



# Torah and Western Thought: Jewish and Western Texts in Conversation

SPRING-SUMMER 2022

## *Shavuot: Modern Lessons in Loving Kindness*

### True Friendship and the Book of Ruth

BY RABBI DR. STU HALPERN

*The following excerpt is from Rabbi Dr. Halpern's [article](#) which appeared in the NYJW Sabbath Week in May 2021.*

**“The thought of leaving my friends was decidedly the most painful thought with which I had to contend. The love of them was my tender point and shook my decision more than all things else.”**

So wrote Frederick Douglass in his autobiography, of his considerations before escaping the bondage of slavery. Being apart from friends can be heartbreakingly hard, even amidst the worst of circumstances.

While Douglass had to part with his friends to survive, in the book of Ruth, the opposite decision is made.

The story, read on Shavuot, begins with the widowed Israelite Naomi's farewell to her Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, also widows. Since family ties no longer bind them, Naomi doesn't expect the women to follow her home to her native Bethlehem.

“Go return, each to your mother's home,” Naomi instructs Orpah and Ruth. “May the Lord grant you rest, each in the house of a husband.”

Ruth makes the unexpected, even inauspicious, decision to accompany Naomi. By doing so, she offered an immortal lesson in the inexplicable nature of friendship.

The two women, one an elderly bereft widow and another an immigrant, also without a husband, didn't stand much of a chance in the economic, political and social Wild West of the Ancient Near East that was the period of Judges. Without the protection and sustenance provided by a caring spouse, the women wouldn't last long. Naomi, of course, knew this: Upon her return to Bethlehem, she instructs its inhabitants not to call her “Pleasant” (“Naomi” in Hebrew), but “Bitter.”

And yet Ruth stood by her decision.

Ruth's commitment to bind herself to Naomi is never fully explained. Her much-quoted pledge of allegiance does not articulate a reason for the unending devotion: “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.”

Even at the end of the book, the reason for that devotion is not articulated, but its fruits are shown. The women of Bethlehem tell a restored Naomi that Ruth, “who loves you, is better than seven sons.” Naomi embraces the child of Ruth and her cousin Boaz, whose line will eventually produce the Messiah. Friendship, the book of Ruth seems to be saying, need not be justified to bestow its salvific effects.

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The French philosopher and essayist Michel de Montaigne, reflecting on his friendship with Etienne de la Boétie, mused that, “If a man should importune me to give a reason why I loved him, I find it could no otherwise be expressed, than by making answer: because it was he, because it was I. There is, beyond all that I am able to say, I know not what inexplicable and fated power that brought on this union.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, too, considered true friendship to be inarticulable:

A friend, therefore, is a sort of paradox in nature. I who alone am, I who see nothing in nature whose existence I can affirm with equal evidence to my own, behold now the semblance of my being, in all its height, variety, and curiosity, reiterated in a foreign form; so that a friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature.

The contemporary public intellectual Nassim Nicholas Taleb, in his “The Bed of Procrustes,” puts it pithily: “If you find any reason why you and someone are friends, you are not friends.”

The coronavirus pandemic, preventing our usual interactions with companions and confidants, reminded us how crucial deep friendships are to our very survival. Our interdependence with friends, despite or perhaps because it is often not explainable, has become clearer than ever in the last two years.

It is no wonder, then, that the Talmud describes blessings that one should recite upon seeing a friend after an extended separation:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: One who sees his friend after thirty days have passed since last seeing him recites: Blessed... Who has given us life, sustained us and brought us to this time. One who sees his friend after twelve months recites: Blessed... Who revives the dead” (*Berakhot* 58b).



As Dr. Erica Brown has aptly noted, “True friendship is a work of art, a thing of holiness. Its absence creates a void. Its renewed presence is worthy of prayer.”

Most of us are familiar with “ruthless,” but not its opposite: ruth, “compassion for the misery of another,” as Merriam-Webster defines it. After all, it was Ruth who first taught us that deep human connection and compassion, despite its paradoxical, unexplainable character, can be the source of our individual and national redemption.

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# Agnon's Redemptive Ruth

BY SARAH RINDNER

*The following excerpt is from Ms. Rindner's chapter in Gleanings: Reflections on Ruth (Maggid Books).*

**While not the most dramatic of all the biblical stories,** the quietly moving Book of Ruth has had a subtle and diffuse influence on English and Hebrew literature. One novelist willing to explore that unique and irreducible quality of *hesed* that is at the heart of the Book of Ruth is the Israeli writer S. Y. Agnon. In his short novella, "In the Prime of Her Life," first published in 1923, Agnon touches on key themes of the Ruth story, particularly the concept of *yibum* and how radical *hesed* might play out in the context of a bereaved family.

"In the Prime of Her Life" is narrated by a young woman named Tirza whose own mother Leah died "in the prime of her life" (age 31) and who now lives with her businessman father. Tirza is consumed by thoughts of a sensitive poet and teacher named Akaviah Mazal, who once loved her mother and whom her mother loved in turn. Tirza's mother was barred from marrying Akaviah for economic reasons related to her poor health, and after her death Tirza finds a journal written by Akaviah that includes his delicate reflections on his affection for Leah.

Tirza thinks of Akaviah for years; she attends a school for teachers where he is employed even though she is ill-suited for the teaching profession, and finally courageously approaches him on her own one evening, in a clandestine fashion that also reminds us of Ruth approaching Boaz. Once there, she learns from Akaviah that he was born to a family of converts, once again bringing to mind Ruth as the prototypical convert.

While Agnon invokes the ingredients of the Ruth story, they do not map out on his characters in a straightforward fashion. While Tirza reminds us of Ruth in some ways, as with her clandestine visit to a much older man, Akaviah also is a Ruth- or perhaps Naomi-like figure in his outsider status among the Jewish community. Tirza longs for Akaviah and for the connection to her mother that he can provide. Akaviah will urge Tirza to pursue a man who is younger and more appropriate for her, but she refuses. Ultimately, the story suggests, in the spirit of *yibum*, that past wrongs can be redeemed, and a broken family can be mended, particularly through the unrelenting dedication of one young woman.

"In the Prime of Her Life" concludes with the idyllic though subtly discomfiting scene of Tirza married to Akaviah and pregnant with their first child. Akaviah had warned Tirza before their marriage that she is still young, and that he had "come to the age where all I desire is some peace and quiet"

(234), perhaps also recalling the multiple references to *menuha*, peaceful rest, in the Book of Ruth.

While this is not a literal *yibum* situation, it shares in the spirit of *yibum*, wherein someone who has lost his beloved (in this case Akaviah) marries her next of kin. It also evokes the *yibum*-esque scenario of Megillat Ruth, where Boaz marries Ruth as a kinsman of her deceased husband and father-in-law.

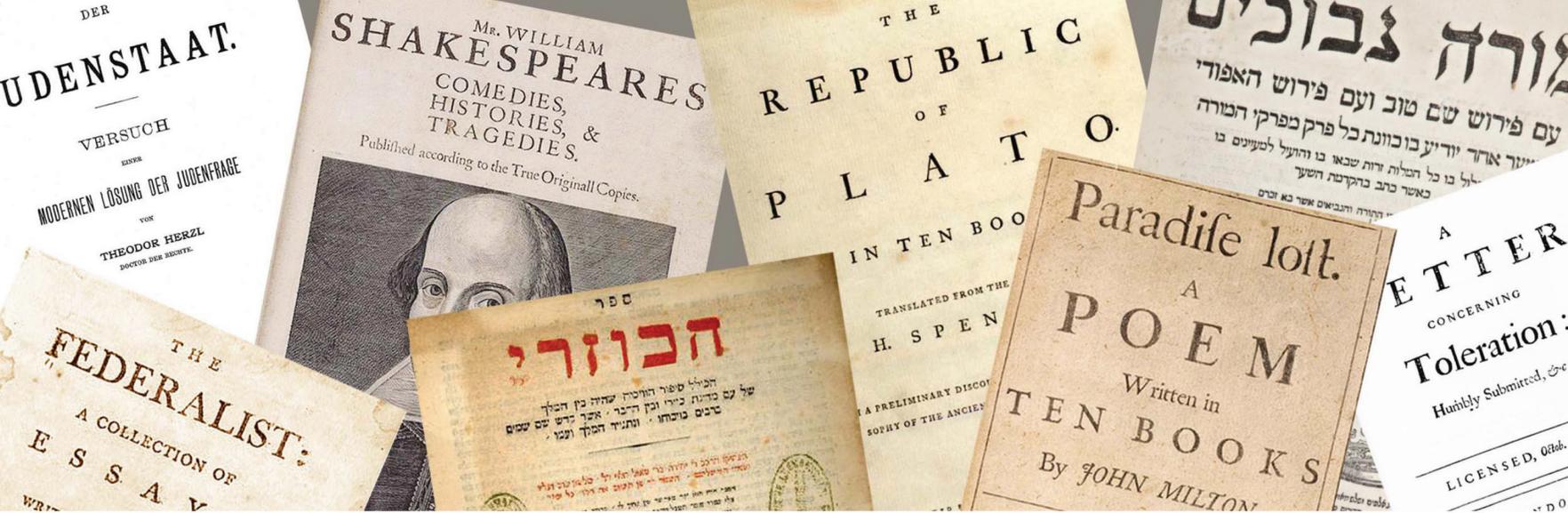
While Tirza's life with Akaviah is far from a perfect relationship, together they mend a rift that had been breached first with Leah's broken engagement to Akaviah and then with Leah's own death. Tirza's father and Akaviah should be at odds with one another, as one replaced the other with respect to Leah. Yet Tirza's marriage to Akaviah unifies the two men and thus closes a circle. Toward the end of the story Tirza gazes upon her husband and father and writes:

Now I glance at my father's face and now at my husband's. I behold the two men and long to cry, to cry in my mother's bosom. Has my husband's sullen mood brought this about, or does a spirit dwell in womankind? My father and my husband sit at the table, their faces shining upon me. By dint of their love and compassion, each resembles the other. Evil has seventy faces and love has but one face. (244)

This sentiment offers a creative iteration of the underlying spirit of *yibum*, through which one husband can virtually morph into another and in which *hesed* makes family restoration possible even after tragic loss. This is part of the triumph of Megillat Ruth—Ruth the Moabite, whose ancestor Lot was once banished from Abraham's tent, now returns to the Jewish people. The family line of Elimelech and Naomi, once threatened with dissolution, is also symbolically maintained through the union of Ruth and Boaz. Through fiction, Agnon brings the unlikely *hesed* of Ruth to life in a nuanced manner that suppresses none of the strangeness of the not-quite-*yibum* predicament depicted in both stories, which are each infused with a hint of the same eternal quality.

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