

The Legend of Rabbi Ben Levi

By Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Rabbi Ben Levi, on the Sabbath, read
A volume of the Law, in which it said,
“No man shall look upon my face and live”
And as he read, he prayed that God would give
His faithful servant grace with mortal eye
To look upon His face and yet not die.
Then fell a sudden shadow on the page,
And, lifting up his eyes, grown dim with age,
He saw the Angel of Death before him stand,
Holding a naked sword in his right hand.

Rabbi Ben Levi was a righteous man,
Yet through his veins a chill of terror ran
With trembling voice he said, “What wilt thou here?”
The Angel answered, “Lo! the time draws near
When thou must die; yet first, by God’s decree,
Whate’er thou askest shall be granted thee.”
Replied the Rabbi, “Let these living eyes
First look upon my place in Paradise.”

Then said the Angel, “Come with me and look.”
Rabbi Ben Levi closed the sacred book,
And rising, and uplifting his gray head,
“Give me thy sword,” he to the Angel said,
“Lest thou shouldst fall upon me by the way.”
The Angel smiled and hastened to obey,
Then led him forth to the Celestial Town,
And set him on the wall, whence, gazing down,
Rabbi Ben Levi, with his living eyes,
Might look upon his place in Paradise.

Then straight into the city of the Lord
The Rabbi leaped with the Death-Angel’s sword,
And through the streets there swept a sudden breath
Of something there unknown, which men call death.
Meanwhile the Angel stayed without, and cried, “Come back!”
To which the Rabbi’s voice replied,
“No! in the name of God, whom I adore,
I swear that hence I will depart no more

Then all the Angels cried, "O Holy One,
See what the son of Levi here hath done!
The kingdom of Heaven he takes by violence,
And in Thy name refuses to go hence!"
The Lord replied, "My Angels, be not wroth;
Did e'er the son of Levi break his oath?
Let him remain; for he with mortal eye
Shall look upon my face and yet not die."

Beyond the outer wall the Angel of Death
Heard the great voice, and said, with panting breath,
"Give back the sword, and let me go my way.
Whereat the Rabbi paused, and answered, "Nay!
Anguish enough already hath it caused
Among the sons of men." And while he paused
He heard the awful mandate of the Lord
Resounding through the air, "Give back the sword

The Rabbi bowed his head in silent prayer,
Then said he to the dreadful Angel, "Swear
No human eye shall look on it again;
But when thou takest away the souls of men,
Thyself unseen, and with an unseen sword,
Thou wilt perform the bidding of the Lord."
The Angel took the sword again, and swore,
And walks on earth unseen forevermore.