

Ahuva Batya Scharff

THE PATH TO
GOD'S PROMISE

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To Gen Z.

You have the power to change the rules.

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קום לך אל־ינינוה העיר הגדולה וקרא עליה כי־עלתה רעתם לפני

Go at once to Ninevah, that great city, and proclaim
judgement upon it, for their wickedness has come before

Me.

Jonah 1:2

Chapter One

עורי עורי דבורה עורי עורי דברי־שיר

Awake! Awake, Devorah! Awake, awake and sing!

Judges 5:12

Be careful what you wish for. As a child, I wished only to be near God. If I'd understood the consequences of wishing, of prayer, I probably would have wished for something else. I suppose I should start at the beginning.

My earliest memory is of God speaking to me. I was four. I climbed the thick-branched tree outside our old farmhouse in California's San Joaquin Valley to lie on one of the limbs. It was early summer. The light breeze made the hair on my arms stand up. I smiled at the way the sun came speckled through the canopy, dappling my skin. While I was delighting in the experience of sun and wind, I heard God's whispered voice. God said, "You belong to Me."

My mother, more superstitious than religious, named me for greatness: Elinor Shefa Simentov. It is the perfect name for a Jewish mystic. Simentov, our family name, means 'good signs' in Hebrew—as in signs and omens. Shefa, my middle name, is usually translated as 'abundance,' but it can also mean 'divine emanation' or 'flow.' In Arabic, it means 'recovery' or 'healing.' Elinor translates from Hebrew as

‘God is my light.’ You could say just from my name that I was fated for a single purpose. But prophecy is a difficult thing for a contemporary Jew. It is not a gift that is accepted in the 21st century, not in my community. And yet I can no longer deny who and what I am.

At first, my visions were simple and comforting. Throughout my childhood, I had a dream about a wall of flowers: blue, deep red, and purple. There was no action, no conversation, just a single picture of a wall covered in a cascade of dark green leaves, vines, and flowers. It cheered me. The vision recurred every year or two until I was nineteen. While on a semester abroad in India, I walked into our classroom at a facility in Pune, turned to my left, and saw through the sliding glass doors that familiar flowered wall. I was shocked. I stared at it for hours on end during our six weeks of classes at the site. Of course, after my stint in Pune, I never dreamed of that wall again. But at the time, seeing the wall encouraged me. It made me feel I was in the right place. More than *déjà vu*, this was an actual vision that I had recorded in the journals I kept in my youth. It was confirmation to me of my visionary capacity.

Other than a few single images like the one I had of the wall, the visions I have rarely have anything to do with me. I do not have the ability to see lottery numbers. When I try to apply my gift for personal reward, the outcomes are poor. When I know which horse is going to win the Kentucky Derby, I write the winner’s name on a piece of paper—but the instant I put a wager on the animal, I lose. I am accurate when I have nothing to gain, when the visions are a touchstone, reassurance, or warning. I am not a fortune teller. I am a vessel

through which visions come. I do not get to choose the channel on the TV.

I look at myself in the full-length mirror in my bedroom, contemplating who I am. The mirror is five feet tall in a dark frame and looks more expensive than it was. The room is shadowy. The only light on is on the bedside table far behind me. Though it is dark, I see myself clearly. I am a typical-looking, if heavy, Jewish woman. Three hundred pounds with all the weight in the middle—pendulous breasts and a protruding belly, no butt. I am an apple on thick legs. My stature is a little taller than the average woman, five feet seven, but I seem much taller, not only because of my weight; it's my presence. I can dominate a room without trying. I'm in a constant battle to 'pull it back'—a phrase I say to myself so often that it has almost become my mantra. My near-black hair is a tumble of curls that, instead of getting longer, gets tighter. The hair grows. I can tell because I have to dye the grey roots, but the length does not change. It stays just below my chin year after year. Everywhere I travel, especially in the Middle East, I am immediately recognized as a Jew. I look like my people.

In front of the mirror, I sigh. My hands caress the belly that hangs heavy under my cheap t-shirt. I think about losing weight. It might be possible if only I was willing to eat fewer latkes. And chimichangas. I sigh again. The effort to be thinner is daunting.

I lean closer to the mirror to examine my face. There are no lines on my skin or bags under my eyes. I do not look my forty-five years. I attribute my youthful appearance to not having had children. My peers who had children early, before twenty-five, have aged well, but my friends who had children

later, especially those who waited until their late thirties or forties, for the most part, have had the life-force sucked out of them. They look shriveled and old. Those who also have to work a full-time job in addition to raising their children have withered on the vine. I gaze at my reflection more closely. The fat helps, too. My facial features are plump and in place. Fat faces crease less than thin ones. Maybe latkes and chimichangas aren't so bad after all.

“Can I really be what God wants?” I ask myself silently as I leave my place in front of the mirror to flop down on my bed. Forty-five. Fat. Barren. Not in particularly good health. No boyfriend, husband, or prospects. A spinster. An also-ran who smiles at a bris and sobs later a block down the road, alone in a parked car, because I will never, ever be that beaming mother. Oh sure, I'm flourishing in my career, but that's the norm in my community. Successful is an adjective applied to almost every Jew I know who works. We're all a successful doctor, lawyer, professor, artist, scientist, teacher, inventor, nonprofit executive, or entrepreneur. In my community, accolades and awards are as ordinary as taxes. What I am though, is a failure in the way that most counts. I did not fulfil what some argue is the primary mitzvah. I was unable to have a child to carry on our traditions.

I think about God and the task set before me. As I lie with my eyes closed, I recall how two months earlier God approached me about doing something important and constructive with the visions I have.

I was in Pacific Palisades, a beach suburb on the Westside of Los Angeles. It's an affluent neighborhood with multimillion-dollar homes perched on the cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Pali, as it is sometimes called locally, is

nestled between Santa Monica and Malibu. Having lived in Los Angeles for many years and gotten sober there, I often return to the area to celebrate important recovery anniversaries with my friends in Alcoholics Anonymous. This year, I reached twenty years clean and flew to Los Angeles to get my twenty-year medallion at a big Monday night meeting in Pali.

It wasn't my regular meeting, the home group I attended faithfully every week for more than ten years. That meeting, on a Friday, I could not make. Not only did I have a writing deadline that prevented me from traveling on Friday, but my sponsor, who has been my sponsor for all of my twenty years sober, now lives in the Palisades. With her three kids, the Pali meeting was more convenient for her than Brentwood, where we usually met when I lived in town.

After the speaker—a Hollywood A-lister more than forty years clean—had finished with his call to recovery, which led to a standing ovation, it was time for the 'birthdays.' I was allowed to speak for three minutes about being twenty years clean. My sponsor presented my cake. I thanked her and the A-list actor. Twenty years earlier, he had found a chair for me to sit on in a different crowded room. I was only a few days sober then and too sick to get to the meeting early enough to get a seat. I stood, desperately ill, sweating, and mildly suicidal, beside a garbage can. I was fairly certain that I was going to vomit. He saw me there, ordered someone to get me a chair, and helped hold me up while we waited for the seat to arrive. Then this very famous man looked me in the eye and told me that I was the most important person in the room. He asked me, as if he could read my mind, not to kill myself that day. He didn't remember his kindness to me, but I did and

thanked him. He kissed me in front of everyone as I walked back to my seat.

Two friends, who had come to town for the event, took me out to celebrate at dinner after that meeting. We went to a busy Italian restaurant on the Promenade in Santa Monica. Izzy and Amanda were not alcoholics, but were extremely supportive of my recovery. Neither could believe that a famous movie star had kissed me in front of several hundred people. I laughed. It's the kind of thing that happens all the time in meetings, but I didn't tell them that. I let them enjoy the 'specialness' of the occasion. And shouldn't we do just that? I thought to myself, 'Being sober for twenty years is special.'

"I can't believe it," Izzy said in her thick Australian accent as the waitress refilled my water glass. I could barely hear her over the bustle and loud conversation. "I remember when you hid beer in the cattle grate at that summer camp we worked at in Montana," she said. I smiled, recalling her look of utter revulsion when I pulled two cold beers from between the grate's metal bars and offered her one. "I knew then," Izzy continued to Amanda, her wife, "that we had a real problem. Anyone who hides beer like that—"

I interrupted. "I also used to keep whiskey in a shampoo bottle," I said, making sure that the salad on my fork had just the right chicken to vegetables ratio. "That's why I never let you borrow my stuff and I never, ever took a shower unless I was alone." I put the salad into my mouth as my friends looked at me, dumbfounded.

"I had no idea," Izzy said.

"I am a real alcoholic," I said. "And by some miracle, I have not had a drink in twenty years and three days."

My companions held up their water glasses. I did, too. “To twenty years of recovery from hopeless alcoholism and a kiss from you-know-who,” Amanda said. We clinked our glasses and laughed.

That night I was alone in my room, a garage converted into a guest house that my cousin generously allows me to borrow when I visit. I like staying there. It is quiet with a bed so comfortable that it’s hard to get going in the morning. If I crack the window over the door slightly, the scent of the garden, of the carefully tended roses, wafts in on the breeze that comes inland from the sea.

I sat on the bed in meditation and felt the familiar draw of God calling me. My breathing slowed in a practiced way as I opened my spirit to a consciousness beyond our everyday shared reality. As my breathing reduced to only a few breaths per minute, I loosed my soul from the bindings that keep it anchored in my body, allowing myself to be brought to the place where I most often meet God.

Our spot, as I affectionately think of it, is a fallen tree on a meadow’s edge. The meadow is expansive and seems to be in a state of perpetual spring or early summer. There are wildflowers in the verdant, ankle-high grass. The log is enormous. It’s almost too tall to sit on. The tree trunk is smooth and comfortable, the rough bark long ago stripped away by time and weather. Behind it is a forest, a mix of deciduous trees and evergreens. The scent of the place is intoxicating. It smells intensely of pine with hints of wildflowers.

When I sat down on the log, God was already waiting for me. “I want to talk with you about a project that I would like you to complete,” God said.

In my visions, God has no form. God presents to me as a kind of heat shimmer that is roughly the size of a man. God has no shape or substance, only an intensity of being and ethereal beauty that are instantly recognizable to me as God. I realize that this appearance is an illusion. It is an access point. God creates it to give me something to hold onto, to communicate with because God's true manner and nature are incomprehensible. I hear a male voice that speaks English because that is what makes it easiest for us to be in relationship, not because God is male or human or English-speaking. God's true nature cannot be described in such terms. What I see is not who or what God is. It is a small piece of divinity that is knowable, but only 'true' to the extent that a pine needle is descriptive of the tree from which it falls.

I smile. Although I am in awe of God's power and presence, God is also my closest confidant and friend. This has been the case the whole of my life. As a young child, I would burst into tears whenever the *V'ahavta* was chanted: "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." I cried because I did love God. I loved Him so much that the mere mention of that love brought tears, and I would throw myself on the synagogue's floor, proclaiming, "I love you, God! I love you!"

My childish fits embarrassed my parents, who would pull me from the floor and hurry out of the sanctuary with me still wailing about my love for God. The other congregants at the shul would smile and shake their heads. It wasn't often that children were removed from services for proclaiming their love for God, though admittedly I was quite loud about it.

While I may no longer have thrown myself on the floor at the shul, my love for God had not changed. I had been

receiving visions all my life, and this was how I expressed what that felt like. At least, that's what I thought before God asked for my devotion to be expressed in action. I was no less sure of my love but far less certain that I could convey my commitment to God in the ways He wanted.

“I want you to be My emissary, My prophet. I would like you to speak truth to power and get a message out to as many people as you possibly can. This world needs to hear My voice in a vibrant and meaningful way,” God said. God's presence comforted me. It felt as if He smiled as He spoke. For the most part, with me, God is affable and pleasant. Although I have never asked God about it, I am aware that God chooses this presentation for me, allows me to hear Him in a way that will soothe and calm me. God's is a strong voice, a voice that makes me feel safe.

“No.”

God laughed, a deep and throaty sound. I imagined that if God ever took human form for me, He'd look like Dan Haggerty, the actor who played Grizzly Adams on TV in the 1970s, rugged, handsome, and a little bit wild. “That was a quick response.”

“Since when does doing anything You ask lead to good for the one You ask it of?” Prophecy is painful for all prophets. I thought about the prophets in the Tanakh. Which of them ever had a good life by doing what God asked of them? Moses, the most revered of our prophets and leaders, had not gotten to enter the Promised Land and had had to put up with decades of people refusing to do what he requested. His experience was the norm for visionaries. People rarely listen to God's prophets, except Jonah, who was miserable anyway. It's a lifetime of headache for the seer. Didn't

Jeremiah, the unluckiest of the prophets, suffer directly not just from his visions, but from the first-hand experience of the Babylonians sacking Jerusalem and sending Israel into exile?

In tractate *Bava Batra* of the Talmud, the rabbis concluded that after the fall of the Second Temple, prophecy is given only to children and madmen. By this time, I was no longer young and at least in my own opinion, not at all mad. I wanted no part of whatever God wanted from me. I didn't desire to be a seer. If I had to be a visionary or prophet, we could stop at visions of flowered walls.

God said nothing for some time, waiting for me to explain myself. When I did not, He asked, "What is your concern?"

I did not immediately respond. My head flooded with dozens of reasons why I did not even want to hear God's request, let alone fulfil it. Finally, I settled on a specific reason, "I do not want You to show me events that I am powerless to change."

A year earlier, I sat in tears in the rabbi's office. A week before that we had both been in Jerusalem, he at an educational seminar, me visiting a friend. Rockets were launched from Gaza, dozens of them. Even in Jerusalem, we were not safe. The missile-alert sirens went off three times, shrilly screaming at us that we had seconds to flee for safety. During the third alarm, I watched the Iron Dome defense system hit one of the incoming rockets. I was leaving an art gallery near the King David Hotel, where I had purchased a painting by Kadishman. They had given me a 'get it out of the country' price that I could not pass up. The art dealer and I

stood in this doorway, gaping as the Iron Dome took out the Palestinian projectile. We watched the debris fall into the garden at the YMCA.

While this violence was going on in Israel, I had a terrible recurring dream. Each morning for a week, in the moments before I awoke, I saw a plane being hit by a missile. I called the rabbi at the apartment he had sublet in Jerusalem. "A plane is going to be hit by a missile, but I don't know where or when. Soon. Soon," I babbled.

"You don't know that," he said, trying to calm me, a note of irritation in his voice. I must have interrupted him while he studied. He viewed his study time as sacred.

I wasn't to be put off. This was a desperate situation in which hundreds of people would be killed. "You're not hearing me!" I shouted. "It could be one of our planes. We leave here in the next two days."

"You'll be fine," he said. "We'll both be fine." He paused. "And if you don't know which plane will be hit, what can you do?"

He was right. What could I do? Call the FAA or the U. S. Embassy and say that I had a dream that a plane would be hit by a missile somewhere in the world at some point in the next few days? There are special places for people who bother the authorities with information like that. They're called asylums, and I didn't care to be admitted to one. Still, the dreams continued.

Three days later, a passenger plane was shot down over the Ukraine. It was filled with research scientists on their way to Australia for a conference on HIV/AIDS. A cure for AIDS was probably percolating in the mind of one of those medical researchers, and in an instant, it was gone.

I thought about that experience of helplessness as I sat in the rabbi's office, where I had been ushered following evening minyan. At the end of Ma'ariv, during the *Kaddish Yasom*, I had run from the room to throw up in a little garbage can in the seminar room across the hall. I did not want to be an ineffective prophet, a seer who was unable to help those around her. But who listens to visionaries? Prophecy is such an inefficient system of communication that seers and mystics always have incomplete information. Visions are open to interpretation. In the present, a person who doesn't have visions might think, 'The vision means no one should shoot down planes,' and they are right. That is one meaning. But each soldier with his head full of politics and orders doesn't believe that he is the one God is speaking to. If he believes in God, God, in his view, is on his side.

What was clear to me was that my visions made me ill. They made me feel culpable and complicit, even though I was never given enough information to take action. As I cried over the deaths of those people on the airplane and complained through tears to the rabbi that it sickened me to receive visions about incidents I could not keep from coming to pass, he had one piece of advice. "If that's how you feel, then tell God."

God asked, "Why are you refusing the gift of prophecy?"

I snorted. "Prophecy is no gift." I paused, sitting silently for several minutes. "I will not be involved in futile attempts to intervene in a future I am powerless over."

"How do you know that you cannot influence others?" God asked. He seemed profoundly perplexed. "You are the messenger. You have no idea how another will act." I was irritated. "You show me bits and pieces of events that have no timeline. I want to know what the deadline is for

action and who is supposed to take that action. I want specifics. That's what's needed for people to believe. Specifics and context are the best ways to coax engagement."

"What if I told you that I cannot give a clearer picture because it takes away free will?"

"Then I'd say that you should show the visions directly to the people who are doing the bad things and not show me the awful aftermath of their choices."

God seemed to think about this for a moment. Then He said, "The visions received by prophets and mystics are meant to sway people to right action. Isn't the message of the prophets, 'If you do these things, this will be the terrible result; turn from your current path?' A prophet isn't a psychic who tells what will happen. I don't give the warning in order to prove that poor choices have horrible consequences, but to show that doing what I suggest is the best path for the community. The most effective prophets are the ones who are wrong in predicting the future because the people take a new course—like Jonah, to whom the people did listen. The message about the plane that you had while you were in Israel,"—I turned my head toward God, frowning—"was not that you could have changed that specific event. This was a message meant for you to believe in yourself and the authenticity of your prophetic gift."

I nodded slowly. That was not an answer I liked. "You didn't tell me who that vision was for," I said, "because that person's mind and course were already set. I wasn't ever meant to do anything."

God said nothing, allowing me to digest my comment. Sometimes prophets see visions of situations they cannot change, and that is simply part of the burden they bear. God

was asking me to believe not only in Him, but in myself. God wanted my complete trust. It was a tough ask.

“I want you to write a book,” God continued. His tone shifted to one of great seriousness. We were no longer talking about me and my insecurities. God had a request and was making it. “Prophecy is not so much about predicting single events, but making sea change. You are a writer, so a book will be your instrument. It is time to share a warning about the way humankind lives. Your relationship with the planet and one another is untenable. It cannot continue. If humankind carries on living as it does, with an ever-expanding need to consume, you all will all perish. This is something you, Elinor, can affect.”

I thought about all the scientific evidence piling up regarding climate change. I had seen droughts ravage East Africa. As a student, I carried food to those in need on the border between Kenya and South Sudan. I had witnessed powerful hurricanes hit the USA’s East and South. The intensity of wildfires had grown beyond comprehension. And the suffering of the animals. I couldn’t help but think of the images of polar bears starving to death. It was unthinkable that those giant, majestic animals faced extinction. “But that’s Your will, isn’t it? Isn’t climate change a punishment for our inappropriate actions?” I thought about the dominant culture around me, full of people who believe that God punishes us for making choices He doesn’t like. Some people call these actions ‘sin.’ I wasn’t sure what I believed.

“It most certainly is not, not in the way you are suggesting,” God said, responding sharply to my accusation. “Whatever happens to humankind is your own doing. It has nothing to do with Me.”

I looked in God's direction. "It has everything to do with You, at least that's how visions are interpreted. Prophecy is always written with the same message. The people have misbehaved and, as a result, You will punish us. Humans use the old prophets and prophecies as proof of God's will when cataclysm occurs. 'The hurricane hit New Orleans because the residents are sinners,' is an argument that some Christian fundamentalists have made. They call it Your punishment for sin. Instead of trying to prevent wars and pestilence, groups of many sorts foment these events as proof of Your disapproval of certain acts, suggesting from the works of the prophets that destruction is Your will."

"You think I want you to write a book about how I will punish humankind for their greed and gluttony?" God asked.

"What else would a prophet write about?" I asked. "Whether our demise is of our own making or not, isn't destruction the only outcome possible?" God did not immediately respond, so I continued. "I'm not just saying no to the book, God, I'm saying no to being Your spokesperson. I don't want to be Your envoy. I want my relationship with You to be private, not part of a public spectacle."

God remained silent. I watched the breeze move the grass in front of me. The weather was warm and comfortable. I waited.

God began to speak. I kept my eyes on the grass, though I listened carefully. "Humans on Earth are killing themselves and most life on the planet. Climate change is a real threat to humankind's survival. Humankind was not created to ravage the planet in an unending quest for riches, impoverishing the majority while a small number revel in incomprehensible wealth."

God paused. I looked in His direction and nodded. I was listening. He continued, "I am going to show you visions of the past and future. I want you to share them as you experience them, and write them down as a chronicler of events, like Dante's writing in the *Inferno*. You are going to take a trip with Me, and you are going to tell the world." "Not hardly," I said, half under my breath.

God ignored my remark. "You do not have any responsibility for the outcome. People will listen to the warning or they will not, and yours will be one of many voices calling out. There are scientists, artists, and seers from all parts of the globe, all religions, who will use their talents, in different ways, to share this message. You will be part of a symphony, not a soloist."

I thought about what God was saying. "I'm not interested. I will be made a laughingstock in my community. Jews no longer accept prophets or prophesy. No modern Jew is a seer or a visionary. I'll be ridiculed and ostracized."

"Let's see if that's true," God said. In an instant, we were gone.

God took me into my past. When I was 25, I flew to Oregon to visit a cousin for the High Holy Days. She attended a small Conservative congregation in the Willamette Valley. The synagogue was not much bigger than a large two-story house. The sanctuary sat perhaps sixty people and was, as would be expected, packed for Yom Kippur. Even at the start of the day, the sanctuary's regular seats were full and a few of

the folding chairs in the aisles were occupied. By the Yizkor service, it would be standing room only.

Outside the large, carved wooden doors leading to the sanctuary was a pile of shoes. A few in the community were poor and could not afford to purchase a pair of white canvas shoes only to be worn on Yom Kippur. The wealthier congregants abandoned their leather shoes before they entered the sanctuary, since wearing leather is prohibited on Yom Kippur. Those who wore tennis shoes that were not white took their shoes off, too. Even those who could afford new shoes went barefoot in solidarity with those with lesser means. The entire congregation was barefoot. I found it a delightful custom and smiled as I watched all the people sit at their seats in bare feet or wearing white socks. The lack of shoes made the whole event feel less formal, almost cozy. I had never been to a Yom Kippur service that was so homey. I was relaxed and felt welcome.

It was into this scene that God brought me. God and I stood behind the rabbi on the bimah, so I could see my younger self and everyone else in the room.

The congregation was about to sing *Avinu Malkeinu*, my favorite part of the liturgy during the High Holy Days. The younger version of me sang with the rest of the congregation, swaying with her eyes closed, her tallit covering her head. In Hebrew, she sang, “Our Father, Our King, be gracious. Answer our prayers, though we have little to commend us. Be kind and gentle with us, and save our people.” She and the congregation sang the verse over and over until the depth of its meaning filled their hearts. The singing was so earnest and heartfelt that the entire room brightened. With a prophet’s vision, I could see an angelic host gleaming through the

windows on the sanctuary's north side. The angels, beams of light, raised their voices. Their chorus amplified the beauty of the human song.

The younger me felt the angels and trembled as she forgot herself and opened to the divine presence. It rushed through her. Her body went from imperceptible trembling to violent shaking. She sang, her body convulsing, though she remained standing. Although her eyes were closed, I could see the strain under her lids as her eyes rolled back in her head. She shuddered forcefully as her knees finally gave, and she fell to the ground. Fortunately, she was in the first row, fell forward into the aisle in front of the bimah, and was not injured.

The young me lay on the floor, twitching, her eyes closed. It was difficult to separate myself from what I saw. I wanted to rush forward and help her, protect her, but I knew that I was unable to do anything. I was disembodied consciousness visiting another time and place. I also knew that she was in a state of rapture. But from the outside, she looked in distress, a small bit of drool coming from her mouth.

The scene also disgusted me. I looked at my younger self on the floor. She was helpless and vulnerable. I wanted her to take control of herself, to get up, and stop being a spectacle. I loved her, but she caused me to feel ashamed.

Two physicians, a nephrologist and an obstetrician, hurried to her side. "She's having a seizure," one of them said, moving back others who had come forward to assist.

I looked at God. "You see? They don't understand. If I'd been in a Pentecostal church, they would have recognized the experience for what it was, being 'slain in the spirit.' They would have asked me about my visions. These people are going to call an ambulance."

“You might have a point,” God said.

“I most certainly do!”

“But you also have not been fair to these people. When you come to in a moment, when you are brought back by their actions to have your attention in this place, you will not tell them what happened. You will not share your experience with them. You will allow them to believe that you had a seizure. You will let the doctors in the hospital discharge you, perplexed that they can find no reason for what happened. You will be dishonest and, in keeping secrets, you do not give them the opportunity to grow.”

I looked at the ground. “I still think they would have laughed at me.”

“Maybe, and I am keeping that in mind, but perhaps not. Those who attend synagogue regularly or study Torah know the prophets. Every week in the synagogue, Jews read from the prophets. Others study them at home. While Jews as a whole may not believe that there are contemporary prophets, they do appreciate prophecy and the role of visionary experience in molding humankind’s choices and experience.”

I had not considered this and made no response. God continued, “Keep in mind too that I am not asking you to speak words of prophesy after a public visionary experience. I am not asking you to become some sort of missionary or preacher. I am asking you to write a story, a story you will tell as fiction, in which you can share truth. Is that not what good fiction is—truth dressed up in the trappings of a compelling story? Let people choose what they want to believe.”

He appealed to the literature-lover part of me. “Sometimes,” I said, “fictional tales can unquestionably feel as real and be as meaningful as lived existence. Dystopian

works certainly are that, in their warnings about what could be. I'm reminded of the expression that what's true does not have to be real."

"Yes! Now you are beginning to understand," God said.

I remained unconvinced. "Maybe, but You allow Your prophets to look like fools. Look at all the flopping on the ground, trembling, and drooling. I want to be part of my community. There's no place in our contemporary tradition for seers and prophets. They're regarded either as charlatans or,"—I paused, looking for the right word—"schmendricks." God laughed. "Perhaps." He paused. "I know what you must see next, Elinor."

Before we left the room, it was not to my younger self that I was drawn. I had no feelings for her now except embarrassment that I refused to allow into my heart. Instead, I turned to the windows on the north side of the building. There was no longer an amplification of light. When the congregation stopped singing to care for that younger version of me, the angels departed. The angelic choir has no desire to be near us when we stop singing God's praises.

We next arrived in the main sanctuary of a synagogue in Northern California. It was a beautiful chamber. The interior walls were built with large stone blocks that look like Jerusalem stone. The room gave the feeling of being at the Kotel in Jerusalem. The shul was new, modern, and massive. The space was inspired.

I like contemporary synagogue construction that has a point of view. These fancy shuls were built in areas of the

country where the Jews were wealthy and felt compelled to donate to the construction of beautiful places of worship, even if they did not regularly attend the synagogue or take an active part in synagogue life. This synagogue, built with Silicon Valley money, was meant to show the Jewish connection to Israel. Any Jew, Zionist or not, would feel at home.

I took my place with God on the balcony. We had a good view of the people below. This balcony was not built as a mechitza—the congregation was egalitarian—but as an overflow area for the High Holy Days. Below, a group of about a hundred people stood as the Torah was taken from the ark and paraded through the gathering.

“Your gifts are from Me, Elinor. Your visions are part of My work.”

“You and I know that, but to the world, I’d be no more credible than a TV evangelist if I did what you asked.”

I considered my conversations with God. They all take place in my head. Even though I feel like we are speaking, I know that the conversations are in another plane of existence, one in which telepathy is used. Some might ask how I know the difference between my own thoughts and God’s. It’s a good question.

There is a marked distinction. God’s voice is concerned with others. It is kind and uplifting. The inner conversations I have with myself would deflate and discourage even the most optimistic individual. Anything that is self-centered or destructive I know comes from me. Words, especially those in defense of others, that build, warn, and heal—those are from God.

“That is why I am asking that you write for Me. You are known in the world as a writer. You can be framed simply as

an artist if you use your gifts to write a book. Some will recognize the message in your work and be stirred to action. Those without that clarity may dismiss the work as dull or overly religious. Either way, you will be who and what you have always been—a storyteller.”

A storyteller. I thought about what God said. I wasn't actually a writer in the world's eyes. My work, the work that paid the bills, was as a nonprofit executive. I created programs for women and girls, helping to build their skills and self-esteem and preparing them to be leaders in their communities. I had written a poetry book that received some awards and a book on nonprofit management that was an Amazon #1 bestseller, but I had not made the transition to writing as a career.

Writing was the work I had dreamed of in college. What I didn't know was how to make a living at it. When I lived in Los Angeles, I had taken up nonprofit work because it was fulfilling and highly regarded in my family. What I saw around me were a lot of out-of-work screenwriters who rarely seemed to finish or sell the scripts they perpetually worked on.

No, it wasn't reasonable to be a writer, my family reminded me. Few people could be like Margaret Atwood, Barbara Kingsolver, Stephen King, or J.K. Rowling, and make a good income from writing. Writing, for someone like me, they proposed, was a hobby. If, in my spare time after all my obligations to work and family were complete, I could write that breakthrough hit, they would be pleasantly surprised. But writing could not take priority when there were cellphone bills and property taxes to be paid. If I was to be anything, it was responsible.

Yet here God was, in a sense, commanding me to follow my dreams and giving me a story to share. It was an important story, too, if I could get out of my own way to tell it.

I came back to what was in front of me as the Torah service started. The first reader commenced chanting from *B'reishit*. I felt the world around me begin to transform. The room twinkled, losing its solidness. The air conditioning's blast was replaced by a hot desert wind, and the façade of Jerusalem stone became the real thing. I listened more intently to the words from Torah, all the while feeling the heat, breathing in the distinct smell of sand and place that one only finds in the Middle East and North Africa. I realized that, without effort, I could understand the Hebrew, not a word here or there as usual, but all of it. I was not translating. I heard and understood the parsha in my soul. Sitting on the bench in my present, beside God in that synagogue, I was transported to Israel, to another place and time, while simultaneously being present in that shul.

I looked over in God's direction. He was no longer near, leaving me to the experience.

Reader after reader chanted from the Torah. The reading was parsha *Vayeira*, the section in which Sarah, at an advanced age, well beyond menopause, was told that she would have a child. She laughed at the news. She is challenged in the text, which asks her if anything is too wondrous for God to accomplish. Her response is to lie, denying that she laughed. She feared God. Then in the future, as it was foretold to her, she did have a son, Isaac, whom she would later learn was taken by her husband to be a sacrifice. She would die, perhaps of a broken heart, before Isaac's safe return.

Feeling Israel's hot climate while hearing Sarah's story, I was overcome with emotion. *Vayeira* is perhaps my least favorite parsha because, in a certain way, it tells my own story. It is unbearably painful to be unable to bear a child. Cosmic power, creation, God, the divine—in humans, that creative force comes through the female. We are born of women. God's manifestation in the world comes through the female of our species. I had never desired children, never wanted to raise a child, or have the experience of being a mother, but I felt completely devalued by my community because I could not have a child even if I wanted to.

But there was something I was clear about. God asked me to write a book, not have a baby. God asked me to give what I cared about most—stories—and what I was capable of producing. Was that not my version of giving birth?

I still felt dispirited. Alone on the balcony, where no one could see or hear me, I wept. When the Torah service concluded, I felt God's presence return beside me.

"There is a thin line between love and hate, God, and there are times that I hate You," I said. God said nothing, so I continued, "I drank for more than a decade, drank myself almost to death because I hated You as much as I loved You." God still said nothing. "How could you allow me to be useless, to be barren?"

"You're not useless," God said softly. "You write better than most, and your love for Me is matchless. I don't need you to have a baby. Many can have babies. But I do ask for something only you can create."

I stood up, turning on God. "Why did you bring me here?" I shouted. "You give me a beautiful gift of being able to feel Israel, to taste and see and smell our ancestral home, and then

you ruin it by sharing the story of a barren woman who gets the one thing she wished for in life, a son, only to die of anguish when she learns that he has been taken as a sacrifice for You. What am I supposed to learn from that?" I was raging, screaming, and pounding my fists in the air. "I will never, ever have a child. No man in our community wants a woman like me, wants a woman who cannot give him a son. No one admires a woman who does not carry on our traditions by having children. I have no one to say *Kaddish* for me when I die. I am the last in my family line. My brother and my cousins are all intermarried. None have Jewish children." I paused, leaning toward God, hot tears running down my face. "You know how I became this dead end and You did nothing to stop it."

When I had finished my tirade, I fell to my knees. In the background, far away, I could hear the rabbi giving his d'var.

I felt what might have been a hand on my back, as if God had made Himself solid enough to give me comfort. "I brought you here to know that you are from a tremendous lineage and that while you will have no children of your own, that has no importance to Me. Your legacy is not to live through children, but from the words you share and the writings you use to teach. Your books are your legacy."

"Elinor, we are at the end of the generations, not because I will it, but because humankind collectively does not act for the benefit of those to come. I do not want you encumbered by children, making yourself upset over their dismal futures, dying because of what would become of them, as Sarah did. Because you are barren, because you are set apart from the world through your gifts, because of your particular talent to write, because of who you are in all your imperfection—all

these traits and experiences are why you are, in My eyes, great and powerful. I favor you, Elinor. I love you. I love you as powerfully as you love Me.”

I was too sad and tired to fight. I stood up. I didn't believe Him. How could He reciprocate my love? If He had, wouldn't He have been more generous? Wouldn't He have made my life easier? But I had no more energy to continue the challenge. “I have other concerns.”

“We shall address them soon,” God said, and let me return home.
