

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

Shiur #24: "I am Ruth:" Self-Identity and Transformation

Boaz and Ruth: A Love Story?

Boaz has indicated repeatedly that his acts of kindness toward Ruth have been motivated by Ruth's piety. Nevertheless, we must still examine the nature of their relationship. Is there any romantic interest between them at any point in the *Megilla*?

While some biblical interpreters do read this narrative as a love story,^[1] the *Megilla* itself consistently and meticulously avoids the customary biblical hints of love or romance between Ruth and Boaz.^[2] We find respect, admiration, and gratitude, but not passionate feelings.^[3] More often than not, Boaz refers to Ruth as "my daughter," even when she appears before him in the fields in the middle of the night, perfumed, dressed up, and ready to obey his every command. On the flip side, Ruth refers to Boaz as "my master" and to herself as his maidservant (*Ruth* 2:13).^[4] This seems a far cry from love. Most strikingly, the word love (*ahav*) never appears in the *Megilla* to describe the relationship between Ruth and Boaz.^[5] Moreover, Ruth is introduced without a physical description, indicating, perhaps, that the story does not revolve around physical attraction between Ruth and Boaz or any blossoming love or passion.^[6] In fact, chapter two ends without Boaz ever approaching Ruth again. Instead, Ruth returns to live with Naomi, who takes unusually bold measures in an attempt to awaken Boaz's interest in Ruth.

Boaz's response to Ruth's bold request, "Spread your cloak over your maidservant," is likewise tepid, if unfailingly kind. While he admits, "I am a *go'el*," Boaz continues, "There is a *go'el* who is closer than I... if he shall redeem you, good, he has redeemed you, but if he shall not desire to redeem you, I myself shall redeem you" (*Ruth* 3:12-13). This does not sound like the speech of someone who ardently desires to marry Ruth. If the *go'el* marries Ruth, Boaz considers that well and good.^[7] If not, Boaz is committed to discharging his duty for the deserving Moavite.

Indeed, the *Megilla* emphasizes that the relationship of Boaz and Ruth is founded on their willingness to fulfill their responsibilities, even at great personal expense. Each of them has a good reason not to want to marry the other. Boaz could rightly hesitate because Ruth is a Moavite. As we will see from the panicked refusal of the closest relative to redeem Ruth, it is not easy to break the social barrier and marry a Moavite:

And the *go'el* said, "I cannot redeem [her] for myself, lest I will destroy my inheritance! You redeem, you yourself, my redemption, for I cannot redeem!" (*Ruth* 4:6)

From Ruth's standpoint, Boaz is undesirable because of his advanced age. As part of his response to Ruth's seduction, Boaz explicitly acknowledges that his wealth does not adequately compensate for this disadvantage:

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,^[8] whether poor or rich." (*Ruth* 3:10)

Nevertheless, both Ruth and Boaz agree to marry the other because of their commitment and responsibility. Ruth agrees to marry Boaz out of a selfless desire to support Naomi, as may be seen by her willingness to accede to Naomi's immodest proposal. Boaz declares his willingness to marry Ruth within the context of his assumption of familial responsibility (*Ruth* 4:5, 10).^[9] It is likely that the *Megilla* avoids any romantic insinuations in order to convey the primary objective of these dedicated characters.

Ruth's Redemption

Ruth's resolute actions in the field are accompanied by just one speech:

"I am Ruth, your maidservant. Spread your wings^[10] over your maidservant, for you are a redeemer." (*Ruth* 3:9)

Ruth's words to Boaz are somewhat of a surprise. After all, Naomi, who orchestrated this event, never instructed Ruth to speak. Naomi directed Ruth to action, which is meant to spur Boaz to speak (*Ruth* 3:4): "And he shall tell you what you are to do." The scene does not play itself out in the passive manner that Naomi had designed, partly, as we noted, because of Boaz. Nevertheless, credit must also be given to Ruth for taking initiative where Naomi's instructions end.^[11]

In answer to Boaz's query, Ruth identifies herself by name, "I am Ruth, your maidservant." As noted in previous *shiurim*, Boaz's query gives Ruth the opportunity to identify herself in a situation in which she has presented herself to him as a sexual object, turning her from object to subject. In prompting Ruth to employ the word "*anokhi*," Boaz allows Ruth to express self-definition, a profound recognition of her I-ness.^[12] More to the point, at this moment, Boaz actually offers Ruth the opportunity to say her name. This act is a momentous contribution to the broader goals of the *Megilla*. One of the ultimate objectives of the *Megilla* is to restore the name of Machlon, who has died childless. This mirrors the national goal of restoring Israel's national identity, which is endangered by societal malfunction at this time. When Boaz facilitates Ruth's ability to proclaim her name and regain her identity, he launches the solution for the

predicament presented in the *Megilla*. Simultaneously, this moment points toward the solution for the period of the Judges.

Following her self-introduction, Ruth continues by informing Boaz of his role as redeemer. Is this a request, a demand, or an appeal? Does Ruth present herself as a humble petitioner or as one who has taken charge of the situation? It is difficult to say. On the one hand, Ruth's reference to herself as maidservant is deferential. On the other hand, Ruth's demeanor is bold and confident, replete with the sense that she requests no more than she rightfully deserves.

Perhaps one key to unraveling Ruth's comportment at this point in the story is by comparing Ruth's self-reference in chapter three to her deferential self-references in chapter two (all marked by the use of the word "*anokhi*"). Ruth's first address to Boaz includes a self-description of her foreign status, indicating her complete lack of belonging (*Ruth* 2:10): "And I am (*va-anokhi*) but a stranger!" Later in the chapter, Ruth responds to Boaz's kindness by defining herself by what she is not, viewing herself as unworthy even of being Boaz's maidservant (*shifkha*): "I (*anokhi*) cannot [even] be likened to one of your maidservants!" (*Ruth* 2:13). In chapter 3, Ruth's self-definition appears to have undergone a radical transformation. Ruth's presentation of herself (*anokhi*) is now a positive one. She proclaims her own name and her own definition, even if it is a lowly one – "your maidservant," *amatekha*.^[13] Ruth follows this self-identification with a bold request that Boaz spread his wings over "his maidservant." Ruth's answer is therefore indicative of her new self-identity, which has gradually transformed during the course of the narrative.

What is the source of Ruth's newfound self-assurance? It is noteworthy that Ruth's speech invokes, rephrases, and weaves together two speeches which she herself previously heard. The first part of Ruth's speech is taken from Boaz, who had described Ruth as one who has come to seek refuge under *the wings of God* (*Ruth* 2:12). Ruth recasts Boaz's perception, suggesting that Boaz is the one who should *spread his wings* over her. In this way, Ruth shifts responsibility from God directly onto Boaz.^[14]

The second half of Ruth's speech derives from Naomi's speech. Upon Ruth's return from the fields, Naomi informed Ruth that Boaz is a potential redeemer, proclaiming enthusiastically that "the man is close[ly related] to us, he is one of our redeemers!" (*Ruth* 2:20). In her own speech, Ruth tones down Naomi's declaration, eschewing any personal pronoun in the word *go'el*. Ruth does not say "you are *my* redeemer," but rather, "you are a redeemer." Ruth seems uncertain, reasoning that an impersonal allusion to Boaz's responsibility in this matter may be received by him more readily. Like Naomi, Ruth also does not use a definite article, avoiding the claim that Boaz is *the* redeemer. Nevertheless, Ruth rephrases Naomi's explicit acknowledgement that Boaz is merely one of her redeemers (*mi-go'eleinu*). It stands to reason that Ruth regards Boaz as her only hope, the only man in Bethlehem confident enough, pious enough, and strong enough to withstand the societal inclination to ostracize the Moavite girl who has accompanied Naomi. Ruth's careful weaving of the

words of both Boaz and Naomi into her statement suggests that her newfound confidence is derived from her two patrons, who have given her hope that her future is not entirely bleak.

“All of My People in the Gate Know that You are a Woman of Valor”

The nocturnal events on the threshing floor are the climactic events of *Megillat Ruth*. From the moment that Boaz allows Ruth the opportunity to identify herself by name (immediately followed by his guarantee of her impending redemption), the narrative pivots and begins its movement toward resolution.^[15] Boaz’s speech containing his reassuring promises also conveys his respect and admiration for Ruth:

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 which 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 the redeemer shall redeem you, good, but if he shall not desire to redeem you, I myself shall redeem you, I swear by God. Lie until the morning.” (*Ruth* 3:10-13)

The encounter between Boaz and Ruth takes place in a private setting. Unlike previous chapters, this episode takes place under the cover of darkness, where two people are accountable only to each other. It is significant, therefore, that Boaz deliberately broadens the scene, including in his speech the opinions of the people in the gate and focusing Ruth’s attention outward, to the public domain. In conjuring up outside parties,^[16] Boaz suggests that their private conversation has public ramifications.

According to Boaz, he is not alone in his respect for Ruth. All of the people in the gate know that Ruth is a woman of valor. Whether the “people in the gate” refer to the multitudes who stream through the gates of the city on a daily basis^[17] or to the elite of the city who sit in the gate to judge or otherwise guide the people,^[18] Boaz’s words convey Ruth’s growing acceptance. This mirrors Boaz’s declaration in the previous chapter (*Ruth* 2:11): “It has surely been told to me all that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband.” Who told Boaz of Ruth’s acts of kindness? Boaz’s words indicate that people are discussing Ruth’s character. And now the people of the gate also know of Ruth’s sterling character. Ruth’s reputation appears to be rapidly growing.

While it is possible that Boaz’s impressions are accurate and the people have begun to appreciate Ruth, it is also possible that Boaz’s assumptions are a reflection of his own attitude. His perception of Ruth’s behavior may be so positive that he transfers it outward, assuming that everyone else regards Ruth with the same respect and admiration that she deserves. In either case, this ostensible knowledge has certainly not induced the townspeople to assist Ruth, nor even to ensure that she is treated with

respect. Consider Ruth's experiences in the field of Bethlehem: The attitude of the foreman, the violence of the harvesters, and the alienation which Ruth experiences do not reflect well upon the people of Bethlehem. The knowledge of the people in the gate will also come up short, considering the *go'el's* upcoming blanket refusal to act upon his responsibilities toward this woman of valor (*Ruth* 4:6).

In the final analysis, whatever the people know or think about Ruth matters little. It is only Boaz who acts upon this knowledge to provide Ruth with sustenance and security.

One thing is certain: Ruth's reputation is important to Boaz; he often peers outward to contemplate the attitude of the public. This will have important ramifications for Ruth herself, as Boaz's concern for her reputation and recognition will bear fruit in the final chapter of the *Megilla*.

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] See, for example, R. Yaakov Medan, *Hope from the Depths: A Study in Megillat Ruth* (2007), pp. 36-37 [Hebrew], where he refers several times to the love between Ruth and Boaz. Many contemporary biblical scholars likewise treat the story as a romance. See, e.g., Robert Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, 1988), p. 1 ff.; Yair Zakovich, *Ruth (Mikra Le-Yisrael, 1990)*, p. 3.

^[2] Rabbinic sources appear to mirror this textual omission. Although exegetes offer various possibilities regarding the nature of Boaz's initial query regarding Ruth, I have not seen rabbinic sources which suggest that Boaz's inquiry is of a romantic nature. A midrash suggests that when Ruth says that Boaz recognizes her, this is really a prophecy that she and Boaz will have a conjugal relationship (*Ruth Rabba* 5:2). Nevertheless, even this midrash does not suggest that Ruth actually *desires* this relationship, only that she expects it.

^[3] It is likewise intriguing that the text is utterly silent on the matter of Ruth's feelings for Machlon. We do not see her mourn and are not privy to any distress on her part over his death (in contrast to Naomi's passionate bitterness). Ruth's emotional world does not appear to be an important part of the story of her widowhood and search for marriage. The striking exception to this is, of course, Ruth's love for Naomi, which is explicitly attested to by the women in *Ruth* 4:15.

^[4] This itself does not preclude the possibility of romantic intentions. See, for example, the story of Avigail and David in *I Shemuel* 25, where these terms are used frequently and the story ends in marriage (see especially *I Shemuel* 25:42). It may, however, be argued that that marriage is also not founded on passion or love.

^[5] The word *ahav* only appears in *Ruth* 4:15 to describe Ruth's love for Naomi, which has motivated her throughout the narrative.

^[6] Indeed, the omission of a physical description is unusual for a woman in the Bible, especially one whose entire story is occupied with her quest for a spouse and children. Rabbinic sources do, however, allude to Ruth's beauty (*Ruth Rabba* 4:4; Ibn Ezra, *Ruth* 3:10).

^[7] A well-known midrashic idea reads the word "*to'v*" in *Ruth* 3:13 as a proper noun, rendering it the actual name of the *go'el* (e.g. *Ruth Rabba* 6:6). This is such a commonplace that *Chazal* often simply refer to

the *go'el* by the proper name *Tov* (e.g. *Ruth Zuta* 4:1, 6). It is possible that this midrashic idea develops because *Chazal* preferred to assume that Boaz would not be pleased about another man marrying the righteous Ruth, such that Boaz would use the word “good” in that regard.

^[8] The word *bachurim* is etymologically related to the word *bachar*, which implies select or chosen men (e.g. *Bamidbar* 11:28; *I Shemuel* 9:2). In a similar vein, the word is employed to connote youth and strength (e.g. *Mishlei* 20:29), and perhaps also virility (*Yeshayahu* 62:5).

^[9] Nevertheless, throughout all the kindnesses Boaz does for Ruth in chapters two and three, he never actually refers to his family; Boaz does not mention Elimelech, Naomi, or their family. He focuses solely on Ruth, praising her actions and her deserving character.

^[10] The word “*kanaf*” properly means an extremity, something on the edge. In *Tanakh*, this word appears with the following meanings: wings (e.g. *Shemot* 19:4; *Yeshayahu* 10:14), and the edge (hem) of a garment (e.g. *Devarim* 22:12; *I Shemuel* 15:27; 24:5, 6, 12; *Yechezkel* 5:3). It can also mean the ends of the earth (e.g. *Yeshayahu* 11:12; *Iyov* 37:3). For our purposes, either wings or the edge of the garment may be pertinent to Ruth’s statement, inasmuch as both contain a figurative expression alluding to Boaz’s protection, presumably through marriage. I have chosen to translate the word as wings, both because of its plural form in this verse and in order to correlate between Ruth’s words and Boaz’s reference, ostensibly to God’s wings, in *Ruth* 2:12.

^[11] It is of profound significance that Ruth informs Boaz that he is the *go'el*. Ruth draws this information from Naomi’s speech in *Ruth* 2:20. Nevertheless, it is perhaps even more significant that Naomi completely omits this designation of Boaz when she sends Ruth to the fields. In fact, as we observed in previous *shiurim*, Naomi does not seem to have in mind *geula* or the attending legal/halakhic implications, but rather a seduction of Boaz, in accordance with biblical precedents. This is why Ruth embarks on a nocturnal, surreptitious journey rather than approaching Boaz in a more straightforward manner.

^[12] This is complemented by Boaz’s forthcoming statement of his own self-definition as a potential redeemer for Ruth, “*ki [im] go'el anokhi*” (*Ruth* 3:12).

^[13] Scholars have debated whether the term “*ama*” (used by Ruth in 3:9) indicates a woman with a socially higher position than a *shifkha*, representing a similar shift in Ruth’s self-perception. See e.g. Jack Sassoon, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (1979), pp. 53-54. The evidence does not necessarily bear out this distinction, as may be seen from the interchangeable use of these terms in most cases in *Tanakh*. For a notable exception in which the usage of these terms may indicate that there is a significant difference between them, see *I Shemuel* 25:41.

^[14] The fact that Boaz places Ruth’s fate in God’s hands, while Ruth shifts the responsibility to Boaz, is reminiscent of the manner in which Chana battles the passivity of the righteous men in her life, Elkana and Eli. In that story, Chana’s insistence that each individual must assume responsibility for the situation at hand rather than relying exclusively on God changes the course of the period of the Judges. Like Chana, Ruth reminds the righteous Boaz that he must assume personal responsibility for her situation, rather than passively relying on God to reward Ruth.

^[15] Obviously, the turning point in the story depends on how one understands the main goal of the story. For those who view the relationship between Ruth and Boaz as a budding romance, the revelation of the existence of a closer relative is disconcerting and upsets the major goal of this book (as noted, this approach is typical of most modern biblical scholars). In this reading, the climax of the book must occur in chapter four, after the *go'el* has announced that he will not marry Ruth and Boaz is then free to do so. Because I do not regard the primary objective to be marriage specifically between Ruth and Boaz, but rather continuity for Naomi’s family and the restoration of the name to the individuals and the nation, I do not regard the information regarding the *go'el* as prolonging the story’s tension. In my mind, the tension in the narrative abates completely once Boaz offers Ruth identity and promises that he will facilitate her marriage to one man or another.

^[16] Conjuring up outside parties also has the effect of defusing the sexually charged atmosphere. We discussed this topic at length in the previous *shiur*.

^[17] This seems to be the usage for this term in *Ovadia* 1:3 and *Micha* 1:9.

^[18] See Targum, *Ruth* 3:11. The elders who sit in judgment at the gate of the city in the next chapter (*Ruth* 4:1) support this reading.