Chained Woman

Writing Sample

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At the butchershop Avi finishes talking with Sarah

AVI
Sarah. You seem very nice and I’m sure that you are modest and proper but I cannot in good faith pursue a woman who is still married. I am new to the community and besides, one should only date if marriage is the intended goal so, you understand, I cannot come to Shabbos at your house.

SARAH
I wasn’t saying we should- It was just an invitation. I would never-- No. I understand.

AVI
Good day, Sarah. Thanks for the Chinese food. I’m sure it will be delightful.

He leaves.

SARAH
Yeah. Good day.

She picks up her knife and stares at it, hums another soulful tune.

Lights up on Rabbi Benaroch.

BENAROCH
Wouldn’t you want to help this poor soul, if it was within your power? Of course there are rules that we must observe that we must live by, but a good rabbi can find the loophole in the law that allows for flexibility - a rabbi who has insufficient knowledge of the Talmud will err on the stricter side cause he is unsure of his ability to find the loopholes. Am I not a good rabbi? No.... No. I am a great one.

Lights down on the Rabbi.

She raises the knife above her head, ready to really chop into the piece of beef on the counter
CHANA
Sarah! With God as my witness, enough with that knife, I could go to an asylum and find a dozen *mishugas* who could work the counter without giving me this kind of *tsuris*!

She puts the knife down and leans wistfully on the counter. Chana notices and puts on a grand smile.

CHANA
(slightly forced)
You were right about that square cut. I told Reuben, *Rhinoceroses* aren’t kosher.

Sarah sighs.

CHANA
He didn’t laugh either. But he wouldn’t know a joke if it crawled up his apron and bit him in the *pupik*.

Sarah manages a dutiful laugh.

CHANA
Who was that young man? I’ve never seen him before.

SARAH
(still wistful)

CHANA
There are Jews in Alaska?

SARAH
(sighing)
That’s what I said.

CHANA
I’m sure he has many invitations, but did you invite him and his wife for dinner. One thing I know, there’s no greater deed than being a good host.
SARAH
I did. He’s actually a widower. He wouldn’t come.

CHANA
This is what I’ve been meaning to talk to you about before that rack of beef fell of the hook in the back. It’s enough already, you need to have meaning in your life. You need that gett so you can move on and be a proper woman.

SARAH
Just let me do this job. Let me slice and chop. I can’t do anything else. I have you. I have Binyamin. I’m healthy. What can a man give me? More pain?

CHANA
What? You’re giving up? We don’t give up.

SARAH
I’m not giving up. But why raise false hope?

CHANA
A good woman always has a solution, Sarale. I saw Batsheva Zweig at the market yesterday. Remember her daughter Leah, you used to sew dolls together when you were little. You remember her? With the nose and the hair?

SARAH
Yes. Yes. Mamma. I remember her.

CHANA
Good. Her husband, may he stay healthy enough to end his own life, he was asking for a half million dollars, even kidnapped their son and daughter, more than once. More than once, and he refused to give her the divorce. They brought him to the Jewish council. They shunned him at Synagogue, refused to let him participate in the rituals, but still he was recalcitrant. He was gone, somewhere in South America, with her children for three years. Do you want this to be us? My heart cannot carry that kind of grief, Sarah. Can yours?

SARAH
What Yaakov has put me through, I’m not sure my heart has room for anything. At least, here I feel like I’m making something. My heart is tough, but meat, at least I can tenderize.
CHANA
That’s no life for a woman. You need a man. And don’t tell me you can’t handle it. Don’t hide behind that cleaver. You’re a Kandelshein and you’re my daughter. Like a chuck roast needs time and care to become tender and delicious, so can this problem be solved, in good time and with the right tools.

SARAH
So now we’re pieces of meat?

CHANA
Oh, stop it, Sarah. There is this man in Brooklyn.

Sarah looks at her mother confused.

Lights up on Benaroch.

BENAROCH
How can I, a man of God, stand idle, while innocent women are being abused, abused by the very religion to which they seek salvation? I did it not for pride, nor for financial remuneration. I assure you. God understands my actions, even though some men will not. God understands.

CHANA
This man, this Rabbi. He is an expert in resolving situations like yours. He got Leah Zweig her Gett. Her mother made another shidduch- she’s getting married again, bless God, next week. You’re a young woman and you too could be married again, start again. Your son needs a father.

SARAH
You’re a young woman too, ma. You can--

CHANA
I have loved deeply, and my heart is open for you and your son, and hopefully, a bigger, much bigger family to dote over as well. That is my place and this is what I need for you.

Sarah picks up the knife. Chana grabs her wrist and she drops it back down.
SARAH
This rabbi, he’s not the one who-

CHANA
Yes. An orthodox rabbi with, let’s say, some unorthodox methods of getting the gett.

SARAH
Unorthodox?

CHANA
You know how the Lord is both a merciful and wrathful God?

SARAH
(...) Yes.

CHANA
Well this rabbi trades on the more wrathful side. And his reputation proceeds him. For all that gonif blowhard husband has put you through, he’s due a little wrath.

(picks up the knife)
No! A lot of wrath. A great deal! A large dose of wrath! If it was just the money he was asking for, we’d find a way, if he’d give you the gett, I’d put his name over your father’s on this door, but he wants my grandson. Over my dead body, Sarah. I will fight. Will you? Where’s your wrathful side?

SARAH
You’re lucky, you’re husband died, mine is ten blocks away, breathing God’s air! Looming over me like a putrid thunder cloud, raining--- all over me, and there are times when I’m breaking down a cow that I dream it was him, as I slice though the veins, as I watch the excess fat fall to the floor, I can almost hear his screams. But he’s still the father of my son. What do I tell my son, when he hears about this, which he will! You know he will. Maybe God wants us to be in pain. Maybe I should just learn to dwell in it. That’s all I’m trying to do and you’re making it harder.
CHANA
Some suffering is good. God needs for us to suffer, but not like this, Sarale. Not when their might be a way. God wants us to try. And if you won’t try, I’ll try for you.

SARAH
Let me go help Reuben. Let me think. I could think when I work.

CHANA
No time for that. He’s on his way. He’ll be here any moment.

Sarah looks around in a fury, trying to find a way to calm herself, she grabs the hunk of beef.

SARAH
Mother, it’s not your life! You can’t--

The Rabbi appears at the door.

BENAROCH

Sarah shakes her head in disbelief. Chana lights up, taking in this man’s composer, his swagger, his tan. She runs to get him a stool to sit on and then goes back behind the counter to fix him something to eat.

BENAROCH``
(sitting on the stool)
I’ve been informed that your husband is refusing to grant you the get. Is this true?

CHANA
Yes, Rav Benaroch.

BENAROCH
And you have been to the Jewish Council?
CHANA
Yes, Rav Benaroch.

BENAROCH
And they have imposed sanctions and penalties against him?

CHANA
They have, they have, Rabbi! And it hasn’t done a thing. That no good--AH-He was a he a knave already in his mother’s belly! He just goes to a different congregation that doesn’t care- We need action now, Rabbi. I am sorry for my outburst but this enrages me so I--

BENAROCH
That is quite fine and natural, Mrs. Kandelshein. Chana, is it, may I address you as such.

CHANA
Of course you may, Rabbi.

BENAROCH
Chana, the Lord has imbued us with a range of emotions. Certainly each one has a time and place. There are many ways to praise Him. You may be devoted in your anger. You may wail to the heavens if you wish. And you may call me, Shlomo.

CHANA
(blushing a little)
Um... I couldn’t.

BENAROCH
And your husband, one Dovid Fishman, he is extorting you for the sum of three hundred and fifty thousand dollars and custody of your only son, which he has been denied by the secular courts?

Sarah doesn’t answer.

CHANA
Sarah, answer the Rabbi. He’s come all this way.

A pause.
SARAH

Yes, Rabbi.

Chana goes around the counter with the plate of food. He mumbles a prayer, and bites into. Considers.

BENAROCH

Could use a little pepper.

CHANA

My sincerest- I could get you some. Many people around are sensitive to even the slightest trace of spice, you understand-- I’m--

She is about to go back to the kitchen but he calms her down with a wave of his hand.

BENAROCH

No it’s delicious. Please. I couldn’t impose. Though I will say, I have just returned from South America, and very much enjoyed the heat of their cuisine.

CHANA

So you can help us, Rabbi?

He eats slowly, contemplating. Sarah stares at him, circumspect. Chana watches him in awe.

BENAROCH

Yes. Indeed. Of course. Yes.

They lean in, waiting for him to elaborate.

BENAROCH

I believe you are prime candidates for my services.

Chana rejoices.
Praise the Lord, for he is good!

What will you do?

Only what is necessary to ensure that you get your divorce, and that you will be free.

I’ve heard things.

You use karate?

Seriously, Sarale. Imagine, a Karate Rabbi. Have you been reading Binyamin’s comic books?

Well... Yes. It’s true. In a sense. We don’t use karate per se. But, I did spend eighteen months in my youth, as the Rabbi of a synagogue in Kobe, Japan, and I was an able student of the martial art.

What do you mean, per se?
CHANA
Sarah, excuse yourself. This man is a righteous man and authority on Jewish Divorce.

BENAROCH
I appreciate your vigilance, young Sarah. I assure you two things, I will use every means at my disposal, and everything I will do will be as kosher as the holy meat which you provide to this devoted community. You will have justice.

SARAH
Will justice make the pain I feel go away? Will it teach my young son right from wrong? Will it inspire me, Rabbi? Will it give life meaning, will it restore my faith, the one thing I thought he couldn’t touch, or will it just add to the misery that my marriage has caused, eating away at my soul?

The rabbi gets up. Chana gets up to castigate Sarah, but Benaroch holds her back with a simple lift of his hand. He walks to the counter and picks up the cleaver. This affects Sarah.

BENAROCH
Yes, Sarah. Yes. I believe it will. It will do all those things. God knows there is no healing without vengeance. I don’t revel in the extreme nature of what must be done, but Sarah, when you got married, your two souls became one, they were fused together. The divorce process must be the opposite of this, the reverse. It is a spiritual amputation, severing one part of the united soul from the other, creating two separate beings. It is painful. When a limb becomes so diseased that it endangers the rest of the body, the patient is faced with a horrible choice: to face the pain of amputation, or risk worse suffering by leaving things as they are. What I am offering is the last resort. We do everything possible to avoid needing to amputate. If there is a remote chance that the limb can be salvaged, even with great effort and expense, it is worth a try. Sarah, do you think there is a possibility that your marriage can be salvaged?

CHANA
Oh course not!

Benaroch looks at Sarah. She looks away.
CHANA
Sarah! Heaven has sent us this man. Who are we to turn him away? I can’t watch you like this. If your father may his memory be blessed, was still alive, he’d die of grief for you, his only daughter, an outsider in the community he helped build.

SARAH
It’s my life. I can’t just give you control! From Yaakov to you!

Sarah winces. Grabs her chest.

SARAH
Excuse me. I have heartburn.

He takes out a Tums from his breast pocket and offers it to her. She declines.

BENAROCH
You are of course familiar with the Tehilim- the Psalms, written by the great warrior poet, King David. Psalm 27: “The Lord is my light and my saviour—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid?” Many interpret this line as: if I have faith in God, if I know he’s with me, than I have nothing to fear, than I am invincible. Inspiring? Yes. Realistic? Of course not. If you stand in front of a speeding subway car, even with all the deepest faith in God in your heart and soul, certainly you should be afraid. God won’t stop you from becoming a pancake. What King David was actually saying was when you have true faith, it’s OK to be afraid, you can accept your fear, without letting it overwhelm you. You can move on. It’s OK to be afraid Sarah. God is with you. I am with you. And your mother. Look at her strength. Let it inspire you. You are a bright and caring young woman, Sarah. Be strong, be strong, and let us be strengthened! You deserve the happiness that God intends for you.

SARAH
Maybe he doesn’t intend happiness for me.

CHANA
How can you say such a thing?
BENAROCH 
The salvation of God, Sarah, is like the blink of an eye. God can change everything in an instant. Time is meaningless. The Lord is infinite.

A moment.

SARAH 
The Lord is infinite but the day is not. Rabbi, there’s traffic. And Shabbos starts fairly soon. You should head out or you’ll never make it back to Brooklyn before sundown.

A long pause.

BENAROCH 
She has wisdom your daughter. Do not burden yourself with these matters this Sabbath, allow yourself to revel in the light of the sabbath queen. You have my contact information. Good Shabbos.

He gets up.

CHANA 
Good Shabbos, Rabbi. I will talk to her. She’ll change her mind. We’ll call you again. God bless you.

SARAH 
Good Shabbos.

Benaroch leaves, humming a Shabbos tune.