

# Rabbi Yochanan ben Zachai

By Lafcadio Hearn

*There is in Heaven a certain living creature which hath letters upon its forehead. And by day these letters, which are brighter than the sun, form the word TRUTH, whereby the angels know that it is day. But when evening cometh, the letters, self changing, do shape themselves into the word FAITH, whereby the angels know that the night cometh. . . .*

Now Hillel the Great, who gathered together the Sedarim of the Talmud, and who was also the teacher of that Jesus the Gentiles worship, had eighty other disciples who became holy men. Of these, thirty were indeed so holy that the Shechinah rested upon them even as upon Moses, so that their faces gave out light; and rays like beams of the sun streamed from their temples.

And of thirty others it is said their holiness was as the holiness of Joshua, the son of Nun, being worthy that the sun should stand still at their behest. And the remaining twenty, of whom the greatest was Rabbi Jonathan ben Uzziel, and the least of all Rabbi Yochanan ben Zachai, were held to be only of middling worth. Yet there is now not one worthy to compare with the least of them, seeing that Rabbi Yochanan was holier than living man to-day.

For, humble as he was, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zachai was deeply learned in the Scriptures,—in the Mishna and the Gemara and the Midrashim,—in the Kabbalah, the rules of Gematria, of Notricon, and of Temurah,—in the five mystic alphabets, Atbash, Atbach, Albam, Aiakbechar, Tashrak,—in legends and the lesser laws and the niceties,—in the theories of the moon, in the language of angels and the whispering of palm-trees and the speech of demons. And if all the seas were ink, and all the reeds that shake by rivers were pens, and all the men of the earth were scribes, never could they write down all that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zachai had learned, nor even so much of it as he taught in his lifetime, which endured for the period of one hundred and twenty years. Yet he was the least of all the disciples of Hillel.

Of the years of his life the first forty he devoted to worldly things, especially to commerce, that he might earn enough to enable him to devote unto good works the remainder of the time allotted him. And the next forty years he devoted to study, becoming so learned that he was indeed accused of being a magician, as were also those Rabbis who, by combination of the letters of the Name Ineffable, did create living animals and fruits,—as were also Rav Oshayah and Rav Chaneanah, who by study of the Book Yetzirah (which is the Book of Creation) did create for themselves a calf, and did eat thereof.

And the last forty years of his most holy life Rabbi Yochanan gave to teaching the people.

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Now, as it is related in the Book Bava Bathra, in Seder Nezikin of the Talmud, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zachai did upon one occasion explain before a vain disciple the words of the Prophet Isaiah. And so explaining he said: “The Most Holy—blessed be His name forever!—shall take precious stones and pearls, each measuring thirty cubits by thirty cubits, and shall cut and polish them till they measure twenty cubits by ten cubits each, and shall set them in the gates of Jerusalem.”

Then the vain and foolish disciple, the son of Impudence, laughed loudly, and with mockery in his voice said: “What man hath ever seen an emerald or a diamond, a ruby or a pearl, even so

large as the egg of a small bird? and wilt thou indeed tell us that there be jewels thirty cubits by thirty?" But Rabbi Yochanan returned no answer; and the disciple, mocking, departed.

Now, some days after these things happened, that wicked disciple went upon a voyage; for he was in commerce and a great driver of bargains, and known in many countries for his skill in bartering and his ability in finding objects of price. Now, while in his vessel, when the sailors slumbered, waiting to raise the anchor at dawn, it was given to that wicked disciple to see a great light below the waters. And looking down he saw mighty angels in the depths of the sea, quarrying monstrous diamonds and emeralds, and opening prodigious shells to obtain enormous pearls. And the eyes of the angels were fixed upon him, even as they worked below the water in that awful light. Then a dreadful fear came upon him, so that his knees smote one against another, and his teeth fell out; and in obedience to a power that moved his tongue against his will, he cried aloud: "For what are those diamonds and those mighty emeralds? For what are those monstrous pearls?" And a Voice answered him from the deep, "For the gates of Jerusalem!"

And having returned from his voyage, the disciple hastened with all speed to the place where Rabbi Yochanan ben Zachai was teaching, and told him that which he had seen, and vowed that the words of Rabbi Yochanan should nevermore be doubted by him.

But the Rabbi, seeing into his heart, and beholding the blackness of the wickedness within it, answered in a voice of thunder: "Raea! hadst thou not seen them, thou wouldst even now mock the words of the sages!" And with a single glance of his eye he consumed that wicked disciple as a dry leaf is consumed by flame, reducing the carcass of his body to a heap of smoking ashes as though it had been smitten by the lightning of the Lord.

And the people marvelled exceedingly. But Rabbi Yochanan ben Zachai, paying no heed to the white ashes smoking at his feet, continued to explain unto his disciples the language of palm-trees and of demons.