The Book of Ruth: A Mystery Unraveled
by Rabbi Noson Weisz

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

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 Shavuot, the holiday when we celebrate the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai?

Torah commentators offer two major theses to explain the custom:

• that Ruth was the model of Torah acceptance, and
• 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: Shavuot 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 seven 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 Shavuot, we would succeed in absorbing the entire spiritual input offered by God on the Shavuot holiday. (See the commentary of the Gaon of Vilna on the Book of Ruth.)

While quite obvious at first glance, this theme does present a major difficulty on closer examination.

Anyone reading the story of Ruth is immediately struck by the strength of her dedication to her mother in law, Naomi. The famous passage from which the Talmud derives many of the laws of conversion (Yevomot 47b) portrays Ruth's stubborn refusal to part from Naomi in the strongest possible terms.

But Ruth said, 'Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back from following you. For where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people are my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may God do to me, and so may He do more, if anything but death separates me from you. (Ruth 1:16-17)
Such love and commitment to the welfare of another person are extremely admirable qualities, but are unrelated to belief in God and in His Torah. Shouldn't someone who is held up to us as a shining example to emulate in our own acceptance of Torah be portrayed as being driven by faith and idealism rather than by her attachment to a particular person, or indeed, to the entire Jewish people for that matter?

**ATTACHMENT TO GOD**

Let us explore this point through an examination of a difficult passage of Talmud:

Rabbi Elazar said: "People who have no Torah knowledge will not experience the revival of the dead, as it is written, (in Isaiah 26): *The dead shall not live.* You might think this refers to all the dead, that's why it is followed up by: *Those requiring a cure will not rise.* Only those whose hold on the words of Torah is shaky and weak will not rise."

Rabbi Yochanan responded: "You have brought no pleasure to their Maker by making this statement about the ignorant in Torah."

Rabbi Elazar saw that his words caused Rabbi Yochanan anguish. He said, "My Rebbe, I have found a cure for them in the Torah. It is written, *But you who cleave to YHVH your God, you are all alive today* (Deut 4:4). But how is it possible for a human being to be attached to the Divine Presence when it is written *For YHVH your God, He is a consuming fire* (Ibid 24). Can a person attach himself to fire? To teach you, that whoever marries his daughter to a Torah scholar, or helps the Torah scholar in business or shares his property with a scholar, is looked upon by God as attached to Himself ... (Talmud, Kesubot, 111b)

Why should the resurrection be related to one's level of scholarship, and how can we relate to the idea that attachment to the Torah scholar is the equivalent of attachment to God?

One of the 613 commandments is the commandment to love God. This seems like an impossible commandment to fulfill. How can you love somebody who you do not know? Furthermore, God is infinite and we are not, we have no comprehension of how He thinks, what His interests are, or His hobbies or anything about Him.

Without knowing some of these details at least about another person it would be impossible for us to honestly say we loved him. We might think he is a very important person, we might even admire him, but to feel love and attachment to somebody, we must be somewhat familiar with the object of our affections.

Of course, this is also true about our love of God. We can only feel love for God to the extent that we develop a knowledge of Him and familiarity with Him.

But how can we do this?

The obvious solution is through our knowledge of Torah. God gave us a lot of information about Himself in His Torah. He told us about His sense of justice and fairness, about His priorities and feelings, about His hopes and dreams for our future.

There are two aspects to Torah knowledge and scholarship:

1. All Jews must amass sufficient Torah knowledge to know how to carry out the commandments properly, as the performance of the commandments is an obligation.
2. The second aspect is unrelated to the performance of the commandments. The *Talmud Chacham* studies the Torah to become familiar with God, and learn His culture.
The first word of the Ten Commandments is Anochi. The Talmud says this is an acrostic that stands for ano nafshi kasvis yahavis, literally "I have written myself into this book that I am giving you." (Talmud Shabos, 105a). The Talmud Chacham who spends his life immersed in Torah study, is imbibing the very soul of God along with the words of Torah that he is learning.

Our aim is familiarity with God as a personality that we can have a relationship with. We want to love God and have Him love us in return, and we want to be aware of the feelings on both sides. For this we need the Talmud Chacham.

It is only through him that we obtain the knowledge of God that is a prerequisite to any possible relationship with Him. Just as in the case of human love, knowledge precedes feelings, so it is with the love of God. Without the Torah scholar this knowledge, and therefore this love, would be absent from the world.

It is one of the many wonders of Judaism that often the Tzaddik who immerses himself in the service of God, such as prayer and good works, feels a greater love for God than the Torah scholar, who spends his life in intellectual pursuit. But without the knowledge of God generated by the Torah scholar, the Tzaddik would not have known how to get started in his pursuit of the emotional attachment to God.

Love of God thus radiates outward from the Torah. The Tzaddik attaches himself to the Torah scholar and is the first to feel this love, and those who attach themselves to the Tzaddik detect its radiant warmth and energy through him. But the ultimate source of this love is the Torah and our access to the Torah must necessarily depend on the amount of Torah knowledge in our possession thanks to the efforts and hard work of the Torah scholar.

RUTH’S SEARCH

Ruth the Moabite was looking for the missing 606 commandments not simply because she was looking for the truth and the right way to live, although no doubt these impulses were also a part of her drive to conversion. But chiefly, she wanted to attach herself to God to cleave to Him, to connect herself to the source of all life and being.

The only way to do this was to attach herself to a person who was already attached in this way to God. Thus she followed Naomi the person, rather than the abstract truth.

We read her story on Shavuot to teach us that this is the type of Torah acceptance we are seeking. We are not after God's laws. We are seeking to attach ourselves to God Himself.

The second major thesis offered by the commentators for reading the Book of Ruth on Shavuot is also hinted to in her name. She is named Ruth because her great grandson, King David showered God with his songs and praises. (Yalkut, Tehilim, 247) The word rave in Hebrew, a play on the letters of Ruth’s name means "to shower," and David authored the book of Psalms, the basic hymnbook to God of the majority of mankind. According to tradition, Shavuot is David's birthday as well as the day on which he passed away, and his full genealogy is recited at the conclusion of the Book of Ruth.

ESSENTIAL LINK

The appreciation of this thesis requires some more background:

God said to Moses: ‘You shall not distress Moab, and you shall not provoke war with them.’ (Deut. 2:9) Why would it have occurred to Moses to wage war with Moab without God's permission? Moses reasoned thus: If the Midionites who only came to assist Moab (in the war Moab waged with Israel described in Parshat Balak) the Torah commanded, Harass the Midionites and smite them; for they harassed you
through their conspiracy that they conspired against you ... (Numbers 25:17-18). Surely the same policy should be applied against the Moabites who were the instigators. But God told Moses, 'I think differently! I still have a wonderful treasure to pull out, Ruth the Moabitite.' (Talmud, Baba Kama 38a)

Not only was Ruth David's great grandmother. It was specifically she that was required to be able to bring David into the world. The need for her was so great that the entire Moabite nation was sustained for several hundred years in her merit while the world waited for Ruth to be born. Can we find any sources to uncover why Ruth the Moabite specifically was needed to bring the line of David from whom would descend the Messiah into the world?

[The angels urged Lot, saying,] 'Take your wife and your two daughters who are present.' (Genesis 19:15) The Hebrew word nimzoas ["who are present"] in this verse is a reference to two important discoveries: Ruth the Moabitite and Na'amah the Amonite. It is written I found my servant David. Where did God find him? In Sodom (Yalkut, Lech lecho, 70).

When God destroyed Sodom he saved Lot because of his two daughters. The daughters, believed that they and their father were the only people left on earth, engaged in acts of incest with him. As a result one gave birth to the progenitor of Moab, and the other to the progenitor of Amon. It would thus seem that Ruth was needed because she was a descendant of Lot? And who was Lot?

Now these are the chronicles of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor and Haran; and Haran begot Lot ... And Abram and Nahor took themselves wives. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milka, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milka and the father of Iscah. (Genesis 11:27-28)

Close examination of this passage reveals an astounding piece of information. It turns out that Haran, Abram's brother, was the grandfather of all of the most important Jewish women in history. The rabbis teach that Iscah was Sara (see Rashi Ibid), Rebecca was Milka's grand-daughter, and all of Jacob's wives were her great grand daughters. Lot was Haran's son and therefore Ruth was also a grand-daughter.

Can this be a coincidence? Let us attempt to uncover the significance of all this.

SPECIAL GENIUS

Electricity was known and understood for many years by the time Edison was born. Graham Bell uncovered nothing new about the nature of sound waves. Yet without these two geniuses the knowledge of electricity and sound waves would not have benefited the world. There is a special genius involved in the exploitation of ideas, just as there is a genius in their discovery. In Hebrew this genius is known as binah, often translated as "understanding," and it is the special property of women.

In the prelude to Sinai, we read:

So shall you say to the House of Jacob and relate to the Children of Israel (Exodus 18:3)

Rashi explains why the seeming redundancy "House of Jacob," and "Children of Israel." The House of Jacob refers to Jewish women -- Jewish women are the Jewish house.

The ideas of Judaism come to life in the Jewish home and are translated into reality by the guidance of the Jewish woman.

The Jewish man carries the obligation of learning the Torah, but it is the Jewish woman who translates its ideas into the realities of everyday living. Abraham was the genius who brought the knowledge of God into the world, but it was his brother Haran who carried the seeds of the genius required to translate the
knowledge that Abraham discovered into everyday life. Thus the greatest Jewish women were Haran's descendants.

The Jewish Kingdom is a reflection of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom of Heaven carries in it a great power. This power is to redeem and regenerate and ensure that no part of what is noble and precious about humanity is ever lost.

Thus an act of heaven was required when Lot, Haran's son, left Abraham and became lost in Sodom. The powers of holiness and greatness that were buried in him seemed forever lost to the service of God. But because God is the absolute King and controls history even as man is free to do what he wants, He has the capacity to ensure the recovery of this lost greatness. This is the true significance of the Kingdom of Heaven.

To ensure that nothing good is ever lost and is ultimately recovered requires eternal vigilance. The conversion of Ruth made possible the recovery of the lost power of Haran required to bring about the birth of the Jewish kingdom, reflective of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. She carried the bina necessary to translate it into every day life.

**LOT'S MISTAKE CORRECTED**

To emphasize the aspect of redemption involved in the establishment of the Jewish Kingdom, the marriage of Ruth to Boaz -- which ultimately resulted in the birth of David -- was a "levirated" marriage. This type of marriage is specifically mandated by the Torah as a means of recovering the soul that left the world without managing to produce any issue. Thus the entire purpose of Ruth's marriage was to ensure that the soul of her first husband Machlon who died -- and the spiritual power and greatness that was latent in it -- would not be lost to the world or to Israel.

The recovery of all this lost potential happened through the correction of Lot's error by his great-great-granddaughter Ruth.

Lot left Abraham over worldly possessions. After all, he was a believer himself, he knew the truth, he had learned how to serve God on his own, and he thought he did not need Abraham. As it was better for him in Sodom materially, and as he didn't perceive any spiritual necessity to remain with Abraham, he left. His error was that to serve God it is not enough to be aware of the absolute truth. You have to be attached to Him. The attachment to God comes about through the attachment to the Talmud Chacham. He should have stayed with Abraham.

The Gaon of Vilna shows how Ruth corrected this mistake: by a steadfast yearning for an attachment to God.

One of the laws of conversion that we learn from the story of Ruth is the need to discourage the potential convert. Thus Naomi talked her daughter in law Orpa out of conversion, and she attempted to dissuade Ruth as well. At a certain point Naomi stopped.

The Gaon asks: How did Naomi know exactly when to stop? He explains: at the point she stopped, it says, *When she saw that she strained to go with her, she stopped arguing with her.* (Ruth 1:18) Naomi was much older than Ruth and Ruth should have had no trouble at all keeping up with Naomi; yet Naomi saw that it was a strain on Ruth to keep pace with her. From this she realized that Ruth was torn; there was a part of her that was reluctant to take the step of conversion.

Ruth was a Moabite princess according to tradition. She was used to the best things in life. She was also a beautiful young woman in the prime of life. The step she was taking would introduce her to a life of poverty; her mother-in-law had lost everything she had through her misfortunes and was returning home
entirely destitute. So, in going with Naomi, Ruth was leaving a life of high status to become a lowly convert of questionable status. It was not even clear if a Jew would even be permitted to marry her. A large part of her said, "Why go to Israel? You can serve God wherever you are. After all these years of living in a Jewish house, you know all the laws and can observe all the commandments right where you are. There is no need for this great self sacrifice."

Ruth was torn. But what she wanted was closeness to God, she wanted attachment. Staying in Moab observing the commandments would not give her that; only attachment to the Talmud Chacham would. She decided to go with Naomi to join the Jewish people no matter what, but the strain of her inner conflict made it difficult for her to keep up. This is when Naomi stopped discouraging her. Naomi understood Ruth and saw that she was after an attachment to God. She had absorbed the true message of Judaism.

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