

The Curse

By Howard Zilber

It's hard to be a woman. Being a sister is a particular challenge, especially if you have a brother. Being a wife is an even harder. That is because you have a husband. Now imagine that your brother and husband are both great sages, and that they are rivals. The love I feel for my brother, the love I feel for my husband, which should nourish me only makes things worse.

My brother, Gamaliel, is as complicated as the law. Yes, he is sweet and gentle. He appreciates Greek wisdom. He mourned when his slave Tabi died. He speaks in a tolerant way to Christians. But there is another side to him, a side that is harsh and even vindictive.

Johanan had calculated that it was Yom Kippur. My brother disagreed with his calculation. Fine. Sages argue. But Gamaliel, who was head of the academy, made Johanan carry money on the day he thought was Yom Kippur. He forced Johanan to sin in his own eyes, just so all would see that it was Gamaliel, the head of the academy that had final say regarding the calendar.

He was even worse to Rabbi Joshua. He humiliated him so many times that the other sages voted him out of office. Then after much debate and conniving they allowed Gamaliel to share the presidency of the academy with my husband Eliezer. Was that the beginning of their rivalry? Perhaps. But I think they never learned to share me. They both wanted my undivided love, attention, and respect.

Eliezer is no better than Gamaliel. His most annoying characteristic is that he is almost always right. King David could sin and God delighted in him anyway. It is the same with Eliezer. God simply seems to like Eliezer more than others. What Eliezer blesses, God will bless. What Eliezer curses God will curse.

The rabbis were debating whether a certain type of oven was susceptible to ritual impurity. All the rabbis were on one side. Eliezer was on the other. When he could not persuade them by argument, he produced miracles. He caused a carob tree to leap from the ground and dance. He caused a stream to reverse course and flow uphill. He even convinced God, his friend, to announce that the law, as usual, was as Eliezer stated it.

But a colleague pointed out that the Torah states that the law is not in heaven. A majority of sages can declare the law, even when miracles are produced, even when God pronounces. A great moment of freedom and maturity for the Jewish people, but a deep humiliation for my husband Eliezer.

Some say there were other reasons -that Eliezer taught a ruling that he learned from an apostate- but I believe it all derives from the oven dispute. Intoxicated, by having

refuted not just Eliezer, but also God, the rabbis banned Eliezer. But God still loved Eliezer. God would bless what Eliezer blessed. God would curse what Eliezer cursed. And if Eliezer curses him, Gamaliel will die. It was Gamaliel, after all, who introduced the resolution that banned Eliezer from all he loved.

“It’s not fair. It’s not right. Gamaliel should...”

I interrupted him immediately. I was afraid that Eliezer was about to curse my brother.

“Academy politics. Nothing more. Enjoy some time at home. Concentrate on your studies.”

“Concentrate on my studies! I’m banned. I must act like a mourner. I cannot enter the academy.”

“You know these things change. My brother was removed from the presidency but reinstated.”

“Your brother!”

I immediately regretted mentioning him.

“Yes, concentrate on your studies. You should be able to convince the others by argument. The time of prophecy is over. Why did you coax God out of silence?”

“All right. All right. I will study.”

I did everything I could to distract my husband from his resentment of my brother. I brought him books, and scrolls, and reports of arguments. And since even the greatest sage cannot study all the time, I seduced him with other pleasures. I cooked dishes rich not only in taste, but in stories.

“This is how the quail was prepared in the desert. This is what manna tasted like. This is the wine that Lot’s daughters got him drunk with.”

I was very proud of that last bit because it got him thinking about sex. And regarding sex Eliezer is a maniac. People ask me why my children are so attractive. I tell them it’s because Eliezer makes love like he’s being pursued by a demon.

Lying on our well-used bed, Eliezer was in a state of deep after-bliss. For a few moments he was Adam, and I was Eve, but unlike them, we delighted in being naked.

“You know maybe I’ve been unfair to your brother. He gave me the most thoughtful wedding present.”

“I forgot. What did he give you?”

“He gave me you.”

“You know before he fought Goliath, Samuel gave David a meal that would fortify him. I happen to know the recipe. I’ll light the oven.”

“The oven that is pure, like my thoughts are pure. Like my love is pure. But those others! Can they make a tree dance? Can they convince a stream to flow the other way? Would God testify that any of them was right? And the worst is your brother. He is so full of himself.”

“Please, Eliezer.”

“He is an idol in his own eyes. I swear, he worships not God but himself.”

“Eli, you know that’s not fair. Gamaliel is a brilliant scholar.”

“So brilliant that he doesn’t belong in the earthly academy but in the heavenly academy.”

And with that Gamaliel fell out of this world into the world to come.

The Holy One was presiding.

Gamaliel: Where am I?

Holy One: In the Heavenly Academy.

Gamaliel: But I didn’t die. I must be dreaming.

Holy One: In this place you will find not just those who died, but those who have not yet lived. You will find ghosts and demons, dream figments, and even characters that only lived in books.

Gamaliel was a little scared, a little confused. He looked around. There were Sages he recognized from when he was a boy. There were others he’s only heard about in stories. And the Holy One truly was the Holy One. But as bizarre as it was there were similarities to the world he knew. This Heavenly Academy was, in some ways, like the earthly academy. A new case was about to be considered.

“I am Komesh, daughter of –no I will not give his name. All my life I wished to grow closer to you, Holy One.”

“I remember well your long and fervent prayers.”

“I hope they were not a burden to you.”

“My children’s prayers are my air, water, and food. They are what sustains me.”

“Then why didn’t you answer me?”

But the Holy One gave no answer.

Komesh continued:

“After a while simply praying to you wasn’t enough. I wanted to know you like a woman knows a lover. So I prayed for dreams that would bring me closer to you. My dreams became a sea in which magical creatures swam. One night Lilith came to me. She said that we were to be lovers. Night after night she came to me, sometimes as a man, sometimes as a woman, and sometimes just as the force of love. I never felt such pleasure. I also never felt closer to you. I had found the little crack in the world that led to you, or so I thought.

But Lilith became more demanding. She brought pleasures too close to terror and pain. When I complained she said all would be better if we married. The Ketubah was drawn up and I became Lilith’s wife. Forgive me if that was wrong. But soon she demanded that I accompany her as she wandered through the dreams of the righteous. I saw her seducing sages and came to realize that the yearning for you, and the power of lust were sisters. But Lilith wasn’t content that I merely observe. She wanted that I too seduce the righteous. I came to you in a dream, Gamaliel. In that dream I appeared to be your sister, Ima Shalom, Mother of Peace.”

“Forgive me. Forgive me.”

“A man is not responsible for his dreams”, interjected the Holy One.

“Lilith delighted in seeing me with the head of the Academy. But she became jealous. She insisted that instead of Gamaliel, I visit and seduce young students. Soon it became clear that I was a distraction to them. Their studies faltered. They drifted away from you, Holy One. I told Lilith I wanted a divorce. But she said since I was her wife, I couldn’t initiate a divorce. Oh, please grant me a divorce so I can be a righteous woman, striving for holiness, rather than bitch to a demon. Forgive my strong language.”

“Well”, began the Holy One, “Can we grant Komesh the divorce she seeks.”

“How can this be a valid marriage”, began Gamaliel, “these are two women?”

“Is a demon a woman? Might a demon not count as a man or a woman,” uttered one of the other sages.

Ima Shalom was feeling alone. Her brother, Gamaliel, was gone. Her husband, Eliezer, retreated deep into himself, almost as if he banned himself. Ima Shalom

wanted to help but knew she first had to restore some of the places that were missing from *her* soul. She began certain mystical practices. Before going to sleep she would write down a question and place it under her pillow, hoping to find the answer to that question in a dream.

“Dear God, my brother has ascended to your holy palace. My husband is a prisoner below. I want to help my husband. I want to reconcile my brother and my husband. How can I do that, dear God? How can I do that?”

The scent of oranges wafted in through the window. Ima Shalom floated on that scent out the window and beyond the stars. She found herself in the heavenly academy.

“Dear sister, please tell me that you have not died. Eliezer is fierce, but he isn’t a monster.”

Ima Shalom was too awestruck to reply. The Holy One answered instead:

“She is here to help us deliberate.”

“I don’t think I can help, but what is the question?”

“This woman, Komesh, is chained to Lilith in a marriage she no longer wants. Can we grant her a divorce?”

A clarity came over Ima Shalom’s mind.

“It seems to me that there are several questions here. First is Lilith a person? Is she the kind of being that can get married? Second, can she be counted as a man, such that she could marry a woman? And third, if she is a person, and can be counted as a man, can she be forced to grant Komesh a divorce?”

There was a deep silence in the academy. They were all impressed by Ima Shalom’s reasoning. Even the Holy One gave her a respectful nod.

“I am a person”, Lilith declared as she flew by in her winged and grotesque beauty.”

“Prove it”, demanded many.

“I think. I feel. I choose. There is in me an urge to create and destroy worlds. Surely I was made in the divine image.”

“She is correct”, intoned the Holy One.

“Forgive mere mortal flesh for challenging you, Holy One, but must that decision not be ratified by the majority of the sages present?”

The other Sages were shocked by Gamaliel’s question. They looked down, not quite frightened but there is no better word to describe how they felt.

"It is true", began the Holy One, "The Torah is not in heaven. And on earth the majority of the sages decide the law. But look around, Gamaliel; does it appear we are on earth?"

Gamaliel wishing to regain his composure and even assert a bit of dignity cleared his throat and spoke again.

"Then we must move on to Ima's second question: can Lilith be counted as male."

Lilith again flew by, this time nearly grazing Gamaliel who did his best to shrink into his seat.

"Read the text, fool, it says we were created male and female in the Holy One's image. I am male and female."

Again there was a chorus of:

"Prove it."

"That I am female, you can see. But I have impregnated women. I am also male."

"That is a lie", shouted Gamaliel.

"Perhaps not" began Ima Shalom, "Eliezer's mother told me of a strange dream she had just before getting pregnant. She was lying under a palm beside a pool. A serpent emerged and promising she could be mother to a great sage."

Taking over, Lilith, continued, "The serpent became a man and made love to her."

"But", added Ima after lovemaking the serpent became a woman and flew away."

"Then she awoke. She found herself next to her familiar husband in her familiar bed."

"It was just a dream, she thought."

"But several months later his mother gave birth to Eliezer."

There was discord and confusion among the sages. But when it was clear that the Holy One was about to speak, all became quiet and attentive.

"My world is more beautiful than you could ever appreciate. It is also more strange than you could ever comprehend. Lilith can count as a human, and she can indeed be counted as a male."

"So the only question remaining is can Lilith be forced to divorce Komesch?"

Gamaliel pointed out that if a woman finds her husband repugnant the court can force him to grant a divorce.

"She is repugnant to me", stated Komesch, "She is repugnant to me."

“Am I?”

Lilith began a series of transformations. She became as beautiful as Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel. Komesh attempted to shield her eyes. Lilith began a second series of transformations. This time she resembled the statues the Greeks made of Zeus, Apollo, and Adonis. But she was not marble either painted or white. She was sex-scented flesh.

Komesh attempted disguising her arousal while shouting:

“He-she-he-she is utterly repugnant to me.”

But she brought her tongue to her lips. The sages were not convinced.

“Sadly”, the Holy One intoned: “I don’t see how we can grant a divorce.”

Ima shalom remembered that sometimes when she dreamt she became aware she was dreaming, and when this happened she could sometimes control her dream. With deep concentration she willed herself to become Eliezer, for surely a woman and man can become one flesh.

“Holy One”, began Eliezer, “Master Gamaliel, Ima Shalom, distinguished members of the Heavenly Academy.”

Ima Shalom was surprised to hear her name mentioned. She thought she had become her husband, but incomprehensibly they were both there.

Eliezer continued: “May I interrogate Lilith?”

The Holy One nodded, delighted.

“You are quite beautiful, Lilith.”

“Thank you.”

“Is it true you were Adam’s first wife?”

“It’s a time a rather not talk about.”

“But you’ve had many lovers since then?”

“Many.”

“Making love to you must be an overwhelming experience. Did any of them die in your arms?”

“No. That has never happened.”

“Well, just out of curiosity have you ever touched a dead body?”

“Of course not.”

“You have such beautiful skin. Flawless. I suppose you never had a mole or any other imperfection on your skin?”

“I most certainly have not.”

“So what do you make of we mere mortals?”

“I think you’re disgusting.”

“I suppose we must seem that way to you.”

“I tell you what really disgusts me, the fluids that ooze out of you. It’s undignified.”

“So such things don’t flow out of you?”

“Of course not.”

“Not even from the place where your legs meet?”

“No. It’s not a sewer. It’s a place of pleasure. Pure pleasure.”

“Pure, just the word I am looking for. Holy One, this being has not touched a corpse, her skin has no imperfection, her body has no discharges. She is not susceptible to impurity. She is hideous, grotesque, and demonic, but she is, and always has been, pure. She is not human. She cannot marry a human.”

“You are right”, announced the Holy One, “Komesch you were never married, you do not require a divorce. You are free.”

Ima Shalom dreamed her way back to our world. She found herself in bed with her husband, Eliezer. He looked tired and much older than she remembered.

“I think I will soon depart for the world to come”

“Don’t speak that way”

“At least there I will not be banned”

A few days later Akiba and some other sages came to visit.

“Is there something you would like to teach us?” Akiba asked.

“That the world can be sordid, and dirty, and even disgusting. And all of that rubs against us even while we study and pray. But at the very core of us there is something holy and pure.”

And with that Eliezer exhaled his final breath.

