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*Day 50*

# The Transformative Power of Torah Learning

*Excerpt from With Liberty and Justice:  
The Fifty-Day Journey from Egypt to Sinai  
by Senator Joe Lieberman with Rabbi Ari D. Kahn*

I introduced this book with the objective of turning the observance of the Passover Seder from a one-night experience into a seven-week journey of study that culminates in the celebration of Shavuot. The study of Torah not only educates, it transforms. Torah study is more than an intellectual experience. It is part of a dialogue with God. When we pray, we speak to God, and when we study the Bible, we listen to what God has said. Through Torah study, the Revelation at Sinai, which took place thousands of years ago on Shavuot, continues. This contributes to an emotional experience, which contains elements of the spiritual and mystical.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik once confided to a group of his students: “When I learn Torah, I feel the breath of eternity on my face.”

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When he studied the Torah, he added, he felt as if he were in conversation with the great sages of previous generations. Torah study connects us with our past and our future, in a chain that joins millennia. The authentic Jewish culture that has stood the test of time is centered around ideas and writings that emerged from our collective learning of Torah law and values. We can help sustain Jewish continuity by making our Passover to Shavuot experience the model for a weekly or even daily encounter in which we stimulate our children to ask us questions about the Torah and the Ten Commandments.

Throughout our history, particularly during the years in exile, it was the study of Torah that allowed Jews in far-flung lands to maintain their identity and sense of community. Throughout the ages, despite their geographic separation, despite the independent nature of the communities they formed around the world, Jews shared a common heritage and destiny in the Torah, whether in the biblical text itself, the talmudic explication of the text, or later commentaries on it.

Through their study of Torah, Jews have shared a common language. They have pondered the same questions, analyzed the same comments, and considered the same solutions. A question raised in France in the 1200s might have been answered in Spain one hundred years later. A rabbi living in Yemen felt perfectly at home reading an Eastern European gloss of the Talmud. Today, a question of Jewish law raised over the internet by a student in Detroit, for example, will be answered within minutes just as easily by people from the United States, or Israel, or South Africa.

In 1923, the Orthodox Jewish organization Agudath Israel initiated worldwide study of one daily page of Talmud called *dafyomi*. Today, hundreds of thousands of Jews, men and women – most of whom are neither yeshiva students nor rabbis – participate in these learning programs. Focusing on the same page, drawing on the same reservoir of Jewish thought, they are joined into a vast community that spans continents and generations. There are additional opportunities for Torah learning offered by every Jewish denomination, Bible study sponsored by Christian groups, and more Torah and Talmud texts published in more languages than ever before.

If you have read the daily essays in this book, you have joined the community of learners across the globe who are keeping the torch

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of the Revelation lit, and carrying it forward. I hope you will continue to do so. Just as Passover should not be the beginning and end of one's Jewish holiday experience, a concise book like this should not be the end of your study of God's Law and values. I hope it will lead to further learning and living with the Law, uniting you with all those who strive to follow God's commandments, given at Sinai on Shavuot.

## Chapter 52

# Shavuot

*Excerpt from Hilkhot Mo'adim:  
Understanding the Festivals  
by Rabbi David Brofsky*

**T**he Torah teaches that upon completing the count of the Omer, the Festival of Shavuot is celebrated:

Seven weeks you shall number unto you; from the time the sickle is first put to the standing corn you should begin to number seven weeks. And you shall keep the Feast of Weeks [*Hag HaShavuot*] unto the Lord your God after the measure of the freewill-offering of your hand, which you shall give according as the Lord your God blessed you. (Deut. 16:9–10)<sup>1</sup>

Shavuot not only commemorates the conclusion of the counting of the weeks of the Omer, but it also celebrates the wheat harvest (Ex. 23:16), and is therefore known as “*Hag HaKatzir*,” the Harvest Festival. The



*shetei halehem*, two leavened loaves made from the new wheat harvest, are offered with the Musaf offering, and the festival is therefore also referred to as “*Yom HaBikkurim*” (Num. 28:26). The offering permits the use of new grains in the *Beit HaMikdash* and ushers in the season of the *Bikkurim*, the first fruits, which are brought to the *Beit HaMikdash* (Deut. 10:1–11).

In addition to the themes reflected by the biblical names given to this festival, the Rabbis refer to this festival as “*Atzeret*” (Rosh HaShana 1:2),<sup>2</sup> seemingly referring to the fact that it marks the conclusion of the Pesah festival.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the Ramban asserts that Pesah and Shavuot are comparable to the first and last days of Sukkot and Pesah, and the days between Pesah and Shavuot are actually similar to *Hol HaMo’ed*:

And you should count forty-nine days, and seven weeks, and sanctify the eighth day, like the eighth day of Sukkot, and these days which are counted in between are akin to *Hol HaMo’ed*, between the first and eighth of a festival.... And that is why our Rabbis refer to Shavuot as “*Atzeret*” [a day of cessation], as it is similar to the eighth day of Sukkot, which is called “*Atzeret*.”<sup>4</sup>

The description of Shavuot as “*Atzeret*” most likely also refers to the religious/historical connection between Pesah and Shavuot – the Jewish people left Egypt on Pesah and received the Torah on Shavuot.

In addition to the agricultural and ritual reasons for the holiday cited above, we traditionally associate Shavuot with the giving of the Torah. The Rabbis point to the uniqueness of Shavuot, as “it is the day upon which the Torah was given” (Pesahim 68b). In addition, the Torah reading of Shavuot (Ex. 19), as recorded by the Tosefta and cited in the Talmud (Megilla 31a), recounts the giving of the Torah. Furthermore, the Shavuot liturgy refers to the day as “*Zeman Matan Torateinu*” – the day upon which the Torah was given.

Numerous commentators have questioned why this aspect of Shavuot, *Matan Torah*, which is so central to our Shavuot celebration, is not mentioned in the Torah. In fact, the Talmud cites a debate between the *hakhamim* and R. Yosi regarding whether the Torah was given on the sixth or seventh of Sivan (Shabbat 86b). According to R. Yosi’s opinion

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that *Matan Torah* took place on the seventh of Sivan, nowadays, when we always celebrate Shavuot on the sixth of Sivan (forty-nine days after the second day of Pesah), we would actually be celebrating *Matan Torah* on the incorrect day!

These questions brought Rabbi Yitzhak Abrabanel (1437–1508) to explain as follows in his commentary to the Torah:

The Torah did not specify that the reason for the celebration for this festival is to remember the day of the giving of the Torah, as no festival was assigned to remember the giving of our Torah; because the Divine Torah and its prophecies, which are in our hands testify to themselves, and there is no need to dedicate a day to remember it. Rather, the reason for the Festival of Shavuot is because it is the beginning of the wheat harvest.<sup>5</sup>

The Abrabanel does acknowledge that certain mitzvot and halakhot hint to the giving of the Torah on Shavuot. For example, the offering of the *shetei halehem* on Shavuot, which are made from leavened wheat, in contrast to Pesah's Omer offering made from barley, indicates the Jewish people's spiritual poverty before receiving the Torah. He continues:

[Although] there is no doubt that on this day the Torah was given, no festival was designated to remember it, just as you will find regarding Yom Terua [Rosh HaShana], upon which we say, “this is the day of the beginning of Your creation, a remembrance for the first day” (Rosh HaShana 27a), and despite this, God did not command that one should observe Rosh HaShana as an anniversary of the creation of the world, rather as a “*Yom HaDin*” [day of judgment].

The giving of the Torah is coincidental and secondary to the primary reason for the observance of Shavuot – the wheat harvest.

Others accept that the giving of the Torah plays a central role in the observance of Shavuot, but maintain that it was deliberately not mentioned by the Torah. Rabbi Yitzhak ben Moses Arama (c. 1420–1494)

offers two reasons for this omission in his commentary to the Torah, the *Akeidat Yitzhak*. First, he suggests that like belief in the existence of God, the giving of the Torah is so basic to Judaism that there is no reason to dedicate a day to its commemoration. Second, he proposes that the very nature of the Torah precludes designating a day of commemoration. He writes:

The commemoration of the giving of the Torah cannot be limited to a particular time, like other matters connected with the festivals, but it is a precept that applies at all hours and at times, as it is written, “This book of the Law shall not move from your mouth and you shall meditate in it day and night” [Josh. 1:8]. Every day, we are commanded that its contents should remain as fresh and as dear to us as on the day they were given, as it is written, “This day, the Lord your God has commanded you to do these statutes and judgments; you shall therefore keep them and do them.”<sup>6</sup>

In other words, although the Torah may have been given on a specific historical date, we relate to Torah as if it is constantly given to us anew, and it is therefore not restricted or limited to a specific time. Indeed, the Midrash writes:

What is meant by “this day”? Had the Holy One, Blessed be He, not ordained these precepts for Israel till now? Surely this verse was stated in the fortieth year! Why does the Scripture therefore state, “this day”? This is what Moshe meant when he addressed Israel: Every day, let the Torah be as dear to you as if you had received it this day from Mt. Sinai.<sup>7</sup>

This beautiful Midrash emphasizes the timeless nature of Torah, and how marking the anniversary of the giving of the Torah might ultimately reduce or minimize our relationship to the Torah.

Finally, Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann (1843–1921), in his commentary to Leviticus, explains why there are no mitzvot associated with Shavuot:

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No symbolic ritual was instituted for Shavuot to mark the Sinaitic Revelation, for the reason that it cannot be translated into the tangible language of symbol. The Children of Israel had been commanded to take heed “that you saw no likeness on the day that the Lord spoke unto you at Horev from the midst of fire,” so as not to become involved in any idolatrous, anthropomorphic conception of the divinity. They were simply bidden to commemorate the historical experience. They would celebrate on the day of the giving of the Law the conclusion of the harvest as well, to give thanks to Him on bringing the first fruits to the Sanctuary and acknowledge that He is the Lord of all, to Whom it was meet to pay homage and Whose commandments they were to obey. By this they would reenact the promise they made on Sinai, “*naaseh venishma*” [“we shall do and hearken”] [Ex. 24:7].

While it is impossible to commemorate the giving of the Torah with any symbols, we bring God our first fruits, give thanks to Him, and fulfill our promise to Him at Har Sinai – “*naaseh ve-nishma*.”

As Rabbi Hoffman observed, there are no halakhot or mitzvot specifically related to Shavuot. In fact, the *Shulhan Arukh* dedicates only one chapter – at the end of the Laws of Pesah – to the “Order of the Prayers on Shavuot.”<sup>8</sup> The Jewish people, however, have enriched the Festival of Shavuot with many customs, which have themselves generated much Torah inquiry. In this chapter, we will investigate a number of these customs.

### ACCEPTING SHAVUOT “EARLY”

The *Rishonim* record that the custom in Medieval Ashkenazic communities was to recite *Tefillat Maariva* after *pelag haminha*, and not only after *tzeit hakokhavim*, in accordance with the position of R. Yehuda (Berakhot 26a). Based upon this custom and another passage in the Talmud that explicitly records the practice of reciting Kiddush on Shabbat before dark (Berakhot 26b), it was also customary to accept Shabbat before dark in Ashkenazic communities until the modern era.

On Shavuot, however, it has become customary to begin the Festival only after dark. What is the source of this practice? Shela, writes in his *Shenei Luchot HaBrit*:

I received [a tradition] from my teacher, the Gaon Rabbi Shlomo of Lublin, who received [this tradition] person to person from the Gaon Rabbi Yaakov Pollack, [that one should] not make Kiddush and eat on the first night of Shavuot until after the stars have appeared. The reason is because it says regarding the counting [of the Omer], “Seven complete weeks there should be”; if one recites Kiddush while it is still day, one slightly detracts from the forty-nine days of Sefirat HaOmer, and Shavuot is supposed to be [observed] after the [full] count.<sup>9</sup>

This tradition dates back to Rabbi Yaakov Pollack (1460–1561), the forefather of the Polish rabbinic tradition. Interestingly, Rabbi Horowitz writes that even though one may not recite Kiddush before nightfall, one may still recite the evening prayers early, as even on Shabbat, one may recite the prayers of Motza’ei Shabbat.

Rabbi Yosef Hahn (Frankfurt am Main, 1570–1637), a contemporary of Rabbi Horowitz, records that he had not seen this practice in Germany. Furthermore, he argues that this practice is not only an unnecessary stringency, but it also takes away from the time one could learn at night, as the night is relatively short during the summer.<sup>10</sup> This seems to have continued have been the practice in Germany thereafter as well, as Rabbi Netanel Weil (1687–1769) writes in his comments to Rosh, the *Korban Netanel*, that one may recite Kiddush and eat while it is still light on all Festival days, including Shavuot.<sup>11</sup> Magen Avraham,<sup>12</sup> however, as well as Peri H’adash,<sup>13</sup> cites Shela, ruling that one should not recite Kiddush until after dark.

Although these early authorities only mention delaying Kiddush until evening, Taz records that the congregation delays beginning Maariv so that the count should be “complete.”<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Yaakov Emden, however, insists that, on the contrary, one should pray before dark in order to fulfill of the mitzva of adding from the weekday onto Shabbat and Yom Tov (*tosefet Shabbat*).<sup>15</sup>

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Rabbi Shimon Sofer, in his *Hitorerut Teshuva*, suggests a different reason to delay Maariv; we should wait until night to ensure that even those who will stay up the entire night will not forget to recite *Keriat Shema* after dark, its proper time.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Rabbi Natan Gestetner suggests that Maariv is not recited until dark simply to ensure that people do not recite Kiddush before dark.<sup>17</sup> Numerous *Aḥaronim*, such as Peri Megadim,<sup>18</sup> the *Shulḥan Arukh HaRav*,<sup>19</sup> the *Kitzur Shulḥan Arukh*,<sup>20</sup> and the *Mishna Berura*,<sup>21</sup> rule that one should not recite Maariv until after dark.

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, the Netziv, offers another suggestion in his commentary to the Torah.<sup>22</sup> The Torah says that one observes Shavuot “*be’etzem hayom hazeh*” – “this very same day” – in order to teach that there is no mitzva of *tosefet Shabbat* on Shavuot. We learn that we should observe Shavuot after dark from this verse, and not in order to ensure that our “count” is complete.

### DAIRY FOODS

One of the most well-known customs associated with Shavuot is the practice of eating dairy foods. Rabbi Isaac Tyrnau records in his *Sefer HaMinhagim*<sup>23</sup> that this custom is alluded to by the verse, “*Minḥa Ḥadasha LaShem BeShavu’oteikhem*” (Num. 28:26), the first letters of which spell “*ḥalav*” – milk. This practice has generated much discussion in halackhic literature.

First, aside from the textual hint, what is the reason for this custom? Rema explains that in remembrance of the *shetei haleḥem*, the two loaves offered in the *Beit HaMikdash* on Shavuot, we wish to eat two loaves of bread at the meal. Since one is not permitted to use the same loaf of bread for both a dairy and meat meal,<sup>24</sup> we eat a dairy meal and then a meat meal, in order to ensure that two loaves are eaten.<sup>25</sup>

Magen Avraham offers another reason. He notes that the Zohar equates the seven weeks between Pesah and Shavuot to the seven “clean days” (*shivat neki’im*) that a woman counts before purification. Just as the woman is “pure” after these seven days (after immersing in the *mikveh*), so too, the Jewish people are purified from the impurity of Egypt after Sefirat HaOmer. Milk is viewed, symbolically, as antithetical to *tuma*, as

a woman who produces milk and nurses generally does not menstruate. We therefore eat dairy foods on Shavuot.<sup>26</sup>

The *Mishna Berura*'s reason is possibly the most well known. He explains that after receiving the Torah, the Jewish people were no longer able to eat their meat; they had to properly slaughter and prepare new meat in kosher vessels. This process is time-consuming, and they therefore ate dairy products, whose halakhot are less intricate and which can be prepared in less time.<sup>27</sup> The *Mishna Berura*<sup>28</sup> also cites *Kol Bo*,<sup>29</sup> who explains that since the Torah is compared to milk and honey,<sup>30</sup> it is customary to eat dairy, and even honey, on Shavuot. The *Aḥaronim* offer additional reasons for this custom as well.

Second, this practice raises numerous halakhic concerns. For example, as we learned previously, one may be obligated to eat meat on Yom Tov as a fulfillment of the mitzva of *simḥat Yom Tov*. Even if one is not obligated to do so, many agree that it is certainly a mitzva to eat meat. The ancient practice of eating dairy on Shavuot seems to contradict this halakha! Indeed, even the *Sefer HaMinhagim* cited above writes that one should still eat meat on Shavuot, as “there is no happiness without meat” (Pesaḥim 109a).

Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Shapiro (1850–1930), the second Munkacser Rebbe, discusses this issue at length in his *Darkhei Teshuva*.<sup>31</sup> He relates that some suggest eating a dairy meal at night and a meat meal during the day. This is the custom in many communities, and was the practice of Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky (1899–1985), the Steipler Gaon.<sup>32</sup> Rabbi Shapiro argues, however, that whether or not *simḥat Yom Tov* is biblically mandated at night is a debate among the *Aḥaronim*,<sup>33</sup> and it is therefore improper not to eat meat at night. In addition, Rema, cited above, implies that dairy food is meant to be eaten in addition to meat at the same meal in order to obligate two loaves. For this reason, the *Sefer Yosef Ometz* records that it is customary to eat dairy on the first day of Shavuot, but that one should eat meat afterward.<sup>34</sup>

The *Aḥaronim* note, however, that eating meat after dairy poses serious halakhic concerns, and therefore one should be careful not to violate the laws of *basar beḥalav* in fulfilling this custom. The Gemara (Ḥullin 105a) explicitly states that after eating cheese, one may eat meat; Rema, in his *Darkhei Moshe* commentary to *Tur*,<sup>35</sup> cites a responsum

of the Maharam of Rutenburg, who relates that he once found cheese between his teeth in between meals. He thereafter decreed upon himself to wait after eating cheese the same way he waits after meat, although he was lenient regarding chicken. The *Darkhei Moshe* continues to cite other sources that limit this stringency to cheese that has aged at least six months.<sup>36</sup> In his comments to the *Shulḥan Arukh*, Rabbi Isserlis cites the custom of waiting after hard cheese, even before eating chicken. He notes, however, that others are lenient and says not to rebuke those who are lenient, as long as they do “*kinuah*,” “*hadaḥa*,” and “*netilat yadayim*.” He concludes, however, that “it is good to be stringent.”<sup>37</sup>

How should one conduct himself if he wishes to eat both meat and milk at the same meal? Some write that one who does not eat hard cheese can simply clean and rinse one’s mouth, and then eat meat at the same meal.<sup>38</sup> Rabbi Ovadia Yosef writes that this is his practice.<sup>39</sup> Others insist that one should eat dairy and then recite the *Birkat HaMazon*,<sup>40</sup> in deference to the Zohar, which implies that one should not eat meat and cheese in the same meal.<sup>41</sup> Still others object to this practice, on the grounds that reciting *Birkat HaMazon* in between the meals constitutes a recitation of a “*berakha she’eina tzerikha*” (an unnecessary blessing),<sup>42</sup> but Rabbi Moshe Feinstein endorses this practice.<sup>43</sup>

*Darkhei Teshuva*, cited above, offers a different suggestion:

The preferred practice is the custom that I received from my teachers and my ancestors: to eat a dairy meal immediately after the morning prayers, during the Kiddush, without bread, but only as a “*se’udat arai*.” And then one should recite the blessing afterward, wait a bit more than an hour, and then eat the day meal with meat and wine. That is the preferred custom in my opinion, and with this, one fulfills one’s obligation according to all.<sup>44</sup>

This custom also appears in the *Luah Eretz Yisrael* of Rabbi Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky.

Interestingly, Rabbi Yitzḥak Ze’ev Soloveitchik (1886–1959), in his commentary to the Torah, suggests that the custom of eating milk and meat at the same meal affirms the commitment the Jewish people,



who, unlike the angels, are able to fulfill the mitzvot with their bodies, with great zeal and alacrity.<sup>45</sup>

### ***Tikkun Leil Shavuot***

The earliest mention of the practice of staying up the entire night of Shavuot and learning Torah appears in the Zohar:

Therefore, the pious in ancient times did not sleep that night but were studying the Torah, saying, “Let us come and receive this holy inheritance for us and our children in both worlds.” That night, the Congregation of Yisrael is an adornment over them, and she comes to unite with the King. Both decorate the heads of those who merit this. R. Shimon said the following when the friends gathered with him that night: Let us come and prepare the jewels of the bride... so that tomorrow she will be bejeweled... and properly ready for the King.<sup>46</sup>

The Zohar connects the learning of Shavuot night to the “wedding” between the Jewish people and the Almighty.

Although this custom is not cited by Rabbi Yosef Karo in the *Shulhan Arukh*, there is written evidence of Rabbi Karo holding a night of learning in Salonica, Greece in 1533. Shela cites a letter from Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz, a friend of Rabbi Yosef Karo’s, and author of the *Lekha Dodi* prayer recited every Friday night, describing that evening and how it eventually led to Rabbi Yosef Karo’s move to Tzefat.<sup>47</sup>

By the seventeenth century, this practice was widespread, and *Magen Avraham* records the custom of staying awake all night on Shavuot:

The Zohar says that the early pious ones would stay awake all night on Shavuot and learn Torah. Nowadays, our custom is for most learned people to do so. Perhaps the reason is based on the fact that the Israelites slept all night long and God had to wake them when He wanted to give them the Torah, as it says in the Midrash, and therefore we must repair this.<sup>48</sup>

There are different customs, however, regarding whether one should learn/recite the *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, a collection of texts selected for study on Shavuot evening, or whether one should learn “whatever his heart pleases.”

This practice of staying up all night has led to numerous and in-depth discussions regarding whether or not one who has not slept may recite the morning blessings. Concerning *netilat yadayim*, Rabbi Yosef Karo writes that there is a doubt, and Rema rules that one should wash without a *berakha*.<sup>49</sup> The *Mishna Berura*, however, maintains that the *Aḥaronim* agree that if one uses the bathroom before Shaḥarit, one should then wash one’s hands and recite the *berakha* of “*al netilat yadayim*.”<sup>50</sup>

Since we follow the opinion that the *birkot hashahar*, the morning blessings, are recited regardless of whether or not one actually received the benefit described by the specific *berakha*, it would seem to follow that one should recite these *berakhot* even if one was awake all night, as they are a daily obligation. This, indeed, is the ruling of the *Arukh HaShulḥan*<sup>51</sup> and Arizal. The *Mishna Berura*, however, cites those who question whether one who did not sleep should recite “*E-lokai neshama*” and “*hamaavir sheina*,” and therefore suggests that one hear these *berakhot* from someone who has slept.<sup>52</sup>

The *Mishna Berura* cites a debate among the *Aḥaronim* regarding the *birkot haTorah*: Ḥayei Adam, Peri Ḥadash, and the Gra rule that one should not say the *birkot haTorah* if one was awake all night, while Magen Avraham and *Eliya Rabba* rule that one should say the *berakhot*. Ideally, one should try to hear the *berakhot* from another person who has slept, but if this is not possible, one may have in mind that the second blessing preceding the morning *Keriat Shema* (“*Ahava Rabba*” in Ashkenazi congregations and “*Ahavat Olam*” in the Sephardic tradition) should exempt him from *birkot haTorah*. One should then study a verse or Mishna after one’s *tefilla*.<sup>53</sup>

Interestingly, the *Mishna Berura*<sup>54</sup> cites the opinion of Rabbi Akiva Eiger, who offers a brilliant solution to this quandary. He suggests that if one engages in *sheinat keva* (significant slumber) the day before, one may then recite *birkot haTorah* the next morning, even if one remained awake all night. He argues that, “*mimah nafshakh*,” whichever opinion one follows, one would be so obligated – if the *berakha* is meant

to be recited daily regardless of whether one slept, one should always recite it on Shavuot morning, and if it is considered a *birkat hamitzva*, then it should be recited after any interruption, such as a long afternoon nap! Therefore, everyone would agree that in such a case one should recite *birkot haTorah* in such a case.

### GREENERY

Another well-known custom of Shavuot is to adorn the *beit kneset* with greenery. Over the course of centuries, this custom developed in different directions, and numerous reasons were given for this practice. Some even expressed opposition to this practice.

It seems that this custom first developed in fifteenth-century Ashkenaz. Rabbi Yaakov Moellin (1360–1427), known as Maharil, records that it was customary to cover the floor of the *beit kneset* with flowers, “*lesimhat haregel*” (for the joy of the festival).<sup>55</sup> While Maharil speaks of adorning the *beit kneset*, the *Sefer Leket Yosher*<sup>56</sup> writes that his teacher, Rabbi Yisrael Isserlin, author of the *Terumat HaDeshen*, put greenery on the floor of his home. It seems that the purpose of this early German custom was to beautify and refresh the *beit kneset*, or even one’s house, in honor of the festival. Indeed, these sources emphasize that “*besamim*,” pleasant-smelling greenery, was placed on the floors.

Writing over a century later in Poland, Rema offers a different reason: “It is customary to place greenery in the *beit kneset* and the homes as a remembrance of the happiness of the giving of the Torah.”<sup>57</sup> In what way does greenery remind us of the giving of the Torah? Rabbi Mordekhai Yoffe (1530–1612) explains in his *Levush Malkhut*, that the greenery reminds us of the plants that adorned Har Sinai, as the verse warns, “neither the flocks nor herds should feed before that mount” (Ex. 34:3) – implying that the mountain was filled with plant life.<sup>58</sup>

Magen Avraham offers a third reason.<sup>59</sup> He records that it is customary to place trees in the *beit kneset* on Shavuot to remind us that the fruits of the trees are judged on Shavuot (Rosh HaShana 1:2) and that we should pray for them.

Ḥayei Adam records that the Vilna Gaon abolished the custom of putting trees in the *beit kneset*, as it resembles the current custom of non-Jews.<sup>60</sup> Despite the Gaon’s objections, however, it is common

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practice to adorn the *beit kneset* with greenery for Shavuot, and the *Aḥaronim* offer numerous defenses of this practice.

### Notes

1. See also Ex. 34:22.
2. See also *Onkelos*, Num. 28:26.
3. See *Pesikta DeRav Kahana*, *pesikta* 28.
4. Ramban, Lev. 23:36.
5. Abarbanel, Lev. 23.
6. *Akeidat Yitzḥak*, Lev. 23.
7. *Tanḥuma*, *Parashat Ki Tavo*.
8. *Shulḥan Arukh* 494.
9. *Shenei Luḥot HaBerit*, *Masekhet Shavuot*.
10. *Yosef Ometz* 850.
11. *Korban Netanel*, *Pesahim* 10:2.
12. *Magen Avraham* 494.
13. *Peri Ḥadash* 494.
14. *Taz* 494.
15. *Siddur Ya'avetz*.
16. *Hitorerut Teshuva* 56.
17. *Responsa Lehorot Natan* 7:31.
18. *Mishbetzot Zahav* 494, s.v. *me'aharin*.
19. *Shulḥan Arukh HaRav* 494:2.
20. *Kitzur Shulḥan Arukh* 120:11.
21. *Mishna Berura* 494:1.
22. *HaAmek Davar*, Lev. 23:21.
23. *Hagahot UMinhagim*, *Ḥag HaShavuot*.
24. See *Shulḥan Arukh*, *Yoreh De'ah* 89:4.
25. *Rema* 494:3.
26. *Magen Avraham* 494:6.
27. *Mishna Berura* 494:12.
28. *Ibid.*, 494:13.
29. *Kol Bo* 52.
30. See *Song*. 4:11.
31. *Darkhei Teshuva*, *Yoreh De'ah* 89:19.
32. *Orḥot Rabbeinu*, vol. 2, p. 98.
33. As discussed by the *Shaarei Teshuva* 529:4.
34. *Sefer Yosef Ometz* 854.
35. *Darkhei Moshe*, *Yoreh De'ah* 89.
36. *Ibid.*, 89:2.
37. *Rema*, *Yoreh Dea'h* 89:2.
38. See *Magen Avraham* 494:6; *Mishna Berura* 494:12.
39. *Ḥazon Ovadia*, *Yom Tov*, p. 318.

40. See *Be'er Heitev* 494:8, citing the *Kenesset Gedola* and *Shela*.
41. *Zohar, Parashat Mishpatim*.
42. See *Orah Mishor* as cited by the *Darkhei Teshuva*.
43. *Iggerot Moshe, Orah Hayim* 1:160.
44. *Darkhei Teshuva, Yoreh De'ah* 89:19.
45. *Hiddushei HaGriz al HaTorah, Parashat Yitro*.
46. *Zohar, Parashat Emor* 88a.
47. *Shela, Masekhet Shavuot*.
48. *Magen Avraham* 494.
49. *Shulhan Arukh* and *Rema* 4:13.
50. *Mishna Berura* 4:30 and in *Bi'ur Halakha*, s.v. *veyitlem*.
51. *Arukh HaShulhan* 46:13.
52. *Mishna Berura* 46:24.
53. *Ibid.*, 47:28.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Maharil, Minhagim, Hilkhot Shavuot*, 2; see also *Sefer HaMinhagim* of Rabbi Isaac Tyrnau, *Hagahot UMinhagim, Hag HaShavuot*.
56. *Leket Yosher*, vol. 1, p. 150.
57. *Rema* 494:3.
58. *Levush Malkhut* 494.
59. *Magen Avraham* 494:5.
60. *Bi'ur HaGra* 131:13; see also *Maase Rav* 196:2.

# It's in the Gene(alogy): Family, Storytelling, and Salvation

By Rabbi Dr. Stuart W. Halpern  
Excerpt from *Gleanings: Reflections on Ruth*

**I**n 1924, the State of Virginia passed the Racial Integrity Act, criminalizing interracial marriages. There was a special dispensation built into the law, however. Through the so-called “Pocahontas exception,” Virginians proud of being descendants of Pocahontas who still wanted to be classified as “white” were able to do so instead of being classified as “Native American.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly politically weighted claims of

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1. For an extensive discussion of the science, politics, and history of genetics, see Carl Zimmer, *She Has Her Mother's Laugh: The Powers, Perversions, and Potential of Heredity* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018). For a review of recent studies on Jewish genetics specifically, see Cynthia M. Baker, *Jew* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

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ancestry have received extensive coverage in recent years, including the question of why former president Barack Obama is widely considered a black man with a white mother, rather than a white man with a black father; President Trump's questioning of Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren's claimed Native American heritage (Trump has, on numerous occasions, referred to her as "Pocahontas");<sup>2</sup> and the extensive doubts recently raised about the Jewish identity of socialist New York State Senator Julia Salazar.<sup>3</sup> As Rutgers professor Eviatar Zerubavel discusses in his *Ancestors and Relatives: Genealogy, Identity, and Community*,<sup>4</sup> how we define or frame our ancestry, and how others define it, is of tremendous importance.

Questions of genealogy are so crucial because our ancestry is often a key element in our social structure, the axis on which many of our social interactions, obligations, loyalties, and emotional sentiments turn. Though we like to believe in meritocracy, that individuals are self-made, our identities can be deeply tied to those we descend from. As Zerubavel writes, "[o]ur psychological integrity depends very much upon... the extent to which we feel linked to our genealogical roots... striking a person's name from his or her family's genealogical records used to be one of the most dreaded punishments in China."<sup>5</sup> And of course, biologically, heredity has a tremendous impact on our traits, personality, and self-perceptions. As Columbia University professor Robert Pollack has noted, our "genomes are a form of literature... a library of the most ancient, precious, and deeply important books."<sup>6</sup> Through studying where we come from, we learn how to tell our own story.

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2. Maggie Astor, "Why Many Native Americans Are Angry with Elizabeth Warren," *The New York Times*, October 17, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/17/us/politics/elizabeth-warren-dna-test.html>.

3. See, for example, Mijal Bitton, "Julia Salazar's Defenders Reveal the Limits of Identity Politics," *The Forward*, August 31, 2018. <https://forward.com/opinion/409391/julia-salazars-defenders-reveal-the-limits-of-identity-politics/>.

4. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. For his discussion of the Obama question, see the discussion beginning on p. 3.

5. *Ibid.*, 5, 7.

6. *Signs of Life: The Language and Meanings of DNA* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 117.

**ARE OUR RELATIVES “RELATIVE”?**

In *It's All Relative: Adventures Up and Down the World's Family Tree*,<sup>7</sup> humorist and author A. J. Jacobs recounts his attempt to assemble his extended, and by that I mean *very* extended, family in the largest family reunion ever. After receiving an e-mail from a man in Israel claiming to be his twelfth cousin, part of an 80,000-person family tree which included Karl Marx and some European aristocrats, Jacobs set out to bring as many of his living relatives together as he could, figuring “people [who spend countless hours tracing their family roots] want to feel connected and anchored. They want to visit what has been called the ‘Museum of Me.’”<sup>8</sup> Utilizing online genealogical tools, he connected to countless celebrities, as well as former president George H. W. Bush. Through this project, Jacobs sought to make the case for people to be kinder to one another because of our shared “cousin-hood.”<sup>9</sup>

Finding out about 79,999 relatives raised for Jacobs questions about the nature of family and the hierarchy of closeness we feel toward certain individuals. He argues that if all of humanity is one, very large, extended family, it is less important who our immediate relatives are. Maybe,

... we can sometimes make room in our hearts to love others without diminishing what we feel for those already dearest to us. Love is not a zero-sum game.... They tell of a seventeenth-century French missionary in Canada who tried to explain traditional monogamous marriage to a tribesman. The tribesman replied, “Thou hast no sense. You French people love only your own children, but we

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7. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017.

8. *Ibid.*, 22.

9. Jacobs even had a column in *People* magazine in which he interviewed the “cousins” he found by tracing his extended family roots. Here’s a representative exchange from an interview he conducted with *Hot in Cleveland* actress Valerie Bertinelli, available at <https://people.com/celebrity/author-a-j-jacobs-interviews-his-very-distant-cousin-valerie-bertinelli/>:

Jacobs: You are, officially, my aunt’s 6th great uncle’s wife’s mother’s husband’s brother’s wife’s 8th great-granddaughter.

Bertinelli: So I’m practically your sister.



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love all the children of our tribe.” Ignorance of their kids’ paternity apparently [can make] for a more compassionate society.<sup>10</sup>

Taking this line of reasoning a step further, maybe our conception of family shouldn’t even be limited to biological relatives, or even people in our local community or tribe. One modern writer has even offered calling those who share your passion or worldview your “horizontal family” as opposed to your “vertical,” biological family.<sup>11</sup> Though we would assume those with common interest are friends rather than family, Zerubavel gives some credence and sociological substance to this counterintuitive idea:

The family... is an inherently boundless community. Since there is no natural boundary separating recent ancestors from remote ones, there is also no such boundary separating close relatives from distant ones, or even relatives from nonrelatives. Any such boundary is therefore a product of social convention alone. Thus, although it is probably nature that determines that our obligations to others be proportional to our genealogical proximity to them, it is nevertheless unmistakably social norms that specify whose blood or honor we ought to avenge and determine the genealogical reach of family reunification policies. It is likewise social conventions that specify who can claim the share of blood money paid to relatives of homicide victims and determine who we invite to family reunions. Thus, whereas the range of other animals’ kin recognition is determined by nature, it is social norms, conventions, and traditions of classification that determine how widely humans’ range of kin recognition actually extends, and societies indeed often vary in where they draw the line between relatives and nonrelatives.<sup>12</sup>

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10. Jacobs, 180, 57. As Rabbi Dr. Ira Bedzow noted to me in private correspondence, Plato, in *The Republic*, suggests abolishing nuclear families and advocates for the communal raising of children.

11. Jacobs, 96, citing Andrew Solomon, *Far From the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity*.

12. Zerubavel, 72.

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And as the renowned astrophysicist Neil deGrassi Tyson put it in a letter to Jacobs:

My philosophy of root-finding may be unorthodox. I just don't care. And that's not a passive, but active sense of caring. In the tree of life, any two people in the world share a common ancestor – depending only on how far you look. So the line we draw to establish family and heritage is entirely arbitrary. When I wonder what I am capable of achieving, I don't look to family lineage, I look to all human beings. That's the genetic relationship that matters to me. The genius of Isaac Newton, the courage of Gandhi and MLK, the bravery of Joan of Arc, the athletic feats of Michael Jordan, the oratorical skills of Sir Winston Churchill, the compassion of Mother Teresa. I look to the entire human race for inspiration for what I can be – because I am human. Couldn't care less if I were a descendant of kings or paupers, saints or sinners, the valorous or cowardly. My life is what I make of it.<sup>13</sup>

### **ARE YOU MY MOTHER?**

The challenge to the idea above, however, is that while it might make for a sound philosophical argument, it doesn't seem to hold water empirically. There have been many experiments and contexts, including Israeli kibbutzim, in which children have been raised communally, as opposed to in a nuclear family model, only to discover it made parents and children less happy. There is social, psychological, and moral value provided by what we intuitively classify as our family, which, assuming it contains a generally positive dynamic, serves to aid in both general health and even survival, and inculcate values that an individual applies to his or her colleagues, neighbors, and friends. As the saying goes, "Men may change their clothes, their politics, their wives, their religions, their philosophies, [but] they cannot change their grandfathers."<sup>14</sup>

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13. Jacobs, 163.

14. Ibid., 58, 54. See also Diane Swanbrow, "Raising a Child Doesn't Take a Village, Research Shows," Phys.org, September 9, 2011, <https://phys.org/news/2011-09-child-doesnt->

## THE JEWISH FAMILY

Judaism, of course, is based upon the story of a family. The Book of Genesis is the story of chosen children, with the tales of those who were not chosen relegated to the periphery.<sup>15</sup> Like many families, the Jewish family's "dynastic mental structure" is conceived of as a "single identity" with "particular norms of remembrance."<sup>16</sup> Thus, while one might refer to one's country of origin as "motherland" or refer to the "founding fathers" of the United States, to the Jewish people, Israel is the land of our *actual* mothers and fathers, and our norms of family remembrance are found in the Torah. We are *Benei Yisrael*, the children of our forefather Israel.

Following the completion of the Bible, the advent of the monarchy, and the sweep of subsequent Jewish history, what has emerged within the story of the Children of Israel is the anticipated restoration of one particular line within our family. We hope and pray multiple times throughout our liturgy for the resumed authority of the Davidic line through the coming of the *Mashiah*, the ultimate redeemer.<sup>17</sup>

With this background in mind, let us examine the Book of Ruth, which ends with a genealogy culminating with the birth of David, the ancestor of the eventual Messiah. Let us examine how the ancestral story of David's family is told and how it might inform our understanding of family in our own lives.

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village.html; Lars-Toralf-Storstrand, "Utopian Ideals Don't Mix Well with Child Welfare Policies," *The Sunday Guardian*, March 31, 2018, <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/culture/utopian-ideals-dont-mix-well-child-welfare-policies>; and Rachel Epstein, Paula Rerer, Orna Tzischinsky, and Peretz Lavie, "Changing from Communal to Familial Sleep Arrangement in the Kibbutz: Effects on Sleep Quality," *Sleep* 20 (5): 334–339.

15. This phenomenon has been examined extensively by many. See, for recent examples, Cynthia R. Chapman, *The House of the Mother: The Social Roles of Maternal Kin in Biblical Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); and Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Schocken Books, 2015).

16. Zerubavel, 19, 67.

17. *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 66. See also Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel* (London: Roman & Littlefield, 2000), 252–254.

## TEN GENERATIONS

The Book of Ruth ends with a list of ten generations:

Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez begot Hezron; and Hezron begot Ram, and Ram begot Amminadab; and Amminadab begot Nahshon, and Nahshon begot Salmon; and Salmon begot Boaz, and Boaz begot Obed; and Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David. (Ruth 4:18–22)

A story that began with an Israelite family leaving Bethlehem and dwelling in Moab for around ten years (1:4), during which time a father and two sons died, now lists ten generations of progeny, a healthy and vibrant family line. The birthing of sons has replaced the death of sons.<sup>18</sup> Beyond this portrayal of restoration, the list has a structure that serves a political function as well. The list could have started with Judah, father of Perez, or even Jacob, Judah's father, but starting with Perez puts David tenth in line, matching an earlier biblical pattern. Just as there were ten generations from Adam to Noah, and another ten from Noah to Abraham, David is listed as the culmination of ten generations. This structure suggests that the book is situating David in the pantheon of foundational biblical figures.<sup>19</sup>

The “surprise ending” of David's birth also reshapes our perception of the entire preceding narrative. Through the realization that this tale of a bereft Naomi and her former daughter-in-law, the Moabite Ruth, ends up producing the ultimate Israelite king, the reader sees how a savior is born through the acts of loyalty and kindness demonstrated by its characters. In the words of Professor André LaCocque:

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18. Todd Linafelt, *Ruth: Berit Olam – Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 80.

19. See Zvi Ron, “The Genealogical List in the Book of Ruth: A Symbolic Approach,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 38:2 (2010): 85–92. As Ron notes, this is the only occurrence of the word “*toldot*” outside of the Torah. As he also points out, starting the list with Perez also places Boaz in the seventh spot on the list, another common favorable biblical number. Note, as well, that despite Boaz stating that he is marrying Ruth to preserve the name of her dead husband, it is Boaz's family memorialized in the genealogy, not Mahlon's.

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The genealogy is their announcement of victory...in the West, individualism has become so excessive, so egocentric, that all devotedness to a future generation appears obsolete and even ridiculous in the eyes of some...but the facts of history do teach us that we cannot take the survival of the group for granted. After Auschwitz, the people of Naomi – who are also Ruth's people – know that they are vulnerable. It was already so in ancient Israel. The discontinuation of the name – that is, of the family, the clan – meant annihilation... what has to be assured is not the number but history, the promise, the hope. The typical modern individual does not have any history, only episodes, like the soap operas on television. But Israel has a history, a history oriented toward the coming of the kingdom of God and its regent, the Messiah... put simply, the story of Ruth is pulled from the episodic and placed, from the perspective of Israel's history, into salvation history.<sup>20</sup>

Living during the troublesome era of the Book of Judges, in which each man did what was right in his own eyes because there was no ruler to unify the nation, Ruth's selfless acts bore the nation's salvific figure, the conqueror of Jerusalem and the singer of Psalms. As Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky suggest, "For an ancient audience this final genealogy would have been an exhilarating conclusion; good people have been rewarded with the high honor of illustrious progeny."<sup>21</sup>

### **THE FEMALE GENEALOGY**

Like all such biblical lists, the final verses of Ruth list male progenitors.<sup>22</sup> However, prior to those last few verses, the narratives offer what

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20. *Ruth: A Continental Commentary*, trans. K. C. Hanson, Continental Commentaries Series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 122.

21. *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2011), 92–93.

22. Jacobs notes that this phenomenon is not exclusive to the Bible: "Even if we find the names of women from our past on various government documents, we often know little beyond that. Women are frequently ciphers, lacking stories, feelings, opinions" (p. 232). Along similar lines, in *Leveling the Playing Field: Advancing Women in Jewish Organizational Life* (St. Paul: Cambridge Leadership Associates, 2008), editors Shifra

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some have suggested is a female genealogy as well, one whose allusions offer even greater insight into the story of David's birth. In this scene, in which Ruth is married to Boaz, the names of certain female biblical heroines are evoked:

And all the people that were in the gate, and the elders, said: "We are witnesses. May God make the woman that is coming into your house like *Rachel* and like *Leah*, those two who built the house of Israel; and be worthy in Ephrat, and be famous in Bethlehem; and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom *Tamar* bore to Judah, of the seed which God shall give you of this young woman." So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife; and he was intimate with her, and God gave her conception, and she bore a son. And the women said unto Naomi: "Blessed be God, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and let his name be famous in Israel. And he shall be for you a restorer of life, and a nourisher for you in your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him." And Naomi took the child, and embraced him, and became his nurse. And the women her neighbors gave it a name, saying: "There is a son born to Naomi"; and they called his name Obed; he is the father of Jesse, the father of David. (4:11–17)

This is the only time in the entire Bible where characters are blessed through the invoking of female characters. Ruth is mentioned as an analogue to none other than Rachel and Leah, two foundational women, mothers and wives. In this radical acceptance of a stranger, a Moabite widow becomes an honorary biblical matriarch.<sup>23</sup>

In the coda of Ruth, the invocation of Rachel and Leah, as well as Tamar, is more than a simple reference to memorable female biblical

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Bronznick, Didi Goldenhar, and Marty Linsky suggest we "listen carefully at meetings and public events. Extract the stories and folklore from the organizational history. Are the triumphs and inspirational moments tethered only to male 'heroes'? Where have women played important roles?" (p. 88).

23. See Chapman, 220; and Rachel E. Adelman, *The Female Ruse: Women's Deception & Divine Sanction in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), 91.

characters. All three of these earlier women, along with the daughters of Lot, have been subtly alluded to over the course of Ruth's tale. All of them, like Ruth, ensured the viability of their family line through personal sacrifice in the form of "bedtricks" of varying degrees of deception and morality.<sup>24</sup> After fleeing the destruction of Sodom, the daughters of Lot made their father drunk and slept with him, thereby producing Ammon and Moab, the latter of which is Ruth's ancestor (Gen. 19). Leah was switched for Rachel on Jacob's wedding night (Gen. 29:25) and the two sisters often fought over their husband, once trading a night with Jacob for mandrakes (30:16). And Tamar dressed as a veiled harlot and slept with Judah (ch. 38).<sup>25</sup> However, as contemporary scholar Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel emphasizes, Ruth and Boaz's story stands both among and beyond those earlier narratives.

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24. See Adelman, 94. Noticing the usage of the masculine "*shteihem*" – "the two of them" in the invocation, writers Shera Tuchman and Sandra Rapoport suggest:

It was their passionate desire for bearing and raising children that formed the dominant theme of Rachel and Leah's lives, and this driving force is the basis for the millennia-old blessing of Ruth. The elders, *invoking the names of Rachel and Leah*, were intoning the benediction of family, generational continuity, and covenantal inheritance upon Ruth ... the Bible uses the masculine form with reference to these biblical women when they take equivalent action to that of their male counterparts. The elders blessed Ruth to be like Rachel and Leah because *both* these matriarchs built the "house of Israel" as partners with the patriarchs [emphasis in the original]. (*The Passion of the Matriarchs* [Jersey City: KTAV, 2004], 346)

See also Prof. Ezra Sivan, "Team of Rivals: Building Israel Like Rachel and Leah," *The Lehrhaus*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/team-of-rivals-building-israel-like-rachel-and-leah/>, who similarly suggests that "*shteihem*" is meant to emphasize that, like Ruth, who also transcended family challenges, "Rachel and Leah were more effective and powerful agents in 'building of the house of Israel' than we might have imagined."

25. Numerous scholars have pointed out the thematic and literary parallels between the episodes of Lot's daughters, Tamar, and Ruth, including the death of two husbands, departure from a place of residence, a father figure and daughter figure, and the root words for "knowledge" (*yada*) and "destruction" (*shahat*) appearing in each context, among others. Sivan, "Team of Rivals," lists numerous parallels between Ruth and Rachel and Leah, including displacement, leaving foreign gods, the presence of witnesses reinforcing rites, and the crucial role played by Bethlehem.

In contrast to the masculine list, which is summarily “historical,” the feminine list is portrayed as “herstory” and as part of... Boaz and Ruth’s wedding scene. This list functions as a connecting link for the formal closing of the book and a disposition to recast forbidden actions into “an expression of blessing” is prominent in it. Absent here is the unforgiving terminology found in the original story: the figure of the *qedesha* or the prostitute at the entrance of Enaim, the problematic revelation at Boaz’s feet, and the hesitation of the redeemer to corrupt his inheritance, the threat of the world’s annihilation in the story of Lot’s daughters and their abandonment to be raped in the beginning of the story of Sodom, the poverty, calamity, and death that accompany Ruth and Tamar, the clashing of the sisters Rachel and Leah. All of these are transformed into unified harmony in the mouths of the congratulators at the city’s gate.<sup>26</sup>

Through their mention in this story, these earlier women are woven into the fabric of Israel’s royal history, and their sacrifices reach an apex in Ruth’s actions. Whereas those earlier stories were tales of deceit, lack of knowledge, seduction, and trickery, Ruth’s “bedtrick” at the threshing floor was a call to action that necessitated recognition and awareness on the part of the individual actors, and that resulted in “fully legitimate, legally certified” marriage. From Lot’s daughters’ incest, to Rachel and Leah’s wedding night switch, to Tamar’s disguised harlotry, we have progressed, finally, to a public marriage ceremony at the city gates of Bethlehem.<sup>27</sup> Through Ruth, those earlier episodes are thus redeemed, affirmed, and celebrated.<sup>28</sup> Maybe this is why the male genea-

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26. *Holiness and Transgression: Mothers of the Messiah in the Jewish Myth* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2017), 14.

27. Kaniel, 35.

28. See Harold Fisch, “Ruth and the Structure of the Covenant History,” *Vetus Testamentum* 32 (1982): 425–437. He notes the episodes reflect a social development in the ancient world with Lot’s daughters representing a cave-dweller society, Tamar (and one could add Rachel and Leah) a pastoral society, and Ruth an agrarian society. See also Adelman, 95, 119–121 and Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, 93.



logical list begins with the name Perez, which means “breach.”<sup>29</sup> Daring to breach propriety for the sake of family, these women not only ensured the continuation of their family line, they provided national salvation.

### **STRUGGLES, STORYTELLING, AND SALVATION**

By telling the story of King David’s genealogy through the Book of Ruth, the text is offering a nuanced framework for thinking about our own history, both national and familial. As psychologist Dr. Lisa Miller has demonstrated, the ability for families to articulate their struggles and challenges builds resilience among their members.<sup>30</sup> Through the tale of a foreign, marginalized widow, whose personal risk mirrors that of other biblical mothers, we are reminded of the sacrifices that sustain the continuity of the Jewish people. We are reminded of the ability of kindness to heal. And we are reminded of the power of family, both biological and beyond. Ruth’s story inspires us to meet the challenges of our own circumstances. Through the tale of communal openness to a disconnected stranger, we are given the keys to redemption.<sup>31</sup> After all, it is the eventual offspring of Lot’s daughter, Rachel and Leah, Tamar, and Ruth, with a family bloodline of struggle, alienation, and foreignness, coupled with selfless dedication to continuity, who is uniquely suited to lead the Children of Israel and bring the nations of the world closer to God.<sup>32</sup> Like Moses, whose virtues and leadership abilities were

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29. See Adelman, 121–122.

30. See *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving* (New York: Picador, 2015), 291.

31. Orit Avner, “Who is in and who is out? The two voices of Ruth,” *Havruta Magazine* (The Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, 2010): 77.

32. See Ruth Rabba 8:1 and Rabbi Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: An Anthology of Interpretation and Commentary on the Five Books of Moses – Bereishis* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1994), 256–257; See also, Kaniel, 20:

These women, going to the threshing floor, to the cave, and the entrance of Enaim, disguised and hidden, are figures whose essence is flexible and their “unstable” identities are a source of power, allowing them to enlarge circles and create a life outside of strict tribal boundaries. By not belonging to any place, they belong to every place. In accordance with their identification with “untamed nature,” they are depicted as running wild and crafting “culture” anew. This is the way Tamar, Ruth, and Lot’s daughters are integrated into the people

developed through his fractured, foreign experiences in both Egypt and Midian, Ruth too embodies the marginal figure's messianic capabilities.<sup>33</sup>

It is through our own striving to survive and flourish alongside our imperfections, struggles, and feelings of disconnectedness that we will eventually repair a fractured world. To quote Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen in his discussion of the Messiah in *Tzidkat HaTzadik* (#111), "the lowest will become the highest."

This is why Ruth is the progenitor of the Messiah, because the Messiah is the ultimate *meishiv nefesh* (Ruth 4:15), restorer of life and dignity when hope seems lost...to restore the name (Ruth 4:5) is to reach across the generations, and across interpersonal divide, and at times across the divide between aspects or periods within one's own self, in active recognition, provoking true transformation. That is what compassionate redemption means ... in the end, Ruth reminds us that nothing is more beautiful than friendship, that grace begets grace, that blessing flourishes in the place between memory and hope, that light shines most from broken vessels. What else is the Messiah about?<sup>34</sup>

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of Israel, and the messianic heroes are born. From an ethnic perspective, they represent the power of the weak, and their seductive manner reflects ... a vital survival practice against oppressive or life denying forces.

33. See Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 3:

The figure of the foreigner serves as a device that allows regimes to import from outside (and then, often, to export back to outside) some specific and much-needed but also potentially dangerous virtue, talent, perspective, practice, gift, or quality that they cannot provide for themselves (or that they cannot admit they have) ... sometimes foreignness operates as an agent of (re-)founding ... Moses appears as an Egyptian prince to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and bring to them the law from the mountain. The biblical Ruth's migration from Moab to Bethlehem reanimates the alienated Israelites' affective identification with their God while also beginning the line that will lead to King David.

34. Nehemiah Polen, "Dark Ladies and Redemptive Compassion: Ruth and the Messianic Lineage in Judaism," in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 69, 74.

*It's in the Gene(alogy): Family, Storytelling, and Salvation*

In our striving to embody the values inspired by Ruth, may we merit the writing of the next chapter of the Jewish story. May we, as individuals, as members of our family, and as members of the Children of Israel, bring the world compassionate redemption.

# For Insiders or Outsiders? The Book of Ruth's American Jewish Reception

*By Rabbi Dr. Zev Eleff  
Excerpt from *Gleanings: Reflections on Ruth**

**I**n May 1912, the editors of a Boston Jewish weekly published an article on “Ruth and Boaz.” The writers gleaned a number of items from the Book of Ruth, but one lesson, they admitted, stood out: Ruth the Moabite foreigner excelled in the Land of Israelites. Therefore, the journalists surmised, “it makes no difference where a person is born or from what country he comes, if he is only good and noble. It is actions that tell and by our good actions we make ourselves pleasing to God and men.”<sup>35</sup> That they contemporized the short biblical book in this way is

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35. “Bible Lesson: Ruth and Boaz,” *Jewish Advocate* (May 24, 1912): 3.

not surprising. In that moment, the American Jewish community was deeply concerned over legislation that threatened to limit migration to the United States and a rising “Know-Nothing” attitude directed toward newcomers and their American-born children. In fact, the same editors had just one week prior published an editorial on the contributions of migrant populations to the United States. Drawing on Mary Antin’s recently published memoir, the New England journalists had claimed that it was the “immigrant who makes America ‘The Promised Land.’”<sup>36</sup> The biblical figure of Ruth imparted the very same moral. Despite her background, Ruth settles in Judea and makes her home there, one that Scripture reports reared King David and his monarchical descendants.

Understanding the Book of Ruth like this was typical in the United States. In New York, for example, it was not uncommon for journalists to draw a parallel between Ruth and immigrants on Ellis Island.<sup>37</sup> Time and again, Jewish (and non-Jewish) writers and sermonizers looked to Ruth to explore the roles of “insiders” and “outsiders” in American life. Perhaps more than other sacred texts, Ruth is ripe for multiple interpretations. She is born an outsider, into a nation with whom the Torah, on the face of it, forbids from intermarrying (Deut. 23:4), even if the Moabite converts. Despite this, Ruth is transformed into an insider through her genuine conversion to Judaism, reinforced by her pledge to her mother-in-law Naomi: “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me” (Ruth 1:16–17). Ruth’s is an exceptional case – not just anyone can convert to Judaism. Her devotion to Naomi’s family in the face of scrutiny from Israelite insiders and willingness to fulfill the levirate marriage requirements with her kinsman also betokens her commitment to become a member of an exclusive religious group. Then again, Boaz’s final acceptance of Ruth despite her Moabite origins reflects a certain openness to incorporate outsiders and expands the possibility of whom we might consider a less exclusive breed of insiders. Aware of its utility for a so-called Nation of Immigrants, American readers seized on this story to tighten or

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36. “The Land of Promise,” *Jewish Advocate* (May 17, 1912): 8.

37. See “Whither Thou Goest, I Will Go,” *American Hebrew* (June 13, 1913): 192.

## *For Insiders or Outsiders?*

loosen boundary lines between themselves and others around them. Paradoxically, Ruth can be interpreted as a narrative about the selectiveness of insiders or the imperative to reach out and convert outsiders.

The persistent but oscillating image of Ruth is emblematic of how the Bible is discussed and remains forcefully present in the United States. Historians can never be certain whether the women and men quoted in this chapter first looked to the Bible to address cultural, political, and social questions or if they searched through Scripture to justify their point of view. However, this helps to prove that the Bible has always played a major role in American discourse and was utilized to persuade and mobilize others to reconfirm or adopt positions of significant importance.<sup>38</sup> For the Book of Ruth, the protagonist's legacy loomed large for all those considering or reconsidering religious and cultural identities in America's rapidly changing environment.

Ruth's reception in the New World and her transformation to an American insider was not at first a Jewish enterprise. The earliest and most visible Ruthian commentators were Protestants who considered Ruth a proto-Christian or the ancestor of their faith.<sup>39</sup> The Book of Ruth was – and continues to be – one of the most popular studied by women's Christian Bible groups. In the nineteenth century, Christian authors looked to Ruth as a model of refinement and “domesticated religion.” This value, according to historian Richard Bushman, stood at the core of a religious enlightenment that looked to American women to maintain the prevailing religious sentiment in the home. They drew on Ruth's piety and loyalty to Naomi and the rest of Elimelech's household. Ruth's attachment to her mother-in-law struck a chord for American Christian writers who placed increasing value on devotion to mothers and the religious matriarchy that stewarded faith in the home. Like Ruth and her adopted mother, opined one author, “Washington revered his.”<sup>40</sup>

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38. See Timothy Beal, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible: An Unexpected History of an Accidental Book* (New York: Mariner Books, 2011), 1–28.

39. Mary V. Spencer, “The Hebrew Convert,” *Ladies' National Magazine* 11 (June 1847): 199.

40. “Be Kind to Your Mother,” *Christian Observer* (June 1, 1850): 88.

Jews did not object to the adaptation of Ruth to American climes but sought to reclaim her as a Jewish insider.<sup>41</sup> Some took exception to the Christian usage, charging that Protestant preachers had “rob[bed] our finest characters from our Bible.”<sup>42</sup> Yet, when Jewish writers did discuss her, they oftentimes depicted Ruth in similar light. The Jewish educator Herman Baar instructed youngsters that compared to Ruth there were no biblical books or passages “which impress the duties of children toward their parents more beautifully.”<sup>43</sup> In her *Women of Israel*, the English novelist Grace Aguilar singled out Ruth as a symbol of domestic heroism, for her “filial devotion and individual goodness.”<sup>44</sup> First printed in 1845 in London, Aguilar’s well-read book was published in the United States six years later and soon after serialized in the New York Jewish press.<sup>45</sup> The educator and philanthropist Rebecca Gratz of Philadelphia welcomed Aguilar’s work to refute the “impression so much insisted on that women were little considered for by the ancient people.” Measuring Jewish teachings against their Protestant counterparts, wrote Gratz, “in the New Testament I do not know of a character so elevated as Deborah, or so lovely and loving as Ruth.”<sup>46</sup> The same was the case for the composer Sir Fredric Hymen Cowen’s oratorio featuring Ruth and its warm reception among Jews in the United States.<sup>47</sup>

Of course, the synagogue was also an important site for biblical interpretations. In a sermon delivered at B’nai El in St. Louis, Rabbi

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41. See “To the Reader,” *The Israelite* (July 15, 1854): 4. This editorial, penned by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, appeared in the inaugural issue of his long-running and influential Jewish newspaper in Cincinnati.

42. See, for example, A. Benjamin, “Ruth and Modern Converts,” *Jewish Messenger* (August 16, 1878): 6.

43. Herman Baar, *Addresses on Homely and Religious Subjects* (New York: H.O.A. Industrial School, 1880), 249. I thank Dr. Jonathan Sarna for alerting me to this source and furnishing a copy for me to review.

44. Grace Aguilar, *The Women of Israel*, vol. I (London: Groombridge and Sons, 1845), 353.

45. For the quoted section, see Grace Aguilar, “Naomi,” *Jewish Messenger* (November 5, 1858): 89.

46. See Dianne Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 187.

47. “Ruth,” *Jewish Messenger* (October 14, 1887): 5.

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Morris Spitz preached that Ruth's commitment to the Jewish home was in complete concert with Jewish virtues. To him, Ruth was so "deeply impressed with the life and conduct of her husband, with the purity of the domestic happiness that she enjoyed during his lifetime, with the many virtues of his parents, and especially that equanimity and moral strength which the ancestral faith had imparted to Naomi amid the greatest vicissitudes and adversities." This version of Ruthian feminine heroics redounded to the Jewish cause in the United States. In the 1870s, a decade marked by declension and general religious disinterest among Jewish women and men, Spitz believed that this message would resonate with his listeners and propel them to "not merely confess Judaism but also profess it; not only believe in it but rather live in it."<sup>48</sup> In all these instances, Jews depicted Ruth with focused attention to attributes that conformed to American ideals. So doing they hoped would elevate Jews and Judaism to an insider status in the United States.

Ruth assumed an even more prominent place in American Jewish rhetoric as it became more essential to reinforce the Jewish foothold in the United States. This transpired around the turn of the twentieth century, as Jews figured more prominently in discussions over immigration and social justice. From 1880 to 1920, the Jewish population swelled from a quarter-million to more than three million women and men.<sup>49</sup> In this period, Jews were more visible and active in social welfare to support throngs of working-class Eastern European migrants and found the Book of Ruth a source of inspiration to better understand changing conditions of Jews and American identity.<sup>50</sup>

American Jews understood Ruth's quick-paced entrance into the Judean mainstream as an ancient model of democracy and fairness. That her descendant was King David proved the far-reaching

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48. "Ruth, the Moabite," *American Israelite* (March 16, 1883): 309. On Jewish religious declension in the 1870s, see Zev Eleff, *Who Rules the Synagogue? Religious Authority and the Formation of American Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 167–174.

49. For basic population figures of Jews in the United States, see Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 375.

50. See Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 61.



open-mindedness of biblical Judaism. Some argued that the Book of Ruth anticipated the social and political activism that marked the Progressive Era of American life. In Joplin, Missouri, for example, an educator at the United Hebrew Congregation chose to produce a children's play of Ruth over other biblical dramas that did not sufficiently underscore the Social Gospel sensibilities of the contemporaneous American religious scene. Other synagogues likewise featured an amalgamized Ruth-America themed pageants, especially during confirmation ceremonies scheduled for Shavuot, the holiday on which the biblical book was read in synagogue.<sup>51</sup> Owing to the sweeping republican spirit, Ruth appealed to the Missouri Jewish teacher because it was a "pastoral tract on tolerance," "monumental monograph on brotherhood," and "splendid preparation for democracy."<sup>52</sup> Another scholar told a rabbinical group that Ruth is "perhaps one of the earliest appeals ever made in behalf of religious and social equality."<sup>53</sup> All this helped Jews stake the claim that their faith rendered them earnest American insiders against those like industrialist Henry Ford who preferred to speak about a more exclusive Protestant America.<sup>54</sup>

Some reckoned that Ruth proved that Judaism could embrace even wider notions of religious choice and American inclusiveness.<sup>55</sup> In particular, Reform leaders were interested in changing non-Jewish outsiders to Jewish insiders. To them, Ruth's was a call for increased

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51. See "Leavenworth, Kan.," *American Israelite* (May 13, 1915): 2; and "Children's Pageant on Temple Lawn," *American Israelite* (June 6, 1918): 6.

52. Joseph Leiser, "The Drama as a Means of Religious Instruction," *American Israelite* (April 20, 1916): 1.

53. See Sidney S. Tedesche, "Jewish Champions of Religious Liberty," *CCAR Year Book* 36 (1926): 202.

54. For one interesting use of Ruth to combat the vocal prejudices of Henry Ford by a US Senator, see Joseph S. Frelinghuysen, "The Jews and World Progress," *Jewish Advocate* (December 7, 1922): 12. For an brief overview of the history of tolerance and antisemitism in the United States, see Zev Eleff, "The Jewish Encounter with Discrimination, Tolerance and Pluralism in the United States," in *Interpreting American Jewish History at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Avi Decter (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 161–178.

55. On this, see Lincoln A. Mullen, *The Chance of Salvation: A History of Conversion in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 9–11.

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proselytizing – or at least vigorously welcoming, as the historian Heinrich Graetz had suggested – converts to Judaism.<sup>56</sup> Rabbi William Rosenau of Baltimore recognized a need to welcome gentiles into the Jewish fold in order to justify his faith's alignment with American pluralism. Conversion proved the porousness of the insider-outsider dichotomy. Rosenau approvingly quoted the British thinker Claude Montefiore who had suggested about Ruth that the “book shows a fidelity wider than race.”<sup>57</sup> And it was not just rabbis. A World War I veteran turned magazine publisher scolded the “old fogey Jews” who rejected loose conversion standards as a “terrible heresy,” and provided Ruth and Boaz as a counterexample.<sup>58</sup> He would have likely, then, approved of the conversion of actress Elizabeth Taylor who switched religions from Christian Science to Judaism. Her Jewish education lasted nine months under the supervision of Reform Rabbi Max Nussbaum. Taylor converted shortly after her engagement to musician Eddie Fisher but made clear that her interest in Judaism had stemmed from her earlier marriage to Michael Todd (née Avrom Hirsch Goldbogen) and their conversations about the travails of Ruth.<sup>59</sup>

Some still understood the Book of Ruth as a tale of exclusiveness and the need for firm barriers between Jewish insiders and gentile outsiders. Tradition-minded Jews read about Ruth's singular determination to become a Jewess and surmised that the rank-and-file were undeserving of similar pathways to Judaism. Just the opposite, Ruth justified the claims to maintain stricter standards for conversion. In Philadelphia, the pseudonymous “Judaeus” expressed his disappointment that Reform Jews had adopted such openness when evaluating the merits of

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56. See Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, vol. I (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1891), 370–371.

57. William Rosenau, “Illustrative Lesson on the ‘Book of Ruth,’” *The Sentinel* (July 21, 1911): 12; and Claude G. Montefiore, *The Bible for Home Reading*, vol. I (London: Macmillan and Co., 1899), 184.

58. William B. Ziff, “Jewry Must About Face!” *The Sentinel* (November 8, 1934): 9.

59. Richard Mathison, “Liz Taylor's Conversion to Judaism Explained,” *Los Angeles Times* (April 4, 1959): B2. Interestingly, Ruth's image was not much invoked in 1956 when Marilyn Monroe converted to Judaism. On this episode, see Lila Corwin Berman, *Speaking of Jews: Rabbis, Intellectuals, and the Creation of an American Public Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 143–167.

prospective converts. This writer was willing to accept choice candidates, to “welcome such proselytes as Ruth who, widowed and impoverished, still clung to her adopted nation and religion”<sup>60</sup> Others, however, were unworthy of Jewish insider status. Toward mid-century, Aaron Rosmarin of the Religious Zionist’s Mizrahi Organization offered a similar point, contending that Ruth was better understood as a critique of individuals who ignored important distinctions between Jewish and Christian religious identities:

The story of Ruth is an ancient tale with current implications that fit right into the contemporary American Jewish scene. There you have the full gallery of our contemporaries – the man who seeks to sever relations with his Jewish past and present, who seeks to escape his own people through the self-effacement of his national self and whose children go even farther, using intermarriage as a means for complete racial and religious self-denial. And there you have, too, Ruth – the perpetual symbol of the few and elite who, non-Jews at birth, find ties of human kinship with the Jew in the hour when some of his own kin desert him.<sup>61</sup>

But Rosmarin’s assessment of Ruth stood in contrast with the prevailing American spirit of civil rights, pluralism, and tolerance. Consider Reform Rabbi Albert Goldstein of Boston who maintained that Boaz’s generosity to Ruth and Naomi could be a model for political support of the “native Negro” or the “Puerto Rican fellow citizen.”<sup>62</sup> Additionally, in the post-World War II period many Americans started to subscribe to a common set of “Judeo-Christian” values. This attitude changed Jewish feelings about insider-outsider dynamics, even for sensitive cases of conversion. In 1940, for instance, Orthodox Rabbi Samuel Rosenblatt cautioned that most conversions in Jewish history had resulted in “fiascos”

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60. Judaeus, “The Book of Ruth and Intermarriage,” *Jewish Exponent* (May 20, 1904): 4.

61. Aaron Rosmarin, “The Legends of Ruth,” *Jewish Advocate* (May 25, 1944): 5; and *Jewish Exponent* (May 11, 1945): 16.

62. Albert S. Goldstein, “Conversion to Judaism in Bible Times,” in *Conversion to Judaism: A History and Analysis*, ed. Max Eichhorn (New York: Ktav, 1965), 31.

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because “would-be-converts to Judaism” rarely reached Ruth’s pedestal.<sup>63</sup> By the late 1950s, Rosenblatt drew a far different lesson from Ruth: that “Jewish religion looks with favor upon newcomers to the Jewish fold.”<sup>64</sup>

Nonetheless, the Book of Ruth remained useful to set apart outsiders from the establishment of insiders. The challenge was to identify an insider-outsider binary that resonated with American perspectives. Take, for instance, Twentieth Century Fox’s 1960 movie, *The Story of Ruth*. Though Fox did not invest the same sort of resources that Universal International contributed to Kirk Douglas’ *Spartacus* blockbuster which appeared the same year – \$5 million in contrast to \$12 million – the Ruth movie was a major production with clear political implications.<sup>65</sup> The widescreen rendition of Ruth was intended to reach a wide swath of viewers and to leverage the heroine as the ancestor of a “Tri-Faith America” of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews and to unite these groups against their common Cold War enemy: the Soviet Union.<sup>66</sup>

It was critical for producer Samuel Engel to cast someone who could appeal as an Israelite and appeared like the rank-and-file American woman. Engel selected the “Western-looking” nineteen-year-old Elana (née Cooper) Eden, an Israeli-born actress and daughter of Eastern European immigrants.<sup>67</sup> Not at all a household name, Eden still managed to win the role over 800 applicants, including Elizabeth Taylor and Sophia Loren.<sup>68</sup> Eden had trained at Tel Aviv’s Habima Theatre and was the runner-up to Millie Perkins for the part of Anne Frank in the 1959 Fox film. The missed opportunity in the sure-to-be-acclaimed movie left Eden “fearfully depressed.” But the audition serendipitously

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63. Samuel Rosenblatt, *Our Heritage* (New York: Bloch, 1940), 161.

64. Samuel Rosenblatt, *Hear, Oh Israel* (New York: Philipp Feldheim, Inc., 1958), 351.

65. See Herbert G. Luft, “Our Film Folk,” *Jewish Advocate* (September 22, 1960): 15A.

66. See Kevin M. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 15–42.

67. Thomas McDonald, “‘Ruth’ in Reality and on Screen,” *New York Times* (January 31, 1960): X7.

68. See Arthur J. Berenson, “Like Ruth Amid the Alien Corn,” *Jewish Post and Opinion* (May 27, 1960): 1; and Leonard Mendlowitz, “Star of ‘Story of Ruth’ an Israeli Sabra,” *Jewish Criterion* (June 10, 1960): 5.

helped her edge out the competition for the Ruth movie.<sup>69</sup> Engel discovered Eden while reviewing the studio files in the recently completed Holocaust-themed film.<sup>70</sup>

In addition, Engel needed a script that would capture the attention of Jewish and Christian audiences. Screenwriter Norman Corwin therefore made sure to depict Ruth as a progenitor of both “insider” faiths. In one scene that liberally departed from Scripture, a town prophet tells Naomi that “through your daughter-in-law shall shoot forth many children and children’s children, and a great king, and a prophet whom many shall worship as the messiah.” One Jewish pundit took umbrage, decrying this use of creative license as “pitiful” and an altogether “objectionable scene.”<sup>71</sup> But most let it slide. Instead, Jewish reviewers praised the film, dubbing it a “distinct tribute to the People of the Book.”<sup>72</sup> American Jewish socialites welcomed Eden to Hollywood stardom, inviting her to major galas and fundraisers.<sup>73</sup> In the general press, a *New York Times* reviewer panned the movie as “rather stiff and pompous” but most other major critics in Boston and Los Angeles disagreed, offering praise for the newcomer Eden and the film.<sup>74</sup>

The Ruth film also resonated with the American public because of its portrayal of a familiar “outsider” enemy. Like the common impression of the Communist villains, Engel’s movie depicted the Moabites

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69. Hedda Hopper, “Elana Eden at 19 Captures Stardom in Her First Film,” *Los Angeles Times* (May 8, 1960): H4.

70. See Philip K. Schneuer, “She Tested as Anne, Plays Ruth!” *Los Angeles Times* (December 23, 1959): 13.

71. Tim Boxer, “The Story of Ruth: Refreshing Diversion from Hollywood Formula,” *The Sentinel* (June 23, 1960): 9.

72. Herbert G. Luft, “Story of Ruth Tribute to the Jewish People,” *B’nai B’rith Messenger* (July 22, 1960): 8.

73. See, for example, “Stage Israel Salute Rally,” *B’nai B’rith Messenger* (July 22, 1960): 1; and “‘Ruth’ Star, Deferred from Israel Army, Visits Atlanta,” *Southern Israelite* (June 3, 1960): 4.

74. See Bosley Crowther, “Screen ‘Story of Ruth,’” *New York Times* (June 18, 1960): 12; Marjory Adams, “Garden of Elana Eden Made Gay by Ruth Role,” *Boston Globe* (June 13, 1960): 22; and Philip K. Scheuer, “Sincerity Marked in ‘Story of Ruth,’” *Los Angeles Times* (July 1, 1960): 25.

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as heartless with an “ideology so hostile to the Israelites.”<sup>75</sup> Before her conversion, Ruth at first denounces Mahlon’s “invisible God” and cannot understand how the Jewish Deity could disapprove of slaves and human sacrifices. Before his death – in this iteration, he is styled a martyred hero – Mahlon gives Ruth a miniature gold-plated Ten Commandments that symbolized a legal and moral code unknown to the religiously unscrupulous Moabites. Then, after accompanying Naomi back to Judea, Ruth encounters Boaz who laments the “long hard history between our countries.” Ruth reminds Boaz and his Jewish brethren of their honorable and peace-loving religion. She is the once-outsider convert who counterintuitively restores the “Judeo-Christian” heritage to her new community of insiders and the American moviegoers who, Engel and Corwin would have had it, were due for a similar Bible lesson. Ruth’s red, white, and blue outfits and the iconic image of the Ten Commandments then in vogue in American religious life do much to reinforce the issue.<sup>76</sup>

On the whole, Ruth persisted as a symbol of inclusion and “big-tent” insiderness to American Jews and non-Jews alike. For example, the Jewish children’s writer Bea Stadtler’s serialized and syndicated stories about “Debbie” often used the Book of Ruth to preach inclusion of neighbors, converts, and different varieties of Jews.<sup>77</sup> In an article published in the pages of *Conservative Judaism*, Rabbi Monford Harris wrote about the importance of togetherness, acceptance, and how Ruth supported “family cohesiveness spanning the generations.”<sup>78</sup> Jewish feminists also seized on the image of Ruth, utilizing the biblical figure in inclusive-minded liturgies designed to make space for those who claimed feelings

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75. See, for example, Herbert G. Luft, “Corwin Writes Biblical Scenario,” *B’nai B’rith Messenger* (March 18, 1960): 25.

76. See Jenna Weissman Joselit, *Set in Stone: America’s Embrace of the Ten Commandments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 101–126.

77. See Bea Stadtler, “Debbie and the Book of Ruth,” *Jewish Advocate* (May 27, 1982): 2; and Bea Stadtler, “Debbie ‘Gleans’ Her Closet,” *Jewish Advocate* (May 23, 1985): 17.

78. Monford Harris, “‘The Way of Man with a Maid’ – Romantic or Leal Love,” *Conservative Judaism* 14 (Winter 1960): 36. See also Joel Rembaum, “Dealing with Strangers: Relations with Gentiles at Home and Abroad,” in *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, ed. David L. Lieber (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2001), 1379–1380.

of marginalization.<sup>79</sup> The Ruth story also inspired creative conjurings of how the multifaceted and all-embracing Jewish infrastructure handles all different kinds of Jews. In 1975, New York's Board of Jewish Education reimaged the biblical tale in "today's world"; how the well-heeled and robust Jewish social welfare organizations might have partnered to solve the plight of Naomi and Ruth:

They would have turned to the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) in Moab for assistance. Through the Jewish Agency they would have been flown to Israel, put up in the absorption center for new *olim* where they would have stayed for months, being processed, learning Hebrew and adjusting to their new surroundings. The Jewish Agency also would have sought housing for them and Naomi, an elderly woman, might have entered a Malben institution for necessary care. Ruth, after marrying Boaz and bearing a son, might enroll him either in an ORT (Organization for Rehabilitation through Training) school to learn a trade or in a UJA academic high school.<sup>80</sup>

Then again, perhaps Ruth would have looked to resettle elsewhere. Once again, the Board of Education indulged a self-described "fantasy"

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79. See Norma Baumel Joseph, "Letters," *Women's Tefillah Newsletter* 1 (August, 1985): 4; Penina V. Adelman, *Miriam's Well: Rituals for Jewish Women Around the Year* (New York: Biblio Press, 1990), 84–93; and Annette Daum, "Language and Liturgy," in *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue*, ed. Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 201.

80. *Tzedakah Guidelines: A Discussion and Program Guide for Pupils and Teachers, Shavuoth 5735* (New York: Board of Jewish Education, Inc., 1975), 3. All of the listed organizations are familiar to general readers with the exception of Malben. Founded in 1949 by the Joint Distribution Committee, Malben aimed to assist "handicapped immigrants" in Israel. I thank my colleague Menachem Butler for obtaining a copy of this pamphlet for my research. Much earlier, in 1926, the Hebrew writer Hayim Nahman Bialik, influenced by midrashic literature, authored his own alternate-history of Ruth titled *Megillat Orpah*. This was translated and summarized in the American Jewish press. See, for instance, Bea Stadler, "Of Ruth and Orpah," *Jewish Advocate* (May 23, 1974): A11.

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of biblical proportions. In a second retelling, Ruth and Naomi would have fared just fine in New York:

Had they elected to settle in the United States, they would have been aided by the United HIAS Service (HIAS) and the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA). Upon arrival on these shores, Ruth might have availed herself of one of Federation's 130 social service, health, educational and recreational agencies. Naomi might have been placed in one of Federation's six homes for the aged and/or sought health care in one of the eleven hospitals and medical care facilities supported by Federation.

Ruth might have turned to the New York Board of Rabbis for spiritual guidance and clarification of her religious status. After marrying Boaz and giving birth to a son, she could have turned to the Board of Jewish Education for information on the religious schools available in her neighborhood. For recreational activities, her children would attend the local "Y."<sup>81</sup>

The exception to Ruthian inclusiveness was the Orthodox. For the so-called Yeshiva World sector of this religious group, Ruth's was a message of merit, authenticity, and, most of all, exclusiveness. Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer put forward the Book of Ruth as a stark counter-example to the ever-changing "situational ethics" of American life. In his reading of the sacred text, Ruth served as a hallmark of steadfast devotion to a timeless set of principles and people that could not be widened or reoriented.<sup>82</sup> Likewise, Rabbi Nosson Scherman admonished readers in the earliest years of the ArtScroll publishing enterprise that even in the turbulent years in which Ruth lived, "Israel was far, far above the moral, ethical, scholarly, and religious standards of the twentieth century which so enjoys basking in the self-anointed status of occupant of civilization's

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81. Ibid.

82. Avrohom Chaim Feuer, "To Kiss – Or to Embrace? The Book of Ruth and Kabolat Ha'Torah," *Jewish Observer* 5 (May 1969): 18–19.



highest rung.”<sup>83</sup> This same circle also took issue with the Board of Education’s Ruthian counter-history. Rabbi Nisson Wolpin shuddered to consider the outcome of Ruth’s experiences with the myriad of modern-day Federation-led aid institutions. In Israel’s absorption center, “would she have learned the 613 mitzvos?” Had Naomi moved into an old-age facility, “who would have directed Ruth to Boaz?” On the prospect of Ruth’s encounter with the New York Board of Rabbis, Wolpin lambasted, “Imagine the liberating experience for Ruth if Board-member Rabbi Sally Priesand is her counselor or any other Reform member, for that matter, when she petitions for ‘clarification of her religious status’: Would they require her to accept the authority of a personal-and-universal Deity and His mitzvos, when they themselves do not?”<sup>84</sup>

The Modern Orthodox rabbinate also tended to read the Book of Ruth as establishing borderlines when it came to conversion, even if its rhetoric was mild compared to the Orthodox Right. To be sure, there were some like Rabbi Shlomo Riskin who drew upon Ruth to urge against stricter conversion standards in the State of Israel, and to “accept the sincere proselyte with sensitivity and compassion.”<sup>85</sup> But Rabbi Walter Wurzburger seems to have spoken for more of his Orthodox-affiliated Rabbinical Council of America colleagues who highlighted Ruth as a narrow example of someone who punctiliously abided by “all the conditions governing Jews.”<sup>86</sup> Wurzburger criticized Reform leaders who used Ruth to extend the borders of Jewish identity without recalling that she was also the prototype for unimpeachable faith and sincere conversion. Similarly, Rabbi Basil Herring advocated an “approach that

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83. Nossou Scherman, “An Overview – Ruth and the Seeds of Mashiach,” in *Megillas Ruth: A New Translation with a Commentary*, ed. Meir Zlotowitz (New York: ArtScroll Studios, 1976), xxvii. For a trenchant critique of this volume, see Isaac Boaz Gottlieb, “The Book of Ruth,” *Tradition* 21 (Spring 1983): 75–83. Other Ruth commentaries appeared around this time in English but do not seem to have offered similar contemporary critiques. See “Books in Review,” *Jewish Observer* 11 (May 1976): 29–30.

84. “‘Borrowed’ Symbols,” *Jewish Observer* 10 (May 1975): 25–26. In June 1972, Rabbi Sally Priesand became the first woman ordained at the Reform-affiliated Hebrew Union College.

85. Steven Riskin, “Conversion in Jewish Law,” *Tradition* 14 (Fall 1973): 39.

86. Walter S. Wurzburger, “Patrilineal Descent and the Jewish Identity Crisis,” *Judaism* 34 (Winter 1985): 122.

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carefully screens potential converts, that does not accept them for conversion until it becomes quite clear after study and practice that they will subscribe in deed to the laws of the Torah and the tradition, in the faithful pattern of Ruth the daughter-in-law of Naomi.”<sup>87</sup>

Similar sentiments can be found in less obvious venues and among less typical Orthodox personalities. One writer felt compelled to remind the readers of an Orthodox women’s magazine that the process for conversion was long and not every prospective proselyte completes the training or is in the end accepted like Ruth. His intention was to warn “those eager beavers who can’t wait to propose a match for this bright new kid on the block even before he or she has completed the formal requirements” for conversion.<sup>88</sup> As well, the popular and progressive Israeli thinker, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, submitted that Ruth “require[s] us to welcome the proselyte in our midst” specifically because she was “unique in the Scriptures in that she is described as being wholly pure” – among the Moabites she was viewed as an “exception, as an outsider.”<sup>89</sup>

Then again, in a more recent formulation, the leading Orthodox scholar Rabbi Hershel Schachter offered that the Book of Ruth is traditionally read on Shavuot because it is emblematic of the source of all “*kedushat Yisrael*,” Jewish sanctity. Even the Israelites at Sinai stood along the foothills as outsiders before “converting” to Judaism.<sup>90</sup> This, then, is the dual and oft-competing American legacy of Ruth. The biblical heroine is at once a principled convert who set a formidable standard for anyone else seeking to become a Jewish insider and a reminder to include the outsider, a theme of tolerance that touches upon a longstanding tension in the United States. Like other biblical figures, the malleable

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87. Basil F. Herring, “To Convert or Not to Convert,” *RCA Sermon Manual* 39 (1981): 193. See also Bernard L. Berzon, “The Symptoms of a World Gone Mad,” *RCA Sermon Manual* 44 (1986): 25.

88. Ira Axelrod, “The Strangers Among Us,” *Jewish Homemaker* (June 1993): 29.

89. See Adin Steinsaltz, *Biblical Images: Men and Women of the Book*, trans. Yehuda Hanegbi and Yehudit Keshet (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 117–123. On the reception and controversy surrounding this book, see “Right-Wing Rabbis Ban Scholars’ Books,” *Jewish Week* (August 25, 1989): 9.

90. Zvi Schachter, “BeGeder Kedushat Yisrael,” in *Rav Chesed: Essays in Honor of Rabbi Dr. Haskel Lookstein*, vol. II, ed. Rafael Medoff (Jersey City: Ktav, 2009), 208.

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image of Ruth mattered much to Jews and other religious people looking to anchor themselves and their experiences in the swift-changing currents of American culture.

# Why Was the Book of Ruth Written?

*Excerpt from Ruth:  
From Alienation to Monarchy  
by Dr. Yael Ziegler*

**R**uth does not seem to be, at first blush, a very dramatic book. Its modest account begins with the journey of a family from Bethlehem to Moab during a famine. Tragedy ensues, all the male members of the family die, and Naomi is left alone, without her husband or sons. Nevertheless, Naomi's daughters-in-law accompany her on her return to Bethlehem, proclaiming their intention to remain with her. Assuming that the women are interested in remarriage, Naomi strongly discourages them. While Orpah is persuaded to return to Moab, Ruth insists on accompanying her mother-in-law, declaring her eternal devotion to Naomi.

In the ensuing account, Ruth manages to procure food for herself and Naomi from Boaz, a wealthy landowner. After physical survival is ensured, Ruth approaches Boaz at night in his fields with the intent of marriage, so as to ensure continuity for Naomi's family and land. Boaz

assures Ruth that he, as a relative of Naomi's dead husband, will take responsibility for her remarriage. The story ends happily with the birth of a child to Ruth and Boaz.

Why is the Book of Ruth included in the Bible? This serene, rather uneventful account of Naomi's return to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law Ruth, and their successful bid to obtain food and a husband for Ruth, seems no more than a nice, if unremarkable, narrative.

### **RUTH: A BOOK OF REWARD FOR *ḤESED***

A midrash addresses this very question: "R. Zeira said: This Megilla does not contain [laws of] impurity or purity, or prohibitions or permits, so why was it written? To teach you how good is the reward for those who do kindness" (Ruth Rabba 2:14).<sup>1</sup>

*Ḥesed* is hailed by this midrash as the most important theme of the book.<sup>2</sup> This key word appears three times in the book, modifying both God (1:8) and humans, namely, Ruth (3:10) and Boaz (2:20). The

1. Though *Hazal* debate whether certain books should be included in the biblical canon, there is no explicit discussion recorded regarding the Book of Ruth. Nevertheless, in the context of an ongoing debate regarding the canonicity of Esther and the Song of Songs, R. Shimon takes pains to assure us that "Ruth, the Song of Songs, and Esther do render the hands unclean" (Megilla 7a) – that is, they are canonical. This statement implies that the status of the Book of Ruth was also under scrutiny. Moreover, the Book of Ruth's place in the third section of the canon (*Ketuvim*, or Writings) instead of in its second section (*Nevi'im*, or Prophets), despite its historical context and genre, may suggest that it was canonized at a later date. See, e.g., Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture* (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1976, 1991), 26–30, where he assumes that the third part of the canon contains books that were not recognized as canonical when the Prophetic books were canonized. He also notes that Ben Sira (ca. 200 BCE) is not influenced in any way by Ruth, suggesting once again a late canonical date for the Book of Ruth.
2. Modern scholars have also frequently cited *ḥesed* as one of the central themes of the book. See, e.g., Robert Gordis, "Love, Marriage, and Business in the Book of Ruth: A Chapter in Hebrew Customary Law," in *A Light Unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers*, ed. H. N. Bream and R. D. Heim (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), 241; Jacqueline Lapsley, "Seeing the Older Woman: Naomi in High Definition," in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World*, ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 107; Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, introduction to *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), xv.

## Why Was the Book of Ruth Written?

word can connote loyalty, compassion, generosity, goodness, kindness, or steadfast love.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from the notion of *hesed*, this midrash focuses our attention on the reward that attends one who performs *hesed*. The midrash does not explicitly identify this reward, nor does it delineate who exactly has performed kindness in this book. Perhaps the vagueness of this midrash is its very point. This book is not about one person or one reward. Rather, it is about the fact that kindness is both invariably rewarded and a reward in itself. All of society benefits from the generous behavior of individuals, and the results of human compassion are apparent and efficacious.

Reward for kind behavior is a well-developed theme in the Book of Ruth. We will see the manner in which it is woven into the very fabric of the plot and into the careful use of language throughout the book. And yet, this idea is not altogether general; the Book of Ruth certainly focuses on one person and one reward. That person is Ruth, the eponymous heroine of the book, who, as a foreign, impoverished Moabite, stands to benefit greatly from her reward. The word reward (*sakhar*) appears only once in the entire book, as part of Boaz's blessing of Ruth (2:12): "God shall repay you your deeds, and your reward (*u'maskurtekh*) shall be complete from the Lord, the God of Israel."

Ruth's kindnesses surely result in a specific reward, namely, kingship. This is explained explicitly in the *Targum's* rendering of Boaz's speech promising Ruth a reward: "And it was told to me by prophecy that there will come forth from you kings and prophets because of [all] the kindness that you have done for your mother-in-law" (*Targum*, Ruth 2:11).

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3. Due to its wide spectrum of use, several monographs have been written about the meaning and significance of this word in Tanakh. See, e.g., Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967); Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (Missoula: Scholars Press for the Harvard Semitic Museum, 1978); Gordon R. Clark, *The Word Hesed in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993). See also the brief essay by Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Hesed in the Bible," in *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), xlvi–ix. While no single word can adequately convey the range of meanings applied to this word, in this study I will use the common translation, kindness.

Nevertheless, because R. Zeira's statement is unspecific with regard to the reward and its recipient, we can view the kindness of Boaz alongside that performed by Ruth, and search for various rewards given to those who perform kindness throughout the book.

#### **ḤESED OF SELFLESSNESS**

While the major characters in this narrative indeed perform extraordinary acts of kindness, there must be more to this midrashic idea than meets the eye. After all, Ruth is not at all unique in performing acts of kindness. Characters throughout the Bible engage in acts of kindness and are defined by them. Consider Abraham, whose legendary kindness constitutes the cornerstone of the Nation of Israel, or his daughter-in-law Rebecca, whose extraordinary generosity is a precondition for her selection as a wife for Isaac. Actually, we can learn the importance of this character trait by paying attention to the Bible's representation of God: God acts with *hesed*, which He extends for many generations (e.g., Ex. 34:6).

The notion that the Book of Ruth revolves around *hesed* raises a second difficulty. Ruth's consistent devotion to Naomi surely constitutes the basis of our story. And yet, the bulk of Ruth's kindness involves altruism and self-sacrifice. In chapter 1, Ruth remains with her aging, isolated mother-in-law, despite the fact that Naomi explicitly warns her that in doing so she will not marry or have a future. At the beginning of chapter 2, Ruth voluntarily relinquishes her dignity and gathers produce in the field to obtain food for herself and her mother-in-law. In the opening scene of chapter 3, responding unhesitatingly to Naomi's difficult instructions, Ruth agrees to risk her reputation by stealthily approaching Boaz as he lies alone at night on the threshing floor, presumably for the sake of bearing children in order to ensure Naomi's future. Finally, Ruth bears a child and gracefully exits the story, allowing Naomi to adopt the child as her own. Naomi places Ruth's son in her bosom and becomes his foster mother, causing the women to proclaim, "A child has been born to Naomi!" (4:17). Ruth disappears from the narrative, having sacrificed her maternal rights for the sake of her beloved mother-in-law. All of Ruth's kindnesses have one thing in common: Ruth repeatedly sabotages her own personal interests in her acts of kindness.

## Why Was the Book of Ruth Written?

It is striking that the midrash presents this as a model, a paradigm of kindness. Is this actually the type of kindness that Judaism wishes to promote? Is the excessive nullification of self in deference to the needs of the Other the ideal definition of *hesed*, the one that merits the greatest reward?

### RUTH: A BOOK OF DAVID'S LINEAGE

Leaving aside the midrash for the present, I would like to examine a second passage that addresses the question of this book's underlying purpose: "I would not be surprised if this Megilla were here simply to trace the genealogy of David, who was born from Ruth the Moabite" (*Zohar Hadash*, Ruth 25b).

This passage offers a different approach. Instead of suggesting that Ruth's eternal message lies in the exceptional personality traits of its characters, the midrash suggests that the book's central purpose is to sketch the background of the Davidic dynasty.<sup>4</sup> The story stretches out toward the birth of David, which occurs as the final, triumphant aim of the narrative (4:22).<sup>5</sup> In the Book of Samuel, David's family background is curiously sparse (especially compared to the lengthy birth story of Samuel himself). The Book of Ruth is therefore necessary to lay the groundwork for David's character and to understand his ancestry and background.

The need for a book describing David's exceptional ancestors may be especially pressing considering David's questionable lineage. Basing themselves on the verse in Deuteronomy, David's detractors could easily claim that his Moabite great-grandmother renders him ineligible for leadership or even for inclusion in the Nation of Israel:

No Ammonite or Moabite shall come into the congregation of the Lord; even the tenth generation shall not come into the congregation of the Lord for eternity. Because of the matter in which

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4. Biblical scholars often conclude that this is the purpose of the Book of Ruth. See, e.g., Oswald Loretz, "The Theme of the Ruth Story," *CBQ* 22 (1960): 391–99; *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. "Ruth, Book of," by Moshe Weinfeld (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971).
  5. The initial narrative setting of the Book of Ruth in Bethlehem, Judah (Ruth 1:1) creates a strong association with David, a Judahite from Bethlehem, Judah (1 Sam. 17:12). Moreover, the description of the family as *Ephratim* (Ruth 1:2) recalls Jesse, David's father, who is likewise referred to as an *Efrati* (1 Sam. 17:12).



## *Why Was the Book of Ruth Written?*

they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt. (Deut. 23:4–5)

Rabbinic sources do, in fact, draw our attention to this point, by constructing a scenario in which David's background is questioned and probed by his adversaries:

So said Saul: "Does he descend from Peretz or does he descend from Zerach?" ...Doeg HaEdomi replied to him, "Before you ask whether he is suitable for kingship or not, ask whether he is worthy to be admitted to the congregation or not! What is the reason? Because he descends from Ruth the Moabite!" Abner said to him, "We have learned, 'Ammonite men [are prohibited from joining the congregation], but not Ammonite women; Moabite men, but not Moabite women'...because the reason [for their exclusion] is stated in the Bible – that they did not greet them with bread and water. It is the way of the man to greet them and not the way of a woman to greet them." (Yevamot 76b)<sup>6</sup>

The trait of miserliness, of lack of concern for the welfare of their fellow man, disqualifies Ammonites and Moabites from admission into the Israelite nation. They did not give bread and water to the nation on the journey out of Egypt. Nevertheless, the Oral Law modifies this prohibition, applying it only to male Ammonites and Moabites. This gemara maintains that it was the men who were accustomed to bring food to travelers; thus, the omission highlights the negative character only of the male members of these societies.

Perhaps, then, the midrashim cited above actually converge, offering just one explanation for the purpose of the Book of Ruth. The ultimate objective of Ruth is to validate the purity of David's lineage. The book does this by illustrating the manner in which Ruth, the Moabite heroine of the story, is a paradigm of kindness, consistently and selflessly giving to Naomi. This affirms the logic behind the halakhic distinction between the cruel male Moabites and their female

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6. Ruth Rabba 4:9 has a variant of this midrash.

## *Why Was the Book of Ruth Written?*

counterparts, whose cruelty has not been established. By presenting an uncommonly kind Moabite woman, who is undoubtedly suitable for entry into the Israelite nation, the Book of Ruth illustrates the purity of David's ancestry.

### **RUTH AND MONARCHY**

The Book of Ruth should be read as the background not simply of David, but of the Davidic dynasty, the very institution of the monarchy.<sup>7</sup> This book moves from the period of the judges (1:1), whose chaotic end is attributed to the absence of a king (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), to the birth of the founder of the kingship (4:22), which anticipates the more stable period of dynastic kingship.

While this appears to be a welcome development, the Bible actually displays an ambivalent attitude toward the monarchy. One biblical passage appears to regard the appointment of a king as an imperative:

When you come to the land that the Lord your God has given you and you possess it and settle it and you say, "I will appoint for myself a king like all of the nations around me," you shall surely appoint for yourself a king, which the Lord your God shall select for you, from among your brethren you shall appoint for yourself a king. (Deut. 17:14–15)

The eventual request for a king, however, infuriates both Samuel and God:

And all of the elders of Israel gathered and they came to Samuel in Rama. And they said to him, "Behold, you are elderly and your sons have not walked in your ways; now appoint for us a king to judge us like all of the nations." And this thing was bad in the eyes of Samuel because they said, "Give us a king to judge us." And Samuel prayed to God. God said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of this nation, to everything that they have said to you, because

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7. See Ibn Ezra's introduction to the Book of Ruth.

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it is not you whom they have rejected, but it is Me whom they have rejected from reigning over them.” (1 Sam. 8:4–7)

Many exegetes struggle with these conflicting verses, attempting to resolve the contradictory approaches to the monarchy expressed in them.<sup>8</sup> Several rabbinic sources present this as an ongoing argument:

“And you will say, ‘I will appoint for myself a king’” – R. Nehorai said: This is a criticism of Israel, as it says, “It is not you whom they have rejected, but it is Me whom they have rejected from reigning over them” (1 Sam. 8:7). R. Yehuda said: But is it not a commandment from the Torah to ask for a king? As it says, “You shall surely appoint for yourself a king” (Deut. 17:15)? Why, then, were they punished in the days of Samuel? Because they asked for a king too early. (*Sifrei*, Deut. 17:14)<sup>9</sup>

Despite the controversy, it is difficult to imagine that the Bible is actually opposed to a monarchical system. God has already informed Abraham and Jacob that kings will come from them (Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11). Despite the obvious failings of the monarchical system narrated in the Book of Kings, many prophets prophesy an ideal vision of the restoration of a monarchy, often specifically the Davidic monarchy (e.g., Is. 9:6; 11:1–5; Jer. 23:5; Ezek. 37:24–25; Zech. 9:9).<sup>10</sup> The majority of medieval

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8. See Abrabanel’s concise formulation of this contradictory approach in his tenth question on Deuteronomy 16. In a well-known passage, the Gemara in Sanhedrin 20b suggests that it is not the request for monarchy that angers God, but rather the underlying attitude of the request, the people’s desire to be like the other nations.

9. Cf. Sanhedrin 20b. R. Yehuda also counts the appointment of a king as one of the three commandments incumbent upon the Israelite nation upon entrance into the land (codified as law by Maimonides, *Laws of Kings* 1:1).

10. A great deal more may be added to this controversial topic. In fact, many biblical sources can be adduced to support the biblical ambivalence about kingship. Narratives that express deep misgivings regarding monarchy include the end of the story of Gideon (Judges 8:22–23) and the parable of Jotham (Judges 9:8–15). On the flip side, the last five chapters of the Book of Judges indicate how terribly things can fall apart when there is no monarchical system. These chapters contain the recurring phrase, “In those days, there was no king in Israel; each man did what was right in his eyes” (Judges 17:6; 18:1;

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exegetes and halakhic authorities consider the appointment of a king to be a biblical commandment.<sup>11</sup>

From a practical standpoint, it would seem that a monarchical system is best suited to facilitate the accomplishment of Israel's national goals, the very reason for its existence.<sup>12</sup> The Nation of Israel is charged with two primary tasks: developing an ongoing self-conscious relationship with God and disseminating knowledge of God to the world at large. Both of these goals – but particularly the universal one – require a stable, strong, centralized government, one that can foster social unity, military security, economic prosperity, and international relations. This can pave the way to propagating God's instructions to the world. Without these elements, it is unlikely that the nation will have the means or the standing to accomplish its goals.<sup>13</sup>

While the institution of monarchy has the potential to achieve greatness, it nevertheless contains an abiding danger. Monarchical systems concentrate power in the hands of one man. The king has all of the power infrastructures at his disposal: the judiciary, military, and treasury. As Lord Acton famously wrote, "Power tends to corrupt, and

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19:1; 21:15). The social anarchy and moral bankruptcy that predominate in these chapters constitute the strongest argument for monarchy. For more on this topic, see Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein, "Jewish Political Theory: The Commandment to Appoint a King," The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash, [vbm-torah.org/archive/kings/01kings.htm](http://vbm-torah.org/archive/kings/01kings.htm); Rabbi Elchanan Samet, "Parashat Shoftim," The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash, [vbm-torah.org/parsha.60/47shoft.htm](http://vbm-torah.org/parsha.60/47shoft.htm); Rabbi Amnon Bazak, "Chapter 8 [Part 1]: 'Give Us a King,'" [vbm-torah.org/archive/shmuel/12shmuel.htm](http://vbm-torah.org/archive/shmuel/12shmuel.htm).

11. Maimonides, Nahmanides, *Sefer HaHinukh*, and Maharsha view the appointment of a king as an obligation. Ibn Ezra (Deut. 17:15) regards the monarchy as permissible, but not obligatory. A notable exception to this approach is Abrabanel (Deut. 17; 1 Sam. 8), who is generally wary of kingship.
12. See *Sefer HaHinukh* 71 and 497 (77 and 493 in the Chavel edition), which makes a strong case that only a single absolute ruler such as a king can enable the nation to function effectively.
13. The Queen of Sheba is not likely to have paid a visit to Israel during the tenure of a judge. Her declaration after witnessing Solomon's kingdom, "The Lord your God shall be blessed" (1 Kings 10:9), represents the magnificent fulfillment of Israel's universal religious aspirations due to King Solomon's successful and glorious reign.

absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The history of monarchies, from ancient to modern times, substantiates the theory that monarchies generate tyrannical, corrupt behavior. One only has to examine the monarchy of northern Israel (described in the Bible alongside the Judean dynasty) to arrive at this conclusion. In fact, *not one* properly righteous king emerges from that system.<sup>14</sup>

Aware of this danger, the Bible creates safeguards and precepts that limit the power of the monarch and guide him to recognize that he is subject to God’s authority:

However, [the king] shall not keep many horses or return the nation to Egypt to acquire many horses, for God told you, “Do not return that way again.” And he shall not have many wives, so that his heart shall not go astray, and he shall not acquire much silver and gold. And when he shall sit on his royal throne, he shall write this Torah in a scroll before the Priests and Levites. And it shall be with him and he shall read from it all of his days, so that he should learn to fear his God and guard the words of this Torah and observe these statutes. Thus, he will not act haughtily with his brethren and not stray right or left from the command so that he and his sons will have long life in his kingship among Israel. (Deut. 17:16–20)

As an additional precaution, biblical narratives suggest that the monarch cannot operate properly without an accompanying prophet, who functions as a check on the king’s absolute power by reminding him of his cardinal duties.<sup>15</sup>

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14. Although God endorses Jehu’s bid to decimate the House of Ahab, indicating that he has acted righteously in this matter (1 Kings 10:30), Jehu’s enthusiastic bloodletting is condemned by the prophet Hosea (1:4). In any case, Jehu is the only king of Israel who *may* be regarded in a positive light.

15. See Rashi’s comment on Deuteronomy 17:20. This point is also made by the manner in which the Book of Samuel (that lays the foundations for monarchy), opens with the birth of the prophet and not the king. This indicates that the substructure of the monarchy is dependent upon the prophet. Moreover, many of the good kings are described working in conjunction with a prophet (e.g., Jehoshaphat in 1 Kings 22:7;

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Nevertheless, the institution of kingship, while desirable in many ways, remains a potentially corrupt institution. In order to find a formula for preventing Judean kings from sliding into tyranny as a result of their extraordinary power, the Bible presents another solution. This solution is found in the Book of Ruth, which describes the union of two uncommonly selfless individuals. While not guaranteeing that the king will necessarily adopt those traits, the Book of Ruth establishes a model of behavior that is expected and appropriate for a king of Israel. Ruth's disregard for her own self-interest and her utter focus on the Other is meant to be adopted by her descendants, the Davidic kings. A king who is inclined to dismiss his own needs in favor of the needs of the Other is unlikely to use the power at his disposal to promote his own interests. Instead, he will employ the various infrastructures for the benefit of society.

This can account for the unusual nature of Ruth's self-nullifying kindness, as noted above. It is true that Ruth's type of selflessness is not something Judaism demands from its constituents. *Yet it is an absolute necessity for our leaders.* Not only do we expect it from our leaders, but it is a virtual prerequisite for the establishment of the monarchy. Without a Ruth at its helm, without someone with the ability to give unselfishly and totally to the Other, monarchy is not a promise or a vision of bounty, but a dangerous threat, a recipe for depravity and despotism.

The Nation of Israel cannot sacrifice its moral or religious integrity for the material, social, political, or even religious advantages of a monarchy. If the king is tyrannical and corrupt, if he perceives himself as above the law, the nation will fail to accomplish its primary objective, creating an ideal society built on justice and righteousness. This would undermine the very purpose of the Israelite nation. Therefore, Ruth is presented as the progenitor and founder of the monarchical dynasty.<sup>16</sup>

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Hezekiah in 11 Kings 19:2), while particularly evil kings are often depicted in opposition to the prophets (e.g., Ahab in 1 Kings 18:17; Jehoakim in Jer. 26:21; 36:20–26).

16. I am not suggesting that this works out perfectly; many of the kings of the Davidic dynasty, descendants of Ruth and Boaz, do not internalize their qualities and become corrupt and self-serving. Nevertheless, I think that when viewed in a relative light, especially when compared to their northern counterparts, the Davidic dynasty is remarkably successful. The Davidic dynasty produces several pious and scrupulous

## *Why Was the Book of Ruth Written?*

Only a king with the qualities of a Ruth, who is kind to the point of abrogating her own self, can retain power without it causing him to degenerate morally and otherwise. A king with a forebear who can guide and even predispose him to serve others can create a kingship whose goal is to serve the people and not to serve the king and his interests.

This reconciles the two disparate explanations found in the different midrashim that examine the essence of the Book of Ruth. The purpose of this book is in fact to indicate the importance of kindness, as R. Zeira noted, specifically the type of kindness necessary to create and maintain the Davidic dynasty (as noted by the Zohar). The marriage of Ruth and Boaz represents an attempt to design a line of kingship where altruistic *hesed* is the underlying principle, thereby eliminating corruption and leading Israel to the fulfillment of its glorious goals.

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kings who appear to have higher interests at heart and who succeed in squelching the quest for self-aggrandizement that generally accompanies power. Consider the reigns of Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Amaziah, Uzziah, Jotham, Hezekiah, and Josiah.

*Chapter thirteen*

# Torah Umadda and Religious Growth

*Excerpt from Torah Umadda:  
The Encounter of Religious Learning  
and Worldly Knowledge in the Jewish Tradition  
by Rabbi Norman Lamm*

**H**aving spoken of Torah Umadda as a problem in a Torah Weltanschauung, and as related to the religious vision and experience of the devout practitioner of Torah Umadda, we must now consider what this can mean to us personally – existentially and psychologically – as citizens of both “Athens” and “Jerusalem.”

## **WHOLENESS**

This issue is raised here largely because of autobiographical reasons. When the author came to Yeshiva University as an eighteen-year-old freshman, the concept of Torah Umadda proved enormously attractive



to him (as mentioned in the Preface). He saw before him a number of outstanding role models, and he yearned to understand and perhaps someday emulate their remarkable integration of such apparently disparate worlds. Torah Umadda became for him not, as so many of its critics aver, a source of spiritual and religious schizophrenia, but quite to the contrary, an opportunity – *because* of all its creative tensions – for ultimate inner harmony, a way to unite deepest Torah commitments with his growing experiences as a modern person living in a scientific technopolis, in an open and democratic society, and in a culture that, despite all its terrible failings, is vibrant and progressive. He could not accept the position of the critics of Yeshiva who numbly accept the idea of Jewish students going to college for vocational or career reasons but were horrified at the thought of their actually getting a liberal education. He was unimpressed by these critics' easy, unquestioning acceptance of a high school education, while objecting on halakhic or theological grounds to education on the university level. He felt that if it was forbidden to indulge in the secular disciplines at the university level, then we should desist from them even on the elementary level and suffer the consequences, if any, for our principles. For him, that would be the way of inner dissonance and self-delusion. It was Torah Umadda that held for him then, as it does now, the promise of spiritual healing, of inner reconciliation, of a cohesive life.

Could it be, as well, a way to religious growth?

### **RELIGIOUS GROWTH**

It is difficult to determine the origin of the term *religious growth*, or to know when it first achieved its current degree of popularity. An educated genealogical guess would identify it as the progeny of a common-law liaison between pop psychology and modernist theology. Yet behind this fashionable neologism lies a reality that is well known, if not quite clearly defined.

In the tradition of the yeshivot, the heads of the schools and the religious supervisors (*mashgihim*) would speak to their students of *shteigen* (ascending) in one's learning of Torah and in the refinement of his character. One who had experienced a notable degree of success in such ascent was considered a *baal-madregah*, "master of a level" – that

is, one who has attained a high level of moral excellence. Drawing on much earlier sources, the idea developed that one's spiritual status could never be static: one had to move either up or down the ladder that connects Heaven and Earth. Only angels are *omed*, stationary; humans are *mehalekh*, always on the move. In the realm of pure Spirit there is only Being; in that of man – spirit ensconced in matter – there is Becoming. Thus, R. Menachem Mendel, the Hasidic Rebbe of Kotzk, in commenting on the verse, “The righteous shall spring up like a palm tree; he shall grow tall like a cedar in Lebanon” (Psalm 92:13), said that “it is in the nature of righteousness (or piety) to spring, to grow.” The religious life does not abide stagnation. It flourishes only when challenged, and if unchallenged it withers.

The term of preference for the end goal of such aspiration is *shelemut*, perfection or wholeness. The process of attaining it, or at least striving for it, is what we mean by religious growth.

The word *shelemut* (as well as the related terms *shalem* and *shelemim*, the singular and plural, respectively, for those who have attained *shelemut*) was used throughout the medieval Spanish period, in both the philosophical and ethical-didactic literatures, by such thinkers as Yehuda Halevi, Bahya, and Maimonides to describe the ideal state and the ideal man.

Maimonides, as might be expected, was the most analytic in his treatment of *shelemut*. He sees not one but four distinct categories of such an ideal state, arranged hierarchically. At the bottom is the perfection of possessions, followed by the *shelemut* of one's physical attributes. From wealth and health we proceed upward to the perfection of *mid-dot* or moral character. The final *shelemut* is that of intellectual perfection, which expresses itself in the grasping of truth, especially the true perception or knowledge of God. It is this last *shelemut*, the rational or cognitive one, that represents the highest state of ideal man.

The notion of *shelemut* has been nurtured in Jewish tradition ever since. The lowest of Maimonides' four types, that of possessions, was, of course, dropped – both because of economic conditions throughout much of Jewish history, and, even more, because this was posited as a form of *shelemut* for analytic or morphological reasons only, and certainly had little else to commend it. The second, physical perfection, similarly

fell into desuetude. Whether this happened because conditions of exile made good nutrition inaccessible and hence ignored, or because of the medieval and mystical penchant for seeing the spiritual and the physical as fundamentally antagonistic, its omission was most unfortunate. The third, moral perfection, was both intensified and broadened, with piety (“fear of Heaven”) and punctiliousness in the performance of the mitzvot included along with refinement of character as a most desirable level of human-Jewish perfection. The highest level, that of intellectual perfection, was narrowed to the knowledge and understanding of Torah, with a concomitant downgrading of the knowledge of God and the philosophical, and especially metaphysical, infrastructure that such knowledge presupposed.

Hence, the conventional concept of *shelemut* and religious growth to which we are heir today consists largely of piety, moral character, and the study of Torah.

#### **OPENNESS**

As the ideal of *shelemut* is understood and accepted today in many of the yeshivot, it is thus an intense, inward-looking enterprise, often requiring an almost monastic dedication. This aspiration is unquestionably a noble one, especially in this narcissistic era of unbridled hedonism and unbuttoned ego display, and hence is deserving of the greatest admiration and approbation. But is there no place for Madda to be integrated in the goal of *shelemut* in a substantive manner? Can we not conceive of a *shelemut* that is outgoing as well as inward-looking, one not limited to one’s own psyche and moral character, embracing rather than confining, open rather than closed?<sup>1</sup> Can we not, for example, exploit the varied backgrounds of the *baalei teshuvah* (Jewish newcomers to Judaism) instead of forcing them into an unnaturally narrow framework?

It is our conviction that Madda certainly ought to be incorporated in the *shelemut* ideal, and that, indeed, it gives it new breadth.

At first blush, “openness” is alien and even antithetical to religious growth, especially in its currently accepted form. The demands of devoutness apparently contradict the principles of openness and of tolerance of ideas that might be considered heretical, and the imperative of intense Torah study apparently leaves no place for other disciplines

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that are integral to the very notion of openness. At bottom, what we have is the clash of two antonymous orientations: a penetrating depth versus a blanketing breadth as most expressive of the ideal of *shelemut*.

Openness can be integrated into religious growth only if we redefine the concept of *shelemut* in a manner compatible with the fundamentals of Torah Umadda. This means moving from the current restricted and constricted conception of wholeness to a more comprehensive vision. In essence, it means returning to a notion of the ideal that is closer to the Maimonidean view of *shelemut* than that developed in the eight centuries since.

### **THREE SOURCES**

There are several sources for this proposed redefinition, not all of them mutually compatible, and they range from contemporary California to medieval Cairo to ancient Canaan.

The West Coast of the United States has a well-earned reputation as the womb and cradle of the most exotic, extravagant, and usually irrational movements or “life-styles” to afflict the nation. Of particular note, as the basis of so many of the “therapies” spawned in California, is the ethos of the “human potential” school: the expression of all latent talents, potencies, and aspirations that the self possesses. This concern with the self usually conforms with the pervasive narcissism, hedonism, and solipsism of contemporary life, the need to taste every dish on the menu of the banquet of life. Everything must be tried and experienced at least once – even if it is corrupt or decadent or perverse – lest one pass through life on this planet only to leave it with the ego untried, hungry, unfulfilled. However, a kernel of genuine moral value lies buried somewhere in this pile of droll dross: the harnessing of all life and experience, and the actualization of all potential contained in the human personality: in short – existential comprehensiveness, containing the promise of a life that is coherent, cohesive, consistent, and comprehensive.

This leads us to our second source: Maimonides. This sage of Fostat (medieval Cairo) declared that for perfection or wholeness to be attained, it is imperative that all potential be realized, all promises fulfilled.<sup>2</sup> Maimonides makes this comment in a rather different

context – in his discussion of divine *shelemut*, as part of his “negative theology” – but the concept is transferable to human perfection. The ideal person is not one who merely possesses great possibilities, but one who has expressed these potencies in reality. Religious growth, to put it colloquially, is a bottom-line business that does not offer rewards for a high I.Q. only. Indeed, the very word “growth” implies the movement from the potential to the actual.

(For the sake of completeness – not an irrelevancy in this chapter advocating wholeness – it should be mentioned that classical Greece, too, is a source for the same notion, and probably had an influence on Maimonides. Goethe, following Friedrich Schiller, considered the striving for many-sidedness a principle of the Greek heritage. Matthew Arnold [in his *Culture and Anarchy*] declared that human perfection, as the Greeks understood it, requires listening to all the voices of human experience and working toward the harmonious expansion of all the powers contained in human nature. Yet we should not conclude that this idea is “borrowed” from the Greeks – a common fallacy of academicians who assume that chronological priority by one party automatically excludes originality by all others. Clearly, Judaism stands on its own in its celebration of *shelemut*, and the emphasis on this comprehensiveness should not be looked on as an alien graft, even if it is true that the reemphasis on this particular theme may well arise in reaction to its currency in the outside world.)

Granted, then, that *shelemut* requires the mobilization of the entire personality and the actualization of all potencies within it, we still must add the teleological element: the harnessing and realization of personality must be guided by a purpose beyond itself, one that will provide direction to the entire process, as well as the critical function of avoiding the growth of noxious propensities of the personality.

That purpose was enunciated by the founding Father of Israel. The Lord revealed Himself to Abraham in ancient Canaan, saying, “Walk before Me and be whole” (Genesis 17:1). The original Hebrew for “whole” is *tamim*, which Onkelos translates into the cognate Aramaic as *shelim*, from the same root as *shelemut*. The goal of such total involvement of the self and the actualization of all its potential is to achieve *shelemut* by “walking before” God. It is, in fact, religious growth.

### THE COMMENTATORS ON SHELEMUT

It is instructive to see how the classical Jewish exegetes dealt with this key verse. Rashi regards both halves of the verse as essentially two commandments to attain one end: Abraham must possess such mighty faith that he can successfully endure all trials visited upon him by God and remain unshaken in his commitment, walking before Him and staying whole in his belief. The “wholeness” is thus an intense one, one that is attained by rejecting the external threats, dangers, and distractions, and building up one’s inner spiritual resources.

Ibn Ezra, reminding us that this verse introduces the revelation in which Abraham is commanded to circumcise himself and his household, similarly sees wholeness as the intensification and internalization of faith: “‘Be whole’ – by not questioning [God] concerning [the reason] for circumcision.”

However, Nahmanides rejects Rashi’s and Ibn Ezra’s glosses. He relates *tamim* in this verse to the same word used in Deuteronomy as the culmination of a passage prohibiting Israel from engaging in idolatrous practices relating to magic, sorcery, necromancy, and so on: “Thou shalt be *tamim* with the Lord thy God” (Deuteronomy 18:13). In both cases, says Nahmanides, the intention is the same: wholeness means to attribute everything to God, and nothing whatever to extra-divine sources – not to demons or magic or whatever idols may be popular at the time. Having accepted the commandment to “walk before Me,” Abraham must “be whole,” committing himself to God wholly and exclusively – but equally: totally and comprehensively – in a manner that is coextensive with every aspect of his unique personality, his experience, his conception of his destiny. This interpretation by Nahmanides thus results in a *shelemut* that is extensive and comprehensive, broadly rather than narrowly focused.<sup>3</sup>

It is this latter explanation of our verse that lends itself to the alternative notion of religious growth here proposed. *Shelemut* thus implies a wide net: the amassing of all one’s attributes – intellectual and psychological, spiritual and esthetic, practical and moral – and all one’s experiences – sacred and profane, profound and superficial, positive and negative – and their actualization and elevation toward the Holy One, as we worship Him both through our spirituality and our corporeality. And,

it should be added, while all models of Torah Umadda can subscribe to this orientation, it is the Hasidic model that has the most affinity for it.

#### **A DYNAMIC CONCEPTION**

Because of the comprehensive scope of this definition of religious growth, it must of necessity result in a dynamic rather than a static conception of *shelemut*. An intensive view can be more eclectic and selective, choosing only those aspects of personality that are compatible with each other, avoiding conflict and internal contradictions. Such is not the case with the extensive version of *shelemut*, for it is inevitable, given the range and variety of human experience, that internal inconsistencies will develop. My musical aptitudes, if they are to be fully developed as part of my religious growth, may well conflict with the commandment to study Torah whenever time is available. For the narrower, conventional version of *shelemut*, there is no problem whatever: the esthetic element has no standing, and the commandment to study Torah prevails. (It is understood that we are speaking of Torah study beyond the minimum required by the Halakhah, as mentioned in Chapter 3. Otherwise, both views would agree that Torah must perforce take precedence.) The broader conception must make judgments based on the unique personality of the questioner, the benefit of either route to the development of his full religious personality: How good a scholar can he be? How serious a musician will he become? Will an artistic career be used by him to enhance his spiritual *Gestalt*? Of what relative benefit will he be to Israel and to the community of believers in either case? Such examples can be multiplied manifold. The solution for the extensive view of *shelemut* is to keep all such forces in a dynamic balance and exercise a kind of utilitarian calculus in order to come to a proper decision.

A metaphor that comes to mind immediately for such an approach is the Platonic one, adopted by R. Yehuda Halevi, the immortal Spanish-Jewish poet and philosopher, in his *Kuzari* – the metaphor of the person of *shelemut* presiding over his character like a prince ruling a city. He must allot to each attribute its due, assign to each its duty, see to it that none of them overdoes or overreaches, while making sure that the totality functions smoothly with all interrelated parts working cooperatively and responsibly. An even more appealing metaphor might be

that of the conductor of an orchestra who must make optimum use of every musician and every instrument, allowing no sound or combination of sounds to be more or less than is necessary for the total effect of the emerging symphony.

The concluding words of the Book of Psalms are: “Let *kol ha-neshamah* praise the Lord, Hallelujah.” The two Hebrew words are usually translated as “every soul.” With equal fidelity to the text, and with additional support for our thesis, they might also be translated as, “let the *entire* soul” – all of it, every aspect, every facet, every talent, every potency – “praise the Lord, Hallelujah.”<sup>4</sup>

### **OPENNESS AND GROWTH**

With these definitions of religious growth, the principle of openness to the world – which consists largely of Torah Umadda and the cluster of subjective attitudes that pertain to it – is certainly compatible with the ideals of *shelemut*.

In Chapter 3 we cited a number of examples from Geonic and medieval times to illustrate the compatibility of Torah and Madda. Perhaps the most striking such case is that of MaHaRaL, who lived during the Renaissance period, and from whom we quoted earlier at some length. These examples are, equally, illustrations of the possibility of an extensive vision of *shelemut* that includes an openness to the world.

If we accept the possibility of this alternative model of *shelemut*, one that requires breadth as well as depth, then openness is not only permissible but inescapable and admirable. The dazzling galaxy of Torah Umadda personalities mentioned in this book, and the many more who remain unmentioned, come closer to the ideal of *shelemut* because of, not despite, their Madda involvements. The knowledge of medicine did not detract from Maimonides’ sense of wholeness; indeed, the *Hilkhot Deiot* of his immortal Code, where he discusses the formation of character, benefits enormously from the medical theories he had learned from the Greeks. Don Isaac Abravanel was no less a full personality because of his financial prowess and diplomatic skill; those acquainted with his commentary on the Bible can attest to the life experiences as a man of Madda that he draws upon in his exegesis. Grammar did not impoverish Abraham Ibn Ezra; philosophy did not diminish the stature of Hasdai



Crescas; secular poetry did not reduce the wholeness of either Solomon Ibn Gabirol or Yehuda Halevi; literary style and grace did not chip away at the well-earned fame of Judah Messer Leone; mathematics did not make the Gaon of Vilna any less a *gaon*; and general philosophy has not lessened the greatness of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. On the contrary, the Madda development of each contributed not only to his intellectual greatness but also to his *shelemut*, which would have suffered without the development of those gifts. Wholeness is enhanced by many-sidedness, and fullness by openness.

A caveat must be entered here. Openness applied uniformly is openness applied mindlessly. Doing everything, trying everything, tasting everything, with no thought to discriminating between the more and the less valuable, is sure to lead to dilettantism, and this is hardly the *shelemut* we seek. The primacy of Torah must be recognized as unchallenged; in the language of Hasidic thought, *avodah she'be'ruhaniut* is superior to *avodah she'be'gashmiut*. This broader conception of *shelemut*, therefore, is meant to modify and expand rather than to supplant the narrower view.

#### **SHELEMUT AND THE ARGUMENTS FOR GOD'S EXISTENCE**

Let us attempt to sharpen the definition of how this form of open *shelemut* attains a truly spiritual end. In order to do so, let us turn to a rather unlikely source, one that is nowadays usually consigned to scholarly antiquarians with little relevance expected for contemporary religious people.

Some of the most famous *Rishonim* offered various proofs for God's existence. This includes such eminences as R. Saadia Gaon, Maimonides, Gersonides, and even R. Bahya and R. Yehuda Halevi. Why did they engage in such metaphysical speculations? Surely their own inner faith was strong enough to resist what we today recognize as obsolete heresies, and they did not need these philosophical proofs to reinforce their own faith. Was it, then, to strengthen the spiritual weaklings among their students, or the wavering faith of the defecting masses?

Not at all, answers Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlop, the famous disciple/colleague of Rav Kook, and author of *Mei Marom*. The reason for indulging in these efforts to prove the existence of God was to enhance *giluy Elohut ba-olam*, to reveal God through the medium of intellect. We

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make Godliness manifest by acts of *hesed* (love) or mitzvot, for example. But we must also reveal Him through the most precious and distinctive property of the human species: the mind.<sup>5</sup>

This “revelation” must not be understood as a function of religious proselytism. While it certainly is valid to preach and teach the existence of God to the world, that is not what motivated the *Rishonim*. Rather, the goal was primarily to reveal Godliness, even if only to one’s self, through the medium of intellect; to place all one’s potencies, including the intellectual, at the service of God; to rise to more exalted levels (*madregot*) in one’s knowledge of God – and thereby to grow religiously and spiritually. This is a form of growth that leads to an intellectual *kid-dush ha-Shem* (sanctification of the divine Name).

This is indeed a hint of what Torah Umadda can mean, especially if it is structured on the basis of the Hasidic model. Grasping a differential equation or a concept in quantum mechanics can let us perceive and reveal Godliness in the abstract governance of the universe. An insight into molecular biology or depth psychology or the dynamics of society can inspire in us a fascination with God’s creation that Maimonides identifies as the love of God. A new appreciation of a Beethoven symphony or a Cézanne painting or the poetry of Wordsworth can move us to a greater sensitivity to the infinite possibilities of the creative imagination with which the Creator endowed His human creatures, all created in the divine Image.

In a word, the purpose of marshaling all areas of experience, of using all one’s talents toward this sacred goal, is the attempt to achieve *shelemut*. For the broader one’s intellectual horizons, the higher one’s spiritual reach and the deeper one’s religious commitment. The more comprehensive and inclusive the domain one attributes to the Holy One, the closer one approaches the asymptotic ideal of *shelemut*, of being *tamim* with the Lord God. This is *shelemut* with a wide-angle instead of a zoom lens.

### **THE MIKVEH OF ISRAEL**

This view of religious growth, which necessarily involves openness, is one that, if properly pursued, constitutes a lifelong process of *avodat ha-Shem*, the service or worship of the Creator. It accords with Nahmanides’

commentary on “be whole,” and it articulates nicely with our Hasidic model of Torah Umadda, the model based on the doctrine of *avodah be’gashmiut*, because it brings everything, without exception, into the realm of the faith in and worship of God.

The prophet Jeremiah (14:8) refers to God as the *Mikveh* of Israel and its Savior in the times of its distress. The Hebrew word lends itself to two equally valid interpretations: “hope” or “pool.” Hope, in this context, is self-explanatory. By the latter term is meant the *mikveh* or the gathering of natural waters used to effect *taharah* or purification from defilement. This interpretation is accepted by the Hasidic master, the Kotzker Rebbe, who explains: According to the Halakhah, the *mikveh* can effect purification only if the body is totally immersed in the water. If any part of the body at all, even a solitary hair, remains outside the waters, the *mikveh* is ineffective. And that is true of man’s relation with God. The Creator is Israel’s *mikveh*. Faith, trust, worship – all are meaningful if all of man, in his entirety, every facet of his person and every aspect of his personality, is immersed in such faith, trust, and worship. Anything less than such a total and comprehensive commitment frustrates the salvific effects of Torah and faith. God is the Savior in times of distress only if He is for us the *Mikveh* of Israel.

“For the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Psalm 24:1).

## NOTES

1. An interesting variation on the ideal of *shelemut* in quite another direction is that of R. Yehiel Nissim of Pisa, the sixteenth-century author of *Minhat Kenaot*, for whom “wholeness” or “completeness” implies the inclusion of the body in the framework of spiritual perfection. This leads him to emphasize the behavioral mitzvot at the expense of an expanded intellectualism. See Isadore Twersky, “Talmudists, Philosophers, Kabbalists: The Quest for Spirituality in the Sixteenth Century,” in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1983), p. 446.
2. *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:55.
3. See, too, R. Obadiah Seforno, ad loc.
4. Cf. the interpretation of the word *kol* in another context by R. Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna, in his *Shenot Eliyahu* (Vilna, 1832) to *Berakhot*, end of Chapter 1.
5. Remarkably, just about the time I was reading this insight by Rabbi Charlop, several decades ago, I chanced upon an article by the late Professor Charles Frankel of Columbia University, who said the identical thing about *all* the philosophers of the Middle Ages – Moslem and Christian as well as Jewish – who undertook similar enterprises.

# III. The Day of Covenant

*Excerpt from Ceremony and Celebration  
Introduction to the Holidays  
by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks*

**T**here is evidence that Shavuot was, from the outset, the anniversary of the Giving of the Torah.

First, according to all of the views as to the date of Shavuot, it took place in the third month, and there is only one significant event in the Torah that happened then. The Israelites arrived at the Sinai desert “on the third new moon” after they had left Egypt (Ex. 19:1). There then follows a series of exchanges between Moses and God, and Moses and the people, each of which involved ascending and descending the mountain. God then told Moses to tell the people to prepare for a revelation that would take place on the third day. Then we read, “On the third day, in the early morning – thunder and lightning; heavy cloud covered the mountain, there was a very loud sound of the shofar, and all of the people in the camp quaked” (Ex. 19:16). There are different ways of calculating the chronology of these events, but the revelation at Sinai clearly

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took place in the third month, and there is only one festival in the third month: Shavuot.

Nor can we doubt the centrality of the Sinai event. We can see this by the sheer space the Torah dedicates to it. The Israelites arrived at Sinai at the beginning of Exodus 19, and not until Numbers 10:11, “On the twentieth day of the second month of the second year,” did they leave. *They spent less than a year at Sinai, but the Torah devotes approximately one third of its entire text to it*, while passing over thirty-eight of the forty wilderness years in silence other than to record the places where the Israelites stopped. It would be astonishing if this event were not commemorated in the Jewish calendar while a relatively minor feature of the wilderness years, the fact that the Israelites lived in sukkot, booths, has a seven-day festival dedicated to it.

There is other evidence. We read in the second book of Chronicles about how King Asa, after cleansing the land of idols, convened a national covenant renewal ceremony:

They assembled at Jerusalem *in the third month* of the fifteenth year of Asa’s reign.... They entered into a covenant to seek the Lord, the God of their ancestors, with all their heart and soul.... They *took an oath* to the Lord with loud acclamation, with shouting and with trumpets and horns. All Judah rejoiced about the oath because they had sworn it wholeheartedly. They sought God eagerly, and He was found by them. So the Lord gave them rest on every side. (II Chr. 15:10–15)

The fact that the ceremony was held in the third month suggests that it coincided with Shavuot, and that the festival itself was associated with the covenant at Mount Sinai. There is even a hint in the text of an early association between the word *Shavuot*, “weeks,” and *shevua*, “oath,” used here to mean commitment to the covenant.

Then there is the fascinating evidence of the Book of Jubilees. This is a text written in the middle of the second century BCE, author unknown but almost certainly a priest, which retells the whole of biblical history in terms of fifty-year, jubilee cycles. It was not accepted as part

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of Tanakh, but it occasionally records traditions unknown elsewhere, and that is the case here. According to Jubilees (6:15–19), Shavuot was first celebrated *by Noah* to celebrate the covenant God made with him, and through him with all humanity, after the Flood. “For this reason it has been ordained and written on the heavenly tablets that they should celebrate the Festival of Weeks during this month, once a year, to renew the covenant each and every year” (6:17). Jubilees goes on to say that God made His covenant *with Abraham* on the same date in the third month (14:20). Thus there was an early tradition that held that Shavuot was supremely the covenant-making and renewal day for all three biblical covenants between God and human beings: with Noah, Abraham and the Israelites in the days of Moses.

Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman (*Commentary to Leviticus*, vol. 2, 158–168) adds that the rabbinic name for the festival – *Atzeret*, or in Aramaic, *Atzarta* – meaning “assembly” or “gathering,” may be related to Moses’ own description of the day the Torah was given as *Yom HaKahal*, “the day of the assembly” (Deut. 9:10, 10:4, 18:16). He also suggests that the reason the Torah relates the festivals to historical events is simply to explain why we perform certain acts, such as sitting in a booth on Sukkot. Since Shavuot has no distinctive mitzva, it needed no historical explanation. As to why there is no distinctive mitzva on Shavuot, he argues that it is to emphasize that at Sinai the Israelites “saw no image; there was only a voice” (Deut. 4:12). There is no symbolic action that could capture the experience of hearing the voice of the invisible God.

Why then, if Shavuot is the anniversary of the covenant at Sinai, does it not have a fixed date in the calendar? The answer was set out by Nahmanides in his *Commentary to the Torah* (Lev. 23:36). The relationship between Shavuot and Pesah, he says, is like that between Shemini Atzeret and Sukkot. In both cases there is a count of seven – seven days in the case of Sukkot, seven weeks in the case of Pesah and the counting of the Omer – followed by a concluding festival. That is how he understands *Atzeret*, the name the Torah gives to the eighth day of Sukkot, and that the rabbis called Shavuot, deriving it from the verb *a-tz-r* meaning “stop,” “close,” “cease,” “conclude.” Though both are festivals in their own right, both celebrate the end of something; they are not stand-alone celebrations. They are defined in terms of what went before.

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Thus the days of counting the Omer between Pesah and Shavuot are like *Hol HaMo'ed*, the intermediate days of a festival. *Pesah and Shavuot are the beginning and end of a single extended festival.* That is why Shavuot is not given a date in the Jewish calendar – because what matters is not what day of the week or month it falls but the fact that it marks the conclusion of the seven weeks initiated by the Omer. That, in fact, is why the Oral tradition held that the Omer begins not on a Sunday (the literal meaning of “the day following the rest day”) but after the first day of Pesah, because the Omer is not a free-standing institution but the start of a seven-week count linking Pesah to Shavuot.

The nature of that link was stated at the very beginning of the Exodus narrative, when Moses met God at the burning bush. God told Moses his mission and then said, “*And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain*” (Ex. 3:12). The Exodus from Egypt, in other words, was only the beginning of a process that would reach its culmination when the people worshiped God at Mount Sinai.

*Pesah and Shavuot are inseparable.* Revelation without the Exodus was impossible. But Exodus without revelation was meaningless. God did not bring the people out of Egypt only to leave them to the hazards of fate. They were His people, “My child, My firstborn, Israel,” as He told Moses to say to Pharaoh (Ex. 4:22).

Why then the forty-nine days? Maimonides and the *Zohar* give subtly different explanations. The *Zohar* (*Emor*, 97a) sees the Giving of the Torah at Sinai as a marriage between God and the people. Just as a bride must purify herself by keeping seven “clean” days and then going to the *mikveh*, so the Israelites, defiled by the impurities of Egypt, had to keep seven “clean” weeks, each day purifying one of the forty-nine combinations of *sefirot*, the sacred emanations linking creation with God.

Maimonides says that since the Giving of the Torah was anticipated by the Israelites as the supreme culmination of the Exodus, they counted the days “just as one who expects his most intimate friend on a certain day counts the days and even the hours” (*Guide for the Perplexed*, III:43).

The most significant hint, though, lies in the name tradition gave to Pesah: *zeman heruteinu*, “the time of our freedom.” Freedom in

### *III. The Day of Covenant*

Judaism means more than release from slavery: individual freedom. It means law-governed liberty, “the rule of laws, not men”: collective freedom. Thus the Israelites did not achieve freedom on Pesah when they left Egypt. They acquired it on Shavuot when, standing at the foot of the mountain, they accepted the covenant and became a holy nation under the sovereignty of God. That is why Pesah and Shavuot are not two separate festivals but the beginning and end of a single stretch of time – the time it took for them to cease to be slaves to Pharaoh and to become instead the servants of God.



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