

THE HONEST RUTH, SESSION 4:  
Queer Narrative; Margin to Center; Family Formation



“Ruth and Naomi” by Adi Nes

EROS OF DEVOTION: THE QUALITY OF RUTH’S CLEAVING

וַתִּשְׁנֶה קוֹלָהּ וַתִּבְכֶּינָה עוֹד וַתִּשְׁקַע עֲרָפָהּ לַחֲמוֹתָהּ וְרוּת דָּבְקָה בָּהּ:

And they lifted up their voice, and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law;  
but Ruth held fast (*davqah*) to her. (Ruth 1:14)

√ *Davaq* Tied to Love, Marriage, or Sexual Union

עַל-כֵּן יַעֲזֹב-אִישׁ אֶת-אָבִיו וְאֶת-אִמּוֹ וְדָבַק בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ וְהִיּוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד:

Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave (*davaq*) to his wife;  
and they shall be one flesh. (Genesis 2:24)

וַתִּדְבַק נַפְשׁוֹ בְּדִינָה בִּת-יַעֲקֹב וַיֵּאָהֵב אֶת-הַנַּעֲרָ וַיְדַבֵּר עִל-לֵב הַנַּעֲרָ:

And [Shechem’s] soul clung to Dinah, daughter of Jacob, and he loved the maiden,  
and he spoke to the maiden tenderly. (Genesis 34:3)

והַמֶּלֶךְ שֶׁלֹמֹה אָהַב נָשִׁים נְכָרִיּוֹת רַבּוֹת וְאֶת-בֵּת-פַּרְעֹה מוֹאֲבִיּוֹת עַמּוֹנִיּוֹת אֲדָמִיּוֹת צִדְנִיּוֹת חִתִּיּוֹת:  
 מִן-הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר-יְהוָה אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא-תִבְנְאוּ בָהֶם וְהֵם לֹא-יִבְנְאוּ בְכֶם אַךְ יִטּוּ אֶת-לִבְבְּכֶם  
 אַחֲרָי אֶל-הֵיחֶם בְּהֶם דָּבַק שְׁלֹמֹה לְאֵהָבָה:

King Solomon loved many foreign women in addition to Pharaoh's daughter —  
 Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Phoenician, and Hittite women,  
 from the nations of which Adonai had said to the Israelites, “None of you shall join them  
 and none of them shall join you [in marriage]  
 lest they turn your heart away to follow their gods.”  
 Such women Solomon clung to (*davaq*) and loved. (I Kings 11:1-2)

כִּי | אִם-שׁוּב תִּשׁוּבוּ וּדְבַקְתֶּם בְּיֹתֵר הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה הַנִּשְׁאָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אִתְּכֶם  
 וְהִתְחַתְּנֶתֶם בָּהֶם וּבְאֵתָם בָּהֶם וְהֵם בְּכֶם:

For should you turn away and attach yourselves (*ud'vaqtem*) to the remnant of those nations—  
 to those that are left among you—and intermarry with them, you joining them and they joining  
 you, [various bad things will happen]. (Joshua 23:12)

### √ *Davaq* as Devotion to (or of) God

אַחֲרָי יְהוָה אֵלֵיכֶם תִּלְכוּ וְאִתּוֹ תִירָאוּ וְאֶת-מִצְוֹתָיו תִּשְׁמְרוּ וּבְקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמְעוּ וְאִתּוֹ תַעֲבֹדוּ וְבוֹ תִדְבַּקוּ:

It is Adonai your God whom you should follow (*telekhu*), whom you should revere,  
 whose commandments you should observe, whose orders you should heed,  
 whom you should worship, and to whom you should hold fast (*tidbaqun*). (Deuteronomy 13:5)

אִישׁ רְעִים לְהִתְרַעֵעַ וְיֵשׁ אֵיחָב דָּבַק מֵאָח:

There are companions to keep one company, and there is one who loves you,  
 more devoted (*daveq*) than a brother. (Proverbs 18:24)

### √ *Davaq* as Physical Closeness

וַיֹּאמֶר בִּיעָז אֶל-רוּת הַלְוָיָה שָׁמְעֵת בְּתִי אֶל-תִּלְכִּי לְלֶקֶט בְּשָׂדֵה אַחֵר  
 וְגַם לֹא תַעֲבוּרִי מִזֶּה וְכֹה תִדְבַּקִּין עִם-נַעֲרֹתַי:

Boaz said to Ruth, “Listen to me, daughter. Don’t go to glean in another field.  
 Don’t go elsewhere, but stay here close (*tidbaqin*) to my maidens. (Ruth 2:8)

וַתֹּאמֶר רוּת הַמוֹאֲבִיָּה גַם | כִּי-אָמַר אֵלַי עִם-הַנַּעֲרִים אֲשֶׁר-לִי תִדְבַּקִּין  
 עַד אִם-כָּלֹו אֵת כָּל-הַקְּצִיר אֲשֶׁר-לִי:

Ruth the Moabite said [to Naomi], “He even told me, ‘Stay close by (*tidbaqin*) my workers  
 until all my harvest is finished.’” (Ruth 2:21)

וַתִּדְבֹק בַּנְּעָרוֹת בְּעֵזֶר לְלֶקֶט עַד-כְּלוֹת קְצִיר-הַשְּׁעָרִים וּקְצִיר הַחֲטָיִם וַתָּשָׁב אֶת-חֲמוֹתֶיהָ:

So [Ruth] stayed close (*vaticdbaq*) to the maidservants of Boaz, and gleaned until the barley harvest and the wheat harvest were finished. Then she stayed at home with her mother-in-law. (Ruth 2:23)

וַיִּקַּח אֶת-אֶחָיו עִמּוֹ וַיִּרְדּוּ אַחֲרָיו דָּרָךְ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים וַיִּדְבֹק אוֹתוֹ בְּהַר הַגִּלְעָד:

So [Laban] took his kinsmen with him and pursued [Jacob et al] a distance of seven days, catching up with (*vayadbeq*) him in the hill country of Gilead. (Genesis 31:23)

### √ *Davaq* as Holding Tight to an Inheritance

זֶה הַדְּבָר־אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּה יְהוָה לְבָנוֹת צִלְפַּחַד יְאֵמֹר לְטוֹב בְּעֵינֵיהֶם תִּהְיֶינָה לְנָשִׁים אֵךְ לְמִשְׁפַּחַת מִטָּה  
אֲבֵיהֶם תִּהְיֶינָה לְנָשִׁים: וְלֹא-תִסָּב נַחֲלָה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּטָּה אֶל-מִטָּה  
כִּי אִישׁ בְּנַחֲלַת מִטָּה אֲבֹתָיו יִדְבֹקוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

This is what Adonai has commanded concerning the daughters of Zelophehad:  
They may become the wives of anyone they wish,  
provided they become wives within a clan of their father's tribe.  
No inheritance of the Israelites may pass over from one tribe to another,  
but rather the Israelite [heirs] — each of them —  
must remain bound (*yidb'qu*) to the ancestral portion of their tribe.

## SAME-SEX INTIMACY

From Elana Spivack, “‘Wherever You Go, I Go’: Queerness in the Book of Ruth,” *Jewish Women's Archives*, May 27, 2020.

The companionship these two biblical women display is in itself is remarkable. Queerness is not always just about one's sexual or romantic inclinations, but also one's status in relation to a group, or one's unorthodox tendencies, exemplified by one's behaviors or the company one keeps. This story is queer without Ruth and Naomi having to express sexual or romantic attraction to each other, as Preser explains: “The Book of Ruth does not detail the relationship between Ruth and Naomi; it simply presents us with an exceptional story of devotion...Cautious not to apply an anachronistic conception of lesbianism to the text, queer scholars seem to agree that the Ruth–Naomi dyad offers a powerful biblical example of same-sex intimacy.” The very existence of Ruth and Naomi's intimate relationship in the Bible, a thousands-of-years-old text, is significant and radical.

## BENDING EXISTING MECHANISMS TO ACHIEVE LEGITIMATE STATUS

From Elon Green, “The Lost History of Gay Adult Adoption,” New York Times, October 19, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/19/magazine/the-lost-history-of-gay-adult-adoption.html>

Now that marriage equality is an American right, partner adoptions are hard to fathom, an artifact of an earlier societal paradigm that, in a remarkably short period of time, has come to seem inconceivable. “People today really have a hard time remembering, let alone feeling, what it was like to be an outlaw — to be truly strangers to the law — shoved out of every legal system, and then persecuted,” said Evan Wolfson, founder of Freedom to Marry, an organization that, for more than a decade, has played a large role in the passage of same-sex marriage legislation. It is easy to forget that an American state would not decriminalize sodomy until 1961; that as late as 1966, gays and lesbians could not legally buy a drink in a New York City bar; that even after the Stonewall riots, in 1969, the American Psychiatric Association considered homosexuality a mental illness. As recently as 2000, civil unions were still not widely available and domestic partnerships didn’t offer federal protections.

Adult adoption by gays and lesbians has only been quietly discussed, both in or outside the gay community, for fairly obvious reasons; there isn’t an easy way to tell your friends and family that the man or woman with whom you share a bed is, legally, your son or father, or your daughter or mother. Consequently, there are no reliable data — or even flimsy data — as to the number of such adoptions, and experts in the field are unwilling to hazard a guess. The practice seems to have taken hold amid the tumult of the 1970s and 1980s, during rampant discrimination and the onset of the AIDS crisis.

### HAPPY (?) ENDING

(Ruth 4:9-22)

9. And Boaz said to the elders, and to all the people, You are witnesses this day, that I have bought all that was Elimelech’s, and all that was Kilion’s and Machlon’s, from the hand of Naomi. 10. And also Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Machlon, have I bought to be my wife, to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance, so that the name of the dead shall not be cut off from among his brothers, and from the gate of his place; you are witnesses this day.

11. And all the people that were in the gate, and the elders, said, We are witnesses. May Adonai make the woman that has come into your house like Rachel and like Leah, who both built the house of Israel. May you prosper in Ephratah, and be famous in Beth-Lehem; 12. And may your house be like the house of Peretz, whom Tamar bore to Judah, of the seed which Adonai shall give you of this young woman.

13. So Boaz took Ruth, and she was his wife; and when he went in to her, Adonai gave her conception, and she bore a son. 14. And the women said to Naomi, Blessed be Adonai, which has not left you this day without a redeemer, that his name may be famous in Israel! 15. And he shall be to you a restorer of your life, and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has born him.

16. And Naomi took the child, and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. 17. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, A son has been born to Naomi; and they called his name Oved; he is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

18. Now these are the generations of Peretz; Peretz fathered Hezron, 19. And Hezron fathered Ram, and Ram fathered Amminadav, 20. And Amminadav fathered Nahshon, and Nahshon fathered Salmon, 21. And Salmon fathered Boaz, and Boaz fathered Oved, 22. And Oved fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David. [Mic drop.]

### QUEER FAMILY FORMATION

From Irwin Keller, “Where You Go I Will Go: A Halachic & Symbolic Consideration of Ruth’s Oath as a Wedding Vow,” (Senior Teshuvah for the Aleph Ordination Program, Fall 2020). (Download link: <https://www.musmachimot-2021.org/s/Keller-Teshuvah-v2021.pdf>)

The phrase “a son is born to Naomi” (Ruth 4:17) validates what many queer families struggle to achieve: to uplift their families and be held as family by others. It elevates *kinship* over *biology*.<sup>1</sup> The wise neighbor women knew the baby was Naomi’s, even though Naomi had no genetic connection with Oved. She was nonetheless offered the honor due a parent.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the whole Book of Ruth hovers around the question of kinship versus biology. Much of the action rests on Naomi’s knowledge of the system of *yibum* or “levirate mar-

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1. It is commonplace for queer parents to be asked inappropriate questions about how their children were conceived, so that those inquiring can judge who the “real” parent is. Sometimes it is the children themselves who are asked these questions. In my own family, a fellow congregant once spent time with our older child at a synagogue camping trip; in questioning him she learned that he and his brother had different donors, and asserted to him that they were therefore not brothers but half-brothers. This was in contradiction to the kinship system within which our family lived and which we had articulated to our community. It took months before he referred to his brother as “brother” again. Parents of adoptive children face similar dishonoring of the truth of their family.

2. BT Sanhedrin 19b say this is because Naomi raised the child, which would also be a fine principle. But within the *p’sbat* – the simple text – of the story, it is not clear that childrearing has even begun. The previous verse says Naomi became Oved’s *omenet*, his nurse or governess or guardian. But in the telling, it does not seem like Naomi has had the time to *earn* her attribution of motherhood through childrearing; it seems rather that the neighbor women give the attribution because they understand the nature of Naomi’s relationship to Ruth and thus to the child.

riage,” under which a younger brother is under obligation to marry his older brother’s widow if they had not yet produced an heir.<sup>3</sup> In levirate marriage, a *social* category of lineage supplants a biological one. The child of *yibum* is the heir of a dead father, not of the person whose DNA they directly carry. The Book of Ruth expands the scope of *yibum* by creating an obligation in cousins, even distant cousins, to marry a childless widow. It is this [somewhat fictionalized] obligation that propels the story.

Even though Ruth’s “redemption” by and marriage to Boaz is a legitimating factor at the story’s conclusion, there remains a delicate dance about parentage and kinship. In the list of “begettings” at the end of the book that leads us to King David, we see that Boaz “begat” Oved.<sup>4</sup> And yet nowhere in the book is Boaz explicitly referred to as Oved’s father, or Oved as Boaz’s son. It seems that Boaz’s genetic connection is acknowledged but his social role as father is being underplayed. Oved is also not referred to as the son of Machlon, which one would expect under the levirate laws. Boaz is identified by the neighbor women as Naomi’s *go’el*, or redeemer under the levirate laws, rather than Ruth’s, and Naomi is identified as the baby’s *omenet* – guardian or foster-parent, the same relationship Mordecai has with Esther.<sup>5</sup>

Especially interesting is that the neighbor women call Ruth Naomi’s *kalah*, a word that can equally mean daughter-in-law or bride.<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that Ruth was Naomi’s bride in any technical way. But there is a recognition here that Ruth and Naomi were in a relationship with each other for which words did not suffice; Ruth was daughter-like and bride-like to Naomi; she pledged her lifelong commitment to her<sup>7</sup> and gave her a child that was recognized as belonging to them both.<sup>8</sup>

This very conscious awareness of how kinship is produced and honored will resonate with

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3. Deuteronomy 25:5-10.

4. Ruth 4:21.

5. Ruth 4:14; 4:16; Esther 2:7.

6. Ruth 4:15.

7. We do not know the effect of Ruth’s marriage to Boaz on her pledge to Naomi. Boaz says: וְגַם אֶת-רִוְתָהּ הַמֹּאבִיטָה אֲשֶׁת מַחֲלֹן קָנִיתִי לִי לְאִשָּׁה לְהַקְיִים שָׁם-הַיְמֹת עַל-בְּחֻלְתָּו וְלֹא-יִכָּרֵת שֵׁם-הַיְמֵת מֵעַם אֲחִיו וּמִשְׁעַר מְקוֹמוֹ עַד־יָם אֲתָם הַיָּם: “I am also acquiring – *kaniti* – Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Machlon, as a wife, in order to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate, that the name of the deceased may not disappear from among his kin and from the gate of his home town.” (Ruth 4:10.) Boaz uses our much-discussed acquisition verb, *kanah*. And he stipulates that it is for the purpose of preserving Machlon’s legacy. Blessings and excitement ensue vis-a-vis this marriage; nonetheless we do not witness any process by which Ruth is released of her oath to Naomi. Have Ruth, Naomi and Boaz found a way for these commitments to co-exist?

8. I am aware that another stream of modern feminist interpretation is concerned here that Ruth’s child was taken by Naomi; that Ruth was exploited here. This is indeed another reasonable interpretation of the story elements we’re given. I think it is important and possible to see both possibilities in the text, and we do not need to decide which is “correct” in order for both to have *aggadic* relevance for our modern understandings.

the experience of queer people. Queer families make children in a range of ways – known donors, anonymous donors, surrogacy, and co-parenting arrangements in which, as arguably in the case of baby Oved, there are more than two people with the social role of parent, even if not all of them are legally recognized.<sup>9</sup>

This is a deep knowing in queer communities. It is also a piece of what makes the Ruth-Naomi story familiar. We may struggle with finding the terminology for Ruth and Naomi's bond in any language. But as a model of alternative family formation, it resonates deeply with queer people, whose relations and families are based on conscious family formation, and rarely on accident.

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9. These issues of kinship vs. biology come to play in other corners of our Jewish practices. There are *mitzvot* that accrue to a father, such as *brit milah*. The father of the baby is halakhically required to perform the *milah* or to delegate someone else to do so. In the case of an anonymous donor, whose *mitzvah* is it? And in the case of a known but uninvolved or only partially involved donor, on what grounds does the duty fall to him instead of, say, to the individuals who will be the primary or exclusive social parents? We see similar difficulties in communities in which Jewishness is accounted for exclusively matrilineally. What if there are numerous social parents, raising a child as co-parents, and the birth mother is the one among them who is not Jewish? All of these questions are deserving of study and *t'shuvot* of their own. Let this serve as a reminder that in queer families (at least), parenthood asks to be honored as something different from paternity or maternity; biology can no longer be the sole halakhic determiner of kinship and duty.