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We sometimes speak about presidents having an eye towards history. And we think too, about wanting to be on the right side of history. Not too many people are proud of a legacy of opposing civil rights, for example. Rather, those who are celebrated are the ones who marched for freedom. Have you ever done something because of the legacy you would leave for the future—for people you will never even know? Maybe it's a practice that you've begun, like recycling. Or maybe there has been activism that you've engaged in because you feel compelled to create a particular legacy.

We have a fascinating case study of legacies with the book of Ruth. There's a famine in the land of Israel, so Elimelech and Naomi, and their two sons go to the land of Moav, to find food. They stay for ten years; their sons marry there, but then Elimelech dies, and the two sons die as well. Naomi is left with her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. Naomi intends to return to Israel, and tells Ruth and Orpah to return to their mothers' houses. Orpah departs, but Ruth insists on staying with Naomi, saying, famously, "Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people is my people, and your god is my god" (Ruth 1:16).

The question is, why does Ruth go with Naomi? Perhaps it's loyalty and duty—she wants to take care of her mother-in-law, and feels duty-bound, obligated, and loyal. Perhaps it's about love—maybe Ruth simply loves her mother-in-law and wants to stay with her. Or perhaps Ruth really wants to be a part of the Jewish people, and this is her *entré*.

Loyalty or duty, love, religion—these are all reasonable motivators, but none of them is about legacy.

I want to tell you about two different legacies, or perhaps, a legacy within a legacy. In the 1864, a Russian Karaite scholar named Abraham Firkovich visited Cairo and collected many ancient Jewish manuscripts. (Karaites were the original biblical literalists, who took the Torah literally, and did not hold by rabbinic interpretation of Torah. They still exist today in small communities in Israel and elsewhere.) Scholars today debate about whether the manuscripts he took were from the Ben Ezra Synagogue geniza thirty years before Solomon Schechter arrived to "discover" the Cairo geniza, or if they were from the Karaite Synagogue in Cairo's geniza. The Firkovich collection resides now in the Russian National Library in St. Peterburg, and many of the manuscripts of midrash in this collection were set aside and hardly touched by researchers. Even today, almost thirty years after the fall of the Iron Curtain and with technologically advanced research methods, most of the material has yet to be correctly catalogued.

But some Israeli scholars have begun to examine this material and Professor Gila Vachman, a scholar of midrash, discovered a previously unknown midrash about Ruth. Can you imagine someone writing in ink on parchment an interpretation of Ruth, somewhere, perhaps, in Egypt, a thousand years ago? So the first legacy is this midrash that someone unknown wrote, that has been unknown for a thousand years, and yet now is being published, studied, written about, and taught. That's quite a legacy!

And the second legacy is in the contents of the midrash, which is itself about legacy. The midrash explains that Ruth did not want to leave Naomi because Ruth wanted to stay with the Jewish people, and wanted to remain “under the wings of the Shekhina,” of God’s presence. Ruth goes on to say, “I will bring you someone who will spread his wings upon you,” meaning that she’ll help find the closest family of Naomi who will “redeem” Naomi and take care of her (which, by the way, she does). And then Ruth says, “And from you the kingship will come,” which is exactly what happens, because when Ruth marries Boaz and has a child, Oved, we are told that Oved becomes the father of Yishai who is the father of King David. And although Ruth is the mother, people say at the moment in the book of Ruth that Oved is the child of Naomi.

Ruth doesn’t leave Naomi because Ruth knows that staying with Naomi will be instrumental in creating a legacy for Naomi (the baby is called Naomi’s, because it is in, some way, a stand-in as a child for her), and for the entire Jewish people.

Ruth, here, is unusually able to see the larger flow of history, to see how everything will play out, and to see the implications not only for her and Naomi, but for the larger world as well.

We might be tempted to scoff at this and say that Ruth had some kind of prophetic experience here, of God communicating to her, which makes her different from us. But it’s notable that this recently rediscovered midrash doesn’t suggest any particular divine prophecy to Ruth. She just knew, or could just see how things would play out. And she very intentionally acts to shape her, and our legacy.

As we turn our thoughts towards Yizkor, we think about the legacies that have been left for us. Legacies can be financial, or ethical. A relationship to a person or another family, to an organization or a cause—these can be legacies too. What are the legacies that those we remember left us? What are we doing to perpetuate that legacy?

Even though Ruth knew that going with Naomi was crucial to the legacy they would both leave, there was still much that needed to happen for that legacy to be fulfilled. As we remember those who are no longer with us, let us rededicate ourselves to their legacies, and let us think also of the legacies we will leave behind in the decades to come.