

The Kabbalah of Repair or The Breaking of the Vessels and The Gathering of the Sparks

It was time for me to go to Israel. It was the only place for me to deepen myself in the sound that had now overwhelmed me.

I turned it over and over in my mind for months. What was the safest way to carry my oud to Israel? I knew that if I packed it into the hard shell case, the airlines would have the option of checking it through, which they prefer to do. On the other hand, if I carried it by hand I would have to pack it into the soft case, and the soft case has no protection, but when you are carrying the instrument and laying it in the luggage bin above your head, what sort of protection do you need? This is how I figured and that is what I decided to do: carry my beloved oud in my arms, in the soft case, so that there was no chance of the airlines spiriting it away and abandoning it to the handling of the baggage druids, about whom I have heard a hundred cautionary tales from other musicians.

At Kennedy airport, we checked all our luggage and I had my hands free to clutch my instrument to my heart as I stood in the line waiting to board the TWA flight from New York to Tel Aviv. They called for boarding, allowed us to pass into the “people who need assistance boarding and small children” line, and as we were waiting to enter the plane, someone pushed me and my oud was pinned for a split second between myself and the wall of the terminal. It happened so quickly and innocently that I had to recreate the scene later to understand what had come about, but by the time I entered the airplane, I was holding my beautiful oud in my hands like a duck about to be prepared for a Chinese feast, dead in my arms, limp neck, the headstock snapped at the neck, its carved rosette popped out of the sound hole and crashing about the bowels of the instrument. As I laid my oud to rest in its compartment over my seat, I felt the folly of all my planning, to have arrived before the trip began with the very eventuality I tried most to avoid. We hadn’t even left the United States and my instrument was broken.

By the time we arrived in Jerusalem, I had decided to pack up the pieces and ship it home, to myself, and when I returned, I would take it to my instrument repair man, who I was quite sure could fix it. I had no confidence in the ability of Israeli technicians to fix my instrument, so I didn’t bother to inquire. They hadn’t as yet created instruments as fine as mine in the Middle East, how could they repair them? One day, as I went to visit a friend, I passed a violin repair person whose shop was just a short block away from my friend’s office. I stopped in out of curiosity and told the man about my instrument. What kind of instrument is it? he asked. I told him it was a big lute. What kind of lute? An oud, I said. Do you

play it? he asked. He had heard of my teacher, and he assured me that he could fix my instrument. I brought it to him.

Two weeks later, I picked up my oud from the violin repair man. It made me sad to see it, because it looked like it had been broken. It was not fixed the way my repair man would have fixed it at home. At home, I would not have seen the break, the finish would have matched perfectly, the filler undetectable. The finish the Israeli violin repair man applied was glossy while the rest of the oud was rubbed with a dull finish. I saw the separation of woods and some discoloration. He was trained in the former Soviet Union, and I wondered if he had the products available to him that we had in the United States, but I didn't ask.

When the instrument was broken, I felt all the notes fly out of it like the letters that flew off the tablets when Moses broke them on the way down the mountain. I told this to the violin repair man, who was formal in conversation. He called me Mar Goodman (Mr. Goodman) and I call him Adon, which is a little more formal. He bowed slightly from the waist when I came into his studio. When I told him the story of the notes flying out of the oud, he smiled and said (in Hebrew), there is always that danger. Then he asked me to play for him, so I sat down in the middle of dozens of broken violins, I tuned it (he admonished me to always put pressure on both sides of the headstock equally, a technical as well as a metaphysical critique), and I began to play, slowly and tentatively.

Maybe it was the place, a single large room that opened up to the street through an opaque metal curtain that was drawn across the entire front of the studio. Perhaps it was Jerusalem, and this the first time I heard my instrument played there. Maybe it was the repair, there is a notion in the Kabbalah that a weakness when repaired is stronger than if there had never been a weakness at all. Perhaps it was the proximity to the source of sound, there is a teaching that when the rope that connects us all to the Source is cut and knotted up again, the distance is diminished.

I started to play, he closed his eyes and listened, then he asked me to play louder, turn it up please he said in Hebrew, and I played a little louder. I heard a sound I had never heard before emerge from my instrument. Do you hear? he said. Yes, it's beautiful, I said, in Hebrew. Thank you, he said, in English. He was smiling an impish smile, as if the secret of the broken oud and its music was something familiar to him, something that we had now shared. He had gathered the notes back into the instrument and they were fluttering around his studio. His name, by the way, was a Russian name that means heart of the strings. Heart of the strings had returned the notes to my oud. Ahhhhh, he said.

I left heart of the strings, and I walked out into the darkening Jerusalem evening clutching my oud to my chest. It was almost night, the sun making its way home in the west. I walked slowly up Palmach Street, past the Islamic

Museum, past the President's House, that's where I saw him, just on the other side of the President's house, before I came to Wingate Square.

He was walking in front of me, it was now dark dark, he took advantage of the deep breath that the city exhales at nightfall and appeared without anyone noticing. But I am sure that I saw him. He walked like an old man but he may have been young, bound with muscles. He was carrying a notebook with the stories and songs of Jerusalem in it under his arm, a hat on his head, he walked slowly and methodically ahead of me. In his notebook were not only the stories, but the interpretations, the obvious and the non-obvious, the known stories and the unknown, and the notes that had returned to my instrument in a way I had never imagined them.

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