

THE REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST□

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

And Naomi her mother-in-law said unto her: 'My daughter, shall I not seek place of rest for you that would be good for you? (3:1)

Three months have passed since Boaz and Ruth spoke, the months of gathering in the barley harvest, then the months of bringing in the wheat.

R. Shmuel Bar Nachman said: "From the beginning of barley harvest to the end of the wheat harvest is three months ", "and she returned to her mother-in-law", and "Naomi, her mother in law said to her, My daughter, shall I not seek a place of rest for you", and "Now Boaz is our relative". (Ruth Rabbah 5:11). Let us explore this puzzling comment.

Many commentators suggest that these three months are the ones that Jewish Law mandates a widow or divorcee to wait before remarrying, so as to ensure that, if she is pregnant, the identity of the father become clear for purposes of paternity and inheritance. The allusion to pregnancy is important. At the same time as Ruth was mentally and emotionally separating from her previous life, a realization and a conviction was ripening and growing within Naomi.

We must remember that Naomi was a contender and a potential competitor for Boaz. That she understood it clearly is evident from how she describes Boaz, "Now Boaz is our relative", and, "The man is nigh of kin unto us, one of our near kinsmen" - OUR kinsman. It would have been simple for Naomi to claim her right to marry him and to resume her old elevated station in Bethlehem. After all, Naomi was a real relative and, in any case, a closer relative than Ruth, and it is Naomi's field that Boaz must redeem. It would not in any way shortchange Ruth. Ruth can also marry a young man and rebuild her life. She would probably gladly accept such an outcome. Is this not the best way, the Godly way, to pursue? Deep inside, as surely as she knows God and herself, Naomi knows differently. Naomi knows that this is not Ruth's destiny, even if she herself may not recognize it. Now, after three months of inner struggle, Naomi abdicates in Ruth's favor. In her appeal, Naomi is speaking as much to Ruth as to herself. This is Ruth, the dutiful daughter, who has abandoned her people and her land to succor Naomi and share her fate. The pathos of "My daughter...", resound within Naomi, penetrate her soul, and define her decision, and this is why in these several sentences Naomi and Ruth are repeatedly referred to as "mother-in-law" and "daughter-in-law".

There is, however, another dimension that underlies everything. Ruth deserves a place of rest a "MANOACH". What is this place of rest? It is not merely the quieting of the stress of being single and

alone. Naomi referred to that kind of alleviation and easing previously as she urged her daughters-in-law to return and make a home with some man, whomever - "HaShem grant you that you may find rest (MNUCHA), each of you in the house of her husband" (Ruth 1:9). The switch from the feminine to the masculine version of the word is highly significant. Before it was "mnucha", a state of repose that a woman finds upon remarriage; now it is a "manoach", the rightful place, the right person, the only fitting partner in life. Why was Boaz the only place of repose for Ruth?

To understand this more fully, we need to return to the surprising and constantly repeated motif in this book - that Ruth performed a great kindness, not only with the living but also with the dead.

And Naomi said unto her two daughters-in-law: 'Go, return each of you to her mother's house; HaShem deal kindly with you, as you dealt with the dead, and with me. (1:8). Again, "And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law: 'Blessed be he of HaShem, who left not off His kindness to the living and to the dead.' And Naomi said unto her: 'The man is a kin to us, one of our near redeemers.' "(2:20)

In contrast, Boaz, when initially speaking to Ruth, carefully avoids mentioning the dead. "And Boaz answered and said unto her: 'It has been told me, all that you did to thy mother-in-law since the death of your husband; and how you left your father and mother, and the land of your birth, and came unto a people that you know not heretofore. (2:11). Notice, all about Ruth and nothing about her kindness to the departed! This tells us that Ruth's kindness to the dead is a very sensitive topic, one that is entirely inappropriate to bring up at this point in their relationship. He refers obliquely to it, however, at the point that he "proposes" to her, in these words, "Blessed be you of HaShem, my daughter; you showed more kindness in the end than at the beginning, inasmuch as you did not follow the young men, whether poor or rich.(3:10)."

The "kindness to the dead" is explored in the following passage. Full understanding of this quote must perforce elude us as it draws on deeply hidden and profound Kabbalistic wisdom. However, everything deep has its expression and reflection on a more superficial level and can be accessed there as well. I ask that the reader mentally translates from the conceptual vocabulary and imagery of a long gone era to the one that we use now. Ability to do so is indispensable if we are to fully learn from the wisdom of the ancients, who spoke and thought in different mental categories than we do in our own day and age. As you read this passage, substitute image, remembrance, paradigm, or energy for the word "spirit" and it will begin to yield its secrets.

"When a man dies he leaves a spirit in his wife's belly and it does not separate from there all the days of her widowhood. If she merits a levirate marriage, this "spirit" becomes the foundation of a structure "to build the house of his brother". If she does not have a levirate and marries another man, he also puts into her a "spirit". Sometimes the later one vanquishes the first one and sometimes the reverse... (Shoresh Ishai cited in Idrei Tson). The concept that a man's widow preserves within her something of his spirit which is then dressed and redeemed through a levirate marriage is alluded to in the following midrashic passage.

And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, Blessed he (i.e. Boaz) be of Hashem who has not left off His kindness from the living and dead". The living - that Boaz fed and provided for the living. The dead - that he took care of their shrouds (Ruth Rabbah 5:10).

Sure, Naomi could have married Boaz and Ruth could have found happiness and contentment with some deserving young man. To human eye that would have been fine, even fitting. Society would see it as a good outcome, perhaps it would have even be cited as evidence of God's Providence in the affairs of men. However, conventional is not identical with the good. This would not have been redemption for the dead were then to be lost and unredeemed, the past forgotten rather than transformed, and the second best taken the place of the truly good.

Naomi understood. Her actions, her self transcendence, her commitment to the right and good over all led Ruth to Boaz and the spirit that she carried in her womb to full expression in David, the King of Israel.

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