

THE CONVERSATION

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

Then said Boaz unto Ruth: *'Did you not hear, my daughter? Go not to glean in a field of another, neither you pass from this, but abide here fast by my maidens. Your eyes be on the field that they do reap, and go after them; have I not charged the young men that they shall not touch you? and when you thirst go to the vessels, and drink of that which the young men have drawn.'* Then she fell on her face, and bowed down to the ground, and said to him: *'Why have I found favor in your eyes to recognize me, and I am a foreigner? (2:8-10)'*

On the surface, Boaz tells Ruth to stay in his field for he has arranged that she be welcomed and be made comfortable. He "puts her on the payroll" and extends to her the courtesies and benefits of employees and for this she is truly grateful. Careful consideration of the language, however, reveals powerful currents under the surface. We are somewhat handicapped in that we discuss in English a complex, multileveled conversation that is conducted in a language that has not been spoken to 2500 years, rabbinic, medieval, and modern Hebrew being in truth dialects of Biblical Hebrew that no longer possess the subtlety and power of their antecedents. Spoken Hebrew has unfortunately gradually taken on much of the syntax and structure of its dominant Indo-European neighbors and is of limited help in understanding its Biblical antecedent. It is nevertheless worthwhile to attempt to understand this conversation and what it may have meant, albeit that the tools in our possession are somewhat inadequate.

Boaz begins his conversation by referring to his instructions to the workers. He uses negative expressions - for emphasis. He knows that Ruth witnessed his discussion with the overseer of harvesters and realized that it was about her. He wants to put her at ease. That reveals Boaz as a sensitive and caring man, even of strangers. Boaz does not tell Ruth that they are related because he does not want his seniority to interfere with his message.

Boaz uses the long and more formal forms of verbs as he addresses Ruth. Biblical Hebrew possesses short and long verb forms; the former are more colloquial and prosaic, the latter denote respect and deference. Boaz speaks to the poor, young and forlorn widow as if she is royalty, as if she is an equal. This shows that he recognizes Ruth's true stature that is temporarily obscured by her poverty, plain cloth and foreign speech and deportment.

It is important to recognize that saying, "Your eyes are upon the field", is an important vote of confidence and trust in a culture that believes in the "Evil Eye". To put it simply, to believe in the existence of the "evil Eye" is to think that jealousy and envy can cause physical and financial harm

(See Brochos 55a). Boaz indicates to Ruth that he knows that she does not harbor resentment and envy of those more fortunate, as lowly and deprived as she currently finds herself. He is not concerned for he recognizes her innate goodness, deep optimism and unfailing trust in Hashem's justice and goodness..

Because Boaz trusts Ruth's eyes, she is emboldened to say "Why have I found favor in your eyes to recognize me?" Ruth is shaken to the core by the depth of insight and profundity of caring that this man reveals ". He has seen into the depths of her soul. Thus far, the people of Bethlehem did not have taken cognizance of the Moabite stranger among them. She may have already resigned herself to her fate, to live out her days alone and lonely among people who, though they carry God's truth, have not accepted or welcomed her. Ruth may have accepted social ostracism as the price for communion with God. But now everything changes. Never before has anyone peered deeply into her soul and affirmed who she is and for what she yearns, not in Moab, not even in Bethlehem. She may have never met anyone like this before and her innermost depth is full of wonder and gratitude.

She falls on her face for she feels inadequate and plain before what was revealed to her at this moment.. She prostrates herself as a pupil does to a Master for she has just met her teacher. She may yet find a path to Hashem and goodness among these people. Her heart sings in gratitude and wonder.

Then she fell on her face, and bowed down to the ground, and said to him: 'Why have I found favor in your eyes to recognize me, and I am a foreigner? (2:8-10)'

All this would be amazing enough. However, the Sages reveal to us a deeper yet level in this remarkable conversation. They describe that Boaz coached Ruth, the Moabite, how to avoid common pitfalls of recent convert. Newcomers to religion not infrequently feel threatened by absolute demands of their newly found way of life. Before, they were independent, valued men and women; now, they are novices, beginners, those who receive rather than those who give. The sense of self-worth and sometimes the ego is threatened. A convert or even a Jew who is new to observance often feels unappreciated and misunderstood by the men and women who are so comfortable, so facile with the minutiae of ritual and observance, who are so secure in their faith, whose mannerisms, tongue and perceptions are so.... well, foreign. To affirm the self, a convert's is often tempted to resort to syncretism - to merge the past and the future, to import beliefs that have no place in Judaism and to blindly affirm that he or she bring something to this community that is valuable and unique, something that only he has. "If only it could be joined to the truths that I experience here", he thinks. "I only I could teach these self-satisfied and smug people true values, my values!" Naturally, they are less than receptive and so he withdraws. The result can be nothing but spiritual ruin and estrangement for arrogance and self exaltation not only interfere with learning but also ultimately leads to heresy.

The three stages of estrangement are described in the following midrash. Do not go to collect in the

filed of another - as it says, "Thou shall have no other gods with Me". And also do not pass from this, as it says, "This is my God and I will dwell in Him". "And so abide you with my maidens - this are the righteous, as it says, "Will You delight in it like a bird and join it to Your maidens" (Ruth Rabba 4:11).

That Boaz through right through her, that he clearly understood what Ruth was perhaps only vaguely cognizing, cut to her heart. She fell on her face, and she prostrated herself in acknowledgment of the wonder that she just experienced - "A Sage is greater than a prophet (Bava Basra 12a)."

Ruth felt totally inadequate in light of her own self that was being so clearly revealed to her. She acknowledged and she humbled herself. This man was like an angel and she was but a human being. Why did he then take interest in her?

'Why have I found favor in your eyes to recognize me, and I am a foreigner?

I suspect that Boaz was also profoundly moved by the sincerity and willingness to follow the truth without preconditions, without excuses that unfolded before him. His response to this crucial question, please God, will engage us next week.

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