

## ON ONE STONE

THOSE WERE GOOD days. I remained secluded in my house, writing the adventures of Rabbi Adam Baal Shem. This wise sage knew the Kabbalah in both theory and practice. He could recognize ghosts and demons as they set out upon their ways. He would throw a shawl over their eyes so that they could not see to do any harm. He was an expert on trees and could tell which ones grew by God's grace and which ones were formed from the bodies of sorcerers in order to trick people. These he would cut down, limb by limb. Thus he saved many of Israel from the depths of evil and restored them to their own root. All this Rabbi Adam did only by the word, for he possessed holy writings of an esoteric sort. And when the time came for Rabbi Adam to depart from this world, he hid the writings in a rock, upon which he cast a spell that it not open itself, so that no unfit person could study those writings and turn the world back to chaos and confusion.

As though in a vision I saw the rock and the writings inside it. I could discern every letter and word, every line, every page of writing, every leaf. Had these writings belonged to the root of my own soul, I would have read them, and out of them I would have fashioned worlds. But I didn't deserve to read them; I could only sit and look. My eyes would surround them like the metal settings in which precious stones are placed but which never combine with the stones themselves. Still, even if I didn't manage to read them, I can tell about them. If we

come into this world to put in order those things that previous generations have left behind, I can claim a certain measure of success.

When I got around to writing the tale of the rock, I began to worry that I might be interrupted in the middle. Even though I dwelt cut off from the world, I suspected that once I got into this matter and began to write the tale itself, people would come and bother me. That's the way it is with people. They're never there when you look for them, but just when you don't want them, they come around. I took all that I needed for writing—ink, pen, and paper—and went to the forest near my town. I went in among the trees, and there I found a certain rock where I made myself a place. I laid my writings down on the rock, and there I sat and wrote. When I stopped my writing, I would see the trees, the birds, and the grass, as well as the river that flowed through their midst. My heart took great joy in hearing how the birds would speak their piece before their Father in heaven, how each shrub in the field would speak up before the Everpresent, how all the trees of the forest would bow down before Him. The river's waters flowed gently, never raising themselves up too high. I did this for several days, until I had finished writing the tale of the writings Rabbi Adam Baal Shem had possessed on the theory and practice of Kabbalah. When the day of his death came, he was afraid that they might fall into the hands of improper folk, so he got up and went to a certain rock. He opened the rock, hid his writings there, and closed it up. No one knows where that rock is.

I wrote a lot about this matter, and I had still more to write. But on the day when I was going to finish the story, a man came by and asked me the way to town. I saw that he was elderly and walked with some difficulty. The path was strewn with rocks and the sun was close to setting. Fearing that he might not make it to town while there was still light, I left my writings and went to his aid. I walked along with him until we were close to town.

After taking leave of the old man I stood in astonishment. The holy Sabbath was coming and I was outside the permitted domain. Not only that, but something I had worked hard on all week long I had now suddenly abandoned in the middle. Even worse, I had left it

there, open to the wind, to beast or to bird. Even if I'd had to fulfill the commandment of honoring the elderly by walking with him, I could have picked up my writings and then walked into town. I could have fulfilled the commandment perfectly and still preserved my writings, and not have to go back to the woods on the eve of the Sabbath as night was falling. It was not regret or distress that I felt, but just a sense of shock, like a person who is astonished at himself, but not distressed.

Just then the sun set. The day turned to silver and the Sabbath light began to break forth. I stood still, not knowing where to go first. If I went to town, I'd be abandoning all I had done in six days. If I went to the forest, the holy Sabbath would be coming in and I would not be coming in with her. While I was still weighing the alternatives in my mind, my legs took themselves to walk into the forest.

When I returned to the forest I found my writings lying on the rock, just as I had left them. No wind had scattered them. No beast or bird had bothered them. Had it not been for that old man who had interrupted me and were it not for the darkness of this Sabbath eve, I would have gone over what I'd written and come away with a finished product. What a shame that I'd let the time go by and left my affairs in such a state.

While I was thinking this, the rock opened up, took in my writings, and closed up again. I left the rock and went back to town.

In that hour the blessed Holy One brought the moon, stars, and constellations out in the sky. The whole earth shone, and every rock that came up before me along the way gave off light. I could see every crack and crevice, every vein in the rock. I took all those rocks into my sight, my eyes serving as the soil that surrounded each rock, the setting in which each rock was placed. I loved and took delight in each and every one. I said to myself: What difference is there between the rock that took in the writings and these rocks right here? They peered out at me, or at least they seemed to be peering. And perhaps they said the same thing I had just said, not in my language but in their own.

TRANSLATED BY ARTHUR GREEN

## THE SENSE OF SMELL

### I THE EXCELLENCE OF THE HOLY TONGUE

THE HOLY TONGUE is a language like no other. All other tongues exist only by agreement, each nation having agreed upon its language. But the holy tongue is the one in which the Torah was given, the one through which the blessed Holy One created His world. Angels and seraphim and holy beings praise Him in the holy tongue. And when He comes to praise Israel, He also does so in the holy tongue, as it is written: "Behold thou art beautiful, my beloved, behold thou art beautiful." What language does Scripture speak? Surely the holy tongue. And when He longs to hear the prayers of Israel, what language is it that He longs to hear? The holy tongue, as He says: "Let me hear your voice for your voice is sweet." What voice is sweet to Him? The voice of Jacob, praying in the holy tongue. By the holy tongue He will one day rebuild Jerusalem and return the exiles to her midst. By the holy tongue He heals the mourners of Zion, their hearts broken by the destruction, and He binds up their wounds. Thus it is written: "The Lord builds Jerusalem, gathering the scattered of Israel; He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." For this reason all Israel should take care with their language, keeping it clear and precise, especially in these last generations so close to redemption, so that our righteous Messiah (may he be revealed speedily, in our own day!) will understand our language and we will understand his.

ist and talmudist. Eibeschutz was suspected of leanings toward Sabbateanism, the cult that developed around the false messiah Sabbatai Zvi. His opponent in a rift that divided Ashkenazic Jewry was Jacob Emden (see note below).

124/ *Gates of Mercy* Shaarei Hesed, one of the Jewish quarters of Jerusalem (outside the Old City) that existed prior to World War I.

124/ *Heshvan* The eighth month of the Jewish calendar (shortened from the original name Marheshvan), falling within the range of October to November. On the seventh of Heshvan, the prayer for rain is inserted into the Amidah portion of the service in the Land of Israel. The rains that fall at the end of the story are thus seasonal, as well as indicative of the narrator's isolation.

124/ *Samuel Emden* Here too Agnon gives the character one of his own given names and the family name of a great rabbi, Jacob Emden (1697–1776), an authority on Jewish law, a kabbalist, and an anti-Sabbatean polemicist. In a drawn-out feud Emden argued that Jonathan Eibeschutz had circulated Sabbatean amulets.

### A BOOK THAT WAS LOST

128/ *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* The Shulhan Arukh is a code of laws compiled by Joseph Caro. It was first printed in Venice in 1565 and became accepted over time as the standard code of Jewish law. The section of it known as Orah Hayyim concerns the daily commandments, the Sabbath, and festivals.

128/ *Magen Avraham* A commentary on the Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim, written by Abraham A. Gombiner (ca. 1637–83).

129/ *Rabbi Samuel Kolin . . . Mahazit Hashekel* Samuel Kolin (1720–1806) wrote *Mahazit Hashekel* as a commentary on the Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim. The section of Kolin's book on Orah Hayyim is actually a commentary on the Magen Avraham that simplifies its difficult language. The *Mahazit Hashekel* was widely used as a source for decisions in Jewish law.

130/ *Tartars who came to wage war on the town* A reference to invasions that occurred between 1655 and 1667.

130/ *Hamizpeh* "The Watchtower," a Hebrew weekly newspaper with a religious Zionist orientation, published in Cracow by Simon Menahem Laser. Laser was one of the first to publish Agnon (still known at that time as Czaczkes).

130/ *Ginzei Yosef Library and the Jewish National and University Library* The Ginzei Yosef Library is the collection established by Dr. Joseph Chasanowitsch (see

note below) that formed the basis for the Jewish National and University Library at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

131/ *Those little books that God does not deign to look upon* Books that belong to secular culture rather than Jewish learning.

134/ *Dr. Joseph Chasanowitsch* (1844–1919) Russian Zionist who studied medicine in Königsberg and settled in Bialystok. He collected ancient and rare books for a national Jewish library in Jerusalem. His collection, *Ginzei Yosef*, consisted of 63,000 books, of which 20,000 were in Hebrew, and formed the basis of the Jewish National and University Library, first at Mount Scopus and then at the Givat Ram campus of the Hebrew University.

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136/ *Rabbi Adam Baal Shem* A legendary kabbalist whose miraculous deeds gave rise to many tales during the seventeenth century. The nineteenth-century compiler of the *Shivehi Habesht*, the collection of stories about the founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, took these stories of Rabbi Adam Baal Shem and transformed them to show him as an esoteric kabbalist who was close in time and place to the Baal Shem Tov.

137/ *The permitted domain* According to Jewish law, this is the permitted distance (2,000 cubits) that one may walk beyond an established community on the Sabbath.

### THE SENSE OF SMELL

139/ "Behold thou art beautiful" Song of Songs 1:15.

139/ "Let me hear your voice" Song of Songs 2:14.

139/ "The Lord builds Jerusalem" Psalm 147:2–3.

140/ *Balaam the Wicked* Chapters 22–25 of Numbers describe how Balak, the king of Moab, commissioned the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites, who were about to travel through his territory. Balaam praised them instead; a section of his poetic prophecy ("How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob!") [Numbers 24:5] is included at the beginning of daily morning liturgy.

141/ *Edom* An epithet for Christendom.

141/ *Like one exiled from his father's palace* Based on a midrashic theme.

142/ *The book called Perfect Treatise* Ketav Tamim, by the thirteenth-century German sage Moses Taku.

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