

“Ki Geirim Anachnu Lefanecha...”

(Because we are Geirim before You)

—Divrei HaYamim I 29:15

R. Yaakov Bieler

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Among the various explanations offered for why Megillat Ruth is read specifically on Shavuot,[1\[1\]](#) the one that conveys the most powerful religious symbolism is the view that the experience of **Ruth** in terms of her **conversion** to Judaism **parallels** what the **Jews** standing **at Sinai** went through so many years earlier.[1\[2\]](#) In case Jews fail to recognize what took place on Shavuot as a conversion of the newly-freed Egyptian slaves into a people en masse committed to HaShem and His Tora, reading the story of Ruth’s conversion offers both a lense and a context for such an understanding.

Ruth serves as the Biblical paradigm of an outsider willingly accepting upon herself the beliefs and practices of Judaism. According to the literal meaning of **Ruth 1:16-17**, the young woman makes every effort to convince Naomi of her sincerity in wanting to remain with her physically and spiritually rather than returning to Moav.

And Ruth said: Do not attempt to force me to forsake you and to return to where I come from. Because a) where you will go, I will go; b) where you will lie down, I will lie down; c) your people are my people, and d) your God is my God.
e) Where you will die, is where I will die and f) there will I be buried.
So HaShem shall Do to me and so He shall Continue because only death will separate me from you.

Yevamot 47b understands each of Ruth’s affirmations to Naomi as an acceptance of a particular category of Halacha or religious commitment which the older woman introduces to the potential convert in order that the latter will be able to get an inkling of the system of law to which she now desires to commit herself:

- a) “Going”—the laws of the Shabbat boundaries.[1\[3\]](#)
- b) “Lying”—the laws of “Yichud”.[1\[4\]](#)
- c) “Peoplehood”—the requirement for Jews to observe 613

Commandments.[1\[5\]](#)

- d) “Belief in God”—the rejection of idolatry.
- e) “Dying”—the four types of execution available to the court judging a capital offense.[1\[6\]](#)
- f) “Burying”—separate graves for those who die naturally vs. those executed by a “Beit Din”.[1\[7\]](#)

The alleged Halachic discussion between Ruth and Naomi is understood by Yevamot 47b as the textual basis for the following law concerning how to acquaint a potential convert with Jewish law, cited on 47a:

The Rabbis taught: A sojourner who comes to convert in the present historical period,[1\[8\]](#) one says to him/her, “What influenced you that you wish to convert? Don’t you realize that Jews today are oppressed, scattered, persecuted, killed and suffer all sorts of afflictions?” If the individual responds, “I know, and I am not worthy (to become part of

such a people)", s/he is accepted immediately and we inform him/her regarding some of the easier Commandments to fulfill, as well as some which are more difficult...**and we do not make the presentation onerous and we are not to be too overbearing regarding him/her.**

Rather than assuming that the Halachic examples that the Talmud identifies as topics presented by Naomi for Ruth's consideration in terms of whether or not to make an absolute commitment to Judaism, were merely examples, and that a much broader and comprehensive discussion of Jewish law would have to precede any acceptance of Ruth into the Jewish people, the Rabbis in the Talmud assert that the issues presented to Ruth constituted an **exhaustive** list, and her decision was based upon **only** these things.^{1[9]}

While the **spirit** of the laws of conversion with regard to how one informs a potential convert of the nature of Judaism may be derived from the conversations between Ruth and her mother-in-law, it would appear that the **ritual** steps of the actual conversion process are detected in the events that transpire at Sinai. R. Yehuda HaNasi, in Tractate **Kritut 9a**, states,

(**BaMidbar 15:15**) "...KaChem, KaGeir Yihyeh Lifnai HaShem"(like you, like the sojourner/convert he will be before HaShem)^{1[10]}—Like you, like your ancestors. Just as your ancestors did not enter into the covenant of the Jewish people until they underwent **a) circumcision**,^{1[11]} **b) ritual immersion**, and **c) the sprinkling of sacrificial blood** upon the altar, so too they (future converts) can complete the conversion process only by similarly undergoing circumcision, ritual immersion, and the sprinkling of sacrificial blood upon the altar.^{1[12]}

The verses describing the Sinai paradigm to which R. Yehuda HaNasi in Masechet Kritut is comparing the contemporary conversion process are recorded in Shemot 24.

Shemot 24:3-8

And Moshe came and he **told** the people all of the **Words of HaShem** and all of the laws. And all of the people **proclaimed**, in one voice, and they said, "All of the things that HaShem Spoke, we will do."

And Moshe wrote down all of the Words of HaShem, and he got up early in the morning and he built an **altar** at the foot of the mountain, and twelve monuments corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel.

And he sent young men of Israel, and they offered up whole burnt **sacrifices**, and they sacrificed peace offerings to HaShem, cows. And Moshe took half of the blood (from the animals offered as sacrifices) and he placed it into troughs, and half the blood he threw/sprinkled (as part of the sacrificial ritual) onto the altar.

And he took the Book of the Covenant and **read it** in the ears of the people. And they **said**, "All that HaShem spoke, 'Na'aseh VeNishma' (we will do and we will hear)."

And Moshe took the **blood** and **threw it upon the people**, and he said, "Here is the blood of the Covenant that HaShem has Entered into with you concerning all of these things."[1\[13\]](#)

There is some debate among biblical commentators concerning **when** the events recorded in this chapter actually **took place**. On the one hand, there are those, RaShI in particular, who invoke the rule, "Ein Mukdam U'Me'uchar BaTora" (lit. there is no earlier and later events in the Tora; i.e., the Tora is not necessarily written in chronological order), and therefore these commentaries posit that what is described in Shemot 24 took place on the fifth of Sivan, just **prior to** the receiving of the **Ten Commandments**, described in Shemot 19-20. Others, e.g., RaShBaM, Ibn Ezra, RaMBaN, and Sephorno, argue that the order of the chapters of the Tora in this case ought to be assumed to be correct historically and that Shemot 24 occurs **following** the Revelation of the Ten Commandments. It would appear that Kritut's R. Yehuda HaNasi would opt for the latter approach, since he understands the verses in question as representing the final step in the conversion process of the Jewish people. It would be logical according to his view that only **after** the people are informed of nature of the Ten Commandments, as well as whatever else may have been contained in the "Book of the Covenant",[\[14\]](#)> that they finally indicate their complete acceptance of Judaism,[\[15\]](#) and enter their new official status as members of the Jewish people.

When Boaz addresses Ruth and praises her for her self-sacrificing efforts on behalf of Naomi, he invokes a turn of phrase that is often associated with converts.

Ruth 2:12

The Lord should Reward you for your deed, a full reward should be Given you by the Lord, God of Israel, "**Asher Ba'at LaChasot Tachat Kenafav**" (that you came to take **refuge** under **His Wings**).

This is the very image that appears in **Beraishit Rabba 84:4** with regard to Avraham.

(Beraishit 12:5) "And Avram took...the souls that they 'Asu' (made) in Charan..."

Said R. Chunia: Avraham would convert the men and Sara would convert the women. But what is connoted by the specific use of the verb "Asu"? But this is to teach that Avraham our father would bring them into his house, and he would feed them and give them drink and bring them close (to monotheism) and **cause them to enter under the Wings of the Divine Presence**, (paralleling the Rabbinic concept that a convert is comparable to a "Tinok SheNolad" (a newborn or one who is born again).

Throughout TaNaCh, there are numerous examples of **anthropomorphisms**, i.e., characteristics and physical forms attributed to HaShem, despite our basic belief that, in the words of the liturgical poem, "Yigdal",[1\[16\]](#) "Ein Lo Demut HaGuf VeEino Guf" (He has no likeness of a physical body, nor is He a physical body). These terminologies are assumed to assist human beings in understanding HaShem, even though He is absolutely unlike anything that we have personally directly experienced. Consequently, the Tora speaks of HaShem's "Eye" (Devarim 32:10), His "Hand" (Shemot 14:34), His "Arm" (Devarim 7:19), His "Anger" (BaMidbar 11:1), characteristics that when we read about them, we imagine the Divine "sharing"

human qualities. However, imagining that HaShem Possesses **wings** appears to force us to focus upon the animal kingdom for parallels.[1\[17\]](#)

Reflecting upon particular traits and abilities of certain animals and then drawing analogies for **human** behavior is not alien to ChaZaL. In **Avot 5:23**, Yehuda ben Teima advises:

Be bold like a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and strong like a lion to carry out the Will of your Father in Heaven.

Not only can the innate strength and abilities of animals be drawn upon for human inspiration, but the Talmud even suggests that moral and ethical principles can be arrived at upon careful observation of the animal world, large and small.

Eiruvim 100b

Said R. Yochanan: Had the Tora not been given, we would have learned modesty from the cat, the prohibition of thievery from the ant (see Mishlei 6:6-8), monogamy from the dove, and empathy from the rooster.

Yet, there seems to be a fundamental difference between attributing human qualities to HaShem as opposed to even metaphorically connecting Him to the characteristics of animals. The gap between man and animals, unfortunately, is not always that great, and therefore it not inherently insulting when men and animals are described with shared characteristics. Furthermore, not only are human beings capable of positive animal characteristics, the same is true about negative behavior patterns. For example, in contrast to most animals that kill their prey before consuming them, man is depicted as capable of being even more barbaric than the members of the animal world.

Avot 3:2

R. Chanina, the deputy High Priest, says: Pray for the welfare of the government, because if people did not fear it, a person would swallow his fellow alive!

However, man, possessing both a spiritual soul and a material body, is dualistic. While there will be moments when the more animalistic qualities will be evident, at other times man has the capacity to strive to live a life of holiness—godliness, and it is during these times that parallels between man and the Divine can be drawn. We are even commanded on numerous occasions to emulate HaShem, as in Devarim 8:6; 19:9; 26:17; 28:9; and 30:16. Consequently it is not surprising when HaShem is compared to human qualities and characteristics. But can the same be said about the members of the animal world? If such an analogy between God and a particular animal characteristic, such as the possession and employment of “wings”, is nevertheless to be drawn in the Bible, the **quality** in question can only be of **major importance**, and there must be nothing comparable to it within a human context that would convey a similar sensibility or emotion.

The only bird to which HaShem is compared in TaNaCh is the eagle.[1\[18\]](#) In **Shemot 19:4** and **Devarim 32:11-12** we encounter one manner in which the adult bird protects its young in a manner that parallels HaShem’s Treatment of the Jewish people:

You saw what I did to Mitzrayim, and how I Carried you **on eagle's wings** and Brought you to Me.

As an **eagle** wakes up his nest, hovers over his nestlings, spreads out his wings and takes them, bearing them aloft **on his wings**,
So will God Lead His People, and next to Him, no strange god.

However, the descriptions of Divine Protection **beneath** His "Wings" are to be found in **Tehillim**.

(17:8) Keep me as the eyelid protects the apple of the eye; **hide me in the shelter of Your Wings.**

(36:8) How precious is Your Lovingkindness which You Show as a God of Judgment; The children of men find assurance **in the shadow of Your Wings.**

(91:4) **He will Cover you with His Wings, and you will take refuge beneath His Wings;** His Truth is a barbed shield and an armor.

What is notable is that although in Rabbinic literature, the idiom of "bringing someone in under the Divine Wings" is associated with conversion, the verses in Tehillim are speaking about everyone and the protection that HaShem potentially Offers not only to those who freely choose to become part of the Jewish people, but to all of His Creatures. The concept is extended even further by **Tehillim 119:19—"Ger Anochi BaAretz' (I am a Ger on the earth)** do not allow Your Commandments to be hidden from me." Even if David was descended from Ruth, he was certainly not considered Halachically a convert. Therefore for him to use this term regarding himself suggests that all Jews to a greater or lesser extent can consider themselves to be figurative if not literal converts, just as all Jews ought to be viewed, and should view themselves as "Ba'alei Teshuva" (lit. masters of repentance). Clearly, a convert who initially belongs to another faith community, must undergo an educational and ritual process before s/he can be accepted as a member of the Jewish community. But all people at one time or another, feel distant and alienated from HaShem, wish to receive support and a greater sense of security so that they will sense that they have become that much closer, that they will be that much less of an outsider, and gain a sense of ultimate acceptance and belonging. Similarly, in terms of engaging in repentance, while the individual who was not at all observant is capable of making the most dramatic change in lifestyle and belief, all people can improve, all people can heighten their spirituality and deepen their devotion to HaShem.

There appears to be a singular synergy between the conversion of an entire people, suggesting that everyone, on whatever level they may find themselves, is worthy and capable of a "conversion experience", and an individual who is moved by an internal disquietude or the inspirational example of a significant other to "burn his/her bridges" and join a new faith community.

Let Ruth inspire not only the way in which we relate to the Tora on Shavuot, but also our yearning to assume our proper places under the protection of HaShem's "Wings" every day of the year.

1[1] Reasons other than what is discussed above, include: a) Shavuot is a harvest festival, and the Megilla deals extensively with a harvest, b) traditionally, it is believed that King David was both born and died on Shavuot, and this book deals with a portion of his genealogy, c) Shavuot is a time of the receiving of the Tora, which will per force entail sacrifice and difficulty comparable to what Ruth experienced, as described in this Megilla..

1[2] See R. Avraham Eliezer Hershowitz, *Otzar Kol Minhagei Yeshurun*, 5730, pp. 198-99.

1[3] An individual is allowed to walk 2000 "Amot" (cubits) from the outside border of the place that s/he establishes as his abode for any particular Shabbat. See RaMBaM, *Hilchot Shabbat* 27:1-2.

1[4] lit. being alone; i.e., it is prohibited for men and women not married to one another to be alone in an inaccessible location since this may lead to sexual impropriety. See *Kiddushin* 81a.

1[5] *Iyun Yaakov* explains that whereas the other expressions are in the first person singular, i.e., "I will go", "I will lie", "I will die", this phrase has to do with the entire people. Consequently, while a woman may be obligated in less than 613 Commandments because of the exemption from positive time-bound Mitzvot, the entire Jewish people do have such an obligation, and therefore the association is made between 613 Mitzvot and the people.

1[6] Stoning, burning, decapitation and strangulation. See *Sanhedrin* 49b.

1[7] See *Sanhedrin* 46b.

1[8] According to *Yevamot* 76a, during the reigns of David and Shlomo, converts were not accepted out of concern that rather than being sincere in their commitment to Judaism, these individuals were merely trying to take advantage of the peace and prosperity that the Jews enjoyed under these two kings. Consequently, a precedent was set for occasionally not considering non-Jews for conversion.

1[9] It is interesting to consider why only these topics and not others were discussed by the women. While it could be argued that the list is entirely dependent upon the language of the verses in question, *Ruth* 1:16-17, and had we not had to interpret this particular text, we would have come up with a different representative group of Jewish law and concepts, on the other hand, we could take the position that these matters were in fact carefully chosen and then proceed to develop a hypothesis that would justify this particular choice. Another variable in this matter may be that the "short list" of Mitzvot might vary from person to person. Just as according to *Mechilta*, *Parsha BaChodesh* #5, when HaShem Approached various peoples in order to inquire regarding their interest in accepting the Tora, the Midrash maintains that the specific issue that was highlighted each time was a Commandment that that nation was most likely to consider untenable for their particular culture and history, so too the individual making the presentation of Judaism to a potential convert can "stack the deck" either to encourage or discourage the individual who has come to him. Perhaps the most obvious examples of the influence of the "presenter" upon someone considering converting are the vignettes involving Hillel and Shamai in *Shabbat* 31a.

1[10] The immediate biblical context of the verse in question is the egalitarian manner in which sacrifices are to be brought, i.e., the same rules that apply to someone who is born Jewish will also apply to those who have decided by their own volition to become part of the Jewish people. However, because of the superfluity of the phraseology, R. Yehuda HaNasi derives from the phrase "KaChem KaGer" that the identical process of conversion that took place at Sinai will be reproduced each time an individual is accepted for conversion.

1[11] Obviously, this ritual is a particular requirement for only male converts, and therefore is never an issue in the case of Ruth.

1[12] *Kritut* 9a notes that the inability to bring sacrifices in the absence of a Temple does not mean that no converts will be accepted. However, there is a discussion in the Talmud as to whether the convert should set aside money so that as soon as the Temple is rebuilt, *IY"H*, the sacrifice that s/he owes could be offered. The proposal is ultimately rejected out of fear that the money which is not "Hekdesh" (associated with property that belongs to "Beit HaMikdash" [the Temple]) and therefore no longer available for private use, will not be kept apart and will be spent on other things, thereby incurring the transgression of "Me'ilah"—see *VaYikra* 5:15 ff.

1[13] While the reference to some form of sacrifice being offered is clear, the Talmud points out that the sources of circumcision and immersion having taken place at Sinai are less apparent. Somewhat indirect—a direct text would have been a description at the time of the Exodus of a mass circumcision, as opposed to citing verses that were formulated after the fact—proof texts for circumcision are brought from *Yehoshua* 5:5 and *Yechezkel* 16:6 (the latter also being quoted in the well-known *RaShI* on *Shemot* 12:6). Ritual immersion for the generation that were freed from slavery is much more difficult to base upon a biblical text, and *Kritut* 9a can do little more than assume that if Moshe sprinkled the sacrificial blood upon the people it must have been preceded by their immersing themselves. Aside from the Talmudic assertion, no other corroborating evidence is offered. *RaMBaM*, *Mishna Tora*, *Hilchot Isurei Biah*, 13:2,3 offers much more likely sources for circumcision and immersion: as for the former, since in *Shemot* 12:48 the Tora specifically requires someone who is to eat from the *Korban Pesach* (the Passover Sacrifice) to be circumcised, and we know that it was eaten by the Jews immediately prior to their departure from Egypt, therefore the males must have undergone circumcision. And as for immersion, *Shemot* 19:10 calls for the people "sanctifying themselves and washing their clothes" prior to the Sinai Revelation. *RaMBaM* assumes that the washing not only applied to the clothing but also to the very bodies of the Jews. While a

distinction could be made between immersion and washing, one can also perceive interchangeability between these two types of actions.

1[14] **RaShI**—the contents of from Beraishit until the giving of the Tora, with an extensive treatment of the Commandments given at Mara—see Shemot 15:25; Sanhedrin 56b.

RaShBaM, Sephorno, Da'at Mikra—what Moshe wrote down according to 24:4, (the Ten Commandments and their explanations?)

Chizkuni—quoting the Mechilta, the warnings in Parshat Bechukotai (!)

1[15] In Shemot 19:8, the Tora records a similar statement on the part of the people, when, before the Ten Commandments are Proclaimed by HaShem, it is written, “And all of the people pronounced together and they said, ‘All that HaShem has Spoken we will do’...” However, not only does the Talmud in Shabbat 88a focus upon the phrase (24:7) “Na’aseh VeNishma” rather than the simpler single word response (19:8; 24:3)“Na’aseh”, but it is also possible that the earlier statements were demonstrations of readiness to accept Judaism, whereas the later statement is the precise official formula for doing so.

1[16] The Complete ArtScroll Siddur, trans. and ed. Nosson Scherman, Mesorah Publications Ltd., Brooklyn, NY, 1996, p. 14.

1[17] It could be maintained that the model for Divine Wings are those associated with angels as in Shemot 25:20 and Yeshayahu 6:2. RaMBaM in Moreh Nevuchim devotes an entire chapter (I:43) to the connotation of “Kanaf” (wing), and suggests that even with respect to angels that are incorporeal, the wings are not to be taken literally. Keying on Yeshayahu 6:2 where a purpose is stated for 4 of the 6 wings of the Serafim, i.e., two to cover the face and two to cover the feet, The remaining 2 are designated as means for flying, clearly a derivation from the bird family. RaMBaM contends that the image of “wings” should not be taken literally, but rather connotes concealment and protection. Consequently, it is defensible to claim that even wings connected to HaShem and His Heavenly Hosts originally derive from this-worldly encounters with flying creatures.

1[18] Christine Ammer, in The Facts on File Dictionary of Clichés, (Checkmark Books, New York, 2001, p. 423), under the heading “under one’s wing, to be/take someone”, writes, “The analogy here is to a hen sheltering her chicks...” While such behavior might be common to all members of the avian family, it would appear to be inappropriate to compare HaShem with a lowly rather than mighty bird.