

MEGILLAT RUTH
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In memory of Ruth Berlove z"l (Rivka bat Moshe David) on her first Yahrzeit

Shiur #18: The Problem of Sustenance

Boaz's Contribution: Procuring Food

What is Boaz's greatest gift to Ruth in chapter two? We have suggested several possible options. Boaz treats Ruth kindly, protects her from the ruffians in the fields, recognizes her, restores her dignity, and publicly pronounces his esteem for her. Each of these acts on its own is praiseworthy, but it is the fact that Boaz provides her with food, with physical sustenance, which lies at the core of this chapter.¹[1] That this is the theme of chapter two is supported by the key word, *leket*, which appears ten times in the chapter. This word draws our attention not simply to the food that is obtained, but also to the manner in which it is obtained – through the generosity and piety of the landowner who permits Ruth to glean in his field.

Naomi's journey to Bethlehem has resulted in two seemingly insurmountable problems. In the short term, Naomi is threatened with imminent starvation. Without a husband or sons to support her and fields that have lain fallow for many years, she simply has no way of obtaining food.²[2] Naomi's return to Bethlehem ironically coincides with the seasonal anticipation of prosperity, as the people joyfully gather in the fruits of their labor (*Ruth* 1:22). Naomi, however, watches in silence. She has no prospects, no food and, judging by the chilly reception she receives, Naomi cannot expect help from any of the villagers. Naomi's economic prospects are bleak.

1 [1] Several rabbinic sources regard the food in this chapter as a metaphor for kingship. *Shabbat* 113b has a series of midrashic interpretations that read the text in this fashion. This reading is significant inasmuch as this chapter anticipates the next, which involves a promise of marriage (and presumably children). Taken together, the two chapters provide a solution both for Naomi's tragic circumstances and for the national catastrophe marked by the absence of monarchy.

2 [2] That is, if she still has fields at all. It is possible that Elimelech's fields have been sold, perhaps as a penalty for having abandoned Bethlehem during the famine. See // *Melakhim* 8:1-6. I will examine this issue further in an upcoming *shiur*.

Naomi's second problem is not of an immediate nature. Even if she does survive the coming winter, even if she somehow manages to restore her fields and secure her economic situation, she has no future. Bereft of her husband, bereft of all progeny, and too old to start another family, Naomi has no hope of continuity.

Ruth will prove to be Naomi's solution to both of her problems, and Boaz will provide the solution for Ruth. In chapter three, Ruth (through Boaz) will solve Naomi's long-term problem of continuity. In chapter two, Ruth confronts Naomi's immediate, pressing predicament – the imminent threat of starvation. Ruth's opening words in this chapter illustrate her bid to provide a solution for this situation:

And Ruth the Moavite said to Naomi, "I will go, by your leave, to the field, and I will pick of the sheaves, after him in whose eyes I shall find favor."
(*Ruth* 2:2)

Ruth initiates the quest, but it is Boaz who furnishes the means for Ruth to obtain food for Naomi. Boaz provides Ruth with sustenance repeatedly throughout the chapter. In his first speech to her, Boaz allows Ruth to pick in his field. Moreover, by permitting Ruth to drink the water drawn by Boaz's workers, Boaz grants Ruth more time to reap, thereby ensuring that she will accumulate more food. After Boaz invites Ruth to a meal and personally hands her food, he instructs the boys to surreptitiously drop her extra sheaves. In this way, he furnishes her with sufficient food both in the short term and for the long term.

Everything that Boaz gives to Ruth, Ruth proffers to Naomi. Ruth brings back the raw grain that she has gathered, as well as the leftovers from her meal.³[3] Ruth does not view the meal that she eats that day nor the stalks that she gleaned as belonging solely to her. Instead, she regards herself as a pipeline of food for Naomi.

We may conclude that Boaz's greatest contribution to Ruth in this chapter is her sustenance. And yet, as we have noted, Boaz's ability to give food derives from his ability to recognize the other, to see Ruth, her misery, and her needs – to see Ruth as a subject and not as an object. This is not self-evident. As we have noted, the book of *Shoftim* describes a period of alienation, an anonymous society in which one person does not recognize the other, a situation that threatens the collapse of the social order. When one does not see a person standing opposite him, but rather an object, one is able to ignore the plight of the other and disregard his basic human needs. This appears to be the case with the women who do not embrace Naomi, *do not bring her food* for survival, and completely disregard Ruth. This may be the case with Naomi herself, whose passivity towards her own survival extends to Ruth as well. Certainly one could conclude this with

3 [3] This will be true in the next chapter as well, when Ruth returns from an encounter with Boaz and extends to Naomi the six stalks of barley that Boaz gave her (*Ruth* 3:17). These six stalks of barley seem to be more symbolic than substantive, as we will discuss.

regard to the overseer, whose derogatory remarks about “the Moavite girl” never include any actual reference to Ruth by name.

There is a literary clue that illustrates Boaz’s ability to regard Ruth as a subject, thereby precipitating his desire to provide her with food. Ruth’s name is mentioned only twice during the first twenty verses of this chapter.⁴[4] On the first occasion that Ruth speaks to Naomi (*Ruth* 2:2), her name is modified by the word Moavite. In other words, Ruth speaks as a Moavite to her mother-in-law. This is the way she is regarded by all of the townspeople, as stated explicitly by the overseer (“she is a Moavite girl”). However, when Boaz speaks to Ruth for the first time, the verse introduces his words as follows: “And Boaz said to Ruth” (*Ruth* 2:8). The narrator’s perspective seems to suggest that Boaz does not speak to Ruth as a Moavite or as an unidentified girl, without a name. Rather, Boaz speaks to Ruth as *Ruth*, a subject who has both a name and an identity.

Boaz Invites Ruth to a Meal

Boaz said to her at mealtime, “Draw near and eat from the bread and dip your morsel in the vinegar.” And she sat by the side of the reapers. And [Boaz] grasped for her roasted grain. And she ate, and she was satisfied, and she left over. (*Ruth* 2:14)

We do not know how much time has passed since Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem; however, it seems likely that Ruth has not had a proper meal for quite some time. In fact, the rapid sequence of verbs that describe Ruth’s meal (*va-tochal*, *va-tisba*, *va-totar*), may point to her hunger and the speed with which she gulped down her food. Boaz’s invitation to Ruth at mealtime shows his sensitivity to Ruth’s plight, and goes above the call of duty, including Ruth in a meal that he provides his paid reapers. During this meal, Ruth sits next to the reapers, thereby indicating her growing acceptance and elevated status.⁵[5] She is no longer functioning as a lowly Moavite pauper, but rather as an invited guest of the respected Boaz. Moreover, it is striking that this wealthy and venerable landowner personally distributes food to Ruth, demonstrably expressing concern for her plight.

The result is that Ruth has more than enough food: “And she left over.” While the text does not inform us immediately of Ruth’s intentions, it will become clear that Ruth puts aside these leftovers for Naomi, who must also be hungry. In fact, when Ruth returns

4 [4] In an upcoming *shiur* we will elaborate on the additional two occasions in which Ruth’s name appears at the end of the chapter.

5 [5] Some *midrashim* interpret this as Ruth’s modest decision to separate herself from the reapers and sit alone. Nevertheless, the other biblical usage of the word *mi-tzad* (also within the context of sitting down to eat a meal) is in *I Shmuel* 20:25, where the word undoubtedly suggests a shared meal and even a seat of honor.

to Naomi, she will hand over her leftovers to Naomi before she utters a word, so that Naomi will not have to suffer a moment longer than necessary:

And she picked it up and came to the city. And her mother-in-law saw what she has gleaned. And she took it out and she gave to her that which she had left over from her satiation. (*Ruth* 2:18)

This verse contains no dialogue and no names. While the lack of dialogue points to Ruth's haste in providing immediate satiation for Naomi's hunger, the absence of names in the verse may also highlight Naomi's hunger. Hunger is an extraordinarily dehumanizing experience. It eliminates one's humanity, one's very identity, and along with that, one's name.

Ruth's Leftovers

Who is actually responsible for the leftovers and for Naomi's ability to eat – Boaz or Ruth? To put it another way, does Boaz heap upon Ruth an overabundance of food, consciously (or perhaps unintentionally) providing excess so that Naomi can eat as well? This is implied by the phrase that describes Ruth's leftovers: "That which she had left over from her satiation."

It is, however, possible that Ruth limits her own consumption to ensure that Naomi has a meal as well. This may be indicated by the verb employed to describe Boaz proffering food to Ruth. The verb *va-yitzbot* (translated above as "and he grasped") is a *hapax legomenon*, a word that appears only once in the Bible.⁶[6] The verb *tzavat* appears in cognate Semitic languages (Arabic, Ethiopic) to mean grasp, hold firmly, or seize.⁷[7] A noun form of this verb appears in Mishnaic Hebrew (*Hagiga* 3:1) to mean the handle of a jug. The noun in Ugaritic means tongs or handles.⁸[8] It seems then that the word connotes grasping with one's hand, or possibly with one's fingers, where one holds tongs.

This is the understanding of a *midrash* that maintains that Boaz pinched for Ruth a small amount of roasted grain with two of his fingers (*Ruth Rabba* 5:6).⁹[9] If the word *va-yitzbot* implies a pinch of roasted grain, a miniscule amount of food, then the fact that

6 [6] Ibn Ezra (*Ruth* 2:14) calls this "a word that has no friend."

7 [7] Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1951), p. 840.

8 [8] C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (1965), p. 472.

9 [9] This is the adaption of the word in modern Hebrew, where the verb *tzavat* means to pinch.

there were leftovers after Ruth's satiation is a miraculous event, an indication of divine favor. The *midrash* discusses who deserves credit for the abundance of food here:

And [Boaz] handed her roasted grain. A little bit of roasted grain in his two fingers. R. Yitzchak said: You can learn from this [one of] two things: either a blessing rested in the fingers of this righteous man [Boaz], or a blessing rested in the innards of this righteous woman [Ruth]. From where [do we learn this]? "And she ate, and she was satisfied, and she left over." It appears that the blessing rested in the innards of this righteous woman. (*Ruth Rabba* 5:6)

In this debate, the *midrash* actually offers a definitive answer to its own query. Surprisingly, the continuation of this *midrash* is critical of Boaz:

R. Yitzchak ben Meryon said: The text comes to teach you that if a man does a commandment, he should do it with a full heart, for if Reuven would have known that God was going to write about him (*Bereishit* 37), "And Reuven heard and he saved [Yosef] from their hands," he would have carried [Yosef] on his shoulders back to his father. And had Aharon known that God was going to write about him (*Shemot* 4), "Behold he is going out to greet you," he would have gone out to greet [Moshe] with drums and circle dances. And had Boaz known that God was going to write about him, "And he handed her roasted grain, and she ate, and she was satisfied and she left over," [Boaz] would have fed her fattened calves.

According to this *midrash*, Boaz could have done more for Ruth.

Interestingly, the other two characters who the *midrash* censures are Reuven in his dealings with Joseph and Aharon in his dealings with Moshe. Each of these situations describes someone who has a good reason to resent the recipient of his benevolence. Reuven, the eldest son, has a perfectly good reason not to save Yosef, who seems intent on usurping his role. Aharon is going to greet his younger brother Moshe, who, despite having never suffered alongside his people, has been selected to act as the nation's savior. Boaz also has several reasons for withholding food from Ruth, Naomi's Moavite daughter-in-law. Indeed, the most basic act of largesse in these particular instances would appear to be commendable. In criticizing these characters, the *midrash* offers an unequivocal moral position: acts of kindness, difficult or not, must be done with a generous heart, with a sense of total commitment. If there is any hesitation on the part of the benefactor, the act falls short of its goal and deserves censure.

Nevertheless, the criticism of the *midrash* seems excessive, even unfounded. Boaz's magnanimity is the fulcrum of the chapter and his largesse and kindness to Ruth are exceptional. Why does the *midrash* offer this unexpected condemnation of Boaz? It may be that this derives from a textual observation. While Boaz's generosity to Ruth is unquestionable and seems to be above reproach, his attitude toward Naomi is less certain. In fact, Boaz and Naomi never meet in the story, and Boaz does not refer to

Naomi in any of his encounters with Ruth. His generosity toward Ruth seems to be entirely directed toward her, without any regard for his own kinsman, Naomi. Boaz only mentions Naomi in chapter four, within the context of the ongoing formal legal transactions. It is possible that Boaz, like the townspeople, harbors resentment against Naomi for abandoning Bethlehem during the famine. Just as the townspeople have not come to Naomi's aid, Boaz likewise balks at providing sustenance for Naomi. This may be the reason that the midrash describes Boaz handing Ruth a small amount of food. He may have indeed provided enough for Ruth, but he was certainly not interested in making sure Ruth had surplus food for Naomi.

In criticizing Boaz's provision of food, this midrash offers a glimpse of a complex situation. The fact that Boaz and Naomi never meet may not be coincidental. In this schema, Ruth is solely responsible for Naomi's survival. Boaz indirectly helps Naomi due to his concern for Ruth, but he may prefer to abandon Naomi to her bitter fate.

In previous *shiurim*, I have suggested that Naomi's character mirrors that of the nation at this time. This reading of Boaz and Naomi may explain a further puzzling question: Why, in fact, does the nation's salvation come at the hands of Ruth, a foreigner and an outsider? The decay of society during the period of the Judges may be so deeply entrenched that no insider can actually accomplish its repair – not even the righteous Boaz. Instead, someone not invested in the complexities and resentments must enter above the fray in order to mend the rifts of the nation. Ultimately, the midrash asserts that Ruth is responsible for Naomi's food; she provides the solution for Naomi's continuity. Ruth also mediates between Boaz and Naomi, allowing Boaz to provide indirectly for Naomi's salvation. In doing so, Ruth begins to fix the broken situation, leading ultimately to the kingship, which is meant to heal the fractured society.

Boaz and his Reapers

And she got up to glean, and Boaz commanded his young men saying, "Let her also glean among the sheaves and do not humiliate her. And also pull some out for her from among the bundles and leave them and she shall glean and do not rebuke her." (*Ruth* 2:15-16)

After Boaz invites Ruth to a meal, he apprises his reapers of four additional commands. First, they are to allow Ruth to glean from the sheaves, rather than just the ears of corn. We noted previously that this may well be a response to the foreman's disparaging citation, or deliberate misquote, of Ruth's request to gather the sheaves (*Ruth* 2:7).¹⁰[10]

Boaz adds that this should be allowed without disgracing Ruth or in any way causing her embarrassment. The verb used here, "*tachlimuha*," is a very strong verb that implies that the men are inclined to hostility toward Ruth. This hostility may derive both

¹⁰ [10] See *shiur* #14.

from Ruth's Moavite origins and the context, in which Ruth is accused by the foreman of requesting something generally not permitted to paupers in the fields. Boaz's instructions prohibit the reapers from humiliating Ruth for any reason, even if she deviates from the accepted norms of gleaning.

In an act of unprecedented generosity, Boaz then instructs the young men to surreptitiously drop her extra sheaves.¹¹[11] It is noteworthy that he uses the word "*va-azavtem*" to indicate that the reapers should leave the sheaves for Ruth. This word was previously used by Boaz to describe Ruth's exceptional behavior when she left (*va-ta'azvi*) her father and mother to come to an unknown nation (*Ruth* 2:11). Previously, the word appears in Ruth's own speech (*Ruth* 1:16), when she implores Naomi not to compel her to leave her (*le-ozveich*). The threefold appearance of this word implies that Boaz's generosity toward Ruth derives from her own behavior.

Finally, as an addendum to this extraordinary generosity, Boaz adds that the reapers should not rebuke (*ga'ar*) her. It is difficult to understand in what way this word adds to Boaz's previous instruction not to humiliate Ruth. The word *ga'ar* appears to refer to speech (e.g. *Bereishit* 37:1) or even perhaps a blast or a roar that issues from one's mouth, whether human or divine (*Il Shmuel* 22:16; *Yeshayahu* 50:2). In this context, the implication may be that not only should the reapers be careful not to do anything to humiliate Ruth, they also must not use their speech to embarrass her. They must even regulate their mode of speaking, carefully ensuring that they do not frighten her with loud or forceful speech.

And she gleaned in the field until the evening. And she beat out what she had gleaned and it was an *eipha* of barley. (*Ruth* 2:17)

Boaz's instructions on Ruth's behalf prove to be successful. Ruth returns with an *eipha* of barley. This amount is quite large;¹²[12] we can deduce from *Shemot* 16:16, 36, that an *eipha* is ten times the daily portion of an adult.¹³[13] Ruth's ability to glean this

11 [11] Rashi (*Ruth* 2:16) portrays Boaz instructing the reapers to pretend that they forgot extra stalks so that she could pick a lot. The Malbim adds that Boaz's intention in instructing his reapers to engage in this pretense is to provide for Ruth with dignity, or perhaps in a plentiful fashion.

12 [12] See also *I Shmuel* 17:17, where David brings an *eipha* of roasted grain to his brothers on the battlefield.

13 [13] *Shemot* 16:16 allows each Israelite in the desert to gather one *omer* of manna daily. This appears to be the daily amount of food necessary for an individual. *Shemot* 16:36 informs us that an *omer* is one-tenth of an *eipha*. Thus, Ruth gleaned ten times the amount that she needed to survive on her own, and five times the amount required for her and Naomi. Nevertheless, Ruth needed to glean enough to last her and Naomi throughout the winter, roughly five times longer than the picking season. This verse informs us that Ruth will bring home enough to last her and Naomi throughout the winter.

large amount is extraordinary given that she is a foreigner and it is her first day in the fields. It is especially astonishing given the possibility that Ruth was rejected from several fields, thereby losing precious picking time.¹⁴[14]

Boaz is the catalyst for providing the solution for this chapter's predicament. By ensuring that Ruth has enough food in the long term and in the short term, Boaz indirectly provides for Naomi, unwittingly or not. Of greater significance is the manner in which Boaz treats Ruth in the fields of Bethlehem. By presenting Ruth as an honored guest and ensuring that everyone in the fields knows that he is her patron and protector, Boaz offers Ruth much more than food and survival; he confers upon her dignity, respectability, and the beginning of acceptance.

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.

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This is undoubtedly due to Boaz's extraordinary kindness and the special instructions that he gives to his reapers, instructions that surpass all expectations.

¹⁴ [14] See *shiur* #14.