



The Modern Jewish Family

Part I: Ruth and Naomi

Ruth

A Study in Stress

In this material we look at the book of Ruth as a story full of stressful moments. We will talk about how Ruth and Naomi can be useful contemporary models as we confront stress in our own daily lives. We also provide a short study piece on the physiological aspects of stress and how it effects our bodies.

Ruth: In Moab, my native country where I grew up, I marry into an immigrant family of Hebrews with entirely different religious beliefs and social customs. I am accepted fully as a member of the household, a daughter to my husband's family. His mother loves me, as she does my sister-in-law who is married to my husband's brother. Our "mother," a widow for ten years, relies on her sons for support and looks forward to being a grandmother. Suddenly both of our husbands die leaving us, three widowed women, without physical protection, financial support or children to carry on the family name.

Our mother decides to return to her own country, broken-hearted and alone. She instructs us to stay behind in our homeland with our own people and our own religious community.

My life is in shambles, I feel suddenly adrift. With my husband dead and no means of support, I also must endure the loss of my adopted religion and culture. While I know that my mother loves me, I still feel discarded, separated from everything that I have come to know. I feel overwhelmed.

Moderator: Today we are that woman who speaks to us from the depths of despair. Let's put ourselves in Ruth's place and explore how her story resonates as we confront challenges in our daily lives.

Discussion questions

- What factors contribute to Ruth's sense of being overwhelmed?
[Major points: death of spouse; no means of support; loss of religious community; feelings of rejection and abandonment; loss of other primary family members (mother, sister-in-law); isolation in a new or adopted culture]
- When you feel overwhelmed how do you react physically, socially, spiritually, psychologically?
[Create list of feelings and behaviors of responses.]

- How might we compare and contrast the stresses on modern women in comparison with those in the ancient world?

Now we return to the story of Ruth and Naomi.

Ruth is overwhelmed, but so is Naomi. As the story continues, Ruth pledges her loyalty to her mother and they journey back to Israel, Naomi's homeland, arriving in time for the barley harvest. Naomi's extended Hebrew family is supportive and with Naomi's insistence and instruction, Ruth is introduced to Boaz, a rich land-owner who is also a distant relative. Whether love at first sight or God's intervention, Boaz takes an active interest in the beautiful young widow and orders that Ruth be treated well while she gleans in his fields. Although destitute, the two women are industrious and work to feed and support themselves. Naomi knows Boaz is an ideal choice for Ruth. Ruth and Boaz eventually marry, taking pains to follow the religious and legal dictates of the time. Their futures and families are secured, and Ruth, according to the biblical narrative, is the great grandmother of King David.

Discussion Questions: *The story of Ruth demonstrates that stress is a normal human occurrence, an ongoing condition from the beginning of human history. We can learn from our biblical antecedents as well as from each other and we can make changes that improve our daily lives.*

- How do Ruth and Naomi regain control and stability in their lives?
[strong family ties; nurturing loving relationships among family members; seeking group support and interdependence; establishing independence, fortitude, planning, industry, religious beliefs, hard work, attitudes for success and learning]
- How do these factors help us maintain stability in our daily lives?.
- Experts who study stress have said: "We are experts at maintaining balance but often novices at managing stressful situations." What do they mean by this?

Part II: Stress

According to WebMD Medical Reference, June 24, 2014:

1. 43% of all adults suffer adverse health effects from stress.
2. 75 - 90% of all doctor's office visits are for stress-related ailments and complaints.
3. Stress can play a part in headaches, high blood pressure, heart problems, diabetes, skin conditions, asthma, arthritis, depression and anxiety.
4. OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) declared stress a hazard of the workplace. It costs American industry more than \$300 billion annually.
5. The lifetime prevalence of an emotional disorder is more than 50%, often due to chronic, untreated stress reactions.

The Science of Stress

Human Reactions to Stress and Danger

Stress is the body's reaction to any change that requires an adjustment or response. The reactions are expressed physically, mentally and emotionally.

The human body is designed to experience and recover from stress. Stress can be positive, keeping us alert and ready to avoid danger, or negative. The latter occurs when we face continuous challenges without relief or relaxation between; stress-related tension builds and we become overworked or feel overwhelmed.

The term "stress" was first used in the 1930s when Hans Selye, an endocrinologist, used it to describe physiological responses in laboratory animals. In his work stress is the reaction to a "stressor" or perceived threat. Experimenting with rats and other animals, he found that they presented a similar series of reactions when exposed to unpleasant or harmful stimuli. He broke their reactions into three stages:

1. **Alarm:** the first stage, as the stressor is realized. The body's system to bring about the "fight-or-flight" response is activated.
2. **Resistance:** the second stage, occurs when the stressor is more than momentary and it becomes necessary to cope with the stressor. The body produces chemicals to bring about a "fight-or-flight response. The body cannot keep up this indefinitely so the longer the stress; the more the body's ability to respond is gradually depleted.
3. **Exhaustion:** the final stage. When all the body's resources are eventually depleted we cannot maintain normal function. A chronic state of exhaustion is felt to contribute to health problems.

Physiologically, the endocrine system regulates our reaction to stress. We produce hormones, chemicals responsible for first activating and later quieting/reversing our reactions to stress. Although the stress response has been heavily studied we still have much to learn about how its components interact with one another.

In response to a perceived threat or "stressor, special structures in our body go to work to help us cope. Neurons (special nerves) in the hypothalamus cause it to secrete two hormones, corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH) and arginine-vasopressin (AVP or vassopressin). These two hormones start up a special "feedback system," or a revolving circuit. This circuit involves three parts of our body, the hypothalamus and pituitary glands located in the brain and the adrenals, glands found close to our kidneys.

Vassopressin is secreted directly into the blood stream. CRH meanwhile acts on the pituitary gland, stimulating it to make a third hormone, Corticotropin. When released into our bloodstream, this new stimulates the adrenals to produce a fourth set of hormones called corticosteroids; the most important one in this group is Cortisol.

Although much more detailed, essentially the body puts these hormones together in a self-regulating system, a special feed-back loop and we experience a stress reaction: our kidneys produce less urine and our blood vessels contract, raising our blood pressure. More sugar is released to give us energy. Sodium and potassium, elements essential to life are preserved. We feel especially alert and may feel butterflies in our stomach. Our muscles tense up and we breathe more rapidly. Our heart rate goes up and the heart beats with more force. This is the classic “flight or fight response.” As the danger or stressor goes away the feed-back loop brings us back to normal and these feelings go away.

Now, imagine that this state goes on unabated or becomes chronic: you are repeatedly stressed, you react, your body attempts to get back to normal. It is well documented that unrelieved stress causes many problems in the body. It can lead to physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach distress, elevated blood pressure, chest pain, sleep disruption, altered immune system response, prolonged healing times, vulnerability to infection, decreased mental awareness and memory loss, lower thyroid function, more abdominal fat, sleep deprivation, drug intolerance (alcohol and prescribed medicines), and even damage or breakdown of the stress feedback mechanism. Fortunately, much of this can be decreased or even reversed if the chronic stress is lessened or overcome.

In summary, it is not so much what chronic stress does to the nervous system but what continuous activation of the nervous system does to other bodily systems. “We are experts at maintaining balance but often novices at managing stressful situations.”

Final Discussion Questions

- How might we apply these three stages of reaction to stress (alarm, resistance, exhaustion) to the story of Ruth and Naomi?
- Think of stressful situations that you, or someone you know, has experienced. How do your/their experiences conform to this model?
- How do you deal with stressful situations?