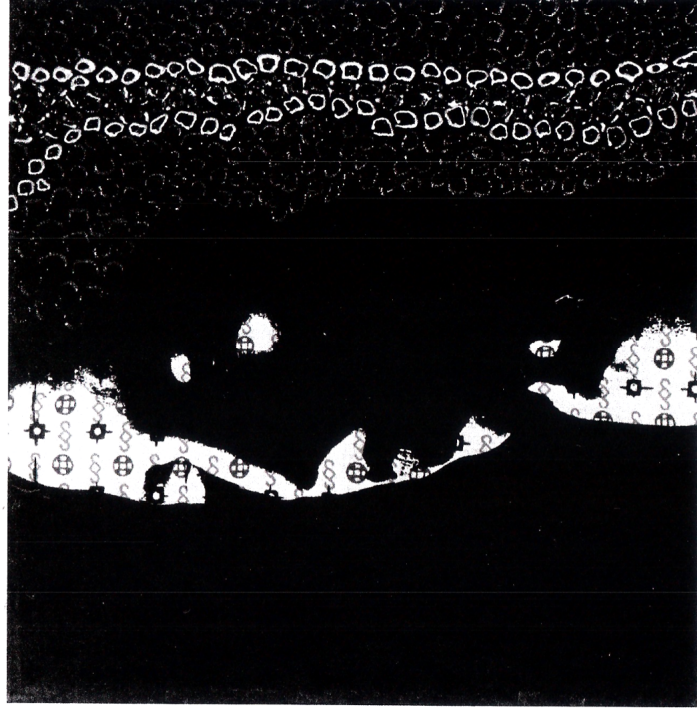


The Difference Between Them

Fiction by Janice Weizman



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It was common knowledge among the Jews of Sadjan that Mazal, the youngest daughter of the Zandani Silversmiths, had sharp eyes. Not sharp like old Shamá's, which could discern fortunes by squinting into coffee grounds splayed across the sides of her chipped cups, but eyes that could look at a thing and perceive, like light seeping through the thinnest of cracks in a mud wall, a forecast of salvation or doom. Once, when Mazal was still a girl, her father considered that those sharp eyes might be an indication of a quick mind, and in a moment of playfulness, opened his book of *tehillim* and pointed out the first letters of the Hebrew alphabet. But when several days later he found her probing a page of his *tanach* for alephs and bets, he feared that he had made a regrettable mistake. "Mazal's sharp eyes are more a burden than a blessing," he complained to Rabbi Sa'adia. "If she sees too well, who will want her for a wife?" Nonetheless, two weeks short of her fifteenth birthday, Meir Ka'atabi, the shoemaker's

son, was found to be more than willing. In a year's time, when Mazal spotted the two light skinned westerners with odd clothes and cropped hair knocking on Rabbi Sadia's front door, she was pregnant with her oldest daughter, Tehila. Peering over the top of her courtyard gate, she noted how the Rabbi embraced the men and led them into his home. "Those two have come take us to the land of Israel," she told her husband, and sure enough, not six months passed before the entire family had been uprooted and transformed into a clan of impoverished immigrants, living off ration cards in a leaky tent at the *Masmia* immigrant camp.

This morning, eight children plus a new pregnancy later, Mazal's sharp eyes still see plainly when trouble is coming. She's standing out by her front gate, watching Shlomi, her youngest, collect oranges from the orchard across the way. A light rain is falling, and the long, dark braid that descends down her back has gone frizzy and damp, but just as she's about to go back in, she spots Eli, the mailman working his way down the muddy

ART: SHOSHANNA GIVON, FROM SERIES "MIRIAM IS YOUR BELOVED DAUGHTER." IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

street. Though he's still several houses away, she can see a plain brown envelope with heavy black writing. And everyone knows what that means. A shudder, cold as a damp winter wind, passes through her.

"Good morning Madam," Eli calls out in his Moroccan accent as he approaches. He hands her the brown envelope and grins. "It looks like your Tehila is going to be a soldier."

"My daughter will be no such thing," she snaps, snatching the envelope from his hand. "Shoshana Grafi is setting her up with a housekeeping job at Sorroka hospital. She's starting there the minute she finishes school."

"Too bad. Tehila would make a great officer," he teases. "Won't you at least show her the summons?"

Mazal doesn't respond immediately to this provocation, but rather scowls thoughtfully as she crosses her arms atop her belly. No respectable daughter of a Yemenite family shames herself by enlisting. A girl who goes off to the army invites disaster. It's stupidly dangerous, like riding horses, or swimming in the sea. And even if she manages to come out body and soul intact, who would want her? "No daughter of mine is going to be a soldier," she calls out as Eli moves on to Yihye Nagar's house next door. "The army will just have to find some other girl."

Though she has tried to raise Tehila to be decent and modest, Mazal fears that in the ruthless struggle between the righteous and honorable ways of the past and the cheap dazzle of New

No respectable daughter of a Yemenite family shames herself by enlisting. It's stupidly dangerous, like riding horses, or swimming in the sea.

Ideas, the righteous and honorable are losing. Not long ago she opened the bathroom door to find Tehila swirling before the mirror in one of those horrible short skirts that the Rabbi speaks against so vehemently. The family radio, perched on a corner of the bathroom sink, was blasting out an offensive tune while Tehila sang along, her hips bouncing like a lewd dancer's, her legs thin and bare, and an unfamiliar flash of invitation lighting up her dark eyes. "Oh!" Tehila screamed in surprise, rushing to dim the noise. Mazal could only stare, speechless and mortified, until she managed to ask, "My daughter, what are you doing?"

Clearly, what the girl needs is a husband. Though she swears that she won't enlist, Mazal has seen the way she watches the female soldiers at the Thursday market. She studies them, from the green army caps, to the stripes and patches sewn into their

sleeves, down the length of their army skirts, to the mannish black shoes on their feet, as they sort through piles of colored hair clips and bottles of bright nail polish.

Turning the envelope over in her hands, a sharp memory comes into focus; Zohara, a fragment from the life that was once hers in Sadjan, rises in her mind. Zohara's mother, Nadra, was raped at fourteen by a Moslem tax collector. No one wanted her after that, and it was no surprise to anyone that she soon became a whore. They lived in a mud hovel on the far side of town. In the evenings, Nadra would open her courtyard gate and sit in the public view, dressed in purple robes, smoking a *nargila*. She lined her eyes with kohl and colored her lips with bright red lipstick. In her raspy voice she would call out to passersby with bold words and ugly laughter. From earliest childhood Mazal was forbidden to go near.

When the girls and women of Sadjan would gather in the afternoons to mend clothes or repair baskets, Zohara was never welcome. When they would meet at the village well, clay jugs balanced firmly on their shoulders, they would ignore her when she spoke. And at the henna celebrations for brides, when they pressed red mud into each other's palms, they would turn their backs to Zohara, so that she would know that on account of her mother, she was not welcome in the circle of the respectable.

Now, thirty years later, Mazal feels her heart sway in remorse. Yet the tradition teaches that a Jewish woman lives in honor.

And who better than the daughter of a whore to teach the daughters of respectable women the difference between them? Zohara, by a pitiless turn of fate, was doomed. Even if she cried and prayed each night, God was always far away. The Rabbis speak of rewards and punishments, but Mazal knows what she sees: in this world, there is no reward and no punishment; only fickle destiny, lying in wait and ready to pounce like a thief in the road.

How is it that even as she gazes out on the green fields and bright orchards, watching their colors grow clear and sharp in the rain, Mazal's thoughts are with the hot and dusty streets of Sadjan? Shlomi calls to her, his small arms struggling to clasp the fat oranges. The envelope is getting wet, the army logo dissolving into a black swirl. As she heads out to the orchard, she lets it slip, slimy as a worm, into the garbage pail by the gate. ■

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