

THE FESTIVAL OF SHAVUOS

A Kiss Is Not Enough

Every time we read the story of Ruth we are once again inspired by the extraordinary loyalty and noble spirit of this former Moabite princess. Naomi, a Jewish woman living in Moab, decides to return to Eretz Yisrael after losing her husband, her two sons and all her wealth. Her two widowed daughters-in-law, Arpah and Ruth, both of them Moabite princesses, want to accompany her, but Naomi insists that they return. Arpah accedes to her mother-in-law's wishes, but Ruth is steadfast in her loyalty. Together, Naomi and Ruth return to Eretz Yisrael, where Ruth ultimately marries Boaz and becomes the ancestress of the Davidic dynasty. Arpah returns to Moab and becomes the ancestress of Goliath.

How and when was Ruth's loyalty expressed? Her famous words immediately come to mind: "Do not press me to abandon you, to turn back and leave you behind. Wherever you go I shall go. Wherever you sleep I shall sleep. Your people are my people, your Lord is my Lord."

But if we look into the Book of Ruth we find that Ruth's loyalty had already become evident even before she spoke these famous words. We read: "And Arpah kissed her mother-in-law, and Ruth embraced her. And [Naomi] said, 'Behold, your sister-in-law is returning to her people and her gods. Follow your sister-in-law.' And Ruth said, 'Do not press me to abandon you . . .'"

How did Naomi know Arpah had decided to return but not Ruth?

The clue seems to have been in their different reactions to Naomi's appeal that they return home. Arpah kissed her, but Ruth embraced her. The Talmud (Sotah 42b) tells us that Goliath was vanquished by David because the Holy Blessed One said, 'Let the child of the one who kissed be vanquished by the one who embraced!' Clearly, there was a great difference between Arpah's kiss and Ruth's embrace, a difference with important ramifications for the future.

How can we define this difference between a kiss and an embrace, which instantly told Naomi that Arpah had decided to return but Ruth was determined to remain?

Perhaps we can answer this question with another question. The Talmud tells us that when the Jewish people assembled at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, Hashem uprooted the mountain and held it over their heads. "If you accept the Torah, all is well," He said, "but if you don't, this will be your burial place." The question immediately arises:

Why did He find it necessary to do this? The Jewish people had just accepted the Torah unconditionally with the immortal declaration of "*Naaseh venishma!* We will do, and we will hear!" Why was it necessary to force them to do something they had already agreed to do?

The commentators explain that Hashem was teaching the Jewish people a critical lesson that would carry them through all future generations. If the Torah had been accepted only because of an emotional impulse, there would always have been a danger that, at some future time, the emotion would dissipate - and the commitment along with it. Therefore, Hashem wanted to impress upon the Jewish people that Torah was the very breath of life, that without it they were as good as in a "burial place." The tremendous inspiration of the moment was to their everlasting credit, of course, but the perpetual bond to the Torah could only be forged by a strong fundamental attachment based on need in addition to emotion.

This is where a kiss differs from an embrace. A kiss is a glancing touch, an incomplete physical contact which expresses strong inner emotion but from a slight distance; a kiss does not show the fusion of two souls. An embrace, however, is an expression of total attachment, of two hearts that beat as one, that cannot live without each other. When Arpah kissed Naomi, she showed that her feelings for her mother-in-law were purely emotional, and Naomi immediately understood that these tender emotions would not lead her to accept the sacrifices that lay ahead. But Ruth hugged her mother-in-law, showing a close attachment, a dependency, and Naomi understood she would not be so easily persuaded to return home. Nevertheless, she tried to send her away, and Ruth responded with her celebrated declaration of undying loyalty.

In our own lives, we sometimes find our observances lacking in zeal and enthusiasm. But if we reflect on the awesome power of the Torah to transform, elevate and give meaning to our lives, we can recapture that enthusiasm. As we prepare to receive the Torah this Shavuot, let us do more than pay lip service to the Torah. Let us recognize that our lives have lasting, eternal value only through the Torah. And if we embrace the Torah with all the devotion and dedication in our hearts, we will surely be rewarded with a feeling of total connection and fulfillment.