

A Reward in this World

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Mom did not have to worry about sitting alone in the women's section during the High Holidays. There were several reasons for this. When services ran long, especially on the fast, tempers tended to run short; but it had already been established that Mom was easy to get along with, and did not bicker. She could follow the davvening accurately. And she had a way with people -- you could express yourself to her in Yiddish, Polish or English (and, in a pinch, in some other languages) and be well understood. This year Mrs. A. took her turn.

I didn't know Mrs. A. at all, except that she and her family lived somewhere up the block. They were not regular shulgoers, but always appeared at the High Holidays. In this, they were quite typical of many of the Brooklyn families who crowded the old shul at that time. I didn't hear Mom say much about Mrs. A. at Rosh Hashana, and, in fact, forgot all about her.

Now it was Yom Kippur, and my parents and I are about to go up the stairs for Shacharit. I precede them and wait as they pause on the first landing. Mom wants Dad to find Hamelech for her, and gives him her blue-fabric-covered Machzor. The cover is nearly a match for his suit. Mom is very neat in her navy jacket and skirt, white blouse, and hat. She regards Dad quietly as he finds the prayer and returns the Machzor to her. She marks the spot with a delicate handkerchief (or was that a white glove, or maybe it is actually a cream colored shul ticket..) and closes the Machzor. They say nothing during this brief moment, but I see the loving look in Mom's eyes, and I know that as she appreciates Dad's religious knowledge, she and he are reflecting on Yom Kippurs past, in other countries, under various governments. They are recalling in this brief instant the way the holiday was observed in the shtetl, while Mom was under the tutelage of Tante Esther, her ultra-religious adoptive mother, and how the Days of Judgment really were observed with great care and apprehension. Then their mutual momentary gaze ends. There is a brief kiss, and as Mom makes ready to separate from Dad and me and go up the next flight of stairs, it occurs to me that she will for many hours be, not with us, but in the company of Mrs. A.

At Yom Kippur's end, we break the fast at home, and Mom mentions something that was on Mrs. A's mind: her son, T., the last one at home, an accountant (maybe a CPA), a nice man. The problem is, he is not seeing anyone, not dating, not going out, just staying home and hanging around the house. It's depressing to see him. No one is getting any younger, and we'd really like to see him married. Maybe you know someone...

I am interested in this topic, but, silently question whether Mom can actually do anything for Mrs. A. I am surprised that Mrs. A. has raised this issue with Mom at all. Even as Dad is voicing his skepticism, however, Mom, eyes a-twinkle, says she thinks she has a match.

"Who?"

"Recently, Mrs. Hirsch was talking about her Ann," Mom tells us. Mrs. Hirsch was very proud of her daughter's pursuit of a Master's, but noted that, as of yet, there was no sign of a Mister. Mom's thinking was that both were well-educated, approximately the same age, from very good families. She was going to try it. What was there to lose?

Somewhat later I ask Mom if she has ever done this before. "You remember your father's cousin Gutte?"

"Yes."

"She came from a very frum and learned family. After the war, Itzik was interested in marriage, and Gutte, who then had no one, came to me for advice."

"So what did you say?"

" Well, it was clear Itzik was no scholar, but he was a good man, and a solid home could be built with him. So I told her to go ahead, and that if anything should go wrong she should say so immediately, and Itzik would have to answer to me, Yes, I took responsibility for that marriage and your father and I escorted Gutte to the chuppah."

Many years and two children later, nothing had gone awry; Mom had been right. It turned out that in addition to Gutte and Itzik, Mom and Dad had escorted several couples to their marriage, as Mom explained to me with the aid of the old photo album. There were many pictures with a distinct form of processing, from Europe, evidently. Some of the people were now in Israel, some in America, all had stories...

"Did you ever match anyone up in America?"

"Yes. Several. One was my hairdresser, an Italian."

Mom evidently was an equal-opportunity matchmaker.

"He was a widower, and expressed to me his wish to meet a suitable companion." Mom remembered and suggested a former coworker. The hairstylist was so delighted with his new wife, that he offered Mom a lifetime of free hair care.

"Did you accept?"

"No. This was his livelihood, I couldn't take it from him."

While this record was admittedly impressive, I still secretly harbored the suspicion that Mom's abilities were with Europeans or older people. She could not possibly understand American youth. To my amazement, however, T. and Ann did agree to meet, went out, liked each other, dated, became engaged, and set a wedding date. We were all invited; it was a joyous affair, and Mom, naturally, reveled in having initiated it.

Not long afterwards, a happy Mrs. A. stopped in at our house and wished to express her gratitude materially. Mom did not accept, but did allow for an alternative arrangement. She did not go into details with me, but I found out the terms several weeks later. I had returned home at Sunday lunchtime, and found Mom standing quietly in the kitchen, meal preparation interrupted. She was listening to the rich baritone voice of the Yiddish radio announcer, as he disclosed contributions to the Jewish Hospital for Chronic Diseases. She quickly put her fingers to her lips; I understood and waited silently, until we both heard that a bed was being donated in memory of Esther Fishbach -- Mom's Tante Esther. The faintest of smiles appeared on Mom's lips, and then vanished. She turned the radio off, and we talked, as she continued her work.

"These are things from which a person reaps a reward in this world, and the principal remains to generate rewards in time to come: honoring parents, doing deeds of lovingkindness, ... helping the needy bride..."

-- Based on the Gemara Shabbat 127 A. Quoted in Siddur Sim Shalom, page 8, second paragraph from bottom

A Roman matron, having learned that Jews regarded God as having created the world in six days, inquired of Rabbi Yose Ben Halafta,

"And what has your God been doing since?"

"He arranges marriages."

"That's it? I have many slaves, and can marry them off to each other in an hour."

"This may seem easy to you, but God regards it as difficult as splitting the Red Sea."

-- Vayikra Rabbah, VIII, 1