

WHEN ANARCHY REIGNS

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

The book of Ruth opens with a description of a time "when judges judged". Clearly this introduction aims to explain something about the era in which the events described in the book took place and it is therefore an important background for the entire book.

Rabbinic sources have this to say about the first verse (Petichta to Ruth Rabba 2).

(At the time after the division of the land by Joshua), the land became precious to them. This one busied himself with his field and this one with his vineyard, this one with his doorpost... they refrained from dealing kindness to Joshua (at his burial) and the Holy One Blessed Be He thought to shake up the entire world (i.e. was angered), as it says, "the earth was shaken up and disturbed (Psalms 18)".

Woe is to the generation that judges its judges! When the judge said: "remove a splinter from between your teeth, the accused said, "you remove a panel from between your eyes" (Bava Basra 15b, see Ruth Rabba 5,10).

What we have here is a portrayal of an era in which anarchy reigns. Rather than describe it as "in those days there was no King in Israel, each man did what was right in his eyes" (Judges 21, 24), which simply describes the political situation, the Book of Ruth says the same thing but emphasizes the effect on the individual. That was the time, perhaps akin to the time in which we ourselves live, when authority was distrusted, obligations to community leadership eschewed, and private lives were held superior and more valuable than public life. In those days, as in ours, the faults of the leaders attracted far more attention than their virtues. The Children of Israel were enthralled, each one by his own plot and land and vineyard, each one jealously guarding the doorpost of his private little world from strangers who might intrude into it. In such times, leaders are seen not as noble individuals who selflessly sacrifice for the common good, but as being tainted by self interest and personal and, therefore, petty needs. If leaders cannot be trusted, neither can our neighbors. Cynicism is corrosive. In the atmosphere of mutual suspicion it becomes hard to view others benevolently and to deal kindly and charitably. The people did not feel that they owed anything to Joshua and they neglected to pay him his last respects. When there is no justice, there is also no sense of security, and every man lives in fear and suspicion of their neighbors. It was the environment in which it was possible for a prominent prince of the people, Elimelech, to abandon his community and extended family in their hour of hardship and join himself to another nation simply because there his material needs would be better served.

As we pointed out in the introduction, Ruth brought back kindness into anarchy. She certainly had reasons to be bitter, suspicious and cynical. A young childless widow who joined herself to a people that she had not known, and still she is called a Moabite (2,5) and rejected as a marital prospect (4,6). Yet, she full-heartedly trusts Naomi and she believes that Boaz would act according to the noble ideas that he appears to embody. It is certainly not easy trust others, when the very air exudes pseudo- sophistication and cynicism and mocks what it portrays as naiveté and foolishness. But, there is a redemptive quality in the deliberate refusal to live negatively. It often brings out the best in others. It also sets the stage for the final redemption, and this is one of the lessons of the book of Ruth.

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