

COMMITMENT

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

And she said: 'Behold, your sister-in-law is gone back to her people, and to her god; return after your sister-in-law.'

And Ruth said: 'Entreat me not to leave you, and to return from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people are my people, and your G-d my G-d; where you die, will I die, and there will I be buried; HaShem do so to me, and more also, for death part you and me.'

And when she saw that she was steadfast to go with her, she left off speaking unto her. And the two walked together... (Ruth 1:15-18).

When Orpah kissed Naomi it became apparent that Orpah intended to go back not only to her people but also to her gods. Such is the nature of a kiss; it is a momentary contact destined by its very shape and transience to be final, to signify separation. With it, Orpah established her independence and that she was no longer following "after" Naomi. Orpah was now going to go her own way, free of influence and perhaps even memories of her former mother-in-law.

This posed a choice in front of Ruth. Naomi and Ruth both recognized that Ruth was a follower and not a leader. With Orpah striking on her own path, who would Ruth follow? The word for "sister-in-law" that is used here is very unusual for the context. What we translate as "sister-in-law" is in the original Hebrew a word that signifies a levirate relationship - in other words, familial similarity, intense closeness and a shared role between two women. Naomi was suggesting that Ruth should follow Orpah who is, after all, a sister, a Moabite and a kindred soul. Perhaps she would be a more appropriate mentor for Ruth than Naomi.

In our culture, followers are seen as weak and leaders represent the ideal. In other cultures it is not so. The truth is, that following a deserving teacher is more ennobling and usually more productive than blundering in spiritual wonderlands on one's own. To be a disciple presupposes intense humility and not a small measure of wisdom and it is certainly harder than exploring freely, unencumbered and untroubled by the likely criticism and instruction, but also without guidance. It is regrettable that the mentoring option is taken by so few in our individualistic and intensely egocentric society, where every youngster raises his head and says, "I shall reign". Since Ruth needed to follow in order to grow, and knew it, she was presented with a clear choice. Who is she going to follow, "after" Naomi or "after" Oprah?

Ruth responded that she is not after vague, diffuse spirituality. She is seeking to join Naomi and her people; she wants God of Israel and to be bound by His Law. 'Entreat me not to leave you, and to return from following after you... your people are my people, and your G-d my G-d'.

The Sages picked up on this subterranean current and interpreted the exchange between Ruth and Naomi in terms of specific religious laws. Although it may be possible to interpret this conversation as being about basic religious credo (see Malbim ad loc and Mamonides, Laws of Forbidden Relationships, 14:2), Talmud in Yevamos 47 frames it in terms of specific laws. Ruth could not learn from Naomi if she did not live like her. I quote Rashi's formulation of the talmudic statement:

From this our Rabbis said: "We inform a convert who seeks conversion of some consequences so that he/ she has an opportunity to withdraw, for from Ruth's response we can infer what Naomi told her. She said to her: It is forbidden for us to go beyond specified distance on the Sabbath. Ruth responded: Where you go, I will go. It is forbidden for us, for a woman to be secluded with a man who is not her husband. She answered: Where you lodge, I will lodge. Our people is separated from other nations through 613 commandments. She said: You people is my people. We are forbidden to serve idols -.she said: Your God is my God. There are four types of capital punishment that our courts use - she answered: where you die, I will die. There are two separate cemeteries, for those who are executed by stoning or fiery metal and for those who are executed by sword or hanging. She said: there I will be buried."

Much has been written about the significance of these specific example and how they represent all of Judaism. We need not concern ourselves with this level of detail. It is sufficient to point out that conversion to Judaism represents not an acceptance of a credo or a system of belief but a commitment to join the Jewish people, to live as they live and to share both their way of life and their destiny. Although being clear on what one believes is also necessary, Jewish spirituality is actualized within a community and a nation and it is expressed through action. Belief and expression of belief is easy but it is daily living of a faith, through all demands of body, family, community and national entity, that represents true commitment. Once Ruth committed, she was transformed.

R. Abbahu said: Come and see how precious are converts before the Holy One Blessed be He. Once she committed, the verse equated her to Naomi, for it says: "and the two walked together" (Rashi).

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