



## THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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# “Two Very Different Texts”

The Ten Commandments and the *Book of Ruth* are two very different biblical texts, yet they both will be read on the upcoming festival of Shavuot. In Israel, where Shavuot is celebrated for just one day, they are even read on the very same day. These two texts are as important to the intellectual appreciation and religious experience of Shavuot as blintzes and cheesecake are to the culinary celebration of this beautiful holiday. Yet they are strikingly different from each other. We are puzzled to find them sharing the center stage of this holiday.

After all, it is “The time of the giving of the Torah!” What connects the *Book of Ruth*, a simple pastoral tale, to the central theme of this festival? Would not some other biblical passage serve as a more apt companion to the Ten Commandments? Why commemorate the momentous occasion of God’s Revelation on Mount Sinai with this charming, but surely not momentous story?

To answer this question let us ponder the plot of the *Book of Ruth*. It is often included in anthologies of the world’s greatest short stories where it is erroneously classified as a tale illustrating that good deeds lead to happy endings. But a careful reading of the book, which I encourage all of you to undertake in preparation for Shavuot, reveals that this story is by no means merely an idyllic morality tale.

The characters of the *Book of Ruth* suffer

almost every conceivable human tragedy: famine, betrayal, exile, sudden death, bereavement, widowhood, loneliness, poverty and shame. The book begins with the depiction of a demoralized nation of Israel, devastated by famine. One noble family deserts its brethren and betrays its homeland. The family soon experiences the pangs of exile. Its sons marry women of an alien culture, further betraying their heritage. Death strikes swiftly, leaving three widows, and one bereaved mother. Two of the women return home in shame and loneliness, with a life of poverty in store for them.

Both women, mother-in-law Naomi and daughter-in-law Ruth, return home with hope. Naomi’s is the hope of desperation. She has no choice but to hope. But Ruth’s is the hope of courage and commitment: “Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you dwell, I will dwell; your people shall be my people and your God my God.” (*Book of Ruth* 1:16)

This makes for a stirring and inspirational narrative. But the question remains: What does this drama have to do with *zman matan Torateinu*, the “time of the giving of the Torah?” Does this tale match up to the majesty and power of the Ten Commandments? What connection is there between God’s Universal Laws, His do’s and don’ts for the human race, and this sad tale? How does this story, in which God barely plays a role, find its way

into the liturgy of a day which celebrates the most foundational religious experience? God Himself utters the Ten Commandments, but His name appears only incidentally in the *Book of Ruth!*

For me, the answer is apparent. Two texts are chosen for Shavuot. One tells of the laws, standards, and requirements of a just and successful society. The Ten Commandments incorporate, as our Rabbis have demonstrated, the Torah's highest values: compassion, generosity, loyalty, and responsibility for each other. The *Book of Ruth* proffers but one example of a society which defies those values with disastrous consequences, but achieves inspiring results when it abides by them.

The Rabbis (*Yalkut Ruth*, 594) tell us that the *Book of Ruth* is read on Shavuot, the anniversary of the giving of the Torah, to teach us that one must be prepared for suffering and poverty in one's search to master Torah. *Mastery* of Torah does not come easy, and a life led according to the Torah's precepts calls for significant sacrifice. But eventually, the difficulties entailed by a total commitment to the Torah's demands prove to be the very sources of a life of happiness and fulfillment.

The tragic circumstances of the *Book of Ruth* gradually recede. Loneliness is overcome by a caring community, shame is lifted by understanding and forgiveness, poverty is ended by charity, and widowhood is overcome by love. Even the bereavement is eventually softened by rebirth.

Rabbi Zeira in the Midrash (*Ruth Rabbah* 2:15) wonders: "This scroll teaches us nothing about ritual purity or impurity, nor does it inform us about what is forbidden and what is permissible. Why then was it given a place in the Biblical canon?" To which he answers, "It is in order to teach us about the benefits

which ensue from a life lived with compassion and loving-kindness."

The Ten Commandments describe the ultimate encounter of Man with God. Our sages teach us that the *Book of Ruth* was written by the Prophet Samuel. In it he tells us a story which is but an illustration of the lesson that our father Abraham taught us by his example centuries before Samuel: "Loving-kindness, exemplified by simple hospitality, pre-empted even the direct experience of the Almighty's Presence!"

The Ten Commandments declare God's expectations of His people. The tale of Ruth and Naomi epitomizes His people's history. Our people have known all of the tragedies described in the story, and more. But as we have persisted through those tragedies we have come to glimpse what a truly benevolent society can resemble. We have experienced, albeit thus far never yet completely, the blessings of redemption.

Those blessings result from our adherence to the values of the Ten Commandments, one of the texts we read on Shavuot. One example of those blessings is described in the other text we read on Shavuot, the *exquisitely* uplifting *Book of Ruth*, which culminates in the birth of King David, the symbol and progenitor of the Messiah, with whom will come the final redemption. ■

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