MEGILLAT RUTH

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Shiur #3: Megillat Ruth and the Book of Shoftim (Part II)

In last week's *shiur*, we noted that despite the fact that *Ruth* takes place during the time of the Judges, it progresses along a distinctly different trajectory and produces a vastly different conclusion. While I suggested last time that Boaz is a solution to the leadership failure of the book of *Shoftim*, in today's *shiur*, I would like to examine the manner in which *Megillat Ruth* as a whole functions as a solution for the prevalent social decay of the time.

Megillat Ruth's portrayal of a harmonious and peaceful lifestyle is a welcome contrast to the violent and warring atmosphere of the book of Shoftim. It is especially different from the chaotic and anarchic society depicted in the last five chapters of the book of Shoftim. By consciously contrasting these two books, Megillat Ruth presents an alternative to the discord that holds sway in the book of Shoftim.

Parallels Between Shoftim and Ruth

There are many linguistic and thematic parallels between the books of *Shoftim* and *Ruth*, which, I believe, underscore the deliberate contrast between them. In later *shiurim*, we will have occasion to compare characters in the book of *Ruth* to Judges such as Devora and Shimshon. In today's *shiur*, we will examine some general parallels that highlight the essential social difference between these books. The first two parallels surround the topics of loyalty and food, after which we will explore the contrasts between the violent and tragic

conclusion of Shoftim and the tranquil ambiance of Ruth.

Primary Loyalties

Due to the failure of the leadership to achieve its goal of national cohesiveness, the society in the book of *Shoftim* steadily splinters off into smaller units. There is an increasing awareness that the nation is naturally divided into tribal and even smaller familial entities. As the national entity fails to cohere, individuals naturally revert to their basic allegiances with increasingly narrower frames of loyalty. Their first loyalty is to themselves, followed by an allegiance to their immediate family, then to their extended family, and lastly to their tribe. Tribalism prevails, as there appears to be little regard for any national unity.1[1] This model leads to infighting and eventually full-blown civil war.

Several scenarios support this factional picture of the nation in the book of *Shoftim*. Consider the song of Devora, in which she lists the tribes separately, praising those tribes who join the national war effort and castigating those who do not (*Shoftim* 5:14-18). Gidon is depicted rallying first his family unit (Aviezer) and second his tribe (Menashe); only then does he call upon other regional tribes to join his war (*Shoftim* 6:34-35). The situation worsens under the leadership of Avimelekh, who splits his own family into two irreconcilable factions: his mother's kin, who become his allies, and his father's kin, whom he massacres. Having been thrown out of his father's house, Yiftach seems to have no loyalties to anyone at all, not even his daughter. This deteriorating situation reaches its nadir in the narrative of Shimshon, who rallies no tribe to war and acts as leader of no one.2[2]

^{1 [1]} Note, for example, that the book of *Shoftim* rarely uses the phrase *kol Yisrael*, "all of Israel," or its equivalent. While this phrase does appear at the beginning of the book (e.g. 2:4) and, ironically, at its concluding civil war (20:1, 11), the only time in which the stories of the Judges contain any reference to "all of Israel" is in one singular description of collective idolatry (*Shoftim* 8:27).

^{2 [2]} I am aware that there are traditions that regard this aspect of Shimshon's methods as a virtue, enabling him to function as a potent and effective guerilla warrior (e.g. Ramban, <u>Bereishit 49:17</u>). While one could certainly debate this approach (see e.g. Rashbam, <u>Bereishit 49:16</u>, who does not regard Shimshon's exploits in a positive light), there is little doubt that Shimshon never actually assumes leadership over others.

The predominance of primary loyalties generates several divisive situations in which tribes clash with one another. Gidon narrowly averts a civil war with the tribe of Ephraim (8:1-3). Yiftach is not prudent enough to avoid a civil war; the war between Yiftach and the Ephraimites leaves forty-two thousand Ephraimites dead (12:6). Finally, the conflict between the tribe of Binyamin and the rest of the nation spirals into full-scale civil war, whose repercussions are nothing short of catastrophic.

Perhaps it is for this reason that *Megillat Ruth* focuses upon unanticipated and unconditional loyalty. Ruth's loyalty to her mother-in-law transcends any familial, tribal, or national primary loyalties. Ruth is in no way focused on her narrow interests. She unhesitatingly offers her fidelity to Naomi, declaring her unequivocal allegiance to a woman with whom she has no binding family ties. Naomi herself appears surprised by Ruth's devotion, urging Ruth to return to her father's house (1:8). Boaz also expresses his astonishment at Ruth's actions, praising Ruth for having left her father, mother, and homeland to follow Naomi to Bethlehem (2:11). Ruth's assertion of fealty (which we shall examine at greater length in later *shiurim*) is all-embracing and inclusive: "Your nation is my nation and your God is my God." This foreigner, guided by compassion and untainted by the prevailing blight of primary loyalties, can guide the nation back to unity and to a willingness to set aside personal interests. It is this quality that enables Ruth to create a monarchy that can unify the nation under one national banner, healing the tribal divisions that have split this fragile nation.3[3]

Food in *Judges* and *Ruth*

Examining the theme of giving and withholding food in each of these books further illustrates the striking contrast between them. There are several accounts in which members of *Am Yisrael* withhold food from one another in the book of *Shoftim*. The people of Sukkot and Penuel callously refuse food to Gidon

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^{3 [3]} The people bless Boaz that Ruth's entrance into his house should render her like Rachel and Leah, who **together** built the house of Israel (<u>Ruth 4:11</u>). The formulation of this blessing suggests that the long-standing divide between Rachel and Leah can finally draw to a close as a result of this narrative. In later *shiurim*, we will examine how this unifying description is a product of Ruth's persona, which brings about the united and unifying Davidic monarchy.

and his hungry, exhausted soldiers (<u>Shoftim 8:6</u>, 8). The husband of the concubine in chapter 19 attempts to convince the old man to give him lodging by stating that he has enough food to feed himself, his entourage, and his animals (<u>Shoftim 19:19</u>). His assumption is that no one has invited him to their house because they do not wish to provide him with food.

In the book of *Shoftim*, *Am Yisrael* has lost all semblance of social cohesiveness, along with a basic decency that compels people to offer food to those in need.4[4] The miserly attitude displayed in the book of *Shoftim* is the very antithesis of the foundations of the nation of Israel, a nation of *chesed* founded by Avraham, whose tent was always open to strangers.

Despite Elimelekh's initial abandonment of the people of Bethlehem during the famine,5[5] the book of *Ruth* records repeated situations in which the two main characters generously provide food for another. Ruth goes to the fields to reap food for herself and for Naomi (2:1). In an unanticipated display of personal compassion, Boaz himself hands Ruth grain, ensuring that she has food for lunch (2:14). Ruth saves her leftovers, returns home, and gives food to Naomi (2:18). At the climax of the story, Boaz presents Ruth with six sheaves of barley (3:15).6[6] Food, given generously and unhesitatingly, becomes the symbol of a society in which social cohesiveness and basic decency form its core, marking these people as the heirs to the legacy of Avraham.7[7]

^{4 [4]} As we shall see in the next *shiur*, this lack of generosity is associated with the Moavite nation, who did not offer food and water to Israel on their way out of Egypt (*Devarim* 23:5).

^{5 [5]} Elimelekh's acts depict him as a character who fully coheres with the manner in which Israelite society behaves during the period of the Judges. As we will see, rabbinic *midrashim* paint a vivid picture of Elimelekh as a figure who belongs to the period of the Judges, thereby explaining why Elimelekh is dismissed early in the book of *Ruth* and left out of the line of kingship.

^{6 [6]} This is not a significant amount of food and therefore it seems to be more symbolic than practical. We will examine the specific symbolism of Boaz's act in later *shiurim*.

^{7 [7]} Avraham is the paradigm of kindness in rabbinic tradition. See, for example, Rambam, *Hilkhot Avadim* 9:8; *Hilkhot Avel* 14:2.

The Concubine in Giv'ah and Megillat Ruth

The fact that *Megillat Ruth* mirrors, converses with, and ultimately repairs the social collapse of the book of *Shoftim* is most succinctly conveyed by the striking linguistic correlation between Ruth and the final, terrible narrative of the book of the *Shoftim*, that of the rape of the concubine in Giv'a. This story is the book's darkest hour. The heinous behavior of all of the characters involved in the story, the ominous echoes of Sedom, and the civil war that is a byproduct of the rape all contribute to the portent of doom which attends this narrative. The abundance of parallels between *Shoftim* 19-21 and *Megillat Ruth* draws our attention to the need to compare and contrast these narratives and note their striking underlying difference.

The following section is highly technical due to the intricate linguistic and thematic comparisons that I am drawing. I have appended a chart of the parallels between the stories in Hebrew at the end of this *shiur*. I recommend that you read the following section with the chart in hand in order to internalize the drama and weight of these parallels. Please note: All citations from chapters 1-4 are from the book of *Ruth*, while citations from chapters 19-21 are from the book of *Shoftim*.

Shoftim 19

The brutal story of the concubine begins with a man marrying a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. The concubine's betrayal of her husband drives her back home to Bethlehem, to her father's house. After several months, her husband comes searching for her "to persuade her" (*le-dabber al libba*, literally, to speak to her heart) to return to him (19:3). Once there, he spends several days "eating, drinking, and lodging" at his father-in-law's home (19:4, 6). When, on several occasions, the husband attempts to depart, his father-in-law urges him to remain, "Stay and lodge and let your heart be merry" (19:6, 9). Eventually, the couple departs late in the day and, spurning the suggestion that they lodge in the Yevusi city on the grounds that it is "a city of foreigners" (*ir nokhri*), they arrive in the Benjamite city of Giv'a. Once there, no one offers them hospitality and it seems that they will have to sleep in the streets. Ultimately, an elderly gentleman making his way back from his work in the field offers lodgings to the man, his "maidservant," and servant. The shadows of the night recede into the

background as the elderly man and his guest8[8] sit down to "eat, drink, and make merry" (19:21-22).

Ruth 1-3

The previous scenario is reminiscent of another union between a man and a woman in Bethlehem, where the woman has arrived after deserting her father's house. The man, Boaz, is the only one who has been kind to Ruth, who describes herself as a "foreigner" (*ve-anokhi nokhriyya*) (2:10), and therefore an object of suspicion. Ruth refers to Boaz as her "master" (2:13), and to herself as his "maidservant" (3:9), but he treats her with respect and compassion, generously providing her with food and protection in his field. Ruth is astonished by Boaz's attention, "falls to her face" in gratitude (2:10), and attests that he has "comforted" her and mollified her (*dibbarta al lev*, literally, "you have spoken to the heart") (2:13). Like the elderly gentlemen host in *Shoftim* 19, Boaz, in spite of his advanced age, attends to work in his fields (2:4; 3:2).

Seeking marriage, Ruth approaches Boaz in the field one night. After he "eats, drinks, and his heart becomes merry" (3:7), Ruth lies by his side waiting to see what he will do. Boaz awakens to find a woman at his side and she proposes that he spread his wings over her.9[9] Boaz's response is gentle and noble. He blesses Ruth in the name of God, speaks of her goodness and her kindness, and describes her reputation as "a woman of valor" (eshet chayil, 3:11). He then offers her safe lodgings for the duration of the night (3:13), maintaining that in the morning (boker, mentioned three times in rapid succession), he will ensure her redemption. Mindful of her reputation, she "arises early" (3:14), lest someone misinterpret the events that occurred that night. In fact, at Boaz's urging, Ruth departs before the light of day: "No one shall know (al yivvada) that a woman has

8 [8] Because of the indeterminate plural verbs used, it is unclear in this story whether the concubine joins the men in their meal. Nevertheless, the concubine never weighs in on their dinner table conversation (which, of course, profoundly affects her). Moreover, it is abundantly clear that the meals in her father's house involved only the two men (19:8) and the similar description of the meals could suggest that the later meal was also made up of exclusively the host and his guest.

^{9 [9]} In a later *shiur*, we will examine the precise meaning of this expression. For now, it will suffice to regard this as a request for protection of sorts.

come to the threshing floor" (3:14). However, before Ruth departs, Boaz entreats her to bring forth her kerchief and "grab hold" (*ve-echozi va*) of it (3:15), so that he can place food in it. The sweet innocence of Ruth's night under Boaz's solicitous protection casts a tranquil aura over the chapter, one which extends to the general mood of the book.

Judges 19

The concubine does not fare so well over the course of the night that she spends with her conciliatory husband. Despite the fact that he has travelled to retrieve his concubine, he pays her very little mind and seems mostly oblivious to her presence. Amid the extensive descriptions of his own feasting, at no point does he offer her any food. More to the point, his concern for his own lodgings does not extend to her; his bid to obtain lodging focuses primarily on himself: "No man has gathered me into his home" (19:18). Needless to say, when the husband is himself threatened with rape (ve-neida'ennu, 19:22), he prefers to forfeit his concubine. And instead of offering her protection, the man mercilessly throws his concubine into the street, where the townspeople brutally rape her (va-yeide'u ota) "throughout the night" (19:25). Morning comes (boker, three times in rapid succession) none too soon and the woman lies "fallen on the threshold" of her "master's" quarters (19:26). The "master arises" in the morning (19:27), preparing to be on his way, when he notices the woman sprawled on his threshold. Having failed to elicit a response, the man takes her home, "grabs hold" of her (va-ochez bi-filagshi, 20:6),10[10] and dismembers her.

Shoftim 20 and Ruth 4

The aftermath of each story corresponds well to its general tone. Determined to procure redemption for Ruth, Boaz "goes up" (ala) to the gate (4:1), "takes ten men" (4:2), and seeks to officially resolve the problem of the "inheritance" (4:5) and "the fields" of their "brother" Elimelekh (4:3).

10 [10] This is the description in the man's public recounting of the story (20:6). In the original narrative, he is described as strongly grasping his concubine (*vayachazek bi-filagsho*). I refer here to the later retelling in order to strengthen the parallel between the two stories.

Equally determined to seek restitution for the wrong which has been done to *him* (20:5), the concubine's husband distributes her dismembered body parts to "every field and inheritance" (20:6). The children of Israel "arise" (*alu*, 20:3), "take ten men" (20:10) from every hundred men from every tribe, and set out to wage war against "their brothers" (20:13).

The civil war which follows represents the collapse of Israelite society at this time. Several salient linguistic usages in the course of the war point to a contrasting mirror image between this war and the book of Ruth.11[11]

- 1. The word *nage'a* (to touch) in the story of the war indicates the manner in which warfare has led the "evil" to touch upon them (20:41). In contrast, Boaz tells Ruth: "Have I not commanded the young men not to touch you (*nog'ekh*)?" (2:9). Boaz's command to the young men not to touch Ruth is good for Ruth, a fact attested to by Naomi's response to Boaz's protective command, "It is **good**, my daughter, that you should go out with his young women and they will not harm you in another field" (2:22).
- 2. The word *davak*, meaning to cleave, appears four times in the book of Ruth. The first describes Ruth's loyalty in cleaving to her mother-in-law (1:14). The next three appearances of this word (2:8, 21, 23) act as Ruth's ostensible reward for her compassionate behavior, as Boaz encourages Ruth to keep herself safe by cleaving to the female workers. This favorable word seems to connote union and loyalty. Nevertheless, in the story of the civil war, the word signifies encroaching dangers and the hot pursuit of the opposing army, which presses closer as the Benjamites endure the final conclusive blow (20:42, 45).
- 3. The word *mashchit* in the war refers to the annihilation of the population (20:42). In the book of *Ruth*, the *go'el* expresses panic at the thought that his marriage to Ruth will impair his estate: "lest I will destroy (*ashchit*) my

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^{11 [11]} I am grateful to Jennifer Rubin Raskas for first pointing out to me the parallel between the civil war and *Megillat Ruth*.

inheritance" (4:6).12[12] The *go'el's* panicked use of the word is both non-violent (in contrast to *Shoftim*) and patently wrong, as we see when Boaz marries Ruth without causing any damage to his own *nachala* (inheritance).

- 4. The meaning of the word *menucha* in <u>Shoftim 20:43</u> is difficult to ascertain. Some assume that it is the proper name of the town,13[13] others that it is a description of a place in which the Benjamite army rested.14[14] In either case, there is an ironic contrast between the use of this idyllic word immediately prior to the decimation of the Benjamites and the peaceful nature of this word in the book of *Ruth*. There it conveys Naomi's blessing for marriage: "God shall give you and you shall find restfulness (*menucha*), each woman in the house of a husband" (1:9). Later in the narrative of *Ruth*, this same word expresses the solicitous concern of a mother-in-law for her daughter-in-law's future: "My daughter, will I not seek restfulness (*manoach*) that shall be good for you?" (3:1).
- 5. The description of the Benjamite men of valor (*anshei chayil*), who have bravely taken part in this deplorable civil war to defend their tribesmen from the consequences of their own horrific actions (20:44, 46), is the antithesis of Boaz, the man of valor (*ish chayil*) who appears in *Megillat Ruth* (2:1). Boaz's valor is characterized by nobility of spirit, the courage to stand up against those who oppose his willingness to embrace the foreigner and the strength of character to pursue what is right. Similarly, Ruth is termed an *eshet chayil*, a woman of valor. This designation does not refer to her military prowess, but to her inner qualities her fortitude, tenacity, and determination to follow a virtuous path, despite the hardships involved.

Shoftim 21

Finally, let us explore the aftermath of the civil war – the horror, the pain,

14 [14] Most medieval exegetes (e.g. *Rashi*, *Radak*) assume this meaning of the word, derived from the precise meaning of the word *menucha*, to rest.

^{12 [12]} We will of course examine in later *shiurim* the reason that the *go'el* has this impression.

^{13 [13]} See, for example, the NJPS translation of this verse.

and the lament. The threatened extermination of the tribe of Binyamin due to the war is compounded by an oath which the nation has sworn, "Not one of us shall give his daughter to Binyamin as a wife" (Shoftim 21:1). This oath is later repeated as a curse, "Cursed be the man who gives a wife to Binyamin" (21:18). This situation eventually generates terrible distress, and the nation realizes the consequences of this oath. They sit in mourning "until evening" (21:2), "lift up their voice and cry" (21:2). Their "regret" (nicham, 21:15) over Binyamin is genuine, as they lament those men who "remain" from the tribe (notarim, 21:7, 16), yet lack any prospects in marriage. The "elders" of the congregation (21:16) eventually come up with two solutions so that this tribe "will not be erased from Israel" (21:17). Both of these solutions entail violence: the first solution involves actual bloodshed (21:8-12), and the other necessitates the ambush and kidnap of innocent girls (21:20-22). Yet this is all ostensibly for a good cause and as the tale ends, the Benjamin survivors return to their inheritance (nachala), having resolved their quandary to their satisfaction. Nevertheless, the curse and the violence hover in the background, leaving the reader uncomfortably aware that the social situation in the period of the Judges remains in jeopardy. The horror and threat of destruction still looms, as the book ends with disunity; each man returns to his tribe and to his family (21:24),15[15] leaving little hope for the future of Israelite society.

Ruth

Much of the language noted above appears in a harmonious, even joyous context in Megillat Ruth. Ruth works to obtain food "until evening" (2:17). She and Orpa twice "raise their voices and cry" in sorrow at the possibility of parting from Naomi (1:9, 14). Ruth takes the only oath in the narrative (1:17), and it is a memorable one, unifying Ruth and Naomi through Ruth's loyalty, determination and compassion. The root (nicham) in Ruth is used to denote consolation (and not regret), as Ruth describes the solace that she has derived from Boaz's consideration (2:13). The word notar, or "remnant," refers to Ruth's satiation and the leftover food she gives to Naomi (2:14, 18). The fear of erasure of a family also abounds in Megillat Ruth, "So that the name of the dead person should not be cut off from his brethren" (4:10).16[16] Nevertheless, the solution of Megillat

^{15 [15]} In my opinion, there is a significant distinction between the final description of Yehoshua sending the nation to its respective nachalot in order to pursue the national agenda of possessing the land (Yehoshua 24:28; Shoftim 2:6), and this description of each man returning to his primary loyalties.

^{16 [16]} The parallel between the goal of preserving the house of Elimelekh (in Megillat Ruth) and the goal of preserving the tribe of Benjamin (in the book of

Ruth, abetted by the "elders" of the city, remains as peaceful as its objectives, and marriage is procured in a tranquil and sympathetic environment. Ruth ends with an abundance of blessings, providing hopeful prospects for continued societal well-being.

Conclusion

In summation, I will briefly review the divergent tones and atmospheres of these narratives. *Megillat Ruth* is a story of loyalty, generosity, union, marriage, blessings, and life. The narrative of *Shoftim* is a story of division, selfishness, miserly behavior, war, destruction, curses, and death. It is no wonder that the threat of annihilation of a tribe of Israel, attended by an ominous portent of doom, closes this narrative.

These two books, therefore, must remain separate because they are, in essence, two opposing models of society. In the society of the book of *Shoftim*, the people are stingy, self-absorbed, detached, and unhelpful to one other. This society invariably leads to chaos and disorder, lack of leadership, and ultimately the unraveling of the entire societal infrastructure, culminating in civil war. In the society depicted in the book of *Ruth*, peace and harmony reign alongside kindness, serenity and compassion. This society leads to a harmonious existence and the possibility of a monarchical infrastructure characterized by societal unity.

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 extraordinary selflessness and kindness.

Shoftim) may be seen in the fact that both narratives draw from the language of the mitzva of *yibbum* in outlining their objectives; see <u>Devarim 25:6-7</u>. We will speak of this at length in a later *shiur*.

Parallels between *Shoftim* and *Ruth*:

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