



## SHABBAT MORNING SERMON

*Jonathan Magonet*

People keep asking me: Tell us Boaz, how old are you? As if I was some kind of Neanderthal, and Ruth was my trophy wife. I am sure there are some who laughed behind our backs about an old man's folly and a young woman's ambitions. And those gossipy old women in Bethlehem never really accepted Ruth. Of course they said the right things at the wedding – may she be like Rachel and Leah who built the house of Israel, or like Tamar who built the house of Peretz. But it was pretty obvious that as far as they were concerned Ruth was only a substitute mother for Naomi. Once she'd had the baby she might just as well go back to Moab. It was bad enough that the line was tainted with Moabite blood without her hanging around to remind us about it.

Forgive my bitterness. Ruth never got the credit she deserved. They saw her beauty, who could not, and were jealous. They recognised her astuteness and called it manipulation. They heard her stories about life in Moab and called her cosmopolitan, and certainly not one of us.

For the most part she took it well, but I know it hurt her deeply. Even Naomi whom she loved and trusted was not immune to the attitudes around her. Once she had been Ruth's confidante in everything – so much so that I was often jealous of their intimacy and wondered what Ruth was telling her about me, her 'old man'. But in time that changed. Naomi became totally possessive of Oved, her grandson, her own little baby. Understandable, of course, since she'd never really recovered from losing both her sons, but shutting Ruth out more and more was very painful. I found Ruth weeping in her room from time to time and nothing I could say could comfort her or even reach her. What does an old soldier know of women's feelings? I tried to tell her how much I loved her. 'Am I not worth more to you than ten sons?' I said. It seemed to help for a while. She must have mentioned it to someone because it became a kind of saying among the men of Ephrat (1 Sam 1:8). I loved her. And I miss her. And that is a strange thing to admit considering my feelings at the beginning.

Like most of us in Bethlehem I felt betrayed when Elimelech left. True the famine was bad, but we were surviving. The Philistines had been quiet for some years and the few incursions into our territory were quickly dealt with. Besides he was an old soldier like me. We'd both fought together in the Midianite, Amalekite and Bnei Kedem campaigns when we were younger. I thought of us as more than brothers, as comrades in arms. There was no reason for him to leave, to abandon us. And if he had to go somewhere, of all the borders to cross, why pick Moab?

We all hated Moab. There was something disgusting in their origins. They claimed they descended from Lot, Abraham's nephew. Part of our family, they said! But what they left out was the bit about how Lot's daughters got him drunk and uncovered his nakedness. It shames me still to think about it. What kind of people are they and what kind of god could tolerate such a thing?

So when Elimelech went to Moab it was doubly shocking. He must have been embarrassed about it as well. Never said a word. Just picked up his wife and sons and slipped across the border one night. Of course they made him very welcome in Moab. Quite a triumph for them for an Israelite

to abandon the true God for their Kemosh, or whatever his name is! Some of our leaders went a bit overboard and thought he might be a security risk, telling them about our weakness at the time. There was even some talk about sending a hit squad to get him, but since we were officially at peace with Moab and the diplomatic fallout would be serious for the region, nothing came of it. The Moabites gave him a big house and some land, and used him for their propaganda. Still he must have retained some loyalty to Israel because he kept his sons in line. It was only after he died that they dared to marry a couple of local Moabite girls. We heard about this from traders who came by. When we learnt that neither of the boys produced children, even after ten years, we figured that God had punished them for marrying into that disgusting nation. Of course we were shocked when we heard that both boys died within a month of each other. After all, who could wish that on anyone. Though a lot of people said they only got what they deserved! Even though I didn't say it aloud, in my heart I agreed. How could they defile the pure seed of Israel with those perverted women of Moab!

And then Naomi turned up. There were those who said that it was her ambition that pushed Elimelech to go to Moab in the first place. But what could you say to the frail old lady who came back, dressed in widow's weeds, her face bitter and ravaged by her losses. Her old friends tried to comfort her but she was too torn apart. God had punished her, that she knew, and in her own way accepted it. But why kill her children? How could any mother bear such pain?

Of course we noticed the woman who came with her. Who could fail to do so. Despite her widow's clothes and her sadness, she had a quiet beauty that set a few pulses racing. That is until one remembered she was a Moabite. The one who'd killed off our cousin Machlon.

I have to confess my own guilt. I knew that Naomi must have been in a pretty desperate situation. All of the family redeemers discussed it at first. But I figured that the others would do something for her, so I didn't even visit her to offer condolences. The whole town talked about Naomi for a few days, and then we got on with the harvest and forgot about her, and that Moabite woman. So imagine my shock when I came out to the field one morning to find her there, large as life, standing next to the overseer. I could hardly believe the nerve of the woman, so I stammered something to the overseer about who did that young woman belong to. When he said she wanted to glean I could hardly refuse. If we don't respect our own laws then we would really be no better than the Moabites! So I told her she could join the other girls, and as far as I was concerned that was the end of the matter. The next thing I knew she was flat on her face in front of me and thanking me for all she was worth. Worst of all she got to me exactly where it hurt. She called herself a foreigner, an outsider, a stranger who was really strange, unacceptable, even contemptible. So what could I do but try to console her, even go half way to welcoming her.

Did I know at that moment how things would work out? When I started to admit that I knew about her loyalty to Naomi and the family, and her readiness to share her fate, to come with her to our beloved land of Israel, I suppose something in me changed. Her foreignness became less of a problem. The disgust with all things Moabite seemed absurd in the face of her directness, her loyalty and I have to admit it, her beauty. So one thing led to another.

That all happened many years ago. To my surprise, and regret, I am the one still here to tell the story. Ruth was younger than me by so many years, but the hand of God works in its own mysterious way. There are those who still say that her death was my punishment for marrying someone like her, from an enemy people and a godless society. So I feel it is up to me to set the record straight. To tell Ruth's story as she might have told it herself. I will do my best and I hope to do justice to an extraordinary woman., who in a brief moment changed my prejudice and fear into acceptance and love. Who gave me a new life. When Oved comes of age he can learn from her own words the story of his true mother.

How would she begin it? Perhaps like this: 'It came to pass in the days when the judges judged ...'