What if the Bible’s Ruth came to America today?

Dear friends,

The Jewish festival of Shavuot, seven weeks and one day after a starting point in Passover, begins Sunday night. In biblical tradition, it celebrated the harvest of spring wheat after an anxious time of waiting – would it grow? In rabbinic tradition, it is the anniversary of the revelation of Torah on Mount Sinai. In Christian tradition, it became the origin of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit allowed all the languages of human kind to be understood and spoken by the disciples.

And for Jews it became the festival when the biblical story of Ruth is read. What does that story mean for us today? All of us, not Jews alone, not the families of Abraham alone – all of us?

In the biblical story, the foreigner Ruth was welcomed onto the fields of Boaz, where she gleaned what the regular harvesters had left behind. Boaz made sure that even this despised foreigner had a decent job at decent pay. When she went one night to the barn where the barley crop was being threshed, he spent the night with her – and decided to marry her.

But – if Ruth came to America today, what would happen?

Would she be admitted at the border?

Or would she be detained for months without a lawyer, ripped from Naomi’s arms while Naomi’s protest brought her under suspicion – detained because she was, after all, a Canaanite who spoke some variety of Arabic, possibly a terrorist, for sure an idolater?

Would she be deported as merely an “economic refugee,” not a worthy candidate for asylum? Or “detained” for years with no medical attention, no access to her friend Naomi or anybody else, while her appeal for asylum was “investigated”?

Would she have to show a “green card” before she could get a job gleaning at any farm, restaurant, or hospital? And if no green card was being offered such a wetback who had swum across the river from her home-town famine, would she be charged as a criminal for having no valid papers?

Would she be sent to “workfare” with no protections for her dignity, her freedom, or her health?

Today in America, some of us are outcasts like Ruth; some are prosperous, like Boaz. He affirmed that in a decent society, everyone was entitled to decent work for a decent income. Everyone – even, or especially, a despised immigrant from a despised nation. Everyone – not just 94% of the people.
Everyone had the right simply to walk onto a field and begin to work, begin to use the means-of-production of that era.

And Boaz could not order his regular workers to be economically “efficient.” They could not harvest everything: not what grew in the corners of the field, not what they missed on the first go-round. Social compassion was more important than efficiency. No downsizing allowed.

Although Boaz was generous-hearted, Ruth’s right to glean did not depend upon his generosity. It was the law.

Ruth was entitled not only to a job, but to respect. No name-calling, no sexual harassment. And she, as well as Boaz, was entitled to Shabbat: time off for rest, reflection, celebration, love. She was entitled to “be,” as well as to “do.”

Because Ruth and Boaz, the outcast and the solid citizen, got together, they could become the ancestors of King David. According to legend, they could thus help bring Messiah into the world. Help bring the world of peace and justice.

What do we learn from their story today?

Since in America today many of us live more nearly in the place of Boaz than of Ruth, and since our society is dismantling many of the legal commitments to the poor that ancient Israelite society affirmed, what are our religious obligations?

And we – those of us with as little money as Ruth or as much as Boaz – what can we do to help bring the world of peace and justice?

Shalom, salaam, peace – Arthur
(Rabbi Arthur Waskow)