

# A Religion of Tests

By Yehoshua November

I

*How beautiful*, I said,  
when I noticed the plaque above two of the synagogue's  
bookshelves:

*This collection of the Rebbe's teachings  
donated so that the soul of the departed little girl\_\_\_\_  
daughter of Rabbi\_\_\_\_ will merit an elevation.*

And I imagined the Rebbe's thoughts curling upwards  
through the minds of young men  
who had drawn books from these shelves  
on Friday evenings,  
as the Sabbath descended,

while, in the upper realms, the little girl  
experienced one weightless ascent after another,  
traveling ever deeper into the region of secrets,  
only a bodiless soul can know.

But then I thought,  
*God should not let it happen,*  
 and I imagined losing my own eldest daughter,  
 and a sharp pain found my stomach,  
 as I pictured her name and mine  
 carved plainly above the shelves.

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## II

God, You have made it clear that this is a religion of tests,  
 but in the books of mysticism  
 You have also whispered that all the while  
 You hide just behind the wall,  
 waiting for us to pass.

And in the pages of *Chasidus*,  
 You have lectured that even Your concealment  
 is a paradox.  
 The soul is exiled from the world  
 of unity above,  
 sentenced to life in a heavy and strange body,

only so that, by its own strength,  
in the darkness,  
the soul might reveal You  
in this lower world as well.

Still, as we lift our faces from our books  
and walk out the synagogue's heavy glass doors,  
we wonder if you have not hidden  
Yourself too well.

And, on more difficult days,  
some of us conclude that our tests are not  
passable, after all.

### III

Yet, once, at the Sabbath afternoon services,  
I saw a man praying.  
His hair was combed perfectly,  
but his heart was broken.  
A month earlier his son had jumped  
from the city's tallest building.

I saw him rocking back and forth in prayer  
like a flame.

The synagogue's lights reflected off his forehead,  
and everyone who was there knew  
he was very close to God, passable, after all.

*From the book G-d's Optimism*