

MACHLON AND KILYON

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

The book of Ruth seemingly tells us almost nothing about Machlon and Kilyon. We read that they were husbands of Ruth and Orpah and sons of Elimelech and Naomi; besides that we are told nearly nothing, except for their names. Their names in Hebrew, however, are remarkable indeed and the Sages made these names the starting point of their interpretation. These Hebrew names imply so much that no serious interpreter can afford to disregard them. In Hebrew, Machlon invokes either forgiveness, or dissipation and profanation and Kilyon is clearly derived from the Hebrew word for destruction. The first meaning of Machlon is expounded in this passage.

"Machlon was called so because the Holy Once Blessed Be He ultimately forgave him because he opposed his father's plan and strove with (or against) him for justice. Kilyon was so called because he was wiped completely from the world.... Ruth, the wife of Machlon joined the Jewish people for God forgave him so that his name is remembered. Orpah, the wife of Kilyon did not join the Jewish people for God destroyed Kilyon and his name was not remembered in Israel (Zohar Chadash 71a)."

The translation that is explicated here is the first one, of "forgiveness". We will shortly discuss a source that interprets the second meaning. The full meaning of the remarkable statement that we just read become clearer as we proceed through the series. For now, note how the meaning of the names serves as the key to interpreting the entire story of Ruth.

When we receive too little information from which to form a larger interpretative picture, recourse to wider context and other Biblical sources becomes imperative. The Talmud records a teaching that exemplifies this exegetical technique. I do not mean to imply, God forbid, that statements of the kind that we are about to read are de-novo interpretations and not based on some ancient tradition but merely ask you to put that likely possibility temporarily aside in an attempt to learn from the Rabbis how to read a Biblical text.

"Sons of Shelah, son of Yehuda: Er...and Yoash and Saraf who became husbands in Moab and those who live in Lehem and these matters are of great depth" (Chronicles I, 4:21-23).

Rav and Shmuel disagree. One says, "Their names were Machlon and Kilyon. Why were they called Yoash (despair) and Saraf (conflagration)? Because they despaired of Redemption and became culpable of destruction by fire." The other one says, "Their names were Yash and Saraf. Why were they called Machlon and Kilyon? Machlon - because they profaned their bodies. Kilyon because they deserved destruction in God's hand, that they became husbands in Moab - they married Moabite

wives. Those who live in Lehem - this is Ruth, the Moabite who settled in Bethlehem. The matters are of great depths - the One Profound of History enunciated them: "I found David, My servant (in Sodom)" and (regarding Lot) "your two daughters that are found (Bava Basra 91a)."

In addition to identifying Machlon and Kilyon with otherwise known Biblical personalities, the Sages placed them squarely within the framework of descendants of Shela, son of Yehuda. More remarkably, they draw our attention to the fact that Shelah called his son, the progenitor of Machlon and Kilyon, by the name of his deceased brother, Er. As we see time after time, in one pithy statement the Rabbis succeeded in alluding to a number of profound teachings (See Yalkut Rebeni Vayeshev 157a and Koheles Yakov, entry Er). We will attempt to merely gain a surface understanding of this passage by demonstrating that it utilizes another rabbinic exegetical technique that is well suited for when information is scanty - recourse to patterns. To do so, we will use the principle, that history is a series of cycles in which the later generations are granted the opportunity to repair the mistakes and missteps of earlier generations.

Although this idea applies to individual destinies as well as nations, it is invoked most aptly in intergenerational sagas of families and may be familiar to some of our readers from certain classics of Western literature. The pattern called up here is that of two brothers, both of whom are given and opportunity to lay the claim to history. Yet, one "steps up to the plate" and gives rise to a line of progeny or a nation and the other one fails and is spiritually lost. This pattern is well known to us from the book of Genesis. Failure is not always complete and final. Often there is a second chance and an opportunity to return. Sometimes it is taken and sometimes it is wasted. This pattern includes Isaac and Ishmael, Esau and Jacob and ...Er and Onan.

And Judah took a wife for Er his first-born, and her name was Tamar. And Er, Judah's first-born, was wicked in the sight of HaShem; and HaShem slew him.

And Judah said unto Onan: 'Go in unto thy brother's wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother unto her, and raise up seed to thy brother.' And Onan knew that the seed would not be his; and it came to pass when he went in unto his brother's wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest he should give seed to his brother. And the thing which he did was evil in the sight of HaShem; and He slew him also (Genesis 37, 7-10).

We see in Yehuda's family, the same recurring situation; in fact it comes back three times. There are two brothers who seemingly are both destined for perdition, yet one is saved and the other one perishes. Er and Onan both sin; however, Er is ultimately redeemed by Yehuda's Levirite marriage to Tamar but Onan is lost. Similarly, Machlon and Kilyohn both die but Boaz brings Machlon's memory back via Levirite marriage to Ruth. Lastly, in Chronicles the name of Er returns to Yehuda's line through his third son Shela, who names his firstborn - Er. Shelah, through this son is an ancestor of Machlon, whose wife was Ruth. Machlon and Kilyon are personally given a chance at redemption but fumble it; yet, Machlon is yet redeemed by Ruth. Yehuda and Tamar also have two children,

Peretz and Zerach. Peretz is an ancestor of Boaz, who redeems Machlon through Ruth and ultimately begets the Davidic line.

Ruth is in a similar situation. Ruth also has the opportunity for redemption. She is a descendant of Lot, who had two daughters. Both committed grievous sins, just like Er and Onan. Like they, one is saved through Ruth and the other one is lost with Orpah (See Zohar 188a on Genesis 25, 24 and the discussion by R. A. Z. Naiman in his commentary on Ruth, in Idrei Ts'on, p14-16).

The story of Boaz and Ruth is not only a narrative about two individuals who find each other but an account of cosmic spiritual forces that propel them together. As we will see, their encounter at the threshing floor replays all the situations above, only this time correct choices are made, sin is overcome and the cycle of redemption can finally close.

Look how much we have learned for our Sages. We mined the names for information, we explored other relevant Biblical passages and we plumbed the depths of recurring patterns. As a result we emerged with a much broader appreciation of both Machlon and Kilyon and the idea of redemption as it is alluded to, painstakingly developed and carefully formulated in the book of Ruth.

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