

LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

In the lessons so far, we turned the spotlight to the ideas of redemption and restoration that operate just below the surface of the Book of Ruth. We focused in particular on how this daughter of Lot and descendant of Eglon, King of Moab (Sanhedrin 105b), brought back certain qualities of Kingship to the nation that was in that phase of its history characterized by "it was in the times that judges judged".

When the Sages say that Ruth is a daughter of Lot, they mean that she is his spiritual descendant. In the literal sense, she was in truth his great- great-great granddaughter. The Sages say that she was the grand-daughter of Eglon, the king of Moab (Sanhedrin 105). There is corroboration of this in the text. Elimelech and his sons are described as Ephratites, one translation of which is "princes". One would naturally then expect that they would marry into the royal family. Beyond this, she is a daughter of Lot in the sense of inheriting his destiny and mission; or we may say, as a Moabite, in the sense of having access to national spiritual legacy, should she so choose. On a very deep level this relates to families sharing something unique, something that non-family members do not share. You might call it a "soul", although this English word is too narrow, too particular, too personal. The infusion of Quality of Royalty let the ground and set the stage for eventual development and success of monarchy in Israel.

What makes a successful ruler? Ancient philosophers thought that it was the ability to maintain balance between opposites - compassion and steadiness, strategic expansiveness and tactical vision, national priorities and individual needs, etc (See Kuzari, 3). Quite beyond that, a Jewish king must be able to be both a follower and a leader - leader for his people and follower of G-d's Law and the voice of his prophets. Saul failed on this task. On the other hand, David excelled in it.

We all know that we carry our parents' inheritance through life, sometimes as a burden, sometimes as a blessing. However, we often do not appreciate our indebtedness to preceding generations. The simple fact is that families share similarities, inclinations, proclivities, and so do nations. Some call these assortments of qualities a national character, others appeal to collective unconscious, but these roots are deep, going into distant past, to the crucible out of which nations arise. Some peoples are by nature intolerant of authority and rule by consensus; others crave direction and seek a heavy hand and control by authority (see Netsiv to Genesis 9, 25). "There is a land that produces warriors and a land that produces weaklings (Rashi to Numbers 13, 18)". It was known from time immemorial that one family in Judah produced powerful leaders.

..and she said: "How did you break a path for yourself, therefore he called his name Peretz (Genesis 38,29)".

Saul said of David: " If he came from Peretz, he will rule, for a king breaks (poretz) a path for himself and no one can stop him. If he came from Zerach, he will merely be a prince (Yevamos 76b)"

A leader must forge his personal path, caring not for what others might say. On the other hand, a leader that cannot also follow, often brings himself and his people into perdition. The two manners of behavior must be harmoniously joined lest a disaster occurs. Witness the results when later kings of Judah refused to follow in the ways of the Lord.

A reader of Ruth is struck by the opacity and mysteriousness of her character. She never expresses doubt or vacillation, she never wavers or questions; nary a complaint escapes her lips. Unlike Naomi or Boaz, she speaks little and whatever she does is in obedience. She follows Naomi to Bethlehem, she walks after the reapers, she carries out Naomi's instructions to meet Boaz on the threshing floor and then she waits patiently for him "to arrange the matter". Even when she gives birth, "a child is born to Naomi". Ruth is the perfect follower. I do not mean to imply that she did not make brave and difficult choices; on the contrary, her steadiness and courage are exceptional and an inspiration. Her choices, however, were those of a follower and not a leader, decisions about whom to follow and after whom to direct her steps. Ruth wisely chose good role models but she did not lead.

Lot was also a follower. At first he faithfully followed Abraham and went after him into the land of Egypt. Apparently, the sophistication and hedonism of the Egyptians appealed to him. To his credit, he did not switch his allegiances immediately and he did not betray his uncle and aunt. It must have been a deed of great courage for a "follower" to withstand the temptation to assimilate to the majority culture but he did withstand it at that time, and for this he was greatly rewarded. "G-d remembered that Lot knew that Sarah was Abraham's wife and he heard that Abraham represented her as his sister but he did not reveal it, for he cared for him. Therefore, Hashem had mercy on Lot (Rashi, Genesis 19, 29)". After they returned from Egypt, Lot settled in Sodom, a place "like the garden of Hashem, like the land of Egypt (Genesis 13, 10)".

He sat there at the gates of the city but his attempts at leadership failed dismally and the angels led him out of the city. His daughters followed but Lot's wife looked back and "she became a pillar of salt".

To understand Lot, we have to take a look at his father. It wasn't just Lot who was a follower; so was his father, Haran, the brother of Abraham. "Terach (the father of both Abram and Haran) complained about Abram to Nimrod because his son broke the idols. Nimrod threw Abraham into a fiery furnace. Haran was sitting and saying to himself: "If Abram wins, I follow him. If Nimrod wins, I follow him". When Abram was miraculously saved, they asked Haran, "To whose party do you belong?". He said, "Abram's". They threw him into the furnace and he was consumed there (Genesis Rabbah 38, 12 and Rashi ibid.)." The Sages picked up here on something basic and essential, something that allows us

to appreciate the extent of Abraham's break with his sterile past, the past that is represented by his change of name from Abram to Abraham. "Abram cannot give birth but Abraham will give birth (Rashi to Genesis 14, 5)". This extra-Biblical story is not a fanciful invention that aims to fill in a gap in our knowledge of Abraham's family or to resolve exegetical difficulties. Rather, it is an excellent example of how the Rabbis taught profound lessons in simple garb. This insight into the difference between Abraham and his family allows us to also understand the things they say about Terach. Terach was also a follower. He first obeyed Nimrod; later he followed Abraham to the land of Canaan. Abraham, the iconoclast forged forward in pursuit of his unique destiny and left behind and rejected the beliefs and lifestyle of his family. However, without the ability to follow, you cannot build a nation. This character trait was to have been preserved in the family of Abraham by Lot.

The crucial ability to follow was to be Lot's contribution to Israel's destiny; when he left Abraham's covenant, it threatened to be forever lost. Hashem brought it back through Lot's descendent Ruth. Mixed with the courage and independence of Peretz, it set the stage for emergence of David, who led his people in Hashem's ways. May we merit to see his descendant speedily and in our day. " ..He will teach us of His ways and we shall walk in His paths for Torah will come out of Zion and the word of Hashem from Jerusalem(Isaiah 2, 3)."

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