

A PLUME BOOK

RASHI'S DAUGHTERS  
BOOK II:  
MIRIAM

MAGGIE ANTON was born Margaret Antonofsky in Los Angeles, California. Raised in a secular, socialist household, she reached adulthood with little knowledge of the Jewish religion. All that changed when Dave Parkhurst entered her life, and they discovered Judaism as adults. That was the start of a lifetime of adult Jewish education, synagogue involvement, and ritual observance. This was in addition to raising their children, Emily and Ari, and working full time as a clinical chemist.

In 1997, as her nest was emptying and her mother was declining with Alzheimer's disease, she became intrigued with the idea that Rashi, one of Judaism's greatest scholars, had no sons, only three daughters. Using techniques developed while doing her family's genealogy, she began to research Rashi's family, and the idea of a book about them was born.

Eight years later, the first volume of *Rashi's Daughters* was finally complete, making Maggie Anton a Talmud maven and an authority on medieval French Jewish women. She retired from the lab and spent the next two years researching and writing *Book II: Miriam*, in addition to lecturing at over a hundred synagogues, JCC's, and Jewish women's organizations.

Maggie lives in Glendale, California, with Dave, her husband of thirty-six years, where she is working on *Rashi's Daughters, Book III: Rachel*, as well as a translation of *Machzor Vitry*. You can follow her blog and contact her at her website, [www.rashisdaughters.com](http://www.rashisdaughters.com).

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# Rashi's Daughters

*Book II: Miriam*

MAGGIE ANTON



A PLUME BOOK

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PLUME

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For Aaron  
for Ray  
and for all the other modern-day Judahs

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# acknowledgments

AS IN THE FIRST BOOK of my *Rashi's Daughters* trilogy, most of the characters in *Miriam* are real historical figures. Again, I've spent years researching how Jews and women lived in medieval France so I can share my knowledge with my readers. Again, there will be plenty of Talmud woven into the story, as taught by the master, Rashi, himself.

On the subject of Talmud, I want to thank Dr. Rachel Adler of HUC-JIR in Los Angeles for introducing me to this amazing holy text almost fifteen years ago and for suggesting what later became the theme for this volume on Miriam. I fell in love with the Talmud at first sight and have been passionately studying it ever since.

That brings me to my second acknowledgment: Rabbi Aaron Katz of the Academy of Jewish Religion. My study partner and dear friend, Aaron has taught me so much that there aren't words enough to thank him. This book would not exist without his assistance. I am also grateful to Rabbi Tsafreer Lev, Zachary Hepner, and Cantor Philip Sherman, who spent hours explaining every intricacy of the circumcision procedure and the training required to become a mohel.

I want to thank my agent, Susanna Einstein, and my editor at Plume, Ali Bothwell Mancini, for her enthusiasm and her encouragement to take *Rashi's Daughters* to the next level. Also many thanks to Beth Lieberman, for editing advice that turned this book into the one I wanted it to be, and to Sharon Goldinger, who shepherded this naive author into becoming a successful one.

My friend Ray Eelsing and my daughter, Emily, spent many hours critiquing my early drafts. Each brought their own unique talents to the task and their comments were invaluable. Last, but certainly not least, I

offer my thanks and love to my husband, Dave, who listened patiently to far too many stories about Rashi and his daughters, who gave me excellent advice about how to improve my first drafts, and who could always think of the right word when I couldn't. Without his support I would have given up long ago.

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# timeline

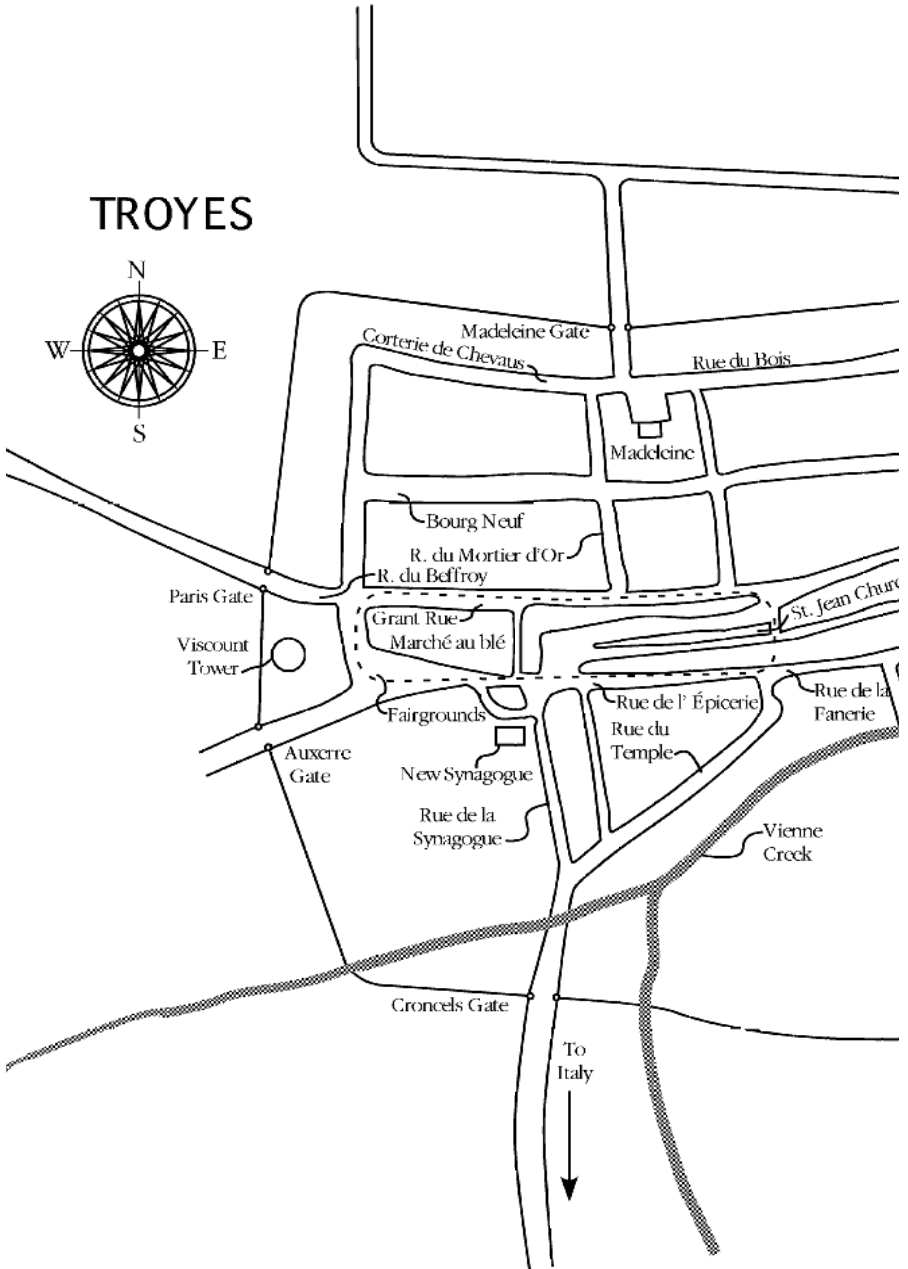
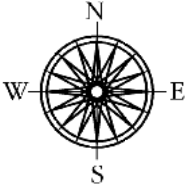
- 1040 Salomon ben Isaac (Rashi) born in Troyes, France, on February 22.  
(4800)
- 1047 Count Etienne dies; his son Eudes III inherits Champagne.
- 1050 Invention of horseshoes and padded collars enable horses to plow fields much more efficiently than oxen.
- 1054 Salomon goes to Mayence to study with Uncle Simon haZaken. Under Pope Leo IX, a split develops between Byzantine/eastern and Roman/western church.
- 1057 Salomon marries Rivka, sister of Isaac ben Judah. Leaves Mayence to study at Worms.
- 1059 Joheved born to Salomon and Rivka in Troyes.
- 1060 Philippe I becomes King of France; Henry IV is Emperor of Germany, Nicholas II is pope, Benedict X antipope.
- 1062 Miriam born to Salomon and Rivka.  
Count Eudes III found guilty of nobleman's murder; Uncle Thibault takes over Champagne and forces Eudes III to flee to Normandy where he takes refuge with his cousin, Duke William (the Bastard) of Normandy.
- 1066 Salomon studies in Mayence with Isaac ben Judah.  
Duke William of Normandy becomes King of England (the Conqueror).
- 1068 Salomon returns to Troyes.
- 1069 Rachel born to Salomon and Rivka.

- Joheved becomes betrothed to Meir ben Samuel of Ramerupt.  
Isaac (Troyes' parnas) becomes winemaking partner with Salomon.
- 1070 Count Thibault marries second wife, Adelaide de Bar, a young  
(4830) widow.  
Salomon founds yeshiva in Troyes.
- 1071 King Philippe marries Bertha.  
Count Thibault and Adelaide's first son, Eudes IV, is born.
- 1073 Hildebrand, a Cluniac monk, is elected Pope Gregory XII.
- 1075 Pope Gregory announces excommunication of married priests,  
suspends German bishops opposed to clerical celibacy, and  
threatens to excommunicate King Philippe.
- 1076 Thibault and Adelaide's third son, Hugues, born.  
Pope Gregory excommunicates German King Henry, appoints  
Rudolph as new king.
- 1077 Isaac ben Meir born in Troyes.
- 1078 Daughter Constance born to King Philippe and Bertha.
- 1080 Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) born at Ramerupt.  
Archbishop Manasse of Rheims is deposed by Pope Gregory; a  
blow to King Philippe.  
King Henry of Germany appoints Clement III antipope.
- 1081 Prince Louis VI born to King Philippe and Bertha.
- 1083 King Henry attacks Rome, Saracens plunder city, Pope Gregory  
flees.
- 1084 Fire in Mayence attributed to Jews; many move to Speyer.  
Count Thibault's oldest son, Étienne-Henri of Blois, marries  
Adèle, daughter of William the Conqueror.
- 1085 Pope Gregory dies in Salerno.
- 1087 King William of England dies.
- 1088 Smallpox epidemic begins in winter.  
Count Thibault becomes ill, son Eudes IV takes over as ruler of  
Champagne.
- 1089 Isaac haParnas and Count Thibault die in epidemic.  
Champagne goes to Eudes IV. Blois goes to Étienne-Henri.

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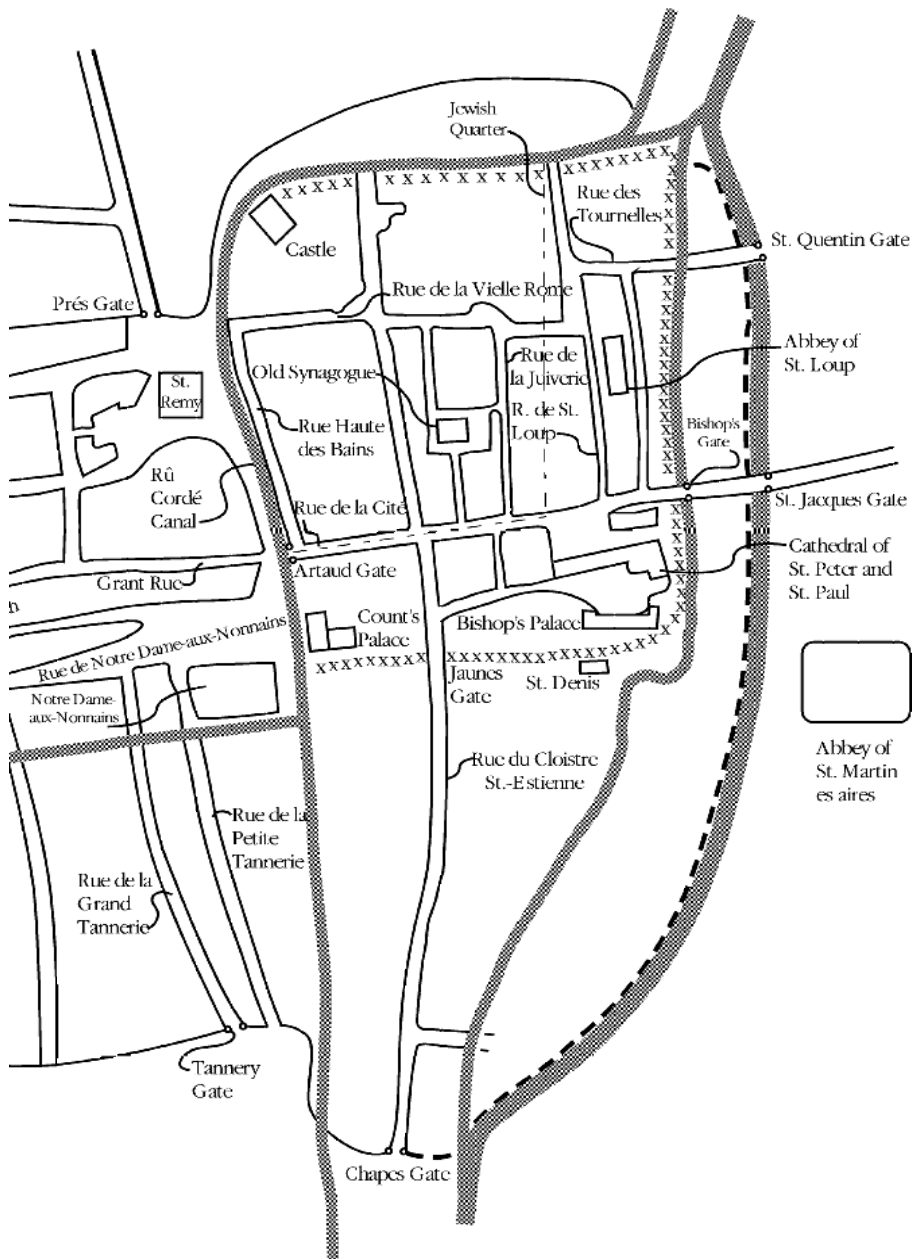
- 1092 Epidemic of infant meningitis in Troyes.  
King Philippe repudiates Queen Bertha and marries Bertrada,  
wife of Count Fulk of Anjou, enraging Pope Urban II.
- 1093 Eudes IV dies on January 1. Thibault's son Hugues becomes  
Count of Champagne.  
Count Erard of Brienne starts war with Hugues.  
Solar eclipse in Germany on September 23, followed by famine.
- 1094 Pope Urban II excommunicates King Philippe over Bertrada.  
Terrible drought in summer in Champagne.
- 1095 Count Hugues marries Constance, daughter of Philippe and  
Bertrada.  
Spectacular meteor shower in early April.
- 1096 Crusades start: Four Jewish communities in Rhineland attacked  
between Passover and Shavuot. May 3, Speyer; May 18, Worms;  
May 27, Mayence; May 30, Cologne. More than 10,000 Jews die.  
Lunar eclipse in early August.
- 1097 Jews converted during crusade permitted to openly return to  
Judaism.  
A comet is seen for seven nights in early October.
- 1098 Robert of Molesme founds Citeaux Abbey and Cistercian Order.
- 1099 Crusaders take Jerusalem.
- 1100 Jews return to Mayence.  
(4860) Louis VI becomes king-elect of France.  
Paschal II is pope, Theodoric antipope.  
Discovery of alcohol by distillation is made in Salerno medical  
school.
- 1104 Assassination attempt made on Count Hugues.
- 1105 Salomon ben Isaac dies on July 17; Samuel ben Meir heads  
Troyes yeshiva.

# TROYES



- x x x x x - Remains of Roman wall
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*Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? One who learns from everyone. As it is written (Psalms 119:99), "From all my teachers I have gained understanding." Who is strong? One who conquers his yetzer. As it is written (Proverbs 16:32), "One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty and one who controls his spirit than one who captures a city." Who is rich? One who is content with his portion. As it is written (Psalms 128:2), "You shall eat from the labor of your hands; you shall be happy."*

—Mishnah Tractate Avot, chapter 4

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# prologue

FOR THE JEWS OF NORTHERN FRANCE, times had never been better than in the second half of the eleventh century. Relations with their Christian neighbors were tolerant, even amiable on occasion, since the Church was too busy rooting out heretical sects and implementing Pope Gregory's controversial reforms to concern itself with the Jews. European society was entering 150 years of advances in political organization, economics, scientific pursuit, and education, in what is now called the Twelfth-Century Renaissance.

Under the feudal system, the Jews' social status was high, equal to that of knights. The Jewish trader was a welcome visitor to French estates, bringing news of the outside world, buying their surfeit produce, and selling them imported goods. Jews were moneylenders much as department stores and gasoline companies are today; if their customers received the bulk of their income at harvest time, for example, merchants extended them credit until then.

As Christian Europe's resources grew, Jews bought wheat, wool, wine, and steel, and then transported it to the Muslim East, where they sold it for a profit. In return they acquired silk, cotton, spices, and jewels, which they brought back to the West, sold for another profit, and began the cycle again. Everyone prospered.

The Jews of Troyes benefited greatly from this commercial success. Under the enlightened sovereignty of Count Thibault, the great fairs of Champagne attracted merchants from throughout the known world, many of them learned in Jewish Law. Credit was extended from one fair to the next, in this infancy of the modern banking system. Since local

middlemen collected a percentage of every sale, the Jews of Troyes became so affluent that even the poorest families had servants.

In 1068, one of these families was that of twenty-eight-year-old Rabbi Salomon ben Isaac, who would be known and revered centuries later as Rashi, one of Judaism's greatest scholars. After fifteen years studying in Germany's finest Talmudic academies, he was forced to return home to manage the family vineyard, which had fallen into decline due to his mother's senility. With no sons, and desperate from having to give up his yeshiva studies, Salomon broke with tradition and secretly began teaching Talmud to his daughters, Joheved and Miriam.

But Salomon did not lack male students for long. Isaac haParnas, the leader of the Jewish community, saw an opportunity to attract more Jewish merchants to the fairs in Troyes by establishing a Talmud academy there. He offered Salomon a generous salary to teach his grandsons, and other boys soon joined them, forming the nucleus of a new yeshiva. To ensure that Salomon had sufficient time to teach, Isaac haParnas partnered with him in the wine business, which finally lifted the vintner's family out of poverty.

Salomon also had time to begin writing his twin commentaries on the Bible and the Talmud. His Bible commentary is so authoritative that today it is studied in every rabbinic school. Yet his extraordinarily clear and concise commentary on the Talmud is his true magnum opus. Since the Talmud was first printed in the fifteenth century, his words have filled the inside column of every page of every copy. Today more Jews read Rashi's words than those of any other Jewish scholar.

Not surprisingly, Salomon's daughters found their fiancés among his students. First Joheved was betrothed to Meir ben Samuel, a lord's son from nearby Ramerupt. Miriam, however, enjoyed a love match with Benjamin ben Reuben, son of a vintner in Rheims. Her initial compassion for the homesick youth blossomed into a deeper feeling as they worked together in Salomon's vineyard. Joheved, terrified that Meir would discover that she knew Talmud, tried to hide her learning from him. But Miriam suffered no such fears with Benjamin, and the two of them would often study Salomon's lessons together.

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Over the next several years, Salomon's yeshiva thrived as more and more foreign merchants studied with him during the semiannual fairs, and then sent their sons to him during the year. His family grew as well when his wife, Rivka, gave birth to another daughter, Rachel. Miriam was so helpful during the delivery that the midwife, her Aunt Sarah, began training her as an apprentice.

Miriam learned to grow her own midwife's herbs and to find the others she needed in the local forest; she helped deliver Countess Adelaide's baby during a complicated childbirth, thereby saving both the countess and the child; she prepared and administered an abortion potion for Catharina, an unmarried childhood friend; and she successfully delivered Joheved's first child.

All this time, Miriam and Joheved continued to study Talmud with their father. When their grandmother died, they took over her position leading services for the women in synagogue, and though they didn't seek it, they were on the way to assume leadership in the community of Jewish women. But Miriam gave no thought to the future of Troyes' Jews or her possible role in it. At seventeen years old, she was focused on her own future as she and Benjamin eagerly prepared for their wedding.

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# Part One




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# one

Troyes, France  
Late Summer 4838 (1078 CE)

iriam silently took her place on the bench she shared with Benjamin. As soon as her father finished blessing the bread, she casually let her hand drop below the table so her fiancé could take hold of it. They'd been betrothed five years, ever since she was twelve, and now their wedding was less than three months away. She blinked back tears of joy. Soon she and Benjamin could be alone together whenever they wanted, could kiss without worrying that someone would catch them. She gazed wistfully at her older sister, Joheved, sitting opposite her with baby Isaac on her lap, and gave Benjamin's hand a gentle squeeze. Next year, *Le Bon Dieu* willing, she'd be holding a baby too.

Benjamin turned to Miriam and smiled. She reached up to smooth her hair into place and realized that she'd left her veil upstairs. Today, however, she was lucky; none of the scholars joining Papa for *disner* were strangers, so she did not need a head covering. Mama, of course, always covered her hair and neck, no matter how hot the weather, even when she was just eating breakfast with the family.

Miriam sighed with relief when Aunt Sarah walked in late from visiting Yvette, who had given birth two days ago. But her relief disappeared when her aunt whispered something to Mama, who immediately frowned in response.

Sarah turned to Miriam. "I don't think I can go to Ramerupt today, dear. I'm afraid that Yvette may be developing a fever, and I want to look in on her every couple of hours."

“She was fine when I checked her last night,” Miriam said, half rising from her seat.

“And she’s probably fine now. I expect that she’s only sweating this afternoon because of the heat, but you know we can’t be too careful where the demon Lillit is concerned.”

Miriam nodded. “I suppose I can collect the alkanet leaves by myself.”

Salomon ben Isaac interrupted the heated discussion he was having at the men’s end of the table. “Absolutely not,” he said, shaking a piece of bread at Miriam. “Until Count Thibault catches the highwaymen who’ve been accosting Troyes’ fairgoers, my daughter is not riding alone in the forest.”

“But Papa, those merchants were robbed at the beginning of the Hot Fair. Surely the thieves are far away with their loot by now.” She wasn’t a little girl who needed his protection anymore. “New mothers really need the alkanet salve, Papa, and it’s best picked now before the weather cools.” If she were going to be a midwife like Aunt Sarah, she had to be able to obtain such medicinal herbs when they were available.

“*Non, ma fille*. Not alone.” Salomon noted his normally dutiful daughter’s expression—part disappointed, part resentful. “If you need the stuff that badly, maybe your sister can go with you.”

Nine-year-old Rachel looked up eagerly, and he added, “Your older sister.”

Joheved stifled a yawn. “Not today, please. Little Isaac’s back teeth are coming in, and I spent most of the night trying to comfort him. Mama has generously offered to watch him this afternoon so I can take a nice long nap.” She handed the baby to her husband, Meir, sitting next to her, and cut them more bread.

Benjamin quickly swallowed his mouthful of chicken stew. In just a few days he’d be returning to Rheims to help his family with their wine harvest. Then the next time he’d see Miriam would be after the festival of Sukkot, on their wedding day. “If you can spare me from the vineyard today, Rabbenu, I’ll go with her.”

“But you don’t know alkanet from foxglove.” Rivka’s eyes narrowed with suspicion.

Benjamin turned to address his future mother-in-law. “I’m sure I’d

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be better protection against thieves than Joheved,” he said. “And once Miriam shows me what the alkanet plant looks like, I can pick leaves as well as anyone.”

“You’re welcome to take my horse, Benjamin, I won’t be needing her.” Meir said with a wink. It wasn’t long ago that he had been desperate for time alone with his bride before their wedding.

Sarah put down her wine cup and faced her brother-in-law. “The alkanet grows fairly close to the Count of Ramerupt’s castle,” she said. “I can’t believe any criminals could hide in such a well-patrolled place.”

Salomon stroked his beard while everyone at the table waited for him to speak. “I suppose so,” he finally announced. Then he shook his finger at Benjamin. “Make sure that Miriam is never out of your sight.”

“Don’t worry, Papa. Benjamin and I will review today’s Talmud session while we ride,” Miriam said, her happiness vanquishing her mother’s frown of disapproval.

Rivka had never forgiven Salomon for teaching their daughters Talmud. It didn’t matter that he was rosh yeshiva of Troyes’ Talmudic academy, and therefore no one in the Jewish community would dare challenge his decision. And it didn’t matter that both Joheved and Miriam had found excellent matches among his students despite her insistence that no man would want to marry a woman more learned than himself. Hens didn’t crow and women didn’t study Talmud; it would only lead to trouble.

Rivka found a way to vent her displeasure. She pulled on one of Miriam’s braids until her daughter was facing her. “And I don’t care how warm it is, a betrothed woman doesn’t go outside without her veil.”

Within an hour the delighted couple was riding through the forest north of Troyes. It was a beautiful late summer day. While most of the foliage was still green, here and there some dazzling red or golden leaves gave a hint of autumn’s future splendor. Birds twittered overhead, seemingly adding their opinions to Miriam and Benjamin’s discussion of the Talmud.

She sighed with pleasure as his golden brown curls bobbed each time he nodded excitedly at an argument she made. “Benjamin, would you

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mind not cutting your hair until after our wedding?” She smiled at him. “I know it’s silly, but I want to run my fingers in your curls.”

“Ever since that morning when you tried to cure my homesickness by pretending to be my sister, I’ve wanted to be with you whenever I could.”

She chuckled. “Joheved got so angry every time I made her take me to the vineyard while you were working there. She was sure something terrible would happen.”

“She was right. You ended up betrothed to a poor vintner’s son instead of a rich Talmud scholar like Meir.” The grin he flashed made Miriam burst out laughing. He wasn’t what most people would call handsome, but he could always make her laugh.

“Remember what Ben Zoma teaches in Pirke Avot,” she said.

“Who is rich? One who is content with his portion.”

She smiled back at him. “Then I am the richest woman in Troyes.”

“And once we’re married, I’ll be the richest man in the whole world.”

This time Benjamin’s voice was serious.

Miriam was too happy to speak. Just thinking about their upcoming wedding made her feel that her heart would burst.

Soon she heard sheep bleating in the distance, which meant they were approaching Meir’s family’s estate. Suddenly Benjamin’s horse shied. They both slowed to see what had spooked the mare and noticed a putrid smell wafting by on the breeze. A sheep carcass blocked the path ahead.

“Should we tell Meir’s parents there’s a fox attacking their flocks?” Miriam called to Benjamin as they made a wide detour.

He paused to let her catch up with him. “I don’t know. If we drop in on them, they’ll insist on offering us hospitality, which will only delay us.”

“Not only that,” Miriam said, a shy smile lighting her face. “If Marona hears we’re out to collect alkanet, she’ll probably want to come with us.”

Their gazes locked. “Perhaps we could stop by on our way back?” Benjamin said, and Miriam nodded.

They eventually found some alkanet bushes and Miriam began to fill her bag with leaves. “Strange, but there don’t seem to be as many plants as before. Would you mind searching for more?”

“I’ll see what I can find.” Benjamin headed back the way they’d come. There was something odd about that dead sheep, and he wanted to have a closer look at it.

He made increasingly wider circles around the area, keeping in mind the location of several alkanet bushes he passed, until he reached the downed animal. *That’s odd, there’s nothing bitten out of the carcass.* In fact, he couldn’t even see where the sheep had been attacked. Wrinkling his nose at the stink, he got down and examined the body.

Foxes hadn’t killed this sheep. Its throat had been slit and a leg cut off. Whoever did it apparently lacked the strength to move his ill-gotten gains alone and had merely carried off the leg, probably intending to return with help.

*Mon Dieu, they could be back any time and I’ve left Miriam alone.* Benjamin hurriedly remounted Meir’s horse. The next moment, he heard her scream.

It seemed an eternity before he reached her. If he lived forever the tableau before him would remain etched in his mind. Clutching a knife in his right hand and advancing toward Miriam was a fellow so skinny and filthy that he obviously neither ate nor bathed regularly. He was staring at her with undisguised lewdness.

Benjamin’s rage flared and his immediate reaction was to drive Meir’s horse straight into the villain. But then, realizing that the mare might be stabbed, some semblance of prudence tempered his fury. He grabbed his own knife and jumped down.

“Get away from her, you filthy scum!” Benjamin positioned himself in front of Miriam and yelled to her, “Quickly, ride to Ramerupt castle and alert the guards.”

“But Benjamin, he’s got a knife,” she pleaded as she climbed onto Sarah’s horse. “He hasn’t harmed me. Please just ride away with me. He won’t be able to catch us.”

“So the girl’s little brother is here to rescue her.” The rogue sneered at them, showing a glimpse of yellow and brown decaying teeth. “Go on, little boy, listen to your sister and ride home to your mama.”

Benjamin’s burning anger flared. What an idiot this fellow was. He could have easily stolen Sarah’s horse and left Miriam alone. But no, he had let his lust rule him. Then, when their riding off would have allowed him to escape, he had stupidly insulted Benjamin, essentially challenging him to a fight, which would mean certain capture if he lost.

“I have a knife, too,” Benjamin responded. “In fact, I’ve got two.” He reached down and pulled one of his father’s pruning knives from its secret sheath in his boot.

Miriam could see that further talk was useless. She wheeled her mount around and galloped into the forest. There were few horses faster than Aunt Sarah’s, and she prayed that she could reach the castle in time.

Benjamin and his opponent circled each other warily. Amazed at his calmness, he realized that he’d soon find out how much remained of the proficiency with knives that the Romanian convert, Samson, had taught him. The rogue seemed surprisingly cautious until he suddenly made a run for Meir’s horse. However, Benjamin forestalled him by slapping the mare’s rump, sending her running, and was rewarded with a shower of curses.

Now they both knew that the villain had no choice but to attack, otherwise they would keep staring at each other until the castle guards arrived. Benjamin tried to remember what Samson had taught him about deflecting and parrying an enemy’s blade. He shouldn’t even try to apprehend the fellow; all he needed to do was defend himself until help came.

“You know what’s going to happen to you; they’ll probably hang you for killing a lord’s sheep.” Perhaps he could delay the inevitable charge by talking.

“Not a chance, little boy.” The man’s smile revealed that besides being decayed, several of his teeth were missing. “I’ll have killed you first, and then I’ll be safe with my friends.”

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“You’re right, you won’t be hanged. You’ll be given to Count Thibault’s men and tortured until you tell them where your hideout is. Then they’ll throw what’s left of your body into a dungeon until you rot.”

Was this man a member of the gang that had been attacking the fair merchants? Benjamin suddenly realized the danger he was in. What if other criminals were nearby? Surely it would take two men to move the dead sheep.

His opponent lunged. Benjamin felt his sleeve rip and resolved to pay better attention. For a while there was silence between the two, punctuated with heavy breathing. The man attacked again, but this time Benjamin dodged the blow and stabbed his knife into the man’s thigh.

Benjamin began to feel confident; he was barely scratched, but his foe was limping badly, favoring his bloody leg. Then a look of desperation came over the outlaw’s face, and he attacked Benjamin straight on. Benjamin jumped away, but not quickly enough. The man’s knife grazed his forehead, and the wound began bleeding into his left eye. Now he could barely see. Inwardly cursing his bad luck, Benjamin tried to wipe away the blood while parrying his opponent’s thrusts.

Just when he was sure he would receive a serious wound at any moment, two dark-haired youths with swords ran up and disarmed his foe. Soft linen was wrapped around Benjamin’s forehead, and he looked up to see Meir’s father, Lord Samuel, astride Meir’s horse, staring down at him anxiously. Benjamin had been so intent on the battle that he hadn’t even heard them.

Samuel dismounted and began to examine Benjamin’s wounds. “Are you all right?” he asked. Benjamin could only nod in reply; he was too shaken to speak.

Apparently satisfied, Samuel turned his attention to the two young men. “When you’ve tied this fellow securely, search the forest for his companions.”

Then he put his arm around Benjamin’s still shaking shoulders. “Of course we feared the worst when my son’s horse showed up at the manor’s gate without a rider. I immediately mounted the mare, called my squires to accompany me, and followed her trail back here.”

Benjamin had barely begun expressing his thanks when he heard a

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rider approaching. Hoping it was Miriam, he was taken aback when Meir's mother, Marona, rode into the clearing, clutching her medicine box. Her veil had slipped down, allowing her two long grey braids to flap behind her. Her already frightened expression turned to horror when she saw the blood on Benjamin.

"Where's Meir? What happened here?" Her gaze darted frantically around the clearing.

"Meir's safe in Troyes." Samuel helped her down from her saddle. "Benjamin was riding his horse."

Marona's terror dissipated when she realized that Benjamin was relatively unharmed. After tucking her hair back into place, she carefully cleaned and applied a healing ointment to each of Benjamin's wounds. As she did so, he recounted the afternoon's events, yelping once when Marona removed the squire's makeshift bandage from his forehead in order to properly deal with the laceration under it.

As they waited, Benjamin began to worry about Miriam. "I hope she made it to the castle all right."

Samuel smiled reassuringly. "We must expect some delay. After all, a strange woman can't just ride up to the gates, cry for help, and then ride off again with a few men-at-arms," he said. "If she mentions her relationship to me, I'm sure my knights will aid her immediately, but if not, the sergeant may want to question her."

"Your knights?" Benjamin's eyes widened in surprise.

Samuel looked up at Marona and shook his head. "Apparently there are some subjects Salomon doesn't teach at his yeshiva." He turned back to Benjamin and sighed. "As Count André of Ramerupt's loyal vassal, I am obliged to provide him with two knights to serve as castle guards. Of course, I'm not about to go myself or send my sons, so I hire a couple of landless knights. If I provide them with armor, weapons, a horse, and a small income, they are agreeable to serving in my place."

"Are your squires training to become your knights?" Benjamin was glad for the small talk as Marona tended his wounds.

"Not exactly," Samuel replied. "Alain and Pierre—excuse me for not introducing my squires, but I didn't want to delay their search. As I was saying, their fathers sent them to me to train for the knighthood. For

several years they will live with me and learn estate management, at the same time receiving their physical training at the castle. If they prove adept, they may attain the position of steward to a landed family, which would allow them to marry.”

Benjamin’s jaw dropped. “Knights don’t get to marry? I thought only monks stayed single.”

Samuel shook his head in sympathy. “*Non*, most knights don’t get to marry, either. Only the eldest son, heir to his father’s lands, may take a bride. Occasionally a younger son finds an heiress to marry, particularly if he impresses her family with his skill at tournaments. But usually he ends up either in the church, where he can live unmarried to a ripe old age, or among some castellan’s guards, where he’s lucky to live past thirty.”

“Which obviously leaves quite a few unwed young women as well,” Marona added archly. “I believe they must choose between being a lady-in-waiting or a nun.”

Benjamin pondered this new information. How could the Edomite lords be so sinful as to prevent all but a few of their number from being fruitful and multiplying? No wonder knights had such a reputation for lechery. A man without a wife would be unable to resist temptation.

“There.” Marona interrupted his reverie by standing up and wiping her hands. “You’re all bandaged now. Be sure and make the *gomet* blessing at services tomorrow—you’re a lucky fellow to have such trifling injuries.”

Suddenly he heard horses approaching. Was it finally Miriam or just Samuel’s squires? Benjamin’s heart leaped as Miriam rode into view, followed by two knights with swords drawn. She jumped off Sarah’s horse, eager to make sure Benjamin was all right. The knights also dismounted, albeit in a more dignified manner, and walked over to address Samuel.

“My Lord.” One of them had a scar on his cheek and he bowed deeply. “I apologize for our delay. There was some confusion at the castle when this distraught young lady first appeared, but as soon as we learned she was one of your relations, we came immediately.”

“It’s all right, men. Alain and Pierre were able to capture this villain

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before he could do any serious damage.” Samuel indicated the man on the ground. Then he introduced the knights; the scarred one was Colon and his companion was Faubert.

“We have already encountered Alain and Pierre, my lord, which is how we were finally able to find this place,” Faubert said. “They told us they have discovered only one brigand, whom they apprehended.”

No sooner had the knight spoken than the two squires rode into the clearing, a foul-looking fellow tied behind Alain’s horse. The man being reluctantly pulled along immediately began to curse his comrade on the ground, accusing him of betraying them.

With great effort, Miriam had restrained herself from showering Benjamin with an immodest amount of affection. Watching the two thieves arguing, her frustration combined with fury at the villain who’d threatened her, and she vented her feelings by kicking him as hard as she could in his bloody leg. He let out a yelp of pain, followed by a string of obscenities.

“Get these disgusting sons of whores out of my sight,” Samuel ordered his knights. “Take them to the castle and let André’s experts make them reveal what he needs to know. If Thibault offers a reward, divide it among the four of you.”

“Count Thibault will be furious that the bandits attacking his fair-goers have been living right under the nose of his vassal, Count André,” Marona said. “And the best way to allay that displeasure will be for André to hand the entire gang over to Thibault before the Hot Fair ends.”

They tied the injured man face down on the back of Colon’s horse and attached his accomplice’s rope to Faubert’s. The two knights set off at a brisk pace, obviously pleased at their captives’ discomfort. Samuel directed his squires to dispose of the sheep carcass and, after Miriam and Benjamin insisted on remaining behind to find more alkanet, he settled himself on his wife’s horse, just behind her. He put his arm around her waist, and the looks the couple exchanged suggested that they expected their ride to be as pleasurable as the criminals’ would be miserable.

As if waking from a dream, Miriam and Benjamin found themselves alone in the forest again. Sunlight glinted through the trees, a gentle

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breeze rustled the leaves, and birds resumed their songs. Except for the small bandage above Benjamin's left eyebrow, everything seemed the same as when they first discovered the alkanet bushes hours earlier. They stood in silence, waiting for the sounds of Samuel's horses to disappear. Then they bolted into each other's arms.

"Oh, Benjamin." Miriam hugged him fiercely and began to cry. "I was so frightened."

"It's all right now." He cradled her head against his chest and stroked her hair. "At least you weren't hurt."

"I was frightened for you." Miriam squeezed him even tighter and began patting his back and arms, as if to assure herself that he was indeed uninjured. "I was terrified that we'd get here too late, and . . ." She couldn't say what she feared most.

"Don't worry—I'm perfectly fine. Marona fixed me up as good as new." He was more than fine. Miriam's caresses were having a most salutary effect.

"You can't imagine how I felt when we got back and I saw you sitting there, chatting with Meir's parents as though nothing had happened. And that horrible man tied up on the ground." As she talked, she felt her tension spilling out along with her words. "I wanted to run over and kiss you."

"So what's stopping you?" Benjamin's *yetzer hara* spoke for him.

"What?" Miriam had been babbling and she wasn't sure exactly what she had said.

"What's stopping you from kissing me?" His voice was husky with desire.

She stared up at him and began to get lost in his gaze. Then she closed her eyes and slowly lifted her face toward his.

He kissed her with almost bruising intensity, and she returned his kisses with equal ardor. Previously she had kept their lovemaking within careful bounds (except for Purim, when they were too drunk to remember what they had done). He could kiss her whenever he wanted, as long as nobody could see them. And if he managed to get her alone for a decent period of time, long enough for her breathing to quicken, he might be emboldened to fondle her breasts through her chemise and feel her nipples harden under his touch.


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But this time there were no limits. She allowed, even encouraged, his hands unchecked license under her chemise while her own roamed freely under his. She couldn't get enough of his kisses and caresses; they were the reassurance she needed to prove that he was still alive. Entwined in each other's arms, they sank down to the soft forest floor.

"Take me, Benjamin, make us one flesh," Miriam whispered with a soft moan. "Make me your wife now."

He struggled to remove his *braises*, while she lifted her skirts and pressed her hips up against his. Then she heard a rustling sound coming from the bushes. The squires said that they searched the area, but what if they missed one of the robbers?

## two

iriam felt as though somebody had doused her with cold water. She looked down and realized that she and Benjamin were lying in a pile of leaves, naked from the waist down. Averting her eyes from his exposed flesh, she pulled her chemise down, just as a ewe and her twin lambs broke into the clearing.

Miriam and Benjamin stared at the sheep and burst out laughing.

“I’m sorry, Miriam. After everything that happened today, I got carried away.”

“You don’t need to apologize, it was my fault too.”

That they had nearly consummated their marriage before the wedding didn’t bother her. The Rabbis taught that a woman couldn’t conceive the first time, but, even if she had gotten pregnant, they’d be husband and wife in a few weeks—nobody would know the difference. Miriam had seen enough of Salomon’s responsa, verified by several of the women whose births she’d attended, to know that other betrothed couples did it. After all, once a man and a woman were betrothed, only death or divorce could end their union.

Upon returning to Troyes, they told a mesmerized audience about their adventure, leaving out, by unspoken consent, the final part of it. The next day the fairground was buzzing with rumors that the brigands had been caught in Ramerupt, but that Count Thibault was seeking the fence who had helped them dispose of their loot. Some Edomites

suspected a Jew, since the captured Jewish merchants had been ransomed while non-Jews were killed.

Salomon was adamant that Jews couldn't be involved. "Of course the Jewish merchants were left alive," he explained as his family shared their midday meal. "Any thieves sophisticated enough to elude capture by Thibault's men would know that Jews always redeem each other. Why kill a Jewish merchant when it's more profitable to ransom him?"

Miriam offered her support. "Besides, no Jew in Troyes would handle goods stolen from other Jews," she said, slicing a piece of roast lamb onto her bread trencher.

"I suspect that some might be willing, if it were only a matter of violating Jewish law," Salomon said. "But the penalty of *herem*, being expelled from the Jewish community, is too great a risk. You'll see. The fence won't be a Jew."

Benjamin had his doubts, but Salomon was correct. The trader in league with the bandits was an Edomite from Burgundy. When Benjamin set off for home with the Rheims merchants, they passed by the town scaffolds, where ten other bodies were hanging along with the man who had attacked him and Miriam.

"You can't imagine how glad I am to see these thieves executed," one of the merchants confided to Benjamin. "My brother and I were captured on our way to the fair and I was loath to return home with the fugitives still at large."

"Wait!" his comrade cried out. "Driver, stop the carts!"

Several of the merchants got out and spit on their captors' bodies. Then the caravan began moving again, and as Benjamin watched the town walls receding behind them, he sighed. This year's vintage would be the last one he'd be helping his family make. But that sad thought was immediately replaced with an exultant one: the next time he saw those walls, it would be his wedding day.

"If you feel the slightest light-headedness," Salomon's tone was severe, "leave the vat immediately and breathe deeply until the sensation passes."

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No sooner had the Hot Fair concluded than the wine harvest began. But a heat spell made treading grapes during *bouillage*, the wine's stormy fermentation, unusually dangerous. Each morning, Salomon exhorted his workers to be constantly vigilant, both for themselves and for the others in the vats with them.

"I want continual conversation among you, the taller workers making sure that everyone replies." He paused until everyone nodded. "Never leave anyone alone in the vat."

"Do we have to talk, Papa?" Rachel asked, her eyes wide. "I mean, can we sing instead?"

"*Oui, ma fille*. You may sing instead." His voice was filled with affection for his youngest daughter. "But you must stay in the vat with me, so I can watch you."

When Salomon realized that hot weather would likely continue for the entire *bouillage* period, his first reaction was to forbid Rachel from treading the grapes. But she was nearly as tall as Miriam now and had been eagerly looking forward to her first vintage.

Salomon shook his head and sighed. It never ceased to amaze him that he and Rivka had produced such a beauty. Not that Joheved and Miriam were unattractive, but they resembled him too much. Rachel, with her dark curls, perfect oval face, and deep green eyes, had somehow managed to combine the ordinary features of her parents into something exquisite.

A father shouldn't favor one child over another, but he couldn't help it. Joheved and Miriam were dutiful daughters, fine vintners, and excellent students, and Joheved had provided him with a grandson, but he had been away studying while they were growing up. It was different with Rachel; he'd returned from Mayence just before her birth, and there had been a special bond between them ever since. Her first word had been *papa*.

By afternoon, the air was sweltering and Rachel, dressed in one of her sister's old chemises, couldn't wait to cool off in the vat of grape juice. Salomon and Miriam were already inside, and Rivka helped her climb up to the top. Rachel looked down, then blanched and hesitated. The

must of fermenting grapes seemed alive as it foamed and hissed, and she imagined she was stepping into a pot of cooking soup. But Salomon held out his hands and coaxed her, and she jumped into his arms.

It was difficult to remain upright in the liquid's constant movement. Stems seemed to reach up and encircle her legs with every step, and she tried not to think of snakes. But Salomon held tight to her hand as she jumped up and down in the must, and Miriam starting singing a merry song. Rachel soon forgot her fears in the excitement of making wine and relaxed enough to enjoy the pleasant feeling of the bubbles rising past her legs as they sang together.

Suddenly Miriam interrupted their song. "Papa, I think I feel dizzy." She clumsily made her way to the side of the vat. "Is it all right if I just sit here on the edge, or should I get out altogether?"

"You may sit on top until you feel better." He helped her climb up and then turned to Rachel. "How are you doing, *ma fille*?"

"I feel fine, Papa." To prove it she began to sing again.

But moments later, Rachel's voice began to waver, and before Miriam's horrified eyes, her sister tottered and slipped into the must. Immediately Salomon reached down into the liquid, pulled his daughter up, and, flinging her over his shoulder, climbed out of the vat. Safe in the courtyard, Rachel coughed, took in several gulps of air, and began to cry.

Rivka came flying out of the kitchen to find her youngest daughter, covered in squashed grapes, weeping in her husband's arms. "What happened?" she demanded, glaring at Salomon.

"Don't worry, Rivka." Without lying, he explained, "Rachel isn't injured, she's only frightened. You see, she lost her balance and fell into the wine."

Rachel stifled her sobs. "I'm all right, Mama. Really I am." She snuggled closer to Salomon. "Can I go back in the tank with you, Papa?"

"You've spent enough time with the vintage this year," Rivka announced. She grabbed Rachel's arm and tried to pull her toward the well, but Rachel clung to Salomon.

"I'll see that she's washed," he told Rivka. He lifted up Rachel's chin and looked her in the eye. "Let's get you cleaned up now, and we'll see about you helping in the vats tomorrow."

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Miriam couldn't help but notice her mother's sour expression as the pair headed toward the well, Salomon gently pulling bits of grapes and stems from Rachel's hair. Mama and Papa had never gotten along well, probably because they'd been strangers when they wed and spent most of the next ten years living apart in different cities. Miriam said a thankful prayer that the Holy One had blessed her with a love match.

Under Salomon's watchful eye, the *bouillage* ended without further incident, and the wine was left to complete its fermentation over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Finally Sukkot was upon them and the wine safely casked in the cellar. Miriam was beside herself with happiness; her wedding clothes were finished, and one of Aunt Sarah's bedrooms had been redecorated for the newlyweds. In recognition of her niece's maturity, Sarah decided that Miriam could handle the simple nighttime births alone. Sarah's night vision wasn't what it used to be.

Miriam's first opportunity began as usual, with an anxious servant knocking at Sarah's door early one evening. The mother, Muriel, had easily borne several children, so Miriam grabbed the midwife's basket and kissed Aunt Sarah good-bye, confident that she would return before midnight.

But when the courtyard's roosters woke Sarah just before dawn, Miriam had still not returned. Leaving breakfast untouched, Sarah rushed to the laboring woman's home. Once in the lying-in chamber, Sarah could see that Muriel was struggling to push the baby out.

"I don't understand it," Miriam whispered, her voice heavy with fatigue. "The baby is in the proper position but refuses to be born. I've tried pepper and agrimony, and some other herbs too, but none of them made any difference."

Sarah examined Muriel while Miriam explained, "I massaged her belly, and I even reached inside to pull the baby out, but nothing helped." Miriam was near tears. "I don't know what else to do, and the poor woman has been pushing for hours."

"The cord may be wrapped around the child, holding him back." Sarah's calm voice masked her concern.

Under Sarah's guidance, Miriam reached up into Muriel's womb,

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where, sure enough, she found the cord wrapped several times around the baby's neck. Once this impediment was undone, the child was delivered easily. But the infant was dead, strangled by its umbilical cord.

Miriam's hands shook as she delivered the placenta, and she blinked back tears of grief and shame. Sarah quickly whispered to her, "I know you didn't want to disturb me, but you need to ask for assistance when it is warranted."

"My baby, my poor baby," Muriel sobbed.

Sarah patted the distraught mother's shoulder. "I'm sorry, so sorry."

Wishing she could be anywhere else, Miriam silently cleaned the baby's body and wrapped it in clean linen. Sarah continued to comfort Muriel, never letting on that the outcome might have been different if she had been called earlier. But Miriam knew. Because of her incompetence, a child was dead.

As the sky began to lighten, the two midwives walked home in silence, Miriam wishing Aunt Sarah would chastise her further so she could apologize and be forgiven. The bells were ringing for Prime as Miriam wearily climbed the stairs to her bedroom, said her morning prayers, and got into bed. It was long after the bells were quiet when she finally cried herself to sleep.

Accompanying her husband and father to synagogue, Joheved knew nothing of Miriam's travail, only that her sister had spent all night with Muriel. As she climbed the stairs to the women's section, she could hear voices discussing the stillbirth, with several of them blaming Miriam. Conversation ceased abruptly when Joheved appeared, but she had heard enough.

*Poor Miriam, this will be hard on her.* But stillbirths happen all the time; it's not necessarily the midwife's fault.

Joheved tried to keep her *kavanah* focused on her prayers, and when services were over, she left quickly to escape the gossip. But Salomon and Meir were deep in conversation with two strangers. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs, reluctant to interrupt what was clearly a serious talk, but Meir motioned her to join them.

It was only as she got closer that she could see the tears in her father's

eyes, and when Salomon introduced the men as Benjamin's brothers, Simeon and Ezra, she looked questioningly at Meir, who shook his head sadly. Joheved could think of only one reason for Benjamin's brothers to travel to Troyes: two witnesses to verify a death.

Joheved clutched Meir's hand. "It can't be, not just before the wedding." She turned from one brother to the other, but there was only painful silence. So she murmured, "*Baruch Dayan Emet*" (Blessed is the True Judge), the first words a Jew says when learning of a death.

*Mon Dieu, Miriam will be devastated.* And if Benjamin's death wasn't bad enough, Miriam was now a childless widow, required by Jewish law to marry one of his brothers in order to produce a child to carry his name. But Simeon and Ezra were already married, forcing them to perform a special ritual, *halitzah*, before Miriam would be free to marry someone else.

"I don't know what happened," Meir whispered as they solemnly walked home. "Some sort of accident. Your father thought it best if they explained only once, with Miriam there."

By the time they entered the kitchen, Joheved was nearly shaking in dread of her sister's reaction. Rivka and Salomon, knowing this to be a parent's burden, went upstairs to wake their daughter, and she soon arrived in the salon, bleary-eyed and terrified. With increasing horror, she listened to the men's story.

"We're sorry to bring such news," Simeon began. He paused to sniff back tears. "Our brother Benjamin died nearly a month ago." His chin began to quiver and he could say no more.

Ezra put his arm around Simeon's shoulders, but before either of them could speak, Miriam let out a shriek.

"*Non!* Not just before the wedding." Her body began to shake and she would have collapsed if her parents, standing on either side of her, had not reached out to support her. "How could this happen?" she demanded.

"It was late at night and our whole family had been working on the vintage for days without much rest." Simeon hesitated and then added, "We don't have as many Jews in Rheims to help us as you have in Troyes. Sometimes there's only one person in a vat at a time."

"Why are you telling me about winemaking? Tell me what happened to Benjamin." Miriam was almost shouting.

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Simeon stared helplessly at Ezra, who took a deep breath before speaking. “Benjamin insisted on treading grapes alone even when the *bouillage* was most vigorous. One night he remained in the vat too long, succumbed to the fumes, and drowned.”

Miriam’s family looked at each other in horror. Then, tears running down her cheeks, Miriam asked the question they were all thinking. “You mean to tell me that in a family of experienced vintners, nobody was aware of the danger, nobody watched out for him?”

“Of course we knew of the danger, and we know how to be careful. But Benjamin didn’t care about danger; he wanted to get the vintage finished as soon as possible.” Ezra sounded angry, his fists clenching and unclenching as he spoke. “We try to keep an eye on each other, but it was dark. I told him I was exhausted and we should get some sleep, but he said he wasn’t tired, that he’d work awhile longer. By the time we realized he hadn’t come to bed, it was too late.”

Miriam remembered the nights that Benjamin had spent alone in the forest with the honey tree and how he had attacked the robber rather than run away. “*Oui*, Benjamin never cared about danger.”

Salomon patted her arm. “We shouldn’t blame ourselves.” Miriam must not think that Benjamin’s hurry to return to Troyes had caused his carelessness any more than his brother should feel guilty for not being there to rescue him.

Simeon gave Salomon a grateful look. “It was a terrible accident.”

Rivka quietly directed their maidservant Anna to make a strong tisane for Miriam from chamomile and wormwood, and when the maidservant returned with the drink, Miriam was asking more questions.

“What day did Benjamin die? Who found him?”

“It’s enough that we know Benjamin is dead.” Rivka’s voice was both soothing and a warning. “We don’t need to hear the details.”

“But I need to know,” Miriam said.

“He died a few days after Selichot.” Simeon looked away from her. “Our father discovered his body just before dawn.”

“It was an evil day, Tuesday the twenty-fourth of Elul.” Ezra shuddered. The even numbers two and four were unlucky enough, and such

a Tuesday, under the baleful influence of Mars, would have been particularly malevolent.

“Papa, do you think Benjamin suffered at the end?” Miriam asked, trying to recall what she had been doing on the twenty-fourth of Elul. Undoubtedly working on the vintage, but the days had all blurred together.

“*Non, ma fille*. He would have been unconscious already when he fell below the surface.”

“I can tell you that Benjamin’s final days were probably some of the happiest of his life. He was so looking forward to the wedding . . .” Simeon trailed off as Miriam broke into renewed sobs.

They were all still sniffing and wiping their noses when Salomon motioned Meir to come closer. “A childless widow isn’t permitted to perform *halitzah* until it’s been three months since her husband’s death.”

Meir looked surprised. “But why? Miriam was widowed from *erusin*; we don’t suspect that she’s pregnant.”

“That’s the law,” Salomon replied.

Meir surveyed the two grieving men. “I hope it won’t be a hardship for one of them to return in two months.”

Rivka’s sedative tisane was working, so she and Joheved helped the increasingly drowsy Miriam stumble back up the stairs.

“There must be some mistake, Mama. Benjamin can’t be dead,” Miriam moaned. “When he went outside . . . in the moonlight . . . last year after Sukkot ended . . . his shadow wasn’t headless . . . he told me so.” She was so sleepy she could barely get the words out.

“*Ma fille*, I don’t know.” Rivka shook her head and sighed. The Book of Life was sealed on the last night of Sukkot, and for those whose moonlit shadows lacked heads, the coming year would be their last.

Joheved helped her sister undress. Maybe Benjamin had experienced a seminal emission on Yom Kippur; that too was an omen of death in the coming year. But she said instead, “May you be comforted among the mourners of Jerusalem.” At times like this the traditional words were best.

For the next two months, Salomon’s family tried to be sympathetic and patient with Miriam. When her daughter picked at her meals instead

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of eating, Rivka restrained herself from complaining about the wasted food. When Joheved found that little Isaac had managed to climb to the top of the staircase while her sister sat oblivious at the dining table below, she held her tongue and resolved not to leave Miriam responsible for her son in the future.

Salomon merely sighed when his bereaved daughter refused to drink any wine, protesting that it reminded her of Benjamin's death. Even Rachel, who had the most cause for complaint because her sleep was interrupted several times a night by her bedmate's sobbing, kept silent and reminded herself that the nights were so long this time of year that she still ought to get enough rest. They all hoped that Miriam's melancholy would diminish after she performed *halitzah*.

To Salomon's relief, and Miriam's dread, Ezra and Simeon returned on the appointed day. Since a *beit din* for *halitzah* required five judges, none of whom were related to the man or the woman, Meir went to fetch Isaac haParnas, his son Joseph, and three other leaders of the community, while Anna's husband, Baruch, gathered a minyan of ten men to meet them at the synagogue. Miriam sat softly crying in her mother's arms, while Benjamin's brothers huddled on a bench, their hands twitching nervously. Ezra stood up immediately as all the men entered and the judges announced, "We have gathered at this place for *halitzah*."

Under Salomon's prompting, Isaac asked the two brothers if Benjamin had indeed died over three months ago, if they had witnessed his death, and if they were his only brothers. After each answered in the affirmative, Isaac stated that he personally could attest that Miriam was more than twelve years old and that Benjamin had been older than thirteen.

Then he asked Ezra, "Do you wish *halitzah* or to take the widow in levirate marriage?"

When Ezra replied, "*Halitzah*," Joseph examined the brother's black leather shoe and then asked him to put it on.

This was the signal for Miriam to begin the legal dialogue from the twenty-fifth chapter of Deuteronomy. She spoke the Hebrew words as if in a daze.

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“My husband’s brother refuses to establish a name for his brother in Israel. He will not perform the *levir’s* duty.”

Ezra stood up and reiterated, “I cannot marry her.”

Now came the part Miriam dreaded. She crouched down and unlaced Ezra’s shoe, being careful to use only her right hand. She tried with some difficulty to gather a mouthful of saliva for the next step, but her mouth was dry from fasting all morning because Jewish law required that her saliva be her own, not from any food she’d eaten.

Finally she managed to pull off Ezra’s shoe, and once she’d done so, she spit on the ground in front of him and declared, “Thus shall be done to the man who refuses to build up his brother’s house.”

The men of the minyan proclaimed, “*Halutz annal*,” three times and it was done. Benjamin’s brothers had done their duty and freed his widow to remarry.

With *halitzah* behind her, Miriam’s family began to lose patience with the thin, grey ghost who was liable to start crying at any moment. The rest of Troyes was celebrating, making it difficult to move between their mournful house and the joyous streets. For after seven barren years, Philippe’s Queen Bertha had given birth to a baby girl. Regional pride was running high as the Champagnois gossiped about the virility, or rather the lack thereof, of the king, who was reputed to spend more time in his lover John’s bed than in the queen’s and who had barely managed to father a daughter in seven years of marriage.

In comparison, Count Thibault, who was twice the king’s age, had sired three healthy boys in the same time. Troyes buzzed with happy speculation at whether Thibault would be able to arrange a match between the new princess and one of his sons.

Conversation at Salomon’s table also turned to the topic of matrimony, adding to Miriam’s distress.

“The man I marry isn’t going to have any brothers.” Rachel took a large bite of apple flummery. “Then I won’t need to worry about *halitzah*.”

“Or you could marry someone who already has children,” Joheved said.

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“Rachel, don’t talk with your mouth full,” Rivka said before turning to her sister. “It isn’t such a terrible thing for a widow to marry her brother-in-law. Sarah, you did.”

Sarah put down her wine cup and thought for a moment. “I suppose it was better than marrying a stranger. But even though it’s traditional for a childless widow to marry again after three months, both of us were still too grieved to celebrate our wedding properly.”

“Could we please discuss something else for a change?” Miriam asked, her eyes filling with tears.

But Rivka was not going to change the subject. “I was waiting at the bakery when Fleur asked me if we’d found a new husband for Miriam yet, it being three months since she had been widowed.”

Conversation at the table halted as Rivka continued, “If we hadn’t, Fleur hoped that we might consider her cousin, Leontin, whose year of mourning for his late wife is almost over.”

Miriam gasped, and her pale visage grew almost white. Her father, on the other hand, began to redden perceptibly as he struggled to control his anger.

“How desperate does she think we are to imagine that I would accept such an *am haaretz* for a son-in-law?” Salomon stood up menacingly. “Leontin can barely read Torah and wouldn’t know what to do with a tractate of Talmud if it fell in his lap. My daughter will not marry an ignorant boor, no matter how rich he is!” He slammed his fist down on the table.

Rivka stood up and put her hands on her hips. “I didn’t say I thought Leontin would be a good match for Miriam, but I do say the best cure for her unhappiness would be to get her married as soon as possible.” She stared defiantly at her husband. “At least I’m looking out for our daughter’s interests, while you’ve got your nose buried in your books.”

Meir could see the storm clouds gathering. He picked up little Isaac and asked Sarah if it was time to make sure all the chickens were safely in their coop. She quickly agreed, and as soon as he closed the door behind them, Salomon exploded.

“How dare you suggest I’m neglecting my daughter!”

“Oh *non*—you’re such a doting father.” Rivka’s words dripped sarcasm. “You teach them Talmud and to pray with tefillin. Well, as soon as the Cold Fair starts, I want you to find Miriam a husband.” Her voice brooked no argument.

“I will not be hurried about this.” Salomon’s voice was equally firm.

“You think a bridegroom will just come to us, like before,” Rivka shot back. “But our daughter’s a widow now; it won’t be so easy.”

Miriam had enough of everyone discussing her as if she weren’t present. “That’s right, Mama, I’m a widow now, not a child, so you and Papa can’t marry me off if I don’t want to.” The rest of the family stared at her in astonishment. This was the most she’d spoken in weeks. “And right now, I don’t want to, so you can stop fighting about it.”

“Well,” Rivka was almost speechless. She turned and pointed her finger at Salomon. “This is your fault. They’re just like you. All book learning about petty legalities and no consideration for what’s really important. I’ve had enough!” She stalked out the door, slamming it behind her.

Salomon stood up and yelled, “Don’t you walk out on me.” He lifted his wine cup, and his horrified daughters were sure he was going to throw it at the closed door. But after a visible struggle, he set down the cup and addressed them with a saying from chapter four of Pirke Avot.

“Ben Zoma says: Who is strong? One who conquers his *yetzer hara*.  
Who is rich? One who is content with his portion.

Now the strong man isn’t just someone who won’t follow his *yetzer hara*, his inclination toward evil, but also the one who conquers his anger. The man who is enraged but restrains his angry words and doesn’t answer quickly—this is true strength.” With these words Salomon strode out into the salon.

“Papa may have conquered his *yetzer hara*, but I am definitely not content with my portion.” Miriam headed for the door. “I’m going to bed.”

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Meir peeked in, and seeing all was calm, deposited their sleepy child in Joheved's lap. "Maybe this would be a good time for the rest of us to go to bed."

"What about Mama?" Rachel asked. "I don't want to go to bed until she comes back."

Meir looked at her with a puzzled expression. "I just saw her going upstairs, talking with your Aunt Sarah. Sarah was saying something about how she had to marry again three months after her husband died and she didn't recommend it."

The next morning at breakfast, neither Salomon nor Rivka showed any sign of poor temper. Rivka was humming a little tune as she served the stirabout, fruit, and cheese, and Salomon smiled as he asked everyone how they slept the previous night. He, himself, he informed them, had slept excellently well.

"By the way, Miriam, I had a long talk last night with your mother and aunt." He paused to slice himself some more cheese. "As you reminded us, you are indeed an adult now, but that doesn't end my obligation. The prophet Jeremiah tells us:

Take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands.

And in Tractate Kiddushin (marriage), we learn that to marry off his daughter,

A father should give her a dowry, clothe her, and adorn her, so that men will leap to marry her."

He smiled sympathetically at her. "So you see that finding you a husband is a mitzvah I cannot neglect."

"Salomon, I see that if you didn't have children you would probably teach Torah to the cats," Rivka gently interrupted him. "Please tell Miriam what you propose to do."

*"Ma fille,* Sarah reminded us that your grief is too fresh for you to

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think about a new husband,” Salomon said. “We think it best to have your availability circulated at the Cold Fair, and then your suitors can present themselves at the Hot Fair, at which time you’ll consider their offers.”

Sarah gave Miriam’s hand a squeeze. “I have no doubt that you will have many suitable matches to choose from, one of which will appeal to you.” Sarah didn’t mention how they had come to this conclusion, that the rigors of childbirth ensured that young widowers greatly outnumbered young widows.

“You will have our guidance to help you make your choice, but it will be your decision,” Rivka concluded, refilling her grandson’s bowl with Miriam’s leftover stirabout. “Le Bon Dieu willing, you can be married next summer.” She looked at Miriam hopefully.

“*Merci, Papa. Merci, Mama,*” Miriam replied softly. Now she was safe for at least six months.

But if her family expected Miriam’s disposition to improve now that the pressure to marry was gone, they were disappointed. When Samuel and Marona spent Shabbat in Troyes, Miriam’s decline could not be ignored. Miriam’s hair used to be the same lustrous chestnut color as Joheved’s, but now it was as dull as weathered wood. Her grey eyes with their dark circles looked drab and colorless compared with Joheved’s vivid blue or Rachel’s dazzling green. And she was so thin.

“Salomon, please excuse our interference, but you are family and . . .” Samuel paused, unsure how to best broach the subject. “My wife and I couldn’t help but notice how pale and gaunt Miriam has become. Perhaps Marona should make her a tonic? She knows some excellent remedies.”

“If you have a tonic to heal a broken heart, I’d order a thousand of them,” Salomon replied sadly. “She won’t eat, she won’t drink wine, she cries in her sleep. I have to keep her from sharpening the pruning knives for fear that she might injure herself.” He shook his head and sighed, “Rachel tells me that Miriam is dreading Hanukkah, that she can’t bear celebrating the new vintage that killed her Benjamin.”

Samuel put his arm around Salomon’s shoulders. “Let her spend Ha-

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nukkah with us. Marona will be glad to have a young face around.” His voice softened. “She still mourns for our daughter, Hannah, and the two of them can comfort each other.”

“I don’t know,” Salomon said. *Send Miriam away?*

“Nobody can match my wife’s cooking for putting flesh on your bones, and if Miriam won’t drink wine, Marona’s ale is as heartening as you could want.” Samuel’s enthusiasm was growing. “One month with us and she’ll be as good as new.”

Rivka needed no convincing. “Perhaps the bad air in Troyes is upsetting Miriam. Some time in the country, breathing clean, sweet air, should be an excellent change for our daughter.”

Sarah knew what Miriam really needed: someplace far away from Troyes, with new people to meet and different things to do; with nothing there to remind her of her loss.