

# THE UNDERSTANDING

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

*Then she said: I have found favor in thy sight, my master; for you comforted me, and because you spoke to the heart of your handmaid, though I am no worthy to be as one of your handmaidens.' And Boaz said to her at meal-time: 'Come hither, and eat of the bread, and dip your morsel in the vinegar.' And she sat beside the reapers; and he handed her parched corn, and she did eat and was satisfied, and left over. (2:13-14)*

The refinement, delicacy and opacity by design of the communication between Ruth and Boaz reaches a level of profundity in these sentences that is hardly matched in any other conversation in Tanach. These two exquisite souls share a deep and abiding commitment to spirituality and Service of God but they are also aware that they are a man and a woman who are speaking heart to heart, and so, they exhibit care, utmost restraint and remarkable refinement in what they say, how they phrase and parse their words and even in what they leave unsaid. They speak in highly stylized and symbolic language for they are masters of "parable and expression, words of the wise and their riddles (Proverbs 1,1)". Before we consider Rabbinic comments on these verses, let us zero in' on some of the expressions that Ruth employs. By comparing her use of these expressions with how they are used elsewhere in Scriptures, some of the idiomatic meaning, tone, and nuance will become revealed, and then we might begin to understand.

"You spoke to the heart of your maiden". Of the ten instances of this expression, the majority are a highly personal appeal by a man to woman. Three examples will suffice.

*And her husband arose, and went after her, to speak kindly to her heart, to bring her back (Judges 19:3)*

Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak to her heart. And I will give her vineyards from there, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope; and she shall respond there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt. And it shall be at that day, says HaShem, that you shall call Me my husband', and shall call Me no more my owner'. (Hoshea 2:16-18)

And Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her; and he took her, and lay with her, and violated her. And his soul did cleave unto Dinah the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the girl, and spoke to the heart of the girl. (Gen. 34:2-3)

That Ruth compares herself to the handmaidens of Boaz is highly significant. Does Boaz have handmaidens and where are they mentioned? Boaz does not have handmaidens and he couldn't

have any, for the Torah only allows a Jewish man to own a Jewish woman as preparation for marriage and with that in highly specific circumstances (See Exodus 21). Surely Ruth did not aspire to be a gentile slave girl. The word that Ruth employs, SHIPCHA as opposed to the word AMA, has special meaning. To understand it let us look at another exchange between a man and a woman in somewhat similar circumstances.

David's band protected shepherds and sheep of Naval the Carmelite but when David needed a favor Naval verbally abused his messengers and flatly refused to help. Here enraged David and his men are descending toward Naval's home so as to reduce his abode to ruins. Abigail, the wife of Naval, goes out to meet David and persuades him to spare her husband and household. Among other things she says this to him (Samuel I, 25).

And she fell at his feet, and said: 'Upon me, my lord, upon me be the iniquity; and let your handmaid, I ask you, speak in your ears, and hear you the words of your handmaid. And it will come to pass, when HaShem shall have done to my lord according to all the good that He has spoken concerning you, and shall have appointed you prince over Israel; ... And when HaShem shall have dealt well with my lord, then remember your handmaid (using the word AMA).'

Pretty forward is it not, coming from a married woman. The Sages noted this and harshly criticized Abigail. "And when HaShem shall have dealt well with my lord, then remember your handmaid. R. Nachman said: This is what people say, (sometimes) a woman chatters as she weaves (Rashi: as she spoke of her husband she mentioned herself, that he should marry her, if he dies). Some say: While a goose walks, he scans what's in front of him"(Megilla 14b).

And when David heard that Nabal was dead, he said: 'Blessed be HaShem, that pleaded the cause of my reproach from the hand of Nabal, and kept back His servant from evil; and the evil-doing of Nabal HaShem returned upon his own head.' And David sent and spoke concerning Abigail, to take her to him to wife. And when the servants of David were come to Abigail to Carmel, they spoke to her, saying: 'David hath sent us to you, to take you to him to wife.' And she arose, and bowed down with her face to the earth, and said: 'Behold, your handmaid (using the word SHIPCHA) is a servant to wash the feet of the servants of my lord.' We see from here that SHIPCHA, the word used by Abigail and by Ruth carries special connotation of marriage.

In the Torah too, a wife can sometimes be referred to as handmaiden'. Bilhah and Zilpah, the wives of Jacob, are alternately referred to as wives or handmaidens, depending on context. I also suggest that you explore the language that Batsheba uses in Samuel II, 1, as she pleads her son Solomons's case to David.

The Sages decode the conversation between Boaz and Ruth for us in their usual poetic style. " He (Boaz) said to her: God forbid, you are not of the maidservants but of the matriarchs". This is a play on words for in Hebrew, the word handmaiden - ama' and matriarch- ima' sound similarly. "Come hither - R. Yochanan interpret it in six ways. Hither means approach Roylty -as it says (of David), "that You

have brought me hither....(Ruth Rabbah 5:6)"

Within a few sentences, Ruth has gone from "a stranger" to a candidate for the mother of a royal family. Unlike Abigail, however, she expresses her hope by using a negative - "I am not worthy to be as one of your handmaidens". It is this circumspection, refinement and humility that earn her the opportunity to join the spiritual aristocracy of the Jewish nation.

In these few sentences, a great deal has been offered and shared. Nothing more remains to be spoken and Boaz invites Ruth to seal the agreement that they made unbeknown to those who surround them. "And Boaz said to her at meal-time: 'Come hither, and eat of the bread, and dip your morsel in the vinegar.' And she sat beside the reapers; and he handed her parched corn, and she did eat and was satisfied, and left over." With all that, their understanding remains preliminary and subject to misreading precisely because it is so well hidden. Their pact is reaffirmed and finally sealed when the two meet again at the threshing floor. There again he hands her an offering of barley.

*"And he said: 'Bring the mantle that is upon you, and hold it'; and she held it; and he measured six measures of barley, and laid it on her; and he went into the city." (Ruth 3:15)*

In these few sentences the book of Ruth sets the stage for the fateful meeting at the threshing floor. In the process we learn to appreciate the truly elevated stature of Boaz and Ruth and that meeting in the middle of the night upon the threshing floor no longer surprises us, for we have grown to respect and look up to these two pure and refined remarkable individuals out of whom is destined to issue the royal seed.

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