

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

Shiur #27: Ruth and Naomi: Resolution

And she came to her mother-in-law. And she said, "Who are you, my daughter?" And she told her all that the man did to her. And she said, "He gave me these six barleys, for he said to me 'Do not come empty-handed to your mother-in-law.'" And she said, "Sit, my daughter until you will know how the thing will fall, for the man will not be silent until this thing is completed today." (*Ruth* 3:16-18)

Naomi's Final Words

This final conversation between Ruth and Naomi follows the same basic pattern of the previous chapter. Ruth returns home from her encounter with Boaz and answers Naomi's questions regarding her day. She shows Naomi what she brought home and Naomi offers a hopeful interpretation of the meeting, along with some helpful advice for Ruth. Naomi's anticipation in chapter three is more immediate and grounded than her excited reaction in chapter two. She refers to Ruth's impending knowledge (*ad asher teid'in*) and speaks of events drawing to a conclusion on this very day. Naomi's confidence in the immediate resolution appears to be based on Ruth's description of the events, especially Boaz's conduct ("all that the man did to her").

Nevertheless, Naomi's final words express a mixture of certainty and uncertainty. While she is surely confident that there will be an immediate resolution of the events, there is still a fair measure of uncertainty regarding the question of how redemption will be attained. Indeed, the identity of the redeemer himself remains unknown. Thus, Naomi offers a vague description of events to come, instructing Ruth to wait patiently and see how events will transpire: "Sit, my daughter until you will know how the thing will fall."

The idiom, "How the thing will fall," is unique to this narrative. Presumably, this expression means to convey how the matter will turn out. The use of the term "to fall" in anticipation of something positive echoes and repairs Ruth's earlier wretched falling on her face (*Ruth* 2:10). Ruth's prostration occurs in response to Boaz's decency, at a time when Ruth is not being treated well in Bethlehem. The description of things "falling into place" at the end of chapter three conveys the new, positive direction of the narrative, even as it is not quite certain how the story will arrive at its happy conclusion.

The expression recalls God, who several times is described in the *Tanakh* as One whose *davar* (word) does not fall.^[1] While the narrative plot of *Megillat Ruth* is driven by human characters, we have noted several times the manner in which God participates in propelling the story in a positive direction. God is depicted as the prime provider of both food and children in the narrative, thereby making it clear that He is the source of Boaz's ability to redeem. The expression in this verse – “how things will fall” – may also allude to God's involvement in the narrative. This is indicated by the Targum, which expands upon the verse: ^[2]

Stay, my daughter, *with me in the house* until you know *from the court*
how it will be decreed from heaven and how the matter will be resolved.
(Targum, *Ruth* 3:18)

Naomi's statement invites us to recall the real redeemer in this story, God. Naomi's final words in the narrative express not simply utter confidence in Boaz – that he will take care of things that very day – but also utter confidence in God, who will ensure that things will fall into place. Now the women must wait and see how Boaz and God will, respectively, facilitate the end of this narrative.

Who Are You, My Daughter?

We have noted several times that questions of identity constitute a leitmotif in *Megillat Ruth*. Boaz twice asks after Ruth's identity, once when he initially sees her and once when he awakens to find someone lying at his feet in the middle of the night. His question, “Who are you?” (“*mi at?*”) is echoed by Naomi's identical query, when Ruth returns early the next morning: “Who are you, my daughter” (“*mi at biti?*” – 3:16).

Naomi's question is peculiar for many reasons. While some interpreters have read this as a genuine query, suggesting either that it is too dark to see Ruth (Malbim, *Ruth* 3:16) or that Ruth is on the other side of Naomi's door when Naomi asks the question (Ibn Ezra, *Ruth* 3:16), it seems unlikely that Naomi is asking after Ruth's actual identity. After all, Naomi sent Ruth off to the threshing floor the previous evening, and she has certainly been anxiously awaiting Ruth's return. Naomi's use of the word “*biti*” confirms that she is well aware of who stands before her when she asks the question. Finally, Ruth's answer suggests that Naomi's question was not merely one of identity.^[3] Therefore, we must offer an interpretation beyond the simple meaning of the words.

It seems likely that Naomi intends to ask not *who* are you, but *what* are you? What is your status? Are you now a married woman? The word “*mi*” can on occasion mean “what,” an interrogative which is usually denoted by the word “*mah*.”^[4] This interpretation of the question is supported by a rabbinic reading:^[5]

And she came to her mother-in-law. And she said, “Who are you, my daughter?” Did she not know her? However, she said to her, “*What* are

you? [Are you] single, or a married woman?" She said to her, "Single."
And she told her all that the man did to her. (*Ruth Rabba* 7:4)

I would like to add two literary points to this discussion. First, the query itself is intriguing, as it combines both intimacy ("my daughter") and estrangement ("who are you?"). Naomi's uncertain approach to Ruth may convey her reservations about sending Ruth off to the threshing house in the first place. It also evokes Naomi's conflicted approach to Ruth, her Moavite daughter-in-law.^[6] More significantly, as we noted, Naomi's question mirrors Boaz's query at the beginning of the chapter (*Ruth* 3:9). We have seen several instances of mirroring between the characters of Boaz and Naomi. For example, both Boaz and Naomi shield Ruth from harm and instruct her to cleave to the young women in the fields. In that case, Naomi's treatment of Ruth follows Boaz's treatment of Ruth. Here, too, Naomi's query seems to be triggered by Boaz's earlier query. This may indicate that it is Boaz's decision to ask after Ruth's identity and regard her as a person that facilitates Naomi's capacity to do so as well. Naomi's ability to recognize Ruth's person-ness presages that of the nation, who will likewise take Boaz's cue and accept Ruth into the Jewish nation.^[7]

Ruth's Response

Ruth's answer to Naomi's question in chapter 3 parallels her response to Naomi's question in chapter 2: "And she told her all that the man did to her" (*Ruth* 3:16).^[8] In chapter two, however, Ruth told Naomi that which *she* did with the man (*Ruth* 2:19).^[9] The description of the events in chapter 3 seems more precise; it is Boaz's initiative towards Ruth which functions as the fulcrum of the chapter. But what exactly does Ruth mean? What did Boaz do to Ruth? This phrase often means to do something for someone and not to them. Indeed, that appears to be the general thrust of Ruth's words, as she informs Naomi of all that Boaz did on her behalf, without burdening the text with repeated details. Ostensibly, Ruth is referring to Boaz's recognition of her, his praise of her, his solicitous protection of her, and his promise to provide her with a *go'el*.^[10]

In a final reversal of the expected events of this chapter, Ruth's description of the day's events point to its unexpected conclusion. Naomi had originally instructed Ruth to lie next to Boaz and, "He will tell you (*yaggidlakh*) that which you should do (*ta'asin*)" (*Ruth* 3:4). Upon Ruth's return, she informs Naomi (*va-tagged la*) "that which the man did to her" (*asa la ha-ish*) (*Ruth* 3:16). This turnaround conveys to Naomi that her design did not go precisely as planned. Ruth has become the one who tells (as we noted in her bold instructions to Boaz to cover her with his wings), and Boaz has become the one who does something on her behalf.

Ruth's Final Words: What Did Boaz Say to Ruth?

When Ruth returns to Naomi, she cites Boaz's concern for Naomi's well-being: "These six barleys he gave to me, for he said to me, 'Do not come empty-handed to your mother-in-law.'" However, we must note that the words Ruth attributes to Boaz do

not appear in the actual textual exchange between them. There are several ways to interpret this previously unmentioned speech. It is not that unusual for the biblical text to present information (including direct speech) long after the fact of its occurrence. One example of this appears in *Ruth* 2:7. In answer to Boaz's initial query regarding Ruth, the overseer of the reapers cites Ruth's speech. However, the narrative itself recorded no such speech of Ruth; the first time we hear of it is in the overseer's citation. This is simply one form of speech-telling employed in biblical narrative.^[11] Events are generally not related in full, but only presented on a need-to-know basis.^[12] In this reading, Boaz's words regarding Naomi are recounted only when Ruth addresses Naomi.

Nevertheless, this type of introduced speech retains a certain tone of ambiguity and should therefore be regarded with a fair measure of suspicion. Indirect presentation of statements may point to a narrative implication that the character has fabricated someone else's speech.^[13] It is therefore the reader's duty to examine whether this may be the case in our narrative and why the text appears to allow for this possibility.

It is possible that Ruth *unwittingly* fabricates Boaz's speech. Ruth's selflessness is so pronounced that she consistently takes herself out of the narrative. Indeed, all that Ruth does, she does for Naomi, and all that Ruth receives, she receives on Naomi's behalf. It may well be the case that even if Boaz did not actually say this to Naomi when he handed Ruth the barley, this is what Ruth *heard* when she received this gift. Ruth has abrogated her own needs so completely that she perceives herself solely as a vehicle for obtaining Naomi's needs.

An interesting textual parallel rounds out Ruth's speech, indicating the extent to which Ruth is concerned here with Naomi's needs. Naomi's embittered speech to the townswomen had conveyed the enormity of her loss: "I left full and God returned me empty (*reikam*)" (*Ruth* 1:21). Naomi's emptiness is a reference both to her lack of food and her loss of children, family, and continuity.^[14] This emptiness resonates throughout the continuation of the narrative, and all of Ruth's actions appear to be a bid to fill Naomi's terrible emptiness. When Ruth cites Boaz, she employs the same word for empty, "Do not return empty (*reikam*) to your mother-in-law" (*Ruth* 3:17). By using this word, we observe Ruth's awareness of Naomi's predicament and her deliberate efforts to repair it. In providing Naomi with these six barleys, Ruth offers Naomi both food and the promise of continuity.^[15] Ruth's words here are all the more significant, as they are the last ones which Ruth utters in the text, and they represent her long-range objectives in this narrative.

Alternatively, Ruth may consciously alter Boaz's communication. We have observed that Naomi and Boaz do not meet in our narrative. In fact, Boaz seems to ignore Naomi – her presence, her tragedy, and her poverty. Instead, Boaz focuses his concern on the virtuous and honorable Moavite woman whose actions are above reproach. I have suggested that Boaz, like the townspeople, harbors resentment against Naomi for abandoning Bethlehem during the famine.^[16] Boaz may indirectly help Naomi by giving to Ruth, who then gives to Naomi, but this is not his intention. In chapter two, in providing Ruth with food and kindness, Boaz makes it clear that he does so purely on

Ruth's own merit and not because he feels any responsibility toward Naomi (*Ruth* 2:11-12; 3:11). Boaz's disregard for Naomi continues in chapter three, as his promise to find a *go'el* for Ruth does not take Naomi into account. This omission is all the more striking when we consider that Naomi's enthusiastic response to Boaz's initial kindness explicitly refers to herself as a potential recipient of the "*geula*" which Boaz can provide: "The man is a relation of *ours*; he is one of *our* redeemers!"^[17] Naomi may regard herself as a partner in reaping Boaz's kindness toward Ruth, but Boaz himself completely ignores Naomi.

It is Ruth who is responsible for giving Naomi food which was given to her by Boaz, and now it is Ruth who will provide for Naomi's continuity by transmitting the promise (and the barley, the symbol of the promise) that Boaz gave to her. For Ruth, however, it is not sufficient that she provide for Naomi that which Boaz gave her. Ruth also mediates between Boaz and Naomi in an attempt to heal their fractured relationship.^[18] When Ruth misquotes Boaz, she may be consciously indicating to Naomi that Boaz seeks her welfare, even if this is not precisely true.^[19] In this way, Ruth seeks to achieve reconciliation and mend the rift between Boaz and Naomi.^[20]

Ruth's role as healer of rifts is significant, inasmuch as Ruth's ultimate task is to produce David, who will establish a stable monarchy. The institution of monarchy is designed first and foremost to repair the divisions which characterize the nation during the period of the Judges and Shaul's rule. The factional divisions of the nation deteriorate into civil war, both at the end of the book of Judges and after Shaul's death. David's ability to unify the splintered nation is highlighted by his first act following his anointment by all of the tribes (*II Shemuel* 5:1-3). In a deft demonstration of his desire for unity, David moves his capital from his secure stronghold in the Judean hill territory of Hebron to the border city of Jerusalem. By making Jerusalem the capital, David effectively links Benjamin and Judah, the two warring tribes. Moreover, by transferring the central government to the border that Judah shares with Benjamin (Shaul's tribe), David effectively declares that he does not intend to forcibly impose his rule upon the Benjaminites (or any rival tribe) as an outsider. The manner in which Ruth functions as an effective mediator between Naomi and Boaz forges the path for David, her descendant, to function in a similar manner at a critical national juncture.

Chapter Three: In Summation

This chapter revolves around the problem of obtaining continuity. Its key word is *go'el* (redeemer), which appears seven times in the chapter. Like the previous chapter, on the surface, this chapter resolves Naomi's predicament. However, on a deeper level, this chapter also contends with Ruth's difficulties as a Moavite seeking acceptance in Bethlehem.

Naomi's predicament is straightforward. The demise of all of the members of Naomi's family leaves Naomi with the problem of the long-term survival of her line. Her sons are dead, her Moavite daughters-in-law unmarriageable in Bethlehem, and Naomi has little hope for obtaining continuity. Will Naomi's family be perpetuated? Will she

have an heir for her family inheritance and land? The resolution of this situation is set into motion in this chapter, when Ruth determinedly makes her way to the threshing floor and Boaz offers Ruth his protection and patronage. Even though it is unclear exactly how the events will unfold, Boaz's guarantee that he will personally procure a *go'el* defuses the tension with regard to the matter of succession of Naomi's family line.

This chapter also resolves one problematic issue with regard to Ruth's Moavite origins. The Moavites are known for their licentious behavior.^[21] Moav was conceived in an act of incest between Lot and his elder daughter. A later narrative portrays the Israelites engaging in promiscuous sexuality and seduced to idolatry by the daughters of Moav (*Bamidbar* 25:1). We have noted both textual allusions and rabbinic sources which recognize Ruth's efforts to rise above the suspicions that her Moavite origins necessarily render her promiscuous. Indeed, this may be another objective of this chapter. In spite of Naomi's suggestive proposal and the charged atmosphere of chapter three, Ruth does not have conjugal relations with Boaz on the threshing floor. While we offered much of the credit for this outcome to Boaz, we cannot ignore Ruth's involvement. Rabbinic sources observe that Ruth slightly (but deftly) modifies Naomi's instructions, allowing herself a bit more modesty.^[22] More significantly, Ruth does not wait for Boaz to tell her what to do, as Naomi had advised. Instead, Ruth speaks, deferentially but firmly, requesting that Boaz offer her protection and redemption. This call to responsibility is a far cry from where the narrative seemed to be headed. Ruth's statement represents her resolute bid to maintain purity and piety as best as she can, given the circumstances. Ruth the Moavite is not at all immodest, and she succeeds in overcoming the temptations of this chapter, similar to her counterpart, Boaz. In this way, Ruth facilitates her own entrance into the nation of Israel by demonstrating that she does not possess the licentious conduct often attributed to Moavites.

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] E.g. *Yehoshua* 21:43; 23:14; *I Melakhim* 8:56; *II Melakhim* 10:10. Apart from Achashverosh's instruction to Haman (*Esther* 6:10), which is surely an ironic play on the manner in which Achashverosh equates himself with God, this phrase is not used about any other person in *Tanakh*.

^[2] See also Ibn Ezra, *Ruth* 3:18.

^[3] The *Peshita*, the Syriac Targum, contains an answer to the literal question: "And she said to her, 'I am Ruth.'" It stands to reason that this is a later addition, motivated by the textual problem of the omission of an answer to Naomi's straightforward question.

^[4] E.g. *Shofetim* 13:17; *Amos* 7:2, 5.

^[5] This reading also appears in an early (first century BCE) fragment of a manuscript found in Qumran, Cave 2. Instead of “*mi*,” “who,” the manuscript reads, “*mah*,” “what.” See Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth* (Anchor Bible, 1975), pp. 40-41, 129.

^[6] We have examined the complex nature of Naomi’s relationship with Ruth in *shiurim* #9, 14, 19, 22.

^[7] I have suggested that Naomi’s role in the narrative is to mirror the people (see e.g. *shiurim* #8, 11, 18). In this schema, Naomi’s recognition of Ruth bodes well for the nation’s ability to accept and embrace Ruth.

^[8] This corresponds to the structural parallel between chapters two and three, which we noted in *shiur* #21.

^[9] We described this irregular formulation in *Ruth* 2:19 in *shiur* #19.

^[10] Ibn Ezra comments that Ruth is specifically referring to Boaz’s promise.

^[11] George Savran, *Stylistic Aspects and Literary Functions of Quoted Direct Speech in Biblical Narrative* (PhD Dissertation, 1982), has examined this phenomenon at length.

^[12] See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981), p. 66; Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (1983), pp. 96-97.

^[13] A situation in which the indirectly presented speech is almost certainly a fabrication is found in *I Shemuel* 19:17.

^[14] That Naomi’s emptiness also refers to the loss of her children is suggested by the midrashic reading (*Ruth Rabba* 3:7, cited by Rashi, *Ruth* 1:21), which explains that Naomi was literally full, namely pregnant, when she left Bethlehem.

^[15] In *shiur* #26 I explained that the symbolic meaning of this barley may be designed to convey that Ruth intends to give Naomi not just food, but children and continuity.

^[16] See *shiur* #18.

^[17] Boaz uses Naomi’s words (*karov* and *go’el*) in *Ruth* 3:12. Nevertheless, his use of these words differs from Naomi’s perception: “There is a redeemer (*go’el*) even closer (*karov*) than me.”

^[18] We noted similarly (in *shiur* #21) that the parallel structure of chapters two and three reveals a flowchart in which Boaz provides for Ruth, while Ruth then provides for Naomi. Structurally, Ruth functions as a mediator between two parties who appear incapable of direct communication.

^[19] We noted that the one occasion in which the midrash casts an unfavorable light on Boaz is in the matter of how he indirectly provides food for Naomi. See *Ruth Rabba* 5:6.

^[20] This is reminiscent of the well-known midrashic portrait of Aharon, who would heal rifts between people by informing each party that the other party sought reconciliation (see e.g. *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* 2:24).

^[21] While this conduct is not given as a reason that Moavites cannot enter the congregation of Israel, it may well be that the reference to hiring Bilam to curse Israel (cited in *Devarim* 23:5 as a reason that the Moavites are forbidden to join the Jewish nation) is also connected to the licentious conduct of the Moavite women. After all, the incident involving the seduction of Israel by the Moavite women occurs immediately following Bilam’s attempt to curse Israel. Rabbinic sources connect these incidents (see e.g. Rashi, *Bamidbar* 25:1).

^[22] See *shiur* #22.