

Megillat RUTH: Hesed and Hutzpah

A Literary Approach

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Selected Bibliography – *The study unit is a synthesis of the wise and useful comments made in the following books which are worth reading for any educator interested in Megillat Ruth. I thank all the authors for their insights:*

Mehuyavut Hevratit via the Story of Ruth HaMoaviah edited by Ron Margolin, Hanoch ben Pazi (Mercaz l'Technologia Hinuchit, 1999)

Reading Ruth edited by Gail Riemer and Judith Kates

"A Human Comedy" in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* by Phyllis Trible

"Ruth in Dialogue with Tamar" from *Reading the Bible* by Ellen Van Wolde

Lethal Love by Mieke Bal

"Theme and Historiosophic Background of the Scroll of Ruth" by Bezalel Porten, in *AJS*, 1977-78

"Reading Strategies and the Story of Ruth" by Edward Greenstein in *Women in the Hebrew Bible* edited by Alice Bach

The Book of Ruth in *Mikrah L'Yisrael* series by Yair Zakovitz,

Reading the Women of the Bible by Tikvah Frymer-Kensky

"Book of Ruth: Complexities in Simplicities," *Judaism*, Summer 1986 by Chaim Chertok

Compromising Redemption by Danna Nolan Fewell and David Gunn

The Freedom of Ruth, Ruth In Art, by Yehudit Zamir, Jo Milgrom, Ayala Paz, TALI Publications, Neve Schechter, Jerusalem

INTRODUCTION

This Megillat Ruth study guide is a curricular resource for a teacher interested in teaching the **values**, the **themes** and the modern **literary method** of text/plot/character analysis.

The **values** are **character traits** associated with the Hesed to act beyond duty and Hutzpah to bring about Tikkun Olam through unconventional means. These are part of a larger question of ideal virtues, what defines the hero/ine, and therefore the feminist question of the ideal woman which has deeply concerned feminist Bible scholars in interpreting Megillat Ruth. These values are also tied to the image of God as a dispenser of Hesed and, beyond Hesed, as the Redeemer, and the way in which God's traits are to be emulated by human beings following God's ways and created in God's image. It also concerns the ideal Jew as contrasted with the Moabite in the Tanakh, as defined by the Rabbinic concept of conversion and as modeled by the first Jew – Abraham.

The **themes** relate to a **narrative storyline** such as:

- (a) fullness to emptiness to fullness related to fertility,
- (b) passivity to activity, dependence on fate to determination of one's own destiny by choice,
- (c) sin and repentance or tikkun (even if it is a later descendant redeeming/ making tikkun, for an ancestor)
- (d) loneliness to romance
- (e) exile to return etc

The **literary methods** appropriate for narrative analysis include in a particular:

- (1) **key word / *milah manca* leitwörter**
- (2) **character development** over time, through conflict and by contrast to foils
- (3) **disclosing and concealing information** from the reader or characters
- (4) **plot development and an envelop structure** that measures a story by resolving in the end issues raised in the beginning or circling back to the beginning
- (5) **three –four literary pattern of storytelling**
- (6) **intertextuality** where later story refers back to earlier one thus reinterpreting both
- (7) **genre** such as a romantic encounter or trial repeated with variations and so on
- (8) **midrash shem** where meaning of name serves as to predict the plot or reflect ironically on the plot
- (9) **exposition** with primary associations **and endings** - the moral lesson of didactic tale

The central focus is on pshat as literary critics read it today. Each chapter contains a structural analysis of the verses – scenes, repeated words and their significance, midrash shem, as well as character development. Multiple views of the character's motives are presented following different commentators and helping students develop a modern sense of *mikraot gedolot* regarding the pshat of the text. While midrash is brought, generally it is midrash that helps clarify the pshat, however pshat is understood as open to multiple literary readings that also make room for the students' argued but subjective reading of the text and the characters.

Background exercises are offered to expand the “background” against which the “foreground” of the Megillah text is read. For example: migrant workers and famines or laws of social welfare and women's status or Biblical leaders and the advent of the king.

Contemporary artistic interpretations of the Megillah in art, movies and poetry are supplied in a limited way. We recommend *The Freedom of Ruth*, *Ruth In Art*, by Yehudit Zamir, Jo Milgrom, Ayala Paz, (TALI Publications, Neve Schechter, Jerusalem) and *Great Women of the Bible in Art and Tradition* edited by Dorothee Solle, Joe Kirchberger (published by William Eerdmans). Also see *Reading Ruth* edited by Gail Reimer.

Structural/Scene Analysis of Megillah

Scene Outline by Locations:

Ruth 1:1-5 - Fields of Moab

Ruth 1:6-18 On the way back to Judea

Ruth 1:19-21 Upon entering Bethlehem

Ruth 2 - During the harvest in the Naomi's house and in the fields of Boaz and back in Naomi's house

Ruth 3 – At the end of the harvest in the Naomi's house and on the threshing floor of Boaz and back in Naomi's house

Ruth 4:1-12 At the Gates of the City

Ruth 4:13-17 Blessings for the Marriage and Birth

Ruth 4:18-22 David's Genealogy

APPROACHES to Getting Started with the Narrative

A literary study of any narrative benefits from the identification of its dramatic theme from complication to resolution, its background and future ground as well as its genre. One may discover these in the reading or plant hints that enable students to read the beginning and the middle against the larger narrative thrust. These themes also invite the student to find relevant parallels in their own search for meaning.

Theme #1– Responses to Tragedy? Naomi, the Female Job?

Chapter One of Megillat Ruth may best be called Megillat Naomi for she is the central figure round which coalesce two levels, two related stages of tragedy: national and familial. **Naomi is a kind of female Job** whose relationship to God is deeply influenced by her suffering, though there is no explicit Divine test stimulated by a Satan as in the case of Job and Naomi is not billed as a tzaddik to be tempted.

Background study: Introducing Ruth might be enhanced by retelling the **Job story** (Job 1-2), so that we can compare and contrast her responses as well as bring our experiences of suffering and how they may make us feel bitter and rejected and yet can be overcome with proper support – here offered by Ruth, the amazing daughter-in-law.

Theme #2 – A Woman's Story in a Man's World

Megillat Ruth is uniquely a woman's tale in a patriarchal man's world where inheritance, decisions about migration, economics and law are exclusively male. Yet once shorn of men – the initial tragedy of Naomi/Ruth/Orpah losing her husband and sons (or not giving birth to sons after a ten year marriage) and shorn of her land (Naomi in exile and Ruth leaving her homeland and family), these **three women are on their own** to make their own lives by their own powerful decisions and relationships. How will they transform themselves from objects to subjects, from victims of men's decisions and God's decisions (about the famine and about their fertility) to masters/mistresses' of their own destiny? How will a mother-in-law, a role that is typically at odds with a daughter-in-law, create a loving, self-sacrificing relationship with that daughter-in-law?

Remarkably, in a romantic book with a sexually provocative night on the threshing floor and with a happy ending of heterosexual marriage, the only time the word love is used is when the women of the town retrospectively describe Ruth's relationship to Naomi as one of *ahava* / **love** (Ruth 4: 15). Naomi had tried to push Ruth away and to ignore her presence as she wallowed in self-pity, but eventually she came to appreciate that love and to reciprocate by helping find a husband for Ruth. There is no competition between male-female and female-female love but the privileged relationship, love without self-interest, is between Ruth and Naomi.

Background study: Introducing Ruth might be enhanced by examining a **woman's legal and social status in the Biblical world**. Her disabilities

in inheritance and her low status when barren complement her privileges as a destitute widow in garnering tithes, forgotten sheaves, fallen grains and in the duty to *yibum*. Later we will compare the heroism of childless women in the story of Lot's daughters and Tamar and Judah.

Another aspect to this background characterizes not the Biblical historical context but the interpreter's impetus. **Contemporary feminists** - have been drawn to this story to reinterpret it and to rewrite it in poetry, literature, art i.e. modern midrash (Show *Reading Ruth* edited by Gail Riemer and Judith Kates).

Phyllis Trible "A Human Comedy" in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, opens: "A man's world tells a woman's story...The aged Naomi and the youthful Ruth struggle for survival in a patriarchal environment. Those women bear their own burdens....No God promises them blessing; no man rushes to their rescue. They themselves risk bold decisions and shocking acts to work out their own salvation in the midst of the alien, the hostile and the unknown." (p.166) "One female has chosen another female in a world whose life depends on men. There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel"(p.173).

Exercise – Movies as Commentary and Midrash: View the movie "**Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe**" (based on the novel by Fannie Flagg) with its Ruth character to see a lesbian understanding of Megillat Ruth, but still one that emphasizes selfless unconventional love rather than sexuality. Compare that movie to the movie "**The Story of Ruth**," a more traditionally Hollywood version.

Theme #3 – A Romance of a migrant foreign-worker Widow and an aging landed Notable

Megillat Ruth is a **romance**, a love story, where a failed relationship in a foreign land with a first husband who is both barren and sickly (Mahlon= sickly one) is replaced by a Cinderella love story of a poor foreign widow with a prominent landowner in the Judean homeland who is called Bo-az (= man with strength).

Background study: Introducing Ruth might be enhanced by reviewing briefly the romantic stories of **courtship** like Rivka, Rachel and Moshe at the well. Here the sheep and the well are replaced by the field and granary.

Theme #4 – Redemption of Land, of a Widow/er and of the Jewish people with Ancestors of King David

From the House of Bread to famine, from homeland to exile and loss of one's land inheritance, from childlessness to widowhood the story is about the runabout that leads to fertility of land, of families and to a redeemer – who fathers King David's great-grandfather. Thus the era of Judges without a judge where a man called "God is my King" (Eli-Melech) dies in exile will yield to a foreshadowing of the era of Kings, the dynasty of David, born in Bethlehem and chosen by God.

Chaim Chertok¹ suggest we read **Megillat Ruth as an allegory for the Jewish people who have been abandoned by their God** – famine, exile, death and threat to survival. Then Ruth is the model of what Jewish people must do to be redeemed. Acts of *hesed*, return (to land and to God – "under God's wings") and a declaration of unconditional loyalty that reenacts Abraham. The convert represents renewed marital *brit* of Sinai. Ruth's marriage imagery of spreading robe is probably taken from Ezekiel's imagery of redemption and marriage.

¹ "Book of Ruth: Complexities in Simplicities," Judaism, Summer 1986 by Chaim Chertok

RUTH Chapter One – Abandoning Bethlehem for the Fields of Moav and Returning to Bethlehem

מגילת רות פרק א

א וַיְהִי בַיָּמִי שִׁפְטֹת הַשְּׁפֹטִים, וַיְהִי רָעַב, בְּאֶרֶץ; וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לָחֶם יְהוּדָה, לְגוֹר בְּשָׂדֵי מוֹאָב--הוּא וְאִשְׁתּוֹ, וּשְׁנֵי בָנָיו. ב וְשֵׁם הָאִישׁ אֱלִימֶלֶךְ וְשֵׁם אִשְׁתּוֹ נָעֲמִי וְשֵׁם שְׁנֵי-בָנָיו מַחְלֹן וְכִלְיוֹן, אֶפְרַתִּים--מִבֵּית לָחֶם, יְהוּדָה; וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׂדֵי-מוֹאָב, וַיְהִיו-שָׁם. ג וַיָּמָת אֱלִימֶלֶךְ, אִישׁ נָעֲמִי; וַתִּשְׁאָר הִיא, וּשְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ. ד וַיִּשְׁאוּ לָחֶם, נָשִׁים מֵאֲבוֹת--שָׁם הָאֲחֻת עֲרָפָה, וְשֵׁם הַשְּׁנִית רוּת; וַיָּשָׁבוּ שָׁם, כְּעָשָׂר שָׁנִים. ה וַיָּמָתוּ גַם-שְׁנֵיהֶם, מַחְלֹן וְכִלְיוֹן; וַתִּשְׁאָר, הָאִשָּׁה, מִשְׁנֵי יְלָדֶיהָ, וּמֵאִשָּׁה. ו וַתָּקָם הִיא וְכִלְתִּיהָ, וַתָּשָׁב מִשְׂדֵי מוֹאָב: כִּי שָׁמָּה, בְּשָׂדֵה מוֹאָב--כִּי-כָּקַד יְהוָה אֶת-עַמּוֹ, לָתֵת לָחֶם לָחֶם. ז וַתֵּצֵא, מִן-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הָיְתָה-שָׁמָּה, וּשְׁתֵּי כִלְתֵּיהָ, עִמָּה; וַתֵּלַכְנָה בְּדֶרֶךְ, לָשׁוּב אֶל-אֶרֶץ יְהוּדָה. ח וַתֹּאמֶר נָעֲמִי, לְשְׁתֵּי כִלְתֵּיהָ, לָכֵנָה שְׂבָנָה, אִשָּׁה לְבֵית אִמָּה; יַעֲשֶׂה (יַעֲשֶׂה) יְהוָה עִמָּכֶם חֶסֶד, כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתֶם עִם-הַמֹּתִים וְעִמָּדִי. ט וַתֵּן יְהוָה, לָכֶם, וּמִצָּאֵן מְנוּחָה, אִשָּׁה בֵּית אִישָׁה; וַתִּשְׁק לָהֶן, וַתִּשְׁאָנָה קוֹלָן וַתִּבְכֶּינָה. י וַתֹּאמְרֶנָּה-לָּה: כִּי-אַתֶּן נָשׁוּב, לְעַמֶּךָ. יא וַתֹּאמֶר נָעֲמִי שְׂבָנָה בְּנָתִי, לָמָּה תֵּלַכְנָה עִמִּי: הַעוֹד-לִי בָנִים בְּמַעֲי, וְהָיוּ לָכֶם לְאֻנָּשִׁים. יב שְׂבָנָה בְּנָתִי לָכֵן, כִּי זָקַנְתִּי מִהָיִוֹת לְאִישׁ: כִּי אָמַרְתִּי, יֵשׁ-לִי תִקְוָה--גַּם הִייתִי הַלֵּילָה לְאִישׁ, וְגַם יְלָדָתִי בָנִים. יג הִלְחֹן תִּשְׁבְּרֶנָּה, עַד אֲשֶׁר יִגְדְּלוּ, הִלְחֹן תַּעֲגֹנָה, לְבִלְתִּי הָיִוֹת לְאִישׁ; אֶל בְּנָתִי, כִּי-מֵר-לִי מָאֵד מִכֶּם--כִּי-יִצְאָה בִּי, יָד-יְהוָה. יד וַתִּשְׁנָה קוֹלָן, וַתִּבְכֶּינָה עוֹד; וַתִּשְׁק עֲרָפָה לַחְמוֹתֶיהָ, וְרוּת דָּבְקָה בָּהּ. טו וַתֹּאמֶר, הִנֵּה שָׁבָה יְבַמְתֶּךָ, אֶל-עַמָּה, וְאֶל-אֱלֹהֶיהָ; שׁוּבִי, אַחֲרַי יְבַמְתֶּךָ. טז וַתֹּאמֶר רוּת אֶל-תַּפְּנָעִי-בִּי, לְעֶזְבֶּךָ לָשׁוּב מֵאַחֲרַיִךְ: כִּי אֶל-אֲשֶׁר תִּלְכִּי אֵלַי, וּבְאֲשֶׁר תֵּלִינִי אֵלָיו--עַמֶּךָ עִמִּי, וְאֱלֹהֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵי. יז בְּאֲשֶׁר תָּמוּתִי אָמוּת, וְשֵׁם אֶקְבֹּר; כֹּה יַעֲשֶׂה יְהוָה לִּי, וְכֹה יוֹסִיף--כִּי הַמָּוֶת, יִפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶךָ. יח וַתֹּרֶא, כִּי-מִתְאַמָּצָה הִיא לָלֶכֶת אִתָּהּ; וַתַּחֲדֵל, לְדַבֵּר אֵלֶיהָ. יט וַתֵּלַכְנָה שְׁתֵּיהֶם, עַד-בּוֹאָנָה בֵּית לָחֶם; וַיְהִי, כְּבּוֹאָנָה בֵּית לָחֶם, וַתִּהְיֶה כָּל-הָעִיר עָלֶיהָ, וַתֹּאמְרֶנָּה הִזֹּאת נָעֲמִי. כ וַתֹּאמֶר אֲלֶיהָ, אֶל-תִּקְרָאנָה לִּי נָעֲמִי: קִרְאָן לִּי מְרָא, כִּי-הִמְרֵ שְׂדֵי לִי מָאֵד. כא אָנִי מְלָאָה הַלֶּכֶתִּי, וְרִיקָם הִשִּׁיבֵנִי יְהוָה; לָמָּה תִּקְרָאנָה לִּי, נָעֲמִי, וַיְהִי עֲנָה בִּי, וּשְׂדֵי הָרַע לִּי. כב וַתָּשָׁב נָעֲמִי, וְרוּת הַמּוֹאָבִיָּה כָּלְתָהּ עִמָּה, הַשְּׂבָה, מִשְׂדֵי מוֹאָב; וְהָמָּה, בָּאוּ בֵּית לָחֶם, בַּתְּחִלָּת, קָצִיר שְׁעָרִים.

Literary Analysis:

- Ruth 1: 1-7 Introduction – Exposition and Exile
 - a. national tragedy (lack of seed in the House of Bread)
 - b. familial tragedy (lack of seed in the land of Mo-Av (From Father))
- Ruth 1: 8-18 – Trialogue at the Crossroads
- Ruth 1: 19-22 – Tragic Homecoming

Ruth 1: 1-7 EXPOSITION IN MOAB

Literary Methods of Analysis:

Exposition and Primary Associations: Ruth 1:1 invites us to brainstorm and gather the background associations of each of its orienting facts. Background connects marshals the student's background knowledge, places the new story in perspective and allows for comparison:

(1) Placing the story in the context of the **Book of Judges** (where for example there is no king, where women are exploited, where violence abounds, where Jews betray God to follow the foreign gods of neighboring nations, where one tribe shows disloyalty to another).

Exercise: Bible books in Tanakh and time chart. Locate Book of Judges and era of Judges between eras and books about Joshua and David.

(2) Placing the story in series of **famine** tales that generate emigration from Israel (like Abraham, almost Yitzchak, and Jacob's sons – Gen. 12:10; 26:1). However the migrants Abraham and Jacob return home after suffering danger with enormous wealth, while Naomi returns home without children or wealth. She is more like the Shunamite (II Kings 8:1-6) who returns to find her land has been lost. The famines of Genesis are not explicitly related to sin, while some Biblical famines are as in the days of Elijah (I Kings 17:1).

Which pattern does this famine in Megillat Ruth follow?

Midrash Ruth suggests the sin is one of a leader abandoning his flock and his land in time of trouble. (See below **Elimelech – Midrashic Character Assassination**)

Exercise: newspaper or website information about contemporary migrant workers leaving impoverished lands for temporary or permanent settlement in wealthier lands. For example: the Irish after potato famine of 19th century moved to USA; the poor of Mexico sneak across US borders to do agricultural work (See the story of Cesar Chavez and the strike of migrant workers in California); Thai and Rumanian workers come to Israel to work; Turks and North Africans come to France. Often these migrants—sometimes illegal—are exploited terribly as were the Jews in ancient Egypt. The successful migrants often send funds home to their families in their native land, as did the Jews coming over to North America in the early 20th century.

- Did economic factors figure in the migration of your ancestors to your present native land?
- In the light of these features of migrant life, do you think Naomi and Elimelech were discriminated against? Did they intend to stay permanently? Would it be in character for them to have sent home food from Moab to poverty stricken Judah?

(3) **Beit Lehem** suggests King David's (I Samuel 17:12) and hence Jesus' proverbial birthplace. It places us in the tribal line of **Judah** who has his own biography to contribute to our associations (Judah and Tamar, Judah taken responsibility for his brother Benjamin in order to provide food from Egypt for his famine-struck family).

Exercise: Christian associations with Bethlehem. Play Christmas Gospels mentioning Bethlehem, see crèche, read New Testament birth story of Jesus, find the number of cities in your country named Bethlehem. (In London the hospital for mentally disturbed was once called Bethlehem from which we derive the term **bedlam**).

Exercise: Explore the facts about today's Bethlehem and the location of Rachel's grave there and the Jewish custom of pilgrimage to her grave.

(4) **Moav** recalls the story of Lot's daughters (Gen. 19) but also the problematic attitude to Moav's seductive women in Numbers 25 and the prohibition on entering the community in Deuteronomy 23:4-7 attributed to Moav's refusal to share water and bread = *Lehem* (from Beit Lehem).

Exercise: Map work on Israel in both contemporary and ancient tribal maps with their neighboring lands. For example note Mountains of Moab and contemporary capital of Jordan – Amman from Ammon brother of Moab in Genesis 19.

Literary Methods of Analysis:

Midrash Shem – Ruth 1:1-4 suggest we explore the names that reveal character traits, plot prophecies about their fate. Note the ironic use of the names:

(a) **Beit Lehem** is ironically the home of the famine. It is a barren house (*beit*) contrasted with a field (*sdei Moav*)

(b) **Mo-av** is ironically about descendants of a father, yet here the three potential fathers of Ruth 1 all die leaving no descendants.

(c) **Naomi** is sweetness, but ironically her trajectory in life so far is bitterness. So she renames herself to fit the plot of her life as she reads it – Mara (Ruth 1:20). The Rabbis explicated her name by her moral qualities – “Her actions were beautiful and pleasant” (Ruth Rabbah 1).

(d) **Eli-Melech** means “my God is king” yet ironically God is absent and there is no king in Israel and Eli-Melech shows no leadership abilities and his decision to emigrate does not contribute to his family’s survival or his people’s well-being. The midrash of Ruth Rabbah suggests that Elimelech was a ruler, a leader that betrays his flock, however it is also a hint that from him will come a king – David.

(e) David’s grandfather is called **Oved**, servant of God, which is also the honorific appellation for David - “God chose David, his personal servant” (Psalm 78:70) reflecting the religious commitment of his parents Ruth and Boaz who refer to God throughout the Megillah.

(f) **Mahlon and Chilyon** – disease and destruction – are not long for this world, just as Hevel was transitory like breath. (Judah’s two sons – Er = *ariri*, childless and Onan = mourning also died childless one after the other leaving Tamar in need of yibum).

(g) **Orpah** will turn away as hinted by the back of her neck.²

(h) **Ruth** is an elusive term that keeps the reader guessing. What might Ruth mean?

Rivayah – overflowing abundance, wet and fresh, satisfied and full?

Reut – friendship? (Syriac Christian translation suggests *Reut*).

² Yair Zakovitch objects that Orpah cannot mean turning away as Hazal suggest in Ruth Rabbah 2:9 because in the Tanakh turning one’s neck means running away from an enemy which does not fit the plot here. (*Mikrah L’Yisrael- Ruth*, p. 49).

Exercise: Read Zelda's poem or listen to Naomi Shemer's song of *L'chol ish yesh shem* which is based on a midrash. Note how one receives name from others but also earns a name for one's self. What name would you rename yourself or characters in the Ruth story in light of their fate?

Literary Methods of Analysis:

Divide up the chapter into subsections with titles, identify repeating leitwörter and then see how the plotline develops and circles around.

Here is one such division:

- Ruth 1: 1-7 Introduction – Exposition and Exile**
 - a. national tragedy (lack of seed in the House of Bread)**
 - b. familial tragedy (lack of seed in the land of Mo-Av (From Father))**
- Ruth 1: 8-18 – Trialogue at the Crossroads**
- Ruth 1: 19-22 – Tragic Homecoming**

The plotline moves from famine in Beit Lehem to Lehem granted by God. (God is not blamed for the famine but God is blessed for the return of fertility). It moves from fullness to emptiness in Naomi's account of her life's passage and her new *midrash shem* (Ruth 1:21).

It moves from Elimelech's decision to go (Ruth 1:1) to Naomi's decision to go (Ruth 1:7) to Ruth's decision to go with Naomi (Ruth 1: 16). Abraham's *Lech Icha* echoes in the background.

It moves from settling to returning (*vayeshvu* to *shuvna*).

Ironically the healthy family that left famine struck Beit Lehem for the fields of Moav lost there its seed, its health, its survival as a family, while those who stayed and waited were recalled by God. Adonai's *pakad* (Ruth 1:6) recalls Sarah's barrenness that was reclaimed (Gen 21) but by contrast Naomi, Ruth and Orpah were not recalled and lost or did not bear children. Ironically when people of Judah is primed to praise God's *hesed*, Naomi the bitter one blames God for harsh judgment for her exceptional fate (Ruth 1: 21). Ironically but justly the family that cut itself off from home suffers an exceptional fate – for judgment, while they had expected to escape the collective judgment of Beit Lehem.

The plot reader hopes for a good resolution and wonders about the two stages of Ruth 1: 1-7:

- a. national tragedy (lack of seed in the House of Bread)
- b. familial tragedy (lack of seed in the land of Mo-Av (From Father)).

In Ruth 1:7 God has reversed the negative judgment of national tragedy – the famine – but can and will God reverse the family tragedy? Famine can turn into

fertility but how can death of all the men generate rebirth? Naomi is convinced that reversal will not happen. Is she correct to blame God? Is she correct to despair? Who can be her redeemer? The rest of the book will prove her wrong.

Literary Methods of Analysis:

Find and count *leitwörter* = *milah mancha*.

a. Ruth 1:1-5 has seven uses of *ish/isha* and 5 uses of *shem* = name. Perhaps suggesting that names are key to plot and that the personhood of the characters is important.

b. Ruth 1: 6-12 and 15-16 and 21-22 has twelve uses of the root *shuv* = return suggesting the central choice – to return from exile – Naomi's exile from her land and the daughter-in-laws' exile from their biological mothers home.

Exercise: Project the story line based on *milah mancha* and on midrash *shem*.

Elimelech – Midrashic Character Assassination

As we noted above, **Eli-Melech** means “my God is king,” yet ironically God is absent and there is no king in Israel and Eli-Melech shows no leadership abilities and his decision to emigrate does not contribute to his family's survival or his people's well-being. The midrash of Ruth Rabbah suggests that Elimelech was a ruler, a leader that betrays his flock. Let us examine the midrash and other traditional commentators. What value message do they derive? In your judgement to what extent is there midrash also a possible pshat consistent with the Biblical worldview and text?

“Why was Elimelech punished? Because he struck despair into the hearts of Israel. He was like a prominent and prosperous man who dwelt in a certain country and the people for that country depended on him and said that if famine should come, he could supply the whole country with food for ten years.

So Elimelech was a notable of his town and a leader of the generation. But when the famine came, he said, ‘Now all Israel will come knocking at my door for help, each one with a basket.’

Therefore he fled from them. This is the meaning of the verse in Ruth 1:1 “An *ish*/ prominent man of the House of Bread in Judah went to live in the fields of Moav” [which was condemned in Deuteronomy 23:4-7 for refusing to give bread and water to the refugee Jews leaving Egypt]. (Ruth Rabbah 1:4).

The midrash picks up on the Biblical and rabbinic pattern of famine as
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punishment (from the days of Elijah) and on Naomi speaking of God's punishing her, without making the sin explicit.

The Gra = Rabbi Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna,

late 18th century Lithuania:

Naomi said that what God did to her was appropriate since she did not show mercy for the poor about whom it says in Exodus 22:26 that "when the poor cries out to God against you and God hears - for I am merciful - then God will have mercy on them [the people left in Judah] and will punish us.. a great punishment.."

Rashi adds:

'A man went forth' (Ruth 1:1) means a great man of wealth [Elimelech] who was left Eretz Yisrael for Hutz LaAretz because of his *tzarut ayin* = narrow vision, stinginess, selfishness, for he was jealousy of those who came to pressure him to give aid, therefore he was punished.

Darkhei Noam, the 18th century Polish Mussar book 9 p. 66b) describes the rich in his day:

The way of the rich is to pleasure themselves with the pleasures of the world in clothing and edible delicacies...They purchase new showy clothes and they might use them one or two days and then they will not put them on again... Every time there is a new fashion, they will refuse to wear the original clothes. The clothes lie in stacks and stacks... for which they have no need.

In the meantime the poor go barefoot and naked without clothing or coats. If the "worn out" clothes thrown to the ground in the houses of the wealthy were to be given to the poor, the poor would regard them as gold and silk embroidered garments.....However the rich are truly "knights of the heart" far from Tzedakah. The rich would rather trample these clothes underfoot and let them become moldy, than let the miserable poor use them.

In their meals the rich eat delicacies all the time... making everyday like a holiday drinking wine and leaving leftovers that would have been adequate to feed 20 or 30 of the oppressed Jewish poor...But the rich are *tzarei ayin* [=narrow-sighted, stingy, jealous]...Better let the food go to waste and rot, worthy only of throwing in the garbage, than let the starving, destitute poor enjoy it."

- Do these descriptions fit our own age? Give an example.
- Is it reasonable to project that behavior on Elimelech and Naomi from a pshat Biblical point of view? Argue your viewpoint.

From a pshat point of view, Megillat Ruth does not explicitly condemn Elimelech rather his name hints that from his stock will come a king – David. David's name closes the Megillah just as Elimelech's opens the Megillah. Why sully David's genealogy with an ancestor bearing the royal name yet demonstrating selfish behavior unbecoming a leader.

Yet Elimelech as a leader would have been obligated to support the poor in Judah, The result of his emigration was for his family to become widowed and later impoverished which would be a **measure for measure punishment** for abandoning the poor. The Rabbis can make a strong argument that this is the pshat since there is a Biblical Divine warning about mistreating widows and orphans, with an explicit threat that “your wives will be come widows and your sons orphans” (Exodus 22:21-23). The same punishment for denial of *hesed* is the eradication of one's name (Psalm 109:8-18). Thus the theological-moral interpretation of the famine and death of the notable family that left a city of famine for foreign land of plenty is completely in line with the Biblical worldview.

A further argument for the midrashic reading's rootedness in Biblical pshat is that the people of Moav where Elimelech found refuge are known for not extending the basic human hospitality of bread and water to Israel when they were refugees coming up from Egypt (Deuteronomy 23: 3-7):

ד לא-יבא עמוני ומואבי בקהל יהוה גם דור עשירי לא-יבא להם בקהל יהוה עד-
עולם: ה על-דבר אשר לא-קדמו אתכם בלחם ובמים בדרך בצאתכם ממצרים ואשר
שכר עליך את-בלעם בן-בעור מפתור ארם נהרים לקללך: ו ולא-אבה יהוה אלהיך
לשמע אל-בלעם ויהפך יהוה אלהיך לך את-הקללה לברכה כי אהבך יהוה אלהיך: ז
לא-תדרש שלמם וטבתם כל-ימך לעולם:

3. A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; to his tenth generation shall he not enter into the congregation of the Lord.
4. An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the Lord forever;
5. Because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when you came out of Egypt; and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor of Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you.
6. Nevertheless the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam; but the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing to you, because the Lord your God loved you.
7. You shall not seek their peace nor their prosperity all your days for ever.

Thus reading identifying Moab's character with Elimelech's we have a strong literary contrast of Judah versus Moab, insider versus outsider. Then Ruth's behavior shows us the Moabite Ruth who is generous can redeem her ancestors, can dispel Judahite prejudices and can teach

the people of Bethlehem that they have much to learn ethically from the Moabite outsider. She also tests whether Judah is as filled with hesed to strangers as they would like to think. It reverses the situation in Deuteronomy 23 where the Jews were in need of hospitality. The happy ending of our story in contrast with its punitive opening will be Ruth's decision to come to Judah out of hesed and solidarity as against Elimelech's decision to abandon Judah out of denial of solidarity. All this goes beyond what the pshat can "prove" but it is a reasonable and dramatically persuasive scenario built out of Biblical building blocks.

Exercise: Write several obituaries of Elimelech from different perspectives as they might appear in the newspaper back in the Bethlehem Star Journal.

Ruth 1: 8-18 – Trialogue at the Crossroads

From Fate to Character

The introduction shows us a tragic fate determined by big events that swallow up the people named. Famine and death sweep down on them like natural or Divine forces (American insurance companies still use the term “acts of God” for natural disasters, which is a good Biblical usage). Their names hint at their fates as essential qualities that cannot be changed as in a fairytales where everyone has one stable identity and character. . Only Elimelech makes a decision – to emigrate – and its inner logic is never illuminated. The women are even more passive – 'tag –alongs' to the movement of men. Their whole identity is tied to being wives and mothers and that is stripped away step by step. Personhood defined by autonomy, by choice, by inner interpretation has been hidden by the narrator or stripped away by patriarchy or by a harsh fate.

However **character development** begins when they have bottomed out and then Naomi makes a decision to reverse the path her husband had chosen and to return home. A ray of external light - good news from home, returned fertility, Divine *hesed* – instigates the choice but Naomi is not hopeful of regeneration. Yet the narrator finds hope not in an external male redeemer but in an inner change reflected in grammar – the women are the subjects of active verbs, the women enter into dialogue of rational persuasion, the women show *hesed* - loyalty and solidarity despite the way fate has torn from them their defining relationships to men, the women reveal love in words and kisses and hugs. The men are non-persons who had no character in life and are now nonexistent. But the women show there is a woman's world with a mother's house and sisterly solidarity that transcends differences in age, in ethnic and religious origin, the usual tension between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. It is a solidarity born not of the usual clan relationships but of the tragedy that leaves all three women childless widows. **Fate, these women turn, into a common destiny of solidarity and *hesed*.**

Literary Methods

Character Development through Conflict: Naomi and Ruth in a Tense Dialogue

Often the relationships of women in Megillat Ruth are described as **idyllic**; yet from a literary point of view, character development is generated through conflict, not harmony. Naomi has not only decided to leave Moav but she has decided to leave – for their own good, her daughters-in-law. She seeks to persuade them to agree to be abandoned. They object strenuously and Naomi waxes eloquent, poetic, but also bitter.

Then Orpah breaks ranks and capitulates to Naomi's love and logic. By contrast Ruth emerges even more determined and eloquent than Naomi. Naomi's persuasion fails and Ruth becomes a person choosing her own destiny in tension

with her beloved mother-in-law. What I earlier described as idyllic women's values of solidarity are played out dramatically and ironically as a deep rift between two women concerned altruistically with each other's life and therefore their conversation ends in a stony silence. They go on together but they are not in harmony. These exceptionally caring characters are both utterly without hope that their "marriage" will be life-giving – one in angry resignation, one by choice. .

Literary Methods

Three-Four Literary Pattern: Dialogue of Naomi and her Daughters-in-law

As Yair Zakovitz points out, the dialogue is pursued in **the literary form of a debate, an extended act of persuasion in four parts** (see Judges 9:8-15 and 16: 6-20 and Balaam with his donkey in Numbers 22). Usually such a pattern ends climactically with a victory but not over Ruth. Ruth's stubbornness proves her mettle and delays the resolution of their relationship until Ruth 3:4 when Ruth agrees to obey every word of Naomi's instructions.

A- Ruth 1:8-10 begins with Naomi invoking God's *hesed* in the future to match her daughter-in-law's human *hesed* in the past - to the living and the dead. She sends them back to their mother's home to find *menucha*.³ Mother will replace mother-in-law. Kisses and tears mark a heartfelt thanks and pain of departure. BUT they both refuse to turn back.

B- Ruth 1:11 is a pragmatic argument that Naomi has no males to offer her bereft daughters-in-law, no future. She calls them by an intimate term – *bnotai* – my daughters. She expresses love at the same time she urges them to let her go alone. BUT they do not respond at all.

C- Ruth 12-14 is an eloquent speech using a subjunctive mode that describes the impossible wish for Naomi to provide more bothers to marry the widows – a kind of *yibum* (Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Gen. 38:11). Denied all hope for herself Naomi feels bitter *for* them lest they become "agunot" (an anachronistic term that still reveals the associative power of the root used here. This is hapaxlagomena unique root in Tanakh which appears to mean limited). Or perhaps Naomi implies that her fate is more bitter *than* theirs and so one should not stay with her. Naomi will later use that term to rename herself as Mara but here she wishes to separate her bitter fate from theirs. Finally Naomi reverses the image of God's *hesed* into the God whose hand has struck out against her. NOW Orpah accepts the arguments

³ Ironically Ruth will find that *menucha* by staying with Naomi until marrying Boaz and receiving Naomi's blessing (Ruth 4: 11)

and the instruction and leaves with a kiss and tears. BUT Ruth holds on – *davka*- to her mother-in-law abandoning her mother's house in the same way a man holds on to his woman and leaves her biological parents (Gen. 2:24).

D- Ruth 1:16-19 presents an abbreviated appeal from Naomi setting Orpah up as model of emulation by Ruth. Unintentionally Naomi creates an ironic pun using the term "return after" which means in Numbers 14:43 and in Judges – to retreat and betray God. That is precisely what Ruth refuses to do. Ruth's speech dominates the last scene. Ruth stops Naomi's mouth with an oath by Naomi's God of hesed and of din. She curses herself if she leaves Naomi, while Naomi had urged her to leave her to receive Divine hesed. Ironically what is used in Anglican tradition exclusively for marriages is the phrase invented by Ruth to describe her relationship to a woman – "until death do us part." Ruth chooses death over life, a woman-woman relationship of barrenness over a potential husband and children, the outsider's tradition over her own, her mother-in-law over her mother's house, age over youth, the past loyalty over the future possibility.⁴

Exercise: Role play the dialogue in words in style of Bibliodrama or in tableaux to show spatially how characters relate to one another.

Exercise: The Rabbinic term "Agunah" is derived somehow from Naomi's unique term – *tei-a-gei-na* (Ruth 1: 13). Study about agunot and the sense in which they are anchored to a man they cannot jettison.

Exercise: Anglican weddings often use "**until death do us part**" as wedding vow. The author of this unit used the whole speech of Ruth's loyalty oath to Naomi as a wedding vow. Ruth 1:14's *davka* = *davka* of man leaving parents to be one with woman (Gen. 2:24). How does the marriage comparison enlighten or make ironic the Ruth-Naomi relationship?

⁴ Later we will explore Ruth's decision by comparison to Abraham's and to Rabbinic notions of conversion in TB Yevamot 47

Character development: How does Naomi change in Chapter One?

Naomi can be seen as undergoing different transformations in Chapter One according to different commentators, which may or may not be consistent with one another. (1) The first occurs when her husband dies and she takes charge.

(2) The second occurs as she arrives in Bethlehem and can measure her fall from her previous status in the eyes of those who knew her then. The woman who gave so much to her daughters-in-law becomes a self-centered, self-pitying victim in her own eyes and in those of the townswomen.

(3) The third transformation is an alternative reading of the second. Naomi turns from a pious to a rebellious woman speaking before the women of Bethlehem but to the God who judged her so harshly.

- (1) Naomi has been portrayed in the opening of the Megillah as a passive, obedient appendage of her husband because that is what she has always been. However she is transformed by suffering in a positive direction as relates to her daughters-in-law. **Cynthia Ozick** reconstructs her proto-feminist transformation:

“Until the death of her husband, we know nothing of her compliance, and it would be foolish to suppose that in Naomi’s world a wife’s obedience is not a fundamental social virtue.

But once Naomi’s husband and sons have been tragically cleared from the stage, Naomi moves from the merely passive virtue of an honorable dependent to risks and contingencies well beyond the reach of comfortable common virtue. Stripped of every social support, isolated in a foreign land, pitifully unprotected, her anomalous position apparently wholly ignored by Moabite practices, responsible for the lives of a pair of foreign daughter-in-laws, **Naomi is transformed overnight**. Under the crush of mourning and defenselessness, she becomes, without warning or preparation, **a woman of valor**. ...

She will set out on a program of autonomy. Her first act is a decision: she will return to Bethlehem...Naomi in returning makes restitution for Elimelech’s abandonment. Simply in her determination to go back, she rights an old wrong.” (*Reading Ruth*, p. 220)

Naomi then takes on the role of **head of household** to take care of her daughters-in-law as best she can by sending them back to their mother’s homes to find new husbands because Naomi acknowledges she cannot take care of them so she must release them from their ties of loyalty to her sons’ memory. She absolves them of guilt for abandoning the boys and for herself and frees them to go on in life. She and they – each to their respective homes – will return. The awful episode in Moab is undone, repealed. But her love for the daughter-in-laws is genuine.

- (2) Naomi’s arrival in Bethlehem provides a strong contrast to the Naomi

we met in dialogue with her daughters-in-law. Naomi can now measure her fall from her previous status in the eyes of those who knew her then. Naomi can be seen as always being a warm loving mother-in-law with altruistic love for her daughter-in-laws reflected in calling them “daughters/*bnotai*,” in the warm hugs and kisses with which they reciprocate. She blesses them and urges them to go home to their native mothers and search for new husbands even though she will be bereft. Ruth’s dedication would be incomprehensible if Naomi had not already shown her exceptional love.

However as Naomi begins to leave the bitterness starts to take over. She does not accept Ruth’s loyalty with open arms but falls into a silence. In Bethlehem she cries out in total despair and lonely pain. She has become a broken aging pitiful futureless woman. The woman who gave so much to her daughters-in-law becomes a self-centered self-pitying victim in her own eyes and in those of the townswomen.

- (3) An alternative view of Naomi’s transformation upon reaching Bethlehem recalls Job. The pious, passive woman turns into an accusatory lion, crying out in public her anger and her betrayal by Shaddai who has plundered her and persecuted her. This too is a move toward autonomy but not toward hope or self-help. (See below for the further development of that theme regarding Ruth 1: 19-22)

Exercise: Write a diary for Naomi and for Ruth describing the heart-wrenching events of Ruth 1.

The Mysterious Ruth the Moabite: What makes her Tick?

In terms of character development Chapter One does much to give us insight into Naomi and her own way of understanding her fate both in her dialogue with her “daughters” and with the town’s womenfolk of Bethlehem. She is a normal woman wanting to go home but deeply embittered by God’s treatment of her. She loves her daughter-in-laws so much and wishes them the best which is unusually open-hearted but makes sense and reflects Naomi’s own name – sweetness, pleasantness.

However Ruth is radically irrational in her behavior and her short determined and eloquent speech and oath to God. She defies Naomi’s logic of self-interest, of a reasonable chance for the young widows to be remarried. She defies the logic of clan loyalty and national and religious loyalty. She defies the logic of the young and the heterosexual by committing to stay with an old barren woman to foreign land. What makes her tick?

TB Yevamot 47 in defining the ideal convert to Judaism as one motivated by love of God without any ulterior motives of self-interest finds Ruth the perfect model and Naomi’s attempts to dissuade her as normative of how *gerim* should be discouraged – up to a point. The process of conversion begins with a review of how

persecuted Israel is in our age, so like Naomi who speaks of God's punishing her, the convert and Ruth need have no expectation of Divine mercy or historical acceptance. The midrash has Naomi explicate all the punishments of violating the Torah including various forms of capital punishment and their separate burial plots. Yet the Talmud does set a limit to such discouragement. Once one sees that the convert is serious as in the case in of Ruth, then like Naomi one must stop dissuading the conversion candidate. 'Do not give them too many mitzvot or too detailed an account of their requirements,' in general do not be too strict in checking the convert from then on.

Yet the more ideologically pure the convert's motive, the less satisfying the literary portrayal a realistic character making rational choices in character. Several theories seek to explicate Ruth's inner logic without emphasizing a religious transformation:

#1. Ruth Putman: Love is stronger than self-interest or even than native affiliations. Ruth is simply responding in kind to Naomi's exceptional love in kind. This theory presumes certain behaviors of Naomi, outside the narrative, that make sense of Ruth and Orpah's exceptional devotion. Thus Naomi seems to have overcome natural affiliations and self-interest to welcome Moabite daughters-in-law into her family (even though there is "bad blood" between Moav and Israel – Numbers 25 and Deuteronomy 23). Hence Naomi calls them "her daughters."

Naomi seems to have overcome usual mother-in-law tensions to become more loving than a biological mother such that both daughters-in-law seem to prefer to stay with her. Naomi overcame natural self interest of bereaved elderly woman who would have been expected to hold on to her daughters-in-law as all she has, all that reminds her of her children, yet she urges them both to go home and abandon her. (*Reading Ruth*, p. 44)

#2. Cynthia Ozick: Ruth – not Naomi – is the exceptional personality. By contrast to the good but not exceptionally *hesed*-driven personality of Orpah, Ruth is just mysteriously, miraculously gracious and self-sacrificing in a way that is typical of certain giving-characters of *hesed*. Thus Boaz recognizes her for her *hesed* to the dead and the living (Ruth 2: 11-12).

Orpah and Ruth are contrasted, not as hero versus villain, but as ordinary goodness versus exceptional altruistic love (see **Cynthia Ozick** in *Reading Ruth*, p. 221ff).

#3. Gail Riemer: Ruth is exceptional not in self-sacrifice, in *hesed* but in **stubborn independent-mindedness and in a liberated women's perspective** on what is truly important in life. Ruth implicitly rejects Naomi's evaluation of her life as utterly empty simply because all the men in her life are gone and those used to define her completely. Ruth truly values female friendship even more than male relatives. (*Reading Ruth*, p97ff)

#4. Lois Dubin: Ruth has faith in God of hope and of life as opposed to Naomi who in her post menopausal and post traumatic crisis has become a

bitter survivor blaming God. (*Reading Ruth*, p 131ff)

Exercise: Mother-in-Law Jokes

The Ruth-Naomi relationship is amazing against the backdrop of the ongoing cultural attitude to mother-in-laws. Examine joke books for jibes about mother-in-laws or report on situation comedies on TV that use that motif.

Consider the halachic position of Maimonides that a woman can refuse to allow her mother-in-law and sister-in-laws into her house or live with them in the same courtyard because they are presumed to be vindictive and demeaning to her (Maimonides, *Sefer Nashim*, *Laws of Marriage*, 13:14). "Daughter-in-law and mother-in-law cannot serve as witnesses one about the other because they are presumed to hate one another" (Maimonides, *Laws of Divorce* 12:16)

Tell the joke about the two mother-in-laws who were arguing. Once two hatanim were ordered from a far away yeshiva to marry two daughters of the town, even though they had never seen each other before. Unfortunately while crossing the river outside the town, one of the hatanim was drown. Now the families came to the rav of the town to decide who gets the remaining living hatan and who gets the dead one. The rav consulted the story of King Solomon and the two prostitutes with one living child and one dead one. The rav then asked that the living hatan be cut in half to share equally. One protested that the hatan should be allowed to live, give hi to the other family. The second mother-in-law said: cut him in half. The rav triumphantly announced. Now there is no need to cut the hatan in half. We know that the true mother-in-law is the one who wanted him cut in half so give him to her daughter. Mother-in-law's instincts for the daughter-in-law or son-in-law are the opposite of maternal instincts for the natural child who is being taken away by the interloper spouse. Now what do these extraneous sources teach us about the extraordinary relationship between Naomi and Ruth?

Character Education: Friends or Best-Friends?

Contrasting Ordinary, Decent from Extraordinary, *Din* from *Hesed*, Dutiful from Altruistic Love, Friends from Bosom-Buddies (best friends), Conventional from Exceptional

Ruth is exceptional and she arouses responses of blessing and praise because of her exceptional *hesed*. Literarily her love is characterized and exemplified in contrast to otherwise good characters - Orpah. Just as Boaz, her match, will be contrasted with Ploni Almoni. This makes them both people of *hayil* = valor.

So Megillat Ruth opens up a form of moral education which is not about doing what's right, about Lawrence Kohlberg's moral education dilemmas of what is the right that takes precedence, not what everyone should do, but what some people do and thereby they expand the realm of possibilities for good. They transcend self-interest in a way that the law cannot demand or teach, but which can be modeled by exceptional goodness. Maimonides in the *Guide to the Perplexed*

II 53 defines *gemilut hesed* in terms of one of two characteristics:

- a. doing something for someone who has no legal claim on you at all
- b. giving someone who deserves goodness even more than they deserve.

A story is the best way to teach this quality of *hesed*. Ask students to describe an encounter with such a person or such an action of *hesed* - seen or read. How did it made them feel and how did they instinctively judge the actor - whether as fools or heroes. What reactions did the act of *hesed* trigger – exploitation or praise or emulation?

Exercise: Make a chart to compare Orpah and Ruth in Ruth1. Then read **Cynthia Ozick's** reconstruction of the story (*Reading Ruth*, p. 221ff):

"Let young, stricken Orpah not be overlooked. She is always overlooked. ...She is no heroine. Her mark is erased from history; there is no Book of Orpah. ...And yet Orpah is history's backdrop. She is the majority of humankind living out its usualness on home ground.

These young women – both of them – are cherished by Naomi; she cannot speak to them without flooding them in her fellow feeling. She *knows* what it is to be Orpah and Ruth. They have all suffered and sorrowed together, and in ten years of living in one household much of the superficial cultural strangeness has worn off. ...Orpah is a loving young woman of clear goodness; she has kisses and tears for the loss of Naomi...Her sensibility is ungrudging and she is not in the least narrow-minded. ...Exogamy is never ordinary...she is already a little more daring than most, already somewhat offbeat – she is one of only two Moabite women to marry Hebrews and Hebrews have never been congenial to Moabites.... Orpah has cut through all this bad blood to plain humanity. ...She has thrown off prejudice ..

Her prototype abounds. She has fine impulses, but she is not an iconoclast. She can push against convention to a generous degree, but it is out of generosity of her temperament, not out of some large metaphysical idea – monotheism...

Naomi, who is no metaphysician herself, who is rather heir to a tradition imposes no monotheistic claim on either of her daughters-in-law. She is right not to do this...She is a bereaved woman far from home and when she looks at her bereaved daughters-in-law, it is home she is thinking of, for herself and for them. ..Naomi is the opposite of coercive or punitive...

So Orpah goes home; or more to the point, she goes nowhere. She stays home. She is never, never, never to be blamed for it. If she is not extraordinary, she is normal...What Orpah gains by staying home with her own people is what she always deserved: family happiness...What Orpah loses is the last three thousand years of being present in history. Israel continues, Moab has not....Does it matter to Orpah that her great-great-great-grandchildren have tumbled out of history and that there is no Book of Orpah?...Normality is not visionary. Normality's appetite stops at satisfaction.

Ruth's words have set 30 centuries to trembling: "Your God shall be my God" uttered in visionary language....Why should she, any more than any other village woman, think beyond personal relations? In the language of personal relations, in the language of pragmatism and exigency, here is what Ruth *might* have replied:

Mother-in-law, I am used to living in your household, and have become accustomed to the ways of your family. I would no longer feel at home if I resumed the ways of my people. ...I was so young when I came into your family that it was you who completed my upbringing. It isn't for nothing that you call me "daughter". So let me go with you.

On a higher spectrum of ideal conduct...she *might* have said:

Mother-in-law, you are heavier in years than I and alone in a strange place, whereas I am stalwart and not likely to be alone for long. Surely I will have a second chance, just as you predict, but you – how helpless you are, how unprotected!

If I stayed in Moab, I would be looking after my own interests, as you recommend, but do you think I can all of a sudden stop feeling for you, just like that? No don't expect me to abandon you – who knows what can happen to a woman of your years all by herself on the road? And what prospects can there be for you, after all this time away, in Bethlehem?

It's true I'll seem a little odd in your country, but I'd rather endure a little oddness in Bethlehem than lose you forever, not knowing what's to

become of you. Let me go and watch over you.

These words are anomalous....extraordinary. For Ruth to cling to Naomi as a daughter to her mother is uncommon enough; a universe of folklore confirms that a daughter-in-law is not a daughter. But for Ruth to become the instrument of Naomi's restoration to safekeeping within her own community – and to prosperity and honor as well – is a thing of magnitude.

[It is as if Ruth had said:]

"Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Only death will part me from you!"

Of course this lovely passage is not the story of the Book of Ruth (any more than my unpoetic made-up monologues are) ...In transcribing from the text, I have left out what Ruth passionately put in: God! And still Ruth's speech, even with God left out, ..is a stupendous expression of loyalty and love.

[But listen to] the cosmic sweep of a single phrase transforming these bare syllables from a touching language of family feeling to the unearthly tongue of the visionary:

*"Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people. **And your God will be my God!** Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Only death will part me from you!"*

Has Ruth "learned" this insight from Naomi and from Naomi's son? It may be....On the other hand, Orpah too encounters that cognition and slips back into Moab to lose it again. Inculcation is not insight....Abraham – the first Hebrew to catch insight – caught it as genius does, autonomously, out of the blue, without inculcating tradition. Ruth is in possession of both inculcation *and* insight. ..One can almost imagine her as a kind of Abraham....To stop at love and loyalty is to have arrived at much, but not all; to stop at love is to stop too soon. Ruth claims the God of Israel out of her own ontological understanding. She knows – she knows directly, prophetically – that the Creator of the Universe is One.

Exercise: Ask four women to read the **four monologues** with feeling and then discuss the differences. Do you agree with Ozick that the addition of God is essential to appreciate fully Ruth's singularity? Would the "God" phrase be important to use at your own wedding or would you be happy leaving it out but still using the rest of the quote? Explain.

The Test of True Friendship

Marge Piercy –Poem (*Reading Ruth*, p159)

...Where you go, I will go too,
your people shall be my people,
I will be a Jew for you,
for what is yours I will love
as I love you, oh Naomi
my mother, my sister, my heart.

Show me a woman who does not dream
a double, a heart's twin, a sister
of the mind in whose ear she can whisper,
whose hair she can braid as her life
twists its pleasure and pain and shame.
Show me a woman who does not hide
in the locket of bone that deep
eye beam of fiercely gentle love
she had once from mother, daughter,
sister; once like a warm moon
that radiance aligned the tides
of her blood into potent order.

At the season of first fruits we recall
those travelers, co-conspirators, scavengers
making do with leftovers and mill ends,
whose friendship was stronger than fear,
stronger than hunger, who walked together
the road of shards, hands joined

What is so special about friendship? What aspects does the poem capture it?

Marge Piercy describes a women's friendship. Is men's friendship different?

Ruth Anna Putnam proposes that friendship can be a subversive value and that it is tested in a conflict of loyalties. "Friendship is the greatest human good; yet loyalty to a friend may conflict with loyalty to one's country or with the demands of morality. Thus the potential for tragedy appears to lie at the very core of friendship." In the other great story of altruistic friendship in the Tanakh we find Jonathan in love with David, despite Jonathan's presumed loyalty to his father the king, to Jonathan's own self-interest as an heir threatened by David popularity, to Jonathan's status as royalty as opposed to David the village boy.

Yet they declare a *brit* of love and loyalty (I Samuel 18:1; 19:1-3; 20:1-17; 20:41-42 II Samuel 1:26).

What conflicts can you imagine or have you seen between loyalty to friends and to family or to institutions or to conventional moral demands? Do not judge what the right things to do would be, but what the meaning of friendship is given these conflicts. Do you agree that “friendship is the greatest human good”?

Ruth abandons her mother, her native land, her religion, for her love of Naomi. But the Megillah does not develop the strains in Ruth’s decision. Ruth’s goodness flows as *hesed* without the pain of the decision. Boaz acknowledges that it must have been hard to leave father and mother and land but we must imagine it to give it depth.

Act out a Bibliodrama dialogue between Ruth and her native mother over the decision to go with Naomi.

The Stork = *Hasida* = *Avis Pia*

In the ancient world of Greece, Egypt and Judea, the stork is identified not with bringing babies but with demonstrating *hesed*. The Rabbis gave the *midrash shem*: “Why is this bird called *hasida*? Because she does *hesed* to her fellow storks.” (TB Hulin 63a). In Latin “*Avis Pia*” means “pious bird.” Ornithologists have noticed how a pair of storks will stay together all their lives and share care of their nests and their young. They return year after year to the same nest.

Ruth as the Rabbis' Star Convert

Today many female converts take the name Ruth and the Talmudic criteria of accepting *gerim* explicitly derives some of its laws from a midrash halalcha on these verses in Megillat Ruth Chapter 1 from the dialogue with Naomi. **TB Yevamot 47** uses Ruth as a model for **the ideal convert** who has no ulterior motives at all.

Our Rabbis taught: If at the present time a man desires to become a proselyte, he is to be addressed as follows: 'What reason have you for desiring to become a proselyte; do you not know that Israel at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions'?

If he replies, 'I know and yet am unworthy', he is accepted forthwith, and is given instruction in some of the minor and some of the major commandments. He is informed of the sin [of the neglect of the commandments of] Gleanings, the Forgotten Sheaf, the Corner and the Poor Man's Tithe.

He is also told of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments. Furthermore, he is addressed thus: 'Be it known to you that before you came to this condition, if you had eaten suet you would not have been punishable with kareth, if you had profaned the Sabbath you would not have been punishable with stoning; but now were you to eat suet you would be punished with kareth; were you to profane the Sabbath you would be punished with stoning'.

And as he is informed of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments, so is he informed of the reward granted for their fulfillment. He is told, 'Be it known to you that the world to come was made only for the righteous, and that Israel at the present time are unable to bear either too much prosperity, or too much suffering'. He is not, however, to be persuaded or dissuaded too much.¹ If he accepted, he is circumcised forthwith.

The Master said, 'If a man desires to become a proselyte . . . he is to be addressed as follows: 'What reason have you for desiring to become a proselyte . . .' and he is made acquainted with some of the minor, and with some of the major commandments'.

What is the reason? — In order that if he desire to withdraw let him do so; for R. Helbo said: Proselytes are as hard for Israel [to endure] as a sore, because it is written in Scripture. "And the proselyte shall join himself with them, and they shall cleave to the house of Jacob." (Isaiah 14).

'He is informed of the sin [of the neglect of the commandment of] Gleanings, the Forgotten Sheaf, the Corner and the Poor Man's Tithe'.

What is the reason? — R. Hiyya b. Abba replied in the name of R. Johanan: Because a Noahide would rather be killed than spend so much as a perutah which is not returnable.

'He is not, however, to be persuaded, or dissuaded too much'.

R. Eleazar said: What is the Scriptural proof? — It is written, *'And when she saw that she was steadfastly minded to go with her, she left off speaking unto her.'*

'We are forbidden', she told her, '[to move on the Sabbath beyond the] Sabbath boundaries'! — *'Whither you go, I will go'.*

'We are forbidden private meeting between man and woman'! — *'Where you lodge, I will lodge'.*

'We have been commanded six hundred and thirteen commandments'! — *'Your people shall be my people'.*

'We are forbidden idolatry'! — *'And your God my God'.*

'Four modes of death were entrusted to Beth din'! — *'Where you die, I will die'.*

'Two graveyards were placed at the disposal of the Beth Din'! — *'And there will I be buried'.*

Presently she saw that she was steadfastly minded etc. 'If he accepted, he is circumcised forthwith'. What is the reason? — The performance of a commandment must not in any way be delayed.

תנו רבנן: גר שבא להתגייר בזמן הזה, אומרים לו: מה ראית שבאת להתגייר? אי אתה יודע שישראל בזמן הזה דוויים, דחופים, סחופים ומטורפין, ויסורין באין עליהם? אם אומר: יודע אני ואיני כדאי, מקבלין אותו מיד.

ומודיעין אותו מקצת מצות קלות ומקצת מצות חמורות, ומודיעין אותו עון לקט שכחה ופאה ומעשר עני. ומודיעין אותו ענשן של מצות, אומרים לו: הוי יודע, שעד שלא באת למדה זו, אכלת חלב אי אתה ענוש כרת, חללת שבת אי אתה ענוש סקילה, ועכשיו, אכלת חלב ענוש כרת, חללת שבת ענוש סקילה.

וכשם שמודיעין אותו ענשן של מצות, כך מודיעין אותו מתן שכר, אומרים לו: הוי יודע, שהעולם הבא אינו עשוי אלא לצדיקים, וישראל בזמן הזה - אינם יכולים לקבל

- לא רוב טובה ולא רוב פורענות. ואין מרבין עליו, ואין מדקדקין עליו. קיבל,

מלין אותו מיד. (יבמות דף מז.)

אמר מר: גר שבא להתגייר, אומרים לו: מה ראית שבאת להתגייר? ומודיעים אותו מקצת מצות קלות ומקצת מצות חמורות.
מ"ט? דאי פריש נפרוש, דא"ר חלבו: קשים גרים לישראל כספחת, דכתיב: (ישעיהו י"ד) ונלוה הגר עליהם ונספחו על בית יעקב.
ומודיעים אותו עון לקט שכחה ופאה ומעשר עני.
מ"ט? א"ר חייא בר אבא א"ר יוחנן: בן נח נהרג על פחות משוה פרוטה, ולא ניתן להשבון. (ומודיעים אותו עון שכחה ופאה).
ואין מרבים עליו, ואין מדקדקים עליו.
אמר רבי אלעזר: מאי קראה? דכתיב: (רות א') ותרא כי מתאמצת היא ללכת אתה ותחדל לדבר אליה, אמרה לה: אסיר לך תחום שבת (רות א') באשר תלכי אלך. אסיר לך יחוד (רות א') באשר תליני אליו. מפקדין שש מאות וי"ג מצות (רות א') עמד עמי. אסיר לך עבודת כוכבים (רות א') ואלהיך אלהי. ארבע מיתות נמסרו לב"ד (רות א') באשר תמותי אמות. ב' קברים נמסרו לב"ד (רות א') ושם אקבר.
מיד, ותרא כי מתאמצת היא וגו'. קיבל, מלין אותו מיד.

Questions: How does this midrash explain the preference God gives to converts? How does it illuminate Boaz's response to Ruth in Ruth 2:11-12?

יא וַיַּעַן בַּעַז וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ הִגְדִּי הִגְדִּי לִי כָּל אֲשֶׁר-עָשִׂית אֶת-חַמּוֹתַי אַחֲרֵי מוֹת אִישׁךָ וַתַּעֲזֹבֵי אֲבִיךָ וְאֶמְךָ וְאֶרֶץ מוֹלְדֹתַי וַתֵּלְכִי אֶל-עַם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַעְתָּ תְּמוּל שְׁלֹשׁוֹם :
יב יִשְׁלַם יְהוָה פְּעֻלָּתְךָ וְתִהְיֶי מְשִׁכְּרֹתַי שְׁלָמָה מֵעַם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר-בָּאת לְחַסּוֹת תַּחַת-כְּנָפָיו :

How does this midrash illuminate Boaz's comment:

God said: *Gerim* are great before me just as much as a Levi because they converted for my own sake.

A *mashal*: It is like a deer who grows in the desert and comes and mixes into a shepherd's flock of sheep. The shepherd feeds him and loves him more than his sheep.

Why? Because the shepherd has invested so much effort in his sheep, taking them out each morning and gathering them each evening until they grew up. Yet this deer grew up in the deserts and forests and came of his own volition.

So too God says; How much have I invested in taking this people out of Egypt, giving them light in the desert, bringing them manna and quail, finding a well, surrounding them with clouds of glory until they finally accepted my Torah. Yet this convert came of his own volition, so I regard him as equal to my people Israel and to the Levi.

(Yalkut Shimoni Emor)

Abraham and Sarah are also seen by rabbinic midrash as converts to Judaism. How does Ruth compare to Abraham as model for conversion? Consider not only the Biblical text (Gene.12:1-9) about Abraham but also the idol breaking midrash.

Exercise: The Contribution of Converts

Ruth not only joins the Jewish people but teaches Jews much about Divine *hesed*. In Rabbinic texts there is both suspicion of and praise for *gerim* = converts. Can you from your experience from your family or others give some positive examples of ethnic outsiders, nonJews, who have entered and brought much richness to their Jewish families and communities (whether they formally converted or not)? Interview such a convert and ask them how they understand Ruth's motivations and how they have been welcomed or stigmatized? Have they found themselves more committed to God or Judaism than the native Jews who did not choose to join the community? How do they feel about that?

Ruth 1: 19-22 – Tragic Homecoming

The Female Job

Despite Ruth's emotional oath of loyalty – “until death do us part,” Naomi responds impassively in silence without any expression of feeling. Perhaps she is withdrawing into herself and her suffering. Naomi does not seem to have assimilated the meaning of her new partner in life. She still feels utterly alone, abandoned by God. It is God who is her significant other and very much “other” – her enemy, her judge, her Jobian God of arbitrary punishment. Ruth 1:20-21 forms a circular structure that begins and ends with Shaddai causing me pain. The language and plot echoes **Job** as Yair Zakovitz points out (*Ruth: Mikra L'Yisrael* p. 30):

- a. Both Job and Naomi begin life blessed with land and children and then blame God when deprived of all.
- b. Job 27:2 says “Shaddai embittered my life” and Naomi laments that “Shaddai embittered me very much” (Ruth 1:21). (“*Shaddai*” never appears in Tanakh - without El Shaddai – except in Ruth 1:20-21 and 30 times in Job).

א וַיִּסֹּף אִיּוֹב שׁ אֶת מְשָׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר: ב חַי־אֵל הִסִּיר מִשְׁפָּטִי וְשֹׁדֵי הַיָּמָר נָפְשִׁי: ג כִּי-כָל-
עוֹד נִשְׁמַתִּי בִּי וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים בְּאַפִּי: ד אִם-תִּדְבַּרְנָה שְׁפָתַי עוֹלָה וּלְשׁוֹנִי אִם-יִהְיֶה רִמְיָה: ה
חֲלִילָה לִּי אִם-אֶצְדִּיק אֶתְכֶם עַד-אֲגֹעַ לֹא-אֶסִּיר תַּמָּתִי מִמֶּנִּי: ו בְּצִדְקָתִי הִחַזְקָתִי וְלֹא
אֲרָפָה לֹא-יִחַרְף לִבִּי מִיָּמִי: ז יְהִי כְרֶשֶׁעַ אִבִּי וּמִתְקוֹמָמִי כְעוֹל: ח כִּי מֵה-תִּקְוֹת חִיָּה כִּי
יִבָּעַע כִּי יִשָּׁל אֱלֹהִים נַפְשׁוֹ: ט הִצַּעְקָתוֹ יִשְׁמַע | אֵל כִּי-תִבּוֹא עָלָיו צָרָה: י אִם-עַל-שֹׁדֵי יִתְעַנֵּג
יִקְרָא אֱלֹהִים בְּכָל-עֵת: יא אוֹרָה אֶתְכֶם בְּיַד-אֵל אֲשֶׁר עִם-שֹׁדֵי לֹא אֶכְחָד: יב הֵן-אַתֶּם כָּלְכֶם
חַזִּיתֶם וְלִמָּה-זֶה הֶבֶל תִּהְבֵּלוּ:

1. And Job continued his discourse, and said,
2. As God lives, who has taken away my judgment; and the Almighty, who has tormented my soul;
3. All the while my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils;
4. My lips shall not speak wickedness, nor my tongue utter deceit.
5. Far be it from me that I should justify you; till I die I will not put away my integrity from me.
6. My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go; my heart shall not reproach me so long as I live.
7. Let my enemy be like the wicked, and he who rises up against me like the unrighteous.

The term “Shaddai” may raise ironic associations with God’s promise of fertility to the Abraham’s clan (Gen. 17:1; 28:3; 35:11) since Shaddai has denied Naomi offspring. But it may also recall the military image of *shod miShaddai* – a God who plunders and destroys (Isaiah 13:6).

- c. Both Naomi's women townsfolk and Job's friends are shocked by seeing Naomi/Job after their tragedies and find them unrecognizable (Ruth 1:19 and Job 2:12-13).

יב וַיִּשְׂאוּ אֶת-עֵינֵיהֶם מִרְחוֹק וְלֹא הִכִּירוּהוּ וַיִּשְׂאוּ קוֹלָם וַיִּבְכּוּ וַיִּקְרְעוּ אִישׁ מְעִלּוֹ וַיִּזְרְקוּ עָפָר
עַל-רֹאשֵׁיהֶם הַשְּׁמַיְמָה: יג וַיֵּשְׁבוּ אִתּוֹ לָאָרֶץ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וְשִׁבְעַת לַיְלוֹת וְאִין-דָּבָר אֵלָיו דָּבַר כִּי
רָאוּ כִּי-גִדְלָה הַכְּאֵב מֵאֲדָּ:

12. And when they lifted up their eyes from far away, and did not recognize him, they lifted up their voice, and wept; and they tore every one his robe, and sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven.

13. And they sat down with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him; for they saw that his suffering was very great.

Naomi's Guilt versus Naomi's Innocence, Sinner versus Victim

While the allusions to Job suggest a bitter woman standing up angrily and with integrity to her enemy God, the Midrash Ruth Rabbah suggests that Naomi's fate is a punishment for her and her husband's sins. They are twofold:

- (1) **abandonment** of family and homeland in a time of trouble, especially if the name Elimelech suggests a notable leader from the community. So much of the positive values for which Ruth is praised are about unconditional loyalty even without any self-interest. The leitwort *azav* is central to the description of God and Ruth in Ruth Chapter Two (Ruth 2:11,16,20).
- (2) **assimilation with Moab**, symbol of otherness, of lack of hospitality (Deuteronomy 23:4-9) and sexual subversion (Gen. 19 and Numbers 25:1). In later terms this will be called intermarriage. Even in the era of Ruth it is exogamy and suggests loss of identity. Ruth is constantly identified as the other – as Moaviah – by the Judeans. Unlike Abraham and Rivka, Naomi is not reported to have objected to her husband about taking foreign wives for her sons.

Exercise: Empathy and Evaluation

Do you think Naomi feels guilty or victimized?
Examine her declarations and read them dramatically in two different tones according to the two different interpretations.

Do you think Naomi *should* feel guilty?
Could the desire to send the Moabite daughters back to their mothers be about correcting her error of moving to Moav and intermarrying with Moav before she returns to Judea and to God?

Literary Methods

Echoes or literary allusions from Ruth 1 to other Biblical stories.

What is similar or different? What do these echoes contribute to enrich the story in Ruth?

a. Ruth 1:6 recalls God's remembering the long barren Sarah in Gen. 21:1. Sarah like Ruth felt punished by God ("*Adonai atzarani miledet*" – Gen. 16:2)

b. Ruth 1:13 – *al bnotai* = *al banai* of Eli to his corrupt two sons (I Samuel 2:24). Two very different examples of rebuke to one's children.

c. Ruth 1:13 – *ad asher yigdlu* = remain as a widow in your father's home until my son Shelah grows up Gen. 38:11).

d. Ruth 1:14 Ruth's *davka* = *davka* of man leaving parents to be one with woman (Gen. 2:24)

e. Ruth 1:17 has Ruth declare that loyalty unto death do us part = David describes love of Jonathan and Saul as inseparable even in death (II Samuel 1:23). Both declare a loyalty to same sex friend that is greater than love of other sex.

f. Ruth 1:19 *vateilachna shteihem* – the two went together is perhaps an echo of Abraham and Yitzchak going the two together to akedah. Similarly Ruth is loyal to Naomi whatever sacrifice is required due to God's harsh treatment of Naomi.

Exercise: Recall experiences of being homesick. What aroused that feeling? What if anything is its relevance to the feelings of our characters? How did it actually feel when you came home?

A Failed Homecoming: Expectation and Plot Twists

What did we expect from the homecoming? What does that term imply?

Expectations: We saw how filled with tears and hugs and kisses was the farewell from Moab which had been a place of tragedy far from one's native land. We heard Naomi's impetus for coming home – the good news about "God recalling his people and restoring to them bread" to the House of Bread (Ruth 1:6). We saw how the two women, Naomi and Ruth, walked off together (Ruth 1:19. In a way this is reminiscent of Abraham and Isaac at the Akeda (Gen. 22: 6 and 8) – though the text lacks the added word – *yahdav* = "together" that would have cemented the relationship even in readiness for sacrifice.

Twist of Plot: However Naomi's return home is ironically not a source of

comfort after exile - recognition by old friends and welcoming by family. The family does not help – until Ruth and Naomi take the initiative in Chapter 2 and 3. The women friends say that Naomi is *un-recognizable* for her fate has made her strange. The very comparison between her past memories and her present plight reinforce her sense of estrangement and suffering at God's hands. The women serve as a Greek chorus and allow Naomi to express her bitterness, but they treat her as “*zoʿ*” – that strange unrecognizable object (Ruth 1:19). There are no hugs or kisses of support, as shared with Ruth and Orpah, and no welcoming reunion, as when Jacob sees his long-lost Joseph.

Unrecognizable as Naomi, she renames herself “**Mara**” to close the painfully ironic gap between her name and her fate. (Other characters like Mahlon and Chilyon had a tragic but fitting match between name and fate). The chapter began by giving each character a name but now Naomi changes the name. The end of the book will also involve naming – naming the grandchild that will comfort all the women.

Naomi continues to live in a women's world greeted by the women of the town, but she does not find sisterly solidarity. Instead she sinks into her own world of unrelenting suffering. Egocentrically she repeats the phrase “me” (*li/bi* five times in Ruth 1: 20-21 and ironically ignores Ruth's presence, Ruth's love and loyalty, when Naomi declares “she left full and returned empty” – as if she were totally alone.

Naomi has suppressed the reason she herself left Moav – “she had heard that God remembered God's people and gave them bread” (Ruth 1:6). She has excluded herself from the people's and from God's redemptive turn. She has described herself as utterly alone, empty even though Ruth has cast in her fate with Naomi and “gone with her.”

However the narrator reminds us that Ruth is “with her” = *ima* (Ruth 1:22) even though Naomi claimed to have returned completely empty and alone. The narrator reminds us that the harvest is on and Bethlehem is again literally a house of Bread. These **signs of hope** are an implicit subversion of Naomi's absolutely despairing, even self-pitying monologue before the townswomen, as will be the coincidence of Ruth gleaning in Boaz the family redeemer's field (Ruth 2:1). The tension between Naomi's self-perception and the narrative hints of national redemption creates upbeat expectations for the reader.

Personalizing Exercise: Reflect – when have you felt or seen others utterly bereft of hope and then a happy turn of events surprises them and forces them to revise their pessimistic view of the world. If appropriate, ask women to share their experience of pregnancy and by contrast miscarriage or still-birth or crib death or the loss of a child of any age.

To be “Remaindered” - Naomi as a Mourner: Reactions, Stages, Processes

Jonathan Magonet in his book *Bible Lives* reads Naomi as a mourner going through a difficult trauma on the way to consolation and healing. Discuss some of the characteristics of people experiencing trauma and then apply them to a close reading of the text in Ruth 1.

- a. Naomi has seen her identity and her family stripped away a piece at a time from leaving Bethlehem, to losing a husband, and then two sons. The Megillah uses a charged term – *vatishaer* = she remained. Each time she struggled to face tragedy – the famine, then the move, but God/fate struck her leaving her “left alone.” Her husband dies, then her sons get married to keep the line alive, but God/fate strikes her again, leaving her utterly “left alone.”

3. And Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was **left** with her two sons.
4. And they took wives of the women of Moab; the name of one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth; and they dwelled there about ten years.
5. And both Machlon and Chilyon died; and the woman was **left** without her two children⁵ and her husband. (Ruth 1:3-5)

ג וַיָּמָת אֶלְיִמֶּלֶךְ אִישׁ נַעֲמִי וַתִּשָּׂאֵר הִיא וּשְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ:
ד וַיֵּשׁ אוֹ לָהֶם נָשִׁים מֵאֲבוֹת שֵׁם הָאֶחָת עֹרְפָה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית רוּת
וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם כְּעֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים:
ה וַיָּמוּתוּ גַם-שְׁנֵיהֶם מִחֵלוֹן וְכִלְיוֹן וַתִּשָּׂאֵר הָאִשָּׁה מִשְׁנֵי יְלָדֶיהָ וּמֵאִשָּׁה:

That term *tishaer* recalls the concern for loss of memory embodied in descendants, which in the Biblical world is worse than death. In II Samuel 14:7 the woman of Tekoah, tries to convince David to forgive his son Avshalom for the murder of his other son Amnon, by acting as if this were her personal story:

“The [remaining son and] heir will be wiped out, my glowing coal which remains/ *nishara* will be extinguished, so no one will bear my husband's name and preserve his remainder/memory/*sheirit*⁶ on the face of the earth.” (II Samuel 14:7).

ה וַיֵּאמֶר-לָהּ הַמֶּלֶךְ מֶה-לָּךְ וַתֹּאמֶר אָבֵל אִשָּׁה-אֶלְמָנָה אֲנִי וַיָּמָת אִישִׁי: ו וַלְשִׁפְחָתְךָ
שְׁנֵי בָנִים וַיָּנֻצוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם בַּשָּׂדֶה וַאֲנִי מְצִיל בְּיָדֵיהֶם וַיָּכּוּ הָאֶחָד אֶת-הָאֶחָד וַיָּמָת אֶת: ז
וְהִנֵּה קָמָה כָּל-הַמִּשְׁפָּחָה עַל-שִׁפְחָתְךָ וַיֵּאמְרוּ תָנִי | אֶת-מִכָּה אָחִיו וְנִמְתָּהּ בְּנֹפֶשׁ אָחִיו
אֲשֶׁר הָרַג וְנִשְׁמִידָה גַם אֶת-הַיּוֹרֵשׁ וְכָבוּ אֶת-גְּחֻלָּתִי אֲשֶׁר נָשָׂאָה לְבִלְתִּי שׁ-וּם- [שִׁימ] -
לְאִישִׁי שֵׁם וּשְׂאִירִית עַל-פָּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה:

⁵ The change of terminology from “sons” to “children” after their deaths evokes greater sympathy for Naomi as we see her relating to her deceased adult sons as her lost children.

⁶ That *sheirit*, that remainder, is also a term used for the Jewish people sent into exile and the hope of the *sheirit* return is the hope that bears all the memories of those that have died. Naomi's plight is also an allegory for the whole Jewish people.

- b. Nevertheless when Naomi initially hears that things in the old country are improving, that God has recalled his people (Ruth 1: 6) and restored bread, she initiates a return home. Perhaps she was impoverished already in Moab with no one family to help her or perhaps she just looked for a ray of hope to start over.
- c. Initially Naomi takes her daughter-in-laws with her on the way home. But then after they have begun their common journey, Naomi realizes she must send her daughter-in-laws back to Moab (Ruth 1:8). Does she understand that whatever hope she looks for in Judah can never solve these young widows' problems? Has Naomi overcome her egocentric concern for self and reached out to put her daughters-in-law first? Has she become more realistic on second thought after that first ray of false hope? Does she know her people in Judah will not help support these Moabites or marry them? (Deuteronomy 23:4-7 "An Amoni and a Moavi shall not enter the community of God forever.. nor shall anyone worry about their peace or their well-being ...forever.")
- d. Or perhaps Naomi is anxious to send away her daughters-in-law, her remaining "family," her last living memories of her sons, as another step in her self-destruction as a woman who has despaired. "*Lechna shovna* = Go get out of here, go away from me, go back where you came from" (Ruth 1:8). Jonathan Magonet suggests: "What Naomi wanted was for them to leave her to her own private bitterness and sadness.... She was herself adding to the process of loss, ridding herself of the last reminders of her husband and children and somehow confirming and even increasing her emptiness and loneliness." Her state of desolation could then justify her self-pity or her suicidal desires.
- e. Perhaps Naomi was also protecting herself from further loss by cutting off relationships which she feels will not last like the one with daughter-in-laws who will go off to remarry. (Listen to the words of Simon and Garfunkel's song of self-protection from pain. Its refrain is "I am a rock, I am an island.")
- f. Maybe Naomi was also imagining, as one does on a trip, the homecoming and imagining the response of the women to these Moabites who would be blamed for causing the death of the men in her family. Maybe she would be ashamed that she allowed her sons to marry them. Midrash Ruth Zuta 1 says: "Why was she trying to return her daughters-in-law to Moab? So she would be embarrassed by them [when she returned to Bethlehem]." Maybe she began to blame them for all that had befallen her as she feared the women of Bethlehem would.

Ruth 1:13 says: "No, my daughters; for it embitters me much **for your sakes**, that the hand of the Lord is gone out against me." – so you too will be affected by my fate!

אֵל בְּנֵי תִי כִי-מֵר-לִי מָאֹד מִכֶּם כִּי-יִצְאָה בִּי יָד-יְהוָה

But Midrash Ruth Rabbah 2:18 explicates: מִכֶּם – "**because of you** God's hand struck me, my sons and my husband."

- g. Naomi then appeals again to the daughter-in-laws in similar language but softened by an intimate renaming of them as her daughters: “*Shovna, Bnotai, lechna.*” Nevertheless Naomi does not abandon her persuasive stance. Refael Breuer, grandson of Shimshon Refael Hirsch, praises Naomi who will not be swayed by all the emotional expressions – tears, kisses, wailing. She remains logical and determined to send the daughter-in-laws away, for their own sake. Naomi sees their long-term needs, ignoring their short-term feelings of abandonment. She understands: “No, my daughters; for it embitters me much **for your sakes**, that the hand of the Lord is gone out against me” (Ruth 1:13) to mean that I will suffer from watching you age and wither as young women wasting your youth and fertility. That will cause me even more bitterness, so for my sake leave me!
- h. After Ruth’s passionate refusal to leave and her demand that Naomi stop trying to persuade her, Naomi sinks into herself, a long unbroken silence until they arrive in Beit Lehem.
- i. Facing the women in Beit Lehem⁷, Naomi must deal with their response. What motivates their response? Are they merely shocked forcing Naomi to take the measure of what she has lost gradually over twenty years? Is this a rebuke for leaving Beit Lehem in its time of famine? Is their pity something that insults her pride as a woman from a notable family? Do the women feel a poorly concealed vengeful satisfaction at the downfall of Naomi - the wealthy, well-married woman with the “perfect family” of two sons, who has now be brought lower than any of them? Do they feel the irony of calling her Naomi in such changed circumstances? Or are they truly interested in being comforters (not like Job’s comforters).
- j. Then before this audience of women, Naomi is able to transform her mute suffering into an articulate poem of mourning. Perhaps it is even an implicit protest against God enunciated before the women of her hometown. Or is it a public confession of guilt as part of her teshuvah?:

Do not call me Naomi (pleasantness)
 Call me Mara (bitterness)
 For Shaddai has embittered me greatly.

I, with fullness, went away,
 Empty Adonai brought me back.

Why do you call me Naomi
 When Shaddai has cause me harm?
 (Ruth 1:21)

Each verse begins with Naomi’s name and ends with Shaddai. The mourner may still be in a deeply egocentric and self-pitying stage, defiantly refusing to be consoled, and yet perhaps the articulation is the beginning of the healing

⁷ Yalkut Shimoni 601 on Ruth suggests: “Is this Naomi whose beauty outshone gold? She once rode I a covered carriage and now she walks barefoot? ..She once wore silk (?) clothes and now she dresses in rags and her face is green from prolonged hunger?”

process for Naomi has expressed her pain, channeled it into the art of poetry, and performed it in public. Raw emotions have been refined into rhetoric..

Yet we the readers know things are looking up. Naomi has heard about how things in Bethlehem have improved thanks to God. The turn to hope is approaching though Naomi cannot see it yet.

Naomi's mourning of her lost possibilities is comforted by Ruth bringing home grain. This is called in the halacha *Seudat havraah* = the meal of consolation served by friends to the mourner after the dead of have been buried. Food is sign of life and commitment to the future.

Exercise: Write **Naomi's dairy** as she sets off for Beit Lehem, what are her expectations, how might she retell her tale to these women.
Then compose **a letter of *nehama* / condolence** as the representative of the women's council of Beit Lehem.

RUTH CHAPTER TWO – A Day in the Fields of Bethlehem

מגילת רות פרק ב

א וּלְנַעֲמִי מִיַּדַּע [מוֹדַע] לְאִישָׁה אִישׁ גִּבּוֹר חֵיל מִמִּשְׁפַּחַת אֱלִימֶלֶךְ וְשָׁמוּ בָּעֵז :
ב וַתֹּאמֶר רוּת הַמּוֹאֲבִיָּה אֶל-נַעֲמִי אִלָּכָה-נָּא הַשָּׂדֶה וְאֶלְקָטָה בְּשִׁבְלִים אַחֵר אֲשֶׁר אֲמָצָא-חֵן בְּעֵינָיו וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ לְכִי בְּתִי :
ג וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתָּבוֹא וַתִּלְקָט בַּשָּׂדֶה אַחֲרֵי הַקֹּצְרִים וַיִּקֶּר מִקְרָהּ חֲלֻקַּת הַשָּׂדֶה לְבָעֵז אֲשֶׁר מִמִּשְׁפַּחַת אֱלִימֶלֶךְ :
ד וַהֲנֶה-בָּעֵז בָּא מִבֵּית לָחֶם וַיֹּאמֶר לְקוֹצְרִים יְהוֹנָה עִמָּכֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ יְבָרְכְךָ יְהוָה :
ה וַיֹּאמֶר בָּעֵז לִנְעָרוֹ הַנֹּצֵב עַל-הַקּוֹצְרִים לְמִי הַנֹּעֲרָה הַזֹּאת :
ו וַיַּעַן הַנֹּעֵר הַנֹּצֵב עַל-הַקּוֹצְרִים וַיֹּאמֶר נֹעֲרָה מוֹאֲבִיָּה הִיא הַשֹּׁבָה עִם-נַעֲמִי מִשָּׂדֶה מוֹאֵב :
ז וַתֹּאמֶר אֶלְקָטָה-נָּא וְאֶסְפָּתִי בְּעִמְרִים אַחֲרֵי הַקּוֹצְרִים וַתָּבוֹא וַתַּעֲמוֹד מֵאֵז הַבָּקָר וְעַד-עֵתָה זֶה שְׁבֵתָהּ הַבֵּית מַעֲט :
ח וַיֹּאמֶר בָּעֵז אֶל-רוּת הַלּוֹא שָׁמַעַתְּ בְּתִי אֶל-תַּלְכִּי לְלָקֵט בַּשָּׂדֶה אַחֵר וְגַם לֹא תַעֲבֹרִי מִזֶּה וְכִּה תִדְבָּקִין עִם-נַעֲרָתִי : ט עֵינֶיךָ בַּשָּׂדֶה אֲשֶׁר-יִקְצְרוּן וְהִלַּכְתְּ אַחֲרֵיהֶן הַלּוֹא צוּיְתִי אֶת-הַנֹּעֲרִים לְבִלְתִּי נִגָּעַךְ וְצִמַּת וְהִלַּכְתְּ אֶל-הַכְּלִים וְשִׁיתִּי מֵאֲשֶׁר יִשְׁאַבּוּן הַנֹּעֲרִים :
י וַתִּפֹּל עַל-פְּנֵיהָ וַתִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֶרְצָה וַתֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִי מִדּוּעַ מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ לְהַכִּירָנִי וְאַנְכִי נִכְרִיָּה : יא וַיַּעַן בָּעֵז וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ הֲגַד הֲגַד לִי כָל אֲשֶׁר-עָשִׂיתְּ אֶת-חֲמוֹתֶיךָ אַחֲרֵי מוֹת אִישֶׁךָ וַתַּעֲזֹבִי אֲבִיךָ וְאִמֶּךָ וְאֶרֶץ מוֹלְדֶתְךָ וַתֵּלֶכִי אֶל-עַם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַעְתָּ תְּמוּל שְׁלֹשׁ : יב וְשָׁלַם יְהוָה פְּעֻלָּתְךָ וְתִהְיֶה מִשְׁפָּרְתְּךָ שְׁלָמָה מֵעַם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר-בָּאת לְחַסּוֹת תַּחַת-כְּנָפָיו :
יג וַתֹּאמֶר אֲמָצָא-חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֲדֹנִי כִּי נִחְמַתָּנִי וְכִי דִבַּרְתָּ עַל-לֵב שִׁפְחָתְךָ וְאַנְכִי לֹא אֶהְיֶה כְּאַחַת שִׁפְחָתֶיךָ : יד וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ בָּעֵז לַעֲת הָאֵכֶל גֹּשִׁי הֵלֶם וְאֶכְלָת מִן-הַלֶּחֶם וְטִבַּלְתְּ פִּתְךָ בְּחֹמֶץ וַתֵּשֶׁב מִצַּד הַקּוֹצְרִים וַיִּצְבֹּט-לָהּ קָלִי וַתֹּאכַל וַתִּשְׁבֹּעַ וַתִּתֵּר :
טו וַתֵּקֶם לְלָקֵט וַיֵּצֵא בָּעֵז אֶת-נַעֲרָיו לֵאמֹר גַּם בֵּין הָעִמְרִים תִּלְקָט וְלֹא תִכְלִימוּהָ : טז וְגַם שַׁל-תִּשְׁלֹו לָהּ מִן-הַצִּבְתִּים וְעִזְבָתָם וְלִקְטָה וְלֹא תִגְעְרוּ-בָּהּ :
יז וַתִּלְקָט בַּשָּׂדֶה עַד-הָעֶרֶב וַתַּחֲבֹט אֶת אֲשֶׁר-לִקְטָה וַיְהִי כְּאִיפָה שְׁעָרִים : יח וַתֵּשֶׂא וַתָּבוֹא הָעִיר וַתִּרְא חֲמוֹתָהּ אֶת אֲשֶׁר-לִקְטָה וַתִּצָּא וַתִּתֵּן-לָהּ אֶת אֲשֶׁר-הוֹתִרָה מִשְׁבָּעָה :
יט וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ חֲמוֹתָהּ אִיפָה לִקְטַת הַיּוֹם וְאַנָּה עָשִׂיתְּ יְהִי מִכִּירְךָ בְּרוּךְ וַתִּגַּד לְחֲמוֹתָהּ אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשִׂתָה עִמּוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר שָׁם הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי עִמּוֹ הַיּוֹם בָּעֵז :
כ וַתֹּאמֶר נַעֲמִי לְכַלְתָּהּ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לִיהוָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עָזַב חֲסִדּוֹ אֶת-הַחַיִּים וְאֶת-הַמֵּתִים וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ נַעֲמִי קְרוֹב לָנוּ הָאִישׁ מִגֵּאֲלָנוּ הוּא :
כא וַתֹּאמֶר רוּת הַמּוֹאֲבִיָּה גַם כִּי-אָמַר אֵלִי עִם-הַנֹּעֲרִים אֲשֶׁר-לִי תִדְבָּקִין עַד אִם-כָּלוּ אֶת כָּל-הַקֹּצִיר אֲשֶׁר-לִי : כב וַתֹּאמֶר נַעֲמִי אֶל-רוּת כָּלְתָה טוֹב בְּתִי כִּי תִצְאִי עִם-נַעֲרֹתָיו וְלֹא יִפְגְּעוּ-בְךָ בַּשָּׂדֶה אַחֵר :
כג וַתִּדְבֹק בְּנַעֲרוֹת בָּעֵז לְלָקֵט עַד-כָּלוֹת קֹצִיר-הַשְּׁעָרִים וַיִּקְצִיר הַחֲטִים וַתֵּשֶׁב אֶת-חֲמוֹתָהּ :

Structural Division

Ruth 2:1- Exposition of Narrator: Naomi's family member Boaz is introduced to the Reader

Ruth 2:2 – Morning - First Dialogue of Ruth and Naomi: I am off to the fields

Ruth 2:3- The Coincidence: The field happens to be the field of Naomi's relative Boaz

Ruth 2:4- – Mid-Morning - First Dialogue of Boaz with male servants about Ruth: Who is she?

Ruth 2:5-8 – First Dialogue between Boaz and Ruth: Why she finds favor in Boaz's eyes?

Ruth 2: 14 – Mid-day - Second Boaz invites Ruth for "Lunch date"

Ruth 2:15-16 – Second Dialogue of Boaz with male servants about Ruth; Leave her extra grain

Ruth 2:17-22 – Evening – Ruth returns home to share food with Naomi and Second Dialogue with Naomi

Ruth 2:23 – Closure of Narrator: Ruth sticks with Boaz for the rest of the barley and wheat harvest seasons

Chapter Two begins the development of the female characters who were presented in Chapter One but it also adds a new character. The plot began from the end of Chapter One where Naomi is at her lowest point – the emptiness of famine, being a bereft widow and being unrecognizable even in her hometown. Chapter One also began with Ruth at her most noble and self-sacrificing giving up any chance of *menucha* with a husband and hope through children Chapter Two will provide grain to fill Naomi's emptiness and hope for a husband for Ruth who had forfeited her best chance for a husband willingly refusing to leave mother(-in-law) to stick to a man (wordplay on Gen.2:24). The new character seems from the exposition to promise redemption and the Divine providence of coincidence will make it

However it does not happen so directly. Neither Naomi nor Boaz make the first move. Ruth and then God do. "God helps those who help themselves." Ruth takes the initiative in her new land to go find a place to glean– with no guidance from the native Naomi. Naomi has not used her contacts so Ruth will try her own strength and we will also test the people of Bethlehem's willingness to share with strangers rather than exploiting them (Leviticus 19:33-36). Then God sets up the coincidence. But still at the end of the harvests, the end of this enormously hopeful chapter, the gleaning connection has not led to redemption of land or *yibum* or direct contact with Naomi and Boaz.

What has changed is the relationship to God and to Ruth. But let us investigate that as the story develops.

Literary Methods

Scenes

Ruth Chapter Two divides up clearly into three **scenes** determined both by who is involved in the dialogue, where it takes place and what time of day it is. There is a circular envelop structure as Ruth goes out on her self-appointed mission to bring home food for the bereft female household by finding someone – male it would seem – whose favor she can win. Then Boaz speaks to his servant boys about Ruth and finally they meet and hold two conversations – one in the morning and one at lunchtime. Then Ruth returns home to report to Naomi.

Ruth 2:1- Exposition of Narrator: Naomi's family member Boaz is introduced
Ruth 2:2 – Morning - First Dialogue of Ruth and Naomi: I am off to the fields
Ruth 2:3- The Coincidence: The field happens to be the field of Naomi's relative Boaz
Ruth 2:4-4 – Midmorning - First Dialogue of Boaz with male servants about Ruth: Who is she?
Ruth 2:5-8 – First Dialogue between Boaz and Ruth: Why she finds favor in Boaz's eyes?
Ruth 2: 14 – Midday - Second Boaz invites Ruth for a "Lunch date"
Ruth 2:15-16 – Second Dialogue of Boaz with male servants about Ruth; Leaves her extra grain
Ruth 2:17-22 – Evening – Ruth returns home to share food with Naomi and Second Dialogue with Naomi
Ruth 2:23 – Closure of Narrator: Ruth sticks with Boaz for the rest of the barley and wheat harvest seasons

Literary Methods

Withholding and Releasing Information

The dramatic expectation and surprise in a story is determined by the flow of information. The narrator tells the reader that Boaz (whose name "strength within") is matched by his traits and wealth as "*ish gibor hayil*." Boaz is also a relative of Elimelech. So the reader knows to expect that the male redeemer has arrived on the scene (technique of *remez makdim* = anticipatory hint at opening of story). The name is saved for the last word of the sentence filled with his praises, so the reader's expectation is peaked (a periodic sentence structure).

וַיֹּאמֶר שֵׁם הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ יְתִי עִמּוֹ הַיּוֹם בְּעֶד:

The narrator leaves the characters in the dark about the coincidence that is about to bring them together. But after Ruth leaves home the narrator lets us know that this

coincidence brings Ruth to Boaz's field. The sense of Divine hand is strongly hinted though not yet explicit. Sometimes in the Tanakh *mikreh* means "accident" and sometimes "providence" (see I Samuel 6:9 versus Gen. 24:12).

Naomi will recognize the coincidence and attribute it to Divine hesed at the end of the chapter when all the hidden information is revealed to the characters. Boaz is the first one to inquire about Ruth. He acts based not only on the information that this is Ruth who has returned with Naomi but on the basis of previous general knowledge that Ruth is an exceptional individual. Yet Boaz hides that knowledge until Ruth insists in knowing what has generated Boaz's exceptional solicitude. Ruth still does not know Boaz' family connection to Naomi, so he has her at an **informational disadvantage**. Only at the end of the chapter and at the end of Ruth's extensive report of the good fortune of the day of gleaning, does Ruth reveal in another periodic sentence (Ruth 2:19) ending in the name Boaz that the gracious man is named Boaz. Then Naomi reveals to Ruth what she had never told her before that Naomi has a powerful relative named Boaz.

What does this manipulation of information contribute?

- a. Reader's interest and focus on how people respond to the revelation.
- b. Sense of surprise of the characters that leads them to praise God.
- c. Coincidence suggests Divine Providence that continues what Naomi acknowledged in God's return of fertility to Bethlehem but not in relationship to Naomi's familial fate. .
- d. However the reader may also become suspicious at what was know and why Ruth is the last to learn about the Naomi – Boaz connection and why neither of them approached one another previously. In fact Naomi never talks to Boaz in Megillat Ruth and everything is done through Ruth the go-between. We may well wonder why Boaz has not stepped forward to take care of Naomi already or why she has been afraid to approach him. (Is Naomi still too proud, is it unacceptable for a woman to ask for help, is Naomi still in shock at coming home so changed or absorbed by self-pity, hence unable to take an initiative to solve her problems? Is Boaz unaware of her straits or reticent for social reasons as a conservative landowner or just a passive figure who needs to be motivated or must one wait for the closer *goel* mentioned in Chapter 4 to take responsibility?).

Literary Methods

Type-Scene - Parallel Story in Same genre:

The Marriage Ordeal of Hesed

Comparing Ruth with Gen. 24 – The Test of Rivka as a bride for Yitzchak

Generating Expectations: In many folktales the male suitor must prove himself to win the daughter of the king. Moshe wins Tziporah and Jacob tries to win Rachel by suitably male tests of physical prowess at the well. Rivka is tested by her *hesed* in *hakhnasat orchim* to strangers. In a sense **Boaz** wins Ruth's heart and the reader's by his *hesed* to the foreign widow – offering her protection from dangerous young men who exploit single women, and providing water, food, and a secure place to gather grain – a kind of home for an otherwise migrant mendicant.

Plot Twist: Yet Boaz changes our perspective when he turns the tables and says that **Ruth** is the one who has found favor by her exceptional *hesed*, not Boaz. Ruth 2:10-12 identifies Ruth's *hesed* both in supporting her mother-in-law and in abandoning her native home. Ruth like Rivka is required to abandon her home in order to be a candidate for finding favor. Abraham and his servant are explicit about this willingness to leave home which is of course typical for most traditional marriages in which the daughter joins the clan of the husband (Gen. 24:5-6, 37-41,58). Rivka explicitly agrees daringly to leave her native land, and thus Abraham's Divine calling to leave his own native land will not be undercut by his son's search for a bride.

Many linguistic echoes strengthen this plot similarity:

- a. Both Boaz and Abraham's servant ask – to whom does this woman belong? (Gen.24:47, 65 and Ruth 2:5)
מִזֹּ ֹאֲשָׁאֵל אֶתָּהּ וְאֶמֶר בֵּת-מִי אֶתָּהּ.....
סֶה וְתֹאמַר אֶל-הַעֲבָד מִי-הָאִישׁ הַלְזָה הֵהָלֵךְ בְּשָׂדֶה לִקְרָאתָנוּ וַיֹּאמֶר הַעֲבָד הוּא אֲדֹנִי
וְתִקַּח הַצִּיעִיף וְתִתְּכֶסּוּ:
- b. Both Naomi and Abraham's servant praise God for making this *shiduch* using the language of *lo azav hasdo* (Gen. 24:27 and Ruth 2:20)
כִּז וַיֹּאמֶר בָּרוּךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲדֹנִי אֲבִרְהָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עָזַב חֲסִדּוֹ וְאַמְתּוֹ מִעַם אֲדֹנִי
- c. Both the narrator and Abraham's servant use the language of coincidence – *mikreh* to identify God's guidance to the right choice (Gen. 24:12 and Ruth 2:3).
ב וַיֹּאמֶר | יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲדֹנִי אֲבִרְהָם הִקְרָה-נָּא לִפְנֵי הַיּוֹם וַעֲשֵׂה-חֲסִדְּךָ עִם אֲדֹנִי
אֲבִרְהָם
- d. Both Ruth 1:8 and Gen. 24:28 use the unusual phrase – mother's house.
כח וְתִרְכַּץ הַנָּעַר וְתִגַּד לְבֵית אִמָּהּ
- e. In both stories one is pressed to make a decision choosing or not choosing to marry, Boaz forces the choice on the other *goel* (Ruth 4:4)

and Abraham's servant forces it on Rivka's family (Gen.24: 49). Yet Rivka's choice means leaving her mother, while Ruth's choice to leave her native mother's home is already done but she refuses to abandon her mother-in-law and makes that a part of her own redemption. Her motive for marriage will later seems to be part of her desire to redeem her mother-in-law.

Exercise: Criteria of Marriage – compare criteria for young romantic couple and for second marriage. Ask students to list traits and then suggest a test.

Exercise: Examine the concept of *Ish Hayil* applied to Boaz (Ruth 2:1) compared to *Eishet hayil* applied later to Ruth (Ruth 3:11). Note that *Ish hayil* in early periods of Tanakh means military strength (like David in I Samuel 16:18), however later on it means economic power (II Kings 15:20).

Study *Eishet Hayil* in Proverbs 31 with commentary and music and contemporary debate in *A Day Apart: Shabbat at Home* by Hartman Institute including Educators Guide (See extensive selection from Appendix of this unit.

Use *Eishet Hayil* to summarize the whole of Megillat Ruth – evaluating Ruth, Naomi and Boaz to determine in what sense they are *anshei hayil*.

What are the gender power relationships in Chapter Two?

Ruth appears as a young impoverished foreign woman taken under the wings of God, of Boaz and of Naomi. Boaz seeks to identify her as a woman who must belong to someone (Ruth 2:5). Realizing she has no male protector he is very worried about young male predators. Age, power and native connections all disadvantage Ruth. Boaz comforts her and speaks to her heart (Ruth 2:13) as Joseph did to his brothers in Egypt (after having previously made himself as a hostile foreigner - *nochri*) to them (Gen.50:21) and as Isaiah prophesied that God would do in Hatfortat *Nachamu* (Isaiah 40:1-2).

Yet Ruth despite her deferential language to Boaz seems to be a powerful independent catalyst. Ruth decides to go gleaning, Ruth evokes Boaz's generosity as act of recognition of her merit not pity. Boaz catalogues her acts with those of Abraham the founder of the Jewish people making her an honored insider in some sense.

Character Development: Naomi

What has changed in the course of Chapter Two?

Naomi's relationship to God and to Ruth.

Naomi the bitter despairing woman has now acknowledged Ruth and has called her again "my daughter." Naomi has taken up the responsibility to care for Ruth – to find her a husband. In the process Naomi has reinterpreted God's actions toward her through Ruth as acts of *hesed*, not abandonment. But Ruth is the catalyst and the most powerful motivator for people to relate to her and to Naomi differently. Ruth is the exceptional model of *hesed* that evokes Boaz's appreciation and generosity. Boaz begins to step into God's shoes, which Boaz himself has defined as God's giving Ruth the reward she deserves (Ruth 2:12).

Character Development: Ruth versus Abraham

What have we learned about the mystery of Ruth?

Ruth is "the new and improved" (*versetzt und verbessert*) Abraham (Ruth 2:11 and Gen.12:1)

After identifying the many similar word choice in both sets of verses, compare and contrast the two stories. Whose act is more heroic?

- Ruth leaves without a Divine command and without a Divine promise, though Boaz adds a prayer for Divine reward.
- Ruth leaves any hope for children or a husband, while Abraham is promised children.
- Ruth leaves her mother but refuses to leave her mother-in-law, so she opts for relationship with another human being - not preferring a relationship with God over a relationship with one's significant other.
- Abraham is an old man while Ruth is young widow. Abraham goes with his wife and nephew and Ruth with her mother-in-law.
- Both Abraham and Ruth begin by leaving family and native land and both commit to a God. But Ruth commits to the God of her mother-in-law without hope of children and Abraham to the God promising him a son.
- Abraham's whole life is tested by the willingness to give up intimate relationships (parents, nephew, second wife, first son and finally chosen son from first wife) reaching its climax in be willing to sacrifice his son whom he loves/*asher ahavta* (Gen.22:2) to God. However Ruth leaves home for the sake of her human relationship and proves herself worthy of Divine blessings because she refuses to abandon that relationship and shows selfless unswerving loyalty and love for Naomi.
- Abraham and Sarah find fulfillment in the child they prayed for, but Ruth never speaks about a child and is not described as reacting to the child at all. The child's significance according to the townswomen is that it fills up her empty mother-in-law and thus shows Ruth's love for Naomi.

Exercise: Bibliodrama conversation or interview with Abraham and Ruth comparing their experiences

Literary Methods

Leitwörter- Milah manha as the Key to Thematic Analysis.

Exercise: Do a word search asking different groups of students to discover and mark with a hi-lighter each of the root words you identify for them. Then brainstorm as to their possible significance and finally how on the basis of these roots they would title the chapter. Do these words connect us back up to Ruth Chapter One thus building narrative continuity?

- a. **kztir 7x lleket 10x** suggests the narrative be studied on the background of the laws of *leket*. (See below and in Appendix III). These roots also fulfill the expectations generated in Ruth Chapter One, which announced to us through Naomi that God had recalled God's people and the barley harvest had begun (Ruth 1:22). Give the whole chapter a title based on these words.
- b. **Azav 3x** is central to the description of God and Ruth in Ruth Chapter Two (Ruth 2: 11,16,20), but also to Boaz who intentionally leaves grain for Ruth to gather. It refers us back to Ruth telling Naomi not to persuade her to *abandon* Naomi (Ruth 1:16).
- c. **Davak 3x**– (Ruth 2:8,21,23) picks up on Ruth's *devekut* to Naomi (Ruth 1:14). Boaz tells Ruth to "stick" with him and his land and the young female grain-gathers as a measure for measure reward for "sticking" with Naomi her mother-in-law and her abandoning her biological family and land. The distant allusion is to man and woman sticking together in marriage in Gen. 2:24.

עַל-כֵּן יַעֲזֹב-אִישׁ אֶת-אָבִיו וְאֶת-אִמּוֹ וְדָבַק בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ וְהָיוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד

That distant allusion may also be a foreshadowing of the clinging and marriage of Ruth and Boaz.

- d. **Emtza hein 3x** (Ruth 2:2,10, 13) is Ruth's explicit self-appointed mission is to find someone to treat her graciously with favor since she is destitute and she needs to support her mother-in-law and herself. Yet surprisingly it is Ruth who finds favor not out of pity but out of appreciation for her *hesed* (Ruth 2:10-11).
- e. **Makir 2x** (Ruth 2:10 and 19) is the process of recognition of the unrecognized – *nochria*, the foreigner. Thus Ruth becomes recognized, valued, a member while Naomi was unrecognizable in her transformed state. Ruth is not only recognized as worthy of gleanings but preferred and given special privileges. Here *makir* has the added meaning of preferential treatment (as in the prohibition *l'hakir panim* for a judge – Deut. 16:19 and 21:17). It also recalls the providential phrase – *mikreh* of the coincidence (Ruth 2:3) that led Boaz and Ruth to their mutual recognition.

The Laws of Peah and Leket: Hesed and the Jewish Way of life toward the Poor, Widow and the Stranger

Megillat Ruth together with the laws of *leket*, *peah* and *geulah* are all generalized categorized as forms of *Hesed*, free-will giving out of love. Yet in fact there is an interesting tension between these **laws** for helping the other and voluntarily-given **hesed**. .

I. **Peah, leket** are both rights of the poor, not handouts as acts of hesed by the land owner. Te Mishna makes it clear that the owner may not even distribute the produce or control the harvesting process. Moshe Alsheich comments that *peah* is *derech kavod* - the honorable way "to earn" one's portion of the field owned, planted and brought to harvest by the another. Theologically the rabbis suggested that God had allotted the poor person's portion through the owner, to give the owner a religious zechut in being a conduit to help the poor. That is Rabbi Akiva's view. Yet legally speaking the owner has no real part in deciding to give or not. The owner is obligated though the amount depends on the owner. Still Leviticus 19 calls this an act of love for the stranger even if legally mandated.

What the poor do receive is only a side portion, a corner, leftovers that have fallen or been forgotten. This is not enough for rehabilitation or independence but for subsistence during the harvest. It does include - at least according tot he Torah - the ethnic foreigner - the *ger toshav*, the resident alien as well as widow and orphan and landless Levi. The poor remain poor and the owner remains an owner.

II **Goel** is the system of Leviticus 25 that helps rehabilitate a brother Jew who has lost or sold off property and body (slavery). Here there is an obligation mediated through family connections, unlike leket and peah. It does not include the nonJewish stranger, again unlike leket and peah. *Goel* for land is parallel to *Goel* for *Yibum*. according to Megillat Ruth. Both solve the problem by virtue of a law obligating next of kin. This is not Hesed but a mutual obligation among Jews in a family who serve as guarantors to one another, a safety net, an insurance policy.

III **Hesed** is classically a free-will gift without expectation of return and even without obligation. It is *lfnim mishurat hadin*. The paradigmatic *hesed* is *hesed shel emet* to the dead since they cannot reciprocate. Boaz compliments Ruth for that hesed to the dead. Help given to the ger is also hesed because of that alien's absolute vulnerability - no one to help or to defend them since they lack network of goel, of family connections and obligations. That is why *ahavat hager* is central. Ruth is interwoven with *hesed* in three senses:

- a- she is a foreigner not obligated to Jewish law or Jewish family
- b - she acts without any regard for self-interest and in fact does so explicitly disregarding self-interest (as when she gives up prospects of further marriage when she follows Naomi)
- c-she is a foreigner who arouses hesed from people of Judah whose legal and ethnic duties to her seem ambiguous, in fact Jews are commanded in Deuteronomy not to care for Moabites

Still the gap between law and hesed is not as absolute as might appear.

First, the Torah as book of hesed commends laws obligating concern for yibum and goel and peah because God models hesed. Hesed is the motivating narrative behind the law.

Second, many people in Bethlehem and thereafter do not live up to their duties - like Ploni Almoni. So when one does decide to do one's duty, it can be seen as voluntary act in some way since there are no legal sanctions against non-compliance. Ruth *hesed* inspires others to live up the legal and social and moral demands.

The Background for Ruth: The Laws of Peah and Gleanings

Let us study these laws in **Leviticus 19:9-10, 33-34** and **23:22**; **Deuteronomy 24:19** and **Ruth 2:7,16** and examine how the poor, widow and stranger get financial support in Biblical Israel. Perhaps divide into groups and ask each group to prepare a poster to present their set of laws. Then compare and contrast with a summary chart. (See **Appendix III** in this unit for further study).

Leviticus 19:9-10, 33-34:

ט וּבְקִצְרְכֶם אֶת-קִצִּיר אֲרָצְכֶם לֹא תִכְלֶה פֶּאֶת שְׂדֵךְ לַקְצִיר וְלִקְט קִצִּירְךָ לֹא תִלְקֹט: י
וְכֹרְמְךָ לֹא תַעֲוִיל וּפְרֹט כְרֹמְךָ לֹא תִלְקֹט לְעֹנִי וְלִגֵּר תַּעֲזֹב אֹתוֹ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:
לג וְכִי-יִגֹּר אִתְּךָ גֵּר בְּאֲרָצְכֶם לֹא תוֹנוּ אֹתוֹ: לד כְּאֶזְרַח מִכֶּם יִהְיֶה לָכֶם הַגֵּר | הַגֵּר
אִתְּכֶם וְאַהֲבֵת לּוֹ כְּמוֹךְ כִּי-גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Deuteronomy 24:19

יט כִּי תִקְצֹר קִצִּירְךָ בְּשֹׂדֶךְ וּשְׂכֻחַת עֹמֶר בְּשָׂדֶה לֹא תָשׁוּב לִקְחָתוֹ לִגֵּר לִיתוֹם וְלֹא לַמָּנָה
יִהְיֶה לַמֶּעֶן וּבִרְכֶךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ בְּכָל מַעֲשֵׂה יָדֶיךָ:

Analytic Questions:

Who is included as recipients according to these social welfare laws?

What do the categories – widow/stranger/orphan/poor/Levi have in common? Which of these categories apply to Ruth? To Naomi?

(Note that ancient Mesopotamian law 4000 years ago includes a tablet guide for the farmer including a warning to leave grains for the workers and for the poor, widows, orphans and war refugees. See *Olam HaTanakh* on Ruth, p. 75)

What does *leket* refer to and how is it different than *peah* or *shichecha* or *maaser ani*?

What does the word “*peah*” mean?

(a) corner/edge/side

(b) facial hair on side of face (side locks)

(c) modern Hebrew – a women's wig

Why should the *peah* be left in the corner of field and why shouldn't the owner of the field simply distribute the produce directly after the harvest as with *maaser*, the tithe?

How is the private giving of one's produce to the poor better or worse than the government taxation and central distribution through the social welfare agencies?

How does the recollection of the Exodus (Exodus 22:20 and 23:9; Deuteronomy 10:19) connect to the distributions to the poor? Does your experience show that when you have suffered, for example as new student in a class, that you have treated others more sensitively?

How does Boaz's instructions (Ruth 2:15-16) to his workers go beyond the letter of the law?

טו : וַתִּקֶּם לְלֶקֶט וַיֵּצֵא בַעַז אֶת-נַעֲרָיו לְאֹמֶר גַּם בֵּין הָעֲמָרִים תִּלְקֹט וְלֹא תִכְלִימוּהָ:
טז וגם שֶׁל-תִּשָּׁלוּ לָהּ מִן-הַצִּבּוֹתִים וְעֲזַבְתֶּם וְלִקְטָהּ וְלֹא תִגְעְרוּ-בָהּ

Boaz commanded his young men, saying,
Let her glean even among the sheaves, and reproach her not;
16. And **let fall also some of the handfuls on purpose for her, and leave them that she may glean them**, and do not rebuke her..
17. So she gleaned in the field until the evening,
and she beat out what she had gleaned;
and it was about an ephah of barley.

How is the negative commandment not to exploit or persecute the stranger related to the positive command to help them financially? Can one "love the stranger" yet exploit them? Is it important or realistic to teach Jews to love strangers or simply not to take advantage of them?

What contemporary forms of exploitation of foreign workers or of the poor? Compare to **Deuteronomy 24:15**.

15. At his day you shall give him his hire, nor shall the sun go down upon it; for he is poor, and sets his heart upon it; lest he cry against you to the Lord, and it should be sin to you.

What does that verse tell us about the emotional feelings of the poor?

Mishna Peah 1:2 מסכת פאה פרק א

אלו דברים שאין להם שעור. **הפאה**. והבכורים. והראיון. וגמילות חסדים. ותלמוד תורה. אלו דברים שאדם אוכל פרותיהן בעולם הזה והקרן קימת לו לעולם הבא. כבוד אב ואם. וגמילות חסדים. והבאת שלום בין אדם לחברו ותלמוד תורה כנגד כולם:

(ב) **אין פוחתין לפאה מששים**. ואף על פי שאמרו אין לפאה שעור. **הכל לפי גודל השדה. ולפי רוב העניים. ולפי רוב הענוה:**

MISHNAH 1. THE FOLLOWING ARE THE THINGS FOR WHICH NO DEFINITE QUANTITY IS PRESCRIBED: THE **CORNERS** [OF THE FIELD]. FIRST-FRUITS, [THE OFFERINGS BROUGHT] ON APPEARING [BEFORE THE LORD AT THE THREE PILGRIM FESTIVALS]. THE PRACTICE OF **LOVINGKINDNESS**, AND THE STUDY OF THE TORAH. THE FOLLOWING ARE THE THINGS FOR WHICH A MAN ENJOYS THE FRUITS IN THIS WORLD WHILE THE PRINCIPAL REMAINS FOR HIM IN THE WORLD TO COME: THE HONOURING OF FATHER AND MOTHER, THE PRACTICE OF CHARITY, AND THE MAKING OF PEACE BETWEEN A MAN AND HIS FRIEND; BUT THE STUDY OF THE TORAH IS EQUAL TO THEM ALL.

MISHNAH 2. ONE SHOULD NOT MAKE THE AMOUNT OF PE'AH LESS THAN ONE-SIXTIETH [OF THE ENTIRE CROP]. BUT ALTHOUGH NO DEFINITE AMOUNT IS GIVEN FOR PE'AH, YET EVERYTHING DEPENDS UPON THE SIZE OF THE FIELD, THE NUMBER OF POOR MEN, AND THE EXTENT OF THE STANDING CROP.

Questions: In your judgment why do these good acts have no stipulated minimum or maximum? Should they have either? What should it be?

Immediately after its opening the Mishna does specify a minimum on peah – 1/60th of the field. Why present two different instructions on limits?

Perhaps the Mishna established an ideal of giving without legal definition according to one's heart and then afterwards felt that those less idealistic needed a minimum requirement. Maybe they were afraid people would only give the minimum if the minimum was listed first.

What does the final part of the Mishna add to our understanding of this mitzvah and its imprecise definition:

Should there also be definition of the poverty line for those who should not be allowed to take welfare? The Mishna suggests a poverty line of 200 dinar equivalent to the total of all food and clothing expenses for a year.

What forms of contemporary social welfare replace the laws of agricultural support for the poor and the aliens? What are the advantages/disadvantages of these new forms? For example, compare Deuteronomy 16:13 to Israeli wedding halls or newly weds who give away leftovers to soup kitchens?

Do you agree with **Moses Mendelssohn** (1729-1786, Berlin) in his book *Jerusalem* about avoiding state sponsored Tzedakah from tax money?

“It is not desirable that the state should take upon itself all the duties of philanthropy (love of human beings) including Tzedakah for the poor, and turn them into public agencies.

For human beings feel and recognize their value in doing acts of goodness and *hesed* and seeing how one’s generosity lightens the burden of pain of his fellow in that one is giving voluntarily. Yet when one gives out of coercion then one only feels one’s chains...

Therefore giving [through state coercion] will not contribute to self-improvement of one’s character. For laws do not change character traits...

Consciousness, reasons, proofs – these alone produce habits that may turn into good character traits.....

“No one is happy in life without doing good actions...No one can reach perfection unless people help one another and connect to one another in a give and take. Therefore one who owns possessions that are not necessary for subsistence.. is obligated to give them for the good of others as an act of tzedakah..”

(freely translated from the Hebrew translation of *Jerusalem* by the editor of this study unit)

Exercise: How would a school or a business (like a restaurant) institute something similar to the ancient laws of the tzedakah in the fields? Prepare a poster of such laws as brochure for schools/businesses or letter of persuasion to the Jewish management of such a school or business.

Research: try to find out what percentage of the food served is leftover in a wedding or Bar Mitzvah or school cafeteria.

How does one offer material help to the needy and yet maintain a personal relationship?

Compare Rambam, Laws of the Gifts for the Poor, Book of Seeds, Chapter 10:4-5 to Boaz's treatment of Ruth and Ruth's response.

כל הנותן צדקה לעני בסבר פנים רעות ופניו כבושות בקרקע אפילו נתן לו אלף זהובים אבד זכותו והפסידה אלא נותן לו בסבר פנים יפות ובשמחה ומתאוון עמו על צרתו שנאמר אם לא בכיתי לקשה יום עגמה נפשי לאביון ומדבר לו דברי תחנונים ונחומים שנאמר ולב אלמנה ארנין:

שאל העני ממך ואין בידך כלום ליתן לו פייסהו בדברים ואסור לגעור בעני או להגביה קולו עליו בצעקה מפני שלבו נשבר ונדכא והרי הוא אומר לב נשבר ונדכה אלהים לא תבזה ואומר להחיות רוח שפלים ולהחיות לב נדכאים ואוי למי שהכלים את העני אוי לו אלא יהיה לו כאב בין ברחמים בין בדברים שנאמר אב אנכי לאביונים

Boaz came from Beth-Lehem, and said to the reapers, The Lord be with you. And they answered him, The Lord bless you.

5. Then said Boaz to his servant who was set over the reapers, Whose maiden is this?

6. And the servant who was set over the reapers answered and said, It is the Moabite maiden who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab;

7. And she said, I beg you, let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves; so she came, and she has continued from morning until now, scarcely spending any time in the hut.

8. Then said Boaz to Ruth, Do you not hear, my daughter? Do not go to glean in another field, nor go away from here, but stay here close to my maidens;

9. Let your eyes be on the field that they reap, and go after them; have I not charged the young men that they shall not touch you? and when you are thirsty, go to the vessels, and drink of that which the young men have drawn.

10. Then she fell on her face, and bowed herself to the ground, and said to him, Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, seeing that I am a stranger?

11. And Boaz answered and said to her, It has been fully told to me, all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband; and how you have left your father and your mother, and the land of your birth, and have come to a people which you did not know before.

12. The Lord will recompense your work, and a full reward shall be given to you by the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

13. Then she said, Let me find favor in your sight, my lord; for **you have comforted me, and spoken kindly to your maidservant, though I am not one of your maidservants.**

14. And at the mealtime Boaz said to her Come here, and eat of the bread, and dip your morsel in the vinegar. And she sat beside the reapers; and he passed to her parched grain, and she ate, and was satisfied, and left.

15. And when she rose to glean, Boaz commanded his young men, saying, Let

her glean even among the sheaves, and reproach her not;
16. And let fall also some of the handfuls on purpose for her, and leave them,
that she may glean them, and rebuke her not.
17. So she gleaned in the field until the evening, and she beat out what she
had gleaned; and it was about an ephah of barley.

“Hard” Evaluative Questions: the Gap between Biblical Jewish ideals of *Hesed* and the story of Ruth

Ruth is a Megillah often used to teach a moral lesson thus making it a moral fable. Yet close analysis shows its literary sophistication and openness to explore the ambivalence about self-congratulatory accolade of Jewish *hesed*. For example, no one in Beit Lehem took the initiative to come and help Naomi when she arrived and on suspects that the reason was the presence of Ruth the Moabite. Many commentators suggest that Deuteronomy 23:4-7 with its implacable rejection not only of marriage to Moabites but of concern for their welfare in anyway is the source of the problem.

Boaz is exceptional in his attitude to strangers in that he welcomes Ruth into his field. As Ruth makes clear in her response to Boaz emphasizing that she is a foreigner yet he relates to her kindly. Though he must be pushed, Boaz unlike the other *goel* is willing to marry Ruth.

It is the foreigner, the Moabite, Ruth's exceptional *hesed* that shines in the book to all the other characters as well as to the reader. Her *hesed* also shames the native Judeans with their selfishness, conventionality and strong ethnic prejudices. Ruth's *hesed* for the living and the dead in the Megillah was not restricted to those in her same ethnic-religious community.

Rabbinic legal understandings do not make the situation more palatable morally. In fact Sefer HaHinuch 206 sums up the halachic position that when the Torah assigned Peah and every other gift for the poor for the “*ger* = stranger” that applies only to the *ger tzedek* = the convert to Judaism.

Rambam's Code of Law states:

Laws of the Gifts for the Poor, Book of Seeds, Chapter 1:9

כל גר האמור במתנות עניים אינו אלא גר צדק שהרי הוא אומר במעשר שני ובא הלוי והגר מה הלוי בן ברית אף הגר בן ברית ואעפ"כ אין מונעין עניי עכו"ם ממתנות אלו אלא באין בכלל עניי ישראל ונוטלין אותן מפני דרכי שלום

Rambam must make an appeal to *hesed*, *lfnim mishurat hadin*, beyond the law, to urge Jews to extend the privilege of *leket* to nonJews, even though the plain meaning of the Torah is that the foundation of *peah*, *leket* etc was to give the *ger* = resident ethnic alien support just as you would have wanted it when Jews were strangers in Egypt driven there by famine.

What are the rationales Rambam offers for helping the poor idol worshippers? Which ones seem closest to Megillat Ruth in their spirit? Which are most problematic for you? Explain.

Exercise: Prophetic Critique of Callousness to the Poor, Stranger and Widow

Read Isaiah 58:1-7 from the Haftorah of Yom Kippur morning or Jeremiah 7:5-6 or Zecharia 7:8-10 to compare it to the world described in Megillat Ruth or to today's society. Would a prophetic critique have been appropriate in Bethlehem then? In Tel Aviv today or New York? What would it have emphasized. Prepare protest signs or stickers for such a critique.

Exercise: Rewriting the Story of Ruth – Compare Josephus' Retelling to the Biblical version (Antiquities Book 5 Chapter 9:2)

Does the retelling improve the image of Boaz? Ruth? The town of Bethlehem? How? Does it fill gaps that may have bothered you as a reader?

“When Ruth came with her mother-in-law to Bethlehem, Boaz, who was near of kin, **welcomed**...Ruth, by leave of her mother-in-law, went out to glean... Now it happened that she came into Boaz's field. Boaz kindly embraced her, both on account of her affection for her mother-in-law and her remembrance of that son of hers to whom she had been married. He wished that she might experience prosperity, so **he desired her not to glean, but to reap what she was able and gave her leave to carry it home.** ..He directed the servant in charge of the reapers, not to stop her when she took it away and to give her dinner and make her drink when he did the like for the reapers. What grain Ruth received from him, she kept for her mother-in-law and came to her in the evening and brought ears of grain with her. **Naomi had kept for her a part of the food her neighbors had plentifully given to her.**”

Exercise- Personal Tzedakah experience: Have you ever been involved in clothing or food drive? For whom? Organized by what kind of organization? What if any contact did you have with the needy? What kind of needs did they have? Who were the needy? Compare to Megillat Ruth. As a group of students studying Ruth it is self-evident that you should develop your way of giving to strangers or widows in need of help. Seek and recipient and a way of aiding them that reflects the values of Ruth

RUTH CHAPTER THREE – A Night on the Threshing Floor

מגילת רות פרק ג

- א וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ נָעָמִי חֲמוּתָהּ בְּתִי הֲלֹא אֲבִקֶּשׁ-לָךְ מְנוּחַ אֲשֶׁר יִיטֵב-לָךְ : ב וְעַתָּה הֲלֹא בָעִז מִדַּעַתְנִי אֲשֶׁר הָיִית אֶת-נַעֲרוֹתַי הִנֵּה-הוּא זָרָה אֶת-גֶּרְךָ הַשְּׁעָרִים הַלְלִיָּהּ : ג וְרַחֲצִיתִי וְסָכַתִּי וְשָׂמַתְּ שִׁמְלַת ד [שְׁמִלְתִּיךָ] עָלַי וְיִרְדָּתִי [וְיִרְדָּתְךָ] הַגֶּרְךָ אֶל-תִּנְדְּעִי לְאִישׁ עַד כִּלְתּוֹ לֶאֱכֹל וּלְשֹׁתוֹת : ד וַיְהִי בְשָׁכְבוֹ וַיִּדְעַת אֶת-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּב-שָׁם וּבָאת וְגִלִּית מְרֻגְלָתִי וְשָׁכַבְתִּי [וְשָׁכַבְתְּ] וְהוּא נֹגֵיד לָךְ אֶת אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשִׂין :
- ה וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ כָּל אֲשֶׁר-תֹּאמְרִי ... [אֵלַי] אֶעֱשֶׂה : ו וַתֵּרֶד הַגֶּרְךָ וַתַּעַשׂ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר-צִוְתָהּ חֲמוּתָהּ :
- ז וַיֹּאכֶל בָּעִז וַיִּשְׁתַּתּוּ וַיִּיטֵב לָבוֹ וַיָּבֹא לִשְׁכַב בְּקֶצֶה הָעֶרְמָה וַתָּבֹא בֹלֵט וַתִּגַּל מְרֻגְלָתִי וַתִּשְׁכַּב :
- ח וַיְהִי בַּחֲצִי הַלַּיְלָה וַיִּחְרַד הָאִישׁ וַיִּלְפַּת וַהֲנִה אִשָּׁה שָׁכַבְת מְרֻגְלָתִי : ט וַיֹּאמֶר מִי-אַתְּ
- י וַתֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי רוּת אֲמִתְךָ וּפְרִשְׁתְּ כִנְפְךָ עַל-אֲמִתְךָ כִּי גֵאל אַתָּה :
- י וַיֹּאמֶר בְּרוּכָה אַתְּ לַיהוָה בְּתִי הֵיטִבְתְּ חֲסִדְךָ הָאֲחֵרוֹן מִן-הָרִאשׁוֹן לְבִלְתִּי-לָקֵת אַחֲרֵי הַבְּחוּרִים אִם-דָּל וְאִם-עָשִׁיר : יא וְעַתָּה בְּתִי אֶל-תִּירָאִי כָּל אֲשֶׁר-תֹּאמְרִי אֶעֱשֶׂה-לָּךְ כִּי יוֹדַע כָּל-שֹׁעֵר עָמִי כִּי אִשְׁת חֵיל אַתְּ : יב וְעַתָּה כִּי אֲמַנֶּם כִּי (כְּתִיב וְלֹא קָרִי) : אִם גֵּאל אֲנֹכִי וְגַם יֵשׁ גֵּאל קְרוֹב מִמֶּנִּי : יג לִינִי הַלַּיְלָה וְהִנֵּה בִבְקָר אִם-יִגָּאֶלְךָ טוֹב יִגָּאֶל וְאִם-לֹא יַחֲפֹץ לִגָּאֶלְךָ וְגִאֲלִיתִיךָ אֲנֹכִי חֵי-יְהוָה שָׁכְבִי עַד-הַבֹּקֶר :
- יד וַתִּשְׁכַּב מְרֻגְלָתִי [מְרֻגְלוֹתִי] עַד-הַבֹּקֶר וַתִּקַּם בְּטָרוֹם [בְּטָרֶם] זָכִיר אִישׁ אֶת-רַעְהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-יִנְדַע כִּי-בָאָה הָאִשָּׁה הַגֶּרְךָ :
- טו וַיֹּאמֶר הֲבִי הַמִּטְפַּחַת אֲשֶׁר-עָלִיךָ וְאַחֲזִי-בָהּ וַתֹּאחֲזֵ בָהּ וַיִּמָּד שֵׁשׁ-שְׁעָרִים וַיִּשְׁתַּתּוּ עָלֶיהָ וַיָּבֹא הָעִיר :
- טז וַתָּבֹא אֶל-חֲמוּתָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר מִי-אַתְּ בְּתִי וַתִּגַּד-לָהּ אֶת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה-לָּהּ הָאִישׁ :
- יז וַתֹּאמֶר שֵׁשׁ-הַשְּׁעָרִים הָאֵלֶּה נָתַן לִי כִּי אָמַר ... [אֵלַי] אֶל-תָּבֹאִי רִיקָם אֶל-חֲמוּתְךָ :
- יח וַתֹּאמֶר שְׁבִי בְּתִי עַד אֲשֶׁר תִּדְּעִין אֵיךְ יִפְּלֵ דָבָר כִּי לֹא יִשְׁקֹט הָאִישׁ כִּי-אִם-כָּלָה הַדָּבָר הַיּוֹם :

Structural Analysis

Ruth 3:1-6 Dialogue and Plot of Naomi and Ruth

Ruth 3: 6-7 Narrator describes Ruth and Boaz's Movements to Physical Encounter

Ruth 3:8 Midnight – Time of Decision (compare to Purim and Pesach)

Ruth 3:9- 15 Dialogue of Boaz and Ruth

Ruth 3:16-18 Second Dialogue – reporting back to Naomi

The Big Gamble – Whose Initiative? Who is the *Giborah*?

In Chapter Three both female characters seem to reverse their roles. Naomi takes charge. Naomi who pushed Ruth away in Chapter One and was passive but hopeful in Chapter Two becomes the initiator of Ruth and Naomi's own salvation in Chapter Three. Naomi had protested in Chapter One that she was impotent to help her daughters-in-law. Hypothetically and counterfactually she proposed that she would gladly have another child who would fulfill the Yibum and marry to Ruth and Orpah. Of course she cannot have another child and who could wait that long. Now back in Bethlehem Naomi sees a way to get a husband for Ruth, so she becomes active.

Ruth who refused to care about a husband in Chapter One and refused demonstratively to follow Naomi's instructions then, now agrees deferentially to do whatever Naomi says to get a husband who may save both of them.

Naomi who had wallowed in self-pity as a victim unable to change her fate in God's hands, now becomes Naomi who devises a dangerous sexually scandalous maneuver to catalyze a decision by Boaz. Naomi has now been revealed with a new-found hutzpah. As an outsider she will do whatever it takes to help Ruth.

Comparing and contrasting the First and Second Major Encounter with Boaz

In contrast to the first dialogue that was initiated by Boaz and concentrated on harvesting the seed of grain, the second reported dialogue is initiated by Ruth at Naomi's instance and concentrates on sowing the seed of descendants.

Phyllis Tribble describes how this second encounter will differ from the first:

"It contrasts with the first in circumstances, place and time. The first was a meeting by chance; the second by choice. The first was in the fields; the second at the threshing floor. The first was public; the second private. The first was work; the second play. The first by day; the second by night. Yet both of them hold the potential for life and death."

("A Human Comedy," p. 183 from *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*)

Naomi figured that Boaz would know what to do when aroused sexually: "He will tell you what to do" (Ruth 3:4). However Boaz does not take the lead and Ruth does not merely passively obey Naomi and Boaz. **Ruth forces the issue** with a moral argument that calls upon Boaz to make good on the blessing that he had referred to God in their first meeting. Boaz had asked God to repay Ruth for coming beneath God's wings, but Ruth demands that Boaz take her under his wing (Ruth 2:12 and 3:9). Now Boaz must be the redeemer – not defer to God.

"Ruth is the defier of custom, the maker of decisions, and the worker of salvation. It puts her intention with her

mother-in-law .. and confirms Boaz as re-actor to the initiative of this woman....A foreign woman has called an Israelite man to responsibility.” (ibid., p. 184).

The foreigner who is reminiscent of Abraham the founder shames and inspires the Judeans to act like Jews – to initiate acts of *hesed* that transgress conservative social traditions but bring Divine redemption for a family and thereby for a people.

The conservative, overly hesitant old notable must turn his paternalist protection of Ruth into an unconventional act of marriage. Boaz finally re-acts by taking charge but he delays because he must deal with legal issue of the other *goel*. Is Boaz stalling again or choosing an appropriate strategy? Naomi is confident that he has been catalyzed into action. Now the women can sit back and let the men play their roles in the *agon* = the contest at the court at the gate of the city.

Ruth, as she did at the end of Chapter Two, returns home to report her encounter to Naomi. She downgrades her own role and pretends that everything went according to Naomi's plan. However Phyllis Trible is convinced that Ruth – not Boaz and not even Naomi – has proven the true heroine. Ruth is the initiator from the outside that shakes up society, the dynamic divine fuse. Yet in the sense of character development she never changes her character, while Naomi and to a lesser extent Boaz are the ones who grow in interaction with Ruth.

Ruth's fulcrum for transforming Naomi and Boaz from pious but passive to proactive is the same. Ruth evokes in them initially merely the goodwill that expresses itself in a pious wish for Divine blessing. Naomi says in Ruth 1:9 - 9. “The Lord grant you that you may find **rest/menucha**, each of you in the house of her husband.” Boaz says in Ruth 2:12 “. The Lord will recompense your work, and a full reward shall be given to you by the Lord God of Israel, under whose **wings/kanaf** you have come to take refuge.”

But neither of them immediately acts as **God's agents** to promote the fulfillment of those blessings. Only Ruth is proactive serving as a catalyst. After Naomi sees Ruth's success in the gleaning and the Divine coincidence that Ruth has chosen Boaz's field, then she praises God again but this time she acts to actualize what she may perceive as the Divine plan. Now Naomi tells Ruth how to achieve the blessing of Chapter One using the same language in Ruth 3:1 “My daughter, shall I not seek a **rest/menucha** for you, so that it will be good for you?”

Similarly Boaz's good wishes are turned by Ruth into an imperative in Ruth 3:9 “, I am Ruth your servant; spread your **wings/kanaf** over your maidservant; for you are the redeemer.” Then Boaz accepts this new definition of his role and of the human role in actualizing Divine blessings.

Literary Method: Deciphering a Symbolic Act

Why does Boaz give Ruth so much grain at the conclusion of their encounter at the granary?

- (1) The encounter was inconclusive or unconsummated in many senses and ends with promises not actions. So concretizing the words with symbolic actions, such as in the making of a *brit*, gives deeper validity to the words pronounced in private without any witnesses.
- (2) Boaz sublimates his sexual urge to Ruth by asking her to open her garment to pour an overabundance of seed into it to take home.
- (3) The grain is also a wordless symbolic promise that, beyond legal redemption, there will be sexual fertility to match the fertile grain harvest that is being completed on the threshing floor.
- (4) The fertility of the land was the sign to Naomi to return to Bethlehem in search of her own family's redemption, so here too it is a hopeful sign of what is to come.
- (5) Ruth hands that seed on to Naomi with a new interpretation which may or not may have come from Boaz but is attributed to Boaz.

Ruth 3: 17

יָזַ וְתֹאמַר שֵׁשׁ-הַשְּׁעָרִים הָאֵלֶּה נָתַן לִי כִי אָמַר [אֵלִי]-
אֶל-תְּבוֹאִי רִיקָם אֶל-חֲמוּתְךָ

"And she said, He gave me these six measures of barley; for he said to me,
Do not go empty to your mother-in-law."
Boaz will be Naomi's redeemer as well reversing the Divine curse which Naomi proclaimed in despair when entering Bethlehem:
"I went out full, and the Lord has brought me back empty; why then do you call me Naomi, seeing the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?" (Ruth 1:21):

אֲנִי מֵלֵאָה הֵלַכְתִּי וְרִיקָם הָשִׁיבֵנִי יְהוָה לָמָּה תִקְרָאנִה לִי נָעֻמִּי
וַיֵּה יְהוָה עֲנָה בִי וְשָׂדֵי הָרַע לִי:

The emptiness is to be filled. Boaz will play the Divine role to Naomi as well as to Ruth. So Naomi who told Ruth at the end of chapter two "My daughter, it is good to go out" to Boaz's field (Ruth 2:22), now can say "sit at home, my daughter,...for this man will not be quiet until this thing is finished" (Ruth 3:18).

Literary Methods

Leitwörter- Milah manha as the Key to Thematic Analysis.

Do a word search asking different groups of students to discover and mark with a highlighter each of the root words you identify for them. Then brainstorm as to their possible significance and finally decide how to title the chapter based on these words.

- a. **Goel** – Here the law of *yibum* and the historical role of God in history intersect. Instead of God calling forth the *goel*, Ruth who was not called (as was Abraham) becomes the one calling to action in God's name (Ruth 3:9,12,13 and again Ruth 4:4,6,7)
- b. **Yadah** – Here Boaz introduced ambiguously as someone we *know* (Ruth 2:1, 3:2) becomes the one to *know* sexually (at least that is the innuendo and therefore since this intimacy is illicit and sensitive it must be done secretly so no one will *know* (Ruth 3: 3,4,14,18) until the right time has arrived.
- c. **Shachav** – Lying down with its sexual overtones and the uncovering of feet which is sexually charged are oft repeated (Ruth 3: 4,7,8,13).
- d. **Reikam** – “Emptiness” is what Naomi suffered but now Boaz will ensure fullness of seed – six measures – in more than one sense of seed (Ruth 1:21 and 3:17).

Innuendo: Was there sex on the threshing floor? What is at stake?

Unlike Tamar and Judah or Lot and his daughters, the sexual initiative of Ruth is ambiguous.

- Did she have intercourse with Boaz – who had drunk wine – as did Lot's daughters in a cave with their drunken father?
- Does Ruth the Moabite continue the shameless and primitive female sexuality of her ancestress who produced Moab = “descended from father”?
- Does Ruth offer herself as a whore at the grain harvest, just as Tamar did at the sheep shearing?
- What happened on that romantic night on the threshing floor?
- Is this love? sex? seduction? Blackmail? a discrete religiously-motivated discussion about accepting the legal responsibilities of a redeemer? the negotiation of a shiduch without the good offices of one's mother or father or guardian?

(1) **Ellen Van Wolde** (“Ruth in Dialogue with Tamar” from *Reading the Bible* p. 433ff) argues that *vatigal marglotav* וַתִּגַּל מֵרַגְלָהּ תַּיִו וַתִּשְׁכַּב (Ruth 3:7) could not mean Ruth uncovered Boaz's legs because *marglotav* means a place – the place of his legs (like *merashotav* – “at the place of his head” for the stone pillow used by Jacob at Bethel). Legs may have euphemistic sexual connotation but his legs were not the grammatical object of this act of uncovering. Probably Ruth uncovered her body and

lay at Boaz's feet and then when he stroked her he realized it was "a woman." *Galah* often goes with uncovering one's sexual parts and Ruth asks Boaz to "cover" her with his mantle – both symbolically marrying her (Deut. 23:1; 27:20; Ezekiel 16:8), taking her under his "wing" and maybe literally covering her nakedness.

Yet Van Wolde is still convinced that nothing happened sexually between Boaz and Ruth because it would have undermined their reputation as *eishet hayil* and *ish hayil* and it would have made superfluous the report that Boaz "came into her" and made her pregnant *after* the wedding (Ruth 4:13). Unlike Tamar and Lot's daughters, it never says that night that they knew one another. Rather we are left with a language of innuendo that pricks our readerly curiosity (*bo/shahav/yada/galah/regel*). The time – night – and the place – a threshing floor with all that seed and thrashing about – are very suggestive. Naomi's curiosity about "everything" that happened is a standin for our interest as readers. Boaz knows that even if "nothing happened," his integrity is compromised as well as his plan if anyone finds out about Ruth's nocturnal visit. Later after the marriage, the people praise Ruth by comparing her to Tamar, but only we the readers not the townsfolk are meant to know how similar Tamar and Ruth's nighttime tryst was.

(2) What did Naomi have in mind for the Nocturnal Meeting?

Yair Zakovitz also does not think intercourse took place on the threshing floor, but he suggests, that Naomi intended that to happen. Naomi tells Ruth to wash, apply oil and change clothes (Ruth 3:3) which implies preparing for sexual relations. Perhaps she has changed her work clothes or perhaps even removed the clothes of a widow as did Tamar (Gen. 38:13). The same verbs are used to describe David as he gets up from his mourning for the death of his first son from Batsheva, goes to the House of God and then has intercourse with Batsheva. This is a typical mark of the end of mourning that in the Biblical period included abstaining for sexual relations and contact with the altar.

Naomi is careful to leave Ruth's suggestive behavior without any explicit verbal come-on. Just do what ever Boaz tells you. Be silent, be acquiescent, instructs the wise old Naomi and Ruth promises to be. Thus Boaz - the elder man, the notable, the property owner – will maintain the male image of the man-in-charge, even though Ruth, as Naomi's agent, is taking the initiative to get him to do what Naomi has in mind. (Is there still a stigma associated with a girl asking a boy out?)

(3) How does Ruth's Image emerge from this encounter?

Ruth's behavior is described in a language that might otherwise be quite **threatening** to a man. Her silent approach to Boaz's sleeping form is described in the same language as Yael in approaching the sleeping Sisera before she bangs a tent peg into his head (Judges 4:21).

Ruth 3:7 "And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain; and she came **silently/balaat**, and uncovered his feet, and laid herself down."

(כא) וַתִּקַּח יָעֵל אִשְׁתּוֹ חֵבֶר אֶת יִתְדֵי הָאֶהָל וַתִּשֹּׂם אֶת הַמִּקְבֶּת בַּיָּדָה
וַתָּבוֹא אֵלָיו בְּלֵאט וַתִּתְקַע אֶת הַיָּתֵד בְּרִקְתּוֹ וַתַּצְנַח בָּאָרֶץ וְהוּא נֹרֵדִם וַיַּעַף וַיָּמָת :

The time when Boaz awakens is the middle of the night – a good time for the Divine *goel* to act – *vayihi b'hatzi halaila*. However Ruth 3:8 וַיְהִי בַחֲצִי הַלַּיְלָה “And it came to pass at midnight” also recalls the ominous object of that midnight attack when God in Egypt struck “at midnight every first born” (Exodus 12:29).

Despite the innuendos Ruth's own reputation is protected as far as the reader is concerned because we heard Naomi's instructions. We cannot see her as a foreign temptress like Moabite women of Numbers 25 inspired by Bilaam's advice but as the obedient daughter of Naomi doing exactly what she says. Still we wonder how to judge Naomi and Ruth when we compare them to Rivka and Jacob instructed by his mother to entrap the blind Yitzchak into blessing Jacob rather than Esav. Here too the secret operation is an attempt to transfer inheritance rights – from the nearest *goel* to Boaz. Here too the elderly man must rely on touch to identify the intruder, but Ruth is above board in a way Jacob was not for she identifies herself honestly.

Naomi may well have intended a silent sexual encounter that would have cemented a relationship with Boaz. But Ruth did not remain passive or silent. She added words to her actions that called for marriage, not just intercourse. “Spreading the *kanaf* over her,” as Ruth requests from Boaz, is not merely a metaphor for Divine protection but also for marriage, as Rashi explains based on Ezekiel 16:8.

Then Boaz who is flattered by Ruth's preference for him over younger men commits himself to listen to whatever Ruth tells him. Ruth 3:11 echoes Ruth 3:5 but reverses the hierarchy. **Ruth is giving the orders** - not Naomi and not Boaz, as originally envisioned. Boaz's seems no more perturbed about following a woman's instructions than was Barak to follow Devorah (Judges 4: 8-9).

Now Boaz does take charge but not sexually, as Naomi implied. Boaz is protective – telling Ruth to continue to lie there to sleep, not to have sex. The narrator reports she continues to lie *at* his feet but not to lie *with* him. Boaz tells Ruth to keep everything secret. But his oath to work out her legal redemption is sealed and Ruth can now “lie back” and wait, as Naomi explains.

Exercise: Literary Associations enhance the Narrative.

Compare Naomi, Ruth and Boaz to Rivka, Jacob and Isaac. (Genesis 27)

Compare Yael and Sisera (Judges 4:21).

Compare God's spreading his mantle over the metaphoric Israel (Ezekiel 16:8)

Exercise: Summation of Chapter Two and Three: "God helps those who help themselves"

Explain that saying and what it means to you. Then apply it to Ruth Chapter Two. Does it fit or not?

The Allegory of Israel as Ruth and Boaz as God the Goel

Chaim Chertok⁸ suggest we read **Megillat Ruth as an allegory for the Jewish people** who have been abandoned by their God – famine, exile, death and threat to survival. Then Ruth is the model of what Jewish people must do to be redeemed. Acts of *hesed*, return (to land and to God – “under God’s wings”) and a declaration of unconditional loyalty that reenacts Abraham. The convert represents renewed marital *brit* of Sinai.

Consider the Rabbinic custom of reading Ruth on Shavuot which is identified by the rabbis as the covenant renewal of Sinai. Shavuot piyyut often treats the Torah as Ketubah. Following the prophets, the God-Israel relationship is compared systematically to the man-woman relationship. (How does that help us understand Megillat Ruth? Create a chart comparing those two relationships).

Ruth’s marriage imagery of “spreading a robe over nakedness” is probably taken from **Ezekiel’s imagery of redemption and marriage**. In Ezekiel 16:7 Israel is described as born of Canaanites and brought up in a field, just as Ruth is foreigner from the fields of Moab. Then:

Ezekiel 16:7 *“I saw you and it was the time of love and I spread my wings over you, covered your nakedness and swore to you to bring you into the brit with me, that is the word of God.”*

This parallels Ruth who comes from the fields of Moab and meets Boaz in the field::

Ruth 3:7. And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain; and she came softly, and *uncovered* at his feet, and laid herself down.

[Uncovered echoes the nakedness mentioned in Ezekiel that refers to Israel as an attractive woman and some commentators say Ruth literally uncovered herself at Boaz’s feet, not uncovered Boaz’s feet].

8. And it came to pass *at midnight*, that the man was startled, and turned over; and, behold, a woman lay at his feet.

[*Midnight* is the time of God’s redemption of the people in Egypt, the *time of love* making perhaps in Ezekiel].

9. And he said, Who are you? And she answered, I am Ruth your maidservant; *spread your robe* over your maidservant; for you are the *Goel*.

[In Ezekiel *I spread my wings over you, covered your nakedness* combines Boaz’s symbolic act of marriage is interpreted together with its echo in Boaz’s own words about God’s wings in Ruth 2: 12. *“The Lord will recompense your work, and a full reward shall be given to you by the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”*]

10. And he said, Blessed be you to the Lord, my daughter; for your last loyal kindness is greater than the first one, because you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.

⁸ “Book of Ruth: Complexities in Simplicities,” Judaism, Summer 1986 by Chaim Chertok

[Ezekiel 16:14-15 describes how Israel the young woman married to God goes abroad to prostitute herself with every other nation. But Ruth is loyal rejecting the free sexuality of playing the field and even the wealthy seductions of the other men/nations and choosing the old partner – Boaz]

11. And now, my daughter, fear not; I will do to you all that you ask, for the whole city of my people knows that you are a worthy woman....

13. Remain this night, and it shall be in the morning, ...then I will do the duty of a *goel* for you, as the Lord lives; lie down until the morning.

[Here Ezekiel describes God's oath to enter a *brit* with Israel, "*and swore to you to bring you into the brit with me, that is the word of God.*" In Ruth Boaz, as God's stand-in, takes an oath to redeem her.]

Ruth is demanding of God become the *Goel*, that God remember us and take us under God's wing. God is *Bo-az* = the source of all strength, though God is reluctant to respond. Step by step God redeems through Boaz – first food, then marriage, then land, and then a descendant who will be true *Oved* = Servant of God.

Naomi represents the Jews who in exile felt that God had totally abandoned them, that there would be no redemption. They blamed God for striking out against them as in *Eicha* and in *Job*. However Naomi is brought back to faith by Ruth's model of *hesed*. Ruth however is not merely sweet and nice, she also has the holy *chutzpah* to force God's = Boaz's hand, demanding he act the role of *Goel*, for Boaz = God is our kin and has duty to redeem us. It is a matter of Divine *din* as well as Divine *hesed*. Law is on our side as well as mercy. God must redeem Israel even if Israel caused itself to be sent into exile and lose its land.

RUTH CHAPTER FOUR: At the City Gate – A Day in Court

מגילת רות פרק ד

- א ובעז עלה השער וישב שם והנה הגאל עבר אשר דבר בעז ויאמר סורה שבה-פה פלני אלמני ויסר וישב: ב וישח עשרה אנשים מזקני העיר ויאמר שבו-פה וישבו:
- ג ויאמר לגאל חלקת השדה אשר לאחינו לאלימלך מכרה נעמי השבה משדה מואב:
- ד ואני אמרתי אלה אונך לאמר קנה נגד הישבים ונגד זקני עמי אם-תגאל גאל ואם-לא יגאל הגידה לי ואדע [ואדעה] כי אין זולתך לגאול ואנכי אחריך ויאמר אנכי אגאל:
- ה ויאמר בעז ביום-קנותך השדה מיד נעמי ומאת רות המואביה אשת-המת קניתי [קניתי] ויאמר הגאל לא אוכל לגאול- [לגאל]- לי פן-אשחית את- להקים שם-המת על-נחלתו: ו נחלתי גאל-לך אתה את-גאלתי כי לא-אוכל לגאל:
- ז וזאת לפנים בישראל על-הגאולה ועל-התמורה לקים כל-דבר שלך איש נעלו ונתן לרעהו וזאת התעודה בישראל:
- ח ויאמר הגאל לבעז קנה-לך וישלף נעלו:
- ט ויאמר בעז לזקנים וכל-העם עדים אתם היום כי קניתי את-כל-אשר לאלימלך ואת כל- אשר לכליון ומחלון מיד נעמי: י וגם את-רות המואביה אשת מחלון קניתי לי לאשה להקים שם-המת על-נחלתו ולא-יכרת שם-המת מעם אחיו ומשער מקומו עדים אתם היום:
- יא ויאמרו כל-העם אשר-בשער והזקנים עדים יתן יהוה את-האשה הבאה אל-ביתך כרחל וכלאה אשר בנו שתיהם את-בית ישראל ועשה-חיל באפרתה וקרא-שם בבית לחם:
- יב ויהי ביתך בבית פרח אשר-ילדה תמר ליהודה מן-הזרע אשר יתן יהוה לך מן-הנערה הזאת:
- יג וישח בעז את-רות ותהי-לו לאשה ויבא אליה ויתן יהוה לה הריון ותלד בן:
- יד ותאמרנה הנשים אל-נעמי ברוך יהוה אשר לא השבית לך גאל היום ויקרא שמו בישראל:
- טו והיה לך למשיב נפש ולכלכל את-שיבתך כי בלתך אשר-אהבתך ולדתו אשר-היא טובה לך משבעה בנים: טז ותקח נעמי את-הילד ותשתהו בחיקה ותהי-לו לאמנת:
- יז ותקראנה לו השכנות שם לאמר ילד-בן לנעמי ותקראנה שמו עובד הוא אבי-ישי אבי דוד:
- יח ואלה תולדות פרח פרח הוליד את-חצרון: יט וחצרון הוליד את-רם ורם הוליד את-עמינדב:
- כ ועמינדב הוליד את-נחשון ונחשון הוליד את-שלמה: כא ושלמון הוליד את-בעז ובעז הוליד את-עובד:
- כב ועבד הוליד את-ישי וישי הוליד את-דוד:

Structural Analysis:

Ruth 4: 1- 8 Negotiations of Boaz with the (other) Goel

(Ruth 4:7 – Historical Aside on the Shoe Ceremony)

**Ruth 4: 9 – 12 Court Certification before elders and people
and the People's Blessing to Ruth and Boaz**

**Ruth 4: 13-17 After marriage and birth of a son, the
women bless Naomi and women neighbors name the child**

Ruth 4: 18 – 22 Official Genealogy of Peretz to Oved

The final chapter brings us full circle to resolve issues raised at the beginning. That literary structure expresses the idea of redemption, the notion that suffering and pain can be compensated and tensions resolved over time through human and Divine effort. Often in the Tanakh the stage of problem solving is historical-political – a new political leader or God arise to defeat the villains and release the victims and keep covenantal promises. Here there are no obvious villains and no political revolution – though the future King David will emerge from the family that is redeemed here and at the place (Bethlehem) whose society meets the needs of this family . The solutions to the familial crisis depend on human decisions to come home and to enter into relationships. However the building of a new or renewed family i.e. *bayit* for Naomi or Elimelech (symbolizing the new *bayit* = dynasty of David for Judah) also depends on negotiating legal commitments ratified by the court/city gate. Law – the realm of men – must be invoked by men (who have been prodded by women) in order to resolve the women's problem which is also the problem of survival of the name of men.

The **dual perspective of men and women** and their alternative though not necessarily contradictory goals and methods helps shape the last chapter that shifts back and forth between those two perspectives. Therefore as we shall see the story has multiple happy endings summed up repeatedly each from a slightly different perspective.

Educationally the focus can be on:

- a. The literary technique of "endings" and how they summarize the big moral of the narrative
- b. male/female perspectives which are central concern of feminist readings and interesting to adolescent students aware of gender differences in their society
- c. interpretive pluralism and the way the Tanakh invites more than one reading, hence we invite the students to enter the fray of "Reading Ruth" from their own angles of interest, compare multiple commentators and marshal evidence from its endings

Literary Methods

Leitwörter- Milah manha as key to Thematic Analysis.

Do a word search asking different groups of students to discover and mark with a highlighter each of the root words you identify for them. Then brainstorm as to their possible significance and finally decide how to title the chapter based on these words.

a. *Goel* – Here the law of *yibum* is adjusted. (Ruth 3:9,12,13 and again Ruth 4:4,6,7).

First, the official *goel* rescinds his right and the *goel* appointed by Ruth – Boaz – takes his place. The official *goel* is only known as John Doe = Ploni Almoni, perhaps because he refused to redeem the name of the dead brother as required by law of *yibum*, so his name was lost.

Second, there is an adjustment not only in who will be the *goel* but in what is expected of a *goel*. It seems that Boaz is asking more of a *goel* than ever was asked before traditionally in the laws of Torah.

b. *Kanah* and *Sadeh* – the purchase of field is a central point of the negotiations. This field will replace the *Sdei Moav* that Naomi gave up.

c. *Bayit* repeats 4 x in Ruth 4: 11-12 to combine the personal house of Boaz with the city Beit Lehem and the nation – Beit Yisrael and the royal family of Judah – Beit Peretz.

Comparative Laws of Geulah

Many commentators note that the laws of *goel* in Ruth 4:1-10 are slightly different than in Gen. 38: 1-11, Lev. 25:25, Deut. 25:5 and Ruth 1:12-13.

Gen. 38: 1-11

1. And it came to pass at that time, that Judah went down from his brothers, and turned in to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah.
2. And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite, whose name was Shuah; and he took her, and went in to her.
3. And she conceived, and bore a son; and he called his name Er.
4. And she conceived again, and bore a son; and she called his name Onan.
5. And she yet again conceived, and bore a son; and called his name Shelah; and he was at Kezib, when she bore him.
6. And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, whose name was Tamar.
7. And Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord slew him.
8. And Judah said to Onan, Go in to your brother's wife, and marry her, and raise up seed to your brother.
9. And Onan knew that the seed should not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in to his brother's wife, that he spilled it on the

ground, lest that he should give seed to his brother.

10. And the thing which he did displeased the Lord; therefore he slew him also.

11. Then said Judah to Tamar his daughter-in-law, Remain a widow at your father's house, till Shelah my son be grown; for he said, Lest perhaps he die also, as his brothers did. And Tamar went and lived in her father's house.

Lev. 25:25. If your brother becomes poor, and has sold away some of his possession, and if any of his kin comes to redeem it, then shall he redeem that which his brother sold.

Deut. 25:5 If brothers live together, and one of them dies, and has no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry outside to a stranger; her husband's brother shall go in to her, and take her to him for a wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her.

6. And it shall be, that the firstborn which she bears shall succeed to the name of his brother who is dead, that his name be not put out of Israel.

7. And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then let his brother's wife go up to the gate to the elders, and say, My husband's brother refuses to raise to his brother a name in Israel, he will not perform the duty of my husband's brother.

8. Then the elders of his city shall call him, and speak to him; and if he persists, and says, I do not wish to take her;

9. Then shall his brother's wife come to him in the presence of the elders, and pull his shoe from off his foot, and spit in his face, and shall answer and say, So shall it be done to that man who will not build up his brother's house.

10. And his name shall be called in Israel, The house of him who has his shoe pulled off.

Ruth 4:2. And he took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, Sit down here. And they sat down.

3. And he said to the next of kin; Naomi, who has returned from the country of Moab, is selling a parcel of land, which was our brother Elimelech's;

4. And I thought I would tell you of it, and say, Buy it in the presence of the inhabitants, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not redeem it, then tell me, that I may know; for there is none to redeem it besides you; and I come after you. And he said, I will redeem it.

5. (K) Then said Boaz, on the day that you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you must buy it also from Ruth the Moabite, the wife of the dead, to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance.

6. And the kinsman said, I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I harm my own inheritance; take my right of redemption for yourself; for I cannot redeem it.

7. Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and concerning exchanging; to confirm a transaction a man took off his shoe, and gave it to his neighbor; and this was the manner of attesting in

Israel.

8. Therefore the kinsman said to Boaz, Buy it for yourself. And he took off his shoe.

9. And Boaz said to the elders, and to all the people, You are witnesses this day, that I have bought all that was Elimelech's, and all that was Kilion's and Mahlon's, from the hand of Naomi.

10. And also Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, have I bought to be my wife, to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance, so that the name of the dead shall not be cut off from among his brothers, and from the gate of his place; you are witnesses this day.

11. And all the people that were in the gate, and the elders, said, We are witnesses.

Questions:

- Create a chart to compare the laws and identify the discrepancies.
- What do you think of the hypothesis that Ruth in her conversation with Boaz and Boaz in his negotiation with official *goel* have stretched the law extending the *geulah* of inherited land mentioned in Leviticus 25:25 to include law of *yibum* of childless widow even though the *goel* is not the direct brother of Mahlon?

Who is the *Goel* and who is the Redeemed?

Geulah is a central Biblical concept both for our relationship to God who redeemed us from Egyptian slavery and for Jewish brotherhood. It applies in three contexts:

- (A) In **Leviticus 25** *geulah* requires that we redeem our poor brethren whose economic distress causes them to sell their family inheritance or themselves into slavery. God and human beings share that same term and that same religious-ethical obligation. That is the theme of **Leviticus 25** which provides an essential background text - even though it does not deal with *yibum*.
- (B) ***Yibum*** is another expression of brotherhood in the Tanakh and it redeems one's brother from death and childlessness. It saves one's name, even though the term *goel* is not used in Deuteronomy 25:5-10.
- (C) Historical redemption by a *goel* applies first to God and later to God's messiah.

Megillat Ruth may be the first text to conflate all three contexts in a confusing dialogue and legal procedure in Ruth Chapter Four. Boaz begins by proposing the redemption of family land for Naomi and then tags on the marriage with Ruth, the childless widow of Mahlon. Peretz and Tamar are mentioned reinforcing the *yibum* associations as well as the terminology derived from Gen 38 and Deuteronomy 25. Then the outcome of this legal redemption is the birth of the ancestor of David the King, descendant of Elimelech who will redeem Israel from the chaotic era of the Judges. David will, we assume from information outside the Megillah, embody the redemptive process begun

by God in Ruth Chapter One when God recalls the people and returns fertility to the land. Megillat Ruth then may actually be the first source to create such a threeway connection thus solving Ruth's problem. It may be understood as a midrashic extension of the law and the terminology of *Goe/*.

Different readings of the legal and narrative ambiguities of Ruth Chapter Four:

- 1- Yair Zakovitz suggests that Naomi is selling her husband's and sons' land to a *goe/* and that Boaz is convincing the nearest *goe/* to relinquish his privilege to redeem the inheritance which then devolves on the next closest relative – Boaz. Initially Ploni Almoni thought he would redeem the land and keep it for himself since Naomi had no more male descendants. But if Boaz marries Ruth or even if Ploni Almoni does, then a child named after Mahlon will inherit what Ploni will have to pay for out of his pocket.
- 2- Robert Gordis suggests Elimelech had sold the land to a third party and now Naomi will cede her rights for repurchase to the *goe/* who has the means to redeem it. But Naomi wants the *goe/* to marry Ruth as well as a condition for the right to buy the land.

In the broadest sense the multiple endings of Ruth Four can be seen as multiple redemptions:

- a- Naomi is redeemed from childlessness by receiving Oved as her child.
- b- Ruth is redeemed from widowhood and childlessness by Boaz
- c- Mahlon is redeemed from childlessness and loss of name by Boaz and the genealogy
- d- Israel is redeemed by God and later by King David
- e- Lot's daughters are redeemed morally by Ruth the Moabite being accepted back into the Abraham's family and by acting sexually much more lawfully and circumspectly than did her ancestor with Lot.

Character Development: Our Hero – Boaz = Man of Strength Within?

We opened the study unit by asking who is the Gibor/a = hero/ine?

(1) Boaz the hero.

- a. Knowing that the origin of the word “*gibor*” is *gever* = male, literally “one who overcomes,” so one would expect the archetypal hero to be male.
- b. Certainly in a book where names like Naomi and Mahlon and Orpah reflect character and/or destiny, we would expect a man named “man of strength within” to be our destined hero, the redeemer.
- c. Legally only a male can redeem the land and the widow and his deceased brother’s name.
- d. If King David, the male redeemer of the Jewish people, is the outcome of our story, then Boaz adds his seed, his genealogy – always a male line of descent in the Tanakh - from Judah and Peretz.
- e. If this romance requires that Cinderella women or widows find “*menucha* in the house of a man” (Ruth 1:9), then the man is the source of their redemption, their prince in shining armor.
- f. Boaz in the field plays the chivalrous role of protecting Ruth and warning her from dangerous men.⁹

Yet of course the Megillah is named after a woman and women dominate the dialogue and take special initiatives to catalyze their own redemption. The question is not are women more heroic than men but rather - *Is Boaz true to his name and heroic in some characteristic sense or is his name an ironic joke?*

(2) Boaz is an Comic Failure as a Hero

Mieke Bal in her book *Lethal Love* recites Boaz’s failure as a typical hero.

- a. Boaz fails to take initiative to contact Naomi or to help Ruth after their shocking, destitute arrival in Bethlehem
- b. Boaz procrastinates¹⁰ in turning his generosity to a foreign gleaner into any more fundamental resolution of their dire straits. Naomi must make a bold move at the end of the harvest lest the opportunity for something to develop between Ruth and Boaz dissipate.
- c. Boaz is sleeping literally and must be aroused sexually as well as morally to act
- d. Boaz is not bold but careful not to make a sexual move on Ruth and to keep his whole nocturnal encounter secret
- e. Boaz feels bound to go through all the legal niceties and even allows the first *goel* first right of refusal rather than insisting on his rights.

⁹ Refael Breuer notes that Boaz warns his servants not to molest but to protect (Ruth 2:16) because he knows that when the boss shows special attention to someone on the bottom of social scale, that his mid-level servants will resent her and will seek to undermine his preferential treatment and drive her away.

¹⁰ Midrash in TB Baba Batra 91a says that Boaz lost his wife and all his children just as Naomi returns to Bethlehem. So parallel to Naomi’s mourning is Boaz’s. Both of them come out of that despair and hopelessness to start life a new only very slowly with prodding from Ruth.

- f. Boaz never speaks or expresses any emotion of love, except indirectly by giving food.

Boaz does not let love endanger his social standing or his commitment to legal process while the definition of romantic hero is precisely to overturn law and social convention and throw public opinion to the winds in pursuit of passion. Boaz is old in spirit as well as in years, conservative, staid, heavy with property and reputation. He is worn out, lacking inner *Oz* = strength. He cannot be called a true descendant of Peretz = the one who “burst forth,” who broke out ahead of his brother.

(3) Boaz is a heroic second fiddle

Initiative belongs to the women but Boaz learns to re-act, to respond, to take the lead – in his own roundabout quiet way.

- a. While generally it is women who show love by nurturing, here Boaz is the giver of food, of seed, who personally prepares the food for Ruth in the field and who pours endless seed into her apron after the night on the threshing floor.
- b. When Ruth describes herself as unworthy of his exceptional recognition of a foreigner in generously allowing her to glean, Boaz turns the tables and acknowledges that his financial *hesed* is nothing compared to Ruth's emotional *hesed* to her dead husband and her mother-in-law. (Ruth 2: 11). Boaz sees Ruth's interest in him as an older man as a great *hesed* – sensitive to his needs, sexual and emotional (Ruth 3: 10).
- c. In spite of his own conservatism, he praises Ruth's radical boldness in leaving behind family and land to follow Naomi and to join Judah's people. Though his status is a matter of inheritance and genealogy, he appreciates a status won by adventure, by willingness to uproot.
- d. Despite the prejudice against Ruth who is always identified as the foreigner, especially the Moabite, Boaz never discriminates against her and even when Ruth comes in the middle of the night, he does not accuse her of being sexually promiscuous like the women of Moab (Numbers 25 or the daughter of Lot). Rather Boaz describes Ruth in the language of Abraham comparing her to the ultimate insider, the founder.
- e. Adin Steinsaltz in *Women in The Bible* finds in Boaz the ability to see beyond the externals. Others see Ruth as poor, as foreign, hence she arouses suspicion, distancing and labeling. However Boaz, even though he was very conservative, sees beyond into Ruth the heroine of *hesed*, the daring adventurer willing to come to new land and to commit to a new God and new way of life. Someone who can live in another's world, who can enter into the Jewish framework
- f. Boaz knows how to handle the law and to negotiate so as to bring about a happy resolution of love and law, unlike the usually tragic romantic stories where law and love are in conflict.
- g. Boaz does learn to be true to Peretz, who grabbed the privilege of being firstborn from his brother, just as Boaz displaced the first *goel* by birth - Ploni Almoni.
- h. Boaz like Judah learns to acknowledge that a woman can be more right than he is and to follow her lead.

- i. Boaz through his sexual restraint during a harvest celebration away from home when propositioned by a specially dressed foreign young woman (Ruth) redeems the unseemly behavior of Judah with Tamar, the foreign widow who approached him during the sheep shearing celebrations far from home.

(4) Women play “First Fiddle”

Mieke Bal draws a larger feminist conclusion from her reading of women's stories in the Tanakh. She shows that women, who are as a class disadvantaged by social and legal system, typically work to undermine or extend the legal system. That requires both **courage and ingenuity** or simply **hutzpah**, since men are the official gatekeepers of the law and benefit from its power. For example, Naomi in Megillat Ruth appears as a seller of her husband's land, though no other Biblical legal text suggests women have such power. Tzelofchad's daughters pushed Moshe to change the laws of inheritance to allow women to inherit under certain circumstances. Lot's daughters violate the incest with parent rule which evoked drunken Noah's curse of Ham, yet earned them recognition for keeping the survival of humanity going after the Sodom flood. Tamar became a whore (violated her *yibum* status, deceived and slept with her father-in-law and deserved death by law, yet earned Judah's pardon and his recognition that she was right and he was wrong. Ruth with Naomi's guidance violates the sexual propriety dictated by Deut. 22:22). Then Ruth undercuts the proscription of marrying Moabites from Deut. 23:2-4 and earns the blessing for her similarity to Tamar and she preserves the lineage of the messianic king-to-be. Ruth through Boaz expands the interpretation of *goel* to combine *yibum* and land redemption even for extended notions of “brother.”

Negotiations and the Court Order of Bethlehem

Boaz manipulates the official *goel* into an untenable bargaining position in front of the all male court. The *goel* is shamed into acting to buy back Naomi's land, though he had taken no initiative previously. Then he surprised him with the tag-along clause – marrying Ruth the Moabite and leaving the newly acquired field to her descendant who will revive the dead males of Naomi's family. Why then does he withdraw his claim?

- 1- religious ethnic disgust at marrying a foreigner, especially a Moabite?
- 2- financial selfishness lest he shell out money for Naomi's field's redemption and then lose it to an heir of Mahlon.
- 3- Masculine pride like Onan son of Judah who refused to spill his seed into Tamar because “the seed would not be considered his” – but his deceased brother.

Boaz makes his case in name of the male need for perpetuating one's name. The all-male court of elders is impressed. Boaz's concern to be the *goel* of Ruth as Ruth emphasized (Ruth 3: 9) or of Naomi as Ruth explained to Naomi (Ruth 3:17) is suppressed in all male rhetoric of patriarchal duty. Boaz's sexual interest in Ruth who prefers elderly stately men to young men (Ruth 3:10) was symbolized very vividly in Chapter 3 when he pours very abundant seed into her apron (Ruth 3:15) as if to make

her pregnant. Yet that is also hidden in the courtroom at the gate as was the whole illicit scandalous liaison on threshing floor the night before (Ruth 3:13-14).

Exercise: Compare Josephus' Retelling with the Biblical version. How does our sense of the law and our image of the characters change? (Antiquities Book 5 Chapter 9:4)

"Boaz: 'Don't you retain the inheritance of Elimelech and his sons?' He confessed that he did, because he was the nearest kinsman. The Boaz said: 'Don't remember the laws by halves. Do everything according to them; for the wife of Mahlon has arrived here, whom you must marry according to the law, in case you would retain their fields.' So the man yielded up both the field and the wife to Boaz....alleging that he already had a wife and children too. So Boaz called the senate (literally, *zekenim*) to witness and directed the woman to loose his shoe and spit in his face according to the law. Boaz married Ruth and they had a son within a year's time. Naomi was herself a nurse of the child and by the advice of the women, called him Oved, so he would be brought up to serve her in her old age, for Oved in Hebrew signifies a servant.

The son of Oved was Jesse and David was his son and left his rule to his sons for 21 generations.

I was therefore obliged to relate this history of Ruth because I had in mind to demonstrate the power of God, who, without difficulty, can raise those that are of ordinary parentage to dignity and splendor, to which he advanced David, though he was born of such common parents."

Character Development:
Our Foil: Delving into the Mind of "John Doe"

Boaz is straightforward in offering Ploni Almoni the right of first refusal¹¹ to redeem the land of Naomi by buying it from her. He also admits he is next in line. But after Ploni Almoni agrees, then Boaz surprises him with the add-on – the obligation to marry Ruth the Moabite. ***Why does Ploni Almoni decline to be the redeemer of Mahlon, Ruth and Naomi?***

- (1) Fear (like Judah's for Shelah - Gen 38) that Ruth (like Tamar) is a "killer wife" who has already killed off two husbands (Midrash Ruth Rabah 7,10).
- (2) Fear that he will be polluted or at least lower the status of his genealogy by marrying a Moabite (Midrash Ruth Rabbah 7,10).
- (3) Concern for law. Rashi suggests that Ploni Almoni is concerned to be a law-abiding individual and he understands Deuteronomy 23:4 as a prohibition to marry any Moabite even a woman.

¹¹ Refael Breuer refers to but does not identify a Talmudic tradition that Ploni was Elimelech's brother and Boaz was his nephew.

- (4) Concern to waste his own inheritance paying to redeem the land of Naomi when Ruth's descendant will get the land
- (5) Concern to waste his seed (*shacheit*), as was Onan in Gen. 38 using the same language, on a child that will be named after another line – in this case Mahlon son of Elimelech
- (6) Ploni is worried that a new wife and new child will introduce marital strife and competition between sons
- (7) Like Orpah Ploni's generosity is limited to the normal acts of kindness, not to the *lifnim mishurat hadin* request to marry Ruth and raise her ex-husband's child.

**Exercise: Why is the official *goel* left nameless? (Hint: Deuteronomy 25:6).
How is the *Goel* similar and different to Orpah?**

The official *goel* is only known as John Doe = *Ploni Almoni*, perhaps because he refused to redeem the name of the dead brother as required by law of *yibum*, so his name was lost (measure for measure). Perhaps the Megillah does not wish to blacken his name, as is prescribed in Deuteronomy, because he is not literally the brother obligated to marry the childless widow.

Orpah's name means turning her neck but she is a more positive figure showing in tears and hugs how pained she is to leave Naomi when Naomi insists she return to her mother's house. Ploni Almoni, however, seems to be put off by Ruth's being a Moabite and he makes explicit his concern to protect his own inheritance.

Still in both cases however the second figure – so important literarily to contrast with Ruth and Boaz who are meant for one another – is also a decent person who initially agrees to stay with Naomi and to redeem the land for Naomi, respectively. Ruth and Boaz are not only nice and decent but exceptionally so in their efforts.

Happy Endings – Too Many Endings – Pick your Favorite

The key to a story is its ending but Ruth has so many endings. How has the opening and the endings of the plot guided us to its resolution?

We may identify as many as **four endings**:

- (A) **the people bless Boaz's wedding,**
- (B) **the women bless Naomi,**
- (C) **the neighbors name Oved as Naomi's**
- (D) **the narrator gives us the male genealogy of Peretz.**

Imagine how the book could have ended with just one of them. How does each ending shape our perception of the point of the Megillah?

- A. Ruth 4:11-12 praises Ruth for being like Tamar** who forced the fulfillment of a failed *yibum* marriage to produce Peretz. Both Tamar and Ruth broke with sexual custom to initiate reproductive contact with a man of Judah. Tamar produced Peretz who broke through before his older brother and whose name means “bursting forth, breaking down fences, physically transgressing.” Though the people do not know how **transgressive** Ruth has been, their praise is still apt. Like Judah, Boaz could well say: *Tzadka mimeni* – “she was right to push me; my dillydallying was inappropriate.” Precisely her transgressive behavior and even her foreign birth as a Moabite are fully legitimated as she is placed by this official praise in the tradition both of the matriarchs Rachel/Leah and of Tamar/Judah. (In Ruth 2: 11 Boaz implicitly ranked Ruth with Abraham, the first “convert” but now Ruth qua mother is assimilated to more traditional female models).
- B. Ruth 4:14-15 blesses Naomi for her revival of life**, for her transformation since Chapter One when she called herself the “bitter one.” Boaz or maybe Oved will care for her in her destitute old age. But the real credit goes to Ruth who connected Naomi to the *goel* whether as Boaz the *goel* or as the yet-unnamed Oved. In fact, however, Ruth's true value according to the blessing is not in mediating a relationship with male *goel* but as one who loves Naomi. Naomi is urged to value Ruth's love more than seven sons. **Life nurtured by love from a daughter is more important than male descendants.** So here the women giving the blessing do not mention the revival of the dead males – Mahlon, Elimelech – but the revival the dead-to-life Naomi. Love of Ruth transcends love of children in the way that Elkanah had hoped that his love for Hannah would transcend her need for children (I Samuel 1: 8). Her love should transcend heterosexual love as David's love for Yonatan, Shaul's son, transcended love of women (II Samuel 1:26). Only in Ruth 4:15 does the word **love** appear and it is not in relationship to one's spouse or one's child, even though they are celebrating the birth of the long-awaited child. Even though they just celebrated a marriage when a daughter leaves parents to cling (*davak*) unto a spouse (Gen. 2:24, with a twist), *davak* is used in Megillat Ruth of Naomi-Ruth

relationship (Ruth 1:14). It is the love of two women, unusually of an old one and a young one, a Juda-ite and a foreigner, a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law. This is an unusual romance, a paean to altruistic friendship. The women who acknowledge Naomi's new status as "full," as having a child to replace her sons, also do their tikkun for their cold greeting of Naomi in Ruth Chapter One.

C. Ruth 4: 17 is the neighbors' blessing that transfers the child from Boaz and Ruth to his grandmother and credits that grandmother with being the mother of the king-to-be – David. Thus Chapter Four brings closure to Chapter One: it comes full circle from Naomi's attack on God, now that her emptiness, her hopelessness, is reversed. It explicates Naomi's intimation that God was remembering and redeeming the people by its foreshadowing of the birth of King David's ancestors. Boaz and Ruth were only tools in Naomi's personal triumph. The chorus of women that witnessed her downfall in Chapter One now acknowledge her redemption – the empty one is now full. Like menopausal Sarah, this old lady Naomi is nursing again. God is blessed, just as God was blamed in Chapter One. Though Naomi herself does not bless God here directly, she already do so back in Chapter Two - Ruth 2: 20). Not the revival of the names of dead men but the revival of a nearly dead women is central.

D. Ruth 4:18-22 is a male genealogy. It disregards some of the previous endings or blessings that gave priority to love over the importance of children. Those children – all male – constitute the redemption. The women are shunted aside and not mentioned at all. The family romance with its local happy ending is swallowed up the mutigenerational promises made to Judah's son and until the future. Megillat Ruth is a local moment of danger. A link in succession, to overcome what might have prematurely prevented the eventual crowning of David. The women's story is swallowed up. Family hesed overcoming a local tragedy contributes to future national redemption. David's choice as *goel* is legitimated by his female and male ancestors. Surprisingly not only are the women left out but so are Elimelech and Mahlon in whose name Boaz married Ruth to save their names from extinction (Ruth 4: 5 and 9-10). It is Boaz who has now been integrated into David's royal ancestry.

Exercise: Write your own ending for the movie version.

Exercise: Offer a modern script of Ruth as a movie.
Pick the cast, the location, the hero and villain etc

Exercise: Retell the story as a fable of symbol people
using their midrashic names (adapted from Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 254):

“Once many years ago, famine drove My-God-is-King and Pleasant-One from House-of-Bread in the land of Judah/Confessor to the land of Moav/From-Father. There My-God-is-King died. His two sons Disease and Destruction married local women, but after a while the sons also died, leaving only Pleasant-One and her two daughter-in-laws.

“When they heard that there was bread in the House-of-Bread, they set out to return. On the way, Pleasant-One released her two daughters-in-law and sent them back to their mother’s houses to begin new lives and find rest with new husbands.

“Back-of-neck tearfully turned and left, but Friendly /Dewy stayed with her mother-in-law, now no longer Pleasant-One but Bitter-Woman, for God had killed her men.

“In House-of-Bread they encountered their redeemer He-who-has-Strength-Within. First, God, then Pleasant-One, then Dewy/Friendly, and then He-who-has-Strength-Within planned to bring them all together. Finally He-who-has-Strength-Within married Dewy/Friendly and from this union came He-who-Serves, the grandfather of Beloved.”

Placing Megillat Ruth in the Canon: Order as Interpretation

Besides the intention of the author and meaning understood by the historic audience when a book was composed, there is also its place in the **official memory** of the people or their library later established. In this case it is the place in the order of the Bible or Tanakh. There are in fact many different organizations of the Tanakh and in many of them the Book of Ruth is located differently.

Exercise: Examine the record of placements as against the placement in the Masoretic text finalized in Tiberias in 9th-10th century. Teachers may bring Bibles of different traditions – Catholic, Protestant, Septuagint, Masoretic to class for comparison and also reprint list so books found in various Biblical encyclopedias. Speculate on the meaning of the placement.

- a. Ruth between Book of Judges and Book of Samuel. (Septuagint, Greek Jewish, Syriac Christian and later Catholic order of cannon, also reported by Origen).
- b. Ruth before Tehillim/Psalms in Ketuvim (TB Baba Batra 14b baraita)
- c. Ruth among Five Megillot in order: Shir HaShirim/Ruth/Eicha/Kohelet/Esther (Masoretic)
- d. Ruth/ Shir Hashirim/ Kohelet/ Eicha /Esther (Sephardi manuscript of Tanakh)
- e. Job / Tehillim / Proverbs / Ruth (Leningrad manuscript)

Some scholars speculate that:

(a) **Ruth between Book of Judges and Book of Samuel.** (Septuagint, Greek Jewish and later Catholic order of cannon) follows the historical introduction to Megillat Ruth in the days of the Judges and it helps to establish why David is preferable to Saul by comparing the rape of concubine in Givah, home of Saul, with Ruth in Bethlehem, home of David. This also fills the gap regarding David's genealogy and birth story which is missing in the Book of Samuel. TB Baba Batra 14B attributes the books of Judges, Ruth and Samuel to the **authorship of Samuel**, so it makes sense to group them together. Similarly Eicha attributed to Jeremiah is often placed after Jeremiah's book of prophecies and Esther is often placed with Ezra-Nehemia from the second Temple Period.

(b) **Ruth before Tehillim/Psalms in Ketuvim** (TB Baba Batra 14b baraita) reflects the attribution of Tehillim to **King David**, so it is prefaced with the story of his ancestor's birth.
(Ruth/Tehillim/Job/Proverbs/Kohelet/Shir Hashirim/Eicha/Esther

(c) **Ruth among Five Megillot** in order: Shir HaShirim /Ruth/Eicha /Kohelet /Esther (Masoretic) reflects the **liturgical order** (first documented in Geonic times) that the Megillot are read publicly at each holiday in order of the Hebrew months beginning with Nisan¹², the first

¹² A few rare manuscripts place Tishrei first so the order is: Kohelet/Esther/Shir hashirim/Ruth/Eicha.
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Hebrew month. So Shir HaShirim = Pesach = Nisan /Ruth = Shavuot = harvest of barley and wheat/Eicha = Tisha B'Av /Kohelet = Sukkot = Tishrei /Esther = Purim = Adar. Shavuot is also identified in rabbinic tradition with the birth and death day of David. Scholars speculate that the five Megillot were taken out of the historical order and grouped together sometime after the sixth century when the liturgical custom of reading a different Megillah on each holiday was established, as witnessed in Masechet Sofrim.

(d) Tehillim/Proverbs/Job/ Ruth/ Shir Hashirim/ Kohelet/ Eicha /Esther (Sephardi manuscript of the Tanakh) reflects the **historical order of putative authors**: David, then Solomon for Shir Hashirim (Solomon as young man according to the Rabbis) / Kohelet (Solomon as old disillusioned man according to the Rabbis), and Jeremiah for Eicha and Esther for Esther.

(e) Job / Tehillim / Proverbs / Ruth (Leningrad manuscript) reflects the connection between Proverbs = Mishlei which ends in Proverbs Chapter 31 with the poem to **Eishet Hayil** and then proceeds with Megillat Ruth that praises Ruth as "Eishet Hayil." (David is also described as a *gibor hayil* – I Samuel 16:18 and he too lived in Bethlehem – I Samuel 17:12).

The Bottomline Message of the Book of Ruth

Compare these various contemporary commentators in their reading of the bottom-line message of the Book of Ruth. Which moral seems most consistent with text? Which draws a moral lesson that is most inspiring for your view of the world and why? Here we have assumed that Megillat Ruth is designed to convey a clear ideological/moral lesson. The ending has interpretive priority in trying to decipher the point of a story. Below are summaries of several contemporary Bible scholars reading of the moral lesson of the book:

(1) Phyllis Trible: "A story beginning in deepest despair has worked its way to wholeness and well-being. Thus it is a comedy [not humorous but the opposite of tragedy] in which brave and bold decisions of women embody and bring to pass the blessings of God. ..Divine curse is gradually removed thorough hidden and fortuitous means...Called to duty by a foreign woman, this Israelite patriarch swore by God to do the right thing for Ruth (Ruth 3:13) .. Women working out their own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works through them." (*God and the Rhetoric*, p.195-196). The highest virtue is **sisterhood, solidarity.**

(2) Bezalel Porten (as summarized by Edward Greenstein): "Porten sees the Moabite connection as essential to major theme of the book. Abraham, the first Hebrew, had two brothers, Nahor and Haran. Abraham's lineage is reunited with Nahor's when in the next generation Isaac marries Rebecca, Nahor's granddaughter (Gen. 22:23). Haran's reunification is achieved in the coupling of Boaz and Ruth....daughter of Moab, the son of Lot and grandson of Haran (Gen. 19:37). **David the climactic scion of the Judean genealogy, then represents a consummation of the Abrahamic covenant...**One can identify a political motive for leading all the blood lines to David. [David is the first king to unite all the tribes]-Jacob's legacy. Among his conquests are the Aramean states (descendants of Abraham's bother Nahor), the Edomites (descendants of Jacob's brother Esau), and the Ammonites and Moabites (sons of Lot, the son of Abraham's brother Haran). **David in his person incorporates the various peoples he governs.** Their blood runs in his veins. He is the one person who can legitimately reign over them all."(Edward Greenstein, "Reading Strategies and the Story of Ruth," p.215-216, in *Women in the Hebrew Bible* edited by Alice Bach). Thus David embodies the Divine promise that Abraham would not only produce *Av-hamon Amim* = "a father of many nations" but also that kings will emerge from his loins. The Lot story begun in Gen. 12: 5-11 sought resolution of potential economic conflict of brothers (*anashim achim anachnu*) over flocks and land through "*hipared na*" = **separation, partition** (a position promoted by Uriel Simon in his contemporary political application of the

Lot story to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict). That separated Abraham's family, his brothers, continuing a process that dominates Genesis where Abraham leaves Nahor, Lot leaves Abraham to create Moab and Ammon, Esav leaves for Edom, Yishmael leaves for the desert, Midian son of Ketura is sent away. "Good fences make good neighbors" and the Divine plan of the spreading over the face of the earth (not uniting around a Tower of Babel is achieved). However Ruth refuses to be sent away like Orpah. Boaz argues for *yibum* to maintain one's connection with brothers. Ruth's oath (Ruth 1:17) that only death will "separate = *yafrid*" may be read as more than a personal preference. She enunciates a goal of conflict resolution through loyalty and commitment across ethnic lines, that is enacted in David's unification of all the sanctions of Terach's family, all the brothers and sons of Abraham. That solution may be coercive in imperial politics but in Ruth it appears as a choice generated by love without ulterior motives, as *hesed* to living and the dead brothers and widows. Highest virtue is the value of **reunion**, unity of separated family members.

(3) Yair Zakovitz adds that the Book of Ruth placed in the era of the Judges and located in the Septuagint between the Book of Judges and the Book of Samuel is designed to polemicize **against the legitimacy of Saul's dynasty** and in favor of David's. For the Book of Judges ends with the story of rape in Givah – the capital of Saul who is from the tribe of Benjamin that perpetrated the gang rape that almost led to the tribe's destruction. The tribe sinned by its Sodom-like perversions of hospitality toward brother Jews.

However David is descended from Ruth, Naomi and Boaz from Bethlehem in Judah where law is upheld, not trampled under foot, where *hesed* - aid to the stranger and widow is practiced, and where Boaz protects vulnerable women from predatory young men. Elimelech = "My God is King" is a forerunner of David, the true king. Zakovitz agrees with the Zohar Hadash: "Rabbi Yossi ben Kismah said: This Megillah comes to give David's genealogy" (Zohar Hadash 1:4). The genealogy of Ruth 4:18 is unique in style to Genesis and it emphasizes that David is tenth to Peretz just as Noah was tenth to Adam and Abraham tenth to Noah. Boaz is seventh which is also an auspicious number. The highest virtue is **ethical yichus** as source of legitimacy for a good ruler.

(4) The conversion of foreign women to Judaism is the point of the Book of Ruth which was written in Second Temple period but retrojected into the era of Judges to polemicize against the forced diverse and exile of foreign women in the days of Ezra. Ezra 9:1, Nehemia 13:1,23 and Deuteronomy 23:4-7 speak uncompromisingly about Moabite women married to Jewish men. They call for the

preservation of *zera hakodesh* – the holy seed and reinterpret the Deuteronomic law forbidding intermarriage with Canaanites (Deut. 7) as applying to Moabites and all others. That is the legal and theological stance against which the author of Megillat Ruth is thought to have polemized. The highest virtue is here is personal, not racial, hence the openness of Judaism to outside world.

(5) **Harold Fisch** takes the approach of anthropological structuralist like Levi Strauss. The Megillah is about the perennial cultural issues of endogamy and exogamy. **When is it legitimate to import outsiders and when is it dangerous?** How do we handle the drive for survival expressed in the women's drive for motherhood with the male concern for law and order. In the story of Lot's daughters and less so with Tamar, the women seduce the men to guarantee survival of the clan. However Ruth's story "redeems" the raw nature of survival by her use of an argument in the name of God and Boaz's final resolution in a legally approved resolution at the city gate. The highest virtue is ***tikkun*, redeeming the past mistakes, increasing moral refinement.**

(6) **Aviva Zornberg follows Ruth Rabbah in saying that Megillat Ruth is book of *hesed*.** It redeems the lack of *hesed* of Moabites to Israel in the desert (Deuteronomy 23:4-7), hence earning Ruth's access to the Jewish people despite the law. Every commendable act in the book goes beyond the law, even the final redemption by Boaz which appears to go beyond the classical requirement of *yibum*. Those who only follow the law like Orpah and Ploni Almoni lose their place in the narrative, even though they are not evil people at all – just ordinary. Rabbi Zeira says: "This Megillah has nothing of purity and impurity, of forbidden and permitted, so why was it written [if it has no legal significance?] To teach you how great the reward for doings acts of *emet va'hesed*." (Ruth Rabbah 2:15). The highest value is ***lfnim mishurat hadin - hesed*.**

(7) **D. F. Rauber** (as summarized by Edward Greenstein p. 216-217) sees here a story of the **cycle of emptiness and fullness**. It is rooted in the agricultural cycle of famine and fertility and reflected in the personal life of mother earth = Naomi. God is the source of both redeeming the land and the barrenness of Naomi. Boaz pouring grain into Ruth's apron is the symbol of the redemptive mechanism and the happy ending is the female neighbors identifying Naomi the nursing woman as the mother of the new child. Porten also agrees that seed and land are central terms and themes of Ruth in the spirit of the Book of Genesis.

(8) **Mieke Bal** argues the point of the Megillah is not *hesed*, the typical female virtue, but *hutzpah* – willingness to challenge, or better, stretch inadequate social/legal norms in the direction of greater justice

and more voice to the deprived. The highest virtue is **high-minded transgressive action** designed to further growth not to undermine the system. The Zohar 71 praises Tamar, Ruth's model, for possessing the "**hutzpah of a tzadeket.**"

Appendix I: Tamar and Ruth

Literary Method: Parallel Narratives and Literary Allusions

The Tanakh is filled with parallels that constitute **type scenes** as in the three well scenes of meeting a mate (Rivka, Tziporah and Rachel). Robert Alter in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* has made that point clearly and shown how similar phrases and words build that internal midrash between stories. Often these later stories work out the moral logic of **measure for measure punishment** (as when Tamar dressed as harlot deceives Judah her father-in-law who wanted to pay her with a goat, just as Judah and the brothers fooled their father Jacob with the coat of Joseph with goat blood. Jacob had already fooled his father with goatskins in stealing Esav's blessing. That moral logic also allows for later stories to redeem, do **measure for measure tikkun** for earlier ones as when Mordechai, descendant of King Shaul, refuses to take spoils in executing Haman's sons and supporters, reversing Shaul's taking of unauthorized spoils from Haman's ancestor King Agag.

In Megillat Ruth there is a type scene of betrothal in Genesis. 24 with Eliezer and Rivka whose parallels we have already seen above in Chapter Two. That literary parallel brings out the theme of *hesed* as a test of character that underlies a good *shiduch* more than beauty. That *hesed* is also the key to fulfillment of the promise of seed and survival.

In Ruth Chapter Four the narrative itself (Ruth 4:12) makes the parallels to the story of Rachel and Leah and to Tamar and Judah explicit. In fact it is the readership of the megillah represented by the "Greek chorus" of men and of women who read the family story as part of a national clan story. The Jewish reader, the people – not only the Jewish writer – are portrayed as **experiencing and interpreting their contemporary reality in terms of a reenactment of grand "first things" of the founding family of Genesis**. (The genealogy of the end of the book adds the perspective not only of past blessing but of future redemption by showing the outcome - David). The story of Tamar and Judah is not only an external parallel identified by those blessing the couple after the fact, but a literary resource for the narrator to shape the description of the events in Chapter Three and Four.

Several commentators like Harold Fisch see a three-fold developing plot of parallel stories: Lot and his daughters (the Moabite connection), Tamar and Judah and Ruth and Boaz. The series refine and even redeem one another in a form of *tikkun*. (Sexuality becomes less raw, law comes to resolve injustice, excluded outsiders are brought inside and even honored for their critical perspective and contribution to the continuity of insiders).

Let us focus on Tamar story, encouraging students to seek parallels and differences. The intertextuality of the Tanakh will become palpable as well as the possibilities of *tikkun*.

The **Tamar story** marks Megillat Ruth as a story of female initiative, of transgressive sex for survival, of outsiders transforming insiders and redeeming them morally, and of the court of law as a crucial venue for redemption (or for corruption of justice).

Parallels of Genesis 38 and Ruth 3 and 4

Features:

- a. family divided when Judah/Elimelech leave their brothers to go to another land
- b. marriage to outsiders, then death of wife/husband and two sons
- c. two sons bear symbolic names that portend evil (Er = *ariri* – childless in Targum Yonatan, Onan = mourning, later masturbation, Mahlon and Chilyon = death and destruction)
- d. death of two sons attributed to God – explicitly in Gen.38 and indirectly by Naomi in Megillat Ruth
- e. law of *yibum* invoked but one brother – Onan/Ploni Almoni refuses to do his duty. Both excuse themselves from doing their duty by reference to their selfish concern not to *shacheit* = corrupt their own inheritance (Gen. 38:8-9 and Ruth 4:5-6 and 10). (These are the only narratives in the Tanakh that refer to *yibum*)
- f. a woman who is an outsider takes the initiative to come back/stay in the family of husband after refusing to be sent home to mother's/father's house by father-in-law/mother-in-law until the child grows = *ad yigdal* (Gen. 38:11 and Ruth 1:8-17).
- g. Judah sends away Tamar because he mistakenly blames her for the death of the two sons¹³, while Naomi sends them away for their own good (nevertheless the commentators Dana Fewell and David Gunn believe Naomi may also blame her sons marriage to forbidden Moabites for the cause of their death as an act of God and she may be sending them away as an act of penance before returning home)
- h. the sexual initiative of seduction involves transgression of law and/or propriety
- i. the redeemer is not literally an immediate brother but rather a father/ more distant cousin, so it is a bold move of the women to extend the interpretation of *yibum*/redeemer status to obligate the father/cousin
- j. the child born is part of the house of Peretz of Judah
- k. a court is the venue of resolution – though Judah's court is travesty of justice, while Boaz's obeys all the rules
- l. a woman, an outsider, prompts a hesitant male patriarch to act after having delayed in redeeming a widow and the name of the deceased
- m. a woman prepares clothes for an encounter in which a man does not expect her and then she reveals/covers herself/himself¹⁴
- n. an outsider woman calls for recognition = *haker* from the redeemer, an older man who eventually acknowledges that she was right
- o. the stories end with genealogies that suppress the names of women
- p. the child is not named by his mother

¹³ The killer wife who jinxes her successive husbands is concern of Book of Tobit and later rabbinic thought

¹⁴ What happened on that romantic night on threshing floor?

Ellen Van Wolde argues that *vatigal marglotav* (Ruth 3:7) could not mean Ruth uncovered Boaz's legs because *marglotav* means a place – the place of his legs (like *merashotav* – at the place of his head for the stone pillow used by Jacob at Bethel). Legs may have euphemistic sexual connotation but his legs were not object of act of uncovering. Probably Ruth uncovered her body and lay at his feet and then when he stroked her he realized it was "a woman." *Galah* often goes with uncovering one's sexual body and Ruth asks Boaz to "cover" her with his mantle – both symbolically marrying her (Deut. 23:1;27:20; Ezekiel 16:8), taking her under his "wing" and maybe literally covering her nakedness

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The differences between our parallel stories are as important as the similarities:

- Tamar deceives Judah, but Ruth is honest about her identity and maybe for that reason they do not necessarily have sexual relations but decide on marriage.
- Tamar gets pregnant first and never again has relations, while Ruth gets pregnant after marriage and lives with Boaz from then on licitly.
- Naomi sends off Orpah and Ruth for their own good to seek alternative husbands, while Judah sends Tamar off to protect his son Shelah as act of deception that leaves Tamar an *agunah* – tied to her *yabam* without any chance of marriage.
- Boaz is passive initially but he is still honorable, while Judah sins and earns forgiveness only in acknowledging his sin. Boaz never admits to his earlier procrastination, so he praises Ruth without needing to confess that she was morally right and he was wrong. .

The deep parallel is that Tamar and Ruth both serve as outsiders to open the eyes of the elder statesmen of Judah who are not doing all they can and should to keep Judah alive, to perpetuate clan survival through taking responsibility. Tamar and Ruth both uncover themselves to open the eyes of Judah/Boaz. Tamar sits at Petach Eynaim – Threshold of the Eyes. Both seek and attain recognition (*haker na*; *makircha*- Ruth 2:10 and 2:19) rather than being socially invisible.

"As non-Judahite women, Tamar and Ruth, are women who are seen but not noticed. In the end they turn out to be instruments by which Judah, Naomi and Boaz perceive and attain knowledge. As foreigners they are able to confront the insiders and to hold a mirror to their faces." (p. 451)

Both Naomi (despairing prematurely) and Boaz (hesitating and procrastinating, a passive bystander) fail to see the need for unconventional acts to guarantee survival. The foreign women are the catalyst for unconventional acts that preserve the Jewish royal line. Subversion is for the sake of shoring up the establishment. Exogamy is to preserve the redemptive leading insider family.

Tikvah Frymer-Kensky in *Reading the Women of the Bible* characterizes Tamar and Ruth as well as Lot's daughters as showing "loyalty, assertiveness and ingenuity." Like Leah and Rivka they are:

"all prepared to risk scandal, ostracism, humiliation or death to have children with their families. They are all assertive and proactive, and each of them is engaged in unconventional sexual activity to achieve their purpose. .. Taken by themselves, incest, adultery, and licentious behavior are subversive acts that could destroy the social order. Loss of male control over female sexuality can destroy the patriarchal system. However in the context of the faithfulness of these women to their family and to its men, the loss of male control was actually a good thing; it enabled the women to serve the family structure

and enable it to survive." (p. 276-277)

NARRATIVE:	Descent	Disaster	Abandoned	Geulah
Abraham and Lot	Separation of Lot/ Abraham and descent to Sodom	Sodom destroyed and two hatanim of two daughters of Lot died without child	Lots' daughters in cave without child and without any prospect of husband	Lot is unaware Goel, next of kin
Judah and Tamar	Separation of brothers and Judah descends	Judah's wife and two sons married and died without child	Tamar held for yibum without child	Judah is unaware Goel, next of kin
Elimelech and Ruth	Separation of Elimelech from Judea and descent to Moab	Naomi's husband and two married sons die without child	Naomi's daughters in law in Moab without child and without any prospect of husband	Boaz is aware of being Goel, next of kin

	Bed Trick	Celebration	Yibum Union	Progeny
Abraham and Lot	Lot tricked by daughters	Lot made drunk and sleeping	Daughters have sex illicitly - incest	Moav and Ammon, (then Ruth and Orpah)
Judah and Tamar	Judah tricked by daughter-in-law dressed as prostitute	Judah after sheep shearing wants to sleep with prostitute	Daughter in-law has sex illicitly - incest and prostitution	Peretz and Zerach, then Boaz
Elimelech and Ruth	Ruth compromised Boaz on threshing floor, but gave him a conscious choice	Boaz after grain harvest, merry with drink and sleeping	Ruth and Boaz have legally recognized marriage and yibum	Oved and then David

Harold Fisch in his article on Ruth in *Vetus Testamentum* 1982 lays out the above chart showing **structural parallels** (synchrony) but also **moral lessons** about progressive growth in civilization that emerge over time (diachrony). He uncovers the moral lessons of these three progressively developing stories, though not every feature appears in every story:

- 1- Tragedy begins when economically motivated separation of brothers begins with descent or abandonment of home land/family and almost leads to extinction in a foreign land
- 2- Marrying out, exogamy, leads initially to destruction without child, yet endogamy – insider marriage which is normally considered incest can be redemptive
- 3- Female, sexually licentious trickery is fair in motivating reluctant redeemer to act
- 4- Revelry especially wine often leads to vulnerability of the man to exploitation by woman, so self-control is male virtue being tested.
- 5- Legal –marital issues must be clarified at court or else progeny (Moab and Amon will be excluded from Israel)
- 6- Progress from story to story follows growing awareness of redeemer where Boaz acts out of conscious choice unlike Lot and Judah. Judah does acknowledge his responsibility after the fact
- 7- Progress from story to story follows move to higher levels of civilization and sexual restraint (from cave with Lot, to street corner after sheep shearing with prostitute to threshing floor and actual consummation after marriage in the gate of the city). Thus narrative follow Levi-Strauss's RAW to COOKED structuralist analysis of cultures.
- 8- Survival of male line depends on boldchutzpah of women
- 9- Final genealogies reflect reunion of family of Abraham, survival and memory of the deceased and redemptive line of Judah

II. Appendix: *EISHET HAYIL* מדרשי אשת חיל

“And now let us speak of noble women”
By Moshe Silberschein

כמה כירכורי כירכורים הקב"ה מתאוה לשמוע שיחתן של צדקניות
How many circuitous ways will the Holy One go in order to hear the conversation of
righteous women!
Talmud Yerushalmi Sota 21b

י אִשֶּׁת חַיִּיל מִי יִמָּצָא וְרַחֲמֵי מִפְּנִינִים מִכָּרָה:
יא בְּטַח בָּהּ לֵב בַּעֲלָהּ וְשִׁלָּל לֹא יִחָסֵר:
יב גְּמֻלָּתָהּ טוֹב וְלֹא-רָע כֹּל יָמֵי חַיֶּיהָ:
יג דְּרָשָׁה צָמֵר וּפְשָׁתִים וְתַעֲשֵׁ בְּחֶפֶץ כַּפִּיהָ:
יד הִיְתָה כְּאֵנִיּוֹת סוֹחֵר מִמֶּרְחֵק תְּבִיא לְחֵמָה:
טו וְתִקֶּם | בְּעוֹד לַיְלָה וְתִתֵּן טָרֶף לְבֵיתָהּ וְחֵק לְנַעַר תִּיהֶ:
טז זְמָמָה שֹׁדֵדָה וְתִקְחָהּ מִפָּרִי כַּפִּיהָ נָטַע [נִטְעָה] כָּרָם:
יז חֲגֵרָה בְּעוֹז מְתַנִּיָּה וְתֹאמֶץ זְרוּעֶתֶיהָ:
יח טַעְמָה כִּי-טוֹב סִחָרָה לֹא-יִכָּבֵד בְּלִיל [בְּלִילָה] נִרָה:
יט יְדִיהָ שְׁלָחָה בְּכִישׁוֹר וּכְפִיהָ תִּמְכּוּ פֶלֶךְ:
כ כֶּפֶה פָּרִשָׁה לְעֵנִי וְיְדִיהָ שְׁלָחָה לְאַבְיוֹן:
כא לֹא-תִירָא לְבֵיתָהּ מִשְׁלָג כִּי כָל-בֵּיתָהּ לְבֹשׁ שָׁנִים:
כב מִרְבָּדִים עֹשֶׂה תֵּה-לָהּ שֵׁשׁ וְאַרְגָּמָן לְבוּשָׁה:
כג נֹדַע בְּשָׁעָרִים בַּעֲלָהּ בְּשִׁבְתָּהּ עִם-זִקְנֵי-אֶרֶץ:
כד סֶדִין עֹשֶׂה תֵּה וְתִמְכֹּר וְחִגּוֹר נִתְּנָה לְכִנְעָנִי:
כה עוֹז-וְהִדָּר לְבוּשָׁה וְתִשׁ חֵק לְיוֹם אַחֲרֹן:
כו פִּיהָ פֶּתַח בְּחִכְמָה וְתוֹרַת-חֵסֶד עַל-לְשׁוֹנָה:
כז צוּפָהּ הֵילֵכוֹת [הֵלִיכוֹת] בֵּיתָהּ וְלֶחֶם עֲצָלוֹת לֹא תֵאָכֵל:
כח קָמוּ בָנֶיהָ וַיֵּאֱשְׁרוּהָ בַּעֲלָהּ וַיְהַלְלֶהָ:
כט רְבוֹת בְּנוֹת עֹשֶׂה חַיִּיל וְאֵת עֲלִית עַל-כָּלָנָה:
ל שֹׁקֵר הָחַן וְהַבֵּל הִי כִּי אִשָּׁה יֵרָאֵת-יָהּ וְהִיא תִתְהַלָּל:
לא תִּגְוֶלָה מִפָּרִי יְדִיהָ וַיְהַלְלוּהָ בְּשָׁעָרִים מַעֲשֵׂי יָהּ:

A Woman of Valor אשת חיל

22 Verses - 22 women - 22 Letters from Aleph to Tav

Midrashic Associations

Biblical Text - Proverbs 31

א Noah's wife	What a rare find is a woman of valor! Her worth is far beyond that of rubies.	Verse 10
ב Sarah	Her husband puts his confidence in her, And lacks no fortune.	Verse 11
ג Rebecca/ Tsipora	She repays his good, but never his harm All the days of her life.	Verse 12
ד Leah	She seeks out wool and flax And sets her hand to them with a will.	Verse 13
ה Rachel	She is like a merchant fleet Bringing her food from afar.	Verse 14

<u>י</u> Bitya Daughter to Pharaoh	She rises while it is still night, And supplies provisions for her household, The daily fare of her maids.	Verse 15
<u>י</u> Yocheved	She sets her mind on an estate and acquires it; She plants a vineyard by her own labors.	Verse 16
<u>מ</u> Miriam	She girds her loins with strength; Her limbs she applies to the task with vigor.	Verse 17
<u>ח</u> Hannah/ Bitya/Tamar	She sees/tastes that her enterprise thrives; Her lamp never goes out at night	Verse 18
<u>י</u> Yael	She extends her hands to the distaff Her palms support the spindle	Verse 19
<u>א</u> The Widow from Tsarefat/ Naomi	She spreads out her palm to the poor; She extends her hands to the needy	Verse 20
<u>ר</u> Rahab	She does not fear for her household In the face of snow, For her entire household is dressed in crimson.	Verse 21
<u>ב</u> Bathsheva	She makes bedspreads for herself; Her clothing is linen and purple.	Verse 22
<u>מ</u> Michal	Her husband is prominent in the city gates, As he sits among the elders of the land.	Verse 23
<u>ח</u> Hatslelponi Samson's mother	She makes cloth and sells it, And offers a sash to the merchant.	Verse 24
<u>ע</u> Elisheba	She is clothed in strength and majesty; She joyfully awaits the final day.	Verse 25
<u>ש</u> Serach Bat Asher	She opens her mouth in wisdom And a teaching /Tora of kindness is on her tongue	Verse 26
<u>א</u> Ovadiya's wife	She oversees the ways of her household And never eats the bread of idleness	Verse 27
<u>ר</u> The Wealthy Wife of Shunem	Her children rise to declare her happy; Her husband praises her.	Verse 28
<u>ר</u> Ruth	Many women have shown valor,	Verse 29

But you surpass them all.

ו Vashti/Ruth

Grace is deceptive, beauty is illusory;
A God-fearing woman is to be praised.

Verse 30

ת Esther/Ruth

Extol her for the fruit of her hand,
And in the city gates let her works praise her.¹⁵

Verse 31

Unlike most of the poetic passages sung at the Shabbat meal table *אשת חיל*, A Women of Valor, is not a medieval Hebrew composition but a piece taken straight out of the Bible. Recited every Friday night before Kiddush, these concluding verses to the Book of Proverbs (Proverbs 31:10-31) were given their new context on Shabbat by the kabbalists of Safed in the 16th century. Before beginning their Friday night meal with the wine of Kiddush, these mystics felt it necessary to sing the praises of “a woman of valor” found in this biblical acrostic poem.

Why sing this specific song at this particular juncture of the meal? There have been those who see *אשת חיל* as a song to be sung by the husband to his wife, praising her for preparing such a festive meal. Others have viewed this poem as welcoming the Shechina, the female aspect of God’s divine presence, or welcoming the Shabbat bride and would therefore have all present at the meal sing *אשת חיל*. However, in reality, from the mystic’s point of view all these images are one: loving one’s life partner prepares one for the closeness of God’s presence and love on Shabbat. Just as the bride in *L’cha Dodi* is a metaphor with multi-layers of meaning, *אשת חיל* on Friday night is not just talking about any one woman.

Not all Jews in very recent history -mystical metaphors notwithstanding - have been enamored with the description of the “ideal” woman described in Proverbs 31. One group of Jewish women in the early 1980’s not satisfied with the classical text composed a modern re-write. Instead of the opening words of *אשת חיל* *A woman of valor - who can find? She is more precious than rubies*, they suggested the following re-wording: *A woman of valor - find yourself! You are worth more than rubies*.¹⁶ Since then others have gone on to compose “egalitarian” *אשת חיל* /גבור *חיל* (woman/man of valor) pieces using biblical verses to praise both the husband and wife of the house.

¹⁵ This chart is based on 7 midrashic passages or fragments on *אשת חיל* found in *מדרש הגדול בראשית*, *מדרש החפץ*, *בתי מדרשות ב'*, *מדרש משלי*, *ילקוט שמעוני*, *מדרש תדשא* and *גני שכטר א'*. Besides these texts another collection also lists “22 (actually 23) upright women, great in acts of righteousness who were of the Jewish people” without citing any connection to any of the verses of *אשת חיל*. This midrash also lists 9 “pious women, converts to Judaism from all the nations of the world, the most worthy of women”, giving us a sum total of 32 noble women found in the Bible. Among the new names which *מדרש תדשא* adds to the honor rolls of 22 already found in *אשת חיל* are Devorah, Avigail, Chulda, Yehoshava, and the 5 daughters of Tselofchad; and among its second list of pious converts one may add the following 4 notables not mentioned in any of the other midrashim cited - Hagar, Osnat, Shifra and Pua

¹⁶ Women’s Rosh Chodesh group of Congregation Adath Jeshurun, Minneapolis, Minnesota. *Megillat RUTH: Hesed and Hutzpah, A Literary Approach* by Noam Zion

However, singing אשת חיל on Friday night has never been understood in Jewish tradition as simply praise for the “happy homemaker.” In fact, אשת חיל has always been read throughout the ages as more than simply a description of the “ideal” mother and wife. Besides the aforementioned readings of who or what אשת חיל signifies, one can also add the pursuit of wisdom or the journey of the soul. (Both wisdom, חכמה, and the soul, נשמה, are nouns of the feminine gender in Hebrew.) This allegorization of Proverbs 31:10-31 goes back to the Book of Proverbs itself! Throughout the Book of Proverbs divine wisdom is personified as a virtuous woman while a wanton woman represents the enticement of other goals (See Proverbs 7-9).

However, some of the most fascinating associations and intricate (even “modern” sounding) interpretations ever read into these 22 biblical verses are to be found in classical rabbinic literature. In classical rabbinic folklore, there is a whole genre of אשת חיל, מדרשי אשת חיל, different folklore collections that view each one of the 22 verses of אשת חיל as referring to specific biblical heroines. 22 heroines, righteous women! Not all of them even Jewish! No comparable list of men from the Bible exists whatsoever anywhere in rabbinic literature. Unfortunately, all these midrashic honor rolls of אשת חיל are printed in some of the least known, rare volumes of rabbinic folklore and are virtually unknown to most Hebrew and English readers alike.¹⁷ Their time though has come. Jewish feminists have often bemoaned the lack of female role models celebrated in classical Jewish sources, the fate of Jewish woman throughout the ages “written out of history.” These lists, this genre, suggest quite a different, more hopeful picture.¹⁸

These lists may even have been part of the reason why the mystics in Safed chose to sing אשת חיל each Friday night at their Shabbat meal table. Perhaps they were aware of these midrashim and saw each of the 22 women celebrated in מדרשי אשת חיל as powerful expressions of the Shechina on this earth. If these kabbalists could create a ritual and liturgy for the holiday of Sukkot where on each night of the festival they invited one of the 7 male shepherds/saviors of Israel to their meal in the sukkah, clearly they could have seen fit to also invite all 22 female manifestations of the Shechina (with her redemptive potential) to their dinner table each Friday night!¹⁹ However, whether they did or not is a moot point. What is important is that these

¹⁷ There does exist though one notable English translation of Midrash Eishet Hayil by Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky, which appeared in Conservative Judaism, Vol. 38(3), Spring 1986.

¹⁸ Deborah Reed Blank writes in Conservative Judaism, Vol. 48(1), Fall 1995 that

[Classic rabbinic] literature is vast, and attitudes reflected in one text may contradict those in another. Moreover, even within a given piece of the literature there are conflicting attitudes. There is, in Judith Hauptman’s words a lack of “univocality” in the tradition. The literature lacks univocality on most issues, and on women’s status as well.

Therefore, if there is one woman “talmudist” mentioned by name in classical rabbinic literature, B’ruriah, one can probably safely assume there were more like her. Especially since B’ruriah is the one woman from Talmudic times singled out as the example of an אשת חיל (Midrash Mishlei Chapter 31)! Archeological finds, ancient inscriptions and texts such as מדרשי אשת חיל suggest a needed re-evaluation of our present day understanding of the role of women during the time of the Talmud.

¹⁹ The Kabbalists viewed the Ushpizin as also corresponding to the accessible first 7 of the 10 sefirot. These sefirot, the basic numbers from 1-10, combined with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet represent the “32 paths of wisdom,” the essence of all human symbolic, “mystical,” language.

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midrashim are part of a long literary tradition of how Jews have always read אשת חיל and they should therefore be part of the rich associations we bring to our “soul-singing” of אשת חיל each Friday night. אשת חיל viewed today through the prism of these midrashim can then become a powerful ode to “unsung heroines,” in which we regain/re-connect with our past, working towards a future redemption on Shabbat Kodesh.

Rabbi Acha taught: Whoever weds a worthy woman - it is as if he has fulfilled the entire Torah from the beginning to the very end... Therefore, A Woman of Valor was written from aleph to tav [in an acrostic from a to z]; and all generations are only redeemed by virtue of the righteous women in each generation. As it is written: “God remembers His lovingkindness and faithfulness to the House of Israel (Psalms 95:9).” It is not written in the verse ‘the children of Israel’ [literally the sons of Israel] but rather ‘the House of Israel.’ - Midrash Zuta -Ruth 4:11

Rabbi Abahu taught: There were twenty-two righteous women in the world....And who were these twenty-two righteous women? - They were the women whom King Solomon praised in the Biblical passage אשת חיל A Woman of Valor. - Midrash Hagadol-Genesis 23:1

When reading the above selections from classical rabbinic literature one must take into account that Rabbis Acha and Abahu were neither vocal feminists or rabid misogynists. They had no hidden or open agenda to create an honor listing of great women in biblical history. How then did this unique tradition, which reads into the biblical text of a woman of valor the achievements of at least 22 individual women, develop? The Rabbis of old were primarily concerned with understanding the Bible, explaining away seemingly contradictory or problematic words or passages in order to recapture a coherent sacred text. The passage of A Woman of Valor Proverbs 31:10-31 posed such a “problem” for them, needing re-interpretation because of the following opening 9 verses of Proverbs chapter 31 preceding it:

1. The words of Lemuel, king of Masa, with which his mother admonished him:
2. No, my son! No, O son of my womb! No, O son of my vows!
3. Do not give your strength to women, your vigor to those who destroy kings.
4. Wine is not for kings, O Lemuel; not for kings to drink, nor any strong drink for princes,
5. Lest they drink and forget what has been ordained, and infringe on the rights of the poor,
6. Give strong drink to the hapless and wine to the embittered.
7. Let them drink and forget their poverty, and put their troubles out of mind.
8. Speak up for the dumb, for the rights of all the unfortunate.
9. Speak up, judge righteously, champion the poor and the needy.

These verses seem to have no necessary connection with the acrostic poem A Woman of Valor which immediately follows them: verses 1-9 have a mother admonish her son King Lemuel to stay away from all women, while verses 10-31 are a paean of praise for an ideal woman of valor. Another problem for our coherent sacred text: who is this King Lemuel or his mother for that matter? The Book of Proverbs is clearly identified in chapter 1, verse 1 as “the proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of

Israel.” Yet the last chapter of Proverbs mentions a mysterious King Lemuel who is cited nowhere else in the Bible. These are the materials which make for midrash, the search for the coherent sacred text.

Midrash Mishlei 31 comes up with a solution to these seemingly unrelated passages placed side by side in chapter 31 of Proverbs. The mysterious Lemuel is identified as one of the names of King Solomon who is chided by his mother Bathsheba for spending too much time with his wife and thereby neglecting his religious duties. This reading of the text has Bathsheba, even though she is a woman herself, generalizing that all women are the ruin of men. Apparently, she was convinced no woman was good enough for her son the king. Following the aforementioned tradition taught by Rabbi Abahu we can envision Solomon disagreeing with his mother and singing the praises of righteous women throughout biblical history -before, during and after his lifetime.²⁰

Our second rabbinic source quoting Rabbi Acha from Midrash Zuta on the Book of Ruth suggests yet another possible piece in this mother-son debate. Ruth the Moabitess²¹ was very much a part of Solomon’s argument in Proverbs 31 against the mother queen Bathsheba. Solomon’s ancestor and Ruth’s husband Boaz is one of many individuals in the Bible cited as גבור חיל the male equivalent in Hebrew for אשת חיל. There are some 36 references to this term in the Bible, but only a scant 3 references to אשת חיל and only one woman specifically designated as אשת חיל - Solomon’s great, great grandmother Ruth (see Ruth 3:11), the woman of valor par excellence. Perhaps part of Solomon’s rebuttal to his mother’s accusation that women were the source of all drink and debauchery, the ruin of even the greatest of men, was to retort with the example of his ancestress Ruth who began her career as a promiscuous pagan Moabitess. In all the midrashim on A Woman of Valor, verse 29 of the acrostic “Many women have shown valor but you surpass them all” is always and only applied to Ruth (see chart).

Ruth then is the pagan who surpasses them all. Ruth who turns away from a life of wantonness to piety is proof - a prime example -of the potential of all women, of all people, to change for the better, a refutation of the queen-mother’s extremely negative judgment of her own sex. Ruth’s lifespan also apparently surpasses them all. The midrash in Ruth Rabba 2:2 “documents” that the final special event in this great woman’s long life was to view her great, great grandson sitting in judgement. “Ruth the Moabitess,” we are told, “did not die until she witnessed Solomon, the son of her son, sitting in judgment over the case of the two prostitutes (I Kings 3:16-28).”

²⁰ The midrash definitely transforms Solomon into the great defender of women in its search for the sacred coherent text. With his 1000 wives King Solomon was clearly an admirer of noble women (see I Kings 11:3). Or alternatively, since Solomon was granted great wisdom by God (see I Kings 5:9) and Solomon in the Book of Proverbs personifies wisdom as a virtuous woman (see Proverbs 3:3-18;8), it was only natural that he assumes this role at the end of his book.

²¹ The rabbis of old were quick to point out that although the Torah clearly states “...no Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord; none of his descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall be admitted...(Deut. 23:4)”, Moabite does not include any Moabitess; and clearly then the female of the species could bring about the redemption of Israel. This “innovation of the Law” conveniently was brought to light during the time of Boaz and Ruth (see Ruth Rabba 2:9;4:1).

Why does the midrash single-out this one event? When Ruth first appears on the biblical stage she is one of two promiscuous Moabite women. Paired with Orpa,²² Naomi's other widowed daughter-in-law, Ruth is not expected in any way to bring a future or even offspring to her deceased husband's family. But she does just that and more. Perhaps the midrash is intimating some connection between Orpa and Ruth and the two prostitutes requiring Solomonic wisdom. Their judgment can be seen as a closing of a circle for a woman who begins her biblical career as one of two "loose" pagan women but at the end of her days lives to see her great, great grandson sit in judgment over the future offspring of one of two "loose women." She has surpassed them all, her humble "licentious beginnings to show there is hope, life and potential for all. What better argument against his mother's misogynous tirade than Solomon's own ancestress - a morally loose Moabite woman who becomes the mother of Israel's redemption.

Not all the unsung heroines found in *מדרשי אשת חיל* are as pro-active as Ruth. Some like Yocheved and Hatslelponi²³ are apparently only important to the authors of these texts as "the mothers of" Moshe and Samson respectively, rather than by virtue of their own deeds. Others such as the "the widow from Tsarefat," "the wealthy wife from Shunem" and "Ovadya's wife" remain nameless and are cited only because they served the needs, housed and fed, the prophets of Israel - Elijah, Elisha and their comrades. But there are others among these unsung heroines of *מדרשי אשת חיל* who are portrayed in classic rabbinic literature as quite the feminist activist.

One of the most surprising portrayals in these texts is that of Vashti, Esther's predecessor as queen of the Persians and Medes! Elsewhere in rabbinic literature Vashti is hardly remembered as a paradigm of virtue,²⁴ but in some *מדרשי אשת חיל* the penultimate verse of a Woman of Valor is applied to her. "Grace is deceptive, beauty is illusory; A God-fearing woman is to be praised (Proverbs 31:30)." Vashti is to be praised because she stood up to King Achashveirosh, because she would not allow

²² The rabbis in their midrashic re-telling of the Book of Ruth had no great expectations for pagan Moabite women such as Orpa and Ruth. "That same night" the rabbis emphasize that Orpa left the positive influence of her mother-in-law Naomi, she had sex with no less than "one hundred men." In true ironic fashion we are told that the future foe of Ruth's descendent David - Goliath of Gath (literally "a wine press") was born as a result of that night, "because all men pressed his mother like a wine press (gath)." (See Ruth Rabba 2:20; Sotah 42b)

²³ Samson's mother in the Bible is only referred to as "the wife of Manoach" (see Judges 13); but as Isaak Heinemann points out in his classic work *דרכי האגדה* the rabbis of classical midrash often identified unnamed characters in the Bible with others already named in the Book of books. In Bamidbar Rabbah 10:5 and Baba Batra 91 Samson's mother is identified as Hatslelponi, a woman mentioned in the genealogies of the tribe of Judah (I Chronicles 4:3). Interesting is Louis Ginzberg's reading of the text from Bamidbar Rabbah in which he "explains this name as "The shadow of God (i.e., the angel) turned to her" (and not to her husband), as it was her piety and virtue which were rewarded with a son like Samson (Legends of the Jews, vol. 6, pg. 205)."

²⁴ In most midrashim Vashti is portrayed as the evil daughter of King Nebuchednezer who married the usurper Achashveirosh, a woman who forced Jewish women to labor for her in the nude on the Sabbath. Divine justice then causes her downfall "on the seventh day when the king was merry with wine (Esther 1:10)" and in likewise perverse fashion demands Vashti "do her work" for him by appearing in the nude for his drunken courtiers' perusal (see Megillah 12b). Another version of this midrash found in Esther Rabbah 3:14 seems more in accord with Vashti as she is viewed in

מדרשי אשת חיל. There Vashti is the aristocratic wise princess who is trying to drive some sense into the head of her foolish drunken crass commoner king of a husband.

her beauty, body,²⁵ to be paraded before the king's guests as a sexual object for their debauchery. Although more often than not portrayed as the villainess in rabbinic literature, Vashti in at least two versions of מדרש אשת חיל refuses the king's orders suffering dire consequences because she is that "God-fearing woman" who "is to be praised!"²⁶

Vashti, however, does not stand alone. Among the 22 women of the Biblical period whose heroic deeds are alluded to in מדרש אשת חיל there are others who were willing to stand up against a temporal power for the sake of Heaven. Three in particular - Bitya, Miriam and Serach - not only prove that there are great women behind every great man but also to the right, to the left and in front of him. Moshe Rabeinu may well have been the greatest of the prophets of Israel, but when one peruses the midrashic fragments written about these three women, it becomes very clear that Moshe would never have gotten "there" at all without their courage, vision and support.

According to rabbinic tradition two of these three women who guaranteed Moshe's role as redeemer were even granted eternal life as reward for their role in human history. The midrashic text Derech Eretz Zuta (1:18) states "Nine entered paradise alive." The most well-known in this list of nine is of course the ever present Elijah the prophet; however among the nine are also 2 women, 2 unsung heroines, Bitya daughter of Pharaoh and Serach the daughter of Asher whose redemptive acts span the ages. The daughter of Pharaoh in Exodus 2:5 who drew Moshe from the Nile has no name in the Torah, but the rabbis of old found her not only a voice and a name but a fitting mate in another verse elsewhere in the Bible, in I Chronicles 4:18 – "These were the sons of Bitya daughter of Pharaoh whom Mered married." On this verse we find the following midrashic expansion in Leviticus Rabbah (1:3):

²⁵ Classic rabbinic midrash reads the king's request "to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing a royal crown, to display her beauty (Esther 1:11)" quite literally: wearing a royal crown and nothing else. This interpretation of a decadent "partying" society fits in well with the so-called "beauty" contest described in Esther 2:13-14.

²⁶ In both Midrash HaHefetz (Genesis), page 160, and Batei Midrashot Volume II, page 150, Vashti is given an entire verse to herself, clearly placing her in the Biblical women hall of fame. Unfortunately, these texts were not brought to Mary Gendler's attention when she wrote her classic piece "The Vindication of Vashti." In her article Gendler contends that

These legends [classic rabbinic midrash] are very significant, for they reflect popular and rabbinic feeling. And it is very clear that in no way was Vashti's refusal to debase herself seen by succeeding Jews as noble or courageous. Quite the contrary. The Rabbis must have found themselves in somewhat of a bind initially. On the one hand they couldn't possibly approve of the demand Ahasuarus makes on Vashti. On the other hand, to support her would be to invite female disobedience in other situations, an idea they apparently could not tolerate. They solve this by condemning Ahasuarus as foolish and by creating legends whereby Vashti is shown as getting exactly what she deserves.

- Response, vol. 18, 1973, pp. 156-157

The two midrashim cited beforehand, however, suggest another picture entirely. Then again, things are no longer "very clear" in either direction. Another midrash on Woman of Valor in Midrash HaGadol is apparently uncomfortable with the tradition of applying the entire verse of Proverbs 31:30 to Vashti and divides the award amongst two recipients, leaving Vashti with the booty prize.

"Grace is deceptive, Beauty is illusory" – this refers to Vashti

"A God-fearing woman is to be praised" – this refers to Esther

- Midrash HaGadol Genesis, pg. 363

Rabbi Yehoshua of Sichnin taught in the name of Rabbi Levi: The Holy One said to Bitya daughter of Pharaoh, “Moshe was not your son and yet you called him your son; so too though you are not my daughter, I will call you my daughter.” As it is written “And these are the sons of Bitya” - Bat ya (a daughter of God), “whom Mered married”- another name for Caleb... Just as he (Caleb/Mered) rebelled (marad) against the counsel of his fellow scouts [their evil report of the Land of Israel], so too did she rebel against the counsel of her father [to drown in the Nile all male babies born to the Hebrew slaves]. Therefore let one rebel marry another rebel ...Just as he saved the flock, she saved the shepherd.

According to Leviticus Rabbah, Bitya by denying her biological father in order to save a helpless child (the future savior of Israel) acquires a new father, the Divine Father, and becomes the earliest paradigm we have in the Bible of any righteous proselyte whether male or female. As early as the 3rd century CE this transformation or even perhaps transfiguration of Bitya is portrayed pictorially in the synagogue panels of Dura Europus where a nude Bitya standing in the waters of the Nile holds triumphantly the baby Moshe. Hardly a Victorian representation, these panels suggest the centrality of Bitya's conversion to the whole story of the redemption from Egypt. Not only is her immersion in the Nile seen in midrashic traditions as part of Bitya's conversion process, her mikveh as it were, but also as a fulfillment of a divine prophesy granted solely to her.²⁷ Bitya is not only a proselyte but a prophetess. Commenting on the Woman of Valor verse - Proverbs 31:13 – we have the following text in Midrash Hagadol (Genesis 23:1):

“She rises while it is still night and supplies provisions for her household, the daily fare of her maidens (Proverbs 31:13).” This refers to Bitya daughter of Pharaoh who foresaw by the Holy Spirit that in the future she would raise the redeemer of Israel. Every evening and morning she and her handmaids would stroll by the Nile; and when Moshe came into her hands she rejoiced, for God had given her what she had requested, as it is written, “Then she opened (the basket) and saw the boy (Ex. 2:6).

“The boy” refers to the one foretold by prophecy. However, not everyone is willing to act on prophecy, on the vision granted as a gift, to act on his or her convictions against the powers that be. Therefore Bitya's eternal reward and destiny are very fittingly tied and guaranteed in rabbinic literature by the continued existence of the Jewish people. “The Holy One said: Since you have brought redemption to Israel, bringing them out to life, I will prolong your life with Israel... I will surely reward this woman who left her father's kingdom to cleave to them (Kallah Rabbati 3:23).” As long as there is an Israel, there will always be a Bitya and others hopefully like her.

²⁷ This iconography of Bitya bathing continues to appear in both Jewish and Christian illuminated manuscripts during the middle ages. (See Sarit Shalev-Einai's article on Pharaoh's daughter in Rimonim volume 5, 1997.) Just as the Gospels modeled their redeemer after Moses, Bitya then may be viewed as a paradigm for Mary. For an in-depth study of variations on the motif of the barren woman who becomes mother to a hero/redeemer in Israel see Robert Alter's article “How Convention Helps Us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-Scene (Proof texts, volume 3, 1983).”

Serach the daughter of Asher, the second immortal heroine found in rabbinic literature, plays a very different role in the career of Moshe and the redemption of Israel. She gains the gift of immortality just before the Jewish people descend into Egypt at the behest of Joseph in order to survive the coming years of famine. When all the adult men of the family were afraid to break the news to Jacob that Joseph was still alive, it took a young Serach, Jacob's favorite granddaughter "to do a man's job." According to midrashic tradition because this young woman had the courage to speak out and "go where no man had gone before," she received the blessing of eternal life.

Our Rabbis taught: The brothers said to themselves "if we're the ones to tell him first that Joseph is still alive, he might die from the shock." What did they do? They told Serach: "You go and tell our father Jacob that Joseph is alive and well in Egypt. What did Serach do? She waited until Jacob was deep in prayer (reciting the amida) and shouted in wonderment: Joseph is still alive in Egypt and he has two sons –Ephraim and Menasseh!! (Midrash Hagadol on Genesis 45:26)

Afraid to break the news to their elderly father too suddenly, they sent Asher's daughter, Serach, since she knew how to play the harp in a soothing manner. They sat her near Jacob and she sang repeatedly: "My uncle Joseph is alive and rules over the land of Egypt"...Jacob responded to her song: "My child, may death never rule over you for you have brought my spirit back to life." (Sefer HaYashar on VaYigash)

Whether it was through youthful exuberance or in the style of David the sweet singer of Israel, according to these fairly late midrashic sources, without Serach's intervention the family of Jacob might never be reunited with Joseph in Egypt. It was also as a result of Serach's intervention that the elders of Israel believed Moshe was the embodiment of God's long awaited redemption from slavery promised so long ago to Abraham in Genesis 15. The Jewish people would also never have left Egypt without Serach. They had promised to take Joseph's bones with them to the Promised Land. Without his bones, they could not in good conscience leave Egypt, but no one living remembered where they had been interred. No one except Serach: for she had been there when Joseph died.

Serach²⁸ is the female equivalent of Elijah the prophet, appearing throughout the ages whenever needed, but she is more: the wise woman of Israel, possessing ancient wisdom by virtue of her age and experience. Paralleling the many tales of Elijah found among Eastern European Jews, the Jews of Persia and Gerusinia have miraculous tales of Serach Bat Asher, the protector of her people in their time of need. In one of these tales Serach appears to an evil king oppressing as the Jews first as a doe in an Artemis/Diana mode and then is transformed into "a beautiful maiden, a warrior woman with her female soldiers." Perhaps this warrior woman image of Serach goes back to another possible translation of the Hebrew term אִשַּׁת חַיִל: the same compound noun more often translated in English as a "woman of valor" can also be understood as a "warrior woman." However, whether the image of Serach as one of the unsung 22 heroines in Proverbs 31 is that of a female David warrior-musician or of a wandering wise woman in the style of Elijah, it is no wonder that Jewish

²⁸ The many pieces of the "Serach legend" scattered throughout the ages are artfully brought together in Marc Bregman's monograph *Serach Bar Asher: Biblical Origins, Ancient Aggadah and Contemporary Folklore*, University of Arizona Bilgay Lectures, 1996.

feminists are rediscovering Serach when trying to create a ceremony for the birth of a baby girl which will parallel the powerful imagery found at a Brit Milah for the birth of a boy. If Elijah is present at each Brit Milah, Serach is a fine model for each newborn daughter of Israel. She was the precursor of the redemption from Egypt: she was always there for the Jewish people – before, during and after the lifetime of Moshe.

The Serach of midrash can also be seen within a 3-generation schema of women of valor who helped mold the mind of the future leader of the Jewish people. She is the grandmother figure in Moshe's life whose wisdom and presence are there for him during the turning points in his career. Bitya is the maternal figure in Moshe's life who will guide him in his dual role of prophet and redeemer, iconoclastic destroyer of an oppressive regime. In rabbinic folklore she follows the classic Biblical motif of a barren woman who is prepared through divine prophecy to be the mother of a future hero-leader of Israel.

However, grand maternal and maternal perspectives are not enough in the making of such a messianic figure. What is needed is the perspective of a peer, an equal, a sibling, an older sister to act as a control and foil in the development of Moshe. Miriam in rabbinic literature is more than an older sister; she is Moshe's equal. We read in Deuteronomy Rabba 7: "why did our sages specify that the minimum unit of Torah read in public can not be less than 3 verses? – To correspond to the 3 patriarchs, Abraham Isaac and Jacob. Or to correspond to the triumvirate of Moshe, Aaron and Miriam because it was through these 3 that the Torah was given." This midrash seeing Miriam as an equal partner may have the following Biblical verses from Micah (6:3-4) in mind as a precedent: "O my people what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moshe, Aaron and Miriam." Miriam is a prophet in her own right as seen by the Biblical verse depicting her role at the splitting of the sea: "Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand (Exodus 15:20)." But what did she prophesy? Miriam is mentioned by name, mostly in passing, in only 3 places in the entire Torah. Miriam's voice, prophetic or not, is basically lost to us or would have been lost if not for the rabbis of old. Rather than see Miriam's message as a one time shot of prophetic ecstasy, singing and dancing at the splitting of the sea, in the mode of Saul's prophetic frenzy found in I Samuel 10:9-13, the rabbis saw Miriam as privy to God's divine plan of redemption before its inception. Similar to their depiction of Bitya, Miriam in the rabbis' eyes also knew though the gift of prophecy that her baby brother was to be the long awaited redeemer. But her role was not to raise the child to greatness, but to ensure his very conception. Without Miriam there might never had been a Moshe at all.

In response to the verse quoted above "Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister..." the sages of old asked rightfully but was she not also Moshe's sister? Their conclusion: the thrust of Miriam's prophecy was given to her when she was only Aaron's sister, before Moshe's birth. In fact, the thrust of her prophecy was that her parents must have a third child, for only through the continued union of her parents would God bring a deliverer to Israel. According to midrashic traditions Amram, the leader of the Hebrew slaves, Miriam's father, despaired so much when learning of Pharaoh decree to kill each new male born babe, that he divorced his wife, seeing no reason to perpetuate a people doomed to extinction. Miriam then in true prophetic

tradition admonished her father and all the other men who followed his practice, shaming them to re-take their wives so that a redeemer would be born to Israel. The rabbis of old found hints to this expanded version of the Biblical story in the very first 4 verses of Exodus chapter 2.

A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son...she got a wicker basket for him...she put the child into it...And his sister stood by from afar... - Exodus 2:1-4

The birth of Moshe as presented in the beginning of Exodus is sketchy indeed. His parents are wed and then he is born. He seems to be an only child when his basket is put in the Nile until we're told "And his sister stood by from afar." Clearly something went on before this marriage or re-marriage of Levites – Pharaoh's evil decree and Amram's reaction, divorcing his wife in despair.

One of the 22 verses of A Women of Valor aptly then applies to Miriam: for she in true Jeremiah fashion opposed the authorities of her generation and forced them to see a different reality (according to some midrashim at the gutsy age of 6 years old).

"She girds her loins with strength" (Proverbs 31:17). - This refers to Miriam. When her father separated from her mother, she said to him, "Your decrees are harsher than Pharaoh's: he decreed only against the male children, but you decree against both male and female. He is evil and thus there is some doubt whether his decrees will come to pass, while you are righteous and 'therefore you shall decree and it shall come to pass for you (Job 22:28).' He immediately took back his wife, but when she gave birth to Moshe and set him afloat on the Nile, Miriam's mother slapped her face and said to her, "Where's your prophecy?" At that instant, "His sister stood by from afar (Ex. 2:4)". She stood by her Prophecy. - Midrash Hagadol on Genesis 23:1

However, Miriam's mission is not only to be a harbinger of messianic hope in her childhood years, following the paradigm of Elijah at the end of days. She is also a powerful prophet in her own right as an adult who will even stand up to Moshe Rabbeinu, the father of all prophets, if she sees his actions opposing her redemptive message of union and reunion, the reproducing of new life. After commanding the Jewish people in preparation for the revelation at Mount Sinai "go not near a woman (Exodus 19:15)" Moshe concluded the following in chapter 2 of Avot D'Rabbi Natan: If as regards Israel – who were only called before God for just one occasion to receive the Ten Commandments at mount Sinai – such restrictions of sanctification apply, then I clearly – who am on constant call before God to receive His revelations every single hour of the day – must observe a constant vigilance of celibacy and stay away from my wife! Miriam was full righteous fury when she learned of Moshe's behavior towards his wife Tzipporah as we see in the following midrashic fragment:

Tzippora was conversing with her sister-in-law Miriam when the Holy Spirit (power of prophecy) descended on Eldad and Medad (see Numbers 11) and all were rejoicing. Said Miriam: "Happy are the children of these two and happy are their wives!" Tipper responded: "Happy are their children but Oy (woe) to their wives." "Why?" asked Miriam. Tzippora confided in her: "From the time the Holy Spirit bonded with your

brother, I have not been able to be his wife.” Miriam then went and told Aaron and they both had words for that righteous one... - Eisenstein’s Otzar HaMidrashim, page 138

From another version of this midrash in Avot D’Rabbi Natan chapter 9 it is clear that what’s at stake here is more than just the conjugal rights of Tzipora, but whether sexuality is part of holiness and spirituality:

Miriam said to Aaron: “God’s revealed word was upon me, but I never kept away from my Husband.” Aaron said: “God’s revealed word was upon me, but I never kept away from my wife. And God’s revealed word was also upon our fathers of old and they never kept away from their wives!”

Miriam’s words for Moshe we are told in Midrash Tanchuma (Parshat Metzora 6) “were only out of true affection for him and were never spoken to his face and her intention was only to re-unite her brother with his wife.” Reuniting husband and wife, Miriam’s mission and message was therefore consistent throughout her career as found in the rabbinic retellings of Exodus 2 and Numbers 12, beginning with her parents’ generation and ending with that of Moshe and Tzipora. Monasticism has never been a primary way to the holy in Judaism. Perhaps in large part this is thanks to Miriam’s definition of redemption, her voice of celebration.

According to our sages old Miriam’s vision of prophecy was not limited to the splitting of the sea, but it did represent nonetheless a high point in her career. *“That which a (recently emancipated) female slave saw at the splitting of the sea was greater than even all the visions of Isaiah, Ezekiel and all the other prophets of Israel.”* Though hardly the feminist, Rabbi Eliezer’s seemingly enigmatic hyperbole may not necessarily be using the image of an Israelite handmaiden to denote the lowest of the low, the one least expected to receive a vision from God. Perhaps the handmaiden-slave he refers to here is Miriam, the only person ever given the direct title of prophet in the Torah. No wonder Miriam broke into ecstatic song and dance at the water. The waters, which had killed so many young sons of Israel and almost claimed her baby brother in his basket on the Nile, those same waters now at the Red Sea were turned against their oppressors. Everyone had long ago doubted her prophecy, but now she was vindicated: the unthinkable had indeed happened. She had seen beyond the veil and now understood in full a part of God’s divine plan for Israel.

Miriam’s vision at the sea was the vision of all Israel. She at that moment of ecstatic song and dance can be seen as the embodiment of all Israel. Therefore the verse applied to Serach in midrashei eishet chayil can also be applied to Miriam and the entire people in Midrash Exodus Rabba 23:4.

As it is written: “She opens her mouth in wisdom, the teaching of loving-kindness is on her tongue (Proverbs 31:26).” From the time that the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world until Israel stood at the sea we find no one singing a song of praise to God until Israel. God created Adam and Adam sang no song. God saved Abraham from the fiery furnace and the war between the kings and Abraham sang no song. So too God saved Isaac from his father’s knife and Isaac sang no song. God saved Jacob from the angel, from Esau and the people of Shechem

and Jacob sang no song. However, when God split the sea for Israel, they immediately broke out in a song of praise to God as it is written “Then Moses and the children of Israel sang a song.” That is to say “She [Israel] opens her mouth in wisdom, the teaching of loving-kindness in on her tongue.” Said the Holy One, blessed be He: “These are the ones I’ve been expecting for so long.”

From the time that the Holy One created the world until Miriam and the children of Israel, no one had thought to sing a song of praise to God. Women of Valor are also given credit in other passages in classic rabbinic literature as spiritual trailblazers for humanity as shown in the following two statements found in the Babylonian Talmud:

Rabbi Yochanan taught in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai: From the day that the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world there was no one who gave thanks to Him, until Leah, as it is written, “Now will I give thanks to the Lord.” (Genesis 29:35) - B’rachot 6a

Rabbi Elazar taught: From the day that the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world, there was no one who called Him [the Lord of] Hosts until Hanna (see

I Samuel 1:11). Hanna said to the Holy One, blessed be He: Lord of the Universe,

since You have created all those hosts of hosts in Your world, would it be too difficult for you to give me one son?! - Brachot 31a-31b

Hannah in the Bible is not just another barren woman who gives birth to a future hero of Israel. She is a paradigm of poignant pleading with God, the petitional prayer of the broken hearted and contrite of spirit. However in Rabbi Elazar’s re-telling in the Talmud Hannah is transformed into a different type of petitioner, arguing with God in the tradition of Abraham or Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. But whether as a gutsy demand or as a humble plea, wrestling with God or begging God, Hanna is the model in classical tradition from whom we learn how to pray the amida, the prayer of petition in Jewish liturgy.

Rabbi Hamnuna taught: How many important laws can be learnt from these verses relating to Hanna. Now Hanna, she spoke in her heart (I Samuel 1:13). From this we learn that one who prays must direct his heart. Only her lips moved (Ibid). From this we learn that he who prays must frame the words distinctly with his lips. But her voice could not be heard (Ibid). From this we learn that it is forbidden to raise one’s voice in the Tefillah. – Brachot 31a

Hanna’s voice was not heard then but whenever a Jew prays the amida in the morning quoting beforehand the verse from Isaiah – “Our redeemer the Lord of Hosts is His name (Isaiah 47:4)” – her voice is heard. We are reminded of her special approach or approaches to God and God’s name.

Hanna, Leah, Miriam, all included on the honor roll of Midrashei Eishet Chayil, were pioneers of prayer- prayers of petition, thanksgiving and praise - along with one other Michal, daughter of King Saul and first wife of King David. She may not come off as

the most sympathetic or likeable of characters in the Bible (see II Samuel 6:12-23), but in classical is considered one of the 22 righteous and set an important precedent in Jewish prayer for all generations. We are told in the Babylonian Talmud that Michal the daughter of Kushi would wear Tefillin and the sages did not attempt to prevent her. - Eruvim 96a

This enigmatic and perhaps anachronistic line in the Talmud has puzzled scholars since the earliest historical evidence we have of tefillin is post-Biblical, from the second Temple period. No less than the great Talmudic Scholar and Jewish folklorist of the first half of the 20th century Professor Louis Ginzberg in his monumental opus *A Commentary on the Palestinian Talmud* (Volume 1, page 289) wrote:

As I conclude my study on this passage I cannot help but comment on what seems to me to be the source of this folk legend that Michal the daughter of King Saul would put on Tefillin: namely, the midrashim on the passage A Woman of Valor found at the end of Proverbs recounting the 22 pious women in world history among whom Michal is listed. These midrashim found extant in Midrash Mishlei and in an expanded version in Midrash Hagadol (Genesis) all apply the biblical verse "Her husband is prominent in the city gates" (Proverbs 31:32) to Michal. However, it is very plausible that there were others who expounded the verse "She is clothed in strength and majesty: She joyfully awaits the final day" (Proverbs 37:25) to this pious woman who did not give birth to a child until the day of her death (according to Sanhedrin 21a). Therefore the 2nd half of the verse "she joyfully awaits the final day" can be applied to Michal who died happily in labor. Whereas the 1st part of the verse "She is clothed in strength and majesty" can be interpreted as referring to Tefillin, for כח (strength) in rabbinic literature is synonymous with תפילין (B'rachot 6a). This, then, is the basis for asserting in the Talmud that Michal would put on (or "wear"/clothed as is the more common expression in the Yerushalmi) Tefillin: the biblical verse, as perhaps was interpreted by the sages, "She is clothed in strength and majesty."

Such a midrashic text as reconstructed by Professor Ginzberg has yet to be found among the many manuscript fragments extant today, but time will tell. Nevertheless, Michal's precedent was there in the Talmud to inspire later generations of Jewish woman in 13th century Franco-Germany and Renaissance Italy to be the first women in recent recorded Jewish history to wear Tefillin.²⁹ Such God-fearing women in the words of Eishet Chayil are truly to be praised (Proverbs 31:30).

Indeed, as our Biblical poem *The Woman of Valor* asserts "many women have shown valor (Proverbs 31:29);" and their voice has not been lost thanks to the many

²⁹ Contrary to popular belief, there is no evidence that the daughters of Rashi wore Tefillin. The first mention of women in Franco-Germany donning Tefillin is found a century later in the writings of one of the last of the Tosafists Rabbi Avigdor HaTsarfati. Also see Alexander Marx's piece in the 1945 Jubilee Volume honoring Professor Louis (page 294 of the Hebrew section) for documentation of women wearing Tefillin in Renaissance Italy.

midrashic expansions of Proverbs 31 found in classical rabbinic literature. Perhaps this rabbinic fascination with Eishet Chayil is due to its unique position in the Bible as the only long poetic passage praising a specific sector or type of person among humanity rather than typically praising God. For this reason some modern scholars have seen Proverbs 31 as an example among others in the Bible where male copyists may have preserved creative literary genres typically found among the oral traditions of women in human societies throughout the generations.³⁰ Proverbs 31 viewed in this light may then be seen as another example of how the rabbis of old preserved the voices of women by including this poem in the Biblical canon. Some modern Bible scholars³¹ comparing the preserved Hebrew text of a Woman of Valor with its ancient Greek version preserved in the Septuagint have even concluded that the one mention of God's name in this poem (in its penultimate verse, verse 30) was a later addition, added to an independent literary unit which once was originally a paean of praise to the successful Jewish businesswomen of ancient times. Whether or not one accepts these recent theories concerning the origins of Eishet Chayil, clearly this poem of praise to women is a unique creative piece in the Bible. So unique in fact that the some of the rabbis of old in their own investigations of this text concerning its authorship went in the exact opposite direction of modern scholarship.

Believe it or not King Solomon is not necessarily the author of this ode to noble women found at the end of Proverbs even according to some extant midrashim on אִשֶּׁת חַיִּל. In the medieval midrashic anthology Yalkut Shimoni (Mishlei 31) the authorship of אִשֶּׁת חַיִּל is given over to none other than the Holy One Blessed be He! "Rabbi Yitzchak Bar Nechemiya taught: Just as the Holy One Blessed be He gave the Torah to Israel by means of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, so too does he praise worthy women by means of these 22 letters." Lest we misconstrue that God only uses Solomon's acrostic text in Proverbs 31:10-31 to praise noble women (which would be more than a good justification for chanting אִשֶּׁת חַיִּל before kiddush on Friday night!), an old manuscript of Midrash Mishlei develops this motif of God's authorship of אִשֶּׁת חַיִּל even further and gives it a very specific context.³²

Know that on the moment the woman misled Adam, the ministering angels said to the Holy One: Master of the Universe, why did you create woman? It is on her account that death has come into the world. Not only that, but women cause men to stumble and lead them away from revering You!

The Holy one immediately answered them: You don't know what I know, how many beautiful sprouts are planted among them.

³⁰ See Michael Carasik's translation of S. D. Goitein's piece "Women as creators of Biblical Genres" in Proof texts 8 (1988)

³¹ See Alexander Rofe's comments on the Septuagint version of Proverbs 31:30 found in the collection תְּשׁוּרָה לשמואל (ירושלים 2001)

³² I wish to thank Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky for bringing this text (which he cites as Manuscript Parma dated circa 1270) to my attention in his English translation of Midrash Eishet Hayil which appeared in Conservative Judaism, Vol. 38(3), Spring 1986.

*Then the Holy One began to recount to the ministering angels. What did He say to them? -“ A woman of valor who can find?”(Proverbs 31:10)
This refers to...*

Whether Lemuel king of Masa or King Solomon or the Holy One wrote אשת חיל; or whether Lemuel and Solomon are just names for the Holy One³³ who wrote אשת חיל - what we have here is a very appropriate setting and context for singing אשת חיל on Friday night. After singing Shalom Aleichem³⁴ at the Friday night meal table, welcoming and bidding farewell to the angels who accompany a Jew home from the synagogue each week, God's response to the angels' misogyny אשת חיל is sung.

According to rabbinic lore not only were Adam and Eve created on the sixth day of creation but on that same day they ate of the tree and were expelled from paradise.³⁵ They had never seen the sun set before and as the first Shabbat of creation approached they were most likely terrified of the encroaching darkness. Is it not too hard to imagine that the Holy One on that same day after chastising the angels took pity on Adam and Eve and taught them how to light a fire to banish the darkness? God perhaps saw in Eve and her daughters to come great potential and taught them how to kindle the Shabbat candles.

The angels would have preferred women to be as obedient as they are, created in their image with no free will. But neither women nor men were meant to be angels. They are instead God's children striving to bring that which is holy - a bit of light - into a very imperfect world when singing אשת חיל on Shabbat Friday night.

³³ Solomon in Hebrew שלמה is understood in some passages of rabbinic literature as שוה שלום that peace, shalom, is His. In other words Shalom is a name of the Holy One and whenever Solomon or Sh'lomo is written in the Bible, it may be interpreted as referring to God. See Mishna Ta'anit 4:8; Perek HaShalom 11 and Shabbat 10b.

³⁴ A zemer written by Kabbalists of the 17th century based on a passage in the Talmud Shabbat 119b.

³⁵ Avot D'Rabbi Natan Chapter 1.

Eishet Hayil: Praising of a Strong and Accomplished Woman

Edited by Noam Zion

From *A Day Apart: Shabbat at Home*, Educator's Guide

Introduction: The Historical Enigma of *Eishet Hayil*

A. The Biblical “Woman of Valor”

B. Modern Objections and Defenses of *Eishet Hayil*

Introduction: The Historical Enigma of *Eishet Hayil* by Moshe Silberschein and Noam Zion

Unlike most of the poetic passages sung at the Shabbat meal table, *Eishet Hayil* is not a medieval Hebrew composition but a chapter taken straight out of the Bible. Recited every Friday night before Kiddush, these concluding verses to the Book of Proverbs (Proverbs 31:10-31) were given their new context at the table rituals on Shabbat by the kabbalists of Safed in the 16th century.

Why did these mystics feel it necessary to sing this alphabetical Biblical poem at this particular juncture of the meal? Who in fact is meant to recite this poem and for whom?

(1) Some think *Eishet Hayil* is to be sung by the husband to his wife, praising her for preparing such a festive meal.

(2) Others argue that all present at the meal should sing this poem to welcome the *Shekhina*, the female aspect of God's divine presence, or the Shabbat bride just as we sing *Shalom Aleichem* to greet the angels. However, from the mystic's point of view these two images are, in reality, one: showing love to one's life partner prepares one for the closeness of God's feminine presence on Shabbat. On Friday night, when both *L'cha Dodi* and *Eishet Hayil* present the woman as a metaphor with multi-layers of meaning, one's loving attention is not restricted to just one woman.

(3) Still others believe that the object of praise is Torah itself. *Eishet Hayil* may also signify the pursuit of wisdom or the journey of the soul. (Both wisdom, חכמה, and the soul, נשמה, are nouns of the feminine gender in Hebrew.) This allegorization of Proverbs 31:10-31 goes back to the Book of Proverbs itself! The introduction to Proverbs explains that the words of the wise are riddles, proverbs and epigrams that require discerning understanding (Proverbs 1:6) similar to those famous riddles posed by the Queen of Sheba and unraveled by King Solomon to whom the Book of Proverbs is traditionally attributed. Throughout the Book of Proverbs, divine wisdom is personified as a virtuous woman, while a wanton woman represents the enticement of other goals (See Proverbs 7-9).

A. The Biblical “Woman of Valor”

The Proverbial Wise Woman by Moshe Silberschein and Noam Zion

Look how many circuitous paths the Holy One is willing to follow in order to satisfy the Divine desire to hear the conversations of righteous women!

- Talmud Yerushalmi Sotah 21b

The Book of Proverbs not only ends with the praise of the woman of valor but it also presents the “wisdom” personified as a persuasive woman filled with practical advice (Proverbs 1-9). In fact, these

two women, who open and close the Book of Proverbs, are deeply connected thematically. The Woman of Wisdom represents the moral message of the Mother (*Torat imecha*) but also the Wife or Woman as Wise Counselor seen throughout the Tanakh – Sarah, Rebecca, Avigail, the woman of Tekoa and of Abel, Esther and Ruth (who is the only woman actually called *Eishet Hayil*). In each case these women take the initiative in guiding their husbands or men in leadership roles to act wisely even against the impulses of the moment. Their power is not by fiat but by eloquent persuasion. Their wisdom protects the home and often the dynastic house.

Wisdom [of women?] builds her house, but folly with her own hands tears it down
(Proverbs 14:1).

*By Wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established;
by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches.*(Proverbs 24:3-4)

The Woman of Valor is similarly praised for protecting her house – *beita*, a term repeated three times. So the military metaphor of a woman “girded with strength” protecting her home is supplemented by the woman of “good judgment” who “opens her mouth in wisdom.” In the Septuagint, the Jewish translation of the Bible into Greek for the Jews of Egypt, the final epithet of the woman of valor is not *isha yirat elohim* / “the woman who fears the God” but *isha nevonah* / “the woman of understanding” (Proverbs 31:30).

In Proverbs 31 itself there is an implied dialogue, so to speak, between the king’s mother and King Solomon. She admonishes him:

“No, my son! No, son of my womb!...

Do not give your valor (*Hayil* – strength, wealth) to women ...to those who destroy kings.” (Proverbs 31: 1-3)

Then Solomon responds:

“What a rare find is a woman of valor (*Hayil* - a capable wife)! ...

Many women have shown valor (*Hayil*), but you surpass them all.” (Proverbs 31: 10,29)

Solomon may just be praising his wife as an exception to his suspicious mother’s warning. Or he may be contradicting her playfully, by praising his own mother as a source of *Hayil* rather than a threat to his own *Hayil*.

B. Modern Objections to *Eshet Hayil* : A Contemporary Debate

Not all Jews in very recent history -mystical metaphors notwithstanding - have been enamored with the description of the “ideal” woman as described in Proverbs 31. One group of Jewish women in the early 1980’s not satisfied with the classical text composed a modern re-write. Instead of the opening words of “*A woman of valor - who can find? / She is more precious than rubies!*”, they suggested the following re-wording: *A woman of valor - find yourself! You are worth more than rubies.*³⁶ Since then, others have gone on to compose an “egalitarian” ode to the wo/man of valor using biblical verses to praise both the husband and wife of the house, or at least to select appropriate verses for the wife to say in praise of her husband.

A Defense of the Biblical “Woman of Valor”

Contemporary criticisms of the woman’s role promoted in *Eishet Hayil* may be too quick to stereotype this Biblical woman as a woman restricted to the “happy homemaker” in the sense of the 1950’s suburban middle class housewife. Without being an egalitarian poem, it still has imagery that expands the woman’s character in the direction of greater responsibility and dignity. The Biblical poem speaks of the woman’s economic acumen, wealth and managerial skills in ways that would violate the ideal of the woman who stays at home to devote herself to the care and feeding of her children and her husband. *Hayil* also means an unlady-like soldierly strength and the imagery of “girding her loins with strength” suggests her battle readiness. Yet while the biblical understanding of *Hayil* presents a woman as

³⁶ Women’s Rosh Chodesh group of Congregation Adath Jeshurun, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
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unafraid to defend her household, it maintains that she is God-fearing, the proper piety required of all creatures to their Creator, and also generous to the poor. She is religious model for all. Though she is not included as is her husband in the political-judicial role of judge “*in the gates*” nor does she study or teach *Torah*, “her works praise her *in the gates*” and “She opens her mouth in wisdom, and a teaching (the *Torah*) of kindness is on her tongue.” The terms *Hayil* and “God-fearing” in Proverbs 31 are used by Moshe in selecting judges – “you shall seek out from the people capable (*Hayil*) people who fear God, people of integrity ...and let them judge the people. (Exodus 18:21). In short, the ideal woman is uniquely suited to govern wisely even though Proverbs 31 still envisages the realm of her responsibility as restricted to business and homemaking.

In Defense of the Homemaker by Sharon Bromberg ³⁷

Should we say then that we are too modern to recite Proverbs praise of the *Eishet Hayil*? Perhaps we are...yet there is definite advantage to its recitation. A majority of the tasks praised there are tasks that usually go unthanked. Most household work is taken for granted and the one performing them is often “taken advantage of” without acknowledgement. No one really notices if the toilet bowl is cleaned or the dishes done – unless something goes wrong. Especially frustrating is that these tasks are circular – they must be redone. As soon as the dishes are washed, another meal is eaten and they must be washed again. A common lament among spouses is “you don’t appreciate me” – especially the household duties I fulfill.

The recitation of Proverbs 31 may guard against that lack of acknowledgement of repetitive menial tasks. After running around, working, carpooling, cooking, doing laundry, there is a structured time, when everyone is sitting quietly at the table, to show gratitude for all the housework. Just as we thank God for having provided us with bread each time we eat, we must thank – at least once a week - the people who filled the more mundane task of actually bringing the bread to the table. By acknowledging the care needed to run a household using a poem drawn from sacred literature, we recognize the “sacredness of housework,” of homemaking.

³⁷ from Shir Yedidot, 1991 honor’s thesis for Barnard College, by permission of the author

III. Appendix: Social Welfare in Rabbinic Thought and Legislation by Noam Zion

Biblical Models:

From a Vision of Economic Justice to Maintenance of the Needy

Genesis 18: 18-19

Isaiah 58: 5-9

Leviticus 25

Deuteronomy 14:28 – 15:18

Deuteronomy 15: 7-11 (Mikraot Gedolot)

Peah by Jeffrey Spitzer from myjewishlearning.com

Introduction: From a Vision of Economic Justice to Maintenance of the Needy

Regarding Tzedakah, the broad move from the genres of Bible to those of Talmud involves an essential change of perspective. The Torah (Deuteronomy 15:7-8) talks of a mitzvah commanding us to open our hand to the poor unconditionally but the Talmud sets conditions. The prophet (Isaiah 58:5-9) speaks inspiringly of theological and moral imperatives in a poetic cadence but the Talmud speaks practically, prosaically often with curious, mundane anecdotes. Both the prophets and the Leviticus model of Jubilee offer a larger vision of economic justice and social reconstruction. That is the original meaning of *tzedakah umispat*, says the scholar Moshe Weinfeld in his book of the same title. Yet the Talmud deals with maintenance of the needy without raising macro concerns about *Tikkun Olam b'Malchut Shadai*, about the reforming society and the redistribution of wealth. Tzedakah as rooted in *tzedek*, justice, has been reduced to communal or individual handouts concerned with daily psychological and physical needs. (See Tzvi Marx, *Dependence and Dignity*, subsection “Redemption through Tzedakah” and Tzedek and Tzedakah” in Appendix). Nevertheless the focus on the micro level has many corrective possibilities. The larger vision does not always take the feelings of the needy into account nor does it have good track record for actually changing things for the better. At the end of this unit on micro tzedakah, one would do well to go back to macro policy issues as reflected in American and Israeli social welfare conceptions.

Genesis 18: 18-19

Abraham is to become a great and populous nation, a blessing to all the nations [*or all nations are to bless themselves by invoking his example as a model nation*]. I have singled him out [*chosen him to found a people*] so that he may instruct his children and his household [*or posterity*] after him to keep the way of Adonai, doing what is just and right [**Tzedakah**] in order that God may bring about for Abraham what was promised him.

While God chose Abraham already in Genesis 12 we have no idea why he was worthy or for what purpose he was chosen until Genesis 18 in the midst of the story of Sodom where Abraham proves himself both to be exemplary in hospitality toward the stranger and to be a courageous defender of the innocent of Sodom.

- 1) What special skills does Abraham require according to this text?
- 2) Abraham is imitating God's ways. What are those divine ways? What is the Hebrew word for those ways? How is its use here different than its usual meaning?
- 3) Beyond being an exemplary individual person, Abraham needs to be able to teach what he embodies, to others. How is teaching related to founding a great nation?

Isaiah 58: 5-9

Is such the fast that I desire,
A day for men to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a reed
And lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast,
A day favored by Adonai?
No, this is the fast I desire:
To unlock the chains of evil,
And untie the ropes of the yoke [of injustice]
To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin.
Then shall your light burst through like dawn
And your healing spring up quickly;
Your justice [*Tidkatcha*] shall march before you,
The presence of Adonai shall be your rear guard.
Then when you call, Adonai will answer,
When you cry, God will say: Here I am!

- 1) Isaiah's sermon is read as the haftorah on Yom Kippur morning. Give two reasons why the Rabbis connected this text with Yom Kippur?
- 2) While fasting involves denial of food to oneself, what does Isaiah demand we do on a fast day?
- 3) Can you find the word root of Tzedakah in these verses? Usually Tzedakah involves giving to the poor. What else is demanded by Isaiah beyond helping the poor meet their needs? How is this connected to the root word of Tzedakah?

The Intertwined Moral and Religious Impulses behind Tzedakah

Tzedakah is too often translated as charity and separated for the concern for justice. In its biblical context the terms are not easily separated. Tzedakah is tied to a larger notion of Jewish mission and Divine identity.

According to the Torah neither **Abraham** nor Sarah were chosen for their monotheism or their philosophic search for the Divine. They excel in hospitality to their orphaned nephew Lot and even to poor nomads (who turn out to be angels) as well as in the military commitment to redeem captives. By exception, the sin of their treatment of Hagar, the *ger*, the Egyptian foreign worker is pointed out by Ramban and it explains for him the prophecy that their descendants will be persecuted as migrant workers in Egypt. The Torah makes explicit the purpose of the Divine mission of Abraham and his descendants only once after describing the hospitality to the angels and before Abraham daringly defends even the people of Sodom from Divine (in)justice or perhaps lack of Divine mercy. Abraham was chosen in order to teach his descendants "the way of God, the doing of *tzedakah umishpat*" (Genesis 18:19). According to Moshe Weinfeld, this technical term involves not the giving of money but the establishment of a social policy of economic justice. The term is used to describe King David's ideal reign and it appears as such in the Rabbinic Amidah's prayer for restoring our judges – *Baruch ..Melech*

Ohaiv Tzedakah uMishpat. In the Biblical world that concern for justice very often encompasses *ger yatom v'almanah* (stranger, orphan and widow – those with no one to take care of them or avenge their wrongs), while Sodom by contrast rejects wandering strangers or, worse, and exploits them with awful sexual violence. Abraham interprets this mandate to become a chosen people as grounds for challenging God's own justice and mercy even towards the awful people of Sodom. God welcomes that challenge and submits to that moral standard in allowing God to be held accountable to Divine ideals.

While on the face of it *tzedakah umishpat* and the challenge of Abraham to God at Sodom are concerned with maintaining standards of justice, underneath that is an **inner tension between God's mercy and God's justice**. On one hand God's mercy generates an impatient demand for immediate punishment of the cruel who exploit the poor.

Do not take advantage of the stranger and oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. Do not abuse any widow or orphan. Because if you should abuse them, then they will certainly **cry out to Me** and I will just as certainly hear them. Then I will become angry and kill you with the sword, so that your wives will become widows and your children orphans (Exodus 22:21-24)

If you should take your fellow's garment in pledge for a loan, you must give it back to him before the sun sets. After all, it is his only clothing, all that he has to cover his bare skin – what else can he sleep in? Consequently, if he **cries out to Me**, I will hear him, **for I am compassionate** (Exodus 22:26-27).

The Lord said: "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin is so grievous! I will go down and see if they have indeed done as **the cry** indicates. Then I will wipe them out! If not, then I will know" (Genesis 18:20-21).

On the other hand God's mercy generates forgiveness and patience even for sinners is the most inner Divine identity – *Eil Hanun v'Rachum, Erech Apaim* (Exodus 34:6) by which Moshe can ask God to forgive or at least postpone the wiping out of Israel. So Abraham asks God to forgive the whole place – Sodom including the wicked - for the sake of at least ten righteous or more precisely, innocent, people who reside there. Will God listen to the *tza'aka /z'aka* of the exploited or the plea for mercy for the wicked from Abraham who will also teach his children to give and to forgive, not just to act justly according to the law. Mercy and righteous anger are dialectically intertwined. As James Kugel (*The God of Old*, pp. 109 –123) points out: "God is uniquely moved by human suffering" whether from his people or any stateless, family-less people. Not the disorder and crime but the cry of the oppressed is what moves God. God dismisses for malfeasance gods/angels/judges that do not live up to that standard:

How long will you judge falsely, showing favor to the guilty party?

Give justice to the poor, the orphan; find in favor of the needy, the wretched.

Save the poor and the lowly, rescue them from the wicked (Psalm 82: 2-4).

In the famous Yom Kippur morning haftarah, **Isaiah** describes the ideal fast day showing that giving food to the poor, clothing to the naked is not just an act of mercy for the unfortunates of a sad fate but part of a total attack on societal injustice that has created such economic inequality, exploitation and enslavement. That kind of behavior will illuminate your true *tzidkatcha* – your justice or innocence – and then God will appear at your bidding.

How does Tzedakah become an independent term for giving to the needy. "*Tzedakah uMishpat*" which refers to economic and social justice is one term like "raining cats and dogs" However the Talmudic Rabbis loved to split such phrases and derive extra meanings from each term as well as pointing out an inner polarity within the notion of justice. Mishpat was identified with strict judicial justice while Tzedakah stood for mercy, forgiveness and generosity that went beyond rights. Thus the Rabbis queried:

It says of David: "David acted with justice (*mishpat*) and mercy (*tzedakah*)" (???).

But isn't it true that that any place you find justice (*mishpat*), you will not find mercy (*tzedakah*) and vice versa?

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Think of it this way: what is justice (*mishpat*) joined with mercy (*tzedakah*)? Compromise.

Another view: King David as a great judge would levy judgment strictly without compromise. He would exonerate the innocent and convict the guilty without bias. However if he declared a poor person guilty of a payment, David himself would pay the judgment from his own pocket. This is justice (*mishpat*) and mercy (*tzedakah*). Justice to the plaintiff who was paid what he was owed and *tzedakah* to the poor who received the money needed from King David. (TB Sanhedrin 6b).

- 1) The psalt of the Tanakh uses *Tzedakah uMishpat* as identical terms that mean the same thing. David as an ideal king is meant to maintain justice and law, *Tzedakah uMishpat*. However the Rabbis felt that justice is often in tension with another important role of the ruler – to be merciful, the way God is called HaRakhman, the merciful one. Give an example of a tension between being merciful and just.
- 2) Which of these contradictory values is more important in a friend? In a judge? In a teacher? Can these be combined?
- 3) The two midrashim on David offer two different ways to combine mercy and justice – *tzedakah* and *tzedek*. How are they different? Compromise is worked out *before* the judge makes his decision on who is right and who is wrong. How is that different than the second solution to the tension?

Leviticus 25 versus Deuteronomy 15:

A System of Self-Corrective Economic Justice among Brothers *versus* A Sermon about Voluntary Loans to the Eternally Poverty-stricken

Give to the poor readily and have no regrets when you do so. For in return the Lord your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings.

For **there will never cease to be needy in your land**, which is why I commend you: open you hand to the poor and needy brothers in your land. (Deuteronomy 15:10-11)

If your brother sinks to the point of selling of his inherited land, then his nearest kin, his *goel* / redeemer will redeem what the brother sold.

If one has no redeemer, then one may still prosper and acquire enough to redeem one's own [inheritance] and if one does not acquire enough...then the inheritance still goes out on the Jubilee and the owner returns to his inheritance (Leviticus 25:25-28).

If your brother sinks and falls beneath your control, hold the brother up like a resident alien [not as slave] and let the brother live with you (Leviticus 25:35)

If your brother sinks and is sold to you, don't work your brother like slave and when the Jubilee comes, he will go out from you – with his wife and children – back to his extended family, back to his ancestral land will he return.

For you are my slaves whom I took out of Egypt so do not sell them as slaves or work them harshly – Fear the Lord (Leviticus 25:39-43).

Proclaim liberty (*dror*) in the land to all the inhabitants, let it be a Jubilee. Each person will return to their inherited land and each person will return to their family (Leviticus 25:10)

Leviticus offers a complete system to “redeem” (using a theological and economic term) a brother in your family and your people as they fall economically and after they fall. No loss is final. The Jubilee will reestablish the basic, just equality of property and return each isolated and hence vulnerable individual back into a family safety network. That is liberty (called in Hebrew *dror*) in the full sense because it provides a social and economic basis for a reconstructed life. Nahum Sarna and Moshe Weinfeld explain that the cancellation of debts and the liberation of slaves were undertaken in ancient near eastern societies by reformist monarchs from time to time under the title *anduraru* (whose root is identical with the Biblical *dror*) or the term *misharum* (like the Hebrew *maisharim* for justice) which describes the cancellation of debts at probably regular intervals by the Babylonian king on their New Year's on 1 Nisan. Nahum Sarna suggests that every seven years in Tishrei the debts were cancelled and as a result most of the slaves were liberated since most Hebrew slavery in Israel derived from debt including thefts that are a form of debt. Thus every seven years rather than every fifty there was a proclamation of emancipation. This helped right a imbalanced society that had lost solidarity among its members since some became totally dependent on others. The Torah imagines this process occurring regularly as a cyclic rehabilitation of the original socio-economic equality of Israel deriving from the distribution of land by Joshua. This is intended to contrast to the rigid hierarchy of ancient Egypt, the “house of bondage” for most Egyptians and not only for the Jews.

However **Deuteronomy 15** is based on a more pessimistic picture of social reality in which there will always be poverty. **There is no legal enforceable obligation to correct this imbalance. Everyone is exhorted – not required – to offer interest free loans to the poor.** The chapter deals with doubts of wary Jews with adequate surpluses to lend but misgivings about opening their hands. Why should I give if the seventh year will bring a mandatory amnesty on all loans? Here is a policy to encourage voluntary *tzedakah* as opposed to Leviticus' setting down of laws that define property in such a way as to make axiomatic its return to its original owner. Here reappears God's proverbial willingness to punish those who do not heed or who

even cause the “outcry of the poor” – “if you do not give to the poor, then they will call out to Me about you, and you will be credited with sin” (Deuteronomy 15:9). But God and human beings do not legislate a solution to poverty. There is no Jubilee, no obligatory redeemer built into the clan structure, though there is a once every seven year moratorium on debt collection and cancellation of debts and there is an obligatory grant to a freed slave at the end of the seven years (Deuteronomy 15:12-15,18). Most of the help to one’s fellow poor must grow from the heart so Deuteronomy “works hard” to persuade for, among other reasons, the law does not give other forms of enforcement.

Notice that the giving mentioned in Deuteronomy 15 is the giving of interest free loans some of which may never be repaid– not yet the outright gift of money or goods which is considered tzedakah in the Talmud. However Deuteronomy 14:28-29 establishes a tithing system so the poor do get foodstuffs, though it is up to each householder to decide to whom to give. Still there is no mechanism for rehabilitating the poor as there is in Leviticus, unless the free loans provide a way back to economic self-sufficiency – though that is not mentioned as a goal in Deuteronomy 15. At least the seven year cancellation of debts prevents accumulative impoverishment as the result of free loans.

Pe'ah: The Corners of Our Fields By Jeffrey A. Spitzer

The author's chronological survey of commentaries concerning agricultural support for the poor identifies a striking continuity over time in the challenges faced by those who try to live by norms of ethical and responsible giving.

Tzedakah and Agriculture in the Bible

The Bible's model of [tzedakah](#) (social justice and support) included a variety of agricultural gifts. Grain and produce that were left or forgotten during the harvest were available for the poor to glean. The corners of the fields ([pe'ah](#)) were also designated for the poor. A biblical source for these laws comes from [Leviticus](#) 19:9-11:

"When you [plural] reap the harvest of your land, you [singular] shall not reap all the way to the corner of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger; I the Lord am your God. You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another."

"Corners?" How [Pe'ah](#) Works

[Rashi](#), the famous eleventh-century French exegete, quotes a midrash (a rabbinic interpretation) from the [Sifra](#) (an early midrashic work on Leviticus) on the phrase "you shall not reap all the way to the corner." He refers to the law that pe'ah is not actually given from the corners, but rather, one should leave one's "pe'ah" at the end of the field.

The full text of the Sifra to which [Rashi](#) refers (Kedoshim 1:10) explains:

"Thus says Rabbi Shimon: They said that a person must leave pe'ah only at the end of the field for four reasons-- because of theft from the poor, wasting the time of the poor, for the sake of appearances and because the Torah states 'You shall not reap all the way to the corner of your field.'

How is it theft from the poor? This way, the farmer will not find an opportune time to say to a poor relative 'come and take all of the pe'ah for yourself' [giving the relative an unfair advantage over the other poor people who are equally entitled to pe'ah]."

Although Jewish law does give higher priority to helping one's relatives than to helping others, some aspects of [tzedakah](#) need to be kept open for all of the poor, lest those without families go unsupported.

"How [does it prevent] wasting the time of the poor? This way, the poor people will not be sitting around and watching all day saying, 'Now he is about to designate pe'ah.' Rather, they can go and collect gleanings from another field and return at the end of the harvest."

People often assume that the unemployed needy have time and can wait for the donor to give whenever it is convenient, but R. Shimon makes it clear that the poor need even more consideration since it is so difficult to gather support from multiple sources.

"How [does it prevent] a negative appearance? This way, passers by will not say "look how so-and-so harvested his field but did not leave any pe'ah for the poor.

And because the Torah states, 'You shall not reap all the way to the corner of your field.'"

While we tend to think of an ideal of anonymous giving, this comment points out the importance of transparent, public giving. Knowing that other people are giving is crucial in order to maintain widespread support for any system of support.

The "You" To Whom The Commandment is Directed

The obvious shift from the Hebrew plural "you" in the first phrase ("When you reap") to the singular "you" in the second phrase ("...you shall not reap all the way") serves as an exegetical hook for several different commentaries. R. Jacob b. Asher (a thirteenth-century Spanish commentator), the son of the Rosh and the author of the Arba'ah Turim, wrote in his commentary (Baal haTurim):

" 'When you [plural] reap.' Read it as 'uv'kutzr--*khem*' [separating the part indicating that the verb refers to 'you' in the plural] 'in the harvest, *khem* [referring to the numerical value of the two Hebrew letters, 60] that one must leave 1/60 which is the minimum amount for pe'ah...

" To the poor and stranger leave them' is put next to 'You shall not steal' to warn the owner not to steal from what belongs to the poor. Similarly, the poor person is warned not to steal from the owners by taking more than what is appropriate."

Minimum Levels of Giving

Baal HaTurim's interpretation uses [gematria](#), in which the various Hebrew letters have numerical values. Although his comment might seem playful, it allows him to emphasize an important aspect of the law of pe'ah that is sometimes ignored. The first mishnah, or unit, in the talmudic [tractate](#) Pe'ah (a paragraph that is recited each morning in the traditional liturgy) announces that there is no prescribed amount for giving pe'ah. Less well known is the second [mishnah](#), which states, "Even though they said that pe'ah has no prescribed amount, one does not give less than one sixtieth." Ideally, the idea that one will be self-motivated to give appropriately is appealing, but practically, people need to know that a certain level of giving is just too low.

Attitudes towards the Poor

Baal haTurim's second comment draws two lessons from the juxtaposition of the laws concerning agricultural support for the poor (Leviticus 19:9-10) and the law against theft and deceit (19:11). The first, that not giving is like theft from the poor, was alluded to in the Sifra and will be elucidated even more by Rabbi Moses Alshikh (see below).

The second comment, that the poor person is warned not to take more than what is appropriate, addresses the general need for equitable distribution so that one poor person does not, in effect, "steal" scarce resources from another by taking too much. It also responds to the (usually exaggerated but nevertheless) corrosive fear of poor people taking advantage of the system.

Pe'ah and The Nature of Property Ownership

R. Moses Alshikh (a sixteenth-century commentator) responds more generally to the issue of who, or more
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precisely, when one owns property. Writing, as it were, in God's voice, Alshikh wrote in his commentary Torat Moshe:

"You shouldn't think that you are giving to the poor person from your own property, or that I have despised him by not giving bread to him as I have given to you. For he is also my child, just as you are, but his portion is in your produce.

"It is for your merit that I have intended to give his/her portion from your hand. And this is the reason why the beginning of the verse 'When you reap' is plural, but the end 'you shall not reap all the way' is singular. At the beginning it uses the plural 'the harvest of your [plural] land,' ['your' meaning belonging to] the owner, the poor, and the stranger, for in truth, their portion is there [in the field].

One is to gain merit by accepting one's responsibility to distribute a portion of the resources with which one has been entrusted. One does not even own one's income until one has separated out the portion for the poor; one holds them briefly in trust for the poor. The challenge is to consider one's tzedakah like the taxes that are withheld from income; it never really was yours anyway.

Defying Despair

Perhaps the most pointed reading of the peculiar switch from plural to singular comes from R. Hayyim Ibn Attar (an eighteenth-century Moroccan commentator) who wrote in his commentary, Or haHayyim:

"'When you reap the harvest' begins in the plural and concludes in the singular 'you shall not reap all the way.' This is intended to contradict the opinion of one who mistakenly says that since there is not enough for all of the poor, he does not have to give, like one who might say 'Why should I give this [little corner] when there are a hundred [poor people] in front of me?' For this reason, God commanded in the singular to say that even one individual has the obligation to give pe'ah."

Perhaps no aspect of the ongoing effort to create a just society creates a greater challenge than the despair engendered by the magnitude of the problem. According to Ibn Attar, the thought that one's individual efforts just do not matter is simply a mistake. Every individual is obligated to be part of the solution.

Ancient Texts, Enduring Concerns

Why should one look at classical sources interpreting laws from an agrarian society that bears so little in common with our own? Precisely because the classical commentators were facing the same difficulty, and succeeded in learning valuable, contemporary lessons through their efforts. As the Midrash Tanhuma (Ki Tavo 4) comments:

"One should not say, 'If the Holy Blessed One had given me a field, I would have given my charitable gifts from it, but now that I don't have a field, I won't give anything.' The Holy Blessed One said, 'See what I wrote in my Torah, "You are blessed in the city," (Deuteronomy 28:3) for those who live in the city; "...you are blessed in the field" for those who have fields."

Jewish tradition understands that social and economic realities change, and the nature of our support for the poor needs to take those changes into consideration. What is striking is how relevant and applicable the concerns of these commentaries from the third through eighteenth centuries are to modern times.

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For further reading see Shalom Hartman Institute Units on Teaching Sugya of Tzedakah and on the Dynamic of Tzedakah.

The outline of unit on Talmudic sugya is below. Please write to receive the whole unit by email attachment to zionsacs@netvision.net.il.

For the Dynamics of Tzedakah Adult Education Unit write to Hartman Institute to order the booklet.

Setting the Parameters of Tzedakah – A Talmudic Sugya on Welfare Legislation (TB Ketubot 67a-b)

By Noam Zion and David Dishon

I. Biblical Models:

From a Vision of Economic Justice to Maintenance of the Needy

Genesis 18: 18-19

Isaiah 58: 5-9

Leviticus 25

Deuteronomy 14:28 – 15:18

Deuteronomy 15: 7-11 (Mikraot Gedolot)

II. Talmudic Triage - TB Ketubot 67a-b

♦ Mishna – A Bridal Dowry for Daughters and Orphans

♦ Braita – Who comes first? Orphan Boys or Orphan Girls?

♦ Braita – Defining Basic Needs for an Orphan

♦ Rambam Laws of Poor 7:3-4 and Sefer HaHinuch 479

♦ Braita – Hillel and the “Outrageous Needs” of the Formerly Rich

♦ Braita – Galilean Cuisine in the Soup Kitchen

Appendix: Pesach in the Mining Country: The Governor Called her “A Woman of Valor” –

“She opens her hands to the poor” (Proverbs 31:20) by Maya Bernstein

♦ Story of Rabbi Nehemia’s Lentils

♦ Story of Rava’s Stuffed Capons

III. Giving to the Vulnerable Recipient TB Ketubot 67b – 68a

Two Braitot: Loans and/or Gifts for Reluctant Recipients or Stingy Recipients?

Story of Mar Ukba and his wife in the Oven

Suspected Welfare Fraud and Mar Ukba and his son,

Rabbi Abba and his scarf and Rabbi Haninah and his wife

Gold or Silver Utensils for the Poor?

Selected Essays

Sympathy versus Solidarity: Philosophical Reflections
on the Emotional Dynamics of Tzedakah summarized from Avi Sagi³⁸
Judaism on Greed by Meir Tamari
The Ladder of Tzedakah: The best forms of charity make the recipient self-sufficient.
by Moses Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon), with commentary by Dr. Meir Tamari
Why Is There a Need for Tzedakah? by Rabbi Louis Jacobs
Investigating the Organizations to Which We Contribute by Professor David Golinkin
Providing Food, Clothing, and Shelter by Rabbi Steven Bayar
Pe'ah: The Corners of Our Fields by Jeffrey A. Spitzer
Meiri 's Commentary on TB Ketubot 67
Tzvi Marx, "Priorities in Zedakah and Their Implications" (*Tradition Magazine*)
Derek Penslar, "The Origins of Modern Jewish Philanthropy"
in *Philanthropy in the World's Traditions*
Julie Salamon, *Rambam's Ladder* (anecdotes on contemporary philanthropy)

³⁸ Avi Sagi, "Siach Hahemlah vHilchot Tzedakah "from *Etgar Hashiva el HaMasoret*, 2003, Shalom Hartman Institute