



Ekev

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AYALAH BAT-LAPIDOT

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Author's note: All events and characters (including the protagonist) in "Ayalah Bat-Lapidot" not attested to in Tanakh and/or Talmud and Midrash are, presumably, fictional. For historical context, the reader's attention is called to [Midrash Ruth Rabbah \(1:1\)](#), in which the events of that megillah are placed within the judicial tenure of Devorah and Barak.

"Fine—but I don't know why I should even bother with the white dress—I might as well just wear your old scabbard and helmet and get it over with!" I huffed and puffed my way past my mother and up to my favorite spot up on the hill behind our home, above my mother's famous

palm tree and overlooking the Kineret plain. It was the 14th of Av—high summer and just one day before the Tu Be-Av dance—and I was dripping by the time I got there. My name may be Ayalah, but I'm not a very fast runner. Not that I mind the name—my parents are really into *shevet* pride (go Naftali!), and they could've named me Hatzor or something weird like that.

Hatzor means a lot to my parents, actually. I mean, it was this Canaanite stronghold of old king Yavin, and if not for the victory, we'd still be subjugated to him, and those days don't sound too pleasant, from what I've heard. But I have to tell you—being a Bat-Lapidot girl is no piece of cake. I mean, how do you answer the *shadkhanit* when she asks you what your mother does—that your mother is a four-star general in the reserves? And also just happens to be the chief justice? You get some raised eyebrows, let me tell you.

And then if you get one of those **really** well-intentioned people, she or he will then quickly

add, “Well if your mother is working, I’ll bet your father must be a big *talmid hakham* who learns all day, right?” And then you have to tell them that no, actually, he’s not the biggest *lamdan*, but your mother finds the time between hearing cases to make the best, thickest wicks for the *Mishkan* which she then sends with him. Wonderful. A female general and a wick-delivery guy walk into the *Mishkan*—tell me if you’ve heard this joke before.

My older brother Naftali (I know, we’re really creative with the names, right?) has taken the easy way out—he’s decided that even though he’s not from Yissakhar or Levi, he’s going for the *Torato umnato* lifestyle. He’s planning on going all the way through *semikhat Yoroh Yeyoreh* for capital cases, which is maybe in the genetics, although he tends to avoid any mention of a familial judicial/military background. He learns in Yeshivat Shiloh, and we basically never see him except at *aliyah la-regel*.

My little brother Avinoam is still at the age where he thinks it’s super cool to have your mother lead your class trip to see the site of battle at Mei Megido. Just wait till the first time boys in his class say something mean about it, though—he’ll be as embarrassed as I was when my class was going on our big trip to Mishkan Shiloh and the *morah* told all of us that our families should send something along as a donation. So far so good—my mother makes the best wicks hands down, and there was no talk of a side trip to her courtroom or war memorial, thank heavens.

But what do you know? On the day of the trip, I handed the *morah* my carefully wrapped package, and out came a note with my father’s big, sloppy handwriting: “Thanks for saving me the trip, Ayalah! Have fun—love, Abba.” Did my teacher really have to read that out loud? I think she figured it was a mitzvah note or something. Everyone was laughing—“Ayalah’s father is a delivery man!” “Ayalah’s Ima the judge is too busy, so she sends Ayalah’s Abba!” “Maybe Ayalah’s an ‘*Ayalah sheluhah*’ too!” “No, no, Ayalah’s Ima got *nevuah*—like this—look at me, I’m falling down!!” Everyone was in hysterics, and the *morah*’s lame words about every person having a unique role to play just didn’t help. I was so embarrassed. And mad.

I don’t know why I’m even bothering with this dance. It’s so mortifying to have to go and borrow a white dress for the third time. I’ve run out of good friends to trade dresses with for the day—they’re all married. My best friend already has two kids. This will be my fifth dance—two years’ worth of Tu Be-Avs and Yom Kippurs and nothing. Nobody goes for three years and doesn’t get married, unless they’re a *Givonit* or something. There aren’t too many *Givonim* around here, anyhow—they live near the *Mishkan*, where they work, drawing water and hewing wood. And according to Naftali, they have their own *shiddukh* initiatives, anyhow. The “lonely *Givoni*” is just a myth.

I mean, these dances are all just *hishtadelut*, anyhow, right? There are other ways for Ha-Shem

to send me the right guy. I think some of our neighbors have decided I don't want to get married, or that I'm not trying hard enough, but that's just not true. I pray to Ha-Shem every day to make it happen, at the right time, and to let that time be really soon! And speaking of *hishtadelut*, why can't Naftali ever bring home a friend or two from his yeshivah? Because it's slightly embarrassing? Yeah, well, do you know what it's like for *me*? Can't I just hope I meet my *hatan* through some kind of less awkward means? Is that really asking for a miracle? I know, I know—if I were really brave, I'd just go to the next dance with a positive attitude (like Abba says) and with my head held high (like Ima says), but it's so tough.

I was really just going to skip this dance, but my mother won't hear of it. And I don't want to get her upset—it's really guilt trip-inducing to be the reason your mother wasn't in the right mood to be able to receive *nevuah*.

Actually, I'm not even the only worry my mother has on her mind this time around. We haven't had a decent rainfall this whole year, and the summer has been a scorcher. The Kineret is at the lowest anybody remembers it, and people are joking that if we'd have entered Israel with Yehoshua in a year like this, there would have been no need for the Yarden to split—as it is, it's more like a creek than the mighty river it's supposed to be. Our *shevet's* crops may be the first to ripen, but a whole lot of them have dried up and shriveled, and when we went to Shiloh this past Shavuot, they had this water-rationing system in place

where if you had camels, you could only water them during off-hours.

We've had *ta'aniyot* this whole past winter for rain, and there are rumors that down south in Yehudah, a real famine could be developing. There was even talk of canceling this year's dance—after all, “restraint and limitation of public expressions of joy” is what *beit din* calls for when you've got such a serious state of affairs. (I would know—I helped stencil all those signs that got posted in the *makolet* in town.) Unfortunately for me, these dances are considered mitzvah activities, so their cancellation didn't pan out—and I've got a strong hunch that my mother was involved in that decision. Like that's going to make really great small talk with any guy who does actually come over: “Really, you're glad they didn't cancel? Yeah, actually my mother is the one who handed down that *psak*; she's kind of involved in stuff like this... Oh, you know her—she ruled against you when your neighbor took you to *beit din* about your goat that ate their laundry? Oh, gosh, I'm so sorry...” **Awkward.**

Okay, I admit—my mother definitely had a hard time with *shiddukhim* herself—probably harder than I'm having it. I mean, what boy wants to marry a *neviah*, right? It's super awkward on several levels, from wondering what Ha-Shem is going to tell her about you, to the fact that she does sometimes get *nevuah* really suddenly, and that means kind of ditching any family plans. She was rejected by all the best boys in Naftali, and the crowd isn't that huge even to begin with when you're like our family (and you don't hold by even

the slightest accommodation to *avodah zarah*). But then she met Abba—everyone told her he wasn't for her, that he wasn't so learned, and she wouldn't be able to look up to him. But they really liked each other—he was totally fine with her, in fact, kind of in awe; and they made it work, even when she became the *shofetet*, and even through the war.

She doesn't really speak of the war much, except for when we ask her about it or when she gets together with her old friend, Yael. Oh, boy—does my mother ever sing her praises. We all love Yael, and it's so much fun when she visits. But, my mother points out to her: “**You** don't have a daughter *in shiddukhim*.” “You have no idea what it's like,” she tells her. “Ayalah will make a wonderful *ishet hayil* and *eim be-Yisrael*,” my mother tells her. “Our Ayalah is intelligent, with a great sense of humor. She's got the right values and a good dose of common sense. She just wants to find the right one, already. But *shiddukhim* these days—I can't begin to tell you. I feel like I'm sending her into battle.”

The truth is, if it weren't so embarrassing for me, I'd be super proud of my mother, I guess. The other day, Avinoam came home from school and told us that some boys were trying to set Ima's poem—it's called “*Shirat Devorah*,” but we don't usually call it that—to *negivot*, in case they ever make an addition to *Sefer Yehoshua* and include it. To *Sefer Yehoshua*!! Can you imagine that—to the only other *sefer* besides the Torah?? I mean, that's an incredible compliment, but really?? My mother just smiled, and Abba said he's looking forward to seeing it in *ketav*.

It's just so tough—our circles are really *makpid* about things like *kol ishah*. There's this whole debate around Ima's song—in my school, they don't even call it a song, just a poem or an ode. Some people say Ima didn't actually sing or say it at all—that Barak, who's her co-*shofet* now, did the actual declamation, back then when he was her chief of staff and adjutant general. But I know that Ima did. Ima doesn't care if people don't report it like it was, but she won't bend the truth herself. When someone asks her, she answers: of course she sang it! It was *nevuah*!

A lot of our neighbors are totally fine with that—but then you find out that so-and-so was seen last week at the temple of Ba'al, or held a garden party for Astarte, and that kind of ruins it. Of course they're okay with Ima's singing—they have a whole bunch of prophetesses and singers and dancers for their goddesses. It's so confusing—I mean, sure, there are people who've just totally gone native. You can barely tell them apart from the Canaanites. (Which is what's **guaranteed** to happen, Ima will point out: There was a **reason** we've been supposed to be getting rid of them, for like the last century and half. When you don't—guess who influences whom?) But I'm not talking about them; I'm talking about a lot of the people who belong to our *beit av*, who go to Shiloh for *regel*, who are good Israelites—but who are a little bit more open-minded, as they put it. Sure, we believe in God. But hey, live and let live—there's always room for more, isn't there?

And I have to tell you—it's so super tempting. It's so inviting, it's almost like a magnetic pull. When they sacrifice to Asheirah right there on their own

roofs, and they're singing and dancing, and maybe even flirting a little—yeah, it's tempting. But I've been given a very good education (my mother definitely saw to that). And so I pull away.

I've lost a couple of really good friends over this, girls who were more open-minded and thought my mother was super cool. But they weren't content to let themselves be chosen for prophecy by Ha-Shem, if that was, by any chance, what He was planning for them. They liked what they saw as the proactive and inclusive nature of Ba'al and Asheirah, where, after a brief stint as a PIT (prophetess-in-training) for them, if you identified as a prophetess, then you were one. And if you declared that such-and-such was okay, that Asheirah said you should do this and that—you were listened to more often than not. Honestly, that seemed pretty suspect to me. I mean, you'd think prophecy was catching, at the rate they were going. Plus, I've seen my mother get *nevuah*—it was nothing—**nothing**—like what these girls claimed.

My parents are really worried about the state of affairs—they're saying the situation is as bad as when Ha-Shem sent us a wake-up call way back when, in the form of that horrible Yavin and his people. These days, people don't even hide their *avodah zarah*. If you think the drought might scare them—nope, just the opposite. They're busy praying to Ba'al for rain. You can hear calls of "*Ha-Ba'al ya'aneinu*" when you walk by some of the farms around here. Avinoam told me he even saw someone driving into town with a picture on their oxcart of Ba'al and Asheirah and the whole gang, and—he reported on the picture with a

giggle—"They had no clothes on!" Yeah, well, if you think some of their devotees have a problem with *tzeniut*, you should see the gods. And when people get a summons to *beit din* for "suspicion of idolatrous practice and/or worship," they're a no-show. Or worse, they show up with a posse. There's like literally no enforcement—everybody just does what they want. And really, what are you going to do? Put a boot on Ba'al? He can't move, anyhow!

But if that's not enough, on the other side of things there are also these people who are super zealous about *tzeniut* and propriety and a woman's place in hearth and home, who just can't understand how Barak still shares the bench with Ima. I mean, like what: It was okay with you that God sent her when you desperately needed a victory, but now you have second thoughts? She was good enough to win the war for you, but then, what—throw her off the court? Do me a favor. It's true that under Ima's leadership, Barak has become an absolute equal, full-fledged *shofet* himself. But he's also really decent, and somehow, he manages to ignore the *pashkevilim* screaming about "*Hutzpah ve-Sha'aruriyah be-Yisrael!!!!*" and "*No Tzeniut = No Rain!!!*" He doesn't seem to let all the alarmist "*Gilui ve-Azharah!!!*" headlines get under his skin. Ima's also really stoic about it; she says that that's just what comes with the territory, when you do *tzarkhei tzibbur* work.

Ima and Barak are an incredible team, but some people seem to not be able to get over how on the eve of the war, way back when, it was **Ima** who summoned **him** and told **him** what to do, and not

the other way around. He is definitely a hometown hero, but he never lets that get to his head. After all, and he's the first to say: he never could have done it without Ima—it's he who insisted she come along!

Whenever I go into town, chances are there's a new broadside up: "*Keriah Kedoshah!!!*" "How dare she still put her name first!" they exclaim. But Barak won't have it any other way. He says Ima is the *shofet* with seniority, and that's how it stays in his book. Between the *avodah zarah* loonies and the scandalized right-wingers, nobody seems to be listening to their local orthodox *shoftim*. Ima laughed and said he'd really nailed it, when Barak commented that these are the days of "*shefot ha-shoftim*"—everybody is judging the judges.

I'd found a nice shady spot up on the hill, and I recited *minhah*. Wouldn't it be nice if I'd look up and see ten camels coming toward me, with my *hatan*? He would ask Ima's chief of staff—the man directing him—who that young woman was, walking in the field, and the staffer would tell him, "That's your fiancée!" I'd put on a veil—or would he put on his helmet?—and he'd jump down off the camel, and I'd listen in fascination while he would tell of his journey and all the wonders that led him directly to me...

I must've fallen asleep—when I woke up, there were no camels, and it was still plenty hot, but it looked like it was nearly sunset. Despite my daydreams, Ima would never, ever pull rank, even if there were some kind of way to do that. The normal *hishtadelut* is what it would be, and if I had

any plans of getting a white dress, I needed to get moving, pronto. After all, this dance is kind of my last shot. If nothing goes down this season, my mother is talking about actually setting me up on one of these awful *shiddukh* dates that old maids have to go on. They sound even worse than the dance. At least at the dance, you can just walk away. Can you imagine having to make conversation for two hours? That sounds like *hishtadelut* with a dose of torture thrown in.

Boy, would it be amazing if something like my parents' story could happen for me. If learning how to make amazing wicks would do the trick, sign me up! But it's not like you can just wait around for a wildly out-of-the-box suggestion that also happens to work out perfectly. I mean, most wild suggestions are just... wild. That's why you need to do the basic *hishtadelut*: I really ought to just put my best foot forward and show up at the dance just one more time. Maybe this time would really be it...

I could probably borrow a dress from the Kedeshes—they live near us and have a whole bunch of girls. If I could tolerate the wishes of "*Im yirtzeh Ha-Shem*, this one should be it" from youngest to oldest and in between, there'd likely be a white dress I could borrow somewhere in the family.

As I stood up, I glimpsed Avinoam going up into the hills with the yoke and buckets to get the water I was supposed to have drawn. Our well is going dry, and we've switched to a spring further up, which makes for a longish walk. Great—now I was really going to get it from everyone—my

accomplishments for the day? A white dress, possibly (yet to be seen), back talk to my mother, and a total slipup of chores. I started the trek back down the hill, which went a lot quicker than the way up, and circled around our house at a distance—no need for my mother to meet me still without a dress, or for Abba to declare it much too late in the day for me to set out, even though the Kedeshes live pretty close to us. I'd just meet the road a little further up, past our house.

This would have worked, if I hadn't run into Abba—not only Abba, but Ima's security detail, who seemed to be setting up a roadblock in front of our house. A roadblock? Seriously? This I had to see. "Ayalah, where are you going?" Abba asked me, with what I could sense was real alarm.

"Um... nowhere. I was just taking a walk..." Exactly at the time I should be doing chores at home, but Abba didn't seem to have that on his mind. "Abba, what's going on? What's wrong with the road?"

"You didn't run into Avinoam? I figured you were behind the house, and I asked him to please tell you not to go anywhere. There could be protests; Ima's team received some intelligence—" A member of the security team called Abba over to tell him something.

"Ayalah, please go *straight* home, okay? Oh, and Ayalah! Go in quietly, please—Ima's holding an emergency session." I had about a million questions, but Abba wouldn't budge until he saw me head up the path to our house, the security guy waiting impatiently.

When I got near our house, Avinoam noticed me, just as I noticed that our house had all the lamps lit. I could see Ima and Barak through the window in the torch-lit room, and it looked like the full court was in session, which was weird. Usually, the *beit din* doesn't meet after *shekiah*, and also, Ima almost always tries to hold the sessions outside, under her beloved palm tree. Abba had called it an emergency session. What was the emergency? Apparently, it was something exciting enough for Avinoam to not be throwing a fit at me about him having to fetch the water in my place. He'd put down the buckets and was calling for me: "Ayalah! Ayalah!" The nights here are usually so gorgeous and still, but now, I realized, there was some kind of background noise—kind of weird, actually, as if we were in the market square, with people all around—and I couldn't make out the rest of what he was saying.

Before I could get any closer, I tripped over someone or something, which turned out to be my brother Naftali, apparently trying to learn in the near-total darkness that had settled by now, with his big, fat traveling pack next to him. Was Yeshivat Shiloh making the boys take their laundry home in order to save water? "What are *you* doing here?" I asked, rubbing the toe I'd stubbed. "Aren't you in Shiloh? And why on earth are you sitting out here in the dark? What is going *on*, anyhow?" I demanded.

Naftali's homecoming was, it emerged, under duress. Yeshivat Shiloh had closed for the duration: things were bad down south, and there was famine in Yehudah. In fact, Naftali had

brought back a letter from Yehudah's central *beit din*, urging for emergency prayers, *ta'aniyot*, and a cancellation of all Tu Be-Av festivities. No, trying to learn in the dark was not his new hobby—did I really think it was? But it was a free country, and he could learn wherever he wanted to, the last time he checked, especially if sisters would watch where they were going. Whoa—I mean, I'd been in a bad mood before, but Naftali was winning the competition now, as far as I could tell.

The noise was getting more perceptible, and I could make out shouts and drumbeats coming from the direction of the road leading to our house. Someone blew a *shofar*. We live pretty far out in the country, and not having *hafganot* at the doorstep is one of the reasons precisely for that choice of location, but tonight was different. Ima's security detail would be busy, and it looked like Abba wasn't going to sit this one out, either.

I started catching some of the chants: "*Ha-Ba'al ya'aneinu be-yom kareinu!*" Seriously—in *front* of *beit din* they're calling for Ba'al to answer them?? "Cancel *your* dance, not ours!" "No to fasting! Yes to dancing!" "*Mahar: Meholot im ha-Molekh!*" I didn't even know we had any Molekh aficionados around here, but they're declaring tomorrow's dance to be with *him*? Maybe they just liked the alliteration. "Dancing is a human right!!" That was mostly coming from one side of the house, as far as I could tell.

When I turned my head toward the other side, and tried to filter out the drumbeats, the results

weren't much better: "Not the wasp and not her daughter! We need rain, we need water!" The wasp is the mean nickname some people have given my mother. And her daughter? Duh, that would be me. Did they think I was trying to clerk for my mother or something? "No *yatzanit bat yatzanit* at *our* dance!" Ouch. The last time I checked, hiking up to my lookout spot or walking to the neighbors does not make me a disreputable or indecent goer-outer. Suddenly anything I do is suspect because I'm my mother's daughter? What does that mean they're implying about *Ima*?!? I mean, if anyone's actions definitely cannot be second-guessed, that would be somebody sent by Ha-Shem, right? How dare they say such horrible things? They weren't through, either: "*Nashim da'atan kallot*—she goes against Yehudah's *beit din* just to make her daughter a *kallah*??!" Ouch and double ouch. If they only knew what pains my mother takes in order to never, ever take advantage of her position. We do *hishtadelut* like everyone else; that's her constant refrain. Most of the time, all she gets from the position is a headache, anyhow.

I needed some answers, pronto. "Well?" I asked Naftali, "Why's there an emergency session? And why are all these idiots at our door? How can they get away with insulting Ima like that? And I still don't get why you're out here—I thought you were dying to get *shimush* at a real *beit din*. They're in session now—but you're sitting in the yard practicing to be a road hazard because—"

Avinoam's voice finished my sentence. "Because

Ima threw him out! You shoulda seen how mad she was, Ayalah!”

“Why’s Ima mad at you, Naftali?” I was truly surprised. What could Naftali possibly have done? He’d just gotten here.

Again, Avinoam rushed to answer instead. “Because Ima said it was court business. You don’t go telling court business in the *makolet* in town. Ima said he should know better than that! That’s why all these crazy people are here at our house. Abba’s pretty upset at you too, Naftali, just by the **way**. And Ayalah, where’d you **go**? Abba was so **worried**.” Avinoam was clearly relishing the experience of being the one Lapidot kid not currently in trouble.

“I don’t get it,” I said. “The famine is horrible news, but why are they all protesting here, and about the *dance* of all things? And since when do hardcore *avodah zarah*’niks even care about the dance? What exactly did you tell them, Naftali?”

Naftali pretended to be deeply engrossed in learning by heart and dismissed my question with a wave of his hand, but Avinoam was bursting to tell me everything. Ima’s date-palm tree is just about impossible to climb, but there’s a conveniently sized olive tree nearby that even I can manage. Of course, Avinoam was ahead of me in about 30 seconds flat (after first sticking his tongue out at Naftali), but I made it to where he was, up on a low, relatively straight branch, facing our house. Now I could see, and not just hear, our

uninvited guests out front. Each side had torches and held posters, showing no signs of leaving any time soon. “Send us rain, the fields to drench—throw Devorah off the bench!” “Restore *tzeniut* standards!” “The *hora’at sha’ah* must end!” More *shofar*-blowing. “Stop monotheistic monopolization of Tu Be-Av!” Loud cheers and drumming followed that one.

As Avinoam told it, Naftali had surprised everyone with his appearance, and when he’d given Ima the letter from Yehudah’s central *beit din*, Ima had convened her *beit din* for an immediate session, at which they’d all decided to cancel the dance after all, in deference to the wishes of Yehudah’s court. But Naftali, it seemed, had stopped in town before making the last stretch of the trek home and shared the contents of the letter with whomever was in the general store at the time.

“It wasn’t sealed or anything!” That was Naftali, who’d moved over to right beneath the tree. The letter, Naftali explained, was just a copy of what in Yehudah was a *kol korei*, a public announcement on every street corner. But Ima had been outraged. Naftali should have realized that there was a reason he’d been asked to deliver it to the central *beit din* (which just happened to be located in his home, so how much was that asking for, already?) and not to the bulletin boards of the *makolet*.

“Okay. So bad judgment on the part of the guy who thinks he’s going to be the big *shofet* someday. But what’s the secret, really? You told

me the *beit din* did exactly what the letter asked them to do.”

The problem, as I pieced it together from Avinoam and Naftali, was exactly that. The people around here who are really dedicated to *avodah zarah* have never shown much interest in the dance. I mean, they have plenty of their own, right? Once they heard, though, that it was being canceled by the *beit din*, and because of the extraterritorial demands of the fanatics in Yehudah (I guess *shevet* pride runs deep all around, here), they immediately announced that **they’d** hold it instead.

Nobody—not somebody named Boaz in Yehudah, and not their own narrow-minded, extremist court—was going to dictate to them whether or not they could hold a dance, or for whom the dance would be dedicated to. Your God doesn’t want it? No problem, we’ve got some other candidates who do. And so when Ima and Barak made the announcement (astutely avoiding any mention of Yehudah’s *beit din*’s request and their heeding it), one camp was ready for a fight.

Since holding a dance dedicated to *avodah zarah* wasn’t exactly what **any** *beit din* had intended, Ima and Barak had reconvened for an emergency, late-afternoon session for a rework. After some pretty quick consideration, they reversed the decision themselves—better to hold a dance within the bounds of Halakhah than cancel and let it fall into the hands of idolaters. The *beit din* might look a little silly, but so be it—anything to

avoid *avodah zarah*. Their colleagues in Yehudah would certainly understand.

It turned out not to be that simple. By the time the second announcement was sent out, shortly before *shekiah* (and probably just about when I’d woken up), not only was the *avodah zarah* crowd readying to demonstrate against the cancellation and threatening to make their own dance—“just-try-and-stop-us”—but Ima’s detractors on the right were also up in arms and making it clear they were not going to be a party to such a *sha’aruriyah*. Enough was enough, they said. Clearly, a woman can’t handle the pressures of the job. Who ever heard of a *beit din* reversing itself like this? What a joke! You want to know why she changed her mind? She remembered, *nebach*, her own daughter. More important was her daughter’s *shiddukh* than standing together with Yehudah. That’s women for you. Barak, time to throw her off the court!

“So let them all jump in a lake, especially if there happens to be any water left. Why is it Ima’s problem if a bunch of fanatics drop out? Good riddance to them.”

“Don’t you get it, Ayalah?” Naftali had regained some of his superior attitude. “It *is* Ima’s problem: If the *kanna’im* boycott the dance, then by numbers alone the *avodah zarah*’niks will be in the majority and basically control the dance and make it another idol fest. Ima has to get those extremists to cooperate and not walk out.”

Just then, I noticed Ima’s clerk heading in our

direction. Even with a torch, he also nearly tripped over Naftali. The clerk regained his footing and addressed Naftali: “Do pardon me, but it’s your sister the Court is looking for. Have you any idea where Miss Bat-Lapidot might be?” Before I could decide whether I ought to climb down before answering, Naftali pointed upwards, while Avinoam flopped his head and shoulders down from the branch so that his upside-down face met the clerk’s startled one. “She’s right here!” The *sofer beit din* recovered himself once again, probably resigned to the unique quirks of clerking for Ima’s court. “Ah, quite fine! Thank you, thank you. Miss Bat-Lapidot, at your convenience...” The clerk retreated a few *amot*, holding his torch in one hand and consulting his notes with the other. “The Court also wishes it known to all men—particularly her sons—by these presents that she has left them supper on the back porch.”

The clerk trailed us back to the house, where I left two hungry brothers on the porch, and opened the door. Abba was there—I guess the protests were under control—and Ima was waiting for me in the kitchen. “Oh, Ayalah—” I’ve seen Ima angry a good number of times, sometimes even furious; I’ve seen her exhausted, after particularly difficult or lengthy cases; and I’ve seen her look like she could tear her hair out in frustration (and no, it’s not always because of me, or even my brothers), but I’d never seen her look like this. It was all of that together, plus this big, deep sadness.

“Ayalah, I don’t know how much you’ve heard, but we absolutely cannot allow the dance to become another depravity. If the right wing pulls out, that’s exactly what’s going to happen, so we

must get everyone on board.” I didn’t know exactly what Ima was getting at, and I’m the one who’s been complaining about this dance for like the last ten months, but I felt like crying. This was definitely not the usual pep talk to get **me** to go along with the program.

“Ayalah, the entire *beit din* is sitting in our living room, waiting for me. We called in representatives from both sides and worked out a compromise.”

So the dance would go on. I let out my breath. I was surprised to realize that most of me felt relieved, even as one tiny part of my brain registered, oh, man—I **still** had no white dress. I’d have to get up really, really early tomorrow, and if the dress would need any altering... I pushed those thoughts aside. It would all work out. Maybe me nearly tripping over a dress in need of hemming would become the story my *hatan* and I would laugh about, years in the future. “Okay. So what’s the compromise?”

The thought suddenly struck me, and I was terrified—“You’re not resigning, are you?!? Everyone needs you!!” Abba smiled and nodded in agreement, even though he looked pretty sad, too. “Ima is a *neviah*, Ayalah. There is no way she **can** resign. And even if she could, Barak and all of us would never let that happen. The last thing this generation needs is to lose one of the few leaders we’ve got.”

Ima was looking at me. “Ayalah, I am not going to sign off on this without your permission.” Abba put his arm around my shoulder. “Ayalah, Ha-

Shem can send you the right *shiddukh* with or without your going to a dance.” Well, that was a new one. If *I’d* have said that just a few hours ago, I would have gotten told off for *hutzpah*.

But my eyes were drawn to Ima. I’d never seen her look like this. “I can handle everything that they throw at me—that’s part of the deal of leading Israel. Like Abba said, the choice isn’t even mine. I *can’t* resign, and the people know that too. They can’t get rid of the wasp. But they’re making the wasp sting her own daughter. They don’t think I’m any kind of an *eim be-Yisrael*, I suppose—and they seem to be proving their point quite well. Ayalah, I’m ashamed—and furious—to have to ask this of you, but for the sake of Heaven, the show must go on. The only condition that those extremists were willing to accept—so as to remedy the alleged non-impartiality of our ruling—was the thing they could think of to hurt me most: They will participate and allow the dance to proceed under our auspices, if and only if you are barred from attending.”

I didn’t know if I was going to laugh or cry. It was all so ridiculous. How did the girl who had to steel herself to go to these dances, just to do the normal *hishtadelut*, end up in the middle of everything, and end up—banned? A *yatzanit*? I never even made it down the road to the Kedeshes! Ima was looking at me, waiting for my answer. “It’s... fine.” The ten camels bearing my *hatan* seemed as far away as the sands of Teiman, while the specter of endless *shiddukh* dates welled up in my mind’s eye. How did Ima ever get through it? Right now, “normal *hishtadelut*” wasn’t looking one bit more normal or likely than

some more unusual *shiddukh* stories I happen to know about personally. “Ima... one thing. Maybe you could teach me how to make wicks?”

THE MEETING

Ben Corvo lives, learns, and writes in Jerusalem. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Salmagundi, Illuminations, Magma, and other publications.

More than 40 years ago, my father, whose yahrzeit falls on Tu Be-Av, visited the ghats in Varanasi, where bodies are burned, bone fragments sifted out, and the ashes poured into the Ganges. I imagine him there with his camera—lift, point, shoot, again and again—among the pilgrims, the mourners, and the dying. Although he is a fairly skilled photographer, as a pyre ignites right next to him with a furious whoosh he is startled, and forgets to advance the film.

I do not know what really happened. All that I know is the outcome, or part of it, two images superimposed in a single frame, the one of the pyre, the other the shape of a man, or the shadow of a man, now seeming to whirl skyward in the flames, like the angel in haftarat Naso ([Shoftim 13:20](#)), or (as I imagine it) the flight of a soul suddenly cut free.

My father liked his images clean, uncluttered. He did not like this one. In all likelihood, he threw it out. In his last years, I do not think that he remembered it at all. But who knows, maybe I am wrong. Maybe the serendipity, Jungian

synchronicity, or hashgahah peratit that brought the two images together—and from beyond the photograph's frame, unintelligible voices, smoke, the smell of burning fat, the tiredness of his own body, his sheer disorientation—underlay in some deep-down sense his latter-day wish to be cremated, and the family's later obedience to that wish, against all dictates of Halakhah and custom.

I was not there when it happened. I am not sure if anyone in the family was. His body was kept in an industrial facility in suburban Atlanta for a few days while paperwork was sorted out and, when the time came, was shunted (smoothly, soundlessly) into the furnace and reduced to powder, with not a fragment to be sifted out. I do not know what was done with the ashes or where they are.

Perhaps a belated protest can be forgiven: don't let them win, them being a long line running from the midrashic Nimrod ([Eruvin 53a](#)) through the people who (during my father's own childhood) presumably burned remnants of his mother's extended family in Poland. The smokes following or not following his mother to industrial Chicago, where her immediate family has immigrated, and into the family house. The rattle of lungs taking them in or not taking them in. His mother is dying of cancer, the disease that will take him decades later. He is kept home when she is buried. Nothing is ever said.

I would like to think that both stories are true—on the one hand, bureaucratic process, self-cancellation, sublimation of bodies and the histories they carry; on the other, a riverbank, a

moment of horror and amazement, perhaps almost immediately forgotten, but working, working underground, and (perhaps unrecognized) someday finding an unlikely light. In a photographic frame, both the flames whirling skyward and the shape of a man, the shadow of a man.

Here is another framework—a photograph, a poem. A street in Jerusalem, the most domesticated of streets; we could almost mistake it for suburban Atlanta, but for the stories that remain there, the stories that are brought there. In the shul there, the men meeting thrice daily for prayers, the syllables they string together, the stories they bring to light. Trees, night camps, crows winging heavily across a fading sky. A sudden flare from distant ghats.

One evening, two old friends meet as if by chance there, outside, afterward. A small shock of mutual recognition passes between them. They cannot say what or why.

The Meeting

Always the same blue opalescence
in the sky as the men spill into the street
after prayers, its mere presence

filling evening air. The men meet
in little clusters of two or three and walk
a short distance together, or greet

each other in passing. Their murmured talk
is at one with the wind in high branches
of the eucalyptus, the muted calls
of last solitary crows straggling across

skylight to night-rookery. Your own
murmured prayer, too, bits and pieces

of words rising a little, then settling
like flotsam in tide, or smoke from watchfires
of goatherds or harvesters, once, in this season,

at this time. Everything is tender
now and hangs in balance, constellations'
wheel above, watchfires below, prayer,

men gathering at evening,
here on the street outside or in outer
edge of firelight. Seen

from above, the men are
tiny flecks in uncanny eyes of goats,
or at harvesttime, black scatter

of olives around each tree. The crows
fly out each morning, return each evening,
they settle in clusters or call out

to each other in passing or warning,
evading the men in the camps, picking at
flotsam, windfall, gleanings,

anything that
is not quite nothing, your own murmured
fragments, smoke whirling from ghats,

watchfires, harvesttime, carrion birds
flapping heavily, it is evening,
prayers are over, you are walking homeward

in blue opalescence of day's end,
where we meet, as if by chance, old friend.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: A RESPONSE TO DAVID POLSKY'S "READING TRAGEDY IN GITTIN AND GAZA"

A native resident of Washington Heights, New York, R.A. is in the doctoral program of Touro's Graduate School of Jewish Studies, where she is focusing on medieval Ashkenazic history and halacha.

David Polsky's article (["Reading Tragedy in Gittin and Gaza"](#)) piece, published on *Erev Tishah Be-Av*, which compares Hamas to the Zealots, and the allegedly "poor, innocent Palestinians" with the Jews of Jerusalem, is, in my opinion, unacceptably and woefully far from the mark.

The Zealots were (for better or for worse, and they certainly do not escape the Talmud's critique) attempting to free the Jews' ancestral homeland, capital city, and Temple from a foreign military power—the Romans. Hamas, in contrast, is fighting for *Dar al-Islam*—a global conquest by the believers, emphatically beginning with knocking those satanic Jews into the sea, once and for all. One needn't even look as far as Gaza to see this venom—it has, unfortunately, been in full display in some of America's finest institutions. Hamas—and all the Palestinian entities over the decades—has repeatedly refused all proposals for peace and all of the two-state solutions offered, while inscribing in its own constitution its aim to utterly exterminate the Jewish state.

The Zealots had no plans to take over the Roman Empire. However one wishes to take Vespasian's words, they are those of the head of a conquering army, of a general who would prefer capitulation to an extended siege. There were no Zealots breaking out of Jerusalem and gleefully going on a spree of murder, torture, and rape in some innocent Roman city (of which there were many in Israel, at the time), thus inciting a Roman siege and attack. The Zealots were defenders and did not rejoice in the spilled blood of innocents.

This brings us to the other side of the issue—the alleged innocent civilians of Gaza. The residents of Jerusalem did not elect the Zealots with a 70% majority. Nor did they join in the Zealots' (non-existent) orgies of murder, rape, and torture. To still insist at this point—after all the revelations of the UNRWA teachers, doctors, and other “innocent civilians” who held, hid, and tortured the hostages, after all the polls showing consistent, extremely strong popularity for Hamas, and after the videos capturing the good citizenry of Gaza accompanying Hamas terrorists over the breach to join in the pillage—that Gaza is full of innocent civilians (who just happen to celebrate terrorism, but hey, for that they could be Ivy League students in the USA, one supposes) is simply blindness to the facts.

We are fortunate that the Allies had no such “progressive,” thoughtful advisors and think tanks when prosecuting World War II. Were there innocents killed in Germany, and in the Pacific theater? Absolutely—this is the reality of war. Indeed, no one really expected average German or Japanese civilians to overthrow Hitler or

Hirohito in the waning hours of the war. However, to claim that war and victory were off the table because of these innocents (real or imagined), would have been to ensure all that much more suffering in the future. No Marshall Plan, no Berlin Airlift, no candy bombers could have occurred had the Third Reich not been utterly and entirely defeated and eradicated, a goal which was (thankfully) understood to be paramount and unarguable. It seems that some of our more “progressive” thinkers have been in retrograde motion ever since. Zion truly has much to mourn for this 9th of Av.

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