



## **A REFLECTION ON RUTH CH 3**

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Monday 26 December 2022  
Limmud<sup>2</sup>

- 1 My 101-year-old great aunt has a friend – or possibly sparring-partner – who lives in the next building. I've never met this friend, and she's never met me, yet when she heard that I was living with a woman before we were married, she told Auntie Marie that she was “very concerned”.
- 2 I have to say, I kind of liked the idea that my, really very inoffensive, private life was giving sleepless nights to this total stranger.
- 3 The fact is, the human capacity to get riled up about things that have absolutely no impact on our own lives, or indeed on anybody else's lives, is an enduring feature of every community on earth. Other people's relationships – especially ‘unconventional’ relationships, whatever that may mean – are prime territory for this.



- 4 The night-time threshing-room drama between Ruth and Boaz in chapter 3, then, presented a serious problem for more traditionally-minded commentators. So our first question might be: did they actually get it together out there in a remote corner of the farm?
  
- 5 Edward Campbell thinks not. The narrative's whole "roster of *double entendres*", he argues, is there in order to emphasise that the couple could have had sex – the opportunity was there – but decided not to: "the choice is made in favour of what righteous living calls for".<sup>a</sup>
  
- 6 Professor Jennifer Koosed, in her fascinating book *Gleaning Ruth*, disagrees quite forcefully: "Campbell's idea of righteousness," she says, "is more informed by his own sexual ethic than the biblical one. The main reason to think that there was no sexual contact that night depends on one's importing to ancient Israel a particular sexual code. There is no law among the biblical laws that forbids all sex outside of marriage."<sup>b</sup>



- 7 If there was sexual contact, of a sort which was perfectly legal yet still engendered some form of social or communal disapproval, that would explain Boaz's reassurance to Ruth immediately after their encounter: אֶל-תִּירָאִי כִּי יוֹדַע כָּל-שַׁעַר עַמִּי כִּי אִשָּׁת חַיִּל אַתְּ, "Do not be afraid, for the gate of my people knows that you are an upright woman."
- 8 That's a literal translation: שַׁעַר עַמִּי, *the gate of my people*. It's quite a curious phrase, usually understood to refer to the local elders or suchlike, because they would sit at the gate of the town.<sup>c</sup> But Rabbi Moses Alshech, a 16th-century commentator in Tzfat, has a slightly different interpretation. Highlighting the fact that Boaz didn't say, "Everyone knows that you are an upright woman," he imagines Boaz saying to Ruth: "The people who matter know that you are an upright woman. And do not worry about רִיקִים וּפּוֹחַזִּים, ignorant and haughty people."<sup>d</sup>
- 9 What is different about the 'people who matter'? They're neither רִיק, empty, ill-informed; nor פּוֹחַז, supercilious, puffed-up with their



own self-importance. Instead, the ‘people who matter’ are respectful, tolerant and clued-up (although they only know what they know: they’re unaware of the business on the threshing-room floor, because it’s a private encounter and none of their business; rather, they reach their opinion about Ruth’s character based on her public activity, the way she interacts with the community – the things about a person that really matter).

- 10 Now, being told to disregard judgmental comments and hostility from stuck-up, interfering busybodies is much easier said than done. And women are always judged more harshly in such affairs: Professors Mary Crawford and Danielle Popp powerfully refer to this phenomenon as the “Madonna-whore dichotomy”, whereby women are seen as “either pure and virginal or promiscuous and easy”.<sup>e</sup> Boaz was the man in the relationship, and as such he had far less to lose from a rumour of sexual impropriety than Ruth did. For somebody with straight elder male privilege to play the “Just ignore it!” card as a way of excusing or minimising behaviour that hurt his partner, was unhelpful at best.



- 11 Yet there is one aspect of Boaz's reassurance (or attempted reassurance), as read through the prism of Rabbi Alshech's commentary, that is helpful: the idea that there is a right way and a wrong way to judge others. It's both impossible and undesirable to go through life never judging anybody else. We need to judge who is a safe driver, who is a competent surgeon, who is a reliable worker, who is a decent employer, who is a trustworthy lawyer or accountant or rabbi.
  
- 12 Yet in making such determinations, we have to avoid falling into the trap of being either **רִיק** or **פָּחוּז**. We should be neither ill-informed nor self-important. And I suspect that if we all faithfully stuck by this principle with every character judgement we ever have to make – if we arm ourselves with all the relevant facts, and discard all the irrelevant facts – we will end up judging others a lot more positively than we otherwise would.
  
- 13 Ruth probably did worry about what people would think of her, in spite of Boaz's half-hearted reassurance that those people didn't



matter. But my Auntie Marie's friend could, perhaps, do with being told that if she continues to poke her nose into the private affairs of total strangers, she risks losing her place among 'people that matter', as do all of those who seek to delegitimise, disparage or demean others' lives for no good reason.

14 I wish you all a good afternoon and an inspiring rest-of-the-day at Limmud!

<sup>a</sup> Edward F Campbell Jr. *The Anchor Bible: Ruth, a new translation with introduction, notes and commentary* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975): 132.

<sup>b</sup> Jennifer L Koosed. *Gleaning Ruth: a biblical heroine and her afterlives* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), ebook edition: ch 6.

<sup>c</sup> Ramban to Numbers 7:3

<sup>d</sup> Alshech to Ruth 3:11

<sup>e</sup> Mary Crawford and Danielle Popp. "Sexual Double Standards: A Review and Methodological Critique of Two Decades of Research", *Journal of Sex Research* 40 (2003), 13-26: 13.