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Ruth and Boaz: Mirror Characters

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Ruth's generosity reverses the downward spiral of the megilla's narrative and launches its arduous movement toward resolution. Ruth, however, cannot act independently. Everything she ultimately 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 completed 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's tragedy 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 Book of Ruth presents several linguistic parallels between these characters.

The most significant similarity between them is their common trait of kindness. The verb "*natan*," to give, is employed once in the book to depict Ruth giving food to Naomi (3:17) and once to portray Boaz giving food to Ruth (2:18). Each of these exemplary characters supplies food to someone needy, thereby solving the essential problem of the book. And yet the book does not portray commonplace kindness; rather, it focuses 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 "*chesed shel emet*."¹ 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 perform 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).²

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 Moab 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 may be seen by the panicked reaction of the "redeemer"

¹ See, e.g., Genesis Rabba 96:5; *Tanchuma Buber, Vayechi* 5; Rashi, Gen. 47:29.

² While it is unclear whether this phrase modifies God or Boaz, I believe that this ambiguity is deliberate and that both levels of meaning exist in the narrative.

(the relative who had the first right to redeem the land and marry Ruth). Both Ruth and Boaz are willing to sacrifice their personal dignity to help others: Ruth when she offers to go to the fields to glean food (2:2), and Boaz when he himself serves Ruth food in the field (2:14). The self-sacrificing quality they share and their willingness to suspend their own personal interests in favor of the needs of the other are 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 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.³ 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.⁴

One interesting parallel between these characters is the manner in which each of them uses the first person pronoun, "*anokhi*," throughout the book.⁵ 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, "*anokhi Rut amatekha*," "I am Ruth, your maidservant!" (3:9). The word *anokhi* depicts Ruth's movement from anonymity and shame to identity and respect. Boaz mirrors Ruth's use of the word, also employing the word *anokhi* three times in the narrative.⁶ However, Boaz uses this word solely to refer to his potential role as a redeemer (3:12, 13; 4:4). Boaz's self-proclaimed identity in the narrative is entirely defined by his role as redeemer. By using this word to mirror Ruth and Boaz, the text highlights the fact that Boaz's willingness to be a redeemer is what facilitates Ruth's 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):

³ This point may be best illustrated by observing what occurs when a king neglects to conduct himself in service to his people. The verse that introduces David's sin describes Joab and all of Israel encamped in the field during the war against Ammon while David stays in Jerusalem (I Sam. 11:1). The next verse clarifies that David does not remain in Jerusalem 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 spiral into sin.

⁴ 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).

⁵ The choice of the word *anokhi* results in an important literary parallel; it is unlikely, however, 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.

⁶ The only other usage of the word *anokhi* is, ironically, in the words of the redeemer, who speedily and enthusiastically initially agrees to redeem the land of Elimelech (Ruth 4:4).

“*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 Sam. 16:18). (Ruth Rabba 4:3)

Boaz and Ruth are described with the same turn of phrase. 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 witnesses 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.⁷ 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). This is a promising hint 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 shiur is adapted from Dr. Ziegler’s book, [Ruth: From Alienation to Monarchy](#) (Maggid, 2015).]

⁷ One midrash (*Midrash Aggada*, Lev. 25) 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.’” (Ruth Rabba 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.