

The Kabbalist's Tale

Alef.

The world is a story told by God.

Before anything else existed, God was, just as He is now and always will be. And God knew God, as the Infinite opens to itself, descending from Crown to Wisdom, generating Understanding, Love embracing Justice, emanating Beauty, Splendor birthing Presence, all His Attributes like a tree branching, the Tree blooming with sefirot: ten steps from which Nothing manifested into Fullness, a divine Person speaking His own unutterable Name, the unfolding pattern in every atom, imprinted upon every soul.

In the Beginning, God spoke ten times, and this sefirotic pattern crystalized as Creation. The Name measured out the heavens, majestic and ordered, and He mapped out the earth, onto which He placed verdant plants and myriad animals and upon which He fashioned people. The original person was named ADM, the pattern of all subsequent humans, and ADM was formed from ADMH, the humus of rich, red earth: thus matter was ensouled. God appointed celestial beings to watch over all of it: every star a soldier in His heavenly host, governed by ranks of angels and seraphs, the upper echelons of Eyes and Electricity, ten measures of divine Service. And God saw that it was good, and He chose His people Israel to keep His world holy and to sanctify His Name.

The world is a story told by God, bless the Name, who measures our days. So I will tell you a story, the brief tale of my life, knowing that it is only a small portion of the divine narrative that extends in all directions. Wherever any story reaches, it inevitably ends with God.

Bet.

I am Benjamin Roth, eldest son of Gedalyah, a humble Jew. I was born in Salonika, the Mother of Israel that sits by the sea, where my own mother's family has lived for more than

three hundred years. The language sung over my cradle was Ladino, although I would hear, at regular intervals, my father swearing in Arabic. My father is Halabi; he departed Aleppo with a shipment of choice damasks and upon arriving in Salonika, the mere sight of my mother passing on the street caused him to settle there, whence he promptly appealed to my grandfather for her hand in marriage.

Such deep veins of earthly passion did not prevent my father from being a spiritual man, for he taught me my prayers and educated me in all the ways of piety. When I was little, I sat in my father's lap and recited mishnayot I had memorized, before my mother lit the Sabbath candles - - the table set with fresh baked breads and sanbusak, pickled fruits and stuffed vegetables, a platter of sharmola - - and all together we welcomed the supernal Bride into our home, celebrating the weekly marriage of Beauty and Presence.

As I grew, I studied Talmud by day. In the evenings, my father took me along to synagogue, where we would return before dawn for bakashot, long supplications we sang to welcome the winter sun. We enlisted the sefirot by their Names, just as we invited guests into our sukkah. More and more I was trusted with the family business, learning to distinguish quality textiles from shoddier handiwork, and I was instructed how to make that distinction profitable. All in all, I was raised in a fine Jewish home, where we prayed and worked and celebrated the sacred round of seasons, fasting on fast days and feasting when occasion warranted: cycles of holiness trod with humility, bounded by love. In Salonika, I lived a happy, perhaps uneventful, life up until that day the Angel of Death arrived.

My parents had promised me to Devorah, whom I had known since she was six. My intended was a woman as intelligent as her namesake, and I thought her as beautiful as the Shulamite. But just three months before our wedding, the Plague seized Devorah. She and I liked to stroll and converse in the cool of evening, watching the moon rise over our Mother of Israel, and it must have been on one such occasion that the Night Air blew upon her its poisonous breath. The physicians would not let me visit her when she fell ill, so I recited Psalm 130 until, so it seemed to me, I had worn smooth its syllables. Devorah passed, and all that was left of the many plans for our life together was for me to mourn her, and to give alms generously, as if any sum could ever equal the enormity of my grief.

Thinking a change of location would alleviate my lingering sorrow, my parents sent me away, awaiting a suitable time for them to arrange another marriage. I had little interest in such matters, but dutifully I departed Salonika and arrived in Djerba, where I stayed with cousins who also made their livelihood with textiles. It was there I met the distinguished teacher, Yosef Yakov Azoulay, with his tall turban and deep voice. Listening to Rabbi Azoulay expound hidden dimensions of Torah soothed my wounded and weary heart. Within a year, this rabbi became my master, leading me deeper into the mysteries of the Zohar; eventually, he entrusted me with arduous methods of ecstasy, as handed down from his own master in Livorno, Raphael Pardo. With the first method, practiced during communal prayers, one visualizes colors corresponding to the sefirot; with the second method, practiced only in seclusion, one permutes letters. Rabbi Azoulay warned me to never combine these methods, for the soul will not return from too steep an ascent, abandoning the body once and for all.

As my grief lessened, I directed more of my energies towards the divine. Sitting at Wisdom's Table, I received Torah's bounty, and acquired the training necessary to exercise the power of Names. All this while, I continued working in the family business; indeed, a brisk trade in silk thread impelled me to take up lodgings here in London. I now contract shipments and inspect cargo, so that my days are crowded by sums, carried within letters and ledgers; thus I labor every day of the week, except for the Sabbath. For I never forget my true purpose: to know my Maker, serving Him in this life and in the world-to-come, bless the Name.

So now you know how I came to be in this story, yet you may still wonder what role I truly play. Of that, I am not entirely sure myself, but allow me to state some certainties. Please understand that my people call God the Name because His Name contains all other names, just as His holy Torah is the source of all Wisdom. Before the world was made, when there was neither parchment or ink nor human hand to hold a quill, His Torah was written as black fire upon white fire. Now His Wisdom is sculpted into the Words we sing and written onto holy scrolls held aloft by pure hands, as we praise His Name. A Jewish scribe writes each scroll with the utmost care, that every letter be precisely in its place, for to jumble divine Wisdom is to

invert God's Creation. So we reverently recreate the world within each scroll of Torah, maintaining the order authored by God.

Our intimacy with every letter of Torah, through which gentiles now power their amulets and automata, has from days of old been our Shield and Salvation. For by use of holy Names, our father Abraham fashioned a calf to serve to his three Visitors. So, too, Jacob beheld angels coming down the Ladder, which he then ascended. By use of holy Names, Moses wrought wonders in Egypt, humbling Pharaoh. By use of holy Names, Aaron entered the Holy of Holies, and, by such esoteric devices, Solomon built the Temple, where the Presence dwelt on earth.

Even after God's House was destroyed, the sages of blessed memory remembered the Names. Haninah, Hoshaiah, Ishmael, Akiba, Meir Baal ha-Nes, Rashby, Rashban, ha-Ari, Shlomo Alkabetz, Raphael Pardo, the Maharal: through exile and indignity, wise men such as these passed down the Names to us, that future generations might keep the secrets of Torah and always remember God.

I humbly continue their work. As the sages gave the Tradition, so I have received it. And as I have received, so I will give it to my sons and to my grandsons, extending the Names.

Gimmel.

Each morning, I rise and give thanks to God for returning my soul to my body. I splash water on my face, dry off with a towel, and then wrap myself in a prayer shawl. I place amulets on my head and arm, affixing holy letters to my person as I pray. More importantly, I bind Names upon my heart, that I should guard my tongue from speaking evil and guide my steps along righteous paths. After I break sleep's fast, I dress, putting on an under-shirt with knotted fringes in each corner, visible below my waist-coast. I wear this garment to remember the commandments Jews undertake, a total of six hundred and thirteen mitzvot. There are two hundred and forty-eight prescriptions, one mitzvah for each bone in my body, and there are three hundred and sixty-five proscriptions, one mitzvah for each day of the year, to circumscribe my time with discipline and holy service. We learn from these numerical

correspondences that each man is himself a small world, so that in everything one does, one should hallow the wider world, sanctifying the Name.

I say prayers twice more each day, and, as befits a loyal servant of the King, I also say blessings before and after meals, and whenever any significant occurs, such as beholding the rainbow. In this life, there is blessing and there is curse. Hence we continually bless our Maker, that He may continue to bless us. And in order to bless and to receive blessing, one must recite letters and Names in their correct order. We repeat the same phrases over and over, yet never in a mechanical way; they must be said with the proper intention, whether we unify the letters or see the colors. This is how we contemplate the holy Names and become fully aware of the divine spark in all Life.

My point in telling you about my routine is this: *holiness matters*. It is not pretense or artifice, that its practices should be dismissed as superstitious Rite. For what is holy is tremendously powerful, as the source of anything so beneficial will also be dreaded and dangerous. Handled with deepest reverence and greatest caution, the holy will heal and protect; handled carelessly, that same power maims and destroys.

This is why kabbalists guard the secrets of Torah, revealing them only to the worthy and the worshipful. Yet gentiles spurn the essential conditions, profaning the Sabbath and foregoing prayer; even when permutating Names, they do not bother to take ritual baths or fast. Yet how, I wonder, is this even possible? How can one be a master of Names if one is not a faithful servant of the King?

As I have seen for myself, gentiles seek only to wring power from our holy tongue, but they care nothing for living a life of Torah. How then is the purest honey made so bitter? They seize our sacred language for their own sake, yet discard its holiness, mangling it in their impure mouths. For while they can write Hebrew, they cannot recite it: a gentile speaks Hebrew like one who would sing while chewing his food. A Torah scroll is written with consonants, but not vowels; and perhaps this explains why gentiles do not pronounce Hebrew correctly. The vowels, as it were, are the soul that animates the corporeal forms of the consonants, giving the words life and praising his Name. But they do not approach Torah with reverence or obedience, only with arrogance! How they chew up and spit out our precious Inheritance, gnawing at Names

until masticated fragments of sacred language fit into porcelain dolls, or they can be stuffed unceremoniously into motorized kettles and driverless carriages.

So long as such toys and trinkets turn a profit, men will produce them. I do not begrudge any man his livelihood, but these desecrations of my Tradition should not be overlooked! Here in England, each castle and cottage is being outfitted with automated servants, ranging from Conveniences to Extravagances. All these objects are powered by Hebrew Names, yet without their makers ever once acknowledging God as their true Source: a parade of idols assembled on the altars of Mammon.

And these domesticated desecrations seem almost mild when compared to reports of other activities that have reached my ears, may the Name keep us away from such unholy things! For I have heard of gentiles crafting artificial whores to satisfy their lusts, or collecting the menses of washer-women, that they might have a sort of soil in which to grow artificial men. It is said that gentiles will even go so far as to masturbate into alchemical gourds, like demonic legions of Samael and Lilith, to harvest their seed for building golems. Such abominations I can scarcely imagine! Is there any level too low to which such men will not stoop?

Yet these same men, steeped in impurity, have greatly prospered, and extended their vice-ridden empire across the earth. Given the British fondness for conquest, I fearfully speculate about mechanical armies, whole legions of soulless slaves marching into battle with enchanted munitions. I dread that such a day is not far off when automated nation will trample nation, cheering their Victory with methods they have purloined from Torah.

I simply do not understand how holy Names can be put to such impious ends. It seems as if the whole of Creation is going mad, overturning what is written in Torah. How much longer must we wait before Messiah comes and rights these wrongs? How will I act justly in such an unjust world? Indeed, how can *this* be the story in which I must live?

Dalet.

Last week, I stopped by the apothecary shoppe of Mister Chiang. Tucked in a quiet lane between a book-seller and a haberdasher, to whom I deliver small parcels of silk thread in exchange for complimentary mending of my suits, Chiang's shop has a small bell that chimes dutifully as I open the door. I am greeted by the earthy scents of dried goods - - tea, mushroom, bird-nest - - mingled with the faint aroma of incense burning in a back room. The walls of Chiang's shoppe are covered with many stout shelves, shouldering tall glass urns in which rest murky tinctures or swim pickled roots. There are also long lines of blue and white porcelain jars, with paper labels made out in Chinese hieroglyphs, to hold sundry snuffs and powders.

Whether I arrive in the morning or in the afternoon, I have hardly ever found any customers in Mister Chiang's shoppe, even as I inevitably find him preparing some kind of concoction, which he then wraps in paper with twine, and sets aside for delivery. It has occurred to me that selling tea and snuff might be a pretext for trafficking in other goods, perhaps of a contraband nature, which might explain how Mister Chiang knows so much about the comings and goings of the Royal Society. For on more than one occasion, Chiang has told me about new discoveries well before their studies have been published.

Back in his native Kiafeng, Mister Chiang was acquainted with Jews - - he tells me there are Jews there who wear their hair in long, braided tails, just as he did in his younger days - - and so Mister Chiang understands that I may not accept his kind offer of food, even though his pickles sorely tempt me. Yet we can drink tea, and I enjoy watching as Chiang prepares the pot, unhurried, steeping the leaves once and then steeping them again. He wears a contented smile on his face as he fills a cup for me.

As we sip tea together, Mister Chiang and I converse about the News of the Day. The shoppe-keeper is very informed, following the tangled skeins of many current events, and he likes to consider the educated opinions of others, to better sort fact from rumor. Some days, Mister Chiang is pensive as we mull over the News, while other days he appears more bemused, as if the News amounts to the same olde story that he hears over and over.

Mister Chiang has never come out and told me his own story in full, but I have gleaned some crucial pieces from our conversations. I understand that family debt, incurred by the reckless actions of others, forced him to undertake his voyage to this unfamiliar place. When I ask too directly about his past life in China, I notice that the expression around his eyes becomes tense, and so I desist. I suppose that he and I share a longing for our distant homes, and perhaps something more: the strained patience of waiting while the world endures Pharaoh after Pharaoh, the sun never setting on their greed.

It is truly an odd thing, for I know here is a man who worships strange gods, yet when our talk ventures into matters of Religion, I find much comfort in his words. There is the steady way Mister Chiang speaks, as if each word was a gem being polished. This is not the result of a lesser facility with English, for I once heard him converse with another man from China who requested that Chiang read the lees of his tea cup. Listening to him divining, I found that Mister Chiang had the same deliberate manner of speaking, an unrushed celebration of each syllable. No, I think the pleasure I take in our conversation is more than affect, for there is a certain sympathy of Ideas involved. When Chiang ventures that respecting Names serves the Will of Heaven, I can only be reminded of my master, rabbi Azoulay. The grievances I feel against other gentiles, I do not feel with Mister Chiang. Perhaps it is his warmth, or his humility, or his reverence for Tradition, but I am very fond of him. He is not quite my friend, but he is definitely an ally.

On this day, I am helping Mister Chiang decipher some pages from an antique Pharmacopoea, where Hebrew and Arabic accompany the Latin and English names for stars. Specific stars or clusters of stars govern certain organs, each of which correspond with certain plants; Mister Chiang wants to understand the Occidental system, for even if the calendars do not align, there is a familiar principle at work in treating ailments. So Chiang has asked me to review the Semitic terms with him, and I am happy to oblige, and we spend about thirty minutes making notations in the yellowed margins of the Pharmacopoea.

Although Mister Chiang is attentive to my translation efforts, I can tell his mind is elsewhere, and from the way his eyes dance around the page, I surmise that he has something he wishes to tell me. Sure enough, before we have gone half-way through the lists of star

names, he sets aside the tome and grins at me, with the sly look of a happy conspirator. Chiang takes a long sip of tea, and tells me he has been informed that the Englishmen have now developed dexterous automata.

I inadvertently allow a gasp to escape my lips, for Chiang's announcement does take me by surprise, as he no doubt intended. I venture the obvious, saying, "That is amazing. It is rather hard to believe the nomenclators could achieve such a prodigious feat. If this claim proves to be true, then surely a very powerful Name has been permuted."

Mister Chiang studies my face. "Yes, they have uncovered a powerful Name. But then these are powerful men, who jealously guard their secrets. Ah, Mister Roth, it has been my sad experience that the more power a man accrues, the less inclined this man is to share power with others. So please," Mister Chiang hands me a folded slip of paper, "... proceed to inquire about such matters with all due caution."

I thank him, and place the paper in my waistcoat pocket, and we proceed to further review the star-names. After a second cup of tea, we are both invigorated, and we part having set a time next week for another visit. I leave the shoppe and head up the lane, walking down Chester Street, taking in the day and eyeing the Tower in the distance. Thirty minutes of absent-minded ambulations brings me to the open green near my lodgings. I unfold the slip of paper, which has an address penned in Mister Chiang's meticulous handwriting. At the top, he has written:

R o b e r t S t r a t t o n .

He.

As I tally columns in my ledger, I ponder the news Mister Chiang shared with me. How I can I not be intrigued? Who can this Mister Stratton be, that he should accomplish such a remarkable feat? How could anyone who is not a kabbalist do what he has purportedly done?

Kabbalists experiment with Scripture, knowing that the Hebrew letters, which are simultaneously numbers, are the basic elements of Being. Whatever is, is constituted by letters, assembled into syllables and further arranged into Names. Through Naming, one can

enumerate, or spell out, the essential code that determines what any thing will do: the calculus of Life.

Even gentiles understand this. Indeed, they understand it all too well, for they exploit it. They have laboratories and manufactories where they are always busy testing and making things, yet they proceed without prayer or piety or fasting, seeking gain from Hebrew Wisdom while turning away from its ultimate Source. I have not accustomed myself to this profanation of our Torah, and doubt that I ever will.

Yet there is something else happening now, something for which my own education has not prepared me. Long have I studied and prayed, but the reality that confronts me resists my efforts to name it. I run the knotted fringes of my undershirt through my fingers, while I muse on this unsettling thought.

Living here in London, I have found that those who work with Names engrandize themselves as Scientists, while they belittle us kabbalists as mere Magicians. It matters not to them that their practices were learned from Jews, that arranging letters and writing Names are the same techniques utilized by men of piety. What differs, I think, are the purposes to which these techniques are being put: good purposes or bad purposes, that depends on the intentions of people, not on the technology itself.

Yes, yes! As with prayer, it all comes down to intention: does one say holy words with humility and focus, or do we mumble them with disinterest, or bark them boastfully? What differentiates my experiments with Truth from those of Scientists is not the technique so much as it is our intentions. I was taught that without proper intention, even holy letters could only be combined into nonsense, and that this work was not harmless, for engineering nonsensical Names would lead from mischief to madness, or it might materialize plague and pogrom. But perhaps that is not entirely true, and the techniques operate independently from the intentions of kabbalists or gentiles? For these Scientists have been very effective in deriving and applying Names, even if they do not sing in Hebrew or maintain our holy ways... and that should not be possible. Gentiles making golems should be impossible...and yet they do it, and on a massive scale. How? How can this Robert Stratton command the elements when men of his profession neglect to fast or pray?

This notion troubles me greatly, and I recall a conversation I had once back in Djerba, studying with the other students of rabbi Azoulay. We were gathered around a big folio of the Zohar, hovering over that mystic tome like bees busying themselves with a spectacular flower, slightly intoxicated with its Wisdom. We were discussing a passage commenting on Joseph's dream when Vitali posed the question to us: *do gentiles have souls?*

The question lingered in the air a while, before several people attacked it. Amado responded that even plants have some form of soul, for, as Midrash teaches, there is no blade of grass that grows without an angel being there to command it. Mois chimed in that animals have additional souls, imbuing them with motion and enough intelligence to be trained; yet, Mois continued, only Jews have been gifted with the highest souls, given to them alone so they may ascend in service to their King. I objected that gentiles speak and write, just as we do; does it not stand to reason that their speech and literacy make them fully ensouled? How, he retorted, can those cultured, clever beasts have higher souls when they refuse to do mitzvot, and instead they mock Jews for being so pious and backwards?

Bendit then quoted a verse from Isaiah, so that we then turned our attentions to how the wicked nations still prosper, while Israel languishes in exile. About this, I had no answer then, and I lack one now. Yet I know this much: a golem is soulless, for only God fashions a soul. This is why even the greatest master of Names will never make a real person, only automata. But I am also sure from my conversations with Mister Chiang that *he* has a soul, and so, I must assume, do other gentiles.

To work with Names, Robert Stratton must have a soul, which he then exercises in ways unfamiliar to me. Might I have something to learn from these Scientists, beyond their haughtiness? It may be that Mister Stratton is a generous soul, and he will share his discovery with one devoted to arranging letters. My devotion is his vocation: should I tell him we are members of the same guild of Mystiks? No, No, professional courtesy does not reach so far, and it never extends to Jews. Moreover, Stratton might balk at being called a Mystik, which sounds to English ears too much like the spiritual exertions of the Turk, or of the Hindoo reclining on his bed of nails.

But, still, this man knows Names. Perhaps if I clearly explain to him my intention, yes, I will tell him of the holiness with which I approach Names, and then Mister Stratton will recognize the nobility of my purpose. It might be that by speaking with him, man to man, his soul will awaken to my pious intention, and then he will agree to help me cleave to God.

Vav.

I arrive at Coade Manufactory, an imposing labyrinth of red brick and iron gates; coal furnaces billow clouds of soot into the clear sky, as befits such a fortress of Industry. I approach the guard-house, and notice the wary look on the guard's face, as his eyes travel from the bottom of my beard up to my eyes, which meet his. I doff my hat and nod to him, and he tips his cap in return, and honoring my request, the guard instructs me where I can find Mister Stratton.

The Manufactory is a place of much Commotion, with busy people hurrying to and fro and generating a great deal of Noise from all the hammering, soldering, and like labors. I walk quickly past rows of massive vats, but my pace slows as I come upon a series of enormous cocoons, large enough for moths the size of men. This, I realize, would account for the increased traffic in silk thread, and I understand that my own story has already overlapped with this castle of unimpeded Commerce.

I reach Mister Stratton's office and rap twice on the door. A voice from within welcomes me into a tidy office. Neat rows of ledgers, quite like the ones I keep, are shelved along with stacks of boxes brimming with anatomical models cast in plaster, including several small bins of fingers. In one corner stands a complete skeleton, wrapped here and there with colored ribbons to indicate muscle or sinew, and hung with felt pouches that simulate organs. Sitting at a drafting table, I spy a slightly plump man in a starched shirt, his pink flesh scrubbed clean and his face clean shaven. Mister Stratton's countenance is enlivened by bright eyes, the wilting blue of cornflowers, that blink rapidly when he speaks, and his blue eyes are set into an earnest, doughy face, as if his Maker had kneaded him just this morning and he has come straight from the oven to Coade Manufactory.

I remove my hat and introduce myself, and Mister Stratton is momentarily left speechless. It is plain to see the man is incredulous that a person such as myself should seek him out, although he tries to hide his surprise, as his blue eyes strain open. He recovers enough to say, "A pleasure to meet you. How might I be of assistance?"

Stratton stands up, offers me a seat, and sits back down again. I compliment him on his achievement and, without much fanfare, tell him why I have come: to better know God. An awkward silence fills the tidy office, as we both try to find the right words to engage each other. The scientist fidgets, and I become less sure of my task. Why did I come here? How can I explain God to one who scoffs at the commandments?

"Please continue."

I nervously twist the fringes hanging below my waistcoat, and press on. We converse about epithets and the abilities they impart, as Stratton blinks out some esoteric code. I am encouraged that we are establishing some common ground, but then the matter of money arises, and I feel my own face redden behind my beard. Stratton patronizes me as he suggests I can wait until the patent expires, as if I am not already waiting for the Messiah! and I can hear the voice in my head crying out: How dare you! What you have done you only did with secrets you stole from Jews! You scoundrel, that you think you own what is holy!

I think these thoughts, but I restrain my tongue. Stratton's blue eyes no longer blink; they now bulge as he too works to suppress his own anger. I will not accuse this man who has consented to meet with me, yet our discussion has proven pointless. Mister Stratton is polite, as Englishmen are taught to be, but we only talk past each other, so I take my leave of him, both of us exasperated by the presumption of the other.

Zayin.

After my meeting with Stratton, I resume my daily routine, and its familiar rhythms carry me through my day. Yet my sleep is restless, and by the second day after our unpleasant encounter at the Manufactory, my concentration has slipped. My mind will simply not let the

incident pass, and returns to muse on how two people who both concentrate such considerable effort on holy Names can be so profoundly different.

The gentile Scientists who wield Names refer to themselves as “nomenclators.” Like kabbalists, nomenclators understand that a Name is the very essence of a thing, determining its beginning and its end: an irrevocable command for what must be, signed and sealed. What we call Providence, the ancient Greeks labeled Fate, and they told stories to warn against tempting it. Gentiles today are not so cautious.

In our times, these nomenclators boldly treat Names merely as Nature, supposing we live in a world ruled by Physics and Thermodynamics and Alchemy, yet wherein God is absent. There are molecules and heat and magnetic attractions, but no souls. It is as if Creation itself were but a giant golem, an immense and intricate piece of Clockwork, which the scientists disassemble and tinker with, never realizing that the world has a Maker, the same Maker as they do. And yet these same gentiles have come to rule so much of His World, and they have mastered enough Names to build such towering cities, equipped with massive Industries and Armies - - perhaps these men are not entirely wrong. Can it be that they even know something that Israel does not?

This is an unhappy thought, unworthy of one who praises the Name! I push these doubts aside as I prepare for my vigil, and ready myself for a possible ascent to my King. For I know without any hesitation that God is, that He is always and He is everywhere, for I have experienced Him wherever I have prayed, and I have felt the distinct elation of drawing nearer to his Presence. May it be His Will that I know such ecstasy this very evening.

I consult my notebook to refresh my memory of a recent permutation of Names I will utilize tonight. The holy letters erase my worldly concerns and they resound in my mind like rams' horns on the Days of Awe. I must detach myself from earthly matters so that my soul can attach to the divine, climbing the Ladder that Jacob climbed. And the higher that a soul ascends, the more prophecy may descend upon that person, so that, if God wills it, this holy person might receive visions: to see, as it were, the Voice of the King.

I have not eaten since noon. I return in silence from a local bathhouse, where I have made arrangements to immerse my body before immersing myself in divine Names. I put on pure, white linen and enter the small, windowless room I have set aside for my vigils. On each wall is affixed an amulet, with two on the door, to deflect any intrusion from the vile forces of Samael. There is a linen cushion for me to sit upon, a taper, a small jug of water, and nothing else inside. Across the walls and over the door I pull heavy drapes, so that any outside noise is muffled. In this chamber of cleaving, there can be no sound, no sight, no smells: I close off any sensation that ties me to bodily needs or wants, and focus exclusively on Names.

Here within this sealed chamber, in the stillness of the early morning hours, I sift my breath from one side of my heart to the other, moving it back and forth in a steady, even flow. I fill my mind with holy Names, pushing everything else out of my consciousness so that nothing remains but God. Now I start to combine Names and begin my journey, meticulously climbing rung by rung, unlocking each gate. As I ascend on high, the Hebrew letters quicken and dissolve: their forms appear and swirl until the divine pattern emerges, a palatial network of holy language into which I am admitted.

Yet I do not know where I am. I am travelling through vast, iridescent halls made entirely of Hebrew, as if each majestic letter was carved from precious gems and set into some towering, elaborate filigree: all of it shimmering in the way that light reflects off water. Never before have I ventured so far into the supernal realms, where every boundary is itself an endless vista. I am being called onward, through an invisible architecture which I can effortlessly navigate, turning here and turning there, guided through innumerable chambers hewn from pure Ideas. I arrive at a Theatre of Forms, and behold a play enacted for me.

Two figures stand before me. The first one, crowned by letters, opens his mouth, from which he removes a scroll. As he reads what is written, a man steps out of the shadow cast by his radiance, and then another man emerges from that man's shadow, and so on, until there are many figures, forming a long line that vanishes in the distance.

Now the second figure steps forward, and I am anxious, although I know not why. His appearance is that of an ordinary man, but he intends great evil. In his hand he grasps an object, a simple sort of tool, yet I understand that he means to wield it as a terrible weapon.

There is a palpable sense of danger, and now I hear cries, whether of warning or distress I am not certain.... Are the cries coming from me?

A primal fear takes hold, occluding my soul's vision. The scene fades, and I am no longer in the prophetic Theatre, and I have been ushered from the palace of Hebrew. I can no longer discern its dizzying structure, and start to descend, slowly withdrawing rung by rung, closing the gates as I pass back through them. After the long process of reversing my permutations, my mouth is very dry, and so I break my fast with a few sips of water, hoping to remove the bitter taste from my tongue. I feel a lingering terror, oddly coupled with a growing sense of assurance: some measure of both pain and comfort, mixed together like the wine and water in Joseph's cup.

Het.

Tired from my vigil, I nap for a few hours. I wake to a jumble of ideas, my mind racing over what it was shown. For the Talmud instructs us that a dream is one sixtieth of prophecy, as sleep is one sixtieth of death, and that a dream uninterpreted is like a letter unread. But this could not be a dream, no matter how dream-like the imagery, as I stayed awake and clave to the Name. No, no, this was a real vision, in which I was granted a small glimpse of immense happenings. Having been gifted with this portion of prophecy, I must discern what it means, so that I know what I must do.

Who was the first figure, crowned with letters? Was this my Double, that I feel for him such kindred spirit? Or maybe it was simply my own Self, and the many men emerging from his shadow signify my descendants? Perhaps the man crowned with letters is Mister Stratton, for this vision must surely be connected to the recent business about the powerful Name.

But is Stratton my mirror image, or is he my nemesis? Should I pay the scientist another visit? I very much doubt that Mister Stratton will invite me to take tea and converse about Religion, or that further conversation will persuade him to grant me access to the Name.

And who was the other figure in my vision? As I feel a strong affinity with the figure crowned with letters, I am repulsed by the second figure. I know that he serves someone else's

bidding, but not as a golem does. The second figure signifies a man who is an incomplete person, and I start to sweat as I experience the beastly rage that radiates from him. Must I encounter this man, or will he find me?

So much is unclear to me. More feelings than facts, as Mister Chiang might say. What would Chiang make of my vision? As much as I would like to hear him divine its obscure contours, it is too personal; asking for his aid in this matter oversteps a boundary. But what would my master in Djerba say?

I recall rabbi Azoulay teaching me that in each man is the germ of all his descendants, like the succession of men emerging from the shadows in my vision. ADM is an acrostic for Adam-David-Messiah, as the form of the first Man contains all men who come after him. Midrash instructs us that Adam donates seventy years from his own life to enable David, the paradigm of service. David represents the true servant of the King, the prototype of Messiah - - may he no longer tarry but come soon and restore Israel. So from first Man to last, there is planted a holy seed that blossoms into the fullness of divine purpose.

Yet even as we affirm Providence, I still wonder: how can I “decide” on a course of action if everything is already decided by God? All this deliberation, all this instruction, just to be moved around like a marionette! I suppose that if I could put this concern to my master, he might respond this way: does not Adam choose to eat the fruit, or choose to give his years to David, even though his choices are already written? Azoulay would then tell me to embrace this paradox, and to surrender to the Name. I can only do what God has decided I will do, and all that remains is to align my intentions with His.

It is one thing to say this, and quite another to live it! For I am not an impulsive man, but one who considers matters carefully, as befits any student of Wisdom. So I am still no closer to knowing how I should proceed, or understanding what my vision means. Confident answers may come through ascending again, aided by a more powerful Name.

Then I realize what must be done: I must use Stratton’s innovative Name and ascend once more to that Theatre of Forms, there to see more clearly the tasks that lie ahead. Yes, I need to be sure who or what the two figures signify, before I can carry out God’s design. I could

easily retrieve the Name from Stratton's office, and without anyone even knowing I had done so.

To be sure, it is no small thing to break laws, even gentile laws; but surely a prophet answers to a higher authority? To trespass on the property of men is a small crime compared to the sin of trespassing Heaven. And stealing from thieves? Solatium, as lawyers would say.

Ah, with this type of reasoning one can justify anything!

Somehow this acknowledgment does nothing to dampen my enthusiasm for the plan that is emerging. I am not an impulsive man, but there is a mysterious sensation confirming my notion to go back to the Manufactory: almost as if this Name itself calls to me, implores me to rescue it from captivity in Edom. It is as if my destiny is coalescing around this single task: the imperative to learn that Name, in my service to the King.

Bless He who writes, and bless the power of Names! Blessed is Hebrew, for it binds the whole world together: subtle glue of Creation! Other languages lack that sublime cohesion, that elemental bonding, which is only strengthened when the letters are combined and braided upon each other, in the same the way twisted fibers become stronger, as the knotted fringes on my undershirt tether me to holy service. Despite some lingering uncertainties, I have been summoned to sacred duty, and I must respond accordingly. A preternatural calm strengthens my resolve.

The world is a story told by God. I do not know what role I have in His story, but I am prepared to play my part. It is time for me to act.

Tet.

Returning to Coade Manufactory, I see its massive outline loom against the deep expanse of night. I make my way around to a side entrance, where a charmed doorway is dimly lit, and I easily disarm its protective amulet with an incantation I learned in Djerba. I enter the building, which is dark and silent: such a stark contrast to my previous visit. I orient myself as I recognize the outlines of the cocoons, and from there I retrace my steps to Mister Stratton's office. Another quick spell opens the door to his office, which I shut behind me as I step in.

A small lamp is lit, and I pull up a chair as I open the ledger-book with the most recent date. There are many musings about Thermodynamiks, interspersed with some mathematical formulae, and the writing is dry enough that I wonder if I might take another nap, right here in Stratton's office. But wait, I turn the page and look at how a column of names are calculated, and I am stunned. Stratton's technique here is flawless, such that the elegance of his permutations leaps off the page, arousing my admiration. In his work with Names, I am confronted by a crystalline beauty, like the intricate patterns of frost on a wintry windowpane. Surely Mister Stratton has a soul, as pure as any I have met! And should we meet again, then I owe him an apology for my ungracious conduct.

I pull out my own notebook, so I can make careful note of his Names, yet almost as soon as I begin to write, I hear the latch. I look up from Stratton's papers as the door opens, seeing a burly man step into the room. He slips a skeleton key back into his waistcoat, and then he spies me spying him, and we both freeze at our unexpected meeting.

He is not a guard, so who can he be? He has an ungroomed mustache, flecked with gray hairs, and he looks flushed, as if he had briskly run up some stairs. His own surprise dissipates as he strides over to where I am writing and grabs me by my coat lapels. As he pulls me up from my seat, I catch a whiff of something medicinal, or possibly floral? What is it? Is this man an apothecary, like Mister Chiang?

Curling the lip at the corner of his mouth, the flushed man freights his voice with menace. He asks me who "the bloody Hell" I am. So I tell him I am a figment of his imagination, adding that it would be best if he went home and got back into bed.

For this advice, he slaps me hard across the face. I wince from the blow, and I feel less brave than I did a moment ago. He tightens his grip on my lapels and pulls my face close to his, staring me down. He is trying to think of a verbal retort, which eludes him, and now I recognize his smell as that of gin. He smiles wickedly, showing me the uneven crags of his teeth.

I smile back, which startles him. Seizing this moment, I punch him in the throat. Releasing his hold on me, Mister Gin gasps for air and drops to one knee. I dash past him towards the door, but as I run by, he grabs my ankle and trips me. I tumble headlong into a

cabinet, causing a couple of boxes of anatomical casts to crash down upon me. I am sprawled on the floor with a dozen plaster hands pointing their accusatory fingers at me.

Will this clatter arouse a guard? Mister Gin is bigger than me, and faster than he looks. When he lunges at me, I kick his chest; but he catches my foot, and twists my leg. He steps on my knee and bears down with all his weight, and I am plunged into waves of pain, crashing over my consciousness. I will not be able to run, and I find myself yelling, hoping to rouse someone to intervene in this assault.

The ruffian wads up papers from the desk and shoves them into my mouth, then roughly throws me back into the chair. Where is the guard? Where is my notebook? What is he doing now? My antagonist has found some sort of thin cable and ties my hands behind my back, while I writhe in resistance and try desperately to expel the papers from my mouth.

Mister Gin steps around to face me, and produces a pair of pliers, which he waves in my face as he tells me that I will tell him what I know about Stratton's work. He removes the impromptu gag and I promptly curse my assailant in blistering Arabic. Another slap, and he steps behind my bound form with the pliers. I can not see him, but I feel the cold of the metal grip my little finger, and suddenly there is excruciating pain. Agony overwhelms me, so that I can barely focus on what Gin says next. He makes threats, he insists on secrets being disclosed; but everything I know is contained in my broken finger. Unsatisfied with my response, he stuffs the papers back in my mouth and brandishes his pliers.

The pain, the pain, the pain! The horrible sensation is so intense, I have trouble keeping my eyes open. When I shut them, people appear to me: here are my dear parents, and rabbi Azoulay bends over me, and now my beloved Devorah, o gazelle upon the hills, come to me, yes, let my bride come! Mister Gin frees my mouth again, and out spills the Ladino of long ago lullabies, of songs I learned decorating the Sukkah, of lessons from the Zohar: the sounds of all that I have loved or grieved.

"Stop babbling, you stinking Yid!" He pulls my beard until a tuft comes away in his hand, yet this injury barely registers for the pain that still shoots up my arm. Gin brings one fist down on my collar bone, and then another, and I am beyond making sense. I can only moan in the cadences of the Prophets; I plead for mercy with David's own Psalms. I seek safe harbor in the

holy language, even as words fail me, as letters slip away from my command. The brute demands answers, but my speech has become slurrred and halting.

Each frustrated query further infuriates Mister Gin, so that his rage is now palpable, as if the room is being heated by his unchecked temper. Stratton's office is an inferno of anger. I feel ready to vomit. I am a mess of ache and panic, trapped here by a madman. There can be no reasoning with this Amalek, for he desires my death more than he wants whatever brought him to the manufactory. He punches me again.

King of the world, make him stop! Where is the voice from Heaven to quiet his rage? Where is the angel to stay his hand? Give the command and spare my life! Is not every man a small world, so that now You watch as your whole world is being destroyed? Judge on high, is this the Justice you offer? Is my punishment for a single infraction to be death? If this man murders me, then he also slaughters all those future generations that would descend from me, the faithful who would carry out Your holy service. You must intervene, you must! If only for the sake of Your holy Name, you must make him stop!

My pitiful petitions go unanswered. Amalek will not cease his cruel labors: his fists continue to pummel me, beating out a savage, percussive rhythm. Then a kick lands hard against my ribs, and each breath comes sharp as a dagger, and the acrid taste in my mouth is blood, my blood. I can no longer stay upright on the chair, and slump towards the ground like a golem with letters erased from its forehead. My vision blurs until the universe has turned purple-black, that ugly color of bruises, and I sink heavily into a bottomless darkness: a stone dropped in the deep sea.

Yod.

Then I remember God, and I know what I must do.

Pain is the ocean in which I am drowning, a torrent of anger and confusion that drags under my soul. My body has betrayed me, accusing me with every aching limb, siding with my enemy. But ecstasy is escape, the sacred route I can follow to leave my physical form behind and take shelter under the wings of His Presence.

O God, we are but fragments of your divine Speech, letters gathered together for a brief moment, spelling out our lives and our deaths, before they scatter again. I am just a single syllable in the endless story that is your unfolding world, spoken from before Time. My syllable is pronounced in full, as the silver chord severs and the golden bowl is broken. If this be your Will, then I sanctify your Name. Yes, I accept this sanctification, but let not this ignoble end at the filthy hands of Amalek be how my story finishes.

King of the world, help me to cleave to you once more, that I might praise you with this, my dying breath. Yes, let what is written come to pass, and let me bless again the One Who Writes. For here on this precipice of silence, I am free to combine methods, so that letters merge with colors, so that Names illuminate the Attributes, that I may reach the point of no return: that I return my soul to God. Forgive me, King of the world, the impurity of this battered body, but give me leave to approach You with Your blessing.

My mind is clear again: I may no longer speak, but I am no golem. I pray fervently with my whole heart, and with every word of silent prayer I see Hebrew letters ascending, like scraps of paper tossed in a chimney. But instead of the taste of ash, honey is on my tongue, as my intention is pure. So rather than curl up and disappear into the sky, the burning letters become luminous and more legible; they turn larger and brighter until their forms fill the firmament. How they shine now, but as white fire on black fire, radiant with holiness: incandescent glyphs that break through the darkness descending upon me. Holy letters loom above me as constellations dancing across the night sky. I arrange them, I combine them, I unify the Names until I see all the sparks rising up, from every corner of the Creation, lights swirling together to form the Tree of Life. Behold! The sefirot are pulsing with colors! Here are vibrant blooms of Life, and everything is living, everything speaks His Name, everywhere I gaze I see the sacred pattern - - even here in my broken body, this ruptured alphabet, that I leave behind.

I will not struggle against what is written. I no longer feel any pain. As the holy letters rise, I rise with them. And as I merge into their fiery light, I forget everything that is not God.