

Be KIND

It's that simple. And great things will come to you | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



WE ARE ALL FAMILIAR WITH THE CUSTOM OF READING Megillas Rus (the Book of Ruth) on Shavuos. So, it should surprise us just a bit to learn that our Sages actually asked regarding this megilla why it was even written down in the first place! Their answer: to teach the greatness of the reward for those who do kindnesses – and they specifically emphasise the word kindnesses, ie. in the plural, noting that the megilla tells of the acts of kindness done by both Rus and Boaz for which they received great rewards, including that from the two of them comes the kingdom of the house of David and, ultimately from there, the Melech

HaMoshiach (the King Messiah). There's a lot we can learn from the many kindnesses that earned them these incredible rewards, as well as the motivations and efforts that were behind their actions.

SISTER, SISTER

Rus and Orpah were sisters, the daughters of Eglon, the King of Moab¹. They were royal princesses who grew up with incredible wealth and privilege and who wound up marrying two brothers, Machlon and Kilyon, the sons of Naomi, whose family had come to live in Moab following a terrible famine in Israel and

whose husband, Elimelech, had subsequently died there. After Rus' and Orpah's husbands also died, leaving them childless, their mother-in-law, Naomi, was left all alone in the world and poverty-stricken as well. The sisters suddenly faced a crossroads in their lives with two very different and divergent paths standing before them: to return to a life of wealth and privilege or to remain by the side of their impoverished mother-in-law and accompany her back to her homeland. Despite the fact that they had shared so many similar experiences in their lives until this point, the sisters could not have made more contrary choices from one another.

Our Sages teach² that the name of a person expresses his character and indicates his essence. Based upon this, they explain³ the choices that Rus and Orpah made. Orpah was so called because she "turned her back (*oreif*) on her mother-in-law"⁴, while Rus "saw (*re'eisa*) (ie. considered) the words of her mother-in-law"⁵. From Rus our Sages learn that, "Kindness does not begin with giving, but with seeing." A person who is self-centred sees only himself, turning his back on the entire world. He sees only his positive qualities and even these he views with a magnifying glass. Such a person is entirely unaware of his own failings, whereas when it comes to others, he hyper-focuses on their failings, and this is in order to emphasise further his own virtues in contrast. Moreover, in viewing those around him, such a person sees only his own needs and what benefit he may be able to derive from other people – for example, when he considers whether to take someone on as a friend, his exclusive consideration is how he will profit from such a relationship.

This was the intention in the words of our Sages regarding Orpah, who failed to see the positive qualities of her mother-in-law, as well as her mother-in-law's greatness, because she was selfish. Orpah didn't care about the virtues of others, and, therefore, during a difficult time – a time when she was being tested – she turned her back on Naomi and separated from her, choosing instead to return to her former life of comfort in her father's palace.

Only someone who epitomises loving-



kindness, whose ego is sufficiently bound-
ed, is fit to see correctly the virtues and
needs of others, and, thereby, to value
them and reward them with kindness. This
was Rus, who, from the goodness of her
own heart, was able to see the virtues of
her mother-in-law and value her. Rus re-
cognised that Naomi was a tzaddekis (right-
eous woman), appreciated her greatness,
and did not want to be separated from her
despite her destitute state. With absolute
devotion, Rus left her people, her privilege,
and her land, and went with Naomi. This
was Rus's first great kindness – that she
did not leave her mother-in-law.

JOINING THE CLUB

Among the kindnesses attributed to Rus,
our Sages count her converting and joining
the Jewish people. It's fair for us to ask,
what was the kindness that Rus did by her
converting, when she herself managed to
benefit as a result of choosing to cleave to
the chosen people, and as a result of which
she later merited to become the mother of
kings? Our Sages teach⁶ that any circum-
stance where a person does an act of kind-
ness, even though he may also, as a result
of doing that kindness, derive benefit from
it, is still considered to be no less an act of
kindness. But Rus converted solely because
she recognised the truth of things and in
order to draw closer to Hashem – to do a
kindness with her Creator. In fact, her
choice to convert seems like a decision that
would be beneficial to her only with the as-
sistance of a lot of hindsight.

At the time Rus made her decision, it was
not clear that she would even be allowed to



join the Jewish people, let alone ever be
able to marry a Jewish man because the To-
rah forever prohibits⁷ the nations of Amon
and Moab from joining the Jewish people.
Whether a Moabitess (a female member of
Moab) would be permitted to join the Jew-
ish people was in doubt at that point in our
history and the halacha regarding this mat-
ter was only established⁸ when Rus, who
was to become the first Moabitess to con-
vert, raised the issue for the first time for
our Sages to decide. She was, to put things
in contemporary legal terms, the “test case”
for such a conversion. Upon further analy-
sis, our Sages determined that the Torah's
prohibition against conversion applied only
to male Amonites and Moabites, but that
the women from these nations were al-
lowed to convert.

Our Sages note⁹ that, even before the
Torah was given, wise men recognised
that it was a great benefit for a man who
had died without siring offspring to have
his brother and, in a case where the man
had no brother (or the brother was other-
wise unavailable), other family relatives
marry the man's widow, and they called
this person who was next in line by the

name “redeemer”. Even after the halacha
was established to permit women from
Amon and Moab to join the Jewish peo-
ple, the matter was not well publicised
among the Jewish nation. We see¹⁰ this
from the events in the megilla, as the
closest potential redeemer did not want
to take Rus for a wife out of fear that he
would be placing a blemish on his off-
spring – that his children from Rus would
be considered Moabites and forbidden
from ever joining the Jewish people.

Even several generations later in the
days of Shaul HaMelech (King Saul), little
had changed. When Shaul wanted to fulfil
his promise to give to David his daughter
in marriage in recognition for David's
having killed Orpah's son, Goliath, there
were still those who questioned the status
of David, and whether it was permitted
for him to join the Jewish people because
he was descended from Rus the
Moabite.¹¹ Based upon all of this, we see
that Rus's conversion was, contrary to ini-
tial appearances, l'sheim shamayim (lit:
for the sake of heaven, ie. selfless).

WAITING FOR A REDEEMER

Once a man marries a woman, that woman
becomes forever prohibited¹² to her hus-
band's brother, even in the event of the
husband's death – with one exception. In
the event that the deceased husband did
not leave behind any offspring, it then be-
comes a mitzvah, known as yibum – aka le-
virate marriage – for his brother to marry
his widow and to have children with her.
The mitzvah of yibum is itself a matter of
great kindness because, through it, the de-
ceased is provided with peace and healing.
Man's purpose in this world is to leave be-
hind children who will serve Hashem and

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do His will and it is in this merit that a person is rewarded with Olam HaBah (the World to Come). Make no mistake, yibum is not a trivial kindness with the deceased. The son who is born from yibum is not reckoned as a continuation of the line of the brother who sired him – ie. the one who performed yibum – but rather of his deceased brother.

Through this mitzvah, the one who performs yibum loses the continuation of his own line, and, therefore, we see in the Torah¹³ that Yehudah's son, Onen, did want to perform yibum with Tamar, the wife of his brother, Or: "And Onen knew that the seed would not be his...and he spilled it on the ground so as not to provide offspring for his brother." Onen recognised that any offspring as a result of yibum would not be considered his and, accordingly, he would not have any descendants – so he chose not to go through with the mitzvah.

Boaz recognised that Rus's willingness to save herself for a relative of her de-

“WHEN A PERSON DOES ALL THAT HE IS ABLE TO DO IN ORDER TO FULFIL A MITZVAH, HASHEM WILL COME TO HIS ASSISTANCE, EVEN IF IT MEANS PERFORMING MIRACLES.”

ceased husband, Machlon, was an incredible act of kindness. Machlon did not have any brothers left for Rus to marry, so she was free to marry whoever she desired. And yet, she behaved like a woman whose deceased husband had left behind a young, minor brother to whom she was now bound and for whom she was required to wait until the child reached the age of maturity so he could perform the mitzvah of yibum with her. Boaz rightly understood Rus's kindness in this area to be even greater than her kindness regarding her conversion, as she behaved like a woman who was obligated to wait for her husband's brother even though she was not. Naomi also understood what Rus was trying to accomplish – that Rus wasn't just after another husband, but instead wanted

one of Machlon's family members who could bring peace and healing to Machlon's soul, and, as a result, the same to Naomi herself. This was Naomi's intention when she said¹⁴ to Rus, "My daughter, I must seek security for you, that it may go well with you."

But the truth is that yibum goes even deeper than this, and explains further why the descendants from such a relationship are reckoned as those of the deceased brother. The child who is born from this union is none other than the reincarnation of the deceased brother himself, with the woman, who was once his wife, now being his mother, and the man, who was once his brother, now being his father. Therefore, the son who is born from yibum is not considered a continuation of the line of the

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brother who sired him – ie. the one who performed yibum – but his brother, who died. Our Sages explain that, despite the fact that this was not the precise mitzvah of yibum¹⁵ from the Torah (as Machlon did not have any brothers for Rus to marry), the intention of Rus was nonetheless for the soul of her husband, Machlon, to be reincarnated in her son, Oved. And this is precisely what happened and why the neighbourhood women said¹⁶ when Rus gave birth, “A son is born to Naomi,” because they didn’t just mean superficially that Naomi would be considered “like” his mother, but rather that the son who Naomi had lost, Machlon, had been returned to her. This is why they said that a son was born to Naomi – and not to Rus or to Boaz!

MAKING THE MITZVAH PERFECT

When, as was the case here, the mitzvah does not actually qualify as yibum as prescribed by the Torah, so the kindnesses done by those involved are considered even greater, as the relative stepping in to marry the wife accomplishes the same thing, helping to heal the soul of the deceased and providing a lineage for him, but without the same close bond to serve as motivation. Boaz took things one step further, however, as he sought also to redeem the fields that belonged to Machlon, as well as to Kilyon and even Elimelech, even though he was not obligated to do any of this.¹⁷

Why did he see this as being so important, as well as connected to the mitzvah of yibum? We each have a special role in revealing the honour of Hashem in the world. In order to fulfil this purpose, we receive all of the things that we will need to accomplish this task, including all of our property. There is, consequently, a connection between the roles that are given to people and the members of an extended family in general, as well as to a particular father and his children within that extended family, because the children are obligated to continue the role of the father when it comes to serving Hashem. This also helps to explain why there is a likeness in the qualities, character traits, and even the outer appearance among the members of a



particular family, and this is why the children and other relatives are the ones who inherit the property that they do when someone passes. Moreover, this is why the Torah provides relatives the possibility to redeem property that belonged to other family members because that property is intimately connected to the extended family’s special role. All of these acts by Boaz served to make possible a continuation of the family’s service of Hashem through Oved (who was, in reality, Machlon), with Boaz seeking to perfect the deed by redeeming the family’s property, so that Oved could later make use of it.

RUNNING TO DO A MITZVAH

And all of these things, Boaz did with tremendous zealotness, accomplishing everything he set out to do in the period of a single day, fulfilling his promise¹⁸ to Rus to do just that, despite the fact that he was 80 years old¹⁹ at the time and the Gadol Hador – the leader of the generation – and that it was not befitting a man of his stature to be involved with such matters. He spoke to the other potential redeemer, negotiated with the owners of the family’s fields, and, in the end, took Rus to be his wife, when in reality each of these things took significant amounts of time. He ac-



complished all of this because, when a tzaddik promises to do something, he does all that he can to bring the matter to a conclusion on that same day and won’t rest until the matter is completed.

Because of his zealousness, Boaz merited special Divine assistance, as we see from the fact that immediately after he reached Beis Din (the Jewish Court), the other potential redeemer, with whom he needed to sort things out regarding Rus, happened to come to that same place as well – giving the appearance that the other redeemer had been standing there waiting for Boaz to arrive! And our Sages note that even if this other man had been at the other end of the earth, Hashem would have performed an open miracle and flown him to where Boaz was so as to avoid causing Boaz to have to sit and be pained over waiting for the man. And all so that Boaz could fulfil the mitzvah that he had zealously set out to perform that day, so that he could keep his word to Rus.

Our Sages learn from this that the only hindrance to doing a mitzvah comes not from Hashem’s side, but from our side, as a result of our laziness and weakness. If we desire and we strive to do something, then anything difficult and complicated will be made easy and simple for us because Hash-

“ WERE IT NOT FOR HIS ZEALOTNESS IN DOING EVERYTHING INVOLVED WITH THIS MITZVAH TO COMPLETE ALL THAT NEEDED TO BE DONE IN A SINGLE DAY, ALL OF THESE SPIRITUAL AND PHYSICAL TREASURES WOULD HAVE BEEN LOST FOREVER. ”



em will give us special help, removing all of the obstacles in our way. And all of this was in addition to the many kindnesses that Boaz instructed his workers to extend to Rus as she gathered grain in his field.

DESERVING OF MIRACLES

We find something astounding regarding Rus. Rus, the mother of Jewish royalty from whom Jewish kings descend via her great grandson David, was not naturally able to have children at all! She was born without a womb. After she married Boaz, however, Hashem performed a miracle and placed a womb within her. Why? Because when a person does all that he is able to do in order to fulfil a mitzvah, Hashem will come to his assistance, even if it means performing miracles. Therefore, when Boaz and Rus sought to do all that they could do to fulfil the mitzvah of yibum – to enable Rus to complete the act of kindness that she had set out to do for her deceased husband, Machlon, and for her mother-in-law,

Naomi – Hashem made a miracle in order that they should succeed in their efforts to do this mitzvah.

But, perhaps even more amazing than this was the timing of everything. Boaz died that night after he married Rus, but not before fathering the child, who would become Oved, with her. Were it not for his zealousness in doing everything involved with this mitzvah to complete all that was needed to be done in a single day, all of these spiritual and physical treasures would have been lost forever. We learn a crucial lesson from this: Hashem suspends, by a single thread, the great things that are designated for an individual. If a man is neglectful or lazy when it comes to doing good things, he may, as a result, quite possibly forfeit the chance of reaching the lofty and sublime levels that are otherwise within his reach. And perhaps this is why our Sages teach²⁰, “Run to do even a ‘light’ mitzvah” – because we simply have no idea how much our future,

our family’s future, and the future of the Jewish people may be riding on it. **LL**

Adapted from a sicha by the Sifsei Chaim, Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, ztz”l.

¹Rus Rabbah 2:9

²See Yoma 83b and Brachos 7b

³See Rus Rabbah 2:9

⁴הפכה עורף לחמותה ערפך ראתה בדברי חמותה

⁵See Brachos 63b and Rashi on Shemos 2:17, 20, and 27 and “Thanks A Lot” in Issue 104 of *Jewish Life*

⁶Devarim 23:4

⁷Yerushalmi Yevamos 88 halacha 3 – and Rus Rabbah 23:4

⁸See Ramban on Bereishis 38:8

⁹Rus 4:6 and Rashi there, and Rus Rabbah 7:10

¹⁰See Yevamos 76b

¹¹See Vayikra 18:16

¹²Bereishis 38:9

¹³Rus 3:1

¹⁴The Sifsei Chaim refers to a case of other relatives marrying the deceased’s widow in order to provide a tikun for the soul as “geulah” (redemption), which is why, he notes, the person performing this role is referred to throughout the megilla as the redeemer

¹⁵Rus 4:17

¹⁶Id. 4:9

¹⁷Id. 3:13

¹⁸Rus Rabbah 6:2

¹⁹Pirkei Avos 4:2

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