

A-267

A-267

1. The Book of Ruth, "Megillas Rus", which we shall read later today as we do every Shevuos, has come under very close scrutiny these past two years or so. It is the story, you will recall, of the woman Naomi whose husband and two sons died after the famine caused them to emigrate from Palestine, and found herself left with her two young widowed daughters-in-law. One of them left her for her non-Jewish parents. The other, also non-Jewish, Ruth the Moabite, pleaded with Naomi and won her consent to stay with her and throw in her lot with her and become Jewish. Ruth ultimately meets Boaz, they marry and Ruth bears a son to make Naomi's older years happy, and four generations later, from this same Ruth, there is born David, King Of Israel.

What these new writers on the Book of Ruth have to offer is mostly a complaint. Why, they argue, is this called the Book of RUTH in the first place? Ruth was a fine young lady, but after ~~the~~ all the real heroism, the real depth of character and even of strategy is shown by Naomi, not Ruth. Such is the argument of Maurice Samuel, and now of Dr. Hillel Zeidman. Naomi is the heroine of this great and charming Biblical narrative, and the Megillah should therefore be called Megillas Naomi, the Book of Naomi.

2. And yet our Tradition HAS called it the Book of RUTH, and it is she, more than Naomi, who shines as the great heroine of the story. Naomi and Boaz are both pleasant and even gigantic characters, endeared to history and beloved by the generations. But the heroine, the ancestress of King David - that is Ruth and only Ruth.

Why is that? Why did Ruth receive so much more commendation and praise than modern students of the Bible are willing to give her? Primarily because she was NOT a Jewess to begin with, because she came to this Jewish way of life as a novice, as a newcomer. Of Naomi we expect a certain noble course of behavior. Of Boaz we expect a high-minded and noble attitude, for he was a great Jew and it was only Jewish to do what he did. But Ruth - not only did she voluntarily accept these ways and laws and beliefs and observances - but because of her very newness, because of her fresh perspective, she derived more from them and brought more to them. For Boaz and for Naomi a Jewish way of life is just natural; for Ruth it was was an amazing adventure, a breaking open of new and thrilling horizons, filled with new and startling meaning and having unexpected and inspiring consequences. It is precisely this child-like wonder, this feeling of perpetual newness and freshness of the Jewish ways that gave Ruth her superiority over the others. For her all that was Jewish and G-dly could never become stale and routinized; it must always remain a new and profound and thrilling discovery. Only that kind of vigorous perspective and attraction could make her turn to her mother-in-law and vow her loyalty to this new way of life into which she so eagerly sought admittance.

3. Perhaps that is what one of the Rabbis of the Midrash meant when he offered a highly cryptic comment on something Boaz said to Ruth in their very first conversation in the fields. He said to her, "the Lord recompense thy work, and may thy reward be complete from the Lord G-d of Israel ASHER BAAS LA'CHASO TACHAS KNAFAV, under whose wings thou art come to take refuge". The Midrashic Rabbi Chassa merely ~~adds the word~~ repeats the last phrase: ASHER.... for thou art come to take refuge under His wings". What does this repetition signify? Simply this: that Ruth's greatness was that she came to G-dliness from afar. and so G-d and Judaism had so much more meaning for her. Because of her previous distance was her present closeness so much more valuable. When a person is like Ruth and views the whole panorama of religious life with this feeling of newness and surprise and delight, then indeed TEHI MASKURTEICH SHELEIMAH, is his reward complete, is his religious experience wholesome and full and pregnant with significance. Because she came, was her reward complete.
4. This attitude of newness and discovery and delightful surprise comes to my mind especially when considering those of us, some even here today, who have only recently begun to live more fully Jewish lives. Take the matter of a kosher home. To most of us, it is an automatic affair, requiring no special consciousness of what we are doing and inspiring no new feeling or thinking. We feel that is what we should do, what Jews have always done, and so we do it - period. That is quite alright - but how much fuller a life we would lead if we always had the same reactions to our Kashruth as do those who have only recently adopted the observance. They have come to it for a number of reasons - and this holds true for other observances as well, from shul-going to Shabbos to family life. There were children to consider, there was a deep yearning for higher meaning in life, there were discussions with a Rabbi or parent or teacher or friend. What to some of us is a good habit, is to these Ruth-like people who have "come" from afar to dwell under G-d's wings a startling discovery always full of hidden surprises. A simple thing like Kashruth offers new and untapped sources of meaning. This is a personal response to a personal request by G-d. Their voluntarily-accepted self-restraint becomes for them a living exercise in the love of G-d; their self-imposed discipline an act of holiness; their new convictions become for them constantly challenging and revealing experiences as the Eternal impinges in the Temporal and as G-d enters daily life in so many unique ways. Food is no longer just food; it becomes fraught with great and overwhelming significance, because this is G-d's will that is being performed, and so all of life, every little aspect of it becomes important in the eyes of G-d. Can a man be insignificant if this is his life? Can he feel crushed or bypassed if whatever he does is important to G-d? His Kashruth means that a greater spirit dwells in his home, a spirit greater than him and his family. His relations with his wife are therefore more delicate and considerate, more noble and more elevated - for G-d is there too. That is what happens when someone comes to Kashruth from afar. Like Ruth, who came from afar, the reward is

SHELEIMAH - complete, there is much novelty and discovery in every aspect.

2/5/19

5. It is this delightful and refreshing attitude of seeing the familiar and the old as new and exotic that we who are religious must learn to develop for ourselves. That is why we read the Book of Ruth - yes, the Book of RUTH - on Shevuos, which commemorates the giving of Torah. All of Torah must be approached with this attitude. Twice a day, as part of our SHEMA, we say VE HAYAH IM SHAMOA...METZAVCHA HAYOM.....today. Why, our rabbis ask, "Today"? It was thousands of years ago, not today! And the answer given is: SHE'YIHYU ALEICHEM CHADASHIM K'ILU SHMATEM BO BAYOM, that every day you read or hear these words, they should appear as new to you as if you had just heard them that day. Torah was given a long time ago. But we receive it every day afresh. Every new insight, every new experience, every new layer of meaning and understanding we penetrate is a new spiritual adventure - a KABALAS HATORAH. It is HAYOM, today - for it always appears CHADASHIM, new and novel to us.

6. It seems that the truly religious Jew, the Ruth-like Jew, ~~is~~ has something of the creative quality of the inventive scientist. The main quality of the great discoverer is not one who studies the exotic and extraordinary, but one who finds the unusual in the usual, the surprising in the commonplace. It is almost a child's world - and hence it is a childlike quality: to be intrigued by the everydayish, to be provoked by the commonplace, to be challenged and ever surprised by the ordinary. It is from this quality of wonder, of viewing the old as new and the familiar as strange, that the greatest discoveries of Nature arise. And it is from this too that the greatest religious insight springs.

The German philosopher Kant once said that two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe: the starry heavens above and the moral law within. In our language we would say: the intricacies of Nature and the marvels of Torah, G-d's World and G-d's Word. The world of Nature, whether the starry heavens above or the dark deep of the ocean below, always appear CHADASHIM BE'EINECHA, new and filled with wondrous surprises, both for the scientific personality and for the religious personality. Our Bible, especially the Psalms and the Book of Job, is full of expressions of the wonder at the greatness of Nature which is always startling and shocking in its greatness. But to this the Jew adds: "the moral law within" - that is, Torah and Mitzvos, the Jewish way of life and observances and precepts. This too is a fascinating world where the more one ponders it the more revealing secrets does one uncover.

It was King David who expressed it most succinctly in his Sabbath Psalm: MAH GADLU MAASECHA HASHEM, ME'OD AMKU MACHSHVOSECHA....."the deeds" refers to G-d's creation, to Nature, and "They thoughts" - to Torah and the commandments. G-d's World and G-d's Word, the starry heavens and the moral order, both are continual sources of marvel. And no wonder King David understood this so well - for today, his Yahrzeit, we read of his grandmother, Ruth, whose quality this was - for, coming from afar, she realized that to be a Jew means to dwell under the wings of G-d. For Ruth as well as for David, all the world was CHADASHIM BE'EINECHA

in our jobs, professions, our careers, new ideas...
in work, art, writing, etc. (interest), etc.
get more from it, like scientists.

7. To those of us who are, therefore, new to our Jewish practices - we say that ~~not~~ only do we admire you, but we envy you. And we want to emulate you. That is what the Book of Ruth urges upon the great majority of us - boredom and mechanical routine has no place in Religion, at its best. Better than nothing - most definitely. But not good enough. We must strive to be like Ruths, constantly challenged by new insights. Observances must become CHADASHIM BE'EINECHA, as if we had never done this before.

Those of us who are "regulars" at davening or in shul are sometimes apt to become overfamiliar with the synagogue and prayerbook. And when they become commonplace and lose their novelty we begin to lose reverence - we talk during davening, we ~~smile~~ act lightheartedly and feel called upon to demonstrate our sense of humor when we should be experiencing awe after wave of surprise and amazement emanating from the new - always, always new - words and ideas of that treasure-chest of meaningfulness called the Siddur. Our Talmudic Sages spoke often of CHIDDUSH B'TEFILLAH - of new ideas, new experiences and novelties of all kinds in our prayer. The same words, the same passages, the same motions - but completely new prayers nonetheless. The words, the books, the prayers - the very synagogue building itself - must always appear as a challenging newness to us. CHADASHIM BE'EINECHA.

8. But if this thoroughly Jewish attitude, so well exemplified in the life of Ruth, is to be brought to bear on the inanimate world of Nature and to the observance of practical Mitzvos, how much more so should this attitude be brought to our relationships with our fellow-men. For people - humans - are G-d's greatest creation in Nature, and one of the very greatest Mitzvos is the love of our fellow men: V'AHAVTA LEREIACHA....

All too often we take people for granted - husband, wife, parents, in-laws, colleagues, friends, neighbors - anyone. We accept their opinions, fears, likes, prejudices at face value, and feel we know all there is to know about them. We know longer look for new experiences of friendship and inter-human discourse. We take them for granted and grow bored. We act as if their behavior is completely predictable, thus making of them mere machines. Well, it just isn't so. We must learn to scratch below the surface and be amazed by the new surprises and new facets of character, new insights into old friends' characters. The human personality is one of the most tantalizing mysteries on the face of the earth. To be challenged, provoked and inspired anew by it every day - that is the intelligent, Jewish, Ruth-like way. To ignore it, take it for granted and skim over it superficially - that is the foolish and cruel and Ruth-less way. It is only when a man is constantly attracted by the surprising depth of his neighbor's character and personality that he can become Ruth-like and observe V'AHAVTA LEREIACHA. ... Otherwise, he must fail to observe that great Mitzvah - and remain Ruth-less. Nature, Mitzvos, People - all must always appear CHADASHIM, K'ILU SHMATEM HAYOM.....

It was this quality of Ruth's, of finding new sources of meaning and surprising depths in every deed and person, that lead her to turn to her mother-in-law with such fierce and yet tender loyalty. Certainly the more expected thing for a young woman only recently widowed would have been to leave Naomi. Certainly one would expect that Naomi symbolize for her an alien people into which she unfortunately married, that Naomi would be to her a symbol of her tragic past, of her failures, of her widowhood of her suffering and that she would be only too glad to take her leave of this prematurely old dominating character as quickly as possible. ~~et~~ she doesn't. She has brought her child-like wonder to bear to her mother-in-law. She has found new discoveries in this woman. She has become attracted to her. She loves her enough now to issue that immortal declaration, "whither thou goest, I will go; where thou lodgest I will lodge; thy people shall be my people; and thy G-d my G-d; where thou diest I shall die, and there will I be buried." Only that person can say that to whom others always appear CHADASHIM, new, tho you've known them a whole life long.

No wonder that Chassidim taught that every Mitzvah has its own individual NESHAMAH, its own soul. For that NESHAMAH is the repository of untold surprises, of amazing facets and abilities and meanings, it is the treasure-house of secret ideas and mysterious experiences - both of a Mitzvah and of a human being. MAH GADLU...ME'OD AMKU... How great are Thy deeds O Lord, Thy natural creations, and how deep Thy thoughts, Thy Mitzvos - and how inscrutably magnificent is the human being, the greatest of both Thy deeds and Thy thoughts!

9. About a month or 6 weeks ago there died in Jerusalem one of the most legendary personalities of modern Israel. Dr. Moshe Wallach was in his 80s or 90s when he left us. And he, perhaps more than any other person that comes to mind, epitomizes these Ruth-like qualities of finding the newness and uniqueness in life. Born Germany...strictly devoutly Orthodox...medicine...great physician....(CHADASHIM to Nature);one of most pious men all Jerusalem...Shaarei Zedek Hospital ("Wallach's")...everything k'das uche'din....(CHADASHIM to Torah)....great humanitarian....devoted to his patients who loved him dearly....Arabs in back-country Lebanon and Syria ..(CHDASHIMto people)....nothing ruthless about this doctor. Most completely Ruth-like. No wonder he inspired such confidence patients,became living legend. Story heard:patient,dying,called for him...anything can do for you son?..No, no pills,np powders; just this: Doctor:SAY ~~TEHILLIM~~ WITH ME! Only when man has achieved this kind of character and characterstic will people turn to him in love and oyalty and regard him worthy enough to join them in reading the holiest of holy words, firstcomposed by the grandson of this same Ruth who came to G-d from afar, and who always found it delightfully new, and whose reward was therefore complete.

10. On this Shevuos,therefore, we are asked to develop that divine capacity for

not long remain

as it thus is our first drink from
the cup of spiritual joy

Benedictin

ה'תש"ו ... חזר י"ח'ן בקדש
שום אלו אריות וקדש 2 את ז' נבאיו