

## MEGILLAT RUTH

By Dr. Yael Ziegler

### Shiur #15: Boaz Welcomes Ruth to Bethlehem

And Boaz answered and he said to her, “It has surely been told to me all that you have done with your mother-in-law after your husband died, and you left your father and your mother and the land of your birthplace and you went to a nation that you did not know yesterday or the day before. God shall repay you your deeds and your reward shall be complete from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to get protection.” (*Ruth* 2:11-12)

#### Boaz’s Public Proclamation

Boaz’s remarkable response to Ruth’s self-effacing words and behavior may not be meant for her ears alone. He seems to make a public proclamation of Ruth’s righteousness, intended as a stamp of approval, thereby facilitating Ruth’s entrance into Bethlehem society. This may be seen by the manner in which Boaz’s statement is introduced by two separate verbs, “*va-ya’an*” and “*vayomer*” (“he answered” and “he said”). This combination seems to have the force of an official pronouncement, rather than a private communication.<sup>1</sup>[1] Moreover, the doubled use of the word “*nagad*” which opens Boaz’s speech (“*huggeid huggad li*,” “it has surely been told to me”), indicates that Ruth’s extraordinary actions are known to all.<sup>2</sup>[2] A *midrash* explains the double verb as an indication that Boaz has been hearing this information from all sides:<sup>3</sup>[3]

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<sup>1</sup> [1] See, e.g. *Bereishit* 24:50; 27:37; 31:43; 40:18; *Shemot* 4:1; 24:3; *Bamidbar* 11:28 and many other salient examples of this verb pair.

<sup>2</sup> [2] The word *nagad*, often used as a synonym for other words which denote speech, such as *amar* and *dibber*, is apparently etymologically related to the word *neged*, which means something conspicuous or in front of you (e.g. *Shemot* 34:10; *Yehoshua* 3:16). This word therefore suggests that something is being announced publically, or, in the context of Boaz’s declaration, that what he is about to say has been made known to him because it is apparent to all. See Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1951), pp. 616-617.

<sup>3</sup> [3] Edward Campbell, Jr., *Ruth*, p. 99, similarly suggests that the doubled verb is iterative. See also Feivel Meltzer, *Ruth (Da’at Mikra)*, p. 17. The other use of this doubled expression (*Yehoshua* 9:24) appears to have a similar connotation.

Why does it say [the verb] twice, “*huggeid huggad li?*” It was told to me in the house and it was told to me in the fields. (*Ruth Rabba* 5:3)

Even if the townspeople know about Ruth’s actions, they do not necessarily view them as worthy of their admiration.<sup>4</sup>[4] This apparently “well-known” depiction of Ruth certainly has not moved anyone thus far to act generously toward Ruth. The overseer’s negative depiction seems to mirror a general consensus. Boaz’s positive spin may be designed to galvanize the people to embrace Ruth and behave toward her in a manner commensurate with her own behavior. In his speech, Boaz counters the derogatory tone of the overseer, whose speech is introduced with the same two verbs (“*va-ya’an*,” “*va-yomer*”) and is likely also meant for public consumption (*Ruth* 2:6).

Boaz’s public speech is poetic and powerful, a bold assurance that Ruth’s actions will obtain due recompense.<sup>5</sup>[5] Indeed, after noting Ruth’s extraordinary behavior, Boaz confers a blessing upon Ruth, endorsing the notion that God will repay her for her kindness. While Boaz’s blessing in God’s name echoes that of Naomi’s in *Ruth* 1:8-9, in reality, the content of Boaz’s blessing is an inversion of Naomi’s blessing. Naomi’s blessing is designed to send Ruth on her way, assuring her that God’s reward will escort her in her journey back to Moav. Boaz’s blessing draws Ruth inward, declaring that God’s reward will attend her quest to join the nation of Israel. These words of welcome are bolstered by the metaphor of Ruth coming under God’s wings. Though she may not yet be accepted among the townspeople, Boaz announces unambiguously that God has embraced her.

In addition to the content of Boaz’s sweeping endorsement of Ruth, Boaz’s employment of formal or poetic language is noteworthy. Some examples of this language include the double use of the verb *nagad*, as in the aforementioned *huggeid huggad li*,<sup>6</sup>[6] the phrase *temol shilshom*, which is an idiom which translates literally as “yesterday and the third day,” and the poetic description of Ruth’s relationship to the God of Israel, “under whose wings you have come to get protection.”<sup>7</sup>[7] Boaz’s use of formal language ensures that this speech will not be mistaken

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<sup>4</sup> [4] Ruth’s decision to remain with Naomi may be perceived as a decision taken out of self-interest and a desire to find a husband in Bethlehem (see e.g. *Ruth* 1:11-13). In any case, Ruth’s loyalty to Naomi is not necessarily viewed as a positive act by the townspeople, who still harbor resentment toward Naomi, who abandoned them during the famine. Thus, Boaz’s conclusions are especially necessary.

<sup>5</sup> [5] Murray Gow, *The Book of Ruth: Its Structure, Theme and Purpose* (1992), p. 46, has noted that these words of Boaz constitute the fulcrum of the narrative and appear in the center of the chiasmic structure of chapter two.

<sup>6</sup> [6] The common syntactic device of using an infinitive absolute form before the indicative of the verb places emphasis upon this verb in the sentence.

<sup>7</sup> [7] Brown, Driver, and Briggs’ lexicon, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1951), p. 821, notes that the noun form of the word *pa’al* (*yeshalem Hashem po’aleikh*) meaning one’s deeds, is always used in a poetic context (see e.g. *Devarim* 33:11; *Yeshayahu* 41:24; *Tehillim* 44:2).

for mundane conversation and impresses its content upon the mind and heart of the listener, further suggesting a deliberate design to facilitate Ruth's acceptance.

The cadence of Boaz's speech is also extraordinary, as every few words end with the second person suffix *-eikh*, creating a sing-song quality:

*huggeid huggad li kol asher asit et  
chamoteikh acharei mot isheikh va-ta'azvi  
avikh ve-immeikh  
ve-eretz moladeteikh...*

*yeshalem Hashem po'aleikh  
u-tehi maskurteikh  
sheleima mei-im Hashem....*

Boaz's rhythmic speech is designed to impress itself upon the listeners' memory and be repeated to one another. This should affect the people of Bethlehem's willingness to accept Ruth into their midst.

Boaz's personal, public endorsement facilitates Ruth's endurance, physically and emotionally, and significantly contributes to Ruth's eventual acceptance in Bethlehem.

Boaz, Ruth's Patron: Why Does Boaz Endorse Ruth?

Why does Boaz give his support to Ruth? Boaz attributes his actions to Ruth's extraordinary character, her generosity, and her willingness to accompany Naomi and join the Jewish nation. Boaz's description of Ruth's remarkable actions – "you left (*va-ta'azvi*) your father and your mother and the land of your birthplace" – recalls Ruth's actual declaration of loyalty to Naomi: "Do not harm me by [requiring me to] depart from you (*le-ozveikh*)."<sup>8</sup> More significantly, Boaz's description of Ruth's actions ("you left your father and your mother and the land of your birthplace and you went, *va-teilekhi*, to a nation that you did not know"), evokes God's command to Avraham: "Go for yourself (*lekh lekha*) from your land, your birthplace, and your father's house." Boaz intimates that Ruth's deeds are equivalent to those of Avraham, the founder of the Jewish nation. The anticipated reward (*maskurteikh*) for Ruth's journey likewise recalls that which God promises Avraham, "Fear not Avram, I am a shield for you. Your reward (*sekharkha*) is very great" (*Bereishit* 15:1).<sup>8</sup>[8] Finally, Boaz implies that, like Avraham, Ruth's choice involves a desire

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<sup>8</sup> [8] It is intriguing that in the verse which follows God's promise to Avraham (*Bereishit* 15:2), Avraham complains that he has no progeny, thereby indicating that he understands that this "reward" involves fertility. This resonates well with the larger theme of *Megillat Ruth* in which Ruth's ultimate goal is to obtain a child to continue Naomi's line. For similar uses of the word *sekharkha*, see *Bereishit* 30:16, 18; *Tehillim* 127:3.

to follow God (and not just Naomi), under whose wings she has come to seek refuge. Thus, Ruth should not be spurned because of her past, but embraced as a result of her courageous and pious resolution.

We have seen in previously cited *midrashim* that Boaz first pays attention to Ruth because of her superior behavior. Rabbinic interpretations offer a similar reason for Boaz's kind actions, affirming Boaz's declaration that his deeds are inspired by Ruth's character:

And so, you shall cleave to my young women [reapers]. And is it the way of Boaz to cleave to women?<sup>9</sup>[9] R. Eliezer said: When he saw, "And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth cleaved to her," he said, "It is permitted to cleave to [Ruth]." (*Shabbat* 113b)

This *gemara* notes the literary allusion between the word that Boaz employs to advise Ruth to cleave to the female reapers (*davak*) and that which was previously used to describe Ruth's manner of devotedly remain with her mother-in-law (*daveka*). In this way, the *gemara* indicates that Boaz's behavior toward Ruth is a reciprocation for Ruth's behavior toward Naomi. In fact, Boaz's kind treatment of Ruth is well-deserved, and Boaz conducts himself in imitation of Ruth's righteousness.

There is little doubt that Boaz is motivated by Ruth's piety. However, it is also the case that Boaz throws his weight behind the forsaken Moavite because of his own extraordinary character. This coheres with our previous descriptions of Boaz. Indeed, some *midrashim* simply regard Boaz's behavior as an indication of his kindness:

R. Simon in the name of R. Elazar said... Who was it that did kindness with [the one] who needed kindness? This is Boaz [in relation to] Ruth, as it says, "And Boaz said to her at the time of eating, 'Draw near.'" (*Vayikra Rabba* 34)

We have examined two separate reasons for Boaz's generosity towards Ruth. The first approach, tendered by Boaz himself, indicates that his largesse is motivated by Ruth's pious character. We also suggested that it is Boaz's personal character, his kindness and generosity, which determines the trajectory of this story.

Boaz: Ruth's Spiritual Guide

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<sup>9</sup> [9] The Maharsha points out that this is not based on Boaz's actual words, in which he advises Ruth to cleave to his girls (and *not* to him). Maharsha proposes that the word *davak* intimates a connection between a man and a woman and therefore the *gemara* formulates their question as though Boaz's actual intent is that Ruth shall cleave to him.

Some *midrashim* offer a different characterization of Boaz and Ruth's initial relationship – that of a mentor guiding a novice proselyte:

And Boaz said to Ruth, "Have you not heard my daughter? Do not go to pick in another field. For the sake [of informing her] (*Shemot* 20), "You shall not have other gods before Me."

And also, do not pass by here (*mi-zeh*). For the sake [of informing her] (*Shemot* 15), "This (*zeh*) is my God and I shall glorify Him."

And so, you shall cleave to my young women [reapers]. These are the righteous, who are called young...

And if you shall get thirsty, you may go to the vessels. These are the righteous, who are called vessels. (*Ruth Rabba* 4:11-12)

According to this *midrash*, Boaz's words to Ruth are intended to educate her toward some fundamental principles of Judaism. When Boaz tells Ruth not to pick in other fields, he is actually informing her that she may not worship other gods. His declaration that she shall not pass by here is meant to teach her that she should glorify God in the manner of those who sang at the miracle of the parting of the sea.<sup>10</sup>[10] And when Boaz notifies Ruth that she should cleave to the young women and drink from the vessels, he is actually advising Ruth to associate herself with righteous people.

This *midrash* situates Boaz in a similar role as the one assigned to Naomi by various *midrashim*, in which Naomi is actively involved in facilitating Ruth's conversion and educating her toward a halakhic lifestyle.<sup>11</sup>[11] One example is the following *midrash*, which attributes Ruth's evolving persona to Naomi's influence:

And the boy who oversees the reapers answered and he said, "She is a Moavite girl. And you say that her ways are pleasing and pleasant?!"<sup>12</sup>[12] However, her mistress [Naomi] softened her [Moavite ways.]"<sup>13</sup>[13] (*Ruth Rabba* 4:9).

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<sup>10</sup> [10] This association is generated by the common word *zeh*, which serves to link the two passages.

<sup>11</sup> [11] See e.g. *Yevamot* 47b, *Ruth Rabba* 2:22-24, 5:12; *Ruth Zuta* 1:12, and the *Targum* on *Ruth* 1:16-17.

<sup>12</sup> [12] This *midrash* uses the words *na'im* and *ne'imim* to express the astonishment over Ruth's pleasant manner. It must be noted that these are the same words employed by *Ruth Rabba* 2:5 as an etymology of Naomi's name. Thus, the *midrash* suggests that the people are amazed that this Moavite girl is so similar to Naomi, and has actually adopted the guise and comportment of a respected Jewish woman.

<sup>13</sup> [13] This *midrash* offers a more empathetic portrait of the overseer than the one which I have presented.

These *midrashim* draw our attention to an important textual phenomenon, namely, Naomi's and Boaz's parallel function and responsibilities with respect to Ruth. Boaz and Naomi are both presented in a parental role vis-à-vis Ruth. Both Boaz and Naomi recognize the dangers of the field, express concern for Ruth's physical safety,<sup>14</sup>[14] and urge her to cleave to Boaz's female reapers. They both refer to Ruth as "*biti*," "my daughter," and they each gently steer Ruth's actions, facilitating her entrance into Bethlehem.<sup>15</sup>[15] These *midrashim* expand upon the parallel roles of these characters, assuming that any parental role includes an element of religious supervision.

## Ruth and Kingship

A related midrashic approach suggests that Boaz directs Ruth toward an understanding of her impending role as the progenitor of kingship:<sup>16</sup>[16]

And Boaz said to her at the time of eating, "Draw near."... Draw near [*goshi halom*], come close to kingship, for [the word] *halom* exclusively [indicates] kingship, as it says (*II Melakhim* 7), "For you have brought me to here (*ad halom*)." And eat from the bread. This is the bread of kingship.

And dip your bread in sauce. These are the sufferings [of kingship], as [David] says (*Tehillim* 6), "God, do not in Your anger rebuke me." (*Ruth Rabba* 5:6)

This approach likewise sees Boaz in the role of educator, but toward a very specific goal.<sup>17</sup>[17] In fact, this *midrash* coheres with the perspective that the entire *Megilla* is primarily interested in Ruth and Boaz as the progenitors of David and the kingship.<sup>18</sup>[18] In this schema, every word

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<sup>14</sup> [14] The word employed by Boaz, *naga* ("Have I not commanded the young men not to touch you?" *Ruth* 2:9), connotes a sexual attack (see *Bereishit* 20:6). Naomi uses the word *paga* (*Ruth* 2:22), which often connotes a hostile encounter (see e.g. *Shofetim* 8:21; *I Shemuel* 22:17-18), but not specifically sexual violence. Nevertheless, some *midrashim* assume that Naomi is specifically referring to a sexual attack as well (e.g. *Ruth Zuta* 2:22).

<sup>15</sup> [15] In chapter two, Naomi and Boaz each address Ruth on separate occasions as *biti* (*Ruth* 2:2, 8, 22). This is also the case in chapter three (*Ruth* 3:1, 10, 11, 16). This is particularly significant because this form of address is found only once outside of the *Megilla* (*Shoftim* 11:35), and in that case, it is used by an actual parent.

<sup>16</sup> [16] I have translated a small abstract of a very long *midrash* which offers various readings of Boaz's speech, all of which proffer a similar approach.

<sup>17</sup> [17] Many *midrashim* adopt this approach, portraying Boaz as informing Ruth of her role as the progenitor of kingship (*Ruth Zuta* 2:13).

<sup>18</sup> [18] See also the Targum on *Ruth* 2:11 which expands on the words *huggeid huggad li*, explaining what it was that Boaz heard that motivates him to bless her in God's name: "And it was told to me by prophecy that there will come forth from you kings and prophets because of [all] the kindness that you have done for your mother-in-law."

exchanged, every action undertaken, and every event in the *Megilla* is all a precursor to the goal: establishing the Davidic dynasty.

There is a literary allusion which supports this midrashic approach. Boaz's blessing of Ruth twice contains the root *shalem*, which brackets the first sentence of his blessing: "God should repay (*yeshalem*) you your deeds and your reward shall be complete (*sheleima*) from the Lord" (*Ruth* 2:12). The repeated usage draws our attention to this word, which suggests that Ruth's ultimate reward is a period that will bring about *sheleimut*: completion, security, and peace. This may refer to the promise of kingship, which augurs an ideal future. It may also hint at Ruth's illustrious descendant Shlomo, who will launch the Davidic dynasty, build the Temple, and set the standard for ideal kingship.<sup>19</sup>[19]

A *midrash* supports this reading:

"Your reward shall be complete (*sheleima*)." (*Ruth* 2:12). It is written *ShLMH*.<sup>20</sup>[20]  
R. Yosi said: He said to her, Shlomo will derive from you. (*Pesikta De-Rav Kahane* 16)

Indeed, the kingship aspires to completion (*shalom*), often used to connote total, absolute peace, the safety and security of a nation in their land. This situation appears to be actualized during the reign of Shlomo:

For [Shlomo] dominated over the entire [region] across from the river, from Tifsach until Azza, over all of the kings [in the region] across from the river, and he had complete peace (*shalom*) on all surrounding sides. And Judah and Israel dwelled in security, each man under his grape vine and under his fig tree, from Dan until Beersheva all of the days of Shlomo. (*I Melakhim* 5:4-5)

Shlomo's very name, along with the name of his capital city (*Yerushalayim*), embodies the total peace and security to which kingship aspires.<sup>21</sup>[21] Boaz's dual employment of the word *shalem* may hint to a promise of kingship, which can bring in its wake peace and security, not just for Ruth, but for the entire nation.

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<sup>19</sup> [19] See R. Baruch Epstein (*Torah Temima*, *Ruth* 2:12), who observes the unnecessary repetition of the word *shalem*, concluding that this is a hidden reference to Shlomo.

<sup>20</sup> [20] This *midrash* is commenting on the fact that the same consonants can be pronounced either *sheleima* (complete) or Shlomo.

<sup>21</sup> [21] The appellation of the woman who represents Shlomo's counterpart in *Shir Ha-shirim*, *Ha-Shulamit*, may be designed to complete this theme. While this idea is too intriguing to omit, it is beyond the scope of this *shiur* to give proper attention to the identity of the figures named in *Shir Ha-shirim*.

*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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