

MEGILLAT RUTH
By Dr. Yael Ziegler

Shiur #22: An Immodest Proposal

Modest Woman, Immodest 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? 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 it shall be, when he lies down, you should make known to yourself the place where he is lying there, and you should come and expose his feet and lie down. And he will tell you what you shall do.” (*Ruth* 3:1-4)

Naomi’s plan to send Ruth surreptitiously to the fields washed, perfumed, and attired in fine apparel is carefully orchestrated.^[1] Ruth is to adorn herself and prepare to encounter Boaz in the fields at night. She is to wait, hidden, until Boaz has eaten and become inebriated.^[2] Only after he has retired should Ruth, who has carefully observed where Boaz rests, approach Boaz, expose his feet, and lie alongside him. At this point, Naomi instructs Ruth to wait for Boaz to inform Ruth what she is to do. The scenario leaves little room to misconstrue Naomi’s intentions. Ruth is being sent to seduce Boaz, the potential *go’el*.

Indeed, an abundance of sexual innuendos accompanies the delineation of Naomi’s plan. The word “*yada*,” which often hints to sexual intimacy, is used twice in short succession (*Ruth* 3:3-4).^[3] The word “*shakhav*,” “to lie,” which frequently connotes the sexual act, appears three times in verse 4 and three more times in verses 7-8. The word “*bo*,” which appears with a sexual meaning often in the *Tanakh* (see *Ruth* 4:13), occurs three times in these verses (*Ruth* 3:4, 7, 14). The word “*gala*,” “to expose [his legs],” creates an association with the phrase “*le-galot erva*,” “to expose one’s nakedness,” in *Vayikra* chapters 18 and 20.^[4]

The description of the events as they occur is also interwoven with innuendos. After describing Boaz’s inebriation, the verse tells us that he lies down at the edge of the “*areima*,” a heap of grain (*Ruth* 3:7). The word *areima* recalls the word *arom*, which means nakedness.^[5] The description of the dramatic moment in which Boaz awakens in the middle of the night is likewise suggestive. This verse contains no personal names, recording the matter of a “man” who awakens to find a “woman” lying at his feet. The absence of names depletes the individuals of their identity. Instead, we witness a highly

charged moment in which two sexual beings of opposite genders meet in an isolated field in the middle of the night.

Sensitive to the multiple allusions and sexual atmosphere, a midrash offers an incisive reading of the temptation that Boaz experienced:

All that night his ardor persecuted him saying, “You are single and are seeking a woman, and she is single and is seeking a man! Arise and have relations with her and she will be for you a wife and your desire will be sated!” (*Ruth Rabba* 6:4)^[6]

Surprisingly, however, the seduction is not achieved. Boaz and Ruth do not have a sexual relationship in the field that night.

Who Thwarts Naomi’s Plan?

Naomi’s suggestive plan puts Ruth in a very difficult situation. One can well imagine that Ruth has spent the harvest season in a bid to shed her Moavite image. Naomi’s plan obliges Ruth to jeopardize her hard-earned reputation. It is not difficult to surmise the conclusions that the people of Bethlehem would draw were anyone to glimpse Ruth, perfumed, washed and dressed, heading for Boaz’s field, where it was known that he spends his nights.^[7] Even if Ruth does manage somehow to slip into the field undetected by the townspeople, she still has to contend with Boaz’s reaction, which could conceivably also ruin her reputation.^[8] And once the townspeople receive word that this Moavite woman has not abandoned her Moavite ways, their rejection will surely be harsh and unforgiving.

It may be that Naomi assumes that Ruth will comply with her instructions *because* of Ruth’s Moavite background.^[9] One midrash appears to associate Naomi’s instructions for Ruth with Ruth’s prior identity in Moav:

What was [Ruth’s] name in the beginning? ... Gillit was her name, and when she married Machlon, he called her name Ruth. (*Zohar Chaddash Ruth* 32b)

It does not seem coincidental that this midrash suggests that Ruth’s former Moavite name was Gillit. This is exactly the form of the word *gala* (to expose) used in *Ruth* 3:5: “and you shall expose his feet” (*ve-gillit margelotav*).^[10] In this reading, Naomi’s instructions recall Ruth’s earlier self, the Moavite woman whose original name connotes uncovering and immodesty. Naomi’s plan appears to draw on her preconceived perceptions of Ruth the Moavite, and it obligates Ruth to return to her former Moavite ways.

And she said to her, “Everything that you tell me, I will do.” (*Ruth* 3:5)

It would be understandable if Ruth would thwart Naomi's plan by categorically refusing to participate.^[11] Ruth's response is, nevertheless, typically selfless. While she is certainly not enthusiastic about the prospect of jeopardizing her reputation,^[12] Ruth accepts Naomi's proposal, staunchly averring, "Everything that you tell me (*eilai*), I will do" (*Ruth* 3:5).^[13] This verse contains a *keri ve-lo ketiv*, in which the word *eilai*, "to me," is missing from the written text. Ruth recognizes that Naomi's plan is not in her interest. It may be that the word *eilai* is taken out of the sentence to indicate Ruth's awareness that what she is about to do is not *for her* at all.^[14] Once again, the narrative portrays Ruth's abiding selflessness, her willingness to undermine her own interests in order to comply with Naomi's needs.^[15]

Nevertheless, the text alludes to the possibility that Ruth deviates, ever so slightly, from Naomi's plan:

And she went down to the threshing floor. And she did all that her mother-in-law commanded her. (*Ruth* 3:6)

The verse does not have a record of Ruth implementing Naomi's instructions *before* she leaves for the threshing floor. A midrash concludes, therefore, that Ruth altered the sequence of Naomi's instructions in order to maintain her modest reputation:

Naomi had said to her, "You should wash, and anoint yourself" (*Ruth* 3:3) and *afterwards* you should go down to the threshing floor... She did not do as her mother-in-law said. What did Ruth do? *After* she went down to the threshing floor, she did [what Naomi had told her], as it says, "And she went down to the threshing floor. And she did all that her mother-in-law commanded her" (*Ruth* 3:6). Why? Because she said, "This generation is rife with licentiousness. If they see me adorned, they will say that I am a prostitute." (*Tanchuma, Behar* 8)^[16]

This midrash maintains that Ruth did not walk down to the fields laved, perfumed and attired in fine apparel. Instead, Ruth makes her way to the threshing floor unadorned. Only once she has arrived does she beautify herself as per Naomi's instructions. In this way, she attempts to protect her reputation, while still basically complying with Naomi's directions.

Another midrash suggests that it is not just her reputation that Ruth seeks to protect. Perhaps she actually fears that someone will see her adorned and sexually attack her.^[17]

And she said to her, "Everything that you say to me (*eilai*), I will do" (*Ruth* 3:5). [The word] *eilai* (to me) is read and not written. [This is because Ruth] said to [Naomi]: "This generation is awash with promiscuity. Perhaps a dog will come and have relations with me."^[18] I must reconcile the situation." "And she went down to the threshing floor.

And [then] she did all that her mother-in-law commanded her" (*Ruth* 3:6).
(*Ruth Rabba* 5:13)

Despite Ruth's slight deviation from Naomi's instructions, Ruth complies with Naomi's general plan:

And Boaz ate, drank, and his heart became merry. He came to lie at the edge of the heap of grain. And she silently approached and exposed his feet and she lay down. (*Ruth* 3:7)

Ruth acts in accordance with Naomi's strategy. There seems little doubt as to the eventual outcome of this episode. Boaz will awaken to Ruth's seduction and will inevitably succumb, as did his predecessors, Lot and Yehuda.

Boaz's Desire for Knowledge

And it was at the midpoint of the night. And the man trembled and he grasped. Behold there is a woman lying at his feet! (*Ruth* 3:8)

Why does Boaz tremble? The word *chared* in *Tanakh* generally indicates a frightened response, often due to a sudden realization of threatening or awesome circumstances.^[19] Why is Boaz so frightened? Several possibilities are raised by biblical commentators. Perhaps Boaz feels physically endangered by the unexpected presence of a strange person in the field at night.^[20] Possibly, Boaz is afraid of the prospect that he will not be able to overcome temptation and will sin with this woman. Yet Boaz allays the sexually charged atmosphere:

And he said, "Who are you?" And she said, "I am Ruth your maidservant. Spread your cloak over your maidservant, for you are a redeemer."
(*Ruth* 3:9)

The significance of this moment cannot be overstated. Instead of allowing the situation to advance toward a sexually satisfying conclusion, Boaz inquires as to the identity of the woman who lies seductively at his feet. How does Boaz accomplish this? From where does he find the restraint and reserves of energy that enable him to resist this all too human temptation?^[21] We will address these questions in the following *shiur*. For the present, I intend to examine a separate question: What is the significance of Boaz's query, "Who are you?"

As we have seen, questions of identity constitute a leitmotif in the book of *Ruth*.^[22] When Naomi returns to Bethlehem, the women ask in astonishment after Naomi's identity "Can this be Naomi?" (*Ruth* 1:19). Naomi's response is to reject her own name, maintaining that she has lost her pleasing identity (*Ruth* 1:20-21). When Boaz first sees Ruth in his fields, he inquires about Ruth's identity, "To whom is that girl?"^[23] We previously examined the significance of Boaz's recognition of Ruth, underscored by Ruth's own astonished appreciation: "Why have I found favor in your

eyes to recognize me, and I am but a stranger?” (*Ruth* 2:10). Boaz’s inquiry regarding Ruth’s identity is especially surprising here, given the sexual atmosphere and the tendency to regard women as sexual objects during the period of the Judges.^[24]

Boaz’s query has the opposite effect with respect to Ruth. His query allows Ruth to restore her identity and elevates her above a mere sexual object. In asking this question, Boaz mends the perverse and chaotic period of the end of the book of Judges. By inquiring after Ruth’s individual identity, Boaz demonstrates that in this period, rife with lack of recognition of the other, someone has found the capacity to recognize the “other,” even a woman. In fact, the sexual purity that Boaz exhibits in this scenario may be regarded as a correction of the sexual immorality found in the period of the Judges.^[25] Boaz’s behavior is in direct opposition to the widespread sexual impropriety of this generation.

Lot, Yehuda, and Boaz

The significance of Boaz’s sincere question may be understood within a different context as well. In the previous *shiur*, we noted that three other women behave in a similarly forward manner in the Bible. Lot’s daughters, Tamar, and Naomi/Ruth all take bold initiative to ensure the continuity of their line. We also observed that they each did this by engaging in deceptive means to trick the man into sleeping with them. This ruse is successful because the man is rendered ignorant; he “does not know” (“*ve-lo yada*”).

In the case of Lot, what he does not know is that he has slept with his daughters. On two successive nights, after getting Lot drunk, Lot’s daughters succeed in having sexual relations with their father: “And he did not know (*ve-lo yada*) when she lay down and when she got up” (*Bereishit* 19:33, 35). Interestingly, a midrashic interpretation wreaks havoc with the simple meaning of the verse, maintaining that *ve-lo yada* actually means that he *did* know:

When she lay down he did not know, but when she got up, he knew.
(*Bamidbar Rabba* 3:13)^[26]

From where does the midrash derive this bold reading? Is there any textual indication that Lot is faking his ignorance? Rabbinic sources maintain that this is indicated by the massoretic dot that appears over the *vav* in the first word, “*u-ve-kumah*.”^[27] It seems likely that the doubling of this episode also aroused suspicion. How could it have happened twice that Lot is so fully deceived by his daughters?

It seems to me that the midrash does not intend to accuse Lot of an act of intentional, lustful incest. Rather, the midrash is commenting on *why* Lot was so easily deceived. It is not so simple to deceive someone who does not wish to be deceived. In fact, lack of knowledge in *Tanakh* is a moral failure. The one who obtains knowledge is the one who seeks it.^[28] In this schema, Lot’s lack of knowledge derives from a lack of *interest* in knowledge, a rejection of his destiny, which we noted in the previous *shiur*. It is Lot’s hopelessness, his apathy and his lack of belief in his own future, that force his

daughters to act.^[29] Lot's daughters are the only ones who care about the future. Lot has given up caring.

Tamar deceives Yehuda by covering her face and thereby disguising her identity.^[30] This is why he does not know that she is his daughter-in-law (*Bereishit* 38:15-16). Yehuda's ignorance would also appear to be a product of his lack of desire to know, manifesting a similarly apathetic attitude toward his destiny. Yehuda's decision to seek a prostitute, his willingness to give her his identifying symbols,^[31] and his failure to recognize that she is his daughter-in-law are all born from the same general failure. Their conscious decision to abandon their destiny makes both Lot and Yehuda unconscious partners in their own deception.^[32]

Naomi's plan appears to draw upon similar modes of deception. Advising Ruth to dress up and go to Boaz is reminiscent of Tamar's deception, while guiding Ruth to wait until Boaz has eaten and drunk recalls the ruse of Lot's daughters. More significantly, Naomi's words include the command, "Do not let yourself be known (*al tivadi*) to the man."

The course of events allows us to anticipate that, as in the previous scenarios, Boaz will be taken in by Ruth's subterfuge. Under cover of darkness, neither recognizes the other, and a sexual act can take place under conditions of total anonymity. But Boaz refuses to be deceived. Instead, he demands full disclosure: "And he said, 'Who are you?'" (*Ruth* 3:9).

Had Lot asked this question of his daughters, or Yehuda of Tamar, those acts would not have taken place either. But they do not inquire, presumably because, having abandoned Avraham's path and rejected their destiny, they do not wish to know.

One source associates the verse that describes Lot's lack of knowledge with the episode in the threshing floor in *Megillat Ruth*:

Boaz joined with [Ruth] in order to uphold the name of the dead person upon his inheritance, and what was established from her were all of these kings and all of the superior [men] of Israel. "And he did not know when she lay down (*be-shikhva*)," as it says, "And she lay down (*va-tishkav*) by his feet until the morning" (*Ruth* 3:14). "[And he did not know when] she got up (*u-ve-kumah*)," as it says, "And she arose (*va-takom*) before a man recognizes his friend" (*Ruth* 3:14). (*Zohar, Vayeira* 111a)

By juxtaposing the terms *shakhav* and *kum* as used in the narratives of both Lot and his daughters and Boaz and Ruth, this passage effectively contrasts the behavior of Lot and Boaz when placed in similar situations.

Boaz wishes to know. He cares about his own destiny and his continuity.^[33] Boaz does not wish to be deceived and he is not. In this way, Boaz alters and corrects the

legendary modus operandi for obtaining continuity. We will continue to examine Boaz's extraordinary behavior in the following *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.

I welcome all comments and questions: yaelziegler@gmail.com

^[1] Similarities to *Yechezkel* 16:9-10 suggest a bride's preparation for marriage. It is unlikely, of course, that Ruth arrives at the field dressed in bridal attire. Rather, this seems to imply preparation for conjugal relations.

Some scholars have observed a similarity to David's behavior when he learns of the death of the child born of his illicit union with Bat-Sheva (*II Shemuel* 12:20). There, David washes, anoints himself, and changes his clothes, thereby signifying the completion of his mourning (see also *II Shemuel* 14:2). On the basis of this comparison, it has been suggested that this signifies the end of Ruth's mourning for Machlon. See, for example, Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (1996), p. 152. I find this theory unlikely for the simple reason that nowhere in the narrative do we find Ruth mourning Machlon or expressing longing for him.

^[2] While the word *li-shtot*, to drink (*Ruth* 3:3), does not necessarily mean to become inebriated, when Boaz does eat and drink (*Ruth* 3:7), his drinking is followed by the words, "*va-yitav libo*," "and his heart became happy," a phrase that often indicates inebriation (see e.g. *II Shemuel* 13:28; *Yeshayahu* 65:13-14; *Esther* 1:10). It seems likely that this is part of Naomi's original scheme.

^[3] The word "*modatanu*" (*Ruth* 3:2) also contains the root *yada*, making a total of three uses of this word in as many verses.

^[4] The sexual connotation of this phrase is supported by the possibility that the uncovering of the *regel*, or leg, is a euphemism for exposing Boaz's sexual organs (see e.g. *I Shemuel* 24:3 and Radak ad loc.; Ibn Ezra, *Peirush Ha-Arokh*, *Shemot* 1:5; *Kohelet* 4:17 and *Berakhot* 23a; *II Melakhim* 18:27; *Yeshayahu* 7:20 and Radak ad loc.; *Yechezkel* 16:25). Another possibility is that this act is a deliberate allusion to the commandment of *yibbum* or its alternative, *chalitza*, which involves the removal of the shoe (that is, exposing the foot). However, there is no mention of the *go'el* or Boaz's foot later in the story; only the shoe is mentioned. It is likely that Naomi's instructions here are left deliberately ambiguous, maintaining in any case the sexual intimations of this uncovering.

^[5] E.g. *Bereishit* 2:25; 3:7; *Devarim* 28:48; *Yechezkel* 16:7, 22, 39; *Iyov* 22:6.

^[6] Other midrashic statements also note the sexual nature of this scenario. See *Sanhedrin* 19b-20a, which describes Boaz's sexual arousal when he awakens next to Ruth and then compares the sexual trials of Yosef, Boaz, and Palti ben Layish.

^[7] The midrash in *Tanhuma Bo* 16 recognizes this, noting that Ruth understood that if anyone should see her dressed up and on her way to the field, they would naturally say, "This prostitute, what has she done?!"

^[8] One midrash (*Ruth Zuta* 3:2) suggests that this act actually endangers Ruth's life, surmising that once Ruth exposes Boaz's feet, he could conceivably awaken and kill her!

^[9] There is a halakhic prohibition of reminding a convert or *ba'al teshuva* of his previous lifestyle for fear that it will offend and hurt him; see Rambam, *Hilkhos Teshuva* 7:8; *Hilkhos Mekhira* 14:13. See also the well-known story of Reish Lakish and R. Yochanan in *BavaMetzia* 84a.

^[10] It is, moreover, intriguing that the consonants of this name, attributed to Ruth's Moavite persona, are identical with those of Goliath, whom *Chazal* identify as Orpah's son.

^[11] One midrash (*Ruth Rabba* 7:1) regards Naomi's plan as extremely problematic, maintaining that this situation could have resulted in the desecration of God's Name.

^[12] One midrash makes this connection: “And she said, ‘Everything that you tell me I will do.’ *Eilai* is read but not written. [Ruth] said to her, ‘Even though this generally is steeped in [licentious] sins, and someone could come and harm me, even so, everything that you tell me I will do” (*Yalkut Shimoni, Ruth* 604).

^[13] It would have been more common to use the perfect verb: “Everything that you just said (*amart*) to me I will do.” The imperfect verb suggests a general assertion of obedience: “Everything that you say to me in any context (including this one) I will do.” See also *II Shemuel* 9:11; *II Melakhim* 10:5.

^[14] We discussed this phenomenon at greater length in *shiur* #7.

^[15] One midrash seeks to limit the lengths that Ruth is willing to go for Naomi, maintaining that Ruth will only agree to act on Naomi’s instructions if they are in accordance with God’s Will, “for the sake of heaven” (*Ruth Zuta* 3:2). Nevertheless, as I noted in *shiur* #10, there is no indication that Ruth is acting to follow God. In fact, her actions are entirely focused on Naomi and seem to derive from her affection for and loyalty to her mother-in-law.

^[16] See also *Shabbat* 113b and Rashi’s commentary on *Ruth* 3:6.

^[17] This midrash implies yet another scathing critique of the licentiousness of Bethlehem society during the period of the Judges.

^[18] Commentaries on this midrash regard the dog as a metaphor, ostensibly for a depraved person. It is intriguing that some *midrashim* relate that on the night that she parted from Naomi and Ruth, Orpah had relations with a dog (*Ruth Rabba* 2:14, 20; *Midrash Shemuel* 20:4). This diametrically opposite portrait of Orpah and Ruth appears to be deliberate. See also *shiur* #4.

^[19] See e.g. *Bereishit* 27:22; 42:28; *Shemot* 19:16; *I Shemuel* 14:15.

^[20] Rashi suggests that Boaz is not afraid of an earthly being, but rather of a demon.

^[21] For the purposes of our study, I will assume, in accordance with the *midrashim*, that Boaz’s restraint is not a result of his advanced age or lack of desire, but rather a conscious attempt to overcome his desire for a higher purpose.

^[22] See especially *shiur* #13.

^[23] The two situations are connected by the common word “*ha-zot*” (meaning “this”) in each query: “Is this Naomi?” followed by “To whom is this girl?” Indeed, in his generosity towards Ruth, Boaz will restore identity not simply to “this girl” (meaning Ruth) but to “this Naomi” as well.

^[24] As noted, the disregard for the identity of women is especially notable in the narrative of the concubine from Giv’ah, who has no name, no voice, and no choice in her story (*Shofetim* 19). She is treated as an object by all of the men in the story, including her husband, father, and the townspeople of Giv’ah.

^[25] We will see several *midrashim* to this effect in our next *shiur*.

^[26] See also *Horayot* 10b.

^[27] See *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* 2:37; *Soferim* 6:3; *Bereishit Rabba* 51:33. *Sifrei Bamidbar* 69 offers a similar interpretation based on massoretic dots that do not appear in our texts.

^[28] The best biblical example of this idea is Mordechai, who is always described as the one who *knows* (*Esther* 2:22; 4:1). While some *midrashim* actually view Mordechai as a particularly intelligent and knowledgeable person (e.g. *Megilla* 13b; *Menachot* 65a), Mordechai’s own words to Esther explain the source of his knowledge. In attempting to persuade Esther that she must go to the king and plead on behalf of her people, Mordechai states (*Esther* 4:14): “And who *knows* if it is for this occasion that you have attained royalty?” Who, indeed, knows for certain why Esther was chosen? The human inability to reach certainty in understanding the world does not, however, absolve anyone of the obligation to seek knowledge. It is only the one who seeks knowledge, one such as Mordechai, who ultimately obtains it.

^[29] See R. Yaakov Medan, *Hope from the Depths: A Study in Megillat Ruth* [Heb.] (2007), p. 87, who attributes the hopelessness of both Lot and Yehuda to the destruction of their family. I have suggested that these characters abandon their destiny and the future *before* there families are destroyed and it is their act which actually precipitates the annihilation of their family and future.

^[30] I am aware of the midrashic interpretation of *Bereishit* 38:15 according to which Yehuda does not recognize Tamar since, due to her modesty, she had always covered her face when she had lived in his house (*Megilla* 10b; *Sota* 10b; Rashi and Ibn Ezra loc. cit.). However, this is hardly the simple meaning of the verse (see Rashbam, Ramban loc. cit.).

^[31] Ramban (*Bereishit* 38:18) suggests that Yehuda gives this prostitute the symbols of his kingship – that is, the symbols of his destiny! In transferring the symbols of his future to a harlot, whom he never again expects to see, Yehuda displays apathy toward his destiny.

^[32] Unlike Lot, Yehuda, of course, returns to his family and his destiny, spurred by Tamar's rather pointed message: "Recognize, please: Is this not *your* seal, cord and staff?" (*Bereishit* 38:25). Yehuda's response, "She is more righteous than I" (*Bereishit* 38:26), is sincere and transformative.

^[33] This comparison between Lot and Boaz is not entirely warranted. After all, Boaz was not the protagonist who opened the *Megilla's* narrative by separating from his kinsmen. Rather, it was Elimelech, who leaves for Moav during a famine in the land of Israel and removes himself from the fate and destiny of the nation of Israel. Boaz, however, finds himself in the position of being deceived by a woman determined to obtain continuity. In my opinion, it is precisely *because* Boaz never left his people and never gave up on continuity that Ruth's attempt to deceive Boaz fails.