

MEGILLAT RUTH

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Shiur #14: Ruth the Moavite in the Fields of Bethlehem

And Ruth the Moavite said to Naomi, “ I will go to the field, and I will pick among the stalks, after him in whose eyes I shall find favor.” And she said to her, “ Go my daughter.” And she went and she arrived and she harvested in the field behind the harvesters. And a chance encounter occurred; the portion of the field [that Ruth happened upon belonged] to Boaz, who is from the family of Elimelekh. And behold, Boaz was coming from Bethlehem. ([Ruth 2:2-3](#))

Ruth’ s words to Naomi may be read either as a request for permission or as a firm declaration of intentions. The word *na*, often translated as “ please” or “ by your leave,” may indicate a deferential entreaty to Naomi to allow her to go.¹[1] Naomi’ s response, then, would indicate her assent to Ruth’ s petition.

Alternatively, Ruth’ s usage of the word *na* may be a means of establishing a logical consequence of the general situation, a resolute determination to find a solution to their wretched circumstances.²[2] In this reading, Ruth emerges (once again) as a strong-willed and purposeful young woman, whose unflagging belief in doing the right thing allows her to make decisions with clarity and determination. By contrast, Naomi’ s response seems weak and somewhat muted, marked by

1 [1] In fact, most English translations offer some version of this reading, rendering the word *na* as a request for permission: “ please,” “ let me go,” “ if you will,” “ by your leave,” and the like.

2 [2] See T. O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (1971), p. 170, where he maintains that this is the biblical usage of the word *na*. See also E. F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth*, pp. 71-72. Some examples of this usage of the word *na* include [Bereishit 19:8](#); [Shemot 3:3](#); [I Melakhim 1:12](#).

brevity and lack of enthusiasm.³[3] In fact, Naomi' s brief utterance echoes her previous attempt to dissuade her daughters-in-law from joining her: “ Return, my daughters, go” ([Ruth 1:12](#)). The fact that these are Naomi' s first words to Ruth since her strenuous bid to convince Ruth to return to her nation may suggest that Naomi is again pushing Ruth away, even as Ruth aspires to draw closer and be of service to her mother-in-law.

In any case, Ruth' s decision to go and pick in the fields like a pauper is an indication of her humility and kindness.⁴[4] Naomi does not offer to accompany Ruth, either because of her apathy, her advanced age, or perhaps due to the extreme indignity that would attend her public behavior as a pauper. According to *midrashic* accounts, Naomi left wealthy,⁵[5] and her miserable return to Bethlehem has already aroused curiosity, pity, and probably a fair measure of smug satisfaction. Ruth' s offer to go and pick food is, therefore, doubly kind, inasmuch as she does not require Naomi to accompany her.

“ After Him in Whose Eyes I Shall Find Favor”

Ruth is uncertain as to the prospects of her success, as evidenced by her comment that she will pick after the one in whose eyes she shall find favor. Why does Ruth think that she needs to find someone who favors her in order to obtain

3 [3] While *Ruth Zuta* 2:2 suggests that until Ruth' s declaration, Naomi provided for both of them, the text itself preserves no such notion. (This *midrash* does not specify by name whether it was Naomi or Ruth who provided; however, the context suggests that it is Naomi.) Naomi' s stated bitterness is accompanied by passivity, suggesting apathy, and perhaps even a desire to die. This apathy is reminiscent of the *midrash* which identified Yoash as one of Naomi' s sons who was called thus because of his despair ([Bava Batra 91b](#)). In the final analysis, it is only Ruth' s actions that deliver Naomi from the threat of starvation that hovers over them at the opening of this chapter.

4 [4] While we have no knowledge of Ruth' s background, several *midrashic* sources portray Ruth as the daughter of the Moavite king, Eglon (e.g. [Ruth Rabba 2:9](#); *Tanhuma Ve-Yehi* 14). This derives in part from the nobility of character that she displays throughout the story. This *midrashic* idea also draws attention to Ruth' s humility.

5 [5] This approach seems to be textually supported by Naomi' s words: “ I left full and God returned me empty” ([Ruth 1:21](#)).

the basic rights of any stranger, orphan, widow, or poor person?⁶[6] After all, Ruth is a stranger, widow, *and* a poor person!

It is possible that Ruth' s search for someone who will show her favor does not concern permission to gather leftover grain in the fields. That is her undeniable right. Ruth' s mission may be a bit more ambitious.⁷[7] Rashi ([Ruth 2:2](#)) maintains that Ruth' s quest is to find someone who will not admonish her and will treat her well. Even if this is not the case, Ruth' s words raise the question of the manner in which the inhabitants of Bethlehem treat their poor. Why does Ruth need to hope that someone will treat her nicely?

Ruth' s assumption may be another symptom of the social degeneration of the period of the Judges. And as it turns out, Ruth' s search for a benevolent landowner is necessary. Boaz' s kindness includes explicit instructions to the men in the field not to touch [Ruth \(2:9\)](#), not to humiliate her (2:15), and not to admonish her (2:16)! In fact, it seems that were it not for Boaz' s patronage, Ruth would have been subject to degradation and harassment.⁸[8] This confirms that the general population in the book of Ruth behaves no differently than the people in the book of *Shoftim*, which is characterized by the corruption of society and the collapse of interpersonal relations.

⁶ [6] See [Vayikra 19:10](#); 23:22, where certain rights in the field are allotted to the pauper and the stranger. In [Devarim 24:19-22](#) similar privileges are accorded the stranger, the orphan and the widow.

⁷ [7] Perhaps Ruth is suggesting that she is searching for someone who is interested in a relationship with her. I raise this possibility in a footnote rather than in the main body of the *shiur* because I consider this unlikely, given the circumstances. Ruth has already been told by Naomi that she should not entertain hopes of marriage in Bethlehem. Moreover, Ruth has experienced firsthand the lack of enthusiasm with which Naomi was welcomed back to Bethlehem and the manner in which the townspeople completely ignore her presence alongside Naomi. Most of the usages of the phrase “ to find favor in someone' s eyes,” refer to the favor of an inferior from his superior, although the following usages may indicate a romantic element in this idiom: [Devarim 24:1](#); [Esther 5:8](#); 7:3. Thus, it seems more likely that Ruth is simply looking to obtain kindness from a wealthy landowner in whose fields she will glean.

⁸ [8] It is possible and even likely (as we shall see) that Ruth was, in fact, subject to unpleasant treatment prior to Boaz' s arrival in the field.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that when Ruth speaks these words, she is introduced as “Ruth the Moavite.” Ruth’s Moavite appellation may indicate her ignorance in matters of Jewish law (and therefore her unawareness of her rights to glean in the fields). However, it is more likely that Ruth speaks as a Moavite, in that she recognizes that her Moavite status precludes her ability to assume the right to glean as a poor person. The Moavites did not provide bread and water to the Israelites on their journey out of Egypt ([Devarim 23:4-5](#)). Consequently, the Jewish nation is enjoined “not to seek their peace and well-being” ([Devarim 23:7](#)). Perhaps Ruth concludes that Moavites do not enjoy the same obvious privileges as other impoverished people in the fields. Thus, Ruth’s Moavite status, compounded by her association with Naomi, who abandoned her people at their time of need, could certainly account for her assertion that she must find someone “in whose eyes she shall find favor,” in order to glean from the fields of Bethlehem.

“ And She Went and She Arrived and She Harvested”

What actually does happen to Ruth the Moavite on her initial sojourn in the fields of Bethlehem? The text records an interesting sequence of verbs: “And she went and she arrived and she harvested in the field behind the harvesters.” A *midrash* cited by Rashi maintains that this rapid sequence suggests Ruth’s disorientation on her first foray into the fields:⁹[9]

We found in *Midrash Ruth* that by the time she went, she came. As it says, “and she came,” and afterward, “and she picked.” But she would mark the paths prior to her entrance to the field and she went and came and returned to the city in order to make markers and indicators so that she would not make a mistake on the paths and would know how to return. (Rashi, [Ruth 2:3](#))

This Hansel and Gretel scene is a response to the unnecessary repetition of the word *va-tavo* (“and she came”) after the word *va-teilekh* (“and she went”). The *midrash* suggests that Ruth actually returns to her point of origin after she already arrived at the field in order to leave markers on the path. While the *midrash* is

⁹ [9] See *Ruth Rabba* 4:4.

ostensibly depicting Ruth' s understandable fear of losing her way on her first day in the fields, it is possible that the primary intention of this *midrash* is to illustrate Ruth' s devotion to Naomi. Even when Ruth leaves Naomi, she meticulously creates a path of return to Naomi, thereby indicating that Ruth has created an unbreakable bond with Naomi.

Another possible reading of this rapid sequence of verbs relates to Ruth' s Moavite status and the unfriendly reception that she anticipates in the fields of Bethlehem. The going and coming mentioned in the verse may in fact be a hint of the continued lack of hospitality that Ruth encounters in Bethlehem. It is possible that Ruth visited several fields that day before she arrived at the field of Boaz. Each time Ruth entered a field, she was promptly compelled to exit, as the owner unceremoniously banished the Moavite daughter-in-law of Naomi from his field. This scenario may have repeated itself several times, until “ a chance encounter occurred, the portion of the field [that Ruth happened upon belonged] to Boaz, who is from the family of Elimelekh.” Upon arrival at Boaz' s field, Ruth was accorded a different treatment. As noted in the previous *shiur*, Boaz' s visits to his fields seem to revolve around his concern for his reapers, and perhaps also his concern that his reapers are adhering to their religious obligations. If this is indeed the case, then the workers may have been hesitant to expel anyone needy without consulting first with their landlord. Thus, while Ruth was not necessarily warmly embraced by the reapers in Boaz' s field (as we shall see), she was also not summarily expelled.

And Boaz said to his boy who oversees the reapers, “ To whom is this girl?” And the boy who oversees the reapers answered and he said, “ She is a Moavite girl, who has returned with Naomi from the fields of Moav. And she had said, ‘ I shall reap and gather the sheaves behind the reapers.’ And she came and she stood from the morning until now; she only sat in the house for a little bit.” 10[10] ([Ruth 2:5-7](#))

The overseer' s response to Boaz' s query may shed further light on Ruth' s experiences. There are three parts to his response. He begins by

10 [10] I have followed Ibn Ezra' s translation of the word *shivta* as “ she sat.” See also Ibn Ezra (*Peirush Ha-Arokh*), [Shemot 21:19](#). Other translations slightly change the vocalization to *shaveta*, meaning “ to rest” (see e.g. Septuagint) or offer a translation which relates the word *shivta* to the word *shuv*, “ to return” (e.g. Vulgate), a root used frequently in the previous chapter.

identifying Ruth, explaining who she is and with whom she is associated in Bethlehem. He then reports to Boaz what Ruth said, citing her actual words. Finally, the overseer describes Ruth' s actions since the morning.

The overseer' s initial description of Ruth does not appear to be positive.¹¹[11] She is depicted as a “ Moavite girl,” who is, furthermore, associated with Naomi, who was from the fields of Moav. Each of these descriptions – Ruth' s Moavite status, her association with Naomi, and the deliberate reminder that Naomi had been in the *fields of Moav*, which were presumably full while the fields of Bethlehem lay fallow from famine – may be designed to persuade Boaz that Ruth should not be allowed to pick in his field. The boy' s reference to Ruth as a *na' ara*, a girl, when she is in fact a woman who has been married for over ten years, also appears to be a derogatory reference. Unlike Boaz, whose advanced age may permit him to refer to Ruth as a *na' ara* without offense, the overseer, himself a *na' ar* ([Ruth 2:5-6](#)), seems to be deliberately belittling Ruth by referring to her in this manner.¹²[12]

The boy' s citation of Ruth' s words also may not be entirely faithful. In verse 2, Ruth had stated that she intends to go and pick the stalks (*ba-shibolim*), as is customary with the mitzva of *leket*.¹³[13] It may be that the overseer offers a slight modification of Ruth' s intentions. He has her boldly stating that she intends to pick and gather sheaves (*omarim*), a bundle of stalks.¹⁴[14] This depiction of

11 [11] Many scholars think otherwise, viewing the overseer' s words as a positive evaluation of Ruth (see e.g. Yair Zakovitch, *Ruth*, p. 71).

12 [12] See [Bereishit 41:12](#), where Joseph is called “ *na' ar ivri*” in a similarly disparaging manner. In particular, calling someone a *na' ar* when they have previously been referred to as an adult appears to be an attempt to denigrate the person. Ruth has been referred to by Naomi as an *isha* ([Ruth 1:9](#)). For further examples, see [Yehoshua 6:23](#); *I Shmuel* 31:5-6, 13. This does not mean that a *na' ar* is a derogatory word (see, e.g. [Shemot 33:11](#)), but rather that it suggests a demotion when used to describe an adult.

13 [13] *Leket*, literally “ gleanings,” refers to the obligation upon the reaper to allow the stalks of grain that fall from his hand or the sickle while the grain is being gathered to belong to the poor people in the field (see, [Vayikra 19:9](#), 23:22; *Mishna Pe' ah* chapters 4-5).

14 [14] Note once again Ruth' s usage of the word *na*, which again I would claim is not necessarily a request for permission, but rather the overseer' s way of illustrating for Boaz' s sake Ruth' s presumptuous boldness. It is doubtful that

Ruth' s greedy and unlawful¹⁵[15] behavior seems designed to raise Boaz' s ire.¹⁶[16] How dare this Moavite stranger enter a field in Bethlehem with such presumptuous intentions!

Whether the overseer accurately cites Ruth' s words or not, it is unclear whether Ruth has in fact acted upon her stated intentions. The overseer' s description of Ruth' s actions is especially intriguing, as it may shed further clarity upon Ruth' s present situation. He describes two separate actions: that Ruth came and stood from the morning until now, and that Ruth only sat in the house for a little bit.¹⁷[17] The description of Ruth standing is especially peculiar. Reapers do not stand, they walk up and down the rows of the field as they pick. In fact, this image of Ruth standing is one of inaction, rather than action.

Ruth actually assumed the aggressive tone conveyed by the overseer. I maintain that it is likewise doubtful that this is an accurate quote of Ruth' s words.

¹⁵ [15] Sheaves of grain are allowed only when they are forgotten in the field (*shikhecha*) while the harvest is being brought to the threshing floor (see [Devarim 24:19](#); *Mishna Pe' ah* 5:7-7:2). The Targum suggests that Ruth is actually asking to glean stalks so that she can gather them into sheaves. Rashi assumes that this citation is accurate and lawful because Ruth is referring to her right to gather the forgotten sheaves (the mitzva of *shikhecha*). Nevertheless, this does not accurately reflect the scenario described, in which Ruth goes to the field in order to follow “ after the reapers” who may drop some stalks (*leket*).

¹⁶ [16] R. Yaakov Medan, *Hope from the Depths: A Study in Megillat Ruth* (Heb.) (2007), p. 75, suggests that it is Ruth' s inappropriate picking which initially draws Boaz' s attention, prompting him to ask, in anger, “ Who is this girl?!” While this reading has certain advantages, it is hardly in keeping with Boaz' s benevolent personality displayed throughout the narrative. I believe that it is equally possible that the boy deliberately distorts Ruth' s words in an attempt to persuade Boaz that Ruth the Moavite, who is both greedy and alien, should not be permitted to pick in Boaz' s field.

¹⁷ [17] As I noted, this phrase (“ *ze shivta ha-bayit me' at'* ”) is difficult to translate or to understand in the context. Malbim suggests that Ruth is described here as so hardworking that she only went to rest a bit from the sun in the shade of the hut. Note the Septuagint' s reading: “ And she came and stood from morning until evening and rested not even a little in the field.” While this depiction of Ruth' s character is certainly borne out by the long day she works in the field (2:17), the overseer' s generally negative portrayal of Ruth lends itself to the suggestion that he is pointing out her avaricious behavior in her unceasing gleaning.

In view of this oddity, I would like to suggest a possible chain of events. Early that first morning, Ruth apprehensively made her way to the fields, aware that she may be rebuffed and prevented access to the area that traditionally is set aside for poor people. This is indeed Ruth's initial experience, as she determinedly makes her way from one field to another, entering and immediately exiting, accompanied, perhaps, by the hostile jeers of the townspeople. When she does happen upon Boaz's field, the attitude of the people there is not considerably kinder. Nevertheless, the workers hesitate to banish Ruth, knowing full well that their owner is particularly scrupulous about the commandments relating to the poor people in his fields. This does not mean that they allow her to work in the fields; rather, they defer a response to her request, motioning her to the side to wait for the owner to arrive at his field. This accounts for the description of Ruth standing (*va-ta' amod*), as she is not permitted to pick until she receives permission from Boaz.¹⁸[18] By "fortunate coincidence," Boaz happens to arrive at his field not long after and immediately notices the young woman, standing by the side in the hot sun, waiting to see if she will be permitted to pick.¹⁹[19] Boaz's query about Ruth is followed by the overseer's somewhat defensive explanation justifying his decision not to allow Ruth into the field. This explanation may be an indication that Boaz's query contained a note of irritation or anger, as may be evidenced by Boaz's total lack of response to the overseer's attempts to explain.²⁰[20] Instead, ignoring the flustered overseer, Boaz turns directly to Ruth:

"Have you not heard, my daughter? Do not go to pick in another field! And also, do not pass by here! And so shall you cleave to my

¹⁸ [18] E. F. Campbell, *Ruth*, p. 96, offers this explanation of the word "*va-ta' amod*." Like many scholars, his view of the overseer is more positive than the one that I presented above.

¹⁹ [19] This scenario has the additional advantage of explaining why, in fact, Boaz immediately notices Ruth. We offered several possible explanations in the previous *shiur*, but this may be the simplest one of all. Boaz notices Ruth because she is not picking, but is instead lingering conspicuously on the side, waiting for the owner to arrive at his field.

²⁰ [20] Boaz's later words also indicate his rejection of the overseer's negative citation of Ruth's words. In his later instructions to his reapers, Boaz states that Ruth should also be allowed to "pick amongst the sheaves." Boaz follows this instruction by commanding the reapers not to shame her. In other words, Boaz seems to be saying that even if Ruth did make an irregular, or even unlawful, request, it should be fulfilled on his personal orders, without indicating to her that it is not the norm.

young women [reapers].²¹[21] Your eyes shall be on [that] field where you shall reap, and you should go after them [the young women]. Have I not commanded the boys that they are not to touch you? And if you shall get thirsty, you may go to the vessels and drink from [the water] that the boys have drawn.” ([Ruth 2:8-9](#))

Boaz’ s repetitive and persuasive speech appears designed, first and foremost, to convince Ruth not to depart from his field. If Ruth had already been reaping, why would she need to be persuaded three times to remain? It seems that Ruth has waited long enough, endured enough in Boaz’ s field. The overseer has treated her contemptuously, the boys were touching her inappropriately, and the day has progressed without Ruth accomplishing that which she had set out to do: obtaining food for herself and Naomi. Ruth is ready to leave and try her luck elsewhere. Boaz’ s placating words are meant to appease her, to convince her not to leave, to kindly, but insistently, draw her back to his fields, by ensuring her safety and her ability to obtain food.

And she fell on her face and she prostrated herself to the ground. And she said to him, “ Why have I found favor in your eyes to recognize me, and I am but a stranger?” ([Ruth 2:10](#))

In light of the above scenario, Ruth’ s extreme gratitude for Boaz’ s kindness is not at all disproportionate. No one has yet been kind to her in Bethlehem, and her initial apprehensive attitude has proven to be warranted. Indeed, Ruth’ s reference here to her original words to Naomi reflects her dreadful disappointment. Ruth left Naomi with the meager hope that she will succeed in finding someone “ in whose eyes I shall find favor.” Nevertheless, by the time Ruth encounters Boaz, she is so amazed that someone is treating her kindly that she repeats her own words in astonishment: “ Why have I *found favor in your eyes* to recognize me, and I am but a stranger?”

²¹ [21] I will briefly note here Boaz’ s usage of the word *davak* as part of his extraordinary kindness to Ruth. This word draws our attention to Ruth’ s previous unique decision to cleave to Naomi, rather than perfunctorily kissing her goodbye like Orpah. Boaz’ s reference to this action is meant to explain that his kindness to Ruth is deserved and not arbitrary. It is also the first instance of an important theme in this book of reward and punishment. We will examine this idea at length in a later *shiur*.

Indeed, why *is* Boaz different? Why is he kind to Ruth, when all of the townspeople treat her so badly? I have already noted Boaz' s extraordinary character, his generosity, and his ability to recognize the other. We will see, however, in next week' s *shiur*, that Boaz himself will attribute his actions to Ruth' s extraordinary character, her generosity, and her willingness to accompany Naomi and join the Jewish nation.

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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