



# Materia giudaica

Rivista dell'associazione italiana  
per lo studio del giudaismo

XXIX (2024)



Giuntina



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## **MATERIA GIUDAICA**

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Chiara Carmen Scordari

NEGOTIATING OTHERNESS:  
THE JOURNEY OF RUTH, THE GENTILE, TOWARD JUDAISM

The book of Ruth is a happy-ending folktale about the journey of a widow toward the land of Israel. The story begins inauspiciously, with famine and death, and concludes hopefully, with the birth of king David's grandfather. A closer look at the story, though, reveals something more. In terms of identity politics, Ruth personifies the ideal outsider. Julia Kristeva states that Ruth broke into Israel's national history and impressed a sense of «radical otherness» upon it.<sup>1</sup> As if to say that her otherness is an ethical invitation to consider the “fertility” of the other (i.e., the foreigner, the excluded). From a theological angle, Ruth is the protagonist of a *Heilsgeschichte*, capable to transform barrenness into fertility, despair into hope: she «teaches us that the most profound hope—the Messiah—comes from a subjectivity that does not surrender to her own despair».<sup>2</sup>

Against this background, this article aims at pointing out a third pattern, which dialectically links the previous two readings: Ruth as a dynamic figure of ethical monotheism. In her essay entitled *Ruth*, the American Jewish author Cynthia Ozick depicts Ruth as a kind of “second Abraham”, capable of knowing «prophetically» and «out of the blue» God's existence and oneness.<sup>3</sup> As I will show later, such a portrayal of Ruth combines Maimonides' prophetic anthropology with Leo Baeck's understanding of Judaism. Unlike Abraham's *hagirah*, the journey of Ruth, from idolatry to monotheism, is not yet over. The strength of her covenantal choice lies in her everlasting return. As a female heir to Abrahamic rational monotheism, Ruth conveys an ideal of a future that is not mere procreation but infinite ethical demand.

*Ruth as a second Abraham*

The story of Ruth reunites and restores two branches of Abraham's family. She descends from Moab, the son of Lot, Abraham's nephew, and she joins the house of Perez, by marrying Boaz (related

<sup>1</sup> J. KRISTEVA, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. by L.S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York 1991, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> C. CHALIER, *Ruth: The Meaning of a Conversion*, in Y. LIN (ed.), *Levinas Faces Biblical Figures*, Lexington Books, Plymouth 2014, pp. 97-108: 106.

<sup>3</sup> C. OZICK, *Ruth* [1987], in J.A. KATES - G. TWERSKY REIMER (eds.), *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim A Sacred Story*, Ballantine Books, New York 1994, pp. 211-232: 217.

to Naomi's family). Perez, whose name means a "breach" or a "break", is the son of Judah, Jacob's son and Abraham's great-grandson.<sup>4</sup> There are also many similarities between Ruth's and Abraham's personalities. Ruth is a "gentile", as Abraham was; like him, Ruth leaves her native land and family to journey to a foreign land, despite being alone, a poor widow not accompanied by either relatives or wealth. Both experienced barrenness and famine. But whereas Abraham was called by God to go from Ur to the one God would show him, Ruth left her father's land on her own initiative.<sup>5</sup>

By interweaving childhood remembrance, collective memory, and ethical commitment, in her essay *Ruth*, Cynthia Ozick writes:

Abraham—the first Hebrew to catch insight—caught it as genius does, autonomously, out of the blue, without any inculcating tradition. Ruth is in possession of both inculcation *and* insight. And yet, so intense is her insight, one can almost imagine her as a kind of Abraham. Suppose Elimelech had never emigrated to Moab; suppose Ruth had never married a Hebrew. The fire of cognition might still have come upon her as it came upon Abraham—autonomously, out of the blue, without any inculcating tradition. Abraham's cognition turned into civilization. Might Ruth have transmuted Moab? Ruth as a second Abraham! [...] Ruth claims the God of Israel out of her own ontological understanding. She knows—she knows directly, prophetically—that the Creator of the Universe is One.<sup>6</sup>

According to Ozick, the story of Ruth contains elements of ordinariness and singularity; it is a story of «desertion, bereavement, barrenness, death, loss, displacement, destitution», out of which mercy and redemption unfold.<sup>7</sup> The singularity of Ruth emerges especially from the comparison with the ordinariness of her sister-in-law Orpah. While, after being widowed, Orpah returned to "her people and her gods", Ruth refused to abandon Naomi and clung to her: «Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God».<sup>8</sup> For Ozick, each of female characters represents a specific attitude toward religion and society: Naomi is «a kind of pluralist»;<sup>9</sup> Orpah is neither an iconoclast nor a philosopher, «but neither is she, after ten years with Naomi, an ordinary Moabite»:<sup>10</sup>

She is somewhere in between, perhaps. In this we may suppose her to be one of us: a modern, no longer a full-fledged member of the pagan world, but always with one foot warming in the seductive bath of

<sup>4</sup> Cf. T. COHN ESKENAZI - T. FRYMER-KENSKY, *JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth*, Jewish Publication Society Philadelphia 2011, pp. xxi-xxiii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ivi*, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> OZICK, *Ruth*, cit., pp. 227-228.

<sup>7</sup> *Ivi*, p. 232. For a recent and thoughtful discussion of Ozick's exegetical and theoretical approach to Ruth's story, see: N.S. NAGEL, *The Lord of History in Cynthia Ozick's "Ruth"*, «Studies in American Jewish Literature» 43/1 (2024), pp. 43-58.

<sup>8</sup> Ruth 1:16.

<sup>9</sup> OZICK, *Ruth*, cit., p. 223.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

those colorful, comfortable, often beautiful old lies (they can console, but because they are lies they can also hurt and kill) [...].<sup>11</sup>

While Orpah is the practical, material Moabite who personifies the normality, Ruth is «a kind of Abraham»,<sup>12</sup> for being capable of mature prophetic imagination. She grasps the invisible Creator and reinvents Israel's religious and ethical order by way of conversion or assimilation:<sup>13</sup> «Ruth sees into the nature of Covenant, and the life of the story streams in». <sup>14</sup> To Ozick's eyes, Ruth looks like a prophet-philosopher, gifted with insight and religious genius. Her love and loyalty to Naomi's God testify to the prophetic cognition that came upon her, «as it came upon Abraham, autonomously, out of the blue, without any inculcating tradition». <sup>15</sup> Ruth relives Naomi's exilic experience in Moab's land, by boldly deciding to dwell among Israel, notwithstanding the precept: «no [...] Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord» (Deut. 23:4). But, while Naomi is a «pluralist», heir to a family tradition, Ruth is an «iconoclast» who longs to assimilate into a new community and faith. While Naomi speaks the language of pragmatism, Ruth speaks the language of visionaries and prophets, for being capable of leaving Moab because she is eager to leave behind her idolatrous past and embrace a redemptive future. Ruth's journey, from Moab to Bethlehem, takes the form of a spiritual and progressive passage from a childish religiosity to an intellectual approach to the divine. In the words of Ozick:

Ruth leaves Moab because she intends to leave childish ideas behind. She is drawn to Israel because Israel is the inheritor of the One Universal God. Has Ruth «learned» this insight from Naomi and from Naomi's son? It may be; the likelihood is almost as pressing as evidence: how, without assimilation into the life of an Israelite family, would Ruth ever have penetrated into the great monotheistic cognition? On the other hand: Orpah too encounters that cognition, and slips back into Moab to lose again. Inculcation is not insight, and what Orpah owns is only that: inculcation without insight. [...] Ruth is in possession of both inculcation *and* insight.<sup>16</sup>

Ozick's reading of Ruth as a dynamic prophet-philosopher, actively engaged in a spiritual growth process, reminds the interpretation of Abraham provided by Moses Maimonides (1138-1205). Especially in his fourteen-volume Code of Law, the *Mišneh Torah*, Maimonides describes Abraham as a public natural theologian (or even an Aristotelian philosopher), who gradually recognizes the existence of One Creator autonomously, «by means of his contemplation of the stars». <sup>17</sup> Abraham

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ivi*, p. 227.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. B. HONIG, *Ruth, the Model Emigrée: Mourning and the Symbolic Politics of Immigration*, «Political Theory» 25/1 (1997), pp. 112-36: 118-119.

<sup>14</sup> OZICK, *Ruth*, cit., p. 232.

<sup>15</sup> *Ivi*, p. 227.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> MAIMONIDES, *Mišneh Torah, Sefer Madda'*, 'Avodat Kohavim 1, 3.

wondered: how could this planet continuously be in motion and have no leader? Who causes it to revolve? Such a seemingly sudden discovery of God is the outcome of a rational and autonomous inquiry; it is a «paradigm of philosophical spirituality».<sup>18</sup> As Maimonides points out:

He [Abraham] neither had a teacher nor one to impart aught to him, for he was sunk in Ur of the Chaldeans among the foolish worshipers of stars, and his father, and his mother, like all the people, worshiped stars, and he, although following them in their worship, busies his heart and reflects until he attains the path of truth, and, by his correct thinking, he understood when he finally saw the line of righteousness. He knew that there is One God; He leads the planet; He created everything; and in all that is there is no god save He.<sup>19</sup>

Maimonides' portrayal of Abraham conveys his anthropological understanding of religion and covenantal commitment. Second only to Moses, Abraham is one of the greatest prophets, because he taught people the oneness of the Creator «by means of speculative proof»;<sup>20</sup> he is the archetype of the pious and religious man, since his acquiescence to sacrifice Isaac informs of «the limit of love for God [...] and fear of Him, that is up to what limit they must reach».<sup>21</sup> Abraham is also a “cultural and religion iconoclast” who—before Ruth—impressed a sense of «radical otherness» upon the history of Israel. He grew up as a “gentile” in Ur among the Sabians (a collective name that Maimonides uses to refer to Egyptians and even the Zoroastrians of his own days).<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, he became the father of Judaism, because he broke with his star-worshipping relatives and instructed the peoples to join the monotheistic truth. Abraham used only rational instruments, «speech and teaching», «speculation and reasoning» (*Iggerot*, 234, lines 5-6). As James Diamond observes, Maimonides looks at Abraham as «the Socrates of his age who missionizes by “sowing doubt,” “engaging in debate,” “informing,” “overpowering with demonstration,” “accumulating a following,” informing each follower “in accordance with his capacity,” and ultimately “authoring treatises”».<sup>23</sup>

According to Maimonides, Abraham is both the wanderer and skeptical educator, endowed with the determination to discombobulate the old idolatrous order, and the activist prophet who bore to be «reviled, blamed, and belittled» by the idolaters «for the sake of God» because he «preferred truth to his reputation».<sup>24</sup> Maimonides identifies himself with the distress of persecuted religious community

<sup>18</sup> D. HARTMAN, *Israelis and the Jewish Tradition. An Ancient People Debating, Its Future*, Yale University Press, New Haven - London 2000, p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> MAIMONIDES, *Mišneh Torah, Sefer Madda*, 'Avodat Koḥavim 1,3; *Guida* II, 13, 19.

<sup>20</sup> See MAIMONIDES, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 39, trans. by S. Pines, The University Press of Chicago, Chicago 1962, p. 379.

<sup>21</sup> MAIMONIDES, *Guide* III, 24, p. 500.

<sup>22</sup> S. STROUMSA, *Maimonides and His World, Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2009, p. 91.

<sup>23</sup> J.A. DIAMOND, *Converts, Heretics, and Lepers. Maimonides and the Outsider*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 2007, pp. 15-16.

<sup>24</sup> MAIMONIDES, *Guide* III, 29, p. 515.

and transfigures the collective trouble into Abraham's suffering experience. But such an account of the Patriarch's pains seems to suggest something more. It is an indication of the frailties of the Abrahamic mission. When speaking of the effects of Abraham's monotheism, Maimonides bears in mind the frailty of a "spiritual" community, exclusively based on the philosophical knowledge of God. The chances of survival of the Abrahamic community of God's knowers were minimal. Being too spiritual and metaphysical, it was on the verge of collapsing under the weight of Egyptian paganism. Therefore, in *Guide* III, 29, Maimonides says: «Abraham our Father began [...]. Then the Master of the prophets [Moses] [...] perfected the purpose».<sup>25</sup> God sent Moses so that he completed and refined what Abraham began, namely, he provided the basis for an institutionalized religious community.

A different but complementary image of Abraham emerges from another of Maimonides' writings, i.e., his *responsum* to Obadiah the Proselyte. Here Maimonides presents Abraham as the bearer of a universal message and the father of all proselytes. Obadiah had asked Maimonides if he, as a convert, could pray to God as "his father". Taking a pragmatic approach to such matter, Maimonides responds:

[...] Abraham our Father taught the masses, enlightened them, and made known to them doctrinal truth [i.e., monotheism] and [the fact of] God's unity. He rejected idolatry and abolished its practices, and he gathered many under the wings of the Divine Presence [...]. Just as he restored his contemporaries [to the true faith] through his oral instruction and his teachings, he [prospectively] brought future generations [to true faith] through the testament he left to his children and household after him. Thus, Abraham our Father, peace be upon him, is the father to those of his descendants who are worthy in that they follow in his ways, as well as the father of his disciples and of all those who become proselytes [...]. Know that those of our ancestors who left Egypt were mostly idolaters; they had mingled with the Egyptians and followed their practices, until the Blessed Holy One sent Moses our Teacher, the supreme prophet, and separated us from the nations and brought us under the wings of the Divine Presence, us and all proselytes, and gave to all of us one Law. Do not consider your status as inferior. While we are descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, yours is a direct relationship with Him through whose word the world was created. This is made explicit in [the Book of] Isaiah: "One shall say, I am the Lord's, and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob" (Is. 44:5).<sup>26</sup>

In portraying Abraham, Maimonides makes a wider use of the metaphor of the journey: Abraham's journey (from Ur to Canaan) foreshadows the spiritual journey of all converts, from paganism to the "doctrinal truth" (*dat ha-'emet*). In his ethical-psychological treatise, the *Eight Chapters*, Maimonides gave the term "truth" the meaning of rational virtues, «for they are immutably true».<sup>27</sup> Con-

<sup>25</sup> MAIMONIDES, *Guide* III, 29, p. 517; see K. SEESKIN, *Thinking about the Torah. A Philosopher Reads the Bible*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia 2013, pp. 88-90.

<sup>26</sup> MAIMONIDES, *Response to Obadiah*, Engl. trans. in E. DIAMOND, *Halakhah, Theology and Psychology: The Case of Maimonides and Obadiah the Proselyte*, in R.A. HARRIS - J.S. MILGRAM (eds.), *Hakol Kol Yaakov: The Joel Roth Jubilee Volume*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2021, pp. 1-27: 6-9.

<sup>27</sup> MAIMONIDES, *Eight Chapters* IV, Engl. trans. in R.L. WEISS - C.E. BUTTERWORTH (eds.), *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, Dover Books, New York 1983, pp. 50-104: 71.

sequently, Abraham learned and taught a philosophical, universal monotheism, to which Moses gave a particularistic twist, i.e., the revelation of the Law. What emerges now is that Maimonides interprets Abraham's fatherhood not in terms of ethnicity but in terms of rational and cultural choice.<sup>28</sup> In *Guide* I, 7, Maimonides specifies that the notion "to bear children" may be used figuratively with reference to «happenings within thought and the opinions and doctrines that they entail. [...] In this sense, whoever instructs an individual in some matter and teaches him an opinion, has, as far as his being provided with this opinion is concerned, as it were engendered that individual».<sup>29</sup> Therefore, whoever follows Abraham's intellectual heritage belongs to his household, whether he is his son or disciple. It is not surprising that Maimonides opens his response to Obadiah by quoting Boaz's address to Ruth: «May the Lord reward your deeds. May you have a full recompense from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge».<sup>30</sup> In Maimonides' eyes, too, Ruth is a model proselyte, the prototype of Abraham's sons.

### *Cynthia Ozick as a second Ruth*

In a February 1992 interview, Cynthia Ozick voiced her insights about Jewishness, her attitude toward religious practices, and her family background. In answer to the question whether she conceived God in a Platonic-Aristotelian sense, i.e., as the first cause and unmoved mover, or, emotionally, as a personal being with whom she had an intimate relationship, she replied:

Well, there are times when I am a primitive Jew or a primitive child, when I privately say *Sh'ma* (declaration of God's oneness, Deut. 6:4) with huge passion and feel the immediacy of that cry, and the urgency, and my need for it and, in a sense, the universe's need for it. But when my soul is not in danger or when Israel is not in peril, I think probably more along Aristotelian lines, as you've just described it, intellectually, yet enormously contradicted by life's crisis and emergencies.<sup>31</sup>

Properly understood, this personal confession reads like a sequel to Ozick's essay *Ruth*. Ozick's passage from an intensive, primitive religious experience to an intellectual, albeit full of contradictions, awareness of God mirrors Ruth's spiritual journey from childish mythological to adult rational religiosity. Ozick tells the interviewer that she takes two different approaches to God, depending on her mood and social surroundings: the immediate-emotional and the strictly rational. While the first implies a mystical-redemptive function of prayer, the second almost looks like an experience of

<sup>28</sup> M. KELLNER, *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People*, State University of New York Press, Albany (NY) 1991, p. 50; ID. - D. GILLIS, *Maimonides the Universalist: The Ethical Horizons of the Mishneh Torah*, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, London 2020, pp. 45-47.

<sup>29</sup> MAIMONIDES, *Guide* I, 7, p. 32.

<sup>30</sup> Ruth 2:12; MAIMONIDE, *Response to Obadiah*, p. 4. For a further analysis of Maimonides' Abraham, see my *Umanità alla prova. Figure bibliche nella filosofia della religione di Maimonide*, Carocci, Roma 2023, pp. 13-25.

<sup>31</sup> J.O. HABERMAN (ed.), *The God I Believe In*, The Free Press, New York 1994, p. 159.

prophecy, which must occur in a state of existential and political peace. Ozick's words echo those of the Talmud: «Divine Presence rests upon an individual neither from an atmosphere of sadness, nor from an atmosphere of languor».<sup>32</sup> Maimonides comments on this passage adding: «prophecy was taken away during the time of the Exile. For what languor or sadness can befall a man in any state that would be stronger than that due to his being a thrall slave in bondage to the ignorant who commit great sins and in whom the privation of true reason is united to the perfection of the lusts of the beasts?».<sup>33</sup> For Maimonides, prophecy can occur only in a «state of delightfulness».<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the prophecy involves both intellect and imagination, but the latter is a bodily faculty that sometimes is weakened and troubled, and at other times is in a healthy state. Therefore, «the prophecy of the prophets», Maimonides concludes, «ceases when they are sad or angry».<sup>35</sup>

An ethical and cultural commitment lies behind Ozick's reading of Ruth. By depicting the Moabite heroine as an extraordinary visionary endowed with «the original Abrahamic insight» and therefore capable of grasping the One Creator, Ozick makes her the spiritual heir of ethical monotheism.<sup>36</sup> By “ethical monotheism” she means «a direct channel (beginning with the principle of the Covenant) between humankind and the Creator, without necessitating a mediator. [...] I might add that in rabbinic Judaism (which *is* Judaism) there aren't any miracles or bizarre contrary-to-nature beliefs, that inquiry is encouraged, that rationalism rules [...]».<sup>37</sup> Such a conception of monotheism seems to reflect the view of Leo Baeck, who in turn borrowed it from Hermann Cohen. The latter based his idea of ethical monotheism on Maimonides' theory of divine actional attributes, expounded in *Guide* I, 54 (glossing Exodus 33:19). For Maimonides, the human being cannot gain any positive knowledge of God's essence; he can grasp only the attributes of divine action, i.e., «the actions proceeding from Him [...] in respect of giving existence to men and governing them».<sup>38</sup> In Cohen's terms, this means that God can only be known as an “ethical being”, as the essence of morality, the “ideal of human action”.<sup>39</sup> The ultimate meaning of Maimonides' theory of attribute is that «God is [...] the God of ethics [...]. God as the paradigm and ideal for human emulation and for the human Self».<sup>40</sup> And yet, according to Leo Baeck, God is more just than an ideal: although He remains impenetrable, He is a reality; He is both the incomprehensible and the originator of morality; the unattainable and the

<sup>32</sup> B.T., Šabbat 30b.

<sup>33</sup> MAIMONIDES, *Guide* II, 36, p. 373.

<sup>34</sup> MAIMONIDES, *Mišneh Torah, Sefer Madda', Yesode ha-Torah*, 7, 4.

<sup>35</sup> MAIMONIDES, *Guide* II, 36, p. 373.

<sup>36</sup> V. STRANDBERG, *Greek Mind/Jewish Soul. The Conflicted Art of Cynthia Ozick*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1994, p. 21.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> MAIMONIDES, *Guide* I, 54, p. 125.

<sup>39</sup> H. COHEN, *Ethics of Maimonides* [1908], trans. with commentary by A. Bruckstein, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2004, p. 69; cf. G.Y. KOHLER, *Maimonides and Ethical Monotheism: The Influence of the Guide of the Perplexed on German Reform Judaism*, in J.T. ROBINSON (ed.), *The Cultures of Maimonideanism*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2009, 309-334: 322.

<sup>40</sup> COHEN, *Ethics of Maimonides*, cit., p. 192.

living personal Creator. As he wrote in his essay, *The essence of Judaism*: «He [God] is the worker of miracle, for whom nothing is too miracle, and yet from him all life derives its order and its law. Jewish religiousness is conscious of the unity of these apparent opposites».<sup>41</sup> Such a conception of God reflects the living paradox of religious man, capable of holding together opposite feelings, such as separation and belonging; the here and the beyond; the mystery and the revealed; the miracle and the Law.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, as both rational and existential at the same time, Judaism alone may endorse such an unsolved tension between mystery, the hidden ground of being, the unknowable on the one hand, and commandment, the categorical imperative on the other.<sup>43</sup> In another essay, not surprisingly titled *Mystery and Commandment*, Baeck states:

There are two experiences of the human soul in which the meaning of his life takes on for a man a vital significance: the experience of mystery and the experience of commandment; or, as we may also put it, the knowledge of what is real and the knowledge of what is to be realized [...]. This twofold experience could also be called humility and reverence. The humility of man is his recognition that his life is framed by infinity and eternity, by that which transcends all human knowledge and apprehension, and surpasses all that is natural and existent; that his life is absolutely dependent; that the unknowable and unnamable, the unfathomable and unthinkable enters into his life. Humility is the feeling for that deep and mysterious sphere in which man is rooted; the feeling, in other words, for that which remains in being and is real—the great quiet, the great devotion in all philosophy and all wisdom. And reverence is man's feeling that something higher confronts him; and whatever is higher is ethically superior and therefore makes demands and directs, speaks to man and requires his reply, his decision. It can reveal itself in the small and weak no less than in the sublime; it can manifest itself in the other as well as in oneself. Reverence is thus the recognition of the holy, that which is infinitely and eternally commanding, that which man is to accept into his life and realize through his life—the great impelling force, the active aspect of wisdom. This twofold experience can also be intimated in this way: the consciousness that we have been created versus the consciousness that we are expected to create. [...] These are the two experiences of the meaning of life. And what is peculiar to Judaism is that these two experiences have here become one, and are experienced as one, in a perfect unity. And it is thus that the soul becomes conscious of its own unity and totality; it is thus that piety springs up in the soul. From the one God come both mystery and commandment, as one from the One, and the soul experiences both as one. Every mystery means and suggests also a commandment; and every commandment means and suggest also a mystery.<sup>44</sup>

In recounting her own idea of Judaism, Cynthia Ozick declared in the same interview that, at the age of twenty-five, she was impressed by Baeck's distinction between "classic" Judaism (religion

<sup>41</sup> L. BAECK, *The Essence of Judaism* [1905], trans. by V. Grubwieser and L. Pearl, Macmillan and Company Limited, London 1936, p. 97.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>43</sup> See A. ALTMANN, *Leo Baeck and the Jewish Mystical Tradition*, «Leo Baeck Memorial Lectures» 17, Leo Baeck Institute, New York 1973, pp. 15-16.

<sup>44</sup> L. BAECK, *Mystery and Commandment* [1921/1922], in ID., *Judaism and Christianity*, trans. by W. Kaufmann, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia 1958, pp. 171-188: 171-173.

of act) and “romantic” Christianity (religion of emotion).<sup>45</sup> Before meeting Baeck, Ozick felt like a mystic, a romantic intoxicated by Blake, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, and Coleridge.<sup>46</sup> She almost felt reproached by Baeck. The latter seemed to warn her of the true nature of ‘romantic religion’: «Its world is the realm in which all rules are suspended; it is the world of the irregular, the extraordinary and the miraculous, that world which lies beyond all reality, the remote which transcends all things».<sup>47</sup> Indeed, especially in his essay *Romantic Religion*, Baeck accuses the Pauline faith of depriving ethics of its basis and justice of its proper meaning: «Either faith or ethics! That is the innermost meaning of the fight which Paul and Luther waged against the “Law”. [...] Law and miracle cannot be reconciled. Either the one or the other; either will or grace, deed or mystery, ethics or religion».<sup>48</sup> Ozick knows and is deeply influenced by Baeck’s *Romantic religion*, which in her eyes seems to be «not merely a polemic against Christianity, but against all essentially mystical religion. I guess you could also define it as a *mitnaggedik* (opposed to Hasidism) essay».<sup>49</sup> According to Baeck, while Christianity prefers the “over-holy” and “tremendous” ideal to ethical personality, Judaism admits the “irrational” as «the profound truth of life and therefore also the profound source of the Law», namely, the covenant between God and humankind;<sup>50</sup> while Christianity knows «only a finished story», in which an absolute goal determines everything, Judaism «knows living history», whose «goal lies ever again in the distance at the end of the road».<sup>51</sup> In her 2006 article, *A Youthful Intoxication*, Ozick added: «“Romantic Religion,” with its emphasis on humane conduct over the perils of the loosened imagination, remains an essay to live by».<sup>52</sup> As if to say that, after its reading, one cannot fail to leave the romantic way of self-delusion and delirium to follow the path of living history, thereby becoming properly Jewish. One may add that *Romantic Religion* urged to follow the religious path of Ruth.

<sup>45</sup> HABERMAN, *The God I Believe In*, cit., p. 159; cf. C. OZICK, *A Youthful Intoxication*, «The New York Times Sunday Book Review», Dec. 10, 2006, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/10/books/review/Ozick.t.html>> (last checked April 16, 2025). Cf. S. PORRO, *Dalla “Jamesian idea” alla “Jewish idea”*: il caso di Trust di Cynthia Ozick, «Filosofia» 64 (2019), pp. 189-203: 193-195. See L. BAECK, *Romantic Religion* [1922], in ID., *Judaism and Christianity*, cit., pp. 189-292; M.A. MEYER, *Rabbi Leo Baeck: Living a Religious Imperative in Troubled Times*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2020, pp. 58-61.

<sup>46</sup> OZICK, *A Youthful Intoxication*, cit.; cf. E. GOLDSTEIN, *Moloch and Monotheism: Ozick’s Aestheticism*, «Studies in American Jewish Literature» 43/1 (2024), pp. 29-42.

<sup>47</sup> BAECK, *Romantic Religion*, cit., p. 190.

<sup>48</sup> *Ivi*, p. 249.

<sup>49</sup> HABERMAN, *The God I Believe In*, cit., p. 159.

<sup>50</sup> BAECK, *Romantic Religion*, cit., p. 291.

<sup>51</sup> *Ivi*, p. 217.

<sup>52</sup> OZICK, *A Youthful Intoxication*, cit.

### Conclusion

Cynthia Ozick depicts Ruth as an extraordinary figure of ethical monotheism. Like Abraham, she is courageous and abandons certainty and beliefs to live with a new people and embrace a new God. When seen from an identarian perspective, Ruth's private story foreshadows the historical-religious progress of Israel as an ongoing process beginning with Abraham's escape from the idolatrous Chaldeans, continuing in the overthrow of Sodom, and ending with the birth of David, the father of a messianic future.<sup>53</sup> In sum, Ruth is the female protagonist of a *Heilsgeschichte*, who gave Israel's history a peculiar messianic twist, for "bearing" Oved, the grandfather of king David, the ancestor of the Messiah. An implicit reference to her otherness full of redemptive hope is already found in Midrashic literature: «R. Yitzhak said: 'I have found David my servant' [Ps. 89:20] Where did I find him? In Sodom».<sup>54</sup> But the exceptionality of Ozick's Ruth lies above all in her transformative power: thanks to her refined imagination, Ruth grasps the invisible Creator, thereby redeeming herself and reinvigorating Israel's religious and ethical legacy. To Ozick's eyes, being 'sons of Ruth' means being the heirs of a mature, intellectual experience of God, which is continuously challenged by «life's crises and emergencies», be they individual or collective.<sup>55</sup> Once again, Baeck's words ring out and echo Cohen's messianism: «Messianic conviction is an ethical treasure in which suffering and consolation, the will to fight and the confidence of peace, are reconciled. [...] Judaism stresses the kingdom of God [...] as something which is growing [...] as the moral task of all. In Judaism, man sanctifies the world by sanctifying God and by overcoming evil and realizing good. [...] The whole of mankind is chosen».<sup>56</sup> In moving from the periphery to the center of history, from death to fertility, Ruth exemplifies a new idea of the future, which is not mere procreation but ethical-political planning. Unlike Abraham, who failed to create a stable and lasting faith community, Ruth awaits her fulfillment. Her monotheism finds the key to its survival in the messianic hope. In the words of Cynthia Ozick:

The Book of Ruth—wherein goodness grows out of goodness, and the extraordinary is found here, and here, and here—is sown in desertion, bereavement, barrenness, death, loss, displacement, destitution. What can sprout from such ash? Then Ruth sees into the nature of Covenant, and the life of the story streams in. Out of this stalk mercy and redemption unfold; flower flood Ruth's feet; and my grandfather goes on following her track until the coming of Messiah from the shoot of David, in the line of Ruth and Naomi<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> H. FISCH, *Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History*, «Vetus Testamentum» 32/4 (1982), pp. 425-37.

<sup>54</sup> Berešit Rabbah 41:4.

<sup>55</sup> OZICK, *Ruth*, cit., p. 159.

<sup>56</sup> BAECK, *The Essence of Judaism*, cit., p. 261.

<sup>57</sup> OZICK, *Ruth*, cit., pp. 231-232.

### SUMMARY

In her personal, sometimes nostalgic, essay *Ruth*, the American Jewish author Cynthia Ozick depicts the biblical matriarch Ruth as a «second Abraham», for being capable of speaking the language of visionaries and prophets, and, therefore, knowing by herself God's existence and oneness. Unlike her sister-in-law, Orpah, Ruth voluntarily leaves her uncomfortable past behind to embrace a not yet realized future. Taking a cue from Maimonides' prophetic anthropology and from Leo Baeck's idea of Judaism, Ozick transforms the Moabite heroine into a modern alter ego. Ruth's spiritual journey from idolatry to ethical monotheism becomes an intrinsic part of Ozick's family story, foreshadowing her spiritual and progressive passage from a childish, mythological religiosity to an intellectual approach to God.

**KEYWORDS:** Ruth; Moses Maimonides; Leo Baeck; Cynthia Ozick.



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