

MEGILLAT RUTH By Dr. Yael Ziegler

Shiur #05: The Days of the Judging of the Judges ([Ruth 1:1](#))

And it was in the days of the judging of the Judges, and there was a famine in the land. ([Ruth 1:1](#))

Megillat Ruth's opening sentence generates two primary questions among the exegetes, one linguistic and the other factual. Linguistically, many exegetes focus on the double language in the verse. Is there an idea underlying this particular reference to the time-period? Why not simply write, "And it was in the days of the Judges?" Second, the vague description of the time-period, in which no specific judge is mentioned, leaves a lacuna that the *midrash* hastens to fill.^{1[1]} Several rabbinic sources endeavor to identify the precise Judge who functions contemporaneous to the events of *Megillat Ruth*. We will examine these suggestions, seeking to understand their theological underpinnings and how they enrich our understanding of *Megillat Ruth*.

Shefot Ha-Shoftim: The Judging of the Judges

Commenting on the double language, the *gemara* ([Bava Batra 15b](#)) treats the noun as the object of the infinitive, suggesting that the words "*shefot ha-Shoftim*" refer to the judging of the Judges themselves. In other words, the *gemara* characterizes this generation as one in which the people render judgment upon their Judges. This is both a comment on the rebelliousness of the people, who do not accept the authority of the Judges, as well as on the quality of the Judges themselves.

The *gemara* follows its general sketch with a descriptive incident intended to portray the degenerate situation. A judge reprimands a supplicant with an idiom intended to direct him to cease his sinning, "Take out the splinter from between your teeth!" The litigant's insolent response, "Take out the *beam* from between *your* eyes," is a reference to more egregious sins committed by the judge himself.^{2[2]} The society depicted by this exegetical reading is chaotic, lacking any

^{1[1]} The attempt to fill in missing information is common in rabbinic sources. *Chazal* tend to provide names for anonymous characters, often identifying them with better-known biblical figures. In a similar vein, *Chazal* often provide missing information regarding the time in which events take place, particularly when this can enrich the theological message of the story. This idea was developed at length in I. Heinemann's *Darkhei ha-Aggada* (1954), pp. 21-26.

^{2[2]} This *gemara* concludes by citing a verse from *Yeshayahu* 1:22, which describes the people as engaged in corruption. The following verse suggests that this corruption is connected to the society's Judges.

viable judicial infrastructure. Not only do the people disrespect the Judges, refusing to heed their instructions, but the Judges themselves are not worthy of respect!³[3]

Ibn Ezra offers a similar reading, but with a twist. He posits that the double language indicates that God judged the Judges at this time, and it is due to the poor conduct of the Judges that God brought a famine upon the land. Ibn Ezra's approach has a syntactical advantage, in that he explains the connection between the opening phrase, "And it was in the days of the judging of the Judges," and the next sentence, "And there was a famine in the land." Moreover, Ibn Ezra provides a theological justification for the famine, which is introduced in the narrative with no causal explanation.

Malbim also addresses the vague description of the time-period at the beginning of *Megillat Ruth*. He maintains that, similar to the period at the end of the book of *Shoftim*, there is no central Judge during the course of the narrative in the book of *Ruth*. Instead, this is a period between the major Judges, when anyone who wished to rule seized control, and Judges proliferated throughout the land, doing as they pleased. As we know from the end of the book of *Shoftim*, lack of central leadership generates chaos, the collapse of the religious and social order. The Malbim resolves the question of the vague description of the time-period. At the same time, he contributes to our sense of the social turmoil of this period, characterized by anarchy and unrest.⁴[4]

By viewing the first sentence of the book as a direct reference to the problem of leadership during this period, the *gemara*, Ibn Ezra, and Malbim all focus our attention on the manner in which the book of *Ruth* presents the problems of this period in its opening. The backdrop of the book of *Ruth* is the chaotic leadership of the period of the Judges. The book of *Ruth* therefore searches for a solution for this era; it concludes with the birth of David, an exemplary leader and the founder of a dynasty of leaders.

Which Judge Ruled During *Megillat Ruth*?

Notwithstanding the Malbim's approach, most rabbinic sources assume that the *Megilla* does take place during the rule of a specific Judge in the book of

³[3] In previous *shiurim*, we dealt quite extensively with the nature of the period of the Judges. While the picture sketched by the *gemara* is not explicitly present in the book of *Judges*, there does appear to be some measure of deterioration among the Judges themselves as the book progresses. Based on this *gemara*, it is possible to speculate as to the reason there are no longer any Judges to be found at the conclusion of the book of *Judges* – the people are tired of the leadership and refuse to accept the authority of any Judge.

⁴[4] This depiction may have an advantage in explaining the famine as well. A leaderless period often fails to provide the necessary economic infrastructure to cope with precarious agricultural circumstances, thereby leading to famine. We should note that the verse itself does not attribute the famine directly to God. Syntactically, it appears that the verse connects the famine to the leadership of the Judges. I am grateful to Joe Wolfson for pointing this out to me.

Shoftim. If this is so, then why does the *Megilla* choose to formulate its time-period in such an imprecise manner? It seems that the *Megilla*'s vagueness is deliberate. After all, the *Megilla* could have been more exact in placing the events during the reign of Devora, Gidon, or Yiftach. *Megillat Ruth* chooses deliberately not to date itself because it is not meant to be seen relative to one specific time-period in the book of *Shoftim*. Instead, its vague time-period allows it to serve as a contrast to the entire book of *Shoftim*. As we have seen, the *Megilla* provides a distinct message and new trajectory for this entire troubled era.

Several *midrashim* nevertheless attempt to locate the precise time frame of the book of *Ruth*. I will analyze these *midrashim*, assuming as my premise that they are not as much dating the story as they are suggesting a comparison between two stories. The most important question to ask with respect to these *midrashim* is, therefore, what they are trying to convey in associating the book of *Ruth* with a specific story during the period of the Judges.

Let us begin with the *midrash* in [Ruth Rabba 1:1](#):

“ And it was in the days of the judging of the Judges.” And who were they?

Rav says: They were Barak and Devora.

R. Yehoshua ben Levi says: They were Shamgar and Ehud.

R. Huna says: They were Devora, Barak, and Yael. *Shefot* [would have implied] one, *Shoftim* [would have implied] two, *ha-Shoftim* [implies] three.

This *midrash* records three opinions as to the identity of the Judges during the period of the book of *Ruth*. Each of the opinions is based on the premise that the plural form of the word “ Judges,” *ha-Shoftim*, designates a period in which multiple Judges ruled simultaneously. While this assumption is grammatically viable (although not necessary, as the plural form could simply refer to the general time period in which many Judges ruled one after the other), R. Huna's opinion is not at all compelling from a grammatical viewpoint. Does the addition of the definite article in the word *ha-Shoftim* actually suggest that there were three Judges and not two? R. Huna's opinion stating that *Megillat Ruth* takes place during the tenure of Devora, Barak, and Yael presents a second difficulty; he does not really offer a distinct opinion with respect to the timeframe of the *megilla*, as Rav had also opined that the book of *Ruth* took place during the story of Devora and Barak.

Ehud and Shamgar

For the present, I will leave aside R. Huna, and attempt to understand the position of R. Yehoshua ben Levi. He suggests that the events of *Megillat Ruth* took place during the rule of Ehud and Shamgar. By recording Ehud's death (4:1) *after* the description of Shamgar's rule (3:31), the book of *Shoftim* does indeed indicate that their reigns overlapped.

Moreover, the possibility that the book of *Ruth* takes place close to the events of Eglon's rule is indicated by several *midrashim*. These sources suggest that Eglon, the king of Moav cut down by Ehud, was either Ruth's grandfather (e.g. [Nazir 23b](#)) or father (e.g. [Ruth Rabba 2:9](#)). It is noteworthy that Ehud's success in conquering Moav leads to the subordination of Moav under Israel's authority for a lengthy period of eighty years. Perhaps R. Yehoshua ben Levi is attempting to explain the connection between Moav and Israel during the course of the *Megilla*. If Moav is subordinate to Israel at this time, this may account for Elimelekh's choice to journey to Moav during the famine, and even perhaps explain the wariness of the inhabitants of Bethlehem to accept a Moavite into their midst.⁵[5]

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of R. Yehoshua ben Levi's suggestion lies in its placement of *Ruth* at the very beginning of the period of the book of *Shoftim*.⁶[6] It is significant that the narrative of Ehud represents the first time in the book of *Shoftim* in which the Judge is not from the tribe of Judah. I posited in [shiur #2](#) that the failure to appoint Judean leadership is the initial malfunction in the book and the catalyst for its collapse.⁷[7] According to this theory, the story of *Megillat Ruth* occurs exactly when leadership begins to go awry. At the very outset of the downward spiral of the period of the Judges, *Ruth* lays the foundations for eventual repair.⁸[8]

Devora and Barak

⁵[5] R. Yaakov Medan, *Hope from the Depths: A Study in Megillat Ruth* [Heb.] (2007), pp. 22-23, takes this in a different direction. He maintains that R. Yehoshua ben Levi points out that Elimelekh's departure takes place during the period in which Israel was subordinate to Eglon. In this schema, Elimelekh commits the ultimate betrayal of his nation by abandoning them to go to the land of their enemy!

⁶[6] I will not contend with the historical question of whether these opinions cohere with the number of generations between Ruth and David. My approach is that *Chazal* are not offering a historic perspective, but are interested in the underlying idea of creating a parallel between Ruth and a story in the book of *Shoftim*. There is also a fair amount of controversy as to the timeline of the book of *Shoftim* itself, as it remains unclear whether the Judges rule consecutively or if there is overlap between them. Generally, issues of historicity are difficult to establish beyond doubt and therefore remain uncertain. In any case, my interest in these *shiurim* lies in the religious ideas of both biblical and rabbinic texts, not their historical context.

⁷[7] While Ehud is by no means an unfavorable leader, there are several striking hints in the narrative that suggest that his leadership represents the beginning of the slow, inexorable slide towards the end. Note, for example, some of the striking linguistic parallels that Ehud's story shares with the story of the rape of the concubine: the left-handed Benjamite in the Ehud story ([Judges 3:15](#)) and in the story of the civil war (20:16); the similar situation in which someone opens a door only to find that, "Behold!" there is a person lying [dead!] (3:25 and 19:27); the enemy Moavites of Ehud's story and the Benjamites' similarity to Sodom (the spiritual ancestor of Moav) in the final story. It is beyond the scope of this *shiur* to develop this point further.

⁸[8] This coheres with a common *aggadic* metaphor in which God creates the antidote for the situation before the actual illness strikes. Needless to say, this principle emphasizes God's personal concern for His creatures.

Rav says, “ They were Barak and Devora” ...R. Huna says, “ They were Devora, Barak, and Yael.”

Rav’ s approach is a bit more obscure than R. Yehoshua ben Levi’ s position. His assumption that Barak and Devora function together as Judges is not borne out by the narrative, which presents Devora as the only Judge in the story. Nevertheless, one could claim that by fulfilling the military role generally undertaken by the Judge, Barak assumes a partial role of Judge during this story. R. Huna’ s addition of Yael requires a similar, if more farfetched, approach. While Yael is not initially selected for military leadership in Israel’ s battle against Sisera, her key military contribution to the defeat of the Canaanites is indisputable and therefore may, according to R. Huna, qualify her to be named one of the Judges at this time.

The suggestion that *Megillat Ruth* takes place during the period of Devora compels the reader to compare the two stories. On the surface, the narrative of Devora ([Shoftim 4-5](#)) shares some very obvious features with the story in *Megillat Ruth*. Each story involves two main female characters, one of whom is not Jewish, but is loyal to the Jewish people. Both stories reach their climax as a woman approaches a sleeping man, following his satiation. These narratives feature a character providing (food and) drink for another: Boaz gives Ruth food and drink and Yael gives Sisera milk.

Nevertheless, the true significance of these comparisons lies in the contrast. Ruth approaches a sleeping Boaz to offer him marriage, to achieve continuity, while Yael approaches a sleeping Sisera to murder him and cut off his line. Boaz gives Ruth food as an act of *chesed*, to revive her, while Yael gives Sisera milk to kill him. Indeed the peaceful undercurrent of the Ruth story, replete with small acts of kindness, is entirely different from the belligerent atmosphere of the story of Devora. These two stories are typical of the manner in which *Shoftim* and *Ruth* intersect; they are a distorted reflection of one another.

Several linguistic similarities support this comparison between the story of Devora and the book of *Ruth*.^{9[9]}

1. The verb *hum*: murmur, roar, discomfit, tumult, to cause confusion

a) Devora: The denouement of the battle against Sisera is described as follows ([Shoftim 4:15](#)):

And God confused (*va-yahom*) Sisera.

b) Ruth: This same word appears in *Megillat Ruth* to describe the atmosphere of bewilderment and excitement that accompanies Naomi’ s return to Bethlehem ([Ruth 1:19](#)):

^{9[9]} For the sake of greater clarity, I have charted these similarities at the end of the *shiur*.

And the entire city was confused (*va-teihom*) upon them.

2. The command, *sura* (turn aside), followed by the immediate obedience to the command, *va-yasar*^{10[10]}

a) Devora: Yael instructs Sisera to turn aside in order to enter her tent, where she ostensibly intends to offer him hospitality ([Shoftim 4:18](#)):

And Yael went out to greet Sisera. And she said to him, “ Turn aside (*sura*) my master, turn aside (*sura*) to me, do not be afraid.” And he turned aside (*va-yasar*) to the tent and she covered him with a blanket.

b) Ruth: Boaz directs the *goel* to turn aside and sit at the gate in search of a buyer for Naomi’ s land and a husband for Ruth ([Ruth 4:1](#)):

And Boaz went up the gate and he sat there. And behold the *goel* is passing about whom Boaz had spoken. And he said, “ Turn aside (*sura*), sit here *Ploni Almoni*.” And he turned aside (*va-yasar*) and he sat.

3. The adverb *lat* or *ba-lat*: stealthily, secretly, gently

a) Devora: Yael approaches Sisera surreptitiously, exercising extreme caution ([Shoftim 4:21](#)):

And she came upon him stealthily (*ba-lat*), and she drove the tent pin into his temple.

b) Ruth: Ruth is likewise silent as she approaches a sleeping Boaz ([Ruth 3:7](#), 9):

And she came stealthily (*va-lat*) and she uncovered his feet...and she said...“ Spread your wings over your maidservant for you are a redeemer.”

These linguistic similarities indicates just how dissimilar these stories are. In the book of *Shoftim*, the verb *hum* describes a tumultuous battle scene, while in the book of *Ruth*, it portrays a town flustered by Naomi’ s homecoming. Diverting the man (*sura*) does not turn out well for him in the story of Devora, as Yael’ s initial hospitality is in fact a ruse designed to provide her with an opportunity to slay Sisera. Boaz’ s intentions, however, are honorable and the diversion of the *goel* concludes with the successful implementation of his plan. While Yael feeds and

^{10[10]} The third (and final) place where this formulation appears in *Tanakh* is in the story of Lot’ s attempt to host the angels in [Bereishit 19:2](#). See Ramban’ s comment on that verse, in which he links these three passages.

stealthily approaches the sleeping Sisera to kill him, Ruth waits for Boaz to eat, and after he has fallen asleep, she stealthily approaches him to propose marriage for the purpose of birth and continuity. The story of Devora bespeaks commotion, war, and death, while the Ruth narrative depicts reunion, marriage, and continuity.

What precipitates these drastically divergent stories, which occur during the same general time frame? One final striking linguistic similarity may be the key to understanding why these books proceed along such divergent paths.

4. The doubling of the verb *lekh*: where you go, I will go¹¹[11]

Devora' s determination to fight the enemy leads her to Barak ben Avinoam. Informing him that the Lord has commanded him to fight the enemy, she assures him of certain victory:

And she said to him, “ Has not the Lord, the God of Israel commanded you? Go and march up to Har Tavor and take with you ten thousand men from the sons of Naphtali and the sons of Zevulun. And I will draw for you to Nachal Kishon, Sisera, the general of Yavin, and his chariots and his masses, and I will give him into your hands.”
([Shoftim 4:6-7](#))

Barak disregards Devora' s indisputable authority and compelling divine promise and responds by appending specific preconditions for accepting the assignment:

And he said to her, “ If you come (*im teilekhi*) with me I will go, but if you do not come (*ve-im lo teilekhi*) with me, I will not go (*lo eileikh*).”
([Shoftim 4:8](#))

Barak' s equivocal loyalty (note his negative formulation: “ If you do not come with me, I will not go!”) contrasts with Ruth' s categorical, unanticipated loyalty to Naomi. Dismissing Naomi' s compelling bid to dissuade Ruth from accompanying her to Bethlehem, Ruth proclaims her unconditional loyalty to her mother-in-law (note her positive formulation: “ Wherever you go, I will go”). Ruth' s famous speech opens with words that echo Barak' s qualified loyalty:

And Ruth said, “ Do not harm me by [forcing me] to leave you, to return from following you, for wherever you go, I will go (*el asher teilekhi eilekh*).” ([Ruth 1:16](#))

The difference between Ruth and Barak underscores the broader difference between the book of *Shoftim* and the book of *Ruth*. The book of *Shoftim* tends to feature characters who are not fully committed to society and whose primary loyalty is to themselves and to the promotion of their own interests. *Megillat Ruth*,

¹¹[11] This particular formulation occurs only in these two narratives.

on the other hand, tells the story of an extraordinary person who displays unhesitating loyalty, even when it undermines her own personal interest. The story of equivocal loyalties and selfishness portrays a society wracked by war, unrest, and troubled social relations. The book of *Ruth*, in contrast, takes place on a backdrop of kindness, selflessness, and devotion, resulting in a society that is tranquil, cohesive, and viable.

These comparisons may be the key to understanding the reason for Rav and R. Huna' s position. By claiming that these stories are contemporaneous, Rav draws our attention to the contrasts between them, highlighting the essential difference between the two books. As for R. Huna, his insistence that Rav' s view is correct, accompanied by an unconvincing grammatical proof, may simply indicate that he recognizes how important it is to draw people' s attention to the need to read these stories in light of one another. R. Huna, moreover, includes Yael in his formulation, indicating Yael' s key role in the contrast which is being drawn between her narrative and that in *Megillat Ruth*.¹²[12]

Boaz and Ivtzan

Rabba bar R. Huna said in the name of Rav: Ivtzan is Boaz. ([Bava Batra 91a](#))

Rashi ([Ruth 1:1](#)) cites this *midrash*, which establishes the precise time period during which *Megillat Ruth* took place. This *midrash* identifies Boaz as Ivtzan, a minor Judge in [Shoftim 12:8-10](#). This is a common technique, known as “ conservation of biblical personalities,” in which the *Midrash* identifies a minor biblical character with another, better-known biblical character.¹³[13] By assimilating these two personae, the *Midrash* can enrich our understanding of the purpose of the minor character' s brief appearance in the biblical narrative. By the same token, this type of identification is often employed to convey an idea about the more prominent character.

To fully understand this *midrash* and its consequences for understanding Boaz, we must examine the biblical portrayal of Ivtzan. The description of Ivtzan is brief, comprising just three verses. The first and third verses state that Ivtzan is from Bethlehem and dies there. The second verse gives an account of Ivtzan' s

¹²[12] This contrast is not intended to suggest in any way that Yael is a less positive character than Ruth. Indeed, there is little doubt that both of these non-Jewish women benefit the Jewish people. Nevertheless, as noted previously, Yael' s assistance involves violence and death, while Ruth' s involves kindness and birth. This is a symptom of the differences between the books and is not intended to shed negative light on the characters in the book of *Judges*.

¹³[13] See footnote 1. Well-known examples of this phenomenon include the identification of Pinchas with Eliyahu and Malki Tzedek with Shem. We will see several other examples of this technique in later *shiurim*.

thirty sons who married foreign women, and thirty daughters who were sent to marry foreign men.¹⁴[14]

While the impetus for this identification appears to be the fact that both Boaz and Ivtzan function in a leadership role in Bethlehem during the period of the Judges,¹⁵[15] it is the information regarding Ivtzan' s children which is of real interest. If Boaz is indeed Ivtzan, then we learn two important things about Boaz. First, we know that he has sixty children; in other words, he does not need to marry Ruth for his own continuity. While in the book of *Ruth*, we have no information regarding Boaz' s family, the identification of Boaz with Ivtzan suggests that Boaz' s intention in marrying Ruth is completely selfless from the perspective of desiring progeny. This is very important to support my assertion that Boaz parallels Ruth, whose selfless behavior is the hallmark of the narrative.

Second, this identification with Ivtzan indicates that Boaz is not averse to external marriages, that he is not xenophobic, and that he would presumably be able to allow for a qualified foreigner to become part of his family. Boaz' s identity as Ivtzan prepares us for his willingness to marry Ruth later in the story, despite the *goel*' s reservations ([Ruth 4:6](#)). This *midrash* launches our hope and expectation that Boaz will be the heroic solution to the problem of finding a husband for Ruth the Moavite.

Conclusion

Megillat Ruth' s deliberately vague time frame indicates that any attempt to date the book definitively is at odds with the objective of the book itself, which presents *Ruth* as the solution to the entire era. Nevertheless, the suggestions found in the *midrashim* enrich our approach to the narrative. These *midrashim* draw our attention to the similarities and differences between the book of *Ruth* and certain narratives in the book of *Shoftim*. By contrasting and comparing these stories, we emerge with new perspectives and valuable insights into the book of *Ruth*, its characters, values, and messages.

This series of shiurim is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Naomi Ruth 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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¹⁴[14] It is not clear exactly what is meant by " foreigners." While it is possible that this means that Ivtzan allowed his children to marry members of other tribes, it could simply indicate that Ivtzan' s children married non-Jews. In any case, the ambiguous description intimates that Ivtzan is not apprehensive of marriage to " outsiders," whoever they may be.

¹⁵[15] As is well known, there is more than one Bethlehem in the land of Israel during this period (see e.g. [Yehoshua 19:15](#)). It is not at all certain that Ivtzan is from Bethlehem in Judah. Nevertheless, the association between the one Judge from Bethlehem and Boaz, who functions in a leadership capacity during the period of the Judges in Bethlehem, is inevitable.

Chart Comparing the Story of Devora and *Megillat Ruth*:

Devora (Shoftim 4-5):	<i>Megillat Ruth</i> :
.áéáí ä' àú-ñéñøà	.áúáí èi-àðéø òìéáí
àÄãÉðÄé ñáìøÈä àÀìÉéä àÇúìÉáìÆø àÇéìÈñÇø úìÄéøÈà àÇì àÀìÇé ñáìøÈä .àÀìÆéäÈ	òìÉä ùÑÁáÉä ñáìøÈä àÇéìÉáìÆø àÇéìÈñÇø àÇìÀìÉðÄé òìÀìÉðÄé .àÇéìÀùÑÁá
.áúááà àìéá áìè	.áúáà áìè
.là àè òíé úìéé là-ááí ááìéúé òíé úìéé-áí	.úìéé àè àùø-àì éé
