

Dear Chavraya,

Yesterday, on the second day of Shavuous, we chanted the Book of Ruth, its melody haunting, its meaning and message poignant and powerful. Set in the agrarian context of ancient Israel, the book speaks to the agricultural dimension of Shavuous. The name of the book, after its central character, speaks to the other dimension of Shavuous, Israel's standing at Sinai to receive Torah. As *Z'man Matan Torateinu/the Season of the Giving of Our Torah*, Shavuous draws its inspiration from Ruth, the paradigmatic "Jew by Choice." The soul-stirring words that Ruth speaks to her mother-in-law Naomi move me to tears, the depth of their commitment meant for all of us if we would stand at Sinai: *Do not urge me to leave you, to return from following you, for wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. So may God do to me and so may God continue, if anything but death separate me and you.*

The great-grandmother of King David, Ruth's destiny is our destiny and her hope is our hope. According to Jewish tradition, the *Moshiach* / Messiah, will come from the line of David, arriving once we have made the world ready, then ushering in an era of peace. Ruth represents the Jewish hope for a world redeemed. In the midst of our chanting yesterday, I found myself wondering, what if the story of Ruth were to unfold today in Israel, what would become of that hope? And if without a time warp, then from her ancient context and in the telling of her tale, what becomes of her message today?

Ruth, a woman and a convert, represents in one person the violence being perpetrated against women and converts by religious zealots in Israel, often abetted by government acquiescence and moral blindness. Of women who through their own faith are worthy heirs to Ruth's commitment, one is arrested at the Kotel for wearing a talis and sheltering a Torah scroll beneath it. Another is called in for questioning by the police and threatened with arrest as the leader of "Women of the Wall." Another is grabbed and kicked by an extremist incensed at the tell tale signs of tefilin having been wrapped upon her arm, a binding of herself to God and her people. A young woman who made aliya with love and commitment decides to leave Israel when her conversion is not recognized prior to her marriage. Through consultation with the Israeli chief rabbinate, a rabbi in Spain refuses to allow bereaved parents to bury their child in the Jewish cemetery because the mother's conversion is called into question. Thousands of conversions facilitated with official recognition by a progressive Orthodox rabbi are called into question. The "Rotem" bill would entrench conversions in the chief rabbinate. On certain public bus routes women are expected to sit at the back of the bus, "uppity" ones intimidated and threatened.

I cry for the insult and the shame done to our people and to God, for the degradation of the Sinai legacy, where all stood as one and answered with one voice. In this week when Ruth's voice is heard among us, how shall we respond? In this week of *Parashat Naso*, we read with compelling irony *parashat azharat gerim/a chapter of warning concerning (the mistreatment of) converts*. A warning against robbing the convert who is without Jewish heir or redeemer to come to her or his aid, how do we respond to the defrauding of converts whose pure faith

and sincere acts of commitment are demeaned and denied? Beyond the proximity of sacred readings this week, the Book of Ruth and *Parashat Naso* are joined through this warning, Ruth's words to Boaz cited in commentary: *Ki go'el attah/for you are near kin/a redeemer*. In midrash forgotten by the zealots, of the convert, who like Ruth comes with willing heart and love for God, so God loves them / *l'fichach HaKadosh Baruch Hu ohavam*, and therefore, the rabbis said so long ago: *so do we need to be grateful to the convert/kach anu tz'richin l'hachazik tovah lager, who leaves family and people and comes to us/u'va lo etzleyanu*.

May we merit the faith of Ruth, which someday will bring through her seed the flowering of peace in the world; and may we merit the faith of her daughters and sons whose presence is a blessing in their lodging among us; and may we merit the faith of her daughters, both born of our people and choosing our people, whose courageous love will bind us together as t'fillin upon the arm and protect us from jeers and taunts as a protective tallis enveloping a Torah, held like a baby to the breast.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor