

Linguistic Mirroring: A Harmonious Story, Part I

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MEGILLAT RUTH

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Shiur #36: Linguistic Mirroring: A Harmonious Story, Part I

Megillat Ruth is a harmonious book. There are no unresolved questions and there is no tension at the conclusion of the narrative. The book's harmonious nature may be discerned in its structure, its language, and in the mirroring of its major characters.

Structure

Ruth is very short, consisting of four distinct parts. These four units, broadly reflected in the chapter division,^[1] manifest a highly structured chiasmic narrative in which the first chapter parallels the fourth, and chapters two and three correspond structurally and thematically.^[2] The chiasmic structure that emerges does not revolve around a central axis.^[3] The effect of this complete chiasmic structure is to create symmetry and balance, which provides a sense of harmony, an impression that nothing is left unresolved.

The broad chiasmic structure of the book of *Ruth* may be delineated as follows:

A: Chapter one: The problem – death, tragedy, lack of food, lack of continuity, Naomi's bitterness and despair

B: Chapter two: Resolution of the problem of lack of food

B': Chapter three: Resolution of the problem of lack of marriage/children

A': Chapter four: The solution – birth, joy, sustenance, marriage, continuity, love for Naomi, redemption^[4]

Chapters One and Four

Chapter one has an internal structure:

A) Introduction: Spans more than ten years (verses 1-5). THE PAST

B) Naomi and her daughters-in-law: Naomi pushes away her daughters-in-law (Ruth and Orpah). This section is enveloped by bitterness and despair and a sense that there is no future, despite Ruth's perseverance (verses 6-18).

C) Meeting at the city entrance: Naomi and the people of Beit Lechem; Naomi is rejected and Ruth is ignored (verses 19-22).

Summary: Chapter one portrays Naomi's personal tragedy. Her misfortune includes the loss of family, continuity, and sustenance. Naomi's situation is unstable; she has no *nachala* (estate) or *bayit* (house) because she and her family had abandoned Bethlehem. Throughout this chapter, Naomi conveys her despair and hopelessness. The townspeople are unsupportive of Naomi, even hostile. Although Ruth has accompanied Naomi back to Bethlehem, Naomi does not refer to Ruth, perhaps even deliberately ignoring her.^[5]

The structure of **chapter four** is related chiastically to the structure of chapter one:

C') Meeting at the city entrance: Boaz, the *go'el*, and the ten elders. The town tends to Naomi's land and the continuity of her family. Ruth is accepted, acknowledged, and praised (verses 1-12).

B') Naomi and the townswomen: Naomi embraces her daughter-in-law (Ruth), who is acknowledged as the savior. This section is enveloped by joy and relief, and explicit anticipation for a hopeful future (verses 13-17).

A') Epilogue: Spans ten generations (verses 18-22). THE FUTURE

Summary: In chapter four, Naomi is again the focus (see 4:3, 5, 9, 14, 16, 17). Her personal tragedy is resolved. Her fortunes now include children, joy, food, and the perpetuation of her dynasty. Naomi's situation is stable, and her *nachala* (estate) has been secured. Ruth and Boaz have constructed a *bayit* (house) for the child who is considered Naomi's progeny. Naomi's arms are filled and she becomes the caretaker of the child. The townspeople bless Naomi and express enthusiastic support for her daughter-in-law and her future.

Chapters Two and Three

Chapter two has three scenes which resolve the pressing problem of sustenance:

A) Conversation between Ruth and Naomi: Ruth is determined to solve the problem of food (verse 2).

B) Ruth and Boaz in the field: Boaz gives food to Ruth and offers her a solution to procure food for the future (verses 3-17).

C) Conversation between Ruth and Naomi: Ruth confers upon Naomi the food that Boaz has given her and conveys Boaz's promise for the future (verses 18-22).

Chapter three has three scenes which resolve the long-term problem of continuity:

A') Conversation between Ruth and Naomi: Naomi is determined to solve the problem of continuity (verses 1-5).

B') Ruth and Boaz in the field (threshing floor): Boaz promises that he will provide a *go'e'l* for Ruth's redemption (and gives her food as a symbol of his promise) (verses 6-15).

C') Conversation between Ruth and Naomi: Ruth confers upon Naomi the food that Boaz has given her and conveys Boaz's promise for the future (verses 16-18).

Chapter two settles the problem of Naomi's immediate survival. However, it does not resolve the broader issue: Will this family be perpetuated? The answer to this question lies in the third, climactic chapter of the book. Chapter three resolves the threat to the continuity of Naomi's family. From this point forward, the book loses most of its tension. The two problems have been resolved and there is no longer any doubt that Boaz intends to ensure that the family will obtain redemption. This chapter leads us directly to the resolution of chapter four: marriage, children, blessings, stability, community, and the definitive line of kingship.

In chapters one and four, Naomi is the center of the story. This narrative recounts *her* tragedy; it is Naomi's line that the *Megilla* seeks to perpetuate. Her story appears at the story's bookends; we begin and end with Naomi. In contrast, the pivotal characters of chapters two and three are Boaz and Ruth. Boaz provides Ruth with food and continuity. Ruth, in turn, becomes the catalyst for the resolution of Naomi's tragedy. It is Ruth's stalwart character that stands at the heart of the narrative, propelling Naomi's turnaround, her return to stability, and the restoration of her future. This is the primary reason that Ruth is the eponymous heroine of this book.

The harmonious structure of the book underlies its ambience as well as its aims and objectives, both personal and national. The joyous atmosphere at the conclusion of the story results from the resolution of Naomi's conflicts and tensions, which paves the way for the new era of monarchy, in which conflicts and tensions are meant to be resolved by the king.

Language

Language is the most fundamental component of any literary composition. Its careful placement and artful arrangement shape the style and aesthetic quality of any narrative. For our purposes, determining the theological meaning of the *Tanakh* narrative is more significant than aesthetics. Yet we should bear in mind that form is inseparable from content. Therefore, only by properly observing the stylistic formulations of the narrative we can attempt to discern the book's theological underpinnings.

One literary technique used quite successfully in *Megillat Ruth* is the recurrence of particular words and phrases. Repetition of words is used to create mirror images between characters and to illustrate the notion of absolute justice: people are rewarded for their actions. Most significantly, motifs and words appear at the opening and closing of the narrative in a manner that weaves together the tragedy and its resolution, thereby attaining complete closure. This technique assures the reader that there is no trace left of the dire predicament which we encountered at the beginning of the *Megilla*.

We have encountered most of these parallels individually through the course of our *shiurim*. In this *shiur*, I will collate these parallels in order to illustrate the overarching effect of this literary technique.

Ruth and Boaz: Mirror Characters

Who is the protagonist of this book? We have asked this question on previous occasions and have offered several possibilities. In the final analysis, however, we should place the spotlight upon the eponymous heroine of the book. It is Ruth's generosity that reverses the downward spiral of this narrative and launches its arduous movement towards resolution. Ruth, however, cannot act independently. Everything that she offers Naomi (food, children) is given to her by Boaz, who is also portrayed as a paragon of generosity. If the first critical shift in the book is initiated by Ruth, its final

pivot is effected by Boaz. It may be most accurate to conclude that the success of the narrative rests upon the coming together of this couple. Ruth and Boaz's marriage represents the conjoining of two similar personalities, whose traits are ideal for producing both the personal solution for Naomi and the national solution for the self-centered, miserly, and slothful society during the period of the Judges. In order to convey the similarity between Boaz and Ruth and simultaneously highlight the important traits that they share, the *Megilla* presents several linguistic parallels between these characters.^[6]

The most significant similarity between these characters is their common trait of kindness. We noted in the previous *shiur* that the verb "*natan*," to give, is employed with regard to both Boaz and Ruth. They both supply food to someone needy, thereby solving the essential problem of the book. And yet the *Megilla* does not portray commonplace kindness; rather, it centers in on a particularly selfless type of kindness. Specifically, these characters are generous without any thoughts of personal benefit that can accrue from their generosity. This type of kindness, which is often associated with acts of kindness done with the deceased, is termed *chessed shel emet*.^[7] There is, of course, no expectation of recompense when one buries a dead person or treats a corpse with respect. It is striking, therefore, that both Ruth and Boaz are explicitly praised for the kindness that they performed for the deceased. Naomi blesses Ruth (and Orpah) that she will receive due recompense for her behavior:

"God shall do with you kindness as you did with the dead ones and with me." (1:8)

Naomi later blesses Boaz in a similar fashion:

"Blessed is he to God, for he has not withheld his kindness from the living or the dead." (2:20)^[8]

In keeping with this trait, each of these characters is portrayed acting not just on someone else's behalf, but doing so in a manner that undermines their own interests. Ruth's original decision to remain with Naomi rather than return to a fulfilling future in Moav attests to her selflessness. Boaz's willingness to buy Elimelekh's land and marry Ruth in order to establish the name of the deceased requires a fair measure of selflessness, as I illustrated in previous *shiurim*. Both Ruth and Boaz are willing to sacrifice their personal dignity for the achievement of their goal of kindness: Ruth when she offers to go to the fields to pick food (2:2), and Boaz when he himself serves Ruth food in

the field. The self-sacrificing quality they share, their willingness to suspend their own personal interests in favor of the needs of the other, is critical to the success of their union. Their marriage is designed to create a dynastic line of kingship from which will emerge a leader, who, like his illustrious ancestors, will be willing to put the needs of the other before his own.

A similar point emerges from the textual description of Ruth's hardworking behavior. Ruth's industriousness, indicated by her willingness to work in the fields from the morning (2:7) until the evening (2:17), corresponds to Boaz's industrious nature. Despite being a wealthy landowner, Boaz personally arrives at his fields during the harvest (2:4), winnows his own barley (3:2), and sleeps in his fields to guard his crops. Their common drive to work hard is critical for producing an unselfish king. A leader who is willing to serve his people can be a benevolent and charitable king.^[9] It is no wonder, then, that the Davidic dynasty begins with a woman and a man who labor in the fields. The marriage of these industrious individuals produces a child whose name is Oved, "The Worker" (4:17), born to serve the people.^[10]

One interesting parallel between these characters is the manner in which they each use the first person pronoun "*anokhi*" throughout the book.^[11] Ruth describes herself using this word three times. The first time she refers to herself as a stranger (2:10), then she declares that she is not even worthy of being Boaz's servant (2:13), and finally, she declaims her own name, "*anokhiRuth amatekha*," "I am Ruth, your maidservant!" (3:9). The word *anokhi* depicts Ruth's movement from anonymity and shame to identity and respect. Boaz also employs the word *anokhi* three times in the narrative,^[12] each time referring to his potential role as a redeemer (3:12, 13; 4:4). Thus, Boaz's self-proclaimed identity in the narrative is entirely defined by his role as redeemer. By using this word in that fashion, Boaz mirrors Ruth's use of the word and also highlights that he facilitates her progression from anonymous foreigner to named heroine.

Rabbinic sources note the linguistic mirroring of Boaz and Ruth in the descriptive phrase, *ish... chayil* (2:1) and *eshet chayil* (3:11):

Ish gibor chayil. And later he says, "For you are an *eshet chayil*" (3:11). R. Abahu said: If a giant marries a giantess, what do they produce? Military warriors. If Boaz marries Ruth, what do they produce? [David,] who "knows how to play music and is a *gibor chayil*..." ([I Shmuel 16:18](#)). ([Ruth Rabba 4:3](#)).

Boaz and Ruth are described with the same turn of phrase. While this midrash focuses on the military connotations of this phrase, we have noted that it can also connote many other positive qualities, such as industriousness, integrity, wealth, kindness, nobility, and dignity. This midrash understands that this relationship's ultimate goal lies in its progeny, and therefore directs our attention forward to David. There we encounter the manner in which the common trait of Boaz and Ruth manifests itself in their descendant. Truly, if Boaz is a man of *chayil* and Ruth is a woman of *chayil*, it is a forgone conclusion that their dynasty will be people of *chayil*. The townspeople grasp this in their blessing of the union of Ruth and Boaz: "*Chayil* shall be done in Efrata" (4:11).

Unsurprisingly, each of these individuals is also blessed in the name of God.^[13] Boaz is blessed by Naomi, "Blessed is he to God!" (2:20), and Ruth is blessed by Boaz, "Blessed are you to God, my daughter!" (3:9). We can easily envision the likelihood that the Davidic dynasty will bring blessings upon the nation.

The mirroring of Ruth and Boaz thus depicts a harmonious alliance of two similar personalities. Moreover, these parallels hint at the successful fruit of this union: the Davidic dynasty, which is founded upon the traits common to both Ruth and Boaz.

This series of shiurim has been 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.

I welcome all comments and questions: yaelziegler@gmail.com

Appendices:

Appendix #1: The Structure of *Megillat Ruth*:

Chapter One:	Chapter Two:	Chapter Three:	Chapter Four:
1. Introduction: the past (ten years)	1. Ruth and Naomi: Ruth offers to resolve the problem of food	1. Ruth and Naomi: Naomi offers to resolve the problem of marriage/children	1a. Boaz welcomes Ruth into his home and into Bethlehem
2a. Naomi Pushes away her daughters-in-law in despair	2. Ruth and Boaz in the field: Boaz resolves Ruth's problem of food	2. Ruth and Boaz in the field: Boaz resolves Ruth's problem of marriage/children	1b. Naomi and the women of Bethlehem: blessings, celebration, life and naming. Ruth acknowledged.
2b. Naomi and the women of Bethlehem: bitterness, loss, rejection and loss of Name. Ruth ignored.	3. Ruth and Naomi: Ruth confers upon Naomi the food that Boaz gave to Ruth	3. Ruth and Naomi: Ruth confers upon Naomi the food that Boaz gave to Ruth (symbolizing marriage/children)	2. Epilogue: the future (ten generations)

Appendix #2: Ruth and Boaz: Mirror Personalities

<u>Ruth:</u>	<u>Boaz:</u>
יעש ה' עמכם חסד כאשר עשיתם עם המתים ועמדי (א) (ח)	ברוך הוא לה' אשר לא עזב חסדו את החיים ואת המתים (ב כ)
ותוצא ותתן לה את אשר הותרה משבועה (ב יח)	ותאמר יש השערים האלה נתן לי (ג יז)
אנכי (3 פעמים) (ב ט, יג; ג ט)	אנכי (3 פעמים) (ג יב, יג; ד ד)
כי אשת חיל את (ג יא)	איש גיבור חיל... ושמו בעז (ב ב)
ותעמוד מאז הבקר ועד עתה... ותלקט בשדה עד הערב (ב ז, יז)	הנה הוא זורה את גרן השערים הלילה (ג ב)
ברוכה את לה' (ג י)	ברוך הוא לה' (ב כ)

^[1] The chapter divisions are not an inherent part of the text and are not a massoretic phenomenon. The Bible was divided into chapters by Christian clerics in medieval times. This division often contradicts massoretic divisions, and sometimes even reflects a Christian exegetical tradition. These chapter divisions appear in almost all printed Bibles because they have become a universally accepted method of citations. *Megillat Ruth* has no massoretic division until [Ruth 4:17](#) and until then is written as one continuous narrative.

^[2] A chiasmic structure is a literary device that involves a crosswise arrangement of concepts or words that are repeated in reverse order, creating a ring structure (A-B-B-A). It is often used in *Tanakh* (both prose and poetry) for a variety of purposes. It can be used, for example, to accentuate the concept of reward and punishment (see e.g. [Bereishit 9:6](#)), or simply to draw attention to parallels in the composition. Sometimes this structure is concentric, in which the parts

revolve around a central axis that has no corresponding part (A-B-C-B-A). This is often used to highlight that central axis. In the case of *Megillat Ruth*, I am suggesting that the structure of the book is composed in a perfect chiasmic structure in order to emphasize the harmonious closure, which mirrors and corrects the initial movements of the narrative.

^[3] This is in contrast to a book such as *Eikha*, which has a concentric structure, in which the middle chapter stands alone as the core and focus of the book.

^[4] I have charted this structure and attached it as an appendix to this *shiur*.

^[5] This is ironic inasmuch as Ruth is the ultimate answer to Naomi's troubles, if only Naomi would pay attention. See Edward F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth* (Anchor Bible, 1975), p. 168.

^[6] For those who prefer to see the parallels in Hebrew, I have appended a Hebrew chart of these similarities at the end of this *shiur* (Appendix #2).

^[7] See e.g. [Bereishit Rabba 96:5](#); *Tanchuma Buber Vayechi 5*; Rashi [Bereishit 47:29](#).

^[8] In *shiur* #19, I noted that it is unclear whether this phrase modifies God or Boaz. I posited that this ambiguity is deliberate and that both levels of meaning exist in the narrative. Throughout this series, I have adopted both readings of this verse.

^[9] This point may be best illustrated by paying careful attention to the verse which introduces David's sin. The verse describes Yoav and all of Israel encamped in the field during the war against Ammon while David stays in Yerushalayim ([I Shmuel 11:1](#)). The next verse clarifies that David does not remain in Yerushalayim to attend to official matters, but rather to nap in the afternoon and stroll on his roof. This depiction of regal luxury in place of David's customary enthusiastic leadership in warfare is the beginning of David's descent into sin.

^[10] Within this schema, we have noted that it is unsurprising that the child is named not by his parents, but by the neighbors. This expresses that the child (and the dynasty of kings which shall emerge from him) belongs to the people. It is they who will shape his destiny and therefore they name him. Ibn Ezra ([Ruth 4:17](#)) recognizes that the child is called Oved because he adopts the character traits of his parents. Ibn Ezra, however, regards their service of God as the crucial and determining factor in this appellation (see also Targum on [Ruth 4:21](#)).

^[11] It is unlikely that there is a substantive distinction between *anokhi* and the more common *ani*. Evidence shows that the word *anokhi* is characteristic of earlier biblical Hebrew and it slowly falls out of use. Its frequent appearance in *Megillat Ruth* (seven times *anokhi* and twice *ani*) has been adduced as partial evidence for an early date for the composition of the *Megilla* (Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (1996), pp. 18-30, especially p. 22).

^[12] The only other usage of the word *anokhi* is, ironically, in the words of the *go'el*, who speedily and enthusiastically initially agrees to redeem the land of Elimelekh ([Ruth 4:4](#)).

^[13] One midrash seems to recognize this mirroring as well (although in a less explicit manner than the previous midrash):

“And he said, Blessed are you to God, my daughter...” R. Yochanan said: No man should prevent himself from going to an elder for a blessing. Boaz was eighty years old and had not yet been remembered [to have a child]. Once the righteous woman prayed for him, he was immediately remembered, as it says, “And Naomi said, Blessed is he to God.” Reish Lakish said: Ruth was forty years old and had not been remembered [to have a child] when she was married to Machlon. Once the righteous man prayed for her, she was remembered, as it says, “And he said, Blessed are you to God, my daughter.” ([RuthRabba 6:2](#)).

Another interesting midrash creates another parallel between Boaz, who is aware of the generation’s promiscuity, and Ruth, who modifies her own actions because of her awareness of this situation. See *Midrash Aggada*, [Vayikra 25](#).