

# RACE AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

## LEARNING TO SEE EACH OTHER AS FAMILY

### TORAH BLESSING

### DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

#### Source Texts:

Rabbi Buchdahl addresses issues of race and racism within the Jewish community. She encourages us to move from an identity model created by our enemies to one that aligns with how God sees us.

#### Invention of our Enemies

Although there are several times when enemy peoples defined Jews by race, the Nuremberg Laws from Nazi Germany are perhaps the most dangerous and infamous example. Below is a visual representation of these laws, which defined a Jew as anyone with one Jewish grandparent, regardless of conversion.



As Rabbi Buchdahl said, the state of Israel adopted this same racial definition of Jewish identity when establishing its immigration policy.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What do you think about the decision of the Israeli government to adopt this definition of Jewish identity? Would you have made the same decision in their shoes?
- The concept of Jewish features also grew under the Nazi regime. How much is the idea of “a Jewish look” today linked to the caricatures made by our enemies?

(c) How does it make you feel to see the influence of our enemies on Jewish identity? Can you imagine an alternative approach to defining Jewish identity with more positive roots?

### The Myth of Homogeneity

Rabbi Buchdahl acknowledges that heredity is both important and meaningful, and that being a link in a chain that extends all the way back to Sinai is a powerful image. Still, it is important to remember that this chain was never defined by blood alone. There were always ways to join the Jewish people and the covenant. Perhaps the most famous example from the *Tanach* is that of Ruth:

Ruth 1:1-9, 14-16

(1) In the days when the chieftains ruled, there was a famine in the land; and a man of Bethlehem in Judah, with his wife and two sons, went to reside in the country of Moab. (2) The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name was Naomi, and his two sons were named Mahlon and Chilion—Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. They came to the country of Moab and remained there. (3) Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. (4) They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth, and they lived there about ten years. (5) Then those two—Mahlon and Chilion—also died; so the woman was left without her two sons and without her husband. (6) She started out with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab; for in the country of Moab she had heard that the LORD had taken note of His people and given them food. (7) Accompanied by her two daughters-in-law, she left the place where she had been living; and they set out on the road back to the land of Judah. (8) But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Turn back, each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me! (9) May the LORD grant that each of you find security in the house of a husband!" And she kissed them farewell. They broke into weeping...(14) They broke into weeping again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law farewell. But Ruth clung to her. (15) So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and her gods. Go follow your sister-in-law." (16) But Ruth replied, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם שֶׁשָׁפֵט הַשָּׂפָטִים וַיְהִי רָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ וְיָלֵךְ  
אִישׁ מִבֵּית לְחֶם יְהוּדָה לְגוֹר בְּשָׂדֵי מוֹאָב הוּא  
וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וּשְׁנֵי בָנָיו:  
בְּשֵׁם הָאִישׁ אֱלִמֶלֶךְ וּשְׁם אִשְׁתּוֹ נְעֹמִי וּשְׁם  
שְׁנֵי־בָנָיו | מַחְלֹון וְכִלְיוֹן אֶפְרַתִּים מִבֵּית לְחֶם  
יְהוּדָה וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׂדֵי־מוֹאָב וַיְהִי־וַיִּשְׁעוּ:  
גִּנְיַמַת אֱלִמֶלֶךְ אִישׁ נְעֹמִי וַתִּשְׁאַר הִיא וּשְׁנֵי  
בָנֶיהָ:  
דוֹשְׁאוֹ לָחֶם נָשִׁים מְאֻבּוֹת שֵׁם הָאֶחָת עֹרְפָה  
וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית רוּת וַיָּשִׁבוּ שָׁם כְּעֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים:  
הַנְּיָמוּתוֹ גַּם־שָׁנִיָּהֶם מַחְלֹון וְכִלְיוֹן וַתִּשְׁאַר  
הָאִשָּׁה מִשְׁנֵי יְלָדֶיהָ וּמֵאִשָּׁה:  
וַתִּקַּם הִיא וְכִלְיוֹן וַתֵּשֶׁב מִשְׂדֵי מוֹאָב כִּי  
שָׁמְעָה בְשָׂדֵה מוֹאָב כִּי־פָקַד יְהוָה אֶת־עַמּוֹ  
לָתֵת לָהֶם לֶחֶם:  
זוֹתָצֵא מִן־הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הָיְתָה־שֹׁמֵה וּשְׁתִּי  
כִלְיוֹן עִמָּה וַתִּלְכְּנָה בְּדֶרֶךְ לָשׁוּב אֶל־אֶרֶץ  
יְהוּדָה:  
חַוְתָאמֶר נְעֹמִי לְשְׁתִּי כִלְיוֹן לָכֵן לָכֵן לְשׁוּבָה אִשָּׁה  
לְבֵית אִמָּה יַעֲשֶׂה [יַעֲשֶׂה] יְהוָה עִמָּכֶם חֲסֹד  
כְּאִשֶׁר עֲשִׂיתֶם עִם־הַמֵּתִים וְעִמָּדִי:  
טִיתָן יְהוָה לָכֶם וּמֵצֵאֵן מְנוּחָה אִשָּׁה בֵּית אִשָּׁה  
וַתִּשָּׂק לָהֶן וַתִּשְׁאַנָּה קוֹלָן וַתִּבְכְּינָה...:  
יָדוּתָשְׁנָה קוֹלָן וַתִּבְכְּינָה עוֹד וַתִּשָּׂק עֹרְפָה  
לְחַמוּתָהּ וְרוּת נִדְבְּקָה בָּהּ:  
טוֹתָאמֶר הִנֵּה שָׁבָה יְבַמְתָּךְ אֶל־עַמָּה וְאֶל־  
אֱלֹהֶיהָ שׁוּבִי אַחֲרַי יְבַמְתָּךְ:  
טזוֹתָאמֶר רוּת אֶל־תִּפְגַּע־בִּי לְעֹזְבֶךָ לָשׁוּב  
מֵאַחֲרַיךָ כִּי אֶל־אֲשֶׁר תִּלְכִּי אֵלַי וּבְאִשֶׁר תִּלְכִּי  
אֵלַי עִמָּד עִמִּי וְאֵלֶיהָ אֵלֶיהָ:

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) How does this story interact with your ideas about Jewish heritage? How does it interact with other texts you might have learned about Jewish continuity?
- (b) Why do you think the text mentions Moab and the fact that Ruth is a Moabite woman so often?
- (c) Is it significant that Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of King David? If not, why not? If so, what do you learn from this fact?

## Family and *B'rit*

Rabbi Buchdahl proposes a different, more inclusive, and more ancient way of defining Jewish identity. She references this excerpt from the Torah portion *N'tzavim* to uplift the idea of peoplehood as defined by family and *b'rit* rather than race.

Deuteronomy 29:9-11

(9) You stand this day, all of you, before the LORD your God— your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, (10) your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer— (11) to enter into the covenant of the LORD your God, which the LORD your God is concluding with you this day, with its sanctions

אַתֶּם וְנָצְבִים הַיּוֹם כְּלָכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה  
אֱלֹהֵיכֶם רְאִשֵׁיכֶם שְׂבִטֵיכֶם זְקֵנֵיכֶם  
וְשֹׁטְרֵיכֶם כָּל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל:  
יִטְפְּכֶם נְשֵׁיכֶם וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּךָ  
מִחֲנֹךָ מִחֹטֵב עֵצִים עַד שֹׂאֵב מִיַּמֵּיךָ:  
יֵאָלְעֶבְרְךָ בְּבְרִית יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ  
וּבְאֵלֹתָיו אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ פָּרַת עִמָּךְ  
הַיּוֹם:

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Why do you think the Torah uses so many words to describe those present at this event? What do you gain from this comprehensive description?
- (b) What does it mean to you to be part of a *b'rit* or covenant with God? What role does this play in your own Jewish identity?
- (c) What do you think of Rabbi Buchdahl defining Jewish identity through the concepts of *b'rit* and family? What impact does this shift have for you and others in the community?