**The Book of Ruth**

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1. *Hevruta*: an Aramaic word related to friendship (hvr). When Rabin was assassinated, Clinton was presented for the funeral. He said, “Shalom haver” (Goodbye, friend). A *hevruta* is a friend for study, a study partner. Debbie has a *hevruta* relationship with three friends. The word is also popular in interreligious circles. Jews, Christians, and Muslims can study texts together “in *hevruta*.”
   1. Instructions. Debbie asked us to talk with one another about the Book of Ruth:
      * 1. What is the message of Ruth? In conversation, my partner was Vince Dulock.
           1. For Christians and Jews, there is the genealogical question: the ancestry of King David.
           2. Ruth is from Moab. So the book is about cultural inclusivity.
           3. The message of friendship and the love between Ruth and Naomi. “Your God will be my God.”
           4. Redemption, *go’el*.
        2. Why do we Jews read *Ruth* on the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost (the Feast of Weeks)?
           1. Shevuot is a harvest festival, and the book is about harvests.
           2. Boaz “redeems” Ruth, just as God redeems us.
           3. Passover is the reception of the Law from Sinai; Ruth becomes a member of the people of Israel.
        3. Why are the names of characters significant?

Naomi means “sweet,” and she becomes *mara* or “bitter.” She was full, and is now empty.

Elimelech. His name means “God is king.”

Boaz. Strength or strong-mindedness.

Ruth. Companionship or friendship.

* + - 1. Who are the main characters?
         1. Naomi. She is the model mother-in-law.
         2. Ruth. God or chance or fortune leads Ruth to the fields of Boaz.
         3. Boaz. He’s clever in the way he relates to the “other redeemer.”
         4. Near kinsman, the “other redeemer.”
      2. Close reading.
         1. How does Ruth come to Boaz’s attention? She goes to glean in a field, and it happens to be the field of Boaz, of Elimelech’s clan.
         2. Elimelech is an Ephrathite. Boaz belongs to this clan.
         3. Genesis 38: Judah got a wife for his firstborn, Er. So the wife was given to Onan, but he refused her. Onan died. Then she was waiting for the third son, Shelah, to be marriageable. But while she was waiting, Judah approached her, thinking her a harlot. Tamar had intercourse with Judah, bearing the twins Perez and Zerah.
         4. Boaz spreads his “skirt” over Ruth, symbolically espousing her.
         5. David has a Moabitess in his genealogy, and so we should be more inclusive.
         6. Boaz “redeems” Ruth, buys her back from her “near kinsman.” Redemption means the price that one pays.
  1. The Word “Go’el” or redeemer.
     + 1. Recovery or retention of family land.
* Lev. 25:25. When one of your kindred is reduced to poverty and has to sell some property, that person’s closest relative,**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/lv/25:25" \l "03025025-1)** who has the duty to redeem it, shall come and redeem what the relative has sold.[**i**](http://www.usccb.org/bible/lv/25:25#03025025-i)
* Lev 27:11-13. If any unclean animal which is unfit for sacrifice**[d](http://www.usccb.org/bible/lv/27:9" \l "03027011-d)** to the LORD is vowed, it must be set before the priest,12who shall determine its value**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/lv/27:9" \l "03027012-1)** in keeping with its good or bad qualities, and the value set by the priest shall stand.13If the offerer wishes to redeem the animal, the person shall pay one fifth more than this valuation.**[e](http://www.usccb.org/bible/lv/27:9" \l "03027013-e)**
* Jer. 32:6-8. Jeremiah said, This word came to me from the LORD:7Hanamel, son of your uncle Shallum, will come to you with the offer:**[e](http://www.usccb.org/bible/jer/32:6" \l "30032007-e)** “Purchase my field in Anathoth, since you, as nearest relative, have the first right of purchase.”[**\***](http://www.usccb.org/bible/jer/32:6#30032007-1)8And, just as the LORD had said, my cousin Hanamel came to me in the court of the guard and said, “Please purchase my field in Anathoth, in the territory of Benjamin; as nearest relative, you have the first right of possession—purchase it for yourself.” Then I knew this was the word of the LORD.
  + - 1. Release of slavery due to indebtedness. Lev. 25.47-49. When your kindred, having been so reduced to poverty, sell themselves to a resident alien who has become wealthy or to descendants of a resident alien’s family,48even after having sold themselves, they still may be redeemed by one of their kindred,49by an uncle or cousin, or by some other relative from their family; or, having acquired the means, they may pay the redemption price themselves.
      2. Satisfaction of vengeance due for a blood debt.
      3. Responsibility of kinship or marriage.

Coffee Break

1. Feminist Bible Scholarship. *Reading the Women of the Bible*, by Tikva Frymer-Kensky.
   1. The Significance of names in Ruth.
      * 1. Naomi = Pleasant woman = Jerusalem/Judah.
        2. Elimelekh = King of Israel or the institution of kingship.
        3. Mahlon and Kilion = the many dead children of Israel.
        4. Ruth (“Dewy”) marries Boaz (“He-who-has-might”) and revitalizes Israel with their child, Obed (“He who serves”).
   2. The Relevance of Genesis 19. Since Lot was afraid to stay in Zoar, he and his two daughters went up from Zoar and settled in the hill country, where he lived with his two daughters in a cave.31The firstborn said to the younger: “Our father is getting old, and there is not a man in the land to have intercourse with us as is the custom everywhere.32Come, let us ply our father with wine and then lie with him, that we may ensure posterity by our father.”33So that night they plied their father with wine, and the firstborn went in and lay with her father; but he was not aware of her lying down or getting up.34The next day the firstborn said to the younger: “Last night I lay with my father. Let us ply him with wine again tonight, and then you go in and lie with him, that we may ensure posterity by our father.”35So that night, too, they plied their father with wine, and then the younger one went in and lay with him; but he was not aware of her lying down or getting up. 36Thus the two daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father.37The firstborn gave birth to a son whom she named Moab, saying, “From my father.”**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/19" \l "01019037-1)** He is the ancestor of the Moabites of today.[**l**](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/19#01019037-l)38The younger one, too, gave birth to a son, and she named him Ammon, saying, “The son of my kin.”**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/19" \l "01019038-1)** He is the ancestor of the Ammonites of today.[**m**](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/19#01019038-m)
      * 1. Moab: “From my father,” the ancestor.
        2. Ammon: “The son of my kin.”
        3. David means “beloved.” He is the son of Jesse, son of Obed (“the worker, the one who serves”). Like Arabic *ibd*, “servant of.”
   3. Father-Daughter Incest initiated by daughters.
      * 1. The story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38). Judah got a wife for his firstborn, Er. So the wife was given to Onan, but he refused her. Onan died. Then she was waiting for the third son, Shelah, to be marriageable. But while she was waiting, Judah approached her, thinking her a harlot. So he [Judah] went over to her at the roadside and said, “Come, let me have intercourse with you,” for he did not realize that she was his daughter-in-law. She replied, “What will you pay me for letting you have intercourse with me?”17He answered, “I will send you a young goat from the flock.” “Very well,” she said, “provided you leave me a pledge until you send it.”18Judah asked, “What pledge should I leave you?” She answered, “Your seal and cord,**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/38" \l "01038018-1)** and the staff in your hand.” So he gave them to her and had intercourse with her, and she conceived by him.19After she got up and went away, she took off her shawl and put on her widow’s garments again. 20Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite to recover the pledge from the woman; but he did not find her.21So he asked the men of that place, “Where is the prostitute,**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/38" \l "01038021-1)** the one by the roadside in Enaim?” But they answered, “No prostitute has been here.”22He went back to Judah and told him, “I did not find her; and besides, the men of the place said, ‘No prostitute has been here.’”23“Let her keep the things,” Judah replied; “otherwise we will become a laughingstock. After all, I did send her this young goat, but you did not find her.” 24About three months later, Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar has acted like a harlot and now she is pregnant from her harlotry.” Judah said, “Bring her out; let her be burned.”25But as she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, “It is by the man to whom these things belong that I am pregnant.” Then she said, “See whose seal and cord and staff these are.”26Judah recognized them and said, “She is in the right rather than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.” He had no further sexual relations with her. 27When the time of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb.**[f](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/38" \l "01038027-f)**28While she was giving birth, one put out his hand; and the midwife took and tied a crimson thread on his hand, noting, “This one came out first.”29**[g](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/38" \l "01038029-g)** But as he withdrew his hand, his brother came out; and she said, “What a breach you have made for yourself!” So he was called Perez.[**\***](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/38#01038029-1)30Afterward his brother, who had the crimson thread on his hand, came out; he was called Zerah.**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/38" \l "01038030-1)** [**h**](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/38#01038030-h)

Tamar wants children and she uses subterfuge to gain Perez and Zerah.

She saves her life by proving that the illegitimate father is her own father-in-law.

* 1. Consequences. In the story of David and Bathsheba, a good person (like David) does bad things.
     + 1. The foil of Ruth is Orpah (Ruth 1). Go, my daughters, for I am too old to marry again. Even if I had any such hope, or if tonight I had a husband and were to bear sons,13would you wait for them and deprive yourselves of husbands until those sons grew up? No, my daughters, my lot is too bitter for you, because the LORD has extended his hand against me.”14Again they wept aloud; then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her.
       2. The foil of Boaz is the “other kinsman” (Ruth 4).[**\***](http://www.usccb.org/bible/ruth/4#08004004-1) So I thought I would inform you. Before those here present, including the elders of my people, purchase the field; act as redeemer.[**b**](http://www.usccb.org/bible/ruth/4#08004004-b) But if you do not want to do it, tell me so, that I may know, for no one has a right of redemption prior to yours, and mine is next.” He answered, “I will act as redeemer.” 5**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/ruth/4" \l "08004005-1)** Boaz continued, “When you acquire the field from Naomi, you also acquire responsibility for Ruth the Moabite,[**c**](http://www.usccb.org/bible/ruth/4#08004005-c) the widow of the late heir, to raise up a family for the deceased on his estate.”6The redeemer replied, “I cannot exercise my right of redemption for that would endanger my own estate. You do it in my place, for I cannot.”
          1. The “kinsman” wants the land, but not Ruth. She’s a Moabite, and she is an addition to the property, she and her future children. She
          2. The “kinsman” is not willing to go the extra mile.
       3. The foil Naomi is the “servant” in charge of the gleaners (Ruth 2:5-6). Boaz asked the young man overseeing his harvesters, “Whose young woman is this?”6The young man overseeing the harvesters answered, “She is the young Moabite who came back with Naomi from the plateau of Moab.**[b](http://www.usccb.org/bible/ruth/2" \l "08002006-b)**7**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/ruth/2" \l "08002007-1)** She said, ‘I would like to gather the gleanings into sheaves after the harvesters.’ Ever since she came this morning she has remained here until now, with scarcely a moment’s rest.”
          1. The servant defines her, not as “Naomi’s,” but as a “Moabitess.”
          2. Ruth is thus not “family.” She is a Moabite. No one has obligations to her. From a modern, inclusivist perspective, he didn’t do Ruth any favors.
          3. Ruth has determined that she will not go back to Moab.

1. The Extra Mile. The book of Ruth is about *hesed* or loving kindness.
   1. Thesis: Ruth is the paradigm of the person toward whom one should exercise *hesed*. She is a woman, a foreigner, a non-Israelite, and poor.
   2. The Characters give *hesed* to Ruth.
   3. Ruth in turn gives *hesed* to Boaz (Ruth 3:8-10). Midway through the night, the man gave a start and groped about, only to find a woman lying at his feet.9“Who are you?” he asked. She replied, “I am your servant Ruth. Spread the wing of your cloak**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/ruth/3" \l "08003009-1)** over your servant, for you are a redeemer.”10He said, “May the LORD bless you, my daughter! You have been even more loyal [hesed] now than before in not going after the young men, whether poor or rich.
      * 1. Boaz calls her “my daughter.”
        2. He is grateful that she has come to him, and not to a younger man.
2. Other Themes of the Book of Ruth.
   1. *Hesed* toward Foreign Women. Ruth was written in the time of Ezra: a polemic against Ezra’s condemnation of Israelites who have taken former wives.
      * 1. God is inclusive.
        2. The book is an argument against sending away foreign women.
        3. Maybe it’s an argument in favor of the possibility of converting to Judaism. “If Ruth wanted to become an Israelite today,” said Debbie, “the Chief Rabbinate would have excluded her.”
   2. Conversion. When Ruth says, “Wherever you go, I will go,” it is a kind of rite of conversion.
   3. Redemption. The Book of Ruth reinforces a prominent theme in Judaism, namely, that loyalty to God is about obeying commandments and taking on responsibilities. When Debbie Weissman spoke about feminism, she emphasized that the key to feminist empowerment in Judaism is about freely taking on obligations that are mandatory only for men. One becomes powerful by submitting to, or honoring, legal rules. The Book of Ruth teaches that another kinsman had “first right” to Ruth. Boaz is scrupulous about honoring the commandment. He takes on the responsibility for Ruth that the kinsman refuses to honor.
   4. Rabbinic Law says that it is not the widow that inherits; the children inherit. The woman is protected by the marriage contract.
   5. Trust in the faithfulness of God and of those who serve God.
3. The Speech of Ruth.
   1. The Text (Ruth 1): But Ruth said, “Do not press me to go back and abandon you! Wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God. 17Where you die I will die, and there be buried. May the LORD do thus to me, and more, if even death separates me from you!”18Naomi then ceased to urge her, for she saw she was determined to go with her.
      * 1. To be an adult human being, it means to assume responsibility, to be open for change, and to be strong, even when you’re depressed.
        2. Ruth loves Naomi, even when she’s depressed (empty rather than full, bitter rather than sweet).
   2. Why do Jews read this book on *Shavuot* the barley harvest?
      * 1. It’s about harvesting and gleaning.
        2. Shavuot is also about the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. Ruth “receives” the Jewish law from her mother-in-law, Naomi.
        3. On *Shavuot*, all Jews are like Ruth. They have to accept God as “their” God, to reaffirm their commitment. Shavuot is about converting, or re-converting.
        4. Abraham was the great “doer” of *hesed*. He received the three guests. They look, not like angels, but like Bedouin. He’s the symbol of compassion.
        5. The Torah is not just for Jews. The question of inclusivism and exclusivism, of particularism and universalism. Many Jews today have focused on the particular, and are ignoring the universal.
4. Conclusion.
   1. David traditionally was born on Shavuot.
      * 1. He is the “beloved,” the child of Boaz and Ruth.
        2. He is the union of Moab and Judah.
   2. Lev. 23:21. On this same day you shall make a proclamation: there shall be a declared holy day for you; no heavy work may be done. This shall be a perpetual statute through all your generations wherever you dwell. 22**[j](http://www.usccb.org/bible/leviticus/23" \l "03023022-j)** When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not be so thorough that you reap the field to its very edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. These things you shall leave for the poor and the alien. I, the LORD, am your God.
      * 1. This is the lynchpin of the chapter: it’s about *hesed*.
        2. The entire calendar should remind us of our responsibility.
   3. *Gematriya*. This is a method developed by Jewish mystics, according to which the letters of the Hebrew alphabet have numerical value.
      * 1. The tribe of Amalek. If you add up the numerical values of the letters in the name, it equals the numerical value of the letters in the Hebrew word for “income tax.”
        2. Ruth has a numerical value of 606. In addition, there are seven commandments for the children of Noah. 606+7=613. This is the number of the commandments.
5. Conclusion: the 929 Project. There are 929 chapters in the Hebrew Bible. At one time, the Bible had a place of prominence in Israeli culture. Now it’s on the decline, even among scholars, who prefer to read the Mishnah and the Talmud. The project is to get people to read the entire Bible by the 70th anniversary of the State of Israel (2018). Thousands are involved. A radio personality opined that the story of Gibeah in Joshua and Judges is unpleasant.
6. Midrash on *Hesed*.
   1. Non-kosher birds. One non-kosher bird is the *hassidah* or stork. Jews can’t eat it.
      * 1. Why is the stork objectionable? There is no reason. It seems arbitrary.
        2. Rashi asked, in the 12th century, why the stork is called “hassidah”? It is because storks do “hesed” with other storks by sharing food.
        3. If Rashi is correct, consider: Storks share food, but only with other storks, and not with other birds. That’s not true *hesed*.
   2. Other ethnic communities may be charitable within themselves, but the question is how you relate to people outside your community.