

# Gleanings

## Reflections on Ruth



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**MAGGID**

# GLEANINGS

## Reflections on Ruth

Edited by  
Rabbi Dr. Stuart W. Halpern

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*Ruth in Boaz's Field*, by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld  
(1794–1872), located at The National Gallery, London

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## *Editor's Introduction*

**A**s the world's premier Jewish institution for higher education, Yeshiva University consists of students, faculty, and community members who are passionate believers in the power of the texts and values of the Jewish tradition to positively impact both contemporary Jewish society and the world at large. While the Book of Ruth, on its surface, may appear to be a simple story of one family's struggle for survival, a deeper look reveals a paradigmatic example of how an ancient Jewish text can enlighten, educate, and inspire.

In this volume, rabbis, professors, scholars, educational innovators, and community leaders offer their readings of Ruth, and insights into its themes, through the prism of their respective academic interests and professional fields. These essays, replete with sophisticated observations, theoretical and practical frameworks, and keen social analyses, demonstrate how our perspectives on the challenges and opportunities of our era, and on the Book of Ruth itself, can be enhanced through the synthesis of *Torah Umadda* (Torah and general wisdom). As illustrated in chapters on immigration in the Bible and Jewish law (Berman), David's origins (Carmy), American history (Eleff), pedagogies of empathy (Fleischmann), psychology (Grossman), family and friendship (Halpern), poetry (Kurshan), nineteenth-century rabbinic interpretation (Lerner), comparative ancient literature (Maged), American immigration law (Nash), the concept of peoplehood in Ireland (O'Malley),

Sephardic studies (Perelis), Midrash (Peters), American and Israeli literature (Rindner), contemporary conversion (Romm), rabbinic tradition (Simkovich), elder care (Tweel), social work (Wozniak), and biblical intertextuality (Ziegler), we have much to glean by looking at the world through the prism of Jewish wisdom.

This book emerged from the fertile environment of YU's classrooms and academic dialogue. In the spring of 2017, I was fortunate to teach a class in YU's Isaac Breuer College on the Book of Ruth. Through the generous support of YU's Zahava and Moshael Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought, directed by Rabbi Dr. Meir Soloveichik, our class benefited from the wisdom of multiple distinguished guest lecturers, some of whose presentations are found in this volume. Additionally, in the spring of 2018, under the leadership of YU's president, Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman, and its provost, Dr. Selma Botman, I, along with Prof. Paul Glassman, the dean of YU Libraries, was privileged to convene an interdisciplinary faculty symposium on the topic of "Immigration and Identity." Some of the presentations from that program also appear in this volume in modified form. I thank Dr. Berman, Dr. Botman, and Dr. Soloveichik for their constant support, wisdom, and leadership, and Prof. Glassman and my wonderful colleagues in the Office of the Provost for their partnership and friendship. My gratitude is also extended to my colleague and cousin, Rabbi Ari Lamm, for his input in the early planning stages of this project; the Michael Scharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University Press; and the Maggid Books team, led by the visionary Matthew Miller and Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, alongside the talented copy editor Nechama Unterman, managing editor Ita Olesker, and translator Rabbi Daniel Tabak. This book is dedicated in appreciation to Ahuva Warburg Halpern and our wonderful children, Erez, Ayal, and Mayim.

In Maccabees II (10:1–8), we read that the victorious Hasmoneans, on the 25th of the month of Kislev, celebrated a delayed holiday of Sukkot, since the military struggle against the Seleucid Greeks had prevented them from observing that holiday on time. The holiday commemorating the wanderings of the Israelites through the desert had been delayed due to further Jewish wanderings through mountains and caves. We, however, are blessed to live in an era in which the nation of Israel no longer has to wander. Though the Messiah, the ultimate descendant of



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Ruth who wandered with Naomi from the plains of Moab to the Land of Israel, is still delayed, we thank God that we as a nation have arrived and dwell securely in our homeland once more. The Jewish people have the opportunity, like never before, to be a “light unto the nations” (Is. 49:6). May our learning of the Book of Ruth, and all of our efforts to light the way to the ultimate redemption, allow us to celebrate the arrival of the Messiah speedily in our day.

Rabbi Dr. Stuart W. Halpern  
Hanukka 5779

# Communities of Care

# It's in the Gene(alogy): Family, Storytelling, and Salvation

Rabbi Dr. Stuart W. Halpern

**I**n 1924, the State of Virginia passed the Racial Integrity Act, criminalizing interracial marriages. There was a special dispensation built into the law, however. Through the so-called “Pocahontas exception,” Virginians proud of being descendants of Pocahontas who still wanted to be classified as “white” were able to do so instead of being classified as “Native American.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly politically weighted claims of ancestry have received extensive coverage in recent years, including the question of why former president Barack Obama is widely considered a black man with a white mother, rather than a white man with a black

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1. For an extensive discussion of the science, politics, and history of genetics, see Carl Zimmer, *She Has Her Mother's Laugh: The Powers, Perversions, and Potential of Heredity* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018). For a review of recent studies on Jewish genetics specifically, see Cynthia M. Baker, *Jew* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

father; President Trump’s questioning of Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren’s claimed Native American heritage (Trump has, on numerous occasions, referred to her as “Pocahontas”);<sup>2</sup> and the extensive doubts recently raised about the Jewish identity of socialist New York State Senator Julia Salazar.<sup>3</sup> As Rutgers professor Eviatar Zerubavel discusses in his *Ancestors and Relatives: Genealogy, Identity, and Community*,<sup>4</sup> how we define or frame our ancestry, and how others define it, is of tremendous importance.

Questions of genealogy are so crucial because our ancestry is often a key element in our social structure, the axis on which many of our social interactions, obligations, loyalties, and emotional sentiments turn. Though we like to believe in meritocracy, that individuals are self-made, our identities can be deeply tied to those we descend from. As Zerubavel writes, “[o]ur psychological integrity depends very much upon...the extent to which we feel linked to our genealogical roots...striking a person’s name from his or her family’s genealogical records used to be one of the most dreaded punishments in China.”<sup>5</sup> And of course, biologically, heredity has a tremendous impact on our traits, personality, and self-perceptions. As Columbia University professor Robert Pollack has noted, our “genomes are a form of literature... a library of the most ancient, precious, and deeply important books.”<sup>6</sup> Through studying where we come from, we learn how to tell our own story.

### ARE OUR RELATIVES “RELATIVE”?

In *It’s All Relative: Adventures Up and Down the World’s Family Tree*,<sup>7</sup> humorist and author A. J. Jacobs recounts his attempt to assemble his

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2. Maggie Astor, “Why Many Native Americans Are Angry with Elizabeth Warren,” *The New York Times*, October 17, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/17/us/politics/elizabeth-warren-dna-test.html>.
  3. See, for example, Mijal Bitton, “Julia Salazar’s Defenders Reveal the Limits of Identity Politics,” *The Forward*, August 31, 2018. <https://forward.com/opinion/409391/julia-salazars-defenders-reveal-the-limits-of-identity-politics/>.
  4. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. For his discussion of the Obama question, see the discussion beginning on p. 3.
  5. *Ibid.*, 5, 7.
  6. *Signs of Life: The Language and Meanings of DNA* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 117.
  7. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017.

extended, and by that I mean *very* extended, family in the largest family reunion ever. After receiving an e-mail from a man in Israel claiming to be his twelfth cousin, part of an 80,000-person family tree which included Karl Marx and some European aristocrats, Jacobs set out to bring as many of his living relatives together as he could, figuring “people [who spend countless hours tracing their family roots] want to feel connected and anchored. They want to visit what has been called the ‘Museum of Me.’”<sup>8</sup> Utilizing online genealogical tools, he connected to countless celebrities, as well as former president George H. W. Bush. Through this project, Jacobs sought to make the case for people to be kinder to one another because of our shared “cousin-hood.”<sup>9</sup>

Finding out about 79,999 relatives raised for Jacobs questions about the nature of family and the hierarchy of closeness we feel toward certain individuals. He argues that if all of humanity is one, very large, extended family, it is less important who our immediate relatives are. Maybe,

... we can sometimes make room in our hearts to love others without diminishing what we feel for those already dearest to us. Love is not a zero-sum game.... They tell of a seventeenth-century French missionary in Canada who tried to explain traditional monogamous marriage to a tribesman. The tribesman replied, “Thou hast no sense. You French people love only your own children, but we love all the children of our tribe.” Ignorance of their kids’ paternity apparently [can make] for a more compassionate society.<sup>10</sup>

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8. Ibid., 22.

9. Jacobs even had a column in *People* magazine in which he interviewed the “cousins” he found by tracing his extended family roots. Here’s a representative exchange from an interview he conducted with *Hot in Cleveland* actress Valerie Bertinelli, available at <https://people.com/celebrity/author-a-j-jacobs-interviews-his-very-distant-cousin-valerie-bertinelli/>:

Jacobs: You are, officially, my aunt’s 6th great uncle’s wife’s mother’s husband’s brother’s wife’s 8th great-granddaughter.

Bertinelli: So I’m practically your sister.

10. Jacobs, 180, 57. As Rabbi Dr. Ira Bedzow noted to me in private correspondence, Plato, in *The Republic*, suggests abolishing nuclear families and advocates for the communal raising of children.

Taking this line of reasoning a step further, maybe our conception of family shouldn't even be limited to biological relatives, or even people in our local community or tribe. One modern writer has even offered calling those who share your passion or worldview your "horizontal family" as opposed to your "vertical," biological family.<sup>11</sup> Though we would assume those with common interest are friends rather than family, Zerubavel gives some credence and sociological substance to this counterintuitive idea:

The family... is an inherently boundless community. Since there is no natural boundary separating recent ancestors from remote ones, there is also no such boundary separating close relatives from distant ones, or even relatives from nonrelatives. Any such boundary is therefore a product of social convention alone. Thus, although it is probably nature that determines that our obligations to others be proportional to our genealogical proximity to them, it is nevertheless unmistakably social norms that specify whose blood or honor we ought to avenge and determine the genealogical reach of family reunification policies. It is likewise social conventions that specify who can claim the share of blood money paid to relatives of homicide victims and determine who we invite to family reunions. Thus, whereas the range of other animals' kin recognition is determined by nature, it is social norms, conventions, and traditions of classification that determine how widely humans' range of kin recognition actually extends, and societies indeed often vary in where they draw the line between relatives and nonrelatives.<sup>12</sup>

And as the renowned astrophysicist Neil deGrassi Tyson put it in a letter to Jacobs:

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11. Jacobs, 96, citing Andrew Solomon, *Far From the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity*.

12. Zerubavel, 72.

My philosophy of root-finding may be unorthodox. I just don't care. And that's not a passive, but active sense of caring. In the tree of life, any two people in the world share a common ancestor – depending only on how far you look. So the line we draw to establish family and heritage is entirely arbitrary. When I wonder what I am capable of achieving, I don't look to family lineage, I look to all human beings. That's the genetic relationship that matters to me. The genius of Isaac Newton, the courage of Gandhi and MLK, the bravery of Joan of Arc, the athletic feats of Michael Jordan, the oratorical skills of Sir Winston Churchill, the compassion of Mother Teresa. I look to the entire human race for inspiration for what I can be – because I am human. Couldn't care less if I were a descendant of kings or paupers, saints or sinners, the valorous or cowardly. My life is what I make of it.<sup>13</sup>

#### **ARE YOU MY MOTHER?**

The challenge to the idea above, however, is that while it might make for a sound philosophical argument, it doesn't seem to hold water empirically. There have been many experiments and contexts, including Israeli kibbutzim, in which children have been raised communally, as opposed to in a nuclear family model, only to discover it made parents and children less happy. There is social, psychological, and moral value provided by what we intuitively classify as our family, which, assuming it contains a generally positive dynamic, serves to aid in both general health and even survival, and inculcate values that an individual applies to his or her colleagues, neighbors, and friends. As the saying goes, "Men may change their clothes, their politics, their wives, their religions, their philosophies, [but] they cannot change their grandfathers."<sup>14</sup>

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13. Jacobs, 163.

14. Ibid., 58, 54. See also Diane Swanbrow, "Raising a Child Doesn't Take a Village, Research Shows," Phys.org, September 9, 2011, <https://phys.org/news/2011-09-child-doesnt-village.html>; Lars-Toralf-Storstrand, "Utopian Ideals Don't Mix Well with Child Welfare Policies," *The Sunday Guardian*, March 31, 2018, <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/culture/utopian-ideals-dont-mix-well-child-welfare-policies>; and Rachel Epstein,

## THE JEWISH FAMILY

Judaism, of course, is based upon the story of a family. The Book of Genesis is the story of chosen children, with the tales of those who were not chosen relegated to the periphery.<sup>15</sup> Like many families, the Jewish family's "dynastic mental structure" is conceived of as a "single identity" with "particular norms of remembrance."<sup>16</sup> Thus, while one might refer to one's country of origin as "motherland" or refer to the "founding fathers" of the United States, to the Jewish people, Israel is the land of our *actual* mothers and fathers, and our norms of family remembrance are found in the Torah. We are *Benei Yisrael*, the children of our forefather Israel.

Following the completion of the Bible, the advent of the monarchy, and the sweep of subsequent Jewish history, what has emerged within the story of the Children of Israel is the anticipated restoration of one particular line within our family. We hope and pray multiple times throughout our liturgy for the resumed authority of the Davidic line through the coming of the *Mashiah*, the ultimate redeemer.<sup>17</sup>

With this background in mind, let us examine the Book of Ruth, which ends with a genealogy culminating with the birth of David, the ancestor of the eventual Messiah. Let us examine how the ancestral story of David's family is told and how it might inform our understanding of family in our own lives.

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Paula Rerer, Orna Tzischinsky, and Peretz Lavie, "Changing from Communal to Familial Sleep Arrangement in the Kibbutz: Effects on Sleep Quality," *Sleep* 20 (5): 334–339.

15. This phenomenon has been examined extensively by many. See, for recent examples, Cynthia R. Chapman, *The House of the Mother: The Social Roles of Maternal Kin in Biblical Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); and Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Schocken Books, 2015).

16. Zerubavel, 19, 67.

17. *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 66. See also Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel* (London: Roman & Littlefield, 2000), 252–254.