

**MEGILLAT RUTH**  
**By Dr. Yael Ziegler**

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Dedicated by Rabbi Barry and Shoshana Hartman in memory of  
Sarah and Gustave (Sarah and Gedalya) Hartman z”l,  
Cipora and Rabbi Moshe Turner z”l  
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**Shiur #19: Naomi: The Rebirth of Hope**

And she gleaned in the field until the evening. She beat out what she had gleaned and it was an *eipha* of barley. She picked it up and came to the city. Her mother-in-law saw what she has gleaned and she took out and gave to her that which she had left over from her satiation. Her mother-in-law said to her, “Where did you glean today and where did you do this? Let the one who recognized you be blessed!” (*Ruth* 2:17-18)

**Surprise and Suspicious**

Ruth’s hard work (in combination with Boaz’s generosity) yields the desired results: having gleaned from the morning until the evening, Ruth returns with a generous supply of barley. Ruth’s ample return evokes an astonished reaction from Naomi, who realizes that someone must have acted on Ruth’s behalf. After all, Ruth is a novice reaper; had she even picked a normal amount of grain, Naomi would have had good cause to marvel at Ruth’s industry. Moreover, as we have noted several times, Ruth is a stranger in Bethlehem, a Moavite. She is also an associate of Naomi, who does not stir up fond feelings among the landowners of Bethlehem. Ruth’s return with so much grain is surprising indeed! Naomi’s focus on the large amount of Ruth’s pickings is indicated by the wordplay between her astonished query, *eipho*, meaning “where,” and the *eipha* of barley that Ruth has picked. [\[1\]](#)

Naomi expresses her amazement and excitement with two seemingly redundant questions: “Where did you glean today and where did you do this?” While this redundancy may simply indicate Naomi’s surprise and enthusiasm, biblical exegetes tend to regard seemingly repetitive statements as containing distinct meanings. Perhaps Naomi’s two questions are prompted by two separate aspects of Ruth’s return. Naomi first addresses the fact that Ruth has returned with an unusually large amount of grain by asking, “Where did you glean today?” Naomi then asks a second question: “Where did you do this?” This second question is decidedly vague. Where did Ruth do *what*? It is unlikely that she is referring to Ruth’s gleanings because she has already inquired about that. The Malbim suggests that this second inquiry is a reaction to the roasted

grain that Ruth proffers.<sup>[2]</sup> After all, no landowner is required to provide the paupers in his field with cooked food for lunch!

The meaning of the second question, however, remains obscure. The Malbim offers a startling suggestion:

**Where did you reap today?** For the large amounts of pickings are astounding. **And where did you do this?** There is no doubt that you did some action for this man that prompted him to give you food, for food is not given to those who pick. (Malbim, *Ruth* 2:19)

According to the Malbim, Naomi assumes that Ruth must have engaged in some kind of action for Boaz in order to obtain the cooked food. Naomi's first question inquires specifically about Ruth's reaping, but her second question alludes to the site of Ruth's "doings," her actions.

While the Malbim does not elaborate further, it is worthwhile to speculate upon his hypothesis. What action could Naomi have in mind? Did Ruth mend some clothes for Boaz, or cook him a meal? It is difficult to imagine what action Ruth, a newcomer to town, could have done for a landowner in a field on her first day on the job. Perhaps Naomi, still suspicious of her Moavite daughter-in-law, is alluding to the possibility that Ruth engaged in licentious activities in exchange for special favor.<sup>[3]</sup> A midrash offers the following portrayal of Naomi's initial response to Ruth's return:

When her mother-in-law saw her, she became frightened and said, "God forbid, she has clung<sup>[4]</sup> to the licentious ones (*paritzim*)!" (*Ruth Zuta* 2:18)

This reading of the intentions that underlie Naomi's query may find further expression in Ruth's peculiarly worded response:

And she told her mother-in-law that which she had done with him, and she said, "The name of the man with whom I did today is Boaz." (*Ruth* 2:19)

Ruth's response is repetitive and vague. The phrase "that which she had done" (*asah im*) is repeated twice and makes little sense in describing Ruth's day. The details of Ruth's actions are concealed.<sup>[5]</sup> This entire verse seems to stretch out to its last word, Boaz, which finally answers Naomi's question regarding the location of her gleaning.<sup>[6]</sup>

What did Ruth do with Boaz? Was it not Boaz who did something for Ruth?<sup>[7]</sup> The phrase "*asah im*" appears elsewhere to indicate sexual behavior. Tamar uses the phrase, "that you have done with me," to refer to Amnon raping her (*// Shemuel* 13:16).<sup>[8]</sup> In her report of the innocuous occurrences in the field, Ruth twice employs this suggestive phrase (*asah im*), which echoes Naomi's query, *anah asit*, "Where did you do this?" Perhaps Ruth repeats these words because of the negative impact they have had upon her.<sup>[9]</sup> Ruth has realized Naomi's suspicions and, consequently, the extent of her alienation. Or perhaps Ruth uses a suggestive phrase

deliberately to uproot the notion that she did anything unseemly. By repeating Naomi's suspicious phrasing and concluding with the identity of the man whose generosity is above suspicion, Ruth offers Boaz's name as convincing evidence that Naomi misread the situation.

The verse seems to stretch out in a manner that consciously delays Ruth's response to her mother-in-law. This is a deft and effective literary technique. By withholding mention of Boaz's name until the very last word in the verse,<sup>[10]</sup> one can feel Naomi's tension and curiosity increase, until finally Ruth concludes with one triumphant word, "Boaz!"<sup>[11]</sup> And once Ruth names the man, Naomi is able to breathe a sigh of relief. Boaz is a man of religious commitment and integrity, one who would not likely take advantage of a poverty-stricken Moavite stranger. Naomi may rest assured that Ruth has done nothing untoward to earn the food that she received.

### **A Renewed Spark of Hope**

The mention of Boaz's name does not merely mitigate Naomi's suspicions. It may also fuel Naomi's hope, which has been steadily dwindling since her return to Bethlehem. We have already noted that Boaz has all of the qualifications necessary to redeem Naomi from her current situation. He is "an acquaintance of her husband, a man of strength and valor, from the family of Elimelekh" (*Ruth* 2:1).<sup>[12]</sup> Ruth's explicit identification of Boaz by name ("The name of the man... is Boaz") recalls the initial verse in this chapter, which concludes, "And his name was Boaz" (*Ruth* 2:1). In a book fraught with the problem of the loss of name, there is a man who retains his name, his identity, and his land. A man who recognizes the importance of names will surely take pains to ensure that no person or family is left anonymous, without a name.

Indeed, Naomi's enthusiasm indicates the reawakening of hope. Her excitement upon hearing Boaz's name is palpable. Boaz is not merely a generous benefactor who has taken pity on an impoverished Moavite woman, but a relative whose kinship to Naomi's family suggests that he is the solution to her predicament. Naomi reacts by proclaiming a blessing upon Boaz and alerting Ruth that Boaz could be their redeemer.<sup>[13]</sup>

And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed is he to God, who has not withheld his kindness from the living or the dead." And Naomi said to her, "The man is close to us, he is of our redeemers." (*Ruth* 2: 20)

Naomi's transformation is remarkable. She has not properly spoken since her embittered speech in chapter one. Her brief, feeble response to Ruth's offer to find food revealed her hopeless despondency (*Ruth* 2:2). Naomi's exuberance at Ruth's lucrative return illustrates that her spirit is revived and her despair commuted. Instead of pushing away kindness, as she did previously (*Ruth* 1:8), Naomi embraces it. God's name here is used to elicit blessings and joy rather than emptiness and bitterness. In this verse, Naomi utters the word *go'el*, redeemer, a word that appears here for the first time in the narrative and will prove to be a key word in the solution of *Megillat Ruth*.<sup>[14]</sup> Finally, this

is the first occasion in which Naomi uses the first person plural (“he is of *our* redeemers”) to include Ruth in her plans. The rebirth of Naomi’s hope, acquired through Ruth, enables her to view Ruth in a new light, as a partner, rather than an obstacle to finding the solution for her predicament.

Naomi’s newfound regard for Ruth is indirectly generated by Boaz. His ability to embrace Ruth’s entry into the nation paves the way for Naomi to regard Ruth as a family member, likewise entitled to the assistance of a kinsman redeemer. Naomi imitates Boaz’s treatment of Ruth in another way as well. In [shiur #18](#), I noted that while everyone else regarded Ruth as a Moavite (herself included), Boaz speaks to Ruth as *Ruth*, as is indicated by the introduction of his words to Ruth: “And Boaz said to Ruth...” (2:8). By the end of the chapter, Naomi’s words to Ruth are introduced in an identical fashion: “And Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law...” (2:22). Naomi’s ability to regard Ruth as a subject who has both a name and an identity is triggered by Boaz, who demonstrably models this behavior. I have suggested that Naomi’s textual representation mirrors that of the nation at this time. Naomi’s metamorphosis in her relationship with Ruth presages that of the nation, who will likewise take Boaz’s cue and accept Ruth into the Jewish nation.

### **Who Has Not Withheld His Kindness?**

“Blessed is he to God, who has not withheld his kindness from the living or the dead.” (*Ruth* 2:20)

For the second time in as many verses, Naomi blesses Boaz. This blessing echoes the previous blessing of Boaz offered by the reapers in *Ruth* 2:4. In a previous *shiur*, I suggested that this blessing is an assurance to Boaz that the reapers are keeping the laws relating to the treatment of the impoverished in the field (*Devarim* 24:19), and therefore God’s attendant blessing is assured. Perhaps this is Naomi’s intention as well. Ruth’s gleanings indicate beyond doubt that Boaz has fulfilled his obligations in the fields and is deserving of God’s blessing.

Nevertheless, there is an interesting literary ambiguity in Naomi’s blessing. It is not clear from the wording of the blessing *who* maintains his kindness to the living and the deceased. Is it Boaz or God?<sup>[15]</sup> More significantly, what can we learn from each reading and why does the text allow this verse to remain ambiguous?

### **Boaz, who has Not Withheld his Kindness from the Living or the Dead**

A *midrash* regards the description as a reference to Boaz, who economically supports the living and prepares shrouds for burying the dead.<sup>[16]</sup> The Malbim also assumes that it is Boaz who has not abandoned his kindness for the living or the dead:

At first, [Naomi] blessed him for not having abandoned his kindness to the living, because she understood that [Boaz] did this [gave Ruth food] to support Naomi and Ruth in a dignified manner... **And from the**

**dead.** For she understood also that he would do kindness with the dead by doing *yibbum*, for with this he would do kindness to the dead soul. (Malbim, *Ruth* 2:20)

According to the Malbim, Naomi's words following her blessing also have two parts that correspond to the two aspects of Boaz's kindness:

And [Naomi] explained her words... **The man is close to us**, and therefore he will do kindness with his living close ones [i.e., relatives]... **He is of our redeemers**, and the redeemer must do *yibbum* and in this way redeem the soul of the dead person so that his name shall not be erased from Israel. (Malbim, *Ruth* 2:20)

If Boaz is the subject of the kindness, the text has created a compelling parallel between Boaz and Ruth.<sup>[17]</sup> Naomi used a similar formulation in blessing her daughters-in-law for their kindness:

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

In this reading, Boaz and Ruth have an important trait in common: kindness, not simply toward those who are living, but also toward those who are dead. This type of kindness has merited a special appellation by *Chazal* – "*chessed shel emet*," or true kindness.<sup>[18]</sup> This is the purest, most inspiring expression of kindness because it carries with it no expectation or possibility of recompense. This is kindness for kindness' sake, without any ulterior motive.

As noted, selfless kindness, the ability to focus totally and completely on the needs of the other, is the *sine qua non* for a successful king. Ruth and Boaz, individuals who embody remarkably similar characteristics, are meant to launch the Davidic dynasty with the hope that those who are at its helm will learn from their progenitors how to successfully wield the kingship.

Finally, according to this reading, the word *azav* (to forsake or abandon) is employed to portray Boaz, who does not forsake his kindness.<sup>[19]</sup> This word was previously used by Ruth, who implores her mother-in-law not to coerce her to abandon her. After Ruth's initial usage, the word *azav* functions in a key manner in the narrative, employed by Boaz to describe Ruth's willingness to leave her father, mother, and birthplace (*Ruth* 2:11) and to instruct his reapers to drop her some extra sheaves (*Ruth* 2:16). The appearance of the word here to describe Boaz creates a significant parallel to Ruth, whose association with this word is frequent and meaningful.

### **God, who Has Not Withheld His Kindness from the Living or the Dead**

An alternate approach maintains that Naomi regards *God* as the one who has not forsaken the living, meaning Naomi and Ruth, nor the dead, meaning Elimelekh and his

sons.<sup>[20]</sup> This approach is supported by another similar phrase that is spoken by Avraham's servant with regard to God (*Bereishit* 24:27): "And he said, 'Blessed is the Lord, the God of my master, Avraham, who has not forsaken His kindness and His faithfulness from my master.'"<sup>[21]</sup> In this case, it is undoubtedly God who has not withheld His kindness. The similarity in the formulation may suggest that this is a common description of God, and that this is Naomi's intent here as well.

If this expression modifies God, then Naomi's exclamation expresses her realization that Boaz's encounter with Ruth was far from happenstance. Moreover, it illustrates the extent to which Naomi has understood the significance of Boaz and Ruth's meeting on the field. Naomi recognizes that God has not abandoned her or Elimelekh.

This reading is particularly important for understanding Naomi's striking transformation in this verse. At the end of the first chapter, Naomi's sense of alienation from God was poignant and harsh. Her plaintive declarations that God's hand has gone out against her, that God has greatly embittered her and brought evil upon her, reverberate throughout chapter one. In chapter two, however, Naomi's situation immediately takes a turn for the better. Her intractable daughter-in-law proves to be an asset and Naomi's lot begins to improve. At what point does Naomi acknowledge God's positive role in this new stage of her life? If we read Naomi's words as a description of God, who has not abandoned either the living or the dead, then this represents a turning point for Naomi. Her previous feeling of estrangement shifts toward gratitude, thereby launching Naomi's recovery.

Literary ambiguity tends to imply a dual meaning, and that appears to be the case in Naomi's words. Indeed, she intends to describe both Boaz and God in this positive manner, as forces in her life who may be relied upon to maintain their kindness to the living and to the dead. This assessment offers new hope for Naomi, thrusting her forward in a quest for redemption.

*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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<sup>[1]</sup> The Ibn Ezra relates an entertaining story of being asked the deeper meaning of this *eipha* of barley. The Ibn Ezra's characteristic (and rather caustic) response is that this information is there simply to tell us what happened. In other words, the Ibn Ezra is of the opinion that not every piece of information necessarily has theological significance. I am more inclined to adopt the approach of

many *midrashim* and exegetes (e.g. Rashi, Malbim) who search for the meaning of every piece of information in the biblical narrative.

<sup>[2]</sup> The Malbim (*Ruth* 2:18) explains the two questions of Naomi: “**And her mother-in-law saw.** [The text] wants to say that she saw and she was astonished about this because it was not the amount [reaped by] a reaper who gathers in one day. Moreover, [Naomi reacted] because [Ruth] gave her that which she left over from her satiation.”

<sup>[3]</sup> Support for this reading may be found in Naomi’s suggestive instructions to Ruth in the next chapter. We will see that Naomi’s instructions almost certainly have a sexual connotation: “And he will tell you what to do (*et asher ta’asin*)” (*Ruth* 3:4). The word *asa* is used by Naomi in both of these places, suggesting a correlation between them. Thus, Naomi’s query here may have an underlying sexual subtext.

<sup>[4]</sup> It is fitting that the midrash uses the word *nidbeka*, derived from the root, *davak*. We have already noted that this is a key word in *Megillat Ruth*, generally used to modify Ruth’s positive actions. In this midrash, Naomi associatively recalls Ruth’s original act of cleaving to her, perhaps speculating that Ruth clung to her only to continue her promiscuous ways.

<sup>[5]</sup> This is not particularly unusual in biblical narratives, which move at varying paces. Sometimes the biblical text lingers over a story, offering elaborate details and repetition (see e.g. *Bereishit* 24). Other times the narrative moves rapidly, skimming over details, such that they are obscured, ambiguous, or have a summary effect (see e.g. *Bereishit* 30:3-13; *Shemot* 2:21-25; *II Shemuel* 11:26-27). The possible reasons for this phenomenon lie at the crux of the interpretative process and may relate to the attempt to create a sense of rapid movement, a desire to focus attention on the primary point of the narrative, or a conscious attempt to blur information so as to convey ambiguity or concealment.

<sup>[6]</sup> The only way for Ruth to explain where she has gleaned is to identify the man who owns the field.

<sup>[7]</sup> Rabbinic sources recognize the irregularity of this formulation, proposing that the poor person contributes more to the rich person in giving him the opportunity for charity than the rich person does for the recipient of his largesse (e.g. *Ruth Rabba* 5:9; *Vayikra Rabba* 34:8).

<sup>[8]</sup> My translation of this difficult phrase is based on Rashi’s interpretation.

<sup>[9]</sup> This recalls Ovadia’s reaction to Eliyahu’s words, which insinuate that Ovadia’s master is Achav: “Go say to your master, here is Eliyahu” (*I Melakhim* 18:8). Ovadia is so distressed by this insinuation that he repeats it twice verbatim (*I Melakhim* 18:11, 14) in his blustering defensive reply.

<sup>[10]</sup> It is possible that Ruth delays identifying Boaz not in order to increase the dramatic power of uttering his name, but rather because she is not aware of its significance for Naomi. Alternatively, she may know very well that Boaz is their optimal hope and she consciously delays mention so as not to arouse Naomi’s hopes. It does appear that Ruth consciously delays mentioning Boaz’s name as long as possible, awkwardly attempting to describe her day without revealing the name of her benefactor.

<sup>[11]</sup> A related phenomenon occurs in *Bereishit* 31:26-30. In an unusually long speech, Lavan proclaims all of the ways in which Yaakov has wronged him by fleeing covertly from his home. Lavan’s concluding words appear to be the dramatic goal of his speech, which he has been leading up to all along: “Why have you stolen my idols?!”

<sup>[12]</sup> In [shnur #12](#), I analyzed the manner in which this verse provides hope as well as anticipation that Boaz will function as the redeemer of Naomi and her family.

<sup>[13]</sup> Blessings are very important in this story. Naomi gave several blessings to her daughters-in-law in her farewell speech to them in 1:8-9, and Boaz blesses Ruth in 2:12, albeit without the word *barakh*. The word *barakh* appears in Boaz’s blessing to his reapers and will reappear in Boaz’s blessing to Ruth in 3:10. The people will bless Boaz without the word *barakh* in 4:11-12, and the women will bless Naomi with the word *barakh* in 4:14-15.

<sup>[14]</sup> I will treat this word, which appears seven times in chapter three and fifteen times in chapter four, along with its multiple meanings and connotations, in a forthcoming *shnur*.

<sup>[15]</sup> This question has long been noted and debated by biblical scholars. See, for example, Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible* (1967), pp. 40-42; Basil Rebera, “Y-H-W-H or Boaz?” *Ruth* 2:20 Reconsidered,” *Bible Translator* 36 (1985), pp. 317-327.

<sup>[16]</sup> *Ruth Rabba* 5:10. See also Rashi on *Ruth* 2:20.

<sup>[17]</sup> This also creates a parallel between Orpah and Boaz, but Orpah has fallen out of the story and is therefore not relevant.

<sup>[18]</sup> See Rashi's succinct comment on *Bereishit* 47:29: "Kindness that is done with the dead is *chessed shel emet*, for it does not anticipate recompense." See also, e.g., *Bereishit Rabba* 96:5; *Tanhuma Veyechi* 5.

<sup>[19]</sup> Bezalel Porten, "The Scroll of Ruth: A Rhetorical Study," *Gratz College Annual* 7 (1978), p. 36, has suggested that the word *azav* is a wordplay with Boaz's name. While this intertwining of letters is intriguing, the association between Ruth and the word *azav* seems more compelling and of greater textual significance. In my opinion, the ancillary association between Boaz and the word make a wordplay of this sort unlikely.

<sup>[20]</sup> This approach is suggested by R. Baruch Epstein in his commentary, *Torah Temima* (*Ruth* 2:20, note 43).

<sup>[21]</sup> This is yet another parallel between Ruth's story and that of Avraham, where *chessed* of both God and man plays a central role.