

OVERCOMING DESPAIR

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

So she came to Beth-lehem, that all the city was astir concerning them, and the women said: 'Is this Naomi?'

And she said unto them: 'Call me not Naomi (pleasant), call me Marah (bitter); for Shakkai dealt very bitterly with me.

I went out full, and HaShem hath brought me back home empty; why call you me Naomi, and HaShem testified against me, and Shad-dai afflicted me?'

So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, with her, who returned out of the field of Moab--and they came to Beth-lehem in the beginning of barley harvest.

It is instructive to compare this anguished cry with the face that Naomi presented earlier to her daughters-in-law.

...nay, my daughters; for it grieves me much for your sakes, for the hand of HaShem is gone forth against me.(1:13)'

The name of God, Shad-dai is significant for it is rarely used in Tanach except in the book of Job. While the etymology of this name is not entirely clear, it appears to be related to the Hebrew word "shod" that signifies destruction and ruin (Ibn Ezra Exodus 6:3). The name Hashem, on the other hand, most often refers to God as friend and ally. Naomi showed faith and trust to her foreign daughters-in-law, her students, the lonely widows who looked to her for consolation, spiritual support and encouragement. To them she spoke of kind Hashem whose judgment one accepts because "all the Merciful One does is for the good". Undoubtedly she spoke the truth for she did accept God's reproof with gratitude. Deep inside, perhaps unawares, bitterness slowly grew and multiplied. Her defenses crumbled when she found herself surrounded by the faces of women who played with her as children, her relatives and kinsmen, and what she did not acknowledge came pouring out. Could she not bare her heart to these kind women with whom she shared so much and who were so much like she was?

Naomi forgot that ten years of suffering have taught her wisdom that her better off neighbors and relatives could not assimilate. True they suffered famine but they suffered it as a community and now God has blessed them with bounty. Naomi alone felt the hand of Shakkai and that made all the difference.

"Did the women have nothing to say in reply? Did they accept her, comfort her - or did they shy away, reject her? For at Naomi's side there stood her gentile daughter-in-law - the daughter of Moab, who had sinfully married Naomi's son. Perhaps Scripture tells us nothing here, because each woman in turn slunk silently to her own home. Shunned Naomi remained alone in the city square, and with her daughter in law, Ruth, the Moabite (Y. Bachrach, *Mother of Royalty* Feldheim, 1980, p. 60)". Naomi returned from Moab with an attitude the women could not assimilate or accept and by her side stood a Moabite girl who represented a morality that imminently threatened their homes and hearths. It was not so long ago that " Israel abode in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab. And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods; and the people did eat, and bowed down to their gods. And Israel joined himself unto the Baal of Peor; and the anger of HaShem was kindled against Israel (Numbers 25:1-3)".

Did Naomi began to doubt the truth and validity of her own religious perception? Did she retreat into silence to allow her heart to sort out the truth that she felt but could not accept? Did she need time to elevate the feelings which unexpectedly broke through to her awareness at that moment? Did she need to make peace with Hashem who testified against her and with Shakkai who did not spare her, who took away Naomi and left behind a stranger called Marah?

The two lonely figures entered the city of Bethlehem and all her inhabitants were there to encounter them. The Sages variously say that they were gathered for a funeral of Boaz's wife or to reap the first barley offering. Two stragglers hesitantly walked into town. The city was astir about them both but the women spoke only to Naomi. No one spoke to Ruth, no one, not even Naomi.

"And when she (Naomi) saw that she (Ruth) was stedfastly minded to go with her, she left off speaking unto her (1:18)." We don't know how long the silence lasted. We do know that this silence was broken by Ruth and not by Naomi. "And Ruth the Moabite said unto Naomi: 'Let me now go to the field, and glean among the ears of corn after him in whose sight I shall find favour.' And she said unto her: 'Go, my daughter (2:2)."

It appears that men recognized the character and worthiness of Ruth. The men admired Ruth but the women shunned her. "And he (Boaz) said: 'Blessed be you of HaShem, my daughter; thou has shown more kindness in the end than at the beginning, inasmuch as you did not follow the young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, fear not; I will do to you all that you say; for all the men in the gate of my people do know that thou art a virtuous woman (3:11)."

This insight may explain the later curious change interchange between Naomi and Ruth. Ruth preferred to stay with the male reapers but Naomi could not understand why.

And Ruth the Moabite said: 'Yea, he said unto me: Thou shalt keep fast by my young MEN, until they have ended all my harvest.'

And Naomi said unto Ruth her daughter-in-law: 'It is good, my daughter, that thou go out with his MAIDENS, and that thou be not met in any other field.'

So she kept fast by the maidens of Boaz to glean unto the end of barley harvest and of wheat harvest; and she dwelt with her mother-in-law. (3:21-13)

Not until the very end of the book do we find women speaking positively of the Moabite stranger. "And the women said unto Naomi: for thy daughter-in-law, who loves thee, who is better to thee than seven sons, hath borne him (3:14-15)." Yet even now they do not call her by name.

Things were certainly not easy for Ruth in her new chosen land and among the people she longed to call her own. Yet, she did not grow bitter. Ruth's resilience and perseverance is an important ingredient in the mix of character traits that earned her the opportunity to become the mother of Israelite royalty.

The Sages tell us that all the people of the town were gathered to ceremoniously reap the first stalks of barley in order to bring them as the Omer sacrifice (Ruth Rabba 4:2). What implication of the last verse of our chapter did they bring out with this comment?

The Omer sacrifice is always brought on the second day of Passover. It seems that on the day that the Jews left Egypt and witnessed God's judgment of Egypt they were granted profound spiritual insights. However, as it was gifted and not earned, all these insights were lost and by the day after, the second day of Passover, they descended back to their original lowly spiritual state. However, they did not despair. That day marked a long, slow climb back up the scale of self-improvement that culminated fifty days later with Revelation at Mount Sinai. The Omer sacrifice represents a victory of despair. It teaches us that even if we fail, even if we fall very, very far, even if we lose all the spiritual gains that we earned with such difficulty and self sacrifice, there is always a new beginning. We can, we must start again at the beginning and with optimism and hope we will again succeed (Idrei Tson).

R. Tsadok Hacoen writes that the Jewish nation began with Abraham and Sarah. Why was it necessary for these two paragons of virtue to suffer childlessness for so many years? It is, he writes, because the beginning of Jewish peoplehood had to start in despair so that the ability to overcome despair and grasp hope becomes a part of our national character. Our people lives and survives against all expectations, even when every reckoning shows that it is doomed. It is above natural law for it is guided by the hand of the Almighty Himself. In this lies the great and true expectation for the deliverance of Israel and in it an individual draws a lesson for overcoming adversity and gaining hope.

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