

RUTH: KINDNESS AND RUTHLESSNESS

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

When Lot, Abraham's nephew and his faithful companion in Canaan and Egypt, chose to abandon the family of Abraham he left a void that was not filled in for many generations. Abraham was childless and Lot was to be the inheritor. What would his position have been, if he had remained with Abraham? We do not know but likely there would have still been an important role for him to play even after Abraham was miraculously granted children. Surely Hashem would have retained a place of greatness for Lot, the devoted associate, in His plan.

Unfortunately, this is not how the things turned out. Lot rejected the Abrahamitic covenant and chose for himself the verdant valleys of wicked Sodom. His seed became two great temporal powers of Moab and Ammon, outside of and antagonistic to G-d's people and G-d's plan.

Yet, Hashem never despairs and his thoughts are beyond human reckoning. As the angels were rushing Lot out of Sodom, they said: "Arise, take your wife and two daughters who are found, lest you be caught in the sin of the city (Genesis 19,15)". On this the Sages comment: "Two daughters - this is Ruth, the Moabite and Na'amah, the Amonite (who married Solomon, King of Israel, Kings 1:14, 21)". Similarly they say in a statement that is surely profound, though open to many interpretations, "I found My servant David (Psalms 89)" - in Sodom (Genesis Rabbah 50, 15)".

This is what Shem Mishmuel (Shevuos 670, for more on him see [link](#)) writes about.

"Royalty was not to be found in Israel and had to be imported from Moab...for the shell of Moab is arrogance (that hides within it true royalty of spirit and aristocracy of behavior), as it says, "We heard the pride of Moab, he is exceedingly high...(Isaia 16,6). This is why the soul of David was caught in captivity within the shell of Moab so as to be able to liberate Royalty from the trappings of arrogance and pride and to join it to the holiness of "authority over others for the sake of heaven."

This suggestion follows kabbalistic worldview that sees history as the process of drawing good out of evil in which it is imprisoned, so that it can join the good that already stands apart and opposes evil. In our world, the good is often intermixed confusingly with bad and it is the task of man to liberate and redeem the good and the holy.

There is another aspect that Moab could contribute to Kingship in Israel. Lot took with him some of the kindness and graciousness of Abraham's house into Sodom. At the same time, he applied it in a deranged and confused manner. He risked his life to protect his guests from the predations of the Sodomites but was willing to deliver his own daughters to their hedonistic designs. His descendents,

on the other hand, displayed heartless insensitivity to their cousins passing near their land in their hour of need.

"An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of HaShem; even to the tenth generation shall none of them enter into the assembly of HaShem for ever; because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt; and because they hired against thee Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse thee" (Deuteronomy 23:4,5).

It is difficult for a king to apply mercy and severity in proper measure. A policy that benefits one group or population invariably hurts or takes away from another. What one subjects considers good is injurious or harmful in the eyes of another.

Saul, the first king of Israel failed on both of these scores - excessive humility, inappropriate for a king, and misapplied kindness. "Why was he punished? Because he forgave an insult to his honor...(Maharsha, Yoma 22b)". His "hiding between the vessels" almost led Israel to destruction (Samuel I, 10). He was merciful to his enemies and merciless to his friends. He spared Agag, the king of Amalek but persecuted his loyal servant David. This inability to combine exercise of power and of kindness, of Justice and Mercy, was his downfall. "He who is merciful when he should be pitiless will end up being cruel when he should be merciful, and falls by the sword (Ecclesiasticus Rabbah 7, 36)".

David's challenges were likewise twofold - to bring aristocratic bearing of Moab into Jewish monarchy and use kingly kindness that he inherited from Ruth in balance with ruthlessness as it is needed. When he failed to keep proper balance between the two, he was punished severely (see Shabbos 56a). That he ultimately succeeded is in great measure in the merit of his illustrious ancestor, Ruth, the Moabite.

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