

## A FLOCK OF ANGELS

### *A Rosh Hodesh Tale*

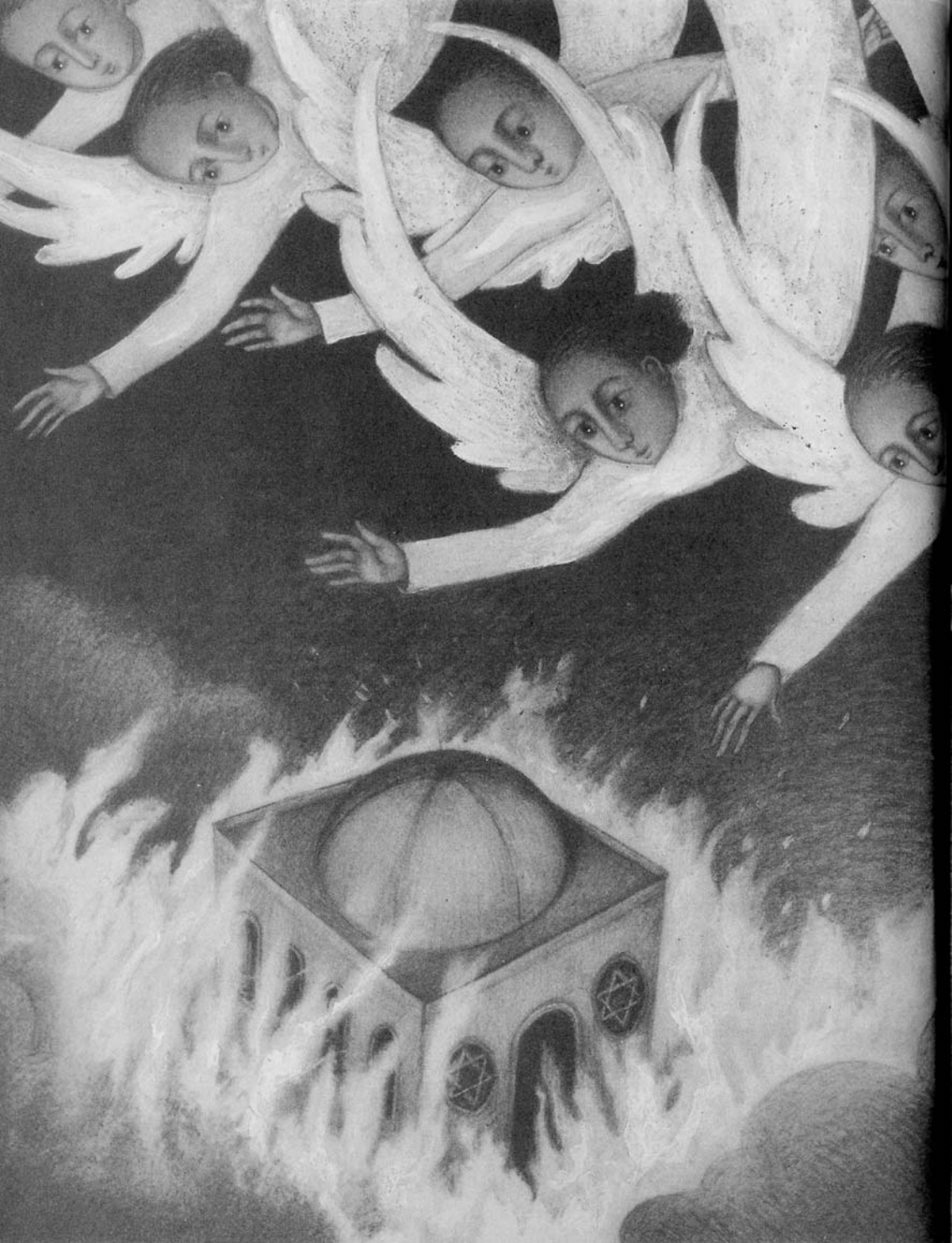


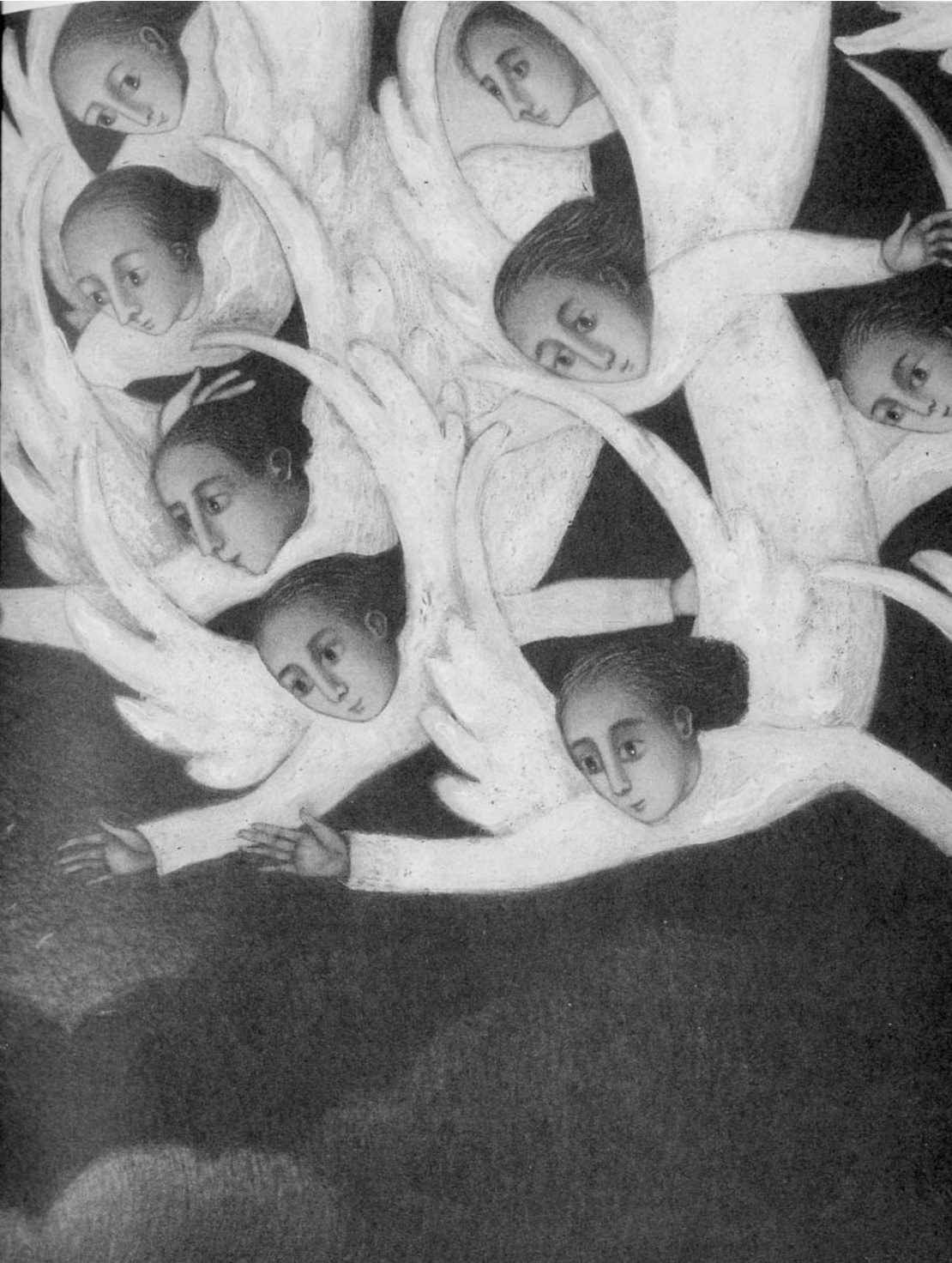
Long ago, in the Kurdish town of Mosul, there lived a young woman named Asenath who was known for performing wonders. Her blessings were often sought by women who wished to have babies, or by sick people who wished to be cured. Her touch had healing powers, especially for children.

Asenath had learned everything from her father, Rabbi Samuel Barzani, who was well acquainted with the secrets of Heaven. He had taught these secrets to her until her wisdom and powers were as great as his own. It was whispered among the people that the spirit of her father rested upon her, and for this reason she was known as Rabbi Asenath.

After Rabbi Samuel died, he often came to his daughter in dreams. He would reveal dangers to her and tell her how to ward them off, saving many lives. One night Asenath dreamed that Rabbi Samuel told her to go to the Kurdish town of Amadiyah for Rosh Hodesh, the celebration of the new moon. He told her that the Jews of Amadiyah needed her protection.

When it became known that Rabbi Asenath was planning to travel to Amadiyah, the people of her town pleaded with her not to go, for things had become dangerous for the Jews living there. "All Jews have been warned to stay away from Amadiyah," they warned her. "If you go, you will surely be risking your life!" But Asenath had made up her mind. She bid farewell to the people of her town and began her journey.





When Rabbi Asenath reached the town that she had visited so often, she was given great respect as a holy woman. But the people were upset when she told them that they should celebrate Rosh Hodesh outdoors, so they could see the crescent of the new moon, as was their custom. They wanted to stay in the safety of the synagogue, for they knew they were surrounded by enemies and that their very lives were in danger. "Don't be afraid," she told them. And their faith in God and their trust in her were so great that they agreed to proceed as in the past, despite the danger.

So on the night of Rosh Hodesh, all the people came out to celebrate the new moon and the new month. At first they were cautious, yet soon they were singing and dancing in the town square with abandon. But suddenly there were shouts and they saw flames shoot up into the sky. The synagogue had been set on fire! Thank God, no one had been inside it. Yet they could not bear to see their synagogue consumed in flames. Many men had to be held back so they wouldn't run inside and be burned to death while trying to save the Torah scrolls. Everywhere people wept, falling to their knees, for they knew the flames were fast approaching the Ark where the Torahs were kept.

At that very moment, Rabbi Asenath whispered a secret name, one that she had learned from her father. All at once the people heard a loud flapping and a great wind swirled around them, and they thought that a flock of birds must be overhead. But when they looked up, they saw a flock of angels descending to the roof of the synagogue. The angels beat the flames with their wings, until every last spark had been put out. Then they rose up into the heavens like a flock of white doves and were gone.

The people were awestruck. They cried out, "Angels! Angels!" And when the smoke cleared, they saw that another miracle had taken place: the synagogue had not burned. Nor was a single letter of any of the Torahs touched by the flames.

When the enemies of the Jews learned of the miracle of the angels and saw how the synagogue had been saved from the fire, they were so fearful that they dared not harm the hair of even a single Jew.

As for the Jews of that town, they wept and prayed and thanked God for saving

them and their beloved synagogue. And they were so grateful to Rabbi Asenath that they renamed the synagogue after her, and it is still standing to this day.

And all this came to pass because of Rabbi Asenath's courage and loyalty in honoring her father's wish, conveyed in a dream, that she go to that town for the celebration of the new moon.

*Kurdistan, seventeenth century*

ABOUT  
"A FLOCK OF ANGELS"



*Rosh Hodesh*

Rosh Hodesh marks the beginning of a new Jewish month. The new month begins when the new moon appears. In Biblical times, months were calculated by the moon, and Rosh Hodesh was a minor festival. Special offerings were made, and the shofar, the ram's horn, was sounded, as written in Psalms 81:4: *Sound the shofar on the new moon . . . for the festive day.* In talmudic times, the beginning of a new month was declared when two witnesses saw the crescent of a new moon and reported it to the Sanhedrin, the high court. They relayed this information by lighting signal fires on hilltops.

Jewish legend records that God made Rosh Hodesh a special day for women, to reward them for refusing to help their husbands build the golden calf at Mount Sinai. It was traditional for women not to work on this day. In recent years, Jewish women have rediscovered Rosh Hodesh

as a time to celebrate the rebirth and renewal of women and the moon. They also choose Rosh Hodesh for a naming ceremony for baby daughters or as a time to meet for religious and educational purposes.

*Rabbi Asenath Barzani*

Until the modern era, very few women were given the title of “Rabbi.” But sometimes a woman’s wisdom and learning were so exceptional that this title was given to her. Such is the case with Rabbi Asenath Barzani, who lived in Mosul, Kurdistan, from 1590 to 1670. Another instance was Hannah Rochel Werbermacher, known as the Maid of Ludomir, who lived in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century and was also recognized as a rabbi. Rabbi Asenath was the daughter of Rabbi Samuel Barzani, who headed many yeshivas (schools for Jewish students) during his lifetime, and whose authority in Kurdistan was absolute. He was a master of Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition, and he was said to have taught many of its secrets to his daughter.

After Rabbi Barzani died, many Jews made pilgrimages to his grave in Amadiyah. His daughter adored her father, whom she regarded as a king of Israel. He was her primary teacher, and after his death she took over many of his duties. Not only did Asenath serve as a rabbi, but she became the head of the Yeshivah of Mosul, and eventually became known as the chief teacher of Torah in Kurdistan. In addition, she was a poet and an expert on Jewish literature, and there are many Kurdish legends about the miracles she performed, such as the one described in “A Flock of Angels.”