



# Rut: A Model of Excellence

Thoughts for Shavuot 5770

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John W. Gardner was an internationally-known thinker and leader who promoted the common good and improved the lives of millions of Americans. He once wrote, "The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity, and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because philosophy is an exalted activity, will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water". Gardner's words are as true today as they were when he wrote them in the 1960's. We all believe in the importance of excellence.

But are we striving for excellence as a community? Are we teaching our children excellence? Do we talk about excellence for our families?

Perhaps we don't strive for excellence because it's so hard to define. I looked up "excellence" in the dictionary. Webster defines excellence as, "the state, quality, or condition of excelling." Thanks very much. What does that mean?

While we might not have such an easy time defining excellence, Chazal teach us that you know it when you see it.

Reading the amazing story of Megillat gives us a small glimpse into Rut's character. We see her as a model for many different characteristics.

She serves as a model for Jewish women. She's the poster child for *gerim*, people that have converted into Judaism. She personifies the attribute of *chesed*. But sometimes I think that we overlook the most critical aspect of her personality. Rut, when all is said and done, is a woman committed to excellence. She succeeds because she never does anything half-way.

We all know the story: After marrying into a foreign family in her homeland, Rut suffers the loss of her husband, brother-in-law and father-in-law in short order. But, in the short time she has with her new family, they light a spark in her and turn her on to Yiddishkeit. When Na'ami prepares to return home, she thinks that Rut is only being nice. "Listen," she tells her daughter in law, "I insisted that you convert to marry my son. But he's dead. I have nothing to offer you. Go home." Rut remains undaunted, and tells Na'ami in no uncertain terms that she doesn't take commitments lightly: באשר -- "Your nation is my nation and your God is my God." When does Na'ami finally allow Rut to come with her? She relents when she sees Rut's determination: ותרא כי מתאמצת ללכת - "Na'ami saw that Rut was steadfastly minded to go with her." That steadfast determination not just to convert – but to do it right, always – that's the hallmark of excellence.

Interestingly, the Midrash sees Boaz as the model for precisely the opposite: for a lack of excellence. When Rut arrives at Boaz's house to beg for grain in the fields, she doesn't bring a lunch. So Boaz asks her to join his workers in the field. She sits down, and ויצבת לה קלי ותאכל ותשב - "he passed her some parched corn, she ate, became full and left food over." To me, reading the text, Boaz seems like a really nice guy. Not only does he allow Rut to collect in his fields. He even gives her lunch! But the Midrash sees it differently.

א"ר יצחק בר מריון: בא הכתוב ללמדך שאם אדם עושה מצוה עשנה בלבב שלם, שאלו היה יודע בעז שהקב"ה מכתוב עליו "ויצבת לה קלי ותאכל ותשב ותותר", עגלות מפוטמות היה מאכילה  
Said Rav Yitzchak, the verse comes to teach us that if a person does a mitzvah he should do it with a full heart. Because if Boaz had known that God would write about him, "he passed her some parched corn", he would have given her spiced veal!

Rav Yitzchak asks a great question: How would each of us behave if we knew that someone was recording our every move? How much money would we give to that visitor collecting money? How many times would we walk out in the middle of davening? Would I still have spoken to my spouse or my mother that way? Says the Midrash: *If you're going to do a mitzvah – great! But do it with a full heart. Do it with excellence.* Put another way, the Midrash asks us: Do we, in our religious and spiritual lives, strive for excellence?



Do we have Rut's determination that if I'm going to learn Torah, I'm going to be at my shiur, no matter what. If I volunteer in my community, I'm going to be there, and not shirk my responsibility and make someone else cover for me?

I began by quoting John W. Gardner. I'd like to share another quote with you, because I think that it applies directly to our shul and our community. In his book, *Excellence*, Gardner wrote:

*If the man in the street says, 'Those fellows at the top have to be good, but I'm just a slob and can act like one' -- then our days of greatness are behind us. We must foster a conception of excellence that may be applied to every degree of ability and to*

*every socially acceptable activity. A missile may blow up on its launching pad because the designer was incompetent or because the mechanic who adjusted the last valve was incompetent. The same is true of everything else in our society. We need excellent physicists and excellent mechanics, excellent cabinet members and excellent first-grade teachers. The tone of our society depends upon a pervasive an almost universal striving for good performance.*

The same, exact rule applies to us in our own communities, and especially here in Israel, as we struggle each and every day to build the Jewish nation. I'll paraphrase Garder:

*If a member of the Jewish nation says, 'Those fellows at the top – the Prime Minister, the community leaders, the rabbis – they have to be good, but I'm just a slob and can act like one' – then our best days as a nation are behind us. We must foster a conception of excellence and apply it to every aspect of Jewish national and community life, from the mayor of every town to the chairman of the local PTA to the volunteer that helps in the local community center.*

This topic of excellence strikes a particular chord in me on Shavuot when we prepare to say yizkor. I think, after learning about John Gardner and his book, I also learned something new about my father. Because, even though he died when I was nine years old and I don't remember that much about him, I do remember that he would always tell us, "I don't care what you do later on in life as long as you do it well. You can be plumber for all I care, as long as you're a good plumber." I was never able to have a serious discussion with my father – he died when I was too young. But I get the sense that my father got that line about the plumber from Gardner, because he was the type of person who would have read that book.

And what he used to tell us still motivates me – to strive for the excellence of Rut, to try and be the best father, husband and member of Klal Yisrael that I can be.