

## The Month of Sivan:

# Megillat Ruth and the Holiday of Shavuot

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

*Looking forward a Torah filled night with my students and additional guests.*

*In honor of Shavuot I wanted to give you a little preview of my newest book Ruth Gleaning the Fallen Sparks. Hope you will enjoy learning about the connection between Megillat Ruth and the Holiday of Shavuot exerted from the book.*

*Shavuot Sameach!*

## Megillat Ruth and the Holiday of Shavuot

Every Shavuot we read the Scroll of Ruth to remind ourselves that we, too, were converts when we received the Torah at Mount Sinai. The Talmud teaches us that the souls of the future righteous converts were actually there, with us at Mount Sinai, and received the Torah together with us.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, we must be careful not to discriminate against righteous converts. Although Hashem chose the Jewish people and gave us the Torah, we are still required to be ready to embrace the righteous converts who cleave to us, as the Torah commands, “You must love the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt.”<sup>2</sup> Reading about Ruth on Shavuot reminds us that we are surely not superior to Ruth who elevated herself from the society most opposed to the Torah way, to become a righteous convert cleaving to the Torah of Israel.

Rabbi Nathan of Breslau explains that we read Megillat Ruth on Shavuot, because the time of the giving of the Torah is most appropriate for converts and *Ba’alei Teshuva*.<sup>3</sup> After having left the impurity of Egypt for the holiness of Israel, all of the Jewish people were like converts, beginning to come close to their Father in Heaven. For this reason the revelation at Sinai included the sound of the Shofar, fire and torches, which comprise the aspect of judgment, in order to burn the negative energy that was attached to the Jewish people from the impurity of Egypt. It is interesting to note that the sound of the shofar is often associated with ingathering converts and those dispersed in exile. For this reason, prior to blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashana, we recite Tehillim 47, which mentions converts.<sup>4</sup>

*Sefat Emet* explains that the Jewish people were created in order to extract holy sparks from the entire world through the merit of learning Torah.<sup>5</sup> If we are worthy, we will attract converts by means of the strength of our Torah learning alone. If we are unworthy, we will have to be dispersed in exile in order to gather converts.<sup>6</sup> This is alluded to in the words of the prophet, “O Hashem, my strength, and my

<sup>1</sup> “But not with you alone...” (*Devarim* 29:13). “...but with those who are here” (*Ibid* 14). I have only those who were currently standing on Mount Sinai. From where do we learn about the future generations and the converts that would convert in the future? Scripture teaches us, “And those who are not here with us today.” (*Ibid*). (*Babylonian Talmud, Shavuot* 39a).

<sup>2</sup> *Devarim* 10:19.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Nathan, *Likutei Halachot, Laws of Converts*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> “The nobles of the peoples are gathered together, the people of the G-d of Avraham” (*Tehillim* 47:10).

<sup>5</sup> *Sefat Emet on the Torah, Parashat Yitro*, 5638.

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Elazar said, The Holy One did not exile Israel among the nations except in order to add converts, as it states, “I will sow her to me in the earth” (*Hoshea* 2:25). A person only sows a *se’ah* in order to produce several *kor*... (*Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim* 87b). A *kor* is equal to 30 *se’ah*; a *se’ah* equals approximately 8.3 liters (8.8 quarts).



stronghold, and my refuge in the day of affliction, nations shall come to you from the end of the earth...”<sup>7</sup> The words for strength and stronghold derive from the Hebrew word *oz* referring to the strength of Torah.

### We Were All Converts

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<sup>9</sup> *Devarim* 10:19.

<sup>10</sup> The faithful student of Rabbi Nachman, *Likutei Halachot, Laws of Converts*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> For example: “The nobles of the peoples are gathered together, the people of the G-d of Avraham” (*Tehillim* 47:10).

<sup>12</sup> *Sefat Emet*, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, (1847–1905), Gora Kalwaria (Ger), Poland, *Admor of Gur. Sefat Emet*, on the Torah distinguished by the profundity of their ideas and clarity of exposition, reflects the marked influence of the Maharal of Prague.

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Israel in order to bring forth the soul of King David and Mashiach. However, the holy soul embodied by Ruth, the righteous convert, came on her own to Boaz, through the power of his Torah learning, as his name testifies. Boaz, means in Elimelech, who was not worthy, had to leave the Land of Israel in order to bring forth the soul of King David and Mashiach through Ruth. However, the holy soul embodied by Ruth, the righteous convert, came on her own to Boaz, through the power of his Torah learning, as his name testifies. Boaz (בְּעֹז – in him is strength) – the strength of the Torah. This concept is alluded to in the language, בָּאתְךָ אֵשֶׁר – “that you have come,”<sup>15</sup> with which Boaz praised Ruth for coming on her own to the Land of Israel, to seek refuge under the wings of G-d.<sup>16</sup>

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When the holy sparks come on their own without being extricated, they can achieve an even greater ascent. The elevation that can be accomplished by the power of the Torah gives us a clue to why we sacrifice two loaves of *chametz* (leavened) bread on Shavuot. Throughout the year, all other meal offerings are made from *matzah*, since *chametz* symbolizes the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination).<sup>19</sup> It is only on Shavuot, at the time of the giving of the Torah, that we sacrifice *chametz* bread, in order to hint to the fact that the power of the Torah gives us the ability to raise up the entire creation.<sup>20</sup>

### Connecting the Written with the Oral Torah

We read the scroll of Ruth on Shavuot to establish the fact that Hashem gave Moshe both the Written and the Oral Torah on the sixth day of the Hebrew month, Sivan. The Torah teaches us that Moshe stayed on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights before descending with the two tablets of the Ten Commandments.<sup>21</sup> How could it be necessary to spend forty days just to receive the two Tablets with the Ten Commandments? It makes sense that during those forty days on the mountain, Hashem taught Moshe the entire Written and Oral Torah.<sup>22</sup>

The story of Ruth is read at the time of the giving of the Torah so that we might know that the Written and the Oral Torah, are interdependent, and it is impossible to understand one without the other. Indeed David, the anointed of G-d unto all generations, was descended from a Moabite

<sup>15</sup> Megillat Ruth 2:12.

<sup>16</sup> See *Yalkut Shimoni*, Ruth 1:601 quoted in this chpt, section, **Ruth and Yitro**.

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<sup>18</sup> See *Yalkut Shimoni*, Ruth 1:601 quoted in this chpt, section, **Ruth and Yitro**.

<sup>19</sup> *Ba'al Haturim*, Rabbi Ya'acov ben Asher, (1269-1343), Cologne, Germany, the author of *Arba'ah Turim*, commentary on the Torah, based on *gematria* and scriptural word patterns, *Vayikra* 2:11.

<sup>20</sup> *Sefat Emet*, *Bamidbar*, for Shavuot year 5659.

<sup>21</sup> *Shemot* 24:18, 34:28.

<sup>22</sup> *Gur Aryeh* (Maharal), Rabbi Yehuda Loew ben Betzalel, (1520-1609), Prague, Talmudic scholar, Jewish mystic and philosopher, served as the Chief Rabbi of Prague, best known for his super-commentary, the *Gur Aryeh*, on Rashi's Torah commentary *Vayikra* 25:1, Rashi, *Vayikra* 26:46.

woman, whose Jewish legitimacy depends on the Oral Torah.<sup>23</sup> The entire people of Israel is supported on the foundations of the House of David, yet without the Oral Torah, King David and Mashiach would not even be Jewish, since their ancestor Ruth, the Moabitess, would never have been able to convert.<sup>24</sup> It is only through the Oral Torah that it becomes clear that a Moabite woman is permitted to convert, because women are not expected to go out in the field and approach strangers with bread and water.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the Torah teaches that Sarah was modest inside of her tent.<sup>26</sup> Still, David's Jewishness was indeed questioned until the Oral interpretation of the Torah, "Moabite but not Moabitess," finally became completely ascertained and accepted by all.<sup>27</sup>

## The Hardships of Torah

Everything worthwhile is acquired through effort and difficulty. We all know the expression, 'Easy Come Easy Go.' In order to achieve anything important in life, we need to first prove our worthiness. Since there is nothing more valuable than the Torah, in order to deserve it, we may be tested with difficulties and hardships.

Why do we read the Scroll of Ruth during Shavuot at the time of the giving of the Torah? It is to teach us that the Torah was only given by means of suffering and poverty as it states, "Your flock found a dwelling in it: You, O G-d prepare of your goodness for the poor"<sup>28</sup> (*Yalkut Shimoni Ruth*, 1:596).

Just as Ruth, a princess from birth, became a pauper gleaning in the fields for the sake of cleaving to the Torah, so must we show willingness to go through thick and thin for the sake of the Torah. The pleasure we receive through drinking from the wellsprings of Torah, and from living a pure spiritual life, greatly outweigh the material sacrifices. As King David exclaimed, "Your Torah is better for me than a thousand gold and silver pieces."<sup>29</sup> Poverty and hardships lead to humility, a prerequisite for receiving the Torah. As the Midrash states, "If those involved in Torah learning are wealthy, they may become haughty, but if they are aware of their hunger they will remain humble."<sup>30</sup> Haughtiness does not leave a space for the Torah to penetrate, as the haughty person is full of himself. On the other hand, through humility, we may open ourselves to encompass Torah. Therefore, Moshe, the receiver of Torah, was known to be the most humble of all men.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, Ruth, the mother of Mashiach,

<sup>23</sup> Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, (1912-1976), Warsaw, Poland – Israel, *The book of the Heritage*, Shavuot, page 105.

<sup>24</sup> See *Devarim* 23:4-5 which states that Moabites are not allowed to convert because they did not bring the Jewish people bread and water, when they were traveling through their land in the desert.

<sup>25</sup> "All the honor of the king's daughter is within" (*Tehillim* 45:14)... It is written "an Ammonite" but not an Ammonitess, "a Moabite" but not a Moabitess (*Devarim* 23:4)... Rabbi Shimon says, "Because they did not approach you with bread and water," (Ibid. 5) – It is the way of a man to approach, but it is not the way of a woman to approach... (*Babylonian Talmud Yevamot* 77a).

<sup>26</sup> *Bereishit* 18:9.

<sup>27</sup> During David's time, Doeg the Edomite said, "Before asking whether he is worthy for kingdom, we should ask whether he is worthy to enter the Jewish congregation." "Why would he not be worthy?" "Because he comes from Ruth the Moabitess." Avner said to him, "They have taught in the Mishna, 'An Ammonite, but not an Ammonitess, a Moabite but not a Moabitess.'" Doeg retorted, "From now on you will say, 'Mamzer but not Mamzeress?'" Avner answered, "Mamzer is not a noun, but a descriptive clause meaning, 'there is a strange blemish,' this applies equally to men and women." Doeg asked, "Perhaps you will say 'An Egyptian but not an Egyptianess?'" Avner answered, "Here it is different since Scripture gives an explicit reason, 'because they did not approach you with bread and with water' (*Devarim* 23:5). It is the way for a man to approach but not the way for a woman." Doeg answered, "The men should approach the men, and the women the women." Avner was silenced... "Go ask in the Beit Midrash." He asked and they told him, "An Ammonite but not an Ammonitess, a Moabite but not a Moabitess." (*Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot* 76b).

<sup>28</sup> *Tehillim* 68:11.

<sup>29</sup> *Tehillim* 119:72.

<sup>30</sup> *Midrash Ruth Zutra*, parasha 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Bamidbar* 12:3.

who will anchor the Torah in the hearts of the world, showed ultimate humility and self-sacrifice. Once she had proven herself worthy of the Torah, she became elevated from gleaning in the fields, to become the mistress of the land, as the wife of Boaz, the wealthy land owner and Torah scholar. He himself had endured the poverty of famine without deserting his people. When Hashem sees that we are willing to go through hardship for the sake of His Torah, poverty has then served its purpose, and is no longer necessary for our spiritual purification. This explains why Rabbi Yochanan says, “Whoever learns Torah through poverty will eventually learn it through wealth.”<sup>32</sup>

### The Torah of Mashiach

Another connection between Megillat Ruth and Shavuot is that King David, Ruth’s great grandson, who integrated Torah to the very essence of his being, was born and passed away on Shavuot. There are three crowns in the world: The crown of *Kehuna* (Priesthood), the crown of Kingship and the crown of Torah.<sup>33</sup> King David only received the crown of Kingship for the sake of his Torah, since the Jewish kingdom must be based on the Torah to the highest degree. Therefore, we read the Scroll of Ruth, which culminates in David’s genealogy, on Shavuot at the time of the giving of the Torah. This in order to elucidate that the reason David merited Kingship was only by means of the crown of his Torah.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, Mashiach, a direct descendant of King David, will reflect the Kingdom of Hashem on earth through his deepest integration of the Torah within our physical world. We are supposed to look forward to the Messianic era<sup>35</sup> and the elevated consciousness it will bring when “The land will be full of the knowledge of G-d.”<sup>36</sup> However, it is hard for us to imagine what this G-d consciousness entails. How can we look forward to something without knowing what exactly it entails? Therefore, we read Megillat Ruth about the birth of King David, the sprout of Mashiach, to help us to connect the spiritual experience of the Torah Revelation with the future elevated G-d consciousness, which we will soon experience at the advent of King Mashiach. By means of our collective memory of the spiritual pleasure that we experienced at Mount Sinai, we have a model for what we are looking forward to with the arrival of the Mashiach.<sup>37</sup>

### Connecting Torah with Tefilah (Prayer)

Receiving the Torah is linked to prayer, as the purpose of prayer is to become a vessel to receive divine influence. Therefore on Shavuot, we sacrifice two loaves of bread corresponding to Torah and *tefilah*. *Sefat Emet* explains<sup>38</sup> that we read Megillat Ruth on Shavuot in order to connect Torah with *tefilah*, which together constitute the complete reception of the Torah, וְנִשְׁמַע וְנַעֲשֶׂה – “We will do and we will hear.”<sup>39</sup> Torah, which we receive from above, corresponds to נִשְׁמַע – hearing. Whereas prayer initiated by us, corresponds to נַעֲשֶׂה – doing. Prayer is also the aspect of deed, because the action of donning *tzitzit*, *tefillin* and giving *tzedaka* (charity) precedes it.

<sup>32</sup> *Pirkei Avot* 4: 9.

<sup>33</sup> Based on *Babylonian Talmud, Yoma* 72b.

<sup>34</sup> *Kedushat Halevi, Drush for Shavuot*.

<sup>35</sup> Rambam, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon – Maimonides, (1135-1204), Egypt, the most influential Jewish thinker of the Middle Ages, author of the first systematic code of Halacha, the *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings*, chapter 11:1.

<sup>36</sup> *Yesha'yahu* 11:9.

<sup>37</sup> *Kedushat Halevi, drush for Shavuot*.

<sup>38</sup> *Sefat Emet on the Torah*, for Shavuot 7643.

<sup>39</sup> *Shemot* 24:7.



Because we blemished נַעֲשֶׂה – deed, on the sixth of Sivan,<sup>40</sup> which corresponds to וְנִשְׁמָע – hearing,<sup>41</sup> we need to repent by means of prayer during Shavuot. Therefore, it is customary to recite the entire prayerful book of Tehillim on Shavuot. The connection between Torah and tefilah is also highlighted in the Scroll of Ruth, where the deeds of Ruth and Boaz were the preparation for Oved, their son, whose name means “to worship or pray.” Their deeds are compared to the *tzedakka* and *tzitzit* preceding prayer.

### The Power of Prayer

Two women gave over their soul for the sake of the tribe of Yehuda, Tamar and Ruth. Tamar would cry out, “Let me not go out empty-handed from this house.” Ruth, whenever her mother-in-law told her, “Go, my daughter” she would cry. As it states, “They lifted their voices and they cried more” (*Megillat Ruth* 1:14; *Midrash Zuta Ruth*, parasha 1).<sup>42</sup>

Why, according to the Midrash does “They lifted their voice and cried” refer to Ruth alone? Didn’t both Ruth and Orpah cry? A close reading of the text reveals that although tears streaked both of the sisters’ faces, actually only one of them cried from her heart, while the other dropped crocodile tears. Alshich notices that the Hebrew word “וַתִּשְׁנֶה” – “lifting their voice in crying” is missing the *alef*.<sup>43</sup> This alludes to the fact that one of them did not truly lift her voice in prayerful crying. Orpah’s crying was very short-lived and only lasted two seconds until she kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, as written in the continuation of the verse. Yet, Ruth’s cry from the depths of her being, reverberating in the heart of “the sweet singer of Israel,” David. He beseeched Hashem through his Tehillim, when he cried out, “הַשֵּׁם קָרָאתִיךָ מִמַּעַמְקִים” – “From the depths I called out to you Hashem.”<sup>44</sup> As a result of Ruth’s heartfelt crying, David was able to testify about himself “תִּנְכַּלֶּה וְאָנִי” – “I am prayer.”<sup>45</sup>

The entire tribe of Yehuda, to which David belonged, is known for the power of their prayer, as it states, “This is the blessing of Yehuda, and he said, ‘Hear, Hashem, the voice of Yehuda...’”<sup>46</sup> The name Yehuda itself means “to praise,” which is the peak of prayer. We can understand why Elimelech (from the tribe of Yehuda) was punished so severely for deserting his people during the time of famine, as the role of the tribe of Yehuda is to precede their prayer for Israel with acts of kindness and *tzedaka*. Moreover, Elimelech corresponds to the letter *yud* in Hashem’s name,<sup>47</sup> which also alludes to the hand that gives.<sup>48</sup> Finally, the quintessence of Kingdom is to be a channel for divine influence in the world, as Kingdom has nothing on its own.<sup>49</sup> Through deeds of *tzedaka* and kindness to Ruth, Boaz (also from the tribe of Yehuda) merited to rectify Elimelech and build the kingdom in Israel.

<sup>40</sup> When we made the golden calf immediately following the revelation at Sinai on the sixth of Sivan.

<sup>41</sup> Shavuot is the aspect of וְנִשְׁמָע – hearing, because on that day we heard, received and accepted the Ten Commandments.

<sup>42</sup> See also *Yalkut Shimoni, Ruth* 1:601, quoting *Megillat Ruth* 1:9.

<sup>43</sup> See Alshich, *Megillat Ruth* 1:14. Compare also with *Megillat Ruth* 1:9 ותִּשְׁנֶה קוֹלָהּ וְתִבְקֶנֶה.

<sup>44</sup> *Tehillim* 130:1.

<sup>45</sup> *Tehillim* 109:4. See also this book, chapter 1. **From Ruth to David**, p. 18.

<sup>46</sup> *Devarim* 33:7.

<sup>47</sup> See this book, chapter 4. **Righteous Convert**. The meaning of the name Ruth, p. 37.

<sup>48</sup> The word *yud* has the same letters as the word *yad* which means hand. In addition, the shape of the letter resembles an outstretched hand.

<sup>49</sup> Arizal, *Sefer Halikutim, Parashat Teruma*, chapter 26.

## Torah of Kindness

Rabbi Zimlai expounded, “The Torah begins and ends with bestowing kindness. Its beginning is the bestowal of kindness as it states, ‘Hashem, G-d made for man and his wife coats of skin and clothed them.’<sup>50</sup> Its end is bestowal of kindness as it states, ‘He buried him...’” [Moshe]<sup>51</sup> (*Babylonian Talmud, Sota 14a*).

G-d’s purpose in creation was to bestow of His goodness to another.<sup>52</sup> The Torah, which is the blueprint of creation,<sup>53</sup> therefore reflects *chesed*; its highest purpose. The Scroll of Ruth, likewise, centers around *chesed* which is mentioned three times in connection with Hashem’s blessing.<sup>54</sup>

“May G-d do kindness to you...”<sup>55</sup> Rabbi Seira said, “This scroll does neither contain [laws of] impurity nor laws of purity, neither prohibitions nor permissions. Why was it written? To teach how great is the reward for those who bestow kindness” (*Midrash Ruth Rabbah 2:14*).

In the beginning of the Megillah we are introduced to Elimelech and his family, who left the Land of Israel during the famine, without sharing their wealth and bestowing kindness upon their fellow Jews. They deserted Israel to the Land of Moav, which was known for its lack of kindness. It was there that Elimelech and his sons eventually met their death. Ruth, Machlon’s widow, rectified Elimelech’s family’s lack of *chesed*. Although she descended from the Moabite people, who were the antithesis to Israel in their lack of *chesed*, Ruth was the precious hidden pearl redeemed from the refuses of Sodom. All her deeds were beyond the letter of the law.<sup>56</sup> In her self-effacing kindness to sustain her mother-in-law both physically and spiritually (by restoring the soul of her lost son) she embodied Hashem’s ultimate *chesed* manifested in the Torah. We, therefore, read Megillat Ruth on Shavuot to remind us of the central role of *chesed* within the Torah, which is also called the Torah of Kindness.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>50</sup> *Bereishit* 3:21.

<sup>51</sup> *Devarim* 34:6.

<sup>52</sup> Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Ramchal, Padua, Italy, (1707-1746), prominent Kabbalist and philosopher, *Derech Hashem*, chapter 2:1.

<sup>53</sup> See *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 1:1, *Zohar* 1:24b, BEREISHIT – “With *reishit*, [meaning Torah] Hashem created the Heavens and Earth;” and “Hashem looked into the Torah and created the world” (*Zohar, Teruma* 161b).

<sup>54</sup> *Megillat Ruth* 1:8, 2:20, 3:10.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 1:8.

<sup>56</sup> *Midrash Ruth Rabbah* 7:6.

<sup>57</sup> *Mishlei* 31:26.