Ruth and My Grandmother

Little of this strange land did she understand
Except the need to glean and gather grain within her hand.
Little of strange language did she comprehend.
A foreigner and widow, her lot was just to bend
And garner enough sustenance for her and for one other.
Thus, Ruth endured and cared for her husband’s aged mother.
Her skin deep burnt by blaze of sun, her garments flecked with grain,
Ruther labored dawn till sunset-in heat of day, in rain.
She, often, knew discouragement but vowed she would remain
Within this place of one God-her faith would strong sustain.
And, often, she knew loneliness-still, she felt gratitude
For love shared with Naomi, for shelter and for food.
She looked beyond her circumstance to view all life as blessed-
How should she dream she, one day soon, would know great happiness-
How should she dream she soon would cradle child unto her breast.

Lucille Frenkel Shavuot 5738 (1978)¹

You never know how you are touched in life by the smallest thing. I am writing this sermon after a March where I felt depression about my grandmother’s passing. It hit after Shiva and stayed with me throughout the month. Depression according to the Baal Shem Tov is the greatest sin—how much more so during the month of Adar when one is commanded to only feel joy. At the same time, while you can work on changing your mentality and making the most out of each and every day, you can never completely control what you feel. My friend Marty said last year that "the thing that makes depression so hard to fight is that depression destroys your will to fight." I knew that I needed to change for my wife and daughter but I didn’t know how.

When you know your world will never be the same what snaps you out of this feeling of helplessness? What give you hope again in the future? I can only speak from personal experience and say that my Uncle Dan sending me one of my grandmother’s new poems was the impetus for me. I shared the poem entitled “Our Precious Heritage: Respecting Truths Our Ancestors Gifted to Us” at the April board meeting. After
reading it I instantly knew that I wanted to write my Shavuot sermon in my grandmother’s memory. Her Shavuot sermon about Ruth made me think deeply about how much faith Ruth had to have. She just lost her husband and had no children. As a single individual, the sensible thing to do would have been to return to her native Moav. Yet Ruth knew she could not abandon her mother-in-law Naomi, despite Naomi’s encouragement for her to do so. Instead she made a vow: “Your people shall be my people and your G-d shall be my G-d.”² She chose a much harder life unaware of what the future would bring. I’m sure that Ruth gleaning under the sweltering Israeli sun had no conception that she would meet and marry a kinsman and become the great-grandmother of King David.

I know that my grandmother would have wanted me to carry on. She loved living so much and strove to do her best each and every day. I remember when I felt like leaving rabbinical school and she told me “You’re not a quitter.” She always gave me the strength and fortitude to continue on no matter what challenges I had. She was always the first

² Ruth 1:16
person I called for advice, up at 4:30 am each morning. She valued raising a family so much and giving her entirety to the next generation. One of my reasons for wanting to have a child so quickly was to make her a great-grandmother so that she could see the fulfillment of her values in the next generation. She never had it easy but like Ruth she kept her faith and integrity in what she believed.

As we remember those who are no longer in our midst, it can be very easy to feel depression or melancholy. After all, these people shaped who we are and our lives have deep voids without their physical presence. At the same time, we are grateful for how they have made our lives all the richer and for all the blessings they imparted us with how they lived. We remember them with a wellspring of emotions and we live each day knowing that they would be proud of who we have become and of how we live our lives.

This is my grandmother’s final poem about Ruth, entitled “Ruth at the Burial of Naomi.”

The tears well up within Ruth’s eyes.
She must admit this open grave,

The fact of Naomi’s demise.

She, who would not live separate

From her in life, must now accept

That death, that such is each man’s fate.

And now Ruth weeps with painswept tears

Recalling all their past shared years.

And she shall miss Naomi’s love.

And she shall miss Naomi’s voice.

She chose to follow in her steps

And never did regret that choice.

Ruth wonders how she shall live on-

Then sees the face of her own son.

She views in his life patterning.
She sees in his life’s flowering

An echo of Naomi’s being.

Ruth would not have him fear of death

Nor question preciousness of breath

She would not have her tears defile

His faith in life. Ruth prays for strength,

And with a love which conquers grief,

Through tears, she manages a smile.\(^3\)