

# THE MATRIARCHS AND THE MOTHER OF ROYALTY

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

*And all the people at the gate, and the elders, said: 'We are witnesses. HaShem make the woman that is coming into your house like Rachel and like Leah, the two of whom built the house of Israel; and he did worthily in Ephrath, and called name in Beth-lehem (4:11).*

The people at the gate blessed the forthcoming marriage of Boaz and Ruth and echoed what they already understood and recognized much earlier, "for all the people in the gate of my people know that you are a worthy woman (3:11)." Ruth made her strongest impression upon the regular folks, the kind of citizens who after completing his or her daily chores went to the gate, to be entertained, educated and to learn from the elders who could often be found there. Unlike Moses who gained fame from the top down (Moses was great in the eyes of Pharaoh's officials and in the eyes of the people (Ex. 11:3)), Ruth was respected from the ground up, first honored by the people and then venerated by the elite.

Those familiar with the Hebrew language, will notice a deviation from the usual rules of grammar. Rachel and Leah are referred to with verbal forms that are in the masculine rather than feminine form. As we noted before, such usage is common in this book. It communicates the high regard in which the matriarchs and Ruth were held, spoken of her as if she was an equal to the heads of households who constituted the power and authority in Bethlehem. As previously mentioned, the Moabite dialect of the Hebrew language appears to not have recognized gender distinctions. In mirroring Moabite usage the people paid respect to Ruth.

Ruth is compared to Rachel and Leah. This comparison can be read in various ways. On one level, the people encouraged and affirmed this foreigner who was now joining them. They pointing out that the mothers of the nation were also foreigners who came from a strange land (Malbim). The Dubno Maggid suggests that they subtly indicated to Boaz the advantage of marrying Ruth, that she, having no family in Bethlehem will be naturally attached and devoted to him. Like Rachel and Leah, she abandoned her family and her people and has thrown her lot with the man whom she married and the people that she joined. On a deeper level the comparison with the matriarchs presages the role that Ruth is to play in the development of the monarchy and in the Redemption.

Rachel and Leah did not just give births and passed from the scene; they continued to live through and within their descendants. The influence of Rachel and Leah on the character and development of her progeny was long lasting and continuous. The traits of the Mothers found expression in her descendents. The Sages frequently trace tribal characteristics and even destinies of Biblical

personalities and even tribes to qualities and characters of the matriarchs. Just like Rachel and Leah shaped the future of their descendents, so did Ruth affected and influenced the course of Israelite monarchy. The Sages taught that parents of worthy children live on through them. "David who left a worthy son is described as (not having died but as) lying with his fathers; Yoav who did not leave worthy sons is described as dying (Bava Basra 116a)". What Ruth bequeathed continued to shape the monarchy of Israel down to the time of Solomon. Whether meant literally or not, "Ruth, the Moabite (lived to) see the reign of Solomon the grandson of her grandson, as it says, "... and he set up a throne for the mother of the king (Kingsl:2, 19)". R. Elazar said: "For the Mother of Royalty". (Bava Basra 91b). At the peak of the united kingdom as Solomon ascended his throne, Ruth was sitting next to him. It is not for nothing that Solomon married an Ammonite and that is was she who produced the king (Reheboam) who sat upon the throne of Judah after him.

Why is Ruth, who was alone, being compared to Rachel and Leah "the TWO of whom together built the house of Israel"? What did they mean by saying that Rachel and Leah were two and that they were together and how does this relate to the current situation? Why did they put it into the double context of Ephrath and Bethlehem? I think that the intent is to call attention to Naomi, to the role that Naomi will play together with Ruth. Throughout this book we have encountered the symbiotic relationship between Ruth and Naomi. These two women function almost as one, distinct in bodies but united in outlook, values and spirit. It is as if Ruth is a proxy for Naomi for Naomi is not only a mentor but a partner in everything that Ruth does. Naomi is Ruth and Ruth is Naomi and the two share accomplishment and fulfillment. These two kindred spirits rectify the conflict and lack of harmony between the two sisters, Rachel and Leah that ultimately expressed itself in strife between the Kingdom of Israel, led by Ephraim who stemmed from Rachel, and the Kingdom of Judah, descendant from Leah. This lack of unity directly led to the long and bitter exile in which we still find ourselves. The Bach and Ben Ish Chai both suggest that Ephrath is mentioned as an allusion to Ephraim whereas Beth -Lehem is associated closely with the tribe of Judah. Davidic monarchy is then a reflection and a re-enactment of the birth of the nation. In this fashion the destiny of Ruth is tied not only to the past but also to the future, separation is transformed into harmony and Redemption shines out upon the world.

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