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The Many Meanings of the Book of Ruth, 1966.

The Many Meanings of the Book of Ruth
Daniel Jeremy Silver
May 8, 1966

Children brought mother breakfast on a tray this morning. Father will take the family out to lunch. Somehow, doors will be opened for you and chairs pulled back for you all day long. You each are sporting a very beautiful flower. Mother's Day is an unexpected interlude of feeling in the routine, non-chalance of family life. It brings, I suspect, a flush of pleasure and some surprise for it's unreal, it's an idol, it's a contrivance of the calendar though I suspect the special care is nonetheless welcome. Year-long family love flows subterraneously. It's there, but it's underground, unseen, and we need occasions, birthdays, anniversaries, Mother's Day to bring it up from under, to touch it, to taste it, to slack our thirst for feeling in its renewing and refreshing waters. So I suspect that however realistic we are about the contrived and the commercial aspects about the Mother's Day we need that and we enjoy it. A father and a rabbi has one of two choices on a Mother's Day: either he can bemoan the relative insignificance of Father's Day, who of us can remember when Father's Day even takes place; or he can wonder about the importance of these romantic moments, these idyllic interludes in our lives for we each seem to need to carve out for ourselves little oases of tranquility and tenderness. And this is surprising in our hard-boiled, no-nonsense generation which prides itself on being realistic, which looks on the idealist as a wooly-headed dreamer, which likes its literature raw and unexpurgated and its truth straight out, which insists that all feelings be analyzed and explored, to not even allow courtesy in its conversation. By and large we are leary of feeling and we look down on sentimentality. Why then does something inside of us insist that we need these moments, that sentiments require sentimentality, that we cannot live only in the thrust and the bustle and the confusion and the noise and the cacaphony of life. We need to touch once or twice innocence, pastoral quiet, simplicity of feeling, simple straight-forward goodness.

And you know, what's true of us as individuals is true of a society as a whole. Greece had its Homer, its heroism, its daring due, its marshal exploits but Greece require also its Hishan, the pastoral poet, the man who could evoke the quietness and the

beauty of the countryside. In the early years of our own nation we had the exaltation, the drama, the vigor of a Whitman and we also required the sylvan quiet of retreat, of Walden Pond. We must build society on the hard facts of economics and of power. We must live our lives realistically. We cannot blink away the truth, but to live only with the rawness, the vulgarity and the coarseness of life is maddening. Life requires the balance of high hopes, of moulting dreams, the truth, for truth it is there are hopes that do materialize. There is a decency in man which is something more than the callous cruel image of man we usually draw about us. You and shift and alternate in these moods, in our attitude towards life and that is our sanity. We are ultimately realistic and romantic, down-to-earth. You know, Biblical critics often wonder how some of the prophets could have preached doom against the people in one paragraph and in another sermon let themselves go and dreamt of a glorious tomorrow. And they had insisted in, say Isaiah, for Isaiah condemns and damns the faithful city that has become a harlot in one chapter, and in the very next turns around his mood and talks of the time when every man shall live under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make him afraid; and these two sermons were teachings that could not have been spoken by the same man. Perhaps they were not, but not for this reason. For I see in myself, and I suggest that you see in yourself, this very alternation of feeling. Sometimes we are quite judgmental, open-eyed, realistic about our professional, our business, our family responsibilities, no nonsense about it; and other times we daydream, all the pieces of the jigsaw in our lives fit together neatly. The picture is whole. Sometimes you and I look on our world soberly and see the possibility, if not the probability, of atomic war; and at other times, deep down within the very marrow of our bones, we know that somehow we are going to make it, that there will be a way and we will muddle through and our children will have their opportunities.

The Bible is, as you know, an anthology of rather realistic literature. The Biblical authors, by and large, pulled no punches. Eve is a greedy and conniving woman. Adam is a weak and pucilanimous creature. Cain is violent. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, complicated beings. They have their strengths, but they have their weaknesses. The Bible does not minimize either. The Biblical writers lived in an age which knew sin crouching at the door.

The impulses of a man's heart are evil from his youth, and yet there are times when the Bible lets itself go, when it dreams the dream, when it allows the romantic spirit which is within each of us to well up, to spill out, when it speaks innocently and naively but, I submit, necessarily, the time when the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the lamb and the young lion and the live together and a young child shall lead them, when they shall no more hurt nor destroy in all of my holy mountain, when the spirit of the Lord shall have spread over the earth as the waters cover the globe. We require Isaiah 11. We require Ruth in our Bible. These idols, these romantic fictions because though they are unreal, fictional, they express truth, necessary reality, that which we all too often forget. And to be true, if we're eager, busy, self-important, if our step is on the ladder of success and if we're busy to be going all this literature seems to be nothing more than something about unreal people who are too good to be true, who suffer the most impossible of tortures and of sufferings, who somehow persevere with exemplary stoicism and then, in the end, God makes all come about right and they live happily ever after. Well, life isn't that way and we know it, and when we are busy and when we are self-important we dismiss this kind of literature as trivia. I submit that it is not for it reminds us there are decent people. There are people who are the salt of the earth. They express what they mean and they say what they mean, whose feelings are honest, who are not driven by status or greed or ambition, who seek to serve, who speak of their love when they love, of their feelings when they feel, whose word is their bond, whose oath can be trusted.

Ruth is a symbolic name. It comes from the Hebrew, Rayut, which means friendship. Ruth symbolizes the possibility of friendship. How so? When we are fearful of other human beings we hold ourselves in, we shackle our feelings. We will not express that which we feel most intimately lest it be trodden on or sullied and dirtied and rejected. And there are many who go through life afraid to love, afraid to have a friend, afraid to be loyal to a cause lest they be let down for to love is to lose and to feel is to open oneself up to deep and bitter grief.

Ruth symbolizes friendship because Ruth stands for all those fine people whom we

know, the decency within ourselves. We know that love within our family is not coarse. We know that the friendships in which we are secure are not self-serving. We know that there is decency. We have seen people such as Ruth, widows who have loved and lost and not soured on life; women and men who have pledged themselves to a cause, a crusade not necessarily by birth their own and who meant what they said and were willing to sacrifice for that cause; friends who wanted to share rather than to own, simply the joy of being with us and not the usefulness, the use that they could find to put us to in their search for advancement or status. And knowing Ruth and reminding ourselves of the Ruths of the Bible we remind ourselves of the decency within us and within others, of the possibility of feeling, of the possibility of true friendship.

Ruth then is an idol. It is unreal and a work of fiction which reminds of a healing and helpful truth, a necessary truth, that there are people in this world who are trustworthy, who will safeguard our feelings, who care and who can be cared for.

What I should like to do briefly this morning is to examine with you the various layers of meaning which we can find in the fiction of Ruth, the truth which romance teaches us, as I have suggested, we require to live not only reality^{but} romance, not only hard-boiled thinking but high-flying vision. Ruth stands for friendship. Ruth stands for decency. Ruth stands for sacrifice. Ruth stands for all that is noble, potentially noble in human life. Think of the relationship between Ruth and Naomi. Naomi is a mother-in-law and by the standards of every society condemns her almost without any act on her part; but more than this, Naomi is associated in Ruth's mind with tragedy compounded, with widowhead, with the loss of property, poverty, with the necessity of making a choice between her family and Naomi's family, her home, an involuntary exile. And no human being could have had uncomplicated feelings about this kind of a mother-in-law. And yet, when the choice is hers, when Naomi offers Ruth an out: return to your people - you get those wonderful words which you all now: treat me not to leave thee, de cease from following after thee, whether thou goest I shall go, whither thou lodgest I shall lodge, thy people shall be my people and thy God shall be my God. Now, there are many who might have impulsively made such a pledge. Words are easily spoken, they are merely tokens of feeling, quickly spoken, quickly

repented. To me the nobility of Ruth is not expressed in the nobility of the poetry which I have just quoted, but rather in what is told of her after her return to Bethlehem and Judah. She is now a stranger, a stranger among a suspicious people. The Moabites were ancient enemies of Israel. Now she might have filled herself, her life with self-pity, walk silently and sullenly in Naomi's home, but no. She tenderly cares for her aging mother-in-law. She sees to it that Naomi need not work. She will toil in the fields, gleaning after the harvest to bring in food for the family. She sees to it that Naomi need not suffer the indignity of being seen by her friends, a once gentle woman now reduced to abjectness. She will go out among the poor, she will sustain the family and keep it as one. Here is the true nobility of the human being, a pledge abided, a promise honored, a life which accepts the bruising, the change, the unexpected, somehow maintains the balance, the strength, direction, grace.

You know, I've often thought that we ought to compare Ruth and Job. Both suffered and suffered bitterly. And Job is often held up as the man, as the symbolic man who can sustain his dignity despite his suffering. And Job, at least, required explanation. Ruth had a greater strength. She asked no explanation. She accepted life for what it was and simply carried on. Her own saintliness, her own decency, bore her through.

Now, there are such people. She sounds in part too good to be true, but it's her very goodness that is true. These are extraordinary people, to be sure, but they exist and you know some of them. You have seen parents who have uncomplainingly accepted the day-in day-out care of a handicapped child without any hope for the ultimate healing of the child; and you have seen them accept grief and carry on. And you have seen young couples who have brought into their home happy and joyously a widow or a widowed parent even though it denied them the freedom they might have wished, and yet, it was their privilege, not their responsibility but their privilege, so to do. And you have seen friends who have persevered in their feelings of companionship when the gossips waxed hot, when malicious stories were being told, who asked not what's in it for me, who sought not to flee from someone who is being castigated for strange views, but who stayed close and who sustained or aided. There are Ruths in our world, rare people to be sure. They are here nonetheless

and they establish for us the possibility of feeling, of family, of love, of friendship, all those wonderful human relationships which carry us on and carry us up. Ruth is an idol, romance, fiction, but it is an idol of romance or fiction which is simply the envelope for deeper truths. And another of the truths which Ruth makes clear to us is this - that goodness is not genetic, that no people, no ethnic group, no religious group, no race, no class has a monopoly on sainthood.

Moab was to Israel what Germany was to France, what Germany is to France, what Russia is to the United States and the United States to Russia: ancient enemies, near neighbors, competitors for power, who always seem to be at each other's jugular vein. The Bible reflects this ancient enmity. The Bible tells us, the book of Deuteronomy, that no Ammonite or no Moabite may enter into the congregation of the Lord even unto the tenth generation for these peoples met you not with bread and water when you came forth out of the land of Egypt and were on the way - in other words, they showed you no hospitality and, indeed, they hired Balam the son of Baor to curse them. Israel was not to seek after their peace nor their well-being at any time forever. There is ancient hate between these two peoples and yet, deliberately, the man who wrote this romance chose his heroine not among the Israelites but among the enemies. It is as if a writer of American ^{romantic} fiction would choose the heroine of his novel from among the Russians; as if one were to write a war novel about Vietnam and choose as the heroine one of the women of the Viet Cong. There is no genetic component in goodness. We must learn to see people as they are without their labels and to recognize that all men have the possibility, the potentiality, to become a Ruth or a Boaz, to become decent. How much good might come into our world if we would take this romantic truth to heart in a world which is so bedeviled by political propaganda and by racial prejudice, to learn to see people for what they are. Every group has its saints and has its sinners; ~~wich~~ has its Ruths and it has those who are not Ruth. Learn to see people and to judge them as individuals. There is no genetic component to goodness.

And finally and supremely, the book of Ruth teaches us this, that nobility is exciting, that decency magnetizes and draws to itself other decencies. Boaz was an ordinary man, a well-respected farmer in his community. Undoubtedly, he shared all of the

prejudices of the Israelites against the Moabites and all the fears for surely his fields had been invested at the harvesttime by Moabite thieves. But when he sees Ruth, the Moabitish woman following his gleaners, picking up what has been left over and fallen behind, he looks at her not as a Moabite but as Ruth for he has heard of her gentility, he has heard of her sacrifice, he has heard of what she has done for his kinswoman, Naomi. Ruth is no longer a stereotype, simply that negro, that Russian, but Ruth, a person, one who is known for her own accomplishments, her own nobility, and her nobility excites his. Boaz tells his young men not to taunt Ruth, who has ordered his young men to pull out some extra sheaves from the bundle so that Ruth will have a full sack to take home to her mother-in-law. Boaz invites Ruth to his table for the noonday lunch. Finally, he takes her unto himself as his wife. He offers her the security and protection of his name.

Now, there are some who misunderstand the book of Ruth by believing that Boaz and Ruth are young people, that they are physically and chemically attracted, and this is simply a romance of this type. Our tradition tells us that at this time Boaz was over eighty and Ruth almost fifty. These were two people who were offering themselves to each other companionship. They were offering friendship. They were offering an end to loneliness perhaps, the decency of their beings, but not the explosive compelling love of twenty-year olds. This is the greatness of the offer that Boaz makes and it is the testimony of the power of goodness that is within Ruth.

The lesson? Simply this. Most of the preachments we make to our children, most of the proverbs we throw at them, the counsel that we badger them with, goes in one ear and out the other. What is it that permits our young people to grow, to have a measure, a standard of goodness? Not what we say but what we do. If they have the example of a father who sets honor above income; if they have the example of a mother who somehow maintains her grace through all the crises of the home; if they see a parent who is dealing with them in fair impartiality, they see their parents respond to friendship, to loyalty and openly they know that at their table there was no gossip or no slander, that they hear talk of the uncle who stood in the face of the spittle and the curse of

stormtrooper without flinching, his stoic, Jewish dignity. These are the images, the sights and the sounds which no one ever forgets. These are the examples which draw out the best in us and draw us on. Parents could be silent as far as the preaching is concerned. Perhaps rabbis could be, too.

I remember a Professor of Homiletics at Hebrew Union College who at the end of two years teaching us how to preach a sermon, concluded with this comment: Rabbis, (he was flattering us at the time) rabbis, the only compelling sermon you will ever preach is your autobiography. And I think he is right.

Mother's Day is a romantic day, a contrived day, a welcome day. It's a day in which we live with our heads a bit in the clouds. Enjoy it. We need it. We need the balance of romance to the hard realities of daily living. And what prayer can we ask for ourselves on this day, this day of idealic love within the family, when the children won't be scrapping with each other till ten minutes after they bring in the breakfast tray. simply this: if we recognize again our own decency and the decency of others, that we look at people as potential Ruths and as potential Boaz's, we see the decency in mankind rather than only the greed, the callousness, the cruelty which we know to be there. You and I need this vision. It sustains us; it encourages us; it bears us on; it corresponds to the romantic mood of the Mother's Day. We go to work tomorrow. We'll be hard-bitten in our decisions, but even in our work and when we are most clear-eyed, the fact that we have refreshed ourselves for this period of time with love and family, with hope and in the decency that is within man, will give encouragement, an excitement to what we do and it will be worth all the extra little courtesies of this day.

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Kaddish

Friday May 6, 1966
Sunday May 8, 1966

Those who passed away this week

SYLVIA ~~A~~ NEWMAN

Jahrzeits

OSCAR MICHAEL JR.
LEONARD M. BIALOSKY
DOROTHY APPLEBAUM DRÖST
JOSEPH C. ROTBART
ROSETTA HAYS
NETTIE TOFFLER
BELLE KLEIN
EDWARD ARONS
LIONEL BENSON
CAROLINE KLAUS
CAROLINE R. EISENMAN
JOSEPH M. GOLDWASSER
ERNST ALTSCHUL
PEPI NEWMAN WIESENBERGER

RICKIE L. HABER
MANUEL WEINBERGER
CHARLES R. FINN
LOUIS HORKHEIMER
ISIDOR R. COPPERMAN
EDWARD A. WEISKOPF
ANNETTE SILVERMAN
MATTIS Y. GOLDMAN
ABRAHAM KROHN

READ ON FRID. MAY 6 ONLY
LOUIS A. BLOOMFIELD