

THE RESPONSES

A Play

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Characters

The RABBI

The SCRIBE

The COURIER

Scene: The Rabbi's study

NOTE

The closing of the Talmud (c. 600 A.D.) left many questions of doctrine, ritual and law still unsettled. Thus in every subsequent era famous rabbinical authorities have found themselves besieged by requests --sometimes from half a world away--for rulings on borderline cases, new developments, etc. These letters of inquiry, together with the rabbis' answers (responsa; Hebrew tishuvot) to them, constitute an immense library of spiritual case-law: the responsa-literature--international in scope, encyclopedic in range, and continuous from the early Middle Ages to the present day.

(The RABBI's study. The RABBI and his SCRIBE at work.

The SCRIBE is seated on a high stool at a spindly, slant-topped clerk's desk. From a peg on the side of the desk hangs a battered leather mail pouch. At rise, the SCRIBE is writing with a quill pen in a small parchment scroll on the desk out before him.

The RABBI sits in a throne-like armchair. His gaze is fixed far away out over the heads of the audience. He is engaged in performing, over and over again, the following obsessive movement-pattern, hereafter referred to as "The Search":

With fingers and palm held stiffly upright, the RABBI sends his left hand out through a series of endless corner-turning movements in air. That is, the hand (itself always rigidly vertical) will glide along horizontally for a while; then make a sharp, right-angle turn upward or downward into vertical motion; then presently "turn another corner" in air --and find itself moving on the horizontal once more ...etc. This movement-pattern, while always more or less the same physically, seems to be different gestures at different moments: now brushing away cobwebs, now parting curtains, now a kind of "dowsing," now the bestowal of a benediction, now a neurotic tic, etc. The RABBI keeps this "Search" going pretty much continuously throughout the play. But it comes into prominence especially at those moments when he is pondering the answer to a query which the SCRIBE has just read out to him. Then, it is as if the RABBI were allowing his hand to range over some immensely complex system of niches--"32 up, 187 out from the body, 14 to the right," etc.--somewhere within which the reply to this or any possible question is to be found.

With a flourish of his quill, the SCRIBE finishes writing in the scroll out before him, rolls it shut, and drops it into the pouch hanging off the side of his desk.

Enter the COURIER. He is rather dashingy dressed: fringed boots, swirling cape, raffish plumed hat, etc. His costume, however, is absolutely filthy--caked through with dried mud from sole to crown. Moreover, he seems weighed down by the battered leather mail pouch he carries--a twin to the one that hangs off the side of the SCRIBE's desk.

The COURIER empties out onto the desktop the contents of his pouch: scrolls of all sizes and descriptions, some tied with ribbons, some sealed with wax. He then straightens up to enjoy a moment of repose.

of release. The SCRIBE lifts the other pouch off its peg on the side of the desk and holds it out to the COURIER. COURIER and SCRIBE exchange pouches. The SCRIBE hangs up the emptied-out pouch which he has received from the COURIER on the desk peg. The COURIER shoulders the (filled) pouch which the SCRIBE has handed him and staggers off under what, again, appears to be a crushing weight.

The SCRIBE undoes one of the scrolls on his desk and scans it hurriedly.

For each of the many questions read out by the SCRIBE and answered by the RABBI in the course of the play, the business is approximately the same:

1. The SCRIBE opens a scroll and reads aloud the question it contains.
2. The RABBI "searches" the air, in the manner described above, for an answer (responsum) to the question.
3. His answer once found, the RABBI delivers it aloud to the SCRIBE, who simultaneously transcribes the RABBI's words onto the edges, bottom or obverse of the same scroll from which he has read the question.
4. The SCRIBE then rolls this scroll shut, drops it into the pouch, and takes up another scroll.

Even late in the play, when the RABBI's answers have ceased to bear much relation to the questions put to him (so that there is little if anything to set down), the SCRIBE attempts to maintain at least the skeleton of this procedure.)

SCRIBE

(reading from the scroll he has just opened:)

From Rabbi Solomon Ibn Adret, known as RAMBAM, Saragossa, Spain:
 O thou in whom our saints and sages once again speak,
 may I add one more to the swirl of voices that break on thy peace?
 Long I prayed to behold a vision of the prophet Elijah, borne in
 upon his throne of flames. At length the heavens opened
 --but all I saw was an unoccupied chair: from which proceeded
 unintelligible words. If the Holy One was not disposed to grant
 --so!; but why is he pleased thus to mock--at this, my heartfelt
 desire?

RABBI

But, you have had your desire! You besought a prophet to appear to a man of our time. How else is a prophet ever going to appear to a man of our time but as a voice unheeded issuing from a place unfilled?

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi Ezekiel Landau of Prague:

Master, in great perplexity we turn. Rashi teaches that amulets intended to bar the entry of evil spirits from a house must be horizontally affixed to the door-frame. His pupil, Zalman of St. Goar, on the other hand, holds that these talismans are most effective when vertically attached. What is your position in this matter?

RABBI

I am for compounding the wisdom of two great men: Let the amulets go up at a slant.

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi Simeon Duran, known as RASHBA, Algiers, North Africa:

O thou dweller in the Tents of the Law! Is a man required to do penance for a Sabbath-violation committed in a dream?

RABBI

It will suffice if he... dream a penance.

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Aristaeus ben Hyrcan, Chief Rabbi of the East Roman Empire:

Proconsul of the Province of Truth! According to Tractate Zebahim, the Angels understand Biblical Hebrew, Chaldee and some Aramaic--but not a word of Greek. Now suppose the Almighty were minded to dispatch an angelic messenger to one ignorant of every tongue save--

RABBI

Is it too much to suppose that He who can send an angel can also send an increase in linguistic facility? However, there is no need to rest content with my teaching in this matter. The question should be put to the very next angel to present himself--in rapidfire, colloquial Greek.

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SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi Judah Grünwald, Sotmar, Hungary:

Light of the Exile! Talmud specifies that graves are to be laid out in such fashion that at the resurrection, the dead will arise and face Jerusalem. However, starting from our corner of Hungary, it is possible to reach Jerusalem by either of two distinct routes: due east through Constantinople, or southward along the upper rim of--

RABBI

Is it all questions, as far as the eye can see?

(The SCRIBE looks up, startled.)

Sift through! See if you cannot dredge me up one that begins: "Eleanora and the babes are well," or "The autumn finds you, as always, much in my thoughts"....

(The SCRIBE rummages through the scrolls on the desk before him.)

How casual his search! When you have sat as long as I among the Respondents, you will know a keener hunger for the letter-in-a-thousand that has nothing it wants to know.

(The SCRIBE, having completed his search, looks up apologetically.)

All roads lead to Jerusalem. Let your gravediggers be guided by the exigencies of soil and site.

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi David Ibn Abi Zimra, known as RABBATZ, Safed, in the Holy Land:

Master, in great perplexity we turn. It is written: "Approaching a village where the majority of the inhabitants are Jewish, one pronounces a blessing. If, however, the majority are gentiles, one does not pronounce a blessing." The question now arises: what does one do in a case where the population is evenly divided?

RABBI

One then... pronounces the blessing with a divided heart.

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi Mordecai Schwadron of Berzun in Galicia:

Voice of the voices! Mishnah forbids construction of a Succah-booth underneath the roof of a house or even where a tree or clothesline o'erspreadeth, as it is written: "From shadow free, thy tents." Now suppose as a man labors upon his Succah-booth, he happens to notice a shorebird with outstretched wing circling and circling the site where he builds--

RABBI

"With her face toward the gallows." "The flesh of the hind-paw."
"Seven winters at least."

(The SCRIBE looks up, puzzled.)

Some answers. Some truths as some answers. Not, perhaps, appearing to you to bear on the question--yet set them down! Questions will be along on which they bear. No question but does not at the last come straggling in here.... Oh, there is something about this filing by, truth on the heels of truth, that falls so miserably short of--well, of one's ambitions for truth, precisely; one's experience of--

(catches the SCRIBE looking at him)

But the Feast of Succah is still some months distant. Suppose we leave the shorebird to circle in peace yet awhile.

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

There is in our town an elderly rabbi, not quite right in the head, but still fancying himself a much sought-after decisor. Occasionally, as something between a joke and a kindness, the yeshiva lads will send him over a query to rule on--actually some long since settled question--which the old man labors furiously to "resolve"; and in this manner, he has acquired the nickname of "the Great Decisor." Now recently a courier from a far land arrived in town with a question for our most distinguished responsa-writer. Not being familiar with the situation I have just described, the courier asked to be brought before "your great decisor"--and was promptly shown into the presence of the doddering rabbi, to whom he stated his case. Now, by what miracle I know not, the old man came back with a responsum of such clarity and depth

that no better answer can be imagined. The problem we now face is: may a response obtained in this manner be taken as valid; and if so, must we now reinstate the old scholar in his former honors and dignity?

(pause)

RABBI

You read no salutation....

SCRIBE

(turns the scroll over)

It is addressed only to "the Great Decisor."

(The eyes of the RABBI and the SCRIBE meet. The SCRIBE sets the scroll aside, opens another scroll, and reads:)

From Rabbi Emek Halacha of New York:

Tongue of the Law! Your luminous pronouncements are the talk of the whole Jewish world. But the actual writings upon which your fame rests--the great series of responsa on disinterment, on the use of embroidered materials as ritual coverings, on chance-enkindled sparks, and the rest--are known to us only from digests and summaries. May we allow ourselves to hope that you will one day bring out all your responses in a book?

RABBI

It is not "bringing out" that tempts us, but... silence. To be at a loss; to stand--mouth hanging open, thoughts coming back and back, absolutely in the dark what to reply.... But yet a silence with nothing of refusal about it. Not a silence that withholds, but silence that holds....

(Pause. The SCRIBE looks up.)

Publication does not figure among ~~our~~ plans at present. The majority of the scholarly world are wiser than ~~we~~; and as for the small minority who are not--why labor on behalf of a small minority?

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi Yosef Dov of Brisk, Lithuania:

Exemptor, exempt us! It is ordained that in every study-house a one-cubit-square section of wall be left unplastered, in memory of the destruction of the Temple. But here, in this Baltic harbor-town, where a salt and raging wind finds its way through the least crack or cranny--

RABBI

If thou thinkest the salt gusts of memory so easily walled out, take up thy trowel!

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi Leon da Modina of Venice:

Star of the Exile! What answer shall be made to those innovators who seek to replace the traditional synagogue chanting with complex choral arrangements for mixed voices?

RABBI

But are we here in the presence of an innovation? What is the public worship already but just such a coming together of a voice that cries and a voice that cries. Thousands of voices on an empty beach....

(The SCRIBE looks up, puzzled; waits a moment... then opens another scroll and reads:)

SCRIBE

From Rabbi Abraham Gombiner, Utrecht, Holland:

Resolver, resolve us! Tradition holds that the Torah was dictated word for word to Moses by the Holy One Himself. Yet recent scholarly methods reveal the presence of all sorts of splicings, inserts and variants in the Sacred Text. How, in the light of such findings, is it possible to go on maintaining--?

RABBI

If He has dictated all, He has dictated the presence of these disparities, though we may be as little able to account for them as for thousands of voices on an empty beach.

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SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi Yussef Hayyim, Baghdad, Iraq:

Father! How is it that the sages of Talmud do not hesitate to greet each other's lapses in such terms as: "Rab must have been half asleep when he said that" or "those who side with the House of Shammai in this matter destroy the world"--language that would appear better suited to a dockyard or marketplace than--

RABBI

Come in to market? But the haggling is all of Talmud.
Turned out in welcome? But it's the middle of the night!
Led forth by grievance? But to the ocean's edge?

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

O thou Venturer-Where-None: I, Yakhel, student, having mastered both Talmuds with the principal Tosefta and commentaries, now seek permission to study the so-called "external writings" of Buffon, Lyell and Darwin, on the grounds that from Nature, too, the Voice may go forth--

RABBI

The beachgrass moves as within breath, but this is not the wind speaking. The sea gives of its motion, but it is not the sea gives forth. Nothing in nature! Nowhere on the scene!
Who speaks--and to whom?

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi Judah the Prince, with the Sages on Mt. Tabor:

Knower: of the knowers of truth! We are taught that a volume of lesser inspiration may not be set atop one of greater: for example, a minor Prophet upon a book of the Law. Our question is: May a tractate of the Mishnah--not itself Scripture, but containing inspired commentary thereon--repose upon a volume of Apocryphal writings, "Scripture," in a sense, but on the whole felt to be--

RABBI

But none "reposes" on other! All speak across to each:
Amoraim and Tannaim, sages and commentators, querier and queried:
all questions ever asked or to be asked, any answer once given
or possible to give....

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi Moses Schick, Rector of the Berlin Rabbinical Academy:
 Resolver, resolve us! The Fathers liken Heaven to a Talmud School, where God binds on the phylacteries and leads the Redeemed in study. Yet elsewhere we read: "His ways are ways of quietness." Now, if Talmud classes here at the Berlin Rabbinische Hauptschul are any guide, "quietness" is about the last thing--

RABBI

And with that, the beach was still. It was not a falling silent, still less a silencing of. But it was of the nature... of a moment... when suddenly voices draw all one way....

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi Samuel di Medina of Constantinople:
 Teacher! In the western wall of our synagogue we have a stained glass window on which the unpronounceable Holy Name of God is inscribed. Each evening at sunset the window --and with it the Tetragrammaton--are lit up by the last gleams of light coming in off the Bosphorus. The question is whether the sudden standing forth of these irradiated letters may not constitute a forbidden "speaking" of the Holy Name.

RABBI

What is speech and when is silence? Struggling to be still in the only fashion they know, they cry out after stillness, they voice their struggle... each question silenced by an answer, each answer silent at the thought of all that must only now--

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Meyer the Preoccupied, Lublin, Poland:
 Searcher of them that search! When Jacob wrestled with the angel--was that a dream, or did it really happen?

RABBI

But--the distinction is a dream, and in vain one wrestles with it. Always somewhere within, the voice that speaks silence, that voices silence: the turn of silence in the way of voice....

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi Yakob Emden, Hamburg-Altona and suburbs:

Tongue of the Mishnah! Some wealthy merchants of this town wish to sponsor an expedition to go in search of the site of the Garden of Eden. Can you offer any guidance as to a route by which--

RABBI

Through fields of voice, past groves of voice, in the coverts of a tone-- The voices are places--yet not such places as the beach where all this while I have never once ceased to--

SCRIBE

(forgetting himself and not reading for the first time in the play:)

What were you doing on this beach?

(The RABBI looks right through him, goes on performing "The Search." The

The SCRIBE, realizing his gaffe, quickly tears open another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi Melammed Feinschnitt, Coral Gables, Florida:

Star of the Exile! Does the wearing of a self-winding watch on Shabbos violate the prohibition against laboring with one's hands on the day of--?

RABBI

What on a beach, what anywhere? Pondering a question!
Jade from the sky, fallen to earth in a meteor--might this be gathered up and put to all the same uses as earthly jade?
However, they'd... neglected to send along a sample of the meteoritic rock. So--this being the time of year when meteor showers are frequent in our latitudes--I took myself out under the stars to see if I might obtain some jade from on high:

(The SCRIBE has a moment of indecision--but then reaches for another scroll:)

SCRIBE

From Rabbi Isaac Schmelkes, Posen, Germany:

Fount of the Law! What are the rules governing use of body-tissue from trayf animals in organ transplant operations on Jewish--?

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RABBI

Not that the composition of the mineral itself was ever really in question: the characteristic streak-patterns of low-grade jadeite were (they wrote) clearly visible; color, density, mass--all pointed to jade....

SCRIBE

(doggedly going on; opens another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi L'Cha Shelomo of Casablanca:

Decisor, decide us! A woman deeds all she has to the poor, on condition that she may but once more look upon the face of her missing son. Next morning a photograph of the runaway --with gentile bride--arrives in the mail--

RABBI

No, chemically, the meteoritic substance was identical to jade that we know. But was it, so to speak, morally identical?

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

From Rabbi Elton-Langley-Cush, Swansea, Wales:

Tongue of the Fathers! Does the man who hears the shofar sound over the wireless thereby fulfill his obligation of hearkening--?

RABBI

If identical,--let them do as they liked! But if not, then even the pious use they had in mind for it--as replacement for a jade Torah-pointer that had, apparently, been stolen some time earlier by superstitious men reasoning that what had so often pointed to truth could not fail to point them out the way to--fortune, safety, what will you. Or was missing and presumed stolen by such men. Or would have been missing and presumed stolen by such men if the whole problem had not been dreamed up by the Katover Rabbinical Board as a test of my worthiness to join the company of the Respondents.

SCRIBE

(again forgetting himself and asking a question of his own:)

How could you be so sure, just because you hadn't received a real meteor, that you hadn't received a real question?

(Enter the COURIER with a fresh batch of mail. He is wearing the same costume as on his first entrance--only now it is luminously, unnaturally clean; and the COURIER himself seems rested and fit. As before, he dumps out a torrent of scrolls of all descriptions onto the SCRIBE's desk, exchanges his emptied pouch for the newly filled one hanging off the side of the desk, and exits.)

The SCRIBE takes up the nearest-to-hand of this new batch of scrolls, opens, and reads:)

From Rabbi Tishuvas ha Geonim, by the wellside, Babylon:

Master! How could you be so sure, just because you hadn't received a real--?

(The SCRIBE goes pale, drops the scroll, and looks quickly off in the direction the COURIER has exited--but the COURIER is gone. Fearfully, the SCRIBE takes up the scroll again and resumes reading in a shaky voice:)

How could you be so sure, just because you hadn't received a real meteor, that you hadn't received a real question?

(During the following response of the RABBI, the SCRIBE crosses to where the COURIER has exited, and seems to scan the distance offstage for him.)

RABBI

Oh, "how"...! But it was so clearly one's views on the responsa-process itself that were being-- I mean, meteors!, that's--what? The questions raining down on the Respondent-- or maybe: the answers flashing in on one who has long scanned the skies.... And the point at issue: how usable what has "come down" from on high? And the use! A Torah-pointer--an instrument for singling out which of all the words before us shall speak to the moment. It was all almost insultingly...! I mean, even if it had not then been my hour of trial--for it stood then with me as with thee now: one had attained some notice, was not infrequently cited in support. But on the key question of whether you were destined to make one of the voices at sound of which silence falls--

(The SCRIBE has his mouth open to say something --but then has a better idea. He hurries back to his desk, tears open another scroll, and reads:)

SCRIBE

The circle around Meyer of Pressburg burns till it knows:
If our master understood

(a tremor coming into his voice)

"meteorites" to be only a pretext, why, then, is he hurrying forth to acquire one?

RABBI

My first instinct, you may be sure, was not to comb the beach-rubble, but to comb the responsa-literature.

(The SCRIBE starts to reach for a scroll, but at the last moment pulls back his hand, very deliberately guides it to another part of the desk, and chooses a different one. He shakes open this latter scroll--which proves to be an exceptionally long one--and reads:)

SCRIBE

The Congregations of Asia rise in dismay: Surely our teacher does not mean to imply that on

(a catch coming into his voice)

meteorites or any other topic, the literature... pointed no path?

RABBI

The only direct treatment I could find was with reference to a certain scholar who mistook a glow on the horizon for one, and so missed an appearance of the Angel Metatron. In analogies, on the other hand--in all manner of crashing-in-out-of-the-blue situations--the literature aboundeth: the ram suddenly beneath Abraham's knife, the soldiers suddenly upon the kneeling congregation, the sense suddenly there for the puzzling scholar.... And in each case, one... grasped the connection, but was not oneself grasped.

(The SCRIBE opens another scroll which, when unfurled, turns out to be a Möbius strip, takes it on his hands like a skein of wool, brings it up over his head, and reads around the loop from inside:)

SCRIBE

But a single question forming in every heart, running from tongue to tongue: Where do we go when the Sacred Writings themselves hold out no hope?

RABBI

I went to the other extreme: that is, to all that was most distinctively meteoric in the situation. Considerations like: Had the burning stone made an impact, or slipped in unnoticed? Fallen on fertile soil or neutral ground? Gone off in a hundred directions or kept to itself? How many midnights did I lavish upon the arc of descent alone--straight down would mean..., whereas broken or sinuous would imply... --before it finally dawned on me there could be only one real measure of continuity between jade of this world and jade above: Was it still aglow when found? Still aglow, it still made part of the heavens whence it came. But "cooled down" was down: it had joined us where we are; one was no more than seizing on one's own. All right: the meteor in the query had come to hand some twenty minutes after being observed to touch earth. Is a meteor still aglow after twenty minutes? It was the latter weeks of Nisan --one of those seasons when our earth passes through meteor showers; and lifting my eyes to heaven from the page, I saw stars even now leaving their places in the night: one had only to come out under a sky already woven through with departures, and wait for the answer to drop at one's feet. So, making fast my study door, I set forth for the sea at the end of the city.

Now, arrived at the waves--

(From here on the SCRIBE no longer bothers to transcribe the RABBI's answers.)

SCRIBE

(tears open another scroll and reads:)

Master! Wait! Help us across! What comes between the synagogue and the sea?

RABBI

I saw a woman beating on a wall as if, of that, an opening....
 I saw an uncast shadow. I saw a possible interpretation of
 the Tannaitic parable of the four saints in the orchard.
 I see something bearing down at me over a bridge: Would those
be wings? In a skirt? That music, where...? But it is only
 the envoy of the Katover Rabbinical Board, come for his reply.
 I shrank back under an archway of the old quarter to escape
 his gaze, and when I came forward, it was into another
 experience. Not that for one moment I ever ceased to
 round corners and thread lanes; but somehow... it had become
 the motion of an eye over text. I was as if reading my way
 to the sea. Or--no: not reading; that's what was so--
 Getting across that tangle of blank squares with dark passages
 coming off them that we call the "Scribes' Quarter" was like

("The Search" here seems to lose itself in a maze.)

what moving over a page would be like if the eye were permitted
 every sort of a traverse but to read. Not even clear what
 "to read" such chaos would amount to: read it back into
 its elements, maybe; or maybe, read it down....

SCRIBE

(opens another scroll and reads:)

Yes, the twists and turns of these old sections--it is all
 very much as you-- And yet this cannot have been the first time,
 nor yet the thousandth, that you attempted a passage....

RABBI

Ah, it is one thing to know

("The Search" here becoming discontinuous, jumpy)

the way here, the way there. But to know your way over and
on off.... For it is a "page" at every moment scribbling itself
out before: the passages one penetrates fall across each other
 like shadows--to start off down one is already to find oneself
 thick in the midst of the next; any line one pursues strikes
 through other lines, themselves only so much striking through
 of strikings through; the site blackens with utterance--it is
 as if the way of every pen in a hand lay through this place--
 until, is there still such a thing in the world as a clear part,
 an open space, sea, my destination, keeping always before,
 like a memory that will neither be found nor cease from
 its assurances....

And then I heard the Roar.

(Something seems to catch the SCRIBE's ear; he strains in the direction of the "sound.")

From here till noted, the SCRIBE gives each scroll he opens only the barest summarizing glance before coming out with a question.)

Do I want to say "Roar," does that even really begin...?
Voices. Raised in.... Forming to....a....

SCRIBE

(his straining after the right words seeming also a straining to hear)

Outcry?

RABBI

No.

SCRIBE

Tumult?

RABBI

No....

SCRIBE

Susurrations?

RABBI

Please....

SCRIBE

If you could point us in a direction, something...!

RABBI

It was like the sound of word spreading through a railway concourse that a girl lies on the tracks. It was like the indignation of thousands at a sudden reversal. It was like the moaning of a hill-tribe as the eclipse deepens....

(From here till noted, the SCRIBE no longer bothers to open scrolls, but, like a "mentalist" getting the contents of an envelope by telepathy, simply holds each unopened scroll to his temple and, after a moment, comes out with a question.)

SCRIBE

Listen, did I just--? Wait a moment, that couldn't have been--?

RABBI

Whatever you think of the sound, sounds there; this, the closer in I drew, the more distinctly I--

SCRIBE

Drew in closer to--what's that up ahead? Is it not always the sea toward which--? At what point did this...din emerge as--?

RABBI

There was never a moment when I looked instead to the Roar. Indeed, if in my desperation to be on through, I sought direction anywhere, it was overhead, in that mesh of starfall which the meteor shower had never ceased to lay across the night: there, in that glowing weave of intersections, I could almost feel I had the way through the garble before me on the night. But even as I struggled to read my turns off the sky --and, of course, in vain; for what could that bright lineation ever have to say of the inky paths I was in?--I could not well keep from noticing that every time my way took a turn for the thunder, my way was clarified; some more of the tangle dropped away; corners straightened as turned; alleys that had given up all thought of the outcome shot forth and held, and--
And it was the sea! This is salt I breathe, sand I tread --even in this utter darkness there can be no--

SCRIBE

(as if suddenly blinded)

Hey! How did it get so--?

(gropes blindly with one hand for the scroll he holds in the other)

We were going along with you under a sky that starfall worked till it glowed. What's become of the light?

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RABBI

Look to the roaring! Search the sound: there you shall find radiance reimagining itself for voices, brightness that thinks out loud....

SCRIBE

Wait! I'm getting a glimmer. The light was from falling stars. If there's no light now, that can only mean the stars are down. Which makes the Roar...cries of wonder from the crowd now forming round--the meteor you seek!

RABBI

There is much to be extracted from the Roar--but not, I think, wonder. And there is no meteor anywhere in sight.

SCRIBE

Then--what are all these voices?

RABBI

--I asked myself. And answered:

SCRIBE

(again, his straining after the right word seeming also a straining to hear)

Perhaps a religious gathering of some kind....

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SCRIBE

Wait a minute.... A desolate beach, a moonless night....
It's an invasion! The first landing-parties just now
stumbling ashore....

RABBI

And I with only my question to oppose! But the strand is
as empty of ships as of men.

SCRIBE

As of--!

RABBI

No one! Here is a seascape made free of human presence
--over which thousands of voices cross and greet.
Who speaks--and to whom?

SCRIBE

Perhaps the sea, in accents of its own--

RABBI

I had a moment of thinking so. But the sea lies stunned and bare.

SCRIBE

Perhaps the wind--

RABBI

Nothing in nature! Nowhere on the scene! The Roar was not
arising "from," it simply arose. And as this grew clearer to me,
the sound itself now begins to clarify and part, and individual
voices to come forward: "Resolver, resolve us"... "According to
Tractate Horyahoth"... "Master, in great perplexity we turn"....
Wait a minute, that sounded for all the world like--
But it was only when I heard a voice in Syriac pronounce the
solution to the so-called Unanswerable Paradox of the
"floating tower," that what I am in the presence of suddenly
broke upon me: It was the total responsa-process--the texts
of all times and every land--present in a moment:
Amoraim and Tannaim, queriers and queried, Toseftists and
commentators--from the well-sides of Babylon to the rabbinical courts

of Henry St.--this one time sounding as the voices they had drawn back from being, so that as texts they might go forth. It was the literature returned upon me: all voices speaking all questions ever asked or to be asked, and every answer ever once given or possible to give.

(The SCRIBE here takes up a single scroll which, in asking the next three questions, he unconsciously brandishes in gestures of probing, pinpointing, brushing aside, etc.)

SCRIBE

But--all these voices--many long since, others not yet--how come they all, here on a day, together to this one--?

RABBI

Nothing "came" to anything. I stood... where it is always roaring. I might not have my meteorite, but I had my solution. For if I was destined to a place among the Respondents, then-- I was there, too: my voice made one of the thunder; somewhere amid the speaking my answer spoke. It was all a question... of finding one's voice.

SCRIBE

Lost, again lost.... How, ever, arrive at a voice amid all that--?

RABBI

Or even: suppose the Roar contains all voices only for the ear that has consented to experience it as a Roar, that holds off from every attempt to disentangle a voice from a voice...? But then I remembered the solution to the "floating tower" --and even with the thought, the ingenious Syriac words were again in my ears. To arrive at a voice, it seemed, one had only to keep on in the certainty it was already speaking. To find my voice was to find my way to the place in the din where my words forever sounded: to go out upon the Roar.

SCRIBE

Master, where are we? Even the first step.... It is all so....

RABBI

I shut my eyes to the sea, and immediately I am upon that other sea--which, however, does not long remain "sea" or any one thing, but changes as ventured upon: now a surface with something working the contours from below (and it comes up here, and it comes up here); now a pattern of highlights coming forward on metal as the metal turns in the light--oh, there are moments when only its being sound keeps me from knowing exactly--! This can only be brushed velvet I have been scuffing up against ever since the portico narrowed; of basalt, surely, these outcrops by which I lift myself along from steep to steep.... But then will come a stretch to which, it seems, nothing visible could correspond; and I am lost not so much in space as for want of it. The places are voices--come at by ways that are also voices: past fields of voice, through groves of voice, in the coverts of a tone: send forth the ear! For all seeking is hearkening in a landscape all voice. And to choose path is to choose to hearken to this tongue sooner than those: to the hard sayings of Moishe Sofer on modernity, say, rather than the speculations of cabalist Isaac Luria on the Return of the Sparks. And if occasionally I find myself slipping over an endless spill of dietary prescriptions, there is also the moment of finding oneself with a voice that seems only now to be creating the possibility of the questions it answers --or else coming forth with questions that take it so far, one cannot really bring oneself to wish them dispatched in reply. And then all at once I knew myself near--in fact, "just round the corner" (though what the "corners" of a situation might be whose each new turn is toward, if anything, some new sense of "turning"...). No covert had disclosed a meteor; of jade the groves are barren; to a pointer nothing points. Yet something is by, trembling forward upon itself, and--

And the Roar... entered me. I... took it all in, where to this day it moves, it sounds, it roars me from within.

SCRIBE

Ah, Master, you are not going to bring us out at:

(opens his hand and lets the scroll he has been flourishing drop into the pouch)

all in the mind...?

RABBI

Not in the mind, but of the mind: the stir of the process, the mind's own roar.

b. 22

(From now until he runs out of scrolls (just ~~after~~ the second question on page 23), the SCRIBE, with each question he asks, sweeps two or three more unread scrolls directly off the desktop into the pouch. The gesture has the character of a compulsive "clearing the decks.")

SCRIBE

Father, we sit among fragments. You first identify this ... buzz you caught with the commingled voices of centuries. Now you give it out to be some wholly internal process of--

RABBI

But it is both!--and is not fully understood as either till grasped as both. I now experienced the range of the responsa-literature as the range of my own responsiveness; the Possible here roared forth its claim to be my possibilites--
And with that, the beach---

(brings "The Search" to a dead halt in air)

SCRIBE

Listen--it's stopped!

RABBI

As if to hear the Roar for what it is, checks it; or maybe: sets me back before--yes! For out of what could that Roar have gathered but as murmurings against--silence, precisely: that deafening silence of texts on points--to which, all this while, it had never ceased to aspire: all that clamor only the sound of voices struggling to be still in the one way they know: they cry out after stillness, they voice their struggle --till at length the speaking draws all one way, each question silenced by its answer, every answer silent at the thought of all that must only now--

SCRIBE

Take us into this silence. Do more. Make us hear this silence.

RABBI

It was not a mere falling silent, still less a silencing of, but it was of the nature of a silence that goes back before: silence more absolute than that of Scripture on its own interpolations; more inward than a dream repented in a dream; more piercing than the terms of contempt which the sages of Talmud hurl on each other's lapses; more profound than the frustration of him who has no tongue but the Grecian in which to hail the Greekless radiance at the door--but yet, too: silence more marked than the Succah-booth which a shorebird circles and circles; more promising than the hush that falls when a rabbi, long unregarded, is suddenly heard speaking truth once more. Nothing was asked of me. I asked nothing. I was... without question.

SCRIBE

But what of the question that brought us where we now-- the meteorite, the Torah-pointer?

RABBI

Is it possible you've not--? The silence... was in response.

SCRIBE

So, then: jade from the sky--one keeps it, one doesn't keep it?

RABBI

One keeps silent.

(The SCRIBE's desk is now swept bare of scrolls.)

SCRIBE

All this way and no answer!

RABBI

The silence "answered." It was, I now saw, nothing but this very silence that I must maintain before the Katover Rabbinical Board; by a silence convey what had been by silence conveyed to me: that what falls in from on high one can only fall silent before, advancing never to a yea or nay, but advancing in questions.

p. 24

And with that, the din broke forth anew,

(He resumes "The Search." The SCRIBE presses his hands to his ears.)

louder than before--and from that hour has never for a moment ceased to roar in my ears, like the sea inside one of those shells lying about the beach where, now, opening my eyes, I find I have never ceased to stand.

SCRIBE

(his hands pressed to his ears)

How do you bear it?

RABBI

It is my thought--how should I not bear it? And then, what is all my skill and fame as a decisor but this access continuing, this returned Roar, over which, set in motion by questions,

("The Search" here becoming open and billowy)

I go, I range, I send forth the ear!

SCRIBE

(his hands still over his ears)

Can't you make it stop? Make it stop!

RABBI

For that, there would have to come a question that sent me back....

SCRIBE

"Back...?"

RABBI

To the place in the Roar where the silence is: the grove of silence in the fields of voice. Back to the voice... that speaks silence, that voices silence--

SCRIBE

(removing his hands from his ears)

What question...?

(Enter the COURIER. This time he is wearing a white robe. Stray details from his earlier costumes--a fringed boot here, a purple hat-feather there--reappear as design-motifs on the pure white field of the robe, as if dropping down through white space.... He is bathed in a blue-green light emanating from his pouch.

As on his earlier entrances, the COURIER starts to empty out his pouch onto the SCRIBE's desk --but the SCRIBE blocks the gesture.)

SCRIBE

What's going on here? Who are you?

(The SCRIBE reaches down into the COURIER's pouch and draws forth a small spherical meteorite, pockmarked like the moon and giving off a blue-green glow.)

I thought all this about the meteor was settled long--
Wait a minute:

(holds out meteorite accusingly toward the RABBI)

didn't you say there never was any--? that it was all--?

(turns back to COURIER)

So now how do you come to be in possession of--

(drops the meteorite back in COURIER's pouch)

well, or for that matter, of any of what you bring up out of that--?
Letters from all over the Diaspora and every period since Antiquity; questions that make the next turn in a conversation not yet dreamt of at the moment of their--?

(protectively snatching the filled pouch off the desk-peg and clutching it to him:)

You steal those bags of inquiries, don't you? But then--
from whom? And how did he--? Or maybe... you're just out there in the next room, tossing them off...? How can you be a party to such misuse of the responsa-process?

(looks at the pouch in his hands)

Or maybe... this is the responsa-process? What are we doing with a responsa-process, anyway? Other religious and legal systems manage without--why not we? Say for a moment we'd none:

how would the issues now thrashed out in responsa-exchanges then be resolved? Even as it is, must there not be all sorts of questions that cannot even be framed within the responsa-format--or even, that pose a threat to it?

(An offstage recorded voice is heard, deafening for an instant, then at once fading to near-inaudibility. Though at first too loud and then too low for many words to be made out, the voice on the tape is recognizably that of the SCRIBE, taking from the top ["What's going on here?", page 25] the barrage of questions which the SCRIBE himself is now well embarked on.

The SCRIBE gives no indication of having heard the offstage voice. The RABBI, however, cocks his ear, instinctive as an animal. As the recorded voice continues, he sends his hand out after it in "The Search": that is, he lets his rigid, vertically held palm "dowse" for the source of the sound, by means of a series of sharp, corner-turning movements in air.)

What is an example of such a question? What is a question? What is to ask a question--and when has one been? Are demands questions? Is a dissatisfaction or uncertainty a question already? Where do rhetorical questions fit into the emerging schema? What is the source of pathos that inheres in questions the casuallest, as, "How came you by the piece of tin on your nightstand?" or, "Who was that at the door?"? "The unfailing mark of the interrogative is to make someone else responsible for certainty of mine"--what do you say? Are you prepared to maintain a distinction between asking for help, asking for an explanation, and asking for it? What, as you see it, is the common ground between responding to treatment, responding to a challenge, and responding to questions?

(A second tape of the SCRIBE's voice starting the question-barrage from the top comes on under the first (which continues). As before, the volume-level is at first deafening, then almost at once subsides to near-inaudibility.

The RABBI's head flicks instinctively in the direction of this new sound. His exploratory, "dowsing" hand sharply turns another corner in air and takes out after the new voice.)

Say you have gone and put my motives in question--where have you put them? If I would call into question a person, value or thing, who do I call? In the case of the "burning questions" of the day --where's the fire? "The question has been raised"--I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask: above what, then? Is to raise a question the same thing as to ask one? Or may I raise the question I do not ask--even, perhaps raise it by not asking it?

What kind of situation is a questioning-situation really trying to be? Suppose one had to do everything whatever in questions--what could one do? Can a question create? Exhaust? Undo? Affirm?

(Simultaneously, six or eight more recorded versions of the SCRIBE's voice come on under the first two (which continue), each picking up the question-barrage at a different point.

The RABBI leaves off motioning with his hand, rises, and begins to move over the stage. He makes his way into the sound, pursuing now with his whole body the course of sudden right-angle turns which formerly his hand alone had described in the air.)

Are questions knowledge? Is there a question that, answered in full, might eliminate the necessity for all questioning more? (Was that it?) Or is it nearer the truth that man, who poses so many questions, can never be wholly at his ease disposing of them; that all the question-and-answer in the world is never going to bring us one inch nearer the point of exchange?

(Hundreds, thousands, of offstage recorded voices now come on: the roar of an enormous crowd. Occasionally, some phrase or fragment from an earlier moment in the SCRIBE's question-barrage detaches itself and is heard above the Roar for an instant.

The RABBI continues to make his way over the stage, "going out upon the Roar." His movements suggest that the character of the space through which he advances is constantly changing: now a bog, now a maze of girders, now a stone stairway, now a windy ledge, etc.)

What is the question toward which I am all this while tending; to which all my asking seems so much asking-the-way; the question which it appears I am incapable of falling silent until I have brought out?

(rounding afresh on the COURIER)

And you--have you not perhaps all this while been building to a question of your own--all this trafficking in the queries of others being perhaps no more than a pretext for slipping one in? What is your question--and why don't you ask it? Or perhaps... you have asked it? Was that yours--the one about prophetic voices and empty chairs? Or leaving a section of the study-house wall unplastered? Or substituting polyphonic singing for solo chant?

But what do you care about prophets or plaster or choral music?

(scoops a handful of scrolls out of the pouch)

Which of them all is athrob with just your own particular brand of--?

(lets the scrolls drop back into the pouch)

Or is it... your intrusions themselves that pose the question?

(turning to the RABBI)

Where does he come from? Whose courier? Was it of him that you...? But then why a real meteor this time? Well, and bring it to that, why a "this time"? You're not going to tell me that the prospect of a "this time" leaves you completely un- --; that you're perfectly content to sit by and watch the entire question be re- --? Master, in great perplexity I turn: doesn't anything about all this raise a question in your mind? Resolver, resolve me: how is it I'm the one asking all the questions? Star of the Exile: what can you possibly be hoping to gain by this silence of yours?

(The RABBI emerges from a final, constricting stretch--a pipeline or crawlspace--and is directly before the COURIER.)

Why don't you ask something?

(The SCRIBE flings down the pouch he is carrying in the direction of the RABBI. Scrolls roll all over the stage-floor, eddying about the feet of RABBI and COURIER.)

Ask something!

(The RABBI straightens up--and is face-to-face with the COURIER. His eyes and those of the COURIER meet. It is the first time the RABBI has acknowledged the COURIER's presence.)

RABBI

(looking the COURIER steadily in the eyes)

I ask... nothing.

SCRIBE

29

b.29

(in exasperation)

Voice of the voices! Do you know, you are, without question--

RABBI

(continuing to look straight in the
COURIER's eyes:)

I am... without question.

(The COURIER returns the RABBI's steady gaze. The glow from the meteorite in the COURIER's pouch isolates RABBI and COURIER in blue-green light.

The roar of voices goes to a dissonant musical chord for a moment; then to a unison tone for an even briefer moment; then to silence.

One beat of silence; then blackout.

In the darkness before the lights come up: the slosh of waves hitting a beach, the cry of a shorebird....

Lights quickly up.)

END