



Torah and Western Thought: Jewish and Western Texts in Conversation

MAY 2021

Shavuot: Tales of Love and Friendship

Friendship in the Fields of Moab

BY RABBI DR. STUART HALPERN

The following excerpt is from Rabbi Dr. Halpern's [article](#) which appeared in The Jewish Review of Books in May 2020.

“Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God” has been understood by some as an ancient form of conversion, a pledge of allegiance. Other interpreters suggest Ruth was expressing familial loyalty to Naomi even though she was no longer her daughter-in-law. And intertextually inclined readers have pointed out that we are told that Ruth “clung” to Naomi, a word used to describe the marriage of Adam and Eve, suggesting that on some level, their relationship replaces the one between Ruth and Naomi’s deceased son, Mahlon. Yet, while there is some truth to each of these interpretations, they miss something both deep and obvious: Ruth and Naomi are friends.

The Peshitta, an early Syriac translation of the Bible, suggests that Ruth’s name stems from *Re’ut*, the Hebrew word for “friendship.” This is more than just playful etymology, or rather if it is, it is the author who is being playful, not the interpreter. The book of Ruth is rife with symbolic names. In the first chapter, Naomi breaks the fourth wall and tells the people of Bethlehem to call her “Bitter”—the opposite of the literal meaning of her name (“pleasant”). The names of her two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, whose deaths set the plot in motion, can be rendered in English as “obliterated” and “eliminated.”

Ruth’s name, by contrast, doesn’t predict her fate; it describes a relationship and a virtue.

“They stand together in an immense solitude...We picture lovers face to face but Friends side by side; their eyes look ahead,” writes C. S. Lewis in *Four Loves*. This is how the Bible depicts Naomi and Ruth after she has declared her intention. They have mourned together and are now setting off on the 50-mile journey from the plains of Moab to Bethlehem, toward an uncertain future—alone but side by side.

“Friendship is—in a sense not at all derogatory to it—the least *natural* of loves; the least instinctive, organic, biological, gregarious and necessary,” Lewis argues. And Naomi agrees: it isn’t natural or prudent for Ruth to want to go with her to Bethlehem. After all, she has nothing more to give her as a mother-in-law, certainly not more sons. It’s an argument that quickly convinces her other daughter-in-law, Orpah, Chilion’s widow. And yet, Ruth clings to Naomi. When Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem (literally the “house of bread”), there are no invitations for room and board. So Ruth offers to glean for both of them in the fields of strangers. There, she stumbles across a man named Boaz, and Ruth, who recognizes him as a relative, sees their chance. It is Boaz, a potential lover who doesn’t even need to love (the text never uses the word to

describe his feelings toward Ruth), who, the women realize, offers the possibility of salvation. As Lewis writes, “Lovers seek for privacy. Friends... would be glad to reduce it. The first two would be glad to find a third.”

Naomi offers instructions as Ruth heads toward the scene on the threshing floor upon which her story turns. Yet Naomi’s orders contain a few discrepancies between how the Hebrew words are read (*keri*), according to Masoretic tradition, and how they are actually written (*ketiv*). Where the written words blur the identity between the two women, making it seem as if one is almost superimposed on the another, the tradition insists upon keeping them distinct:

So bathe, anoint yourself, dress up, and go down [written: *and I will go down*] to the threshing floor. But do not disclose yourself to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.

When he lies down, note the place where he lies down, and go over and uncover his feet and lie down [written: *and I will lie down*]. He will tell you what you are to do. (Ruth 3:3–4)

In the text as it is written, it is as if, at this crucial moment, Naomi’s shadow is draped upon Ruth. Borrowing an anthropological phrase from Marshall Sahlins, their friendship now constitutes a kind of “dual unity.”

In the final chapter, Boaz marries Ruth at the gates of the city. Their union, blessed by the formerly inhospitable residents of Bethlehem, produces a son named Oved. His name means “servant,” and he is, the book tells us in its final verse, the ancestor of God’s eventual servant David. And it is, of course, “David’s seed” whose eventual arrival is traditionally prayed for three times a day.

Ruth’s vow—a vow, above all, of friendship—is the root of our eventual redemption.

Rabbi Dr. Stuart Halpern is Senior Advisor to the Provost of Yeshiva University and Senior Program Officer of YU’s Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought. He is the editor of Gleanings: Reflections on Ruth (Maggid Books).



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Seeing Ruth's Face

BY DR. ERICA BROWN

The following excerpt is adapted from Dr. Brown's [article](#) which appeared on [eJewishPhilanthropy.com](#) in May 2020.

In one of the most tender moments in the Book of Ruth,

Boaz offered Ruth the simple gift of permission to stay and glean in his fields. She responded with dramatic wonderment at his generosity. Ruth bowed low, with her face to the ground, and asked, without looking at him, "Why are you so kind as to single me out, when I am a foreigner?" (Ruth 2:10).

Boaz told Ruth that he knew exactly who she was. Ruth's self-sacrifice preceded her: the kindnesses she did for her late husband and her mother-in-law, what she gave up to make Israel her new home, to make the Israelites her people. Whatever meager handout Boaz had given Ruth could never compare. With these few words, Boaz made an invisible woman visible, lifting her face full of life's harshest scars from the ground and meeting her eye to eye.

In Hebrew, the word for face, *panim*, is plural and not singular, capturing the way that the face changes continually in response and reaction to the world around it. The biblical expression "*panim el panim*," face-to-face, is used in the Hebrew Bible multiple times to suggest the highest level of intimacy in communication. After Jacob wrestled with an angel, he understood something extraordinary and sacred had taken place in his sleep. When he awoke, he named the very spot Peniel—God's face—saying: "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved" (Genesis 32:30).

Panim el panim is mentioned three times to describe the way God interacted with Moses as a statement of his prophetic uniqueness (Exodus 33:11, Numbers 12:8, Deuteronomy 34:11). In Exodus, the expression is qualified with intimacy. They spoke, "just as one speaks to his friend," reflecting Heschel's observation in *The Prophets* that, "A prophet's true greatness is his ability to hold God and man in a single thought."

This is in sharp contrast to Gideon's encounter with God, in the Book of Judges; Gideon believed that because he encountered the intensity of God's face, he would die and had to be reassured: "But the Lord said to him, 'All is well; have no fear, you shall not die'" (6:24). Gideon's reaction of fear reminds us of the way we often cower in the face of intensity. In some of our closest relationships we fail to hold eye contact long enough to reach deep into another's soul. To maintain the comfortable remoteness that invites no obligation, that summons no empathy, we remain at a visual distance. It is God who steps into the moment to remind Gideon that he was in no danger. There is often greater danger in not looking at someone than in looking hard.

This message of the face's danger and the danger of invisibility

was reinforced by Lucy Grealy's 1994 memoir, *Autobiography of a Face*, about her struggle with Ewing's sarcoma. The childhood cancer ravaged Grealy's face. She began the first of many reconstructive surgeries at 16, a hard age to battle beauty and lose. She became her face: "This singularity of meaning—I was my face, I was ugliness—though sometimes unbearable, also offered a possible point of escape. It became the launching pad from which to lift off, the one immediately recognizable place to point to when asked what was wrong with my life. Everything led to it, everything receded from it—my face as a personal vanishing point." Grealy experienced the exact opposite of what we are dealing with online in quarantine. Today, a face is not our vanishing point but now, in many professional and personal contexts, our only point.

Grealy's distorted self-image received further treatment in *Truth and Beauty*, Ann Patchett's testament to their friendship, where we are treated to more reflections on the face. To Patchett, the physicians who treated Grealy also only saw her face as object: "They didn't account for Lucy, only for her face... But how can you operate on the face without understanding what the face means to the girl? How can the meaning of kissing, swallowing, speaking, be completely ignored in favor of mechanics?" Eight years after the book was published, Grealy died of a heroin overdose.

Patchett describes the human cruelty of looking judgmentally at a face: "The gawk was full of brazen curiosity, pity, and fear, every unattractive human emotion rolled into one unflattering facial expression." The doctors who were afraid to look at Grealy's face may have been avoiding the threatening mortal reality she represented—a living *memento mori*. Had they let their eyes stay on her face long enough, they may have raised Grealy out of the scab of invisibility, much the way Boaz did for Ruth. With a glance and a word, Boaz carried Ruth from defeat and anguish into worthiness.

This Shavuot, I will celebrate not only the Torah but the face that studies Torah, the face that bestows kindness, the face that constantly alters. For all that I have resented in this year of COVID, for all my anger at the death, destruction and waste, I am profoundly grateful for every face. With vulnerability, in a time of loss and grief, our eyes meet, and there is relief for a time.

Dr. Erica Brown is an associate professor at the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at The George Washington University and director of its Mayberg Center for Jewish Education and Leadership. She is a frequent lecturer at the Straus Center.



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