

THE RETURN OF MACHLON

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

And Boaz said unto the elders, and to all the people: 'You are witnesses this day, that I have bought all that was Elimelech's, and all that was Kilyon's and Mahlon's, from the hand of Naomi. Moreover Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of Machlon, I have acquired to be my wife, to set up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren, and from the gate of his place; you are witnesses this day.' (4:9-10)

Boaz names Kilyon first and then Machlon. This is the opposite of what we find in the beginning of Ruth where Machlon is listed before Kilyon. The Midrash Lekach Tov derives a moral lesson from this deviation from the usual order: "Why was Kilyon mentioned before Machlon? To teach us that we must guard against the bad ones in the family, so that Orpah should not appear and say: This field belongs to my husband or that her son should appear and say - I am representing Kilyon".

This is truly good advice. The change in the order can also be understood in a much deeper fashion. We start with the following midrash (Zohar Chadash 88b).

R. Yuda said: The commandment of marrying a deceased brother's wife is exalted and he who fulfills it becomes a partner with God in the act of Creation. He is greater than Ezekiel whose prophecy of the reviving of the dead bones in Ch. 37 was performed with great tumult whereas what a levirate does is in stillness... "And he gave to his fellow (Ruth 4:7-8)" - this is the rite of levirate marriage"... R. Chanina said: This is like a man who was lost in a desert, a place of robbers and brigands.. When they saw him wandering, they struck him, and robbed him and took everything that he had... A friend heard about this. He armed himself and went out and rescued him from them albeit naked and deprived of everything. What did he do? He built him a replacement house, provided him new clothing, and he began to again prosper. This is what it says: "...and he gave to his fellow."

This enigmatic parable (what is the comparison to Ezekiel?) contains the idea of the transmigration of souls. The teaching that God affords certain individuals additional opportunities to fulfill their purpose in this world by sending their souls down again and again is a basic Kabbalistic teaching, one that, however, is not necessarily among the essential Jewish beliefs. In fact, it was opposed by some of the greatest Jewish thinkers, giants like Saadiah Gaon and Maimonides. With the revelation and spread of Kabala, it has become increasingly more accepted and central to subsequent Jewish theology.

Abarbanel to Deuteronomy 38 and R. Menashe ben Israel in his Nishmas Chaim 4:7 emphasize that

the concept of transmigration is an expression of God's absolute justice and mercy. It is possible, with some justification to blame God himself for a man's lack of success in spiritual endeavors. After all, it is He who placed the soul in an unsuitable vehicle, a body that perhaps possessed desires, proclivities and inclination that were incompatible with that individual's purpose in life. The cards are stacked against me. Can a soul called to ascetism and self-denial succeed if placed into a body given to sensuality and strong emotions? Can the soul of a leader succeed in the vessel that is by nature cowardly and retiring? Can a great thinker overcome a dull mind and a dimwitted intellect? Accordingly, God allows the soul that has not succeeded in its first sojourn to return to a different body, one with another set of givens, so that it may now succeed, of it fails, leave it no excuses.

This Zoharic passage connects the ritual that Boaz performed with the act of marrying the widow of his brother. The connection is natural on both the surface level and in the deeper sense. Compare the following three verses and note their shared language.

...to set up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren, and from the gate of his place (Ruth *ibid*)

When brothers live together, and one of them dies childless, the dead man's wife shall not be allowed to marry an outsider. Her husband's brother must cohabit with her, making her his wife, and thus performing a brother-in-law's duty to her. The first-born son whom she bears will then set up name of the dead brother, so that his name will not be cut off from Israel. (Deuteronomy 25:6-7)

Judah said to Onan, 'Marry your brother's wife, and thus fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. You will then set up your brother's name. Onan, however, realized that the children would not pertain to him. Therefore, whenever he came to his brother's wife, he let [the seed] go to waste on the ground, so as not to have children in his brother's name (Genesis 38:8-9).

Of course there is also an exegetical difficulty in drawing these three verses together. Boaz was not a brother of Ruth's husband and the verse in Deuteronomy should not pertain to him. It is a serious enough consideration to lead the great commentator Rashi to reject the comparison. However, the Ramban in his commentary to Genesis 38:8 not only explained the difficulty away but made it into an underpinning of a masterful elucidation.

"The ancients before the time of the Torah recognized that there is great benefit in the brother marrying his brother's widow. The brother is the first properly in line and after him, the rest of the relatives. This is because any relative who can inherit provides this benefit. It is considered to be a great cruelty when a brother does not wish to afford such a benefit to his brother. And the ancient Sages, knowing of this matter, enacted it to be done in Israel by all inheritors of property, those among whom the prohibition of an incestuous marriage did not exist. They called it redemption. This is the explanation of the matter of Boaz and the meaning of the words of the neighbors to Naomi (a child is born to Naomi)".

As explicated by others (see also Recanti *ibid*), the nature of close relatives is most conducive to

host the returnee. They are compatible enough and the same time different enough to accomplish the purpose and the task. More significantly, the common phenomenon of transmigration throws light upon the unique and singular event of the resurrection of the dead (hence the comparison of Boaz and Ezekiel). Just as transmigration is a reflection of Hashem's unceasing goodness in giving an individual another chance, so is the resurrection a second chance for humanity.

"R Toviah said in the name of R. Yoshia: What does it mean, "Sheol and the withholding of the womb will not be satisfied (Proverbs 30)"?" What does Sheol have in common with the womb? One puts life into the womb in silence but the child comes out of in great tumult (screaming and wailing). The dead are placed into Sheol (grave) in silence. How much more so will they come out of it in great tumult. Here is a response to those who deny that the Torah teaches Resurrection (Sanhedrin 92a).

The circle closed. Boaz rectified the sin of his progenitor Onan who refused to give his seed to his brother. Judah redeemed the soul of Onan who was reborn of Tamar, as Peretz, and Peretz was an ancestor of Boaz. Kilyon was lost but Machlon returned, through Boaz, through Ruth. A child was born to Naomi, the child that she once carried and now carried again.

Although significant in itself, the story of Boaz and Ruth symbolizes all of humanity. The redemption of one family stands for the cosmic cycle of redemption. David, the descendent of Ruth-Naomi and Boaz-Machlon not only is destined to realize the private redemption of one family of Judea but to become the symbol and expectation of the ultimate redemption of Israel and of all humanity.

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