

The White Smudge on the Wall
by Yisroel Shtern (1927)
 translated by Jon Levitow (2004)

Sometimes I think as follows:

What is theater? It's the escape from threat to danger, in order to free oneself from the threat. What do I mean by this?

My grandfather once told me the following story:

"Once, a long time ago, on the first night of Passover, the Seder over with, *Khad-Gadyo* sung, the Song of Songs recited, your poor grandmother lay asleep with her head on the table, without even eating a piece of the *afikomen* after having worked the whole day long, washing, scraping, scrubbing, and koshering. So, I was in a sense alone – you hadn't come along yet, and your parents lived in another street. The other children were either at yeshivas or at their in-laws. I took off my glasses and set them down in a *Hagadah*, put on my hat over my yarmulke, and went out into the courtyard. It was a beautiful night – the moon so lovely, you felt it was a holiday up in Heaven. I walked around and up and down – and suddenly I stopped. I couldn't move. My heart was pounding like a robber's. What could it be?

"By Reuben the Wagon-Driver's shed stands a man in a shroud as if for burial, with a white cap on his head, looking straight at me. I go crashing into the apartment like thunder to wake up your grandmother, but then I feel sorry for her after she had worked so much that day. What to do? I recite Psalms, but then I remember that they shouldn't be recited at night, and I can't get a word to come out anyway. Something sticks in my throat so I can't breathe. I forget everything, take your grandmother by the sleeve, pull at her, and cry with my last bit of strength, 'Leah! Leah!' She's dead asleep, and is that a surprise after so much hard work?

"I run around the apartment, and then I have an idea. Idiot! What are you afraid of? Today spirits and devils have no power – it's the 'Night of the Watches', and one only recites the first paragraph of the Sh'ma and skips the other two. I calm down a little but not entirely. I go to the window and open the curtain very slowly, and what do you think? The man in white is looking right in at me – and he winks!

"What does a person do in such a situation? It was too much! Even today I don't know how it happened. Like a crazy person, I run outside and grab the dead man by the neck. There is nothing there. The good-for-nothing White

Pinkhas who painted all the apartments in the courtyard with lime for the holiday had left a smudge with his brush along the entire length of the wall."

Here the old man became silent for a minute.

"Except, what happened later wasn't so simple, my child. Out of thirteen children, six sons and seven daughters, only your mother survived (may she have a long life!) – and that thanks only to miracles."

The same thing happens to us when we go to the theater.

The elements that live in the inner recesses of the world await an opportunity, just as once in the shadowy, haunted night, to jump out of their hiding places, show themselves, and stare us in the face until all our nerves tremble.

We are surrounded by uncertainties. A million moments watch us like the million eyes of the Angel of Death.

We feel the threat to life continually, and everything around us also feels it and wants to save itself. The streets, fastened to the earth with cobblestones as if with nails, break their bonds, run off, and stretch far, far away...and in the corners tended by the gardeners, so much fear is flowering that the trees tear themselves upwards, as if trying to escape from their own bark... but they can't, so they hang in the air with outstretched hands and pray that somewhere... and they pray.

What should people do? Pray as well? They do. Everybody prays, some by themselves and others in groups, some excitedly and some silently, some in song and some in battle. Everyone prays and wants to be made pure, to be set free, to be made holy.

However, if sometimes the limit is surpassed, if the prayer itself becomes a cause of sadness, sticks in the throat, and suffocates, if all the atoms are against us, if every piece of smooth steel is imbued with the will to raise itself up over our skulls, if every spark is so nimble as to bring us news of nearby conflagration, if "every person is a wolf to everyone else," if the limit is surpassed, and the prayer itself is a cause of sadness because one doubts one's own hands as they stretch forth in prayer – where is the way out then?

There's only one – go outside and look the danger in the face. Get outside of your own heart, as outside of a house into which you had fled from the threat

that, stubbornly silent, looked in through the window with bitterness. There's no time to waste! Go out to that ghost and grab it by the neck!

That's what my grandfather, who lived 96 years, once did, and to his death he never knew that on that Passover night he became a playwright, director, and actor in a frank and shocking play. As do we all with our tense curiosity about the theater.

We live amid fears, words, affairs, thoughts, and aspirations – everything is caution and wakefulness. Conflict hangs in the air, and we tremble lest it should fall near us, lest the time should come when there is no counsel left, and when the days lie in a stupor, looking with glass eyes, and when the stars at night have human faces that ask...We tremble for the moment when the constellations will lay on the scale, for the decisive moment of conflict.

How long can one live in constant fear? It becomes unbearable. We want out of the predicament.

What to do? We demand life. We stretch out our arms and draw down the lightning on ourselves. Let the final moment come. Let happen what must, whatever the result, no matter how hard, no matter how sharp the edge. Let us look upon the result of a thousand marvels and complications. We want to see once and for all the collision, the final collision.

For that we run to the theater.

Theater is the flight from the threat to the danger in order to become free of the threat.

This definition hasn't been included in any dictionary, and for that very reason I like to think it's true.

People may ask me, what? What are you saying? "For that we run to the theater?" By that do you mean that nowadays we don't run at all, and that it's because the theater more and more lets slip out of sight the momentous, the shocking, and the fatal? Do you mean that the reason the theater sees so few visitors is because it's an embarrassment, and one avoids it? It did something bad – it threw out its own mother – tragedy, and very seldom lets her back in, except in order to look good in front of people. She stumbles around in the dark, in No Man's Land, in gloomy days of rain, in stormy nights, without strength, without anything to cover her. Tragedy – is that what you mean?

I answer, maybe that's what I mean (if not entirely, at least in part), but I'll say it one more time...

People ask me yet again: according to your description, the theater is the last stretch of the dangerous path of the constellations, and in the course of two hours we want to see in the reflection provided on stage the beginning of the end of our great confusion. If we're talking about a smooth mirror, what about a warped one? Didn't the people who had Sophocles also have Aristophanes?

I answer, first, I don't care how it turns out, whether it's really a ghost in a burial shroud or a white smudge on the wall, but we need to be aware of it; we need to grasp it by the throat.

Second, as my grandfather said, "However, my child, it didn't turn out so smoothly." Certainly not – nothing's free. Real laughter doesn't come cheap. Comedy isn't the same thing as being tickled or enjoying a newspaper cartoon.

The people in the situations presented by the joyful Moliere contribute to the business of the world, to the secret of life, no less than those in the mysteries of the ghostly Ibsen. The comic characters of Gogol are as saddening and uncanny as... and so on.

Have a little patience. This last subject deserves a separate conversation.
