

# Ruth in Bethlehem

By Phyllis Chesler

**Quite clearly, Ruth is an Abrahamic figure.** Her story circles right back to Bereshit (12:1-3). I may have noticed this in the past, but I don't think I ever wrote about it before.

In what way is this possible?



Why do I describe Boaz as Ruth's kinsman, not just her late father-in-law Elimelech's, not only as her beloved mother-in-law Naomi's relative. Wait, I'll tell you. But first: Listen to what Boaz tells Ruth as she gleanes in his fields.

In Megillat Ruth (2:11), Ruth's redeemer, future husband, and *kinsman*, Boaz, tells us so.

He says: "It has been fully reported to me all that you have done for your mother-in-law since your husband's death. How you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth and went to a people you had never known before."

This is very close to what Abraham has done—except he was instructed to do so by God. Rather mysteriously, Ruth knows exactly the steps to take—and she does so without any God-proclaimed promises; she does so instinctively, riskily, but as if she's done it before, as if she was there at the very beginning when our forefather Avram took his first steps out of paganism.

In Bereshit 12:1-3, God tells Avram to “lech lecha,” leave, turn yourself inside out, turn to yourself, and go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great and you will be a blessing.

But really, how is it possible that Boaz is a kinsman to Ruth?

Easy. She is a Moaviya, a female member of Moav. She is a descendent of Lot, who slept with his two daughters after the destruction of Sdom and Gmorrah. His daughters believed they were the only human beings still alive on earth. They got their father drunk and took the initiative in order to populate the world. The two girls gave birth to Moav and Ammon.

Lot was Avram's nephew, and until Ishmael and Yitzhak were born, Avram treated Lot as his son and heir. Their shepherds quarreled over grazing lands for their cattle and Lot chose to separate from his uncle/father figure and to go another way. While Lot had still retained some of Avram's laws of hospitality, Lot chose an evil city in which to live.

Thus, Ruth, Lot's descendent, is also related to Boaz, not only through her late husband, Machlon, but also through both Naomi and her own long-ago ancestor, Lot—who, according to Bereshit 12:4-5, was Avram's brother Haran's son.

Ruth's “return” to a land she's never seen to be part of a *people* she's not known—she married into a lone Jewish family living in exile in Moav. Nevertheless, Ruth's return is not

only a “spiritual” return (although it is that too); it is also a return to the very people who first set out on the covenantal journey toward the One True God.

Ruth is not only “feeding” Naomi as a tikkun (to make up for) Moav’s long-ago refusal to do so when we were wandering in the desert; Ruth is also repairing the rift between Lot and Abraham.

She is surely worthy of becoming King David’s great-grandmother.

And no, she is not prohibited to Boaz because she comes from Moav. The rabbis ruled that the prohibition only applies to male members of that nation, not to female members. Neat trick that.

As I was studying this brief and elegant Megillah, I had a heretical thought. I have always bitterly opposed the fact that father-daughter incest is not expressly forbidden in the Torah along with all the other tabooed sexual relationships. I still do—and yet: It has just occurred to me that had Lot’s unnamed daughters not slept with their father there would have been no Moav, no Ruth, and no potential Messianic line coming our way courtesy of Ruth’s extraordinary deeds.

Author’s note: I want to thank Fern Sidman for talking to me before Shavuot about this and of course, as ever, I thank my late chevrotah, Rivka Haut z”l, with whom I studied this Megillah, long, long ago. I beg my reader’s indulgence because I finalized this when I was away from my desk and all my notes.

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*Marc Chagall – The Meeting of Ruth and Boaz*