

# TWO SOULS

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

*Then said Boaz unto his servant that was set over the reapers: 'Whose girl is this? And the servant that was set over the reapers answered and said: 'It is a Moabite girl that came back with Naomi out of the field of Moab; and she said: Let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves; so she came, and continued from the morning until now, she tarried little at home (2: 5-7).*

The servant answers Boaz' question but then volunteers information that he was never asked. That Ruth is a Moabite and that she came back with Naomi is, of course, exactly what Boaz wanted to know. The comments about Ruth's working ethic, however, are out of place and should have little to do with what interested Boaz. They only make sense once we realize that Scripture often uses the device of introducing a seminal event with an apparently unrelated conversation. These conversations play an important role as introduction and subtle guidance to understanding the turning point in the narrative. Other examples of this technique is Josef's conversation with the man in the field before meeting his brothers (Gen. 47:13), David's talk with his brothers before engaging Goliath (Sam. I 17:28), and Saul's question to the maidens whom he meets just prior to being anointed by Samuel (ibid 9:11). If so, what does this servant's response contribute to our understanding of the ensuing conversation?

It would seem that at that time just as in our own time (and likely even more than now), when meeting a new person people wanted to know the family and the nation from who he or she came and the kind of work or occupation that the stranger performed (See Yonah 1:8; Samuel I, 25:2, Gen. 32:18). It is these things that allow us human beings, rightly or wrongly, to form first impressions upon which future associations can be added. The servant was in fact attempting to provide exactly this kind of information to his master and so, he told him that this was a Moabite girl, that she belonged to Naomi and that her work was remarkably good. Aside from what this tells us about Ruth, his words throw into relief Boaz' refusal to allow this information to shape his behavior and to behave conventionally, as other, lesser men may have done.

Boaz was not an average person. He was a sage, a divinely inspired leader of men, an individual deeply tuned into the prophetic tradition and shaped by Law and teachings transmitted from Sinai only a few generations previously. His words to Ruth betray none of the biases and preconceptions of people who surrounded him. Boaz speech to Ruth is filled with kindness, fatherly affection, genuine caring and true humility. At the same time, there is a lot more to that conversation than is apparent on the surface. Before we begin to unpack it, a short introduction is in order.

It is a basic tenet of Jewish Biblical interpretation that Torah is to be understood simultaneously on many levels. We speak of four levels of interpretation - Peshat, Derash, Remez (allusion) and Sod (mystical meaning, we will not address the latter two at this time). Peshat is the plain meaning which is not necessarily identical with the apparent meaning. To arrive to the correct understanding of Peshat one must bring together linguistic expertise, familiarity with local and extended context, erudition, sensitivity to religious tradition, and a clear sense of the principles that one uses to resolve and reconcile discrepancies and divergent implications of traditions and texts, as well as a pretty good sense of interpretative balance. Derash is inner meaning, a true meaning that is deliberately encoded into the text.

Whereas Derash is often subjective and lies in an uneasy balance with the Peshat, it is especially appropriate for deconstructing conversations, for undercurrents and hidden meanings in verbal give and take are wholly within our everyday experience. Anyone who routinely participates in group meetings in business, education and other settings is wholly aware of this phenomenon. Consider, for example, a husband and a wife who are hosting guests who are overstaying their welcome. The husband turns to the wife and says: "Dear, what time is it now?". She responds, "It is already 12:30 at night". Oh, my", he sighs, "How does time fly! You know, I have to get up early for work tomorrow". The guests get the hint and promptly leave. What happened here? On the level of Peshat there was only a request for time of night and the husband venting. On the level of Derash, deeper communication took place. Which is the more "correct" interpretation?

When we take this matter up again next week we will, please God, see that the conversation of Boaz and Ruth proceeded on several levels. First, there was the apparent substance of the conversation, that Ruth should glean in Boaz's field and that he will facilitate it for her. On a deeper level, there was an exchange between two unique individuals who, as the conversation progressed found themselves uniquely matched in intelligence, moral stature, purity of character, and conception and religious outlook. On even more profound level Boaz and Ruth spoke of their respective paths in life, how to serve God, and where He was leading them. It is this dialogue that developed trust between these two kindred souls that made possible the encounter on the threshing floor and led to the match made in Heaven.

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