

LIGHT AND DARKNESS

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

The meeting of Boaz and Ruth on the threshing floor is the peak of the story. It is here that gripping narrative, psychological insight, historical awareness, symbolism and allusion are woven together in a parable of redemption. Before we immerse ourselves in the narrative, let us set guideposts along the way and note some of the interwoven levels along which the story develops.

Psychological insight - the story of two pure souls who trust one another under the most improbable circumstances. The understanding that Boaz and Ruth established during their brief conversation was sorely tested in this encounter in the darkness. Ruth tested Boaz because she was sure that he will pass the test. She also tried herself; Naomi asked Ruth, a recent convert to trust her body and soul utterly and completely to a strange man from a foreign people. Boaz could have failed in so many different ways, some of them even honorable and respectable. Many excuses were available to him; instead he chose the path of integrity, one that asked him to maintain his belief in Ruth against all evidence. After all, Ruth was a Moabite, from a nation of low moral standards and here she was lying at his uncovered feet in the middle of the night. Yet Boaz trusted Ruth and above all he trusted himself and his perception of who she was. He did not waver and did not question. He knew that his vision was pure and sprung from a pure heart and he trusted that which he instinctively understood. The story of this meeting is ultimately about trusting - oneself, God and others.

Undoubtedly Boaz very much wanted to marry Ruth. However, the path of integrity required that he consider Ploni-Almoni, the other relative who could have wedded Ruth and so he offered him the chance to trust as he trusted. Ploni-Almoni did not grasp the greatness that was within his reach, and so he remains Ploni-Amoni, "that man", John Doe, the person without a name. Still he deserved that chance. Boaz's conduct teaches us that no matter how exalted the purpose and how great the spiritual benefits, they never trump simple human decency.

The symbolism of the threshing floor deserves a mention. This is a place where wheat is separated from the chaff. The motif of fertile harvest, seed and bounty certainly adds to the significance that surrounds and envelops these verses. Redemption also is preceded by separation of good and evil. In our world, good and evil are inextricably intermixed. We might say that our reality is neither night nor day but a twilight, a time when light and darkness function together, when shadows appear solid and the real unreal. It is the task of man to separate light and darkness, to extract the good and join it to its root', so it can be redeemed. Then the evil will of itself perish and the good will be transformed

into Godliness, as wheat becomes bread, as Boaz and Ruth become progenitors of the Messianic line. In Kabbalah this is known as Birur, or clarification, the first condition of Redemption.

History informs our understanding of the narrative. Both Boaz and Ruth came to this Divinely arranged meeting with a baggage of historical precedent. As noted in the introductory lessons, Boaz descended from Tamar who, with all good intentions, tempted Judah in the guise of a courtesan and brought him to descend. Ruth came from Lot whose daughters beguiled their father to lie with them "for there is no man to come unto us as is the way of all land". Good intentions; good intentions sometimes lead to poor outcomes. Ruth repeats the pattern. Boaz as the older authority figure stands in for Lot and Judah while she takes the place of the younger women of those episodes. By choosing differently, by rising above the burden of inheritance, Boaz and Ruth perform Tikkun, or Rectification, the second necessary pre-condition of Redemption. They liberated the good intentions of Lot's daughter and Tamar that are concealed within the outwardly ugly form of their actions and in this way raised the good and made it suitable for Redemption.

As the crux of the entire book, the few verses that we are about to explore require special tools. To do justice to this complex, multi- stranded, nuanced and shadowed narrative, will require us to move freely from one level of meaning to another. The tools of the commentator are textual analysis and intellectual reflection and they less suited for this task than those that a poet and mystic effortlessly possesses and applies. Nevertheless, we must try. With God's help we will begin on this topic next week.

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