

MEGILLAT RUTH
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Dedicated in memory of Joseph Y. Nadler, z'l, Yosef ben Yechezkel Tzvi.

Shiur #23: Boaz's Extraordinary Restraint

And he said, "Who are you?" And she said, "I am Ruth your maidservant. Spread your cloak over your maidservant for you are a redeemer." And he said, "Blessed are you to God, my daughter, for you have shown more kindness in the latter [case] than in the first [case], in that you did not follow the young men whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not be afraid. Everything that you say I will do for you, because all of my people in the gate know that you are a woman of valor. And now, even though truly I am a *go'el*, there is a *go'el* who is closer than I. Lie here tonight and in the morning, if he shall redeem you, good, he has redeemed you, but if he shall not desire to redeem you, I myself shall redeem you, I swear by God. Lie until the morning." (*Ruth* 3:9-13)

Boaz: A Virtuous Man

How does Boaz successfully neutralize the sexually suggestive scenario contrived by Naomi? We have discussed the significance of Boaz's initial query at the crucial moment he awakens. His long speech that follows Ruth's self-identification further offsets the charged atmosphere. Boaz blesses Ruth in the name of God, affectionately refers to her twice as "my daughter," and terms her a woman of valor (*eshet chayil*). He speaks of her sterling reputation among the townspeople and transposes the subject of her request to a legal one, in which Ruth's *go'el* will be determined by proper juridical procedure. Boaz mentions the word *go'el* six times in quick succession, usually to refer to the other, closer relative. In this way, Boaz indicates that his own desires are not the focus of the discussion; he is seeking the correct legal route. When Boaz urges Ruth to lodge there for the night, he uses the verb *lini* (to lodge), a word that has no sexual connotations anywhere in *Tanakh*. Boaz even purifies the word *shakhav*, employing it to indicate that Ruth should lie until the morning under his chaste protection. In the morning, Boaz will express his interest in protecting Ruth's reputation: "And he said, 'It should not become known that a woman came to the threshing floor'" (*Ruth* 3:14).

Nowhere is Boaz's moral character as evident as in this scene. And yet, Boaz attributes his actions to Ruth's extraordinary character, her *chessed*. His very ability to understand that Ruth's suggestive appearance is an act of *chessed* is itself

extraordinary.^[1] Instead of assuming that Ruth has pursued him for her own advantage or because of her Moavite promiscuity, Boaz recognizes the act of sacrifice that accompanies her bold seduction.^[2] Her act causes Boaz to think more of Ruth, not less.

To make it clear that his conduct is modeled after hers, Boaz laces his language with allusions to Ruth's magnanimity towards Naomi. His words, "Everything that you say I will do for you" (*Ruth* 3:11), recall Ruth's words to Naomi: "Everything that you tell me, I will do" (*Ruth* 3:5). Boaz's kindly offer that she lodge the night in his threshing floor (*lini ha-layla*) linguistically recalls Ruth's declaration of unwavering loyalty to her mother-in-law, "Where you lodge, I will lodge" (*ba-asher talini alin*) (*Ruth* 1:15). Just as we saw in chapter two, this linguistic usage suggests that Boaz acts as he does because of Ruth's behavior, that his conduct is inspired by hers.

Nevertheless, the hero of this chapter is not Ruth, but Boaz.^[3] Were it not for his restraint, the chapter would have assumed an entirely different trajectory, one that would have compromised the moral purity of the situation. Not only does Boaz conquer his own desires, but he turns this scene into one of joyful anticipation, assuring Ruth that he will immediately attend to her future. In this *shiur*, we will examine the power and source of Boaz's restraint, as well as its significance within a broader biblical context.

Boaz's Restraint

Midrashim offer various elucidations of Boaz's conduct in this chapter, all of which point to Boaz's honorable character. Prior to the moment in which Boaz exhibits restraint in the face of Ruth's seduction, several *midrashim* depict Boaz battling the rampant sexual immorality of his generation. In answering the question as to why Boaz, a wealthy landowner, would sleep in his threshing floor, several *midrashim* offers the following explanation:^[4]

Boaz was a leader of his generation and you say [that he slept] "at the edge of the piles"? He said to him, [Boaz slept there] because this generation was steeped in sexual immorality^[5] and would give the recompense to the prostitutes from the threshing floor. (*Ruth Rabba* 5:15)^[6]

Some sources observe that Boaz's primary character trait is in fact this pious restraint, which confers upon him the status of a *tzaddik*:^[7]

Boaz... is a completely righteous man of strength. He guarded the covenant when his desires attacked him. [Therefore] he is called a man of strong valor (*gibor chayil*) (*Ruth* 2:1). Truly he was a *tzaddik*... And he is called Boaz because the pleasures of the flesh and the beauty of the body attacked him... and he did not weaken.^[8] (*Zohar Chaddash, Ruth* 43b)

Textually, Boaz's virtuous character is evident when he awakens to Ruth's presence and does not behave as anticipated. What enables Boaz to resist this all-too-

human temptation? Noting the difficulty of Boaz's task, some *midrashim* maintain that Boaz carefully takes an oath in 3:13 in order to bind himself to his decision not to succumb to his ardor:^[9]

“I swear by God” (*Ruth* 3:13). This teaches that [Boaz] swore to his passion (*yitzro*) that was prosecuting him and saying to him, “You are single and she is single. The hour has come for you to cohabit with her.” Immediately the righteous man swore, “I swear by God that I will not touch her.” (*Bamidbar Rabba* 15:16)^[10]

According to this approach, Boaz does not trust himself to continue to overcome his passions. He therefore takes a binding oath in the name of God, which is designed to assist him in the difficult task of upholding his honorable intentions.^[11]

Shimshon and Boaz

Midrashim abound with admiration and praise for Boaz's piety and forbearance. He is deemed greater than Yosef in his restraint (*Sanhedrin* 19b) and the diametrical opposite of Potiphar's wife (*Bereishit Rabba* 87). One intriguing midrash contrasts Boaz's restraint to Shimshon's weakness:

“Good in the eyes of God is he who escapes from her and the sinner shall be ensnared by her” (*Kohelet* 7:26). “Good” – This is Boaz, who said to Ruth, “Sleep here tonight” (*Ruth* 3:13). And “the sinner shall be ensnared by her” – this is Shimshon. (*Tanchuma Naso* 4)

This midrash is aware of the temptations that attend the scenario in *Ruth* chapter 3, noting that Boaz succeeded where Shimshon failed. Methodologically, a rabbinic interpretation that draws a parallel between two biblical characters tends to hint at a deeper connection. I will therefore explore a broader comparison between Boaz and Shimshon, both of whom function in a leadership capacity during the period of the Judges. We shall see that Shimshon's unrestrained passions prevent him from extricating the nation from the period of the Judges, while Boaz's honorable behavior leads to the reversal of this catastrophic period.

Shimshon's Weakness

Occurring on the backdrop of increasingly deficient leadership, the narrative of Shimshon's birth offers unexpected hope. Shimshon is conceived subsequent to an angelic oracle, which confers upon him the responsibility of lifelong Nazirite status and designates him the military savior of Israel (*Shofetim* 13:3-7). As the story progresses, the spirit of God alights upon Shimshon at critical moments, allotting him supernatural strength (*Shofetim* 14:6, 19; 15, 14). In his divinely supported role as leader, Shimshon is well-positioned to reverse the negative trajectory of the period of the Judges. His Nazirite status suggests his potential religious leadership, and his passions and strength may be employed to unite the people. In this way, Shimshon can guide the

nation to improve its social and religious infrastructure, and subsequently extricate them from their dire military situation.

A midrash discerns Shimshon's great potential, suggesting that he had the potential to be the national savior, the *Mashiach*:

Yaakov our father saw [Shimshon] and thought that he was the King Messiah. When he saw that he died, he said, "Even this [one] died! [Only] in your salvation I have hope, God!" (*Bereishit* 49:17) (*BereishitRabba* 98)

To our great disappointment, Shimshon does not achieve these lofty aims. Despite a promising scene in which Shimshon's thirst propels him to pray to God, recognize God's role in his numerous military triumphs, and assume leadership for twenty years (*Shofetim* 15:18-20), Shimshon's passions ultimately overpower him and lead to his captivity and failure.^[12] Immediately following this description of his successful leadership, Shimshon goes to Azza, where he sees a prostitute, sleeps with her, and is discovered by the townspeople, who plot all night to kill the errant Judge of Israel (*Shofetim* 16:1-2).^[13]

In a regrettable reversal of our expectations, Shimshon's actions do not pull us out of this dark period in Israel's history. The fact that Shimshon saves himself from the Gazans at the midpoint of the night (*ba-chatziha-layla*) is an ironic indication of missed opportunity. This propitious (and rare) phrase evokes recollections of the final, decisive plague that led directly to redemption from Egypt (*Shemot* 12:29). This was the event that extracted Israel from the darkness of slavery into the bright morning of freedom. In contrast, Shimshon's actions at this turning point of the night do not lead to redemption. Instead, Shimshon uses that moment to summon up a supreme act of strength in order to extricate himself from a predicament of his own making. Uprooting the gate of Gaza, along with its doorposts and bolt, Shimshon bears them on his shoulders until he arrives in Hebron. There, he deposits them unceremoniously on the ground, and, without uttering a word, continues on his way (*Shofetim* 16:3).

The final episode in Shimshon's narrative is likewise disturbing. Shimshon's passion for Delila induces him to sell his soul to her, and he reveals to her the secret of his strength (*Shofetim* 16:17).^[14] This secret is, of course, not his to relinquish. Moreover, the surrender of this national treasure leads not merely to Shimshon's capture but to the demise of the hopeful prospect that Shimshon could rescue the nation from their increasingly bleak military situation. In Shimshon's final moments, blinded and subjected to mockery by his Philistine masters, he prays for personal vengeance, places his hands upon the supporting pillars, and collapses the house upon the Philistine officials and civilians (*Shofetim* 16:28-30). Many Philistines lie dead alongside Shimshon, whose death spells the end of leadership in the book of *Shofetim* and the termination of any hope of a leader who can reverse the downward spiral of this book.

And yet, parallel to the book of *Shofetim* is a contemporaneous book, the book of *Ruth*. In this book, another man, himself a leader, is challenged to overcome his own passions in the middle of the night. Ruth's arrival in his field presents Boaz with a critical choice that will determine his destiny. If he succumbs to his passions, Boaz will be similar to Shimshon, and presumably his lack of accomplishments in the national arena will mirror those of Shimshon. Nevertheless, in a remarkable display of heroic forbearance and great piety, Boaz resists temptation and transforms this suggestive scenario. In so doing, he reverses several types of societal malfunction that characterize the period of the Judges, including the rampant sexual decadence.

There are several linguistic parallels between Shimshon's disastrous exploit in Gaza and Boaz's encounter at the threshing floor, suggesting a deliberate contrast between Boaz's restraint and Shimshon's weakness. Both events take place *ba-chatzi ha-layla*,^[15] at the midpoint of the night, a moment ripe with the potential to actualize the redemption, symbolized by the dawn.^[16] A second literary parallel occurs with the rare word *va-yilafet*, which appears only in these two narratives.^[17] Rashi notes the parallel occurrence of this word, cross-referencing its appearance both in the Shimshon story and in *Ruth*.^[18] This word probably means "to twist" or "to grasp" with a twisting motion.^[19] Perhaps Boaz grasped Ruth to identify who was lying beside him.^[20] Alternatively, he twisted from one side to the other,^[21] perhaps due to his fear or his attempt to physically prevent himself from succumbing to the lure of a woman lying by his side. In any case, this same word describes Shimshon's final, dramatic act. In grasping the two pillars, right and left (*va-yilpot et shnei amudei hatavekh*), Shimshon brings the house crashing to the ground.

Shimshon's act of bringing the house down has been widely acclaimed. Indeed, it leads to the demise of 3,000 of Israel's enemies. However, it should be noted that bringing the house down is not in itself a constructive act. The fragile nature of the house is a lamentable theme of the book of *Shofetim*. In several narratives, a threat looms over "the house," and it ceases to be a secure or stable structure. This appears to be a metaphor for the general instability that reigns at this time, threatening the continuity of the nation. For example, in the story of Yiftach, when his daughter emerges from the house, she consequently dooms her father's house and line (*Shofetim* 11:34). It is no coincidence that, following this incident, the men of Ephraim threaten to burn down Yiftach's house (*Shofetim* 12:1).^[22] A second example is the tragic concubine, who cannot enter the house. The image of her limp hand reaching over the threshold of her host's house (*Shofetim* 19:27) indicates the failure of society to protect its members.^[23] This story results in a civil war in which the nation declares that until they have excised the evil from their midst, "No man shall return to his house!" (*Shofetim* 20:8). It may very well be that until this evil is uprooted, there is simply no house to which they can return, for the house has begun to corrode.

Indeed, in the book of *Shofetim*, the house appears to be a metaphor for a solid and well-established society, which is beginning to collapse. Shimshon, whose hollow act does not result in the defeat of the Philistines,^[24] much less the salvation of Israel,

does not reinforce the house of Israel. In a stunning symbol of his own unfulfilled potential, Shimshon collapses the Philistine house upon himself.

Boaz provides the solution for Shimshon's failures. In contrast to Shimshon, Boaz builds and fortifies houses. His marriage to Ruth will be described with a fivefold reference to the word "house" (*Ruth* 4:11-12). This marriage is not simply about the construction of Boaz's own house; it also strengthens the house of Israel by paving the way for the eventual building of the house of David, alongside the house of sanctity, the Temple.^[25] Boaz's act of restraint and his regard for the other allows him to build houses, and thereby bring about the solution to the book of *Shofetim*, a task at which Shimshon failed. It is intriguing that aside from Shimshon's destruction of the pillars, the only other reference to a house that has a right and a left pillar is the Temple (*Melakhim* 7:21). These two pillars, which function as the mainstay for supporting the Temple structure, are actually given names: one is called Yakhin and the other, quite significantly, is Boaz.^[26]

By exhibiting leadership and restraint, Boaz is able to begin the repair of the period of the Judges. He builds his own house, facilitating the beginning of the restoration of the house of Israel. Most significantly, Boaz paves the path to the construction of the Temple, as indicated by the pillar which bears his name.

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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^[1] In addition to Boaz's sexual restraint, he also does not get angry at Ruth. A midrash recognizes how unlikely Boaz's reaction is:

It is written (*Mishlei* 29), "The fear of man proves to be a snare, but whoever puts his trust in God is kept safe." The fear (*cherdat*) is that which Ruth imposed upon Boaz, as it says, "And the man trembled and he grasped." [This is] "The fear of man proves to be a snare." It should have been that [Boaz] would have cursed her. However, "whoever puts his trust in God is kept safe." These [words, Boaz] put in his heart and he blessed her. (*Bereishit Rabba* 67:1)

^[2] Unlike Boaz, Naomi misconstrued Ruth's initial act of *chessed*, assuming that it was self-serving (*Ruth* 1:11-13). Likewise, we suggested that Naomi suspected that Ruth's Moavite background would enable her to carry out Naomi's immodest plan. The Targum (*Ruth* 3:10) reads into Boaz's words praise of Ruth's abandonment of her Moavite customs: "You have made your latter good deed better than your former one, the former being that you became a

proselyte and the latter that you have made yourself as a woman who waits for a young brother-in-law until the time that he is grown up, in that you have not gone after young men to commit fornication with them, whether poor or rich.”

^[3] One way in which this point is indicated literarily is by constructing the narrative from Boaz’s viewpoint. Note especially *Ruth* 3:8, where Boaz awakens and finds a woman at his feet. In this way, we are mainly focused on Boaz’s reactions, his response and the manner in which he reacts to the situation. His control over the narrative events is thereby established.

^[4] Variations of this midrash appear in *Tanchuma Behar* 8; *Yalkut Shimoni* 605. The association between a threshing floor and licentiousness appears to be based on *Hoshea* 9:1.

^[5] We have noted on several occasions that Boaz’s behavior is in direct opposition to the widespread sexual impropriety of the period of the *Shofetim*.

^[6] The intent of this midrash appears to be that Boaz tries to prevent the sexually immoral behavior prevalent in his society.

^[7] See also the Targum on *Ruth* 3:8.

^[8] The name Boaz may be understood to mean *be-oz*, “with strength” or “in him is strength.”

^[9] It is worthwhile to examine the textual reason that Boaz takes an oath. Presumably, he does so to reassure Ruth of the sincerity of his intent. Moreover, oaths are a sign of authority and confidence, taken by people who believe that they have the ability to carry out these oaths. For more on this subject, see my book, *Promises to Keep: The Oath in Biblical Narrative* (2008).

^[10] See also *Ruth Rabba* 6:8; *Vayikra Rabba* 23; Rashi on *Ruth* 3:13.

^[11] The above cited rabbinic sources suggest that two others used a similar mechanism to prevent themselves from sin: Yosef, when he was tempted to sleep with Potiphar’s wife (*Bereishit* 39:9), and Boaz’s descendant David, who took an oath to keep himself from harming Saul, despite the temptation (see *I Shemuel* 24:6; 26:10). In the case of Yosef, the oath itself is not evident in the verse.

^[12] While the extent of Shimshon’s success is still debatable, there is little doubt that Shimshon’s ultimate capture and demise is not a noble end for a leader in Israel, a point noted sharply by the Rashbam (*Bereishit* 49:15) as well as the Ramban (*Bereishit* 49:18). More to the point, the Ramban notes that Shimshon is the last of the Judges, and his death precipitates a leaderless period characterized by societal chaos and corruption, both religiously and socially.

^[13] Several rabbinic sources regard this particular episode as the beginning of Shimshon’s downfall. See e.g. *Sota* 9b.

^[14] *Shofetim* 16:16 indicates that Delila torments Shimshon until he desires death. Although the nature of the torment is unspecified, rabbinic tradition revealingly regards Delilah’s act as sexual torment that Shimshon is unable to withstand (see *Sota* 9b and Radak loc. cit.).

^[15] The fact that this phrase appears only in three narratives (the plague of the firstborn, Shimshon in Azza, and Boaz on the threshing floor) renders this correlation between Shimshon and Boaz all the more compelling.

^[16] I will examine the underlying idea of redemption in the *Megilla*, and specifically in chapter three, in a later *shiur*.

^[17] In *Shofetim* 16:29, the word is vocalized *va-yilpot*. The consonants, however, are identical.

^[18] Rashi’s observation is based on a midrash (*Tanchuma Bo* 16).

^[19] Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1951), p. 542, notes that two cognate Semitic languages have a similar word. In Arabic, this word means to twist or wring, while in Assyrian, the word *lapat* means to overthrow.

^[20] See e.g. *Tanchuma, Behar* 8.

^[21] Ibn Ezra, *Ruth* 3:8.

^[22] The irony of this incident should not be lost on the reader. For all intents and purposes, Yiftach’s house has already been extinguished.

^[23] This incident is precipitated by the fact that no one from the city of Giv'ah is willing to invite these guests into his *house* (*Shofetim* 19:15, 18)! Note that the word *bayit*, or house, is a key word in the narrative, appearing nineteen times in *Shofetim* 19 alone!

^[24] The Philistines will recoup and emerge victorious in the next battle against Israel in *I Shemuel* 4.

^[25] Shimshon's failure in this regard is reinforced by the rabbinic tradition that the tribe of Dan is meant to be partially responsible for the construction of the Temple (see e.g. *Tanchuma, Ki Tisa* 13). Shimshon is, of course, from the tribe of Dan.

^[26] It is intriguing that while most rabbinic sources associate the name *yakhin* (related to the word *khon*, meaning firmly established) with the house of David, which is well-established, the commentary attributed to Rashi in *I Divrei Ha-Yamim* 3:17 suggests that the pillar named *yakhin* is attributed to the persona of Shimshon. This is because Shimshon destroys pillars upon which the house is established (*asher ha-bayit nakhon aleihem – Shofetim* 16:29). I would maintain an opposite approach that coheres with the general thrust of this *shiur*. Shimshon *could* have been the pillar that the Temple rested upon. However, because he collapses the house and destroys pillars by which the house is supported, Shimshon's name is erased from the pillars and replaced by a generic word for support, namely, *yakhin*.