

AND IT WAS AT MIDNIGHT...

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

And Boaz had eaten and drunk and his heart became happy, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of corn; and she came in darkness and uncovered his feet, and laid down.

And it came to pass at midnight, that the man trembled and was grasped ; and, behold, a woman lay at his feet.

And he said: 'Who are you?' And she answered: 'I am Ruth your handmaiden; spread therefore your wing over your handmaid; for you are a redeemer.' And he said: 'Blessed be you of HaShem, my daughter... (3:7-10)

This little passage stands out for drama, for its depth is what is said and of what is left unexplained. It is full of shadows and gaps that the reader is called to fill in. How one does it depends, as always in Hebrew Scripture, on who the interpreter is and what traditions, experience, values and training he or she brings to the task of interpretation. We will attempt to present a reading that bases itself on the comments of the Sages and is guided by the approach that we have taken so far. As will shortly become apparent, Rabbinic interpretation is informed by parallel passages and verses.

"Uncovering the feet" is plainly ambiguous. On one hand it is simply a sign of submission and acceptance of leadership. Maimonides in the Guide of the Perplexed I, 28 cites many examples of such usage of this simile. On the other hand, it carries certain connotations of physical closeness and exposure, such as in Sam. I 24:4 and Samuel II 11:8. This second meaning is made clear in Rashi's explanation of Talmud Sanhedrin 19B where it is said that Boaz' body became like the heads of turnips (however, the plural form of "turnips" presents a difficulty for this interpretation; for an alternate possible explanation compare with Sanhedrin 94a where Jethro's flesh is said to become "sharp points", signifying perhaps what we call "goose bumps").

R. Shmuel Bar Nachman said "Cursed be the wicked. In reference to Potiphar's wife it says, 'and she said, 'lie with me'', like an animal, but of Ruth it says, 'and spread your wing over your handmaid'" (Genesis Rabbah 87,4). This comparison between Ruth and Potiphar's wife calls to mind an important idea explicated so beautifully by R. Tsadok Hakohen in Likutei Amarim 80b. He writes that every element seeks to join itself with what is like it. If a woman on a low spiritual level seeks out an elevated man it is either a sign that something within him still requires correction or, that an element of goodness within her is crying out for redemption. The impure does not desire to attach itself to the pure, if not for one of these two reasons. Why would a Gentile jet-setter, a woman like the wife

of Pharaoh's chief executioner desire to attach herself to a completely pious Jewish man? It must be a desperate cry for meaning and redemption. This is why Joseph was initially tempted somewhat by his master's wife, for he understood that she could not be attracted to him unless they shared something. So happens, it turned out to be her (and Potiphar's) daughter Asnat, who ultimately married Joseph. The contrast between Potiphar's wife and Ruth emphasizes that Ruth wanted Boaz solely for his goodness and righteousness. She was motivated by pure and religious motives and he instinctively understood that. Ruth throws back to Boaz the same words that he said to her at their first meeting: "HaShem recompense your work, and be your reward complete from HaShem, the G-d of Israel, under whose wings you came to take refuge." (Ruth 2:14). She asks that Boaz spread his wing over her, meaning his outer four-fringed garment, as we still do during the marriage ceremony, alluding to the commandment of Tsitsit and its power to guard against temptation (see Malbim here, and Rashash to Kiddushin 18b). When a man spreads his garment over a woman the symbolism is that this man and this woman are now wearing the same cloak and face the world under the same cover. Ruth was prepared to cloak herself in the garments of the Sage of Israel with everything that it entailed.

Boaz was grasped - by whom? The unusual verb form that is used here (see Judges 16:29) is passive and not reflexive, therefore it is clear that someone else grasped him. It may be that it was Ruth who grasped him in an attempt to prevent him from involuntarily crying out in fright. Certain sources suggest that Boaz may have had a servant who slept with him in the granary (Targum Ruth to v. 14). This is the fellow who Boaz tells later: " 'Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing-floor' (3:14)." Perhaps that it was he who grasped Boaz at that moment.

Boaz trembled. Like Isaac, he suddenly found himself in front of a fateful choice. He could accept Ruth, trust in her and in God and bless her, or he could blame her, call her a manipulator and curse her. "R. Akiva was to go to (lobby in) Rome. He said to his servant bring me something valuable from the market (to bring as a gift). He went and brought him a pair of birds. R. Akiva asked him, why did it take you so long". He said because birds make one tremble and take care to watch them. R. Akiva applied it to himself - Man's trembling leads to failure but he who trusts God will be saved (Proverbs 29)'. The trembling that Jacob caused Isaac - it was by right that Isaac should have cursed Jacob (Gen 27:33). However, "he who trusts in God will be saved" - You put in Isaac's heart to bless his son. Trembling that Ruth caused to Boaz - it was only right that he should curse her. But, "he who trusts in God shall be uplifted". You put in his heart to bless her, as it says, "Blessed are you to Hashem..." (Ruth Rabba 6:2)

At midnight I shall arise to praise you for your righteous judgments (Psalms 109:15). (David said, I praise You) for the judgments that You brought unto Ammonites and Moabites and the goodness that you did for my great grandfather and grandmother. Had Boaz rushed in with a curse, from whence would I have come? However, You put into his heart a blessing, as it says, "Blessed be you..." (Ruth Rabbah 6:1).

The righteous in crisis err on the side of blessing. When push came to shove and Boaz had to make a split decision he choose to bless and not to curse for that was his nature. Everything else that followed was a consequence of this choice. Blessed be Boaz and fortunate are we for the choices that he made and the lessons he left to us. May we be worthy of internalizing and living his lessons to the full.

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