

The Unseen

Midrash Yitro, by Shira Eliaser

Now Moses' father in law, Yitro, and his sons and his wife came to Moses, to the desert where he was encamped by the mountain of God. And he said to Moses, "I, Yitro, your father in law, am coming to you, and your wife and your two sons with her." So Moses went out to greet his wife and family. To his father in law he prostrated himself, and he kissed his two sons, and also Moses embraced his wife and kissed her, thereupon he fell upon her neck and wept. So they greeted each other, and they entered the tent.

Moses told his wife and sons all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians on account of Israel, all the hardships that had befallen them on the way, and [that] the Lord had saved them. They were happy about all the good that the Lord had done for Israel, that He had rescued them from the hands of the Egyptians. Tziporah said, "Blessed is the Lord, Who has rescued you from the hands of the Egyptians and from the hand of Pharaoh, Who has rescued the people from beneath the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all the deities, for with the thing that they plotted, [He brought] upon them."

Then Moses' father in law, the priest of Midian, sacrificed burnt offering[s] and [peace] offerings to God, and Aaron and all the elders of Israel came to dine with Moses' father in law before God. But Moses retired to his tent that night.

I am the silent bird, flitting through the night on silver wings. Throughout the camp, the flickering torches cast shadows of the men as they stride from place to place, waiting on the great men as they dine in state. They do not see me. I hear the clatter of jars and the sound of women's voices raised in song. In the sparks from the fire, I see a man at the tent door returning from his day's work, and a woman welcoming him in with joyful cries. They do not see me either.

I am invisible.

At the holy tent, no one has laid a place for me. No one calls for me to bring the wine, or to dress my sons to appear before the great ones. I wait on no one. Amidst the thousand noises of the night, my tent is dark and silent.

I know the peace of the grave.

There is trouble about, strife and fierce words. Staves strike and shatter, one against the other. Strong rocks crack, gushing torrents unsuspected, unchecked by the flashes of flame. There is weeping in tents, or feasting and laughing, or sickness and wailing and death. My husband sits with shoulders bowed with knowledge, crushed by words and cares. Through it all, I drift silently, my grey wings one small shadow in the night.

It is not so bad to be invisible.

I hear the voice of my sister in law. She is angry that I am invisible. She speaks harshly against my husband, hard words dropping like stones from high places. "We too are prophets of the Lord, and yet our beds are not cold! Our wives and husbands do not sigh with neglect, nor are our sons grown in ignorance and disrepute! Who is Moses, to cause such grief to the wife of his youth? Why did he take her from her father's house to sit in loneliness?" I wish she would not speak so harshly, her righteous tones ringing in my ears, her cries stirring trouble and grief and shame. Now the Lord is angry too, angry that she presumes to speak for me, that she talks in the street of others' beds. My sister in law means well, but she too cannot see me.

A trumpet calls. I hear the sound of rushing footsteps. The assembly is in motion, hems and shoulders swirling like grains in a sandstorm. My sons are among them, cold faces like the dark side of the moon, their hands in motion as they heft and hoist. They know no glory, these men I have borne to fetch and carry holiness they cannot see. They are moving on with their

lives, their faces forward, their footfalls heavy. In the midst of all this turmoil, they too cannot see me, and as the assembly moves off, I can no longer see them.

In the wind of their passing, I feel as light as a feather. I have no cares, no worries. My back is unbowed, my wings are straight and strong. I do not grieve, for I have no one to grieve for.

Humanity flows around me like streams, like the voices of many waters. Martial tongues speak of promise, of motion and change, of the future. The future does not worry me. In their midst I pass unseen, deaf on my silent wings to the clamor around me. They cannot hurt me, the sightless multitudes. Nor do I envy them. How can the invisible envy the blind?

I am the invisible bird, the mote in the sunbeam. I drift in the breeze, unwept-for and unweeping. The wind bears me up, and I am gone.