

# GLEANINGS

## Reflections on Ruth

Edited by  
Rabbi Dr. Stuart W. Halpern

Yeshiva University Press  
Maggid Books

*Gleanings: Reflections on Ruth*

First Edition, 2019

*Maggid Books*

*An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.*

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA  
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel  
[www.maggidbooks.com](http://www.maggidbooks.com)

Copyright © Yeshiva University 2019

Cover art based on a detail from the painting  
*Ruth in Boaz's Field*, by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld  
(1794–1872), located at The National Gallery, London

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embedded in critical articles or reviews.

ISBN 978-1-59264-518-3, *hardcover*

A CIP catalogue record for this title is  
available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the United States

# You've Got a Friend in Me: Ruth and the Dynamics of Friendship

Rabbi Dr. Stuart W. Halpern

*You got troubles, I've got 'em too  
There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you  
We stick together and see it through  
Cause you've got a friend in me.*

Randy Newman, "You've Got a  
Friend in Me," *Toy Story* (1995)

*When you pick up the Tanakh and read the Book  
of Ruth, it is a shock how little it resembles memory.  
It's concerned with inheritance, lands, men's names,  
how women must wiggle and wobble to live. Yet  
women have kept it dear for the beloved elder who  
cherished Ruth, more friend than daughter.*

Marge Piercy, "The Book  
of Naomi and Ruth"

Is your coworker your friend? Can your child be your friend? Can your cousin be your friend? Can men and women just be friends?

Of course, one's perspective on these questions would begin with the very definition of friendship itself. Most North Americans and Europeans would probably agree that friendship is "a voluntary association between people who enjoy one another's company and care, at least to some degree, about one another's welfare."<sup>1</sup> However, this basic definition still leaves many questions unanswered. What about people whose ages differ by decades? Or whose wealth, power, or social status are diametrically opposed? Do friends have to be on par with each other in every respect? Is a certain level of emotional intimacy required for a friendship? The answers to all of these are debatable even within contemporary Western society, and are likely to vary based on the cultural, gender, and class background of the respondent. Of course, non-Western and ancient cultures, due to their linguistic, cultural, or historical distance from our context, offer approaches that might differ widely from our own.

#### AN ANCIENT FRAMEWORK

The classical theoretical framework for thinking about friendship is offered by Aristotle (384–322 BCE) in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. As summarized by Princeton philosophy professor Alexander Nehamas in his volume that will serve as a crucial guide in our study,<sup>2</sup> Aristotle suggests that:

some of us...are attracted to one another because we have something to gain from our relationship, some because of the pleasure we provide for one another, and some are drawn to one another's... "excellence" or "virtue."... When I bear you good will, I do so either because of the practical benefits I derive from our relationship, or because of the pleasure our interaction gives me, or finally because I am drawn to your virtues – courage, justice,

1. Saul Olyan, *Friendship in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 1.
2. *On Friendship* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

temperance, magnificence, wisdom, and the features that are necessary to make a life a good and happy one.<sup>3</sup>

For Aristotle, there are three categories of friendship: 1) *Friendship of utility*, in which we stand to gain something from the relationship – for example, business partners or classmates; 2) *Friendship of pleasure*, which, as Aristotle writes, we engage in with others “not because of what they are in themselves, but because they are agreeable to us” – for example, lovers, fellow poker players, or fellow sports fans; and 3) *Friendship of the good*, which, unlike the other two, is not fleeting:

The perfect form of friendship is that between the good, and those who resemble each other in virtue. For these friends wish each alike the other's good in respect of their goodness, and they are good in themselves; but it is those who wish the good of their friends for their friends' sake who are friends in the fullest sense, since they love each other for themselves and not accidentally. Hence the friendship of these lasts as long as they continue to be good; and virtue is a permanent quality.<sup>4</sup>

### THE MODERN ERA

Contrast the simplicity of Aristotle's categories with how friendships are conceived of today. As British author Tim Lott's award-winning novel *White City Blue* puts it in the following representative exchange:

How many varieties of friends are there? She replies . . . Oh, loads. For a start there are friends you don't like. I've got plenty of those. Then there are friends you do like, but never bother to see. Then there are the ones you really like a lot, but can't stand their partners. There are those you just have out of habit and can't shake off. Then there's the ones you're friends with not because you like

---

3. *Ibid.*, 13, 16. Nehamas does not address friendship in the Bible, though, as I hope to convey in this chapter, his work can inform our understanding of the dynamics of biblical friendship.

4. *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII 3.

them, but because they're very good-looking or popular and it's kind of cool to be their friends. There are friends of convenience – they're usually work friends. There are pity friends who you stay with because you feel sorry for them. There are acquaintances who are on probation as friends. There are "Enough!" he finally interrupts her.<sup>5</sup>

Nehamas expands with some additional categories, noting that "there are fair-weather, heart-sink, dangerous, fossil friends, and 'frenemies' – not to mention friends who know each other only through the virtual spaces of social media."<sup>6</sup>

### BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

#### What Does the Bible Say About Friendship?

While there is no biblical word that directly translates into "friendship," there are many words that connote "friend" which have been translated to reflect various senses of the word. Most well-known is from the root word "*rei'a*" as it occurs in Leviticus 19:18, "*ve'ahavta lerei'akha kamokha*" – "love your fellow as yourself." It also appears in Exodus 33:11 in the context of the relationship between Moses and God,<sup>7</sup> and in the context of the laws of those who would entice an Israelite to idol worship, where the concept of a "closest friend" is referred to.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Psalms 38:12 laments the Psalmist being abandoned by those he expected to stand by

---

5. Penguin Books, 2000, pp. 45–46.

6. Nehamas, 102. For an extensive discussion of online friendships, see Mark Vernon, *The Meaning of Friendship* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 104–121.

7. "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another (*el rei'eihu*)."

8. "If your brother, your own mother's son, or your son or daughter, or the wife of your bosom, or your closest friend (*rei'akha asher kenafshekha*) entices you in secret, saying, 'Come let us worship other gods'" (Deut. 13:7).

his side – “*ohavai verei'ai*.”<sup>9</sup> Less well-known Hebrew words connoting “friend” include “*aluf*,”<sup>10</sup> “*ish shalom*,”<sup>11</sup> and “*meyudaav*.”<sup>12</sup>

The expectations the Bible conveys in these and other verses is that a proper friend should display love, trust, and support in times of trouble. These biblical expectations for friendship are very much in line with Nehamas' assessment of friendship generally:

The love friendship provokes gives depth and color to life; the loyalty it inspires erodes the barriers of selfishness. It provides companionship and a safety net when we are in various kinds of trouble; it offers sympathy for our misfortunes, discretion for our secrets, encouragement for our efforts.<sup>13</sup>

### Does “Friend” Always Mean “Friend”?

Several times throughout Tanakh, a word that could otherwise be translated as “friend” seems to refer to someone less intimate than a friend, such as a neighbor or peer. In such cases, the exact meaning of the word is dependent upon its contextual usage. In Deuteronomy 19:4, for example, the Israelites are told “You shall not move your neighbor's (*rei'akha*) landmarks, set up by previous generations,” and I Kings 20:35 refers to a peer who belongs to the same group with the same word.<sup>14</sup> In the building of the Tower of Babel, the word seems to connote simply “another person.”<sup>15</sup> Even more starkly, when Samuel tells Saul that God

9. “*Ohavai verei'ai mineged nigi yaamodu*” – “my friends and companions stand back from my affliction.”
10. As in Proverbs 17:9, “he who seeks love overlooks faults, but he who harps on a matter alienates his friend (*aluf*),” and Micah 7:5, “trust no friend, rely on no intimate (*be'aluf*); be guarded in speech with her who lies in your bosom.”
11. As in Jeremiah 20:10, “I heard the whispers of the crowd – Terror all around: ‘Inform! Let us inform against him!’ All my friends (*anshei shelomi*) are waiting for me to stumble.”
12. As in II Kings 10:11, “And Jehu struck down all that were left of the House of Ahab in Jezreel – and all his notables, intimates (*umeyudaav*), and priests – till he left him no survivor.”
13. Nehamas, 187.
14. “A certain man, a disciple of the prophets, said to another (*rei'eihu*).”
15. Genesis 11:3: “They said to one another (*rei'eihu*), ‘Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard.’”

has decided to take away his kingdom and give it to a rival, he says, "The Lord has this day torn the kingship over Israel away from you and has given it to another (*rei'akha*) who is worthier than you" (1 Sam. 15:28). Lamentations 1:2 similarly uses the same form to refer to former political allies who have now turned their backs on Jerusalem.

### Family vs. Friend

Besides "friend" not always meaning "friend" in the conventional sense, there is the complex relationship between "friend" and "family." There is significant overlap in Tanakh between expectations of family members and expectations of friends. Like friends, family members display love,<sup>16</sup> have their own internal hierarchies,<sup>17</sup> are expected to behave honestly and be supportive,<sup>18</sup> and manifest kindness toward each other.<sup>19</sup> Family and friends seem to be part of the same spectrum of emotional and practical ties.<sup>20</sup> As Proverbs 18:24 notes, "there are companions to keep one company, and there is a friend more devoted than a brother." Even the word "brother" itself can connote a biological brother or an unrelated friend.<sup>21</sup>

---

16. Genesis 25:28: "Isaac loved Esau because he had a taste for game."

17. The laws of inheritance within the family, as well as other family-related regulations, are reflective of an internal hierarchy of obligation. With regard to hierarchy within friendships, as Deuteronomy 13:7 alludes to, there are good friends and there are regular friends. As the saying goes, "friends help you move, good friends help you move a body."

18. Jeremiah 12:6: "For even your kinsmen and your father's house, even they are treacherous toward you." As Olyan (pp. 85–86) notes, "Behavioral parity, in contrast to formal equality of social status, wealth, life stage, or other personal characteristics, is a broadly attested expectation of friendship across biblical texts, mentioned most frequently in the breach... friends are expected to seek each other's welfare, support one another when times are bad, be loyal, and reciprocate appropriate behavior."

19. Genesis 47:29: "And when the time approached for Israel to die, he summoned his son Joseph and said to him, 'Do me this favor, place your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your kindness and loyalty: please do not bury me in Egypt.'"

20. See Deuteronomy 13:7, which lists close friends alongside family members, and Psalm 15:3, which also seems to group together friend and family.

21. See Genesis 31:23 where Laban takes his previously unmentioned "*ahim*" to chase after Jacob. As Cynthia R. Chapman notes, "Words like 'brother' can mean uterine brother, half-brother, cousin, and ally." See her *The House of the Mother: The Social Roles of Maternal Kin in Biblical Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (New Haven: Yale, 2016), 77.



While family and friends seem to share certain core characteristics, “the comparison of relatives to friends, *as if friendship were the paradigmatic relationship*, a phenomenon familiar to some contemporary Westerners – ‘my brother/sister/child/parent/cousin is my best friend’ – is unattested in biblical texts.”<sup>22</sup> Rather, it is family that is the paradigmatic source of relationships in the Bible. Thus, Song of Songs uses that same root *rei’u* to refer to a lover (the *ra’aya*), who says about her male paramour, “If only it could be as with a brother, as if you had nursed at my mother’s breast: Then I could kiss you when I met you in the street, and no one would despise me” (Song. 8:1). This passage offers a striking wish to modern ears, but illuminates an assumption of a shared emotional categorization between friend and family member that differs in degree, with the family serving as the baseline.<sup>23</sup>

[Family members are] paradigmatic intimates...characterized by intimacy, harmony, loyalty, support (particularly in times of need), and respect for hierarchy, [they] serve as a model for relationships, both voluntary and involuntary, that extend beyond the immediate family circle and larger kin group. Ties between a deity and his or her worshipers, a king and his people, human treaty partners, members of professional classes, and friends are all shaped by, at least in part, by the rhetoric and/or presuppositions of idealized familial relations.<sup>24</sup>

---

22. Olyan, 25. Emphasis mine.

23. As Olyan (89) observes:

The use of friendship vocabulary for sexual intimates further complicates things.... Could it be that biblical constructions of friendship might potentially include a sexual dimension? Or is the friendship language used of husbands, wives, and lovers to be understood simply as metaphorical, intended to enrich the poetic imagery of the text in some way...by adding yet another axis of emotional intimacy to the portrait of the relationship... [maybe] it makes the portrayal of the relationship between the lovers more emotionally complex without suggesting anything about the nature of friendship per se.

24. Olyan, 11–12.

Unlike friendship, however, a family association is involuntary, and there are distinct formal obligations. Only family members display signs of mourning (though friends offer comfort when one of them is mourning over a family member);<sup>25</sup> only family members have an obligation to honor,<sup>26</sup> and there are multiple restrictions with respect to inter-family sexual relationships (see Lev., chapters 18 and 20). Other family-specific rituals include levirate marriage (*yibum*; see Deut. 25:5), burial (Gen. 47:30), redemption of a poor family relative who has sold himself into servitude (Lev. 25:47–49), and serving as a blood avenger (*go'el hadam*).<sup>27</sup>

### THE PROBLEM OF FRIENDSHIP IN CHRISTIANITY

It is interesting to briefly note that, as Nehamas points out, friendship is a theologically problematic concept for Christianity, a faith premised on the belief that Jesus loves all of humanity equally.

The love of an infinite being, who loves everything and everyone unconditionally, translated into the earth's finite realm, becomes love for everyone God loves. And that is absolutely everyone – including, in particular, one's enemies – in loving whom one ultimately loves God himself. *Friendship, though, unlike Christian love, involves loving some people more than the rest of the world, toward which, though not necessarily ill-disposed, friends may remain more or less emotionally indifferent.*<sup>28</sup>

According to the Christian theologian Søren Kierkegaard, “to distinguish one person from the rest of the world, to love one in preference

---

25. While Job's friends cry, tear their clothes, and throw dust (2:12), the text doesn't describe this as “mourning,” contra “Jacob rent his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and observed mourning for his son many days” (Gen. 37:34). Similarly, “paying a *shiva* visit” is something friends do, while it is only the family members themselves who do the actual mourning.

26. Exodus 20:12: “Honor your father and your mother.”

27. Numbers 35:12, which, based on other occurrences of the root “*go'el*” as well as ancient Near Eastern parallels, is assumed to refer to a blood relative.

28. Nehamas, 31. Emphasis mine.

to others, is 'a mockery of God.'"<sup>29</sup> This Christian principle appears to contrast with the very nature of "friendship... [which] is inconceivable without thinking that it is perfectly all right to treat some people differently from the way we treat everyone else, to give them preference and pride of place, simply because they are our friends."<sup>30</sup>

#### **FRIENDSHIP IN RUTH: A CASE STUDY**

Keeping in mind this brief survey of friendship as explored in Western conceptualizations and the Bible – its core components and expectations, and the overlap and distinctions between friendships and familial relationships – let us examine the Book of Ruth's portrayal of the nature of friendship, with a focus on the dynamic between Ruth and Naomi.<sup>31</sup> This friendship is a unique one, as it is the only biblical friendship between two named women, it spans the length of an entire book, and it consists of a dynamic between two individuals of vastly different cultural backgrounds and ages.

After the death of Ruth's husband, Mahlon, her association with Naomi becomes a voluntary one, lacking in any formal obligation or affiliation. Notably, Naomi actively attempts to dissuade Ruth and Orpah (the wife of Naomi's other deceased son) from joining Naomi on her journey back to Bethlehem:

But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Turn back, each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me!" (1:8)

With no remaining familial bond between the women, and thus no obligation or cultural expectation for them to stay together, Orpah is

---

29. *Works of Love*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 37.

30. *Ibid.*, 57, 59.

31. There are many other rich biblical narratives of friendship well worth analysis through the prism of friendship studies, including most famously David and Jonathan, as well as that of Job and his friends, and Jephthah's daughter and her friends (Judges ch. 11), among others.

persuaded to return home to her people.<sup>32</sup> And yet, Ruth clings to Naomi, a voluntary association which is arguably best categorized as a friendship:

They broke into weeping again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law farewell. But Ruth clung to her. (Ruth 1:14)<sup>33</sup>

Though the meaning of the name "Ruth" is debated, some suggest it stems from that very same root "rei'á," an etymological signal that Ruth is the quintessential friend. In fact, the *Peshitta*, the Syriac translation of the Bible, renders her name *Rei'ut*.<sup>34</sup> As theologian and novelist C. S. Lewis describes, friendship is "a sort of secession, even a rebellion... a pocket of potential resistance... [because friends] have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share."<sup>35</sup> Here we see this manifest – Ruth "rebels" against her native society, one which Orpah readily returns to, and aligns herself with Naomi and the Israelite people. Ruth demonstrates that "friends recognize in one another something they don't find in the rest of the world."<sup>36</sup> In essence, through friendship one testifies that:

Our friendship promises – and continues to promise, as long as it lasts – a better future; but all that I can know about that future

- 
32. Though the midrashic tradition has judged Orpah negatively for this decision (see Dr. Ziegler's chapter in this volume, "The Roots of the Book of Ruth," pp. 241–242), the text itself does not do so, and many readers of Ruth have noted that Orpah's decision is justifiable on moral grounds. In particular, Naomi told Orpah to go back home and former family members do not have formal obligations toward one another, neither in the Bible, nor in the modern era.
33. Olyan (p. 68) is quick to note that "the author's perpetuation of the in-law terminology [i.e., 'her mother-in-law'] may be intended to underscore the continuing importance of the two women's tie to the family of their dead husbands and to foreshadow future positive developments for them both in the context of that family."
34. I thank Alex Maged for noting this possible meaning of the name in personal correspondence. See Yael Ziegler, *Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy*, Maggid Studies in Tanakh (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2015), 165, who suggests it while noting it is a "stretch." Scholars have not reached a consensus on the actual etymology of Ruth's name.
35. *The Four Loves*, cited in Nehamas, 203.
36. Nehamas, 51.

is that I can't approach it with anyone but you . . . [T]he promise friendship makes can be very firm but, however firm it is, its fulfillment is never guaranteed: ready as I am to come to want new things and harbor new wishes because of your own desires and wishes, I also can't know what will become of me once these have a hand in shaping my life.<sup>37</sup>

Ruth then offers her loyalty to Naomi, pledged until death:

But Ruth replied, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the Lord do to me if anything but death parts me from you." (Ruth 1:16-17)

As Nehamas notes, "Dying for the sake of one's friend may perhaps be the noblest expression of friendship, and a friendship that leads to it may make the friends' lives altogether worth living."<sup>38</sup> This blurring of distinction between Ruth and Naomi, 'til death do them part, is a unique moral bond. Possibly, it is the ultimate manifestation of Leviticus' commandment to "love your fellow as yourself."<sup>39</sup> As contemporary scholar Laurie Zoloth-Dorfman elaborates:

What makes the bond possible and, hence, moral and meaningful is that Ruth has recognized Naomi as a self, taken on the responsibility of the entire capacity of her being and in that moment truly has been able to be a self in the text. She sees herself as Naomi, as paired as surely as Adam and Eve were paired, a coupling of similar selves in the darkness of the world . . . The moral encounter involves a decentering of being, an opening up

---

37. *Ibid.*, 135.

38. *Ibid.*, 69.

39. I thank Alex Maged for this suggestion.

to the plurality and, indeed, to the infinity of possibility in the presence of the other.<sup>40</sup>

The story continues when, after arriving in Bethlehem, Ruth happens upon the field of Boaz, a relative of Naomi's. He allows her to glean in the field, and advises her:

Listen to me, daughter. Don't go to glean in another field. Don't go elsewhere, but stay here close to my girls. (Ruth 2:8)

It is the fellow females in the field best positioned to provide support to the mendicant Ruth as she strives to ensure economic support for herself and Naomi. "Feminism pays particular interest to friendship because it can be deeply liberating for those who don't fit well into society's existing structures: friendships can be agents of social change."<sup>41</sup> As in chapter 1, where it is the women of Bethlehem who address the returned Naomi, and in the later chapter 4, where the women bless Naomi upon the marriage of Ruth and Boaz and bestow a name upon the child born of that union, here, too, women play the crucial role of social support in a patriarchal context.<sup>42</sup>

Though Boaz allows Ruth protection and privileges in the field, he does not ensure her and Naomi's sustained financial viability. Thus, in chapter 3, Ruth, on the advice of Naomi, puts on special clothing and goes down to the threshing floor of Boaz. Naomi's instructions to Ruth on what she should do as she heads toward Boaz contain a few discrepancies between how the Hebrew words are read and how they are written. These discrepancies seem to blur the distinction between the two

---

40. "An Ethics of Encounter: Private Choices and Public Acts," ed. Elliot N. Dorff and Louis E. Newman, *Contemporary Jewish Ethics and Morality: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 226–227.

41. *Ibid.*, 55.

42. Once, when teaching this chapter in my synagogue, Cong. Ahavath Torah in Englewood, NJ, an audience member suggested, only half in jest, that maybe the women of Bethlehem named the baby since they didn't trust Naomi to name it, given that she had named her own children Mahlon and Chilion, loosely translated as "Sickness" and "Destruction." The person who made this observation happened to be named Peretz, whose name is mentioned in the verse immediately preceding the marriage of Boaz and Ruth.

women, making it seem as if one is superimposed on the other, to the point where it's almost unclear who it is getting dressed and going to the threshing floor. These verses read:

So bathe, anoint yourself, dress up, and go down [written: *and I will go down*] to the threshing floor. But do not disclose yourself to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he lies down, and go over and uncover his feet and lie down [written: *and I will lie down*]. He will tell you what you are to do. (Ruth 3:3-4)

"A friend is another self" [said Aristotle] ... some of us think of our friends as a kind of mirror in which we can see and come to know ourselves as we couldn't possibly do on our own, as another self."<sup>43</sup> Contemporary scholar Rachel E. Adelman asks:

Does Naomi intend Ruth to take along her mother-in-law's shadow as she wraps herself up in her garments and descends to the threshing floor? ... is Ruth assuming an alternative identity, perhaps the identity of Naomi herself? Do these "slips of the tongue" and "pen" gesture at the older woman's desire to lie at the man's feet, to bear his child, to be the one who will redeem herself of widowhood .... Leah, Tamar and Ruth ... each of the three women ... pretends to be another woman in bed. While Leah simulates Rachel, and Tamar dresses up as a harlot, it is Naomi's identity that Ruth assumes.<sup>44</sup>

After Ruth succeeds in inspiring Boaz to take action, Boaz and Ruth are married. They bear a child, Obed, and the women of Bethlehem joyously react:

And the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not withheld a redeemer from you today! May his name be

---

43. Nehamas, 11.

44. *The Female Ruse: Women's Deception and Divine Sanction in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), 116-117.

perpetuated in Israel! He will renew your life and sustain your old age; for he is born of your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons." (Ruth 4:14-15)

This encomium – in which God Himself is invoked – of Ruth's love for Naomi, a dynamic which long ago transitioned from daughter-in-law to friend, brings to mind the nineteenth-century American philosopher and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson's statement that "[friendship is] a select and sacred relation, which is a kind of absolute, and which even leaves the language of love suspicious and common, so much is this purer, and nothing is so much divine."<sup>45</sup>

The salvific effect Ruth has had on Naomi has reached its culmination. Just as Naomi regained her youth vicariously through Ruth's actions at the threshing floor, she now embraces Ruth's baby – the product, albeit indirectly, of that nighttime interaction – as its nurse (4:16). Though Naomi had claimed, upon her return after years in Moab, to be empty (1:21), she has been made full by Ruth. "Could our friends be irreplaceable because, just as with metaphors, we never fully know what their role in our life may be? Could our friends be, in the sense that metaphors are, inexhaustible?"<sup>46</sup> Ruth has elevated Naomi from bereft and bitter widow to woman renewed and redeemed. We never know what effect our friendships will have through the vicissitudes of life and on our personal development and fulfillment. After all:

What we "really" are is not a hidden, unchanging nature that is from within us from the beginning, sometime unearthed and brought to light. It is something that we become – the result, but not the overall purpose, of countless activities and the vagaries of life.... Our love for our friends is also entwined with a sense that we haven't yet exhausted what's good in ourselves. "Friends bring out the best in one another"... Our friends also have an idea of what we are or should be – an idea that, given our friendship, we are apt to take seriously. That is what we see of ourselves in them:

---

45. *Essays and Letters*, cited in Nehamas, 12.

46. Nehamas, 125.



not, as Aristotle may have thought, our virtuous similarities but a picture, an interpretation of who we are to them that we can use – not uncritically – to guide our self-formation.<sup>47</sup>

Though Naomi and Ruth shared a history as mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, it was not these broken family ties that kept them together; rather, it was the bonds of friendship. In reflecting on his own lifelong friends, Nehamas offers what is a rather fitting conclusion for this analysis of the dynamic of Ruth and Naomi:

When I realized that these people are who they have come to be, at least in part (and it is a large part) because of their friendship, I also realized that friendship, even when motivated by a desire to regain a common past, is also crucial in forging a different future.... Friendship is crucial to what most of us come to be in life.<sup>48</sup>

Of course, we will never know exactly what motivated Ruth to stick with Naomi despite their troubles and to make a choice different from Orpah's: Was Ruth's fealty and friendship premised on the shared past they had as members of a family? Was it inspired by Naomi's quiet faith despite the harshness of her circumstances? Was it born of admiration for Naomi's virtue? While we cannot know for sure, we do know that Ruth turned to Naomi and said, in essence:

You got troubles, I've got 'em too  
There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you  
We stick together and see it through  
Cause you've got a friend in me.<sup>49</sup>

---

47. *Ibid.*, 211–212, 223. Elie Wiesel, in his meditation on his life's work composed after undergoing heart surgery, remarked that "friendship contains an element of immortality." See *Open Heart* (New York: Schocken, 2015), 55.

48. *Ibid.*, 3–4.

49. Many thanks to Alex Maged and Ilana Kurshan for their review of this chapter and their many helpful suggestions, and Prof. Christine Hayes for bringing the Piercy poem to my attention.