



## MISHPACHAH II

### Lessons From Our Sisters

#### **Ruth and Naomi**

#### **An Exploration of Three Values**

*This material examines three important values derived from the book of Ruth: friendship, resilience/inner strength, welcoming the stranger.*

*You can choose one or all. Discussion questions are provided at the end of each segment. These could be mini-study units for a rosh chodesh group, a short discussion before a meeting, or role playing activities.*

In the beginning of the Book of Ruth, Naomi perhaps does not see the value in women's relationships as she urges her daughters-in-law to leave her, noting bitterly, "Why should you go with me? Have I any more sons inside of me who can be husbands for you?" (1:11) Naomi understands her relationship to her daughters-in-law as existing only by virtue of their connection to her sons. Since her sons have died, and she has no others who could be potential husbands, Naomi believes that she has nothing to offer the younger women.

Orpah heeds her mother-in-law's advice and returns home. Ruth, though, is determined to stick with Naomi. She declares her loyalty in a powerful, poetic speech that has become a timeless testimony of devotion. She promises, "Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people are my people; and your God is my God." (1:16) Ruth tells Naomi that she does not want to be with her because of any potential suitors that Naomi can provide. Instead, Ruth explains, she just wants to be with Naomi, now, forever, until death separates them.

#### **VALUE 1**

#### **Friendship**

In *Pirke Avot, Ethics of Our Ancestors*, it says: "Make for yourself a teacher and acquire for yourself a friend." The commentator Rambam, in speaking about this verse, said there are three types of friends: useful friend; a pleasant friend; a friend who ethically inspires and instructs.

He explains as follows: Useful friends are like two partners; theirs is like the friendship between a king and his army.

There are two kinds of pleasant friends: the delightful friend and the trusted friend. The love of men for women [and today, women for women and men for men] is characteristic of the relationship with the delightful friend. A trusted friend inspires full confidence so that you feel it unnecessary to be reserved with him or her in action or in speech. Rather you will be able to reveal all your concerns, the good and the ugly, without fear that you will be hurt. When one achieves this level of confidence in another person (s)he will discover deep pleasure in speaking with him/her and loving him/her.

When both friends yearn for and are directed toward one goal, namely, the good, they are to each other ethically inspiring friends. Each one will want to be helped by the friend in achieving that good for both of them together. And this is the kind of friend that we are commanded to acquire. This kind of friendship is similar to the friendship that a teacher feels for a student and a student feels for a teacher.

### Questions for Discussion:

1. According to Rambam's explanation, which type of friendship do you think Ruth had with Naomi? Do you think their type of friendship changed over time? How so?
2. How would you explain your friendship with your mother-in-law or a non-blood relative in Rambam's terms? Did it change over time? What might it take to change the dynamic?
3. Think to yourself of your own friends and place them within these three categories: the useful friend, the delightful friend and the ethically instructive friend. Do you think that these categories overlap?
4. How would you move a friend from one type to another? Can you?
5. How can you identify and create more meaning in your friendships?

### Suggested activities

**Activity 1:** Using a flip chart or board, have participants create lists of what are the best traits of friendship. Break up into smaller groups to discuss and prioritize the traits. Come back together to discuss each group's list.

**Activity 2:** Hand out paper to everyone. Ask each participant to write a short paragraph about each of these statements:

- “*I was (or had) a great friend when .....*” (write about the situation)
- “*I regret that I could have been (or had) a better friend when .....*” (write about the situation)

Collect the papers and read some of them aloud for discussion.

## **VALUE 2**

### **Resilience/Inner Strength**

Stereotypically, relationships between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law can be stressful and full of tension. If you simply conduct an internet search for *mother-in-law*, you will find a lot of jokes and criticisms about the giving of unsolicited advice, disapproval, and generally negative feelings.

Mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law can, of course, learn to love and cope with each other. But imagine being in the shoes of either Ruth or Naomi. If you are Ruth, your husband and his brother have died and you are left with your mother-in-law who tells you to return home to get on with your

life. If you are Naomi, your two beloved sons have now passed away and even though you are older and could use someone to take care of you, you do not want to impose on your daughters-in-law and therefore tell them to go home. Meanwhile, you are no longer technically mother-in-law or daughter-in-law.

*From Ruth's perspective:* Would you want to live with your mother-in-law instead of returning to your family and the comfort of your own people? Do you want to be responsible for taking care of her? Do you want to adopt her ways and have her involved in finding you a new husband?

*From Naomi's perspective:* Do you want to be responsible for teaching your ex-daughter-in-law how to deal in society? Do you want to be responsible for helping her find a new husband when you are mourning for your son, her deceased husband?

Often times in modern society, people who were once related distance themselves from one another when their common bond is gone. But Ruth had something inside that made her want to stay with Naomi, a woman who possessed nothing particularly beneficial for her. Similarly, Naomi must have had something that motivated her to allow Ruth to stay, to teach Ruth the ways of the Israelites and to guide Ruth to a new husband, one that would not be Naomi's son.

How did each deal with this terrible loss and how did each move toward finding happiness?

In *Pirke Avot, Ethics of Our Ancestors*, Ben Zoma asks, "Who is a hero?" and answers saying, "the one who controls his/her passions (sometimes translated as "his/her evil impulse"). The Talmud adds, "Who is the greatest of heroes?" and answers, "the one who controls passions and makes an enemy into a friend."

### **Questions for Discussion:**

1. How does Ben Zoma and the Talmud help to illuminate the resounding inner strength and courage of Ruth and Naomi?
2. In your opinion, who has more inner strength, Ruth or Naomi? How so?
3. Can you think of a challenging situation when you used your inner strength to control your passions?
4. What does it take to have inner strength and courage?
5. Today, when you can get what you want with a push of a button, how can we teach our children about inner strength, courage, resilience? How can we teach them to make lemonade out of lemons?

### **VALUE 3 Welcoming the Stranger**

In her book, *Seasons Friendship: Naomi and Ruth as a Model for Relationship*, Marjory Zoet Bankson writes:

*Although Naomi and Ruth's arrival in Bethlehem signals a shift in the external season of their friendship - from winter to spring - conditions are chilly and unpredictable. Whatever bonding has taken place between the older woman and the younger one while they travel in the desert remains unspoken. They have not yet become a pair, a clearly defined 'we' of spring friends. The village women cannot name them as partners either, because custom in Bethlehem is limited to conventional dyads - married couple, mothers with children - amid auxiliary family groupings.*

*Naomi's bitterness matches Ruth's marginal status and the two women seem bound only by their need for safety. Since Ruth cannot participate in this community through any children of her own, she remains an outsider. And from Naomi's description of herself as 'bitter,' we know that she, too, sees her value in this particular community solely on the basis of a mother's role, no matter how rich her living experiences has been. Both women are aliens to the cultural norms for women in Bethlehem.*

#### **Questions for Discussion:**

1. We might imagine that when Naomi returns to Bethlehem with Ruth, the Israelite women begin to talk about the two women. What might they say? In what spirit do you think they would be speaking and questioning?
2. Why do people tend to gossip about people who are new or different to their community?
3. How is it possible to talk about new comers in a way that is not disparaging or gossipy?

In Exodus 22:20-23:9 we read, “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress a stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.” The Hebrew word for Egypt, *mitzrayim*, comes from the root *tzar*, meaning *narrow*. Egypt was for the Israelites a narrow place where they were stifled by Pharaoh’s hatred and ill treatment.

4. When have you felt that you were a stranger or odd person out in a social setting? Where was your Egypt? How did it feel? How did you get out of it? Did someone help you?
5. How can we help others find the wide space, the space where everyone can grow as himself or herself? How might we change our mindset about newcomers or visitors and welcome them instead of being suspicious and gossiping about their differences?