

## Lovingkindness in the Time of COVID

### Shirley Traum

On Shavuot, we read Megillas Ruth, which tells the story of Naomi and Ruth. Naomi is married to Elimelech and has two sons, Mahlon and Kilion. The family leaves Bethlehem due to a famine and settle in Moab. Elimelech dies there, leaving Naomi a widow. Her sons take Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. After ten years, tragedy strikes again; both of Naomi's sons die in a plague. Naomi decides to return to Judah, and tells her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab with their people. After some hesitation, Orpah kisses Naomi and leaves, but Ruth is obstinate. Her immortal words are: "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your G-d my G-d."

The circumstances in Moab parallel what the world faces today. Instead of a plague that threatens lives, we have a pandemic. We are sheltering at home to protect our families, so that no one should experience the pain of losing multiple family members the way Naomi did. We are separated from those we love, distanced from everyone. We feel isolated because we are isolated, and in such a world, it is easy to wonder if G-d has abandoned us. The gematria for COVID (נוביד) is 42. In the 42nd verse of Megillas Ruth (2:20), we read: "Blessed be he by the Lord, who has not abandoned his lovingkindness to the living and to the dead." There is an ambiguity regarding the subject of this statement by Naomi. Is she referring to Boaz, who has shown kindness to Ruth, or is she referring to Hashem? Is it "his lovingkindness" or "His lovingkindness"?

On one hand, Malbim<sup>3</sup> and Ibn Ezra<sup>4</sup> contend that Naomi is recognizing Boaz for the kindness that he showed her through his magnanimity towards and protection of Ruth. On the other hand, Ruth Rabbah<sup>5</sup> and Otzar Midrashim<sup>6</sup> argue in favor of the latter, that Naomi is thanking G-d for continually showing lovingkindness towards the Jewish people, both in life and beyond. She has an unshakeable faith that her well-being as well as Ruth's are ultimately in His hands.

Perhaps both points are true, that even at times like these, G-d has not forsaken us. He continues to shield us with lovingkindness while expecting us to do the same. Boaz was blessed because he showed lovingkindness towards both kin, Naomi, and convert/stranger, Ruth. It was Ruth's willingness to be a stranger in a strange land out of love and loyalty to Naomi that

---

<sup>3</sup> Malbim on Ruth 2:20:1: "She began by blessing him (Boaz) with the words 'who has not abandoned his kindness with the living', because she understood that what he had done was in order to honorably provide for Naomi and Ruth, who were living and of his kin, 'and for the dead,' since she also understood that he would show kindness to the dead by performing the levirate rituals, which do good for the soul of the dead."

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Ezra on Ruth 2:20: "'Blessed is he to G-d, who has not abandoned his kindness' - this is evidence that he had performed kindness beforehand toward Elimelech and his sons."

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Rabbah 5:10: "Blessed be he of Hashem, Who has not failed in His kindness to the living - He nourished and supported the living - and to the dead - He attended to their burial shrouds."

<sup>6</sup> Otzar Midrashim, Midrash on Ruth 2:48: "Blessed is he to the Lord! Blessed is the name of the Lord who does not withdraw His lovingkindness from the living, and is destined to resurrect the dead."

touched Boaz. His words to Ruth are: "It has been fully told to me, all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband; and how you have left your father and your mother, and the land of your birth, and have come to a people which you did not know before. The Lord will recompense your work, and a full reward shall be given to you by the Lord G-d of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."

By showing lovingkindness towards all, kin and stranger, during this crisis, G-d will continue to protect us as we shelter at home. What goes around comes around, and Ruth and Boaz were blessed by G-d with being the great-grandparents of King David. Perhaps it is how we treat each other, both those in our families and those in the wider community, during a time when it is easy to hunker down and turn a blind eye, that will merit us worthy of seeing the Mashiach come speedily in our days.