

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

A Life of Vertical & Horizontal Responsibility

What I wanted to do with this shiur is to talk about the Coronavirus. Because Torah gets very interesting when you relate them to the things that are constantly changing. Now, as the Chief Rabbi has already said, the Coronavirus pandemic has enforced a situation that seems to be exactly the opposite of the situation at Mount Sinai. We have three indications of that in the Torah, pretty explicitly. Number one, the famous line at the beginning of Chapter 19 of Shemot, just before the Giving of the Torah, where it says “vayichan-sham Yisrael negged hahar.” (Ex. 19:2). The Torah uses the singular form: “and Israel encamped (in the singular) there opposite the mountain”. The famous words of Chazal, echoed by Rashi “k’ish echad b’lev echad”, explain that the singular form of the verb is used because they encamped together as though they were “One person with one mind”. That enormous sense of unity.

The second, a pretty explicit statement of this, is when Moshe Rabbeinu proposes to the people what God is proposing. “Vaya’anu chol-ha’am yachdav.” (Ex. 19:8). “And all the people answered together and said, ‘All that God has said we will do.’” The “yachad” (unity) there is explicitly in the verse, in verse eight of this chapter. And then after the revelation, in chapter 24, when Moshe Rabbeinu repeats the terms of the Torah, “vaya’anu kol-ha’amkol echad”. (Ex. 24:3) “All the people answered with one voice. “Now, these are pretty unique statements of unity, and all three of them are about the giving of the Torah. What we have here are three statements of people coming together. The question is, where do we find the opposite of isolation, of tragedy, of bad things happening, with people being left alone? And the answer is that we find this in Megillat Rut, in the Megillah that we read on Shavuot, of the story of Ruth. Let’s just remind ourselves at how that story begins.

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Manya Citer ob"m
by David & Judy Citer and family

It begins with five hammer blows of tragedy. First of all, the first verse tells us, Vayehi bimei shfot hashoftim...(Ruth 1:1) And it came to pass, at the time when the Judges judged, that there was a famine in the land. Now, a famine in those days was pretty much as severe as an epidemic in our time. Because without freezers and fridges and supermarkets, a famine was a life-threatening condition. So, the first hammer blow there is a famine. Secondly, a man from Bet Lechem, together with his wife and two sons, went to live in the country of Moab. Now, here we have a double tragedy. There’s a famine, specifically in Bet-Lechem in Israel. Bet-Lechem means the House of Bread. Of all places where you would not wish to have a famine, Bethlehem is that.

Then the man goes, but does not go the way Avraham went, to Egypt, or to Gerar, he goes to Moab. Moab was Israel's enemy. Here is a family forced out of their own land, out of their own home, to go to the country of their enemies. Then comes the next blow. Elimelech, this man himself, Naomi's husband, dies and she is left a widow. Then comes the fourth blow. Her two sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Moabite women were not exactly welcome in Israel, because the Moabites, as we have said, were Israel's enemies. (Of course, in the end, one of them turns out to be an exceptional human being.) That is the fourth tragedy. And then comes the fifth tragedy, that Machlon and Chilyon, Naomi's two sons, died also. Now you have Naomi left a childless widow and her two daughters-in-law also left as childless widows. Three childless widows, and you cannot get more vulnerable than that in biblical society because they had absolutely no one to support them.

We then read of how Naomi hears that there's again food available in her own land and she decides to go back. Her two daughters-in-law initially accompany her. She says, "Please, don't. There's nothing for you here. I can't give you any more children. Go back and get married. " Of course Orpah does go back. Ruth refuses and goes with her. She then returns to Israel. People of the town, the people she knew not that long ago, come and they look at her and they say, "Can this be Naomi? She has been so shattered by tragedy. " The people hardly recognise her. And then she replies, "Don't call me Naomi(i.e. pleasant one),call me Mara, (i.e. bitter one), because God has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord brought me back

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empty. The Lord has afflicted me. The Almighty has brought misfortune on me. " That is point number one. We now have a point of contact with a very tragic episode which left three women exceptionally vulnerable. And one in particular, Naomi, completely isolated, completely devastated.

Then we move to the end of the Megillah. At the end of the Megillah we know what has happened. Boaz, a kinsmen of Naomi, has taken Ruth as a wife, and repurchased the family properties. They now have a child, a son, and all the women of the town come and surround them and say, "Praise be to the Lord who has not left you without a guardian redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel. " Everyone is rejoicing with Naomi, who now has a grandchild. Boaz has a wife and a child. Ruth has a husband and a child. The ultimate blessing, the final coup de theatre at the end of the Megillah, is that the child that they have called Oved is the grandfather of David Hamelech, the greatest King of Israel. We have a situation in which in the space of four chapters, our story has moved from isolation and devastation to one of rejoicing, and, indeed, a kind of renewal of life for all concerned.

The second question is: what brings about this change? The answer is very interesting. There is a Midrash Rabbah that says "Amar Rabbi Zeira", "Rabbi Zeira said", "Megillah Zu", "this scroll, " "ein ba lo tuma velo taharah, velo issur velo heiter. "It contains no laws of any consequence. Not pure, impure, permitted, forbidden. " "Velamar nichtavah?" "Why was it written?" "Lelamed echah kamah s'char tov legomli chassidim" "To teach how great is the reward of those who do acts of kindness." (Rut Rabbah 2:14)

The story of Ruth is the supreme story of kindness in Tanach. The word itself appears three times in the megillah. But most importantly, it is Ruth's kindness in staying with Naomi despite all of Naomi's protestations, and Boaz' kindness in really realising what it would take to redeem this family from tragedy. Those two acts of kindness are the reason why the story that begins in tragedy ends in joy. That is the power of chessed, to redeem tragedy and bring joy where there was sadness and hope where there was despair.

Obviously the question that we ask ourselves is why Ruth is read on Shavuot. There's no obvious connection between Ruth and Shavuot. The two

standard explanations are that, number one, it has to do with the time of the year. Ruth is set bimei k'tzir cheitim, at the time of the wheat harvest. And Shavuot takes place at the time of the wheat harvest. Or, number two, that Ruth became a convert. "Where you go, I go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your God will be my God. Your people will be my people. " And the Israelites, as it were, became converts at Mount Sinai because the essence of conversion is kabbalat hamitzvot, acceptance of the commands, and that's what the Israelites did at Sinai. Maybe it has to do with time of the year, or maybe it has to do with Ruth's conversion.

However, I want to suggest to a different answer. An answer put forward by none other than Moses Maimonides in The Guide For the Perplexed. The Guide For the Perplexed is the greatest work of Jewish philosophy, and it's a big work. It consists of three books, and it's a very lengthy work. Right at the end, (book three has 54 chapters, and right at the end in chapter 53 of book three) in the penultimate chapter, the Rambam devotes one third of that chapter to defining what is chessed, what is loving kindness? The Rambam says chessed means doing good for people in a way that they have no claim on you. It's not justice, it's not tzedakah, it's chessed. You have no claim, but nonetheless, we do good to somebody that is chessed, going beyond anything the law requires.

In chapter 54, we begin to understand why the Rambam has taken all this time to tell us the meaning of chessed. In book four, chapter 54, the closing chapter of the Guide, he quotes Jeremiah, who says, "Koh amar Hashem", Thus says God, "Al yithallel chacham bechochmato... ", "Let the wise not boast of his wisdom, nor the strong hero of his strength, or the rich person of his wealth. " "Ki im bezot yithallel hamithallel". But only boast of this, "haskel veyado'a oti. " "Think hard, meditate hard, and know Me. " "Ki Ani Hashem. " "That I am God. " (Jer. 9:22) This is a very Rambam sort of idea, that the highest thing in life is to develop an intellectual understanding of God.

But Jeremiah doesn't stop there. He goes on and says, "Haskel veyado'a oti, ki Ani Hashem oseh chessed mishpat utzedakah ba'aretz" . "I" says God, "do loving-kindness, justice and righteousness on earth. " "Ki v'eileh chafatzti n'oom Hashem". Because these are what I desire,' says God. " The Rambam says, (to paraphrase), "I may have been giving you the impression that the most important thing in life is to intellectually understand what God is. But actually, the most important thing in life is to do acts of loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness. "It is the kind of people we become and the kind of virtues we embody, that are what the Torah are all about. And since Ruth is the Book of chessed in Tanach, maybe that is why we read it on Shavuot. Because the Rambam tells us that the whole purpose of Torah culminates in this ability to

do acts of loving-kindness to other people. Thus far, the Rambam.

However, I want to suggest something else as well and take it just a little bit further. We know what happened at Mount Sinai. The Israelites made a covenant with God. He would be their God and they would be His people. But at key moments in Tanach, critical moments, we find another phrase altogether. Listen very carefully. Here is Moshe Rabbeinu, here is Moses, speaking in the Book of Devarim. "Veyadata ki Hashem Elokecha hu haElokim Hakel hane'eman shomer habrit ve'hachessed", "You shall know that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God, who keeps" "Habrit ve'hachessed", "the covenant and the loving-kindness" (Deut. 7:9). He says it again a few verses later. "Vehaya eikev tish'me'un et hamishpatim ha'eleh ushmartem ve'asitem otam v'shamar Hashem Elokecha lecha et habrit v'et hachessed". "God will keep the covenant and the loving kindness. "(Deut. 7:12). When King Solomon dedicated the Temple, he uttered the following prayer. "Hashem Elokei Yisrael, ein kemocha Elokim bashamayim mima'al ve'al ha'aretz mitachat... ", "There is no one like you, God, in the heavens above or the earth below. " "shomer habrit ve'hachessed", "keeping the covenant and the loving-kindness"(I Kings 8:23). And likewise, Nehemiah, when he renews the covenant as the people come back from Babylon. He says, "Hakel hagadol hagibor v'hanora", "The great, mighty, and awesome God, " "shomer habrit ve'hachessed". "He who keeps the covenant and the loving-kindness. "(Neh. 9:32)

That's a really puzzling phrase, "shomer habrit ve'hachessed", the covenant and the loving-kindness. If you look, for instance, at the Jewish Publication Society translation, they just translate 'covenant'. Because the chessed is included in the covenant. If you look at the New International version, which is a very good non-Jewish translation, habrit ve'hachessed is translated as, "The covenant of love. " But of course it doesn't mean that, it means "covenant and love. "Everyone had a problem in understanding what else God does for the Jewish people other than make a covenant with them on Shavuot, at Mount Sinai. But if you think about it, the answer's really quite simple. A covenant is what sociologists and anthropologists call reciprocal altruism. You do this for me. I will do this for you. "You serve Me, " says God, "and I will protect you. " Covenant is always reciprocal and neutral. But that is terribly vulnerable, because what happens if we don't keep the covenant? The covenant is then rendered null and void.

The covenant is not enough. And that's what Moses was saying, that's what King Solomon was saying, that is what Nehemiah was saying. God does not just make a covenant with us. He has a relationship of chessed with us. An unconditional love, which is translated into deeds of kindness to us. The covenant is conditional, but chessed is unconditional. That is

exactly what the Rambam meant when it said chessed means doing something for somebody who has no claim on us. There's nothing reciprocal.

And maybe ultimately that is what the Book of Ruth is there to show us. The Book of Ruth is the Book of chessed. We received a covenant at Mount Sinai, but we also received something much more long-lasting and profound, which is God's unconditional love. And that's what the book is telling us, that God has love for us, the way Ruth had for Naomi and Boaz had for Ruth. Acts of loving-kindness all define our relationship with God. And as the Book of Ruth shows, they should be what define our relationship with one another.

Coming back to where we are in the Coronavirus crisis, the short answer is that just as in the Book of Ruth, tragedy and loneliness and isolation are healed by acts of loving-kindness, so have the isolation of so many of us been healed by acts of loving-kindness, acts of neighbourliness, people being in touch, helping us, getting things for us, phoning us up, connecting us by Zoom, showing that they care about us. Those acts of kindness have humanised and lightened our want. Chessed has a redemptive quality, that it transforms tragedy into some form of celebration and despair into some powerful form of hope. Let what Ruth did for Naomi and Boaz did for Ruth be with us in the months ahead, as we try and help those who have been so terribly isolated these last weeks and months. And may we remember that, as well as giving us a covenant at Mount Sinai, God gave us a bond of love that is unbreakable. He will never abandon us, let us never abandoned Him. ©2020 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

The Scroll of Ruth contains one of the most idyllic stories in the Bible, a tale of "autumnal love" between a widow (Ruth) and a widower (Boaz), within the backdrop of diaspora inter-marriage, conversion to Judaism, and the agricultural life in ancient Israel. The Rabbinic Sages ordained that we read this Scroll on Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, the anniversary of the Torah Revelation at Sinai and the celebration of the first fruits brought to the Temple in Jerusalem. And since Shavuot is the climatic zenith of Passover, the development of a newly freed group of slaves in the Sinai desert into a rah-imbued nation firmly ensconced in their own homeland of Israel, the reasons for this special reading are many: Boaz and Ruth are the great – grandparents of David, the Psalm-singing military hero who united the tribes of Israel and first envisioned the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, Ruth the Moabite is Jew-by-choice whose commitment to Torah Judaism makes her worthy of being the great grandmother of the prototype of the eventual Messiah-King, and the last three chapters of the story takes place

between the beginning of the barley harvest (just before Passover) and the very end of the wheat harvest (not long after Shavuot). I would wish to ask three questions on the Scroll of Ruth, the answer to which I believe will provide an extra dimension of our understanding as to why we read this particular Scroll on Shavuot, the festival which serves as harbinger to redemption.

Firstly, from a narrative perspective: the first chapter spans the ten years the family of Naomi is in Moab, and the last three chapters describe the happenings of the three month period between the barley and wheat harvests. Why did the author give so much text space to such a small span of times?

Secondly, the midrash (Ruth Rabbah) tells us that Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem at the precise time of the funeral of Boaz's wife, and that Boaz died immediately after he impregnated Ruth; that is how the Rabbinic Sages account for the fact that Boaz is not mentioned in the last verses of the Scroll (Ruth 4:14-22), which specifically deal with the birth of Oved, son to Boaz and Ruth as well as father to Jesse. Why do the Sages see fit to sandwich these joyous verses recounting such a significant love story between two seemingly tragic deaths – without the text itself mentioning those deaths explicitly or even hinting at a mournful mood? And finally, can we possibly glean from between the lines of the Scroll what precisely occurred between Boaz and Ruth during the night they spent together on the threshing floor. What did her mother-in-law Naomi suggest that she do – and what did she do in actuality?

If Shavuot is truly the Festival of Redemption – and redemption links humanity to the Eternal G-d of all eternity – the period which is eternally Sabbath – then the Scroll of Ruth must deal with the eternal rather than the temporal. Israel is the eternal homeland of the Jewish people – and any diaspora experience can only be temporal at best and destructive at worst. The first chapter opens with a famine in Israel, and an important personage (Elimelekh) who leaves Bethlehem (literally the house of bread) with his wife and sons to seek “greener pastures” in the idolatrous Moab. As happened with Father Abraham, Diaspora proved far more dangerous (Genesis 12:10-20), the two sons, Mahlon (lit. sickness) and Kilion (lit. destruction) marry Hittite wives – and since the children follow the religion of the mother, the Israelite line of Elimelekh and Naomi – seems to have ended! The father and his sons all die in Moab – their earlier spiritual demise expressing itself physically; fortunately one daughter-in-law clings to her mother-in-law Naomi, converts to Judaism (“Where you will go” – to Israel – “there shall I go, where you will lodge, there shall I lodge,” – maintaining the same sexual purity as you – “Your people shall be my people, your God my God” – Ruth 1:16), and returns to Bethlehem. Only now – in Israel – can eternal history

begin, and so the next three chapters, and the next three months, are far more significant than the previous ten years, which had almost destroyed the family line.

The midrash tells us that Boaz's wife has died just as Naomi and Ruth return – and that Boaz will die three months later. But death in itself is not tragic for Judaism: after all, every individual must die sooner or later. The only relevant question is to what extent the individual, when alive, participates in Jewish eternity. Naomi sends Ruth to glean the forgotten grain and harvest the produce in the corner of the field – agricultural provision which the Torah provides for the poor Israelites. Divine Providence sent Ruth to Boaz's field – and Boaz was a Kinsman of Elimelekh. Boaz seems to be attracted to this comely proselyte – stranger and gives her his protection. Naomi understands that participation in Jewish eternity means having a child with Jewish parentage in Israel; she therefore instructs Ruth to wash and anoint herself, dress in special finery, visit the place on the threshing floor where Boaz will be spending the night at the height of the harvest season, and lie down at his feet. She also warns Ruth not to reveal who she is (Ruth 3:3,4). In effect, she is suggesting that Ruth tempt Boaz as Tamar had tempted Boaz's forbear Judah generations earlier – and at least enter Jewish history by bearing his child (see Genesis, chapter 38).

Ruth senses that Boaz loves her – and so she holds out for higher stakes than a mere “one night stand.” She tells him exactly who she is, and she asks that he “redeem” her by marriage and by restoring to her Elimelekh's previously sold homestead in Israel. Ruth understands that true eternity means bearing a child on your own piece of land in Israel – not in the sly, but as a respected wife and householder. Boaz complies, and Oved, the grandfather of King David, is born. Ruth's commitment to Torah – the land of Torah, the laws of Torah, the loving-kindness of Torah, the modesty of Torah – catapults this convert into the center stage of Jewish eternity.

And this for a very important reason. According to the Midrash of R. Yishmael, the reason the Torah was given at Mt. Sinai – a desert galut – and not on Mt. Moriah in Jerusalem, is because had the Torah been given in Israel the Jews may have thought that the Gentiles have no place in Torah. The truth is the very opposite: Rav Shimon ben Elazar maintains that in the future (Days of the Messiah) the Gentiles will all convert, and Maimonides, at the very conclusion of his Mishneh Torah, rules that at the End of the Days “everyone will return to the true religion”, which for him was certainly Judaism. The truth is that to a partial extent the issue is in dispute between two Prophets, Isaiah (chapter 2) maintaining that all the nations will rush to our Jerusalem Temple, declaring “Let us learn from the Jewish ways, let us walk in the Jewish paths, for from Zion will go forth Torah and the word of God

from Jerusalem” (to the entire world), while the Prophet Micha quotes Isaiah’s words almost verbatim, and then concluding, “each nation will walk in the Name of its (individual) god and we will walk in the name of the Living Lord our God forever” – ethical absolutism (in accordance with the Torah demands of ethical absolutism – compassionate righteousness, moral justice, universal peace) and ritual pluralism!

I am ready to accept either view, and according to everyone at least the Biblical ethic will reign supreme. And the truth is that God initially blessed Abraham with becoming a great nation through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed with peace and security (Gen 12:1-3) – the Gentiles will certainly adopt our ethical outlook!

This is the vision of Shavuot and this is why we read about the righteous proselyte Ruth on Shavuot!
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RABBI BEREL WEIN

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Every biblical narrative has at its heart a main character, a hero or heroine. Even though the book and the scroll of Ruth is named for her, the true main character and heroine of the story is Naomi. This is confirmed in the book itself when the prophet Samuel, the author of the book, relates that when Ruth gave birth to Oved, the women of Bethlehem declared; “A male child has been born to Naomi.”

It is obvious that they did not mean this literally, for Naomi was widowed and no longer of child-bearing age. Nevertheless, the wise women of the town recognized that if it were not for Naomi, Ruth would never have met Boaz in a matrimonial relationship. It was Naomi who planned the entire series of events that would lead to the birth of this child and the beginning of the dynastic monarchy of the Jewish people.

The book instructs us not to view things in a superficial manner but rather to analyze and understand the causes and circumstances that eventually lead to the details of the narrative. The whole linchpin of the story is the steadfast commitment of Naomi, and her determination not to be crushed by the tragedies that engulfed her. Because of her, there can be a Ruth, a Boaz and eventually, a King David.

Life is oftentimes very difficult, and its burdens can be crushing. For many of us, we are passing through such a time currently. Everything that was familiar, and in fact taken for granted, has been struck from our daily lives. Our future is certainly murky and mysterious. Because of this, strength of character and an iron will to persevere and overcome is vitally necessary.

Naomi is the symbol of these strengths that we desire for ourselves and our community. It is her resourcefulness and true understanding of human nature that will stand us in good stead in our hour of

difficulty and adjustment that is upon us. The challenge is how to summon up these characteristics and apply them to our own lives.

In this we can also be instructed by Ruth herself. Her selfless devotion to Naomi even though it meant the forsaking of everything she had known, and of her worldly positions, became her strongest asset. Her commitment was complete and boundless. Her determination not to abandon Naomi, and the faith and tradition of Naomi, became the turning point in her life and brought her to unimagined glory and success. Sometimes in life, forsaking everything becomes the key to acquiring greater things. Judaism teaches that we are measured not by what we take and acquire but by what we give, donate, and forsake.

This is a difficult lesson to put into practice since it runs counter to much of our innate nature, but both Naomi and Ruth rise to greatness on the basis of what they were willing to give up for a higher and nobler goal in life. One has to be willing to humble oneself and to sit amongst the gleaners of fallen grain in order to become, eventually, the matriarch of Jewish eternal monarchy. ©2020 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Shavuot celebrates the time when Jews at Sinai declared, “na’aseh ve-nishma, we will do and we will listen (to the commandments).” (Exodus 24:7) This order is perplexing as one usually does the opposite, and listens before deciding to act.

In his Mikhtav M’Eliyahu, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler offers an understanding of love that may explain why doing can come before listening. Rabbi Dessler insists that the cornerstone of love is the capacity to give to the loved one. And, he adds, it’s not necessarily the case that one first loves and from the loving comes the giving. The reverse is equally true and often even more powerful. One gives, and from the giving, love grows. The more one gives, the more one loves.

Years ago, there was an extraordinarily successful program known as Marriage Encounter. One of its basic teachings was that love is not only a feeling – “it’s a decision.” After all, feelings change. One morning I may wake up feeling like loving my spouse, child, parent, sibling or friend, and the next morning I may not. But if I’ve decided to love you – that is, if love is a decision – from the decision, from the action, the feeling will come. In fact, the real test of love is not simply what I feel toward you, but what I am prepared to do for you.

This idea is central to an understanding of

prayer. If prayer is an expression of love, why should we be mandated to pray? Why not pray only when we feel like it? It can be argued, however, that we may not feel like praying for long periods of time. But if we're obligated to pray—if, indeed, we make a decision to pray—from placing ourselves in a prayerful mode, feelings of prayer may surface.

Indeed, this is the basic conceptual underpinning of religious observance. Perform the ritual and from the act, the feeling may come. Hence, Jews at Sinai first proclaimed “we will do.” Only afterward did they say, “we will listen.”

A favorite personal story reinforces this idea. My mother and father, of blessed memory, made aliyah (emigrated to Israel) years ago. Whenever my parents flew to New York, it was my responsibility, as their only child living there, to meet them at the airport.

One time my father called me to inform me that at the last moment, their arrival was moved up by twenty-four hours. Professing my deep love for my parents, I insisted that I couldn't change my schedule on such short notice.

“I know you're busy,” my father responded, “but is it possible that you don't have time for your parents?” “I love you deeply,” I protested, “but it's difficult to alter plans at the last minute.”

I'll never forget my father's response. “Don't love me so much, just pick me up at the airport.”

My father's comments echoed the very essence of *na'aseh ve-nishma* – actions are primary, they are the indicator, the inspiration for true love.

“Don't love me so much, just pick me up at the airport.” ©2020 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI YAAKOV BERNSTEIN

Ha'aros

On Shavuot, we read the story of Rus. There are different reasons for this custom. Rus was a *geyores* (convert); her story reminds us that the entire Jewish People accepted conversion at Mount Sinai. In addition, Rus is the ancestress of Dovid Hamelech, whose *yahrzeit* occurs on Shavuot.

Hashem loves the *geir* and commands us to love the *geir*, just as He commands us to love Himself. (Devorim 10:18-19, Rambam Hilchos Deos, 6:4, see Pachad Yitzchak, Pesach 29)

According to one opinion, the sons of Yaakov married their half-sisters. (Rashi, Bereishis 37:35) How were they permitted to marry a relation prohibited by Torah law?

The Maharal explained (Bereishis 46:10). A *geir* is considered to be like a new-born infant. According to halacha, siblings who convert are no longer considered related. Originally, these siblings

were allowed to marry one another. (The Rabbis would later prohibit this.)

The early generations had to go through a conversion process in order to be considered members of the covenant. Since the men and women -- children of Yaakov -- went through *geirus* (a conversion process), they didn't have the status of relatives any more, and could marry one another.

However, there seems to be a contradiction. After the receiving of the Torah, we find that the Jews were crying about their families. (B'midbar 11:10) They had married close relatives. Once the Torah was given, these marriages became prohibited; they were crying because they would now be forced to divorce their wives. (See Rashi, *ibid.*) The Maharal asked: Why should these marriages be forbidden? There was certainly a conversion process at the giving of the Torah; the laws of conversion are derived from Mount Sinai! Since, as we said, the convert is as if newly-born, the halacha dictates that he has no relatives. If so, the generation that received the Torah would be allowed to maintain their marriages (since they were considered converts)!

No, answered the Maharal. The conversion which took place at Har Sinai was completely different. Chazal tell us that (in some aspect) the giving of the Torah was through coercion.

The Maharal did not elaborate. What is the significance here that the Torah was given through coercion?

The Kli Chemda explained (Bereishis p. 59). The Medrash says that Hashem threatened the Jews with death. "He turned the mountain over them and said, 'If you accept the Torah -- fine. If not, there will be your graves!'" (Shabbos 88a) This analogy really means to say -- The entire life of Klal Yisrael is Torah. If you don't accept the Torah -- there you will be buried -- you have no life without Torah!

Usually, conversion entails the *geir* separating from his past family ties. In the case of the Jewish People at Mount Sinai -- they were returning to their ancient roots. They were told they must come back.

Only the *geir* who separates himself from the nations of the world -- becomes a newborn person -- because he has broken himself away from his parents and family -- from the natural pattern of the world. Klal Yisrael, however, were always destined for Torah -- because they are the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. However, they had to go through the purification process of leaving *Mitzrayim*.

Rav Moshe Shternbuch (Mo'adim Uzmanim v. 8, 239) discusses a woman who undergoes conversion during pregnancy. The immersion of the mother works for the unborn child as well. However, Ramban is of the opinion that the child is a *geir*, and the conversion is not complete until he has *bris mila*.

This is very strange -- the Talmud states clearly

(Yevamos 93b) that such a child is completely related to his siblings by Torah law. The implication is that he is not regarded as a geir at all!

It must be that he is a Jew by birth, having been born to a Jewish mother. At the same time, he needs a small form of conversion -- the bris mila completes this process.

This is indeed comparable to the status of the Jews at Mount Sinai. By birth, they were Jewish, descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. At the same time, they were lacking a correction -- a form of the conversion process -- the receiving of the Torah at Har Sinai. However, for a Jew who still needs this correction process, we will not say that he is like a completely newborn person; rather, he is returning to his ancient roots. © 2020 Rabbi Y. Bernstein & torah.org

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

I am the L-rd your G-d who took you out of Egypt from the house of slavery.” (Shmos 20:2) These words became Hashem’s personal introduction to the Jewish People. Instead of hearing about Him from others, second-hand reports from prophets and parents, this time, Hashem Himself spoke to the entire nation without exception. Much is discussed about how He chose to identify Himself, and it is very telling.

The question is asked why Hashem did not identify Himself as the Creator of the Universe, or at least, Heaven and Earth. Why focus on the exodus from Egypt which, while important, is much less marvelous than the creation of the world ex nihilo, something from nothing?

Simply stated, as Rashi explains, even if Hashem had not created the world, but only taken us from Egypt, that would have been sufficient for us to be indebted to Him and be His servants. But is that what it’s all about; justifying why we are obligated to follow the Torah, because Hashem did something good for us?

Something else about the syntax enlightens us. Though this was said to millions of people, the Ten Commandments were given in the singular form. It’s as if G-d were speaking to a single individual.

We know that the Jews camped at the mountain “as one man, with one heart,” and the unity we expressed then would make it appropriate for us to be considered as a single person. Though one’s mission might be to act as the body’s right eye, and another’s to be the left pinky toe, we are not jealous of each other because we are all one person interested in doing Hashem’s will.

Dovid HaMelech, purported to have been born on Shavuos, and descended from Rus whose story we read on Shavuos, shared a deep love with Yehonason ben Shaul, the crown prince whose throne was given to Dovid. The basis of this love, says the Bartenura, is that

they both wished to fulfill Hashem’s will, so there was no jealousy.

What this means, though, is that each and every individual has a purpose as part of the common goal. When Hashem took ‘you’ out, it means ‘you, the individual.’ The world was not created to be empty, but to be filled. Identifying Himself as “Creator of the world” would therefore not convey the direct one-to-one connection Hashem has with each of us.

If that is the case, that He cares about us so much, and has a plan for each of us, then certainly it behooves us to fulfill His will not because we are obligated by Him, but because our own reason understands how logical it is to pursue this relationship, begun when Har Sinai was lifted over us like a chuppah.

R’ Noach Weinberg z”l, who devoted his life to teaching people how to return to Hashem and how to teach others to do the same, was once approached by a fellow who told him, “I don’t need your Yeshiva. I already have a great relationship with G-d. He loves me the way I am and does miracles for me.” Impressed, R’ Noach asked for details.

“I ride a motorcycle,” the fellow explained. “Once, I was riding down a narrow road and a truck came around the corner out of nowhere. I swerved and went over a cliff. As I began to fall, I called out to G-d to save me. Suddenly, my bike caught between two rocks and I was thrown into a soft hedge. I lived to tell the tale. You see? G-d does miracles for me. I don’t need to learn your Torah.”

R’ Noach smiled, then asked the young man: “And Who do you think sent the truck? Do you want Hashem to send you another reminder of how much He loves you?” © 2020 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

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Shavuos

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

When the Jewish people received the first set of Tablets, they were warned: “Beware of ascending the mountain or touching its border” (*Shemot* 19:12). Similarly, before G-d gave the second set of Tablets, He instructed Moshe: “No one else shall come up with you, and no one else shall be seen anywhere on the mountain; neither shall the flocks and the herds graze at the foot of this mountain” (*Shemot* 34:3). This second warning was even more sweeping than the first. This time, the people were warned away from the entire mountain, even its base (where they had stood the first time). Furthermore, even cattle were prohibited from grazing. Finally, the first time the elders ascended part-way with Moshe, while the second time no one else joined him.

The first warning about the mountain continued: “No hand shall touch it” (*Shemot* 19:13). The *Mechilta* offers a homiletic reading: “No hand shall touch it” – this

applies to the mountain only, but not to the Tabernacle and the Temple. Thus, according to this view a person is allowed to touch the stones of the *Kotel*, which is the remnant of the retaining wall around the Temple. Even though it is possible that it is forbidden to enter the area behind the *Kotel* as we are all impure, touching is still allowed. Some, though, are so strict about not entering that they avoid getting too close to the *Kotel*. This is because then they might end up putting their fingers between the stones of the wall, which might count as forbidden entering.

It should be noted that some interpret the *Mechilta* as saying that the admonition "No hand shall touch it" comes to include the Tabernacle and the Temple in the prohibition of touching. However, the straightforward reading of the *Mechilta* is as we explained above, that these are excluded from the prohibition. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

One of the issues that always seems to pique the interest and curiosity of my students in the introductory level at Ohr Somayach is the subject of gilgulim, the transmigration of souls. Whenever the subject is broached, even on a peripheral level, it inevitably triggers an avalanche of queries. Why the need for gilgul? Is it true that some sinners are reincarnated into animals? How many times are our souls recycled? If one marries a second time, which soul is one destined to live with for eternity in the next world?

I immediately put out a disclaimer, telling my students that these esoteric matters are beyond our comprehension and it is preferable not to delve into them too deeply. Yet it is too difficult to steer the discussion away from such a thought-provoking subject.

In Megilas Rus however, we do get a faint glimpse of the sublime heavenly pathway that Hashem prepares for all souls, enabling them to realize their ultimate mission and destiny.

On its simplest level, Megilas Rus is a gripping and inspiring narrative. The nation's leader Elimelech, a grandson of Nachson and a scion of the kingly tribe of Judah, had abandoned his coreligionists in their hour of need. During a famine in the holy land, he moved with his wife, Naomi, and sons, Machlon and Kilyon, to neighboring Moav, to protect his wealth. He was punished severely for his grievous sin. The two daughters of Eglon, King of Moav, Rus and Orpah, were attracted to his sons' noble bearing and good character and in short order they married. Tragedy strikes the family, however, with the demise of Elimelech, the loss of his wealth and the tragic passing of both of his sons. It seems that Elimelech's illustrious

family's lineage had been abruptly aborted, with the souls of Machlon and Kilyon unable to perpetuate their rich legacy for eternity.

The narrative continues with the Moabite women accompanying Naomi, their righteous mother-in-law, towards the border of Israel. When Naomi exhorts them to return, Rus cannot bring herself to part from her. Her unconditional embrace of Naomi is in effect an unconditional embrace of Torah and Mitzvos, and the nascent spark of spirituality that had lain dormant in her ancestor Lot was thus ignited.

We know that with every union between man and woman, a bonding of souls takes place. Machlon's neshama is embedded deep within Rus and it falls to Boaz, the redeemer, to perform the mitzvah of yibum and provide solace and tikun to Machlon's soul. Elimelech's legacy and that of his family, is thus redeemed. From the union of Boaz and Rus emerge the soul of King David and the ultimate redeemer, the Melech Hamoshiach.

Perhaps, the most inspiring part of the entire narrative is its underlying message: No Jew Shall be Left Behind. Even those who have wandered far away from their ancestral moorings will be redeemed by the Melech Hamoshiach, a scion of Judah who will unite us as one and re-bond us together to our Father in heaven.

The means Dovid Hamelech used to achieve were often cryptic and seemingly controversial. The Talmud tells us that we should not be deluded into reading the narrative of Dovid and his seemingly illicit encounter with Bassheva on a superficial level. "Whoever says Dovid sinned," explains the Gemora "is in completely error." King David consorted with Bassheva in order to teach future generations the power of Teshuva. Similarly, the Talmud in Sanhedrin teaches us that King David wished to serve idols, in order to go through the process of repentance and to redeem even those souls that have strayed from G-d, denying his existence and rebelling against His very being.

Like Elimelech and Machlon, we all trace our lineage back to our Patriarch Jacob; we all have royal blood flowing in our veins. It will only be a matter of time

before our souls will also experience their elevation and reconnection at the end of time, to be suffused with the light of the Shechihna and bonded forever with our Divine source.

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