

PROJECT RUTH

COMBATING FOOD INSECURITY



**RELIEF
MISSIONS**

LEARNING THROUGH SERVICE

RUTH'S CHALLENGE AND OUR CHALLENGE

Cars, houses, vacations, all the greatest luxuries in the world. To live in such comforts is, perhaps, the dream of every individual. If any of us achieved this level of luxury, or if we were lucky, were born into such an environment, we would not want to give it up so easily.

Ruth, a Moabite princess, grew up in such a world. She not only grew up in luxury but also married into a rich immigrant family from nearby Judah. She had everything in the world. But then, tragedy struck. Her father-in-law, brother-in-law, and most tragically, her husband, all died in quick succession. In reaction to this, Naomi, her mother-in-law, told her to return to her family home. Her sister took up this offer, but she did not. She chose to stick with Naomi, joining a new "family", a new people, and living in a foreign land.

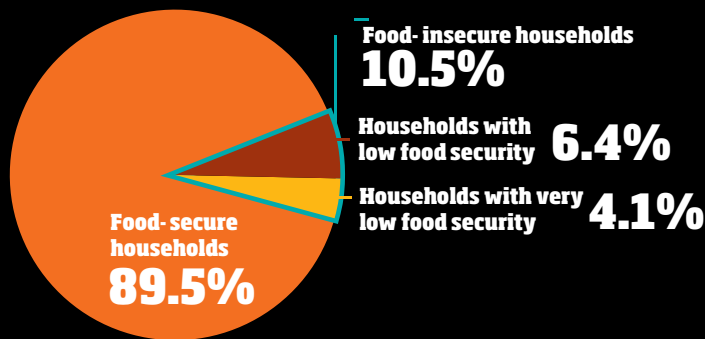
In the ancient world, this was a suicidal decision. Ruth was not merely a stranger, an immigrant, but also a widow. She had no societal protections in place for her. In many societies, she wouldn't even have legal recourse to solve her problem. She knew what she was deciding. But she didn't exactly know where she was headed.

In Judah, one of the Israelite tribes, they followed different rules. They worshiped a God who primarily identified not as a mighty warrior or a great ruler, but rather a father to orphans and a protector of widows. This God also commanded his people to take care of the poor and destitute of society. To provide them with food, money, and all other manners of help, if possible.

To this end, Ruth and Naomi had somewhere to turn, not merely to God, but to the people of Judah. Primary among them was Boaz, a rich landowner, and distant relative of Naomi, who ensured that Ruth and Naomi, among others, could have something to eat, and the ability to live.

In fact, it is through the eventual union of Ruth and Boaz that the Davidic monarchy arises, the true spiritual form of government that Judaism, to this day, ultimately strives for.

US households by food security status 2019



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, using data from the December 2019 Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement.



PRESENTING THE PROBLEM

In the United States today, there are too many Ruths and Naomis.

According to the USDA, as of 2019, over 1 in 10 households in America experience hunger or food insecurity.

That represents nearly 14 million households, containing 11 million hungry children, in addition to food-insecure adults, according to Save the Children¹.

Much like in the time of Ruth, many of those affected by food insecurity come from rural areas, that are also suffering from poverty, the opioid epidemic, and other issues. 84% of counties with food insecurity issues are such counties².

However, it is not merely rural areas that suffer from a lack of food. Even in cities, many low-income areas are "Food Deserts". As defined by DoSomething.org, "Food deserts" are geographic areas where access to affordable, healthy food options (aka fresh fruits and veggies) is limited or nonexistent because grocery stores are too far away, usually a mile or further away. Between 2000 and 2006, the USDA identified around 6,500 food deserts, across the nation.

Even in cases where a grocery store may be nearby, most people who live in "Food Deserts" may have too low an income to afford healthy food and fresh produce. Recent studies by the USDA have found that 12.8% of the US population lives in areas with both³.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated both of these issues.

According to Save the Children, the number of food-insecure households has skyrocketed to 1-in-5 from 1-in-10. Additionally, many children who would have been properly fed due to food from school have no access to meals, due to extended school closures⁴.

Food shortages, restricted shopping time, lack of public transportation, and fear of the coronavirus have all caused food deserts to dry up further, according to reportings from CNN⁵.



NCSY'S PLAN

In Tehillim or Psalms, God is described as "נותן לחם לכל בשר", the one who provides food to all living things. Thankfully, there is in fact more than enough food in the world to, in theory, feed all people. However, God does not work alone. God expects the Boazes and Ruths of the world to step up to the plate, and take the responsibility to help everyone have a healthy meal to eat.

NCSY Teen Relief Missions is "at bat", with Project Ruth, expanding programming in three main ways:

Firstly, NCSY chapters nationwide are gearing up to help plant community vegetable gardens in their communities and cities. These will make free and fresh produce available to communities, and provide important outdoor green spaces in urban areas.

Additionally, NCSY Teen Relief Missions will be working on an ongoing basis with farms that donate to food banks and shelters, as well as small family farms, providing volunteer workers. In addition to "returning the favor" for their donated produce, such work will help reduce costs for farms and allow farms to rebuild faster in cases of natural disaster.

Finally, NCSY Teen Relief Missions will be creating the "Ruth's Garden" program. This initiative will allow those with a need to sign up for a backyard garden. NCSY volunteers will help install the garden and plant the initial crop. Afterward, NCSY Teen Relief Missions will provide seeds for two years of future seasons, and provide educational material on how to properly plant and upkeep gardens.

These programs will also be paired with educational material for NCSY teens on Jewish volunteerism, the importance of healthy eating, and many other topics.

Project Ruth will come in addition to NCSY Teen Relief Mission's existing programming, such as volunteering across the continental United States and Puerto Rico in disaster relief, volunteering.

All of these initiatives will help play a part in making healthy food and fresh produce more available, accessible, and appetizing. This healthy food will also have positive effects on communities that Project Ruth will serve as well.

Studies from universities worldwide have found that regardless of age, gender, among other factors, that eating foods such as fruits, vegetables, salads, and fish have a positive effect on brain development and memory retention, in addition to other well-known health benefits.

According to a 2018 study from Rush University, even 1.3 more servings of vegetables- the equivalent of just over a half cup of cooked spinach a day, improves cognitive function overall.

Providing even a minimal amount of fresh fruits and vegetables will not just have an immediate effect, but will have a domino effect, further helping improve people's grades, livelihoods, and lives.

CONCLUSION

As discussed above, God has provided all life with enough to eat. However, He has given humanity the role to take his abundant resources, and ensure it is easily available.

In the past, there have been individuals like Ruth and Boaz who have taken up the responsibility to ensure that people are fed.

Project Ruth seeks to fulfill this heavenly imperative, and emulate our ancestors. Through serving in communities, making food more easily accessible, and educating teens and the community about the importance of volunteerism and healthy eating, NCSY Teen Relief Missions hopes to fulfill this role.

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1 <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/charity-stories/food-insecurity-america-malnutrition-united-states>

2 *ibid*

3 <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/what-are-food-deserts#location>

4 Save the Children

5 <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/09/business/food-deserts-coronavirus-grocery-stores/index.html>