

Ruth and Moses

Regardless of Shavuot's pastoral origins, the emphasis on Torah and the anniversary of the Sinai Revelation is now the dominant theme. What was once a rare kabbalistic custom of staying up all night to study, the Tikkun, has become pretty universal. For example, in the Manhattan JCC on Thursday night there will be thousands of Jews of all degrees of commitment, practice and beliefs gathered to study and discuss all sorts of topics of Jewish interest and socialize as well. So in recognition of Shavuot, instead of my usual light fair, here is something more substantial

Is being Jewish an objective statement about one's historical and genetic heritage or is it a statement of one's personal identity based on subjective experience? We have the Biblical narrative of how Moses received the Ten Principles (not really "commandments" as such) on Sinai, which were then expanded into what we now call Torah. And we are familiar with the story of the Book of Ruth, of how one non-Jewish person came to commit herself to Judaism. In fact, they represent two very different ways of looking at the relationship of individuals to Torah on the one hand and the nature of the relationship to the people on the other

There are many covenants in the Torah, from the covenant of Noah to that of Abraham, from the physical act of circumcision to the "constitutional" commitment at Sinai, to the later reaffirmation of national commitment on the Plains of Moab. But with regard to the Children of Israel, two covenants are conflated into the Sinai experience: the covenant of Torah and the covenant of peoplehood. I want to differentiate between a covenant of identity, a personal commitment to God, and a national covenant in which one subsumes one's individuality within the nation. Both feature in both sets of narratives

In fact, there are at least three differing accounts in the text of the Bible of what happened at Sinai. The first is Chapter 9 of Exodus. God tells Moses to address the nation: "Go and speak to the House of Jacob and tell it to the children of Israel." Exodus 9:3); and then the expression of the Divine hope that, if they accepted the covenant and listened to God, they would be a "nation of priests" (Exodus 9:5). The "people" then reply, unanimously, with one voice, that they will listen, which implies acceptance. This then is purely national

Except the text goes on to have God saying, "I will appear to you in a pillar of cloud so that the people will hear when I speak to you and they will believe in you forever." Once the notion of belief is introduced, then of necessity we have moved from national to personal. How else does one use the word "believe" if not of as a very personal commitment, something a person can only do for himself? Belonging can be a matter of deciding to join, pay one's dues, conform. But genuine belief requires a personal process either of feeling or thinking

The text goes on to describe the preparations and the limitations imposed on

the people so that they should remain disciplined. There is a lot of heavenly noise, thunder and lightning. The people are afraid. This, like "belief", is a personal emotion. But both emotions are separate from the acceptance of a code of law and morality. That was what the Tablets of stone, also known as the Tablets of the Covenant, also called the Ten Commandments meant. Emotions need the structure, the consistency and objectivity of a constitution. The feelings facilitated the acceptance of the covenant

The second version comes in Chapter 24. Here the emphasis is less on the National Covenant and more on the Constitution, the Mishpatim (24:3)—a word not used in the first version. That is when the people reply again, unanimously, "We will listen", except this time they add, "AND we will do." You can't "do" belief but you can do actions. Moses writes down the words of the Covenant and the Covenant is sealed with the blood of sacrifices, an obviously ritual response to a behavioural obligation. Only then does Moses go up the mountain to receive the tablets and the rest

But at this moment something else happens. There is a kind of epiphany. In 24:10 it says, "They saw the God of Israel and underneath His feet it was like sapphire as pure as the essential heavens." It is not entirely clear who the people who had this experience, called the Atzilei Benei Yisrael were. Were they princes, or rebels, or anyone who was not up the mountain, or those half way up

The text says that nothing untoward happened to them, "They saw God and sat down to eat and drink." They were warned not to come too close, but they did and saw "an impression of God." The implication is that the sort of visual, mystical experience they had was not necessary but accidental. Does this mean that mystical experience, personal experience, is unnecessary, even dangerous, but that if it happens it can actually be a good thing? Is this an acceptance of personal autonomy to complement national obedience? Is it a personal covenant with God in addition to the national? That indeed is what Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik suggested when he coined the phrase Brit Yeud, A Covenant of Personal Choice, to balance Brit Goral, the Covenant of one's National Inheritance

You might think that this is a typically mystical event. Something almost magical happens and as a result the people then reacted by eating and drinking, celebrating, were trying to relate that spiritual high to their material lives. Perhaps therefore this narrative talks about the personal mystical experience of God. And it is as an adjunct or addition to the national covenantal experience which is accompanied by Thunder and Lightning. Notice how the National Covenant is associated with sounds and awe, whereas the personal is associated with celebration through food and drink. You can be a committed practising Jew without experiencing God spiritually, but ideally one should try to. Spirituality is an extra dimension

Finally after the Golden Calf episode and the smashing of the first tablets in Chapter 33:17-23, Moses engages directly with God. He too sees, experiences an impression of God. Except he is shown the back, rather than the feet as in Chapter 24. Moses then returns up the Mountain to the cloud and the thunder and sounds of the shofar. There the text quite specifically

refers only to his receiving the two tablets, the covenant, the "Ten"

When he descends his face is shining and people cannot look directly at him. To some he was almost a God substitute. He could relate to God directly. The people on the other hand could not even bear to look at him without the mask on his face. Does this mean the end of a direct man-God relationship and the need for intermediary, or is it simply a unique episode

This is a statement about the nature of people. For most people, religion is concerned with doing, performing, obeying. Priests and rabbis are there to do it for you. Most people do not struggle to experience God or mystical enlightenment. They tend to stay within received parameters, social and religious. Only a small number embark on a journey of spiritual enlightenment. Judaism requires both, but recognizes that only a minority will be able to sustain the pressures and tensions of experiment and exploration

Now consider the Book of Ruth, seemingly just a pastoral tale of redemption on different levels. It is read on Shavuot because the main action takes place during the barley harvest from Passover to Pentecost. But it is no accident that it also coincides, in Rabbinic thought and Biblical calculation, with the anniversary of the Sinai Covenant. Of course the book focuses on Land, both agricultural and national, a feature missing from the Sinai Covenant and that is another subject for discussion.

Naomi is the wife of a Judean leader who abandons his responsibilities and his people during a famine and escapes with his family to Moab. He has reneged on the National Covenant. He and his two sons die in Moab, but not before the sons have married two Moabite girls. The Midrash suggests they were princesses, so we see a classic example not just of relinquishing responsibility but positive assimilation into the upper classes. Other religions and other peoples seemed more attractive to those seeking to escape their Jewishness

Naomi, left destitute, wants to return home because she has heard that God has "visited" the land (PaKaD)—a hint to "visiting" the sins of the fathers in the Decalogue. But equally, the same word used of God's remembering his people just as He did in Egypt. Initially both daughters-in-law want to return with her, but she tries to dissuade them. She makes reference to the Biblical laws of levirate marriage. This suggests, contrary to what I have said previously, that the Judean family did remain loyal to Judean Law and custom

One of the daughters-in-law, Orpa, returns to her home. But Ruth persists with the famous phrase "Where you go I will go, where you lodge I will lodge, your people are my people, your God is my God, where you die I will die and there I will be buried." She is accepting the individual religious commitment as well as the national covenant

It is Ruth's goodness, devotion, and hard work in supporting Naomi that attract the attention of Boaz, the wealthy landowner. But it also recalls the servitude of the Jews in Egypt prior to redemption. She merits reward simply

in her own right, regardless of background or nation. Boaz is good to Ruth, simply out of charity. He praises her and gives her extra supplies.

Naomi misreads the message and believes that Boaz, as a family redeemer, has designs on Ruth. Naomi encourages her to go down to the threshing floor at night and to cement the relationship by sleeping with him. This act was sufficient for marriage in Biblical times. But it seems Boaz was not thinking in those terms at all. It might appear to us moderns that Boaz has a problem with relationships and in a way needs Ruth to light his fire. The Talmud in Ketubot says he was a widower and the Midrash suggests he was simply very old and actually died after the wedding night. When Ruth informs him he is a redeemer Boaz replies that there is someone closer who has the right of first refusal

At this point the legal side takes centre stage. Biblical law mandated that tribal property should be redeemed within tribes if it was sold to outsiders. But here, unlike Biblical law, it seems at the time an additional custom was to take in the widow together with the land. This would have been a variation on the levirate marriage which Biblically only applied to brothers of childless males

Boaz has to appear before the judges to demand that the closer relative redeem Naomi's husband's lands. This he is prepared to do. But then when he is told about his obligation to Ruth he pulls out. Was this obligation to marry Ruth a halachic obligation? Unlikely. Probably it was more of a moral one. His argument about destroying his inheritance is difficult to understand unless it is a reference to taking in another wife over his present ones, something that would not be a problem for an old bachelor (or widower) like Boaz. Others have suggested he did not want to marry a convert (though, interestingly, there is no hint in the text of any formal process of conversion). And of course Ruth was a Moabite woman and the Torah explicitly forbids Moabites from joining the Children of Israel (the legal solution was to see the ban on men only!). Boaz is now free to redeem the land and marry Ruth, which he does

I believe this emphasis on the law and legal procedure is an important cross-reference to Sinai. Religious or ethical commitment without the structure of law and the association with a National Covenant is too vague and fragile. Ruth's personal commitment and goodness needs the seal of law, just as conversely law without commitment is a shell and a sham

Naomi is then redeemed in every sense. Her position is restored, thanks to Ruth, and she cradles the grandfather of King David. Of course, David not only symbolizes ultimate redemption as the Messiah, but he, of all Biblical characters, is the most passionate, poetical, and mystical in his religious expression. Therefore, if Boaz represents Law and Ruth represents Passion, it is Ruth who is the precursor of David rather than Boaz, her genes rather than his

There are those who argue that after Boaz marries Ruth she seems superfluous and it is Naomi who is regarded as the mother, rather like the barren wives of Abraham and Jacob. But the title of the book, I think, confirms what

tradition has always argued—that Ruth is the inspiration of the Psalmist who “Overwhelmed the Almighty with shirot VeTishbachot”, songs and praise. And they pun ShiRUT (songs) to refer to RUT (Brachot 7b). Law without the songs, structure without religious passion is dry and insipid.

This final reference to King David is significant, because it emphasizes the national again. The Book of Ruth starts with an escape from the nation and ends with its great establisher, who combined the national with the spiritual. By tradition (Jerusalem Talmud, Chagiga), King David was born and died on Shavuot. So what starts inauspiciously, may end in glory. A personal expression of faith can only grow, expand and be passed on, if it is allied to a structure and a people and not simply kept within oneself