Ruth and Naomi: The Return of the Seed

By Jill Hammer

Many cultures of the ancient Near East have myths of the cycle of planting and harvest. The Greek story of Demeter and Persephone imagines the seed as a beautiful girl, torn from her mother the earth to go below the soil when winter comes. She is restored again for a time in spring, as warmth comes to the land.[1] In the Sumerian tale of Dumuzi, a shepherd-god, symbol of the grain, wails as he is dragged to the underworld. His sister Geshtinanna, goddess of grapes, offers to take his place for six months of the year, and the two deities take turns beneath the ground as summer turns to winter and winter to spring.[2] In the Canaanite myth, Mot the death-god defeats and kills Baal – but Baal's sister Anat journeys to the underworld, slays Mot, and restores Baal to life, thus restoring the spring rains and the planting cycle.[3] The Bible, which does not deify the planting and harvest cycle, does not have any such myths – at least not on the surface. Yet the pastoral and down-to-earth Book of Ruth is, in its symbolism and its ethics, a powerful grain cycle story. In the Book of Ruth, we see human beings in parallel to the cycles of the land, partnering with God to bring life out of death.

The House of Bread

At the opening of the book of Ruth, there is immediately a famine. This sets the tone of the book – we feel a sense of anxiety about the missing grain. Then we come upon a family living in Bethlehem: Elimelech, Naomi, and their sons Machlon and Chilion. *Beit-lehem* means the "house of bread." This tells us that the story is not only about the family, it is about bread itself – the process by which grain sustains life.

The family leaves the "house of bread" and goes to the foreign land of Moab. While there, Elimelech dies. The two sons marry Moabite women: Orpah and Ruth. After ten years, the two sons die as well. Naomi now has no husband, no children, and no protector. She only has her two daughters-in-law, and her connection to them is very tenuous indeed. The daughters-in-law have no children to connect them to her tribe. The men have disappeared, and without men, there is no seed to make new babies. The famine of Bethlehem, in which there is no grain to plant in the ground, has now turned to a famine in which there is no male seed to fertilize the womb. For the rest of the book, grain-seed will be connected to human seed.

In desperation, Naomi sets out from Moab for Bethlehem, where there is now a plentiful harvest. Her daughters-in-law go with her, out of love, loyalty, or a sense of obligation. They have not gotten far when Naomi stops them and addresses them with stark pathos:

> "Go, turn back, each woman to her mother's house! May God do kindness with you as you have done with the dead and with me. May God grant that you will find rest, each woman in her husband's house." And she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.
> *Ruth 1:8-9*

When the women protest that they will go with her, Naomi responds in even more heartbreaking language:

> Return, my daughters. Why would you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb to be husbands to you? Turn back, my daughters, for I am too old to be with a man. Even if I were to say "I have hope!" Even if I lay with a man tonight, even if I gave birth to sons. Would you wait till they grew up? Would you deny yourselves lying with men? No, my daughters, it is more bitter for me than you, for the hand of YHWH has gone against me.

She calls the women who are with her "my daughters," but they are not her daughters without their husbands to tie them to her. Naomi is retuning the women that she had thought would bear her grandchildren to their respective families. She cannot hold them with her, because she has no seed for them, so that they may build families. She gives them back to the flow of life.

Yet even in Naomi's despair she introduces one seed of hope – "Would you wait till they grew up?" Naomi is referring to the concept of levirate marriage; the idea that Orpah and Ruth could marry male relatives of the dead men and symbolically produce grandchildren for Naomi. In the Torah's understanding of levirate marriage, only a brother of a deceased man can perform a levirate marriage with a widow, such that the first child of the union would be seen as the son of the dead man. By the Torah's understanding, Naomi's hope is almost impossible: she is too old to bear sons who would be brothers to Machlon and Chilion, and even if she could, Ruth and Orpah would not wait twenty years for them to grow up. But Naomi has the stray idea that a levirate marriage might be possible. On this hope of new seed from her husband's line will hinge Naomi's redemption.

Naomi is the key figure of the Book of Ruth. The story asks: is it possible for Naomi to find new life? Her sons are dead. She is too old to have seed in her womb. She is like the earth after harvest, barren, with all her children ripped away and devoured. But new life is possible, and new seed will come from an unexpected place.

Who will be the agent of this redemption? Ruth steps forward and refuses to leave Naomi. For no logical reason, she insists on accompanying the widow back to her place of birth:

> "Don't wound me with the pain of leaving you, and returning from after you, for where you go I will go, where you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May God do thus-and-so and even more to me, if death parts me from you." *Ruth 1:16-18*

Jewish commentators have focused on Ruth's spiritual devotion to Naomi's ways, and modern commentators have interpreted Ruth's love for Naomi in many ways. One way to read this text is that Ruth is offering to be Naomi's daughter, to adopt Naomi's identity as if she had been borne in Naomi's womb – even more so, since Naomi's born daughter would go to the house of a husband, and Ruth pledges that she will not. Ruth is offering an eternal tribal commitment to Naomi, like that of a child. This is indeed a conversion, but less a conversion to Naomi's God than to Naomi's body. Orpah returns to her mother's house, but Ruth, out of an inexplicable love and devotion, abandons her own mother to follow Naomi.

Ruth particularly promises not to be separated from Naomi in death. This is critical. Naomi's deep fear is that she will die as if she had never been – with no children to carry on her line, it is as if she is without substance. Ruth promises that death will not part them. She will carry on Naomi's traditions and be buried on the same land. She will remember Naomi and be her legacy. But we do not yet know how Ruth will do that.

When Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem, Ruth becomes invisible. Naomi does not introduce Ruth as her daughter – Naomi does not introduce Ruth at all. When the women of the town buzz around Naomi, Naomi depicts herself as a retroactively barren woman.

> "Do not call me Naomi! Call me Mara, for Shaddai has made me very bitter. Full I went away, and empty YHWH has returned me. Why do you call me Naomi, when YHWH has oppressed me, and Shaddai has wronged me?"
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> So Naomi returned from the country of Moab: Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, was with her, and they arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. *Ruth 1:20-22*

Naomi calls God Shaddai, a name related to the word *shad* or breast. God, the giver of breasts, the nurturer of life, has betrayed Naomi. The sweetness of Naomi's name (my pleasantness) has deserted her. She, who was a woman with a husband and children, is now a vulnerable widow. Her fullness has become famine. She chooses the name Mara, bitter, out of grief and anger.

The book began with famine, and Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. This signifies that life is about to look up for our two heroines. The harvest is the moment when the cut-down grain, the dead seed, becomes new seed for the planting next season. In an instant, death turns to life. The timing of Naomi and Ruth's arrival reminds us of the connection between human seed and grain, between the plenty of the earth and the mysterious cyclical beneficence of God.

Among the Ears of Grain

Having lost their male relatives and their land, Ruth and Naomi are dependent on others for seed – in more ways than one. Ruth offers to go and glean among the ears of grain (*shibolim*) and sustain herself and Naomi. In other words, they rely on the compassion of the community and on the *mitzvah* of *leket*, gleaning.[4]

Gleaning is a central metaphor of this text. Ruth and Naomi have no plot of earth that is theirs, and no man that is theirs. They cannot get seed for themselves. They must rely on what does not belong to them, on what falls to them by chance or compassion. So too, humans must rely on God for seed. We cannot produce either our food or our children through our own wills; we must hope that these gifts come to us by grace.

Ruth and Naomi are Everyman and Everywoman: they remind us of our dependence on circumstance. Ruth "happens" upon the field of Naomi's kinsman Boaz: *vayiker mikreha ḥelkat hasadeh l'Boaz.* (Ruth 2:5) It just so happens that the man whose field she chooses is the redeemer for her and Naomi.

As if he is a landed gentleman out of a Jane Austen novel, Boaz rides up and asks: 'Whose girl is that?" Without any direct language, we instantly feel his interest, even his sexual interest, in Ruth. Boaz orders his staff to treat Ruth well and not to harass her. His order reminds us of Ruth's vulnerability: she may be seen as an easily available sex partner by field hands who know she has no protecting patriarch at home. Boaz steps into this role, offering her a safe place among the women who work his land. "Don't go to glean in another field, don't go away from here, but stay close to my girls. Keep your eyes on the field… Have I not commanded the boys not to touch you?" (Ruth 2:8-9)

This is very kind, and it is also funny. Boaz is making sure that the boys stay away from Ruth and that her eyes do not turn elsewhere. It is his seed he wants her to glean, with all the Shakespearean double-entendre that implies. This gets even funnier later when Ruth sits beside Boaz at lunch and he keeps handing her handfuls of grain until she is satisfied. Then he orders the reapers to drop even more seed for her to pick up. Ruth goes home to her mother-in-law with so much seed she can barely carry it.

This seed-gifting is not just charity. It is all a metaphor for sex and pregnancy – but not in a coarse way, because Boaz is also interested in Ruth for her good qualities. "I have been told of all you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, and left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you

had not known two days before." (Ruth 2:11) As many have noted, this is Abrahamic language, connecting Ruth to the faith and courage of the earliest Israelite patriarch. As with Abraham and Sarah, who produce a child in old age, it is Ruth's courage and persistence that makes her fertility possible.

Many forms of *ḥesed* are coming together here: the *ḥesed* of the land, finally giving abundant grain after years of famine; the *ḥesed* of Ruth, giving sustenance and love to Naomi when she fears she is empty; the *ḥesed* of Boaz, offering nourishment to Ruth from his field; and the *ḥesed* of Abraham who once left his own land because he believed in God's promise. Every single form of *ḥesed* here is connected to seed and to fertility. The Book of Ruth is a harvest drama because it asks again and again the question: "The old seed is dead. From where will the new seed come?

When Ruth gets home, and Naomi sees the barley for herself, Naomi undergoes an extraordinary change. Her silence to Ruth, which has persisted since she and Ruth set off for Bethlehem, ends. Her words about emptiness and bitterness fade into the past, and in their place are words of blessing: "Blessed is he of God, who has not failed in his kindness to the living or the dead. The man is close to us, he is one of our redeemers." (Ruth 2:20)

Naomi's words are also odd at first. Certainly she and Ruth will be helped by Boaz's charity, but how is this kindness to the dead? But Naomi has glimpsed a new possibility: the possibility that the dead too will receive love and redemption. Just as the cut-down grain is redeemed by the new seed, so Naomi's dead husband and sons will be replanted in a miraculous way. As we will see, the word *goel*/redeemer is at the core of the message of the Book of Ruth. *Ḥesed* and *geulah*, love and redemption, are the twin engines that turn death into life.

On the Threshing Floor

Naomi now has a problem, and again we English readers must think of Jane Austen. Harvest is over, and it is not seemly for Ruth to go and simply knock on Boaz's door. Like a proper girl, she must stay at home and wait for him to come to her, and since she is a poor girl, a visit from a wealthy landowner is unlikely. So, in Ruth 3, Naomi conceives of what is essentially a mythic drama, a sacred marriage in the grand traditions of the ancient Near East. She asks Ruth to dress up, anoint herself, and go down to the threshing floor. Boaz will be sleeping alone there to protect the harvest. Ruth is to uncover his feet (or his genitals) and lie down, and follow the man's instructions.

We must pause here for a moment to remember that Inanna, the goddess with whom the ancient kings of Sumer perfomed the sacred marriage, was first and foremost a storehouse goddess, protector of the harvest grain. The king's sexuality was a human metaphor for the seed, and the priestess who stood in for the goddess represented the earth. In the ancient mind, their union was identical with the land's fertility. To have

sexual relations on a threshing floor is to evoke this tradition of the kings of old. (And, as we readers know, Boaz is in fact a king in potential, since he is about to produce the Davidic line.) Boaz and Ruth are the seed and the land, even as they represent humans in their own vulnerable situations.

> She went down to the threshing floor and did all that her mother-in-law had instructed. Boaz ate and drank and his heart was happy. He came to lie down beside the grainpile. She went over quietly and uncovered [revealed] his legs, and lay down. In the middle of the night, the man trembled and flinched—and there was a woman lying at his feet!
>
> Who are you?" he asked. She said: "I am Ruth your handmaid. Spread your wings over your handmaid, for you are a redeemer [*goel*]." *Ruth 3:6-9*

"Who are you?" Boaz asks, as if Ruth is not herself, as if she is the grainpile come to life. Ruth is standing in for a priestess or goddess here – but in a unique Israelite way. Like a priestess, Ruth is not there on her own behalf. She is not there for sexual fulfillment. She is there to fulfill the promise she made to Naomi: that death will not part them, that the death of Ruth's husband has not severed the destinies of Naomi and Ruth.

Ruth is carrying a unique task that Boaz must do. She carries the dead like a ghost in her womb. Metaphysically, her dead husband Machlon is within her, waiting for a redeemer to give his seed life, even though this is impossible on a physical level. Aviva Zornberg calls this "the unsatisfied need of the dead man who hasn't done the one thing a person wants to do in the world: to leave life behind him which bears his name."[5] Zornberg sees Ruth's carrying of this metaphysical possibility as a function of her deep love for her deceased husband and her desire to make him live again. Yet, in her role as part of the Davidic drama and the harvest cycle, Ruth is also acting on behalf of the people and the land as a whole, embodying the hope that life will come out of death, that the seed will be reborn.

Boaz now can choose to have sex with Ruth and send her away. Yet he can also choose the path of *hesed* and *geulah*: he can redeem Machlon, Ruth, and Naomi and give all three new life. To be an agent of this cosmic drama is to act like a king, and with kingship Boaz will be rewarded.

In the Book of Ruth, the arcane law of levirate marriage is a symbol of the returning grain, because levirate marriage provides new seed to replace the old. The *goel*, the redeemer of the dead husband, ritually brings the dead seed back to life and transmits it to the widow, as if resurrecting the dead for a single night. Through levirate marriage, the dead return to life, just as the old gods come back from the underworld.

> He said: "Blessed are you of YHWH, my daughter. Your last act of kindness is better than the first, for you have not gone after younger men, whether rich or poor. Now, my daughter, have no fear. I will do for you whatever you say, for all the gate of my people knows you are a valiant woman.
>
> But while it is true I am a *goel*, there is another *goel* closer than I. Stay the night, and in the morning if he will redeem you, good, and if he does not wish to redeem you, I am your redeemer, as God lives! Lie down until morning."
> *Ruth 3:10-13*

This final paragraph shows how worthy Boaz is. He humbly steps away from this heroic role, not because he is afraid, but because he is conscious of his tribal responsibilities. There is another redeemer closer than he, and this man must be asked if he wants to be the *goel* before Boaz can proceed with his desire to redeem Ruth. Here we see Boaz's true selflessness and restraint. He wants Ruth, but he wants the drama of life out of death to unfold properly, even more than he wants Ruth. (And, the fact that the couple doesn't have sex on the threshing floor but rather later on, puts the mythological associations at a distance and highlights the role of God in the story.) Yet when Ruth leaves the threshing floor at dawn, Boaz places six measures of seed on her back. This brings us back to the connection between human fertility and the grain. It is a token of harvests and pregnancies to come.

Perhaps this is why Boaz calls Ruth "my daughter." The phrase emphasizes his age, but it also reminds us that Ruth is the bearer of the future. For both Boaz and Naomi, Ruth is the Maiden, the energy and generosity of life let loose in its youth and potential. She is the *eishet ḥayil* to Boaz's *gibor ḥayil.* She is the gatherer of the seed: a willing and loving partner in this larger-than-life chain of events. As Zornberg says, "she will find a way of giving life to the dead."[6]

The words "there is another *goel* closer than I" can be read as a reference to God, who does not speak or act during all this, but whose hand may be guiding events. Boaz may be acting like a god-king, and Ruth like a goddess-designate, but they are still human beings, and YHWH is the true redeemer here. The harvest-seed and the human-seed are dependent on Shaddai for their fruition. The grain-cycle drama of Ruth brings together polytheistic traditions with an ultimately monotheist worldview.

Cause the Name of the Dead to Arise

Boaz immediately visits the gate, where official tribal business happens, and corrals the seemingly unsuspecting kinsman of Naomi's, as well as ten elders. Boaz explains to the man that Naomi has a piece of land that must be sold. The text assumes we know that a kinsman must buy the land in order to preserve it for the tribe. The man is willing to buy the land and redeem it. Then, Boaz changes the story.

> Boaz said: "On the day you acquire the field from Naomi's hand, you must also acquire Ruth the Moabite, wife of the dead one, to cause the name of the dead to rise up on his inherited land." The *goel* replied: "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I destroy my inheritance. You redeem my redemption [*g'al l'kha et geulati*), for I cannot redeem."
> *Ruth 4:5-6*

The text here reminds us, if we didn't already get it, that land and people are the same. Ruth comes along with a field, the field comes along with Ruth. What field? Why didn't we hear of it before? Why don't Ruth and Naomi use it to sustain themselves? Presumably, the field is lying unplanted, just as Ruth is lying unplanted. Both are waiting for a *goel* to come and bring life out of the "soil." Boaz explains to the unnamed redeemer that he must be willing to act as part of the drama of levirate marriage, and bring life to a dead man.

The potential *goel* (we'll call him Ploni as the text does) refuses with a zeal that betrays a kind of horror. "I would destroy my own inheritance!" Why is Ploni refusing? Because Ruth is a Moabite, and her children might not be accepted into his clan? Or, Ploni might be refusing because he has no heirs to his own land yet. If Ploni marries Ruth, her son (who would not really be his, but Machlon's) might be perceived as Ploni's heir and take the family land in addition to Elimelekh's land. Ploni doesn't want to interact with dead people or women who stand in for them. He just wants to go on with his life. Like Orpah at the beginning of the story, Ploni chooses to just be a person, to not become part of the drama of the returning grain. That is his prerogative, but he's no king either.

Ploni performs a ritual refusal of the role of *goel*, and makes way for the true redeemer, Boaz. Boaz gives the speech that we now know is a reminder of God's *hesed*, a reminder that humans and the grain are both part of a cycle of life that mysteriously returns from death.

> "You are witnesses today that I am acquiring all that was Elimelekh's and all that was Machlon's and Chilion's, from the hand of Naomi. I am also taking Ruth for my wife, to raise up the name of the dead on

> his inherited land, that the name of the dead not be cut off from his brothers, and from the gate of his home city. You are witnesses today! All the crowd at the gate, and the elders, said: Witnesses we are! May YHWH make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel! Do mightily in Efratah and make your name known in Bethlehem! And may your house be like the house of Peretz whom Tamar bore to Judah, through the seed YHWH will give to you from this maiden."
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> So Boaz married Ruth, she became his wife. He came in to her, and YHWH made her pregnant and she bore a son. *Ruth 4:9-10*

This paragraph is the ritual conclusion to *geulah*, redemption. Here, *geulah* means the reintegration of a lost individual into land and family. Boaz, the *goel*, is the one who assures Naomi, Ruth, and their dead men a place on the land and in the generations of the tribe.

The blessing of the crowd contains so many allusions it is hard to parse them all. First Ruth is blessed to be like Rachel and Leah: two women! This is because Ruth is two women. She is Ruth herself, and she is also Naomi. She is carrying Naomi's desperate hope for a grandchild in her body – not biologically but metaphysically, though his name. Naomi wants someone to "take" her land – to make her fertile again through some miracle. Ruth, by serving as a vehicle for Machlon's "seed," becomes two mothers in one.

Then the people bless Boaz and Ruth to "do mightily in Efratah" – Efratah, a name for the region, also means "fruitful" – and to "make a name for yourselves in Bethlehem" – the house of bread. Boaz and Ruth are being blessed to be as fruitful as the land itself.

Finally, the people bless the couple to be like the house of Peretz, son of Tamar and Judah. "Seed" is mentioned explicitly here, as is the union of Tamar and Judah. On one level the blessing makes sense – the two couples are both connected to levirate marriage – and on another level it is very odd indeed. Why mention Tamar at a wedding when Tamar's relations with Judah were so unconventional?

The incident between Tamar and Judah is another incident where a "sacred marriage" occurs between a man who is the ancestor of a royal house, and a woman who is acting to produce seed that is not the man's own, but rather the seed of a deceased relative. Tamar is actually called a priestess (*kedeishah*) by one of the characters. (Genesis 38:21) This blessing seems to be a tip-off that the scene between Boaz and Ruth on the threshing floor is indeed a sacred marriage. The Book of Ruth seems to have an understanding of *yibum* or levirate marriage as a fertility ceremony of great significance, worthy of producing the king – precisely because the levirate marriage ceremony answers the dilemma: "The old seed is dead. From where will the new seed come?"

A Son is Born to Naomi

Remember that Naomi is the core character of the Book of Ruth. She represents the land in famine, the empty womb, the lost hope. She is the one who most needs redemption. While the camera has been on Ruth and Boaz, Naomi has been waiting to see if Shaddai can do the only thing Naomi really wants: make her full again. "Have I any more children in my womb?" she asks forlornly in chapter 1. In the moment, the only answer we can give to her rhetorical question is a regretful "no." Yet now the townswomen gather around Naomi and announce that a son is born to her.

> The women said to Naomi: "Blessed be YHWH who has not kept a redeemer from you today. May his name be called in Israel! May he restore life (*meishiv nefesh*) and sustain your old age (*khalkeil et seivatekh*), for your daughter-in-law who loves you has borne him, and she is better to you than seven sons."
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> Naomi took the child and held it to her bosom, and she became his foster-mother. 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.

The miracle is complete. Through the metaphysical magic of *geulah*, Naomi has a grandson, the very thing she told her daughters-in-law was impossible. "A son is born to Naomi!" becomes spiritually and tribally true. The townswomen refer to the child as a *meishiv nefesh*, a restorer of life, and so he is: he restores Naomi's bond with her dead children. His "name" (not his biological identity) connects him eternally to her. He is her *goel*: he re-connects her to the land and her people.

Little Obed is also called *khalkeil*, sustainer: like the rest of the individuals in the story, he is both a human being and a representation of the grain cycle. Now he is young and needs sustenance, but one day he will feed the aging Naomi, just as the grain begins small and grows to be a sustainer of life. Like Boaz, he is a builder of society through the keeping of relationships between planting and harvest, old and new.

Ruth, of course, is also a restorer of life and sustainer of old age. Through her acts of *hesed*, she has already done for Naomi what Obed will one day do: fed her and enlivened her. The townswomen acknowledge this, telling Naomi that Ruth is better to her than seven sons. (They don't call her "Ruth the Moabite" but "your daughter-in-law," a phrase which removes the aura of the stranger from Ruth at last.) There is an echo here of the Hannah story, where Elkanah tells Hannah that his love for her is better than ten sons. But Ruth's love is more effective than Elkanah's, because Ruth has actually gotten Naomi what she needs. The comment on the townswomen's part that Ruth is better

than seven sons may in part reflect a subterranean attitude toward women and the earth. Seed may come and go, but without a womb to carry it, it is blown away on the wind.

By sharing her child with Naomi, Ruth has fulfilled her promise: "Where you go, I will go." Ruth truly makes Naomi her mother, not by an act of birth but by an act of love. Ruth merges with Naomi, in a sense, for both of them are named Obed's mother. Ruth is the spring to Naomi's winter: a new season in the circle of life. Ruth, by being willing to carry life for Naomi, is a *goelet* even if she is not named as such. Ruth may be a stranger (as the new season is always a stranger to us) but she brings hope with her.

There is another merging at work here. Obed, father of Jesse and grandfather of David, seems to have a very boring name: "Worker." Yet consider that an *oved* is both a worker of the land (*avodah* as work), and one who does priestly service (*avodah* as Temple ritual). Obed is a bridge between the land and the Temple. This connection becomes deeply poignant when we remember that the Temple was built on a threshing floor: "Arise and raise for YHWH an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." (II Sam. 24:18)

The name Obed hints to us that the work of the Temple (which Ruth's descendant Solomon will build) and the work of the threshing floor (where Boaz and Ruth lie together) are the same: the sustaining of life, and the bridging of the past (harvest) with the future (seed). Boaz, the kind landowner, the *goel* who gives his grain to the poor and his seed to the dead, bears the same name as one of the pillars of the Temple. The ancient grain cycle and the Temple rites are not separate. One is the mirror of the other. The Temple is a planting-and-harvest cycle of the spirit.

The final lines of Ruth, which recite David's genealogy, remind us that this story of *geulah* is a story of the line of the king and the building of the Temple. David is a legitimate king not in spite of his foreign origins but because of them: he is the seed of a *goel* and a *goelet*, an heir to acts of love and redemption. If the Temple is the threshing floor on a societal scale, the king is the *goel* on a societal scale. Both institutions, the text wants to tell us, are stewards of the tribal business of planting and harvest, burying and childbearing, charity and caretaking, the making of bonds between one person and another, one generation and the next.

Conclusion

The characters of Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, Obed, Orpah and Ploni, may seem rustic, but they represent the forces that drive human life: love and fear, loss and restoration, famine and abundance. They are humble people, but through their actions they tell the same powerful story as the deities of the grain and the springtime who journey to the underworld and back. They bring life out of death, not through miraculous return from the dead (as with Persephone and Dumuzi), but rather through acts of human love that have the same emotional effect: the restoration of hope.

When we understand this, we discover yet another reason why Jews read the Book of Ruth on *Shavuot*. *Shavuot* is the holiday of revelation, commemorating the covenant at Sinai. It is also the festival of first-fruits, when fresh loaves are brought to the altar. On *Shavuot*, we should consider not only our responsibility to the Torah as Jews, but the human responsibilities that arise from our shared destiny as mortal beings dependent on the grain (and all kinds of seed) for our lives.

The Book of Ruth is a drama of the harvest, not only because it takes place during the barley harvest but because it explores what harvest means to human beings. Naomi's journey in and out of famine teaches us of mortality and also of resilience; Ruth gleaning among the ears of grain is an image of our vulnerability and strength; Boaz on the threshing floor reminds us of our earthiness and nobility. Harvest is a hope, a miracle, a future that is lost each year and then rebuilt through hard work, love, and a little help from the unseen forces of life.

[1]Karl Kerenyi, *The Gods of the Greeks* (Thames & Hudson, 1951, 1980), p. 232-41; Maryline Parca and Angeliki Tzanetou (eds), *Finding Persephone: Women's Rituals in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 3-4.

[2]Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer. *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer*, p. 74-75.

[3]J.C.L. Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (T. and T. Clark, 1978)

[4] Lev. 19:9, 23;22; Deut. 24:19-21, Mishnah Peah.

[5]Aviva Zornberg. "The Concealed Alternative," in *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (eds. Judith A. Kates and Gail Reimer) Ballantine Books, 1994. p. 65-82.

[6]Aviva Zornberg. "The Concealed Alternative," in *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (eds. Judith A. Kates and Gail Reimer) Ballantine Books, 1994. p. 79.