

MA'ARAT HA'MACHEPELA

The moment I entered the revered site, I was bombarded by the deafening buzz of hundreds of murmured prayers, rumbling through the large chamber and into the little room I had stepped into. I clasped my hands together, the clammy hands of an anxious defendant awaiting the judge's verdict. A certain lightheadedness rose to my cheeks, leaving me to reach out for the worshippers standing around me for balance.

Oxygen stopped entering my body; all breathing halted as if I believed in the childhood superstition that one mustn't inhale when passing a cemetery, so as not to disturb the souls of the dead. Despite visiting such an important shrine, such significant graves, I was holding my breath for a very different reason. Quite simply, there was no air to breathe. I was slowly suffocating, getting pulled under. Choked by the women elbowing around me, trying to get closer to the crypts. Smothered by the mob of ultra-religious men barricaded behind the wall they had created in their hearts and minds, shutting the rest of the world out; their side locks swaying to the beat of their whispered prayers. I felt my blood pounding wildly behind my temples, and with a sudden rush of anxiety I realized that if I didn't leave I would faint. Frantically, I spun around; tripping over my laces, I lunged forward into the sweating crowd. I was sure that I would never make it out of the heart of the beast—everywhere I turned, hordes of people poured out supplications, their faces contorted, hopeful, ecstatic.

I was disappointed in myself. Where was the rush of excitement, the flash of inspiration one might expect visiting the graves of the forefathers who populate my daily prayers? I was standing in the structure built over *Ma'arat ha'Machpela*, the cave in the largely Arab city of Hebron, where the revered founders of the Jewish people are buried: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah.

For as long as I can remember, every Friday night around the Sabbath table, my father has smiled into my eyes, his hands resting gently on my shoulders, blessing me, beginning with, "May G-d bless you as Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah..." Now, for the first time, I was at the tombs of these remote, mystical ancestors, standing only meters above their burial chambers. Why, in such a place, could I only think about my claustrophobia, letting my physical needs take over when spirituality is, or should be, the driving force?

I received no help escaping the ocean of people, no miraculous parting of the Red Sea. But finally, I forced myself into a little alcove where not so many people were standing. I turned to find myself staring through iron bars into a little room. The bars obscured my view—spaced just wide enough for my hands to wrap around, but not wide enough to fit my head through. I forced myself to look past the bars into the memorial site for Abraham, the father of monotheism. Before I had the opportunity to study the room before me, I caught sight of three sets of wide eyes staring at me from behind an identical set of bars on the opposite side of the room. There, three Muslim girls were standing in the hall outside the memorial site for Isaac, a place that is forbidden to Jews except for 10 days of the year, during which the Muslim religious authorities are compelled to grant us entrance. A woman beside me followed my eyes and whispered, "Isaac isn't even their ancestor! It's a disgrace that they have the power to keep us out." She glared across at the girls.

The girls' hair coverings were swept over their foreheads with the elegance of a light kiss on the hand of a queen; the traditional headwear bore the familiarity of a mother's touch, snuggling up close to their chins. But I could see their faces, and in their expressions, a mix of interest and mistrust. The tallest of the girls looked straight into my eyes while the other two made a show of pretending to pray, taking turns sneaking glances at me. I stared back at the tall one, intrigued by the person behind those cold brown eyes, those pinched lips perched above a sharp jaw line, the kind I had always envied. Her dark skin was flawless, perfect as a stretch of desert sand. A smile broke across my face before I could stop myself as I tried to imagine her removing the head covering within the confines

of her home, rinsing her face with the “Clean and Clear” that Jennifer Love Hewitt represents, parading around the television screen wrapped in a towel. The girl’s eyes narrowed in response to my grin, the nostrils on her prominent, ironically “Jewish”, nose flaring slightly, her anger somehow only adding to her striking beauty, making her painfully human as her glare pierced into me from across the room, through the two sets of bars. Her narrow shoulders stooped forward as she whispered something into the ear of one of the little girls, never taking her eyes off me, like a guard dog that growls until the stranger reaches the next house. The little one glanced at me and I stared back at her, wondering how often she came here, how many other people like me she has studied at memorial site of her beloved forefather, of my beloved forefather. Of the man whose two sons made their way down such different paths that their descendants have lost all sense of familial connection: Isaac, ancestor of the Jews; Ishmael, ancestor of the Arabs. In a moment of bravery, the little girl stuck out her tongue, then turned and scampered away.

My heart jumped into my throat, the image of her pudgy cheeks and button nose lingering before my eyes. As the cold metal pressed into my forehead, I felt grateful for the prison bars separating us, protecting me. As that gratefulness entered my consciousness, shame washed over me. Were the bars actually necessary, what exactly did I think they would do to me if there was nothing between us? I needed protection from *them*? It was absurd; the oldest must have been thirteen or fourteen. *Look at them*, I told myself, *they’re just little kids*.

After a moment the pudgy cheeks returned, flanked by two women dressed in the uniform of black robes with white cloths hiding their hair and necks. Without even glancing at the memorial before them, they pushed their noses right up between the bars on their side and glowered. Their glares accosted me like a freezing shower on a cold, winter night. Tears rushed to my eyes, and I looked down upon at the prayer book I had been grasping, unopened, the whole time. Their hatred shot across the room, aimed and fired straight into me. My teardrops escaped one by one, joining those of the people around me, who were pleading breathlessly to our ancestors to intercede on our behalf. But my crying was different, empty of prayer and awe, filled only with pain and sorrow.

In a steady stream, the tears tip-toed down my cheeks, pausing at my chin, then took the plunge drop by drop, glad to escape the quivering surface of my face. Quite suddenly, my friend Tzipporah’s freckles and wide smile flashed before my eyes. I could picture her praying, eyes clenched shut as her slim frame rocked back and forth in the room from which I had escaped just a while ago.

I wondered if there was anger in her prayers, blame for the loss of her brother, kidnapped and murdered by Arabs a week before the start of last summer's war in Lebanon. I wondered how she would react to my tears, tears that she would consider blasphemy in the face of the undying hatred that killed her brother.

The next time I looked up, the women and their daughters were gone. That beautiful teenaged face retreated back into her world, and of course, I knew that I would never see her again. Our separate lives hardly provided opportunity for our paths to cross, but then, why would I even want such a thing? The memory of her glare burned into me, smothering the hope that someday, somehow, there will be peace. More than anything, I wanted to find her and shake her, to feel her bony arms between my fingers, to make her look at me, really see me. But what would she see? The angry frown of her stern mouth had been aimed solely at me, a Jew. I was defenseless and exposed; her entirely human eyes pierced right through me, leaving a small scar on my heart.

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