

Why the Book of Ruth is My Favorite Book in the Entire Hebrew Bible

MAY 15, 2009

BY RABBI STUART W. GERSHON

Copyright © 2009 Temple Sinai, Summit, NJ

Written in the late fifth/early fourth century BCE, the Book of Ruth still has much to teach us in the 21st century about love and extraordinary kindness, about prayer and action, about bringing God's presence into this world and into your heart.

Tonight I want to introduce you to the Book of Ruth. I choose the Book of Ruth not only because it is my favorite Book in the entire Hebrew bible. I choose it because we shall soon celebrate Shavuot, the festival that celebrates the giving of the Torah on Mt Sinai, on May 28 and May 29, and Ruth is the biblical Book that is read on this festival.

Here's the story of the Book of Ruth in a nutshell:

- 1) In the beginning of the story, there is a famine in the holy land. Naomi moves with her husband and two sons from the land of Israel to the land of Moab in search of food. Then all three of the males in the family pass away in catastrophic succession
- 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 tradition of levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5-10), which is the custom that a brother-in-law is obligated to marry his brother's widow. This custom afforded the widow protection and companionship. It also served to keep the family line going because the children of their union are deemed to be the children of the deceased brother.

Now that you know the story, let me tell you some of the reasons why I love this book and it teaches me a lot.

First of all, I love the book because I love the major characters and the way they conduct themselves. Over and over again, all the major characters in this story engage in *gemilut chasadim*, extraordinary human kindness, kindness that goes above and beyond.

For example, after the deaths of her husband and sons, Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to leave her, to find new husbands and make new lives for themselves. Naomi wants what's best for her daughters-in-law, even though that would leave Naomi completely and utterly alone in the world. Now that's *chesed*.

Orpah does leave Naomi. What does Ruth decide?

Let's read Ruth's famous words to Naomi : "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)

Ruth insists upon staying with Naomi and looking out for her, even though this means Ruth must leave her homeland and live as a stranger in a strange land. Ruth wants to stay with Naomi even though it means Ruth might never find a husband and have children of her own. Now that’s *chesed*.

One more example of *chesed* is shown by Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi. Boaz marries Ruth, fulfilling the practice of levirate marriage that we talked about before. Boaz marries Ruth, even though their children will not be treated as his own, but as the children of Ruth’s deceased husband. Now that’s *chesed*.

So what’s the Book of Ruth about?

It’s about the commanding voice of love and selflessness. The Book of Ruth 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 teaches us something very important about the nature of prayer and the role of genuine religious community. This is illustrated in Boaz’s famous remark to Ruth: “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)

The Book of Ruth describes a religious community that constantly invokes God’s blessing. What is significant is that Boaz doesn’t wait for God to take care of Ruth. He does it himself.

The Book of Ruth teaches that we should pray as if everything depended upon God, but we should act as if everything depended upon us. Indeed, the primary purpose of prayer is not to rouse God to action, but to rouse ourselves to action. As the saying goes, let there be no prayer that does not become a deed.

The Book of Ruth also gives us a beautiful vision of what it truly means to be a religious person and what it means to belong to religious community. To be a religious person means to feel God’s presence in the world and to seek God’s blessing for our loved ones, friends, and neighbors, by doing *chesed*, extraordinary deeds of loving kindness, as much as we possibly can.

To belong to religious community means to belong to a community in which everyone is loved, everyone is taken care of, and everyone recognizes that for God’s love and compassion to be in the world, it must come through us. What could be a more beautiful vision than that?

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. Written in the late fifth/early fourth century BCE, this book still has much to teach us in the 21st century about love and extraordinary acts of kindness, about prayer and action, about bringing God's presence into this world and into your heart.

**Why the Book of Ruth is my favorite book
in the entire Hebrew bible**

“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)

“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.” (Ruth 2:11-12)