

FUCHSBERG JERUSALEM CENTER CONSERVATIVE YESHIVA

TORAH SPARKS

Shavuot, Shabbat Shavuot | Nasso (Israel)

May 26-27, 2023 | 7 Sivan 5783

First Day Shavuot: Exodus 19:1-23; Numbers 28:26-31;

Haftorah: Ezekiel 1:1-28; 3:12

Second Day Shavuot (outside of Israel): Deuteronomy 14:22-16:17;

Numbers 28:26-31; Haftorah: Habakkuk 3:1-19

Shabbat (Israel): Numbers 4:1-7:89; Haftorah Judges 13:2-25

Ruth and Rebecca

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt

Parashah

On Shavuot, we read the short, seemingly simple tale of Ruth. There are multiple reasons for this - it happens during the harvest, it tells a story of acceptance of Torah, it emphasizes *hesed*. It's a really good story with a happy ending. It points us toward King David. But what most fascinated me is that the four short chapters of Megillat Ruth seem to contain just about every other biblical story within them. The characters and stories of the rest of the Tanakh are alluded to and sometimes even retold within Megillat Ruth. This recasting in the Megillah offers a new and distinctive spin on the familiar tales. We read

echoes of well-known stories retold such that the hero is now a non-Israelite woman.

The stories of Genesis feature prominently in Ruth. We can find Abraham's journey from Canaan, Lot's daughters, the constant famines necessitating journeys, and Jacob's name change without looking too hard. The story of Tamar and Judah and the importance of levirate marriage is central to the way Megillat Ruth is told. These retellings add new perspectives to the original stories. I find the most thrilling retelling to be that of the betrothal of Rebecca.

The story of Rebecca's betrothal is told in Genesis 24 from the point of view of Abraham's servant. The chapter has the dubious honor of being the longest chapter in Genesis, largely because the story is repeated so many times, with the servant relating the tale of his journey in slightly different ways to various different audiences. Rebecca herself appears only briefly. However, iconically, she makes the choice to leave behind her homeland and her family to go with the servant back to the servant's land in order to marry a man she does not know there and become a mother of the Israelite people. Likewise, Ruth chooses to leave behind Moab and her mother's house in order to return with Naomi to her homeland where she will marry Boaz and become a foremother of King David. As noted by biblical scholar Yoni Grossman, the language used in Ruth mirrors the language of the Rebecca story - we read of mothers' houses and bless God for not withholding.

The power of Ruth recasting Rebecca's story is that we get more of Ruth's perspective than we had of Rebecca's. Rebecca's opening lines to the servant seem to be prewritten for her by God, scripted

according to the servant's test that she must offer water also to his camels. We do not know what motivates her or how she feels. Moreover, the marriage is negotiated almost entirely in her absence. It is only after days of feasting and plotting that Rebecca is brought back into the story to be consulted. She is asked, "Will you go with this man?" and she replies, in one word, "I will go."

The Ruth story radically expands our access to the woman's perspective. Ruth explains her decision to go with Naomi at length, "Do not entreat me to forsake you, to turn back from you. For wherever you go, I will go. And wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people is my people, and your god is my god. Wherever you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. So may the LORD do to me or even more, for only death will part you and me." Ruth's words help us to understand the enormity of Rebecca's decision, the near craziness of putting one's life in someone else's hands to follow them to a foreign place. Ruth helps us to understand both her decision and Rebecca's decision as on par with Abraham's original decision to answer the call to leave behind everything he knew to come to a new land. She helps us to understand our own decision to do the same on Shavuot, to leave Egypt fully behind to come to a new land and tie our fate to it.

However, Ruth does not leave her fate in God's hands. Much like Rebecca, Ruth arranges circumstances so that she will succeed. She, like Rebecca, is a stranger in a strange land, and yet both of them determine their own destinies. Rebecca consults with God when pregnancy is difficult and then becomes an agent to ensure that God's will is carried out. Ruth in her determination to keep herself and her mother-in-law alive and well seems to figure out the nuances of biblical law even better than the Torah wrote them in order to manage the

situation to her benefit and the benefit of the community. She and Rebecca serve as powerful calls to action for all of us. Of course, this call comes from understanding Ruth in light of Rebecca. This Shavuot, I encourage you to listen for the rest of the Torah as you hear the Megillah read and see what Ruth can teach you.

What I Might Have Seen at Sinai

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

Haftarah

Would you have liked to be at the moment of revelation at Mount Sinai? The Torah tells us that we got to Mount Sinai at the beginning of the third month. In a later development, the rabbis attached celebrating the event to the holiday of Shavuot and hence for Shavuot Torah reading we read of the revelation at Sinai.

While we commemorate the event by reading about it, reading is very different from experiencing. A written record helps in passing on a narrative for generations, it does not enable the reader or listener to step into the experience with all the senses.

Narrators compensate for such deficiencies by describing sound, smell, and feel. The Torah is rarely that obliging. Nonetheless, we seek to experience the awe of the event that is sometimes likened to our national wedding day. The haftarah from Ezekiel chapter 1 steps into this void.

In the haftarah Ezekiel describes his overwhelming experience of receiving prophecy and seeing the Heavenly Host. He spends about 25 verses explaining what he sees, to no avail. Reading his account, we are left with the clear sense that we understand nothing of what he saw. Ezekiel describes fantastic creatures whose identity is impossible to discern. Their practical purpose is no clearer. Anyone who has had the experience of describing something for which they had no context might sympathize with Ezekiel. He lacks the vocabulary to transmit the unbelievable sight in front of him. No terms exist to describe the

wonders of Heaven. We can sense the frustration of the prophet when we listen to part of his description:

*(13)And the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was **like** burning coals of fire, **like** the appearance of torches... (16)The appearance of the wheels and their workings was **like** the color of beryl, and all four had the same likeness. The appearance of their workings was, **as it were**, a wheel in the middle of a wheel. (Ez. 1:13-16)*

The repeated use of the word “like” indicates a need to describe a thing by something else. It suggests that while Ezekiel internalizes the awe-inspiring event that he is living through, he is not able to formulate a description of his senses. That, too, is a portrayal of sorts.

After reading Ezekiel’s description the reader is no wiser about what Ezekiel saw but appreciates the tremendous impact this experience had on the person who went through it. We do not feel the vibrations, the smells, the physical environment of revelation, but we have some sense of the deep awe the experience created. Ezekiel gave us a window into an event that otherwise is a mere narrative. Now we are left to imagine what it would have been like when multiplied by the many people who stood at the foot of the mountain as the earth shook, the lightning struck, the thunderstorm roared, and a voice was seen and heard: “I am the LORD your God.” (Ex. 20:2)

Competitive Eating, Hungry Goldfish, and the Paschal Lamb

Ilana Kurshan

Adventures in Mishnah with My Kids

Pesachim 8:3,7

We are learning the eighth chapter of tractate Pesachim, which is all about the eating of the Paschal sacrifice. The sacrifice is slaughtered for a pre-determined group of people who will all partake of that sacrifice, divide it among themselves and eat it together. The Mishnah discusses the various laws that govern this group of people, known as a Chavurah. What kind of people may constitute a Chavurah? When do people have to give their consent in order to be included in the Chavurah, and when is it assumed that they are automatically included? When is it too late to add more people to a Chavurah?

The third mishnah in the chapter considers the case of a man who announces that he will slaughter the Paschal sacrifice for whichever of his kids arrives in Jerusalem first. Presumably the family was traveling to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festival, and the kids were having trouble making the long trek. “Are we there yet? Are we there yet?” I can just hear them asking, dragging their sacks behind them. And then the father has an idea for how to hurry his kids along. He tells them, “If you get there first, I’ll slaughter the sacrifice in your honor!” And so the kids race ahead. The Mishnah rules that whichever kid sticks “his head and the majority of his body” into Jerusalem first is considered the winner. Matan enjoys imagining this scenario. “It’s sort of like a race, but instead of wearing the chip in your shoe, you wear it in your hat,” he tells me, “because even if you cross the finish line first, it doesn’t

count until you stick your head in.” The Talmud (Pesachim 89a) tells the story of a family in which all the girls ran ahead and made it in first, while their brothers trudged lazily behind. Of course, Matan is convinced that would never happen in our family – he’s much faster than his sisters, he insists.

However, even if the girls won, they would still have to share the meat with their siblings, since a father automatically includes all his unmarried children in his Chavurah when he slaughters the Paschal sacrifice. But what happens if a group of people get together and then one of them decides he wants to include more people in the Chavurah, so that they too might partake of the sacrifice? Wouldn’t that mean that everyone would get less meat, which would be unfair to those who originally joined together as a group? The fourth mishnah in the chapter considers such a case. Can one member of the group add others without the approval of all the other members? Or, as Matan put it: If the Chavurah were a Whatsapp group, who would be the admin?

Matan is already thinking about his own Pesach sacrifice guest list. “Let’s say you slaughter a Pesach sacrifice for our family,” he tells me. “You assume that all seven people in our family are going to divide the meat equally. But none of you know that I am actually planning to give part to Turtle and Elizabeth too. Can I divide the meat nine ways instead of seven, even without asking all of you?” Turtle and Elizabeth are Matan’s goldfish, named for the pet he really wanted and for the queen who died the day the fish were purchased from the pet store, respectively. The problem, as I remind Matan, is that a person cannot be included in a Chavurah unless they are capable of eating a certain minimal amount of meat, which the rabbis identified as the equivalent of an olive in volume. “I’ve seen those goldfish pellets you feed them,”

I tell Matan. “No way Turtle and Elizabeth can eat anything the size of an olive.” Matan agrees. Still, if he wanted to share the sacrifice with others, the Mishnah teaches that he would have to subdivide his own portion, rather than demanding that all members of the group re-allocate the rations.

On the one hand, everyone in the Chavurah has to be able to eat at least an olive bulk’s worth of the sacrificial meat. On the other hand, we have to make sure that enough people are included in the Chavurah so that we can reasonably expect them to finish the meat (8:7). The Torah teaches that the Pesach may not be left over until the next morning; anything not eaten on the fourteenth of Nisan must be burned. Rabbi Yehuda therefore teaches that it is forbidden to slaughter a Pesach sacrifice for a single individual; it is extremely unlikely that one person could eat the whole animal. “That’s not true,” says Matan, who insists that he once heard about a man who could eat 72 hot dogs at once. “His name is Joey Chestnut,” said Matan. “He won a hot dog eating contest, and he’s not even fat.” Matan is convinced that Joey Chestnut—who is in fact a real person, as I later verify on Google—could surely eat the whole Paschal lamb himself. Apparently Matan is not alone in this conviction. Rabbi Yossi disagrees with Rabbi Yehuda and teaches in the Mishnah that if a person could in fact eat the whole sacrifice, he could constitute a Chavurah in and of himself. “Maybe Rabbi Yossi could also eat a lot of hot dogs,” Matan speculates.

All this talk about eating has left Matan hungry, and I follow him into the kitchen for a late-night snack. Matan asks if he can have a small piece of the chocolate bar he and his siblings received as a gift for walking the neighbor’s dog. I nod. He opens the silver foil and is

dismayed to discover there are only three squares left. “That’s not fair, everyone was supposed to get four squares, and I didn’t eat any yet. Who ate one of mine?” Each square of chocolate is about the size of an olive in volume. “You can finish them all,” I tell him, because even though it’s late, it’s clear that it would be ill-advised to try to leave over the rest for tomorrow.