

THE CONVERSATION

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

And she went forth out of the place where she was, and her two daughters- in-law with her; and they went on the way to return unto the land of Judah.

And Naomi said unto her two daughters-in-law: 'Go, return each of you to her mother's house; HaShem deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me.

HaShem grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband.' Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept. and they said unto her: 'Nay, but we will return with thee unto thy people.'

One of the most baffling aspects of this narrative is the loyalty, love and affection that Naomi inspired in her two daughters-in-law, a feat rare enough amongst women raised in the same culture and sharing the same spirit, much less for a Judean mother-in-law and the Moabites who married her sons. Did she not feel bitterness and betrayal after have her sons' intermarriage and distancing from theirs, from hers, heritage? Would she be able to move past hurt and disappointment to perceive that she gained two daughters, two precious souls even if their mannerisms, comportment and speech were so unlike the modest ways of Judean women. And do not be deceived - the chasm between those brought up under the wings of Divine Presence and those who grew up in the shadow of idol Kemosh was surely wide. Those familiar with observant Jewish lifestyle appreciate the many details and customs that circumscribe, elevate and sanctify every moment of daily life. Oprah and Ruth surely had no idea. A glimpse of this gulf can be grasped from when Ruth already lived some time in Bethlehem. Here she, already committed the Jewish way of life, unwittingly contravenes something as basic as public separation of the sexes, a feature of life in Judea but apparently not in Moab. Note how Naomi gently brings this to her attention.

Then said Boaz unto Ruth: 'Hearest thou not, my daughter? Go not to lean in another field, neither pass from hence, but abide here fast by my maidens...

And Ruth the Moabite said: 'Yea, he said unto me: Thou shalt keep fast by my young men, until they have ended all my harvest.'

And Naomi said unto Ruth her daughter-in-law: 'It is good, my daughter, that thou go out with his maidens, and that thou be not met in any other field (Ruth 2:8, 21-22).'

No matter how well-meaning, these daughters-in-law must have seemed foreign to their mother-in-

law. How easy would it have been for her to disapprove and to seek justification and sanction in the command, "Thou shalt not seek their peace nor their prosperity all thy days for ever (Deuteronomy 22, 7)". But, Naomi, whose name means pleasantness and whose soul was tied to the root of Loving-Kindness rose above all that and, so, her daughters-in-law adored her.

However, Naomi realized that the step that they were about to take must be based on something much more profound than a personal connection. She knew that people join religious communities for one of three basic reasons, or some variations and combinations thereof. Some are driven by personal considerations - love, friendship, search for acceptance, anger at the place from which they have come. Others are drawn to the mannerisms, language, social structures, and the way of life. A few are pursuing the religious idea itself. Personal considerations rarely survive adversity. Social identification once established can endure but are of little merit. A true righteous proselyte is a treasure and an inspiration.

So she probes, HaShem grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband.' Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept. And they said unto her: 'Nay, but we will return with thee unto thy people.'

Is their motivation social or religious?

What Naomi recognizes and her daughters-in-law do not know is that her people might not be as welcoming as her daughters-in-law imagine. What do they know of Judeans but Naomi and Elimelech, Machlon and Kilyon? These were aristocrats, people of stature, people of spirit. Will the average citizen of Bethlehem be able to see beyond the Moabite exterior?

Naomi recognizes that reality often falls short of ideals and that even those who should know better so often behave in ways that are limited and petty. He who puts stock in human beings is sure to eventually be disappointed.

"Thus saith HaShem: Cursed is the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from HaShem. For he shall be like a tamarisk in the desert, and shall not see when good cometh; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, a salt land and not inhabited. Blessed is the man that trusteth in HaShem, and whose trust HaShem is. For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out its roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but its foliage shall be luxuriant; and shall not be anxious in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit. The heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceeding weak--who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17, 5-9)

Coming back with two Moabite daughters-in-law was not particularly good for Naomi's reputation either, a constant reminder of her family's sin and assimilation. Group cohesiveness is absolutely necessary to keep a religious society internally bound against outside winds and to preserve its uniqueness and mission but it also often results in regrettable side effects - lack of vision, intolerance, distrust of the stranger. She knew that she was returning to a stratified society in which

Moabite women and their handler could not easily find a group to which to belong. Could she foresee that inner righteousness will triumph over social strictures? Could she bank that the best in her people will come out? Yes, as we know, ultimately the generosity and universality of Jewish spirit came through to their aid but how could she have known? How could she explain this to Oprah and Ruth, who expected to find Bethlehem populated by Naomis and Elimelechs, who looked forward to being loved and accepted as Naomi loved and cherished them, that it was not so. How could she crush their spirit and destroy their faith?

"Why is she sanding them back? So as not to suffer shame on their account, for so we have found: There were many streets in Jerusalem but the inhabitants of one would not mix with the inhabitants of another. There was a (separate) street for the royals, a separate street for priests, for Levites, for Israelites. People were recognized in the market place by the clothes that they wore. No one single group wore the same clothing as another (Ruth Zura 8)."

What to do? Naomi invokes the emotional power of marriage and childbearing and discounts the social aspects of moving to Bethlehem.

And Naomi said: 'Turn back, my daughters; why will ye go with me? have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?

Turn back, my daughters, go your way; for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say: I have hope, should I even have an husband to-night, and also bear sons; would ye tarry for them till they were grown? would ye shut yourselves off for them and have no husbands? nay, my daughters; for it grieveth me much for your sakes, for the hand of HaShem is gone forth against me.'

Naomi makes several important points. She subtly indicates that Orpah and Ruth might have great difficulty finding husbands in Bethlehem (that the prohibition of marrying Moabites applies only to males was not widely known, perhaps not even to Naomi herself). At the same time, she introduces the concept of Levirate marriage. In that she foreshadows the future and preserves hope amidst despair.

She also demonstrates that she truly and deeply cares about personal happiness of her two daughters-in-law. People in pain often cannot find heart to care for others. That Naomi is able to rise above her truly tragic personal situation is in itself an indication of an elevated spiritual stature and vindicates the Sages' reading of her character.

Orpah is swayed, for her attachment to her mother-in-law is personal and social but Ruth rises to the heights of spiritual heroism. Ruth accompanies Naomi not only because she loves her but because Naomi teaches Ruth how to worship the God of Israel.

And they lifted up their voice, and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law; but Ruth cleaved unto her.

"A ray of loving kindness illuminates the path of these two daughters of Moab and it is reflected

indirectly upon Machlon and Kilyon who have by now receded behind the horizon. The Book of Ruth does not disclose the nature of the inner life of this family. Yet the passionate devotion of the daughters-in-law the mother of their departed husbands allows us to appraise the purity and warmth permeating the family life of these two aristocrats of Judah. Otherwise the strong ties binding the women to this family would be utterly incomprehensible...The strongest influence, however, emanates from Naomi. She was "refined in word and deed". Orpah and Ruth were drawn toward her like planets gravitating around the sun (Rabbi I. Z. Lipowitz in Nachal Yosef).

Both Orpah and Ruth bore love and affection for Naomi; however, Ruth was also fired up by a religious ideal that led her beyond the world of feeling and emotion, beyond concern with personal happiness and private life. As we continue delving into their conversation, the greatness of this remarkable personality will become fully apparent.

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