

Elie Wiesel In the Bible: The Book of Ruth

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Elie Wiesel:

Vayehi bimei shfot ha'shoftim. Once upon a time in a faraway country, there lived a simple yet exceptional, poor yet singularly noble woman to whom an entire people owes not only its important place and role in God's vision of time but its claim to national pride and immortality, or call it redemption. Her name, Ruth the Moabite, evokes gentleness, tenderness, and above all, loyalty. A unique woman, whose qualities will make her a mother of royalty. We have been [00:01:00] invited to meet with her tonight, but beware, she may resist being observed and examined. She prefers to stay out of the limelight, away from publicity. That is her nature. Too shy? Unpretentious, perhaps. In those times, pious women stayed home, except for special circumstances, such as looking for a husband, for example. (laughter) And yet let us not be discouraged. Let's make the effort. She deserves it. We shall try to find her at her place in the distant land of Moav, and later in the less distant land of Judea, and then at her closest place, the mysterious depths of our collective memory.

Ruth *HaMo'aviah*, Ruth the Moabite -- her name [00:02:00] conjures up a past filled with doubts and anguish and a future penetrated by an irresistible light, the light that illuminates exile, the messianic light, that will put an end to suffering and injustice everywhere. In our tradition, she is loved -- oh, how she is loved. She ranks among the matriarchs -- Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah. They gave us the 12 tribes of Israel, but Ruth gave them and us a king. King David is a descendant not of Sarah but of Ruth. Without Ruth, our people might never have had a king or else might have had another king, but not David, of whom it will be said *David melech Yisrael chai vekayam*, [00:03:00] he lives and shall go on living until the end of days. What do we owe Ruth? We owe Ruth King David, and our hope.

Tradition attributes the Book of Ruth to the prophet Samuel himself. If this is true, Samuel had great literary gifts and a wonderful romantic imagination. This very special book is indeed very special. It begins by describing events that are related not to national politics but to individual adventures. There are no prophetic exhortations, no miracles, no divine interventions to be found in its pages. In fact, God is surprisingly inactive in this story. All you read about in the text [00:04:00] is the extraordinary friendship between two

ordinary women who in time will become exceptional. Then the plot shifts direction. While it remains a story about friendship, a new element, love, is added to it. Mysterious and delicate, full of suspense, of anxiety too, this love story unfolds on a variety of levels. It illustrates many relationships between men and women, the individual and the community, the beginning and the ultimate end of humanity. And yet the people of Israel, a people already singled by destiny, hardly figures in its texture. Said Rabbi Zeira, and I quote, "This book contains no law related to purity or impurity, [00:05:00] to the forbidden and the permitted, the sacred and the profane. It was written solely to teach us the rewards of generosity."

Usually the Book of Ruth is read during Shavuot, the holy day of weeks. Why? Is it because King David, Ruth's illustrious descendant, died on Shavuot? Another hypothesis has been suggested by another Talmudic school: Like Ruth, our ancestors became Jewish -- that is, converted to the Jewish faith -- when they received the law. When was that? On Shavuot.

As we read the book, we stumble upon bizarre passages. We come across certain written words that are not to be read aloud and others that we do read aloud although they are [00:06:00] not

part of the text. But then the whole book presents strange aspects. Just imagine, had Ruth's ancestors behaved a little bit differently with our own, then she herself might not have entered Jewish history. Scripture tells us, and I quote, "An Ammonite and a Moabite may not enter the congregation or the assembly of God," the *qahal Adoshem*. Why not? "Because they did not offer you bread and water when you left Egypt." What? Because these two tribes had chosen not to be too hospitable towards our fugitive ancestors in the desert, their descendants ought to be punished forever? Why such exclusionary harshness? Harshness toward men and women who at the time may themselves have been lacking [00:07:00] both bread and water? Was their one-time behavior sufficient reason for us never again to show interest in their descendants' welfare and happiness? Is that fair? Does that correspond to our concept of Jewish ethics? Should one remain that vindictive that long?

What could be the reason for such long-lasting severity? The fact that Balaq, the Moabite king, once hired Bil'am to curse Israel as a ghostwriter? That is all. Bil'am was hired to curse us. So what? Since when are Jews afraid of anti-Semitic curses? (laughter) Furthermore, didn't, in fact, Bil'am's curses turn into blessings? Isn't our first morning prayer "*Ma tovu ohalekha Ya'akov, mishk'notekha Yisra'el*," [00:08:00] "How

beautiful are thy dwellings, Jacob"? Isn't it taken from Bil'am? We are angry with Bil'am. We are angry with the king who hired him. We are angry with his subjects. We are angry with their descendants -- so much so that we may not marry their offspring. But wait a minute. If we may not, how come a Jew could marry Ruth? Wasn't she a Moabite? Why such favoritism? Only because she was to become a celebrity? (laughter) And what a celebrity, the grandmother of the great Jewish king! True, she converted, but when did she convert? Not when she married Naomi's son. The words she pronounced, which now every convert utters, and they are so beautiful - *ki el-asher teilchi eileich uvasher alin ameich ami veilokaiyich elokai*, "I shall go where you go, sleep where you sleep, die where you die. Your people is my people; your God is my God." But to whom did she say that? Not to her husband, but to her mother-in-law. Is this why she was accepted? (laughter)

These are troubling questions. Naturally, we shall try to elucidate them in the course of our encounter tonight, but first, as always, some preliminary remarks seem to be in order. One, it seems, impossible for me not to recall, the genesis, the history of these annual encounters. Though mathematics has never been my strength, [00:10:00] I have learned to count years, and this is the twenty-third. In two years, *im yirtzeh*

hashem, as we say, it will be a quarter of a century. And I say to myself, When I began, I was younger. (laughter) So were some of you. (laughter) But at times I wonder, Why are you here? I have heard of marriages that originated in this hall. A young couple confided in me recently they were sitting in the last row, and since they couldn't see the lecturer, (laughter) they looked at one another, (laughter) and all the rest is commentary. (laughter) Now, from now on, if anyone complains to Richie, he will have a good answer. But I know why I am here: I am here to study. My passion for study has not [00:11:00] diminished with the passing years. Quite the contrary; it keeps on growing. There is a new sense of urgency in me. I feel I have to move fast.

Two, once more, all of us have to thank those who are really organizing these encounters. It's Amos and Danny?, and I heard of the session you had this afternoon with Rabbi Joseph.

Then, three, why Ruth this year? Because she is irresistible or because she is a woman and I feel feminist criticism? We really have invited too many men to this stage over the course of these years -- not enough women. Four, Ruth is special, even as a woman. She is loved by everybody. So why should we be different from everybody else? I do not know whether she was

[00:12:00] beautiful, but the story surely is. Her story makes us smile. Isn't that the way we ought to study these ancient texts, with a smile? Five, we shall explore the Book of Ruth and its manifold commentaries, and with their help, once more, we shall reconstruct the character, the character of Ruth tonight, and we shall follow them and her everywhere.

So Ruth *HaMo'aviah*, Ruth the Moabite, here she is, at the beginning of the story, waiting patiently -- or impatiently -- to enter the pages of Jewish history. (laughter) And I know, and you know, that she's knocking at its doors, and she will open the doors of Jewish history, just as soon as we open ours. (laughter; applause; pause) [00:13:00]

And so let us start from the beginning once more, shall we? "*Vayehi bime'ei shfot ha'shoftim*," "This is what happened at a time when the judges judged," or according to a different, more cruel version -- more realistic -- "at the time when the judges themselves were judged." The country was ravaged by famine, [00:14:00] and Boaz and Ruth met in the land of Moav. Rather, because of what happened in the land of Moav, they met later.

What do we know of that land, of Moav? What do we know about its inhabitants? Quite a lot, and the sources are varied:

Babylonian, Egyptian, Assyrian, and, *lehavdil*, biblical. A main source is what is called the Moabite Stone, also known as the inscription of Mesha, king of Moab. Much is known of their religion, their culture, their national characteristics. Their god, Chemosh, rewarded or punished his subjects according to their behavior. When they were good, they became conquerors. [00:15:00] When they were bad, they were conquered by Egypt or Judea. King David, whose great-great-grandmother was a Moabite, defeated them in battle, killed two-thirds of their warriors, and enslaved the others. Hence, although no civilians were ever harmed, their lasting hatred for the children of Israel is comprehensible.

The Moabites figured prominently in the visions of our great prophets. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah predict Moab's downfall, but Jeremiah foresees redemption for the Moabites as part of universal deliverance. Ezekiel also believes in a Moabite saving remnant, but [00:16:00] Zephaniah is convinced that they will all be destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah.

The text is kind and generous to future scholars and exegetes. Time and location are precisely indicated -- no need to waste years in research for PhDs. We know more or less when our two romantic heroes, Boaz and Naomi [*sic*], met and wed. They met in

the year 968 Before the Common Era in Bethlehem. On the surface, the narrative runs fast and well, almost breathlessly, without difficulty or obstacle. It is not written in verse; not all holy books are. [00:17:00] Incidentally, this realization caused such distress to a famous orientalist in the '30s, a certain Paul Kraus, who had dedicated his life to prove that the entire Bible was written in verse, that he committed suicide. Still, though the Book of Ruth is not a poem, is it poetic? Based on facts, with no recourse to the supernatural, the story is full of everyday details. We almost could give you a picture of how people behaved in those times simply from reading the text -- how they behaved when they were hungry, how they behaved when they needed bread, how they behaved when they needed to get married. The whole story is set in concrete reality.

It begins in sorrow. [00:18:00] There was a man named Elimelech who had a wife named Naomi. They had two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. One day, they decided to leave their home in Bethlehem, which is in Judea. Why the double precision, "Bethlehem in Judea"? Because villages with the same name existed in other provinces too. Also because the family decided to leave not only its home and village but Judea, its homeland. Where was the immigrant family going? To the land of the Moabites. Why did they venture so far into hostile territory?

Surely the motive was of pragmatic nature: it was easier to make a living there. Was it? Elimelech dies soon after they get there. [00:19:00] His widow, Naomi, is now alone with her two sons. How will she feed her family? Her worries are short lived. Her two sons marry two Moabite girls, Orpah and Ruth. Is she unhappy? Is Naomi unhappy that her sons married out of their faith? If so, she doesn't say it, for Naomi doesn't speak much. She's always quiet, withdrawn, concealing her feelings. Ten years later, new tragedy: her sons die. Again, she does not show her sadness. All the text tells us is that after her sons passed away, Naomi heard that the situation had improved back home, in the land of Judea. [00:20:00] It was time to go home. For Orpah and Ruth as well? Yes, for the three of them together. And the three women, the three widows, start out thinking that they would be inseparable, and that is something that cannot but appeal to our imagination, to see these three widows marching, leaving the house of tragedy, going towards a new country, an old country. But halfway through their journey, something happened. Naomi had a change of heart. She looked at her two daughters-in-law and decided that it would be better for them to go their own way. They were young. Life was still before them. Why bring them into a land which was not theirs? Why [00:21:00] make them face unnecessary distress? She spoke to them, tried to make them see reason. She succeeded with

Orpah, but not with Ruth. She made three attempts, and failed. Ruth was stubborn -- stubborn in her loyalty, solemn in her resolve, and her response was "Your people is my people. Death alone will set us apart."

Next, Naomi and Ruth go on to Bethlehem. There lived one of Naomi's relatives, who was both wealthy and a man of valor, Boaz. He was the owner of extensive cultivated fields, and Ruth had the idea to do what other people have done: [00:22:00] to go and glean among the ears of corn left behind after the harvest. Ruth didn't know it, but that particular field belonged to Boaz, who of course ended up noticing her. Now, the question is, did they fall in love right then and there? Was it love at first sight? The proverbial *coup de foudre*? We don't know. We imagine. But we do know that they got married and that 10 generations later, their descendant, David, ascended the throne of Judah and symbolized then, and will continue to symbolize forever, Jewish loyalty till the end of times.

Now, why are we so concerned with this simple love story, [00:23:00] and why has it been included in the canon? It contains a kind of sensuality but no transcendental element. It is a story about human beings and what they do to one another, with one another. God, as we said, plays almost no role in it.

Why, then, is it sacred? What makes it sacred? We shall analyze the major characters in the cast, but first a few words about the problem they all share, the problem of strangeness. One of the major themes of the book is how to overcome strangeness. In general, Jewish tradition insists on every person's right to be different. As a Jew, I must believe that having been a stranger in Pharaoh's Egypt, I am therefore compelled [00:24:00] to respect all strangers for what they are. I must not seek to change their ways or views. I must not try to make them resemble me. Every human being reflects the image of God, who has no image. Mine is neither purer nor holier than yours or theirs. Truth is one for all of us, but the paths leading to it are many. In the eyes of the father, all his children are worthy of his love. The other is in my eyes, the center of the universe, just as I ought to be in his or her eyes. Only in dictatorships do all citizens look alike, speak alike, and behave alike. In their servitude [00:25:00] or civility, they reject the other, for the other eludes them. They denounce and hate the stranger, for the stranger is freer than they.

The story of Ruth may sound as an apology of proselytism. It is not. The Jewish religion has consistently, with very rare exceptions, discouraged conversion. Before a person is accepted

into the fold, he or she must be forewarned of what he or she may have to endure. The candidate must be aware of the persecutions, the sufferings, the torments, the massacres that fill and crowd Jewish memory. Are you ready for all this, the candidate is asked. [00:26:00] Won't you prefer a quieter life? Maybe less interesting. Even on the individual level, efforts are being made to discourage the candidate. To convert, he or she is told, means to leave not only your present faith but also your family. You will be like a newborn child, with Abraham and Sarah as parents. According to *halakha*, which is not really interpreted very often, in this case, a convert actually has to celebrate bar mitzvah 13 years later, or bat mitzvah 12 years later. To frighten the candidate, the candidate is told something which may sound strange and disturbing. [00:27:00] The candidate is told that that the convert may theoretically -- I insist, theoretically -- because of his status of newborn child with no family, that the candidate therefore may marry his sister or even his mother. And I wonder what Sigmund Freud would say to all this. (laughter) If this wouldn't frighten the prospective convert, what will? (laughter)

But why discourage conversions? Because we were too often victims of forced conversion. The reason may be a deeper one. In Jewish tradition, it is the freedom of the stranger, his or

her right to self-definition, that must be respected. It is because the other is other, [00:28:00] because he or she is not I, that I am to consider him or her both sovereign, an instrument used by God to act upon history and justify his faith in his entire creation. When are we suspicious of the stranger? When he or she comes from our midst. Remember the difference between *ger*, *nokri*, and *zar*? We have spoken about it from 15 years ago. Scripture is kind to the first two, to the *ger* and the *nokri*, and harsh to the third, the *zar*, for only the *zar* is Jewish, and a Jew who chooses to estrange himself from his people, a Jew who makes use [00:29:00] of his Jewishness only to attack and denigrate Jewish life and Jewish history, as embodied by the Jewish people, of whom it may be said *shehotzi et atzmo min hak'lal*, who removed himself from the community, who shares neither its sorrow nor its joy, that Jew is not our brother, nor is he our equal; that Jew is a stranger. As for real strangers, objective strangers, strangers who really are from other traditions, other milieus, other disciplines, other people, other nations, other cultures, they must be treated with dignity. Of course, one finds here and there in the vast Talmudic literature statements and references that could be interpreted as excessive praise of the Jewish person and faith, but then, one [00:30:00] finds everything in the Talmud. One could find as many statements and opinions emphasizing human

equality. All men and women who believe in God are equally heard by God, who understands all languages -- though He hears and understands Yiddish a little bit better. (laughter) But He receives prayers everywhere.

But then why the love for Ruth? Because while Jewish religion discourages conversion, it loves converts. Ruth is not the only one. Other celebrated cases have been recorded, not without a certain measure of understandable pride. The emperor's nephew Aquila or Onkelos -- what a marvelous story. When he came to tell the emperor, [00:31:00] telling him he wants to convert, the emperor said, "Are you crazy? Don't you know that the Jewish people is destined for persecution? Why do you want to join the Jewish people?" And he said, "Because Jewish children alone are studying and learning the mystery of creation," and for this, he was drawn to the Jewish people and converted.

Then there is a story of the king of Himyar in the fifth century; the Khazars of the eighth century; the learned proselyte of Obadiah, Obadiah of Normandy; some princes; a few bishops; a British aristocrat, Lord George Gordon, who one day decided to convert to Judaism and live as a Jew, dress [00:32:00] as a Jew, pray as a Jew, observe Jewish law and tradition and custom even in prison till his death. My neighbor

in shul and good friend, Dr. [Dienstag], gave me this story -- and one day we have to devote the entire evening only to this man. Count Potoski, a fabulous character. Even in my childhood, I always heard about Count Potoski. I used to hear people say, "Who are you? Well, what do you think you are, Graf Potoski?" (laughter) Count Potoski, who was to endure a similar fate of martyrdom, and he died in Vilna, and I heard that until the end of the Jewish community in Vilna during the war, they used to say a special El Maleh Rachamim for him every Shabbat, for the martyr who died [00:33:00] as a Jew.

In Talmudic literature, a bizarre phenomenon emerged: some of our cruelest enemies are said to be among the converts. Take, for instance, the general Nebuzaradan, the murderer of hundreds of scholars and thousands of children. What did he do when there was no one left to kill? Halakh venitgayyer-- converted. The same has been said of Nero -- after fiddling, he converted. (laughter) A descendant of Haman -- do you know what he did? Not only did he convert; he established a yeshiva in Bnei Brak. (laughter) The meaning of these legends: to teach us that history is never finished, good may emerge from bad, evil's triumph is and [00:34:00] must be temporary, repentance is granted even to killers. There may be one day high priests and learned individuals among their descendants. But the other way

around too. These legends teach us modesty. Not all our ancestors have been prophets and poets. Not all have with their scholarship contributed to the glory of God and his law. Some may have committed sinful and criminal acts that brought dishonor to humanity. In other words, there is no collective, eternal guilt; there is only individual responsibility. In other words, in Jewish history, everything could be possible, and so everything is possible. [00:35:00]

And now, let us come back to the Book of Ruth, which actually, in all fairness, ought to have been called the Book of Naomi. Let's start once more, shall we? We have a drama. Who are the principal characters in the cast? There are three: Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. Secondary characters? Three. Elimelech, Orpah, and the anonymous *goel*, the redeemer, who appears only to disappear at the end of the book. Then, of course, as in every good drama, every good play, there are many extras -- harvesters, spectators, neighbors, passers-by -- in short, the entire population of Bethlehem, which, like the chorus in ancient Greece, participates in the play with outcry, silent gestures, meaningful winks and murmurs. In the beginning, all are kind, [00:36:00] all are charming, all have appealing qualities.

Elimelech -- for once, let us say gentlemen first -- Elimelech moves us not only by his personal tragedy but also by his inability to overcome it. He had a wife and two sons whom he could not feed, so much so that he could bear it no longer and felt compelled to leave his home, his native city, his country. He felt compelled to go away, to live as a stranger among strangers in the land of the Moabites, the enemy. Surely he had hoped to come home one day and start all over again, but he died. When? We do not know. Of what illness? We do not know. Of misery? Of despair, perhaps? Of nostalgia, homesickness?

[00:37:00] It was never easy to live as an uprooted refugee or immigrant. Did he die of remorse, perhaps? Did he regret anything? But he had been a good father, a good husband, he was a good Jew. Now, did he regret, perhaps, having had to leave the Holy Land? His was surely a tragic destiny. Impossible not to empathize with Elimelech.

Next, Naomi. Naomi -- all the tenderness in the world is reflected in her name, and mirrored in her personality. Totally selfless, she was always thinking of others, never of herself. She was happy at home in Bethlehem, that much is clear. She was always happy. Even in the midst of misfortune, she found ways to invent happiness, not for herself, [00:38:00] but for those around her. One imagines her always busy -- busy helping her

husband, her children, their wives. Her sons married Moabite girls. If she was hurt -- and she must have been, as a Jewish mother -- she did not show it. Never were Orpah or Ruth offended or even pained by Naomi's behavior. Dignified in her distress, she manifested exemplary courage under stress when faced with the challenges of existence. At the end, it was she who pulled the strings. Behind all that is done or undertaken in the book, it is her silhouette that can be seen. Oh yes, this book ought to be named after her. Why wasn't it? My guess is she must have vetoed the proposal. (laughter) [00:39:00] Naomi was too modest. Glory was good for others, not for her.

Now, we are also touched by Orpah. She is not treated too well, because first, we let her go, and second, because at one point, we oppose Orpah to Ruth in the future. When we imagine the future, we say Ruth's descendant was David, but who was Orpah's descendant? I'm sure you guessed it. Goliath. Still, I feel I like her. Having lost her husband, she decided to follow Naomi to Judea. She didn't stay home; she said, "I'll go with you." The three of them moved together. Why? Didn't she know that her life there would consist of hardship and worry? [00:40:00] That did not matter to her. Faithful to her late husband, she wanted to stay close to his struggling people. In the end, she yielded to Naomi's persistent arguments. Why? Maybe because

she could not make -- as one friend of mine, the rabbi, said tonight -- she could not make the last effort. Just one last effort, and she would have entered, together with Ruth, not only history but legend as well. But maybe it was different. Maybe because it was easier to return to her parents' home. She had parents -- famous parents, rich parents, glorious parents. Is that the reason? I don't think so. I think much higher of her. I think that if she finally accepted to leave Naomi, it was because she refused to sadden her mother-in-law even more. She must have thought that it would be easier for Naomi not to be accompanied [00:41:00] when she reappeared in her village, when she had to readjust to new conditions. It was for Naomi's sake, for Naomi's good feelings, for her welfare, not her own, that Orpah may have left Naomi.

What about Ruth? Ruth is perfect. (laughter) Humble, obedient, submissive, she accepts everything without the slightest trace of protest or dissent. Her husband, Chilion, died; she accepted his death without complaint. Naomi wanted to go back to Judea; she will go with her. Naomi tried to dissuade her -- oh, no, that she resists. Gently but forcefully, Ruth convinced her of her desire to stay at her side always, [00:42:00] everywhere. The very thought that Naomi, who had been so happy and respected, so proud, could now return home alone and lonely, was

intolerable to Ruth. Orpah changed her mind halfway. Orpah was young. She would be happy again. Not so Naomi. Naomi needed Ruth more than Orpah did. Even when Ruth remarried and had a son, it fell to Naomi to give him a name. Ruth wanted Naomi to feel active, present, useful.

Now we come to Boaz, a true gentleman. Defender of the weak, protector of the poor. He noticed an unknown woman in his field and did all he could not to make her feel an intruder.

[00:43:00] Always calm, Boaz. He knew what to do and what not to do. With him present, nothing bad could occur to anyone. Respected, admired, Boaz inspired security and gratitude.

The collective image projected by Bethlehem is one of warmth and humanity. Its inhabitants were kind, never envious or bitter. Strangers were always welcome. "*Hazot no'omi?*" people cried out when they saw her reappear in their streets. "Is this Naomi? Has she returned at last?" They felt sorry for her. Not only were they not angry at her for abandoning them during the famine, they were now ready to come to her aid. Not one person said, "She's unhappy? Good, she deserves it. (laughter) Why didn't she stay here, sharing our sorrow?" And when Ruth joined the harvesters, instead of chasing [00:44:00] her away, they allowed her to glean ears of corn in the field without a

word, without protest. Their wives did not see her as competition. When she married Boaz, there was no gossip about them. Ruth's joy was shared by Naomi and then by the entire community.

Is that why we are so enticed by this idyllic romance, because of its reassuring aspects? Because it has no part for the villain? Is that then the major theme of the book -- human brotherhood, Jewish solidarity? But then, if all the characters are good and kind, why are we not bored by this story?

(laughter) Can a story without tension and conflict be of interest? Can it have any literary value? I'm afraid [00:45:00] that we might be obliged to read the book again, and in scrutinizing certain characters more closely, we may discover some dark areas that we have not seen.

First of all, we realize right away that the narrative, from beginning to the end, is bathed in unfathomable suffering. From the very first sentence, we are confronted by one more character in the cast whom we have not mentioned: famine. Misfortune. Things are not going well. Quite the opposite. For now we realize that hunger too is a character in the drama -- not only scenery, not only the setting, it is there, present, acting on people, making them better or worse. [00:46:00] Hunger was and

still is a malediction. Hunger and death, death and starvation, starvation and shame. Hunger crosses social and religious boundaries. All corpses look alike. Individual death during famine has lost its uniqueness. Hunger in ancient times represented the ultimate malediction. Rich and poor, young and old, kings and beggars lived in fear of drought. They all joined the priests and saints and just men in prayers for rain. Rain meant harvest, harvest meant food, food meant life, just as lack of food meant death. It still does, and more. Hunger means humiliation. A hungry person experiences an overwhelming feeling of abandonment and shame -- [00:47:00] the father who cannot feed his children, the son who witnesses his mother's helplessness. All desires, aspirations, and dreams lose their lofty qualities and relate to food alone, hence the feeling of degradation. But shame in Hebrew is linked to one disease alone, hunger -- *cherpat raav*, the shame of hunger -- and to escape it, one is ready to leave everything behind, as did Abraham and Jacob and Elimelech.

With a heavy heart, Elimelech and his family left for the unknown in search of survival. They expected the worst, and it came. Trials and tragedies followed and resembled one another. First, it was the sudden death of Elimelech. Naomi remained alone with her two sons. [00:48:00] Was it because they wished

to introduce some joy in the orphaned home that Mahlon and Chilion decided to get married? They found two beautiful young girls from good families. Was that the end of the tragedy? Sadly, no. After a brief period of respite and serenity, misfortune struck again. The two young husbands collapsed and died. Again, of what illness? Was it the same illness? Did they die the same day? The text is curiously secretive. It is as though it wanted to tell us: faced with so many tragedies, one can do nothing but enumerate. Details, explanations seem superfluous. One imagines the three widows under the same roof. One imagines the silent grief that moves them closer to one another. One imagines their [00:49:00] unspoken questions: Why so much sadness in one home, under one roof? Why did destiny strike only men? Why were the women spared?

Naomi decides to put an end to exile. She could not go on living in an empty house marked by mourning. We see the three women close the door behind them and begin the long road home. At the crossroad, a new trial was awaiting them: to stay together or not. They separate. The two young widows -- sisters and Moabite princesses, according to one Midrashic source, part ways. Will they see each other again? Orpah, in tears, stayed in the land of Moab, whereas Naomi and Ruth headed toward Judea, their heavy memories their only luggage.

When they reach Judea, [00:50:00] they aroused pity. The country was no longer suffering from famine, but the two women were poor -- so poor that Ruth, the former princess, had to look for work. And yet she was no longer that young. She was 40, and 40 in those years was an advanced age for women. Her only chance? Naomi's relative, Boaz. Guided by Naomi, Ruth will humble herself and go to meet Boaz at night, in the barn. Well, they will get married, (laughter) but they will not live happily ever after, for, according to one commentary, Boaz, the groom, died on his wedding day.

See, the story of Ruth is far from being a cheerful one. But there we must [00:51:00] once more raise the question of fairness. Why so many blows directed at one person, at one chosen family? What sins could it have committed to deserve so many afflictions? No suffering is gratuitous. That is part of Jewish belief. The question of theodicy must not go unanswered. There is misconduct in misfortune, according to that tradition. Sin and punishment are supposed to be forever intertwined. God is just, and his name is truth, and his divine truth is meant to be affirmed and sanctified and magnified by human justice, or at least by human quest for justice.

So let us look more closely for possible shortcomings in the [00:52:00] victims of our story -- and there are many. The famine in Judea? According to the Midrashic commentaries, it is linked to the state of moral hunger that stifles its inhabitant. Demoralization has pervaded all spheres of populations. The judicial system itself is affected. Selfishness is the accepted rule everywhere. The judges themselves are submitted to the judgment of those who appear before them in court, and they, the judges, are asked, "Who are you to judge us? You are notorious sinners. Who are you to preach the law to us?" Society has rarely been as permissive, as promiscuous, as immoral. A Talmudic commentator adds, and I quote, that entire generation was bathing in exaggerated sensuality and eroticism. How could not [00:53:00] God intervene and say to them, "Look, I am also here?" Therefore, the famine.

Elimelech -- why was he made to suffer? The Talmud declares him guilty. He should have interceded in heaven on behalf of his contemporaries. Too selfish, Elimelech, certainly too egocentric. He could have prevented the national catastrophe of hunger, says the Talmud. How? By praying. He didn't even pray? That is the least he could have done. It costs nothing. Why didn't he? Other commentators go further and say Elimelech wasn't a kind person at all. He refused to give charity to the

needy. The hungry beggars were sent away from his home on an empty stomach and empty-handed. Was he poor? [00:54:00] No, he had the means to help them. He wasn't just anybody, Elimelech. As a descendant of the illustrious Nachshon ben Aminadav, the one who courageously led the crossing of the Red Sea. He was the head of his village. People looked up to him for guidance and direction. And yet, instead of sharing the tragic fate of his community, what did he do? He ran away. Where did he run? To the Moabites, whose hostility to Israel was as old as Israel. No wonder that after his death, the text refers to him constantly as *elimelech ish no'omi*, "Elimelech, Naomi's husband." She was the only one to mourn his passing. It seems to be a fact, the *Parneis HaDor*, the leader of his generation, was not popular among those who knew him. Is [00:55:00] that why he was condemned to suffer? Is that the reason for his sudden death? Let's say it's possible.

What about his two sons? Were they not without sin? One ought not to speak evil of the dead, but Midrashic commentators do it, (laughter) so I may quote them, correct? As their Hebrew names indicate, Mahlon and Chilion were almost predestined to be forgotten. "*Nimchu vechalu min haolam*", says the Midrash. They were wiped out from the world, erased from history. Why? Because they too were guilty on many counts. One, they too were

wrong in deserting their fellow citizens and emigrating from Judea. Two, they adjusted too quickly to their new surroundings. They became successful and [00:56:00] stopped being refugees almost overnight. The Midrash says so. They made money, lots of money, and became socialites, to the point that King Eglon of Moav offered them his two beautiful daughters, Orpah and Ruth, as wives. And instead of responding, "Majesty, we are Jewish. We are not allowed to marry Moabite girls, be they princesses. It's against the law of Moses and Israel," no, they were seduced by the royal offer. Easy to be influenced by appearances and the trappings of power and glory, by all that is superficial in life, they did not bring honor to their people. That is why they perished abroad.

Thus we are disappointed in the father and his sons. But what about the gentle and gracious Naomi? Wasn't she a woman of [00:57:00] valor and impeccable virtue? Well, let's see. She was good towards everybody, but that is not always equality. Moliere, the great French classic humorist, said, "Every man's friend is no friend of mine." (laughter) It's not good for you to be everybody's friend; you must choose. But then, she followed her husband abroad, right? An excellent matchmaker, isn't she? Yes, but what about her qualities as mother, as Jewish mother? If her children were blinded by money and power,

wasn't it also her fault? It's always her fault. (laughter)

What kind of education did she give her children if, at the slightest provocation and/or temptation, they turned their back to their people and its religious tradition? Why didn't she [00:58:00] teach them Jewish values? Why didn't she speak to them like a Jewish mother, warning them against marrying girls without conversion? Did she at least make an effort? Why didn't she try to persuade Orpah and Ruth to espouse the faith of their future husbands? Is there a Jewish mother who wouldn't at least cry a little bit? All the text tells us is "*vatishaer haishah mishne yeladeha umeishah*," "Having survived the death of her husband and her two sons, she remained lonely and alone." One detects in it a note of remorse that is natural. Rightly or wrongly, survivors occasionally feel guilty for remaining alive. "What have I done to deserve life?" also means "What have I done to deserve solitude?" Survivors at times envy the departed. Naomi says to herself, "If I am alone, it's because they have [00:59:00] abandoned me. What have I done to deserve that?" She almost says it, in different words, naturally. She says, "*veshaddai hera li*," and God pained me, hurt me, punished me. You listen? God, not people. Is she reproaching Him anything? Is she reproaching herself?

The anonymous redeemer, the *goel* -- 12 times is the word *goel* repeated in this story, redeemer -- therefore another leitmotif is redemption. But the redeemer doesn't fare too well. His image is less than perfect. He's ready to take possession of what belonged to Elimelech, but then he hears that according to law, this implies that he take on the responsibility for Ruth's welfare. And believe it or not, the coward [01:00:00] quickly withdraws, runs off the stage -- disappears.

The good and great Boaz himself comes across as someone not totally appealing. Naomi is his relative, his poor cousin. Why doesn't he take care of her? Why doesn't he offer her shelter and protection? Did he but pay her a courtesy visit? He could easily afford to give her some kind of subsidy -- a monthly check. (laughter) Why doesn't he? Why doesn't he even try to find out whether she needs something, whether she's hungry? Had Boaz shown himself to be more generous, Naomi wouldn't be in such an embarrassing situation. She wouldn't have to send Ruth, poor Ruth, to bring back some food or money from the household. Whatever happened to generosity in his case? [01:01:00] In Talmudic literature, Boaz is depicted as timid, bashful, a bit frightened of everyone and everything. He wants to marry Ruth but is unable to overcome his hesitation. He is afraid, afraid of receiving the punishment her husband had received. Boaz,

according to the Talmud, says to himself, "Naomi's two sons died because they married Moabite girls. What will happen to me if I now marry one of them?" Really? Is this the way a man you love speaks? Shouldn't the man you love be less prudent, less calculating, more daring?

One more look at the extras, the chorus, the anonymous bystanders or passers-by. Their outcry, "*hazot no'omi*," "Is this Naomi?", could have reflected [01:02:00] their joy or what we call their *schadenfreude*, their pleasure of seeing her destitute, as if they were saying, "Look at that rich snob now." Maybe they were happy to see her unhappy, all those neighbors who had been envious of her wealth and serenity.

Clearly the Midrash intends to establish a pattern of its own, a system of its own, aimed at correcting the biblical text. In Scripture all the protagonists are pure; in the Midrash, none is pure. In Scripture, all are generous; none is above suspicion in the Midrash. Naomi, the sweet and selfless Naomi, is angry with God, who, I quote, according to the Midrash, "thinks of me," says Naomi, "only to make me suffer." Boaz, the good and devoted [01:03:00] Boaz, is actually tempted by Ruth. The shy Boaz is tempted. Listen to the Midrash, and I quote: "All night, the *yetzer hara*, the evil spirit, tried to persuade him

to move closer to Ruth, saying to him, 'You are free, she is free. What are you waiting for? Take her in your arms.'"

Granted, Boaz resisted. But one version shows him caressing her hair -- not because he desires her, God forbid. (laughter) He caresses her hair to see whether she is a woman, really, or a demon, for demons have no hair, or at least this is what Boaz thinks. But she had hair. Another Midrashic version tells us that when Boaz discovered Ruth so near to him in the barn, he got so panicky that he seized her by her legs. (laughter)

[01:04:00]

As for Ruth, there we must stop. Ruth remains the exception. Presented in the text as pure, she appears to be pure, even purer, in all its commentaries. Ruth is untouchable, above criticism. All her thoughts are directed towards God. Nothing worldly is of interest to her. A king's daughter, she could return to the luxury of her father's palace, but she chooses poverty and stays with Naomi so as to save her from the ultimate pain of being alone and a stranger in her own home. In Bethlehem, it is her idea to go and work. It is she who is ready to assure the livelihood of this small family. It is she who brings back the food. She delicately, unobtrusively, walks behind [01:05:00] the harvesters, not mingling with them so as not to disturb them, not to annoy them. She goes only where she

is allowed to go by law. She picks up only what others have left behind. Naomi tells her to go and spend the night with a stranger in his barn, she goes there. But what will he think of her? Ruth rejects vanity. He will not think anything bad because she never thinks anything bad. Ruth is incapable of thinking anything unworthy. Naomi tells her to lift up the blanket covering his feet; she does as she's told. That is the only night she spends away from Naomi, comments the Talmud. Usually a woman prefers a young man, though poor, to an old man, be he rich. [01:06:00] Not so Ruth. Boaz is old, but Ruth accepts him. She knows, she feels, God's will. At no moment does she think of anything else. God is forever present in her deeds, in her thoughts.

But tell me, isn't Ruth Moabite? How can Boaz marry her? There the Talmud goes out of its way to invent solutions. (laughter) One sage says that she had already converted at home. Another declares the law forbidding acceptance of Moabites in God's assembly pertains to men, not to women. (laughter) So both Ruth and Boaz are irreproachable. In fact, suddenly we discover Talmudic sages bending backwards to plead in favor of all the characters in the story. Mahlon himself will be redeemed: his name derives from *mahal*, [01:07:00] forgiveness. God will forgive him his faults. Elimelech left Judea. He had no

choice. Had Elimelech stayed home, would we be here?

(laughter) The story of Ruth would not have happened, and without Ruth, would there be a David, or a son of David, *mashiach*? And so we discovered a new element, perhaps the most important of them all, in this wondrous tale: the element of coincidence. Up until now, we might have saw that the theme of the Book of Ruth was compassion towards strangers, the way of coping with strangeness, or with separation between individuals, groups, families, communities, or faith in God and messianic redemption, meaning believing that God is not outside history but in it, that God is the one conferring meaning to history, that in the end, [01:08:00] everything will be resolved and settled. How did Ernest Renan put it? He said that Greeks were given reason, the Romans force, and the Jews a sense of God as beginning and end.

All these themes are possible and even plausible within the framework and texture of the tale. Is it coincidence or divine design? The meaning of the story is that there is no coincidence in Jewish history. Had there been no famine in Judea, Elimelech and his family might have stayed home. Naomi would not have met Ruth, who would not have married Boaz. Had Boaz not lost his wife the very day Ruth and Naomi arrived in town, (laughter) had it not been Boaz's custom to sleep in the

barn, (laughter) had the anonymous redeemer not appeared on the stage at the last moment to go away... [01:09:00] In Jewish history and tradition, all things and events are linked. At the end of the book, Boaz and Ruth reach the gates of the city just as the redeemer happens to pass by. Boaz seizes the opportunity and sets into motion the accelerated process leading to his wedding. But how is it that the redeemer happened to arrive at the gates of the city just at that moment? And here the Midrash gives us an answer bringing God into the picture. And the Midrash says, "Had he, the redeemer, been at the other end of the world, God would have picked him up by his hair and brought him to his appointment with history." In one Midrashic source, the denouement is set, [01:10:00] as I said already. Boaz is 80 when he marries Ruth. It's too much for him, (laughter) and he dies on the day of the wedding. (laughter) And Ruth is once more a widow, alone, and yet at the end, we are called upon to think not of her solitude but of her happiness, for we must think of her child, and his and his and hers and hers. We must think of her descendant, David. For in conclusion, what we learn from the Book of Ruth is that whenever human destiny is affected, for better or worse, we may ask, "And where is God in all this?" And answers the Midrash, and I quote, "During these events, when all this happened in the Book of Ruth, [01:11:00]

God said, 'Elimelech has done his part, Naomi hers, and all the others theirs. Now it's my turn to do Mine.'"

And so, from a very beautiful and moving love story between a man and a woman will be born another one, the story of a people obsessed with the idea of eternity, a people and its dream, a people and its future, a people and our hope. (applause)

[01:12:00]

M:

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