

# Try a Little Tenderness: Chesed and the Book of Ruth

Source Sheet by Rabbi Sari Laufer

## Ruth 1:8

(8) And Naomi said unto her two daughters-in-law: 'Go, return each of you to her mother's house; the LORD **deal kindly** with you, as you have dealt with the dead, and with me.

## רות א':ח

(ח) וַתֹּאמֶר נְעָמִי לְשֵׁתַי כְּלִתְיָהּ  
לִכְנָה שִׁבְנָה אִשָּׁה לְבֵית אִמָּה יַעֲשֶׂה  
[יַעֲשֶׂה] יְהוָה עִמָּכֶם חֶסֶד כַּאֲשֶׁר  
עֲשִׂיתֶם עִם־הַמֵּתִים וְעִמָּדִי:

## Ruth 2:20

(20) And Naomi said unto her daughter-in-law: 'Blessed be he of Adonai, who has not left off God's **kindness** to the living and to the dead.' And Naomi said unto her: 'The man is nigh of kin unto us, one of our near kinsmen.'

## רות ב':כ

(כ) וַתֹּאמֶר נְעָמִי לְכַלְתָּה בְּרוּךְ הוּא  
לְיְהוָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָזַב חֶסְדּוֹ  
אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַמֵּתִים וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ  
נְעָמִי קָרוֹב לָנוּ הָאִישׁ מִגְּאֻלָּנוּ הוּא:

## Ruth 3:10

(10) And he said: 'Blessed be you of Adonai, my daughter; you have shown more **kindness** in the end than at the beginning, inasmuch as you did not follow the young men, whether poor or rich.

## רות ג':י

(י) וַיֹּאמֶר בְּרוּכָה אַתְּ לְיְהוָה בְּפִתִּי  
הִיטַבְתְּ חֶסְדְּךָ הָאֲחֵרוֹן מִזֶּה־הָרִאשׁוֹן  
לְבִלְתִּי־לָקֶת אַחֲרֵי הַבְּחוּרִים אִם־יָדַל  
וְאִם־עָשִׁיר:

### Rut Rabba 2:14

(14) "God will deal kindly with you (Ruth 1:8)" . Rabbi Chanina bar Ada says, "Will show (ya'aseh)" is what is written (k'tiv), "as you showed with the dead (ibid)" when you were occupied with their shrouds, "and with me (ibid)" when they renounced their ketubot. Rabbi Zeira says, "This scroll does not have anything in it concerned with impurity or purity nor what is forbidden and what is permitted. So why is it written? To teach us the greatness of the reward for acts of lovingkindness."

### Hosea 6:6

(6) For I desire **mercy**, and not sacrifice, And the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings.

### Psalms 89:3

(3) For I have said: All existence is built upon *hesed*; loving commitment is found even in the heavens.

### Avot D'Rabbi Natan 4:7

How do we know the significance of acts of *hesed*? As the Prophet Hosea said: "For I desire *hesed*, and not sacrifice."

### רות רבה ב':י"ד

(יד) יעשה ה' עמכם חסד ר' חנינא בר אדא אמר: יעשה כתיב. כאשר עשיתם עם המתים שנטפלתם בתכריכיהון. ועמדי שויתרו לה כתובותיהן. אמר רבי זעירא מגילה זו אין בה לא טומאה ולא טהרה, ולא איסור ולא היתר. ולמה נכתבה? ללמדך כמה שכר טוב לגומלי חסדים.

### הושע ו':ו'

(ו) כִּי חָסֵד חָפְצָתִי וְלֹא־זֶבַח וְדַעַת אֱלֹהִים מַעֲלֹת:

### תהילים פ"ט:ג'

(ג) כִּי־אֲמַרְתִּי עֹלָם חָסֵד יִבְנֶה שָׁמַיִם וְתִכַּן אֲמוֹנֶתָהּ בָּהֶם:

### על גמ"ח כיצד הרי הוא אומר

(הושע ו) כי חסד חפצתי ולא זבח. העולם מתחלה לא נברא אלא

The world began only with *hesed*, as it says in Psalms: "All existence is built upon *hesed*; loving commitment is found even in the heavens."

One time it happened that Rabban Yohannan ben Zakkai was leaving Jeruslaem, and Rabbi Joshua was walking after him. He saw the ruins of Solomon's Temple.

Rabbi Joshua said: "Oy! What a devastation for us that the place where Israel atoned for our sins has been destroyed."

Rabbi Yohannan replied: "My son, do not fear. We have another form of atonement that is just as effective."

What is it? Acts of *hesed*.

This is what the verse from Hosea means when it says:

"For I desire *hesed*, and not sacrifice."

#### **Kohelet Rabba 7:4**

Rabbi Yehuda said: anyone who denies the primacy of *hesed*, it is as if they deny the Holy One and all that is good.

בחסד שנאמר (תהלים פט) כי  
אמרתי עולם חסד יבנה שמים תכין  
אמונתך בהם. פעם אחת היה רבן  
יוחנן בן זכאי יוצא מירושלים והיה  
רבי יהושע הולך אחריו וראה בית  
המקדש חרב [אר"י או לנו על זה  
שהוא חרב] מקום שמכפרים בו  
עונותיהם של ישראל. א"ל בני אל  
ירע לך יש לנו כפרה אחת שהיא  
כמותה ואיזה זה גמ"ח שנאמר כי  
חסד חפצתי ולא זבח.

אמר ר' יהודה ללמדך שכל הכופר  
בגמילות חסד כאילו כופר בעיקר

## **Dr. Leila L. Bronner**

*Hesed* is indeed one of the key words controlling the text....

Every character acting in this brief story—from Naomi to Ruth to Boaz to the minor characters—behaves in a manner that demonstrates this heroic concept of some form of *hesed*. The main actors of the story all act in the spirit of *hesed*; some perform ordinary *hesed*, and some—especially Ruth—extraordinary *hesed*. Their exemplary behavior is somewhat reminiscent of that of the patriarchs and matriarchs.

The Ruth narrative resembles the older narratives in language, content, and style (Ruth 3.3-9; cf. Genesis 24.12-14). Ruth, like Abraham—the founder of the nation, the first of the proselytes—leaves the house of her father and mother and goes to join a people who, as far as she knows, will not accept her because of her foreign origins (Midrash Genesis Rabbah 59.9; Talmud, Sukkah 49b). Yet she will not be dissuaded and joins the Israelite nation, with no thought of reward for this act of affiliation, and in this lies her great *hesed*.

The rabbinic sources emphasize the superabundance of *hesed*, its "more-than-enoughness." As Maimonides puts it, the concept of *hesed*:

*"Includes two notions, one of them consisting in the exercise of beneficence toward one who deserves it, but in a greater measure than he deserves it. In most cases, the prophetic books use the word hesed in the sense of practicing beneficence toward one who has no right at all to claim this from you" [Guide for the Perplexed].*

Ruth's mode is the second, to practice benevolence toward people who have no claim on her for it.

*Source Sheet created on Sefaria by Sari Laufer*