



Jewish Community Center of Paramus
Congregation Beth Tikvah
304 E. Midland Avenue – Paramus NJ 07652- 201.262.7691

A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

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Shavuot Has an Important Message for Every American

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

I came across an interesting essay earlier this week. A prominent Rabbi from Chicago wrote about the difficulty of finding the right words in the aftermath of the murder of 21 people, including 19 school children in Uvalde, Texas. To his great credit, he found them. But in his column <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/walking-with-god-after-ualde/> he presented two contrasting visions of society based on last week's Torah reading of *Bechukotai*. One vision is of a blessed society, one that is prosperous, peaceful and secure. The other, cursed, chaotic, violent and deadly. How can we maintain our balance, our faith and our optimism when we experience both visions every day?

Allow me share an idea with you which is based on the reading of the Book of Ruth, a Shavuot observance. Please remember that Shavuot starts this Saturday night. There is a common understanding that the Book of Ruth is a paean to the value of conversion. When Naomi and her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah face the prospect of a future as destitute widows in the Land of Moab, Naomi implores her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab, reestablish families and carry on with their lives. Orpah says good-bye. Yet in some of the most stirring rhetoric in the Bible, Ruth tells Naomi that she will return to the Land of Israel with her. *“Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge. You people will be my people and your God my God.”* (Ruth 1:16-17). Ruth remains the model of the righteous convert, and thus the Book of Ruth is the proof of the importance of conversion.

I want to suggest a different explanation of the meaning of *Megillat Ruth*, its significance on Shavuot and why I am talking about it today in the context of several weeks of tragedy in America. Mass murder in Buffalo just 3 weeks ago. Uvalde. Four murdered yesterday in Tulsa Oklahoma. There have been 17 mass shootings in

the U.S. since Uvalde, leaving at least 13 people dead and 70 others injured, according to Gun Violence Archive.

https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting?utm_source=The+Trace+mailing+list&utm_campaign=09b4c4885b-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_09_24_04_06_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_f76c3ff31c-09b4c4885b-112434573

Gun violence is but one of the great issues and challenges before us. Against this backdrop, I want to suggest that Shavuot has an important message for every American right now.

The Book of Ruth begins with tragedy. There is a famine in the land of Israel. People are dying and society is falling apart. Naomi and her husband Elimelech go to Moab, a Biblical enemy of Israel to survive. Then Elimelech dies. Their sons marry local women, Ruth and Orpah and then the sons die and all three are left destitute and alone.

Naomi decides to return to the land of Israel. She makes an honorable and reasonable choice: to allow her daughters-in-law to return to their home and rebuild their lives while she returns to the land of Israel with nothing. Yet Ruth refuses. She tells her mother-in-law she will not leave her for anything. Despite their pain and sadness, they agree to stay together, help each other, and return to Israel. Yet life there is hard. Soon, Ruth goes out to find food for her and Naomi, and is soon surprised by the kindness she is shown by a relative of Naomi's late husband, the honorable and virtuous Boaz. He not only offers her compassion but warns his workers to refrain from bothering her since, ordinarily, a poor widowed foreigner might indeed encounter danger among the locals. When she asks why Boaz is being so good to her, an alien, a widow, Boaz tells her *"I have had a full report for all you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land you were born in and came to a people whom you had never known before. May the Lord reward your work."* (Ruth 2:11-12) Boaz responded to Ruth's difficult plight with respect and kindness that she could not have possibly anticipated.

The point of the Book of Ruth and the real reason we read it on Shavuot, the holiday that celebrates the giving of the Torah, is that against the backdrop of profound loss,

unspeakable evil, and immorality, this is a story of a people acting righteously, even under the most difficult of circumstances, and how those acts of righteousness transform their world. The heroes in the Book of Ruth are ordinary people whose actions are motivated by a real and honest concern for the welfare of others, whether family or strangers. The Book of Ruth is a metaphor for the entire Torah: living responsibly, caring about others, responding to real human needs of all in the community will not only bring rewards—it is the reward. As our Rabbis teach *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*, one mitzvah leads to the performance of another mitzvah (*Avot 4:2*). Such acts of righteousness can change the world and as Ruth teaches, transform the bitterness of today into tomorrow's possibilities.

I write this Shabbat message while thinking of the many families dealing so personally with the impact of violence in our country. I can't know what their future is going to be like. But what 33 years in the Rabbinate has taught me is that simple acts of compassion and righteousness, people doing the right and kind thing just like Naomi and Ruth and Boaz did make a real difference in helping the survivors cope and eventually move on with their lives.

Reading the Book of Ruth on Shavuot challenges us in the same way. It reminds us that it is the Torah's message and our eternal responsibility to rise above what is petty, immoral and evil and do what is good and what is right. That's why the Torah was given to the Jewish people. Torah reminds us not only who we actually are, but what we yet might be.

Our efforts to live our truth, and fulfill our responsibilities will not guarantee a pain free life for ourselves or anyone else. Yet what it does guarantee are people and institutions that will be there to help us, no matter what life may throw at us.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Arthur Weiner