

# Ruth & Shavuot

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Book of Ruth, which is read on the Festival of *Shavuot*, is one of the shortest books in the Bible.

On the face of it, it is a simple story of a wealthy family that flees a famine in Bethlehem for Moab in the east. Elimelech and Naomi and their two sons Mahlon and Kilyon ( their names imply decline and destruction in Hebrew). There, over a ten-year period, the father and two sons die leaving a widow and two daughters-in-law. The famine eases. The widow decides to return home. The two daughters in law want to join her. But she remonstrates, and only one of them, Ruth, perseveres and adopts her mother in-law's people and way of life. Back in Judea Ruth joins other destitute people gleaning in the fields at harvest time to support her and her mother-in-law. Relief comes from a wealthy landowner who, impressed by her devotion, redeems the family lands and marries her. They have a son who is the grandfather of King David.

Beneath this narrative lies a complex range of ideas and contradictions. Like the Book of Job, which the Talmud puts in the same era, it is a story about decline and fall followed by reconciliation and redemption. But Job is theoretical: why do bad things happen? Is it all in the hands of God and beyond human agency? The Book of Ruth is concerned with humanity, with the choices people make and their consequences. To leave. To come back. To change ones' religion and nation. To act with love and care. To be charitable and kind. The goodness of a person rather than genealogy or status. It displays the redemptive powers of women. But it also recognizes the drawbacks of societies, class systems, levels of wealth, and the limitations of conventions and rules.

As with all Biblical Books, there are questions. Midrash and traditional commentators argue about Elimelech and his family. If he was a leader in the community, as his name implies, why did he abandon his people to the famine? Was it because he couldn't face being unable to ameliorate their agonies? Was he a coward or simply bent on self-preservation? Was he like Jonah, running away from having to witness a catastrophe? And did his wife and sons object or co-operate? Did his sons marry into the Moabite aristocracy for self-advancement or as a rebellion against their Israelite identity?

Having lost everything, and the famine abating back home, Naomi (the widow) decides to return. When the daughters-in-law declare that they want to join

Naomi, her reply refers us to the Law of the *Yevama* in the Torah regarding her daughters-in-law. When a man dies childless, his brother has to marry the dead brother's wife to have a child in order to keep his memory alive. Naomi insists they should not be bound by this because she is too old to have more sons for them to marry. This idea of passing on a name was crucial in the tribal world of Ancient Israel because tribal and family property could only be passed on according to relatives.

On their return, Ruth goes out to gather grain with the other poor and she finds her way to the fields of Boaz. He is a wealthy landowner and an upstanding, law-abiding good man. He welcomes the poor to his fields but goes beyond that. He treats his workers with respect and they him. He notices Ruth gleaning in his fields. He learns of her reputation for hard work and that she has been looking after Naomi. He becomes her protector from the young men working in the fields. He provides extra food for her to take home to Naomi. But he makes no move to engage with her personally. Nor to redeem Naomi's land.

Naomi had not directed Ruth to Boaz's property initially. But now learning of Boaz's interest, she tells her to go down to the threshing floor at night to offer herself to him. Yet the Bible only imposes the marriage of a childless man's widow on a brother. Whereas redeeming land could be done by any tribal relative. Did she not know the law or was this an example of different tribal traditions?

Was Boaz married? A Widower? According to the Midrash, he had already married off thirty sons and thirty daughters. Was this why he hesitated? Boaz does not take advantage of Ruth that night. He holds himself back. He is concerned about her reputation.

He tells Ruth that he must go through the legal process for there is a closer redeemer than he. The following morning Boaz goes to the city gates where the Judiciary sat, in order to resolve the issues. This location of the courts at the entrance to the city illustrates the importance of law and access to it in early Israelite society.

The character of the anonymous relative is called *Ploni Almoni* – someone, anyone. He passes by and Boaz accosts him and informs him of his obligations. He is happy to redeem the land but not take in Ruth (why the two should be linked is not clear traditionally). His reluctance and weak excuse make him the foil to the other characters. They are named – he is not. As the tradition goes "the charitable will be remembered, the selfish will not." Now the way was open for Boaz.

Boaz, Naomi and Ruth are all characterized as having the quality of *Hessed* – kindness (which has nothing to do with wealth). Indeed, charity and kindness are the two core themes of the Book.

Why do the Rabbis chose this book to be read on Shavuot? On the simplest level, the story unfolds during the barley harvest which starts with the Omer on the second day of *Pesah* and extends to *Shavuot*. The obligation, particularly on festivals, is to share one's fortune with the poor. Celebration requires one to combine consideration and charity with ritual observance.

Harvests, in all societies, were crucial and vulnerable. A good harvest meant a good year. Yet from Abraham in Egypt to Joseph, and throughout the Bible, the two biggest threats that keep on recurring are famine and war – and they are interconnected. One was in the hands of God and other in the actions of men. At harvest time, someone could only entreat God for help with nature if humans showed mercy and support to those in need.

As societies evolved commercially, non-agricultural elements became more important. *Shavuot* was the anniversary of the Sinai Revelation. The Torah set the tone for a just society which guaranteed the weakest and most disadvantaged would be helped. If the Torah imposed commandments that connected humanity with God, it also required humans to connect with each other. That is what the Torah expected, and what we celebrate, on *Shavuot*.

The most popular explanation of the link between *Shavuot* and Ruth is that Ruth actually chose to live a life according to Naomi's Israelite customs and ideals. She made the commitment that the Israelites made at Sinai. As Boaz said to her when he met her, "May the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to trust, reward you."

The Midrash often refers to the presence of women at Sinai and their role in maintaining the Israelite tradition. There is no reference here to a conversion process but a clear assumption that a person choosing to dedicate their lives to God and Torah is the supreme expression of free will, choice and commitment. If we are born into a tradition, we are benefitting from previous generations. Someone who comes to Judaism through her own decision and passion is regarded as being especially praiseworthy. A true woman of valor.

The Book of Ruth is a story of how life is unpredictable and often tragic. And yet, through human kindness which the Bible stresses, we can find

redemption and build a better world.