ADVANCING JEWISH THOUGHT

Mosaic

WEEKLY PDF DIGEST 25 MAY 2023

EDITOR'S LETTER

This week in *Mosaic*

Jonathan Silver looks back at the week

OBSERVATIONS

The Road to Israel-Saudi Normalization Runs Through Washington

Open ties between the two nations are in everyone's interest, but it will take serious intent and deft maneuvering from America to get there. Is the administration up to it?

The Battle of the Seventy Translators

How many rabbis first translated the Hebrew Bible, and how many different translations did they produce?

Podcast: Leon Kass on Reading Ruth Through Washington

The eminent scholar talks about Ruth, and *Reading Ruth*, the 2021 book he co-authored with his granddaughter.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

Beyond Sighing and Swooning: Love in the Hebrew Bible

Although it does not seem to be about romantic attachment at all, the tale of Ruth and Boaz is the quintessential example of a biblical love story.

+ The best of the editors' picks of the week

Dear friends,

The road to Israel-Saudi normalization runs through Washington

Back in March, I spoke with the foreign-policy analyst Jonathan Schachter about how to understand the news that Saudi Arabia had normalized relations with its regional adversary, Iran, with the help of Chinese diplomats. He had an original interpretation of what had just transpired: it was not necessarily the end of Washington's influence in the Middle East, nor was Saudi Arabia taking an irrevocable step out of the American alliance structure. It was, he argued, Saudi Arabia's way of getting America's attention and framing for the Biden administration a choice: Saudi Arabia can follow the orbit of Iran and China, or it can normalize relations with Israel and strengthen regional stability in partnership with the United States.

This week, Richard Goldberg analyzes in greater detail what it would take for the Saudis to choose that latter course of action. It is in America's interests, Israel's interests, and indeed, in Saudi Arabia's interests to make official relations that have been happening for years in private. Still, while such an alignment of interests might be necessary for that to happen, it's not enough, Goldberg argues, and he spells out just what the next steps in Washington should be.

Two ways to read the book of Ruth

Many Jewish communities study the book of Ruth on the holiday Shavuot, which starts tonight. For this week's pick from the *Mosaic* archives, I'd like to reintroduce my friend Alan Rubenstein's examination of romantic love in Ruth. And then, on our podcast this week, I bring you a conversation that I recorded in 2021 with Leon Kass. Kass had then just published a commentary on the book of Ruth with his granddaughter, Hannah Mandelbaum. The story of their studying and writing together is perhaps as moving as their discoveries in the text, and we discuss all that and more in our conversation.

49,000 ways to read Ruth, and the rest of the Torah

Let me also take the opportunity to highlight our language columnist Philologos's column this week on the earliest forms of biblical commentary and interpretation. He looks at early accounts of the Septuagint, the first Bible translation, so named in Latin for the 72 (rounded down to 70) translators who produced it. Philologos then maps these accounts onto the midrashic accounts that the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai itself was offered in 70 voices and 70 languages. Then, the permutations of these languages and voices and interpretations and translations raise the question

of the extent to which the Hebrew Bible has a single or original intent. How do you know what it actually means, and how do you draw the lines and boundaries of interpretative creativity?

Yesterday, we hosted *Mosaic* subscribers for a discussion of our May essay on Leon Pinsker with its author, Aaron Schimmel, along with the experts Einat Wilf and Daniel Polisar. We'll bring you a recording of that discussion in the coming days. In the meantime, I wish you a chag Shavuot sameach, and for the Americans among us, a happy Memorial Day.

With every good wish,

Jonathan Silver
Editor, *Mosaic*
Warren R. Stern Senior Fellow of Jewish Civilization

President Joe Biden is welcomed by Mecca province governor Prince Khaled al-Faisal (white robe) and Princess Reema bint Bandar Al-Saud (L), Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Washington, at the King Abdulaziz International Airport in the Saudi coastal city of Jeddah, upon his arrival from Israel, on July 15, 2022. MANDEL NGAN/AFP via Getty Images.

RICHARD GOLDBERG

MAY 23 2023

About the author
Richard Goldberg is a senior advisor at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. He has served on Capitol Hill, on the U.S. National Security Council, as the chief of staff for Illinois's governor, and as a Navy Reserve Intelligence Officer.

The Road to Israel-Saudi Normalization Runs Through Washington

Open ties between the two nations are in everyone's interest, but it will take serious intent and deft maneuvering from America to get there. Is the administration up to it?

Saudi Arabia's crown prince reportedly told senior U.S. officials earlier this month that he is prepared to normalize the kingdom's relations with Israel as part of a broader reset in relations between Riyadh and Washington. That's welcome news for a White House scrambling to repair a rupture in U.S.-Saudi ties, as Riyadh appears to be inching toward the exit from its historic relationship with the United States.

For two years, President Joe Biden found every opportunity to distance the U.S. from its decades-long Arab partner in the Gulf. And as a result, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman went shopping for new allies—with China, already his country's largest trading partner, at the top of the list.

Without a change in course, the United States and Saudi Arabia are headed toward a strategic divorce. Were that to happen, sensitive military and dual-use commercial relationships between Riyadh and Beijing would preclude Washington from sharing certain military hardware, intelligence, and high-tech systems with the kingdom. And as the Chinese-Saudi partnership grows, Israel will also find itself under pressure to keep

its distance, although normalization with the Saudis remains a coveted strategic prize for its prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Any exposure and vulnerability to China inside Israel's defense and high-tech sectors inevitably causes problems for U.S.-Israel defense and high-tech cooperation; in effect, were the Saudis to leave the American alliance structure and integrate into China's, Israel would be forced to choose between its most important benefactor and diplomatic relations with the most significant kingdom in the Arab world.

All of this is great news for China and its most natural ally in the Middle East, Iran. As the U.S. pulls back further from the region and Saudi-Israel normalization gets put on hold, China will fill the vacuum—using its influence on both Iran and on America's erstwhile Gulf allies to play the kind of global energy politics the U.S. mastered during the cold war. What is now a primarily commercial partnership between Beijing and Riyadh will take on increasing strategic significance, and Saudi Arabia (along with Iran) will become one of several oil-producing friends China can rely upon during moments of confrontation with the United States.

Tehran, for its part, will score a major victory by blocking the development of an integrated U.S.-Israel-Arab security architecture that could contain it, and perhaps even defeat it. Instead, it will use its Palestinian terror proxies to provoke clashes with Israel that stir emotions in the Arabic-language press and refocus Middle Eastern attention on the Israel-Palestinian conflict instead of on its own role in fomenting chaos and bloodshed around the region. For the Saudis, normalization with the Jewish state will lose its appeal, becoming a risky move in support of an alliance with the U.S. that no longer appears worthwhile.

If Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (known in the Western media as MBS) intended to send Washington a wake-up call by cozying up to Beijing, he succeeded. After nearly a year of inaction, the White House leaned on the Senate to confirm a new U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Michael Ratney, who presented his credentials in Riyadh in late April. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan visited the kingdom in early May, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken is planning to follow in June. These are important steps, but healing the relationship's open wounds and brokering Israeli-Saudi normalization will take more than promises and platitudes; it will require creative reimagination from both capitals and a commitment not merely to maintain, but to upgrade, the alliance.

Since the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the United States and Saudi Arabia have been through a lot to together—for better and for worse. This relationship has weathered no small number of tensions and crises, despite having no formal agreements or official documents that would give it a binding status. The story begins with Saudi

Arabia's founder, King Abdulaziz, who fueled the United States to victory over Germany and Japan in World War II. After the war, the kingdom emerged as a major cold-war ally in the Middle East. But the Saudi-led oil embargo of 1973—retaliation for U.S. support for Israel during the Yom Kippur War—sent the American economy into a tailspin.

Yet the relationship recovered from this particular low point. By 1975, Riyadh agreed to make the dollar the standard currency for the global sale of oil—a decision that would help establish the dollar's primacy in international trade, and thus the primacy of the American financial system. And in the 1980s, Abdulaziz's son, King Fahd, helped Ronald Reagan win the cold war by covertly funding Afghan mujahideen attacks against the USSR while increasing oil production to drive down prices, thereby drying up resources for an oil revenue-dependent Kremlin.

By 1990, ties were stronger than ever. President George H.W. Bush ordered more than 500,000 U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia to defend the kingdom and drive the forces of the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait. Yet just ten years later, things took another dramatic turn for the worse with the September 11 attacks. Of the nineteen hijackers, fifteen were Saudi nationals. The Saudi government was not behind the attacks—but the episode exposed the royal court's decades-long strategy of appeasing radical voices within the kingdom at the expense of U.S. national security.

But even this setback did not prove sufficient to break the U.S-Saudi alliance. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama both made multiple visits to the kingdom, while the Saudis took a dramatic turn away from their terror- and Islamism-supporting ways. It seems that with each crisis, the strategic paradigm of "oil for security"—that Saudi Arabia would rely on the United States for its physical security while the United States would rely on Saudi Arabia for its energy and economic security—has in the end reasserted itself.

Until now.

In Riyadh, a generation of leaders whose worldviews were molded by the cold war is being replaced by a younger generation raised in a more interconnected era, with the thirty-seven-year-old Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman at the helm. In Washington, after decades of hard-power presence in the Middle East and an invasion of Iraq that fundamentally altered the region, the United States is pulling back, responding to populist campaign rhetoric, shifting attention and resources to the Indo-Pacific, and ceding great-power influence in the region to China and Russia.

At the same time, the last decade ushered in geopolitical and economic transformations that called into question the doctrine of oil for security. Wounds first opened by President Obama have turned gangrenous under President Biden.

Obama's perceived abandonment of the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in favor of the Muslim Brotherhood sent shockwaves through the Arab world—as did Obama's decision to walk away from a threat to use force against the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. Add in the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran—an attempt to rebalance power in the Gulf between Saudi Arabia, an American ally, and Iran, the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism—while declaring an American "pivot to Asia," and the U.S.-Saudi relationship found itself on thin ice.

President Donald Trump's embrace of MBS and reimposition of tough sanctions on Iran appeared at first to be another iteration of the cycle, with reconciliation again following crisis. In reality, it may have done little more than buy time. Trump treated Saudi Arabia transactionally and talked condescendingly. He spoke often of ending "endless wars" in the Middle East, and his precipitous withdrawal of troops from Syria, which left Kurdish allies unprotected from Turkish air power, and his desperation for a peace agreement with the Taliban, which fundamentally weakened the Afghan government, continued the Obama policy of ceding the region to great-power competitors.

For Riyadh, the question of whether the United States would ever again come to Saudi Arabia's military aid, as it did during the first Gulf War, was tested in 2019 when Iran launched a drone and cruise-missile strike against Saudi Aramco—immediately taking 5 percent of the global oil supply offline and exposing a catastrophic vulnerability in Saudi air defense. President Trump opted against a military response, fearing that American use of force in retaliation for an attack on foreign interests would meet with a backlash that could upend his maximum-pressure campaign on Iran and spur bipartisan calls to lift sanctions on Tehran. Trump reportedly ordered a cyberattack instead and later sent more U.S. troops and missile-defense assets to the region to placate an outraged Saudi leadership.

While not directly connected to the attack on Aramco, Trump's decision months later to kill Qassem Suleimani, the commander of Iran's elite paramilitary Quds Force and architect of regional mayhem and sponsorship of terrorism, demonstrated America's capacity to be a more valuable, albeit sometimes unreliable, military ally than either China or Russia. So too did Trump's reported interest in exploring a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

But Joe Biden's decision while running for president to placate pro-Tehran sentiment inside the Democratic party's progressive base—vowing to make MBS a "pariah" and to return the United States to the nuclear deal—made it all but impossible to slow the erosion of America's ongoing commitment in Riyadh. Worse still, Biden governed as he campaigned, attempting to weaken Saudi Arabia's regional power while elevating Iran's and declaring economic war on oil, the lifeblood of the Saudi economy. Upon assuming office, he removed the Iran-sponsored Yemeni Houthis from the official list of foreign terrorist organizations, prompting an uptick

in missile and drone attacks against the kingdom. He followed up with an order to end U.S. military sales and intelligence support that could help Saudi Arabia target the Iran- and Hizballah-trained Houthis inside Yemen—and then withdrew the extra U.S. missile-defense assets Trump had provided. In short, he drove a stake through the heart of oil-for-security.

Biden appointed Robert Malley—a veteran left-wing think tanker and former Obama administration official known for his advocacy of warmer American relations with Iran, Hizballah, and Hamas—special envoy for Iran with a mandate to loosen enforcement of U.S. sanctions while pleading with Tehran to return to the 2015 nuclear deal. And then, making good on his pledge to isolate MBS, Biden made him persona non grata in the White House and declassified an intelligence assessment about the crown prince's involvement in the grisly murder of Jamal Khashoggi—an assessment that added no new information to existing public reporting but which was evidently intended to cause the crown prince personal embarrassment.

Then reality set in. Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine sent oil prices skyrocketing. Biden scrambled. Washington called Saudi Arabia to help stabilize the market. But MBS was in no mood to do Biden any favors—the higher price of oil, after all, would help finance his massive economic development program, dubbed Vision 2030.

Suspecting MBS was merely playing "hard to get," Biden reluctantly scheduled a visit to Saudi Arabia under cover of a multilateral forum and agreed to meet the crown prince on one condition: no shaking hands. It was the height of disrespect on MBS's home turf—and the last straw. MBS welcomed the president and began to shop around for new patrons. Hedging against the U.S., and betting on the emergence of a multipolar world, he pursued several security partnerships simultaneously. He reportedly also put a price on normalization with Israel: NATO-like security guarantees from the United States, a vast expansion of U.S. arm sales, domestic defense production, and a civilian nuclear program that included uranium enrichment on Saudi soil.

Sensing an opening, China's President Xi Jinping wasted little time in offering Riyadh an alternative strategic framework. China, already Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner, could offer MBS something new: political and economic influence over Tehran in exchange for expanding relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). MBS welcomed Xi to Saudi Arabia in December for a China-GCC summit that ended with a joint communique committing Beijing to the strategic interests of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the rest of the GCC—explicitly pledging to pursue a regional framework that would address Iran's sponsorship of terrorism, missile proliferation, and nuclear ambitions.

By March, a deal was hatched. Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to restore diplomatic ties and to end all direct or indirect attempts to inflict harm on one another. Saudi Arabia—for a price still unknown—bought a period of relative calm along its borders, aiming to halt Iran-sponsored missile and drone attacks that threaten Vision 2030. Iran, facing a collapsing currency, hyperinflation, and domestic unrest, struck back at U.S.-led efforts to isolate it—while increasing its military support to Russia, launching a multi-front attack on Israel, and racing toward the nuclear threshold.

The Saudis claim they had nothing to lose and plenty to gain. Iran, they argue, is the weaker party, suing for peace in Yemen to conserve its resources. If China can use its influence to advance Saudi security interests at a time the United States either cannot or will not, so be it. The door is still open to discuss the terms of an upgraded U.S.-Saudi partnership, but Saudi Arabia will do what it must to defend its interests in the meantime.

Washington should hold no illusions. Should China prove itself a more reliable powerbroker than the United States, a more permanent Saudi-China strategic partnership will likely ensue—one that could include military, nuclear, and other elements that threaten American interests. Indeed, Riyadh has already announced it will apply to become a "dialogue partner" (a status beneath both "member" and "observer") in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Sino-Russian attempt at a counterweight to the U.S.-led order in Europe and Asia.

The looming threat of losing Saudi Arabia entirely to its main international rivals should focus Washington's attention. This is more than the latest rough patch in what might seem like a never-ending series of highs and lows that is the U.S.-Saudi relationship. The fact is that the oil-for-security paradigm no longer makes sense in the 21st century, at least not in its historic form, and restoring the alliance will entail rethinking its underlying assumptions.

From social media to artificial intelligence to environmental concerns to new military technologies to the Abraham Accords, the world today is profoundly different than the one discussed by President Roosevelt and King Abdulaziz aboard the USS *Quincy* in 1945. The Saudi Arabia of MBS is lightyears apart from the desert kingdom of his grandfather. Attempts to create an innovation economy, the government-led campaign against Islamic extremism, the extension of new rights to millions of Saudi women, the open discussion of normalizing relations with Israel, and the liberalization of sports and entertainment amount to the beginning of a new era.

Reinvigorating U.S.-Saudi relations must begin with a re-evaluation of what the United States needs from Saudi Arabia and what Saudi Arabia needs from the United States. For the United States, the role of oil in the re-

lationship remains critical in two ways. First, despite the dramatic growth in American energy production in the last decade, Saudi Arabia still has unparalleled influence over the global petroleum trade. Thus in 2011 and 2012, Riyadh helped Washington stabilize the oil market when Congress enacted sanctions on the Central Bank of Iran. Washington asked for help again when, in both 2018 and 2019, President Trump reimposed sanctions on Iranian oil and worked to bring Tehran's revenues to near-zero. Riyadh again complied. And as last year's oil price spike reminded the White House, the American economy pays a steep price when Riyadh is alienated and refuses to help.

But Saudi Arabia's ability to contribute to American economic security goes beyond its ability to stabilize oil markets. U.S. economic supremacy depends in part on the kingdom continuing to trade oil in dollars. The primacy of the dollar as a global currency benefits Riyadh as well, since U.S. sanctions—the very same sanctions that weakened Iran's economy and enabled Saudi Arabia's recent de-escalation agreement—rely heavily on the dominance of the American financial system.

Important as such assistance is, there is more that Saudi Arabia can do to help the United States—and that the United States is within its rights to ask for. More than twenty years after the September 11 attacks, America has learned a few things. One of the most important: the U.S. military can accomplish much, but it cannot win a war against a religious ideology. For that, Washington must support independent nations whose interests and aspirations align with its own and that have the means and will to counter extremism in the Middle East and around the world. No country is better positioned to do that than Saudi Arabia, which has an unrivaled status in the Muslim world as the birthplace of Islam and home of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The crown prince's commitment to combating radical Islam should form a core pillar of a U.S.-Saudi framework—a combination of Saudi soft power with American hard power—alongside continued intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation.

In the same vein, long-term regional security and stability will only arrive when the United States and its allies build an integrated political, economic, and security architecture. That is, American allies in the Middle East should, with U.S. leadership, take responsibility in a systematic and reliable way for maintaining some semblance of regional order. Such an architecture would demoralize common enemies—isolating the Islamic Republic of Iran and drying up resources and support for its regional proxies. It would of course entail cooperation among the Gulf states, Jordan, Egypt—and Israel. So long as its neighbors continue to shun the Jewish state, this sort of regional comity will remain impossible. The steps taken by the UAE and Bahrain following the Abraham Accords are historic and rightly celebrated, but only Saudi Arabia can complete the process of normalization.

A Middle East security partnership led jointly by Israel and Saudi Arabia, and backed by the United States, would enable multinational military

exercises in or near the Gulf, regional integrated air defenses to counter Iranian missile threats, and enhanced intelligence cooperation to combat Iran-backed terrorist groups. Over time, these and similar arrangements will reduce the demand for U.S. defense resources that are sorely needed in the Indo-Pacific as American military planners prepare for a possible war with China.

For Israel, normalization with Saudi Arabia will bring an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and create a domino effect of diplomatic ties with Muslim countries throughout the world, dramatically undermining the global Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions campaign (BDS). New markets will open to Israeli firms and new security partnerships will be formed. And the ideological impact on a generation of young Muslims that will grow up seeing Israel as just another Middle Eastern country will pay dividends for decades to come.

Saudi-Israel normalization is in the kingdom's interest, too. Some believe Riyadh already reaps the benefits of diplomatic relations with Israel without risking a backlash from its own people or from the Arab and Muslim worlds. After all, Israel already maintains clandestine security ties with the kingdom and Israelis with dual passports increasingly fly back and forth for business. What more would Saudi Arabia get by making these ties public and thus risking instability inside its borders?

Quite a lot, in fact. While it's true that Riyadh already enjoys many of the security and intelligence benefits of normalization at minimal political cost, the kind of real-time coordination and military technology transfers that come with normalization would be a game-changer for Saudi Arabia's defense posture. Whatever Saudi Arabia thinks it's getting from Israel in the security domain is a highly diluted version of what it would get from full, public, and friendly diplomatic relations.

Perhaps more importantly, however, MBS knows that the success of his Vision 2030 economic program hinges on the kingdom establishing itself as high-tech hub—and no matter how many American, Asian, or European executives visit, he is unlikely to achieve the vision's lofty goals without integration into Tel Aviv's high-tech ecosystem. Normalization would unlock the "start-up nation" to Saudi entrepreneurs and investors, providing the injection of dynamism and innovation that MBS needs to establish his own start-up kingdom.

Likewise, there is much that Saudi Arabia will want from the United States in order to achieve its own national priorities. Riyadh desires a stable and secure Middle East as much, if not more, than Washington does. It, too, wants energy security, including the defense of its energy infrastructure as well as of the sea lanes in and around the Gulf. The kingdom wants attacks from Iran and its proxies to stop. And it wants the offensive and defensive military capabilities to defeat active threats to its national security.

All those objectives are in line with U.S. national interests—as detailed at length last July in the U.S.-Saudi "Jeddah Communique"—though Riyadh might conclude that such objectives fall in line with Beijing's interests as well. What sets Washington apart, however, aside from its superior military technology, is that only the United States is an enemy of Saudi Arabia's primary antagonist, the Islamic Republic of Iran. America may not be consistent in its use of military force, but it is the only great power that might ever use it against Tehran. China and Russia, by contrast, are both deepening their investments in Iran. While there's no guarantee the United States will attack Iran, there is a guarantee that China and Russia never will. Rather than drive the U.S. military away with closer Chinese relations, MBS should consider what an upgraded defense arrangement with the United States could offer.

A recent report from Brad Bowman, Orde Kittrie, and Ryan Brobst at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies outlines a range of options for such an enhancement with two notably topping the list: designating Saudi Arabia a major defense partner—a designation currently only given to India—and adding the kingdom to the list of major non-NATO allies. Both would be within the president's authority to approve and would provide such tangible benefits as domestic defense production and forward-stationed arms depots.

Beyond security and defense guarantees, the kingdom also wants its Vision 2030 economic program to succeed. The American private sector is already lined up to take part in the investment bonanza, but the White House could bring the public sector along by establishing a Vision 2030 cabinet-level working group to provide technical assistance. Vision 2030 focuses on issues like housing, healthcare, education, sustainability, art, cultural diversity, and women's empowerment—all of which the Biden administration should naturally support. The plan is intrinsically linked to Saudi Arabia's continued progress on social liberalization and countering extremism. It should be a cornerstone of any strategic partnership.

Finally, Saudi officials say that in a world increasingly pressing for an oil-free future, the kingdom needs to diversify its energy production—including by tapping into Saudi uranium as part of a domestic nuclear-energy program. The crown prince, however, reportedly wants to enrich that uranium on Saudi soil rather than importing already-enriched nuclear fuel from outside the country—the latter being the gold standard of American nonproliferation policy adopted by other partners like the UAE and the former raising concerns that Saudi Arabia wants to build a nuclear-weapons capability in response to Iran's.

Under U.S. law, transfers of nuclear technology require a written "123 agreement" detailing how such technology will be used. That agreement must be submitted to Congress for review. To the extent Saudi Arabia can find proven uranium deposits, the U.S. could consider support for joint exploration, mining, milling, and even exporting Saudi uranium. That would elevate Saudi stature as a uranium supplier on the world stage.

But any administration, Democratic or Republican, will be hard-pressed to approve the sale of nuclear technology without an express commitment to forego domestic enrichment—not least because other countries, including the UAE, would immediately demand their own enrichment programs. The Saudis, of course, have an easy retort to a Biden administration that still supports the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, which legitimizes an Iranian enrichment program born out of illicit nuclear weapons-related activities. "How," the Saudis would rightly ask, "can you approve domestic enrichment under the nuclear deal for an enemy like Iran, and not approve domestic enrichment for a strategic partner like us?"

For the majority of the U.S. Congress that opposed the Iran deal, the answer is easy: we absolutely reject Iran having any enrichment program. Even for those who support the deal, it amounts only to tolerating temporarily an illicit program. Riyadh shouldn't want a nuclear program viewed as illicit, suspect, or merely tolerated—casting a shadow over the rest of Vision 2030 and potentially threatening investment.

Meanwhile, there is a decision point coming for the Biden administration this fall when a UN missile embargo on Iran is scheduled to expire unless the original parties to the nuclear deal "snap back" sanctions and restrictions on Iran. The snapback would not only keep the missile embargo and restore a conventional arms embargo that expired in 2020, it would also restore the international standard of zero enrichment for Iran. Trading the snapback for a Saudi commitment to forgo enrichment would be the most obvious way to cut what could otherwise become a Gordian knot preventing not only an upgraded U.S.-Saudi alliance but normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel, too.

President Biden and his counterparts in Europe are afraid of triggering the snapback for fear Tehran would retaliate by enriching uranium at weapons-grade levels. That makes a compromise harder to reach, but not impossible. Earlier this year, John Hannah of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs claimed that MBS had another solution in mind: establishing an Arabian American Nuclear Company to oversee and safeguard enrichment, on the model of the Arabian American Oil Company, Aramco.

This sort of partnership sounds appealing at first. Russia's invasion of Ukraine accelerated the U.S. government's push to diversify its own nuclear-fuel supply. In 2021, America imported 14 percent of its nuclear fuel from Russia, and a bill banning such imports is moving through Congress. The prospects for Saudi Arabia to contribute to a Western-oriented nuclear fuel supply chain should be fully explored.

The Aramco model, however, has its limitations. Saudi Arabia eventually took control of Aramco; such a move in the nuclear case would eliminate U.S. oversight of Saudi enrichment. The White House would need to find an arrangement under permanent U.S. control, potentially in cooperation

with a close European nuclear power, secured on a U.S. military base with only American or authorized European personnel. And even then, the plan would prove a hard sell to skeptics in Washington and Jerusalem, which has its own longstanding policy of denying its neighbors potential pathways to nuclear weapons. Far better would be to keep enrichment off the table and explore other avenues of advanced nuclear-energy research and development involving the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia that could establish the kingdom as a global leader in the civil nuclear arena.

Still, when reviewing the list of mutual needs in totality, one thing becomes clear: a relationship based on oil for security no longer makes sense for the United States and Saudi Arabia. Instead, this must be a security-for-security framework—diplomatic security, military security, economic security, energy security—and an alliance based not only on mutual respect and historic ties, but on the defense of vital interests. A closer relationship, rather than a separation, serves the interests of both countries. Anything that drives them apart will undermine those interests.

China, of course, will loom large over any such negotiation. The Saudi royal court has made expanding international partnerships a strategic priority. That's understandable for a rising mid-sized power. Changes are taking place rapidly in the kingdom and interested investors are lining up from every corner of the earth. But Riyadh should also consider the difference between trade partnerships and security architectures.

China is Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner. But the United States remains heavily dependent on China for imports, too, and oftentimes relies on Saudi Arabia to sell more oil to China to prevent U.S. oil sanctions from throwing off the market. While the U.S. is taking steps to reduce its dependency on China when it comes to critical supply chains, unwinding all trade is not under discussion.

Although Washington does not seek conflict, it must take Beijing at its word and deed and prepare for potential clashes in the years ahead. That means the question to all allies of the United States—from Great Britain to Israel to Saudi Arabia—is what kind of ties with China can and cannot coexist in the context of the emerging great-power competition. In the case of U.S.-Saudi relations, given China's close ties to Iran, defending against the transfer of sensitive technology and information not only protects U.S. national security but Saudi Arabis's, too.

Washington's goal vis-à-vis Beijing is not to limit Riyadh's diplomatic relations or wide range of economic interests; it is to ensure that the United States can confidently open the keys to its own proverbial kingdom without letting China's top military adversary inside the gates. This is a conversation that can be conducted thoughtfully, respectfully, and quietly—as it already has with a wide range of U.S. allies.

Two parties that wish to form an upgraded alliance based on mutual vital

interests can conclude an agreement relatively quickly. The question is whether they want that or not. The Biden administration will need to persuade MBS that it recognizes its own missteps, and make clear that it believes that U.S. national security is stronger when it is allied with Saudi Arabia. At the same time, because power attracts power, and to make the American alliance more attractive than its Chinese rival, the United States will need to project a renewed self-confidence in its conduct in the region. For his part, MBS will need to persuade Washington that Saudi Arabia's move toward China can be walked back, and that in the coming hour of decision that every such nation will face, Saudi Arabia's trade and bilateral cooperation with China will not hamper a U.S.-Saudi security architecture. Both countries have much to gain, and perhaps even more to lose if they miss the opportunity. If they find a way forward, normalization with Israel won't be a Saudi concession, but a prize.

The main page of the Complutensian Polyglot Bible, 16th century, which contains a rendering of the Septuagint. Wikipedia.

PHILOLOGOS

MAY 25 2023

About Philologos

Philologos, the renowned Jewish-language columnist, appears twice a month in *Mosaic*.

The Battle of the Seventy Translators

How many rabbis first translated the Hebrew Bible, and how many different translations did they produce?

> The voice [of God at Mount Sinai] went forth and divided into 70 voices and 70 languages, so that every nation would hear it in the language that it spoke.—Exodus Rabbah 5:9
>
> Consider how the voice [of God at Mount Sinai] reached every Israelite, each according to his powers: the elderly according to their powers, and the youths according to their powers, and the children according to their powers, and the infants according to their powers, and the women according to their powers, and even Moses himself.—Exodus Rabbah, 5:9
>
> It happened that King Ptolemy convened 72 elders, enclosed them in 72 chambers without telling them why, and then went from one to the other and said, "Transcribe for me [in Greek] the Torah of your master Moses." God bestowed His counsel on each of them and all arrived at a single identical translation.—Talmud, *Megillah* 9a

Ptolemy II, the Hellenistic monarch of Egypt from 283 to 246 BCE, was the ruler who commissioned the Septuagint, the earliest Bible translation whose first part, the Five Books of Moses, was carried out under his reign. Its name derives from its Latin title of *Vetus Testamentum ex Versione Septuaginta Interpretum*, "The Old Testament in the Version of the 70 Translators." In rabbinic tradition, too, it is known as *targum ha-shiv'im*, "the translation of the 70," even though the oldest accounts of it

have it that the actual number of scholars summoned by Ptolemy was 72, six from each of the twelve tribes of Israel.

This is an obvious anachronism, the twelve tribes of Israel having long disappeared by Ptolemy's time. Whether real or apocryphal, however, it is not a coincidence, I think, that the number of 72 was rounded off by rabbinic—and in its wake, Christian—tradition to 70, which was also held by the rabbis to be the number of the world's languages.

The two brief passages cited above from Exodus Rabbah, a compilation of midrashim relating to the book of Exodus that dates to the medieval period but reflects older sources, are well-known. Both comment on the fact that the description of revelation in Exodus 19 speaks once of God's "voice" (*kol*) and once of His "voices" (*kolot*), and while the first passage has been taken to bear witness to Judaism's universalism, the second has been frequently cited by Jewish sources as a justification for biblical exegesis that seems far removed from the original intention of the text. If the Israelites, after all, heard different things at Sinai in accord with each listener's personal development, don't we, their descendants, also have the right to our different understandings of what was said there?

It would appear to follow from this that there is no single "correct" reading of the Torah. Or, as stated by another medieval Hebrew text with older antecedents, "The Alphabet of Rabbi Akiva": "The Books of Moses were given in the 70 facets of 70 languages, and the Prophets in the 70 facets of 70 languages, and the Law in the 70 facets of 70 languages." Biblical interpretation is thus open-ended, or at least extends to a possible 4,900 (70 x 70) ways of reading each biblical verse.

And yet, according to the talmudic tractate of *Megillah*, when the 72 (later reduced to 70) translators of the Bible were assembled, each produced, despite being isolated from the others, the exact same translation, down to the last word! This story, moreover, contradicts the earliest and (though it, too, has its embellishments) most reliable description of what happened in Alexandria, the so-called *Epistle of Aristeas to Polycrates*. An account in the form of a lengthy letter relating how the Septuagint came into being, purportedly sent to his brother by an official in Ptolemy's court and probably written within a few decades of the latter's death, the epistle tells how the Bible's first translators were taken to a magnificent villa on an island near Ptolemy's palace. After the commensurate banqueting, speech-making, and gift-giving, so it continues:

> They set to work by comparing [their different translations] until they reached agreement, and once an agreement was reached, it was recorded by Demetrius, [a royal official]. This went until the ninth hour of each day, after which they indulged in bodily recreation and had all their needs generously provided for. . . . Thus they gathered every day and performed the task given them.

This is in fact quite the opposite of what we are told by the midrash: not the miraculous coinciding of separately produced translations but a group effort leading, via debate and discussion, to a consensual text. Nor were the rabbis the first to reverse the *Epistle of Aristeas* in this respect. Preceding them was the early 1st-century CE Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, who wrote of the Septuagint's origins: "Therefore, being settled in a secret place, . . . they [the translators], like men inspired, prophesied, not one saying one thing and another another, but every one of them employing the self-same nouns and verbs, as if some unseen prompter had suggested all their language to them. And yet who is there who does not know that every language, and the Greek language above all others, is rich in a variety of words, and that it is possible to vary a sentence and to paraphrase the same idea, so as to set it forth in a great variety of manners, adapting many different forms of expression to it at different times?"

Although Philo, who was demonstrably familiar with the *Epistle of Aristea*s, does not explicitly say that the translators of the Septuagint worked in isolation from one another, he clearly implies as much, since there would have been nothing remarkable about their arriving at the same language if they had done so through a process of mutual dialogue. And while the rabbis do not seem to have known Philo's writings, it is possible that his version of the Septuagint's origins reached them indirectly—or conversely, that he himself was influenced by an early rabbinic or Pharisaic source. One way or another, if Greek, like every language, has 70 "facets" according to "The Alphabet of Rabbi Akiva," the 70 translators of the Septuagint, according to both Philo and the rabbis, ignored 69 of them in favor of just one.

Seventy versus seventy: this is a controversy between strict constructionism and latitudinarianism that lies at the heart of the Jewish attitude toward the Bible—indeed of all biblical commentary, and in a wider context, of all literary criticism. Does a text like the Bible mean whatever we take it to mean, so that it is potentially infinite in its meanings, or does it mean only one thing, which is what its composer intended it to mean?

And yet the argument is in a sense an illusory one, for if the Torah's composer was an Infinite Being, this Being's compositional intentions could have been infinite, too. Indeed rabbinic Judaism has traditionally resolved the 70-70 debate by being strict-constructionist and latitudinarian at once—the former in relation to God's word, which is regarded as sacredly fixed and unchangeable, the latter in relation to its interpretation, which is thought of as endless. In the battle of the seventies, which bears on the seventh-week holiday of Shavuot, this week's celebration of the giving of the law at Sinai, both sides are thus the winners.

Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, Ruth in Boaz's Field, 1828. Wikipedia.

LEON KASS AND TIKVAH PODCAST AT MOSAIC

MAY 25 2023

About the authors

A weekly podcast, produced in partnership with the Tikvah Fund, offering up the best thinking on Jewish thought and culture.

Podcast: Leon Kass on Reading Ruth

The eminent scholar talks about Ruth, and Reading Ruth, the 2021 book he co-authored with his granddaughter.

Podcast: Leon Kass

Most everyone who reads it loves the book of Ruth, with its bucolic settings, its charming loves, its grace, and its devoted characters—Naomi, Boaz, and Ruth herself. Alongside that appeal, the book of Ruth also conveys truths about the human condition: about who children are and what they mean for the life of a woman, a family, and a nation; about the complementary human and divine sources of redemption; and about a distinctly Hebraic sense of the shape of a human life.

These ideas and more are offered up in a 2021 book about Ruth by Leon Kass and Hannah Mandelbaum, *Reading Ruth: Birth, Redemption, and the Way of Israel*. The origins of their book—a line by line commentary on Ruth—is itself a story no less moving than the text it interprets. Hannah Mandelbaum is Leon Kass's granddaughter, and they began to read the book of Ruth together while mourning Amy Kass, Kass's late and beloved wife of 54 years and Mandelbaum's grandmother. In so doing, they followed a path that Ruth herself treads, from desolation to gladness, with a distinguished Jewish future unfurling along the way.

Leon Kass is an emeritus professor at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, the author of many books, including studies of Genesis and Exodus, and the dean of faculty at Shalem College in Jerusalem. In this conversation, recorded at an event in 2021, he joins *Mosaic*'s editor Jonathan Silver to talk about *Reading Ruth* and writing it with his granddaughter.

From Ruth in Boaz's Field, by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, 1828. Wikimedia.

ALAN RUBENSTEIN

JAN 12 2017

About the author
Alan Rubenstein, director of university programs at the Tikvah Fund, teaches a great-books seminar, "Windows on the Good Life," at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota.

Beyond Sighing and Swooning: Love in the Hebrew Bible

Although it does not seem to be about romantic attachment at all, the tale of Ruth and Boaz is the quintessential example of a biblical love story.

Where in the Hebrew Bible can you find expressions of human love and the part it plays in life? There's Jacob and Rachel's enchanting kiss at the well in Genesis; there's the Song of Songs, that fantastic and mysterious poem of sexual and romantic longing. And then of course there's the book of Ruth, the most complete example of a biblical love story: a tale of two highly sympathetic characters, Boaz and Ruth, one an older bachelor and the other a young widow, who navigate a series of obstacles that seem to prevent their union from ever taking place until, in the end, it does—and, in a final scene, bears fruit in the birth of a child.

In short, the quintessential love story. Or is it? According to the Israeli scholar Yael Ziegler, the book of Ruth is not a love story at all and should not be read as one. Is Ziegler right? Borrowing heavily from her excellent recent study, From *Alienation to Monarchy*, I'll present her case and then argue against it.

Exhibit A in the anti-love-story case is the character whose plight is front and center in the book: neither the Moabite Ruth nor the Judean Boaz but Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi. Naomi's husband Elimelekh and both of her sons have died in Moab; her daughter-in-law Orpah has heeded her urgings to seek another husband in Moab; and Naomi is now returning to Bethlehem penniless and bereft of all but Ruth, who in contrast to Orpah

has rejected her mother-in-law's instructions and instead "clung" to her. The Hebrew word is *davak*, which implies more than a physical holding-on, being used most often to describe the ideal relationship between Israel and God:

> And Ruth said, "Do not entreat me to forsake you, to turn back from you. For wherever you go, I will go. And wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people is my people, and your god is my god. Wherever you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. So may the Lord do to me or even more, for only death will part you and me."

Such is Ruth's exceptional love of Naomi, and such indeed is the only kind of love that, in this reading, is central to her book. Reinforcing this impression—the case continues—is Ruth's behavior throughout. In the book's second chapter she sets out to glean like a pauper so that she and Naomi can eat. Returning from the field, she shares generously of her bounty, obtained at a field belonging to the compassionate Boaz. Chapter 3 shows her setting out again—this time to debase herself, at Naomi's request, by seducing Boaz. We'll return to this scene later, but for now the point is the extent of Ruth's self-denying efforts to support Naomi and raise her up. And so it goes with her act of marrying Boaz. Only once in the book is the word "love" (*ahav*) actually used: in the immediate sequel to Boaz and Ruth's marriage where the love referred to is Ruth's for her beloved Naomi.

And Boaz? Is he smitten by the lovely young widow? Well, for one thing she is never described as lovely; in fact we're given no physical description at all, even of the minimalist kind common in the stories of the matriarchs of Israel. For another thing, Boaz refers to her affectionately throughout as "my daughter" (the same term used by Naomi), even in response to her seductive arrival alone and in darkness on the threshing floor. That he admires Ruth is emphatically clear—he offers her immense and unexpected kindness on the day they meet and repeatedly praises her for her benevolence and bravery. But one would be hard-pressed to show that this implies romantic love.

So why does he marry her? The answer, Ziegler reminds us, is not hard to find. Boaz is a dutiful man. Those who come to glean in his field are treated generously; is this not the law? Other landowners may flout the law—his own foreman seems reluctant to let the Moabite beggar girl exercise her right to pick from the fallen produce—but not Boaz. More importantly, he is also a kinsman of Naomi's deceased husband Elimelekh, which places on him an obligation to redeem the family's land. He must step up, and, being a dutiful man, he will.

In the episode at the center of the fourth and final chapter, Boaz alerts a man who is also a kinsman—a nearer kinsman—to Naomi that he can (or must? or should?) play the part of the redeemer. But to this he adds a caveat: it is impossible, he claims, to buy Naomi's land, and thus save her from

destitution, without also choosing to marry Ruth. This strong connection between the law of redemption (*g'ula*) and that of levirate marriage (*yibbum*) is not drawn anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. Could it be an invention of Boaz's on the spot, contrived to bring about a better outcome for Ruth and Naomi than that offered through land redemption by this "near kinsman" alone? Boaz knows, as others in this book seem to know as well, that restoring Naomi to her land will yield her little unless she has an heir to pass it on to.

At this the other kinsman demurs, and so Boaz and Ruth marry. But most of the joy attending their union is owing not to the satisfaction of their own ambitions for mutual happiness but to their shared desire to see Naomi lifted out of poverty and family ruin. When the curtain falls on the book's final scene, it is the grandmother, Naomi, and not Ruth who holds the infant in her arms, and it is the women of Bethlehem, not Boaz, who look approvingly over her shoulder. Nor do we hear again about Boaz and Ruth being in each other's company or even conversing; their good fortune seems to have dissolved in the selfless act of restoring Naomi's fortunes.

All of which leads to a simple conclusion: the book of Ruth is a heroic story of human sacrifice and goodness. But it is not a love story.

To this I say: plausible, but it can't be so. The argument advanced by Zeigler and elaborated above is based on the premise that a love story must focus on the unfulfilled needs of the lovers, and on an emotional vulnerability that can be resolved and surmounted only by their union. Can a story about two individuals who are in a fundamental sense already complete still be a love story? I believe it can, and that this is exactly what we have in Ruth. To recognize this, we must suspend our normal expectations. Panting, swooning, and infatuation might be the usual condition of men and women in the throes of erotic attraction, but time and again Boaz and Ruth are revealed as two exemplary human beings if not giants among mere men, comporting themselves with the dignity that suits their greatness.

Take a closer look at some key moments. Boaz is introduced at the start of the second chapter in these words: "And Naomi had a kinsman through her husband, a man of worth from the clan of Elimelekh, and his name was Boaz." The phrase translated here as "a man of worth" is *ish gibor ḥayil*. *Ish*: a man; *Gibor*: a hero. *Ḥayil*: a word that can mean wealthy but can also mean manly, brave, or noble.

The phrase fits him. The first word off of Boaz's tongue is the holy name of God, offered in greeting to lift the spirits of his workers. When he hears his foreman deriding Ruth, and no doubt speaking for others as well, he adroitly shows them how a woman like her should be treated. He is kind to her not merely as one should be kind to a pauper according to the laws of Israel. He is extraordinarily solicitous of her because he recognizes human

virtue—that rare commodity—when he sees it. When Ruth asks him to explain his kindness to her, he replies:

> It was indeed told me all that you did for your mother-in-law after your husband's death, and that you left your mother and your father and the land of your birth to come to a people that you did not know in time past. May the Lord requite your actions and may your reward be complete from the Lord God of Israel, under Whose wings you have come to shelter.

Ruth's very act of loyalty, which we, the readers, have already been led to admire, is seen by Boaz exactly as if he had been there on the plains of Moab, hearing her pledge, "wherever you go, I will go," and resonating to the heroic spirit it bespeaks.

And notice Boaz's unique perspective here. "It was indeed told me," he says, but we've been given no reason to think that this recognition of Ruth's greatness is shared by others. The other Bethlehemites, after all, seem content to have left Naomi and Ruth in their state of destitution and misery. In claiming to speak for other putative admirers of Ruth, what he is doing—and he does it repeatedly—is legislating. Others will think what he asserts they think because he is that kind of man wielding that kind of authority: *an ish gibor ḥayil*.

Now consider Ruth's visit to the threshing floor in chapter 3. It is clear what Naomi has in mind, having charged her to bathe and anoint herself and her garments, to wait until Boaz has become drunk, and then to lie down and "uncover his feet" (or legs). In seducing him, she will in a sense be fulfilling a destiny set for her by her birth. She is, after all, a Moabite woman—a descendant of Moab, who was born from the incestuous union of Lot and his eldest daughter (Genesis 19). That daughter also waited until the man she meant to seduce became drunk. In the dark of night, Lot, we are told, "knew not when she lay down or when she arose"—though, on some level, he knew enough to acquiesce. The seduction succeeded.

Consider, too, the line from which Boaz comes. His ancestor is Judah, son of the patriarch Jacob, specifically through Judah's union with his daughter-in-law Tamar (Genesis 38). Like Lot's daughter, Tamar also found herself in a position where the seduction of an older man in her family seemed the only way forward. Dressed as a prostitute, she stood by the road as Judah, himself very likely drunk from the celebration of a sheep-shearing, was passing by.

Women in desperate straits take advantage of men's inability to restrain their lust: such appears to be the lesson about love common to the two lines that have respectively produced Ruth and Boaz. But something very different happens on Boaz's threshing floor. Ruth has been told by her mother-in-law that Boaz "will tell you what you should do." But when Boaz awakes to discover Ruth at his uncovered feet, it is she who tells *him* what to do:

> And he said, "Who are you?" And she said, "I am Ruth your servant. May you spread your wing over your servant, for you are a redeeming kinsman."

"May you spread your wing over your servant." At their very first meeting, Boaz had solicitously prayed that Ruth herself be granted a complete reward "from the Lord God of Israel under whose wings you have come to shelter." Now Ruth instructs him: it is not from God's wings that I seek shelter and reward, but from yours. Boaz's reply rises to and wholly matches her artful expression of high-minded affection:

> And he said, "Blessed are you to the Lord, my daughter. You have done better in your latest kindness than in the first, not going after the young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not be afraid. Whatever you say I will do for you, for all my people's town knows that you are a worthy woman."

"A worthy woman": *eshet ḥayil*—a brave, noble woman. Boaz here echoes and applies to Ruth the very description offered earlier of him. She and he are joined by a shared excellence. Eschewing the role that Naomi and her own family history have assigned to her, Ruth is no daughter of Lot; she seeks more from Boaz than a night's encounter. Boaz's restraint in the face of sexual temptation demonstrates that he is no Judah; he will possess Ruth only in the context of marriage and law.

Again we hear Boaz assert that his own esteem for Ruth is shared by others: "All my people's town knows," he says, and again we have reason to doubt the truth of his statement. But it will soon be demonstrably proved by the very public show Boaz will make of his devotion to this Moabite damsel. To understand the episode about to take place at the town gate, we need to ask a simple question: where did the land come from? Naomi has returned from her sojourn on the plains of Moab in total destitution. Now we learn that she has land to sell; what explains the discrepancy?

I believe we can answer this question, and confirm our sense of Boaz's unique authority, by postulating that in taking Naomi and their sons away from Bethlehem, Elimelekh likely did not make any legal arrangement for the (probably barren) land he left behind. Years passed—Naomi sojourned in Moab for at least a decade. By the time she returns, the famine in Judea has abated and others have moved in to sow the land and reap its crops. They are not about to give up the property they've taken possession of in this chaotic era "when the chieftans ruled."

Some such scenario is likely to have prompted Boaz's forceful convening of the town elders and his initiation of a legal proceeding that will publicly acknowledge Naomi's right to dispose of Elimelekh's land. She may not be able to evict the unlawful tenants, but a redeeming kinsman would be

obligated to buy back the land on the family's behalf. So says the biblical law of redemption, and, more importantly in these circumstances, so says Boaz. And that is not all. The redeeming kinsman must give the family of Naomi an heir through Ruth. So, in a way, says the law of levirate marriage, and, again more importantly, so says Boaz.

When the kinsman balks, Boaz steps in to take his place. At this public display of his willingness to turn the world upside down for the hand of Ruth and the security of both her and Naomi, the town mood changes and Ruth is extolled as the heroine Boaz always knew her to be.

So is this a love story? If a love story requires focusing on the emotions of the would-be lovers and the tensions inherent in their unresolved longing for each other, then no, it is not a love story. That is, not a *romantic* love story. But if a love story can be one that reaches its happy end by presenting the uplifting union in marriage and procreation of two excellent individuals who can be said uniquely to deserve each other, then this is a great love story indeed.

At the end of the book of Ruth there comes a positively shocking revelation:

> And the neighbor women called a name for [the child], saying, "A son is born to Naomi," and they called his name Obed. He was the father of Jesse father of David.

Only here, and only in the most understated way, does the book reveal that Ruth and Boaz, these two extraordinary figures, are the great-grandparents of David king of Israel. The union that might not have been, that has been accomplished against such tall odds, is a union of the utmost national importance. Which raises a final question: are we meant to learn something about David from this story of his forebears?

It may be so. David is another individual who stands head and shoulders above those he interacts with. Like Boaz, he possesses the power to change people's conception of what is possible—to legislate—by force of his will and his charisma. Moreover, at the core of several central episodes in his life, when he is acting according to his own law, we can discern a species of overpowering love: ecstatic love of God as he brings the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem; passionate love of a woman when he brings Bathsheba to his palace; deep, familial love when he mourns Absalom, his rebel son, in spite of all the harm Absalom has done him. Even if these are not unambiguously salutary moments in David's life, or as readily applauded as are the superior actions of Boaz, they show an expansiveness of soul that makes him, too, a giant among men.

The story of Boaz and Ruth is bathed in light, giving us a glimpse of love

at its sunlit peak. But, as in life, so in history, dark shadows lurk around that peak, and a properly comprehensive account of love must reveal those as well. David's story of love, or perhaps more properly of *eros*, is morally more questionable than the story of Boaz and Ruth, and for this reason it is perhaps also more complete. But lest we mistake David's erotic acts as the mere failings of a lustful descendant of Lot and Judah, two men for whom the story of love is one of unopposable appetite, the book of Ruth interposes in the family history a portrait of love in full bloom—love built on the foundation of human excellence.

Englishness, Jewishness, Saul Bellow—and Martin Amis

OCT 5 2020
From David Herman at *The Critic*

With his latest book, *Inside Story*, the English novelist Martin Amis has attempted a hybrid of fiction and autobiography, using the book to discuss his relationships with various literary friends and, of course, with his father—the novelist Kingsley Amis. While most critics have not been kind to the book, **David Herman** finds that it has its merits, especially when it addresses the themes of "literary fathers, Englishness, Jews, [and] envy." Herman finds of special interest the portions of the book devoted to the novelist Saul Bellow, whom Martin appears to regard as a sort of substitute father:

> If Kingsley was insular and middlebrow, what kind of literary father was Bellow? American, cosmopolitan, he had found his voice in *Augie March*, he took on "the deeps": big issues and big ideas. Bellow was the sort of writer who named one of his most famous characters after a minor character in Joyce's *Ulysses* and wrote two novels about friends who had died, Delmore Schwartz (Humboldt in *Humboldt's Gift*) and Allan Bloom (the title character in *Ravelstein*).
>
> Above all, Bellow was Jewish. One of the first conversations Martin Amis describes having with Bellow was about Jews. "Why don't Jews drink?" Martin wants to know. They soon get onto "anti-Semitic culture," what Bellow calls "the traditional culture of [Ezra] Pound and Wyndham Lewis and T.S. Eliot." "Well, two nutters and a monarchist," says Amis.
>
> Herman contrasts this to *Inside Story*'s occasional references to the elder Amis's casual anti-Semitism—or, at least hints of it.
>
> Martin writes in *Inside Story* about a conversation with his wife. "'Did you ring the Jews?'" he asks her. "'Yes,' said Elena [his wife]. 'And they're alright?' 'They're fine.' The Jews were their daughters (and they were full Jews too, by the way, by the ancient law of matrilinearity, and could simply walk into Israel as full citizens)." If Kingsley was the sort of writer who would write, "Yid" in a game of Scrabble, Martin was the sort who would proudly flaunt his children's Jewishness. [Yet] Amis never explains why Jewishness was so important to him.

The Shoah Was Brought about by Anti-Semitism, Not "Hate"

MAY 23 2023
From Ben Poser and Naya Lekht at *White Rose*

When teachers, museums, activists, and other well-meaning people endeavor to teach children and adults about the Holocaust, they tend to do so hoping to instill certain lessons. **Ben Poser** and **Naya Lekht** have reason to believe these aren't usually the right ones:

> In 2018, Jewish students at a pluralistic community high school participated in a project called "We Will Not Be Silenced," a week-long commemoration of the Holocaust. . . . The interactive project compelled students to write on small pieces of paper the things about which they would not be silent as a result of [having learned about] Kristallnacht. The following are examples of what students chose to write: on note cards bearing the heading "I will not be silent in the face of," students wrote "homophobia," "trans violence," "gun violence," "environmental degradation," "rape culture," "sexism," "racism," and "any hate." Not one student wrote "anti-Semitism." . . .
>
> Holocaust curricula and Holocaust museums have transformed from spaces to commemorate the particularity of the Jewish story into temples dedicated to a universal story of human insensitivity—a mere allegory of anything unjust, now or then. The Museum of Tolerance, [created by the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles], indeed does offer exhibits on the subjects of "homelessness, LGBTQ+ issues, bullying, the challenges of policing," and much else that has nothing to do with the Nazis' Final Solution, including the January 6, 2021 Capitol riot.
>
> Sadly, the Museum of Tolerance is not alone in this behavior. . . . Even the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the most prestigious institution of Holocaust education in America, has published material concerning how "climate change" has contributed to several modern-day genocides.
>
> The best-case scenario is the abstraction of the Holocaust to such a degree that students do not even know that they are learning about the murder of Jews; the worst-case scenario is [that] universalization lends itself to accusing the only Jewish country, Israel, of crimes against humanity and the anti-Semitic canard of comparing Israel to the Nazi state.

On College Campuses, "Inclusion" Has Come to Mean Excluding Jews

MAY 22 2023
From Seth Mandel at *Commentary*

Recent years have seen the rise of professionals, and then whole departments, whose mandate is to ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)—first in universities, and later in private corporations. Yet including Jews or granting them "equity" is not a priority for the DEI consultants and commissars. Quite the opposite, writes **Seth Mandel**:

> On campus, DEI bureaucracies are straightforward ideological enforcers. Their ideology views Jews as emissaries of (white) power. That's why DEI officials aren't merely indifferent to campus Jew-baiting, but its ringleaders.
>
> In 2021, Jewish employees of a Stanford University mental-health division filed complaints against the university over incidents in a staff DEI program. According to *Inside Higher Education*, staff were divided into two groups, one for people of color and the other for "whiteness accountability." The Jewish employees were told to join the "whiteness accountability" group because it was for all who are complicit in systemic racism, including those who are "white-passing." According to the complaints, the DEI committee "endorsed the narrative that Jews are connected to white supremacy, advancing anti-Semitic tropes concerning Jewish power, conspiracy, and control."
>
> In 2021, amid a rash of anti-Jewish violence around the country, the Rutgers University chancellor Christopher Molloy and the provost Francine Conway unequivocally denounced the hate, . . . and then promptly apologized for doing so. "Our diversity must be supported by equity, inclusion, antiracism, and the condemnation of all forms of bigotry and hatred, including anti-Semitism and Islamophobia," they said, titling the second statement "An Apology." That pernicious apology was clarifying, because it insisted that "diversity" and empathy for Jewish suffering are mutually exclusive.
>
> The administrators, educators, and bureaucrats at America's colleges and universities are to blame for this state of affairs. And they should be held accountable for it.

Rashida Tlaib's Obscene Effort to Use the Elie Wiesel Genocide Act against Israel

MAY 22 2023
From Elisha Wiesel
at *The Hill*

In 2018, Congress passed the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Act, which establishes a mechanism for using government resources to monitor and call attention to current acts of genocide. On May 10, the Michigan congresswoman Rashida Tlaib—along with five of her far-left fellow lawmakers—submitted a resolution to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs invoking the act to condemn "Israel's ongoing Nakba against the Palestinian people." Elisha Wiesel, after whose late father the law was named, comments:

> Rabbi Leo Dee lost his wife and two daughters last month to cold-blooded murderers. He spoke recently about his desire to understand their killers. "I want to meet the parents and siblings of the terrorists and ask them two questions. What did they think they would accomplish with what they did and what is their vision for the future—what do they want for their grandchildren?"
>
> The mother of one of the terrorists gave her answer in a televised interview. "Praise be to Allah for granting him [martyrdom]. We should fight them with our children, with our money, with our families, with our fingernails. We should devour the Jews with our teeth."
>
> We [Jews] know what it means to be devoured. . . .
>
> The Elie Wiesel Genocide Act is needed now more than ever. No help has come yet for the Rohingya in Myanmar. And it will take incredible community building by Americans of all faiths and parties to advocate effectively for the Chinese Communist Party to turn away from genocide against the 1 million Muslim Uyghurs estimated to be imprisoned in concentration camps in Xinjiang.
>
> My father spoke for those who had no voice. Now my father is gone, and his life's work is being obscenely, needlessly cheapened, distracting from the real work ahead of us.

The Forgotten Shavuot Rebellion

MAY 23 2023
From Martin Goodman at *theTorah.com*

The holiday of Shavuot (Pentecost), which marks the start of the wheat harvest and, according to tradition, the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, begins on Thursday night. In 4 BCE, it was the occasion of a Judean revolt against Rome, brought about by the death of the Roman client King Herod a few weeks earlier. **Martin Goodman**, in a brief examination of Second Temple-era sources about the festival, tells the story:

> Crowds who gathered to mark [Herod's] passing were treated to a feast to mark the end of the seven days of mourning by Archelaus, the son finally designated as his heir, but they took advantage of a mass assembly in the Temple to pour out their grievances, demanding lighter taxes, the release of prisoners put in chains by Herod over many years, and the replacement of the high priest appointed by Herod shortly before his death. . . .
>
> Despite the chaos, Archelaus traveled to Rome to seek confirmation from Augustus but on arrival found himself faced with extensive opposition. As he was delayed in the imperial city, Judaea erupted in unrest, which reached a peak on Shavuot. . . .
>
> Following this incident, Judea rapidly melted into chaos, with violent uprisings all over the country. Rome expected the governor of Syria to intervene when there was serious trouble in Judaea. Publius Quinctilius Varus, the current governor of Syria, accordingly marched south from Antioch with a large army, and he savagely suppressed the uprisings around the kingdom.

Goodman also details how Shavuot was celebrated by an Egyptian-Jewish sect known as the Therapeutae, who welcomed the holiday with a vegetarian feast and then stayed up all night singing hymns and listening to their leaders expound Scripture—a custom strikingly similar to the all-night Shavuot study sessions that originated in the 16th and 17th centuries.