

## **Two weddings and some funerals**

I have known Mary for ever. We were born a few weeks apart, and as our mothers were friends, it was only natural that we should play together and learn together. My mother was a great cook and Mary's mother was a wonderful weaver, so Aunt Anne taught us both to weave and my mother taught us both to cook. As I was the older by a few months, it was



my mother who went to the Shadchan, the matchmaker, first, soon after my twelfth birthday. She took some months to consider who would be the best husband for me, and eventually my parents and I went to the home of Nathan's parents, so that I could meet him for the first time. He was 16 years old and from a village near Nazareth. His family were basket makers and he had been learning the family trade since he was young. Now he was ready to set up his own workshop and get married. We talked a bit with our parents sitting near us and then my parents and I went home. For several weeks either he would walk to Nazareth to see me, or my parents would take me to see him. My parents were very anxious that I should be sure that I wanted to marry him. They were very relieved when I agreed that he was a nice young man, and that I would marry him. The Shidukhin, our betrothal took place in his parents house. The Shtar Tena'im, the Document of Conditions, drawn up for us by the Rabbi, was read out to us and then signed by our parents. Nathan gave me a ring to signify our betrothal and then our mothers broke a plate each to complete the contract. After the ceremony, I went home with my parents leaving Nathan to begin preparations for our marriage.

It was decided between our families that there would be more opportunities for Nathan in Nazareth, as it is a bigger place, so Nathan began to build our house near that of my parents and set up his workshop next door to it. That was difficult time for him, living with his parents, having to produce enough baskets for sale, and coming to Nazareth to build the house. Sometimes he would bring his father or a couple of his friends with him. Sometimes he would have to stay in his own village and help his friends build their houses, as some of them were preparing for their marriages as well. Sometimes he would stay with my family while he was working on the house for a few days.

My mother set to, to make sure I had all the skills that I needed to be a virtuous wife, so that when we married I would be able to spin, sew, weave, make our clothing, fetch water from the well, bake the daily loaves of bread and look after the goats and chickens we would keep for food and milk.

Some couples cannot wait for the preparations for the wedding and the house to be completed, and families bring the wedding forward quickly when the couple find that a baby is on the way, even though it would still be considered legitimate, but not Nathan and I. It was nearly a year before Nathan announced that everything was ready for our wedding ceremony. By then I had spent a lot of time with him, and was glad that we were getting married. Once harvest was finished, the date of our wedding was announced and the whole town seemed to start cooking. On the day of the wedding, Nathan signed the Ketubah, our marriage contract, in the presence of both of our fathers, who also signed it as witnesses. The Ketubah set out Nathan's obligations to me, among which were that he should make sure I have food and clothing, and his obligation to undertake marital relations. He has always kept faithfully to his contract.

When the day finally arrived, and everyone had had time to come in from the fields and change into their best clothes, Nathan came to fetch me, along with our mothers and my attendant, Mary, from my parents house. Our fathers and his friends who accompanied him were very jolly and sang and laughed and joked as they led us through the darkened streets carrying flaming torches. Outside our new house, under the awning, we exchanged our vows in front of all our friends and family. Then the feasting began. It wasn't until we lay down together on our rush mats, under our cloaks, with our drunken neighbours snoring nearby, and our animals snuffling in their hay at the far end of our house, that I knew that we were really married.

Nathan's and my betrothal and marriage was very traditional, and I would have expected that Mary's would have been the same. I looked forward to being her confidant and handmaid, as she had been mine. Things went well to begin with. The Shadchan chose Joseph for her. Mary is a Cohen, a member of the family of Aaron, from whom are drawn the Temple Priests, so it was only right that Joseph, a member of the family of our great King David, should be chosen for her. He was about 20 years old, and she told me that his first wife had died in childbirth. Our people do not like it when there is a large age gap between husband and wife, and at 20 he was rather old for Mary, but he was kind and gentle, and Mary seemed to like him, so they became betrothed. After their betrothal things seemed alright for a few weeks, then Mary stopped talking to me. She seemed to have withdrawn into herself. Joseph looked really unhappy and spent several evenings talking with Mary's parents. Mary was then sent away on a visit to see her cousin Elizabeth who lived with her husband Zechariah in Hebron. When she came back it was obvious that she was pregnant. The gossip mongers around the town had a field day speculating whether the child was Joseph's.

If Mary had been with someone else, Joseph could have divorced her. In order to get out of a betrothal as well as a marriage, all a man needs to do is give his wife a 'Get' a bill of divorce and say 'I divorce you' three times. A really vindictive man might want to condemn his wife and charge her with adultery, but short of actually being caught

in the act, it is very rare that a woman is stoned to death these days. But Joseph chose to stick by her, and took her to his home and there under an awning in front of his house, they spoke their vows to each other. The ceremony took place during harvest time, and the feasting and celebrations were rather muted as everyone was so tired from working in the fields all day, but they were married and feasted.

I tried talking to Mary, and finding out what had been going on, but she just smiled at me, and kept her own counsel. By this time I had just given birth to Jonathan and I was kept rather busy with him. Then came the really crushing blow, just a few weeks before Mary thought that her child was due, Roman soldiers rode into town and hammered up a notice on the village well. It demanded that everyone be registered for a census, and that to do so they must return to their family town. As Nathan's wife I had to return with him to the village where he had been born, only an hours walk away. I could carry my baby Jonathan there easily, but Mary, married to Joseph had to go with him to Nazareth, the town of David, and she was almost ready to give birth. The Roman soldiers made it clear that there were to be no exceptions; old, young, almost about to give birth, all had to be registered.

Joseph was almost beside himself, but strangely Mary appeared quite serene about the whole thing, and kept on telling Joseph that it was going to be alright, and that God knew what he was doing. I had no idea what she meant by that, but Joseph seemed to know, and calmed down enough to plan the journey, and the things they would need to take with them in order to deal with a birth and a new born baby. When they set off with Joseph's donkey carrying Mary, I had no idea that it would be more than two years before I would see them again.

I talked to a shepherd once. Nathan wouldn't usually let me talk to them when they came into town. They have a terrible reputation. They are usually dirty and always smell of sheep. They spend a lot of their time on their own, just watching over their sheep and some of them are quite odd. At night groups of them get together and bring their sheep into caves or into one of the many ancient sheepfolds dotted around the countryside. You know which ones are in use, because they put thorn branches on the tops of the low stone walls to help keep the wild animals out. One of the group will doze in the doorway with a large club and a slingshot beside him, to attack any animals that comes after the flock. They have a really bad reputation for fighting, usually over water. They all want the best and most water for their flocks and in times of drought they will fight to get their sheep to water, and sometimes die trying. Worst of all they have a woman in every village; at least that is what people say. The shepherd I talked to looked as though he had scrubbed up to come into town, as he wanted to barter some sheep's cheese for some baskets.

While I was looking at the cheeses he had brought with him, he sat in the shade and I gave him a mug of water to drink. I don't know how we got talking about it, but I must have mentioned that I had friends who had left the town to go to Bethlehem for

the census, who had never returned. As soon as I mentioned Bethlehem, his face lit up and he turned eagerly to me.

'I was there when the census took place' he said 'I was out in the fields near the town looking after my sheep, as I am of the tribe of Benjamin, of the house of David. I must tell you a story, that happened to me and some of my friends. After we had been in to Bethlehem to register, we returned to our sheep. It was getting quite late, as we had had to wait a long time to get to the front of the queue to register. We moved our sheep into a couple of the caves in the hills nearby and got our fires lit near their entrances. One of the old ewes had died during the day, so we roasted her over the fire, and ate her with bread we had bought in the town and drank wine we had exchanged for a lamb, to feed some of the visitors to the town. When we had finished eating I got out my flute, and we began singing a few of the old songs.

Then it happened. I can't quite describe how the light seemed to change. It wasn't as if the whole sky became light, it was more as if a great tear appeared in the sky, and the light of the heavens beyond shone through it. Then we heard music, at first it seemed to join with our singing, but when we stopped, it carried on, and began swelling in volume. It was so beautiful, so perfect, it would have brought tears to our eyes, if it wasn't for the fact that we were so scared that we hid our eyes from the light, and tried to move away from it, to hide in the caves with our sheep. Then we heard a voice coming through the tear, from beyond the light, telling us that God's son had been born in Bethlehem, and that we should go and visit him and pay our respects. When the message finished, the music swelled again; these angelic voices singing a triumphal song 'Glory to God in the highest and peace to his people on earth'. The light became so intense that we could no longer bear to look. Then the tear seemed to gradually repair itself, the music began to fade and the light shrunk until it was just a single large star in the sky hanging over Bethlehem, as if it were pointing the way to somewhere. I could not tell you even now how long the whole thing lasted it could have been seconds or hours or even days, it was just timeless.'

'None of us could really believe what had happened. We began to pinch each other to make sure we were awake and that we were not drunk with too much wine. We sat for a long time discussing what had happened, and eventually I got up and told the others that I was going to see whether what we had been told was true. If it wasn't, then I would just be making a fool of myself. If there was a baby there, then I would give it one of the lambs as a present, as that was all that I had to give. The others all decided to join me, and risk leaving the sheep on their own for a while. We piled wood on the fire to keep it going and ran into Bethlehem. Following the star, we arrived at a stable door. I knocked, and when a man opened it, I explained to him why we were there. I expected him to throw me out, but he heard my story in silence, then when I had finished, he smiled and moved to one side. There in the center of the stable, lit by the star hovering above, was a new born baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger, with his young mother lying on a bed of straw beside him. The baby was asleep, so we crept quietly towards him. I put the lamb down, and

pushed it towards the mother. I explained that it was a gift for the baby. I shouldn't have asked it, but it came out all of a rush, I asked her whether this baby really was God's Son. "Yes" was all she said to me. When we had looked at him for a while, we left the stable. Once we were well out of the way we just leapt around shouting that we had seen God's son. We made so much noise that heads began to appear around doors, and several people threatened us, if we didn't go away and be quiet. Some suggested we were drunk, but we weren't, we really weren't, we were just so happy. Since then, we have all told our tale to pretty well everyone we have met. God's son has come, and in a few years, maybe even in my lifetime, our people will be led to freedom again.'

I listened to this story in astonished silence. Maybe there was another woman who had had to travel to Bethlehem while pregnant. So I asked the shepherd what the names of the people were. 'Mary and Joseph' he said. And the baby had been named Jesus. I felt relief flood over me. I had been so worried when after a few weeks Mary and Joseph did not return to Nazareth. It should only have taken them a week or so to get to Bethlehem, and unless something had gone wrong with her baby's birth, she should have been able to start to travel back within a few days. I feared the worse, the more time passed, and I began to expect just Joseph on his own, but he did not return either. Then we had begun to hear tales that King Herod had caused all the babies in Bethlehem to be killed, and I thought then that Mary and Joseph must have been killed along with their baby. I imagined the funerals for Mary and Joseph and all those poor children and I wept for them, until Nathan took me in hand and told me that for Jonathan's sake, I must end my mourning. The shepherd's story told me that at least the baby, Jesus, had been born safely and all had been well when he had seen them, but I still did not know what had happened to them since then. One day, about 6 months after I had heard the shepherd's story, Aunt Ann took me aside and told me that a merchant had brought a message from Mary and Joseph. They had escaped the massacre, and had fled south. They would return when it was safe to do so.

I was delighted the day I saw Mary and Joseph walking down the street leading a donkey hung with all the belongings they had brought back with them from their exile in Egypt; with Jesus perched on top. Over the next few months and years Mary told me bit by bit about Jesus birth, how they had been visited by shepherds and village folk, and wise men from far countries. I would not have believed her had she not unwrapped a jar of myrrh and a box of frankincense, which she said had been given to Jesus as a present. The gold they had also been given they had had to use to make their escape, and to live on until Joseph was able to set up a workshop in the Jewish area of Alexandria, and earn money for them to live on. They had returned to Nazareth when they had heard stories from passing merchants of the death of Herod and of his extravagant funeral with the 2000 soldiers of his bodyguard processing with his body through the streets of Jerusalem on the way to his place of burial, watched by sullen citizens of the city.

One day I ventured to ask her about Jesus conception. She looked at me for a very

long time, and then swore me to secrecy. She told me that an angel had come to her in the night, and told her that she had been chosen to carry God's son. She had just said 'yes'. She didn't think that she could really say 'no' to God. When I asked her what Joseph thought about that, she said that he had been minded to give her a 'get', a bill of divorce, and walk away from their betrothal. However he had received a dream from God, assuring him that I had told him the truth, and that he should wake up, marry me, and look after me and God's son as if he were his own, and that is just what he has done.

I don't know to this day whether I quite believe her. God has not spoken to our people in many generations now. The last of the prophets was heard and listened to long before the Romans came. Many in our land long for a new prophet to lead our people out of our slavery to the Romans. Could that prophet be Jesus? Could the boy who gets muddy and into scrapes with my son, whom I chastise and love as I love my own son, really be the saviour of our people as Mary says he is, as the shepherds told me he is, all those years ago?