Loss, Discovery, and a Lost Discovery in "Reading Ruth"

Parent-child collaborations are rare enough in literary history. Grandparent-grandchild collaborations are unheard of, until the publication this spring of a new study of the book of Ruth.

OBSERVATION
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The Mosaic contributor Leon Kass and his co-author, Hannah Mandelbaum, have recently published a new commentary on the book of Ruth, which is traditionally read during the upcoming holiday of Shavuot. Below, the writer Hillel Halkin reviews their commentary, and the rabbi Meir Soloveichik reflects on their relationship.—The Editors

Hillel Halkin

Parent-child collaborations are extremely rare in literary history. Of grandparent-grandchild collaborations, I had never heard—never, that is, until the publication this spring of *Reading Ruth: Birth, Redemption, and the Way of Israel*, a slim book jointly written by the eminent American-Jewish thinker, author, Bible commentator, and *Mosaic* contributor Leon Kass and his granddaughter Hannah Mandelbaum. As told by Kass in a brief preface:

> We did not start out intending to write a book. We began it, in the fall of 2015, to give comfort to each other following the death of our beloved Amy Apfel Kass—wife of 54 years to Leon, grandmother ("Gaga") of sixteen years to Hannah. Leon was living, then as now, in Washington, D.C.; Hannah was living, then as now, in Jerusalem. The idea was Hannah's, suggested in one of her daily calls: "*Zeydeh*," she said, "perhaps you would like to read something with me." Leon grabbed the offer: a log brought to a drowning man. We settled easily and quickly on the book of Ruth. Not only was it short and lovely. It also had special meaning for Leon. Some twenty years earlier, Amy and he had made a discovery in the book of Ruth that they thought might be the key to understanding its meaning, and they had spoken about working on it in the future. But that future never arrived, and Leon had forgotten the insight. He was therefore particularly keen to see whether, with Hannah's help, it could be recovered.

And so one begins *Reading Ruth* with a set of questions. What was Leon and Amy Kass's insight? Will Leon recover it? And how can Hannah help him to do this? It is almost like starting a suspense novel.

Although there are many ways of reading Ruth, they all fall into two basic categories. One, more appealing to modern sensibilities, is to view it as a love story, the tale of a widowed young Moabite who tells her mother-in-law Naomi, a widow herself, "Whither you go, I shall go. . . . Your people is my people and your God, my God." Ruth joins Naomi in returning from Moab to her native town of Bethlehem in Judea; lives there with her in poverty and isolation; catches the admiring eye of the unmarried Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi's late husband Elimelech and a leading citizen of the town, when he notices her foraging for the grain left behind by the harvesters in his fields; is drawn to him in return; and, in the end, following a dramatic night of romantic confession, is happily wed to him and bears him a son who turns out to be the grandfather of King David.

The second and more traditional way of reading Ruth, best exemplified by rabbinic exegesis, is as a narrative of religious faith, personal virtue, and obedience to God's commandments, for their exemplification of which Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz are rewarded with the ancestry of Israel's greatest king. And since the Moabites, according to the Bible, are Israel's bitter foes with whom it is forbidden to mingle, there are also two ways of thinking about Ruth's Moabite identity. Its function in the story can be said to champion acceptance of the stranger, no matter how hateful his or her background, or to extol the determination of the proselyte who overcomes such a background in order to cleave to a new people and its God.

These two ways of reading Ruth are not incompatible; nor do Kass and Mandelbaum treat them as though they were. On the contrary: one of the strengths of their book, which takes the form of a nearly verse-by-verse commentary on the biblical text, is their skillful weaving together of both approaches. Their Ruth is indeed a love story. Equally, though, it is a religious and national drama. Boaz and Ruth's romance is part of this drama, but it is not all of it, and Naomi's role in the story is no less important.

Kass and Mandelbaum's treatment of Naomi is superb. They show, through careful attention to what the Bible says and sometimes does not say, how both her essential goodness and depth of calculation are far greater than a casual reading of the biblical text reveals. Take, for example, her decision, which sets the book's plot in motion, to return to Bethlehem after ten years in Moab, where she, Elimelech, and their two sons have gone to escape a famine in Judea. On the face of it, her motive is simple: her husband and sons, both of whose marriages to Moabite women were childless, are dead; she has no grandchildren; and there is nothing to keep her in this foreign land to which she is connected only by her daughters-in-law, who love her but are not her flesh-and-blood. Now that the famine has ended, what better option does she have than to return home, even if this means doing so as a single and no longer young woman who has no means of support?

And yet, Kass and Mandelbaum argue, "it quickly becomes evident that Naomi has a different reason for wanting to leave: the well-being of her daughters-in-law. It is largely for *their* sake that Naomi wants to return, and . . . to return *alone*." What is modestly said to be "quickly evident" is in fact not evident at all, and Kass and Mandelbaum are to my knowledge the first readers of Ruth ever to make this point. They do this convincingly by calling our attention to subtleties in the Hebrew text which convey that Naomi realizes two things. She knows, first, that unless her daughters-in-law abandon her to her fate and return to the sponsorship of their parents' homes, they will not, by the mores of their society, be eligible for remarriage; and second, that were they to accompany her back to Bethlehem, their situation would be dire, since no Israelite would have anything to do with them. For their own good, she must return to Bethlehem by herself.

Naomi loves Ruth and her other daughter-in-law Orpah as much as they love her: the dialogue in the opening lines of the story, in which they set out to accompany her on the first leg of her journey home, make this clear. But after telling them that they have come far enough and should turn back, which Orpah tearfully agrees to do while Ruth refuses to, Naomi does not—and this is Kass and Mandelbaum's next striking aperçu—take pleasure in Ruth's decision; or, if she does (for surely Ruth's company is also a comfort), it is a guilty pleasure that berates itself for not having Ruth's true interests at heart. Because we, missing this point, assume that Ruth's decision must make Naomi happy, we also miss, as Kass and Mandelbaum do not, the significance of the text's telling us, "And when she [Naomi] saw that she [Ruth] insisted, she said no more to her." Not only is this "said no more," *Reading Ruth* observes, not a grateful "How good of you," it is not even a wordless look of thanks. It is the resigned and troubled silence of a woman who knows that she is going to arrive in Bethlehem with a Moabite outcast whose misery she will be responsible for. This silence, we are told, in which Naomi walks the rest of the way, must be conceived of as being "consumed by sadness."

I will not try to follow Kass and Mandelbaum's reading of Ruth through all its twists and turns. It's enough to say that its surprising perceptions continue right up to the story's end. It is acutely sensitive to the minds and hearts of the story's three characters, whose own caring sensitiveness toward each other—what Kass and Mandelbaum call their *ḥesed* or lovingkindness—results in a *pas de trois* in which each alternately leads and is led, now taking a crucial initiative and now perfectly responding to another's. Although there is something miraculous in Ruth and Boaz's union, the only divine thing about this miracle is that Ruth, having decided to take advantage of Israelite laws of gleaning to keep her and Naomi from starvation, just happens to choose Boaz's field to glean in. This is God's contribution to the story. From there on everything depends on the exquisite tact, emotional intelligence, and innate nobility of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz themselves.

The little story, extraordinarily compact as all biblical narrative is, builds to its climax. Throughout the days of the harvest, Boaz has been chivalrous to Ruth, keeping a protective eye on her while seeing to it that her gleaner's basket is full and that his workers treat her respectfully. A no longer despondent Naomi, buoyed by the possibility that Boaz has fallen in love with Ruth and will use his levirate obligation to redeem Elimelech's lands and lineage as an excuse for marrying her despite her being a Moabite, waits impatiently for him to make a declaration. Yet despite his obvious attraction to Ruth, he has sought no intimacy and made no advances, and now the harvest is done and with it, their opportunity to meet freely. One last chance remains. Boaz and his workers are about to winnow the harvested grain on the town's threshing floor, on which they will camp at night, and Naomi instructs Ruth: "Bathe, and anoint yourself, and put on your good dress, and go to the threshing floor, and let no one see you until he [Boaz] finishes eating and drinking. When he lies down to sleep, mark his place, and then [later at night] go uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do next."

Suspecting that Boaz is either too shy or too worried about the social propriety of a match with Ruth to make a move, Naomi decides to take matters into her own hands—or rather, to throw them into the hands of Boaz and Ruth and trust in them. But "what exactly," Kass and Mandelbaum ask, "is Naomi directing Ruth to do?"

A great deal of exegetical ink has been spilled over this question, most of it concerned with whether Naomi is telling Ruth to seduce Boaz, and if so, whether this is what she does. Kass and Mandelbaum try puzzling it out:

> The situation is certainly sexually charged. But what Ruth is to do there depends especially on how she understands Naomi's order to "uncover his feet." Should she take it literally, she will expose his feet—and perhaps, symbolically, the fact of his having had "cold feet" in her direction—and throw herself upon them as a supplicant, hoping he will recognize the gesture and know what should be done. Should she, however, take it euphemistically—and there is ample biblical precedent for using "feet" or "legs" as a euphemism for the male genitalia—she will uncover his sexual nakedness and offer herself to him for the night, hoping for more.

Ultimately—and sensibly, in my opinion—Kass and Mandelbaum join the rabbis in concluding that Ruth and Boaz do not make love that night on the threshing floor. But here, for once, I believe that they themselves fail to see how clever Naomi is. Naomi knows that not only must Boaz not perceive Ruth as sexually forward, much less as suggesting a tryst with him in a public place, which even if feasible would tarnish her forever in his eyes; he must not even be aware that she has deliberately awoken him, since this, too, would seem too aggressive an act. What is the solution? To uncover, quite literally, Boaz's feet—that is, to remove quietly the blanket from them, exposing them to the cold air of a spring night in the Judean hills. This will waken him, but not at once. In the few seconds it takes his bared feet to communicate to his sleeping brain that they want the blanket restored, Ruth will have time to lie down and pretend to be asleep herself, allowing Boaz to think that he is the initiator of what follows. And so, the text tells us: "In the middle of the night, Boaz woke with a start—and behold a woman was lying at his feet. And he said, 'Who are you?' And she said, 'I am Ruth the Moabite, your maidservant. Spread your wings over your maidservant, because you are a redeeming kinsman.'"

Ruth, acting as though *she* were the one to be awakened, is, quite astonishingly, proposing marriage. But she is also justifying Naomi's faith in her resourcefulness by veiling her boldness behind an appeal to both Israelite law and Boaz's protective male instincts. His reply, too, is all Naomi could have hoped for. With consummate deftness he first tells Ruth that it is he, not she, who should feel beholden, because she has preferred his company to the young harvesters she could have had her pick of; next praises her as a "woman of valor"; then accepts her proposal while asserting his male authority by saying, "Do not fear, my child, I will do as you say"; and finally, cautions her that Elimelech has a nearer kinsman than himself who has a prior claim on being the levirate redeemer. Only if this relative can be gotten to waive his claim can he, Boaz, take his place.

Throughout their commentary, Kass and Mandelbaum remind us time and again of how Ruth blends the personal with the collective, and how the story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz must always be read in the context of biblical tradition, whether this pertains to the Moabites, the laws of gleaning, the customs of levirate marriage and land redemption, or the overall principles of Israelite life. "At the center of that life," they write,

> and at the center of the book of Ruth, are commitments to family continuity and attachment to the land. It is only through marriage and especially procreation that the covenantal way of life is transmitted and preserved from generation to generation. . . . In a word, in Israel, begetting and belonging are of the essence.

The final chapter of Ruth describes a town meeting at which Boaz gets the above-mentioned closer kinsman to relinquish his claim to Naomi's land and Ruth's hand. In the past, I have always considered this chapter to be anticlimactic, the mere legal codicil, as it were, that seals the preceding events. Thanks to Kass and Mandelbaum, I now see how wrong I was. Of course, anyone familiar with the book of Ruth knows how it ends, and few know it better than the Jews who read it annually on the holiday of Shavuot. But if one does not know the end—and one should try to read every story as though one does not—there is a genuine element of suspense in Ruth's last chapter, one that only grows as the kinsman expresses his interest in being the redeemer, in which case Ruth will have no choice but to marry him. Love and the law, the human heart and God's commandments, seem about to part. Now, it is Boaz's turn to save the situation by putting cunning at the service of *ḥesed*, and we breathe a sigh of relief when he succeeds.

And that other suspense, with which we began our reading of *Reading Ruth*? Here we are in for a last surprise, because the coauthors never reveals to us, as we have been sure they would, the nature of Leon and his wife Amy's lost "discovery." Hannah doesn't return to it. This he does, writing in the book's final paragraph how, in his collaboration with Hannah, "In the company of fresh eyes and an eager heart, a lost insight of Amy's was recovered, revivified, and perpetuated into the next generation." *He just never tells us what this insight was!*

I don't know quite what to make of this. I suppose I could have asked my friend Leon directly (yes, we are friends: this disclosure should have been made at the outset), but for whatever reason, I didn't. I can think, though, of two possibilities. One is simple oversight: Leon meant to tell us what the lost discovery was and forgot to.

The other possibility starts with a closing remark of Hannah's. Telling of working on *Reading Ruth*, she relates: "Even the special bond formed between my Zeydeh and me through this process was the work of Gaga's smiling hand, working Naomi-like behind the scenes." Following this are a few summarizing words of Leon's, who writes, after considering a question once asked by Maurice Samuel about why the book of Ruth wasn't called the book of Naomi:

> We have a different suggestion [from Samuel's]. The book is named for Ruth because the loving and self-effacing Naomi would not have had it any other way.

I did not know Amy Kass very well. She died not long after my and my wife's friendship with her and Leon began. But the four of us did twice have lunch together in Jerusalem, and each of these lunches lasted far into the afternoon and early evening, so lost were we in talk. One of them was at the café of the Jerusalem Cinematheque, on an outdoor terrace overlooking the Judean desert and the mountains of Moab across the Jordan. Leon and Amy's perceptible love for each other, her quiet smile that said *Yes, I know*, her felt presence in every word of the conversation even though for stretches of it she never spoke: could their insight have been that they were in the book of Ruth, too?

Meir Soloveichik

On the upcoming holiday of Shavuot it's customary to read the book of Ruth in synagogues, and it has now become routine to see the appearance of new commentaries on this text as Shavuot approaches. This year, we have *Reading Ruth*, which is not only beautifully written and full of intriguing interpretations, but also interestingly authored: composed by a grandfather and granddaughter. Leon Kass, one of the coauthors, is one of the most insightful scholars and teachers of our time, a longtime professor at the University of Chicago and a dean at Shalem College. Throughout his career, he would often teach together with his late, beloved wife, Amy Kass. It was in mourning for Amy that this book came to be, for in his grief Kass began to study the book of Ruth with his granddaughter Hannah Mandelbaum. As they explain, in engaging in joint study they had not intended to emerge as authors of a book on Ruth; rather, they were seeking solace.

> We did not start out intending to write a book. We began, in the fall of 2015, merely seeking to give comfort to each other following the death of our beloved Amy Apfel Kass—wife of 54 years to Leon; grandmother ("Gaga") of sixteen years to Hannah. Leon was living, then as now, in Washington, DC; Hannah was living, then as now, in Jerusalem. The idea was Hannah's, suggested in one of her daily calls: "Zeydeh," she said, "perhaps you would like to read something with me." Leon grabbed the offer: a log brought to a drowning man. We settled easily and quickly on the book of Ruth. Not only was it short and lovely. It also had special meaning for Leon. Some twenty years earlier, Amy and he had made a discovery in the book of Ruth that they thought might be the key to understanding its meaning, and they had spoken about working on it in the future. But that never arrived, and Leon had forgotten the insight. He was therefore particularly keen to see whether, with Hannah's help, it would be recovered.

Thus a grandfather and granddaughter learn together to mourn the wife and matriarch who is missed, and to rediscover her own wisdom in this ancient text.

And while there is a great deal to say about the substance of their reading of Ruth—some of which is highlighted in the review by Hillel Halkin that accompanies this reflection—I wish to explain the significance of the book having been written by these two remarkable people: it is the very endeavor in which they engaged that entranced me: grandfather and granddaughter, seeking solace for their loss, decide to study Torah together. And how fitting it is that it was Ruth that they studied.

For the solace that comes to the bereaved through connection to loved ones is Ruth's great theme. Indeed, rightly understood, that is the meaning of the often-mistranslated word that is central to Ruth itself: *ḥesed*. What is *ḥesed*? The word is often rendered as "loving kindness," but as Kass and Mandelbaum note, the real meaning is a bit different. Consider the famous verse from the second chapter of Jeremiah: "Thus saith the Lord, I remember the *ḥesed* of your youth, your bridal love, that you followed me into the desert, into an unsown land." What *ḥesed* did the Jewish people then show to the Almighty, in following Him into the desert? Was it really a demonstration of kindness?

I think instead it is an expression of loving loyalty, or loyal devotion. When the Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin, upon election to the premiership, told his own beloved wife Aliza—in the words of Jeremiah—that he remembered the *ḥesed* of her youth, her bridal love, that she followed him into—not an unsown land, but an *erets z'ruat mokshim*, a land strewn with mines—he was praising her loyalty, the devotion that led her to stand by and support her husband when he was the most wanted man in Mandatory Palestine, when every day she rose knowing that she might never see him again.

Ḥesed means loving loyalty, ardent devotion, or as I would render it, loyal love. *Ḥesed*, say the sages, is the central theme of the book of Ruth, and indeed it is. Ruth shows Naomi *ḥesed* by refusing to forsake her; and Boaz, in turn, shows *ḥesed* to those who have died by marrying Ruth and perpetuating the family. Hence the beautiful blessing uttered by Naomi, one of the most exquisite sentences in scripture: "blessed is the Lord who has not forsaken His loyal love for the living and the dead."

If this is so, then can there be anything more fitting than a grandfather and granddaughter studying Ruth, to show loyalty and love to one whom they had lost, and to each other? To engage in the study of Torah across the generations is, truth be told, unusual in today's society. In his 2017 book *The Vanishing American Adult*, the Nebraska senator Ben Sasse notes that today's youth very rarely seriously engage the older generation, or as he put it, among those 60 and older, "only a quarter had discussed anything important with anyone under 36 in the previous six months." How many grandchildren sit and study a text—any text—with their grandparents today?

Thus the very existence of *Reading Ruth* invites us to ask that central question of who we are. Are we primarily individuals unbounded, free to define ourselves, or do we find ourselves in our obligations to others? This is one of the questions that Kass and Mandelbaum explore, and that emerges with such charm in the book of Ruth. And it does so by way of what is perhaps the strangest name in the entire Bible. I am referring, of course, to a relation of Naomi's late husband Elimelech, the man who by rite is supposed to marry Ruth, and thereby perpetuate the family and its memories. This man refuses, not seeing, as Boaz did see, Ruth's greatness.

This man is called Ploni Almoni, which, as the biblical equivalent of John Doe, tells us that the text wishes him to be anonymous. The Bible erases his name, or rather it goes out of its way to deny us his personal name, and the reason for this can be discovered in an article that Leon and Amy Kass together wrote about the meaning of naming and the names we all carry. In "What's your Name," recently republished in Leon Kass's *Leading a Worthy Life*, they argue that naming is an example of how parents form children, choosing on their behalf, and of how a child, in turn, encounters his own identity as a product of someone else's decision.

Parents take the responsibility very seriously; or perhaps most do. The Kasses amusingly describe a Jewish family from Shaker Heights, who some decades ago decided to name their child Lancelot, and then, when they would call him in to the house, would endow the appellation with a Yiddish diminutive, and so their voices would ring throughout the neighborhood: Lancelotkele! Lancelotkele! But in general parents sense the responsibility in the choice, and often in naming the child after someone from the family or the Bible or a distinguished personage from history, they seek to impress a legacy and ideal upon the child. Leon and Amy Kass put it this way:

> In all these ways, the naming of a child is, in fact, an emblem of the entire parent-child relation, in both its human generality and its radical particularity. Human children are born naked and nameless, like the animals; they become humanized only through rearing, the work not of nature but of acts of speech and symbolic deed, including praise and blame, reward and punishment, custom, habituation, and education. They become humanized, in the first instance, at the hands of parents, who, among other duties, try steadily to teach children how to call all things by their proper names and to show them how to acquire a good name for themselves.

The paradox of the name is that while it seems to mark us as an individual, that individual meaning is a product of our parents, and thereby it reminds us that we are not simply individuals, but recipients and stewards of a larger whole. If Someone-or-Other, Ruth's Ploni Almoni, desists from his familial obligation to past and posterity, then his individual qualities recede into anonymity.

In *Reading Ruth*, grandfather and granddaughter learn this lesson well, and as they make their way through the text of the book of Ruth, they remember Amy Kass, their wife and grandmother, and rediscover her insights. In so doing, they bind themselves to each other, and link past and future. The book itself is one of the most interesting examples of the talmudic dictum that when one bids goodbye, one should do so with words of Torah, "for through this, you will remember your comrade." The words of sacred scripture bind us to one another, connecting us across space and time. Here, they came to be in bidding farewell to one they have lost, but in the act of study and composition, our coauthors find her again, remembered, renewed.

At the end of the book, Kass writes that his "loss of Amy has been partly redeemed also by Hannah's Ruth-like and Amy-like *ḥesed*—her gracious kindness and loving devotion—which she has steadily showered on me and on Amy's memory. I am overwhelmed with gratitude for these blessings." *Reading Ruth* is, in other words, Kass's own way of expressing what Naomi said thousands of years ago, blessed is God who has not removed His loyal love from the living and those no longer with us.

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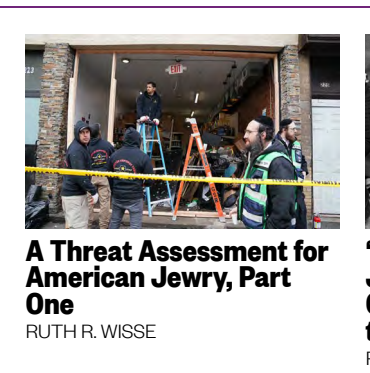

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RUTH R. WISSE

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