

"So wisely and tenderly written that the reading is a soul-delight. Rabbi Barclay uncovers our shared human longing to discern and align with the spiritual laws governing the universe, and to do the inner work required to profoundly interface with the Divine and one another."

— Michael Bernard Beckwith, author of *Life Visioning*

"Rabbi Barclay's book is a reminder of the golden threads which join so many different religions. This is particularly true of the Jewish and Christian faiths which share history and a sacred literature. This book will give spiritual comfort to many grateful readers."

— Christopher (Lord) Patten
Chancellor of the University of Oxford

"The books in the third section of the Bible are often inaccessible to people. Rabbi Barclay is a sure guide to the understanding of the text, but even more, he opens the door to insightful application of these sacred treasures to the life of the reader. To go with him, his book and Bible in hand, is a wonderful spiritual adventure."

— Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, author of *Davening*

"Michael Barclay brings to this study of the Ketuvim the unique perspective of a Jewish rabbi who has taught in a Catholic university. He does a masterful job of blending scholarship and spirituality. His controlling insight that these biblical books show us how to 'experience God in every relationship' makes this book a valuable tool for learning how to live well."

— Irene Nowell, OSB
Benedictine of Mount St. Scholastica and adjunct
professor of Scripture at Saint John's School of
Theology•Seminary, Collegeville, Minnesota

“Rabbi Barclay has opened a fresh and innovative approach to the Writings, one that draws from the rabbinic tradition, but also from the wisdom and mysticism of various religions.”

— James Chukwuma Okoye
Director, Center for Spiritan Studies
Duquesne University

“The transformation of Christian-Jewish relations by Vatican II has resulted in a new appreciation in the church of the spiritual depth and practical insights found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Rabbi Barclay skillfully opens up the final section of these Scriptures for their integration into contemporary spirituality and faith-based action.”

— John T. Pawlikowski, OSM
Director, Catholic-Jewish Studies Program
Catholic Theological Union, Chicago

“Refreshing engagement theology between pulpit and pew. Ideal for synagogue, church, and interfaith scriptural study and dialogue.”

— Prof. Zev Garber
Professor Emeritus and Chair of Jewish Studies and
Philosophy
Los Angeles Valley College
Editor of *Shofar* and Founding Editor of *Shofar*
Supplements in Jewish Studies (Purdue)

Sacred Relationships

Biblical Wisdom for
Deepening Our Lives Together

Rabbi Michael Barclay



LITURGICAL PRESS

Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Cover design by Stefan Killen Design. Cover photo © iStockphoto.

Scripture texts reprinted from the *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. Copyright 1985 The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia.

Scripture texts reproduced from *Tanach* with permission of the copyright holders, ArtScroll / Mesorah Publications, Ltd.

Material reproduced from *Talmud: the Schottenstein edition* by permission of the copyright holders, ArtScroll / Mesorah Publications, Ltd.

Material reproduced from *The Babylonian Talmud*, edited by I. Epstein and published by Soncino Press.

Material reprinted from *The Kabir Book: Forty-four of the Ecstatic Poems of Kabir*, versions by Robert Bly, Beacon Press, Boston, 1977. Copyright © 1977 Robert Bly. Used with his permission.

© 2013 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, microfilm, microfiche, mechanical recording, photocopying, translation, or by any other means, known or yet unknown, for any purpose except brief quotations in reviews, without the previous written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John’s Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Barclay, Michael Lawrence.
Sacred relationships : biblical wisdom for deepening our lives together / Rabbi Michael Barclay.
pages cm.
ISBN 978-0-8146-3518-6 — ISBN 978-0-8146-3543-8 (ebook)
1. Bible. O.T. Hagiographa—Criticism, interpretation, etc. I. Title.
BS1308.B37 2013
221.6—dc23

2012042376

Contents

With Gratitude ix

Introduction:

Ketuvim, Biblical Wisdom for Relationships 1

Of Talmuds, Targums, Texts, and Traditions 3

1 Ruth: The First Interpersonal Relationship 9

Ruth and Naomi 9

The Primary Human Relationship of Parenthood 10

Naomi, the Life Coach 12

2 Psalms: Experiencing God within Every Feeling 16

The Psalms as Literature 18

The Author of the Psalms:

King David, the Man of Passion 19

Using the Psalms to See Divinity in Emotions 20

Gratitude, Praise, and Happiness 24

What If? 26

3 Job: Transforming Suffering into Love 28

What Did I Do to Deserve This? 28

How Can God Let the Good Suffer? 32

How to Be Human in a Divine World 33

The Hidden Benefits of Suffering: Hitting the Curve Ball 35

- 4 Proverbs: Knowing God in the Marketplace 41**
King Solomon, the Wisest of Humans 42
Divine Experience of Family 45
Surviving the Marketplace in a Healthy Way 47
- 5 Ecclesiastes: How to Find Awe in Every Place 50**
The Depths of Awe Become the Heights of Understanding 53
Seeing the Divine in Every Place in Every Moment 56
- 6 Song of Songs: Integrating Intimacy and the Divine 59**
The Sensual Union with the Divine 60
Success, Sensuality, and the Temple 63
Sex, Solomon, and Intensity 64
To Love Another Person Is to See the Face of God 68
- 7 Lamentations:
Pain and the Promise That Comes from It 72**
No Pain, No Gain 75
Teshuvah: A Map to Pass through the Dark Night 78
- 8 Daniel:
Time, Timelessness, and the Art of Being Present 84**
Difficulties in Daniel 87
Do You Have the Time? 90
The Future Is Now 95
- 9 Esther: Even Where God Isn't . . . God Is 97**
A Present God in the Midst of Absence? 100
Excess, Addictions, and Role Models 102
Embracing the Shadow, Unifying with the Light, and
Being Willing to Walk Away 105
- 10 Ezra-Nehemiah-Chronicles:
Spirit Becomes Substance 110**
The World Is the Temple 111
Ezra the Lawgiver 113

Nehemiah: Building the Holy	114
The Anchor of the Sabbath	116
Chronicles: Where Have We Been, and Where Are We Going?	118

Conclusion: The Journey in Every Place	121
---	------------

Glossary	127
-----------------	------------

With Gratitude

A person's work is based on the many experiences and people that have affected him, and this book is no exception. I could not have even started working on this without the help, guidance, and support of so many people. If the reader finds any value in this writing, then it is because of my teachers, family, and friends; and before embarking on this journey through the text together, it is important to give the respect due to those who have prepared the trail for us.

As a young man, I often thought about attending rabbinical school, but it was only when the Academy for Jewish Religion, California (AJRCA), opened its pluralistic doors that it became a reality. I did not ever wish to be educated in just one "movement" of Judaism, and I've always believed that one of the weaknesses of our tradition as it is practiced here in America is that we are so divisive among ourselves. It did not matter to Hitler whether someone was a secular, Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox Jew; and it won't matter to the Messiah, may he or she come in our time. So why do we place such emphasis on judging one another? The holy texts of our tradition were given to us all, and AJRCA encouraged, through its diverse faculty and spirit of inclusion, an environment that fostered the creativity and love for text that I now find such an important part of my life. Without the learning and intellectual support that I found there, I could not have even started to analyze text in a creative way.

The people from AJRCA that affected me, both students and faculty, are too many to list here. But it would be inappropriate if

I did not give the honor to some of the teachers who so deeply influenced me, helping my love for our traditions and text grow and flourish. Rabbi Mel Gottlieb, the president of AJRCA, is a greater rabbi than I could ever hope to be. He combines his knowledge and decades of experience with compassion and caring. Dr. Tamar Frankiel, the dean of Academic Affairs, is a truly righteous woman, with an unparalleled understanding of the necessity of combining academics with tradition. Rabbi Steve Robbins has been a lifelong teacher and a tremendous bridge in integrating our mystical tradition with psycho-emotional understandings; and Rabbi Mordecai Finley has been a source of support and strength, and a model for me not only as a rabbi but also as a man. I am grateful to Dr. Joel Gereboff, Dr. Marvin Sweeney, and Dr. Gil Graff for opening my mind to the academic approaches to text; and I am equally grateful to Dr. Vered Hopenstad and Cantor Nate Lam, who live with a passion that exemplifies the very best of our tradition. Rabbis Daniel Bouskila and Haim Ovadia continue to be guides for me to understand the Sephardic approaches to our tradition; and there are no words to describe the blessings I have received from Rabbi Shlomo “Schwartzie” Schwartz, who has constantly pushed me to know the beauty of Hasidism. The combining of joy and depth that I have always experienced from Rabbi Stan Levy and Rabbi J. B. Sacks is a practice that I continue to try to model in all aspects of the teaching that I do.

There are a few men in particular for whom I am more grateful than can be expressed. Ronnie Serr is one of the most knowledgeable and compassionate men I have ever known in my life, and is the embodiment of a tzaddik, a righteous man. Rabbi Avraham Greenbaum of the Azamra Institute in Jerusalem has been an anchor and teacher for my entire family for many years; his teachings, words, and actions have guided me into a level of love for Torah that I never would have imagined decades ago. Rabbi David Baron of The Temple of the Arts has been not only a dear friend but also a wonderful mentor and teacher in integrating the depths of our teachings with the arts of the twenty-first century; and Rabbi Gershon Weissman is a consistent teacher in the art of wis-

dom through gentleness. Rabbi Shimon Kraft of the 613 Mitzvah Store in Los Angeles is a true teacher of Torah, and has always been an amazing resource for me in all my studies; and Rabbi Aaron Katz is a true master at integrating text into practical applications in the twenty-first century.

Certain people so deeply affect your life in all ways that you do not even know how to begin to define the relationship. I have been blessed to have two of those men not only be friends and teachers but also to act as the witnesses on my *ketubah*, my marriage contract. Rabbi Elijah Schochet is a great scholar and rabbi, a model of what a human being can achieve. As a mutual friend once said of him, “only pearls fall from his mouth,” and I was blessed to have him at AJRCA not only as a professor but also as my thesis advisor. I am even more blessed that he continues to be a teacher and friend to my family and me; without his guidance I would never have had the ability, nor even the desire, to find the love of Talmud and our texts that is now so ingrained in my soul. This book is a direct result of his encouragement at all times to learn the text as deeply and personally as possible, and I cannot imagine a better guide into the world of our holy writings. He personifies doing more than is ever required through the way that he walks with beauty, grace, and dignity in the world. Rabbi Arthur Gross Schaefer has been and continues to be my friend and confidant, a guide and support that began long before I embarked on a serious journey into Judaism and continues today. Because of him, I had the opportunity to teach at the university level, which spawned so many of the teachings of this book. He and his family—his son Elisha has even stood by my side as a cantor for multiple High Holiday services—are not only dear friends but also part of that integral support system that every human being so needs.

It is often said that when the student is ready, the teacher appears, and I learned a great deal about what a rabbi can be from a man who was not even Jewish. Anselmo Valencia, of blessed memory, taught me about life, God, the spirit, and community without ever standing in front of me in a classroom. This great man, who was the chief of the Yaqui Indians, would constantly

toss out little comments that would cause me to rethink my entire perspective of Life and God, and was one of the great leaders of his people in their history. His family and culture are all a special part of my life, and their friendship is a continued source of caring and strength.

The entire concept for this book came from the many experiences I had while teaching theology at Loyola Marymount University, and I have no doubt that I learned more from the students of my classes than they ever learned from me. Similarly, I learned so much about relationships through spending time with couples at whose weddings I've been blessed to officiate. Experiencing Divinity within the context of a wedding is transforming, and out of all the amazing weddings I have been privileged to be part of, I am especially grateful to Cami and Scott, Dana and Phil, Sonia and Nick, Nicole and Ophir, Anna and Eli, Nicole and Josh, Jessica and David, Judy and Dan, and Coco and Bruce for allowing me to participate in their special days while I was working on this manuscript. Without my friend and teacher Ayodele Adeyemi, I would never have understood and experienced so many of the teachings about passion, joy, and strength that are found in the texts that are explored in this book. Both Ayo and my dear friend Yuval Ron have always been masters and guides for me in integrating the power of music with the presence of God. Like many teenagers, my love for Judaism was enhanced and nurtured through the summer camp experience, and I will always be grateful for the guidance I and so many other young people were given by Stephen Breuer and Chuck Feldman. Ira Boren has modeled living in a sacred way in the workplace; and on the most basic of levels this book would not be here without the hard work of Trish, Andy, Stephanie, and all the wonderful people at Liturgical Press. I am also so grateful to the many periodicals, and especially the *Jewish Journal* of Los Angeles, for allowing me to write and share my thoughts about our tradition in a public setting.

There are those who are no longer with us physically but without whom I would simply not know how to be a man, let alone a rabbi. My brother of blessed memory, John Barclay, Yonaton ben

Avram HaCohen, was my best friend, teacher, and guide; he taught me that every moment and action can be a prayer. My beloved grandmother, Rose Handler, Shoshanah bat Israel, may her memory be a blessing, instilled within me a love and respect for Jewish values, and I know her love is always with me and my family. My parents of blessed memory, George and Iris Barclay, Avram HaCohen and Sara bat Moshe v'Shoshanah, brought me into this world, raised me to have a love and appreciation for life, ethics, Judaism, and to see God in everything and everywhere. They are the roots of my Tree of Life, and I pray that their souls find joy in these writings.

There are teachers and friends, sages and rabbis, but the greatest teachers for me are the ones that I am blessed to be with every day, *B"H*: my wife, Allison, and my sons, Benjamin and Jonathan. They have put up with me while I've been working on this book, guiding me with their thoughts and insights about life—sometimes through words, and often (especially in the case of my toddler twins) through their actions. They remind me of the deep purpose of our lives and are not only my support but also are my teachers in every moment about what is really important in life.

The most thanks and honor must be given to the Creator of All, who has blessed me with life, teachers, and my beloved wife and sons. This entire book is for You, so that all of us may deepen our own relationships with You, and let You into our daily lives.

To each of you, and to so many others . . . my thanks and gratitude for all that you have given me is overwhelming.

May I live in a way that is deserving of your gifts and that brings you joy.

B'shalom u'vracha
Rabbi Michael Barclay

Introduction:

Ketuvim, Biblical Wisdom for Relationships

When we open up a Jewish Bible (called Tanakh, a Hebrew acronym for Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim), we find a beautiful collection of writings that is often called the Ketuvim (meaning "Writings").¹ Included in this section are books of praise and wisdom, pain and suffering, and the entire gamut of human emotions. These books are often considered the "Wisdom literature" of the Bible. Many people from all faith traditions are familiar with the Psalms, which are used so often by all Western religions in rites of passage and life-cycle rituals; with the book of Proverbs, which gives practical advice on how to live and love; and with Job, which is the archetype used by everyone from clergy to psychologists to understand the ancient question of "why bad things happen to good people." These, and the other books of this section of Scripture, are quoted and used by people from all walks of life. But is there possibly a deeper meaning hidden in all of these books that ties them together? How can we use these powerful texts to enhance our own lives and our relationship with God? Are there commonalities between these texts that can help us live more passionately, fully, and consciously? Simply put, what are these books really all about?

To understand the Ketuvim, we need to look at all the books individually, as well as their history and placement, and examine any potential ties that bind them together thematically. We need to become "Bible detectives"—questioning and turning over the texts to understand and integrate them at a deep and full level.

As we do this, we may find that there is much more to Psalms than just comforting us in our grief, more to Job than just a question about suffering, and a hidden depth to each of these books that can guide us to deeper, more meaningful lives.

Ketuvim, meaning “Writings,” is the name of the third section of the Hebrew Scriptures. Along with Torah (the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) and *Nevi'im* (meaning “Prophets,” including the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi), this third section comprises the Hebrew Scriptures (known in the Christian world as the Old Testament). Included in Ketuvim are Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. As Bible detectives, we need to unearth what is at the heart of each of these books. We need to look at why they are grouped together and, even more importantly, how we can raise the quality of our daily lives through their understanding.

Written primarily in ancient Hebrew, the original texts contain subtleties that are easily lost in translation. To explore the texts deeply, we will need to look at some of these double meanings that may be found in specific words. The translations used here are from the Jewish Publication Society’s Tanakh, the ArtScroll Tanach by Mesorah Publishing, the Soncino Edition of the Babylonian Talmud, the Schottenstein Edition of the Babylonian Talmud, or my own direct translations of the Hebrew.² Similarly, these ancient writings use multiple Hebrew words for the name of God. In the Kabbalistic (Jewish mystical) tradition, each of these names has a different connotation, which we will not be exploring, as it is beyond the scope of this book. But it is important to recognize that God is beyond being either “feminine” or “masculine,” and I have attempted to use language that reflects that understanding of Divinity. While using anthropomorphic terms is helpful for many people when referring to God, it can also be a setback, and

so I have also used terms such as Divine, Life, or the Universe to reflect the infinite nature of God. Any reference to the Divine as “he” or “she” here is merely for the sake of ease and has no connotation of gender. As Rabbi J. B. Sacks is fond of saying, when he refers to God as “he,” “I figure that God’s a big girl and she can take care of herself.”

Perhaps the first item we need to examine in our exploration is the compilation of the books themselves, and their order within Ketuvim. In today’s Bible, they are ordered in the way listed above. Intellectually, this makes sense. Psalms, Proverbs, and Job are written in a similar style, with all being books of “poetry.” Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther are called the Megillot—scrolls that are each read on different Jewish holidays. Song of Songs is read on the holiday of Passover; Ruth on Shavuot, the holiday commemorating the giving of Torah on Mount Sinai; Lamentations is read on Tisha B’Av, the holiday mourning the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem; Ecclesiastes is read during Sukkot, the holiday remembering the forty years the Hebrews spent wandering in the desert; and Esther is read on Purim, a holiday teaching of excess, persecution, and redemption. Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles are considered the “other books” of Ketuvim, as they don’t fit into either of the previous two groups. This is an order that makes sense, has meaning, and is easily understood.

But this is not the order of the books as they were originally canonized. Let’s take a look at what the original order was, and then, with some investigation, we may be able to evaluate each of the books and the entire group more clearly.

Of Talmuds, Targums, Texts, and Traditions

The earliest record of the Bible’s canonization is found in the Talmud. Also known as the Oral Torah, this collection of writings was assembled between the second and fifth centuries of the Common Era. Originally taught orally, it is an ancient tradition that

some of the text of this great work dates back all the way to Moses and Mount Sinai. *Pirkei Avot*, one of these tractates of Talmud whose name translates to “Teachings of Our Fathers,” states, “Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly” (*Pirkei Avot* 1:1, Schottenstein). Fearing that these oral teachings would be lost, the head of the Great Assembly in the second century, Judah HaNasi (Judah the Prince), codified and assembled these teachings into the Mishnah, which became the foundation of the Talmud. The discussions found in the Talmud give us insight into the dialogues and debates about law, ethics, customs, and history as understood at that time.

The importance of the Talmud when unearthing the hidden meanings of the Bible cannot be overestimated. Many things in the Bible are not clearly explained in the text itself and can only be understood in conjunction with the Talmudic understanding. A simple way to understand this importance is with the following traditional example. God tells Moses to write down “Remember the sabbath day” (Exod 20:8, JPS). God then verbally explains to Moses what it means to “remember” the Sabbath. Moses passes that oral understanding to Joshua, who passes it to the elders, and so on. Hundreds of years later, like in any game of “telephone,” there are discussions among the men of the Great Assembly about what was really said to Moses, and then further dialogues about the hidden meanings and how they relate to the human condition. Those dialogues are the foundation of a series of more intense and in-depth discussions and laws that become codified as the “Talmud.”

Each section, or tractate, of the Talmud deals with different issues and themes. Tractate *Bava Batra* deals primarily with a person’s rights and responsibilities of ownership. Yet, on page 14b of this tractate, we find an interesting discussion between the sages of the Talmud:

The order of the Writings is Ruth, and the book of Psalms, and Job, and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, and

Lamentations, Daniel, and the Scroll of Esther, Ezra, and Chronicles.

This is a very different order than what we are accustomed to today. By medieval times, the current order of today was used by the Jews of Germany, probably dating back to customs of the ninth century. While this more modern sequence is based on literary style and holiday celebrations, it is the original order as described in the Talmud that will allow us to understand these texts at deeper levels, and enable us to explore and investigate some of the potentially life-changing teachings in Ketuvim.

Before proceeding with our investigation, there is another crucial piece to understand, again coming from a line in the Talmud. It was the custom of the ancients to write a *Targum* of biblical text. A Targum is a translation and commentary on the text in the spoken language of the time; in the times of Talmud this was Aramaic. This was to help with the study and understanding of the text. Oldest are the targumim of Targum Onkelos, a translation and commentary on the Torah; and Targum Jonathan ben Uzziel, a commentary on the Prophets section of the Bible. We find this in the Talmudic tractate *Megillah* on page 3a:

The *Targum* of the Pentateuch was composed by Onkelos the proselyte under the guidance of R. Eleazar and R. Joshua. The *Targum* of the Prophets was composed by Jonathan ben Uzziel under the guidance of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, and the land of Israel [thereupon] quaked over an area of four hundred *parasangs* by four hundred *parasangs*, and a *Bath Kol* (heavenly voice) came forth and exclaimed, Who is this that has revealed My secrets to mankind? Jonathan b. Uzziel thereupon arose and said, It is I who have revealed Thy secrets to mankind. It is fully known to Thee that I have not done this for my own honour or for the honour of my father's house, but for Thy honour I have done it, that dissension may not increase in Israel. He further sought to reveal [by] a *targum* [the inner meaning] of the Hagiographa [Ketuvim], but a *Bath Kol* went forth and said, Enough! What was the reason?—Because the date of the Messiah is foretold in it. (Soncino)

Although countless commentaries on Ketuvim were created subsequent to this Talmudic discussion, there has never been an “official” Targum as a result of this passage. This book is also not a Targum, and it would be arrogant to think that we can even begin to explore the inner meanings of the Ketuvim with the depth and understanding of Jonathan ben Uzziel. But, by exploring together the text through a different lens than it is traditionally understood, perhaps we can begin to glean some of the depth and wisdom that is truly hidden in these Writings.

We will probably never know what Jonathan ben Uzziel would have explained to future generations. But by careful analysis of the text, the original order of the books, and the unifying theme that ties through all of them, it may be possible to understand and utilize the Ketuvim in a practical way that increases our awareness of our relationship with God.

And it is that relationship lying at the heart of all these books. Ketuvim is not about understanding God as a “noun” or even as a “verb” but experiencing God directly through relationships. Each of the books teaches us how to experience God in a variety of circumstances, in a multiplicity of situations. Through Ketuvim, we can learn how to not only see but also experience the Divine in every aspect of Life—in every moment. We can learn to be “present,” to transcend pain into peace, and to be conscious of God’s hand in each and every instant.

How do these books teach us to experience God in every relationship? Why is this a valid lens with which to understand these texts? The answer is in the exploration. With investigation, we will find that each of these books deals with a uniquely different opportunity of experiencing God in relationship. Ruth teaches us to experience God in the relationship between mentor and mentee, between elder and youth, between parent and child. Psalms guides us to know God as we experience the emotions and feelings that are such an integral part of the human experience. Job shows us how to know God in the midst of suffering, and Proverbs helps us learn to experience God in the midst of a community. Ecclesiastes

goes even a step further, guiding us to experience God in all aspects of Life. Song of Songs is the ultimate handbook about knowing God through an intimate relationship with an other, and Lamentations reminds us of how to face God in the midst of pain. Daniel, considered a difficult book for scholars and clergy for thousands of years, teaches us to know and experience God in the relationship that we have with time itself; while the scroll of Esther reminds us of how to know God even when he/she seems not to be there and/or when there are issues of addiction and excessive behavior patterns. Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles take all this information about experiencing God in relationships and anchor it back into physical actions. Each of these texts is a guide into directly experiencing God in every possible relationship, in every possible way, and adjusting our behavior and actions as a result.

The understandings and interpretations of the texts as presented here are gleaned from a variety of sources and traditions, both ancient and modern. Sometimes, the understandings may reflect one specific faith tradition or denomination's view. Occasionally, they are not entirely consonant with the "normative" Jewish commentaries or viewing perspective usually presented by rabbis, ministers, and academics. Nowhere in this book is this truer than in the chapter on Esther. The interpretation presented here, while valid, important, and extremely useful in the twenty-first century, is by no means the majority opinion historically. The interpretation of the book of Esther is usually presented as a story of courage and redemption, a story of the heroism of both Esther and Mordecai. This is not only the more common understanding but is also accurate: they are heroes, and God saved the Jewish people from a persecution. Yet, part of the premise of the book in your hands is that these texts have many meanings simultaneously, and it is an entirely different meaning that is gleaned from the book of Esther here than you would find in a typical commentary. This is not meant to denigrate or infer that the more normative interpretation is inaccurate, but rather to deepen and add to the more

common understandings. With Esther, and with any of the other books examined here, it is up to readers to find the more “classic” commentaries if they choose, and I recommend it wholeheartedly. *Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:15 teaches that there are seventy different interpretations (literally, “seventy faces”) of any text, and the contents of this book are meant to enhance and deepen the reader’s personal experience of Ketuvim, so that these ancient words can enhance your daily life.

Two thousand years ago, Jonathan ben Uzziel explained and helped all people understand the section of Prophets through his monumental work. As he said, it was so “that dissension may not increase in Israel.” Perhaps by investigating the Ketuvim more thoroughly and by delving deeply into these books of wisdom, we too can prevent dissension from increasing in our own lives and, as a result, in the world.

Now, let us start to explore. . . .

Note

1. This book uses a couple of special characters in the transliteration of Hebrew words, none of which present difficulties for pronunciation but they are good to know nonetheless. The ʾ (as in *Neviʾim*) denotes the aleph (א). This letter is silent, acting as a placeholder for whatever vowel that follows it. An apostrophe (') denotes a contraction of a preposition or conjunction with a noun. For instance, *B'shalom* means “with peace” and *B'shalom u'vracha* means “with peace and blessings.”

2. In citations, these are indicated as JPS, ArtScroll, Soncino, and Schottenstein, respectively.

1

Ruth: The First Interpersonal Relationship

Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.

—Ruth 1:16 (American Standard Version)

Ruth and Naomi

The story of Ruth and Naomi is one of the most beautiful relationships in the Hebrew Scriptures. The story is simple and elegant, with a multitude of hidden meanings if we are willing to really turn the text over.

The story of the book takes place in the “days when the Judges judged” (Ruth 1:1, ArtScroll). It is before the time of the kings in Israel, and there is a famine occurring in the land of Israel. Elimelech, a great man from Judah, travels with his wife Naomi from Bethlehem to Moab with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Elimelech dies, and Naomi’s sons marry two Moabite women: Orpah and Ruth. Some years later, Mahlon and Chilion also die, and Naomi chooses to return to Judah when she hears that the famine is over.

Naomi encourages both her daughters-in-law to leave her, to return to their people, and to be blessed with rich lives. Both

young women wish to stay with Naomi, but Orpah relents after Naomi tells her again to leave. Ruth, however, chooses to stay with her mother-in-law, creating one of the deepest of relationships in the Bible. The two women return to Bethlehem, and Ruth goes to collect the gleanings of the fields that are left for widows and orphans. There, Ruth meets the owner of the fields, Boaz, who is much older than she. Boaz is also related to Elimelech and, as such, has an obligation to both redeem and take care of Naomi and Ruth. Boaz is helpful to Ruth and invites her to keep gleaning in his fields so that she can be under his protection.

Naomi realizes that she must help Ruth gain security in life, and so Naomi guides her daughter-in-law to approach Boaz, and ultimately to convince him to redeem them. Using Naomi's advice, Ruth becomes intimate with Boaz, who publicly redeems and marries her. They have a child, Obed, who becomes the grandfather of King David; the neighborhood women say, "A son is born to Naomi," as Ruth lets her mother-in-law raise the child (4:17, JPS).

The book of Ruth is a simple and elegant story of a woman who has seemingly lost everything, only to find life again in the relationship with her daughter-in-law. Although the main character is Naomi, the book itself is about Ruth's journey from Moabite to widow to wife to mother. Throughout it all, there is a clear and strong relationship between Naomi and Ruth, and it is in the understanding of this relationship that we will be able to glean other meanings from the text.

The Primary Human Relationship of Parenthood

The first relationship that almost every child experiences is that with a parent, specifically a mother. It is through this relationship that the child first comes to understand God in whatever terms. "God" is too big to understand, but the mother who supplies physical and emotional nourishment is the first cognitive understanding of Divinity. Many studies by psychologists place such

importance on this primary relationship that they believe that a person's entire ethical behavioral system is developed by the age of three: all based on the first interactions with the elder.

This is the first relationship we find explored in Ketuvim: the relationship of a daughter and a mother. Although technically Ruth is a daughter-in-law, Naomi calls Ruth a "daughter." Naomi, while not her physical mother, is Ruth's "spiritual" mother. Through this relationship and love, Ruth chooses to be reborn as a Hebrew, a convert to Judaism, because of her love for Naomi. Naomi opens up her eyes to experiencing God in the ways of the Israelites (rather than the Moabite idol worship that Ruth grew up with). This mother-daughter relationship becomes the first model of experiencing God directly—so directly that Ruth commits her entire well-being and life to be with Naomi, to explore that relationship, and to knowing God through that relationship. "Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God," says Ruth to her mother-in-law.

As children get a bit older, they are able to relate to other elders, uncles and aunts, teachers, and mentors. Ruth mirrors this in her own spiritual development. As they journey together, Naomi becomes more of a mentor as opposed to only a mother for Ruth, and guides the young woman in multiple ways. She instructs Ruth to glean from the fields, to stay close to Boaz, and to ultimately go to Boaz in the middle of the night. Through her guidance, Ruth grows into a strong woman who develops her own relationship with Boaz, eventually becoming his wife. From this union comes the grandfather of David, the king of Israel, who not only unifies the kingdom but from whose loins the Messiah is foretold to be descended.

How can we take this understanding of the relationship between Ruth and Naomi and utilize it in our own lives? The easiest way is perhaps to compare Ruth with Naomi's other daughter-in-law, Orpah. Orpah also expresses a desire to stay with Naomi, but quickly succumbs and goes back to her homeland. Ruth, on the other hand, realizes the depth of her relationship and understands

on some level the spiritual awakening into which Naomi has already guided her. She not only commits her physical body to stay with her mentor but places her spiritual well-being in the hands of Naomi as well.

Naomi, the Life Coach

For some people of the twenty-first century, this may seem like a form of surrendering one's own personality and free will, but this is not the case. This model of surrendering to the guidance of the mentor who opens up a spiritual awakening is found around the world in different religious and spiritual faith traditions. It is accepted in the yogic traditions that the "guru" knows more about the spiritual journey needed for the disciple than the disciple does, and the disciple must choose to exercise free will and surrender to the guru's guidance. Similarly, in the world of the Hasidic Jew, the "rebbe" is understood to know the needs of the Hasid better than the Hasid does, and so the Hasidic Jew lets go of his ego and attaches himself completely on a spiritual level with the rebbe. To become the shaman in many of the indigenous tribes of North, South, and Central America, the would-be disciple must demonstrate his ability to give up choosing anything other than accepting what the shaman tells him to do, all in order that his own awareness of Life increases so that he can someday become the shaman of the tribe. The pattern is consistent throughout the world and exemplified by the relationship of Ruth and Naomi. Ruth gives up her own previous identity to attach herself to Naomi, and in doing this she will ultimately come to her destiny to not only marry Boaz but also to be the mother of the ancestor of both the great King David and the future Messiah.

As adults in modern times, it is often difficult to surrender our free will, and it is *never* appropriate to have it taken from us. Notice that Naomi tries to convince her daughters to leave her; she does not try to encourage them to follow her. She even uses every argument that she can to convince Ruth not to follow her:

Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there yet any more sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way; for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say, I have hope, even if I should have a husband tonight, and should bear sons. Would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you, for them, refrain from having husbands? No, my daughters; for it grieves me much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord is gone out against me. (Ruth 1:11-14, ArtScroll)

It is not a “cult of the personality” wherein Naomi makes all sorts of promises of fame, fortune, and fun to Orpah and Ruth; rather she clearly tries to dissuade them from staying with her. In Orpah’s case, she is successful. But even though it is difficult for Ruth, she chooses to follow and attach herself to Naomi, despite the discouragement. This is one of the keys to understanding the appropriate mentor-mentee relationship: be wary if the “guide” wants a “disciple” too much. We learn through this text that the real Guide doesn’t want disciples but will accept them when they commit fully to the journey together.

The text teaches us that once we have attached ourselves to a guide/guru/rebbe/mentor, we must then trust that person completely. Although on the surface it may appear that Ruth gave up her own free will, in reality she made the deepest of decisions by choosing to surrender to Naomi’s guidance. Even when Naomi tells Ruth to go to Boaz and lie by his feet, her daughter-in-law does this without hesitation (Ruth 3:4). Despite the challenging implications of Naomi’s instruction, Ruth’s only reply is “All that you say to me I will do” (Ruth 3:5, ArtScroll). From this eventually comes the union and commitment of Boaz to Ruth. If Ruth had argued with Naomi, or chosen to do anything other than what Naomi told her, she would not have ended up being married to Boaz, nor would she have been the ancestor of the Messiah.

It is this aspect of Ruth’s commitment to the relationship with Naomi that needs to be explored to see how it teaches us to experience God. Once we have attached ourselves to a guide, it is

imperative that we trust him or her fully, even more than our own mothers. In some circles of Judaism, there is greater respect paid to one's teachers than even to one's parents. While the parents are responsible for the physical growth of the child, the teachers are responsible for the spiritual and intellectual growth. As such, they are given extra honors. When we accept a teacher upon ourselves, we must choose to surrender to his or her wisdom as a guide. It is only in doing this, as we see from Ruth's commitment to doing what Naomi instructed, that we can come to our ultimate "destiny."

What wisdom do we learn from this text of Ruth? We learn to attach ourselves to a spiritual teacher, a mentor—a "mother" (or "father"). We can identify mentors by their commitment to their own tradition (Naomi, although poor and a widow, decides to return to Israel), their commitment to discouraging us from following them, and their willingness to take responsibility for the relationship if we persist. We learn through this text that surrendering free will in favor of accepting guidance from a mentor can be extremely difficult on many levels, but also fruitful and valuable. By attaching ourselves to one who is wiser, and who has introduced and guided us into a deeper spiritual awakening, we can experience God in the fulfillment of our destiny. Through this primary relationship of child to parent, and then student to a teacher or guide, we can directly experience God in our lives: in our workplace (Ruth's gleanings of the field support her and Naomi), in our families (Ruth ultimately becomes married to Boaz), and in our soul's purpose. Ruth goes from being a young widow to becoming the great-grandmother of a king and the ancestor of the Messiah, all through her relationship with Naomi. The text asks us to surrender, to learn, to grow, and to see the results of God's interactions with us through our own relationship with elders.

The Talmud teaches, "Make for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend, and judge all men in the scale of merit" (*Pirkei Avot* 1:6, Schottenstein). There is no more primary relationship

that we can have, no relationship that can open the door to experiencing God directly in our daily lives, that is simpler and deeper than the interpersonal relationship of teacher-student, parent-child, and mentor-mentee. Attach yourself to that teacher as Ruth did, acquire friends as a result of your learning from that mentor, and then you will truly experience God so fully that you will be able to judge all humans based on the scale of their true merit, and what was “fate” will become the hand of God moving you into your own destiny.