

THE LEAP OF FAITH

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

And now it is true that I am a near kinsman; however there is a kinsman nearer than I.

Sleep over this night, and it shall be in the morning, that if Tob will redeem you, let him, but if he does not redeem you then will I redeem you; lie down until the morning.' (3:12-13)

The reason why Boaz has not yet reached out to Ruth now becomes clear. There is another redeemer and Boaz will not build his personal happiness on the loss of another. This unexpected development surely also came as a shock and great disappointment to Ruth. Now, after taking all these risks, after so much ventured, so much hoped, expectation, longing and risk - "there is a kinsmen nearer than I". What could Naomi have thought? Did she not know that there is another relative, a closer kinsman? Ruth does not complain and nary a sigh escapes her lips. "All that God does is for the best". She will wait and trust in His kindness. More importantly, she will continue to trust Naomi.

It is often easier to trust God than those close to you. Ruth does not allow cynicism, bitterness and recriminations to enter her heart. Such unwavering trust is only possible if it is a conscious decision. What faith can accomplish no blind denial will possibly achieve. Ruth trusts beyond measure. It is this boundless optimism and loyalty that she has come to teach to the world. Ruth tells us that faith is a decision, in regards to God and in regards to men, and that the two cannot be separated. We, of limited sight have but eyes of flesh but only God knows what is in the hearts of people. Therefore we may not presume to know. "... HaShem said to Samuel: 'Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have rejected him; for it is not as man sees: for man sees with the eyes, but HaShem sees the heart. (Samuel I, 16:7)".

One of the hardest challenges in our cynical times is how to strike a proper balance between trust and naivette. From one side there yawns the abyss of cynicism and nihilism that destroys all faith, from the other simple mindedness and naiveté that can be dangerous and leaves one open to manipulation. The Sages provided a pity answer - "Respect him and suspect him". They said in Tractate Kallah Rabbati 9: "Always consider every man as a (potential) thief but honor him as if he is Rabbon Gamliel". In other words, maintain intellectual honesty and be prepared to intervene but act with all the benefit of the doubt. Ruth returns to Naomi with the same optimism and commitment as before and she does not reproach or even question her, for what purpose would be in that.

The translation of Tob (the good one) as a proper name follows Ruth Rabbah. As Ibn Ezra points out

it suffers from a disadvantage of this same individual later being called Pelsoni Almoni, "that certain anonymous one" (Ruth 4:1). For this reason he and the Targum translate it as "well, OK, let him redeem you"; however it is an awkward interpretation of the verse and the cantillation signs work against it. Interpreting Tob as a proper name is reasonable. Tob is found in Tanach (the land of Tob in Judges 11:3,5). The men of Ish-Tob are mentioned in Samuel II:10 and we know the name Tobith from the Apocrypha. If, as most traditional commentaries assume, Tob is the name of this near kinsman, why then when push comes to shove at the gates of the city is he called "that certain one without a name"?

The answer may come from considering how Scripture uses irony. It is now well appreciated that irony is a common technique with which the inspired authors of Biblical books convey meaning. In this case, Tob is not really so good for he passes up the chance to marry the Mother of Royalty. He represents conventional piety, not the deep and passionate love and faith but its tepid reflection among men. Can we really blame Tob? Do we know his family circumstances, the state of affairs in his home, his relationship to his wife and his father-in-law? Yet, his goodness is a sham for it conceals timidity and smallness of spirit. He is quite willing to make a business transaction and purchase Ruth's land... but to marry a Moabite convert?! Perhaps, Tob knows himself. He is a good businessman and can do well with additional property but he is not really good with women. He is secure within the boundaries that the tradition and social convention prescribes, with the patterns of behavior and comportment that his forefathers handed on to him. Throwing a wrench into his well-organized existence is not on his agenda. Tob is good at what he does and he knows his purpose in life and, whatever it is, it is not marrying Moabites. He refuses to compromise his standards even at the expense of foregoing a chance at greatness, "lest I destroy my inheritance". This Moabite convert will change his life and Tob is quite content with the current state of things. When he rejects Ruth Tob recedes into the obscurity of anonymity, for he foregoes the opportunity to stand out and to be recorded in the Book of Life.

In a certain way Tob is the Jewish version of Orpah. One comes to this conclusion not only through textual but also through form analysis. Remember the chiasmic structure? This is an arrangement in which each topic in the beginning of a story corresponds to the one at the end, and the central idea stands at the center (For more on that see <http://www.torah.org/learning/yonah/class24.html>). Consider the following division of the book into topics.

- 1 Elimelech and his family ----- 13 David and his family
- 2 Naomi loses her children ----- 12 A child is born to Naomi
- 3 Ruth is a Moabite ----- 11 Ruth is equated to Rachel and Leah
- 4 Orpah drops out ----- 10 Pelsoni Almoni/Tob drops out
- 5 Naomi proves unworthy/complains ----- 9 Naomi confirms Ruth's election

6 Ruth proves worthy in the field ----- 8 Ruth proves worthy/ receives gifts of barley

7. Boaz meets Ruth at the threshing floor

At the end Boaz swears by God's life that if Tob doesn't, he will redeem Ruth. The sages say that he swore to subjugate his desire. "I am single and she is single. I seek a woman and she seeks a man. He jumped up and swore that he will not touch her until the morning" (see Rashi). The inspiration for this Rabbinic comment may be a parallel between Boaz and another Biblical personality who has undergone and emerged victorious from a similar ordeal. Boaz always invokes God. Joseph also has God's name on his lips; almost every Biblical quotation of Joseph contains a mention of Hashem's name. "And his master saw that Hashem is with him (Genesis 40:3)" - "That the name of Heaven is constant in his mouth" (Tanchuma Vyeshev 8). If so this teaches us that constant awareness of Hashem's presence is the only way to rise above temptation.

The great drama of Redemption is drawing to a close. It remains for us to see how God's plan actually plays out in the next chapter. Before that, however, we have to understand the emerging role for Naomi and we will see that with Hashem's help next week.

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