

THE TWO MOTHERS

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

"... and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law; but Ruth clung to her." (Ruth 1:14).

So Orpah has left but Ruth cleaved to Naomi. This description of their relationship is pregnant with meaning for the word "clinging" is usually used in Tanach to indicate an intense commitment of one individual to another or of man to God. So we find:

"To love Hashem...and to cling to Him." (Deuteronomy 30:20, see also 10:20, 11:23)

"I clung to your testimonies." (Pslams 119:31)

"Therefore shall man leave his father and mother and cling to his wife." (Genesis 2:24)

"And his soul clung to Dina, daughter of Yakov." (Genesis 34:3)

This choice of words may contain a clue to a larger question, one that bedeviled many commentators. What exactly is the relationship between Ruth and Naomi. The relationship of these two women, a daughter -in-law and a mother-in-law, presents many difficulties. Why did Ruth follow her mother- in-law with such one sided devotion? Ruth's decision to go with Naomi is implausible on the surface. A young woman, she is ready to give up her country, her people, even, as Naomi points out, a chance for marriage, children and personal happiness. One would expect that it is the older woman weighed down with losses and bitterness who would "cling" to the younger one, but such is not the case. Although Ruth is strong and optimistic and never complains, in Bethlehem Ruth is but an extension of Naomi.

Then said Boaz: 'What day thou buyest the field of the hand of Naomi--hast thou also bought of Ruth the Moabite, the wife of the dead, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance?' (Ruth 3:5)

Ruth is clearly a spirited individual with great inner strength. It is she who provided materially for herself and Naomi by gathering in the fields. It is she who took the initiative and ultimately brought salvation to herself and Naomi. Yet Ruth is not the one who proposes marriage to Boaz; it is Naomi's idea. Not only is Naomi responsible for Ruth's success, but Ruth's child, it seems, is also credited to Naomi.

So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife; and he went in unto her, and HaShem gave her conception, and she bore a son.

And the women said unto Naomi: 'Blessed be HaShem, who has not left you this day without a near

kinsman, and let his name be famous in Israel. And he shall be for you a restorer of life, and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him.'

And Naomi took the child, and laid it in her bosom, and became nurse unto it.

And the women her neighbors gave it a name, saying: 'There is a son born to Naomi'; and they called his name Obed; he is the father of Jesse, the father of David (Ruth 4:13-17).

It is as if the two women merge and the child of Ruth is really the son of Naomi. The symbiosis is underscored at the point of Ruth's - Naomi's child's birth by the use of an idiom that we have first encountered in the story of Chana. Here Chana's husband is consoling her for her bareness. Compare it to what the women say to Naomi.

And Elkanah her husband said unto her: 'Chana, why weep you and why you eat not and why are your grieved? am not I better to you than ten sons?' (Samuel 1, 8)

"...for your daughter-in-law who loves you who loves you, who is better to you than seven son, has borne him." (Ruth, ibid)

As I struggled over the past several weeks to link these observations into a coherent approach, Hashem "enlightened my eyes" by arranging that a passage from the Zohar (Tikunei Zohar Chadash 117) cross my path. Full discussion of the passage is beyond our limits and my abilities. It suffices for the reader to know that it identifies the two women with the only two mother' sefiros, Bina and Malchus. These two "feminine" sefiros, unlike the others, not only convey and filter Divine light but also receive, transmute and transmit the light from above. On its simplest level this passage can be understood on the level of psychological insight about the relationship of Ruth and Naomi. The Zohar says:

"There are two mothers', the higher one and the lower one, the Presence (Shekhina) of Above and the Presence of Below. Of it, it says, "Send, send the mother, and children take for yourself" - two intermediaries, one corresponding to the other. Of them it says, "and the two walked together (quote from Ruth 1:17)"

Ruth clung to Naomi who was her teacher and conduit of spirituality. We might say that Ruth and Naomi were two stations through which the light of Redemption traveled. Ruth understood. Ruth was wise, accepting the role of the lesser light and willing to receive before she could give. On the simplest level, Naomi was her teacher of Judaism but it goes far beyond that. Ruth found her mentor and her teacher not only of religion but of religious life; she found her soul-mate and model for living. Naomi received and transmitted and Ruth received and gave life. Of course, Naomi taught Ruth how to be a Jewess but on some level they became one soul, linked in one purpose, drawn to the same goal. Together the two mothers accomplished something rare and exceedingly precious, a union of two souls hewn from the same rock and perfectly complementing each other. We might

state that Ruth understood that Naomi was not only her mentor but a model of how to receive in order to give, and in fact she also received from Naomi so that she could also give. Ruth could model herself after Naomi because Naomi was just like her but closer to God and the two "walked together". The two walked together because they belonged together. Physically it was Ruth, the mother below, who conceived and gave birth but in the spiritual realm it was Naomi, the mother above who received the seed and transmitted it to Ruth, the mother below. The wise women of Bethlehem did nothing more than understand and express this truth.

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