



It is customary to read the story of Ruth, during the holiday of Shavuot. This biblical story is about the transformation and journey Ruth makes, as she accompanies her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Bethlehem, leaving behind her homeland and committing herself to belong to the Jewish people. As we explore gratitude for the people and places we belong, let's delve into a few Jewish texts about strangeness and belonging, and the journey between them.

1

The Torah describes the attitude one should take towards the stranger:

Exodus 23:9 **שְׂמוֹת כ"ג:ט'**

You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings [soul] of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.

וְגֵר לֹא תִלְחָץ וְאַתֶּם יָדַעְתֶּם אֶת־נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר כִּי־גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

- 1) Why does the Torah need to specify this commandment? Is it not obvious?
- 2) Have you ever experienced being a stranger?

2

When the Torah was given at Mt. Sinai, the text specifies that it was given not only to those physically present, but also to those who were not there:

Deuteronomy 29:14 **דְּבָרִים כ"ט:יד'**

But both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day.

כִּי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר יֵשְׁנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ עֹמֵד הַיּוֹם לִפְנֵי ה' אֶ-לֹהֵינוּ וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר אֵינָנוּ פֹה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם:

- 1) Who does the text mean to include?
- 2) Do you see yourself addressed in this verse?



The story of Ruth the Moabite, who followed her mother-in-law, Naomi, and joined her people, is read on *Shavuot*.

Ruth 1:11-18

But Naomi replied, "Turn back, my daughters! Why should you go with me? Have I any more sons in my body who might be husbands for you? Turn back, my daughters, for I am too old to be married. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I were married tonight and I also bore sons, should you wait for them to grow up? Should you on their account debar yourselves from marriage? Oh no, my daughters! My lot is far more bitter than yours, for the hand of the Lord has struck out against me." They broke into weeping again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law farewell. But Ruth clung to her. So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and her gods. Go follow your sister-in-law." But Ruth replied, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. **For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.** Thus and more may the Lord do to me if anything but death parts me from you." When [Naomi] saw how determined she was to go with her, she ceased to argue with her

רות א"א-י"ח

וּתְאֹמַר נַעֲמִי שׁוּבָה בְּנֹתַי לָמָּה תִּלְכְּנָה עִמִּי הַעוֹד־
 לִי בָנִים בְּמַעֲוֵי וְהָיוּ לָכֶם לְאַנְשִׁים: שׁוּבָה בְּנֹתַי
 לְכוּ כִּי זָקַנְתִּי מֵהָיוֹת לְאִישׁ כִּי אָמַרְתִּי יִשְׁלִי
 תִּקְוָה גַם הִיְיִתִי הַלְיִלָּה לְאִישׁ וְגַם יִלְדֹתַי בָּנִים:
 הֲלֵהוּ תִשְׁבְּרֶנָּה עַד אֲשֶׁר יִגְדְּלוּ הֲלֵהוּ תַעֲגֶנָּה
 לְבִלְתִּי הָיוֹת לְאִישׁ אֶל בְּנֹתַי כִּי־מֵרֵלִי מֵאֵד
 מִכֶּם כִּי־צָאָה בִּי יְדֹה' וְתִשְׁנֶה קוֹלוֹ וְתִבְכֶּינָה
 עוֹד וְתִשְׁקַע עַרְפָּהּ לַחֲמוֹתֶיהָ וְרוּת דָּבָרָה בָּהּ:
 וּתְאֹמַר הִנֵּה שָׁבָה יְבַמְתֶּךָ אֶל־עַמָּה וְאֶל־אֱלֹקֶיהָ
 שׁוּבִי אַחֲרַי יְבַמְתֶּךָ: וּתְאֹמַר רוּת אֶל־תִּפְגַּעֵי־בִי
 לְעִזְבוֹ לָשׁוּב מֵאַחֲרַי כִּי אֶל־אֲשֶׁר תִּלְכִּי אֵלַי
 וּבְאֲשֶׁר תִּלְיִנִי אֵלַיִן עִמָּךְ עִמִּי וְאֶל־קִיֶּיךָ אֶל־קִיֶּי:
 בְּאֲשֶׁר תָּמוּתִי אָמוֹת וְשֵׁם אֶקְבְּרָךְ כֹּה יַעֲשֶׂה ה' לִי
 וְכֹה יִסִּיף כִּי הַמּוֹת יִפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבֵינָךְ: וּתְרָא כִּי־
 מִתְאַמְצָת הִיא לְלַכֵּת אִתָּהּ וְתִחַדְּלַל לְדַבֵּר אֵלֶיהָ:

- 1) What type of belonging does Ruth voluntarily take upon herself?
- 2) Can you think of situations where you chose to belong and commit to a specific community?

4

Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy by Dr. Yael Ziegler

"Ruth is a *devuka*, a woman who knows how to fasten herself to another person. What does it mean to be a *devuka*? The act of cleaving to another is the very opposite of selfishness. Individualistic behavior entails looking out for oneself, regarding one's own interests as paramount even when it undermines the needs of the Other. This attitude prevails during the period of the judges, in which tribalism and individualism eclipse any possibility of national unity. Ruth's unprecedented act of attaching herself to another is an important step in beginning the renovation of society so sorely needed at this juncture... [Davak] connotes an all-encompassing connection, a relationship characterized by identification, in which one party embraces the totality of the Other, totally and completely. This description accurately describes Ruth's unusual relationship with Naomi, in which her decision to remain with her mother in law undermines her own self-interest.

- 1) According to Zeigler, what is the significance of the root: davk, to cleave, which describes Ruth's actions?
- 2) Is there a community, or an "other" to which you feel you are able to cleave?

5

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Mourning 14:2

The reward for escorting a stranger is greater than any reward. It is a practice introduced by our father Abraham, a way of kindness which was habitual with him. He served food and drink to wayfarers and escorted them. Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence, as it is written: "He saw three men ... he ran to meet them". Escorting them is even greater than receiving them. The sages have declared: "Anyone who does not escort his guests is almost guilty of bloodshed".

רמב"ם, משנה תורה, הלכות אהל י"ד:ה'

שָׂכַר הַלְוִיָּהּ מְרֻבָּה מִן הַכֹּל. וְהוּא הַחֵק שְׂחָקוֹ אֲבָרָהֶם אֲבִינוּ וְדָרָךְ הַחֶסֶד שְׁנֵהֵג בָּהּ. מְאָכִיל עוֹבְרֵי דְרָכִים וּמְשָׂקָה אוֹתוֹן וּמְלֻוָּה אוֹתוֹן. וּגְדוּלָּה הַכְּנֻסֶת אוֹרְחִים מִהַקְּבֵלֶת פְּנֵי שְׂכִינָהּ. שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים." וְלוֹוִיִּם יוֹתֵר מִהַכְּנֻסָּתוֹן. אֲמָרוּ חֲכָמִים כָּל שְׂאִינוּ מְלֻוָּה כְּאֵלוֹ שׁוֹפֵף דָּמִים:

- 1) What is the significance of escorting a stranger?
- 2) Is it meaningful for the stranger or for the escorter?
- 3) Note that the text moves from describing the person as a "stranger" to a "guest". How does one make that shift?