

# THEN AND NOW

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

*And he said: 'Blessed be you to HaShem, my daughter; your last kindness is more than the first, inasmuch as you did not walk after the young men, whether poor or rich.*

And now, my daughter, fear not; I will do for you all that you said for all the people in the gate of my people do know that you are a woman of much accomplishment (3:7-8).

One of the wonderful aspects of Tanach that never ceases to move and amaze me is how well it uses echoes and reflections to communicate rich and complex vision. This is no doubt an intentional technique that enables the Author to encode and contain a great deal of meaning in a few words. Let us compare the words of Boaz now to his first conversation with Ruth.

Our verses parallel and recap much of the previous encounter between Boaz and Ruth, drawing out the implicit and making it explicit, securing vague impressions and fixing their boundaries and converting a loose and approximate understanding between two parties into shared knowledge and mutual awareness.

Boaz begins by recalling that Ruth is "blessed of Hashem". Who brought about that blessing? It is Boaz himself, as it says, "and he said to the reapers, 'Hashem be with you' and they said, 'May Hashem bless you'". (2:4)

Boaz again calls Ruth, "My daughter", as he did in 2:8, when he asked her not to glean in the field of another. He reminds her that he always desired that she stays with him. At the same time, by again referring to her as "daughter", he conserves the boundaries of their relationship. It is and must remain "for the sake of Heaven". The Sages say that "He who marries a woman for the sake of Heaven is considered as if he gave birth to her (Sotah 12a) - hence, "my daughter". The man must support and assist the woman in reaching her potential as a mother and wife. "A woman does not make a covenant but only with a man who makes her into a vessel (Sanhedrin 22b)". A husband can only do so if, like a father, he seeks to elevate her and the entire household. This aspiration by necessity puts him into a paternal role - minimizing and overlooking his own needs and seeking and desiring the good of his wife and family. Even though Boaz and Ruth were bound together at a moment of great intimacy, Boaz does not attempt to draw on the powers of attraction that would come so naturally in that intense and desolate surrounding. This relationship is filial, so it has shaped itself, and so it shall remain.

Boaz recognizes that he and Ruth are inextricably intertwined in the religious and the personal. He

takes great care so that one does not intrude upon, compromise or sully the other. He now again alludes again to their first meeting in which the motif of God's great compassion was prominent.

"...Your last kindness is more than the first". Clearly the later kindness is Ruth's request of marriage but what is the first one? The commentators offer various interpretations. I propose the one by the Malbim who writes, "The first kindness that you did to your husband when you got married for you elected to marry a man of the seed of Israel". In other words, Ruth looked upon marriage as another opportunity to deal kindness. Not that she married Machlon out of pity; yet, this Moabite aristocrat had many choices other than the Israelite refugee, a stranger in her land. Ruth was kind and she cleaved to the nation whose nature was to be charitable and kind. It is that which drew her from the beginning to the religion of Israel. Now, having spiritually grown, having advanced in her understanding and religious development, having been tempered by God's wrath and sustained by His kindness, she has truly traveled far beyond where she was a decade before. Yet, she continues to elevate herself in accordance to who she has always been. Her marriage to Boaz repeats her previous choices but on a much higher level of spiritual development. Boaz always knew that Ruth came to "dwell under the wings" of Hashem. Now she has asked him to spread his wing over her. The personal and the religious! Boaz knows that Ruth desires to learn and to grow with him and for that he was immensely grateful. It is a greater kindness than the first has been. At the time of her first marriage Ruth had not seen and understood her choices as clearly as she does now. At that time she was a young woman marrying a young man. She was guided by nothing more than a vague sense of destiny. The personal and the spiritual were perhaps less clear and distinct in her mind. Yes she married a Jewish man, but he was living in Moab and comporting himself after the manner of the Moabites. He was a man in the prime of youth and she liked him, whether poor or wealthy. Yes, she was looking through him at the God of Israel but her vision was muddled, confused, indistinct. Now she is no longer walking after young men, rich or poor. She is now at the feet of Boaz and she will walk after him, an older man and a Sage in Israel. Ruth lives among the Judeans and with a much greater knowledge of what it entailed. Not all women would want this. It is indeed a greater kindness than the first one. Why is it a kindness? Because Ruth did not have to do any of it, and yet she did.

Boaz is sensitive in how he speaks to Ruth. He wishes to build her up, to shore up her sense of self-worth, her self confidence. "I will do for you all that you said". This echoes Ruth's unquestioning acceptance of Naomi's advice - "All that you say, I will do". Boaz, however, introduces one additional word, "for you". Because Ruth followed Naomi and now she is "walking" after Boaz, he pays her the respect of affirming her individuality and autonomy - "I will do for you all that YOU said".

In addition, Boaz must reassure Ruth. "Undoubtedly", he says to her, "there will be many who will see our marriage as not seemly, even as tainted with your Moabite heritage. Yet, those classes who are at the gate of my people, the judges, the scholars and the elite will support us, for they know that you are a woman of great accomplishment.

The Chacham Yosef David Azulai in his commentary to Ruth makes an interesting comment. He

takes us back to the well-known passage from Proverbs 32 that we sing at the Friday night meal, "The woman of valor". Toward the end of that acrostic we find the following verse: "Many daughters have done valor but you rise over them all". Chida explains that each woman is precious in her own way, each one has an area in which she excels, in which she is more accomplished and more expert than other women. Yet, it is rare to find a woman who excels in everything. "Who will find such a woman of valor and her worth is greater than rubies". Ruth was unusual in possessing all virtues and those who understand such things knew and appreciated it. "Blessed are you to Hashem" and blessed is the union that a woman like this seeks and desires.

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