

The grandfather of R' Pereida found a skull cast down at the gates of Jerusalem. Upon it was written: This and still another. He buried it, but it would not stay buried. Again he buried it, but again it would not stay buried. Thereupon he said: It is the skull of Yehoiakim,<sup>α</sup> concerning whom it is written – His shall be the burial of a donkey, dragged and cast beyond the gates. He said to himself: Yehoiakim was nonetheless a king. So he wrapped the skull in silk and placed it in a chest. Later, his wife saw the skull. She thought: This is surely the skull of my husband's first wife, whom he cannot forget! So she fired up the oven and burned the skull. This is the meaning of what was written on the skull. Those words foretold that Yehoiakim was destined to suffer a two-fold retribution: *this* – his skull was to be cast into the streets; *and still another* – it would be consumed by fire ::

far only hunger. How slowly time passes on an empty stomach. While we exercised a mystery's solution between our knees. Had he not spent much of that time with his face toward, even flat against, the ground? Shall we rely on answers such as these? Perhaps you cannot possibly think so. It is written here and it is written there. Is this a case of a Halakhah for the Time of the Messiah? Shall we, in the very meanness of our time, operate merely in case, and seek out staircases to climb? And what shall we find on the floors above? Aside from a shortness of breath and our knees sagging beneath our ankles? A room and a half in the mirror of a room and a half. Perhaps a golem met his creator on those steps to a room and a half. That was the one, in your haste to mount a staircase, you elbowed out of the way. We live in a case of just in case on the staircase of our times. We are a republic of staircases. In any case, the direction of Europe was always up. Shall we pause a moment to stare in that direction and contemplate a space of our own fabrication? Shall we don the winding scarf of staircases? Step forward step by step to attack the staircase of our wonder? Let us say we cling to the teleological handrail of a Hegelian spiral staircase. We count stairs. We add and subtract and expound staircases. We interpret beginnings of staircases. We say this case of stairs is this case and this case of stairs is this case. This staircase is not like that staircase, and that staircase is not like this case. We provide a theory of staircases. Here was the father of the fathers of ritual staircases. The thirty-nine primary categories of staircases? This is our staircase and this is their staircase. If there is a staircase, this is the staircase? A very heavy staircase. Shall we count and collect a careful of staircases? Have we not rejected this once? We climb. We clamber. We thrust upward to build up an argument in the face of the Other's mysterious face. We take up our skirts and rise to the occasional uplifting expression. We are a legend of staircases. Shall we raise the spectre of a narrative staircase? And if I prefer not to? We can learn but not refute. Hence, there follows the inevitable plunge in the opposite direction. I mean down. Oh, don't we know that sinking feeling. We paint a vertical stroke<sup>δ</sup> on a horizontal staircase and call it inspiration.<sup>ε</sup> Perhaps the discomfort in our lungs may comfort us. Is it necessary? If two staircases are next to each other, place a detail between them and treat them as a staircase and a detail and a staircase. I was an architect of staircases. I spoke in the language of staircases. Staircases were my routine. I laboured on the ladder of successful staircases. I imagined a happy end to this continuous motion. And furthermore. And nothing more. Are we still at this? When he removed his shoes, they were filled with desert sand<sup>ϕ</sup> ::

He took the stairs. Or rather, they took something out of him. On the first three floors, no one. Up to three, an accumulation of garbage.<sup>γ</sup> On four and five he found much the same. How high had those refugees from the fall of communism risen above a Western accumulation of refusal? To the tenth sefrot of a tenement? And if he reached that high what could he learn?<sup>η</sup> In any language? Every difficulty persuades stuff. Would he rap his lost knuckles against the spy hole of a Ukrainian refugee? And risk a good beating? Under the weight of those questions his heels trailed a step or two behind his knees. And so would yours. And yet. Not yet. Though very soon. Let us say he continued to climb the steps to the scene of those crimes. He was for once in his earthly life upwardly mobile. Though the slope was steep, the pace slow. He was a parade marching between the passage and his doubts. Let us wrap a suspension and pause to claw the airless staircase for a breath of continuation ::

<sup>γ</sup> And yet we continue to peddle it.

<sup>η</sup> One gazed and died, one was stricken, a third cut down the shoots. Only R' Akiva departed in peace. Hagigah 14b

What failed to make this story my story? I mean why can't we B-Boop instead of droning on with that big boy sound? If there's a difficulty this is the curling pistol up your butt, pal. A goil toils in the garden. She straddles her rough red heels in the ground and points her ass in the air. And who wouldn't prefer weeding beggar's ticks to wedding bells? I'll take a pokeweed over a poke any fortnight and a day. Not to mention a dandelion over a dandy line. Perhaps you can't possibly mull it over. And it may be your itch to say: honey, the right man just hasn't come along all over you yet. Or something like that. I mean what goil wants a golem? As though we ever doubted every boy wasn't all part-zuf. But now we're drifting back into their dark plot of dampish soil. As though we didn't carry our own fair sexy share of that zuf chromosome. As though there wasn't a bit of the zuf in every gal's goilish gene pool. Who doesn't puff up her pillows and tidy up her mad mother's attic? Ride a broom across that virgin soil? Who trudged through a century's marital plots and cemetery plots? We were tight-lipped and heavy-lidded. We were a common denominator until someone said this is this girl and this is this girl and that made a colourful difference. Still, we could all be just sheepish golems who've lost their Bo-peeps and don't know where to find them. In the end, any Boop is a creature of her time and place. She can bebop all she pleases. Writing is not enough. We are the stuff our moms stuffed into us. And they got stuffed too. Who scrawled the Truth across my furrowed brow? In whatever language. Some handsome boy's hand did that handiwork, no doubt. You can bet your pistol butt on that, bud. Those buddy boys love to scribble their name on any girl's plot of ground. Not to mention her forehead. Given half a chance, I'd scratch my own story across that desert garden.<sup>γ</sup> Fat chance. Watch, he'll bury me again before this book is done ::

<sup>γ</sup> Even a golem has that possibility. To run amok. Did you think Betty Boop would fall for a thick-headed determinist?

Four entered an orchard and these are they: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher and R' Akiva. Shall we do likewise and perform certain exercises? Now that fasting comes so easily to us? Those four wore clean white vestments. They took virgin soil and water that had never been contained in any vessel. They breathed. They chanted letters. R' Akiva said to them: When you reach the stones of pure marble, do not say: Water, water! For it is said: He that speaketh falsehood shall not be established before Mine eyes. Ben Azzai gazed and died. Of him Scripture says: Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints. Ben Zoma gazed and was stricken. Of him Scripture says: Hast thou found honey? Eat as much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith and vomit it. Aher cut down the shoots. R' Akiva departed in peace. Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma were both named Simeon. Aher is Elisha ben Avuyah. Aher means the other one ::

<sup>α</sup> Shall we say he inclined on that staircase toward an evil inclination – יצר הרע? According to Rav Katina, in the seventh millennium it shall become easier for man to gain mastery over his evil inclinations. Sanhedrin 97a

<sup>δ</sup> Once having donned the habit of witnessing, one may easily turn to witnessing sin, if only for lack of something better to witness.

<sup>ε</sup> There was Chilkak and Billak and a host of Sodomites. Sanhedrin 98b

<sup>ϕ</sup> The further one climbs the more rarified the atmosphere, and the greater the spiritual danger. *Sefer Yetzirah*

<sup>α</sup> When Yehoiakim came along, he said: The earlier ones did not know how to anger God. And he proceeded to blaspheme and declared: "Do we need God for anything other than his light?" And on the matter of that which they found upon him, let us say the Amoraim disagree. Some say Yehoiakim tattooed the name of a pagan deity on his organ, and others say he tattooed the name of God. Sanhedrin 103b

<sup>δ</sup> To every righteous person, draw a line of ink upon his forehead, a line of life, in order that he may live; and to every wicked person, draw a line of blood upon his forehead, that he may die. A line of life, a line of ink; and a line of death, a line of blood. Abraham Abulafia *Sefer ha-Melitz*

<sup>ε</sup> Or abstract expressionism, which we called the next step to modernism.

<sup>ϕ</sup> That sand gathers in the desert of our errance. In the desert where our footsteps draw the face of the Other.