



ICJW Online Study Program

“The Jewish Festivals”

Community Issues in The Book of Ruth

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At different times in our lives, our relationship to our community changes. Sometimes social or economic circumstances beyond our control make us regard our community differently. Sometimes it's because of our personal circumstances.

The Book of Ruth asks us to examine the many ways we relate to our community, and our community relates to us. Let's think about all those different ways, and what we can learn about our own lives from them.

1. “There was a famine in the land, and a man went out from Bethlehem-Judah to reside in the fields of Moab, he, his wife, and his two sons.” (Ruth 1:1).

The issue: On the one hand, the man was trying to protect his family – after all there was a famine, and isn't his first responsibility making sure his family had enough to eat? On the other hand, our ancient rabbis tell us that this man was a leader of his community, and he considered only the needs of his own family, rather than the needs of the whole community, at a time when the community really needed his leadership. Do you think he was right or wrong to leave Bethlehem? Why? Do you have any personal experience you can relate to his dilemma? What would you have done?

2. The man quickly dies – and, after marrying, so do his sons. That leaves his widow Naomi, and her daughter-in-laws Ruth and Orpah. Naomi hears that there is food in Bethlehem again, and heads home in a state of terrible depression – after all, both her husband and her sons are dead. On the road home, she begs her daughters-in-law to return to their own people, the *people* of Moab. At first, they both refuse. When she insists, Orpah kisses her goodbye, and leaves. Ruth unexpectedly says, “Don't ask me to leave you. Where you go, I go. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.”

The issue: Although Orpah loves her mother-in-law, she feels primary loyalty to the community she knows. Ruth, on the other hand, chooses to leave everything she has ever known and go to live with a people, and accept a faith, entirely new to her. Imagine yourself on that road. Which way would you turn – forward to Bethlehem/Judah, or back home? Can you imagine yourself choosing to leave your personal past and your familiar community behind, in order to join a new community, or go to a new country, or become a part of the Jewish people?

3. Once they arrive in Bethlehem, Ruth realizes she must find food for Naomi and herself. She goes to glean barley in the fields of the landowner Boaz, who is Naomi's relative. She can go there because the Torah has a law called *peah*: it requires every landowner not to harvest *all* of his fields – he must leave a corner of them for the poor to reap, so that they will not go hungry. Boaz sees her there, falls in love with her, and eventually marries her – and their child becomes the ancestor of King David, who himself is traditionally considered the ancestor of the Messiah. So the laws of *peah* clearly have a very important place in this story.

The issue: most of us don't live on farms today; and if we do, the chances are we don't honor laws like those of peah. Do our communities have any provision or law parallel to peah today? What do we consider our obligation to the poor in our societies? Why do you think the Torah considers it so important that there's an actual law insisting on it? Should making provision for the poor be voluntary or required? If you think it should be required, how would you require it? If you think it should be voluntary, what do you do when no one's volunteering?