

JESSE

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

Jesse, or Ishai, was the father of David. As such, he was an important personality but we do not know much about him. The Biblical record is scant and tells us very little about this direct ancestor of the Messianic King. The Sages attempted to fill this gap with a variety of traditions and their concept of Redemption played an important role in how these traditions were conveyed. First, they viewed him as a great man, certainly not the clueless patriarch portrayed by the superficial reading of Samuel I, 16.

Ishai is one of the "eight princes of man" in Micha 5:4 according to Sukkah 52b. He went out at the head of a multitude of followers and returned with a multitude and he taught Torah to a multitude (Brochos 58a). Ishai inspired David to fight Goliath (Tanchuma Buber Vayigash 8). Four died solely because of the serpent's advice to Eve, for they never sinned. Ishai was one of them (Shabbos 55b). "The Sages said: Ishai lived more than 400 years (Genesis Rabbah 96:4)."

We will focus upon a long midrashic passage that characterizes both Ishai and David. More importantly, it throws a strong light upon the approach of the Sages towards the recurring patterns in Tanach, the return of generations and the nature of repentance and redemption in history.

There is an opinion that Ishai separated from his wife after he came to learn that there were some who questioned the legal propriety of the marriage of Boaz to Ruth. As a descendent of Moabites, he was, perhaps, prohibited from living with a full-fledged Jewess. He then separated from his wife. He told his non-fully Jewish maid to prepare herself so he can cohabit with her and in this fashion fulfill the commandment of procreation (the Midrash invokes a conditional freeing arrangement that renders her permitted for those with a tainted lineage). In the meantime, Ishai's wife was distressed for she desired more children from her sainted husband. The maidservant suggested that they do as Rachel and Leah - that they change place under the cover of darkness so that Ishai cohabit with his wife instead of the maidservant. The plan worked and the wife conceived and bore a child. This was David. When Jesse and his sons saw this, they suspected her of adultery but they held their peace for 28 years, until Samuel came to Ishai's house to anoint the new king (Yalkut Hamechiri, Psalms 118:28, retold in Sefer Hatodya, p322-323).

What might at first glance be seen as no more than a fanciful tale is in fact a necessary denouement to the progression of the process of purification and repentance throughout generation. As you surely recall, the motif of a well intentioned woman deceiving a man for a laudable goal is a recurrent pattern that we have encountered many times. First there was Lot and his daughters, then

Judah and Tamar, then Ruth and Boaz. At each succeeding instance, the sin became finer and less apparent, the evil of it becoming more subordinate and, we might say, more diluted by the good intention. What Lot's daughters did is abhorrent and off-putting. The transgression of Judah and Tamar was technically much less prominent for both he and she were single; yet, clearly some sin was committed. Ruth and Boaz triumphed over their inclinations; however, it is hard to deny that their encounter in a secluded place and in the middle of the night was nevertheless improper. A scent of impropriety hung over the ancestry of David. To complete the great cosmic drama of redemption, the situation must have been replayed again, even if the Bible does not say so explicitly, this time with no sin whatsoever.

The Sages understood that this must have taken place before the curtain descends upon this episode in the life of the royal family. A wholly righteous man and an entirely deserving woman must once again come together to replay the scene totally within the confines of holy matrimony. No law was broken when Ishai approached his wife, no technical prohibition and no moral consideration. Both he and she acted out of most laudable motives and their union was blessed with David. A cycle has ended, another cycle was ready to begin. What is human history but a spiral that continually passes over the same ground, over the same issues but each time at a higher level. David certainly continued the personal and national work of redemption throughout his life and career and in the life of his descendents. Yet, a chapter has closed and a new chapter opened. The ground that was gained will never be forfeited and the failures and ascents will henceforth play out on a more elevated platform.

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