

MEGILLAT RUTH
By Dr. Yael Ziegler

Shiur #17: Ruth and Chana: Mothers in Israel

And she said, “I have found favor in your eyes, my master, for you have comforted me and you have spoken to the heart of your maidservant. And I cannot [even] be likened to one of your maidservants!” (*Ruth* 2:13)

Boaz’s Comfort and His Speech to Ruth’s Heart

Following Boaz’s extraordinary public endorsement, Ruth presents herself as grateful and placated. Ruth cites two reasons for her gratitude. First, Boaz has comforted her. Second, he has spoken to her heart. What is the meaning of this rather repetitive explanation?¹[1]

The text does not specify in what way Boaz has comforted Ruth.²[2] Is she describing a change in her emotional state (perhaps due to his recognition of her) or a change in her actual situation (presumably due to the fact that he guarantees that she can obtain food in his field)? As for the second phrase, it is tempting to understand her description that Boaz has spoken to her heart in a romantic context. This is especially true given its usage in the description of Shekhem’s attempt to woo Dina: “And his soul cleaved to Dina, the daughter of Yaakov. And he loved the young woman, *and he spoke to the heart* of the young woman” (*Bereishit* 34:3).³[3] Nevertheless, this meaning is not borne out by other appearances of this phrase, which preclude any possibility of romantic content (e.g. *Il Shemuel* 19:8; *Yeshayahu* 40:2; *Il Divrei Ha-yamim* 30:22; 32:6). Indeed, it seems to me that it is premature to attribute to Ruth any notions of romantic connection to Boaz. Instead, to speak to the heart of the listener appears to connote persuasive speech, words designed to penetrate to the heart of the listener and convince him of the speaker’s sincerity.

1 [1] The Targum (*Ruth* 2:13) also assumes that Ruth must be referring to two distinct aspects of Boaz’s kindness: “For you have comforted me *by deeming me worthy to be admitted to the congregation of the Lord*, and you have spoken *consolation* to the heart of your maidservant *in that you have assured me of inheriting the next world in righteousness.*”

2 [2] This verb is most often used to refer to comfort for the bereaved. That does not seem likely in this context. At no point in the narrative does Ruth mention her husband, Machlon.

3 [3] See also *Hoshea* 2:16.

It is worthwhile to examine the two other cases in which these phrases appear juxtaposed in the *Tanakh*.⁴[4] After Yaakov's death, Yosef's brothers express trepidation, assuming that Yosef intends to wreak vengeance upon them. Yosef emphatically denies any such intentions and the text assures us that the brothers' fears were allayed: "And he comforted them and he spoke to their heart" (*Bereishit* 50:21). It is intriguing that the first half of this verse begins with Yosef's promise that he will provide sustenance for his brothers and their children. Extrapolating from this, we can suggest that Ruth's comfort likewise derives from Boaz's assurance regarding her (and Naomi's) physical survival.

Yeshayahu's prophecy of comfort for Jerusalem and the nation also juxtaposes these two phrases: "Comfort, comfort My people... Speak to the heart of Jerusalem" (*Yeshayahu* 40:1-2). These words initiate Yeshayahu's prophecies of comfort, prophecies that anticipate redemption and God's salvation.⁵[5] These verses offer a more profound understanding of Boaz's role. Ruth's words, even if they are uttered unwittingly on her part, suggest to the reader that Boaz has set Ruth's redemption into motion, a personal redemption that will pave the path for national redemption.

A *midrash* offers a powerful expression of this idea, suggesting that God learns from Boaz how to offer comfort to the nation in need of redemption:

God said: "Boaz comforts and I will not comfort?!" As it says... "For you have comforted me" (*Ruth* 2:13). When God will come to comfort Yerushalayim, how much more so [will Yerushalayim be comforted]. (*Yalkut Shimoni, Iyyov* 897)⁶[6]

Ruth's Deferential Behavior

Despite Boaz's laudatory speech and generous blessings, Ruth's response is deferential, perhaps even self-abasing. She addresses Boaz as her master and refers to herself as Boaz's maidservant. Ruth then hastily corrects herself, immediately declares that she is not even worthy of being referred to as Boaz's maidservant.⁷[7] The use of the

4 [4] Interestingly, both of these phrases also appear in the story of the concubine and the civil war (*Shoftim* 19:3; 21:6, 15). While the phrases are not juxtaposed, the fact that they both occur in that narrative creates another parallel between the two narratives (a parallel which we developed at length in an earlier *shiur*).

5 [5] Unlike *Yeshayahu* chapters 1-39, which focus on destruction and punishment, chapters 40-66 focus on salvation. See Rashi, *Yeshayahu* 40:1.

6 [6] See also *Pesikta DeRav Kahana* 16; *Yalkut Shimoni, Yeshayahu* 443.

7 [7] The Greek translation omits the negative, rendering the phrase: "I will become one of your maidservants." While it is difficult to understand the meaning of the phrase as it is written, I have adopted the interpretation of both Rashi and Ibn Ezra. In this reading, the irony of Ruth's words cannot be ignored; Ruth will not be Boaz's maidservant, she will be his wife! A *midrash* observes this irony, and places in Boaz's mouth the following response to Ruth's words (*Pesikta DeRabbi Kahana* 16): "[Boaz] said to her

self-referential pronoun, *anokhi*, initially appears intended to draw Boaz's attention to herself. Nevertheless, the actual content of her speech ("I cannot even be likened to one of your maidservants!") belies its opening and ironically underscores Ruth's sense of her own insignificance. Ruth's choice of the word *shifcha* rather than *ama* to describe her servile status may likewise connote her lowly self-perception.^{8[8]}

Ruth's extreme obsequiousness can be magnified by a different reading of this verse, one that can explain some of its awkwardness. Ruth's opening words, "I have found favor in your eyes," do not seem to flow well with the verse. Is it a statement? If so, why does she state it, especially inasmuch as she has already noted this point in verse 10? Perhaps it expresses a wish for the future, as in "May I find favor in your eyes!" That would suggest that Ruth has become bold enough to petition Boaz for more favor. Is this a question? In fact, one could read this entire verse as a series of rhetorical questions, each of which highlights Ruth's disbelief in having experienced this unexpected kindness:

And she said, "Have I have found favor in your eyes, my master? Have you comforted me? Have you have spoken to the heart of your maidservant? And I cannot [even] be likened to one of your maidservants!" (*Ruth* 2:13)

In this reading, Ruth's incredulity conveys the distance that she perceives between herself and Boaz. This alienation, perhaps a product of the humiliations and traumas that Ruth experienced throughout the day, is less an expression of ingratitude than an expression of despair. Is there anyone who can comfort Ruth? Is there anyone who can truly speak to her heart? Devoid of any societal support or human compassion, Ruth is bereft of hope; she regards her situation to be beyond repair. Perhaps Ruth's desperation can only be eased after Boaz offers her food in the next verse. This reading implies that the *Megilla* has not yet reached its turning point.

Ruth and Chana

The combination of deference and despair in Ruth's words evokes Chana and her speech in *I Shemuel* 1. Chana's childlessness is the source of profound grief, causing her to weep and refuse food. Chana's misery is not alleviated by any of the people who surround her. Penina, her husband's fertile wife, is openly antagonistic towards her.^{9[9]}

'You should not speak thus. God forbid that you will be counted as one of the maidservants (*amahot*); rather, you shall be counted as one of the matriarchs (*imahot*)!'

8 [8] While *shifcha* and *ama* are generally used synonymously (e.g. *II Shemuel* 14:15-17), Avigail's words to David (*I Shemuel* 25:41) suggest that *shifcha* denotes the lowest servant in the social hierarchy. We will examine this further when we encounter Ruth's reference to herself as an *ama* (introduced once again by the self-referential *anokhi*) in *Ruth* 3:9.

9 [9] Despite the well-known Rabbinic approach that Penina had good intentions and was trying to induce Chana to prayer (e.g. *Bava Batra* 16a), the verse itself presents a more

Chana's husband, Elkana, who loves her, is simply unable to understand the depth of her pain. His words, "Why do you cry and why do you not eat? Am I not better for you than ten sons?" are less callous than clueless.¹⁰[10] Chana's despair and loneliness cause her to seek comfort in the *Mishkan*, where Eli the high priest likewise misunderstands her motives and needs, assuming that she is drunk rather than anguished. Her embittered explanation prompts Eli to offer a blessing:

And Eli answered and he said, "Go in peace, and the God of Israel shall grant you your request that you have requested from Him." (*I Shmuel* 1:17)

Grateful and overwhelmed by finally experiencing some empathy and support, Chana's response echoes Ruth's response to Boaz's similar blessing:

And she said, "May your maidservant find favor in your eyes!" (*I Shemuel* 1:18)

Alternatively, this may also be read as a rhetorical question:

And she said, "Has your maidservant found favor in your eyes?!" (*I Shemuel* 1:18)

Like Ruth, Chana's deference and incredulity stem from her deep sense of societal alienation. Both Chana and Ruth experience humiliation and insults at the hands of others. Chana suffers the taunts of Penina, while Ruth endures the coldness and degradation imposed upon her by the people of Bethlehem and especially the lad appointed over the reapers. Neither woman is deterred by her experience. Instead, the lonesomeness and anguish strengthen the resolve of these women, whose determination to accomplish their goals grows ever fiercer.¹¹[11]

Another shared feature of both of these stories is the extraordinary sacrifice of each of these women. After a concerted effort to obtain a child, each of these women relinquishes her son voluntarily, for a higher cause. This is in keeping with their

negative picture. In either case, it is clear that Chana suffers from Penina's treatment of her.

¹⁰ [10] This expression contains another indication that these two stories are linguistically (and therefore deliberately) connected. The townspeople of Bethlehem employ a similar expression when they describe Ruth's value for Naomi (4:15): "Your daughter-in-law... who is better for you than seven sons."

¹¹ [11] We should distinguish between Chana's objective, which is to have a child, and Ruth's goal, which is to help Naomi in any way she can, including having a child. In this chapter, Ruth's sole objective is not her quest for a marriage and child, but rather to obtain short-term security for Naomi: food and economic survival.

recognition that these sons do not rightly belong to them, but are rather born with a specific divine destiny.¹²[12] It also demonstrates that their fierce determination was never selfish, but rather motivated by a broader goal. In fact, Chana bequeaths her son, Shemuel, to the *Mishkan*, where he grows up as an apprentice of Eli, the high priest (*Shemuel* 2:11). Ruth confers her son, Oved, upon Naomi, who raises him as her own and ensures his rightful place in the genealogy of the Davidic dynasty.

Together, the sons of these aggrieved women bring about the desperately awaited new form of leadership: the monarchy. Shemuel is the anointer of kings and David is the progenitor of the dynasty of kings. In fact, loneliness and alienation can generate greatness, and the ability to sacrifice for the greater good is the prerequisite for producing exemplary leadership. In this way, these two deferential, anguished women, who have despaired of experiencing kindness or hope, restore kindness and hope to their nation by producing the monarchy in Israel.

Mothers in Israel

As the producers of kingship, both Ruth and Chana commence the repair of the degenerative period of the Judges. The book of *Shoftim* concludes with dreadful societal and religious chaos explicitly attributed to the lack of a monarchy.¹³[13] However, throughout the book of *Shoftim* there are progressive indicators of the impending downfall of society. One notable sign is the corrupted role of the women, and specifically mothers, in the book.

Biblical sources suggest that the general makeup of mothers is a constant; the compassion and love of a mother for her child is more reliable than perhaps any other aspect of the human persona.¹⁴[14] The portrait of a society that has lost its moorings,

12 [12] Generally, this is an important theme in the barren women stories in the Bible. Each barren woman must be willing to relinquish her child to the child's designated divine destiny. This acknowledges both that the child does not truly belong to the parent and that each individual is born with a unique destiny. In this schema, the barren woman story becomes a paradigm for a general theological conception of conception and childbirth. Indeed, every child born is meant to be regarded as a miracle, and all humans should relate to their children as individuals who are obliged to seek to fulfill the unique divine destiny for which they were born.

13 [13] Each of these women is responsible for reforming a different aspect of the societal dysfunction of this period. Ruth sets into motion the repair of the societal situation. Chana launches the overhaul of the religious deterioration, which begins by bringing about the downfall of the house of Eli and its corrupt priests.

14 [14] The most poignant example of this may be the one portrayed in *Yeshayahu* 49:15: "Can a woman forget her nursing child? Or withhold compassion from the child of her womb?"

whose actions are beyond comprehension, and where the world is a wreck of shattered perspectives employs the image of a mother who no longer exhibits compassion for her child or, more grotesquely, eats her child to survive.15[15]

Similarly, at the beginning of the book of *Shoftim*, the story of Devora depicts three women (Yael, Devora, and Sisera's mother), each of whom casts off her role as a mother. This appears to be an attempt to portray a society that is becoming topsy-turvy, where things are not as they should be, where people's actions defy our reasonable expectations. Let us begin with Yael, in many ways the heroine of our story. Having chosen to assist the Israelites in their battle against the pitiless persecutor, Yael murders Sisera in her tent. Sisera has arrived from the battle, seeking asylum, and Yael soothingly invites him in:16[16]

And Yael went out to greet Sisera, and she said, "Turn aside, my master, turn aside to me, do not be afraid." And he turned aside to her to the tent, and she covered him with a blanket. And he said to her, "Allow me to drink some water, for I am thirsty." And she opened the flask of milk and she gave him to drink and she covered him. (*Shoftim* 4:18-19)

Yael's gentle behavior, the way in which she soothingly covers Sisera (twice) with a blanket, and gives him milk to drink completes the picture of a maternal figure. This placid picture of tender affection is shattered by Yael's unexpected violent act. Seizing the tent pin, she quietly approaches Sisera, and hammers the pin into Sisera's temple, mercilessly murdering him in his sleep. I do not presume to condemn Yael for her heroic act. Indeed, she liberates the Israelites from their brutal persecutor. Nevertheless, this portrayal of Yael betraying her maternal image is unsettling, perhaps deliberately so.

There are, moreover, two women in this narrative who are explicitly given the appellation, "Mother." The first is Devora, who refers to herself as "a mother in Israel" (*Shoftim* 5:7). This appears to be an ironic appellation inasmuch as Devora, unlike most biblical women, does not actually function in any discernable way as a mother in her private life.17[17]

15 [15] *Megillat Eikha* is filled with these images in its attempt to express the interminable torment and anguish caused by the destruction of Jerusalem. See e.g. *Eikha* 2:14, 20; 4:3-4, 10.

16 [16] It is important to listen to the sounds of this verse, as the biblical text is meant to be heard (and not merely read). In fact, the repeated sound in this verse is the "S," a sound that is soothing and gentle. Yael is inviting Sisera to believe that she is gentle and has peaceful intentions.

17 [17] Even in her public life, it is difficult to understand the appellation that she confers upon herself. The Malbim (*Shofetim* 5:7) attempts to explain that it is as though the nation of Israel has ceased to be a nation and they are now born anew. In this schema, Devora is the mother who births the nation. *Metzudat David* offers a similar approach,

Sisera's mother does not even have a name in the text; she is solely identified as the mother of Sisera. Interestingly, while Devora's deficiency is simply that she does not overtly act as a mother, Sisera's mother, similar to Yael, actually betrays her maternal nature. At the end of Devora's song, Devora describes Sisera's mother watching from her window, eagerly anticipating the victorious return of her warrior son. Having inquired after the reason for Sisera's delayed return, she exultantly answers her own query:

Have they not found, divided the spoils? A womb or two for every man!
(*Shoftim* 5:30)

The Hebrew word for compassion is *rachamim*, which is etymologically related to the word *rechem*, meaning a womb.¹⁸[18] Indeed, the very quality of compassion appears to exist in this world due to humankind's ability to procreate, to produce life. The profound attachment between a mother and her child, who is conceived, raised, and birthed from the woman's body, generates the protectiveness, concern and care that characterize the mother's feelings toward her child. It is this relationship, therefore, that becomes the paradigm of compassion and can teach humankind how to act with mercy in all human dealings.

Sisera's mother employs the word *rechem* twice in her speech, but it is a crude reference to the women who are raped as spoils of war. Sisera's mother's triumphant glee in imagining her son's cruel treatment of these innocent victims of war defies the very essence of her maternal nature. Mothers should rightly recoil from cruelty, even as they rejoice in their children's success.

The three separate portraits of the women in this narrative cohere to form a composite picture of the distortion of motherhood during the period of the Judges. Even if the motives are justified, the corruption of this quintessentially good aspect of human nature suggests that society is doomed, that it cannot maintain its most fundamental humane characteristic.

commenting that Devora punishes Israel in order to restore the nation to its proper path, just as a mother does to her son. These explanations are unconvincing. First of all, there is no indication that Devora punishes Israel or that the nation is birthed anew by Devora in this narrative. Moreover, Devora does not appear to be any more parental than any other leader in *Tanakh*. Thus, we remain with the question as to why Devora's leadership is specifically likened to that of a mother.

18 [18] Rabbinic sources refer to this connection. See e.g. *Chullin* 63a; *Midrash Aggada, Devarim* 1.

In contrast to this portrait, both Ruth and Chana are portrayed as characteristic mothers. Ruth is designated the Mother of Kingship.¹⁹[19] Chana functions as the ideal mother, and the midrash picks up on this by attributing to her a series of desperate pleas to God for a son.²⁰[20]

In this schema, Ruth and Chana do not simply reinstate order to a failing society by producing sons who engender kingship. Rather, they themselves contribute to the rehabilitation of a corrupted society by functioning as effective mothers, and thereby restoring to society at large the possibility of compassion.

This series of shiurim is dedicated to the memory of my mother Naomi Ruth z"l bat Aharon Simcha, a woman defined by Naomi's unwavering commitment to family and continuity, and Ruth's selflessness and kindness.

I welcome all comments and questions: yaelziegler@gmail.com

¹⁹ [19] E.g. *Ruth Zuta* 1.

²⁰ [20] These *midrashim*, which appear in *Berakhot* 31a-b, are powerful testimonies of the fierceness of a woman's desire for motherhood.