

**Shavuot**  
**Choosing God Back**  
**Naima Hirsch Gelman - Class of 2024**

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When I would sleep over at a friend's house in high school, we would plan out a whole evening of movies and snacks and trade gossip anecdotes in hushed whispers long after parents and younger siblings went to sleep. We would complain about our teachers and concoct theories about the newest character in our favorite TV show, until we finally succumbed to sleep. Staying up all night for a *tikkun leil Shavuot* has a lot of the same features: eating lots of sugary snacks, consuming stories, but perhaps most importantly, a shared intimacy. Just like I used to stay up late with my dearest friends to try to make sense of the world, on Shavuot I stay up late with Torah to try to make sense of the gift God gave me.

Jewish text and traditions teach us that there are many ways to connect to God; my favorite model of studying Torah is but one of them. The opening of Megillat Rut, which we read on Shavuot because of its thematic connections to the holiday, teaches us about another one. After Naomi instructs her daughters-in-law, Rut and Orpah, not to follow her to Canaan, we read:

וַתִּשָּׂנֶה קוֹלָן וַתִּבְכְּינָה עוֹד וַתִּשָּׂק עֶרְפָּהּ לַחֲמוּתָהּ וְרוּת דָּבְקָה בָּהּ: (רות א:יד)  
They broke into weeping again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law farewell. But Ruth clung to her (Ruth 1:14).

The word דָּבְקָה, clung, may refer to a physical act of clinging to another person, but there's a deeper meaning at play here, based on the other times we see the word appear. In Bereishit, the word דבק has a sexually intimate connotation when a man clings to his wife to become one flesh (Bereishit 2:24). This linguistic connection provides a textual proof for those who read Naomi and Rut's relationship as a queer one,<sup>1</sup> but even if we eschew that reading, the word דבק indicates something new about Rut's choice to stay with her mother-in-law.

The word דבק is also used in the book of Devarim to describe a Godly relationship – telling us that we should relate to God not just by offering sacrifices and prayers, or

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<sup>1</sup> See here: <https://jwa.org/blog/wherever-you-go-i-go-queerness-book-ruth>



even by behaving morally, but by being דובק, by clinging or holding fast to God (Devarim 4:4, 11:22). Historically, the chasidic idea of *devekut* fuels meditation or prayer practices, but at its core, it teaches us that a core part of relating to God is a deep sense of love and intimacy.

Rut is often viewed as the original convert to the extent that many laws about conversion are derived from her narrative.<sup>2</sup> Whereas her sister-in-law Orpah returns to Moab after Naomi declares she cannot provide Orpah with a second husband (Rut 1:11-13), Rut clings specifically to Naomi. She knows that Naomi can't promise a remarriage and therefore a secure, traditional family. Rut stays because she chooses Judaism, chooses the Jews and their God. Furthermore, a close reading of Rut's declaration proves that it is through a deep love for Naomi that she joins the Jewish people. Two verses after she clings to Naomi, Rut declares "כִּי אֶל-אֱשֶׁר תֵּלְכִי אֵלֶּה וּבְאֶשֶׁר יִלְוֶנִי אֶלֶּה-יָרֶה אֶלֶּה-יִלְוֶנִי – For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Rut 1:16). Rut chooses to follow Naomi in the same breath as she chooses to be Jewish. To Rut, Naomi represents the Jewish community. Rut's act of claiming Naomi's people and God as her own signifies not only a commitment to Naomi as an individual, but as a representative of Judaism and God. By rejecting her Moabite family of origin for a chosen Jewish family, Rut comes closer to God.

Rut's devotion to Naomi is a reminder that our closest human relationships are echoes of our relationships with the Divine. While we aren't often faced with a moment like Rut was – an opportunity to explicitly choose to stay close to another person – we are faced every day with a series of smaller choices through which we declare our values. Will we answer the phone during dinner with our families? Decide to take that solo backpacking trip? Go out of our way to run errands for a sick friend? Wake up ten minutes early to put on *tefillin* before commuting to work? When we nurture our intimate relationships, we demonstrate their importance to our friends and family. When we nurture our divine relationships, we demonstrate our commitment to God and God's commandments.

We ostensibly read Rut's story on Shavuot because it is a story of becoming Jewish, just like the Israelites became Jews at the foot of Mount Sinai. I think this is an oversimplification of a deeper connection. If, as our tradition tells us, every Jewish soul was present at Mount Sinai, then God chose each of us by giving us the Torah.

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<sup>2</sup> See [Ruth Rabbah 2:22](#)

Regardless of whether we are born Jewish or not, we must follow Rut's lead and choose God in return. While we may not all have turning points as dramatic as Rut's, we all have faced moments when we need to prove – to ourselves, to our communities, to God – our commitment. Rut's *devekut* to Naomi serves as a reminder that our relationships with other people cannot be separated from our relationships with God. We are connected not only by shared texts and traditions, but by love and care for one another.

So when we gather in our communities on *leil Shavuot* to study and learn and spend time with the Torah, let us remember that our relationships are Torah, too. And as we share food and conversation and board games on long Shabbat afternoons, let us remember that too, is Godly.



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