If All the Seas Were Ink


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*If All the Seas were Ink* is a memoir of a decade in the life of a young woman, Ilana Kurshan, who moved to Jerusalem and began studying Talmud soon after her marriage fell apart. In this fascinating cross between confession and ethical legacy, told through the lens of rabbinic themes, Kurshan recounts her transformation from a “childless woman” (a divorcée) to a “joyous mother of children.” (Ps. 113:9) Loosely chronological, the book opens when she first took up her study of daf yomi (a page of Talmud a day) with Tractate Yoma at the age of twenty eight. Describing in fine detail the “spinsterish” life she led in those years of despair and self-blame, the reader can hear her own self-reflection – “how [eichah] had this happened?” – echo the Rabbis’ “how” in the wake of the Destruction of the Temple and Babylonian Exile (70 CE).

She recounts the break-up of her marriage and the attempt to change her life, through the lens of “Rosh haShanah” and “Ta’anit”, measuring time in images: writing in the Book of Life and remembering the first hard rain, the yoreh, of fall. (p. 67) She retells the story of a carpenter’s tragic betrayal by his apprentice who coveted his master’s wife (b. Gittin 58a). As Kurshan recounts the image of the carpenter’s tears dropping into the goblets he comes to serve his servant (now his master) and ex-wife (now his rival’s), one hears her own tears drop along with God’s decree to destroy the Temple and Jerusalem. (p. 150) There are disturbing flashbacks to her struggles with anorexia as an undergraduate at Harvard, told through the lens of the Nazir, one who vowed to abstain from wine, consecrate his life to God by taking ascetic vows, refrain from cutting his hair, and avoid corpses, graves, and tombs, which are considered impure in the Jewish tradition, (Numbers 6:1-21). Like the Nazir, Kurshan is drawn to self-denial, but she has learned to untie some of those strictures and loosen up. (p. 135) She also recounts the difficulty of being female and single in Jerusalem. Yet, through “Ketubot” (laws concerned with terms of marriage), she realizes that she is more like a man of the rabbinic world.
than a woman, whose life was so economically and socially restricted. She also recounts comic scenes: a man’s flirtation with her on a plane ride while studying the Talmudic tractate “Sotah.” As she muses on seduction, she quotes Billy Collin’s evocative “Taking off Emily Dickenson’s Clothes.”

There is something teasing about Kurshan’s own “Dickensonian sensibility.” She claims to be intensely private, while revealing deeply vulnerable aspects of herself over the course of the memoir. One wonders at her ability to pivot between the private and public, or, rather, “published” life that she simultaneously lives, especially since she has worked in the literary field as a translator, editor, and foreign rights agent. It is precisely the Talmud that gives her the courage. She is not only telling her own story. As the reader traces her transformation from a desolate woman to a busy mother, singing Psalms while walking with her toddler or twin infant girls to gan (pre-school), one follows the transformation of the Jewish people. Where once the city was laid “waste…desolate,” one now hears “the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride” in the streets of Jerusalem, (Jeremiah 33:10-11). The story is the story of one woman’s transformation, but it resonates with the story of a city, a people, and a nation. This is a beautiful book about personal change from a voice as clear and as poignant as Zion herself calling out through the Prophets.