

How is a Moabite Accepted: Through a Vow, a Legal Loophole, Reinterpretation of the Law, or Divine Benevolence?

Deuteronomy. 23:4

“No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aramnaharaim, to curse you. — But the Lord your God refused to heed Balaam; instead, the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, for the Lord your God loves you. — You shall never concern yourself with their welfare or benefit as long as you live.”

I. A Legal Loophole to Legitimize a Kingship

Midrash Rabbah Ruth, Chapter IV

“... in [Boaz's] day the new law was enacted: ‘Ammonite but not Ammonitess, Moabite but not Moabitess.’”

“[W]hen Saul saw the head of the Philistine [Goliath] he began to ask concerning David, ‘Is he a son of Perez, a king? Is he a descendant of Zarah, a judge?’ And Doeg, the Edomite, was there, at that time, and he said to him, ‘Even if he is a descendent of Perez, is he not of impure descent? Is he not a descendant of Ruth, the Moabitess?’ But Abner said to him, ‘But has not the law been made, “Ammonite but not Ammonitess, Moabite, but not Moabitess”?’ . . . And Saul said to him, ‘Go and enquire regarding that law you have forgotten from Samuel and his Court.’ When he came to Samuel and his Court, [Samuel] said to him . . . ‘*All glorious is the king's daughter within the palace* (Psalms, XLV, 14). It is not for a woman to go out and bring food, but only for a man. *And because they hired against thee Balaam* (Deuteronomy, XXIII, 5). A man hires, but not a woman.’ (R. Eliezer)

II. A Kind Reinterpretation of the Law

Four mitzvot through which Naomi rejoins the Jewish community after her long absence:

1. *Matanot ani'im*, agricultural gifts to the poor, such as permission to glean
2. *Geula*, the redemption of property from a kinsman
3. *Yibbum*, levirate marriage
4. Acceptance of the convert as part of Israel

“We notice here the beginning of the intertwining of the double plot: Ruth takes Naomi’s place, so that Naomi need not do the hard work. Thus Ruth becomes Naomi’s substitute, even though Jewish law technically does not apply to Moabites” (Susanne Klingenstein).

“We don’t know what gives Boaz the authority to attach such a condition. He clearly has the law of levirate marriage in mind, but as we have seen, it is applicable neither to Naomi (who was left with children) nor to Ruth (who is from Moab). Or has Ruth now succeeded to Naomi’s rights? Is she Naomi’s substitute only when it comes to collecting of *matanot ani'im*? Or can she establish a claim to Naomi’s other rights as well? Is she can, it would mean she is Jewish” (Klingenstein).

“For Boaz, Jewish law applies to Ruth . . . He seems to know that laws based on human flaws, on hostility and misjudgment, can change as human beings amend their ways . . . Boaz, we believe, has insight into Ruth’s extraordinary qualities as a mensch and the foresight to recognize that a novel interpretation of the law (*chidush be-halakha*) is possible. In fact, when he accepts Ruth as his wife, Boaz himself implements the partial amendment of Deuteronomy 23:3” (Klingenstein).

“Samuel recognized that there could be no better ancestry and political endowment for Israel’s favorite king than the marriage of ideational commitment [Ruth] and just government [Boaz]” (Klingenstein).

III. Ruth , not Boaz, sets the above laws into motion

“Ruth has achieved two purposes: she has established herself as a relative of Boaz, one who deserves preferential treatment in the field, and she has made Boaz acknowledge the fact that he knows much more about Naomi and Ruth than his actions so far have shown” (Nehama Aschkenazy).

“I am your handmaid Ruth. Spread your robe over your handmaid for you are a redeeming kinsman” (Ruth, 3:9).

“By calling Boaz a redeemer, whose responsibility it would be to marry her, Ruth is technically wrong. But she makes Boaz understand the spirit of the law, rather than simply its narrow meaning. She makes him realize that the law itself does not always cover all the cases confronted in real life. . . [B]y naming Boaz a ‘redeemer,’ Ruth makes him one” (Aschkenazy).

IV. People and G!d acting together bring about our happy ending

“If humans do *chesed*, then G!d mirrors them. God sometimes does the irrational, the unexpected. But humans set up what Peter Berger, in his book *Rumour of Angels*, calls “signals of transcendence.” The phrase refers to certain ordinary human gestures which suggest transcendent order if one pays attention to them . . . When people find the *chayil*, the courage, to do this, then ‘G!d will do *chesed*’ with them; G!d will come and break the patterns that He Himself, apparently, has structured the world on” (Avivah Zornberg. 78-80).

Naso @ the DC Beit Midrash

Monday, May 24, 2004; 4 Sivan 5764

Welcome to the DC Beit Midrash!

The *Chumash* (Five Books of Moses) is divided into 54 portions, which Jews read sequentially each week in services. This Shabbat, we will be reading *Parashat Naso* from the book of *Bemidbar* (Numbers).

Tonight, a member of our community will lead us in a text-study on the book of Ruth, traditionally read on the upcoming holiday of *Shavuot*. The voices of both past and contemporary interpreters will inform our discussion.

Below you will find a summary of this week's *Torah* portion, along with brief biographies of the commentators cited. The presentation will be followed by *chavruta* (paired) study on a subject of your choice.

This week's parsha (Torah portion): Naso, Bemidbar (Numbers), 4:21-7:89

Parshat Naso (Numbers 4:21-7:89) continues where last week's portion left off, delineating the responsibilities and tasks of the three Levite families - Gershon and Merari this week, Kehat last week - and counting all of the Levites who were of age to serve in the Mishkan (Tabernacle). After God commands Moses to purify the camp so that it will be a worthy home for the Divine presence, the Torah describes the process to be carried out with a Sotah, a wife who was warned by her husband not to seclude herself with another man and was subsequently found doing so, providing good reason to suspect her of adultery. She is taken to the Kohen (priest) in the Temple and, if she doesn't admit her guilt, given sacred bitter waters to drink which will lead to one of two results: The waters will either establish her innocence, removing any doubt from her husband's mind by blessing her with children, or the waters will prove her guilt through a miraculous, grotesque death. The Torah then describes the laws of the Nazir, a person who has voluntarily accepted upon himself to adopt a special state of holiness, usually for thirty days, by abstaining from eating or drinking any grape products, from taking a haircut, and from becoming contaminated through contact with a corpse. After relating the blessings by which the Kohanim (priests) will bless the people, the Torah portion concludes with a lengthy listing of the offerings brought by each of the twelve tribal leaders during the dedication of the Mishkan for regular use. Each prince makes a communal gift to help transport the Mishkan, as well as donating gifts of gold, silver, animal, and meal offerings.

(<http://www.tfdixie.com/parshat/naso/000.htm>)

This week's sources:

The Book of Ruth

Traditionally read on the second day of Shavuot, Ruth opens with the account of the migration of a wealthy man named Elimelech, along with his wife Naomi and their two sons, from the land of Israel to the immoral society of Moav. He was leaving the Holy Land to escape the pressures of the poverty-stricken Jewish people who were constantly asking him for handouts. Soon after their arrival, Elimelech dies and the two sons marry royal Moavite princesses -- one named Orpah and the other named Ruth. After a short time, the two sons also die. Having lost both her husband and her sons, the righteous Naomi decides to return to her homeland and bids farewell to her daughters-in-law. Orpah, at first refusing to abandon her mother-in-law, decides to stay in Moav. Ruth, on the other hand, cleaves to her faith and ascends to Israel with Naomi, willing to encounter the harsh poverty which awaited them, and stating the immortal lines, "Your people are my people, and your God is my God" (Ruth 1:16). Poor and hungry, Ruth gathers bundles of wheat that have been dropped by the reapers in the vast fields of Boaz, a prominent Jewish judge. Eventually, Boaz takes notice of Ruth's righteousness and asks her for her hand in marriage. Their great-grandson is King David.

(<http://www.tfdixie.com/holidays/shavuot/000.htm>)

(over)

Susanne Klingenstein

Susanne Klingenstein was born in Germany in 1959. Her mother was a Swiss-born Catholic, her father a German Jew. From 1973 to 1982, she received an education in centrally Jewish text in Mannheim's Jewish community. She received her Ph.D. in American studies from the University of Heidelberg in 1990 and converted to Judaism in the same year. She now lives in Boston and is an assistant professor in the program of writing and humanistic studies at MIT. Her publications include essays on American Holocaust literature and American Jewish history, and the book *Jews in the American Academy, 1900-1940: The Dynamic of Intellectual Assimilation*.

Nehama Aschkenazy

Dr. Nehama Aschkenazy is director of the program in Judaic studies and Middle Eastern affairs at the University of Connecticut at Stamford, where she also teaches English literature and women's studies. Her book *Eve's Journey: Feminine Images in Hebraic Literary Tradition* won the 1988 Present Tense Literary Award for "best book in the category of religious thought."

Avivah Zornberg

Avivah Zornberg received an education in traditional Jewish texts from her father, Rabbi Doctor Zeev Gottlieb, and at the Gateshead Seminary in England. She holds a doctorate in English literature from Cambridge University. She lives in Jerusalem where she teaches shiurim (Torah classes) in institutions of higher Jewish learning.

This week's teacher:

Laura Simpson

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Laura Simpson is thrilled to be teaching DC Beit Midrash for the first time after converting to Judaism in March. When not studying Torah, she reads Russian newspapers for a living, and she swing dances and tutors fourth graders for fun. She can be reached at lks2002@highsteam.net.

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