

Meet the *Makhatonim*: Understanding Ashkenazic Kinship

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Our fascination with the untranslatable is not so difficult to understand. The word or phrase without a linguistic equivalent is a powerful tool to illuminate what is distinctive in a language or culture. There are words and concepts — *chutzpah*, *kvetch* — whose untranslatability is evident to all, and others whose cultural distinctiveness is masked by the existence of a near-equivalent, a kind of cultural “false friend” — the term translators use to describe words in different languages that somehow mislead us into believing them to be equivalents (as in the French “*marcher*” and the English “march”).

The Yiddish term “*makhatonim*” is one such word. American Jews will confidently declare that the word means “in-laws,” but there is an important shade of difference that disappears in such easy translation. The term “in-law” primarily describes the relationship between an individual and the parents or siblings of his or her spouse; it is thus a “diagonal” kinship term.


Makhatonim, by contrast, are the parents of both spouses, and it is their “horizontal” relationship — between the parents of the bride and the parents of the groom — that is the primary significance of the term. The traditional Jewish community of Eastern Europe considered this an important kinship term, indeed, and the loss of its equivalent in English, in the New World, marks a cultural deficit.

The untranslatability of the term alerts us to two radically different conceptualizations of marriage. It is true that both systems revolve around a couple, the apparent heart and — by definition — the pivot of a marriage. The contemporary American system recognizes, of course, that a husband and wife have parents, and recognizes that one spouse will have some relationship with the parents of the other spouse. Folklore offers stories about the relationship that connects a husband and his mother-in-law, stories that are often rich in aggressive humor and ambivalent tension. The mother-in-law interferes, judges, prefigures her daughter’s aging; she functions as the “diagonal” in an otherwise balanced scene.

The traditional marriage of the Jews of Eastern Europe encloses the married couple in a larger web, constructing relationships beyond

the couple. The term *makhatonim* reveals how the relationship works structurally rather than affectively. Families, in their connection through the marriage of their children, have a relationship shaped by a set of conventions and obligations that comprise a third space, a degree of connection “beyond” either the biological or sexual. It’s almost as if the marriage of the children works backward (to a previous generation) as well as forward (to grandchildren) to create family. The relationship is certainly not only semantic: In the traditional world, parents played a far greater role — if not the sole role — in choosing a mate for their children and negotiating the dowry and support of the young couple. Newlyweds often lived with one of the families in the first years of marriage (in a system known, untranslatably, as *kest*). I do not mean to suggest that this was an idyllic or functional system. Jewish literature is filled with outrage against the deafness of parents to the desires of their children, against a system that put young bridegrooms at the mercy of cruel mothers-in-law (the young couple ordinarily moved in with the bride’s parents) and burdened adolescents of both genders with sexual and marital obligations.

Makhatonim, then, were not so much “lost” as thrown overboard, deliberately or as a side effect of other choices: the right to choose a mate, delay marriage, and live independently in a very mobile society. Is there a price to pay for these freedoms? Are we better off “alone” in our marriages, within the compass of sentiment and children, to the exclusion of a wider sense of family? Perhaps, after all, romantic choice is a heavier burden than that of an arranged, early marriage, or at least one in which the marital relationship was “distributed” among the generations.

Even my question here recapitulates our cultural focus on the couple. What is lost in our romantic isolation is lost, above all, for the older generation. Among the tragedies of Tevye’s old age — exile, the death of his wife, a daughter’s apostasy, a son-in-law’s incarceration, another daughter’s widowhood — is one that is nearly invisible, a side effect of his daughters’ romantic choices: Tevye, at the end, has sons-in-law, but he has no *makhatonim*. Beyond his daughters, the world holds only strangers. 

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