

# A Life of Vertical & Horizontal Responsibility: Shavuot During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Rabbi Jonathan Sachs May 24, 2020

Obviously the question that we ask ourselves is why Ruth is read on Shavuot. There's no obvious connection between Ruth and Shavuot. The two standard explanations are that, number one, it has to do with the time of the year. Ruth is set bimei k'tzir cheitim, at the time of the wheat harvest. And Shavuot takes place at the time of the wheat harvest. Or, number two, that Ruth became a convert. "Where you go, I go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your God will be my God. Your people will be my people." And the Israelites, as it were, became converts at Mount Sinai because the essence of conversion is kabbalat hamitzvot, acceptance of the commands, and that's what the Israelites did at Sinai. Maybe it has to do with time of the year, or maybe it has to do with Ruth's conversion.

However, I want to suggest to a different answer. An answer put forward by none other than Moses Maimonides in *The Guide For the Perplexed*. *The Guide For the Perplexed* is the greatest work of Jewish philosophy, and it's a big work. It consists of three books, and it's a very lengthy work. Right at the end, (book three has 54 chapters, and right at the end in chapter 53 of book three) in the penultimate chapter, the Rambam devotes one third of that chapter to defining what is chessed, what is loving kindness? The Rambam says chessed means doing good for people in a way that they have no claim on you. It's not justice, it's not tzedakah, it's chessed. You have no claim, but nonetheless, we do good to somebody that is chessed, going beyond anything the law requires.

In chapter 54, we begin to understand why the Rambam has taken all this time to tell us the meaning of chessed. In book four, chapter 54, the closing chapter of the *Guide*, he quotes Jeremiah, who says, "Koh amar Hashem", Thus says God, "Al yithallel chacham

bechochmato...”, “Let the wise not boast of his wisdom, nor the strong hero of his strength, or the rich person of his wealth.” “Ki im bezot yithallel hamithallel”. But only boast of this, “haskel veyado’a oti.” “Think hard, meditate hard, and know Me.” “Ki Ani Hashem.” “That I am God.” (Jer. 9:22) This is a very Rambam sort of idea, that the highest thing in life is to develop an intellectual understanding of God.

**But Jeremiah doesn’t stop there. He goes on and says, “Haskel veyado’a oti, ki Ani Hashem oseh chessed mishpat utzedakah ba’aretz” . “I” says God, “do loving-kindness, justice and righteousness on earth.” “Ki v’eileh chafatzti n’oom Hashem”. Because these are what I desire,’ says God.” The Rambam says, (to paraphrase), “I may have been giving you the impression that the most important thing in life is to intellectually understand what God is. But actually, the most important thing in life is to do acts of loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness.” It is the kind of people we become and the kind of virtues we embody, that are what the Torah are all about.** And since Ruth is the Book of chessed in Tanach, maybe that is why we read it on Shavuot. Because the Rambam tells us that the whole purpose of Torah culminates in this ability to do acts of loving-kindness to other people.