# Sisters

## Ruth Calderon

A story is told of two sisters who resembled one another.

One sister was married and lived in one city;

And the other sister was married and lived in another city.

The husband of one of them grew jealous of his wife

And wanted to bring her to Jerusalem to drink the bitter waters.

That sister went to the city where her sister lived with her husband.

Her sister said to her: Why did you see fi t to come here?

She said to her: My husband wants me to drink the bitter waters.

Her sister said: I will go in your stead and drink.

She said to her: Go.

She dressed herself in her sister’s clothes and went in her stead.

She drank the bitter waters, and was found to be innocent.

She returned to the home of her sister, who came out happily to greet her.

She embraced her sister and kissed her on the lips.

When they kissed one another, her sister breathed in the smell of the bitter waters

And immediately she died.

*— Midrash Tanhuma, Naso, 6*

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Sometimes even Mother could not tell the difference between my younger sister and me. As children, we used to dress in each other’s clothes and confuse the neighbors. Even so, she was always the prettier one. She got married before I did, though this was not the custom where we lived. Because I am the older one.

My sister’s husband was a wealthy Torah scholar from a good family. As she was wont, she captured his heart easily and effortlessly. Swarms of suitors buzzed around our house, thirsty for the sweet nectar of her glance, for her laughter, for the shine of her flowing hair. When they saw me, they would merely nod politely. Only the shy men would pay attention to me, the older sister, the ever- patient virgin. Eventually, one of them settled for me. I married without passion or affection, bearing the burden of the household on my shoulders. After her marriage my sister moved with her husband to the big city, and her occasional letters teemed with bustling excitement. I went a long time without seeing her, until she came to our town two months ago. When my sister showed up at our home, my husband was away on business. I did not yet have any children.

My sister entered, looking pale and thin. She shook like a baby, tears brimming in her eyes. When I sat her down on my bed, she told me about a peddler of perfumes who had passed through her town. He came to her house to display his wares, and they exchanged words. Her husband, immersed in Torah, was always at the study house. The peddler returned several times. Their chatting led to more chatting, until she bared all her secrets and her soul became bound up in his. They were alone together, secluded.

My sister’s words moved me deeply. She begged desperately for my help. She had not had her monthly courses for six weeks, “and my husband,” she added, “suspects me, or perhaps the neighbors whispered something in his ear. A wave of jealousy has washed over him and he wants me to drink the bitter waters in Jerusalem, given to all those wives suspected of adultery.” She said that the local court had pressured her to confess and thereby gain release from her marriage, albeit without financial or legal protection. But she feared for the child within her, who would be born homeless and fatherless, and thus she would not confess.

Fear swept through the room like a cold wind. “Dear sister,” I said, “I will go to Jerusalem in your stead.” She clasped her arms around my neck and kissed me. That night we were like two young girls again. We laughed as we cooked and ate dinner together. In the morning she dressed me in her clothes, styled my hair like hers, and told me all about her relationship with her husband— their terms of endearment and their way of relating when alone. I committed it all to memory.

Her husband would not know the difference between us. At their wedding he was drunk. I hadn’t seen him since that day. And besides, how many times does a man look squarely into the eye of the woman who shares his home?

I left her in my home wearing my gown and made my way to her home in the city. When her husband came to bring her to Jerusalem, escorted by two sages, it was I who set out instead. My escorts left enough space for me to hide myself between them.

The journey to Jerusalem was lovely. The first signs of winter chilled the air, and it was a pleasant time to be outside. I had never before traveled so far. The walk roused me. At the first rest stop I ate out of genuine hunger, as if I had just woken up from a long slumber. When he first laid eyes on me, my sister’s husband quickly averted his glance; there was hatred in his face. I kept silent and walked by his side with my head bent. I worried that he would figure out that I was not his wife.

When we stopped for the night, I took deliberate care with those labors that a woman performs for her husband. But the escorts would not let me make his bed or mix his wine. I was disappointed. I had genuinely wanted to win him over. The next morning I tied my kerchief neatly, washed my hair, and combed it straight, hoping that the smell of my perfume would be pleasant to him.

On the fourth day I sensed that he was drawing closer, pleased with the ruddy color that the walk had brought to my cheeks. For the first time my shyness and self- consciousness worked to my advantage. I saw that I found favor in his eyes. Soon we approached the spring in Motza, home of the famous willows used in the holiday processions. When the two Torah scholars accompanying us had turned their faces away, he leaned in to address me. It was nighttime, and our convoy was unloading its store. A makeshift camp was erected around us. He spoke about forgiveness, about returning home. He took my hands in his under cover of darkness. But I avoided his gaze.

That night he wanted me. Had he come into my bed, the trip would have all been for naught. “It is forbidden to give the bitter waters to any woman whose husband sleeps with her after he accuses her.” So I had learned from our escorts. I was afraid of how I felt when he came near me because he was, after all, my sister’s husband. I pretended I was asleep, until he withdrew his arm and abandoned his attempts to caress me.

At the entrance to Jerusalem I blessed “That He has sustained me” and also “That so it is in His world.” The sages took us to the Gate of Nicanor, where women suspected of adultery are made to drink the bitter waters and where new mothers and lepers are purified. They took me alone to the holy sanctum, at which point my sister’s husband parted from me with a sad look on his face. I saw him praying.

As if in a dream, I passed through the Women’s Gallery and the Israelite Gallery, where the general public is forbidden from entering. The young priests kept their distance as I approached the site of the bitter waters. A priest dressed in a white gown with a stern look on his face recited formulaically, “My daughter” (how I liked that way of referring to me), “if you know that you are pure, then prove your innocence and drink because the bitter waters will act like a dry remedy rubbed upon living flesh: If there is an injury, it will be healed; if there is no injury, then it will have no effect.”

I listened calmly to his words and declared, “I am pure.” I knew that God is a true God and would not allow me to die. One of the priests grabbed hold of my garment and tore it until my chest was bared. I was not ashamed. It seemed fitting to be exposed in such a holy place. My breath rose and fell, but I did not lower my gaze. Afterward they brought an Egyptian rope and tied it above my breasts. The priest tried to avoid touching me, but he brushed against me and trembled as he did. A large crowd had assembled, excited at the chance to witness the trial of a suspected adulteress upon visiting the Temple.

But I was hardly conscious of their presence. I turned my face toward the Holy of Holies. The most senior priest among them lifted a marble tablet affixed to a ring. With a silver ladle he brushed dust into a clay cup that was already filled with a half- measure of water from the Temple sink. He took a parchment scroll with the verses from the Torah about the curse of the adulteress written in ink upon it. Next he lowered the scroll into the glass of water until the letters dissolved. Then he mixed the dust and ink in the water. He brought the water to my lips, and I closed my eyes, feeling as calm and content as a baby nursing at its mother’s breast. I sensed the eyes of the crowd on my face, and I felt a new beauty spreading from my lips to my whole body like a wave of warmth, the water in my mouth tasting as salty as seawater or as a man’s body.

Suddenly my face lit up, and I opened my eyes.

“She is pure,” I heard the priest declare. Immediately, my husband—her husband— embraced me and lifted me off my trembling feet to the space outside the sanctum. His embrace was like a reward. “She shall be absolved and shall retain seed.” I hoped that the blessing would be fulfilled and that I would give birth within ten months.

The days of the journey back to my sister’s husband’s home passed quickly. I was sad. I wished I had more time before I had to divest myself of this life and give back the husband, the home, and the new heart beating inside me. And behold, now we were approaching the gates of the city, the market square. She and I had arranged that she would wait inside her house for me. We passed through the gate to the courtyard.

I heard her footsteps approaching. My heart was overflowing with joy. In just a moment she would come out, and I would greet her with a kiss.