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Women's Whispers: Brides of blood

By VIVA HAMMER
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I spent the week between my son's birth and his circumcision on the kitchen floor, breast pump in one hand and telephone in the other, searching for a mohel. The baby was born on Shabbat Rosh Hodesh Nisan, and the circumcision was to be on Shabbat Hagadol, one week before Pessah. Manhattan, where we lived, was not thick with mohelim and so I had to import one.

A man who shall remain nameless anticipated my difficulties and, without consulting me, hired a novice for the task. The nameless man had circumcised his own son without prior experience, and was confident that since that child had turned out splendidly, likely mine would too. Even in the delirium after childbirth, I remembered that in surgery one thing matters: experience. So after my fury had subsided, I took responsibility for finding the ritual surgeon entirely on myself.

Countless people I reached out to in the few days between those weighty Sabbaths. People who I had not dared contact for years, from long-forgiven foes to distinguished rabbis, all received my calls. I begged, offered exorbitant bribes and called favors, all for naught. Not one mohel agreed to abandon his family in the heat of Pessah preparations, even if it only meant a ride across the Brooklyn Bridge.

From a referral at the fourth remove, I obtained the name of a mohel in Lakewood who had conducted one thousand circumcisions. A pious man by all accounts, and better yet, one who needed funds to finance his daughter's immanent marriage. With the money I promised him, the mohel was assured forgiveness for absenting himself that weekend. And I marveled at being forced to import a mohel into New York, fount of Diaspora life.

In all the tumult of mohel-hunting, I had not reflected on the deed I was hiring the mohel to do. But when he arrived on Friday afternoon and performed the *prohbe* of the surgery site, I swooned. Panic rose in me. This man was going to take my infant, perfect and without blemish, and mutilate him.

My mother watched hysteria mount and fall and tried to sooth me. Never having had a son, it was hard for her to imagine voluntarily handing one over to be cut up, "But," she comforted me,

“In the scheme of things, they seem to turn out all right.” I was a little mollified, and distracted myself by focusing on the children, who were dazzled with the throngs that had arrived for the event.

On Shabbat, my mother took me for a walk. As the deed was done, and my son entered into the congregation of Israel, she and I trod the streets of New York speaking of sweet nothings. Excising the well of fear, I came back to a room jammed with people. I had eyes only for one -

My son -

Who was returned to me, fed at my breast and fell asleep. To the crowd assembled at the festivities, I addressed a complex *pilpul* about the mercifully questionable obligation of a woman in the circumcision of her son. But it was devoid of my usual animation: I was still shaking.

An inscrutable passage in Exodus finds Moses, Zippora and their sons journeying from Midian to Egypt. They stop at an inn, where God - who has just chosen Moses redeemer of Israel - now seeks to kill him.

Zippora interprets the threat as punishment for Moses failing his fatherly duty to circumcise their son. How can a man who does not imprint on his son the sign of the nation, possibly claim to be that nation’s redeemer? Zippora responds swiftly by performing the circumcision herself, placing the foreskin at her husband’s feet and hurling a curse as she does so, “For you are a bridegroom of blood to me!” And as the grip of death is loosened on Moses, Zippora curses again, “A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision!”

No swooning, lily-livered woman for the wife of Moses.

I named my son after my father’s brother, who hid in Budapest during the war under an excellent guise. He spoke French fluently and posed as a diplomat. The stories vary as to how he was caught, either he landed in the hospital after an air raid, or he was recognized by someone in the street. But as soon as his circumcision was revealed, by whatever means, he was dead.

On the Great Sabbath before Pessah, I allowed the men to impress upon my son an irrevocable sign of his Jewishness, and I named him for a man who died by reason of that sign. I did not permit the mohel to perform the required extraction of blood with his mouth; who knows what diseases might lurk there? My husband did it instead. For, as I told him, a bridegroom of blood are you to me, a bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision.

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