

MEGILLAT RUTH

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Shiur #06:

The Family of Elimelekh: The Good, the Bad, and the Sinful

It was in the days of the judging of the Judges, and there was a famine in the land. And a man went from Bethlehem in Yehuda to live in the fields of Moav, he, his wife, and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelekh, and the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Machlon and Khilyon, *Efratim* from Bethlehem in Yehuda. They came to the fields of Moav and they stayed there. Elimelekh, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married for themselves Moavite women, the name of one was Orpah and the name of the second was Ruth, and they lived there for around ten years. And the two of them also died, Machlon and Khilyon, and the woman was left without her two children or her husband. ([Ruth 1:1-5](#))

The five verse introduction to the book of Ruth recounts a tragic unfolding of events. A journey to Moav results in the death of the head of the household, followed by the untimely deaths of both sons. Naomi is left alone.

The downward spiral of misfortune that befalls the family of Elimelekh is narrated as a rapid sequence of events. This mode of narration makes it seem as though the events are causally connected; Elimelekh's troubles are a consequence of his departure from the land of Israel, and his sons' deaths occur as a result of their marriage to Moavite women. In reality, the course of these events spans more than ten years. Moreover, the text does not draw an explicit causal connection between the characters' actions and their deaths.¹[1] Should,

1 [1] This, of course, is not particularly surprising. More often than not, biblical stories do not pass explicit judgment on characters or offer an overt theological

then, the deaths of Elimelekh, Machlon, and Khilyon be viewed as divine punishment?

In this *shiur*, we will examine rabbinic sources that relate to this question and attempt to identify the specific misdemeanor for which they receive punishment. While the simple meaning of the text does not necessarily indicate that there was misconduct within the family, this is undoubtedly the widespread approach among biblical exegetes throughout the generations. We will analyze these sources and explore them for their insights and theological lessons.

Elimelekh' s Religious Misconduct

R. Shimon ben Yochai said: Elimelekh, Machlon, and Khilyon were the greatest of their generation and the sustainers of their generation. And why were they punished? Because they departed from the land [of Israel and went] outside of the land [of Israel]. ([Bava Batra 91a](#))

This *midrash* asserts that leaving the land of Israel is a sin that warrants punishment. This is based on the juxtaposition of verses 2 and 3, which relate in quick succession the account of Elimelekh' s departure and death. Nevertheless, other biblical characters leave the land of Israel during a famine without incurring retribution. Avraham, for example, journeys to Egypt to escape a famine, a mere nine verses after God commands him to travel to Israel ([Bereishit 12:1](#) and 10). While the Ramban ([Bereishit 12:10](#)) condemns Avraham for this act, the text allows the event to pass in silence.²[2] Later, Yaakov departs with his family during a famine, with God' s explicit approval ([Bereishit 46:2-4](#)).³[3]

explanation of the course of events. It is often left to the reader to infer the theological message of the events in the narrative.

² [2] Aside from the Ramban, most exegetes do not condemn Avraham for leaving the land. In fact, *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* 26 explicitly lists this as one of the ten tests with which God tested Avraham and in which Avraham prevailed.

³ [3] Yefet Ben Ali, the Karaite exegete and philosopher, in fact regards the departure of Avraham and Yaakov from the land during a famine as a precedent

There may be a distinction between a famine during the era of the forefathers' initial settlement in the land and a famine during the period of national existence in the land. After the Jewish nation is established in its land, the theological implications of famine in the land of Israel are quite clear. Because lack of rain in the land of Israel and its attendant dearth of produce are controlled directly by God ([Devarim 11:10-12](#)), drought is supposed to be seen as a punishment for religious misconduct ([Devarim 11:16-17](#)). On the flip side, a year of economically successful produce is an indication that God is satisfied with the behavior of the Jewish nation ([Devarim 11:13-15](#)). In this way, the Jewish nation recognizes its dependence upon God for survival and learns to shape its lifestyle in accordance with God's command.⁴[4] Famine in the land of Israel prior to national existence in the land, however, does not necessarily bear this theological significance. In contrast, there is little doubt that in the time of Elimelekh, the nation was required to regard the famine as a theological indication of divine displeasure.⁵[5]

The *Zohar Chadash* notes the difference between the forefathers' decision and that of Elimelekh:

R. Berachya said: Is this not the way of the righteous to flee from a famine? Greater men than Elimelekh – [namely,] Avraham and ...

that justifies the decision of Elimelekh and his family to depart from the land for the duration of the famine.

4 [4] This appears to be the reason that the land of Israel has no natural water sources. The goal is to cultivate Israel's dependence on the rain, which arrives in an unpredictable fashion. This fosters man's sense of helplessness and dependence upon God.

5 [5] The *Targum* on [Ruth 1:1](#) adopts this approach with regard to *all* famines in the Bible, including the ones that occur during the period of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov: "And it was in the days of the judging of the Judges and there was a severe famine in the land of Israel. Ten severe famines were decreed from heaven to be in the world from the day that the world was created until the coming of the King Messiah in order to use them to chastise the inhabitants of the land." It seems evident, in any case, that the rebuke implied by the famine in Canaan during the time of the forefathers was directed against the Canaanite inhabitants of the land and not against the isolated family of Avraham.

Yaakov – were wealthier than he and they went to Egypt because of the famine... R. Berachya said in the name of R. Yitzchak: God caused these righteous men to leave from amidst the evildoers..and that is why He brought the famine. But Elimelekh lived in a place of righteous men... and when he saw the judgment imposed upon the world, he fled and went [to live] amongst the nations. (*Zohar Chadash, Ruth 35a*)

It seems that Elimelekh should have recognized God' s judgment inherent in the famine rather than seeking his fortune elsewhere. Moreover, Elimelekh, who lived amongst righteous men, should have rallied his nation to repent instead of turning his back upon the land in which God has decreed a famine.⁶[6]

Elimelekh' s Social Misconduct

The *midrash* censuring Elimelekh for his departure from Israel at this time is plausible, both textually and theologically. It is therefore surprising that many *midrashim* offer a different explanation for Elimelekh' s punishment:⁷[7]

Why was Elimelekh punished?... Elimelekh was among the greatest [people] in the country and was one of the sustainers of his generation, and when the years of famine came, he said, “ Now all of Israel will surround my doorway, this one with his alms box and this one with his alms box.” He stood up and fled from them. ([Ruth Rabba 1:4](#))

⁶ [6] *Tanhuma, Shemeni 9*, comments that Elimelekh should have roused the people to repent. In a similar vein, the Maharsha ([Bava Batra 91b](#)) says that the family should have prayed for the nation' s forgiveness, as is customary during a time of famine.

⁷ [7] This common approach appears in various forms in rabbinic literature. *Yalkut Shimoni* 600 offers the following idea: And do not all humans die? However, [Elimelekh' s death] comes to teach you that ...no man leaves orphans unless he was stingy with his money. Similarly the above-cited *Zohar Chadash (Ruth 35a)* depicts Elimelekh fleeing from the poor people who come to him during the famine.

This approach is textually difficult to sustain. There is no indication whatsoever that Elimelekh was miserly or fled the pressure of supporting the people during the time of famine. Nevertheless, Rashi ([Ruth 1:1](#)) likewise accuses Elimelekh of parsimony:

He was very rich and a sustainer of the generation and he left the land of Israel to [go to] the Diaspora because of his stinginess. He was stingy with the poor people who came to pressure him [for assistance]; therefore, he was punished.

It appears that this approach is motivated both by textual and ideological considerations. From a textual viewpoint, Elimelekh' s destination in his quest to escape the famine is peculiar. The more logical place to go when there is a famine in the land of Israel is not Moav, where the climactic conditions resemble Bethlehem,^{8[8]} but rather Egypt, a land perpetually watered by the Nile. Indeed, that is the destination of both Avraham and Yaakov during a famine, and Yitzchak' s intended destination as well ([Bereishit 26:2](#)).

What makes this move even more peculiar is that Moavites are not known for their generosity in sharing food with strangers. It is due to their miserliness that the Moavites are not allowed to become part of the Jewish nation ([Devarim 23:4-5](#)). Why would Elimelekh choose Moav if he is fleeing a famine in search of food?

^{8 [8]} This is not to say that the climactic conditions are identical. The region north of the river Arnon (which is the area most accessible from Bethlehem) is a well-watered area that obtains a fair amount of rainfall and where conditions can differ from those in the Judean hills. The *gemara* (*Ta' anit* 25a) seems to be aware of the climactic differences between Moav and Israel and offers a theological explanation for this discrepancy. It recounts an incident in which God punitively withholds rain from Israel, and bearing the burden of excess precipitation, the clouds decide to spill their water in Ammon and Moav. This *gemara* suggests that when the land of Israel suffers as a result of God' s anger, the climactic conditions will of necessity be different (and better) in Moav. Nevertheless, because Moav is likewise dependent upon rain, it is similarly unstable. Egypt, on the other hand, has a constant, natural water source, rendering it the logical refuge for those seeking respite from drought or famine. Therefore, it is still anomalous behavior for someone to go from the land of Israel to Moav during a famine.

The *midrash* resolves this enigma by presuming that Elimelekh does not go in search of food. He is independently wealthy, able to sustain himself and his household even as a stranger in an unfriendly land. Why, then, does Elimelekh leave Bethlehem? Because he does not want to share his resources with his neighbors, those less fortunate than himself. Moav is actually an excellent choice if Elimelekh is indeed motivated by stinginess. In a country where it is not the custom to share food, Elimelekh can easily hoard his supplies for himself and his family.

In this *midrashic* explanation of Elimelekh' s sin, Elimelekh' s behavior mirrors that of Sedom and Amora, who refuse to provide food for those in need ([Yechezkel 16:49](#)). Moreover, the fanciful scenario in which Elimelekh imagines his neighbors surrounding his house with their alms boxes strongly recalls the Sedom and Amora story. In an inverted twist of the narrative in [Bereishit 19](#), the *midrash* depicts the townspeople who encircle Elimelekh' s house as innocent, while it is the man inside the house, Elimelekh, who flees from his moral obligations. This parallel explains how it can be that Elimelekh, a Judean leader during the period of the Judges,9[9] abandons his nation in order to go to Moav. In terms of their societal norms, going to Moav is tantamount to going to Sedom and Amora!10[10] Elimelekh, who behaves like the inhabitants of Sedom and Amora in his miserly behavior, naturally identifies with Moav as well.

Elimelekh' s desertion of Israel for Moav during the period of the Judges is an apt metaphor for the national failure during this period. If even the leaders of the tribe of Yehuda prefer Moav and their corrupt societal values, then there is little hope of diverting the nation from taking a similar path. Thus, it should not surprise anyone that the book of *Shoftim* concludes with a story in which *Am Yisrael* behaves exactly like Sedom and Amora, whose cultural norms are similar to those embodied by Moav.11[11]

9 [9] In *Tanhuma Behar* 3, Elimelekh is described as the prince of his generation.

10 [10] As noted in *shiur* #4, Moav and Amon are the spiritual heirs of Sedom and Amora as well as their sole descendants ([Bereishit 19:29-38](#)). This is evidenced, inter alia, by Moav' s refusal to proffer food to Israel on their journey in the desert ([Devarim 23](#)). The geographical proximity of Sedom and Amora to Moav and Ammon is further indication of the theme of the conceptual assimilation of these cities in the *Tanakh*. See also Zephania 2:9.

11 [11] The story of the rape of the concubine ([Shoftim 19](#)) is explicit about the miserly norms of the inhabitants of Giva. The Levite and his entourage sit in the

Moreover, this midrashic depiction of Elimelekh is important for its message regarding monarchy and leadership. Despite God's initial instruction ([Shoftim 1:2](#)), Yehuda does not assume leadership during the period of the Judges. No explanation is given for this disobedience, and the consequences are grave. Elimelekh's actions in the introduction to *Megillat Ruth* may offer some insights into Yehuda's malfunction during this period. Elimelekh is presented as a Judean leader whose selfishness and parsimonious behavior precipitate his flight from the land and his subsequent divinely ordained death. The *megilla* illustrates the manner in which men from the tribe of Yehuda reject leadership and abandon their constituents out of selfish concerns. This portrait helps to account for Yehuda's disappearance as a leadership tribe during this period and explains why the nation finds itself rapidly spiraling toward a factionalized, self-centered society that fails to cohere as a national entity.

Ultimately, these Judeans, who initially appear to be the seminal figures in *Megillat Ruth*,¹²[12] all but vanish from the book. Despite their lineage, Elimelekh and his sons do not have significant roles in the narrative, nor do they take part in the establishment of the monarchy. In fact, the text hints to Elimelekh's impending insignificance by introducing him without a genealogy. At the book's conclusion ([Ruth 4:18-22](#)), we encounter what would have been Elimelekh's genealogy, testimony to his exceptionally illustrious pedigree. Elimelekh, however, does not appear in it, having been replaced by his generous and worthy relative, Boaz.¹³[13] Elimelekh is not assigned his own genealogy, because he has lost his right to be part of it. His actions disqualify him from becoming part of the line of

streets and no one invites them in to lodge ([Shoftim 19:15](#)). When the Levite tries to convince the elderly man from Ephraim to allow him to stay for the night, he assures him that he has food for his animals and companions. As noted in *shiur* #3, the Levite's assumption is that according to societal norm, no one is expected to provide food for another, certainly not a stranger! This attitude is not explicit in the story of Sodom and Amora in *Bereishit*, but is indicated by Yechezkel's censure of the social corruption of those societies, as stated above.

¹² [12] See Rashi ([Ruth 1:2](#)), who explains that the word *Ephratim* connotes people of importance. The Targum likewise translates the word as *rabbatin*, great men. The *Midrash Tanhuma* (*Shemini* 9) explains the word *ish* similarly.

¹³ [13] The *midrashic* depiction of Elimelekh's miserliness should be seen in contrast to Boaz, who provides food graciously and generously to Ruth later in the narrative. In the next *shiur*, we will see other *midrashim* that seem to create a conscious contrast between Elimelekh's family and Boaz. This contrast may be designed to draw our attention to the reason that Elimelekh's family takes no part in the construction of the impending monarchy.

kingship; his lack of generosity renders him unfit for an honored place on the genealogy that leads to David. It is this message that lies at the core of the *midrashim* portraying Elimelekh as a stingy, unsuitable leader. The man who flees from his townspeople is unworthy of producing the kingship.

Machlon and Khilyon

There are several indications that Machlon and Khilyon's deaths are untimely and punitive. Aside from the fact that their mother is still alive, they both leave behind wives of child-bearing age. More critically, their premature demise leaves no heir, threatening them and their family line with extinction.

How do the rabbinic sources perceive Machlon and Khilyon's death? One approach is that their sin is identical to that of their father. Indeed, a previously cited *midrash* ([Bava Batra 91a](#)) condemns Machlon and Khilyon alongside their father for departing the land of Israel and abandoning their responsibility as sustainers of the nation. This approach appears in several different *midrashim*, indicating that Machlon and Khilyon bear a measure of responsibility for the decision to leave.¹⁴[14]

Nevertheless, this approach is not strictly borne out by the text, which portrays Elimelekh as the sole initiator of the journey ([Ruth 1:2](#)):

And a man went from Bethlehem in Yehuda, to live in the fields of Moav, he, his wife, and his two sons.

Moreover, Elimelekh dies following the description of the family's arrival in Moav, while the brothers marry Moavite women and live another ten years before their deaths. The text separates the deaths of Elimelekh and his two sons,¹⁵[15]

¹⁴ [14] *Sifrei Zuta* 10:29; *Tanhuma Behar* 8.

¹⁵ [15] *Midrashim* that note this point suggest that the tragedies do not occur all at once to show that God punishes in incremental stages: " In the beginning, their horses, donkeys, and camels

thereby suggesting that even if their deaths are causally connected to their behavior, their sins are distinct from those of their father.¹⁶[16]

Some exegetes therefore turn their attention to Machlon and Khilyon' s marriages to Moavite women.¹⁷[17] These marriages are textually juxtaposed to their deaths, suggesting a causal connection.¹⁸[18] Two additional textual points support the possibility that the marriages of Machlon and Khilyon were unacceptable. First, they marry Moavite women only after their father dies. Second, they do not consult their mother about the marriage, nor do they receive her permission, despite the fact that this is probably the proper practice at this time.¹⁹[19] This omission is highlighted by the unusual textual formulation of their marriage:²⁰[20]

And they married *for themselves* Moavite women.

died, and afterward, ' And Elimelekh died,' and afterward, ' And the two of them also died, Machlon and Khilyon' ” ([Ruth Rabba 2:10](#)). See also [Vayikra Rabba 17:4](#), *Tanhuma Behar* 3.

¹⁶ [16] However, the text does somewhat connect the death of Elimelekh and the deaths of his sons by stating that the sons “ *also died*” ([Ruth 1:5](#)).

¹⁷ [17] While this seems to be an obvious direction, rabbinic sources tend to prefer the approach that the sin of Machlom and Khilyon lay in their parsimony, like their father. It is, after all, difficult to condemn the marriage to Ruth, the Moavite woman who later becomes the progenitor of the Davidic dynasty. Because Ruth and Orpah' s marriages are linked, it seems preferable to exonerate both brothers for their marriages.

¹⁸ [18] Nonetheless, the marriage does last ten years before they die. The temporal connection is therefore lacking even if the textual juxtaposition is striking.

¹⁹ [19] The fact that Samson requests his parents' involvement in his marriage ([Shoftim 14:2](#)) indicates that this is the custom at this time. Moreover, several biblical accounts emphasize the role of the mother in marriage (e.g. [Bereishit 24:28](#); *Shir Ha-Shirim* 3:4, 11). There is a reference in the book of *Ruth* itself that pertains to this; Naomi, in attempting to persuade her daughters-in-law to seek marriage in Moav, sends each girl home to her “ mother' s house” ([Ruth 1:8](#)).

²⁰ [20] Malbim comments that the word *va-yis' u*, instead of the more common, *va-yikchu*, implies an unsanctified marriage, such as that to gentiles. While there does not seem to be any evidence supporting this distinction, it is striking that the word also appears in [Shoftim 21:23](#) to describe marriages conceived in violence. This constitutes yet another correlation between the family of Elimelekh and the corruption of the nation of Israel during the period of the Judges.

Indeed, the Targum presents their death as a direct result of their marriages, which were a violation of the word of God:

They transgressed the decree of the word of God and they took for themselves foreign wives from the house of Moav... And because they had transgressed the decree of the word of God and married into foreign nations, their days were cut short. And both Machlon and Khilyon also died in the unclean land and the woman was left bereft of her two sons and widowed of her husband. (Targum, [Ruth 1:4-5](#))

A *midrash* also regards the punishment of Machlon and Khilyon as a direct result of their marriage to the Moavite women:

His sons should have learned from their father and returned to the land of Israel. And what did they do? They additionally married for themselves Moavite women, and did not immerse them [in a mikva] or convert them.²¹[21] (*Tanhuma Behar* 3)

The Malbim ([Ruth 1:4](#)) is similarly blunt in his presentation of this situation:

And behold the sons continued to sin in that they married Moavite women whom they did not convert.

One obscure *midrash* has been interpreted in various ways:

²¹ [21] There are dissenting views on the matter of the marriage of Machlon and Khilyon to Ruth and Orpah. In the present *shiur*, I am examining the different midrashic understandings of what constitute the sins of this family. In a later *shiur*, I will deal with the question of whether or not Ruth and Orpah joined the Jewish nation before marriage.

Why were they called Machlon and Khilyon? Machlon because they made their bodies profane (*asu gufeihen chulin*). ([Bava Batra 91b](#))

What is meant by this idea? Rashbam' s explanation harks back to the original suggestion that the sin lies in leaving the land. By going to a place of impurity, they profane their bodies. A second possibility, maintained by Maharsha, is that the *gemara* is referring to the marriage to foreign women.

It is noteworthy, however, that the formulation is vague and seems to suggest general sexual misconduct. In a previous *shiur*, we delineated the primary character traits of Sedom and Amora (and later Moav) as both miserliness, namely social misconduct, and sexual immorality. While Elimelekh was deliberately compared to Moav in terms of his social transgression, according to this *midrash*, the sons are depicted as having Moav-like characteristics in the arena of sexual misconduct.

Taken together, these *midrashim* seem to direct the reader to one coherent conclusion; because Elimelekh' s family chose to go to Moav, they must have cultural values similar to Moav. By adopting those values, these Judean leaders are responsible for the deterioration of the nation during this time and their subsequent movement toward sexual immorality and social wrongdoing.

In support of this notion, I offer the following two *midrashim*. The first *midrash* explicitly attributes the ill-favored marriage of Machlon and Khilyon to the fact that they maintain Moav-like traits:

What caused the tribe of Yehuda to intermarry with a Moavite woman? Because they performed the acts of Ammon and Moav in the way in which they “ did not greet them with bread and water” ([Devarim 23:5](#)). (*Ruth Zuta* 1)

While this *midrash* blurs between those sins attributed specifically to Elimelekh and those attributed to his sons, it illustrates how this Judean family as a whole identifies with Moavite values.

The second *midrash* is a bit more obscure:

“ Elimelekh, the husband of Naomi died” ([Ruth 1](#)). And also her sons died, as it says, “ And the two of them also died, Machlon and Khilyon, and the woman was left without her two children or her husband” ([Ruth 1](#)). For they were judging the Judges just as they did in Sedom. (*Tanhuma Shemini* 9)

While one could argue regarding the finer points of this *midrash*, one thing is clear. The *midrash* wishes to correlate the family of Elimelekh with the corruption of Sedom.

Rabbinic sources spend a great deal of effort searching for the precise misdeeds of Elimelekh and his family. And yet the question does not seem to be as much why they die, as to why they disappear from the book of *Ruth*. In fact, these Judean characters have no place in the book. Instead of being part of the solution of *Megillat Ruth*, they are part of the problem of the book of *Shoftim*. The book of *Shoftim* illustrates how the nation of Israel has become so steeped in social and sexual misconduct that it is not clear if they can continue to exist as a viable society. *Megillat Ruth* is designed to provide the nation with leaders who can lead them away from their Sedom-like values and back to the path of Avraham. By portraying Elimelekh and his sons as Sedom-like, the rabbinic sources explain why they are not worthy to be part of the solution, the Davidic dynasty. The leader who emerges to revive the nation in this period must be a role model, a beacon of exemplary leadership, morality and kindness.

There is one fascinating and complex character of Elimelekh' s family whom we have yet to examine, namely, Naomi. I intend to probe the midrashic and textual portrayal of Naomi' s character in a forthcoming *shiur*.

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.

I welcome all comments and questions: yaelziegler@gmail.com
