

# We Will Go Back With You to Your People

## 1: 6-10

**DIG:** Without a husband or sons, what crisis is Na'omi facing? In a male-dominated age, how important would male relatives be for widows? Why did Na'omi go back to Beit-Lechem? Why didn't she want to take her daughters-in-law? What ethnic enmity complicates prospects for her daughters-in-law? Given the social problems facing these widows, why do you think Na'omi told Ruth and Orpah to return to their families?

**REFLECT:** Na'omi wanted to be alone in her grief. Can you relate? Na'omi didn't want to be responsible for her two daughters-in-law. Does that sound familiar? What is your motivation in dealing with others? Are you a giver or a taker? What was Orpah? Ruth? Na'omi? When was the last time anyone showed that amount of devotion to you?

After an absence of ten years, Na'omi, widowed and childless, homeless and destitute, prepared to return to Judea where she learns from traveling merchants that the famine had ended. When Na'omi heard in Mo'av that YHVH had visited (Hebrew: *paqad*) His people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there (1:6). Given the setting in the days of the judges, this can only mean that the LORD's people repented and saw His favor restored to them. She would have to swallow her pride and go back to YHVH's people in Beit-Lechem where she had had heard that there was now food again. God's blessing had finally returned to Judah. After experiencing the bitter emptiness of the land of compromise, the time was long overdue for the prodigal daughter to go home.<sup>19</sup>

This shows that the famine was one of divine judgment. The Hebrew verb *paqad* is used of divine activity in the TaNaKh, it can either carry the overtones of divine judgment (Jeremiah 25:12) or divine blessing as we see here. Thus, when ADONAI visits, His response depends on the faithfulness or faithlessness that He finds in His people. Faithfulness will result in blessing; faithlessness will result in judgment. The verb *paqad* is a warning against presuming on the holiness of YHVH and a reminder that God delights to bless.<sup>20</sup> In this particular case, ADONAI visits His people and the result was the end of the famine. The Rabbis teach that God gave bread to His people on account of the righteousness of Ibtzan of Beit-Lechem (Judges 12:8-10), and on account of Bo'az the pious.

Whenever we have disobeyed **the Lord** and departed from **His** will, we must confess our sin and return to the place of blessing. Abraham had to leave Egypt and go back to the altar he had abandoned (**Gen 13:1-4**), and Jacob had to go back to Bethel (**35:1**). The repeated plea of the prophets to **God's people** was that **they turn (shuwb)** from their sins and **return (shuwb)** to the Lord. **The wicked must forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts.** The only way **they** will be able to do that is for **them to turn to the LORD, and He will have mercy on them, and to our God, for He will freely pardon (Isaiah 55:7).**

**Na'omi's** decision was right, but **her** motive was wrong. **She** was still interested primarily in food, not in fellowship with **YHVH**. You don't hear **her** confessing **her** sins to **God** and asking **Him** to forgive **her**. **She** was returning to **her Land . . .** but not **her LORD**.<sup>21</sup> **So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return (shuwb) to the land of Judah (1:7 NASB).**

What was **Na'omi's** motivation? **Beit-Lechem** had been **Na'omi's** home, it was never **the home of her daughter-in-laws.** **Her people** were not **their people.** If **Orpah** and **Ruth** came with **her**, it would mean two more mouths to feed. **Na'omi** wasn't even sure **she** could feed **herself.** Two more bodies to clothe and house, all the while dependent on charity from family members. Oy vey! Would anyone welcome them into the polite society of **Tziyon**?

Somewhere along the road, likely some distance from **Mo'av**, **Na'omi** finally broke **her** long, tense silence. These, **her** first recorded words, launched a lengthy conversation among the three women. It was probably easier on **her** having this conversation some distance from **Mo'av.** If **she** had to say good-bye, the further from **their homes** the better. **Then Na'omi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Return (shuwb), each of you to your mother's home (1:8a).** This was surprising because widows normally returned to their father's house (**Genesis 38:11; Leviticus 22:12; Numbers 30:3-5; Deuteronomy 22:21; Judges 19:2**).

On the one hand, these were **Moabite women** who by **their** very presence would be a constant reminder to **Na'omi** and all those around **her** of **her** sin in abandoning **the Promised Land** and marrying **her** sons outside the covenant people. Every time **she** saw **their** foreign faces, **she** would be confronted with the heavy hand of **God's** judgment upon **her** in the loss of **her husband** and **sons.** It was in some ways similar to the situation of a young woman who has lived a rebellious life away from home and has a child outside of marriage. Adoption may be a hard choice, but if she keeps the child when she returns home, she (and everyone around her) may be constantly reminded of her sin by the child's presence. Unless grace abounds, the child could easily be viewed as an embarrassing intruder.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, though the deaths severed their social ties with Na'omi, Orpah and Ruth had voluntarily stayed with her, indeed, Ruth had even chosen to leave her own country to care for Na'omi in Na'omi's country. These acts reflect remarkable self-sacrifice . . . the forfeiture of their own happiness to provide Na'omi with a "mother's house," that is, some semblance of social roots in a mother's role. They willingly endured their own widowhood, childlessness, and displacement for her sake.<sup>23</sup>

Na'omi genuinely cared for both of them. She said: **May ADONAI show you chesed (see Af - The Concept of Chesed), just as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me beyond the normal expectations (1:8). May YHVH grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband (1:9a).** The concept of rest in this book refers to marriage and this was exactly the problem for her two Moabite daughters-in-law. It was unlikely that they would find husbands in Judah because they were Moabites. Surely they would only end up sharing in Na'omi's poverty and therefore would not find rest.

No wonder, then, that Na'omi thought it far better for her daughters-in-laws (and for her) that they should go back to their parent's houses, to live on the charity of their own people and find new husbands among the Moabite community. Why should they choose a road to nowhere and come along with her to a land that was not their own?<sup>24</sup> Then, with very mixed emotions, she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud (1:9b).

Even so, they still clung to her, saying: **We will return (shuwb) with you to your people (1:10).** This is a touching scene. The years together had forged a firm, affectionate bond among the women. You can just see the three of them standing in the middle of the road and crying. It demonstrates that after all the grief these two young women had shared with their mother-in-law, they were more attached to her than to their own people.<sup>25</sup>

At the end of this section, one must not miss that the storyteller has introduced a major theme to be followed in succeeding events, namely, the finding of a husband for a widow (3:1-2 and 18, 4:13). The audience now waits for something to happen. And if it does, God will get the credit. It will be His act, but the answer will be Na'omi's wish.<sup>26</sup>