

A Thought For Shavuot

The story of Ruth is really the story of - in the words of Dr Yael Ziegler - the rebirth of hope. Naomi - who had once had it all - a husband, children, status, wealth - returns to the Land of Israel almost completely alone in the world.

לִי מָאֵד: דְּ-יָהוָה אֱלֹהֵי-תִקְרָאנִי לִי נָעָמִי קָרָאן לִי מָרָא כִּי-הֵמָּר שׁוֹתָאמָר אֶל
“Do not call me Naomi,” she replied. “Call me Mara, for G-d has made my lot very bitter.

עָנָה בָּי וְשָׂדֵי הָרַע לִי: לָמָּה תִקְרָאנִי לִי נָעָמִי וְהֵאָנִי מָרָא הִלַּכְתִּי וְרִיקָם הָשִׁיבֵנִי
I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. How can you call me Naomi, when the LORD has dealt harshly with me, when Shaddai has brought misfortune upon me!”

Ruth, the faithful daughter in law goes to glean in the field - to pick up the meager stalks dropped by the workers. But as ‘luck’ would have it this field belongs to the wealthy landowner Boaz - who happens to be a distant relative. And Boaz, it emerges, is familiar with the story of Naomi, and is immensely taken with the story of Ruth and her courage and kindness in not abandoning her mother in law.

And so when Naomi hears who it is that has taken an interest in their desperate plight - she exclaims:

בְּרוּךְ הוּא לֵה' אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עָזַב חֶסֶדּוֹ אֶת-הַחַיִּים וְאֶת-הַמֵּתִים

Blessed be he of the LORD, who has not failed in His kindness to the living or to the dead!

What a transformation - hope has been rekindled! Hashem, to Naomi, is no longer (only) the source of her pain, but is now seen as a rock - G-d has not ceased doing kindness with the living and the dead.

What does Naomi mean, exactly, when she refers to Chesed done to the living and the dead?

Rashi maintains chesed to the dead means burying them, providing shrouds etc - but it is not Hashem, strictly speaking, who performs those acts of kindness.

What Chesed does G-d do the dead? One answer - connected to why we recite Yizkor on the second day of Yom Tov - is that G-d remembers the dead. “You will not abandon my soul to the grave’ says King David. Life in the world to come is a blissful existence.

But - what prompts that realisation, that exclamation now by Naomi? It seems that she is sharing a new born insight, born of her actual experiences that she is reflecting on.

I want to suggest that perhaps Naomi has a very specific chesed in mind. After all - what do the dead want? None of us can say. But as a Rabbi, of - yikes - nearly 25 years experience - I can say what people who are dying want.

From time to time, I have been asked by people with a terminal diagnosis to visit them as they have something they want to discuss with me. Sometimes people ask for insight -

reassurance - about what awaits them. Sometimes people want to get something off their chest. But sometimes they have something they want me to promise them. And that has never - not once - been to do with investments, real estate, physical goods and property. What people ask - at least of a rabbi - is to promise to look after the living. The family. That they will be looked after, that they won't be alone. That they shouldn't fight. That they shouldn't be forgotten, after the shiva is over.

Naomi senses this too. G-d has not abandoned the dead - because he has given us reason to hope - because we know that he is going to look after us.

Mitzvah l'kayam divrei hamet - it is a Mitzvah to fulfill the words of the dead. It is common at a funeral - G-d forbid - for us to ask the deceased to be a 'meilitz yosher' - to intercede with the Almighty on our behalf. Many times - too many times - these past few weeks I have found myself at a grave side, tearfully beseeching the niftar to ask the Almighty to remove this terrible plague from our midst. We understand - intuit - that the dead willingly go before the Heavenly Throne and make requests on behalf of their loved ones.

So on Shavuot this year, as we say Yizkor at home, it might be appropriate to ask what it is that our beloved, departed relatives want for us? And the answer is, I think, what Naomi realized is that what brings them comfort in the World to Come is knowing that we are doing well. Naomi's change of fortune, she understood, was a chesed not just to her, but to her deceased family as well.

As we remember our relatives, let us do a chesed to them. Let's look after ourselves. Physically - let's keep being careful, keep staying healthy, not be reckless as we begin to emerge out of lockdown. At the same time - let's look after ourselves emotionally too. These last 10 weeks have been hard on all of us. We have all suffered - we have worried, we have been lonely, we have been stressed about many things. We need to look after ourselves - and each other! With kindness, patience, understanding - let's not push ourselves, pretend that everything is fine when we really need a friend - or a professional - to talk to.

We might not always realize how much chesed we personally need. We are taught to give, not take. And we should keep giving as much as we can. But it's also OK to realize that we need to do everything we can to look after ourselves too.

It's not something to feel guilty about - If you won't do it for yourself, do it for those who love you - even if they are no longer alive. After all, as Naomi realized - when we are doing well - that is an act of chesed for those no longer with us.

Chag Sameach!