It’s in the Gene(alogy): Family, Storytelling, and Salvation

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In 1924, the State of Virginia passed the Racial Integrity Act, criminalizing interracial marriages. There was a special dispensation built into the law, however. Through the so-called “Pocahontas exception,” Virginians proud of being descendants of Pocahontas who still wanted to classify as “white” were able to do so instead of being classified as “Native American.” Similarly politically-weighted claims of ancestry have received extensive coverage in recent years, including the question of why Barack Obama is widely considered a black man with a white mother, rather than a white man with a black father; President Trump’s questioning of Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren’s claimed Native American heritage (Trump has, on numerous occasions, referred to her as “Pocahontas”); and the extensive doubts recently raised about the Jewish identity of socialist New York State Senator Julia Salazar. As Rutgers professor Eviatar Zerubavel discusses in his Ancestors and Relatives: Genealogy, Identity, and Community (Oxford, 2011), how we define or frame our ancestry, and how others define it, is of tremendous importance.

Questions of genealogy are so vital because our ancestry is often a key element in our social structure, the axis on which many of our social interactions, obligations, loyalties, and emotional sentiments, turn. Although we like to believe in meritocracy, that individuals are self-made, our identities can be deeply tied to those from whom we descend. As Zerubavel writes, “Our psychological integrity depends very much upon…the extent to which we feel linked to our genealogical

roots.... [S]triking a person's name from his or her family's genealogical records used to be one of the most dreaded punishments in China" (pp. 5, 7). And of course, biologically, heredity has a tremendous impact on our traits, personality, and self-perceptions. As Columbia University professor Robert Pollack has noted, our "genomes are a form of literature… a library of the most ancient, precious, and deeply important books" (Signs of Life: The Language and Meanings of DNA [Houghton Mifflin, 1994], 117). Through studying where we come from, we learn how to tell our own story.

Are Our Relatives… Relative?

In It's All Relative: Adventures Up and Down the World's Family Tree (Simon & Schuster, 2017) humorist and author A. J. Jacobs recounts his attempt to assemble his extended, and by that I mean very extended, family, in the largest family reunion ever. After receiving an e-mail from a man in Israel claiming to be his 12th cousin, part of an 80,000-person family tree that included Karl Marx and some European aristocrats, Jacobs set out to bring as many of his living relatives together as he could, figuring "people [who spend countless hours tracing their family roots] want to feel connected and anchored. They want to visit what has been called the "Museum of Me.'" Utilizing online genealogical tools, he connected to countless celebrities, as well as former U.S. President George H. W. Bush. Through this project, Jacobs sought to make the case for people to be kinder to one another because of our shared "cousin-hood."

Finding out about 79,999 relatives raised for Jacobs questions about the nature of family and the hierarchy of closeness we feel toward certain individuals. He argues that if all of humanity is one very large extended family, it is less important who our immediate relatives are. Maybe,

> … we can sometimes make room in our hearts to love others without diminishing what we feel for those already dearest to us. Love is not a zero-sum game.... They tell of a seventeenth-century French missionary in Canada who tried to explain traditional monogamous marriage to a tribesman. The tribesman replied, "Thou hast no sense. You French people love only your own children, but we love all the children of our tribe." Ignorance of their kids' paternity apparently [can make] for a more compassionate society. (pp. 87, 150)

Taking this line of reasoning a step further, maybe our conception of family shouldn't even be limited to biological relatives, or even people in our local community or tribe. One modern writer, Andrew Solomon, has even offered calling those who share your passion or worldview your "horizontal family" as opposed to your "vertical," biological family. Though we would assume those with common interests are friends rather than family, Zerubavel gives some credence and sociological substance to this counterintuitive idea:

The family… is an inherently boundless community. Since there is no natural boundary separating recent ancestors from remote ones, there is also no such boundary separating close relatives from distant ones, or even relatives from nonrelatives. Any such boundary is therefore a product of social convention alone. Thus, although it is probably nature that determines that our obligations to others be proportional to our genealogical proximity to them, it is nevertheless unmistakably social norms that specify whose blood or honor we ought to avenge and determine the genealogical reach of family reunification policies. It is likewise social conventions that specify who can claim the share of blood money paid to relatives of homicide victims and determine who we invite to family reunions. Thus, whereas the range of other animals' kin recognition is determined by nature, it is social norms, conventions, and traditions of classification that determine how widely humans' range of kin recognition actually extends, and societies indeed often vary in where they draw the line between relatives and nonrelatives. (p. 72)

And as the renowned astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson put it in a letter to Jacobs (p. 163):

My philosophy of root-finding may be unorthodox. I just don't care. And that's not a passive, but active sense of caring. In the tree of life, any two people in the world share a common ancestor—depending only on how far you look. So the line we draw to establish family and heritage is entirely arbitrary. When I wonder what I am capable of achieving, I don't look to family lineage, I look to all human beings. That's the genetic relationship that matters to me. The genius of Isaac Newton, the courage of Gandhi and MLK, the bravery of Joan of Arc, the athletic

feats of Michael Jordan, the oratorical skills of Sir Winston Churchill, the compassion of Mother Teresa. I look to the entire human race for inspiration for what I can be—because I am human. [I] couldn't care less if I were a descendant of kings and paupers, saints or sinners, the valorous or cowardly. My life is what I make of it.

Are You My Mother?

The challenge to the idea above, however, is that while it might make for a sound philosophical argument, it doesn't seem to hold water empirically. There have been many experiments and contexts, including Israeli kibbutzim, in which children have been raised communally, as opposed to in a nuclear family model, only to discover it made parents and children less happy. There is social, psychological, and moral value provided by what we intuitively classify as our family, which, assuming it contains a generally positive dynamic, serves to aid in both general health and even survival, and inculcate values that an individual applies to his or her colleagues, neighbors, and friends. As the saying goes, "Men may change their clothes, their politics, their wives, their religions, their philosophies—[but] they cannot change their grandfathers."

The Jewish Family

Judaism, of course, is based upon the story of a family. The Book of Genesis is the story of chosen children, with the tales of those who were not chosen relegated to the periphery. Like many families, the Jewish family's "dynastic mental structure" is conceived of as a "single identity" with "particular norms of remembrance" (Zerubavel, 19, 67). Thus, while one might refer to one's country of origin a "motherland" or refer to the "founding fathers" of the United States, to the Jewish people, Israel is the land of our actual mothers and fathers, and our norms of family remembrance are found in the Torah. We are Benei Yisrael, the children of our forefather Israel.

Following the completion of the Bible, the advent of the monarchy, and the sweep of subsequent Jewish history, what has emerged within the story of the Children of Israel is the anticipated restoration of one particular line within our family. We

hope and pray multiple times throughout our liturgy for the resumed authority of the Davidic line through the coming of the Messiah, the ultimate redeemer.

With this background in mind, let us examine the Book of Ruth, which ends with a genealogy culminating with the birth of David, the ancestor of the eventual Messiah. Let us also examine how the ancestral story of David's family is told and how it might inform our understanding of family in our own lives.

Ten Generations

The Book of Ruth ends with a list of ten generations:

Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez begot Hezron; and Hezron begot Ram, and Ram begot Amminadab; and Amminadab begot Nahshon, and Nahshon begot Salmon; and Salmon begot Boaz, and Boaz begot Obed; and Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David. (Ruth 4:18–22)

A story that began with an Israelite family leaving Bethlehem and dwelling in Moab for around ten years (1:4), during which time a father and two sons died, now lists ten generations of progeny, a healthy and vibrant family line. The birthing of sons has replaced the death of sons. Beyond this portrayal of restoration, the list has a structure that serves a political function as well. The list could have started with Judah, father of Perez, or even Jacob, Judah's father, but starting with Perez puts David tenth in line, matching an earlier biblical pattern. Just as there were ten generations from Adam to Noah, and another ten from Noah to Abraham, David is listed as the culmination of ten generations. This structure suggests that the book is situating David in the pantheon of foundational biblical figures (See Zvi Ron, "The Genealogical List in the Book of Ruth: A Symbolic Approach," Jewish Bible Quarterly 38:2 [2010]: 85–92).

The "surprise ending" of David's birth also reshapes our perception of the entire preceding narrative. Through the realization that this tale of a bereft Naomi and her former daughter-in-law, the Moabite Ruth, ends up producing the ultimate Israelite king, the reader sees how a savior is born through the acts of loyalty and kindness demonstrated by its characters. In the words of Professor André LaCocque in his Ruth: A Continental Commentary (Fortress Press, 2004):

The genealogy is their announcement of victory…. [I]n the West, individualism has become so excessive, so egocentric, that all devotedness to a future

generation appears obsolete and even ridiculous in the eyes of some… but the facts of history do teach us that we cannot take the survival of the group for granted. After Auschwitz, the people of Naomi—who are also Ruth's people—know that they are vulnerable. It was already so in ancient Israel. The discontinuation of the name—that is, of the family, the clan—meant annihilation…. [W]hat has to be assured is not the number but history, the promise, the hope. The typical modern individual does not have any history, only episodes, like the soap operas on television. But Israel has a history, a history oriented toward the coming of the kingdom of God and its regent, the Messiah…. [P]ut simply, the story of Ruth is pulled from the episodic and placed, from the perspective of Israel's history, into salvation history. (p. 122)

Living during the troublesome era of the Book of Judges, in which each man did what was right in his own eyes because there was no ruler to unify the nation, Ruth merits the bearing the nation's salvific figure, the conqueror of Jerusalem, and the singer of Psalms through her selfless acts. As Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky suggest, "For an ancient audience this final genealogy would have been an exhilarating conclusion; good people have been rewarded with the high honor of illustrious progeny" (The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth (Philadelphia: JPS, 2011), 92–93).

The Female Genealogy

Like all such biblical lists, the final verses of Ruth list male progenitors. However, prior to those last few verses, the narratives offer what some have suggested is a female genealogy as well, one whose allusions offer even greater insight into the story of David's birth. In this scene, in which Ruth is married to Boaz, the names of certain female biblical heroines are evoked:

And all the people that were in the gate, and the elders, said: "We are witnesses. May God make the woman that is coming into your house like Rachel and like Leah, those two who built the house of Israel; and be worthy in Ephrat, and be famous in Bethlehem; and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, of the seed which God shall give you of this young woman." So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife; and he was intimate with her, and God gave her conception, and she bore a son. And the women said unto Naomi: "Blessed be God, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and let his name be famous in Israel. And he shall be for you a restorer of life, and a nourisher for you in your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is

better to you than seven sons, has borne him.” And Naomi took the child, and laid embraced him, and became his nurse. And the women her neighbors gave it a name, saying: “There is a son born to Naomi”; and they called his name Obed; he is the father of Jesse, the father of David. (4:11–17)

This is the only time in the entire Bible where characters are blessed through the invoking of female characters. Ruth is mentioned as an analogue to none other than Rachel and Leah, two foundational women, mothers, and wives. In this radical acceptance of a stranger, a Moabite widow becomes an honorary biblical matriarch.

In the coda of Ruth, the invocation of Rachel and Leah, as well as Tamar, is more than a simple reference to memorable female biblical characters. All three of these earlier women, along with the daughters of Lot, have been subtly alluded to over the course of Ruth’s tale. All of them, like Ruth, ensured the viability of their family line through personal sacrifice in the form of “bedtricks” of varying degrees of deception and morality. After fleeing the destruction of Sodom, the daughters of Lot made their father drunk and slept with him, thereby producing Amon and Moab, the latter of which is Ruth’s ancestor (Genesis 19). Leah was switched for Rachel on Jacob’s wedding night (Genesis 29:25) and the two sisters often fought over their husband, once trading a night with Jacob for mandrakes (30:16). (It can be noted that Leah was the mother of Judah, whose descendants include Boaz and David.) And Tamar dressed as a veiled harlot and slept with Judah (Genesis 38). However, as contemporary scholar Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel emphasizes in her Holiness and Transgression: Mothers of the Messiah in the Jewish Myth (Academic Studies Press, 2017), Ruth and Boaz’s story stands both among and beyond those earlier narratives:

In contrast to the masculine list, which is summarily “historical,” the feminine list is portrayed as “herstory” and as part of... Boaz and Ruth's wedding scene. This list functions as a connecting link for the formal closing of the book and a disposition to recast forbidden actions into “an expression of blessing” is prominent in it. Absent here is the unforgiving terminology found in the original story: the figure of the qedeisha or the prostitute at the entrance of Enaim, the problematic revelation at Boaz's feet, and the hesitation of the redeemer to corrupt his inheritance, the threat of the world's annihilation in the story of Lot's daughters and their abandonment to be raped in the beginning of the story of Sodom, the poverty, calamity, and death that accompany Ruth and Tamar, the clashing of the sisters Rachel and Leah. All of these are transformed into unified harmony in the mouths of the congratulators at the city's gate. (p. 14)

Through their mention in this story, these earlier women are woven into the fabric of Israel's royal history, and their sacrifices reach an apex in Ruth's actions. Whereas those earlier stories were tales of deceit, lack of knowledge, seduction, and trickery, Ruth's "bedtrick" at the threshing floor was a call to action that necessitated recognition and awareness on the part of the individual actors, and that resulted in "fully legitimate, legally certified" marriage. From Lot's daughters' incest, to Rachel and Leah's wedding night switch, to Tamar's disguised harlotry, we have progressed, finally, to a public marriage ceremony at the city gates of Bethlehem. Through Ruth, those earlier episodes are thus redeemed, affirmed, and celebrated. Maybe this is why the male genealogical list begins with the name Perez, which means "breach." Daring to breach propriety for the sake of family, these women not only ensured the continuation of their family line, they provided national salvation.

Struggles, Storytelling, and Salvation

By telling the story of King David's genealogy through the Book of Ruth, the text is offering a nuanced framework for thinking about our own history, both national and familial. As psychologist Dr. Lisa Miller has demonstrated, the ability for families to articulate their struggles and challenges builds resilience among its members (see The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving [Picador, 2015], 291). Through the tale of a foreign, marginalized widow, whose personal risk mirrors that of other biblical mothers, we are reminded of the sacrifices that sustain the continuity of the Jewish people. We are reminded of the ability of kindness to heal. And we are reminded of the power of family, both biological and beyond. Ruth's story inspires us to meet the challenges of our own circumstances. Through the tale of communal openness to a disconnected stranger, we are given the keys to redemption. After all, it is the offspring of Lot's daughter, Rachel and Leah, Tamar, and Ruth, with its family bloodline of struggle, alienation, and foreignness, coupled with selfless dedication to continuity, who is uniquely suited to lead the Children of Israel and bring the nations of the world closer to God. Like Moses, whose virtues and leadership abilities were developed through his fractured, foreign experiences in both Egypt and Midian, Ruth, too, embodies the marginal figure's messianic capabilities.

It is through our own striving to survive and flourish alongside our imperfections, struggles, and feelings of disconnectedness that will eventually repair a fractured

world. To quote Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen in his discussion of the Messiah in Tzidkat HaTzadik (#111), “the lowest will become the highest.”

This is why Ruth is the progenitor of the Messiah, because the Messiah is the ultimate meishiv nefesh [Ruth 4:15], restorer of life and dignity when hope seems lost.… [T]o restore the name [Ruth 4:5] is to reach across the generations, and across interpersonal divide, and at times across the divide between aspects or periods within one’s own self, in active recognition, provoking true transformation. That is what compassionate redemption means.… [I]n the end, Ruth reminds us that nothing is more beautiful than friendship, that grace begets grace, that blessing flourishes in the place between memory and hope, that light shines most from broken vessels. What else is the Messiah about? (Nehemiah Polen, “Dark Ladies and Redemptive Compassion: Ruth and the Messianic Lineage in Judaism,” in Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, eds., Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs [Fordham University Press, 2006], 69, 74.)

In our striving to embody the values inspired by Ruth, may we merit the writing of the next chapter of the Jewish story. May we, as individuals, as members of our family, and as members of the Children of Israel, bring the world compassionate redemption.