Chapter One

Beginningwise

When I was a young girl, my chief aim in life was to become a famous saint, a great lover, or both. Not right away, of course, but when at length I would be grown up.

What above all I did *not* want was to settle into being the usual sort of grown-up, who never said exactly what he or she meant—it was impossible under the clothes and the posturing and the arbitrarily changing colors of the skin to tell what the person meant or whether he or she had ever really meant anything, and whose life seemed through and through a willed construct.

It wasn't that I held people like that in contempt. In one way I admired their abilities to patch together constructs that were so nearly consistent, so close to persuasive, that teetered on the brink of the genuine and were adorned with so many authentic elements, and then, after the initial burst of creative engineering, to remain so nicely and civilly confined within these shelters to which apparently they alone held the keys. But what attracted me about becoming a great lover or an outstanding saint was that I thought that neither of these things was an artifact. These things represented to me ways to become real.

My parents, and a few parental friends within their inner circle, were to me real. I was essentially their fascinated student, and being their child just gave me the chance to study with them longer—as I think about all that now.

A few years back, I wrote a philosophical article about my par-

ents, and more especially about my mother, which piece was titled "The Filial Art." It was my tribute to the great art with which my mother practiced the calling of mother, and my attempt to work out in fairly educated terms what might be the reciprocal, daughterly art. I couldn't get it published in America, but *finally* I got it published in England.

Then, more recently, I have seen to the posthumous publication of my father's *Consolations of Philosophy: Hobbes's Secret; Spinoza's Way*, writing its biographical as well as accompanying philosophical introduction. Although most of the philosophical critics whose reviews I have read so far have been almost startlingly appreciative—both of him as an author more than ten years dead and not obviously a power in the profession and even of me as his faithful filial mediator—in the present-day profession of philosophy itself, we are not exactly celebrating efforts to live in *the historical mode*. By that I mean living with ceaseless attempts to see one's present thought, feeling, and action as the precise outcome of a long but clarified past, woven of persons and ideas—and speakable. Yet these writer-editor efforts of mine fully to express my sense of filial piety have been such attempts, to live in the historical mode. And to complete the course of my studies with my parents.

In the sharpest and steepest contrast imaginable, as if one were visualizing a vertical line of jagged cliffs juxtaposed against the horizontal sweep of ocean waves, the emphasis in more fashionably current philosophical writing would still be rather on the fault lines, the places where you *couldn't* see the connections, the junctures where, for one reason or another, the original thread of meaning was being dropped.

For example, in the English-speaking world, the attention of philosophers has of late been focused on the question of "personal identity"—how it is that I know I'm me. The usual claim nowadays is that I *don't* know, not really, and—face to face with the hazards of neuron misfirings, memory blackouts, surgical severings of the corpus collosum, evolutionary maladaptations, and incoherently conditioned role playing—"personal identity" tends to dissolve, under analysis, into mere floating islands of experience. Analogies with the chinoiseries of Buddhist antimetaphysics have been from time to time openly acknowledged by these tough-minded analytic philosophers, whose commitment to the latter-day microparticle materialism of the West remains otherwise staunch. Put these two, great, cultural floating islands together (the episodic in Buddhism and in current Western "personal identity theory"), as some people do these days, and you have the kind of pseudo-Buddhist koan that

doesn't get you anywhere: the sound of one bare foot tapping—on a rock it can't find.

So the theme and rhythm of quite a lot of current philosophical writing is still the episodic. On the Continent, that sort of thing used to be called "the absurd." But even to call something "absurd," one must *follow* it for a while. Which is why the absurd is passé too.[1] Not too many people will give something undivided attention for long enough to find out whether it really *is* absurd or not. Perhaps a visitor from another era might think that there had not been enough devotion among us even for that much detective work to happen.

In the course of devotedly following Socrates around, Plato *discovered* personal identity. The real thing, I mean, not the current subdiscipline. What today we often look at instead, under the heading of "personal identity," is the discontinuous.

In decided contrast, both of my parents had this exceptional power to be "historical": to be themselves from the beginning, to remain so over time, and to become even more so by the end of their lives. It was as if they had internalized some invisible filament within the time process. What current philosophy would want to say about such a talent, I don't precisely know. I think that, for the most part, when it wears its professional guise, it is unaware that there is such a thing as a genius for that. Either it is unaware, or it is professionally undisturbed by the awareness.[2]

Actually, great people are a kind of mirror in which other people can see their many little faces crowded together in reflection. Apart from the very few friends of the inner circle, people in general looked in the great convex mirror of my parents and saw what they themselves brought to the mirror—what psychoanalysis purports to see, or cultural anthropology: biological and cultural detritus, in other words. They saw some sort of conscious vital force that made them uneasy and got various labels. Among the labels was "Jewish," or "something Jewish"—whatever they meant by that.

In the spring of 1979, when I was in the sixth year of a struggle to be reinstated with tenure at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, I myself had an experience of "something Jewish."

I was walking from the studio apartment on the Upper East Side where I lived to what was then called the Board of Higher Education (now the Board of Trustees), where yet one more hearing on my case was to be held that morning. There was about a mile and a half to be trudged over, and I was carrying a heavy satchel, loaded with all the documents that pertained to that stage of my case.

It was a late spring day and rather warm, even that early in the morning. I was quite weary. I felt so alone. My father had died two

years before. My mother would begin to die that summer, as perhaps I already sensed. The people I would soon be seeing, from the side of my adversaries, I knew and had seen many times before.

For me they had become cartoon figures, like the ones in Daumier's cartoons about the law: greenish or reddish, insulated from innocence, smiling their secrets of the bureaucracy at one another, talking over their padded shoulders and behind their cupped hands, all safely salaried by the city. I had no job contract for that fall. The building, which I also knew, the Board, had the smell of countless old, official miseries on its heavy concrete shanks.

Finally, I was headed down the last block, the one that goes from York Avenue to the East River, on Eightieth Street. (The Board is sometimes referred to, simply, as "Eightieth Street.") As I remember it there was a concrete overhang, just before the door of the Board. The long block I was walking slanted downhill, toward the concrete overhang at the far end of the block, and the river.

Suddenly I perceived that there were figures behind me, a whole series of them, one behind the other, connected to one another apparently, and the nearest one connected almost umbilically to me. They were vibrating at a faster rate than we do (at that same moment I became aware that we human beings "vibrate" too), and they seemed to be about a foot or more off the ground, on a kind of path of their own, made—like them—of finer stuff, something like the "yellow brick road" in *The Wizard of Oz*. This path of theirs wound its way above the concrete sidewalk I traversed now as if it had always been there: an additional world behind the visible one.

I was not able to see these figures as clearly as one sees real people or, for that matter, hallucinations. Nor were they as faded and porous as daydream figures. They had a specificity—there were details—that I could not have put in a daydream. In clarity, they were somewhere between real and daydream figures. I was afraid to turn and look at them as they stretched out behind me, lest they fade altogether.

As to what they looked like, they had silvery shimmering garments. One could not see their feet. They were bearded, but *not* with the white, "Old Testament," patriarchal beards that one sees in Protestant children's Sunday school book illustrations—and which had been part of my Jewish iconography too, since my grandfather had looked like that. My grandfather (the one who was a Talmudic scholar) had been tall and muscular, white bearded and heroic, like God in the Sistine Chapel, and that's what I would have expected the archaic Jewish appearance to be. But these figures had black, tight-curled, "Assyrian" beards. So they did not look as I expected.

Nonetheless, they were connected to me by the most warm and intimate of liens. I could not tell if they were rabbinic ancestors or something else. They did not have much individuation. But they knew *me* very well. And their line stretched back and back to their point of absolute origins: Ur of the Chaldees. They went as far back in time as it is possible for anything Jewish to go. They went all the way back to the beginning: straight and direct.

Now their path wound on ahead of me till its left and right edges met together in a point, the way parallel lines appear to meet at the horizon. Only this point was not at the horizon, since their path came to closure just under the concrete overhang that presaged the Board of Higher Education.

They were saying something to me, which I could hear distinctly, though it was not audible to the ear: You have been on a pilgrimage. You have been on a long pilgrimage, they said. And it is over.

Just as the parallel lines of the path that they walked had curved together and met right at the door of the BHE, so it was over, now. Nothing could be clearer.

The concept of "pilgrimage" is not Jewish as such. But it was not unfamiliar to me. In my heart of hearts, I had long felt that it must have been the secret of this case. Whatever people cared to say about it, it had been a fight for justice, I felt, in a small but real historical context. And the fight's true witnesses could not have been the bystanders with the reductive descriptions ("self-destructive," "naïve," "foolhardy," and so on). So they must have been *these* figures, who had been above the battle, but near it, the whole time. I didn't look at them, even sidewise, any more. Afraid to lose them, I looked on ahead, and they faded as I came up to the dark entrance of the building.

While it is certainly possible to read this as a projection, thrown upon the screen of my senses by nearly intolerable sorrow, fatigue, and despair—and anyone is free to do that who likes—I myself did not decide to doubt my vision. That is, whatever the undertow of thought and emotion jouncing around in me, I did not doubt it on the practical level.

Perhaps I was all out of ideas by that time. Or I didn't have any better ideas. In any event, I *acted* as if it were all over. At the hearing, I didn't intervene over the small points, of advantage or disadvantage to me, that were being contested. I did not fight for myself any more. By and large I just sat there, absent, slumped, cherishing this small warm light of certainty in my heart.

Afterward, in midsummer, when an official from the Profes-