

MEGILLAT RUTH

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Shiur #8:

Naomi: The Wife of Elimelekh

We previously examined a range of approaches pinpointing the sins of Elimelekh and his sons. Their early disappearance from the story seems to indicate that they are unworthy of taking part in the formation of monarchy, toward which the *Megilla* aspires. There is, however, one figure from the house of Elimelekh who continues to function as a prominent character in the book, and that is Naomi. She is the primary figure of the first chapter; her decisions, state of mind, and interactions lie at its core.

In this *shiur*, I will begin by focusing on Naomi' s character. Does Naomi share responsibility for the family' s departure to Moav? Does the fact that she remains alive indicate her worthiness? I will then examine the manner in which the text describes Naomi' s return to Bethlehem, and see whether that description provides any clues towards a deeper understanding of Naomi' s character.

Did Naomi Sin in Leaving Bethlehem?

Rashi offers textual proof that Naomi bears no responsibility whatsoever for her family' s move to Moav during the famine:

And it says, “ [Elimelekh,] the husband of Naomi, [died,]” – in other words, since he was Naomi' s husband and had control over her and she was secondary to him, divine justice struck him and not her. (Rashi, [Ruth 1:3](#))

Nevertheless, the people of Bethlehem are not quite so forgiving. Their lukewarm greeting upon Naomi' s return to Bethlehem after an extended absence consists of just two words, “ Is this Naomi?” One *midrash*, as we shall see, reads this query as a caustic comment, perhaps tinged with *Schadenfreude*, on the difference between Naomi' s aristocratic departure and her undignified return.

Some less-known *midrashim* do not exonerate Naomi at all, suggesting that she is just as culpable as the rest of her family:

Why did the text decree against him, his wife and his sons? Because they failed to prevent one another from acting on the stinginess that they all possessed. When a man wants [to sin] and his wife and sons do not want this, or the opposite, the decree is withdrawn. But when there is no one to prevent the other [from sinning,] the decree strikes them. (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Ruth, 599)

At first their horses, camels, and donkeys died. Afterwards he died, as it says, “ Elimelekh, the husband of Naomi, died.” Afterwards the two sons died, “ And the two of them also died, Machlon and Khilyon.” And afterwards, she died. (*Pesikta De-Rav Kahana* 17:6)1[1]

The fact that Naomi did not die in the introductory passage does not mean that she was not punished. After all, the text describes Naomi as alone, destitute, and embittered. A *midrash* indicates that Naomi' s destitute state should also be seen as divine retribution:

“ I left full” – From here we find that she had been rich and full. And what caused her to lose her possessions and to become bereft of

1 [1] While this version appears in *Pesikta De-Rav Kahana*, others versions of this same *midrash* ([Vayikra Rabba 17:4](#); [Ruth Rabba 2:10](#)) omit this last line, which suggests that Naomi' s eventual death is part of the family' s punishment. Omitting this line is certainly logical, given that Naomi seems to have died many years later. Another version of this *midrash* concludes, “ ‘ And the woman was left,’ Naomi had become residual surplus” ([Ruth Rabba 2](#)). This renders a more accurate depiction of Naomi' s punishment.

her husband and sons? Because of the stinginess that [the family] possessed. (*Ruth Zuta* 1)

Indeed, Naomi herself regards her situation as a sentence handed down from God, as she states several times:

For God' s hand has gone out against me. (1:13)

For God has embittered me greatly. (1:20)

God has done evil to me. (1:21)

How can we reconcile these conflicting approaches? Is Naomi so uninvolved in the family' s decisions that she has no role in the family' s departure from Bethlehem during the famine? Or is Naomi guilty of the same charges which *midrashim* leveled against her husband and sons? Is there a textual clue that can help us determine whether Naomi is guilty or blameless in the family' s departure from the land?

Synonyms: *Gur*, *Yashav*, *Haya*

A brief examination of the verbs employed in the beginning of the *Megilla* may be instructive in answering the above questions. Three different verbs are used to denote the family' s stay in Moav: *gur*, *yashav*, *haya*. Each of these verbs connotes a different type of stay. *Yashav*, meaning both “ to sit” and “ to dwell,” implies permanent settlement.²[2] Etymologically similar to the word, *ger*, meaning stranger, the word *gur* suggests a temporary sojourn.³[3] *Haya* conveys human existence. When used to refer to a person' s settlement in a particular place, it can

² [2] E.g. [Bereishit 36:8](#); 50:22.

³ [3] See, for example, [Bereishit 12:10](#). See also [Bereishit 47:4](#) and [Devarim 26:5](#), and the subsequent citation in the *Haggada*: “ This teaches us that Yaakov did not go down to integrate himself in Egypt, but rather simply to live there (*la-gur sham*).” See the *Keli Yakar* on [Bereishit 47:27](#), who comments similarly on the difference between the word *gur* and *yashav*.

connote a passive stay, sometimes even against one' s will, due to external factors beyond one' s control.⁴[4]

.. And a man went from Bethlehem in Yehuda, to live (*la-gur*) in the fields of Moav, he, his wife, and his two sons...They came to the fields of Moav and they stayed (*va-yihiyu*) there... And [the sons] married for themselves Moavite women, the name of one was Orpah and the name of the second was Ruth, and they lived (*va-yeishevu*) there for around ten years. ([Ruth 1:1-4](#))

Megillat Ruth opens with a man taking his family on a journey to Moav, *la-gur*, to live there temporarily. Presumably, Elimelekh intends to stay in Moav only for the duration of the famine, at which time he means to return to Bethlehem.⁵[5] Once they arrive in Moav, they are described as “ being there,” *va-yihiyu*, as it is the length of the famine which ostensibly determines the duration of their stay. It is only after the father dies and his sons marry Moavites that they are described as having settled, *va-yeishevu*, in Moav.

And what of Naomi herself? The death of her sons as well as the news that the famine has ceased precipitates her immediate return to Bethlehem. The description of Naomi' s departure from Moav offers an enlightening insight into Naomi' s attitude toward the family' s decision to reside in Moav:

And she left the place where she was, *asher hayeta shama*. ([Ruth 1:7](#))

4 [4] See, for example, [Bereishit 40:4](#), in which people dwelling in prison are described as “ being there” (*va-yiheyu sham*).

5 [5] Based on [Ruth 4:3-4](#), R. Yaakov Medan, *Hope from the Depths: A Study in Megillat Ruth* [Heb.] (2007), pp. 16-17, maintains that Elimelekh sold his land prior to his departure from Bethlehem, thereby demonstrating that he had no intention ever to return. In my opinion, while the verse in [Ruth 4](#) is ambiguous, the use of the verb *la-gur* in [Ruth 1:2](#) leaves little room to doubt that Elimelekh' s original intention was a temporary sojourn. I will contend with the ambiguities of [Ruth 4:3-4](#) in a later *shiur*.

The verb, *haya*, used to describe Naomi' s sojourn in Moav, implies that Naomi simply existed there. She was there passively, compelled to stay there by external factors beyond her control (the famine and her sons' marriage and permanent residence). The textual analysis of the verbs allows us to infer that Naomi never integrated into Moav, never intended to remain there, and probably was not involved in the original decision to leave Bethlehem. Naomi' s culpability in fleeing Bethlehem during the famine is minimal. Nevertheless, rabbinic interpretations preserve the ambiguity in this matter, leaving open the reading of Naomi' s character.

Naomi' s Return

And she and her daughters-in-law arose, and she returned from the fields of Moav, for she heard in the fields of Moav that God had remembered His people to give them bread. And she departed from the place where she had been, and her two daughters-in-law with her, and they walked on the road to return to the land of Yehuda.
([Ruth 1:6-7](#))

Naomi' s decision to return to Bethlehem is precipitated by the report that God has “ remembered His people to give them bread.” At first glance, Naomi' s reasoning seems to be practical, based on economic considerations. Even if Naomi was eager to return to Bethlehem after the death of her husband and sons, returning to a situation of famine would be quite difficult for Naomi as a widow, without even sons to support her. Thus, it appears that Naomi waits until the famine is over to return.

Nevertheless, we should note carefully the description of the report which motivates Naomi' s return. It is God' s role which is emphasized more than the bread. She hears, first and perhaps primarily, that God “ *remembered His people,*” and only afterwards does she register “ to give them bread.” 6[6] The word employed to denote God remembering, *pakad*, is used often to depict God' s

6 [6] I will briefly note here that this is God' s first appearance in the book, one which depicts Him actively engaged in the nation' s affairs. I will return to this point when we later examine the nature of God' s role in the book.

direct interactions with His people, both to punish and to reward.⁷[7] The possessive form utilized to depict God' s people, *ammo*, likewise conveys an engaged God, one who is acting because of His relationship with *His* nation. Thus, it does not appear that Naomi' s primary motivation is the practical consideration but rather the theological one. Naomi returns to Bethlehem when she discerns that God has reconnected with His people.⁸[8]

This textual portrayal of Naomi is consistent with the rabbinic presentation of Naomi as a deeply pious character, often motivated by religious considerations:

And Ruth said, “ Do not harm me [by requiring me] to depart from you, to return from following you.” What does she mean by “ Do not harm me” ? ... [Ruth said,] “ In any case, my intention is to convert, and it is better to do so with your help and not with someone else' s [assistance].” When Naomi heard this, she immediately began to present to her the laws of converts. ([Ruth Rabba 2:22](#))

There were twenty-three pious and greatly righteous women in Israel. These are they: Sara, Rivka, Rachel, and Leah... Naomi... (*Otzar Ha-Midrashim*, Eisenstein, p. 486)

A Repetitive Description

The two verses that describe Naomi' s departure from Moav are strikingly repetitive. Indeed, these two verses contain four verbs: *va-takom*, *va-tashov*, *va-tetzei*, and *va-telakhna*, each of which would have been sufficient on its own to convey Naomi' s departure. A *midrash* poses a different question regarding the need to describe Naomi' s departure at all:

7 [7] Examples of the different usages of this verb abound. For punitive usages, see, e.g., [Shemot 20:4](#); [Vayikra 18:25](#); [I Shmuel 15:2](#); [Yeshayahu 10:12](#); [Yirmiyahu 5:9](#); 14:10. For God' s reward, see, e.g., [Bereishit 21:1](#); 50:24; [I Shmuel 2:21](#). For a greatly expanded list of the different uses of the word *pakad*, see *Pesikta De-Rav Kahana* (Ish Shalom ed.), 42.

8 [8] See the Malbim on [Ruth 1:6](#), who makes this point explicitly.

“ And she departed from the place where she had been” – “ And she departed” : Is she, then, the only one who departed from there? ... R. Azaria in the name of R. Yehuda in the name of R. Shimon said: The great person in a city is [the city’ s] radiance and glory and splendor and praise. When she [Naomi] departed, [the city’ s] radiance departed, its glory departed, its splendor departed, and its praise departed. ([Ruth Rabba 2:7](#))

Why, indeed, is it necessary to state at all that Naomi departed from the city? It would have been sufficient simply to depict Naomi’ s return to Bethlehem. The *midrash* suggests that Naomi’ s departure had an impact upon the city, whose magnificence was significantly dimmed by Naomi’ s absence.

Rashi adapts this *midrash* to address the verses’ repetitiveness:

“ And she left the place” – Why does it say this? It has already stated, “ And she returned from the field of Moav.” And from where would she return if not “ from the place where she had been” ? Rather, it teaches that the departure of a righteous person from a place is noteworthy and makes an impression. The city’ s radiance, splendor and praise departed. Similarly ([Bereishit 28](#)), “ And Yaakov departed from Beer Sheba.” (Rashi, [Ruth 1:7](#))

I would like to add a literary point to this discussion. Often, repeated verbs connote eagerness and excitement, a zealous enthusiasm that accompanies one’ s actions.^{9[9]} One can certainly imagine the excited anticipation that must have accompanied Naomi’ s decision to depart the plains of Moav. As noted previously, the verb modifying Naomi’ s sojourn in Moav indicates that she was not there of her own volition. Drawn after her husband’ s decision and constrained by circumstances beyond her control, Naomi must have been keen to return to her hometown.

Nevertheless, in a deft display of literary ambiguity, the profusion of verbs depicting Naomi’ s departure can, in fact, convey the exact opposite idea. These

^{9 [9]} Notable examples of this phenomenon appear in [Bereishit 25:34](#) and [I Shmuel 17:48-51](#).

verbs, which repeatedly describe Naomi' s departure from the fields of Moav, may actually indicate how difficult it was for Naomi to leave Moav! The numerous verbs can imply that each time Naomi took a step to leave, she withdrew back to the city, only to gather her strength again in an attempt to depart. One could paraphrase the verbs in the story in the following manner:

And she got up [but then she sat down again]. And she returned from the fields of Moav [but then she went back]. And she departed from the place [only to return to it]. And she went on the road...

This literary ambiguity is an exquisite presentation of the complex feelings that must have accompanied Naomi' s journey back to Bethlehem. Despite her genuine desire to return home, Naomi must have been distraught when it came to actually leaving Moav. She is leaving behind the burial place of her husband and sons to return to a town that she had abandoned in their time of need. When she left Bethlehem, she had everything, and now she returns with nothing, except painful memories of her joyous past in Bethlehem. Naomi does not anticipate a warm homecoming reception, and indeed she does not receive one. Compounding Naomi' s excitement are many other feelings: fear, guilt, embarrassment, and pain.

In order to support this reading, we will turn to the other biblical example of unusually repeated verbs of departure, cited both by a *midrash* and Rashi. When Yaakov left his father to go to Charan, his departure is presented several times, using repetitive verbs:

And Yitzchak sent Yaakov and he went to Paddan Aram... And Yaakov listened to his father and his mother and he went to Paddan Aram... And Yaakov departed from Beer Sheva and he went to Charan. ([Bereishit 28:5-10](#))

Both the *midrash* and Rashi draw an analogy between Yaakov' s repeated departure and Naomi' s repetitive departure, citing an identical idea in explanation of both cases: a righteous person' s departure makes an impression upon the city. Notwithstanding this approach, it seems to me that a similar ambiguity may also be present in the story of Yaakov' s departure from Beer Sheva, as noted above. Indeed, Yaakov' s eagerness to leave requires no explanation. Esav is enraged and dangerous. Yaakov must flee for his life swiftly and unhesitatingly if he wishes

to survive. And yet, how can Yaakov not hesitate? The duration of his journey is indefinite (“ until your brother’ s anger is allayed”)¹⁰[10] and he may never again return to his homeland or see his parents.¹¹[11] Moreover, he cannot be certain that his eviction from the land of God’ s promise is not a punishment from his father for his recent deception! Yaakov must suspect that he is being deliberately distanced from the Promised Land, in order to indicate to him that he has lost his inheritance in that land.¹²[12] Indeed, Yaakov’ s departure, like Naomi’ s, is fraught with tensions, ambiguities, and complexities, deftly conveyed by the repetitive verbs that convey their respective departures.

In this *shiur*, we have offered a preliminary examination of the complexity of Naomi’ s character. From the introductory verses, it is not clear whether Naomi should be judged harshly or not for the family’ s presumed misconduct in departing the land. Later verses that describe her eventual return to Bethlehem are similarly obscure, allowing for multiple readings of her motivations in returning home and the attitudes and emotions that accompany her return. Though we noted the text’ s leanings in each case, the text preserves a marked ambivalence toward Naomi’ s character. This ambivalence is present in rabbinic sources as well.

It seems to me that the ambiguities surrounding Naomi’ s persona make her the most intriguing character in the *Megilla*. I would like to propose that we view Naomi as a mirror of the Jewish nation at this time. Determining the nation’ s culpability during the period of the Judges is as difficult as determining Naomi’ s. Who is actually responsible for the deterioration in the book of *Shofetim*? Is the guilt confined to the perpetrators of the horrors as designated by the narrative, or is the narrative pointing to a widespread societal malaise? In fact, life is rarely as simple as proclaiming someone guilty or innocent. It is possible that the nation at the time of the Judges should be judged severely and that they should have assumed responsibility for society’ s downward spiral. However, it is equally likely that most of the nation remained outside the fray and simply perceived themselves as helpless and hopeless. The complexities inherent within Naomi’ s character

¹⁰ [10] [Bereishit 27:44](#).

¹¹ [11] Although the text never tells us when Rivka died, it does not appear that Yaakov ever sees his mother again, thereby justifying his natural hesitation.

¹² [12] This conclusion is supported by the fact that Avraham bestowed the inheritance upon only one of his sons, consequently expelling the other from his home ([Bereishit 21:10](#)).

evince that of the nation, just as Naomi' s bitter state recalls the nation' s bleak situation.

On a concluding hopeful note, we will find that the successful bid to rebuild Naomi' s family, restore her name, and provide her with continuity, will concurrently result in the rebuilding of the nation of Israel and the restoration of their identity and stability.

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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