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The Nafkaminer Rebbe

I knew interesting times had caught up with me as soon as the Rebbe and his four-person'd entourage sat down at the table in my Shabbes room.

I had been alone with Masha/Moshe, polishing the prose on my e-mail when the doorbell rang. E-mails are not an ideal medium for rabbinic responsa, but they're still a lot better than the telephone. It's in the detail, you see, in the fiddly little appendix that the differences between an off-the-cuff reply and a solemn rabbinic ruling are enshrined. We moved away from the computer and cleared a little space among the reference books on the table; the writing would wait. Truth is, I prefer responding to rabbinical questions directly, even when a query doesn't appear urgent to me, it may be a very pressing matter to the questioner. This one concerned body modification, nipple piercing and the Mikveh - ritual bath. Questions concerning Mikveh usually imply someone is thinking of sex. Finding a rabbinical ruling that will allow a couple to have sex, tonight, so my preceptors drummed into me, is as important as springing someone out of prison.

Running down to answer the door, I found the Nafkaminer Rebbe with shining face and silver top walking stick, smiling at me winningly through the window. The Rebbe and I go back a couple of generations at least, perhaps more. We've bumped into each other here and there, around the world, knocking on similar doors in search of funding for pet projects, attending weddings of family and visiting mutual friends.

First there were niceties to be observed. After ushering him in and seating him at the head of the table, I furnished a bowl of fruit, some plates and a knife, a stack of drinking glasses and a bottle of seltzer. The four young and earnest men accompanying him each grabbed a glass. The Rebbe waited patiently while all the glasses were being filled before noticing that we were one glass short. Masha/Moshe jumped up saying, in English, "There are plastic cups in the cupboard over the sink, I'll fetch one."

"The Rebbe doesn't allow blessings to be made over drink in plastic cups," I countered. "Bring a coffee cup."

The Rebbe, preoccupied, peeling a tangerine from the bowl, noticed me filling my coffee cup with seltzer and looked at me sideways over his spectacles, asking, in Yiddish, "How do you know all my secrets?"

"I was once by your father in law, in his Sukkah¹. There were lots of people there; he was pouring everyone a glass of wine. When he ran out of glasses he apologized, asking people to finish up drinking so the glasses might be washed and used again," I replied. "When

¹ Sukkah: A temporary and rudimentary dwelling house used during the Feast of Tabernacles, in the Autumn.

someone suggested bringing plastic cups, he turned quite emphatic. Make a blessing over something in a plastic cup? No.”

The Rebbe nodded calmly.

"Was that the year of his own wine?"

"Yes," I said, "*Yismechu Anovim* - Let the Grapes Rejoice." Actually, *Yismechu Anovim* doesn't mean grapes at all; it's a quote from psalms and refers to something else entirely. But hasidim take license with Hebrew; words are there to be played with. When you've never watched cartoons in your life, or read a comic book, you'd be surprised at what you can find hilarious, and hasidim celebrate levity. The Nafkaminer Rebbe has never encountered G. K. Chesterton or C. S. Lewis, but he'd appreciate the quote, "Satan fell through force of gravity," I know he would. I just don't have the patience to make all the cross-cultural translations; I make Yiddish jokes instead.

The Rebbe nodded again, but couldn't keep the smile out of his eyes. One year his father in law tried his hand at winemaking for the Sukkah feast. It was a rollicking sort of wine, a fizz-me-fizzer decoction. The following summer saw a riot of babies and circumcisions and parties and harassed fathers.

Splitting the tangerine into segments, he made the blessing and ate a slice. I stuck out my hand; he put three or four pieces into it. I made the blessing and ate. Masha/Moshe, taking a cue from me, also stuck out a hand.

I was seventeen years old and a *yeshiva bochur*² studying in Israel. It was Purim, the carnival day when anyone may pass as anyone else, and I was coaching my cousin, Ruth, on how properly to comport herself at the Vishnitzer Rebbe's table in Bnei Brak, while arguing continually against her mad scheme. Not that I thought her desire to pass herself off as a young man on Purim was necessarily a bad idea, but somewhere in the back of my head a niggling worm of doubt kept crawling up with the warning that there would be consequences. I showed Ruth how to dress her long hair to mimic *Peyos*, the sidelocks hasidim dangle in front of their ears, but it was not my idea to lend her my beaver hat, and it was almost entirely not my fault that she forgot to remove her nail polish. The incident never made the Orthodox Jewish newspapers because, after the fracas, the stampede and the evacuation, guests did reassemble, the broken glass was swept away, tables were laid again, and the Rebbe pretended it never happened. My beaver hat, of course, was never retrieved and the incident has become the stuff of hasidic urban legend. You'd be surprised how much of a giveaway the hands can be. When we examine our fingernails, men do it palm upwards, fingers crooked, while women usually do it palm downwards, did you know that?

Masha/Moshe spent three trying years practicing how to pass for a man. He wasn't the one who was worried, I was. He didn't even sweat this encounter with the Nafkaminer Rebbe.

² Your average *yeshiva bochur*, a student in a rabbinical academy, is a vastly undereducated, socially inept, future father of eight. He spends his days dreaming about marriage and automobiles, and his nights drinking coffee and eating the very pizza with which he will eventually not feed his family of eight.

This far into the F2M³ journey he expected no less of himself. But then he didn't know Rebbes as I did.

I held my breath but the moment passed without incident; tangerine slices traveled from hand to hand and nothing exploded. I breathed again. The seltzer was similarly dispatched, *I'chaim* cheers were exchanged and the room became silent.

The Rebbe quietly began. "The world says⁴ you were very close with Reb Shlomo Carlebach, that he ordained you. You are a very gifted man. I have heard that your Torah is a very high and joyous light to uplift the downtrodden and illumine the darkest places. But please listen to me. I have also heard that you shake hands with women, that you hug and kiss them, even. I, myself, I one-hundred percent don't believe them, you should know this, my sweetest friend, you should know this. How could it be so?⁵ It could not be so. But if they, the world, say this, then there are those for whom this is a truth. So, I'm coming to speak about this with you. Our grandfathers were childhood friends. Everybody knows the famous story of the amulet your ancestor wrote for my great grandmother, with which she passed through the enemy lines invisible as an angel, like a wraith in the fog. The rebbetzin - my wife reads your holy book every Shabbes before we sleep. I hear your musical recordings issuing forth from my kitchen. But these things, these holy works must not be taken captive by the powers that be, by the dark side. Listen to me my holy brother..."

The Rebbe put his hand on my arm as he spoke, but I was already tuning him out, thinking about our matriarch Rachel.

The Bible narrates how Jacob and Rachel met at the well in the land of Haran. He kissed her. It's a bit of a problem for Orthodox Jews, is that verse in Genesis. What could the Bible text possibly mean when it says right out that Jacob kissed her? He kissed her on the street, on the mouth? It goes without saying that the commentators argue whether it really was a kiss on the mouth or not⁵; medieval Jewish commentators are like that - and it's just the kind of detail they would pick apart. But, as an article of faith, we were taught as kids that the lives of the biblical patriarchs and matriarchs are lessons in proper conduct. Well... except, of course, in cases where their behavior contradicts the lessons teacher is trying to hammer into us.

I once heard two hasidim arguing about Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach for whom touching and kissing was an article of faith, in and of itself.

"How can you hold from him?" the one hasid earnestly entreated his colleague. "He kissed with women!"

³ Female to Male. aka Boychick, Tefillindyke, Niddahmorph, Shiksabait, the names are still being savored and discarded, but transsexual is definitely out, as are androgyne, bigendered, omnigendered, polygendered or inner sexed.

⁴ When a hasid uses the expression 'the world says,' it can mean my wife says, my brother told me, I heard it from a taxi driver on the way here, or I overheard it in the mikveh this morning.

⁵ E.g. could a man who never saw a naked *flame* until he was sixty-five years old, have known how to kiss a woman? The Hebrew word for 'kiss' must be a variant of the phrase, 'bearing gifts.' He brought her a duty-free souvenir from a gift shop in the Holy Land, that's what it most probably means.

“But did he discriminate?” argued the other. “Did he kiss only the young ones, the fit ones? No! He kissed the old and the ugly ones; he kissed them all. From here we can learn that his *kavvana*⁶ was for the sake of heaven.”

The unspoken assumption is that touching leads to kissing, and kissing leads to babies. You can't argue with Orthodox Jews about assumptions or customs. When we lose the logical argument by the Socratic method we revert to the tradition. When the tradition is shown, through the Talmudic method, to accept diversity, we revert to mysticism. Shlomo never argued at all. He hugged and kissed like crazy. You'd think, to watch him, his ambition was to kiss every Jew in the world, and you'd be right.

In hasidic areas there are special coin trays on store counters, so that money does not have to change hands between the sexes, because making change can lead to touching. Touching can lead to hugging, hugging to kissing, kissing to babies, and babies can lead, God forbid, to mixed dancing.

The Nafkaminer Rebbe was wrapping up his exhortations. I could sense the urge to respond welling up inside me. “I have to tell you,” I said quietly when he was done speaking, “I only recall Shlomo being angry at me one time, and that was when I avoided hugging a woman who was expecting a hug from me.”

There was a long silence.

The goodbye bustling began. We made all the polite noises at one another. He gathered his coat skirts and hung the walking stick over his arm; I escorted him to the door where he turned to me and gave me his blessing. Taking my right hand in his, his eyes turning back in their sockets, he spoke at some length. His hasidim, the four intense young men, swayed back and forth in time with the flow of words. I murmured all the responses in the right places and answered Amen at the end. I opened the door for the Rebbe. He laid a hand on the *mezuzah* scroll attached to the doorpost, and kissed it, straightened the broad rimmed beaver hat on his head and smiled again at me.

"Where is that bochur with whom you were learning when I arrived? I must wish for him too."

Masha/Moshe squeezed into the small vestibule with us. The Rebbe took the proffered hand without hesitation and was struck mute as a corpse.

The first rabbinic question Masha/Moshe had for me, back when he was still a she, 18 years old and beginning his transition, was this: If, once I am proficient at passing as a man, I find myself the tenth man in a *minyán* - synagogue quorum, what should I do? Should I

⁶ *Kavvana* - Intention is to religiosity what location is to real estate. The desirability of a location grows with the quality of the real estate while the price of the real estate grows with the desirability of the location. In Orthodox circles *kavvanot* – Intentions are traded like gold futures. The more complicated the *kavvanah* the more efficacious the prayer. Of course, Rebbes pray with such highly evolved *kavvana*, the intent is simply to obey the command to pray. But that's too simple for us; we thrive on complication.

make an excuse and leave the room until a tenth male has joined, so as not force my issues on them, or can I just not say anything and allow everyone to assume I am who I am, or what?

Orthodox Jews worship in groups, with ten males the minimum requirement for the recitation of the mourner's *kadish* prayer and other important components of the service. Men and women worship in separate areas or rooms, and only the men are directly involved in the rituals. Women are never more than spectators in the synagogue. Most Orthodox Jews would argue that Masha/Moshe is no more than a male impersonator, transgressing the biblical prohibition against wearing men's clothing. But modern Jewish Law, halacha, is more sophisticated than the average Joseph on the street may be aware of. Rabbis have been answering questions about sex for as long as men and women have been interested in it, and they know that sexuality and gender issues are going to dominate the 21st century's Jewish agenda the way technology was the focus of the 20th. As soon as a rabbi responds in writing to a question, there exist the beginnings of rabbinic responsa literature on a subject. Somewhere in a book published not long ago, perhaps, Jerusalem legal scholar Rabbi Waldenberg may have written that when a man undergoes a sex change operation his wife does not need a divorce to release her from the marriage. And it is true; the wife may well turn to Waldenberg for best ways to extricate herself from her legal dilemmas.

But her husband will most probably turn to me.

Beads of sweat popped out on the Nafkaminer Rebbe's forehead and his face became pale as a shroud. He dropped Masha/Moshe's hand, and, turning to me, said plaintively, "Why didn't you tell me this is not a man, why did you let me touch?"

"I, I, but ..." I began stammering, shaking my head, knowing that nothing would defuse the bomb going off in my vestibule.

My life is punctuated with pyrotechnics of this sort. Explosions, curses and the sound of breaking glass are the muzak of my spiritual elevator.

At that moment Masha/Moshe cut in, saying, in perfect Yiddish, "The Rebbe should forgive, but in this house at least, it has long been forgotten that I was ever a girl."

"That makes it worse," retorted the Rebbe testily. "If we forget who we are, we have to begin again from the beginning. You are mixing things up precisely when the world needs to have everything clear and sorted."

"Go complain to the artisan who made me," said Masha/Moshe quietly, paraphrasing a Talmudic debater, and with some aplomb, I thought.

"No, you go back and complain to the artisan who made you," snapped the Rebbe.

There was sharp hissing intake of breath all around. Had the Rebbe actually pronounced a death sentence? To the seven of us standing in the cramped space it was as though the world was holding its breath, afraid to exhale.

The Rebbe turned to me, saying, “Nu, all this time I was thinking you’ve finished with trying to shock the world. Are you are only just starting?”

In response I grabbed a piece of notepaper from my pocket and scribbled a *kvitt'l*, the traditional petition all hasidim write to their rebbes when afraid for their lives. I tried handing it to the Rebbe, but he only touched it with his fingertips and pushed it back at me, saying, “No. These *kvitt'lech* I make you the rebbe for, to read.” I nodded and tucked it back into my pocket. He bade me goodnight and left without more ado.

“The Rebbe doesn’t frighten me,” said Masha/Moshe later as we cleared away the plates and cups. “I sent Masha back to the artisan who made her many years ago.”

But the Rebbe sure frightened me. Masha/Moshe can pass anywhere as a man. If the Nafkaminer Rebbe can sense just by touching that the hand he’s holding is female, he’s obviously tuned into a higher frequency than the one I’m receiving. To my way of thinking, his implied curse was no laughing matter.

Masha/Moshe can pass anywhere except in the Mikveh, and he’s working on that too. His breasts were surgically removed before starting on a course of testosterone injections, because with male hormones comes hair, and the hair growing around the sutures and incisions can cause infection. I never wanted all this knowledge, but Masha/Moshe is preparing for ordination at a prestigious rabbinic seminary on the east coast, thanks in no small part to my encouragement and involvement, so I’d better know what’s going on.

He feels cheated out of a Bar Mitzvah, but there’s not much to be done about it now. At age thirteen she was a demure, OK, not so demure girl, attending a Jewish day school in Borough Park, Brooklyn. I was there when his parents disowned her and threw him out of the house. I was there in the synagogue on that first morning when he went in as a 19-year old man and put on his *tefillin*⁷. I was there when he went trembling to the reader’s table and made the blessings over the Torah for the first time, as any Bar Mitzvah boy would have done.

To tell or not to tell, that’s the question the Rebbe’s visit had placed in sharp relief. **When** does the need to know outweigh the right to privacy? What happens when communal, religious law and the physical, spiritual-psychosexual journey of an individual intersect?

I said nothing to Masha/Moshe, but felt the *kvitt'l*, refused by the Rebbe, burning a hole in my pocket. We sat down to finish what the Rebbe’s visit had interrupted, the e-mail

⁷ Long black leather straps bound around the upper left arm from biceps down to the hand, and wound lovingly around the fingers like engagement rings. A similar arrangement wrapped around the head, with black leather straps coming from the nape of the neck, forward over the shoulders and down the front of the body; one to the waist and another to the groin.

rabbinical response. Nipple jewelry can cause problems for women who use the Mikveh on a monthly basis because this particular piercing can take so long to heal, sometimes as much as a year. If removed during that time it's almost impossible to put back in. Now, the Mikveh ceremony doesn't require they necessarily be removed, only that the water be able to penetrate the piercing. But pierced nipples often develop a film or scab while healing and that can interfere with the flow of water over the whole body and into the nooks and crannies. Rotating the nipple barbell or ring while in the Mikveh water can be painful and increase the risk of infection. My questioner wanted to know whether it was OK for her to rub Vaseline into the piercing before dunking in the Mikveh?

Masha/Moshe knows more than any young rabbi in the world today about body-modification and the halacha. I allow him to answer most questions as they come up. It's his sense of humor I have to keep in check. After looking over the final draft I made him remove the advice tagged on the end: Did you know that a clitoral hood piercing heals in less than two weeks? Definitely a rabbinically preferred procedure.

"Our job is not to advocate genital piercing among Jewish women," I remonstrated. "Just answer the question."

"Yes, Rabbi," he murmured. "And be grateful I didn't add that a good clitoral hood piercing can be obtained without feeling more than a small prick."

It was only later that night, after he went back to her lodgings and I remained alone at the table again that I took out the kvitt'l and read it to myself.

"Masha/Moshe son/daughter of Chana, for health and long years and for success in Torah studies."