RUTH & NAOMI RELATIONSHIP SHAVUOTH 5780

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CCRJ Tikkun Leil Shavuot

1. The Ruth/Naomi relationship is complicated – to say the least
2. We tend to look for the best and make good examples of biblical relationships, even when they are flawed
    a. Adam & Eve
    b. Abraham & Sarah
    c. Isaac & Rebecca
    d. Jacob, Rachel & Leah
        i. Each was problematic, each had its very human flaws and while we will use them for example, we also tend to deify these relationships, as they come from Torah and we will often excuse behaviour such as
            1. Jealousy
            2. Favoritism
            3. Emotional manipulation
                a. As being excusable given the greater arc of their story lines
3. The same could be said of Ruth and Naomi
    a. In the Hebrew School telling of the story and in particular the verse that we have focussed on this evening, “wherever you go I will go…” this is a mutually loving relationship between two widowed women connected through the death of their son and husband.
    b. Indeed there are admirable elements of the relationship
        i. Namely:
            1. Grief and Sorrow Cannot Stop Love – in fact as is so often the case these devastating events rather than tear us fully apart can often be the bridge that brings people together. The commonality and share experience of mourning brings these two women closer together.
            2. Thanks and Recognition Go a Long Way – Naomi sets this tone, but Ruth reciprocates with thanks, and recognition. We understand the importance of being thankful and recognizing others that make a difference within our life – especially within our relationships. Providing your significant other with gratitude will shows them that you genuinely care and want to make this relationship last forever.
            3. Love Looks Different for Every Couple – Naomi thinks at first that Ruth only loves her for the son/husband she can or did provide, but Ruth’s love for Naomi is not conditional on the husband she

now mourns. She sees in Naomi what Buber saw in the I though relationship, she is a better version of herself when her heart and life is joined with Naomi.

4. BUT – the relationship is also troubling, and that part is too often overlooked for the fairy tale story we have been shown.
    a. In researching this lesson I was enlightened by a 2013 piece written by Deborah Rosenbloom, then director of Jewish Women International – she pointed out themes and power dynamics in this relationship that the Hollywood version overlooks or simply ignores.
        i. She sees in the vulnerability of Ruth in this moment an unhealthy and possibly abusive power dynamic directed by Naomi toward Ruth.
        ii. Looking again at the verse we have focussed on:
            1. "Wherever you go, I shall go, where you live, I will live; your people shall be my people, and your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried" (Ruth 1:16-17).
5. Ruth clearly is choosing not simply to choose Judaism but to merge her entire identity with Naomi. Why?
    a. What is going on with Ruth in this moment that causes her to believe she cannot have her own identity separate from Naomi?
        i. Clearly she is in shock over the death of her husband. Rather than encourage her to nurture her independence and resilience Naomi COULD be seen as exploiting her in a moment of weakness
            1. She places constraints on how Ruth will comport herself around men, in particular demanding modest behaviour in one instance and then when in chapter 3 she is introduced to Boaz, Naomi instructs Ruth to:
                a. "Bathe, anoint yourself, put on clean garments, and lie down at his feet, Ruth is instructed" (Ruth 3:3).
                b. Hadn't she been told she would have to renounce "immodest" sexualized behavior? And yet, without a word, Ruth does as she is bidden. "I will do everything you tell me," she says (3:5).
                    i. That alone should be a red flag
                    ii. Clearly, Ruth is under the spell of the dominant Naomi.
    b. Later Ruth marries Boaz and they have a child, but though the child is born to Ruth, the women of the town claim it is Naomi's
        i. And the women of the town said "there is a son born to Naomi" (4:13). Born to Naomi? The Talmud asks, was it Naomi who bore him? Surely it was Ruth! And the women of the town said to Naomi, "Blessed be the

Lord, who had not left thee this day … and Naomi took the child, and laid it in her bosom, and became nurse unto it" (4:16).

ii. Wait a minute, why isn't Ruth doing that? Did she give up her child to Naomi? Yes. Ruth gave birth to him, but Naomi rears him. Ruth gave up custody of her son!

c. Quoting directly from Rosenbloom:
   i. Isolated from her network, having fully given up her identity, Ruth is offered up to bear a child, and then has the child taken away from her to be raised by another. Ruth is the biological mother, Naomi is the adoptive mother.
      1. Ironically, the Midrash tells us that both Orphah and Ruth come from royal families, perhaps to give the future King David a royal lineage, something which Naomi could not do.
   ii. I wonder when I read the story of Ruth and Naomi about what their relationship was really like?
   iii. I know that in my work in counselling and advising those in potentially abusive relationships they can often be viewed through the lens of power and control, a relationship like this one, far from the Hollywood/Fair Tale Hebrew School version might be suspect, might raise a red flag or two about power dynamics and questions about the underlying reasons for this behavior.
   iv. "Wherever you go, I will go." Its sounds great in theory but if you son or daughter comes home and tells you they have professed this to their boyfriend/girlfriend I would be a little concerned they were not complete control of their own decission. Wouldn't you?