

# Converting to Kindness<sup>s</sup>

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## Gifts to the poor

*R. Zeira said, this megila [Ruth] has not in it any [issues of] purity or impurity, nor prohibited or permitted [items], and [so] why was it written? To teach the reward for performing acts of kindness.*

### **Ruth Rabbah 2**

א"ר זעירא מגלה זו אין בה לא טומאה ולא טהרה ולא איסור ולא היתר ולמה נכתבה ללמדך כמה שכר טוב לגומלי חסדים.  
**רות רבה (וילנא) פרשה ב**

This Midrashic statement explains the essence and message of Megillat Rut, the enchanting and inspiring tale we read each year on Shavuot. Our custom to read various Megillot on specific holidays is recorded in Masechet Sofrim (Chapter 14), and we are left to explore the connection between each Megillah and its holiday. In light of our Midrash, we wonder, what the thematic connection between Rut and Shavuot is. In the phrasing of our tefillot on Shavuot, we refer to this Yom Tov as the time of the giving of our Torah. It is quite curious, then, that on this day that commemorates the revelation at Sinai, at which we received the Ten Commandments, we read a tale that contains no laws at all?! Moreover, why is kindness so essential to the story of Rut?

An oblique connection between Megillat Rut and Shavuot can be found in the Torah's description of the holiday itself. In Parshat Emor, in its section dedicated to the holidays, the Torah describes this day as the culmination of a period of counting, beginning with the Omer offering and concluding with the Shte Halechem offering forty-nine days later. The capstone of the counting is our festival, which is described immediately before the Torah's introduction of Rosh Hashana, the ensuing holiday on the calendar. Yet, a peculiar law appears in this context:

*And you shall make proclamation on the selfsame day; there shall be a holy convocation for you; you shall do no manner of servile work; it is a statute for ever in all your dwellings throughout your generations. And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corner of your field, neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor, and for the stranger: I am the Lord your God.*

### **Vayikra 23:21-22**

וקראתם בעצם היום הזה מקרא קדש יהיה לכם כל מלאכת עבודה לא תעשו חקת עולם בכל מושבתים לדרתיכם: ובקצרכם את קציר ארצכם לא תכלה פאת שדך בקצרך ולקט קצירך לא תלקט לעני ולגר תעזב אתם אני ה' אלהיכם:  
**ויקרא כג:כא-כב**

This Biblical prescription of מתנות עניים- gifts to the poor- plays a key role in the story of Rut, for it was while collecting these gifts that Rut first encountered Boaz, her future redeemer and husband. The development of the relationship between Boaz and Rut was formed on the backdrop of this

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mitzvah. However, the inclusion of the principles of gleanings for the poor at this point in the Chumash is perplexing. We have already been taught this law in Parshat Kedoshim, so why is it being repeated and why in the middle of the Torah's section of the festivals?

Another fascinating instance when we find a specific reference to gifts to the poor is in the guidelines regarding the process of conversion. While the acceptance of each and every mitzvah is the essence and definition of conversion, the convert is not required to learn all of the Torah's precepts in advance of conversion.

*It was taught: A convert who comes nowadays to convert is asked "what did you see that motivated you to convert? Don't you know that the Jewish people today are wanderers, pushed, beaten and ravaged, and suffering befall them"? If he says "I know, and I am not worthy" we accept him immediately. We tell him some of the light mitzvos and some of the heavy mitzvos, and we tell him the punishment for [not giving] leket, shichacha, peah and maser ani.*

**Yevamot 47a**

תנו רבנן: גר שבא להתגייר בזמן הזה, אומרים לו: מה ראית שבאת להתגייר? אי אתה יודע שישראל בזמן הזה דוויים, דחופים, סחופים ומטורפין, ויסורין באין עליהם? אם אומר: יודע אני ואיני כדאי, מקבלין אותו מיד. ומודיעין אותו מקצת מצות קלות ומקצת מצות חמורות, ומודיעין אותו עון לקט שכחה ופאה ומעשר עני  
**מסכת יבמות דף מז.**

Why are the mitzvot of gifts for the poor singled out of all the possible choices as necessary for the convert to accept in specific? To understand the role of gifts to the poor in the context of conversion, we must examine the roots of conversion itself and who was the first convert to Judaism.

## Conversion and Kindness

At the conclusion of our seder, many have the custom to sing a poem with the refrain, "and it was in the middle of the night." In this poem, the anonymous author makes reference to an unnamed גר צדק - an authentic convert. Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn (12<sup>th</sup> c. France) in his commentary on this poem identifies this convert as Avraham Avinu. The Gemara supports this by noting:

*"The precious ones of the nations were gathered with the God of Avraham." The God of Avraham and not of Yitzchak and Yaacov? Rather, the God of Avraham who was the first to convert.*

**Chagiga 3a**

(תהלים מז) נדיבי עמים נאספו עם אלהי אברהם. אלהי אברהם ולא אלהי יצחק ויעקב? אלא אלהי אברהם שהיה תחילה לגרים.  
**מסכת חגיגה דף ג.**

It is not coincidental that Avraham Avinu was historically the first convert and the founder of our faith. We know that the foundation of our universe is kindness, as Tehillim (89) teaches: כי אמרתי "as I have said, the world, on kindness will be built". The world of Judaism, too, is built upon kindness, as Avraham, the first convert, is the quintessential paragon of kindness:

*"He who runs after charity and kindness will find life, charity and honor." Runs after kindness refers to Avraham, as it says "And he kept the ways of Hashem to do charity" kindness is the kindness he did for Sarah, will find life, [as it says] the number of years of Avraham's life were 100 years, and 70 years and 5 years.*

**Bereishit Rabbah Parshat Chaye Sarah 58**

(משלי כא) רודף צדקה וחסד ימצא חיים צדקה וכבוד, רודף צדקה זה אברהם שנאמר ושמרו דרך ה' לעשות צדקה, וחסד שגמל חסד לשרה, ימצא חיים, ושני חיי אברהם מאת שנה ושבעים שנה וחמשה שנים  
**בראשית רבה פרשה נח**

The prophet Micah sums up this notion with his attribution: “חסד לאברהם,” kindness is to Avraham, our founding father. All future converts to Judaism continue the tradition of Avraham, building the foundation of their Judaism, their connection with Hashem, upon the precept of kindness, embodied by our first convert.<sup>9</sup> We now understand why the specific mitzvot that we share with a potential convert are those of kindness, the trait of Avraham the convert. This can also shed light on why the Torah includes this theme in its description of Shavuot, our anniversary of the revelation at Sinai, as we will explore.

## Conversion at Sinai

The Torah outlines several fundamental tenets of Jewish faith that were established at the revelation of Matan Torah, yet the Talmud views it as a model for a Halachic process as well. According to the Talmud, Matan Torah and the revelation at Sinai is the model for conversion for generations as it culminated the conversion process of the Jewish people:

*Rebi said: Like you, like your forefathers. Just as your forefathers entered the covenant with mila, immersion and a blood-gift, so too they will enter the covenant with mila, immersion and a blood-gift ... A blood gift, as it is written “and the young ones of the Jewish people were sent...” and what is the source for immersion? As it is written “Moshe took half the blood and sprinkled it on the people” and there is no sprinkling without immersion.*

### **Keritot 9a**

רבי אומר: ככם - כאבותיכם, מה אבותיכם לא נכנסו לברית אלא במילה וטבילה והרצאת דם, אף הם לא יכנסו לברית אלא במילה וטבילה והרצאת דמים ... הרצאת דמים, דכתיב: (שמות כ"ד) וישלח את נערי בני ישראל, אלא טבילה מנלן? דכתיב: (שמות כ"ד) ויקח משה חצי הדם ויזרק על העם, ואין הזאה בלא טבילה  
מסכת כריתות דף ט.

The Talmud describes that when the Jewish people stood at Har Sinai they immersed for Tevilah and offered korbanot, which completed their conversion to Judaism. Ramban (Shemot 24:1) explains that their response of נעשה ונשמע - we will do and we will listen- was the fulfillment of a key step in conversion: the acceptance of Hashem’s mitzvot. Our experience at Sinai was history’s first communal conversion to Judaism and the model for the future. In light of what we have learned, an essence aspect of this national conversion is a culture of kindness, one that became embedded in our national identity, as the Talmud (Yevamot 79a) relates, Jewish people are marked with three qualities: merciful, bashful and ambassadors of kindness.

The Torah’s inclusion of a reference to the gifts to the poor at the onset of the harvest season heralded by the holiday of Shavuot is fully in consonance with the theme of Matan Torah- conversion to Judaism and its character of kindness. This is the bridge to understanding its connection with the reading of Megillat Rut.

## A Tale of a Convert

Rut is the shining example of a convert to Judaism. The Megillah describes her insistence on becoming part of G-d’s covenant, in contrast to her sister, who returned to their Moabite origins.

<sup>9</sup> Hence, Hillel the elder, when approached by a potential convert who wanted to learn the entirety of Torah while standing on one foot, responded with a summative dictum guiding interpersonal relationships. See Shabbat 31a.

And she said: 'Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people, and to her god; return after your sister-in-law.' And Ruth said: 'Entreat me not to leave you, and to return from following after you; for where you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me, and more also, if only death will part us.' And when she saw that she was steadfastly minded to go with her, she left off speaking unto her.

**Ruth 1:16-18**

ותאמר הננה שבה יבמתך אל עמה ואל אלהיה שובי אחרי יבמתך: ותאמר רות אל תפגעני בי לעזובך לשוב מאחריך כי אל אשר תלכי אלך ובאשר תליני אליו עמך עמי ואלהיך אלהי: באשר תמותי אמות ושם אקבר כה יעשה יקוק לי וכה יסיף כי המות יפריד ביני ובינך: ותרא כי מתאמצת היא ללכת אתה ותחדל לדבר אליה:

**רות א:טו-יח**

This steadfast commitment, despite Naomi's discouragement, becomes the framework for future converts and the litmus test for their sincerity, as the Talmud teaches:

[The potential convert] is not to be persuaded, or dissuaded too much'. R. Eleazar said: What is the Scriptural proof? It is written, And when she saw that she was steadfastly minded to go with her, she left off speaking unto her. 'We are forbidden', she told her, '[to move on the Sabbath beyond the] Sabbath boundaries!' 'Where you go I will go'. 'We are forbidden private meeting between man and woman!' 'Where you lodge, I will lodge' 'We have been commanded 613 commandments!' 'Your people shall be my people'. 'We are forbidden idolatry!' 'And your God my God'. 'Four modes of death were entrusted to Beth din!' 'Where you die, will I die'. 'Two graveyards were placed at the disposal of the Beth din!' 'And there will I be buried'. Immediately she saw that she was steadfastly minded...

**Yevamot 47b**

ואין מרבים עליו, ואין מדקדקים עליו. אמר רבי אלעזר: מאי קראה? דכתיב: ותרא כי מתאמצת היא ללכת אתה ותחדל לדבר אליה, אמרה לה: אסיר לך תחום שבת! באשר תלכי אלך. אסיר לך יהוד! באשר תליני אליו. מפקדינן שש מאות וי"ג מצות! עמך עמי. אסיר לך עבודת כוכבים! ואלהיך אלהי. ארבע מיתות נמסרו לב"ד! באשר תמותי אמות. ב' קברים נמסרו לב"ד! ושם אקבר. מיד, ותרא כי מתאמצת היא וגו' **מסכת יבמות דף מז:**

We learn that Rut is the paradigm of a true convert. Hence, explained Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in the name of the Gaon of Vilna, Megillat Rut is the perfect fit for Shavuot.<sup>10</sup> Megillat Rut is the story of conversion and Shavuot is the anniversary of our national conversion to Judaism. Furthermore, the personality of Rut and her embrace of Judaism are all about kindness. In contrast to Moab, a nation that is described in the Torah as cruel and uncaring (Devarim 23:5) Rut seeks a new lifestyle, a religion of kindness, which she finds embodied in Boaz and Hashem's people. We now appreciate that just as at Har Sinai we entered into the covenant of Avraham, the conversion of kindness, for all future generations, we read the story of Rut, the individual who entered into this covenant. The Midrash with which we began underscores that the central motif of the story of the Rut, the story of her conversion and the story of the founding of our nation is keenly focused on kindness.

<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Soloveitchik delivered this talk on Megillat Rut in 5728. Notes from the talk were published in Beit Yitzchak vol. 24 by Alan Rothman.