

## ***Megillat Ruth: What's in a Name?***

**By Dr. Yael Ziegler**

The era of the Judges concludes with a profusion of unnamed characters (such as the concubine in Giv' ah, her husband, their host, and many others). This anonymity signals a society whose members feel alienated from one another, where individuals have lost their sense of purpose and their personal identity. The book of Ruth, which takes place during the period of the Judges, is similarly concerned with the loss of names and their restoration. To begin our analysis of the subject of names in *Megillat Ruth*, let us examine how *Chazal* draw our attention to this central theme.

### **Midrashic Name Etymologies**

*Midrashim* interpret the names of biblical characters with the goal of revealing the core of their character or their role in the biblical narrative. Thus, a negative etymology is offered by *Chazal* as a criticism of that character. Midrashic name etymologies are particularly enlightening when they stray from the simple meaning of the name. This implies that the character himself has strayed from his designated name and, likewise, his destiny.

#### **1. Elimelekh**

R. Meir would expound upon names. R. Yehoshua ben Karcha would expound upon names. “ And the name of the man was Elimelekh,” because he would say, “ To me shall come the kingship.” ([\*Ruth Rabba 2:5\*](#))

The midrash here creatively diverges from a literal reading of Elimelekh' s name, which would yield, “ My God is king.” 1[1] This is an ideal name for a child born during the period of the Judges. The recurring refrain at the end of the book of *Shofetim* designates this as a period of chaos, marked by lawlessness and societal dysfunction due to the absence of kingship: “ In those days there was no king in Israel; each man did what was right in his own eyes” (*Shofetim* 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Elimelekh' s name suggests that the absence of a king should not be a problem for the nation of Israel; indeed, if God is king, this should be enough to cure the ills of the generation. Elimelekh' s name is a declaration of faith, designed to counter the tribulations of the period and spur the nation to reinstate a viable society.

Strikingly, the midrash in *Ruth Rabba* distorts the plain meaning of Elimelekh' s name. Instead of *E-li*, meaning “ my God,” the midrash alters the vowels, rendering *elai*, “ to me,” or perhaps, “ for me.” This midrash seems designed to explain why Elimelekh disappears from the narrative and never participates in the destiny of his family, the family that produces the Davidic dynasty. A man who regards kingship as something designed to serve his own needs, or who thinks he is entitled to kingship by virtue of having been born into royal lineage, is a man who will abuse the power of kingship. By distorting the obvious meaning of Elimelekh' s name, the midrash explains why Elimelekh does not deserve the kingship. Perhaps he *could* have been part of the dynasty of kingship and propagated the notion that God is the ultimate king, but, according to this midrash, Elimelekh has abandoned this path. Instead he regards the kingship as his privilege and is thereby disqualified from participating in it.

This creative midrashicetymology (“ *elai tavo ha-malkhut*”) has an intriguing textual corollary in *Megillat Ruth*. In chapter three, there are two identical cases of *keri ve-lo ketiv* (a word that is read but not written).2[2] In both cases,

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1 [1] In Eisenstein' s collection of *midrashim*,there is a midrash that explains Elimelekh' s name according to its simple meaning: “ ‘ And the name of the man was Elimelekh’ – certainly this is because he would say, ‘ My God is king’ ” (*Otzar Midrashim, Ruth*, p. 515).

2 [2] Similar phenomena include *keri u-ketiv* (a word that is read one way and written another) and *ketiv ve-lo keriv* (a word that is written, but not read). There is significant debate as to the origins of this phenomenon. See e.g. Yosef Ofer, “ *Ketiv U-Keriv*: An Explanation of the Phenomenon,” *Leshonenu* 70 (2008), 55-73; 71 (2009), 255-279. Many exegetes and rabbinic sources agree, however, that because this phenomenon is part of the massoretic tradition, both readings are ripe for exegesis and should be understood within the context of the narrative. See, for example, Abравanel' s introduction to *Yirmiyahu*. For application of this principle, see e.g. Radak, *Shofetim* 19:3; [II Shemuel 15:8](#). I have followed the lead of both *Chazal* and medieval exegetes in interpreting this phenomenon.

Ruth is speaking to Naomi, and in both cases, the reader is instructed to read the word “ *elai*” despite the fact that it does not appear in the text:

And she said to her, “ Everything that you say [to me (*elai*)], I will do.” (3:5)

And she said, “ He gave me these six barleys because he said [to me (*elai*)], ‘ Do not come empty-handed to your mother-in-law.’ ” (3:17)

This unusually duplicated phenomenon characterizes Ruth in a strikingly apt fashion: Ruth is a person who is ready and willing to take herself, the *elai*, out of her sentence.<sup>3</sup>[3]

In the etymologically-based midrashic portrayal of Elimelekh, the midrash does not merely disqualify Elimelekh because he regards the kingship as his birthright; the midrash disqualifies Elimelekh because his character is the very opposite of Ruth. Ruth is the ideal candidate to produce kingship because she disregards herself and her personal needs, considering only the needs of the other.<sup>4</sup>[4] Elimelekh, on the other hand, is deliberately portrayed as one who cannot act in this fashion. According to this midrash, Elimelekh has been disqualified from kingship using the very same criterion – indeed, the very same *word* – that explains why Ruth was chosen.

## 2. **Machlon and Khilyon**

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3 [3] I thank my brother, Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Zeiger, for this original idea, related to me many years ago as part of a *devar Torah* for Shavuot.

4 [4] This is a penetrating characterization of Ruth, whose self-nullification runs throughout the story. Consider, for example, her stalwart decision to remain with Naomi, despite Naomi’s warning that she will not find a husband or a future in Bethlehem.

While the specifics may vary, the names Machlon and Khilyon are nearly unanimously assigned negative etymologies. This did not necessarily have to be the case. A daughter of Tzelofchad is named Machla, a son of Merari is Machli, and a granddaughter of David is named Machalat. Suggestions for a positive explanation of the name Machlon include an association with the word “*machol*,” to dance; “*nachala*,” an inheritance; or “*mechila*,” forgiveness.<sup>5</sup>[5] One may likewise suggest that Khilyon’ s name is related to the word that denotes completion, and as a derivative of that word, perfection.<sup>6</sup>[6] In that sense, a completed article is called a *keli*, vessel. One would certainly imagine that Naomi’ s intention was not negative when she named her sons!

Nevertheless, the *midrashim* tend to use their name etymologies to offer a negative portrait of Machlon and Khilyon. One midrash associates Machlon and Khilyon with two obscure biblical characters: “ And Yoash and Saraph who married into Moav, and were inhabitants of Lechem, and these records are ancient” (*I Divrei Ha-yamim* 4:22).<sup>7</sup>[7]A *gemara* explores all of the possibilities that can emerge from this identification:

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5 [5] Indeed, a midrash records the reaction of a Sage who takes exception to this negative etymology: “ R. Yochanan said, One should observe well the name: Machlon, [whose name] is [related to] the language of forgiveness, was married to Ruth, who trembled from transgressions, while Khilyon, [whose name] is [related to] the language of destruction, was married to Orpah, from whom emerged Goliat the Philistine” (*Ruth Zuta* 1). This midrash attempts to distinguish between Machlon and Khilyon due to their respective choice of wife. See also *Zohar Bereishit (Lekh Lekha)*, p. 80; *Ruth Zuta* 4:9.

6 [6] This word is especially positive, in that it is used for describing God’ s completion of His creation of the world ([Bereishit 2:1-2](#)), Moshe’ s completion of the *Mishkan* ([Shemot 39:32](#); 40:33), and Shelomo’ s completion of the Temple ([Melakhim 6:38](#); *I Divrei Ha-yamim* 28:20). Note especially the juxtaposition to the word *shalem* in *II Divrei Ha-yamim* 8:16.

7 [7] The midrashic identification of Yoash and Saraf with Machlon and Khilyon is in keeping with the midrashic principle of conservation of biblical characters. The sparse information given in *Divrei Ha-yamim* about Yoash and Saraf can support the notion that these men could be Machlon and Khilyon. They are, after all, men who married Moavites, were inhabitants of Lechem (Bethlehem), and whose lives were recorded for posterity (in the book of *Ruth*).

It is written “Machlon and Khilyon” and it is written “Yoash and Saraf.” Rav and Samuel [argue].

One says that Machlon and Khilyon are their names, and why were they called Saraf and Yoash? Yoash because they despaired of redemption (*nitya' ashu min ha-geula*) and Saraf because they were divinely liable for the death penalty of burning (*nit' chayevu sereifa la-Makom*).

One says that their names were Yoash and Saraf, and why were they called Machlon and Khilyon? Machlon because they made their bodies profane (*asu gufeihen chulin*) and Khilyon because they were divinely liable for destruction (*nitchayevu kheliya la-Makom*).

[\(Bava Batra 91b\)](#)

Two of these etymologies relate to the total destruction of Machlon and Khilyon, and cohere with other midrashic name derivations, as we shall see below. Another etymology relates to their intermarriage with Moavite women (“they made their bodies profane”), and the final one to Machlon and Khilyon’s despair (“they despaired of redemption”). The despondency of Elimelekh’s sons is not alluded to in the text itself. It is possible, though, that the very act of abandoning the land of Israel and settling in Moav should be understood as an act of despair. Viewed against the background of the period of the Judges, in which enemies are prevalent and leadership is scarce, one can well understand why someone might lose hope and renounce his optimism and faith.

It seems to me, however, that there is a deeper meaning to the etymology that links these characters to the loss of hope in redemption. The objective of *Megillat Ruth* is *geula* (redemption). The root *ga' al* is a key word both in chapter three, where it appears seven times, and in chapter four, where it appears *fifteen* times! Boaz’s great deed is his willingness to act as the *go' el*, the redeemer, despite the apparent obstacles. Boaz’s quest for *geula* is what defines him as the hero of our story and confirms his role as the progenitor of the kingship. This midrashic depiction of the rejection of *geula* by Elimelekh’s sons contrasts these men with Boaz and explains why they are not qualified to take part in the founding of the monarchy. Just as the previous midrash presents Elimelekh as the opposite of Ruth, this midrash contrasts Machlon and Khilyon with Boaz.

“And the names of his two sons were Machlon and Khilyon” : Machlon, because they were erased (*nimchu*) from the world, and Khilyon, because they were destroyed (*khalu*) from the world. ([Ruth Rabba 2:5](#))

A second etymological midrash describes the erasure and destruction of Machlon and Khilyon. This is because their brief introduction almost immediately terminates in their untimely death without children, suggesting that they represent unfulfilled potential, or failed destiny.<sup>8</sup>[8] Indeed, it appears that Machlon and Khilyon have left nothing behind and have been erased and destroyed from this world.

The annihilation of Machlon and Khilyon is presented by the midrash as a punishment for their behavior. While the textual representation of their actions is sparse, *midrashim* assume that they have abandoned their nation and their role as Judean leaders, and settled in Moav, a stingy and immoral society.<sup>9</sup>[9] These midrashic etymologies identify them with the negative behavior in the book of *Shofetim*. By going to Moav, Machlon and Khilyon have associated with the spiritual heir of Sedom and Amora.<sup>10</sup>[10] The period of the Judges also portrays the nation adopting the heinous behavior of the people of Sedom. In the concluding story of the book of *Shofetim*, the people of Giv' ah surround the home of a host and demand to rape his male guest (*Shofetim* 19:22). This Sedom-like behavior bespeaks a society that is no longer viable.

The midrash offers a clear message: whoever behaves like Sedom and Amora will share the fate of Sedom and Amora. The family of Elimelekh takes part in the national misconduct during the era of the Judges; therefore, the sons of Elimelekh are accorded the same punishment: erasure and destruction.

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8 [8] R. Yaakov Medan, *Hope from the Depths: A Study in Megillat Ruth* [Heb.] (2007), p. 13, maintains that the demise of the various members of this family suggests *karet*, a punishment that entails untimely death and no progeny (see Rashi, [Bereishit 17:14](#)).

9 [9] See, for example, [Bava Batra 91a](#); *Sifrei Zuta* 10:29; *Tanhuma Behar* 3 and 8; [Ruth Rabba 2:10](#); Targum [Ruth 1:4-5](#).

10 [10] A midrash seems to recognize this idea, associating Machlon and Khilyon' s behavior with that of the inhabitants of Sedom (*Tanchuma, Shemini* 9): “ ‘ And Elimelekh the husband of Naomi died.’ And also his sons died, as it says, ‘ And the two of them also died, Machlon and Khilyon, and the woman was left without her two boys or her husband.’ And this was because they would judge the Judges, as in Sedom.”

The book of *Shofetim* also concludes with a threat of the annihilation of the national entity. The civil war and the danger of the imminent erasure of the tribe of Benjamin is a result of the nation's Sedom-like behavior. The elders recognize that the national entity is in mortal danger. Dismayed by Benjamin's plight, they attempt to avert the annihilation of the tribe:

And the elders of the congregation said, "What shall we do [to obtain] wives for those remaining, for the women of Benjamin have been killed?" And they said, "There must be a remnant of an inheritance for Benjamin so that a tribe of Israel will not be **erased** (*ve-lo yimache shevet mi-Yisrael*)." (*Shofetim* 21:16-17)

The midrashic etymology of Machlon's name ("because they were **erased** [*nimchu*] from the world") linguistically parallels the alarm expressed by the elders over the **erasure** of the tribe of Benjamin. The midrash has drawn a conscious analogy between the plight of Elimelekh's family and that of the nation during this era. Both are threatened with erasure, for both seem to have lost their path and their destinies.

### What's in a Name?

Even though the midrash portrays the men of Elimelekh's family as having received their just deserts, the ultimate goal of the *Megilla* is to restore the name of the family of Elimelekh ([Ruth 4:5](#), 10). The potential loss of the name is a major theme in the *Megilla*. The narrative opens with the deaths of Machlon and Khilyon, and the threat of erasure of the family name. This is followed by Naomi's bitter declaration of the loss of her own name (1:20),<sup>11</sup>[11] and Ruth's initial namelessness in Bethlehem (e.g. 2:6).

The act of establishing a name in *Megillat Ruth* has a national goal as well. As noted above, the family of Elimelekh is presented as a mirror of the nation

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11 [11] Naomi's declaration that she has lost her name seems to derive from two correlative losses: that of her land and that of her children. This explains the accomplishment of chapter four, which involves the restoration of Naomi's land and progeny, thereby restoring her name and that of her family.

during the period of the *Shofetim*. Thus, the quest to restore the family' s name and continuity by producing a child is not simply a solution for the family itself. This child, who produces kingship, will also remove the threat of annihilation and namelessness which hovers over the nation during this era.

Boaz, the champion of the story, is the restorer of names. Himself possessing an inheritance (2:3) and a name (2:1), Boaz is aware of the importance of names.<sup>12</sup>[12] Boaz provides Ruth with the means to pronounce her own name, instead of being known simply as “ the Moavite” (3:9). And at the story' s conclusion, Boaz facilitates the rehabilitation of the name of Naomi<sup>13</sup>[13] and the deceased members of Naomi' s family (4:5, 10). Significantly, Boaz' s official proclamation of purchase of the land explicitly mentions the names of each member of Elimelekh' s family, including the sons, who have not been mentioned since their deaths in [Ruth 1:5](#):

And Boaz said to the elders and the entire nation, “ You are witnesses today that I hereby purchase all that belongs to **Elimelekh** and all that belongs to **Khilyon** and **Machlon** from the hands of **Naomi**. And also Ruth the Moavite, the wife of Machlon, I hereby purchase as a wife to establish the *name* of the deceased upon his inheritance and the *name* of the deceased will not be cut off from his brethren and from the gates of his place. You are witnesses today.”  
([Ruth 4:9-10](#))

It is significant that the relative who refuses to uphold the name of the

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12 [12] Perhaps for this reason, it is the mere mention of Boaz' s *name* which initially restores Naomi' s hope in her future: “ And [Ruth] said, ‘ The *name* of the man with whom I worked today is *Boaz* ’ ” (2:19). In response to Ruth' s mention of Boaz' s name, Naomi declares for the first time that perhaps someone will redeem her: “ The man is close to us; he is of our redeemers” (2:20).

13 [13] By the end of chapter four, Naomi has joyfully reacquired her name. This is most poignantly evidenced by the threefold repetition of the word *kara* (4:14, 17) at the end of the book, which marks the overturning of its threefold appearance at the beginning of the book (1:20-21), where Naomi rejected her name (“ Do not call me Naomi [pleasant], call me Mara [bitter], for God has embittered me terribly. I left full and God has returned me empty; why should you call me Naomi?” ). I am suggesting that Boaz facilitates this transformation.

deceased, the *go' el*, is rendered purposefully nameless, and the text refers to him as “*Peloni Almoni*,” or “no-name.” 14[14]

## The Word, “*Shem*”

The word “name” (*shem*) is, in fact, one of the key words of the triumphant resolution of the *Megilla*, appearing a pivotal seven times in chapter four. The blessing of the union of Boaz and Ruth contains the cryptic wish, “And call a name in Bethlehem” (4:11). This union is blessed with a goal of paramount importance: it should succeed in restoring names. This phrase suggests that the solution for the loss of names so prevalent in this narrative will be obtained in the union of Boaz and Ruth.

The women’s public blessing of Naomi after the birth of Ruth’s child also refers to name-giving. They confer the elliptical blessing upon Naomi, “And his name shall be called in Israel” (4:14). This phrase is unusual, as it would seem to require a direct object and thereby precede the naming of the child.<sup>15</sup>[15] Nevertheless, in the *Megilla*, this phrase is independent; in fact, the naming of the child does not occur until verse 17! How can we understand this fragmentary phrase? It seems to me that the very act of naming the child is itself the goal. It matters not what the name is; the purpose of the narrative is to ensure that the child will have a name, an identity, and a destiny. Thus, the women excitedly bless Naomi: “The child will be given a *name* in Israel!”

The final appearance of the key word, “*shem*” is the actual naming of the child (4:17). This child, Oved, is born to restore the name of the family whose name is threatened with extinction. Significantly, Oved is given his name not by his parents but by the inhabitants of Bethlehem, by general society. In this way,

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14 [14] This seems to be a punishment for refusing to uphold the name of the deceased. See Rashi, [Ruth 4:1](#).

15 [15] In many congregations today, the naming of a child is preceded precisely by this phrase, “*va-yikarei shemo be-Yisrael*.” An interesting parallel is found with regard to the brother who refuses to perform *yibbum*, where the phrase is followed by a new appellation: “And his name shall be called in Israel, ‘The House of the One who Removed his Shoe’ ” ([Devarim 25:10](#)).

*Megillat Ruth* ends with society' s acknowledgement of the importance of each individual acquiring a name. The act of naming the child is followed by a genealogical list ([Ruth 4:18-22](#)), which extends back ten generations. This impressive list of names suggests that the birth of this child has restored the link between the generations, rejuvenating a chain that consists of individuals with names, identities, and a shared destiny.

Boaz does not merely make it possible for the family of Elimelekh to reacquire its name. He paves the way towards restoration of names in society at large, thereby repairing society during the period of the Judges and enabling the nation to reacquire its destiny.

Boaz' s accomplishment stretches out to affect future generations as well. Boaz produces David from Bethlehem, 16[16] a man with a name (e.g. [I Shemuel 18:30](#); [II Shemuel 8:13](#)), and the eponymous founder of the Davidic dynasty. 17[17] In the chapter which delineates the ideal state of this dynasty ([II Shemuel 7](#)), God promises David a great name ([II Shemuel 7:9](#)). When the king has a name, then it is likely that he will be successful in conferring a name upon his people. 18[18] The establishment of the name in *Megillat Ruth* offers hope for the restoration of names, identity, and destiny within the nation, and the hope that the situation will be perpetuated by a virtuous dynasty of kings.

*This shiur 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*

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16 [16] Perhaps this is the reason that the witnesses bless the union of Boaz and Ruth with the words, " And call a name in Bethlehem" (4:11).

17 [17] The *Tanakh* highlights the greatness of the name of David' s son, Shelomo ([I Melakhim 1:47](#); 5:11).

18 [18] The primary aim of the Davidic dynasty is, of course, to build a house for the purpose of disseminating God' s name ([II Shemuel 7:13](#)). The intertwining of man' s name and God' s name in [II Shemuel 7](#) suggests that they are interdependent. Only when the nation has a name, an identity, and an awareness of its unique destiny, will God' s name be promulgated in the world. It is beyond the scope of this *shiur* to properly examine this important idea.

*continuity, and Ruth' s extraordinary selflessness and kindness.*

