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Women's Whispers: Landswoman

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On a visit to Jerusalem once, I had occasion to need a mikve. A friend recommended one with nice facilities in a distant neighborhood, and I ordered a taxi. Midway through our journey, the lights in the city went out. Soon after, we lost our way.

It was a tense time in Jerusalem; the Sbarro pizzeria had just been blown up and as we drove aimlessly up and down the hills, I grew nervous. The driver was foreign, and he could not get a signal from his base. The city was in the thrall of a thick mist, which in the morning would be the dew for which we prayed thrice daily. But that night it concealed all landmarks; we could easily have found ourselves in a hostile area.

After studying a map, we traced out a route and arrived at the road which contained the mikve. The buildings were tall and utterly dark; the pavements were deserted. Up and down we drove, not able to find a number anywhere, and certainly no mikve. I got out, determined to find help, ringing intercoms at the entrance to one block of flats after another. There was no answer: The bells relied on electricity too. I approached a man walking past but he was an Arab and did not know about mikvaot.

We drove some more, and I noticed that we kept passing a little group of people on the street, wandering as if as lost as we were: a young couple, bearded and kerchiefed, with three small children. What could possibly motivate a family stroll on a night like this? I wondered, then dismissed it from my mind. The taxi driver had found someone who pointed us to a low structure concealed from the road, dug into an incline.

The mikve reception was dimly lit with candles. The ladies greeted me warmly; I was the lone visitor that night. When I asked to take a shower, they were surprised: Hadn't I already bathed? I explained that I liked to make absolutely sure nothing had clung to my body during my (hair-raising) journey here. "I come from a long way," I explained. "Yes," they agreed, "people often come from far; we have a special mikve."

I rested a candle on the bathtub and tried to maneuver the shower handle so as to keep from putting it out. Shadows bounced everywhere. I was ready: I called the women in and they came with a torch. I dipped three times and uttered the blessing; they pronounced me kosher.

As I was dressing, I heard the mikve ladies addressing another visitor. “I can’t speak Hebrew,” she pleaded, in an unmistakable Australian accent. “English?” The mikve ladies came looking for me. “Can you interpret for us?” Hair dripping, I emerged. Instantly I recognized the other visitor as the kerchiefed one who had been wandering with her family on the street.

The young woman was wrapped in a towel; the mikve ladies wanted to know how many times she dipped and if she covered herself while reciting the blessing. I translated.

The woman’s eyes widened, disbelieving “Where are you *from*?”

“Sydney,” I answered.

“Me too,” she said, “we just made aliya. I’ve always dreamed of it, I came from Russia originally. But I can’t get my children into day care and so my husband and I each do ulpan every second day; I’m not getting anything. I desperately need to learn; I can’t manage here otherwise.”

“You’ll learn,” I comforted her. “Your children will teach you. Which area in Sydney?”

And so standing on the edge of the mikve pool, lighted and hidden by candlelight, in the midst of a total electrical blackout and of the darkness of the intifada, we chatted about the incomparably beautiful hometown which we had both abandoned.

I explained our excitement to the mikve ladies, who had been watching us uncomprehending but without complaint. They reveled in our happiness in having found each other, after a long night of wandering.

“We told you this is a special mikve,” one of them said.

“I must dip now,” the woman said. “My family is waiting for me outside.”

In the reception area was a platter of fresh food, of every hue and shape, cut by loving and inexpert hands: the fruits of Israel. It is a custom to put something in your mouth after dipping, but in the Diaspora, it would not do to offer anything so sumptuous and fresh: what of the ants, rats and diets? “Take, take” the mikve ladies said. I was not hungry, but I ate.

And when I left the building, I saw the bearded man standing patiently in the blackness, minding his brood.

“G’day!” I gave the traditional Australian greeting. The man started a moment, searching for the voice, then smiled and saluted me back.

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