

PARALLEL UNIVERSES

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

Those who have not previously been exposed to Rabbinic literature may have noticed by now that the Rabbis teach through parable and allusion. Why did they not employ the method of simple, straightforward exposition? Among other reasons is the pedagogical imperative. It is well known that the best way to learn is with a story. The Rabbis painted a colorful world of relationships, events and connections so as to have us perceive and accept some fairly complex ideas. The parable is a means to education. It is quite clear that the Sages possessed traditions as to the intended significance of every story and character in Tanach. To this end, they went beyond what is described in the Scriptures and bequeathed us images, stories and characterizations that palpably embody central teachings received by tradition.

I do not for a moment mean to imply that midrashic stories are not historical. They are always eminently plausible and can usually be seen to reside in the verses and be present within them by hint or allusion. Certainly, these stories contain a kernel of historical truth. That granted, there still remains a question: "Why do they choose to share this particular story with us rather than some other one?" Proper understanding of the midrashic method calls for appreciation of the message. One starts to study Midrash by discovering the key, the underlying idea or interpretation that is central to various, sometimes disparate rabbinic comments.

I hope that at this point you are convinced that that Chazal see the Book of Ruth as teaching the workings of redemption in history. First, there is the idea is that good and evil are profoundly mixed in this world, much as twilight is a mixture of light and darkness. Redemption consists of separation of good and evil, of light and darkness, and this occurs when man makes correct moral choices. On the national level, this process may take generations, each generation, in its own unique circumstances replaying the drama of its ancestors. Step by step the good is rewarded and set apart from the bad until only pure evil remains and is then consigned to perdition. To drive this point home, the Sages often trace patterns that are not literally in Scriptures, though they are reasonable, plausible and make exegetic sense. Let's take a look at how this works in regard to the characters of Ruth and Oprah. I will list a number of these rabbinic comments side by side with only minimal discussion.

1. Ruth and Orpah were sisters. This implies that they faced the same choice.

Ruth and Orpah were descendents of Eglon, king of Moab (Ruth Rabbah 2:9) Ruth was the descendent of Eglon who was the son of Balak (Sotah 47a)

2. Balak was evil but he did some good and it was rewarded.

In reward of 42 sacrifices that Balak, king of Maob offered, he merited that Ruth would be descended from him (Sotah 47a).

3. His descendent Eglon, another king of Moab, also did some good and it was also rewarded.

God said to Eglon: Because you rose from your throne to honor me, I swear that you will have a descendent (David) who will sit on my throne (Ruth Rabbah 2:9)

4. Orpah followed the same pattern. Although unlike Ruth she did not go beyond the honor that her ancestors gave to the Almighty, she was also rewarded for it.

In the merit of four tears that Orpah spilled for her mother-in-law, four mighty fighters descended from her (Sotah 42b).

At each step, although Balak, Eglon and Orpah do not move beyond what they as Gentiles were expected to do, they (or rather their descendants) are rewarded with another chance, but after three tries the process stops. The warriors, among them Goliath, who descended from Orpah represent complete and unadulterated evil and they are destined to fall by the hand of the messianic king, David.

Thus, at the very beginning of the book of Ruth we thus encounter three characters who fail their personal, familial or national process of redemption and two who do not. Machlon and Kilyon as descendants of Er, son of Shelah could have rectified the sin of Er and Onan who "did not wish to give seed to their brother". However, they were stingy and did not share their wealth with their brothers in Bethlehem. They chose flight over sharing, and so they perished. Yet, Ruth redeemed them when she pursued Levirate marriage to Boaz.

Orpah could have rectified the sin of her aces tors, the kings of Moab. When she turned back she gave up that opportunity and she was also lost.

Ruth and Boaz rose to the challenge. Boaz was a descendent of Peretz, son of Yehuda and Tamar. Ruth was by descent and constitution a daughter of Lot. The parallels are striking and we will discuss them at some other times. Suffices to say, it would have been natural for Ruth and Boaz to repeat the patterns of the past but they did not. Instead, when they met at the threshing floor, they rose to the pinnacle of spirituality, assuring their personal portion within the Holy and the future of their descendants.

Every man and woman exists within this continuum of heredity and tradition; each family and nation is given their two or three chances. This is as true of individual failings as of communal deficiencies. "So also all these God does, two or three times with man (Job 33, 29)" (see Maimonides, Laws of Repentance, 3:5)"

To summarize, careful correlation of various sayings of the Sages scattered among disparate

midrashic sources leads us to several conclusions. First, the Sages possessed a tradition of interpretation, a set of exegetical keys widely shared across sources remote from one another in time and space. Second, they expressed and transmitted them by setting up an alternative parallel universe populated by the same characters found in the books of Tanach but with much richer detail and background. However, all such detail is designed to reinforce and transmit the received interpretative approach and a specific set of teachings. Finally, echoes of many of these teachings can be found in the later books of Kabbala, which, after all, also deals with substantive questions of meaning and purpose, albeit from a more explicit perspective.

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