

# THE BOOK OF RUTH: AN EXPLORATION OF JEWISH FEMININITY PART II

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(Adapted from a lecture by Tsiporah Heller entitled, "Great Women: Ruth and Naomi")

In our previous class, we left Ruth and Naomi on the border of Israel, poised to re-enter the land from which Naomi had departed an aristocrat and was about to return to a pauper. Ruth has committed to Judaism, in spite of Naomi's challenges to her decision. In this class we follow their story...

Once in Israel, Ruth - a convert and a foreigner - sustains herself and Naomi as best she can, by gathering gleanings from fields in Bethlehem. She is able to do so, because Torah law mandates that every person who owns a field must leave gleanings from the harvest - as well as a corner of the field itself - for collection by the poor. (The Torah rationale for this type of charity is that it gives the person who is collecting gleanings a sense of purpose, while it instills in the field owner an understanding that his property belongs ultimately not to him, but to G-d).

Enter a man named Boaz, recently widowed, and the owner of the field where Ruth is gleaning. Boaz is a leader of his generation - a judge - whose formal residence is in Jerusalem, but who is in Bethlehem for his wife's funeral and to inspect his fields at harvest. Boaz notices Ruth, from among hundreds of people in the field. According to the Midrash, she stands out as the only one bending her knees to glean, in order to expose less of her legs, rather than bending from her back. While, according to the more promiscuous standards of Ruth's Moabite background this gesture might have been considered a wasted effort, from a Jewish point of view it demonstrates to Boaz the important Jewish quality of "tsniut" - modesty. Ruth has, in essence, fully embraced the more dignified standards at the heart of her new Jewish life. What's more, from Moabite society which valued "me," with a capital "M," Ruth has transformed herself to a point where she is committed to laboring in the fields in order to support her mother-in-law.

Boaz approaches Ruth, encourages her to return to his field as often as she needs to, introduces her to the other women who work for him, arranges for gleanings to be left for her on purpose and basically goes his way. Meanwhile, Naomi already knows of Boaz and is aware of the fact that he is Ruth's great uncle, forty years her senior. Their family connection is significant to Naomi, in light of the Torah law of "yibum," which obligates one of the male relatives of a man who died before having children to marry his widow. This takes place in order to bring down the soul of the dead man

through the life of the new couple's future child. Ruth's husband had died and left her childless, so Naomi sees Boaz as a candidate for Ruth, according to the laws of yibum.

Ruth's contemplated match, however, might be construed as problematic by the surrounding society, since Torah law states that a Jew cannot marry a Moabite. While the Oral tradition is that this mandate does not include women, most people at the time the story of Ruth takes place are unaware of this fact.

Naomi suggests that Ruth appear that night on the threshing floor, where all of the workers including Boaz would be sleeping, in order to be as close as possible to the fields at a critical time in the harvest. She instructs Ruth to uncover Boaz's feet so as to wake him and set the process of "yibum" in motion. From Ruth's point of view, the plan is problematic, not only because it is unconventional, but because the marriage of a Moabite to a Jew is unlikely (as explained above). What's more, such a brash approach runs counter to Ruth's innate modesty, which is what so impressed Boaz in the first place. While Ruth's conduct would be for all the right reasons, she is concerned that he may view her behavior as inappropriate and then be unwilling to marry her. This would leave Ruth without a way to bring a child into the world for the sake of her deceased husband.

In spite of the obvious obstacles, Ruth consents to Naomi's plan, doing so not for her own sake, but for the sake of her husband in the hope that she will be able to bring his soul back into the world, through her offspring. This gesture of kindness and the risk she is willing to take for her husband demonstrate the extent of Ruth's transformation from Moabite to Jew. Ultimately, the plan works. Boaz awakens and Ruth successfully confronts him with her request for marriage. Their union produces a lineage that leads to King David and eventually will bring the Moshiach. Their marriage merits this lineage because of its purity of intentions and the greatness of the two individuals involved.

For the contemporary Jewish woman, Ruth and Naomi are not only ancient heroines, but role models with relevant lessons to share. Naomi, who refused to be depressed in the face of adversity, can inspire us to seek answers in those places upon which we have turned our backs. On a practical level this might mean facing our past, in order to create for ourselves a better future, or even embracing those close to us who do not necessarily see eye to eye with our own opinions. In this way, we build, rather than destroy, which is exactly what Naomi managed to do.

Ruth, who created for herself a life of dignity, inspires us to assess our own surroundings and to transcend their less desirable aspects. By doing so, we free ourselves to make decisions about who we are, based on what we inherently know about ourselves, rather than what we are told we should be. From this process we emerge unique individuals, surprising ourselves - even delighting ourselves - with an ongoing discovery of our deepest gifts.

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