What do we learn from the story of Ruth?

In the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) there are five “small” books called Megilot (literally “scrolls”). One of these “Megilot” narrates the story of Ruth, a Moabite woman who converted to Judaism. Ruth came to Israel and settled in Bethlehem in the province of Yehuda in Israel to accompany and help her mother-in-law Naomi , an elderly woman who had lost her husband and her two sons. Ruth knew that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for Naomi to ask or expect help from the inhabitants of Bethlehem, because ten years ago, according to the Midrash, her husband Elimelekh left Bethlehem and went into exile in Moab, so he does not need to help the poor in a time of a drought … Now Naomi returns in times of plenty, alone, widowed, childless, poor, emotionally destroyed, and utterly ashamed.

When Ruth decided to accompany Naomi and stay with her, she was leaving her home, her family and her people. And she was willing to sacrifice all that with the sole intention of helping a poor widow to survive in utter indigence. In the second chapter of the Megila we see the conditions in which Naomi and Ruth lived: apparently they did not even have a roof to protect themselves. Ruth, also a widow but younger than Naomi, had to go out to gather food (leqet) in the fields, as it was usually done by the poor and the stranger (ger toshab), and thus provide a piece of bread for herself and her mother-in-law Naomi. Without Ruth’s help, Naomi would have preferred to starve rather than to go out and ask for assistance …. What Ruth did was an incredible act of altruism: to leave all her life behind in order to prevent a widow from embarrassing herself and starving herself to death.

The Megila also tells us about Bo’az, a relative of Elimelekh, the husband of Naomi. According to Jewish law, when someone impoverishes, loses his land or has to pawn his physical freedom to survive, the obligation to help and rescue this person and his family falls upon the next of kin. In Hebrew, this relative is called “GOEL”, i.e., he who must rescue his relatives from destitution and poverty. This rule, in a

certain way, applies to this day. The Tora states that in terms of Tsedaqa, financial assistance to the poor, there is an order of priorities. Our first obligation is to help our relatives (siblings, cousins, etc., and of course parents and children), then to the needy in my city and then to the poor of another city (with the exception of the needy in Erets Israel, which always have priority!). At first, we do not see that Bo'az rushed to help Naomi. But then Ruth went to gather barley and "by (Divine) chance" she found herself in a field belonging to Bo'az. When Bo'az found out, he behaved generously with Ruth. While it was normal for the poor to get her own water and sit on the floor to eat what she collected, Bo'az allowed Ruth to share the water and food with his employees and ordered all the workers to treat Ruth with much respect. Bo'az behaved with Ruth, and by extension with Naomi, with much generosity. In the end, Ruth ended up converting to Judaism and Bo'az married her. Bo'az thus reestablished the family of his kinsman Elimelekh, who otherwise would have disappeared forever. Both Ruth and Bo'az had the opportunity to act generously, and they did not waste it.

From Ruth and Bo'az was born 'Obed. From 'Obed was born Yshai and from Yshai was born David, the great King of Israel. As we can appreciate, the most important Jewish dynasty, the Messianic dynasty, did not emerge from warriors or gladiators but from a man and a woman who excelled in Hesed, exceptional altruism.

I think that from the simple and beautiful story of Ruth and Bo'az we must learn, among other things, that HaShem often presents us with situations where we can choose to act with generosity and kindness. These situations put our morality to the test. These are opportunities to do good that we should not let go.