

The Cave of the Holy Child

Steven Tarlow

Despite repeated warnings and his own great fat
 Rav Nachman managed once to squeeze
 Into the cave where a holy child was buried.
 He lowered himself by a tree root
 Which fed into the cave. Once down, he beat on
 The smooth floor with a stick.
 He felt the walls and sniffed the guano
 In their crevices. No snakes—
 He yelled up to his followers—
 No sign of snakes. They murmured
 At the cave mouth like children.
 They did not smell what he smelled.
 He lay at the back of the cave
 Next to the small tomb and whispered
 Over it—The root is firm,
 The root is firm. He thought of the one substance
 And how it was hatched, how light
 First forked from its root.
 But his followers grew anxious
 At the cave mouth; they wanted him back.
 So he hauled himself up by the tree and brushed
 The guano from his clothing.
 The floor is smooth enough to sleep on,
 He assured them. The tree is solid.
 He did not speak, then or ever, of the weak
 Root light which coiled around the tomb.

Steven Tarlow has published poems in Tikkun, Northwest Review, Southern Poetry Review, and many other journals. He has also published translations from Hebrew of the poems of Pinchas Sadeh. He works as a manager of software development projects for a pharmaceutical firm.