

In June the Sabbath ends late, and by the time three stars appeared in the sky, Rachel and Grandmama Leah had already gone to bed. Everyone involved in the frantic beehive hunt was nearing exhaustion as they gathered in Salomon's courtyard for Havdalah<sup>1-4</sup>, the ceremony that marks the close of Shabbat. Even if she had been awake, Rachel was too little to hold the ritual braided candle, so the honor fell to Miriam, the next youngest daughter.

“Hold the candle high,” Rivka urged her. “So you’ll have a tall husband.”

But Miriam kept it close to her, refusing to lift it above her own head. She kept her eyes on the candle's flame, which flared brightly with its three

1. Ivan G. Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood, Jewish Acculturation in Medieval Europe*; (Yale Univ Press, 1996): pp. 67-69.
2. *Machzor Vitry*. Edited by S. Horowitz and A. Berliner. (J. Bulka Nuremberg, 1923): pp 114-119.
3. Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition - A Study in Folk Religion*; (Behrman House, 1939): p. 67
4. *Teshuvot Rashi*, ed. Israel Elfenbein, (Shulsinger Bros, New York, 1943): p. 123

wicks, while Joheved surveyed the circle of students. Did anyone else find it significant that Benjamin was the shortest boy in the group?

Any woman who drank from the Havdalah cup would grow a beard, so Joheved passed the wine on for the boys to bless and taste. Rivka handed around the container of fragrant spices, a reminder of the Sabbath's sweetness to fortify their spirits as they reentered the regular workweek. Joheved recognized cinnamon and cloves, but there were more.

In the Talmud, the Rabbis taught that wine and spices restored one's learning, so the scholars' Havdalah ceremony came to include the incantation against Potach<sup>5,6</sup>, Demon Prince of Forgetfulness. Salomon made his students recite the incantation together with him, to protect them from forgetting their Torah learning during the coming week. Miriam said it out loud as well, but Joheved murmured it under her breath.

Finally, with many in the group stifling yawns, it was time to chant the final blessing. The candlelight cast strange shadows behind the circle of students, their faces distorted as the flame grew and danced about. There was a liminal moment of sadness as the candle was poised about the wine cup and then a soft communal sigh along with the hiss of the extinguishing flame. Everyone wished each other, "A good week, *shavua tov.*" The moon had risen, allowing Salomon to watch as the boys climbed up to the attic. Downstairs, Joheved and Miriam were waiting for him.

"Papa." Miriam had a worried look on her face. "What will happen to the poor bees when their tree is chopped down? Where will they go? How can they live if we take away their honey?"

"Don't worry, *ma fille*, the bees will be fine." He smiled down at her. Sarah was right, she would make a good midwife; she was even concerned about hurting insects. "Robert<sup>7</sup> told me that the monks of Montier-la-Cell would send someone to move our bees into a new hive at the Abbey. So we can't go for the honey until Monday, we have to wait until their sabbath is over."

"You and Robert planned all this before you even knew that we'd found the beehive." Joheved was more convinced than ever that her father was the wisest man in France.

As the three of them climbed the stairs, Salomon seemed to be thinking out loud. "It's interesting ... I've read about honey so often in Torah, but I've never seen the inside of a beehive."

5. Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition - A Study in Folk Religion*; (Behrman House, 1939): p.191

6. Ivan G. Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood, Jewish Acculturation in Medieval Europe*; (Yale Univ Press, 1996): pp. 57-58.

7. Catholic Encyclopedia (online)

Once in bed, Miriam stayed awake only long enough for the implication of her father's words to reach her. "Joheved," she nudged her drowsy sister. "Maybe Papa will let us come too."

"That would be nice," Joheved mumbled, and she drifted off to sleep wondering how they could possibly arrange it.

As it turned out, Aunt Sarah made all the arrangements they needed by announcing that as long as everyone was spending an afternoon in the forest, she could use help gathering her special midwife's herbs. Now was the perfect time for Miriam to begin her education on the subject, and it wouldn't hurt for Joheved to become familiar with these things as well. They could even watch Rachel at the same time.

Monday morning at dawn, Miriam was collecting eggs and wondering why Benjamin hadn't joined her the last two days. Surely he wasn't ill. Suddenly the courtyard gate opened and he came in from the street, carrying several loaves of fresh bread.

"There you are, Benjamin." She ran over and closed the gate behind him. "It's thoughtful of you to get us fresh bread so early."

"It's more thoughtful that you think." He smiled at her slyly. "Can you keep a secret?"

Intrigued, Miriam nodded.

"I've been worried about somebody else getting our honey, so the last two nights, I slept in the forest, next to our tree."

"Benjamin, were you out of your mind?! Don't you know how dangerous it is to be out in the forest alone at night?"

He looked at her in surprise. "But I was perfectly safe. There aren't any highwaymen so close to the town walls. And I wouldn't have gotten lost, there was a moon out."

"But what about demons, what about Agrat bat Machlat<sup>8-9</sup> and her eighteen myriads? You know there's nothing they'd like better than to find you, all by yourself, in the forest, in the middle of the night." Miriam paused for emphasis after each danger. "I can't believe you'd be so reckless."

"I'm sorry, but I just had to be sure that our honey was all right." He stared at the ground, unwilling to face her. She sounded just like his mother did when she caught him doing something risky. "I thought you only have to worry about Agrat bat Machlat on Wednesday and Saturday<sup>10</sup>

8. Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition - A Study in Folk Religion*; (Behrman House, 1939): pp. 36, 47.

9. Ronald H. Isaacs, *Divination, Magic and Healing - the Book of Jewish Folklore*; (Aronson, 1998): p. 128

10. Talmud Bavli, Tractate Pesachim 112b

nights. Besides, I had my *tefillin* with me, so I was protected.” Not that all the *tefillin* and holy books in Salomon’s house kept Lillit<sup>11,12</sup> from finding him in the attic.

“That was clever of you to buy the bread, just in case somebody else saw you coming home at dawn,” Miriam admitted. There was no point in scolding Benjamin now. They were going after the honey that day, so he wouldn’t be spending any more nights in the forest.

The sun was high in the sky as Sarah and her three nieces accompanied Salomon and his students, Joseph and two strong servants, plus the beekeeper and a couple of novices from the abbey. When they reached the forest, the groups divided according to gender, the males swiftly heading for the bee tree, their eyes fixed skyward, while the females meandered slowly in no particular direction, their concentration focused on the ground.

Aunt Sarah directed most of her instruction at Miriam, pointing out the various herbs and explaining how each was used<sup>13,14</sup>. “See these columbines’ large downward-hanging violet flowers. An infusion of ragwort and columbine seeds helps speed the birth, so we’ll come back in the fall to collect them.”

They walked a bit further and came to a small bush whose felt-like leaves were green on top and white underneath. “This plant has two names, artemisia and wormwood. Tea made from its leaves helps the anxious mother relax, while its seeds bring on a woman’s menses when it’s delayed.”

Sarah talked on, explaining the properties of each herb as they came upon it. “Sage tea is good for a woman likely to miscarry, due to slipperiness of her womb, but it’s best collected later in the season. Nettle juice and powdered bark of black alder help stop excessive bleeding. I mix mugwort with cowslip and pepper to help the mother sneeze her baby out.”

“Sneeze her baby out?” Miriam asked in surprise.

“*Oui*,” her aunt replied with a smile. “After a long labor, when the baby is close to being born, the mother may lack strength for the final effort. When she sneezes, though, she cannot help but push the child through the birth passage at the same time.”

Miriam was fascinated with Aunt Sarah’s lessons, but Joheved grew bored and directed her attention towards entertaining Rachel. Together

11. Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition - A Study in Folk Religion*; (Behrman House, 1939): pp. 36, 51.

12. Ronald H. Isaacs, *Divination, Magic and Healing - the Book of Jewish Folklore*; (Aronson, 1998): pp. 134-139.

13. Monica H. Green, *The Trotula - An English Translation of the Medieval Compendium of Women’s Medicine*; (Univ Penn Press, 2002).

14. Ron Barkai, “Medieval Hebrew Treatise on Obstetrics” *Medical History* 33: pp 110-112, 1989

they chased dragonflies and butterflies, stopping occasionally to help Sarah dig up a special root or pick some unusual leaves<sup>15</sup>. In the distance, they could hear the sounds of men wielding axes.

Suddenly Joheved thought of something she'd never considered before. Sarah was Mama's older sister, which meant she ought to know about Mama's youth. They knew she'd grown up in Allemande and that her parents were dead, but no matter how nicely she and Miriam asked, Rivka would not talk about her childhood. But now Mama wasn't here and Aunt Sarah was.

"Aunt Sarah," Joheved made her move. "What was it like when you and Mama were little? She won't tell us very much about it."

"I'm not surprised," her aunt said, picking some artemisia leaves and adding them to her basket. "Our mother, may her memory be for blessing, died in childbirth along with the next baby."

Miriam impulsively joined the questioning. "Is that why you became a midwife, Aunt Sarah?"

"You may be right." She was lost in thought for a moment, and then continued. "Of course, Judah, our papa, may his merit protect us, married again."

The girls waited silently for her to proceed. "His new wife was young and soon had babies of her own. She wasn't mean to Rivka, or anything like that, but she preferred her own children. She wasn't an educated woman either, not like your grandmama."

Sarah frowned in disapproval. "She filled your mother's head with tales of *mazikim*, evil spirits and demons, until Rivka was afraid to leave the house without our mother's protective amulet in her sleeve<sup>16,17</sup>. Our father had to make a silver case so she could wear it around her neck instead."

"Mama still wears that amulet," Joheved said, helping her aunt strip the leaves off a mugwort bush. "Aunt Sarah, you go out at night all the time. Aren't you scared of demons?"

"Well, of course I want to avoid the *mazikim*, everyone does. But good, pious folk who say their bedtime Shema and don't brag about their good fortune, they shouldn't be bothered by demons. You two don't need to worry; your father is a *talmid chacham*."

They came to a grove of black alder trees and stopped to peel off the bark. "How did Mama end up marrying Papa?" Miriam asked.

15. Hildegard von Bingen, *Hildegard's Healing Plants*; (Beacon, 2002). From her medieval classic *Physica*, Translated by Bruce W. Hozeski

16. Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition - A Study in Folk Religion*; (Behrman House, 1939): pp. 47, 132-152.

17. Ronald H. Isaacs, *Divination, Magic and Healing - the Book of Jewish Folklore*; (Aronson, 1998): pp. 95-98.

“Being the oldest, I married while my father was still alive, so I got my share of his estate as my dowry.” Sarah paused and a flicker of pain creased her forehead. “My first husband died without giving me any children, so I collected my *ketubah* payment and married his younger brother<sup>18,19</sup>. I had just given birth to my son, Eleazar, when my second husband died too, and with that *ketubah* I had enough money to live on without getting married again. Which was just as well, since few men will marry a ‘killer wife’ who’s already buried two husbands.”<sup>20,21</sup>

“So what happened to Mama after you got married?” Joheved wanted to hear about their mother’s life, not Aunt Sarah’s.

“Then our father died.” Sarah sighed. “And that meant his estate was mortgaged to our stepmother’s *ketubah*.<sup>22</sup> Naturally she wanted to provide for her own children and rather than set aside money for Rivka’s dowry.”

“But Mama knew she’d marry eventually,” Miriam said, thinking of Catharina. “Instead of staying on as a servant.”

Sarah picked up the alder bark that had fallen around the base of the tree. “*Oui*, and it fell to our brother, Isaac, to arrange her marriage. Salomon was also a student at the *yeshiva* in Mayence and Leah didn’t care about a big dowry; she wanted a daughter-in-law from a learned family. So it seemed a good match. Your mama only met your papa once before their wedding in Troyes.”

Rachel began to lag behind and Joheved hoisted the toddler onto her hip. “So how did you come to live here, Aunt Sarah?” she asked. “Did you stay with Mama after her wedding or did you move to Troyes later?”

“I’m not proud of what happened next, but as long as I’ve told you this much ...” Sarah paused a moment. “You may as well know that in-laws don’t always get along. My brother and I stayed in Troyes for the celebratory wedding week, and what I saw of Leah’s domineering ways convinced me that I should move to Troyes to help my lonely and frightened sister. I’m ashamed to say that I thought Leah would treat your mother badly.”

Joheved had suspected there was some problem between Aunt Sarah and Grandmama Leah because their aunt didn’t seem to visit anymore. She’d never dared to ask about it, but now at least she’d hear Aunt Sarah’s side of the story.

18. Avraham Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious - Jewish Women in Medieval Europe*; (Brandeis Univ Press, 2004): pp. 90-96, 268-69.

19. *Teshuvot Rashi*, ed. Israel Elfenbein, (Shulsinger Bros, New York, 1943): p. 47

20. Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law*; (Schocken, 1984): pp. 116-117.

21. Elisheva Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children - Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe*; (Princeton, 2004): pp. 170-172.

22. Irving A. Agus, *Urban Civilization in Pre-Crusade Europe: Volumes I and II*; (Yeshiva, 1965): pp. 705-706.

“When I found out that Troyes’ Jewish midwife had recently died, I made up my mind. My son, Eleazar, was grown, living with my brother Isaac in Mayence and studying at the *yeshiva*. So I bought a house here, in the same courtyard as Leah’s. She was immediately suspicious.”

Joheved and Miriam stared at each in amazement. Rachel was squirming to get down, and distracted, Joheved almost set her down in a stand of nettles. Who would have imagined her aunt and grandmother being jealous of Mama’s affection?

“But there was no battle for Rivka’s loyalty.” Sarah shook her head wanly. “My sister was relieved, happy even, to be the dutiful daughter-in-law under Leah’s over-protective wing, to let Leah run the household. Leah became the mother she never had.”

They stopped to inventory the herbs they’d collected so far. “When Rivka had you, Joheved, and Miriam soon after, Leah became a doting grandmother,” Sarah said. “And now I have to admit that Leah did an excellent job of teaching her granddaughters.”

Sarah paused to let her nieces enjoy the memory of their grandmother in her better days. “But then Leah’s illness started. She imagined that I was plotting behind her back and she even accused me of putting a curse on Rivka, my own sister, so she wouldn’t have any more children.”

“It was too much for me.” There was hurt and anger in her eyes. “I didn’t want to cause any more grief than Rivka already had with Leah, so I tried to avoid her whenever Leah was home.”

Joheved and Miriam stood in pained silence. Each struggled to find something suitable to say, but could think of nothing that might begin to address the years of estrangement between their mother and her sister. In desperation, Joheved said the first thing that came into her mind.

“Aunt Sarah, what’s a wandering womb?”<sup>23-26</sup>

The older woman turned to her in surprise. “Where did you hear about wandering wombs?”

“Somebody told me that girls who study too much will get it.”

“Joheved,” Aunt Sarah smiled and shook her head. “Girls don’t get wandering wombs, only grown women do. And the proper term is hysteria,” she continued, this time addressing Miriam as well, “which is caused by a wandering womb.”

“What are the symptoms?” Miriam asked eagerly.

23. Monica H. Green, *The Trotula - An English Translation of the Medieval Compendium of Women’s Medicine*; (Univ Penn Press, 2002): p. 71.

24. Robert Edwards and Vickie Ziegler Ed., *Matrons and Marginal Women in Medieval Society*; (Boydell Press, 1995): pp. 49-65.

25. P. Boissonnade, *Life and Work in Medieval Europe*; (Alfred Knopf, 1950).

26. Beryl Rowland, *Medieval Woman’s Guide to Health - the First English Gynecological Handbook*; (Kent State Univ Press, 1981): pp. 87-93.

“It depends on where the womb wanders to. If goes to her head, the woman suffers from headaches. When it presses against her lungs, she has trouble breathing, and if lodges near her stomach or intestines, she experiences indigestion. But only the Notzrim get hysteria.”

Observing her nieces puzzled expressions, she explained, “Not all the Notzrim, of course, just women who don’t marry, like nuns. Married women, Jewish or not, are not susceptible to hysteria.”

Sarah had a good idea what the girls’ next question was going to be, but before she could decide how to tell her innocent young nieces that it was regular sexual relations that prevented hysteria, the men’s enthusiastic shouts interrupted their conversation. They picked up Rachel and the herbs they’d collected, and arrived in time to see the men carefully lowering the top of the honey tree, now severed from its trunk, to the ground with a contraption of ropes.

The hollow tree was almost completely filled with honeycombs. It took every container they had plus Salomon’s empty wine barrels to hold it all. Benjamin immediately became a hero to his fellows, and his popularity grew when Salomon sold the excess honey at the Hot Fair<sup>27-32</sup> and divided the proceeds among the students. His pupils couldn’t believe their good fortune; here they were, at the largest fair in France, their purses full of spending money.

27. Theodore Evergates, *Feudal Society in Medieval France: Documents from the County of Champagne*, (Univ Penn, 1993): pp. 23-32.

28. Irving A. Agus, *Urban Civilization in Pre-Crusade Europe: Volumes I and II*; (Yeshiva, 1965): pp. 86, 251.

29. P. Boissonnade, *Life and Work in Medieval Europe*; (Alfred Knopf, 1950).

30. N. J. G. Pounds, *An Economic History of Medieval Europe*; (Longman Press).

31. Joseph and Frances Gies, *Life in a Medieval City: A Portrait of Troyes*; (Thomas Crowell, 1964): pp. 23-31.

32. Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*; (JPS, 1961): p. 216.



## Chapter Eleven

Troyes; Summer 4831 (1071 C.E.)

Once the foreign merchants arrived in Troyes, Salomon's *yeshiva* gained more students. Shemiah ben Asher, an associate of Hiyya ibn Ezra, came all the way from Provence for this purpose. Shemiah was accompanied by two boys, the older one about the age for starting *yeshiva*, the younger perhaps attending school for the first time. Father and sons were very tanned, though not so swarthy as Hiyya, with dark, curling locks that cascaded out from under their hats. Shemiah had an unusual offer for Salomon.

"I would like my son Asher to begin his studies in Troyes immediately, and I also wish to secure little Eliezer's future education," Shemiah said. "In payment, I offer you a pair of Jewish slaves, Baruch and Anna. I intended to sell them in Andalusia, but since they converted to Judaism, I have no choice but to sell or trade them to a Jew."

"Slaves?!" Salomon knew that some foreign Jews owned slaves, but they were a rarity in France.<sup>33-35</sup>

"Few of us still trade in slaves," Shemiah said. "I have considered leaving the field, since it is getting more difficult to find pagans for sale." He paused and frowned slightly. "The Byzantines who worship the Hanged One are rapidly converting the Slavs to their misguided faith, and the French bishops will only allow pagan slaves to cross their lands."

Salomon's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "How do you get these slaves, where do they come from?"

"The land of the Slavs, which is east of the Danube, is regularly invaded by barbarian armies who are only too happy to sell the vanquished occupants into servitude."

33. *Teshuvot Rashi*, ed. Israel Elfenbein, (Shulsinger Bros, New York, 1943): p. 205.

34. Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*; (JPS, 1961): pp. 95-100.

35. Irving A. Agus, *Urban Civilization in Pre-Crusade Europe: Volumes I and II*; (Yeshiva, 1965): pp. 281 and others.

Hiyya leaned forward and addressed his host. “Surely you see, Salomon, how acquiring Jewish slaves would benefit you in your winemaking business. And with so many students, an extra maidservant will lessen the burden on your wife and daughters.”

Salomon saw the hope in his wife’s eyes. Taking care of his mother and the *yeshiva* students was a hardship for her. “I assume that Baruch and Anna are married?”

“*Oui*,” Shemiah replied.

“Do they speak our language?” Rivka asked, encouraged that Salomon had asked about the slaves’ status. “I need servants I can talk to.”

“Baruch’s French is very good, and Anna’s is improving daily,” Shemiah said. “Why don’t you come meet them?”

He took them to the fairgrounds near St. Jean’s square, where Baruch and Anna were waiting. “Rabbi Salomon ben Isaac, this is my servant, Baruch ben Abraham.” Shemiah motioned to the woman. “And his wife, Anna.”

The two couples exchanged glances and Salomon hoped he didn’t look too much like a shopper checking merchandise for defects. Baruch was trying to stand calmly while Anna, a rabbit forced out of its hole into a predator’s view, cowered at his side.

Rivka recognized the dread and panic in Anna’s demeanor, and felt her heart swell with empathy. It had been so difficult when she’d first moved to Troyes, living with strangers and not knowing their language. She felt an urge to protect and shelter the frightened young woman. Rivka looked at Salomon, who was watching for her reaction, and gave him a nearly imperceptible nod.

Now that he had his wife’s approval, Salomon examined the slaves more closely. The man was in his early twenties and the woman slightly younger. They were fair skinned and freckled, and the man had straight reddish-brown hair. The woman seemed to possess red hair as well, but it was hidden under her cap. Both were unusually tall and looked strong and sturdy.

“Very well, I’ll take them,” Salomon said. “It will be a relief to have their help, especially during the wine harvest<sup>36</sup>.”

36. Irving A. Agus, *Urban Civilization in Pre-Crusade Europe: Volumes I and II*; (Yeshiva, 1965): pp. 772-789.

One morning in mid-August, Joheved was awakened by Leah's shrill voice, insisting that she needed to go on a walk. Joheved listened as Anna soothing told her to be patient, to wait until her hair was done. Outside she could hear Baruch chopping wood in the courtyard. Oddly, it seemed as if the slaves had been with them for months instead of weeks. Baruch had easily learned his vineyard duties, and Anna needed no lessons in caring for Leah and Rachel.

And just in time, Joheved thought, recalling how difficult last summer had been. There were so many more wine buyers this summer, people who could show up at any time of day, and the accounts were more complicated too. A few customers paid cash, but most, like the baker and butcher, traded their wares for Salomon's wine. Thank Heaven Anna was able to keep Leah occupied; otherwise Joheved would never have time to balance the household books properly. It was a shame that Grandmama was never able to remember who Baruch was.

In the next room, Leah complained again that she wanted to go out now, and again Anna calmed her, assuring her that Master Salomon was almost done with his prayers and then he'd be happy to walk with her. It was early Elul, the month preceding the Days of Awe, when Papa got up before dawn to add *selichot*, special penitential prayers and supplications, to his morning litany.

Joheved, sure she would have to lead Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services for the women, wanted to pray *selichot* herself in preparation, but it was difficult waking up early.<sup>37-40</sup>

But now she was awake with time enough for the longest prayer. When she heard her father join Grandmama Leah downstairs, Joheved stepped into the hall. Mama and the servants were below, preparing the morning meal. She tiptoed towards her parents' room, peeked in, and saw that Rachel was still asleep in her cradle. Another late sleeper like her.

Then she noticed that Papa had forgotten to put his *tefillin* away. Joheved stared at the worn black leather straps and boxes that made up the *tefillin*, one box for the hand and the other for the forehead, as it was written in Deuteronomy, following the Shema. "Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them be a symbol on your forehead." Before they were Papa's, they had belonged to Grandpapa Isaac. It didn't seem right for such holy objects to be left out on the bed, exposed and vulnerable. What if a mouse gnawed on the leather?

37. Emily Taitz, "Women's Voices, Women's Prayers: The European Synagogues of the Middle Ages" in *Daughters of the King, Women and the Synagogue: A Survey of History, Halakhah and Contemporary Realities*, (JPS 1992) pp. 59-71,

38. Avraham Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious - Jewish Women in Medieval Europe*; (Brandeis Univ Press, 2004): pp 181.

39. Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*; (JPS, 1961): p. 26

40. Lawrence Fine Ed., *Judaism in Practice: From the Middle Ages through the Early Modern Period*; (Princeton Univ Press, 2001): p. 27.

With every intention of returning the *tefillin* to their storage bag, Joheved silently entered her parents' room. She picked up the arm box first; its long straps were in disarray and she tried to gather them up quickly. She couldn't help but caress the lengths of black leather, supple from years of handling. Papa, and all Jewish men, wore *tefillin* when they said their morning prayers, as a sign of accepting the commandments. *Tefillin* were also powerful protection - Papa had hung them on the bed frame when Mama was in labor.

Joheved had almost finished folding up the straps when a shocking thought struck her. She accepted the commandments. Why shouldn't she pray with *tefillin*?<sup>41-46</sup> Nobody would see her if she closed the door. She'd just try it once, to see what it was like.

Shaking with fear and excitement, she rolled up the sleeves of her chemise, unwrapped the *tefillin*'s arm straps, and started putting them on. When she finished winding them around her hand, a sense of holiness enveloped her that obliterated any feeling of wrongdoing. The sacred leather, pressing tightly against her skin, gave her a constant awareness of the Holy One's presence. Before, it had been hard to shut out the world and concentrate on her prayers. Wearing *tefillin*, she had no difficulty devoting herself to her *selichot*.

When her morning blessings were done, she reluctantly removed the *tefillin* and carefully replaced them on the bed, just as she had found them. As much as she regretted leaving them exposed, she didn't dare put them away and have Papa wonder who had disturbed his things. Then, heart pounding, she slipped back to her room, leaving Rachel still asleep and nobody the wiser. The rest of the morning Joheved could feel where the *tefillin* straps had left their mark on her arm, and she was careful to keep her chemise sleeves lowered.

The next day, overcome with remorse, she fought the temptation to wear Papa's *tefillin* again. But she kept thinking how the tight *tefillin* straps made her feel as if the Holy One was holding her arm Himself, and she was unable to focus on her prayers. So the following morning, terrified but helpless to stop herself, she stole into Papa's bedroom and prayed with his *tefillin*. Again she felt the Holy One's strength fill her as she donned the ritual objects, and she knew she couldn't be committing a sin.

Except for Shabbat, when *tefillin* weren't worn because the holiday itself is the sign of devotion, Joheved began urging Miriam to wake her early. Then, as soon as Papa took Grandmama Leah on their walk, she quickly put on his *tefillin* and prayed.

One of the most enduring legends about Rashi's daughters is that they laid *tefillin*. The subject of medieval Ashkenazi women wearing *tefillin* is discussed in references 41-46.

41. Avraham Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious - Jewish Women in Medieval Europe*; (Brandeis Univ Press, 2004): pp. 178-179, 275-276.

42. *Teshuvot Rashi*, ed. Israel Elfenbein, (Shulsinger Bros, New York, 1943): p. 80-81.

It wasn't long before Mama, not Papa, discovered her, after coming upstairs to wake her sleepy-head daughters.

As Rivka watched in appalled silence, she couldn't help but observe the look of awe and concentration on Joheved's face. She shook her head, sighed heavily and waited for her daughter to finish, all the while trying to decide what she should say.

It was her inability to give Salomon sons that had made him teach the girls Talmud in the first place, Rivka thought bitterly. She had hoped that once the *yeshiva* was thriving he would concentrate on his male students and forget about educating his daughters, but no, he had encouraged the girls to listen to his lessons. Perhaps he had sanctioned them to lay *tefillin* too.

Rivka groaned inwardly. This could only lead to marital problems for her daughters. Salomon had made good on his promise to find Joheved a *talmid* husband and would likely find matches for the other girls among his students, but what would they think when their wives acted more like men than women? Rivka wrung her hands in frustration. How could she prevent her husband from raising the girls however he wished, particularly when they were willing accomplices?

The surprise and fear on Joheved's face when she turned and saw her mother convinced Rivka that Salomon knew nothing of his daughter's actions. Joheved had tried to think of what she would say when she was finally caught, as she knew she would be, but she was speechless. She quietly put the *tefillin* away while waiting for her mother's angry lecture, one she knew she deserved.

But Rivka couldn't bring herself to chastise her daughter. The girl had only been praying, after all. Besides, this was Salomon's problem. He had Joheved studying Talmud like a boy - how would he react when he found that she wanted to pray like one too? Rivka felt a surge of satisfaction at her husband's dilemma.

She addressed Joheved simply. "If your father allows you to pray with *tefillin*, then any objections I have are meaningless. You are a betrothed maiden, no longer a child, so I have no intention of running to your father

43. Elisheva Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children - Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe*; (Princeton, 2004): pp. 88-91.

44. Judith R. Baskin, *Jewish Women in the Middle Ages*; (Wayne St. U Press, 1990): p. 95.

45. Getsel Ellinson, *Women and the Mitzvot, Vol. 3 - Partners in Life*; (At Ahva Press, Israel 1998): pp. 80-89.

46. Lawrence Fine Ed., *Judaism in Practice: From the Middle Ages through the Early Modern Period*; (Princeton Univ Press, 2001): pp. 29, 52-53.

with this tale of misbehavior. You must speak to him yourself, and not use his things again until he gives you permission.”

Tears of remorse and shame filled Joheved's eyes; she had not expected to be treated with such respect. “I'll talk to Papa soon, I promise.” Unable to face her mother, she slowly walked past her, eyes fixed on the floor. “I'm sorry, Mama, I should have asked him first.”

But Joheved couldn't find the right time or the right way to ask Salomon about the *tefillin*, even though morning prayers no longer felt right without them.

Miriam was sympathetic, but not very encouraging. “It's too bad he's not still in Mayence,” she said as they took turns braiding each other's hair. “Then you could write him, and not have to actually face him with your question.”

Her sister's offhand comment was just what Joheved needed. “Miriam, I will write to him. I'll send him a query just like other people do when they have a difficult ritual question.”<sup>47-49</sup>

“A betrothed maiden (thus she is an adult) who studies Talmud (therefore she is learned) wishes to observe the commandment of *tefillin*. Is this permitted?” Joheved read the letter out loud for Miriam's approval. “There, what do you think?”

“Short and to the point, it sounds fine to me.” Miriam gave Joheved a quick hug. “Good luck.”

That evening Joheved paced the salon waiting for her father to come home. She wanted to give him the letter in private, and she hoped he would be in a pleasant mood after studying with other scholars. She tried to compose herself, to be ready to defend her position against any objections he might offer. But when she heard the door open, her heart began to pound.

Salomon, tired but satisfied after a long day in the *yeshiva*, slowly set down his manuscripts. He was taken aback when Joheved handed him the query; surely it hadn't arrived at this late hour. His daughter seemed unusually quiet. Normally she was full of questions if he returned while she was still awake. He began to tell her about his studies, but she stopped him and asked him to read the letter first.

Salomon read it twice, then surveyed his visibly nervous daughter and weighed how to respond. She couldn't know that, in Worms, the prayer

47. *Teshuvot Rashi*, ed. Israel Elfenbein, (Shulsinger Bros, New York, 1943).

48. Avraham Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious - Jewish Women in Medieval Europe*; (Brandeis Univ Press, 2004): p. 194.

49. Irving A. Agus, *Urban Civilization in Pre-Crusade Europe: Volumes I and II*; (Yeshiva, 1965).

leader in the women's section of the synagogue reputedly wore *tefillin*, or that Tractate Eruvin reported that King Saul's daughter, Michal, did so as well.<sup>50-51</sup> In fact, a woman laying *tefillin* wasn't nearly as scandalous as a woman studying Talmud. But it was not something to be done lightly. Salomon decided this would be an opportunity for Joheved to learn how responsa answers were determined.

"This question is a bit more complicated than the ones I usually receive. My reputation must be growing," he teased her. "You can help me answer it by getting out Tractate Berachot. There's a section in the third chapter that should be useful."

Joheved's hands shook as she lifted the manuscript out of the storage chest. Papa must have figured out who wrote the query, yet he wasn't acting angry or even surprised. Did he really need to look up the answer? He knew Berachot by heart. Maybe he wanted her to see the answer herself, so she wouldn't be angry at him for refusing her permission. With great trepidation, she began to read from the spot he pointed to. It was in Hebrew, and she could see it was Mishnah.<sup>52</sup>

**"Women, slaves, and minors are exempt from reciting the Shema and from laying *tefillin*. But they are obligated in prayer and in the command to attach a mezuzah."**

This didn't sound right. She and Miriam both said the Shema at night as protection against demons, every Jew did. "Papa, why are women exempt from these mitzvot?"

Salomon stroked his beard as he answered her. "In general, women and slaves are exempt from time-bound positive mitzvot, those that command us to do something at a certain time<sup>53-54</sup>. And when you think about it, both the Shema and *tefillin* involve specific times. We say the Shema in the morning and at night. *Tefillin* are time-bound because they are not worn at night or on Shabbat."

Joheved nodded and Salomon continued, "The reason women and slaves are exempt from them is because a slave's time belongs to his master and a woman's time belongs to her husband."

She could see the sentence that mentioned *tefillin* and nervously read on.

**"Women are exempt from *tefillin* - this is obvious."**

50. Talmud Bavli, Tractate Eruvim 96a

51. Avraham Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious - Jewish Women in Medieval Europe*; (Brandeis Univ Press, 2004): p. 194

52. Talmud Bavli, Tractate Berachot 20a-20b

53. Getsel Ellinson, *Women and the Mitzvot, Vol. 3 - Partners in Life*; (At Ahva Press, Israel 1998): p. 96.

54. Amy E. Schomer, *Denied One Day, Obligated the Next - A Study of Women and Tefillin*; (UJ Dissertation 1993).

But Joheved didn't see anything obvious about it. "It is?"

"The Gemara<sup>55</sup> wonders why the Mishnah even mentions *tefillin*, since we know it is time-bound," he explained.

And indeed, the answer followed.

**"Since *tefillin* is compared to mezuzah, you might think that women should be required to lay *tefillin* just as they are required to attach a mezuzah to their doors. The Mishnah informs us this is not so."**

"*Tefillin* and mezuzah are both mentioned in the same section of Deuteronomy as the Shema, which is why they are discussed here together," Salomon said.

To Joheved none of this made sense. The Gemara's objection sounded logical to her, the Mishnah's rules arbitrary. And neither said whether women were permitted to wear *tefillin* or not. She was about to ask her father about this, when Salomon urged her to finish the passage.

**"Since the commandment of mezuzah is compared to the commandment of Torah study, you might think that women should be exempt from mezuzah just as they are exempt from Torah study. The Mishnah tells us that women are obligated to attach the mezuzah."**

"Women are exempt from Torah study<sup>56,57</sup> because it says that fathers are obligated to teach their 'sons' Torah; daughters are not mentioned." Salomon stopped to think. "It also says those who study Torah prolong their days ... but can this mean that only men need their life lengthened, not women?" He sat stroking his beard, a puzzled expression on his face. "A difficult question, and I don't have an answer."

Joheved's jaw dropped. She had never heard Papa admit he didn't understand something in the Talmud. She sensed that their lesson was over, but he hadn't answered her question. Or had he? The Gemara stated that women were exempt from saying the Shema and from Torah study, yet she and Miriam both recited the Shema and studied Torah. If these were permitted, why not *tefillin*?

She gathered up her courage and repeated these thoughts to her father. He stared at her silently, a small smile on his face, and then she realized that she had won. He had made no objection to her argument.

55. Talmud Bavli, Tractate Berachot 20a-20b

56. Avraham Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious - Jewish Women in Medieval Europe*; (Brandeis Univ Press, 2004): p. 161.

57. Getsel Ellinson, *Women and the Mitzvot, Vol. 3 - Partners in Life*; (At Ahva Press, Israel 1998): pp. 242-249.



“You realize that once you take on this mitzvah, you are committed to it?” he asked with a sigh. At least she wouldn’t be wearing *tefillin* in public, like the woman in Worms. Here in Troyes, they were only worn at home.

“*Oui*, Papa.”

Salomon’s voice became stern. “I cannot stress too strongly the importance of scrupulous cleanliness before you put on *tefillin*, especially when you’re older. Do you understand?” Much of the opposition to women wearing *tefillin* stemmed from fear that they would not be sufficiently sanitary during *niddah*.<sup>58-61</sup>

“Don’t worry, Papa. I’ll be careful to wash my hands first.” “But you are betrothed now.” He paused and stroked his beard. “Perhaps we should write to Meir about this.

Joheved’s heart sank. Did her time belong to Meir already? What if he didn’t approve? And even if he did, it could take months before they’d find out.

”As long as you live in my house and not your husband’s, my permission is all you need,” he decided.

Joheved’s belly relaxed and she gave a sigh of relief.

“And I suppose my permission is meaningless unless you have *tefillin* to pray with,” Salomon continued to the logical conclusion. “Which means we must buy you some.”

“*Merci*, Papa.” Joheved hadn’t thought that far. But Papa was right; she couldn’t expect to borrow his every morning.

Even so, Joheved was surprised when Salomon presented her with her own set of *tefillin* the following Sunday, just before she went to bed. Miriam stroked black leather<sup>62</sup> and looked hopefully at her father, who responded that she was not yet old enough to take on the responsibility of *tefillin*. Yet as much as Joheved basked in her sister’s admiration, her pride was tinged with trepidation at how Mama would react.

Walking downstairs the next morning, Joheved steeled herself to face her mother’s wrath. But there were no clanging pots or words of recrimination; Rivka served breakfast and *disner* in a sullen silence. Overcome with guilt, Joheved had to say something to heal the breach. Rosh Hashanah was less than a week away.

58. Elisheva Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children - Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe*; (Princeton, 2004): pp. 88.

59. Getsel Ellinson, *Women and the Mitzvot, Vol. 3 - Partners in Life*; (At Ahva Press, Israel 1998): pp. 98-99.

60. Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law*; (Schocken, 1984): pp. 17-19.

61. L. Rabinowitz, *The Social Life of the Jews of Northern France in the XII-XIV Centuries as Reflected in the Rabbinical Literature of the Period*; (Edward Goldston Ltd, 1938): pp. 158-161.

62. *Machzor Vitry*. Edited by S. Horowitz and A. Berliner. (J. Bulka Nuremberg, 1923): p. 640.

Joheved finally found her mother alone, weeding the herb garden. “Mama,” she said, stooping to help her. “I can’t explain it, but *tefillin* makes me pray better. Please don’t be angry.”

Rivka shook her head sadly and sighed. Why did it upset her so much? “Joheved, just as the Holy One created roosters to crow and hens to lay eggs, so too it is with people. It’s not natural for girls to study Talmud and pray with *tefillin*, it’s not right.”

“But Papa found me a husband more learned than I am,” Joheved cried out. Wasn’t that what Mama cared about?

“If your father wishes to indulge you and pretend he has a son, that is his affair. But Meir may prefer that his wife pursue more feminine pursuits.” Rivka’s voice softened and she said, “Joheved, dear, think about what I’m telling you. I don’t want you to be unhappy when you’re living with your husband.”

Would Meir really object to her praying with *tefillin*? Joheved didn’t want to know if her mother was right. She and Meir were married now, so her time belonged to him ... except he didn’t know about her *tefillin*. That was the answer; somehow she’d find a way to pray privately. Then he’d never know she wore *tefillin*.

Summer was drawing to a close, and just when vintners thought they’d managed to get through the season successfully, they were denied the fair weather they’d anticipated. The last week in August brought such drop in temperature that Bernard the cellarer briefly considered delaying the grape picking. But cool, damp weather inevitably brought a grey woolly fungus, *pourriture grise*,<sup>63</sup> which quickly ruined a vineyard full of grapes.

Many believed the ripening process was like pregnancy, that Le Bon Dieu decrees that a grape will be ripe one hundred days after flowering, just as a child will be born ten lunar months after conception. The weather only affected the flavor of the ripe grape, not the time to reach ripeness. Having originally set the harvest for the hundred-day mark, Bernard declared that it would be prudent not to change it.

Salomon held to a middle ground.<sup>64</sup> “Just as most babies are born after ten months in the womb, with some early and some late, so most grapes ripen about one hundred days after flowering. But it seems to me that heat tends to speed the process while the cold delays it.” He explained that cool

63. Patrick Forbes, *Champagne: The Wine, The Land and The People*; (Reynal and Co, 1967): pp. 270-271.

64. Esra Shereshevsky, *Rashi - the Man and His World*; (Sepher-Hermon, 1982): pp. 212-213

weather had both a good and bad side for the winemaker. “The wine’s flavor may suffer because the grapes can not reach optimum sweetness, but fermentation will be slower, and thus easier to control.”

A few days later, when carts full of grapes began to arrive at Salomon’s courtyard, Baruch declared to Anna, “If this is a slow fermentation, let the Holy One save us from a fast one.”

For the next three weeks, except for prayers and meals, Salomon’s household and students spent every waking hour on the vintage.<sup>65-70</sup> First the grapes were piled into vats in the courtyard, the last job performed by non-Jews. Then Salomon’s people took over. Wearing linen boots and their oldest chemises, they trod the grapes vigorously.

Then they waited for the stinging smell of fermentation to fill the courtyard. From then on they labored in shifts, both day and night. Morning and afternoon, Joheved, Miriam and Anna carefully climbed into one of the vats. Their combined weight was barely enough, even with a bit of bouncing, to break the thick raft of skins and grapes buoyed on the surface by the fizzling fermentation below.

Once into the warm half-wine, they used blunt wooden spades to turn the raft fragments upside down and tread them back in. Anna’s years of hard living had given her a strength and stamina which now served her well, despite her pregnancy, and the girls agreed that they could not have worked an entire vat without her.

In the other vats, Baruch and the younger students did the same, all under the watchful gaze of Grandmama Leah. Leah no longer needed walks to soothe her agitation. She circled the courtyard like a hawk, intently observing the treaders, every so often dipping a finger in the vats and taking a taste. At night, the courtyard lit by torches, Salomon and the older students took their turn.

Joheved and Miriam had never spent so much time in the vats before, and never without their father’s supervision. This stage of making wine had its risks. Once the deep wooden vat was full, too much carbon dioxide could form and suffocate the treaders. The danger was greatest in warm years when fermentation went quickly, but with the weather on the chilly side, Salomon didn’t expect any such problems. He worried about the process halting before enough sugar had been changed into alcohol.

It is believed that Rashi earned his living as a vintner. References 65-70 deal with medieval winemaking, particularly by Jews and in the province of Champagne.

65. L. Rabinowitz, *The Social Life of the Jews of Northern France in the XII-XIV Centuries as Reflected in the Rabbinical Literature of the Period*; (Edward Goldston Ltd, 1938): pp. 43-4.

66. Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*; (JPS, 1961): pp. 224-225.

Everyone was relieved when the stormy first phase of the fermentation, *bouillage*, was over in time for the Days of Awe. Thereafter the fermentation would proceed calmly for another ten to twenty days, allowing time for the intense contemplation and prayer that the holiday period demanded. Joheved and Miriam successfully took turns leading the women for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, even though it took every bit of concentration they had to stay awake and follow the service.

Once the contents of the vats needed only a brief daily treading, the workers returned to their normal lives. One arduous task remained, that of removing the heavy stems, now free of grapes, from the vats and discarding them. Joheved listened carefully as Grandmama Leah and Salomon tasted the half-wine and consulted with each other about whether to leave all or part of the stalks in the vats, and for how long. In a good vintage they gave the wine more astringent tannins, greater flavor and bite. But in a cold, damp year they merely diluted it.

Baruch was working in one of the vats when Leah came over, took a taste, and suddenly prodded him with a large wooden rake. Before he could reply, Joheved rushed over to see what her grandmother wanted with him and to intercede if necessary. Leah poked Baruch again and demanded, "Young man, take this rake and pull it through the crushed grapes, from bottom to top. Then dump out any stems that cling to it outside the vat."

Joheved stared at her in astonishment; Leah had never spoken to Baruch before. He raked out several large stalks and asked her, "Mistress, do you want me to take out all the stems?"

Leah took another taste and made a sour face. "Bah, this stuff has no flavor, the grapes were picked before they were properly ripe. You may as well take out all the stems before what little quality this wine has is lost altogether."

Baruch took a drink himself, not wanting to miss the subtlety Leah had discerned, but the liquid tasted sweet and syrupy. "How can anybody call this flavorless?" he whispered to Joheved.

Leah chuckled at his puzzled look. "When you've been making wine for as long as I have, young man, then maybe you'll know what I'm talking about."

67. Hugh Johnson, *Vintage: The Story of Wine*; (Simon and Schuster, 1990): pp. 121-128.

68. *The Dictionary of the Middle Ages: WINE and WINEMAKING* (pp. 649-654)

69. Patrick Forbes, *Champagne: The Wine, The Land and The People*; (Reynal and Co, 1967): pp. 295-307.

70. Joseph and Frances Gies, *Life in a Medieval City: A Portrait of Troyes*; (Thomas Crowell,): p. 56.

Joheved had a taste, too, and Leah looked at her expectantly. "It's sweet, but not as sweet as other years, I think," Joheved said hesitantly. Her grandmother's smile of approval emboldened her to continue. "It's definitely not as sweet as two years ago, when everyone said the vintage was superb."

Of course Leah didn't remember what the vintage was like that year, but she did know how sweet an excellent wine should taste at this stage in its formation. "Joheved is going to be a great winemaker some day, just like her grandmother," she announced.

Once the stalks were removed from the vats, their contents would sit undisturbed until the grape skins and other solid debris settled to the bottom. Then it was just a matter of running the wine into the casks and storing them in the cellar. When that final job was done, it would be time for the Cold Fair with its return of merchants and students to Salomon's *yeshiva*.

But winter also brought the pox<sup>71,72</sup> to Troyes, and Rachel was among those stricken. An endemic childhood disease, smallpox swept through a community about once a decade, sometimes so severely that a third of its children died. Worried about his youngest daughter, Salomon spent a week unable to study properly, even though Rivka assured him that Rachel wasn't nearly as ill as Joheved and Miriam had been during the previous epidemic. Indeed, this outbreak was milder than usual, with most of Troyes' children surviving it. Rachel recovered with no visible scars, and like others who survived the pox, she now enjoyed immunity for life.

71. *The Dictionary of the Middle Ages*: PLAGUES (pp. 75-90)

72, Alfred Jay Bollett, *Plagues and Poxes*; (Demos NY, 2004): pp. 75-90.

## Chapter Twelve

Winter 4832 (1072 C.E.)

With the smallpox epidemic behind them, it seemed that the rest of winter would pass uneventfully. Then Anna's labor began. For two days she struggled, but the baby didn't come. Joheved wasn't sure how long labor was supposed to take, except that Mama had delivered Rachel in only one night. When another evening came and the women were still occupied with Anna, Joheved volunteered to divert her little sister's attention.

"Tell me the story of Rachel from the Bible."

Joheved groaned inwardly. "I told you that one last night."

"I like stories with Rachel in them." Her voice was a whine.

"What if I tell you one about a Rachel in the Talmud?"<sup>73</sup>

"There's a Rachel in the Talmud? Tell me, tell me."

"All right, but let me put more charcoal on the brazier first," Joheved said. Then she began the story.<sup>74</sup>

"Akiva was a poor shepherd who worked for one of the richest men of Jerusalem. His master's daughter, Rachel, saw Akiva's great potential and fell in love with him. She promised to be his wife if he would devote himself to Jewish learning."

Joheved wasn't sure this was the right tale for her self-centered little sister. It was more about Akiva than Rachel. "Now Akiva was over thirty years old and still didn't know the alphabet, but Rachel insisted that he could be a great scholar."

"Then what happened?" Rachel asked.

"Akiva went off to Babylon to study and when Rachel's father found out she'd married one of his shepherds, he refused to support them."

"Were they very poor?"

73. Talmud Bavli, Tractate Shabbat 156b

74. Abraham E. Hischowitz, *Yohale Sarah - Religious Duties of the Daughters of Israel*; (New York 1902): pp. xix-xx,

“*Oui*, they were. Once there was so little food in the house that Rachel had to cut off her beautiful braids and sell them.” Joheved tugged gently at one of her sister’s braids.

“After twelve years at the *yeshiva*, Akiva returned to Jerusalem. He was approaching his house when he heard a neighbor berating Rachel, saying, ‘How much longer will you live like a widow?’ Rachel replied that she was so sure her husband was devoting himself to Torah that she would gladly wait another twelve years. So what do you think Akiva did when he heard that?”

Joheved wanted to hear that Akiva entered his home, embraced his long-suffering wife, and promised to study Torah in their own city from then on, but little Rachel knew the correct answer. “Akiva went back to his *yeshiva*.”

“That’s right. After another twelve years he returned with thousands of disciples,” Joheved said. “When Rachel saw Akiva surrounded by his students, she pushed through the crowd to greet him. They tried to turn her away, but Akiva embraced her and told them, ‘All that I possess and from which you benefit, I acquired only because of her.’ When Rachel’s father heard that a great scholar had come to town, he went to Akiva and asked for help in making peace with his estranged daughter.”

“Rachel’s father didn’t recognize his own son-in-law?!”

Her little sister was getting excited in anticipation of the happy ending, and Joheved couldn’t help smiling. “Rachel’s father repented for making his daughter suffer all those years, and Akiva made his identity known. They were all reconciled and Rachel’s father gave Akiva half his wealth. And as a reward for his faithful wife, who had sold her hair for him years before, he bought her the finest hair ornaments in Jerusalem.”

Joheved preferred the stories of Rabbi Meir and his learned wife, Beruria, but she knew Rachel wouldn’t want to hear those. Soon her little sister’s breathing was regular with sleep, and she could hear the men downstairs reciting Psalms to guard Anna from evil spirits. Maybe there would be good news in the morning.

Several hours later, Miriam tried not to wake her sisters when she came to bed, but Joheved stirred as soon as she felt Miriam sit down and awoke fully when she heard Miriam weeping.

“What’s wrong?” It was quiet downstairs; maybe she’d slept through the birth cries. “Is everyone all right?”

The scene describing Anna’s treatment by her captors was taken almost verbatim from a 1998 NPR interview with a young woman who had been kidnapped during the war in Bosnia, in what was approximately the same location that Anna would have lived.

Miriam turned and buried her face in Joheved's shoulder. "No, everyone's not all right, the baby died. It was horrible."

Joheved clutched her sister tightly. "What about Anna?"

"Anna is still alive." Miriam gulped down her tears. "She looks awful, but Aunt Sarah says it's normal after a hard birth."

"What happened? Why did the baby die?"

Miriam was only too willing to share the burden she carried. "He was strangled by the cord. Aunt Sarah had to unwrap it twice from around his neck." She choked back a sob.

"Poor Anna! She must feel terrible."

"But she doesn't, that's what's really awful." Miriam began to tremble. "Baruch wasn't the baby's father; it was one of the barbarians who captured her.<sup>75</sup> Anna was glad the baby died."

"Mon Dieu," was all Joheved could say before she started crying too. The two sisters held each other in silent grief.

But Miriam wasn't finished. "It's so horrible what happened to her, but I can't stop thinking about it."

Joheved murmured something soothing and Miriam continued, "When the raiders found her people, they killed everyone except the young women."

Joheved cringed inside and braced herself for the details that were sure to follow.

Miriam took a deep breath and began to whisper. "They took away the girls' clothes and locked them up naked in a hut. Every so often somebody opened the door and threw some food in for them, but it was never enough. Yet more often than they got food, one of the barbarians would open the door, leer at the poor naked girls, and take one of them away."

Miriam spoke so softly that Joheved could barely make out her words. "But he didn't take her far enough away. Anna and the others had to listen to the missing girl's screams and moans until she was dragged back in. Sometimes she never came back."

Miriam buried her head against Joheved's shoulder. "The girls who were virgins, it was worst for them. Anna had already married Baruch, so it didn't hurt her so much. Some of the men enjoyed it more when the girls screamed and cried, and they avoided her if she remained silent."

Miriam paused and Joheved could feel her sister's tears, wet against her chest. "One day the door opened and men entered who looked different

75. *The Dictionary of the Middle Ages*: SLAVES (pp. 336-40) and VLACH (pp. 483-84)



from her captors, less coarse somehow. They pointed to her and a couple others, and they took them away. Anna never saw the barbarians again.”

“Was it Shemiah who bought her?” Joheved asked, her disgust rising. How could he deal with such evil people?

“*Non*, not yet,” Miriam said, reassuring her. “Her new captors ran the slave market where Baruch saw her and got his master to buy her. They didn’t know she was pregnant.”

“So after all that, do you still wanted to be a midwife?”

There was a long silence and Joheved thought that her sister had fallen asleep.

“I only know that I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” Miriam said. “Let’s try and get some sleep before all the bells start ringing.”

The next morning, Joheved dressed and prayed quietly so she wouldn’t disturb her sleeping sister. Once downstairs, she learned that Baruch had been told nothing except that the baby had not survived the birth. If people interpreted this to mean that the boy had been born prematurely, which would have been the case if Baruch had fathered him, it was just as well.

Under Jewish law, a stillborn is not entitled to the same bereavement rituals as a child who lives at least a month.<sup>76</sup> Anna’s son was buried without a funeral in an anonymous section of the cemetery reserved for stillborns, amputated limbs and worn-out holy books. Legally, Anna and Baruch were not mourners and thus would not interrupt their routines for the seven days of intense grief that a family death usually required. Anna told the women that this was fine with her; she wanted to forget the baby and everything having to do with it as soon as possible.

76. *Teshuvot Rashi*, ed. Israel Elfenbein, (Shulsinger Bros, New York, 1943): p. 207.