

# The Return of Hayy Ibn Yaqzan

A symbolic Reverie

## Introduction

Hayy ibn Yaqzan (Arabic: Alive son of Awake), is the name of the protagonist of one of the masterpieces of the Arabic literature of the Golden Age of Islam. Its topic has been taken up, in succession, by a few of the most cosmopolitan Arabic minds. The first of these was the illustrious physician/philosopher of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century **Ibn Sina** (Latin: Avicenna). Today the story is mostly associated with the Andalusian philosopher/physician of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century **Ibn Tofail**, whose version had a profound influence on the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment in Europe. It is the story of an infant whose mother abandons it on a raft to protect his life. The child lands on an inhabited island and is raised by a gazelle without any contact with human beings. When his gazelle mother dies of old age, he tries desperately to revive her and dissects her body to find out what caused her death. This incident taught the growing child to exercise his reasoning faculties in understanding the workings of Nature. With time, he matures and reaches the highest ranges of mind and intuits the Unity of all creation and the necessity for the existence of a Maker who is the Origin of all things. Later on, a religious castaway lands on the island and joins Hayy. He teaches him human speech, and together they discover that the knowledge Hayy acquired through reasoning fully agrees with the Knowledge the religious man received from his Holy Scriptures. Ibn Tofail's story "Hay ibn Yaqzan" became, five centuries later, the model for Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe" and, still later, other stories like Jungle Book and Tarzan.

Readers interested to know more than the above summary, will find good materials on the web and YouTube such as the full text of Ibn Tofail in several languages, and the original Arabic text in the form of an audio book.

I offer my symbolic story "The Return of Hayy ibn Yaqzan" as an ardent prayer that the spirit of the Golden Age of Islam, characterized by an intense seeking for Knowledge and Unity may return and replace the current spirit of defeatism, apathy and isolation.

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One day, long ago, Hayy suddenly stood in front of my house, as if he had materialized from nowhere. The house, a fine mansion that had belonged to countless generations of my family, was at the time quite dilapidated, though some signs of its bygone glory were still recognizable. My immediate ancestors had not done much to maintain it; and I, the only resident now, hadn't fared better either. To keep up appearances, I tried to keep the front yard facing the elegant quiet street in good shape, while totally neglecting the huge garden at the back of the house. The garden was all covered now

by tall weeds; only a few old trees were still distinguishable in the general disarray. Only two wings of the house were used, one by myself; the other by occasional friends and family when they paid me a visit.

It was a warm and sunny spring afternoon; I was happily planting flower bulbs in the front yard, when I noticed a man standing there looking hesitantly around. I had not heard any car that might have dropped him off where he stood; and I was somewhat surprised by his sudden appearance. He was neatly dressed, had thick dark black hair and a dark tan; I thought he must be quite strong to be able to move around with such a heavy suitcase.

Advancing towards the fence, I offered my help. He asked me, in good English and an accent I could not identify, if I knew of any apartment in the immediate neighborhood he could rent for a few months. He introduced himself by his first name and added that he liked the area because of its neatness and quietness and that he would much rather have private quarters than stay in a hotel. His dignified face, and the way he spoke, filled me with so much trust and confidence, that I spontaneously offered him my vacant guest wing. He stepped in, inspected the rooms and seemed quite satisfied. A sudden inspiration moved me to tell him: "If you like, you are welcome to have my rooms; I will not charge you any rent, if you promise to help me, in return, with some manual work around the garden and the house." He jumped at my suggestion saying that renovating old houses was exactly what he loved to do, whenever he got the chance. We marveled at having reached such a fortunate arrangement for both of us in less than ten minutes.

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In the following days, I rarely saw Hayy. I used to leave for work early in the mornings; and when I came back in the afternoon, I was always delighted to discover some improvements in the property that were not there the day before. We did meet occasionally in the kitchen, which he was entitled to use. Otherwise, Hayy was quiet and retiring; hardly any sounds came to me from his quarter. The only signs of his presence were the lights showing in his windows or from under his door. From the quantity of books he received regularly at the post office, I assumed he must be filling his evenings with reading or doing some kind of research.

The ingenuity and caliber of the work Hayy was investing, day after day, in a house not his own, filled me with gratitude and appreciation. He had already done unasked in a few weeks work whose value would easily cover his rent for a year. My wish to know him better grew steadily, and I finally asked him if he would care to share dinner with me. Cooking for two, I said, was, after all, hardly more effort, and surely more satisfying, than cooking for myself alone. He thankfully accepted.

Our relationship entered a new phase. We developed the habit of spending some time chatting together after dinner. In the beginning, he had a lot to tell me about the projects he would still like to carry out for me. The material expenses for these projects were always modest and within the range I could afford, and I gladly went along with everything he suggested.

Slowly the ice of formality and reserve began to recede in front of the warmth and the cordiality steadily growing between us. At first we talked about general topics. Hayy seemed not particularly interested in the local news, but showed, on the other hand, great interest in the global issues of the day. He loved to link these issues to events of world history and to reflect upon their probable developments in the future. Whenever I dared to ask Hayy personal questions, he evaded either by skillfully changing the topic or by giving enigmatic replies which left me as much in the dark as I had been before. The few times I insisted on getting from him a clear response, he simply ignored my question and leaned back, with closed eyes, in his armchair. One time, on protesting that all I knew about him was his first name, I told Hayy I needed, for legal reasons, to know at least his full name; he was, after all, my tenant. Unperturbed, he said: "Nonsense, my first name should do; it is the name people have associated me with in the last eight hundred years!" I must admit that I did not appreciate his sense of humor. But I had learned my lesson. I decided to stop putting him under pressure and to be more cautious in approaching him in the future. Fortunately, I did find an approach that worked.

My new approach consisted in sharing more of my own life, without expecting Hayy to reciprocate. I had always wished for a close friend with whom I could converse about deeper issues of the heart. One evening, I casually mentioned to Hayy that, from time to time, I have bouts of unpleasant thoughts, feelings of loneliness and apprehensions of aging and death. To my gratification, he listened with great attention and concentration. He asked me to say more and listened silently, occasionally giving an approving nod or an expression of genuine empathy. He was very reticent in offering ready-made solutions, and whenever I specifically asked for advice, he used to say: "I do not believe in the utility of advice. Do not worry though. Someday soon you will find yourself the answers to all your questions. There is only one piece of advice that I can give you, and it is the only one you will ever get from me: to become conscious of the Divine Presence in yourself, and to surrender totally to this Presence. To live this highest knowledge concretely is a major achievement; it does not happen overnight. If you really want it, you must want it with all your heart, and you must have a lot of patience and perseverance. But you will be helped, and one day you will reach your goal."

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Days and weeks sped by. The house was being gradually transformed in front of my eyes. Every time I went into the garden, I was overwhelmed by waves of bliss and

gratitude. This outer change reflected positively on my inner state and gave me ultimately the strength to make some important decisions. I stopped taking new assignments at work and started joining Hayy in completing the outstanding renovation projects. I felt carried by a new force hitherto unknown to me. My health improved considerably; headaches, insomnia, and depressions seemed now a thing of the past. I wondered how the encounter with one human being, who concretely demonstrates to us true love and selflessness, could influence my life in such a dramatic way. Hayy's single example was enough to efface countless disappointments and setbacks I had experienced in the past.

I can recall only one incident in which Hayy went totally out of his reticence. I provoked him one evening by saying: "What are all these books you receive? One would suspect you must be trading in them!" He smiled and said: "I am glad you asked; I was waiting for an opportunity to tell you about my other interests. For ages I have been very active in building philosophical bridges, that is, in finding a synthesis between seemingly conflicting views which had divided people into camps ready to fight each other to the last breath. The ancient conflict between Matter and Soul or Nature and God has troubled humanity since times immemorial; but seems now to have been widely resolved. Then came the great conflict between Religion and Science, but humanity seems to have gone beyond that one as well. An increasing number of scientists succeed these days in harmonizing their Science with their Spiritual Convictions. Humanity is now ready for the Grand Synthesis, namely the ancient knowledge, particularly well-developed in India, that God and His Creation are **One**. If this knowledge is concretely applied, and not confined to the realm of metaphysics, it would solve all the problems afflicting the world today. I am one of many who are currently working towards narrowing the gap between the notion of God the One and Only and that of God the One and All. With some goodwill and flexibility, one can see that if God is everything, He will also necessarily be The One and Only, since nothing could exist outside Him. What I have just said might sound like irrelevant metaphysical chatter to you; but in fact, if well understood and applied, it will remove a great deal of the suspicion and alienation still separating major religious groups today, thus paving the road towards establishing a united humanity and a lasting Peace on earth."

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One marvelous autumn day, Hayy and I were silently contemplating the garden, now awash in the bright colors of trees, flowers and butterflies and the happy sounds of birds, frogs and bees, when he suddenly declared: "As you remember, my plan has been, from the beginning, to spend only a few months here. Soon I will have to leave; the call to my next assignment is becoming more urgent. The last day of this month will be my last day here."

Though I had been expecting this announcement for some time, it struck me with great force when it finally came; I had to pull together all my inner resources to

control my emotions. In my agony, a faint hope shimmered through my head and made me appeal to Hayy to become the co-owner and heir to my property. My hope was that sharing the property with him would guarantee keeping our contact alive. Hayy's face lit up. He said: "What you have just said makes me very happy, but not for the reasons you would expect. I am deeply comforted to see how much progress you have made inwardly and outwardly in the last months, and I know now for sure that you will be able to progress further on your own. I cannot accept your offer, for which I thank you warmly all the same. Financially, I am well cared for, and I always receive what I need for my work. To do the kind of work I do, one should not have attachments of any kind. I have no doubt though that you will be guided and shown the best way for investing your money to the welfare of all, thus securing your own happiness."

A long pause ensued. I felt strongly the inappropriateness of words in such a moment of the soul. In addition, Hayy was in deep concentration, and I did not want to shake him out of it. He finally looked at me and said with a big smile: "I still have one request: that we spend some time meditating together in the remaining days. I suggest we meditate, for half an hour each day. We can do it after supper. It would be a great help if we refrain from all unnecessary talk. Should your meditation bring up relevant issues you would care to share, you are welcome to do that the next morning. In these meditations, I will try to establish an inner contact with you. If I succeed, it would make it easier for me to make contact from wherever I may be in the future."

His wish to maintain contact dispersed much of my gloom, and I willingly accepted his proposal. I had never done any serious meditation before, though I had developed, in the course of my education and career, some capacity for concentration. I welcomed the opportunity of meditating with a friend, whom I highly admired and who had grown to be my mentor and guide.

Already by the first meditation, I noticed a great difference. Very soon, a solid peace came down that shut out quite naturally all stray thoughts. I felt as if I had invisible wings with which I could travel instantly to distant places I had visited in earlier travels. My travels were not limited to space alone; I could as easily travel in time. In a later meditation, incidents, totally forgotten or suppressed, suddenly surfaced in my mind, in all their colorful details. I saw them now in a different light and could intuit in them significances I had never thought of before. I understood how they had influenced the overall flow of my life. Whenever painful memories surfaced, I could infuse them with new meanings, thus imbedding them in peace. In later meditations, I relived the highlights of my relationships with departed relatives and friends and recognized the deeper reasons for the experiences we shared together. In some meditations, I did not get into trance at all; I just sat quietly reviewing my life, giving thanks for all its blessings and asking for guidance and help in surmounting whatever obstacles I seemed to have at that time. I invariably experienced the next day, or soon

after, that these obstacles were either removed or they proved to have had no reality in the first place.

In one of the meditations I saw my entire life as one natural sequence of events pointing in a certain direction, and I knew with certainty how I should design my future life. I decided in the meditation itself to retire at the first opportunity; I had worked long enough, and it was time for me to live according to the dictates of my soul, and not according to the necessities of life. I wondered why I had delayed taking this decision so long, since my financial situation had always been secure. A new framework for my life stood complete; all I needed was to fill in the details.

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The last day came. When it arrived, I resisted with all my strength getting sentimental about Hayy's imminent departure. All I can remember about the last meditation is that it was peaceful and blissful and much longer than all our previous meditations.

When I opened my eyes, the room was dark. My trance must have lasted for an hour or so. Hayy was not in his chair; I assumed he must have retired to his room to prepare for his early departure next morning. I went to his room and found no light shining from under the door. He must have already gone to bed. I decided to sleep on the living room sofa, to be sure I could hear him next morning and drive him to the nearby train station. When I woke up, the sun was already high in the sky. I jumped from the sofa and went directly to his room. The door was shut. All this seemed very strange to me; I opened the door and looked inside. Everything was absolutely still, and the room gave me the impression that it had not been touched for some time. I looked around for any farewell note he might have left me, but could find none. I rushed to the station in the hope his train might have had a delay. The station was very quiet; only individual passengers were moving about. I went to the ticket counter to ask about the destinations of the trains which had left early that morning. I was told there hadn't been any. The last train had left the station the evening before.

I came home with a heavy heart. The house was sparkling in golden light. I took a stroll in the garden and was immediately welcomed by the teeming and blissful life of plants, birds and insects. From the way Hayy had arranged things so he could disappear unnoticed, I knew I would probably never set eyes on him again. But he had expressed his wish to keep inner contact, and I was sure I would receive an inner sign soon. To avoid falling back into loneliness and gloom, I decided to start that same day preparing for big changes in my outer life. Since that day, I have kept up my meditations; they seemed to me the most probable means of contact.

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The last months had brought many surprises, but the last big one was yet to come. About a month after his disappearance, I happened to be in the university library not far from my house. While casually browsing the shelves in the World Literature section, I chanced on a book titled *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*. The title resonated strongly with something deep inside me; I was immediately drawn to the book and opened it at random. My eyes fell on the following paragraph:

*“He next considered those Bodies which have neither Sense, Nutrition nor Growth, such as Stones, Earth, Water, Air, and Flame, ... upon which Contemplation it appeared to him that all Bodies, as well those that had Life, as those that had not, as well those that moved, as those that rested in their Natural places were **One.**”*

A few pages later I read: *“And when he perceived that all things which did exist were the one Maker’s Workmanship, he looked them over again, considering in them attentively the Power of their Author, and admiring the Wonderfulness of the Workmanship, and such accurate Wisdom and subtle Knowledge. And there appeared to him in the most minute Creatures (much more in the greater) such Footsteps and wonders of the Work of Creation, that he was swallowed up with Admiration, and fully assured that these things could not proceed from any other than an Agent of infinite Perfection, nay that was above all Perfection....”*

Suddenly lightning tore through my whole being. In a flash, I knew at last who Hayy was. All his mysterious assertions such as “having been known by that name in the last eight hundred years” and “having worked for ages on building philosophical bridges” acquired suddenly their true significance. He had come into my life to show me, by example, what it takes to guide and help other people, and he always insisted I should discover the Inner Divine Guide within myself, to be able to stand on my own feet. Since this stunning recognition, I have endeavored to follow Hayy’s example and to realize his maxim.

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Twenty years have passed since; I am now what people commonly call an “old man” — I have to say that old age is not that bad after all. Until this day, I have never shared my experience with Hayy with anyone; I saw no point in exposing myself to incredulity and ridicule. But major changes have happened in the world in these last years, and people from all walks of life and from the four quarters of the globe, have been increasingly opening to spirituality. I am now convinced that a few of these know that symbols, ideals and dreams can sometimes influence and change our lives much more strongly and positively than mere facts and so-called concrete realities. To these few I dedicate my story.

PS:

- My warmest thanks to John Robert Cornell for his perceptive editing of this story
- The two paragraphs cited above are taken from the excellent English translation of “Hayy ibn Yaqzan” made by the Orientalist Simon Ockley in the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century.