



Who Knows Ruth?

How does Ruth the Moabite ultimately gain acceptance within the Jewish people, and even become the mother of royalty? Ruth is the Moabite wife of Machlon, son of Elimelech and Naomi, who left Israel during a famine to find sustenance in Moav. Elimelech and his two sons have died, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law alone. Naomi decides it's time to go home and the three women begin the journey. On the way, Naomi implores her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, to go back to their families and begin new lives, since she is bereft and penniless and can offer nothing but a bleak future. Orpah reluctantly agrees to remain in Moav. Ruth, however, insists on accompanying her mother-in-law on her journey. In doing so, Ruth not only leaves her home and family but also explicitly accepts Naomi's G-d: "Your nation is my nation and your G-d is my G-d."¹

When Ruth and Naomi return, they are hardly embraced. The townspeople can't even believe it's Naomi when they see her, and they utterly ignore the young Moabite woman who came back with her. When Ruth goes to pick up leftover wheat amongst the destitute in the fields of Boaz, the farmhands see simply a nameless "Moabite girl who returned with Naomi from the fields of Moab" when Boaz inquires as to her identity. But Boaz looks at her differently; alone among the Jews of Beit Lechem, Boaz is kind to Ruth, and her expression

of surprise shows how rare that reaction was! When she asks him why he is kind to her, when after all she is a stranger, he responds: "I have heard all that you have done for your mother-in-law after your husband died; you left your father and your mother and your birthplace to move to a nation that you never knew before."²

What made Boaz see Ruth differently? The name "Boaz" combines two Hebrew words, and it means "in him, is strength." To everyone else, Ruth is the appendage of a family who abandoned the homeland when times were tough and comes from a nation we are told to have nothing to do with. Boaz has the strength to see the parallel in Ruth to another individual who came from an idol-worshipping family from a strange land, and he hints at it in the words he chooses as he comforts Ruth.

Those words Boaz chooses are so reminiscent of G-d's command to Avraham in Bereishit 12: "Go forth from your land, your birthplace, and the home of your father, to the Land that I will show you." Ruth is portrayed as a second Avraham – willing to leave her homeland and family and move to the Land of Israel. Avraham is known as the father of all converts, recognizing G-d in a pagan world. Ruth, too, accepts G-d as part of her journey. We know Avraham as the paragon of lovingkindness and the ultimate host, seeking out guests and hurrying to make them comfortable.

Ruth is so incredibly kind to her mother-in-law, insisting on accompanying her back home, and then seeking out food for her when they return to Beit Lechem penniless. Avraham was willing to sacrifice Yitzchak to follow G-d's command; Ruth is willing to sacrifice her own future as well, as she insists on going back with Naomi even after Naomi makes it abundantly clear that if she joins her, she will unlikely remarry – and therefore never have children.

So many generations after Avraham, we are reminded that each of us, man and woman, can be Avraham – making the conscious choice to follow G-d, and exemplifying Avraham's trait of kindness and caring, which of course is really G-d's trait – קל רחום קל רחום (Exodus 34).

We read Megillat Ruth on Shavuot, the day on which we all renew our acceptance of the Torah each year, rededicating ourselves to G-d and to the Torah and its values. May we follow the example of Avraham and Ruth – of sincere dedication to G-d and sensitivity and kindness to all those around us.

1 Ruth 1:16.

2 Ibid 2:6,11.

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