

# THE PATH OF DESPAIR AND THE PATH OF RETURN.

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

*"And it came to pass in the days when the judges judged, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Beth-lehem in Judah went to sojourn in the field of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons. And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Beth-lehem in Judah. And they came into the field of Moab, and continued there. And Elimelech Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons. And they took them wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth; and they dwelt there about ten years. And Mahlon and Chilion died both of them; and the woman was left of her two children and of her husband" (Ruth 1, 1-5).*

Look how much happened in the life of this family in ten years. Exile, dislocation, childlessness, bereavement, and loss. Surely, there were relationships formed, connections forged and characters tested, and yet, of them we are told practically nothing. How did Naomi merit to gain trust and love of her daughters-in-law, a rare situation in most families? How did they grow to appreciate the religion and ideals of Israel? What brought Elimelech to the field of Moab instead of the traditional refuge from famine, the Land of Egypt? How did the princes of Bethlehem justify marrying Moabite women and what did this mean to them in respect of their faith and religion? What induced Orpah and Ruth to start out with Naomi into a foreign land? Why did neither of them have children after ten years of marriage and why didn't Naomi? Many readers feel compelled to recreate what to them is indispensable background so that they can begin to grasp the motivations and sensibilities of these mysterious characters. None of this is in the text. An ordinary writer would have felt constrained to flesh out the background for us but not the Author. For Him, the outlines suffice for from the Divine perspective Orpah, Ruth and Naomi only begin to exist at the point of their return. Everything before that point is ephemeral and unreal, everything after it is true and real. The story of Ruth and the story of Naomi begin when they choose to return to Bethlehem. Until now they sojourned in the fields of Moab but now they are coming home.

Rabbinic sources are divided on whether Naomi had a part in the original decision to go to Moab or whether she had no choice but to follow her husband. In any case, now she was unencumbered and she alone held the reins of free choice.

The Midrash says, "the woman was left of her children and her husband"- she became like the remnants of the meal offering (Ruth Rabbah 2,10). A small part of the meal offering is taken off and burned on the altar and the rest is ceremoniously eaten. This pithy saying has attracted many

expositions. Let us also offer an interpretation that might, perhaps, provide give us some light.

Meal offerings are brought to expiate bitterness and anger (Netsiv to Lev. 2,1), as is evident from Samuel I, 26, " And Saul knew David's voice, and said: 'Is this thy voice, my son David?' And David said: 'It is my voice, my lord, O king.' And he said: 'Wherefore doth my lord pursue after his servant? for what have I done? or what evil is in my hand? Now therefore, I pray thee, let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If it be HaShem that hath stirred thee up against me, let Him accept a meal offering..."

The word that is used to describe Naomi's bereavement is also significant for in Hebrew there are two synonyms that mean "left over", NTR and NSHR. The first signifies that which is left over by chance, by accident, without intent, while the second is used for that which is left to remain on purpose(See Netsiv to Ex. 10, 19). It is the second form that is used regarding Naomi.

Naomi alone was left but she was left on purpose. She was left so that she may choose. Her suffering came from God and therefore it possessed a measure of holiness and of sacrificial character. Her family was consumed but she remained. She was a survivor of the tragic events that claimed all that she had. She had moved far away from her land and from her people and now her God was pushing her farther away and showing her "the face of anger". At such times, the choice is stark - give back anger and distance farther from God or to come home, that is to justify His actions and, in some obscure way, a springboard back to Him. There is nothing in between.

The two polarities of feeling, anger versus contrition, that are available to survivors of great tragedies are expressed in the following verses:

He is unto me as a bear lying in wait, as a lion in secret places. He hath turned aside my ways, and pulled me in pieces; He hath made me desolate. He hath bent His bow, and set me as a mark for the arrow. He hath caused the arrows of His quiver to enter into my reins. I am become a derision to all my people, and their song all the day. He hath filled me with bitterness, He hath sated me with wormwood. He hath also broken my teeth with gravel stones, He hath made me to wallow in ashes. And my soul is removed far off from peace, I forgot prosperity. And I said: 'My strength is perished, and mine expectation from HaShem (Lamentation 3).

Or, This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. Surely HaShem's mercies are not consumed, surely His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness. 'The HaShem is my portion', saith my soul; 'Therefore will I hope in Him.' HaShem is good unto them that wait for Him, to the soul that seeketh Him. It is good that a man should quietly wait for the salvation of HaShem. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone and keep silence, because He hath laid it upon him. Let him put his mouth in the dust, if so be there may be hope. Let him give his cheek to him that smiteth him let him be filled full with reproach. For the Lord will not cast off for ever. For though He cause grief, yet will He have compassion according to the multitude of His mercies. For He doth not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men. To crush under foot

all the prisoners of the earth, To turn aside the right of a man before the face of the Most High, To subvert a man in his cause, the L-rd approveth not. Who is he that saith, and it cometh to pass, when the L-rd commandeth it not? Out of the mouth of the Most High proceedeth not evil and good? Wherefore doth a living man complain, a strong man because of his sins? Let us search and try our ways, and return to HaShem. Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto G-d in the heavens.

Events are great teachers, sent by the greatest Teacher, and He gives out trials exactly according to one's capacity to bear. When things are at most bleakest, the choices are also starkest. One can react with anger or denial or accept responsibility for being the active agent of one's own pain and them as a springboard back to God. Often people are broken by suffering for there is no greater rejection than to be rejected by God and only exceptional people can distinguish between lessons and rejection. The highest courage is to absorb the lessons, qua lessons; the easiest course is to dissolve into blaming and victimization. The hardest thing is to acknowledge God's judgment, to surmount anger and bitterness, to trust when there seems to exist no more hope. The easy way out is to deny His culpability or knowledge. The brave thing is to turn to repentance despite the bitterness and anger. The cowardly thing is to build philosophies that take Him out of the picture and explain away suffering as random and accidental and therefore meaningless events. Naomi certainly knew what she felt and experienced but she also know from where it came.

She said unto them: 'Call me not Naomi, call me Marah; for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and HaShem hath brought me back HOME empty; why call ye me Naomi, seeing HaShem hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me? (Ruth 1, 20-21)'

She knew exactly who was responsible for her suffering but she went home anyway. In the Bible, such trust is always rewarded.

The extent of Naomi's anguish is difficult to imagine. Naomi was empty, bereft of her husband and her sons, she had no possession and no hope, empty, completely empty. Her being longed to be filled. Ruth understood that and so did Boaz.

And he said: 'Bring the mantle that is upon thee, and hold it'; and she held it; and he measured six measures of barley, and laid it on her; and he went into the city. And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said: 'Who art thou, my daughter?' And she told her all that the man had done to her. And she said: 'These six measures of barley gave he me; for he said to me: Go not empty unto thy mother-in-law (Ruth 3, 15-17).'

Naomi had a hard road to walk, so God sent her Ruth to walk it with her.

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