

Jumping the Road

Jack Dann

It really isn't right that I should give you my name. True enough that this is history, and history, if it is to be kept alive, must be recorded for posterity. But the name of Isaac ibn Chabib of Philadelphia need not be mentioned.

However, does not the *Pirkei Avos*, the *Ethics of the Fathers*, demand that we repeat a saying in the name of the one who said it?

I will admit to being Isaac ibn Chabib, fool, hypocrite, rabbi, and unregenerate disbeliever in miracles.

So for posterity, for all those who will listen, here is my story.

First of all, I should tell you that I didn't want to go to Tobias.

Tobias is not even the real name of the planet. The Jews who live there call it *Bharees*, or Covenant, because the remnants of one of its moons form a ring of dust and stones that appear as a gauzy rainbow in the night sky. It is, I will admit, a beautiful sight; and as if that's not enough, the comets rain across the heavens and sheets of aurorae shimmer like tinted crystal.

Everyone else calls the place *Ulim*, which means world. We named it Tobias, after Martin Tobias, President of the United States of Canada. But I'm getting away from the point. The point is that all Jews—*any* Jews on any planet—must trace their cultural heritage back to Earth. There can be only one Sinai, one Torah, one Adonoi.

If the Jews have scaly skin like alligators and yellow eyes and seven fingers on each hand, that's fine. Good for them; they're converts. The Torah doesn't discriminate. At some time, some adventurous Jews colonized Covenant and converted the natives. Or the natives listened in on our radio transmissions—not that Jews have so many programs on the air—and decided to become Jewish. (Which just goes to prove that you don't need to be human to be a masochist.) That's the only logical explanation why the Good Will Traders discovered Jews on Covenant.

That was my argument, but the xeno-historians and cultural anthropologists had written an *Encyclopedia Galactica* detailing that the "*Ulim* Jews" were as indigenous to the planet as the electric cats and the

flimflams that soared in the sky like birds and burrowed into the earth like worms. It seemed that Judaism had actually, impossibly, evolved *independently* on a different planet. Oh, there were plenty of theories about how such a thing could happen, but they were as wild and esoteric as anything Leibniz or the Lurianic Kabbalists could have imagined: ghostly quantum worlds splitting into imperfect copies of themselves (not so different from the mystic's worlds of angels and demons), the Copenhagen collapse, mirror universes, splitting universes, the Everett Wheeler Graham metatheorem, the turbulent effects of chaos, the great fractal chain, and who knows what else.

So now we are to believe in two Sinai's, two Torahs, and four Talmuds, for like us, the *Ulim* Jews had two versions of Talmud, which, in case you might not know, are chronicles of Jewish culture, law, and myth. They even spoke Hebrew... well, they spoke something like Hebrew.

Why didn't I want to go to Tobias—to Covenant, to *Ulim*, if you like? Why wouldn't I want to verify a miracle and renew my faith?

The truth?

I was afraid. I had come to terms with history. Faith could not supplant reason. The evidence was incontrovertible.

Had *been* incontrovertible...

The shuttle landed in the country of *Chakk*, which had once been the Mesopotamia of this planet. Although it was in a northern latitude, it was quite temperate. The landing field was huge, for this was a major spaceport, but it was, in effect, a crater in the center of a coral green city of bole and root and leaf the size of New Boston. I waited in the airlock, alone, staring out the bolted plastocene door, as if I was a pariah; the crew and other passengers had debouched earlier. As this was my first visit, I had to wait in isolation. It seemed like days, but it was only hours. By exposing me to enough radiation to make me glow like a tropical fish, they would certainly make me kosher. I guess they didn't trust anyone's infection control procedures but their own. So what could be lost but a little time? I'm ninety-seven years old. I've got a slow metabolism. A little radiation won't kill me, and if it does, that wouldn't be such a loss.

The *Tzaddik*—the “Good Jew who makes miracles and talks with God,” the grand rabbi, my boss—would just have to send someone younger and less cynical to discover the nature of God.

So I stood before the lock and stared out into the landing field. It would

soon be time, for an alien stood on the field below and waited for me. He didn't wave, nor did he move around or shift his weight from foot to foot. He stood still as stone, his yellowish eyes fixed on me. He wore a blue yarmulke that fitted tightly to his bald, blue-gray head—the kind of yarmulkes handed out at Bar Mitzvahs on Long Island—and a black-striped prayer-shawl was draped over his shoulders. Suddenly a crowd of other Ulimites gathered before the shuttle, but they stayed well away from the one dressed as a Jew. Those that came too close to him moved away quickly with nervous grins on their faces. Except for the Jew, they all seemed agitated. The Ulimites were dressed in fine linens that billowed and ballooned, multi-hued gowns and coats and breeches that were meant to create new shapes rather than accentuate or improve nature. It reminded me of sixteenth-century English fashion, the kind of clothes worn during the reign of Henry VIII.

A human delegation arrived, all in evening clothes; so I was to be formally received.

I would have preferred to go off quietly with the alien in the *tallis*.

Then the ship wished me farewell, the lock sighed open, and I walked down the enclosed gangway. The mossy smells of forest and grass, which were carried on gentle breezes, were overwhelming. I shook hands with the ambassador from the Canadian States and his officers from the foreign office, and was introduced to the alien ambassador and other dignitaries who extended their seven-fingered hands to greet me. Their skin was surprisingly hot, and leathery as the case of an old book. It took a moment to get used to looking at the aliens and listening to the translator, who was a young woman with a hard, shiny face and a deep voice.

Two men clutched my elbows as if I were a fugitive and gently propelled me toward what looked to be a slidewalk the size of a thoroughfare. They were going to ghost me away before the alien in the *tallis* could introduce himself. "Excuse me," I said to the man on my right (after all, I'm right-handed), "but what about my friend there?" I waved to the alien in the yarmulke, who stood alone away from the crowd. He frowned, which for an Ulimite is the same thing as a smile. (I had had the whole voyage in the starship to study, so I knew a *few* things.)

"*Shalom*," he said in a voice that carried over the noise of the others. The intonation was odd: he pronounced the word as if it were divided into three distinct syllables, and he glottalized the "al" and "om."

I asked him who he was: "*Mee Ahtaw*?"

He spoke quickly, as if the group surrounding me would stop him any

second, but it was as if he didn't exist: his brethren either didn't notice him or were purposely ignoring him. Although he used words I had never heard, I understood most of what he said. His name was Tahlmeade, which meant student, at least in Terran Hebrew.

A member of the Ulimite delegation stepped right in front of me, even as I was speaking to Tahlmeade. I thought it very rude, and odd; but Tahlmeade simply moved around the periphery of the nervous crowd and re-established eye-contact with me. As he moved about, like a child playing peekaboo, I could not help but smile. All the Ulimites were short—about four and a half feet tall—and their flattened features, serious expressions, and roundish heads made them seem... cute. But even to think about them that way was condescending. No, more than that. Was it not just another form of prejudice? Of racism? Indeed, the human dignitaries might well think that an old man with a long beard and earlocks was *cute*, especially one wearing a fur-brimmed hat, and a black caftan with a silk cord knotted around his waist to separate the Godly parts—the mind, the soul, and the heart—from the lower parts.

And who knows what the Ulimites thought of *humans*? Most likely, they didn't perceive us as cute. Perhaps they considered us smelly, sweaty, brutelike, fleshy as mushrooms, and most likely crazy: *meshuggener*.

The uniformed young man beside me motioned to Tahlmeade. He was with the consulate mission and held onto my elbow as if I was on my last legs and about to fall face-flat on the ground. "Don't worry, Rabbi, he knows his way around. He'll catch up with us later."

"I should *hope* he knows his way around, but where are we going?"

"To the consulate. A party has been prepared in your honor." The young bureaucrat was quite handsome: dark hair, a good sharp nose that you could see, a strong chin, and dark eyes that would make women talk.

"Please, let's bring the alien in the prayer-shawl along with us. It's obvious that—"

"I'm afraid that would not do, Rabbi."

"Would not *do*?"

The young men pulled me along, and I, of course, did not resist; I just walked slowly—after all, I'm an old man.

"After the briefing, you'll understand."

"Ah, now it's a briefing!" and after a step or two, I asked, "So if Jews are not allowed at this party, what am *I* going to do there?"

“With all due respect, Rabbi, you’re jumping to conclusions,” said the ambassador, who walked beside us; he was tall and gray, and wore a thin mustache that was black as a pencil mark. Then he frowned at the aliens and smiled at me. The Ulimites frowned happily back at us, indicating that all was well with their world.

As I was whisked across the spaceport, I looked over my shoulder. But Tahlmeade and the ship had disappeared, replaced by an architectural chaos of brown and green. The city of Kharig, the largest and most fabulous city on Ulim, was a sculpted garden, and I was passing through it at a hundred miles an hour. Arches, stadiums, peristyle courts, statues as large as skyscrapers, castles, rotundas, pavilions, halls, lodges, offices, governmental complexes vaulted over razor-cut avenues; they grew out of the ground complete with flying buttresses, towers, domes, and cupolas; their architectural styles were as exotic as the Hagia Sophia or the Cetian monoliths. I imagined that I could see the façades of San Carlo, the Doric porticos of Hagley Park, the Romanesque and gothic pinnacles of the Milan Cathedral, and the glass skyscraper needles of van der Rohe. The Ulim had planted a city, had shaped trees and shrub and mirrored leaves into habitation: into civilization. I felt dizzy, overwhelmed, enraptured. I felt swallowed by the silvery green *alienness* of it all.

So this was culture shock.

If such a thing could turn an old man with ear locks into a poet, imagine what it might do to someone who still had some *juice* left inside him?

The cocktail party was endless, the talk small, and although the ambassador took special pains to provide me with some ninety-proof Slivovitz whiskey (which he thought all Jews drank), I left all the *schnapps* alone; neither did I take any narcodrines or enhancers; neither did I attend any of the Virtual parties that were also being held in my honor. I am a simple man. I drink in private. I am too old for sex. (I could still perform, I suppose; but I’ve courted peace and privacy for far too long to give them up for a wife.) I like to read, go to bed early, eat like a glutton at the Tzaddik’s court, argue pilpul and philosophy with the other rabbis, smoke the flat, foul-smelling cigarettes from Turkey, and wake up with the cock (not what you think!) to begin another—and perhaps final—day.

Yet I felt like the alien here, and not because I was carrying on conversations with creatures with yellow eyes and blue-gray skin the texture of alligators (albeit through my interpreter, who indicated that she

would be willing to warm me up during the night, and then gave me a blank look when I told her that I was no Gandhi—she probably thought “Gandhi” was a Jewish perversion); no, I felt just now like the hypocrite I was. You see, Jewish guilt is indeed a fact. I was a fraud, and these people, both alien and human, thought they were talking to a real Chassid master rebbeh, a living anachronism, a mystic who believed in kabbalah and amulets, who had his own *derekh*, his own special channel to communicate with God, and who knew His secret name: the Tetragrammaton. Indeed, they thought they had found a human who would understand and could explain the mystery of the Jews of this planet. The “Jewish Mystery” seemed to be a major philosophical problem for the intelligentsia of Ulim, both human and alien. It was as if they had to go to secondary sources to find out about these Jews... as if it never occurred to anyone just to go and ask a blue-skinned Jew.

So they asked *me*, a human hypocrite who remained a Chassid and a rabbi only because that was all I knew. I was too old and frightened, too corrupt, to leave the *Tzaddik’s* court and die alone among strangers. I needed respect, and wasn’t willing to give up my few servants and my small congregation. I could tell you that I lost my faith because of Auschwitz, but who remembers Auschwitz? Not my Tzaddik, who believed himself to be the *melits yoysher*, the one who pleads for the Jews who violate any one of the six hundred and thirteen positive and negative commandments, who believes that all *tsores*, all the troubles visited upon the Jews, are punishment for collective and individual sin. So six million Jews die because they sinned...

Oh, I argued with the Tzaddik, I told him that only a madman could believe in prayer after the Holocaust. If there was a God, He was no longer in the world; He was not the God of history. He could not be propitiated. After all, what terrible crime had we committed? The Torah says, “for our sins we are punished,” but who was punished, who was murdered? The poorest, the most faithful, the most pious. This, then, was the revelation, and the Holocaust was the modern Sinai—if one could call an event that happened two hundred years ago *modern*.

So what did my Tzaddik do? He told his three thousand followers that *I* had had a revelation, that God had revealed himself to me alone, that *I* was now a Tzaddik.

And *that’s* why he sent me to Tobias instead of going himself.

I told the story of my Tzaddik to my hosts, and everyone frowned and

shook my hand, until I actually almost began to feel like a Tzaddik who could do no wrong. I told them funny stories, and they especially liked Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav's story of the wise but skeptical man who had been sent a message from his king, but refused to open it because the messenger couldn't prove to the wise man that the king existed; nor could anyone else.

“ ‘Now do you see?’ the skeptical wise man said to the messenger. ‘People are foolish and naive and believe what they wish. They live a lie because they fear the truth.’ ”

Everyone agreed with Rabbi Nachman, who probably would have gotten a kick out of knowing his story was being told by a poor Jew to goyim who lived in the heavens.

Against all my good judgment, I began to enjoy myself a little; and just when I was about to indulge in a finger of Slivovitz (even if it tastes like rubbing alcohol, why break tradition?), the ambassador's aide relieved me of my newfound admirers and took me down narrow, labyrinthine corridors to an inner sanctum for the threatened briefing. I have to say, though, that these people were poets; they knew a good metaphor when they saw one. Although the striated walls of this grand salon seemed to be made of wood, they looked like meat. Whether it was sap or water, I don't know; but the very walls seemed to be sweating.

And there were no windows in here. A perfect place for an interrogation.

“Well?” I asked the ambassador, who was sitting opposite me with his staff beside him. We sat at a conference table made of the same stuff as the walls, but I didn't touch the table or anything on it. There was a setting before me: blue monochrome Delft china, heavy silverware, and crystal; and within easy reach were sandwiches on painted porcelain plates, and liquor, juice, and wine in clear Bristol goblets. A pear-shaped silver coffee pot took up an entire corner of the table, which seemed to be sweating profusely under the feet of the pot. The slightly acrid aroma of coffee was delicious.

“It's all kosher,” he said, gesturing at the food and drink. “I noticed you neither ate nor drank at the party. Surely you must be hungry...”

“Why all this fuss over a rabbi from Brooklyn who's not even published?”

“Because it seems that you're the key to the mystery.”

“Ah, yes, the mystery of the Jews,” I said. “Why are these blue people

asking *me* to tell them about their own Jews.”

“Ulimites,” the ambassador said, correcting me; yet there was no condescension in his voice.

“Ulimites.” Then after a beat, I said, “They had a Jew right at the shuttle port. Why didn’t they ask *him*? And why wasn’t he allowed to come along?”

“That’s just the problem. They can’t even *see* him. They have some kind of proprioceptive sense that he’s there, but that’s all.”

“That’s crazy!”

The ambassador shrugged. “The Ulimites can’t see Jews. Why? We don’t know. Yet they’re absolutely obsessed with finding out all they can about the Jews.”

“Well, they certainly seem to be able to see me,” I said. “So either I’m not a Jew or—”

“They have no trouble seeing humans, whether they’re Jewish or not,” the ambassador said, humoring me. After all, what else could he do?

“So before you came to colonize—”

“Not to colonize, Rabbi. We do not colonize planets that—”

“Excuse me for my ignorance, Ambassador, but before you came here to visit—”

“—To establish diplomatic relations.”

“—How could they be obsessed with finding out about Jews *before* you arrived, if they couldn’t *see* Jews or ask anyone else who *could*?”

“It was like an itch they couldn’t scratch,” one of the aides said; the one with the handsome face and good nose.

The ambassador glanced at the aide, who reddened slightly, and then said to me, “They discovered various Jewish texts that had not been destroyed.”

“Destroyed?”

Again he shrugged. “We know very little about what happened. We expect, or hope, that you can answer those questions for us. But the Ulimite Jews here seem to be the only religious group on the planet. None of the other Ulimites have any sense of the spiritual at all. It’s as if part of their psyche has been entirely wiped away, lost.”

“They lost their ability to hear their God, or gods,” said the aide who

had spoken before. “That’s what they’ve told us, anyway.”

“And what about the... encyclopedia your historians and anthropologists wrote about the Jews?”

“All correct, as far as we know.”

“Then they interviewed the Jews?”

“No,” the ambassador said. “All the information is gleaned from secondhand sources. Although we know where the Jews live—or think we do—we have not been able to initiate any direct contact, except with their intermediaries.”

“Ah, the *shtadlans*,” I said. “The fixers. So Tahlmeade is a fixer... But why *should* he help you? You treated him as if he were *dreck*. A nothing.”

“He had planned to see you, Rabbi. He understood that it would be impossible for him to join us.”

“Why? If no one can *see* him, what’s the difference?”

“They sense him and become very nervous. Believe me, it would be a mistake; but you’ll see for yourself soon enough.”

I waited for him to tell me what I would see soon enough, and when he didn’t, I let it alone; I would find out in due time. “How can one believe anything when it’s all secondhand and censored, when nothing is mentioned about your claim that the Jews are... invisible?” I asked. “Why wasn’t that in your reports?”

“This is a very sensitive and... explosive issue,” the ambassador said. “We considered what to do very carefully, and finally decided to keep the mystery confidential until we’ve resolved it. All the reports and monographs, although true, are smoke-screens.” He paused, as if to study my expression, but I have what’s called a poker-face, which I understand has something to do with an ancient game of chance. “There are too many implications for Jews at home,” he continued.

“Implications?”

“Something terrible has happened here. We do not wish to give extremists an excuse to kill any more Jews, not after what happened in Savannah.”

I didn’t retreat from his stare. History repeats itself in different guises. What had once been America was now like ancient Poland.

“You know,” I said, “I’m going to ask you something every Jew asks himself: Why me?”

The ambassador pushed his chair back, and an aide stood up to help him, although I saw no reason why he needed help. The ambassador was a relatively young man. “Because the Jewish government here, if indeed there *is* a government, *asked* for you.”

“Asked for me?”

“Over a month ago, Earth time. The one you call Tahlmeade made the request.”

“He asked for me?” I was sounding like an echo, but I couldn’t help it.

“Yes. He specifically asked for you, by name.”

“How could he have known my name?” I asked.

The ambassador stood up and looked at me until I felt uncomfortable. “That’s exactly what *we’d* like to know, Rabbi.”

Tahlmeade came to the consulate to pick me up. He had come right into the suite where the party was being held in my honor, and was standing in the doorway waiting for me. His prayer shawl was wrapped around himself as if for protection, but it didn’t seem to be Tahlmeade who needed protection. The other aliens in the room seemed somehow dislocated, lost; they moved aimlessly about the room, every one in a sudden state of agitation. I could not help but imagine that they were in some kind of psychic pain, yet—if I didn’t know better—I would have thought them happy. They were all grinning at each other, at me, at the tables and walls and ceiling.

But their grins were frozen.

And I knew that on Ulim, a smile was not a smile.

Tahlmeade and I left quickly. We rode an elevator through the center of the building, which was a tree, or a forest that had grown into one solid mass. We stepped outside, and for a few moments we were in the streets, streets that smelled like thyme and roses, that were as clean as my wife’s (may she rest in peace) table. But the street crowds were agitated, too; people dashed past us and eddied around us, giving us a wide berth.

We were the quiet eye of the storm.

Then Tahlmeade led me below ground, into what seemed to be another city. We waited on a transparent platform that seemed to be situated on the edge of an abyss. Above and below were contrasts of light and dark; but below were huge organic stalactites and stalagmites worked with

glastex and metal: trees as large and high as skyscrapers, their flesh smooth and irised. People lived in these illuminated boles, which were connected by communication grids and transportation tubes. I looked down into the descending levels of habitation. I might have been looking at jewels, at strings of light set upon velvet; I might as well have been looking into the eternity of space.

Just looking down made me dizzy, made me a little *meshuggener*.

Made me, God forbid, want to leap into the darkness. But such things I ignore; even when I was young, I had a fear of heights.

A transpod rushed into the station and hushed to a stop. The pod cracked open and we climbed in. Tahlmeade punched in the coordinates, and it suddenly seemed as if we were falling. Yet there was no definite sense of motion, just the buildings rushing past us as we sped forward through tubes that choked through the city like transparent vines.

“If you would close the windows,” I said in Hebrew, forgetting that phrase was slang for “opaque the walls.” “I’m getting dizzy.” But Tahlmeade seemed to comprehend what I meant immediately, for in an instant, gray walls surrounded us. Graffitied images glowed redly over the gray: some smart youngster must have figured out how to change the light patterns.

My dizziness passed, and I asked, “Why can’t they see you?” Only after I spoke the words did I realize how blunt I had been.

Tahlmeade frowned at me and said, “Perhaps for the same reason that they are able to see *you*.”

I was going to ask him what he meant, yet somehow I knew... I *knew* what he meant.

They could not see Tahlmeade because he was a Jew.

But they *could* see me.

And what did they see?

A fraud, a fool, a counterfeit. A phony.

We hurtled forward at three hundred miles an hour, a slight rhythmic vibration and the digital read-outs on the control console the only indications of movement. I tried to communicate with Tahlmeade, but he was preoccupied. One thing was certain: to him I was not a Tzaddik. He stared at the control console as intently as if the apocalyptic words of the

Torah were flaming across the screen, and tented his fingers. I interrupted his thoughts a few times, but he simply frowned and then turned back to the console. He was, of course, shutting me out. My questions would have to wait... at least, until he awakened.

For he gave himself away when he began to snore.

So our species were not so different, after all.

It took five hours to reach our destination: *Michborah*.

Which meant graveyard.

This was mountain country: cold, rugged, inhospitable, and beautiful. The mountains—white and bald and worn, except for foothill sheathing of bright green scrub—seemed to reach into the hazy expanse of red sky like the towers of a completed Babel, and huge cumulous cloud formations scudded past above, carried on storm-winds. The sky was in constant movement: continents formed and reformed, arms and ships and towers swirled into being, and then dissolved; phantoms and spirits roiled and sailed in pursuit, one after another, chasing themselves into the ominous blackness of a storm, which suddenly erupted, dropping torrents and covering the world in a caftan of fog. The sun was smeary, and low; and night, which came fast on this planet, was but footsteps away.

But night would be like twilight, and the sky like the inside of a dance hall.

I pulled my threadbare coat tightly around me for protection from the rain, which splashed from the wide brim of my hat, and I followed Tahlmeade down the winding road that cut into the side of a mountain; the road was paved with sharp, jagged, and slippery stones. As would be our luck, we were walking along the side of the mountain that offered us no protection from the pounding rain.

Lightning snaked across the sky ahead of us, lighting up cliffs, gorges, and the grotesque rock cones in the valley ahead. I shivered and remembered the blessings: the blessing upon seeing lightning and—I waited a few seconds for the crashing boom of thunder—the blessing upon hearing thunder. A Jew must pronounce a minimum of a hundred blessings every day: a blessing when he gets up, when he eats, prays, goes to bed, puts on clothes, eliminates, sees a rainbow, a scholar, a beautiful or strange-looking person, or hears bad news, or good news. Breathing itself is a prayer, yet breathe as I might, I had been silent for years. Only in public would prayers pass through my mouth as naturally as greetings and

commands. Yet just now I remembered my *Tata*, my father, teaching me the prayer over lightning as we both stood in just such a rain as this one.

“Borouch ahtaw Hashem Eloheinu melech ha’olam . . .”

“Well?” Tahlmeade asked. “Are you going to say the blessings, or not?”

Startled, I glanced to the side, as if I would see my father standing there, my father who had been dead for over thirty years: Tahlmeade had asked the question exactly as my father used to, with the same intonation, the same voice, the same accent. In fact, it was as if my father had just spoken to me from Heaven, where there is no distance.

Of course, I didn’t believe that for a moment, but nevertheless...

“Did you read my thoughts?” I asked him.

“The blessing... ?”

I said it: “Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the universe, who makes the work of Creation.”

Together, we said the blessing for thunder: “Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the Universe, for His strength and His power fill the universe.”

“... v-g’vuraso mahlay olam. ...”

The rain became drizzle as day gave way to twilight.

“Well,” I asked again as we walked, “*Did* you read my thoughts?”

“Yes, but not the way you think.”

“Then how?”

“You’ll see, I assure you, Reb Isaac.” It was kind of Tahlmeade to address me by the title of teacher, but perhaps that was an Ulimate form of sarcasm. Who could know?

“Nevertheless, I *don’t* see.”

“You will,” Tahlmeade insisted, yet I had the very strong feeling that he was speaking by rote, as a good salesman often does when making a sale, although his thoughts might be entirely elsewhere.

I suddenly smelled something acrid, like smoke, and tar, and as I looked around to discover the source, Tahlmeade said, “Do you smell the volcano, Rebbe? It’s old and quiet now, but it was quite an artist in its day, and still wakes up to cough and fart.” The road turned and then abruptly ended in a sheer drop. Ahead was a chasm, and below and beyond were canyons within canyons, ravines, and a huge dry lake. Steps cut into the rock led

down to a high plateau that was filled with conical fairy chimneys, which were over fifty feet high and capped with hard stone: natural sculptures created by millennia of wind, rain, and snow. But the chimneys were dwarfed by stone chimeras that stood hundreds of feet high and were evenly spaced along terraced cliff walls that had been carved and sculpted and hollowed into a city. The chimeras had heads like cats, or tigers, and the bodies of eagles—that's what they looked like to me, anyway. Yet as I looked down at them, I felt a terrible emptiness, as if somehow gravity itself was leaching away the stuff of my soul, as if I were falling, falling into a grave; and I could only think of Auschwitz, of death and the choking, second-by-second eternity of gasping pain that ended in the chest-still darkness of the ovens.

I felt as if I was looking straight into Hell, and I felt soiled and frightened, for it was horrifyingly, terrifyingly beautiful, in the same way that a cat must appear to the bird caught in its claws.

“Thought is like an atmosphere, like clouds,” Tahlmeade said, although I must admit I was still caught by this place, by its dead immensities, and I heard Tahlmeade's voice as if it was my own thoughts, my own internal voice. “Usually you can make out vague shapes, and sometimes you can see with absolute clarity, but not as often as we'd like. So you're making out shapes now, am I correct? And what do you see, Rebbe? What do you see?”

I was fixed on the chimeras and the city carved out of the cliff behind them; the city was like a bas-relief of rust-red arches, columns, cupolas, pavilions, spires, and balustrades, all fluted, the arches and horizontal planes covered with chimeras, smaller versions of those that stood guard below, blindly waiting through the centuries. The storm had blown itself away, leaving the sky pink and still; spirals of clouds seemed to cling to *Me'al'lim*, one of Ulim's two moons, which was now a pale crescent.

“I don't know,” I said, replying to his question.

“Yes, you do, Rebbe. Reveal yourself.”

“I fear I am already revealed.”

Tahlmeade was silent.

“I feel empty in this place, as if something terrible has happened here. It reminds me of death, of what Jews on Earth refer to as the Holocaust.”

“It reminds you of Auschwitz.”

“So you know of our history,” I said.

“Yes, Rebbe. We know each other's histories.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, but Tahlmeade led the way down the steps into the valley, and I followed him.

Into Hell.

The emptiness seemed to take everything from me, especially my questions; it was as if I could feel gravity pulling harder on me with every step. I clung to the side of the stairwell chipped out of the mountainside, afraid that I would become too heavy and fall. Water pooled in the hollows of the steps, and I was careful, for the stone was slippery. I was soaked, and my clothes smelled musty. Once at the bottom, we walked toward the chimeras. The sandy ground was muddy from the rain. As we walked, the sun set, shadows deepened and lengthened, and the shattered remains of Ulim’s third moon appeared as pale fire overhead: a celestial rainbow. Now there were two moons in the sky, one vague, the other as sharp and distinct as Earth’s, and the stationary fireworks above provided enough light to read by.

I saw movement ahead of me in the distance, and at first imagined that smaller versions of the chimeras were alive and prowling about. They glowed like ocean algae and fluoresced with every movement.

“*N’mdr.*”

I turned to Tahlmeade, happy to hear a sound in this desolation... and then I realized that he had not *said* anything. I thought he had said “tigers.”

“This is their mating season,” Tahlmeade said; and this time he *was* speaking. “They come here to mate, and to die. Ancient peoples worshipped them, for they believed the animals had souls, which were what they saw glowing.” Tahlmeade’s skin, which was scored, as if made up of thousands of shale pebbles, glistened, and his wet tallis clung to his shoulders like a mantle. “But don’t worry, Rebbe, voracious as they can be, they can’t see us... or smell us. We are like ghosts, even here—*especially* here.”

I felt suddenly weary, exhausted; every step was a trial. I could only concentrate on getting out of here, of putting the great stylized, stone chimeras behind us, souls or no souls, ghosts or no ghosts.

“Now you have no questions,” Tahlmeade said. Or perhaps it was a question; I could not be sure. After a beat, he said, “You see, Rebbe, you *are* a Tzaddik.”

“What do you mean?”

“Because you can see, and feel, and hear.”

“So can all men.”

“No, not all men... nor all of us.”

Although we had turned away from the chimeras and the glowing tigers and had cut across to the southern edge of the field, which was close to us, I felt the place pulling at me, pulling me back as if into a vortex, pulling me to its center, which I imagined was as deep and lifeless as the pits in Poland. Mass graves...

“It is,” Tahlmeade said.

“What?” I asked, still shocked at the soft explosion of his thoughts touching my mind.

“It is a mass grave, all of it a cemetery. As are the cliffs, the cities in the cliffs: a necropolis. On Earth you have nothing like this, Rebbe. You ask where the Jews are.” He swept his hand in the air, as if he were throwing sand. “They are *here*, all twelve million of them. We walk on bones, on lives, on ashes.”

“How did this happen?” I asked, but for an instant I could see engines of death working in the labyrinths behind the carved facades in the cliffs. I could smell the charnel house. Here was where Ulimate technology had reached its perfection.

“It happened as it happened *on your* world. Those who killed us, if they were alive to talk, would say their gods told them to do it. *Those* Gods, the *N'mdr* that guard the ground.”

“But you are alive,” I said, and there was desperation in my voice. “We are alive.”

“Do you feel alive... here?” Tahlmeade asked, and I felt rooted to the ground, as if their gods had buried me where I stood. For an instant I panicked; but I could indeed still move my arms, my legs.

“Is it because of what happened here that your brethren can't see you?” I asked.

Tahlmeade did not answer my question, but said, “The statues are almost as old as the cliffs. This place is known as the Valley of Creation.” He frowned, as if savoring the irony, and then led the way to a corner of the cliff wall and into an arched entrance flanked by fluted columns, all carved into the stone.

I followed him through pitch-dark catacombs.

I was blind, but I could feel the weight of the dead all around me, as heavy as the crushing darkness itself.

I was breathing it, dissolving in it.

And then I saw light, a dim flicker at the end of a long tunnel. I felt relieved, as if I had escaped the death that permeated the very air of the Valley of Creation; death was like a thought, and thought like a vapor, or perhaps an odor, a perfume that could be breathed, inhaled and exhaled, passing from one person to another. Thus could I feel the heaviness of the martyrs buried in the valley... thus could I hear Tahlmeade even when he didn't speak.

We walked out of the catacomb into the bright night, and my mood suddenly lightened, as if the mass of the mountain we had passed through was acting like a psychic shield.

"Good *Shabbos*," Tahlmeade said. He frowned at me and nodded his head; his mood, too, had changed.

So on Ulim it was Friday, *Ereu Shabbos*: Sabbath eve.

"I apologize that we had to pass through Gehenna to greet the Queen Bride of the Sabbath, but I assure you, she is here."

The Sabbath was a Queen to be made welcome, for she was the foretaste of Heaven, God's great gift to those who obeyed his Torah. But for me, for years, *Shabbos* was not a gift, not a freedom, but a prison of rules and regulations. It was, of course, not enough merely to *obey* the Law. You had to *believe* in it, take joy from it, give yourself up to it.

I was bursting with questions, but *Shabbos* would not allow sadness or bitterness: I would have to wait.

A *Shabbos* calmness came over me, such as I hadn't felt in years.

"Good *Shabbos*," I whispered.

We came to a sheer cliff that looked unscalable. Tahlmeade guided me through a concealed opening in the rock, and we took a lifter deep inside the mountain.

It was cold and bitter atop the mountain plateau, yet this place was verdant: trees were thick, if stunted, and we took a winding road through forest. Past the edge of the forest with its sharp tang of wood and sap, we came to fields covered with flowers that appeared translucent in the night light; and the ring glittered above, a metallic rainbow of color that appeared and reappeared as cloud masses scudded across it. The haze of aurorae was purple and pink, sheets of gauze that seemed to shimmer in the sky like illuminated silk curtains.

“It’s beautiful,” I said. “But how can anything grow in this cold?” I pulled my coat around me.

“The ground is warm, Rebbe. You see, your feet aren’t cold. The mountain is alive, it breathes, and one day, it will explode.” He frowned. I was beginning to understand his humor.

Children were shouting ahead; they stood on the edge of the field and were bundled in shiny black caftans and caps. Behind them was the village, which seemed ethereal in the colored veils of night. The town seemed to be cut out of the mountain itself, but it was an incongruous, yet charming marriage of wood and stone: elongated domes sat upon thick towers; other buildings were tent-shaped, and had galleries with open sides to give shelter; and everything was glimmerous and multi-hued, as if the village was mimicking the heavens.

“Rebbe Tahlmeade!” they shouted, and waved their arms. “Good *Shabbos*.”

Tahlmeade motioned to them, and then stopped walking. He looked up at the sky, at the ring—at Ulim’s night rainbow—and made a prayer. He gazed at me steadily and said, “The rainbow is our covenant, just as it is yours.”

He continued to stare at me, making me uncomfortable. I was beginning to realize that Tahlmeade was not merely a fixer, an intermediary, as the ambassador mistakenly thought, but that he must be the Tzaddik himself.

“Have you nothing to say to that?” he asked.

“The children, if they are children, are waiting for you.”

“Waiting will not hurt them. And, yes, Rebbe, of course they are children.”

“What do you wish me to say, Rebbe.” I had to smile, for I had not called him a rabbi before. Then I caught myself, for I remembered that a smile did not signal pleasure to a Ulimite.

“I wish you to say the truth. That you believe the Covenant has been broken.”

“Can it be otherwise?” I asked. “You have been nearly destroyed. Did God hear your prayers? And do *nothing*?” I recited the words of the Prophets, one of the Thirteen Articles of Faith, “ ‘I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, rewards those who keep His commandments and punishes those who transgress them.’ Is that not the pact between God and the Jewish people? But if Jews are to remain Jews,

they must suspend that; they must suspend all traditional doctrine and remove God from history, for it would be sacrilege even to *contemplate* that God would allow millions of innocent children to die as punishment for the sins of other Jews!” After I said that, I asked, out of respect, “But do you wish to speak of such things on the Sabbath?”

“One can always question, Rebbe, especially on the Sabbath, for that is the time when God is most visible.”

“Let me ask you, then, if you *knew* that the Holocaust would come to the next generation, would you raise your children Jewish? If Jews are responsible to each other, you to me, me to you, and both of us to all of them”—I motioned toward the children, who were waiting impatiently—“then those who died in the Holocaust did *not* die because they failed to keep the Covenant. They died because their grandparents and parents *kept* it. So, Rebbe, I suppose I answered my own question. They did die because of the sins of others... the sin of their parents for remaining faithful to the Covenant!”

“So God has abandoned us?” Tahlmeade said.

“Unless you wish to believe our respective Holocausts were the means by which God tested his people, as he did Job. But I cannot imagine such a cruel conclusion.”

“Then what *do* you imagine, Rebbe?”

“Emptiness,” I said. The cold worked itself over my face until I felt I was wearing a mask.

“Better Job.” Tahlmeade frowned and then made a coughing noise, which I understood as a laugh—but I could not tell if it was good-natured or derisive. He opened his arms and walked toward the children, who ran to meet us. Their small, pebbled faces seemed very gray; perhaps it was the light of the night, or the cold. “Perhaps you’ll feel differently when you jump the road.”

“What?” I asked, surprised. “Jumping the Road” was an old superstition, like the “evil eye.”

“We’ll talk tomorrow, Rebbe, after you’ve—” The children distracted him with questions.

But I learned what he meant that night.

In the middle of the night, as light poured like mercury through the small high windows of my little room in the highest part of Tahlmeade’s

house, I listened to the voices downstairs and dreamed.

I felt myself being hurled into the darkness. Yet who could imagine speed without the reference of light or the pressure of gravity? Perhaps I flew. Perhaps I fell.

To Earth. Into the heart of Philadelphia. Into the Tzaddik's court.

Into the Tzaddik's dream.

"So, have you renewed your faith?" he asked. We sat on stone steps in the ruins of a synagogue; after all, it was my Tzaddik's dream.

"I'm asleep," I said.

"As am I, but certainly you'll remember this when you wake up."

"Remember what?"

"That you jumped the road and spoke with your Tzaddik." He smiled at me, and then looked down at his age-freckled hands, which rested on his lap. He was several years younger than me, yet I always thought of him as much older. (Of course, how much older than me could anyone *be* and still be alive?) His beard was mottled white and gray, which gave it a yellowish cast.

"I told Tahlmeade that you were a Tzaddik," he continued. "I told him that you had the *'kuk,'* that you could 'see.' But I told him you didn't know any of these things." When I didn't reply, he said, "Of course, Tahlmeade helped you jump, just to get you started."

To "jump the road" was to see into other places without being there. It was the miraculous means by which Tzaddiks could help and protect other Jews who were in trouble.

It was pure, unadulterated, medieval, Jewish superstition.

"If it's superstition, then what are you doing here?" the Tzaddik asked. "You came to *me.*"

"I am *not* here," I said.

"Well, as long as you aren't here, do you wish to ask me a question?"

"Ah, so you'll give me proof that I've jumped the road."

"Tahlmeade told you that you would do so. Doesn't that tell you anything?"

"It tells me that I'm suggestible."

"Ask him how Jews came to be on two planets," the Tzaddik said. "And tell Ruchel that I send my felicitations."

Ruchel was Tahlmeade's wife. But *I* knew that, and it was *my* dream.

I awakened with a start, and stared up at the ceiling, which, like the walls, seemed to be constructed out of one solid piece of wood the color of mahogany. I wiped my eyes, for the ceiling seemed to be moving, undulating ever so slightly, but that had to be an effect of the light drifting in.

I heard something, whisperings that seemed to be right here in the room. A voice that could not be denied, for I could not help but think that God was speaking directly to me.

Giving me a history lesson.

The children woke me up with an aromatic glass of sweetened tea. It was barely dawn, and the light made everything in the room seem soft and gauzy. My back ached from sleeping on the mattress on the floor, for I was too large to fit on the bed, sumptuous as it might be. I sat up and thanked these two tiny versions of Tahlmeade, dressed in their Sabbath best. They fell over each other to get out of the room and made loud chirping noises as they ran down the hallway; I assumed they were feigning terror, for I understood their chirps to be laughter. Last night at *Shabbos* dinner, they stared at me throughout the meal, except when Tahlmeade made them sing the *z'miros*, the traditional songs of praise.

As I dressed, I remembered that I had dreamed of my Tzaddik, and that he had told me—no, a voice had whispered to me, whispered the answer to my questions... but I couldn't remember. It frustrated me for a moment, and then I shrugged it off and went downstairs. Dreams were always like that. They make sense only to the sleeper.

By the time I came downstairs, the house was already filled with people, male Ulimites wearing shiny hats and large black-and-white prayer shawls the size of blankets. Like Tahlmeade, they dressed in black caftans that were tied around the waist with cords to separate the lofty parts from the profane. There must have been sixty Ulimites in the living room and more crowded in doorways, all here for the privilege of accompanying Tahlmeade to synagogue. Tahlmeade's home, I should mention, was huge, more an inn than a house for a single family. It was all rather plainly furnished, except for the dining room, where the candelabra and kiddish cups were kept. Tahlmeade's table could comfortably seat twenty-five, and at the head was his golden chair: a throne. The table was filled for every meal, for many of his followers had sacrificed to come to his court; in

return, he gave advice and relief and expounded the word of God—who better to do so, for was he not a direct conduit to the Creator?

We went to the *shul*, to the synagogue, like a conquering army returning home. It was a parade, and everyone was in uniform, as I was. I was dressed no differently than the Ulimites—the black caftan and prayer shawl—and as I entered the *shul* with the crowd, as I was seated near the eastern wall—a place of honor—I remembered that I had jumped the road last night. I remembered my dream, talking to my Tzaddik. There was more to the dream, though, but I could not recall what it might have been.

Tahlmeade sat in a plushly upholstered high-backed chair beside the red-curtained Ark where the Holy Scrolls reposed; he looked out upon his congregation, as if each person was a book that he could read in a trice. The *shul* was packed, every seat accounted for, both upstairs and downstairs (for the women, dressed in their drab finery, sat together in the balcony, separated from the men by tradition, if not choice); and in the rear, around a study table, stood the *prosteh yidden*, those without learning.

“Better an educated bastard than an ignorant rabbi.”

That’s from the Talmud, which has something to say about everything.

A cantor led the morning *Shacharis* service, and I *davened*, which is how Jews pray—we rock back and forth, as if shaking out the prayers from a saltshaker. Like shaking oneself into a trance. Well, that’s how the Ulimites in the *shul* prayed, every one of them; their yarmulkes were pulled over their hairless heads, their pebbly faces were expressionless. I must confess to becoming caught up in the mood, caught up in the familiarity of the surroundings, the chanting, the prayers and blessings, the readings from the Torah that was resplendent upon the *bimah* platform, which was itself crowded with honored “guests of the Holy Scrolls.” It was true: a Jew can go anywhere among Jews and be at home. So did I feel at home on this faraway world, with aliens whose faces were like blue leather with bumps. I felt sleepy, as I always did in *shul* on *Shabbos*, for it was a day to rest. One could not light a fire or switch on a light, for today God was in control. He was the maker and shaker. Not us.

But could I *believe*, as I sat and rested with strangers who looked like nothing I had ever seen?

Let’s just say that I was comfortable. That was enough, and I could lose myself in the moment, in the prayers that were said standing up with feet together, as if at attention. I was called up to the *bimah* to read from the Scrolls. I bowed and shook everyone’s hand when I was finished. I returned

to my seat. It was *pro forma*, familiar. Like sleeping in your own bed. As I prayed, I thought about my dream, and remembered. “Ask him how Jews came to be on two planets,” my Tzaddik had said. And what would Tahlmeade tell me? That Jews have been jumping the road for centuries, for millennia?

That would explain how these Jews came to be.

Or perhaps it would explain how the Jews on *Earth* came to be...

But it was superstition. I could more easily believe that worlds and universes were splitting into 10¹⁰⁰⁺ imperfect copies of themselves: the Isaac ibn Chabib quantum theory of creating Jews.

“He who pays attention to dreams should have his head examined.” That’s from Isaac ibn Chabib, not the Talmud.

Thus the service went on, from the morning into the afternoon, sleeping hours dissolving into an aromatic Jewish stew of routine and memory. As we prayed, I suddenly realized that, indeed, the world around me was dissolving. Praying was a dream, and the congregation dreamed.

They dreamed Tahlmeade’s dream...

And I found myself alone. In the Valley of Creation.

The Jews who had died, their twelve million souls massing like clouds in the sky, whispered to me, telling me their myriad stories. They were safe, beyond pain and chance and care.

But the *other* Jews—those who were alive and singing and chanting and praying with me in the synagogue—had disappeared.

For their dream was death and oblivion. It was protection. It was a river: Lethe, the drowning river of forgetfulness.

A river that covered the world.

So this was a dream... and it wasn’t a dream. If I were religious in the sense that I had set out to be when I entered the rabbinate, I would call it a revelation. I had entered what the sages called *Pardes*, which means orchard, or Paradise. Ah, irony of ironies, that revelation would come to me on the mountain of graves. The Talmud tells the story of the four

rabbis who entered Pardes: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Ben Abuyah, and the great Rabbi Akiba. (Of course, it's not the Talmud that tells the story. But for Jews the Talmud is like a person; when we read the sages in this tractate or that, it is as if the Talmud itself is talking.) They all entered Pardes through their dreams, which took the form of fiery chariots. Akiba said to the other travelers, "Don't be distracted, lest you lose yourselves," but Ben Azzai looked about and lost his soul, Ben Zoma lost his way, and Ben Abuyah became an apostate. Only Rabbi Akiba entered in peace and departed with his life.

I'm certainly no Akiba, or Ben Zoma—perhaps a Ben Abuyah, God forbid—but here I was in the dream that was not a dream. Like them I had, indeed, jumped the road; and this time without Tahlmeade's help. If Tahlmeade was worth his robes, he would be searching for me frantically right now. But I had learned a few more things, and I wouldn't let him in.

Here I sat in the Valley of Creation beside a fairy chimney the color of chalk, facing the stone chimeras and the city of death hollowed out of the cliffs. The chimeras rose above me like Incan cenotaphs, huge and stylized and not yet worn smooth by the turbulent elements. The sky was clear, washed of clouds, and the cliffs stood sharply against it. It was cold, but I felt nothing of the physical senses: wind was an idea, sight a shadow, voice an abstraction.

And as I sat facing death, listening to the instructions of dead martyrs, the collective unconscious of the Ulimate Jewish race, I watched the glowing tigers, the *N'mdr*, padding around me, sniffing the air. They were frustrated, for although they could see me, they couldn't detect my essence.

You see, Tahlmeade hadn't told me that the tigers could not be seen by *most* people. That was their defense mechanism. But through the eons there were those who had learned to see them... who saw them as souls glowing in the light. Who worshipped them and learned to use them as familiars.

Just so had Tahlmeade, who had inherited the second sight and the mantle of the Tzaddik, learned to use them to protect those in his charge: all the Jews. He had learned from his father, who had learned from *his* father.

Thus, Jews had become like the *N'mdr*.

Invisible.

Invulnerable... for how can you kill what you can't see?

A tiger stood before me, gazing at me, as I gazed at him. The creature seemed to draw my essence through its burning eyes, and I had to anchor myself to my own reality, to my past and present, or I would become another Rabbi Ben Azzai, who lost his soul in Pardes.

But as I stared into those numinous eyes, I drew the creature to *me*. I took its habits and its tricks of evolution. And I knew then what I had to do.

I met Tahlmeade in the *bais medrash* after sunset: the conclusion of the Sabbath. The *bais medrash*, which means “House of Study,” was a small room in the Synagogue. It had a high ceiling and long narrow windows, which let in the hazy starglow. I could see comets raining like fire through the narrow slats.

We both sat across from each other at a study table piled with ancient books and interactives that rested inches above the tables like rectangular clouds.

“I looked for you during the afternoon,” Tahlmeade said, touching an interactive, which spoke and shivered into being, becoming its subject: another touch and it would transform the entire room into a mnemonic of the twentieth century mystical text *Sh’ar Hayichud* by Rabbi Dov Ber of Lubavitch. Tahlmeade withdrew his finger and the interactive dissolved into its former state. “It seems that you have become quite efficient at Jumping the Road, Rebbe.”

“You are a good teacher.”

“Ah, so your Tzaddik told you that I gave you an initial push to get you started.”

“He did,” I said.

“Then you believe?”

“Only after you pulled the entire congregation into your dream this afternoon.”

“But *you* were not pulled into our dream,” Tahlmeade said. “Why?”

“Do you think that I have some great strength that I was not sucked into your dream?” I asked. “I could see into your dream, and it frightened me. But then I am not a courageous man. No, Rebbe, I simply dreamed my *own* dream. The Valley of Creation drew me to itself, the souls of your martyrs—of our martyrs—drew me to them. It was the power of the dead. They snatched me into their dream before you could carry me into yours.”

“So you chose death.”

“It wasn’t a matter of choice, Rebbe.” I paused, and then said, “But I know what you have done.”

Tahlmeade looked at me intently and nodded his head slightly as he read my thoughts, my memories. “So you know the *N’mdr*. You have seen the tigers.”

I nodded.

“And you have spoken to the dead.”

“I heard voices,” I said. “Perhaps I heard the tigers, perhaps they’ve absorbed—”

“You are a strange creature, Rebbe,” Tahlmeade said. “You disbelieve your own senses because they conflict with your preconceptions. You spoke to the dead. You spoke to the tigers. Now you know.”

“And you know what I must do.”

“You wish to give us up, to reveal us to the world.”

“You have not only hidden yourselves,” I said. “You have taken the Gentiles’ souls from them; you have taken their religion, their spirit.”

“We simply concealed ourselves,” Tahlmeade said.

“No, you did *more* than that. You stole from them. You took revenge. You’ve—” I paused, searching for words. “It’s very much like murder.”

“No, Rebbe, it was *they* who murdered us. We have blinded them, perhaps, but no more than that.”

“And would you blind them unto the fourth generation?” I asked “Until they became machines? When would you stop? When would you stop being afraid? When there were no more Gentiles left alive... ?” Tahlmeade did not answer, so I continued; after all, I have a reputation for stuffing my feet into my mouth, for speaking when listening would be a *mitzuah*, a judicious act of kindness. “You have robbed them,” I said, quoting *Tosefta Baba Kamma*: “It’s a more heinous crime for a Jew to rob a Gentile than a Jew, for such a crime involves the desecration of the Name. And does not the *Sefer Hasidim* say, ‘If a Jew attempts to kill a Gentile, help the Gentile’? You must stop dreaming their souls away, Tahlmeade. You must return to the world.”

“You, who believe that the Holocaust has rendered all traditional doctrine absurd... *you* are quoting *Tosefta Baba Kamma* and *Sefer Hasidim* to me? You, who cannot even find his *own* faith, you would preach to *me* in the words of the sages?” Tahlmeade smiled at me,

showing small, even teeth: an expression of pure hatred. “The Gentiles will only kill us again,” he said in a soft voice, as if he were teaching a child.

“You are killing *yourselves* by robbing *them*. My hypocrisy or lack of faith will not change that.”

“We will not submit to them,” Tahlmeade said. “We will not allow another Holocaust, another Valley of Creation.”

I pushed myself away from the table and stood up.

“I cannot let you leave, Rebbe.”

“You cannot stop me,” I said; and I allowed myself to dream the beast, the tiger, the *N'mdr*. I would jump the road. I would leave this place in the time it takes a hummingbird to flap its wings. And Tahlmeade would not find me, just as he had not been able to find me when I was in the Valley of Creation. I had learned from the beasts... just as Tahlmeade had, and as his father before him.

I could be as invisible as the Jews of Ulim.

I slipped into a dream, a dream of glowing tigers, and I imagined myself... away. But I was lead. I was all mass, as heavy as any body without its root, without its soul.

And Tahlmeade could see me, as I could see him. We could not disappear from each other's sight. We could not escape each other's grasp. Tahlmeade stared into me like fire, for he was fire. He was the tiger, the beast.

And the *bais medrash* began to burn with a cold light.

As stars fell by outside the windows.

Tahlmeade and I were locked claw to claw, eye to eye, in mortal combat.

Whosoever would let go—let down his guard—would suffer. We two were tigers fighting in a dream—*N'mdr*—each caught in the grip of the other. Our eyes were our weapons, for they are the mirrors of the soul. Tahlmeade and I fought and burned. I tried to pull away, to disappear, to jump the road, to escape. But Tahlmeade was like my own thought, my own volition, myself.

It was a stalemate.

I remembered being in the Valley of Creation and staring at the tiger. As he gazed at me, so had I gazed at *him*; and he tried to draw my essence into his burning eyes. Eyes of fire, of sleep, of dream, of loss, of perdition.

So it was now, except Tahlmeade was no *N'mdr*. He was much, much stronger.

He drew me into his eyes, into his dream...

As I drew him into mine.

And yet, for all this wrestling of souls and minds, we were sitting quietly at the study table in the *bais medrash*: two Jews staring each other down. Two Jews trying to jump the road, trying to escape each other by any means possible.

But we found ourselves jumping the road *together*, as if we had but one will... as if our two dreams had suddenly merged into one, and the one became a chariot, the same chariot that Ezekiel had seen in a vision. In just such a chariot had the four sages—Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Ben Abuyah, and Akiba—entered Paradise.

We were hurled like a meteor into the darkness.

And a voice said, “How dare you disgrace yourselves before this court! Stop fighting! Immediately!”

It sounded like my Tzaddik.

I was not surprised to find that it *was*.

Tahlmeade stood beside me; before us were the Tzaddik and two other men.

I had been here before when I jumped the road and met the Tzaddik. We were in the courtyard of a ruined temple, a synagogue. The air was warm and full of moisture, and the sun was high in the sky. I thought I was back in the Tzaddik's dream, in Philadelphia, but he corrected my thoughts and revealed that we were not in our own time, or place. We were in Judea, in a place called *Benei Berak*, and we were standing before the judges of a *Bais Din*: a Rabbinical Court. The Tzaddik and the two other men who were as old as me—as old as the sand itself—sat upon cushions, which faced east, the direction of prayer. They sat, and we stood, upon cracked and crumbling stone. Although I did not know the other two men, I knew the seating arrangements for a *Bais Din*: the one who sat in the center—who leaned forward—as if to hear every word, even when nothing was being said, was the *Nasi*, the big shot: the president of the Court. The Tzaddik and the other rabbi were his deputies.

They were certainly all Tzaddiks, all saints. They all clucked their tongues and shook their heads as we stood before them.

“You should be ashamed,” the *Nasi* said to us. “You are learned men,

not brawlers.”

“To be one is to be the other,” I said, but the Tzaddiks were not receptive to my wit.

Tahlmeade began to speak, but the *Nasi* interrupted him and said, “All has been decided. You will do as Rebbe Isaac ibn Chabib asks. We sent him to you. You received him. Now let him liberate you.”

“*Avol*—” Tahlmeade began to say, which was “but” in Hebrew.

“There is no argument, Rebbe,” the *Nasi* said to Tahlmeade.

Tahlmeade stood rigid as a bar mitzvah boy saying the blessings in front of an entire congregation. He smiled, but would not go against the decision of a *Bais Din*.

Perhaps the Tzaddiks misunderstood his expression of hatred and frustration and anger, for they smiled back at him.

On second thought, perhaps they did understand.

So even if Jumping the Road wasn't a dream but a form of revelation, we would dream ourselves back to *Ulim* in a fiery chariot. (After all, rabbis are naturally a grandiloquent and flamboyant lot.)

But before I departed, I asked the *Nasi* one question: “Who are you, Rebbe?”

“Elazar ben Azaryah Akiba,” he said, leaning toward me.

Rabbi Akiba... ?

“But don't worry, Isaac,” he said. “You're not in Paradise.”

So now... we shall see what we shall see.

The Ulimate Gentiles will soon be able to remember... to hear the voices of their Gods and their consciences again. What will their voices tell them to do?

Who can know? (Well, perhaps Rabbi Akiba knows, but the rest of us *potzers*—those of us who barely manage to get by—we'll just have to take our chances.) Even if we are to be slaughtered in the next generation, even if we will have to become invisible again, even if we have to fight like animals, we will live *today*. We *will* endure.

And as for myself—

I decided to stay right here and see this thing through.

So do I believe in miracles?

Do I believe in God?

Perhaps it is enough to say that I believe in *Shabbos*. I believe in its bready tastes, its music and spicy smells. When the candles flicker and gutter like life itself, when the kiddish cups glisten and the stars fall into the night like fireworks, I can feel *something* . . . the Queen Bride of the Sabbath... the *Shekhinah*, which is the holy presence, the second soul we are given for but one day a week. And then I, too, can taste *Pardes* . . . Paradise.

And after all, if *I* can be a Tzaddik, then who am I to doubt the Creator?

The End