



Class #8

# Ruth

WOMEN IN THE BIBLE

MOTHER OF ROYALTY, PARADIGM OF HUMILITY AND GENEROSITY.

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Ruth is the ancestor of King David, and consequently the matriarch of the Messianic line. Who is this woman, special enough to have an entire book in the Bible named for her, which we read on Shavuot, the epic day on which the Torah was given to the Jewish people? Ruth must have a very important message to convey to us about what it means to be a Jew, to receive the Torah, and to merit royalty.

## Background Story

The story of Ruth takes place in the time period of the Judges. As mentioned in the essay on Devorah, this was a difficult time of spiritual ups and downs in Jewish history.

*"And it was in the days of the judgment of the Judges": This refers to a generation that judged its own judges... [The Judge] would say, "Remove the toothpick from between your teeth," and [the people] would answer, "Remove the beam from between your eyes." (Talmud - Bava Batra 15b)*



The 400-year span of the Judges began after the death of Joshua, who conquered and divided the Land of Israel, and ended with the establishment of the monarchy with King Saul. This period was known for the serious deterioration of the spiritual state of the Jewish nation. Each time a Judge would arise to help restore order for a number of years, inevitably the nation would slip back into its old idolatrous habits and assimilate into the surrounding nations' culture and behaviors, erasing their own unique identity meant to be a light unto the nations.

When we meet the characters surrounding Ruth, the Land of Israel has been hit with a famine:

*At that time God said: "My children are stubborn. To destroy them is impossible. To return them to Egypt is impossible. I cannot exchange them for another nation. What, then can I do? I must make them suffer and cleanse them with famine." (Midrash - Ruth Rabba, Intro. 1)*

### **The Leadership Fails**

It seems that as soon as the Land of Israel was conquered, everyone ran to settle his own portion, work the land, plant vineyards and fields, establish gardens and farms, and in general amass material wealth and creature comforts. The leaders at that time, the heads of the judicial court, the Sanhedrin, were expected to take this opportunity to travel across the country from one border to another, teaching Torah ethics to the populace. The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni 12 - Shoftim 68) describes a kind of mobile Beit Midrash that should have existed in those early years of settling the land, but did not. As a result, the nation became self-centered and materialistic. They quickly forgot the Torah and mitzvot, and deteriorated into moral corruption.

Then, when a famine hit, Elimelech from the tribe of Judah -- a great and wealthy man with many acres of land and enough produce to feed the entire nation for years -- jumped ship:

*Elimelech was among the great scholars and patrons of the nation, and when the years of famine came, he said: "Now all of Israel will come to my door, each with his box (to collect money)." He stood up and ran away from them. (Midrash - Ruth Rabba 1:4)*

Besides his lack of generosity, Elimelech severely disappointed everyone's expectations, causing demoralization and loss of hope among the people. He

took his family and defected to Moav, where his two sons, Machlon and Kilyon, married Moabite women.

### **Moav - The Self-Centered Nation**

Elimelech and his family left the Jews of Israel in a state of famine and financial crisis. Their escape from responsibility came from a desire to save themselves and their possessions from the difficulties facing the nation. Their self-centeredness was indicative of the level of the Jewish people at that time, each intent on maintaining his own material wealth.

*And a man from Beit Lechem... went to sojourn in the fields of Moav, he and his wife and his two sons. (Ruth 1:1)*

It started as a "sojourn." Then:

*They arrived in the fields of Moav and stayed there. They married Moabite women -- one named Orpah, and the other names Ruth. And they dwelled there for 10 years. (Ruth 1:4).*

The decision to leave the Land of Israel and avoid helping out led Elimelech's family to deteriorate spiritually to the point where they intermarried with the Moabites:

*They didn't convert them... and there was no law yet that allowed Moabite women to enter into the congregation of Israel (even with conversion). (Midrash - Yalkut Shimoni)*

The Torah ostensibly prohibits the Moabite nation from ever entering into the Jewish covenant:

*They should not come into the congregation of God, neither Moabite nor Amonite, even the tenth generation should not enter into the congregation of God, forever, because they did not greet you with bread and water on the way when you left Egypt... (Deut. 23:4-5)*

After the Jewish people left Egypt, they had to pass by the lands of Moav and Amon. These nations did not attack the passing straggling group of Jewish slaves as the Amalekites did. Yet they were expected to greet the Jews with food and drink, especially since Amon and Moav are descendants of Lot, who owed so

much to his uncle Avraham for the care he showed him when they both started out in the land of Canaan. This Amon and Moav did not do, denying the refugees even the most common courtesy. Moav, then, is considered the epitome of self-centeredness and lack of generosity and kindness.

Significantly, Moav is the place where Elimelech and his family felt most comfortable settling. The similarity is striking: Moav avoided feeding the suffering Israelites, who were distant cousins, and Elimelech escaped from feeding his fellow Jews in their time of need. As if to complete the circle, Elimelech's sons then marry Moabite girls!

Seemingly, this is the beginning of the end of this family. Elimelech dies, as do both his sons, and Naomi is left alone with her two non-Jewish daughters-in-law. And yet, at this very moment God opens a window of hope and a second chance. Somehow, out of this family, will eventually come King David -- and the Messiah from the house of David.

### **Ruth Returns to Judaism**

Naomi, the lone remnant of an illustrious family, decides to leave Moav with its tragic memories and go back to the Land of Israel:

*Because she heard that God redeemed His nation to give them bread.  
(Ruth 1:6)*

This entails tremendous courage, to go back -- alone -- to a country where she will have to face the family and friends she betrayed, to admit she was wrong and has suffered the loss of her husband and sons -- and now to try rebuilding her life in a society that feels only animosity toward her.

*And she left the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her, and they went on the way to return to the Land of Judah. (Ruth 1:7)*

At first, both daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, choose to leave their country with Naomi. This speaks volumes about Naomi's character and about the relationship that existed between this lone Jewish family and the Moabite wives. These girls were both daughters of Eglon, the king of Moav. They left a house of royalty and the status of princesses to connect to this Jewish family, its values and its practices. And now they are willing to leave their homes, country and culture to go with Naomi to a place where they will be strangers and completely

alone, with no husbands and no view of a future. They must have really loved Naomi who -- over the ten years of marriage -- must have inculcated in them a spiritual value system and Jewish lifestyle to the point where they were willing to start anew with their old widowed mother-in-law.

Naomi tries to dissuade them from coming with her. Initially they refuse to be dissuaded, but as Naomi genuinely convinces them that her tragic life will only tie them down and limit their options for happiness and blessing, one of the daughters-in-law, Orpah, agrees to leave. Ruth, however, is able to see beyond the logic of Naomi's words, to the nuances of love and care.

*"Don't, my daughters, because I am bitter and sad for you, because the hand of God has come out against me." (Ruth 1:13)*

Ruth, like the matriarchs in the Torah, intuitively understands the deeper meaning in Naomi's words: Naomi really would be happy to go back with someone and not be completely alone. Her words were only meant as a necessary discouragement to one who wishes to convert to Judaism, to make sure their intentions are pure.

In seeing beyond the logic and surface, Ruth exhibits the trait of *binah*, deeper understanding. She also expresses a deep caring and kindness -- the complete opposite of her countrymen and of her husband's family. She prepares to leave all of her own physical wealth and comforts behind to care for an aging lonely woman who isn't even her family anymore, with only spiritual benefits to gain.

*"Don't push me to leave you and to go back, for wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you sleep, I will sleep. Your nation is my nation, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. So will God do to me and so He will add (I swear) that only death will separate between us." (Ruth 1:16-17)*

This is Ruth's famous statement, which the Midrash tells us is an announcement of her desire to convert to Judaism -- no matter what. Naomi, sensing her sincerity, starts explaining to her the basics of Judaism. Being a princess in Moav, Ruth was used to the kinds of entertainment that were not acceptable among Jewish people:

*It is not the way of the daughters of Israel to go to theaters and circuses of idol worship, so Ruth said: "Wherever you go, I will go." Naomi said to*

*her: "My daughter, Jewish people live in a house with a mezuzah." Ruth said: "Wherever you sleep, I will sleep." (Midrash - Ruth Rabba 2:23)*

Ruth is making it clear to Naomi that she is perfectly ready to leave her old habits of leisure and meaningless entertainment, and adopt a more purposeful, spiritual life.

### **Life In Beit Lechem**

*And it was, as they came to Beit Lechem, the whole city was startled at the sight of them, and they said: "Could this be Naomi?" She said to them: "Don't call me Naomi; call me 'bitter' (mara), because God has made me bitter. I went full, and God has returned me empty..." (Ruth 1:19-20)*

The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni Ruth 601) says that the whole city had gathered together on that day to attend the funeral of the wife of Boaz, the leader and Judge of the generation. They see Naomi coming back widowed, impoverished, wearing tattered clothes and with a Moabite girl at her side. They are shocked and horrified, and perhaps a little bit pleased at the turn of fate that she was dealt after her family's defection.

Naomi and Ruth settle back in Israel, which has slowly returned to a semblance of normalcy after a 10-year "depression." Though people had suffered due to their lack of consideration and care for others during the early years of settling the land, they have rehabilitated themselves, returning to the path of generosity with the help of their Judge and leader, Boaz.

With regard to Naomi, however, there seems to be a lingering anger and resentment. No one caters to her needs, even though Boaz himself is Naomi's cousin. Boaz could be excused, given that he recently lost his wife, but it seems like the two women are ignored by virtually everyone.

### **Humility and Modesty**

Ruth, a famous princess, who had married into the wealthiest Jewish family around, now offers her mother-in-law:

*"I'll go out to the field and collect some sheaves of wheat." (Ruth 2:2)*



Ruth doesn't go without obtaining permission from Naomi. She hopes to find someone who will allow her to take the leftover wheat that falls from the crops being collected. This is an obligatory charity that field owners must leave for the poor, but Ruth knows she must still find someone kind and willing. She is humbly submitting to her new station in life, not expecting anything from this nation for which she gave up her past life, and not disappointed in their lack of care for her.

Once Ruth goes out to the field, her behavior stands out as well:

*All the women would bow and gather, while Ruth would bend her knees to gather... All the women would flirt with the field workers, while Ruth behaved modestly. All the women would take from among the rows of wheat, while Ruth would only take from what was clearly ownerless. (Midrash - Ruth Rabba 4: 9)*

Ruth is focused on her goal, behaving as a "rose among thorns," not influenced by the loose behavior of the other gatherers. She also carefully observed the laws of *leket* (collection for the poor) so as not to accidentally take from the field owners what is not rightfully hers.

Divine guidance leads Ruth to a field belonging to Boaz, Naomi's cousin, and the nephew of Naomi's deceased husband Elimelech. Although Boaz was the greatest sage of the generation and didn't normally come to his field, this day he came and noticed Ruth's uniquely dignified and modest behavior.

"Who is this girl?" Boaz asks of the field workers. Even though he must have heard that his cousin had returned from Moav with a widowed daughter-in-law, he must not have gone to pay them a visit or to offer any assistance. It could even be that his hands-off approach was copied by the other Jews, as he was a leader and role model. If he didn't feel the need to reach out to his own cousins, why should they?

A field worker answers him with subtle criticism:

*"She is a Moabite girl returning with Naomi from Moav, and she said: 'I will gather and collect the sheaves of wheat that fall behind the rows,' and she has been here gathering since the morning..." (Ruth 2: 6-7)*

Don't you know her, the worker asks Boaz? Doesn't everyone in Beit Lechem know this story of the gentile girl who is now supporting her mother-in-law and being forced to gather the remnants of the crops as a poor woman?

Boaz may feel some pangs of guilt as he tries to compensate by being extra kind to Ruth, but he still doesn't take any real responsibility for his relatives. He begs her to stay in his fields, and his workers are instructed to treat her kindly and give her drink from their own well water. He also addresses her with endearment, "my daughter," and tells her that for the wonderful kindness to her mother-in-law, she will be rewarded from God.

And yet, Boaz doesn't seem to get the message. He doesn't realize it is his mission to take these women into his care, to support them and make sure they are reaccepted into the community. The Torah itself commands a Jew to "love the convert" and to leave crops behind for the poor, so really Boaz wasn't even going beyond the call of duty for his relatives. Nor did he ask how Naomi was doing after ten years in Moav and about the fate of his uncle Elimelech and his cousins Machlon and Kilyon.

Ruth doesn't have any better expectations. She, who started out a Moabite princess, now falls on her face and bows down in immense gratitude and appreciation for this small consideration and asks:

*"Why have I found favor in your eyes, as I am a gentile?" (Ruth 2: 10)*

She is so humble and modest that she doesn't even realize her "rights" in this situation. She is full of positivity and is able to see the good in others and in life.

### **Moabite Converts?**

When Machlon and Kilyon, Naomi's sons, married the Moabite princesses, there existed a distinct prohibition to accept a Moabite convert into the Jewish community. How then could Ruth have converted and become a part, albeit not wholly accepted by society, of the Jewish people?

In the days of Boaz's leadership, the Sanhedrin (high court) revealed that the prohibition in the Torah regarding Moabite converts applied only to male Moabites and not to females. The reason was that in biblical times, only the males were expected to go out and greet travelers (the Jewish refugees), and therefore they were faulted for not doing so. However, women who tended to

stay at home could not be blamed for not proactively welcoming the passing nation with food and drink.

In Boaz's words of consolation to Ruth, he alludes to the fact that she has, in fact, a future with the Jewish nation.

*"God should pay your reward... from Whom you have come to take shelter under His wings..." (Ruth 2: 12)*

And later, when she implies that she is a stranger and not even worthy of being one of Boaz's servants, he reassures her:

*"God forbid, you are not one of the servants (ama'hot) but rather like one of the matriarchs (ima'hot)." (Midrash - Ruth Rabba 5:5)*

### **Yibum - The Levirate Marriage**

The Torah tells us:

*If brothers abide together and one of them dies and has no child, then the wife of the dead brother should not marry a stranger. Her husband's brother should take her to him as a wife and perform the duty of yibum. And it shall be that her firstborn child will have the name of the dead brother, so that his name not be wiped out from Israel. (Deut. 25:5-6)*

The mitzvah of yibum applies when a married man dies and leaves no children. The brother of the dead man (or the next closest relative, if there is no brother), has a special mitzvah to marry the widow. If they subsequently have children, the first son is considered to "fill the void" of the dead brother -- inheriting his estate and his portion of land in the Land of Israel. He thus "redeems" the name and memory of the dead man, who otherwise would have no lasting remnant in this world.

Of course, there are ways to get out of this obligation and responsibility, if either the widow or relative are not so inclined, but it is considered a great kindness to the dead to go through with the marriage and the resulting redemption of the land. If the brother refuses to marry his sister-in-law, he then goes through an act of severing the bond, in which he is shamed for not keeping his brother's memory alive.

In this story, Ruth is a widow of a Jewish man who has died and left no children. His brother and father have also died, so that the family, although they may own some land currently, will have no continuity and will lose the land when Naomi dies, unless a close relative marries Ruth and fulfills the obligation of yibum.

Boaz seems to be the perfect choice for the performance of this mitzvah. He is a cousin, part of Elimelech's family. And yet he doesn't even seem to realize that he has a decision to make regarding Ruth.

### **Naomi's Plan of Redemption**

Ruth has been frequenting Boaz's fields for two months now, bringing home to Naomi the stray pieces of wheat, happy with her lot, not expecting any more. But Naomi, knowing the Torah laws, and concerned for the future of her widowed daughter-in-law, is waiting for something else -- a sign, some news of Boaz's interest in Ruth and her family. Naomi sees the greatness and the potential in Ruth, and knows that she is destined to become an integral part of the Jewish nation in some way. After waiting, praying and hoping, Naomi decides to help matters along with a more proactive plan:

*Naomi said to her: "My daughter, I would like you to have a better future. Now, our relative, Boaz... is piling the wheat in the granary tonight. Wash and anoint yourself, dress up and go down to the granary. Don't show yourself until he is finished eating and drinking. And when he lies down, see where he goes to sleep and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do." Ruth replied: "Anything you tell me to do, I will do." (Ruth 3: 1-5)*

Naomi suggests a rather audacious, even dangerous plan. It's the only choice, now that the harvesting season is over, and Ruth will no longer be going out to the field. Though it is necessary, Naomi suggests it with fear and trepidation. What a risk to Ruth's reputation as a modest Jewish girl! If anyone should see her, or if Boaz is repelled by her behavior, her chances of ever marrying would be greatly limited. However, Naomi knows Boaz's greatness and his descent from the royal family of Judah, and she secretly hopes he would fulfill his responsibility and agree to marry Ruth. The situation only demands a little bit of effort.

Ruth must have been shocked by this idea. She must have had countless questions and doubts, tormented by thoughts of discovery or rejection. And yet

she answers simply, with faith in Naomi's Torah perspective: "Whatever you say, I will do."

### **Ruth Weds Boaz**

Ruth went down to the granary, with Naomi's promise that her merit will accompany her (Yalkut Shimoni 605). She wisely took clothes with her and changed into them only after her arrival (Midrash Lekach Tov). Although she complied with her mother-in-law's every word, she kept her wits about her and strategized the best way to go unnoticed.

Boaz wakes at midnight to discover a woman lying at his feet. His initial horror gives way to rationality as he asks for her identity. She answers: "I am Ruth, your maidservant. Spread your wings over your maidservant, since you are a redeemer" (Ruth 3:9). He immediately pulls himself together: "Blessed are you to God, my daughter."

Surprisingly, only now does Boaz realize that he should have initiated this union, and that his prior passivity had caused Ruth torment and shame. He praises her for her willingness to confront him and to marry him only for the sake of the mitzvah of yibum and redemption of the land. He assures her: "You have done more kindness now, in not going after the young men, than your first kindness (to come with your mother-in-law to Israel)." Boaz then promised to make sure she would be taken care of.

Boaz asks Ruth to stay through the night out of concern for her safety, even though he was risking his reputation, and had to resist the temptation to touch her:

*All that night Boaz prayed to God: "You know I have not touched her. Please let it be Your Will that it not be known that a woman came to the granary, causing a desecration of God's Name through me." (Yalkut Shimoni 606)*

Boaz walked Ruth to the town at dawn, gave her a gift of grain and oats to bring to Naomi, and promised to be in touch as soon as he figured out if he is the closest relative with whom she can perform the mitzvah of yibum.

After a short process in court, where a closer relative absolves himself of the obligation to marry Ruth (out of the fear of "sully" his gene pool by marrying

a Moabite convert), Boaz publicly declares that he intends to marry Ruth and redeem their land as well.

Ruth's voice is not heard in this last chapter of marriage and acceptance. Through her marriage to the great leader Boaz, she achieves credibility by virtue of the publicizing of the Jewish law that Moabite women can convert to Judaism, but not Moabite men.

The elders of the nation and Judges in the court respond with a special blessing:

*"God should allow this woman who is entering your home to be like Rachel and Leah, who both built the house of Israel... And your home should be like the home of Peretz, whom Tamar bore to Yehuda, from the seed which God will give you with this girl." (Ruth 4: 11-12)*

The ultimate praise for Ruth is to be like Rachel and Leah, the matriarchs who built the nation of Israel through the birth and raising of the Twelve Tribes. Ruth was to build the monarchy of Israel by marrying into the royal line, a descendant of Peretz, the son of Yehuda.

In his book *Simchat HaRegel*, Rabbi Chaim Yosef Dovid Azulai (the 18th century "Chida"), comments on the similarity between Ruth and Leah and Rachel in another way:

*Ruth demanded verbally [that Boaz marry her], just like Rachel and Leah demanded with words. Leah said: "You will come to me tonight," and Rachel said, "Give me children or else I will die."*

A proactive assertiveness, a willingness to do whatever it takes to become a part of the creation of Jewish destiny, is a thread that ties Ruth to the matriarchs of the nation.

## **Aftermath**

*Boaz married Ruth and she became his wife... and God granted her a pregnancy and she bore a son" (Ruth, 4:5-16). The same night in which Ruth conceived, Boaz died. (Yalkut Shimoni 608)*

Boaz, an 83-year-old man, fulfilled his purpose in this world by conceiving a child with Ruth, and dies. She, on the other hand, becomes a widow again, this time of the leader of the generation, and pregnant.

Her suffering is not over, but she merits to have a child, raise him with Naomi, to see a future hope for her family and the continuity for Naomi's son's name. Ruth, full of kindness and generosity, even seems to be marrying Boaz for the sake of others. Ruth doesn't voice any opinions or comments until the end of the book recording her life:

*The neighbors all named him, saying "Naomi has borne a son," and they called him "Oved"; he is the father of Yishai, the father of David. (Ruth 4:17)*

Ruth and Naomi are now full-fledged members of the community, and the other women share in their newfound happiness. Even here, it is obvious that Ruth has given the best years of her life to take care of Naomi, giving her a grandchild and seeing the family line continue.

But Ruth's reward is still forthcoming. The text indicates the direct lineage of King David: Ruth's son Oved is the father of Yishai, the father of David. Ruth deserves to become part of the Jewish royal family which will eventually produce the Messiah, and be an eternal light for the Jewish people and the world.

Ruth herself lived a long, fruitful life, and even merited to see King Solomon, her great-great grandchild ascend the throne:

*And he put a throne next to his for the mother of the king (Kings I 2:19). Rabbi Eliezer said: "for the mother of royalty" -- this is Ruth. (Talmud - Bava Batra 91a)*

## **Ruth and Monarchy**

Since Moav is considered such a self-centered nation with bad character traits, how could it be that King David and the royal line descended from this nation?

On the verse in Genesis 12:13, "And the nations of the world will be blessed through you," the Talmud interprets the word "blessed" to mean "grafted," which shares the same root:

*God said to Avraham, "Two good graftings I have to graft in you: Ruth the Moabite and Naama the Amonite (King Solomon's wife, and mother of the next king, Rechavam)." (Yevamot 63a)*

These "graftings" from Amon and Moav are considered a key component in the fulfillment of Jewish destiny. Moav and Amon come from Avraham's nephew Lot - born from the incestuous union of Lot and his two daughters after the destruction of Sodom. His daughters, thinking they were the only survivors of an apocalypse, figured it was up to them to repopulate the world. They got their father drunk and then slept with him. (The name Moav actually means "from father.")

The main character trait of Lot was brazenness. We see how his daughters inherited this audacity for behaving in an inappropriate and unnatural manner for a cause they considered important.

However, boldness is a trait that is possible to be used for the right causes, "for the sake of Heaven." After going through a process of purification and refinement through the generations, finally being distilled in Ruth's personality, the trait of "holy brazenness" is grafted into the foundations of a Jewish monarchy, through King David. As it is said (2-Chronicles 17:6), "And his heart [King David] was proud (arrogant) in the ways of God." It is necessary for a Jewish king to be forceful and bold when it comes to doing the will of God and ruling over the populace.

The concept of monarchy did not exist in Israel, and it was necessary to take it from Amon and Moav, since the "shell" of Moav is brazenness, as it says: "The pride of Moav is very arrogant" (Isaiah 16:6). King David's soul was trapped in the shell of Moav. Through Ruth, and then to David, the concept of boldness from the shells and elevating it to holiness (i.e. being brazen for the sake of Heaven) was brought to the Jewish people. (Shem Mishmuel - Shavuot 5760)

## **Ruth and Shavuot**

The book of Ruth is read on Shavuot, the holiday celebrating the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. We, who were all present as a nation at Mount Sinai, who experienced the revelation of God and became Jews by nature of the overwhelming force of that revelation, have much to learn from Ruth, who converted on her own and whose whole life was dedicated to doing good for others.

*This megillah has no laws of purity or impurity, no transgressions and no mitzvot. It is just to teach how much reward comes to those who act with loving-kindness. (Midrash - Ruth Rabba 2: 14)*

*Why do we read the book of Ruth on Shavuot? This Book is full of chesed (kindness) and the Torah is all chesed, as it says, "The Torah of chesed is on her lips," and [the Torah was] was given on Shavuot. (Midrash Lekach Tov)*

The holiday of Shavuot is also the birthday of King David, as well as the day of his death. It is fitting to commemorate on this day his roots in a righteous ancestor who merited to be the Mother of Royalty.