

An Inn-Side Story

A Monologue for One Woman

By Shirley Harkins

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The Innkeeper's Wife

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25 Minutes: Excellent for adults or children. Works nicely in the sanctuary setting.

Notes: Ruth wears a tunic to the ankles, leather sandals, and a very, long mantle—simple colors.



No set required. Darkened room with a single spotlight on Ruth. When I do Ruth, I prefer to be free to walk into the auditorium among the congregation. A swaddling cloth—about three inches wide and eighteen inches long, should be placed within easy reach. Another cloth about the size of a receiving blanket.

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SPOT OPENS CENTER STAGE

RUTH ENTERS: (Walk into the light—stop as if surprised to see the congregation) Oh! Shalom U Bracha! (shah-LOME-oo-brah-KAH) Peace and blessing! Welcome to Bethlehem—the birthplace of the Messiah! Bethlehem or Beit Lechem (Bait-lekhem) as we say in Hebrew, means “House of Bread.” What better birthplace the Bread of Life¹!

My name is Ruth and if you folks are looking for a room, I run the inn in Bethlehem—well, me and my husband, Chiam (HI-am) Ben Reuben (roo-BANE). We do our last names a little differently than you folks. All the men here have last names that began with “ben”—means “son of.” Ben Reuben means that my Chiam is Reuben’s boy. In our small community, that’s all we need.

We don’t need a fancy hotel like you folks are used to, either. Our inn is really just our house! Chiam’s father built it back when his trading business was at its peak—big enough to house his 14 children! Oy! Being the oldest, Chiam inherited the house. Ah, but the Holy One, blessed be He, never saw fit to give us any little ones. We were just rattling around the old place and Chiam felt guilty having all that room while travelers coming through town on their way to and from Jerusalem slept in the town square. Chiam is a good-hearted man. And I’ve always been good in the kitchen—Chiam just LOVES my lamb stew! So, we decided to pass the word along that we’d take a few travelers in.

Almost immediately, we started getting folks at the door—a guest or two each night...sometimes more! Some stayed in our spare rooms but we charged a lot less for those who were willing to sleep in the court downstairs—with the camels and donkeys. It’s not as bad as it sounds—it’s warm and a lot safer than the town square! Those same travelers would always stop back in when they came through Bethlehem. Many of those dear folks became good friends—like that couple from Nazareth . . .

You might know them as Joseph and Mary, but we called them Yoseph and Miriam—both from the house and lineage of our beloved king, David with ancestral roots in Bethlehem. They came the year of that ridiculous census—when everyone was required to return to the home of his ancestors to register. The emperor just wanted to make doubly sure he was getting all his taxes—counting us women and taxing us, too!

To be fair, though, he did give us months to register and the inn stayed busy that year—especially during the times of the feasts when our Law requires all the menfolk to present themselves at the Temple. Folks with ancestral roots in Jerusalem or the surrounding area—like Yoseph—just waited for the feasts to come and register for the census—since they had to go to the Temple, anyway. I mean, it’s not like we can just jump in the SUV and swing by Jerusalem any old time we want, you know! Traveling is a real hardship for us—and dangerous, too, with robbers and other rabble on the dark stretches between villages.

During the feasts, though, the roads to Jerusalem were congested with pilgrims, which made traveling much safer and kind of fun. I imagine that’s why Yoseph waited for the fall feasts to bring Miriam to Bethlehem. We’re only 5 miles from Jerusalem, after all. I remember he told me

that Miriam had been visiting a cousin around the time of the Spring Feasts—of course, with all the stress and excitement, he might have been confused about the details—after all he claimed that Miriam’s cousin—a woman well advanced in years—had a baby boy at Passover!

(Whimsically) You know? If I’d have had a boy on Passover, I’d have named him Elijah. Elijah is supposed to return at Passover and proclaim the coming of Messiah! I think Miriam’s cousin named her boy John.

Well, either way, when Miriam returned home to Nazareth and told Yoseph that she was with child, he made the journey to Jerusalem all by himself for the Feast of Weeks—what you might know as Pentecost. Yoseph told me that he spent that whole trip praying and deciding what he was going to do with Miriam. Our Law prescribes a stiff penalty for a woman discovered under such incriminating circumstances, you know—to be stoned to death at her own father’s door! Yoseph, being a very honorable man, took her in all the same—said something about an angel appearing to him in a dream . . . (Tilt head and tug on bottom lid of right eye) I can’t say that I blame the man—Miriam was a beautiful girl.

Anyway, the Feast of Tabernacles—or Booths, as it’s sometimes called, is the last feast of the year. It falls just after the late harvest when last crops come in. We all go to Jerusalem with our tithes and build temporary shelters or booths. Oh it’s a grand time—seeing old friends, dancing, worshipping—eating—the whole town lit up with oil lamps—you can see the lights of Jerusalem all the way from our inn in Bethlehem! By that time, Miriam was well into her pregnancy—poor child—but Yoseph had no choice. Tabernacles was the last feast in the year of registration—so in order to get his wife and child to Bethlehem safely, he chose the time of the feast.

Chiam and I just stayed home that year and built a nice booth behind the inn, because hundreds of families were flooding into Bethlehem from all over the province that week. Our house filled up the first night of the feast, but the travelers kept coming. Chiam started doubling the families two and three to a room. They still kept coming, so he finally let them into our private quarters. The court downstairs was filled with people and animals—there just wasn’t anymore room in the house. By the middle of the week, Chiam had to start turning people away.

He must have gotten out of bed ten times to answer the door that night, stumbling over the people sleeping on our bedroom floor. He’d have to tell whoever it was at the door that he was sorry—that there was no more room. They’d mutter something and head back to the town square where they’d sleep under the shelter of their own garments.

During the second watch, there was another knock on the door and Chiam got up, again, lit the lamp, and headed for the door. I heard him talking for a long time and thought trouble might be brewing. I got up and peeked out from behind him.

It was Yoseph—a big, burly man with strong arms and hands. He kept waving them around—refusing to take no for an answer. He told us that he traveled with his wife all the way from the Galilee—about 80 miles. Such a walk might take 4 or 5 days under normal circumstances, but Yoseph said that he had to slow the pace, Miriam being great with child, and all. That’s why they didn’t arrive until the middle of the feast.

Miriam was on a donkey out on the road, in the dark alone—(roll eyes)Men!—I took Chiam’s lantern and went to her. She looked pale and exhausted, pleading to me with those frightened, little girl eyes. I wondered where Miriam’s mother was and if she was worried.

About the time that Chiam and Yoseph stepped up behind me, and Miriam grabbed for her tummy in pain. No wonder Yoseph was so persistent! He didn’t just have wife with child but one about to give birth! Chiam and I couldn’t let that child have her baby out in the town square but there was no room in the house—and certainly no place for Miriam to have the privacy she needed.

When Chiam told Yoseph about our booth that we’d built on the hill behind the inn, I couldn’t believe my ears! Chiam expected Miriam to have her baby in our little booth? But before I could protest, Yoseph grinned ear to ear, bowing respectfully to Chiam.

I could tell by Chiam’s face that he felt disgraced—having nothing better to offer than our booth—I mean, we’re supposed to invite guests to the booth, but not under such desperate circumstances!

Chiam took the lantern and led the way. I walked Miriam and the donkey up the hill, a few steps behind the men. Chiam went to the stable to fetch some fresh hay, and while he and I lined the floor, making a warm, bed for Miriam, Yoseph helped her down off the donkey, and settled her in.

Miriam was whimpering by that time, and I knew I’d better run for my Aunt Deborah, who was the midwife in Bethlehem. (If performing for children, ask if they know what a midwife is and explain it in simple terms) I raced all the way down the hill to her house and pounded on the door until my Uncle Schmuell answered. I told him that one of our travelers was about to have a baby. Tell Deborah to hurry! There isn’t much time!

Well, Deborah’s getting on, you know. It took her awhile to dress and gather her things. When she finally came, I hooked her arm and nearly dragged her up the hill but by the time we got there, little Miriam and her newborn Son were resting on the bed of hay. Yoseph was gently wiped the perspiration from Miriam’s brow and spoke to tenderly to her!

Even though we were late, Deborah still felt like she needed to take charge. She shooed Yoseph out. “This is no place for men folk!” Never mind that it was Yoseph who helped bring this baby Boy into the world!

Deborah’s skills were still put to good use. While Miriam rested, we bathed the Baby in salt water and bound him in swaddling cloths. Miriam knew that she’d have her Baby on the journey, so she packed salt and swaddling in her things. Actually, it’s hard to tell if she’d brought the swaddling for the baby or for the Feast. The women also used the same kind of swaddling cloths as wicks to light the 16 vats of oil in the court of the women during the Temple lighting ceremony.

(Pick up swaddling) Swaddling cloth looks something like this. (Hold up strip of cloth) The baby was placed diagonally on this square cloth and bound up tightly, with his arms at his sides. We even wrapped the cloths under his chin and across his forehead—almost like those mummies in Egypt! We did this so the baby wouldn't scratch himself and to protect him from infections. We didn't have a sterile environment for him, after all. This is the best a young mother could do. We also believed that the cloths would make the baby grow tall and strong. Once we had the Baby bathed and swaddled, Deborah looked around for a place to set Him down while we helped Miriam clean herself up but there was no cradle or crib. I just fluffed up a mound of fresh hay and Deborah laid Him there.

When Miriam was finally settled with a fresh blanket around her, we gave her the Baby to feed. She was so excited and happy—talking a mile a minute. The rabbis tell us that a father is to name a boy at his circumcision when he is eight days old, but she told us that she was to name Him, Yeshua—the Hebrew word for “salvation” because He would save His people from their sins. Some people call Him Jesus, I think. Either way—(sing) There's something about that Name . . .

About that time Yoseph lumbered back, sat down next to his little Miriam, and gave her a big, awkward hug. It was a peaceful scene. Our little booth wasn't such a bad idea after all and I patted Chiam's shoulder to tell him I thought so. That's how I left things when I went to walk Deborah home. By the time I got back, we had a few more visitors.

Shepherds! Raggedy old shepherds were trying to crowd into the booth! Well, actually, they were Levitical shepherds from the Temple. During Tabernacles—right around the time of the harvest—the shepherds have their flocks out in the field! Jacob buried Rachel in Bethlehem and shepherds gather their sheep around the area of her tomb, because Rachel was a shepherdess, Jacob called this place *Migdal Eder* or Watchtower of the Flock. All the flocks in this area are Temple property.

Levites or no Levites, I squeezed in past them and was about to open my mouth to tell Chiam to kindly run them off, when he raised a hand to quiet me.

He was gazing over my shoulder with a look of awe. I turned and saw that the shepherds were falling down on the ground in front Baby Yeshua. Some were weeping with joy and others were raising hands and praising God. The oldest of the men finally stood up and told us about the angel that appeared to them in the field to tell them that the long awaited Messiah had been born. The angel gave them a sign—that they'd find the Child in Bethlehem, wrapped in swaddling bands, lain in the fodder. He went on to tell us about the heavenly glory of a multitude of angels in the sky. He said it was if, in their ecstasy and excitement, they burst into view, singing for joy. Surely, he said, this must be the Child foretold to them. Little Yeshua was probably the only baby in Bethlehem, swaddled and lying in the straw. I was still so confused—Messiah??—but when I looked back at Chiam but he had also fallen to his knees in front of the Child.

The shepherds finally left. Chiam made his way back to the house. Yoseph had curled up in the hay and fallen into an exhausted sleep so I told Chaim that I would sit up for awhile with Miriam, while she fed the Baby again. She didn't look like a frightened little girl anymore—but like a confident young mother—but she was nodding off, too. So, when she was done, I told her

to hand Him over so she could get some rest. (Cradle mantle as if holding a baby) It had been a big day for all of us. Miriam settled next to Yoseph and soon was fast asleep.

I was holding the Baby for the first time. In all the excitement, I really hadn't gotten a good look at the Little Fellow, so I carried Him over to the lantern so I could see Him better. He was by far the most beautiful Baby I had ever seen. He had deep olive skin and a nose—with character, perfect round lips, and almond shaped eyes. And oh! Little Yehsua was still awake—and being so good!

I couldn't resist talking a little baby talk to Him. (Coo in baby talk) Then, I sung him a lullaby that my own mother sang to me years before and He just kept looking up at me. There was a certain—almost ancient wisdom in those clear, cherry black eyes of His. And you know what He did then? He smiled at me! Oh, I know what Deborah would say—that newborn babies can't smile—it's just gas. But I know—I saw—He looked right up into my eyes and smiled at me.

I think that's when it hit me—that I was holding our long awaited Messiah in my arms—the prophet my people had been waiting for for 1500 years! My Deliverer and my King!

To think that He was born of a young woman—almost a child herself! The Holy One, blessed be He, overlooked all the fine homes in Bethlehem and had chosen our humble little booth to be birthplace for His Son. His mother rested in my straw—with my lantern giving light—and my own good husband assisting with the birth! And now, I got to hold my Messiah in my arms!

(For a group of children—Would you children like to hold him? Here, let me set Him down now and you can pick Him up. Gently now! Watch His head! You need to support His head. There now. Rock Him gently. I think He's getting sleepy.)

When the week was over, Miriam and Yoseph moved into the Inn and stayed on for about two years. Of course, Yoseph took Miriam and the Baby to Jerusalem to take care of all Moses told us to do for baby boys and women after they have a baby—even the Messiah—you know—to keep with all righteousness. Oh, they had plenty of visitors during that time. Some wise men came from Persia one day—wearing fine robes and riding on grand camels. They looked for all the world like kings! They gave Baby Yeshua expensive gifts—gold, perfume, and spices—Yoseph and Miriam needed it, too! Those poor kids barely had two shekels to rub together!

But Yeshua is the *real* Gift—life that lasts forever and forgiveness for our sins! Yeshua came to preach good news to the poor, to heal the broken hearted, to give sight to the blind, and to proclaim liberty to the captives and those who are oppressed. Strange—how some people don't want this gift—the greatest gift of all!

Miriam and Yoseph left suddenly—right after the wise men's visit. Yoseph said that he couldn't tell us where he was taking Miriam and the Baby, but it's a good thing they left when they did . . . Right after that, Herod . . . well . . . you know. Oh, that was the only day I was glad not to be a mother or grandmother. Still—it was a tearful good-bye but I'll always hold Baby Yeshua in my heart.

I am so glad that Chiam made room for that little family in our booth that night. You see? Chiam wasn't a mean, old innkeeper, as you may have heard! I was there! I saw Chiam open our home and his heart to Baby Yeshua. I hope you (children) will remember *this* story about the birth of Yeshua, each year during the Season of Our Joy.

Shalom U'Hag Sameach! (shah-LOME-oo-HOG-sah-MAY-akh) Peace and Happy Holidays!

Notes:

An Excerpt From the Book: *Rosh HaShanah and the Messianic Kingdom to Come*
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¹ John 6:35, 48