

SEFER RUS -- LOSS AND REDEMPTION

by Rabbi Yaakov Bernstein

Yichus

The best family lineage stems from Dovid Hamelech. Yet, surprisingly, Dovid comes from Rus -- the Moabite convert. Moav was prohibited from marrying into Klal Yisrael! (Devorim 23:3)

In Sefer Rus, it was promulgated for the first time that only Moabite males were prohibited, but females were permitted.

To most, the distinction in halacha between Moabite males and females was a completely novel -- and questionable -- concept. For many years, Dovid was ostracized due to concern that his lineage was not acceptable. For this reason, Shmuel Hanavi composed Sefer Rus -- to affirm the legitimacy of Dovid's ancestry. (Zos Nechamasi).

The End of Vayikra

The last parshiyos of Vayikra remind us that we have to look out for one another, not only ourselves: Remember the poor man, redeem the field that he was forced to sell.

If we don't keep the mitzvos, we will be exiled; we will suffer immensely. Yet, Hashem will not forsake us. As a result of all our troubles, we will return to Him -- and He will return to us.

These lessons are powerfully demonstrated during the Yom Tov of Shavuot the yahrzeit of Dovid Hamelech -- when we learn the story of Rus.

Challenges of Naomi

Sefer Rus presents us with the story of Elimelech, a wealthy leader of the Jewish People. When severe famine reaches Eretz Yisrael, he's in a dilemma. The demands of the people are extreme and he feels overwhelmed. In such a desperate situation, Elimelech is afraid that thieves would attack him in the night.

He takes his family and leaves Eretz Yisrael, taking refuge in Moav.

Actually, these are serious errors; when people's demands are great, one must not forsake them. Nonetheless, his wife Naomi faithfully follows her husband, and their two sons honor their father's wishes. As long as he lives, Elimelech prevents his sons from intermingling with the Moabite population. (Zos Nechamasi)

Hashem's wrath is kindled. Elimelech dies; Naomi is unable to restrain her younger son, who marries a local princess, Orpah. The older son then follows, taking Rus as wife (also a princess). Both sons die without offspring, leaving Naomi bereft of husband and children, devoid of income and assets.

Forlorn, Naomi realizes that she could have protested her husband's behavior; perhaps she could have prevented the tragedies which unfolded. She hears that the famine in Eretz Yisrael is over, and sets out -- on foot.

Orpah is easily persuaded to return to her family's palace, but Rus says that she will remain with Naomi and her people forever. Although Naomi's family had forsaken their people, Rus will not!

Redeemer of the Fields

Rus and Naomi arrive, penniless, in Eretz Yisrael. The verses tell us that Naomi had property which she needed to sell. Rus approached Boaz, that he should be the Go'el -- "redeemer." This expression has several connotations.

First, the Go'el helps his impoverished relative by re-acquiring the inheritance which the poor man sold. Indeed, through a series of transactions, Boaz does redeem Naomi's property.

The classic commentaries query. How does Naomi have property to sell? The verses tell us that it was part of Elimelech's inheritance, needing to be redeemed. How could Naomi sell it? According to the Torah, the wife doesn't inherit the husband. Besides, an inherited field must not be redeemed within the first two years of the sale, and very little time had passed, certainly not two years.

The Bach, in Meishiv Nefesh, shows that the field had been promised to Naomi in the K'suva. The K'suva is an agreement made before the marriage, guaranteeing the wife assets in the event of divorce or the husband's death.

Now that her husband has died, the assets belong to Naomi, and she can sell them for sustenance.

Why is Boaz called the Go'el -- "redeemer"? What does this have to do with re-acquiring an inheritance? The Bach shows that Naomi does actually inherit fields, not as a wife, but as a descendant:

Rashi tells us that Naomi was descended from her husband's father. When Elimelech dies, the properties went to her sons. They, too, die without offspring.

The fields now revert to the father's family. Naomi is one of the inheritors.

So Boaz is the redeemer of the field which Naomi sold. He is returning the property of inheritance. On the other hand, Naomi didn't sell the field as inherited property (she didn't have any control of the inheritance yet) but as her K'suva. Therefore, it could be restored within the two year period.

Lessons

There is much to be learned from the story of Rus. It is a story of error, return and forgiveness. It is a story of pain and deprivation, encouragement and success. It teaches about stinginess and generosity, loss and redemption.

It tells us of Geula. Boaz redeemed the field, and he redeemed Rus, marrying her and engendering the lineage of Dovid, Melech Yisrael.