

Naomi / נְעֻמִי

Biblical Text

In the days when the chieftains ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah, with his wife and two sons, went to reside in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name was Naomi, and his two sons were named Mahlon and Chilion—Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. They came to the country of Moab and remained there. Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth, and they lived there about ten years. Then those two—Mahlon and Chilion—also died, so the woman was left without her two sons and without her husband. She started out with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for in the country of Moab she had heard that Adonai had taken note of God's people and given them food. Accompanied by her two daughters-in-law, she left the place where she had been living, and they set out on the road back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Turn back, each of you to her mother's house. May Adonai deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me! May Adonai grant that each of you find security in the house of a husband!" And she kissed them farewell. They broke into weeping and said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But Naomi replied, "Turn back, my daughters! Why should you go with me? Have I any more sons in my body 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 on their account prohibit yourselves from marriage? Oh no, my daughters! My lot is far more bitter than yours, for the hand of Adonai has struck out against me." They broke into weeping again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law farewell. But Ruth clung to her....

When [Naomi] saw how determined she was to go with her, she ceased to argue with her, and the two went on until they reached Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole city buzzed with excitement over them. The women said, "Can this be Naomi?" "Do not call me Naomi," she replied. "Call me Mara, for Shaddai has made my lot very bitter. I went away full, and Adonai has brought me back empty. How can you call me Naomi, when Adonai has dealt harshly with me, when Shaddai has brought misfortune upon me!" Thus, Naomi returned from the country of Moab; she returned with her daughter-in-law Ruth the Moabite. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

- Ruth 1:1-22

Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a man of substance, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "I would like to go to the fields and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone who may show me kindness." "Yes, daughter, go," she replied, he gleaned in the field until evening. ... When her mother-in-law saw what Ruth had gleaned...her mother-in-law asked her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be he who took such generous notice of you!" So Ruth told her mother-in-law whom she had worked with, saying, "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz." Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he of Adonai, who has not failed to show kindness to the living or to the dead! For," Naomi explained to her daughter-in-law, "the man is related to us, he is one of our redeeming kinsmen." Ruth the Moabite said, "He even told me, 'Stay close by my

workers until all my harvest is finished.” And Naomi answered her daughter-in-law Ruth, “It is best, daughter, that you go out with his girls, and not be annoyed in some other field.” So she stayed close to the maidservants of Boaz, and gleaned until the barley harvest and the wheat harvest were finished. Then she stayed at home with her mother-in-law.
- *Ruth 2: 1-2,17-23*

Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, “Daughter, I must seek a home for you, where you may be happy. Now there is our kinsman Boaz, whose girls you were close to. He will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor tonight. So bathe, anoint yourself, dress up, and 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. He will tell you what you are to do.” She replied, “I will do everything you tell me.”
- *Ruth 3:1-5*

[Boaz] said to the redeemer, “Naomi, now returned from the country of Moab, must sell the piece of land which belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. I thought I should disclose the matter to you and say: Acquire it in the presence of those seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you are willing to redeem it, redeem! But if you will not redeem, tell me, that I may know. For there is no one to redeem but you, and I come after you.” “I am willing to redeem it,” he replied. Boaz continued, “When you acquire the property from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabite, you must also acquire the wife of the deceased, so as to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate.”
- *Ruth 4:3-5*

And the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be Adonai, who has not withheld a redeemer from you today! May his name be perpetuated in Israel! He will renew your life and sustain your old age, for he is born of your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons.” Naomi took the child and held it to her bosom. She became its foster mother, and the women neighbors gave him a name, saying, “A son is born to Naomi!” They named him Obed, he was the father of Jesse, father of David.
- *Ruth 4:14-22*

Classical Midrash

“His wife’s name was Naomi” because her deeds were pleasant (*na'im*) and pleasing (*ne'imim*).
- *Ruth Rabbah 2:5*

And Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai would likewise say: Elimelech and his sons Mahlon and Chilion were prominent members of their generation and were leaders of their generation. And for what reason were they punished? They were punished because they left Eretz Yisrael to go outside of Eretz Yisrael, as it is stated concerning Naomi and Ruth: “And all the city was astir concerning them, and the women said: Is this Naomi?” (Ruth 1:19). The Gemara asks: What is the meaning of the phrase: “Is this Naomi?” How does this indicate that her husband and sons were punished for leaving Eretz Yisrael? Rabbi Yitzḥak says that the women said: Have you seen what befell Naomi, who left Eretz Yisrael for outside of Eretz Yisrael? Not only did she not escape tribulations there, but she lost her status entirely.
- *Talmud: Bava Batra 91a*

A SON IS BORN TO NAOMI ...Naomi gave birth to him? Didn't Ruth give birth to him? Rather, Ruth gave birth and Naomi raised him. Therefore, he was called by her name: "A son born to Naomi."
- *Talmud: Sanhedrin 19b*

"I WENT AWAY FULL, AND GOD HAS BROUGHT ME BACK EMPTY. (Ruth 1:21)". "I went away full with sons and full with daughters. Another explanation: "I went away full," that is, I was pregnant."
-*Ruth Rabbah 3:7*

Contemporary Midrash

When we retell the story using names translated into English, we get a vivid picture of its significance for Israel:

Once, many years ago, famine drove My-God-is-King and Pleasant-One from Bethlehem in the land of Judah to the land of Moab. There My-God-is-King died. His two sons Disease and Destruction married local women, but after a while, they too died, leaving only Pleasant-One and her two daughters-in-law. When they heard that there was food in Bethlehem, they set out to return. On the way, Pleasant-One released her two daughters-in-law and sent them back to begin new lives. Back-of-neck tearfully turned and left, but Dewy stayed with her mother-in-law, now no longer Pleasant-One but Bitter-Woman, for God had killed her men. In Bethlehem, they turned to their kinsman He-who-has-Might. First God, then Pleasant-Woman, then Dewy, and then He-who-has-Might planned to bring them together, and finally He-who-has-Might married Dewy and from this union came He-who-Serves, the grandfather of Beloved.

- *Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Reading the Women of the Bible p. 254*

Read this way, the story is an allegory for Israel's destiny, beginning with her bereavement and ending with her joy. Pleasant-Woman is Jerusalem/Judah, so often personified as a woman, the most lovely of women....the combined efforts of these gracious three (Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz) all of whom act with *hesed* toward one another, make possible the rebirth of the lineage. And so, "A child is born to Pleasant-Woman," from which came Beloved (David).

A MAN'S WORLD tells a woman's story. With consummate artistry, the book of Ruth presents the aged Naomi and the youthful Ruth as they struggle for survival in a patriarchal environment.¹ These women bear their own burdens. They know hardship, danger, insecurity, and death. No God promises them blessing; no man rushes to their rescue. They themselves risk bold decisions and shocking acts to work out their own salvation in the midst of the alien, the hostile, and the unknown.

As a whole, this comedy suggests a theological interpretation of feminism: women working out their own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in them. Naomi works as a bridge between tradition and innovation. Ruth and the females of Bethlehem work as paradigms for radicality. All together they are women in culture, women against culture, and women transforming culture. What they reflect, they challenge. And that challenge is a legacy of faith to this day for all who have ears to hear the stories of women in a man's world.

Phyllis Trible, Two Women in a Man's World: A Reading of the Book of Ruth, Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal

Naomi: "Call Me Bitter"

Ruth: 1:19-22

**The path grows stonier, the hills are steep
and the sheep and goats graze on the prickly brush.
On terraced plots cling olive trees, their leaves
sigh ashy melodies of my return.
I walked this path ten years ago, going up,
away from Bethlehem, whose walls now glisten
where the road dips and branches out, a maze
of what I've lost and what my God has gained.
Ten years ago, I had to leave behind
this starving puzzle of the ways of God.
I was young then. My husband, hungry for
a better life, trudged at my side, our sons
walked, dreaming of their suppers in Moab.
High noon. The sun is strong. It finds my face
although I want to hide how old I am,
how much I've lost. I'm not alone, there's Ruth,
but how can I without my husband, sons,
be coming home? The women peer out from
their market stalls, their courtyard gates,
at Ruth concealed beside me in her foreign veil,
and ask, "Naomi? Is that you?" I spit.
"Do not call me Naomi, pleasant name.
But call me bitter, Marah, for my God
dealt bitterly with me. He emptied me
of all my fullness. I have nothing now."**

Kathryn Hellerstein

The Book of Ruth and Naomi

By Marge Piercy (1972)

When you pick up the Tanakh and read
the Book of Ruth, it is a shock
how little it resembles memory.
It's concerned with inheritance,
lands, men's names, how women
must wiggle and wobble to live.

Yet women have kept it dear
for the beloved elder who
cherished Ruth, more friend than
daughter. Daughters leave. Ruth
brought even the baby she made
with Boaz home as a gift.
Where you go, I will go too,
your people shall be my people,
I will be a Jew for you,
for what is yours I will love

The Awakening (Erika Dreifus, 2016)

*Yes, daughter, go, said Naomi,
and so off Ruth went, out from Bethlehem,
to the fields of barley,
the fields of Boaz.
All that long day Naomi waited,
weak with hunger
and worry.
Had she been younger
or stronger,
she, too, might have gone—
to glean amidst the grain
for bits of kindness.
But Naomi was not young;
she was not strong;
so in Bethlehem she stayed
and slept,
dreaming, sometimes,
of the younger woman,
hidden among the sheaves,
perhaps never to emerge
or return.
With every dream
panic pulsed through Naomi's blood
until she wakened to see before her
Ruth, and food, and
the future.*

as I love you, oh Naomi
my mother, my sister, my heart.

Show me a woman who does not dream
a double, heart's twin, a sister
of the mind in whose ear she can whisper,
whose hair she can braid as her life
twists its pleasure and pain and shame.
Show me a woman who does not hide
in the locket of bone that deep
eye beam of fiercely gentle love
she had once from mother, daughter,
sister; once like a warm moon
that radiance aligned the tides
of her blood into potent order.

At the season of first fruits, we recall
two travelers, co-conspirators, scavengers
making do with leftovers and mill ends,
whose friendship was stronger than fear,
stronger than hunger, who walked together,
the road of shards, hands joined.

