

THE PLAN

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

And now is there not Boaz our kinsman, with whose maidens you were? Behold, he winnows barley tonight in the threshing-floor.

Wash yourself, and anoint yourself, and put your special clothing on, and go down to the threshing-floor; but make not yourself known to a man, until he shall have done eating and drinking.

And it shall be, when he lies down, that you mark the place where he shall lie, and you go and uncover his feet, and lay down; and he will tell you what to do.' (3:2-3)

The physical description of the meeting between Boaz and Ruth is confused and confusing. Boaz, who previously had many workers in his employ is now portrayed winnowing alone. Not only is he left to do the mammoth work of winnowing the entire barley crop by himself (and what happened to the wheat?), he does so at night. Normally, winnowing is performed by throwing the mixture of grains and chaff up to the wind; the lighter chaff is carried away and the heavier grain falls to the ground. Winds tend to quiet down at night which is therefore not a propitious time to engage in this labor. From the verses it seems that Boaz winnows at the low ground, an area of less wind - a place to which Ruth had to "descend", just the opposite of an area that a sensible winnower would choose. When Boaz finishes his work, he eats and drinks and instead of returning home, goes to sleep. Somehow in the darkness, Ruth manages to not only find him but also to uncover his feet and to lie down without awakening him.

A partial solution to some of these difficulties is the following scenario drawn from various commentators and based primarily on the Malbim.

Ruth went to join Boaz's maidens before they left for the day. As a regular there, she did not draw particular attention hence, the reference "with whose maidens you were". Boaz remains behind alone to winnow a small measure of barley which he prepares for the barley Omer sacrifice. The Omer is cut down and prepared at night to offer it on the following day (Rokeach). After everyone else has left, Ruth hides on the grounds and waits for Boaz to finish his holy work. Boaz does not return home because it is not becoming for a religious leader to be seen walking around at night lest he be suspected of unbecoming behavior (see an extended discussion in the commentary of Bach). He goes down to a lower, less exposed area or the threshing ground and wearily lies down to rest. Ruth changes into festival clothes and descends to where she knows Boaz will rest. She reposes at his feet and waits.

Why does the book of Ruth not make all this clear? I would venture to say that it wishes to indicate to us, even those of us who may be oblivious to these things, that we should at this point by right be confused and perturbed. The outer form of the narrative follows the inner content. Naomi's plan should really disturb us. Granted, it is the widow's obligation to seek to perpetuate her departed husband's name as it says, "And his wife shall go up to the gate, to the elders (Deut. 25)." Still, should not have Naomi pursued a nicer way, a more conventionally accepted approach; should she not have sent matchmakers to Boaz or gone to him herself with a proposal? We know that Ruth is a fine outstanding woman graced with all manner of nobility but others do not. What Naomi suggests has a lot of risk. Naomi's plan could have gone terribly wrong. What if someone saw, what if Boaz cried out in his fright and people rushed in. Imagine, a Moabite girl slipping under the cover of darkness to tempt the leader of the generation?! Woe to Ruth from that embarrassment, woe to Naomi from that shame.

It is not like Naomi did not take responsibility. The story in the beginning of chapter 3 has great depth. In these few sentences there are no less than 17 "keri vketiv", words that are spelled in one way but read in another. Most of these otherwise rare variants are can be read as if it is Naomi herself who descends to the threshing floor, changes into festival clothing and lies at Boaz's feet. "And you shall go down to the barn" - the ketiv: I shall go down. She said: May my merit go with you (Yerushalmi Peah 8:7)."

It may be that Naomi understood two crucial things. First she knew that Hashem has not in vain led Ruth to the field of Boaz, has for a reason inclined Boaz's heart to notice her, and did not for naught bring about a an inner connection between the two, even if Boaz has not yet acted upon it. However, she also understood that not everything in life can be planned and that a life in which every detail has its place is bereft of Divine influence. She gave God a chance, she created the situation in which He could work a miracle. It is tempting to leave nothing to chance but doing so leaves Hashem out and is not the way of those with true faith.

Naomi knew that Ruth must act out her destiny. The verses just before this chapter emphasize that Ruth was a Moabite. True, she converted but it was specifically that Moabite quality of Royalty that she was to bring to the Davidic line. "My kidneys advised me: Go, do as your ancestral mother, the daughter of Lot has done, when Lot finished eating and drinking, and she came unto her father in the darkness...(Commentary Zot Nechmati and Alshich). The conventional conduct was not the best fitting, the most appropriate behavior - not the right way. The spiritual forces that Ruth's conduct would awaken raised a tempest of forces and opportunities and offered the highest peak. Fortunately, Boaz and Ruth proved equal to the challenge of containing and elevating these forces and in so doing changed the course of all human history.

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