



## Today's Ruth

Deborah Dash Moore

**I**n the book of Ruth we read an extraordinary expression of love between two women, spoken by a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law. The text has often been read as a reflection of Judaism's position on intermarriage because Ruth, a Moabite, becomes the great-grandmother of David, King of Israel. It is worth looking at two verses (Ruth 1:16-17): "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the Lord do to me, if anything but death parts me from you."

Ruth swears fealty to Naomi, her land, her people, and finally, to her God. The order suggests a path often followed in forsaking family, country, nation, and faith. Beginning with intimacy and commitment to an individual, the journey gradually broadens. Unlike religious conversion, there is no search for a new God.

For centuries, the Book of Ruth's tradition of welcoming a poor outsider coexisted with rabbinic interpretations of conversion that set considerable barriers for a potential convert. Ruth's journey represents an ethnic alternative to religious conversion: first join the people, then accept the faith. It resonates with American attitudes toward frontiers as fluid, liminal space that invites exploration, as opposed to European borders that prevent movement.

Modernity disrupted this Jewish bond linking peoplehood and faith. Zionism successfully argued that nationhood did not require religious commitment. A Sabbath-desecrating, pork-eating Jew remained part of the Jewish nation. Only adherence to false gods (be they Karl Marx or Jesus Christ) severed a Jew from his or her people. Although the Zionist distinction lacked logic, it sustained a connection between peoplehood and faith.

So where does this leave today's Ruth? Does Judaism have room for someone who wants to follow a secular path of joining a people rather than a religious journey of adopting a new faith? Have we drawn boundaries designed to deter the intrepid adventurer who is ready to commit first to an individual Jew and then to a religious civilization?

Taking Ruth's journey as our guide, we imagine that love would be present from the beginning. Love, and an ounce of rebellion and risk. Today's

Ruth would be willing to leave her family and homeland and set off on an uncharted journey alongside her beloved. Likely, such a bold person has already rejected aspects of her upbringing, seeking alternatives to the familiar.

If Ruth's journey begins in love, it deepens with knowledge. To become attached to a homeland and a people requires learning their language, history, culture, and traditions. Today's Ruth might study Hebrew and Judaism as part of her people's heritage. She might learn how to read the news as a Jew, seeing the world afresh. She might come to appreciate the Sabbath as a day for rest, contemplation, and family. She might seek out other Jews, joining organizations that shared her beliefs and welcomed her.

Gradually, as her perceptions, experiences, language, and culture changed, she might come to wrestle with the God of Israel. Undoubtedly, those festivals that celebrate a people's traditions, such as Hanukkah and Pesach, would appeal to her more than holidays that focus on God's power and glory, such as Shavuot and Yom Kippur. As for critical events in the life cycle – birth, *bar/bat mitzvah*, and marriage – today's Ruth would see them as part of her culture. She would want to participate fully in each.

Should Jews welcome today's Ruth? I think they

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should. Barring her from religious activities in synagogues creates a hierarchy that elevates rabbinic attitudes toward boundaries over folk traditions. We need to recognize how Jews as a transnational people consistently violated borders established by gentiles. Rather than imitating gentile practices segregating Jews, we

should work to reconnect peoplehood and faith.

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## Of Borders and Boundaries

*Nina Beth Cardin*

**F**rom nation-states to dinner plates, from liver cells to water wells, boundaries are essential. Boundaries outline who we are. They give us a sense of identity, defining where we start and where we stop so that we do not end up spilling all over the place, or bumping into the furniture, or oozing into someone, or something, else. They offer us walls of security, even if sometimes more fanciful than true. They are our refuge, the frame of our physical integrity, our barriers against intruders, our assertion of privacy.

And yet, no entity can live in isolation. So boundaries must have places that open, allowing the outside in and the inside out. Organisms need to eat, breathe, share, give, and receive. Without openings, organisms die. Even more, without openings, they are isolated, disconnected, and hence, meaningless.

So, while boundaries define one's integrity, it is the openings that provide access to the meaning of life. The question for Judaism, then, as for all other organisms, physical or social, is not so much about boundaries, but rather about openings.

For the Jewish people, the 20th Century has been the time of renegotiating these openings. We can name some of the factors that have made it so: the decline of social barriers that kept us in here; the rise of intermarriage that increasingly ties us to the community out there; Hitler's non-*halakhic* definition of who is a Jew; and the growing awareness on the part of world Jewry that even within Judaism, there are all kinds of Jews.

And today, there is one very large, blessed addition to the list urging us to renegotiate our boundaries: the State of Israel.

For nearly 2000 years, the Jewish people were landless. We had no country to define our borders. Our boundaries were written in our laws, rather than our land. Jewish identity, Jewish belonging, was a

matter for the rabbis to determine, not for the land to confer. But, with Statehood, that has changed.

Today, for the first time in two thousand years, we have two ways to determine identity: land and law. Israeli and Jew. Jew as determined by Israel. Jew as determined by law, as determined by the various religious movements. The Law of Return grants immediate citizenship to anyone who has a Jewish grandparent (a legacy of Hitler), even if that person could not get an *aliyah* in the most liberal of synagogues.

In the 21st Century, we will be called upon to imagine new ways of defining our boundaries. But we need not grope blindly in this venture, for we are not the first to encounter such a challenge. We can begin by turning to the various terms and ways of belonging that we find in the Bible. We can study the ways that early post-biblical Jews struggled to understand and create the boundaries of Judaism. In his new book, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties and Uncertainties*, Shaye Cohen discusses the three meanings of the term *Yehudi* around the start of the Common Era: ethnic (those who live in or hail from Judea); religious/cultural; and political.

Indeed, we are already experiencing a similar complexity today, where different situations call for different definitions of "Jew." Take, for example, a patrilineal Jew, one who was given a Jewish education, who celebrated her *bat mitzvah* in a Reform synagogue and who is now very active in philanthropic Jewish life. While a Conservative rabbi would not count her in a *minyan* or perform her wedding, she would accept her as a legitimate president of her community's Federation.

What can guide us and reassure us as we