

OVED

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

And the women neighbours gave him a name, saying: 'There is a son born to Naomi'; and they called his name Oved; he is the father of Ishai, the father of David (4:17).

We do not know much about Oved and whatever we know about him, we know solely from this verse. There are many questions. Who in reality named this child? We can safely assume that, as was customary, Boaz or Ruth gave him a name but apparently that name was not preserved. We know only the name that the neighbors gave him, "Oved, the father of Ishai, the father of David". This is highly irregular and it well may be the only such naming' in Tanach.

Who were these mysterious women? Were they the same as "the people at the gate", or "the women" spoken of earlier or were they not? When did they give Oved his name? From what we read it appears to have happened after his birth and possibly much later, after he has matured, had a child and a grandchild, and the contours of his life came into focus. There is no parallel in Tanach to such a delayed "giving of the name". Undoubtedly these neighbors really existed but they also serve the purpose of introducing an editorial comment. The Sages understood that the women, whoever they were and whenever they lived, did not merely give a name but that they were describing Oved and what his life's work was all about.

Oved means "servant". "... (He was named) after his father and his mother. His father was an elderly man and took a wife purely for the sake of Heaven - he was (therefore) called a servant of God". So it says, "and Israel served for a woman (Hosea 13:2)." After his mother - as it says, "and you shall turn back and distinguish between the just and the wicked, between he who served God and he who did not serve Him (Malachi 13:18). This means: between Ruth and Orpah. Orpah became an emblem of shame (play of words Orpah and Cherpah) while Ruth clung to God in clarity. This is why his name was called Oved. A righteous man married a righteous woman and the son was a completed saint.(Midrash Lekach Tov)".

These neighbor women correctly surmised that Oved's life task was to shape the spiritual inheritance of his parents. His father was a wholly righteous sage but his mother came from the world of confusion, a place where good and evil was intermixed and not easily separated. She turned her back on falsehood but had not had the opportunity to complete the work of separation. She had forsaken her people and clung to the God of Israel. Yes, she has chosen to serve God; yet, it is not easy to leave the past completely behind and even harder to not transmit it to the next generation. Some trace, some memory, some smudge and fragrance of depravity still clung to her

descendents. It was Oved's life-task to purify his inheritance and to become a completed saint. How did he do it? By reaching back into his psyche and his soul to the level before the backsliding of Lot, by discovering and bringing to the fore the Abrahamitic roots of both his father and his mother. He was able to recapture Ruth's true inheritance from Abraham, from the time before it was sullied and bastardized by Lot and his daughters, before the lofty teachings of Abraham became the debased life-springs of Moab that culminated in the sophisticated rebellion of Orpah. Ruth made first steps upon the Judaic path but it was left to Oved to do the hard work in the trenches - weeding, tending and watering, separating the true from the false, step by step, teaching by teaching, behavior by behavior, branch by branch, connection by connection.

"Now we will turn to a great and exalted place which is in the world and the branch and root of truth - Oved, the father of Ishai, the father of David. We learned that he was at the end (of a chain); how then did the root of Truth come from such a place? However, Oved rectified himself in supernal rectification and the root of a tree that has been turned upside down, he turned back on its foundation. He rose through it and corrected himself and was therefore called "the Servant". This is something that others did not merit. Oved came and worked and cultivated the basis and root of the Tree. He (then) left the Face of Bitterness and rectified the foliage of the tree. Ishai, his son came and reinforced it and fixed it and held himself by the branches of another, higher tree, and connected one tree to the other, so that the two trees became intermingled. Once David came, he found the trees intermingled and held securely together. He inherited the Reign - and Oved caused all this (Zohar Chodosh 2:103b). The trees, I suggest, are Moab and Abraham.

This simple understanding of the Zohar (and there are, of course, others) is supported by the passage in Ruth Rabbah (8:13) that compares David to a diamond that a King once dropped in the sand. To recover it, he had to call many workers to sift and sieve the sand grain by grain. "The Holy One Blessed Be He said to Abraham: "Go you yourself out of your land. It is you who I was waiting for? Why did I need to list your genealogies - Shem, Arpachshad, Shelach, Eber, Peleg, Nachor, Terach". Only for you - Avram he is Abraham', " (of who it says) "You found his heart faithful before You". This is what the Holy One said to David. Why did I need to list your genealogies - Peretz, Chetzron, Ram, Aminadav, Nachshon, Salmon, Boaz, Oved, Ishai? Only for you - "I found David my servant". Abraham was a diamond that represents the end of long process of sifting and selecting, rejection and election. So also is David. The genealogy of David is therefore not at all incidental to the central message of the book of Ruth and neither are the names of his ancestors. Ruth brought something essential and precious to Jewish Royalty but along with it she brought elements that had to be purified and set aside. The tension between bringing in and putting out, election and exile, is and will forever remain at the core of the process of Redemption.

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