

Miriam's Song

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Until our tenth birthday, my sister and I were one person. Identical twins, our closeness was not hindered, but enhanced, by our difference in gender. Our thoughts were as one thought. Since we could feel what the other was thinking, we had no need to speak. It was not until our third birthday that we spoke our first words, and then at the same time according to our mother, “Only because you had to communicate with the outside world,” by which she meant the rest of the family. When reminded by the shtetl women about our slowness in speaking—for signs of intelligence were eagerly sought in shtetl children and speaking early was one of them—she would reply, “Why should they speak? They speak to each other without speech. Even after they learned to speak, they talked with their father and me less than other children talk with their parents.” It was clear that she felt apart, especially from her daughter whom it was her duty to train in the ways of the home. As for me, Miriam, my sister, my twin, was more a mother to me.

We preferred our own company to that of other children. On the infrequent occasions when we joined their games, we had their advantage. In hide-and-seek we knew where the other was hiding and would mentally warn each other of whoever was “it.” And when one of us was “it,” we never “found” the other person—that was an unspoken rule, like all our rules. The game, like everything we did, was our conspiracy against the rest of the world, against our parents, against everything that was not us.

We were the darlings and the mystery of the shtetl. Adam and Eve we were called, since we seemed each a part of the other.

While I learned Torah, Miriam, as a girl groomed for the home, was taught only a few prayers, yet she knew as much as I did, to the astonishment of everyone but us. Whatever I learned was absorbed by her simultaneously. When I was honored with a ceremony on completing my studies, I felt that she felt she had earned it, too. The residents of the shtetl began to call us “Double Ayin,” for the Hebrew verbs where the two same letters coming together are written as one letter. “Hello, Double Ayin,” they would say, whether addressing me, or Miriam, or us together.

In the eyes of the shtetl our most amazing feat was our ability to suddenly start singing the same song at the same time without previous signal, even if we started in the middle instead of at the beginning, as we sometimes did. In this we were like the shofars of Reb Zalman and Reb Elya: if one was blown, the other would reverberate.

Our closeness continued, two magnets in each other's pull, until our tenth birthday. On this birthday, as on every one that had gone before, we received gifts we considered ours rather than mine, but then, at 10 o'clock in the morning—so vividly is it fixed in my memory—it happened. We were sitting in the kitchen, nibbling on the after breakfast snacks left by mother to tide us over from breakfast to lunch, when my twin began singing a song I had never heard, a song without words. Although I had never heard the melody before, it was not the melody that turned my blood to ice. She was singing *alone*, and not because I chose not to join in: *I hadn't felt the song*. I could only stare at her, numbed into a speechlessness that was the first borne of our failure to communicate, and if she was aware of my surprise (as I have no doubt that she was), she showed no sign, refusing even to send me an explanation. From that moment, we were two people instead of one.