MEGILLAT RUTH
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Dedicated in memory of Joseph Y. Nadler, z'l, Yosef ben Yechezkel Tzvi.
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Shiur #28: Boaz and Ploni Almoni

> And Boaz went up to the gate and he sat there. And behold, the *go'el* about whom Boaz has spoken is passing! And he said, "Turn aside, sit here, Ploni Almoni." And he turned aside and he sat. (*Ruth* 4:1)

Boaz: The Protagonist of This Chapter

The final chapter of the *Megilla* opens with Boaz's movement toward the gate, presumably in order to carry out his promise to Ruth immediately. Boaz's eager and determined initiative was already anticipated by Naomi at the close of the previous scene. She projected that "the man will not be silent until this thing is completed today" (*Ruth* 3:18). Indeed, this chapter is launched by Boaz's steadfast action; all subsequent events in the chapter follow from this act.

At this point, I would like to ask a basic literary question which should have consequences for the manner in which we understand this book. Who, in fact, is the protagonist of *Megillat Ruth*? At first glance, the answer seems obvious. After all, Ruth is the eponymous heroine of the book; she drives the story and propels it forward to its felicitous conclusion. There is little doubt that Ruth is a significant – if not *the* significant – character in this narrative.

However, it should be noted that even if Ruth moves the book towards its dénouement, the narrative is about Naomi. In the final analysis, this is Naomi's story, and the story revolves around Naomi's problem and Naomi's tragedy. In that sense, one could claim that Naomi is the central character of this book. Adele Berlin maintains that all other main characters are introduced relative to Naomi.[1] This approach may shed further light on my assertion that Naomi's story is a microcosm of the broader story of Israel during this period of the Judges.[2] Within the resolution of Naomi's misfortune lies the resolution of Israel's calamity. In empowering Naomi to break free of her stagnant situation and her passive depression, Ruth enables Israel to emerge from the dark and degenerative era of the Judges.

To round out this discussion of the protagonist of the book of *Ruth*, we should take note of the other significant characters in this book who contribute to the book's trajectory. Naturally, the character who initiates the action in each chapter maintains a primary role in stimulating the chapter's course of events.[3] Each chapter begins with a

verb describing the action of a different character. Elimelekh's journey to Moav launches the first chapter. The second chapter begins with Ruth's words to Naomi. Chapter three opens with Naomi's words to Ruth. Boaz's movement toward the gate is the first act of chapter four.

When viewed together, these observations suggest a symmetrical pattern. At the periphery of the story, men's actions set the narrative into motion. Their respective movements drive forward the plot and determine its trajectory. Elimelekh journeys away from his brethren, outward toward Moav, and all subsequent events in the chapter are designed to reverse this action. Boaz's action involves a movement towards his people. His quest for justice at the city gate is modified by the verb "*ala*," meaning ascent toward the central plaza of the town's affairs.[4] While this verb suggests an uphill movement, it also has spiritual resonance; Boaz's journey evinces a desirable, spiritually uplifting pursuit.[5] The central chapters feature women's speech: Ruth's speech to Naomi initiates the resolution of the immediate predicament of food, while Naomi's speech to Ruth launches the resolution of the long-term problem of marriage and children.

By broadening the above-noted themes of the book of *Ruth* and dividing the book into two halves, another idea emerges with regard to the book's protagonists and purpose. The first half of the book (chapters 1-2) contends with the problem of food. Elimelekh responds to the challenge of famine by abandoning his town and journeying to Moav, leaving behind the havoc wreaked by the famine.[6] Ruth's response to the threat of starvation is markedly different. She does not abandon Naomi, but acts instead on Naomi's behalf, offering to go in search of food. In this way, Ruth counteracts Elimelekh's decisions and behavior.

The second half of the book is preoccupied with the problem of marriage and children. Naomi's initial act on Ruth's behalf is questionable. She commands Ruth to engage in an immodest act of forward and perhaps promiscuous behavior. This event takes place in the dead of the night and its private, secretive setting suggests deception and seduction. Boaz's behavior in chapter four counteracts the previous scene.[7] He, too, seeks marriage and security for Ruth. However, Boaz's mission takes place in a public forum, without deception and without seduction. He operates transparently, convenes a legal assembly, marries Ruth publically, and facilitates Ruth's legitimate entrance into the nation. In this way, Boaz's actions offset those of Naomi.

In this schema, Elimelekh and Naomi represent the old guard, the personae from the era of the Judges, whose actions mirror that of the decaying previous social structure. Ruth and Boaz replace these leaders, offering fresh direction and a renewed society, based on a different and forward-looking ethos of leadership.

As an indication of the flawed nature of their respective plans, neither Elimelekh's nor Naomi's actions bear fruit. Elimelekh's journey to Moav has a tragic conclusion. Nothing positive emerges from his expedition. On the contrary, the remainder of the book is a furious attempt to repair the repercussions of Elimelekh's errors. Naomi's strategy is likewise deflected. Despite the sevenfold use of the

word *shakhav*, which retains a sexual connotation in the *Tanakh*, no sexual relationship is consummated that night. Instead, Boaz assumes responsibility for Ruth's future. In support of the corrective actions of both Boaz and Ruth, each of their decisive actions is followed by a coincidence, indicating divine providence:

> 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)

> And Boaz went up to the city gate and he sat there. **And behold**, the *go'el* about whom Boaz has spoken is passing! (*Ruth* 4:1)

The use of the surprised, "And behold!" ("*ve-hinei!*"), followed by the subject and a participle implies that just the right person arrives at exactly the right moment.[8] The fact that this occurs twice in *Megillat Ruth* suggests a connection between these occurrences.[9] A coincidence in biblical narrative implies divine assistance, as is noted by a midrash interpreting the appearance of the *go'el* at precisely the moment that Boaz sat down.

> "And Boaz went up to the gate and he sat there. And behold, the *go'el* about whom Boaz has spoken is passing" (*Ruth* 4:1). Was he standing behind the gate? R. Shemuel bar Nachman said: Even if he had been at the end of the world, the text would have flown him and brought him so that this righteous man would not have to sit and be troubled as he sits… R. Eliezer said: Boaz did his part and Ruth did her part [and Naomi did her part].[10] God said, "It is upon Me to do My part." (*Ruth Rabba* 7:7)

Boaz's appearance at the field on the day that Ruth arrived is no less impressive a coincidence. Does Boaz, the wealthy landowner, actually visit his field every day? It seems unlikely. In any case, the surprise indicated by the word *ve-hinei* suggests that he does not. It seems that we are meant to conclude that neither of these incidents is accidental. It may well be that the text employs the phrase *ve-hinei* to suggest God's involvement in the event. This, of course, implies God's approval of the behavior of both Ruth and Boaz in their respective chapters.

Who is the *Go'el*?

Who is this *go'el* who is a closer relative to Elimelekh's family than Boaz (*Ruth* 3:12)?[11] Some rabbinic sources suggest that he is Elimelekh's brother (and Boaz's uncle):[12]

> Our Rabbis *z"l* have said: Elimelekh and Salmon, the father of Boaz, and Ploni Almoni the *go'el*, and the father of Naomi were all the sons of Nachshon ben Aminadav. (Rashi, *Ruth* 2:1)[13]

Other sources suggest that the *go'el* is Boaz's older brother.[14] In any case, it is striking that the *go'el* is not identified in any way by the narrative. Not only does the precise matter of his identity remain unstated, this closer *go'el* is not even given a name![15] Instead this *go'el* is rendered anonymous, referred to as "*Ploni Almoni*."

The term *ploni almoni* occurs in two other biblical narratives to denote a place which, for reasons of military secrecy, cannot be named (*I Shemuel* 21:3; *II Melakhim* 6:8).[16] The unique appearance of this idiom to refer to a person implies the deliberate removal of his name.[17] Indeed, the usage of the words seems to indicate a person without an identity.[18]

To explain this idiom, Rashi first cites the Aramaic Targum of its appearance in *I Shemuel* 21:3: "Covered and hidden."[19] He then offers an unlikely etymology for the word *Ploni*, suggesting that it is related to the word *pele*, meaning wondrous or beyond human understanding.[20] Even if this etymology is unlikely, Rashi's reading generally agrees with the above conclusion that this idiom means someone who is intentionally unnamed.

The word *Almoni* seems to be related to the word *alman* or *almana*, meaning widow. The semantic connection between these words may be indicated by the possibility that a widow's lack of husband can erase her name along with her status, rendering her anonymous. Rashi rather elliptically raises this possibility:

Almoni. A widower without a name. (Rashi, *Ruth* 4:1)

Other rabbinic sources suggest that the word *almoni* is related to the word *ilem*, meaning mute.[21]

R. Shemuel bar Nachman said: He was mute (*ilem*) in the words of Torah, for he said, "The first ones [Machlon and Khilyon] died because they took them [the Moavite women]. Shall I go and take her [in marriage]?! God forbid that I should take her! I shall not mix my seed. I shall not mix the disqualified along with my sons!" And he did not know that the *halakha* had been renewed: An Ammonite man [shall not enter the congregation of God], but an Ammonite woman [may enter]. A Moavite man [shall not enter the congregation of God], but a Moavite woman [may enter]. (*Ruth Rabba* 7:7)[22]

Why is the *go'el* referred to as the man who has no name? There are various reasons why a character may be deliberately rendered anonymous in biblical narratives. Some characters remain anonymous because of their lack of importance to the narrative. Leaving them unnamed can indicate that they are not relevant as independent characters; they may be a vehicle, accessory or agent of another character, a foil for another character, or a character whose entire essence is in pushing forward the plot. Examples of this anonymous character include the man who finds Yosef wandering in the field and propels him forward in his elusive quest to find his brothers

(*Bereishit* 37:15); the refugee who arrives to inform Avraham of Lot's capture (*Bereishit* 14:13); the servant of Avraham who operates as the long arm of Avraham (*Bereishit* 24); and the Egyptian man left to die by the pitiless Amalekites (*I Shemuel* 30:11-15).[23]

Often, anonymity is an integral part either of the essence of the character presented or the message of the narrative. Sometimes, it indicates the objectification of the character (e.g. the concubine in *Shofetim* 19 or the daughter of Yiftach in *Shofetim* 11). In other narratives, anonymity may indicate the condition of slavery, in which people have been stripped of their individual identity (*Shemot* 1-2), or it may be used to describe a society in which people are alienated one from the other (*Shofetim* 17-21). Alternatively, the anonymity in the final chapters in the book of *Shofetim* may describe a situation in which the acts committed by the anonymous characters represent Everyman. The anonymous man could be anyone, and everyone is therefore partially culpable for the sins in the chapter.

Anonymity may be wielded by the text as a punishment. One who loses his name is one who does not deserve a name, either because he sinned or because he did not fulfill his destiny, and instead shirked his responsibility.[24] This would certainly seem to be the case of the erstwhile *go'el*, who shirks his responsibility as redeemer. Rashi states this simply:

> *Ploni Almoni*. His name was not written because he did not want to redeem. (Rashi, *Ruth* 4:1)

The midrash cited above implicating *Ploni Almoni*'s ignorance of the law as the reason that he recoils from his responsibility seems to go in a similar direction. Indeed, the *go'el* does not marry Ruth, does not become part of the lineage of kingship, and is instead relegated to the obscurity of history, uncelebrated and unrecalled.

There may also be a specific reason for this *go'el* to lose his name. This *go'el* did not merely evade a responsibility; he refused to do an act whose very objective is "to uphold the name of the dead person upon his inheritance" (*Ruth* 4:5, 10). It is an apt punishment, measure for measure (*midda ke-negged mida*), to delete the name of the one who refused to establish the name of his deceased relative. Likewise, a man who refuses to perform the mitzva of *yibbum* (which is similarly designed to uphold the name of the deceased brother)[25] is given a new, shameful name.[26] The name that he is henceforth called in Israel is "the house of the one who removes his shoe," alluding to the ceremony which accompanies the refusal of the brother to marry his sister-in-law. Thus, the *go'el*, the man who had the opportunity and the responsibility to restore the name of his deceased relative, loses his name in this narrative, as a fitting consequence for his refusal to fulfill this duty.

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] Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (1983), pp. 83-84.

[2] See *shiurim* #8, 11, 18, 27.

[3] Chapter division is a medieval invention unrelated to Jewish massoretic tradition. In fact, the massoretic tradition records no divisions or section endings in the entire narrative. Broadly speaking, however, the chapters of *Megillat Ruth* cohere well with its different scenes. As we have noted, chapters two and three have very clear openings and endings which run parallel to each other (see *shiur* #21). While one could argue that the first five verses of chapter one are an introduction to the book and should be regarded as separate from the chapter, I am inclined to view Elimelekh's actions as the launch of the events of the chapter.

[4] This movement may constitute another intriguing contrast between Boaz and Shimshon (see *shiur* #23). Shimshon seizes the doors of the city gates and bears them on an upward journey (*va-ya'alem*) to Chevron. Nevertheless, Shimshon's act serves no larger purpose and does not appear to facilitate an upward spiritual movement for Shimshon. Indeed, Shimshon's life is filled with downward movements (see footnote 5), which will continue to define the trajectory of his life in his final narrative (*Shoftim* 16:21). In the verse which concludes his life, Shimshon's brothers go *down* to him and bear him *upward* for burial among his family (*Shoftim* 16:31).

[5] Verbs suggesting upward and downward movement in the biblical narrative nearly always indicate something beyond physical movement. An example of a description of a downward journey occurs in the narrative of Shimshon (*Shoftim* 14:1, 7, 19; 15:8), while upward movements tend to describe Eliyahu (e.g. *I Melakhim* 17:19; 18:41-44; *II Melakhim* 1:3; 2:1, 1). See also *Bereishit Rabba* 85:2 on Yehuda's descent from his brothers (*Bereishit* 38:1).

[6] This is certainly the predominant rabbinic portrayal of Elimelekh. See *shiur* #6.

[7] In light of my observation regarding downward and upward movements in biblical narratives, it is significant that Boaz's upward move (*ala*) appears contrary to Naomi's instructions that Ruth descend (*ve-yaradet*) to encounter Boaz (*Ruth* 3:3). Ruth's compliance with Naomi's command is similarly described: "And she went *down* to the threshing floor" (*va-tered ha-goren*) (*Ruth* 3:6).

[8] This type of clause occurs elsewhere in *Tanakh*. See e.g. *Bereishit* 24:15; *I Melakhim* 1:42. See Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *The Book of Ruth*, p. 93.

[9] A third appearance of the word *ve-hinei* appears in *Ruth* 3:8 to indicate Boaz's shock at seeing a woman at his feet. In that case, however, it is not the reader who is surprised by the fortunate turn of events, which have been carefully orchestrated by Naomi in advance. Rather, it is Boaz who is taken aback, and his surprise is registered as fear rather than a desired coincidence.

[10] Some versions of this midrash omit the bracketed phrase that mentions Naomi's role. This omission strengthens my contention that Boaz's and Ruth's actions spawn divine assistance.

[11] It is worth noting that we are likewise in the dark regarding Boaz's exact relationship to Naomi and Elimelekh. Naomi calls him a *karov* (*Ruth* 2:20) and a *moda* (*Ruth* 3:2), and the text refers to him also as a *moda* from the family of Elimelekh (*Ruth* 2:1). The precise nature of the familial relationship, however, is left unspecified.

[12] An uncle is considered to be a closer relative than a cousin for purposes of family responsibilities and rights. See *Vayikra* 25:48-49.

[13] See *Bava Batra* 91a; *Tanchuma Behar* 3:3. I have brought Rashi's version of the midrash because Rashi clarifies the precise nature of Salmon's relationship to Boaz.

[14] *Ruth Rabba* 6:5; *Tanchuma Behar* 8; *Ruth Zuta* 4:1. This reading assumes that the word "*achinu*," our brother (*Ruth* 4:3), is meant to be taken literally. Nevertheless, as the midrash in *Ruth Rabba* 6:5 acknowledges, the word *ach* is often used in *Tanakh* to refer to a male relative, and not necessarily a brother.

[15] One opinion in the midrash (e.g. *Ruth Rabba* 7:7) suggests that *Ploni Almoni* is the actual name of the *go'el*. In light of the other usages of this idiom in the *Tanakh*, this reading seems rather unlikely. Another midrash has interpreted the verse in *Ruth* 3:13 to mean that the *go'el's* proper name was Tov (variations of this name appear in several places in the Bible; see e.g. *Zekharia* 6:10; *Ezra* 2:60; *Nechemia* 3:35, 4:1). While Ibn Ezra (*Ruth* 3:13) dismisses this reading as unlikely, there are several reasons for this homiletic reading. One motivation may be to present Boaz as not blithely giving up the opportunity to marry Ruth. By using the word "good" in reference to Ruth's possible marriage to another man, Boaz indicates indifference. How could Boaz possibly be indifferent in the face of the loss of a union with the righteous Ruth? Therefore, the midrash suggests that the word "*tov*" does not mean "good," but is actually a proper noun. Second, this midrash may be designed to offer an explanation for the eventual rendering of this *go'el* as deliberately nameless, as in *Ploni Almoni*. If the *go'el* is not good like his name, then he must surely lose that name! Finally, it is worth noting the significance of the word "*tov*" in the narrative. As a reversal of Naomi's proclamation that God has done evil to her (*Ruth* 1:22), the word *tov* appears several times in the narrative (*Ruth* 2:22; 3:1, 7, 10). The possibility that the man named Tov has the potential to finally repair Naomi's misfortunate is a tantalizing one.

[16] The term *Ploni Almoni* is employed in a somewhat similar manner as the contemporary English usage of "John Doe." For a contracted usage of this idiom, "the *palmoni*," see *Daniel* 8:13.

[17] Some Greek translations of this verse render *Ploni Almoni* as κρύφιε, or surreptitious, implying "the secret one." Other manuscripts of the Septuagint have the words, ό δείνα, meaning, "such a one," or "a certain someone."

[18] A similar word, *Pelon* (or *Phulan*), appears in cognate languages, such as Aramaic and Arabic, with the meaning, "a particular one." See Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1951), p. 811.

[19] The Aramaic Targum of *Ruth* 4:1 renders *Ploni Almoni* as "*gevar de-tzenian orchatei*," or "the man whose ways are hidden."

[20] Rashi brings two proof-texts to explain the way in which the word *Ploni* is used in this verse, *Devarim* 17:8 and *Bereishit* 18:14. Both passages imply knowledge is elusive or beyond the capacity of man's understanding. This etymology is unlikely because it requires dropping the letter *nun* and substituting an *aleph* in the root of the word *ploni*.

[21] See e.g. *Ruth Rabba* 7:7. This etymology requires the dropping of the letter *nun* from the word *almoni*.

[22] This critical midrash may relate to the general trend to regard the anonymous *Ploni Almoni* as one who is deserving of losing his name because of his behavior.

[23] Each of these cases deserves independent attention that is beyond the scope of these *shiurim*.

[24] This is the reason, in my opinion, that the wife of Manoach loses her name in *Shoftim* 13. There is little doubt that she is the dominant figure in the narrative, in spite of her anonymity. In an astute and witty quip, Professor Uriel Simon would often refer to the lesser figure of the named Manoach as, "the husband of the wife of Manoach." In my reading of the narrative, the wife of Manoach is not named because she refuses to educate Shimshon toward his destiny, thereby laying the groundwork for his eventual failure. The woman from Shunem (*II Melakhim* 4) is, in my view, not named for a similar reason. It is beyond the scope of this *shiur* to further develop this idea.

[25] See *Devarim* 25:6.

[26] We will examine the nature of the relationship between this episode and the mitzva of *yibbum* in the following *shiur*.