

The Recognition of Greatness and the Greatness of Recognition

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The Jewish Center

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For 35 years, a Nepalese immigrant named Indra Tamang worked as a butler on Central Park West in the Dakota. Today, he owns the very same apartments in which he labored – gifts from his grateful former employers, writer Charles Henri Ford, who died in 2002, and his sister, Ruth Ford, who passed recently at the age of 98. Not sure if he'd make it past the co-op board, Tamang has put both apartments up for sale. So if anyone is thinking about moving to 72nd St., be sure to check your local real estate listings.

Think of some of the Megillas that we read over the course of the year. They're not just connected to the holiday. They define the holiday. Think of Esther. What would Purim be without the Megillah? It captures the entire narrative and spirit of the day. It's the basis for all the mitzvos we observe on Purim. Or Eichah on Tisha B'Av. We don't have to think too creatively about how the megillah dovetails with the theme of the day. It's synonymous with the theme of the day.

When it comes to the book of Ruth, though, the connection is less obvious. I would even say that on the surface the links between Shavuos and Ruth appear a little tenuous.

- Maybe it has to do with King David who is said to have been born on Shavuos.
- Or maybe it's about entrée into the Jewish people.
- Or maybe it's just about the barley harvest.

None of these suggestions is particularly satisfying.

What I'd like to propose to you this morning is that Megillas Rus accomplishes a crucial function on the holiday when we need it most. Because it helps us move from the world of the abstract to the world of the concrete.

I think we struggle with Shavuos for a number of reasons: Chiefly, I believe, because its theme is so impossibly big, we get a little paralyzed when we try to get started. To understand how Megillas Rus helps get us over this hurdle, we need to do a little learning together – appropriate I suppose for the holiday so taken with the theme of Talmud Torah.

We know that the book of Ruth is fundamentally about acts of Chessed. But I'm not so convinced that these acts of chessed are so simple to identify. What does Ruth do that's such a chessed? What does Boaz do that's such a chessed?

I want to return to the text for a moment and share with you what I think is the conscious argument put forth by the author of our megillah on the topic of chessed.

If you examine the text very closely, you'll see that both Boaz and Ruth quite explicitly identify the acts of chessed we're trying to locate.

They're just two pesukim – but they reveal everything. If you have the text in front of you and want to follow along, I invite you to open your chumash to page 233. It's chapter II, pesukim 10-11. Listen to the conversation. Ruth is thanking Boaz for what he's done for her. It's stunning:

רות פרק ב

ותאמר אליו מדוע מצאתי חן בעיניך להכירני ואנכי נכריה:

Ruth said Boaz: Why have I found favor in your eyes that you've recognized me even though I'm an outsider?

Notice that she doesn't say: *Why have you been so generous with me? Why have you gone out of your way to help me?* What's the kindness Boaz has done for her? He's recognized her!

It's so poetic. Notice the word play: להכירני ואנכי נכריה

You recognized me – you made me ניכר even though I was a נכריה – I was a stranger. It's the same root: נ-כ-ר – it means both to recognize and the one who is unrecognized – the outsider. Chesed in the book of Ruth is the transition from נכרי to ניכר – it's the capacity to recognize the needs of the other and respond to them so precisely that in the process you transform the other from an outsider into an insider.

Now let's go back to the conversation. What does Boaz say in response?

רות פרק ב

(יא) ויען בעז ויאמר לה הגד הגד לי כל אשר עשית את חמותך אחרי מות אישך ותעזבי אביך ואמך וארץ מולדתך ותלכי אל עם אשר לא ידעת תמול שלשום:

Boaz said in reply: I have been told of all that you did for your mother in law after the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before.

Does this remind of you anyone? Someone who left their land and their family and started on a journey endowed with divine purpose?

It's Avraham! Boaz is telling Ruth: I know all about you! Your chessed is legendary! So legendary, in fact, in warrants comparison to the very paradigm of chessed – Avraham himself.

You know what Boaz is telling Ruth? That she is endowed with exactly the same quality! She's an Avraham! This is how he lived his life. He didn't just give or do. He noticed – he identified what was lacking – he recognized what others needed and then responded in kind: Food, water, lodging, rescue, space, advice – whatever the situation called for, Avraham responded in kind.

Chesed in the book of Ruth is all about recognition. It's all over the text. If you continue in the next lines and notice what Ruth thanks Boaz for – it's not his largesse, but rather for speaking to her heart: דברת על לב שפחתך – he recognizes what she needs. It's more

than money or food or provisions – it’s recognition, companionship – someone to help her feel less alone, less like an outsider and more like someone on the inside.

This is in essence the chesed of Ruth as well. The character of Orpah helps throw into relief the kindness of Ruth. Who can fault Orpah? She accompanies Naomi – she stays with her. It’s just that Naomi is so forceful and so insistent that Orpah listens. Naomi keeps telling her to go – to move on with her life – so finally she does. Where’s the crime in that?

There’s no crime. But what separates Ruth from Orpah is that Ruth recognizes the layer of meaning underneath the surface of her mother-in-law’s words. Naomi is pleading with her daughters-in-law to go. And maybe on one level she really means it. But on another level Ruth understands that Naomi is lonely and dejected and would love nothing more than the solace and empathy of her daughter-in-law’s companionship. She remains with Naomi not because anyone tells her it was the right thing – but because she intuitively recognizes the deeper needs of the person closest to her.

That’s why we read Megillas Rus today: Because it gives us something immanently practical to which to attach on what otherwise is a holiday absent the practical or the experiential. If you want to know where to begin, start with chesed. Identify a need in the life of someone close to you and see what you can do to fill it:

- Maybe it’s an invitation for a shabbos meal.
- Maybe they’re single and they’d be interested in being set up.
- Maybe they’re looking for a job and you can help.

Acts of chesed in the book of Ruth range from the grand and life-altering to the seemingly minute and inconsequential. It’s not the scope of the act, but its quality – and really its profound capacity to be transformative.

In a moment we’re going to recite Yizkor. We’ll think about and remember people in our lives that we miss deeply. Perhaps in your minds’ eye you can imagine a moment as well that captures an act of חסד – a gesture of kindness that remains imbedded in your memory.

When one day we are remembered, what are the everlasting acts of chesed that others will recall about us? The bequest we leave this world doesn’t have to wait until the moment we leave this world. Our mission is to fill our living days with acts worthy of those who descend from the likes of Ruth and Boaz. And in the process of transforming others, perhaps we’ll be transforming ourselves as well.