

# MEGILLAT RUTH

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Dedicated in memory of Joseph Y. Nadler, z'l, Yosef ben Yechezkel Tzvi.  
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### Shiur #25: Ruth's Redemption

"I am Ruth, your maidservant. Spread your wings (*khenafekha*) over your maidservant, for you are a redeemer." (*Ruth* 3:9)

#### Ruth's Personal Redemption

This statement represents Ruth's newfound identity, her profound transformation from object to subject. But what is the actual meaning of her words? What is Ruth requesting from Boaz?

Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban<sup>[1]</sup> assume that Ruth's request for Boaz to spread his *khanaf*<sup>[2]</sup> over her is a request for marriage.<sup>[3]</sup> Indeed, a corresponding expression is found in *Yechezkel* 16:8 in an allusion to the metaphorical marital relationship between God and His people:<sup>[4]</sup>

And I passed over you and saw you, and behold, it is your time for love.  
And I spread my wings (*khenafi*) over you and I covered your nakedness  
and I swore to you and entered a covenant with you, says God, and you  
became Mine. (*Yechezkel* 16:8)

Nevertheless, it is less clear what Ruth means when she states plainly, "For you are the *go'el*." In what way does this relate to Ruth's previous request?<sup>[5]</sup> Is it also a bid for marriage, which Ruth terms her redemption, or does this refer to Boaz's ostensible duty to buy Naomi's property?

#### The Word *Go'el*

In order to understand what Ruth means, we must turn our attention to the meaning of the word *go'el*, which I have translated "redeemer." This word first appears in Yaakov's description of the divine personal salvation he has received (*Bereishit* 48:16): "The angel who has redeemed (*ha-go'el*) me from all evil, he shall bless the lads." Nevertheless, in the Torah, the word *ga'al* usually refers to human intercession on behalf of a kinsman.<sup>[6]</sup> Generally, the kinsman is obligated to intervene as a *go'el* when a relative has fallen on dire economic straits and has been forced to sell his ancestral land,<sup>[7]</sup> his house, or himself into slavery (*Vayikra* 25). Sometimes, the

word *go'el* refers to a relative who is seeking to avenge (literally, redeem) the blood of his kinsman (*Bamidbar* 35; *Devarim* 19; *Yehoshua* 20).

The Torah only uses the word *go'el* twice to describe God's intercession on behalf of the nation of Israel (*Shemot* 6:6; 15:13). The prophets and the psalms, however, tend to utilize the uncommon usage in the Torah, frequently employing the word *go'el* to refer to God as the redeemer of His nation (see especially *Yeshayahu*, chapters 40-66).

In the context of *Megillat Ruth*, the ubiquitous *go'el*<sup>[8]</sup> clearly refers to a human redeemer. Therefore, it is not surprising that most exegetes assume that Ruth's statement that Boaz is the *go'el* refers to Boaz's obligation to redeem the property of Naomi, who has returned impoverished from the fields of Moav:

And he said, "Who are you?" And she said, "I am Ruth your maidservant." He said to her, "What have you come here to do?" And she said, "To uphold the Torah, as it says (*Vayikra* 25:25), 'If your kinsman is in straits [and has to sell part of his land inheritance, his closest redeemer shall come and redeem that which his brother has sold].' Stand up and uphold the Torah!" (*Tanchuma, Behar* 8)

Rashi suggests that Ruth's statement connects the redemption of the field and her marriage:

"For you are a redeemer" – To redeem the inheritance of my husband, as it says (*Vayikra* 25:25): "The nearest redeemer shall come and redeem..." And I and my mother-in-law need to sell our inheritance. And now it is upon you to buy; buy also me along with [the inheritance] so that the name of the deceased will be recalled upon his inheritance. (Rashi, *Ruth* 3:9)

In this reading, Ruth's midnight request of Boaz contains two parts: the first pertains to her marriage, and the second to the purchase (redemption) of Naomi's lands. According to Rashi, it is Ruth who links the responsibility to buy Naomi's land with her own hand in marriage. This linkage has no legal basis whatsoever. Nevertheless, Boaz will also connect these two duties, and this will become a major theme in chapter four. We will further examine the purpose in joining together these two seemingly unrelated commitments in a later *shiur*.

Alternatively, Ruth's proclamation that Boaz is a *go'el* may be causally linked to her *previous* statement. In fact, Ruth may be explaining to Boaz that he should marry her because he is a redeemer – that is, the one who bears the responsibility to marry her. The Targum on this verse has this reading:

And she said, "I am Ruth your maidservant. Let your name be called over your maidservant by taking me as a wife, for you are a redeemer." (Targum, *Ruth* 3:9)

According to the Targum, the redemption involves marriage to Ruth and does not refer to the redemption of land.

While there is no indication of this usage of the word *go'el* anywhere else in the *Tanakh*, Ramban maintains that this is in fact one usage of this word, albeit employed in this fashion exclusively in *Megillat Ruth*. In discussing the situation of *yibbum* in the story of Tamar and Yehuda,<sup>[9]</sup> Ramban suggests that due to the importance of *yibbum*, early sages developed a *yibbum*-like custom which was called *geula*.<sup>[10]</sup> Ramban explains that a *yibbum*-like marriage could be performed among any relatives who are in line to inherit the land (so long as there is no forbidden incestuous relationship involved). His proof for this custom is in fact the marriage of Boaz and Ruth.

In the Ramban's reading, the word *go'el* here indeed refers to Boaz's obligation to marry Ruth and has little to do with his obligation to redeem the land. This understanding of the word *go'el* is derived by broadly applying the idea of familial responsibility inherent in the biblical concept of *geula*. In this schema, the principle of *geula* should be applied in any situation in which the extended family is required to assume responsibility for the continued well-being of a relative. This includes concern for a relative's ancestral land, his sale into servitude, and presumably also the matter of his family's continuity. As Ramban astutely notes, the laws of *yibbum* support the notion that the extended family shoulders responsibility for the continuity of the family line. As a kinsman, Boaz must act as a *go'el* in this case by marrying Ruth, and thereby delivering the house of Elimelekh from the threat of oblivion.

## Ruth and National Redemption

The word *go'el* is a pivotal word in our narrative, thereby implying its conceptual centrality. Ruth's singular speech in this scene revolves around the word *go'el*. The centrality of this word is sustained by Boaz's remarkable six-fold use of this word in short succession in response to Ruth's bold assertion:

“And now it is true that I am a redeemer (*go'el*), but there is still a redeemer (*go'el*) who is closer than me. Lodge here tonight, and it will be in the morning, if he shall redeem you (*yig'aleikh*), good, he shall redeem (*yigal*), but if he shall not desire to redeem you (*le-go'aleikh*), I myself shall redeem you (*u-ge'altikh anokhi*), I swear by God. Lie until the morning.” (*Ruth* 3:12-13)

Ruth's redemption will receive due attention in the next chapter as well, where the narrative revolves around the question of who will step up to fulfill his responsibility as redeemer.<sup>[11]</sup> Indeed, the goal of redemption appears to be a primary objective of the narrative.

It seems to me that the notion of redemption in *Megillat Ruth* should be understood on three separate levels: its simple meaning and two deeper layers of meaning. The primary sense of the text records Ruth's own intention. She seeks her personal redemption, which is also the redemption of the house of Elimelekh. Nevertheless, I propose that there are two supplementary meanings to the idea of redemption embedded within the narrative, even if they are not Ruth's intended meaning.

One deeper level of meaning refers to the urgently needed national redemption during the period of the Judges, a devastating time for the Jewish nation. In this schema, Ruth's declaration that Boaz is a redeemer may unwittingly refer to the ultimate goal of the union of Boaz and Ruth. The son who is born to them at the conclusion of the *Megilla* may provide the solution for the reigning chaos: the beginning of a dynasty which can restore stability to the land, build the Temple,<sup>[12]</sup> and create a strong religious and social infrastructure. In this scene, Boaz has the ability to function not merely as the *go'el* of Ruth and the house of Elimelekh; he may also act as the *go'el* of the nation.<sup>[13]</sup>

### The “*Geula*”

The final layer of meaning for the word *go'el* in this chapter may refer to the ultimate, future national redemption, which is, of course, the conventional usage of the term “*geula*.” This last level of understanding offers an insight into a deeper meaning of this brief book, one which bears upon the most fervent aims of the *Tanakh* narratives: the manner in which the Jewish nation can arrive at an ideal society.

Indeed, *Megillat Ruth* should be regarded as a book that facilitates the future *geula* of the nation, the eschatological vision often referred to as “the end of days.” This idea, featured prominently in rabbinic literature, draws inspiration from the tranquil picture drawn by *Yeshayahu* in chapter 11. It is a vision of justice and righteousness, faithfulness, and peace between creatures. Above all, the end of days is a time in which all creatures are awash with knowledge of God, an existence which generates the erasure of evil and perversions (*Yeshayahu* 11:9). However, this vision does not erupt spontaneously. Rather, it revolves around the appearance of an ideal king, a shoot which will grow from the stump of Yishai and will facilitate this idyllic scenario. In other words, this king will emerge from the Davidic line. This king is described as a man upon whom rests the spirit of God, which grants him the spirit of wisdom and insight, counsel and valor, knowledge, and reverence for God (*Yeshayahu* 11:2). For our purposes, it is important to bear in mind that this king is also a product of our narrative, born of the union of Ruth and Boaz, who have thereby produced national redemption both for their current situation and for the future.

The meeting between Boaz and Ruth on the threshing floor, then, contains the stirrings of the ultimate redemption of the Jewish people. A midrashic reading recognizes this deeper level in the narrative and suggests a homiletic reading of Boaz's words to Ruth:

“Lodge here tonight, and it will be in the **morning**, if he shall redeem you, good, he shall redeem, but if he shall not desire to redeem you, I myself shall redeem you, I swear by God. Lie until the **morning**.” (*Ruth* 3:13)

The imagery of night and day is often used to connote exile and redemption in *Tanakh*.<sup>[14]</sup> Accordingly, the Zohar draws our attention to the deeper meaning in the *Megilla* by regarding these words of Boaz as the words of God addressing His nation during the course of their long years in exile:

**Lodge here tonight** – You are presently in exile and are occupied informing your sons [in exile] of Torah and good deeds. If your good deeds shall testify in your favor to deliver you, then you shall be delivered. But if not, I shall redeem you Myself, swears God. **Lie until the morning** – Until the light comes and lights [the way for] your delivery. (*Zohar Chadash, Ruth* 8)

This passage suggests that underlying Boaz’s words to Ruth are God’s words to His people during the long period of darkness and exile. Thus, this narrative is not simply occupied with Ruth and Naomi’s individual deliverance or even merely with the salvation of the nation during the period of the Judges. One layer of our narrative aspires toward ultimate salvation of the Jewish people. This eventual deliverance will be facilitated by the emergence of a scion of the Davidic dynasty, the *Mashiach*, who will sprout from the seeds of this narrative.

While it is certainly important to distinguish between the simple sense of the text and what has emerged as deeper meanings in the narrative, to omit the deeper levels of understanding this narrative would result in neglecting a significant stratum of the story along with its theological aim. Indeed, the coexistence of these different layers of this narrative is one of the most compelling lessons which emerge from *Megillat Ruth*.

*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> See Ramban’s comment on *Devarim* 27:20, where he explains this verse.

<sup>[2]</sup> We noted in last week’s *shiur* that the word *kanaf* often means wing or the hem of a garment in *Tanakh*. Both of these meanings connote protection, and may well allude to marriage.

<sup>[3]</sup> The notion that spreading one’s *kanaf* over someone connotes marital protection may likewise be indicated in several passages in which having sexual relations with one’s father’s wife is referred to as

uncovering of the *kanaf* of one's father (e.g., *Devarim* 23:1; 27:20). The Malbim (*Ruth* 3:9) regards Ruth's request as a solicitation for marital relations: "This [word] is taken from the birds, who spread out their wings on their partner during cohabitation." This is consistent with Malbim's general perception of this scenario as a fulfillment of the *mitzva* of *yibbum* (see his explanations on *Ruth* 3:4, 9, 10, 11; 4:5). Malbim (4:13) later qualifies this by explaining that this is not *yibbum*, but rather a custom related to *yibbum*, and therefore operates with a different legal procedure.

<sup>[4]</sup> The metaphor of a marital relationship for the man-God relationship appears throughout the Bible. See e.g. *Yeshayahu* 62:5; *Hoshea* 2:21-22. Most traditional sources (e.g. *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba*; Targum, *Shir Ha-shirim*) maintain that all of *Shir Ha-shirim* is written as a metaphor for the love relationship between God and His people. This parallel to the book of *Yechezkel*, in which marriage is a metaphor for the covenant between God and His people, may suggest that Ruth is asking for more than marriage. Ruth's request for Boaz's protection may imply a request to draw her into the covenantal community. Compare to *Ruth* 2:12.

<sup>[5]</sup> This question also hinges on the meaning of the word *ki*, which may be understood in different ways in the *Tanakh*. (See e.g. Brown, Driver, and Briggs' lexicon, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1951, pp. 471-474.) The word *ki* may be understood here either as a causal connection, "because you are the redeemer," or in an exclamatory or emphatic sense, "Indeed, you are a redeemer!"

<sup>[6]</sup> The word *ga'al* is also used when someone wishes to extricate himself from a vow that he has taken (*Vayikra* 27). This usage of the word seems to have no relation to the acts of a close kinsman and therefore does not pertain to our discussion.

<sup>[7]</sup> See also *Yirmiyahu* 34.

<sup>[8]</sup> The pronominal use of this word appears nine times in the *Megilla*, while the verbal usage appears twelve times. The nominal use appears twice. Altogether, this root appears 23 times in the *Megilla*.

<sup>[9]</sup> See Ramban, *Bereishit* 38:8.

<sup>[10]</sup> We will have occasion to examine the fuller version of this excursus of Ramban in a later *shiur*.

<sup>[11]</sup> The word *go'el* appears fifteen times in chapter four, rendering it the key word of that chapter as well. Its sevenfold appearance in chapter three suggests its deliberate placement as a key word. Umberto Cassuto often notes the significance of the number seven in the appearance of a *leitwort* (leading word). See, for example, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (1967) pp. 75, 91ff.

<sup>[12]</sup> The fact that the place where Boaz promises Ruth redemption takes place in a *goren*, a threshing floor, may point forward to the moment when David buys the *goren* from Aravna (*II Shemuel* 24:18, 21), which is the place where the Temple is to be built.

<sup>[13]</sup> This portrait lends new meaning to a previously examined midrash, which identifies Machlon and Khilyon as Yoash and Saraf, offering several etymological explanations for the names of Naomi's sons. One explanation suggested is that the name Yoash is used for Naomi's son because "they had [both] despaired (*nitya'ashu*) of *ge'ula*" (*Bava Batra* 91b). In light of the manner in which we have explained the deeper goals of the *Megilla*, it transpires that Machlon and Khilyon disappear from the narrative because they are unable to push it forward toward its ultimate goal of national redemption, *geula*.

<sup>[14]</sup> While this topic can easily comprise an essay in its own right, I will suffice with referring to several salient examples of this in the *Tanakh*. See for example, *Yeshayahu*, especially chapters 59 and 60, and images of darkness/night and bright morning in the *Shemot* narrative detailing redemption from Egypt (e.g. *Shemot* 12:29, 41). Because *Shir Ha-shirim* is also treated as a book about exile and redemption, it is intriguing to examine the manner in which images of night and day are consciously employed in *Shir Ha-shirim* 2:17; 4:6; 6:10. See also Yerushalmi, *Yoma* 3:2.