

## A Life of Vertical & Horizontal Responsibility: Shavuot During the Coronavirus Pandemic

*Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks | Delivered on 24<sup>th</sup> May 2020*

What I wanted to do with this *shiur* is to talk about the Coronavirus. Because Torah gets very interesting when you relate them to the things that are constantly changing. Now, as the Chief Rabbi has already said, the Coronavirus pandemic has enforced a situation that seems to be exactly the opposite of the situation at Mount Sinai. We have three indications of that in the Torah, pretty explicitly. Number one, the famous line at the beginning of Chapter 19 of Shemot, just before the Giving of the Torah, where it says “*vayichan-sham Yisrael negged hahar.*” (Ex. 19:2). The Torah uses the singular form: “and Israel encamped (in the singular) there opposite the mountain”. The famous words of Chazal, echoed by Rashi “*k'ish echad b'lev echad*”, explain that the singular form of the verb is used because they encamped together as though they were “One person with one mind”. That enormous sense of unity.

The second, a pretty explicit statement of this, is when Moshe Rabbeinu proposes to the people what God is proposing. “*Vaya'anuh chol-ha'am yachdav.*” (Ex. 19:8). “And all the people answered together and said, ‘All that God has said we will do.’” The “*yachad*” (unity) there is explicitly in the verse, in verse eight of this chapter. And then after the revelation, in chapter 24, when Moshe Rabbeinu repeats the terms of the Torah, “*vaya'anuh kol-ha'am kol echad*”. (Ex. 24:3) “All the people answered with one voice.” Now, these are pretty unique statements of unity, and all three of them are about the giving of the Torah. What we have here are three statements of people coming together. The question is, where do we find the opposite of isolation, of tragedy, of bad things happening, with people being left alone? And the answer is that we find this in Megillat Ruth, in the Megillah that we read on Shavuot, of the story of Ruth. Let's just remind ourselves at how that story begins.

It begins with five hammer blows of tragedy. First of all, the first verse tells us, “*Vayehi bimei shfot hashoftim...*” (Ruth 1:1) “And it came to pass, at the time when the Judges judged, that there was a famine in the land.” Now, a famine in those days was pretty much as severe as an epidemic in our time. Because without freezers and fridges and supermarkets, a famine was a life-threatening condition. So, the first hammer blow there is a famine. Secondly, a man from Bet Lechem, together with his wife and two sons, went to live in the country of Moab. Now, here we have a double tragedy. There's a famine, specifically in Bet-Lechem in Israel. Bet-Lechem means the House of Bread. Of all places where you would not wish to have a famine, Bethlehem is the most unlikely.

Then the man journeys, but he does not go the way Avraham went, to Egypt, or to Gerar, he goes to Moab. Moab was Israel's enemy. Here is a family forced out of their own land, out of their own home, to go to the country of their enemies. Then comes the next blow. Elimelech, this man himself, Naomi's husband, dies and she is left a widow. Then comes the fourth blow. Her two sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Moabite women were not exactly welcome in Israel, because the Moabites, as we have said, were Israel's enemies. (Of course, in the end, one of them turns out to be an exceptional human being.) That is the fourth tragedy. And then comes the fifth tragedy, that Machlon and Chilyon, Naomi's two sons, died also. Now you have Naomi left a childless widow and her two daughters-in-law also left as

childless widows. Three childless widows, and you cannot get more vulnerable than that in biblical society because they had absolutely no one to support them.

We then read of how Naomi hears that there's again food available in her own land and she decides to go back. Her two daughters-in-law initially accompany her. She says, "Please, don't. There's nothing for you here. I can't give you any more children. Go back and get married." Of course Orpah does go back. Ruth refuses and goes with her. She then returns to Israel. People of the town, the people she knew not that long ago, come and they look at her and they say, "Can this be Naomi? She has been so shattered by tragedy." The people hardly recognise her. And then she replies, "Don't call me Naomi (i.e. pleasant one), call me Mara, (i.e. bitter one), because God has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord brought me back empty. The Lord has afflicted me. The Almighty has brought misfortune on me." That is point number one. We now have a point of contact with a very tragic episode which left three women exceptionally vulnerable. And one in particular, Naomi, completely isolated, completely devastated.

Then we move to the end of the Megillah. At the end of the Megillah we know what has happened. Boaz, a kinsmen of Naomi, has taken Ruth as a wife, and repurchased the family properties. They now have a child, a son, and all the women of the town come and surround them and say, "Praise be to the Lord who has not left you without a guardian redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel." Everyone is rejoicing with Naomi, who now has a grandchild. Boaz has a wife and a child. Ruth has a husband and a child. The ultimate blessing, the final coup de theatre at the end of the Megillah, is that the child that they have called Oved is the grandfather of David Hamelech, the greatest King of Israel. We have a situation in which in the space of four chapters, our story has moved from isolation and devastation to one of rejoicing, and, indeed, a kind of renewal of life for all concerned.

The second question is: what brings about this change? The answer is very interesting. There is a Midrash Rabbah that says "Amar Rabbi Zeira", "Rabbi Zeira said", "Megillah Zu", "this scroll," "*ein ba lo tuma velo taharah, velo issur velo heiter*." "It contains no laws of any consequence. Not pure, impure, permitted, forbidden." "*Velamar nichtavah?*" "Why was it written?" "*Lelamedechah kamah s'char tov legomli chassidim*" "To teach how great is the reward of those who do acts of kindness." (Rut Rabbah 2:14)

The story of Ruth is the supreme story of kindness in Tanach. The word itself appears three times in the megillah. But most importantly, it is Ruth's kindness in staying with Naomi despite all of Naomi's protestations, and Boaz' kindness in really realising what it would take to redeem this family from tragedy. Those two acts of kindness are the reason why the story that begins in tragedy ends in joy. That is the power of *chesed*, to redeem tragedy and bring joy where there was sadness and hope where there was despair.

Obviously the question that we ask ourselves is why Ruth is read on Shavuot. There's no obvious connection between Ruth and Shavuot. The two standard explanations are that, number one, it has to do with the time of the year. Ruth is set *bimei k'tzir cheitim*, at the time of the wheat harvest. And Shavuot takes place at the time of the wheat harvest. Or, number two, that Ruth became a convert. "Where you go, I go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your God will be my God. Your people will be my people." And the Israelites, as it were, became converts at Mount Sinai because the essence of conversion is *kabbalat hamitzvot*, acceptance of the commands, and that's what the Israelites did at Sinai. Maybe it has to do with time of the year, or maybe it has to do with Ruth's conversion.

However, I want to suggest to a different answer. An answer put forward by none other than Moses Maimonides in The Guide for the Perplexed. The Guide for the Perplexed is the greatest work of Jewish philosophy, and it's a big work. It consists of three books, and it's a very lengthy work. Right at the end, (book three has 54 chapters, and right at the end in chapter 53 of book three) in the penultimate chapter, the Rambam devotes one third of that chapter to defining what is *chessed*, what is loving kindness? The Rambam says *chessed* means doing good for people in a way that they have no claim on you. It's not justice, it's not tzedakah, it's *chessed*. You have no claim, but nonetheless, we do good to somebody that is *chessed*, going beyond anything the law requires.

In chapter 54, we begin to understand why the Rambam has taken all this time to tell us the meaning of *chessed*. In book four, chapter 54, the closing chapter of the Guide, he quotes Jeremiah, who says, "*Koh amar Hashem*", Thus says God, "*Al yithallel chacham bechochmato...*", "Let the wise not boast of his wisdom, nor the strong hero of his strength, or the rich person of his wealth." "*Ki im bezot yithallel hamithallel*". But only boast of this, "haskel veyado'a oti." "Think hard, meditate hard, and know Me." "Ki Ani Hashem." "That I am God." (Jer. 9:22) This is a very Rambam sort of idea, that the highest thing in life is to develop an intellectual understanding of God.

But Jeremiah doesn't stop there. He goes on and says, "*Haskel veyado'a oti, ki Ani Hashem oseh chessed mishpat utzedakah ba'aretz*". "I" says God, "do loving-kindness, justice and righteousness on earth." "*Ki v'eileh chafatzti n'oom Hashem*". Because these are what I desire,' says God." The Rambam says, (to paraphrase), "I may have been giving you the impression that the most important thing in life is to intellectually understand what God is. But actually, the most important thing in life is to do acts of loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness." It is the kind of people we become and the kind of virtues we embody, that are what the Torah are all about. And since Ruth is the Book of *chessed* in Tanach, maybe that is why we read it on Shavuot. Because the Rambam tells us that the whole purpose of Torah culminates in this ability to do acts of loving-kindness to other people. Thus far, the Rambam.

However, I want to suggest something else as well and take it just a little bit further. We know what happened at Mount Sinai. The Israelites made a covenant with God. He would be their God and they would be His people. But at key moments in Tanach, critical moments, we find another phrase altogether. Listen very carefully. Here is Moshe Rabbeinu, here is Moses, speaking in the Book of Devarim. "*Veyadata ki Hashem Elokecha hu haElokim Hakel hane'eman shomer habit ve'hachessed*", "You shall know that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God, who keeps" "*Habit ve'hachessed*," "the covenant and the loving-kindness" (Deut. 7:9). He says it again a few verses later. "*Vehaya eikev tish'me'un et hamishpatim ha'eleh ushmartem ve'asitem otam v'shamar Hashem Elokecha lecha et habit v'et hachessed*". "God will keep the covenant and the loving kindness." (Deut. 7:12). When King Solomon dedicated the Temple, he uttered the following prayer. "*Hashem Elokei Yisrael, ein kemocha Elokim bashamayim mima'al ve'al ha'aretz mitachat...*", "There is no one like you, God, in the heavens above or the earth below." "*shomer habit ve'hachessed*", "keeping the covenant and the loving-kindness" (I Kings 8:23). And likewise, Nehemiah, when he renews the covenant as the people come back from Babylon. He says, "*Hakel hagadol hagibor v'hanora*", "The great, mighty, and awesome God," "*shomer habit ve'hachessed*". "He who keeps the covenant and the loving-kindness." (Neh. 9:32)

That's a really puzzling phrase, “*shomer habrit ve'hachessed*”, the covenant and the loving-kindness. If you look, for instance, at the Jewish Publication Society translation, they just translate ‘covenant’. Because the *chessed* is included in the covenant. If you look at the New International version, which is a very good non-Jewish translation, *habrit ve'hachessed* is translated as, "The covenant of love." But of course it doesn't mean that, it means “covenant and love.” Everyone had a problem in understanding what else God does for the Jewish people other than make a covenant with them on Shavuot, at Mount Sinai. But if you think about it, the answer's really quite simple. A covenant is what sociologists and anthropologists call reciprocal altruism. You do this for me. I will do this for you. "You serve Me," says God, "and I will protect you." Covenant is always reciprocal and neutral. But that is terribly vulnerable, because what happens if we don't keep the covenant? The covenant is then rendered null and void.

The covenant is not enough. And that's what Moses was saying, that's what King Solomon was saying, that is what Nehemiah was saying. God does not just make a covenant with us. He has a relationship of *chessed* with us. An unconditional love, which is translated into deeds of kindness to us. The covenant is conditional, but *chessed* is unconditional. That is exactly what the Rambam meant when it said *chessed* means doing something for somebody who has no claim on us. There's nothing reciprocal.

And maybe ultimately that is what the Book of Ruth is there to show us. The Book of Ruth is the Book of *chessed*. We received a covenant at Mount Sinai, but we also received something much more long-lasting and profound, which is God's unconditional love. And that's what the book is telling us, that God has love for us, the way Ruth had for Naomi and Boaz had for Ruth. Acts of loving-kindness all define our relationship with God. And as the Book of Ruth shows, they should be what define our relationship with one another.

Coming back to where we are in the Coronavirus crisis, the short answer is that just as in the Book of Ruth, tragedy and loneliness and isolation are healed by acts of lovingkindness, so have the isolation of so many of us been healed by acts of loving-kindness, acts of neighbourliness, people being in touch, helping us, getting things for us, phoning us up, connecting us by Zoom, showing that they care about us. Those acts of kindness have humanised and lightened our want. *Chessed* has a redemptive quality, that it transforms tragedy into some form of celebration and despair into some powerful form of hope. Let what Ruth did for Naomi and Boaz did for Ruth be with us in the months ahead, as we try and help those who have been so terribly isolated these last weeks and months. And may we remember that, as well as giving us a covenant at Mount Sinai, God gave us a bond of love that is unbreakable. He will never abandon us, let us never abandon Him.

Chag Sameach, and Shavuot Sameach. Be well.

To watch the video of this shiur which was followed by a shiur from Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, please visit [www.RabbiSacks.org](http://www.RabbiSacks.org).