

*La Agua de la Sota, or  
The Ordeal of Jealousy  
by Viktor Levi, 1889*

*Translated from Ladino by Nesi Altaras*

המים המרים המאררים

או

לה אנואה די לה סוטה

סדר

ב'יקטור לוי

דומאנסו איגטיריסאנטי

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קון לה חאונוריאקסיון דיז וניקטיריון די  
לה אינקטרוקסיון סובליקה .

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חינפרינדיז חין לה חינפרינטה די

איל טילינראפ'ו

5649—1889

The front matter of the novella. The title is in Hebrew (*Ha-mayim ha-marim ha-me'arerim*) and the subtitle—*La Agua de la Sota*—is in Ladino. The middle section contains the authorization of the Ottoman censorship bureau, “The Ministry of Public Instruction.”

## Translator's Introduction

Viktor Levi was a Ladino writer and newspaperman born in Istanbul in 1865 (d. Istanbul, 1940). *The Ordeal of Jealousy*, which was published at the press of the Istanbul-based *El Telegrafo* in 1889, is not simply a melodramatic family story. The crux of the story (and the title) is the out-of-use public fidelity test described in the Torah's Book of Numbers and in the Mishna. Levi alters this ancient custom to heighten the drama. As scholar Michael Alpert explains, Levi's *romanso* is part of a genre of Ladino literature centered on infidelity.

Levi sets the story in Jerusalem at the time of Solomon's Temple. By using the fig leaf of a villainous high priest in biblical times, Levi launches a searing critique of the corruption at the Chief Rabbinate in Istanbul. Despite the historical cover, his criticism was certainly noticed. Chief Rabbi Moshe Levi declared that the book should not be bought and that those who had it should burn it. This strong reaction makes the story even more interesting.

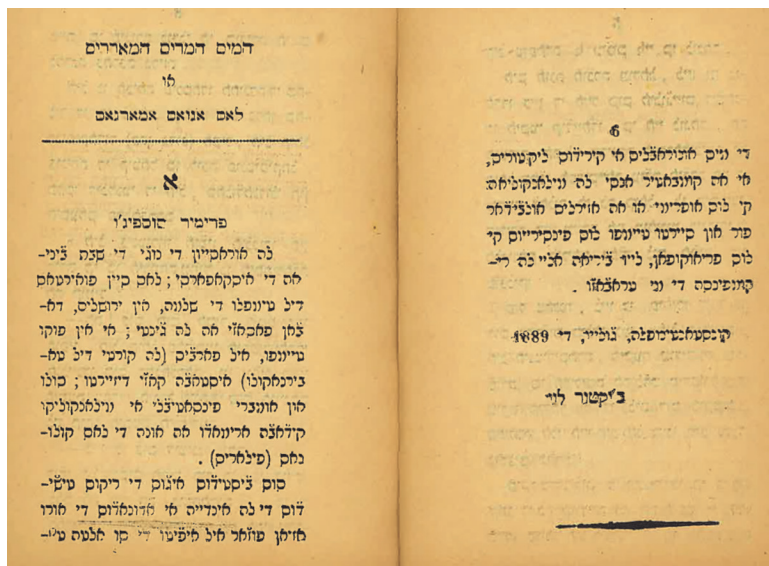
Levi likely received Jewish religious education at a local *meldar* (traditional Sephardic schooling), and he almost certainly received some schooling in French, though we do not know exactly at which institution or for how long. As Alpert relays, Levi was an editor or owner of various Ladino periodicals, a novelist, and a translator of French literature. His language, especially in his introduction, is florid and reflects his Francophile tendency, evinced by his Gallicisms and French borrowings. But the story is not merely the product of a Westernized Ottoman, reproducing French literary forms in his native tongue. Levi brings to bear deep knowledge about the Torah and Talmud, down to the names of areas of biblical Jerusalem. He uses this knowledge as a cudgel against the religious establishment and as a vehicle for expressing his proto-feminist ideas. These ideas motivated him across the years as an outspoken activist for the abolition of sex trafficking, for which Istanbul had become a major node during his lifetime.

Like much of Ladino literature, *The Ordeal of Jealousy* was published in Rashi letters, a modified Hebrew script used by Ladino presses. But over the twentieth century, Ladino became romanized, and new learners mostly engaged with the language in Latin letters.

Thus, transliterations have proliferated to introduce older works to new readers. A transliterated version of *The Ordeal of Jealousy* was published in Istanbul's *El Amaneser* in 2022. This novella can serve as an entry point to Ladino literature, a collection of works that are still underrated among scholars of Jewish literature.

## Work Cited

Alpert, Michael. "An Anti-Clerical Judeo-Spanish Novel in Defence of Ill-Treated Women: Víctor Levi's 'Hamávim hamarim hame'ar'erim o la Agua de la sotá.'" *Ladinar* 9 (2017): xxxi–xli.



The opening pages of the novella, including the author's introduction.

## *La Agua de la Sota, or The Ordeal of Jealousy*

### Prologue

In recent times, when the Judeo-Spanish press has expanded remarkably, as periodicals enlighten the masses and as more and more novels are translated, I believed I, too, should add my efforts, however weak in proportion, to those demonstrated by many of our competent coreligionists who have set their sights on the laudable goal of enriching Judeo-Spanish literature.

Today, thanks to the efforts of these men of letters, lovers of reading have small libraries in their homes adorned in a satisfactory manner with newspapers, periodicals, and other things corresponding to their needs in every moment: newspapers to brighten their horizons considerably, novels and stories for moments of rest, science for moments when the spirit is thirsty for marvels, statistics to satisfy their capricious curiosity at any moment, useful advice responding to the greatest needs of practical life, etc., etc.

In these libraries, my small endeavor cannot have the pretense of occupying one of the better spots; modest in its format, it is also humble in its intentions. A small corner, dusty and dark, on one of the bottom shelves, in a small, hidden, neglected, forgotten corner, there at least it will find its place. It is a moral work, and I keep myself from singing its praises, leaving this care, if there is a place for it, to others, to the Jewish press, which knows how to assess each work to its just value and which, I hope, will want to put an account of a few lines under the eyes of the public.

Therefore, I cannot say but two things: it will please you and it will interest you. This modest pamphlet is for people of all ages, and also of both sexes. I created this with the sole aim of making it useful.

Thus, as this work grips the reader from beginning to end with interest, I will draw the attention of my honorable and beloved readers, and thus to combat the melancholy with which they come to me, or hear them forget, for a certain time, the thoughts that worry them. I shall see this as the recompense of my work.

Konstantinopla, July of 1889

Viktor Levi

## Aleph—The First Suspicion

The evening Shabbat prayer had just ended; the hundred doors of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem gave way to the people, in little time the floor (the court of the altar) was virtually deserted. Only one man, pensive and melancholic, remained, leaning against one of the columns.

His clothes were made of rich fabrics from India and adorned in gold, increasing the effect of his grand stature, his noble and severe figure, and his long gray beard.

He had not yet thought to leave his spot when the high priest (*hakham gadol*) Asher, who had just taken off his pontifical robes, came in front of him, greeting him with these words:

“The Lucky Ofen has surely forgotten that his beautiful wife is waiting for him to eat?”

“Ah! Asher,” answered Ofen, who seemed to wake up hearing his words. “My wife ate this afternoon at the home of one of her friends who is ill.”

So said Asher, “I won’t keep you any longer . . . because doubtlessly you are going to go look for her . . . unless you hand this responsibility off to that young orphan boy you adopted five years ago during Sukkot.”

“Yes, thank God,” responded Ofen, smiling.

“You don’t sound too excited about attending to the needs of your new wife.”

“You should learn to listen better, Asher,” said Ofen, as if he wanted to dispense with an annoying thought. “The feast of the cabins, as you already know, takes place in autumn, the most beautiful season of the year. The season of flowers and fruits. This holiday is celebrated to bless the products of the earth, and thus the divine hand that makes them grow. Wicker cabins are made in front of our doors. It is necessary, during the whole time that the feast goes on, to have our meals together. How could I bring myself to partake in the pleasures of the holiday while refusing hospitality to a dying boy? That boy, Amial, was a child.”

“And today he is no longer one,” said Asher with an air of indifference.

Ofen said, "I remember, it was the first day of these grand celebrations, and the meal had already been prepared in the cabin. Held back at home to deal with a few religious obligations, I had just gone downstairs when Izel came to me, her eyes glassy with tears: 'Sir,' she said to me, 'a boy . . . a poor orphan has presented himself at your door, he is homeless! He is without refuge . . . ah! May the first year of our union be marked by a good deed and may the first holiday that I am celebrating under the roof of my husband be for his wife and his servant a memory of his generous charity! My friend, do not refuse me the first wish I have asked of you!' Izel was so beautiful, so moving in the way that she spoke to me, that I promised her to be the boy's protector. I returned to the cabin with her. A small boy was leaning against the hut. To me, he seemed no older than twelve. He was thirteen. I took him by the hand, invited him in, sat him down at my table, and called him 'my son.' I hope that I will never have reason to regret this deed."

"I hope so too, for your sake," Asher said darkly.

"You say that in a peculiar tone," said Ofen, on whose face a lively redness was replacing his usual pallor.

"But . . . this is my regular tone."

"I already know that you are my enemy," the husband of Izel repeated heartily.

"Me? Your enemy?!" cried the high priest with an air of benevolence that sharply contrasted with his hard and severe physiognomy. "Ofen, I might be your rival . . . but not your enemy, never! Having heard of her beauty, I had asked to marry Izel, the daughter of the widow Shiras of the valley of Hebron, her only daughter, I believe. I was refused. You were accepted. It's true that at first, I hated you, but later I consoled myself: the refusal of my proposal, my fortune, was lucky. It was lucky that this marriage did not come to be . . . Izel was fifteen at the time, I was already fifty . . ."

"That's my age now," said Ofen.

"Izel is beautiful, while the years and worries have transformed my face."

"And mine also," said Ofen in turn.

"Izel is sweet, smart . . . but young, lively . . ."

“Asher!”

“Like everyone her age,” rushed to add the high priest, without appearing to pay much attention to this pause, “and I, I am . . . suspicious . . . jealous . . . so . . .”

Ofen sighed with pain.

“I have a younger brother at home . . .”

“And I—a stranger,” murmured Ofen.

“A boy of thirteen,” continued Asher, “but after five years, he is eighteen; and Izel—twenty. The difference isn’t so great. This boy is becoming a young man, whose blond beard will put my gray beard to shame, and his words will seem sweeter and mine—harsher, perhaps . . .”

“Asher!” yelled Ofen, losing his patience.

“In short,” the high priest went on, seemingly without hearing or seeing the anguish displayed on Ofen’s face, “my young wife would have pulled away, and surely, I . . .”

“Asher!” repeated Ofen, his voice trembling with emotion.

“As I said, I am jealous . . . and . . .”

“Mercy! Ah . . .”

“Jealousy would have poisoned my days and nights,” Asher continued, emotionless.

“Oh, that I sense,” murmured Ofen.

“I would believe I was being cuckolded . . . and maybe I would have been!”

“You terrible man! Shut up!” screamed the husband of Izel, shaking his clenched fists.

“I’m not saying this about you, of course!” responded Asher, with apparent delight.

“What!” said Ofen, his voice multiplying in echoes. “What! You barbarian, don’t you understand that each of your words is a jab of the knife that you stab deep into my heart? Sure, unlike you, I do not have a brother. I have at my home a stranger!”

“But maybe he is not Izel’s lover?” the high priest responded.

“And who can assure me of that?”

“Well, you! You said you are not jealous.”

“And who told you that I am not jealous?” responded the unfortunate husband, his teeth clenched and his hand on the hilt of his dagger.



“None other than wise conduct, which everyone admires,” said Asher—his tone constant since the beginning of this dialogue, “the liberty you allow your young wife to enjoy, the trust you have in this young man Amial, who you let so close to her.”

“It is a trust that neither one abuses . . .”

“And who says otherwise?” Asher said. “Certainly I have no doubts, but . . .”

“Stop there!” said Ofen, gripping him by his coat.

“Excuse me if I may,” responded the high priest, wanting to get away.

“You may not leave me, sir,” yelled Ofen without letting go. “You will explain your words, explain that strange ‘but’ . . .!”

“I do not know anything,” Asher said genially, “I swear to you. Then again, I am like you: simple, trusting, and certainly I am not one of those who thinks your wife is cheating on you . . .”

“Cheating on me!” Ofen repeated staggering side to side like he had just taken a blow to the head. “Cheating on me! God of Israel, I am losing my head! Could this be the truth?! And others besides me have seen this?!”

“You must not upset yourself merely because of talk from wretched people. There are many who have nothing better to do than probe the interior lives of families. Many good-for-nothings whose sole occupation is to go here and there, telling what they have seen, what they have heard . . .”

“But what have they heard?! What have they seen?!” Ofen yelled, sweating. “I am going to go mad, Asher! Speak or kill me with a single blow . . . that would be more generous.”

“To be honest, Ofen,” Asher responded in cold blood, which could not be more at odds with the irritation that Izel’s husband was feeling, “to be honest, it is not wise or prudent to listen to what they say . . . Amial does not love your wife, without a doubt. He loves her as the wife of his protector, he loves her as a mother. And it is calumny, I swear to you, when they say that they spend the night together on the terrace.”

“And tonight, she was there,” Ofen said.

“Surely the orphan was not there.”

“He, too, was there, and I was as well.”

“Yes, tonight you were, but the others . . .” Asher said, throwing his words in Ofen’s face.

“The others!” Ofen repeated angrily, “The others! Are you a man, a snake or a demon? What is it you want? That I kill my wife, and this orphan, and you along with them? Asher! Take back your words. Pull back from my mind these suspicions that you have brought. Have mercy on me!”

“Your pain moves me!” Asher responded, squeezing his hand in a pragmatic move of friendship. “Come, come dine at my home. I already have a solution for how you could ascertain that your wife loves you.”

“How?”

“With one of our sacred customs that is not used much these days, one I wish to reestablish.”

“Which custom?”

“I am going to explain it to you—come!” Asher said, putting his arm under Ofen’s and pulling him out of the temple.

### **Bet—The Terrace**

It was already late at night when Ofen, passing through a major street of Jerusalem, came to knock on the door of his house. An old slave came to open it.

“Where is Izel?” he asked with such a spent voice that the slave raised her lamp to shine some light on the face of the inquirer, Ofen, to ensure that he really was his owner.

“Where is Izel?” Ofen repeated.

“On the terrace.”

“Alone?”

“No sir, the young Amial is with her.”

In an instant, Ofen found himself on the terrace, and with one look he had examined it in its entirety.

The night was clear and serene, as are the most beautiful nights of the East; thousands of stars of gold twinkled on a blue sky and formed a beautiful walkway toward the moon, which had just appeared.

In one corner of the terrace, some slaves were seated on straw mats. They were speaking in low voices. In the other part, Izel,

unveiled,<sup>1</sup> was sitting on some cushions, singing a psalm of David in a sweet, peaceful voice. Amial was sitting at her feet. Izel was smiling as she sang, and she looked at him as if she was playing with the emotions that she saw on the young man's face.

When they saw that Ofen was near them, they did not change their disposition at all: Izel continued to sing and Amial to listen. Still, when she arrived at a high note, the beautiful woman must have noticed her husband, raising her eyes toward him, noticing his cold and severe demeanor, and stood up, completely flustered. "Sir," she said, "What is going on with you? What happened?"

Ofen, declaring slowly and stressing each word, "Why did you leave the house of your friend Rika before I came to collect you?"

"Sir," responded Izel, her husband's tone bringing tears to her eyes, "you had not given me any order, my friend had gone to sleep, it had gotten late, and Amial was already there . . ."

"Amial! Amial!" repeated Ofen, unable to suppress his anger, "And what was Amial doing at your friend's house?"

To this unexpected question, the young and fearful wife had no answer. Amial stepped in, "My father," he said, "night was getting closer, and hoping to meet you, I went after you and Izel. When I arrived at Rika's, I realized that you had not come there. And thinking that you would be here at home already, we rushed, your wife and I, to come back here."

"Both of you have behaved badly," Ofen replied harshly.

"My God!" Izel said, letting the tears that she could no longer hold back run down her cheeks. "Sir, I ask you . . . forgive me . . . but I did not know that you would get so angry over this!"

To get the truth, Ofen thought it best to hide the suspicion that was piercing his heart under an air of calm. He sat among the cushions, took his wife by the hand and pulled her closer to his side. Wrapping his arm around her graceful figure, placing his hand on

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<sup>1</sup> Our honorable readers: Do not forget that Jewish women carried themselves this way by covering their faces with veils in front of strangers. Currently, this custom is conserved among our coreligionists in many countries of the extreme Orient.

hers to keep track of her heartbeat, he addressed Amial: "My son," he told him, "you are already eighteen years of age."

"As of last month," responded Amial, trying to make sense of these words.

"Are you aware you are no longer a little boy? Amial! And it is a great shame for you, being so big and strong, to spend your time like this, in women's quarters."

"What would you like me to do my father?" Amial responded, dejected. "I am an orphan, I have no one else in this world besides you . . . and Izel," he added, looking at the young woman who was smiling sweetly.

Ofen squeezed Izel's arm so tightly that it made her scream. Without paying attention to this, he added, "You are a man, and a man who does not want to expose himself as dishonorable must do as 'a man' does."

"If there were a war, I would serve . . . but the king of Israel lives in peace and harmony with his neighbors."

"In peace, just as in war, the state needs soldiers," Ofen said with a severe tone.

"I hear you, sir," the orphan said proudly.

"You want Amial to be a soldier?!" cried Izel.

"You will respond or provide your opinion only when I ask," Ofen responded.

The silence that followed this exchange seemed to weigh even on the slaves who had gathered in the corner. Ofen broke this silence a minute later.

"Hezekiah, the captain of the guards, is a relative of mine and my friend. He will receive you into the corps he commands. I will give you a letter to give him. Amial, you shall leave tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!" Izel yelled unintentionally. "Tomorrow!"

"Something the matter?" her husband asked calmly.

"You are being cruel to me, sir," said Izel, lowering her voice and pointing with a fearful gesture to the hilt of her husband's dagger that was nestled in his belt and that sat between her and her husband. "You are doing me an unkindness," she repeated, trying to get away.

"Wait!" Ofen said with an explosive voice that echoed from terrace to terrace.

The poor wife did not dare speak another word. A flash of indignation passed through the big blue eyes of the young orphan. He almost erupted . . . then he settled down.

“What time shall I come to receive your orders, sir?” Amial asked when he was finally able to hide his profound emotional distress.

“Two hours after sunrise,” Ofen responded coldly.

Amial bowed and exited.

Ofen got up and gave various orders to his slaves with a tone that made everyone shudder. An hour later, silence reigned in the abode of the rich man where the three main characters live, and, as our readers already know, none were able to sleep.

### **Gimel — The Shores of the Kidron**

Before the sun rose, Asher and Ofen were strolling along the shore of the Kidron.

“Is the ordeal of jealousy, this test of the bitter waters, infallible?” Ofen asked.

“Infallible?!” his friend responded with a pensive, knowledgeable tone.

“My reason will not let me believe it.”

“God’s might is great!”

“Yes, but if Izel is not guilty?” Ofen said, as if talking to himself.

“She will look more beautiful.”

“And if she is guilty?”

“Her body will swell and then she will die.”

“Asher!” the husband of Izel said, glaring around the deserted landscape around the Kidron River, whose waters were lapping up at his feet. “Asher, she must die! Do you understand?”

“The justice of God will prevail.”

“Asher!” Ofen went on, “You are an expert of the Law, and I am, too. But you are the high priest, and I am not. Your fancy words might work for the masses, but they lose their effect with me. So let’s speak with our faces bare, without veils, without covering up anything. Let’s not speak like a learned man speaking to an ignorant Levi, but man to man. Let’s sit down, but first let’s see if anyone is around to hear us.”

“Who would want to get up before the sun? Unless he is jealous or a scrooge, he would not be awake,” responded Asher, taking a seat on the trunk of a tree that had fallen because of a storm.

Ofen also sat down.

“I am a cuckold, Asher,” he said in a low voice. “I have been cheated. My wife and the orphan are lovers! Are you shaken? They are lovers! I am sure of it!”

Overtaken by emotion, which caused this train of thought, he fell silent for a moment. Then he started up again:

“It was yesterday, late yesterday when I became certain. If I do not kill the infidel and the ingrate both with the same knife, it is because I want nothing less than a dazzling revenge, vengeance that will serve as an example to all women, that will ensure that in the future, all husbands can rest assured. And I want Izel to die. Not at night, under the covers, murdered, assassinated, strangled by my hands. I want her to die at high noon, in the middle of the sacred temple, in front of the God of Israel. I want her to die on the test of the bitter waters. Do you understand me now, Asher?”

“The water in the ordeal is not inherently harmful; it only hurts guilty women, Ofen,” responded Asher.

“If I were the high priest, it would be up to my discretion, Asher.”

“The dust I mix into the water for the ceremony is taken from the floor of the temple.”

“Bitter herbs are mixed in with the dust . . .”

“I prepare two cups: one for the wife, one for the husband.”

“Put a sign on one of the cups, Asher.”

The light of wild joy shone in the eyes of the Kohen. An infernal thought appeared to redden his short and narrow brow.

“All deeds must be compensated,” he said, coldly.

From his belt, Ofen took out a knitted bag full of gold and gave it to Asher.

“But before doing it,” said Asher, “I want you to ensure that I . . . even if Izel deserves the fate you are preparing . . . I wish to have with her an hour of conversation . . . alone . . . me and her.”

“It seems you are dreaming!”

The priest got up.

“Asher,” Ofen said while getting up in turn, “ask me for something else.”

“Well, you want to do the test of the bitter waters . . . as you say . . . maybe speak to someone else then . . .” he said, inching away as he spoke.

“Asher!” yelled Ofen, “you have my secret.”

“I regret it so, and I am miserable, sir, to not have one to give you in return.”

Ofen thought for a minute about killing him, but he said instead, with the manner of a violent man:<sup>2</sup>

“Asher, when would you like to speak to my wife?”

“In the afternoon, after the *minha* prayer is over.”

“Fine, then it shall be.”

And without saluting each other, without exchanging looks, they both went their separate ways.

### **Dalet—The Goodbyes**

It was already daytime when Izel and the young man went down to the street from Ofen’s house.

“Brother!”

“Sister,” they called to each other as they threw their arms around one another.

“Amial! We must confess everything to my husband,” the young wife said through her tears.

“Never! Sister,” Amial said forcefully, “listen and be warned. Our father departed for that long voyage ten years ago, from which, ah, he never returned! He took me with him on that trip. You were then ten years old, and I eight. Shortly after, our mother, may God rest her soul, learned that the boat on which we had embarked on this voyage had sunk, along with the people and goods on board. I know these details from old Eli, our relative. Listen, sister—he told me—apart from all this, that the death of our dear father changed nothing of our fortune. When you got to a marriageable age, many men bid for your hand. Our mother narrowed the choice down to two: Asher the priest and Ofen, the most honorable and wealthiest man in Jerusalem. What a thing! The one who offered a larger

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<sup>2</sup> Originally, this thought is attributed to Asher, but that was, most likely, an error of the author.

dowry, Ofen, was the one that our mother preferred. She was so pleased to have him as a son-in-law that she promised him her entire fortune. In the meantime—listen well, Izel—our mother, she alone, knew that I was alive, that a sailor from the ship had swum to my rescue, that of this fortune she had promised to your betrothed, half belonged to me. But she was afraid that by admitting to Ofen that she had found her son, she would break up this matrimony. She kept silent and your marriage was done. You then followed your husband here, to Jerusalem.”

“And you, poor boy,” Izel said, putting her loving arms around the young man’s neck and bringing her lips to his brow, “you dear boy, when, five years ago, you came to the Valley of Josaphat, looking for a mother, a fortune, you found nothing, but this letter entrusted to Eli. Ah! Let me read it again, Amial, so that it gives me the strength to resist the current desire to tell everything to my husband, so that I hear one more time the last wishes of our mother, so I can take encouragement to obey her commands.”

Then, taking from Amial’s hands a parchment that he had taken from his bosom, the young woman cleaned her brow filled with sweat, her tearful eyes, and read out loud:

*My son,*

*When you return to the roof under which you were born, you will not find anything besides a plea; the plea of a dead woman that begs you not to dishonor her memory, the plea of a mother that has a confession to make, a pardon to ask for, but who, even in her tomb, does not wish to be embarrassed before her son or to ask for pardon from her son.*

*Our relative Eli will tell you the events that took place before your sister’s marriage. When I told Ofen that I had no other child besides Izel, I was telling lies. I had just been informed that you were still living. In my final hour, this lie weighed on me because who knows, will my lie tar my daughter’s honor? Will she have to blush every time her husband accuses her of having cheated him?*

*With that, my son, from the bottom of my tomb, this is the plea that your mother makes to you:*

*Be near your sister, tell her all this, order her to stay quiet, for the sake of my memory.*



*After you become a man, Amial, you will work, and with God's help, you will earn, I hope in this way, the fortune of which I robbed you.*

*Oh my son! May the God of Israel sustain you and give you, and likewise to your sister, the courage to fulfill my last wishes!*

*Your mother,*

*Shiras*

“So, you see that you must stay silent, Izel,” Amial said, taking the parchment.

“Ah!” Izel responded crying and throwing her head on her brother's shoulder.

“Courage,” he added with goodness, “Courage. Ofen does not know of the ties that bind us. He is jealous of our friendship, and he has reason to be. He wants me to go. A little earlier, a little later, don't we have to wake up? Shall I live like this all my life, under the care of your husband?”

“Under his care?!” Izel repeated in the tone of a sweet complaint. “I am the one who . . .”

“Hush!” said the young man, putting his hand on his sister's lips, “hush and bid me farewell!”

“Amial, listen to me. Do not leave Jerusalem this morning, or this afternoon, not even tomorrow. I beg you, grant me two more days for me to get used to our separation. So that I can tell myself: my brother is here, two steps away, and I can see him if I want to . . .”

“What childishness!” Amial said with affection.

“Do not refuse me!” She turned with her arms trembling. “Wait until tomorrow afternoon, at the foot of the Tower of David. I will come . . . or I will send a slave.”

“Very well, I promise.”

Suddenly, he pushed her away brusquely and left her arms; he had just noticed his brother-in-law.

“Forgive us for our tears and our goodbyes, sir,” said the young man with a dignity rife with sadness. “Izel is like a sister to me. I owe her the protection that you have accorded to a poor orphan. She took care of me, raised me—do not punish her for her pain.”

“I already know what must be believed to grant pardon, my son,” Izel's husband responded coldly. “Go join the army corps that you

are assigned to. I am giving you the horse you love the most and three sacks full of gold," he added, pulling them out of his belt and handing them to him.

Amial was going to refuse these offerings. A sign from his sister made him accept.

"Now, sir," he said to Ofen, "it is as a brother that I receive these gifts."

Then, fearing every minute that his sister would betray everything, he shook Ofen's hand, glanced affectionately at Izel, and quickly went away.

"Now it is just us two," Ofen said between his lips as he took his wife by the arm to force her into the house.

### He—The False Pilgrim

Leaning against the marble balustrade that surrounded the terrace of the house, Izel was gazing at a black point in the horizon. It was the Tower of David, where her brother ought to be waiting for her. She was shaken from this contemplation by the arrival of a slave.

"Madam, a pilgrim asks for your hospitality," he said, after bowing to kiss the ground with his brow.

"May hospitality be extended to him," Izel responded without taking her eyes off the black point.

The slave left, then returned once more.

"The pilgrim wishes a personal audience with you."

"Where is your owner?" Izel said.

"At the *tefilla* prayer," the slave responded.

"I do not receive anyone in the absence of your master; be gone!"

The slave went away but did not take long to reappear.

"The pilgrim asks for this audience in the name of humanity."

"I cannot!"

"In the name of your life, which he says, is in great danger."

"Be gone, leave me."

"In the name of your husband . . ."

"I cannot! I should not receive this man," Izel responded while thinking.

"In the name of the orphan Amial," added the slave, lowering his voice.

"May this pilgrim enter," she yelled hastily.

Izel covered up with her veil, but she had hardly taken one look at the pilgrim who had just been introduced that she exclaimed:

“Asher!”

“Daughter of Shiras, wife of Ofen, said the priest, I must speak to you without witnesses.”

Izel made a signal; the slave disappeared.

“Speak now, sir,” she said with an icy dignity.

“Daughter of Shiras,” said Asher, “before, your mother refused my proposal, she preferred Ofen . . . the rich Ofen. The spirit of jealousy reigns in the heart of your husband. Tomorrow you will be called in the temple by my voice and you will be forced to pass the test of the bitter waters.”

“I am not scared, sir,” Izel responded, unmoved.

“Girl,” Asher said, getting closer to Izel, “you are not afraid, and you would be right, perhaps, if the hand of God prepared the waters for the ordeal. But it is the hand of men . . .”

“Is it not your hand, Asher?”

“Yes. It is mine! And for that I asked to speak to you.”

After lowering his voice, the priest continued:

“Listen, young lady, and know that if you repeat any of these words that I am about to say to you, I will accuse you of lying. Your husband wishes for your death. And on his orders, I will poison the cup that will be given to you.”

“You vile slanderer!” Izel yelled, standing up, shaking and disturbed.

“This bag,” asked Asher calmly, taking a bag full of gold out of his belt, “do you recognize it?”

Agitated, Izel responded, “It was made by my own hand!”

“It is the price of your death!” the priest murmured.

Izel covered her face with her hands and began to cry behind her veil.

“But, if you want, this will become the price of your husband’s death.”

“You terrible man!” Izel yelled, recoiling in disgust.

“Listen,” the priest went on, “tomorrow during the ceremony, there will be two cups: one for you and one for your husband. One of the two will be poisoned. Promise to be my wife in one year and

one day, and you will leave the ordeal beautiful and pure, sure that you are righteous!”

Then, when Izel seemed unable to understand the meaning of his words, he added:

“What? Don’t you understand that if you drink from the healthy cup, your husband will drink the other and that tomorrow afternoon you will be a widow?”

“Infamy!” She yelled to God.

Before Asher had the time to know where she had disappeared to, a slave appeared, commanding him on behalf of his mistress to leave the house this instant.

### **Vav — The Test of the Bitter Waters**

The people of Jerusalem diligently and curiously filed into the Temple of Solomon. Each said hesitantly that the spirit of jealousy had conquered the rich Ofen, he had called on his wife to pass the test of the bitter waters.

When everyone had been seated—the men in the temple and the women in the upper galleries, covered in rags from top to bottom—a terrible silence reigned, even though there were throngs of people, this being a terrible ordeal that was being prepared. The spectators could not stop themselves from trembling in fear for this poor wife, so young, so beautiful, suspected of a crime, on whom the power of God was, maybe, going to manifest in a cruel manner.

The high priest had just appeared. He went step-by-step up the stairs to the altar. When he arrived at the sacred ark, he bent down to the ground and got up.

A man and a woman had followed him from a short distance. The man, dark and nervous, seemed to look at nothing except the bread that was in his two hands. It was Ofen.

The woman, which was Izel, walked on the left of her husband. She was fully wrapped up in a large veil of white wool. Even from behind it, her youth and her beauty were seen.

A heavy, thick atmosphere seemed to weigh on the crowded assembly and made every brow furrow pensively, all the faces uneasy. The husband, placing the bread on the altar, spoke these words: “The spirit of jealousy has overtaken my heart: I demand the test of the bitter waters for my wife.”

“This test of yours is accepted,” the priest responded.

“To that effect,” continued the husband, “I brought an offering: tenth of the semolina flour from a bushel of wheat, in which I neither mixed oil nor added any substance. It is a bread of jealousy, a memorial bread, to remind the memory of unfairness, the corruption of the customs.”

“Wife of Ofen, come closer!” said the priest. Izel took a few steps forward. Her way of walking displayed her fear clearly. Her legs were shaking.

The high priest, with an earthenware jug of holy water, filled the two cups that a young boy brought to him. Then, he collected dust from the floor of the temple two times. He put what he collected in the first of these cups. He collected another two times and did the same for the second cup. Placing the cups on the altar, he approached Ofen’s wife and removed her veil. A howl of admiration was heard arising from this beauty, so fair, so pure. A sweet mercy had won over every heart.

“Oh! Grace! Grace! For her!” yelled many voices, together.

The priest continued his ministry. He took the bread from the husband’s hands to place it on the hands of the wife, and nearing his mouth to Izel’s ear:

“You still have time,” he said to her. “Consent to be my wife.”

“Never!” screamed the accused, in disgust.

“One of these two cups is going to proclaim your innocence, the other will make you appear as a criminal!”

“Ah! My God! Have mercy on me!” Izel said, without responding to the priest.

“Give me one word, Izel,” he went on, “just tell me ‘yes.’”

“Kohen,” she responded proudly and with disdain, “finish the ceremony, and may the will of God be fulfilled!”

Asher took the cups angrily, and with a voice that he labored in vain to make solemn, but which a sort of convulsion kept from changing, he said, “Daughter of Shiras, wife of Ofen, if, being under the authority of your husband, you stayed wise and pure, may these bitter waters leave your body unchanged. However, if on the contrary, being under the authority of your husband, you stayed neither wise nor pure, may these bitter waters entering your

entrails make your body swell, your limbs fall off—such is the law of jealousy.”

The priests finished his words thus, and as he was stating the text of the law, he was alternately pale and blushed. Then, he put down the cup that he had in his hand and wiped his face covered with sweat.

He broke the bread, burned it, and neared Izel once again with the intention of trying his proposal again, but she pulled herself back. Annoyed, Asher brusquely took the cup and, placing it in Izel’s hands, said in a loud voice, from which only she understood the threat, “Drink, wife of Ofen.” Izel’s small hands took the cup, and, turning toward Ofen, who was looking at her in somber silence, she fell to her knees in front of him.

“Sir,” she said to him, crying and in a way that could not be heard by anyone except her husband, “since yesterday, I have been begging you for a moment of conversation, and you have been pushing me away. They tell me your wish is that I die. I love you and respect you, despite this harsh wish . . . but at this moment, appearing before God, allow me to testify to you that I am innocent, that she who you have honored with your name and your love will die with her dignity and without having cheated the other. Sir, have mercy on me!”

“And Amial? Amial!” murmured Ofen.

“Ah! Amial! Amial!” Izel repeated in a tone so sweet that Ofen got away from his wife and yelled at her in anger.

“Drink these waters, you vile creature, and pay the price of your crime.”

This injustice revived the victim. She got up, noble and calm: “People of Israel!” she said in a voice that seemed to echo off each column of the temple, the silence was so deep. “People of Israel! You, men, may you judge me, and you women, may you hear me. I swear to you that I am innocent, that my heart is pure, that my lips are righteous . . . and with all that, I am still afraid of this test. Because you could take the malice of men for the justice of God! Oh God! Forgive my enemies as I forgive them!”

Finishing these words, she brought the cup to her lips, drank its contents, and her beautiful black eyes, raised toward the sky, lowered little by little and met the heads of the men who surrounded her, an

immobile person, a mute, who looked as though she listened without hearing and saw without watching.

“Farewell, Amial,” Izel yelled, “Farewell!”

“Now it is your turn to drink, sir,” Asher said to Ofen, giving the second cup to the husband.

The minute he was about to put it to his lips, Amial jumped from his place, pushing everyone who stood in his path away, right and left, and came to take Izel in his arms, yelling:

“My sister! Sister! They have slandered you!”

The poor woman had fainted.

“Her brother!” repeated Ofen, whose hands the cup had escaped and, falling on the marble floor of the temple, broke.

“Here, sir,” Amial said coldly, giving him the parchment that his mother had left him as inheritance.

Ofen read it, in his despair, he was going to accuse the priest of having caused the death of Izel and of himself, when Asher spoke into his ear in a very low voice:

“The poison was not in this cup.”

“Then where was it?” Ofen asked moving back out of fear.

“In neither!” the high priest responded, his eyes fixed on the drink spilled on the floor.

“Ah! Izel! Could you ever forgive me?” Ofen said, expressing profound and touching repentance.

“Sir,” the young and beautiful woman responded, looking at the hand that Ofen had extended with love, “I am yours. You have the right to freely dispose of my life.”

Ofen, leaning against his brother-in-law and holding up Izel, stepped out of the temple. He left with his head held high, his gaze proud and menacing before the high priest who had lowered his eyes to not see this good fortune that he could not break. And the people spread out through Jerusalem, returning to their homes declaring the virtue of Izel who came out victorious from the ordeal of jealousy.