

# “LOVE, SHMOVE”

by Sam Levenson

Nobody ever told Mama that marriage was supposed to make her happy; certainly Papa hadn't. Nobody had promised him happy either.

“Love, shmlove!” Papa used to say. The word “love” embarrassed them. It was an unmentionable, like “brassiere,” “hernia,” and “miscarriage.” They felt it, but avoided the precise definition that young people demand. Defining it might lead to misunderstanding rather than understanding. Defining it might even diminish it.

To Mama love was not passion, or infatuation, or compatibility. She has given birth to ten kids without any of those. “Love,” said Mama after many years of marriage, “is what you have been through with someone.”

Love was made up of satisfaction (“Ten kids, thank God, is plenty”), sharing (“If he can take it, I can take it”), optimism (“Worse it couldn't get!”), and friendship, not in the style of Romeo and Juliet, but more like Damon and Pythias.

I knew my parents valued each other, because Papa told me always to listen to Mama and Mama told me always to listen to Papa; because Papa wouldn't spend a penny on himself unless Mama spent on herself. So the day Mama had all her teeth pulled, Papa bought a suit.

If papas were at all romantic before marriage, they quickly shed “the foolishness” as soon after as possible. My father never took my mother out before they were married, and afterwards only if they were headed for the maternity hospital, which in Mama's case was often enough to give her rosy cheeks. They had never had a honeymoon (“We didn't have enough money, so Papa went by himself.”) There were anniversaries, but they went uncelebrated.

(“How long are you married, Pa?”

“Please! Not while I'm eating!”)

No candy, no flowers, no inscribed charms to wear on bracelets; nothing but a big, fat, immovable, indestructible wedding ring. At the end of each day Mama could count on Papa to come home with those three little words on his lips that made it all worth while: “What's for supper?”

Every night, after we kids were in bed and supposedly asleep, I could hear Mama and Papa in the kitchen, not making love, no, but reading about it. Papa would read aloud the daily installment of a romantic novel that ran on forever in the Yiddish newspaper. He read in a dull, monotonous voice, perhaps to avoid betraying any emotional involvement in the subject matter, while Mama pressed his shirts. The hissing of her iron seemed to become more urgent as the hero pressed his passion on the girl: "... and he drew her toward him, looking into the quivering pupils of her wide blue eyes and kissed her on her trembling lips ---"

"Again?" said Mama, her iron coming to a dead stop. "He kissed her only yesterday!" Papa took a closer look at the paper and hurled it against the wall. "You're right! It's yesterday's paper!"

The day my brother Albert and I caught Papa kissing Mama we got hysterical. "What happened, Al?" "I don't know. I think maybe the landlord died!" It had to be an event of supreme emotional significance. Papa had not kissed Mama even at their wedding. Theirs was a marriage of convenience between two poor families. The first time he had met her was at the wedding – and he would never kiss a girl the first time he met her! He certainly was not going to go around now kissing married women, like Mama. Generally, kissing was considered unmanly. The presence of eight living children had proved his manliness.

If any one of us tried to kiss Mama, we would get brushed off with "Go away, crazy! You got nothing better to do?" – thereby classifying kissing as another of those "foolishness" things. Besides, it was dangerous to kiss Mama. She always wore a needle near the neckline of her dress, and a wild embrace would be fatal to the embracer. It was not the fashion of those times to smother children with kisses, but to smother them with care. I knew I wasn't being kissed, but I also knew I was being loved, even more than I deserved. It made one rise to the deserving.

And yes, I learned the true meaning of **love**.