

## Drashah for Shavuot Rut: Model of Excellence

John W. Gardner was a nationally-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's 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, מ"ל תל"ל teach us that you know it when you see it.

Reading the amazing story of מגילת רות 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 גרים – people that have converted into Judaism. She personifies the attribute of תון. 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 loses 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's 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 נעמי in no uncertain terms that she doesn't take commitments lightly. -- באשר תלכי אלך -- "Where you go, I go, I go, I go." -- עמך עמי ואלקירי אלקי -- "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. -- [Naami] 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 בוועז 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 ויאכל ותשבוע ותוטר -- "he passed her some parched corn, she ate, became full and left food over." To me, reading the מגילה, 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 another way:

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

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 from Israel? How many times would we walk out in the middle of davening? Would we still have spoken to our spouse 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 volunteered for an organization or my shul or my community, I'm going to be there, and not shirk my responsibility and make someone else cover for me. And if I belong to a shul, I'm going to make sure that that shul represents the best of what a Jewish community can be.

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, called 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 a shul (or for that matter, any group). I'll paraphrase Gardner:

If a man in a shul says, 'Those fellows at the top – the rabbi, the gabbai, the President – they have to be good, but I'm just a slob and can act like one' – then our best days as a shul are behind us. We must foster a conception of excellence and apply it to every shul activity, from the person who sets the lights to the man who makes the Kiddush to the mother who comes to daven. Yes, we need excellent קריאה בעלי חזנים and learners and volunteers.

This topic of excellence strikes a particular chord in me as we prepare to say yizkor. I think, after learning about John Gardner and his book while preparing this דרשה, 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 get a 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 try and be the best rabbi, and father, and husband that I can be.