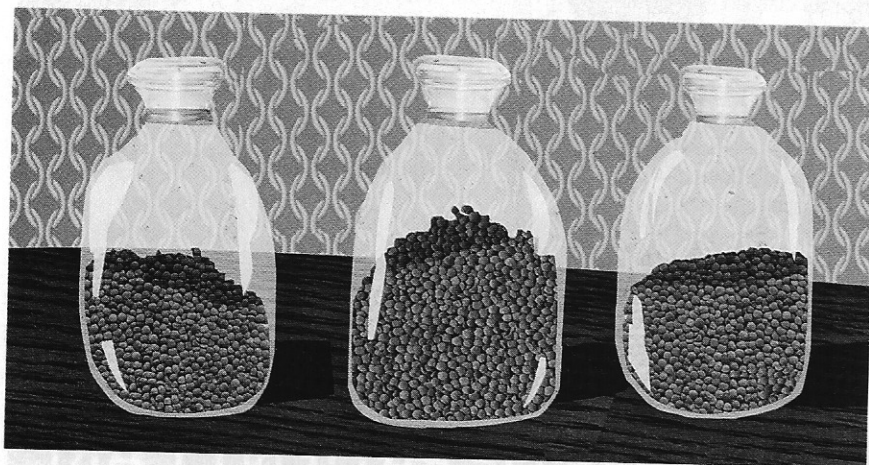


Commentary

One Singular Sensation

By Ilana Kurshan



For the past few weeks, I have been composing in my head an extended poem on the pleasures of sleeping alone. ♡ Chief among them is the delight I take in reading in bed—at the beginning of the night, when I can fall asleep with my bedside lamp still on, my book eventu-

ally collapsing to form a tent over my face; in the middle of the night, when the house is quiet and the world is calm; and in the early morning hours, when I arise before my alarm and read by the light streaming through my open window.

Writing in bed, too, is another newly rediscovered pleasure. There are entries in my journal that I am able to write only when alone under the covers, as if I cannot expose these negatives to the harsh light of day. A friend recently told me that she loves being single because her nightlife is so much wilder, and I could relate; it was when I slept by myself that my wild literary nightlife took off.

I suspect that the women of the Talmud would not have been able to relate to the pleasure I take in sleeping solo. I don't know much about

how the rabbis' wives spent their nights, but I'm quite certain that they were not reading in bed. We hear in Masekhet Sotah (6b, 31a) and again in Gittin (89a) about women who would spin flax and gossip by the moonlight. The Talmud states that once a particular adulterous liaison became the subject of gossip among these women, it could be considered public knowledge. Presumably, those women who were gossiping about adultery then returned home to their husbands' beds, and it was only the most forlorn among them who were left to sleep alone.

The Talmud clearly looks pitifully upon any woman who does not have a man with whom to share her bed. We know this from a popular folk saying attributed to Reish Lakish that appears five times throughout the

Babylonian Talmud: *Tav lemeitav tan du mi'lemeitav armelo*. The phrase literally means, "It is better for a woman to sit as two than to sit alone by herself." In the tractate Kiddushin (7a), this expression is invoked to explain the lengths to which a woman would go so as not to be alone. The Talmud considers whether a woman can become betrothed to a man by giving him a present rather than by receiving money from him. That is, can she be betrothed by means of the benefit that she derives from the knowledge that he is receiving her gift? The Talmud comes to the conclusion that "it is better for her in any case" to be married than unmarried.

Although *kiddushin* is generally defined as a transaction in which the man gives the woman something and she in return becomes betrothed unto him, the Talmud suggests in this passage that a woman may be so desperate to be married that she'll actually give the man a gift rather than receive one, so that she can become his wife.

THE PHRASE *TAV LEMEITAV TAN du* appears again when the rabbis (Ketubot 75a, Yevamot 118b) discuss the case of a man who betroths a wife on the condition that she does not have a particular blemish, and then discovers that she has that blemish; does the betrothal still take? The answer is no, even if she goes to a doctor and has the offending mark removed. However, in the opposite case, a woman who makes such a conditional statement is indeed still betrothed on the grounds

KATHERINE STREETER

of *Tav lemeitav*. A woman desires to be married to such an extent that we can assume she will overlook those very blemishes that she had initially stipulated that she would not tolerate. This assertion triggers a flurry of colorful comments attributed to various Talmudic sages about just how strongly a woman desires a husband.

Abbaye: Even if her husband is the size of a sesame seed, she is proud to place her chair among the free women.

Rav Papa: Even if her husband is just a spinner of wool, she will call out to him to come sit with her at the entrance to their home.

Rav Ashi: Even if her husband is a cabbage-head, at least she will not lack for lentils in her pot.

Each of these sages asserts that a woman wishes to have a husband, even an unattractive one, because of the status that is conferred upon her by being married. Were the passage to end there, the Talmud's stance would be unequivocal: Better for a woman to be married than to be alone. Were Abbaye, Rav Papa and Rav Ashi to have the last word, then I might offer different advice the next time a friend comes to me and asks whether she should marry the man she is currently dating. I might even consider pulling those novels out from under my covers and replacing them with a husband of my own.

Fortunately, however, the Talmud has more to say on this matter. The passage concludes with the following assertion: "And all these women commit adultery and attribute their offspring to their husbands." That is, all these women who so desperately want to be married are really just interested in having a convenient excuse when they find themselves pregnant as a result of their adulterous affairs. Why do they need husbands? So that they can point to a legitimate father for their bastard children!

This final line, astonishing in its

flippancy and subversiveness, casts the preceding statements in a new light: A woman needs a husband so that she can "place her chair among the free women," that is, so that she can count herself among those women who are free to have adulterous affairs! And even if her husband is a cabbage-head, she doesn't care, because she's just using him as a cover so that she can gallivant off and engage in extramarital sex! For this reason it is better for a woman to be married than to be alone. This reason, though, gives me pause. Personally, I must confess that I prefer the pleasure of reading alone in bed to the prospect of extramarital affairs. And while it might be fun to set off in search of a husband, the literature I read tends to be far more exciting than the life I might otherwise lead.

I WAS REMINDED OF THESE TALMUDIC passages last Purim, when a good friend brought me *mishloah manot* in the form of a beautiful glass vase stuffed with hamentaschen and other goodies. "When you finish all the sweets," she told me, "you can save the vase for the next time a man brings you flowers." I smiled, knowing that I would do no such thing. Instead, I washed out the giant vase, filled it with two pounds of lentils, and placed it in my cupboard alongside my beans, split peas and other dried goods. I put a sign on the vase that contains these words from the Ketubot passage: "she does not lack for lentils in her pot." I think of this when I get into bed with my books after dinner, which often consists of lentil soup. Sometimes I serve a bowl of it to one or another of my male friends. I am married to none of them. **H**

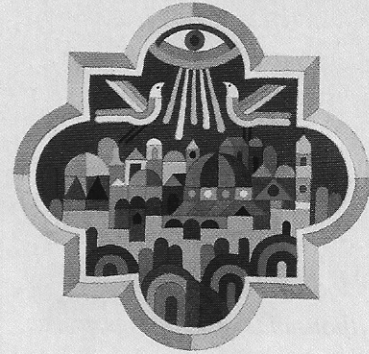
Ilana Kurshan works as a literary agent in Jerusalem. Although she recently got married, there are still many books in her bed.

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