

MEGILLAT RUTH

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DAYS OF DELIVERANCE: ESSAYS ON PURIM AND HANUKKAH

by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

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Shiur #1: Why Was This *Megilla* Written?

Megillat Ruth is a not a very dramatic book. Its modest account begins with the journey of a family from Bethlehem to Moav during a famine. Tragedy ensues, all the male members of the family die, and Naomi is left alone, without her husband or sons. Nevertheless, Naomi's daughters-in-law accompany her on her return to Bethlehem, proclaiming their intention to remain with her. Assuming that the women are interested in remarriage, Naomi strongly discourages them. While Orpah is persuaded to return to Moav, Ruth insists on accompanying her mother-in-law, declaring her eternal devotion to Naomi.

In the ensuing account, Ruth manages to procure food for herself and Naomi from Boaz, a wealthy landowner. After physical survival is ensured, Ruth approaches Boaz at night in his fields with the intent of marriage so as to ensure continuity for Naomi's family and land. Boaz assures Ruth that he, as a relative

of Naomi' s dead husband, will take responsibility for her remarriage. The story ends happily with the birth of a child to Ruth and Boaz.

Why is *Megillat Ruth* included in the Bible? Biblical books are generally included in the *Tanakh* because of their theological or moral message or due to their historical impact. For example, the books of classical prophecy contain perpetual and resounding messages of moral and religious integrity, and the book of *Esther* offers a dramatic account of *Am Yisrael* s salvation from a royal decree of genocide. The book of *Ruth*, however, does not appear to contain an obvious eternal religious message or overt historical significance. At first glance, this serene, rather uneventful account of Naomi' s return to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law Ruth, and their successful bid to obtain food and a husband for Ruth, seems no more than a nice, if unremarkable, narrative.

Megillat Ruth: A Book of Chesed

The Midrash addresses this very question:1[1]

R. Zeira said: This *Megilla* does not contain [laws of] impurity or purity, or prohibitions or permits, so why was it written? To teach you how good is the reward for those who do kindness. ([Ruth Rabba 2:14](#))

While the major characters in this narrative indeed perform extraordinary acts of kindness, there must be more to this *midrash* than meets the eye. After all, characters throughout the Bible engage in acts of kindness and are defined by them. Consider Avraham, whose legendary kindness constitutes the cornerstone of the Jewish nation, or his daughter-in-law Rivka, whose unhesitating kindness is

1 [1] Though *Chazal* debate whether certain books should be included in the biblical canon, there is no explicit discussion recorded regarding the book of *Ruth*. Nevertheless, in the context of their ongoing debate regarding the canonicity of *Esther* and *Shir Ha-shirim*, R. Shimon takes pains to assure us that “ *Ruth*, *Shir Ha-shirim*, and *Esther* do render the hands unclean” ([Megilla 7a](#)) – that is, they are canonical. This may indicate that the status of the book of *Ruth* was also under scrutiny.

a precondition for selecting her as a wife for Isaac. Actually, we can learn the importance of this character trait by paying attention to the Bible' s representation of God: God acts with mercy and grace; He is slow to anger and extends His kindness for many generations.

This *midrash* raises a second question as well. Although this *midrash* does not mention Ruth by name, it certainly directs our attention to Ruth' s extraordinary kindness. Indeed, Ruth' s consistent devotion to Naomi constitutes the basis of our story. Each chapter has, at its core, a story in which Ruth single-mindedly focuses all of her efforts on caring for Naomi and enabling her to rebuild her ruined life. Notably, the bulk of Ruth' s kindness involves self-sacrifice. In chapter 1, Ruth remains with her aging, isolated mother-in-law, despite the fact that Naomi explicitly warns her that she will not marry or have a future in Bethlehem. At the beginning of chapter 2, Ruth voluntarily relinquishes her dignity and gathers produce in the field to obtain food for herself and her mother-in-law. In the opening scene of chapter 3, responding unhesitatingly to Naomi's difficult instructions, Ruth agrees to risk her reputation in offering herself to Boaz, presumably for the sake of bearing children in order to ensure Naomi's future. Finally, Ruth bears a child and gracefully exits the story, allowing Naomi to adopt the child as her own.^{2[2]} In this way, Ruth sacrifices her maternal rights for the sake of her beloved mother-in-law. In fact, all of Ruth' s kindnesses have one thing in common: Ruth repeatedly sabotages her own personal interests in undertaking her acts of kindness.

It is striking that the *midrash* presents this as a model, a paradigm of kindness. Is this actually the type of kindness that Judaism wishes to promote? Is the excessive nullification of self in deference to the needs of the other the ideal definition of *chesed*, the one which merits the greatest reward?

Megillat Ruth: A Book of David' s Lineage

Leaving aside the *midrash* for a moment, I would like to examine a second passage that addresses the question of the *Megilla' s* underlying purpose:

2 [2] After Naomi places the child in her bosom and becomes his foster mother, the women respond with the declaration, " A child has been born to Naomi!" ([Ruth 4:17](#)).

I would not be surprised if this *Megilla* were here simply to trace the genealogy of David, who was born from Ruth the Moabite. (*Zohar Chadash, Megillat Ruth 25b*)

This passage offers a different approach. Instead of suggesting that the *Megilla*'s eternal message lies in the exceptional personality traits of its characters, this approach regards the *Megilla*'s central purpose as sketching the background of the Davidic dynasty. Indeed, the fact that the *Megilla* ends with the birth of David suggests that David's birth is the aim of the story's trajectory. In addition, David's family background is curiously sparse in *I Shmuel* 17, especially compared to the lengthy birth story of Shmuel himself, which appears at the opening of the book. *Megillat Ruth* is therefore necessary in order to understand David's background.

The need for a book describing David's exceptional ancestors may be especially pressing because his lineage is not free from potential problems. Indeed, David's detractors could easily claim that his Moavite great-grandmother renders him ineligible for leadership or even for inclusion in the Jewish nation! After all, the Torah states:

No Ammonite or Moavite shall come into the congregation of the Lord; even the tenth generation shall not come into the congregation of the Lord for eternity. Because of the matter in which they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt. ([Devarim 23:4](#))

Rabbinic sources do, in fact, describe a scenario in which David's background is questioned and probed by his adversaries:

So said Saul: "Does he descend from Peretz or does he descend from Zerach?" ... Doeg Ha-Edomi replied to him, "Before you ask whether he is suitable for kingship or not, ask whether he is worthy to be admitted to the congregation or not! What is the reason? Because he descends from Ruth the Moabite!" Avner said to him, "We have learned, 'Ammonite men [are prohibited from joining the congregation], but not Ammonite women; Moavite men, but not Moavite women,' ..because the reason [for their exclusion] is stated in the Bible – that they did not greet them with bread and water. It is

the way of the man to greet them and not the way of a woman to greet them.” ([Yevamot 76b](#))

The Ammonites' and Moavites' trait of miserliness, of lack of concern for the welfare of their fellow man, disqualifies them from admission into the Jewish nation. They did not give bread and water to the Jewish nation during the Exodus. Nevertheless, the Oral Law modifies this prohibition, applying it only to the male Ammonites and Moavites. As proof, the *gemara* maintains that it was the men who should have brought out food to weary travelers; therefore, the omission highlights the negative character only of the male members of these societies.

Based on the above, one could suggest that the different explanations cited above actually converge, offering only one approach to the purpose of *Megillat Ruth*. According to this reading, the objective of *Megillat Ruth* is to validate the purity of David's lineage. It does so by illustrating the manner in which Ruth, the Moavite woman in the story, is a paradigm of kindness, consistently and selflessly giving to others. This affirms the logic behind the halakhic distinction between the cruel male Moavites and their female counterparts, whose cruelty has not been established. In fact, the *Megilla* illustrates this well, creating an image of the unusually kind Moavite woman who is undoubtedly suitable for entrance into *kahal Hashem*, the congregation of the Lord.

***Megillat Ruth* and Monarchy**

As indicated by the *Zohar Chadash*, *Megillat Ruth* should be read as the background to the story of David. The story of David, of course, extends far beyond the person of David himself. In fact, the book of Ruth should be read as the background to the Davidic dynasty, the very institution of the monarchy.

The Bible displays an ambivalent, or perhaps contradictory, attitude towards the monarchy. One biblical passage appears to regard the appointment of a king as an imperative:

When you come to the land which the Lord your God has given you and you possess it and settle it and you say, “ I shall appoint for myself a king like all of the nations around me,” you shall surely

appoint for yourself a king, which the Lord your God shall select for you, from among your brethren you shall appoint for yourself a king... ([Devarim 17:14-15](#))

Nevertheless, the people' s eventual request for a king infuriates both the prophet Shmuel and God. They regard monarchy as a dangerous institution, designed to replace God' s own rule:

And all of the elders of Israel gathered and they came to Shmuel in Ramah. And they said to him, “ Behold, you are elderly and your sons have not walked in your ways; now appoint for us a king to judge us like all of the nations.” And this thing was bad in the eyes of Shmuel because they said, “ Give us a king to judge us.” And Shmuel prayed to God. God said to Shmuel, “ Listen to the voice of this nation, to everything which they have said to you, because it is not you whom they have rejected, but it is Me who they have rejected from reigning over them.” ([I Shmuel 8:4-7](#))

Many exegetes struggle with these texts, attempting to resolve the contradictory approaches to the monarchy expressed in them.^{3[3]} Some Rabbinic sources present an ongoing argument with regard to these contradictory sources:

“ And you will say, ‘ I will appoint for myself a king’ ” – R. Nehorai said: This is a criticism of Israel, as it says, “ It is not you whom they have rejected, but it is Me who they have rejected from reigning over them” ([I Shmuel 8:7](#)). R. Yehuda said: But is it not a commandment from the Torah to ask for a king? As it says, “ You shall surely appoint for yourself a king” ([Devarim 17](#))? Why, then, were they punished in the days of Shmuel? Because they asked for a king too early. (*Sifrei*, [Devarim 17:14](#))^{4[4]}

3 [3] In a well-known passage, the *gemara* in [Sanhedrin 20b](#) suggests that it is not the request for monarchy which angers God, but rather the underlying attitude of the request, the people' s desire to be like the other nations.

4 [4] Cf. [Sanhedrin 20b](#).

Despite the controversy, it is difficult to imagine that the Bible is actually opposed to a monarchical system. God already informs Avraham and Yaakov that kings will come from them ([Bereishit 17:6](#), 16, 35:11). Despite the obvious failings of the monarchical system narrated in the book of *Melakhim*, many prophets prophesy an ideal vision of the restoration of a monarchy, often specifically the Davidic monarchy (e.g., *Yeshayahu* 9:6; 11:1-5; [Yirmiyahu 23:5](#); [Yechezkel 37:24-25](#); [Zekharia 9:9](#)).^{5[5]} In later debate, the majority of medieval exegetes and halakhic authorities consider the appointment of a king to be a biblical commandment.^{6[6]}

From a practical standpoint, it would seem that a monarchical system is best suited to facilitate the accomplishment of *Am Yisrael*'s national goals, the very reason for its existence.^{7[7]} *Am Yisrael* is charged with two primary tasks: developing an ongoing self-conscious relationship with their God and disseminating knowledge of God to the world at large. Both of these goals – but particularly the lofty universal goal – require a stable, strong, centralized government, one which can maintain social unity, military security, economic prosperity, and religious integrity. This can pave the way to propagate God's instructions to the world. Without these elements, it is certain that the nation will not have the means or the standing to accomplish its goals.

The last five chapters of the book of *Shoftim* indicate how terribly things can fall apart when there is no monarchical system. These chapters contain the recurring phrase, “ In those days, there was no king in Israel; each man did what

5 [5] A great deal more may be added to this controversial topic. Taken together, the biblical sources appear to be ambivalent about kingship. Several narratives express deep misgivings regarding monarchy; see, for example the end of the story of Gidon ([Shoftim 8:22-23](#)) and the parable of Yotam ([Shoftim 9: 8-15](#)). While it is beyond the scope of this shiur to contend fully with these issues, I refer interested readers to R. Moshe Lichtenstein's VBM article, Jewish Political Theory: The Commandment to Appoint a King; R. Elchanan's Samet's VBM article, on Parashat Shoftim; and R. Amnon's Bazak VBM article, *I Shmuel* chapter 8:

6 [6] The Rambam, Ramban, *Sefer Ha-chinukh* and Maharsha view the appointment of a king as an obligation. The Ibn Ezra ([Devarim 17:15](#)) regards the monarchy as permissible, but not obligatory. A notable exception to this approach is the Abravanel, who is generally wary of kingship.

7 [7] See *Sefer Ha-chinukh* 71 and 497 (77 and 493 in the Chavel edition) who makes a strong case that only a single absolute ruler such as a king can enable the nation to function effectively.

was right in his eyes.” 8[8] Indeed, the social anarchy and moral bankruptcy that predominate in these chapters constitute the strongest argument for monarchy. Finally, the book of *Shoftim* concludes with a deplorable story, eerily reminiscent of Sodom and Amorrhah, which suggests that the Jewish society is no longer viable and is, in fact, slated for destruction.9[9]

Nevertheless, while the institution of monarchy has the potential to achieve greatness, it contains within it an abiding danger. Monarchical systems concentrate power in the hands of one man. The king has all of the societal infrastructures at his disposal: the judicial system, army, and treasury. Lord Acton famously wrote that, “ Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The history of monarchies, from ancient to modern times, indeed substantiates the theory that monarchies can easily generate tyrannical, corrupt behavior. One only has to examine the northern monarchy of Israel to arrive at this conclusion. In fact, *not one* good king emerges from that system.10[10]

Aware of this danger, the Bible creates precautions and safeguards to contain the power of the monarch:

However, he shall not keep many horses or return the nation to Egypt to acquire many horses, for God told you, “ Do not return that way again.” And he shall not have many wives, so that his heart shall not go astray, and he shall not acquire much silver and gold. And when he shall sit on his royal throne, he shall write this Torah in a scroll before the Priests and Levites. And it shall be with him and he shall read from it all of his days, so that he should learn to fear his God and guard the words of this Torah and observe these statutes. Thus, he will not act haughtily with his brethren and not stray right or

8 [8] [Shoftim 17:6](#); 18:1;19:1; 21:15.

9 [9] This story, which portrays the inhospitable nature of the inhabitants of Giv’ ah, precipitates the collective rape and dismemberment of a woman, the consequence of which is a horrible civil war and a looming threat over the future of the nation of Israel. We will have occasion to discuss this story at greater length in later *shiurim*.

10 [10] Although God endorses Yehu’ s bid to decimate the house of Achav, indicating that he has acted righteously in this matter ([1 Melakhim 10:30](#)), Yehu’ s enthusiastic bloodletting is condemned by the prophet [Hoshea \(1:4\)](#). In any case, Yehu is the only king of Israel who *may* be regarded in a positive light.

left from the command so that he and his sons will have long life in his kingship among Israel. ([Devarim 17:16-20](#))

As an additional precaution, biblical narratives suggest that the monarch cannot function without an accompanying prophet, who functions as a check on the king' s absolute power by reminding him of his cardinal duties.

Nevertheless, the institution of kingship, while desirable in many ways, remains a potentially corrupt institution. In order to find a formula for ensuring that Judean kings do not slide into tyranny as a result of their extraordinary power, the Bible presents an ingenious solution. In addition to the safeguards and checks on the king' s behavior, the king is actually born from a union of two uncommonly altruistic and generous individuals.¹¹[11] This, of course, does not mean that the king will necessarily adopt those traits. As is clear from later narratives, some of the kings of the Davidic dynasty, themselves descendants of Ruth and Boaz, will not actualize their potential and will ignore the qualities of their forbearers. And yet, the notion of creating a dynasty that emerges from two self-sacrificing individuals represents a brilliant attempt to mitigate the dangers of kingship.

It is true that Ruth' s type of selflessness is not something Judaism demands from its constituents. **Yet, it is an absolute necessity for our leaders.** Not only do we expect it from our leaders, but it is a virtual prerequisite for the establishment of the monarchy. Without a Ruth at its helm, without someone with the ability to give unselfishly and totally to the other, monarchy is not a promise or a vision of bounty, but a dangerous threat, an ominous future, a recipe for debauchery, depravity and despotism.

The Jewish nation cannot be willing to sacrifice their moral or religious integrity for the material, social, political, or even religious advantages of a

¹¹ [11] In this *shiur*, I have focused exclusively on the manner in which this trait of selfless kindness manifests itself in the personality of Ruth, the “ Mother of Kingship.” In later *shiurim*, I will examine the way in which Boaz' s personality mirrors Ruth in this regard. For the present, I will merely note that the very idea of marrying a Moavite woman demands that Boaz demonstrate his willingness to sacrifice his reputation, and perhaps even the future of his family (see the *goel' s* words in [Ruth 4:6](#)). We will examine this and other complementary ideas at greater length in later *shiurim*.

monarchy. If the king is tyrannical and corrupt, if he perceives himself as above the law, the nation will fail to accomplish their primary objective, creating an ideal society built on *mishpat and tzedaka*, justice and righteousness. This would undermine the very purpose of the Jewish nation. Therefore, Ruth' s character is presented as the foundation of the monarchical dynasty.¹²[12] Only a king with the qualities of a Ruth, kind to the point of abrogating her own self, can retain power without it causing him to degenerate morally and otherwise. A king with a forebear who can guide and even predispose him to serve others can create a kingship whose goal is to serve the people and not to serve the king and his interests.

I believe that this constitutes the very essence of *Megillat Ruth*. *Megillat Ruth* is the attempt to create a line of kingship designed to minimize the potential for corruption. This is accomplished by seeking particular personality traits in the progenitors of monarchy. This can explain the specific type of kindness displayed repeatedly by Ruth. By consistently undermining her own interests, Ruth demonstrates the ability to act with complete disregard for her own self-interest, focusing instead utterly, totally, and completely on the other. It is hoped that this trait will be adopted by Ruth' s descendants, the Davidic kings, who will behave in accordance with the needs of the other, rather than promoting their own interests.

Thus, we have again reconciled the two disparate explanations with which we began this *shiur*. Indeed, the purpose of *Megillat Ruth* is to indicate the importance of kindness, specifically the type of kindness necessary to create and maintain the Davidic dynasty.

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 extraordinary selflessness and kindness.

¹² [12] I am not suggesting that the experiment of *Megillat Ruth* works out perfectly; the Davidic dynasty certainly has its share of problems. Nevertheless, I think that when viewed in a relative light, especially when compared to their northern counterparts, we get a sense of the success of the Davidic dynasty. After all, the Davidic dynasty has several pious and scrupulous kings who appear to have higher interests at heart. In this way, they succeed in squelching the quest for self-aggrandizement that generally accompanies power. Consider the reigns of Asa, Yehoshaphat, Yoash, Amatzia, Uzia, Yotam, Chezekia, and Yoshiahu.

