

Fool's Paradise

Somewhere, sometime, there lived a rich man whose name was Kadish. He had an only son who was called Atzel. In the household of Kadish there lived a distant relative, an orphan girl, called Aksah. Atzel was a tall boy with black hair and black eyes. Aksah had blue eyes and golden hair. Both were about the same age. As children, they ate together, studied together, played together. It was taken for granted that when they grew up they would marry.

But when they had grown up, Atzel suddenly became ill. It was a sickness no one had ever heard of before: Atzel imagined that he was dead.

How did such an idea come to him? It seems he had had an old nurse who constantly told stories about paradise. She had told him that in paradise it was not necessary to work or to study. In paradise one ate the meat of wild oxen and the flesh of whales; one drank the wine that the Lord reserved for the just; one slept late into the day; and one had no duties.

Atzel was lazy by nature. He hated to get up early and to study. He knew that one day he would have to take over his father's business and he did not want to.

Since the only way to get to paradise was to die, he had made up his mind to do just that as quickly as possible. He thought about it so much that soon he began to imagine that he was dead.

Of course his parents became terribly worried. Aksah cried in secret. The family did everything possible to try to convince Atzel that he was alive, but he refused to believe them. He would say, "Why don't you bury me? You see that I am dead. Because of you I cannot get to paradise."

Many doctors were called in to examine Atzel, and all tried to convince the boy that he was alive. They pointed out that he was talking and eating. But before long Atzel began to eat less, and he rarely spoke. His family feared that he would die.

In despair, Kadish went to consult a great specialist, celebrated for his knowledge and wisdom. His name was Dr. Yoetz. After listening to a description of Atzel's illness, he said to Kadish, "I promise to cure your son in eight days, on one condition. You must do whatever I tell you to, no matter how strange it may seem."

orphan - child whose parents are dead
taken for granted - taken for sure
convince - make him understand
bury - place the dead body in the ground
wisdom - great cleverness and knowledge
cure - make healthy

Kadish agreed, and Dr. Yoetz said he would visit Atzel that same day. Kadish went home and told his wife, Aksah and the servants that all were to follow the doctor's orders without question.

When Dr. Yoetz arrived, he was taken to Atzel's room. The boy lay on his bed, pale and thin from fasting.

The doctor took one look at Atzel and called out, "Why do you keep a dead body in the house? Why don't you make a funeral?"

On hearing these words the parents became terribly frightened, but Atzel's face lit up with a smile and he said, "You see, I was right."

Although Kadish and his wife were bewildered by the doctor's words, they remembered Kadish's promise, and went immediately to make arrangements for the funeral.

The doctor requested that a room be prepared to look like paradise. The walls were hung with white satin. The windows were shuttered and draperies tightly drawn. Candles burned day and night. The servants were dressed in white with wings on their backs and were to play angels.

Atzel was placed in an open coffin, and a funeral ceremony was held. Atzel was so exhausted with happiness that he slept right through it. When he awoke, he found himself in a room he didn't recognize. "Where am I?" he asked.

"In paradise, my lord", a winged servant replied.

"I'm terribly hungry", Atzel said. "I'd like some whale flesh and sacred wine."

The chief servant clapped his hands and in came men servants and maids, all with wings on their backs, bearing golden trays laden with meat, fish, pomegranates and persimmons, pineapples and peaches. A tall servant with a long white beard carried a golden goblet full of wine.

Atzel ate ravenously. When he had finished, he declared he wanted to rest. Two angels undressed and bathed him, and carried him to a bed with silken sheets and a purple velvet canopy. Atzel immediately fell into a deep and happy sleep.

When he awoke, it was morning but it could just as well have been night. The shutters were closed, and the candles were burning. As soon as the servants saw that Atzel was awake, they brought in exactly the same meal as the day before.

Atzel asked, "Don't you have any milk, coffee, fresh rolls and butter?"

"No, my lord. In paradise one always eats the same food", the servant replied.

fasting - not eating
funeral - ceremony of placing a dead body in the ground
bewildered - very surprised, puzzled
draperies - curtains
coffin - box in which a dead body is placed in the earth
bearing - carrying
laden - full of
ravenously - hungrily

90 "Is it already day, or is it still night?" Atzel asked.
 "In paradise there is neither day nor night."
 Atzel again ate the fish, meat, fruit, and drank the wine, but his appetite was not as good as it had been. When he had finished, he asked, "What time is it?"
 "In paradise time does not exist", the servant answered.
 95 "What shall I do now?" Atzel questioned.
 "In paradise, my lord, one doesn't do anything."
 "Where are the other saints?" Atzel inquired.
 "In paradise each family has a place of its own."
 "Can't one go visiting?"
 100 "In paradise the dwellings are too far from each other for visiting. It would take thousands of years to go from one to the other."
 "When will my family come?" Atzel asked.
 "Your father still has twenty years to live, your mother
 105 thirty. And as long as they live they can't come here."
 "What about Aksah?"
 "She has fifty years to live."
 "Do I have to be alone all that time?"
 110 "Yes, my lord."
 For a while Atzel shook his head, pondering. Then he asked, "What is Aksah going to do?"
 "Right now, she's mourning for you. But sooner or later she will forget you, meet another young man, and marry. That's how it is with the living."
 115 Atzel got up and began to walk to and fro. For the first time in years he had a desire to do something, but there was nothing to do in his paradise. He missed his father; he longed for his mother; he yearned for Aksah. He wished he had something to study; he dreamed of traveling; he wanted to ride his horse, to talk to friends.
 The time came when he could no longer conceal his sadness. He remarked to one of the servants, "I see now that it is not as bad to live as I had thought."
 "To live, my lord, is difficult. One has to study, work,
 125 do business: Here everything is easy."
 "I would rather chop wood and carry stones than sit here. And how long will this last?"
 "Forever."
 "Stay here forever?" Atzel began to tear his hair in
 130 grief. "I'd rather kill myself."
 "A dead man cannot kill himself."
 On the eighth day, when Atzel had reached the deepest despair, one of the servants, as had been arranged, came to him and said, "My lord, there has been a mistake. You are
 135 not dead. You must leave paradise."

*dwelling*s – houses, flats
pondering – thinking
mourning – crying or being sad because of somebody's death
to and fro – to and from, up and down
longed – felt strong desire for
yearned – desired strongly
conceal – hide
chop – cut up
grief – great pain
despair – loss of hope

"I'm alive?"
 "Yes, you are alive, and I will bring you back to earth."
 Atzel was beside himself with joy. The servant blindfolded him, and after leading him back and forth through the long corridors of the house, brought him to the room where his family was waiting and uncovered his eyes.
 140 It was a bright day, and the sun shone through the open windows. In the garden outside, the birds were singing and the bees buzzing. Joyfully, he embraced and kissed his parents and Aksah.
 145 And to Aksah he said, "Do you still love me?"
 "Yes, I do, Atzel. I could not forget you."
 "If that is so, it is time we got married."

It was not long before the wedding took place. Dr. Yoetz was the guest of honor. Musicians played; guests came from faraway cities. All brought fine gifts for the bride and groom. The celebration lasted seven days and seven nights.
 150 Atzel and Aksah were extremely happy, and both lived to a ripe old age. Atzel stopped being lazy and became the most diligent merchant in the whole region.
 155 It was not until after the wedding that Atzel learned how Dr. Yoetz had cured him, and that he had lived in a fool's paradise. In the years to come, he and Aksah often told the tale of Dr. Yoetz's wonderful cure to their children and grandchildren, always finishing with the words, "But, of course, what paradise is really like, no one can tell."
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beside himself with joy – extremely happy
blindfolded – covered his eyes with a scarf
diligent – hardworking

