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Reflections on Mothers-in-law and Daughters-in-law in Megillat Ruth

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Naomi and Ruth's mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship is a refreshing counterpoint to our contemporary portrayal of the in-law relationship as fraught with toxic conflict and the object of caustic humor. Psychological research supports the view that mother-in-law – daughter-in-law relationships are, indeed, amongst the most challenging of familial pairs and can be a major factor in marital discord. Unfortunately, our cultural discourse does little to reimagine this relationship's great potential for loving engagement and mutual respect. Naomi overturns the archetype of the overbearing mother-in-law and provides us with a model that is both more nuanced and more appealing. For her part, Ruth as a daughter-in-law remains loyal and loving in both anguish and good fortune.

Why are mother and daughter-in-law relationships thought to be so challenging? Why does popular culture often portray them as a tug of war? For mothers, the marriage of a child, no matter how joyful, can still entail a profound, inchoate sense of loss. Daughters-in-law, in turn, hope to secure an intimate relationship with their new spouse in part by establishing boundaries. These burgeoning intimacies may take the form of newlyweds distancing from the "overbearing" mother-in-law. Inherently complex, triangular relationships often leave one person feeling excluded. Perhaps, therefore, it is no accident that Ruth and Naomi's loving relationship unfolds and is forged as a twosome.

Notably, Orpah and Ruth do not enter Megilat Ruth's narrative as daughters-in-law. Rather, they are the Moabite wives of Naomi's sons, "*They married Moabite women...*" The text introduces us to Naomi and Ruth's relationship as a mother and daughter-in-law pair only after tragedy has struck. While the death of Ruth's husband leaves her a young and childless widow, Naomi must bury both her husband and her two sons. One wonders how Naomi felt about her two foreign daughters-in-law prior to these devastating losses. Were Machlon and Chilion, Naomi's sons, princes who could do no wrong in the eyes of their mother? Did Naomi welcome Ruth and Orpah as the partners of her noble sons? Or was she threatened by the different customs they brought to the family? Did she complain about their housekeeping? Compete with them for her sons' attention and affection? The text omits how difficult it may have been for Machalon and Chilion, intensely pulled between their recently widowed, Jewish mother and their young, foreign wives.

This certainly seems like an all too familiar, modern story. In fact, Naomi may not have always been the exemplary mother-in-law our tradition praises. The Megillah actually suggests that her relationship with her daughters-in-law began with deep ambivalence. Naomi's voice is first heard when she says, "*Turn back each of you to your mothers' house...*" She pleads with Ruth and Orpah to reverse course after the three women were already on the road. Why start the journey together and then have a change of heart? The very reason Naomi gives Ruth and Orpah, that she cannot provide them with husbands, was surely known before the three women packed up and set out. Midrash Ruth Zuta wonders whether Naomi told Orpah and Ruth to return because she was embarrassed by their Moabite origins. Perhaps she loved them dearly, but with each step closer to Bethlehem, her discomfiture with their foreignness, and anxiety about what others might think overpowered her.

Alternatively, another interpretation suggests that Naomi argued for Ruth and Orpah to return out of love. Like every good parent, Naomi wanted what was best for them. By urging Ruth and Orpah to retrace their steps, Naomi was sacrificing her own need to hold the last link to her sons close. This internal struggle within Naomi ceases with Ruth's unwavering, renowned declaration, *"Wherever you go, I shall go..."* And *Orpah kissed her mother-in-law farewell. But Ruth clung to her..."* When Naomi saw how determined Ruth was to remain with her, Naomi ceased to plead. Ruth's words mediated Naomi's worries with empathy, and provided fortitude for the challenges ahead.

Naomi left Bethlehem to Moab with a husband and two sons and returns through the city gates with only one Moabite daughter-in-law. As she arrives home she tells the women who have gathered around her, *"Do not call me Naomi...call me Mara, for Shaddai has made my lot very bitter"*. It is within the bitterness of grief and poverty that the deep, mutually protective bond between mother and daughter-in-law unfolds.

The nature of Naomi and Ruth's new connection is reflected when Naomi next speaks to Ruth. Instructing her to glean in the fields she says, *"Go my daughter"*. There is no ambiguity in this statement. Ruth is not just a daughter. For Naomi, she has become uniquely *her* daughter. While the third person text continues to refer to Ruth as "the Moabite", Naomi's nomenclature, *biti*, my daughter, is unambiguous. Naomi's bond with her adopted daughter only emerges over time and place. Significantly, it also crystallizes when Naomi is in her own home, in Bethlehem, and not Moab. Now, as mother and daughter, they unite around their vulnerability, mobilize their partnership, and spring into action. First, they set out to secure food, and then a new husband for Ruth.

Ruth's marriage to Boaz resumes the triadic matrix. Yet this time there are no harshly delineated boundaries. Naomi and Ruth remain partners. The endpoint of their joint venture is the birth of Ruth's son, Obed. He is a triumph of life over death. Obed is undoubtedly the beneficiary of the love of both women. *"Naomi took the child and held it to her bosom."* It is in the embrace of this newly created threesome that the future is secured and enshrined, for Ruth, Naomi, and future generations.

Ruth and Naomi serve us best not as icons of idealized women, but rather in their all too human lived experience. Both with their men and in their absence, it is their dogged determination and sense of common purpose that sustains them. They prevail because they have the capacity to reconfigure their relationship. In light of new realities, they adapt and embrace each other.

In memory of my beloved mother-in-law, Elaine Cantor, z"l.



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