

Whither Thou Goest...

By Carol Spanbock

Nine years ago, I had the privilege of speaking at the second JOFA conference, together with Rabbi Marc Angel of Congregation Shearith Israel, on the subject of conversion. I recently listened to the tape of that talk. My thoughts turned, as they often do in anticipation of Shavuot, to the story of Ruth and her relationship with Naomi and the Jewish people, particularly because it was at this time of year, twenty-three years ago, that my own conversion took place.

My story, like that of so many other converts, was simply that I had fallen in love with a Jewish man. We were both very young at the time, and the idea of marriage, much less conversion, was not at the forefront of our minds. But later, when we were both able to confront the issue, I began, with some trepidation, to study and take “beginners” classes at Lincoln Square Synagogue, and we both attended the Beginner’s Service there. At first, I worried about how I might fit into this new world. Initially, I was less concerned with whether I could pass muster as a Jew than with how I might be losing myself, my sense of who I was. Certainly, my friends and family thought I had gone off the deep end.

Yet, I soon discovered that I loved this new world I had entered. I studied more and began to meet people in my new community. I learned the many things I needed to know, such as the laws of Shabbat and *kashrut*, practice, and ritual – all the details that I needed to live this life on which I was embarking. As I learned the mechanics of practice as well as their theological underpinnings, traditional Judaism, seen as a whole and in its context, began to make sense to me. It began to feel like a life I could live. Meanwhile, my old friends and family thought that I was going through a “phase” that would last through the wedding and that I’d get over it sooner or later.

As far as I was concerned, all was well during that stage of the conversion process, except for some nagging doubts and a lingering sense of insecurity. I didn’t worry that I’d forget the rules or be tempted by my past life. I was no longer fearful of losing myself in the process. No, my concern was about nuance. How do you create that feeling in your home, around a Shabbat table with invited guests, which seemed so natural to all the people who hosted me (and my future husband) during the period of studying for conversion? How would I ever feel that I belonged, that I fit into the larger community? What was that *something* that other people had, and could I get it for myself? Anyone who has been on the outside looking in—in any situation—knows what I’m talking about.

As I listened to that tape from the JOFA conference, I thought about how much had changed since that time and how much has remained the same. Of course, my children (and I) are that much older. My husband died, suddenly and unexpectedly, two years ago. My relationship with my own parents has improved, in terms of my Judaism, at least. But among the elements of my life that have remained the same and have perhaps even become stronger is my relationship with my in-laws, particularly my mother-in-law.

In that talk I gave to JOFA so long ago, I spoke of the pivotal role that my mother-in-law played in my becoming a Jew. I learned all the nuance from her: how to create that welcoming feeling in my own home, how to have guests you didn’t know very well, or at all, and make them feel at home, and how to give of yourself to your community in many ways. Yes, I acknowledged then that she did teach me how to make chicken soup and matzo balls. But she taught me so much more about how to live as a Jewish woman, with all of its complexities and conflicts, as well as its joys.

In the aftermath of my husband’s death, I was shocked that some people actually asked me whether I would continue to live

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Mount Sinai

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commanded to keep the Sabbath for a different reason: “Keep the Sabbath day...and remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out from there” (Deut. 5: 12, 15). We rest on Sabbath because God took us out of a place where we could not rest and He then restored our freedom so that we could rest again. Keeping the Sabbath is not only about emulating God but also about remembering that which God did for us.

There is an additional nuance in the articulation of the commandment to keep the Sabbath in Deuteronomy that is absent from the Exodus version: “On [the Sabbath] you shall not do any work...so that your male and female servants may rest as well” (Deut. 5:14). The motivation for the commandment to keep the Sabbath in Deuteronomy is in large measure a humanitarian one. The memory of Israelite servitude in Egypt is intended to foster empathy for the need of fellow human beings to

rest. This adds a whole new dimension to our understanding of the Exodus from Egypt as the central theological experience of the nation of Israel. The Exodus experience teaches us not only that God took care of us but also that by God’s example we must take care of others.

The centrality of this lesson from the Israelite experience in Egypt is manifested in the Torah’s use of it as the motivation for observing many humanitarian commandments. Perhaps the most provocative example is the injunction against oppression of the stranger: “Do not oppress a stranger for you *know the soul of the stranger*, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Ex. 23:9).

CONCLUSION: EXODUS AS THE CORE OF THE SINAI COVENANT

Why is the Exodus from Egypt the central theological experience of the nation of Israel? Why does this experience define our relationship with God?

The Exodus from Egypt adds a dimension to our relationship with God that enables us not only to *emulate* God but also to feel an *intimate*

connection to God. Not only did God create us but God continually cared for us. At Mount Sinai, God asks the nation of Israel to willingly enter into a covenantal bond – as human beings we tend to make commitments to those who are with us in times of stress and defeat, to those with whom we feel a deep existential connection. It is clear then why God identifies Himself as the God who redeemed Israel from Egypt in the introduction to the Ten Commandments. The redemption from Egypt encompasses not only the idea that God is our Creator in control of our natural existence but also that God cares for us always and similarly we must care for each other.

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1 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Jason Aronson Publishers, Northvale, 1997.

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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