

# MEGILLAT RUTH

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## *Shiur* #12:

### Introducing the Hero: Who is Boaz?

#### Part I

And Naomi had an acquaintance of her husband, a man of strength and valor, from the family of Elimelekh, and his name was Boaz.  
([Ruth 2:1](#))

Boaz is introduced at the opening of the second chapter, in anticipation of Ruth' s arrival at Boaz' s field. This verse is rife with hints, preparing us for the happy resolution of the hitherto tragic story. Boaz is the hero, the solution to the terrible events that unfolded in the first chapter. In this vein, the *Zohar* comments that the *Megilla* should really have opened with the verse that introduces Boaz, in keeping with the principle that God does not create any catastrophe without first establishing its remedy.<sup>1[1]</sup> In this *shiur*, we will examine the *Megilla*' s initial presentation of Boaz and try to ascertain what impression it leaves.

#### The *Moda* of Her Husband

Boaz is from the family of Elimelekh. But what exactly is the meaning of the phrase, “ *moda le-ishah* ” ? And what does it add to the description of Boaz? The

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<sup>1</sup> [1] *Zohar Chadash, Ruth II, 43a.*

word *moda* is a noun formed from the same root of the verb *yada*, meaning to know someone intimately.<sup>2</sup>[2] It seems to mean a close acquaintance. One *midrash* comments:

“ And Naomi had an acquaintance of her husband (*moda le-ishah*)”  
– He was beloved of her husband, and the son of his uncle. (*Ruth Zuta* 2:1)

This interpretation seems to be based upon two separate elements in this verse, which represent Boaz’ s dual relationship to Naomi’ s husband. In this reading, the phrase *moda le-ishah* suggests that Boaz is an intimate associate of Elimelekh, a beloved friend.<sup>3</sup>[3] This is sufficient to place Boaz in the role of possible redeemer of the family, someone who cares enough to repair the misfortune that has befallen them. Moreover, the *midrash* (following the verse) notes the familial relationship between Boaz and Elimelekh. This relationship also presents Boaz as a potential savior of the family.

While this would appear to be the simple meaning of the verse, Rashi understands the word *moda* to mean a relative, a kinsman:<sup>4</sup>[4]

*Moda* – An intimate (*karov*).<sup>5</sup>[5] [He was] the son of the brother of Elimelekh. Our Rabbis said: Elimelekh, Salmon, the father of Boaz,

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2 [2] This word connotes such intimacy that it may even be used for conjugal intimacy in the Bible (see e.g. [Bereishit 4:1](#), 17, 25; 38:26). This, of course, is not the primary usage of the word, which generally means to be deeply acquainted with someone ([Bereishit 29:5](#); [Shemot 1:8](#); [Iyov 42:11](#)). Appropriately, this word can also convey God’ s knowledge of someone, which is all-encompassing (e.g. [II Shemuel 7:20](#); [Hoshea 5:3](#); [Amos 3:2](#)). The use of this word here may prepare us for its multiple appearances in chapter 3, where it does seem to hint to the possibility of conjugal intimacy.

3 [3] See also Malbim on [Ruth 2:1](#); Metzudat David on [Tehillim 101:4](#).

4 [4] Curiously, elsewhere Rashi cites this phrase as proof that the word *yada* connotes affection and intimacy; see Rashi on [Bereishit 18:19](#). See also Ramban ad loc.

5 [5] Based on the context, it is clear that Rashi uses the word *karov* to mean a kinsman. This coheres with the usage of the word *karov* in several places in *Tanakh* (e.g. [Vayikra 2:2-3](#)). It is especially significant that this word seems to imply a blood relative in Naomi’ s words in [Ruth 2:20](#) (see also [Ruth 3:12](#)). Nevertheless, the actual meaning of the word *karov* is a close relationship, and therefore this usage among other exegetes may simply allude to an intimate relationship. See *Ruth Rabba* 4:1, which does not seem to use *karov*

Ploni Almoni the Goel, and the father of Naomi were all the sons of Nachshon ben Aminadav. (Rashi, [Ruth 2:1](#))

The problem with this explanation is self-evident. Why read the verse as though it contains a flagrant repetition? After all, Boaz' s familial relationship to Elimelekh is explicitly stated in the verse itself. Rashi generally attempts to ensure that no verse retains any superfluous idea.<sup>6</sup>[6] Moreover, the word *moda* does not necessarily connote a familial relationship, but simply a deep familiarity.<sup>7</sup>[7]

There are several possible advantages to explaining the word *moda* here as a familial association. First of all, it defuses the notion that Boaz actually had an intimate, affectionate relationship with Elimelekh. The existence of this sort of relationship would have raised an obvious question: Why does Boaz neglect Naomi if he had such deep affection for Naomi' s husband, Elimelekh?<sup>8</sup>[8] While this question exists even if there is merely a familial relationship, it is compounded by the suggestion of emotional intimacy between the families.

A second possible reason for dismissing the notion of friendship between Boaz and Elimelekh is because of the negative representation of Elimelekh in the Midrash. In the midrashic depiction, Elimelekh is a miser who flees his people during their time of need, departing the holy land for a country steeped in

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to indicate a relative. See also Metzudat Zion on [Mishlei 7:4](#); the manner in which Radak explains our verse in his commentary on [II Melakhim 10:11](#); and Ralbag' s explanation of our verse in [Mishlei 7:1](#).

6 [6] This aspect of Rashi' s methodology and its broader context is nicely presented in N. Leibowitz and M. Ahrend, *Rashi' s Commentary on the Torah* (Heb.) (1990), pp. 69-106, especially pp. 94-98.

7 [7] Unexpectedly, the other place in the *Tanakh* where this form of the noun occurs is in [Mishlei 7:4](#), where it is parallel to the word “ my sister,” thereby suggesting that it does in fact connote a familial relationship. The Ibn Ezra cites this verse in *Mishlei*, explaining that the word *moda* means a “ *karov yadua*,” an intimate kinsman. (This reading is based on the assumption that when Ibn Ezra uses the word *karov* he means, like Rashi, a kinsman.) Ibn Ezra thereby conflates the two approaches.

8 [8] The point at which Boaz becomes aware of Naomi' s plight is itself debatable. While it is certainly possible that Boaz is not apprised of Naomi' s initial return to Bethlehem, by the end of chapter two, he is undoubtedly acquainted with Naomi' s dire circumstance. We will examine in upcoming *shiurim* the reason that Boaz never seeks Naomi or directly offers her assistance.

promiscuity and cruelty. It would not be seemly to suggest that the righteous Boaz selected Elimelekh to be his cherished companion. Boaz' s familial relationship with Elimelekh may be beyond his control, but his friendships are a matter of personal choice. Thus, the above *midrash* allows the verse to relate that Elimelekh is a member of Boaz' s family, but emphatically avoids the suggestion that Boaz ever chose Elimelekh to be his intimate.

Another way to understand this approach is to examine the meaning of a familial relationship, as distinct from a friendship, within the context of *Megillat Ruth*. It appears that the controversy surrounding the word *moda* relates to the central goal of our narrative. Why, in fact, would Boaz assume responsibility for Ruth' s marriage? Does he do so out of residual affection for his dear old friend, or is it because of his familial responsibility, in accordance with halakhic tradition and/or custom? Friendship carries little obligatory weight in *Tanakh*, while a familial relationship is often grounds for responsibility. Familial responsibilities include a special set of obligations toward the widow of a deceased relative,<sup>9</sup>[9] as well as to his property.<sup>10</sup>[10] Boaz' s close relationship with Elimelekh appears to add nothing to our understanding of the story, while his familial relationship is vital.

Thus, the repetition in this verse is highly allusive, designed to draw our attention to the goals of the narrative. This presentation of Boaz anticipates his role as Naomi' s redeemer. The repeated information that Boaz is a close relative of Elimelekh heightens our expectation that Boaz will live up to his familial responsibilities.

The repeated linking of Boaz to Naomi' s husband, rather than to Naomi herself, may also relate to this goal. Familial responsibility in matters of land and widows falls upon the relatives of the deceased or incapacitated husband. The wife' s relatives have no responsibility in this regard. Thus, despite the midrashic suggestion that Naomi is likewise related to Boaz, the text makes no reference to this relationship, focusing instead solely on the relationship between Boaz and Naomi' s husband.

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9 [9] I refer here to the laws of *yibbum* ([Devarim 25](#)), but also to the custom of *ge' ula* referred to by the Ramban in [Bereishit 38:8](#). We will have occasion to examine this Ramban in a future *shiur*.

10 [10] See the laws of property in [Vayikra 25](#).

## ***Ish Gibor Chayil***

What is the meaning of the phrase that initially describes Boaz' s character, “ *ish gibor chayil* ” ?<sup>11</sup>[11] Both the word *gibor* (might) as well as the word *chayil* (which also connotes strength)<sup>12</sup>[12] imply military strength.<sup>13</sup>[13] While military strength not does appear to be a significant aspect of Boaz' s role in this narrative, this trait surely anticipates Boaz' s ultimate role as the progenitor of David. The Jewish nation' s request for a king is originally predicated upon their desire for someone who can lead them into battle (*I Shemuel* 8:20), and this factor is essential to David' s biblical portrait. In the first description of the young David, he is said to be a “ *gibor chayil ve-ish milchama*,” a man of valor and a man of war ([I Shemuel 16:18](#)).<sup>14</sup>[14] David' s military prowess is borne out by his courageous

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11 [11] This phrase is particularly meaningful inasmuch as the *Tanakh* tends to eschew direct descriptions of the traits of characters, preferring to allow their deeds and their speech to speak for themselves. In this way, the *Tanakh* allows for the characters to be represented in all of their depth and complexity, creating a vague backdrop which contains multiple possibilities for development. At the same time, it allows the reader to become an active participant in the story, one who is able to draw conclusions with regard to the character' s nature. Perhaps most significantly, this reticence with regard to characters reflects a particular view of human nature implicit in the *Tanakh*: People are free to create their destiny and are not doomed to one-dimensional representations that determine their essence. One classic treatment of this subject is Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (1957), pp. 1-15. See also Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981), pp. 114-130; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (1987), pp. 321-364. It should be noted that this is not an immutable rule. Often the *Tanakh* does offer a concise description of a character, which should be explained within the context of the given narrative. In describing Boaz in advance as an *ish gibor chayil*, the narrative appears to evaluate Boaz' s character in a positive manner. I am interested both in the nature of this description and in the reason the text offers this information in advance of our acquaintance with Boaz.

12 [12] Brown, Driver, and Briggs' lexicon (*A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1951, p. 298) adduces cognate words from Aramaic, Ethiopic, Arabic, and Assyrian which suggest that *chayil* denotes strength, especially in a military context.

13 [13] See, for example, [I Shemuel 14:52](#); *II Divrei Ha-Yamim* 13:3. See also Ralbag' s comment on [I Shemuel 14:52](#).

14 [14] A *midrash* ([Ruth Rabba 3:1](#)) explicitly makes this connection between Boaz and David, maintaining, however, that their “ strength” refers to prowess in learning Torah.

combat with Goliath, and subsequently proves to be a central feature of David' s success as king.<sup>15</sup>[15]

This phrase may, however, retain other meanings that reflect Boaz' s actual role in the narrative. Rashi, commenting on *I Divrei Ha-Yamim* 26:8, refers to this depiction of Boaz, noting that the phrase “ *ish chayil*” does not necessarily connote physical strength, but can instead depict a man of importance. This may be derived from one of the rare usages of the complete phrase, “ *anashim giborei chayil*,” <sup>16</sup>[16] which is modified by a phrase explaining that these are men of repute (*anshei shem*):

These were the heads of their father' s household...*anashim giborei chayil*, men of repute, heads of the father' s household. (*I Divrei Ha-Yamim* 5:24)

Likewise, the Malbim comments:

[Boaz] was an *ish gibor chayil*. As I already explained (in *Parashat Yitro* 18:25), the appellation “ *anshei chayil*” connotes all of the positive traits, including generosity and avoidance of profit. (Malbim, [Ruth 2:1](#))

Thus, the word *chayil* is certainly related to strength, but it may further connote an inner strength, valor, or moral worth.<sup>17</sup>[17] The Ramban suggests that

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<sup>15</sup> [15] Note the list of David' s extensive conquests in [II Shemuel 8](#). Moreover, this seems to be a primary reason that the people love David (see [I Shemuel 18:16](#)) and eventually embrace him as king ([II Shemuel 5:1-3](#)).

<sup>16</sup> [16] The complete phrase appears three times in the *Tanakh*, once in our story in the singular ([Ruth 2:1](#)), and twice more in the plural form (*I Divrei Ha-Yamim* 5:24; 8:40). We will take special note of the verses in which the complete phrase appears.

<sup>17</sup> [17] A *midrash* (*Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* 43) regards the phrase *anshei chayil* in the war against Amalek as a description of God-fearing men. This is, of course, in distinction to Amalek, who are described in [Devarim 25:18](#) as *not* God-fearing.

the word *chayil* is related to the ability to gather together, thereby allowing it to be employed in various contexts:

And the meaning of *anshei chayil* is people who are suitable for leading a great nation, because every gathering together is called *chayil*, and not merely those who go out to war... And in matters of judgment, an *ish chayil* denotes a wise, industrious, and honorable man. And in war, [this is] the strong [man] who is industrious and knows the tactics of warfare. And a woman may also be called an *eshet chayil*, if she is industrious and knows the how to [efficiently] run a house.<sup>18</sup>[18] (Ramban, [Shemot 18:21](#))

In accordance with these readings, Boaz is rightly deemed an *ish gibor chayil*. Boaz' s worthiness, courage, importance, wisdom,<sup>19</sup>[19] and industrious work ethic are all traits that we shall encounter over the course of the story, rendering this phrase an accurate introduction to Boaz' s persona.

I would like to examine two final explanations of this phrase. In his comment on [Shemot 18:21](#), Rashi suggests that *anshei chayil* denotes men of wealth. This is related to the Ramban' s observation that every gathering together is called *chayil*. Indeed, numerous biblical verses testify that a gathering of wealth can also be referred to as *chayil*.<sup>20</sup>[20] This reading certainly contributes to the initial presentation of Boaz as the potential savior of Naomi and Ruth. Boaz' s wealth and success as a landowner places him in a position to help the destitute Naomi, both by providing her with food and by assuming the burden of marriage to Ruth and subsequently supporting her.

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<sup>18</sup> [18] The fact that Boaz uses this very phrase to describe Ruth in 3:11 suggests that the phrase is not primarily military in nature, even when describing Boaz.

<sup>19</sup> [19] Wisdom is a trait quite often attributed to Boaz in later literature. See, for example, [Vayikra Rabba 23](#), which reads the verse in [Mishlei 24:5](#) as a reference to Boaz' s wisdom. This is unsurprising given Boaz' s role in the narrative as the one who facilitates Ruth' s entrance into the Jewish community based on the little-known *halakha* that a Moavite woman may enter into the congregation of Israel.

<sup>20</sup> [20] See e.g. [Bereishit 34:29](#); [Bamidbar 31:9](#); [Yeshayahu 8:4](#); [60:5](#); [Yechezkel 28:4](#); [Zekharia 14:14](#).

Finally, the entire phrase *ish gibor chayil* appears in *I Divrei Ha-Yamim* 8:40:

And the children of Ulam were *anashim giborei chayil*, poised with their bow, and multiplying children and sons of children, one hundred and fifty, all of these from the sons of Benjamin.

The description of these children of Ulam, poised with the bow, may indicate that the verse refers to their military prowess when it calls them *anashim giborei chayil*. Nevertheless, we should observe that the strength of these men is also directly related to their fertility: “multiplying children and sons of children, one hundred and fifty.” 21[21] This ability to produce children is an exceedingly significant piece of information in relation to Boaz’ s role in the narrative. Indeed, Boaz’ s primary responsibility is to marry Ruth and provide continuity for the family of Elimelekh.<sup>22</sup>[22]

Thus, the resonant verse that introduces Boaz in *Megillat Ruth* may be paraphrased as follows:

And Naomi had a close relative of her husband, a man of integrity, courage, wealth, and fertility, from the family of Elimelekh, whose name was Boaz.

Naomi is fortunate to have a relative who is a man of integrity and in a position to help her. As Naomi excitedly notes, when Ruth returns from her first encounter

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21 [21] I have not yet pointed out the obvious, which is that Boaz’ s name contains the word “oz,” which also means strength or power, generally of a military sort (e.g. [II Shemuel 22:18](#); [Yeshayahu 26:1](#); [Tehillim 28:8](#)). It is certainly possible that this word contains other connotations as well, connoting inner strength (e.g. [Tehillim 96:6](#)) as well as fertility (see [Bereishit 49:3](#) for an interesting juxtaposition between strength in bearing children and the word oz). We will return to this topic in later *shiurim*.

22 [22] This coheres with one idea underlying the midrashic identification of Boaz with Ivtzan. We noted previously that the sparse textual description of Ivtzan includes the information that Ivtzan had sixty children. One of the goals of this identification may be to point to Ivtzan’ s fertility as a promising feature accompanying Boaz’ s appearance on the scene in *Megillat Ruth*.

with Boaz' s kindness and generosity: “ The man is our *karov*, he is one of our redeemers!”

## Conclusion

The portrait of Boaz that emerges from his introduction in *Megillat Ruth* is promising indeed. [Ruth 2:1](#) offers a picture of a man of strength and honor, who is introduced first of all as a relative of Elimelekh, Naomi' s husband. In the next *shiur*, we will examine Boaz' s first acts in the narrative. These, we shall see, prove to be just as promising. Boaz' s concern for the meticulous observance of Jewish law, compounded by his recognition of one young, impoverished woman, allows us to be optimistic that Boaz will act to redeem Naomi' s family from the impending threat of extinction.

*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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