

DISTANCING AND RETURN

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

And a certain man of Beth-lehem in Judah went to sojourn in the field of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons... And they came into the field of Moab, and continued there...And they took them wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth; and they dwelt there about ten years.

These verses describe an all too familiar pattern of decline and estrangement. Machlon went to sojourn, hoping to return to Judea as soon as he could, as soon as the famine ceased.

"To sojourn in the land are we come; for there is no pasture for thy servants' flocks; for the famine is sore in the land of Canaan (Genesis 47,4) - That teaches that they did not come to assimilate there but to reside temporarily (Passover Haggada).

While the patriarch was alive, the old country and its religion exerted sufficient pull upon the children but once he died, " And they took for them wives of the women of Moab". They did so against the plain meaning of the Torah Law that prohibited such unions. As we will see later, correct interpretation of the verse in Deuteronomy 23,4 does allow marriage to a female Moabite convert but they did not appear to know that. As we will see, this dispensation seems to have either been forgotten among the masses or was never applied until that time. The pattern of assimilation to the culture of the surrounding population is sadly familiar to us from the American Jewish experience. The slow slide into complete estrangement can be arrested in the first few generations, as long as there remains an awareness and affection for one's heritage among children. At times, the return is accompanied by those of the nations of the world who joined and experienced the values that still persist in some attenuated form among those who are forgetting their native land but have not yet forgotten it completely. As we will discuss at a subsequent lesson, this phenomenon explains the attraction of Ruth and Orpah to their mother-in-law, a woman to whom the first generation is still securely attached, still living and breathing strong, unadulterated Judaism of her native land and culture. This experience of the tug and pull has been well chronicled in literature, film (The Jazz Singer) and personal memory of so many families.

Rabbi Uziel Milevsky (bio on <http://ohr.edu/tapes/speaker.php?id=12>) of blessed memory wrote in his commentary on the Haggada (Ohr Someach Haggada) that the four sons of the Passover Haggadah are emblematic of this process of estrangement. The first son is the first generation, Chacham, the wise and learned one. He is the son who has not yet taken any steps toward assimilation. The second generation is the wicked one, who is in headlong pursuit to throw off the

shackles of his religion to gain acculturation and acceptance in the glittering gentile world around him. The third son no longer knows much, he is the simple son. However, he vaguely remembers his grandfather and retains positive feelings and associations about his Jewish origin. The fourth generation is represented by the son who does not know what to ask. This son knows very little about Judaism but he is still a Jew and he is still present at the family Passover table. The fifth son sadly is no longer there. He is gone and lost to his family and to the Jewish people. How sad, how unfortunately true!

You may recall the Rabbinic interpretation that Machlon left Judea because he did not wish to share his wealth with the destitute during the famine. Moab was also known for its lack of generosity, "because they did not greet you with bread and water when you were on the way out of Egypt, (Deut. 23,5). "What led them to marry Moabite women? That they comported themselves like Amon and Moab in regards to generosity (Yalkut)." Naomi did not escape censure either, though she did eventually arrest and reverse the spiritual decline. "Naomi was fallen but she arose by her return to the Land (Lekach Tov)." "Then she arose with her daughters-in-law, that she might return from the field of Moab; for she had heard in the field of Moab how that HaShem had remembered His people in giving them bread (Ruth 1, 6)."

"And she went forth out of the place where she was (Ruth 1, 6-7)." From that place where she was, from that state of mind, from that state of descent.

"To return from the field of Moab".

The word "return" is used fourteen times in the book of Ruth (4,15 is of the same root but has a different meaning, a not uncommon finding when using this method). This indicates that it is the Key-Word, one that encodes and conceals the key to interpretation (for an explanation of Key Words as tools for interpretation see <http://www.torah.org/learning/yonah/class5.html>). This tells us that the concept of return is the key to understanding this book.

Yet, as this noble family went lower and lower, as it squandered its spiritual riches in pursuit of plebeian goals, as it descended and assimilated, it encountered two precious souls who themselves were ascending.

Here is the paradox of a great person who falls and in the very act of failing inspires others (for another Biblical example see <http://torah.org/learning/yonah/class14.html>). Even dying embers can start a fire if they fall upon parched ground. This phenomenon is widespread even in our own day for there are many sincere converts who were first attracted to Judaism through an involvement with someone who was in one way or another turning his or her back on their heritage.

Orpah and Ruth walked along Naomi as she returned to her people, the people who Hashem has blessed to give them bread. With this we close the first cycle of return and embark on the second- the return of Lot's progeny to the covenant of Abraham.

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