

MEGILLAT RUTH By Dr. Yael Ziegler

Shiur #21: Naomi, Tamar, and Lot's Daughters: Continuity at All Cost

Food and Children

In the previous *shiur*, we noted that the tragic introduction of *Megillat Ruth* leaves Naomi with two critical problems: short-term survival (food) and long-term survival (progeny). While chapter two resolved the crisis of food, chapter three contends with the challenge of Naomi's continuity.

Structurally, these two chapters are remarkably parallel. Chapter two consists of three scenes. In the first scene, a brief conversation takes place between Ruth and Naomi in Bethlehem, in which Ruth informs Naomi of her intention to go and pick food in the fields (*Ruth* 2:2). The second, lengthy scene features Boaz and Ruth in Boaz's field, where Boaz enables Ruth to obtain food (*Ruth* 2:3-17). The third scene depicts Ruth's return to Naomi in Bethlehem, where she shares her success with her mother-in-law and presents her with a meal and the promise of an adequate food supply (*Ruth* 2:18-23).

Chapter three contains three nearly identical scenes. The initial scene consists of a conversation between Ruth and Naomi in Bethlehem. In this case, it is Naomi who takes initiative,^[1] advising Ruth that she intends to seek a solution for Ruth's precarious status, presumably referring to marriage (*Ruth* 3:1-5).^[2] The second scene of chapter three again features Boaz and Ruth in Boaz's field, where Boaz promises that Ruth will be "redeemed" by the morrow (*Ruth* 3:6-15). The third scene portrays Ruth returning to Naomi in Bethlehem, where she shares her success with her mother-in-law and presents her with six stalks of barley, the tangible symbol of Boaz's promise (*Ruth* 3:16-18).

The structure of these chapters reveals a flowchart in which Boaz provides for Ruth, while Ruth then provides for Naomi. Ruth functions as a mediator between two parties who appear incapable of direct communication. Nevertheless, while Boaz appears to be the original catalyst for resolving the predicaments of Ruth and Naomi, a closer look at the narrative offers a different picture. *Megillat Ruth* presents God as the primary stimulus for the resolution of the problems posed in this narrative. God's direct involvement in the events of *Megillat Ruth* is indicated only twice in the book.^[3] In *Ruth* 1:6, God "remembers His people to give them bread." Later in the *Megilla*, in a unique biblical description of divine resolution of infertility, God is described giving Ruth pregnancy (*Ruth* 4:13). God is depicted as the provider of both food and children. Indeed, an adequate food supply and fertility are both matters generally assumed to be under exclusive divine control:

R. Yochanan said: Three keys are in the hand of God and have not been given over to a messenger. They are the key of rain, the key of childbirth, and the key of reviving the dead. (*Ta'anit* 2a)

Boaz may be the proximate source who directly provides food and children to Ruth, but the narrative leaves little doubt that it is God who is actually responsible for redeeming Ruth, Naomi, the family of Elimelekh, and the nation. In fact, by creating a correspondence between God's actions and Boaz's action, the *Megilla* establishes a harmonious co-existence between man and God, a situation that is designed to lay the foundations for a successful monarchy.

To Whose Advantage is Naomi's Plan?

And Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, shall I not seek for you a resting place that shall benefit you?" (*Ruth* 3:1)

Naomi's bid to provide a resting place for Ruth is, at first blush, welcome. As a fitting reward for Ruth's generosity in the previous chapter, Naomi now makes it clear that she has no qualms about helping Ruth enter the community. In a complete turnaround from chapter one, where Naomi adamantly insisted that Ruth should not count on finding a husband in Bethlehem, Naomi hatches a plan to find a husband for Ruth.

Who, however is the real beneficiary of this plan? And whose concerns are paramount in Naomi's plan? Naomi presents her scheme to Ruth as something that is good for her. Naomi twice uses the second person pronoun "you," stressing that she seeks Ruth's advantage: "Shall I not seek *for you* a resting place that shall benefit *you*?" (*Ruth* 3:1). Nevertheless, Naomi's words contain a technical peculiarity that can offer a different reading of her intentions.

There are multiple phenomena of *keri u-ketiv* in Naomi's speech to Ruth.^[4] Several of these have a common underlying principle. While in the *keri*, Naomi speaks in the second person, as she issues instructions to Ruth, in the *ketiv*, it appears that Naomi speaks in the first person, implying that she herself is going to the fields to seduce Boaz.^[5] For example, when Naomi tells Ruth to go down to the fields, the consonants of the *ketiv* render, "*ve-yaradeti*," "*I will go down*," even as the vocalized word is *ve-yaradt*, "*You shall go down*." When Naomi instructs Ruth to lie down, the consonants yield the word, "*ve-shakhavti*," "*I will lie down*," even as the vocalized word is *ve-shakhavt*, "*You shall lie down*." It is possible that this massoretic phenomenon is designed to offer us insight into Naomi's actual intent. While she sends Ruth down to the fields ostensibly for Ruth's own good, subconsciously, Naomi is thinking of herself and acting on her own behalf.^[6] Moreover, this phenomenon may suggest that Naomi expects to live vicariously through Ruth's actions. In any case, all of Ruth's actions do turn out to be also for Naomi's benefit, and everything that Ruth obtains, she obtains for Naomi as well.

A *gemara* offers a different explanation for the first person verbs that are written but not read in Naomi's speech:

You should wash, and anoint yourself, and place a dress upon yourself, and go down to the threshing floor. It is written, "And / will go down." [Naomi] said to her, "My merit shall accompany you down [to the threshing floor.] (*Yerushalmi, Pe'ah* 8:7)

This midrash depicts Naomi's tremendous sensitivity to Ruth's hesitations and fears. Naomi reassures Ruth that she supports her as Ruth carries out this formidable undertaking. Naomi may even imply that she is willing to assume responsibility for the moral uncertainty that accompanies this situation.^[7]

Textually, it remains unclear whether Naomi is taking action primarily out of concern for Ruth or in order to further her own interests. One final clue may be the unique depiction of Naomi here: "And Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her" (*Ruth* 3:1). We may deduce from this dual appellation that the text describes a complex reality: Naomi functions here both on her own behalf, as Naomi, and for Ruth, as her mother-in-law.

An Immodest Proposal

Even if Naomi has Ruth's best interests at heart, her plan is confounding, especially for Ruth. Naomi requests that Ruth act in a boldly suggestive manner in approaching Boaz:

"And now, is not Boaz, whose girls you were with, our close acquaintance? Behold, he is winnowing barley at the threshing floor tonight. You should wash, and anoint yourself, and place a dress upon yourself, and go down to the threshing floor. Do not make yourself known to the man until he finishes eating and drinking. And when he lies down, you should make known to yourself the place where he is lying there, and you should come and uncover his feet and lie down. And he will tell you what you shall do." (*Ruth* 3:2-4)

This is undoubtedly the most peculiar and morally questionable scenario in the book. In the previous chapter, Naomi was depicted gently guiding Ruth to observe the modest norms of Bethlehem's society. And now she asks Ruth to flout those norms and act in an egregiously immodest manner! Naomi's plan is bewildering. Why does she encourage Ruth to act in this manner? Is there not a better way? Why not simply knock on Boaz's door?

Naomi must be convinced that there is no more direct route to obtain her goals. While Boaz did assume responsibility for providing Ruth with food, he seemed to relegate responsibility for her protection (implying marriage and fertility)^[8] to God: "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 2:12). More significantly, the harvest season has ended and Boaz seems to have made no further overtures toward Ruth.^[9] He has also made no overtures toward Naomi, his close relative. The chasm between them seems evident from Naomi’s actions, which illustrate that she regards Boaz as unapproachable.^[10] Nevertheless, Naomi’s plan still requires an explanation: Why does she send Ruth to act in this illicit manner?^[11]

Naomi’s plan appears to be based on solid biblical precedents. There are several noteworthy instances in which desperate women contrive to ensure continuity by acting in a boldly forward manner. Indeed, this behavior is consistent with the portrayal of women in *Tanakh*.^[12] Women are frequently depicted as willing to act courageously and innovatively to ensure continuity. The story of the Exodus from Egypt, for example, depicts the midwives who risk their lives to protect the Hebrew children, despite a direct order from Pharaoh (*Shemot* 1:15-21). In the next story, three women defy Pharaoh to save the newborn Moshe: his mother, who engineers an elaborate plan to hide him, his sister, who guards him, and Pharaoh’s daughter, who adopts him (*Shemot* 2:1-10). In recognition of the courage and determination displayed by the women in this story, *midrashim* supply numerous extra-biblical stories that underscore the extraordinary behavior of the Jewish women in Egypt, who go to great lengths to obtain continuity.^[13]

There are two previous biblical incidents that particularly hover in the background of the story of Boaz and Ruth. In both occurrences, women who are desperate for progeny employ deception or lack of knowledge (indicated by the phrase “*lo yada*”) in order to trick a man into sleeping with them.^[14] Intriguingly, these stories are linked by genealogy to our story. The first story is that of Lot’s daughters, who get their father drunk in order to sleep with him (*Bereishit* 19:30-38).^[15] The second story is that of Tamar, who covers her face and pretends to be a harlot on the side of the road in a bid to seduce Yehuda (*Bereishit* 38).^[16] The story of Lot and his daughters results in the birth of Moav, from whom Ruth descended. The story of Yehuda and Tamar eventually produces Boaz. These stories, and the brazen actions depicted in them, spawn the characters who feature in the third story, that of Boaz and Ruth.^[17]

The similarities between the three stories are not limited merely to the determination of the female protagonists and their deception of the male protagonists.^[18] Each of these stories begins with a separation between brothers. The very act of the departure of the protagonist (Lot, Yehuda, and Elimelekh) is in each case dubious, as he proceeds in the direction of an immoral culture (Sedom, Canaan, Moav). The culture of these cities is depicted as the antithesis of Avraham’s character and value system; they encourage cruelty and sexual immorality.^[19] Because this type of culture is destined for erasure, the protagonist, who has associated himself with this culture, is threatened with erasure and the forfeiture of his continuity. Thus, each departing character essentially makes a decision to abandon Avraham’s vision, path and destiny.

Lot is introduced into the narrative as an adjunct of Avraham. He accompanies Avraham to Canaan, then to Egypt, and is with Avraham upon his return to Canaan (*Bereishit* 12:4-5; 13:1). When Avraham and Lot's shepherds fight, Avraham suggests that Lot go either right (south) or left (north) (*Bereishit* 13:9).^[20] Lot, however, goes straight ahead, to the land of Sedom and Amora, where the people are evil and sinful to God (*Bereishit* 13:10-13). In doing so, Lot engages in an act of separation from Avraham ("And each man separated from his brother") and seems to rebuff Avraham's divine destiny (*Bereishit* 13:11).^[21]

The story of Yehuda and Tamar likewise begins with a separation between brothers. Immediately following the sale of Yosef, Yehuda departs from his brothers: "And it was at this time, and Yehuda went down from his brothers" (*Bereishit* 38:1). Yehuda's departure is accompanied by several significant acts that imply he has turned his back on his family and destiny.^[22] First, immediately following his departure, Yehuda marries a Canaanite woman (*Bereishit* 38:2).^[23] Avraham's principled opposition to his descendants' marrying Canaanites (*Bereishit* 24:3) appears to be an integral component of the family's destiny, given that Avraham's family is meant to dispossess the Canaanites, not to integrate with them.^[24] Moreover, Yehuda seems unconcerned with producing progeny. This is indicated by the fact that he never rebukes Er for spilling seed (*Bereishit* 38:8-10), and he refuses to give his third son, Sheila, to Tamar, allowing her to remain childless (*Bereishit* 38:11). It seems that Yehuda has consciously abandoned his share in the destiny of the family of Avraham, a destiny that is defined by a promise of children and land.^[25]

The story of Ruth also opens with a brother separating from the others. In this case, it is Elimelekh, who leaves for Moav, whose act seems to remove him from the fate and destiny of the nation of Israel.

In each of these stories, the separation between brothers leads to catastrophe and threatens the continuity of the family line. The threatened continuity appears to be a result of the decision to depart from Avraham's path. Rejection of one's destiny represents an existential threat, endangering one's very continuity. Moreover, by choosing to live in an immoral culture, a society that has no future, these individuals doom themselves to suffer the same fate as that non-viable society – erasure and discontinuity.

Indeed, Sedom and Amora are devastated by a cataclysm that completely wipes out the population of the cities of the plain. Consequently, Lot's daughters fear that there is no man left on earth who can impregnate them and ensure continuity. In a similar vein, Yehuda's two elder sons die and he does not allow his third son to marry their widow. Consequently, Tamar fears that she will remain a childless widow. Likewise, Naomi witnesses the deaths of her husband and sons. Naomi regards herself as too old to have children (*Ruth* 1:12) and her daughters-in-law as unmarriageable in Bethlehem. Naomi fears that her family line will be discontinued.

Nevertheless, the women in these stories refuse to surrender to this fate. Each of them takes bold initiative to obtain continuity of their line. Their determination to use all means at their disposal has the desired results: progeny and continuity. Naomi's bold plot, the peculiar mechanism that she employs to obtain continuity, is therefore an expected, and perhaps accepted, mode of action for a virtuous biblical woman.^[26] In the final analysis, when the family line is threatened (deserved or not), the women resist. They engage in unconventional, morally questionable behaviors in order to obtain continuity. This is part of the legacy of the Davidic dynasty. Ultimately, the bringing of the Messiah is rooted in the courage and determination to obtain continuity.

We will see that *Megillat Ruth* diverges from these others stories in significant ways. It is not Elimelekh who continues the line, but rather Boaz (who never departed from his brothers, and consequently, did not opt out of his destiny) who changes the expected course of this story. We will continue to reflect upon the similarities and differences between these stories in our next *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.

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^[1] It is not difficult to account for this difference between the chapters. While there is nothing untoward in Ruth's initiative to obtain food, had Ruth approached Boaz of her own initiative to request marriage or children, one could suspect that her forward behavior stems from her Moavite origins. Moreover, Naomi's initiative in this chapter illustrates, quite poignantly, the manner in which she has sprung back to life, and, taking charge of the situation, eagerly anticipates a hopeful conclusion to her tragic circumstances.

^[2] Naomi informs Ruth that she intends to seek for her *mano'ach*, literally, "rest." This rare word (appearing only seven times throughout the Bible) is employed by Naomi earlier in the narrative (*Ruth* 1:9) as a reference to marriage. This would seem to be Naomi's intent here as well, as she outlines her plan to persuade Boaz to marry Ruth. See also *Ruth Rabba* 5:11; Ibn Ezra, *Ruth* 3:1.

^[3] This fact is especially significant in light of the frequency with which God's name is evoked by charters in the *Megilla*. Despite His ubiquitous presence in the story, God's actual direct involvement is minimal.

^[4] The *keri u-ketiv* is a phenomenon in which a word is written in the *Tanakh* in one way and read another way, often not in accordance with the consonants that appear in the text. There is significant debate as to the origins of this phenomenon. See Yosef Ofer, "Ketiv U-Keri: An Explanation of the Phenomenon," *Leshonenu* 70 (2008), 55-73; 71 (2009), 255-279. Many exegetes and rabbinic sources agree, however, that because this phenomenon is part of the massoretic tradition, both readings are ripe for exegesis and should be understood within the context of the narrative. See, for example, Abravanel's introduction to *Yirmiyahu*. For application of this principle, see e.g. Radak, *Shoftim* 19:3; *II Shmuel* 15:8. See also *Otzar Midrashim, Keri U-Ketiv*, p. 503.

^[5] Some scholars have suggested that the *ketiv* reflects an archaic feminine second person ending (also found in Ugaritic texts), in which verbs are spelled with a final *yud*. See Edward F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth* (Anchor Bible, 1975), p. 120; J. M. Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth* (1955), p. 11. Other examples of the manner in which a *keri* fixes a *ketiv* with the second person feminine *yud* ending appear in *Shoftim* 17:2 and *II Melakhim* 4:2-3, 7. Nevertheless, it is curious that none

of the other occurrences of the second person singular feminine verb in this narrative have been similarly rendered. This phenomenon therefore seems to have significance and these verbs appear to have been selected to look like first person verbs, spoken by Naomi about herself. Indeed, as we shall see, *Chazal* do not simply regard the instances of *keri u-ketiv* here as a bid to modernize an archaic word. Instead, they offer a substantive interpretation of this phenomenon.

^[6] A rather obscure midrash may hint at Naomi's self-interest at this point in the narrative (*Ruth Zuta* 3:1): "And Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, 'My daughter...' [Naomi] began to ponder and she said [to herself]: 'Perhaps he will marry her without my knowledge!' She began to tempt [Ruth] with words..." The meaning of the end of this midrash is unclear and it is therefore not possible to draw a definitive conclusion about its intent. Nevertheless, Naomi's concern that Ruth will get married without her involvement seems to imply Naomi's self-interest in this matter.

^[7] This reading recalls Rivka's promise to Yaakov when she orchestrates his deception of Yitzchak: "Your curse shall be upon me, my son" (*Bereishit* 27:13).

^[8] By using the word "*maskurteikh*" to indicate Ruth's reward, Boaz's blessing recalls God's promise to Avraham in *Bereishit* 15:2-3. The context suggests that Avraham understands God's promise of a reward as a promise of fertility. See *shiur* #15, footnote 8. We will soon see that Ruth employs the metaphor used by Boaz, of taking shelter under someone's wings, as a reference to marriage.

^[9] I am not inclined to regard Boaz's lack of action in a negative manner (unlike, for example, Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* (1988), p. 165, who portrays Boaz as having shirked his responsibility in the matter). It is not at all clear that Boaz should assume that marrying Ruth is his responsibility. After all, there is a closer redeemer than he. It may well be that the reason that Boaz has not approached Ruth is because there is a closer relative, who has both the primary obligation and the prerogative to redeem Ruth (along with Naomi's land). We will discuss this connection in a later *shiur*.

^[10] One could make a similar observation in chapter two: If Naomi is in need of food, why doesn't she simply turn to Boaz, her wealthy relative? Malbim (*Ruth* 2:1) claims that she is deeply ashamed of her plight and would prefer not to ask him for *chessed*. It is possible, however, that this is simply another indication of the alienation between Boaz and Naomi. It seems to me that the situations are not at all similar. In chapter two, Naomi does not initiate the quest for food and seems prepared to die of starvation, bringing an end to her hopeless despair. Therefore, she does not approach Boaz or anyone else. In that chapter, only Ruth will take the initiative to search for sustenance.

^[11] According to *Kiddushin* 1:1, one can legitimately betroth a woman through the act of cohabitation. However, this route does not meet the criteria of marriage as defined by Halakha, as the Rambam writes (*Mishnah Torah, Hilkhot Ishut* 1:1): "Prior to the giving of the Torah, a man would meet a woman in the marketplace. If he and she desired to marry, he would bring her into his home and cohabit with her in private, and she would become his wife. Once the Torah was given, Yisrael was commanded that if a man should desire to marry a woman, he must first acquire her in the presence of witnesses and only then would she become his wife, as it says, 'When a man takes a woman and comes to her.'" See also R. Mordechai Sabato, "The Night at the Threshing Floor: Uncovering the Motives of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz" (<http://www.vbm-torah.org/shavuot/shav64-ms.htm>).

^[12] It is intriguing that the prescription for the mitzva of *yibbum/chalitza* mandates that the woman must take the initiative to protest her brother-in-law's refusal to perform *yibbum* (*Devarim* 25:7). This precept apparently acknowledges and even approves of the unwavering determination of women in obtaining continuity.

^[13] The most famous midrash in this vein describes how all of the Israelite men divorced their wives (following Amram's lead) until Miriam (or, in some versions, Yocheved) convinced him that his approach threatened the continuity of the Jewish people even more than Pharaoh's decrees. See *Shemot Rabba* 1:13. See also *Shemot Rabba* 1:12; *Tanchuma Pekudei* 9.

^[14] In next week's *shiur*, we will deal extensively with the role of deception in these stories.

^[15] Many *midrashim*, as well as medieval and modern scholars, recognize the connection between the origins of Moav and Ruth's actions in this story. See, for example, *Ruth Rabba* 8:14; *Bereishit Rabba* 51:10.

^[16] The connection between these stories is intimated in the *Megilla* itself, as the nation blesses Boaz and Ruth's marriage by associating it with the house of Peretz, who Tamar bore for Yehuda (*Ruth* 4:12). See also *Ruth Zuta* 1:12, which begins: "Two women surrendered themselves on behalf of the tribe of Yehuda: Tamar and Ruth." Parallels between *Megillat Ruth* and the Yehuda and Tamar story have long been noted by many scholars, including Yechezkel Kaufmann, *Toledot Ha-Emunah Ha-Yisraelit* II (1963),

p. 213 (Hebrew). Yair Zakovitch, "The Threshing Floor Scene in Ruth 3," in *Shenaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 3 (1978-9), pp. 28-33 (Hebrew), examines the parallels between *Megillat Ruth* and the story of Lot and his daughters. I will focus specifically on the connection between all three stories.

^[17] *Midrashim* also recognize the connection between all three stories. See, for example, *Ruth Rabba* 8:1.

^[18] Some scholarly articles have isolated the common elements of all three of these stories. See, for example, Harold Fisch, "A Structuralist Approach to the Story of Ruth and Boaz," *Beit Mikra* 3 (1979), pp. 260-265 (Hebrew). I will offer my own interpretation of the commonly acknowledged shared features of these narratives.

^[19] See *shiur #4* for a lengthy development of this idea with regard to Sodom and its spiritual heir, Moav. While Canaan's sexual immorality is explicitly noted (see *Vayikra* 18:3 in its context), its social failing is not.

^[20] As noted in *shiur #4*, the notion that left and right refers to the north and south is also indicated in *Yechezkel* 4:4-6. For a twist on this, see *Yechezkel* 16:46.

^[21] See *Bereishit Rabba* 41:7 and Rashi on *Bereishit* 13:11.

^[22] There is little doubt that Yehuda's rejection of his brothers is related to the sale of Yosef, which frames the story of Yehuda's departure (*Bereishit* 37:36; 39:1). In this way, Yehuda's abandonment of his brothers appears to interrupt the sale of Yosef, suggesting that Yehuda has renounced these brotherly relationships that lead to fratricide.

^[23] *Chazal* and the various exegetes discuss this issue at length, arguing whether it is possible that Yehuda actually marries a Canaanite woman in light of Avraham and Yitzchak's objections. See the Ramban's review and discussion of this issue in *Bereishit* 38:2. I have adopted a position similar to Ibn Ezra (*Bereishit* 46:19), who views Yehuda's actions as a transgression with grave consequences. This approach seems to adhere most closely to the simple meaning of the text.

^[24] Note Yitzchak's similar resistance to Yaakov's intermarriage with Canaanite women in *Bereishit* 28:1.

^[25] For a similar approach, see R. Yaakov Medan, *Hope from the Depths: A Study in Megillat Ruth* (2007), p. 19 (Hebrew).

^[26] There is very little debate with regard to the honorable actions of both Tamar (see e.g. *Nazir* 23b and Rashi ad loc.; *Horayot* 10b) and Naomi/Ruth (see *Zohar* I 188b, which draws a parallel between these women in terms of their righteousness). Lot's daughters receive a bit of criticism from biblical commentators (e.g. *Bereishit Rabba* 51:11; Rashi, *Bereishit* 19:33), although they too are often excused (e.g. *Bereishit Rabba* 49:8; 51:9; *Pesikta Rabbati* 42) and even awarded accolades for their actions (*Horayot* 11:1; *Nazir* 23a; *Ruth Rabba* 5:14; Rabbeinu Behaye, *Bereishit* 19:30).