

Bill Buckner's Revival
Shavuot - 5779
Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky¹

It was a beautiful sunny day on April 8, 2008 at Fenway Park. The game against the Detroit Tigers was about to commence in front of a packed crowd: the Red Sox were honoring franchise legends that day. A man with graying hair and an elegantly trimmed moustache emerged, as famed announcer, Carl Beane, intoned the following:

*“Now it’s time to welcome our star who will throw out the ceremonial first pitch on this day in which we honor champions. And how happy we are that amidst this celebration and joy this Red Sox alumnus has come back to join us. He amassed Hall of Fame credentials in his 21 year career and the Red Sox would never have won the 1986 American League Pennant without him. Won’t you please welcome back to Boston, and let him know that he is welcome **always**- number 6...BILL BUCKNER!!!”*

A two minute, full throated standing ovation greeted the tearful Billy Bucks, who no doubt, at that moment, felt vindicated. For nearly two decades, the same individual was reviled by the Red Sox Nation for the error they claimed cost them the 1986 World Series, yet another example of the Curse

¹ Prepared in partnership with Rabbi Shaanan Gelman, Senior Rabbi of Kehilat Chovevei Tzion of Skokie, Illinois.

of the Bambino. And yet, on this day, there was nothing but love and forgiveness in the air.

Bill Buckner passed away last week after a battle with Lewy Body Dementia, surrounded by his loved ones. Condolences poured in, and reminiscences about an outstanding and apparently exemplary human being. If you were born yesterday, you would never that he was once so hated he had to relocate from the Boston area to Idaho. For the conscientious Jew, this is not merely an opportunity to reflect upon the death of a sports icon. It is instead a chance to reflect on something larger; how do we rehabilitate a person's reputation?

If there were a biblical parallel to Bill Buckner, it might *lehavdil* be Naomi. When we are introduced to her, she is the center of a riches to rags saga- a member of the elite of Ephrata reduced to penury by a miserable famine. In truth, her poverty seems to have been the product of a series of ill advised and even immoral decisions:

מדרש זוטא - רות (בובר) פרשה א

וילך איש מבית לחם יהודה. מי גרם לו גלות, עין רעה שהיה בו, שכך אמר למחר עניים מתכנסין ואיני יכול לגור ביניהם, הוי שעין רעה שהיה בו גרמה גלות לו וליצא חוצה לארץ. [א"ר פרחיה באותה שעה היה הקדוש ברוך הוא דן את העולם, וב"ד שלמעלה עומדין והקב"ה מסתירו, שנאמר וילך איש, עמדה מדת הדין והזכירו, שנאמר ושם האיש אלימלך, מיד נגזר עליו ועל בניו, מה כתיב בתריה וימת אלימלך].

Even the names which she granted to her children, מחלון and כליון (the equivalent of naming children “pestilence” and “calamity”) are indicative of someone who has taken a dramatic fall from favor.

And so it is that, in the throes of her wretchedness, fully cognizant of reversal of fortune, Naomi returns home. It is there that she announces that she no longer wishes to be known by the name which she previously held - instead she implores her neighbors to refer to her henceforth as “מרה”.

רות פרק א

(יט) וַתֵּלְכֶנָּה שְׁתֵּיהֶם עַד-בְּאֵנָה בַּיַּת לְחָם וַיְהִי כַּבְּאֵנָה בַּיַּת לְחָם וַתְּהִי כְּלִיּוֹן וַתִּמְרָנָה הַזָּאת

נְעֻמִי:

(כ) וַתֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶן אֵל-תְּקַרְאֵנָה לִי נְעֻמִי קְרָאן לִי מְרָא כִּי-הֵמָּר שִׁדִּי לִי מֵאָד:

(כא) אֲנִי מְלֵאָה הִלְכֹתִי וְרִיקָם הִשִּׁיבֵנִי יִקְוֶה לְמָה תְּקַרְאֵנָה לִי נְעֻמִי וַיִּקְוֶה עָנָה בִּי וְשִׁדִּי הִרְעֵ לִי:

Clearly she is consumed by the magnitude of her misfortune. נעמי, which means “a woman of sweetness” was transformed into מרה, which may be best understood by its Yiddish translation, *farbisseneh*.

It seems that from Naomi’s vantage point, her situation is beyond reprieve, her condition a terminal one.

This all takes place in the opening chapter of the book of Ruth.

By the end of the *megila*, a stunning metamorphosis has taken place. When her daughter-in-law, Ruth, gives birth to a son, we are privy once again, to a conversation between Naomi and her neighbors:

(יד) וַתֹּאמְרֵן הַנָּשִׁים אֶל־נַעֲמִי בְרוּךְ יְקֹוֹק אֲשֶׁר לֹא הִשְׁבִּית לָךְ גֹּאֵל הַיּוֹם וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל:

14 And the women said unto Naomi: 'Blessed be the LORD, who hath not left thee this day without a near kinsman, and let his name be famous in Israel.

(טו) וְהָיָה לָךְ לְמַשְׁיב נֶפֶשׁ וּלְכֹלֵל אֶת־שִׁיבְתְּךָ כִּי כָלַתְךָ אֶשְׁרָאֵהְבִתְךָ יְלִדְתוּ אֲשֶׁר־הִיא טוֹבָה לָךְ מִשְׁבַּעַה בָּנִים:

15 And he shall be unto thee a restorer of life, and a nourisher of thine old age; for thy daughter-in-law, who loveth thee, who is better to thee than seven sons, hath borne him.'

This verse might as well have been uttered by Carl Beane:

*“Now it’s time to welcome our star without whose matchmaking skills, the house of David would never exist. And how happy we are that amidst this celebration and joy this alumnus of the Bnei Yisrael has come back to join us. Won’t you please welcome back to Beit Lechem Yehuda, and let her know that she is welcome **always-Naomi!!!**”*

And the crowd goes wild....

The role of the neighbors during these two critical junctures in Naomi’s life is teaching us something important about reputation. For how else may we gauge a person’s reputation other than through the eyes of others?

The very same women who were taken aback by Naomi's hacked appearance, now provide her with the antidote to her tarnished image - at first insisting that her name is נְעֻמִי and not מָרָה, and moreover by adding that her soul has been restored - וְהָיָה לָךְ לְמִשְׁיבֵי נַפְשׁ.

Naomi's saga was so close to ending in tragedy, because she had failed her family, her nation and her God. Yet, in the waning years of her life, long after her child bearing years, a new child, who was not even a blood relation helped her to find her footing once again. She does have a hand in the foundation of the Davidic dynasty, her finest days, and greatest achievements are yet to come!

This is more than just an uplifting tale from long ago, it is a lifeline through which we navigate a complicated Yizkor experience. Because, while many who are commemorating their loved ones do so through the prism of positive memories, encouraging words and holidays and family time spent together, there are others among us whose memories feature toxic conflicts and holidays spent in discord or distance. Perhaps our relationships were strong but our thoughts fixate upon the failures and disappointments. And maybe we are disappointed with ourselves for not having gone the extra distance. We are the נְשִׁים of Beit Lechem Yehuda, the neighbors who reflect upon our dear friend and relative thinking about who they were and who they became. And too often, as we consider those relatives who have

passed, we more readily seize upon the moments of bitterness, of מרה, than upon the moments which restore the soul and elevate the spirit.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could rehabilitate those memories!

The Book of Ruth is reminding us that in order to do so - we need to evaluate them through another light. Maybe a parent yelled constantly, and when we looked upon them through immature eyes, we perceived bitterness. Now that we are older, we understand a bit more about their struggles and their traumas- how they rebuilt their lives after catastrophe or how hard they worked to support their young families. Maybe they hated every day of their jobs, but dealt with it because that was the price of raising a Jewish family. Or perhaps a sibling, whose final interaction with us was either trivial or painful. It is so easy to focus solely on the things that make people look bad- when the proverbial baseball rolled right past their glove. But we mustn't confine their memories to little snapshots of their worst moments and most unfortunate qualities. Instead, let us take a page from Naomi and rehabilitate them in our own minds.

Several generations later, Naomi's spiritual descendant, King David, would reflect this very emotion in the 37th chapter of Tehillim.

וְעוֹד מְעַט וְאֵין רָשָׁע וְהִתְבּוֹנְנֵת עַל מְקוֹמוֹ וְאֵינּוּ.

10 And yet a little while, and the wicked is no more; yea, thou shalt look well at his place, and he is not.

The *Seforim Hakedoshim*, the Chassidic masters, tell us that this verse refers exactly to this reorientation. If we look at someone differently, we will feel understanding and empathy when perhaps we only saw wickedness earlier. This interpretation gives new meaning to a now-hackneyed phrase; “the neshama should have an aliyah” Why do we say that when we have nothing of substance to offer? I believe it is more than a meaningless aphorism. Whenever we reconsider the past, we elevate people from their worst moments to their best.

Every kaddish we recite, every mitzvah done in their memory is believed to be a source of merit for us, and in turn for the soul of the deceased. The *chiddush* of Naomi is that other people can elevate that soul simply by changing themselves. We need not wait until a yizkor for a person long gone to change our outlook. Red Sox fans did it with Bill Buckner, 15 years before his passing, after they finally won a World Series. There are people we know who may deserve a second look, and a second chance, for their life and legacy to be re-evaluated- while they are still alive. This is a gift we can give those who have departed, but also those in our lives right now. Our lives, and theirs, will be better for it.