

A Comparison of Ruth and Iyov

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"Olam Chesed Yibaneh" - A Comparison of Ruth and Iyov

by

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A. Introduction

Many have pondered over the question as to why Megillat Ruth was written (see the introduction to the "Da'at Mikra" commentary on Megillat Ruth, pp. 3-6). This question begs to be asked since it is an accepted principle that all biblical texts must indicate the involvement of God in His world. The unequivocal and recurring point in Tanakh is that every event stems from the will of God. God causes death and life, lowers the haughty and raises the downtrodden, repays man with kindness according to his deeds, and repays the wicked with evil according to his wickedness. The famous exception to this rule is Megillat Esther, within which God's name is not mentioned at all. However, this omission is understood since Megillat Esther deals with the period of the Second Temple during which there was no prophecy within Israel. The whole purpose of that megilla is to show the hidden providence that characterized this time period.

With this in mind, Megillat Ruth stands out: this wonderful story is completely brought about through the actions of man without any involvement of God - neither in speech nor in action. (The two times God is depicted as acting - Ruth 1:6 and 4:13 - are side points and are natural events which are not portrayed as miracles.) Furthermore, even an event that could have been seen as miraculous - Ruth's coming specifically to Boaz's fields on the exact day that Boaz visited that very field - is explained in the megilla as a chance occurrence ("va-yiker mikreha," 2:3). Another place in the megilla where the idea of "chance" is prominent is at the beginning of chapter 4: "And Boaz went up to the gate and sat there, and behold the relative whom Boaz had spoken of passed by." This is an exceptional phenomenon in Tanakh, since on the whole the Tanakh does not lend itself to chance occurrences. What, then, is the message that Megillat Ruth is coming to express?

We will not be able, due to limited space, to delve into the depths of the megilla and its hidden plots. Therefore, we will focus on one point which may shed some light upon our question. We will compare

Megillat Ruth to the book of Iyov, which has many similar details to the story of Naomi. With this comparison as our background, we will be able to distinguish the essential difference between them.

B. "Iyov Lived in the Days when the Shoftim Judged"

These two stories have many points of comparison (see "Mikra Le-Yisrael," Yair Zakovitch, introduction, pp. 30-31):

1) Both stories discuss a person who has lost his/her children and possessions, and is left without any realistic chance of rebuilding his name anew.

2) Both sufferers complain about their bitter fate with the realization that God is behind all that happens to them. The words which each of them use are amazingly similar: Iyov said, "As God lives, Who has taken away my right, and the Almighty, Who has embittered my soul" (27:2); and Naomi mourns, "The Almighty has embittered my soul greatly" (1:20). It is important to stress that these two books are the only ones in Tanakh in which God is called by the name Shakkai (Almighty). [The phrase "Kel Shakkai," on the other hand, appears many times in Tanakh, and the name Shakkai appears from time to time in biblical songs (e.g., Bereishit 49:25).]

3) In both stories, society reacts in astonishment at the tragedies, which affected even the external appearance of the sufferers: about Iyov's friends it says - "And they lifted up their eyes from afar and they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept" (2:12), and about the women at Beit Lechem it says - "And the whole city was astir at their arrival, and they said: 'Is this Naomi?'" (1:19).

4) There is a "happy ending" in both stories - the destroyed family rises to rebirth (Iyov has children, and Naomi - a grandson). There is a parallel as well in the way in which salvation is reached: Iyov lived to see four generations of sons and Megillat Ruth ends with the fourth generation of Naomi - David. To Iyov seven sons were born (42:13), and paralleling this, the women of Beit Lechem give testimony about Ruth: "[She] is better to you than seven sons"(4:15).

5) There is no doubt that these comparisons were noticed by R. Elazar, who maintains (Bava Batra 15) that "Iyov lived in the days when the shoftim judged." The wording of this statement is intentionally similar to the opening of Megillat Ruth.

However, these comparisons actually sharpen the essential DIFFERENCE between the two stories, which is expressed through the means of salvation in each. By explaining this difference, we can clarify the different and even opposing purposes of the two books. Firstly, let us take a look at the book of Iyov.

C. "Shall a Rebuker Contend with God? He who Reproaches God, Let Him Answer" (Iyov 40:2)

The book of Iyov deals with the classic problem of "tzaddik ve-ra lo" (evil befalling the righteous). Throughout the majority of the book, Iyov and his companions are involved in raising philosophical ideas concerning this problem. No one in the book attempts to actively change the situation. The entire story consists of deliberations alone.

Even the solution in the end is a philosophical one. Iyov never finds out what we know from the beginning of the book: that all the troubles which befall him are only a result of the "argument" between God and the Satan as to whether Iyov would remain steadfast. God does not reveal the specific solution to Iyov concerning his plight, but rather deals with the general question: the ability of man to come with complaints before the awesome and exalted Creator. The story of Iyov is one example of many of the suffering which comes upon man without his understanding why, and God wants to clarify the general picture: even when man does not understand, he does not have the right to complain before God. After all, who is man - who comes from dust and returns to dust - that he can stand before the everlasting King? "Who is this that darkens counsel with words without knowledge ... Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth, say if you have understanding ... Have you entered into the springs of the sea, have you walked in the hollows of the depth? Have the gates of death been revealed to you or have you seen the gates of the deepest darkness? ... Have you entered the treasuries of the snow or seen the treasuries of hail? ... Do you know the laws of Heaven, can you establish its rule on earth? ... Shall a rebuker contend with God? He who reproaches God let him answer." (Iyov, chapter 38)

Only after Iyov admits that "I know that You can do everything and that no plan of Yours can be thwarted ... therefore, I have said things which I did not understand, things too wondrous for me that I knew not" (42:2-3), does the time come to complete the circle: "And God gave Iyov twice as much as he had before" (42:10). Just as there was no apparent reason for the calamity, so too, there was no apparent reason for the salvation.

The book of Iyov thus considers human tragedy from God's viewpoint. "He is a faithful God, never unfair, righteous and moral is He" (Devarim 32:4). Man with his limited perspective and short life span cannot judge God. Man's actions will not always directly determine his destiny. Even when he does not understand, he must recognize his place. "What is man that You remember him and the son of man that You are mindful of him ... God, our master, how mighty is Your name in all the earth" (Tehillim 8:5,10).

D. "Kindness Builds the World" (Tehillim 89:3)

How different is the picture in Megillat Ruth, the same megilla in which God does not act directly at all! In Ruth, it is people with THEIR acts of kindness who bring about the redemption and the building of the house of David. The whole essence of the megilla is the chain of acts of kindness brought about by people of chesed:

1) The first kindness we find is when Ruth and Orpa remain with lonely Naomi after her husband's and sons' deaths. For this, Naomi thanks her daughters-in-law: "May God do kindness with you as you have done with the dead and with me" (1:8).

2) Ruth, by leaving her nation and god in order to live with her mother-in-law Naomi in a strange land and strange surroundings, without any practical chance of building a family, does an amazing kindness: "It has been fully told to me all that you have done for your mother-in-law after your husband died, and how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth, and have come to a nation whom you did not know before" (2:11).

3) Boaz gladly accepts Ruth into his field and allows her to glean with a generous hand. This brings Naomi to bless him, "Blessed is he to God who has not abandoned his kindness to the living and the dead" (2:20). The story of the meeting of Boaz and Ruth resembles in many ways the meeting of Avraham's servant and Rivka in Bereishit 24 (see the introduction to "Da'at Mikra," pp. 13-14). Ruth has also been compared to Rivka, who was a prototype of kindness.

4) Naomi's turn arrives to do kindness for her daughter-in-law: "Shall I not seek a home for you that I may be good for you?" (3:1), and therefore she initiates the meeting between Boaz and Ruth, which brings about their marriage.

5) Ruth's agreement to marry Boaz, who was older than her by many years, is seen in the eyes of Boaz as a kindness: "For you have shown greater kindness in the end than at the beginning, that you did not follow after the young men whether poor or rich" (3:10). ("At the beginning" here is referring to Ruth going with Naomi - see number 2 above.)

6) There is no doubt as well that the readiness of Boaz to marry Ruth was an act of kindness. This is obvious, based on the refusal of her kinsman to marry her - "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I harm my own inheritance" (4:6).

We shall not continue to prove this point, because the motif of kindness is interwoven throughout the entire megilla. "The characters of the megilla contribute their part to an ideal atmosphere; there are no negative characters. Similarly, the heroes of the megilla compete amongst themselves over doing

good; everyone helps one another, everyone is striving to see their fellow man in a state of abundant goodness" (Y. Zakovitch, page 3).

In contrast to the book of Iyov, Megillat Ruth reveals another facet in the way the world runs: man through his actions can fix, build, establish, expand and redeem. "Olam chesed yibaneh" - the world can be built through kindness. Man has a significant form of power. "You gave him dominion over the works of Your hands, You put everything at his feet" (Tehillim 8:1). Through the power of acts of kindness, the world MUST (as it were) be repaired. It is impossible that a person of kindness such as Ruth would not come to the fields of Boaz, a man of kindness, exactly on the day that he arrives at the field. It is impossible that the kinsman would not pass by the gate of the city at the exact moment that Boaz was trying to complete the circle of kindness. This is the power of kindness. All the deeds of Naomi, Boaz and Ruth and all the rest of the good people along the way, shout out for themselves: "We have done that which have decreed upon us, do with us that which you have promised us" (Sifri Devarim 26:15). "Boaz did what he had to do, and Ruth did what she must do, and Naomi did what she was supposed to do, God said also: I shall do My part" (Midrash Ruth Rabba 7:7). God has no choice, as it were, but to look down from His holy dwelling place, and to complete the work - "And God gave her a pregnancy and she bore a son" (Ruth 4:13).

E. "And in the days when the Shoftim Ruled" (Ruth 1:1) ... "And Yishai Fathered David" (Ruth 4:22)

We began with the question of the purpose of Megillat Ruth, and discussed the message that arises from its plot, namely, the abundance and influence of acts of kindness. It still remains for us to discuss one detail: the framework within which all of these events occurred - the passage from the time period of the judges to that of the kings.

It seems as if the text wished to express the message of man's responsibility and his ability to be active in the world specifically at this point in time, when the Israelite monarchy is about to commence. There is no one like the king to represent the highest level that man is capable of reaching, in terms of his authority and power to act. It is specifically at this time period, then, that it must be stressed that man must invest all his efforts in doing kindness, and then he will be able to build worlds, rebuild ruins, and redeem.

There are two ways in which God rules the world. One way is fixed from the beginning according to a hidden plan, and man must come to terms with it and accept it as absolute truth. The other is placed in the hands of man and he is given almost unlimited powers to influence his world. Megillat Ruth, then, comes to stress man's ability and obligation to do good; this is the power which brought about the lineage of King David and eventually the Mashiach, may he redeem us speedily.

"R. Ze'ira said: This megilla does not discuss purity or impurity, commandments or prohibitions; so why was it written? To teach how great the reward is for the bestowers of kindness." (Ruth Rabba 2:15)

Translated by Sara Krengel

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