



Adas Israel *Megillat* Ruth

One of the greatest privileges of our rabbinic work is getting to hear the stories of those whose conversions we facilitate and witness. The people who convert to Judaism through this community are brave, thoughtful, wise, funny, serious, intentional, and compassionate. Their reflections lift up in honest and powerful ways all of the complexities in making a journey to Jewish faith, peoplehood and community. We are grateful for their stories; we are grateful for their presence.

These present-day journeys towards Judaism also echo the ancient path that our foremothers walked. Today, too, so many are moving through these similar stages of loss, discovery, belonging and entry. The story of Ruth is lived and traversed over and over again in each place and each generation.

For Shavuot this year, we created our own Megillat Ruth—compiling the stories and experiences of some of those who have converted to Judaism through Adas in recent years. This scroll overlays ancient verses, rabbinic teachings, and personal testimony taken directly from conversion essays from members of the Adas community. With their permission, their stories have been woven together to create a narrative that is both ancient and new, that is both deeply personal and also relatably universal, and that brings Megillat Ruth into the here and now—into our own losses, discoveries, relationships and places of belonging.

We thank the following Adas members for allowing us to use their words:

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Chapter 1: Loss and Departure

Ruth 1:5

וַיָּמָתוּ גַם-שְׁנֵיהֶם מַחֲלֹן וְכִלְיוֹן וַתָּשָׂאֲרָה אִשָּׁה מְשֻׁנִּי יְלָדֶיהָ וּמֵאִשָּׁה:

Then those two—Mahlon and Chilion—also died; so the woman was left without her two sons and without her husband.

As a little kid, I had to go to a church service every week. I remember, from a young age, feeling so guilty with what was preached. But I was a kid.

Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I remained unsatisfied with my family's faith. I would challenge my parents, who were understanding and told me to go read and form my own conclusions. I challenged clergy who were less understanding. I challenged God, always during my bath (I thought if I were to get struck down by lightning, the water would make the process less painful) and didn't get an answer. I hid who I was to avoid God's anger.

The honest truth is that I'm a queer person who questions god's existence and goodness and certainly wasn't convinced that Jesus was god, nonetheless whether scripture was divinely inspired or in any way historical. But I was raised to have certain beliefs - Jesus obviously, but more subtle things too, like that abortion is murder, queer love is sinful, and non-christians are going straight to hell. There was no framework for questioning god, the Bible, church doctrine - if you question, you're outside the tent. But I so needed that connection with community, ritual, and routine, so I stuck with it.

And then, my world turned upside down.

I watched my dad take his last breath before passing away. It was something I can't forget. I saw everyone breakdown in tears and try to hold onto the little positive memories left. I was not concerned about religion after this. I thought it all wasn't for me. I watched a 56-year-old man die in the prime of his life. His wife loses her life partner, children lost their protector, and so many people lost a great friend. I felt so distant from religion and those that tried to explain terrible things in the name of god.

This loss left me feeling spiritually lost and yearning for a deeper connection. So, I embarked on a spiritual journey, exploring various religious traditions, including Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, neopaganism, Bahai Faith, Hinduism, and Taoism. Yet, despite my efforts, the divine presence I sought remained elusive. That is, until I realized that Judaism could and would eventually fill this void.

The decision wasn't made swiftly or easily. I had some questions about specific concepts in Judaism - the notion of a chosen people, the relationship between individual Jews and the State of Israel, levels of religious observance and what they mean.

And there is no pain-free parting of ways. I started slowly getting rid of Christian kids books/toys that I'd been gifted (a stuffed Jesus, why?!) and I felt a little guilty as if my mom was watching and would be sad. I'm no longer celebrating holidays like Easter and Christmas, I haven't been to Mass in a few years, and I don't rely on the liturgical prayers that I grew up with. These are beautiful traditions that served me and continue to serve my family, but they no longer tickle my soul or give me the calm and comfort they once did.

But the truth is, even amicable breakups hurt. If I was flirting with and then going steady with Judaism last year, then I suppose Christianity was my first love and I'll never forget those experiences. And that can be a good thing. But it can also really hurt.



A question I've had to ask is "without these traditions, what do I do?" As I've approached the moment of conversion, the answer has become so clear: make my own traditions. And this isn't just some aspirational thing... my mom and I have worked together to come up with traditions that acknowledge the beautiful upbringing she gave me with my new identity as a Jew: putting up the old christmas ornaments in my sukkah; spending Shabbat afternoons playing rummikub and skipbo; adding Hanukkah songs to the Christmas music playlist that we jam to in the car in December; looking up the locations of ancestors graves near the DC area so I can visit them for Kever Avot. My mother's taste can be seen on my Shabbat dinner table, where some of the weekly items she has gifted me help me beautify the mitzvot of Shabbat.

Living Jewishly - especially for the first time as an adult - is hard as hell. Having to start my recipe list from scratch and remembering that Friday nights weren't just Friday nights was hard. I knew this was for me, but was not sure where to begin. I came to Adas in this state: yearning for a Jewish life but not sure how to make it happen.

Babylonian Talmud Brachot 32b

וַאֲמַר רַבִּי אֱלֶעָזָר: מֵיוֹם שְׁחָרַב בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ נִנְעָלוּ שַׁעְרֵי תְּפִלָּה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "גַּם כִּי אֶזְעַק וְאִשְׁוֹעַ שְׁתָּם תִּפְלֹתַי". וְאָף עַל פִּי שֶׁשַּׁעְרֵי תְּפִלָּה נִנְעָלוּ, שַׁעְרֵי דַמְעָה לֹא נִנְעָלוּ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "שְׁמָעָה תִּפְלֹתַי ה' וְשִׁוְעֹתַי הֲאִזִּינָה אֶל דַּמְעָתִי אֶל תִּחְרַשׁ".

On the subject of prayer, Rabbi Elazar also said: Since the day the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer were locked and prayer is not accepted as it once was, as it is said in lamentation of the Temple's destruction: "Though I plead and call out, He shuts out my prayer" (Lamentations 3:8). Yet, despite the fact that the gates of prayer were locked with the destruction of the Temple, the gates of tears were not locked, and one who cries before God may rest assured that his prayers will be answered, as it is stated: "Hear my prayer, Lord, and give ear to my pleading, keep not silence at my tears" (Psalms 39:13). Since this prayer is a request that God should pay heed to the tears of one who is praying, he is certain that at least the gates of tears are not locked.

Chapter 2 - Journey and Discovery

Ruth 2:2

וַתֹּאמֶר רוּת הַמוֹאבִּית אֶל-נְעָמִי אֵלֶכָה-נָּא הַשָּׂדֶה וְנִלְקָטָה בְּשָׂבָלִים אַחֲרֵי אִשֶּׁר אִמְצָא-הֵן בְּעֵינָיו וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ לְכִי בְתִי:

Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "I would like to go to the fields and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone who may show me kindness." "Yes, daughter, go," she replied;

My first encounter with Judaism came during one of my darkest hours - I was in the sixth grade struggling with my newly found identity as a gay man in a conservative, ultra religious community. When I revealed my truth to my friends, they turned their backs on me. Years later, in a place of mourning and pain, I found no solace in the faith of my upbringing. This pain propelled me on a spiritual journey. Despite my initial fears of rejection due to my deep-seated social anxiety and the ethnoreligious nature of judaism, I resolved to explore this faith anew.

At that point, I was in grad school, and found myself entangled very intimately with social justice work. I realized I had a blind spot for antisemitism, and decided to buy and read essential judaism by George Robinson to catch me out on what jewish was and how to ally myself to jews as well. Well chapter 2's primer on shabbat absolutely existentially kicked my tuchus. I was feeling...envious???...as I read this book about someone else's religion. Shabbat sounded so radically beautiful, transformative, and challenging to me. I wanted that shabbat for myself. Here I am, reading this book to unlearn antisemitism, and instead I'm falling in love with jewish joy and resistance? I think I emailed a rabbi the morning after I read that chapter and said I'm having a crisis, help. Naturally, with hashem's sense of humor, I got an auto-reply email from her - this inbox is closed with shabbat.

Around that time, I was invited to attend services at Adas. I was struck by two things. First, everyone was praying not just to God, but to a Book, the Torah! And second, that a version of that book was available right in front of me to touch and read and form my own opinions. When I was younger, my parents gave me the "big book of tell me why" because I asked so many questions. I was always a question asker, in spaces where that wasn't celebrated, rewarded, or valued, especially for a young person. For the first time, I found a religious space that wanted that of me too. I was able to ask questions of my rabbi and have discussions with my classmates in which we were able to disagree or challenge one another.

As I experimented with various congregations and Jewish practices, I felt a profound connection that I had never felt before. The rituals and customs, such as lighting the shabbat candles and reciting blessings, embraced me like a warm hug. My thirst for learning about jewish history and traditions seemed unquenchable, and I eagerly devoured texts like the torah, talmud, various commentaries and books.

A midrash tells us we are given a second soul every Shabbat; our bodies are fed with an extra portion of challah and our spirits boosted with another neshama. For the better part of several decades, I would have winced at the mention of a soul. I never would have admitted to having a religious experience. But then I visited Adas. And I found my soul in the Smith. Stage right, several rows back. The place was alive. Children climbing in the windows, newborns being given names and books, the Torah procession through the congregation. I didn't always understand what was happening, but I felt my spirit swell until tears started to fall. Just an hour before, I had worried I wouldn't fit in, concerned again that my lifelong conviction that I needed to be Jewish was something I should ignore, but as long as I was there those worries were replaced by the understanding that I was exactly where I belonged. I have no better word for that than soul. It's a growing feeling, a sense of feeling grounded and at flight, and a fire.



Rambam (Maimonides) Guide for the Perplexed Part III 3: Section 39

אבל 'מקרא ביכורים' יש בו מדת ענוה גם כן שהוא לוקח סל על כתפיו ומודיע חסדי האלוה וגמולותיו להודיע לבני אדם – שמעבודת האלוה הוא שיזכור עיתות צרתו ועניני מצוקותיו כשירחיב לו האלוה. וזאת הכונה חיזקה אותה ה'תורה' במקומות רבים: "וזכרת כי עבד היית וגו'" – מפני שפחד מן המידות המפורסמות לכל מי שגדל בעושר ונחת – רצוני לומר: הבעיטה והגאווה ועזיבת הדעות האמיתיות – "פן תאכל ושבעת ובתים וגו'" ואמר: "וישמך ישורון ויבעט וגו'" – ומפני זאת היראה צוה ב'מקרא בכורים' בכל שנה לפניו ית' ולפני שכינתו. וכבר ידעת גם כן חיזוק ה'תורה' לזכור ה'מכות' שחלו על המצריים תמיד: "למען תזכור את יום צאתך וגו'" ואמר: "ולמען תספר באזני בנך וגו'". ובדין היה לעשות כן בזה הענין, מפני שהם ענינים..אם כן, כל 'מצוה' שמביאה לזכרון דבר מן הנפלאות או להתמיד האמונה ההיא – כבר נודע תועלתה

The reciting of a certain portion of the Law when the first-fruits are brought to the temple, tends also to create humility. For one who brings the first-fruits takes the basket upon their shoulders and proclaims the kindness and goodness of God. This ceremony teaches to human beings that it is essential in the service of God to remember the times of trouble and the history of past distress, in days of comfort. The Law lays stress on this duty in several places; "And you shall remember that you have been a slave," etc. (Deut. 5:15). For it is to be feared that those who become great in material wealth might, as is sometimes the case, fall into the vices of insolence and haughtiness, and abandon all their principles. "Lest you eat and be full, etc., and your heart be lifted up and you forget the Lord" (ibid. 8:12-14)...On account of this fear the Law commanded us to read each year a certain portion before the Lord and God's glory, when we offer the first-fruit. You know how much the Torah insists that we shall always remember the plagues that have befallen the Egyptians; "So you may remember the day when you came forth out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life" (ibid. 16:3); "So you may tell in the ears of your child what things I have brought in Egypt" (Exod. 10:2). Such a law was necessary in order to perpetuate the memory of the departure from Egypt...The benefit of every commandment that serves to keep certain miracles in remembrance...

Chapter 3: Relationship and Belonging

Ruth 3:1

וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ נַעֲמִי חֲמוּתָהּ בְּתִי הֲלֹא אֶבְקֶשׁ לָךְ מִנוֹחַ אֲשֶׁר יִיטֵב לָךְ:

Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, “Daughter, I must seek a home for you, where you may be happy.

My internal clock runs on the Jewish calendar. I finally reached a point where (aspiring to be) Jewish impacted almost all of my decision making. When I grocery shop (Wednesdays, so I can cook Thursday for Shabbat dinner), where I grocery shop (hello Trader Joe's and Moti's), what I eat (always dairy for breakfast so I can drink real cream with my coffee), what restaurants I can meet friends at (gotta have vegetarian or fish options on the menu), how I budget (gotta reserve a little extra to buy something beautiful to add to my Shabbat table, even just flowers, and my monthly tzedakah commitments), my entire Thursday schedule (gotta clean my room, apartment, bathroom, bedroom, wash my favorite towels, put the Kedem bottles in the fridge, wash and fold laundry, pick out my Shabbat outfit), just to name a few.

My heart feels at rest when I am practicing Judaism, when I'm in Israel, when I pray, when I fast. I am at peace. So much is meaningful for me in my Jewish life, but a really important thing to me is not only the space but the expectation to wrestle with our Torah, scripture, laws, and traditions. There's something dynamic about being allowed to ask questions, disagree with the perspectives presented to me, and being allowed to change my mind next year when we read that parsha again. This keeps our texts alive as much as it gives us life. The Torah has something new to say to me every time I read it or I discuss it with a friend or I hear someone's d'var torah or I read MyJewishLearning's summary. Judaism sees Torah as a conversation, our relationship with G-d as a partnership, and me as a player - not just a learner or observer.

The idea of being able to own my theology is wild, and I mean wild very literally. I have a blank slate and it's so freeing. I can make a relationship with God into my own. While the God of my Christian childhood, a benevolent (but not really) man (but not a human) who is all-knowing, all-loving and all-powerful (but will send you straight to hell if you haven't heard of him) is something I cannot accept, he is something I can explain. My God is harder to tell other people about. My God is ancient and constant, but doesn't pick winners and losers from the sky. My God led me to that sanctuary and gave me the courage to sit down with strangers at my first kiddush and come back for Havdallah that night. My God is the sense that things will get better when the world is dark and lonely and I can't see what's coming next. My God is what drives people to make the world a little more just. My God is like those cables lying across the ocean floor: always there, always facilitating, but can't and won't dial the number for us. On my worst nights, I've known that I could make it to the next sunrise. That knowledge? That's God.

But perhaps most importantly of all, I have started to form the nucleus of that religious community I've never felt a part of when reading the Bible by myself. And at some point in the summer, I realized things had shifted. I didn't walk among kiddush tables hoping to find an empty seat anymore. I had people who saved one for me. There were people who recognized me in the sanctuary and came by to say hello. I missed three Shabbats during the election rush in October and November and was greeted with “thank goodness” and “where have you been?” when I came back. On the last night of Chanukah, I was invited to a congregant's home. These people weren't just members of a group I wanted to join; they were friends holding my place for me. I have close Jewish friends from this class with whom I can attend synagogue, celebrate a seder, or ask questions and learn from. One of my classmates even brought me a whole Passover meal this year when I was sick and quarantining with COVID-19. I'm still at the beginning of a new spiritual journey but the prospect of doing that with others makes it far less daunting. At the very least, I know I'm not alone in it. On the eve of formally joining the Jewish people, it feels like coming home.



Rav Avraham Isaac Kook, Orot HaKodesh: A Fourfold Song שיר מרובע

“שירת נפש— **The Song of Self**”: There is one who sings the song of his own life, and in himself he finds everything, his full spiritual satisfaction.

“שירת האומה— **The Song of Nation**” There is another who sings the song of her people. She leaves the circle of her own individual self, because she finds it without sufficient breadth, without an idealistic basis. She aspires towards the heights, and she attaches herself with a gentle love to the whole community of Israel. Together with Israel she sings her songs. She feels grieved over her afflictions and delights in her hopes. She contemplates noble and pure thoughts about her past and her future, and probes with love and wisdom her inner spiritual essence.

“שירת האדם— **The Song of Humanity**”: There is another who reaches toward more distant realms, and he goes beyond the boundary of Israel to sing the song of humanity. His spirit extends to the wider vistas of the majesty of humankind, and their noble essence. He aspires toward humanity’s general goal and looks forward toward their higher perfection. From the source of life he draws the subjects of his meditation and study, his aspiration and his visions.

“שירת העולם— **The Song of Creation**”: Then there is one who rises toward wider horizons, until she links herself with all existence, with all God’s creatures, with all worlds, and she sings her song with all of them. It is of such a one as this that tradition has said that whoever sings a portion of song each day is assured of having a share in the world to come. And then there is one who rises with all these songs in one ensemble, and they all join their voices. Together they sing their songs with beauty, each one lends vitality and life to the other. They are sounds of joy and gladness, sounds of jubilation and celebration, sounds of ecstasy and holiness. The song of the soul, the song of the nation, the song of humanity, the song of creation - they all mix together with this person at every moment and at all times. And this simplicity in its fullness rises to become a song of holiness, the song of God, the song that is simple, doubled, tripled, quadrupled, the song of song of Solomon - the king of completeness and peace.

Chapter 4: Entry and the Future

Ruth 4:11-12

וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָל-הָעָם אֲשֶׁר-בְּשַׁעַר וְהַזְקֵנִים עֲדִים יִתְּנוּ יְהוָה אֶת-הָאִשָּׁה הַבָּאָה אֶל-בֵּיתְךָ כְּרָחֵל וְכִלְאָה אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ שְׂתִיהֶם אֶת-בַּיִת
יִשְׂרָאֵל וַעֲשֵׂה-חַיִּיל בְּאַפְרָתָה וּקְרָא-שֵׁם בְּבֵית לָחֶם:

All the people at the gate and the elders answered, “We are [witnesses today]. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the House of Israel! Prosper in Ephrathah and perpetuate your name in Bethlehem!

וַיְהִי בֵּיתְךָ כְּבֵית פֶּרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-יָלְדָה תָמָר לַיהוּדָה מִן-הַזָּרַע אֲשֶׁר יִתְּנוּ יְהוָה לָךְ מִן-הַנְּעָרָה הַזֹּאת:

And may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah—through the offspring which the LORD will give you by this young woman.”

What comes next then? Does going to the mikvah change anything for me? I don't feel like who I am has changed much in this process – becoming Jewish has felt very much like learning about myself than learning about some foreign culture and belief system. In other ways, becoming Jewish has totally shaken up my world. I have rituals and frameworks for interacting with the world, time, history, and myself in new ways. These things are new and exciting, but the learning and growing most certainly doesn't end for me when I leave the mikvah.

I started this process without knowing who I would be after this, and this experience turned into me becoming a better person from it. The stories of fighting for what is right and against oppression should be every person's story. This will be my story.

With each step on this path, I'm seeing my future come into focus, and things I was always ambivalent about (where to live next, whether I would have children, even what a wedding would look like) have new clarity and importance. However long the rest of my life will be, I plan to live it as well and as Jewishly as I can. And I'll do that knowing that there's a little kid in Alabama with freckles and crooked teeth who is so proud of us for getting here. When I look back on where I was, I can't believe I actually summoned up the courage to do this.

Jewish tradition says the souls of all jews, even those who convert, were at mount sinai when God gave Moses the torah. My soul was at mount sinai and no one can tell me otherwise. I have been waiting to celebrate Shavuot since I started the conversion process. Shavuot is a celebration of being intrinsically jewish. Shavuot is dedicated to me, someone coming home to Judaism later in life. As I continue to grow and learn as a Jew, I am eager to cherish the values, teachings, and traditions of Judaism that have guided me thus far. Grateful for the path that led me to Judaism, I am excited to embrace my place in this ancient and enduring legacy as a convert, knowing that my soul, too, was present at Sinai.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sukkah, 46a-6

ואמר רבי זירא ואיתימא רבי חנינא בר פפא: בא וראה שלא כמדת הקדוש ברוך הוא מדת בשר ודם; מדת בשר ודם, כלי ריקן - מחזיק, מלא - אינו מחזיק
אבל מדת הקדוש ברוך הוא: מלא - מחזיק, ריקן - אינו מחזיק
שנאמר (דברים כח:א) והיה אם שמוע תשמע וגו' אם שמוע - תשמע, ואם לאו - לא תשמע
דבר אחר: אם שמוע בישן - תשמע בחדש, (דברים ל"ז) ואם יפנה לבבך - שוב לא תשמע

Rabbi Zera, or, some say, R. Hanina bar Papa further stated: Come and see how different the characteristics of the Holy Blessed One are compared to human characteristics. Human characteristics emerge as empty vessels which can contain only what is poured into them. [When they are] full they cannot hold [more].

[But for] Godly characteristics - an already full vessel can hold [even more]. An empty vessel - cannot hold [more].

As it is stated [in Deut. 28:1]: And it will be that if you if you listen...? If you listen, you will continue to listen, but if not, you will be unable to listen/hear.

Another interpretation: If you will listen to the old, you will be able to listen to the new. 'But if your heart turns away' - then subsequently - 'you will not listen.' (Deut. 30:17)