Love Tested: Exploring the Depths of Forgiveness, Fidelity, and Family Ties

by Gabor Por · March 19, 2024

Review of "Woman of Valor" by Lynne Golodner

When I worked with my father 25+ years ago, he had a sign on his desk saying "**Simplify, Focus, Deepen**". That slogan appeal(ed) to me quite a bit. I internalized it but never managed to follow it 100%. Still, it is always there as a goal in the back of my mind. So when I see or read about a life where it is at least partially accomplished, I am in awe. **From an outsider's perspective, it always seemed to me the life of ultra-orthodox Jews succeeded in these three areas.** From what I observed and read, the distractions of secular life have been mostly avoided by shutting those out as much as they can be, so their lifestyle is simpler. By focusing on studying Torah and its derivatives, they can sharpen their mental focus on one (vast) area for their whole life. Which also comes with the territory of deepening the knowledge gained.

Golodner's book strengthened and challenged my preconceptions. It strengthened as it describes an inherently peaceful existence of a wife and mother who turned from secular life to that of the ultra-orthodox. It was warm, assuring, and seemingly provided the framework for happiness. However, the test of the strength of any system is how well it can handle a crisis. There are two kinds of crises, the causes of which are dramatic tensions, and neither of them was solved just by the principles and practice of the closed community. One of them is a child abuse issue, where the value system of the heroine that she brought from outside clashes with the ones she found in her new environment. The question is what one values more: status quo/respect for authorities/compliance with rules vs. impartial justice/clear delineation of right and wrong, consequences for actions. Both of these sets exist in every section of society, but the balance is off for the mother of the abused. I will not spoil the solution for this situation; I assure you there is one, albeit outside the box.

The other troubling point in this fictional paradise is an act of **marital infidelity. On the surface, it might be harder to understand what drove the erring spouse to this action, what kind of emptiness she was trying to fill with it, and ultimately, how the couple got over it. The answer to almost every question about human behavior is love**. It is clear that the feeling of not getting the attention/love she craved caused the adultery and her devotion to her husband and his capacity for forgiveness. The latter has been cultivated by his religion and religious education. It is almost taking a line from Christianity's book, where it is sometimes said, "Love the sinner, hate the sin." All of these felt a bit unrealistic for me, but I am having a hard time envisioning being at either end of infidelity. Hence, I can only imagine how I would react. Or not, I cannot even imagine it. Can you?

The primary beauty of this book does not lie in the dramas and their resolution. It is in the power of the illustration of harmonious everyday life. The tensions exist only to emphasize how strong, beautiful, and nourishing peace and harmony are—within an individual, in the

interpersonal relations of a couple and a family, and even between members of the wider community. **Golodner is a master of painting an alluring picture that we can long for independently of what kind of community we belong to. The other aspect I admired in her writing was depicting the main character's internal struggle, thought, and emotional processes.** These can be hard to capture and convey meaningfully and comprehensibly, but Golodner did a superb job that was a pleasure to read.