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WHITHER?
& OTHER STORIES

TRANSLATED FROM HEBREW AND
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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Whither?

I see his melancholy profile as though through a mist, through the curtain of thick cloud that descended on him in his lifetime and darkened his bright trail with a multitude of vain fictions and will-o'-the-wisps—yes, I see him, poor devil, who thought so much about life and received nothing back in return, not even a decent remembrance when it was over.

Let this be his epitaph.

My mother told me many a story when I was a child, stories as dark and as dreadful as the darkness of the Exile and as ghastly and grim as the history of the Jews. My gray hairs and beard have nothing to do with old age, because I was already old as a boy; each of her stories bleached one more hair, until the color was gone from them all. I know now of course that there are persons on life's stage who eat, drink, and stay merry well enough...who aren't perpetually bowed beneath the curses of a vengeful God...yet then all of life presented itself to me as a terrible tragedy...and most terrible of all was the story of crazy Nachman, which we children discussed all the time in the *heder*, because we too knew all about it, down to its last eccentric detail.

“Reb Moshe, crazy Nachman’s father,” my mother once told me, “was a brilliant rabbi and a saintly Jew, but the old Holy Man of Chernobyl was even greater, and Reb Moshe didn’t believe in him. Once the old man came to visit our town, but Reb Moshe refused to greet him, and when the old man sent for him specially, Reb Moshe wouldn’t go. That Sabbath, when they were both in the synagogue, the old man turned to him and said: ‘So you don’t believe in me, Moshe? Let this be a sign to you. I know you’ve been wanting a son. This year your wife will give birth to one. There was once a great soul in the upper worlds, a very great and holy spirit, but Samael made off with it and ever since it’s been in his clutches, hovering in the void for seventy years. I had thought I might rescue it from him, and so I’ve kept it from descending to earth, but now I see that the task is too much for me because of this sinful generation, which doesn’t believe in me, so that my powers have been sapped. This soul will be—your son. He will be a great student of Torah and of wisdom, but all will go to Samael in the end, to the *klipa*. And because of him, you’ll go down to your grave a broken old man.’”

“Crazy Nachman,” our rabbi once told us in the *heder* when he was feeling well-disposed, “had great gifts of mind, but he couldn’t resist the temptation to study cabala, even though he knew that it was forbidden under twenty-five years of age. He entered the mystic gardens and was struck down by what he saw, like Elisha ben Avuyah before him.”

Crazy Nachman, went the story, was sitting over his books in the study house one night when suddenly he heard a horrid voice call out: “Nachman, I want a pinch of snuff!” When he looked up, he saw a long tongue sticking out at him from the women’s gallery.... He took leave of his senses right then and there—and never came back to them.

“Crazy Nachman,” a boy once told me, “wanted to know what’s above and what’s below, what’s ahead and what’s behind. He looked where he shouldn’t have. Even now he goes on thinking the same weird thoughts. He doesn’t think he’s crazy at all.”



The worst conflagration is that which flares up from the depths. All the water in the world can't extinguish such a fire before it has gutted everything in its way, because by the time it has been discovered, it is already burning full blaze and nothing can be snatched from its jaws. Such is the battle that a man fights within himself with his own heart and soul. It is the most dreadful battle of all, in which the heart is reduced to ruins long before the flame bursts into the open.

There was nothing really that sudden about Nachman's "madness" or about the sacrilege that he committed on that awful day.

The Day of Atonement. The synagogue was filled from wall to wall with men in white prayer gowns and prayer shawls. Reb Moshe stood by the ark in a tearful, prayerful study. His silvery beard hanging over his gown, his high, broad forehead, pale face, and deepset black eyes, and the outlines of his back configured in white combined to give him an angelic appearance. On the podium in the center of the synagogue stood a frail, sickly young man with a white, cadaverous face and long, jutting jaws from the juncture of which grew a short, black beard. His large, dark eyes shone through their oval circuits like burning coals. The lines on his face and the expression in his eyes bore witness to the fact that here was someone who had thought much and deeply. At times his meditations were interrupted by the melodies of the cantor, which made him look up and stare oddly at his surroundings, as though he couldn't believe what he saw, or understand the meaning of it, or why he in particular should be among all these people on an evening like this. The crowd of worshipers regarded him with deference, for it knew that no ordinary thoughts could be passing through the head of Reb Nachman, the rabbi's son, the new star ascendant in Jewish skies. He was barely twenty years old—and already his fame had spread far and wide.

The service drew to an end. The cantor finished singing the "Song of Unity." Reb Nachman was still lost in thought, in deep contemplation of that marvelous philosophic poem that was so rich in life, faith, and intellectual inquiry, when a young Talmud student approached him with a question about the ritual performed by the high priest on this holiest of days in ancient times. The student addressed him once and yet again but received no answer. Amazed

that the young man should be so involved with his thoughts as to be oblivious of what was said to him, the members of the congregation pressed closer. The student asked his question again. Suddenly Reb Nachman stirred and looked about with a strange and distracted glance. Turning on his questioner, he bitterly exclaimed:

“Ah! How long will this waste of life be allowed to go on?”

“What?” asked the bewildered student. “What waste of life do you mean?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” sighed Reb Nachman with a glance of his dark eyes.

The crowd of worshipers stared at him curiously. His father, the rabbi, came over too. Nachman’s eyes burned like fire. He wanted to say something bitterer yet, something that had plagued him for days and for years and had been like salt in his wounds on this evening too, but to whom could he say it? Who was there to understand him and to follow his thought to the end? He stood leaning against the podium, from where he looked back at the congregation with a mixture of pity, anguish, and despair. Then he faced the young student again and went on:

“Yes, it’s all nonsense. What does the high priest mean to you? Why should you care about something that happened thousands of years ago?”

“What’s the matter with you, Nachman?” his father cried out. “Have you gone mad?”

“It’s all nonsense!” he declared. And he picked up the candle that stood burning on the podium—and blew it out.

“He’s gone mad!” his father cried harshly, and fell down in a daze.

The irreversible sentence was passed on the spot: he was “mad.”

The members of the congregation stood whispering to each other with sad looks and strained voices, staring now at the elderly rabbi, who lay propped on his hands with his face to the floor as though ashamed to face the large crowd, now at his lunatic son, who had tarred himself in public with his own brush, and now at one another with upturned, unfathoming faces. It was too much to grasp. How could it have happened?

The lunatic remained leaning against a lectern, his face aflame, his eyes shooting strange sparks of fire as though he had really gone mad. He saw and felt in a flash how all had been ruined; he knew that in an instant's time he had hurled himself down an abyss and destroyed everything that he, and not only he, had labored to build in a lifetime. His good name, his good fortune, now lay at the bottom of these dizzying, dread depths. He saw the future stretch bleakly before him...now, at this very moment, he had already begun a new life—who knew or could number the ordeals it might hold in store? It had taken but a second to make him the most miserable of men—how frightful it was! And why? Why had he blown out the candle? The thought of it depressed him terribly. How could he have brought such disgrace, such everlasting shame, upon his father, who was dearer to him than life itself? Cain had killed Abel, his brother, but he had killed his own father! Ah, what a dreadful thought...but had he really wanted to do it? No, he felt as though he had been forced to blow out the candle against his will. The ache inside him had grown too great to be held in any longer...for years now he'd felt as though he were a stranger to everything and everyone were a stranger to him...and now the fire had flared forth. But why had it done so in a way he hadn't wanted? Why must he profane what was holy to so many people?—It's my curse, he thought, to belong to a nation that has nothing in this world but its religion. This leaves only two choices...to attack the faith or defend it...and yet all that I want for myself is to be a free man. I can't spend my life being for or against religion...there are other things that I want to be, and other things that I want to do for myself and among my people.

He imagined his brief life passing before him. Here were his childhood, his boyhood, and adolescence; here were the ambitions and hopes which lay buried in the fastness of his soul. It had been poor, this life, in the pleasures and amusements of the senses, but it had been rich in fantasies, dreams, visions, and high ambition instead.

One memory stood out among many blurred recollections. It was a summer afternoon; the sun was already low in the sky; he had come home from the *heder* in an exhilarated mood because the rabbi had favored him especially that day and said that he had never seen

a nine-year-old before with such a marvelous head for the intricacies of the Talmud. The air had cooled off a bit and felt terribly good and refreshing after the long day shut up in the awful, sweltering heat of the *heder*. His path was crossed by a gang of boys, his friends, and in no time he was standing in their midst. They ran this way and that, racing together with exuberant cries. Suddenly his father, the rabbi, appeared on his way to the synagogue for the afternoon and evening service.

“Nachman, have you prayed yet?”

“I prayed in the *heder*.”

“And why must you run about like that?”

He said nothing.

“Why must you make friends with such foolish boys?”

He said nothing.

“Come along with me. From now on, we’ll pray in the synagogue together. A Jew mustn’t fill his mouth with laughter in this world. We’re here to worship God and to study His Law; we mustn’t even think of spending our time in such foolery.

“Ah, son, don’t you say every day in your prayers, ‘And let not the Evil Urge have power over us?’ What a great prayer it is! But the Evil Urge does have power over us because of our sins. Every moment of pleasure and enjoyment is put there by the devil to drag us down into the vanities of this world so as to rob us of our place in the next. We mustn’t take pleasure, son, we mustn’t ever take pleasure in this world!”

He stared longingly after the gay pack of boys that continued to romp back and forth. How hard it was to leave his friends when they were having such good fun! How he had waited and hoped all day long—half choked to death by the heat and the unbreathable air—for just these dear, pleasant moments! But what was he to do? And how could he say “And let not the Evil Urge have power over us” in his prayers tomorrow if he didn’t really mean it?



The synagogue. The afternoon service was over. The worshipers had taken candles and placed them upon lecterns to light a Talmud,

Mishnah, or other sacred text. A peculiar, hushed sadness reigned in the room. A few men stood near the podium, their books open before them, exchanging an occasional comment or debating some fine point of law. It was terrifically hot. The men's pale, dry lips were caked with dust. The candles burned laboriously, casting a dim light over the interior. And it was here that he would have to spend his favorite evening hours from now on!...Only, why did the devil lure him so strongly outside? What could be out there? He recalled the Talmudic text he had learned the other day, which advised: "And if the Evil One accost you on your way, drag him with you to the house of study."...—No, he swore, I won't lose my soul like those silly-headed boys who spend all their time in foolish games. I'll fight with the Evil Urge until I drive him from my heart!—But his heart was evil too...it kept calling him outdoors until the tears came to his eyes...he felt as though he were sacrificing himself to the God of Israel, purifying spirit and soul to worship his Creator. He resolved to dedicate himself body and soul to God and to have nothing more to do with vain, worldly pleasure.—O God, he prayed, make me strong enough to conquer the Evil Urge and to worship You really and truly.—All about him were Jews sitting in study; he alone was without a book. He went to the bookcase to find one and chose a volume that was called *The Beginnings of Wisdom*. His father had told him that every Jew was obliged to know *The Beginnings of Wisdom* by heart and to obey all that was written in it. He leafed through its pages until he came to a chapter that was called "About Hell." The title intrigued him. For years he had heard all kinds of stories about hell and the punishments of the world to come. He wanted to know what the truth really was. He wanted to understand hell exactly, to know what it looked like and what was in it, how big it was and how much it could hold. He wanted to know it all, the whole truth. It was time he found out. He read on.

The congregation was done with the evening prayer; many of the worshipers had already gone home; yet he remained where he was, propped against the lectern. The book lay open before him, but he could have been blindfolded for all that he saw.—So it's all true, he thought. It's true that there's really a hell. And it's true, God, that

You really do punish all those who rebel against You. How great You must be, God, how terrible and tremendous, so powerful and so strong that You can do whatever You want—and yet this is how You punish a weak little thing like man!—He felt as though the light had suddenly gone out from his world. How could anyone live in such an accursed, gloomy place? Wherever you went, sin followed after. If you didn't say "amen" the right way after a single prayer, your soul was already damned. If you forgot to wash your hands even once before praying or eating, it was condemned to live in a frog for seven whole years.—It's so terrible, God, it's so hard to live in Your world. Only please, God, don't lead me any more into temptation. Remember that I'm just flesh and blood, and how am I supposed to understand and obey Your whole deep Torah?—He shut his book and rose heavily from his place. A deep groan escaped from him. It was as though a great stone had been laid upon his heart. How oppressive and heavy it felt! And yet this was what the world was like. This was life. He simply hadn't known it until now....

He left the synagogue slowly in a sullen, peevish mood. On the threshold he pulled himself up to his full height, placed a kiss on the mezuzah with the fingers of his right hand, and recited in a whisper, "For he commandeth his angels to guard thee in all thy ways," concentrating as he had been told to on what it said in the holy books about the guardian angel who was born from each commandment one obeyed to help keep one from falling into sin. And yet once outside—the devil himself couldn't have made it more lovely! The great vault of the sky glittered with thousands of bright stars; the pale moon looked down with a kindly, winsome, pitying smile. He was forced to put God aside and to look up at the pure heavens, at the sea-blue valley overhead. The cool, moist air filled him with grudging pleasure and gratification. He thought it so beautiful: the moon, the stars, the blue skies, the shimmer of the rooftops in the moonlight, the trees—it all seemed so simple and right. And yet, ah, how many thousands of ghosts, ghouls, goblins, demons, she-devils, fallen angels, and stray spirits lay in ambush on every side! How much needed to be redeemed in this vile world! And why had he been put in it in the first place? Yes, to redeem as much as he could

and to purify his soul—and yet the Evil Urge kept diverting him with foolish amusements and thoughts.

The windows and doors in the street were ajar as he passed. Heads of households sat relaxing by the open windows, eating and drinking after a hard day's work. Women stood in kitchens and cooked dinner over woodburning stoves. Children sat in the doorways or on the ground by the front stoops, eating hot baked potatoes from a communal dish. He walked his solemn way, casting a sorrowful glance at the miserable sinners whom each passing moment brought nearer to perdition. What fools they were to be enjoying a world that was never made for their pleasure! They had forgotten the most important thing of all. His sorrow mounted. Not a person the length of the street was remembering to be mindful of God—how did he know that someday the Evil Urge would not cause him to slip the same way?

He came home feeling fretful and out of sorts. The house was full of light and good cheer. His father, the rabbi, sat at the head of the table, surrounded by a large group of men who were arguing loudly with emphatic gestures. A wit among them was amusing the others with his jokes...but ah, what a dreadful sight: his father was laughing! His father was laughing! Hadn't he just told him awhile ago that a Jew mustn't laugh in this world? He looked straight at his face—yes, he really had laughed. He looked again, hoping to find there a flicker of guilt, a prick of remorse for having laughed and forgotten God—but no, he could tell that he'd laughed with a heart that was perfectly clear. He knew that his father, the rabbi, was a good Jew who would yet make up for it with much groaning, fasting, repentance, and confession. Didn't he spend whole nights as it was in tears and penitent prayer and whole days without food? But dear God, why had he forgotten that it was forbidden to laugh? Why had he laughed and at what? What need did he have to laugh? And if someone like him could be tricked by the Evil Urge—*his* father, who had worshiped God all his life and never let down his guard against the *klipa* and the “other side”—yes, if even he lacked the strength to vanquish the Evil Urge, what chance was stood by a mere boy like himself?

And at night! Ah, how terrible the nights were! The battles that

raged then! How many dreadful warnings were written in the holy books about the nighttime kingdom of the *klipa*! The oil was gone from the lamp. The room was dark. It was terribly quiet. He felt a great weight on his heart. His thoughts were confused and spasmodic. His brain worked at breakneck speed, but he couldn't keep up with it. One thing he knew, however: he was alone by himself in a terrible, black world—he, a weak, lowly boy, was all alone in this dismal world. Thousands of angels and hidden powers lurked all about him...the whole world lay in ambush to drag him down to the fiery pit, to hell, and he...how weak and lowly he was! He covered his face with the blanket and cried. He felt desperate; it was hopeless; there was no way out. Suddenly a fearful thought crept into his mind and made him recoil. No! It was a sin to even think it. He mustn't. God was good. But why then, the thought went on torturing him, did He create such a terrible world? God was good, but if you didn't wash your hands when you were supposed to, he might turn you into a frog. He made man lowly and weak and expected him to be as strong as Himself.—No, I musn't sin. God is good, good, good. Be gone, you Evil Urge!—He bit his lips, clenched his teeth, pulled his hair in anger at the bitterness of his thought. *Good, good, good*, he deliberately drilled himself; but something inside him spitefully insisted: Either God wasn't good at all, or whoever wrote *The Beginnings of Wisdom* was lying. And how after all did he know? Had he been there himself? But this too, he knew, was the devil at work. It was the Evil Urge provoking him to think blasphemous thoughts about God and the holy *Beginnings of Wisdom*...

A sudden ray of light entered from the next room. Through the slightly opened door he saw his father sit down on the floor in a corner. The candle in his hand cast a dim light over the house. His gaunt, suffering face wore a look of sorrow and portentous grief. The corner was alive with an unseen magical field that flowed from it over the house. His father leaned silently on one hand, a terrible sadness in the frozen stare on his guileless countenance. He let out a sigh, and then another and another. A moment passed and he could be heard as he began to chant the midnight vigil in a slow, drear voice.—“Remember, O Lord, what is come upon us, behold,

and see our reproach.”—His voice inched along in a whisper, word after word. How awful it was!—“*O God, the heathen are come into Thine inheritance; they have defiled Thy holy temple; ...they have given the dead bodies of Thy servants to be food unto the fowls of heaven.... Though Thou hast crushed us into a place of jackals and covered us with the shadow of death, if we had forgotten the name of our God, or spread forth our hands to a strange god.... Nay, but for Thy sake are we killed all the day; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.... For our soul is bowed down to the dust; our belly cleaveth to the earth....*”—He eased himself down off his bed and tiptoed to the door to see his father more closely. It was a fearful, an awesomely holy scene. The plaintive chant bore into the recesses of his heart and soul.—“How long will there be mourning in Zion and weeping in Jerusalem?”—The old man was secretly weeping. Tear after tear rolled down his white beard.—*I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, they shall never hold their peace day nor night.*—He thought of the stories about Jerusalem’s walls that he had heard from Jews who had been there. In his mind’s eye he saw two large teardrops fall from the Wailing Wall, while a fox ran stealthily in and out of its breaches. He stood among the ruins by the holy wall and watched the crowds of Jews as they wept out loud and threw themselves on the ground. Here were the remnants of Jerusalem’s towers, from a crumbled mound of which he heard a voice cry out: “Woe to the father who has sent his children into exile and woe to the children who are banished from their father’s table!” A veil of darkness covered Jerusalem. The city lay in mourning. Before a cave by one of its gates sat the aging King David and played a frightfully sad and poignant tune upon his harp. Near him an armed Arab stood guarding the city, his spear in one hand and his sword on his hip. High, far away the heavens split open and there was God himself sitting on His throne and looking down on the world that served as His footstool. He saw Jerusalem lying desolate. The throne rocked back and forth, and two enormous tears hurtled to the bottom of the great sea. Then all the holy souls who had martyred themselves in His name came forth from paradise surrounded by fire, while a river of blood flowed before them. Their bodies were beaten and torn; their bony hands were held high and in

them were the scraps of parchment from the Torah scrolls they had saved from the foe. Before the mercy seat they flung themselves down, but an awesome voice called out to them from above: "Return to your place of rest, ye holy souls, the time has not yet come!" Then Mother Rachel too fell upon the throne with a heartrending wail, and the holy fathers prostrated themselves at its feet with a terrible cry... But the long, bitter exile was not yet over. Jerusalem was burned to ashes. The land of Israel lay waste. The *Shekhinah* was in exile, and the Jews lay scattered and dispersed among the nations. Satan reigned victorious. Samael held sway over all. Mikhael, the angel of Israel, his father had told him, lay bound in chains. Man was ruled by his passions and couldn't worship God. Ah, when would the Messiah come? He must come. No, he must be brought. The Messiah wouldn't come by himself, his father had said. Each generation must bring him. And yet so many had tried! Joseph de la Reina. The blessed Ari. The Baal Shem Tov. They couldn't bring him because the time hadn't come. But perhaps it now had. It was time to try again. The Messiah must be brought. He must, no matter what!

The candle was nearing its end. The flame burned low, throwing out small bits of wax with a thin sputter. Through the windows of the house the dawn light furtively broke. It grew brighter. The candle had gone out. His father, the rabbi, stood in one corner and read aloud from the Book of Psalms in a drained, gentle voice that seemed to flow through the house. A boundless happiness filled the heart. God's presence, his *Shekhinah*, was afoot in the house. The whole universe overflowed with His holiness and goodness. The world lay quietly outside the window, sunning itself in God's light. His father had closed his eyes and stood leaning against the doorway as though in a trance, his face radiant with splendor. He seemed to have risen slightly from the ground and to be floating above the floor of the house. He was singing finely and clearly; the soft, thin lilt of his voice was full of a hidden, mysterious power that was easy and light as a childhood dream and terribly sweet to the soul. Now he too was lifted from the ground like his father and hovered in midair. His father soared high toward a fiery stream that ran down the far end of the sky. The fierce light hurt the eyes. His father soared on and

on, closer and closer to the terrible stream of fire. The sound of his singing grew stronger and mingled with thousands of other voices of airborne song. The whole world was singing. But the fire grew fiercer and fiercer. The universe was bathed in an ocean of flame. It was hell that was burning so fiercely. Thousands of horrid angels full of eyes, monstrous and ferocious to behold, were transporting hordes of sinful children to be cast into the fire that raged in hell's bowels. Ah, what a dreadful sight! Here was a boy hanging by his tongue. Arms, legs, heads, and torsos tossed on the broiling flames. Now down swooped hideous Satan himself, his red wings blotting out all else. He seized him by a tuft of his hair and began to drag him noisily off to hell. He wanted to cry out, but the flames had burned his lips and he couldn't make a sound. Above him his father was breasting the burning stream...he was swimming toward the Messiah...no, he had seen him in the devil's grasp and had turned back to rescue him. His father grabbed hold of him firmly. The struggle was savage. His father held on to him by his hand while the devil tore wrathfully at his hair. The terrible pain made him open his eyes.... He was lying in bed, surrounded by his father and family.

"Thank God," said his father, the rabbi. "He's opened his eyes."



From that night on—so he remembered—his childhood innocence and animal spirits were taken from him. It was then that he first came to realize that life was a dreadful contest in which he was condemned to struggle and toil for as long as he lived without ever knowing whether he was winning or not. In a vague, undefined way great questions about God, man, and the world now awakened for the first time in his still-unformed mind. They bore there unremittingly, and imperiously demanded an answer. It was then that he first conceived the tremendous idea that it was he who would be the awaited hero, he who would fight the great war and emerge with victory's palm.

A Sabbath eve.

Looking back toward his father's house he saw first the garden, beyond whose fence stretched a broad pond covered with marsh