

## Shavuot: What's In A Name?

- Rav Yehiel Michel Kossowsky.

Why did Ruth and Esther retain their non-Jewish names? Esther is really Hadassah, and Ruth in a Moabite name. The very names represent their heroism, for they could have hidden behind their non-Jewish identity, Ruth as a Moabite princess, Esther, as a hidden Jewess in the King's palace. Their heroism in declaring for Judaism is therefore apparent in their names.

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by Rav Yehiel Michel Kossowsky, zt"l

(In many synagogues where learning through the night is the practice, the Rabbi still feels obliged on the first day of Shavuoth, to offer a dvar Torah or sermon to his congregants. I suggest this short dvar Torah, found in "Toafot HaRi'm, by Rabbi Yehiel Michel Kossowsky, zt"l, my revered father-in-law.)

Ruth and Esther: What's in a Name?

The Midrash Rabbah discusses Ruth's name, with comments such as: Vayikhu lahem nashim Moaviyot: Lama nikraah shema Rut? Sheyatza mimena David (sheriva leKadosh Baruch Hu beshirot vetishbachot)

The Midrash takes up this issue because Ruth is a Moabite name. Why did it stick? Why is there a book of the Bible by that name?

The same question can be asked about Esther. She actually had a Hebrew name, Hadassah, yet the Persian name Esther (Astarte) is how she is known to our people and she, too, has a Biblical book named after her.

Apparently the members of the Great Assembly, the Anshe Knesset Hagedolah, chose particularly to leave these two heroic women with their non-Jewish names and wanted these very names to become part of Jewish consciousness. Why? Because precisely these names express their greatness.

When Haman sought to destroy the Jews Esther could have hidden behind her Persian identity. She was the queen, and would have been safe. But – as Mordechai urged her to do – she chose to identify with her Jewish people, preferring even death, but as a Jewess, kaasher avadeti, avadeti. This is expressed by her name, and so the Rabbis honored her through her name, choosing to make it part of the Bible itself.

Similarly, Ruth could have returned to her father's house. She and her sister, Arpa, were Moabite princesses, daughters of the king. She chose to become part of the Jewish people and is the symbol of the ger tzedek. She, too, wears her Moabite name as a sign of the promise, wealth, luxury and honor she left behind, choosing poverty, persecution, danger and insecurity in

Naomi's house, instead of wealth and nobility as the daughter of Eglon king of Moab.

That is why she produced as King David as a descendent, who is the symbol of emunah:  
sherivahu laHakadosh Baruch Hu beshirot vetishbachot.

That is why the book of Ruth is read on Shavuoth, because on that first Shavuoth, long ago, all Jews did as Ruth did, and willingly chose to undertake the difficulties and hardships of the covenant of Mt. Sinai. Every Shavuoth since then, by observing this holiday, all Jews make the same pledge, and like Ruth, undertake the obligations and requirements of Torah, and like both, Ruth and Esther, reaffirm their commitment to the destiny of Israel.

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(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)