

RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS CHANGE THE WORLD:

A Teaching From the Book of Ruth in anticipation of Shavuot

In honor of Rick and Ann, I am going to give a sermon instead of an interactive teaching. But Rick, be careful what you wish for.... sermons are often long! And in honor of all of you who have asked that we sometimes teach about other parts of Tenach beside the Torah portion, this morning I want to talk about the Book of Ruth, the scroll we read for Shavuot, the end of this intense period of counting and reflecting on what really counts.

The traditional reason we read Ruth at this season is because it takes place now, during the wheat harvest. But there are deeper reasons as well to read this story at the moment in the calendar when we most experience that each of us is on a journey, and that there are crossroads along the way.

The book of Ruth invites us to think about what happens when people stand at a crossroads in their lives. To borrow the words of poet Merle Feld: “How do unforeseen consequences unfold from choices we make and the relationships we enter into, and how are our characters forged by the ways in which we improvise responses to what fate throws our way?”

Before I remind you of the story, let me remind you of the back story: “No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord; none of their descendants even into the tenth generation shall ever be admitted into the congregation of Lord

because they did not meet you with food and water after you left Egypt, and because the hired Balaam to curse you...” (Deut. 23:4) Got that? No Moabite, ever, can join our people.

So here’s the story of Ruth: There was a famine in the land of Judah, So Naomi and Elimelech and their two sons move from Bethlehem to Moav. The sons marry Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah, and Elimelech dies. Ten years later the sons die, leaving no children. Now a widow with no grandchildren, Naomi, upon hearing that the famine in Judah is over, decides to go back to Bethlehem. Her daughters in law want to go with her, but she urges them to stay in Moav, go home to their families, and go on with their lives. Orpah decides to stay, but Ruth is determined to go with her mother in law, and utters the now famous words: “Where you go I will go...”

Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. When the women of the city hear that Naomi has returned, they are shocked by how poor and ragged this once wealthy woman has become. She tells them: “Don’t call me Naomi which means pleasant. call me Mara, bitter, because God has dealt bitterly with me. I left here full but God has brought me back empty. Why me?”

Notice all the crossroads in the story so far... and we are only up to verse 22! The first was the decision of Naomi and Elimelech to leave Bethlehem. The ancient rabbis ask why they left and answer by imagining that Elimelech, a rich man, was concerned that because of the famine people would expect him to help them out. He didn’t want that responsibility because all he cared about was protecting his own family. Another crossroad was the decisions of the daughters in law: Orpah to return to her family and

Ruth to go with Naomi. Both choices are understandable—the story doesn't judge Orpah for going home. But the story reminds us that the choices we make at the crossroads of our lives determine the rest of the journey.

How do you imagine Ruth feels standing next to her mother in law as she complains how horrible her life is? (And what am I? Chopped liver?) How often in your own life have you chosen to focus on what you don't have instead of what is right there next to you?

Ruth could have decided to end the story there...leave this bitter old woman to really have nothing. But she doesn't. She chooses relationship: "where you go I will go." She chooses kindness. Her act of kindness... evokes random acts of kindness from others.

So Ruth the Moabite—the text keeps emphasizing that Ruth is a Moabite--- goes out to glean the leftovers in the unharvested four corners of fields as Torah law describes. As luck would have it, she ends up in the field of Boaz, a distant relative. He is curious about her and learns from his servant that Ruth is the Moabite girl who returned with Naomi from Moav. (Apparently this is big news in Bethlehem—everyone seems to know!) He urges her to stay and orders that his men protect her. She wants to know why he is being so kind, especially since she is a foreigner. (Did I mention that Ruth is a Moabite?) He responds: "I've heard all about what you have done for your mother in law." Her kindness evokes his.

Again there are choices. Ruth isn't really powerless. She doesn't wait for someone to rescue her. It couldn't have been easy for this immigrant girl to come into a new culture

and find work. She initiates it: “Let me go now to the field and glean,” she says to Naomi.

Boaz makes choices too. He is required by law to leave the corners of his fields for the poor, but not to leave extra, not to protect her from harassment, not to give her water. But he too chooses kindness and compassion

So Ruth continues to gleaning in his fields until the end of the wheat harvest, bringing food home to her mother in law. But then, the harvest ends; there is no more wheat to glean. So Naomi comes up with a plan, a dangerous one. She tells Ruth to wash, perfume and dress herself and then go out to the threshing floor at night. There she is to uncover his feet, lie down and wait for him to tell her what to do. What is she really asking Ruth to do? Remember, the threshing floor is out in the fields, far away from town. It is dangerous for a girl to be alone there with a man. And remember too that people didn't take showers every day; to bathe and perfume yourself was to get ready for sex. And uncovering feet? A biblical expression for uncovering genitals!

Naomi seems to be asking Ruth to prepare to seduce Boaz! To say this is transgressive is an understatement. But in a world where women alone had little power, what other choices did Ruth have? But even here, she has choices.

When Boaz wakes up and finds her there in his bed, he asks: “Who are you?”

“Who are you?” It's a simple question yet it is the question of the crossroads. Who are you, as you face the choices that will determine how your journey unfolds.

“Who are you?” he asks... and she responds: “I am Ruth your handmaid.” And then, even though her mother in law told her to wait for him to tell her what tells him what to do, she instead tells him: “Spread your robe over me... take care of me.”

Ruth gentleness is also strength; she knows what she wants and she takes risks to make it happen. Boaz responds: “this is an act of kindness...you could have gone after younger men, rich or poor, but instead you chose me, an older man.”

So Ruth returns home to Naomi, her reputation protected by Boaz’ insistence that she leave while it is still dark so no one would see her. The first question Naomi asks is the same one Boaz asked: “Who are you?” What choices did you make there on the threshing floor?

Fast forward to the end of the story. They get married, have a son whom Naomi helps raise. The women, the same ones who heard Naomi say how bitter she was, now remind her how lucky she is: “your daughter in law who loves you is better than seven sons” they say. The women name this child Oved. And then we learn that Oved is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

The story ends with a genealogy of men. It begins with Peretz, then five generations later is Nachson, who turns out to be Boaz’ father. Then comes Oved, the grandfather of David, the ancestor of the messiah.

This genealogy is amazing. Who was Peretz? He was the child Tamar conceived in the book of Genesis, when she dressed as a prostitute to seduce Judah, her father in law, in order to force him to do what he should have done: allow her to marry her dead

husbands' brother or release her to be free to marry another man. Tamar, like Ruth, took a great risk. She did something transgressive and dangerous in order to make right what was wrong. Peretz' descendant was Nachson, the one whom we learn in Midrash jumped into waters over his head at the Sea of Reeds. It was his act of courage, his risk taking, that split the sea. This genealogy is here to tell us that redemption, the messianic possibility, comes into the world only when people take risks. And more, this genealogy is here to teach us that redemption comes into the world through random acts of kindness.

It is impossible to read this book now and not imagine what might have happened if Ruth came to Arizona. Would she be admitted at the border? Or would she be arrested because she was, after all, a Moabite, and a refugee coming solely for economic reasons. She couldn't even have claimed family reunification; Naomi wasn't even a blood relation.

Could she have found work as a farm worker if she didn't have a green card? Would she be pulled over by a police officer because she looked Moabite and spoke with an accent?

It was easier in Biblical times than now. Ruth's right to glean did not depend upon her immigration status. It was the law. The story reminds us that need law to protect the powerless. But the story reminds us of something more: law itself is not enough. We need to go beyond the letter of the law. We need compassion, we need chesed. It was the law that enabled her to glean, but it was Boaz' willingness to go beyond the letter of the law that gave Ruth not only a job, but respect and a safe working environment.

Now is not the time for a full discussion about the challenges of immigration. But perhaps it is the time to make sure that as we engage in discussions about immigration we remember that chesed (loving kindness) needs to be part of the conversation.

We read the book of Ruth on so many different levels at the same time: aesthetic, spiritual and political. There is the beauty of the simple narrative, the power of a story about intergenerational friendship between women, a love story between an older man and younger woman. There are the personal and spiritual questions the book raises about choices we make at the crossroads of our lives. And there is the political challenge posed by the image of a despised foreigner being the key to redemption.

We read this book on Shavuot, the anniversary of the giving of law, to remind us that law by itself is not enough. And maybe even that sometimes law can be wrong. (Did I mention that Ruth was a Moabite?)

We read the Book of Ruth to remind us that at each crossroad on the journey of our lives, we should choose chesed if we want to bring healing in the world. And we read the book now, at this season of counting, to teach us that kindness is what really counts.