

Ploni Almoni

A Play

Ethan Seidel

[Elihu:*)

You're asking an old man like me??

You come to me for advice about marriage??

[aside] Since when has he come to me for advice about anything?

[to Elkanah] You know my "way" with women!

I was lucky to marry even one wife...

your grandmother, who died before you ever knew her.

[aside] What a piece of work she was

[to Elkanah] I'm no expert when it comes to marriage.

Wha?? I could have done what??

Speak a bit louder, boy.

What? Where'd you hear that?

One of your cousins, right?

Yeah, that's what they say —

that I could've taken a second wife,

I could've married your great aunt, Ruth.

It's a damned lie — everyone knows it's forbidden to marry a Moabite.

How was I to marry Ruth, may I ask you?

[aside] Not that I didn't think about it, mind you.

[to Elkanah] I remember when I first saw her, when she first came to town.

* Elihu is the grandfather of Elkanah (1 Samuel 1:1). *Ploni Almoni* connotes an anonymous "John Doe." It appears in the Book of Ruth (4:1) as the name of Ruth's kinsman who chooses not to redeem her.

Had I ever laid eyes on a Moabite before?

I'm sure I had, but I'd never seen one of their women.

[aside] God, she was a good looking woman.

She moved with the grace of an animal,

an animal you wouldn't want to meet up with out in the wild.

And if you did, you certainly didn't want to meet its gaze.

But at the same time, you couldn't not look at her.

She was beautiful.

She looked dangerous and inviting at the same time.

[to Elkanah] She walked differently from our women.

Or maybe it was her clothes —

a little more tight-fitting than our women wore —

[aside] There was more to watch, when she walked.

[to Elkanah] All us men of Beit-Lechem were fascinated by her. [nods off]

[Elihu wakes up with a start, and says to Elkanah]

But she was forbidden.

She shouldn't ever have married into an Israelite family in the first place.

But your great uncle Elimelekh and his family left town during the famine, and were living in Moav when his boys came of age.

Whom else would they marry?

Then there was some kind of plague and their menfolk all died.

Just Naomi and Ruth came back here, to beg for food.

Where was I? You had asked me a question.

Yes, you were asking me, if you should take a second wife.

It's Hannah, isn't it?

[laughs] Come now, Elkanah, how could I not know?

Who else could it be?

You always travel the hardest road.

And what woman in this town is harder than Hannah?

Most men are afraid to meet her eyes —

In that way, I suppose she is a bit like Ruth was.
Strange, scary women.

But Hannah is an Israelite — you can marry her if you want.
Though why you'd want to marry Hannah I don't know —
Isn't she old? She's probably even older than P'ninah!?
Why on Earth would you take a second wife older than your first??
She's not likely to bear you any children.

[listening]

No, I'm not saying "Don't marry her."

I don't know what advice to give you.

Your situation is different than mine —

I didn't have that option with Ruth — I couldn't marry her.

I'm remembering the second time I saw Ruth,
It was just a few days after she'd come to town.
It was dusk, and Ruth was walking on a path from the fields into town.
She was walking by herself, all bent over from the heavy sack
she was carrying.

I should have realized that something was up,
that someone else was interested in her.

Nobody could have gleaned that much in a single day without some
help.

Someone must have taken pity on her.

Anyway, I offered to help her with her sack,

[aside] actually, I offered her my cloak too,

I invited her to lie down on the ground and take a rest for a while.

From all I'd heard about Moabite women,

I assumed that Ruth would be open to my suggestion that...

we get to know each other better...

[to Elkanah] But for some reason she got mortally offended.

[aside] She slapped me, hard.

I was tempted to ...

[to Elkanah] She said that she knew exactly who I was,
that I was her redeeming kinsman,
and that she was waiting for me to redeem her.

[aside] She said she would lay down with me,
but only after we had a proper *huppah*.

Maybe I should have followed her suggestion.

What would that have been like, to be near that unearthly creature
every day?

But I was scared of her,

the way she looked, the way she looked at me.

But why didn't I pursue her?

It could have been so good.

Or would our love have soured, as my wife and I soured on each other,
after just a few months of marriage?

No, it would've been good.

She understood so much about me, without my saying anything.

Just like she understood our culture, even though she was born in
Moav.

That's what really scared me — she was so sharp.

I never was a brave one, I guess.

Not like my Saba, Nachshon — striding into the Sea of Reeds,
confident it would split for him. [nods off]

[to Elkanah] What was I saying?

But how could I redeem her? You can't marry a Moabite.

So how could I possibly be expected to redeem a Moabite??

What? That's not fair. I did not steal anyone's land.

Boaz's family always brings this up.

Yes, I'd been farming the family plot
ever since Elimelekh had left Beit-Lechem.

So what?

I was the oldest surviving brother of Elimelekh.

It belonged to me — it was my inheritance!

I didn't have to marry Ruth to get the family plot —
they forfeited it when their sons married Moabites.

But it all comes down to the same point: you can't marry a Moabite.
Ruth was Moabite, and I couldn't marry her. End of story.

What? Speak up!

Yes, I know Boaz married her. And it was entirely against our law.

He was so taken with her beauty that he completely disregarded halakhah.

Of all the immoral...

[listening] Yes, yes, I know what the halakhah is in this case.

It was Boaz who invented it.

I was walking by the gate one day — Ruth was the last thing on my
mind —

And Boaz just grabbed me.

I saw that he had assembled ten elders at the gate.

Something was up.

He said, in his self-confident, pompous way,

"Brother, I hereby ask you to formally declare your interest,
in front of the elders, in Elimelekh's fields."

So I said, "Sure, they're mine."

Then he asks me: "To formally take possession of the fields,
you must also agree to marry Ruth."

I, of course, tell him that the Torah explicitly says

Lo yavo Moavi bik'hal Hashem (DEUT. 23:4) —

A Moabite cannot enter God's congregation.

But then Boaz says — I still can't believe the chutzpah of this guy —

"A Moabite cannot join us, yes,
but the Torah does not say:

Lo tavo Moaviah bik'hal Hashem.

About a Moabite, the Torah is silent."

The elders he'd assembled heard his clever little midrash,
and they all answered "Amen."

[listening] No, I still couldn't have married her, Elkanah.

I still had my principles — no matter how beautiful she was —
the law is the law, and you can't just change it on a whim.

[aside] Boaz's midrash didn't help.

I was still afraid of Ruth — she was too beautiful, too smart for me.

And what if I ended up dead like her first husband, for marrying a
Moabite?

I backed out. I even gave up all that good land.

I let Boaz have her...

I started realizing my mistake at their wedding.

[to Elkanah] Though I did not approve of their match,
their wedding, was, I admit, an amazing celebration.

[aside] You could feel it in the air — something special was happening.
This was no ordinary match.

[to Elkanah] We were just recovering from the famine,

the whole town was poor — our clothes were drab.

But someone had found a strip of bright red cloth,
which just fit around Ruth's pale throat.

She glowed from happiness.

I'll never forget the energy of the singing and dancing.

There was a flute player — I'd never seen him before or since —

who played so clearly, so gently,
 I felt he was carrying me off to heaven.
 [cries, but tries to hide it from Elkanah]
 [to Elkanah] There's something in my eye.

There was a catchy song everyone had been singing that year.
Na'a'va Tehilah — "Prayer is fitting."

[Elihu sings and dances to Afghani folk-song from
 Cantor Richard Kaplan's CD "Life of the Worlds"]

In the middle of the dancing they changed the words to:
Na'a'vah Moaviyah — "The Moabite woman is fitting."
 [sings and dances with those words]
 [Elihu's face loses its luster, and returns to its bitterness.]
 Those words didn't really fit the music.
 A Moabite is not fitting.
 The impudence of those two.

[aside] Sometimes I worry: that that wedding was the most joyous day of
 my life.

It certainly was the most humiliating.
 I kept thinking: I should've been under the *huppah* with Ruth.
 I was sure everyone else was thinking that too.
 Boaz and Ruth.
 They were strong together, they gave birth to the most amazing children,
 heroes in Israel. Even their grandchildren have an aura about themselves.

[to Elkanah] So, Elkanah, you could have a nice wedding with
 Hannah, too.

Just like I did, I mean, just like Boaz did with Ruth.

But don't count on it.

Life with Hannah will be difficult, that you can count on.

You could be courting disaster.
 You really want to marry someone who is so...challenging?
 You have six kids by P'ninah —
 You need the added aggravation of another wife?

What? P'ninah is okay with it? She even said so?
 Just wait.

You think you can tell what a woman wants?
 She'll say to you, "Sure honey, take a second wife!"
 But that doesn't mean anything.

[aside] My wife did tell me that if I wanted, I could marry Ruth.

[to Elkanah] What?
 You still think you can tell.
 You think that with hard work,
 it's possible to understand what a woman wants?
 Maybe.
 But are you sure you really want to know?
 What if what she wants is too painful to talk about?

Listen, Elkanah, can I ask you something?
 When you tell this story, after I'm dead and gone,
 there's no need to mention my name.
 Leave my name out of it.
 Substitute some other name if you like.
 Let me go to my resting place in peace.

Ethan Seidel is a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary and Rabbi of Tifereth Israel Congregation in Washington, DC. He is a poet, musician, and juggler, and rides a unicycle. He performed this play at the synagogue's Tikkun Leil Shavuot in 2006.

who played so clearly, so gently,
 I felt he was carrying me off to heaven.
 [cries, but tries to hide it from Elkanah]
 [to Elkanah] There's something in my eye.

There was a catchy song everyone had been singing that year.
Na'a'va Tehilah — "Prayer is fitting."

[Elihu sings and dances to Afghani folk-song from
 Cantor Richard Kaplan's CD "Life of the Worlds"]

In the middle of the dancing they changed the words to:
Na'a'vah Moaviyah — "The Moabite woman is fitting."
 [sings and dances with those words]
 [Elihu's face loses its luster, and returns to its bitterness.]
 Those words didn't really fit the music.
 A Moabite is not fitting.
 The impudence of those two.

[aside] Sometimes I worry: that that wedding was the most joyous day of
 my life.

It certainly was the most humiliating.
 I kept thinking: I should've been under the *huppah* with Ruth.
 I was sure everyone else was thinking that too.
 Boaz and Ruth.
 They were strong together, they gave birth to the most amazing children,
 heroes in Israel. Even their grandchildren have an aura about themselves.

[to Elkanah] So, Elkanah, you could have a nice wedding with
 Hannah, too.
 Just like I did, I mean, just like Boaz did with Ruth.
 But don't count on it.
 Life with Hannah will be difficult, that you can count on.

You could be courting disaster.
 You really want to marry someone who is so...challenging?
 You have six kids by P'ninah —
 You need the added aggravation of another wife?

What? P'ninah is okay with it? She even said so?
 Just wait.
 You think you can tell what a woman wants?
 She'll say to you, "Sure honey, take a second wife!"
 But that doesn't mean anything.

[aside] My wife did tell me that if I wanted, I could marry Ruth.

[to Elkanah] What?
 You still think you can tell.
 You think that with hard work,
 it's possible to understand what a woman wants?
 Maybe.
 But are you sure you really want to know?
 What if what she wants is too painful to talk about?

Listen, Elkanah, can I ask you something?
 When you tell this story, after I'm dead and gone,
 there's no need to mention my name.
 Leave my name out of it.
 Substitute some other name if you like.
 Let me go to my resting place in peace.

Ethan Seidel is a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary and Rabbi of Tifereth Israel
 Congregation in Washington, DC. He is a poet, musician, and juggler, and rides a unicycle.
 He performed this play at the synagogue's Tikkun Leil Shavuot in 2006.