



Overcoming the Inevitable

Or: Could Ruth Have Saved Moshe?¹

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There are many moments in our lives where we feel driven not by choice or careful planning, but by sheer inevitability. While we might ascribe these experiences to serendipity or fate, they are so often borne of acculturation, habit, or lack of imagination. At times, this can feel paralyzing: How can we claim agency over our choices when they are shaped so deeply by unconscious expectations or ingrained patterns of behavior? The Book of Ruth, which is read each year on Shavuot, raises this very question, as its characters navigate their own conflicting senses of what is and is not possible. Upon close reading, Ruth can offer us compelling models for responding to these moments of paralysis, and reclaiming agency over our lives.

In the book of Ruth, Naomi realises, after the deaths of her sons, that she has no option but to go back to her home in Eretz Yehudah.² And, while she has developed deep relationships with her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, she knows that they cannot come with her. When Ruth and Orpah express reluctance to leave Naomi, she pleads with them to understand that the continuation of their relationship is untenable:

¹ Thank you to my dear chavruta Akiva Mattenson, with whom I learnt and worked through a lot of this material.

² I.e. the land of Judah, the southern kingdom; see Ruth 1:7.



רות א:יא-יג

וַתֹּאמֶר נָעֲמִי שְׁבִנָּה בְּנִי לָמָּה תִּלְכְּנָה עִמִּי הַעוֹד לִי בָנִים בְּמַעַי וְהָיוּ לָכֶם לְאֻנָּשִׁים: שְׁבִנָּה בְּנִי לָכֵן, כִּי זָקְנָתִי מְהִיּוֹת לְאִישׁ כִּי אֲמַרְתִּי יֵשׁ לִי תִקְוָה גַם הִיִּיתִי הַלֵּילָה לְאִישׁ וְגַם יִלְדָּתִי בָּנִים: הִלָּהֵן תִּשְׁבְּרֶנָּה עַד אֲשֶׁר יִגְדְּלוּ הִלָּהֵן תַּעֲגֹנָה לְבִלְתִּי הָיֹת לְאִישׁ אֶל בְּנִי כִּי מֵר לִי מְאֹד מִכֶּם כִּי יֵצֵאָה בִּי יַד יְקֹנֶק:

Ruth 1:11-13

But Naomi replied, “Turn back, my daughters! Why should you go with me? Have I any more sons in my womb who might be husbands for you? Turn back, my daughters, for I am too old to be married. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I were married tonight and I also bore sons, should you wait for them to grow up? Should you be chained for them? No, my daughters! My lot is far more bitter than yours, for the hand of God has struck out against me.”

At this moment, Naomi is feeling deeply embittered. She is stuck in what feels to her like an intractable bind. She cannot spend the rest of her life away from her people. She is simply too vulnerable, living as a widow amongst a foreign nation.³ Moreover, Ruth and Orpah are Moabites; moving to Eretz Yehudah would require a dramatic shift in their way of life and even identity. Furthermore, it's not at all clear that Ruth and Orpah would even be welcome to join the society in Eretz Yehudah. Ever since the Moabites refused to support *Benei Yisrael* / the Israelites with basic sustenance on their journey through the desert after leaving Egypt, there had been a prohibition against welcoming Moabites into the community.⁴ From Naomi's perspective, it makes no sense for Ruth and Orpah to return with her to Eretz Yehudah.

³ The following comment by R. Ya'akov Kamenetsky, in *Emet le-Ya'akov* (Bereishit 28:10), suggests that Naomi felt that she had to leave Moab because she didn't feel safe: וכן בנעמי היה, וכן בנעמי היה, וכן בנעמי היה: "ל דבאמת יציאת יעקב היתה כדי לברוח שלא יהיה בבאר שבע, וכן בנעמי היה: העיקר לצאת משדה מואב."

⁴ —לא יבא עמוני ומואבי בקהל יקנן גם דור עשירי לא יבא להם בקהל יקנן עד עולם—No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the community of God; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the community of God” (Devarim 23:4). The *midrash* in *Ruth Rabbah* also makes clear that, at this point, no exception for women had been established. Indeed, Mahlon and Hilyon's weddings to Orpah and Ruth are regarded as transgressive for this reason (*Ruth Rabbah* 2:9). In fact, according to the *Zohar Hadash* on *Midrash Ruth*, it was Ruth herself for whom the exception of women was generated: “הלכה, עמוני ולא עמונית, מואבי ולא מואבית.”



In classic and brilliant Rabbinic fashion, Hazal hear in this moment echoes of another moment in Jewish history: Moshe's expression of dismay at his powerlessness to cross over the Jordan and enter the land (Ruth Rabbah 2:18). Moshe's sense of dejection at not being able to enter the land is connected to Naomi's sense of unavoidable loss. Both of them are stuck. This *midrash* tells how Moshe pleads with God to allow him to enter the land, but to no avail. Similarly, Ruth and Orpah protest "כִּי אֲנִי וְנָשׁוּבָה לְעִמָּהּ / let us come with you!" (Ruth 1:10). But Naomi cannot agree. It's almost as though Naomi understands that this is her *Moshe moment*. There is a tragic destiny to it. Orpah, too, understands the inevitability, and so, resigned to this fate, she kisses Naomi and returns to her home in Moab.

But then, in a moment that subverts all expectations, Ruth simply refuses to accept the reality as it is being presented. Her love and commitment to Naomi will not let anything get in the way. "אֶל אֲשֶׁר אֵלַי / תֵּלֶכִי אֵלַי וּבְאֲשֶׁר תֵּלִינִי אֵלַי / Wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you rest, I will rest. Your people is my people, and your God is my God. Where you die, I will die" (Ruth 1:16-17).

One cannot fail to be moved by this incredible expression of love; it is so impassioned and all-encompassing. By bringing this story into conversation with Moshe's tragedy, the *midrash* is conveying a profound message: the sort of love and commitment that Ruth felt for Naomi is so powerful that it is able to overcome a challenge that even our great leader, Moshe, was unable to overcome.

Once Naomi sees that Ruth is insistent and committed to joining her on her return to Eretz Yehudah, the story tells us something a little odd: "וַתִּחְדַּל לְדַבֵּר אֵלֶיהָ / Naomi stopped talking to Ruth" (Ruth 1:18). Why did Naomi stop talking to her? Isn't she delighted that Ruth will be joining her? Isn't she grateful for this act of kindness? Rabbi Abahu offers an answer:



רות רבה (לרנר) ג:ה

ותחדל לדבר אליה א"ר אבהו, בוא וראה כמה חביבין גרים לפני הקב"ה. כיון שנתנה דעתה להתגייר השוה אותה הכת' לנעמי, ותלכנה שתיהן (רות א:יט).

Ruth Rabbah (Lerner) 3:5

"And she stopped speaking to her." Rabbi Abahu said: come and see how beloved converts are to The Holy Blessed One. Once Ruth had decided to convert, the story presents her as equal to Naomi, "And they walked together..." (Ruth 1:19)

Naomi doesn't stop speaking to Ruth entirely. Rather, Naomi stops speaking *to* her, and starts speaking *with* her. Any remaining hierarchy between the two of them is gone, and they are now truly walking together, in the deepest existential sense.

All of this can help us to understand the tragedy at the end of Moshe's life. Read in the light of the story of Ruth and Naomi, we see that what seemed like the inevitable end of Moshe's journey—in which he was destined to die in the desert, and not join *Benei Yisrael* in entering the land—actually wasn't inevitable at all.

The avoidable nature of Moshe's predicament is hinted at in a devastating *midrash* that explores Moshe's parting words with *Benei Yisrael*:

דברים רבה (וילנא) פרשת עקב, ג

היה אומ' לבני ישראל, והיה כי יביאך ה' אלהיך אל הארץ אשר אתה בא שמה לרשתה (דברים יא:כט) אתה עובר היום (דברים ט:א), ואני איני עובר, שמא יבינו ויבקשו עליו רחמים, ולא היו מבינים.

Devarim Rabbah (Vilna) Parashat Eikev, 3

Moshe said to *Benei Yisrael*, "When Adonai your God brings *you* into the land that *you* are about to enter and possess," (Devarim 11:29), "*you* will cross over today," but as for me, he implied, I will not



cross over. Moshe thought that they might understand what he was implying, and they would pray for compassion on his behalf. But they didn't understand.

Moshe didn't enter the land not because it was impossible, but because *Benei Yisrael* didn't act more like Ruth. They were willing to accept the reality as it was being presented. They were not willing to risk asking God to reevaluate the situation. They were unable to escape a hierarchical relationship between them and Moshe, one in which Moshe spoke *to* them, and not *with* them.⁵ Moshe had always been *their* advocate, and they couldn't imagine that it might be their role to pray on Moshe's behalf. Whilst that sort of relationship may have been appropriate whilst Moshe was leading the people through the desert, it was an untenable dynamic going forward into the land.

Ruth's actions serve as a *tikkun*/repair for this tragic moment of our history. She teaches us that love, commitment, a willingness to take risks, a willingness to be vulnerable, and a posture of deep equality, can help us overcome even the most seemingly inevitable fates.

⁵ Over and over again in the Torah, Moshe's speech is introduced with the phrase וידבר משה אל בני ישראל.

