RUTH:
THE LEGAL CODE FOR THE LAWS OF KINDNESS

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This article is dedicated to the memory of Perl Hendel, may she rest in peace, who personified in her personal life the attributes of kindness written about in this article

A well-known cliché sees a paradigm of the biblical narrative and organized religion as consisting of Divine revelation, amidst thunder and lightning, with apodictic requirements of "do" and "do not." But in reality, the Bible and religion are capable of softer moments that have religious value equal to the more dramatic moments. One such instance of religiously significant biblical softness is the Book of Ruth. The following citation from the Midrash focuses on its soft, non-commandment nature:

> Rav Zeirah said: "This scroll [Ruth] was not written to explain impurity or purity, forbidden or permissible: so then why was this scroll written? In order to teach the good reward given to those who perform acts of loving-kindness" (Ruth Rabbah, 2:14).

In approaching such a midrash it is tempting to interpret it using literary techniques of exaggeration and hyperbole; that is, it is tempting to see the midrash as focusing on one significant example of loving-kindness in the book. In this instance, that would be that Ruth was an ancestress of King David as a reward for her loyalty to her mother-in-law, expressed in Ruth leaving her family and nation to join a people of whom she knew nothing. Such a midrashic interpretation exaggerates the importance of this one, albeit outstanding, example, claiming that the purpose of the book was to record this one significant event.

But a deeper approach would see this one significant example as archetypical of a broad spectrum of examples that permeate the book. What we shall attempt to show in this paper is that the Book of Ruth consists of approximately two dozen well-defined scenes, each of which emphasizes non-mainstream insights in the practice of *hesed* [kindness]. [1] None of these insights is new. On the contrary, they all have a firm halakhic basis. However,

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it is refreshing to see these non-mainstream laws woven together in a natural setting.

Jewish law's mainstream concept of kindness is codified in the traditional codes.[2] The main requirement is for both the community and individual to provide for indigent people with food and shelter. The Rambam introduces his notable "kindness-charity-ladder" in which providing a person with a means of livelihood is a higher level of kindness than giving gifts of charity. From this, we infer that the degree of kindness in an act of kindness-charity is assessed by the amount of good resulting from the act, rather than by the personal degree of sacrifice incurred in performing the act.

Against this background, we examine five non-mainstream areas of kindness-charity found in the Book of Ruth. In this analysis, we show a dynamic tension between the simple reading of the text, which seems to be giving mere fill-in and background, contrasted to the talmudic reading of the text, which subtly sees, in these simple passages, kindness-charity ideas of profound loftiness.

VERBAL KINDNESS

The Talmud, Berachot 54a, relates the following requirement: "It was also laid down that greetings should be given in [God's] name, as it says *And behold Boaz came from Bethlehem and said unto the reapers, 'The Lord be with you,' and they answered him: 'The Lord bless thee'* (Ruth 2:4)."[3]

This passage introduces the idea of verbal kindness; that is, providing people with verbal, in contrast to monetary, gifts. A greeting should not simply be a mere "hello," but should also contain a blessing. The idea of verbal kindness as a required component of monetary kindness is consistent with Jewish law (Rambam, ibid. 10:7).

Several other instances of verbal kindness are presented in the Book of Ruth, such as Boaz's lavish praise for Ruth's loyalty to her mother-in-law (2:8-12), and for her social overtures towards him (3:10-11), and the city elders' marriage blessing to Boaz and Ruth (4:11-13).

SOCIAL KINDNESS

Chapter 3 seems like a scene from a movie film. One woman shares secrets with a younger woman on how best to take the initiative in a social relation-

ship. The couple gets married and lives happily ever after. We intuitively see this as sharing, which after all is an important component of kindness, but we do not see this as a religious act. You would not think of asking rabbinical guidance on how best to make initiatives to win a mate. This is more the type of advice you get from friends, or writers on the subject,

But the author of the Book of Ruth seems to disagree. An entire chapter of the text, 25 percent of it, is devoted to just this situation, even though prima facie the book seems to read well if Chapter 3 were entirely omitted! Apparently, there is importance in providing detailed religious guidance on social matters. This suggested viewpoint is consistent with Jewish law which, in its list of requirements for implementing kindness-charity, includes provision of (1) food, (2) clothing, (c) shelter, (d) a spouse, and (e) restoration of life-style (Rambam, ibid. 7:2).

Several other examples of neighborly gestures and social kindness are presented in the Book of Ruth, such as the support group that women form when a child is being nursed (4:14-17).

Of course, the most dramatic act of kindness is Ruth's social loyalty to her mother-in-law (1:14-18, 2:11). Ruth voluntarily gives up her people and past in order to remain with her widowed mother-in-law, accepting a future with a people that she really does not yet understand.

Despite the heroic nature of this act, I have chosen to emphasize its social component of loyalty. As indicated above, this is consistent with Jewish law, that measures the degree of kindness not by the amount of sacrifice and self-negation needed for the act, but rather by the amount of good resulting from the act. It is of course, worthwhile, to point out that social kindness frequently requires sacrifice and self-negation; however, the important thing to focus on is how much good is being effected.

VOCATIONAL *CHESED*

As indicated earlier in the paper, providing a person with a means of livelihood is a higher form of kindness than outright monetary gifts. We traditionally measure competing jobs by salary, so that the job with the higher salary is better. But job environment is equally important as salary in assessing a job. It follows, that kindness requires not only providing a job, but providing a dignified job environment.

Such an emphasis on job environment is suggested twice in the Book of Ruth. When Naomi learns that Ruth is gleaning in Boaz's fields she says: *'It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his maidens,* ***that you should not be molested in any other field'*** (2:19-22). The emphasized phrase suggests that Naomi prefers environment to remuneration. Naomi negates the importance of possibly finding more gleanings in some other field with an inferior work environment.

Another passage indicating the importance of the work environment is provided by Boaz's orders to his staff concerning Ruth (2:15-16). Here, Boaz, the boss, is "breaking the rules," and "eliminating red tape," to make it easier for Ruth to obtain what she needs. Conceptually, two jobs can have the same pay with, however, one job having more red tape. Vocational kindness manifests itself not only in provision of a good income, but also in provision of work that more easily allows achievement of goals.

These exegetical observations are consistent with modern studies that connect poor job environments with increased risk in blood pressure.[4]

REPUTATIONAL *CHESED*

Besides monetary, social, verbal, and vocational acts, kindness can focus on enhancing or protecting a person's reputation. Most people are familiar with the prohibitions in Jewish law against slander (for example, Rambam Deoth, Chapter 7). In contrast, enhancing, or protecting, a person's reputation can be a component of kindness.

The Book of Ruth contains several examples of kindness in matters of reputation. When Ruth secretly visits Boaz at night, he makes a point of having her leave before dawn, so as not to create an appearance of anything unseemly (3:14). We see here a kindness that protects reputation.

When Boaz marries Ruth, he seems to make a point of restoring the reputation of the deceased Elimelech. This is suggested in the passage:

> *'And also Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, have I bought to be my wife, to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance, so that the name of the dead shall not be cut off from among his brothers, and from the gate of his place; you are witnesses this day'* (4:10).

To understand this fully, we must remember that Elimelech deserted the

community during the famine so as to preserve his wealth.[5] If Elimelech was wealthy, it seems reasonable to conjecture that he probably had done many charitable deeds. However, his good reputation was erased when he deserted the community in its time of need. Boaz's levirate marriage to Ruth not only restored the continuity of land ownership by the kin of Elimelech, but *restored his name to his town gate* – that is, restored his reputation.

We can understand this suggestion of restoration of reputation as follows: Ruth was known as a kind, charitable woman (3:11). Undoubtedly, despite the intermarriage with a Moabite, there was commonality between Elimelech's family and Ruth. She was attracted to Elimelech's family because they too were kind, charitable people. In other words, Elimelech's family and Ruth discovered each other because they both were kind. Therefore, Boaz, by first providing Ruth with a work environment with dignity and then marrying her, thereby restored the continuity of Elimelech's reputation for charity and kindness.

Another example of empathy for one's fellow-man's reputation occurs in the dialogue between Boaz and the other redeemer (4:1-6). Boaz presumably knew he was married, and therefore would probably not want to marry Ruth. Boaz could simply have asked him outright if he wanted Ruth, and when the other declined, Boaz, as next in line, would marry Ruth. Instead, Boaz first asks the other redeemer if he wants to care for the property of the deceased. To this, the other redeemer responds in the affirmative. Only then does Boaz mention that there is a package deal requiring him to marry Ruth, at which point the other redeemer declines. By making his offer in two stages, Boaz enables the other redeemer to look good; he has the opportunity to show his interest in helping out. The decline is then seen as a result, not of lack of interest, but of higher priorities. Such social nicety could be classified as reputational kindness.

THE OVERLAP OF JUSTICE AND KINDNESS

Kindness is traditionally seen as contrastive to strict justice. Nevertheless, there are times when an act can be simultaneously classified both as just and required and also as kindness. An outstanding example of this in the Book of Ruth is Boaz's abstention from sinning with Ruth, who secretly crept to where he was sleeping and uncovered him. While it would be (technically)

prohibited for Boaz to take advantage of Ruth, nevertheless, if he had taken advantage of her and thereafter they were happily married, no one would hold it against him. We would understand his lapse. Hence here the requirement of abstinence is simultaneously seen as both a just requirement and an act of kindness.

Jewish law prohibits bearing a grudge; that is, it is prohibited when loaning a person an item to remind this person of his refusal to make a similar loan in the past (Rambam, Deoth, Chapter 7). The required abstention from bearing a grudge is simultaneously a legal requirement and an act of kindness. Several examples of not bearing grudges occur in the Book of Ruth. When Naomi, who deserted the city during a famine to preserve her wealth, returns penniless to that city, and she herself acknowledges her poverty as an act of Divine retribution, the city does not bear a grudge but rather expresses shock and presumably sympathy (1:19-22). In a similar manner, Boaz's marriage to Ruth which restores the continuity of Elimelech's progeny and land ownership is done without mention of Elimelech's past (4:10).

A rather beautiful example of the overlap of justice and kindness occurs at the beginning of the book (1:1-5). Traditionally, we think of monetary kindness as something optional, not required. But both charity and kindness are legal requirements in Jewish law. For example, every city could levy charity taxes on each individual (Rambam, Hilchot Matnot Evyonim, Chapters 7-10). The observation that the wealthy Elimelech should have stayed and given charity to people during the famine is simultaneously a statement of halakhic

requirement as well as a statement of an opportunity for kindness. Moreover, the Book of Ruth's graphic description of the punishment that befell Elimelech for not lending or giving to the poor during the famine – Elimelech died, his wife was widowed, his sons intermarried and then died – this punishment is consistent with the admonitory biblical punishment for withholding charity and loans (Deut. 15:7-9).

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have covered almost all of the two dozen scenes in the Book of Ruth. We have shown how it paints a picture of kindness in a variety of non-monetary spheres including verbal, social, vocational, reputational,

and judicial.

At the beginning of the paper we stated our goal: That it would be improper to confine the meaning of the book merely to the conclusion that King David descended from a female convert who left her own people to be loyal to her mother-in-law. I believe we have indeed demonstrated that Ruth's loyalty is only one highlight in the book, and the rest is filled with a variety of non-mainstream forms of kindness-charity in several different spheres. We may therefore see the Book of Ruth as the legal code for the laws of kindness.

NOTES

1. Although all translations are approximations, we believe that a good comprehensive translation of the Hebrew "*hesed*" is the English "kindness." "Kindness" is the modern connotation of *hesed.* Radak in his Book of Roots also considers "kindness" as the original biblical meaning of *hesed.* Throughout the article, we use the term kindness (or kindness-charity) as an umbrella term covering requirements of charity proper, loving-kindness, loans, and related interpersonal legal areas. This is a matter of convenience, using one term to refer to a broad area. We could have equally used the English terms charity or interpersonal relations or the Hebrew *hesed.* The article is very specific about what is to be included under the term kindness, and therefore there is no loss of generality in using one term.

2. For example: Rambam, *Hilchot Matanot Evyonim*, Chapters 7, 8, 9, 10. The *Shulkhan Arukh* also has several chapters on the legal requirements of charity and *hesed*.

3. Throughout, we use translations of the Talmud and Bible provided by Davka, www.davka.com, Judaic Classics, Version 3.0.6.

4. C. Guimont, C. Brisson, G.R. Dagenais, A, Milot, M. Vezina, B. Masse, J. Moisan, N. Laflamme, C. Blanchette, "Effects of job strain on blood pressure: a prospective study of male and female white-collar workers," *American Journal of Public Health* 96 (2006) pp. 1436-43.

5. Ruth 1:1 suggests a causal relationship between the famine and Elimelech's leaving Israel, as indicated by the underlined phrases in the following passage: *It came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a man of Beth-Lehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons.* The suggestion that Elimelech left to preserve his wealth is also hinted at in Ruth 1:21, *'I went out full, and the Lord has brought me back empty.'*