

Steampunk Torah: Naso Numbers 4:21-7:89 June 4, 2011

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My beloved is like a gazelle or a young hart

Behold, he stands behind our wall

He looks in through the windows

Peering through the lattice (Song of Songs, 2:9)

She didn't see the door open; it seemed to just melt away. She found herself in a grassy clearing, the color of the grass a very familiar bright gold-green that told her immediately where she was. The hazy, blueish-purple mountains of her home rose up against the skyline all around her. The sky was a strange dull, greyish-brown: she had never seen it that color. There was a bitter smell of burning in the air- a fire somewhere.

She started forward across the grass to the familiar wooden walkway, and turned on it to meet a line of houses. There they all were: the tidy red roof of Selma Boren's house, the bright front garden of her next-door neighbor, Max. Mari's spine stiffened and she pulled her coat down as far as it would reach over her belt; she straightened her kippah as she walked, looking to the other side of the street where...how odd.

On the other side of the street, the houses were identical. There was Selma's, there was Max's. As she looked down the row, she began to realize that there was something off about these houses. They were all a bit too bright, shiny, perfect. They were the houses of her neighbors, all of them very familiar, but...as she came level with Selma's house, she noticed something else. While in her hometown there were more streets, here, it appeared this was the only street. The mountains looked as purple and far away as always, but it appeared they were directly behind the houses, like the painted backdrop in a theater. Mari's heart pounded once, hard, and an electric tingle ran into her fingertips as Selma's bright red door opened, and Selma came out on the step.

"Shouldn't have run away, Mari," she said, her voice sounding like Selma, her eyes and short, curly grey hair the same, but the old familiar smile nowhere to be seen. Selma continued, in a flat tone. "Should have faced it. Should have stood by his side, weathered the storm, let the talk die down." Selma walked forward, put her hands on her front gate, and stared at Mari with a strange intensity. "He had no one. No one. No one when you left."

Mari's breath came in gasps; she forced herself to look forward, keep walking forward. As she passed Selma's house, oddly, the color drained out of the roof and the grass, leaving the house and Selma grey, like an illustration in the Daily Post. Mari stopped and looked back. Selma was standing still at her gate, completely grey like a sketch brought to life, but her eyes were alive and aware and watching Mari still.

"This is all in my mind," Mari said firmly, and continued toward Max's house. Mari was not as surprised when Max's door opened, and her Grandfather's most constant friend came

limping out of his house. He grasped his worn cane, the wood gleaming from long use; his old favorite woven kippah sat on the back of his head (Max always pushed it back further throughout the day; she could tell how frustrating his day had been by the state of his wild hair, and how far back his kippah rode on his head), he was round as ever, but there was no welcoming grin, no twinkle in his eyes. “Deserter. It’s a worse word than loose woman. Traitor is a far worse word than Adulteress, Mari. There was no one to defend him when you left. You walked away from your crime, and left him to take all the blame. He’s in there now,” He glanced toward the end of the street, “and the Maker help him. You are too late. You are too late.”

Her knees trembling, she kept walking forward, and again the color drained out of Max and his house. She glanced to the other side of the street and froze: the color was drained out of those houses, too, and there in front of her gate and at his door, stood an identical Selma and Max.

“I can change this with my mind. Find the light in the darkness,” Mari muttered to herself. As she continued down the street, she found that the houses were not in order- not as they were in her real home town; the people who came out of the doors were the ones she was closest to, the friends it had hurt the most to walk away from. One by one, they voiced their accusations, and one by one, the color drained out of their houses as she walked by, and they stayed to watch her.

As she walked, she began to notice that the strange, hazy air was growing darker by the minute; it had been difficult to see the mountains for a little while, and now the houses and gardens she passed were hazy, indistinct. The bitter smell of smoke filled her nostrils, burning-

her eyes stung. She paused, wondering if she should continue forward. Turning to look back, she found that the people had not stayed at their houses after all. They had filed silently behind her, and were standing there, not too close, but blocking her way back, a still, accusing wall of grey people.

Mari took a deep breath, coughed, took a handkerchief out of the pouch at her belt and covered her nose, continuing forward. More and more of them came out now. There was Frances, her Mother's best friend. "He said he loved you, Mari; it was all he would say. After you left, everything crumbled: his synagogue, his friends, his family. You destroyed our Rabbi," Mari reached out to try to touch Frances, but she pulled away, turning grey right before Mari's eyes, and fell in behind with the silent, shuffling crowd.

The smoke was visible now, great billows pouring down the street. Mari could hardly see anything; she continued on through sheer stubbornness. Somewhere, she was determined to find the way to heal this, to fix this nightmare. Grandfather had told her that this door stood for constancy, that this was her home, that this was safety. She wondered if her mind was creating this nightmare, or if the Shadow that had somehow begun poisoning the Archives was responsible for this. Mari took a small canteen of water from her belt, doused the handkerchief with it, and continued walking, wiping her streaming eyes, and holding the damp handkerchief to her nose. Everything seemed to be growing larger as she walked forward, now only able to see the houses as great looming shapes- or was she growing smaller? She felt a strange sense of lethargy, of numb despair stealing over her. It was almost a relief to retreat from the sharpness of her pain, still raw at leaving him. Hearing the people still muttering behind her, she could catch

a word now and then: “Adulteress. Traitor. Deserter. Betrayer.” They were all names she had called herself, many times over. In fact, she thought, so surprised by the thought that she stopped walking for a moment, they were all saying things she had said to herself. She turned to look back at them, where they stood in a lifeless-seeming grey crowd, only their eyes moving. They were all in her mind, she thought, they were all a part of her: they were her fears, the things that attacked her at night. Like the stealthy Amalek tribe, they would attack her from the side and the back, her unprotected places; they would creep in when she was most vulnerable, and torment her until she could not move.

Resolutely, she took a step forward, then another. She felt them at her back, and the skin that had prickled with fear there now began to relax. Even as the smoke grew thicker, she felt her fear ebb away and the numbness recede as she realized those people were all just herself.

She had thought leaving this town was the only answer to the wrong she had done, but she was constantly plagued with the fear that she had made a grave mistake. She should have stayed, as they said- stayed by his side and held her head up, faced the trouble with him. They were deeply in love; they had nothing to be ashamed of, but the town would not see it that way: he was not only her beshert, her soul mate, he was also her Rabbi. So she left, thinking to save him from the harm that could come to him. She slipped away from the town and from her true love in the dead of night, walking with shame and fear, but also with hope that the Maker was somehow guiding her steps.

With each step forward, it became clearer that this strange, scenery-fake town ended at the synagogue. The fountain, which had flowed freely and stood in a completely different part of

town in reality, stood here like a great monument at the end of the street, cracked, dull, filling with ash and looking like it had not flowed with water in many years. The synagogue was similarly broken; its shining, colorful stained glass windows were shattered, and she could now hear the crackling of the fire that raged inside. “He’s in there,” she heard a whisper, and turned around to find that the crowd of people had come to stand very close behind her. “He’s in the synagogue; he couldn’t move at all when you left,” one of them said. She started forward, to go into the synagogue and get him out, but her arms were grasped firmly on either side. She didn’t know who held her: they had blurred, their identities mixing and blending until these people were grey and featureless, all similar. “You can’t do anything now,” one of them said in a strong voice. “He’s got to come out on his own.”

Mari’s upper arms were held, but she could still reach her belt. She grabbed at her knife; someone snatched it out of her hand. She grabbed at the rope, and lunged forward, thinking to take them by surprise. They lunged forward with her and kept her arms firmly in their grasp. This strange, nightmare crowd felt like a yielding but powerful sea. Someone pulled the rope out of her hands, and she felt it being wound around her, passing across her from behind, binding her shoulders, then looping around her repeatedly to bind her upper arms close to her body. The smoke blinded her; she had dropped her handkerchief when they grabbed her arms.

“What will he learn? What will he learn if you are always the strong one, Mari?” a voice said in her ear. Mari remembered then: Aleph. The symbol on the door. It wasn’t just for her. She stood there, tears streaming down her face, her heart heaving around in her body so violently she thought she might be sick, but her brain was still working. If I am the strong one, if I make

everything all right, she thought, I will always wonder if he really loved me. I would rather leave him behind and continue on my life, than spend a lifetime with my deepest love wondering if he loved me. If he doesn't love me enough to fight for me, I have my answer. If he does, I have my answer.

The lethargy she was feeling grew stronger, and she slumped in the arms of the crowd; they were supporting her now, holding her up, rather than holding her back. The rope felt almost comforting in its firm constriction. Tears streamed down her face as she watched the dancing flames eating away at her beloved Temple.

The rope grew slack, and she felt more and more arms surrounding her. They swayed and seemed to almost be rocking her gently, and her eyes closed; she felt like she was borne along in a grey boat. "Let him suffer. Let him grow or not grow. This is the deepest gift you can give to your love. Let him have his life. Let him have his death. Let him choose between them." The murmurs were ceaseless, and strangely gentle. Her eyes still closed, she felt herself growing heavier and heavier, her emotions slipping into dullness. "The biggest test of your heart is the last one you expected," a small voice observed smugly, and Mari felt a twinge of annoyance, wanting to slap at the voice as she would a mosquito, even as she slipped into sleep.

When she awoke, they were gone; the rope lay in a tangled heap around her. She lifted her head slowly, scrubbing her face roughly with the sleeve of her coat. There, in front of her face, lay her handkerchief. She picked it up and sat up slowly, her hands automatically going to the rope to coil it into her belt, even as she looked around her. The crowd was gone. The air shimmered still; it was clearer, but she felt as though she were looking through a rippling, filthy

window. She heard a step behind her, and threw herself back down into a crouch, turning to face her attacker. There, on the ground in front of her face, unmistakably, were his boots. She fell back a bit and looked up into his face. He stood before her, Ariel: her lion, her Rabbi, her truest friend, her lover. He stood looking down at her, and there was no anger in his gaze; nothing but love. The air rippled and danced between them, so it was hard to see him; it almost seemed as if he were not completely there, a mirage or a creature made of smoke.

She reached for him, but he shook his head, and his lips curved in a sweet smile even as his eyes grew grave and full of sadness. He leaned forward and held both of his hands slightly over her head, fingers forming a V-shape, the thumbs out to the sides.

His voice sounded as though it were coming from a great distance, and as he spoke, the smoke seemed to recede faster and faster, the air growing clear.

“Y'varekh'kha Adonai v'yishm'rekha; May the Maker bless you and guard you, בָּרַכְךָ יְהוָה, וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ

Y'a'ar Adonai Panav ay'lekha viy'hunekha; May He shine His face upon you and within you, יָאֵר יְהוָה

פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ, וַיַּחֲנֶךָ

Yisa Adonai Panav ay'lekha, v'yasaym l'kha shalom. May He lead you back to the peace you always carry within you,

” יֵשֵׂא יְהוָה פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ, וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם. ”

As he spoke, the smoke had receded increasingly quickly, as though it were being blown away by a strong wind. The air grew clear, and Mari could see the mountains again, towering up

in vibrant beauty behind her love's head. His eyes were the color of those mountains as he gazed at her in patient love. He lowered his hands, and looked as though he were about to say something more. Then he looked sharply to where the synagogue had stood; Mari followed his eyes, and saw a terrible blackness bubbling out of the fountain. It wasn't a darkness with substance: it was, rather, as though everything around her was a picture being eaten away by nothingness. She cried out, and scrambled to her feet, hastily shoving the last of the rope into her belt. She looked back at Ariel, and he turned to her and, oddly, put his hand to his lips and kissed the fingers, then blew over his fingertips in her direction.

At a time like this, he's blowing me a kiss? She thought, and then everything around her, the mountains, Ariel, the blackened, burned synagogue, the cracked fountain with its slowly encroaching, bubbling black stain, the houses, the grass; all of it swirled around her in a foaming grey mass like a sea of ashes. She put her arms up to shield her face, and crouched low to the ground. When silence settled around her, she slowly lowered her arms, and found herself back in the circular room. She turned to look at the Aleph door: it was blackened and burnt, the shiny purple paint bubbling and blistered, the Aleph stained but intact; a deep, single crack ran straight through the entire door, through the center of the once beautiful symbol. Unaccountably, Mari felt pure gratitude wash through her. She sank to the floor, and wrapped her arms around her knees. "Thank you," she whispered, "thank you, thank you."