

The Book of Ruth celebrates empathy toward a woman from the Moabite people – a nation that the Hebrew Bible treats with great suspicion for their fraught interactions with Israelites. Why is this the book we read on the holiday we celebrate receiving Torah?

The Biblical “Sin of Empathy” for Moabites

לֹא־יָבֹא עִמּוֹנֵי וּמוֹאָבִי בְּקִהְלֵי יְהוָה גַּם דּוֹר עֲשִׂירֵי לֹא־יָבֹא לָהֶם בְּקִהְלֵי יְהוָה עַד־עוֹלָם: עַל־דִּבְרֵי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־קִדְּמוּ אֶתְכֶם בְּלַחֵם וּבַמַּיִם בְּדַרְךְ בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם וְאֲשֶׁר שָׁכַר עָלֶיךָ אֶת־בְּלַעַם בֶּן־בְּעוֹר מִפֶּתוֹר אֲרָם נִתְּרִים לְקַלְלֶךָ:

No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of GOD; no descendants of such, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of GOD, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse you. [Deuteronomy 23:4-5](#)

The Book of Ruth’s Challenge to Biblical Law

וַתֹּאמֶר רוּת אֶל־תִּפְגַּעֵי־בִי לְעֻזְבֶּךָ לְשׁוּב מֵאֲחֵרָיִךְ כִּי אֶל־אֲשֶׁר תִּלְכִּי אֵלָיךְ וּבְאֲשֶׁר תִּלְיִנִי אֵלָיִן עִמָּךְ עַמִּי וְאֵלֶיךָ אֵלֹהֵי: בְּאֲשֶׁר תָּמוּתִי אָמוּת וְשָׁם אֶקְבֹּר כֹּה נַעֲשֶׂה יְהוָה לִי וְכֹה יוֹסִיף כִּי הִמְנֹת יִפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶךָ:

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 God do to me if anything but death parts me from you.” [Ruth 1:16-17](#)

Texting IRL (A Shalom Hartman Institute Podcast): “We Were Strangers Too”

On Shavuot, we read the book of Ruth, and Ruth is a quintessential immigrant. She comes to the Jewish community; she’s a Moabite woman, and here she is. She undoes all of the stereotypes about Moav... [You] can see if the Torah tells you that the Moabites are licentious in the way that they trick the Jews into paganism through sleeping with their women. Ruth tells you, no, Ruth the Moabite, she’s so wonderful and has the right marriage, and she goes through the process and she not only doesn’t bring anyone to paganism, she actually goes towards monotheism... If the Moabites hired Bil’am to curse us, all throughout the Book of Ruth, it’s all about how she’s a blessing to everybody who meets her. It’s so clear it’s on purpose. Or how about the fact that the Moabites, they’re not supposed to marry into the Jewish people because they didn’t greet us with food and water when we were leaving Egypt and all she does, she goes out to the field in order to...make herself vulnerable and be near the field hands picking up food for her mother-in-law. She’s literally the opposite of every stereotype. -[Elana Stein Hain](#)

- *What is Jewish tradition teaching by centering a story that actively contradicts laws in Torah on the holiday in which we celebrate receiving the Torah?*

The “Sin of Empathy” or “Toxic Empathy”

Conservative religious thought leaders like Pastor Joe Rigney in “Leadership and the Sin of Empathy” and podcaster Allie Beth Stuckey in “Toxic Empathy” argue that empathy in excess leads societies morally astray for over-identifying with some forms of pain and ignoring others. This critique is not limited to Christians. Voices of critique in the Jewish community challenge HIAS’ commitment to serve people of all backgrounds who have been forcibly displaced as a misinterpretation of Jewish values and a misapplication of communal resources.

- *As you read this discourse from the Christian community, how does it parallel the conversation in the Jewish community? How does it differ?*

Premier Christianity: “This Church Leader Thinks Empathy Can Be a Sin. We Asked Him to Explain Himself.”

Virtues typically go wrong in one of two directions, either deficiency or an excess...The defect of compassion would be apathy, callousness or heartlessness. But there is such a thing as an excess of compassion. You say, “How could you be too compassionate?” Well, if you’re overwhelmed by your feelings and you lose touch with what is true and what is good, if you lose touch with Christ, you have an excess of that emotion that sweeps you off your feet and can be very destructive. – **Pastor Joe Rigney**

New York Times Opinion: “Christians Against Empathy Aren’t Who They Think They Are”

Sometimes, as the argument [of the sin of empathy] goes, you have to do tough, hard things. That means mass deportation. That means cutting off aid to the poor and vulnerable in the developing world... Are you concerned about children who might die because we gratuitously and needlessly cut billions of dollars to foreign aid? That’s toxic empathy. Are you worried about the conditions in detention facilities where migrants are held by the thousands? That’s more toxic empathy. Are you shocked and appalled at ICE’s aggression in the streets? Well, then, you’re losing your moorings. Mass deportation was always going to be tough to watch. Stay strong. Don’t let empathy seep into your soul...

[O]ur problem isn’t too much empathy, but too little. We’re unwilling to place ourselves in other people’s shoes, to try to understand who they are and what their lives are like...It is no coincidence that the attack on empathy correlates with an extraordinary rise in blatant racism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia on the right. Empathy stands as a firewall against bigotry. But it’s more than that – it can also free you from bigotry. Understanding another person’s experience (and imagining if it happened to you) softens our hearts and creates human connection. – **David French**

How Jewish Tradition Connects the Book of Ruth with Shavuot

The alignment of The Book of Ruth with a holiday about receiving Torah is not obvious beyond the alignment of the harvest in the story and the time of the holiday. Moreover, the narrative of Ruth appears to contradict both lessons and law contained within the sacred text we celebrate receiving. For Jewish sages across time, therein lies a greater message about the purpose of Torah and who it wants us to be.

- *Can tradition authoritatively weigh in on one side of the conversation? Does it?*

Early Rabbinic Rationale For Connecting Ruth to Shavuot

אמר רבי זעירא, מגלה זו אין בה לא טמאה, ולא טהרה, ולא אסור, ולא היתר, ולמה נכתבה ללמדך כמה שכר טוב לגומלי חסדים

Rabbi Ze'eira said: [The Book of Ruth] does not contain [the laws of] purity or impurity, and not prohibitions or allowances. Why was it written? It is to teach you the extent of the good reward for those who perform kindness.

Midrash Ruth Rabbah 2:14

Shavuot: Extraordinary People in an Ordinary World

Ruth, Boaz and Naomi live happily ever after, rewarded with offspring including a great grandchild that will become known as King David. However, this is a biblical book, and as such we might wonder why the book of Ruth was canonized. As Rabbi Ze'ira asks in Midrash on Ruth, it does not contain any legal value, it does not elucidate any other issues, why include it? He answers that Ruth was canonized, "To teach you how great is the reward of those who grant loving kindness (*hesed*).” It does not contain any villains, the people of Bethlehem are ordinary people, the family of Elimelekh is selfish, but no more than most. Orpah only did as she was begged to do.

Against all that gray and ordinary human scenery there are three extraordinary individuals; Naomi, Ruth and Boaz who rose above what was commonly expected from human beings; they are people of *hesed* (loving kindness). It is not coincidental that on the day that the Jewish tradition considers to be the day we received the Torah, the Law, the rabbis included a reading that stresses *hesed*—loving kindness that goes beyond the letter of the law. – **Vered Hollander-Goldfarb**