

MEGILLAT RUTH
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Shiur #20: Ruth the Moavite

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.” And Ruth the Moavite said, “Also, he said to me, ‘With the boys that are mine you should cleave, until all of the harvest which is mine shall be finished.’”
(*Ruth* 2:20-21)

Naomi’s blessing is followed immediately by her auspicious identification of Boaz as a relative who can function as their redeemer. Naomi’s continued speech is reintroduced with the words, “And Naomi said to her.” If Naomi is still speaking, why does the text need to reintroduce her words?^[1] By reintroducing a second consecutive statement by the same person, the text implies that something has occurred in the interim. This could be a non-verbal response, such as a gesture, a pregnant pause, or a conspicuous lack of response.^[2]

Why, then, is Naomi’s second statement introduced separately? Has Naomi paused for effect, to illustrate to Ruth the import of her forthcoming statement? Or perhaps Naomi hesitates, weighing carefully whether or not she should burden Ruth with the knowledge that Boaz is not just any Bethlehem landowner but their potential redeemer.

In any case, Naomi’s dawning understanding of the fortuitous events appears to leave little impact on Ruth. Ruth’s eager response seems almost childlike in the way it glosses over the significance of Naomi’s statement.^[3] Instead of internalizing the gravity of what she has just heard, Ruth enthusiastically marvels at Boaz’s magnanimity in the fields.

By introducing Ruth as a Moavite in this verse, the text emphasizes that it is Ruth’s Moavite status that underlies her response. There are several possible reasons for this depiction. It may be to emphasize that this woman, of Moavite origins, genuinely cannot understand Naomi’s dramatic disclosure. Ruth simply has no idea what a *go’el* is and therefore fails to properly understand Naomi’s intentions.

A second possible reading of the situation is that Ruth fully understands Naomi’s intention. Nevertheless, Ruth summarily dismisses Naomi’s excitement because, as a Moavite, she considers its fulfillment unlikely. Having spent the day in the fields of Bethlehem, and having experienced firsthand the antipathy of the townspeople, Ruth

may find it hard to imagine that Boaz, despite his generous nature, would flout public opinion and redeem Naomi and Ruth.

Ruth's Modesty

There appears to be another possible reason that Ruth is introduced as "Ruth the Moavite." Intriguingly, Ruth misquotes Boaz in her citation of his words to Naomi. While Boaz advised Ruth to cleave to his female reapers, *na'arotai* (*Ruth* 2:8), Ruth cites Boaz telling her to cleave to his boys, *ne'arim* (*Ruth* 2:21). A *midrash* suggests that Ruth's misrepresentation of Boaz's words is a product of her Moavite origins:

And Ruth the Moavite said, "He also said to me, 'With the boys that are mine you should cleave'" (*Ruth* 2:21). R. Chanan ben Levi said: This one is certainly a Moavite! [Boaz] said, "And so, you shall cleave to my young women" (*Ruth* 2:8). And she said, "With the boys that are mine you should cleave." (*Ruth Rabba* 5:11)

The Malbim expands on the connection between Ruth's error and her Moavite origins:

[Ruth] said, "He also said to me, 'With the boys that are mine you should cleave.'" Truly he said to her, "And so, you shall cleave to my young women." But because she was a Moavite, and there they do not distance themselves from the young men, she did not understand to be precise with his words and she thought that his intention was that she should cleave to his men. [This was] because the boys were primary for her and she thought that one of them would marry her. And for that she is called a Moavite, because a daughter of Israel would understand ... the words of Boaz when he said "with my youngwomen." (Malbim, *Ruth* 2:21)

This approach runs counter to the more common approach found in rabbinic literature, which treats Ruth as an exemplar of modesty:

R. Chisdai said: Ruth, because of her modesty, entered under the wings of the divine presence and David came from her. (*Zohar Chadash, Ruth* 32b)

According to several *midrashim*, it was Ruth's modesty which initially attracted Boaz's attention:

To whom is this young woman? Did he not know her? But when he saw her pleasantness and her pleasing ways, he began to ask after her... All of the women were flirting with the male reapers and she behaved modestly. (*Ruth Rabba* 4:9)

Other *midrashim* portray the boy who oversees the reapers enthusiastically describing Ruth's modesty to Boaz.^[4]

The boy began to tell of her praises and the modesty which she possessed: Behold, she has been with us for several days^[6] and we have not seen even one of her fingers or toes and we have no idea if she is mute or she can speak. (*Ruth Zuta* 2:7)

The midrashic image of Ruth's modest sitting position while she reaps has become immortalized by various artistic renditions throughout the centuries:

When she would sit to pick with the reapers, she would turn her face to the other side and she would not show even one of her fingers. When she would see a sheaf standing, she would pick it standing, but when she would see a sheaf thrown [on the ground] she would [bend down in a sitting position] and pick it up.^[6] When Boaz saw these three character traits, he immediately asked his overseer, "To whom is this young woman?" (*Ruth Zuta* 2:3)

Returning to the text, it appears that the *midrashim* which extol Ruth's natural modesty upon her arrival from Moav do not cohere with the textual portrayal of Ruth. From the beginning, Ruth is drawn to reap alongside the male reapers. When she first arrives at the field, we are told that Ruth "harvested in the field behind the harvesters (*ha-kotzerim*)" (*Ruth* 2:3). While the plural nominal form in Hebrew masks the gender, the word "harvesters" is certainly not exclusively female, because that has a specific case in Hebrew (*kotzerot*), which is not employed here. Given that both Boaz and Naomi seem to describe gender separation in the field (*Ruth* 2:8; 2:22), Ruth's association with the male reapers may imply that she chooses not to pick alongside the females in the field.

Indeed, this could be one component of the overseer's derogatory description of Ruth, as he cites her declaration that she shall "reap and gather the sheaves behind the reapers (*acharei ha-kotzerim*)" (*Ruth* 2:7). In fact, Boaz's deliberate advice that Ruth should cleave to the young women (*Ruth* 2:8) may be a conscious attempt to steer her away from her inclination to follow the male reapers. Boaz specifically directs Ruth to associate with the young women (*na'aroti*) and then twice uses exclusively feminine verbs (*yiktzurun*, *achareihen*) to ensure that Ruth understands his intent (*Ruth* 2:7-8). Boaz follows these instructions by informing Ruth of the aggressive behavior of the boys, the *ne'arim*. In doing so, Boaz seems intent upon apprising Ruth of the reason that she should remain with the women in the field and remove herself from any association with the young men.

Ruth does not seem to have grasped Boaz's meaning. Her meal is taken while she sits next to the reapers (*mi-tzad ha-kotzerim*), who, once again, are certainly not exclusively female. And Ruth's erroneous citation of Boaz's words in *Ruth* 2:21 confirms that Ruth has not internalized Boaz's counsel with regard to the female reapers. The Moavite norms with which Ruth was raised appear to emerge clearly in this chapter, as

Ruth disregards the social norm of gender separation practiced by the reapers in Bethlehem.

Like Boaz, Naomi's response to Ruth's gaffe is to gently correct her blunder:

And Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, "It is good my daughter, that you should go out with his young *women*,^[7] and they will not harm you in another field." (*Ruth* 2:22).

The manner in which Naomi explicitly instructs Ruth to join the young women in Boaz's fields evokes Boaz's earlier guidance. Like Boaz, Naomi also refers to those who may harm Ruth in the fields of Bethlehem.^[8] A midrash implies that this harm is sexual in nature, once again recalling Boaz's concern that the boys will physically manhandle Ruth.^[9]

Ruth finally grasps the meaning of Naomi's gentle remonstrance. Indeed, the next verse informs us that Ruth internalizes Naomi's message:

And she cleaved to the *young women* of Boaz to reap until the conclusion of the barley harvest and the wheat harvest. And she dwelled with her mother-in-law. (*Ruth* 2:23)

There is a striking difference between the midrash's portrayal of Ruth's modest nature and the textual depiction of Ruth. The biblical text portrays Ruth as a typical convert, clumsily but steadily traversing the complex pathways of Judaism. Indeed, the social mores of Judaism tend to be more difficult to apprehend than the unambiguous halakhic guidelines. In this portrait, both Boaz and Naomi guide Ruth's actions, firmly but gently facilitating her entrance into Bethlehem.

In representing Ruth as the ideal modest woman, the *midrashim* disregard the process which a convert naturally undergoes in seeking to adapt to a new set of norms. Instead, the primary objective of these *midrashim* is to create a portrait of Ruth which highlights her extraordinary modesty. We have previously observed that *Chazal's* portrayal of Ruth as modest emerges as the diametrical opposite of their portrayal of Orpah, who is represented as the paradigm of promiscuity. The midrashic portrait of a naturally modest Ruth explains Ruth's choice to abandon her life in Moav. By choosing instead to join the modest Jewish nation, Ruth proves that she desires a life of modesty and becomes, therefore, the paradigm of modesty for all generations.

Ruth and Naomi: An Emerging Relationship

In light of the textual evidence for Ruth's lingering Moavite behavior, Naomi's wariness toward her daughter-in-law seems warranted. It is not a simple matter for Naomi to return to Bethlehem with a daughter-in-law whose Moavite manner is evident. Nevertheless, the end of chapter two witnesses a discernable shift in Naomi's attitude toward Ruth. Beginning with the plural form which Naomi's employs to refer to herself

and Ruth in 2:20 (“the man is close to *us*; he is *our* redeemer”), Naomi increasingly embraces Ruth and regards her as a companion and partner. At this point, Naomi’s role toward Ruth becomes increasingly parental.^[10] Like Boaz (and perhaps following his cue), Naomi shields Ruth and steers her toward proper behavior. Naomi’s response to Ruth the Moavite’s error is gentle. Her first words are affectionate and maternal: “It is good, my daughter, that you should go out with his young *women* and they will not harm you in another field” (*Ruth* 2:22).^[11]

Naomi’s newfound appreciation of Ruth is a direct result of Ruth’s actions. One way in which the text conveys this is by linguistically associating Naomi’s concern for Ruth’s safety with Ruth’s original declaration that she intends to remain with Naomi. In offering Ruth her protection, Naomi employs the word *paga* to mean harm, recalling the word which Ruth utilizes in her pledge to remain with Naomi: “*al tifga’i vi le-ozveikh*,” “Do not harm me by [requiring me to] depart from you” (*Ruth* 1:16). Ruth’s original determination to remain with Naomi has resulted in allaying Naomi’s hunger and warding off the immediate danger of starvation. Having recognized Ruth’s sincerity and ability, Naomi softens toward Ruth.

Chapter Two: In Summation

This chapter revolves around the problem of obtaining food. Its key words are “*katzar*” (harvest) and “*lakat*” (glean), appearing seven times and ten times respectively. More significantly, the manner of obtaining food in this chapter has solved two related problems. The first relates to Naomi’s circumstances. The demise of all of the members of Naomi’s family leaves Naomi with two dire problems: short-term survival (food) and long-term survival (children). In the short term, the question is one of sustenance. Without a husband or sons, there is little guarantee of economic viability. Will Naomi survive physically? How will she obtain enough food to ward off starvation for the duration of the winter? This situation is resolved in this chapter, when Ruth determinedly makes her way to the fields and Boaz offers Ruth his protection and patronage. The question of long-term survival remains unresolved for the present.

The second problem resolved in this chapter relates to Ruth’s predicament as a Moavite. The Moavites are banned from entering into the congregation of God because they are considered stingy and unkind. Specifically, the text maintains that they are banned because “they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt.” (*Devarim* 23:4). As her first act in this chapter, Ruth the Moavite volunteers to go to the fields to obtain food for Naomi. In doing this, Ruth demonstrates that she does not possess the churlishness which precludes Moavites from entering the nation of Israel.

This may explain Ruth’s seemingly naïve response to Naomi’s excited realization that Boaz is one of the redeemers. Instead of responding to the possibility that Boaz’s familial status can result in the redemption of marriage, Ruth the Moavite shifts Naomi’s attention back to Boaz’s generosity in enabling Ruth to procure food. Earlier, I posited that this is either because Ruth misunderstood or despaired of the possibility that Boaz

could be the redeemer. However, it may simply be that Ruth is not at present thinking about the long-term situation. In this chapter, Ruth's role is exclusively focused on procuring short-term survival for Naomi. In this way, she also facilitates her own entrance into the nation of Israel by demonstrating that she does not possess the negative traits which prevent the Moavites from obtaining membership in the congregation of God.

And she cleaved to the *young women* of Boaz to reap until the conclusion of the barley harvest and the wheat harvest. And she dwelled with her mother-in-law. (*Ruth 2:23*)

Despite the extraordinary success of this chapter, it ends without any resolution for Naomi's dire long-term situation. Naomi has understood Boaz's kindness to Ruth to mean that he *may* be the solution to her problems. This is supported throughout the chapter, which begins by introducing us to the potential savior and illustrates his excessive benevolence and generosity toward Ruth, which extends by proxy to Naomi as well. There is every reason to think that Boaz will extricate Ruth and Naomi from their predicament. Nonetheless, the chapter concludes on a pessimistic note. Boaz has made no overture toward Ruth for the duration of the harvest season. It is not clear whether Ruth and Boaz meet again in the fields. And by the conclusion of the chapter, the cycle of food has ended, but Boaz has not stepped up to act as redeemer. Survival in the short term is guaranteed, but this chapter does not promise continuity for Naomi's family. That will be the subject of chapter three.

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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^[1] Chazal take note of a similar literary phenomenon in which two consecutive verbs introduce a speaker's words (*Tanchuma Emor 3*): "And God said to Moshe: Say to the *Kohanim*, the sons of Aharon, and say to them.' R. Yochanan said: Every place in which it says, 'say' and [then again] 'say' requires examination. 'And King Achashverosh said. And he said to Esther the queen' (*Esther 7:5*). And he said, and he said: why do I need [both]?... Similarly, 'And the man of God drew near and he said to the king of Israel. And he said: So says God' (*I Melakhim 20:28*). 'And he said' [appears] twice; why do I need [both]?" See also *Megilla 16a*; *Eikha Rabba 1:41*; *Midrash Shmuel 24:8*. This phenomenon, deemed worthy of interpretation by Chazal, is slightly different from the one in our narrative. In each of the above cases, the first "*va-yomer*" is not followed by any speech.

^[2] Exegetes occasionally relate to this widespread phenomenon. See, for example, Ralbag's interpretation of Avimelekh's two consecutive speeches to Avraham in *Beresheet 20:9-10*. Ralbag explains that Avraham's lack of response to Avimelekh's first speech is the cause of the reintroduction of Avimelekh's speech. Abravanel (*Bereishit 20:8*) explains that same phenomenon as deriving from

Avraham's fear, which paralyzes his speech. See also Radak's comment on this phenomenon in his explanation of *Bereishit* 16:9-11. Other examples include *Shoftim* 11:36-37; *I Shmuel* 17:8-10; 26:9-10.

^[3] The juxtaposition of the words "*gam ki*" generally means, "even though," in a contrastive sense (see e.g. *Yeshayahu* 1:15; *Eikha* 3:8), which makes little sense here. The context suggests Ruth's enthusiasm, which should be translated, "He *even* said to me...!"

^[4] As noted previously (see especially *shiur* #14), I tend to regard the overseer as having a considerably more negative attitude toward Ruth.

^[5] According to this midrash, Ruth arrives in Boaz's field several days before he arrives. This reading mitigates what seems to be textually represented as the "coincidence" of Boaz arriving in the field not long after Ruth's arrival (*Ruth* 2:4).

^[6] See also *Shabbat* 113b.

^[7] Ibn Ezra (*Ruth* 2:22) notes Naomi's gentle correction, commenting on the word *na'arotai*: "and *not* with the boys (*ne'arim*)."

^[8] The word "*paga*," which I have translated to mean harm, literally connotes a meeting between people. In certain cases in *Tanakh*, the word *paga* means to plead for or to intercede (*Bereishit* 23:8; *Yirmiyahu* 7:16). Generally, however, this word has a hostile association, often even appearing as a synonym for killing (e.g. *Shemot* 5:3; *Shoftim* 8:21; *I Shmuel* 22:18).

^[9] *Ruth Zuta* 2:22: "'And they shall not harm you in another field.' Because the gentiles are suspect [of sexual impropriety]... It is better than you bring back a little [amount of food] under the protection of [Boaz] rather than a lot from another [field] so that you shall not tarnish the reputation of our family." Interestingly, this midrash entertains the possibility that Ruth will pick less in Boaz's field than in another, recalling the previous midrashic idea (which is not well-founded textually) that Boaz was not generous with the food he gave to Ruth. More significantly, this midrash continues to portray Naomi as suspicious of Ruth's moral behavior due to her Moavite origins.

^[10] Previously, we have noted that Naomi refers to her daughters-in-law as "*benotai*," my daughters (*Ruth* 1:11, 12, 13). Nevertheless, there we debated whether this was an affectionate term, especially considering the context, in which Naomi is rebuffing their offer to remain with her. In *Ruth* 2:2, Naomi first refers directly to Ruth as "*biti*," my daughter. In my view, at the opening of chapter two, Naomi is depicted as apathetic and hopeless. It is, therefore, unlikely that this word depicts Naomi functioning in an actively parental manner.

^[11] Naomi's ability to use the word "good" is another indication of the transformation described in the previous *shiur*. At the end of chapter one, Naomi can only perceive her own bitterness and misfortune. Her life had become bad, and she proclaims, "God has done evil (*hayra*) to me." By the end of chapter two, Ruth has facilitated the stirrings of Naomi's recovery and transformation. Naomi can now begin to anticipate a good future and can therefore employ the word "good."