

CREATING A HERO

Cantor Rabbi Arik Wollheim and Dr. Ellen Basian

On Shavuot, we celebrate the receiving of the Torah and we perform the ancient custom of reading the Book of Ruth. Shavuot is also the day that King David was born and, seventy years later, it is the day upon which he died. On this significant anniversary, we might expect to focus upon one of the many sources in the Bible that honor David's legacy as can be found in his monumental work the Book of Psalms, in the chapters of Samuel, or in the references to King David as the ultimate leader to whom we refer "Chai Vekeyam (i.e. alive and exists). Instead, we read the Book of Ruth that does not really tell us anything about David, the man, the leader.

To understand the importance of this custom, we would like to suggest that while other books may better present King David and his achievements, the placement of his name as the last word in the Book of Ruth signifies that we are meant to study David's ancestry on this holiday. From the plethora of significant players in David's ancestry, we find four extraordinary female figures whose stories illustrate their pivotal roles as essential enablers of the Davidic lineage and reveal themes of transformation from transgression to redemption. Drawing from their stories, we will demonstrate common elements embedded within them as well as thematic threads woven across them. We will appreciate the context within which these women lived, how they coped with their challenges, and the generational consequences of their actions. Furthermore, we will suggest that these ancestral conditions sow seeds that literally or figuratively contribute to the cultivation of David's character such that he emerges as the ultimate leader, and, by extension, that they contain crucial elements for his lineage, the "Messiah, son of David".

To set the stage for our observations and analysis, we will briefly outline the stories of the following four women: Lot's eldest daughter; Tamar (daughter-in-law of Judah); Ruth; and Nitzevet (Mother of King David).

A) Lot's eldest daughter

Lot was the orphan nephew of Abraham who grew up in Abraham's house and then decided to part from his uncle to settle in Sodom for financial reasons. Sodom represents the worst of human behavior, such that it cannot be corrected and, therefore, Sodom had to be destroyed. The city of Sodom was destined for complete destruction due to its moral and social corruption, despite Abraham's plea to God to save it. God decided to destroy Sodom, but agreed to save Lot and his family and sends angels to evacuate the family. The angels appeared as strangers looking for hospitality and only Lot was willing to offer it to them. The rest of the city residents demanded that the guests be handed over to them and, in an effort to save the strangers and appease the crowd, Lot, offered his daughters instead. Before that exchange, the angels were

able to safely extract the family from Sodom, however, along the way, Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt and he and his two daughters took refuge in a cave nearby. Believing that they are the only survivors in the world, Lot's older daughter decided that she and her sister have the sole responsibility to continue mankind. In order to fulfill that responsibility, she arranged for her father to get so drunk that he unwittingly complies with her efforts to become pregnant. That union results with the birth of Moab, father of the nation of Ruth.

B) Tamar

Judah, fourth son of Jacob, following the sale of Joseph, moves out of the house, marries a Canaanite woman and fathers three sons. The oldest marries a Canaanite woman named Tamar and dies before having any children. Judah asked his second son to provide offspring for Tamar so that the family line might continue, however, he too dies before they have children. At this point, Judah is portrayed as viewing Tamar as cursed and, therefore, he is reluctant to give her his remaining and youngest son, Shelah. Rather, he tells Tamar to wait for Shelah. However, even after Shelah has grown up, Judah still does not give Tamar to him in marriage. After Shelah had grown up, Judah became a widower and following the mourning of his wife, he planned on going to shear his sheep. Upon hearing this news, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and went there. Judah saw the prostitute, but he did not recognize her as Tamar in her disguise and he requested her services. Tamar's plan was to become pregnant by this ruse so that she might bear a child in Judah's line. While she was disguised as a prostitute, Tamar struck a bargain with Judah for a goat, secured by his staff, seal, and cord. When Judah was able to have a goat sent to her in order to collect his staff and seal, the woman was nowhere to be found. Three months later, Judah wrongfully accused Tamar of inappropriate relations and he ordered that she be burned to death. Tamar sent the staff, seal, and cord to Judah with a message declaring that the owner of these items was the man who had made her pregnant. Upon recognizing these items as his security, Judah released Tamar from her sentence and admitted his mistake of not letting her marry Shelah and of accusing her of inappropriate relations. Tamar, having thus secured her place in the family as well as Judah's posterity, gave birth to twins, and one of them, Perez, is identified in the book of Ruth as an ancestor of King David.

C) Ruth

Elimelech a man of Bethlehem-Judah, with his wife, Naomi, and his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, went in time of famine and sojourned in the land of Moab. Elimelech died in Moab and his two sons married. Mahlon married Ruth and Chilion married Orpa; both women of Moab and both widowed shortly after they wed. Naomi heard that the famine in Judah had passed and determined to return home. Ruth, in spite of the dissuasion of Naomi, declared her devotion to G-d and to the Jewish people in her statement "your nation is my nation, your G-d is my G-d" and Ruth accompanied her mother-in-law to Bethlehem. The two women arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest in a state of dire poverty, but Elimelech had an

inheritance of land among his brethren. In order for Naomi to claim it, she had to find a Goel, that is, a kinsman of Elimelech who could assert Elimelech's inheritance rights. Elimelech had a prosperous relative in Bethlehem whose name was Boaz. Boaz was busy with the harvest, so Naomi sent Ruth to his fields to collect barley where Boaz spoke with her kindly and showed her some favors. Acting upon the advice of her mother-in-law, Ruth approached Boaz at night, and he was inspired to take responsibility for her. Before he could do so, Boaz informed her that there was a kinsman nearer than he who had the first right to redeem the estate of Elimelech and that it would be necessary for this kinsman to renounce his right before Boaz could proceed in that matter. After informing the elders and the kinsman that the kinsman had renounced his rights in favor of Boaz, Boaz bought the estate from Naomi. Boaz then interpreted the Torah prohibition about marrying a Moabite as one that only applies to the men, not to the women, which enabled him to marry Ruth. Ruth and Boaz became the great grandparents of David.

D) Nitzevet

Only the Talmud reveals the name of David's mother, Nitzevet. David's father, Jesse, was married to Nitzevet, however, the Midrash explains that, at some point, after they married, Jesse second guessed his own status as a Jew because he as a descendant of Ruth and the ruling about distinguishing marriage with a Moabite man versus a Moabite woman was still controversial three generations later. Therefore, Jesse separated himself from Nitzevet to her great despair and he planned to be with his non-Jewish servant instead of her. The servant told Nitzevet and they switched places unbeknownst to Jesse. Nitzevet become pregnant from their union, but Jesse and his sons believed that she had been unfaithful. When Nitzevet gives birth to their son, David, he was treated as a bastard by his father and brothers and she suffered humiliation for 28 years. Only when Samuel the prophet comes to Jesse to anoint "his son, David" as King of Israel does the truth come out that Jesse was David's father indeed and that Nitzevet was faithful. At that point, Jesse reconciled with his Jewish status and with his wife, Nitzevet.

Having briefly outlined the tales of these four women, we will now explore how their stories share common elements as well as how their stories seem to progress from the most extreme situation to more subtle variations of a theme.

1. Context

Each woman's story takes place against the backdrop of the senior male figure making a mistake of moving away from the Jewish nation in varying degrees. Across the stories, we observe how the moral qualities of the reason to leave improve from the worst reason to seek financial gain, to social success, to find food, and then to misguided Halachic belief. Additionally, the progression follows the greatest separation from their Jewish identity to their least departure from it.

Lot leaves Abraham and chooses to live in Sodom where he seeks financial gain and becomes highly assimilated into that corrupt society which represents the greatest departure from a moral Jewish life. Judah leaves Jacob's house after the sale of Joseph to live among the Canaanites where he marries a Canaanite woman, but he still holds onto his Jewish identity. While Elimelech moves to Moab because of famine in Israel, he retains his Jewish identity, but his sons assimilate and marry Moabite women. Jesse separates himself mentally from the Jewish community under the misguided belief that his Jewish status is in question.

2. Alienation

Each woman is alien to the Jewish nation in the sense that she is an outsider and it is only through her decisive actions that she moves into alignment to become a critical predecessor of King David.

Lot's daughters are the only survivors after the destruction of Sodom. Sodom represents the worst of human behavior beyond redemption. Since the Torah requires us to live a moral and conscience life, Sodom is the most alien society to the Jewish nation. While Lot's eldest daughter is associated with this most egregious society, she is counted amongst David's predecessors through the birth of her son Moab who is the founder of Ruth's birth nation. Tamar, according to the Midrash, is a descendant of Shem, son of Noah. Even though the Jewish nation also traces back to Shem, she is still not considered to be part of the Jewish lineage. She moves closer to it initially by securing her membership as part of Judah's family and then by bearing his children, one of whom is noted as David's ancestor. Although Ruth was a Moabite, she becomes an integral part of the Jewish nation when she marries Mahlon and remains devoted to Naomi who connects her with Boaz. Ruth's marriage with Boaz positions her to become a great grandparent of David. Nitzevet is estranged from her husband Jesse and their union is essential for the birth of David.

3. Rejection

At the heart of each woman's crisis are profound feelings of unresolved rejection ranging from the most expansive rejection by G-d to the intimate rejection by a spouse.

Lot's daughter believes that they are the lone survivors in the world after the destruction of Sodom and that God has rejected them and the entire world without recourse. Tamar is rejected by Judah twice: first, when she was not given in marriage to the third son; and secondly, when he discovers that she is pregnant. Both rejections are resolved when he acknowledges his mistakes and she returns to the fold of the family. Ruth is rejected by Naomi, but that rejection is quickly rectified when Ruth decides to stay with Naomi. Nitzevet is rejected by her husband for more than 28 years before they fully reconcile.

4. Abandonment

Within each story, we find our underdog heroine abandoned by the person upon whom she was dependent. The theme of isolation is woven into the most concrete physical plane of existence through to the social, emotional, and Halachic fabric of marital connection.

Lot's daughter is left motherless, homeless, and bereft of any protective resources with no foreseeable future dependent upon a father who was willing to give her to an angry mob to be abused. Tamar, twice widowed and still childless, is abandoned by a father-in-law who refuses to grant her future marriage. Ruth is left widowed, childless, and dependent upon her Mother-in-law. Nitzevet is dependent on her husband Jesse who emotionally and sexually abandons her for reasons related to his beliefs.

5. Life threatening trouble

Within each traumatic tale, the woman recognizes that life as she knew it is over and she is in crisis. These crises progress from global devastation to marital dissolution.

Lot's daughter believes the world was destroyed and the very survival of mankind is threatened. Tamar has lost two husbands and realizes that her future options are bleak. Ruth, widowed and dependent upon mother-in-law Naomi, faces a journey into unknown land to secure the future of their family. Nitzevet recognizes that Jesse is intimately inaccessible to her and that situation later deteriorates further when she is accused of infidelity.

6. Motivation

Here we are addressing the underlying motivations rather than the behavior itself. They each have a compelling reason for their "mis-conduct" that is greater than their own self-interest. These characters are driven by a sense of loyalty to life itself, to the Jewish nation, to the family, and to the marriage. They are willing to make personal sacrifices for the greater good and, in doing so, they express their courage to break taboos, engage in prohibited relations, violate societal norms, and cross personal boundaries.

Lot's daughter believes it is up to her to continue Mankind, even at the price of committing incest. Tamar is motivated to pursue prohibited sexual relations with Judah to perpetuate the Tribe. Ruth is motivated to secure the continuity of the Family even by bending the rules of extra-marital relations. Nitzevet is motivated to have another child and to reconcile her marriage even without Jesse's informed consent.

7. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

The women initiate action to create optimal conditions to ensure future generations. They assume responsibility for fulfilling their destiny as far as they can conceive it to be, given their limited horizons. Their extreme efforts to fulfill their vital mission range from committing the most heinous sin of incest to covert deception within a marital relationship.

While Lot's daughter gets him drunk so he will not be conscious enough to object to committing incest, Tamar plans a strategic meeting with Judah, sets the stage, prepares her disguise,

negotiates a trade, and reveals the truth in a timely and modest manner. Ruth approaches Boaz in a way that occurs outside the sanctity of marriage and Nitzevet secretly switches place with her servant in order to be intimate with her own husband.

8. Deliberately Disguised Identity to Ensure Anonymity

Within each scenario, the woman deliberately disguises her identity to fulfill the objective of having a child for the greater good. Across this theme of anonymity, we see their deception progress from creating a state of unconsciousness to contriving a case of mistaken identity. Lot is drunk, passively compliant and totally unaware of his actions as the Torah states “he did not know when she lay or when she arose”. Judah is conscious of his actions, but he does not know that the prostitute is actually Tamar. Boaz is in a half sleep state and susceptible to Ruth’s subtle advances. Jesse is unaware that Nitzevet has switched places with the servant.

9. Informed Consent

Another common element is the absence of informed consent by the men. None of the male partners would have knowingly consented to the coupling with their respective female partners had they been aware of their true identity at that time.

10. Powerful men

Each woman is forced to deal with the powerful, dominant man in her life who would be reluctant to cooperate with her under consensual circumstances. There is a progression in the amount of control the man has over the woman from complete control to a more equal partner. Lot has complete control over his daughter to the extent that he can send her to be abused by an angry mob. Tamar’s father-in-law has complete control over whether and when she will re-marry. Boaz is a powerful kinsman who holds the key for Ruth’s future. Despite Jesse and Nitzevet’s relatively equal status as husband and wife, Jesse still exercises a measure of emotional control over her as he believes that she was unfaithful and makes her suffer for 28 years.

11. Un-normative leverage marriage

The Torah tells us that a childless widow is supposed to marry her brother-in-law and that the child “shall be accounted to the dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out in Israel”. Yet, in all our stories, there is a twist where someone else unites with the widow and, while they are from the same family, they are not the intended Yabam (i.e. the husband’s brother). Lot is the father, not the Kinsman. Selah is supposed to be with Tamar, not Judah. Not until after the closest kinsman declines to be with Ruth does Boaz marry her. After Jesse clarifies his Halachic status as a Jew, he returns to the intimate relationship with Nitzevet.

12. It's a Boy!

Our heroines consciously choose to take decisive action in the direction of motherhood and they each produce a son that is instrumental in providing for the next generation; each of whom plays a pivotal role in assuring the perpetuation of David's ancestry.

Lot's eldest daughter's son was Moab who is the founder of Ruth's birth nation. Tamar bore twins and one of them was Peretz who continued the lineage which 10 generations later produced David. Ruth is the mother of Oved who was the grandfather of David. Nitzevet is the mother of David.

13. Redemption

One of the ideals in Judaism is the creation of a long-lasting marriage with children. In each of these scenarios, the women strive for this ideal with lesser to greater success.

The only decree of success that Lot's daughter achieves is that she gives birth to Moab who is essential for the future generations to culminate in the birth of David. Tamar achieves a greater degree by giving birth to twins and reuniting with the family, however, she does not regain full marital status. Ruth and Boaz do marry and have a child, however, according to tradition, Boaz dies shortly after they wed, so they do not experience the ideal long-lasting marriage. After 28 years, Nitzevet and Jesse fully reconcile their marriage.

14. Conversion

Each woman moves a step closer towards Judaism. There is a progression from Lot's daughter who starts the nation of Moab to Tamar who ties her destiny to Judah's Jewish family. Ruth is the first recorded convert and, finally, Nitzevet, is already Jewish.

Each personal journey presents a poignant arc of transformation from suffering victimhood via circumstances beyond their control through self-assertion to arrange conditions whereby they actualize their potency to create future generations for the greater good. Each scenario is imbued with intricate elements that cultivate conditions propelling the generations into alignment with the destiny of David. From the crudest of conditions to the most delicate of dynamics, we see how these four women emerge to become pivotal predecessors of King David and how the Book of Ruth calls our attention to these ancestral stories that may contain the seeds of King David's lineage leading to the Messiah.

For in the face of adversity, these women demonstrate their loyalty to their life affirming ideals, creativity to cope with crisis, courage to take risks, humbleness to make personal sacrifices, and willingness to use unconventional measures, despite their impoverished beginnings, disadvantages, vulnerability, and limited resources. All their qualities are conducive to creating a true and noble leader who possesses the heart, mind, and will to lead with kindness, compassion, and integrity.

Unlike other cultures where the Myth of the Hero includes a pre-destined future, our King David is the Antihero story. While David would appear to be the least likely person to become the king because he is small, weak, rejected by his father and outcast by his family, he emerges from his low status and difficult conditions to become the ultimate king because of his character and how he masters his challenges.

As we celebrate receiving the Torah on Shavuot, we are reminded that while our ancestors hold the key to our history, they neither guarantee nor limit our legacy. Likewise, we must not judge the history or future potential of another person as if we can stereotype their destiny based on their circumstances or station in life. The rabbis continue the message of the Bible and teach us that the crown of Torah is greater than the crown of priesthood and sovereignty because it is available to all who want it, not just to those who are born to it (Rambam, Talmud Torah 3,1).

Chag Same'ach and Shabbat Shalom