THE SEVEN SONS

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

...for your daughter-in-law, who loves you has born him, who is better to you than seven sons. (4:15)

In these verses Naomi is no longer Marah (bitter). God no longer deals bitterly with her. He deals kindly with her for He gives her a child to sustain her old age and to perpetuate her name. Strangely, in the very next breath the neighbor women tell Naomi that Ruth is "better to her than seven sons". They seem to be reassuring Naomi about something... but what is it? What troubles Naomi? Is Naomi uncertain how Ruth would react to her stewardship of the child? Are they saying: "Do not fear Naomi, Ruth will continue to love you even now that you will be bringing up this child". Or, perhaps they sense Naomi's disappointment in that she herself will never again have a baby. Perhaps it is the realization that this child will remain an only child and there will be no others - but Ruth will always be there for you and she is better to you than seven children? All these are possible explanations. What remains puzzling is why tell her that Ruth is better than seven sons at the moment that Naomi is blessed with a child, as if she is undergoing a calamity instead of a blessing. The question becomes even stronger when we realize that this expression is generally used in the completely opposite situation - to comfort those who are childless.

Here Elkanah is comforting his wife Hannah.

...but to Hannah he gave a double portion; for he loved Hannah, but HaShem had shut up her womb.

And her rival angered her much to make her fret, because HaShem had shut up her womb.

And as he did so year by year, when she went up to the house of HaShem, so she vexed her; therefore she wept, and would not eat.

And Elkanah her husband said to her: 'Hannah, why do you cry? and why do you eat not? and why your heart grieved? am I not better to you than ten sons? (Samuel I, 1:5-8)

According to tradition in Bava Bathra 15b, both Ruth and Samuel were written by the prophet Samuel. If so, why does he use the expression "better than ten sons" in Samuel and "better than seven sons" in Ruth. Surely, there is meaning behind that!

The Sages appear to have noted this problem for they comment as follows:

R. Yehuda and R. Nechemia (disagree). R. Yehuda says: (Better than) seven heads of families (of Ishai, the father of David) described in a later book (Chronicles I, 2:15), "Etsem is the sixth (son), David is the seventh". R. Nechemia says: "(better then) the seven described here - "Peretz, Chetzron, Ram,

Aminadav, Nachshon, Salmon, Boaz".(Ruth Rabbah 7:16)

The "seven' in Ruth refer therefore to something specific whereas the "ten" in Samuel is merely an expression. It is interesting to realize, however, that the word "son" or "sons" is repeated in the first chapter of Samuel exactly seven times. In the manner of an allusion, the text in Ruth points to and amplifies the passage in Samuel.

On a yet deeper level, the "seven sons" recall the concept that we have already encountered. It sees David as the final step of a development that in ten steps parallels the process of Creation. David's reign (malchus beis david) is the last step in this unfolding of the Divine plan and corresponds to the sefira of malchus (Sha'arei Orah Ch.1). In this regard Naomi is the third step (Binah), while Ruth is also the tenth (Malchus). The two mothers are inextricably united when goodness flows thorough them.

"...better to you than seven sons" - that is the flow of goodness... is better for you than seven sons, the six intermediate steps + Malchus (referred to as "seven sons" or "seven days of construction"), that they aid the beginning of the process and lead the plan to fruition (R. Isaac Luria, Tsadik Yisod Olam).

Put simply, Naomi and Ruth were a unit that moved forward the development of God's Intent. The neighbors told Naomi that she and Ruth were inseparable vis-à-vis the Divine Plan. Naomi was the third station, Boaz the sixth, Ruth and David the tenth. This is why the genealogy of David at the end of the book reads both forwards and backwards (the exact elaboration of the relationship is beyond our scope, see Idrei Tson). First the three forwards: Obed, Ishai, David: "And the women, the neighbors gave it a name, saying: 'There is a son born to Naomi'; and they called his name Obed; he is the father of Jesse, the father of David".

Then we return to the beginning and count the ten generations: Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez begot Hezron;
and Hezron begot Ram, and Ram begot Amminadab;
and Amminadab begot Nahshon, and Nahshon begot Salmon;
and Salmon begot Boaz, and Boaz begot Obed;
and Obed begot Ishai, and Ishai begot David.

In Samuel I, Hannah was childless. As such she had not yet even embarked on this process of ten steps; therefore, Elkanah comforted her by saying that he was better to her than ten children. With Ruth, the plan was already in motion and the neighboring women used the idiom of "seven".

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