

The Concept of Chesed

The book of **Ruth** holds out the practice of **chesed** as the ideal lifestyle for **Isra'el**. Every blessing enjoyed by **Ruth** and **Bo'az** at the story's end derives from **their** firm loyalty. The storyteller holds **them** up as role models of living by **chesed**. Through **them**, the reader learns the heavy demands of **chesed**.⁸

The Hebrew word **chesed** has no English equivalent. Being an expression of relationship, the term means *faithfulness, kindness, goodness, mercy, love and compassion*, but primarily *loyalty* to a covenant. **YHVH** is **the One** who models **chesed**. It is a characteristic of **Ha'Shem** rather than human beings; it is rooted in the divine nature. **Chesed** precedes the covenant (*b'rit*), which provides additional assurance that **YHVH's** promise will not fail. While the righteous may call for help based on a relationship with **EI**, there can also be an appeal for help based not on any human merit, but rather on the faithfulness of **ADONAI** to help the undeserving to bring forgiveness and restoration. Again, **God** models "doing **chesed**" for us. The **chesed** of **the LORD** that is experienced and known by **His** children comes to define what human **chesed** can be, ought to be, and sometimes actually is.⁹

And as Robert Hubbard describes in his commentary on **Ruth**, the author stresses the idea of **chesed** through two sets of contrasting characters. First, he contrasted the two daughters-in-law, **Orpah** and **Ruth (1:8-17)**. Without criticism, he reported **Orpah's** return to Moab in obedience to **Na'omi's** commands. **She** represents one who does the ordinary . . . except that it is not **chesed**. By contrast, **Ruth** represents one who does the extraordinary - the unexpected. **She** was not content to rejoin **her Moabite** family, remarry, and live, as **her** contemporaries would have. **Her** commitment was to **Na'omi's people** and **God** - even in the afterlife (**1:17**). Further, even in Beit-Lechem, **she** refused to seek a husband for **her** own advantage (**3:10**). Instead, **she** sought a marriage for **Na'omi's** benefit. In such compassionate devotion **she** stands out from **her** peers as one who does **chesed**.

Second, the writer contrasted **Bo'az** over **the unnamed kinsman** (see **Ba - Bo'az Obtains the Right of Redemption**). Again, **the kinsman** turns out to be average in character, **one** who gladly passed on **his** duty to someone else when **he** gained no economic advantage. One may not fault **him** for this action, for **Israelite** custom permitted it . . . but it is not **chesed**. By contrast, willing to sacrifice **his** own means, **his** own life for two impoverished widows, **Bo'az** far exceeded **him** and modeled the extraordinary demands of **chesed**.

Such commitment requires taking unusual risks. Again, both **Ruth** and **Bo'az** illustrate this aspect of **chesed**. **Ruth** demonstrated great courage in going out to glean in Beit-Lechem's fields! **She** risked ostracism - perhaps even physical abuse - because of **her** gender, social status, or race. **She** also faced possible rejection when **she** asked for special gleaning privileges (2:7). But the ultimate risk shadowed **her** nighttime visit to the threshing floor. **She** could not foresee **Bo'az's** reaction to such feminine forwardness - anger, embarrassment, awkwardness, acceptance? Nor could **she** calculate the lost reputation and new accusations to result, were **she** and **Bo'az** discovered. On the other hand, much was to be gained - the survival of **Na'omi's** family - so **she** took the risk. Along similar lines **Bo'az** took some risks in bringing **her** case before the ten elders of the town (4:1-8). **He** could not anticipate how the proceedings at the gate would go. Nor could **he** determine how the town would interpret **his** taking a **Moabite wife**, or the initiative in the matter. Again, the gain was worth the risk. Both did what **chesed** demanded.

Though rare, risky and restrictive, the practice of loyal, compassionate devotion - in a word, **chesed** - pleases **YHVH** so much that one may reasonably expect repayment in kind from **Him** (1:8 and 3:10). Such reward is the generous gift of a sovereign **LORD** who graciously chooses to honor human **chesed**. Only those who do **it** may receive **it**.¹⁰