TWELVE
Law and Narrative in the Book of Ruth

LAW AND LOVE

> R. Ze'ira said: This scroll [of Ruth] tells us nothing of purity or impurity, of prohibition or permission. For what purpose was it written? To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of loving-kindness *[chasadim]*.[1]

The central message of the book of Ruth, declares R. Ze'ira, is not embodied in law but in narrative. The book tells a story about the good things that happen to good people. For modern readers, of course, whose assumptions have been shaped by empirical and cultural experience of the *bad* things that often happen to good people, this conventional moral theme is not a simple teaching. But R. Ze'ira is careful with his terms: he refers specifically to "those who do *chasadim*—deeds of loving-kindness": *chesed* is the elemental quality often translated as "love," in the expansive sense that opens out into kindness, loyalty, and courage. But the core meaning of the word resists translation. I suggest that Ruth is the narrative that displays that core meaning in dynamic form.

Here, *chesed* moves and breathes and generates; here, we can take the measure of its uncanny power. Here are Ruth and Orpah, in their devotion to their mother-in-law;[2] and Ruth in relation to Boaz (and perhaps to her dead husband, Machlon).[3] But here, too, is Boaz, encouraging Ruth to glean in his field, and instructing his reapers not to shame her but to leave the "forgotten" stalks for her gleaning. He, too, is one of the *chesed* people who, the midrash affirms, will receive great reward. His goodness, however, is precisely an expression of the *legal* requirements of his situation; that is, of the "prohibitions and permissions" that the midrash maintains are *not* the subject of the book. The laws of the field, as they are sketched out in Leviticus (19:9–10), are given dramatic form in Boaz's words of *chesed.*

In this narrative, then, law and *chesed* are not schematically opposed to each other. Indeed, law and custom inform many aspects of the narrative of *chesed.*[4] It is precisely the licit and the illicit— prohibition and permission— that provide a structure of meaning within which human desire and fear may resonate. Nevertheless, the *main* purpose of the book is "to teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of *chasadim.*" In the end, the book tells a tale of a certain kind of human being. How does this way of being human relate to the concept of law that defines the world of Ruth?

The law that most significantly defines this world is an exclusionary law that is never articulated in the text. Throughout the whole course of her narrative, its shadow looms over Ruth: "No Ammonite or Moabite may enter into the community of God; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever enter into the community of God."[5]

This law, repressed in the text, bans Ruth from ever marrying into the community that she has so passionately insisted on claiming as her own ("Your people are my people and your God my God" [Ruth 1:16]). In the presence of this law, the unguarded desire with which she solicits Naomi resonates poignantly. We will look more closely at this opening scene. For now, I suggest that if Ruth is described, repeatedly and redundantly, as Ruth *the Moabite,*

this is a way of intimating the legal barriers that frame her world. If no explicit mention is made of this law, its presence nevertheless informs all the interactions, in speech and silence, of the narrative. Repressed, it is everywhere operative.

THE CONVERSATIONAL FABRIC AT RISK

However, perhaps the most radical claim that the midrash has to make about law in the world of this book is in its reading of the opening words: "And it was in the days when the Judges judged." As a historical framework for the narrative, the expression "when the Judges judged" *(b'shfot ha-shoftim)* has a tongue-twisting, ambiguous quality: "In the days of the Judges" would have served the purpose more simply. The mirroring noun/verb structure raises questions: Does it mean "when the Judges judged"? or "when the Judges were judged"?

> It was a generation that judged its judges. If the judge said to a man, "Take the splinter from between your teeth," he would retort, "Take the beam from between your eyes." If the judge said, "Your silver is dross," he would retort, "Your liquor is mixed with water."[6]

If the judge is subject to harsher criticism than the defendant, this signifies a breakdown in the rule of law. If judges cannot rule on the improprieties of those they judge without provoking much more serious charges against themselves, this indicates how seriously disabled the legal system has become. The images—the splinter between the defendant's teeth, the beam that grotesquely emerges from *between his eyes*—indicate the greater gravity of the judge's misdeeds. The splinter may be embarrassing, inappropriate, but the beam—massive, distorting the judge's vision—compromises the radar by which he evaluates the world.[7]

In another round of metaphors, the judge compares the defendant to alloyed silver: hidden acts have compromised his integrity. The latter responds with a counterimage: the judge is like watered-down liquor. At what point does diluted liquor stop being liquor? By imperceptible degrees, the judge has lost his claim to represent justice; or worse, in a world of such judges, the very concept of justice may lose all meaning.

From a sociological perspective, the corruption of judges signifies the collapse of a shared world of meaning. Peter Berger discusses the challenge posed by the sociology of knowledge to the maintenance of a particular worldview. Concerned with "studying the relationship between human thought and the social condition under which it occurs," this discipline proposes that "the plausibility . . . of views of reality depends upon the social support these receive." Individuals are subject to powerful pressures to conform to the views of others. "It is in conversation, in the broadest sense of the word, that we build up and keep going our view of the world."[8] Social networks or "conversational fabrics" produce practices and explanations to bolster conviction: controls, therapies, legitimations create the "plausibility structure of the conception in question."[9]

In this view, the mystery of faith disappears as the theologian's world becomes "one world among many," a community of faith constructed in a specific human history. Similarly, when judges lay themselves open to serious charges of personal corruption, a world of expectation and belief begins to crumble. "Woe to that generation," declares another midrash, "that judges its judges—who require judgment!"[10] The woe of this condition is socially determined but its effects endanger the survival of a world of meaning.

In a similar vein, the midrash indicates the reason for the catastrophe that befell the aristocratic house of Elimelekh. The death of father and sons, which effectively sets the narrative of Naomi and Ruth in motion, demands moral explanation. What was the family's sin that brought down such calamity?

> It has been taught: In time of pestilence and in time of war, gather in your feet, but in time of famine, spread out your feet. Why then was Elimelekh punished? Because he struck despair into the hearts of Israel. He was like a prominent man who dwelt in a certain country, and the people of that country depended upon him and said that if a drought should come he could supply the whole country with food for ten years. When a drought came, however, his maidservant went out and stood in the marketplace with her basket in her hand. And the people of the country said, "This is the man upon whom we depended that if a drought should come he would supply our wants for ten years, and here his maidservant stands in the marketplace with her basket in her hand!" So with Elimelekh! He was one of the notables of his place and one of the leaders of his generation. But when the famine came he said, "Now all Israel will come knocking at my door [for help], each one with his basket." He therefore arose and fled before them. This is the meaning of the verse, "And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went . . ."[11]

Even though it is legitimate to flee the country in famine, Elimelekh bears responsibility for the social effect of abandoning his city. As a leader, a wealthy man, a *parnas* (lit., a feeder), he is the focus of economic expectations; when famine comes and his servant is found begging for bread in the market, this deals a blow to morale in Bethlehem. An unwritten contract has been betrayed; his power in the community had been based on an implicit network of social expectations.

The midrash emphasizes the inner world of the community, the narrative it has created around its feeder-leader. Beyond any specific law that might have prevented him from fleeing the country, his place in the "conversational fabric" of Bethlehem makes its own moral demand. Indeed, he flees not at the prompting of hunger, but in a kind of nervous recoil: he speaks of being besieged at every aperture by hands grasping begging bowls. What will remain of him? He flees, that is, in apprehensive fantasy of depletion, of loss of selfhood. To be a feeder means power; but it also raises the specter of the self consumed by the needs of others. In the face of this, Elimelekh abandons his position in his social world.

Nurturing life, maintaining vital connections with others, fulfilling needs—this is the world of *gomlei chasadim*, of "those who do deeds of kindness." In fleeing, Elimelekh removes not only his food resources but his role in the "plausibility structure" of his world. Essentially, he fails as a *father:* the death of his sons testifies to this larger failure.

"NOMOS AND NARRATIVE"

In his important essay "Nomos and Narrative," Robert Cover writes of the normative universe that is created and maintained by the interaction of law and narrative:

> We inhabit a *nomos*—a normative universe. We constantly create and maintain a world of right and wrong, of lawful and unlawful, of valid and void. . . . The rules and principles of justice, the formal institutions of the law, and the conventions of a social order are, indeed, important to that world; they are, however, but a small part of the normative universe that ought to claim our attention. No set of legal institutions or prescriptions exists apart from the narratives that locate it and give it meaning. For every constitution there is an epic, for each decalogue a scripture.[12]

The commitments of those who administer and live in this world determine what law means. Law may be viewed as a "bridge linking a conception of a reality to an imagined alternative—that is, as a connective between two states of affairs, both of which can be represented in their normative significance only through the devices of narrative."[13] This "alternity" is one element of a *nomos* that is

> a present world constituted by a system of tension between reality and vision. . . . Our visions hold our reality up to us as unredeemed. . . . But law gives a vision depth of field, by placing one part of it in the highlight of insistent and immediate demand while casting another part in the shadow of the millennium.[14]

Cover illustrates the tension between law and narrative by the example of the biblical law of inheritance, by which the eldest son receives a double portion of the family inheritance.[15] This is formulated as case history: the rights of the son of the less favored wife are pitted against those of the loved wife, already suggesting the human complexity that law addresses. But accompanying these legal texts are many significant biblical narratives, in which the firstborn is passed over in favor of the younger son: Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, Moses, Solomon.

Cover argues that the formal precept is not ignored; indeed, these narratives owe their power to the fact that the rule was normally obeyed. However, in each narrative where succession is contested,

> there is a layer of meaning added to the event by virtue of the fact that the mythos of this people has associated the divine hand of destiny with the typology of reversal of this particular rule. . . . Revelation and . . . prophecy are the revolutionary challenges to an order founded on revelation. . . . The biblical narratives always retained their subversive force—the memory that
> divine destiny is not lawful.[16]

NAOMI'S BITTERNESS

In terms of Cover's analysis, the normative world in which Ruth's story plays out displays, from the start, symptoms of collapse. Law no longer acts as the bridge linking reality and vision. The judge's vision is skewed, yielding no depth of vision but mere fragmentation. Skeptical narratives are generated in this world, where the "is," the "ought," and the "what might be" are separated by impassable gaps. Midrashic stories illustrate the failure to maintain a world of meaning: stories of hypocrisy and resentment at norms that have lost their power to inspire.

One such midrashic theme describes the famine at the beginning of the narrative as a spiritual drought, a hunger for the word of God.[17] Law has been rendered problematic by the way it is embedded in narrative. The very idea of the world-builder, world-protector, the feeder, the parent, has become hollow, and with it the sense of a normative universe. An unacknowledged "hunger" pervades the world to which Naomi returns with her two Moabite daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah.

All three are widows, childless, the wreckage cast up after the storm. "She remained," we are twice told of Naomi—"the debris of her husband's death, and then of her sons."[18] Eviscerated of meaning, Naomi is compared in the midrash to the husk that is left over after the meal offering goes up in smoke; after her sons die, she becomes "the husk of a husk" *(shiyarei shirayim).*[19] Inessential, connected to nothing, she returns with her daughters-in-law to Bethlehem. Like the walking dead . . .

Naomi is absorbed in persuading the younger women to leave her, to return to their proper place—*ishah beit imah:* "each woman to *her mother's house*" (Ruth 1:8). "May God deal kindly with you, as you have with the dead

and with me! May God grant that each of you finds security in the *house of a husband*!" Either within the mother's world or within the husband's, a woman finds her home. Even the Hebrew wordplay (*ishah beit ishah*—lit., "each woman the house of her man") conveys the mirroring of identity that is to be sought. In this way, the hunger that these Moabite women bring with them may be appeased.

For their sakes, Naomi works to detach them from her. Speaking with affectionate gratitude, she calls them *b'nottai:* "my daughters." But in the same breath, tenderly, imperatively, she presses them: "*Shovna b'nottai*—Go back, my daughters!" Even as they link their destiny with hers—*ki ittakh nashuv:* "No, we will return with you"—she insists on the empirical meaning of "return": for them, this refers to Moab, for her to Bethlehem. Three times, she urges them, *Shovna,* pathos mounting as she demonstrates the absurdity of their journey.

At this point, Naomi's speech becomes charged with complex meaning: "It is very bitter to me because of you" (Ruth 1:13). Her passion to send them back to Moab is, on one level, concern for their future, for their sterile prospects if they attach themselves to one so wounded by fate. At the same time, however, she tells of her bitterness, which is *because* of them: these Moabite marriages have undone her sons, and the presence of these forbidden wives in her future life in Bethlehem would be a constant irritant and reminder of her losses. Naomi thus is driven by a real desire to rid herself of these clinging foreigners. She refuses their love, kissing them goodbye even as they weep, until Orpah returns her kisses, yielding to Naomi's bitter desire.

Naomi's bitterness is the main burden of her response to the women of Bethlehem. She repudiates her own name; she has outlived its meaning. ("Don't call me Naomi [sweetness]. Call me Mara, for God has made my lot very bitter" [Ruth 1:20]). Unrecognizable, now, as the wealthy patroness of an ordered world, she addresses those who had been abandoned by her family, telling them about her own inner world, grown rank and sterile. God is the agent of her bitterness. The taste in the mouth conveys an intimate experience, which comes from God. For if He is the God of justice, and the world is a world of law, her suffering must be a sign of guilt. "God has afflicted me *[anah bi],*" she declares (1:21); but also, "God has *testified* against me."[20] This alternative translation is offered by Rashi and Ibn Ezra: Naomi declares that her sufferings proclaim her failure; the bitterness of her fate becomes a source of humiliation.

Here, Naomi speaks like Job, justifying God and reproaching Him. Ibn Ezra in fact refers to Job's use of a similar metaphor of suffering as testimony to guilt. "You renew Your witnesses against me" (Job 10:17). But in Job's speech, we can clearly hear the complexity of his feeling:

> If I am wicked, woe is me; and if I am righteous, yet I will not lift up my head, for I am filled with disgrace, and I see my affliction;
>
> If my head is lifted up proudly, you hunt me like a lion; and again work wonders against me:
>
> *You renew Your witnesses against me,* and increase Your indig nation against me; You bring fresh armies against me. (Job 10:15–17)

Job's state of mind, like Naomi's, is one of bitterness: "I will speak in the bitterness of my soul" (Job 10:1). Baffled by God's vindictiveness, Job wishes both to justify it and to reaffirm his innocence. Desiring a meaningful world, he searches for the law he has transgressed, but he can never quite convince himself that this accounting is true. Naomi similarly brings God into her narrative, as both rationale and enigma. If she is implicated in her husband's guilt, her sin is that she betrayed the expectations of her world, and her punishment that she is left empty, isolated: "I went away full, and God has brought me back empty" (Ruth 1:21). But if she is not to be held

responsible for her husband's dereliction—if, that is, her status as a woman exonerates her from blame for his decisions—then she is wrecked indeed: of husband, children, and meaningful world.

Throughout her Job-like speech, Naomi ignores Ruth's silent presence—as, indeed, do the townspeople, the women of Bethlehem. Ruth's attachment does not at all, it seems, mitigate Naomi's emptiness. Nothing in her resonates to Ruth's equally passionate speech of devotion ("Where you go, I will go . . ."). Fiercely dedicated to her rhetoric of bitterness, Naomi had responded to Ruth's passion with silence: "And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she ceased speaking to her" (Ruth 1:18). Out of that silence came her testament of bitterness and utter loneliness. And now, Ruth stands silent and unnoticed, her loving words fallen on deaf ears. At this point in the narrative, Naomi allows Ruth to accompany her, but her silence becomes an attack on Ruth's consoling presence.

In a well-known anecdote, Freud describes his infant grandson playing with a reel and string, throwing it into the crib and pulling it back, at the same time uttering sounds that Freud interpreted as *Fort!—Da!: Gone!—Here!* In play, the child is enacting his mother's absence, repeatedly staging her disappearance and return.[21] Jonathan Lear comments that "the game is prompted by a rip in the fabric of life. . . . The outcome of the game is to convert what would otherwise be a nameless trauma into a loss."[22]

"In being able to get to 'da,' the child is able to bring his experience together." The game "creates a cultural space in which the child can play with loss: in this way he comes to be able to tolerate it and name it. . . . It is only now that the mind can wander around the idea of mother's absence. . . . Inventing the game, the child thereby creates the capacity *to think* about mother's absence. . . . This is courage-in-the-making.[23]

If, however, the child could never get to *"Da!,"* if he kept endlessly repeating "*Fort!*" he "would never be able to get a thought together. . . . Rather than face his own loss, the child might opt to attack his own ability to understand what had happened to him."[24]

Naomi, I suggest, is engaged in such an attack on her own capacity for making meaning. Imaginative activity might link loss with recovery. Instead, Naomi's rhetoric isolates her in bitterness. For her, hope can mean only a grotesque scenario of the aged body giving birth to infant husbands for aging wives (Ruth 1:11–13).

THE PARADOX OF RUTH

The ironic aspect of this is that Naomi's one resource, that might have motivated her to hope, is Ruth—who is invisible, inaudible, and banned by law from entering the community of God. Because she is a Moabite, Ruth is excluded from Naomi's world. This is the law, and its reason is clear: "because they did not come out to greet you with bread and water on your journey after you left Egypt" (Deut. 23:5).

The Moabite stigma originates in a historical failure of *chesed*, of connectivity, of acknowledgment of the other's need.[25] The Moabites are not feeders, maintainers of the world. But in this narrative, as we have seen, it is precisely the Judean world that has failed to sustain the social networks, the conversational fabrics that keep faith alive. And it is Ruth the Moabite who has offered to be a link between past and future, a possible resource of meaning in Naomi's destitute condition.

Here, then, is the problem constituted by Ruth. Her situation is sharply defined by law: she can never find her place within the community of God. But, as every reader has always known, the book of Ruth will conclude in the way legislated by history: Ruth will marry Boaz, and their child will be grandfather to King David. In a sense, then, all the delays in the narrative, the episodes drawn out over a summer, the outrageous move that sends Ruth, dressed and scented, to the granary floor and to Boaz's feet on a harvest night—all contain a hidden necessity: the ending is

legislated in advance.

NARRATIVE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

"Une chose," says Sartre, *"commence pour finir."*[26] Since everyone— writer and readers—knows that Ruth must marry Boaz, what is holding the narrative back? What, in fact, allows there to be a narrative at all? What makes this piece of history narratable? The answer is related to Ruth's identity, to the problem that she poses to the *nomos,* the normative world of law and story that, even before she arrived, had already been in palpable crisis.

Problems, crisis, conflict, instability—these are the very substance of narrative. Ruth constitutes the possibility of narrative, as well as the necessity of closure. But narrative is often radically at odds with the utopian state of closure. This central tension in the traditional novel, for instance, is the subject of D. A. Miller's *Narrative and Its Discontents.* Miller argues that "closure" and "narratability" are essentially in conflict. If the *ending* of a Jane Austen novel, for instance, yields "a state of absolute propriety: proper understanding expressed in proper erotic objects and proper social arrangements," her *narratives* are "generated precisely by an underlying instability of desire, language, and society, and, as such, they are inevitably felt to threaten the very possibility of this definitive, 'finalizing' state of affairs."[27]

Such a fiction, then, is a "perverse" project, since it longs to eliminate the narratable: it "is a quest after that which will end questing; or a distortion of what will be made straight." Since "only insufficiencies, defaults, deferrals, can be 'told,' " the very idea of a narrative of happiness is put in question.[28] For to bring the narrative to a state of fulfillment is, virtually, to end it. Miller argues, therefore, that narratives are never fully or finally governed by their endings.[29] There is an ongoing tension between the two states:

> One might say that the traditional novelist gives play to his discontent only to assuage it in the end, much as the child in Freud makes his toy temporarily disappear the better to enjoy its reinstated presence. . . . [It] would therefore work on the principle of vaccination; incorporating the narratable in safe doses to prevent it from breaking out.

If the novel attempts to master the narratable, it rarely succeeds. Even in Freud, the "anxiety of disappearance is intrinsically stronger than the gratification of return, for the former is not merely a moment in the game, it is the underlying inspiration of the game itself."[30]

In the book of Ruth, the narratable dimension is generated by Ruth herself, by the problem, the instability that she constitutes for the normative world that she enters. The resulting turbulence in some sense survives even the fulfillment, legislated in advance, of the ending. Simply by being Ruth, she raises questions and disrupts norms. She represents the "quest after that which will end questing," the "distortion of what will be made straight."

The "distortion of what will be made straight" embedded in Miller's rhetoric refers to the verse from Ecclesiastes that inaugurates the following midrash:

> It is said, "That which is crooked cannot be made straight; and that which is wanting cannot be counted" (Eccles. 1:15). In this world, he who is crooked can be made straight, and he who is straight can become crooked; but in the hereafter he who is crooked cannot be made straight, nor can he who is straight become crooked. "And that which is wanting cannot be numbered." Consider two wicked men who associated with one another in this world. One of them repented of his evil deeds before his death while the other did not, with the result that the former stands in the company of the righteous while his fellow stands in the

company of the wicked. Seeing him there, he says, "Woe is me, is there favoritism here? We both of us committed robberies, we both of us committed murders together, yet he stands in the company of the righteous and I in the company of the wicked!" And they [the angels] reply to him and say, "You fool! You were despicable after your death and lay for three days, and did not they drag you to your grave with ropes? 'The maggot is spread under you, and the worms cover you' (Isa. 14:11). But your old acquaintance understood and repented of his evil ways, while you too had the opportunity to repent but you did not take it."

He immediately replied, "Let me go and repent!" And they answer him, "You fool! Do you not know that this world is like the Sabbath and the world from which you have come is like the eve of the Sabbath? If a man does not prepare his meal on the eve of the Sabbath, what shall he eat on the Sabbath? And do you not know also that this world is like the sea, and the world from which you have come is like the dry land? If a man does not prepare his food on the dry land, what shall he eat at sea? And do you not know also that this world is like the wilderness and the world from which you have come is like cultivated land? If a man does not prepare his food on cultivated land, what shall he eat in the wilderness?"[31]

The verse from Ecclesiastes becomes a description of *olam ha-ba,* the world to come. There, the distorted can never be made straight. Herein lies a bittersweet paradox: our present world is the world for *teshuvah,* for repentance, while in the world to come, character and destiny are determined on arrival. The case of the two sinners, whose ways part so dramatically in the hereafter, stages the classic idea: repentance, transformation, is possible in this world only. Our hero is slow to comprehend this radical difference between worlds: he can no longer transform himself and his fate. The world he came from was the place and time for making the crooked straight. Three classic images conclude the midrash: the Sabbath, the sea, the wilderness—all must have food prepared in advance if one is to eat there. Or rather—from the perspective of the world to come, where the sinner now finds himself—if you want to eat *here,* you had to prepare *there.* This midrash draws its narrative power from its shifted perspective. A classic notion about the relation between worlds looks different from the viewpoint of the hereafter. The world to come represents to the human being in this world a consummation devoutly to be wished, a prospect of clarity and fulfillment after the turbulence of this world. But it turns out that there is a sting in the sweetness. A melancholy limitation invests the hereafter: nothing there can change.

In Miller's terms, this world is the world of narrative, while the hereafter represents closure. Once instability and error have been resolved, one may find oneself at sea, or in a wilderness, or in the quiescence that is the Sabbath, without access to the "food" that can be prepared only in the energy of narrative. Narrative and closure are incongruous worlds; but they yearn for each other. In the world of narrative, ultimate meanings are veiled; desires and fears, multiple possibilities, suspense, insufficiency keep the story going. But when the end comes, nothing further can develop; all is arrested in the condition to which its turbulent history has brought it.

THE RIGORS OF NARRATIVE

From this midrashic perspective, Ruth and Orpah represent these two modalities. Ruth has the capacity to generate a story. Precisely because of her vulnerability, her "outsider" status, as well as her mysterious desire to find her way in, she sets episodes in motion. Lacking everything, she makes a decision to leave behind her the stability of family, nation, and religion, and to embark on a *narrative:* on a course that offers no visible fulfillment. Orpah starts out with her but soon yields to the blandishments of closure: "Return," Naomi urges, "*ishah beit ishah*—each woman

[ishah] to the home of her man *[ishah]*" (Ruth 1:9). The play on words enacts closure, fulfillment. Orpah chooses the resolution that will liquidate a senseless journey.

But Ruth knowingly declares her commitment to a future that can bear no imaginable fruit. To Naomi's plea that she *go after* her sister-in-law, she responds, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not *go after* you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may God do to me if anything but death parts me from you" (Ruth 1:16-17).

Her famous speech holds no hint of fantasy, of utopian closure. Her desire is to go with Naomi—or rather, to *go after* her—and to be with her unto death and burial. The dynamic of the moment is stark: urged to follow Orpah's lucid journey to womanly fulfillment, she redescribes this as a movement away from the essential magnetic connection to Naomi. *Going after* Naomi evokes an entranced state, an attachment blind to rational interest. *"I remember for you the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride—how you went after Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown"* (Jer. 2:2). Like the children who follow the Pied Piper into the mountain, she knows only the life she senses in this connection. This is the future she chooses, soberly, undeluded; it leads to the only plausible consummation, death, burial. She has no argument with Naomi's grim realism about the possibility of a conventional happy ending. Marriage and children do not figure in her expectations. Instead, she commits herself to the unmitigated rigors of her desire. Naomi is the essential clue in her labyrinth: for Ruth, she opens up a vista of movement and rest, of nation and God.

Orpah acts out the classic consummation of narrative: tearfully, she kisses her mother-in-law farewell and makes toward her foreseeable ending. Ruth, on the other hand, *clings* to Naomi *(davkah bah).* To cling is to affirm the passionate desire that constitutes its own gratification. It is to refuse to flee the rigors of narrative. The word *davak* is most resonantly used of erotic and of mystic connections: "Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife, so that they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). "And you who cling to God your God are all alive today" (Deut. 4:4). Implicitly, to cling is to move away from the given relationships of childhood, to desire a life beyond infantile fantasy.[32] At the same time, it evokes a risky persistence, a courage of desire that bears one through the drifts of the narratable. Ironically, this courage is subject to ambiguous judgments: it can be viewed as a clinging *to* infantile fantasy.

The tactile imagery of *devekut* (clinging, *stickiness*) accompanies Ruth throughout her narrative. She holds fast to Naomi, whose emptiness, as we have seen, is at first unappeased by her. Ignored by the women of Bethlehem, Ruth then proposes to find a field in which to glean—"following someone in whose eyes I may find favor." She is casting herself into the drift of chance and desire. In this world of narrative, the traveler has no guarantee of finding safe harbor. With unusual pungency, the narrative declares, *va-yiker mikrehah*—"*as luck would have it,* it was the land belonging to Boaz who was of Elimelekh's family" (Ruth 2:3). Unwittingly, she has fallen upon her destiny; her trajectory now holds out hope of a real "return" to Naomi's family. But, from Ruth's perspective, she is *taking her chances* (lit., *her chance chanced it*).

The coincidence that brings her to Boaz's field is of the kind that, retrospectively, can be read as an accident that was meant to happen. But Ruth has no knowledge of the ending of her story. In the drift of contingency, she enters a field; unknown to her, Boaz asks his servant about her: "Whose is this young woman?" And the servant answers: "She is the Moabite woman, who returned with Naomi from the fields of Moab" (Ruth 2:5–6).

The reader is caught in the subtle anguish of narrative. Ruth is being maligned: twice in one sentence, the servant has managed to refer to her Moabite origin—and this, after the narrator has reintroduced her at the beginning of the chapter as Ruth *the Moabite.* All the hopelessness of her situation is here, insult added to injury. What is the servant implying as he harps on her background?

"Whose is this young woman?" Did he not then recognize her? But when he saw how attractive she was, and how modest her comportment, he began to inquire about her. All the other women bend down to gather the ears of corn, but she sits and gathers; all the other women hitch up their skirts, and she keeps hers down; all the other women jest with the reapers, while she is reserved; all the other women gather from between the sheaves, while she gathers from that which is already abandoned.

In the same way one must understand the verse, "And when Saul saw David go forth against the Philistine, he said to Avner . . . 'Whose son is this youth?' " (1 Sam. 17:55). Did he not then recognize him? But yesterday he sent to Jesse saying, "Let David, I pray you, stand before me: for he has found favor in my sight" (16:22); and now he inquires about him? But when Saul saw the head of the Philistine [Goliath], he began to ask about David, "Is he a descendant of Perez, a king? Is he a descendant of Zerah, a judge?"

And Doeg the Edomite was present at that time, and he said to him, "Even if he is a descendant of Perez, is he not of impure descent? Is he not a descendant of Ruth the Moabitess?" Avner said to him, "But has the law not been revised: *Ammonite but not Ammonitess, Moabite but not Moabitess*?" He answered him: "But if so, we could also say *Edomite but not Edomitess, Egyptian men but not Egyptian women*? Why were the men repudiated? Was it not 'because they did not meet you with bread and water'? (Deut. 23:5). The women ought to have met the women!" And for the moment, Avner forgot the law.

Saul said to him, "Go and inquire about that law which you have forgotten from Samuel and his court." When he came to Samuel and his court, he said, "Where did this come from? Not from Doeg? Doeg is a heretic and will not leave this world in peace! And yet I cannot let you go without an answer: 'All glorious is the king's daughter within the palace' (Ps. 45:14)—It is not for a woman to go out and bring food [to foreign armies], but only for a man. 'And because they hired Balaam against you' (Deut. 17:5)—A man hires, but not a woman."

"And the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered and said, 'It is a Moabite woman' " (Ruth 2:6)—and yet you say that her conduct is praiseworthy and modest? Her mother-inlaw has taught her well![33]

The midrash finely inflects the dialogue. Why did Boaz ask about Ruth? Surely he knew of her? Soon after, in fact, he will tell her of her admirable reputation for *chesed*, loving-kindness. His question, however, is "*Whose is she?*"—meaning that he is impressed by her bearing, her modesty and intelligence, and implying: "Could she be mine? Could she belong to my world?" Generations later, the same question will be asked by Saul about David, implicitly about his potential for positions of power. Immediately, David will be disparaged by Doeg, on the grounds of his impure descent from Ruth the Moabitess. A debate breaks out: on a closer look at the biblical text, it has become clear that only the male Moabite is banned from the community of God, not the female. The law has been revised, since this gender distinction makes room for Ruth to marry Boaz. But is this not a mere verbal quibble, which could be extended *ad absurdum* to all such marital bans? No, declares Samuel; here the issue of greeting and feeding strangers would exempt women on the grounds of modesty; the cultural codes of the time would make that obvious.

On Samuel's view, the biblical text always contained this nuanced gender distinction that might have been interpreted at any time. The fact remains that this interpretation was never made until Ruth came on the scene; she is the first Moabite woman to benefit from the change in the law.[34] It is striking, too, that in the time of David the issue is still controversial, so that the malicious counselor, Doeg, can still cast aspersions on David's ancestry, while even the honest counselor, Avner, forgets the law. The question has to be taken to Samuel, as the final court of appeal. He determines the gender functions in such a way as to make the new reading unassailable. But the midrash concludes by returning to Boaz and the servant in the field. His disparaging answer directly addresses Boaz's admiration of Ruth: she has merely benefited from good coaching (lit., *healing*) by Naomi. In other words, once a Moabite, always

a Moabite. . . .

The midrash dramatizes the hostility of the social world that Ruth is trying to penetrate. The premise, both now and in the future, in the story of David, is that the law has been changed: otherwise, how could Boaz marry her? But the change has just happened, and society retains its sense of a normative world that excludes Moabites. Such classifications of inside/outside are hard to shift. One hears in the tone of the servant in the field, as well as of Doeg, generations later, a malicious satisfaction in ruling the other out. In Doeg's case, he himself is then paradoxically *ruled out* from the world ("He is a heretic and will not leave this world in peace")—precisely because of his rigidity. Revisions in the law constitute its organic life. But Ruth will nevertheless remain suspect; the taint of her ancestry will remain troubling in the narratives, if not in the law books, of her new people.

Moreover, the fact that the law is changed just as Ruth meets Boaz suggests that it is Ruth's presence that has made this change necessary. The servant's grudging answer defines her as merely *well coached.* But clearly it is her distinction that rouses Boaz's interest; in combination with her taboo status, it constitutes her as an irresoluble question. *Whose* is she? Her nation is under the stigma of lacking *chesed,* the instinct to nurture the vulnerable other. But this national character is not reflected in Ruth's bearing, which is charged with *chesed.* To what world, then, does she belong?

The law will make space for her inside the world of Judea. Boaz will beautifully describe her to her face in terms that evoke the epic heroes of his world.[35] Law and narrative both include her—and yet, poignantly, she remains an outsider, foreign in the eyes of others and in her own eyes.

POWERS OF HORROR

One specific dimension of her reviled status is the sexual notoriety of Moabite women. *Zenut,* sexual seduction, sexual waywardness, has marked the Moabite story from its origins. We remember how, after the destruction of Sodom, Lot's daughters made their father drunk and had sexual relations with him.[36] But it was the daughter who inscribed the incest into her son's name (Mo'av=Me-avi [from my father]) who exposed the act of darkness to the light. Later, it was the women of Moab who enticed Israel into the sin of Ba'al-peor (Num. 25:1).

This association of Moab—and, particularly of its women—with lasciviousness accompanies Ruth throughout her dealings with the world of Bethlehem. She becomes the embodiment of what Julia Kristeva calls *the abject:* that which is *cast out* of the self and considered loathsome:

> The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territory of *animal.* Thus by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals and animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.
>
> The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language.[37]

Both upheld by taboos and a focus of fascination, the abject rouses fear of the loss of boundaries.

Ruth's transactions with Boaz can be read as marked by such an ambiguity. After the servant has answered Boaz's question and Boaz has kindly opened up the field for her gleaning, her first speech transforms her from an object discussed by others into a linguistic being, neither animal nor the mother of early, preverbal life:

> And she fell upon her face and bowed down to the ground and she said to him, "Why have I found favor in your eyes to recognize me, though I am a stranger?" (Ruth 2:10)

In addressing him, she in a sense responds to his question: "Do you not hear me, my daughter?" (Ruth 2:8). Something unresponsive in her moves him to ask, *Do you hear? Do you understand my language?* But strikingly, her answer questions the very possibility of his *recognition* of her. The Gaon comments: Falling on her face expresses a certain dejection. Ruth sees that Boaz has spoken kindly to her, as though he means to marry her, and yet he adds, "So shall you cling to my servant girls," classing her with his servants and making no further move of courtship. Nevertheless, she bows down in gratitude for his kind words, and she says, "Why have I found favor in your eyes to recognize me, to single me out, as though you will know me as a wife?" But again, "I am a stranger": it is clear from your last words that I am a foreigner. I don't understand your meaning!

On this reading, Ruth is acutely sensitive to the ambivalence that Boaz displays toward her. The law may have been changed, but Ruth is depressingly conscious of the residues of the old boundaries: Boaz is blowing hot and cold. What might have been a moment of closure remains tantalizingly ambiguous—and keeps the narrative going in all its danger and possibility.

And yet, even as closure eludes her, Ruth speaks with a certain lucid pleasure in the sheer paradox of the moment. She plays with language: "Why have you acted as though you *know* me *[l'hakireini]*, as though I were recognizable to you, when I am a *stranger [nokhriyah]*?" To be known by the other, *as the other*—this, too, is recognition. Perhaps Ruth senses the hopefulness in being known in her very difference? Perhaps her foreignness can even become a gift that she can offer Boaz? As Edmond Jabès suggests, "The foreigner allows you to be yourself by making a foreigner of you."

At any rate, the Gaon notes a certain confidence in Ruth's tone, as she responds again to Boaz's second, and even more kindly, speech: "And she said, 'May I find favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have consoled me and you have spoken gently to your maidservant— *though I am not so much as one of your maidservants' "* (Ruth 2:13). Between this usual reading and the Gaon's *("I shall not be like one of your maidservants"),* the complexity of Ruth appears—modest and assertive, dejected but hopeful.

This complexity is her response to the ambivalence of Boaz and his world toward her. At the same time, we can say that it is precisely this complexity that arouses hostility and suspicion in a solidly demarcated world. As one who *clings*—serially, to Naomi, to the servants in the field, to Boaz during the night on the granary floor— Ruth is perceived as disturbingly anomalous.

In a classic essay, Sartre writes of the *viscosity*, stickiness, neither solid nor liquid, which is among our primary experiences. Mary Douglas amplifies Sartre's notion to discuss cultural categories and their relation to anomalies. She engages with the threatening quality of the viscous as "aberrant fluid or . . . melting solid":

> Its stickiness is a trap, it clings like a leech; it attacks the boundary between myself and it. Long columns falling off my fingers suggest my own substance flowing into the pool of stickiness. . . . In this way the first contact with stickiness enriches a child's experience. He has learnt something about himself and the properties of matter and the interrelation between self and other things. . . . It makes the point that we can and do reflect with profit on our main classifications and on experiences which do not exactly fit them. . . . So from these earliest tactile adventures we have always known that life does not conform to our most simple categories.[38]

The public character of a culture makes its categories more rigid, so that the anomalies that inevitably occur must generate new interpretations to reduce the threat to its definitions of reality.

In her *stickiness*—her persistent desire, her bold modesty—Ruth poses a disconcerting challenge to the world of Bethlehem. On the one hand, she is obedient, malleable: according to the midrash, she is submissive to all the legal stringencies with which Naomi tries to deter her. Even her great speech of devotion is read in this way, as a point-by-point response to the difficult demands of the law: Naomi warns her: "It is forbidden for us to go beyond the Shabbat boundary," and Ruth answers, *"Where you go, I will go."*[39] She accepts the boundaries of law, in its 613 forms: she will not visit theaters and circuses; she will not sleep in a house without a mezuzah; she acknowledges the sanctions for serious crimes—four types of executions and two types of ignominious burial. All these limitations she accepts.

On the other hand, her very existence challenges the imaginative boundaries that have defined the world she desires to penetrate. Moreover, in her poetic declaration of love for what she senses in and through Naomi, she has the courage to "play" with the imaginings of death, destruction, and loss. She not only *clings:* she *reflects* on *devekut* (the clinging posture), on the ways that language creates boundaries and dissolves them. Naomi acknowledges Ruth's capacity to play—but only, at first, by "ceasing to speak to her"—that is, she yields to Ruth's wish not to be separated from her, but she yields without any corresponding wish of her own.

Boaz acknowledges Ruth's spiritual parentage: like Abraham, she has left her father and mother in her quest for an unknown alternative.[40] She belongs to the world of Abraham, which for her is represented by Naomi. As a *mother,* however, Naomi is far from incarnating the soft mother of infancy. Her words create her as separate, distinct, not the loving mother of primal desire, but the mother whom Christopher Bollas describes as a *process of transformation.* From the mother who constantly alters the infant's environment to meet her needs, the child is born into her own emerging capacities to transform the world, to handle and differentiate objects, to speak their distinctness. This transformational impact of the mother in early life is carried over into adulthood, when there will appear "the object that is pursued in order to surrender to it as a medium that alters the self."[41] The Ruth who is able to articulate her experience, to play in the potential space between desire and reality, is also the Ruth who seeks *devekut,* the transformative moment of uncanny fusion.[42]

It is at the hands of a somewhat austere mother, then, that Ruth seeks out her own transformation. Confronting the image of her own abjectness, she persists in her desire for the *devekut,* the unthinkable intimacy that is its other face. Treading a fine line, she assumes the risks of narrative: clinging to Naomi, seeking out someone in whose eyes she will find favor, even twining herself around Boaz's feet on the granary floor. Haunted by racial stereotypes both of sexual license and of emotional stinginess, she neither acts them out nor violently repudiates them. If she is to find the transformation she so devoutly wishes, she must open herself to the vagaries of narrative, and to its dangerous language of becoming.

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THE WINGS OF THE DOVE

Ruth's process has its palpable effect on Naomi and Boaz. Naomi at first responds to Ruth's initiative of gleaning with just two words: "Go, my daughter." But at the end of the day, she greets Ruth returned from the field as *her mother-in-law,* three times repeated (Ruth 2:18,19). She speaks a language of blessing—that is, of wishfulness—previously unheard on her lips: "May the one who acknowledged you be blessed. . . . Blessed be he by God, who has not abandoned His love *(chesed)* to the living and the dead!" (2:19–20). She is now able to speak of God's love as persisting through all, as falling on the living and the dead. That is, where previously she had spoken dismissively of

Ruth's *chesed* "with the dead and with me" (1:8), she now defines herself and Ruth as *the living*. God's love is now a sensed reality, affecting even the traumatic past. Redundantly, she addresses Ruth as her daughter-in-law (2:20,22), as well as her daughter (2:22). The increased vitality and warmth of Naomi's language is her tribute to Ruth's very being. Most strikingly, Ruth is once again named, both at the beginning of the chapter and at the end, as *Ruth the Moabite* (2:2,21). Outsider still, evoking complex associations, Ruth has palpably brought Naomi to life and to a language of attachment.

The dynamic effect on Naomi of Ruth's presence is felt most clearly in chapter 3. Here, Naomi takes the initiative and plots for Ruth the nighttime encounter with Boaz that will bring her narrative to its consummation: "And Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, 'My daughter, shall I not seek for you *a resting place* that shall be good for you' " (Ruth 3:1). Naomi declares the nature of her quest: an end to questing for Ruth, a full closure that will meet her desire.

The idea of *mano'ach*, a resting place, reminds us of Noach's dove, sent out to test the waters after the Flood: "And the dove did not find *a resting place* for the sole of its foot, so it returned to him to the ark, for there was water over all the earth" (Gen. 8:8). Like the dove, Ruth seeks a place of stability in the volatile world. By now, Naomi identifies sufficiently with Ruth's quest to wish it happily over.

But the dove's flight configures a question *(Have the waters abated?);* whether she returns to the ark or not will become the answer. Ruth's quest, too, raises an existential question, about the possibility of fulfillment for such desires as she harbors. Naomi demonstrates how deeply she has been affected by Ruth's courage, by her stamina in the face of danger. To find consummation for Ruth—and for herself—she adopts Ruth's "narrative" mode, endangering her reputation in the most Moabite way imaginable.

Naomi sends Ruth to the granary where Boaz lies during the night after the harvest, to uncover his feet and lie there. Ruth's preparations are to be those of a woman before a sexual encounter: washing, scenting, dressing, and secrecy. Boaz's acts are precisely foreseen: he will eat and drink and lie down—and he will tell her what to do. Ruth obediently replies, "Everything you tell me I will do"—her obedience including obedience to Boaz's instructions. Naomi, it seems, has entered into Ruth's risk-taking mode, coaching her for a role that unnervingly resembles the role of the harlots, the *zonot*, who haunt granary floors and who are the target of prophetic anger[43]—the role for which Ruth's Moabite background has prepared her. Only by such ambiguous means, it seems, can the world of law, of normative order, be accessed.

Ruth, in fact, follows Naomi's instructions, but not their timing: first, she goes down to the threshing floor and only then she makes her preparations. The Talmud notes the change: she prefers not to walk in public in her perfumed finery.[44] Another midrash adds that she fears being accosted by "one of the dogs."[45] Her own intelligence guides her to modify Naomi's instructions.[46]

Naomi thrusts Ruth into the eye of the storm, into all the turbulence of narrative. It is as though she now loves Ruth sufficiently to take risks with her. Indeed, she makes common cause with Ruth, referring to Boaz as *our kinsman.*[47] The Jerusalem Talmud indicates the depth of Naomi's identification with Ruth by noting her instructions—"Wash, perfume yourself, dress up, and go down to the granary . . . and lie down" (Ruth 3:3): the Hebrew verbs are read in the second person, but written, strangely, in the *first person.* "She told her: 'My merit shall go down there with you.' "[48] In other words, Ruth does not go alone: Naomi is with her as she moves into her moment of greatest narrative suspense.

In her relation with Boaz, too, Ruth displays a *chesed* quality that affects him profoundly. Here, too, the paradox is that the humble outsider, needy, suspect, abject, generates a movement of reciprocal recognition and gratitude in the other. The teacher is redeemed by the student, the older man is guided by the younger woman, Israel is

regenerated by the woman from Moab.

Ruth is under Naomi's instructions to obey his wishes: "he will tell you what to do." But when he wakes at midnight, shuddering at the mysterious being who grips his feet, and asks, "*Who are you?*" she answers by identifying herself and, in the same breath, *giving him, too, an identity:* "I am Ruth your maidservant. Spread your robe over your maidservant, *for you are a redeemer*" (Ruth 3:9). She is, in fact, proposing marriage to him.[49] In a sense, too, she is answering his question to the servant in the field: "*Whose* is this woman?" She is his, she tells him, soliciting his care, protection, warmth, sexual intimacy; his concrete representation of the "wings[50] of the Lord God of Israel." He himself had described her as seeking refuge beneath those wings (2:12). Bringing his rhetoric in the field into intimate focus, she makes him the very emissary of the Lord God of Israel.

In soliciting him in this way, however, she is also expressing her solicitude for him: she is giving him an opportunity to be a redeemer. By redeeming Naomi's estate, in the legal sense, and by becoming Ruth's metaphorical redeemer—by taking her under his wing—Boaz will find his own redemption.[51] She has given him a place in her narrative, which, it will transpire, is to become *the* narrative. Through his connection with her, he will endow Elimelekh's family with a future. And as this connection takes form in her words, he is affected by the *chesed*, the beauty that her words create. He responds with strange gratitude: "Blessed are you of God, my daughter! Your latest deed of *chesed* is finer than the first, in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich" (Ruth 3:10).

Boaz addresses Ruth as a source of blessing, and of *chesed*— precisely in her relation with him. He had woken, shuddering at the mysterious pressure at his feet; at first, he had not identified her as a woman—perhaps she is a demon embodied from his dream?[52] His initial terror modulates into acknowledgment of the loving energy that emanates from her. In soliciting his redemption, she has drawn out of him, with gentle force, a possibility of larger life. Demonic, uncanny, speaking with numinous authority, she regenerates both herself and him.

Chesed intimates, among other translations—love, kindness, devotion, courage—*beauty*. The grace, the favor *(chen)* that she characteristically hopes to find in the eyes of others is the twin of *chesed:* a beauty of being and of language.[53]

In the potential space created by their words, they sleep till dawn. She rises before the light, "so that none may know that the woman came to the granary." And the next day, Boaz brings the work of narrative to its conclusion. What has been acknowledged in the darkness is publicly ratified in the daylight, at the gate of the city. Here, it turns out, the other redeemer, Mr. X, is willing to undertake the legal redemption of Naomi's estate—but not the metaphorical redemption of Ruth. His reason is clear: "lest I destroy my own estate" (Ruth 4:6). Ruth would bring confusion, anomaly to his condition. In economic terms, he would be investing his own resources in a son who would legally be regarded as Machlon's. A banal and immediate "happy ending" to his narrative is endangered by Ruth's ambiguity, by her neediness, her viscosity. So Boaz consummates the narrative: by legal transaction before witnesses, he claims both land and woman, assuming responsibility, allowing intimacy, freeing all three from limbo.

Ruth, meanwhile, returns unseen in the dark to her mother-inlaw, who asks her, "*Who are you,* my daughter?" What quality in Ruth leads both Naomi and Boaz to ask this question? Boaz, of course, asked it in a midnight daze, between sleep and waking. Naomi knows her as "my daughter." And yet, for both, Ruth retains to the end an *unknown* quality. Something in her remains strange. In both cases, she has an answer. We have seen how deeply Boaz is affected by the authority of her words. For Naomi, Ruth produces the barley that Boaz has given her in token of promised plenitude. The dove has found a resting place in the midst of many waters. But both answers only partially eliminate the force of the question. There is a residue of inscrutable *chesed,* of sheer unknownness, in the woman whose impact they both know.

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IF BOAZ HAD KNOWN . . .

The end of the story is, of course, triumphant. It is also public knowledge, an ending legislated in advance. A baby is born of the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, whose genealogy is then doubly traced: he is grandfather to David, and descendant, generation by generation, of Perez, son of Judah. The roll call of generations from Perez leads to Boaz and onward again to David. This is closure in its most utopic, definitive form: a list of male names, quasi-mythical, making for full and final meaning.

But what are we to make of the relation between this ending and the narrative that has come before? The midrash raises an uncanny question:

> "And he reached her parched corn, and she ate and was satisfied and had some left over" (Ruth 2:14). R. Isaac ben Marion said: This verse can teach that if a person is going to perform a good deed, he should do it with all his heart. For had Reuben known that Scripture would record of him, "And Reuben heard it, and saved him from their hand" (Gen. 37:21), he would have borne Joseph on his shoulder to his father. And had Aaron known that Scripture would record of him, "And also, behold, he comes forth to you" (Exod. 4:14), he would have gone forth to meet him with timbrels and dances. And had Boaz known that Scripture would record of him, "And he reached her parched corn, and she ate and was satisfied and had some left over" (Ruth 2:14), he would have fed her fatted calves.
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> R. Cohen and R. Joshua of Siknin said in the name of R. Levi: In the past, when a person performed a good deed, the prophet placed it on record; but nowadays when a person performs a good deed, who records it? Elijah records it and the Messiah and the Holy One, blessed be He, add their seal to it. This is the meaning of the verse, "Then they who feared God spoke with one another; and God listened, and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before Him" (Mal. 3:16).[54]

If Boaz had known how his narrative would be written, he would have acted with greater panache—less equivocally, less hesitantly. Instead of a pinch of parched corn, he would have fed Ruth fatted calves! In the light of retrospective knowledge—that is, of full and final versions—how much better would we play our roles! If we knew the camera was focused on us, we would acknowledge one another with drums and dancing. The midrash seems to be advocating a kind of imaginative awareness that will intensify the good deed—*as if* we knew the final record.

However, in using the rhetoric of "If Boaz had known," the midrash paradoxically stages the unbridgeable gap that must exist between act and record, between narrative and closure. In the conditions of this world, the world of narrative, human beings struggle, ignorant on many levels, to act well, to "perform good deeds." The deeds of *chesed* in this world are often hesitant, partial, expressing the instability, complexity, insufficiency of narrative. Moreover, if Boaz had known how his story would be recorded, his act of kindness to Ruth might have been more fulsome; but it would have lost its human force, which was born precisely of the tensions of the situation that Ruth has precipitated. The fraught moment of his gift, the pinch of parched corn, if recorded on camera, would need an inspired director to communicate its mute expressiveness. The narrator of Ruth achieves just this in quietly observing, "And she ate and she was satisfied"—she was well satisfied by his gift. A pinch of corn has become an epiphany within this narrative world.

Narrative and closure constitute incompatible worlds. It is in the nature of narrative to be plagued by ignorance, oscillations, misunderstanding. Within these risky parameters, Ruth expresses, passionately but incompletely, her desire. Without knowing how the text will inscribe her, she clings, seeking that uncanny fusion, the *devekut* that her words can only intimate.

In fact, the midrash goes on to speak of the "nowadays" reality as one of pure narrative: when one does a good deed, who records it? In the past, the prophet was at hand to record such deeds—the gap between narrative and closure was narrowed, the prophet effecting almost simultaneous translation, so that full and final meanings were, to some extent, even in this world, to be understood. But now, such record is a matter of faith: Elijah, the Messiah, God Himself ensure that the significant moments of narrative are written, their meanings elucidated. But that writing happens in some other world. Here, now, Ruth must speak her desire without hearing its ultimate resonance.

The midrash ends with a verse from Malachi, the last prophet: "Then they that feared God spoke[55] with one another; and God listened, and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before Him." The conversation of the righteous is heard and recorded by God. In the reading of R. David Kimchi (Radak), the prophet is recording a contest of conversations: the disbelievers speak to one another, questioning God's appeals to them to consider their ways ("It is useless to serve God" [Mal. 3:14]); in response, "those who feared God and esteemed His name" maintain a conversation of faith. The constructive conversation is thus doubly recorded—by the prophet and, in his account, by God, too.

After the prophetic period, however, the existence of such a divine record becomes a matter of faith. We remain essentially uncorroborated in this world, with our various social networks, normative worlds, conversational fabrics. Although the midrash maintains that all is ultimately on record—signed by God—in this world we have no access to the divine text. Those who belong to the society of believers sustain their world of belief in God's providence and in the larger repercussions of human action. They may discuss theology and interpret reality; but final meaning—the divine writing—is not available to them. Like Reuven, and Aaron, and Boaz, they live in this world, which is the world of narrative. Here, a pinch of parched corn may have to do in place of fatted calves; Boaz's heart will have to be whole enough to sustain the energy of Ruth's desire.

In Ruth, even if theirs is only one among many conversations, those who seek meaning generate a world of meaning. In the end, Ruth's narrative is written, and brought to triumphant closure. All the emptiness is filled, the distortion made straight. The child that is born to Ruth and Boaz is set in a line of names that leads to David and to the Messiah himself. A world of narrative desire is consummated.

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RUTH EFFACED

But there remains one disturbing dimension to this fulfillment: Ruth disappears from the text. Just as the whole community seems to welcome her among them, ratifying Boaz's redemption, blessing her with the destiny of Rachel and Leah, the matriarchs who built the House of Israel, her disappearance begins. She becomes "the woman who is entering your home" (Ruth 4:11); "this young woman" (4:12). For the women who congratulate Naomi on the birth of the child, she is "your daughter-in-law who loved you" (4:15). It is they who name the child, after Naomi has taken him into her bosom and become his foster mother; deliberately, they displace Ruth: "A son is born to Naomi!" (4:17). Only for Boaz is she simply Ruth: "And Boaz took Ruth; she became his wife, and he came unto her" (4:13).

Ruth has faded out of this triumphant pageant. In uncanny fulfillment of her own absurd scenario of hope, Naomi has in old age given birth to this child and suckled him. Some translators evade this implication: in using the word *yulad* (born), the women may be referring simply to Naomi's fostering, rearing the child; so, too, the word *omenet* may refer to her nurturing role.[56] But these are metaphorical expansions; the literal meanings, with their strong physical base, shockingly displace Ruth and set Naomi at the center of the closing vignette, as mother and nurturer.

In a sense, Ruth's disappearance is inevitable. So powerfully is she associated with the turbulence and

contingency of narrative that no place can be found for her in the world of full and final meaning. Perhaps her presence in the utopian pageant would be too disturbing; the ending might not fully govern the discomfort that Ruth arouses, the questions that her narrative has evoked. If there is to be a sense of total coherence at the close of her book, she must be effaced.

With the disclosure of the birth line that leads from Ruth to David, a hidden necessity comes to light; it has all been for this; *une chose commence pour finir*. But if all has been legislated in advance, how is it that this narrative remains readable, even strangely compelling? Perhaps we return to it again and again because its discontents, its drift of desire, are not totally assuaged? If the subversive questions that she evokes are not to get out of hand, Ruth must be effaced from the ending. Pressing against too many boundaries, she endangers the magnificent necessity of this closure.

CHOOSING RUTH

Might there have been an ending that read Ruth back into the text? The midrash offers such an alternative ending, where narrative and closure, desire and law, find, in all their tension, a moment of meeting:

> "There they dwelt, occupied in the king's work." On the strength of this verse, they said that Ruth the Moabite did not die until she saw her descendant Solomon sitting and judging the case of the harlots. That is the meaning of the verse, "And set a throne for the king's mother," that is, Bathsheba, "And she sat at his right hand" (1 Kings 2:19), referring to Ruth the Moabite.[57]

It seems that, after all, there is more to tell: another story about a mother and child. The midrashic writer begins by speaking of Ruth's death—the true closure of narrative—as deferred, so that she may see a narrative unfold which is not, properly, her narrative. "Ruth the Moabite did not die until she saw her descendant Solomon sitting and judging the case of the harlots." Till she witnesses this scene, she *cannot die.* Effaced from the public record at the moment she gives birth, she can be laid to rest only after she sees how Solomon her grandson stages her life in his judgment.[58]

In this last scene, Solomon, her grandson, is powerfully, and famously, maintaining a world of law: judging a case of disputed maternity, he sets a seat for his mother, Bathsheba. By midrashic license, the biblical description is complicated, its folds unfurled, to make room for Ruth. *"She sat at his right hand—that is, Ruth the Moabite."* A spectral presence,unable to die, she is read into the scene to witness the judicial narrative that now unfolds.

In what will become Solomon's flagship case, two harlots lay claim to the surviving baby. One woman narrates the circumstances of the case at great length: how both mothers gave birth, alone in the house, how the other woman lay upon her baby during the night and smothered him, how she switched the babies, how the speaker rose to nurse her baby in the morning, and "behold it was not my son, whom I did bear." The other woman disputes the narrative, creating a deadlock of versions: "No, the dead child is yours, mine is the living one" (1 Kings 3:16–23). The king repeats the deadlocked stories, calls for a sword, and commands that the live baby be cut in two, half for each mother. The true mother responds: "*Give her the living child— only don't kill him!*" But the other woman insists, "He shall be neither yours nor mine—cut him in two!" The king's verdict follows: "*Give her the living child—only don't kill him;* she is his mother."

With this judgment, Solomon gains his extraordinary reputation: "divine wisdom was within him to do justice" (1 Kings 3:28). This is the case that Ruth the Moabite witnesses before she dies. Here, like nesting boxes, narrative within narrative, we have Ruth's closure, Solomon's initiation into divine wisdom, the two harlots' stories, each

excluding the other. Solomon orders the baby to be cut in two, a brutal gesture of justice,[59] which the false mother accepts: *gezoru*— Cut! It is only fair, evenhanded; in such a case of conflicting desires and versions, neither woman shall have the baby. The true mother prefers to lose the baby to her rival. Solomon's true verdict now emerges, once the counterfeit has done its work. But his majestic words of law simply repeat the words of the true mother, adding simply *hi imo—she is his mother.*

It turns out, then, that the first verdict, *Cut him in two!* was simply a charade, an incitement to extend the narrative. Apparently an expression of pure legality, his verdict acts performatively to generate a yet unknown justice. It provokes both women to show their true colors. Essentially, it provokes the true mother, in all her blind despair, to *frame the verdict.* It is as though Solomon is quoting her in a self-evident decision.[60] The true mother identifies herself in the very words with which she yields her child to the lying mother, in her readiness, that is, to live the confusion and anguish of narrative, rather than cut through to the inhumanly incisive gesture of law: "Cut!" Solomon, in a sense, does no more than *listen* to the language of a woman struggling in and with her desire. Unwittingly, she speaks the words that he simply redirects to her.

Where did Solomon learn to listen so well? In the midrashic narrative, the two women who flank the king, Bathsheba and Ruth, become more than witnesses: both are associated with the issues that are brought into brutal focus in the case of the harlots. Solomon is in fact the child born of the illicit relationship between David and Bathsheba; he is also the great-great-grandson of Ruth *the Moabite,* once liminal, abject, full of desire. Perhaps Solomon has learned from these women to inform law with narrative, to bring the incompatible universes into dynamic relation.

Perhaps Ruth, in particular—who once chose for herself a new mother—has been chosen by Solomon as his ancestor. When he is faced with the challenge of recuperating and sustaining a viable normative world, his version of law seeks to bridge the reality and the vision, what is and what may be. As Robert Cover says, "Choosing ancestry is always a serious business." Solomon chooses Ruth the Moabite, as a constant reminder of the narrative anguish out of which transformations emerge.[61] Perhaps her willingness to be effaced from the written text of her own narrative, to give up her child as an act of devotion, is what gives her the grace of the "true mother" in the moment of Solomon's choice.

THE UNKNOWN WOMAN

In making this choice, Solomon has, in a sense, undermined the totality of closure. He has placed Ruth in a position where he can see her while he comes to his verdict. But perhaps more important, he is *seen by her:* "she did not die before *seeing* Solomon rendering judgment in the case of the harlots." To arrive at a true judgment that will reverse the anomie, the normative collapse with which Ruth's story began—*In the days when the judges judged*—Solomon must know himself as seen by the woman, the ultimately unknown woman, whose gaze has been acknowledged with such difficulty.

In the closing moment of Max Ophuls's film *Letter from an Unknown Woman,* the man covers his eyes with both hands in horror and exhaustion, as images from earlier in the film assault him. Stanley Cavell suggests that this is

> an ambiguous gesture, between avoiding the horror of knowing the existence of others and avoiding the horror of not knowing it . . . he is in that gesture both warding off his seeing something and warding off at the same time his being seen by something, which is to say, his own existence being known, being seen, by

the woman of the letter.[62]

As in the ending of Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle," the "unknown woman" becomes a figure for the difficulty of seeing the other as other, of acknowledging her separate human existence. If the stupefied heroes of the Ophuls film and of the James tale survive the deaths of their unknown women, it is only to recognize, in a "horror of waking," that "*she* was what he had missed."[63] The essential point of view of the other, from the position of the feminine, is too late acknowledged. To have missed her would mean to have missed everything.

I suggest that the midrash responds to a similar concern with seeing and being seen in relation to Ruth. In the biblical story, this question animates her connections with Naomi, with Boaz, with the people of Bethlehem. She is the invisible heroine whose impact of *chesed,* of beauty, flows from her words.[64] The midrashic ending to her narrative allows her to see and to be seen in a mode of full acknowledgment.

Ruth's paradoxical closure comes when she sees Solomon *dan dinan shel zonot;* absorbing the voice of the harlot, the wayward voice of pure narrative, he regenerates a normative world that had lost plausibility. In some private sense, she presides over this scene; she is Solomon's teacher. Seeing this, she can die. As her grandson, Solomon learns from her a transformative dimension of Torah.

> R. Joshua b. Levi said: One who teaches his grandson Torah, is regarded by Scripture as though he had received it [direct] from Mount Sinai, for it is said, "And you shall make them [the things your eyes have seen] known to your sons and your sons' sons"— which is followed by, "the day you stood before God at Horeb" (Deut. 4:9–10).[65]

The Torah one teaches a grandchild is the Torah of "the things your eyes have seen" (Deut. 4:9). This is the Torah that flashes back to Sinai, to the subversive moment of pure narrative. That foundational experience, before the Law was given, aroused "dread, fear, shuddering and trembling."[66] Desire and fear sent the people plunging back and forth at the base of the mountain, in overwhelming attraction and recoil.[67] The grandparent teaches a Torah of *r'iyah* (seeing), of personal experience, of oscillation, reversals, suspense, insufficiency. Unlike the parent who transmits what has been handed down, generation to generation, the grandparent, across a gap, dares to tell a narrative of danger: how an unmediated vision of great love, the impact of a passion, shook her being into movement, unfurling it into a new language.[68]

Ruth's story makes it possible to reimagine Sinai. She becomes the source of a teaching that Solomon acknowledges and makes his own. She returns us, her grandchildren, across a gap, to that subversive force of narrative that is never lost. This is the Torah that, like its teacher, can never be fully known, that is always discontinuous, of which we ask, *Who are you?* and rejoice in the silence that animates its response.