The Judaism Site

The Fall of the House of Orpah

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

According to the Sages, Ruth and Orpah were sisters, descendents of Eglon and Balak, kings of Moab. The burden of this inheritance both informed and influenced the choices that these sisters made. We will discuss how Providence and human choice interacts to shape the history on individuals and nations, God willing, next week. For now it suffices to say that as soon as Orpah stepped off the stage of History she fell and fell far. Naomi understood that bereft of her guidance Orpah might slip. When Naomi initially sent her daughters-in-law back, she kissed them. As Ruth Rabbah to this verse points out, this kiss was not a mere expression of emotion but constituted a ritual. Naomi breathed into Orpah something of her own spirit that would accompany her in her sojourn among the idols of Moab. When Orpah did ultimately leave she gave that kiss back for she no longer wanted Naomi or her God. She was going back and it will be for her a new life. Yet, what she had learned in the house of these Judeans refused to be forgotten; you might say it pursued her, it did not let her sleep. We can only imagine what feelings of frustration, anger and self-loathing Orpah experienced when she returned to the environment in which she grew up but which now felt foreign, which now disgusted and revolted her. Yet, she could not go back; her choice was final and could not be undone. To put it differently she experienced a profound failure. It is not uncommon for people in such situations to feel such an overwhelming sense of defeat, such contempt for what they have done that they thrust themselves into the very depths of degradation, to punish and castigate themselves at the same time as they vainly attempt to assert the rightness of their actions before themselves and others. They down the bitter cup to its last dregs.

"The night that Orpah parted from her mother-in-law she was mixed with a hundred men from a hundred nations. R. Tanchum said: also by one dog, as it says, "The Pelishti (Goliath) said to David, Am I a dog?" (Ruth Rabbah 2:20).

It is crucial at such times to break one's fall. To what may this be compared? To a mountain climber who loses his foothings and slides down the steep incline. If he manages to grab onto a branch or an outcropping of rock and break his fall, there is hope. He may yet reverse his course and retake the heights that were surrendered. If not, he is truly lost and falls to the deepest depths.

R. Chaim Shmulevitz used this thought to explain a strange episode involving the prophet Samuel and King Saul. When Samuel informed Saul that God rejected him from being the king over Israel, Saul reacted in a truly perplexing fashion. Instead of arguing, or at the very least begging forgiveness and beseeching the prophet’s intercession to reverse the decree, he asks that Samuel
join him at a public meal "to honor me in the eyes of the elders". Of what ultimate significance is this honor when it is not destined to last? What purpose, what end would be served by Samuel's participation in this empty charade, and yet, he agrees.

"Saul has just been humiliated in an unprecedented way. He had been the hope of Israel, the chosen and anointed one. He was now totally rejected, a bitter disappointment, a discarded relic in the course of history. God has become "disgusted" with him. If he remained in that state of disappointment, he could never recover and all hopes of a comeback would be gone. He pleaded with Samuel, "Give me some dignity so that I may break my fall, so that I may continue and perhaps salvage something of my life (Reb Chaim's Discourses, ArtScroll,1998, p. 16)".

Oprah did not do so. In relating to us what happened to her that night, the Sages not only present Orpah and Ruth as a metaphysical parable of good and evil and reveal a view of history as a process of Redemption, they also take an opportunity to teach an important psychological and moral insight. The hundred men from a hundred nations represent one direction in which humanity has traveled ever since Sinai - toward rebellion against the Almighty and his onerous rules. The addition of the dog to the parable points out to us that this direction leads not to the romantic Byronian rebels, revolutions against injustice, individual against tyranny, even if the tyranny is that of God's law. No, this rebellion leads to the loss of the Image of God, to the generation whose "face if the face of a dog". It leads man away from what is finest in humanity, straight down into inner recesses of degradation, and not as Romantic imagined to full expression of man's grandeur as man.

The ultimate outcome of Oprah's failure of nerve was that she joined the forces of evil. She returned to the fields of Moab but because she was wanton, they did not accept her. She went to the land of Philistines where she bore six bastards. All of them fell by the hand of David, the descendent of Ruth (Zohar Chadash, Ruth 81b).

In reward of the four tears that Orpah shed over Naomi, the punishment of her son Goliath was suspended forty days (Ruth Rabbah 20:2)

The exegetical basis for these statements seem to be identification of Orpah with Haruphah in the book of Samuel II, 21:15-22 which speaks of the four mighty warriors who fought against David, Goliath among them (R. M. Eisemann, A Pearl in the Sand, Reflections on Shavuos, Ruth and Davidic Kingdom, 1997).

The sons of the "kissed one" fell before the sons of the "one who clung (Sotah 42b)". The power of Naomi's kiss did not help Orpah. Instead it was returned and misdirected into a course that opposed Hashem's plan for humankind. Orpah did not simply fade into obscurity. She produced the worst enemies of Israel. She could not longer access redemption and the only promise that the future held for her was that of utter destruction in the course of history.