ON LESBIAN INVISIBILITY: A MIDRASH FOR SHAUVOS

Preface

A midrash is a teaching legend. Jewish law is composed of the Talmud (the five books of Moses) plus their commentaries (Mishnah and Gemarrah). These writings compose Jewish law, called halachah. But commentaries on the writings and commentaries on the commentaries continued to be written long after the "1.w" was defined. These writings became known as midrashim, which means teaching legends. The method of a midrash is to provoke thought, to provide an answer by providing a question.

Shavuos is a harvest holiday, one of three such holidays marked by ancient Middle Eastern tribes. Jews marked the harvest period by bringing a sacrificial offering, the omer, to the Temple. Traditionally, the omer was barley. Eventually, religious meanings were added to the original harvest festival of Shavuos. It became known as the Feast of the Covenant and marked two events said to occur between God and the Jews. The first event was the offering of Isaac for sacrifice, and God's subsequent covenant with Abraham. The second event is Moses receiving the ten commandments, thus marking a covenant between the Jewish people and God. There is no particular historical reason why these events are attributed to what began as a harvest holiday.

The story of Ruth and Naomi is read at Shavuous, for reasons that are not clear. The original story is as follows: Naomi and her two sons left Judea and moved to Moab, probably because of famine in Judea. There her sons married. Later, both sons died. At that point Naomi decided to return to Judea. She encouraged her daughters-in-law to go back to their own tribes. After some urging, one of them agreed, but the other, Ruth, refused to leave Naomi. She returned to Judea with Naomi and later married a rich kinsman. Ruth is remembered both for her loyalty to Naomi (usually portrayed as her aging mother-in-law), and for being grandmother to King David.

Judith Stein May 21 (6 Sivan) 1980
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This piece is part of a collection of work called Bobbeh Meisehs, Jewish Lesbian Rituals and Tales. For a list of other Bobbeh Meisehs, write:

Bobbeh Meisehs Press
I.

Now is Shavuos, the end of the omer, the barley offering, which began on the second day of Pesach. For a long time, Shavuos was a harvest holiday with no other meaning imposed. A remnant of the time when we, the women, determined celebrations in accordance with nature. The harvest is in, the grain is cut, another feast day is created. Seven weeks after the Passover, time again to mark the growing season, harvest, new beginning of yet another growing season. So began Shavuus.

Then, later, one of the many times when nature religions and goddess worship posed their threat to the "One True God," the priests decided that Shavuos, the Feast of Weeks, could not remain only a nature day. Stronger connections to the God of Abraham must be created. They reached for ties to bind men to their God Above, to tie this feast of growth and harvest to the male god, the patriarch.

They named the Covenant one such tie -- the bond between Abraham and his god which rose from his willingness to murder his child, to act on his piety with knives and blood. Where was Sarah, the child's mother? What were her ties to the Covenant created between God and Man, created because the father, in the name of his god, would cut the throat of his own child.

The priests feared that the miraculous story of the sacrifice of children was not enough to keep people from their other gods. So they made a decision, then created the indisputable heavenly proof that at this time, the sixth of Sivan, the God of the Covenant gave us the Law. The Law, those stone-clad words which made quite clear the ropes that bound us in. The first of them, the Covenant, established God the Father as the only god.

Now Shavuos had "real" meaning, better than those times before which reeked of women's goddesses. Now Shavuos meant the Covenant, the Giving of the Law, and men were joyful. The priests were clever, having tried for years to subdue the goddess, to deny her worship. So they let Shavuos retain its harvest side, a tinge of nature, the scent of women, creeping likes vines around the feet of God the Father.

The priests were very clever. They kept the story of love between women, added God, made it safe, made it fit to remember. They let us hold onto Ruth and Naomi, to tease all our memories, to keep us content. The priests were very clever. We, the women, almost lost our roots of this harvest.

II.

Where were we, the Lesbians, as God revealed himself to Man?

We were with Sarah, powerless, weeping and shaking with rage. We watched Abraham take her only child, fruit of her body, born of her age. We screamed and cursed at the follies of man, mourned the child's coming death, and then we remembered the ways of the mothers. We prayed in our way that the man and his god be stopped. We called on our powers, we honored our spirits, we gathered together with all of our strength. The child lived.
power grew thin, then was gone. nightwind, the desert, the vultures. We gathered our energies, drew on each other, calming and holding ourselves centered and clear. The men panicked. They felt abandoned, feared they would wither and burn from the sun. We tried to share comfort, but they would have none of it. They wanted only their Father, their God.

Finally, Moses returned. And brought with him rules. And brought with him laws which forbid women's ways. We thought we'd survive with our power intact. We never expected the strength of those tablets or the force men would use. They fought us, they beat us, when need be, they murdered us. We learned outward submission, we learned secrecy, stealth. All that remained was one memory, a reminder, an offering.

It's the story of Ruth and Naomi, of love between women. Men read it at Shavuot with false reasons why. They'll tell you they read it because barley is mentioned, the omer, the harvest, the fiftieth day. They'll tell you they read it because Ruth made her covenant. She turned, they will say, to their One God Above. But, hidden in their story is our women's truth. Their story tells of our lives, and our travels. It tells of our deaths and our grief and our pain. All those are true, but buried within them is the deep hidden truth of love between women.

Men say, "Ruth's a dutiful daughter, a wife lovingly revering the dead husband's mother." But we know the truth of her love. Men say: "She too made her Covenant, her commitment to the God of Us All. She left the Moabites to come to Judea, she grew out of paganism into the truth." But we say, "She loved Naomi, whose name meant 'the lovely one'." Naomi was aging, she had to leave Moab, she wanted her home. She would not ask Ruth to leave all that she knew, to go to those people who loved God the Father. Naomi was aging, she wanted her home, even at the loss of her beloved friend Ruth. But Ruth loved Naomi, refused to leave her. She made her true covenant with the woman she loved.

That love was so powerful, that bond, those connections, that their truth endured. Men altered the words, denied women loving, men added the god that they thought caused it all.

We, the lesbians, give you our omer, our offering. We reclaim these words which were really our own. Let this love between women be our covenant, our harvest. We gather its forces, and use them to grow. This year at Shavuot, learn the truth of our words. See there the passion, the love between women so strong it would not disappear. We were there with the women in the field of Moab, in the fields of Judea, throughout all those lands. We, the lesbians, reach out to hold you, we share with you truth that endures across time:

Entreat me not to leave thee.
For whither thou goest, I will go.
Where thou lodgest, I will lodge.
Thy people will be my people,
Thy God, my God.
Where thou diest, I will die,
and there I will be buried.
And naught but death will part thee and me.