

MEGILLAT RUTH

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Dedicated by the Wise and Etshalom families
in memory of Rabbi Aaron M. Wise, whose yahrzeit is 21 Tamuz.
Y'hi Zikhro Barukh.

Shiur #13:

Introducing the Hero: Who is Boaz?

Part II

Boaz' s First Words

And behold, Boaz was coming from Bethlehem. And he said to his reapers, “ God be with you.” And they said to him, “ May God bless you. ([Ruth 2:4](#))

Boaz' s character can be better understood by examining his first speech in the narrative. The *Tanakh* tends to shape its characters through their speech, and our first direct acquaintance with a character is often through his opening speech.^{1[1]} It is especially significant that the first word that issues out of Boaz' s mouth in this story is the name of God: “ God be with you!” This is an indication that Boaz is God-fearing, a man driven by the name of God that is constantly on

1 [1] Both Eliyahu' s ([I Melakhim 17:1](#)) and Izevel' s ([I Melakhim 19:2](#)) opening words are good examples of this phenomenon. In Eliyahu' s case, his initial speech constitutes his first appearance in the Tanakh. Izevel, like Boaz, has already been introduced in an indirect manner prior to her opening words. In any case, Izevel' s opening words provide an incisive insight into her character.

his mind and lips.²[2] Boaz' s first uttered word allows us to grasp this central feature of his persona, namely, his piety, which is critical to understand the role he plays in the story.

Boaz' s first words illustrate another aspect of his persona as well, as they are addressed to his common workers, rather than to the foreman. This is an indication of Boaz' s humility, the absence of a superior attitude toward the ordinary worker, a trait that enables him to father David, the beloved king of the people.³[3]

Boaz Comes to His Fields

And [Ruth] went and she arrived and she harvested in the field behind the harvesters. And a chance encounter occurred, the portion of the field [that Ruth happened upon belonged] to Boaz, who is from the family of Elimelekh. And behold, Boaz was coming from Bethlehem. ([Ruth 2:3-4](#))

Boaz' s appearance at his field on precisely the day that Ruth arrives is portrayed in these verses as a matter of happenstance, Ruth' s good fortune.⁴[4] This complements the “ coincidence” related in the previous sentence, regarding Ruth' s chance arrival at Boaz' s field. Surely, both of these incidents are not

2 [2] This perception of Boaz is adduced by the Targum, which previously rendered the phrase *ish gibbor chayil* with a slight expansion, indicating Boaz' s devoutness and Torah learning: “ And Naomi had an acquaintance of her husband, *a man of powerful strength in Torah* from the family of Elimelekh, and his name was Boaz” (Targum [Ruth 2:1](#)).

3 [3] Without entering into the complex balance that a leader must create between distance from and familiarity with his people, suffice it to say that the people' s love for David derives, to a large extent, from his familiar presence amongst them (e.g., [I Shmuel 18:16](#)).

4 [4] The word *ve-hinnei* often calls attention to the element of surprise at an occurrence which seems to be unexpected but desirable. See e.g. [Bereishit 24:15](#); [I Melakhim 1:42](#); [Ruth 1:4](#).

meant to be perceived as accidental in the least. In fact, it appears that the text uses the phrase, “ *va-yiker mikreha*,” to mean an event arranged by God.⁵[5]

Nevertheless, we must ask, why does Boaz come to his field? For what purpose would an affluent proprietor come to his field at the height of the harvest? The most logical explanation is that Boaz arrives to check on the harvest. This explanation is not necessarily designed to yield a portrait of a mercenary and wealthy landowner, but may rather indicate Boaz’ s industrious personality, one that does not shirk personal responsibility or eschew hard work. This image coheres well with the later representation of Boaz, who personally winnows his own barley ([Ruth 3:2](#)) and afterward sleeps in his fields to guard his crops.⁶[6]

However, Boaz never does actually inquire as to the state of his crops. His initial greeting to his harvesters is followed by an inquiry with regard to Ruth’ s identity. For the duration of Boaz’ s excursion to his fields, we see his active concern for Ruth; he occupies himself with Ruth’ s safety, dignity, and her ability to obtain food.

The key to clarifying Boaz’ s reason for coming to his fields may lie in identifying the nature of the initial exchange between Boaz and his reapers. My assumption above that the exchange is simply a greeting is a commonplace.⁷[7] Nevertheless, the exchange between Boaz and his harvesters may not be a simple exchange of pleasantries. It is possible instead to read it as a conversation in which

5 [5] Ironic usages of the word *kara* (which literally means an event that happens by chance; see Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [1951], pp. 899-900) similar to the one in [Ruth 2:4](#) include [Bereishit 24:12](#) and [Shemot 3:18](#). See also the Malbim on this verse. One example in which the word *kara* actually means to befall or happen, implying a chance event devoid of God’ s control, is in [I Shmuel 6:9](#).

6 [6] See Rashi on [Ruth 3:2](#).

7 [7] See also the angel’ s similar greeting of Gidon in [Shoftim 6:12](#). The *gemara* ([Makkot 23b](#)) describes Boaz’ s greeting that incorporates God’ s name as one of three innovations instituted by the earthly court and agreed to by the heavenly court.

Boaz inquires about the reapers' adherence to Jewish law.^{8[8]} In this reading, Boaz' s inquiry, " Is God with you?" is an actual question directed to his workers: " Are you keeping the laws as you pick in my fields?" This reading is supported by the reaper' s response to Boaz' s query: " God shall bless you." Their response recalls a verse that delineates the reward for observing the laws related to poor people in the fields:

When you harvest the harvest in your field, and you forget a sheaf in the field, do not return to retrieve it, it shall be for the stranger, orphan and widow, *so that God shall bless you* in all of your endeavors.
([Devarim 24:19](#))

The reapers' response assures Boaz that the laws of his fields are being meticulously observed and the attending blessings will certainly be bestowed upon him.^{9[9]}

This reading presents Boaz in an entirely new light. In fact, his primary concern, perhaps his sole concern, in coming to his field during the harvest is not mercenary but religious.^{10[10]} Boaz himself attends to the proper observance of the biblical precepts regarding the poor in his field.^{11[11]} This depiction may explain why Boaz notices the impoverished young stranger, Ruth, and accounts

8 [8] The angel' s similar greeting of Gidon (" *Hashem imekha gibor he-chayil,*" [Shoftim 6:12](#)) is likewise treated as a statement (that Gidon rejects, " Is God really with us?!"), rather than a simple greeting.

9 [9] In a similar vein, Ibn Ezra ([Ruth 2:4](#)) offers an interpretation of the exchange between Boaz and his reapers. He maintains that Boaz blesses the reapers that God should be with them in their labors. They respond that God should bless Boaz in his harvest.

10 [10] An interesting comment of the Malbim maintains a similar portrait of Boaz. The Malbim ([Ruth 2:14](#)) claims that the reason that Boaz eats with his reapers is to ensure that they are properly making the blessing after the meal.

11 [11] R. Yehoshua Bachrach (*Imma Shel Malkhut* [1984], p. 51) adduces that Boaz' s behavior is based on a *mishna* in *Pe' ah* (4:5) which R. Ovadia Bartenura explains to mean that the owner is supposed to make an appearance at his fields three times a day to ensure that the poor receive their corner of the field. Other exegetes explain this *mishna* differently.

for the manner of instructions that Boaz issues to his workers and the nature of Boaz' s actions and speech throughout the chapter.¹²[12]

Le-Mi Ha-Na' ara Ha-Zot? To Whom is This Girl?

And Boaz said to his boy who oversees the reapers, “ To whom is this girl?” And the boy who oversees the reapers answered and he said, “ She is a Moavite girl, who has returned with Naomi from the fields of Moav. And she had said, ‘ I shall reap and gather the sheaves behind the reapers.’ And she came and she stood from the morning until now; she only returned to the house for a little bit.”
([Ruth 2:5-7](#))

Boaz' s query with regard to Ruth generates two separate questions. First, what is the nature of Boaz' s query: “ *Le-mi ha-na' ara ha-zot?*” – “ To whom is this girl?” Second, it is curious that Boaz notices Ruth at all. Were there not many reapers in his field? Finally, how can these questions shed light on Boaz – his persona, his motivations, and his eventual relationship with Ruth?

Ibn Ezra addresses both of these questions, opting, typically, for a practical explanation:

Le-mi ha-na' ara ha-zot? He thought that she was a married woman. Perhaps he asked the boy because he saw that her dress was like the dress of her country. Also, [people' s] appearances are different because of the climate. (Ibn Ezra on [Ruth 2:5](#))

Ibn Ezra' s maintains that the word *le-mi* suggests that Boaz asks about her personal associations. To whom does she belong? Why is she forced to pick like a pauper if she has a husband? The question implies that Boaz is probing the

12 [12] Several *midrashim* do, unsurprisingly, focus on Boaz' s religious integrity. See, for example, [Ruth Rabba 5:15](#). Yerushalmi [Yevamot 8:3](#) describes Boaz as free from all sins.

circumstances of Ruth' s neglect.¹³[13] In a similar vein, the Targum suggests that Boaz is asking to which nation Ruth belongs. This may be because Ruth is noticeably foreign, or perhaps because her need to pick in the fields indicates that she has no kinsman who can take care of her. This explanation has the advantage of cohering well with the answer of the foreman, who opens his response by asserting that she is a Moavite.

In addressing the reason that Boaz notices Ruth, Ibn Ezra suggests a simple explanation. Ruth looks different, either because she dresses like a foreigner or because her appearance is that of a foreigner. Rashi forgoes this simple explanation to cite a *midrash* that suggests that Ruth behaves in a manner that draws Boaz' s attention:¹⁴[14]

Le-mi ha-naara ha-zot? And is it the way of Boaz to ask after women? However, he saw modesty and wisdom in her. She harvested two sheaves, but not three, and she would harvest the standing [grain] while standing and the lying [grain] while [in a] sitting [position] so that she would not have to bend over. (Rashi, [Ruth 2:5](#))

This *midrashic* approach aptly calls attention both to Ruth' s extraordinary personal traits and to Boaz' s discerning ability to observe these traits and inquire after the one who possesses them. In any case, the exegetes avoid the possibility that Boaz has a romantic interest in Ruth. This appears to be borne out by the nature of the exchange that takes place between them during the course of this chapter. Moreover, at the end of the harvest season, it transpires that Boaz has not approached Ruth again, and Ruth returns to Naomi, with no further indication of Boaz' s interest. Indeed, we shall observe that this story consistently avoids any indication of romantic involvement between Ruth and Boaz. This may be intended to emphasize that it is a sense of responsibility that motivates both of these extraordinary people to commit to one another. Ruth marries Boaz because she wants to facilitate the continuity of Naomi' s family, and Boaz assumes responsibility for the continuity of Elimelekh' s family because of the prevalent

¹³ [13] David asks a similar question about the starved, abandoned Amalekite slave in [I Shmuel 30:13](#): *Le-mi ata?* The question is asked due to the immoral treatment of the man: Who was meant to take care of you and why was he derelict in his duties?

¹⁴ [14] See *Ruth Rabba* 4:9 and [Shabbat 113b](#).

custom that requires him to do so. Any romantic stirrings are either misleading or, at the very least, superfluous for the purpose of this narrative.

Hashem Imachem: Boaz' s Recognition of the Other

Beyond the question of the meaning of Boaz' s question lies the matter of Boaz' s simple recognition of Ruth. From the time that Ruth entered Bethlehem, she has not been acknowledged by the townspeople. No one asks Naomi about Ruth; she appears to be unnoticed or even deliberately shunned as the townspeople focus exclusively on Naomi. Ruth' s voluntary foray to the fields of Bethlehem likewise takes place without human contact. Ruth appears to wander silently, anonymously in the fields, following the reapers, an indistinct figure without name or identity or any cognizance of her presence. This situation may derive from Ruth' s Moavite origins or perhaps her association with the censured family of Elimelekh. Alternatively, this may simply be the manner in which the townspeople of Bethlehem tend to rebuff strangers, disdaining any gesture of acceptance or welcome.

One thing, however, seems eminently clear. Ruth' s gratitude to Boaz stems first of all from the mere act of his recognition of her.

And she fell on her face and she prostrated herself to the ground.
And she said to him, " Why have I found favor in your eyes to **recognize** me (*le-hakireini*), and I am but a stranger (*nokhriya*)?"
([Ruth 2:10](#))

The wordplay between the word *le-hakireini* (to recognize me) and *nokhriya* (stranger) draws our attention to Ruth' s interpretation of the situation. She assumes that she is disregarded and neglected because she is regarded as an outsider. Indeed, the Targum reads Ruth' s words in this manner:

Why have I found favor in your eyes that you should befriend me, since I am from a foreign people, from the daughters of Moav, who are not purified to enter into the congregation of the Lord? (Targum, [Ruth 2:10](#))

Thus, Boaz' s attention is appreciated mostly because Ruth has come to expect to be ignored. It appears that Naomi has similarly low expectations, expressing astonishment when she sees that Ruth has returned with so much food.

And her mother-in-law said to her, “ Where did you reap today and where did you do this? Let the one who **recognized** you (*makireikh*) be blessed!” ([Ruth 2:19](#))

And yet, I would suggest that the reason for Ruth' s invisibility is not related primarily to her foreign status. This is, after all, the period of the *Shoftim*, a time when proper social interactions are sorely lacking and generosity is not the norm. It is unlikely that anyone, familiar or alien, was given a charitable welcome at this time, as is evident from the narrative of the concubine in Giv' ah.¹⁵[15]

A final usage of the root *nekhar* (stranger) in *Megillat Ruth* may hint to this idea. Ruth' s return to Bethlehem after her overnight stay at the threshing floor is accompanied by Boaz' s concern for Ruth' s reputation: “ Let no one know that the woman came to the threshing floor” ([Ruth 3:14](#)). Ruth wakes up “ before a man recognizes his friend” ([Ruth 3:14](#)). While the plain meaning of this description is that Ruth awakens pre-dawn, before the day is light enough to discern a person' s visage, the word used, *yakir*, suggests that this sentence is part of the larger theme of recognition in this story. In fact, I will propose in a later *shiur* that chapter 3 is a turning point both in the book of *Ruth* and in the era of the Judges. Until Boaz' s appearance on the scene and his recognition of the *other*, of Ruth, it was a period “ before a man recognizes his friend.” Societal interactions were defined by disaffection and mutual estrangement.¹⁶[16] The dearth of names in

¹⁵ [15] We treated this topic extensively in *shiurim* #2 and #3.

¹⁶ [16] A similar phrase occurs in *Eikha* 4:8, *lo nikru ba-chutzot*, describing the inhabitants of Jerusalem as unrecognizable due to the ravages of famine. On a deeper level, however, that description may also point to the unraveling of the moral fabric due to the ravages of famine. In this schema, *lo nikru ba-chutzot* means simply that people were estranged from one another and did not give their fellow man any sort of recognition. This reading coheres with the scandalous description of the mothers who, in the horror of slow starvation, neglect their children both by withholding food (*Eikha* 4:3-4) and, eventually, by consuming

the final episodes of the book of *Shoftim* testifies to this social alienation. Boaz' s act of recognition is a seminal moment in the book, not only in order to restore Ruth' s personal dignity, but also to guide the townspeople to recognize each other and begin the process of repairing society.

This idea sheds new light on a well-known *midrash*:

R. Tanhuma in the name of the Rabbis said, Three things were decreed by the earthly court and the heavenly court accepted, and these are they: Inquiring after someone' s welfare in the name [of God]...Boaz and his court stood up and instituted that one should inquire after another' s welfare in [God' s] name, as it says, “ And behold, Boaz was coming from Bethlehem. [And he said to his reapers, ‘ God be with you.’]” ([Ruth Rabba 4:4](#))

How fitting is it that this ruling is attributed to Boaz, the man who fixes the nearly collapsed societal infrastructure! By establishing that the name of God may be uttered in greeting one' s fellow human, Boaz establishes how profoundly important it is to greet one' s fellow properly. His decree moreover emphasizes that God cares about man' s social interactions and is ultimately responsible for and intimately woven into the fabric of correct social interactions.¹⁷[17]

Boaz' s initial speech and actions are as promising as his initial introduction. His reference to God may well manifest his concern for the reapers' observance of Jewish law in his fields. This, compounded by his focus upon one young, impoverished woman, allows us to hope that Boaz will act to redeem Naomi' s family from the impending threat of extinction.

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

them (*Eikha* 4:10). See also the description of alienation in [Tehillim 142:5](#), *ein li makir*.

¹⁷ [17] See Malbim' s commentary on [Ruth 2:4](#).

family and continuity, and Ruth' s selflessness and kindness.

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