Chevruta of Soil

Dorothy Field

Just this morning I was shelling out beans–their dry pods bled of color, arced like angels’ wings, horny as a scarab, the beans themselves spotted pebbles, lifeless, yet they swell up fine when I cook them to plump rebirth—and I was thinking of you: you Ben Zoma, you Ben Akai, always talking Pardes, Pardes, as if you ever left those study halls where you write and argue your days away. You’d shrivel like my beans if I didn’t bring up a bit of kishke, a few latkes, a little shalet. You talk of chevruta, the meeting of minds, while I’m here, fingernails ragged, hands stained from the chevruta of soil. Mayim mayim, waters above, waters below: it should rain on your heads, on all our heads for that matter—here’s me waiting in line with the other women, hauling buckets from the well below town, no rain these last three months. Now I worry the well will fail. And that Acher, talking about cutting down shoots—sophistry and navel gazing—where does he think his food comes from, hasn’t he ever noticed his wife on the ladder picking the figs he can’t get enough of? A chevruta, yes—manure and lime, scions and grafts. Listen, like Rabbi Akiva says—and he should know, started a woodsman, then turned scholar—Go in Shalom. Me, I don’t want to stir things up. Men with the books, women with the soil. Who am I to make trouble? But before I get back to my garden, I have something more to say: When my peas poke up through wintry soil, a wobbly row of tiny green girl scouts, sleeping beauties waking to spring, that’s Pardes. If the rains fail and crops shrivel, still Pardes, because even when the bean pods are empty, somehow endive and leeks thrive. Summers when the codling moth takes the apples, the grapes flourish. Or vice versa. Pardes
when the neighbor’s cow nibbles
the tips off the young quince trees.
True Pardes when for once the rust fly misses
my ferny carrot forest. Shekinah forbid,
we should expect every year from everything
a bumper crop. That’s women’s wisdom:
No expectations. Weighing the beans in your hand,
loving what is.

Chevruta – Hebrew: connection, two people who study together
Pardes – Hebrew: paradise
Mayim – Hebrew: water
Shekinah – Hebrew: feminine principal of god
Kishke, Latkes, Shalet – Yiddish: traditional Jewish foods

Jew

He remembers the rag and bone men,
he was just a kid in Britain,
a bag of old clothes, These your mamma’s bloomers? their cockney kids would say,
holding up ratty old purple-flowered undies.
Bloody Jews, his father snarled.
I can’t use that word, he says.

I am a Jew, I say.

Not a Jewish person, not
an Israelite, not someone
of the Hebrew persuasion.

Say the word. Use the word.

When I was a kid in New York,
my mother would say: Too Jewish,
a family that was all over each other,
Too Jewish, men in yarmulkes, anyone
eating kosher, going to shul,
Too Jewish, observing anything
at all. Jewish blood, but raised
so it didn’t show (except for her face,
and mine – you couldn’t miss us).

There is no other word
for what I am.

Suck out the poison.

Jew.

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