

Torah of Love: Ruth and Shavuot 2020

This week we celebrate an extraordinary moment for our people - the receiving of Torah at Sinai, amidst thunder and lightning, the sound of a mysterious heavenly shofar and the voice and words of none other than God God-self. On Shavuot, we chant that story in the Torah, and we also chant the Book of Ruth. With Ruth, we have a much quieter account of receiving Torah, as Ruth - one lone individual – chooses to cling to her Israelite mother-in-law Naomi, and to become a member of Naomi's people. [If you don't remember the book of Ruth in detail, and even if you do, I suggest you take out a Hebrew Bible and read it again, in celebration of this chag. It is a quick, wonderful read.]

What is the nature of the Torah that Ruth receives? In our sages commentary on the book, Ruth Rabbah, they wonder why it was included in the Bible, in the canon of sacred books. They say: Megillat Ruth has no description of what is pure and what is impure, what is permitted and what is forbidden - in other words, it has no halacha, no legal content. Its sole purpose, say the sages, is “to teach the rewards of *gemilut chesed*, acts of lovingkindness.”

In truth, issues of Jewish law are *all over* this book: issues about conversion, about tzedakah, and about proper procedures for levirate marriage – for carrying on the line of a man who dies childless. Yet the book pointedly avoids dealing with any of these issues from a legal, “halachically correct” perspective. Maybe that is what the rabbis of the midrash meant. It is as though the Book of Ruth wants to tell us that yes, there is a Torah of Law; there is also a Torah of life as it is lived, as Ruth displays it, and *this* Torah is one of *chesed*, of lovingkindness.

Most dramatically - this book seems to suggest – it is *this* kind of Torah that can change the world! The book tells us that the descendant of Ruth and Boaz is none other than King David. His line, according to Jewish tradition, will ultimately give birth to none other than the messiah – the *mashiach* – our symbol of a better world, a repaired world, an *ideal* world. So we can say that the coming together of Ruth and Boaz changes the world. It will lead to the messianic age!

Stories about changing the world are usually quite different from this one. In the Bible we have: our enslaved people escaping from Egypt; the dramatic appearance of God on a mountain to create an eternal covenant; the crowning or de-throning of kings. When we think of world-changing stories, we might think about wars in which evil forces are vanquished, or in which they prevail. We might think of the world changing through political action, like when a leader is voted in or out. Or, now, we think of this devastating pandemic which has changed everything across our planet.

The Book of Ruth has *none* of these – no battles between the forces of good and evil; no military heroes, and no villains at all. It purports to be set in the “time of the judges or chieftains” – the shoftim, a time that is known to be one of chaos, violence and political strife. Yet there is not a shred of politics in Ruth. Indeed, in this story, the world is changed through *chesed*, and it is changed by simple, ordinary people just living their lives and trying to survive as best they can.

Chesed is usually translated into English as lovingkindness, and we tend to focus on the kindness piece, because, God knows, we need more kindness in our world, and because kindness is easier to define. But we also need to think about love; love – a word used in so many different ways that it can become clichéd and almost meaningless. But the book of Ruth is first and foremost a powerful love story, a story about love in its many dimensions. It is not only the romantic love story of Ruth and Boaz, if it is even that at all, but love is laced through every part of this story – the love of parents and children, the love of extended families, the love of friends and of strangers. The principle players in the story feed each other when they are hungry, protect each other from harm and show loyalty and total commitment.

Most beautifully to me, in the book of Ruth, is that it is hard sometimes to define who is helping whom, who is the dispenser and who is the recipient of kindness, because *when it flows, chesed doesn't flow in only one direction*. Ruth, Naomi and Boaz each offers help and support; each also *receives* help and support. Lovingkindness raises us beyond categories of helper and helped, categories which lead to hierarchical relationships and which limit the true nature of love. Or, put more simply - as many of us have been hearing and saying in our current time, we are in this together.

By objective standards, it is Ruth who is most in need of help – she is destitute, with no husband or children, she is an outsider to her own people and a stranger among Naomi's people. Naomi, on the other hand, although poor and widowed and bereaved of her sons, has a community and relatives that should embrace her when she returns to the land of Israel. Yet it is Ruth who “takes care” of Naomi.

In this story, people see the good in each other: Think of Boaz the wealthy landowner speaking to Ruth the Moabite, a beggar on his land. He says to her, I have heard about all that you did, how you left your people and joined Naomi; Boaz acknowledges her *chesed* and offers his own – in essence saying, I do not label you merely as a Moabite, a refugee, a poor outsider; but rather as a person who has made powerful and beautiful choices.

Blessings and well-wishes for others flow through every interaction in the story –we might even say that *chesed* itself is really the main character in this story. And we might even say that as it introduces us to the ancestors of the messiah, the book of Ruth paints a picture of what a messianic world might look like, right here among real people living real lives, if *chesed* were our driving force, if love flowed through all of our actions.

Love changes the world, says the Book of Ruth; and those acting with lovingkindness, often quietly and humbly, might not even be aware of their power and impact. Yet the power and impact are great beyond measure.

In a dark, life-threatening situation, as Ruth and Naomi find their way to survival, they bring *chesed* into the world around them. As we make our way through this challenging pandemic experience, we must remain safe and help keep others safe. Let us also promote love and kindness in our little corners of the world. Let us not be too judgmental of our friends and loved ones for the ways that they express their anxiety and stress right now. Let us be

forgiving of ourselves and of each other, as we remember that we are all in this together, and that love changes the world.