

NAOMI AND RUTH

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

And to Naomi a kinsman for her husband, a mighty man of valor, of the family of Elimelech, and his name was Boaz (Ruth 2:1).

The second chapter starts after Naomi and Ruth had just entered Bethlehem. We are now introduced to Boaz. According to the usual pattern of such introductions, we would expect a sentence such as: "And there lived in Bethlehem a man by the name of Boaz, a kin to Naomi, a mighty man of valor". Had it been so written, the focus would have been on Boaz as the Narrator perceives him. However, the verse chooses to shine a spotlight on Naomi and who Boaz was in relation to her. The verse also utilizes an intentional ambiguity for it can be read as suggesting that Boaz was to be a husband for Naomi. If so, we might expect Naomi to reach out to Boaz but she does not. Instead the focus abruptly shifts to Ruth.

And Ruth the Moabitess said to 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.'

And she went, and came and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and her hap was to light on the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.

It is Boaz in whose eyes Ruth will find favor. Providence led her to him but Naomi assisted.

A careful reader quickly notices that while Boaz certainly appreciated Ruth's sterling qualities, his heart tended more to Naomi. Naomi was, after all, his kin, the wife of his relative, a part of his world and his heritage. Although the Sages tell us that Ruth was forty years-old at that time (Ruth Rabbah 6:2), according to the plain sense of the verses, Naomi was still fertile and not much older than Ruth, perhaps in her mid- thirties (see 1:12-13, Ruth Rabbah 3:7 and Sanhedrin 69b). Even if Naomi was older, she was a more fitting partner for the twilight of Boaz's life. Naomi was a natural; Ruth was a gamble. We find that Boaz appreciated and praised Ruth for what she has done for Naomi.

And Boaz answered and said unto her: 'It has fully been told me, all that thou has done unto your mother-in-law since the death of your husband; and how you left your father and your mother, and the land of your birth, and came unto a people that you knew not heretofore (v. 11).

Even at the point that Boaz commits to Ruth, he is still thinking of Naomi.

And she said: 'These six measures of barley he gave me; for he said to me: Go not empty unto your mother-in-law (Ruth 3:17).

Naomi could have had Boaz but in an act of profound self-transcendence and selflessness she put Ruth forward instead.

And Naomi her mother-in-law said unto her: 'My daughter, shall I not seek rest for thee, that it may be well with thee? And now is there not Boaz OUR kinsman...' (Ruth 3:1-2)

Why did Naomi do this? Was it simply the sense of gratitude and obligation that the older woman felt for the younger one, her who left her people and her land to share Naomi's fate? Or, was it the sense that Ruth was more suited to play the role that history prepared for Boaz? Naomi knew Ruth and she understood Boaz for Ruth and Boaz shared a quality that Naomi herself no longer possessed.

Significantly Boaz describes Ruth with the same words that the verse describes him. Boaz is a man of valor and Ruth is a woman of valor (3:11). The Midrash notes this fact and comments (Ruth Rabbah ad. loc.):

R. Abbahu said: A giant marries a giantess, who do they produce? Men of valor. Boaz married Ruth. What did they produce - David of whom it says, "man of valor... (Samuel I, 16)".

What, however, of Naomi. Is she not a closer kin for purposes of a levirate relationship and is she not the actual owner of the field that Boaz is supposed to redeem? Is she not one who should have more fittingly given birth to a messianic king than Ruth, the stranger, the Moabite?

The answer lies, I believe in the last verses of the preceding chapter. We must ask to what purpose did Scripture recount Naomi's "breakdown" upon return to Bethlehem. On the surface it contributes little to the story. In truth, however, it is essential. Yes, Naomi would have been perfect for Boaz; however, Naomi no longer existed. In her place, by her own testimony, there now stood another woman, weighed down by suffering, embittered and not at peace with God, a woman called Marah. This woman was not suitable to give birth to the Redeemer, for Redemption is all about hope among darkness, deliverance in darkness and despair, a vision of glorious and consoling future in the midst of bitter exile. Ruth has traveled through her own Gehenna and never abandoned hope. Her suffering has not bent her. She remained optimistic and trusting of God and people. She threw her lot with a nation she barely knew and people who did not welcome her and God Whom she knew only as one who took her husband away and withheld children from her womb. David and the Jewish people needed an ancestor such as this. David had a hard life but rose above it and his descendants were destined to drink the cup of bitterness and gall to its darkest dregs. Only optimism, hope and trust could guarantee their survival. Ruth Boaz and Naomi understood that this match was beyond human calculations, likes and proclivities. This was about destiny. The second chapter of Ruth tells us about human beings who were inspired to rise above their needs, feelings, and limitations to see and act upon God's plan. Boaz, Naomi and Ruth understood that Ruth was suited to be Mother of Royalty in a way that Naomi could no longer be and the rest, as they say, is history.

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