The Trauma of Otherness and Hunger: Ruth and Lot’s Daughters

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Abstract

In this article, the author traces the narrative dynamic of the book of Ruth and demonstrates how it effectively delivers an important moral lesson about the rewards of inclusion and belonging, setting an important cultural model of adoption and appropriation of otherness. In this connection, the evolution and expression of trauma and survival is considered through total destruction, hunger, feeding and reproduction spanning from the narrative of Lot in Genesis to the book of Ruth.

In stories of famine and hunger, when feeding finally occurs, the readers are also fed. Hunger and satiation are familiar sensations; readers identify with them, consuming and being consumed, feeding and being fed throughout the process of reading. Ideologically, such stories also serve existential allegories or didactic models. My reading of hunger and satiation in the book of Ruth exposes the ideological operation of gendered (or even sexualized) foreignness and its treatment within the culture of the Bible. I approach the story as a narrative of trauma and survival in their various symbolic and allegorical manifestations, and in the process I unfold an already unfolded script of prophecy that transforms the breadless into the satiated, the homeless into natives, and lonely foreigners into cultural protagonists.

The book of Ruth tells a story of a stranger’s journey from her birthplace – the land of Moab – to her new homeland in Bethlehem (Bet Lechem). The story is also about Ruth’s transformation from a stranger, a total other, into a native. Before I proceed to my counter-mainstream reading of the story of Ruth, a short synopsis of it, as told in the Hebrew Bible might be helpful.

The story moves between two geographical places: Moab, a nation that has been cursed by God beyond ten generations, and Bethlehem in Judea, where there is famine. Naomi, her husband, Elimelekh and their two sons – Machlon and Kilyon – decide to migrate to Moab in search of food. They settle there for ten years, where the sons marry Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. The three men subsequently die, and upon hearing that there is no longer famine in Judea, Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, a journey of around fifty miles to the northwest. On route, Orpah, turns back, but Ruth continues on with Naomi. Once in Bethlehem, the hungry Ruth gleans barley from the fields of Boaz, who is Naomi’s relative. Boaz and Ruth meet, and he assumes responsibility for her well being. Naomi instructs Ruth to approach him sexually, she does and they subsequently marry. Ruth becomes pregnant and gives birth to Obed, the forefather of King David.

Ruth is more than just a woman and a widow; one could label her a pariah. As a Moabite, she belongs to one of the most symbolically “polluted” of biblical peoples. She is constructed as a foreigner in the book of Ruth, a status that puts her outside of the purview of the legal system, where she has no national and political rights (Kristeva 1993: 103). Of course, as an outsider, she is not obliged to obey the law and is free to leave, free to return to Moab. But she comes instead with Naomi to Bethlehem. In the Bible and in the mainstream interpretation of the story, Ruth is rewarded for her loyalty to Naomi; not only is she redeemed by Boaz, but she is also incorporated into Judean culture and ultimately becomes the ancestor of King David.
and of the future messiah. In this way Ruth enters the comunitas of the Hebrew people and, from her previously cursed cultural location, is assimilated into the heart of the sacred canon.

In this article, I trace the narrative dynamic of the book of Ruth and demonstrate how it effectively delivers an important moral lesson about the rewards of inclusion and belonging, setting an important cultural model of adoption and appropriation of otherness. In this connection, I consider the evolution and expression of trauma and survival through total destruction, hunger, feeding and reproduction spanning from the narrative of Lot in Genesis to the book of Ruth.  

Hunger as a Cultural Limit

The book of Ruth reflects a historically sedimented understanding of history and culture through reading and rereading. The dating of the book of Ruth has been the subject of ongoing controversy, the gist of which is whether the book is pre- or post- exilic. Suffice it to say here that the book of Ruth (like the book of Job) is a work of historicized fiction that was most likely written during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, between 500 and 350 BCE, and set in the historical period of the Judges, some 250-450 years earlier. Several compelling reasons have been advanced for a post-exilic dating of Ruth. These include: the vocabulary and style of the narrative; the idyllic representation of the genealogy of David; and evidence of legal customs, such as the levirate marriage, gleaning in the fields, and the redemption of the land. Moreover, a post-exilic dating supports the view that the original and explicit purpose of the book was to make a case against the ban on intermarriage imposed by Ezra and Nehemaya. As an anti-miscegenist response to specific socio-political realities, the book is a fascinating document that makes apparent the internal use of history and historical narrative for political and ideological purposes.

What mobilizes the plot and guides the depiction of the characters and their resolutions in the book of Ruth is the extreme pathological trauma which itself covers or reenacts an older trauma reactivated by the experience of hunger and famine. The radical act of inclusion and incorporation that the book teaches becomes a testimony of survival against the reality of total annihilation. What makes this book so different from other books is that it presents a narrative model in which hunger (be it physical, sexual, metaphysical or epistemological) brings a woman “home,” turning the struggle of her survival into her arrival cum inclusion. As such, the book engages several paradigms and symbolic systems, such as geography (territory), Jewish genealogy (kinship), and naming (native language), in an attempt to transform the foreigner and/or the exiled into an indigenous local who will share the promise of the covenant with God. Ruth’s arrival in Judea builds on the connections with the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and to some extent, Lot, who is discussed further on.

In the Bible, so goes the rabbinical retelling, “Ten years of famine came to the world… and one was in the days when the Judges ruled…” in the time of Naomi and Elimelekh (Bereshit Rabba 25:3, Ruth Rabba 1:4; also in Blumental 1947: 8). Hunger for food is often tied (by the rabbis) to hunger for the Torah. The Hebrew term ra’av means “famine,” “scarcity,” and “hunger,” and it always signals a condition that moves from land to mouth, and from human to God. Ra’av ties together different institutions with different moral economies. Material scarcity was perceived in moral terms, Ra’av, which is also associated with a place believed to be ruled by the angel of death and its laws, further motivated Israelites to escape in search of food and refuge from evil.
Migration in the context of hunger is often associated with theological wrongdoing, whereas permanent dwelling is an indicator of a harmonious, balanced relationship with God. Ra‘av thus, raises questions about both its own metaphorical and historical status, and the elaborate discursive mechanisms that deploy hunger in the internalized Israelite, Jewish, and later, Israeli, imagination. More precisely, it is important to ask, how are hunger and its multilayered meanings and immense magnitude represented historically and at present? Can the description of the dry and barren land elicit the entirety of the symbolic threat on survival? Can the empty granary do that? What about the empty stomach or the dry breast of the mother? Can hunger be quantified? If so, how? By the number of loaves of bread missing? The rainless days? Or perhaps, as I touch upon later, one should go back to Pharaoh’s dream of his seven “emaciated and lean fleshed cows” or seven ears of wheat (Genesis 41: 2-8)?

These questions are crucial in the attempt to explore the textual representation of hunger. Hunger as trauma is an all-consuming experience. It is an overwhelming crisis that tightens the connections of the human body to nature, the land to moral commitment, and local traditions to a wider geography. Hunger compels one to challenge old attachments and relationships as it sets limits on one’s knowledge and understanding of reality and life. To be traumatized is to be possessed by the image of an event, such as hunger (Caruth 1995: 4-5). Contextualizing hunger, or any type of trauma for that matter, is crucial, as it helps one, in the words of Felman and Laub in their work on Holocaust testimony, “gain insight into the significance and impact of the context on the text” (Felman & Laub 1992: xv). The matter of contextualizing trauma in a wider cultural perspective cannot be emphasized enough for, as they explain, “the empirical context needs not just to be known, but to be read: to be read in conjunction with, and as part of, the reading of the text” (Felman & Laub 1992: xv). Their point is pushed further by Cathy Caruth, in her work on trauma and memory; namely, that the “truth” of a traumatic event like hunger, forms the center of its (hunger’s) pathology. In other words, at the core of this pathology is truth, as it was remembered and not as it was experienced. Caruth’s emphasis here is on the persistent reoccurrence of traumatic memory in its literal manifestation (Caruth 1995:4-5).

Mapping Geographies and Genealogies

In the book of Ruth, the trauma of hunger animates two important maps: a geographical map and a genealogical map of biblical figures and ancestors. The geographical map traces their journey to Moab, and then, ten years later, back to Bethlehem. The book highlights their movement out of Judea and across national and ethnic boundaries. Dynamic geography and genealogy are thus intertwined, rendering the text dialogical while historically situating the narrative.

The genealogical map illustrates the connections among the patriarchal lineages of the tribe of Yehudah, the family of Elimelekh, the people of Moab, and five generations later, King David. Women too are incorporated into these lineages. The genealogical ties shared by women and men provide an Ür-template that links past, present and future generations. In fact, one can count at least ten generations from Boaz back to Yehuda and Peretz (in Genesis), and from Ruth back to Lot. One can also count forwards to David, and even to Goliath in the book of Kings, who, according to the Rabbis, was the descendent of Orpah. The genealogical map is part of the larger project originating in Genesis, to write *Sefer Toldot Ha-‘Adam*, The book of generations of man (Genesis 5:1), namely the construction of the house of Israel.
Moving across geographical or familial boundaries is often an act of choice that underscores one’s freedom to invent new alternatives. However, movement impelled by hunger is dictated by urgency. Migration for the sake of survival is motivated by the quest for food, land, or -- as in the case of Ruth -- a husband. It often entails the crossing of borders, an intensified confrontation with ambivalence, and the reconciliation of identities. More significantly, hunger forces possible transgressions of taboos such as forbidden foods and proscribed marriage partners. As a symptom, hunger also marks the boundaries of the body, disrupting categories of identity, knowledge and order. The question, then, is how does the trauma of hunger become transformed into a narrative of belonging and nativity?

In her book, The Curse of Cain, Regina Schwartz approaches the subject of difference in biblical and sacred narratives by focusing on the construction of the Other, arguing that, “[a]cts of identity formation are themselves acts of violence” (Schwartz 1997: 5). Here violence involves not only violent acts like war or rape but the very conceptualization and articulation of the Other. Markers of difference are hierarchical. Within the contemporary Israeli mindset of “us” and “them,” Moab of ancient Judaism can hardly be understood as a tragedy of representation and violence. From its early conception, and throughout the Bible, the nation of Moab is positioned along with the Amalekites and Philistines as the ultimate absolute enemies. Located along the northeastern part of the Dead Sea, in what later became the Moabite Desert, Moab entered into the Israelites’ discourse of hunger as they wandered through the desert. There, God imposed the Moabites’ exclusionary status beyond ten generations because “they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 23:4-7). This tense encounter around food and feeding positioned Moab as the ultimate other in the collective memory of Israel. The book of Ruth, in part, struggles with the undiminished potency of this memory, locating Ruth within national boundaries while at the same time expanding the limits of tolerance of her otherness.

Moab is at the most extreme end of the Israeli exclusionary system, and represents a “category of ‘unbelonging’” (Rogoff 2000:5). To the extent that Israeli culture has developed a discourse of belonging and a constitution based on shared terms of inclusion – whether institutional, disciplinary, national, regional, cultural, sexual or racial -- it has also developed a discourse of unbelonging. No mere articulation of exclusion, this is a discourse involving an “active form of ‘unbelonging’ against which the anxiety-laden work of collectivities and mutualities and shared values and histories and rights” defines difference and other epistemological constructs (Rogoff 2000: 5). Systems of meaning that are disrupted as difference and otherness introduce a new ontology (Kristeva 1995: 119). Foreignness challenges tolerance and defines the parameters of inclusion and exclusion; it becomes the border of culture, its limits and its symptoms.

**Full Satiation: The Respond to Historical Hunger**

One of the lessons in the book of Ruth is that ultimately the cursed nation of Moab cannot provide a solution to hunger. The nation of Moab provides a pyrrhic victory over hunger: they temporarily win the battle of starvation, in the end lose the war of future survival. On the level of ideology this saga is portrayed as a locked, futile cause, one that necessitates a major shift in conscience and consciousness. Geography is critical here; the bountiful fields of Boaz in Bethlehem provide the most fulfilling relief from hunger. Before the hungry, breadless Ruth in the field of Boaz is identified as Ruth, she is called “the young Moabite woman (na’ara).”
exchange between Boaz and Ruth is revealing: not only does he immediately assume the role of her protector, but he blesses her in God’s name, thereby confirming another level of her inclusion:

\[ yeshalem Jehovah pa’alekh, u-tehi maskurtech shlemah me-’im Jehovah elohay Yisrael… \]

(May perfect recompense be made to you by Yahweh, the God of Israel, to whom you have come, to find shelter beneath his wings) (Ruth 2:12).

Boaz then rewards Ruth with roasted grains, an act, which, as I will show, not only responds to her historical and traumatic hunger, but also marks a crucial shift in the story of her emerging subjectivity and nativeness. A demonstration how this shift occurs linguistically follows.

Boaz uses three words in his blessing – yeshalem, maskurtekh and shlemah – all of which signify a full reward, payment or compensation. The root shalem signifies perfect, complete, and whole; in its pi’el verbal form, it means to pay back, to compensate, and to remunerate. Boaz’s blessing, therefore, triply emphasizes Ruth’s worthiness for her reward. The triplicate structure of his utterance will soon be repeated in another configuration. Ruth, sitting “beside the harvesters,” eats Boaz’ gift of roasted grains, as recounted in Chapter two of the story:

\[ va-to’khal, va-tisba’ va-totar\]

(And she ate, and she had her fill, and she had leftovers) (Ruth 2:14).

In Hebrew, these three consecutive verbs impart a picture of incredible existential balance. Symbolically, Ruth’s new experience of satiation sets a limit on the all-consuming trauma of historical hunger. Recognizing the singularly potent economy of this passage, the Rabbis elaborated on the meaning of Boaz’ gift of grains or bread, referring to it as lechem malkhut, or the bread of kingship, the emblem of the future Davidic kingdom. In another teleological commentary, these three consecutive verbs are deployed as grandiose models of and for Jewish history: a) va-to’khal, she ate the bread of the kingdom that would emerge from her in the days of David; b) va-tisba’, she had her fill in the days of Solomon; and c) va-totar, she had leftovers in the days of Hezekeyah. Another commentary posits an even more monumental scale of Jewish time that occurs first in the days of this world, then in the days of the Messiah, and finally, in the days of the world to come (Ruth Rabba 2:14).

However perceptive the Rabbis were in recognizing the critical significance of Ruth’s satiation, they nevertheless overlooked its connection to her history of hunger, which I find crucial to understanding the shift in her status and subjectivity, from breadless to well fed, and from marginal other to an insider. According to the Midrash, “Boaz gave her just a ‘pinch of parched [roasted] grain between his two fingers’, and Ruth’s stomach was blessed, for she was satisfied by such a small morsel and even had some left over” (Zlotowitz 1994: 99). The Rabbis concluded that, “it seems like there was a blessing in the intestines [gut] of that virtuous woman” (Ruth Rabba 2:14, also Fogel et al. 1995: 30). Her portrayal as a completely satisfied woman corresponds with another rabbinical interpretation of the name Ruth, as the “saturated” or “satiated one” (Berakhot 7b; also Kristeva 1991: 71). Against a backdrop of the traumatic collapse of boundaries imposed by widowhood and hunger, the narrative aims to restore the perfect moment: the totality encapsulated by shlemah and the triplicate repetition of her reward.
and subsequent satiation. It is precisely the overdetermined nature of her compensation that underscores the extent of her symbolic hunger and desire for inclusion.

Boaz’ gift of roasted grains enables Ruth to return to her mother-in-law, Naomi, not as the impoverished gleaner who shares her grains, but as a satiated provider of bread. From a psychological perspective, it can be argued that Ruth is thereby transformed into a “mother” who can begin to heal the symbolic wound in Naomi’s family, but especially in Moab. The verb, “eating her fill,” va-tisba’, introduces the possibility of actually healing or closing this wound, which in turn, allows for the opening of new discursive spaces where the experiences of the foreigner (Ruth) in a new geography and genealogical history can be inscribed. This transition from closing to opening signifies Ruth’s moment of “departure” (Caruth 1995: 10-11), her new modality of identification with Boaz, and his grains, and Naomi. At the same time, the balance (or leftovers) of her reward of grain becomes a gift that she takes to Naomi, thereby resolving allegorically, the harsh judgment inflicted upon Moab and introducing the possibility of inter-cultural hospitality.

Thus far, I have been discussing the symbolic wound and the traumatic historical hunger in the book of Ruth. I shall now move from text to context, and tie the book of Ruth to the story of Lot in Genesis, which I believe should be read as a preface to Ruth. Several scholars have alluded to the internal connection between the story of Lot and the book of Ruth, focusing primarily on the veiled (hetero)sexual act of procreation. My contribution will be to frame both stories within a context of psychological ethnic trauma of total annihilation and its subsequent ramifications.

Surviving Total Annihilation

The story of Lot functions as a preface to the book of Ruth not simply because Ruth is a descendent of the incestuous Moabiters -- a fact that defines her otherness -- but because she embodies her people’s collective memory. The origin of Moab is based on the assumption of the total destruction of the world. Unfolding in a mountain cave of Zo‘ar, the story of Lot also helps us fathom the depth of the pathology that motivates Naomi and her family to locate from one place to another. It provides the etiological framework that informs Moabitic and Amonite identity. These nations emerged from an ultimate threat to humankind which was fully internalized by Lot’s daughters; namely, the fear of apocalyptic kilayon, or annihilation. This story can be understood as a radical cosmogony in which Lot and his family are rescued from the city of Sodom. God has resolved to destroy Sodom and its sinning inhabitants and instructs Lot to flee. In the sequence that follows the city’s destruction, Lot’s daughters ply him with drink and, once he is fast asleep, proceed to have sex with him; although unconscious, Lot is nevertheless implicated in this incestuous act of impregnation.

Indirectly, the story of Lot addresses the subject of collective punishment by articulating the moral justification for God’s vindictive decision. Earlier, in Genesis 18, Abraham challenges the totality of God’s collective punishment against all the peoples of Sodom and Gomorrah. Genesis 18 introduces the grand-scale, all-encompassing plan of the destruction through Abraham’s notorious dispute with God. If God is proving that as part of the covenant, he does not “cover anything from Abraham,” (Genesis 18: 17) then the divine’s motives for moral punishment are transparent, accessible and comprehensible to humans. For Abraham they are. He challenges God’s totalizing decree and uncompromising action by arguing that it is possible that there are some righteous (tsadikim) within the sinning people of Sodom. Lot, Abraham’s
nephew, is singled out, emerging as the only possible survivor of the approaching destruction. As his name, from malat (escape), indicates, Lot is God’s only concession to Abraham.

The Bible gives a relatively detailed description of the physical, as well as psychological difficulty of letting go of the past. Lot’s departure from the destroyed city was exceptionally difficult. He lingers (va-yitmahmehah), and his guests, the angels, themselves have to urge him to leave – they literally take Lot’s hand, and the hands of his wife and daughters, leading them out of the city and toward the mountain. But afraid it will be too far of a journey, Lot goes only as far as the nearby town of Zo’ar. He expresses his fear, a fear that either reflects his shrinking faith in God or causes him to doubt God’s word.

And Lot said unto them: ‘Oh, not so, my lord; behold now, thy servant hath found grace in thy sight, and thou hast magnified thy mercy, which thou hast shown unto me in saving my life; and I cannot escape to the mountain, lest the evil overtake me, and I die. Behold now, this city is near to flee unto, and it is a little one; oh, let me escape thither--is it not a little one? --and my soul shall live.’ (Genesis 19: 18-20).

The family’s narrow escape culminates with the transformation of Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt. Now, the overwhelming drama of destruction and escape -- enhanced by ear-shattering blasts and the smell of burning sulfur -- is amplified by the prohibition on looking back, not only at the city, but also at the wife/mother left behind. Lot is frightened and slow to move. Once in Zo’ar, the fearful Lot presumes that even Zo’ar is dangerous, and so he makes his way to the mountains and finds refuge in a cave. “And Lot went up out of Zo’ar, and dwelt in the mountain, and his two daughters with him; for he feared to dwell in Zo’ar; and he dwelt in a cave, he and his two daughters” (Genesis 19: 30, emphasis is mine). Does his hesitation and contradictions reveal just lack of trust in God, or, is it typical of human behavior in moments of extreme terror? Throughout this panicky episode, the destructive God appears all fire and brimstones overthrowing “those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground” (Genesis 19: 25).

In this very moment of Lot’s indecision, his daughters emerge as the agents of history, and metamorphose from daughters into mothers. This moment marks a pivotal transformation of the two women. Earlier, while residing in Sodom, Lot had offered his daughters to the rowdy men milling outside his door -- “both old and young all the people from every quarter” (Genesis 19: 4) -- in exchange for the male angels whom they were eager to sodomize. With the application of what Derrida calls, “Sodomy and sexual difference,” Lot, himself a foreigner (ger), employs ‘the law of hospitality,” which occasions a tense negotiation based on a hierarchy of guests and hostages (Derrida 2000: 151-152). By offering his two virgin daughters, in part to prevent the commission of homosexual acts, Lot sets into motion the process culminating in the total collapse of his parental role and agency. Moreover, the departure of Lot and his daughters from the city precipitates a crisis during which the mother is eliminated, figuratively shifting the subject of survival from the individual or familial realm to the realm of humankind. This shift in turn, forces another crisis: that of incest between Lot and his daughters. Rationalizing that, “[o]ur father is old, and there is not a man on the earth to come in unto us after the manner of all the earth,” (Genesis 19: 31) the daughters use Lot as a means to inseminate themselves on successive nights.

The daughters interpret their reality according to the psychological impact and magnitude of their trauma. They perceive the destruction as far more extensive in scope than just the city.
Even the rabbis were sympathetic to their sex act, decreeing that the daughters did not know that only Sodom was destroyed and that, therefore, they did not sin (Psikta Rabbati ['Ish Shalom] 42: 5, in Lubin 2003: 309). Their incestuous act was not motivated by libidinal desire but by an altruistic urge to rescue humankind. Nevertheless, I would argue that incest, as a form of violence, is as much a crisis in itself as it is a remedy for their perceived crisis. 

(I am using “crisis” in the sense employed by Caruth, following Freud, to mean the inherent void of knowledge, and the collapse of understanding [Caruth 1995].) Their reproductive albeit incestuous act attests to the daughters’ anxiety of the trauma and experience of total destruction, including the disappearance of both their mother and all males on the planet. They employ a deductive interpretation of their history. The cave in which they find refuge and where they commit their incestuous act, symbolizes, in Freudian terms, female genitalia; it is a compromised setting for fear and hope. The mountain cave is isolated enough to give rise to the daughters’ sense of total annihilation which justifies their desperate act of survival. Lot goes on to become another patriarchal figure in Genesis; but, unlike his “perfect” uncle, Abraham, he is positioned outside of the covenant and becomes the father of Moab.

Reading the story of Lot helps us realize that the solution to a given crisis generates another crisis in its wake. Resolutions are preceded and succeeded by resolutions. Felman and Laub have argued that the representation of trauma is problematic because it is unrepresentable. However, I argue that one of the problems associated with trauma is that it is often veiled, unrecognized as such, especially if it is an other’s trauma, and therefore a crisis never fully acknowledged in the first place. The actions of Biblical subjects in a state of crisis, therefore, are constrained; they are given little legitimacy to reveal a wider range of human behaviors and are instead represented as encoded fragments. Rather than being perceived of as a symptom of pathology, a given crisis becomes the very essence or main aspect of representation. If such a crisis is the founding moment of certain realities – an ordeal, a test, a proof, a lesson -- it is soon identified as the main aspect of identity.

Even if Lot and his daughters successfully escape to Zo’ar, the psychological impact of the trauma of experiencing the disintegration of the world as they know it obliterates whatever sense they may have entertained about the future. With the disappearance of the mother (Lot’s wife) from the historical record of Moab, and within the context of their “crisis consciousness,” the daughters’ economic imperative is to “preserve the seed (zera’)” of the father (Genesis 19: 33, 35), for biological father is perceived by them as the only living provider of semen. Anticipating total destruction, they must, as survivors, “document” with their bodies the absence of their mother and the erasure of their past. Not only do they embody God’s punishment of Sodom, the daughters serve as living testimony of the historical trauma of that sinful society. Moreover, their embodied testimony legitimizes Lot as the father of a nation -- despite the incestuous nature of his paternity -- in Genesis’ overall scheme of nations and ethnicities emerging out of individuals and their kinship relations. But if the Bible accentuates the narrative’s terms of survival as the basis for Lot’s moral and ethical setback – blurring the distinction between the crisis itself and its resolution -- it also legitimizes his incestuous act. Also made explicitly clear is that Lot’s indecisiveness when faced with a crisis allowing few compromises and no ambiguities, situates him as among the “unchosen.” Thus, in a narrative about “the chosen people,” Lot is greatly reduced in stature.

The story of Lot brackets patriarchy and emphasizes women’s traumatic subjectivity. Hunger, per se, is not explicitly the central issue. Rather, it is a sense of scarcity (and scarcity of semen) that dominates the gist of the narrative, which is about the flight toward safety and
survival. To a large extent, the story of Lot presupposes Ruth’s inability to refuse the power of ideological determination and its totalizing authority; her story too is introduced within the uncompromising threat of complete annihilation. What is shared between these two biblical narratives is not only the sexual act and the Moabite origin of the protagonists (as others have claimed), but more importantly they also the underlying etiological pattern of identity formation. Moab emerges from within the total ruinations of humankind, and ten generations later, now represented by Ruth, is still a land facing dire threats to life and reproduction.

From the Burden of Survival to the Freedom of Arrival

The total annihilation that underscores the story of Lot intertextually foregrounds the Book of Ruth. This relationship plays out through the names of the male protagonists, Machalon and Kilayon which provides discursive narratives. The name “Kilayon,” derives from the root kalah, “to annihilate, or to consume,” weaves the inherent totality of the historical annihilation of Moab and the doomed destiny of Ruth’s husband. As early as the first verses of the book of Ruth (Ruth 1:2), readers are introduced to Machalon and Kilayon, Naomi’s sons, whose very names refer to their short life spans (see also Bal 1988). The name “Machlon” derives from either or both, chalah, sick, or machah, to wipe away, or wash clean. From Ruth and Naomi’s perspectives, this totality is the sum of their own dialectical experience of death, destruction and hunger, and life, restoration and satiation: for Ruth, wheat and love encapsulate the entirety of her sensual and intellectual experience, culminating in her magical satiation (va-tisba’) and in her motherhood; for Naomi, it is embodied knowledge of the extremes of life and death and the possibility of change that she sees in them.16

If one reads carefully the words of Naomi while on the road back to Bethlehem, one can fathom Naomi’s unequivocal certainty that change—from hunger to satiation, from empty to full, from barren to fertile—is not only impossible but beyond comprehension. As Naomi puts it, even if it were possible for her to conceive a son, she could never conceive a husband either for Ruth or Orpah. Naomi does not mince any words in telling Ruth that in returning to Bethlehem together, their shared genealogical destiny is sealed. In other words, Naomi, knowing the extent of Ruth’s historical, pathological hunger and genealogical trauma, frames the conditions of Ruth’s belonging in stark, realistic terms. In admonishing Ruth and Orpah to return to their people, Naomi further acknowledges their foreignness, and in articulating her concern for them, she marks their ethnic difference as a critical factor defining their problematic chances of belonging.

In the same way, Ruth’s speech act – her response to Naomi’s insistence that she return to Moab, her home -- must be heard from within the particular context of her peoples’ crisis, trauma and survival. As a testimony of her history, it must be heard with a sensitized acuity to a discourse that is unable to be represented, yet, nevertheless is written (Caruth 1995:10). Personal narratives, such as the following exchange between Naomi and Ruth, compel the reader to engage with and to participate in the unfolding events, and to consider the possibility that their words, perceived as a testimony, can facilitate an understanding of trauma, its impact and the human responses to it. The profound and prophetic force of Ruth’s words reverberates with the crisis of hunger and famine, the experience of death, the collapse of identity (both Moabite and Judean), and the total threat to history itself.
8 And Naomi said unto her two daughters-in-law: 'Go (shovnah) return each of you to her mother's house; God deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me.

9 God grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband.' Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept.

10 And they said unto her: 'Surely, we will return with you to your people.'

11 And Naomi said: 'Return (shovnah) my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there yet any more sons in my womb, that they may be your husband?'

12 Return (Shovnah) my daughters; go your way; for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say: I have hope, should I even have an husband to-night, and also bear sons;

13 would you wait for them until they were grown? Would you, then, refrain, from marrying? No, my daughters; it has been far more bitter for it for your sakes, for the hand of God has turned against me.'

14 And they lifted up their voice, and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law; but Ruth clung (davkah) to her.

15 And she said: 'Behold, your sister-in-law is gone back to her people, and to her god; return after your sister-in-law.'

16 And Ruth said: 'Do not entreat me to leave you, and to return from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God;

17 where you die, will I die, and there will I be buried; God will do so to me, and thus shall he add, for only death will tear us apart.'

18 And when she [Naomi] saw that she [Ruth] was absolutely determined to go with her, she stopped talking to her (my italics).

Orpah returns to Moab. Ruth insists on remaining with Naomi; and it is in this singular moment that Ruth resolutely (re)asserts her assimilatory belonging in a totality that crosses national, religious, and territorial boundaries. Her invocation of God seals her speech act, transforming her words into a contract, an unbreakable vow of her identification with Naomi and of her new identity conceived within her commitment to change. Ruth’s contract of identity becomes her claim of inclusion, a virtual passport into the affective core of a culture from which she would kept at bay. She eventually becomes the mother of David and the ancestor of the Messiah.

**Conclusion: The Emplotment of Hunger**

Within the unique ideological space of the Bible, the moral lesson works to resolve the predicament of otherness of narratives (including the book of Ruth), and their subjects (Ruth and her offspring) through the literal and symbolic treatment of hunger and feeding.

The book of Ruth proceeds from actual acts of feeding to a didactic story about feeding hunger for the experience of nativeness. In this way, the phenomenon of hunger expands its own boundaries from the personal body to encompass the textual one. Rather than simply motivating the narrative plot, the trope of the ever-hungry mouth provides a historically grounded framework that continuously informs the ontological limits and their construction. The degree to
which Ruth adamantly insists on being included geographically, territorially, religiously and nationally, is directly proportionate to her reward of nativeness: she not only gives birth to Obed, but most significantly, she is the foremother of David and the Messiah. Her story of return is a story of redemption, a form of arrival.

The density of the entire narrative, no different from the totality of one grain or one seed, motivates poetic solutions to crises in the same way that Bethlehem, literally, the House of Bread, transforms a literal granary into an ideological metaphor of the loving or benevolent body and its reproduction. More in the book of Ruth than elsewhere in the Bible, a grain of wheat is a seed of prophecy in the stories told of land and nation. After all, as the women of Judea remind Naomi, Ruth is “better than seven sons” (Ruth 4: 16).

The lesson that the stories of Ruth and Lot’s daughters provide is that the variety of resources available to the women have been used to set the boundaries of national identity, wherein meaning is inscribed in each grain of barley, and in each (male) seed, soliciting and securing their loyalty and commitment. A long, continuous, ideological lineage describes the existential contours of peoplehood, and the process of identification with the bounded nation and its imagined community.

The response to total hunger and historical hunger cannot be another hunger but a full satiation. Inclusion and full hospitality are occasioned by the ability to feel fully satisfied, to get rid of the traumatic, historical hunger, be it physical, psychological, or metaphysical. By getting rid of the trauma.

References

The Trauma of Otherness and Hunger: Ruth and Lot’s Daughters


Notes:

Only when I concluded my analysis of the book of Ruth was I aware of Michal Ben Naftali’s books, *Khronikah shel Predah (A Chronicle of Separation – On Deconstruction’s Disillusioned Love)* (2000), and *Sefer, Yaldut (Childhood, a book)* (2006). While we both discuss the narrative within the context of hunger and trauma, our methodologies, approaches and conclusions differ (See Ben-Naftali 2000 and 2006).

1 I would like to thank Gil Anidjar, Karyn Berger, and Jennifer Robertson for having read and discussed versions of this article.

2 Elsewhere I discuss the role of the book in contemporary Israeli society, asking how this biblical text has become activated within Zionist logics and consciousness. See, forthcoming, Ruth Tsoffar, *Cannibal Ideology: Sexuality, Ethnicity and Colonialism in Hebrew Cultures*, University of California Press.

3 Only when I concluded my analysis of the book of Ruth was I aware of Michal Ben Naftali’s books, *Khronikah shel Predah: ‘al ‘Ahavatah ha-Nikhzevet shel ha-Dekonstraktsyah* (A Chronicle of Separation – On Deconstruction’s Disillusioned Love) (2000), and *Sefer, Yaldut (Childhood, a book)* (2006). While we both discuss the narrative within the context of hunger and trauma, our methodologies, approaches and conclusions differ (See Ben-Naftali 2000 and 2006).

4 In the Bible, the book of Ruth is the second of the Five Scrolls, *Megillot*, following the Song of Songs. In the Septuagint, the book of Ruth is placed after the book of Judges, an order that has been kept in English translations ever since. As such, the book is a functional postexilic text, reconstructing the period circa 968 BCE, when it is assumed that Ruth married the Judge Itzizan (also in Kristeva 1991: 70).

5 According to the Sages, the period of Judges, starting from the death of Joshua, lasted 365 years, placing Ruth either during the period of Shamgar and Ehud, or of Debra, Barak and Yael. See Ruth Rabba (1); and the BT Baba Batra (91a).

6 Rabbinic commentary explains that since the time reference, *va-yehi*, is mentioned twice, two kinds of hunger are at stake: “one hunger for bread and one hunger for the Torah” (Yalkut Shimon Ruth 597, cf. Fogel et al. 1995: 3). A later Chasidic source deduces that hunger is also a spiritual phenomenon. “Famine struck the land,” means that “the soul of Judaism hungers with pangs no less severe or lethal than those of an emaciated body” (Or Yohel in Zlotowitz 1994: xx).

7 In English too, “hunger” refers to the desire, need, physical sensation, or craving for food while “famine” emphasizes extreme scarcity or a shortage of food.

8 Another kind of dialogue or intertext in the book of Ruth is created through allusions to other biblical figures such as Rachel and Leah (Ruth 4: 11).

9 The Semitic verb *sava’* implies not only eating one’s fill, but also the ultimate sense of satisfaction and contentment, as in metaphorical expressions such as *sava’ yayin* (lit., “one with a satiated eye” or visually content) or *sava’ ratzon* (lit., “one with a satiated desire” or emotionally mentally content). In the Bible, Abraham died satiated, at a ripe old age (*zaken ve-savea’*) (Genesis 25: 8).

10 See also Kristeva (1991: 74-75). Recently, other feminists have addressed this connection: Frymer-Kensky, for example, introduces a more tolerant view of the incest (2002: 258-263).
Whereas Lot was slow to rise and greet the angels, Abraham *ran* to welcome them (cf. Genesis 18:1-2 and 19:1-2).

According to Derrida, the tradition and practice of hospitality helps to explain ethical and political situations whereby the stranger or foreigner encounters “the limits of power, norms, rights and duties” (2000: 77).

In Pamela Levi’s painting, “Lot and His Daughters” (1994), a faceless Lot is pictured lying stark naked on a bed in a room that replaces the cave in the Bible. According to Orly Lubin, male nudity signifies the anonymous pornographic gaze, and thus in the painting, highlights Levi’s subversive attempt to unframe and fragment the biblical narrative (Lubin 2003: 262-275).

A different approach was introduced by the Sages who rationalized the incestuous act as Lot’s punishment for offering his daughters to the lascivious men of Sodom (Midrash Tanhuma, *Vayira* ’12).

The Midrash contends that Lot’s daughters did not accept the yoke of the Law, the Torah (*Sefer Ha-aggadah, Matan Torah* 59).

In poem #14 of his series, “The Bible, The Bible, with you, with you, and Other Midrashim,” (*Tanakh Tanakh, ’Itakh ’Itakh, u-Midrashim ’Acherim*) (Amichai 1998: 34-35), Yehuda Amichai poses a unique lesson in and of Jewish history by representing both Ruth and Naomi through a totality of knowledge, implicitly contrasting their innate “total knowledge” with the apparent lack of knowledge of Israelis today.