

MEGILLAT RUTH
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Shiur #33: Redemption, Acquisitions, and Blessings

And Boaz said to the elders and the entire nation, “You are witnesses today that I hereby purchase all that belongs to Elimelekh and all that belongs to Khilyon and Machlon from the hands of Naomi. And also Ruth the Moavite, the wife of Machlon, I hereby purchase as a wife to establish the name of the deceased upon his inheritance and the name of the deceased will not be cut off from his brethren and from the gates of his place. You are witnesses today.” (*Ruth* 4:9-10)

Farewell to the *Go’el*

Following the shoe’s removal, Boaz unceremoniously dismisses the *go’el*, uttering not another word in his direction. Instead, Boaz addresses the elders and the people, omitting even a single reference to the *go’el* in his speech. In this way, the *go’el* is effectively erased from the proceedings. This abrupt disappearance recalls Boaz’s treatment of the overseer in *Ruth* 2:5-7. Boaz responds to the overseer’s lengthy (and, in my view, derogatory) description of Ruth by simply ignoring him and turning directly to Ruth.^[1] At that point, the overseer vanishes from the narrative. While this may simply reflect the manner in which minor characters fade out of narratives without much ado,^[2] there may also be a common statement in both Boaz’s and the text’s treatment of these characters. Characters who do not play a positive role in the narrative are dropped from the story. More specifically, characters who are not willing to restore names, personal dignity, and identity to Ruth (and to the family of Naomi) are rendered anonymous.^[3]

Nevertheless, there is a reference to a “*go’el*” once more in the narrative after the *go’el*’s dismissal:

And the women said to Naomi, “Blessed is God who has not withheld from you a ***go’el*** today! And his name shall be called in Israel.” (*Ruth* 4:14)

This *go’el* is *not* a reference to the man who has been called the *go’el* fourteen times in chapter four. Umberto Cassuto has noted that any word that appears in a multiple of seven in a narrative section should be treated as a *leitwort*, or a key word.^[4] We noted the sevenfold appearance of the root *ga’al* (redemption, or redeemer) in chapter three.^[5] In chapter four, the root *ga’al* appears fifteen times, fourteen of which are references to the same man, the erstwhile redeemer.

To obtain a better understanding of the textual portrayal of this *go'el*, we should carefully note the manner in which this word is arranged in our narrative. The word appears in two groups of seven, followed by an unexpected fifteenth appearance.

The first seven references to the *go'el* appear in the context of his willingness to redeem Elimelekh's land. The seventh, climactic appearance of this word in the first group is the *go'el's* concise assent: "I will redeem (*anokhi eg'al*)" (*Ruth* 4:4). Boaz's subsequent stipulation, in which he links redemption of the land to marrying Ruth, is promptly followed by the *go'el's* speedy refusal. Ironically, despite the *go'el's* unequivocal decision not to redeem, the next seven occurrences of the word (all of which revolve around the *go'el's* refusal to act as a *go'el*) continue to refer to him as the *go'el*.^[6]

The fifteenth and final appearance of this word occurs as part of the blessing of the women, as cited above. Who is the *go'el* referred to by these women? While the context of the verse suggests that the *go'el* here is the child,^[7] the broader context indicates that it is Boaz.^[8] In either case, it is Boaz who acts instead of the *go'el*, replacing him and his role in the narrative – redeeming the land and marrying Ruth.

The Word "*Kana*"

Boaz's official, legal acquisition of both the land and of Ruth employs the word "*kaniti*" twice. What is meant by the word "*kana*," "to purchase," in the context of the marriage? Did Boaz actually purchase Ruth's hand in marriage in a similar manner as his purchase of the land?

The word "*kana*," which appears six times in this chapter, generally signifies a commercial purchase of land, houses, animals,^[9] and servants. Quite often it is employed with regard to land acquisition, such as Avraham's purchase of the cave of Machpela (*Bereishit* 25:10; 49:30; 50:13), Yaakov's purchase of a field in Shekhem (*Bereishit* 33:19), and David's purchase of the *goren* that will become the site of the Temple (*I Shmuel* 24:21, 24). When the word *kana* refers to God, it is used in several exceptional ways.^[10] Nevertheless, it is never used elsewhere in the *Tanakh* in a marital context.^[11]

In *Megillat Ruth*, the word *kana* initially is employed to mean the purchase of Elimelekh's field, as we would expect (*Ruth* 4:3-4). Boaz's innovative conflation of the *go'el's* duty to purchase land and the responsibility to marry Ruth involves an original usage of the word *kana*, with the meaning to purchase a wife:

And Boaz said, "On the day that you have purchased (*kenotkha*) the field from the hands of Naomi and from Ruth the Moavite, you have purchased (*kanita*) the deceased's wife to establish the name of the deceased upon his inheritance." (*Ruth* 4:5)

When the *go'el* relinquishes his rights to Boaz, tersely stating, "Purchase it for yourself (*kenei lakh*)," he appears simultaneously to reference both the purchase of the land and of Ruth. In Boaz's official proclamation of purchase, he employs the word "*kanit*" twice: once when he refers to all that belongs to the family (presumably, property), and once explicitly in regard to his marriage to Ruth.

Gesenius distinguishes between the commercial use of this word and a more general meaning of acquisition (not in a monetary sense). This may be the primary sense of the word "*kana*" when used in connection to wisdom in *Mishlei* (e.g. 4:7; 15:32; 16:16).^[12] Gesenius includes the acquisition of Ruth in the same category as these verses describing acquiring wisdom. Nevertheless, in *Ruth* 4, the word "*kana*" is used repeatedly about both the land and the marriage. Can we really distinguish between different meanings of the same word in juxtaposed verses, when the text does not indicate that we should do so?

Actually, Boaz does appear to separate the land transaction from the marriage to Ruth by using the word "*ve-gam*," "and also," at the beginning of the second verse of his speech (*Ruth* 4:10). By placing Boaz's acquisition of a wife in a separate verse from his purchase of the land, the text may be attempting to distinguish between these acts. Nevertheless, using the same verb links these two acquisitions and illustrates that Boaz acquires the land and Ruth simultaneously, as part of the same purchase.

Although the word "*kana*" does not appear in the *Tanakh* with the meaning of purchasing a wife, this word does appear in the Mishna in this sense.^[13] While many Talmud scholars consider this to be evidence that marriage by purchase was in existence in biblical times and after, David Weiss Halivni maintains that the word "*kana*" is only used about marriage in contexts where other purchases are taking place at the same time.^[14] In this reading, the employment of the word "*kana*" to mean marriage to Ruth makes good sense. This marriage takes place as part of a broader transaction involving other acquisitions. Thus, as a matter of stylistic uniformity, the writer employs a term to refer to all the acquisitions that are taking place together.

A substantive idea may also underlie the use of the word "*kana*" here. In one other biblical context, the verb "*kana*" is used in parallel to the word "*ga'al*."^[15] This intriguing parallel takes place in the Song of the Sea (*Shemot* 15). There, God is described as the redeemer of this nation, "You led in Your kindness this nation that You redeemed" (*am zu ga'alta*) (*Shemot* 15:13). In remarkably similar syntax a few verses later, God is depicted as the one who purchased this nation, "*am zu kanita*" (*Shemot* 15:16). Onkelos actually conflates these verbs, translating them both with the identical word, "*depirkata*," "that You redeemed." In Onkelos' reading, the word "*kana*," when used about God's relationship to His nation, takes on an identical meaning as the word "*ga'al*." This may occur in our narrative as well, in which the words "*ga'al*" and "*kana*" both have a redemptive sense.

This similarity links Boaz's role in our narrative to God's role as redeemer of the nation. Boaz's act combining redemption and purchase recalls God's original kindness

toward His nation. In this way, our narrative uses as its model God's concern for His people and His formation of the nation of Israel. This correlation between God's actions and Boaz's action also looks forward toward the future national redemption. In this schema, Boaz acts as a vehicle for divine redemption, setting in motion the ideal model of kingship, in which the king acts as a conduit for God's blessings.

Blessings

The public legal forum convened by Boaz is witnessed by the elders and by the people. Although these witnesses are passive, they follow Boaz's legal pronouncement with an eloquent blessing, which does not simply formalize the agreement, but infuses it with poetry, history, and pathos.

And the nation in the gate and the elders as witnesses said, "God shall place this woman who is coming into your house as Rachel and as Leah, who built, the two of them, the house of Israel, and do valor in Efrata and call a name in Bethlehem. And your house shall be as the house of Peretz, whom Tamar birthed for Yehuda, from the seed that God shall give you from this young woman." (*Ruth* 4:11-12)

This beautiful speech has several themes: God's involvement in their good fortune, the erection of a stable house, the mention of illustrious personages from the past, the towns of Bethlehem and Efrata, the name, the invocation of valor, birth, seed and life. These bring the narrative to a close with a gratifying sense of serenity and well-being.

Poetically, this speech is constructed in a chiasmic structure (ABC C'B'A'), drawing our attention to several important ideas that underscore the goal of the marriage between Boaz and Ruth:

- A** - God shall place (*yitein*) this **woman** who is coming into your house
- B** - As Rachel and as Leah who built, the two of them, the **house** of Israel
- C** - Do valor in **Efrata**
- C'** - Call a name in **Bethlehem**
- B'** - Your **house** shall be as the **house** of Peretz, whom Tamar birthed for Yehuda
- A'** - From the seed that **God** shall give **you** (*yitein*) from this young **woman**.

A and A': The blessing that God's favor should be toward Ruth and Boaz forms the periphery of this speech. Two separate individuals become the recipients of God's attention (*yitein Hashem*), first Ruth (**A**) and then Boaz (**A'**). God is the agent of this marriage and He has ensured both Ruth's arrival at Boaz's house and the seed that will emerge from it. [\[16\]](#)

B and B': The next segment of this speech features illustrious personages from the early history of the Jewish nation. Each of these personae is credited with having built a

house (the national house of Israel (**B**) and the tribal house of Yehuda (**B'**)), and Ruth and Boaz are given a blessing that they should build a comparable house. The construction of a house is thereby featured as a prominent aim of this union.

C and C': The core of this speech focuses our attention upon the projected and anticipated outcome of Ruth's entrance into Boaz's house. It is somewhat ambiguous as to *who* exactly will do valor^[17] in Efrata and call a name in Bethlehem. Presumably, the subject of this wish is Boaz,^[18] although it could also refer to the child who will be born to the union. It could possibly be a description of Boaz and Ruth's joint house.

Asa

“And do (**ve-aseh**) valor in Efrata and call (**u-kera**) a name in Bethlehem.”
(*Ruth* 4:11)

The center of this blessing features two separate verbs, “*asa*” and “*kara*,” that have been employed previously in *Megillat Ruth*. The first verb, “*asa*,” to do, appears twelve times in the narrative thus far.^[19] Its first ten appearances relate to Ruth, mostly describing her generous actions toward Naomi. Consider, for example, Boaz's recognition of Ruth's kindness: “It has surely been told to me all that you have done (*asit*) with your mother-in-law” (*Ruth* 2:11). There are several occasions in which Ruth is described as doing something “with Boaz” (*Ruth* 2:19), or in accordance with Boaz's instructions (*Ruth* 3:4). Twice this verb highlights Boaz's own acts of largesse toward Ruth (*Ruth* 3:11, 16). One notable parallel between Boaz's and Ruth's use of this word is found in Ruth's unhesitating response to Naomi's instructions: “Everything that you tell me, I will do” (*Ruth* 3:5). This is mirrored not long after by Boaz's assertion in response to Ruth's bold request: “Everything that you say I will do for you” (*Ruth* 3:11).

It seems that the verb “*asa*,” appearing in the center of the blessing, highlights the common trait of Boaz and Ruth suggested by previous appearances of this verb. They both act with kindness and generosity, suggesting that these traits will emerge from the union. This idea is furthermore indicated by the object of the verb, the word “*chayil*.” We have seen that both Boaz (2:1) and Ruth (3:11) are referred to as people of *chayil*. The appearance of the phrase “*aseh chayil*” at the nexus of this speech is an excellent way to convey that the narrative is describing the successful outcome of the union of Boaz and Ruth.

Kara

The second verb, “*kara*,” and its direct object, “*shem*,” also has broader significance within the narrative. The verb, “*kara*,” appears a total of seven times in the *Megilla*, six of which directly involve Naomi. Its first three appearances occur within Naomi's short and bitter speech to the women upon her return to Bethlehem:

And they said, “Is this Naomi?!” And she said to them, “Do not **call** me Naomi [pleasant], **call** me Mara [bitter], for *Sha-ddai* has embittered me

terribly. I left full and God has returned me empty; why should you **call** me Naomi?" (Ruth 4:19-21)

The final three appearances of the word appear in the words of the women who bless Naomi and name the child:

And the women said to Naomi, "Blessed is God who has not withheld from you a *go'e*! today! And his name shall be **called** in Israel." ... And the neighbor women **called** his name, saying, "A child has been born to Naomi!" And they **called** his name Oved, he is the father of Yishai, the father of David. (*Ruth* 4:14, 17)

The structural symmetry is remarkable.^[20] The women who speak at the end of the book reverse Naomi's initial dismissal of her pleasant name, illustrating how completely Naomi's fortunes have changed.

The seventh occurrence of the word "*kara*" appears at the nexus of the seven appearances and at the core of the witnesses' blessing: "And **call** a name in Bethlehem." We have repeatedly explored the significance of the name in *Megillat Ruth*. The goal of the marriage and the book is to restore the names of Naomi's family. And, as we have noted, Naomi's predicament mirrors that of the nation, and the solution for Naomi anticipates and presages the national solution.

The appearance of the phrase "*kara shem*" (to call a name) at the center of the blessing highlights the potential of this marriage to restore the names of both Naomi and the entire nation during the period of the *Shoftim*. The phrase "*asa chayil*" recalls the generosity of the two individuals who come together to form a union that can create a society of integrity and magnanimity to replace the one characterized by selfishness and slothful behavior. In this way, the two phrases that form the nexus of this speech also form the nexus of the plot of *Megillat Ruth*, casting a spotlight upon two of the most important ideas of the narrative.

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] See *shiur* # 14, where the subject is the behavior of the overseer.

^[2] See, for example, Uriel Simon's study, "Minor Characters in Biblical Narrative," *JSOT* 46 (1990), pp. 11-19.

^[3] Orpah is an obvious exception to this point, as she retains her name in the narrative despite her decision to return to Moav. Nevertheless, Naomi encourages Orpah to leave. See e.g. *shiur* # 9, where I explore this matter at some length.

^[4] As noted in *shiur* #25, Umberto Cassuto often notes the significance of the number seven in the identification of a *leitwort* (leading word). See, for example, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (1967), pp. 75, 91ff.

^[5] See *shiur* #25.

^[6] There is an amusing irony in the following paraphrase of the verse (*Ruth* 4:6): “And the *go’el* said, I cannot act as a *go’el*.”

^[7] Malbim, *Ruth* 4:14; Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (1996), p. 253. Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* (1988), p. 271 maintains that this is the scholarly consensus.

^[8] J. A. Bewer, “The *Go’el* in *Ruth* 4:14, 15,” *AJSL* 20 (1903-1904), pp. 202-206. See Jack Sassoon’s discussion of this issue, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (1979), pp. 163-164, in which he ultimately disagrees with Bewer’s conclusion.

^[9] The word “*mikneh*,” which means cattle (with the connotation of possessions and wealth), appears to be etymologically related to the word “*kana*.” See Ramban, *Bereishit* 14:19; Gesenius’ *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (1957), p. 504.

^[10] For example, in *Bereishit* 14:19; 22, God is described as the “*koneh shamayim va-aretz*,” which literally translated means the “One who purchased the heavens and the earth.” Rashi (ad loc.) maintains that “*koneh*” there means “created,” suggesting that creating something is a form of purchase. Gesenius’ *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (1957), p. 735, proposes that the word “*kana*” is a cognate of “*khun*,” meaning to establish. The simple meaning of this phrase would then be that God established the heavens and earth.

^[11] The verb “*kana*” is, however, sometimes employed with regard to the purchase of people, namely slaves (e.g. *Bereishit* 39:1; *Amos* 8:6; *Nechemia* 5:8). Nevertheless, the sole example of marriage by purchase is here. W. A. Van Gemeren (ed.), *Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* 3 (1997), pp. 940-941, conflates the two uses of the word “*kana*” of humans, thereby suggesting that just as the word “*kana*” can signify the purchase of humans for slavery, it can also refer to the acquisition of a wife. There seems to be little evidence for this idea.

^[12] Gesenius’ *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (1957), p. 735.

^[13] E.g. *Kiddushin* 1:1. The *gemara* asks why this word is used to denote marriage in the *mishna* (*Kiddushin* 2a-2b). Interestingly, this *gemara* does not turn to our passage in *Megillat Ruth* as a proof text to explain why the word “*kana*” is an appropriate term for marriage.

^[14] For a review of this argument among Talmud scholars, see David Weiss Halivini, “The Use of QNY in Connection with Marriage,” *Harvard Theological Review* 57 (1964), pp. 244-248.

^[15] The words “*kana*” and “*ga’al*” appear together in several contexts in which the topic is redemption (*Vayikra* 25:25-55; *Yirmiyahu* 32:7-8). Nevertheless, in these contexts they mean something distinct. The parallel in *Shemot* is intriguing because it suggests that the two words mean something similar. Edward F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth* (Anchor Bible, 1975), pp. 159-160, astutely notes this parallel and its importance for our narrative.

^[16] The reference to the *zera* that results from this union constitutes another parallel to the story of Chana. See *I Shmuel* 1:11. Note especially the similar phrase in Eli’s blessing to Elkana and Chana in *I Shmuel* 2:20. This indicates again (see *shiur* #17) that Chana and Ruth in tandem provide the seed (Shmuel and David) that repairs the era of the *Shoftim* and launches the hopeful period of the kingship.

^[17] I have translated the term “*chayil*” as valor. We have noted, however, that this phrase carries many (perhaps simultaneous) meanings: military power, wealth, leadership, integrity, and fertility. See *shiurim* #12 and #26.

^[18] Rashi (*Ruth* 4:11) indicates that the blessing is directed toward Boaz, whose name will be exalted. See also Malbim, *Ruth* 4:11.

^[19] In *shiur* #19, we discussed the significance of this word within the context of chapter two.

^[20] This is all the more remarkable, considering that *Ruth* 4:17 appears to repeat the phrase, “they called his name,” for no apparent reason. This has caused some scholars to attempt to revise this verse. See, for example, Campbell’s discussion of this (Edward F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth* (Anchor Bible, 1975), pp. 165-166). In my view, the threefold use of the verb *kara* at the end of the book is designed to deliberately parallel the threefold usage at the beginning of the book.