

## Why do we read Megillat Ruth on Shavuot?

by Rabbi Dovid Kaplan, Congregation Ohav Zedek, Wilkes-Barre, PA

Our Rabbis offer a multitude of reasons for the connection between Shavuot and Megillat Ruth. I want to share with you an approach that will hopefully redefine Shavuot for you in a new and different light.

There are few verses in the Torah that are more moving and poetic than those that we find in the first chapter of Megillat Ruth. Naomi begins a transformative journey back from the fields of Moav to Israel. Naomi has lost everything: her family, her youth, and her hope. So desperate is Naomi to leave Moav, that she even travels on Pesach, when such travel is forbidden. Naomi's daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah accompany her. Naomi attempts to dissuade them from coming with her by using some very direct and even harsh words. Orpah kisses Naomi good-bye and departs; Ruth clings to Naomi and refuses to leave.

Ruth then expresses her love for Hashem, the Jewish People, and Naomi through the following magical pesukim:

### **Book of Ruth 1:16-17**

ותאמר רות אל־תפגע־יָבִי לְעִזְבֹתָ לְשׁוֹב מֵאַחֲרַיָּךְ כִּי אֶל־אַשֶׁר תִּלְכִּי אֶלֶף וּבְאַשֶׁר תִּלְיִנִי אֶלֶיךָ עִמָּךְ עִמָּךְ וְאֶל־הָ אֱלֹהֵי בְּאֶשֶׁר תִּמְוִתִי אֲמוֹת וְשֵׁם אֲקַבֵּר כֹּה יַעֲשֶׂה יְיָ לִּי וְכֹה יוֹסִיף כִּי הִמּוֹת יִפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבֵינָךְ:

*And Ruth said, "Do not entreat me to leave you, to return from following you, for wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. So may the Lord do to me and so may He continue, if anything but death separate me and you."*

The poetry and majesty of Ruth's words are magnificent! The Talmud however, sees Ruth's words in a much less poetic way and explains that her words, her declarations of love, are in fact her responses to Naomi's repeated attempts at dissuading her from conversion.

### **Talmud Bavli, Masechet Yevamot 47B**

אמרה לה אסיר לך תחום שבת באשר תלכי אלך אסיר לך יחוד באשר תליני אלך מפקדינן שש מאות וי"ג מצות עמך עמי אסיר לך עבודת כוכבים ואלקיך אלקי ארבע מיתות נמסרו לב"ד באשר תמותי אמות ב' קברים נמסרו לב"ד ושם אקבר:

*Naomi: "On Shabbat, it is prohibited for us to go beyond the Shabbat limit."*

*Ruth: "Where you go, I shall go."*

*Naomi: "It is forbidden for us to be secluded with a man."*

*Ruth: "Where you lodge, I shall lodge."*

*Naomi: "We are commanded to observe six hundred and thirteen mitzvot."*

*Ruth: "Your people are my people".*

*Naomi: "Idol worship is forbidden to us."*

*Ruth: "Your God is my God."*

*Naomi: "The court has the authority to execute sinners in four ways".*

*Ruth: "Where you die, I shall die."*

*Naomi: "Two burial grounds were handed over to the court for those executed."*

*Ruth: "And there I will be buried." (Talmud Bavli, Masechet Yevamot 47B)*

Why exclude Naomi's dialogue from the *Megillah* and leave it to the Talmud (and most Midrashim) to fill in the blanks for us with a less than inspiring Halachic approach? The *halachot* of how and when we can accept a convert are based upon these pesukim, so why is half the conversation absent in the *Megillah* itself? Incredibly, both the Rambam and the Shulchan Aruch follow the *Megillah*'s approach when discussing the Halachic parameters and rules of how we accept a convert. They specifically do not follow the Talmud's exegesis.

### **Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Issurei Biah 14:1-2**

פיצד מקבלין גרי הצדק. כשיבוא אחד להתגייר מן העפ"ם ויבדקו אחריו ולא ימצאו עלה. אומרים לו מה ראית שפאת להתגייר. אי אפה יודע שישראל בזמן הזה דוויים ודחופים ומסחפים ומטרפין ויסורין באין עליהן. אם אמר אני יודע ואיני כדאי מקבלין אותו מיד: ומודיעין אותו עקרי הדת שהוא יחיד השם ואסור עפ"ם. ומאריכין בדבר הזה. ומודיעין אותו מקצת מצות קלות ומקצת מצות חמורות. ואין מאריכין בדבר זה.

*What is the procedure when accepting a righteous convert? When one of the gentiles comes to convert, we inspect his background. If an ulterior motive for conversion is not found, we ask him: "Why did you choose to convert? Don't you know that in the present era, the Jews are afflicted, crushed, subjugated, strained, and suffering comes upon them?" If he answers: "I know and I do not consider myself worthy of joining", we accept him immediately. We then inform him of the fundamentals of the faith: the unity of God and the prohibition against the worship of idols. We elaborate on this matter. We inform him about some of the easy mitzvot and some of the more severe ones. We do not elaborate on this matter. (Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Issurei Biah 14:1-2)*

The Rambam says that we are not permitted to have a long, involved *Halachic* discussion with the potential convert ala Naomi and Ruth in the Talmud. Once we exclude any ulterior motives for conversion, we question the convert's sanity, "Why on earth would you ever want to join the most maligned and persecuted Nation in the World?" If the convert responds, "Yes, I know all about the dark history of the Jewish People, if only I was worthy to join them", we must convert them on the spot! Only after converting them do we even inform them that they can no longer worship idols and must believe in one God. The Rambam's words parallel those of Ruth. Hashem doesn't want a cerebral covenant based on Halachic minutiae; He wants our hearts! These are Ruth's own words to Naomi, "I am joining the Jewish People no matter what you say! No law or rule could possibly matter to me, for they are mere details. Whatever it takes and whatever it may mean for me, I am in!"

Ruth's words should be very familiar to each of us, for they echo the words that we said on Shavuot to Hashem: "And Moshe took the Book of the Covenant and read it within the hearing of the people, and they said, "All that the L-rd spoke we will do and (then) we will hear." Hashem asked us on Mt. Sinai, "Do you want to know what is written in My Torah?" We responded, "No, we are in, we love You and we want a relationship with You, tell us the details tomorrow."

It is nigh but impossible for us to even imagine what it really means to accept Hashem and His Torah. Ruth allows us to see ourselves from without, through her magnificent eyes, to help us fully appreciate the enormity of Hashem's gift, the privilege of being a member of Israel. May Ruth always inspire us and help lift us to new heights this Shavuot!

**Questions to ponder:**

- What circumstances and dynamics have occurred over the centuries that necessitated the current model?
- Does Israel's right of return policy impact World conversion standards?
- How does *Klal Yisrael* view those who convert? Are we more like a Boaz or a *Ploni Almoni*?