

MEGILLAT RUTH

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Shiur #10: Ruth and Conversion

And she said, “Behold, your sister-in-law has returned to her nation and to her gods. Return after your sister-in-law.” And Ruth said, “Do not harm me by [requiring me to] depart from you, to return from following you. For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you lie, I will lie, your nation is my nation, and your God is my God. However you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. So shall God do, and so shall He continue to do [i.e., I swear] that only death shall separate between me and you.” (*Ruth* 1:15-17)

When Did Ruth Join the Jewish Nation?

Did Ruth and Orpah convert to Judaism prior to marrying Machlon and Khilyon?¹[1] Most *midrashim* assume that they did not convert at that time:

¹ [1] While there are many biblical stories of marriage between an Israelite and a member of another nation (e.g., Shimshon and Philistine women; Shlomo and the daughter of Pharaoh, among others), the Bible does not maintain any record of an actual conversion process. Rabbinic texts, on the other hand, delineate explicit guidelines for conversion to Judaism (e.g., *Keritot* 8b-9a), some of which are learned from the story of Ruth (*Yevamot* 47b). In exploring the question of conversion in *Megillat Ruth*, then, we are focusing on the perspective of rabbinic texts and not on the simple meaning of the story.

“And they married for themselves Moavite women.” A teaching in the name of R. Meir: They did not convert them and they did not immerse them [in the *mikveh*]. (*Ruth Rabba* 2:9)²[2]

This reading may be indicated textually in several ways. When Ruth and Orpah initially resist returning to Moav, they declare in unison, “For we will return with you to *your* people” (*Ruth* 1:10). Their implied disassociation from the Israelite nation may attest to the fact that at this point, neither Ruth nor Orpah regards Naomi’s nation as her own.³[3] Subsequently, Ruth modifies this approach and chooses to attach herself to Naomi’s nation (*Ruth* 1:16): “Your nation is my nation.”⁴[4]

Moreover, when Naomi recounts Orpah’s eventual return to Moav in a bid to induce Ruth to follow suit, she notes that, “Your sister-in-law has returned to her nation and to her gods” (*Ruth* 1:15). Orpah’s uncomplicated return to her nation and to her gods may indicate that she had not severed her ties to them.

Finally, Boaz’s praise of Ruth who has “come to a nation which [she] did not know yesterday or the day before” (*Ruth* 2:11) suggests that Ruth was not intimately connected to the Jewish nation while she was married to Machlon in Moav. It is only after she accompanies Naomi on her return to Bethlehem that she officially joins the Jewish nation.

If indeed the Moavite women never converted, this could explain why Naomi unhesitatingly sends Ruth and Orpah back to Moav. Indeed, Naomi never seems

2 [2] While this *midrash* does not seem to feel that these marriages to Moavite women are problematic, we have noted (in *shiur* #6) that other sources regard this as a sin for which Machlon and Khilyon received due punishment (e.g. *Targum Ruth* 1:4; *Tanchuma Behar* 3; *Bava Batra* 91b; Malbim, *Ruth* 1:4).

3 [3] See also Rashi on *Ruth* 1:12, who maintains that these women were not properly converted before marriage and therefore not properly married to Machlon and Khilyon. Rashi indeed bases this on *Ruth* 1:10.

4 [4] See also *Zohar Balak* 190a: “When did she convert? Afterward, when she went with Naomi, as it says, ‘Your nation is my nation, and your God is my God.’”

to consider the possibility that it could be problematic to return a Jewish convert to her former idolatrous practice.^{5[5]}

Nevertheless, Ibn Ezra insists that Ruth and Orpah did convert, averring that Machlon and Khilyon could never have married Moavite women had they not converted first:

It is not possible that Machlon and Khilyon would marry these women before they converted! And witness [the prooftext], “To her nation and to her God.” (Ibn Ezra, *Ruth* 1:2)

Interestingly, the same verse that I suggested indicates that the women did *not* convert (*Ruth* 1:15) is employed by Ibn Ezra here as a proof that they *did* convert. Ibn Ezra emphasizes the word “return,” thereby concluding that Orpah *had* previously abandoned her nation and gods, to whom she has now reverted.

A *midrash* offers a more complex approach to this question:

R. Pedat asked the son of R. Yosi, the man of Socho: When Ruth converted, why was she not given a new name? He said to him: So I have heard – she had another name, and when she married Machlon, they called her Ruth... Because when she married Machlon, she converted not long after.

He said to him: But does it not say, “Your God is my God”?... And if she converted before that, why do we have all of this [speech]?

He said to him: God forbid that Machlon would marry her if she was a gentile! However, when she married, she converted and she remained [Jewish] out of fear of her husband, she and Orpah, in this matter. When their husbands died, Orpah returned to her corruptions

5 [5] In Jewish law, once a person converts, he remains a Jew for the rest of his life, even if he should return to his former ways. See, for example, *Yevamot* 47b; Rambam, *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah* 13:17; *Shulchan Arukh*, *Yoreh De'ah* 268:2. In certain cases, a conversion may be later rejected if there are convincing grounds to believe that the convert was insincere or deceptive during the conversion process itself.

and Ruth remained in her reasoning... When [Ruth's] husband died, [Ruth] cleaved to the Torah of her own volition. (*Zohar Chaddash, Ruth 32b*)

This passage adopts somewhat of a middle ground in addressing the question of Ruth and Orpah's conversion. Like the Ibn Ezra, it is unwilling to conceive of the possibility that Machlon and Khilyon, scions of this great Judean family, could have married gentile women without converting them first. Nevertheless, it concedes that the conversion may have been insincere and the only reason that the women retained their Judaism was because they feared their husbands. Thus, after the death of their husbands, it becomes necessary for them to reassert their loyalty.

The discussion regarding the conversion of Ruth and Orpah may be helpful in resolving the question of our previous *shiur*. Why, in fact, do Ruth and Oprah initially accompany Naomi back to Bethlehem? If they had adopted Judaism prior to marrying Machlon and Khilyon, this may be why they declare their willingness to abandon Moav and accompany Naomi back to Bethlehem.

If Orpah and Ruth had previously converted, Orpah's return to her people indicates that her connection to the Jewish people was rather weak, while Ruth's was strong. If the women had not converted (as seems more likely), Orpah's actions are entirely understandable. It is Ruth whose behavior is exceptional. We shall see that the majority of the *midrashim* assume that the women did not convert prior to their marriage, enabling them to present Ruth's magnificent pronouncement of loyalty to Naomi as part of the process of her conversion.

Ruth and Orpah: Of Kissing and Cleaving

The Ibn Ezra and a small number of *midrashim* notwithstanding, most exegetes regard the young women as Moavites who have made no commitment to the Jewish nation. And yet, Ruth is adamant about her choice to remain with Naomi. Why? What distinguishes Ruth from Orpah and what are her motivations?

The actual moment of individuation, in which Ruth and Orpah diverge, occurs in *Ruth* 1:14:6[6]

And they lifted up their voices, and they cried again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth cleaved to her.

It is interesting that the women initially distinguish themselves with an action, rather than words. Orpah offers a kiss to her mother-in-law (*va-tishak*), a perfunctory gesture of farewell,⁷[7] while Ruth cleaves to her (*daveka bah*). Significantly, a *midrash* regards these gestures as indicative of the very essence of each woman, labeling each woman according to her action:

R. Isaac said: Said the Holy one blessed be He: Let the sons of the one who kisses (*benei ha-neshuka*) come and fall in the hands of the sons of the one who cleaves (*benei ha-devuka*).⁸[8] (*Sota* 42b)

The verb *davak*, meaning cleave, is used three more times to modify Ruth in the *Megilla*, as Boaz graciously instructs Ruth to cleave to his maidens (*Ruth* 2:8) and she excitedly repeats (*Ruth* 2:21) and accepts (*Ruth* 2:23) his offer. Boaz's offer may be considered a reward for Ruth's behavior vis-à-vis Naomi, and a recognition that this verb characterizes Ruth's persona. Ruth is a *devuka*, a woman who knows how to fasten herself to another person.

What does it mean to be a *devuka*? This word appears frequently in the context of man's relationship with God (*Devarim* 4:4, 10:20, 11:22, 30:20; *Yehoshua* 22:5, 23:8; *Yirmiyahu* 13:11). While the verb *davak* nowhere else appears to describe the relationship between two named individuals, it *is* employed

6 [6] Prior to this verse, all of the actions of Ruth and Orpah action appear in plural form, as they act in unison.

7 [7] A kiss does seem to connote affection (e.g. *Bereishit* 27:27) and even occasionally deep emotion (e.g. *Bereishit* 45:15; 50:1). Often, however, it is simply an expression of greeting (e.g. *Shemot* 4:27; 18:7) or farewell (*Bereishit* 32:1; *Il Shmuel* 20:9).

8 [8] This *midrash* is referring to the renowned battle between David (who is descended from Ruth) and Golyat (who is, according to this tradition, descended from Orpah).

to portray the relationship between a man and his wife.^{9[9]} Taken together, these examples suggest that this rare verb connotes an all-encompassing connection, a relationship in which one party embraces the totality of the other, utterly and completely. There is something illogical in this type of relationship, in which one's own ego, one's I-awareness, is subsumed by one's concern for the other. This description accurately depicts Ruth's relationship with Naomi, in which her decision to remain with her mother-in-law seems to undermine her own self-interest.

Indeed, Ruth proffers no reason for her choice to go to Bethlehem, rather than to return to her own family. She simply declares her resolute and unequivocal decision to remain steadfastly loyal to Naomi for the remainder of her life (*Ruth* 1:17): "Only death shall separate between me and you." Ruth's speech is firm and compelling; she counters each attempt that Naomi made in her bid to dissuade her. Consider the following chart:

^{9 [9]} *Bereishit* 2:24: "Therefore shall a man leave (*ya'azov*) his father and his mother and cleave (*davak*) to his wife and they shall be as one flesh." Boaz's description of Ruth's action further corroborates this comparison. In 2:11, Boaz compliments Ruth for having left (*va-ta'azvi*) her father and her mother to join a foreign nation.

Naomi's Attempt to Dissuade	Ruth's Firm Answer to Naomi
Return (<i>shovna</i>) my daughters, why should you go (<i>teilakhna</i>) with me? (1:11)	Do not harm me [by requiring me]... to return (<i>la-shuv</i>) from following you. For wherever you go, I will go (<i>el asher teilkhi eileikh</i>). (1:16)
Do I yet have sons in my innards that they shall be for you as husbands? ... Go. For, I am too old to be with a man. (1:11-12)	However you die, I will die. ¹⁰ [10] (1:17)
Even if I said, "I have hope. Tonight I shall be with a man and I will birth sons." (1:12)	However you lie, I will lie. (1:16)
Behold, your sister-in-law has returned to her nation (<i>el amah</i>) and to her gods (<i>ve-el eloheha</i>). Return after your sister-in-law. (1:15)	Your nation is my nation (<i>ameikh ami</i>), and your God is my God (<i>ve-e-lohayikh e-lohai</i>). (1:16)

10 [10] This parallel implies that Ruth's assertion – "However you die, I will die" – refers to their common childless fate, which will result in the cessation of their family line.

This speech leaves little doubt that Ruth intends to stay with Naomi at any cost. But the narrative never actually explains why.

The simplest explanation is that Ruth genuinely loves Naomi. She does not wish to leave her because she cannot bear to do so. Ruth's love for Naomi attains important results; Ruth is the reason that Naomi does not suffer the same erasure that threatened her sons and husband. It is through Ruth that Naomi obtains continuity.¹¹[11]

Ruth's Conversion

Nevertheless, numerous *midrashim* propose another approach. Instead of love for Naomi, it is love for God that motivates Ruth's unselfish and courageous decision. This approach is derived textually from Ruth's declaration that she intends to embrace Naomi's nation and God as her own. Moreover, this is Boaz's assumption when he praises Ruth for having abandoned her family and come to Bethlehem to "take refuge under [God's] wings."

Some *midrashim* go so far as to deliberately downplay Ruth's devotion to Naomi. In one *midrash*, Ruth sidelines Naomi, informing her: "In any case, my intention is to convert; it is better to do so with your help and not with someone

11 [11] Of course, Naomi's continuity technically affects Machlon and Elimelekh as well. However, the narrative clearly presents Naomi as the direct beneficiary of Ruth's acts. By the same token, the narrative illustrates Ruth's concern for Naomi and not necessarily for obtaining continuity for her deceased husband. In *shiur #7*, I noted Rav Medan's suggestion that the description of the deaths of various family members, both in the narrative and in rabbinic exegetical readings, intimates that they are subject to a *karet*-like punishment. Since one who is punished with *karet* is buried apart from others in order to symbolize his exclusion from the nation, Rav Medan maintains that Ruth's desire to be buried next to Naomi is meant to help mitigate Naomi's punishment (see his *Hope from the Depths: A Study in Megillat Ruth* [Heb.] (2007), p. 55). This prepares the way for Ruth to enable Naomi to dodge her bitter fate entirely by providing her with a child.

else's" (*Ruth Rabba* 2:22).¹²[12] Another *midrash* explains that Ruth's desperate desire not to return to Moav stems from her recoil from the idolatry practiced in her former home:¹³[13]

And Ruth began to plead with her ... "I cannot return to my family and to the evil of the idolatry of my father's house!" (*Ruth Zuta* 1:12)

In a similar vein, rabbinic sources treat Ruth as the paradigmatic convert, and they derive several laws of conversion from this scenario.¹⁴[14] These *midrashim* read Ruth's magnificent pronouncement of loyalty to Naomi as part of the process of her conversion. In these readings, Ruth's monologue is rendered instead as a dialogue in which the text records only Ruth's answers to Naomi's instructions regarding Jewish law (*Yevamot* 47b).¹⁵[15] (For purposes of clarity I have rendered the actual textual citations in italics.)

R. Elazar said, what does the text mean when it says, "*And she [Naomi] saw that she [Ruth] was determined to go with her, and she ceased to speak with her*"?

[Naomi] said to her: "We are forbidden [to exit] the Sabbath limits."
[Ruth responded:] "*Where you go I will go.*"

12 [12] This approach is sustained by interpretations of later events in the story. *Ruth Zuta* 3:2 explains the missing word *eilai* (3:5) in the following manner: "[Ruth] said: It could be that [she would think] that even if she told me [to do] something not for the sake of heaven [that I would indeed obey her]! Therefore, [the word] *eilai* is read but not written." In this reading, Ruth clarifies that she only obeys Naomi when Naomi is guiding her to do God's will.

13 [13] This *midrash* is an attempt to explain Ruth's words stating that leaving Naomi would actually be harmful for her: "Do not *harm* me [by requiring me] to depart from you, to return from following you" (*Ruth* 1:16).

14 [14] The *gemara* (*Yevamot* 47b) learns from this scenario that a potential convert should be dissuaded initially and informed of some of the laws, the burden involved in keeping these laws, as well as their punishments. However, we also learn from this scenario that one should not dissuade converts overly emphatically, and if they appear sincere, they should be embraced and welcomed. See e.g., Rambam, *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah* 13:14; *Shulchan Arukh* 268:2 and *Levush* ad loc.

15 [15] Slightly different versions of this dialogue appear in *Ruth Rabba* 2:22-24, *Ruth Zuta* 1:12, and the *Targum*. Nevertheless, the general dialogue structure remains the same in all of these *midrashim*.

[Naomi said to her:] “We are forbidden privacy [between a man and a woman who are not married].”¹⁶[16]

[Ruth responded:] “*Where you lie I will lie.*”

[Naomi said to her:] “We have been commanded six hundred and thirteen commandments.”

[Ruth responded:] “*Your nation is my nation.*”

[Naomi said to her:] “We are forbidden idolatry.”

[Ruth responded:] “*And your God is my God.*”

[Naomi said to her:] “Four capital punishments have been entrusted to the courts.”

[Ruth responded:] “*However you die, I will die.*”

[Naomi said to her:] “Two graves have been entrusted to the courts.”

[Ruth responded:] “*And there I will be buried.*”

Immediately, “*And she [Naomi] saw that she [Ruth] was determined to go with her.*”

Chazal's point is well-made. In this scenario, Ruth's unselfish decision and unwavering position emanate from a sincere desire to become a member of the Jewish people. This marks Ruth as an eminent figure in Jewish history, and a sterling role model. Against all logic, against her own self-interest, this Moavite woman decides to forgo her future because of her deep desire to cleave to God.

Ruth's Love for Naomi

It seems to me, however, that we can learn this same message from Ruth, even if she is motivated “merely” by her love for Naomi. If Ruth is willing to relinquish all possibility of a bright future because of her genuine concern and love for her elderly mother-in-law, then Ruth emerges as a woman of admirable

¹⁶ [16] This is especially intriguing given Naomi's later instruction to Ruth that she should go alone to Boaz at night in the threshing floor (*Ruth* 3:1-4).

character and profound sensitivity.¹⁷[17] From this trait of Ruth, we can learn about human love, friendship, and camaraderie.¹⁸[18]

Ruth's commitment to Naomi may contain a theological lesson as well as a social one. In several of his essays, R. Soloveitchik maintains that man's inherent difficulty in creating a relationship with an amorphous God may be resolved by harnessing one's human relationships in order to achieve this:

Judaic faith and theology are linked with finite experiences and meaningful human relations. By developing proper human relation structures, the Jew learns how to love, revere, and serve God.¹⁹[19]

Ruth's character and behavior vis-à-vis Naomi can serve as a model for acquiring commitment, love, and loyalty to God. By modeling this behavior in the world of human, finite relationships, Ruth educates by example, teaching us how to embrace God totally and utterly. A *midrash* appears to advocate a similar idea:

God said, "Let Ruth the proselyte who did not renounce her mother-in-law come and chastise Israel who has rebelled against Me." (*Ruth Zuta* 1:7)

¹⁷ [17] In a similar vein, *Chazal* mandate that one should question the proselyte: "Why have you come to convert? Do you not know that Israel in this time is miserable, disdained, oppressed, and exiled? Adversity is often upon [Israel]!" If [the proselyte] says, 'I know this and I am unworthy,' he is immediately accepted" (*Yevamot* 47a). Ruth seems to be a model for this exceptional response, willing, and even eager, to suffer alongside Naomi in spite of the fact that she could have escaped Naomi's fate.

¹⁸ [18] R. Yaakov Medan, *Hope from the Depths: A Study in Megillat Ruth* [Heb.] (2007), pp. 38-39, suggests that Hillel's willingness to accept a proselyte simply on the basis of his acceptance of the principle that one should love one's friend as oneself (*Shabbat* 31a) is learned from Ruth, whose love for Naomi qualifies her for acceptance into the Jewish nation.

¹⁹ [19] R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed* (2002), p. 167.

In other words, Ruth's behavior vis-à-vis her mother-in-law is an exemplary model for teaching Israel proper behavior towards God. Ruth demonstrates how one can vanquish one's own ego in pursuit of a relationship, even when it is illogical and against one's interest to do so. In this way, Ruth teaches man how to cleave to God.

Ruth's Oath

The oath formula, "*ko ya'aseh... ve-kho yosif*," generally incorporates the universal name of God: *E-lohim*.²⁰[20] Nevertheless, in her oath of loyalty, Ruth employs the Tetragrammaton, or the name of the national God of Israel, in this oath formula:²¹[21]

So shall the Lord do,²²[22] and so shall He continue to do [i.e., I swear], that only death shall separate between me and you. (*Ruth* 1:17)

This is Ruth's attempt to persuade her mother-in-law that she intends to embrace Naomi's norms and culture wholeheartedly. This mention of the personal God of the Nation of Israel underscores Ruth's active and total acceptance of the God of Israel, and is, at the same time, a deliberate and conscious rejection of any other god.

There is a second exception to this rule. Yonatan's oath, expressing loyalty to David, also invokes the Tetragrammaton:

²⁰ [20] For further elucidation of the meaning and context of this particular oath formula, see my article, "So Shall God Do...Variations of an Oath Formula and its Literary Meaning," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126 (2007), pp. 59-81.

²¹ [21] For elucidation of the usages of different names of God in the Bible, see Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis* (1961), pp. 18, 31-32.

²² [22] For the purposes of this *shiur*, in order to maintain clarity, I will use the term Lord when the text employs the Tetragrammaton.

So shall the Lord do to Yonatan and so shall He continue to do [i.e., I swear] that if the evil that my father will do to you becomes good for him, I will inform you and I will send to you and you will go in peace.
(*1 Shemuel* 20:13)

Interestingly, those who are party to these two oaths represent some of the most incongruous relationships in the Bible. In taking this oath, Yonatan is choosing allegiance to David rather than to his own father, Shaul. Yonatan does this despite the fact that David's ultimate success will result in the usurpation of his own rightful position as heir to the throne. Ruth cleaves to her mother-in-law despite Naomi's urging and persuasive arguments regarding Ruth's bleak future in Bethlehem.

Yonatan's oath and Ruth's oath go against all logic; indeed, they seem to undermine the future of these individuals. It is perhaps for this reason that each of these individuals employs the Tetragrammaton in taking an oath. In attempting to convince the other party that they are committed to their pledge of loyalty, they use the most persuasive means at their disposal, the name of the personal God of *Am Yisrael*.

At the same time, the usage of the name of the Lord in their oaths may be viewed as an attempt to explain their respective decisions. The factor that motivates Yonatan to give up his kingship is his belief that this is what the God of Israel requires of him. In God's direct involvement in and manipulation of Israel's history, He has determined that David will be king, and Yonatan has no choice but to comply with God's will. It is this message that Yonatan conveys by taking this extraordinary oath of allegiance to David, while employing an invocation of the name of God unusual for this oath formula.

The same may be said for Ruth's resolution. The peculiarity of Ruth's choice to abandon all hope of a future family is mitigated by her pronouncing the name of God in explaining her actions. In this way, Ruth asserts her belief that her decision is a result of her understanding of what the personal deity of the people of Israel requires of her. Both Yonatan and Ruth account for their unusual decision by, in essence, declaring that they believe that it is the will of the God of Israel that they should act against their own interests. On a final note, it is striking that both of these decisions ultimately lead to the creation of the Davidic dynasty, an institution that is established and endorsed by the national God of Israel.

Ruth emerges as a heroic figure in this chapter. Her choice to remain with Naomi is courageous and sensitive, and it appears to contain a religious component as well. Ruth's outstanding character positions her as a model of staunch commitment to God and to her fellow man.

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
