

The Book of Ruth Taught Me that True Friendship Can't Be Explained

Stu Halpern :: 5/12/2021

JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY

“The thought of leaving my friends was decidedly the most painful thought with which I had to contend. The love of them was my tender point, and shook my decision more than all things else.”

So wrote Frederick Douglass in his autobiography, of his considerations before escaping the bondage of slavery. Being apart from friends can be heartbreakingly hard, even amidst the worst of circumstances.

While Douglass had to part with his friends to survive, in the book of Ruth, the opposite decision is made.

The story, read on Shavuot, begins with the widowed Israelite Naomi's farewell to her Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, also widows. Since family ties no longer bind them, Naomi doesn't expect the women to follow her home to her native Bethlehem.

AdChoices

ADVERTISING



Sign up for our newsletter to get must-read New York stories each day

I accept the JTA [Privacy Policy](#).

^ Please accept the JTA Privacy Policy

By submitting the above I agree to the [privacy policy](#) and [terms](#) of use of JTA.org

“Go return, each to your mother’s home,” Naomi instructs Orpah and Ruth. “May the Lord grant you rest, each in the house of a husband.”

Ruth makes the unexpected, even inauspicious, decision to accompany Naomi. By doing so, she offered an immortal lesson in the inexplicable nature of friendship.

The two women, one an elderly bereft widow and another an immigrant, also without a husband, didn’t stand much of a chance in the economic, political and social Wild West of the Ancient Near East that was the period of Judges. Without the protection and sustenance provided by a caring spouse, the women wouldn’t last long. Naomi, of course, knew this: Upon her return to Bethlehem, she instructs its inhabitants not to call her “Pleasant” (“Naomi” in Hebrew), but “Bitter.”

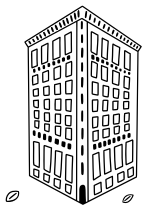
And yet Ruth stood by her decision.

Ruth’s commitment to bind herself to Naomi is never fully explained. Her much-quoted pledge of allegiance does not articulate a reason for the unending devotion: “Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried.”

Even at the end of the book, the reason for that devotion is not articulated, but its fruits are shown. The women of Bethlehem tell a restored Naomi that Ruth, “who loves you, is better than seven sons.” Naomi embraces the child of Ruth and her cousin Boaz, whose line will eventually produce the Messiah. Friendship, the book of Ruth seems to be saying, need not be justified to bestow its salvific effects.

The French philosopher and essayist Michel de Montaigne, reflecting on his friendship with Etienne de la Boétie, mused that, “If a man should importune me to give a reason why I loved him, I find it could no otherwise be expressed, than by making answer: because it was he, because it was I. There is, beyond all that I am able to say, I know not what inexplicable and fated power that brought on this union.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, too, considered true friendship to be inarticulable:



Support the New York Jewish Week

Our nonprofit newsroom depends on readers like you. Make a donation now to support independent Jewish journalism in New York.

[Donate](#)

A friend, therefore, is a sort of paradox in nature. I who alone am, I who see nothing in nature whose existence I can affirm with equal evidence to my own, behold now the semblance of my being, in all its height, variety, and curiosity, reiterated in a foreign form; so that a friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature.

The contemporary public intellectual Nassim Nicholas Taleb, in his “The Bed of Procrustes,” puts it pithily: “If you find any reason why you and someone are friends, you are not friends.”

The coronavirus, preventing our usual interactions with companions and confidants, has reminded us how crucial deep friendships are to our very survival. Our interdependence with friends, despite or perhaps because it is often not explainable, has become clearer than ever.

Our interdependence with friends, despite or perhaps because it is often not explainable, has become clearer than ever.

It is no wonder, then, that the Talmud describes blessings that one should recite upon seeing a friend after an extended separation:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: One who sees his friend after thirty days have passed since last seeing him recites: Blessed . . . Who has given us life, sustained us and brought us to this time. One who sees his friend after twelve months recites: Blessed . . . Who revives the dead” (*Berakhot* 58b)

As Dr. Erica Brown has aptly noted, “True friendship is a work of art, a thing of holiness. Its absence creates a void. Its renewed presence is worthy of prayer.”

Most of us are familiar with “ruthless,” but not its opposite: *ruth*, “compassion for the misery of another,” as Merriam-Webster defines it. After all, it was Ruth who first taught us that deep human connection and compassion, despite its paradoxical, unexplainable character, can be the source of our individual and national redemption.

Rabbi Dr. Stu Halpern is senior advisor to the provost, and senior program officer of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought, at Yeshiva University. He is the editor of [“Gleanings: Reflections on Ruth”](#) (Maggid Books).

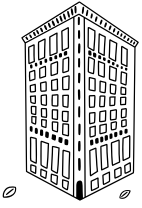
Candlelighting, Readings

Friday, May 14, 2021

Sivan 3, 5781

Light Candles at 7:48 pm

Saturday, May 15,
Sivan 4



Support the New York Jewish Week

Our nonprofit newsroom depends on readers like you. Make a donation now to support independent Jewish journalism in New York.

[Donate](#)

Torah Reading: Bamidbar: Numbers 1:1 – 4:20

Haftarah:Hosea 2:1-22

Shabbat Ends 8:54 pm

Shavuot

Sunday, May 16

Sivan 5

Light holiday candles at 7:49 pm

Monday, May 17

Sivan 6

Light holiday candles after 8:55 pm

Tuesday, May 18

Sivan 7

Holiday ends 8:56 pm