

One Act of Kindness Can Change the World

By Allyson Gronowitz

As the great-grandmother of King David and the first woman to have a book in the Bible named after her, Ruth must have been an extraordinary human being. Her constant devotion to Naomi throughout times of trouble is something we can admire, and her famous words of loyalty are recognized by all. However, Ruth is only one of the countless remarkable women in the *Tanakh*. Although she is undoubtedly an outstanding person, there are many other women who have shown ideal qualities as well. As our first Jewish mother, Sarah was the only woman addressed by God directly, whereas God does not even make an appearance in Ruth's story. Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, set the precedent for prayer to God, and Yael helped save *B'nei Yisrael* from Canaan by singlehandedly destroying the mighty general Sisera.

With so many historical figures to choose from, I have often wondered why God would decide that Ruth should merit giving birth to the great King David and our future *Mashiach*? Ruth was from the Moabite nation, and the people of Moab are considered so immoral that Jewish women are forbidden to marry any man from this nation. What exactly did Ruth do that was so exemplary?

Tehillim 89:3 provides the answer with these words: "Kindness builds the world." The trait of kindness, or *chesed*, is often overshadowed by such qualities as piety or courage, but it is arguably the most important quality a person can have.

Acts of kindness are rooted into the framework of the Torah; the Torah begins with God clothing Adam and Eve, and it ends with God burying Moses. All this comes to teach us that

acts of kindness will lead to *ahavat hinam*, gratuitous or baseless love, as opposed to *sinat hinam*, gratuitous or baseless hatred. Chief Rabbi Kook considered that just as the Temple was destroyed because of *sinat hinam*, so it would be rebuilt because of *ahavat hinam*. Fittingly, this pure love for a fellow Jew is what will eventually lead to the coming of the Messiah.

The word "*chesed*" is found a total of three times in *Megillat Ruth*, and each time it is associated with a blessing from God. The first time this word is mentioned is when Naomi prays that her two daughters-in-law will be treated by God as kindly as they have treated her. Then, Naomi uses the word *chesed* to praise Boaz's kindness for letting Ruth work in his field. Finally, Boaz uses this word as he expresses his gratitude to Ruth for the kindnesses she has done for Naomi and for himself. It would seem that though God was not overtly involved in the events of *Megillat Ruth*, and even though the people were suffering through a famine, their society was still able to flourish, because each person's acts of kindness "built" the community by giving it stability and strength.

The prime example of Ruth's kindness is when she refuses to leave Naomi's side, even after Naomi urges her to do so. Ruth chooses to forsake her ancestry of luxury and paganism to adopt a culture that was foreign and demanding, in order to help Naomi. In fact, Moab and Ammon were prohibited from marrying into the Jewish congregation because of their *lack* of kindness, but Ruth rises above her nation's faults and displays the kindness and loyalty that enable her to become a part of God's congregation. Ruth poses a sharp contrast to Naomi's

husband, Elimelech, who acted selfishly and spitefully toward his fellow Jews. From the word "*ish*" (meaning "man") that is used to describe him, we can infer that he was a wealthy and important person. However, after a famine ravaged the land, he immediately moved his family out of *Eretz Yisrael* so that he wouldn't have to spend his own money to provide for the people around him. In contrast to this selfish act, Ruth's kindness and compassion shine even brighter.

Perhaps, because God does not play a more obvious role in *Megillat Ruth*, it is the people of the time who bring about the redemption of *B'nei Yisrael* through their acts of kindness. Ruth's decision to stay with Naomi sets into motion a chain of acts of kindness in which Naomi and Boaz also play key roles. In the first verse of the third chapter, Naomi says, "Shall I not seek a home for you that I may be good for you?" Ruth has dutifully remained by Naomi's side, and she has taken the extra step of providing food for Naomi and herself by picking up the dropped sheaves of grain in Boaz's field. Now, Naomi feels that it is her turn to do a kindness for Ruth. She initiates the meeting of Boaz and Ruth, which eventually brings about their marriage. Boaz sees Ruth's agreement to marry him as an act of kindness because she could have married a much younger man. Boaz's eagerness to marry Ruth can also be seen as a kindness because many men despised her national origins. Boaz shows further compassion when Ruth first begins to gather grain from his field. He orders his workers not to embarrass Ruth in any way, but to discreetly drop sheaves of barley for her to gather.

What is it about Ruth that merited her to be the great-grandmother of the future King of Israel and Messiah? The answer is clear. It was her compassion toward other people, her acts of kindness and the importance of the *chesed* she performed. It is this trait that is passed down to King David and is highlighted as an important quality throughout his kingship. The second book of Samuel summarizes David's reign with the following words: "And David reigned over all of Israel, and David performed judgment and charity (*tzedaka*) for his entire nation" (2 Samuel 8:15). The book of Proverbs emphasizes the importance of kindness even more with the words: "Charity saves from death" (Proverbs 10:2).

In Tractate *Shabbat*, the Talmud tells us an incredible story of Rabbi Akiva to illustrate this point. Rabbi Akiva was told by astrologers that his daughter would die on her wedding day from a

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The Human Element in the Commandments:

The Effect of Changing Community Norms on Halakhic Decisions

By Rabbi Daniel Sperber

Embedded in various rabbinic passages is a very basic principle, namely the force of the human element even in divinely given commandments. In *Mishnat R. Eliezer* (p. 266),¹ for example, it is stated that the difference between the first tablets of the Ten Commandments and the second ones was that “in the first, the image of Moses did not shine within them, but in the second the image of Moses shone within them”, and hence, the second tablets had additional merit. What is being expressed here is that for divinely given commandments to be relevant to human beings, with their frailties and shortcomings, they must be tempered with the human, mundane element. And it is precisely this human element, which we call interpretation (*drash*, midrash, hermeneutics, and the like) that gives the Torah its flexibility, which enables it to be eternally relevant, meaningful and authoritative.

How much more so with regard to man-made halakhic rulings (*de-rabanan*), which must be reconsidered by major authorities in every generation so that the authority and relevance of the rulings can be preserved. Indeed, the great rabbis in each generation were keenly aware of the necessity of ensuring that the halakha remained a living halakha and a livable one. Hence, changing circumstances necessitate re-evaluation of the classic halakhic formulations to ensure that they remain relevant to the contemporary situation.

In this context, it is worth citing the words of R. Hayyim David Halevi, who served as the Sephardic Chief Rabbi and head of the Rabbinical Courts of Tel Aviv, in his essay, “On the Flexibility of Halakha”:

As it is extremely clear, that no law or edict can maintain its position over a long period of time due to the changes in the conditions

of life, and that the law which was good in its time is no longer suitable after a generation or more, but requires correction or change, how is it that our Holy Torah gave us righteous and upright laws and edicts thousands of years ago and we continue to act in accordance with them to this very day (and will even continue to do so to the end of all generations)? How is it that these same laws were good in their time and are good to this very day as well..? Such a thing was only possible because the Sages of Israel were given permission in every generations to innovate in matters of halakha in accordance with the changing times and situations... Anybody who thinks that the halakha is frozen and that one is not permitted to deviate from it right or left, is very much mistaken. On the contrary, there is nothing so flexible as the halakha....And it is only by virtue of the halakha that the Jewish people were able, through the numerous and useful innovations that were introduced by Jewish Sages over the generations, to “walk” in the ways of Torah and *mitzvot* for thousands of years.²

However, sometimes our classical halakhic sources give us a ruling that seems totally impractical in contemporary terms. It is instructive to see how the rabbis deal with such a situation. A case in point is that of a man walking behind a woman. In the Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 61a, we read in a *baraita*:

A man should not walk on a pathway behind a woman, even his wife. And if he meets up [with a woman] on a bridge, he should push her to the side. And whoever walks behind a woman by the riverside has no position in the World to Come.³

This ruling is cited by the Rambam in *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah* 21:22 in the following formulation:

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snake-bite. Consequently, he was ecstatic to find out that, after taking a pin out of her hair, his daughter had placed the pin through a hole in the wall and inadvertently killed a snake that had been poised to attack her. Amazed, he asked his daughter if she had performed any recent act of *chesed* that would warrant her being saved. His daughter replied, “At the wedding, everyone was too busy feasting and celebrating to notice that a poor, hungry man had come to the door. Upon seeing this man, I immediately offered him my portion of food so that he would not be hungry” (*Shabbat* 156b).

It has been said that one act of kindness can change the world. This message is even more profound in the story of Ruth, where countless acts of *chesed* are performed on a daily basis. If we enrich our lives with these acts of kindness just like Ruth did, we too have the potential to have great things come from us.

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an Orthodox Jewish life or whether I would “give it up.” (I was surprised that people who knew me would even think such thoughts, but positively stunned that anyone would actually ask me that question!) It would never have occurred to me to live any way other than the way I have for most of my adult life, because this *is* who I am. One of the many lessons I have learned is that I became a Jew, but I have always been me. Ruth’s words resonate with me now, as they never did before. After all, it is relatively easy to cling to a people when it means forging a life with the man you love, when both of you are young and looking forward to starting a family. It is quite another to do so in his absence, when those children are a reality and after the shock of losing him prematurely.

Ruth follows her mother-in-law because she has no alternative. Unlike Orpah, there is no turning back for her. I understand that difference now in much more profound ways than I ever could have imagined. Ruth’s determination to stay with her mother-in-law, expressed in one of the most moving passages in the *Megilla*, stops Naomi in her tracks. Naomi offers no more words of discouragement, no more entreaties for Ruth to return to “her” people, for Naomi comes to realize that Ruth’s people *are* the Jewish people.

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