray to the One God who created everything in the universe."

"Teach me how to pray like that!" Vladimir said. "I want you to let me wear a shawl and straps like that, too."

"But these things are only for Jews," Menachem replied. "If I put them on you, your father will be very angry, because he hates the Jews. He would punish you severely, and probably put me to death."

"Put it on me anyway!" Vladimir commanded, "or I shall call the guards and tell my father about it right now!"

So Menachem had no choice but to show his student how to put on the tallis and tefillin. As soon as he did so, a strange light shone in Vladimir's eyes. "I want to be a Jew, too!" he exclaimed. "Please, please make me into a Jew!"

"It's not as easy as all that," Menachem said. "In order to become a Jew, you would have to study with a rabbi for a long

time, and then convert by being circumcised and going to the mikveh. If your father ever found out, he would put both me and the rabbi to death. You could lose your right to inherit the palace, and the Church would not be happy about your conversion, either. You could even be burned at the stake, heaven forbid. It would be better for you to remain as you are, and worship the One God through your own religion."

But Valdimir would not be dissuaded. From the moment he put on that tallis and tefillin, he wanted to be a Jew with all his heart. In order to humor him, Menachem taught him the Jewish prayers, reasoning that, if his father ever found out, they could say he was just practicing the Hebrew language. One thing led to another, and soon they were discussing religion, philosophy, *mitzvot*, and the meaning of life. The young man soaked it all up like a sponge. He loved everything about Judaism, because he really had a Jewish soul.

The day finally came when Vladimir decided to run away and formally convert to Judaism. Menachem went, too, because his life would be in danger as soon as the nobleman discovered that his son was missing. The local rabbi did not want to convert Vladimir, for fear of reprisals against the whole Jewish community. So they traveled all the way to Jerusalem, where the rabbis performed the conversion. Vladimir remained in the Holy Land for a long time, praying and learning Torah, and became a devout scholar.

Meanwhile, his parents were burning with anger. They were so ashamed of their son becoming a Jew, that they broke off one of the eagle claws on the family crest, to represent Vladimir's disgrace. Had they been willing to let it go at that, this story would have a different ending, because Vladimir did not care about his royal status, and would gladly have given it up to follow the path of God. But the father wanted control over his son, so he hired detectives to track him down and bring him back to Poland by force. "Vladimir loves beautiful lacework," he told the detectives.

"It's even possible that he will go into the lace business. So keep a sharp eye out around the lace shops."

Sure enough, several years later, one of the detectives saw a bearded man standing in front of a shop in the marketplace, admiring the fine lacework. He recognized him as Vladimir Pototzki, captured him, and took him by force to his father's castle in Poland. There, the Church officials gave Vladimir two choices: reconvert to Christianity and be forgiven, or remain a Jew and be burned at the stake as a heretic.

Vladimir stood firm as a rock, and could not be persuaded to give up Judaism. His mother begged and pleaded with him, saying, "What do you see in those Jews? What do they have that we don't? With us you can have anything you want—we are rich, we can give you absolutely anything—just name it."

"What I want, you cannot give me," Vladimir replied. "The simple taste of gefilte fish at the Sabbath evening meal is more delicious to me than all the fine banquets in a nobleman's castle."

When the Church officials saw that Vladimir remained firm in his new religion, they ordered him to be burned at the stake. As they were about to light the fire, they gave him one more chance to save his life. They even brought his family there to plead with him. "You could still change your mind," they begged him. "Give up this Jewish foolishness and live!"

But Vladimir replied, "My soul is Jewish, and it draws me to the Jews. I know my soul is pure and will go to heaven. But I was born among you and raised among you, and my body was corrupted by your ways. For many long years I have fasted and prayed and practiced all types of austerities, in order to purify myself of those sins. But it was not enough. Now this fire will burn away the last of the dross, and I will be purified at last. By executing me for my faith, you are doing me a favor—and so I thank you for this!"

With that, they lit the fire and he was burned at the stake. When Vladimir's soul ascended and stood before the Heavenly

Court, he lacked only one thing in order to enter Paradise: he had never been nursed by a Jewish mother. Plus, there was a taint on his soul from the idolatrous lullabies that he had heard at his gentile mother's breast. So it was decreed that he would have to reincarnate one more time, in order to be nursed by a Jewish mother, who would sing to him about the One True God.

"And so," said the Baal Shem Tov to the grieving woman, "the soul of this righteous convert descended to earth and incarnated as your son. You nursed him, loved him, and sang to him with all the tenderness of a Jewish mother's heart. In so doing, you brought about the repair that his soul needed. When he reached the age of three and received his first ritual fringes, his babyhood was ended, and the work was complete. So his pure soul left the body and ascended to the Garden of Eden."

When the woman heard this, she was happy for the soul that had incarnated as her child, but sad for her own loss here on earth. The Baal Shem Tov saw her sadness and said, "Because you went through so much in order to help this soul, it has been decreed in heaven that you will have another child, who will live to see many generations."

Everything happened as the Baal Shem Tov had predicted. And some say that the second child grew up to be the famous Hasidic Rebbe, Rabbi Aaron of Karlin.

(early Hasidic)

THE MEDICINE FROM SINAI

When all the Jewish souls were gathered at Mt. Sinai, ready to receive the Torah, it was a truly cosmic event. The soul of every Jew who ever was or would be born was there, either in body or in spirit. Present, past, and future were fused together in one magnificent timeless moment. And in that moment, God foresaw the entire history of the Jewish people.

There would be wonderful times of joy and beauty, with magnificent processions in Jerusalem, and family meals around the Sabbath table. Throughout the centuries, Jews would sharpen their minds by learning Torah far into the night, seeking out the hidden meanings within the sacred texts. They would dance in ecstasy as they carried the scrolls around the synagogue on Simchat Torah, and sing with pride and strength as they kindled the Hanukkah candles. Oh, there would be so many wonderful things to celebrate—births and weddings, songs and poems—the very joy of life itself!

But alas, there would also be terrible times of suffering and exile, when the collective soul of the Jewish people would be crushed by sadness. Slavery, crusades, inquisitions, pogroms, holocausts . . . So much persecution and so much sorrow!

Yes, God could have made a universe where terrible things never happen. But there would have been no free will. Alas, the price of granting freedom to others is that they sometimes choose to use it for harm. But God so valued the wonderful gift of free will, that He decided to put up with a world that was not in perfect harmony.

Still, God was deeply saddened by the things that would happen to His people in the future. He could see that there would be times when the suffering would be so horrible, and the persecutions so brutal, that the joy within Judaism would be crushed under the weight of sadness. This sadness would become bitterness, and a dark heaviness would enter the Jewish community. At such times the Jews would forget the joy of Sinai, and would see their Jewishness as nothing but a burden, to be cast off at the first opportunity.

Where there is an illness, there must also be a cure. So God designed the medicine right there at Sinai. What did he do? He called aside some of the Jewish souls and said, "I see in the future that there will come times when the Jewish people will be filled with deep pain. From the very day that they are born, they will

be so severely persecuted by the surrounding nations, that their souls will become weighted down with depression. This depression will prevent them from soaring into the realms of joy for many generations."

The souls whom God had called aside were deeply saddened to hear this prediction. "What can we do?" they cried out in despair.

"Today I have already planned the medicine," God replied. "But I need some brave volunteers. Would some of you be willing to go into exile—to remain Jewish souls, but be born among the gentiles? You will grow up in safety and not be persecuted as Jews, but you will also feel out of place among the nations, and will long to return to your own people. Your mission will be to carry the joy of Sinai in your hearts, protecting it from bitterness. Whenever the suffering becomes too great for My people to bear, some of you will convert to Judaism and bring back the happiness that you feel here today. You will be like a time-release medicine, lying dormant in the world until you are needed."

Upon hearing what their mission would be, the souls whom God had called aside were silent for a very long time. This was a difficult thing that God was asking them to do. To spend so many incarnations among the very nations that would oppress the Jewish people? To live so many lives alone and alienated? Yet in the end the souls agreed to do it. God blessed them all and said, "You shall be known as the *Shomrei Simchah*—the Keepers of the Joy."

And so it has happened, down through the centuries, that in every generation a few of these Keepers have converted to Judaism. Sometimes the souls who were born as Jews were so filled with pain that they could not understand the bubbling enthusiasm of the Keepers, and tended to resent them. But gradually their joy would spread among the people and the balance would be restored.

In past centuries, the Keepers of the Joy only came in twos or threes, because although there were persecutions, there was also great faith among the Jews. But alas, in the twentieth century,

there came Adolf Hitler—may his name be erased!—whom some say was an incarnation of the wicked Haman. The suffering under Hitler was so severe, so utterly, unspeakably horrible, that the light of the Jewish people was almost extinguished. The Jews who survived the Holocaust felt utterly abandoned by God and humanity, and many were unable to feel any joy for decades afterward.

And so it has happened that in this generation, at the end of the twentieth century, more time-release Jewish souls are returning to Judaism than ever before. This is why there are such large numbers of converts in modern times, and why they are so filled with enthusiasm. They are not really "Jews by choice" as they sometimes call themselves, but souls who are already Jewish, completing their mission from the days of Sinai. They are the Keepers of the Joy.

(based on a teaching by Rachel Brachah O'Brian, USA)

HEIRLOOMS IN THE ATTIC

Little Billy loved to play pirate in the attic of the old farmhouse. His family had lived in the same Ohio town for over four generations, so there were plenty of boxes and trunks filled with "pirate treasure" for him to guard and explore. "Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum!" Billy would shout, wielding his toy sword to ward off imaginary attacks from Captain Hook and other notorious brigands.

One day, while searching through his "treasure chests," Billy found an old, worn cloth bag with some strange writing embroidered on it. He couldn't read very well yet, but he knew that the letters were not the same as the ones he had learned in school. Maybe they weren't even letters at all, he thought, as he untied the drawstring and opened the bag.

Inside, he found two small black boxes with long leather straps attached. Billy had never seen anything like these before—what on earth could they be? They were very strange, but at the

same time, they seemed familiar somehow. Filled with curiosity, he carried the boxes and cloth bag downstairs to his mother.

"Hey, Mom!" Billy shouted. "Look what I found in the attic! What are these things, anyway?"

His mother looked at the black boxes, but was as puzzled as her son. "I don't know," she replied. "I haven't seen these for years—since I was a child myself, playing up in the attic. I wondered about them, just like you. But all my mother could tell me was, that they are old family heirlooms."

"Can I take them to school and ask the teacher?" Billy asked.

"I don't see why not," his mother said. "You can use them for show-and-tell this week."

At school, Billy told the class how he had found the strange embroidered bag, and how nobody in his family knew what the little black boxes were. Everybody thought it was a great mystery. But not even the teacher had any idea what they could be. She suggested that Billy should take them to the school librarian. But the librarian didn't know, either.

Billy continued to ask around about the boxes. When nobody in his small town could identify them, he put them back in the attic where he had found them. New interests came and went, but he always continued to wonder about the strange little boxes. Sometimes he even went back up to the attic, took them out, and held them in his hand. They always gave him a warm sense of peace and belonging. But belonging to *what*, he wondered?

Years later, during a college art class, Billy saw a reproduction of a famous painting called "The Praying Jew" by Marc Chagall. There, on top of the Jew's head in the painting, was a square black box! A dark leather strap was wrapped around his arm. Billy immediately recognized the objects in the painting as the mysterious boxes he had found in the attic so long ago. They had something to do with Jewish prayer!

As soon as the bell rang, Billy rushed out of class to the college library in search of more information. He soon discovered that the mysterious family heirloom was a set of phylacteries, known among

religious Jews as *tefillin*. Tefillin are worn by Orthodox Jewish men during the morning prayers. The straps are used to bind them on the arm and head, based on Deuteronomy 6:8:

> And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thy hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes.

So far, so good. But how on earth did a set of Jewish tefillin end up in his Christian parents' farmhouse attic? This burning question led Billy on a long quest to research the family tree. And sure enough, there was a forgotten Jew in his heritage—his own great-grandfather!

Billy's Jewish ancestor, whom we shall call Jacob, was born in Bavaria, Germany, during the 1850s. At that time, the restrictions against Jews in Germany were so rigid, that a young man had little chance of advancing himself. He could not even marry without paying an exorbitant sum of money to the government authorities. Like many German Jews of his generation, Jacob left his family and traveled alone to America, seeking his fortune in the new land of opportunity.

After a long, difficult voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, followed by a hazardous overland journey to the Ohio River Valley, Jacob was finally able to set himself up as a peddler. Trudging from farm to farm with a heavy pack on his back, he eventually made enough money to buy a horse and wagon, and later a dry-goods store. The time had come for Jacob to settle down and raise a family.

But finding a wife was no easy matter for a Jew on the American frontier. Very few single Jewish women had crossed the ocean in the mid-1800s, and there were none in the territory where Jacob lived. He had wanted to have a Jewish home and keep up the practices of his religion, but it was very difficult in the primitive conditions of the New World. One by one, the *mitzvot* had gone by the wayside.

Jacob became more and more assimilated into the gentile world. He gave up kosher food, forgot his daily prayers, kept his

store open on Saturdays. Finally he succumbed to temptation and married a gentile woman. Their children were raised in the mother's religion, and they, too, married non-Jews. Four generations later, the entire family had completely forgotten about the Jewish side of their origins—until that day when Billy found Jacob's tefillin in the old trunk in the attic.

Billy had always been strangely drawn to that set of tefillin. They held a fascination like no other objects he had ever seen. From the very moment he first laid eyes on them, he had felt as if they belonged to him personally, even though he had no idea what they were. Now, as he delved into the religion, history, and culture of his great-grandfather's people, a strong desire awakened in his heart to convert to Judaism. Eventually Billy became an Orthodox Jew—and now believes that he is the reincarnation of his own great-grandfather. In this lifetime, he married a wonderful Jewish wife, and they live with their children in Jerusalem.

(oral tradition, USA)

THE MYSTERIOUS MEMORIES

When she was a little girl, Susie had terrible nightmares. In her dreams, she was in a frightening place where the people wore striped uniforms and had shaved heads. A huge chimney was belching smoke into the sky, and there was a terrible smell in the air. Men in uniforms and black boots were standing guard with big barking dogs. People were screaming and she could hear gunshots. Then she would begin to run in terror, until she finally woke up.

In her waking life, there was nothing to account for these nightmares. Susie grew up in the 1950s in a comfortable American suburb, and had never known hunger or fear. When she told her Protestant parents about the dreams, they just held her close and said not to worry. "It's only a bad dream," her mother would say. "You are safe here with Mommy. Now go back to sleep."

But Susie didn't feel safe. There was always a feeling that somebody was watching her, and that if she made even the slightest mistake, she would be in big trouble. Again, there was nothing in her present life to account for this fear. It was just there. Once, she had tried to talk about it with her minister, but he didn't understand at all. He tried to say that it was God watching over her. But that didn't feel right.

In fact, a lot about Christianity didn't feel right to Susie. She could not accept the idea of the trinity, and didn't believe that Jesus was God. If he died on a cross, how could he be God? And if God had died, then who sustained the universe now? The whole New Testament made no sense to her, and it gave her a very uneasy feeling when she read it. The Old Testament, on the other hand, felt very familiar. She really identified with the stories about the ancient Hebrews, and almost felt as if she were one of them. She especially liked the story of Moses leading the people out of Egypt.

In high school, Susie elected to take a comparative religion class. She was amazed to learn that the Jews were the same people as the "ancient Hebrews" from the Old Testament. Somehow, she had always thought they were a different group, because her parents talked about Jews as if they were bad people. Now she found out that the Jews had a beautiful religion, and believed about God the same way she did. The God of the Jews was not a tortured man nailed to a cross, and He wasn't the "angry Jehovah," either. God was a loving Creator who was all spirit, and could not be represented by any statue or image. The Jewish ceremonies sounded interesting, too.

There were no Jews in the suburban neighborhood where Susie grew up, so she had no one to talk to about these ideas. When she got to college, she finally had a chance to visit a Reform synagogue. It was a very strange experience. On the one hand, it felt familiar, and seemed to awaken pleasant memories from another life. But on the other hand, something was not quite right. The service was too stiff, too church-like. It was as if she were step-

ping back into a personal memory that seemed out of alignment with reality. But what reality? Why was she remembering herself as a Jew?

In Susie's Protestant background, there were no teachings about reincarnation. She had been told by her minister that such things came from the devil. But she had also learned in the comparative religion class that millions of people around the world believed in it. Could reincarnation be real after all? Was she a Jew in another life? She decided to go to a past-life therapist and find out.

Under hypnosis, Susie remembered being a Jew in a Nazi concentration camp. The scene from her childhood nightmares had taken place just before she died in that life. She had been shot in the back by Nazi soldiers. Then her soul had left her body and floated upward, toward a beautiful blue light. An angel met her, and wanted to take her to the higher worlds, but she did not want to go. "My family is still down there," she said. "I must go back!"

"You can't go back," the angel explained. "Your body is dead, and they are cremating it in the ovens. That life is over."

"Then give me another body!" she had demanded. "I must go back right now!"

Because of this desire to return immediately, Susie's soul had been reborn too soon. Instead of coming back with her own Jewish soul group, she grabbed the first available body and ended up in a family of American Protestants. There had been so little time between incarnations, that her soul was not healed from the trauma of the concentration camp experience. The nightmares and the feeling of being watched all the time had "bled through" from the past life into her present life, causing the childhood fears.

Susie eventually decided to become a Jew. Because the Reform services were in English, she went there first, took the conversion classes, and eventually converted. Of course, she never told the rabbi about the past-life memories. He had seemed like a very unmystical sort of person, focusing mostly on Jewish cul-

ture and history. She wasn't even sure that Reform Jews believed in a life after death, because nobody ever talked about it.

As Susie began living a Jewish life, she decided that Reform Judaism was not right for her. She wanted to be more religious than that. By now, she had learned enough Hebrew to follow the traditional services, and the Orthodox world felt more and more comfortable to her. She eventually converted Orthodox. But again, she never told the rabbi about the past-life memories. She was afraid he might think her crazy for claiming to have died in the Holocaust.

Many years later, while surfing the Internet, she came across a website about cases of reincarnation from the Holocaust. A chill of excitement went up her spine. So Jews do have teachings about reincarnation! She contacted the rabbi on the website, and learned that there were other converts just like her—lost Jewish souls who had died in the Holocaust and somehow gotten separated from their people. These souls were now finding their way back home.

(oral tradition, USA)

THE AMERICAN SPARKS

As the armies of Adolf Hitler—may his name be erased!—marched across Europe in the middle of the twentieth century, they sought and destroyed every Jewish town and village they could find, burning the records and murdering the people without mercy. Entire families were completely wiped out, with not a single surviving individual anywhere on the European continent. Even the dead were attacked by the Nazis. Ruthless soldiers destroyed the Jewish cemeteries in a vicious attempt to make it seem as if Jews had never lived there.

When these millions of murdered Jews arrived in the Other World, they were filled with unspeakable sadness because of what they had experienced on earth. The concentration camps had not

only destroyed their physical bodies, they had penetrated to the deepest depths of their souls. Even their spiritual bodies—which should have been glowing with holy light—were twisted and mangled from the pain and humiliation of the Nazi horrors.

It took a long time for these poor Holocaust souls to heal in the other world, but heal they did, with the help of the ministering angels, who surrounded them with light and love. Eventually the souls were ready to move on to the next stage of their development. Some chose to remain in heaven, because they could not bear the thought of ever facing physical life again. But other souls decided that the time had come for them to reincarnate. They turned their attention toward the earth below, to choose the families where they would be born for their next lifetime.

Normally, these Jewish souls would have chosen to return in their genetic family lines, as their own great-grandchildren. Thus it had been for many, many centuries of Jewish life on earth. But alas, Hitler's henchmen had been so thorough in their evil work, that many souls could not find even one single survivor of their families anywhere in Europe. Where there should have been brightly glowing Sabbath candles in Jewish homes on Friday night, there was only sad darkness. Europe had become one vast Jewish graveyard, with no place for the Holocaust souls to reincarnate among their own people.

So the Holocaust souls turned their attention to the New World across the Atlantic Ocean. Aha—there were still Jews in America, and many long-lost relatives among them! True, they were quite secularized, and some had totally forgotten that they were even Jewish. But they were family, and even an assimilated Jewish body is better than no Jewish body at all. So these souls happily descended to earth and entered the wombs of their new American mothers, to become the postwar generation. In future decades, during the 1960s and 1970s, their pre-Holocaust joy and spirituality would awaken, and they would help renew the Jewish spirit throughout America.

But other Holocaust souls were not so lucky. Try as they might, they could not find a single Jew anywhere on earth who was even remotely related to their family line. Such anguish they felt! All that they had been on earth was totally erased, as if it had never been . . .

But wait, there were some tiny remnants of their family left—descendants of Jews who had come to America over a century ago. Only now, they weren't Jewish anymore. For generations they had intermarried, converted, assimilated—for all intents and purposes, they were totally merged with the surrounding population. Not only were they no longer Jewish according to Jewish law—their Jewish ancestry was totally forgotten by everyone on earth.

"What shall we do?" the souls cried out to the angels. "Do we return into strange Jewish families, or do we return as gentiles in our own family lines?" But the angels could not advise them, because angels do not understand what it means to procreate on earth. Angels do not have parents or descendants—angels just are. On this question, the souls had to decide for themselves.

"Let's return into these lost, assimilated families," they said, "in order to bring them back to their rightful place among the Jewish people. We will reincarnate as gentiles, but with our Jewish memories intact. We will grow up as strangers in a strange land, but when the time is right, we will rediscover Judaism and convert. In that way, we shall redeem the sparks of our people that are in exile there, and renew what Hitler sought to destroy."

And so it happened. Thousands upon thousands of Holocaust souls sought out the remaining sparks of their family trees on earth, and joined with them, to become Jewish souls in gentile bodies. It was not an easy thing to do, growing up in a strange culture and practicing a different religion. How lonely and alienated the poor souls felt! In some cases, their new birth families lived in such remote areas, that there was not a single Jew to be found there for hundreds of miles around. The souls longed for a

Jewish life on the spiritual level, but in the physical world, they did not even have the words to decribe what they were seeking.

Nevertheless, they continued to search. And this time, the angels could help, by guiding the souls to "accidentally" find the people, books, and resources they needed to reawaken their Jewish soul-memories. One by one, the Holocaust souls began converting to Judaism, and reconnected their genetic lines to the Jewish family tree. And so it continues to this very day.

(oral tradition, USA)

Endnotes

CHAPTER 1: HEAVEN AND EARTH

The Heavenly Body of Adam

Rabbi Simlai in the Talmud was the first to state that the Torah has 613 *mitzvot*. A number of scholars have produced lists of the 613, the best-known being *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* by Maimonides in the twelfth century. In the mid-sixteenth century, Isaac Luria developed a system that explained correspondences between the *mitzvot* and the parts of the spiritual body. See "Roots of the Soul" in this chapter for a further explanation of this idea.

Why Adam Ate the Fruit

Based on Buber, *Tales*, Vol. 1, pp. 243–44. This is the same Reb Zusya who said, "When I get to the next world, they will not ask me, 'Why weren't you Moses?' They will ask, 'Why weren't you Zusya?'"

The Hall of Exchanges

I am deeply indebted to Aryeh Kaplan's commentary on "The Exchanged Children" (*Rabbi Nachman's Stories*, pp. 232–33) for

revealing the hidden connection between the "Hall" or "Chamber" of Exchanges (*Hechal Ha-Temurot*) and reincarnation. Several of Rabbi Nachman's stories are based on this theme of things being "turned around" in the world below.

Roots of the Soul

The three sections in this story are usually told as separate tales. By linking them together, my version makes a clear connection between the doctrine of Adam's body, and the reason why the sages stressed the importance of choosing a personal mitzvah. The motif of souls clinging to Adam's body is from the Midrash (Exodus Rabbah 40:3). The tale about the sages comes from the Talmud, *Shabbat* 118–19. (The order of the sages' statements has been rearranged for the sake of the narrative here.) See my notes to "The Heavenly Body of Adam" above for references on the 613 *mitzvot*. The Seven Laws of Noah are in *Sanhedrin* 56a. Rabbi Nachman's teachings about choosing one special mitzvah is from *Shevachey Haran* # 235.

The Treasury of Souls

This parable is adapted from the *Sefer Ha-Bahir* # 184. See "Good and Evil" in Chapter 4 for an explanation of how "a generation comes" is understood by the *Bahir* as a reference to reincarnation.

A very garbled version of this motif was used in the apocalyptic Christian film, *The Seventh Sign*. An "old Jewish prophecy" is cited where the "Well of Souls" was almost empty, and a child was about to be born without a soul—thus heralding the end of the world. In the movie version, the "Well of Souls" was called the "guff," from the Hebrew *gupf*, meaning "body," i.e., the celestial body of the First Adam. However, there is nothing in the Jewish version of the story to indicate that a person can be born without a soul!

Soulmates

The idea of soulmates is common in Judaism, and can also be found in many other cultures as well. The story told here is a

composite of teachings from various sources, both oral and written. The hermaphroditic nature of Adam Kadmon is described in the Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 8:1). The announcing angel is mentioned in the Talmud (*Sotah* 2a). The teaching about false soulmates comes from *Sefer Baal Shem Tov*, # 239. The Baal Shem Tov's quote about the light of two souls joining into one stream is cited by Meyer Levin (*Classic Hasidic Tales*, p. 71) and others, and has recently become a popular reading at Jewish weddings.

Although the early Hasidic stories say very little about the wives of the Rebbes, they were held in high esteem as the soulmates of great Zaddikim. The Besht himself believed that he would be able to rise bodily to heaven like the Prophet Elijah, but after his wife died, he said could not do this anymore, because he was now only "half a soul" (*Shivchei Ha-Besht* # 146).

The findings of modern parapsychology suggest that the soul doesn't really "split," but simply takes on the male or female attributes of the body when it incarnates. This is the currently accepted view among many modern Jewish groups, such as Jewish Renewal and the women's spirituality movements.

Of Men and Angels

This is definitely a case where the bride and groom were *not* soulmates! There are many oral variants of this story, attributed to different rabbis. A retelling by Zalman Schachter appeared in the *Holy Beggar's Gazette*, a periodical published by Shlomo Carlebach's "House of Love and Prayer" in 1975. In Schachter's version, the Baal Shem Tov is present at the divorce hearing—presumably in disguise, since he is wearing peasant clothing and lights the stove to warm the room where the proceedings took place.

Adam's Children

There are several versions of this story, some of which occur in non-Jewish Gnostic sources. Although mainstream Judaism does not equate Adam's sin with sexuality, certain strains of

mystical thought do make that connection. However, the sexual act is not the same as "eating the forbidden fruit." God had commanded Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply" even *before* they were cast out of Eden. It is clear from the biblical narrative that they were intended to have children even if they had remained within the Garden. The sin of the "forbidden fruit" was not sex, but disobedience to the will of God. Adam's sin in this story was the misuse of sex, not sex itself.

Gedaliah Fleer cites a version of this story in *Rabbi Nachman's Foundation*, a treatise on the Ten Psalms that Breslover Hasidim (and others) recite as a *tikkun* (repair) for nocturnal emissions. Reference to Adam's 130–year period of separation from Eve can be found in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 91b) and his reaction to the death of Cain is described in the Midrash (*Bereshit Rabbah* 23:5). Although the original version focuses on Adam, I prefer a more egalitarian telling, where both husband and wife are involved in the decision not to have children.

Reference to the tainted souls created by Adam, and their subsequent healing at Mt. Sinai, is found in the Zohar (cf. Zohar III, 168a).

For a retelling of the many oral traditions surrounding the death of Abel and the punishment of Cain, see Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, pp. 54–63. The "mark of Cain" has been variously interpreted, in both Jewish and non-Jewish circles, as a physical deformity, leprosy, a change in skin color, a brand, or even a horn on his head (!). I prefer the version cited here, because it has no racial connotations. The purpose of the mark was to place Cain under God's protection, not social discrimination.

The idea that certain "races" or strains of humanity are more "tainted" than others is common in occult circles, and has found its way into some of the "new age" philosophies of today. Some of these versions are openly racist and offensive. While this story does have some of the same elements, it is important to note that differences among "races" of souls (if such ever existed in the first place) were removed forever with the giving of the Torah at Sinai.

Judaism stresses the oneness of humanity, and does not recognize barriers based on skin color.

Rabbi Dead Man

This story is based on an account from the oral tradition of the Breslover Hasidim, cited by Aryeh Kaplan in *Until the Moschiach*, pp. 326–27. Although the story is not about reincarnation per se, it was included because of what it tells us about Feiga's beliefs concerning the afterlife, and her relationship with the soul of her saintly grandfather. See also "Feiga the Prophetess" in Chapter 7.

This story is also interesting in the light of what we now know about near-death experiences (NDEs). A common motif in the NDE accounts is that of a "barrier" beyond which the soul cannot pass—or else he or she will be unable to return to the body. Here we are told by the Baal Shem Tov that the soul of little Yisroel was already mingling with the souls of the other world, so it was difficult to bring it back to the body. The idea that he could have retrieved the wrong soul is disturbing, unless we consider the possibility that the boy did not want to return from the joys of Paradise, so he relinquished his body to another spirit, which did. In "new age" terms, this would be called a "walk-in."

The Ship of Souls

This story is also known as "The First Beggar's Tale" and comes from a much longer cycle, "The Seven Beggars" by Nachman of Breslov. On each of the seven nights after the wedding, a different beggar comes and tells a mystical tale that explains his strange blessing in the forest: "To be like I am." All of the stories have kabbalistic themes, but only the first beggar's tale—the one given here—has an explanation of the symbolism.

"The Ship of Souls" can be interpreted as a teaching about reincarnation or physical resurrection or both, depending upon how one "hears" it. Because a soul may have to experience a series of earthly lives before the Great Resurrection at the end of

time, the sojourn of the shipwrecked souls in the "very high tower" might refer to an interlude in the higher spiritual realms in preparation for the next earthly incarnation.

The "Garden of Eden" is a common kabbalistic metaphor for both the pre-existent spiritual world and the afterlife—which may well be the same plane of consciousness. The "Great Eagle" apparently comes from Psalm 103: "[God] satisfied your old age with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle." Rashi's commentary on this verse cites the ancient belief that an eagle gets younger the older it gets. This is not biologically accurate, of course, but may refer to the change in plumage colors that takes place in some species at maturity. The eagle was also one of the "four creatures" in Ezekiel's vision of the Heavenly Chariot, and has long been associated with the Prophet Elijah. (See Kaplan, *Rabbi Nachman's Stories*, p. 466.) The reference to the "burning light" and the angel that teaches the child in the womb is from the Talmud (*Niddah* 30b).

CHAPTER 2: REDEEMING SPARKS

The Grain of Wheat

I first heard this story on Tu B'Shevat, the Jewish equivalent of "Earth Day." Being an avid gardener and amateur naturalist, I embroidered it with horticultural details, and told it many times in connection with discussions about Judaism and ecology. Not until 1997 did I finally find a printed version. Rabbi Chaim Kramer (Breslov) cites it in his commentary to *Likutey Moharan* (Lesson # 37:6), attributing the story to Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev.

In Kramer's version, the rabbi told the story to a Jew who had failed to make a blessing on some whiskey while traveling to see his Rebbe. It was later revealed that his father's soul was incarnated in the grain of wheat, and the entire purpose of the journey had been to redeem the soul in the whiskey. By failing to make

the blessing at the inn, the son failed to help free his father from the cycle of reincarnation among the lower life forms. See the next story, "The Frog Scholar," on a similar theme.

The Frog Scholar

There are several versions of the Baal Shem Tov and the frog story, as well as numerous other stories on the theme of ritual handwashing, which I have combined into one longer tale here. In *Shivchei ha-Besht*, the first compilation of Baal Shem Tov stories ever printed, we already have two variants. In the first, the Besht meets the frog while traveling with the robbers to the Holy Land. In the second, he simply walks a long way, lost in ecstatic prayer for three days and three nights. At the end of this reverie, he finds himself in a desert (presumably at an oasis where there is water!) and meets the frog.

In *The Earth is the Lord's*, A. J. Heschel gives yet a third version of the Besht-and-the-frog story, which I incorporated here as a prelude to the other two. In Heschel's version, the father reincarnates as a frog, and the son becomes the butler to a merchant who goes to the spa, etc. (See Heschel, pp. 58–59.)

I chose to assume that the soul in Heschel's version was the same soul that was later rescued by the Besht. *Shivchei Ha-Besht* tells us that the soul had been a frog for 500 years and that the Holy Ari (mid-sixteenth century) had not been able to save him because the frog was in a remote place where the Ari never walked. This places the frog somewhere in Israel. Yet the Besht later finds the frog in a wooded swamp in Eastern Europe! I solved the problem by having Yossi soul reincarnate multiple times into different frog bodies over the centuries. That made it possible for him to "travel" without hopping for thousands of miles.

My model for the dialogue between Rav Yossi and the voice of temptation comes from yet another handwashing tale, attributed to Reb Sholem, a devoted disciple of the Seer of Lublin. In Reb Sholem's story, the man had already broken every commandment *except* the one to wash before eating bread. One day, on a

long hot journey, the voice of temptation almost convinces him to eat bread without washing, but at the very last moment he refuses. He goes in search of water, and is killed by robbers at the spring. However, because he was devoted to this mitzvah even unto death, the man is granted a full pardon by the Heavenly Court (Langer, *Nine Gates*, pp. 49–50).

In *Legends of the Hasidim*, Jerome Mintz cites a more recent story about the handwashing mitzvah. In that version, an American soldier went to the Lubovitcher Rebbe, who told him to scrupulously observe this mitzvah. The soldier was later sent to Korea, where his devotion saved his life, because he left the very spot where a bomb later fell, in order to search for water (Mintz, pp. 330–31). In this version, nobody is turned into a frog, but the message is the same: we really do not know the true worth of a mitzvah.

The Stone in the Wall

The source of this short tale is *Emet Hamelech* 153:2, edited by Hirsh ben Elhanah, Amsterdam 1653. The verse from Habakkuk is 2:12–13. The story seems to imply that this soul had been trapped in the stone since the days of the prophet Habakkuk. We are not told who the soul was, nor what specific sin it committed in order to be sentenced to such confinement. However, Chaim Vital wrote in the *Sefer Ha-Gilgulim*: "The person who speaks slander is reincarnated into an inanimate stone," presumably because it cannot speak.

The synagogue of Rabbi Yochanan, who lived in the Talmudic period, was not yet built in the days of Habakkuk. But stone-cutting was a laborious task in ancient times, so it was not unusual for materials to be re-used as one structure was torn down and another built from its rubble. We can assume that the stone dated to the time of Habakkuk, even though the synagogue did not.

Modern readers might argue that this is really a story about an earthbound soul, not reincarnation, since one cannot be "re-

born" as a rock in the same was as one might be reborn as an animal or a human. The theme of redemption, however, remains the same.

The Oxen-Men

From *Shivchei ha-Ari*. This is one of those tales in which *gilgul* could be interpreted in several ways: as possession by an earth-bound soul, as a magical transformation, or as reincarnation. I have heard it told in all three contexts.

Cutting off one's sidecurls would be more than a mere haircut in this context. Because the sidecurls clearly mark their wearer as a Jew, the implication is that the three men had attempted to pass for gentiles. Assimilation into the dominant culture is considered a sin in traditional Judaism, because God expects the Jews to retain a distinctive identity in His honor. Removing the sidecurls would be tantamount to removing insignia from a uniform.

The Bull of Castile

Based on a short anecdote from *Sefer Haredim 3:7* (Venice 1601), also cited in *Chemdat Yamim*, which states that most of the souls in recent generations have reincarnated and are now back for *tikkun*, (repair) to mend what they did not fix before.

My version is greatly expanded from the original, which consists of a mere four paragraphs that read more like lecture notes than a completely developed story. In order to make the tale understandable as a parable about reincarnation, I had to fill in the surrounding details, using a technique similar to historical fiction. The dream scene follows the content of the original, but is expanded to include details like the Heavenly Court, as well as the *reason* the father wants his bull-body to be fed to the poor. The emotional "eye contact" between the bull and the son is my own addition. The names of the characters are entirely fictional.

A similar story is told of Nosson of Nemirov (Ukraine, early nineteenth century), involving a fish rather than a bull. Reb

Nosson dreamed that a man would offer to sell him a fish. The next day, everything happened exactly as in the dream. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov then told Reb Nosson that the fishmonger was really Elijah the Prophet in disguise, and the fish held the soul of Reb Nosson's father. The soul could be freed by cooking the fish and serving it on Shabbat—which he did. (See Schwartz, *Gabriel's' Palace*, pp. 233–34.)

One Less Death

I first heard this story from a Lubovitcher Hasid in Baltimore. Zalman Schachter cites it in *Spiritual Intimacy* (p. 157), and Jerome Mintz in *Legends of the Hasidim* (pp. 390–91). Both collected it at least three decades ago, from oral sources within the Lubovitch community in New York.

The verse from Ecclesiastes is probably 7:26: "I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is all snares and nets . . . "

There are numerous other variants on this theme of husbands and wives who find themselves locked in a stressful marriage because of "bad karma" from another life. Although there appear to be more stories about nagging wives than husbands in the anthologies, this is probably because it was the husbands who traveled to the Rebbes, so their side of the story was recorded. Oral stories in this genre reflect a more equal number of complaints from both sides. I have even heard a version about a teenager and his parents!

The Animals' Complaint

I heard this story in 1997 at an Anthroposophy conference on reincarnation in Berlin, from a German Jew who shared it after my storytelling performance. The tale is an interesting blend of traditional Hasidic thought and modern concerns about ecology.

Shabbetai Zevi was a historical personage, about whom a great deal has been written (cf. Scholem, *Shabbetai Zevi*). The misinter-

pretation of the blessing is based upon a play on words concerning the technical meaning of *assur* ("bound") in Jewish law. Something that is *assur* is "bound by the law" and forbidden for use by Jews. By reciting "Who releases the bound" over nonkosher foods, the Sabbateans were claiming that they were now "unbound" and permitted to be eaten. The Sabbatean heresy eventually led to the breakdown of Torah observance and the secularization of European Jews in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To counteract this trend, the Hasidic masters stressed that one must observe the *mitzvot* with meticulous care, even after spiritual enlightenment.

A Dream of Eden

Based on a true story that I first reported in a different form in *Jewish Vegetarians*, Autumn 1986, under the title "Animal Souls."

CHAPTER 3: REBIRTH OR GEHENNA?

The Wisdom of the Martyrs

Based on *Shivchei Ha-Besht* # 137, first published in 1814. This was only sixty-one years after the blood libel took place, so the event was still fresh in the minds of the Jewish community at that time. I have expanded the story here, in order to make the issues clear to modern readers.

The apparition of Rabbi Akiva is an allusion to the story of the Ten Martyrs, which is read every year on Yom Kippur. Akiva died while reciting the *Shema* prayer, declaring the unity of God, and is the archetype of Jewish martyrs.

The idea that our actions here on earth can affect the heavenly realms is central to kabbalistic and Hasidic thought. But the suggestion that the Baal Shem Tov was prevented from knowing

the outcome of the libelous trial, lest his prayers prevent the martyrdom from occurring, is disturbing to the modern reader. With the Holocaust fresh in our minds, we find it difficult to accept that such a horrible death was "decreed in heaven." But martyrdom was no less horrible in the Baal Shem Tov's day, and he, too, was embittered by it for a time. Interestingly, the martyrs themselves had already found peace in heaven; it was the living survivors below who were bent on revenge.

To Earth Again—or to Hell?

This is a well-known Lubovitch story, told to me on numerous occasions during my research for this book. It was also cited by Jerome Mintz in 1968, who gives his source as a 60–year-old Lubovitcher rabbi (Mintz, *Legends of the Hasidim*, pp. 250–51).

The Alter Rebbe's advice appears to be a reversal of the well-known Talmudic dictum, "Better one hour of spiritual bliss in the Hereafter than an entire lifetime of this world's pleasures" (*Pirkei Avot* 4:22).

The Mouse

Although the original text does not say that the informer worked for the Inquisition, this would be a reasonable assumption, given that many of Luria's disciples had fled the Inquisition themselves. Throughout Jewish history, informers have been regarded as especially vile characters, because they turn innocent Jews over to their persecutors for personal gain.

In most of the informer stories, the souls of the informers return as dogs, probably because dogs bark and sound the alarm, and are used to track down fugitives. In this story the informer returns as a mouse, perhaps related to the expression about eavesdroppers being "a mouse in the corner of the room."

A Soul Before the Heavenly Court

This is a "formula" story about the Heavenly Court, which has many different versions, told about various Rebbes and their

followers. This one comes from the Satmar tradition, and is also cited in *Legends of the Hasidim* by Jerome Mintz, pp. 279–80.

The idea that a Rebbe can serve as one's advocate in the Heavenly Court is central to the relationship between Rebbe and Hasid. Nevertheless, the Rebbe is not an intermediary, nor does he do vicarious atonement for the Hasid. The Rebbe can argue on behalf of his client, but the client himself must do the actual repenting in order to avert the negative decree.

In non-Hasidic stories about near-death experiences, the Rebbe does not play as central a role, but the plot remains the same. When I was traveling in Switzerland in 1997, Rabbi Levinger, the Rav of Basel, told me a similar story about a secular woman who had a near-death experience. When she got to the next world, she realized that she could bring nothing with her except Torah and *mitzvot*—of which she had almost none. After recovering from her illness, she became a very religious Jew and eventually moved to Israel.

The Fire of Purgatory

Adapted from *Sefer Shomer Emunim*, p. 244, and oral tradition. Also cited by Zalman Schachter in *Spiritual Intimacy*, p. 49. The Reb Arelach Hasidim (followers of Rabbi Roth's teachings) are among the strictest of the Haredim in Jerusalem today.

The Funeral Procession

From the Breslov text, *Tzaddik*, lesson # 446, recorded by Nosson of Nemirov. Also cited by Chaim Kramer, *Through Fire and Water: The Life of Reb Nosson of Nemirov*, pp. 159–61.

The Two Friends

Lubovitch oral tradition. Also cited by Zalman Schachter, who heard it at a Lubovitch *farbrengen* in the 1950s (*Spiritual Intimacy*, pp. 157–58). I named the two men "Aharon and Berel" (representing "person A" and "person B") to help keep the characters straight. In the oral version, hand gestures pointing to the left and right (for "this one" and "that one") are used instead.

The Value of Mud

Cited by Mintz (*Legends*, pp. 256). Newman includes a similar story about the Rizhiner Rebbe in *Hasidic Anthology* (p. 169), but does not mention reincarnation. In the version collected by Mintz, the storyteller clearly states that the Court would "send him down to this world once again," etc. That is also how I heard it told in Lubovitch circles.

CHAPTER 4: RECYCLED SOULS

Good and Evil

This story is constructed from several passages in the *Sefer Ha-Bahir* (sections 121–22, 154–55, 194–95). The teachings in the *Bahir* are attributed to Nehuniah ben Hakana, headmaster of the first-century school of Merkavah mystics. The *Bahir* was first published in its present form in 1176 by the Provence school of kabbalists in southern France.

Rabbi Rahumai, who tells the first parable about reincarnation, is mentioned thirteen times in the *Bahir*. In the Zohar we are told that he knew Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair, the father-in-law of Shimon bar Yochai, who is traditionally regarded as the author of the Zohar. From the *Bahir* itself there is evidence that Rabbi Rahumai led the mystical school after Nehuniah's death.

Rabbi Akiva is well-known to us from the Talmud as a master of Jewish law and exegesis. In addition, he was also a mystic of the Merkavah ("Chariot") school. The Talmud (*Chagigah* 14b) tells how four sages "entered the mystic Paradise," a metaphor for practicing the meditation techniques of Merkavah. These were dangerous exercises, and the only one to come out unscathed was Rabbi Akiva. Because of this story, Jewish mystical tradition regards Akiva as a master of kabbalistic knowledge.

Rich Man, Poor Man

This well-known story is cited by Buber (*Tales*, Vol. I, pp. 273–74) and is one of the clearest references to reincarnation in his entire collection. The names "Bettler" and "Geltman" are fictitious.

Although it is commonly believed that there is a long waiting period between incarnations, this is only one of many Jewish tales where a soul comes back immediately. The lack of a waiting period between lives seems to contribute toward the detailed memories of the previous life. See also "The Difficult Decision" and "From Life to Life" in this chapter.

The Difficult Decision

Ezekiel Rothenberg and Moses Shanefield, *HaRabi Mikotzk v'shishim Giborim*, Saviv Lo, p. 375, cited by Schachter-Shalomi in *Spiritual Intimacy*, pp. 90–91. See "The Treasury of Souls" in Chapter 1 for more on new souls coming into the world.

From Life to Life

Buber, *Tales*, Vol. I, pp. 310. This tale is a perfect example of how reincarnation was taught among Jews through cryptic hints and allusions. The Buber version is a single paragraph that makes no reference to reincarnation. In the oral version, the reader is expected to understand, aided by a "knowing" gesture and voice inflection by the storyteller, that the soul of Count Shalom had immediately passed into the body of his grandson. I have expanded the story to clarify the subtle hints in print.

The Long Dispute

This well-known tale is cited by both Buber (*Tales*, Vol. II, pp. 310–11) and Langer (*Nine Gates*, pp. 183–84). The "Iron Head" (*Eiserner Kopf*) was Rabbi Azriel Horowitz of Lublin. Some say that he eventually came to believe in the saintliness of the Seer of Lublin, partially because of this incident. Others say that he remained vehemently opposed to Hasidism to the end.

The Innkeeper's Son

I first heard this story at the table of Zalman Schachter in 1980. A slightly different version is cited by Mintz (*Legends*, p. 236), where the boy was born normal, but later took sick and refused to speak. Both Schachter and Mintz attribute it to Lubovitch sources. I prefer the version told here, because it provides a positive reason for a child to be born mentally handicapped—a severe stigma in traditional Jewish society, where scholarship is held in highest esteem.

The story is quite radical in another way, because it suggests that a ruling in Jewish law that had become generally accepted was, in fact, based on human error. Note, however, that the Besht is not questioning the system of kashrut itself, only this one rabbi's decision in a particular case. Nevertheless, such stories caused the early opponents of Hasidism to accuse the Besht and his followers of laxness in Torah observance. Some opposing rabbis went so far as to forbid the eating of meat slaughtered by Hasidim. (These conflicts have long since been resolved.)

The Bride's Debt

From *Shivchei Ha-Ari*. A slightly different version appears in *Oseh Feleh*, and is cited by Pinchas Sadeh in *Jewish Folktales*. In Sadeh's retelling, the bride lives only three months instead of six, and the disciple does not learn the reason for her sudden death until after he returns to Safed.

Stories about souls changing sex from life to life are relatively rare in Jewish sources, but not unknown. Unfortunately, some of the older tales are rather misogynous, perceiving the change from male to female as a form of "demotion." Modern anecdotes take a more egalitarian approach to the question, viewing the change of sex as a learning experience for the purpose of achieving spiritual balance. See also "Soulmates" in Chapter 1, and "The Soul of Ruth" in Chapter 6.

The Wedding

From *Sipurei Ha-Ari*, also cited by Schachter-Shalomi, *Spiritual Intimacy*, p. 155. In this and the previous two stories, there is a significant difference between the Jewish and "new age" perspectives about sudden death from physiological causes. In the "new age" interpretation, the deaths would probably be attributed to some type of "negative karma" from a previous life, as a form of payback in a "life-for-life" scenario. From the Jewish viewpoint, the "karma" is more often connected to a mitzvah that must be performed by the returning soul. Once the task is completed, the soul leaves for the higher worlds.

CHAPTER 5: ANIMAL AND HUMAN

The Little Horse

One of the best-known Baal Shem Tov stories on the theme of reincarnation. It comes from *Shivchei Ha-Besht*, the earliest collection of Baal Shem Tov stories, and has been retold in many anthologies. Jerome Mintz cites a similar story about Reb Mottel of Chernobyl (Mintz, *Legends*, pp. 257–58).

The Life of a Dog

The story of the Shunamite woman is from II Kings 4:8–37, where we are told that "Gehazi had gone on before them" with the staff, but not what he did along the way.

In *Jewish Folktales*, Israeli writer Pinchas Sadeh cites a version where the prophet's staff does not work because it has been *defiled* by touching the dog (Sadeh, pp. 134–36). This reason would make sense to listeners in the Middle East, where dogs are regarded as "unclean" animals by both Jews and Arabs.

The oral version used here, which I first heard in the United States, gives a "magical" reason for Gehazi's failure. The prophet's blessing was more like a one-shot spell placed on the staff by

Elisha, in order for Gehazi to carry it to the Shunamite's house. Gehazi used up the blessing by resurrecting the dog, so it did not work on the child.

The American version demonstrates how changing attitudes about animals are affecting the way we tell these stories. Throughout most of Jewish history, dogs were not "man's best friend" at all. In Middle Eastern or Sephardic tales, dogs are "unclean beasts," which defile everything they touch. In European or Hasidic stories, they are the howling accomplices of angry peasant mobs carrying torches and pitchforks. And in twentieth-century Holocaust stories, they are snarling guard dogs that the Nazis used to track Jews or terrorize them in the concentration camps. Add all of these themes together, and it's easy to see why dogs had negative associations among Jews in the Old Country. This imagery was carried by Jewish immigrants to the New World, where it has persisted for several generations.

In American folklore, on the other hand, the family dog is a trusted, faithful friend who plays with the children and is willing to sacrifice his very life to keep them from danger. If this story took place today, the dog would be posthumously awarded a medal for bravery! In a way, that's what happened in Luria's day also, because the story itself remains as a lasting testimonial.

In *Magic, Mysticism, and Hasidism*, Gedalyah Nigel cites a similar story about a dog that sacrifices its life to save the lives of Jews (p. 243). In that tale, collected orally from an old family in Safed, the dog was buried with full honors—complete with kaddish!—and the funeral was attended by none other than the great Hasidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev.

The Fish and the Dog #1

From *Shivchei Ha-Besht*, # 108. The same collection contains another story about an informer who almost ended up reincarnating as a dog, but was saved from this fate by the insulting sermon that was preached at his funeral. The soul of the deceased informer later appears to the preacher and thanks him for the

public humiliation, which had humbled his soul and enabled him to repent.

The idea that informers reincarnate as dogs was already well-known in the time of Isaac Luria (mid-sixteenth century). Chaim Vital, a disciple of Luria, states in the *Sefer Ha-Gilgulim* that "anyone who causes the money of a Jew to be given over to idolators as a result of informing is sentenced to become a barking dog." What is most likely meant here was informing to the Roman Catholic Inquisition, which confiscated the possessions of its victims.

The Fish and the Dog #2

From *Shivchei Ha-Besht*, # 250. This is an interesting mixture of reincarnation and possession, where the father's soul is born into the dog as an embryo, but later leaps immediately into a full-grown fish. It then enters the son as an *ibbur*, the temporary entry of a holy soul into a living person for the purpose of a mitzvah (in this case, the Sabbath). See also "Reincarnation or Possession?" in the "Basic Themes" section of this book.

The Two Ravens

From *Shivchei Ha-Ari*. In retelling this story, I expanded the Ari's explanations to make the biblical references clearer. The interpretation regarding why the two souls came back as ravens is my own, based upon personal observation of ravens in the wild. I have often seen songbirds of many species banding together to harass a raven or crow into leaving their territory.

When I first encountered this story many years ago, I thought the Ari's answer was exceedingly harsh. Here were two souls asking for forgiveness, and he sends them away with a curse! But in recent years, I have come to understand the deeper meaning of this tale. While on a speaking tour in Central Europe in 1997, I was repeatedly asked if I could grant group forgiveness to the Germans for the Holocaust. But Judaism does not work that way; we do not have a pope who grants amnesty on behalf of the entire people. If the soul of Adolf Hitler himself (equivalent to King

Balak in the raven story) were to come to me for forgiveness, my answer would be similar to that of the Ari: "You tried to destroy an entire people, so it is not enough to ask forgiveness from one token Jew." (See Gershom, "Did the Soul of Hitler Repent?", *From Ashes to Healing*, pp. 149–59.)

The Praying Sheep

Meyer Levin's version of this story in *Classic Hasidic Tales* ends with the sheep standing in the field. The oral version, which I heard from a Satmar Hasid, apparently merges two stories, one about the sheep and a second story, from *Shivchei Ha-Besht* (# 219), about a Hasid who ends up spending Yom Kippur in a field, and is told by the Besht that his prayers helped elevate souls that were exiled there. Human-like behavior by animals is often regarded as a sign that they are reincarnations. A Breslover Hasid once told me about a pet rabbit that would always stand on its hind legs during the recital of kiddush on Friday night (when it is customary for everyone to stand).

The Unwanted Guests

I wrote this tale in honor of my wife, Caryl Rachel. In Minnesota where we currently live, the bees (or, more properly, yellowjacket wasps) are an especially annoying problem in the sukkah, and she really does try to lure them away with sweets.

The Bershader's teaching concerning souls who return as bees is well-known, and can be found in *Midrash Pinchas* (Warsaw 1876). It is cited by Buber (*Tales*, Vol. I, p. 28), but the English translation renders the story meaningless, because it does not explain the Yiddish pun. In *Nine Gates*, Jiri Langer clearly attributes the teaching to the Ari and further explains:

> We know that this punishment is a truly appropriate and just one, and that the life of a bee counterbalances the damage done by human conceit. For the bee is a creature that never thinks of itself. All its thoughts, feelings and acts are exclusively devoted to the general happiness of the entire hive. [p. 209]

The Vengeful Rat

My thanks to Grigori Kaskin, who shared this bit of dark humor during a political discussion on the Internet. This twentieth-century Russian tale is interesting because it reverses the usual order of incarnations. In traditional Jewish sources, the souls of humans can come back as animals to atone for sins, but they retain their human consciousness. In this case, the rats return as humans, but retain their animal behavior. The choice of species for the story is based, of course, on the modern expression, "You dirty rat!"

CHAPTER 6: WHO WAS WHO

Idol at the Crossroads

I first heard this story while traveling in Germany in 1997. Pinchas Sadeh also cites it in *Jewish Folktales* (pp. 162–63), giving his source as simply "a volume published in Jerusalem." In Sadeh's version, Reb Moshe has no last name. In the German version he is called "Moshe Stein" after the name of his tavern, which is probably fictitious.

This is only one of many such stories about disputations between Jews and the Roman Catholic Church. After the Holocaust, the Catholic Church began reexamining many of its doctrines, and has repudiated many former anti-Jewish stances. Modern Christians are often unaware of the centuries of antagonism and persecution that produced this type of folktale.

The story of King Manasseh is found in the Bible in II Kings, chapter 21. After the death of Hezekiah, Manasseh ascended the throne at the tender age of twelve years old, and reigned for fifty-five years. The idolatrous practices that were set into motion during his generation are generally regarded by the rabbis as the "karmic" causes for the later destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Exile circa 550 B.C.E.

See the next story, "Destroyer of Idols," where Rabbi Schmelke of Nikolsburg decides a similar case.

Destroyer of Idols

Cited in the name of Reb Simchah-Bunem of Pshischkah by Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin in *A Treasury of Chassidic Tales*, Vol. I, pp. 43–45. Compare this with the previous tale, "Idol at the Crossroads."

The Soul of Samuel

Cited by Buber, *Tales*, Vol. I, p. 194. The story seems to imply that Reb Shmelke remembered his past life during his early childhood—a phenomenon that has been documented in modern times by Carol Bowman in *Children's Past Lives*. It is widely believed among Jews that the name of a child connects him (or her) to the original bearer of that name. Calling himself "Shmelke" rather than "Samuel" was a matter of humility. Although it is common for the followers of a Hasidic Rebbe to attribute signs and wonders to him, the Rebbe himself is expected to play down his own greatness. This probably accounts for the fact that so many of these stories take place on the deathbed.

The Soul of Ruth

Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz was a historical personage, whose grandfather, Rabbi Joshua Sheftl, wrote a mystical book, *Shefa Tal* (The Outpouring of Dew), which describes the infinite bliss that fills the heavenly spheres at the moment of sexual union between married persons when done in holiness and purity. The basis for my story comes from Jiri Langer's *Nine Gates to the Hasidic Mysteries* (p. 179), where he explains the origin of the Horowitz surname and the acrostic that connects Isaac Horowitz with Ruth.

Ruth is regarded as the archetypal convert, who chose to follow Naomi and become Jewish, not for wealth or convenience (her

husband was dead, and Naomi was a penniless widow) but rather, because "Your people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God." Although no specific reason is given for the rebirth of Ruth's soul as Isaiah Horowitz, one possible reason for her return as a Jewish man would be to perform the gender-specific commandments, such as circumcision, which only men can do. (See "Soulmates" in Chapter 1.)

Regarding the acrostic, although this may seem a strange way to prove a connection with a past life, it was quite common during the Middle Ages, and continues to be used to the present day. Note that the acrostic is based upon the Hebrew version of the name, and that "Horowitz" plays no part in the acrostic. This is an interesting transition in the use of names among Jews. Until the late Middle Ages, Jews commonly did not have surnames, but often took the name of their town or occupation.

The Hebrew letters in question are not in the exact order in the Book of Ruth, but this poses no problem, because the rules of gematria allow for some rearrangement. The verses in question are:

Isaiah (Yod-Shin-Ayin-Yud-Heh) 1:9, 1:12, 2:9, 2:12, and 1:13.

Ben Avraham Levi (Bet-Aleph-Lamed) 1:17, 1:21, 3:13.

A Hundred Deaths

From *Notzer Chesed* 21b, an early Hasidic volume that attributes it to the Baal Shem Tov himself. (Also cited by Gedalyah Nigal in *Magic, Mysticism, and Chassidism*, p. 65.) It is not clear why the soul of the rabbi would have to be murdered a hundred times in order to atone for one death. One possibility is that he was responsible for all the fatal blows that struck Zechariah during the mob beating, and was therefore sentenced by the Heavenly Court to "die a hundred deaths." The story may also have served as a not-so-subtle rebuke to the opponents of Hasidism, who accused the Baal Shem Tov himself of being an ignoramus.

According to Rabbi Yaakov-Yosef of Polnoye (a major disciple of the Baal Shem Tov), the souls of those who hit Zechariah after

the first blow were incarnated as hypocritical Torah scholars because "they mocked the prophets of God" in those days and, in his opinion, continued to do so (*Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, 169c).

The Soul of Napoleon

I am indebted to Aryeh Kaplan's commentary on "The Exchanged Children" in *Rabbi Nachman's Stories* for revealing the connection between the anecdote about Napoleon and reincarnation. In "The Exchanged Children" tale, the prince and the servant's child are switched at birth by the midwife, and no mention is made of reincarnation or the "Hall of Exchanges" (*Hechal Ha-Temurot*). But, as Kaplan explains, the "Hall" or "Chamber" was mentioned by Rabbi Nachman in connection with Napoleon immediately before the story was revealed, and was the underlying theme. In Kaplan's words:

> The story itself represents an aspect of the Chamber of Exchanges, since, as Rabbi Nachman himself said at the end of the story, in this tale, things are sometimes given one name, and sometimes another . . . [Kaplan, *Rabbi Nachman's Stories*, p. 232]

The rise of Napoleon marked the beginning of the end of the hereditary monarchies of Europe, initiating a profound series of social changes that Rabbi Nachman seems to have clearly grasped on many levels. The idea that one's family of birth does not necessarily indicate one's true potential recurs frequently in his works. Several of his tales deal with various forms of social role reversal ("The Sophisticate and the Simpleton," "The Burgher and the Pauper," etc.) as if to say that *yichus* (social status inherited through one's genealogy) is not always an indication of the true state of the individual soul.

Amalek–Haman–Hitler

The story of Eliphaz's pursuit of Jacob and Timna's thirst for revenge comes from midrashic sources, and is retold in Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Bible*, pp. 164–66. In Jewish folklore,

Amalek often plays a role similar to that of the Devil in the battle between Good and Evil. The word *satan* means "the opposer" in Hebrew, and Amalek has opposed the Jews in every generation. Hence, he is a form of "Satan." Nevertheless, Amalek is a created being and not a "god of evil" as in some mythologies.

The belief that Hitler was a reincarnation of Amalek-Haman is widespread among Hasidic and Haredi groups today. Corollary to it is the belief that the secularization and assimilation of Western European Jews in the nineteenth century corresponds to Moses' "lowering his arms" in the battle with Amalek. By ceasing to do the *mitzvot* ("raise their hands in prayer"), the "enlightened" Jews (*maskilim*) played a "karmic" role in the rise of Hitler by allowing the forces of evil to grow unchecked. Needless to say, this is not a popular stance among secular Jews!

The High Priest's Prayer

This story is constructed from numerous fragments, both traditional and modern. The description of the High Priest's service (*Avodah*) can be found in any Orthodox Yom Kippur prayerbook. Zohar III 102a contains the reference to the rope around his foot, along with various signs that his prayer was accepted. See Jacobs, *Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, pp. 80–86, for a translation and kabbalistic analysis of this Zohar passage. The Hosea reference is based upon a "pun" in the prophet's words, namely, that the Hebrew word *d'varim* can mean either "things" or "words." The verse in question reads:

> Come back to the Lord [YHVH] your God, O [people of] Israel! Take *d'varim* and return to the Lord. Say to God: Forgive all iniquity, and accept what is good; instead of bullocks, we will offer the prayer of our lips. [Hosea 14:2–3]

By reading *d'varim* as "words" instead of "things," Hosea pointed the way for sins to be forgiven when the Temple sacrifices were no longer possible: instead of bringing *d'varim*/things in the form of animals, the people could bring *d'varim*/words in the form

of verbal prayers. Nor is this mere semantics. Words have creative power. The word "Abracadabra," now associated with stage magic, originally came from the Aramaic *ibra k'dibra,* meaning "created as it was spoken." Reciting the words of the Torah that describe the *Avodah* rituals creates the sacrifices on the spiritual level.

The Apter Rebbe's full name was Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, which translates into Abraham Joshua Heschel. I chose to leave off the Apter's surname in this story to avoid confusion between the two characters and/or giving away the ending. Reference to the Apter's previous incarnations and the heavenly funeral procession can be found in Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim* (Vol. II, pp. 118, 122).

The connection with the modern Abraham Joshua Heschel is an oral tradition from the Jewish Renewal movement. I have heard it on several occasions in discussions about peace work and social responsibility. This is an excellent example of how traditional Hasidic tales continue to be adapted to address current issues.

CHAPTER 7: THE HASIDIC MASTERS

The Shoemaker of Safed

I first heard part of this story from Rabbi Zalman Schachter at the University of Minnesota Hillel House in 1980, where he told it in honor of an upcoming bar mitzvah celebration. In Schachter's version, the shoemaker must return to teach publicly because he had never faced temptation. A different reason is cited in *Tales of the Baal Shem Tov* by Yisroel Yaakov Klapholz, who gives his source as a text called *Hatamim* (Klapholz, p. 31). In that version, the soul of the shoemaker is rewarded for its piety in one life by becoming a Torah teacher in the next. My current version combines elements of both. To be a teacher is also to face earthly temptations!

There is mystical symbolism in the idea that the Baal Shem Tov's previous incarnation had been as a shoemaker. Shoes are worn to walk the path (*derech* in Hebrew). We commonly speak

of "walking in the master's shoes," and a famous Hasidic tale tells of the disciple who went to see "how the master ties his shoelaces."

Several versions of the Besht's birth exist in both oral and written form. *Shivhei Ha-Besht* makes no mention of Elijah's visit to the house, but has the prophet visiting Rabbi Eliezer while he is still on the journey home. Elie Wiesel makes brief reference to the version I have told here (Wiesel, *Souls on Fire*, p. 11), adding the detail about the vow in heaven. I included it in my version because it tells us something about the Baal Shem Tov's mother as well as his father. The verse in Isaiah cited by Elijah is 49:3.

The exact location of Okup, also spelled "Okop," remains something of a mystery. As far as I know, it no longer exists, at least not under that name. Elie Wiesel writes of it:

> There seems to be no disagreement as to the place of his birth: a small village—a fortress perhaps—named Okop. Still, the scholars have some difficulty in agreeing on its precise location. Dubnov believes it to be near Kamenetz, Balaban moves it to the banks of the Dnieper, whereas Schechter prefers to see it in Bukovina. As for Mahler, he simply annexes it to Galicia. Evidently, the Baal Shem succeeded in turning even geography into a mystery. [*Souls on Fire*, p. 10]

The Sixty Souls

Cf. Buber, *Tales*, Vol. I, p. 35. This story seems to contradict the previous tale, "Shoemaker of Safed," where the Besht had already been on earth before. There are conflicting opinions about this. Some say he was a new soul. But others say he was a hidden Zaddik who was already on earth for many incarnations, and was told to reveal himself publicly in the eighteenth century.

Poor Shmulik

There are many "formula" stories of this type, where a Rebbe sends a disciple on a quest to find the answer to a question that turns out to be related to "past-life karma." I first heard this version from Zalman Schachter in Philadelphia, 1983. A published

version by Schachter appeared in *The Holy Beggar's Gazette* in 1976. The story also appears in *Maaseh Ha-Zaddikim*, and, in a somewhat different version, in *Migdal Oz*, edited by Yehoshuah Mondstein (Kfar Chabad, 1980).

Over the years, in retelling the story, I have added more details and dialogue to make the reincarnation connections clearer. The names of the characters are fictitious. So are the dates on the tombstone, although the original story does say that the miser died sixty years before the Hasid in question was born. (The number sixty, in kabbalistic symbolism, represents "a taste of the World to Come.") The name of the town is as given in the version cited by Nigal in *Mysticism, Magic, and Hasidism*. In Schachter's version, the grave was in the city of Brod in Eastern Europe.

It is indeed ironic that gentile folklore frequently portrays Jews as misers. In authentic Jewish tales, the miser is considered to be the lowest of wretches. The Jewish attitude toward money (and material things in general) is that "the earth is the Lord's." All wealth belongs to God, and we are only its caretakers. Those who are blessed with wealth have a moral and spiritual obligation to share it with those less fortunate. The character of the miser, therefore, goes completely against all Jewish values by hoarding his money and refusing to help others in need.

The Rabbi's Son

Buber cites this story in a much shorter form (*Tales*, Vol. I, pp. 158–59), but does not clearly explain that the apparition which appears to Reb Yekhiel-Mikhel is the same soul that later incarnates as Zev Wolf. Buber does tell us that the soul that visits the Maggid of Zolochev is about to reincarnate. But he ends the tale by simply stating that a son was born to the *maggid* and he was very humble. The reader is expected to make a leap of logic to know that the soul of the Torah reader has become the rabbi's son.

The Zohar passage in question is Zohar 1:221b. The idea that souls are judged to reincarnate on Rosh Hashanah is an extension of the standard teaching that every soul's fate is judged on that

day. Although the rabbis of old would not have known or used the word "karma," when we consider that *karma* in Sanskrit literally means "actions" or "deeds," then one might say that God judges the karma of the world on Rosh Hashanah.

The idea that a holy man can read one's fate on one's forehead is quite old among Jews. Gershom Scholem wrote:

> In the circle of the Provencal kabbalists, it was said that Isaac the Blind (circa 1200), the most important mystic of this group, "could tell by a person's face whether he was from the new or old [souls]." As he was blind, we may assume that this "looking" alludes to the ability to perceive that "aura" surrounding an individual. [Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead,* p. 207]

"New souls" are those which have never been on earth before. See "The Treasury of Souls" in Chapter 1.

Feiga the Prophetess

This story comes from the oral tradition of the Breslover Hasidim, and is cited by Aryeh Kaplan in his biography of Rabbi Nachman, *Until the Moschiah,* p. 325. The arranged marriage between Feiga and Simcha was actually a "fee" that the Baal Shem Tov had demanded of Rabbi Nachman Horodenker (Simcha's father) in return for arranging Horodenker's own marriage. Although no clear reference to reincarnation per se is made here, there are other stories about the Baal Shem Tov where he revealed the destiny of a bride and groom as being connected with a past-life relationship. See also "Soulmates" in Chapter 1.

The psychic insight of Feiga is well-known in the Hasidic world. According to Breslover tradition, Feiga once told the Hasidim that she had seen the soul of her deceased grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov, attending the wedding of her granddaughter, Adil. Rabbi Nachman himself once told his disciples that if, after his death, they wished to dedicate a mitzvah on his behalf, they should refer to him as "Nachman son of Feiga," using his mother's name and not his father's (thus breaking with the usual

custom). To this day, when Breslover Hasidim write out a *kvittel* (prayer request) to be left at Rabbi Nachman's grave, they always use their mothers' Hebrew names.

The gift of psychic insight appears to have been passed down in Rabbi Nachman's family to his daughters, Adil [named after Feiga's mother Adil] and Sarah. "My daughters have been blessed with a divine spirit nearing prophecy," he said (Kaplan, *Rabbi Nachman's Stories*, p. 333). Rabbi Nachman greatly valued Adil's opinions and discussed many issues with her. Nathan of Nemirov, who was Nachman's chief disciple, also valued the insights of Adil's dreams, even though he was skeptical about psychic dreams in general.

Regarding visions that appear in the early stages of sleep, Rabbi Nachman once said:

> Before each person goes to sleep, he sees the souls of all his dead relatives. One also sees the souls of those who share his Soul root. It is taught that when one dies, one sees all these souls. [It is also taught that] sleep is one sixtieth of death. Therefore, one also sees all these souls before going to sleep. [Kaplan, *Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom*, p. 211]

The startling idea that "sleep is one-sixtieth of death" comes from the Talmud [*Berachot* 57b] and needs some explaining here. "One-sixtieth" is considered to be the threshold of taste in certain questions regarding the fitness of kosher foods. From there, the phrase has become a metaphor for thresholds in general. To say that "sleep is one-sixtieth of death" means that in the sleep state we can gain a tiny glimpse of the afterlife state. The saying that "The Sabbath is a taste of the World to Come" has a similar meaning, i.e., the joy we taste on Shabbos here is only a sixtieth—a mere threshold—of the joy that the soul experiences in the afterlife.

To Pray with Feeling

I heard this story from an anonymous Hasid in Uman, Ukraine, while on pilgrimage in 1997. It was prompted by a discussion of

how some Jews with learning disabilities have difficulty concentrating in the constant hubbub of an Orthodox synagogue. I later found a brief reference to a similar incident described by Reb Nathan of Nemirov (disciple of Rabbi Nachman) in *Likutei Moharan Tinyana 121*. It can be found in English translation in Aryeh Kaplan's translation of *Outpouring of the Soul*, p. 31. (See also *Sichos HaRan* # 75.) "Reb Ploni" is a fictitious name, meaning "Mr. So-and-so."

The idea that various parts of the service relate to different aspects of the soul is an extension of the kabbalistic idea that each of the 613 *mitzvot* in the Torah corresponds to a specific part of the spiritual body. See "The Heavenly Body of Adam" in Chapter 1.

Redeeming Lost Souls

Based on Langer, *Nine Gates*, pp. 100–111. Urele of Strelisk was Rabbi Uri Bronfenbrenner, d. 1826. The fragment about receiving inspiration from Samson and David comes from Buber (*Tales*, Vol. II, p. 147). See "A Dream of Eden" in Chapter 2 for a modern case of a Hasid who had finished redeeming the souls in animals that were specifically connected to him and became a vegetarian.

The Prayer Request

From Langer, *Nine Gates*, pp. 53, 51. The comparison between reading a *kvittel* and giving a "psychic reading" is obvious here. It is my understanding that the names on the *kvittel* somehow attune the Rebbe's consciousness to the soul of the petitioner and all of its previous incarnations, perhaps through contemplating the Hebrew letters. But the *kvittel* itself is only a tool—the insight comes through the Rebbe's inner wisdom.

Not all of the Rebbes use these methods, however. A Bobover Hasid recently told me that his Rebbe once said that all of these methods are revealed in the kabbalah, but he chooses not to utilize them, because it is wrong to look into the soul of another

person. The Bobover Rebbe feels that this violates the Hasid's privacy, because only God should look into a person's soul. So he limits himself to more ordinary means of giving consultations.

Why the Rebbe Laughed

Cited by Buber (*Tales*, Vol. II, pp. 118–19) and others. The allusion to the man having been "one of those who lived remote from the rest" during Temple times suggests that he was a celibate ascetic. There were many such ascetics in the desert outside Jerusalem, the best-known group being the Essene community at Qumran. In addition, numerous Jewish hermits inhabited the caves in the area, where they practiced a very strict, sometimes celibate, way of life.

Such ascetic practices were never mainstream within Judaism, but various mystical groups have used them throughout history. The Lurianic school in the sixteenth century practiced prolonged fasts and other austerities to attempt to purify themselves of sins in order to be worthy to receive divine inspiration. But the Baal Shem Tov—and the disciples who followed him—condemned asceticism as leading to pride. There are numerous Hasidic stories where a broken heart is deemed more important than a physical penance.

The Apter Rebbe in this story is the same teacher who believed himself to be the reincarnation of a High Priest in the time of the Temple. See "The High Priest's Prayer" in Chapter 6.

The Gift of Self

Buber, *Tales*, Vol. I, pp. 302–3, 318. The Seer of Lublin was born in 1745 and died in 1815. He was honored by almost all of the great Rebbes of Poland in his day. His books are major sources of early Hasidic thought. Skeptics might argue that the strange characteristic of having different-sized eyes was a hereditary trait passed down genetically from grandfather to grandson. The point of the story, however, is that the Seer believed he would come back within his own family line.

CHAPTER 8: JEW BY CHOICE

Children of Abraham and Sarah

See Zohar III:168a. The law of converts being called "son or daughter of Abraham and Sarah" can be found in the *Shulchan Arukh* (Code of Jewish Law), *Even HaEzer* 129:20.

The Righteous Gentiles

The midrash referred to here comes from *Sifre* on Deuteronomy 33:2, and includes encounters with other nations besides the Edomites. It is axiomatic among Jews, even in secular circles, that the midrash's intent was meant to counter the accusation that Jews think they are "better than everyone else" because they are "chosen." Although it originally had little to do with reincarnation per se, the mystics saw a deeper meaning, and made it a central theme concerning the "soul group" that was present at Sinai.

The Ultimate Price

Count Vladimir (Valentine) Pototzki (Potocki) was a historical figure, who converted to Judaism and is reported to have been burned at the stake by the Inquisition on May 24, 1749. Numerous legends have sprung up around him, some of which are combined here to form my version of the narrative.

The Baal Shem Tov was actively teaching at the time of Pototzki's martyrdom, which was a major tragedy for the Jews of that time. So it is hardly surprising that elements of Pototzki's life have entered the Hasidic legends in various forms. Meyer Levin's *Classic Hasidic Tales* contains a reincarnation story entitled "Two Souls," which includes the motif of a prince who is tutored by a secret Jew who spends an hour each day in solitude. Yet another variant of this same theme appears in "The Journey of Soul Mates" in Eliahu Klein's collection, *Meetings with Remarkable Souls.*

Strangely, Vladimir's Hebrew name (which he would have received at his conversion) does not seem to have come down to us in the legends. He is referred to as simply "Graf [Count] Pototzki." His teacher is believed to have been Menachem-Man ben Aryeh Loeb of Visun, who was also executed.

In *Legends of the Hasidim*, Jerome Mintz cites two different versions of Vladimir's last words at the stake, collected from members of different Hasidic groups. The Stoliner version has Vladimir referring to the midrash about non-Jewish souls that wanted to accept the Torah at Sinai (cf. "The Righteous Gentiles" above). In a different tale, the same Stoliner source added the detail about a second child who became the Karliner Rebbe (ibid., p. 237).

In the Bobover version, the convert sees his martyrdom as a form of purification (ibid., pp. 422–24). The line about the taste of fish on the Sabbath appears in all versions cited by Mintz, as well as the ones I heard orally. The reference here is to the otherworldly bliss of observing the Sabbath itself. A well-known axiom has it that "the Sabbath is a taste of the World to Come." There are numerous stories about recipes that have "Sabbath" as the secret ingredient, where one must actually be observing the Sabbath in order to benefit from the mystical "energy" of the Sabbath foods.

The Medicine from Sinai

Adapted from "Keepers of the Joy" by Rachel Brachah O'Brian, which first appeared in my previous book, *From Ashes to Healing: Mystical Encounters with the Holocaust* (A.R.E. Press, 1996). With her permission, I developed the idea of the "Shomrei Simchah" into the story presented here, which I always tell in Rachel Brachah's name. See also the Overview to this chapter.

Heirlooms in the Attic

Told to me personally by "Billy" who asked to remain anonymous. I have heard many similar stories from converts to Judaism who later discover that they have a "lost" Jewish ancestor.

In *God, Sex, and Kabbalah* (p. 122), Allen Maller cites the true story of a Midwestern gentile woman who also found a set of tefillin in the attic. In her case, the great-grandfather came to America with a Jewish wife, but she died soon after arrival. Alone on the prairie, he, too, had married a gentile woman and was eventually "forgotten" by his descendants. For a historical overview of the experience of German Jewish immigrants in the mid-1800s, see Sharfman, *Jews on the Frontier*, pp. 89–105.

The Mysterious Memories

This tale is a composite of hundreds of such stories that I heard in the course of collecting material for my two books on cases of reincarnation from the Holocaust, *Beyond the Ashes* and *From Ashes to Healing*. At this point, the basic scenario has entered the realm of Jewish folklore as a "formula" story. The website to in the story is mine, and is located at: www.pinenet.com/~rooster.

The American Sparks

Like the previous story, this is a composite of personal narratives shared with me by converts about their family histories and reasons for converting. It offers a beautiful solution to the question of why so many souls of Holocaust victims returned as gentiles immediately after the war. See also "Heirlooms in the Attic" above.

Glossary

The following glossary contains vocabulary and technical terms used in this book. Hebrew pronunciations are a mixture of Ashkenazic and Sephardic, tending to follow the most common way in which American Jews pronounce these words. In some cases, both pronunciations are given. Although I am aware of the current system of Hebrew transliteration used by scholars, I have chosen to use spellings that will be easiest for the English-speaking reader.

Information on rabbis and other individuals mentioned in the stories can be found in the Biographical Index.

Adam-Kadmon (ah-DAHM-kahd-MOAN): Literally "first" or "primal" Adam. The first human being, in a cosmic form before being placed in the Garden of Eden.

Amalek (Ah-mah-LAKE): A biblical character first mentioned in Genesis 36:10–16. Because the Amalekites attacked the Israelites from the rear (Exodus 17:8), they became the archetype of senseless brutality.

Ari, Holy Ari: Rabbi Isaac Luria.

Ark of the Covenant: An ornate golden box in the innermost sanctuary of the Temple, which contained the original stone tablets with the Ten Commandments inscribed on them.

Ashkenazic (ASH-ken-nazz-ic): Relating to Jews from Eastern Europe or their descendants. Ashkenazic Hebrew differs in pronunciation from Israeli (Sephardic) Hebrew.

B.C.E.: "Before Common Era." Used by archeologists and others instead of "B.C." (before Christ) to avoid Christian connotations.

Baal Shem Tov: Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer.

Bahir (bah-HERE): A major Jewish mystical text, attributed to Nehunia ben ha-Kana, first-century Jewish mystic. First published in its present form in the twelfth century.

bar mitzvah (BAR MITS-vah): Literally, "son of the Commandments." A male Jew thirteen years or older. Also, the ceremony marking this religious coming of age. See bat mitzvah.

bat mitzvah (BAHT MITS-vah): literally, "daughter of the Commandments." A female Jew twelve years or older. Also, the ceremony marking this religious coming of age. See bar mitzvah.

Besht: acronym for "Baal Shem Tov," the founder of Hasidism.

Bet Din (bait DEEN): A rabbinical court, made up of three judges, one of whom must be an ordained rabbi. Also, the Heavenly Court.

bimah (BEE-muh): A table or pulpit in the synagogue, where the prayer leader stands and the Torah scroll is read. To "pray at the bimah" is to lead the congregation in liturgical prayers.

Brochah (BRAHKH-uh or brah-KHAH): A formal blessing said by Jews before performing a mitzvah.

C.E.: "Common Era." Used by archeologists and others instead of A.D. (Latin *Anno Domini*, "in the Year of Our Lord," i.e., Jesus' birth) to avoid Christian connotations. (Some Christian scholars read it as "Christian Era.")

Covenant: a binding agreement between two parties. There are three covenants in the Bible: (1) the Rainbow Covenant between God and Noah after the Flood, which applies to all people; (2) the Covenant between God and Abraham, which applies to all descendants of Abraham; (3) the Covenant at Sinai, between God and the Jews.

dybbuk (DIH-buk): soul of a dead person who possesses the living.

gefilte fish: A traditional Jewish festive food consisting of fish that is ground up, formed into flattened balls, and boiled. Originally this mixture was served stuffed into the whole skin of the fish—origin of the name gefilte (filled) fish—but in modern times it is made as balls or patties only. It is served cold, usually with a sauce made from ground-up horseradish root and beets.

Gehenna (ge-HEN-ah): purgatory, where souls are purged (purified). Usually thought of as a spiritual realm, but sometimes also referring to states of existence while still on earth.

gentile (GEN-tile): a person who is not Jewish. The term "gentile" is not usually used by Jews in everyday speech or storytelling, but is used in some places by the author because of its familiarity to the non-Jewish reader.

gilgul (GILL-gool): Hebrew term for reincarnation.

halachah (hah-LAH-khah): Jewish law as revealed in the Torah and interpreted by oral tradition through rabbinical authority. Literally means "the way to walk." (Adj.: *halachic*)

Haredi (hah-RAY-dee): Literally "trembling [before God]." A form of post-Holocaust Orthodox Judaism that stresses very strict observance of the commandments, and semi-isolation from the modern world. Plural: Haredim.

Hasid (KHAH-sid): a follower of Hasidism. (Plural: Hasidim, adj. Hasidic.) Variant spelling: Chassid, Chassidism, Chassidic.

Hasidism (KHAH-see-dism): A mystical, pietist movement within Judaism, founded by the Baal Shem Tov in the 1700s in Eastern Europe. Characterized by fervent devotion to God and meticulous observance of the commandments.

ha'takah (ha-TAh-kah): "transference." Older term for reincarnation; not commonly used today.

havdalah (hahv-DAH-lah): ritual to end the Sabbath or a Festival, using a braided candle, a cup of beverage, and sweet-smelling spices.

High Holy Days: The ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, which come in the fall. Also called the Ten Days of Repentance. This is the

holiest, most solemn time on the Jewish calendar. See also the glossary entries for these two holy days.

High Priest: in Hebrew the *Kohen Gadol* (ko-HAYN gah-DOLE). The individual who performed certain ceremonies in the wilderness Tabernacle, and in later centuries, the Temple in Jerusalem.

Hisboddidus (hiss-BO-dee-duss): literally "to make yourself be in solitude." A form of meditation consisting of private, spontaneous prayers to God in the vernacular. ("Hitbadedut" in Israeli Hebrew.)

Holy of Holies: The Innermost Sanctuary of the wilderness Tabernacle and, later, the Temple in Jerusalem. Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and then only on Yom Kippur.

ibbur (EE-boor): literally "impregnation." The entry of another soul into a living person for the purpose of a good deed or commandment as a form of benign possession. Also called *sod ha-ibbur* ("mystery of impregnation").

Jewish Renewal: A modern movement originating in the United States during the 1960s, which combines certain aspects of Hasidic mysticism and philosophy with modernized forms of liturgy and observance.

Jewish soul (yiddische neshamah): The Jewish belief that the souls of the Jews who were present at Mt. Sinai remain Jewish in all future lives, even if they are born into non-Jewish bodies. In colloquial usage, "to have a Jewish soul" means to have a positive understanding of what it means to be a Jew.

kabbalah (kah-bah-LAH or ka-BAH-luh): The collective body of Jewish mystical teachings. There is no one book called "the kabbalah."

kaddish: a Jewish prayer in memory of the dead. The text makes no mention of death but is an affirmation of God's majesty.

karet (kah-RATE): literally "cut off." Banned or excommunicated from the Jewish people. In practice, this meant ostracism. In mystical terms, it can refer to the state of a Jewish soul who is "cut off from his people" through reincarnation in a gentile body.

karma (CAR-mah): Sanskrit word meaning "action," used in Eastern religions to refer to the Law of Cause and Effect. Commonly used in English to refer to one's debts and merits from a previous incarnation.

kavannah (kah-VAH-nah, *or* kah-vah-NAH): "intention"; the inner focus of prayer or the "spirit" of the Torah. Also, a special meditation before doing a mitzvah. (Plural: *kavannot*)

kiddush (KIDD-ish): A special blessing on a cup of wine or grape juice, said in the evening to usher in the Sabbath or a holy day. A second kiddush is also said at the noon meal on the following day.

kiddush Hashem (KIH-dish ha-SHEM): Literally, "sanctification of the Name of God." Jewish martyrdom.

kosher (KOE-sher): permissible according to Jewish law. Kosher foods are not blessed by a rabbi; rather, they are prepared according to the Jewish dietary laws. "Kosher" can also refer to non-food items such as "a kosher prayer shawl." A "kosher Jew" is one who lives according to the laws of the Torah.

kvittel (KVIT'ul): A written prayer request.

Lecha Dodi (leh-KHA-doe-DEE): "Come, My Beloved," a mystical Sabbath hymn written by Rabbi Solomon Alkabetz of the Safed community in the sixteenth century. It is sung today by Jews throughout the world on Friday evening, and has been set to literally hundreds of tunes. This hymn contains beautiful feminine imagery, personifying the Sabbath as a Bride or Queen.

lishmah (lee-SHMAH): Literally, "for the Name." For the sake of God. To do something "lishmah" is to do it without ulterior motives or hope for reward, but for the love of God alone.

Lubovitcher (loo-BAH-vich-er): of or pertaining to the Lubovitch sect of Hasidim. A member of this group. Lubovitchers follow the teachings of the eighteenth-century Hasidic master, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liady, and his six successors.

mantra: A Sanskrit term for a word or phrase that is repeated in certain forms of meditation. In Jewish mysticism, phrases from the liturgy or holy Names of God are sometimes used like a mantra. Rabbi

Nachman of Breslov, for example, recommended repeating *Ribbono Shel Olam*—"Master of the Universe."

matir assurim (mah-TEER-ah-soo-REM): "Who releases the bound." One of the early-morning blessings.

Melavah Malkah: literally, "escorting the Queen (Sabbath)." A post-Sabbath gathering on Saturday night, often with music, singing, and storytelling.

Merkavah (mer-KAH-vah, *or* mer-kah-VAH): literally "chariot." A type of Jewish mysticism that flourished during the Talmudic period, involving meditations on the visions of Ezekiel and "palaces" of God.

midrash (me-DRASH): Torah commentaries of a nonhalachic nature, often stories, legends, and exegesis from oral tradition. (Plural: midrashim)

mikveh (MIK-vah): a special ritual immersion pool used by women after menstruation, by men after nocturnal emissions, and by all Jews for other purification purposes. A convert to Judaism is also immersed in the *mikveh*. Also used as a verb: to *mikveh*.

minyan: The quorum of ten Jews required by Jewish law to hold a synagogue service, say kaddish, or perform certain other rituals. (Without a minyan, kaddish is forbidden to be said.) An Orthodox minyan is formed with men only. Some Conservative and Reform congregations count women in a minyan also.

mitzvah (MITS-vah): any commandment in the Torah. Colloquially, a "good deed." (Plural: *mitzvot*)

mohel (MOE-el or MOY'L): a Jewish ritual circumciser.

Moschiach (mah-SHEE-akh): "anointed one"; messiah.

Nefesh (NEH-fesh): the first, or lowest level of the soul, corresponding to the life force of the body.

Neshamah (neh-SHAH-mah): third level of the soul, corresponding to the intellect, and also the "immortal soul," which survives death.

Olam Ha-ba (O-LAHM ha-BAH): The "World to Come," or spirit world.

prayer shawl: A ritual garment worn by Jews during the morning prayers. Often white with stripes, it can be any color or design, but must have four corners with tassels, called *tzitzit* or "fringes," that are tied in a specific traditional way.

Rav (RAHV): A rabbi, especially one who specializes in Jewish law. Also the head of a rabbinical court.

Reb (REB): "sir" in Yiddish. Term of respect used by Hasidim, often denoting a teacher. In Yiddish it is used with the *first* name, but in recent American usage can be used with the surname.

Reb Zalman: Rabbi Zalman Schachter.

Rebbe (REB-uh or REB-ee): a Jewish teacher, not necessarily ordained. In Hasidism, the leader of a Hasidic sect, considered an enlightened spiritual master.

Rosh Hashanah (ROSH ha-SHAH-nah): The Jewish New Year, which comes near the autumnal equinox. It is a solemn day of judgment and repentance, on which the ram's horn (shofar) is blown.

Ruach (ROO-akh): literally "spirit." Second level of the soul, corresponding to the emotions and conscious ego.

Sabbath bread (also challah): The traditional bread served on the Sabbath and Jewish holy days. Sabbath bread is usually braided, and placed on the table whole and unsliced. There are two loaves at each meal, to represent the double portion of manna that fell on Friday in the time of Moses, so that the Jews would not have to gather it on the Sabbath.

Seder (SAY-der): literally, "order." The ritual meal on the first two nights of Passover. A similar meal on Tu B'Shevat.

Sephardic (seh-FAR-dik): of or pertaining to Jews descended from those who were expelled from Spain by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492, or in subsequent persecutions.

Shabbat (shah-BAHT): The Jewish Sabbath, beginning before sundown on Friday evening, and ending after sundown on Saturday night. Celebrated with prayer, song, feasting, study, and storytelling.

Shema prayer: central prayer of Judaism: "Hear [*shema*] O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One." Also said on the deathbed.

shochet (SHO-khet or sho-KHATE): a Jewish butcher who slaughters according to the kosher laws. A schochet must be an Orthodox Jew who lives according to the commandments, has respect for the lives of the animals, and is specially trained in this area.

Shomrei Simchah (SHOME-ray SIM-kha): Literally, "Keepers of the Joy." From a modern midrash by Rachel Brachah O'Brian, about the role of converts.

Shul (SHOOL): Yiddish for "synagogue." Related to the German "Shule" (school) because the synagogue is a place of study as well as prayer.

Sod ha-ibbur (SODE-hah-EE-boor): See "ibbur."

sparks, holy sparks: fragments of Divine Light or consciousness that are trapped or enmeshed in the physical world. "Raising holy sparks" refers to elevating these fragments of Divine Light back to their proper place in the universe, i.e., restoring wholeness.

stetl (SHTET-'l): a small Jewish village in Eastern Europe, such as was portrayed in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Has a nostalgic connotation of "down-hominess" and Old-World Jewish culture.

sukkah (SOOK-uh or soo-KAH): A hut or booth erected in celebration of the Feast of Booths. The walls of the sukkah can be made from anything, but the roof must be made from unprocessed natural plant materials, such as palm branches, cornstalks, evergreens, etc. See Sukkot.

Sukkot (Soo-KOTE): The Feast of Booths or "Tabernacles." A week-long harvest festival prescribed by the Torah (Leviticus 23:39–43). Ashkenazic variant: Sukkos or Succos (SOOK-uss).

Talmud (TALL-mud): a many volumed compilation of Jewish teachings, both legal and nonlegal, spanning 200 B.C.E. to 500 C.E.

tefillin (teh-FILL-in): small black rawhide boxes with leather straps, containing specific passages of Scripture written on parchment, worn on the head and arm during morning prayer.

tikkun (tee-KUN): "a repairing," a reparation for past actions.

Tikkun chatzot (Tee-KUN khat-ZOTE): Midnight prayer focusing on repentance and the coming of the Messianic Age.

tikkun olam: (tee-KUN o-LAHM): "to repair the world." "New age" equivalent: to clear up bad karma; planetary healing.

Tisha B'Av (tish-a BAHV): The ninth day of the Jewish month of Av, falling in July or August. A fast day, mourning for the destruction of the First and Second Temples, and the exile of the Jews.

Torah (TOE-rah, or toe-RAH): specifically, the Five Book of Moses; more broadly, the sum total of all Jewish teachings and commentaries, both written and oral.

trayfe (TRAYF): Literally "torn by beasts." Not kosher. Usually used in reference to food. Ritual objects that are not kosher are *possel*. See "kosher."

Tu B'Shevat: The fifteenth day of the month of Shevat on the Jewish calendar (January–February). In biblical times, it marked the "birthday" of trees for the purpose of tithing their fruits, regardless of what day they were actually planted. In modern Israel, Jews plant trees on this day. In America, it is a form of "Jewish Earth Day" for discussing ecology issues, etc. Many Jewish schools have nature activities on Tu B'Shevat. The focus of the day is on hope, life, and healing the earth.

yarmulke (YAH-muh-kah): A Jewish skullcap. Available in many styles, the colors and designs have no religious significance but may indicate a social connection with a particular Jewish group. Traditional Jews cover their heads to show respect before God.

yeshiva: An orthodox Jewish school or religious academy. In Hasidic and very orthodox yeshivas, only a minimum of secular subjects are studied, and the main focus is on studying Torah, Talmud and other sacred texts, with the goal of becoming a scholar or a rabbi. In more modern yeshivas, secular subjects are studied also. In pre-Holocaust Europe only boys went to yeshiva, but there are now yeshivas for girls also.

YHVH: the unpronounceable Name of God. (Neither "Yahweh" nor "Jehovah" are true pronunciations, and are never used by Jews.) Often rendered as "Ha-Shem" (the Name) in everyday conversation, and as "Adonai" (Ruler) in prayers.

Yiddish (YID-ish): A language spoken by Jews of European background. Based on medieval German, it includes many words of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Slavic origin. In Eastern Europe, Yiddish was the

"mother language" of home and marketplace, while Hebrew was reserved for prayer and Torah study. Yiddish is still spoken by many Jews in America and Israel. It is written in the Hebrew alphabet.

Yiddishkeit (YID-ish-KITE): literally, "Jewishness." The lifestyle of traditional Jews, including, but not limited to, observance of the *mitzvot*, holidays, customs, etc; Jewish ambience.

Yom Kippur (yahm-KIH-per *or* yome-kee-POOR): The Day of Atonement, holiest day on the Jewish calendar. Yom Kippur is a day of fasting, prayer, and repentance.

Zaddik (TSAH-dik): Literally "righteous one." A holy person, saint. Also a Hasidic Rebbe.

Zohar (ZO-har): a compilation of Jewish mystical teachings and stories, first published in the thirteenth century, and attributed to the first-century mystic, Shimon bar Yochai.

Biographical Index

The following brief biographical notes are provided to help the interested reader identify the various historical personalities mentioned in the stories. Some dates are approximate.

About Jewish names:

In past centuries, the vast majority of Jews did not follow the Anglo-Saxon custom of using first and last names. Instead, they were known by one or more Hebrew or Yiddish names, often followed by the name of their town, occupation, or other distinguishing feature(s). Where there were double Hebrew names, these were usually treated as a single name, with the *first* name taking precedence in shortened forms. For example, "Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev" would not be called "Rabbi Yitzchak," but "Rabbi Levi-Yitzchak" (formal) or "Reb Levi" (informal). In cases where the modern reader might confuse the second Hebrew name with a surname, I have chosen to hyphenate them.

Rabbis, scholars, and saintly persons are sometimes further designated by various titles. These can be derived from initials, the name of their best-known book, or some other outstanding

attribute. For example, Rabbi Israel ben (son of) Eliezer is known as the "Besht," an acronym formed from the first letters of his Hasidic title, "Baal Shem Tov" (Master of the Good Name). Similarly, Rabbi Yaakov-Yitzhak is called the "Seer of Lublin" because of his clairvoyance, and Rabbi Israel Meir Hacohen is better known as the "Chofetz Chaim" (one who desires life) after his book of that title.

Hasidic Rebbes are usually designated by the name of the town where they or their ancestors lived and/or taught. In most cases, the name of the original Rebbe's town later became the name of the Hasidic group itself, even though the headquarters of these groups are now located elsewhere. The late Menachem M. Schneerson was known as the Lubovitcher Rebbe, after the town of Lubovitch, Russia, where the movement first began, even though he lived in New York City.

To help avoid confusion in this list, I chose to alphabetize all the names and titles according to their first word, regardless of whether it is a Hebrew name, a title, an acronym, or surname. Transliterations are according to the common spellings currently in use in American English. In the case of Hasidic names, I purposely chose the Ashkenazi pronunciations over the modern Israeli ones, because that is how the Hasidim themselves pronounce them. I have generally avoided using a "ch" spelling for gutturals, except where the names are standardized, because this is often confusing to the English-speaking reader. Where a person is known by more than one name or title, both are included and cross-indexed on the list.

LIST OF PERSONALITIES

Aaron of Karlin ("Aaron the Great"): 1736–1772. Disciple of the Maggid of Mezeritch. First Karliner Rebbe.

Aaron of Stolin ("The Great Stoliner") : d. 1827. Son of Aaron of Karlin.

Abraham Isaac Kook ("Rav Kook"): d. 1935. First chief Ashkenazic rabbi of modern Palestine.

Abraham Joshua Heschel: twentieth-century theologian and civil rights activist. Author of *The Sabbath, God's Search for Man,* and others.

Akiva (also Akiba): Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph, circa. 50–132 C.E.. Major codifier of Jewish law. One of the four mystics who "entered Paradise" in the famous Talmudic story. Died a martyr.

Apter Rebbe: see Avraham Yehoshua of Apt.

Arele Roth: b. 1894 in Ungar, d. 1956 in Israel. Author of *Shomer Emunim* ("Guardian of the Faithful"). Had followers in Satmar, Jerusalem, Bergas, and Pest. His Hasidim are known today as the "Reb Arelach" and live mostly in Jerusalem.

Ari, Holy Ari: see Isaac Luria.

Aryeh Leib of Zlatipola: (1725–1812). Also known as the "Shpoler Zayde" (Grandfather). A follower of Pinchas of Koretz, and an opponent of Nachman of Breslov.

Avram-Simchah: disciple of Urele of Strelisk.

Avraham-Yehoshua Heschel of Apt: (1755–1825). Also known as the Apter Rebbe and the "Ohev Yisroel." A disciple of Elimelech of Lizhensk. After 1815, he was universally recognized as the leading Hasidic master in the Ukraine.

Baal Shem Tov ("the Besht"): 1700–1762. Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, also known as the "Besht." Founder of Hasidism. Pronounced "bahl-SHEM-tove" or "bahl-shem-TOVE."

Berditchever: see Levi-Yitzchak of Berditchev.

Besht: see Baal Shem Tov.

Breslover: See Nachman of Breslov.

Chaim Vital: 1543–1620. Chief disciple of Rabbi Isaac Luria, "the Ari." Responsible for recording his master's teachings.

Dov-Ber of Mezeritch: 1704–1772. Rabbi Dov-Ber ben Avraham Friedman. Disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, and major leader of the second generation of Hasidic Rebbes. Known as "the Maggid of Mezeritch."

Elimelech ben Elazar of Lizhensk: 1717–1786. "The Rebbe Elimelech." Brother of Reb Zusya of Hanipol. Author of *Noam Elimelech.*

Feiga: Granddaughter of the Baal Shem Tov and mother of Nachman of Breslov. Known as "Feiga the Prophetess."

Heschel of Komarno: disciple of Yaakov Yitzchak of Lublin.

Judah Hirsch of Stretana: disciple of Urele of Strelisk.

Levi-Yitzchak ben Meir of Berditchev: 1740–1809. Author of *Kedushat Levi.* Best known for his spontaneous prayers on the High Holy Days, and his practice of looking for something good in every Jew.

Loewe of Prague ("The Maharal"): d. 1609. Legend credits him with creating a Golem (automaton) according to kabbalistic arts.

Luria, Isaac: one of the greatest masters of kabbalah. He is also referred to as the Ari, the "Holy Lion of Safed." He was born in Jerusalem in 1534, and spent part of his life in Cairo, where he is said to have spent two years in a hut along the Nile, studying the Zohar. He died in Safed in 1572.

Maggid of Mezeritch: see Dov-Ber of Mezeritch.

Menachem-Mendel Morgenstern of Kotsk: 1787–1859. The Kotzker Rebbe. Disciple of the Seer of Lublin and Simcha Bunem of Pshishka. Famed for his uncompromising search for truth and his pithy aphorisms.

Mottel of Chernobyl: (1770–1837). Son of Nachum Chernobyler and son-in-law of Aaron of Karlin. Ancestor of the Squarer Rebbe.

Nachman ben Simcha of Breslov (also spelled Bratzlav): d. 1772–1810. Great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov. Best known for his original stories and parables. Buried in Uman, Ukraine.

Nachman Horodenker: (1680–1766). Father-in-law of "Feiga the Prophetess," who was the mother of Nachman of Breslov.

Naftali Hertz b'Reb Yehudah Weinberg: (1780–1860). "Reb Naftali," disciple of Nachman of Breslov and close friend of Reb Nosson.

Nathan of Gaza: self-proclaimed herald to the false messiah, Shabbetai Zevi, in the mid-1600s.

Nosson (Nathan) of Nemirov: chief disciple and scribe of Nachman of Breslov.

Pinchas Shapiro of Koretz: (1726–1791): Born in Sklov, Lithuania; moved to Volyhynia, where he met the Besht and became one of his closest disciples.

Pototski: see Vladimir Pototski.

Rahumai: first-century teacher in Tiberias, Israel

Rashi: acronym for Rabbi Shlomo ben Isaac, 1040–1105. Major Jewish commentator on the Torah and Talmud.

Rav Kook: see Abraham Isaac Kook.

Roth: see Arele Roth.

Schneur Zalman of Liady: (1745–1813). "The Alter Rebbe." Founder of the Chabad (Lubovitch) Hasidic movement. Author of the *Tanya*.

Seer of Lublin: see Yaakov Yitzchak of Lublin.

Shabbetai Zevi (Tzvi): d. 1676. False messiah from Turkey, who converted to Islam and founded a sect called the Donmeh.

Shalom Sharabi: (1702–1777). Sephardic kabbalist.

Shelo, or Holy Shelo: d. circa 1630. Rabbi Isaiah ben Avraham-Levi ish Horowitz, author of *Shenai Lukhot Ha-Brit*.

Shimon bar Yochai: second-century Jewish mystic who lived in a cave outside of Meron, Israel. Traditionally regarded as the author of the Zohar.

Shlomo of Karlin: 1738–1792. Disciple of Aaron of Karlin.

Shmelke of Nicholsburg: Rabbi Shmuel Horowitz, d. 1778. Hasidic Rebbe and Rav (chief rabbi) of Nikolsburg, Austria.

Shpoler Zayde: see Aryeh-Leib of Zlatipola.

Simcha-Bunem of Pshischkah: 1767–1827. Author of *Kol Simchah*.

Urele of Strelisk: d. 1826. Rabbi Uri Bronfenbrenner, born in Yanov through a blessing by the Maggid of Mezeritch. Known as "the Seraph" and the Strelisker Rebbe. Disciple of Shlomo of Karlin. Author of *Imrei Kodesh*.

Vladimir (Valentine) Pototski (Potocki): d. 1749. Polish convert to Judaism who was burned at the stake by the Inquisition.

Yaakov-Yitzchak ish Horowitz: 1745–1815. The "seer of Lublin."

Studied under Schmelke of Nikolsburg and Levi-Yitzchak of Berditchev. Later became a disciple of Elimelech of Lizhensk.

Yaakov-Yosef of Polnoye: major disciple of the Baal Shem Tov. Author of the first book on Hasidic teachings, *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*.

Yekhiel-Mikhel of Zolochev: (1726–1781). Disciple of the Besht. His father was Rabbi Yitzchak of Drovitch, a close disciple of the Besht.

Yisroel Ber Odesser: d. 1994. Saintly Breslover rabbi, disciple of Rabbi Yisroel Karduner of Tiberias. Author of *Ibay Hanachal*.

Yochanan ben Zakkai: (circa 40–80 C.E.) Talmudic rabbi.

Yoel (Joel) Teitelbaum (the "Yismach Moshe"): (1759–1839). Disciple of the Seer of Lublin.

Yoel (Joel) Teitelbaum ("Der Yoilish"): d. 1979. Previous Rebbe of the Satmar Hasidim.

Yudel of Chudnov: disciple of the Baal Shem Tov.

Zalman Schachter: formerly the B'nai Or Rebbe (USA). Currently the major leader in the Jewish Renewal movement. Also known as "Zayde Zalman."

Zev-Wolf Strikover: 1806–1891. Son of Abraham Landau of Tshenkanov.

Zev-Wolf of Zbarash: d. 1800. Son of Rabbi Yekhiel-Mikhel of Zolochev.

Zevi, Zvi: see Shabbetai Zevi.

Zusya: d. 1800. Meshullam-Zusya of Hanipol. Brother of Elimelech of Lizhensk, both of whom were disciples of the Maggid of Mezeritch.

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