



Ruth, Covenant, and Safe Communities

— RABBI MARY ZAMORE

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This text study is based on what was originally a *d'var torah* (a sermonic teaching) on the book of Ruth, traditionally read on the spring holiday of Shavuot. It highlights the concept of *brit*, covenant, and the themes of safety and power. Discussion questions invite participants to reflect on the written and unwritten practices and policies that support safety from abuse. This material can be used to directly ground discussion of policy development and enforcement or to raise these issues in the context of a Shavuot study session.

וַתֹּאמֶר רוּת אֶל־תַּפְגְּעֵי־בִי לְעִזְבוֹךָ לָשׁוּב מֵאַחֲרָיִךָ כִּי אֶל־אֲשֶׁר תִּלְכִּי
אֵלַי וּבְאֲשֶׁר תִּלְיִנִי אֵלַיִן עִמָּךְ עַמִּי וְאֱלֹהֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵי:

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.

בְּאֲשֶׁר תָּמוּתִי אָמוּת וְשָׁם אֶקְבֹּר כֹּה יַעֲשֶׂה יְהוָה לִי וְכֹה יוֹסִיף כִּי
הַמָּוֶת יִפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ:

Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the Eternal do to me if anything but death parts me from you" (Ruth 1:16-17).

These well-known words are Ruth's response to her mother-in-law Naomi, who suggests Ruth return to her own people, the Moabites, just as her sister-in-law Orpah has already done. At this point in the narrative, all three women are widows, a precarious socioeconomic position within the ancient world. Naomi gives her two daughters-in-law the opportunity to find economic security in the form of marriage by returning to their people. With this permission, Orpah does the expected and leaves; Ruth, in contrast, proclaims her passionate words, which Jewish tradition holds up as a model of faith, especially conversion. However, this narrative and Ruth's famous promise can also teach us about the power of safe, respectful communities and the double-sided nature of covenants.

Ruth and Naomi are widows without personal wealth and without men to protect, support, or represent them--essential elements of security for women in the ancient world. They are powerless. Yet, given the opportunity to return to her own people, Ruth declines and proclaims her intent to remain by Naomi's side until death (1:17). This statement not only provides dramatic emphasis of Ruth's commitment to Naomi; it emphasizes the precariousness and uncertainty of her situation—whatever happens to Naomi will happen to Ruth. She is taking a risk. Yet, within her words is also an expression of hope. She describes the life journey she expects for the two of them; death will come eventually, but not yet. The fact that she decides to stay with Naomi, travel to her land, live with her people, and align herself with her God reflects Ruth's hope to find her place among Naomi's people.

When Ruth binds herself to Naomi's community, land, and God, it is possible that she does so with the hope that her choice will provide her with a measure of protection even though her words are framed through her relationship with her mother-in-law. Ruth could have stayed with the Moabites but instead chooses to align her fate with the Israelites. Although she does not know it then, that decision will provide sustenance for herself and Naomi, a worthy marriage (by biblical standards), and a place in history as the great-grandmother of King David.

When Boaz, who will later become Ruth's husband, sees her for the first time, she is benefiting from social welfare norms of biblical times. She gleans in his field, collecting free food as outlined and commanded by the Torah in Leviticus 19:9, among other texts. Boaz urges her to stay at his field, saying:

עֵינַיִךְ בַּשָּׂדֶה אֲשֶׁר יִקְצְרוּן וְהִלַּכְתְּ אַחֲרֵיהֶן הֲלוֹא צִוִּיתִי אֶת־הַנְּעָרִים
לְבִלְתִּי נִגְעוֹךָ וְצִמְתְּ וְהִלַּכְתְּ אֶל־הַכֵּלִים וְשָׁתִית מֵאֲשֶׁר יִשְׁאָבוּן הַנְּעָרִים:

Keep your eyes on the field they [the workers] are reaping and follow them. I have ordered the men not to molest you. And when you are thirsty, go to the jars and drink some of [the water] that the men have drawn. (Ruth 2:9)

Boaz is clearly upholding the Torah law of giving Ruth access to food by allowing her to glean in his field—that is, she will follow his workers, picking the barley they have overlooked. He assures Ruth's physical safety by ordering his male workers to refrain from molesting her. Keeping her safe from harassment, Boaz's protection gives Ruth access to the water and food she needs to sustain herself and Naomi. As this text demonstrates, though, without safety from harassment or assault, social welfare laws providing access to food are not enough.

When Ruth binds herself to Naomi, she declares, "...wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God." This is the language of *brit* or covenant; her words are the pronouncement of a social contract, reflecting a two-way relationship. Ruth's words emphasize her promise to remain in Naomi's life, to live among her people, and to be loyal to her God, but when Ruth binds herself to the Israelite land, people, and God, the Israelites also assume obligations to her.

To be in relationship with one another is to be bound by written, spoken, and even unspoken rules. In our Jewish communities, we are bound by Jewish law and secular law. The most fundamental promise we must make to one another is that every person will be safe in our communities. Safety, both physical and emotional, is the foundation of any individual's success in our community.

Abuse and harassment are misdeeds done by those who prey on the powerless. The #metoo movement has opened our communal eyes to a truth that has long existed in plain sight; the Jewish community has not protected those with less power from those with more. If women had enough power, we would not still be harassed. And people would believe us. Abuse and harassment are as common within our communities as anywhere else.

To be a just community, we must ensure the physical and emotional safety of all who live, pray, learn, and work within our Jewish communities and institutions. Only in an atmosphere of safety can the members of our communities benefit from all that Judaism and the Jewish community have to offer. We must ensure that our communities and institutions have the standards, policies, procedures, and trainings necessary to foster safety. Most of all, we must be brave enough to enforce them. Safety must be prioritized and enacted as a fundamental part of the communal covenant that binds us to each other.

Discussion Questions

1. We have already named some of the ways in which Ruth and Naomi lack power. Can you think of any other precarious aspects of their situation? What makes their future uncertain?
2. Look through the book of Ruth to locate moments in the text that highlight a community's responsibilities to strangers within its boundaries. Where does the text underscore communal responsibility for others' safety?
3. The author of this piece notes that Boaz offered specific protections to Ruth so she would not be molested. What do you think that suggests about Boaz's society? In what ways do these kinds of explicit protections feel useful? In what ways do they feel problematic?
4. The author notes that the Torah laws meant to protect the hungry and homeless cannot properly function without the foundation of physical and emotional safety. What examples of contemporary laws or values cannot properly function without the foundation of physical and emotional safety?
5. Which standards, policies, and procedures foster safety, especially from assault and harassment, in your community? Your organization? (These might be in secular law, Jewish law and values, organizational policies, even unspoken norms...)

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