

## **To Transform the Jewish Future**

Shavuot 2017

The Jewish Center

Rabbi Yosie Levine

A curmudgeonly congregant with atheistic leanings once asked his rabbi: "Do you honestly believe that Moses spent 40 days and 40 nights on top of a mountain in a desert with no food or water?"

The rabbi said: "I really don't know, but when I get to heaven, I'll ask him."

The congregant says: "But suppose Moses isn't in heaven?"

"Well," the rabbi says: "Then you ask him."

My question this morning is a very simply one: On this holiday of Matan Torah, why do we read the book of Ruth?

Any school child can provide a host of answers ranging from King David to springtime; but the most prominent explanation is the connection between two narratives of conversion. The holiday of revelation is the anniversary of our "conversion" to a Torah-centered people. Shavuot is the story of our national conversion. So we read the story of one individual's conversion.

But while this line of reasoning seems to make sense at first blush, I'm not sure it stands up to further scrutiny.

After all, Ruth's initiation into the Jewish people is really only a very minor component of the story. And once we shine a little more light on the connection itself, it seems to be rather tenuous.

- The story of revelation is national and quite public; the story of Ruth's conversion is personal and quite private.
- The first story is about מצווה and commandments; the second is about family loyalty.
- And while the Jewish people are destined to stand at Sinai; Ruth makes a decision of her own volition.

So just what is it about this book that makes it suited to our holiday?

What I'd like to suggest is that conversion is too narrow a lens through which to appreciate the theme of this extraordinary little story. But it points us in the right direction. In fact, Megillath Ruth is a book about transformation. And it's not just Ruth who's transformed, but virtually every character in the story.

Think of Naomi. By the time she returns to Beit Lechem, she's penniless and childless – bereft of any hope of futurity. As she herself says to her daughters in law: *העוד לי בנים במעי*? The time for me to be a mother has passed. She considers the prospect of having a child an utter impossibility.

And yet over the course of the narrative – thanks to Ruth – Naomi finds sustenance – and ultimately finds futurity: When Ruth gives birth to a child at the very end of the Megillah, the text says something amazing! Naomi held the child and became his nurse. ותקראנה לו השכנות שם. לאמר יולד בן לענמי – the local women saw this and they said, “A son has been born to Naomi.” The woman who though it unimaginable that she could mother a child becomes a surrogate mother after all.

Now think of Ruth. When she comes to Beit Lechem, she has no identity. Of course she arrives together with Naomi, but the townspeople barely even notice her. When she does get noticed in the field, the foreman refers to her only as the מאביה. She is the paradigmatic outsider – the foreigner – the other – the woman with no name, no standing, no identity. When Boaz offers her kindness, her response is stunning. We fully expect her to thank him for his generosity. She has no food – no means of sustenance and Boaz saves her. And yet Ruth focuses on something much more fundamental: ותאמר אליו מדוע מצאתי חן בעיניך להכירני ואני נכריה – I was an outsider – a נכריה – and you recognized me! You made me ניכר! When she says נחמתני – she doesn’t just mean that Boaz comforted her, but that he transformed her! Now that she’s been seen, she has an identity of her own. And by the end of the story it’s not just that the proverbial nobody has become a somebody, she’s become the ancestor of the Davidic dynasty.

Finally Boaz – who seems self-sufficient from the beginning – undergoes a transformation. Too. When we’re introduced to him for the first time, he’s described as איש גבור חיל – he’s a man of prominence and strength. As חז"ל say he sleeps alone outside the threshing floor because he’s protecting his wealth from bandits and brigands. But before the story is over, the man intent on protecting what is his is transformed into the גואל – the redeemer who gives of himself to preserve the name of his brother.

Even the townspeople are transformed. When they first appear they all murmur and buzz: ותהום – they want to know if this suffering woman is really the same woman they knew as Naomi. By the end of the book, the very people who could barely pronounce the name of their old friend, shower the blessing of a good name on the newly married couple: ויאמרו כל העם אשר בשער... וקרא שם בבית לחם.

By all accounts, there’s a compelling case to be made that transformation is in fact the overarching theme of the Megillah. But why read such a story on the anniversary of revelation?

Martin Seligman and John Tierney wrote a fascinating essay recently in the Sunday Review. They argue that we are misnamed. We call ourselves homo sapiens, imputing wisdom to our species, but they would prefer that we called ourselves Homo prospectus. Because what sets us apart from other species is not language or tools or cooperation – but rather our capacity to contemplate the future. We are forever – consciously and unconsciously – thinking and worrying about the days ahead. As they put, “if you’re a chimp, you spend much of the day searching for your next meal; if you’re a human,” you can usually rely on the foresight of your local supermarket manager or restaurateur to know that food will be available tonight or tomorrow.

I think their argument is very sound. The problem is that as much time and energy as we devote to thinking about our future writ large, we spend far too little time and energy thinking about our Jewish future.

Our Jewish lives are fixed.

- We have the shul we go to and the shul we don't.
- We have the types of Jewish books we read and the types we don't.
- We have our standards for Shabbat and Kashrut.
- Even the time we get to shul is pre-set.

On some level, we question just how much change or transformation is really possible in the future of our Jewish lives. And so perhaps on this holiday that celebrates our relationship to Torah, the Book of Ruth comes along to remind us that transformation – for anyone and everyone – is really possible.

The book of Ruth is a fairy tale. The prince and the princess live happily ever after and all is well with the world.

Our lives don't operate that way. But part of the reason we read fairy tales is that they allow us to see the world vicariously. Through someone else's eyes, we get to put ourselves into the narrative in a way that we would otherwise never do. We don't sit around fantasizing about what religious fulfillment might look like. But reading a book like Ruth invites us to do just that: To consider a contemporary plotline in which we could play the part of a Ruth or a Naomi or a Boaz – a story in which really could transform our Jewish lives.

In a moment we're going to recite Yizkor. And it's an opportunity to enact another kind of transformation, too: We all have memories of our parents and grandparents. But do we consign them to the realm of nostalgia and reminiscences or do we allow them to animate some piece of our future. Whether in our words or in our actions, we can pay tribute to their lives by living the values that mattered to them.

Whether within the four walls of this building or beyond them, let's use this *זמן מתן תורתנו* to think about the path we're charting for our own Jewish futures. Opportunities for Torah learning have never been richer: From webinars to evening classes; from daf yomi to a new learning club for kids – it's all here. Our goal is for every member and friend of The Jewish Center to be actively engaged in Talmud Torah. Just because we haven't done it in the past doesn't mean we can't do it in the future. And particularly as spring rolls into summer and our schedules get a little more flexible – there has never been a better time.

Luckily for us, we don't need to spend 40 days on a mountaintop to become the recipients of the Torah: All we need is a little faith that tomorrow might yet be different from today.