

WHO WILL BE MINE FOR TODAY?



by RUTH CALDERON
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The Talmud recounts:

When Rav would visit Darshish, he would announce: Who will be mine for a day?

And when Rav Nachman would visit Shechantziv, he would announce: Who will be mine for a day?

[How could the rabbis do this?] Wasn't it taught that Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov said: A person should not marry one woman in one country and then go and marry another woman in another country, lest the children of the two marriages pair up together and a brother inadvertently marry his sister??

And concerning this, it is written: "And the land will become filled with depravity" (Leviticus 19:29).

They say [in response to this objection]: The rabbis were famous [so that any children they had would be recognized as their offspring].

But Rava said [in another objection]: If marriage was proposed to a woman and she accepted, she is required to observe seven clean days [of menstrual purity].

The rabbis would inform the women of their arrival ahead of time. They would send a messenger in advance to publicize the marriage proposal.

Or if you wish to say: The visiting rabbi would simply stay alone with the woman [and not sleep with her, and thus the period of seven clean days was unnecessary]. Because there is no comparison between a person who has bread in his basket and one who does not. [That is, a man would be happy simply to have a woman by his side, i.e. "bread in his basket."]

B. Yoma 18b



When Rav would come to Darshish, once or twice a year, the whole synagogue would get caught up in a frenzy of excitement, and Rav would lock himself up for hours in the study house to settle matters of law that had been left unresolved. On Shabbat he would come up to pray in the synagogue at the top of the hill, which overlooked the whole town and its houses, yards, orchards, and gardens. Through the screen marking off the women's section, I saw him stand before the ark to lead the congregation in prayer. His body was erect, his form splendid in a robe of fine stitching, his bright forehead unblemished by sun—and all the men clustered around him as if he were a prince.

On laundry days among the women, I heard rumors that they were looking for someone to serve as Rav's wife for the duration of his visit to our town. And so when the synagogue beadle came to talk to me in my backyard four weeks ago, I knew what he had come to say. He found me with my sleeves rolled up and my hands buried inside a basket of laundry, delighting in the pleasant scent of clean clothes and the warm sun that would dry the laundry well. I was no longer a girl; eight years had passed since I had been widowed.

At first, I let the beadle stammer in embarrassment about the role they needed me to play, and hint at the assistance I would receive from the community, and at the amount of ketubah money I would receive if the rabbi should elect to divorce me after the fact. I requested some time to think over the matter, and I sent the man on his way. While lying in bed that night I resolved that I would accede—because of the money, and because of what people always say: "Two is better than one." And because it had been years since I had known the feel of a man's caress and the smell of his breath, and I yearned for those days again.

The next day, when the beadle returned, I nonetheless gave him a hard time before agreeing to his terms, lest I seem overly eager. He conveyed a few strictures that I had to be sure to observe so that I would be pure in advance of the rabbi's visit. His concern that I might begin to bleed as a result of excitement and anticipation seemed rather excessive, if not downright amusing. Nonetheless, I carefully calculated the days of my menstrual cycle as if I were a young bride. They would open the ritual bath especially for me in the darkness of night so that no one would see me.

The days raced by. On the eve of the rabbi's arrival, word spread that he had permitted the remarriage of two "chained widows," women who had lost their husbands in the flooding

of the river. A wave of grateful approval washed over the community, and even I was stirred by the news. As the rabbi stood at the head of the synagogue giving his talk, his wandering glance lingered on me for a moment. I felt drawn to his image, together with the rest of the community. From my place among the women, I began to blush – even as I stood in mourning clothes with a scarf around my head. A forgotten feeling awoke inside me. I wanted to get closer to him.

After the talk, during the reception, Rav was surrounded by a crowd that sought his blessing and kissed the palms of his great hands. The leaders of the community allowed for one moment of respite from the crowds, and on the terrace of the synagogue, amidst a great sea of people, I stood there before him.

I heard him turn to the surrounding men and ask: “Who will be my wife for today?” Perhaps I didn’t exactly hear him say that, but I read his intentions in the curl of his lip. And I knew that I was not the only one who heard the question—virgins hid their faces, mothers pulled their curious daughters outside and away. There were already a few women who were known to

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have spent the night with Rav on a previous visit. Two of them had come to the synagogue dressed in full finery, strutting to and fro. One of them even looked the rabbi in the eye and gave him a knowing smile. He nodded back to her in blessing.

I walked towards him with lowered eyes. My feet pattered against the floor to the rhythm of my fluttering heart. I approached no further than honor would allow. The beadle whispered in his ears. The rabbi looked at me and signaled to me to come closer.

A murmur passed over the crowd, and I felt suddenly relieved that my elderly mother had stayed home. I thought about the chattering of the local kitchen workers, who dice up gossip into bite-sized morsels. I feared for my good name. I lifted my eyes. The face of the rabbi was luminous and shone only on me. His beadle approached and took me out of the crowd and out of my thoughts and into a new reality. A door was opened to a side room. The rabbi disappeared and the crowd began slowly to disperse. I stood there as if paralyzed. I heard as if from a distance the instructions of the beadle echoing in my ears: “When it gets dark.... In the town inn.... In the great guest room.... There his honor will await you.”

I had become a bride for a moment. Even that old feeling of embarrassment seized me as if I were a virgin. When I rushed home, the sun had already sunk to the height of the trees. I moved about the house silently, washed my face in cold water,

dressed in my best frock, and walked out into the empty streets with wet hair, amidst the melodies of the evening prayers. The light of the oil lamps dancing in the windows spilled out into the street, which had become my wedding canopy.

When I found him at the inn, Rav was immersed in solitary study in the corner of the room. I was greeted by his beadle, a man whom I found not particularly pleasant. I kept my distance. From somewhere there suddenly appeared the rabbi of the town and two witnesses. (No wedding canopy, no candles.) I stood there as if dreaming, with the great Rav at my side, my head reaching only to the height of his chest. I heard once again the words of the wedding blessing: “Who forbids to us... and permits to us.... By means of the wedding canopy and sanctification.” The words were spoken like an ordinary prayer, quickly, unaccompanied by tears or by smiling parents. Rav said in his deep voice, “Behold you are sanctified unto me,” and handed me a handkerchief from his pocket. I reached out my hand and took it. The rabbi and his attendants checked that the handkerchief had been properly transferred and muttered in approval. Rav said to them, “You are my witnesses,” and the rabbi concluded, “She is sanctified.” And then everyone went out of the room as if they had never been there.

We were there, just he and I in one room, the guest room of the town inn. It was our wedding canopy and our bedroom and our house and our whole world for one night.

Rav did not mince words and did not try to win me over as young men are wont. He also didn’t fall all over me—he just sat by my side. I could see his eyelashes, which were long and straight, as he is. He looked at me with curiosity and with a certain tranquility, and I watched him calmly. The look on his face appealed to me even more from up close, and I delighted in him like a young girl. The room and the honor of the man who sat cross-legged beside me seemed to me like all I would want of heaven. My life, exhausted and well-worn like a paved road, had suddenly arrived at a main thoroughfare that I had never expected to traverse. The heads of the community, the luminaries of the generation, and me.

Rav began to say a few words about the town and we sat for an easy hour exchanging pleasantries, until I nearly forgot the whole reason that I had entered into this hasty matrimony.

Suddenly he took my hand in his and brought it to his mouth. My breath fled, then fluttered, then relaxed like a dove. His eyes gazed at me as if I were a vision. I realized, then, that I found favor in his eyes.

With the casting off of gowns and scarves, names and roles and titles fell away. He became a man, and I shed my widowhood and became, once again, a woman. Our nakedness opened the floodgates of our hearts and there was nothing to worry about and no reputation to uphold—after all, this man was no villain. And was not the rabbi responsible for it all?

This body in its full expanse were mine by right and holy

law, and there was no fear that our union was “not for the sake of heaven,” as our teachers used to warn us about in school.

I delighted in the sound of “my master,” which brought back the old sense of being conquered by another and served as an invitation and a request. Our bodies did not know if palm would fit to palm, if cheek to cheek, if hip to hip. We had been taught the proper way of touching on this day, but I was nothing like the young bride I had once been. And this man was first far and then close, as if he were always a part of me, passing through me like a shadow, and I tasted of his goodness and I smelled him and touched him and felt my own fingers come alive and went into him and took himself inside me and I built up and knocked down and erected pillars around him and relished the full surrender that had never before been so complete, and my hunger for his breath and for the scent of his body could not be satisfied, and his body was hot and steamy until it reached complete rest.

We were splayed across the bed when I opened my eyes, my body full, and I saw that he was looking at me. “I’ll take you

with me,” he said. “Come to my home,” he said. “My wife.” I smiled, kissed his forehead, and fell back to sleep.

In the morning he continued to sleep after I had awoken. It is commonly believed that larger bodies require more sleep. I woke up and looked at him as if he were a dream that had not fled with the passing of night. I banished all thoughts of a baby with a face like Rav, and all thoughts of following on his heels back to his home. Once again he was not Rav to me, and the form of his body was known to me like that of a little boy whose fears I assuaged. I knew what I would do. I put on my frock and dropped his handkerchief over the bed, drawing its smell once more inside me—and it drifted to the bed swiftly and wondrously, just like our marriage. ■

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THE AUTHOR EXAMINES THE STORY...

When confronted with this story, I find myself entertaining a host of questions.

Does this practice reflect more than just the valorization of promiscuity? Were the women who were chosen members of the Jewish community? Why did rabbis prefer to get entangled in a complicated procedure like marriage for a day instead of simply sleeping with an anonymous woman under cover of night? There is precedent for this sort of deviance—we read several times in the Talmud about one who is seized by his evil impulse: “He should dress in black and wrap himself in black and go to an unknown city.” Was turning to a prostitute beneath the dignity of the rabbis, whereas they would not hesitate to use women and co-opt the sacred institution of marriage for the sake of preserving their own reputations?

When met with the question “Who will be mine for a day,” could a woman really answer, “I will”? And just between us, why would she do it? It seems unlikely that without specific

incentives and without independent stature a woman would enter lightly into an arrangement like this. Perhaps she was hungry and wanted to partake of the festive wedding meal? Perhaps she longed to become pregnant with a son of the Rav? In that case, it is possible that the two rabbis served as traveling sperm banks. But even in the height of the modern feminist revolution, it is still fair to assume that a woman would not enter into an intimate connection with a man without at least harboring the hope that their liaison would lead to something more. Is the Talmud hazarding the novel idea that such a hope lives also in the heart of men? Must every night of intimacy be an instance of fleeting sanctity?

Confining matrimony to one day contradicts the very essence of the marriage covenant, which pledges security for an unbounded period of time. On the other hand, it reflects respect for the now, for living one day to its fullest. Under conditions of marriage for one day, the criteria for choosing a spouse change, as does the definition of love. The appeal of the

one-night-stand is bound to make us think twice about how much opportunity we waste in our lives of routine and certainty. And the concept of “marriage for a day” allows us to test how we would behave if we were freed of the accepted and enshrined conventions that govern our lives—the material, the social, the psychological.

The Christian idea of matrimony as sacrament has influenced Western culture. We are accustomed to viewing the romance of love “til death do us part” as the final stage of cultural evolution. By the same token, we are accustomed to viewing the values of the rabbis—whose primary expectation of marriage was the fulfillment of the commandment to procreate—as a betrayal of love. But perhaps in reality things are otherwise. If we consider Rav and Rav Nachman as alternatives to love as we know it, we may find ourselves, Western liberals confronting Eastern rabbis, not unlike members of the stuffy bourgeoisie confronting our more liberated anarchist counterparts. ■

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