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THE BOOK OF RUTH: BETWEEN STORY AND HISTORY, BETWEEN SACRED AND SECULAR (OR, SCRIPTURE FOR THE PEW'S JEWS)

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In "A D'var Torah for Beha'alotcha: The Search for an Evocative History," Blaire French investigates a series of interrelated questions. Some of the questions are questions of genre: she touches on the nature of history, attending in particular to the distinctions between secular history and sacred history and the perceived distinctions between history and story. Others turn on modes of remembering and the act of retelling and rewriting—re-storying, perhaps—historical memory. Others still are about identity and the extent to which identity is connected to remembering and to retelling, the degree to which the content of what is remembered—sacred (hi)story or secular history—can solidify a sense of collective or individual identity.

French's starting point is Numbers 8, which she summarizes as "a description of the ritual purification of the Levites as a sacrificial offering

to God."[1] It is a subject taken up by the Chronicler who, in French's terms "reconfigured and supplemented" the more 'reliable' history of Israel laid out in the books of Genesis through Kings. She conceives of the Chronicler's activity as history-telling, which may have served as a way of revitalizing his own audience's engagement with what French calls its "sacred origins." The theme of returning to beginnings, particularly sacred ones, as a way of consolidating identity is at the heart of French's paper. She notes that "remembrance of the past has always been vital for the maintenance of Jewish identity," a category that is increasingly diffuse.

Connected to the fragmentation of Jewish identity is the turn of many 21st century Jews from People of the Book to people of the books. Tremendously focused on education, American Jewry (as we will see more later) seems now to privilege secular over sacred texts. French laments this shift, particularly as it bears on secular versus sacred Jewish history. Her concern is that "once one removes a sense of divine purpose and Jewish election…the mere act of remembering [will not] be enough" to sustain Judaism, despite assertions by the likes of Yosef Yerushalmi who encourages Jewish historians to deploy evocative history as a way of "seal[ing] the bonds of Jewish unity and identity today" (French's paraphrase of Yerushalmi). One form of history that has proven especially successful in evoking engagement—and deepening a sense of personal connection and/or collective identity—investigates moments of Jewish rupture alongside Jewish responses to that rupture.[2]

How else to foster engagement and consolidate identity, particularly if one is skeptical (as French seems rightly to be) about the potential of secular history either to sustain or to unify a people? French recognizes that the solution cannot be a forced embrace of "traditional remembrance," which is often at odds with secular history and which

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[1] Blaire French, "A D'var Torah for Beha'alotcha: The Search for Evocative History," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 9, no. 1 (December 2016): 6-11, esp. 6.

[2] See, for instance, Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

tends to presuppose belief on the part of the rememberer. What she advocates instead is a first step back toward tradition, a turn toward the Bible which is itself a source—the first source, even—of evocative Jewish history. Her push is not for a full embrace of the narratives that demand belief, the ones that "bear out the…theme [of] God's involvement in the salvation of Israel," but for a consideration of the "many occasions in the biblical narrative where people seem to act outside the sphere of divine oversight." She foregrounds the Book of Esther, "which famously bears no mention of God," and extracts from it a potentially unifying ethos: "Jews are Jews by virtue of what they do for each other while living as world citizens."

French's impulse to hold up Esther as an example of a text with which a fuller range of modern Jews might identify comes from her sense that "many Jews today are…drawn to the idea of recounting persecution and triumph as a basis for generating solidarity." In her d'var, this is expressed as an intuition, but there is significant data to support her notion. Indeed, many of the anxieties about the state of modern Judaism that ripple throughout the d'var are substantiated in the 2013 Pew Center Research Survey of U.S. Jews, a probing look at the contemporary Jewish American moment that set off a "furor … over the closely related questions of intermarriage, religious identity and overall Jewish population numbers."[3] According to the Pew report, a full one in five American Jews self-describes as having no religion. Whereas 93% of Jews in the "Greatest Generation" (those born between 1914 and 1927) identify themselves as Jewish based on religion, only 68% of Millennials (those born after 1980) do.

Having a religion could be a designator for a number of things: denominational affiliation,[4] regular attendance at religious services, ritual observance, etc. It need not be a marker of belief, which can be kindled

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[3] J. J. Goldberg, "Pew Confesses: The News Wasn't as Bad as It Looked," *The Jewish Daily Forward,* November 14, 2013, http://blogs.forward.com/jj-goldberg/187632/pew-confesses-the-news-wasnt-as-badas-it-looked/.

[4] To the concern of synagogue leaders everywhere, 30% of U.S. Jews responded that they have no denominational affiliation.

outside the framework of institutional religion. But the data about belief also suggest a shift away from tradition: in a nation in which 69% of the total population professes absolute certain belief in God or a universal spirit, only 34% of Jews make that declaration. Indeed, "even among Jews by religion, belief in God [was] less common than among members of other major US religious groups."[5] By contrast, a full 62% of all U.S. Jews—55% of Jews by religion and 83% of Jews of no religion—agreed with the statement that "being Jewish" is mainly a matter of ancestry and culture rather than religion, reflecting the sense of Jewish "disaffection from revelation" articulated in French's d'var. Moreover, it appears that Jewish self-identification is strongly tied to secular history: 73% of U.S. Jews stated that remembering the Holocaust (a moment of rupture as monumental as any) is an essential or important part of what being Jewish means to them.

Drawing on the impulse of "many Jews today" to "recount… persecution and triumph as a basis for generating solidarity," French turned her audience to the Book of Esther as a traditional text treating rupture and response. This paper turns in a different biblical direction, to the more domestic and more novelistic Book of Ruth, which—like French's Esther—is a biblical narrative in which "people seem to act outside the sphere of divine influence." If an impediment for contemporary Jews is the tension between sacred and secular history, and particularly the distanciation from tradition that occurs when many modern Jews are confronted with the lack of alignment between the history within the Bible and the history of the archaeologists, then the lesser the claim to historicity that a biblical book makes, the more likely it is to be compelling to the type of modern Jews with whom French is most concerned. Similarly, if revelation is a foreign or even alienating mode for the disenfranchised 21st century Jew—and if, as French asserts, belief cannot be commanded—then Ruth, with its emphasis on interpersonal

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[5] 39% of Jews by religion claim absolute belief in God. (*A Portrait of Jewish Americans: Findings from a Pew Research Survey of U.S. Jews,* 74, http://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/jewishamerican-full-report-for-web.pdf [Hereafter: Pew]).

rather than human-divine dynamics, seems particularly accessible. Finally, Ruth can be understood as a work that both operates within and without the confines of Torah law, and so it may serve as a thought-provoking resource for those many Jews for whom leading an ethical life is more constitutive of their Jewish identity than following halakhah.

Ostensibly set "in the days that the judges ruled,"[6] Ruth recounts the migration of a family— Elimelech and Naomi and their sons Mahlon and Chilion—from Bethlehem to Moab during a famine. After a time, Elimelech dies and the two sons take Ruth and Orpah, Moabite women, as wives. When her sons also die, Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, which is no longer suffering from famine. Initially both daughters-in-law resolve to follow their mother-in-law, but after Naomi attempts to persuade them that she has little to offer the women, Orpah ultimately returns to her father's house. Ruth, however, cleaves to her mother-in-law, making a declaration of love and loyalty so powerful it has become a mainstay of wedding ceremonies. Upon return to Bethlehem, the women conspire to find a man who will provide for them: in a narrative expansion of the law of levirate marriage,[7] the book foregrounds the interplay between Ruth and a redeeming kinsman, Boaz, who extends kindness to Ruth by allowing her to glean in his fields. Ruth is surprised by his decision to help a foreigner in need, but he asserts that he was taken by the kindness she had shown her mother-in-law. He perceives her to be a woman of virtue, in part because she has not sought after younger men, and vows to redeem her once it is clear that a closer kinsman is not interested in fulfilling his levirate duty. Boaz and Ruth marry, and she gives birth to a son, whose arrival the women of Bethlehem announce with the declaration, "A son is born to Naomi." A phrase at the end of the short book identifies this son, Obed, as the father of Jesse, father of [King] David; a genealogy in the final verses creates links from Perez [son of Judah and Tamar] to David.

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[6] Ruth 1:1.

[7] Deuteronomy 25:5-6.

Stylistically, the Book of Ruth is unlike any other in the canon: heavily dialogic, focused on character growth and development, and ostensibly domestic in its focus,[8] it is sometimes cast as being a drama, short story, or even the Bible's only novella. Goethe called it "the loveliest little epic and idyllic entity…that has been passed on to us."[9] Rabbi and Torah scholar Reuven Hammer characterizes it as being "usually patronized and overlooked as a minor but lovely creation of Hebrew letters."[10] On the face of it, there is no great drama here: what human drama there is is local and personal—certainly not divine.[11]

The apparently secular nature of the story makes it something of an outlier within the biblical canon: God not only isn't an actor or agent, but seems not even to be present in the story at all. In order to make sense of this work in the context of the canon in which it is found, religious readers of the story focus on the manifestations of providence they find within it. God is concerned with the human in need, and God will orchestrate the world so that even the merest humans—here, two women, both childless widows—are taken care of. As with the Book of Job, "the search for some comfort is the core of the book,"[12] and for the faithful, the comfort has a theological dimension: it "is embodied in the concept of *hesed,* faithfulness combined with care and concern."[13] This is not the only respect in which the book is read theologically, however. Once the genealogy at the end is revealed and King David is mentioned, the understanding of both the

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[8] That is, "interested in typical people in everyday life." (Irmtraud Fischer, "The Book of Ruth as Exegetical Literature," *European Judaism* 40, no. 2, [Autumn 2007], 141.)

[9] Fischer, 140.

[10] Reuven Hammer, "Two Approaches to the Problem of Suffering," *Judaism* 35, no. 3, (Summer 1986), 300.

[11] Evidently, this is debatable. After having written this sentence, I encountered a banner headline at the Ruth entry in the ancient history section of abouteducation.com that reads, "The Book of Ruth is a Tale of High Drama and Divine Intervention" (http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/biblicalhistory/a/011911-CW-TheBook-Of-Ruth-Features-A-Loyal-Heroine.htm).

[12] Hammer, 304.

[13] Ibid.

book and God's role in it shift: it becomes a national drama, a prophecy of kingship, even an assertion of "perpetuity of the royal line."[14] With its theme of redemption, it is also read (by Christians and Jews alike) as speaking "to the messianic period and the final Davidic king."[15] Thus, in terms of genre, it is often understood as "theological historiography"[16]—much like Chronicles.

For French's 21st century secularized Jew, however, the potential of the Book of Ruth does not come from any of this. The power of the story lies in the fact that its humans treat one another with loyalty, respect, honor, and—most importantly—*hesed,* loving-kindness. The book provides a model for righteous human interaction and demonstrates a significant concern with social justice. A story about two widows, one of whom is also poor, a stranger, and (symbolically, at least) an orphan, it centers on those at the margins of society.[17] Returning again to Pew's portrait of contemporary American Jewry, "leading an ethical life (69%) [is] essential to their sense of Jewishness. More than half (56%) say that working for justice and equality is essential to what being Jewish means to them."[18] The Book of Ruth, with its illustration of concern for those in need, with its emphasis on doing the right thing, certainly has the capacity to speak to the Jew whose Judaism is manifest in a lived ethic of justice and equality. French is right: belief is impossible to mandate.[19] And while the Torah makes clear that action can be dictated, for the Jew who does

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[14] Abraham D. Cohen, "The Eschatological Meaning of the Book of Ruth," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* (June 2012), 167.

[15] Cohen, 168.

[16] Fischer, 141.

[17] That God "executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and…loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing" (Deut. 10:18) leads to an injunction to Israel also to "love the stranger" (10:19). The prophets enjoin Israel not to "oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor" (Zech. 7:10).

[18] Pew, 14.

[19] And indeed, for the Jews with whom French is most concerned, belief seems not to be a crucial marker of Judaism: "Two-thirds of Jews say that a person can be Jewish even if he or she does not believe in God" (Pew, 47).

not believe,[20] a book that models righteousness rather than commands it is likely to have greater resonance.

There is another, quite different way that Ruth might speak to today's Jew, the one whose sense of Judaism is barely connected to action or Jewish observance. Among all Jews surveyed by Pew, "observing Jewish law and eating traditional Jewish foods [was] near the bottom of what it means to be Jewish."[21] Whereas (as noted earlier) 76% of Jews by religion and 60% of Jews of no religion listed remembering the Holocaust as an essential part of what being Jewish means to them, the numbers for "observing Jewish law" were 23% and 7% respectively.[22] Here again, the Book of Ruth can offer a possible model. The Pew surveyors did not ask respondents why they did not observe Jewish law, but a number of possible answers spring immediately to mind. If one is not raised observing the commandments, one is unlikely to observe them as an adult—this is one aspect of the problem of assimilation French alludes to. But here Ruth makes a rather simple point: the commandments are something that need not come from one's family of origin. They can be adopted, if one has significant impetus to choose to do so. Out of love for her mother-in-law, Ruth declares, "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people; and your God my God"[23]—a vow understood by most commentators as Ruth taking on the yoke of the commandments.[24]

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[20] Yet believe? One thinks of the various rabbinic adages about belief stemming from righteous action / observance of the commandments rather than being a precondition for it.

[21] Pew, 55.

[22] Among the Jews by religion, the statistics vary radically by denomination: "Eight-in-ten Orthodox Jews (79%) say observing Jewish law is essential to what being Jewish means to them. This view is shared by just 24% of Conservative Jews, 11% of Reform Jews and 8% of Jews with no denominational affiliation" (Pew, 57).

[23] Ruth 1:16.

[24] The idea of someone wanting to become Jewish should also be resonant with the contemporary American Jew: 94% of U.S. Jews describe themselves as "proud to be Jewish" (Pew, 13).

There is a more complicated message in Ruth with regard to the law, however. If the secularized modern Jew's sense of the law is that it is fixed or unbending, that it does not apply in a modern world or cannot speak to modern sensibilities (all of which we could imagine as reasons the 21st century Jew does not observe), Ruth offers a model of a community negotiating between human circumstance and the strictures of the law. As noted, the Book of Ruth "history-tells" the Davidic story, giving King David a family history that goes back to the patriarchs and matriarchs of Genesis[25] and sets as a backdrop for the birth of King David's grandfather and "ultimately of David himself, a ubiquitous spirit of kindness, charity, and fidelity."[26] But the "Book of Ruth works not only with *narrative texts* from the Torah, but also with *legal texts*":[27] it has been understood to be an intra-biblical critique of Deuteronomic law.[28] Specifically, it has been taken as a revisioning of the laws regarding the exclusion of the Moabite from Israel;[29] as a new interpretation (and expansion) of the role of the *levir*

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[25] David's line comes from Judah and Tamar (see Genesis 38).

[26] Cohen, 163.

[27] Fischer, 143.

[28] See, for instance, Georg Braulik, "The Book of Ruth as Intra-Biblical Critique on the Deuteronomic Law," *Acta Theologica* 19 (1999): 1-20. As Agnethe Siquans notes, based on the dating of Braulik and Fischer (below), "both assume that Ruth was written as a response to Ezra and Nehemiah. Both presuppose the authoritative status of Deuteronomy at the time the book of Ruth was written" (Agnethe Siquans, "A Legal Way for a Poor Woman to be Integrated into Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 3 [2009], 444). The view that Ruth is responding to Deuteronomy is by no means universally held: for instance, many scholars understand the differences in the descriptions of the levirate law in Deuteronomy and the Book of Ruth as reflecting a progression of thinking about the law, in which Ruth represents an earlier articulation of it than Deuteronomy. Even if Ruth was written after Deuteronomy, others contend that the inclusion of Ruth in the assembly of Israel was not a contravention of Deuteronomy's proscription against including Moabites, which they understand to have been directed only at Moabite men. We find this ruling in the Talmud also: "A Moabite, not a Moabitess" (*b. Yevamot* 77a).

[29] Irmtraud Fischer notes, "Exegetical work on the Book of Ruth has always noted that particularly the two legal institutions of Levirate marriage and of redemption play a part. But the right to the gleaning (cf. Deut 24: 19–22) and the so-called paragraph on the Moabites in Deut 23: 4–7, which prohibits the acceptance of Moabites into the community of Israel to the tenth generation, are also important in the Book of Ruth, which causes Michael Goulder

; and as a proposal for legally integrating a poor woman into Israel.[30] Rachel Adelman notes that in Ruth, "redemption entails a *breach* in the law"—it is a story in which "the force of life, of continuity, chafe[s] against the line of the law."[31] She draws on a teaching from the Talmud, in which R. Yohanan claims that "Jerusalem was destroyed…*only* because [the judges] based their judgments [strictly] upon biblical law, and did not go beyond the line of the law [*lo 'avdu lifnim mishurat hadin*]. (BT *Bava Metzia* 30b)."[32] Adelman explains:

> That is, the sages were too strict in their interpretation of the law and failed to act compassionately in expounding it. By contrast, the process of redemption, which might have prevented the destruction, entails an opening up of the "line" of the law to loving kindness (*hesed*). The translation "beyond the line of the law" does not quite capture the meaning, since it presumes *either* mercy or law, grace or legality, compassion or justice; a hackneyed trope I do not intend to resurrect.[33]

Ruth is a book that grapples with the law, that reforms it when it needs reforming. Ruth is a book that could provide a model for the contemporary Jew who feels alienated from a law that is often not expounded with compassion.

It might also be a book that broadens the understanding of who may interpret the law. In this case, the community takes in the stranger and welcomes the child born of a foreign mother as its own, contra the dictates

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even to consider whether the Book of Ruth was created as a homily on deuteronomic community law" (Fischer, 143).

[30] See Agnethe Siquans, "A Legal Way for a Poor Woman to be Integrated into Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 3 (2009): 443-452.

[31] Rachel Adelman, "Seduction and Recognition in the Story of the Judah and Tamar and the Book of Ruth." *Nashim* 23 (2012), 102.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

of Torah.[34] Moreover, and this may be of interest to the modern Jew who resists the patriarchy of Judaism, the Book of Ruth sets women at its center. Although the book "never exceeds the limits of patriarchy,"[35] "by means of its narratives, it seeks to apply the teachings of the Torah in a life-giving way, and in so doing, its aim is above all the wellbeing of women."[36] Ruth reminds us of the feminist potential in Judaism—of the potential of Judaism to be determined by more than just its men. As Rachel Adelman notes, "Where the biblical women might be seen as victims within a patriarchal world, forced to resort to manipulation or deceit because they do not have power,…feminist readers see them as active agents, transforming the social order within which they live." [37] Consequently, "the line of law itself shifts as a result of the life force these biblical women urge forward."[38] This is a crucial message for the modern egalitarian Jew.

There is another key expansion of Judaism in Ruth. Ultimately, the narrative Book of Ruth admits to the community of Israel a person whom the law would not admit "even to the tenth generation" (Deut. 23:2). More astonishing, this Moabite woman becomes the foremother of King David himself. Herein lies another crucial message from the Book of Ruth for the contemporary Jew: the community of Israel need not be as closed to the stranger as you may have come to believe it is. In an era of rising intermarriage rates among Jewish and non-Jewish populations, this may be an important message. The Pew survey reports that "overall, 56% of married Jews have a Jewish spouse, while 44% of Jewish respondents are married to a non-Jew. Among Jews by religion who are married, 64% have a Jewish spouse and 36% have a non-Jewish spouse. By comparison, Jews

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[34] The Book of Ruth as a model for communal rejection or modification of a law is a central idea in my "Modern Day Moabites: (Mis)Using the Bible in the Debate about Same Sex Marriage," *Biblical Interpretation* 16 (November 5, 2008): 442-475.

[35] Siquans, 447.

[36] Fischer, 145.

[37] Adelman, 88.

[38] Ibid.

of no religion are much more likely to be in mixed marriages; just 21% of married Jews of no religion are married to a Jewish spouse, while 79% are married to a non-Jewish spouse."[39] Unlike the very clear signals that emanate from many American Jewish communities panicked by rates of intermarriage and driven by the desire to maintain purity of Jewish lineage,[40] the message of the Book of Ruth is that the stranger is to be welcomed.

If all this is not enough to suggest that the Book of Ruth is a site for what French seeks—a "common Jewish identity in the modern era"—allow one parting entry into the work. 42% of all Jews surveyed stated that "having a good sense of humor was essential to their Jewish identity."[41] Ruth, with ill-fated characters named Sickliness and Consumption (Mahlon and Chilion) and an irrelevant kinsman named What's His Face (Ploni Almoni), with Ruth's romantic ambush of Boaz on the threshing room floor, and with its pre-modern walk of shame, isn't merely a drama of enacted social justice, reframed Jewish identity, and grappling with the law—it's also a little bit funny.

Abraham Cohen contends that "it is likely that from the moment of its writing, the diminutive Book of Ruth was seen as an ethically compelling religious work of the highest order."[42] It is the type of story French yearns for the modern Jew to be able to hear: a story of "God's involvement in the salvation of Israel." But it is also—equally, even—an ethically compelling non-religious work of the highest order, a story of human involvement in the salvation of humans, and thereby of Israel. (And more? As the Talmud has it, to save one life is as if to have saved the entire world.) The secular

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[39] Pew, 36.

[40] Relevant here are the debates about matriliny and patriliny in ancient Israel—and contemporary Judaism. The rabbis understood Judaism to be matrilineal, which would mean King David was not Jewish. Biblical "Judaism" seems to have been patrilineal, in which case David's Judaism would have come through Boaz. See Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[41] Pew, 14.

[42] Cohen, 163.

Jew, the one at risk of losing identity, can find in Ruth a secular history (a domestic drama largely devoid of divine action) set in a theological context (the biblical canon) that can inform theological action (social justice for the stranger, widow, orphan, refugee, elderly, etc.) in a secular context (our contemporary world).

French asserts that "remembrance of the past has always been vital for the maintenance of Jewish identity, but determining what constitutes Jewish identity in the modern era has become increasingly difficult." The Pew survey of American Jewry gives us some insight here, and the insight suggests that the Book of Ruth might serve well in evoking in the modern Jew a connection to a scriptural Judaism that is ethical, open, and kind.