

CONGREGATION AGUDATH JACOB

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From the Desk of
Rabbi Ben-Zion Lanxner



The Book of Ruth & Shavu'ot, what's the Connection?

Although Ruth was a Moabite princess who converted to Judaism in the 10th century BCE, what does her story have to do with the events at Mount Sinai more than 300 years earlier?

Let us start with a brief introduction. In other words, why is it that we read the Book of Ruth -- the story of a Moabite woman who converted to Judaism and who eventually married a judge of Israel, Boaz -- on Shavu'ot, the holiday when we celebrate the giving and the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai?

Our Sages offer two major suggestions to explain this custom. First that Ruth was the model of Torah acceptance, and secondly, that without her, Jewish history could not continue. Both are puzzling as we shall see, and we shall explore them one by one.

The first one seems quite straightforward, at least at first glance: Shavu'ot commemorates the acceptance of the Torah by the Jewish people, and the Book of Ruth describes the acceptance of the Torah by a single individual through an act of conversion.

Inasmuch as we were all converts at Mt. Sinai, her experience is a reminder to us that we are all Jews only thanks to our own act of Torah acceptance. Judaism is not a racial trait and is not automatic for anyone; at bottom, it is based on conversion and Torah acceptance even for the children of Abraham.

Ruth was no ordinary convert. Her name gives us a clue to her essence. In Hebrew, Ruth's name is comprised of the letters *Reish*, *Vav*, *Tav*, which add up to a numerical value of **606**. As all human beings have an obligation to observe the seven Noachide commandments -- so called, because they were given after the flood -- as did Ruth upon her birth as a Moabite. Add those **7** commandments to the value of her name and you get **613**, the number of commandments in the Torah.

The essence of Ruth, her driving life force, was the discovery and acceptance of the 606 commandments she was missing. Thus, Ruth is a Torah seeker par excellence, who is held up to the rest of us as the shining model of proper Torah acceptance.

If we could learn to emulate Ruth in our own act of Torah acceptance, the act of Divine service that is the essence of Shavu'ot, we would succeed in absorbing the entire spiritual input offered by G-d on the Shavu'ot holiday.

Now that we have a better understanding of why Ruth is connected to the holiday of Shavu'ot, let us try to expand more in depth into the Book of Ruth.

The Megillat Ruth or 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 Shavu'ot, the Festival of Weeks, the anniversary of the Torah Revelation at Mount Sinai and the celebration of the harvest of the first fruits brought to the Temple in Jerusalem (one of the 3 Pilgrimage Holidays in the Jewish calendars, with Passover and Sukkot, called in Hebrew, the Shloshah Regalim).

And since Shavu'ot is the climatic zenith of Passover, the development of a newly freed group of slaves in the Sinai desert into a Torah-imbued nation firmly ensconced in their own homeland of Israel, the reasons for this special reading are many. Firstly, Boaz and Ruth are the great – grandparents of King David, the Psalm-singing military hero who united the Twelve Tribes of Israel and first envisioned the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Secondly, Ruth the Moabite is Jew-by-choice whose commitment to Torah Judaism makes her worthy of being the great grand-mother of the prototype of the eventual Messiah-King. Thirdly, 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 Shavu'ot).

Having said that, I would like 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.

First, from a narrative perspective: the first chapter spans the ten years the family of Naomi is in Moav, 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, King David's father.

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 Shavu'ot is truly the Festival of Redemption – and redemption links humanity to the Eternal G-d of all eternity – the period which is eternally Sabbath (

as I often cite the Talmud suggesting Messianic time called Yom SheKulo Shabbat) – 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 (Exile) experience can only be temporal at best and destructive at worst.

The first chapter opens with a famine in the Land of Israel, and an important personage (Elimelech) who leaves Bethlehem (literally the house of bread) with his wife and sons to seek “greener pastures” in the idolatrous plains of Moav.

As happened with Abraham, our Patriarch, 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 Elimelech and Naomi – seems to have ended!

The father and his sons all die in Moav – 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 G-d my G-d” – 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 Elimelech.

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 Elimelech'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 Rabbi Yishmael, the reason the Torah was given at Mount Sinai – in the wilderness (Galut - Exile/Diaspora) and not on Mount 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, nor in studying Torah, which is totally erroneous. (Another reason could be that the wilderness is a place without ownership whatsoever, and therefore nobody had “control” over it).

On the contrary, we the Jews, as His Chosen People, Ambassadors of G-d's Torah, are on a Holy Mission of transmitting His Torah to the entire world, in order of making this world a better place, not only for the Jews but for all of Humanity, for the entire Nations of the world, and that is what we call Tikkun Olam, the repair of the World.

That truth is also corroborated by Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar (a contemporary of Rabbi Akiva), who maintains that in the future (Days of the Messiah) the Gentiles will all convert, and Maimonides, at the very conclusion of his Magnum Opus, The Mishneh Torah, rules that at the End of the Days “everyone will return to the true religion” (the Source - HaMakor), 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 Holy Temple in Jerusalem, 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 G-d 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 G-d forever” – ethical absolutism (in accordance with the Torah demands of ethical absolutism – compassionate righteousness, moral justice, universal peace) and ritual pluralism!

I personally am ready accepting either view, and according to everyone at least the Biblical ethic will reign supreme. And the truth is that G-d initially blessed Abraham with becoming a great nation through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed with peace and security (the Hebrew name of Abraham, explained in the Torah, being Av Hamon Goyim- the Father of a multitude of Nations), Genesis 12:1-3 – the Gentiles will certainly adopt Judaism’s ethical outlook!

This is the vision of Shavu’ot and this is why we read about the righteous Ruth, the Convert/Proselyte, on Shavu’ot!

Wishing you all a meaningful holiday of Shavu’ot and a Chag Same’ach!

Rabbi Ben-Zion Lanxner, Mara d’Atra.

PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

In the past few monthly messages, I have weighed in on *emunah* (faith), *bitachon* (trust in G-d), and several other issues. This month I would like to offer some thoughts on what is referred to as *hakarat ha’tov*, generally translated as “recognizing the good” or, simply, gratitude. It is quite easy, understandably so, in the hubbub of weekly services and events and personal interactions, some positive and some less so, to lose sight of the many blessings that we have in our Jewish community here in Waco. This holds true for both congregations, but my focus here is on CAJ.

The cure, I believe, is reflection—on all the goodness that we have here at *shul* and, conversely, on all the challenges faced by our Jewish brothers and sisters in many troubled places throughout the world. Here in Waco, we have two paid-for synagogues, two full-time rabbis, a safe community, and so many friendly people. While CAJ is small and we do not always make a *minyan*, we do so most of the time, and we are just coming off of several wonderful, triumphant communal events. Our Chanukah gathering had over 50 folks, Purim over 40, the Pesach *seder* also over 40, and over 150 people attended our Holocaust Remembrance Day event. The latter brought together at least a couple dozen members from *shul*, a bunch of members from TRS, members of the congregations of other faiths, including clergy, and a smattering of Baylor faculty and folks from the larger community. Most recently, 20 of us celebrated Lag Ba’Omer with a fun cookout under the *sukkah*.

Take a moment and think about the plight of our fellow Jews in Ukraine, Russia, Turkey, and Iran, and that does not even factor in places like France and parts of the U.K. where Jews are under attack and afraid to reveal their identity in public. By comparison, we have it good here, and we all would do well to keep this in mind. Could relations between the two congregations find room for improvement? Sure. Does every single Jew in the community get along with every other Jew? Fat chance (!), but tell me where this has ever been the case. But let us try to remember that we are all, essentially, cousins—literally or by “adoption”—and Hashem wants us to have our fellow family members’ backs. There are bigger challenges out there, especially from those who do not care for us, than whatever separates us within our faith community. I am speaking not about Waco or any given congregation, but about our people as a whole.

It is easy to slip into negativity—we are a small *shul*, as noted—and we wish to attract more full-dues members and more donations and more attendance at our services. As President, I would be remiss in not bringing that up. It is in my job description. But we are so mightily blessed and I hope that everyone can feel that spirit of blessing every time they walk inside the *shul*. For each of us, this is our second home, and it should be a place to feel a sense of *kedushah* (sanctity or holiness) and experience a sense of *chaverut* (fellowship or friendship). Our *shul* is a true sanctuary—a place to feel close to G-d, and a place to separate from the secular concerns of the outside world. We should all feel a sense of *hakarat ha’tov* for this wonderful blessing.

Thank you to everyone who contributes so generously to helping us to maintain this great and holy sanctuary!

L’shalom,
Jeff Levin

June Service Schedule

Friday, June 6

Kabbalat Shabbat 6:00 pm
Candle Lighting 7:52 pm

Saturday, June 7

Shacharit 10:00 am
Shabbat Ends 8:49 pm

Friday, June 13

Kabbalat Shabbat 6:00 pm
Candle Lighting 7:56 pm

Saturday, June 14

Shacharit 10:00 am
Shabbat Ends 8:49 pm

Friday, June 20

Kabbalat Shabbat 6:00 pm
Candle Lighting 8:01 pm

Saturday, June 21

Shacharit 10:00 am
Shabbat Ends 9:00 pm

Friday, June 27

Kabbalat Shabbat 6:00 pm
Candle Lighting 8:06 pm

Saturday, June 28

Shacharit 10:00 am
Shabbat Ends 9:05 pm



June 4

Yhoshua Via

June 7

Paula Farmer

June 8

Martin Schwartz

Schmuel Via

June 17

Ray Via

June 18

Susan Raphael

June 27

Hanna Harelik

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY

June 20

**Rick & Melanie
Bauer**



ANNOUNCEMENTS

- ❖ There will no longer be regular office hours. Please send an email or leave a voice message if you are in need of assistance.
- ❖ Please join us for Shavuot services coming up on **Sunday evening, June 1st at 6 pm**, and then again on **Monday morning, June 2nd at 10 am**, when we'll say *Yizkor* prayers. Shavuot is one of the three "pilgrim festivals" and one of the four times a year that we say *Yizkor* prayers. So please come and help us to make a *minyan*. We look forward to seeing folks at *shul*!

THANK YOU for your donations in May!

Shabbat

Susan Raphael
Jeff Levin

Michael Pesses
Inez Bonneville

Steve & Carrie Draher
George & Kathleen
Keller

In Memory of

Bertha Rosen
Harry Harelík
Al Jacobson
Ester Lipinsky
Phillip Citrin
Jeff Levin

Mandel Citrin
Jeff Levin
Mazk Papernov
Semyon Papernov
Mariya Gordon
Semyon Papernov

YAHREZEITS

The following names of dearly departed will be read aloud by the Rabbi preceding the Mourner's Kaddish on Shabbat morning. It is fitting and customary that the nearest of kin be present in the synagogue for the recitation of this special prayer in their memory. Attendance not only honors the departed but also enhances and guarantees that a Minyan is present to recite the Kaddish.

Kaddish will be read on June 6

Sivan 9	Esther Neuwirth Frank Sifuentes David Stein
Sivan 10	Mrs A Adelman*
Sivan 11	Klaire Kohn Schwarz*
Sivan 12	Louise Grass Nathan Gurwitz*
Sivan 13	Esther Greenspan Neuwirth* Mrs A (Jennie) Novich*
Sivan 14	Dorothy Kempler Harelik*
Sivan 15	Israel Berkman*

Kaddish will be read on June 13

Sivan 16	Willie Rosen*
Sivan 17	Sylvia Chernoff Jacqueline Leeds Rev J M Rosenberg*
Sivan 18	Louis Fred* Pearl Esther Goodman* Rose Todd
Sivan 19	Howard Hoppenstein* Jacqueline Leeds Phil Smith* Zelda Taub
Sivan 21	David Hoppenstein* Hannah Moser* Barnett Sachs* Selma Schulman* Evelyn Sherman
Sivan 22	Morris Goodman* Dorothy Gulman Harry Rubel*

Kaddish will be read on June 20

Sivan 24	Isadore Budin* Bessie Taub
Sivan 25	Alvin Leonard Adelman* Edith Schwartz*
Sivan 26	Joseph Gurkoff Mary Haymann Harry H Schwarz*
Sivan 27	Jack Chodorow* AJ Farmer Julius Ceasar Genecov Nathan Julius Genecov Barney R Goldberg* Milton Harelik Bernard Wolstein
Sivan 28	Mrs Nathan Zidman*
Sivan 29	Mary Bertha Englander* Fannie Fogel

Kaddish will be read on June 27

Sivan 30	Morris Novy* Hilda Ruttenberg* Abe Wietzman
Tammuz 1	Joshua Nechemiah Gershon
Tammuz 3	Esther Goldie Lubin
Tammuz 4	Robert Alpert Lt A F Englander Tillie Goodman Goldstein
Tammuz 5	Annie Geetah Gus Holste Sadie Wolkoff Kaplan*
Tammuz 6	Hyman Fogel Abe Wizig* Morris Ben Zoblotsky*