

## **Embracing the Stranger**

### *Thought for the Day*

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Tonight is the beginning of the festival of Shavuot. The name just means “sevens” or “weeks” in Hebrew, because there have been seven times seven days since Pesach or Passover. The festival is on the fiftieth day, so it gets its English name, “Pentecost”, from the Greek for “50”.

But it’s not just a celebration of arithmetic! In ancient Israel these were harvest festivals – Pesach was the time of the barley harvest, and Shavuot of the wheat harvest, and farmers would bring offerings of their crops to the Temple in Jerusalem. But its main religious significance is to commemorate the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai, so some people have the custom of staying up all night studying. But that aside, nowadays there are no particular religious observances, just a custom that people struggle to explain – to eat cheese cake!

And tomorrow, during the synagogue service, we’ll read the Book of Ruth, a harvest-time story of rags to riches. It starts with a famine in Bethlehem, and a family taking refuge in neighbouring Moab as what are now stigmatised as economic migrants. Their sons marry local wives, but times get harder and their husbands die. Ruth refuses to leave her mother-in-law and converts to Judaism, declaring, “*Where you go, I will go; your people will be my people, and your God my God*”. Back in Bethlehem, Ruth survives by collecting what the harvesters leave in the fields, till she meets a distant relative; they don’t merely live happily ever after, but their son becomes the grandfather of King David.

There are many lessons from this story – the acceptance of the poor and the stranger, the agricultural laws that amounted to a system of social security, the mixed pedigree of Israel’s most celebrated king. The world has had 3000 years to learn these lessons, but sadly, for all our progress, when it comes to coexisting with those we disagree with, some of us still have a long way to go.