

# MEGILLAT RUTH (I)

*by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom*

I

## RUTH AND SHAVU'OT

The custom of reading Megillat Ruth on Shavu'ot is a well-established one, first appearing (by allusion, at least) in the 8<sup>th</sup> century Massechet Soph'rim (14:3, 18) and attested to in numerous works of the Rishonim.

Widespread as this custom may be, the connection between this short narrative about a Moavite woman who becomes the "Matron of Monarchy" and the festival of Shavu'ot is less than clear. Various solutions have been suggested, including some of the following:

1. The catalyst of the story is the barley (and, later, wheat) harvest and Shavu'ot is the harvest festival (**Hag haKatzir**). This explanation is first found in the **Mahzor Vitri** (reflecting the traditions of the school of Rashi).
2. Ruth is the archetype of a convert and Shavu'ot (= **Mattan Torah**) represents the "mass conversion" of Am Yisra'el (see BT Keritut 9a, MT Issurei Bi'ah 13:1-4). This explanation is also found in the **Mahzor Vitri**.
3. The earliest explanation provided is that found in the Midrashic collection Ruth Zuta (1:1): "What does [Megillat] Ruth have to do with Shavu'ot, the season of the giving of the Torah? To teach you that the Torah was given through afflictions and poverty."

There are several other reasons suggested (including the tradition, found in the Talmud Yerushalmi Betza (61c) that King David (Ruth's great-grandson) died on Shavu'ot. The interested reader is directed to Da'at Mikra (Meltzer), pp.20-21 as well as Mikra l'Yisra'el (Zakovitch) pp. 37-38.

I would like to analyze the Megillah with an eye to understanding the connection between Ruth and Shavu'ot. If any new ideas or perspectives on this beautiful Sefer emerge from this analysis, **t'he zot s'chari**. Hopefully, we will gain a fresh understanding about the story woven through this Megillah and, thereby, increase our appreciation of the custom of reading Megillat Ruth on Shavu'ot.

For better or for worse, any analysis of the Megillah will take us well beyond the space limitations of this forum; as such, this shiur will be a multi-issue essay. In order to maintain a sense of timeliness,

however, we will endeavor to complete the analysis before the end of the harvest season (see Ruth 2:23).

Before beginning, I owe a debt of gratitude. During my recent visit to Eretz Yisra'el, I had the great pleasure of auditing two shiurim on Megillat Ruth given by Rav Elhanan Samet of the Herzog Teacher's College in Alon Sh'vut. Much of the material here is inspired by those classes.

## II

### INTRODUCTION (1:1-6)

#### OVERVIEW

The setting for the story is established in these six terse verses. We are introduced to a family which begins with a husband, wife and two sons and ends with the widowed wife and her two widowed daughters-in-law. The story begins with this family leaving their ancestral land due to a famine and, by verse 6, the remaining members are prepared to return to the land of Yehudah. Tragedy strikes anywhere between two and four times in this brief introductory section - but it ends with a sense of hope: Throughout this introduction, a number of allusions and associations with various events and persons found in Sefer B'resheet are readily identified.

#### ANALYSIS

1:1: It came to pass in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a man of Beit-Lechem in Yehudah went to sojourn in the country of Moav, he, and his wife, and his two sons.

The phrase **bi'Y'mei Sh'fot haShof'tim** places the story squarely in the period of the Judges; however, a quick peek at the lineage listed at the end of the Megillah indicates otherwise. Since David's grandfather was born during the year following the return to Beit-Lechem, this places the entire story well after the last of the Judges listed in Sefer Shof'tim. (See, however, the discussion in Ruth Rabbah 1:1 and BT Bava Batra 91a). In any case, this superscription calls attention to the fact that the entire story takes place before the establishment of the monarchy (see the final verse in Sefer Shof'tim), which explains the "tribal" aspect of the entire story. There is, the reader will note, no concern about (or mention of) the rest of the nation; nor is there an explanation given for the famine (in our verse) nor for the bounty (in v. 6). This is particularly odd in light of the fact that there was no period in our history where G-d's **Hashgachah** was as manifest as the period of the Judges. When the B'nei Yisra'el were loyal, He sent a "Judge" to save them from oppression - and when they strayed from the path, they were immediately subjugated to any one of a number of foes. The introductory phrase, therefore, draws our attention to the time period while contrasting the Divine

omnipresence of Sefer Shof'tim with the near-silence of Megillat Ruth. We will yet return to this point.

The famine immediately evokes several stories in B'resheet (Avraham - 12:10, Yitzhak - 26:1, Ya'akov and his sons - 41:57), each of which was a catalyst in the forcing interaction between the Patriarchal family and a "significant" outsider.

Note that none of the characters is given a name in this opening verse. We will return to this in the next verse.

Vayelech Ish miBeit... reminds us of the beginning of the Mosheh story in Sh'mot (2:1) - a man of the house of Levi went and took a daughter of Levi. Again, the text is creating strong associations with the earliest eras (and heroes) of our people.

The "sojourn" of this man (and his family), which, we soon learn, lasts much longer than intended, again reminds us of the Patriarchal narratives. Each of the Avot is described as a "sojourner" (B'resheet 23:4, 26:3, 47:4). The critical difference between this "sojourn" and those mentioned in B'resheet is location: Mitzrayim (B'resheet) as opposed to Moav.

1.2. And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Kilion, Ephrathites of Beit-Lechem in Yehudah. And they came to the country of Moav, and remained there.

This verse seems to be an awkward repetition of the first verse. We are again told about a family which leaves Beit-Lechem for **S'dei Moav** - but, this time, we are given the names of the family members. There is a clear intent for us to pay attention to these names - else, why "double up" the verses? It would have been more economical to begin with verse 2 (and dispense with verse 1); by introducing the story and the first set of characters and, only then, telling us their names, it is clear that the names have a significance of their own.

Elimelekh is a powerful name, one associated with royalty. His name evokes an association with Avraham, who interacted with kings (B'resheet 12, 14, 20). This association is strengthened when we recall that Avraham was the first to leave Eretz Yisra'el on account of a famine - it is possible that the story here provides subtle rebuke to Avraham for his leaving the Land (see Ramban on B'resheet 12:10). (That Elimelekh's leaving the land was considered sinful is hardly a new idea - his fate and that of his sons seem to confirm this idea, which Hazal explicitly state.)

The very name *Naomi* means "pleasant"; the import of this meaning will become clear further on. In any case, her name also carries within it a significant word: **Ami** - (my people) - a word which will play a crucial role in her relationship with Ruth.

Whereas the names of the parents are "positive"; their sons' carry names which no parent would think of granting their children. *Mahlon* is related to *Mahalah* (disease) and *Kilion* to *K'liyah* (destruction). Considering their untimely deaths, in a foreign land no less, it is reasonable to posit that

these were not their birth-names, rather names given them posthumously, symbolic of their tragic lives. [Keep in mind that Megillat Ruth was not written as a journal; it was composed after the key events in the story transpired. That being the case, it is not problematic to posit a posthumous "renaming" of the dead sons.] These tragic names (and many other points of reference in the story) evoke an association with yet another story in B'resheet - the Yehudah-Tamar interlude (Ch38) The story in B'resheet opwith Yehudah "leaving his brothers" and giving birth to two sons whose names are anything but positive (Er - meaning "barren" and Onan, meaning "mourning"). We must, again, posit that these names were given posthumously, as both sons died young (leaving the heroine, Tamar, as the prototypical Y'vamah - yet another connection with our story.)

After repeating the identification of their homeland (Beit Lechem Yehudah), fortifying our awareness of their relationship with that area (so that the return carries an expectation of a homecoming of sorts - an expectation which is only tragically realized), we are told that they *remained there*. In other words, the temporary sojourn turned into a quasi-permanent state of residence.

1.3. And Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons.

Note the rapid shift of focus. In the first two verses, Naomi was Elimelekh's wife - and, suddenly, he is **her** husband. Naomi has quickly been thrust to center stage - whereas Mahlon and Kilion have lost their identities as anything but "her sons".

1.4. And they took wives of the women of Moav; the name of one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth; and they dwelled there about ten years.

Note that we do not learn (until the last chapter) which brother was married to which Moavite. The reason is rather straightforward: It isn't of any consequence. This is a common trait of Biblical narrative, omitting the information which has no bearing on the ultimate message of the story.

The mention of dwelling there ten years reminds us of yet another passage in B'resheet (16:3) - it is only after ten years of childless cohabitation in the Land that Sarah arranges the "match" between Avraham and Hagar. We soon learn that both Ruth and Orpah were childless, and the association with one more B'resheet story is complete.

1.5. And both Mahlon and Kilion died; and the woman was bereft of her two sons and her husband.

Note the similar phrasing between the end of this verse and the end of v. 3: **vatiSha'er** - and she was left - which serves to hammer home the impact of her repeated losses - first her husband, then her two sons.

1.6. Then she arose with her daughters-in-law, to return from the country of Moav; for she had heard in the country of Moav that Hashem had visited his people and given them bread.

There are several points in this verse which are surprising.

First of all, why do her **Kalot** agree to return with her - what of their own families? (In Naomi's dialogue with them we learn that their parental homes are still available to them) After all, they aren't really "related" to Naomi anymore - the husbands/sons that were their bond to Naomi are dead.

Second, this verse seems to lead us all the way back to Beit Lechem Yehudah - no mention is given to any misgivings or concerns that any of these three women may have had regarding their return - yet the very next set of verses records Naomi's valiant (as we shall see) attempts to persuade them to stay in Moav. Why does our verse record their return in such a cavalier fashion?

Finally, we are left wondering why G-d has suddenly blessed His people. As mentioned above (v. 1), the period of the Shof'tim was a time when G-d's Presence and intervention in affairs of the people was most manifest. We would expect to hear that the people had demonstrated their readiness to recommit to G-d and that, as a result, He blessed the land. We would also expect some sort of explanation for the famine which set all of these events into motion - but the text is silent in that regard as well.

## SUMMARY

The introductory verses, rapidly setting the stage for our story, utilize a number of allusions to the Patriarchal narratives of B'resheet. The text places a clear stress on the names of the family members, while placing G-d's role in the national fortunes in a less explicit setting than that which we would expect for this time period. At the end of the section, we get the sense that both **Kalot** abandon their families to join Naomi in Beit Lechem - an impression which is dashed by the dialogue in the next section.

## III

### NAOMI, ORPAH AND RUTH (1:7-19a)

## OVERVIEW

In the process of returning, Naomi turns to her **Kalot** and tries to convince them to return to their ancestral homes and faiths. She begins with warm words of blessing (vv. 8-9); when rebuffed by their stubborn insistence on returning with her (10), she responds with a bitter soliloquy, turning her earlier blessing into a self-directed dirge (11-13). Orpah leaves, but Ruth clings to her (14). Naomi tries one last time to convince Ruth to go home, using Orpah's behavior as an example for her to follow (15). Ruth's final words here, representing her longest speech in the Megillah, are the powerful words of loyalty which are, perhaps, the most famous citation from the Megillah (16-17). When Naomi sees that her efforts bear no fruit, she ceases speaking to Ruth and the scene is set for their return to Beit

Lechem Yehudah.

## ANALYSIS

1.7. So she went forth out of the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Yehudah.

Naomi is clearly at the center of the text-focus here; her **Kalot** are her escorts. Nonetheless, there is something disarming about the use of the verb **Shuv** (return) here; the text describes all three of these barren widows as "returning" to the land of Yehudah - yet only one of them (Naomi) ever lived there! This curious usage shows up several more times in the dialogue which follows, highlighting the extent to which the daughters-in-law identified with Naomi.

Incidentally, the verb **Shuv** operates in this chapter as a **Milah Manchah** (key word), which guides the sense of the text. It shows up an extraordinary 12 times in this chapter, indicating that the underlying theme of the chapter is "return". We won't fully appreciate the sense of this message until much later in the story. By the way, a **Milah Manchah** usually appears 7 times within a given Parashah; the number 12 here has some significance. We will address it in our analysis of the second chapter, where the **Milah Manchah** also shows up 12 times.

1.8. And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, Go, return each of you to her mother's house; Hashem deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead, and with me.

Note the ironic use of **Shuv** here - instead of returning to Yehudah, the word is used here in the context of the **Kalot** returning to their families in Moav.

Why does Naomi mention *return to your mother's house* - as opposed to (the more likely) *father's house*?

Although we would be tempted to posit that Orpah and Ruth were orphans (thus explaining their reticence to return home), with only mothers at home, the text in 2:11 doesn't allow for that possibility.

Besides yet another textual allusion to the Patriarchal narratives (regarding Rivkah, the verse states: *and the young girl ran in order to relate the events to her mother's house* - B'resheet 24:28), Naomi seems to be emphasizing that **she** is not their mother - they have mothers of their own at home. This will soon be reversed, as the love and devotion of Orpah and Ruth for Naomi becomes more clearly expressed.

Naomi's mention of *the dead*, a clear reference to her sons, is a bit disarming here. Why doesn't she mention their names - or, at least, say *my sons*?

It would seem that Naomi is speaking with great restraint here. After all, she is returning with no family, no children (or grandchildren). At the very least, she has these two devoted daughters-in-law to accompany her. From Naomi's perspective, their returning home would be a devastating blow - yet, that is exactly what she wishes them to do. A bit of her special character begins to shine through, as we see her act as the brave parent, forcing the child whom she loves to leave home, leaving her with an empty nest but assuring the child's growth and success. Knowing that her **Kalot** would face great difficulties as outsiders in Yehudah, she tried to convince them to go home. We can easily imagine her choking back tears as she attempts to persuade; this is whshe refers to her sons simply as "the dead". Any mention of her , by name or by relationship, would certainly test that wall of restraint that she must put up in order to convince them to leave her.

We are also left a bit puzzled by the last phrase here - until this point, what **Hessed** have the **Kalot** done for Naomi?

1.9. Hashem grant you that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband. Then she kissed them; and they lifted up their voice, and wept.

1.10. And they said to her, No, we will return with you to your people.

Naomi continues to wish them well; at this point, as mentioned above, her attempt is couched in positive terms, blessing them that each should find a new husband and should find comfort in a new home.

Their reaction to Naomi's kiss cannot help but remind us of Ya'akov's first meeting with Rachel (B'resheet 29:11). Even though that kiss was not one associated with painful parting (although see Rashi's comments there), the juxtaposition of kissing and weeping continues to strengthen the association between our narrative and Sefer B'resheet.

As pointed out earlier, the use of **Shuv**, which is the key word of this chapter, is ironic here. How can the young women "return" to a land to which they've never been?

It seems that we are witnessing a deep expression of empathy and identification; even though this is a new land, since Naomi is returning, they, too, consider it a return. Nonetheless, harsh reality creeps into the next word - **l'Ameikh** - *to your nation*; there is a clear awareness that the nation residing in Yehudah is not theirs but Naomi's and that they will be strangers there.

1.11. And Naomi said, Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? are there yet any more sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands?

1.12. Turn back, my daughters, go your way; for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say, I have hope, even if I should have a husband tonight, and should bear sons;

1.13. Would you wait for them till they were grown? would you, for them, refrain from having

husbands? no, my daughters; for it grieves me much for your sakes that the hand of Hashem is gone out against me.

1.14. And they lifted up their voice, and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law; but Ruth held fast to her.

It is unclear if we have one argument here or two. The uninterrupted flow of Naomi's words indicate one speech; yet the repeat of **Shovna b'notai** at the beginning of v. 12 (echoing the beginning of v. 11) may suggest a further attempt at persuasion. Although the entire section addresses one issue - the lack of any more male family members who would "redeem" the **Kalot**, the sense of v. 11 is dramatically different from that of 12-13 - and there is room to comment here.

One of the common features of Biblical heroes is their refusal to rely on miracles in order to extricate them from troubles. Naomi does not suggest that she will become another Sarah, bearing a child at an advanced age.

In vv. 12-13, her tone turns sardonic. Even if she would experience the absurd, the **Kalot** would still be in an unlivable situation - waiting (as **Agunot** - the word comes from the **te'Ageinah** in v.13) for her children to come of age. It seems, therefore, that there are two arguments here - to wit: I will have no more children. Even if I were to have children, that would not be a solution for you.

This is, properly speaking, Naomi's second (and third) attempt at convincing the young widows to go home. Note, however, that her refusal to accept the role of mother (noted in v. 8) has shifted perceptibly: At the beginning of each of these arguments, she calls them *my daughters*.

The end of her argument is phrased oddly: **Ki mar li m'od mikem** - the translation here is faithful to the intent. She is convinced that all of the tragedies that befell the family are on account of her sins - such that the losses incurred by these loyal "daughters" are her fault, as well. She is, understandably, reticent to accept any more responsibility for their welfare, especially considering her diminished circumstances back in Beit Lechem.

1.15. And she said, Behold, your sister-in-law is gone back to her people, and to her gods; go back you after your sister-in-law.

The odd mention of *returning to her..gods* implies that neither woman had converted to the Israelite faith (it would be anachronistic to refer to "Judaism" here). Surely Naomi would not be willing to see her co-religionists revert to idolatry - much less push them in that direction.

The phrase **Shuv Aharei...** usually means "to abandon"; here, Naomi uses it in the opposite manner - to follow. Subtly hidden in her words, perhaps, is buried the vision of abandonment - a future that Ruth, in any case, stubbornly rejects. Note how Ruth uses the same phrase in the opposite (usual) manner in her response.



1.16. And Ruth said, Do not entreat me to leave you, or to keep from following you; for wherever you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your G-d my G-d;

1.17. Where you die, will I die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me, and more also, if even death parts me from you.

There is so much about this beautiful speech that is worthy of comment; a starting point for the interested reader is BT Yevamot 47b, along with the classical commentaries here. One point of interest - the verb **Lalin** (rendered here "to lodge"), does not carry the same meaning as that of modern Hebrew. In Biblical Hebrew, it refers to "camping out", i.e. sleeping arrangements made while sojourning. See, for example, B'resheet 19:2. Ruth, accepting Naomi's fate as a traveler, commits to joining her on her travels "till death do us part."

1.18. When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her.

The immediate sense of the end of this phrase is that Naomi ceased here entreaties. We will soon see that her silence at this point was much deeper and impactful than we presently assume.

1.19. So the two went until they came to Beit-Lechem...

Although this is the middle of a verse, it is clear from the beginning of the second half of the verse that this phrase properly ends the "travel" segment of the story. This phrase brings the two of them, sans Orpah and in silence, back to the city of Beit Lechem. The second half of the verse sets the scene in the city itself, as Naomi interacts with the women of Beit Lechem and bemoans her fate...but that belongs to next week's shiur.

#### IV

#### IN THE MEANTIME...

It would be unfair to pause at this point and not draw any conclusions about the text, leaving the Ruth-Shavuot relationship as unclear as it was at the beginning of this part of the shiur.

We have noted that there are constant allusions and associations which serve to "graft" the story of Ruth into a "B'resheet mode". We get the sense that Naomi and Ruth are heroines who belong squarely in the book of B'resheet, as opposed to several hundred years later.

One of the remarkable features which serves as an undercurrent of Sefer B'resheet is the notion of birth - and renewal. **Avram and Sarai** are incapable of having children, but **Avraham and Sarah** are fertile. Ya'akov is one type of person, but his heroism (however we understand it) allows him to become Yisra'el. It is not only the granting of names (which will play a critical role in our

understanding of the final chapter of Ruth) which signals this rebirth in B'resheet; the cycles of exile and homecoming, experienced twice each by Avraham and Ya'akov, represent the theme of spiritual renewal.

Ruth, as the prototypical **Giyoret** (convert), is truly a daughter of B'resheet. Whatever spiritual metamorphosis she underwent in Moav that enabled her to act with such devotion surely places her squarely in a class with the great Patriarchs who built out nation.

Shavu'ot, celebrated as the time of **Mattan Torah**, is a time for recommitment to the covenant of Sinai but also an opportunity to start fresh in our relationship with haKadosh Barukh Hu and with His precious Torah.

There is much more to be said, but we will pick up in the middle of 1:19 next week.