

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

Last week, in a short, rambling and somewhat incoherent account, we acquainted ourselves with the idea that the threads of Redemption bind us not only to the future but also to the past. The book of Ruth sets the reader in the middle of a process that has a history and a direction. Every individual is joined silently with innumerable ancestors, immediate and distant and uncountable descendents, those near to him and those far yet to come.

It is a common, and some might say, fatal error of Western thought to believe that an individual exists and functions in a some kind of vacuum, filled by himself alone and shaped solely by his own efforts. Like all of us, Boaz and Ruth stand in a long line of development. It is not for nothing that the genealogy of David at the end of the book moves first backwards and only then forwards. Before David started his line, there were many men who repeatedly confronted and agonized over the same choices and the same temptations. Not only men go through the process of clarification, so do the women. Ruth also is only a station within the process; she also has ancestors and allies in a recurrent cycle of trial and triumph, or rout and restoration. At times, the two lines, that of the men and that of the women, meet and intertwine - Judah and Tamar, Jacob and Rachel/ Leah, daughters of Lot and their father - finally Boaz and Ruth.

The family is the background for each encounter; always the wider look brings us back to the family. The encounter between Boaz and Ruth is on the backdrop of Elimelech, Naomi, their sons, and Orpha; Judah's story incorporates his sons and his separation from his brothers, Lot being estranged from Abraham, and Rachel and Leah's revolt against their brother Laban in order to follow Jacob and his truth.

At every misstep, there is an opportunity to correct, to rectify to grasp harmony, to create wholeness. The actors in the drama of Redemption traverse the fractured landscape of fall and failure to partial restoration to the ultimate rectification and realization of completeness. The conflict and estrangement of man from God gives rise to every man's alienation from his brother and finds its source in the very first conflict between brothers, when Cain rose up against Abel and killed him. At that moment the very fabric of human communal existence was torn asunder, and conflict, betrayal, violence and injustice became the daily accompaniment of human experience within a group. It was also at that moment, R. Tanchuma tells us, that the seed of the Messiah came into being. It was then that the process of clarification and rectification began. Abel was reborn as Seth, as Judah, as Boaz, even as the Kabbalists tell us, as Moses.

The axis of conflict and harmony intersects and interacts with the axis of good and evil. The two daughters of Lot were united in what they did. They committed a grievous sin but their unity of purpose was something that was worth saving. From the time when people disagree about what course is right, they also have to consider whether to walk separately or to pursue compromise for the sake of common purpose and peace. The choice between pure truth and the common good made itself felt between Ruth and Orpha, Rachel and Leah, Ruth and Naomi. In the world in which conflict and disagreement is part and parcel of human condition, there are no simple answers. The irreducible contradiction of good and evil and war and peace will only be ultimately solved by the Messiah who will bring wholeness to fractured humanity. Cain and Abel will be redeemed and harmony shall reign forever.

"Certainly there is peace which derives from the absolute harmony in which disparate components interact and complement one another. We think of a piece of music in which each note enriches and colors the other to produce the loveliness which so deeply touches our hearts. But, to remain with our musical metaphor, discord and dissonance also have their place. ...Metzudos to Divrei Hayamim (Chronicles) notes that the very word which in Hebrew denotes music, nitzuach, connotes victory, the ability to overcome, because the beauty of music derives from the many voices or instruments vying with one another in a battle for beauty.

This second form, this harmony which draws upon the disharmonious to enhance its attractiveness, needs the firm hand of the composer to assign form, location and degree. Uncontrolled, it is nothing but raucous cacophony plaguing the air and offending the senses." (M. M. Eisemann, A Pearl in the Sand, p. 70)

The Conductor knows how to conduct. In His hand, discord and conflict become the means to healing and redemption. Suffering and discord become in His Plan a path to wholeness and peace. Suffering leads to healing which is greater than an absence of suffering. Rachel and Leah argued and disagreed - through it they also negotiated and cooperated and "both together built the House of Israel". Lot's daughters utilized deceit; through Tamar and Ruth it was uplifted and became the element for achieving Truth. Oppression becomes Justice and rejection is transformed into acceptance. The lesson of the Messianic idea is that disharmony is only a building block from which harmony is ultimately fashioned. The book of Ruth starts with Elimelech's betrayal of his people and ends with his symbolic return into the midst of them. In the beginning there is death, poverty and exile, estrangement and suffering - at the end, acceptance, joy regeneration and life.

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