

Ruth Bader Ginsburg saw the biblical Deborah as a role model

When I asked her why, she talked about another role model: Pauli Murray.

by [Serene Jones](#) in the [October 21, 2020](#) issue



Ruth Bader Ginsburg's 2016 official portrait (US Supreme Court)

Last February, Union Theological Seminary hosted Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg for our annual Judith Davidson Moyers Women of Spirit Lecture. It's an honor given to women whose work is motivated and energized by their faith and beliefs. We at Union were honored that she came, especially since it proved to be one of her last public appearances.

The evening was electric.

When Ginsburg stepped onto the stage on the arm of Bill Moyers, [who was interviewing her](#), Union's James Chapel went wild with applause. There she was, a woman of such small stature, her hair pulled tightly back in a schoolmarmish bun, her face serious—no cheery hand waving, no sparkling smile of the kind women are usually forced to master. It was clear we had before us not a movie star or campaigning politician but a Supreme Court justice of singular moral clarity and authority—and one who, unlike so many of her conservative colleagues, was motivated by her faith to protect the rights of others, not limit them. She was a hero to many in the room.

As the president of Union, I had the chance to spend a lot of time with RBG that evening, both behind and in front of the stage she held so nobly. What the audience didn't see was how much her security personnel clearly adored her, and how insistent she was on spending time with students rather than "bigwigs," and how she preferred to walk down the block to my apartment for dinner, refusing the offer of a car.

Likely, no one in the audience knew how much she enjoyed a crisp white wine. Not even the caterers could have known she would ask for another helping of food or that she would gently overrule one of her aides when he suggested she hold off on a second glass of wine. And no one at the dinner table was prepared for how far they would have to lean forward, ears cupped, to hear Ginsburg's low, gravelly voice offer a few, pointed words.

At dinner, Ginsburg sat next to me and near Episcopal Divinity School dean Kelly Brown Douglas. She warmed up for a moment, and I saw another side. She asked me questions about myself and about Union, giving me no time to stumble through my own carefully planned questions for her. She patted my hand in a grandmotherly way. "Thank you for your work, Madam President."

I did get in one question, though.

During the interview, Moyers had asked about Ginsburg's role models as a young Jewish girl growing up in Brooklyn.

"One was real, one was made up, and one was biblical," she said. "Amelia Earhart. A hero. Nancy Drew—she didn't wait for boys to solve problems, she just did it herself. And Deborah, the judge from the Hebrew Bible. I didn't know what judges did, but I wanted to be like her."

The last one had caught me by surprise. A religious role model for a Supreme Court justice? And an extremely complicated biblical figure, at that?

In the Hebrew Bible, Deborah is one of just four female judges mentioned, among the hundreds of men who hold the title. Biblical judges are not what we think of when we think of judges today.

And Deborah is unique. She sits under a palm tree to deliver her brilliant opinions to the crowds. She is also a poet; the Song of Deborah is still recited today. It is clear that she loves her people and that they love her. I could see those same traits in Ginsburg.

But there's more. Deborah is also a mighty warrior, known for commanding great armies of men and for her strategic prowess in defeating her enemies. She is a prodigious military hero.

That last part didn't quite fit my image of RBG.

We aren't told anything about Deborah's height, her family, where she grew up, or her taste for wine. As scripture sums it up, her job as judge, simply put, is to do everything in her power to make sure the people are true to the covenant they made, the constitution that binds them, even when being true means battle. She is a mighty protector, referred to as the mother of her people.

Seeing Ginsburg as a protector of the people, willing to go into battle—it began to make a little more sense.

So at dinner, I finally asked her my one question directly: Why Deborah?

She answered by telling me about the role model who influenced her most as an adult: Pauli Murray, the African American civil rights lawyer who, among her many accomplishments, worked with Ginsburg on the landmark litigation that established the legal category of gender discrimination. Murray coined the term “Jane Crow,” establishing the intersection between racial and gender discrimination. Ginsburg said she was the greatest legal mind she had ever known. A Deborah, a warrior.

“Pauli was driven by her faith from the start,” she told me. “The only way she survived. The truth she followed was bigger than laws, bigger than even her own life. She eventually left the court to become the first ordained African American female Episcopal priest, part of the first class of women to enter the priesthood in the denomination. A bit like Deborah, yes?”

Overhearing the conversation, Kelly Brown Douglas asked Ginsburg if she knew that Murray had died destitute and alone, with no fanfare or op-eds about her legacy.

“No, I didn’t,” Ginsburg replied. The justice sat very still, in long silence, prayerlike, reaching over to hold my hand tightly.

Then she asked for seconds on dessert and another glass of wine.