

# MEGILLAT RUTH (IV)

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

## I

### RUTH'S "SECOND GLEANING" (2:15-17)

#### OVERVIEW

After the generous request of Bo'az (that Ruth remain as a **M'laketet** in his field for the duration of the harvest) and after having eaten with the harvesters, Ruth returns to the field. This again demonstrates her diligence - instead of seeing her newly elevated status in the field as a reason for relaxing her standards, she returns to the task at hand. Note that this brief section is bookended by a mention of Ruth's gleaning. At the heart of this section is Bo'az's command to his workers regarding Ruth - the next step in his commitment to her family.

#### ANALYSIS

2.15. And when she rose to glean, Bo'az commanded his young men, saying, Let her glean even among the sheaves, and reproach her not;

Bo'az fulfills his earlier promise: *have I not charged the young men that they shall not touch you?* (v. 9); note that he has expanded the purview of her gleaning from the **Shibbolim** (grains) to the **Omarim** (sheaves). Although this is reminiscent and evocative of the Mitzvah of **Shikh'hat ha'Omer** (the forgotten sheaf - see D'varim 24:19), that isn't what's being "added" here. Bo'az is simply allowing Ruth to glean even among the already bound sheaves. His expansion of her rights in the field continues in the next verse:

2.16. And let fall also some of the handfuls on purpose for her, and leave them, that she may glean them, and rebuke her not.

Within the Halakhic details of **Leket**, the poor have rights to those stalks which fell from the hand (or tool) of the reaper. Bo'az commands that the harvesters allow Ruth to collect some stalks that did not fall, but have been placed aside for binding. In other words, all of the grains she is given access to are unbound - including the normal **Leket**, grains found among the sheaves and non-dropped grains which are awaiting inclusion in a sheaf.

The first key phrase in this verse: **Shol taSholu** is hard to decipher - is the root **Nashal** (Rashi's approach - meaning "fall off" - see D'varim 28:40) or is it **Shalal** (meaning "fortune" - to wit: "allow her

to collect her fortune" - Ibn Ezra adopts this approach). The translation presented here seems to favor Rashi's approach, although the form of the words as they appear in the text seem to suggest the root **Shalal**. We will yet return to this phrase in next week's shiur.

Bo'az orders to the young men have gotten more favorable for Ruth in one other regard: The honor with which they must treat her. It is safe to assume - based on the description and dialogue earlier in this chapter - that the poor women who gleaned were subject to various forms of harassment from the young men. At first Bo'az ordered them "not to touch her"; now we learn that they must not only avoid physically abusing her, they must also not "reproach her" (v. 15) nor may they "rebuke her" (v. 16). The sense here is that with the expansion of Ruth's "rights" in the field, the jealousy felt by the hired hands towards her would increase in kind - so that at each step of the way, they need to be warned against violating her dignity.

2.17. So she gleaned in the field until the evening, and she beat out what she had gleaned; and it was about an ephah of barley.

Ruth's diligence is exemplary. Even though she has now been given a favored position in Bo'az's field - and has a secure position for the duration of the harvest season, she does not ease up her work standard until evening. Witness the astounding amount of barley which she brings back to Naomi - a full **Ephah** of barley. An Ephah is roughly 35 lbs. - testimony both to her diligence and to Bo'az's kindness.

Regarding the "beating of what she had gleaned"; evidently small amounts of grain, such as those collected as **Leket**, were threshed on the spot to lighten the load of the **M'laket**. (See Shof'tim 6:11 and Yeshaya 28:27). This threshing was, as evidenced by the cited verse in Yeshaya, done with a stick.

## SUMMARY

This brief section, which brings to a close Ruth's activities in Bo'az's field on the first day, both opens and closes with the focus on the rest of that day, after her "favored **M'laketet**" experience at the mid-morning meal. In the middle of this section, we learn more about Bo'az's kindness towards this foreigner. There are only two possible reasons we may posit for Bo'az favoring of Ruth. He has already expressed his admiration for her **Hessed**, done on behalf of Naomi, in v. 11. Even earlier than that, his attention was drawn to Ruth on account of her diligence (as presented in the text) and/or her modesty (as Haza"l expressed in BT Shabbat - cited in last week's installment). As we will see anon, Bo'az's demonstration of favor for Ruth indicates (at least to Naomi) a deeper interest which is yet to be requited.

## II

### DIALOGUE B: NAOMI AND RUTH (2:18-23)

#### OVERVIEW

Upon her return to the city with an amount of barley which, at the very least, was unanticipated by Naomi, Ruth and Naomi engage in a dialogue which is curiously similar to the interaction between Bo'az and Ruth earlier that day. In both dialogues, Ruth is only the respondent and Bo'az/Naomi not only "monopolize" the conversation, but their words both open and close the dialogue. We will assess the relationship between these dialogues in our analysis of v. 20.

Naomi's sudden excitement and loquacious reaction to Ruth's successful return to the city, punctuated with words of blessing, stands in sharp contrast to her earlier reticence and reserve. In the summary section, we will address this contrast and utilize it to respond to the original question with which we opened the entire series (back in the first installment).

#### ANALYSIS

2.18. And she took it up, and went into the city; and her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned; and she brought out and gave to her what she had left over after being satisfied.

The end of this verse serves two critical functions:

First of all, in spite of the large amount of barley that Ruth brought home, it is specifically the "leftovers" which testify to Bo'az's kindness. As far as Naomi is concerned, the "large haul" is an indication of Ruth's hard work - no more than that. But, once she sees that Ruth has also been invited to eat with the landowner - and been given so much that there are leftovers - that demonstrates to Naomi that the landowner is someone special, worthy of her blessing.

In addition, *what she had left over after being satisfied*. returns our attention to the field and to verse 14 - from here on, we will see how the conversation between Naomi and Ruth relates to the conversation between Bo'az and Ruth which concluded in v. 14.

2.19 And her mother-in-law said to her, Where have you gleaned today? and where have you worked? blessed is he who took notice of you. And she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, The man's name with whom I worked today is Bo'az.

Naomi's enthusiastic reaction to Ruth's return stands in sharp contrast to her earlier terse remarks. Instead of speaking briefly, she is credited with poetic parallelism here: **Eiphoh Likat' haYom v'Anah Aseet**; in addition, there is a play on words here: **Eihpoh** (where) is spelled exactly like (and sounds nearly like) the measure of barley which Ruth brought back - an **Eiphah**. There is even an allusion to

Ruth's future at the same field - the word **Anah** (parallel to **Eiphoh**) usually means **L'An** (toward where...) and indicates future movement. We will see that Naomi consistently urges Ruth to stay at Bo'az's field, just as did Bo'az himself.

Note that Naomi, even after she is stirred to excited speech, still seems ignorant of Ruth's rights as a **M'laketet** and assumes that the **M'laketet** is dependent on the goodwill of the landowner.

2.20. And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, Blessed be he by Hashem, who (Who) has not abandoned his loving kindness to the living and to the dead. And Naomi said to her, The man is a relative of ours, one of our close relatives.

This verse is the core of the dialogue - both thematically and schematically. Naomi's reaction to learning that Ruth's benefactor is Bo'az is to bless G-d (notice how frequently this happens in dialogues in the Megillah - much more frequently than anywhere else in T'nakh). This blessing is (perhaps deliberately) ambiguous (as reflected by the parenthetical alternative translation) - who is it that has not withheld kindness? Bo'az or G-d? The verse reads equally well either way. It is possible that Naomi left this phrase deliberately "open" to allow for both interpretations. In either case, there is something striking about her blessing - whoever Naomi is blessing has not withheld kindness from the living and the dead. We understand the kindness towards the living - both Naomi and Ruth have already benefited from Bo'az beneficence. What *kindness towards the dead* is there here?

Naomi seems to already have planned the Shiddukh here - she immediately envisions Bo'az marrying Ruth, thus (after a fashion) redeeming her dead son's legacy, in an expanded form of the "salvation" associated with **Yibbum** (Levirate marriage - see D'varim 25:5-10)

It is prudent to note another "B'resheet-allusion" here. The only other place in T'nakh where the phrase **Asher lo Azav Hasdo** (who has not withheld his kindness) shows up is in the prayer of thanksgiving offered by Avraham's slave when he identifies Rivkah as the proper wife for Yitzchak (B'resheet 24:27).

When Naomi remarks that Bo'az is a relative, she adds **miGo'aleinu hu** - he is one of our redeemers. When we analyze the fourth chapter, we will address the role of the Go'el more completely; nevertheless, there are two inferences we may make from Naomi's use of the phrase.

First of all, she recognizes that the first association which ties Bo'az to her (and Ruth) is his role as a Go'el - this will become the central focus of the first half of the final chapter. In addition, more to our point, the phrase **miGo'aleinu** means *he is **one of** our redeemers* - but not first on the list. This foreshadows the central tension which will inform the latter half of the third chapter - the existence of a "primary redeemer" whose offices must first be addressed before Bo'az can act.

As noted above, this dialogue is strikingly similar to the earlier dialogue between Bo'az and Ruth. In both cases, Ruth responds - twice - to her elder, who begins and ends the conversation. In addition, the central statement by Bo'az/Naomi focuses on the theme of **Hessed** - in Bo'az's case, praise for

Ruth's kindness exhibited towards Naomi; in Naomi's case, blessings for G-d and Bo'az who/Who has not withheld kindness.

There is one other curious connection between the dialogues. The opening remark of Bo'az (vv. 8-9) contains his entreaty to Ruth to stay in his field throughout the harvest and to safeguard her dignity (the reapers will not harass her) - exactly the theme of Naomi's **final** statement to Ruth. In other words, we have something of a chiasmus here, where the beginning of dialogue A parallels the end of dialogue B. It seems that this order is preserved in the text in order for us to take notice of the strong similarity between the dialogues - and to give us added insight into the nature of **Hessed** as exemplified in this short Megillah. We will address this point in the summary of this section.

2.21. And Ruth the Moavite said, He also said to me, You shall keep close to my young men, until they have ended all my harvest.

Again, the text underscores Ruth's foreign-ness, drawing our attention to Bo'az outstanding kindness in recognizing the value and virtue of this foreign woman.

2.22. And Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his maidens, that you should not be molested in any other field.

Note how much Naomi has "woken up" in this conversation. The text identifies Ruth as "her daughter-in-law"; immediately, Naomi addresses her as **Bitti** (my daughter). Note that Ruth is called **Bitti** three times in this chapter - the first time, in Naomi's terse approval of Ruth's initiative to glean. The second time is in Bo'az's first remarks to her - and the final one is in Naomi's final remark to her (further demonstrating the chiastic relationship between the two dialogues).

2.23. So she kept close to the maidens of Bo'az to glean to the end of the barley harvest and of the wheat harvest; and lived with her mother-in-law.

Naomi's subtle urging of Ruth to "make herself more available" to Bo'az (alluded to in v. 20) goes unheeded. Ruth continues to glean in his fields throughout the barley and wheat harvest (which, in the Beit Lechem area, come one on the heels of the other).

Note how the chapter ends right where it began (noted at the end of last week's shiur) - in Naomi's house.

## SUMMARY

In this dialogue, Naomi suddenly "comes alive" and immediately takes Bo'az's kindness as an indication that there is even greater **Hessed** to anticipate from him in the future. This foreshadows the audacious suggestion raised by Naomi and acted upon by Ruth in chapter 3 - but that will have to wait for next week.

The dialogues can be charted as follows:

- A1(vv. 8-9): **Bitti** - Bo'az's concern for Ruth's dignity, safety and safety and continued success in gleaning
- A2(v. 10): Ruth's protestations that she is a foreigner
- A3(vv. 11-12): Bo'az's recognition of Ruth's **Hessed** towards Naomi - *after the death of your husband* - and her Avrahamic qualities (see last week's shiur) and a blessing that G-d should repay her fully for her kindness
- A4(v. 13): Ruth's acknowledgment of Bo'az's comforting words
- A5(v. 14): Bo'az's invitation to Ruth to partake of the mid-morning meal
- B5(v. 19a): Naomi's question as to the identity of the one who favored Ruth
- B4(v. 19b): Ruth's acknowledgment that Bo'az is the landowner in question
- B3(v. 20): Naomi's recognition of Bo'az special relationship and her blessing of G-d or Bo'az for not withholding *kindness from the living and the dead*. (a reference to the same dead husband mentioned in Bo'az's blessing)
- B2(v. 21): Ruth **HaMo'aviah** tells Naomi of her inclusion with the harvesters
- B1(v. 22) : **Bitti** - Naomi's concern for Ruth's dignity, safety and continued success in gleaning

### III

#### RUTH AND SHAVU'OT

Before moving on to the third chapter, I would like to address the question which generated this entire series of shiurim: Why do we read Megillat Ruth on Shavu'ot?

In the first installment, we cited several of the more popular theories:

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."

4. There is a tradition in the Yerushalmi (Betza 2:4) that David died on Shavu'ot. Some have suggested that Shavu'ot is the appropriate time for the reading of this Megillah; the "prequel" of the Davidic monarchy.

Each of these explanations can be challenged, as follows:

Beginning from the end of the list (in true chiastic fashion), we do not find that a "Yahrzeit" has such significance in the Talmudic or Geonic period (from which the custom of this reading dates). True, the Gemara does mention the custom of avoiding eating meat on the anniversary of the death of a parent (BT Sh'vu'ot 20a), but that is the extent of the significance of a "Yahrzeit" in the Talmudic tradition. It would be hard to posit that the Rabbis ordained that we read Megillat Ruth on Shavu'ot only on account of David's death occurring on that day.

The third explanation - chronologically, the first one - is hard to decipher. How do we learn that the Torah is only acquired through afflictions and poverty? We certainly see afflictions and poverty which beset Ruth, but we don't see her "get Torah" at the end of that road; indeed, it is her early cleaving to the Torah which causes her much of her affliction in Beit Lechem.

The second explanation is, on the face of it, much more appealing. Ruth is truly the only (post-Sinaitic) convert whose story is related in T'nakh - and that certainly connects well with the theme of Shavu'ot - or so it would seem. If we pay close attention, however, to how Shavu'ot "evolved" into a celebration of the Stand at Sinai, we see that it was the "**giving** of the Torah" that the Rabbis emphasized (the day is called **Z'man Mattan Torateinu**) as opposed to the acceptance of the Torah by Am Yisra'el (**Kabbalat haTorah**). The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this discussion; suffice it to say that, in Rabbinic thinking, every day is an experience of **Kabbalat haTorah** (see Sifri va'Et'hanan #8) as opposed to the "one-time" event of **Mattan Torah** which we celebrate annually. It is clear that the "conversion" aspect of the Stand at Sinai relates much more closely to the **Kabbalat haTorah** than to the theme of **Mattan Torah**.

The first explanation is certainly appealing, considering how closely the story of Ruth revolves around the harvest. The problem with this theory is simply one of development and evolution of the holiday. Although there is no explicit mention in the T'nakh of anything but an agricultural association with Shavu'ot, the connection with Mattan Torah appears in the earliest stratum of post-Biblical literature (see the beginning of the pseudepigraphic Book of Jubilees). Rabbinic writing wholly emphasizes the Sinai-theme of Shavu'ot - to the exclusion of agricultural considerations (excepting where it is Halakhically germane).

Why would the Rabbis have instituted a Megillah to be read on Shavu'ot if the only connection was one that was no longer central to the celebration of that holiday?

I would like to suggest that the reading of Megillat Ruth on Shavu'ot is motivated by a combination of several of these considerations - and by a theme of the Megillah which strongly ties the Torah to

the Megillah. First, a brief recap and some introductory remarks:

Ruth's cleaving to Naomi (as well as Orpah's) was remarkable beyond the way in which it is usually understood. From Naomi's remarks to the young women (1:8) it is clear that their mothers still live - and from Bo'az's praise of Ruth (2:11) we also see that Ruth's father was also alive. We can also surmise, from both of these comments, that Ruth had every option of returning home after the death of her husband - she was not an outcast as a result of marrying into a Judean family. Nonetheless, Ruth forsakes her family for Naomi, her nation and her G-d (1:16). Why does she behave this way (and why does Orpah begin her path to Yehudah with the same steadfast devotion)?

An appeal to Ruth's piety is not sufficient here - for it is certainly not a characteristic of the pious to abandon their parents for a foreign land.

We must posit that Ruth (and, to a lesser degree perhaps, Orpah) had a strong relationship with Naomi which made leaving her so unthinkable that even abandoning kith and kin was to be favored (if necessary). Why would this be the case?

We must suggest that Naomi was Ruth's teacher in the ways of kindness - for, after all, where did a Moavite woman acquire the great depths of **Hessed** - certainly not a common Moavite trait (see, inter alia, Amos 2:1, Melakhim II 3:27). How could Ruth leave the side of her Rebbi, her instructor in the ways of **Hessed**?

That being the case, we have to ponder how Naomi taught Ruth about kindness. As is the case with any behavioral trait, the strongest and most lasting instruction is effected not through verbal teaching but rather by example. Naomi was an example par excellence of **Hessed** - and, who, we may ask, was the beneficiary of her kindness? It stands to reason that those closest to her benefited the most.

In other words - Ruth was the most direct and closest beneficiary of Naomi's **Hessed**. Naomi brought Ruth close to Torah by bringing her close to herself - through the loving kindness that, perhaps, only comes to the fore in times of great tragedy, such as those experienced by Naomi's family.

With this bit of (hypothesized) background in hand, we now look at the developing relationship between Ruth and Naomi - and the subsequent relationship between Ruth and Bo'az - and learn something powerful and essential about **Hessed**. The kindness which Naomi showed to Ruth made such a strong impact on Ruth that she was able to repay it - not just in kind, but with greater strength. In other words, whatever kindness Naomi demonstrated towards Ruth was certainly outshone by the kindness with which Ruth interacted with her former mother-in-law. After all, upon arrival in Beit Lechem, Naomi had drawn into herself, neither suggesting a solution to their plight nor attending to the needs of her (foreign) companion, who was surely in a worse predicament than she.

Nevertheless, it is Ruth who pulls Naomi out of her despondency - first by boldly offering to find a

friendly landowner who will allow her to glean in his field - then by returning with such a promising "haul" of **Leket** that Naomi is astounded and awoken from her depression - and finally by the revelation that her benefactor is none other than Bo'az. Naomi quickly moves from helplessness to formulating a promising plan - from dwelling on a lost past to manipulating a brighter future. Who brought her out of the depths of her loss, if not Ruth?

The lesson here is clear - and becomes clearer when we see how Bo'az's treatment of Ruth is fully infused by an attitude of **Hessed**. Hessed is, effectively, the echo that grows stronger with each ricochet. Each time a person acts with kindness towards another, he implants the potential for even greater kindness which will, eventually, come back to benefit him:

These are the things which man performs and enjoys their fruits in this world, while the principal remains for him for the world to come... **G'milut Hassadim** (BT Shabbat 127a)

Indeed, the most basic lesson of this entire Megillah is the "power of **Hessed**":

R. Ze'ira says: This Scroll [of Ruth] has no [laws of] impurity and purity, prohibition and permission - so why was it written? To teach you how great is the reward of **Gom'lei Hassadim** (people who perform acts of lovingkindness). (Ruth Rabbah 2:14)

That is, after all, the most fundamental principle of the Torah:

R. Simlai expounded: Torah begins with an act of **G'milut Hassadim** and ends with an act of benevolence. It begins with an act of **G'milut Hassadim**, for it is written: *And Hashem G-d made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them*; and it ends with an act of **G'milut Hassadim**, for it is written: *And He buried him in the valley*. (BT Sotah 14a)

As we celebrate the giving of the Torah, we are reminded that the goal of the Torah - for us to embody the Divine attributes (*imitatio Dei*) begins with simple acts of kindness towards our fellow. There is no greater story in T'nakh which brings this point home than that brief saga of Ruth, Naomi and Bo'az - the Megillah of Hessed.

#### IV

#### POSTSCRIPT

As noted above, the harvest-association between Shavu'ot and Ruth is both clear and, apparently, part of the connection which motivates the reading of this Megillah at this time. How does that fit in with the **Hessed** - theory expounded above?

If we look into the Torah - and the entire matrix of Halakhah - we find that there is no place where **Hessed** is legislated as much as in the field - **Pe'ah**, **Leket** and **Shikh'hah**. It is specifically when harvesting our bounty, when enjoying G-d's blessing, that we are commanded to take care of those

disenfranchised members of society. The Torah, with its great lessons of **Hessed**, also teaches us how we should respond to our own blessings - by seeing them as opportunities to benefit our fellow. The Megillah of **Hessed** is not only read on the festival of the harvest - but also utilizes the harvest itself as the vehicle for that **Hessed**.