

TORAH SPARKS

NOT NOBODY, NOT NO HOW

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt

Dvar Parashah

In the book of Ruth, two sons die in Moab. And perhaps their deaths fulfill the Torah's most troubling law. Our [parashah](#) confronts us with the figure of the rebellious child:

“If a person has a stubborn and rebellious son who does not heed his father or mother ... his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town ... and they shall say: ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He does not listen to our voice...’ Then the men of the town shall stone him to death.”

The parents’ cry is unbearable: “*He does not listen to us.*” The most intimate bond collapses, and its failure is declared in public at the gate. The law imagines the possibility that some children will never hear, never turn, never change. *Ben sorer u’moreh* imagines parents who know their child so well that they see no hope of redemption.

The rabbis recoil from this law. In [Sanhedrin 71a](#), Rabbi Shimon insists: *בן סורר ומורה לא היה ולא* – *עתיד להיות ולמה נכתב? דרוש וקבל שכר* – “The case of the stubborn and rebellious son never was and never will be. And why was it written? So that you may study it and receive reward.” Others pile on restrictions: the boy must be precisely the right age, consume precisely the right measure of meat and wine, and have parents whose voices and appearances are alike. The halakhah is narrowed into impossibility. The rabbis would not allow us to kill our children.

And yet Tanakh gives us a story where the rebellious sons do die. In the opening verses of Ruth, Naomi’s two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, marry Moabite women. Then the [text](#) states bluntly: *וַיָּמָתוּ גַם-שְׁנֵיהֶם מַחְלוֹן וְכִלְיוֹן* – *the two of them, Mahlon and Chilion, also died*. Their names already carried the weight of doom: Mahlon meaning “sickness,” Chilion “destruction.” They die childless, their line cut off. Like the rebellious son of Deuteronomy, they cannot inherit covenant, cannot transmit a name in Israel.

The Talmud connects their deaths to rebellion. In [Bava Batra 91a](#), Elimelech and his sons are said to have been punished for leaving Bethlehem during famine, unwilling to share their wealth with the poor. They chose self-preservation over covenantal responsibility. Their departure to Moab marked them as men who would not listen, who abandoned their people. Their fate is the fate of the rebellious son: cut off *על שם סופו*, on account of their end.

And yet, from within their death comes life. The Moabite widow Ruth steps into covenant with a fidelity that Israel's sons could not embody. Everything Parashat Ki Teitzei feared in Moab is reversed in her. Where [Deuteronomy](#) declared “No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter... forever” , Ruth the Moabite enters. Where Moab failed to bring bread and water, Ruth meets Naomi on the road with loyalty and food. Where Ki Teitzei commands gleanings for the widow, orphan, and stranger, Ruth goes out to glean as a widow and for a widow. Where Ki Teitzei commands levirate marriage, Ruth calls upon Boaz to redeem, at the gate, before the elders.

Ruth embodies the very laws of Ki Teitzei, and in doing so she overturns its verdict. The rabbis in [Yevamot 76b](#) safeguarded her inclusion with a midrashic hinge: עמוני ולא עמונית, מואבי ולא מואבית “An Ammonite man, but not an Ammonite woman; a Moabite man, but not a Moabite woman.” Does the Edomite once tried to disqualify David's kingship because he descended from Ruth, but the sages replied: the ban never applied to her. Through that opening Ruth walked, and with her came the line of kings. Human law closed the door; God reopened it.

The prophets sing the same transformation in the Israelite people. [Jeremiah](#) gives voice to despair: “וְלָעָם הַזֶּה הָיָה לֵב סוֹרֵר וּמוֹרֶה סָרוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ,” “Yet this people has a wayward and defiant heart; they have turned aside and gone their way.” God, too, is the parent of a rebellious child, crying out: My children will not listen. And yet, by the time we reach this week's haftarah, [Isaiah 54](#), the voice has changed. “For a brief moment I forsook you, but with vast love I will bring you back... Though the mountains may move and the hills be shaken, my love shall never move from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be shaken.”

The rebellious sons of Naomi die childless in Moab. But Ruth, the Moabite widow, becomes the mother of kings. The people called stubborn and unfaithful are remembered still. Ruth is the living proof of Isaiah's promise: covenantal love breaking through human exclusion. God's love is stronger than our fear.

Sometimes we must protect ourselves. Sometimes the law must say “not here, not ever.” The Torah gives voice to that necessity. The rabbis restrain it, insisting the rebellious son “never was and never will be.” And even in Moab, in the shadow of death, the seeds of redemption are already present: Ruth gleaning, Boaz redeeming, God remembering still.

BRING IT INTO YOUR HOUSE

Jonathan Lipnick
Exploring the Parashah



*In this video series, we will explore an often neglected aspect of the parashah: geography. Each week we will focus on a physical location mentioned in the parashah and examine its historical significance. Of course not every parashah contains a narrative situated in a place; for these weeks we will select a word from the parashah that relates to the material culture of ancient Israel.