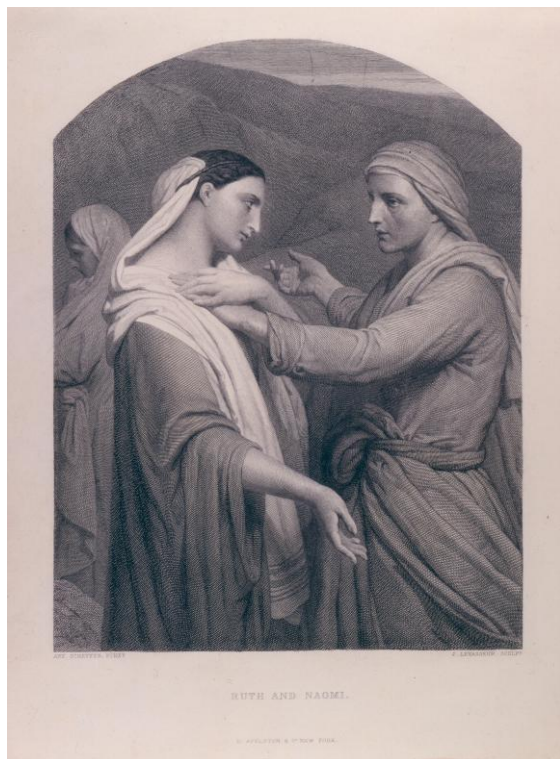


We Were All Converts at Sinai

David C. Kraemer, Joseph J. and Dora Abbell Librarian and Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics



One of the few age-old rituals that distinguishes the holiday of Shavuot is the public reading of the Book of Ruth. The reason for this association may be no more than that the narrative of Ruth describes its events as taking place “at the beginning of the barley harvest” (1:22), that is to say, at the time of Shavuot. But there is another association, deeper and more fundamental, that ties Ruth to Shavuot in instructive and inspiring ways.



Photogravure by Jules Gabriel Levasseur
After a painting by Ary Scheffer
New York : D. Appleton, late 19th century
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Ruth, who was a Moabite, is often described as a model convert, on account of her declaration to her mother-in-law, Naomi, “where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will

lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God” (1:16). Indeed, Ruth is referenced as one of the first “converts” to Judaism, after Abraham and Sarah (well, before their “conversion,” Abram and Sarai). It is for this reason that we in the Library of JTS feature Ruth prominently in our current exhibition, “Your People Shall Be My People: Conversion to Judaism through the Centuries,” even naming the exhibition after Ruth’s declaration to Naomi. We chose to create an exhibition about conversion to Judaism at this time because in the modern age, many people have made that choice. In an age of fluid identities, when conscious choice becomes crucial, more people than ever (and there were such converts in the past, even despite laws that forbade such transitions) have chosen to affiliate with the Jewish path. But what do Ruth and what she represents have to do with Shavuot?

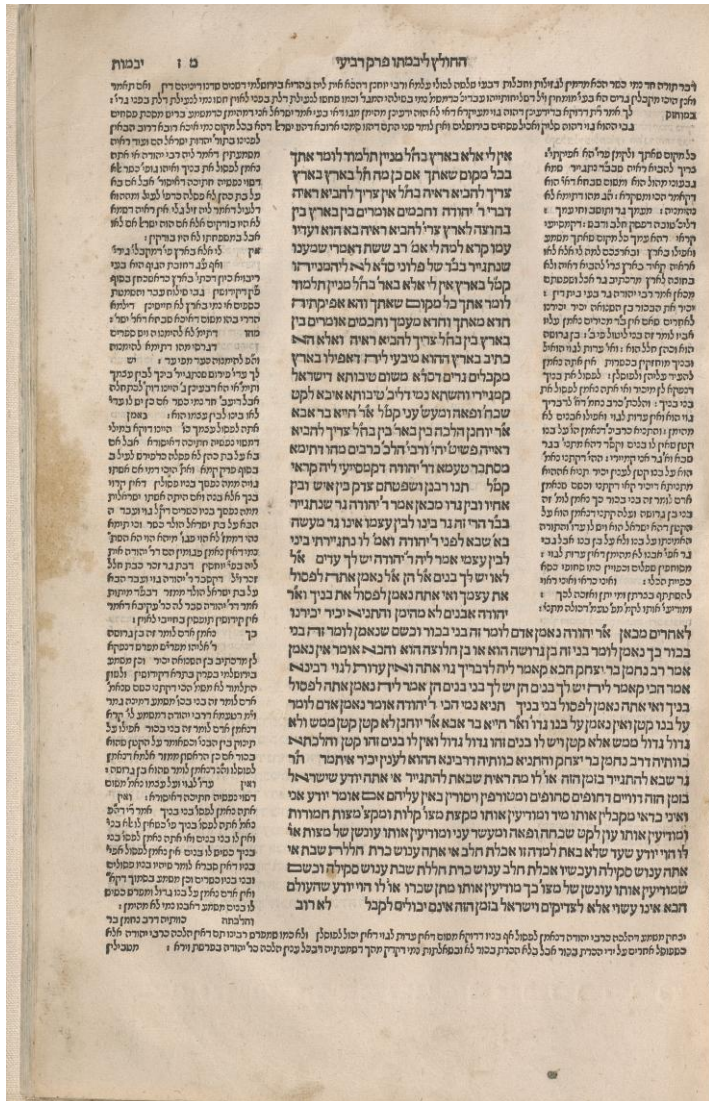
Shavuot—biblically a holiday marking the first harvest—came to be associated with the revelation of the law at Mt. Sinai. Indeed, it is described in our prayers as “the time of the giving of our Torah.” At Sinai, the people of Israel stood at the foot of the mountain, ready to accept the Law given to Moses as instruction for Israel for all generations. What kind of transition did the people undergo at Sinai? In what ways were the people different after that revelation than they were before?

In the view of the Talmudic rabbis, the people of Israel *converted* at Sinai. Since, for the rabbis, to be a Jew is to be a person of the Torah, before the revelation the children of Israel were not “Jews” (the term is anachronistic here). They only became “Jews” when, at Sinai, they did what converts to Judaism must do: they immersed (the Talmud imagines this), the men were circumcised (the Torah reports this explicitly), and they accepted the “yoke of the

commandments,” that is, the Torah. Indeed, as the Talmud, in tractate Yebamot, makes clear (and there is a fine 16th century volume showing this in the Library exhibition), the children of Israel serve, for the rabbis, as the models for later conversions. The rituals a convert must undertake are precisely those executed by the people at Sinai.

Now, it is true that Jewish tradition also identified others as models for conversion. The model offered by Abraham (and, we would say, Sarah) is well known, and as we can see in the names of converts written on *ketubbot* (Jewish marriage contracts) in the exhibition, all converts are ultimately the sons or daughters of Abraham. And, of course, Ruth was also seen as a model for conversion. But the association of Ruth and Shavuot subtly makes another point: that there is no conversion without standing at Sinai. Because Shavuot is about the revelation at Sinai, it is also, inescapably, about conversion. It is this of the reading of Ruth also reminds us.

There is a well-known rabbinic teaching claiming that all Jews, of all generations, stood at Sinai. Hence, we are all converts. The term the rabbis adopted for “convert” was the biblical word “ger” – “resident alien” or “stranger.” The Torah commands that we not oppress the ger, because we too were gerim in the land of Egypt. Whether converts or strangers, we have been both, and thanks to what we have learned from our experiences, we are obligated to welcome and protect the strangers and newcomers among us, for we are they. On this Shavuot, when we all stand again at Sinai, let us rededicate ourselves to this value, for ours is a world where it is often neglected.



Talmud Tractate Yebamot
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