

Steampunk Torah Ha'azinu/Vezot Habrakha Deut. 32:1-32:52, 33:1-34:12

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“Listen/ And this is the blessing”

“It is not a worthless thing; it is your life...” Rabbi Ariel Wolf rested his arms on the podium, taking deep breaths to try to slow his heart and calm his jumping stomach. He felt as though he stood on a cliff top, so close to the edge his shoes knocked pieces of earth loose; he felt his stomach jump, weightless, as if he watched those pieces of earth tumble free, turning and crumbling as they fell, aware that he would follow them in moments.*

“It is not a little thing; it is your life,” he began again, taking his time to look into each of the faces of his congregation as they sat there looking up at him, waiting for him to give them a teaching from this week’s Torah portion, as he had done predictably year after year.

He looked at Margaret, soon to be his wife no longer. Her stony, unforgiving eyes stared back at him. She represented years...but had they ever truly seen one another? Had they truly connected honestly and in love, or had they merely jogged along, mostly ignoring each other, presenting a facade to the world, the appearance that was expected of them? They were not growing any more; their marriage was making them both smaller, not expanding their hearts and souls. He had come to the conclusion that divorce in such a case was a mitzvah; acknowledging that they were both no longer living their truth was a good deed which would eventually bring them both healing. It was a step on a journey that they both could learn from if they chose. It was like a death, but a death that would bring rebirth. Living life in a lie simply because they

feared the death of their marriage would be to waste both her life and his, simply to try to please others. A false marriage spread ripples of harm out into the world; it hurt not only the people in it, but everyone who was in their lives. They both needed to be free; they needed to go through the pain of acknowledging that theirs was not a true marriage. God would weep with them, but it would be healing tears, rather than the stony, dry-eyed calcification of the heart that would have come with more years in a marriage that was not a true marriage of souls.

“It is time for me to leave you.” He let his words settle, let the people take them in. He had been with these people through births, deaths, marriages, traumas, hardships; they had grown together as they examined their lives for lessons, as they fell and picked themselves back up. He owed them honesty now.

“I have not been honest. I have lied to someone I love, and I have lied to myself. I have lived life as I was expected to live, because I was weak and afraid of being myself. I wanted to be admired and looked up to. I wanted to be respected; I played a role, as we all do, from time to time. Much of my heart that I gave to you was true, but I hid a lot of myself, too. I have wrestled, I have prayed; I have come to the end of a marriage that was not a marriage of the heart and soul- and I am taking the courage now to tell you that I am human. I hope that rather than revile me, you will see that it takes deep courage and love to do what I am doing; I hope that my standing before you with complete honesty today will give you all this gift: that you will have compassion for yourselves when you stumble in your own lives, when you have to make a change because you are no longer living your truth.”

He told them his heart; he told them all of it, no longer ashamed of who he was. He had realized that if he was ashamed of his true self, what, then, was he telling God? Was he saying

he knew better than God, the person he would pretend to be was more valuable, somehow, than the person he really was, created by the Maker? He was ashamed that it had taken him so many years to stand up straight and look the world in the eye, no longer hiding his true self.

He knew the social condemnation that would occur; the gossip, the shock- they were only human, after all, and many of them did not live their lives on a level that could comprehend this kind of honesty. He knew he was committing social “suicide” but he no longer cared. Mari’s Grandfather, the only one who would have truly understood him, was gone; Mari was gone...It was between him and God now, as it always should have been. He would be truly honest for the first time in his life.

After he had finished speaking, he walked slowly to his office where he had a small pack ready. He removed his tallit and kippah, folding them carefully away into the top of the pack, took his old Tanach down from the shelf; it would help guide him on this open-ended journey. He smiled softly as he tucked the book into the side of his pack. He was not sure where he was going; he may have lost his mind, but he felt clear and honest for the first time in a long, long time. It was just him, his truth and his heart, the road, and the Holy Divine Maker, his shield and guide. His Torah and his heart would be his map. He exited from the side door, encountering no one on his way. He had given them the gift of honesty; what they did with it was their journey, now. With each step away from the town, he felt lighter.

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Mari braced herself with one hand as the carriage squeaked and jolted its way down the hard-packed dirt road. She reached out the other hand to take the bulky metal-and-leather goggles that Professor Malone held out to her. “She’s not weather-proof,” he shouted over the

din of the cheerfully clanking and whistling carriage, “going to need these, keep the debris and...things out,” He puffed a breath through his elaborate mustache and tugged at a leather strap dangling from the side of his own goggles, settling them more tightly over his eyes. He called his carriage “she,” and Mari could see he was utterly in love with his creation. He pulled a chain from time to time from sheer high spirits, it seemed, and the carriage let out a ridiculous tooting sound; he chuckled and chattered to himself, patting the carriage fondly as he made adjustments. He had a leather belt around his waist that was hooked to a ring in the carriage wall; it kept him from falling over as he clambered around the carriage like a white-whiskered old monkey.

There was nothing to hold onto that Mari could see. She glanced across at Varya. The woman seemed to be having little trouble; her round face settled into a complacent simper, she was reading a small, burgundy colored book from her reticule, which she had called a “prayerbook.” Mari hoped there was a prayer for safe travels in that book. She surreptitiously slid her hand around the edge of the seat, wedging it between the wall and the seat. At least the seat was firm enough to hold on to. With her other hand, she looped the wide leather strap of the goggles around her neck, sliding the heavy things over her eyes. They felt enormous on her nose; one jolt, and they’d come sliding right down. Carefully, she took her hand away from the seat and held the goggles in place while she pulled at the strap to tighten them. The soft leather that held the thick glass cupped her eyes comfortably; it was like looking through bubbled, thick sea-glass. She could not see as clearly, but the world looked enchanting. The carriage jolted and she bounced along sideways on the gathered part of her skirt, the fake natural form “bustle” that was really just gathered fabric. That portion of her anatomy was well-padded anyway; she had

always been rounded of figure, even with the privations in the woods, she still had enough padding to make her more comfortable on the carriage's firm seats. She fetched up against the other side of the wide bench seat with a gasp, and her hand flew out to cling to the window-ledge. Varya glanced up, her nose lifting slightly, her mouth primming disapprovingly. If she does that much more, she's going to permanently resemble a blowfish, Mari thought wickedly. This was going to be an interesting ride.

"Never flown her before," the Professor chuntered right in her ear, making her jump.

"I...you...what?" Mari sputtered incoherently.

"Never flown. Just put the wings on; trying to get to the Lost Kingdom, you see. Clockwork horses. Don't seem to do the trick, have to go out of the plane we're used to, I'm thinking, faster, farther, higher up, maybe."

Mari took a few deep, calming breaths, glad yet again that she had left her corset behind long ago and her ribs could expand properly.

"Er... are we using a boiler? I noticed the clockwork horses...but..."

"Fairly standard double-acting steam engine." His eyes lit up, "know about boilers, missie?"

"A fair amount. My..." she cleared her throat, glad of the thick goggles obscuring her eyes. "My Grandfather was an inventor. He was working on a wearable boiler when he died."

"Wearable! Hum," the Professor chewed his mustache in quick nibbles, which made him look even more like an excited rodent or monkey. "Difficult prospect, that. Not sure it would be safe. But could be done, could be done. Amazing what you can do when you set your mind to it..." he offered this cliché with a beaming grin, as though he had hit on an extremely brilliant

new idea, "...when you set your mind to it!" He chortled and chuntered to himself a bit like a delighted little tea kettle. He seemed to be full of the steam he worked with, bubbling and popping, chuckling and whirring; steam appeared to come out of his head, his white hair and whiskers floating around exuberantly. He was truly working within his element, Mari smiled to herself. "Double acting steam engine, this one very small, quite efficient," he continued in his peculiar, wheezing, explosive style. "Hot gases from coal or wood, high pressure steam in, valve rod and side valve, exhaust steam out...only thing is, she's got to take on water, make regular stops; run out of water, run out of steam, also don't keep her cool enough, and BOOM!" He opened his mouth and his eyes behind his goggles went wide. Mari jumped, and he chuckled. "Shan't happen, don't worry, missie. Professor here won't let you down. Whether the wings work, now, we'll see."

He went on another tangent about air currents and angles which left Mari behind entirely. What she gathered was that he had crafted the wings on a whim, never fully intending to use them, but he had decided to test them out.

Mari leaned across to Varya, raising her voice above the clanking din of the accelerating carriage. "Why are you along on this journey, Miss...Lean...Grin?" she choked slightly. Really, she was going to have to get used to saying that name without chortling like a schoolboy.

Varya looked up from her small book. "Please, dear, call me Varya," she simpered. Mari sighed in relief. Varya was a whole lot easier to say. "And call me Mari," she offered.

Varya smiled, continuing, "I am on this journey because I was called. I very clearly was told that I must bring religion to the poor souls in the Kingdom of the Lost." She raised her chin, angling her face perfectly, as though to illuminate herself with the light streaming in through the

thick bubbled glass windows. Really, Mari thought, this woman is a masterpiece. Mari shook her head, ashamed of her unfettered catty impulses. She wasn't usually this way. Surely she wasn't becoming a critical little old maid? She had to face it: she could not stand Varya, and she did not have a specific reason for it. Taking a deep breath, she tried to push aside her feelings. "Don't you think they have religion?" her voice ended in an undignified squeak as the carriage hit a particularly nasty bump. "I mean," she continued, sliding over to wedge her hand around the seat again, "people have disappeared throughout the years, from all places. Surely they had religions of their own at the time; I can't imagine that would have changed."

Varya sniffed, the color rising in her cheeks slightly, and said, "I am called. I know I am needed." and looked down firmly at her book again, raising her eyebrows and dismissing Mari.

Mari chuckled under her breath, glad the noise of the carriage masked her voice. She really must stop baiting Varya, but the woman was so intriguing, Mari felt as though she needed to prod and pry and see what the overstuffed bolster would do next. She told herself firmly that she would be kind; Varya was probably going to be a great teacher to her, for Mari would have to work on patience and compassion in order to try to see beyond the strange, prim facade. Mari smiled. She was wonderfully intrigued by her new companions.

The carriage bumped, the professor whooped, and hooted "Hold on, now," and it bumped again. With each successive bump, it took a little longer to hit the ground again. Mari, with both hands crammed down the side of the seat, holding onto the firm cushion until she thought she'd leave permanent gouges, angled her face to peer out of one of the thick portholes, her goggles clacking ridiculously against the thick glass.

The wings were spiny like bat wings, and they were enormous. They flapped ridiculously; Mari felt a sudden split sense of unreality, watching those great things move. They moved down, and the carriage bobbed up a bit between them; they moved up, and the carriage dropped. Mari felt a giggle bubble up to her lips, and clamped her mouth firmly shut. She wasn't at all sure she would survive this trip, but she wouldn't miss a second of it for the world.

The professor continued to hoot and cackle, and Varya continued to read her prayerbook with an almost frightening concentration- the only thing moving about her person was the large black ostrich feather on her hat which bobbed and waved, and the vast amount of jet beads decorating her dress, which clacked and shimmied excitedly. Mari let some giggles escape; they were lost in the general mayhem.

Then her stomach plummeted and she forgot everything as she heard someone gasp, and realized it was herself. They had lurched into the air, and they had not come down again- the trees were lowering past the windows and the carriage bobbed steadily higher. Mari placed her trembling hands on either side of the porthole, not heeding the loud clacking her goggles made against the window. She forgot the others, she forgot the danger, she forgot everything, losing herself in the sight of the ground spreading out below her like a quilt. The trees grew smaller until they were just a patch. In her mind, she traced her journey back...would that she could see her life this way, laid out before her in one piece, all of it fitting together. Perhaps she would be able to do that when she came to the end of her life. Her hands clenched on either side of the window as she was taken by surprise by an upwelling of longing, and gratitude- a deep, passionate gratitude for her life, and a longing to keep living it. Her heart felt bruised, it pained her, as she looked at the beautiful land spreading below her. She had expected to feel small, but

she did not; instead, she expanded. She was distanced from her life, and yet passionately inside it; she felt as though she had come to an “end” of sorts, a threshold. It is only at the end that we are granted the gift of looking back to see what our life has been. One can only look backward, not forward into what will be. Now, when she stood on the threshold of the unknown, when she left her past completely behind her, she was granted, if she wished to take the gift, the ability to see where she had been.

Her eyes welled with tears; they made a curving, shifting lens through which she viewed the unfolding world. She longed to take off her goggles, but gusts of wind whistled through the gaps in the clockwork sides of the carriage, and all kinds of debris- bits of leaves, bugs, dust from the coal being used as fuel- flew about, so she didn't dare remove them. There was a strange shimmering in the air that she thought at first might be her tears; she lifted the goggles to wipe under each eye, but the shimmering grew even stronger. Before she could turn around to see if professor Malone or Varya had seen it, the professor shouted over the clank of the vehicle and skirl of the wind.

“She's shifting, something ahead. Hold on, now, hold on tight!” He began to maneuver the carriage downward, angling down into a shimmering swirl of light. Mari thought of her Grandfather and began to say the Shema, just in case these were her last moments in this life. The carriage bucked and shimmied sideways; it felt as though it might shake to pieces. The professor had given up the controls, and was standing, one hand clutching the thick metal frame of a porthole near him, the other hanging onto the leather strap that bound him to the carriage. His hair blew wildly, and he seemed lost in a feverish exultation. Varya appeared to have fainted;

her head bobbed against the side of the carriage, the plume in her hat still waving valiantly. Mari took it all in; her heart was stuttering, and each breath felt like a precious, sweet gift.

Then, it was all a whirl- colors, sounds, the copper of the carriage and the white of Malone's hair, the green glass of his goggles, staring, the blue, achingly blue sky, and a swirl of shimmering silvery whiteness- sounds were mixed and jumbled, she was no longer Mari, but she was carriage and woman and tree, a black plume and white feathery hair; she was steam and coal and fire, serene sky, and wine colored prayerbook...and then, there was nothing.

**Moses' song, Deut. 32:47*