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What I Learned from the Book of Ruth

Thoughts on the Festival of Shavuot

In the evening on the first day of June we Jews will celebrate the festival of Shavuot. Synagogues around the world will be filled with flowers, plants, fruits and song as we commemorate what was at first a pilgrimage holiday and what has become the celebration of the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people.

Shavuot, which means "weeks," occurs seven weeks after Pesach. Fifty days to be exact and it was the Jews of Greece who named Shavuot "Pentecoste," a name which persists today for Christians who celebrate a festival at about the same time. For Jews, services include the traditional reading of the Book of Ruth. This reading is as beautiful as the plants and the flowers that decorate our sanctuaries because the Book of Ruth reminds us of the beauty and mystery of love.

As I read the story again this year I was struck by one concept that is so simple, so easy and so uncomplicated that I almost missed it completely. In the Book of Ruth we see just how important it is to give a compliment. How basic to human interaction it is for us to offer words of kindness and gratitude and how this simple act, a mitzvah of the highest order, can lead to something as profound as true love.

The story of Ruth is many things but most of all it is a love story. We read about how an older man, the widower Boaz, was able to persuade the much younger Ruth to marry him. How did this happen? How is it that this young and beautiful woman was willing to marry this old man? How is that this older and wealthy man was willing to risk his reputation by marrying a foreigner? What was it that they saw in each other that made them fall in love and decide to spend their lives together?

In the story we discover that Boaz learns about Ruth from his foreman. It is the supervisor of the fields who informs Boaz of her presence. What happens next? Boaz tells Ruth that she is a hard worker. He gives her a compliment.

This is how it happens. Boaz encounters Ruth and says something like this. "Don't go gleaning anywhere else. Stay here with my servants. Keep your eyes on the field and follow along. I will order my men not to harass you. And, if you get thirsty, go to their jars and drink some their water."

Then Ruth responded to Boaz by bowing low and saying, "Why are you being so good to me even though I am a foreigner? Listen to how Boaz responds. He says, "I have heard of all that you did for your mother-in-law. I have heard how you left your parents and your birthplace and came with her to a land and a people you had never known before. May God reward you for this good deed."

What a kind and loving thing to do. What a nice thing for Boaz to say to a stranger. How decent of him to take the time to note that Ruth is a person of courage and character. Boaz stops what he's doing to let Ruth know that he is impressed.

So Boaz wins Ruth's heart. Not with his good looks and not with his money, but with his compliments. He won her heart by saying kind words of welcome and generosity. He bowled her over, not by telling her how great he is, but by telling her that he is impressed with how good she is.

And so their romance begins and theirs is a story that eventually leads to marriage and to the beginning of the royal line that goes from Ruth and Boaz to David. We Jews know that it is from the House of David that the messiah will finally come to the world.

The lesson is clear. Before we do or say anything else, choosing words of kindness and caring can make all the difference. It seems like a little thing, but we live in a society where sometimes we are suspicious of compliments when we get them. This can make us reluctant to give them. Sometimes we think, "Hmmm... If I give him a compliment, it will go to his head." Or we think, "If I say something nice, she'll wonder what I'm after and what I want from her."

At other times we pooh-pooh a compliment. We we make light of the kind words ("It was nothing... I really didn't do all that much ... etc.") and in doing so we deny our friend or family member the opportunity to do a mitzvah. We react in all these ways when in fact The Book of Ruth teaches us that the power of a compliment is transforming.

Heartfelt words of praise - that's all it took for Boaz to elevate their relationship from the mundane to something really special. This is our challenge as well. To let the words we choose to speak to one another reflect the same spirit of generosity and compassion that we find in Ruth's beautiful story. That same beauty awaits us as well. Chag Sameach.

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