

# Ka Kaf Kafka M'Prague

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## Before the Law- Franz Kafka

Before the law sits a gatekeeper. To this gatekeeper comes a man from the country who asks to gain entry into the law. But the gatekeeper says that he cannot grant him entry at the moment. The man thinks about it and then asks if he will be allowed to come in sometime later on. "It is possible," says the gatekeeper, "but not now." The gate to the law stands open, as always, and the gatekeeper walks to the side, so the man bends over in order to see through the gate into the inside. When the gatekeeper notices that, he laughs and says: "If it tempts you so much, try going inside in spite of my prohibition. But take note. I am powerful. And I am only the most lowly gatekeeper. But from room to room stand gatekeepers, each more powerful than the other. I cannot endure even one glimpse of the third." The man from the country has not expected such difficulties: the law should always be accessible for everyone, he thinks, but as he now looks more closely at the gatekeeper in his fur coat, at his large pointed nose and his long, thin, black Tartar's beard, he decides that it would be better to wait until he gets permission to go inside. The gatekeeper gives him a stool and allows him to sit down at the side in front of the gate. There he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to be let in, and he wears the gatekeeper out with his requests. The gatekeeper often interrogates him briefly, questioning him about his homeland and many other things, but they are indifferent questions, the kind great men put, and at the end he always tells him once more that he cannot let him inside yet. The man, who has equipped himself with many things for his journey, spends everything, no matter how valuable, to win over the gatekeeper. The latter takes it all but, as he does so, says, "I am taking this only so that you do not think you have failed to do anything." During the many years the man observes the gatekeeper almost continuously. He forgets the other gatekeepers, and this first one seems to him the only obstacle for entry into the law. He curses the unlucky circumstance, in the first years thoughtlessly and out loud; later, as he grows old, he only mumbles to himself. He becomes childish and, since in the long years studying the gatekeeper he has also come to know the fleas in his fur collar, he even asks the fleas to help him persuade the gatekeeper. Finally his eyesight grows weak, and he does not know whether things are really darker around him or whether his eyes are merely deceiving him. But he recognizes now in the darkness an illumination which breaks inextinguishably out of the gateway to the law. Now he no longer has much time to live. Before his death he gathers in his head all his experiences of the entire time up into one question which he has not yet put to the gatekeeper. He waves to him, since he can no longer lift up his stiffening body. The gatekeeper has to bend way down to him, for the great difference has changed things considerably to the disadvantage of the man. "What do you still want to know now?" asks the gatekeeper. "You are insatiable." "Everyone strives after the law," says the man, "so how is it that in these many years no one except me has requested entry?" The gatekeeper sees that the man is already dying and, in order to reach his diminishing sense of hearing, he shouts at him, "Here no one else can gain entry, since this entrance was assigned only to you. I'm going now to close it."

## The King's Son and the Servant's Son Who Heard the Melody of all the Earth's Creation- Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav

At last the prince and his servant came to the land of the Foolish People with the Wise King. The kingdom was girt around by a high wall, and there was only one gate in the wall, through which strangers might pass into the kingdom. They followed the wall for a long time until they came to the gate. But the guards at the gate would not allow them to enter, for the king of that country had died, and though his son who ruled after him was learned when compared to other men, he was so little wise when compared to his father that the country was now called the land of the Wise People with the Foolish King. And the former king had commanded that only the man who could again make the country known as the land of the Foolish People with the Wise King should be crowned to succeed him. So no one was allowed to enter the country unless he undertook to make it the land of the Wise King.

"Can you do that?" the guards asked of the prince.

"How can I do that?" thought the prince, and he was afraid to try. His slave said, "Let us go home." But as they stood there another stranger, riding a horse, came and stopped by the gate to the kingdom. Then as the prince saw the horse he thought, "Now I can try the magic flute!" and he ran up and touched the horse with the

reed. At once the animal began to sing the wildly sweet song of the beasts, and all who heard were astonished.

The stranger who rode the horse cried, "Sell me that magic reed!" But the prince would not part with it.

"Fool!" said the stranger, and he was as one who was known to them, "Of what use can the reed be to you? You will go about making jokes with it, and perhaps someone will give you a gulden for your folly! Rather become a man than a child. I have a thing I can give you in exchange for the wand."

"What is it?" asked the prince.

"I can give you the secret of understanding the meaning of the thing within the thing. It is a secret that was given me by my father, who had it from his father, who had it from his own father before him. And I have never told it to anyone."

The prince was satisfied, and gave the man

the flute, and the man went aside with him and taught him to know the meaning that is at the heart of each thing.

And when the prince understood how one thing comes from another, he returned to the gate, and knew that he must go in and try to give back to the land its former name. So he was taken before the court of noblemen who were the judges of wisdom, and they said to him, "Know, that we ourselves are no fools, but the king who died was so marvelously wise that against him we were as fools, and the country was called the land of the Foolish People with the Wise King. When the king died he left a son who was no simpleton, but against our wisdom he seemed as simple as a fool, so the land was changed and called the land of the Wise People with the Foolish King. Now whoever brings back the former name may be crowned our ruler, but if you would test your wisdom for this task you must go into the garden that was left by our wise king."

He was told that the king's garden was a wondrous place where things of gold and silver grew, but that since the king's death no man had been able to remain in the garden, for as soon as he entered, he was pursued, and he would run, and run faster, but he would be pursued until he ran out of the garden, and pursued until he was far away.

## Burnt Books: Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav and Franz Kafka- Rodger Kamenetz (8)

We know Kafka read Martin Buber's German rendition of the tales. Perhaps some literary detective could follow this trail. But my experience in reading felt more uncanny. Often I found that a Franz Kafka story asked a question that a Rabbi Nachman tale answered.

Since kabbalah presents an expansive theory of the universe far beyond time and space, mere literary influence feels too pedestrian. A more intriguing proposition is that Franz Kafka actually influenced Rabbi Nachman.

## Burnt Books: Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav and Franz Kafka- Rodger Kamenetz (41)

For me, Rabbi Nachman is Rosh Hashanah and Franz Kafka is Yom Kippur