

# THE BENJAMIN AND ROSE BERGER TORAH TO-GO®

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Center for the Jewish Future

## **Featuring Divrei Torah from**

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Rabbi Ozer Glickman

Mr. Charles Harary

Rabbi Dr. David Horwitz

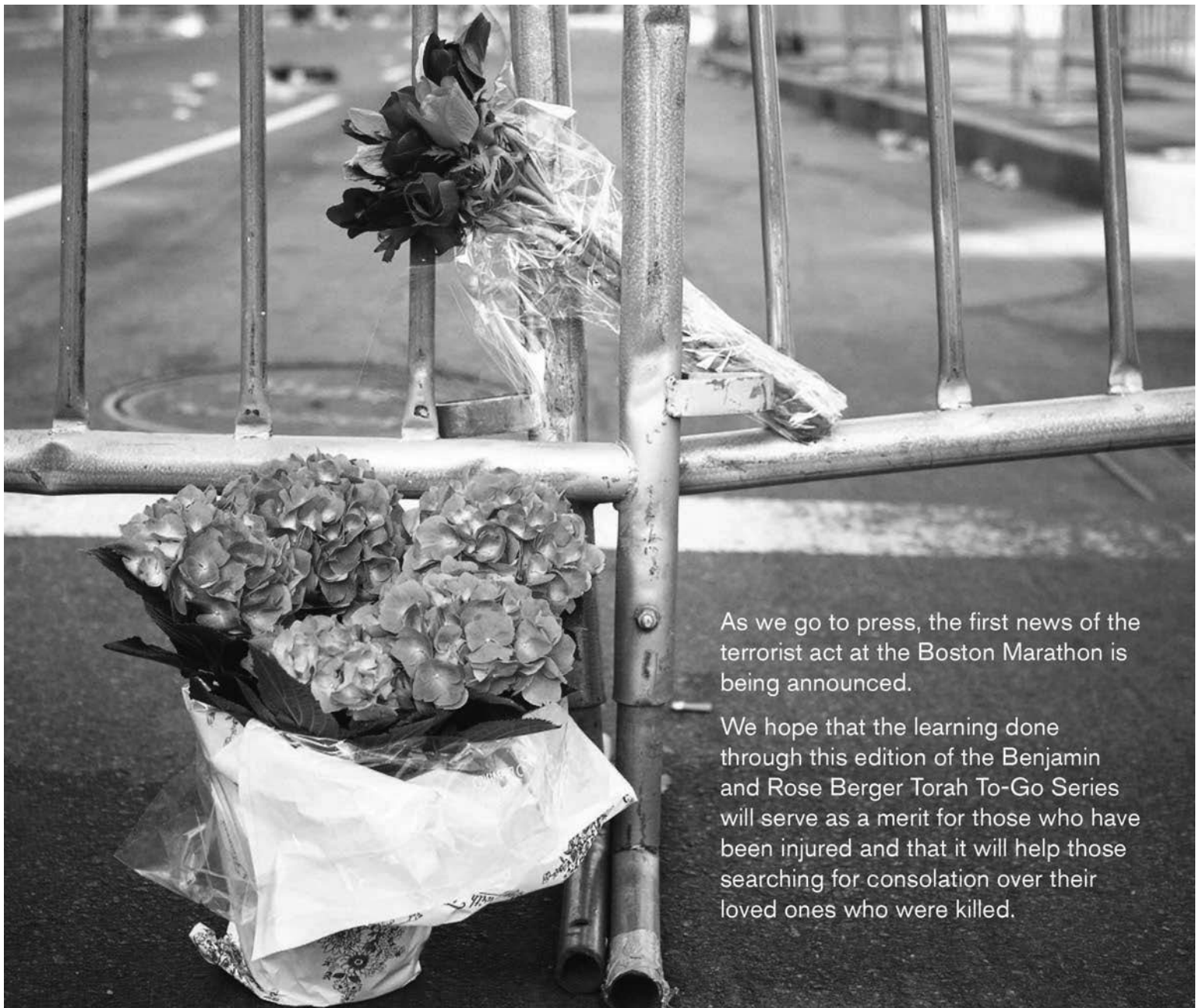
Rabbi Josh Joseph

Dr. Yitzchak Schechter

Mrs. Natalie Taylor

Dr. Ilana Turetsky





As we go to press, the first news of the terrorist act at the Boston Marathon is being announced.

We hope that the learning done through this edition of the Benjamin and Rose Berger Torah To-Go Series will serve as a merit for those who have been injured and that it will help those searching for consolation over their loved ones who were killed.

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**Editor's Note:** A correction from Meira Davis: I apologize for an inaccuracy in my interview about the Rav (which appeared in the most recent Pesach To Go) regarding the Rav's objection to the Boston Eruv. I stand corrected by Dr. Jesse Hefter, who was personally responsible for the design, development, and construction of the Boston Eruv and still manages it to this day with great dedication. Dr. Hefter notes: "Our project to build the Boston Eruv began in the fall of 1984. I initially met with the Bostoner Rebbe, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Horowitz zt"l, and we discussed whether the Rav's position on eruv would in any way hinder this project. Rabbi Horowitz explained to me that he had met with the Rav and discussed this topic and that the Rav's position was that as long as the eruv was constructed according to proper halachic standards, he was in no way against erecting an eruv in Boston (I recently reconfirmed this position with Rabbi Naftali Horowitz shlita, the current Bostoner Rebbe). Further, Rabbi Morris Funk a"h, a close friend of the Rav, spent years of summers at Onset (the Rav's summer home) and told me personally that the Rav was asked during Shabbos afternoon Q&A sessions about the possibility of an eruv in Boston. Rabbi Funk told me that the Rav, consistently and emphatically, explained to the group that he had no issues with the construction of an Eruv in Boston. On Shabbat VaYechi in January of 1993, our Boston (Brookline/Brighton/Newton) Eruv was completed (after an eight-year effort) and the community was able to use it for the very first time. The Rav was niftar three months later during Chol HaMoed Pesach, in April of 1993."

# Introduction

Richard M. Joel

President and Bravmann Family Professor, Yeshiva University

In our *Amidah* prayer for Shavuot, we categorize the breathtakingly wondrous act of Divine Revelation at Sinai not as *Kabbalat Torateinu*, or “receiving” of the Torah, but as *Matan Torateinu*, the “gifting” of our Torah. Our Torah was and remains the greatest gift ever bestowed, a truly “perfect” bequest—“The Torah of Hashem is perfect” (Psalms 19:8). Moreover, it is an enduring gift: Torah does not remain confined to that singular mountaintop or crystallized in any individual moment in time—it is a dynamic *Torat chaim*, a living and breathing Torah, which continues to give for perpetuity.

Torah informs every inch and every crevice of our ostensibly quotidian existence. “Return to your tents” (Devarim 5:27), the Jews are instructed after receiving the Torah in an awesome and dazzling display—when the pomp and the fanfare finally subsides, take the Torah and inject it into your home and into every detail of your daily routine.

Torah Judaism, however, exists not only in the exacting details, but in the “big picture” as well. Perhaps the greatest gift within a gift that we Jews received at *Matan Torateinu* was the sense of sacred responsibility with which we were charged and subsequently ennobled.

Peculiarly, the Torah itself only vaguely explains the nature and purpose of the holiday of Shavuot. It’s very name, *Chag Hashavuot*, does not correspond to any specific custom or central practice associated with the holiday, as with *Chag Hasukkot* and *Chag Hamatzot*. An explanation of Shavuot’s whole point and purpose evades the written Torah entirely, and is instead left to the oral tradition.

Rabbi Michael Rosensweig, one of our esteemed roshei yeshiva, expounds the message which emerges from the text’s ambiguity in reference to Shavuot: “The very theme of *Matan Torah* as the centerpiece of Shavuot is specifically transmitted by means of the oral tradition entrusted to human transmission because it is precisely the human component that singularly characterizes Torah life that is uniquely celebrated on this day ... the greatest moment of human history, Divine Revelation, is celebrated not merely as a passive albeit awesome experience, but also as the foundational moment for the establishment of a covenant-partnership.”

Torah, then, affords us the capacity to both anchor and launch our lives under the guidance of Torah and as a critical partner with God. It fills our hearts and our minds with purpose, rescuing us from a meaningless, mission-less, meandering existence. Instead, the Torah proclaims loudly and clearly: Humanity matters in this world.

And it is the very notion of mattering that fuels our entire sacred enterprise here at Yeshiva University. As we all enjoy the Benjamin and Rose Berger Shavuot To-Go 5773 in our synagogues and homes, nearly 1,000 members of our community have gathered together for the

third annual RIETS Yarchei Kallah. So many individuals from various backgrounds, generations and locations, as well as distinctive perspectives along the *hashkafic* spectrum, have assembled as one to learn Torah from our incredible faculty. This touching assemblage almost serves as a beautiful metaphor for the Sinai experience itself.

Together, then, let us receive and celebrate anew our sacred Torah and heritage; let us celebrate the timeless ideas and ideals which infuse substance and meaning to our lives; let us resolve to make strides towards our promised land, nurtured and driven by our Torah and its timeless values.

Chag Sameach.

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Yeshiva University

# Notes on Aspects of Hag Ha-Shavu'ot and Megillat Ruth

Rabbi Dr. David Horwitz

Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS

## The dispute concerning the celebration of Yom Tov

The Talmud in *Massekhet Pesahim* (68b) and *Betzah* (15b) presents a debate between two *Tannaim* regarding the correct manner of celebrating Yom Tov.

*R. Eliezer says: A person has no (absolute obligation) on a festival day. Rather, he may eat and drink or he may sit and study. R. Joshua says: Divide the day—half of it (should be devoted) to eating and drinking, and half of it (should be devoted) to the study hall.*

רבי אליעזר אומר: אין לו לאדם ביום טוב אלא או אוכל ושותה או יושב ושונה רבי יהושע אומר חלקהו חציו לאכילה ושתיה וחציו לבית המדרש.

In both places, the *amora* R. Yohanan comments that both views were attempts to reconcile the conflicting deductions that arise from two biblical verses concerning Yom Tov.

*And R. Yohanan said: And they both expounded the same Scriptural text (in reaching their conclusions, as follows): One verse states, **there shall be an assembly to the L-rd, your God** (Deuteronomy 16:8), but one other verse states (there) **shall be an assembly for you** (Numbers 29:35). R. Eliezer holds (that the verses offer two options for observing Yom Tov—by devoting it) either exclusively to God or exclusively to yourselves. But R. Joshua holds (that the requirements in both verses must be fulfilled, as follows: Divide the day by devoting) half of it to God and half of it to yourselves.*

ואמר רבי יוחנן: ושניהם מקרא אחד דרשו, כתוב אחד אומר עצרת לה' אלקיך, וכתוב אחד אומר עצרת תהיה לכם. רבי אליעזר סבר: או כולו לה' או כולו לכם. ורבי יהושע סבר: חלקהו, חציו לה' וחציו לכם.

The Gemara in *Pesahim* (ad loc.) proceeds to cite the comment of the *amora* R. Elazar that even R. Eliezer, who held open the option of observing Yom Tov by refraining from eating and drinking, and instead spending the entire day in prayer and study, maintains that on Shavu'ot, some measure of *lakhem*, that is, eating and drinking, is mandated. At first blush this seems counterintuitive. One might have suggested that *davka* on Shavu'ot, the anniversary of the day that the Israelites received the Torah, one must spend all day in study and prayer and desist from eating and drinking! But before we address this point, we should examine the debate between R. Eliezer and R. Joshua more closely.

The contours of the debate between R. Eliezer and R. Joshua, as interpreted by R. Yohanan, are well known. However, it has generally gone unnoticed that there is something additionally striking about the two verses (one denoting that Yom Tov should be dedicated to God, the other that it should be devoted to human needs), in light of R. Elazar's restriction of the debate.<sup>1</sup> Both conflicting verses refer to the two specific *yamim tovim* that the Torah designates as *atzeret*; namely, the seventh day of Pesach (Deuteronomy 16:8) and the eighth day of Sukkot, that is, Shemini Atzeret (Numbers 29:35). The *amora* R. Elazar can be understood, consequently, as saying, "No matter how one resolves the tension regarding the *biblical* cases of *atzeret*, with respect to Shavu'ot, that is, regarding the day that Hazal designate as *atzeret*, all agree that one must designate time on that day for eating and drinking."

R. Elezar thus distinguishes between the laws on the biblical days called *atzeret* and the day that the Rabbis designate as *atzeret*. But although the Torah does *not* refer to Shavu'ot as *atzeret*, Hazal do. Why? This question leads us to the interpretation of Maran Ha-Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *zatzal*, on the matter.<sup>2</sup>

## The Rav's interpretation of Hazal's use of the term *atzeret*

*Megilat Ta'anit* records the following:

*These are the days upon which one should not fast: on some of them one should (also) not deliver a eulogy. From Rosh Chodesh Nisan until the eighth of that month, during which the qorban Tamid was established firmly, one should not deliver a eulogy. From the eighth until the end of the holiday of Pesach (i.e., until the twenty-first of Nisan, during which time the holiday of Shavu'ot was settled), one should neither fast nor deliver a eulogy.*<sup>3</sup>

אילן יומיא דילא להתענאה  
בהון ומקצתהון דילא למספד  
בהון. מן ריש ירחא דניסן עד  
תמניא ביה אתוקם תמידא  
דילא למספד. מן תמניא ביה  
ועד סוף מועדא אתותב חגא  
דילא למספד ודילא להתענאה.

The *Tzadukim* maintained that the mitzvah of *u-sefartem lachem mi-mochorat ha-Shabbat* (Leviticus 23:15), which inaugurates the seven-week period of *sefirat ha-'omer*, and which is followed by *Hag Ha-Shavu'ot*, begins on the first *Sunday* (literally, "the morrow of the Shabbat") after the onset of Pesach. Our forefathers, the *Perushim*, on the other hand, upheld the traditional rabbinic position that, *mi-mochorat ha-Shabbat* does *not* refer to Sunday but to the day after Yom Tov, that is, the second day of Pesach, whichever day of the week it happens to fall on. In our rabbinic view, when the Torah *states* "the morrow of the Sabbath," it *means* "the morrow of Yom Tov," which is in this case the correct interpretation of the biblical term "Shabbat." Although we consider the position of the *Tzadukim* to be transparently erroneous, Hazal struggled for many years to combat their view. When they were finally victorious, they

<sup>1</sup> As noted by Rabbi David Shapiro, *Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Pesach, Sefirat Ha-Omer and Shavu'ot* (Brookline, Mass. and Jerusalem, 2005), p. 195, n. 24. See note two below.

<sup>2</sup> I will be following the presentation of the Rav's approach found in Rabbi David Shapiro, "The Great Debate Between the *Tzadukim/Baitusim* and the *Perushim* concerning the Date of Shavu'ot," in Shapiro, *Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Pesach, Sefirat Ha-Omer and Shavu'ot*, pp. 183-207. Indeed, in several places I shall be reproducing passages verbatim. Rabbi Shapiro's presentation was directly based upon a *shiur* that the Rav gave in 1972.

<sup>3</sup> See now, Vered Naom, *Megillat Ta'anit* (Jerusalem, 2002) p. 53 and p. 57. The passage is quoted twice in the Talmud Bavli: *Ta'anit* 17b and *Menahot* 65a.



instituted an annual two-week celebration—from the eighth to the twenty-first of Nisan—to commemorate their victory, as *Megilat Ta’anit* records.

The Rav further noted that from a purely philological perspective, the *Tzadukim* had a persuasive argument. Beyond the fact that the simple sense of *shabbatot temimot* (Leviticus 23:15) suggests weeks that extend, as “normal” weeks do, from Sunday through Shabbat, the phrase *ve-asita Hag Shavu’ot* (Deuteronomy 16:10) also can lead one to the position of the *Tzadukim*. The word *shavu’a* denotes a conventional seven-day week, beginning on Sunday and ending on Shabbat. The simplest understanding of *Hag Ha-Shavu’ot* would be of a holiday that begins after seven full (Sunday-Shabbat) weeks have ended, and which is celebrated on a Sunday. Moreover, the simplest meaning of the term *mi-mochoroat ha-Shabbat* (Leviticus 23:15-16) also means the day following Shabbat, that is, Sunday.

Of course, the fundamental position of the *Perushim* was that the biblical term *mi-mochorat ha-Shabbat* means the day after Yom Tov. The Rav explained that conceptually, this means that the fundamental linkage is between Shavu’ot and Pesach. And this is why, he maintained, that Hazal in their various works changed the biblical name of *Hag Ha-Shavu’ot* to *Atzeret*. In the Torah (as mentioned above), the two times that this term is used, denote the last day of a Yom Tov, either the seventh day of Pesach or the eighth day of Sukkot. The Torah never uses it to designate the first day of a Yom Tov, since it means “an addendum to an earlier period.” Hence, by employing *Atzeret* to Shavu’ot, Hazal were polemicizing against the *Tzadukim*. They wished to emphasize that Shavu’ot is *not* free-floating, independent of Pesach. It is, rather, determined by Pesach, and it stands in relation to Pesach the same way that Shemini Atzeret stands in relation to Sukkot.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the only exceptions to this rule are the places where the Gemara (*Ta’anit* 17b, *Menahot* 65a) quotes the aforementioned passage from *Megilat Ta’anit*, which records the original debate between the sects. The Rav suggested that the term *shevuaya* (the Aramaic equivalent of Shavu’ot) is used there *davka* to emphasize that the term Shavu’ot is what misled the *Tzadukim*. Our victory over our opponents occurred when we convinced them that Deuteronomy 16:10 does *not* mean the holiday of the natural weeks, but the holiday seven weeks after Pesach.

The Rav further explained that there was a profound philosophical dimension to their debate. According to the *Tzadukim*, there was no intrinsic connection between Pesach and Shavu’ot. The former holiday celebrated our release from slavery; the latter was an agricultural festival. According to the *Perushim*, however, our release from slavery was only the first stage of our redemption. God’s plan was to intervene in our political situation in order to implement his goal of presenting the Torah to us. The Exodus was only consummated with the giving of the Torah. Thus, the *Perushim* insisted that Shavu’ot was *not* a holiday separate from Pesach. Rather, it constituted what the ultimate objective of the Exodus was in the first place.<sup>5</sup> One can say that physical emancipation led to the ultimate *telos* (purpose) of spiritual emancipation, through the Torah.

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<sup>4</sup> See Shapiro, *ibid.*, pp. 191-92.

<sup>5</sup> Shapiro, *ibid.*, pp. 194-95.

## Why *davka* on Shavu'ot one must celebrate Yom Tov with food and drink.

The Rav utilized the notion that the physical emancipation of Pesach is only a prelude to the spiritual *telos* of the emancipation, that is the receipt of the Torah that we celebrate on Shavu'ot, to explain the aforementioned position that even R. Eliezer insists that one celebrate on Shavu'ot through food and drink. This is because on Shavu'ot we are actually celebrating our liberation from slavery. The Rav put it as follows:

*The Ribbono shel Olam's purpose in releasing us from bondage was to give us the Torah. Shavu'ot, therefore, is the ultimate celebration of that which we celebrate on Pesach. We should rejoice over our physical release from slavery by expressing our freedom physically through food and drink. Shavu'ot is thus linked intimately with Pesach.*<sup>6</sup>

Rabbi David Shapiro, in a note in his presentation of the Rav's approach, points out that whereas this interpretation of the reason why we are commanded *davka* to eat and drink on Shavu'ot represents one approach, many others exist. Rashi (*Pesachim* 68b) explains as follows: We should celebrate with food and drink, as we normally celebrate any joyous occasion, to express our appreciation for the Torah. For his part, the Rav's great-grandfather (also named Rav Yosef Baer Soloveitchik), the author of the *Beit Ha-Levi*, in his commentary on the Torah (*Parashat Yitro*), points to the debate between Moses and the angels portrayed in the Talmud (*Shabbat* 88b-89a). Moshe Rabbeinu convinced them that the Torah appropriately belongs in our physical, mundane world, and not in the incorporeal world of the angels. This is because so many mitzvot are themselves of a physical nature. Therefore, we "highlight the strategic basis of Moshe's victory by celebrating physically, with food and drink," on the anniversary of the day that we received the Torah. Finally, R. Shlomo Yosef Zevin (in *La-Mo'ed*, Vol. 4 [Jerusalem, 1946], p. 7) explained as follows: the purpose of the Torah is to endow the mundane with spiritual value. We thus sanctify the acts of eating and drinking by dedicating these behaviors to the glorification of the Torah. Moreover, that is why the Torah identifies Shavu'ot with the harvest and calls it *Yom Ha-Bikkurim* (Numbers 28:26), emphasizing the implementation of the Torah's laws through mundane activities.<sup>7</sup>

## Megillat Ruth and Shavu'ot

Rav Shlomo Yosef Zevin, *zatzal*, in his book *Ha-Moad'im ba-Halakhah*, in the section regarding Shavu'ot, devotes a chapter to various aspects of Megillat Ruth, and explores the connection between Shavu'ot and Ruth. The source of the custom to read the biblical book of Ruth on Shavu'ot is first mentioned in *Massekhet Soferim*, a post-Talmudic work, which records two practices that are not followed today. One is to split the reading, reciting the first half of the book on the night after the first day of Shavu'ot and to complete it on the night after the last day. The other is to read the entire book on the Saturday night before the holiday commences.<sup>8</sup> The

<sup>6</sup> Shapiro, *ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>7</sup> Shapiro, *ibid.*, p. 196, n. 25.

<sup>8</sup> R. Shlomo Yosef Zevin, *Ha-Moad'im Ba-Halakhah* (Jerusalem, 1980), p. 391, citing *Massekhet Soferim*, chapter 14 (ed. M. Higger [New York, 1937], p. 270).

*Yalqut Shim'oni*, a late Midrashic collection, cites this custom as well, writing that the reason why one reads Ruth on Shavu'ot is to emphasize that Torah can only be acquired through affliction and poverty.<sup>9</sup> The custom to read Ruth on Shavu'ot is cited by the Ramoh (R. Moshe Isserles, 1525-1572) to *Shulhan Aruch Orach Chayim* 490:9, but it is unclear what exactly he means.<sup>10</sup> Although he could be read as stating that a chazan recites the text in front of a congregation, he could also be understood as saying that it is customary that everyone reads the *megillah* individually (perhaps not even necessarily in *shul!*) In his responsum,<sup>11</sup> Ramoh writes that since the contemporary custom was only to read Eichah (on the ninth of Av) and Megillat Esther (on Purim) *be-tzibbur*, in a congregational setting, but the custom is to read Song of Songs (on Pesach), Ruth (on Shavu'ot) and Ecclesiastes (on Sukkot) by oneself, one should not recite the blessing *'al miqra Megillah* on the recitation of the latter three scrolls. The blessings, in his view, were only enacted in cases of public reading, for the honor of the congregation.<sup>12</sup>

Writing in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Rav Zevin presented four contemporary customs. (A) Jews of *Edot Ha-Mizrach* will not recite Megillat Ruth at all in shul during Shavu'ot *davening*. (This is, he adds, is also the custom of the Hasidim of Chabad, Kotzk, Ger and others.) (B) Most Hasidim from Vohloniya and Galicia will read Megillat Ruth to themselves individually from a Chumash, in Israel on the single day of Shavu'ot, and outside the Land of Israel on the second day of Shavu'ot. (C) Ashkenazim (that is, *Mitnaggedim* or *Perushim*), will read Megillat Ruth *be-tzibbur* just as they read the Torah every Shabbat and Megillat Esther on Purim. If a congregation possesses a scroll of Ruth written on parchment that fulfills all the requisite requirements for a scroll of *kitvei ha-kodesh*, the chazan will read from it. If no kosher scroll can be found, one will read the *megillah* from a Chumash. (D) *Perushim* in *Eretz Yisrael* will read Megillat Ruth from a kosher scroll, and will recite the blessing of *'al miqrah megillah* (and the blessing of *She-hehiyanu* as well). In this custom, the last group is following the lead of the Vilna Gaon.<sup>13</sup> As Rav Zevin notes, the source of the Vilna Gaon's view was not the aforementioned passage in *Massekhet Soferim* concerning Megillat Ruth, but a previous passage that was not connected to Shavu'ot at all.<sup>14</sup> Thus, a paradoxical situation emerges. *Poskim* do *not* cite *Massekhet Soferim* as the source to read the *megillah* itself on Shavu'ot (due to the numerous discrepancies between the custom as presented in *Massekhet Soferim* and our practice), but *do* cite it for the custom of making a blessing of *'al miqrah megillah* on Ruth when we do recite it.

Writing in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, R. David Abudraham (fl. 1340) presented two further connections between Shavu'ot and Ruth which can serve as reasons why the custom to read Ruth on Shavu'ot developed in the first place. First, the events depicted in the Book of Ruth took place during the harvest season, and the holiday of Shavu'ot also takes place during that time of the

<sup>9</sup> Zevin, *ibid.*, citing *Yalqut Shim'oni* Ruth, sec. 596.

<sup>10</sup> *Shulhan Aruch Orach Chayim*, sec 490, *hagah* to sec. 9. The *Mishnah Berurah*, sec. 17 (ad loc.), cites the *Yalqut Shim'oni* cited above, as well as the custom to read the *megillah* on the second day of Shavu'ot.

<sup>11</sup> *Teshuvot Ha-Ramoh*, # 35.

<sup>12</sup> In his *hagahot* on *Shulhan Aruch Orach Chaim* 490, Ramoh also mentions that one should not recite the *berachah* of *'al miqrah ketuvim* either.

<sup>13</sup> Zevin, *ibid.*, p. 392.

<sup>14</sup> Zevin, *ibid.* See Michael Higger (ed.), *Massekhet Soferim* (New York, 1937), pp. 251-52.

year. Second, Shavu'ot is when our forefathers received the Torah and entered the covenant at Sinai through the conversion process, just as Ruth converted to Judaism.

Rav Mordecai Jaffe (1530-1612), author of the work known as the *Levush*, adds another insight: In Leviticus 23, the Torah states the law to leave a part of the produce of the field for the poor person and the convert, immediately after stating the law of the two loaves that are brought in the Temple on Shavu'ot. Megillat Ruth records how Boaz magnificently fulfilled this law with respect to Ruth, who was both a convert and a poverty-stricken person, letting her glean the grain freely from his fields. To highlight this, we recite the book of Ruth on Shavu'ot. Rav Alexander Sender Schor (d. 1737), the author of the works *Tevu'ot Shor* and *Bekhor Shor*, adds yet another perspective. The Talmud Yerushalmi (*Hagigah* 2:3, and see *Tosafot* to *Hagigah* 14a) records a tradition that King David, the great-grandson of Ruth, died on Shavu'ot. As another tradition teaches that God rewards righteous people by giving them a lifespan of full years in which the day of their death is also the day of their birth, we can conclude that King David was also born on Shavu'ot. Hence, when we read Ruth on Shavu'ot, we proclaim that this is the birthday of King David, the ultimate product of the union of Boaz and Ruth.<sup>15</sup>

## Ruth, King David, and the Integration of Positive Masculine and Feminine Influences

In Midrash *Ruth Rabbah* it is written:

*R. Ze'ira said: this scroll (of Ruth) tells us nothing either of cleanliness or of uncleanness, either of prohibition or permission. For what purpose then was it written? To teach how great the reward of those is who do deeds of kindness.*<sup>16</sup>

אמר ר' זעירא מגלה זו אין בה לא טומאה  
ולא טהרה ולא איסור ולא היתר ולמה  
נכתבה ללמדך כמה שכר טוב לגומלי  
חסדים.

Perhaps one can interpret this Midrash not just regarding the “macro” level of the Book of Ruth, but on the “micro” level of individual verses as well. It is this spirit that the following ruminations and musings are offered.

The conclusion of the Book of Ruth details the genealogy of King David. Immediately before these last verses (Ruth 4:11-12), however, two striking verses are recorded:

*All the people at the gate and the elders answered, “We are [witnesses]. May the L-rd make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the House of Israel. Prosper in Ephrathah and perpetuate you name in Bethlehem! And may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah—through the offspring which the L-rd will give you by this young woman.”*

ויאמרו כל העם אשר בשער, והזקנים--  
עדים; יתן ה' את-האשה הבאה אל-ביתך,  
כרחל וכלאה אשר בנו שתיהם את-בית  
ישראל, ועשה-חיל באפרתה, וקרא-שם  
בבית לחם. ויהי ביתך כבית פריז, אשר-  
קלדה תמר ליהודה--מן-הגרע, אשר יתן ה'  
לך, מן-הנצרה, הזאת.

<sup>15</sup> The insights of Abudraham, the *Levush* and the *Tevu'ot Shor* are all cited in Zevin, *ibid.*, p. 393.

<sup>16</sup> *Midrash Rabbah: Ruth*, translated by Rabbi Dr. L. Rabinowitz (London, 1939), Chapter II, sec. 14, p. 35. See also R. Zevin, *Ha-Moadim Ba-Halakhah*, p. 394, quoting *Yalqut Shim'oni*, sec. 601.

Why, in the first verse, is Rachel mentioned before Leah? Rashi (ad loc.) writes that although Boaz, as well as all the people gathered to witness his marriage to Ruth, stemmed from the tribe of Judah, the son of Jacob's wife Leah, with this declaration they admitted that the primary wife of Jacob was indeed Rachel.

R. Dovid Cohen, in his work *Ohel David* on Ruth,<sup>17</sup> quotes a remarkable statement from the Italian kabbalist R. Menachem Azariah of Fano (1548-1620). He had expressed wonderment at the actions of Jonathan, the son of Saul, the first King of Israel. How could he (I Samuel, chapter 18ff.) so easily submit himself to David, and not on the contrary, act as an adversary and further the claims of his father King Saul? R. Menachem Azariah answers that Jonathan inherited this ability of self-renunciation from his maternal ancestor Rachel.<sup>18</sup> Hazal poignantly describe how Rachel knew that Laban was going to trick Jacob and substitute her sister for her on the wedding night. But she did not want to embarrass her sister. So she passed on to her sister the secret signs that she and Jacob had previously agreed upon to ensure that Laban could not trick them.<sup>19</sup> In other words, she magnificently submitted to her sister. Thus, in spite of the differences between Rachel and Leah, there was an overarching unity of purpose between them, and Rachel willingly submitted to her sister to help achieve this goal. Similarly, Rachel's descendant Jonathan submitted to David, ensuring the inauguration of David as the King of Israel, fulfilling the command of Jacob (Genesis 49:10), that *the scepter shall not depart from Judah*, i.e., that *de jure*, the King of Israel must come from the tribe of Judah, at *his own personal cost*. Thus, it was Rachel, with magnificent sacrificial action, who ensured the future unity of the Jewish people. Hence, she is mentioned first before Leah.

In the second verse, the crowd at Bethlehem mentions Tamar. Why is she mentioned? On this point, R. Dovid Cohen quotes Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher's comment on Exodus 19:3:

*And Moses went up to God. The L-rd called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel."*

ומִשֶׁה עָלָה, אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים; וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהֵי ה', מִן-הַהָר לֵאמֹר, כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יַעֲקֹב, וְתִגִּיד לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Traditionally, the phrase "house of Jacob" was understood as referring to the women, and "children of Israel" to the men. Both aspects, apparently, are necessary, supplementing and complementing each other.

R. Bahya writes that although halakhically, within the Jewish people, proper Jewish genealogy (with respect to designation as a Kohen, Levi, etc.) stems exclusively from one's father's side, with respect to the personal qualities of character, the *middot* that are required for appropriate exercise of kingship, the primary determinant is the mother. Hence, Tamar and Judah are

<sup>17</sup> *Ohel David* (Brooklyn, 2003), p. 104.

<sup>18</sup> The manner in which portrayal of the matriarch Rachel seems to change through various biblical books is described in Yael Shemesh, "The Character of Rachel: From a Beloved Wife to the Mother of the Nation," in Shmuel Vargon, et al (eds.), *Studies in Bible and Exegesis, Vol. IX* (Presented to Moshe Garsiel) (Ramat-Gan, 2009), pp. 81-110. Shemesh cites the portrayal of Rachel in the Book of Ruth on pp. 106-07.

<sup>19</sup> *Megillah* 13b (and parallels).

mentioned, as the parents of Perez, the ancestor of Boaz, who together with Ruth will now be the great-grandparents of King David, the first and paradigmatic king of Israel.<sup>20</sup>

The idea that one of the themes of the book of Ruth is to ensure the expression of full masculine and feminine characteristics in the union of Boaz and Ruth (and consequently, in their progeny) was also noticed by an author with a radically different perspective than ours.<sup>21</sup> Yehezkel Kluger, in his book *A Psychological Interpretation of Ruth* (Einseideln, Switzerland, 1999), writes that originally, Elimelech's family, consisting of himself, Naomi, Mahlon and Khilyon, was too "overloaded" on the masculine side. On the other hand, the nation of Moab had a history of family relationships being too "overloaded" on the feminine side (e.g., Lot and his daughters). Ruth comes from this tradition of Moab. Both Ruth, from her side, and the family of Elimelech, on the other, had lacked the balanced masculine/feminine totality. The meeting of Ruth and Boaz was the path to achieve redemption of wholeness.

Boaz blessed Ruth with the following prayer (Ruth 2:12):

<i>May the L-rd reward your deeds. May you have a full recompense from the L-rd, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge.</i>	<i>יְשָׁלֵם ה', פְּעֻלָּתְךָ; וַתְּהִי מִשְׁכַּרְתְּךָ שְׂלֵמָה, מֵעַם ה' אֱלֹ-הֵינוּ. לְחֶסֶת תַּחַת-כַּנְּפֵיו.</i>
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This blessing might not just express a request for a religious reward from God, but for full personal integration and wholeness as well. And indeed, the ultimate fruitful union of Boaz and Ruth expressed the reparation of the previously unbalanced situations that both of them were heir to. Their union was blessed by God, and the wholesome psychological and religious integration of their lives led to the birth of King David.

Rav Chaim Ya'akov Goldvicht, *zatzal*, the former rosh yeshiva of Kerem Bi-Yavneh, published an article almost 30 years ago entitled "Malkhut Beit David," in which he pulled various strands within Hazal together to illuminate, among other issues, why King David "had" to come (if only through Ruth) from Moab.<sup>22</sup> He quoted the *Shem mi-Shmuel's* quotation of his grandfather the Rebbe of Kotzk, to the effect that the *ga'avah* (haughtiness) that characterized Moab was a necessary component of a successful kingship. Whereas King Saul was *too* modest, and was therefore unable to retain kingship, David possessed those elements of pride, strength, self-confidence and fortitude, which if rightfully used, that is, for the service of God, are indeed necessary elements of the personality of a successful ruler. R. Goldvicht also quoted, among other sources, the Talmudic passage<sup>23</sup> that stated that the reason God did not let Moses fight the children of Moab and Ammon was because in the future, two

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>21</sup> His perspective was that of a follower of the theories of Carl Gustav Jung. Yehezkel Kluger's work on Ruth was written as part of the requirements of the first graduating class of the Jung Institute in Zurich, as he investigated and interpreted the biblical book in light of Jungian psychology.

Of course, as *frum* Jews we must reject the aspects of his book that are not in agreement with our *masorah* and beliefs. I only cite this book *le-sabber et ha-ozen*, as a source that can add a fortifying perspective to themes that can also be found, here and there, in various statements of our Sages through the centuries.

<sup>22</sup> R. Chaim Ya'akov Goldvicht, "Malkhut Beit David," in Moshe Sherman and Jeffrey Woolf (eds.), *Sepher Kavod Ha-Rav* (New York, 1984), pp. 96-103.

<sup>23</sup> *Bava Qamma* 38a.

descendants of these nations, i.e., Ruth from Moab and Na'amah from Ammon, will join the Jewish people. Following this logic, it was *davka* Ruth's assertiveness, self-confidence and daring (the "Moab" in her) that was a necessary prerequisite of the ancestry of King David.

Now, this approach fits nicely with one of two possible interpretations of the mention of Tamar in the aforementioned verse. Does one stress Tamar's daring, assertiveness, etc., in approaching Judah (Genesis 38:14ff.)? Is Tamar to be seen, then, as a precursor of Ruth, who was similarly daring in approaching Boaz? Is that the aspect of Tamar that is relevant here? The approach that emphasizes the unusual aspects of Judah's initial encounter with Tamar is well known, but there is another aspect of the story of Tamar: her absolute refusal to embarrass Judah (Genesis 38:25ff). Tamar was willing to die rather than embarrass Judah.<sup>24</sup> In other words, adopting terminology of the Rav, *zatzal*, she engaged in sacrificial, heroic action. This, of course, is the same type of action that Rachel engaged in when she gave Jacob's secret signs over to her sister Leah, and would not participate in the humiliation of her sister. The point of quoting Tamar, then, might be to reinforce the same point that is made by quoting Rachel.

Understanding the aforementioned verses concerning Rachel and Tamar in this fashion helps us, I think, provide a more balanced approach to understanding the qualities of Ruth. It is certainly true that Hazal praise Ruth's assertiveness in coming to Boaz, and we have already mentioned Rav Goldvicht's article concerning Ruth, Moab, and the source of this necessary assertiveness (whose source he locates in Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve, who was not merely a replacement for Abel but a replacement for Cain as well, for he possessed the element of fortitude that Abel did not!). But this is not the entire picture! Even granting that (*'al pi ruah ha-qodesh*) Ruth did the right thing in assertively going to Boaz in the middle of the night, as the *megillah* details, it is simply inconceivable that the *megillah* is merely teaching us an unsophisticated praise of assertiveness *per se*. *Megillat Ruth* teaches us the elements of a properly wholesome personality from a religious perspective, and it simply cannot mean that "the most aggressive person wins!" But Ruth (and Boaz!) are also people who agree to submit to the demands of the halakhah, and the ability to withdraw, to engage in sacrificial/heroic action. These qualities are certainly part of the spiritual makeup of a Jew. After all, there are three commandments wherein one must die rather than violate. An aggressive attitude *per se* toward the demands of life is *not* the ultimate expression of what it means to live as a Jew.

I think that in light of the aforementioned lessons that can be gleaned from the citation of the matriarchs Rachel and Tamar at the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, and more specifically the acts of renunciation that both of them performed, a more properly nuanced understanding can now be absorbed.<sup>25</sup> The right measure of assertiveness and sacrificial action is what God demands of a Jew. Similarly, the right balance of masculinity and femininity is what God wants from the appropriate Jewish family. It is this wholeness, both in our individual and familial (and communal) Jewish lives, which we strive for, as we serve God through lives of Torah and mitzvot.

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<sup>24</sup> See *Sotah* 10b, "Better for a man to cast himself into a fiery furnace rather than shame his fellow in public. Whence is this? From Tamar." See Tosafot (ad loc.) s.v. "Noah lo la'adam."

<sup>25</sup> Actually, Rav Goldvicht himself (ibid., pp. 98-99) quotes the aspect of submission in Ruth's behavior toward her mother-in-law Naomi.

# Megillas Naomi: Identity, Alienation and Redemption

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The Book of Rus, the paradigmatic story of *chesed* and the inclusion of all those who bring themselves under *kanfei haShechina* (those who convert), is upon closer examination of the *p'shat* (straightforward reading), in essence, not about the assumed heroine Rus but actually about her mother-in-law, Naomi, and her story of alienation and redemption. The turn of events in the *megilla* are succinctly expressed through the single leitmotif of ש"ב (the letters *shin beis*)— ישב (settling), שוב (returning) and יושב (sitting). It is these words that tell us the story of Naomi, Rus, and in metaphor, the drama and dynamic flux of the Jewish people.

This *megilla* is a story of alienation, lost identity, redemption and return. While this may seem speculative, it is the clear flow of the *p'shat* (text) from beginning to end, and it carries a message that resonates for the Jewish people after their short stay in the land of Israel and the vicissitudes of their emerging history. (Rus takes place in the early portion of the time of the *shoftim*<sup>1</sup> (judges) only one generation after Yehosuha brings the Jewish people into the Land of Israel. According to the Gemara (*Baba Basra* 91a), Naomi was the granddaughter of the fearless and faithful Nachshon ben Aminadav. It is a theme that is equally resonant in the modern era as well, and lends itself to a different and nuanced reading of this *megilla*.

The story opens with Naomi and the short-lived Elimelech leaving their ancestral home of Beis Lechem Yehuda to live in Sdei Moav on account of the famine and depressed state of the Jewish people. After they leave their home among the Jewish nation - וישבו שם כעשר שנים (1:4) they settle in for nearly a decade with the Moavi people, and their children intermarry with the local girls.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Rav Yehoshua ben Levi cited in *Rus Rabba* 1 and *Seder Olam Rabah* (12) the *shofet* of “ יהיה בימי שפוט “  
השופטים, It was in the days of judges,” (Rus 1:1) is Ehud ben Gera. Rav is quoted in the Gemara, *Baba Basra* (91a) as  
saying that Boaz is Ivtzan, who ruled in Bais Lechem and was shortly before the time of Shimshon, a slightly later Shofet.



To fully appreciate the significance of that move, one must imagine the family as royalty and leadership of the Jewish community moving to, of all places, Sdei Moav—the seat of their arch-enemies with whom they have been in battle for the past many years. As the Gemara, *Baba Basra* (91a), describes in the name of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai, Elimelech, Machlon and Kilyon were *gedolai hador* and *parnasei hador* (leaders of the generation). Or in more contemporary terms, Naomi and her family were the first family of the Jewish State moving to the equivalent of Ramaalah for a full decade. That is alienation and disconnection from their roots (and according to R. Shimon bar Yochai, further, the cause of their downfall).

Despite their settling in, after 10 years the time has come for Naomi to return to her land and her people:

*And she arose with her daughters-in-law to **return** from the fields of Moav because she heard in the field of Moav that God had remembered his nation to give them bread.*

**Rus 1:6**

ותקם היא וכלתיה **ותשב** משדי מואב כי שמעה בשדה מואב כי פקד ה' את עמו לתת להם לחם.  
רות א:ו

Here the *shoresh* is שׁוּב—to return, as she heard, even from the far reaches of her exile in Sdei Moav, that God has remembered the Jewish people and their fate has changed.

*She left the place where she was, with her two daughters-in-law, and she went on her way to **return** to the land of Judah.*

**Rus 1:7**

ותצא מן המקום אשר היתה שמה ושתי כלותיה עמה ותלכנה בדרך ל**שוב** אל ארץ יהודה.  
רות א:ז

To make sure we understand the change that is about to occur, the *pasuk* repeats clearly that she is leaving her place, where she has been (no longer mentioning the place by name since she has begun the process of uprooting her identity from *Sdei Moav*), and goes on her way to return to the land of Yehuda.

In Naomi's return to her roots, her non-Jewish daughters-in-law of her deceased sons, symbols of her being an interloper in a foreign land and alienated from her identity, must go back to their place and return to their rightful ancestral home of Moav, thus:

*Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law: Go and **return**, each of you to her mother's house.*

**Rus 1:8**

ותאמר נעמי לשתי כלותיה לכנה **שבנה** אשה לבית אמה.  
רות א:ח

At first, the bonds of their cumulative and joint suffering created a shared sense of belonging and both Rus and Orpah say they will return with Naomi:

*And they said to her: [No] we will **return** with you to your nation.*

**Rus 1:10**

ותאמרנה לה כי אתך **נשוב** לעמך.  
רות א:י

But taking on a new identity is a transformative and active process, not something that occurs because of a past association or fleeting connection. They cannot return to a place they had never been to—thus Naomi responds:

**Return**, my daughters, go, because I am too old to have a husband.

**Rus 1:12**

**שבנה** בנתי לכן כי זקנתי מהיות לאיש.  
רות י:יב

The connection of our past is expired and will not be recreated—do not stake your identity on our past relationship. Here is where Rus’s courageous and defiant stance comes in to distinguish her—**ורות דבקה בה**, and Rus cleaved to her (1:14). But Naomi pushes back:

And she said, behold, your sister-in-law **returned** to her nation and her god, **return** after your sister-in-law.

**Rus 1:15**

ותאמר הנה **שבה** יבמתך אל עמה ואל אלהיה  
**שוב** אחרי יבמתך.  
רות א:טו

Nevertheless, Rus is steadfast in her commitment to throw her lot with the Jewish people:

Rus said: Do not implore me to abandon you, to **return** from you.

**Rus 1:16**

ותאמר רות אל תפגעני בי לעזובך **לשוב** מאחריך.  
רות א:טז

Contrary to its eponymous title, this is not a story about Rus’s identity, but Naomi’s; the ensuing four *pesukim* (1:19- 22) describe Naomi’s return to Yehuda. Naomi, the woman known for her stature and nobility (as the granddaughter of Nachshon, the leader of Yehuda, the wife and parent of the first family, and a woman of outstanding wealth<sup>2</sup>), comes back as a broken and impoverished woman and the entire city gasped in shock;<sup>3</sup> she was returned empty by Hashem and bitter—**אני מלאה הלכתי וריקם השיבני** ה' (1:21). But it is here that Naomi and Rus return—**ותשב** (1:22)—and to be sure you understand from whence they were returning, they are labeled—**השבה** משדי מואב—returning from the fields of Moav.

Now that Rus and Naomi are bound into one fate, Rus is described by the *na'ar* (lad) as the Moabite women who **returned** with Naomi—**עם נעמי משדי מואב** (2:6). The story shifts, temporarily, to how, through Hashem’s providence, Rus finds Boaz, and through Boaz’s *chesed* Rus enters the Jewish people and by extension, Naomi reclaims her place among her people.

At this point in the *megilla* the guiding verb of **שוב** returning, has shifted to **ישב**—sitting and settling (2:14) as she sits by the side of the gatherers—**ותשב** מצד הקוצרים—and states that she will not be like one of his maidservants (2:13). Naomi understands that which is unfolding and sees that he is a relative and of “**our** redeemers,” Rus and Naomi together. On Naomi’s advice Rus stays in Boaz’s field until the end of the season—**ותשב** את המותה—and she literally sits with her mother-in-law and their fate remains bound together (2:23).

As the *geulah* (redemption) process comes to fruition we see the root **ישב**—being settled, rooted and in your place, emerge and through the play with words the text tells us the meta-narrative—that Rus and Naomi are coming to being settled as well. Shortly before the completion of the

<sup>2</sup> *Rus Rabbah*, 3:6

<sup>3</sup> The Gemara, *Baba Basra* 91a, describes everyone’s shock, *V'zos Naomi*—is this Naomi that alienated herself from the Jewish people and has thus caused her misfortune? This highlights her disengagement from the Jewish people as the theme of her fate.

*geulah* process, Naomi tells her daughter-in-law: **שבי** בתי עד אשר תדעין איך יפל דבר—sit tight and see how this plays out (3:18), since Boaz has said he will act. They have done their parts and now they can see God’s plan unfold.

The next scene opens with Boaz:

*Boaz went up to the gate and sat there. Behold, the redeemer that Boaz spoke about passed by and [Boaz] said to him: Please turn aside and sit here, sir, and he turned and sat. And he took 10 elders of the city and said sit and they sat.*

**Rus 4:1-2**

ובעז עלה השער **וישב** שם והנה  
 הגאל עבר אשר דבר בעז ויאמר  
 סורה **שבה** פה לפני אלמני ויסר  
**וישב**. ויקח עשרה אנשים מזקני  
 העיר ויאמר **שבו** פה **וישבו**.  
 רות ד:א-ב

Boaz too is sitting—he is in his proper place; the *goel* (*redeemer*), Ploni Almoni, on the other hand is passing by and is told to sit (**יושב**). The role of Rus (and by extension Naomi) is switching to a *yoshev* and Ploni Almoni, in contrast, is the passer-by. It is also important to note that here, in this suspenseful and pivotal moment as the story is about to turn, Naomi (and Rus) are referred back to their old identity as *hashava msdei Moav*—and thus rejected by Ploni Almoni. Here, for the last time, she is juxtaposed opposite those sitting (*neged hayoshvim* 4:4). She is seen as the returnee from Sdei Moav, not yet integrated into the community and thus cannot be redeemed—for it would destroy the purity of Ploni Almoni’s home. Here Boaz acts boldly to complete the return for Rus and Naomi:

*Boaz said to the elders and to the entire nation: You are my witnesses today that I have acquired everything that belonged to Elimelech, Machlon and Kilyon from Naomi. I have also taken Rus the Moabite, wife of Machlon as a wife to perpetuate the name of the deceased on his estate, and his name shall not be cut off from his brethren and from his place. You are my witnesses today.*

**Rus 4:9-10**

ויאמר בעז לזקנים וכל העם עדים אתם  
 היום כי קניתי את כל אשר לאלימלך  
 ואת כל אשר לכליון ומחלון מיד נעמי.  
 וגם את רות המאביה אשת מחלון קניתי  
 לי לאשה להקים שם המת על נחלתו  
 ולא יכרת שם המת מעם אחיו ומשער  
 מקומו, עדים אתם היום.  
 רות ד:ט-י

Boaz says, in public and in broad view of everyone as his witnesses, that he is redeeming the estate of Naomi and her family and also takes Rus HaMoaviah as a wife. With full awareness of their history, shortcomings and potential taint, he is the *goel* of Naomi and Rus.

As the redemption seems to be completed—all those around say **לחם שם בבית לחם**, you shall establish a good name in Beis Lechem (4:11)—the house of Naomi and Elimelech is once again established in their ancestral home, once again for Naomi and for the first time for Rus.

Boaz and Rus are married and Rus give birth to a child and is assumedly absorbed into the community. Thus ends the story of Rus, and indeed she is no longer mentioned in the *megilla* (4:13).<sup>4</sup> But the story of Naomi continues (4:14-17) ...

<sup>4</sup>Furthering the theme of this being Naomi’s story, the Midrash (*Rus Rabbah* 6:2) says from this *pasuk* that even the story of Rus and Boaz was not absent of Naomi’s imprint—that Boaz was 80 and never had children, along comes this righteous woman (Naomi) and immediately he is blessed with children.

Upon the birth of this child to Rus, all the women say to Naami (not Rus who is no longer mentioned):

*The women said: Blessed is Hashem that He did not keep from you a redeemer today and his name shall be well established in Israel.*

**Rus 4:14**

ותאמרנה הנשים אל נעמי ברוך ה' אשר לא השבית לך גאל היום ויקרא שמו בישראל.  
רות ד:יד

What is now established as the tagline to introducing a child's newly given name- ויקרא שמו (and his name should be called/established in Israel)- leaves us hanging. What is his name? That is not important only that it is indeed a name that is now “established in Israel.” Naami has reestablished her lineage and her role as a matriarch in the destiny of the Jewish people. This new grandchild will be a משיב נפש, a restorer of spirit and support in your old age—שיבתך (4:15).

*Naami took the child and placed it in her bosom and became a nurse to him. The neighbors gave him a name saying: a son was born to Naami and she called him Oved, he was the father of Yishai the father of David.*

**Rus 4:16-17**

ותקה נעמי את הילד ותשתהו בחיקה ותהי לו לאמנת. ותקראנה לו השכנות שם לאמר ילד בן לנעמי ותקראנה שמו עובד הוא אבי ישי אבי דוד.  
רות ד:טז-יז

Naami, the elderly woman who throughout her life has experienced both blessing and loss, raises this young child in her lap and becomes his mentor and a link to her prestigious past and the family's future. Finally, the child (who was born five *pesukim* previously) is named Oved, but only before his nickname given by the neighbors is fully appreciated—*yulad ben l'Naami*—a son is born to Naami. It is with this and the delineation of the lineage of the house of Yehuda—from Peretz to David—that the narrative concludes and the cycle of return is complete. Naami's story of disconnection and losing everything comes full circle to returning and raising “her” child in the land of Yehuda that she once rejected and raising her “grandson” as part of the chain of royalty.

The movement of שוב, וישב to נפש משיב (restorer of spirit) tells the story of Naami's departure, return and reintegration, a feat perhaps not known possible in the early stages of the people of Israel in their land. Putting the story of Naami in this light, she fits right in to the lineage of Yehuda, Dovid and ultimately Mashiach Ben Dovid and the complete *geula*. The house of Yehuda carries the theme of fall and return to royalty, and Naami follows in her family's footsteps. It is with understanding of Naami's fall, departure and faith in Hashem to see her ultimate return through the most unlikely conduit of her Moabite daughter-in-law, that her *geulah* indeed does come. Dovid is a worthy scion from this lineage, and not just because of the ironic root of the messianic lineage from Rus the Moabite, but because Naami herself was *shav* and *yoshev*.

# The Centrality of the Message of Megillat Ruth in Biblical Canon

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When reading any book in the Bible, it is important to think of the context as well as the reason why this specific book is included in the biblical canon. The Five Books of Moses lay the foundations of the Jewish people, outline laws for a moral and just society, reflect on events that we return to throughout the Jewish festivals, and include many inspirational passages. As we depart from those books and move our way into Nach, it is even more important as critical readers to ask about the placement and inspiration of each book in the Canon. What is the Divine message that we should carry with us? Why has this book and the stories therein been enshrined in our tradition? Megillat Ruth bears no exception. The bookends of this book are very important words for this question.

Ruth Chapter 1 offers us a historical context:

*1 And it came to pass in the days when the judges judged, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the field of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons.*

א וַיְהִי, בַּיָּמִי שֶׁפֶט הַשְּׁפֹטִים, וַיְהִי רָעָב,  
בְּאֶרֶץ; וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לָחֶם יְהוּדָה,  
לְגוֹר בְּשֵׂדֵי מוֹאָב--הוּא וְאִשְׁתּוֹ, וּשְׁנֵי  
בָנָיו.

And of course the dramatic ending in Ruth 4:18-22, which provides an illustrious genealogy of the heroes as the forbearers of *David Hamelech*:

*18 Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez begot Hezron; 19 and Hezron begot Ram, and Ram begot Amminadab; 20 and Amminadab begot Nahshon, and Nahshon begot Salma; 21 and Salmon begot Boaz, and Boaz begot Obed; 22 and Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David.*

יח וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת פֶּרֶץ, פֶּרֶץ הוֹלִיד אֶת-  
קְצָרוֹן. יט וְקְצָרוֹן הוֹלִיד אֶת-רָם, וְרָם הוֹלִיד  
אֶת-עַמִּינָדָב. כ וְעַמִּינָדָב הוֹלִיד אֶת-נַחֲשׁוֹן,  
וְנַחֲשׁוֹן הוֹלִיד אֶת-שַׁלְמָה. כא וְשַׁלְמֹן הוֹלִיד  
אֶת-בֹּעַז, וּבֹעַז הוֹלִיד אֶת-עוֹבֵד. כב וְעוֹבֵד  
הוֹלִיד אֶת-יֵשׁוּ, וַיֵּשִׁי הוֹלִיד אֶת-דָּוִד.

We read of the dramatic exodus of an important family from the tribe of Judah, but finish the story with the birth of *David Hamelech*. And yet, between the introductory and concluding words, a simple story develops. In the words of Chazal:

R. Zei'ra said: This scroll [of Ruth] tells us nothing either of cleanliness or of uncleanness, either of prohibition or permission. For what purpose then was it written? ...

**Ruth Rabbah 2:14**

אמר ר זעירא מגלה זו אין בה לא  
טומאה ולא טהרה ולא איסור ולא היתר  
ולמה נכתבה ...  
רות רבה ב:יד

It does not brim with tensions and religious overtures. Multiple *mitzvot* do not appear in this short story, *Am Israel* is not in existential danger and there are no prophecies that are meant to open the hearts and spirits of the nation to repent and change their ways. So the question must be asked: How does this simple story of Megillat Ruth have such a prominent place in the biblical canon, and furthermore, receive center stage on the festival of Shavuot, the holiday that celebrates the giving of the Torah at Sinai? Let us explore a few themes that emerge from the narrative, and see whether they bear significance for the questions raised.<sup>1</sup>

## Chesed

R. Zei'ra said: This scroll [of Ruth] tells us nothing either of cleanliness or of uncleanness, either of prohibition or permission. For what purpose then was it written? **To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness.**

**Ruth Rabbah 2:14**

אמר ר זעירא מגלה זו אין בה לא  
טומאה ולא טהרה ולא איסור ולא  
היתר ולמה נכתבה ללמדך כמה שכר  
טוב לגומלי חסדים.  
רות רבה ב:יד

The introductory paragraphs describe a woman who finds herself in a foreign land, losing her husband and sons, and left with two daughters-in-law. She encourages them to return to their own homeland and give themselves the best opportunity to begin their lives again. One of the daughters-in-law, Orpah, heeds this advice and departs from the narrative. This is contrasted with a passionate plea of the other daughter-in-law, Ruth, who states emphatically to Naomi (Ruth 1:15-16):

**16** And Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; **17** where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried; the LORD do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me."

טז ותאמר רות אל-תפגעני-בי, לעזבך  
לשוב מאחריך: כי אל-אשר תלכי  
אלה, ובאשר תליני אליו--עמך עמי,  
ואלקיך אלקי. יז באשר תמותי אמות,  
ושם אקבר; פה יעשה ה' לי, וכה  
יוסיף--כי תמות, יפריד ביני ובינך.

Not only does Ruth align herself physically with Naomi and not leave a widow on her own, but she also casts her lot theologically with Naomi. The *mesirut nefesh* (sacrifice) of Ruth is characterized by the Hebrew verbs *davak* (cling, 2:8,21,23) and *azav* (abandon, 1:15), which have religious connotations as well. Similarly, the language of this discussion bears resemblance to the discussion between G-d and Avraham in the Book of Bereshit. Ruth mirrors the linguistic pattern here, from more general to more specific:

<sup>1</sup> There is a six part KMTT podcast series on Megillat Ruth by Dr. Yael Ziegler, which explores different themes in Megillat Ruth and contains useful literary comparisons to other books in Tanach. I used some of Dr. Ziegler's ideas in preparing this article.

**1** Now the LORD said unto Abram: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee. **2** And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing. **3** And I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse; and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed."

**Bereshit 12:1-3**

א וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-אַבְרָם, לֵךְ-לְךָ  
מֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וּמִמִּלְדָּתְךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ,  
אֶל-הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ. ב וְאֶעֱשֶׂה  
לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל, וְאַבְרָכָה, וְאֶגְדַּלְהָ שְׁמִי;  
וְהָיָה, בְּרַכָּה. ג וְאַבְרָכָה, מְבָרְכֶיךָ,  
וּמְקַלְלֶיךָ, אָאָר; וְנִבְרַכְו בְּךָ, כָּל  
מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה.  
**בראשית יב:א-ג**

It is no coincidence that we are taken back to this story, as Avraham is the progenitor of *chesed* (kindness) and monotheism, both values that are not espoused by the surrounding culture. Just as Avraham heeds a Divine call, leaves his family, homeland and everything that is familiar, so too Ruth prefers to cast her lot with Naomi, to go against what is familiar and perhaps easier, and follow Naomi back to her homeland.

Another act of *chesed* that we read takes place in the third chapter of the *megilla* and is considered to be the climactic point of the story. In a very suggestive dialogue, Naomi instructs Ruth to go to Boaz in the middle of the night and lay at his feet. Once again, we can draw linguistic parallels to the beginning of Bereshit where Lot's daughters believe that they are the only women left in the world and devise a scheme to become impregnated by their father:

**31** And the first-born said unto the younger: "Our father is old, and there is not a man in the earth to come in unto us after the manner of all the earth. **32** Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father." **33** And they made their father drink wine that night. And the first-born went in, and lay with her father; and he knew not when she lay down, nor when she arose. **34** And it came to pass on the morrow, that the first-born said unto the younger: "Behold, I lay yesternight with my father. Let us make him drink wine this night also; and go thou in, and lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father." **35** And they made their father drink wine that night also. And the younger arose, and lay with him; and he knew not when she lay down, nor when she arose. **36** Thus were both the daughters of Lot with child by their father.

**Bereshit 19:31-36**

לֹא וַתֹּאמֶר הַבְּכִירָה אֶל-הַצְּעִירָה,  
אָבִינוּ זָקֵן; וְאִישׁ אֵין בְּאֶרֶץ לְבוֹא  
עֲלֵינוּ, כְּדָרְךָ כָּל-הָאָרֶץ. לֵב לְכֵה  
נִשְׁכָּה אֶת-אָבִינוּ זֶה, וְנִשְׁכָּה עִמּוֹ;  
וְנַחֲמֵה מֵאֲבִינוּ, זָרַע. לֵג וַתִּשְׁקֶינּוּ אֶת-  
אָבִיהֶן זֶה, בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא; וַתְּבֹא  
הַבְּכִירָה וַתִּשְׁכַּב אֶת-אָבִיהָ, וְלֹא-יָדַע  
בְּשִׁכְבָּהּ וּבְקוּמָהּ. לֵד וַיְהִי, מִמָּחָר־  
וַתֹּאמֶר הַבְּכִירָה אֶל-הַצְּעִירָה, הֵן-  
שָׁכַבְתִּי אִמָּשׁ אֶת-אָבִי; נִשְׁקֶנּוּ זֶה  
גַּם-הַלַּיְלָה, וּבֹאֵי שְׁכָבֵי עִמּוֹ, וְנַחֲמֵה  
מֵאֲבִינוּ, זָרַע. לֵה וַתִּשְׁקֶינּוּ גַם בַּלַּיְלָה  
הַהוּא, אֶת-אָבִיהֶן--זֶה; וַתִּקַּם  
הַצְּעִירָה וַתִּשְׁכַּב עִמּוֹ, וְלֹא-יָדַע  
בְּשִׁכְבָּהּ וּבְקוּמָהּ. לו וַתִּהְרֶינּוּ שְׁתֵּי  
בָנוֹת-לוֹט, מֵאֲבִיהֶן.  
**בראשית יט:לא-לו**

While their intentions were good, this incestuous relationship bears its "black mark" in future generations of these nations. However, in contrast to the inebriated Lot, when Boaz wakes up in the middle of the night with a woman at his feet, he demands to know who it is and does not play innocent in this scene. The kindness of this act, of taking responsibility for the situation, of promising Ruth that he shall redeem her, sheds light on the greatness of his character and of his kindness:

**7** And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of corn; and she came softly,

ז וַיֹּאכַל בַּעַז וַיִּשְׂתֵּה, וַיֵּיטֵב לְבוֹ,  
וַיִּבֹא, לְשֹׁכֵב בְּקֵצה הָעֵרְמָה;  
וַתְּבֹא בַלֵּט, וַתִּגַּל מֵרַגְלֶיהָ

and uncovered his feet, and laid her down. **8** And it came to pass at midnight, that the man was startled, and turned himself; and, behold, a woman lay at his feet. **9** And he said: "Who art thou?" And she answered: "I am Ruth thine handmaid; spread therefore thy skirt over thy handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman." **10** And he said: "Blessed be thou of the LORD, my daughter; thou hast shown more kindness in the end than at the beginning, inasmuch as thou didst not follow the young men, whether poor or rich. **11** And now, my daughter, fear not; I will do to thee all that thou sayest; for all the men in the gate of my people do know that thou art a virtuous woman. **12** And now it is true that I am a near kinsman; howbeit there is a kinsman nearer than I. **13** Tarry this night, and it shall be in the morning, that if he will perform unto thee the part of a kinsman, well; let him do the kinsman's part; but if he be not willing to do the part of a kinsman to thee, then will I do the part of a kinsman to thee, as the LORD liveth; lie down until the morning."

**Ruth 3:7-13**

ותשכב. ח ויהי בחצי הלילה, ויחרד האישה וילפת; והנה אשה, שכבת מרגלתיו. ט ויאמר, מי-את; ותאמר, אנכי רות אמתך, וכרשת כנפך על-אמתך, כי גאל אתה. י ויאמר, ברוכה את ליהנה בתי--היטבת חסדך האחרון, מן-הראשון: לבלתי-לקת, אחרי הבחורים--אם-דל, ואם-עשיר. יא ועתה, בתי אל-תיראי, כל אשר-תאמרי, אעשה-לך: כי יודע כל-שער עמי, כי אשת חיל את. יב ועתה כי אמנם, כי אם גאל אנכי; וגם יש גאל, קרוב ממני. יג ליני הלילה, והנה בבקר אם-יגאלך טוב יגאל, ואם-לא יחפץ לגאלך יגאלתיך אנכי, חי-ה'; שכיבי, עד-הבקר.

**רות ג:ז-יג**

Naomi was surely aware that there was a closer relative to perform the mitzvah of *yibbum* (levirate marriage), yet she sent Ruth specifically to Boaz, in these surreptitious circumstances. Boaz, who we can define as someone who acts with intention, knew that in order for Ruth to receive full reward for her kindness (to Naomi), her redemption needed to be carried out in all its details and in strict compliance with Jewish law, i.e. elders and witnesses. And thus, this redemption earned them the following blessing:

*And all the people that were in the gate, and the elders, said: "We are witnesses. The LORD make the woman that is come into thy house like Rachel and like Leah, which two did build the house of Israel; and do thou worthily in Ephrath, and be famous in Beth-lehem.*

**Ruth 4:11**

ויאמרו כל-העם אשר-בשער, והזקנים--עדים; יתן ה' את-האשה הבאה אל-ביתך, כרחל וכלאה אשר בנו שתיהם את-בית ישראל, ועשה-חיל באפרתה, וקרא-שם בבית לחם.

**רות ד:יא**

The midrashim take this one step further. It is not only Boaz's kindness and attention to detail in this situation, but his *mesirut nefesh* in the face of a sexually charged situation, which are noteworthy. Let us look at a midrash that highlights this:

*Rabbi Yossi said: There were three whose evil inclination threatened to overtake them, and each of them responded to it with an oath. They are: Yosef, David and Boaz. Yosef—as it says, "How can I do this most wicked thing ... and sin before G-d?" ... He swore to his evil inclination and said, "By G-d, I will not sin" ... Boaz—from where do we know? For it says, "as the Lord lives—lie down until morning" ... Rabbi Yehuda says: That entire night his evil inclination worked against him saying,*

א"ר יוסי שלשה הן שבא יצרן לתקפן ונזדרזו עליו כל אחד ואחד בשבועה, ואלה הן יוסף ודוד ובוועז, יוסף דכתיב ואיך אעשה הרעה הגדולה הזאת ... נשבע ליצרו ואמר לאלהים איני חוטא ואיני עושה הרעה הגדולה הזאת ... בוועז מניין שנאמר חי ה' שכבי עד הבקר ... ר' יהודה אומר כל אותו הלילה היה יצרו מקטרגו ואומר



*“You are single and seek a wife, she is single and seeks a husband. Arise and sleep with her, and she will be your wife! He swore to his evil inclination and said, “As the Lord lives, I will not touch her.”*

**Ruth Rabbah 6:4**

את פנוי ומבקש אשה והיא פנויה  
ומבקשת איש עמוד ובוועלה ותהיה לך  
לאשה ונשבע ליצרו ואמר חי ה'  
שאיני נוגע בה.  
רות רבה ו:ד

In the final verses of the book, Ruth performs another act of kindness toward her mother-in-law. The downcast woman who lost her husband and sons is blessed with Ruth almost handing over her son to Naomi:

*16 And Naomi took the child, and laid it in her bosom, and became nurse unto it. 17 And the women her neighbors gave it a name, saying: “There is a son born to Naomi”; and they called his name Obed; he is the father of Jesse, the father of David.*

**Ruth 4:16-17**

טז ותקח נעמי את-הילד ותשתהו  
בחיקה, ותהי-לו לאמנת. יז ותקראנה  
לו השכנות שם לאמר, ילד-בן לנעמי;  
ותקראנה שמו עובד, הוא אבי-יש  
אבי דוד.  
רות ד:טז-יז

With such sensitivity, Ruth retreats to the background and almost allows Naomi to recapture some of her former glory.

## Leadership

*It was in the time that the judges judged. Woe to a generation who judges its judges and woe to a generation whose judges need to be judged, as it says (Book of Judges 2) and they even did not listen to their judges. And who were they? Rabbi Yehuda Ben Levi says it was Shamgar and Ehud, Rav Huna says it was Devorah, Yael and Barak.*

**Ruth Rabbah 1:1**

ויהי בימי שפוט השופטים אוי לדור  
ששפטו את שופטיהם ואוי לדור ששופטיו  
צריכין להשפט, שנא' (שופטים ב') וגם  
אל שופטיהם לא שמעו, ומי היו רב אמר  
ברק ודבורה היו, ריב"ל אמר שמגר  
ואהוד היו, רב הונא אמר דבורה וברק  
ויעל היו.  
רות רבה א:א

As was mentioned previously, the first few verses frame the story of Megillat Ruth to the time of the Judges. Historically, the period of Judges marks the downslide of *Am Israel* after the period of Joshua. The line of kingship has not yet been established and the common refrain that is repeated in throughout the book is "איש הישר בעיניו יעשה" (Shoftim 17:6; 21:25). There was no central leadership; the spiritual and moral decline of the Judges was reflective of what was taking place among *Am Israel*. Let us remember that the Book of Judges finished with the travesty of the story of the concubine in Givah, and the outcasting of the tribe of Benjamin.

It is in this context that we can compare and contrast the heroes in Megillat Ruth with those in the Book of Judges. While we see a downward spiral in Judges from a social, moral and religious perspective, Ruth and Boaz are portrayed in the exact opposite light. Ruth insists on remaining close to Naomi, following her to a new land, adopting the monotheistic theology and even serving as a caregiver to her. Boaz is seen to perform acts of *chesed* a number of times in the short story. Most striking, in a story that reminds us of Lot and his daughters and even Yehuda and Tamar, Boaz does not play innocent or allow himself to be tricked into an illicit relationship. His

words to Ruth in the shed are demanding yet honorable when compared with previous similar scenarios.

The final verses of Megillat Ruth attribute *David Hamelech*, the superior figure of the Judaic kingship, as Ruth and Boaz's great-grandson. Once again, if we compare and contrast the descent in faith and behavior found in the Book of Judges against the exemplary behavior and actions of the heroes of Megillat Ruth, we see that the introductory words are designed to show the reader what a different setting this story and people are to the other biblical characters in Shoftim. Rabbi Hayyim Angel quotes Rabbi Yisrael Rozen, who observed that the word *chesed* appears only twice, and both in negative contexts in the book of Shoftim (1:24 and 8:35). By contrast, in the small book of Ruth, which is only four chapters in length, the word *chesed* appears in a prominent way (1:8; 2:20; 3:10).<sup>2</sup> This is highly indicative of the reversal of leadership that occurs with Ruth, Boaz and Naomi, despite the reference to a darker period in Israel's history with regards to its influential people.

## Conclusion

To our last question: Why has this story been chosen for special reading and attention on the festival of Shavuot? There are many reasons that the readers may be familiar with. The Abudirham<sup>3</sup> mentions that because the *megilla* mentions harvesting the crops and the festival of Shavuot takes place at harvest time, therefore it is relevant to read. Other reasons make the connection between the fact that our forefathers received the Torah as converts, and so too Ruth was a convert. Another common reason is that *David Hamelech* came from the paradigmatic convert and his birthday and *yarzheit* (date of death) was on Shavuot. While these are all valid, perhaps we should also think about the connection of *chesed* and dignified leadership to the world of Torah.

*R. Yishmael son of R. Nachman said: Derech erez preceded Torah by 26 generations. This is the meaning of what is written: "to guard the way of the tree of life" — "the way" refers to derech erez; afterward, "the tree of life," which is Torah.*

### **Vayikra Rabbah Chapter 9**

א"ר ישמעאל בר רב נחמן עשרים  
וששה דורות קדמה דרך ארץ את  
התורה הה"ד (בראשית ג) לשמור את  
דרך עץ החיים דרך זו דרך ארץ ואח"כ  
עץ החיים זו תורה.  
ויקרא רבה, פרק ט

On the festival where we celebrate the giving of the Torah, how relevant it is to read this story, which celebrates the acts of kindness of Ruth, Boaz and Naomi. May Hashem bless us with inspiration to remember this in our learning and for His Name to be sanctified through our actions.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Hayyim Angel, "A Woman of Valor Has Been Found: Ruth Amidst a Sea of Ambiguity"  
<http://tebah.org/publications/shabuot/Ruth-%20Rabbi%20Hayyim%20Angel.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> R. David Abudirham, 14<sup>th</sup> Century, Spain.

# The Individualized Experience of Matan Torah

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Shavuot is the anniversary of the day that perhaps most significantly altered the history of the Jewish people. It is the celebration of the Jewish people's receiving the Torah. This event signifies a one-time national direct encounter with G-d and the forging of an eternal covenant, with implications for the major and minor beliefs and behaviors of every Jew thereafter. Chazal even write that the continued existence of the world was contingent upon the willingness of the Jewish people to accept the Torah,<sup>2</sup> suggesting that this event had profound universalistic ramifications beyond its direct impact on the Jewish people.

*Matan Torah* (the giving of the Torah) was, on the one hand, a major event on a national, collective level. The unity experienced by the Jewish people as they stood at the foot of the mountain was unparalleled, as noted by Rashi on Shemot, 19:2. The exclamation of “*na'aseh vinishmah*, we will do and we will listen,” affirmed the collective active acceptance of the Torah by the entire Jewish people as one unified body. On the other hand, a close examination of the manner in which the Torah was given points subtly to highly individualized elements of the experience. Indeed, given that the Torah was meant not just to be collectively accepted, but also personally embraced and internalized, it follows logically that the *Matan Torah* experience would include individually-unique elements. In the brief article that follows, the private dimensions of the *Matan Torah* event will be explored, along with a consideration of the implications for the personal relationship with Torah that each individual can attain.

## Approach # 1: Everyone Can Learn

There is some ambiguity surrounding the events of *Matan Torah*. One issue left somewhat unclear is the precise location of Moshe Rabbeinu during *Kabbalat haTorah* (the receiving of the Torah). According to Rashi (see Shemot 24:1), Moshe was standing on top of Har Sinai when

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my husband, Yehuda Turetsky, for his valuable suggestions in preparation of this article.

<sup>2</sup> See *Bereishit Rabbah* 1:1, and an elaboration of this point in *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* 4:25.

Hashem gave the Jewish people the Torah. However, a close reading of the text may indicate otherwise, as the final *pasuk* prior to the giving of the *Aseret Hadibrot* (Ten Commandments) states that Moshe went down from the mountain. Based on that *pasuk*, Ramban and Ibn Ezra (ad loc) challenge Rashi's assertion and maintain that Moshe was in fact at the bottom of the mountain during *Kabbalat HaTorah*.

R. Zvi Grumet<sup>3</sup> notes that Ramban and Ibn Ezra's reading of the Chumash conveys an important message. Moshe's physical position among the people during *Matan Torah* indicates that the Torah belongs to all of *Klal Yisrael* equally. Lest one think that greater piety or increased scholarship grants a stronger claim to the Torah, Moshe's position at the bottom of the mountain clearly signifies that all Jews have equal access to the Torah, irrespective of status or stature.

An additional implication of Moshe's stance among the people during *Kabbalat HaTorah* relates to the role of intermediaries in *avodat Hashem* (service of G-d). Had Moshe been on the mountain, the Jewish people could have erroneously concluded that they could only truly connect to Hashem through Moshe or some other intermediary. Moshe's position within the nation suggests that it is incumbent upon each individual to forge his or her unique and personal relationship with G-d, without reliance on any outside mechanism or individual to mediate the relationship between G-d and him or herself.

The Jewish tradition has long embraced this very powerful idea; the Rambam's principles of faith include the prohibition against relying on an intermediary when approaching G-d. Additionally, the Talmud<sup>4</sup> writes that in contrast to the crown of kingship and priesthood, the crown of Torah is accessible to all. It sits in the corner, available for anyone who desires it to take it. It is possible this same idea of equal access and opportunity manifests itself through an additional element of *Ma'amad Har Sinai* (the gathering at Sinai). The Jewish religion is unique in that its national inception was marked by a mass revelation rather than a revelation to an individual. R. Yehuda HaLevi notes one important dimension of mass revelation, in that it serves as strong evidence in demonstrating the Torah's authenticity.<sup>5</sup>

However, in light of the above ideas, it is possible that mass revelation underscores an additional message. Every member of *Klal Yisrael* alive at that time, and according to some, every Jew that would ever be born, was present at the moment of the most intense Divine revelation the world has ever known. This signifies that every Jew has a unique portion in the Torah and is charged with an individualized role in carrying out the Torah's mission in the world. As long as one believes that he or she can rely on the Torah study of others, or that one individual's Divine mission in the world is less important than that of another, one will be unable to maximally invest in and grow from the treasure of Torah. When one perceives the Torah as uniquely meaningful for each individual, one can commit to actualizing one's own potential through scrupulous yet personalized *avodat Hashem*.

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<sup>3</sup> His article is available at <http://www.tzemachdavid.org/Vsamachta/Shavuot01/mountain.shtml>.

<sup>4</sup> See *Yoma* 72b.

<sup>5</sup> See *Kuzari* 1:25.

## Approach # 2: The Role of Passion in Personal Acquisition of Torah

The Sinaitic experience is often referred to as “*Kabbalat haTorah*,” loosely translated as “the acceptance of the Torah,” referring to the Jewish people’s willing acceptance of the Torah. Chazal, on the other hand, paint a very different picture. Rather than portraying the *Matan Torah* episode as one in which the Jewish people lovingly embraced the Torah, Chazal suggest that Hashem forced the Jewish people into accepting the Torah:

*The verse states, “And they stood under the mountain.” R. Avdimi b. Chama b. Chasa said: This teaches that God hung the mountain over them like a barrel and said to them, “If you accept the Torah, good, but if not, this will be your burial ground.”*

**Shabbat 88a**

ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר אמר רב אבדימי  
בר חמא בר חסא מלמד שכפה הקדוש  
ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית ואמר  
להם אם אתם מקבלים התורה מוטב  
ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם.  
**שבת פח.**

Various commentaries have explored the significance of the coercion that was used by G-d during *Matan Torah*. Tosafot (ad loc) question why any amount of force would be necessary in convincing *Klal Yisrael*, given that *Klal Yisrael* had already stated “*na’aseh vinishmah*,” expressing their absolute commitment to accepting the Torah!<sup>6</sup> They answer that while the Jews were initially prepared to accept the Torah willingly, they became incredibly frightened when witnessing the awesome fire that accompanied the delivering of the *Luchot* (Tablets). Hashem therefore had to force them to accept the Torah because they would otherwise have reneged on their initial commitment.

An astute question is asked by R. Shmuel Birnbaum, the late *Mirr*er Rosh Yeshiva.<sup>7</sup> R. Birnbaum questions why the Torah needed to be given with fire if it would cause the Jewish people to retract their commitment. Would it not have been simpler to give the Torah without fire, thereby letting the Jewish people accept the Torah on their own volition and not as a result of being threatened by possible doom? R. Birnbaum suggests that the Torah needed to be given with fire, even if it meant that the Jews would have to be forced into accepting the Torah. This, he explains, is because “Torah without fire isn’t called Torah.” Torah void of passion, fervor and excitement is not authentic Torah; Torah must be infused with an emotional zeal and dedication.

Perhaps R. Birnbaum’s understanding of the role of the fire at *Ma’amad Har Sinai* can also inform one’s understanding of the role of metaphorical fire when engaging with Torah. Acquisition of Torah is not meant to involve the mere imparting of information. If Torah were meant to remain relegated to the cognitive domain, perhaps it could have been given in a more subdued manner. However, Torah is inextricably linked with fire: with an emotional attachment

<sup>6</sup> This follows the position of Rashi (and Chazal) that the Jewish people said *na’aseh vinishmah* prior to receiving the Torah. Ramban offers an alternate approach in his commentary on the Torah.

<sup>7</sup> His approach is cited in *Yalkut Kitrah Shel Torah* 21-22.

and with a passion that is reflective of a personal enthusiasm toward that which one treasures, values and perceives as eternally meaningful. Only when one proactively invests all of one's faculties into understanding and penetrating Torah can the personal relationship with the divine word be maximized.

### Approach # 3: One Torah for Many Different People

An age-old educational question relates to whether to teach to the top, middle, or bottom of the class. Should one teach to the lowest common denominator, explaining and re-explaining the material until every single student understands, even if the stronger students will become bored and disengaged within the first few minutes? Alternatively, perhaps teachers should aim to challenge and stimulate, thereby promoting a rich experience for the stronger students, though at risk of losing the weaker ones along the way? This struggle is common to novice and veteran teachers alike, across all grade levels and disciplines. Consider this educational challenge in the context of *Ma'amad Har Sinai*. *Ma'amad Har Sinai* was meant to be personally meaningful, engaging and instructive for not just a handful of students but for an entire nation of individuals. If a teacher finds it difficult to engage a diverse class that may consist of only 10 or 15 students, how did Hashem deliver the Torah in a way that was accessible and meaningful to the entire Jewish people? Based on the writings of later commentaries, two approaches can be suggested that highlight the individualized dimensions that were subtly woven into what was otherwise the highly collective experience of *Ma'amad Har Sinai*.

R. Shlomo Luria, known as the Maharshal, describes the differentiated nature in which the Torah was conveyed.<sup>8</sup> According to the Maharshal, while the actual Torah presented by G-d was finite, each person processed and experienced the Torah through the unique prism of his or her background, thereby receiving the Torah in a unique and personalized way. In that sense, *Matan Torah* reflects a sophisticated educational model in which various individuals are capable of partaking in a single experience, yet benefiting in different ways. Indeed, recent developments in the field of education in which teachers use an array of strategies to simultaneously meet the needs of diverse students mirror the methods modeled by G-d at *Matan Torah*.<sup>9</sup> Individual needs and proclivities are respected, while still promoting a sense of community and cohesiveness. What was on some level an experience focused on the collective was actually a highly personal encounter for each member of *Klal Yisrael*.

R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, author of *Meshech Chochma*, offers an alternate approach.<sup>10</sup> He suggests that at times the Torah intentionally uses a vague formulation in order to allow for different interpretations and to remain relevant for different people. A prime example of this phenomenon relates to the obligation to learn Torah. The Torah avoids giving an explicit measurement that quantitatively delineates how much Torah each person is expected to learn. This ambiguity necessitates follow up with an oral law and later rabbinic clarification to

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<sup>8</sup> *Yam Shel Shlomo*, Introduction to *Bava Kammah*.

<sup>9</sup> Levy, H. M. (2008). Meeting the needs of all students through differentiated instruction: Helping every child reach and exceed standards. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues, and Ideas*, 81(4), 161-164.

<sup>10</sup> See *Ohr Sameach*, *Hilchot Talmud Torah* 1:2 and *Meshech Chochmah*, *Parashat Eikev* 11:13.

elaborate on the various factors that determine one's particular obligation to study Torah. This ambiguity, therefore, should not be perceived as an imperfection in the Torah's formulation; rather, R. Meir Simcha suggests that Hashem never meant for the requirement to study Torah to be categorical and absolute. Recognizing individual differences, both internal traits and external circumstances, Hashem crafted a sophisticated system in which each individual is meant to use divine guidelines to honestly assess personal roles and responsibilities.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the pedagogical ramifications of the individualization of *Matan Torah*, the nuances of the experience at *Ma'amad Har Sinai* highlight opportunities for finding personal meaning in Torah, and encourage each individual to forge a personal connection with the Torah. Rather than trying to squelch a sense of uniqueness, we are encouraged to bring our individuality into our relationship with Torah and to use it as a basis to strengthen and deepen our connection with the divine word.

## Conclusion

*Matan Torah* may be among the most significant national events in Jewish collective history. At the same time, the nuances of the *Matan Torah* story demonstrate that while G-d interacts with us as a nation, He also engages with us as individuals. The physical arrangement of the nation and its leader during *Ma'amad Har Sinai*, the divine revelation to which every single Jew bore witness, the symbolism of the fire that accompanied the *Aseret Hadibrot*, and the individualized manner in which each person heard and processed the divine word, all point to the unique portion in Torah that is allotted to every single Jew. Through the carefully crafted *Ma'amad Har Sinai* experience, G-d conveyed the value of every individual Jew and their potential for forging a deep, meaningful, personalized connection with G-d and His Torah.

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<sup>11</sup> R. Avraham Yitzchak HaKohain Kook has a similar formulation in *Ma'amarei Raaya* p. 198-199. It is interesting to compare how R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk and R. Kook agree in their general position on the amount of Torah one must study, while possibly differing on which factors would lead to people having different requirements.

# Feature Section: Leadership

Editor's note: One of the themes of the holiday of Shavuot is leadership. It celebrates the day that Moshe Rabbeinu became the teacher par excellence of the Jewish people and assumed new responsibilities as their leader. It also commemorates the birth of King David, another great Jewish leader, through the reading of Megillat Ruth. While all of the articles discuss certain aspects of leadership, we are proud to include a section dealing specifically with the question:

**What are the traits of good leaders?**

# Ben Zoma and the Qualifications for Leadership

Rabbi Ozer Glickman

Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS

This past spring, I found myself in a Paris hotel lobby with my eyes fixed on the front door awaiting the CEO of a major public company. We share a close friend and he had suggested we all three meet while I was passing through Europe on my way to the Middle East. Despite a long e-mail correspondence exchanging views on economics and politics, I had resisted the temptation to Google him. I therefore had no way to recognize my guest.

And so I found myself scanning a succession of males emerging from the revolving glass door (there are many women business leaders today but I knew to expect a man). I eliminated most of them: too young, too hip, wrong nationality. After about a dozen good candidates walked past me to the elevators, I experienced a moment of self-awareness that I found alternately amusing and fascinating: I was only focusing on tall individuals. Why was I so certain that the leader of a corporate giant would himself tower over others?

As it turns out, there is evidence that my unconscious prejudice may in fact be justifiable. When the journalist and social commentator Malcolm Gladwell surveyed Fortune 500 CEOs a few years ago, he discovered that 58 percent of his male respondents were 6-footers; the corresponding percentage of males in the general population is less than 15 percent! (See Gladwell's *Blink*, chapter 2)



What are we to make of the correlation between height and success in the corporate world? We cannot fairly conclude that taller people possess greater leadership qualities since we have no indication that their disproportionate selection for corporate office is warranted. If Gladwell's sample is sufficient to draw any conclusion, it can only be that tall men are more frequently chosen by corporate boards for leadership positions than we could fairly predict from their percentage in the general population. Taller men appear to be perceived more favorably than their shorter colleagues.

That tall men are disproportionately perceived as leadership material is an idea of great antiquity. The Aristotelian heroes of the Greek tragedies are depicted as tall men. The fall from grace of the head that stands above the crowd resonates with the audience in a way that bringing low a shorter man would not. Sophocles' Oedipus is tall as is Shakespeare's Othello. Both are noble men with an unfortunate tragic flaw that is exploited by circumstance or the unprincipled to bring them low.

We should not be very much surprised to find rabbinic tradition ascribing better than average height to its heroes. The greatest of our leaders, Moshe Rabbeinu, was a tall man. So teaches the Talmud, *Shabbat* 92a, in passing, in its discussion of the laws of carrying on Shabbat. The B'nai Kehat, a branch of the Levi'im, carried the boards of the Mishkan as it traveled through the desert. One suggestion is that they were tall because they were of the tribe of Levi and would, like their cousin Moshe, be tall as well (the tradition cites another verse to demonstrate Moshe's height).

Here is where the discussion takes an unexpected turn. The Talmud suggests that Moshe Rabbeinu may have been tall for another reason altogether. It cites an anonymous statement that the *Shekhina* (Divine Presence) rests only upon individuals with a particular set of characteristics:

*The Divine Presence rests only upon one who is wise, strong, wealthy and tall.*

**Shabbat 92a**

אין השכינה שורה אלא על חכם גבור ועשיר ובעל קומה.

**שבת צב.**

Perhaps Moshe was exceptionally tall and not typical of the members of his tribe.

There is something unsettling about this Talmudic statement. It is one thing for human beings to lean unconsciously toward those who project an aura of power; it is another for the Divine Presence to seek out the privileged. Why should the prophetic mantle rest only upon the wealthy and the powerful? I am not certain what is more disconcerting to most of us: learning that leadership is the province of the beautiful people or discovering that we will never be one of them.

And yet the discussion in the Gemara, *Shabbat*, ends there, without a word of protest: the Divine Presence rests only upon one who is wise, strong, wealthy and tall. The *baalei ha-sugya* move on to a new topic, the halakhic status of carrying objects on one's head. Isn't there a sage somewhere, in Eretz Yisrael or in Bavel, who would challenge this elitist model of Heavenly favor?

But there is something that catches our eye. We have seen these adjectives before: wise, strong, and wealthy ... grouped together and in the same order. They form the questions of Ben Zoma in the fourth perek of *Pirkei Avot*:

Ben Zoma would say: *Who is wise? Who is strong? Who is wealthy?*

**Avos 4:1**

בן זומא אמר איזהו חכם ... איזהו גבור ... איזהו  
עשיר.  
**אבות ד:א**

In this realization is the beginning of insight. Shimon ben Zoma, the second-generation *tanna*, possessed such mastery of the halakha that the Talmud says his mere appearance in a dream promises the acquisition of wisdom. Ben Zoma possessed such personal wealth that tradesmen flocked to his door to serve him (*Berachot* 58a). It is precisely this sage who redefines for us the qualifications for spiritual leadership stipulated by the anonymous authority in the Gemara, *Shabbat*. His answers are proverbial:

*Who is truly wise? One who learns from everyone ... Who is truly strong? One who conquers one's own appetite ... Who is truly wealthy? One who is happy with one's own lot.*

איזהו חכם הלומד מכל אדם ... איזהו גבור הכובש  
את יצרו ... איזהו עשיר השמח בחלקו.

While these are among the most oft-quoted sayings in rabbinic literature, they take on a new (and perhaps original) meaning in the context of the Talmudic discussion of spiritual leadership. They are Ben Zoma's redefinition of qualifications for leadership. **They shift the focus from privilege to character.**

Ben Zoma's words are even more powerful when we consider his own career. His name is synonymous with scholarship, not only in the context of dreams mentioned above but throughout the entire Talmud. In the first perek of *Sanhedrin* (17b), we learn that whenever the rabbis say a matter was discussed before the sages without specifying to whom they refer, they mean Shimon ben Zoma and his four colleagues on the court in Yavneh.

Despite his achievements in scholarship, rabbinic tradition reports that Shimon ben Zoma (and his colleague Shimon Ben Azzai) were never ordained. They remain in the rabbinic imagination as *talmidim*, disciples par excellence, so much so that the Gemara in *Kiddushin* 49b declares that if one stipulates during betrothal, "You are betrothed on condition that I am a disciple," one need not be as erudite as Ben Zoma and Ben Azzai to fulfill the condition. The two are in a class by themselves. The Yerushalmi (*Sotah* IX, 16) laments:

*When Ben Zoma died, discipleship disappeared from Israel.*

משמת בן זומא פסקו התלמידים.

Ben Zoma nevertheless remains an outsider. This may have been due to his obsession with the mysteries of metaphysics. His own rebbe, R. Yehoshua ben Chananya, once encountered Ben Zoma on the *Har ha-Bayit* (the Temple Mount). Deep in thought, Ben Zoma did not notice him and continued to sit, normally an act of disrespect before one's teacher. R. Yehoshua aroused him from his trance by asking him what he was doing. Ben Zoma replied that he was gazing at the space between the upper and lower waters. R. Yehoshua turned to his disciples to explain: Ben Zoma is still outside. It was not much later that Ben Zoma left this world (*Chagiga* 15a; Tosefta *Chagiga* II, 6)

That this brilliant mind chose to pursue the mysteries of the creation to the detriment of his own position within the hierarchy of sages endows him with a unique measure of credibility on

questions of status and privilege. Ben Zoma's lessons on leadership have not been adequately learned by we who need them most. We continue to honor privilege over character. Choosing successful business people to manage the secular affairs of Jewish institutions makes good sense. To be sure, I would rather have men and women who have achieved real-world success responsible for the fiscal health of a yeshiva or a synagogue than rabbinic scholars with little understanding of economics and finance, no matter how brilliant. Jewish leadership, though, is only partially about business and management. The secular leadership of Jewish institutions sets policy and it needs to be informed by Jewish values. One of these, Ben Zoma teaches, is to know when material success is enough (who is truly wealthy?). Another is to consider even the humblest individual's views as a potential source of wisdom (who is truly wise?). Another is to eschew power for character (who is truly strong?).

A close reading of the perennial student's prescriptions for leadership can guide us in other directions as well. We should note that every one of the characteristics he described is attainable by anyone of any social rank in the community. Political and organizational leaders do not have exclusive rights to the mantle of leadership. In fact, it might be argued that religious groups suffer when their organizational leadership is confused with their spiritual mission. Jewish groups across the entire spectrum of religious expression often make this mistake, ceding spiritual leadership to their rabbis rather than working to improve their own spirituality. In other spiritual communities, the problems of the clergy can obscure the group's broader mission. This is a corollary of the discredited axiom that leadership is confined to the privileged. Such an approach relieves the group's laity of its own responsibility to lead.

Shavuot, the holiday commemorating the day when we all became students, is an opportunity to remember that we still need to study Ben Zoma's words. The power to which a potential leader should aspire is not the physical strength of an Achilles but the self-restraint of an Aharon ha-Kohein. The wealth to which a potential leader should aspire is not the treasure of a Midas but the balance and contentment of a Moshe. The wisdom to which a potential leader should aspire is not the acknowledged public wisdom of an Oracle but the intellectual openness of Ben Zoma, the student who continues to teach.

# Humility: The Essential Ingredient in Great Leadership

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Leadership is one of the most coveted qualities in the world today. In business, academia and communal affairs, leaders play an invaluable role, and as such we go to all lengths to develop and prove our leadership ability and capacity to others. Students join clubs just for the sake of demonstrating their leadership skills on their resume. Universities market themselves as building the leaders of tomorrow. Businesses try to breed leaders from the moment their newly hired employees walk through the door. It is almost irrelevant who you lead and what you're leading them toward; strong leadership is, in itself, viewed as an independently valuable quality.

At the same time, the term "leader" has all but lost its meaning. We don't really know what we want in leaders anymore. On the one hand, it seems that our most prized leaders must have strength, intelligence and charisma. Celebrities, politicians and CEOs are the people society looks to as its leaders. On the other hand, we often hear that they cause turmoil in their own lives and the lives of others.

If leadership is not about strength, intelligence and charisma, then what are we looking for in a leader? You cannot achieve a goal if you cannot define it. If we all want to be leaders, whether in our community, business or personal lives, we have to understand what exactly we're looking for.

The place to get the answer is the Torah, where the Creator of the Universe teaches us what makes the perfect leader.

The Torah is filled with strong leaders: prophets, scholars, kings, queens, heroes and villains. You can't turn a page without reading an intimate account of the dramatic trials and triumphant victories of Jewish leaders. Yet, the Torah is clear that among all of these impressive leaders, one rose above the rest.

That person is Moshe, and G-d refers to him as the greatest leader in history. The Torah states:

*Never again did a prophet like Moshe come up in Israel, who G-d knew face to face.*

**Devarim 34:10**

וְלֹא-קָם נָבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, כְּמֹשֶׁה, אֲשֶׁר יָדָעוּ ה',  
פְּנִים אֶל-פְּנִים.  
דְּבָרִים לַד':

No one ever did or ever will achieve what Moshe achieved.

Moshe was the leader at the most monumental moments in Jewish history. He led a group of slaves to become a nation poised to conquer the Promised Land. He fought Pharaoh, one of the most powerful men in history. He was G-d's agent to bring the plagues, split the sea, make bread fall from the sky and make water flow from a magical well. Moshe was the liaison between the Jews and G-d in the giving of the Torah. Moshe was the leader of leaders.

However, it seems that Moshe was unqualified for the position as a savior for the Jewish people. His resume was less than impressive. To highlight a few seemingly disqualifying factors:

1. The Jews were enslaved and oppressed by the very person that Moshe called "Dad."
2. Moshe wasn't "of the people." He grew up in the palace, protected from the pain and agony the Jews faced.
3. He had no Jewish education.
4. He was a convicted felon.
5. He married the daughter of an idolatrous priest from another country.
6. He wasn't articulate or charismatic.

In truth, if Moshe was alive today, he probably wouldn't even get an *aliya* in shul, let alone be our leader. There was a nation full of people that G-d could have chosen to be the leader. Why did He choose Moshe?

The answer, I believe, is found in *Parshas Beha'aloscha*.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the *parsha*, there is a short story that gives us an insight into the essence of Moshe's leadership quality.

Moshe, Miriam and Aaron were all siblings and prophets. Miriam and Aaron had normal marital relationships with their spouses, but Moshe disengaged conjugally from his wife, Tzipora. Miriam disapproved of Moshe acting differently from them, and commented to Aaron:

*Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moshe regarding the Cushite woman he married, for he married a Cushite woman. And they said: Has G-d only spoken to Moshe? Hasn't He spoken to us too? And G-d heard.*

**Bamidbar 12:1-2**

וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁחָה עַל אֲדוֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכַּשִּׁיטָה  
אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי אִשָּׁה כַּשִּׁיטָה לָקַח. וַיֹּאמְרוּ, הֲרַק אֲדָ-  
בְּמִשְׁחָה דִּבֶּר ה'--הֲלֵא, גַם-בָּנוּ דִּבֶּר; וַיִּשְׁמַע, ה'.  
**במדבר יב: א-ב**

The Torah then does something unusual. It interrupts the flow of the story with commentary:

*Moshe was more humble than anyone else on the earth.*

**Bamidbar 12:3**

וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה, עָנָו מְאֹד--מִכָּל, הָאָדָם, אֲשֶׁר, עַל-פְּנֵי  
הָאֲדָמָה.  
**במדבר יב: ג**

Weren't we in the middle of the story? Why did we suddenly shift to commentary?

<sup>1</sup> This idea is based on a comment of Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "Covenant and Conversation 5768: Beha'aloscha-Humility," available at: <http://www.chief Rabbi.org/2008/06/14/>.

The Torah, the ultimate lesson book, was highlighting a fact that we would have otherwise overlooked. Initially, it seems that the conversation was between Miriam and Aaron, and nobody else. But that wasn't the case. There were actually three people present. Moshe was sitting quietly as Miriam was wrongly criticizing him.

Moshe had every reason to defend himself. He knew that Miriam was wrong. He understood that his relationship with G-d was different from theirs. His prophetic ability was "face to face" and therefore he needed to take precautions that the other prophets didn't need.

So why didn't he interject when Miriam accused him? In the past, Moshe showed no hesitance in standing up for truth. He confronted Pharaoh, the Jewish people and even G-d.

Anticipating the question, the Torah jumps in with commentary to make sure we don't miss the point. It explains that Moshe's lack of protest was due to his unique quality of humility.

We mistakenly associate humility with being passive or incapable. In fact, the English word humility stems from the Latin word *humilitas*, which means "grounded," "from the earth," or "low." However, according to Jewish thought, humility is not meekness. A humble person can be strong, assertive and proactive. Humility is not downplaying our strengths. Humility is appreciating our G-d-given talents and focusing them on the needs of others.

Moshe knew Miriam was wrong. However, he just didn't care to defend himself. He had little concern for his honor or reputation. In fact, he had little concern for himself.

This quality of humility seems to be what separates Moshe from the rest. From the moment we are introduced to Moshe, the Torah shows us just how much he sacrifices his own well-being for others.

The first time we meet Moshe as an adult, the *pasuk* states: "וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה" And Moshe grew up." (Shemos 2:11). Rashi on that verse asks the obvious question: The previous verse already stated "וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד" the boy grew up." Why does the very next verse repeat the fact the Moshe grew up? Rashi explains:

*Didn't it already state "the boy grew up"? R. Yehuda b. Ilai answered: The first time refers to his physical growth and the second time refers to his stature, Pharaoh appointed him a leader of his house.*

**Rashi, Shemos 2:11**

והלא כבר כתיב ויגדל הילד אמר רבי יהודה ברבי אלעאי הראשון לקומה והשני לגדולה, שמינהו פרעה על ביתו.  
רש"י, שמות ב:יא

According to Rashi, the first time the verse mentions growth was referring to when Moshe grew in age. The second mention of growth was in stature. He rose in the ranks of the Egyptian monarch. He became a man of stature, responsibility and power.

What was the first thing Moshe did in his newfound status? Order new business cards? Buy a leather couch for his corner office overlooking the Nile?

No. The verse continues: "וַיֵּצֵא אֶל-אֶחָיו וַיֵּרָא בְּסִבְלָתָם" He went out to his brethren and he saw their suffering." He was completely unconcerned with himself. He went out and focused on the pain of the Jewish slaves.

Remember that Moshe was a prince living in a luxurious palace. He could have turned a blind eye. He could have read the horrible stories about Jewish bondage in the Egyptian newspapers and, over coffee and eggs, shrugged his shoulders the way many of us do when we read about someone else's suffering.

In the book *Timeless Healing*, Dr. Herbert Benson, famous for his studies on the connection between medicine and spirituality, shows that what we focus on can actually change our reality. Moshe chose to focus on the pain of the Jewish people because that's who he was. He couldn't focus on himself. He couldn't turn a blind eye. He just cared about others too much.

The Midrash on this verse states:

*What is meant by the words, "And he (Moshe) saw"? He would see their suffering and weep, "Woe is to me for you, would that I could die for you." For there is no work more strenuous than molding bricks; and he used to shoulder the burdens and help each one of them ...*

*Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Yose the Galilean said, "He [Moshe] saw a child carrying the load of an adult, and an adult bearing the load of a child; a woman bearing a man's load, and a man bearing the load of a woman; a young man carrying the load of an old man, and an old man with a young man's load. He would overlook his high office [as Prince of Egypt] and go and rearrange their burdens and pretend he was doing it for Pharaoh's sake ... Said the Holy One, Blessed be He, 'You put aside your own affairs and went to share in Israel's suffering and acted like their brother. Therefore, I will put aside the higher and lower worlds and speak only to you.'"*

**Shemos Rabbah 1:27**

מהו וירא שהיה רואה בסבלותם  
ובוכה ואומר חבל לי עליכם מי יתן  
מותי עליכם שאין לך מלאכה קשה  
ממלאכת הטיט והיה נותן כתיפיו  
ומסייע לכל אחד ואחד מהן ... ר'  
אלעזר בנו של רבי יוסי הגלילי  
אומר ראה משוי גדול על קטן  
ומשוי קטן על גדול ומשוי איש על  
אשה ומשוי אשה על איש ומשוי  
זקן על בחור ומשוי בחור על זקן  
והיה מניח דרגון שלו והולך  
ומיישב להם סבלותיהם ועושה  
כאלו מסייע לפרעה ... אמר הקב"ה  
אתה הנחת עסקיך והלכת לראות  
בצערן של ישראל ונהגת בהן מנהג  
אחים, אני מניח את העליונים ואת  
התחתונים ואדבר עמך.  
**שמות רבה א:כו**

Moshe is introduced to us with this unique quality of caring for others more than himself. Moshe's humility becomes the *raison d'être* for his role as a leader.

Because of his sacrifice, Moshe went from being an Egyptian prince to a Midianite shepherd almost overnight. It started when he saw an Egyptian officer hitting a Jewish slave. Undeterred by the disastrous personal implications of attacking an Egyptian in defense of a Jew, Moshe killed the Egyptian. After fleeing Egypt to escape persecution, Moshe ended up in the neighboring country Midian. You would think that these consequences would have changed his approach to conflict, namely avoiding it.

Not Moshe.

When Moshe arrived to Midian he saw male shepherds harassing the daughters of Yisro. True to his character, he came to their defense. Upon realizing his inherent selflessness, Yisro invited him to their home and eventually gave him one of his daughters, Tzipora, to marry.

There is another Midrash that demonstrates Moshe's profound care for others:

Once, while Moshe Rabbeinu was tending Yisro's sheep, a lamb ran away. Moshe ran after it until it reached a small, shaded place. There, the lamb came across a pool of water and began to drink. As Moshe approached the lamb he said, "I did not know you ran away because you were thirsty. You must be tired." So he put the lamb on his shoulders and carried him back. The Holy One said, "You tend the flock which belongs to a human [Yisro] with such overwhelming compassion. I swear to you, as you live today, that you will tend the flock which belongs to Me – Israel." This is what is meant by the verse, "and Moshe was a shepherd."

### **Shemos Rabbah 2:2**

אמרו רבותינו כשהיה מרע"ה רועה צאנו של יתרו במדבר ברה ממנו גדי ורץ אחריו עד שהגיע לחסית כיון שהגיע לחסית נזדמנה לו בריכה של מים ועמד הגדי לשתות כיון שהגיע משה אצלו אמר אני לא הייתי יודע שרץ היית מפני צמא עיף אתה הרכיבו על כתיפו והיה מהלך אמר הקב"ה יש לך רחמים לנהוג צאנו של בשר ודם כך, הייך אתה תרעה צאני ישראל הוי ומשה היה רועה:

**שמות רבה ב:ב**

It was immediately after demonstrating this tremendous humility—by putting the needs of his flock over his own comfort—that G-d appeared to Moshe in the burning bush and chose him as the leader of the Jewish people.

The Torah seems to be pretty clear that the core ingredient for leadership is humility. The more you think you should be a leader, the less you are qualified. The more your leadership role involves your own interest, the less of a leader you are. Leadership, according to G-d, is stewardship. Leaders serve the people, and not vice versa. Therefore, the most appropriate leader is the one who cares less for himself—the one who is humble. This applies to every dimension of life. It applies to our roles as parents, spouses, teachers, friends, Jews and humans.

Even the business world has recognized the impact of humility. Jim Stengel, in his book *Grow: How Ideals Power Growth and Profit at the World's Greatest Companies*, created an index called the "Stengel 50," based on a ten year study of 50,000 brands. He found that the world's 50 highest performing businesses were financially successful in proportion to their ability to connect with consumers' emotions and values. Consumers that felt that they were being given to, not being taken from, created a deeper affiliation with the brands, which led to increased success for the business.

Bestselling business author Jim Collins, who wrote the blockbuster *Good to Great*, studied almost 1,500 companies' performance over 40 years. In his research, he isolated the qualities of top business leaders. His findings were that one of the top two qualities of a great business leader is humility. The other is fierce resolve.

Famed author and psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi found similar findings in his research. As discussed in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Csikszentmihalyi discovered that business people that are the most likely to get the highest ratings are the ones that think about their organization or their colleagues before themselves. He found that every single indication of long-term strategic growth in the personal, communal and business lives all align on the same principles.

Victor Frankel wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning*, "Don't aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be



pursued; it must ensue ... as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a course greater than oneself."

Each of us is a leader, whether it's for a business, an organization, a family or even ourselves. To be great leaders we have to examine the motivation behind our actions. Is it for our glory? Is it for our grandeur? If it is, we won't be able to be successful leaders.

Are we pushing our kids to succeed at school or sports for their sake or for ours? Are we upset with our spouse because he/she is not doing what we want? Are we frustrated with our communal leaders because they're not serving our needs or the community's? Are we positioning our professional lives to get as much as possible or give as much as possible, to our employers, colleagues and customers? Do we turn to G-d when we want something? Do we ever consider what we can do for Him?

When our outlook is focused on how a set of circumstances will affect us, it is impossible to become the leaders we are meant to be. To be real leaders, we have to think about others' needs. Our own desires become a faint backdrop to our mission in life, which is to serve others.

Humility is not something that we turn on in shul and turn off in the boardroom. Humility is a form of true strength to be used at every moment of life. It is the secret to a great marriage, business, friendship and ultimately, a strong relationship with G-d. As much as we endlessly chase after and worry about our own needs, the legacy of Moshe teaches us that there is only one way to truly lead: to strive, with all your strength, to worry about someone else's needs.

Shavuot reminds us not just *that* we received the Torah, but *how* we received the Torah. The Torah was given to the Jews as a group, not by chance, but specifically to show us that our greatness as individuals is dependent on our ability to humble ourselves to each other. On a grand scale, we are servants of Hashem, but we are also servants of each other—from the people closest to us to the strangers on the street. When we live with this credo, when we model the qualities of Moshe, the Jewish über-leader, we will merit to truly reach the level of “כאיש אחד בלב” כאיש אחד as one man with one heart.”

# Answering the Call, In Life and Leadership<sup>1</sup>

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## Answering the Call

“Everyone who wills can hear the inner voice. It is within everyone.” Mahatma Gandhi, the great and famous champion of civil rights, uttered these insightful words in the 20th century; and yet, many centuries before his time, our Sages of blessed memory conveyed a remarkably similar concept.

In *Parshat Lech Lecha*, Hashem calls on Avraham (known as Avram at that time):

*And Hashem said to Avram: Go yourself from you land, from your hometown, from the house of your father to the land that I will show you.*

**Bereishit 12:1**

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-אַבְרָם, לֵךְ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ  
וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ, אֶל-הָאֶרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר  
אֶרְאֶה.  
בְּרֵאשִׁית יב:א

An important question arises: Why did Hashem aim this divine directive at Avraham in particular? On what ground did Hashem select Avraham? What of the others who populated that pre-monotheistic universe? Surely anyone who was spoken to by the Almighty Himself would speedily come to their wits and uproot themselves to whichever far-flung realm that Awesome Voice might compel them.

The *Chiddushei Harim*<sup>2</sup> supplies an answer to this quandary which is as beautiful as it is brilliant, encompassing within it the great challenge of modern-man in an increasingly frenzied society: The call of the Almighty went forth for all to hear; only Avraham, however, made the choice to answer that call.

In that same vein, Chazal, our Sages, note (for example, *Pirkei Avot* 6:2) that a *bat kol*, or a Heavenly voice, calls out from Mount Sinai each day, unbeknownst to the Children of Israel. The question and the challenge, then, is to discover our calling; to understand our challenge; to tease out that soft, subtle and sometimes soundless voice that beckons us to rise to our potential, and to magnify it into a resounding declaration that both guides and colors our lives.

<sup>1</sup> I am deeply indebted to Noah Jacobson for his tireless efforts and without whom writing this article would not have been possible.

<sup>2</sup> See *Sfat Emet, Lech Lecha* S632 and S662 based on *Bereishit Rabbah* 39:1.

## Beginning with a Question

How can we tease out that voice from the cacophonous constellation of sounds that seem to totally inundate our environment? To be sure, amid the clutter of earthly diversions lies our personal mission and purpose. “G-d hides things,” goes the old adage, “by putting them all around us.” But how do we initiate the formidable and often overwhelming process of sifting through those innumerable “things”?

The answer: simply by *asking*. Through the holiday of Passover and its central seder procedure, Jews learn well the criticality of asking important and incisive questions, so much so that the actual answers to those questions seem to assume an almost secondary importance. The very process of asking itself invariably leads to greater learning and understanding. If the seder on Passover serves as the paradigm of our educational philosophy, then an extensive line of questioning certainly stands at square one of the educational process.

## What are the Questions? Life and Leadership

Which questions will lead to this discovery and truly set off the process of self-education in earnest? American author Richard Bach in his book *Illusions* wrote: “The simplest questions are the most profound. Where were you born? Where is your home? Where are you going? What are you doing? Think about these once in a while and watch your answers change.” Bach’s assertion may seem at first elementary, perhaps even offensive to the supposedly sophisticated sensibilities of some. But we must ask ourselves: How often do we take pause in pondering the most rudimentary and essential components of our earthly, humanly existence?

Though I personally dedicate much of my time helping others navigate these sorts of questions in discerning their own direction in life, I want to focus this essay specifically on the underpinnings of effective and inspired leadership. What questions must leaders ask to propel themselves to effective leadership?

In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins suggests that one’s “Hedgehog Principle”—or particularized, idiosyncratic sweet-spot—resides at the focal intersection of three main components: passion, skills, and value-added capability. In other words: What am I deeply passionate about? What am I naturally good at? What does the world at large, or at least my own world in particular, need from me?

## Moshe, a Familiar Paradigm

For a biblical manifestation of this Hedgehog Principle at work within the subject of leadership, one needn’t look further than our cherished leader Moshe. Moshe serves as the paradigmatic leader of Jewish history, a *manhig* (leader) par excellence. I believe that three episodes, each occurring and adjacent to one another within the span of a few verses in chapter two of Exodus, demonstrate Moshe’s own challenge in “answering the call,” and his endeavor to learn about himself in the process. What type of person is Moshe? What type of leader? And how did Moshe succeed in securing his status—a status he certainly never sought out—as the greatest leader in the history of mankind: “There was never another prophet in Israel like Moshe” (Devarim 34:10).

## Round 1: Egyptian v. Jew: Passion and Skills

The first of three episodes depicts Moshe's decision to confront a violent Egyptian taskmaster seen striking a Jewish man:

*And it came to pass in those days, when Moshe was grown up, that he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brethren. And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he smote the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand.*

**Shemot 2:11-12**

וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָהֵם, וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא  
אֶל-אֶחָיו, וַיֵּרָא, בְּסִבְלָתָם; וַיֵּרָא  
אִישׁ מִצְרִי, מַכֶּה אִישׁ-עִבְרִי מֵאֶחָיו.  
וַיִּפֶן כֹּה וְכֹה, וַיֵּרָא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ; וַיִּד, וַיִּסְמָךְ  
אֶת-הַמִּצְרִי, וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ, בַּחֹל.  
שְׁמוֹת ב:י"א-י"ב

At first glance, this initial episode might leave the reader with a less than impeccable opinion of Moshe. Moshe seems to act as a vengeful vigilante poised to take the law into his own hands in a violent manner. What gave Moshe the right to act in such a manner and to render such a decision? Certainly, his response could not qualify as *middah kenegged middah* (measure for measure), for the taskmaster himself beat the Jewish servant, while Moshe killed the taskmaster in retribution.<sup>3</sup>

The various commentaries on these verses, however, take up this point of the hastiness of Moshe's response and seek to validate his decision. Rashi clarifies that Moshe procured the credential of a leader among the Egyptians, and even achieved great stature, and therefore reserved the right to punish that particular taskmaster had he erred. In other words, the Egyptian government, as it were, conferred upon Moshe the legal privilege of meting out justice, and therefore his action was justified and appropriate.<sup>4</sup>

More important for this particular conversation of the Hedgehog Principle and leadership, Rashi contends that Moshe did not merely act on a whim, but made a concrete decision to empathize with and defend his brothers in the field. Moshe, in fact, did indeed act in a thought-out manner. He summoned the instinctual emotion and passion that coursed intensely through his veins, and channeled them into a calculated, careful and effectual response.

Moreover, Moshe understood the power and urgency of that particular moment. The commentator R. Ya'akov Mecklenburg, author of *haKetav ve'ha-Kabbalah*, suggests that Moshe wanted someone else to save the Hebrew but "he looked and there was no person," no savior but himself. In addition to the morality of the action that that particular moment called for, Moshe realized that only he—in his own unique way and owing to his own unique position—could truly and satisfactorily answer that call. Moshe knew that he must step forward and lead the Children of Israel. He endeavored to take on the presumptions of an entire legal system, a system that perpetuated injustice and which tormented Jewish slaves on a daily basis. Moshe dramatically demonstrates that leaders must not only have passion and the smarts to channel that passion, but they must also recognize and utilize the power of a particular moment to propel their own actions.

<sup>3</sup> R. Yosef Kapach, in his footnotes to the *Torat Chaim Chumash* to Shemot 2:12 infers that R. Saadiah Gaon maintains that Moshe, in actuality, did not have intent to kill when he smote the Egyptian.

<sup>4</sup> See also *Chizkuni* who writes that Moshe actually investigated and found out that this Egyptian had violated other crimes worthy of capital punishment.

## Round 2: Jew v. Jew: “Rebel Without a Cause”

In the next episode, however, Moshe realizes that despite a healthy dose of passion, good tact, and a *carpe diem* (“seize the day!”) philosophy, a leader must ultimately have one thing before all else: willing followers.

*And he went out the second day, and, behold, two men of the Hebrews were striving together; and he said to him that did the wrong: “Why are you smiting your fellow?” And he said: “Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you plan to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?” And Moshe feared, and said: “Surely the thing is known.”*

**Shemot 2:13-14**

וַיֵּצֵא בַיּוֹם הַשֵּׁנִי, וַהֲגִיחַ שְׁנֵי-אֲנָשִׁים  
עֹבְרִים נֹצִים; וַיֹּאמֶר, לְרֹשֶׁעַ, לָמָּה  
תִּכֹּה, רֵעֶךָ. וַיֹּאמֶר מִי שְׂמֹךְ לְאִישׁ שׁוֹר  
וְשֹׁפֵט, עָלַיְנוּ--הֲלֹהֵרִגְנִי אַתָּה אֹמֵר,  
כַּאֲשֶׁר הִרְגַתְּ אֶת-הַמִּצְרִי; וַיִּירָא מֹשֶׁה  
וַיֹּאמֶר, אֲכֵן נֹדֵעַ הַדָּבָר.  
שְׁמוֹת ב:יג-יד

Moshe’s new encounter with Jewish infighting seems to overturn several of his own assumptions, namely that the Jews themselves prefer him as their leader. The seeds of the Jewish people’s timeless reputation as a “stiff-necked” people, and more particularly, as a nation that swallows its own leaders, seem to take root in this very episode.

Rashi explains that these two quarrelling Jews were, in fact, Datan and Aviram, infamous troublemakers who continued to wreak havoc for Moshe in the desert. But Datan and Aviram merely stand as forerunners of a larger contingency of Jews who will continue to reject and resist Moshe’s leadership at every step along their national sojourn. At this critical juncture, Moshe learns another critical lesson in leadership, one that any passionate and restless young visionary might identify with today: he must contend with the obstacles to forward motion established by those who cannot share his vision. One can imagine the frustration, as Moshe feels his unbridled energy and passion slowly dissipate, becoming suddenly a leader without a nation; a visionary without an enterprise; a “rebel without a cause.”

## Round 3: Daughters v. Shepherd: The Capacity to Add Value

Sensing the peril in remaining in Egypt, Moshe escapes:

*When Pharaoh heard about the incident, he sought to kill Moshe, but Moshe fled from the face of Pharaoh, and dwelt in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well. Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. And the shepherds came and drove them away; but Moshe stood up and helped them, and watered their flock.*

**Shemot 2:15-17**

וַיִּשְׁמַע פַּרְעֹה אֶת-הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ לְהַרְגוֹ  
אֶת-מֹשֶׁה וַיִּבְרַח מִפְּנֵי פַרְעֹה וַיָּשָׁב  
בְּאֶרֶץ-מִדְיָן וַיֹּשֶׁב עַל-הַבְּאֵר. וְלִכְהֵן מִדְיָן  
שִׁבְעַת בָּנוֹת וַתְּבָאנָה וַתִּדְלְגָה וַתְּמַלְאנָה  
אֶת-הַרְהֻטִים לְהַשְׁקוֹת צֹאן אֲבֵיהֶן. וַיָּבֹאוּ  
הַרְעִים וַיִּגְרְשׁוּם וַיִּקָּם מֹשֶׁה וַיּוֹשַׁעַן וַיִּשְׁק  
אֶת-צֹאנָם.  
שְׁמוֹת ב:טו-יז

Unlike the Jews in Egypt, the daughters seem eager to accept Moshe’s assistance, and appreciative of his initiative. In that context, with a willing followership, Moshe is able to thrive as a leader and rise to the occasion. Sforno expounds on the words “but Moshe stood up and helped them”:

He did not try to reprove them, but simply rose to save the oppressed from their oppressors.

**Sforno, Shemot 2:17**

לא הקפיד לישר ארחותם בתוכחות מוסר, רק  
קם להושיע את העשוקים מיד עושקיהם.  
ספורנו, שמות ב:יז

Moshe was able to act swiftly and effectively, and to actualize his passion for compassion and moral-social justice. In short, Moshe learns how to succeed in these combative situations. He uses force when necessary, but also knows that he can thrive only in situations where his help fills a need that is desired by his constituency.

## Nuance and Balance: A Leader in His Element

Perhaps the most critical theme that emerges from Moshe's narrative, in terms of effective leadership, is the necessity of nuance and complexity for successful leadership. Put differently, a leader must refine his or her ability to "wear many hats," and wear them well, and in different situations. A leader must take into account a multitude of considerations and seemingly conflicting emotions in order to arrive at the optimal course of action.

Moshe himself seems to pass this lesson on to his own successor. In *Parshat Pinchas*, as Hashem instructs Moshe that he tragically will not merit to enter the Land of Israel, the Jewish people must accept new leadership. Who will Moshe choose?

Moshe's eventual heir to the leadership of the Jewish people, Yehoshua, successfully strikes a delicate and diplomatic balance. On the one hand, Yehoshua's military prowess and aggression solidify his status as a commanding force to be reckoned with. And yet, the Torah (Shemot 33:11) describes Yehoshua as "*lo yamish mitoch ha'ohel*," a learned type who prefers to confine himself in solitude and in scholarship.

In other words, Yehoshua finds his element in equilibrium. Like Moshe, he both listens to and draws on his passions when necessary and in order to fuel his actions, and yet constantly maintains his sensitivity to the context at hand: context of who he is, context of Who he serves, context of what a particular situation calls for—Yehoshua, in other words, "answers the call" with flying colors.

## Autobiographical Leadership

Will we answer the call? Will we listen to the inner voice, which beckons us to seize our opportunities and realize our leadership potential? In a well-known *Harvard Business Review* article by Harris Collingwood, recently cited by Jewish leadership expert Erica Brown,<sup>5</sup> Collingwood asserts that, "Leadership is autobiographical. If I don't know your life story, I don't know a thing about you as a leader." One might add that if you yourself have never pondered the plot of your own life, have never bothered to navigate your own narrative of human existence, you cannot possibly realize your own potential to lead. Moshe taught this; Yehoshua taught this; now, in a confused world in desperate need of direction and strong, inspired leadership, we must faithfully follow in their lofty footsteps.

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<sup>5</sup> Erica Brown, "Making Inspired Leaders: New Approaches to Leadership Development," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 81 (2005).

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