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Women's Whispers: Runaway sistah

By [VIVA HAMMER](#)
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A religious woman in our town left her husband and three children this year and ran off with another man. *Poor lucky woman* her neighbors murmur. *Poor* for choosing such a man, with no qualms about filching her from her family. *Lucky* because she got away.

In her 33 years, this woman has had three children and nine miscarriages. On one of those occasions, it was I who accompanied her to the hospital.

“Back again!” she glanced at me conspiratorially. “Here I am, laid on an uncreased sheet, and I sleep.” Her puckish grin turned sardonic. “I ache for these intermissions of silence,” she told me. “Usually an infant conquistador has set up camp in my bed. But even when I’m in bed alone, I’m listening for a cry, or wandering into the nursery, pulling a blanket onto a restless baby. And if by some miracle God grants me a night without disturbance, my body is still bridled and cannot free itself to sleep.

“In seminary they told us our bodies are temples; we women are the vessels for the souls to descend. Religious women are the only ones replenishing the Jewish people! If so, *my* body is a *hurban*, a wasteland of destruction.” The woman grew red and angry. “I have lost three times more lives than I have given birth to. Foxes prowl among the rubble of my temple; the land is plowed with salt.”

We neighbors explained to the runaway woman that she didn’t have to always be pregnant: we are not Catholics, and birth control could be permitted if she asked. But she wouldn’t hear of it. If her role in life was to bear children, she was going to do it to perfection: be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.

IN THE RADIANT film *Shira*, Israeli director Miryam Adler unfolds the crisis of a mother of five small girls. Her rabbinic spouse dismisses her timid inquiry about contraception because she has not borne a boy. Counting the days to her next mikve visit, which will be the precursor to her next pregnancy, Shira unravels before us. An angelic mother and wife, she refuses to deceive her husband and protect herself, as a friend urges her. Instead, she escapes into catatonic sleep.

The woman in my neighborhood is gone, bolted, but I imagine what I should have said

to her when she was still among us.

“Runaway mother, my sister, let me share with you that we have all been there. The Jewish people is replenished through our sacrifice, but it does not send us an emissary to soothe the incessant crying, the whining and cantankerous tyrants. Who faces every evening the mess that cannot be kept at bay, the eternal laundry and dirty dishes? It is we, alone, who have been up so many nights that we can no longer separate between light and darkness.

“Why is it so difficult to bear and raise children? Perhaps there is a perverted reason: we are hardened in our early childhood to expect fury and blows in response to our infinite demands. Then we go out well prepared for the reality outside.

“I have never hit my children, nor lost my temper,” I continue the imaginary confession to the runaway woman. “But if I ever let go, I would reduce them to a pulp. And yet, I cannot let them grow wild either. I must confine them within gentle limits, so they grow up strong and secure. I live in a perpetual straitjacket, never revealing my real, fiery, tempestuous self. The divine balance in parenting: how it wears me down!”

THE RUNAWAY woman will never be allowed to return to her husband, her children. But she can come back to us. We will tell her then that there is not a day when one of us hasn't wanted to run away, when that voice behind us calls “jump, jump” and we dream of the freedom to be had were we to heed that voice. With difficulty, I choose not to give in to the voice. Not because of the purported moments of joy, when the children put their arms around my neck or when they clean up the mess on their own.

I stay because when I'm at the edge, I call one of my friends, and she says, “Yes, I too dream about getting into the car and driving and driving and never coming back.”

Runaway mother, my sister, I tell you these things because you need to know that we will comfort you when you return from the abyss, and we will mourn together. Foxes did prowl on the desolated **Temple Mount** and the Sages were appalled. But the great Akiva dismissed the other Sages' view; he saw the desolation as proof certain of the final Redemption.

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