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# The Erotic Mikva

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According to the second-century Alphabet of Ben Sira, the mystic who gives the text its name was conceived when the prophet Jeremiah's daughter bathed in a *mikva* in which her father had ejaculated earlier that day. Ben Sira was thus a child of virgin birth; the son and grandson of Jeremiah, the prophet of Israel's doom; and the product of an unintentional incestuous union between father and daughter.

Often, when I step into the mikva, I am reminded of this tale, particularly when, as is often the case, the cleansing waters of the ritual bath are themselves filthy with bits of floating human hair and flesh. The mikva's purifying powers are not unlike the health-giving powers of kosher food: they exist in a way so conventionally false, so distant from physical reality, as to only be cognizable as 'spiritual' in nature. Materially, the "living waters" of the mikva are often stagnant, unchlorinated pools -- just as "healthy" kosher foods are often poor cuts



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of tough, greasy meat. Although the tale of Ben Sira seems fantastic, it is entirely reasonable to me that I may be ingesting the bodily fluids of a previous visitor to the mikva, as I immerse my naked body in its warmed waters seven times every Friday. Since the water, by law, must be untreated, I do not doubt that, like Ben Sira's sister-mother, I am engaging in unintentional intercourse with dozens of men I do not know.

I moved to Jerusalem two years ago, and have missed only two weekly visits to the mikva in that time. One time was on a weekend holiday in Paris, where I arrived too late on Friday to begin the complicated process of finding a ritual bath for men. And another was when my shopping was postponed by a terrorist attack at the *shuk*. The attack did not come close to my usual stores, but it thoroughly disrupted both the market and my own personal shopping routine, as well as (I suppose) my heart. By the time I had made all the purchases I needed to make, the sun was almost setting, *shabbat* had nearly arrived, and the mikva had closed.

At first, I went to the mikva to cleanse myself of the sin of homosexuality which God had seen fit to bestow upon me. Strictly speaking, the mikva only removes certain kinds of *tum'a* (impurity) and the authorities are divided as to whether the *tum'a* from wrongly-spilled seed is among them. Still, there is no alternative, until such time as the Temple is rebuilt and the sacrifices are restored. For my sin, the consequences of my nature, it is the mikva, or nothing.

It was during my first full year in Israel, a year of *yeshiva* study before college, that I both became aware of my sin and began my regime of effacing it. I had grown up in an Orthodox home, even though, privately, many of the so-called 'lesser' *mitzvos* were disregarded or treated lightly by my parents. Outwardly, we conformed entirely to the modern Orthodox mainstream, but when no one else was looking, corners were cut. It was not until I became an adolescent that I learned that our secret transgressions—not *toveling* our new dishes, being lax when it came to gossip and other forms of *lashon hara*—were part of that mainstream as well; that they were not, as my parents had said, peripheral *mitzvos*

attended to only by the ‘crazies.’ Over time, I came to develop a disdain for my parents’ casual commitment, their inability to see their transgressions as what they were, their abundant desire both to explain away their own shortcomings, and ascribe pejorative labels to those who did not share them. Better to reject one’s Judaism outright, I felt, than to pretend that one is a practitioner while in fact violating its essence. I eventually grew to be mystified by my parents’ occasional levity in the face of God’s command; it simply made no sense to me. Fleeing their home for the monastic, meticulous life of my yeshiva in Israel was a flight into the opportunity to be the more reverent Jew I wanted to be.

At that time, I had no real understanding of my own sexuality, and how it would come to interfere with the life I desired. Growing up, all sexual desire was effectively forbidden, so the fantasies I entertained about my classmates were repressed, I imagined, with no more or less effort than the fantasies they held about models or actresses, women whose bodies I always found repulsively rounded and curved. My and their desires were equally constrained; and all were equally forbidden. Of course, I was troubled. I consulted certain trusted sources for instruction as to wet dreams, and learned of Rabbi Nachman’s *tikkun kelali*, a set of psalms to recite in penance after such a dream came. Yet at the time, I did not see myself as special. In the showers at the gym or in the bunks at my summer camp, I observed myself to be no more inquisitive as to the naked bodies of my friends than they were as to each other’s, or mine.

It was only at yeshiva—now over ten years ago—that I began to see myself as abnormal, different, and in need of repair. I was living in a dorm room with three other boys, all from around New York, like me; all going to college afterwards, like me; and all, like me, sincerely thankful, it seemed, for the chance to learn with some of the great rabbis at our yeshiva. Often, we would confide in one another that, if not for our parents, we would stay a second year, or maybe even stay forever—make *aliyah* and live here permanently. The secular world of modern Israel held little appeal for us. It was the Torah learning, the sincerity, the *piety*

that we saw, every day, in the faces of our teachers—these enticed us. We clung to the yeshiva, as if it were a tiny life preserver in a sea of ignorance and superficiality. Many of us only left its walls when we really had to do so.

At the same time, the yeshiva was like a hormonally-charged locker room. In high school, my bodily interactions with other boys had been bounded by the walls of the gym and the bells of fourth period. Now, physicality was omnipresent. The place was redolent with the smells of late adolescence. The sexual tension could be felt in the air, in the *beis medresh*, in the dorms, even in the room where we ate our meals. Moreover, I learned from my roommates that my high-school illusions of universal celibacy were false; in fact, they had all been “hooking up” with certain of the girls, and if not, then “jerking off” themselves. These terms were more foreign to me than the Aramaic of the *gemara*, but I quickly came to understand their meanings. Only I, it seemed, had scrupulously avoided encouraging my evil inclinations; during my entire adolescence, only once, in a moment of weakness, had I pleased myself, in the shower, and even then it seemed to happen half by accident, and was followed by weeks of *tehillim*. But, I learned, this was not the norm even among the *frum* boys whose piety I had admired. They had all been carrying on in ways I had never imagined.

Yet now, in the yeshiva, the outlets for sexual energy were denied to my classmates; neither hooking up nor jerking off were so easily accomplished. As for meeting girls, there was little opportunity to socialize with them in an unsupervised setting, and hardly any free time at night; even getting to a place where there *were* any women (apart from the wives and young children of the rabbis) was a serious undertaking. And as for oneself, there was hardly any privacy in the yeshiva. All the dorms were four-to-a-room, and the showers were open, army-style. The only places one could be assured of privacy were in the stalls of the bathroom, and I soon learned that an array of euphemisms for the excretory acts had been passed down in the yeshiva as code-words for masturbation.

Frequently, however, the sexually charged atmosphere proved too volatile to be contained in the toilets. Boys masturbated in their beds, even with their roommates present; they did it in the showers, even if other people were there; they did it as a contest, as a game, with targets and prizes and rules. And I participated—of course, I participated. At first I was reluctant, knowing these games to be an incitement to the *yetzer hara*, anxious about my own lack of expertise, but I felt that if I didn't join in, my secret—that I wanted not only to pleasure myself, but to touch and kiss the other boys as well—would somehow be discovered. As if the queerness of not participating in these sexual games would naturally be associated with the deeper queerness I truly—as I only fully understood that year in yeshiva—possessed.

Confronted with the eroticism of the yeshiva, it had become impossible for me to deny my own sexual orientation any longer. When all desire had been repressed, not even discussed, it was easy to see myself as the same as everyone else. But now, with constant talk about breasts and vaginas and the other disgusting viscera of the female body on the one hand, and with, on the other, the naked bodies of beautiful boys constantly around me, constantly available, and constantly engaged in open sexual acts, it was clear what I wanted—and how that set me apart from the others.

I told no one, convinced that I might in some way be able to master this inclination. But I knew. I also knew that none of the guys was entirely innocent. Notwithstanding the macho talk—or, perhaps, as a quite unsurprising complement to it—my classmates' sexual play was undeniably homoerotic; their sarcastic remarks about each others' "hot bods" and "big cocks" contained a grain of honesty, no matter how much they might deny it if confronted. No one was as straight as they seemed. Yet, for all that, I also knew that I was different. These guys were playing with each other as part of a phase; their homosexuality was part of who they were, but only part. Most of the time, I believed, they really were fantasizing about girls, as they said they were, and I had no doubt that (as they later did) they would all go on to be happily married

to women. Not me. I lied about which models I found attractive, which girls back in school I desired; lied about it all, inventing a series of false fantasies, when in fact the objects of my erotic attention were right in front of me.

I first went to the mikva before Yom Kippur, with all of the yeshiva. Most of us had already spent the whole summer together, so being naked in front of each other was hardly novel. I even felt the stirrings of an erection as we stripped, habituated as I was to the frequent group sessions that took place in the showers. But this was supposed to be different. We had learned about the mikva before we went to it, learned of the waters' purifying power and holiness. We learned—I especially—for which sins the mikva was especially efficacious, although we had to deduce them from the rabbi's nineteenth-century talk of "self-pollution" and "seed." And of course we learned of the many *halachot* of the mikva: its minimum size, its use, the requirement for waters untouched by human or mechanical agency.

Although I did not understand it at the time, I have since come to understand the warm, amniotic waters of the mikva as allowing a sort of new birth. The plunge into the waters is like a re-entry into the womb, where all is undifferentiated, and I emerge from them a new man every time. That first Yom Kippur, I knew more than ever before what stains clung to me, stuck to me like barnacles on the side of a ship. And in those first immersions in the mikva, I wanted nothing more than to cleanse them from my body. I imagined the mikva as filled with acid, or cleanser—anything to scrub away my defects. Yom Kippur itself is centered around this notion of catharsis; *kapparah*, usually translated as 'atonement,' more literally means 'cleaning.' It is what must be done to any place that has become impure: scouring, uncovering hidden stains, confronting them, and, through hard effort, expunging them.

Afterwards, I felt refreshed in a way I could not explain. I was prepared to focus my mind when entering the mikva, and had learned how important the mikva had been to the Israelites in the desert, and indeed to Jews throughout the centuries. I knew that the first building a

Jewish community would build, even before the synagogue, would be the mikva. And I was taught that while immersion was only commanded of women, it was practiced by men, regularly, across hundreds of generations. But nothing had prepared me for the *feeling* of it, the real feeling that I experienced, donning my white clothes, symbolic of death, for Yom Kippur: a sensation, and also a deep, profound knowledge, of having died and been reborn. I felt as though the mikva had annihilated my sexual longings along with the residue of my sexual sin. Yom Kippur is known as the “day of death,” the day on which Jews, who normally eschew asceticism of any kind, deny themselves all of life’s pleasures. And I felt as if the mikva was a portal to this special death which contained within it the seeds of life. It had done what, alone, I had failed to do: kill my inclination.

And so, I went again, before Sukkot. And again, before every shabbos. It became a part of my life. I would review, before each visit, how well or poorly I had fared in the preceding week’s efforts to control my *yetzer*. I would consciously focus on annihilating this inclination within me, and feel myself dying as I entered the liminal space of purifying water, only to be reborn, with a clean slate and fresh chance, as I exited them.

Though both the yeshiva’s showers and the mikva entailed bathing with other naked men, and though I was often conscious of this or that beautiful boy among them, I imagined these twin aspects of the mikva—the erasure of desire and the locus of it—to be polar opposites, one side an aspect sin and desire, the other a place of purity and equanimity. To minimize the chances of encountering anyone I knew, I found a different mikva, further from the yeshiva. The last thing I wanted, as I effaced myself and obliterated my desire, was some chitchat with a guy from one of my classes.

That was all many years ago, and everything about my life has changed. I am no longer in touch with any of my friends from yeshiva. All of them have wives, and most, by now, have children. In college, and for the first few years afterwards, bachelorhood was a shared condition,

and we would spend time together, have *shabbat* together. But gradually, as they settled into relationships, they stopped calling me, stopped needing to call me, as their new lives supplanted the old ones. I grew increasingly removed from the community, increasingly worried that my abnormality was readily apparent, if only from my lack of a wedding band. But by the time someone would be expected to say something, there was no one left to say it.

For a while, I contemplated marriage myself, and dated several women, in the non-sexual way that many Torah Jews date. It was not difficult, really. A few meetings in hotels and parks, honest discussions about everything except for *that*, and the celibate march toward marriage could proceed. But, in the end, I was unwilling to live this life. Primarily, I was anxious about completing the sexual act; I was unsure I could do it, repulsed by the very idea, and racked with nervousness. I thought I probably could do it; after all, if I can fantasize by myself, I should be able to do it with a woman. But it was more than mere sex. I was unsure if I could manage the deception as a whole, unwilling to enter into vows that I could not be sure I would keep. I preferred to remain alone, and have everyone know but not say, or say but only in a hushed tone, rather than this—rather than put a woman through the hell of marriage to man who could not love her. I could not force another person to live the life into which God had forced me.

Yet I knew that the ‘gay lifestyle’ was not for me either. I experimented now and then, venturing out into their seedy bars and mindless, pulsating dance clubs. But no matter how I tried to convince myself otherwise, I saw the sin, the darkness, everywhere I went. It would be enough of a burden if it were merely the sexuality, only the act itself that alienated these people from God. That burden, I thought, might be overcome, with sincerity and monogamy and, if possible, love. But everywhere I went in the ‘gay world,’ I saw the glorification of surface, sensuality, and the kind of ‘freedom’ that exists only in the hearts of men who do not truly understand the meaning of the word. The few times I did meet men for sex were limited to semi-anonymous

encounters in parks or, once, at a club. There, in those contexts, it was at least clear that we were servicing a biological need, like going to the bathroom; there was no glorification of it, no illusions. The sex was quick, and at once mechanical and animalistic. I never knew the men's names, never wanted to hear them speak. Where this sort of indulgence was celebrated, I was disgusted as much as by women.

As a consequence of this double alienation—from the Jewish community on the one hand and from the gay community on the other—I became virtually celibate, and quite alone. I am not so strong or so righteous as to say that my piety was stronger than my libido. My lifestyle was due to my inability to ignore the resilient conscience that guides my life as a Jew in every aspect of its existence. I know what some would say—that this voice of conscience was not a spark of God but was instead a residue of guilt; that the voice was to be suppressed, not heeded. But each time I heard it, whether in a bar or in bed or catching someone's eyes in the park, I recognized its timbre as precisely that tone which accompanies the exhortation to do good. I knew it well; I knew it from parts of my life that have nothing to do with my sexuality. To deny this identity—the identity, that is, of the Voice—was as false as to deny my own.

One of the reasons I came to live in Jerusalem was that here, being a single, *frum* man in one's thirties is not as much an aberration as in America. Everyone in the Anglo-Israeli community here seems a little damaged, a little... off, in their awkward sandals and plaid shirts. They've come here for different reasons, some for ideology, others for love, but all *olim* have at least one radical idiosyncrasy in common: we've all rejected the more comfortable living of our home countries for a place riven by war and inflation and a thousand inconveniences. In other words, everyone here has made a highly Un-American choice: to value a commitment above convenience. In such an environment, where everyone is a bit of a misfit, my own difference seemed somehow to matter less.

Of course, in Israel, machismo is a principle of the secular religion. But beneath that surface, and almost universally among boys about to enter the army, there is a kind of bisexuality inherent in many Israeli men: you can almost read the impressions of their overbearing mothers on them, see how it has made their sexuality just that marginal amount more open and tentative—and thus accessible. In America, the boys I knew lost their effeminate vocal cadences and pretty-boy features by age sixteen or seventeen at the latest. Here, somehow, I find myself surrounded by instances of the same ambiguity and sensitive fragility even in men whose ages approach my own. There is, as a consequence, a sort of ambient anti-masculinity in the air, feeding and resisting all the posing and militarism of the culture, an atmosphere that sets me at a curious kind of ease.

And, there are many *frum* Jews like me. We do not march in the parades. We don't look like the gays, or act like them. But we are here, in the parks and the personal ads. And so I hold out hope that, one day, I might even find a man with whom I can share my life, someone who has refused all the same compromises as I have, and with whom I can share our uneasy contradictions.

I continue to go to the mikva with complete faithfulness. It was harder in America, where I worked on Wall Street for a while, to keep to my practice as regularly as I do here. There are fewer mikvas there, less time, more of a sense of strangeness and even freakishness to the ritual. One feels almost ashamed, buzzing the un-labeled doorbell on an anonymous Manhattan brownstone, skulking up the stairs. Here, however, everyone goes: families, students, Ashkenazim, Sephardim. I almost imagine that I am normal.

The mikva has grown into the simultaneous expression and abnegation of my sexuality. I still feel its waters cleanse me of whatever sins I have accumulated; its all-encompassing warmth and silence return me to a state of innocence and purity, if only temporarily. And—I do not want to say “but”—and, the mikva is also a place of confrontation, an erotic zone of permissible shared nudity, like the showers at the

yeshiva those years ago. Unlike in my yeshiva days, going to the mikva is now one of the few—the only—times during the week that I see other men, and boys as well, naked. Stripping off our clothes together in the changing room is usually the most sexually liberating act I perform all week. This is where we are naked with each other, old and young, straight and gay; this is where we simultaneously stimulate and annihilate our appetites for one another. I have long since eroded the Chinese wall I tried to construct between the eroticism of the mikva and its power to efface and abnegate desire; it is in the union of those contradictory impulses that the power of the ritual bath lies.

And more than that: the mikva itself is charged with eroticism. Most modern mikvas are heated, and one feels release, surrender, the warm intimacy of a pre-natal memory, of the maternal heartbeat and soothing heat. Other mikvas are cold, fed by streams or natural springs, and require a different kind of surrender. In those, it is all I can do to suppress the lustful, soprano-pitched sigh as the impossibly cool water takes me, possesses me. I have always been afraid of the cold, I suppose; normally, in a swimming pool, I might take five or even ten minutes to wade in, slowly, inch by inch. The legs, the thighs, the waist, the abdomen—that is the hardest—the chest, and then at last the total consummation. But there is never time for such idling in the mikva. The erasure is absolute, and instant. In the years that I have allowed myself to be penetrated by other men, no act of intercourse has ever amounted to the total subjugation of the cold water surrounding my naked body. I am its plaything.

Here, in the conspiracy of the changing room, all of the men are transfigured together. At the mikva, we are men in a place normally associated with women. In the showers, friends, fathers, sons are all naked together, dissolving boundaries that, in my recollection, strictly governed my adolescence. And in the bath's waters, we commingle with one another, an act most men would usually deny.

Yet I try to actually enter the mikva itself alone. Joining another man in the mikva is too much: it is an act of intimacy commensurate with

sexual union itself. The mikva is a womb; it is a place of non-self, of dissolving the illusory boundaries of what it means to be a self, distinct from the world, and a place of return to the primordial pre-individuation of the amniotic sac. And to be in the womb with another person is a consummation: more than any pathetic imitation of heterosexual sex, it is the mikva that allows two men to unite with each other. Were such an intimacy desired, it surely would be the place for it. But as a casual encounter with someone who happens, obviously, to slip into the mikva with me, it is too much; it is sex with a stranger.

The eroticism of the mikva, of course, is concealed. Sometimes men chatter in the showers, before and after they bathe, as if nothing is different, as if they are naked with each other all the time, as if the mysticism of the forty *se'ab* of living water is as commonplace as a traffic light. Only the younger boys look overtly at the other penises in the room, their curiosity allowed by their youth and coupled with an innocent acceptance of our shared nudity. This casualness of intimacy is perhaps what arouses me the most. Many quiet nights, I have brought myself to ecstasy with the images of three or four naked students, fully exposed to one another, casually chatting in the shower, knowing yet not knowing the frontal intimacy that is shared in silence.

Actual physical contact, actual sexual consummation seems superfluous. The very possibility of it would compromise the delicate nest of illusions in which we all nakedly reside. And so across ten years of going to the mikva, I have never witnessed any overt expression of physical sexuality.

Except once.

It was a normal Friday afternoon—tidying up the house, buying challah and fruits and vegetables, the city rapidly preparing for its weekly slowing-down, everyone carrying shopping bags from one place to the next, the last buses making their rounds as the streets began to slowly empty. For some reason, I was running later than usual, and by the time I got to the mikva, the attendant had already left, as is frequently the case

when it is less than one hour before shabbos. I was fortunate that the mikva was open at all, this late in the afternoon.

When I entered, the place was virtually empty. Only one man was in the changing area, a round-bodied and hairless man in his fifties, and he was putting on his clothes. I felt a familiar blend of satisfaction and disappointment. My meditation would be easier, undistracted by naked bodies glimpsed in my peripheral vision. And yet, did I not also want those distractions? Had I not looked forward to them all through the lonely week? The consummation devoutly to be wished for; in the presence of it; surrounded by it?

I nodded perfunctorily to the man, and began to take off my clothes. As is my custom, I reviewed the week, my tasks at work, my plans for shabbos, my lapses in self-control. It had been an ordinary week; only two nights in front of the computer screen to be washed away in the water; and nothing particularly remarkable besides. I had lost some weight, I noticed. My skin was pale, but summer was coming; it would turn a healthier shade soon. Naked, I walked to the shower, where I washed off any bits of hair or dirt still clinging to my body, making sure that nothing interrupted the complete contact between myself and the living waters. Both of the two mikvas had been heavily used that day, and showed it, but I was in my own mind now, largely equanimous regarding the dirty water; I was preparing for the shabbos, shifting from the weekday to the holy. I immersed myself my customary seven times, spending a few moments under water each time, feeling the renewal and the peace and the quiet, making sure that none of my body protruded from the water, visualizing an inner *mem-yood-mem*, spelling the the Hebrew word for water, *mayim*. I heard its feminine, maternal sound, each *mem* the numerical equivalent of the forty se'ah of water needed to make a mikva valid, each forty a symbolic representation of completeness and rebirth, like the forty years in the desert and the forty days and nights on Mount Sinai. Each *mem* the Hebrew equivalent of *Om*, the universal mother, rebirthing us anew; the lone *yood* of my own sex suspended in between.

As I stood up from my seventh and final immersion, I saw a beautiful boy stepping into the mikva—my mikva, I thought immediately, even though the other one was empty. Why? Stunned, I couldn't help but watch him. He looked to be about sixteen, white skin, dark brown hair; a thin frame; delicate, feminine, quintessentially Jewish features. His chest was between a boy's and a man's; his body was smooth; his penis hung slightly to the right in a small nest of brown pubic hair, well-sized, slightly larger than mine. The way he carried himself, the kind of insouciant obliviousness to his own beauty and nakedness, made me certain of his heterosexuality, despite his choice of the occupied mikva over the unoccupied one. The boy seemed to have an unconscious, unpracticed straightness that I could not duplicate even with years of effort. It was only as my eyes watched his calves gently stepping into the mikva's waters that I realized I had been staring.

Immediately I ought to have averted my eyes, gotten up, moved past the boy, and returned to the shower room. The right thing to do was clear. I still cannot explain why I did not do this, why instead I moved my eyes up from his legs to his body to his face, to find that he was looking at me, expressionless. It was still safe to leave. His face was completely blank; he was neither offended nor interested nor anything at all. Just impassively, impenetrably blank. His dark hair was matted to his head; I tried to discern whether he had any *payes*, to see how religious he was, but couldn't tell.

“Hello,” he said, in English, but with an Israeli accent.

“Hi,” I said back, shocked that he had spoken to me, greeted me—and in English, as if he knew (as many Israelis seemed to know) of my foreign origins. It was surprising that he even acknowledged my presence as another person with him, otherwise alone, in this place; let alone in English; let alone as he seemed, too, to stare back at me. I tried to act as if I were one of those who talked in the mikva, that it was not unusual to say hello to another person coming in—and thus, not unusual to linger, either, enjoying the warm water and the relaxation before getting out. I thought of making small talk, to justify my presence, but

instead pushed off my feet as if to swim innocently for a moment in the mikva, which was about six feet square and four feet deep. This action unintentionally flashed my slightly-stirring penis above the water line. The boy, I noticed, looked over at it.

He looked away and did three immersions in the mikva, quickly, again seemingly without much expression or feeling. Then he stood up and, as I had done but more exaggerated and obvious, lifted up his feet and floated on his back, as if showing off.

“Are you looking at me?” he asked, almost in a whisper.

“Sorry,” I said, growing erect under the water. The boy moved closer.

“Do you want to touch it?”

I put my hand on him. I had never done this before, never in the mikva, never with someone so young, and apart from a few encounters, never at all. He grew rapidly in my hand.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. I stroked him gently, not masturbating him—caressing him. There was a silence in the room that I had never heard before. It was as if we were entirely underwater, instead of only partly; the air seemed to be made of wool.

“You won’t tell me your name?” I said.

“It’s not important.”

I continued touching him. I quickly wondered if we would be caught. Unlikely—shabbos was almost in. No one would be coming, except maybe the attendant to lock up. We would hear him. What was I supposed to do? I had never done this before. I maneuvered him so that he was in front of me, my hardness pressing up against his lower back, my hands caressing him. I was touching him lovingly, gently, instead of lustily; I wondered if he noticed this. I wondered if he preferred to be touched in this way or the other way, if he had done this before, or whether, as for me, this was one of the precious and silent times when the ordinary laws of the universe seem temporarily suspended—perhaps I had emerged from my immersions reborn not

into the ordinary world, but a world to come in which this was as natural as it felt.

He reached around his back and touched me. I sighed reflexively.

“What’s your name?” I asked again. He didn’t answer. I don’t know why I was asking; it seemed the only set of words that I could think of. But I wanted to know, I wanted to know *him*, wanted to know if he was like me—not like me simply in sexuality, but like me in some deeper way that I could not adequately express—with a shared *neshama*, as the Baal Shem Tov says, a soul with shared roots in the other world. *Like* me, like *me*. Maybe I asked because I wanted to know this for sure, to learn the essence of his being, which as the mystical books tell us is encoded in his name. At the same time, I did not offer my own name; I wanted to know his first; I wanted his reply to be honest, uncorrupted by what I would tell him. I felt he was not truly naked until he would tell me, not fully known, not fully capable of being loved. Even as I touched him. Even as he stood close in front of me and touched me in return. And it was not lust that I felt, now; it was a love that is *kadosh*, holy. I knew in one moment that I wanted what the other Jews had, as they consummate their love for their wives every Friday night, and in so doing effect a unity on high between the shechinah and the Holy One Blessed by He. I wanted no lines of separation. The sexual and the spiritual had always been separate for me; but now I wanted their union. I want the holy love that others take for granted, unifying the lusts of the body with the thirst of the spirit. This is my place, I thought, this place of nakedness and exposure, intimacy and purification. What is his *name*?

“Tell me your name,” I whispered into his ear. He only sighed. He was getting close, I could tell. As was I. Closer to unity; closer to what was always denied, deferred. His hand moved faster on me, his body had begun to tense. I remembered my roommates in the yeshiva, seeing who could shoot the farthest, ripping off their clothes to compete, naked, even though there—was no—reason they had to take off their shirts, and shoes, and socks, because they—wanted it; they wanted each other completely, just as God wants us completely, just as we must strip away

all of our clothes and all of our personalities, all our thoughts and sins and sense of self, just as we must cleave to God and stand naked in front of God, face to face as the Zohar says, and behind God, and we must know Him, and make love to Him, and unite with Her in her mikva bath, and become one with Her and with Him and conceive mercy that comes to us, raining down on us from the Foundation of God's sex, and in this bath in this moment, and—what is his *name*?

“Tell me your name,” I said urgently, on the brink of orgasm.

“Mendel,” he said, and he came in my hand, and I in his. And we shuddered together with the exhalation of a single *aleph*, a sigh that precedes the sigh, and his come flew over his chest and onto my neck, onto the small of my neck to the left of my adam's apple, as my head was arched back in release, and I said, “Mendel,” as I ejaculated again into the water, and he came again and again, and we both fell backwards slightly in the water, and I held him as we floated in the water.

The Alphabet of Ben Sira does not explain the circumstances of how Jeremiah's sperm came to be floating in the mikva where his daughter would later bathe. Some commentators assert that Jeremiah was accosted by a group of homosexuals, that they forced him to ejaculate into the bath, that his ecstasy was neither deliberate nor true. I, of course, prefer to think otherwise, and wonder who the prophet met that day in the mikva, or whether he was by himself, imagining a postponed consummation. I wonder why a book concerned with the arrangement of letters in creation, the codes that determine our natures and our desires, begins with this parodic virgin birth that originated in the ecstasy of the mikva—and whether through those letters, what is done may be undone, and what is broken be brought together.

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