



The Fifty Gates

Artist: Shoshannah Brombacher, PhD

Pastel and ink on paper

Brooklyn, New York, April, 2010

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The Chassidic Jews of Eastern Europe loved to tell stories. Many anecdotes about their Rebbes (rabbis, or spiritual leaders) contained profound spiritual, allegorical and philosophical truths, hidden in layers of simple folk tales. A good example is the story of Rabbi Barukh of Medzhibuzh (1757-1811), the grandson of the founder of the Chassidic movement, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov. Battling melancholy and depression his whole life,

This is how our forefathers danced.

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Today is Lag Baomer, a Jewish holiday in the middle of the period of mourning between Pesach and Shavuot, when all kind of disasters befell the Jewish people, in different times and places. We celebrate today that the plague epidemic which hit the students of Rabbi Akiva stopped on the thirty-third day of the Omer. Rabbi Akiva played a role in the bloody Bar Kochba revolt in 132-136 C.E against anti-Jewish measures by the Romans, persecution of the Jewish religion, thus prohibiting Jews to live like Jews.

But Akiva's students were struck by the plague because they were not respectful to each other. We can learn a lesson from this.

Lag Baomer is also connected with Rabbi Akiva's student Shimon bar Yochai, who was compelled to flee Roman persecutions. Together with his son Eleazar he hid in a cave in the wilderness. There, the two of them studied Torah, naked but buried up unto their neck into the sand. The reason for this was, that they wanted to preserve their clothes for Shabbat and times of prayers, when they came out of the sand. They did not know when they would be able to leave that cave to get new clothes. It turned out they would be stuck for years. This theme, the two rabbis learning in the cave, inspired the Chassidic Rebbe Yissachar Baer of Radoschitz, who stated:

When Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son were forced to hide for a very long time from the Romans, in a cave, Rabbi Shimon said:



“My son, you and I are sufficient for the world.”
Rabbi Yissachar Baer explained what this meant:
atta elokeynu, (You are our G'd), and HaShem answers: ani ha-shem
elokaykha, (I am HaShem your G'd!).
This ‘You’ and ‘I’ are sufficient for the world.

I included this story in my collection of Chassidic stories, which I illustrated in black and white, because I hoped that would make it easier to find a publisher. I decided to make an ink drawing of the two rabbis, with their clothes on, ready for Shabbat (see above). Later I added color illustrations to the same collection of Chassidic stories, and chose an old painting, which I had made when I lived in Chassidic Williamsburg, after a friend turned all of a sudden around in the street, and said, “You know who just passed us? The Spinker Rebbe and his *gabbay* (assistant!)” He was in awe. I did not see the Rebbe clearly because it was already dark, but the incident impressed me, and I made a painting (to the right). I do not remember why, but I added a line from a mystical prayer and a book, the Zohar, which has been ascribed to Shimon bar Yochai. As an artist you don’t always have to remember—or explain—everything. A lot of what we do is intuitive, like the colors and the composition. It speaks for itself, of course, that intuitive feelings only produce good art when they are paired with good techniques and good art materials. I consider this painting is an excellent illustration for “*You and I.*”

On Lag Baomer we can conduct weddings and get a haircut, which is generally not done during a time of mourning. Many people light bonfires and dance, especially near Shimon bar Yochai’s tomb in the Israeli City of Meron. But we should never forget that this festive day is just one day in the middle of a gloomy period for the Jews, like a little candle in a vast, dark cellar vault. And that inspired me to illustrate a poem of Yitzchak Lamdan. He describes how perilous our existence has been for the last few millennia, and often still is. Lamdan (1899-1954) was a religious Zionist poet, who made aliyah in 1920. In 1926 he composed his epic poem about the siege of Masada, one of the last Jewish strongholds against the Romans, and the site of fierce and brave resistance. I have visited Massada two times, and was impressed and moved every time to see to what great length people will go—and did go—to defend their freedom of thought and speech, to determine how they want to live their lives. Such Jewish resilience became the inspiration of





generations of oppressed Jews. The people of Massada were religious, the Jewish anarchists, like Emma Goldman in the Lower Eastside of New York, in the early twentieth century were not, but all these people wanted freedom. In Lamdan's work, the chorus sings the following mystical lines:

*The chain is still not broken,
From father to child,
From fire to fire,
The chain continues.
Thus danced our fathers,
One hand on a neighbor's shoulder,
The other holding a scroll of the Law.
A people's burden is raised with love.
So let us dance,
One hand gripping the circle,
The other clutching our heavy book of sorrow,
So let us dance.*

*When our fathers danced,
They closed their eyes and wells of joy were opened.
They knew they were dancing on the abyss,
That if they opened their eyes,
The wells of joy would turn dry.
So let us dance too, with our eyes closed.
Thus shall we continue the chain, lest it crumble into the deep,
To let us dance too.*

(Masada, From: Milken Archive of Jewish Music)

Since this scene is timeless, I made a line of dancing Jews from different backgrounds and periods of time at the edge of the abyss, like a medieval rabbi next to a man in a striped concentration camp suit with a yellow star, a chassid, a working class eastern-European Jew, a scholarly “German” type, a kibbutznik with short pants a thimble hat, a Persian or Ottoman Jew with a turban, and a man with a medieval pointed hat, imposed on him by the rulers of his time to state clearly that he is a Jew, (in the colored version) and some timeless, non-descript Jews. All these are dancing together, the religious and the non-religious, the rich and the poor, educated and non-educated. They carry Torah scrolls, because no matter what individuals believe or don’t believe, over the ages the Torah has defined our lifestyle and thinking. Behind the dancers is the fire, in front of their feet the edges of the abyss are crumbling. But they dance on, because there is no other choice. The same principle applies to many of us, Jewish artists.

I wish you a happy lag baOmer and much inspiration,

Shoshannah Brombacher, New York,

5-23-2019



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Rabbi Barukh was known to be meticulous in helping his students with their problems, being conscious of his own.

In the story of the “Fifty Gates” Rabbi Barukh had a student, who frequently visited his Rabbi and teacher to discuss his life, his studies, and his doubts and questions. Even after the student had moved to a different town, he returned to Medzhibuzh at regular intervals. At one point the Rabbi realized that he had not seen his student for an unusual length of time. Possessing insight, Divine inspiration and a keen sense of psychology, Rabbi



Barukh sensed something was really wrong. He ordered his servant to harness his wagon, and traveled without delay to his student’s town. Upon arrival, Rabbi Barukh made his way into the house of his student, without so much as even taking the trouble of having his servant announce his presence. The student was home, seated at his desk, surrounded by books and papers, and the sudden appearance of the Rabbi startled him!

The Rabbi greeted him with the words, “I know what is hidden in your heart! You have passed through all the Forty-Nine Gates of Reason.

You became horribly entangled in your thoughts. You tried logic, reason, all kind of other sciences and philosophies! Every time you came up with a question, you tried to find an answer as best as you could (-this made you pass a 'Gate'). After you passed through the First Gate, each additional problem brought you to a Second Gate, which in turn brought you to a Third Gate, and so on. Soon you noticed, that all of your reasoning and analytical skills invoked still other questions, which led you to discover still others answers, which led you to pass through higher and higher levels of Gates. And so you continued on this path, till you arrived at the Fiftieth Gate. This is the



Gate that leads one straight down into the Abyss.
You have now posed and wrestled with questions for which no living man in this world has ever discovered any satisfactory or truthful understanding. If

you proceed and continue trying to do so anyway, you will stumble, fail, and fall ever more deeply. There is no return from this Abyss!!”

The student was stunned that Rabbi Barukh not only knew what was troubling him, but that he had taken the time, trouble and effort to come in person in order to share his wisdom, and show support to his wayward former pupil. The student felt great remorse.

“So what can I do?”, he asked, “Please! Don’t just tell me that in order to repent I have to go back all the way to the first Gate!”

“No,” answered the Rebbe, “you can’t undo knowledge or experience once you have acquired it, but you can handle it in a different way. When you turn yourself around, you will not be going backwards. You will be standing way beyond the last and Fiftieth Gate. You will stand in Faith!”



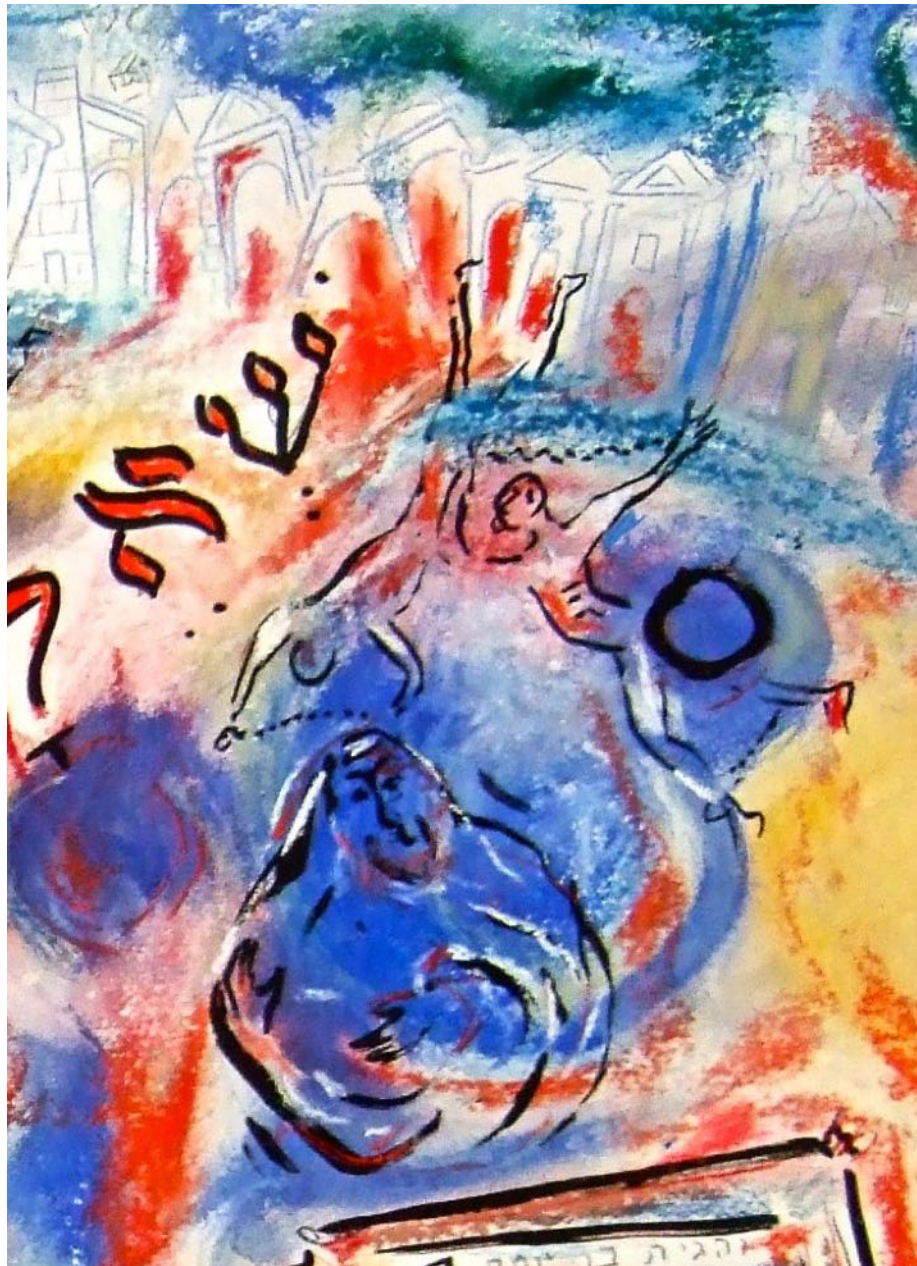
This story has universal value, but the way it is told here, it is clearly aimed at an 18th or 19th century Chassidic audience, people who were deeply religious and believed in the mystical experience and the divine and eternal truth of the Torah, that is the Pentateuch, the cornerstone and foundation of the Jewish religion. Chassidim at this time were determined to distance themselves from the religious rationalism and secular sciences and philosophies that gained popularity in Jewish circles through the influence of the Haskalah (Enlightenment Movement), which derived truth and knowledge from *sekhel* (which has the same root in Hebrew as Haskalah), the Intellect. The Haskalah strove for the civil, cultural and religious liberation of the Jewish population by opening up the community to secular influences, starting in Germany, and from there spreading to Eastern Europe. This movement caused deep rifts and strife in Chassidic communities, where young men started frequenting formerly “forbidden” universities, reading German or other secular philosophical works, including the banned works of Spinoza. As a result many turned their backs on the traditional and mystical beliefs of their parents and former rabbinical teachers. The young man in this story is an example par excellence of this phenomenon. The advice of

Rabbi Barukh is, that the student must return to the Faith of his ancestors. Since the story ends here, we may assume that the student paid attention to



Rabbi Barukh's admonishing, and returned to the fold of Chassidism.

However, the quest for knowledge is of course not limited to this one Chassidic culture, and such stories do not always share the same outcome. We all know about the dilemma of the medieval German Magician, Doctor Faustus, who studied



“... Juristerei und Medizin Und leider auch Theologie / Durchaus studiert mit heißem Bemühn. Da steh ich nun, ich armer Tor! Und bin so klug als wie zuvor.”

(Law and Medicine, and unfortunately also Theology, I studied diligently and thoroughly. Now I stand here, I, poor fool, and am just as clever as I was before.., Goethe, Faust 1: 345).

Faust felt, just like the student of Rabbi Barukh, constricted and confined by the laws and conventions imposed on him by his society, especially by the restrictions made by the Church (“und leider auch Theologie”). E.g., it was strictly forbidden to dissect dead bodies. This prevented medical doctors to increase their knowledge about certain aspects of the human body and its functions. Faust strove to broaden his horizon, and deepen his knowledge beyond what was permissible, or available, at his time and in his place. However, Faust’s visitor is not Rabbi Barukh but Mephistopheles, who offers him the answers (and more importantly), the experiences to the ‘questions that no mortal man can answer,’ in return for his eternal soul, for which Faust has to sign a contract with his own blood. In a way, the student of



Rabbi Barukh would have sold his (Chassidic) soul too, had not his teacher intervened at the last moment.

In the older versions of the Faust story, like the early folktales and Christopher Marlowe’s play --”The Tragic History of Dr. Faustus”, (1592) -

Faust dies after a long and sinful life that exceeds ‘breaking the codes and boundaries’ of his milieu and his society by investigating and lusting for what man is not allowed to investigate. As a result he is forced to surrender his immortal soul to eternal damnation. In Marlowe’s version, Faust’s corpse is discovered the morning after he died lying face down, a sure sign for his contemporaries that he was dragged to the Netherworld, to Hell. However, in the famous account of Faust’s life by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (“Faust II”, 1832) who was under the influence of the Enlightenment, the angels sing about the dead Faust:

“Luft ist gereinigt, Atme der Geist!”



(The air has been cleansed, let the Spirit breathe, Faust 2, Grablegung 11820), and the often quoted:

“Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, Den können wir erlösen!”

(Whoever strives and tries continuously, him we can save or redeem, Faust II, 11936-7.)

Faust made bad mistakes and showed poor judgment in choosing his friends. But his thirst for knowledge ultimately was looked upon favorably, and saved him from the medieval fate of eternal damnation.

We, humans, have been endowed with intelligence and curiosity and with a Divine soul. Should we not use both our Divine mind, our moral Divine soul, and our innate curiosity to probe, and prove ourselves worthy of our Divine mind, even though we can make mistakes and fail, as it is said in Koheleth (Ecclesiastes): “For with much wisdom comes much grief, and who increases knowledge increases pain (Ecc.1:19)?” On the other hand, a healthy judgment and an ability to be eclectic is enriching, as is said in the New Testament by Paul, in his letter to the community of Thessalonica (1 Thess.5:21): “Investigate all things, and keep what is good!”

If we restrict or exclude ourselves from asking questions, do we deny the Divine image according to which we were created, even if asking questions implies making mistakes?

Many Jewish and non-Jewish sources state that real poverty is not a lack of material wealth and goods, but rather poverty of the mind. We find this idea back even in politics; e.g., Kemal Ataturk, in his endeavor to reform the Ottoman Empire into a Turkish modern state in the early 20th century, made this the foundation of his doctrine, stating that education and the obliteration of illiteracy are the keys to enlightenment and democracy.

This spirit of the quest and thirst for knowledge is embedded in the artwork “The 50 Gates”. It contains a lot of symbolism and rituals, which will be explained in the following paragraphs.

In the center we see Rabbi Barukh’s student, surrounded by words and symbols, falling, jumping, floating, past an arch with forty-nine Gates. The last Gate, the fiftieth Gate, stands isolated, dominating the bottom right corner of the drawing. In the top left corner, the wagon carrying Rabbi Barukh

speeds towards the student's house, surrounded by the dark clouds of the dark foreboding of the Rabbi.

The forty-nine Gates, which the student has passed through already earlier in the story, have been outlined scantily. They are nearly diaphanous,



and were left mainly uncolored: they are the Gates we each have to fill in for ourselves, they change for every person and on every occasion.

The architectonic styles vary from Ancient Egyptian, Greek, Hellenistic, Medieval, Western, Oriental, Renaissance, Baroque, towards more modern, and some are accompanied by the great minds and artists of that era, like Socrates and Plato, Aristotle, Averroes and Avicenna, Euclides, Maimonides,



Mozart (seated at his piano), Goethe, Voltaire, Erasmus, Spinoza, etc. But

any philosopher, artist, author or thinker can take their place in any individual's mind.

In the case of Rabbi Barukh's student, with his Chassidic background, I imagine Spinoza or Voltaire could be one of his biggest challenges. Spinoza's features are vaguely visible next to the student's.

In the top right corner at the beginning of the Gates (which go from right to left) flies or falls a sketchy figure with wings: Icarus. His image is a warning against hubris, but it also symbolizes the more optimistic message found in the Zohar (the Book of Splendor, a collection of ancient Kabbalistic texts first published in 13th century in Spain): "The falling down encompasses the jumping up," in other words, whoever has the possibility to probe and fall or fail has the potential to rise and redeem himself.

In the right top half of the drawing we see the Hebrew word *she'elah*, diagonally written in red letters, and the word *teshuvah* under the student.

She'elah has 2 different meanings. In general it means a 'question', but more specifically it is also a 'question about an aspect of Jewish law and ritual, posed to a competent Rabbi', who then renders a 'legally binding decision', a teshuvah, a 'legal answer or responsum', that can lead to jurisprudence. But teshuvah also means just plain 'answer' in general.

A third meaning of teshuvah is to 'return in repentance from one's deviant life style, in casu a return to the doctrines, lifestyle and beliefs of the orthodox forefathers'.

In the student's case the words she'elah and teshuvah encompass all these meanings. In offering a rabbinical and binding direction ('to go beyond the 50th Gate'), Rabbi Barukh not only gives an 'answer' (teshuvah) to the problems of the student, but more importantly, he orders and inspires him to 'return' from his wrong paths (technically called 'to do teshuvah').

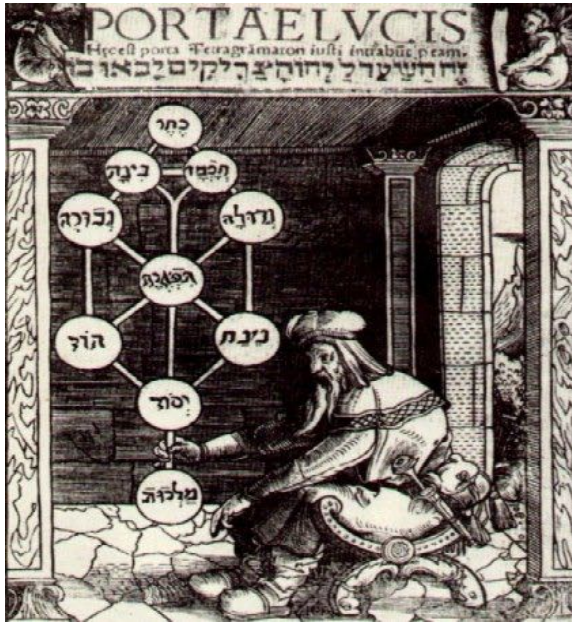
The Fifty Gates of our story have a distinctly negative connotation. They are the questions and answers that ultimately lead to the Abyss. To counterbalance this, I introduced Forty-Nine other Gates, which are connected to the Ten *Sefirot*. These 10 "enumerations" stand for the attributes or emanations of the Eternal or the Infinite One or, *Eyn Sof* (without end), meaning God. God Himself uses this term (*Eyn Sof*) to represent Himself,



and to create both the physical and the metaphysical worlds in Kabbalistic philosophy.

In the drawing the Sefirot are represented as a tree-shaped figure with connecting branches, starting close to the Rabbi's carriage and going downward diagonally towards the right bottom corner, to the base of the Fiftieth Gate. The circles in the tree each contain one attribute, which are traditionally (from top to bottom and from right to left):

- Keter (crown), the above conscious
-
- Chochmah (wisdom) Binah (understanding)
-
- Gevurah (strength) Chesed (kindness)
-
- Tiferet (beauty)
-
- Hod (glory) Netzach (victory)
-
- Yesod (foundation)
- Malchut (Kingship)



These circles are connected to each other by lines (branches or paths):

The Divine attributes can be emulated by humans to improve their own character, hence making the world a better place. This system has influenced modern thinkers and scientists, e.g. Jung, Freud and Hegel.

(title page of a medieval work about the Kabbalah of Moses de Leon from Spain)

The attributes are connected to the Forty-Nine Gates in the background of Rabbi Barukh's student because of the ritual of "counting 7 weeks", or forty-nine days, between the Festival of Passover (Pesach) in spring and the Festival of Weeks (Shavuoth) in early summer (these Biblical festivals are mentioned in Deuteronomy 16:19 et al.). Passover is the Festival of Liberation. In the historical context it celebrates the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egyptian oppression and slavery a few millennia ago. One gives it meaning in his own life by trying to liberate oneself from his own personal material, mental or psychological 'slavery' or addictions as well. Then one counts seven weeks, or forty-nine days (called 'counting the sefirah', the same word as the (plural) sefirot), till the time the Torah was given to Moses on Mount Sinai during the Festival of Weeks. One prepares himself by improving and refining his character and behavior, thus passing through forty-nine Gates of Improvement. It can be compared with the difficult trip in the desert after the freed slaves left Egypt, during which they prepared themselves to think and act as free men instead of as slaves, and be-



come a free nation with a covenant. One counts the sefirot in the evening with specific blessings, and by reciting Psalm 67, which counts exactly forty-nine words and is often written in the shape of a seven branched candelabra. One also ‘connects’ the kabbalistic sefirot or attributes through the ‘paths’ between them (e.g., when you take Chesed and Gevurah, loving kindness and strength, you can work on a combination of them in your own character and behavior). Every person is different, and ideally finds out his personal strengths and weaknesses, and works on them accordingly.

The important Greek admonition ‘*gnoti seauton*,’ ‘Know Yourself’, which is held dear by Masons and non-Masons alike, is written at the bottom of the sefirot tree, in large letters. It is the beginning of wisdom.

The Fiftieth Gate stands separated from the others. Because of the above mentioned efforts to improve oneself, or, as in the story, the willing-

ness to ‘do teshuvah’, to ‘return’, it does not look like an Abyss. It has hybrid architectonic elements, to emphasize that no two persons are alike and enter through the same Gate. Behind the Gate is a Torah scroll, the place the student of Rabbi Barukh returns to, as well as the Torah which is given after Forty-Nine days on Mount Sinai, but also a glowing light that has been left void of symbols or letters, and can be filled in individually in an enlightened way. In the tympanum we see a quote from Jos.1:8: “And you shall study it day and night” next to the Hebrew letter Nun, which has the numerical value of 50, and originates in the hieroglyphic pictogram for ‘water’: *panta rhei*, everything flows.

The alpha and the omega, the aleph and the taf are the beginning and the end, and symbolize the alphabets used to pass on texts of wisdom. Where would humanity be without script!?

On top of the Fiftieth Gate are the outlines of a sage (Rabbi Barukh?) and of unfortunate souls who writhe in agony, being chained by their ignorance and unguided passions.

Next to *gnoti seauton* is a so-called *iggul*, a circle consisting of concentric rings, with the word *eyn sof* (no end), symbolizing the metaphysical sciences, and a paper with the word *verbum* (word), which alludes to John 1:1 and Gen.1:3. It was a word which separated light and darkness, and brought the creation into being, the word as the beginning of everything. The Greek word *logos* (word) appears over the Forty-Nine Gates. The paper with *verbum* is surrounded by flames, the burning desire of mankind to improve themselves through knowledge and man’s innate enthusiasm. The colors blue and red reflect the Talmudic idea that the universe was composed of the cold, fluid, blue element of water and the warm, consuming, red element of fire (BT Chagigah 12a).

Above the shoulders of the student in the center is a sun, in dark blue; Petronius stated, “*Sol lucet omnibus*,” the sun shines for everybody, but Koheleth (Ecclesiastes) said, “*eyn chadash tachat ha-shemesh*,” there is nothing new under the sun. Above the student’s shoulders we see the two pillars Jachin and Boaz, which stood besides the entrance of the Temple in Jerusalem. They imply that one has to try and put forth every possible effort to help rebuild the Temple, by improving himself and the world.

Attributes of science, literature, music and knowledge in general, and an inspiring angelic figure, which can help us with this effort, are floating around the student. He clutches a scroll (knowledge) in one hand and points

with the other to the masonic tools, the compass and the square, to build and rebuild.

Shoshannah Brombacher, New York 2010

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For further reading I recommend:

- On the Kabbalah and its System, Gershom Scholem, 1996.
- Tales of the Hasidim: Early Masters, Martin Buber, 1947 (contains the story of the 50 gates)
- Die Fuenfzigste Pforte, Martin Buber, 1907



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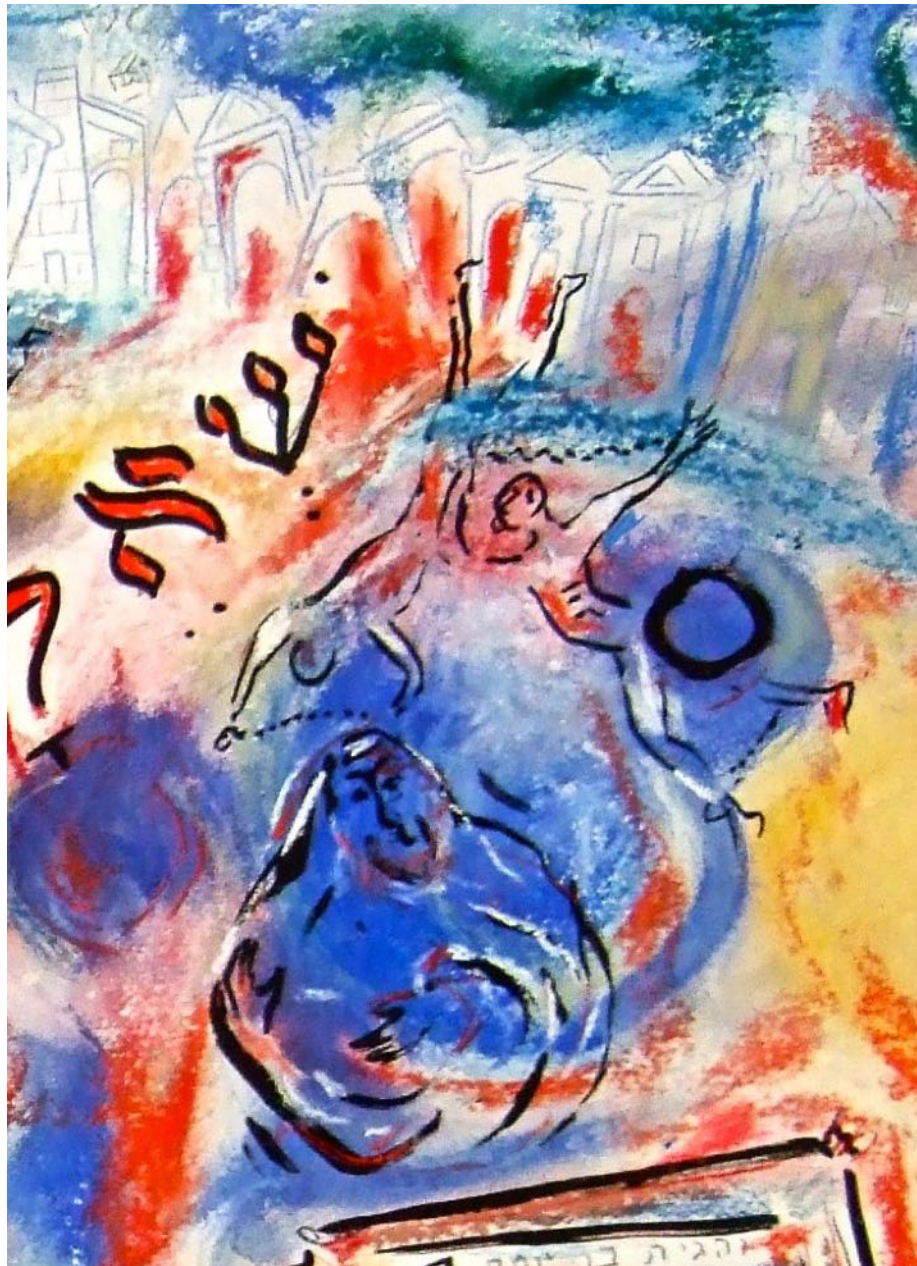
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(Whoever strives and tries continuously, him we can save or redeem, Faust II, 11936-7.)

Faust made bad mistakes and showed poor judgment in choosing his friends. But his thirst for knowledge ultimately was looked upon favorably, and saved him from the medieval fate of eternal damnation.

We, humans, have been endowed with intelligence and curiosity and with a Divine soul. Should we not use both our Divine mind, our moral Divine soul, and our innate curiosity to probe, and prove ourselves worthy of our Divine mind, even though we can make mistakes and fail, as it is said in Koheleth (Ecclesiastes): “For with much wisdom comes much grief, and who increases knowledge increases pain (Ecc.1:19)?” On the other hand, a healthy judgment and an ability to be eclectic is enriching, as is said in the New Testament by Paul, in his letter to the community of Thessalonica (1 Thess.5:21): “Investigate all things, and keep what is good!”

If we restrict or exclude ourselves from asking questions, do we deny the Divine image according to which we were created, even if asking questions implies making mistakes?

Many Jewish and non-Jewish sources state that real poverty is not a lack of material wealth and goods, but rather poverty of the mind. We find this idea back even in politics; e.g., Kemal Ataturk, in his endeavor to reform the Ottoman Empire into a Turkish modern state in the early 20th century, made this the foundation of his doctrine, stating that education and the obliteration of illiteracy are the keys to enlightenment and democracy.

This spirit of the quest and thirst for knowledge is embedded in the artwork “The 50 Gates”. It contains a lot of symbolism and rituals, which will be explained in the following paragraphs.

In the center we see Rabbi Barukh’s student, surrounded by words and symbols, falling, jumping, floating, past an arch with forty-nine Gates. The last Gate, the fiftieth Gate, stands isolated, dominating the bottom right corner of the drawing. In the top left corner, the wagon carrying Rabbi Barukh

speeds towards the student's house, surrounded by the dark clouds of the dark foreboding of the Rabbi.

The forty-nine Gates, which the student has passed through already earlier in the story, have been outlined scantily. They are nearly diaphanous,



and were left mainly uncolored: they are the Gates we each have to fill in for ourselves, they change for every person and on every occasion.

The architectonic styles vary from Ancient Egyptian, Greek, Hellenistic, Medieval, Western, Oriental, Renaissance, Baroque, towards more modern, and some are accompanied by the great minds and artists of that era, like Socrates and Plato, Aristotle, Averroes and Avicenna, Euclides, Maimonides,



Mozart (seated at his piano), Goethe, Voltaire, Erasmus, Spinoza, etc. But

any philosopher, artist, author or thinker can take their place in any individual's mind.

In the case of Rabbi Barukh's student, with his Chassidic background, I imagine Spinoza or Voltaire could be one of his biggest challenges. Spinoza's features are vaguely visible next to the student's.

In the top right corner at the beginning of the Gates (which go from right to left) flies or falls a sketchy figure with wings: Icarus. His image is a warning against hubris, but it also symbolizes the more optimistic message found in the Zohar (the Book of Splendor, a collection of ancient Kabbalistic texts first published in 13th century in Spain): "The falling down encompasses the jumping up," in other words, whoever has the possibility to probe and fall or fail has the potential to rise and redeem himself.

In the right top half of the drawing we see the Hebrew word *she'elah*, diagonally written in red letters, and the word *teshuvah* under the student.

She'elah has 2 different meanings. In general it means a 'question', but more specifically it is also a 'question about an aspect of Jewish law and ritual, posed to a competent Rabbi', who then renders a 'legally binding decision', a teshuvah, a 'legal answer or responsum', that can lead to jurisprudence. But teshuvah also means just plain 'answer' in general.

A third meaning of teshuvah is to 'return in repentance from one's deviant life style, in casu a return to the doctrines, lifestyle and beliefs of the orthodox forefathers'.

In the student's case the words she'elah and teshuvah encompass all these meanings. In offering a rabbinical and binding direction ('to go beyond the 50th Gate'), Rabbi Barukh not only gives an 'answer' (teshuvah) to the problems of the student, but more importantly, he orders and inspires him to 'return' from his wrong paths (technically called 'to do teshuvah').

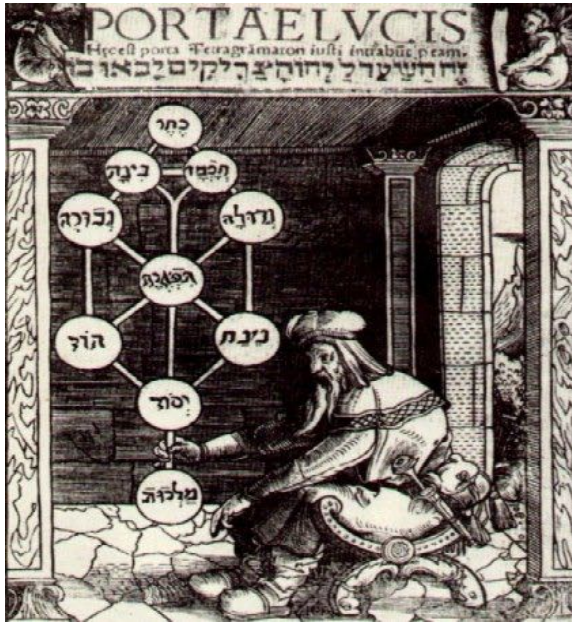
The Fifty Gates of our story have a distinctly negative connotation. They are the questions and answers that ultimately lead to the Abyss. To counterbalance this, I introduced Forty-Nine other Gates, which are connected to the Ten *Sefirot*. These 10 "enumerations" stand for the attributes or emanations of the Eternal or the Infinite One or, *Eyn Sof* (without end), meaning God. God Himself uses this term (*Eyn Sof*) to represent Himself,



and to create both the physical and the metaphysical worlds in Kabbalistic philosophy.

In the drawing the Sefirot are represented as a tree-shaped figure with connecting branches, starting close to the Rabbi's carriage and going downward diagonally towards the right bottom corner, to the base of the Fiftieth Gate. The circles in the tree each contain one attribute, which are traditionally (from top to bottom and from right to left):

- Keter (crown), the above conscious
-
- Chochmah (wisdom) Binah (understanding)
-
- Gevurah (strength) Chesed (kindness)
-
- Tiferet (beauty)
-
- Hod (glory) Netzach (victory)
-
- Yesod (foundation)
- Malchut (Kingship)



These circles are connected to each other by lines (branches or paths):

The Divine attributes can be emulated by humans to improve their own character, hence making the world a better place. This system has influenced modern thinkers and scientists, e.g. Jung, Freud and Hegel.

(title page of a medieval work about the Kabbalah of Moses de Leon from Spain)

The attributes are connected to the Forty-Nine Gates in the background of Rabbi Barukh's student because of the ritual of "counting 7 weeks", or forty-nine days, between the Festival of Passover (Pesach) in spring and the Festival of Weeks (Shavuoth) in early summer (these Biblical festivals are mentioned in Deuteronomy 16:19 et al.). Passover is the Festival of Liberation. In the historical context it celebrates the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Egyptian oppression and slavery a few millennia ago. One gives it meaning in his own life by trying to liberate oneself from his own personal material, mental or psychological 'slavery' or addictions as well. Then one counts seven weeks, or forty-nine days (called 'counting the sefirah', the same word as the (plural) sefirot), till the time the Torah was given to Moses on Mount Sinai during the Festival of Weeks. One prepares himself by improving and refining his character and behavior, thus passing through forty-nine Gates of Improvement. It can be compared with the difficult trip in the desert after the freed slaves left Egypt, during which they prepared themselves to think and act as free men instead of as slaves, and be-



come a free nation with a covenant. One counts the sefirot in the evening with specific blessings, and by reciting Psalm 67, which counts exactly forty-nine words and is often written in the shape of a seven branched candelabra. One also ‘connects’ the kabbalistic sefirot or attributes through the ‘paths’ between them (e.g., when you take Chesed and Gevurah, loving kindness and strength, you can work on a combination of them in your own character and behavior). Every person is different, and ideally finds out his personal strengths and weaknesses, and works on them accordingly.

The important Greek admonition ‘*gnoti seauton*,’ ‘Know Yourself’, which is held dear by Masons and non-Masons alike, is written at the bottom of the sefirot tree, in large letters. It is the beginning of wisdom.

The Fiftieth Gate stands separated from the others. Because of the above mentioned efforts to improve oneself, or, as in the story, the willing-

ness to ‘do teshuvah’, to ‘return’, it does not look like an Abyss. It has hybrid architectonic elements, to emphasize that no two persons are alike and enter through the same Gate. Behind the Gate is a Torah scroll, the place the student of Rabbi Barukh returns to, as well as the Torah which is given after Forty-Nine days on Mount Sinai, but also a glowing light that has been left void of symbols or letters, and can be filled in individually in an enlightened way. In the tympanum we see a quote from Jos.1:8: “And you shall study it day and night” next to the Hebrew letter Nun, which has the numerical value of 50, and originates in the hieroglyphic pictogram for ‘water’: *panta rhei*, everything flows.

The alpha and the omega, the aleph and the taf are the beginning and the end, and symbolize the alphabets used to pass on texts of wisdom. Where would humanity be without script!?

On top of the Fiftieth Gate are the outlines of a sage (Rabbi Barukh?) and of unfortunate souls who writhe in agony, being chained by their ignorance and unguided passions.

Next to *gnoti seauton* is a so-called *iggul*, a circle consisting of concentric rings, with the word *eyn sof* (no end), symbolizing the metaphysical sciences, and a paper with the word *verbum* (word), which alludes to John 1:1 and Gen.1:3. It was a word which separated light and darkness, and brought the creation into being, the word as the beginning of everything. The Greek word *logos* (word) appears over the Forty-Nine Gates. The paper with *verbum* is surrounded by flames, the burning desire of mankind to improve themselves through knowledge and man’s innate enthusiasm. The colors blue and red reflect the Talmudic idea that the universe was composed of the cold, fluid, blue element of water and the warm, consuming, red element of fire (BT Chagigah 12a).

Above the shoulders of the student in the center is a sun, in dark blue; Petronius stated, “*Sol lucet omnibus*,” the sun shines for everybody, but Koheleth (Ecclesiastes) said, “*eyn chadash tachat ha-shemesh*,” there is nothing new under the sun. Above the student’s shoulders we see the two pillars Jachin and Boaz, which stood besides the entrance of the Temple in Jerusalem. They imply that one has to try and put forth every possible effort to help rebuild the Temple, by improving himself and the world.

Attributes of science, literature, music and knowledge in general, and an inspiring angelic figure, which can help us with this effort, are floating around the student. He clutches a scroll (knowledge) in one hand and points

with the other to the masonic tools, the compass and the square, to build and rebuild.

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For further reading I recommend:

- On the Kabbalah and its System, Gershom Scholem, 1996.
- Tales of the Hasidim: Early Masters, Martin Buber, 1947 (contains the story of the 50 gates)
- Die Fuenfzigste Pforte, Martin Buber, 1907

