

ANALYSIS OF MEGILLAT RUTH (V)

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I

NAOMI'S COUNSEL (3:1-5)

OVERVIEW

Chapter 3 begins with a setting parallel to the opening of chapter 2 - while moving it in a markedly different direction. Both chapters begin with a dialogue between Ruth and Naomi taking place in Naomi's house. Each dialogue includes an initiative which involves Ruth going out of the house to further the fortunes of the family - and involves an interaction with Bo'az (albeit the interaction in chapter 2 is "coincidental" - on her part). Unlike the conversation at the beginning of Chapter 2, this one is initiated by Naomi and with full vigor and attention to detail. Moreover, the initiative is, to put it mildly, audacious and out of keeping with the character we normally associate with Naomi (counsel) and Ruth (implementation). We will address the difficulties attendant upon this counsel in the analysis of v. 4.

ANALYSIS

3.1. Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, My daughter, shall I not seek a home for you, that it may be well with you?

The opening phrase **vaTomer Lah** indicates that this chapter is a continuation of the previous one and ties the two chapters together quite neatly.

Even though Naomi's opening line does not explicitly reveal her bold plan, the words certainly allude to it in a manner which successfully foreshadows the next verses: **haLo Avakesh Lakh Manoach** - (translated as *shall I not seek a home for you?*) evokes a similar phrase in Chapter 1: **uM'tzena Menuchah Ishah Beit Ishah** (1:9: *you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband*). That blessing of Naomi - part of her first attempt to dissuade Ruth and Orpah from following her home to Beit Lechem - is explicitly and clearly marriage-oriented; indeed, that is how this piece of advice will unfold.

The final phrase - **Asher Yiytav Lakh** - implies that this counsel is purely for Ruth's benefit. As we will see in our analysis of the next few verses, the text recognizes Naomi's stake in the success of this mission; yet the first concern which motivates Naomi seems to be Ruth's welfare - a sure sign that Naomi is "back to her good old self" (see the end of last week's shiur).

3.2. Now is not Boaz, with whose maidens you were, our relative? Behold, he winnows barley tonight in the threshing floor.

Naomi uses the same term for Bo'az with which the text introduced him (2:1) - **Moda'**, bringing us again back to the setting at the beginning of the previous chapter. This allows us to maintain awareness of the dramatic changes effected by Ruth's behavior in chapter 3 and to better appreciate the momentous events which are about to unfold.

One remarkable point about Naomi which could easily go unnoticed is her awareness of so many details about Bo'az's habits (see this verse and the next). While sitting at home, she "has her hand on the pulse" of the goings-on out in the field and on the threshing floor. She not only knows the day that Bo'az will thresh the harvested barley, she also knows where the threshing floor is, what time of day he'll be there, that he will eat, drink and sleep there and that he'll be alone - that very night. The introductory **Hinei** in the middle of our verse suggests that her awareness of this is so matter-of-fact that we might translate it as: "after all".

"Tonight" mentioned here probably does not mean nighttime as much as evening (compare Yehoshua 2:2 with 2:5). Anyone who has had the pleasure to stand outside in the Judean hills during the two hours before sunset can testify that there is a regular - oftentimes strong - westerly wind which blows at that time of day. It is probably this wind that Bo'az planned to use for his threshing (which also explains some of Naomi's "inside information").

One ancillary question about the timing of this barley-threshing may be raised: Why did Bo'az wait until the end of the barley **and** wheat harvest (2:23) to winnow the barley?

In the Beit-Lechem area, barley and wheat are harvested at nearly the same time; in addition, the barley was left to dry out while the wheat (which ripened later) was harvested; only then could the barley be threshed.

3.3. Wash yourself therefore, and anoint yourself, and put your garment upon you, and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man, until he has finished eating and drinking.

The series of preparations which Ruth is to undertake in anticipation of the evening is evocative of David's behavior when he rises from mourning for his son:

Then David arose from the earth, **and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his garment**, and came to the house of the Lord, and bowed down; then he came to his own house; and when he required, they set bread before him, and he ate. (Shmu'el II 12:20 - see also B'resheet 41:14)

Some commentators suggest that the *washing* mentioned here implies ritual ablution (**T'vilah**) in the Mikvah, for purposes of ritual purification. Support can be marshaled for this interpretation from the allegoric description of the "wedding" of Am Yisra'el in the beautiful imagery of Yehezq'e'l:

Then I washed you (**va'Erhatzeikh**) with water; indeed, I thoroughly washed away your blood from you, and I anointed you (**va'Asukheikh**) with oil. I clothed you (**va'Albisheikh**) also with embroidered cloth, and shod you with leather, and I girded you with fine linen, and I covered you with silk.
(16:9-10)

This description employs these three verbs - in the same order - as setting the preparation for a marriage canopy and the attendant intimacy. We see that Naomi's plan was clearly geared to bringing about both intimacy and, ultimately, the marriage of Bo'az and Ruth.

The curious *K'tiv* form of **v'Yarad't** (written **v'Yarad'ti** - I will go down, as opposed to **you** will go down) is likely poetic in nature (we find many instances of this ending in the Isaiah scroll from Qumran; see also T'hilim 103:3-4); nonetheless, it may allude to Naomi's personal involvement with this match and the extent to which she is investment in the success of this evening's fateful meeting. This allusion is more powerful in v. 4, where Naomi will be the woman lying at Bo'az's feet.

Note how differently this scenario is to be played out in contrast with the initial meeting of Bo'az and Ruth. In chapter 2, Bo'az arrives at the field after Ruth; here, Ruth is to show up after Bo'az. In their first encounter, Ruth is out in the field; here she must keep herself hidden (from him and everyone else) until he has finished eating and drinking and she is to approach him. Whereas in the meeting in the field, Bo'az invited Ruth to join him for the meal, Ruth is directed by Naomi to wait for Bo'az to finish his meal alone before appearing to him. We have already outlined the general differences - nighttime versus day, the privacy of the threshing floor against the public nature of the field.

3.4. And it shall be, when he lies down, that you shall mark the place where he shall lie, and you shall go in, and uncover his feet, and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.

We have two issues to address in analyzing this verse which are interrelated: Understanding Naomi's seemingly immodest and certainly audacious advice - and identifying the role of the **Milah Manchah** (keyword) in this chapter.

The **Milah Manchah** is **Shakhov** (root: **Sh*kh*b***), which has two meanings in T'nakh: to physically lie down (and, secondarily, to sleep) and to have sexual relations. In noting where it shows up in our chapter, we (again) find a curious and apparently deliberate pattern:

v. 4:

A: *when he lies down* (**Bo'az**)

B: *the place where he shall lie* (**Bo'az**)

C: *and lie down* (**Ruth**)

v. 7

D: *he went to lie* (**Bo'az**)

E: *she... laid herself down* (Ruth)

v. 8

F: *a woman lay at his feet* (Ruth)

v. 13

G: *lie down until the morning* (Ruth)

v. 14

H: *she lay at his feet* (Ruth)

Through v. 8, there are three occurrences of the word for each of them - and the meaning is clearly "to lie down" and does not connote sexual interaction. Even the symmetry of three occurrences for each lends credence to reading this as "separate lying down".

We would expect the meaning to shift after Ruth identifies herself to Bo'az - she is clearly prepared for more intimacy (see our notes on v. 3) and he is apparently interested in a more intimate relationship. Yet, Bo'az demonstrates the power that earns him his name (see installment #3, in the analysis of Bo'az's name at 2:1). As Hazal teach us: "Who is powerful? He who subdues his base instincts." (**Eizehu Gibbor? HaKovesh et Yitzro** - Avot 4:1). Bo'az's nobility is quite apparent, as he concerns himself with Ruth's dignity in not ejecting her from the threshing floor while honoring the rights of the "first Go'el" (the redeemer who has precedence over Bo'az in the family structure) by not taking advantage of Ruth's vulnerability. Instead he abjures her to remain with him until morning - the last two occurrences of the **Milah Manhah** refer to Ruth lying down. She stays the night at Bo'az's feet, but they do not consummate their relationship - not yet.

Unlike the 12 instances of the **Milah Manhah** in each of the first two chapters - which we linked to the special association of the number 6 to the Davidic narratives - the **Milah Manhah** appears 8 times in this chapter. What is the implication of this number of occurrences?

Maharal, in a number of places (see, inter alia, Tif'eret Yisra'el Ch. 2 and Ner Mitzvah p. 23), notes that the number seven represents the entire scope of the physical world, while the number 8 indicates that which is "above nature" (**L'Ma'alah min haTeva**). This is how he explains the fact that B'rit Milah - the basic statement that Man's nature is not to be idolized in the spirit of **Hellenes**, rather it is to be purified - is both the eighth Mitzvah given (after the 6 Mitzvot given to Adam and the seventh given to Noach, B'rit Milah was the only one given to Avraham) and occurs on the eighth day.

In much the same way, Bo'az's behavior here is **L'Ma'alah min haTeva**. It takes a great - and constant - noble spirit to be able to spend a night in such a sensitive position without taking advantage of it or allowing the base instinct to "have its way". Indeed, the **Sh'khivah** (lying down) of both Ruth **and** Bo'az on the threshing floor is remarkable and its eight appearances appropriately guide our understanding of this scene and chapter.

How do we understand Naomi's counsel? Does the image of piety and religious scrupulousness with which we associate these two heroines fit with this audacious plan? To paraphrase a question posed to me by one of my Talmidot - where is the modesty? Where is the **Tz'ni'ut**?

Ralbag, in his commentary (quoted in the Iggeret Sh'mu'el, a commentary authored by R. Sh'mu'el Ozida, a student of the Ari, who lived in Tz'fat in the 16th century), suggests that a great lesson can be learned here: When a great gain can be gotten through an action which involves some **Azut** (inappropriate boldness), that great good should not be forfeited on account of his shame of this **Azut** - but he should, nevertheless, minimize the **Azut** as much as possible.

What are we to make of Ralbag's explanation? What is the *great good* that was to be gained here - and why could it not have been gotten through less audacious means?

Naomi understood from Ruth's first day in Bo'az's field that this was an ideal match for her daughter-in-law on several levels:

1. Bo'az demonstrated admiration and respect for Ruth in spite of - perhaps on account of - her being a foreigner;
2. Bo'az was impressed with Ruth's character and favored her in ways that indicated a special affection;
3. Bo'az was wealthy, noble (as above) and well-connected in the Beit-Lechem community;
4. Bo'az was a member of Elimelekh's family - thus able to participate in the redemption of his ancestral land.

Naomi tried to get Ruth to pursue Bo'az throughout the harvest season(s), but to no avail. She understood that it was "now or never" for this match, since there would be no reason for Ruth and Bo'az's paths to cross after the conclusion of the harvest season.

Since the match was not about to happen "organically" - and since the presence of an "earlier Go'el" prevented Naomi from arranging this match in a formal manner, the only way to set it into motion was through the catalyst of a private encounter in suitable surroundings. Ruth's future, as well as the renaissance of the family (as it were) depended on the successful meeting between Ruth and Bo'az - and Naomi had to engineer that even if, as Ralbag states, it involved behavior that is otherwise unseemly.

The last component of Naomi's plan - that Bo'az will tell Ruth what to do next - creates a sense of "handing her over" (**M'sirah**). In other words, until now Ruth has been a ward of Naomi. As of this evening, she is moving into Bo'az's orbit and will follow him and his directives. We address another dimension of this component in the analysis of the next verse.

3.5. And she said to her, All that you say to me I will do.

The **Q'ri/K'tiv** here is odd - the entire word **Elai** (to me) is missing in the written version, although it is read that way. In other words, the written tradition has "All that you say I will do", whereas the oral version adds in the words "to me", as per the translation above.

A brief word about the relationship between **Q'ri** and **K'tiv** is in order. Theories abound as to why there are occasions where we do not read the text as it is written; one of the conventional approaches to understanding this phenomenon is that proposed by Rada"k (R. David Kimchi, 1160-1235, France) in the preface to his commentary on Sefer Yehoshua:

It seems that these words have come about because the books [of T'nakh] were lost and scattered during the first (i.e. Babylonian) exile; and the sages who were knowledgeable in Mikra had died. The men of the K'nesset haG'dolah, who restored the Torah to its previous state, found divergent readings in the books and followed those which were supported by the majority of readings, according to their understanding. But whenever they could not decisively resolve the reading, they wrote one down but did not vocalize it, or they wrote it down in the margin but not in the text. Similarly, they sometimes inserted one reading in the text and another in the margin. (Thanks to Professor M. Fishbane for the translation).

To wit, the maintenance of an oral version distinct from the written version is a method for essentially maintaining two equally valid traditions. While it certainly is the case that manuscripts of books of T'nakh vary from each other - sometimes in a significant manner (see, e.g. Yehoshua 21:35-36 and the two interjected verses which appear in some Mss - the Koren T'nakh records this interjection at the bottom of the page), Rada"k's theory leaves us with one significant question unanswered: How did the tradents decide which version should be the written one and which should be the oral reading?

However we resolve this question, the fact is that we don't have **Elai** as a written word, yet it is read. I believe that each tradition has much to teach us, justifying both versions, as follows:

Although Ruth responded (in the "official" - i.e. written - version) that she would fulfill everything that Naomi told her to do, in truth that was not a promise she could necessarily keep. If we look carefully at Naomi's directions, a piece of the plan involved Bo'az's response to Ruth's presence on the threshing floor: *and he will tell you what to do*. Ruth was not in a position to commit that Bo'az would, indeed, instruct her as to what to do.

Therefore, the oral tradition adds the key word **Elai** - to wit, "everything that you told **me** to do, I will do - but, as far as your anticipation that Bo'az will direct me from there on, to that I cannot commit - for it is out of my control."

Why, then, is the written version maintained? If we look ahead to v. 11, Bo'az's first response to Ruth's request is **Kol Asher Tom'ri E'eseh Lakh** (*I will do to you all that you ask*) - a perfect mirror to Ruth's response to Naomi. In other words, the author of the Megillah (tradition maintains that it is Sh'mu'el), via the written version, continues showing us the pattern of "echoing Hessed" (see last week's

shiur) - just as Ruth's wholehearted devotion to Naomi is expressed in her complete readiness to fulfill her mother-in-law's directives, similarly, she is rewarded by Bo'az expressing the exact same type of readiness to do her bidding.

SUMMARY

Naomi's advice to Ruth, something of a last-ditch effort to bring the two of them together, hints at Naomi's own investment in the success of this match. There are various textual nuances in these verses which both tie Naomi in to the fateful events of that evening and which continue to demonstrate the inherent reward of **Hessed** in this world.

II

EISHET HAYYIL

As we leave Ruth and Naomi, the former is about to "rise up at night" and follow the path down to the threshing floor. What she initiates there will bring the Davidic monarchy into this world - a monarchy founded by her great-grandson and which will ultimately be restored - all of our Messianic visions revolve around a scion of the house of David.

A beautiful paean written to the **Eishet Hayyil** (woman of strength) was composed, according to tradition, by David's son, Sh'lomo. I would like to take leave of Ruth as she prepares for her meeting with Bo'az - and look at these last 22 verses of Mishlei through the lens of Megillat Ruth. I would like to suggest that Sh'lomo wrote this beautiful poem in honor of his great-great grandmother, the Matron of Monarchy.

31.10. A worthy woman who can find? For her price is far above rubies.

We will yet return to the title phrase.

The next words - **Mi Yimtza** - place this song squarely in the Ruth-David schema. In relating the story of Lot's fleeing from S'dom, the messenger tells Lot:

"Arise, take your wife and your two daughters who are found here (**haNimtza'ot**)..." (19:16)

This curious turn of a phrase - **haNimtza'ot** - leads the Midrash to associate this verse with a (seemingly unrelated) verse in T'hilim about David:

"I have found (**Matza'ti**) David my servant; with my holy oil have I anointed him," (T'hilim 89:21).

The Midrash states: "R. Yitzhak says: 'I have found (**Matza'ti**) David my servant' - where did I find him? In S'dom" (B'eresheet Rabbah 41:4)

31.11. The heart of her husband safely trusts in her, and he shall have no lack of gain

Ruth brought home a great fortune (as pointed out in last week's shiur) when she returned from the field on that first day of the harvest. In addition, the word here used for "fortune" - **Shalal** evokes Bo'az's command to the young men in 2:16 - **v'Gam Shol Tasholu Lah** (see our analysis of 2:16 in last week's shiur).

31.12. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.

Compare with Bo'az's words of blessing to Ruth in 3:10 - **Heitav't Hasdeikh ha'Acharon min haRishon.**

31.13. She seeks wool, and flax, and works willingly with her hands.

Which woman in T'nakh worked so diligently with her hands as Ruth?

31.14. She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from far away.

Note that the verse refers to food as **Lechem** - both an allusion to the distance she traveled to come to Beit-Lechem and her involvement with the harvest.

31.15. She rises also while it is yet night, and gives food to her household, and a portion to her maidens.

Is there any other woman in T'nakh who arises while it is night to provide for her family? The entire scene in Chapter 3 is only made possible when Ruth arises at night. In addition, the mention of **Na'arot** (maidens) reminds us of the **Na'arot** of Bo'az with whom Ruth is encouraged to join (2:8,22)

31.16. She considers a field, and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.

Again - who fits the description of a woman conspiring - and succeeding - to buy a field than Ruth? As we will see next week, the "threshing-floor" scene turns from a potentially romantic meeting to a plea for Bo'az to redeem the field of Elimelekh.

31.17. She girds her loins with strength, and makes her arms strong.

"With strength" her is **B'oz** - need we say more? Again - which woman in T'nakh worked so hard with her arms?

31.18. She perceives that her merchandise is good; her candle does not go out by night.

31.19. She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.

31.20. She stretches out her hand to the poor; she reaches forth her hands to the needy.

31.21. She is not afraid of the snow for her household; for all her household are clothed with scarlet.

31.22. She makes herself coverlets; her clothing is fine linen and purple.

The combination of diligence and royalty (fine linen and purple, scarlet) evokes the glory of the Davidic monarchy.

31.23. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land.

The first half of the fourth chapter of Megillat Ruth takes place at the gates of the city - where Bo'az assembles elders (4:2 - see BT Ketubot 8a)γ

31.24. She makes linen garments, and sells them; and delivers girdles to the merchant.

31.25. Strength and dignity are her clothing; and she shall rejoice at the time to come.

Again, we find the use of **Oz** (strength), with the clear Bo'az-association.

31.26. She opens her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the Torah of loving kindness.

The entire Megillah of Ruth is a Megillat Hessed, as we demonstrated at the end of last week's shiur.

31.27. She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.

This is certainly an accurate and pointed description of Ruth - idleness is the very opposite of her nature - and that is most clearly demonstrated in her collecting the seeds of bread.

31.28. Her children rise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her.

Written by her own descendant, this verse is, perhaps, an allusion by the author to the object of his praise.

31.29. Many daughters have done virtuously, but you excel them all.

The sense of this verse is that the "woman of valor" in question is not a daughter - although she surpasses the "real" daughters. Ruth, as a Moavite, surpassed the kindness and devotion of the daughters of Israel (compare with Ruth 4:15).

31.30. Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain; but a woman who fears the Lord shall be praised.

31.31. Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own deeds praise her in the gates.

Ruth is praised in the gates of the city by the "Greek chorus" - see 4:14-15.

Besides the archetypical **Eishet Hayyil** of Mishlei (31:10 and also 12:4), the only real woman to be honored with this epithet was Ruth herself:

3.11. And now, my daughter, fear not; I will do to you all that you ask, for the whole city of my people knows that you are **Eishet Hayyil** (a worthy woman).

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