

In Pursuit of Wholeness: The Book of Ruth in Modern American and Israeli Literature

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While not the most dramatic of all the biblical stories, the quietly moving Book of Ruth has had a concrete impact on later Western literature. Sometimes the references to Ruth are explicit, as when the Romantic poet John Keats invokes her in “Ode to a Nightingale”: “Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home / She stood in tears amid the alien corn.” Yet generally, the influence of Ruth in English and Hebrew literature is more subtle and diffused. What we encounter instead are Ruth-like scenarios, in which the ingredients of the original story are rearranged to form a new story that either draws on or even undermines the spirit of the original with its central theme of *hesed*, or loving-kindness. For modern writers in particular, an engagement with the Book of Ruth reveals the limits of *hesed*’s power to transform and elevate the complicated and often cruel world in which we live. The

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American novelists Marilynne Robinson and Jane Hamilton as well as the Israeli writer Meir Shalev invoke the Ruth story in order to convey biblically infused narratives in which many of the themes of the Ruth story are present, yet without the redemptive overlay. In contrast, the Israeli writer S. Y. Agnon is able to draw upon the Book of Ruth in the manner of a modern writer, yet offers a formula by which the transformative spirit of the biblical narrative can inform our experience in the present. Appreciating how these varied writers understand the Book of Ruth can provide a heightened appreciation for how remarkable, and rare, the triumphs of Ruth and Boaz in the biblical account truly are.

MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S MIGRANT RUTH

In 1980, the American novelist Marilynne Robinson burst onto the literary scene with her critically acclaimed novel *Housekeeping*.¹ *Housekeeping* is the story of a young girl named Ruth who, along with her sister Lucille, is abandoned by their mother and left with a chain of relatives, finally ending up in the care of their eccentric Aunt Sylvie. This aunt and the two girls have all been abandoned by their closest relatives, and they try to create a home for themselves together. As is often the case in Robinson's fiction, echoes of the Bible are everywhere. Ruth, in considering her own yearning for the restoration of her family, reflects:

Cain murdered Abel, and blood cried out from the earth; the house fell on Job's children, and a voice was induced or provoked into speaking from a whirlwind; and Rachel mourned for her children; and King David for Absalom. The force behind the movement of time is a mourning that will not be comforted. That is why the first event is known to have been an expulsion, and the last is hoped to be a reconciliation and return. (192)²

Here Ruth considers the many places in the Hebrew Bible where a loss of family and pursuit of restoration propels the narrative forward, the Book of Ruth being no exception. Robinson's Ruth is similar to the

1. New York, Picador.

2. Page numbers taken from the 2004 Picador reprint edition.

biblical Ruth in her fierce loyalty to her aunt, in contrast to her sister Lucille who, like Orpah, ultimately rejects both of them in favor of a more conventional existence. In the Bible, Ruth achieves a stunning level of success in restoring Naomi's family to life through her union with Boaz, redeeming their family name and helping to forge the destiny of the nation of Israel.

Restoration is far more elusive in Robinson's novel. The home that Sylvie builds for herself and Ruth is described in delicate detail and beauty, but it is provisional in nature. Whereas Ruth gleanes in foreign fields out of necessity for Naomi and herself, Sylvie and Ruth are drawn to the trappings of an itinerant lifestyle out of some kind of unfulfilled inner need. Sylvie sleeps with her shoes on every night and identifies with the migrants who pass through their remote Western town. Whereas in the Bible Naomi seeks a home for Ruth, "Daughter, I must seek a home for you, where you may be happy" (3:3), Sylvie believes that Ruth's happiness lies with Sylvie and in the temporary home they fashion together. At times it feels like Robinson is in dialogue with the Book of Ruth, imagining what would have happened if Ruth never had the luck of running into Boaz the redeemer, and instead had stayed together with Naomi and fashioned a life for the two of themselves together, away from the busybodies of the city of Bethlehem.

Yet Sylvie and Ruth pay a great price for their excommunication from polite society, and that is the sense, in contrast to the great genealogy following the Book of Ruth, that they will be forgotten. Early on in the novel Ruth meditates on the wife of the biblical Noah and wonders whatever happened to her:

She was a nameless woman, and so at home among all those who were never found and never missed, who were uncommemorated, whose deaths were not remarked, nor their begettings. (172)

Soon, Robinson's Ruth finds herself entering this sisterhood of nameless women, as she and Sylvie quietly slip out of their hometown into an anonymous vagrant lifestyle that will provide some solace and well as a lingering sense of incompleteness. This, in a way, is the Ruth that

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could have been, an alternate literary universe which throws the greatness of Boaz and the serendipity of the biblical account into even greater relief.³

MEIR SHALEV'S WOUNDED RUTH

This anxiety about genealogy – and about being forgotten – colors another modern novel in dialogue with the Book of Ruth, *Two She-Bears* (*Shetayim Dubim*), published in Hebrew by Israeli writer Meir Shalev and translated into English by Stuart Schoffman.⁴

Two She-Bears is the story of two Ruths. One, Ruth Tavori, endures a difficult marriage with a complicated man named Zev in British Mandate Palestine. The second, her granddaughter Ruth, called Ruta, is a high-school Bible teacher in the same Yishuv her grandparents helped build. The connections with the biblical Book of Ruth are both explicit and implicit, as the narrator writes in regard to the younger Ruth:

She was called Ruth Tavori in proper Hebrew: Rut Tavori, with a dignified pause in between, like at a state ceremony. But if you say the name without a proper space it comes out sounding “Ruta Vori.” Try it, Varda, say it out loud. You see? Just like Ruth the Moabite. You pronounce it formally, she’s the great-grandmother of King David – but “Rutamoaviah” is the one who spent the night with Boaz on the threshing floor. (32)

3. Incidentally, Marilynne Robinson, whose 1980 Ruth never experiences a homecoming along the lines of her biblical namesake, and spends her days wandering in a kind of backwards version of the biblical book, returns to some of the concerns of *House-keeping* in her 2004 novel called *Gilead* (New York: Picador). *Gilead* is the fictional memoir of the elderly pastor Reverend John Ames. Ames lives most of his life alone, after the tragic death of his young wife and infant daughter, until well into old age. He meets an itinerant woman much younger than himself, and they implausibly marry and have a child. Ames is as shocked that his wife would be interested in someone as old as he is just as she is startled that someone from civilized society would consider, or even look upon, someone as impoverished and unlearned as herself. While it’s not clear that Robinson means to directly engage with the Book of Ruth in *Gilead*, though at one point Ames’ wife does tell him that “you’re just like all them old men in the Bible,” Lila and John’s mutual *hesed* toward each other seems to, in a way, fill in the void left empty by her earlier treatment of Ruth.
4. New York: Schocken, 2016.

As figures who are involved in building the State of Israel from its inception, the elder Tavoris live their lives in a biblical key. The narrator asks, “Who wasn’t a woman of valor in the history of the Yishuv?” (34). Yet the characters break under the burdens they carry – their sense that they are participating in something of great historical importance contrasts with the dissolution of their private lives and relationships. (“You hear that, Grandma Ruth? You were a woman of valor even if you cried for no reason” [Ibid.].) The novel contains some explicit parallels with the Book of Ruth – two strong women, “she-bears,” who endure huge losses and strive to move on amid a pastoral agricultural landscape in the Land of Israel. However, in Shalev’s story there is also a pronounced contrast. The Book of Ruth seems to hover as a specter in this novel to remind us of the characters’ limitations, particularly in the realm of reproduction. Early on in the novel, the narrator reflects:

As you may or may not know, history in the Bible is inseparable from genealogy, all those long lists of people who begat and begat and begat, this one begat that one who begat that one who begat that one, because that is what’s really important and not all the Zionist slogans about coming to the Land of Israel and founding a village and forming committees and plowing the first furrow – what’s really important are names, births, deaths. (35)

We will soon learn that the house of Tavori is plagued from its inception by a certain impotence, both literal and figurative, and all of the characters need to make a kind of peace with the question of what will endure after them. One child dies by snakebite, another is cruelly murdered only a week after she’s born. In exploring all of these traumatic events from her family history, the younger Ruta seeks a narrative where they can have some kind of redemptive meanings. Here and there she finds a moving note of consolation, but overall there is a sense that this family has removed itself from the biblical train of who “begat” whom, and the connections with the biblical Ruth remain ironic at best.

Perhaps the one aspect of Ruth that is most difficult for a modern author to adopt or incorporate in his or her novel is the motif of *hesed*. This is a key element of the Book of Ruth, which the sages teach

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was written only “to teach how much reward comes to those who act with loving-kindness” (Ruth Rabba 2:14). In the hardscrabble world in which Marilynne Robinson’s Ruth resides, Christian neighbors can at best offer a bland and conventional kind of assistance. They don’t truly help Ruth and Sylvie, and, once the townsfolk recognize the depth of Sylvie’s non-conventional ways, the neighbors’ interest in the protagonists is ultimately weaponized against them. In *Two She-Bears*, the patriarch of the family, Zev Tavori, does not possess the humility that characterizes the biblical Boaz. Whereas Boaz essentially effaces himself by enabling *yibum*, the continuation of the family line, Tavori turns to murder over accepting any sort of imperfect family situation in which he is not securely situated at the head.

JANE HAMILTON’S RUTH IN A MEAN WORLD

In 1988, Jane Hamilton published the novel *The Book of Ruth*⁵ where the eponymous heroine also partakes in a dysfunctional family arrangement and oversees a gruesome murder, after which she begins to pick up the pieces of her life. While the connections between the novel and the biblical book are more tenuous than in the previous two examples, the opening lines in the novel are illustrative, if only by way of contrast with the biblical version: “What it begins with, I know finally, is the kernel of meanness in people’s hearts. I don’t know exactly how or why it gets inside us; that’s one of the mysteries I haven’t solved yet.”

For Hamilton’s Ruth, who has lived a more difficult life than most, kindness is not a given, but it may be possible to minimize a natural cruelty, “A person has to fight the meanness that sometimes comes with you when you’re born” (326), and at times her readings of the Bible help her get there. This kind of provisional victory over evil is the best that Hamilton’s Ruth can hope for in the world in which she lives, which makes the biblical vision of *hesed* appear all the more radical in contrast.

AGNON’S REDEMPTIVE RUTH

One novelist willing to explore that unique and irreducible quality of *hesed* that is at the heart of the Book of Ruth is S. Y. Agnon. In his short

5. New York: Anchor Books, 1990.

novella, “In the Prime of Her Life,”⁶ first published in 1923, Agnon touches on key themes of the Ruth story, particularly the concept of *yibum* and how radical *hesed* might play out in the context of a bereaved family.

“In the Prime of Her Life” is narrated by a young woman named Tirza whose own mother Leah died “in the prime of her life” (age 31) of a “heart illness” (*maḥalat halev*) and who now lives with her businessman father. Tirza is consumed by thoughts of a sensitive poet and teacher named Akaviah Mazal, who once loved her mother and whom her mother loved in turn. Tirza’s mother was barred from marrying Akaviah for economic reasons related to her poor health, and after her death Tirza finds a journal written by Akaviah that includes his delicate reflections on his affection for Leah. Agnon, in his typical subtle fashion, suggests a connection to the Book of Ruth without making it explicit: “And in those days I read from the Books of Joshua and Judges, and at that time I found a book among my mother’s books, may she rest in peace” (197). The Book of Ruth also opens with “In those days of the Judges,” and thus Agnon clues in the Jewishly literate reader that there may be some connection between Tirza’s mother and the story of Ruth.

As Tirza broods upon the loss of her mother, she increasingly feels a kinship with Mazal, with whom her mother had such a strong connection. She concludes that, in a manner that recalls S. Ansky’s *Dybbuk*, “Mazal has been wronged. He seemed to me to be like a man bereft of his wife and yet she was not his wife” (201). Tirza thinks of Akaviah for years; she attends a school for teachers where he is employed even though she is ill-suited for the teaching profession, and finally courageously approaches him on her own one evening, in a clandestine fashion that also reminds us of Ruth. Once there, she learns from Akaviah that he was born to a family of converts, once again bringing to mind Ruth as the prototypical convert, though in Akaviah’s case they had begrudgingly converted to Christianity for reasons of livelihood. Akaviah’s mother sought to return to the Jewish people, despite the downgrade in her financial and social status, and Akaviah continues this trajectory:

6. Trans. Gabriel Levine, in *8 Great Hebrew Short Novels*, ed. Alan Lelchuk and Gershon Shaken (Jerusalem: Toby Press, 2005).

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He had yearned with all his heart to complete what his mother had set out to accomplish upon returning to the God of Israel, for he had returned to his people. Yet they did not understand him. He walked as a stranger in their midst – they drew him close, but when he was as one of them they divided their hearts from him. (226)

While Agnon invokes the ingredients of the Ruth story, they do not map out on his characters in a straightforward fashion. While Tirza reminds us of Ruth in some ways, as with her clandestine visit to a much older man, Akaviah also is a Ruth- or perhaps Naomi-like figure in his outsider status among the Jewish community to which he has returned. Even in the Ruth story itself, some of this inversion of roles exists. When Ruth prostrates before Boaz in his Bethlehem field she thanks him for the kindness he has shown to her, a foreigner. Yet when she comes before him in the middle of the night it is he who thanks her: “Be blessed of the Lord, daughter! Your latest deed of kindness (*hesed*) is greater than the first, in that you have not turned to younger men, whether poor or rich” (Ruth 3:10). *Hesed* does not stream in one direction in the Book of Ruth – Ruth and Boaz each provide *hesed* and are recipients in turn, thus collapsing the hierarchy between them. Tirza longs for Akaviah and for the connection to her mother that he can provide. Akaviah will urge Tirza to pursue a man who is younger and more appropriate for her but she refuses. Ultimately, the story suggests, in the spirit of *yibum*, that past wrongs can be redeemed and a broken family can be mended, particularly through the unrelenting dedication of one young woman.

“In the Prime of Her Life” concludes with the idyllic though subtly discomfiting scene of Tirza married to Akaviah and pregnant with their first child. Akaviah had warned Tirza before their marriage that she is still young, and that he had “come to the age where all I desire is some peace and quiet” (234), perhaps also recalling the multiple references to *menuḥa*, peaceful rest, in the Book of Ruth. Akaviah’s hesitation, as well as the reservations of those around her, do not deter Tirza, and she pursues this unlikely union faithfully even if it is not the romantic love story for which other girls her age may hope. Their newlywed bliss is soon punctured by some misgivings on Tirza’s part – her husband is busy

writing a history of the Jews of their town, and she finds herself resentful of her domestic duties and rather lonely. Nevertheless, the rooms of the newlywed couple are “suffused with warmth and light” (244), and Tirza is heartened by the close relationship that grows between her husband and her father who visits them each evening. While this is not a literal *yibum* situation, it shares in the spirit of *yibum*, wherein someone who has lost his beloved (in this case Akaviah) marries her next of kin. It also evokes the *yibum*-esque scenario of Megillat Ruth, where Boaz marries Ruth as a kinsman of her deceased husband and father-in-law.

While Tirza’s life with Akaviah is far from a perfect relationship, she senses, as does the reader, that her unconventional choice is imbued with larger significance. Together they mend a rift that had been breached first with Leah’s broken engagement to Akaviah and then with Leah’s own death. Tirza’s father and Akaviah should be at odds with one another, as one replaced the other with respect to Leah. Yet Tirza’s marriage to Akaviah unifies the two men and thus closes a circle. Toward the end of the story Tirza gazes upon her husband and father and writes:

Now I glance at my father’s face and now at my husband’s. I behold the two men and long to cry, to cry in my mother’s bosom. Has my husband’s sullen mood brought this about, or does a spirit dwell in womankind? My father and my husband sit at the table, their faces shining upon me. By dint of their love and compassion, each resembles the other. Evil has seventy faces and love has but one face. (244)

This sentiment, “evil has seventy faces and love has but one face,” offers a creative iteration of underlying spirit of *yibum*, through which one husband can virtually morph into another and in which *hesed* makes family restoration possible even after tragic loss. This is part of the triumph of Megillat Ruth – Ruth the Moabite, whose ancestor Lot was once banished from Abraham’s tent, now returns to the Jewish people. The family line of Elimelech and Naomi, once threatened with dissolution, is also symbolically maintained through the union of Ruth and Boaz. Even writing in 1923, Agnon would be all too familiar with the modern individualism that would have made such a sentiment feel

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hopelessly outdated. Even in the world of the Book of Ruth such *hesed* was not ubiquitous, as testified to by the horrors of the contemporaneous Book of Judges. Through fiction Agnon is able to do something that few other novelists engaging with the Book of Ruth want, or perhaps are able, to do. Agnon brings the unlikely *hesed* of Ruth to life in a nuanced manner that suppresses none of the strangeness of the not-quite-*yibum* predicament depicted in both stories, which are each infused with a hint of the same eternal quality.

The dissolution of families and relationships is an immutable part of the world in which we live. Modern Western societies, with their strong emphasis on individualism, have been particularly susceptible to this dynamic, and as such scores of modern novels explore these themes. The Book of Ruth presents an account of familial dissolution but importantly, restoration as well. Agnon's invocation of the book, notwithstanding its irony, is a rare example in modern literature that mines the biblical story to its full depth. Ruth's travails alongside Naomi, their exile and their exclusion from civilized society are a natural fit for modern novelists like Robinson, Shalev, and Hamilton. The inexplicable acts of goodness that drive men and women like Boaz, Naomi, and Ruth are harder to find, in literature and in life.⁷

7. The book *Rising Moon* (Modi'in: Renana Publishers, 2015), by Rabbi Moshe Miller, influenced my understanding of the way in which *hesed* and *yibum* are at the heart of the Book of Ruth. Rabbi Jeffrey Saks' brilliant reading of the Agnon story, "In the Prime of Her Life," available at <http://www.webyeshiva.org/course/midrash-agnon-in-the-prime-of-her-life/>, enriched my appreciation of the story. Finally, a lecture by Professor Ilana Pardes of Hebrew University gave me the idea to place "In the Prime of Her Life" in dialogue with Ruth in the first place (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYgNSrXz59Q>).