



# CHAG V' CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

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## Shavuot 5775

### *Celebrating the Torah of Economic Justice and Compassion*

By Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum

Shavuot is less well known than most other Jewish holidays, and yet its message is crucial. Shavuot is the moment we celebrate *matan Torah*, the giving of the Torah—the revelation of the truth of the Holy One's presence in the human sphere. Could any holiday be more important?

Some of the deepest truths of Shavuot lie in the unabashedly human tale we read on this sacred holiday. The Book of Ruth tells the story of immigrant women struggling to survive in times of economic and political insecurity.

The classical *midrash* on the Book of Ruth tells us that the entire point of the book is to teach *gemilut hasadim*—acts of lovingkindness and generosity.<sup>1</sup>

The central elements to the story have not lost relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In fact, thanks to our internet-interconnected world, we are all better and more quickly informed now than we were 50 years ago. We know immediately about ecological disasters and the consequent forced migrations around the globe. In recent weeks alone, we learned immediately of migrants losing their lives on the Mediterranean and the people of Nepal suffering terribly in the wake of an earthquake.

The Book of Ruth begins as famine forces a family to leave one country for another in the search for economic security and basic means for survival. It is a story of migrants looking for a better life. But the journey of exile is arduous, and shortly after they arrive safely in the foreign land, all the men of the family die. The women—Ruth and Naomi—are left alone in a new land, without resources to survive.

In large part, Ruth and Naomi survive because they encounter generosity in their vulnerable state rather than abuse or exploitation. Ruth goes into the fields to scavenge food left behind after the harvest, and rather than shoo her away, the land owner, Boaz, asks that his workers treat her with respect. He performs the acts of economic justice commanded in our tradition: Three types of produce must be left behind for the poor after the harvest: *peah*, the corners of the field, *shikachakh*, forgotten

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Rabbah 2:14

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sheaves, *leket*, produce that falls during harvesting, and *maser ani*, a certain portion of each crop that is reserved as a tithe.

When Ruth later goes to Boaz at night, trying to rely on the familiar barter of sexual relations for security, she is extremely fortunate to find a man of such profound humanity. He does not touch her but offers to provide her the protection of marriage, which was essential for a woman's survival during that time. The Torah contains no shortage of stories in which male power is exercised with brutality rather than *mentshlikhkayt*—human decency—and so this moment of compassion stands out.

It is profound that on the holiday in which we celebrate the giving of the Torah, the text that we read is the Torah of economic justice, of the obligation to make our society care for the vulnerable, the immigrant, the migrant worker, the weak, the poor.

It remains unmistakably true that the many of the most vulnerable people globally are immigrant women and girls like Naomi and Ruth. It remains our obligation (through working for the passage of the International Violence Against Women Act, for example) to see that the urgent Torah of *gemilut hasadim* and *mentshlikhkayt* trumps entrenched traditions of abuse and power.



**Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum** is the Senior Rabbi and spiritual leader of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah (CBST) in New York City—the world's largest LGBTQ synagogue for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Rabbi Kleinbaum has placed social and political activism, combined with an equal commitment to prayer, pastoral counseling and study, at the heart of her work as a congregational rabbi. Under her leadership, CBST has become a powerful voice for equality and justice for people of all sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions. She has been a leading social activist on behalf of the LGBTQ community, advocating from the pulpit and in the streets for full civil rights. She has testified before Congress on same-sex marriage and has served on New York City's Commission for LGBTQ Runaway and Homeless Youth. Early in her career, when HIV/AIDS was devastating life in New York City, she became a pioneer in Jewish pastoral care for people with AIDS. Rabbi Kleinbaum has been recognized by *Newsweek* magazine as one of the 50 most influential rabbis in America, and has been named by *The Huffington Post* as one of the nation's Top 10 Women Religious Leaders and 15 most Inspiring LGBT Religious Leaders.

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