

Standing SUSPENDED In This Miracle

A BRIDE TEACHES ABOUT CREATING A WEDDING HOUSE

by ILANA KURSHAN

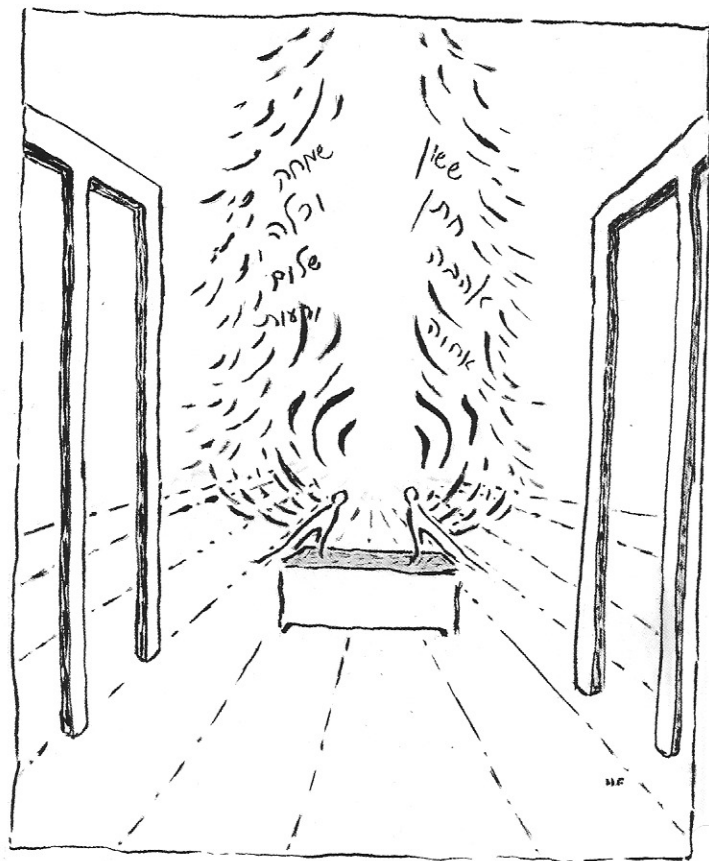
WHEN ILANA KURSHAN AND DANIEL FELDMAN GOT MARRIED IN DECEMBER 2009, THEY DECIDED TO CELEBRATE NOT JUST THEIR WEDDING, BUT ALSO THE CULMINATION OF THEIR MONTHS OF STUDYING TALMUD TOGETHER. SO AT A PRE-CEREMONY TISCH—A LEARNING SESSION TRADITIONALLY MEN-ONLY BUT WHICH HERE INCLUDED THE BRIDE, THE GROOM, AND ALL THEIR GUESTS—ILANA DELIVERED THIS D'VAR TORAH.

Daniel and I have chosen to speak today from *Masechet Bava Batra*, the tractate of Talmud that we are currently learning as part of *Daf Yomi*. This is a program in which thousands of Jews the world over learn the same page of Talmud every day, completing the cycle in seven and a half years. Our learning has taken a variety of forms. Some days we meet at a morning *shiur* (lesson) in a local synagogue, taught by Rabbi Benny Lau; other days we learn on our own after work; and still other days we meet in the evening to learn the *daf* together over dinner.

I'd like to teach from a recent *daf*, 98, where we find a learned discussion about a person who accepts a contract from a friend to build for him a *beit chatanot*, a wedding house for his son. The Mishnah considers the minimum size of house that is acceptable for this purpose, touching upon such issues as whether a person can choose to live in a home that resembles a cattle barn, and why a bride and groom are not advised to move in with their in-laws (at least according to Ben Sira, which may help to explain why his work is known as wisdom literature). In its discussion of the minimum dimensions of the wedding house, the Talmud draws an analogy to the Temple, which is often used as the model for other structures in rabbinic literature. Rabbi Chanina points out a contradiction between two different measurements of the Temple. In one verse, the *Kodesh Kodashim* (Holy of Holies) is 30 *amot* high; and in another verse, it is 20 *amot* high. The Talmud reconciles this contradiction by explaining that one measurement refers to the height of the Holy of Holies from

floor to ceiling, whereas the other measurement starts from the tops of the *kruvim* (cherubim), which were 10 *amot* tall, and goes up to the ceiling. But why would one opt to measure from the tops of the *kruvim* rather than from the floor? The Talmud answers that this way of measuring comes to teach us that all 30 *amot* of the Holy of Holies were as empty as the uppermost 20 because the *kruvim*, the cherubs, took up no physical space.

Miraculously, the *kruvim* did not take up any room. They existed in spiritual space only, and not in the physical world. This expression speaks to me, for I am a person who lives very much inside her head. I feel very grateful—and relieved!—to have found a partner who is so practical and down-to-earth, someone who reminds me to cook food for myself, and prevents me from burning down my home while doing so. Much as I admire Daniel's pragmatism and his masterful organizational skills, I also feel privileged to be privy to his intellectual and spiritual depths. So much of our relationship developed in the context of classes we attended, poems we read, Shabbat meals we shared, and other tastes of the world to come—that world that is suspended somewhere beyond the physical and material realm. And so I love the next phrase that the Talmud uses to describe the *kruvim*: The *kruvim* were *suspended in a miracle*. This notion of being suspended in a miracle is very much how I feel today—as if my whole life until this day hangs in balance with the wondrous miracle of joining my life today with Daniel's, surrounded by so many people we both love. On this day of



Even the Talmud is concerned with how to let another person into your space, into your life.

Kedusha (holiness) and of our *Kidushin* (wedding vows), we are not unlike the *kruvim*, suspended in a miracle in the midst of the *Kodesh Kodashim*.

The Talmud explains that part of the miraculous positioning of the *kruvim* was due to the fact their wingspan alone were equivalent to the entire width of the Holy of Holies. Where, then, were their bodies? The Talmud posits a series of possible answers: Perhaps they stood on a diagonal, or perhaps they stood with their wings overlapping, or perhaps they stood with their wings protruding from the center of their backs like chickens (this is the Talmud's image, not my own!). What I like about all of these answers is that they all have to do with how to share space—how to make room for another person, and how to let another person into your space. That this space is the Holy of Holies is not incidental. I feel privileged, in the past few months, that Daniel has made room for me in his life, and that I, in turn, have felt so eager to let him into mine. This intimate shared space, built on a deep trust that developed between us over time, is truly, to my mind, a sacred enclosure.

In speaking of the *kruvim*, the Talmud goes on to ask, How were they standing? Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Elazar disagree about this. One rabbi says that they were facing each other (perhaps looking into each other's eyes?), and the other rabbi says that they were facing the walls of the *Kodesh Kodashim*, meaning that they were turned away from each other. The Talmud famously resolves this contradiction by saying that both

answers are correct, though they apply at different moments. When Israel is doing God's will, the two *kruvim* are facing each other; when Israel is not doing God's will, they are facing away from each other.

It is my hope, in our marriage, that we will spend most of our time facing towards and not away from each other, working in partnership to do God's will in the world. After all, it is from the space between the *kruvim* that God speaks to the people: "There I will meet with you, and I will speak to you, from above the cover, from between the two cherubim." (Exodus 25: 22)

God speaks from between the two *kruvim*, a space that our teacher Avivah Zornberg describes as the "locus of desire." I like to think that this is also the space between *Ish* and *Isha*, man and woman; that is, the space of *Shekhina*—the presence of God whose dwelling place is the Holy of Holies and all our holiest moments.

Of course, two people, no matter how much they are in love, cannot and should not always be looking at each other. And so when we are not looking at one another, I hope that we are at least looking in the same direction, as Daniel and I look together today towards our shared future. As we prepare to move into our own *beit chatanot*, we set our sights towards a future in which we will always have moments of looking into one another's eyes; always make space for one another; and always carry with us the memory of today, of standing suspended in this miracle. ■

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