

Devotion Without End

There once dwelt in Safed a Jew of great wealth and good fortune, who traded in jewels, diamonds, and other precious stones. He was truly a man of great wealth, not like the upstarts of our day.

This Jew lived in a palace of his own, with windows that shone like gleaming eyes upon the Sea of Galilee; and about this palace bloomed a magnificent garden with all manner of beautiful trees and fruits. Songbirds sang in the sky, and on the earth there grew aromatic herbs that were a joy to behold and of much use in healing. Wide paths, strewn with golden sand, wound through the garden, and over these paths the crowns of the trees wove into one another to form a canopy of shade. Little arbors in which one could rest lay scattered along the edges of the garden, and in the ponds, which glistened like mirrors, there swam the rarest and whitest of swans. It was an earthly paradise.

The Jew had his own mules and camels with which to cross the desert; and for sailing the sea he had his own ship, with his own crew and captain. Would that all Israel knew such blessings!

Nor was this Jew miserly with his wealth. He married his children into rabbinical families and into the families of the learned in both Babylon and Palestine; he sent his sons to study Torah, and when the time came for his sons to leave he would joyfully give to each of them his share of the inheritance. In time there remained at home only his youngest child, the beloved Sarah, whom he treasured above all others.

Sarah was exceedingly beautiful, a maiden soft in heart and sweet in temper.

And when the time came he presented his youngest daughter with a wonderful gift, brought from the Babylonian yeshivah: a youth named Chiya. The head of the Babylonian yeshivah wrote to the rabbi of Safed that Chiya was no less than "the crown of my head" and "the crown of the yeshivah." And as for lineage, Chiya's was the finest, the very finest in Israel.

Rumors soon spread through the world that Chiya came from

a princely line; but the records of his descent had been destroyed in the siege of Babylon, where Chiya had lost mother and father, brothers and sisters, and had himself been saved only through a miracle. Of this none ever knew for certain, since Reb Chiya, in his great modesty, never spoke of it. But it is known that when the people saw the lad Chiya walking in the street they would gaze upon him as upon a radiant picture, and some would even stop to recite a blessing over his loveliness. For Chiya had a truly royal face: the Divine Presence shone down upon him.

Chiya settled with his father-in-law at Safed, devoting himself entirely to the study of Torah. Soon, however, his life of seclusion and repose came to an end, for his father-in-law died shortly after the wedding. The young man had no choice but to take over the worldly affairs of the family and to make journeys to every corner of the earth. So it was that he became one of the greatest merchants of his time.

But this, God forbid, did not tempt him to relinquish his study of the Torah. When Reb Chiya rode upon his camel in the desert, a servant would lead the animal by the reins, while he kept his eyes fastened upon the sacred book that lay in his hand. And in his ship there was a separate cabin where he would sit in privacy, giving himself unto Torah, both to that which is revealed and that which is unrevealed.

Reb Chiya even found time to devote himself to the Seven Wisdoms of the old sheiks whom he met on his journeys in the desert: to the science of medicine, to the language of the birds and the beasts, even to astrology.

His deeds of charity were numberless, and wherever he went his hand gave freely to those in need. Not only did he put aside a tenth of his earnings for the poor, he also ransomed captive Jews of whose plight he heard while traveling in distant lands. And so it came about that Reb Chiya performed many a great deed in behalf of the people of Israel.

Since Reb Chiya dealt in diamonds and pearls, he met many princes and their ministers during his travels, and through his beauty and honesty—or perhaps it was still more through his wisdom—he gained favor in their eyes. These princes and ministers had faith in his word, and were always ready to grant him mercy for a fellow Jew.

Thus did Reb Chiya become a spokesman for his people. Merely by giving his word, he could obtain the annulment of

evil decrees, save Jews from the chains and lashes to which they had been unjustly condemned, and more than once snatch a victim from the hangman's rope. Many, too, were the souls that he rescued from the still worse fate of forced apostasy.

During the lengthy months and years that Reb Chiya was absent from home, his good wife Sarah would maintain the kind of household that did honor to a man of his standing. Reb Chiya had complete faith in her. He knew that the hungry would leave her door sated and the thirsty refreshed. And he knew that Sarah would raise their only daughter in the ways of piety and goodness.

So, indeed, it was. The palace was always full of guests, the poor and the learned, beggars and rabbis. Whenever the heads of the yeshivahs traveled abroad to seek help, they would stop at the House of Reb Chiya's Wife—for so it had come to be called—and there she would receive them with generosity and joy. She would ask for one thing only: that they place their hands on the head of Miriam, her daughter, and give her their blessing. Nor were the blessings in vain, for Miriam was like a gift from heaven, a child of loveliness. All of Safed basked in her beauty and goodness, saying, "Reb Chiya's daughter is radiant as the sun. She moves with the grace and charm of Queen Esther."

But the ways of God are beyond understanding, and as King Solomon once said, "Whomever God loves, him does He chastise." Often the Almighty tests the pious by visiting many sorrows upon them to see how deep and strong is their faith. Be that as it may, the virtuous Sarah suddenly fell sick. Reb Chiya received the news in a distant corner of the earth, and in his heart knew that the worst had come. Quickly he abandoned all his affairs and hastened home over mountains and valleys, seas and deserts. Many were the obstacles he encountered: mules and camels fell beneath him in the desert, the storms of the sea beat wildly against his ship—yet God did not forsake him. Reb Chiya overcame all these troubles and reached his home in safety. Sarah was close to her end. When the pious wife looked upon her husband, she gathered together all her strength and sat up in bed, murmuring her gratitude to God for listening to her prayer and allowing her to see once more the face of her beloved husband. She turned to Reb Chiya and consoled him, saying that she accepted the coming of death in a spirit of readiness; and then she spoke to him of their daughter Miriam. Reb Chiya vowed that he

would be both father and mother to the child, that no strange hands would be allowed to bend or twist or, heaven forbid, break their tender plant. And the dying Sarah promised that in the world above she would not forget her husband Chiya or her daughter Miriam; she would beg the heavenly powers to send their daughter a husband of honor and virtue. If ever there should be any perplexity with regard to the child, she, Sarah, would beg permission to appear before Chiya in a dream and there tell him what must be done. So it was that she bid farewell to Reb Chiya. She recited the Shema Yisrael once more, and then she cast loving eyes upon the face of Reb Chiya and begged him to accept the will of heaven. She slid down from her pillow, drew up her feet, turned toward the wall, and rendered her spotless soul unto God.

No sooner were the thirty days of mourning at an end than Reb Chiya, without a moment's hesitation, disposed of his pearls and rubies and diamonds and settled once again to a life of study and good deeds. He transformed his palace into a yeshivah, and from among the Jews of Safed and its vicinity he brought together the most gifted youths, whom he taught each day another portion of holy wisdom. These youths drank from his wisdom with eagerness, and those who were poor he maintained in his palace, lodging two or three to a splendid room and clothing them as if they were the sons of the wealthy. Nothing could escape Reb Chiya's foresight: he even thought to give them pocket money, so that the poorest among them might enjoy an occasional innocent pleasure and not be shamed before their wealthier companions.

Whenever one of these poorer students reached the age for marriage, Reb Chiya would send messengers in search of a suitable bride. He would provide the dowry, the wedding clothes, and at least half the cost of the wedding; he would conduct the bridegroom to the wedding canopy; and he would himself give the wedded pair his blessing. As for his beloved daughter, Miriam, he hoped that the day would come when there would appear for her a youth among youths, one who would find favor in the eyes of man and in the eyes of God.

It was on this theme that he once wrote to the head of the Babylonian yeshivah, a sage with whom he corresponded on all matters holy and profane. He wrote in that flowery Hebrew which is only proper for such subjects, and as we transpose it

here into profane Yiddish it must lose much of its sweetness:

“With the help of Him whose name is sweet I have planted a lovely garden (the yeshivah) in which many trees bear fruit (the students), and once the fruit ripens (the students who reach the age of marriage), I seek to find for it a worthy buyer (a good father-in-law) and tell him to say the blessing over the fruit (the wedding ceremony). And if God will look upon me with favor and show me a citron without blemish, that citron shall be for my beloved Miriam, long may she live.”

To which the head of the Babylonian yeshivah replied in his usual concise way: “Can it be that in your yeshivah there are no scholars of sufficient distinction?”

And then it was that Reb Chiya hinted that something other than scholarship was troubling him.

“The Torah,” he wrote in his metaphorical style, “is like a stream, yet not all streams have their source in Paradise—not all men study Torah in a spirit of purity. One man studies Torah only to slake his vanity: his sole desire is to surpass and humiliate his fellows. A second studies for the sake of reputation: his desire is not to honor the Torah but that the Torah honor him. A third brings to the Torah still another kind of lust: he enjoys disputation for its own sake; his delight consists not in reaching toward the wisdom of God but in displaying the cleverness of his mind, his little novelties of interpretation, his paltry twisting of texts. To prove his cleverness he is even ready to distort the visible meaning of the Torah. And others are still more gross: the Torah becomes for them a spade with which to dig the ground, to find a wealthy father-in-law, a fat living, and, at the end, an inheritance! Even if a student may be found who desires learning for its own sake—still his soul is marred by some stain, some imperfection. Of citrons there are many, but Reb Chiya desires for his Miriam only one that is pure within and pure without. Nor is that so easy to find, for the heart of man is deep and devious. As the Talmud says, honor a man and beware of him.”

Again the head of the Babylonian yeshivah replied with his customary terseness: “Search and thou shalt find.”

But where is one to search?

Reb Chiya used to say: “One might imagine that a man’s true character could be discovered in his eyes. The soul lies imprisoned in his body, and the Creator of the Universe, in his infinite mercy, has built two windows in the walls of his prison. These are the eyes, and through them the soul looks out upon the world

and may, in turn, be seen by the world. But these windows, alas, have curtains; and a man whose soul is flawed tries to keep it from sight—even as a bride with a defect is kept from sight before the wedding. And just when the soul is ready to let itself be seen, he lowers the curtain, presumably from modesty.”

It would be easier, claimed Reb Chiya, to recognize a man’s character by his voice. And about this Reb Chiya had a theory of his own.

“Man may be compared to an earthen pot. The ordinary soul is but a piece of broken pottery, while the extraordinary soul is like an earthen pot which can receive the waters of the Torah without losing a drop. But this is possible only when the pottery is whole and uncracked. How then can one be certain that the pottery is not flawed, even if flawed so slightly as to escape the eye? You need only tap the pot with your finger, and if its ring is clear and full, all is well. If not . . .

“A man who is not whole may have a voice that is high or low, a voice that is broken or a voice that trembles; but he will never have one that is clear and true. Between a man and a pot, however, there is this difference: if you tap a man whose voice is defective, he has the ability to imitate, in the manner of a parrot, the voice of a stranger. Have you sometimes heard from a distance the voice of a bird and then, upon coming nearer, discovered that it was the mimicry of a parrot?”

These notions Reb Chiya would put to the test in the following manner.

It was his custom to teach the day’s lesson in the morning. Later, in the afternoon, he would release his students to enjoy the shade of the trees, taste the fruit, and say the blessing over it. As they walked through the garden they would rehearse the lesson of the day or discuss some obscure problem of the Torah; or even if they engaged in some innocent chatter on a secular topic, that too was no fault. Reb Chiya would shut himself away in his study and pore over the unrevealed portions of the Torah. Over a window of this room looking out upon the garden, there hung a thick silken curtain. From time to time Reb Chiya would drop his spectacles, lay them on the prayer book before him, cover it with his scarf, and on top of all place his little snuffbox. He would walk over to the window and stand near the curtain, listening to the voices of his students, who were walking about in pairs or in groups and talking freely to one another.

What they said he neither could nor wished to hear; only the sound of their voices reached him, never the words. And as the months passed Reb Chiya, never once hearing a true voice, fell into a deep sadness.

Once he went so far as to complain. "Master of the Universe, the birds in the garden that have but the souls of animals sing thy praises; my pupils, each of whom has a unique soul, study the Torah. Yet, why is it that the voice of the birds is pure and whole, while the voices of my students . . ."

Reb Chiya did not finish; it would be unseemly to speak ill of his own pupils. But the sadness in his heart remained.

From time to time new pupils arrived, and with them new voices, yet there was not a voice of perfect quality among them.

Once he stopped his daughter, Miriam, looked upon her with love and pity, and asked, "My daughter, do you ever visit your mother's grave?"

"Yes," she answered.

"And what do you pray for at your mother's grave?"

Lifting her faithful eyes, she replied, "I pray for your health, my father. At times you seem so sad, and I, alas, know not how to gladden you. She, my mother, knew how. So I pray to her that she shall teach my heart, or tell me in a dream."

Reb Chiya patted her silken cheeks and told her, "My health, praise be to God, is as it should be. There is something else that you must pray for at your mother's grave."

"And that is——?"

"Beg her to help bring to pass that which I have in mind for you."

"I shall, my father."

It happened once, before the evening prayer, that Reb Chiya heard a loud quarrel in a distant part of the house. He could hear two voices, the angry voice of his assistant and the other, young and strange. The unfamiliar voice astonished Reb Chiya: this was the voice for which he had hoped and prayed. Closing the book he had been studying, Reb Chiya heard how the pleading young voice was slowly drowned out by the wrathful voice of his assistant. Reb Chiya rapped on his table to call his assistant, who came running, frightened and alarmed. His aged face was still pale, his eyes flashed darts of fire, his nostrils still danced—so angry had he been.

Reb Chiya warned him: anger is a sin more terrible than idolatry.

"No, Rabbi," the old man said sulkily, "the Messiah must be here—that's the only explanation for such insolence from a mere youth."

"Well, all right—but what does he want?"

"A trifle—just to be admitted to your yeshivah!"

"Well?"

"So I ask him, 'Do you know the Talmud?' He answers, 'No!' 'Mishnah, at least?' 'No,' he says again. So I try a joke. 'Can you at least say the prayers?' And again, 'No!' He bursts into tears. What then? Well, he can read the words of the prayers but has forgotten their meaning. 'Numskull, what do you want from us?' He wants Reb Chiya. 'Why?' To beg you to let him sit in the yeshivah and listen to the lessons, so that perhaps God will help him remember."

"That means he knew and forgot," mused Reb Chiya. "He's sick. Why be angry?"

"Why be angry? I say to him, 'All right, I'll let you see Reb Chiya.' But the youth is dressed in rags, with a rope around his loins, and he carries a staff in his hand, as if he were a thief—a peeled branch of an almond tree. I tell him, 'You can see Reb Chiya, but first change your clothes. Have you others?' He neither has nor wishes to. He's not allowed to, he says. 'At least put your staff away.' Nor that either. He's not allowed to part with it, neither in the day nor at night. He sleeps with it!"

Reb Chiya, realizing that this must be a penitent, said, "Send him in."

A pale slender youth entered, dressed just as the assistant had said, and remained standing at the door.

Reb Chiya asked him to come nearer, extended a hand of welcome, and prevented him from kneeling or kissing his hand. Seeing that the youth did not lift his eyes, Reb Chiya asked, "My son, why do you not look at me? Are you hiding your soul from my eyes?"

"Yes, Rabbi," answered the youth, "my soul is sinful, my shame is great."

Replied Reb Chiya, "Our sages say that no man may speak against himself. I ask you to lift up your eyes."

The youth obeyed. And Reb Chiya, looking into his eyes, was seized with a violent trembling: before him he saw a soul that had been cursed.

"Tell me, my son, who has cursed you?"

"The head of the Jerusalem yeshivah."

Knowing that the head of the Jerusalem yeshivah had died only recently, Reb Chiya asked, "When?"

"Two months ago."

Correct, thought Reb Chiya. Two months ago he was still alive. Aloud he asked, "Why?"

"About that I have been directed to confess to you."

"Good. And your name?"

"Chananiah."

"Well, Chananiah," said Reb Chiya, rising, "let us say the evening prayers and then you will be shown your place at the table. After you have eaten, go to the garden, where I shall hear out your story."

Reb Chiya took the youth by the hand and led him to the little synagogue by the side of the yeshivah.

And while they walked, these were the thoughts that ran through Reb Chiya's head: so young and such a voice . . . and a penitent . . . a curse in his eyes . . . wondrous are the ways of the Almighty.

It was late in the evening when Reb Chiya and Chananiah walked through the garden. Reb Chiya would cast glances at the sky, seeking some sign or omen; but the sky was veiled with a gray and silent mist; a night without a moon, without stars. Only the windows of the palace gleamed with little lights, and by these Reb Chiya led the youth Chananiah to an arbor.

Reb Chiya began, "There is a hebrew proverb, '*D'aga b'lev ish—yeshina.*' "

"What does that mean, Rabbi?"

"It means: *d'aga*—sorrow (Chananiah repeated each word); *b'lev*—in the heart; *ish* of a man; *yeshina*—he shall tell another. That is, a man with a heart of sorrow shall pour it out to another." And though the youth understood only the translation his pale face began to flush, as if he had fainted and only now was his soul gradually returning to his body.

Reb Chiya, filled with pity for the youth, told him, "Open your lips, my son, and may your words enter the light. Speak to me, my son."

And this was the strange tale that Chananiah told him.

The youth had been born in Jerusalem, the son of a wealthy widow who dealt in spices. Of her two children, the woman

avored Chananiah over his elder sister Esther, for it was he who would someday say Kaddish in her memory, and he, moreover, who quickly showed himself to be a prodigy.

Even when Esther reached the age of sixteen the mother remained untroubled by the fact that her daughter had not yet married. And when the neighbors reminded her that the time for marriage had come, the mother had a ready answer: "The girl's hair has not even turned gray." The mother's heart was wholly given over to her son Chananiah. She hired excellent tutors for the boy, and since, as a distant relative of the head of the Jerusalem yeshivah, she had entry into his house, she would bring Chananiah to be examined by him every few Sabbaths.

The youth impressed the head of the yeshivah greatly, and the mother would be beside herself with joy as she stood listening near the door, peering through a crack and seeing how the rabbi pinched the boy's cheek fondly and gave him the best apple from the Sabbath fruit bowl. Still greater was her joy when the rabbi's wife told her that the boy would be accepted by the Jerusalem yeshivah—though to this she did not agree, for she was unwilling to part from her son. She wished to keep her darling at home, so that she could entrust her shop to a neighbor for a moment and hurry into the house to embrace her child. She therefore engaged a more learned scholar who would study with the boy at home.

And it was this teacher who caused her downfall.

He was one of the false scholars who come to the Torah not for its own sake or from love of God but out of a lust to shine in their own right; and he soon led Chananiah along his false path. He taught the boy nothing but the devices of sophistry, the art of negating all things; and in the boy's heart he planted the bitter herbs of pride and presumption. Chananiah soon learned all of his tricks, for such knowledge is, in truth, mere trickery, not the wisdom of the Torah—it was not this that was meant at Sinai. But neither the mother nor the neighbors understood this; and so they praised the boy still more. And the mother—for what can one expect from a foolish woman?—swelled with pride.

The time came when Chananiah had absorbed all that his teacher could offer, and he told his mother that he could now study on his own. The foolish woman felt that the gates of heaven had opened for her.

Chananiah now trod the false path by himself, engaging in

disputes with the students at the yeshivah and with older scholars, whom he always put to shame and made seem mere ignoramuses. So it continued until word reached the head of the yeshivah, who said, "Youthful foolishness! But he will grow out of it," and then sent word to Chananiah's mother that she should punish the boy. "A mother," he added, "is allowed to."

But instead the mother gave Chananiah a kiss and bought him a costly present.

Encouraged, Chananiah strayed still further, running about in all the synagogues to display his tricks. He would interrupt the studies of pupils, asking them questions about the passages they were reading and then destroying the answers they gave him. So it continued until the student would become bewildered, and Chananiah had proved to everyone that the student was worthless.

Sometimes it happened that when a youth was explaining a passage of the Torah or a scholar was preaching—and this hardly before the speaker had finished—Chananiah would spring onto the pulpit and ridicule the explanation or cut the sermon into ribbons, as if with a scissors, ripping through it as through a cobweb and making the other seem a mere fool.

Again, word was brought to the head of the yeshivah, who now issued a stricter judgment: "Tell his mother that I have asked her to punish him severely." And again, instead of beating Chananiah, she rewarded him with kisses and gifts, so that he went still further along the paths of evil. When the word was brought once more to the head of the yeshivah he sighed, hesitating to do that which should be left to a mother. But once he was told how the mother responded, he ordered that Chananiah be brought to him. The youth came, flaming with pride. And when the head of the yeshivah began to speak of Torah, he interrupted with needling questions, questions upon questions that were meant to show the prowess of his mind.

But the head of the yeshivah was truly a saintly man, and without a trace of anger he quietly replied "Hear me out, Chananiah! All your knowledge can do is to negate—you have nothing but the power of saying 'no'—which means that you do not possess the Torah whole. For the Torah is made up of two parts, the one that allows and the other that forbids, the one that says 'Thou shalt' and the other 'Thou shalt not.' And you,

Chananiah, have only the second half of the Torah. More than half you shall never have. And here is proof: say something of your own that carries the power of 'yes.' "

Chananiah was silent; his strength lay solely in destruction. He tried to justify himself. "But this I did not learn from my teacher."

Answered the head of the yeshivah, "Your teacher, Chananiah, is dead, and the fires of hell have wrapped themselves around him. His kind of Torah cannot save him. He will burn, Chananiah, until you root out from your heart the weeds he planted. You must take pity both on your soul and on his; come, repent, study the Torah in its purity."

Chananiah quickly ran off to the cemetery to see whether his teacher was really dead. There he was told, "Yes, the funeral took place yesterday," and they led him to the grave. He saw that overnight the grave had been covered with foul and ugly weeds. And Chananiah, knowing what this meant, decided to repent.

But something happened to interfere, alas, with Chananiah's resolve.

There lived in Jerusalem in those days a retired butcher, to whom the Jewish authorities had once sent a learned Jew to see whether he sold defiled meat as kosher; and when this learned Jew tried to carry out his task faithfully and appeared unannounced at a slaughtering, the butcher seized an ax and hurled it at his head. It was a miracle that the man survived; and a great commotion followed in the city. The Jewish authorities announced that the butcher's meat was not kosher, worse even than the flesh of swine. But since the butcher had by now become wealthy from his illicit trade, he closed his shop and became a usurer and an informer for the government. He complained against the Jewish authorities, who were thereupon cast into prison and banished. And since he no longer sold meat to his fellow Jews there was nothing they could do to him. They merely thanked God that this scoundrel had done no more damage than he had and hoped that he might now be quiet.

The wealthy butcher, who possessed the heart of a miser, did not enjoy his wealth; he neither ate nor drank, he dressed shabbily, and he raised fierce dogs to keep beggars from his door. He had no sons and but one daughter, whose name was Hannah. When this only daughter was born, his wife, a good and pious woman, fully realized the evil of her husband's ways and prayed

to God that her womb be closed, for she did not desire sons who would follow in their father's footsteps. So it came to pass; she had but one daughter, and all her efforts to lead her husband to the path of virtue failed. As her life became unbearable to her, she prayed for an early death; and this prayer too was granted. Before she died she begged her relatives to bury her in secrecy, so that her husband would not know the place of her grave.

Thus it happened that the tyrant became a widower. And since no father would entrust him with a daughter, he did not remarry but lived alone with his only child Hannah. By some miracle he loved his daughter with all his heart and was ready to bestow upon her all the pleasures he denied himself—even though money was dearer to him than his soul. But Hannah refused everything, living by her mother's command that she accept nothing from her father but bread and water. Nor did the girl need expensive clothes, for she never left her father's house, not wishing to hear him cursed and abused in the streets of Jerusalem. Yet the less she desired the use of his money, the more did the father wish to heap favors upon her.

When he saw that his daughter remained stubborn in her ways the father decided: one favor she will accept, a husband who is a great scholar.

As soon as Hannah approached the age for marriage the father began to seek a husband for her. He wanted a scholar surpassing all other scholars; he hired marriage brokers to scour the land, and he himself rushed through Jerusalem, searching in all the yeshivahs and promising a generous dowry to the youth who might be chosen. But it was all in vain. No one wished to be related to the wealthy butcher—and as for his daughter, her true worth remained unknown.

The man grew angry, and angrier still when a marriage broker once told him to put aside his pride and make the best of things by accepting the one man who was available, a poor carpenter who earned his bread honestly and who wanted Hannah for her own sake.

The wealthy butcher hit upon the plan of sending through the length and breadth of the land, especially to the distant corners where his name was not known, two poverty-stricken scholars whom he paid for two years in advance. Being poor, the two scholars could not refuse, and so they traveled the length and breadth of Israel—but to no avail.

Nor was it difficult to discover the reason for their failure. They spoke of a dowry and of maintenance for the future husband and of gifts, but of Hannah's father they said not a word. When they were asked about him they pretended not to hear, for they were honest men who did not wish to lie. And thus it became clear that something was very wrong, and no one wanted the match.

The two years passed, and now, before the gates of Jerusalem, the two learned Jews stood empty-handed, trembling with fear. Had they not left behind them wives and children they might have gone to some other country, for they knew that their employer would refuse to believe them and would think they had failed to do as he had told them. Perhaps he would even go so far as to turn them over to the government. The two learned Jews gave way to lamentations.

And as they sat before the gates of Jerusalem, lamenting their fate, they were accosted by a poor youth dressed in sackcloth, with a hempen rope around his loins and a staff cut from an almond tree in his hand; and this youth came to them, greeted them, asked if they wanted to drink, and inquired why they sat in such dejection; and he told them that he lived in the nearby desert and knew of a well from which they could drink. If they wished he would lead them. But the two learned Jews were not thirsty; they were worried. They asked the youth who he was, and he answered that he was a homeless orphan, living apart from all other men and subsisting on wild grasses.

"And have you no wish to study Torah?"

But he did study Torah, he replied. Every night, when darkness came over the desert, an old man appeared before him and taught him the Torah by word of mouth. He could see this old man from afar, his eyes sparkling like the stars in heaven and his white beard shining like snow, and each night the old man sat beside him, teaching him both Torah and its commentaries.

When they questioned the youth to see if he were truthful, pearls of wisdom seemed to fall from his lips. Then they asked him why he had abandoned the desert and come to sit by the gates of Jerusalem, and he answered with simple honesty that on the previous night the old man had bade him farewell, saying that they had met for the last time, and had directed him to the holy city where he would find both bride and fortune. "And I must obey the old man," added the youth.

As soon as the two learned Jews heard this story they were filled with joy and said to the youth, "Come with us, we know the bride for you." And he went with them.

They took him directly to the wealthy butcher and said, "Do not be concerned with the appearance of this youth. For he is truly wise: Elijah the Prophet has taught him in the wilderness." Without delay or question, the rich man accepted the youth, and fearful that a long delay might result in someone's casting an evil eye or at least spreading malicious gossip, he arranged for a marriage in two weeks. First of all he took the rags off the back of the youth and took the staff from his hand, and then he gave him new clothes such as are suitable for the son of a rich man. The old clothes he kept, however, hoping to sell them for a few coppers after the wedding. The news of this match spread quickly through the town, and some said the biggest dog gets the best bone; while others contended that it was the doing of the bride's mother, who had interceded in heaven. Still others remarked that the ways of God are beyond human comprehension.

The two weeks passed without incident and the day of the wedding came near. For the sake of his daughter the old miser forgot his niggardliness and arranged a feast such as the world has seldom seen. And to honor the bridegroom, all the distinguished Jews of Jerusalem came to the wedding, as did also the students of the yeshivah. While the bride was being prepared for the wedding, the bridegroom discoursed among the men on an esoteric point of Torah.

In the other room, the bride has been made ready. The musicians have begun to play. The chief rabbi and the head of the yeshivah, who are to conduct the groom to the canopy, hold candles in readiness for the wedding procession. And from the groom's lips the wisdom of the Torah continues to flow like a river of myrrh and frankincense, while his eyes gleam like the stars of heaven. All stand gaping with admiration, and Chananiah among them, silently, with no thought of envy or contradiction. On the contrary, he rejoices at the thought that he will now have a companion in study, a friend with whom to discuss all matters of learning. And he is flooded with love, a warm love for the bridegroom. He yearns to get up, to embrace him. He begins to move forward—and then the terrible thing happens.

Passing through the crowd, he hears one yeshivah student

tell another, "The bridegroom is a better scholar than Chananiah," and the second one replies, "Of course, Chananiah is a blockhead by comparison." And this proves too much for Chananiah. It seems as if his heart is bursting, as if a wound has opened, as if a serpent has stung him—the Evil One, his own evil spirit. He stops, he rises on tiptoe, he begins suddenly to speak, and from his mouth there pours a stream of pitch and brimstone, contradiction and desecration. He senses that he is betraying his soul, that he is desecrating the wisdom of Elijah the Prophet, the wisdom of the Torah itself, that he is piercing the heart of the Torah with spears and with swords, he is murdering the Torah. Frightened, he wishes to cease, but he cannot—something outside of his will, a devil, speaks through him, something against his will. He sees the bridegroom turn pale with fear, stagger, collapse.

The wedding chamber becomes a living hell. The old miser, enraged, roars like a wounded lion, "Swindled! I've been swindled!" He rushes about like a madman, finds the two learned Jews who were his emissaries, beats them, and tears out their beards. He throws himself upon the musicians, wrenches the instruments from their hands, and smashes them into pieces. He runs to the bride and drags her away from the wedding canopy. He dashes out to another room and comes back with the bridegroom's old clothes: sackcloth, hempen rope, and staff. Tearing the new ones from the bridegroom's back, he hurls the youth into the street, and his clothes after him. The dignitaries of Jerusalem flee in terror. Only Chananiah remains. He stands in the same spot as if paralyzed and hears the old miser scream, "I won't waste this wedding feast! Bring the carpenter! Let him marry my daughter!" And only now does Chananiah manage to escape from the house.

In the street he encounters the head of the yeshivah, who takes him by the hand and says to him, "Chananiah, your evil is enough to destroy a world! Far better that you forget all you have learned."

"It was at this moment," continued Chananiah, "that something snapped in my brain, and I became as empty as a cage from which the birds have fled. The Torah had taken flight from me. I fell at the feet of the head of the yeshivah and begged for atonement, but he could only sigh. 'Who knows if there is any for you?'

"I began to sob wildly, and he pointed to the bridegroom, who stood not far away, bewildered in the strange city.

“ ‘As a first step,’ said the head of the yeshivah, ‘you might beg his forgiveness.’

“ ‘I was afraid, but he prodded me, ‘Go, ask him to go home with you. I will come later.’

“ ‘I went to the bridegroom I had shamed, and before I could say a word he ran up to me and cried out, ‘You are forgiven, forgiven! The match was not destined for me.’

“ ‘I would have preferred a beating, and he comes up to me, his hand on my shoulder, and calls me friend!

“ ‘But what sort of friendship,’ I replied, ‘can there be between an ignoramus and a scholar?’ He looked at me, amazed, and then I told him of the curse the head of the yeshivah had placed upon my head. And he said to me, ‘If ever again there appears before me my old teacher’—he meant Elijah the Prophet—‘I will beg him to help you.’

“ ‘I brought him to my mother, suffering all the while the agonies of the damned. He spoke to me of Torah and I understood not a word. My heart wept with yearning for the Torah . . . darkness and desolation flooded my soul, as in a ruin at night. And when we came to my mother’s house, I fell upon her neck with the cry, ‘Mother, Mother, God has punished us. Your son no longer has a word of learning!’

“ ‘She cried out in fright, ‘What do you mean? Who has cast a spell upon you?’

“ ‘And then I told her the whole story, pointing to the bridegroom I had shamed. She wept bitter tears, and my sister Esther turned her face to the wall, weeping. But at this moment there came the head of the yeshivah, and it was to Esther that he spoke first. ‘Hear me, my daughter, go to the kitchen and prepare food for this scholar’—pointing to the youth who stood beside me—‘and if fortune will shine upon you, he will prove to be your destined mate.’

“ ‘With dismay Esther glanced at the shamed bridegroom, but she obeyed the head of the yeshivah.

“ ‘And then he turned to my mother and said, ‘This is no time for tears. You too have sinned in not providing for Esther and not punishing Chananiah.’ And when my mother sobbed still louder, he continued, ‘Not tears are needed now, but acts. Will you do as I tell you?’

“ ‘Yes,’ sobbed my mother, ‘I shall, I shall!’

“ ‘First marry Esther to this youth, for he is her destined mate.’

"A cry broke out of my mother's heart. 'This beggar in rags?'

" 'This is the youth to whom Elijah the Prophet taught the Torah. Is that how you obey me?'

" 'Forgive me, Rabbi! I obey, I obey!'

" 'And your son,' he continued, 'must crawl through the lands of exile, until the mercy of the All-Merciful shall be awakened in his behalf. He too will bring you happiness, but later. Esther is the older one!'

" 'And as for you,' he said to me, 'atonement for your dreadful sin might not have been possible had you not been fortunate. The marriage was not a destined one, and what you did has proved to be good for both bride and bridegroom.'

" 'Even the bride?' wondered my mother.

"To which the head of the yeshivah replied, 'It is known that Hannah, the daughter of the old miser, is good and pious. Her saintly mother pleaded for her in heaven and won for her one of the Thirty-Six Secret Saints upon whom the earth rests. And he is the carpenter whom the old miser dragged to the wedding canopy so that his feast might not go to waste. But this you must keep secret until he reveals himself.'

" 'God's miracles,' said my mother, somewhat relieved.

" 'And now,' he said to me and to the bridegroom, 'now, my dear children, each of you must take the other's clothes.'

" 'And you,' he added to me, 'must begin your wanderings in exile. Take the staff and guard it as the apple of your eye. At night, when you sleep, you shall place it beside your head. And I will pray that help may come to you and that the staff may blossom, so that your soul too will blossom, and then you will remember all that you have forgotten. But remember that only then may you wear other garments. And now go, without saying farewell to anyone.'

"I quickly dressed in the clothes of the bridegroom I had shamed, and at the very moment my sister entered with a plate of food. Seeing us now, she dropped the plate in astonishment. It broke with a loud noise, and the head of the yeshivah cried out, '*Mazel tov, mazel tov!*'

"More I did not hear, for I was already on my way."

As soon as he left Jerusalem, said Chananiah to Reb Chiya, he lost his way in a desert, where neither bread nor water was to be found. But he knew no desire for bread or for water, and he satisfied the wants of his body with the wild grasses that lay scattered in the desert. Throughout his wanderings he was in

constant danger from the wild beasts, yet they harmed him not. When he came near them they would growl and then turn from his path. Chananiah understood that they had no power over him, for he was not yet fated to die. Once it seemed to him that a voice called out, "He belongs to . . ." But to whom it was that he belonged he could not hear.

And so he wandered in exile, through the days and through the nights, mourning over his youth that was being wasted without Torah, without a light or a ray for his darkened mind. If only he could have heard one word of Torah, one word. . . .

Once, continued Chananiah with his story, he poured a handful of sand upon his head and then, in self-castigation, he stood on one leg, crying out toward heaven, "Torah, Torah." He cried with earnest devotion, on and on, until the sun sank, and then he fell to the earth and slept. In his sleep he saw again the head of the Jerusalem yeshivah, dressed in the clothes of the grave and with a golden crown upon his head. And the head of the Jerusalem yeshivah said to Chananiah, "Arise, Chananiah, for the time of your redemption is at hand. God has heard your prayer, and Elijah the Prophet has interceded for you. Arise and go forward, till you reach the city of Safed, where you shall go to the good man Reb Chiya and make full confession to him of all that you have done. You shall beg him to let you enter his yeshivah, and he will not refuse you. And when you reach the age of eighteen, he will find your destined bride and he will pray for you. His prayers, you shall remember, are hearkened to in heaven. And besides that, the ceremony of marriage and the blessings that follow it will also help you. On the eighth day after the wedding you will arise in the morning and will see that the staff by your head has begun to blossom and to sprout almonds; so too will your soul bloom and sprout. Then you will remember everything but the evil that was in you, and you will recite for Reb Chiya a portion of the Torah, but now it will be a Torah pure and without defilement. Reb Chiya will rejoice in you, but whether you will live long after that I cannot foretell."

With these words the head of the Jerusalem yeshivah vanished from Chananiah's dream. Chananiah awoke and began his journey.

"And now, Reb Chiya, I have come to you." So said Chananiah.

Reb Chiya looked upon him with great sadness and asked, "How old are you, my son?"

"Seventeen years and ten months."

"To be cut off so young," mused Reb Chiya.

Chananiah raised his big imploring eyes to Reb Chiya's face and pleaded in a voice that was trembling, "Rabbi, will you take me into your yeshivah?"

An empty soul, thought Reb Chiya, a stranger to the Torah—and yet from his throat one hears a voice like King David's violin. Aloud he said, "Sleep now, my son. Tomorrow I shall answer you."

Chananiah left him, and Reb Chiya remained for a while in the arbor, gazing up at the sky and wondering: Is this the youth for whom I have so long been waiting?

But the heavens were clouded and did not speak.

The next morning, once they were alone, Reb Chiya said to Chananiah, "Know, my son, that for my part I am ready to grant your request, but——"

Chananiah began to tremble. "Rabbi," he begged, "let me sit somewhere in a dark corner, at the back, farthest away from you. I will listen only to what you tell your pupils, I will do nothing but listen."

"I am willing," Reb Chiya comforted him, "but I fear that my students, being young and mischievous, may mock you. And let us not delude ourselves—they know a good deal while you, for the time being. . . . The scorn of the learned for the unlearned is large, and you, my son, will suffer."

Joyously Chananiah cried out, "But I must suffer, Rabbi, I should suffer, and the more I am shamed the sooner will my curse be lifted."

"That may be," said Reb Chiya, "but I am afraid your presence will harm the others. For is it not written"—he continued in Hebrew—"that those who shame others before the world shall lose their portion of paradise?"

These words were now beyond Chananiah's understanding, but when Reb Chiya translated them he was still happier. "It means that even if the curse is lifted from my head I shall still have no share of paradise, so that if I study the Torah it can be only for its own sake, without hope of reward."

To Reb Chiya these words were a delight and a balm. But he continued, "They, my pupils, how can I allow them to lose their share of eternal life?"

Chananiah remained silent for a moment and then replied, "And if I forgave them beforehand?"

Reb Chiya's answer was to take Chananiah by the hand, lead him to the yeshivah, and seat him, as the youth had requested, in a corner, apart from the students.

While Reb Chiya was expounding a passage of the Torah he cast an occasional glance at Chananiah and saw that the youth sat with eyes closed and ears attentive, his face flushing with happiness when the meaning of a word became clear to him and paling with anguish when he failed to understand. Sometimes a pall of fear would descend upon him: he could not make out even a word in translation. To Reb Chiya he seemed like a bewildered creature, lost and stumbling in the desert, parched with thirst yet brightening with hope at the sound of distant water.

Reb Chiya would frequently overhear his students whispering among themselves about Chananiah, taking his name in slander and contempt, and though this brought sadness to his heart he did not rebuke them, for he also saw that Chananiah returned their glances of evil with glances of love, as if they were bestowing a great favor upon him. And so Reb Chiya continued to speak of the Torah.

After Reb Chiya spoke, the students would ask questions and he would answer them. Only Chananiah remained mute, not a word of assent or denial passing his lips. But the devotion—a devotion without end—that he gave to every word glowed upon his face. When the class was done Chananiah would be the last to leave, and, still a solitary, he would spend his afternoon hours walking along the most distant and neglected path, which led to an abandoned hut amidst oleander trees. And there he would sit, lost in meditation, until the time for prayer.

Once, at prayer time, Reb Chiya went to the hut where Chananiah sat and inquired as to the progress Chananiah had made in his studies.

"My knowledge," answered Chananiah, "has yet to be restored to me, but now I do hear the words and I hear them with increasing clarity, and sometimes I can even remember their meanings in translation."

Reb Chiya sighed and remained silent.

"Rabbi," begged Chananiah, "you once used the word *yeshina*—let him tell another. This word has lived in my memory, lighting up the darkness of my soul. Let me speak to you!"

"Of course," said Reb Chiya.

"Sitting alone in this hut, I sometimes surrender myself to meditation, and it seems to me at times that I have been like a

cage, full of songbirds that sang God's glory and celebrated His Sabbath. But then there came a magician who cast a spell upon the birds, and they began to sing other melodies, melodies insolent and dissolute. The mob did not understand this and praised both the cage and the birds in the cage, until there once passed through a learned man who paused to listen. He quickly caught the true drift of the melody, the undertones of error and deceit, and he went to the birds and said, 'Rather than sing as you do, may you be stricken dumb!' He blew a harsh blast of cold and angry air into the cage; and then, as if by a miracle, the birds were silent. They fell to the bottom of the cage as if they were frozen, and there they still lie with wings folded, beaks closed, and eyes shut, like the dead.

"And now, when I listen to your discourse and snatch a meaning from one or another word, each of your words seems to waken in me another bird. It opens its little eyes and its mouth and it begins to sing with a soft voice, a quiet voice, but the melodies are good, pious, and truthful melodies, and its wings begin to stir. Soon, soon it will fly."

"You see," comforted Reb Chiya, "God has mercy."

But Chananiah would not be comforted. "All this happens during the day. As soon as the sun goes down, the shadows of night settle again upon my soul. The cage is silent and frozen, the birds that have stirred their wings are lamed once more, and they fall as if dead, with their mouths closed and their eyes shut."

Reb Chiya, from his sadness, could only say, "Go, my son, to the prayers. I shall remain here and pray for you."

Gazing upon Reb Chiya with love and gratitude, Chananiah left.

Reb Chiya remained alone, reciting the evening prayers. As he was leaving the hut, intending to offer a prayer for Chananiah in the open, he saw two snakes twined about oleander trees, with their mouths drooping toward each other so that their venomous tongues almost met.

Reb Chiya was familiar with all the creatures of his garden, those that fly into the heavens, those that slumber on the branches of trees, and those that crawl on the ground. One of the snakes he quickly recognized, but the other, of the species called Achnai, seemed a stranger. But even as he grew curious as to why this snake had come to his garden, he overheard the familiar one ask the visitor this very question.

"I have come to sting someone."

The familiar snake smiled. "Your troubles are in vain. It is many years since I settled here, and when I came I too was a fiery and venomous snake. Frequently would I sting the students of the yeshivah. But with time I ceased. And do you know why? Because Reb Chiya, who is the head of the yeshivah, was once a merchant who traveled over the length and breadth of the world, and from the wise old sheiks whom he met in the deserts he learned many arts, not least of all the art of healing. I would sting and then he would apply the herbs that cured the stings. So I realized that my efforts were being wasted and I simply ceased working."

"Foolishness!" sneered the visiting snake. "Reb Chiya's herbs help only when a snake bites from innate malice, because of the ancient enmity between man and snake. It is well known that the Creator of the Universe prepares a cure for each plague when the plague is not yet visited, and even before he created the venom of snakes he had decreed that the earth should yield its remedies. But I do not fear this, for I come not of my own will, and I shall sting not from the animosity of the snake. I come rather as the servant of the Angel of Death, and I come to carry out a sentence against a man who has been condemned."

"How is that possible?" asked the familiar snake with wonderment. "Here there are only the learned and pious students of Reb Chiya."

"It is Chananiah for whom I come, the youth who meditates here each day."

"But why?"

"This youth once publicly shamed a pupil of Elijah the Prophet. For that sin he was cursed by the head of the Jerusalem yeshivah with the curse of forgetfulness, and it was further decreed that he wander in exile, clad in sackcloth and with an almond staff in hand. Not till the staff blossoms can he again remember the Torah."

"That means—never."

"Who can know?" answered the stranger. "In heaven this sentence was found unsatisfactory; some said it was too mild and declared that Chananiah should be deprived of his share of eternal life. But the Master of the Torah was obdurate; he insisted that the youth be permitted to atone for his sins. A compromise was reached. The youth was to marry a pious daughter of Israel

on the eighth day after the wedding he would die. Half of his sin would be atoned for by the blessings of marriage, and the other other half by his death. And since the young woman would be left a widow so quickly, she would be blessed with a son who would become a light of wisdom and a comfort to the world."

The snake grew weary of discourse, never before, perhaps, having spoken at such length. He begged his companion to lead him to water, whereupon the two snakes uncoiled from the trees and glided away. Reb Chiya remained standing, struck with fear.

For Reb Chiya now found himself in a terrible dilemma. If he did nothing to further the marriage of Chananiah, he would be contesting the will of paradise and Chananiah would never recover the Torah. If he helped Chananiah to marry, he would be destroying the youth with his own hands and would, furthermore, be helping to condemn a Jewish daughter to early widowhood.

Reb Chiya searched the heavens; and the heavens kept silent. But his heart began to pound, and a voice within him said, "Chiya, sacrifice thy only daughter Miriam. Father Abraham would not have hesitated."

But it is not so easy to give up one's only daughter. And at this moment Reb Chiya remembered that his sainted wife Sarah had promised that, when need be, she would appear to him in a dream, and so he raised his eyes imploringly. As he prayed, the clouds vanished from his sight and millions of stars came out, promising him that all would yet be well.

His prayer was soon heeded. Once, toward the end of a fast day, Reb Chiya grew faint; his eyes began to close and he fell asleep. In his dream he saw his beloved Sarah, her eyes still shining with the love she had always borne him. As she placed her hand on his right shoulder, she said to him, "Fear not, Chiya. The life of our daughter shall be as bright as the light of the sun. Have faith."

He would have asked her more, but Sarah faded from his dream, and he felt himself being awakened. As Reb Chiya opened his eyes he saw before him his daughter Miriam, her hand on his right shoulder. "Forgive me, Father," she said, "but the sun has long since set, the moon has come into sight, and the stars are shining. It is time for you to break your fast."

Reb Chiya, seeing before him the climax of his dream, took her lovingly by the hand, drew her to his heart, and said, "I shall

not break my fast, my daughter, until I have asked you and you have spoken the truth."

And when he saw the color spread across his daughter's face, he said, "My daughter, it is the custom that a young girl should unburden her feelings only to her mother. But you are an orphan, and I must be to you both mother and father. Therefore speak to me in honesty and leave nothing hidden in your heart."

Miriam buried her face in his breast and whispered, "Ask, my father."

"You see that the years pass by and I grow no younger. My beard has become as white as the snows of Mount Hebron. And how shall it be when I am called to my judgment? With whom shall I leave you?"

"Speak not of this, my father. I shall always heed you."

And so he asked, "Would you wish, my daughter, to be more righteous than Rebecca?"

"Not at all." She smiled.

"When Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, came to propose the marriage between Isaac and Rebecca, the Bible says that he was met with the words. 'We shall inquire of her wishes.' Nor was she shamefaced, for she answered, 'Yes, I do.' "

"Ask, father, and I too shall answer."

"Tell me truthfully, which among my students would you desire as a husband?"

"Chananiah," answered Miriam softly, so softly that only a father's ear could have heard the name.

Amazed at the answer, Reb Chiya asked again, "And why does he please you above all others? Have you ever spoken with him?"

"God forbid," she replied. "And besides—would he have answered me?"

Reb Chiya smiled. "What is it then? Tell me." And when he saw that she found it difficult to speak he added, "I command it of you, Miriam, by my right of fatherhood."

And then it was that she told him why Chananiah pleased her above all others, and pleased her from the very first moment. "It was his voice, which flows into my heart with sweetness; and then—it was his strength."

"His strength?" wondered Reb Chiya.

"Surely it shows strength for a youth to go about in sackcloth among the well-clad students and to feel neither shame nor fear."

"And anything else?"

"And for the goodness of his heart, which glows from his eyes whenever he lifts them from the ground. And for his sadness——"

"But he is a penitent, a great sin burdens his soul."

"God will forgive him. He must forgive him!" she cried out. "There have been times when I passed his hut and heard his prayers. Is it conceivable that such heart-rending prayers will not be answered?"

"Our God, Miriam, is a God of Mercy."

"Of his sin I know not, but his atonement is deep. So much regret, so much pain, are cut into his face, and sometimes so much melancholy. One must pity him."

"Is it only pity that you feel?"

"At the beginning that was all. I used to think that if I were you I would constantly pray for him. Afterward the thought came to me: were I his brother I would surrender my life in his behalf. And then—you have asked me to be truthful—a warm stream of blood would rush into my heart. It seemed to me that the deepest sacrifice is possible only to a wife. Since you have commanded me, I speak.

"And once it happened, dear Father, I dreamed—it was on the holiday that you and your pupils went sailing. Chananiah also went—you asked him to—and I, watching through the window, saw the sadness on his face as he followed you. I remained alone in the house—it seemed so sad and lonely. I went into the garden. There too it was quiet; not a bird sang. And I became strangely weary. I looked at the flowers, and they too were drooping. The day was hot; I lay down near the white lilies, my hands folded beneath my head, and gazed at the sky. I slept and I dreamed.

"I dreamed that a dove was flying through the air, so white and gentle and sad. Beneath the dove there flew a black bird of prey, with a sharp beak that sought to stab it. My heart filled with pity for the dove, and I cried out in warning. The dove did not hear me, it continued to fly, but the black bird heard me and, for a moment, made off in alarm. Soon it came back, flying still faster and coming closer to the dove. I felt myself overcome with pity, and I cried still more loudly. Again the black bird grew frightened and turned aside, and again it returned to the chase. This happened several times, until the dove heard me and glided down to ask in tones of sadness, 'Why do you cry, child?' I answered,

'There is a black bird chasing you but you do not see it, and I am trying to frighten it away.' The dove said mournfully, 'It does not *want* to kill me; it *must* kill me. I am condemned to death, and the black bird will carry out the sentence unless someone sacrifices his life for me. And who will do that?' 'I will do it,' I cried to the dove. 'And you will feel no regret?' he asked. 'No, I swear it, I shall never regret.' The dove made signs of affection, stayed for a few moments, and then flew away. And when I awoke I understood what the dream had meant. I knew that the dove was he—Chananiah. I knew that true devotion, devotion without end, can be shown only by a wife. I have sworn, Father, I have sworn!"

Reb Chiya listened, and then he sadly asked, "And how would it be, my daughter, if Chananiah were destined to die in his youth? If he were destined to beget a son who would become a great scholar, but he himself were to leave this world at an early age?"

"Whatever the number of years decreed to him, they shall be happy."

Once more Reb Chiya's eyes grew sad, and again he asked, "And how shall it be if Chananiah is destined to bring forth a great scholar—a truly great one—but his life is reckoned not in years but, from the moment of his wedding, in days?"

"Days then, but days of happiness."

"And you would become a widow in your youth?"

"A widow, but a widow blessed by God."

Reb Chiya remained silent, unable to fathom the strength of his child. A deed of heaven, he thought.

Once again Miriam placed her hand on his shoulder. With eyes uplifted and in a voice that seemed prophetic she said, "I live in the hope that the sentence that hangs over him will be removed. I shall offer my life for his."

"But how, my daughter?"

"I do not know, since the sin for which he suffers is unknown to me. Later he will tell me."

In Reb Chiya's heart there could remain no doubt that this was a destined marriage. God tries me, he thought, and I shall endure the trial. To his daughter he said, "*Mazel tov*, my child. With God's blessing, we will arrange the betrothal tomorrow."

Miriam bent to kiss her father's hand, and when she rose Reb Chiya could hardly recognize her, so transported had her face become with happiness and joy.

"You have no fear, Miriam?"

"No, I wait upon God's word." Her voice rang as clear and pure as crystal.

But after Miriam left, Reb Chiya could not quiet his fears and he dispatched letters to the head of the yeshivah in Jerusalem and to the head of the Jews in Babylon. To them he poured out all his woe and perplexity.

"Tomorrow we shall mark the betrothal of my daughter Miriam, may God grant her long life. There are moments when it seems that I am placing a crown upon her head, and moments when I feel that I am leading my only child, my little white lamb, to the slaughter. Yet I do not wish to oppose the will of God. I shall set the date of the wedding for a month from this day, and during this month I shall wait for word from you, for your counsel and your wisdom. And I beg you to pray for me, to pray for my daughter and for the penitent youth as well."

The next day the betrothal took place. Everyone gasped, and the students of the yeshivah were beside themselves with astonishment. That such good fortune should befall Chananiah! But out of respect for their teacher they said not a word.

So the month passed. No letter for Reb Chiya came from Jerusalem or Babylon, which seemed to him an evil omen. On the day of the wedding he drew Miriam aside and said to her, "Do you know, my child, that your beloved Chananiah is fated to leave this world on the eighth day after the wedding?" And then he repeated what the snake had said and told her that he had not yet heard from Jerusalem and Babylon. If there was a speck of uncertainty in her heart, she could still withdraw.

Miriam replied "I am certain, and my heart is certain. Now that I know the sentence I know how to undo it."

"You! By what virtues and by what powers?" wondered Reb Chiya.

"By the power of my faith, and by the virtue of my mother, may she rest with God, and of you, my father."

The wedding canopy was made ready.

The bridegroom came in his sackcloth, with a hempen rope about his loins and in his hands a staff made from a peeled almond branch. Since he could not speak, Reb Chiya delivered the wedding sermon for him, and Chananiah listened with joy and with sorrow.

And when the bridegroom was led to his bride, she awaited him in workday clothes, with a drab kerchief covering her hair, so that she would not place herself above him.

And when the time came for the bride to be unveiled, her face shone like the sun and her eyes were clear and trusting and quiet, yet happy beyond measure.

And the bride was led around the bridegroom seven times, dressed as she was in her workday clothes, so as not to burden the heart of her beloved. Reb Chiya watched, with pride and with tears.

When Chananiah was asked to repeat the Hebrew words of the marriage ceremony he asked, "What do the words mean?"

Reb Chiya translated from the Hebrew, word for word.

All Safed gasped. And they gasped still more when the groom spoke not a word of Torah at the wedding feast.

The ceremony of the Seven Blessings that followed the wedding was held in the garden. The bride sat among the women like an orphan among the wealthy, and the groom like a dullard among scholars and rabbis discoursing upon Torah. Reb Chiya, no matter whether he spoke himself or listened to others, sat nervous and ill at ease, his eyes searching through the garden. Not that he regretted the wedding! He was, rather, looking for the strange snake, and soon he saw how Achnai glided silently among the guests, seen by none of them, never taking his eyes off its victim, the youth Chananiah.

On the evening of the seventh day of the Seven Blessings, Reb Chiya drew his daughter to his side and in a strained voice said to her, "Tomorrow is the day of judgment. Be strong, my daughter!"

"I am strong," replied the young wife, "for I am blessed by God. And I will redeem my husband from death."

"God be with you," said Reb Chiya, his eyes filling with hot tears.

"But remember," added Miriam, "tomorrow the miracle must occur. The staff must bloom and so must his soul! He must recite to you a portion of the Torah! Come to us early, dear Father."

The next morning, when Reb Chiya came to them, Miriam was already dressed but Chananiah still lay in bed. "Forgive me," he said to his father-in-law, closing his eyes, "I do not feel well."

Reb Chiya, however, was staring at the white staff that stood by Chananiah's bed. For the staff was slowly turning green, veins were beginning to course through it and tiny blossoms to appear. As Reb Chiya drew closer to gaze upon this miracle, he saw that Chananiah's face was also undergoing a transformation. Slowly it took on color, and the eyes, when Chananiah opened them, were clear and tranquil, untroubled by any curse. Reb Chiya

turned to his daughter, to see whether she too had noticed this miracle, but Miriam was no longer in sight. Soon, however, Reb Chiya forgot his daughter and the miracle of the staff and even the snake Achnai, the messenger of the Angel of Death; for Chananiah had opened his lips and the words had begun to flow. They flowed like pearls of wisdom, wisdom that lighted up the Torah and the inner secrets and mysteries of the Torah. Chananiah, as he spoke, opened for Reb Chiya the gates to a new world, a paradise where the tree of knowledge and the tree of life and many other marvelous trees were blossoming. The clear light of the first seven days shone upon this paradise as with rays of gold; among the leaves sang a multitude of birds, and on every side there was a blossoming and burgeoning of life. Chananiah spoke; and to Reb Chiya it seemed that the soul of the world was speaking. Straining ears and eyes, Reb Chiya drank in every word that streamed from Chananiah's lips, and a great bliss, silent and holy, spread through his whole being.

The secrets and the mysteries of the Torah, as Chananiah unfolded them to Reb Chiya, were later recorded in the Book of Chananiah, which Reb Chiya issued with bindings of gold. But since these are wonders not to be described, let us leave the sages of the Torah and turn to the blessed Miriam.

Once she had seen her father gazing upon the miracle of the staff, Miriam snatched up her husband's sackcloth and ran from the room. Quietly and lightly she went through the palace, the thick carpet muffling her steps, and once alone she quickly threw off her clothes. "Forgive me, my God," she murmured, "forgive me if I violate the law that forbids a woman to wear the dress of a man, but a life is at stake." And she lowered Chananiah's sackcloth over her body and ran into the garden. She remained there quietly, staring at the path that wound its way from the door of the house far, far into the distance, until it disappeared among the oleander trees.

Murmuring prayers to the Almighty that he accept her sacrifice, Miriam saw the messenger of the Angel of Death, Achnai, uncoil itself from an oleander tree, and she quickly covered her face with her hands so as to seem to it like the fated victim Chananiah. Between the cracks of her fingers she watched the snake approach her, gliding slowly and with assurance, for it knew that its victim could not flee.

When the snake saw Chananiah (as it supposed) sitting calmly, waiting with his face covered, it thought: My victim waits and his heart is filled with foreboding. He is praying or perhaps confessing. The snake uncovered its fangs of venom. Miriam saw how Achnai began to move faster, now that its appetite was aroused. She heard the rustle of its skin over the ground. And when it had come so close that she could see the spots on its skin, Miriam closed her fingers and prayed silently in her heart, Lord of the Universe, accept my sacrifice! Quietly, without taking breath, she began her last confession, and not once did her lips tremble. Before the prayer was done she felt the sting of the fangs—and fell to the ground with the cry, “O Lord of the Universe, forgive me for the great scholar with which you were to bless me. May Chananiah live in his place!”

The death struggle followed, and it was with great pain that the soul tore its way out of her body.

But our God is a God of Judgment.

When Miriam’s soul rose to heaven, the saints of paradise were waiting for it, or more exactly, they were waiting for the soul of Chananiah. And when she was led to the seat of judgment she was asked, merely for the sake of custom, since the answer was known to all, “Were your dealings on earth honest?”

Answered Miriam, “I had no dealings on earth.”

“Did you study the Torah?”

She smiled charmingly. “Lord of the Universe, have you ever directed the daughters of Israel to study your Torah?”

A tumult broke out. “Who are you? Who are you?”

“Miriam, daughter of Sarah and Chiya, wife of Chananiah!”

Consternation! The heavenly host realized that she had sacrificed herself, from devotion without end, for her husband, and that Achnai, the messenger of the Angel of Death, had been deceived.

So they cried out to her soul, “Return, quickly! Return to your body before it is moved.”

No, said Miriam, and refused. To suffer twice the agonies of death, she declared, is beyond the burden placed on man. Unless, of course, she said, they would accept her death in place of Chananiah’s. For he must live.

“Agreed, agreed!” rose the cry in heaven. They were fearful of delay.

And at that very moment Miriam's soul returned to her body, and she rose from the ground without even a wound. With great joy she ran to tell her husband and her father what had happened, and as she entered the palace there arrived two messengers, one from the head of the yeshivah of Jerusalem and the other from the head of the Jews of Babylon. Both letters said only: "*Mazel tov!*"

About the great scholar that was born to Miriam, and of the satisfaction he brought to Reb Chiya, we may, with God's help, speak another time. Here it need only be added that the snake Achnai, the messenger of the Angel of Death who had let himself be deceived, was promptly dismissed and has never been heard from since.

Translated by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg