

WOMAN OF VALOR

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

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 (2:3).

During the several days between arrival to Bethlehem and the episode with Boaz on the threshing floor, Ruth's reputation became firmly established. "For all men at the gate of my people know that you are a woman of valor (3:11)", says Boaz to Ruth. Note that at the first meeting Boaz praises her only for her kindness to Naomi. It is at the second meeting, at the threshing floor, that he bestows on her the title of a woman of valor. It appears then that Ruth's reputation was established as she walked in the fields behind the reapers. What is it about her and her behavior that created such a positive impression among the people of Bethlehem?

Let us look at some factors that may have gone into the making of this good impression. Through this exercise we not only grow to appreciate reticent Ruth but also learn lessons that elevate and inspire.

1. Ruth volunteered to go out and glean in the fields so that Naomi doesn't. She willingly took upon herself an obligation that lay upon Naomi. Ruth does not say: "You got us into this mess, you are the one who knows these people, recognizes these fields, and enjoys respect and regard of the owners of these fields. None of them, your childhood friends, your relatives are lifting a finger to help two poor widows who they know reside in their midst. They should be helping you. I am a stranger, unfamiliar with the town and the customs and ways of its inhabitants. It is not safe for me here - it is you who should go". Had she done so, she would have been in the right. Yet, she spared Naomi for it would embarrass her (Malbim). Such sensitivity was undoubtedly noticed.
2. "She went and she came". While the deliberate use of the words "went" plays off Ruth's offer, "I will go...", and Naomi's assent, "Go my daughter...", "she came" seems out of place. The Sages comment: She went and she came. Ruth retraced her steps to identify the paths before engaging in the field so that she not get lost on her way back (Ruth Rabbah 4:6) She tested out the owners of the fields so that she does not walk after people who are not decent (selecting some fields and rejecting others) (Shabbos 113b). She went to the closest field (Rashi) (so that she needs not carry a large load back a long distance). With this she demonstrated that she was not after the loot and cared only to collect as much as she and Naomi needed.
3. She chose to glean rather than set her sights on Peah, the corner of the field that was left for the

poor during the harvest. In this fashion she worked hard for what she took, as hard as the owners themselves, and also avoided the arguments and dissension among the hordes of the poor who descended on the "corner" as soon as it was left available for them. She elected to work harder but preserved her dignity (Nachalas Yosef).

4. The Sages picked up these clues and filled the picture farther for us in Shabbos 113b. They said:

Then said Boaz unto his servant that was set over the reapers: 'Whose maiden is this? (Ruth 2:5) Is it the way of Boaz to inquire about maidens? R. Eliezer said: He saw wisdom in her behavior. She picked up two fallen stalks together but not three (the owner of the field willingly foregoes two stalks but might begrudge her three stalks taken together). In a collection (of teachings) it was taught - He saw refinement in her. She picked standing stalks in an upright posture but she sat down to pick up the fallen ones (rather than bend down and compromise herself).

Ruth is the most mysterious, most private and the most opaque of the characters in this book. She is retiring and willingly steps behind others. She utters no complaints and all her words are pleasant, measured and appropriate. She does for others and asks nothing for herself. It is almost too good to be true but in it is in reality both good and true. In the verses leading up to the first meeting of Ruth and Boaz we begin to glimpse the real Ruth and to realize that she is precious and genuine inside and outside. Ruth is an aristocrat in her bearing, comportment, feelings and thoughts. It is wide recognition of this fact that enabled her to escape the opprobrium for going to lay at Boaz's feet in the middle of the night and it is it that led to his evaluation of what for another woman would be presumed to be brazen self promotion, "for all the men of the gate of my people know that you are a woman of valor".

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