

Rabbi David Wolpe's

Off The Pulpit

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Parataxis

Rabbi Moshe Taub pointed out to me that of the eighty-five sentences in the book of Ruth, all but eight begin with "and." Parataxis is the name scholars give to the practice of recounting a string of happenings without explanation or causality. E.M. Forster wrote that, "the queen died and the king died" is a story; "The queen died and the king died of grief" is a plot. Children tell plotless, paratactic stories: "and he said. And I said. And then..."

Parataxis impels the reader to interpret. We are left to fill in the "why." When a sentence suddenly breaks the paratactic pattern, we take notice. One *pasuk* in Ruth that does not begin with "and" is "Where you die, I shall die."

We read the book of Ruth on the *Shavuot* morning of *Yizkor*. Death breaks the continuity of "and." Why do eight sentences in the book begin otherwise? Perhaps because the eighth day is what happens after things are done — after the seven days of creation, the *Brit Milah* after a full

week of life. While a usual harp has seven strings, the Talmud teaches, the harp of the messiah will have eight strings. Eight represents eternity. Life is piled on life until the "and" ends. For each sentence, as with our faithful ancestor Ruth, we find and transmit the meaning.

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