



Seventh Annual Semikha Ceremony
June 17, 2019
Rabbi Dr. Devorah Schoenfeld

When I was ten years old, while studying for the Chidon haTanach I read Sefer Bamidbar for the first time, and then over and over. It exposed me to many halachot, some unfamiliar, some confusing, but with one consistent message throughout: God cares what we do. We learn to serve God through details of practices embodied in our lives.

When a non-Jew asked Hillel to teach him all of Torah on one foot he replied, what is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor, now go study. In those few words we see some of the most important lessons of Torah: God cares what we do. How we treat each other matters. And the work of figuring out what that means requires true self-understanding, deep respect for the other, and authentic knowledge of Torah that can only be found when you study.

On Shavuot when we receive the revelation of the Torah we also read the megillat Ruth, which is a story about how it looks when the details of practices described in the Torah become ways for people to show chessed, love and kindness, to each other. Ruth, as a migrant foreigner, is welcomed kindly to glean in Boaz's fields, fulfilling mitzvot from Vayikra and Devarim. When Ruth willingly chooses Boaz, their relationship, which in some ways is like the mitzvah of yibum becomes what he describes an act of chessed, not just from him to her but from her to him. There is a kind of redemption in this book, but it is practical and concrete, the redemption of land which we are asked in Vayikra to do for any family that loses their land. At the center of all of this kindness is the complex, multifaceted relationship between Ruth and Naomi, which is, among other things, a relationship between teacher and student. Gemara Yevamot 47b describes Naomi in the role of the rabbi teaching Ruth for conversion, instructing her in the 613 mitzvot which Ruth eagerly accepts from her teacher. In the rest of Ruth's story we see the chessed with which she lived the Torah that Naomi taught her. Naomi, like Hillel, found a way to teach Torah in which care for the other and the details of practice are bound together.

It is my honor to stand in the tradition of Naomi and of Hillel, of those who teach Torah inside the Jewish world and out of it, to Jews and to non-Jews and people who are still seeking. It is my honor to be among those who teach the Torah of love expressed through constant practice. Blessed is God who has brought me to this time.