

Ruth's Turning Point

By Dr Annette M. Boeckler

It's difficult, with regard to this year's magazine's theme, "Turning Points", not to immediately think of Megillat Ruth. Fortunately, this allows me to grasp the opportunity to finish my KNMS magazine series about the five megillot.

Megillat Ruth – read in Kol Nefesh Masorti Synagogue after the Shacharit Amidah on the second day of Shavuot¹ – is full of dramatic turning points: A famine forces a family to leave their home country; an esteemed, wealthy family² must become strangers in a foreign land (1:1). Illness and death change the destiny of a mother of two, from family life to loneliness and bitterness (1:3,5). A middle-aged woman decides to change her life and moves to a land and culture she does not know (1:7-19). A man's life is changed when he suddenly discovers a woman in his bed (3:7-8). And finally, Israel's history will be transformed by the birth of King David's grandfather (4:22).

Megillat Ruth leaves it enigmatically open if these turning points are catastrophes or blessings. None of them was long or carefully planned. The turning points in Megillat Ruth are reactions to unforeseen changes in life. What has all this to do with *zman mattan torateinu* (the time that Torah is given to us), Shavuot?

The reading of a Megillah generally indicates that Israel's very existence was endangered, but Judaism survived. One has to read Megillat Ruth from Naomi's perspective to discover this aspect. Naomi symbolizes the people of Israel. Naomi's life is threatened, almost extinguished: She had to leave her country. Her husband died. Her two sons died. About Naomi, however, the Midrash says: She was called Naomi, because "her deeds were beautiful (נאים) and pleasant (נעימות)" (Ruth Rabba 2:5). The son that is born will be laid in her bosom, and the text says: "A son has

been born to Naomi" (4:17). Naomi clearly is the theological heroine of the story and the figure we are meant to identify with. However, the Greeks (like us Europeans) loved to create book titles mentioning the most active figures in the plot, so – given that Naomi mainly just talks, while busy Ruth runs around the fields and after Boaz – the title of the book in the Septuagint became "Ruth". Thus we call it Megillat Ruth, not Megillat Naomi.

The turning point in Judaism is Shavuot. This is the liturgical moment where Jewish identity begins; Pessach is just the pre-condition for Shavuot, as Ibn Ezra said: "I will take you as my people' when you accept the Torah at Mount Sinai" (Ibn Ezra on Exod 6:7). Shavuot marks the end of a period of days and weeks after Pessach – 7, actually! – and defines the freedom given at Pessach. Megillat Ruth is linked to the whole time period between the second day of Pessach and Shavuot, because the main action, the encounter between Ruth and Boaz, starts at the beginning of the barley harvest (1:22), which according to tradition is the harvest of the Omer.³ Megillat Ruth is thus not just about Shavuot, but also about the Omer period and the connection between Pessach and Shavuot, the connection between freedom and turning points and about how we interpret both.

Other connections between Ruth and Shavuot are diverse links and hints to Torah. "R. Zeira said: This book of Scripture contains neither laws of ritual impurity nor laws of ritual purity and neither laws of prohibition nor laws of permission. Why then was it written? – To teach you how good the reward is for those who bestow kindness (*gemillut chasadim*) on others" (Ruth Rabba 2:14). The word *Chesed*, "kindness", a *Leitwort* of the book of Ruth, is revealed as the foundation and principle of the Torah when reading Ruth on Shavuot.⁴ One of its key verses is: *Ya'as adonai imachem chesed*, "May God deal kindly with you" (1:8).

One of the major connections between Ruth and Shavuot was already pointed out by the fourteenth-century Spanish scholar David Abudraham. Both Shavuot and Megillat Ruth are about *Kabbalat Torah*, accepting Torah. The dialogue between Naomi – representing Israel – and Ruth in 1:15-18 is commonly interpreted as a conversion-to-Judaism interview, as David's grandmother had to be Jewish and from Ruth's words it was deduced what Naomi must have said. The derived questions differ between targum, midrash (RuthR 2:22-23), Talmud (Yevamot 47b) and Biblical commentators. Let me quote Rashi's version as an example of how Jewish tradition imagines the dialogue:

Naomi: "We may not go beyond 2000 cubits on Shabbat."

Ruth: "*Where you go, I shall go.*"

Naomi: "We may not allow a woman to be with a man who is not her husband."

Ruth: "*Where you lodge, I shall lodge.*"

Naomi: "Our nation is separated from other nations by 613 commandments."

Ruth: "*Your people is my people.*"

Naomi: "Idolatry is forbidden to us."

Ruth: "*Your God is my God.*"

Naomi: "There are four types of death penalties."

Ruth: "*Where you die, I will die.*"

Naomi: "We have a special cemetery."

Ruth: "*And there I shall be buried.*"

These days Beth Din questions are different – nobody, for example, ever revealed to me the four Jewish death penalties before my giur. But two things stay unchanged: a conversion to Judaism is a turning point in life like very few other events. Sometimes – as in my case – it is a reaction to an unbearable gap between something one loves and begins to identify with and one's past identity. But it is more than just one single turning point,

as it keeps turning up again and again afterwards. The sharp scrutiny of Naomi's questions – if not expressed in the Beth Din – will be expressed later by others. Sometimes, according to my observation, they will be expressed by people who can't fathom the idea that there is something deeply lovable about Judaism, something worth being passionate about, worth even giving up material things and security for. Even if your life continues to develop after that turning point, even if you become a "normal" Jew in the course of time, wondering why you actually do what you do or can't do what you want to, seeing no special advantage in your

situation – you will regularly be reminded of that past turning point by sometimes hurtful, mostly thoughtless comments, by curious "personal" questions, or sometimes by the discovery that a certain conversion is not accepted in certain circles. It is as if that one turning point in life was more important than the many years of "normal" Jewish life that followed, and as if you are defined eternally by that one single turning point.

I was recently asked by someone: "Have you ever regretted your 'decision'?" I clearly completely surprised the questioner with my spontaneous, honest,

simple, short, decisive reply: "Yes." But I don't regard this critical self-reflection, or the repetitive inquiries, as negative, as they actually draw me regularly back to the original reasons why I am Jewish. I wonder if people who are born Jewish have similar regular self-reflections, because in fact, nobody *has* to accept Torah, nobody *has* to live a Jewish life. In these days and times everybody is completely free to choose the lifestyle he or she wants. Each new day bears the complete freedom to become a turning point. So may I ask a very "personal" question: Why do you stay Jewish? ■

¹ KNMS follows the general Ashkenazi tradition. There are other customs: Yemenites read it in the afternoon, while in the Sephardic and Italian traditions the book is divided: 1:1-3:8 are read on the first day, 3:8-4:22 on the second day, both in the afternoon.

² According to Jewish tradition Elimelech was very wealthy and powerful. See Rashi and Midrash Ruth Rabba.

³ RuthR 5:11; Rashi on 1:22. The fourteenth-century Spanish liturgical scholar Abudraham mentions this as one of two reasons why Ruth is read on Shavuot.

⁴ There are other reasons for the link between Ruth and Shavuot. The Hebrew letters of "Ruth" add up to 606, and the addition of the seven Noachide commandments brings this to 613 – the total number of commandments in the Torah. And often one hears that we read Ruth on Shavuot because it contains the genealogy of King David, who was born and died on Shavuot.

