

Me, Is a Very Small Word

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I. The Problem

The Book of Ruth begins with tragedy. Famine engulfs the land of Israel. To escape its clutches Elimelech with his wife Naomi and their two sons journey to Moab. In and of itself this does not seem like a crime deserving of death. However it brings calamity. Elimelech dies. His sons then marry Moabite women who had not converted.

After ten years both sons die leaving Naomi bereft of husband and children. We cannot help but wonder at the severity of the catastrophe which befell this family. True they had sinned but the Torah does not mandate the death penalty for emigrating from Eretz Yisrael.

Indeed *Halacha* permits one to leave in circumstances of dire need such as famine. Intermarriage, on the other hand, is a great sin yet does not call for the death penalty. We cannot help but wonder, what was the cause for the harshness of the divine judgment?

On one level, Judaism can be viewed as a personal guide to living which governs one's relationship to the Creator. On this level the damage of sin, even those pertaining to mistreatment of others, is purely to the self. Whenever one sins his personal relationship to G-d is affected.

In this framework all sins are not equally severe. Some are more harmful than others. Thus, leaving Israel during a famine is not a crime. Marrying a gentile is very serious but does not call for death at the "Hands of Heaven".

A superficial reading of the text creates the impression that Machlon and Kilyon died because of their marriages. However the Rabbis deny this. The verse says "and Machlon and Kilyon *also* died...". The word *also* is intended to associate their death to that of Elimelech.

The text is teaching that they too died for the sin of leaving the land. This exegesis is extremely perplexing. It raises two questions. First of all, why does the plain flow of the text associate their deaths with their forbidden marriages? Second, and more troubling, is the notion that they were treated more harshly for leaving the land than for taking forbidden wives. The matter requires elucidation.

II. The Individual and the Community

Hillel said (Pirkey Avot 2:5) "Do not separate yourself from the community." On the surface this seems like sound practical advice as one derives many benefits from the community. It certainly is in line with the idea of religion as an important personal interest. However it is a concept with greater implications and reveals an entirely new dimension of Jewish existence.

The Rambam in *Hilchot Teshuva* (laws of repentance) lists those sins which due to their great evil cause one to lose the World to Come. Included among them is a category of wrongdoing which at first glance does not seem to warrant such a harsh penalty.

Rambam-Yad HaChazaka-Laws of Repentance 3:6

*“The following types of people have no share in the World to Come, and are cut off, destroyed and excommunicated forever on account of their very great sins and wickedness: An infidel; a heretic; one who denies the Torah; one who renounces the resurrection; one who renounces the coming of the redeemer; one who converts from Judaism; one who causes many to sin; **one who withdraws from communal ways**; one who sins publicly in a defiant way like Yehoyakim did; an informer against Jews; one who instills fear on the congregation but not in the Name of God; a murderer; one who relates Lashon Harah; and one who pulls back his foreskin in order to cover his Brit Milah.”*

Rambam-Yad HaChazaka-Laws of Repentance 3:11

“Someone who withdraws from communal ways, even if he didn't commit any sins, but separated from the Congregation of Israel and does not join with them in the performance of Mitzvot and does not concern himself with their sufferings and does not join them in their fast days but goes in his own path as though he were of another nation and is not part of them (the Jewish people) has no share in the world to come.”

This statement makes it clear that Judaism is not only concerned with the personal fulfillment of the individual. It is not enough to just conform to *Halacha* and perform the *Mitzvot*. This is very important but in itself does not render one a true Jew.

One cannot practice Judaism in isolation. The essence of being a Jew is to be a full-fledged member of a unique metaphysical community which has been established by G-d. The individual has importance but only insofar as he is part of the *Tzibur* (community).

Klal Yisrael is the primary instrument through which G-d's purpose in Creation is fulfilled. The Torah provides great personal benefits to any individuals who follow it. However, when it is embraced and implemented on the societal level it achieves the ultimate aim of making G-d's name known and sanctified in the world.

Thus, when G-d offered His Torah to the Jews he told them that their acceptance would have the effect of making them a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation”. The aim of the Torah is to establish a society whose holiness derives from the fact that its way of life is based on knowledge of G-d and imitation of His Ways.

The national mission of the Jewish people is spelled out in the words of our Creator: "and I shall be sanctified in the midst of the children of Israel." The preeminence of the *Tzibur* finds eloquent expression in the Rambam's formulation of a basic rule of prayer.

Rambam-Yad HaChazaka-Laws of Prayer 8:1

"The Prayer of the Tzibur (community/congregation) is always heard. And even if there were sinners amongst them the Holy One Blessed is He does not despise the prayers of the multitude. Therefore one must join himself to the Tzibur and should not pray alone whenever he can pray with the Tzibur. And one should always go to the Bait HaKnesset (shul/synagogue) in the morning and the evening, because his prayer is only heard at all times from the Bait HaKnesset. And one who has a Bait HaKnesset in his town and does not pray there with the Tzibur is referred to as a bad neighbor."

One's service of G-d is bound up with love of His "anointed one", the Jewish people. Whoever denies the sanctity of *Klal Yisrael* denies Torah. Whoever maligns the Jewish people or hates them is an enemy of the Almighty. The Torah records what Moshe proclaimed when the Ark traveled.

Bamidbar 10:35

"And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said, Rise up, Lord, and let your enemies be scattered; and let them who hate you flee before you."

One wonders who are the "haters of God"? Rashi, the great the biblical commentator, explains, "These are the haters of Israel". The words of the Rambam in *Hilchot Teshuva* now make perfect sense. One who separates from the *Tzibur* renounces the eternal relationship between God and the Jewish people and is unworthy of the ultimate reward.

III. The Sin of Elimelech

We can now understand the deeper dimension of the sin of Elimelech and his sons. A severe famine had descended upon the land as a result of spiritual corruption. The nation was in dire need of help. Elimelech was a man of great wealth and national influence. He had a vital role to play in guiding the people through its calamity.

However, he faced a crisis. He feared that his personal fortune would be consumed in the great *Tzedaka* demand that the famine had created. Rashi refers to him as *Tzar Ayin*, stingy. This is a defect but in and of itself does not warrant destruction.

However, the seriousness of a defect is determined by the context in which it is manifested. Cowardice is not so consequential in times of peace. Elimelech abdicated his responsibility in order to escape from his conflict.

There are times when all personal considerations must be put aside in order to save the *Tzibur*. The Torah warns, "Do not stand by the blood of your brother." A genuine leader is completely immersed in the objective welfare of *Klal Yisrael*.

In leaving the land at a time of such need Elimelech placed personal concerns above the community. In my opinion the essence of his sin was that he was *Poresh Min HaTzibur* (abandoned the community). His "sojourn" in Moab was supposed to be temporary but "they remained there". Actions have unintended consequences.

The sons were attracted to Moabite women. The decision to marry them without conversion indicated a further break with the Jewish people and the land of Israel. Thus the Rabbis say that they died not so much because of the Halachic violation of intermarriage but for *the separation from the Tzibur*, which it expressed.

IV. Naomi and Ruth

Naomi was a unique personality. She was the inspiration for the conversion of her daughter-in-law Ruth. Ruth was attracted to the spiritual ideals reflected in the personality of Naomi. She discovered that they did not originate with her but could be traced to the nation from what she sprang. She fell in love with the Jewish people and wanted to be part of them. The words of Ruth clearly express the chief motivation behind her desire to convert.

Ruth 1:16-17

"And Ruth said, Do not entreat me to leave you, or to keep from following you; for wherever you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your G-d my G-d; Where you die, will I die, and there will I be buried; the L-d do so to me, and more also, if even death parts me from you."

Ruth embraced the *Tzibur* because she recognized its profound importance as the instrument of G-d's purpose. She expressed her deep gratitude for the privilege of belonging to *Klal Yisrael* by her determination to marry the much older Boaz who was her "redeemer."

She realized that she owed a debt of gratitude to her departed husband who in spite of his sin had remained true to the philosophical beliefs and ethical ideals of the Jewish people. She wanted the world to know that he had not cut himself off from the teachings of Judaism and that, to the contrary, he was the original inspiration of her quest to be part of G-d's community. The objective of her marriage to Boaz was clearly expressed in his declaration:

Ruth 4:10-11

*And also Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Machlon, have I bought to be my wife, **to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance, so that the name of the dead shall not be cut off from among his brothers, and from the gate of his place;** you are witnesses this day. And all the*

*people that were in the gate, and the elders, said, We are witnesses. **The L-d make the woman that has come into your house like Rachel and like Leah, who both built the house of Israel.** May you prosper in Ephratah, and be famous in Beth-Lehem;*

V. Me, Is a Very Small Word

This lesson has great relevance to contemporary American Jews. We live in a culture whose major theme is personal gratification. The highest aim is the unfettered expression of the individual. This sometimes assumes more importance than the welfare of the society.

There is no sense of involvement in a community which reflects values that are greater than the personal wants of individuals. This petty individualism affects Jews in their attitude towards Judaism. The center of gravity is the self.

Today, many Jews are drawn to Judaism in search of "meaning". Few are concerned with objective truth. For most the questions are: What does it for *me*?, What makes *me* feel *comfortable*? What caters to *my* particular *feelings* about the "spiritual?"

One doesn't get the feeling that people are engaged in a genuine and intellectually honest search for an objective truth. "In those days there was no king in Israel, each did that which was right in his own eyes".

We have lost our sense of appreciation for the sacred Jewish community. In this respect we are very shortsighted and lack *Hakarat HaTov* (gratitude-Lit. recognition of the good). It is only because of the eternal *Tzibur* that Judaism survived, developed its spiritual treasures and transmitted them through every generation.

We should come to our senses and recognize that all genuine Torah blessings come to us only because of the *Tzibur*. Ruth fell in love with the Jewish nation because she discerned its true character and beauty. Let us be inspired by her example to eliminate baseless hatred from our hearts and seek out the many positive ways in which we can contribute to the welfare of *Klal Yisrael*.