

## A River Could Be A Tree

### Foreword by Shulem Deen

As a child, little held my imagination as did the mystery of the Sambatyon River.

Like every Hasidic child in our insular enclave in Brooklyn, I was raised on the stories of the Bible and Talmud. From an early age, I learned of the Israelites who'd been driven away by Sennacherib the king of Assyria, who conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and scattered our brethren tribes to places unknown. That left only us, the Judeans – the tribes of Judah and Benjamin – as the known remnants of the ancient people of Israel. The others became known as the ten lost tribes.

Lost – except we knew one thing: they lived beyond the Sambatyon river, which we could not cross. For one thing, according to Talmudic tradition, the Sambatyon prevents passage by tossing boulders in the air six days a week, resting only on the Sabbath, when crossing a river is forbidden. More importantly, the Sambatyon's very location remains a mystery. And so the ten lost tribes remain apart from us until the Messiah will come and lead us to them, at which time the Sambatyon will rest forever.

I remember, at around age ten, studying a world atlas and wondering how it was that we could not find the Sambatyon. The remotest islands in the Pacific, the forbidding peaks of the Himalayas, the enormous Amazon river snaking its way through thousands of miles of dense jungle, all were fully charted. Only the Sambatyon they could not find?

How could the lost tribes have gotten so lost?

Turns out, they were just living in Indiana.

Or so believed Angela Himsel, who, in her memoir *A River Could be a Tree*, tells us about her upbringing in Jasper, Indiana, within the Worldwide Church of God, an apocalyptic, doomsday Christian sect led by Herbert Armstrong, a former Ku Klux Klan member who preached a version of British-Israelism, a doctrine that claims the ten lost tribes ended up in

Ireland and Great Britain. Armstrong himself claimed to be descended from those lost tribes, and so his followers, too, at least spiritually, were identified with them.

Angela Himsel, too, was raised on stories. To a young Angela, seventh of eleven children, the biblical figures of Adam, Noah, and Joseph were as real as her shotgun-toting Catholic grandfather and her Lutheran German-speaking grandmother. “I was a literal-minded child,” she writes. “I imagined God hanging out in the neighborhood, popping up on the street unexpectedly. I wished God would do that still, show up at the courthouse square in Jasper or maybe just appear in the backyard while we were playing Red Rover.”

It is not only the literal-mindedness of the stories that would come to guide Himsel’s life, but also a yearning for that divine encounter, that of bumping into God in the backyard. Specifically, what she yearned for was an encounter with Jesus and the Holy Spirit, who would be her path to salvation, to the afterlife, to the rapturing of the faithful to the city of Petra, Jordan – Armstrong’s very specific apocalyptic fantasy – where Jesus was to greet them in a great fatherly embrace.

Which brings us indeed to Jesus – embodying Christian charity and goodness and love and eternal salvation to some, apostasy and persecution and pogroms to others. To Angela, though, Jesus was no abstract notion, no theological symbol cloaked in a metaphor of God made flesh, but the central figure in a cosmic drama so real that every smallest deed affected her role within it.

“Life.... requires life-supporting illusions,” wrote Joseph Campbell, the great scholar of mythology. “Where these have been dispelled, there is nothing secure to hold on to.” As the myth of the Sambatyon and the lost tribes was to me, so the myth of Petra, the place of safety to which the faithful would be raptured, where Jesus himself awaited, was to Himsel.

The “life-supporting illusions” of our respective faiths were the stories that gave our everyday life meaning.

What happens, however, when the myths are dispelled?

When the myths are dispelled, the stories lose their power, and as often as not, the edifices built upon them first shake then crumble. Not without a showdown, though, body wrestling with soul, our infant selves yearning for stories with literal meaning and our evolved minds forced to a painful reckoning with truth. “Truth” – life’s certainties previously handed to us in tales of literal, material reality – we now learn, is barely within human grasp, and where does that leave us and our wondrous illusions?

For Himsel, that reckoning arrived slowly, as it did for me, as it does to all of us with imaginations so fierce, so protective of our need for story, that our souls scream in protest for our illusions to remain intact. Illusions, though, have ways of dissolving, and when they do, they leave us fallen, stricken, to contend with a sterile reality.

A chance encounter with a photo-covered brochure of the land of Israel was the gateway to Himsel’s own forced reckoning. A student at the University of Indiana, she discovered an opportunity to study abroad – specifically, at the Hebrew University in Israel. This was not, to her, Israel the modern state, but Israel, ancient homeland of the Israelites and all the other biblical figures. “I imagined John the Baptist fasting in the desert and David fighting Goliath.... Israel was the place that God had chosen for Abraham's descendants, the place where Jesus had walked and preached.” The tantalizing fantasy of myth actualized. “Modern Israel was just a conduit to the distant past, which was where I hoped I would find the Holy Spirit.”

It was in Israel that Himsel discovered that her mythology required a serious reorientation. These were “not Jews who rode on camels, but people like me who complained it was too hot or too rainy, who told jokes and swore and had their own opinions.” First in her biblical studies classes at

The Hebrew University, and then on an archaeological dig, Himself found the historical basis of her cherished bible stories in doubt, and so, too, their truth.

“God created Man in His Image,” one of her professors joked, “and man, being a gentleman, returned the favor.”

Therein lies a truth not only about God but all our beliefs and values, as well as our stories. All of it made by man in his own image.

Civilizations are built on stories, written in different times in different places repurposed by different populations for different reasons, until they come to tell us something far beyond their literal meanings. We still do that today, as we visit movie theaters or get lost in novels, seeking symbols in stories. They speak to our desires, fears, joys, and so they guide us toward meaning. Our stories, Joseph Campbell wrote, speak “not of outside events but of themes of the imagination.”

This more evolved understanding of the function of stories, however, is new to us. It is a relative blip in time from when we considered the historic and the mythic to be one and the same. Christopher Columbus, a sophisticate for his time, who believed in a spherical rather than a flat earth, was also convinced that the Orinoco river, the mouth of which he encountered as he passed between the island of Trinidad and the northern coast of South America, was in fact, the biblical Gihon river, flowing directly from the Garden of Eden through the Mountain of Purgatory of Dante Alighieri fame.

To Columbus, Eden was no mere symbolic truth, but material reality. In “History, Prophecy, and the Stars,” Laura Ackerman Smoller writes that Columbus, in addition to an enlightened adventurer (as well as an opportunistic plunderer), was “also stirred by a curious blend of astrological prognostications and apocalyptic fervor.” From his journals and letters, we learn that Columbus believed the world had less than 200

years to go before the end times, thus seeing it his mission to convert the natives of the New World to Christianity before Jesus's return.

A century or so later, in the city of Prague, Johannes Kepler worked out the laws of planetary motion, grounded in mathematics and the empirical evidence of his day, even as he maintained a side gig as an astrologer. As James A. Connor writes in a biography of Kepler: in medieval times, astrology, even to men of science, contained "the story of God's relationship with the human race."

In Prague, around that same time, was also a Jew, the great mystic Rabbi Judah Loew, known as the Maharal, advisor to Emperor Rudolf II on the teachings of the Kabbalah. Also: creator of the famed Golem of Prague, a man made of clay, created by Loew using a magical Kabbalistic formula and who was to protect the Jews of Prague from anti-Semitic persecution.

Like the Sambatyon, the golem's existence was, in my own childhood, as true and as real as any historical fact. The Sambatyon was as real as New York's East River, and the golem as real as Prague itself, which was, to me, as real as Brooklyn – why would it not be? The Maharal and the magical powers of the Kabbalah required no more corroboration than the existence of the moon and the stars beyond. That the golem's creation defied nature was a marvel, but so was the airplane and the rocketship and the submarine. So was the electronic calculator on my teacher's desk. I understood none of it, and so all of it was real.

I remember when I first encountered the notion that the golem's existence might have been fictitious. I was well into adulthood, around age 24, a father of three, when a friend of mine who had left our insular Hasidic enclave to study at institutions with more modern orientations, where Hasidic lore was ridiculed and all mysticism was suspect, returned with a storehouse of ideas that cast doubt on much that I knew to be true.

“You thought the golem was real?!” I remember him asking once, and the incredulity in his voice made me feel at once foolish and angry. Foolish for my own gullibility. Angry at him for spoiling the myth.

The myths would be spoiled further, over and over again, as I would come to see that some of our stories were truer than others, and it wouldn't be long until much of the narrative that upheld my life and my universe, my “life-supporting illusions,” fell to the demands of historical evidence, including much of what I had once believed about the stories of the bible and the Talmud; the world atlas, upon which I tried in vain to find the Sambatyon, would serve forever as a sad reminder of a shattered illusion.

The ecstasy of discovering material truth in a mythic story is matched only by the devastation that follows on discovering that material truth to be utterly implausible if not demonstrably false. And so we understand Himsel's desperate desire to find her stories not only in books, but in the very ground she digs in, in the archaeological work she takes part in as part of her university studies. She seeks not merely to discover but to confirm the myth she already holds. When she finds just the opposite, we are hurtled with her into the psychic mess that follows.

Is there a bridge from historic truth to metaphoric truth? Is there a way through the initial cognitive dissonance to an embrace of multiple truths, to the view, put forward by science writer Stephen Jay Gould, of “non-overlapping magisteria,” that the “truths” of science and religion, existing at first blush in unresolvable contradiction, are not, in fact, in conflict?

With this we must all grapple – believer or heathen. Our stories are shaped in the image of our beliefs, and when what once was history becomes myth, the stories and their meanings, our beliefs and values, remain. What to do with the stories is the question. For the believer: How do we maintain the myth when history rejects its literal truth? For the non-believer: where do we find our life-supporting illusions when our scientific instruments interrupt our imaginations?

For Himsel, the answer comes slowly, agonizingly, as she attempts a vertiginous balancing act between her critical reading of the old tales, and her desperate desire to cling to the stories so deeply embedded within her they cannot be excised, only reoriented. Jesus takes on an even more fully human figure: a Semitic man, a Jew, living in the Galilee. Through that understanding, she grows enamored with Israel's Jews and their story. Still, she struggles with what appears to be Jewish indifference to Jesus, blending the Jesus of history, the Jew from Galilee, with Jesus the mythic figure in the great apocalyptic drama to come, her own yearning for that great encounter still beating. In a friend's sukkah during the Sukkot holiday, she finds herself agonizing over this:

I looked up at the Jerusalem sky.... Without believing in Jesus, I thought, Jews were missing out on a big part of the meaning of the Feast. It didn't just recall Moses wandering in the desert for 40 years. It also represented the second resurrection. If I remained in the church, I would be there when the last trumpet was blown and the dead were resurrected from the ground. I wanted to be there.

Where we thought she had let go of Jesus, we find she has not. She herself, over and over, thinks Jesus gone, only to find that he has returned. And with that, somehow, the myth lives.

Back in the states, after moving to New York City, she encounters Jews once again. This time, she must reconcile the seeming contradiction of Jews who maintain the centrality of their own story, even as many choose to ignore the faith built upon it. Her boyfriend Selig, son of an Orthodox rabbi but himself an atheist, confounds her most, with his ease in finding the synthesis that so eludes her. Most of all, she struggles with the inexpressible burdens of the mythology within her. "The power of Jesus blood, and my stubborn refusal to completely let go of the church," she tells us, "was not easy to explain, especially to a Jewish atheist who had not grown up believing I would be raptured to Petra, to salvation."

Again and again, there he is, Jesus, appearing and reappearing, just as she thinks she's moved on. "Like an old boyfriend I still had feelings for, but to whom I couldn't quite commit. If I actively rejected Jesus whose blood had been sacrificed to give me eternal life... the door to the Next World would be forever shut to me. I would never see those I've loved and lost and who resided there."

Not Jesus of history, not Jesus the Jew, not even the Jesus of the theologian, mere doctrinal symbol, but Jesus and his crimson, metallic blood, as true and as real as the blood of her own finger when pricked. Jesus who might show up in front of the courthouse in Jasper. Jesus, to whose bosom she yearns to be close. Jesus, whose blood sacrifice is to give her eternal life.

"Himsel begins her book with a story about blood, and she ends it on the same note: "You always return for blood." Indeed, blood is a recurring theme in Himsel's story. The blood of her own German ancestry. The blood binding her to her family, even as she embraces the story of another tribe. The blood of her menses, which, she discovers, the Jewish faith fears obsessively. The blood of Jesus, sacrificed for her sins. Most of all, the blood of Jesus.

What, however, is blood about?

"For the life of every creature is its blood," the bible tells us in Leviticus, and if blood itself has a life force within it, it is story. It is history. It is myth.

As Himsel clung to her own stories, I, too, find myself clinging to mine. The atlas will never show the Sambatyon, but its force still has power over me, the legend of the lost tribes still exciting my imagination. The Maharal and the golem, too, are forever true to me; they will never be otherwise, even as the historic truth says otherwise.



*When the myth is dispelled, there is nothing secure to hold onto.* When the myths lose their power, the edifices built upon them shake, crumble, and with them, we fear, goes life itself. And so the task then is to keep the story alive. To retain the myth. The myth that gives us life. The story within the blood.