

The Book of Ruth: What It Teaches About Love, Community, and Interfaith Marriage

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Abstract: The Book of Ruth is about the commanding voice of love. Ruth teaches that all of life's hardships and obstacles can be overcome -- through love and through chesed, extraordinary human kindness. What message could be better than that?

The focus of my teaching tonight is the Book of Ruth, and what it teaches about love, community, and interfaith marriage.

We explore the Book of Ruth not only because it is one of the most beautiful books of the Bible, and one of its best kept secrets, but also because on Tuesday night and Wednesday we celebrated Shavuot, the festival that celebrates the Israelites' encounter with God, and their acceptance of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Ruth is the biblical book that is most closely associated with, and read on, Shavuot. In a few moments, you will understand why.

In order to understand the meaning and message of the Book of Ruth, you need to know three things: 1) in the beginning of the story, Naomi moves with her husband and two sons to the land of Moab in search of food. In catastrophic succession, all three of the men pass away; 2) Naomi's daughters-in-law are Ruth and Orpah. They are not Jews. They are Moabite women; 3) the story hinges on the biblical custom of levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

What is levirate marriage? A brother-in-law was obligated to marry his brother's widow. This afforded her protection and companionship. And this kept the family line going because the children would be deemed the children of the deceased brother.

Now what are the messages of the book of Ruth? Why was the book of Ruth written and for what audience? Why do we read the book of Ruth on Shavuot?

The book of Ruth is a beautiful and endearing story about love and *chesed*, extraordinary human kindness. Ruth is a story about the kind of self-sacrificial love that goes above and beyond the call of duty. Ruth is a story about the kind of loyalty and kindness that goes above and beyond what we may even deserve -- but we get it anyway.

In Ruth, all the major characters engage in *chesed*. Naomi is a widow. Both her sons have died in catastrophe succession. Nevertheless, Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to find new husbands and make new lives for themselves, even though that would leave her completely and utterly alone in the world. That's *chesed*. Orpah does leave Naomi. But Ruth insists upon staying with Naomi and looking out for Naomi, even though that means leaving her homeland to live as a stranger in a strange land; even though it means she might never find a husband and have children of her own. That's *chesed*.

Ruth's famous words to Naomi have been described as "incandescent": "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the Lord do to me if anything but death parts me from you" (Ruth 1:16-17).

A kinsman named Boaz marries Ruth, fulfilling the practice of levirate marriage, even though his children would be treated as Machlon's, and not his own. That's *chesed*.

Thus, we come to understand a core teaching of the book of Ruth. The book of Ruth is about the commanding voice of love. It teaches that all of life's hardships and obstacles can be overcome – through love and through *chesed*. What message could be more beautiful than that?

The book of Ruth also depicts what an ideal Jewish spiritual community would be like. It depicts a community that feels God's presence everywhere. The Book of Ruth describes a community that constantly invokes God's blessing upon others. For example, Boaz says, "I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before. May the Lord reward your deeds. May you have a full recompense from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge" (2:11-12).

Most significantly, Ruth teaches us what makes a spiritual community. The community asks for God's blessing upon someone and then the community proceeds to fulfill it, to make it come true. The Book of Ruth teaches that God works through us.

Finally, the Book of Ruth is also making a statement about interfaith marriage, isn't it? For we all know that Ruth is not a Hebrew. She is a Moabite.

It may come as a surprise to you, but the debate over whether or not Jews should intermarry is not at all new. In the mid 5th century, around 445 BCE, this was a big and controversial issue between the Jews who returned to the land of Israel after the Babylonian exile and those who never left. The Judeans who never left Judea did not intermarry. But many of the Judeans who returned from Babylonia had brought along with them non-Jewish wives or husbands. In an effort to re-establish a strong Jewish community in Judea, Ezra and Nehemiah started an anti-intermarriage movement (Ezra 9:10-15; 10:1-4). The book of Ruth takes a strong position in this ancient debate over intermarriage – or what historians call exogamy vs. endogamy. And its message is clear. The book of Ruth rejects and refutes Ezra's condemnation of intermarriage.

The Book of Ruth teaches that Ruth is an amazing person with utmost loyalty to God and to the Jewish people. The Book of Ruth teaches that intermarriage brings and will continue to bring incredible, wonderful women within the fold of the Jewish community. Women who will be just like Ruth.

So, the Book of Ruth argues that interfaith marriage is a good thing for Judaism and for the Jewish people. And this is in the late 5th/early 4th century BCE! And the correctness of this interpretation is clinched in the genealogy found in chapter 4:16-17: "This is the line of Perez:

Perez begot Hezron, Hezron begot Ram, Ram begot Amminadab, Amminadab begot Nahshon, Nahshon begot Salmon, Salmon begot Boaz, Boaz begot Obed, Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David.”

What does this genealogy tell us? It tells us that Ruth is the great-grandmother of King David! Is intermarriage good for the Jewish people? You bet! Why? Because Ruth – the Moabite -- was the great-grandmother of the greatest king the Israelite people ever had – King David.

From our discussion this evening, I hope you have learned that every biblical book is written with a particular message and a particular audience in mind. This is how the ancients debated the great, controversial issues of their day. They didn't have talk radio, CNN, or MacNeil-Lehrer. What did they do? They wrote a book. If you want to truly understand any book of the Hebrew Bible, you must ask and answer what is the message and for whom was the book written.

It is my hope that everyone now has a greater appreciation for the Book of Ruth. I think you can now see why Ruth is the perfect book for the festival of Shavuot, the festival of divine revelation and the giving of the Torah. I hope you will agree with me that the book of Ruth is truly one of the most beautiful books in the entire Hebrew Bible and still has much to teach us, even in the 21st century, about love, community, and interfaith marriage.