

The Most Beautiful Ketubah and its Affirmation of Life

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It was the most beautiful *ketubah* I had ever seen. It was not for its illumination. Its only brightness was in the glow of the two souls whose love it affirmed. It was not for its fine paper. It was written upon what might have been a small sheet of simple stationary, now well creased and stained from age. Nor was its beauty in the fine calligraphy of a scribe's careful hand. It was written in simple Hebrew cursive, neat and flowing, light in tone, as though of pencil, but probably ink, the precious fluid of a fountain pen somehow carried to that place. The last few lines are suddenly of stronger and brighter tone, as though more ink had been found tucked away, as in a miracle of oil once, a final effort to complete the task, to affirm life, as though crying out, *מיר זיינען דא / mir zaynen doh/we are here!* The last three words stand out as the only ones written in block letters, the three words that complete and duly confirm every *ketubah*, this one even more so, *והכל שריר וקיים / v'ha'kol sharir v'ka'yam/and all is enduring and abiding.*

I first saw the *ketubah* in a small glass display case in a meditatively lit room in the Kazerne Dossin, the Dossin Barracks, an eighteenth-century barracks in the Belgian city of Mechelen, Malines in French, transit point for Belgian Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Mechelen is between Antwerp and Brussels, a distance then, and so its lesson remains, more than of kilometers, a moral tale of two cities. The room in which the *ketubah* is displayed is in the original building, where they were, where the *ketubah* was written. Just across the street from where the tracks were then, is a new museum to honor and remember what happened there, the Kazerne Dossin -- Memorial, Museum, and Documentation Centre on Holocaust and Human Rights.

Staring through tears, raw from the emotional journey through the museum, I began to read the *ketubah*, then to chant it softly, as I would under the *chuppah*: *בערב שבת / קודש כ"ז לחודש תמוז שנת חמשת אלפים שבע מאות ושלוש לבריאת העולם למנין שאנו מונים כאן במאלין / B'erev Shabbos Kodesh kaf zayin l'chodesh Tammuz sh'nas chameshes alafim sheva me'os v'shalosh l'ori'as ha'olam l'minyan she'anu monim kan b'malin/On the eve of the Holy Sabbath, 27th of the month of Tammuz, the year five-thousand seven hundred and three since the creation of the world as we are accustomed to count here in Maline. And then it continues, as we encounter *chasan* and *kallah* for the first time: *איך שהבחור החתן כ' ר' ישראל יצחק נ"י בן / ר' יהודה יואל נ"י אמר לה להדא בתולתא מרת רחל תח' בת ר' רפאל נ"י הוי לי לאנתו כדת משה וישראל / So the young man, the groom, Reb Yisroel Yitzchok, may his light shine, son of Reb Yehudah Yoel, may his light shine, said to the young woman, Rachel, may she live, daughter of Reb Rephoel, may his light shine, be my wife according to the laws of Moses and Israel....**

I did not know anything more of Israel Isaak and his bride Rachel. There was some information in the display case, but I could not take in any more at the time. The couple remained in my heart, the ketubah, enduring and abiding, as an image before my eyes. Upon returning home to Boston, I realized I could not let go of Rachel and Israel Isaak. We had purchased a hard cover catalogue of the museum's exhibits, but there was no information about the ketubah or the couple. Mieke asked me why the ketubah had touched me so deeply, why it was so important to me to know more. I tried to explain, as I do now, a *d'rasha* formed in the telling, a story that is more than itself, needing to be told. I realized in the end that I probably can't explain the depth to which the story has touched me and continues to, the degree to which the couple has become as family. Sometimes I see them as they would be today, in their nineties. Sometimes I see them as the young couple they were then, turning to me as rabbi to honor and sanctify their love in the way of Jewish tradition, even then, even there. When they come to me as rabbi, I hold them close, seeking to allay their fear, as their faith and affirmation helps me to transcend my own fear.

There is a Belgian family connection, which I am sure becomes a factor that draws me to this story. There is my relationship now, of course, with Mieke's family, whom I love, but I also have my own family link to Belgium from long ago. My grandparents, my great-aunt and uncle, and my great-grandmother all came to Antwerp from Russia during World War I, fleeing pogroms and conscription of the men into Kerentzy's army. While the others went on to the States fairly soon, Bobi and Pa remained in Antwerp for several years. Long perplexed as to why the family went to Belgium, I realized through the museum that Antwerp was then a hub for immigrants from many places. I have also mused, wondering through the years what if they had stayed in Belgium, and now having come to wonder if in Antwerp as opposed to Brussels. I realized this summer what it likely would have meant. As though seeking information about family, Mieke and I began a correspondence, with archivists at Kazerne Dossin, Mieke writing our letters in Flemish. I needed to know more about The Most Beautiful Ketubah and its Affirmation of Life.

The first response from the archivists came almost immediately, seeming to sense the depth of feeling in my questions. Along with a close-up photograph of the ketubah, they sent a photograph of the couple walking arm in arm on an Antwerp street, likely in the summer of 1942, chic and bouncy. It seems so normal and happy, until noticing the identifying Jewish star on their coats, able to pretend they were free, before the mass arrests began. The archivists also sent photographs of two pencil drawings, a small portrait of each of the lovers, so simple and evocative, neither smiling now, faces drawn, so young and vulnerable, as the artist saw them on that day that should have been the happiest of days.

Rachel and Israel Isaak were both second generation Belgian Jews, born of Polish immigrant parents. Her full name is quite regal, Rachel Mandel recta Kwadrat. His full name is Israel Isaak Lipschitz. They were both born in Antwerp, Rachel in 1924, Israel Isaak in the same year as my mother, 1923. My mother would have been born in Antwerp had my grandparents not left the year before, eleven months prior to my

mother's birth. According to the ketubah and their dates of birth, the bride was nineteen and the groom twenty at the time of their marriage.

The story turns on their marriage. Already very much a couple prior to their arrest, they both arrived at Kazerne Dossin in January, 1943, Israel Isaak and Rachel, along with Rachel's two sisters Eva and Rosie. Rachel and Israel Isaak were married on 27 Tammuz 5703, July 30, 1943. Its own affirmation of life and the will to live, to enjoy, to be alive, and to give life, somehow finding spirit and place in that place, Rachel was several months pregnant at the time of the wedding. They were married in a secret ceremony in a room they had managed to hide in by a rabbi also interned in the Kazerne. The two drawings were made that day as wedding portraits by an artist also imprisoned there, signed and dated, 30 July 43, and the place, Malines. It was the week of Torah portion *מטות-מסעי* / *Mattos-Masei*, *אלה מסעי בני ישראל* / *eleh masei v'nei Yisrael* / *these are the journeys of the children of Israel*. They were deported the very next day to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Israel Isaak, Rachel, Eva, and the rabbi, on Shabbos, 28 Tamuz, July 31st, seven years to the day that would be my birth date. It was the 21st transport to leave Kazerne Dossin, the first in sealed, green, wooden box cars, one of which remains on a section of rail to the side of the museum. The sealed cars from Dossin were in response to what has come to be known as the Sabotage of Transport 20, an effort by partisans to free Jews on the night of April 19, 1943, the first night of Pesach, the same night that the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt was beginning. From transport 21, there was no chance of escape.

In its survival, the ketubah continues to tell its own story and theirs. The details of its telling become the affirmation of life of which its very presence sings. That is the abiding legacy of each of those whose lives it forever joins, Rachel, Israel Isaak, and the rabbi, *והכל שריר וקיים* / *v'ha'kol sharir v'ka'yam* / *and all is enduring and abiding*. That each wanted the ceremony to happen when it did is its own overwhelming expression of faith, faith beyond details and yet within details, the faith to live in the face of death, an extreme expression of the nature of life itself. I try to imagine how the couple approached the rabbi, what was said, what went through the hearts and minds of each, how the rabbi responded, all knowing what would be the next day. The ketubah itself tells more about the rabbi than the missing details of his life, its writing an act of spiritual resistance to evil. In that time and place, *davke* / *all the more*, it had to be a proper wedding, *davke* in that time and place. First finding pen and paper as means of transmission, conveying then from the treasury of his mind and soul, the rabbi had to have written the traditional Aramaic text of the ketubah from memory. As I stared through tears and softly chanted, wondering when it might last have been so read, perhaps not even since then, I wanted to honor the rabbi and those whose lives he so lovingly joined. However one approaches the text of the ketubah today, however we may reframe it in practice or intention, there is a beauty and power in the traditional text, in its language, its cadence, its rootedness in the unfolding of the Jewish people, and in the radical nature of a text that in its time sought to protect women.

In small anomalies in the ketubah text as the rabbi wrote it, there is a great cry to protect each of those whose names are mentioned, as though crying out through

prayerful plea to protect these few he could protect all Israel. Having written an abbreviation, the letters נ"י / *nun yud*, after the names of each of the men, Israel Isaak, his father and father-in-law, I can imagine the rabbi shouting out as loud as he might have dared in that secret holy place, ברוך יאיר / *neyro ya'ir/may his light shine*. And after Rachel's name appear the letters תה / *taf ches*, for the most simple and essential prayer, one word, only to be sobbed, תחיה / *t'chi'yeh / may she live*, she who was ripening with new life. Knowing the context from which the rabbi presumably came and in which he lived, there is something poignant and loving that in his standing before a clearly pregnant bride, he refers to her in the ketubah as בתולה / *b'sulta / the virgin*. Even there, *davke* there, he desperately sought to nurture hope, honoring the freshness and possibility of a new beginning, affirming life. So too, in his effort to embrace and to affirm, how he must have sighed as he wrote the wedding date into the ketubah, כ"ז תמוז / *kaf zayin Tammuz/the 27th of Tammuz*. It is in the midst of the three weeks preceding *Tisha B'Av*, day of mourning for the destruction of the ancient Temples and other tragedies of our people, three weeks of sorrow in which weddings are traditionally not performed.

It was a time when each day was *Tisha B'Av*, when the Three Weeks became as years, as endless ages, without dams or dikes to hold back the torrent of tears, without the seven following weeks of comfort that our calendar prescribes. In that time the rabbi offered what solace he could in his way of accommodation, affirmation, and love. While his teachings of wisdom and witness stand by themselves, the light of his soul shining beyond naming, we honor him with the name the archivists believe to be his. There was only one rabbi in the Kazerne at the time that Rachel and Israel Isaak were there, only one rabbi on Transport 21. Rabbijn Michael Lustig was born in Nowy Sacz, Poland, the center of Sanzer Chassidism, on August 27, 1891, and before his arrest had lived in Gent. At the time of the wedding, Rabbi Lustig was fifty-two years old. The flowing script of the ketubah, probably the last words that he wrote in his life, form the marriage contract for two people, while forming an ethical will for all Israel, a testament that is beyond its words, unbound by time, an affirmation of life that is Rabbi Lustig's legacy to all of us.

Survival happens in the intersecting lines of connection where chance and will meet, where people are joined with each other in the folds of faith and fate. It is not known just how the ketubah survived, nor the drawings and photograph of Rachel and Israel Isaak. The photograph, taken by an Antwerp street photographer, may have been brought to the Kazerne by the couple themselves, their own smiling faces offering encouragement to look ahead to what might yet be. Both the ketubah and the drawings are creased with intersecting lines that in helping to insure survival come to be a grid of life. The spaces between the folds are each no more than the size of a postage stamp, indicating that the ketubah and drawings were folded into very small squares of paper to be easily hidden. It is speculated that Rachel's sister Rosie, imprisoned in the Kazerne, but not deported, may have been the angel who watched over them, keeping them hidden until the liberation of Belgium in September, 1944. As small precious packets, were they held in Rosie's pocket, or placed above her broken heart that yearned for the others? Or, perhaps they were placed in the cracks of a wall in the way of prayer notes, or beneath the whispering floor boards in the same

dark building where they continue to tell their story, now in a place of meditative light.

A document folded into itself and held in loving hands, the survival of the ketubah tells of what is needed for the survival of human beings. Beyond individual will to survive, as people and peoples, all need to be enfolded equally in the weave of society, each held in the care and concern of others, each with a place in the grid of life. Of goodness rooted in the human heart and made real in law and policy, the challenge to insure equal place and standing for all depends on the moral choices made by each one of us and on the courage to act when the humanity of anyone is violated. On the grid of a road map that shows us where we are and the way from place to place, arrows pointing, we too often find ourselves in Mechelen, holding the tension between Antwerp and Brussels as it was then, as it is now for the challenge it represents, a tale of two cities as moral metaphor. During the German occupation, the mayors of most boroughs of Brussels famously refused to cooperate with the occupier, choosing to affirm "the dignity of every man, whoever he may be" (acting mayor of Brussels, Jules Coelst, June 5, 1942), refusing to register Jews and distribute the yellow stars. Imbued by triumphalist religious views and nationalist and xenophobic politics, the mayor of Antwerp was only too ready to cooperate. More than 25,250 Jews and 352 Roma arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau through Kazerne Dossin, most from the Antwerp area. Barely 5% of the Jews survived, and only about thirty Roma from Belgium. Had Rachel and Israel Isaak been from Brussels, the enfolding courage of others might well have insured their survival.

The museum stands at the moral crossroads between Antwerp and Brussels, the new building just across the now busy street from the Kazerne Dossin itself, just beyond where the train tracks were. The museum courageously teaches the meaning of the place where it stands, and challenges us to recognize with equal courage the place where we stand. It looks with unflinching and inspiring honesty at Belgium's moral failure during the Shoah, the failure of government, of citizens, of the church; trying to understand for the sake of today and tomorrow why people acted then as they did, both collaborators and resisters. Not for the sake of salving its own conscience, but to empower the conscience of all who visit, the museum offers a moral compass to help us better point our own. Large images remind us of moral intersections in time as well as space, in our own lives as well as in the social context, and of the compass needed wherever we stand. We are there with the young Chinese man as he stands down tanks in Tiananmen Square. We witness the horror of genocide in Rwanda, Cambodia, and Armenia, the horror of racist violence in South Africa and in the United States. Probing the way of response to immigrants and those seeking refuge today, we are brought to the moment, wondering what we've learned, where we stand. Of remembrance and memorial, of lessons learned and their challenge to be applied, it all unfolds beneath the gaze of four stories of photographs, thousands of faces, portraits of those deported from Kazerne Dossin.

We walked across the street in the gray cool of the Belgian summer and entered the kazerne. In that small meditatively lit room, I gazed at the ketubah for the first time, trying to read through tears as I realized its meaning and felt its hold upon my heart.

I chanted softly the names of those whose lives it joined, encountering in the stillness the couple and their rabbi. Simple acts of affirmation are not often recognized for their greater significance by those who do them. As meant to be at all times, in extreme times even more so, the holy and the ordinary merge, as a couple in love, love that is enduring and abiding, והכל שריר וקיים / *v'ha'kol sharir v'ka'yam*. Rachel and Israel Isaak's love endures, and so the song that was in her womb. Transport 21 arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau on August 2, 1943, three days after the wedding. None of the three survived, leaving only the ketubah to tell their story, and two penciled drawings, and a photograph of a smiling couple. I remember them now for the light of their souls and the gift they have given to us, a simple act of affirmation whose greater significance they could not have known. With this *Yizkor*, I will softly chant their names as I first did in the Kazerne-Dossin, saying now, too, the name of the holy rabbi, Michael Lustig, who joined them to each other, and to us, with The Most Beautiful Ketubah and its Affirmation of Life.