

Today we enjoy the denouement of the story of Ruth, the happy ending for a kind and loyal woman, her loving mother-in-law, and the noble landowner Boaz. Our Jewish neighbors read the book of Ruth during June, which is the first of the two harvest times in Israel, when they celebrate Shavuot, which is both a harvest festival and a celebration of receiving the Torah. But this is a good time to read it too, with tomatoes and cucumbers and peppers being harvested; we can kind of put ourselves into the mood of general abundance that's in the background of the Ruth story.

But first our heroine faces one last peril. She has asked for Boaz's protection, and specifically that he fulfill his obligation as closest kinsman to marry her, and he has agreed. BUT, guess what, there's one kinsman even closer than Boaz who has to be given first refusal. This guy is a total unknown. Naomi didn't mention him when she sent Ruth to Boaz, he hasn't made an appearance in the field or on the threshing floor, and now suddenly the whole happily-ever-after hangs in the balance while he makes his decision. For a heart-stopping moment, we think that all is lost, when the guy says that yes indeed, he'd like to redeem the parcel of land that's come up for sale. But then when Boaz says, "Oh, and by the way, the land comes with a new wife, this woman from Moab," the closer kinsman backs out. Suddenly he remembers that to redeem that piece of land would damage his own inheritance, so he yields it to Boaz, whew.

The narrator has thrown shade at this close kinsman by not giving him a name. So let's pause on this a minute. The whole story so far has been about good and decent people going out of their way for others. Ismar Schorsch, a retired professor from Jewish Theological Seminary, pointed out in an article that Torah

legislates charitable acts that are quite unnatural, slightly utopian and utterly unenforceable. <http://www.jtsa.edu/lessons-from-the-book-of-ruth> One of those is the edict that you must leave at least 1/60th of your harvest in the field for gleaners; this is what enables Ruth and Naomi to survive when they first return to Judah. If the whole book of Ruth is about people *not* pursuing their own best interests exclusively, but rather engaging in acts that are unnatural and utopian, then the book of Ruth is actually a ground-level version of Torah. Here's what happens when you look out for others as well as for yourself: sustenance, expansion of family, new life.

So this unnamed close kinsman, in addition to heightening the suspense, may also serve as a foil to the good and generous Boaz. He's all about acquiring this parcel of land that used to belong to Elimelech, his if he wants it because of the levirate law. The fact that he backs out when he finds out that Ruth is also part of the package suggests that he isn't really oriented toward looking out for others. It's certainly possible that a new wife was just one thing more than he could manage, but the narrator doesn't suggest that. The narrator just says that the kinsman's reason is that taking the field will damage his own inheritance. So *Boaz* gets the girl, *Boaz* gets the son who will become King David's grandfather, and *Boaz* lives happily ever after. As Shmoop says, "Well played, Boaz," and "Better luck next time, other random guy." <https://www.shmoop.com/ruth/other-kinsman.html>

The story ends with lavish particulars about what the happily-ever-after looked like. The people at the gate collectively issued a blessing on the couple, wishing them families like those of Rachel and Leah, Tamar and Judah. Ruth bore a

son to Boaz; Naomi nursed him. The women of the neighborhood weighed in and gave the baby a name. And finally, the climax: this very baby became the grandfather of King David. This is a happy ending, but it's more than a happy ending: read at the time of harvest, this story set at harvest time holds up a model of the spirit of Torah: generosity and audacity lived out in the humblest settings. Generosity and audacity—these qualities can be lived in the most mundane and modest, even constricted, situations. And that's what we ought to be remembering when we're harvesting our crops and planning how we're going to make best use of what God has given us.

The book of Ruth is certainly an idealized kind of story, but it's told so gently, with such a light touch, that I don't feel like pushing back and arguing that sometimes the good guys *don't* win. Honestly, that's not the point. The point is that Torah gives us what we need to live wisely and even happily in whatever our situation may be. Ruth exemplifies a person who has internalized the spirit of Torah, *even though* she is a Moabite. (And perhaps there's also an implicit warning to Judeans not to lean too hard on their fortunate births.) She puts aside her own best interests to make common cause with her widowed mother-in-law; she gleanes for both of them; she comports herself with dignity, integrity, and courage. She treats others with respect. And what comes about for her is relationships with others who value her qualities, relationships that are generative and life-giving, that benefit the whole community in the present and for future generations. That's all. It's not streets of gold or angel song, but it's just solid good life, like sweet corn and home-grown tomatoes and singing with your friends. That's plenty.

May this story be a blessing and a delight for us.

Let us pray: Ever-giving God, thank you for the lovely story of Ruth, that invites us to live generously and audaciously. As many times as we hear that it's best to share, and as deeply as we have tried to internalize that truth, we know that such a life is never perfected. As we discover new levels of wisdom by following your path, may we continue to draw out the truths we need from this beautiful story. And knowing that we have many sisters and brothers who are literally exiles or hungry, may we connect with them more faithfully. Amen.