

"FOUR STEPS"

1. The Book of Ruth, which is read on this Festival of Shevuoth, and whose mood of pastoral beauty at harvest time in the agricultural community of ancient Palestine dominates the whole atmosphere of this holiday, teaches us, quite incidentally, a profound lesson on the very nature of Torah and its tremendous significance in our daily lives.
2. Synopsis of Book...especially Naomi, Ruth, Orpah...Ruth wants to remain, but Orpah really wants to leave, just feigns desire to remain....finally Ruth-David, Orpah-Goliath.
3. Our Rabbis seem to have attached great significance to that tender parting scene. That Ruth acted nobly, selflessly and devotedly we know. Her reward - marriage to the great Boaz and grandmother of King David - was deserved and recognized. But what of Orpah, the woman doomed to become the grandmother of this foul Phillistine, this Moabite who returned to her people. True she did not remain with Naomi, with the religion and the people she adopted when she married the ill-fated son of Naomi. But, after all, she did make some attempt, some offer, to remain with her mother-in-law. Did not she too, with Ruth, declare her willingness to accept Judaism? Does not this unfortunate person deserve some recognition?

Yes, our Rabbis answer, she deserved and got recognition. RABBI BERACHIAN OMER, ARBA PESIOS HALCHAH ORPAH IM CHAMOSAH, VE'NISLU LI'VNAH ARBA'IM YOM. R. Berachiah says that Orpah accompanied her mother-in-law four steps, and because of this kindness of four paces with Naomi, her descendent Goliath was spared for 40 days between the time he challenged Isreal and terrorized his Hebrew enemies and the time young David came and slew him. Only four steps, four small steps. But they were significant, they were important. And for it her Goliath was rewarded 40 more days of life, glorious days for him and his family and his Phillistines; 40 days in which he shined as the great hero, as the unchallenged champion of the battle-field, 40 days in which he basked as the supreme warrior of the Near East.

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4. It is only a small incident in the Book of Ruth; only a small side-road on the highway of history where Ruth and Boaz lead to David and Solomon and the whole story of the emergence of the Jewish people. But that is precisely what the Rabbis wanted to tell us: that every little act is important. Nothing man does goes unnoticed. Every move he makes is filled with meaning and real importance.

Perhaps that is one of the main contributions of the whole Bible. The Torah called upon man to realize the tremendous implications of simple acts. Not only do the "heavens declare the glory of G-d", but the simple deeds of men may either declare or deny that glory.

5. How insignificant those four steps seem! Why right afterwards, according to Jewish legend, that same night, Orpah left Naomi and returned to her previous way of life, she plunged into a life of shame and sin, a life of degeneracy and promiscuity. And yet, they were great steps. They were meaningful. For how Orpah really longed to return to her home and her parents, to her familiar Moabite surroundings and routines, to her childhood idols and the relaxed looseness of her people, away from this life of trouble and anxiety and widowhood and bad memories of a husband she should never have married, and a mother-in-law who, no matter how pleasant, always remained a stranger to her, who had too many religious scruples, who believed in some kind of Invisible G-d and was overly strict in her morals. How Orpah's heart pined and longed to leave this life of strangers and hunger and widowhood. How she awaited the blessed moment of departure, those wonderful words "I'm going home!" And yet she had enough sympathy and consideration in her heart to feel the bitterness of this woman who was her mother-in-law, the great void in her life the terrible and overwhelming loneliness. And so Orpah did not leave her immediately, but walked with her - only a bit, mind you, only four paces. But four paces more removed from her own desires and dreams. A small act, terribly small, perhaps insufficient. But the Torah thought it important. G-d considered it great. And the reward was great - 40 days of life and glory and victory. Certainly, simple acts have tremendous implications.

6. Many of you here this morning have probably been as frustrated as I, on occasion, when trying to convince others of the necessity for keeping the practical observances of Judaism. Try to "sell" Kashruth or Sabbath observance to someone who is non-observant, and you are frequently challenged by the highly sophisticated question: "Do you mean to say that G-d is interested in such petty things? Do you think G-d cares about my diet or my dishes or whether and when I smoke or go shopping?" The question has been asked hundreds of times, and it really gives its own answer.

Of course G-d is interested in what we call "small" things. If G-d were not interested in "small things" He would not have provided us with eyebrows and we would be an ugly race; He would not have given us thumbs and we would be clumsy creatures. There is no such thing as a small thing in the eyes of G-d. And who knows but perhaps that the very reason, or one of the main ones, for many of these practical Mitzvos is to teach us the tremendous implications of men's acts, simple though they appear.

The very fact that they have such great significance means that Man has some connection with G-d, an intimate one. It means that he is not a solitary creature on the face of the earth. "The Bible," writes Prof. Heschel, "has shattered man's illusion of being alone. Sinai broke the cosmic silence that thickens our blood with despair. G-d does not stand aloof from our cries; He is a pattern, not only a power, and life is a task, not a curse."

7. Surely that is one of the really great achievements of Torah. It endows with meaning and consecrates eating, drinking, marital relationships, the human word and the human thought, reading, walking, singing. A human being who knows this does not lead an empty, lonely, desperate life. A man who knows - as our Rabbis phrased it allegorically - that every act of man creates either an angel or a demon, makes use of every moment and consecrates every act to a higher and nobler goal. Life is not dry and prosaic and utterly flat. It becomes deeper and higher and weightier, it becomes meaningful and three-dimensional and poetic.
8. Look at it this way, remember that 4 steps ^{can} account for 40 days, and all of life assumes new meaning and greater significance and beauty. Simple things no longer seem so simple.
- *A WORD becomes the echo of the silent oratory of the mind.
 - *A TEAR is the distilled drop of the turbulent emotions of the heart.
 - *A GROAN is the audible grinding of conflicting emotions and frustrated desires and hidden miseries.
 - *A CHUCKLE is the overtone of happiness from the orchestrated harmony of the whole human being.
 - *A SMILE is the visible symbol of the goodness that lies within one, seeking to plant a seed of happiness and courage within another.

All these simple things become to be viewed like icebergs - one sees only a fraction of the topmost part, but the bulk is there, only hidden by the waters. And it is these simple things which can move mountains, which can kill and make alive, encourage and discourage.

DA MAH LEMAALAH MIMCHA, said the ages... AYIN ROAH V'OZEN SHOMAAS VE'CHOL MAASECHA BESEFER NICHAVIM... With such knowledge there is no longer such a thing as a "simple" act. Every act of devotion becomes a profession of love, and every word of prayer a sacrifice. Every visit to the synagogue becomes a pilgrimage, and every memory of a dead parent a reverent consecration. The more we are concerned with G-d, the more is He concerned with us. That is why even the Orpahs in life are rewarded for a few steps in the right direction. That is why Rabbis try to urge their people to practice Judaism, and why its abandonment shrinks one's outlook until even the greatest acts become arid and barren and empty.

9. It is told that when Henry Norris Russell, the Princeton astronomer, had concluded a lecture on the Milky Way, a woman said to him, "If our world is so little, and the universe is so great, can we believe that G-d pays any attention to us?" Dr. Russell replied, "That depends, madam, entirely on how big a G-d you believe in."

We believe in a G-d who is great indeed. To quote from the Akdamus, "He has endless might, not to be described even were the skies parchment, were all the reeds quills, were all the seas and waters made of ink, and were all the world's inhabitants made scribes." With a G-d who is that great, nothing is unimportant, and all is holy.

*A soul or sinner - a page of tricks of nature have been hardened whose affairs of business have been hardened

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