

# Ne'ilah

By Rosa Palatnik

TRANSLATED BY JESSICA KIRZANE

**P**an Kendre was the First Secretary of the municipal government. His father's finely decorated home stood on a clay hill, directly across from the rabbi's large property. Kendre's small windows were always filled with oleanders, red blossoms, and many other flowers. Kendre's blue, lovelorn eyes peeked out from between the leafy branches into the rabbi's gardens. There he could catch a glimpse of Miriam's dark shadow hovering over the white tulle curtains. When he was lucky, the shadow would rise, pull back the silky curtains, open the vent, and a ray of sun would shine through the window, lighting all the corners of the rabbi's garden.

"Jesus, Maria," Kendre's lips muttered as though bewitched, "it's so powerful, so beautiful!"

Miriam knew that the well-dressed Pan Kendre, with his blond moustache and shiny, manicured nails, followed her every step. She felt the prick of his intense gaze as it hit her from afar. His fiery eyes burned through the curtains. No matter where she was, Miriam could feel his longing eyes shoot through her. Even at the farthest wall Miriam felt them and shuddered. A strange power drew her to the window, and Miriam was never mistaken. Kendre was always standing there. He would elegantly doff his hat and greet her in his deep voice, "Good morning, *krasavitsa*, beautiful girl."

Miriam barely answered. A blush arose from her neck and fell over her alabaster face so that her eyes shone out, giving her white face greater charm.

Miriam knew that not only the *shaygetz*, Kendre, was enchanted by her stunning looks but also the young men who studied all day in her father's *beys medresh*. They were smitten with her. They peered out

the open windows trying to catch a glimpse of her. Not infrequently, a lovesick young man appeared at her doorway in a short *khalatl*, twisted *peyes*, and a *yarmulke* on his head. He would quickly glance at her gleaming face, lower his eyes, and shyly ask, “What time is it, according to the rabbi’s clock?”

As Miriam, with her full hips and elastic stride, sauntered away with a clever smirk to look at the clock, the lovesick young man could tell from her sidelong glance that she very well understood the true reason behind his conversation. He usually disappeared before Miriam returned with an answer.

Yes, Miriam knew that she was the loftiest dream of the most handsome young men in the *shtetl*. One kind look from her was enough to set off their deepest fantasies. She knew they all dreamed about her and longed for her, but she could not understand why none of them aroused in her anything but indifference, while her neighbor, who was nothing but a doll come to life . . .

A delicious scent always wafted from him of perfume and spices; his stiff collar parted under the rosy plumpness that shone from his healthy neck; his tall boots glistened like a polished mirror; his ill-fitting sport jacket with a buckle in the back lay on his slim figure as though overflowing; he always had a red rose sticking out of his ironed pocket; he held a brown switch in his manicured hand, and he brandished it with such vigor that Miriam could hear it all the way from her room. She knew that even now Kendre was going to his two ponies, with their brown necks bent over the stream that flowed steps away from the rabbi’s property. It was quiet by the stream. In the distance she could see half-naked shepherds lying there spread out on the damp grass, dozing or playing forlorn melodies on hand-carved wooden flutes . . .

The first time Kendre saw Miriam sitting on a fallen tree with an open book and dreamy eyes blinking into the distance he stood, bewitched. Awestruck, he felt as though he should fall on his knees and pray, as though she were an angel. Miriam, startled, thought fearfully about what others would say about a rabbi’s daughter sitting alone in the woods, without a chaperone, with a *shaygetz*.

Her first thought was to flee. But Kendre stopped her. “I swear by Christ that I would do nothing to bother you. You are a wonderful, a holy thing . . .”

Miriam sat in her white cambric blouse, buttoned up to the neck and long narrow sleeves down to her wrists. But the thin fabric revealed the plumpness of her breasts and the gentle curve of her shoulders.

Kendre smelled of fresh jasmine and other exhilarating spices. His tight riding pants were rolled above his knees and white calves, and he carried his blue jacket by the collar so that it blew rakishly in the wind. He pierced Miriam’s blushing face with his burning eyes. They were two young, beautiful people amid the budding trees. The stream murmured the deep secrets of creation. Nothing more. She was the rabbi’s daughter, Miriam, and he was a goy, the magistrate’s secretary. But here, among the fragrant grass and fresh hay, under the expansive sky, they were just two warm, beating hearts. Two dream worlds. Nothing more . . .

Miriam was clever, intelligent, and above all enchantingly beautiful. Her collected thoughts were rabbinic *pilpul*. Her gentle demeanor was modest. Her lyrical voice was like music. Kendre heeded with all of his senses the quietly flowing symphony of her language: “Speak, Miriam, translate with your sweet voice the thoughts of rabbis. For weeks, for months I have dreamed, hoped, waited for this moment. Don’t run away from me now. Come back tomorrow, and the day after. Come back here always. Come, sit here. You can sit as far away as you please. I will just look at you and listen to your melodious voice. Nothing more. Absolutely nothing . . .”

But the *beys-medresh* students, who loved to hear Miriam’s sweet voice no less than Kendre did, took notice. They realized that her bewitching voice had been vanishing every day, and they looked for her. The *beys-medresh* students figured it out. Seek, and you shall find . . .

They found nothing strictly amiss. Kendre was on one side of the tree and she on the opposite. Between them there was enough of a *mekhitse* . . . but nothing more. And she, a rabbi’s daughter.

“You should be ashamed of yourself! Miriam, go home this

minute! If not, we'll tell your father."

From then on, Miriam's melodious voice could no longer be found among the trees. She didn't leave the rabbi's house. The dreamy young men continued to come and peek in on her to ask what time it was on the rabbi's clock.

But Kendre's eyes shone out to her from afar. He played romantic songs to her on his flute and sent her rosy letters:

He told her that all he wanted was to hear her sweet voice just one more time. She could stand far away from him, she could curse him, throw stones at him, if only she would come . . . he just wanted to see her. He swore in the name of Holy Maria, whose form was realized in Miriam's body, that he would not touch her. He would just fall on his knees and send his prayers to her from afar . . .

Miriam's resolve grew weaker. Her heart pounded as she saw him sadly pining for her by his window, and when she heard his longing flute song, when he cracked his whip from afar . . . She thought she would see him just one last time. She would tell him how it was. She was a Jewish girl, a rabbi's daughter, and he was a goy, a magistrate's secretary. They must remain apart. She knew that he was noble and meant her no wrong, of course, but her father, her mother . . . she did not want anything to happen.

So at the appointed time, on Yom Kippur as *Ne'ilah* began and everyone was in the *shul*, she would come to him and explain to him that they must part ways for good.

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The last rays of the sun creep over the trees of the rabbi's green property and spill onto the walls and doors until half-fainting rays of sunlight lie scattered on either side of the fences.

In the rabbi's packed *beys medresh*, Jews stand in white socks, *kitels*, and *taleysim*. Their legs are weak and their bodies tired, but their hearts are full of certainty. Soon all the gates of mercy will open, the heavenly gates of justice and judgment will accept their holy prayers. Their pious pleas will rise up to the heavenly throne. Their

well-nourished prayers will reach the heart of heaven, and it will surely be a *gmar khsime toyve*, sealed for a good year. They can imagine nothing less.

In the women's gallery, the righteous souls freely pour out their collective cry, as though a dam has let loose a previously calm river. The restrained tears now flow freely. This is no game. This is for *Ne'ilah*. Their eyes well up and overflow over their noses and necks as the final minutes near. Soon the gates of heaven will close.

All is silent in the rabbi's courtyard. A thin goat stands by the open door, holding its beard haughtily in the air. Its ears perk as though listening to the sound of prayers drifting from the *beys medresh*. A cat relishes the last stroke of the setting sun as it parts with the darkened sky.

Miriam is wearing a white dress, buttoned up to the neckline. Her black hair is bound tightly in a scarf so that only her white face with its sparkling eyes glimmers in the setting sun like a star. Her delicate steps falter as though she is drunk, not from fasting but from the sin that she has been fighting against all day.

Because, really and truly, why did it have to be today? Couldn't she sneak out of her house some other day? And why hadn't she simply refused to honor his request? Does she owe him some kind of explanation? Or does she have feelings for him? No, that is forbidden. Her heart pounds at the sound of his flute song in the distance. She knows that a goy is forbidden. So tell me, how can this be a sin? He is a man, and her father taught her that all men are creatures of God. And he, the goy, Kendre, is such a lovely creature. She would not touch him even with a finger. She just wants to know, what is the great sin that she had been shoring herself up against this whole day?

Miriam creeps past the walls. The scent of freshly baled hay wafts from the filled racks, together with the scents of ripened fruit and sweet milk. Dozing birds in their closed cages startle at her step. They pierce the silence with their sudden clucking. Miriam cringes at the ruckus. Can these only be hen's voices? Yes, it's only hens clucking. And yet it seems as though she can hear whole lamentations. Maybe, as her father

might say, there are evil spirits here? Demons hiding in the form of animals and birds? No, that's only foolishness . . .

The wide path to the little stream is made of clay. The sun dried it out like concrete, and Miriam strides across it like she is crossing stones. Chestnut trees line the path, with dried out, yellowed leaves. Some fallen leaves crunch under her feet.

Could that be just leaves crunching? It seems to her that something cries out from under her steps, but leaves cannot cry . . . aha! These thoughts again! Merciful God, have pity on me!

She catches a whiff of Kendre's perfume. It seems to her that she can hear him brandishing his elegant switch. And his voice, so quiet, as though it were stroking her, says, "I want nothing from you, nothing but to look into your Jewish eyes and hear the wisdom that sings out with your gentle voice . . ."

What could be the sin in this?

It seems to her that the wind from the field answers her question: "Now is the time for *Ne'ilah*, and you are a rabbi's daughter!"

The horizon reddens as though dipped in blood. Her path darkens. From all sides, clouds like sheep flock across the graying sky. Long, narrow, thick, broad, they all drew closer to the seat of heaven. There, the struggle persists: "Who by water, and who by fire, who by sword and who by beast . . ." The scales teeter, up and down and up again.

Miriam trembles. Oh God, if my balance pan should reach the seventh heaven and the persecuting angel should see me as I am walking now, the scale would lean back, back, until it pulls me into the depths of *Sheol* . . .

In the distance she sees the quiet stream in a fleck of sunlight hiding between two fallen trees. In the shadows she sees the slender figure of *Pan* Kendre waiting. All Miriam has to do is walk across the little bridge to him. She does not know what is happening to her . . . it seems that she is being turned back by some uncanny force. She finds herself suddenly back among the sobbing women in the *shul*. Her silk shawl falls across her forehead. Her tearful eyes peer into an open *makhzor*, but she does not see the letters, only flickering shadows that

hide the shine of her eyes. But she feels that her heart is pure, pure as a white dove fluttering, fluttering, thanking God for the miracle that happened to her and begging furtively, “*Reboyno shel oylem*, Master of the Universe: forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement . . .”

Source: Rosa Palatnik, *Baym Geroysh fun Atlantik*. Monte Scopus: Rio de Janeiro: 1957, pp. 113–119.