DARK LADIES AND REDEMPTIVE COMPASSION: RUTH AND THE MESSIANIC LINEAGE IN JUDAISM

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Jewish tradition celebrates Shavuot as the festival of the Giving of the Torah, the anniversary of the time when, fifty days after the Exodus, God came down on Mount Sinai and spoke the Decalogue (the "Ten Commandments") to Israel. So it is that every year synagogue congregations take out the Torah scroll from the Holy Ark, place it on the reading table, and read from Exodus 19–20 as a public reenactment of that ancient covenantal proclamation. But just before that happens, another, much smaller scroll is opened and read: the scroll of Ruth.[1]

The significance of this smaller scroll claims my attention in this essay, but I want to reflect for a moment on the juxtaposition of these two public readings. The synagogue lectionary is designed to take the congregation through the entire Torah, the Five Books of Moses, once a year. The Pentateuch is divided into over fifty sections, each with its own conventional name that gives some hint of the basic topic: "In the Beginning"; "Noah"; "Get Thee Out [of Thy Father's House]"; and so on. But along with this weekly sequence from Genesis to Deuteronomy, there is another coordinated set of readings from the prophets, called the Haftarah. Each selection from the prophets is in some way related to the Torah reading, although the relationship is not always obvious or simple. Sometimes the prophetic reading carries the Pentateuchal narrative forward in time, sometimes it highlights the ethical teaching of the Torah selection, and sometimes it provides a counterpoint to the Torah reading, as when Leviticus 1–5 is followed by Isaiah 43:21–44:23, and the week after, when Leviticus 6–8 is followed by Jeremiah 7:21–8:3. The juxtapositions are provocative and meant to be so. But because they are part and parcel of one liturgy, the congregation hears verses such as "For I spoke not unto

your fathers nor commanded them . . . concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices" (Jer. 7:22) not as a repudiations of the sacrifices of Leviticus, much less as a polemical denunciation of the law as a whole, but as something different.[2] Wisely, no attempt was ever made to encapsulate the message in a single formulation or aphorism, and there surely is enormous variation among listeners, interpreters, and periods of history. But in general, one may say that the words are heard as a challenge, as a call to reflection and deeper understanding. These readings open dialogue, rather than shutting it down.

While the reading from the prophets always follows the Torah reading, there are three occasions when a scriptural reading precedes the Torah lection: on Passover in the spring, with the Song of Songs; on Sukkot in the fall, with Ecclesiastes; and (as mentioned above) on Shavuot, with Ruth. In the tripartite division of the Jewish Bible, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Ruth fall in the third division, the "Sacred Writings." It is surely notable that these three short works, each of great interest in its own way, are chosen to precede the Torah reading on the three pilgrim festivals.

The connection between spring's holiday Passover, and Song of Song's passionate love is direct and unmistakable. It is also possible to discern the wisdom of pairing Ecclesiastes with Succot, the fall harvest festival: The celebratory joy and self-assured bounty of harvest time need to be tempered with a touch of Ecclesiastes' uncertainty and skepticism. But perhaps most intriguing of all is the reading of Ruth, which links Bethlehem with Sinai, Moab with Moses. And again, unlike the traditional Haftorot—which follow the Torah reading and remain ancillary to it—the reading of Ruth *precedes* the reading of Torah. It is as if to say the covenant of Sinai and the Torah of Moses are framed by—are to be understood under the canopy of—Ruth and her teaching.

It is not only in liturgical settings that Judaism creates seemingly unlikely neighbors. The entire genre of midrash involves revealing meaning by hurling texts at each other and observing the resultant trajectories and the energies released. As Michael Fishbane and others have reminded us, midrashic activity is traceable back to the Bible itself, which brims with intertextual allusions and delights in lexical plays and phonemic echoes in both prose and poetry.

In truth, the very embodiment of the Tanakh, the Hebrew Scriptures, as a physical artifact implies relationship. I hold a Tanakh in my hand, aware that I grasp a wide variety of genres and works: story and genealogy, creedal affirmation, ethical maxim, and joyous celebration. Bound in

one volume are narrative, prophecy, prayer, wisdom, and law. In older times each work came written on its own scroll—scribal practice preserves this tradition even today—so the whole anthology would have been stored in a large pouch. I often wonder what these scrolls say to each other as they jostle about, rubbing shoulders willy-nilly. What does curmudgeonly Ecclesiastes say to pious, not to say the credulous Psalms? Do Job and Deuteronomy understand each other? How do Jeremiah and Ezekiel respond when approached by Song of Songs, all sultry and ready for a big hug? We know that some books were nearly excluded—or did they wish to opt out?—but in the end remained in the pouch. There were some works—Enoch and Jubilees among others—that did not make the cut.

I am personifying here, projecting human characteristics onto scrolls. But the reality is that behind each work stands a community, a group of devoted disciples who preserved, taught, and likely edited each of the scrolls, passing on words and voice and perspective for generations. Furthermore, the collection as a whole became the Scriptures of postexilic Judaism, the common ground of the people who gathered under the shadow of the Second Temple to pick up the pieces of the first one, who claimed the Bible as their living guide even though most of the events described in it already were of unimaginable antiquity in their own day.

When inviting guests to a dinner party, one can never predict which will hit it off, where the most scintillating conversation will arise, and who might exchange phone numbers or arrange a subsequent meeting. But if the party is to succeed at all, there must be some shared understanding. A basic trust undergirds the process of extending and accepting invitations, an implied pact between host and guests. Like all tacit understandings, this one probably cannot be brought to full articulation, but it surely includes the assumption that all participants will be open to camaraderie, discovery, and dialogue and that no one will prove an enduring embarrassment to anyone else.

This analogy should remind us that when speaking of a "canon," we are speaking of people as much as (perhaps more than) of books. As Rolf Rendtorff has put it, the postexilic Jewish community of returnees is:

> the community whose self-definition is expressed in the final form of the Old Testament canon. We have to think of a mutual relationship: through its handling of the texts passed down to it, the community builds up the way it sees itself; while in the process it often gives these texts a new interpretation, which is ultimately reflected in the final form of the text and the canon as a whole.[3]

All this means that there was always interchange and conversation between the subgroups that formed Second Temple Judaism and the books they held sacred. Because we are speaking of people more than books, perhaps it is time to find a term other than "canon," with its air of cold fixity, to describe the shaping of the Tanakh as Jewish sacred Scripture; we need a concept more open and capacious that can suggest the dynamic attractions and surprising alliances between books that attentive readers have always noticed. Whatever word we might come up with, one thing is certain: The Tanakh is a relational latticework that bestows a common frame of possibility for those who bear it as sacred.

This reminds us of other important features of the Tanakh: its fundamental mood of beneficence and hope, its bias toward growth and repair, its anticipation of the return of all things to their place and their dignity in God's good time. A deep optimism pervades the Hebrew Bible, despite repeated tragedy and trauma. This may be related to the experience of return from exile to Judea, which (quoting Rendtorff again) "Israel herself had obviously understood as God's Yes."[4] This disposition to optimism is heard with particular clarity at the close of the prophets, with the promise of Elijah's return and the restoration of "the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the fathers," and at the conclusion of the sacred writings—and thus the Hebrew Bible as a whole—with the proclamation to the Jewish exiles by the Persian king, Cyrus, encouraging those who wished to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple: "the Lord his God is with him—let him go up."

This leads us to the book of Ruth itself—a work unmistakably modest in size, gentle in tone, brimming with blessing and with a glimmer of what later generations would call messianic hope. The web of intertextual allusions that readers ancient and modern have found between the Torah and Ruth—works so very different in character and size—might leave a beginning student surprised, yet the web is rich indeed, densely woven and firmly knotted. Some points of contact—with Deuteronomy and Leviticus, and most of all with Genesis—have been explored by previous writers; I hope to build on their insights. But let us begin by noting that Ruth stands at roughly a midpoint in the Bible's implied chronology. As we follow the biblical trajectory of time's arrow, the era "when the judges judged" stands about equidistant between the primeval age of patriarchs and matriarchs on the one hand, and the era that the Second Temple community would have experienced as *now*, the current age. Providing a welcome counterbalance to the bleak portrait of premonarchical Israel in the book of Judges, Ruth also forms a graceful arch with one foot in the

era of primeval founders and the other in the "modern times" of postexilic restoration, cresting nobly in the days of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. The ten-step *tolᵊdot* genealogy with which Ruth ends—the only such genealogy outside the Pentateuch—creates a similar effect, suggesting the possibilities available for those who locate themselves in the arch's open space to find companionship and shelter, to hope, and to wait.

Modest in size as Ruth is, the book plays a surprisingly important role in the biblical schema. It is astonishing that the matriarch Leah, for all her centrality in the book of Genesis and later Jewish memory, is mentioned nowhere else in the Bible—except in Ruth. With Rachel, it is almost the same: After Genesis, she receives but two mentions in Jewish Scripture—plus here in Ruth. The pattern is similar for Judah's daughter-in-law Tamar: Other than a brief reprise in Chronicles, she appears only here, and it is much the same for Peretz. This should be a clue that the retrieval of lost names—*lᵊ-hakim shem*, "to restore the name" (Ruth 4:5; in the felicitous translation of Ellen Davis)—is central to the message of Ruth. If, as noted above, the liturgical placement of Ruth on Shavuot suggests that her story can serve as a key to Moses's Torah, then perhaps an exploration of "restoring the name" would help us understand the nature of that key. Along the way, we also hope to gain a better grasp of Ruth's place in the development of Jewish messianism.

We begin our exploration with a rabbinic midrash from the classic period, roughly contemporaneous with the Talmuds, which already points to some mysterious divine plan in the puzzling events of the messianic line. Commenting on Genesis 38:1, "And it came to pass at that time, that Judah went down from his brethren," the midrash Genesis Rabbah (an early Palestinian midrash from about the fourth century CE) notes: "The tribal ancestors were engaged in selling Joseph; Jacob was engaged in sackcloth and fasting; and Judah was busy taking a wife. . . . And God was occupied in creating the light of King Messiah."[5]

When studying a midrashic text, is always important to note the biblical proof texts that frame the passage in question and shape its meaning. Here, along with Genesis 38:1, the midrash juxtaposes a prophetic passage, specifically Jeremiah 29:11, "For I am mindful of the plans that I made concerning you—declares the Lord—plans for your welfare, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope." Chapter 29 of Jeremiah is the prophet's letter to those deported to Babylon in 597 BCE; he encourages them to build houses and raise families in exile and assures them that at the end of seventy years, God would fulfill his promise and bring them back to Jerusalem. So the sense of our midrash here is that at

the very moment of apparent collapse—of fraternal betrayal and familial disaster—God was planning "a future and a hope." God was somehow involved in Judah's unfolding family saga and the establishment of the Judahite lineage with the birth of Peretz and Zerah, a story whose meaning would come to light centuries later, "when the judges judged" and that further provided the paradigm for Jeremiah's message of hope beyond destruction many centuries later still, in the exile and eventual restoration to Jerusalem.

This reading is reinforced by what follows directly in the midrash: " 'Before she labored she was delivered; [before her pangs came, she bore a son]' (Isa. 66:7)" Before their final oppressor was born, their first redeemer was born." That is to say, long before Israel was to suffer the imperial tyranny of Rome and the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the messianic line had already made its appearance with Peretz. The seeds of the final redemption already had been sown and would one day bear fruit. The linkage of Genesis 38 with Isaiah 66, moreover, makes Tamar, who was once mistaken for a harlot, the prototype for Jerusalem—the city stigmatized as a harlot by the prophet in Isaiah 1:21, but now to be restored and rebuilt. And the prophet's imagery of restored city as mother who gives birth without labor pains brings to mind the bereft Naomi, who at the end of the book of Ruth took the child Obed "and laid it to her bosom," the child of whom the neighbors said, "There is a son born to Naomi"—surely the exemplar of mothering without birth pangs. Here, as elsewhere, midrashic method reveals the meaning across biblical texts when they are read dynamically, read across arching spans of time, where the past foreshadows the future and the present fulfills the past. Neither exegesis nor eisegesis, this disclosure of the living convergence of text and community is itself a sign of enduring hopefulness.

The same midrashic collection also finds messianic significance in the story of Lot's daughters. On Genesis 19:31–32—"And the firstborn said to the younger: our father is old, and there is not a man on the earth. . . . Come, let us make our father drink wine . . . that we may bring life to seed of our father,"—Genesis Rabbah comments, "The verse does not say, 'so that we may bring a child of our father to life,' but seed of our father, meaning, seed destined to appear elsewhere, that is, King Messiah."[6]

The midrash continues by questioning how Lot's daughters obtained wine in the cave. One response was that the Sodomites had an abundance of wine, which they customarily stored in caves. But another midrashist,

Rabbi Yudan son of Rabbi Simon, taught that "they were given an experience of the Messianic Age, of which Scripture says, 'It shall come to pass on that day, that the mountains shall drip with sweet wine' (Joel 4:18)." So by entering the cave, Lot and his daughters had crossed into another reality, the world of final things and redemptive time. This is surely an intriguing view of what on the surface appears to be a most tawdry biblical episode.

The suggestion that the embarrassing liaisons of Genesis have some eschatological significance is found in the Babylonian Talmud, as well. At Sotah 10b, in an exploration of the episode of Judah and Tamar, the rabbis make the following comment: "'and Judah recognized [the signs] and he said, 'she is more righteous than I' (Gen. 38:25). The word *tzadkah*—she is righteous—was uttered by Judah, while the word *mi-meni* was interjected by a heavenly voice, by God, to say, 'it is I—these events are my hidden plan.'"[7]

These Talmudic and midrashic comments on the origins of the messianic line amount to little more than intriguing but undeveloped hints; in the vast corpus of rabbinic literature, this theme never receives sustained attention. A fuller exposition awaited the flowering of Jewish mysticism in the medieval period, in particular the Zohar, the Kabbalistic classic from the thirteenth century. The Zohar notes the similarities between the stories of Judah and Tamar and those of Ruth and Boaz and sees in them confirmation of its belief in the transmigration of the soul. Levirate marriage for the Zohar gives a second chance to souls that did not fulfill their mission during their first sojourn on earth.

> Tamar was a priest's daughter [the daughter of Shem, midrashically identified with Malkizedek, the king of Salem, priest of the Most High God]; it is inconceivable that she would have gone to fornicate with her father-in-law; she was in fact a most modest woman. Rather, she was righteous, and acted out of wisdom . . . she had knowledge, she saw wisely, she came to Judah to do kindness and truth [to the souls of Er and Onan].
>
> It was all from God. . . . There were two women from whom the seed of Judah was raised up; from those women came King David, King Solomon, and King Messiah. Those two women were alike—one corresponding to the other [*da ke-gavna de-da*], Tamar and Ruth—who had lost their prior husbands, and who worked to accomplish this thing—Tamar with her father-in-law [Judah], and Ruth with Boaz. (1:187b–188b)[8]

For the Zohar, then, Peretz and Zerah are reincarnations of Er and Onan, while Obed carries the soul of Ruth's dead first husband, Mahlon. Another Zohar passage comments on Boaz's words to Ruth, "Should you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink (Ruth 2:9)": "If you are thirsty for a man, to establish seed in the world, then go to the vessels—go to the righteous, who are called God's vessels [see Isaiah 52:11], whom all the world will one day bring as a gift to King Messiah; they are indeed God's vessels, in whom God takes pleasure—they are broken vessels" (2:218a).

The notion of the righteous as God's "broken vessels" is evidently suggested by the repeated episodes of impropriety attending the establishment of the messianic line. These include not only the liaisons of Lot with his daughters and Judah with Tamar, but David with Bathsheba, mother of Solomon. In Zohar 3:71b-72a, we read: "From the *ḥutzpah* (brazenness) of the righteous woman Tamar, many blessings came into the world, as it is written, 'and she sat at *petaḥ ʿEynayim* (Gen. 38:14).' This is like Bathsheba, who was destined from the six days of creation to be the mother of King Solomon, so too was Tamar destined for Judah from the day the world was created."[9]

The transgressive behavior of Tamar was a *petaḥ ʿeynayim*—the Hebrew can mean "opening of the eyes"—to new possibilities, as well as "opening of wellsprings"—of blessing and fruitfulness. Similarly, the episode of David's espying Bathsheba's bath was no accident, but the fulfillment of destiny. Is the Zohar suggesting that Bathsheba was not entirely innocent and unaware of the unobstructed view to the king's palace? In any event, the Zohar has made explicit what the Talmud and midrash had only hinted at—that the incest or adultery of the biblical heroes may have been part of a divine plan. And by pointing to a three-part correspondence: Tamar-Judah, Ruth-Boaz, and Bathsheba-David, the Zohar underscores the emergence of the messianic line from parallel transgressive episodes. Of course, Ruth does not commit incest or adultery. Yet, as Tikva Frymer-Kensky has noted, Ruth "does aggressively pursue Boaz, and comes to his bed in the middle of the night. . . . [She] does not consider herself bound by conventional mores when an important issue is at stake."[10] The *ḥutzpah* of women such as Tamar and Ruth opened eyes, opened wellsprings, breaking down barriers to blessing and redemption.

The Zohar's treatment of Tamar, Ruth, and Bathsheba grasps the lines of connection embedded in the biblical texts, lines that had only begun to be teased out by the Talmudic rabbis. By amplifying the intertextual reverberations, Zohar makes explicit what had been merely implied. This

is consistent with the Zohar's contribution in general: Midrashic methods are raised to a new level of creativity and visionary sweep. All later writers on this theme were influenced by the Zohar's insights on Scripture and messianism. Yet for all the importance of the Zohar's contribution, it is also true that the Zohar initiated a process that eventually obscured the biblical heroes and heroines as actual characters, as personalities. In Kabbalistic theory, such figures as Tamar, Ruth, and Bathsheba, like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, become symbols of cosmic forces, of the *sefirot*—the manifestations of the divine on earth. At some point, therefore, the interest shifts from the actual lives (historical or literary) of the ancestors to these figures as avatars and finally as markers of an intradivine process. Kabbalistic texts are deeply interested in biblical narratives, but largely to highlight theosophical-cosmic processes and mystical doctrines such as reincarnation and the emergence of redemption from evil, light from darkness, and restoration from exile. So as the Zoharic teachings are taken up by subsequent Kabbalists, attention often shifts away from actual personalities toward theory-laden elaboration of these ideas.

This same tendency is evident in current scholarly writing, as well. In recent years, academic discussions on Jewish messianism have displayed little interest in David, even as a literary figure. Gershom Scholem's celebrated collection of essays *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* focuses on Kabbalistic notions of the redemptive process; Scholem barely mentions the biblical Ruth and David at all.[11] If any one personality dominates Scholem's concerns, it is that of Sabbatai Zevi, the messianic pretender whose movement engulfed all of world Jewry in 1666 and had a remarkable afterlife even following Sabbatai Zevi's conversion to Islam. Scholem is much interested in the Kabbalistic ideas that laid the groundwork for his career and the antinomian turn that they took as the Sabbatean movement developed. He writes of the anarchic element that entered messianic utopianism, out of which would emerge latent antinomian potentialities. Scholem points to one part of the Zoharic corpus where we find the idea that the entire system of Jewish law known as *halakha* is given in the shadow of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden. But in the domain of the Tree of Life, there is only goodness, holiness, with no admixture of evil, no death, and therefore no need for restriction. In the time of messianic redemption, conceived as restoration of the state of Paradise, the time of universal holiness and purity, there will be no need or room for prohibitions or restrictions. This idea was taken up by Sabbatai Zevi and developed with even more vigor and insistence by his followers. The upshot was that the sign of belief in

Sabbatai Zevi as the true messiah was public transgression of traditional prohibitions, such as consuming nonkosher foods and eating on fast days. Many Sabbateans went further and argued that sexual restrictions such as the prohibition of adultery were abrogated in the messianic era that had arrived. As Scholem summarizes one Sabbatean author: "In the perspective of the paradisiac order of things where the Tree of Life has supplanted the Tree of Knowledge, even the biblical laws of incest—symbolizing the restraints of sexual morality—lose their unconditional validity. The laws of incest were imposed on Adam in this lower world, but in the higher world of *'asiluth* there is no incest."[12] Playing out their antinomian dramas, the Sabbateans ransacked the texts of the Jewish tradition to find support for their ideas. Of course, the dark episodes in the Davidic lineage did not escape their attention. As Scholem summarizes:

> In order to accomplish his mission, the messiah would have to adopt "crooked" ways [because his soul comes from the mysterious place of *tehiru*, the cosmic void or vacuum]. It is not without reason that the origins and history of David, the founder of the messianic dynasty, were "crooked" by ordinary human standards: Lot's incest with his daughters (from which descended the ancestress Ruth the Moabite), Judah and Tamar, Boaz and Ruth . . . and [David's] lapse with Bathsheba. . . . Let no one, therefore, rashly cast aspersions at the Lord's Anointed [Sabbatai Zevi]. (*Sabbatai Sevi*, 819)

The Hasidic movement distanced itself from the antinomian excesses of Sabbateanism. Yet while working to avoid sectarian-heretical implications, it nonetheless drew upon the same basic store of Kabbalistic-Zoharic-Lurianic ideas in its own theology. Regarding the messianic idea, therefore, we find a similar notion of light coming from the darkness. The late nineteenth-century Polish Hasidic master, Rabbi Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin, for example, writes in his *Tzidkat ha-Tzadik*:

> In the period leading up to the messianic advent, the main task is to extract the precious from the base (cf. Jer. 15:19). The redemption will emerge precisely from the place of lust and sin—by means of repentance. This is what the Talmud means when it says "The son of David will come in a generation which is entirely guilty" (Sanhedrin 98a). David is the archetype for the messianic soul because he showed how to make repentance into a life principle of sacrificial offering. The souls of people living in the era of the messianic advent will come from the feet [of Primordial Adam, the

> universal soul]. . . . The Messiah himself is born from such a [lowly] place—you know what the Zohar says about Lot and his daughters: they are the source of the *yetzer ha-ra*, the evil inclination, and it's from there that the roots of the son of David grow. And just that is the realization of ultimate fulfillment—that the root of evil will be transformed to good. . . . At that time the lowest will become the highest. (no. 111)[13]

Once again, while this passage mentions biblical characters such as Adam, Lot, and David, its primary concern is to understand messianic redemption as a historical-theosophical process. One may conclude that while Kabbalistic and Hasidic authors were most astute biblical readers, acutely alive to patterns and allusions, their emphasis on theory limits their ability to shed light on the biblical characters as actual personalities. It therefore would be interesting to see what happens if we return to the Bible with the intertextual awareness of the midrash and Kabbalah, but bracketing the theoretical ideas of the Kabbalists.

Whatever one thinks of the doctrine of transmigration and the emergence of eschatological light from primordial evil, abstract ideas such as these seem not entirely at home in the biblical period. So the rest of this essay will attempt to explore the connections between Ruth and Genesis from a perspective immanent to the texts themselves. Our focus will be on names and people, on how reputations can be tarnished and redeemed by intergenerational dialogue and posthumous restoration. Because such developments are emergent, requiring trust and patience and collective memory, it follows that the Tanakh itself—the relational latticework spanning vast stretches of time—is itself one of the key actors in our drama.

Lot is hardly a heroic figure. It is not just that he allows himself to be intoxicated on two successive nights so that, stone drunk, he has sex with his own daughters. What was he doing in that cave in the first place? We recall that the town of Zoar ("tiny") was originally intended to be included in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, but that Lot had pleaded that it be spared so that he could take refuge there. But we are told "now Lot went up from Zoar and settled on the mountain, for he was afraid to remain in Zoar, he dwelt in a cave, he with his two daughters" (Gen. 19:30). That is, his lack of faith in God caused him to abandon Zoar and hide in a cave, where he slipped into the compromising situation of the rest of the narrative. This is the same Lot who had earlier separated from Abraham and whose misadventure as a captive required

Abraham to rescue him. Let us recall that Lot is Abraham's nephew, several times called his "brother." Yet he and Abraham part from each other—Lot choosing to live in Sodom. As Genesis 13:10–11 tells us, "So Lot raised his eyes and saw the entire plain of the Jordan, that is was well-watered everywhere, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, like the Garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, going to Zoar. So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward; so they parted, one from his brother."

But parting from Abraham would seem to imply parting from the promise of blessing of Gen. 12:1–4, "and you shall be a blessing . . . through you shall be blessed all the families of the earth." In Abraham's own family there is a parting of the ways, his brother/nephew moving to Sodom, of all places. Recall that as Abraham returns from the rescue of Lot, he is met by two kings—the king of Sodom and the king of Salem. The king of Sodom says, quite abruptly and crassly, "Give me the people and take the possessions for yourself." (Gen. 14:21) But another king greets Abraham, as well. Malkizedek, the king of Salem, takes bread and wine and uses them to express greeting, thankfulness, and blessing. Genesis 12:1–4, which can be seen as the mission statement of Judaism, of all Abrahamic religion, begins to be realized in Salem. But, as we are soon to learn, the king and people of Sodom have taken their "Garden of Eden" and made it into hell.

Genesis 14 is actually a tale of two cities: Salem versus Sodom. Lot has separated himself from Abraham and the Abrahamic blessing and has aligned himself with Sodom. Then Ruth's actions and words, which occasion so many blessings throughout her story, are a return, many centuries later, to the Abrahamic blessing.

The intertextual allusions between Ruth and Genesis are bidirectional. A key word in the Ruth narrative is *yadᶜa*—"to know," which immediately evokes the usage of *yada/daᶜat* as "carnal knowledge "in Genesis. Boaz is introduced to us in 2:1 as "*u-le-Na'omi moda' le-ishah*"—"Naomi had a kinsman of her husband's." Later, when Naomi instructs Ruth on her night visit to the threshing-floor at 3:3, she says, *al tivadᶜi la-ʾish,* "do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking." But all this should remind us of Lot and his two daughters—Genesis 19:33—"That night they gave their father wine to drink, and the older one went in and lay with her father; he **did not know** when he lay or when he rose—**ve-lo yadᶜa** *bᵊshikhvah u-vᵊkumah.* The usage here is ironic and mildly derisive—Lot knew his daughters carnally, mechanically, but without rising to conscious awareness or relationship. By contrast, while Boaz as well has eaten and drunk, *va-yitav libo*—his heart

was merry—nevertheless, nothing carnal happens that evening. Boaz assures Ruth that he will act nobly, responsibly, but only after all legal issues have been addressed. "And now, my daughter, do not fear, whatever you say, I will do for you; for everyone at my people's gate **knows** that you are a woman of valor." To forestall any mischievous rumors, Boaz instructs, "Let it not be **known** [*al yivodaʿ*] that the woman came to the threshing floor" (3:14).

To sum up: Lot has carnal knowledge of his (actual biological) daughters but is oblivious; he has no higher-order knowledge. By contrast, Boaz delays carnal knowledge until the appropriate time, while he fully acknowledges Ruth's virtue and value as an individual.

Thus, Boaz redeems Lot, and Ruth redeems Lot's daughters, and if we were in any danger of missing any of this, the narrator winks at us—there is a rather arch reference to Lot at 3:7—"Boaz ate and drank and his heart was merry. He went to lie down at the end of the grain pile, and she came stealthily, uncovered his feet, and lay down." The Hebrew for the phrase "and she came stealthily"—*va-teshev ba*-**lot**—should give us a start. The Hebrew word *lot*, in the sense of secrecy or stealth, occurs but three times in Scripture, twice in the book of Samuel with reference to David and here in the book of Ruth. This gentle wink of the narrator's eye should not be missed.

Judah is mentioned in the very first verse of Ruth: *va-yelekh ʾish mi-Bet Leḥem Yehudah*—"and a man went from Bethlehem of Judah/Judea"—of course Judah is here a geographic term, a name for a region within the land of Israel, but especially in light of the ten-generation genealogy at the end of the scroll, it is impossible not to think of the eponymous ancestor who stands at the head of the lineage.

In Genesis 38—the Judah and Tamar episode—we recall that Judah was trying to locate the woman he thought was a harlot, make payment of a kid from the flock, and retrieve his seal, cord, and staff. But his friend was not able to find her. Judah then says at 38:23: *tiḳaḥ lah, pen nihyeh* **la-buz**—"Let her keep them, lest we become a laughing-stock." This last term is *buz* in Hebrew**.** Instead of Buz, however, Ruth enabled Judah's latter-day descendent to rise to the calling of Boaz—the man of courage and dignity.

This reading is strengthened by noticing other intertextual echoes between Genesis and the book of Ruth. Commentators as early as the midrash and as recent as Robert Alter have noted the centrality of the word *haḳer*—"recognize"—in various grammatical forms and usages in Genesis as a whole and especially in chapter 38. Similarly, in Ruth, in the

initial meeting of Ruth and Boaz, Ruth says (2:10) "Why have I found favor in your eyes [*le-hakireini*], to take special note of me, to recognize me [*vᵊ'anokhi nokhriya*]—though I am a foreigner." And in 3:14, "she lay at his feet until the morning and arose before one man could recognize another"—*bᵊ-terem* **yakir** *'ish et reʿehyu.* Judah at first does not recognize his own daughter-in-law and has sex with Tamar, whereas Boaz does recognize Ruth as a noble, compassionate woman and refrains from sex until the proper moment.

Finally, let us start to look at some broader patterns. We first meet Judah as the one who comes up with idea of selling his brother Joseph into slavery; then he has a rather squalid encounter with a harlot who turns out to be his own daughter-in-law, whom he almost has put to death by fire for a pregnancy which he caused. And yet, the whole point of placing Genesis 38 at this location is to establish Judah's turnaround, his *teshuvah*. In his role as family head and chieftain, when confronted with Tamar and her evidence, he could have easily said "I never had sex with that woman"; his acknowledgment of *tzadkah mimeni*—"she is more righteous than I"—rings through the millennia as an act of integrity, humility, and repentance. This sets the stage for the unfolding of the rest of the book of Genesis, and especially for Judah's breathtaking plea at Gen. 44:18–34, begging Egypt's viceroy to spare the life of Benjamin, his half-brother from Rachel, and to take himself—Judah—as a slave instead. This is a replay of the sale of Joseph twenty-two years earlier with Benjamin substituting for Joseph and with Judah reversing his role: Instead of selling a son of Rachel into slavery, he now saves his half-brother by offering himself. This is the perfect act of *teshuvah*, return, repentance. One can argue, then, that the real hero of the Joseph story is not Joseph, but Judah, and the inspiration for Judah's turnaround is none other than Tamar.

The process of redemption begun by Tamar is advanced by Ruth. She motivates Boaz to redeem Lot. This explains the prominence of *shov*—"return"—verbs in the book of Ruth. A particularly notable instance is at 2:6—Boaz has just noticed Ruth for the first time and asks about her identity. His servant replies, "She is a Moabite girl, who returned [*hashavah*] with Naomi from the fields of Moab." Commentators are puzzled by the fact that Ruth was not returning—she had never been in Judea before. But if regarded canonically, Ruth's presence was the return of Lot's family, Lot's progeny: the reunion of the Abrahamic family. So Boaz, like Lot, has indulged in drink, his heart is merry, and he too sleeps with a woman at his feet, but unlike Lot, Boaz is a *yodeʿa*—he knows

who Ruth really is, he knows the right thing to do, and he knows when and how to do it.

All of this may explain in part why Judaism settled on David as the messianic precursor. We recall that there are some biblical strands where God alone acts as savior (see Exod. 14:30). If a human figure were deemed necessary, why not Moses, whom the midrash calls *moshi'an ha-rishon,* Israel's first savior? Why do Jews not pray for the return of Moses from occultation or for the emergence of a worthy scion from his lineage? The paradoxical answer seems to be that Moses is too close to perfection to do the job. Yes, he slew the Egyptian in Exodus 2:11–12, but commentators largely view the episode as a justified intervention to save the life of the victim, the Hebrew slave. Yes, he smote the rock in Numbers 20, but generations of readers have yet to figure out for sure exactly what the sin was. Moses apparently did not know, either, for he never apologizes for what he did (see, for instance, Deuteronomy 3:26).

Whatever flaws we may be able to discern in Moses, we sense that we already know them all; the FBI background search will not contain surprising new disclosures, no awkward revelations, certainly nothing with a whiff of scandal. Rectitude is wonderful, but what rectitude does not know is the yearning for redemption. For this reason, those whose story is painted only in bright colors could not serve in the role of redeemer. It is rather the Judah-Peretz-Davidic lineage, with its emphasis on re-cognition (*hakarah*), appropriate knowledge (*yedi'ah*), and repentance (*teshuvah*), that could embody the notion of redemption emerging out of imperfection. It is this line which could sustain the notion of the redemption of humans as and by "broken vessels" in the Zohar's telling phrase.

Only an imperfect messiah can redeem an imperfect world and himself as well. Judah's two-word *tzadkah mi-meni,* "she is more righteous than I," is excelled in brevity only by David's one-word cry of confession when confronted with his sin by the prophet Nathan—*ḥatati,* "I have sinned." This does not erase or remove the sin or even block its effects (as we might say today, its karmic consequences) from unfolding in the rest of the Davidic history. The child with Bathsheba dies, trouble in various forms strikes David's family *from within*—the rape of Tamar, the revolt of Absalom—but the royal line, the messianic line, continues through Solomon, son of David and Bathsheba, the same Bathsheba who in Chronicles is called Bat-Shu'a, the designation used for Judah's wife in Genesis 38.

The scroll of Ruth exemplifies the redemptive power of compassionate memory: "a child is born to Naomi . . . he shall be to you a restorer of life [*meshiv nefesh*]." This is not a messianism of muscularity, militarism, and conquest, but of redemptive compassion and revisioning—of spreading the corners or folds of the garment. This is why Ruth is the progenitor of the Messiah, because the Messiah is the ultimate *meshiv nefesh*, restorer of life and dignity when hope seems lost.

"To restore the name" need not be understood in the context of the transmigration of the soul, of reincarnation. To restore the name is to reach across the generations, and across the interpersonal divide, and at times across the divide between aspects or periods within one's own self, in active recognition, provoking true transformation. This is what compassionate redemption means.

And so, too, the "dark ladies" of my title. Lot's daughters do their deed at night, in a cave. Tamar covers herself with a veil and sits at the crossroads. Ruth comes from Moab, in the unstated shadow of Deuteronomy 23:4, " An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the congregation of the Lord." She, too, comes at night, in stealth. Although one could look at Lot's daughters, at Tamar, and at Ruth as four figures of the biblical demimonde, they return, through kindness and grace, to give and to receive blessing. And all of this is conveyed in echoes, in the dappled interplay of light and shadow, figure and ground, in eyes, in blessed gazes, and wellsprings.

At the end of the book of Malachi, the last of the prophets, we are enjoined to "Remember the Torah of Moses my servant; which I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel, decrees and ordinances." But then Malachi goes on to speak of Elijah,[14] the great day of the Lord, and the "restoration of the hearts of parents to children and children to parents." I would suggest that this last note—of return, reconciliation, of revisioning—alludes to the Torah of Ruth, the Torah of kindness, after Proverbs 31: *pihah pat-ḥah bᵊ-ḥokhmah, vᵊtorat ḥesed al lᵊshonah*: "She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the Torah of kindness is on her tongue." So the task is to remember both the Torah of Moses and that of Ruth, to read the Torah of Moses in light of the Torah of Ruth. That is why on Shavuot, the festival of first fruits, also the festival of the covenant, the giving of the Torah, we read the scroll of Ruth, the Torah of kindness, to prepare the way to receive the Decalogue itself as a Torah of kindness.

In the end, Ruth reminds us that nothing is more beautiful than friendship, that grace begets grace, that blessing flourishes in the place between memory and hope, that light shines most from broken vessels. What else is the Messiah about?

Dark Ladies and Redemptive Compassion / Nehemia Polen

1. Outside the land of Israel, Shavuot is observed as a two-day festival, and Ruth is read before Torah on the second day, but the basic point is the same.

2. Translations of biblical verses are based on Jewish Publication Society 1999 translation.

3. Rolf Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology*, trans. and ed. Margaret Kohl (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1993), 53.

4. Ibid., 60.

5. The quote follows the version found in *Bereshit Rabbah*, 3 vols., ed. Julius Theodor and Chanock Albeck (Jerusalem: Warhmann, 1965), 2:1031.

6. Ibid., 2:537–38.

7. See Rashi's comment on the passage; see also Shabbat 113b.

8. Zohar 1:187b–188b.

9. This Zohar builds upon an enigmatic Talmudic passage in Sanhedrin 107a.

10. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 2002), 263.

11. Gershom Scholem *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971).

12. Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 810.

13. Rabbi Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin, *Sefer Tzidkat ha-Tzadik* (Jerusalem: 'A' Publishers, 1968), p. 68.

14. Ellen Davis reminds us that Elijah alludes to the "still small voice." Ruth can be thought of as the still small voice in the canon.

Ruth amid the Gentiles / Peter S. Hawkins

1. *The Complete Poems of John Keats* (New York: Modern Library, 1994).

2. "The seventh stanza of Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' [is] famous for an unexpected allusion to the Book of Ruth and for a peculiar resistance to criticism." Andrew J. Kappel, "The Immortality of the Natural: Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale,' " *ELH* 54, no. 2 (Summer, 1978), 270. Helen Vendler's magisterial reading of the poem in *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), 77–109, shows no interest in the difference between the situation of Keats's Ruth and the Bible's account.

3. All citations of the Bible are from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV with Apocrypha*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

4. Julia Kristeva, in *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), says of David's dubious Moabite lineage, "[David's] ancestor Ruth the foreigner is there to remind those unable to read that the divine revelation often requires a lapse, the acceptance of radical otherness, the recognition of a foreignness that one might have tended at the very first to

Scrolls of Love

READING RUTH AND THE SONG OF SONGS

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