
At the Crossroads: Reflections on Ruth

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RUTH: SWEET LIONESS IN THE DESERT, THE SUN ALREADY IN YOUR EYES, YOUR FEET ALREADY PACING IMPATIENTLY. YOU STAND AT THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN THE WORLD OF SHADOWS AND PAIN—THE ONE that taught you to worship gods that bleed and shatter, the one that left you widowed—and the brilliant, sunlit world of mirages, in which all that is truest cannot be seen. A road that will lead you to a world you can only dimly imagine, to a future you cannot yet comprehend—but you know you cannot turn back. You cannot turn back to those who knew you before, to the old world—there is something stagnant, already decaying there. Moab is disappearing; its roots were not planted deeply enough. You know you must go on—and even though you are afraid, you know that for you, there is no other way but to follow the voice you once heard, the path of truth, the God of your husband and your mother-in-law, the God of the Wilderness and the God of History—the One who is fierce, hot, inescapable as a *khamsin*, He who promises nothing and whose anger is terrifying, but He who also sheltered you under His wing the night Machlon died.

You don't know much about Him, you haven't been raised worshipping Him, but you *know* Him—and what you know is this: that at this very moment, as you stand at the crossroads, while Naomi and Orpah search the sky for signs, you know that this invisible God, so harsh, wailing, tender and true, has just blown into your heart and your soul—and the fire is overwhelming, the heat has rendered you powerless and mute for an instant and the light is blinding, blinding—but you know now what you were seeking all your life, all those restless years, running after your mother, testing boundaries,

breaking through barriers, penetrating other worlds, other ideas, falling in love with and marrying an Israelite, one of that strange, mysterious breed. It's here and it's in you and you feel suddenly as if you will never be alone again as long as you live. And you open your mouth to speak and the words you utter are limpid, pure, luminous: they illuminate the very page as they must have illuminated the desert sky that morning so long ago:

Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me.

You and Naomi say good-bye to Orpah and watch her return to Moab, her back receding in the distance until she disappears from view. When she is gone, you and Naomi take a deep breath and start walking into history.

GOD IS SINGING IN THE GRASS IN BETHLEHEM. THE TOWN THAT RUTH AND NAOMI enter is sensually charged with divine power. Everything is palpable and real, concrete and earthy. The women of Bethlehem kiss and hug...Boaz feeds Ruth, tells her to dip her food into vinegar...the sweet smell of the harvest...gathering the sheaves...physical work under the sun...the act of gleaning. Everything can be touched, breathed, felt.

This overpowering sensuality, this sheer delight in the universe that unfolds around us, culminates in the relationship between Ruth and Boaz. Here, in the rolling rhythms of the simple, transparent poetic words, we see love grow between them. What is lovely, so terribly poignant and breathtaking in the story is the fact that Boaz is a man who deserves Ruth. He is equally great of soul, equally selfless and compassionate, equally courageous. He can stand next to her and not be afraid, not have to hide from her strength.

All the passion and sensual joy in the harvest world and between Ruth and Boaz is embodied in the threshing floor scene. In the secret night of the soul, a man and woman, alone in the dark, stare at each other and confront their common destiny. The infinite power of the scene, its suggestive richness, lies in its acceptance of Ruth's and Boaz' erotic vulnerability to each other. It all comes down to this: Ruth is a woman. Boaz is a man. They are alone in the night. She has come to him, and he wants her.

There is erotic power in the threshing floor scene which Biblical commentators have gone to great pains to explain away or diffuse: the fact that Ruth uncovers Boaz' "legs"—sexually ambiguous in Hebrew terminology—or the fact that she does not leave him until the morning. But this Song of Songs-like loving awareness of each other signifies neither lewdness nor immorality—when did love between two adults become lewd and dirty in people's minds? It simply means that God is everywhere—in us, around us, in the love between a man and a woman. Human love is one expression, perhaps the greatest, most potent and most far-reaching, of the sacred in us.

Covenant-bonds exist not only between human beings and God, but between people. We are our sister's keeper: we need to care for each other, to go beyond the letter of the law and to embrace the spirit, to welcome the stranger, to love God and each other with every pore, every part of us. The mystical doctrine subtly communicated by the Book of Ruth is all the more powerful in that it is grounded in the everyday: God is in the sheaves of wheat Ruth gathers, in the setting sun over the fields, in Boaz covering Ruth at night, in the women of Bethlehem rejoicing over Ruth's baby's birth.

People are tender with one another in "Ruth." They bless each other and give to each other—like God. They don't wait for God to do things for them; they perform their own miracles. Boaz feeds Ruth who feeds Naomi; Boaz and Ruth together make a child that will fill Naomi's emptiness; the women of Bethlehem appreciate Ruth by comparing her worth to that of seven sons; Naomi blesses Boaz before knowing who he is, because he has shared his food with Ruth; Ruth *cleaves* to Naomi, a word that resonates with the cleaving of a human being to the Lord. From the story of Ruth, we learn that people possess the potential to live as "gods"—to be giving, selfless and true, while going about our daily lives. God is everpresent: in Ruth's every word, in Boaz' every act, in the blessed series of events that culminates in the promised end—a promised land for Ruth and a promised child for Naomi, who will, in a sense, redeem Israel.

Here is a world in which prayers are answered. It is as simple, as miraculous, as that. Naomi was empty; now she is full. Ruth was rootless, alone, widowed, childless, homeless; now she is loved, blessed and needed on all levels: she is a daughter to Naomi, a wife to Boaz, a mother to Obed, a Jew to God. The spirit of *tikkun*, restoration and completion, dominates the movement in Ruth's story: the scattered exiles return to Israel, the empty are made full, the hungry

are fed, the seekers discover what they are seeking, lost souls are redeemed, broken fragments are made whole, a complete and meaningful world. And Ruth? Our beautiful pilgrim at the crossroads, the woman for whom the sensual night of the soul is as sacred as the brilliant light of day, the wanderer of the soul and the spirit, Ruth has finally come home.



Ruth Knafo Setton's work has been published in *Lilith*, *Bridges*, *New Directions for Women*, and other journals and anthologies. She is currently working on her first novel, *Suleika*, about a Moroccan-Jewish woman.