

SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST

John, the Baptist as he was called, was a holy man. Everyone agreed on that, even my mother who judges every man as a potential husband for me. She says that since I am beautiful, she can let herself be critical. She knew that I loved John, and suspects I love him even now though he is dead. Her suspicions are correct, for I love him still.

He was strong, a solitary who kept the Law, even in his wild-man ways. It is not well known even among our people that he did not eat unclean food. He ate locusts and wild honey. The tales of him have already memorialized that. But of the eight types of locust, five are clean and permitted in the Law, and he ate those.

When I would meet him in the secret dawns we shared, I tried at first to eat what he did. He would pop the creatures into hot oil where they rapidly cooked, and drizzle honey over them while they were hot. When he served me some of them I recoiled and hid my eyes. Then I tried to eat for his sake, for love's sake, for the sake of my being a guest in his house which was the very desert. I closed my eyes once more and ate a piece of one; it was delicious. Then I opened my eyes and seeing their forms again, began to cry. He already knew I could not eat meat for thinking of the lambs, of the silent patience of the creatures who were slaughtered. Now he smiled at my pity and my tears, but it made him love me more. Not even for love's sake could I eat a whole locust just as, not even for love, for me, for his mother, could he remain in Ain Karim. He did not cease to love us, he simply did more than love us. My pity for the locusts was for him a principle, a deep movement in my soul, and that is where he found in me the echo of his whole life.

We were not lovers, for that is unthinkable. Yet he made me feel what I came to know as exaltation. Of course everyone feels the same in love, it seems, but no one can explain it or feel it for anyone else and so love is always new, always startling, always a shaking wonder of being. I know this as I watch the girls who truly love. It may come late for those girls who never see their husbands before their weddings. For me and for other girls who have grown up with boys they love, as I with John, love was always there, a certainty. Maybe that is why the death of John has so undone me, for a piece of the world disappeared. The foundation of my house was undermined, one corner of the edifice torn away. There are only four such corners: my parents one, as John was one, as I was one, our Law the fourth.

His mother Elizabeth hoped he would love me, stay with us, return soon from his mission, leave its continuance to others. Alas for all our hopes. She was torn herself yet had compassion left for me as she came to see that John was called away from marriage. She longed for the daughter I would be to her, as I already was to her, and for the grandchildren our youth and love would give her.

It is hard to be the mother of such a man. For a while the mothers of great men bask in the fame of their sons. For a longer while, for all the rest of their lives perhaps, the mothers of great men become strange kinds of orphans, parents who have no children, rather than children who have no parents. We all in our time, Elizabeth in hers and I in mine, and who knows, my parents too it seems, find it difficult to be brave for the sake of goodness. If John had been cruel, or apostate, or some other terrible thing, we could have been angry, made him the object of our anger, and by our tears dissolve the great place he occupied in our hearts. We can have done with the wicked man, but must go on loving and enduring the holy one. The pain is endless.

John came into the world in ways that were prophetic. We are children of Sarah as much as of Abraham, and Sarah's ancient miracle had happened also to Elizabeth who had despaired of having children. Then John was conceived past all time she thought it possible to conceive. An angel had come to the temple where Zachary led the prayers, finding him when he was at last alone, telling him the news that he and Elizabeth would have a son. Zachary's reaction was doubt and fear, perhaps angry disbelief in his heart. For that doubt and anger, and as a sign, Zachary was punished by having his lips sealed until John was born. I have often wondered at the scene, having heard the story from the time I was a little girl. Was the angel angry the way a man gets angry, or was Zachary's punishment all the harder for being pronounced by a cool and unperturbed heavenly being? At least his defiance did not cause him to share the fate of Lot's wife, poor woman, who became a pillar of salt.

Our mother Sarah, when she received the same sort of news that Zachary had received, had simply laughed as women do, when the angel made what seemed to be a ridiculous announcement. We commemorate her response in her son's name, Yitzrach, Isaac, which means "Sarah laughed." When the angel came to Zachary, however, he did not have Sarah's grace or lightness. An important priest, he may have been affronted by the angel's news. The stories say he gave an angry shout. The angel surely was affronted in turn by Zachary's lack of rejoicing or even good humor.

Whatever the exchange, Zachary became meek as well as silent through all the months Elizabeth grew with child. Zachary, dear man, was humbled by the experience, changed by it to the sweet old man I came to know in my childhood. Able to speak again he praised Adonai, but after that he spoke little although his silence was warm rather than cold. His eyes flashed with love and his son's eyes held the same brilliance. In John there was added the anger that was his

undoing. John raged against Herod, our adulterous ruler who had married his brother's wife Herodias. Her daughter Salome, that lonely child, danced between Herod's lust for her and her mother's lust for approval. Salome danced away John's life. She became a murderess to find some place of rest in that corrupt palace, to gain her mother's love. She, their pawn, married them in their crime.

Do I sound wise? I am not. I am a woman of eighteen, two years past the time when my marriage should have taken place, two years past the death of John. My parents gently offer other husbands to me. My nieces and nephews grow toward their own betrothals. Once in a while my parents and sisters and brothers become angry with me because among our people life, not death, must prevail in our years. Still, John prevails so that even the rabbis worry. Holy men, they feel my suffering, counsel me to draw free of it, to take my place among the living as the wife of an upright man of whom many have sought me. The rabbis' perception is great for I do not mangle, and since John's death only Elizabeth has seen me cry. In her presence is the loss of my desired husband, yes, but also of her only child. Her pain requires me to be strong by daring to cry with her, and then leading her to stop. Each time I cry with her I wonder if this time I will be able to stop once more. It is always a risk.

I do not want to turn into a madwoman, crying endlessly. I do not think I will, yet what a temptation to release it is, for if I am pronounced mad perhaps Adonai will grant me the unreality of madness so that John will not be dead. Dangerous thoughts, I know it as I think them, and fight them as they rise. I remain a good daughter, a loved aunt, a visitor with my mother among the poor and the sick. Yet, unmarried, I seem to have no real place. It is a mitzvah, a blessing and commandment, to marry. The mitzvah of proper mourning is very short in duration, while marriage is the blessing that spans all one's life and continues in one's children. My parents

want that blessing for me. The sensitive rabbis have added their encouragement through they are less ardent now. They talk to me but their eyes have changed. Fluent and learned men, they falter and stop. One has wept. The rest have become, for the most part, silent.

My life has the strange rhythms of a girl too old to be living still in her parents' house. My heart's own habit wakes me before the dawn, as in the days when John was baptizing. I would rise and dress, taking bread that John would later moisten with honey for my breakfast, and steal away to the hill where his cave was. It was the only time the masses of people were not all around him, their very presence making him lonely. I connected him to his own life. When we were children I was his worshipping shadow, going everywhere with him, exploring the desolate reaches with him when other boys had abandoned him as strange and different. From those early years I would spend weeks with Elizabeth that were really days with John. Elizabeth is a sort of cousin to my mother and she was always asking that I be allowed stay with her. Especially as others among the young began to fear and avoid John, I was the only one he could be certain was his friend. So Elizabeth asked again and again, for her sake and for her son. My sisters provided a sufficient daughterly presence for my mother and so she would send me off with John, whom Elizabeth always sent to accompany me.

Ours is a small village and our ways are informal; my kinship to John's family was known and so no one thought our companionship wrong. It would have been so different in Jerusalem, which is only five miles away; it could be another world for the strict ways demanded of virgins there. It helped also that John's family were rich and important, of the priests of Levi who are our spiritual nobility. Important families have important friends, and as I was protected by John so was he protected by his heritage and wealth, and by the Lord. It was so natural for me to hear John say something like, "The Lord has told me to rise early, to reflect on Him and

hear Him.” Where I was happy, proud, excited when he said these things, the grownups were often shocked or startled. He learned finally not to say such things too readily among them. Some scoffed, others scowled, the heat of their anger and fear rising in them but concealed and deflected by their deference to Zachary and to his family’s standing.

A community of strict observance had sent some men to our town who stayed with John’s family. He was fascinated by them. They called Israel to ascetic, holy ways and did not even believe in divorce though it is permitted in our Law.

After his fifteenth year John would sometimes go to spend weeks with them. I waited, with Elizabeth, for his homecoming each time. Then he began to spend much time alone in his cave. Eventually, the baptizing began. After those days commenced, John no longer came home. I would have to seek him, chilly in a life without John’s smile for me or his grave attention to my girlish concerns which became more serious as my fate, wrapped in his, grew more uncertain. I never had the courage to urge him to leave his task and marry me, or simply to marry me. My lips were sealed as tightly as Zachary’s had been and I could not struggle past the muteness and the helplessness. In those days I came to understand the beggars who tremble at possibilities they dare not ask for. Withal, neither pride nor powerlessness could stop me from running in those dawning times of blue shadows to the hills directly beyond, to John. If the sun could moderate its heat, could be made to shine on us with a warmth we desire rather than what its nature dictates, its perfection would have the same effect for me as John’s presence in my life. John’s cousin Yeshua later said of himself that he was the light of the world. I gladly concede anything for the world but my own special light, my candle in the darkness, was John.

Shortly after John baptized Yeshua, who then gathered his own followers, the suspicions against both of them began to rise. My father worried and muttered that I was in love with a man from a family of holy madmen. In my defense my mother said the prophets have always seemed mad, that even Noah's neighbors made fun of him for building an ark, that Job was treated as a hapless fool by his friends. Such words and so many of them from my mother to my father on my behalf, had never before occurred in my hearing. The surprise of it was even greater for me when my father acceded with a grunt, with that rumble of consent that boys and men all seem to learn when they learn the rest of speech.

Everything about John became a myth, including the garment he wore. It was actually the skin of a beast that had tried to kill him. John told me it had wanted his cave for a home, his flesh for a meal. I had cried out at the story, but John reassured me and said it was a sign. Now he would wear the garment the lord gave to creatures who dwell in rocky places. Cloth that shredded and tore was of no use to him.

The supple leather he made of the beast's hide did stand fast against the earth and stones and rough branches of John's surroundings. He actually did wear cloth, for modesty, as he stood in the river to baptize, for the leather hide would have shrunk in the water and grown brittle.

When he came out of the river and stood on the shore, calling people to repent and taunting the inquisitors sent by Herod and officials in Jerusalem, he wore the leather skin that set him so apart from the people in their cotton robes. His words only sounded cruel to those who were themselves cruel; most of the people were not put off by his words or dress or intensity. They rejoiced in him, nodding as he called back to his hecklers that they were a generation of vipers.

The love of the people troubled him and I wonder if it ever tempted him. I have seen that adulation is more tempting than lust, have watched men who were greatly loved come to love themselves. Such adulation makes us, to ourselves, the very idols we are forbidden to worship. I think John may have struggled with that temptation and overcome it. The wildness people thought they saw in him was actually, or at least became, the frenzy of his task, his defiant purity.

I was certainly tempted, I remember. On the last morning that I saw him he was impatient but determined. "I keep telling them I am not the Messiah," he said.

"Perhaps you are," I ventured timidly. He only shook his head, ate distractedly, listened inwardly.

Part of me was happy not to be in love with the deliverer of our people, but part of me was vain for if he saved our people, I would be a queen. That was my foolish dream the morning of the day that Herod arrested him.

I was not allowed to see him after that. My parents feared for me among the sinful men who could imprison a holy one. We heard only rumors, and prayed the Lord would soften Herod's heart. I wept and fretted, sleeping little, unable to eat. I went to cook for Elizabeth who was alone since Zachary's death. She and I would pretend to eat, each to encourage the other. She had sent away her kinswomen, her nephews, most of the servants. Only one woman was in the house with us, an old woman who kept things tidy and who had no other home. She was ashamed to eat when we could not, but Elizabeth grew upset to realize it, so the woman would eat in the kitchen yard, visited by one or another of the neighbor women who came to keep her company and hear of Elizabeth's endurance.

While John was a prisoner we thus all became prisoners to his fate, in his house. Only once did we get direct word from John, through Yeshua who had gone secretly one night to see him. Yeshua's appearances were surprising, for he moved about much, keeping his movements concealed lest he also be arrested. First Simon, that big gentle man who followed Yeshua, came running down the road to warn us that his Master was coming to tell Elizabeth of John. Simon told Elizabeth, shamefacedly, that he had bribed a guard to walk away from the prison bars for a few minutes so that the cousins could see each other and talk. Elizabeth smiled at his words, an unexpected reaction that confused the gruff man. It confused me as well but I did not, could not, press her to explain for Simon withdrew as Yeshua entered to speak with us. It was brief, for it was too dangerous for him to linger here.

I thought Elizabeth would ask many questions but she only waited. Her nephew understood, greeting us with courteous brevity and speaking at once, softly, giving Elizabeth her son's message of love. Then he turned to me as I sat bursting with the questions I longed to say aloud. "He asks for you," Yeshua told me. I wanted to ask, is it dark, do the chains cut his skin, do his jailers torment him. I said none of these things for Elizabeth's sake, but Yeshua saw, the sadness in his eyes holding all my answers. He wept, and I wept. Elizabeth was too sad to weep, a despairing weariness stealing her strength to cry.

I was grateful, in my tears, that Yeshua said nothing of my going on, or anything about the future. He who had no wife understood that I might have no husband. That was my greatest consolation, that he did not attempt to foreshorten my grief with optimism. Perhaps that is why that night was my first of restful sleep since John's arrest, and my last for many months. John was beheaded the next day.

It is wearying to hear a long sad story, let alone to live one as I did so unrelentingly in the months that followed. Night after night I would try to imagine how John felt when he saw the headsman walking toward him, the axe glinting; was the stone cold when his head was thrust upon it; the sensation of death. I tormented myself wondering, thinking of the struggles of animals even after the death blow, the violence of such extinction. I who could never watch the slaughter of a chicken, saw John's death over and over in my mind. One night I could no longer bear it, and screamed. My parents flew into my room, their loose bed garments wrapping around me as they held me to quiet and comfort me. I gained peace by imagining their garments as my winding sheet, that now at last I was in the final hour with John, who had been buried by his followers in a secret, lonely place near the community of ascetics.

My hatred silenced me in the first months after that. I hated Salome, Herod, Rome, Herodias, the prison guards I never saw. Fight as I would against the fury that crashed through my thoughts, I succumbed to it again and again; in my mind I beheaded each of them. It did no good, for the scenes of beheading gave way to my imaginings of their long, tortured deaths. Horror stopped me at last, and emptiness, and the growing hollowness of my own soul. But only a few days of respite passed. Now, futile wishes haunted me and filled me. I wished his father had beaten him when he first said the Lord had spoken to him. I wished Zachary had been less proud of a son who was a prophet, more caring of his townspeople's regard and ease. I wished Elizabeth had burdened him with guilt as he burdened us with sorrow, that she had cried out like Isaac that this was the son of her old age, that she could not die in peace without beholding at least one grandchild. My wishes took on such detail, twisting what was into what could have been, my own stupidity shocked me into stopping that form of self-torment. And that only led me to the next stage of nightmare days, when I hated John for leaving us and for leaving the

world so empty. What good has your death accomplished, I would rail to his face as I saw it in my mind. Do you repent of dying, I shouted inwardly, of causing such grief? You let me adore you yet you never married me. I would be better off as a widow than as a bereft and never-married girl. A woman of virtue never had your embrace, yet women of sin gained your very life. In my silent, unremitting quarrel with his ghost I found eloquence, his stilled voice freeing mine at last.

The stories of John's imprisonment began to circulate; at first they were withheld from me but when that did no good for my grieving, they were told to me. With these stories, my hatred began to wither. John did not use himself up with hatred. He screamed his preachings through the walls and floors of his jail, he spoke to Herod, he ignored the guards who tormented him. Eventually the guards were ashamed and Herod, of course, died horribly. I decided to learn this, John's last lesson for me, taught by the words of hearsay. The hardest part of that lesson was John had never asked for release. His message never changed: repent, repent, repent.

I wonder if John will be remembered. I am grateful that I will not, for it would be too difficult to think my actions would be magnified by time. It would make me self-conscious, steal the peace I gather slowly and hardly. My choices are still open as choices of the great never are, once they have been declared great. My nieces and nephews press me for stories of John, which I tell them, to which I add innocent embellishments to encourage the boys to study the Law. In the dawn I look out at the spare hills and see in their plainness the reality of what happened, remembering the truth of doubt and love, the ambiguity of all human sanctity.