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Upcoming Events:

June 6-June 20 Rabbi Dr. Yaakov Elman at the JCC in NYC on "Modern Orthodoxy—the Fourth Century Version" 7:00-8:15 pm

June 6-June 13 Dr. Lawrence Schiffman at the JCC in NYC on "A Brief History of Heresy" 8:30-9:45 pm

June 18 Edah mini-conference at the JCC

Sinai, Megillat Ruth and the Torah of Hesed

By Eugene Korn

The Bible describes *Chag ha-Shavu'ot* as a harvest festival, but the Talmud and rabbinic tradition overlaid the holiday with a theological motif: the celebration of Divine Revelation, when the Jewish People stood at Sinai and accepted the Torah, God and *mitsvot*. In philosophical terms, Revelation is movement from "negative freedom"—liberation from slavery—to "positive freedom"—acceptance of religious and moral values. Hence the beautiful tradition developed of studying Torah all *Shavu'ot* night, so every Jew could re-experience the miraculous human-divine encounter at Sinai.

Our Sages also prescribed that we read *Megillat Ruth* on *Shavu'ot*. Its story *Ruth* is short; its plot elegant. There are secondary dimensions, such as the connection to *Eretz Yisrael*, conversion to Judaism, Naomi's spiritual renewal, and Ruth's role in shaping the Jewish people. But the dominant theme is neither Zionist, nor halakhic, nor feminist. At the center of the story stands *Hesed* (lovingkindness) and its power in history. The *midrash* describes the story as "*Megillah sh'kula hesed*"—a scroll that is entirely *Hesed*.

The poignant tale begins in Bethlehem (literally, "a house of sustenance") circa 1200 BCE when a famine hits and Elimelech leaves his home. *Midrash Rabbah* indicates that the wealthy Elimelech fled because he did not want to support his neighbors in the time of need. He takes his wife, Naomi, and two sons with him to live with Moabites—enemies of the Jews known for their stinginess (Deut. 23). He finds the good life there, decides to stay and his sons marry Moabite women. After some years, disaster strikes: Elimelech and his sons die, widowing Naomi and her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. The women find themselves abandoned and poverty-stricken in a hostile country.

Naomi loses all hope and decides to return home—perhaps to die. She implores her daughters-in-law not to accompany her, for Moabite women will have no future with her in Jewish Bethlehem. Orpah accepts the logic of Naomi's plea, but Ruth resists. In a gesture of breathtaking kindness, Ruth pledges absolute devotion to Naomi: "*Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you stay I will stay. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God*" (1:16). So the two widows return to Bethlehem where Naomi instructs the residents to call her Mara ('bitterness') rather than her true name, which means 'pleasantness.' Crushed and embittered, Naomi has lost faith in the future.

It is harvest season and Ruth sets out to provide for Naomi by gleaning the fields, in accordance with the biblical *mitzvah* requiring land owners to leave some crops for the poor—a biblical welfare system. Ruth chances on the fields of Boaz, the richest land-baron in the area. When Boaz learns Ruth's identity, he pleads with her to stay on his fields and take whatever she needs. He orders his workers to protect her and treat her generously, as one of the family. "Why are you so kind to single me out when I am only a foreigner?" asks Ruth" (2:10). Replies Boaz, "*I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after your husband's death: how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before.*" Boaz stands in awe of Ruth's love and

selflessness. He is honored in the presence of this indigent, yet magnanimous, stranger!

Boaz gives Ruth enough barley to sustain the women for five full days—well beyond the *mitzvah* requirement for one day's gleaning. When Ruth returns and describes Boaz' kindness to her mother-in-law, hope and thankfulness start to penetrate Naomi's bitter spirit: "*Blessed be he to the Lord who has not withheld his Hesed to the living or the dead*"(2:20). Naomi hopes that her relative Boaz will redeem (buy back) the family plot, which had been sold as a result of poverty. Dare she also hope that he will marry Ruth to preserve the family name and protect the two widows—two other *mitzvot* of the Torah?

The harvest season passes, and Boaz has maintained his generous—but formal—posture toward Ruth. Naomi takes the initiative, instructing Ruth to act boldly: "Bathe, cover yourself with oils, dress up and go to the threshing floor tonight...When Boaz is asleep, uncover his feet and lie down next to him." After Ruth follows her mother-in-law's instructions, Boaz awakens and is startled to find a woman lying near him: "*Who are you?*" "*I am your handmaid Ruth. Spread your robe over your handmaid, for you are a redeeming kinsman*" (3:9). Boaz, an old man of eighty years, correctly interprets Ruth's gesture as a request for marriage and responds, "*This recent act of Hesed is greater than your first, for you have not turned to younger men, rich or poor*" (3:10).

How ironic, yet true: The wealthy and powerful Boaz also needs human kindness! (Evidently Boaz was a successful entrepreneur, but his personal life was in shambles. How many rich people suffer loneliness? How many CEO's are divorced?) The *megillah* is telling us that every person, whether rich or poor, powerful or weak, successful or unfortunate, feels loneliness and insecurity. Every one of us needs *hesed*.

Boaz wants to marry Ruth, but there is an obstacle: Naomi has a closer relative with prior rights to redeem the family plot. Early the next morning Boaz confronts this relative at the town gate: "*Buy the land in the presence of those seated here... But if you refuse to redeem it, tell me, for I am next after you*" (4:4). The relative is eager to own more property, but then Boaz shrewdly adds "You must also acquire the wife of the deceased, Ruth the Moabite." Buying profitable land makes sense, but taking responsibility for the Moabite woman is quite another matter. "*I cannot redeem it lest I destroy my own estate.*" The *megillah* pointedly refuses to identify this selfish kinsman. He is simply called '*Ploni-Almoni*'—the Hebrew equivalent of John Doe. His stinginess stands in marked contrast to Boaz' generosity, and his selfishness disqualifies his name from being recorded among the Jewish people.

Free of impediments, Boaz marries Ruth and assumes responsibility for both women. Out of this loving marriage, Ruth bears a son. Naomi regains full hope when she is told that "*the boy will renew your life and sustain you in old age. He is born to your daughter-in-law who loves you and is better to you than seven sons*" (4:15). Who is this child born to Boaz and Ruth? He is Obed, the grandfather of King David, who begins the messianic lineage. From Ruth's one grand act of *Hesed* emerges the king of the Jewish people; and from King David will emerge the messiah who will bring peace to all humanity.

Why did our sages establish that we hear *Megillat Ruth* on *Shavu'ot*? According to the Talmud (*Sotah* 14a), "*The Torah begins with an act of hesed and ends with an act of Hesed.*" In other words, the entire Torah is *hesed*. The laws of the Torah lay out a blueprint for a life of kindness; *Megillat Ruth* poetically dramatizes that life. Maimonides defined *Hesed* as *haflagah* (excess), i.e., what overflows naturally and is beyond what is required. By instructing us to read both the Ten Commandments and *Megillat Ruth* on *Shavu'ot*, the sages are teaching us that law alone is not sufficient for the ideal Torah life. Legal compliance must be supplemented with voluntary, free-flowing kindness.

Jews have a widespread custom to eat dairy foods on *Shavu'ot*. Both Shakespeare and the 19th century Hasidic master, R. Tsvi Elimelech of Dynow ("Benei Yissaschar"), knew that a mother's milk is a universal symbol of kindness. The Rabbi taught that we eat dairy to remind ourselves of the importance of *Hesed* in living a life of Torah.

The Torah describes God as the role model for acts of *Hesed*: The Holy One, Himself, clothes the naked (Adam and Eve), visits the sick (Abraham), comforts those in mourning (Isaac), and buries the dead (Moses). Ten centuries later,

Maimonides taught that the most profound reason the Torah mentions God's merciful attributes is to teach us to emulate divine kindness. *Megillat Ruth* is the most human of biblical stories; its focus is personal *hesed*. Yet beneath the surface is the interplay of human and divine kindness. The entire story is made possible by Ruth's magnificent gesture toward Naomi. God responds by setting up Ruth's 'accidental' meeting of Boaz. All would end there but for Boaz' generosity toward Ruth. God then reacts by giving Ruth a son, the ancestor of King David and the messiah—the redeemer of the Jewish people and all humanity. As the *midrash* explains, "Ruth did her part, Boaz did his part, whereupon God said, "I must do My part." Evidently, to merit divine compassion we must act with *hesed* toward each other.

The stage was thus set for messianic history. *Megillat Ruth* tells us that one person's act of *hesed* can have cosmic influence, and that God has an infinite stake in every gesture of human kindness.

Dr. Eugene Korn is Director of Jewish Affairs at the American Jewish Congress, and editor of The Edah Journal.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF SHAVUOT

By Mordecai Beck

It is a peculiarity of Shavuot that it is called not after the day itself but by the process that leads up to it. The Biblical nomenclature "Feast of Weeks" refers to a span of time just gone -- the seven weeks from Passover to the day before Shavuot (Leviticus 23:15, Deuteronomy 16:12). Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev observes that in no other place do we make a blessing over something we have already finished; blessings usually precede the deed. For the mystical Rabbi Levi Yitzhak Shavuot is a sign of God's yearning, not to take His departure from Israel, but to linger in their company as it were for one more day. After having blessed each day of the Sefirat Ha'Omer, He wants to present us with yet a further reason to be together. Since the sages liken Shavuot to a wedding (between God and Israel), it could be said that this period of waiting and counting is the period of pre-nuptial anticipation.

It might further be argued that just as Rosh Hashana is a celebration of the Year (Mishna Rosh Hashana 1:1), and Passover of the months (Exodus 12 :2), so Shavuot celebrates the week. While the former two are 'natural,' flowing from the tempo of the solar and lunar cycles, the latter is an artificial construct, though one that is surprisingly high universal. Attempts during the French Revolution, for example, to make a 'week' of ten days failed abjectly.

The week did not, of course, start at Sinai. The Bible itself opens with a typological 'week' encompassing the creation of the universe (Genesis 1 & 2), suggesting that it was built into the very structure of the cosmos in all its entirety. Moreover, the sages see in "The Sixth Day" of the creation narrative a veiled reference to the sixth day of the month of Sivan when the Torah was to be given. Unlike other days of the creation only the sixth is given a direct object (*Ha-Shishi* in Hebrew) suggesting to the fluid mind of the rabbis that it was already earmarked for something special:

"Said Resh Lakish: that the Holy One Blessed Be He made the creation of the world conditional -- if Israel accepted the Torah it will be sustained, if not then I will return you to chaos and nothingness." (Talmud Shabbat 88a).

The sages thus see the festival of Shavuot as a distant echo of the creation of

the world, and a reminder that the day upon which the Torah was given was woven into the very fabric of the primal cosmos. It is in this sense not an exclusive Torah, but one upon which the entire world depends.

Yet, since no hint of the giving of the Torah on this day appears in the Biblical text, what is so special about a week that it had to have its own celebration? Very possibly, the week is the most human of the time zones that we cross in our daily lives. Months and years are dependant on the stars in their courses; a week is fashioned out of our own labours. In the Biblical context this has an added significance.

The Book of Genesis is full of stories about creation and destruction. A well known midrash talks of the creation and destruction of dozens of worlds before the present one. Even in the Genesis narrative there are examples of destruction or near destruction -- the exile of the First Couple Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, Noah's Flood, the Tower of Babel, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the string of famines that plague the patriarchs.

In Exodus, the Children of Israel could not be further from the paradigmatic Adam and Eve; they are broken in body and spirit. They appear incapable of even desiring release; they no longer believe in the possibility of redemption. According to Rashi only a fifth of them finally make it through the Egyptian night to freedom. (Exodus 13:18). Even when they are taken out of Egypt they are in no state to receive God's holy Torah. They are still in state of inner collapse.

What finally brings them to that elevated state is the process of counting these seven weeks. In doing so, they not only recall the days of creation; they reconstruct them. The Book of Exodus is the book of re-creation, starting from ground up. It shows the lowest people on earth -- slaves -- and demonstrates how even they can reach higher and higher levels of purity and divine insight, but not without preparation.

The seven weeks leading up to the festival is thus like the construction of a building which we are able to enter on completion. Shavuot is the goal of all the efforts made in the seven weeks beforehand. Only when we finish a building do we understand that its whole purpose is the space within it.

Mordechai Beck is Jerusalem-based artist, writer and teacher. His original prints are to be found in MoMA, the Library of Congress, the Universities of Yale, Berkeley, YU, and JTS and in private collections. He is a regular contributor to the London "Jewish Chronicle," "The Guardian," and other professional journals.