

The Promised Life

Love, with Strings Attached

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Introduction

Sophie, a student in Amsterdam, is madly in love with Max, a charismatic art dealer from an Orthodox Jewish background. Sophie has a Jewish father she has never known. Her mother isn't a fan of religion and never misses an opportunity to say so. Max is a modern man. He doesn't stick to the age-old rules of Judaism, but when it comes to the crunch, he feels an obligation to his parents – both Holocaust survivors – to marry a 'proper' Jewish woman.

But you can't choose who you fall in love with. Sophie goes to Jerusalem to study at a *yeshiva* so that she can convert to Orthodox Judaism. Max, who isn't involved in this process because converting for someone else is considered taboo, stays behind in Amsterdam.

Once in Jerusalem, Sophie's idea of Orthodox Judaism slowly starts to change. She finds something liberating in the submission the faith assumes and in the clarity the laws and commandments give her. She tries, slowly but surely, to immerse herself in her new life, filled with rules.

Sophie meets people who challenge her newly acquired ideas about Orthodox Judaism, like her roommate Mila who is trying to convert so she can get a residence permit and stay in Israel. And Amos, the *rabbani's* nephew, a Mossad agent who is recovering after being attacked. He's not a fan of Orthodox Judaism. He sees himself as more of a Zionist.

Sophie starts to find her feet in the promised land, but in the background Max is growing increasingly impatient. He misses her and tries to tempt her to meet up in secret. Sophie isn't sure that's such a good idea. What if they are caught? Then all her efforts to live a pious life would

have been in vain. You hear about girls who get sent packing just before the *beth din*. But Max puts her under more and more pressure.

Between all these conflicting forces, Sophie has to develop her own identity. Who is she? And what does she really want?

The extracts below are the prologue and chapter 27. The prologue takes place in Jerusalem. Sophie has just arrived and has been asked by the rabbi's wife to help prepare for the Shabbat. She is entering a new world – one that is completely unfamiliar. You share this journey with her.

In chapter 27, we meet Amos. Sophie has been in Israel for a while now. Amos is an attractive young man who asks probing questions. In this chapter he walks Sophie home. The light-heartedness of the meeting does her the world of good. But it also causes her to start doubting herself again: is she really on the right path?

Prologue

The Shuk in Jerusalem, September 2017

In the centre of Jerusalem, between Jaffa Road in the north and Agrippas Street in the south, is Mahane Yehuda Market – affectionately referred to by *Jerusalemites* as the *Shuk*. Narrow streets filled with stalls and stands branch off through the pious roads of the Holy city like the roots of an old oak. Handcarts piled high with citrus fruit stand alongside counters where *bourekas* and *baklava* in date syrup await the eager hands of the *yeshiva buchers*. Here and there a mother gives in to a child whining for a packet of Bamba or a brightly coloured candy cane.

If I had been alone, I would have stopped at every stall to marvel at the produce, to breathe in the smells, to look at the aubergines reflecting the sunlight or to listen to the hollow sound the marbled watermelon makes under the hands of the market trader. But I am walking with Zelda, or rather behind Zelda. I am following the swaying derriere of our rabbi's wife. I mustn't lose her in the growing crowd. In my one hand a plastic bag containing four freshly slaughtered chickens, in the other arm a bunch of fresh mint. I think of Max, how proud he would be if he could see me now. He's still in Amsterdam. But he's always with me in my thoughts.

A lanky young man in a three-quarter-length jacket with a rope around his waist approaches, his hips swaying like a power walker's. He holds two plaited loaves against his chest. His sidelocks move to the rhythm of his footsteps. I forget to step aside in time and his shoulder collides with my chest. He starts scolding me. I understand simple Hebrew, but this man speaks quickly. Zelda comes to my aid. She apologises for me: the disciple, who doesn't yet know all the mores of her new environment, who doesn't yet understand that you step aside if a yeshiva bucher is rushing to get his shopping done on a Friday, who doesn't understand that his time is more valuable than yours. The young man brushes off the point of contact on his jacket as if it's a stain and nods at Zelda. No one asks after my chest, which tingles under the fabric of my high-necked blouse.

Although there are lots of customers, the trader at the herb and spice stall recognises Zelda immediately. Without asking any questions, his well-trained hands gather up everything she needs: *za'atar*, paprika, pine nuts, aniseed and an aubergine-coloured spice called *sumac*.

'Thanks, Chaim,' she says, in a tone that suggests she wants to reassure him. 'God bless you, Chaim.' Her pale face contrasts with the brightly coloured shawl wrapped around her head.

'Anything else, Zeldele?' His voice isn't hoarse like that of a seasoned salesman, but velvety, melodious. He has a small stature, thick folds of skin in his neck and small sparkling eyes. He makes a joke I don't follow, but she smiles. I've never seen her smile like that at Rav, her husband.

Rabbi Elimelech Nachman, or Rav, as we call him, is a *hakham*, a scholar. The father of our *yeshiva*. A man who lives to learn and to teach us.

'Have you got any seeds?' Zelda asks when Chaim enquires if she needs anything else. 'Not too much salt, Chaim-le.'

With a single decisive arm movement, he opens up a paper bag. 'Your wish is my command, Zeldele.'

She glances over her shoulder to see if I'm still there. It looks like she's blushing. 'The doctor says I eat too much salt, Chaim, I need to think of my health.'

Chaim is wearing a crocheted skullcap. Grubby tassels dangle out from under his shirt. Behind him, on the wall of his corrugated stall, is a yellowed piece of paper that, although it has been laminated, curls up at the corners. It is a *hechsher*, a certificate that proves his produce is kosher. I wonder what could possibly be *terefah* about herbs and spices. But the risk can come from virtually anywhere. Zelda has pointed this out to me on various occasions. I need to take care, not only with what I eat, but also where I eat.

I've been here a month now, but I still sometimes feel like an actor on a film set. The real Sophie stayed behind in Amsterdam, she got a job like all her fellow students did after graduating. The fact that I came here for Max, that there is someone in my life I love so much I am willing to go through all this for, still feels surreal.

Chaim fills the bag from a big tin drum under the counter. The sunflower seeds that he says are salty, but less salty than the normal ones, are on the house. Zelda protests, but Chaim insists. Zelda puts her hand on her heart and bows her head, before taking out her purse and putting the *shekels* on a dish on the counter. Physical contact is forbidden. She has a pretty face, her skin is nourished and supple like that of a young woman, although she can't be that young anymore, with seven children.

I pick up the basket from the counter and smile at him. He smiles hesitantly back, not recognising me. I am the umpteenth student trailing behind Zelda with a bag full of Shabbat shopping. Yet another girl who really wants to belong. But he doesn't know that I'm a different

type of girl. That I'm actually already Jewish, like Max claims. A Jew in a non-Jewish body. I stuff the mint leaves in with the herbs.

'We'd better get moving,' Zelda says. 'We don't have much time.'

The Shabbat is approaching and the residents of Jerusalem pick up their pace. Skirts creep up hurried legs before being quickly tugged back down again by God-fearing hands. Children are dragged along by their sleeves. Men lug around watermelons and bottles of *kiddush* wine. Pushchairs are piled high with food.

We arrive home sometime after noon. The hustle and bustle of the Holy city comes in through the open windows. People are busy cooking, seasoning, scrubbing, shouting, running and cleaning, right until the last minute. It always comes around, the Shabbat. In winter somewhat earlier than in summer, but every Friday without fail.

When it starts to get dark, everyone knows it's time to round off the last few things. Anything left unfinished will have to wait another twenty-four hours. When the sirens blare their liberating song and the city comes squeaking and creaking to a halt, the results of all the effort become visible. The Shabbat bride is received with all due respect in a clean, tidy house that smells of chicken soup, gefilte fish and *cholent*. A house where children sit waiting on the sofa, having had a wash and put on their best clothes. A house where it seems like no one has gone to any trouble, as if everything takes care of itself. That house is the stage of togetherness, of harmony and devotion, and nobody will dare cast a glance at the chaos behind the scenes in the twenty-four hours that follow.

At twenty past five Zelda removes her apron and disappears to her room. When she returns she looks like a bride, in a white shapeless satin dress and a chic Shabbat wig. In the presence of her children she lights the two candles that stand on the sideboard in large silver candleholders. She covers her eyes with her hands and mutters: '*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha-olam.*' The girls join in. I wonder what she sees when she closes her eyes. I close my eyes and see Max. He puts his hand on my shoulder and says the *bracha* with me. *Asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel shabbat.* And then he's gone.

That's when my work really begins.

Chapter 27

Evening stroll

When it's time for the guests to leave, Zelda asks Amos if he'll walk me home. I don't think it's necessary. I feel safe on the streets, especially on the Shabbat when there are lots of people out walking. But Amos agrees immediately.

We walk the well-lit streets of Jerusalem. The tapping of Amos's stick on the pavement is like a third person accompanying us. That evening the streetlights have competition from the milky white light of the full moon that casts elongated shadows across the road. A gentle breeze transports the resinous smell of cypress trees. Many houses have lights on; washing lines hang from one balcony to the next. Most of the laundry is white, or at least that's how it appears in the moonlight. I notice a fresh scar on Amos's neck. I suspect he's had an accident, but daren't ask him about it directly.

'How do you know the Nachmans?' I ask.

'Zelda's my aunt,' Amos says. 'My mother's sister. My mother died when I was six. After that we moved to Israel with my father. His family's from here. Zelda's the only relative here on my mother's side. The rest are in Brooklyn. My aunt raised me like one of her own, but she sometimes forgets I'm a fully grown man.'

'My father wasn't around either,' I say. I sometimes wish he'd simply died, so I wouldn't have to admit he'd abandoned me.

But Amos doesn't ask the reason for his absence. 'See, God screws up,' he says.

'Not just God,' I say.

He sniggers. 'True, but that's because we're created in his image.'

'You were having a lively discussion with Rav.'

'Rav and I always argue about that guy.'

'HaShem, you mean?'

'HaShem, God, the Eternal One, what difference does it make? The beast has to have a name.'

'You just shouldn't say that name out loud.'

'Don't tell me you're one of those strict types?'

'No, not strict, but I like to do things properly.'

'Ah, I get it, you've been brainwashed at my uncle's yeshiva. They're good at that there.'

'I want to do a giyur, so I have to behave properly.'

'You? Why are you doing a giyur?'

'My father's Jewish, but my mother isn't.'

'So...?' Amos reaches for his back. 'Ouch.' He bends forwards and winces. '*Chara!*' He rubs his right side and groans, before slowly standing upright again. 'Sorry, I'm meant to be escorting you home but I can't take another step.'

'Should I get a doctor?'

'No, no, it'll be fine in a moment.'

'Let's wait a bit then.' I sit down on the low wall alongside the pavement.

Amos sits down beside me. He takes a pack of cigarettes out of his inside pocket, removes one and lights it. 'Do you mind? I've had to hold back all evening.'

It seems a bit reckless to me, smoking a cigarette in the middle of the street on the holy Shabbat, but who am I to judge? 'No, feel free.'

He inhales deeply. 'So what's your name then?'

'Sophie.' I can't be Sarah, not here on the street sitting next to a complete stranger who's smoking a cigarette. He blows out rings of smoke, his mouth moving like a fish.

'Nice name. I thought my aunt called you Sarah.'

'Why are you asking then?'

'I wasn't sure I heard it right.'

'Sarah's my Jewish name.'

Amos looks amused. 'Two names. Two girls?'

'So you had to learn Hebrew later in life too?' I ask.

'Are you trying to change the subject?' He looks at me inquisitively, as if I'm trying to hide something.

'No.'

'Do you speak Hebrew?'

'*Ktzat*'.

He smiles. '*Yoffi*. I spoke Hebrew with my father at home. So I didn't have to learn it when I came here. But I did learn Arabic. And I speak fluent Russian.'

'How come?'

'Always handy,' he winks and takes another puff. The tip of the cigarette glows bright orange.

'You're not meant to light a fire on Shabbat, you know.'

'There are lots of things you're not meant to do. But luckily I've got some common sense and don't let my life be determined by laws a man on a hill in the desert gave our people five thousand years ago.'

'Not a man,' I say, a bit more patronisingly than intended. 'HaShem gave us the laws, via Moses. And also, if you've got any common sense you wouldn't be smoking.'

He grins. 'See, you've been brainwashed already'. He stubs out his cigarette butt against the wall and stuffs the filter back in the pack.

'What's the point in becoming Jewish and then cutting corners?' I'm asking myself more than him.

'What's the point in becoming Jewish?'

'I've got my reasons.'

'Good, whatever makes you happy. Come on, I'm feeling better already. Let's get going.'

The road goes downhill. Amos walks slowly, I hold back my pace.

'What kind of work do you do?' I ask.

He rubs his neck and winces as if he's in pain again. 'I'm not working at the moment. I had an accident, an accident at work.' He points at his leg. 'I was in hospital for a while and I've spent the past couple of months recovering.'

'How awful.'

'It'll be fine.'

The street is quiet, every now and then I hear chatter coming from an open window. The path is narrower than it was a moment ago. 'Let's walk on the road,' Amos says. 'There won't be any cars tonight. That's the best thing about the Shabbat, no traffic.'

Two scrawny cats dart off in front of us. 'Silly things. Loads of stupid people feed those pests.' He points his stick at another cat sitting gracefully on a car roof.

'We have a stray, Hulda. I feed her every day.'

'So it's your fault it stinks of cat piss everywhere.' He sniggers.

'I can smell oranges, pine needles, cypresses...'

'Then you're the romantic here. I could tell when I first set eyes on you. You're a dreamer.'

I feel myself blushing, but it's too dark for him to see. 'And what are you then?'

‘Me? I’m a pragmatist.’

A bit further on we see a man standing outside an apartment block. It looks like he’s waiting for us.

‘*Shabbat shalom*, are you tourists?’ The man is wearing an old black suit, a hem on his jacket has come loose. His trouser legs are just a bit too long and they are shiny around his knees. His well-fed belly, which presses against the buttons on his white shirt, sticks out under his jacket like a half moon. His hair is shiny with grease.

Amos tells him we’re not tourists.

‘It might sound like a strange question...’ He adjusts his skullcap with one hand, as if he’s seeking support from above. ‘But may I ask if you’re Jewish?’

‘Yes, you may,’ Amos replies. ‘And the answer is “yes”.’

‘How about you?’ The man looks at me imploringly, as if I have the redemptive answer.

I hesitate.

‘May I ask why you want to know?’ Amos says, before I get the chance to answer.

The man points to the building behind him. ‘Well, I live up there. See that brightly lit window? That’s my bedroom. I was daft enough to leave the light on when I went to my sister’s for dinner and now I can’t turn it off again.’ He raises his hands and says in a sorrowful tone. ‘*Shabbat HaChodesh*’. He offers a hand. ‘I’m Chanina.’

Amos shakes his hand. ‘I’ll turn it off for you,’ Amos says.

‘No, you see, you can’t do that. You’re Jewish. If I encourage you to commit a sin, that’s as bad as me doing it myself.’

‘But I’m not devout,’ Amos says. ‘I’m forever committing sins. I just smoked a cigarette.’

‘HaShem forgive his soul,’ Chanina says. ‘*Baruch HaShem*.’

I don’t need forgiveness,’ Amos says.

‘It’s your free will,’ Chanina says, ‘But regardless of how many cigarettes you smoke on the Shabbat, you are and remain a Jew.’

‘Shall I turn the light off for you?’ I suggest, glad my non-Jewish status can finally come in handy. ‘I’m not Jewish.’ Amos slowly turns his head to the side, but I avoid his gaze.

‘Are you really not Jewish?’ Chanina looks surprised. ‘You look so... um...’ He looks at my skirt and doesn’t finish his sentence, concerned that this fish will also wriggle out of his clasp.

‘Well then, yes please, that would be great.’

'She is Jewish, really,' Amos says.

'Is that right?' Chanina looks from me to Amos and back again.

'I'm not technically Jewish,' I say. 'My father's Jewish, but my mother isn't.'

'Aaah,' says Chanina, his face brightening up. 'What a stroke of luck.' His voice has something voracious about it. 'The Almighty put you on my path. *Es muss sein.*'

I think of the mitzvah to help your neighbour in times of need. And necessity knows no laws, including Shabbat laws. But who determines how necessary something is? Chanina's life certainly isn't at stake here.

We follow Chanina up the concrete steps to the second floor, where the light is waiting for me to discipline it like a naughty child. Amos comes tapping his way up the stairs behind us.

'Sleeping with the light on isn't much fun. I've had to do it before.' Chanina keeps looking around as if to make sure I'm still there. He puts the key in the lock and opens the door to a well-lit, empty hallway. 'Do you live nearby?' Chanina asks.

'Yes,' I say. 'I study at Rav Kook Yeshiva.'

'Rav Nachman's place?'

'Yes.' We go through to the living room, which is also brightly lit. There is quite some work to be done here by someone who is technically not Jewish.

'Hang on a moment.' He turns around and raises his eyebrows. 'If you're not Jewish, what are you doing at a yeshiva?'

'I want to do a giyur.'

Chanina looks like he's having second thoughts. 'I don't know if that's allowed then. Technically, Jews doing a giyur procedure have to be treated by the community as fully fledged Jews. I'd have to check with my rabbi.' He looks at Amos.

Amos raises his hand. 'You tell me, Chanina, you've clearly studied for it.'

'Would you mind coming along to my rabbi's house with me?'

I was about to agree, but Amos points to his bad leg.

'Those stairs were one thing, we're not going on an excursion to your rabbi to ease your conscience. Sorry. She can turn the light off. Take it or leave it. Now or never. A good night's sleep, or no sleep.'

Chanina looks helpless. Amos leaves the room, his stick tapping against the cheap laminate flooring.

Chanina wants to know how far along I am and if I stick to all the laws. I tell him I do my best to keep to the Shabbat, but it doesn't always work out. I can tell from his face that that's the end of it. 'I daren't,' he says, 'I'll just sleep with the light on then.'

I notice that I feel relieved too. I wanted to act tough for Amos, but I'd rather not break the Shabbat.

'We'll be off then,' Amos says, his head poking round the living room door.

'OK then,' Chanina sighs. 'Thank you for offering to help anyway. I'll go back down with you. Maybe I'll have more luck with the next lot.' Finding a non-Jew in this neighbourhood is like finding a tropical fish in the Amstel River. But you never know.

'You don't have to come with us,' Amos says. 'When I was having a nose around your room – nice dresser by the way – my elbow accidentally knocked the light switch. My sincere apologies.'

Chanina's jaw drops as if he wants to say something, but not a sound comes out. Amos lovingly pulls me along with him. A shock wave travels from my chest to my tummy. His eyes gleam mischievously. His limp has a sudden sense of urgency about it.

Back out on the street I burst out laughing. I can still see Chanina's face in his living room, drenched in fluorescent light, in front of me. My fit of laughter is out of proportion to what just happened, which sets Amos off too. We laugh until we both end up leaning against a car with aching tummies and tears in our eyes.

When I get home I see I've got a text message from my mother. *Sophie, everything OK?* That's not the whole message. It continues: *Perhaps it's time to...* Then, in almost venomous letters: *read more*. But in order to do so I would need to unlock my phone and commit a sin. After standing contemplatively beside the phone for a few minutes, perhaps in the hope that the message would open itself, I decide to give the phone a helping hand. After all, the message is for Sophie, not Sarah. I read the message and feel myself going lightheaded. I really want to phone her.

But it's half twelve at night. I can't call her now.

Glossary

Baklava	Sweet delicacy from the Middle East
Baruch HaShem	Is often said to ward off fate (literally: blessed be God)
Beth din	Jewish court consisting of three or four rabbis
Bourekas	Savoury delicacy, puff pastry filled with e.g. cheese, olives or potato
Bracha	Blessing (plural: brachot)
Chara!	Shit!
Cholent	Typical Jewish dish made from stewed meat, potato and beans
Giyur	Official procedure to become Jewish
Hakham	Scholar
HaShem	One of the many names for God. There are lots of synonyms for God in Judaism because God's name must not be spoken (literally: the name).
Hechsher	Proof issued by the rabbinate that wares/foodstuffs are deemed kosher
Jerusalemites	Residents of Jerusalem
Kiddush	Blessing that is said at the start of the Shabbat (usually over the wine) and the High Holy Days
Ktzat	A little
Rabbanit	The rabbi's wife
Sumac	Spice with a deep purple colour
Shabbat HaChodesh	The holy Shabbat
Shabbat Shalom	Shabbat greeting, can also be used to say hello or goodbye to someone
Shekels	Israeli currency
Shuk	Market
Terefah	Not kosher
Yeshiva	Talmud school intended for Jewish boys who are not yet married (sometimes girls also study at a yeshiva)
Yeshiva bucher	Boy who studies at a yeshiva
Yoffi	Great
Za'atar	Spice mixture