

Shavuot May 19, 2010 / 6 Sivan 5770

It's not easy being a Jew. It's not easy being an observant Jew, that's for sure. This week my dedication to our faith was severely tested. I was offered a ticket to go to last night's (Tuesday) Flyers game, and of course, with Shavuot beginning at sunset, I had to turn it down. But it wasn't easy. I grew up playing street hockey and following the Flyers since I was a little boy. They won their first Stanley Cup three months after my bar mitzvah. I skipped school to go to the Flyers Parade in town. And now, years later, the Flyers are again the center of my attention, and almost everyone in this area who cares about sports.

This is the great Cinderella story, a fantastic comeback story; a story about unexpected heroes. Well, on this holiday of Shavuot, we read a similar story, and it is called the Book of Ruth. It is not a story familiar to a great many, and I thought it might be worthwhile to take some time to learn about what is in it, and why it is part of our Shavuot celebration.

The Book of Ruth comes from the third section of the Hebrew Bible, Ketuvim, and it is one of the Five Megillot, or Scrolls, read throughout the Jewish holiday cycle. Ruth was a Moabite princess who married a Jew. How they met, why they married, what her father, the Moabite King said, we don't know. We do know, however, that the marriage did not last long. Her husband died while Ruth was still young. Now, she could have easily returned to her people and been a celebrity, taking her place again as a member of the royal family. Instead, she tenaciously clung to Naomi, her Jewish mother-in-law. Ruth's Judaism had been solely by virtue of being married to her husband, and once he was gone, she really did not have any Jewish identity of her own. She was determined to convert and embrace Judaism despite Naomi's attempts to dissuade her. She joined the Jewish nation penniless with only her mother-in-law as a friend.

Yet her self-sacrifice and spiritual determination was noticed by a wealthy landowner and prominent judge named Boaz. Ruth used to quietly troll his field collecting left-over grain for herself and Naomi. He eventually married her, and that relationship, the Bible tells us, gave rise to the Jewish monarchy for King David ultimately descended from her. King David was Ruth's great-grandson. And tradition teaches that the Mashiach, the future king of the Jewish people, will come from that line as well. Since David was born on Shavuot, we read the story of his ancestry on that day.

The irony of the Jewish royal family's origin is remarkable. Moab was the lowliest of nations, known for its cruelty, especially to the Jews, and for its overt promiscuity. The Torah even reminds us that Moab's own ancestry itself was of questionable nature. We read in Genesis that Moab stemmed from an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter who got her father drunk, and seduced him. The

nation's very name announced the incestuous origin of the nation. That daughter called her offspring "Moab" which literally means "from my father." Yet David nonetheless came from the family of that Moabite princess who, at least in title, represented everything that Moab stood for!

Ruth, her re-birth as a Jew, and the personal transformation that ultimately gave rise to King David, born on Shavuot, parallels our national march, our national rebirth from Passover to Shavuot. We went from the darkest night of slavery into the light of Mount Sinai where we received the Torah. We begin on the lowest of spiritual levels just as Ruth did, but work our way up to the point at which we can receive Torah.

And that too, is a comeback story of the ages, one that has animated our People throughout our long history. It reminds us that Gd can and does work miracles in all our lives; that even in the darkest night of our own personal experience, light and rebirth are just around the corner. We have to keep marching forward in faith, knowing that good indeed does lie in store for us; that our comeback is just around the corner. And it further reminds us that guides and teachers, role models and personal heroes are all around us, often taking the most unlikely of forms.

Everyone likes a comeback story, everyone likes to root for the underdog. Everyone likes a come from behind victory. That's what makes the Flyers games so tantalizing, and it is the very same emotion that makes our story as Jews so compelling in every generation. We are the people that overcome the odds stacked against us. Ours is a nation surrounded by hostile enemies and yet we still thrive. We are a minority that somehow comes out on top.

But the true challenge comes in the next generation. Will our little ones still see their story as "come from behind", or are they so complacent to think that Jews have reached the Promised Land? Living in the affluence of Cherry Hill, surrounded by a vibrant and well organized Jewish community, do we really need to come from behind? We are already on top! When one third of the Supreme Court is Jewish, when so much of the Senate and House are Jewish, when Israel can defend itself, when anti-Semitism is a relatively unknown phenomenon to Jewish kids today, do they still embrace the "come from behind" story of our People? And the answer is: Only if we teach it to them. And that's why this holiday and this sacred book of Bible are so important. They are the story of our People, our success, our own come from behind victory; proof of our ability to beat the odds, time and again. That is a story for the ages - that is OUR story for the ages. Everyone loves a come from behind story. Let's make sure that it is the story we continue to tell about ourselves.

Well, that's it for now.

See You in Shul,

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi