

MEGILLAT RUTH

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Shiur #2:

Megillat Ruth and the Book of *Shoftim*:

A Book of Its Own, Part I

Megillat Ruth begins with the words, “ And it was in the days of the judging of the Judges.” Why, then, is this *megilla* not included as part of the book of *Shoftim* (Judges)?

In his polemical treatise *Against Apion* (1:8), Josephus refers to twenty-two books of the Jewish canon.¹[1] While different theories have been proposed with regard to the missing two books, the reigning theory is that Josephus simply combined the book of *Ruth* with the book of *Shoftim*, while *Eikha* (Lamentations) was absorbed into the book of *Yirmiyahu*.²[2] Indeed, in his historical retelling of biblical history, Josephus appears to append *Ruth* to the book of *Shoftim*, where it functions as a bridge between the chaotic period of the Judges and the more stable period of the monarchy, described in the book of *Shmuel*.³[3]

1 [1] Josephus' comment is especially significant because it is one of the earliest sources that mentions the complete biblical canon.

2 [2] It seems unlikely that Josephus denied canonicity to any of the twenty-four books of the *Tanakh*. Moreover, there are several indications that an early Jewish tradition existed that attached *Ruth* to *Shoftim*. (This tradition is explicitly noted first by some of the Church Fathers, such as Eusebius and Jerome, who attribute the tradition to the Jews.) A contemporary of Josephus, the author of the apocryphal *II Esdras* (14:45), mentions twenty-four books.

3 [3] *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book V, chapter IX.

The existence of a tradition that fuses these books together only reinforces the question as to why our tradition has retained two separate books that refer to the same historical period. In order to explore this question more fully, we must compare the book of *Shoftim* and the book of *Ruth*. We shall soon see that despite their chronological overlap, these two books differ profoundly.

I. The Book of *Shoftim*

The book of *Shoftim* describes a particularly chaotic period in biblical history characterized by progressive degeneration in three interconnected areas: administrative (leadership), religious, and social. But what is the cause and what is the effect? Do these deteriorating situations occur simultaneously, or can we discern the catalyst that sets the book's negative trajectory into motion?

Deterioration of the Leadership, the Tribe of Yehuda, and the Monarchy

I submit that the problem of this period begins with leadership. In fact, the very first verse of the book of *Shoftim* details the nation's petition to God to provide a leader to succeed Yehoshua in the conquest of the land. God's response is surprisingly evasive. Rather than naming an individual (as God did in response to Moses' identical request – [Bamidbar 27:15-18](#)), God designates a tribe:

And the children of Israel inquired of God, "Who shall arise to fight first for us against the Canaanites?" And God said, "Yehuda shall arise." ([Shoftim 1:1-2](#))

The selection of the tribe of Yehuda may signify that God is not merely appointing a leader, but a new type of leadership derived from the tribe of Yehuda – namely, the monarchy. This reading is offered by a medieval midrashic commentary, which offers this exchange as evidence that Yehuda was chosen for kingship:

Just as a covenant was convened for the priesthood, so was a

covenant convened for the Davidic kingship: “ And the banner of Yehuda travelled in the front.” And also after the death of Joshua it is written, “ ‘ Who shall arise to fight first for us against the Canaanites?’ And God said, ‘ Yehuda shall arise.’ ” (*Pesikta Zutrata*, [Bereishit 49:8](#))

If God’ s answer is, in fact, a divine directive to launch the monarchy, then there is little doubt that the nation errs egregiously.⁴[4] There is no attempt in the book of *Shoftim* to set up a monarchy from the tribe of Yehuda.⁵[5] The gravity of this failure may be discerned in the manner in which the subject of kingship emerges at the end of the book of *Shoftim* to account for the appalling narratives of idolatry, rape, and civil war. Indeed, the weight of the responsibility for the scandalous situation is assigned repeatedly to the fact that there is no king in Israel (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25)! We may surmise that had the nation anointed a monarch at the beginning of this period, they could have averted the disastrous predicament at its conclusion. ⁶ [6]

This approach is borne out by an impressive *inclusio* that forms the bookends of *Shoftim*.⁷[7] Close to the end of the book, in the midst of the terrible civil war, the text records a familiar dialogue between Israel and God:

4 [4] I will address the nature of Judah’ s leadership failures during this period in later *shiurim*, when we discuss the leadership of Elimelekh and his sons.

5 [5] There is one explicit request for dynastic leadership (which seems to imply kingship) in this book, but it is directed at Gideon, from the tribe of Menashe (8:22-23). This attempt fails for reasons beyond the scope of this *shiur*. The possibility is raised by one *midrash* ([Bereishit Rabba 97:8](#)) that the appointment of Otniel may be the nation’ s attempt to respond to God’ s directive. Nevertheless, this *midrash* immediately continues by noting that Boaz, too, was from the tribe of Judah. Is this because the *midrash* recognizes that Otniel does not accomplish what God’ s directive had in mind? Similarly, *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 4:7 records an argument as to whether Otniel or Boaz is the Judean man referred to by God who shall arise to lead this generation.

6 [6] With regard to the question of the correct chronological sequence of these chapters, see below, footnote 14.

7 [7] An *inclusio* is a literary device that creates a frame by placing similar material (words, phrases, or themes) at the beginning and end of a section.

And they inquired of God, and the children of Israel said, “ Who shall arise first for us in battle against the sons of Benjamin?” And God said, “ Yehuda shall be first.” ([Shoftim 20:18](#))

This exchange recalls the nearly identical initial query in this book, regarding the divinely-inspired war against the Canaanites. Recasting this exchange in the context of civil war suggests how far and how hard the nation has fallen. God’ s answer contains an implied rebuke: Had you only listened to Me in the beginning of the book, you would not have arrived at a situation in which you are fighting your own brethren, the Benjamites! Moreover, God’ s answer and solution for the nation’ s abysmal state remains the same – the tribe of Yehuda must be appointed your leader.

Each leader in the book of *Shoftim* seems a bit less qualified for the job than the one before, both on a personal level and an administrative one. Another indication that the original misdeed in the book of *Shoftim* is the people’ s disregard for God’ s initial instructions may be seen in the manner in which the chosen leaders deteriorate as the book progresses. As the book progresses, each leader is gradually less powerful than his/her predecessor; the breadth of the leader’ s hegemony narrows, alongside the leader’ s ability to unify the people and guide them towards religious integrity.

Notably, there also seems to be a geographical component to their decline: each successive leader is farther and farther from Yehuda.⁸[8] The leader after the Judean Othniel⁹[9] is Ehud from Benjamin (north of Yehuda), then Devora in Ephraim (north of Benjamin), Gideon from western Menashe (north of Ephraim),

8 [8] In this overview, I have consciously omitted all of the minor judges. The dearth of information surrounding their missions and accomplishments does not allow us to draw persuasive conclusions with regard to their personal piety or leadership capabilities.

9 [9] Although this is not explicitly stated, a simple reading of the narratives leads to the conclusion that Othniel is from the tribe of Judah; he is presented as a relative of Kalev ([Yehoshua 16:17](#); [Shoftim 1:13](#)), who is certainly from the tribe of Judah. See e.g., [Bereishit Rabba 97:8](#); [Tanhuma Vayera 29](#). Rashi, in his commentary on [Sukka 27a](#), disagrees, for reasons beyond the scope of this *shiur*. Curiously, in his commentary on [Shoftim 9:8](#), Rashi adheres to the majority view that Othniel is from the tribe of Judah.

Yiftach from Gilead (northeast of Menashe), and Shimshon from Dan.¹⁰[10] This suggests that there is a correlation between the growing physical distance from the tribe who is meant to lead (Yehuda) and the progressive deterioration of the major judges.¹¹[11]

Having posited that the problems of *Shoftim* are generated by a failure in leadership, we must examine the disastrous consequences of this leadership debacle. They emerge in two arenas: religious and social.

Religious Deterioration

The impact of the failure of leadership is first felt in the religious arena. The nation's religious deterioration begins with its failure to dispossess the previous inhabitants of the land (1:21; 27-35). While the tribe of Yehuda does help the tribe of Shimon to complete the conquest of his land (1:3), Yehuda's apathy with regard to the other tribes who do not succeed in possessing their tribal inheritance is noteworthy. This disregard for the other tribes (when viewed in contrast to Yehuda's assistance to Shimon) is one of the initial signs of Yehuda's failure to assume his rightful position as leader of the tribes. The ramifications of failing to uproot the Canaanites are exactly as predicted – the Canaanites influence the Israelites to worship foreign gods (2:2-3, 11-12; 3:5-6), a transgression described with increasing intensity in the book of *Shoftim* (6:10; 10:6, 13-14).

The national apathy towards religious observance may be further discerned in the notable absence of religious leadership (priests or Levites), *mitzvot*, or inquiry directed to God in this book. More significantly, the Israelites seem to have

¹⁰ [10] Shimshon is from the coastal portion of Dan, which is adjacent to Judah. Nevertheless, Dan's second *nachala* is north of Gilead. While this somewhat deviates from the thesis presented above, I am convinced that the theory remains compelling.

¹¹ [11] To assist you in visualizing this point, I have appended a map at the end of this *shiur*. This map does not mark the mountains of Gilead, which are on the eastern bank of the Jordan.

lost interest in the *Mishkan*.¹²[12] Until the eighteenth chapter in the book, the *Mishkan* in Shilo is not even mentioned at all! In a startling irony, the first time the book of *Shoftim* refers to the “ House of God in Shilo” (18:31), it is mentioned as a contrast to the place of worship established for Mikha’ s idol. Shilo’ s second mention is accompanied by explicit directions, indicating that no one knows how to get there:

And they said, “ Behold, there is a holiday of the Lord in Shilo...which is north of Beit El, east of the path that leads up from Beit El to Shechem and south of Levona.” ([Shoftim 21:19](#))

Social Deterioration

The second outcome of the lack of good leadership is in the social arena. Social unity poses an acute problem for the nation of Israel in the period following Yehoshua’ s conquest. The nascent nation, comprised of twelve separate tribes, is, for the first time, separated geographically in their own country. Israel’ s history of inter-tribal rivalry (especially between the sons of Leah and the sons of Rachel) compounds the problem of social unity. The spiritual degeneration noted above likewise contributes to the disintegration of the social fabric of the nation. The *Mishkan* was to bring the people together at least three times a year, thereby promoting a sense of unity and serving as a focal point and common ground of the nation. Neglect of the *Mishkan*, therefore, causes the different tribes to lose sight of their common ground. The infighting, bickering, and civil wars that sporadically appear throughout *Shoftim* with increasing severity serve as markers that denote the unraveling of the nation. Significantly, the book concludes with a terrible civil war, which nearly eradicates the entire tribe of Benjamin.

The Conclusion of the Book ([Shoftim 17-21](#))

Characterized by the total absence of judge, king, or any leadership at all,

¹² [12] This disregard for the *Mishkan* does not find its solution in the book of *Ruth*, but rather in the opening of the book of *Shmuel*. Elkana’ s first act described in the book is his regular pilgrimage to the *Mishkan* in Shilo ([I Shmuel 1:3](#)).

the final section of the book of *Shoftim* (chapters 17-21) bears witness to religious and social collapse.¹³[13] This unfortunate denouement depicts a society that has spiraled dangerously out of control in each of the three interconnected areas delineated above.

Notwithstanding their common tale of societal misfortune, it is clear that these chapters contain two distinct accounts. The first narrative (chapters 17-18) describes the establishment of an idolatrous shrine and the tribe of Dan's search for an ancestral home. This story focuses upon primarily religious transgressions,¹⁴[14] as stolen money is atoned for by making an idol, and a private shrine is established, replete with an *ephod* and *teraphim*. Ephraimites and Levites are made priests. The commandment of conquest of the land is perverted, as the tribe of Dan engages in an unauthorized attack on an innocent and helpless city.¹⁵[15]

The second narrative of this final section (chapters 19-21) describes predominantly social misconduct, as a woman betrays her husband, a city shows just how inhospitable it can be (the pinnacle of which is a brutal act of collective rape), a woman is callously dismembered to convey a message, and a civil war nearly decimates an entire tribe. Thus, each of the two poles along which this society deteriorated throughout the book, the religious and the social, has its own conclusion.

13 [13] The question of when these chapters took place is, in my view, largely immaterial for our purposes. Despite the well-known position of some of the rabbinic exegetes that these chapters took place at the beginning of the period of the Judges, the fact remains that Shmuel (the author of *Shoftim*) placed these chapters at the end, where they function as the narrative's climax. In this sense, the final five chapters should be regarded as the narrative in which all the streams of the book eventually gather and boil over. See the Abravanel's lengthy excurses on [Shoftim 17](#), in which he disagrees with the opinion that these chapters are not in chronological order.

14 [14] Of course, there is social misconduct as well. In this narrative, a boy steals from his mother and a tribe steals an idol from the house of Mikha.

15 [15] Various exegetes note that this city was not within the borders of the biblically mandated conquest, nor were its inhabitants members of one of the nations slated for destructions. See, for example, Radak and Abravanel ad loc.

The common elements of this period remind us that the different areas of degeneration have converged, leaving us with a seemingly hopeless situation. One indication of the lamentable circumstances at the end of this period is the profusion of unnamed characters in these chapters. The prevailing anonymity suggests a society that dehumanizes the “other,” a society in which its members feel alienated from one another and where individuals have lost their sense of purpose and their personal identity. Moreover, when no one is named, every man is interchangeable with his friend; indeed, the evil deeds of one man should be seen as the evil of every man during this time period. In these narratives, no one is innocent and no one is pious; each unspecified individual mirrors and mimics his friend’ s deplorable acts.

It is not surprising that this conclusion alludes to an existential threat for the nation of Israel. The story of the men who surround the house in Givah and demand to rape the male guest, only for the concubine to be tossed out as a substitute, ominously echoes the narrative of Sodom.¹⁶[16] Sodom’ s crime is so severe that God deems it unworthy of continued existence, ultimately consigning it to weeds and salt (*Tzephania* 2:9).¹⁷[17] Sodom is thereby designated to be remembered as a society that produced nothing of value, has no continuity, and from which nothing more can grow. It is no wonder that the replication of this story in Israel spurs a civil war, relegating *Shoftim*’ s final narrative to calamities, death and destruction, and the looming threat of the annihilation of their society.

II. Megillat Ruth

The book of *Shoftim* leaves the reader hovering over an abyss, a seemingly irreparable situation. The question remains as to how this corrupt nation can extricate itself from the terrible quagmire in which it finds itself. How can *Am Yisrael*

¹⁶ [16] The myriad parallels between the two stories have been explored at great length by various exegetes and scholars (see, for example, Ramban on [Bereishit 19:8](#)). It is beyond the scope of this *shiur* to examine the parallels.

¹⁷ [17] The salt imagery is alluded to in [Bereishit 19:25](#), when Lot’ s wife looks back at the destroyed city (yearning to return?) and turns into a pillar of salt.

avoid a fate similar to Sedom, given that its deeds so strongly mirror that of the doomed iniquitous society?

The answer is *Megillat Ruth*.¹⁸[18] This narrative, which takes place concurrent with the book of *Shoftim*, leads us to monarchy, the book's proposed solution. But how does it do this? There are several different ways in which *Megillat Ruth* functions as the solution to the book of *Shoftim*. In this *shiur*, we have focused specifically on the problem of leadership as the catalyst for the general deterioration in the book of *Shoftim*. It seems to me that the *tikkun* for the leadership failures of the book of *Shoftim* is Boaz, a man from the tribe of Yehuda.¹⁹[19]

The respect which Boaz commands in Bethlehem may be seen in the manner in which the people of Bethlehem obey him throughout the narrative. Even the elders unhesitatingly obey Boaz when he commands them:

And Boaz went up to the gate and he sat there, and behold, the *goel* about whom Boaz had spoken, passed. And he said, "Turn aside, sit here, Ploni Almoni!" And he turned aside and he sat. And he took ten men from the elders of the city, and he said, "Sit here!" And they sat. ([Ruth 4:1-2](#))

Throughout the story, Boaz steps up to the task at hand, displaying effective and concerned leadership which has immediate and profound impact upon the

¹⁸ [18] A second answer is the book of *Shmuel*, which spearheads the monarchy. I will focus on the book of *Ruth* as the panacea which is produced in the same climate as the book of *Shoftim*, but is presented as its diametrical opposite as well as its proximate solution.

¹⁹ [19] In later *shiurim*, we will discuss Ruth's unique contribution to the reparation of the book of *Shoftim*. We will also explore the cast of minor characters in the book, particularly the Judean cast: Elimelech, Machlon, Khilyon, and the other *goel*, all figures who mirror the unfortunate values that we see in the book of *Shoftim*. Thus, Boaz's exemplary behavior in this story is the exception in the period of the Judges, and thereby facilitates its solution.

society in Bethlehem, both religiously and socially. Boaz ultimately produces kingship, the cure for the leadership failure in the book of *Shoftim*.²⁰[20]

Boaz' s Social *Tikkun*

Boaz' s capabilities in leadership are frequently utilized in the service of social repair. Boaz repeatedly defies societal norms regarding the treatment of Ruth the Moavite. He acknowledges Ruth as an individual,²¹[21] treating her as a person while others regard her as a pariah. When Boaz senses that Ruth has not been treated properly, he acts immediately to facilitate her ability to obtain food, taking great care, at the same time, to preserve her dignity:

And Boaz said to Ruth, “ Have you not heard, my daughter? Do not go and pick in a different field and also do not pass this [field] by, and you shall cleave to my girls. Your eyes shall be upon the field in which you shall reap and you can follow after [the girls]. I have commanded the boys not to touch you, and if you become thirsty, you may go to the vessels and drink from that which the boys have drawn.” ([Ruth 2:8-9](#))

Boaz' s wordy response indicates his concern for Ruth' s well-being. As later events will illustrate, Boaz' s concern emanates both from his integrity with regard to observing God' s laws and his genuine concern for the dignity of his fellow human. Boaz eventually marries Ruth, in spite of the *goel*' s panicked, public refusal to marry the Moavite foreigner (4:6).

²⁰ [20] I am certainly not suggesting that kingship offers an automatic, assured solution. It is doubtful that the period of the kings could be termed a sweeping success in terms of leadership. Nevertheless, it seems to me that this is the only type of leadership that has the potential to resolve the prevalent social and religious decay of the period of the Judges.

²¹ [21] Boaz' s simple recognition of Ruth (the root used is *ā.ē.ø*, meaning to recognize, a significant *leitwort* in this story) is met with astonishment and an undue measure of gratitude (2:10, 19), thereby indicating how incongruous his behavior is when compared with societal norms.

Boaz' s generous treatment of Ruth ripples outward, prompting the people of Bethlehem to recognize Ruth (4:11-12, 15) and accept her. Indeed, Boaz' s example has the potential to help the people of Bethlehem overcome their estrangement from each other and from the strangers in their midst. In a similar vein, Boaz' s restoration of “ the name of the dead man upon his inheritance” (4:10) may have wider implications. Boaz becomes a role model who guides the people to reacquire the value of restoring one' s name. Boaz' s act paves the way towards restoration of names in society at large, thereby alleviating the alienation expressed by the characters' anonymity at the end of the book of *Shoftim*. Boaz' s singular behavior, incongruent with the societal norms of the period of the Judges, positions him to function as its *tikkun* and facilitate its ultimate solution.

Boaz' s Religious *Tikkun*

Boaz' s religious integrity is also the antithesis of the values displayed by society in the period of *Shoftim*. The first word that he utters in *Ruth* is the name of God (2:4). As we will see in later *shiurim*, Boaz is wholly consumed with the observance of laws. His query about the identity of the girl in the field, seemingly born of romantic interest, turns out to be an attempt to ensure that the poor people in his field are treated in accordance with *Halakha*. Boaz assumes personal responsibility for the laws connected to the poor people in his fields, the laws involving *geula* of Naomi' s land, and Ruth' s eventual marriage.²²[22] Boaz' s piety is so exemplary that we derive several notable *halakhot* from his personal example.²³[23] Once again, we will see that Boaz' s personal piety has broader repercussions, impacting the religious integrity of society at large. This impact is felt particularly in his interactions with his reapers in chapter 2 and with the townspeople in chapter 4. Boaz' s religious integrity is a necessary prerequisite

22 [22] In a later *shiur*, we will discuss whether Boaz' s concern for Ruth' s marriage is a matter of observance of *Halakha*, a *minhag*, or simply a generous act of responsibility and caring.

23 [23] *Yerushalmi Berakhot 9* avers that there are three rulings which were instituted by an earthly court and accepted by the heavenly court. One of these decrees is the manner in which Boaz employs the name of God in greeting his friend. A second example of *halakhot* which we learn from Boaz is the manner in which Boaz pulls aside ten men to convene the proceedings involving Naomi' s land and Ruth' s marriage (4:2); from here we learn that the *berakhot* made at a wedding ceremony require a forum of ten (*Ruth Rabba 7:8*).

for the founder of the monarchy, which is designated to restore piety to the errant society of the book of *Shoftim*.

Conclusion

The book of *Shoftim* describes a leadership vacuum that has severe repercussions. The book of *Ruth* resolves these problems, first by supplying a leader. That leader is Boaz from Yehuda, an influential figure who is personally both pious and virtuous. Boaz functions as a role model who teaches society how to behave properly during the chaotic period of the Judges, thereby solving the narrow problems of *Megillat Ruth*. More significantly, Boaz is deemed the fitting progenitor of the monarchy, selected to correct the nation's religious and social deterioration. In this way, Boaz is the catalyst whose actions ultimately stabilize society and restore the values from which it has so dangerously veered.

The distinction between the book of *Shoftim* and *Megillat Ruth* in terms of leadership may be seen in the dissimilarity between the final verses of each book. The book of *Shoftim* ends with the terrible chaos engendered by the lack of a monarchy:

In those days there was no king in Israel, each person did what was right in his own eyes. ([Shoftim 21:25](#))

The book of *Ruth* concludes with the solution to the book of *Shoftim*, the birth of David and the Davidic monarchy:

And Oved gave birth to Jesse, and Jesse gave birth to David. ([Ruth 4:22](#))

While Boaz's character will only be properly developed as we progress in our learning of the *Megilla*, it seems clear that Boaz's leadership, his concern for the individual, and his religious integrity resolve the leadership failure represented

in the book of *Shoftim*. It is for this reason that the book of *Ruth* cannot be part of the book of *Shoftim*. Instead, Boaz' s atypical character operates outside of the book of *Shoftim*, enabling him to function as the *tikkun* for this period.

I welcome all comments and questions: yael.ziegler@gmail.com

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 extraordinary selflessness and kindness.
