

# ANALYSIS OF MEGILLAT RUTH (VI)

*by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom*

I

## RUTH AND BO'AZ (3:6-15)

### OVERVIEW

This momentous encounter, on the threshing floor, is an opportunity for both Ruth and Bo'az to prove their mettle. Indeed, each of them, in his/her own way, demonstrates the greatness of character to which each rises - and which ultimately gives birth to the Davidic dynasty.

For her part, Ruth subtly yet critically alters the instructions given her by Naomi - as we will see in our analysis of v. 9. We are given new insight into the trait of **Hessed** which typifies Ruth (and which is the constant theme of this entire Megillah); Ruth not only focuses her kindness on Naomi, but that same characteristic of **Hessed** radiates outward, affecting - while infecting - everyone touched by it.

As far as Bo'az is concerned, we have already noted the "supernatural" strength which he shows in this evening of near-intimacy (see last week's shiur). We will gain much more understanding of his piety and power, his compassion and his sense of fairness, as we watch this scene unfold.

### ANALYSIS

3.6. And she went down to the threshing floor, and did according to all that her mother-in-law had told her.

The text is intent on crediting Ruth with scrupulously following Naomi's instructions. Indeed, until Bo'az wakes, she has been faithful to her mother-in-law's directives. There is a certain sense of praise for Ruth here. This is similar to the frequent observations of Haza"l when the text testifies that Mosheh, Aharon, or the B'nei Yisra'el did "exactly as God commanded" - "this teaches us that he did not vary from the directive." (see, inter alia, Bamidbar 8:3 and the Sifri quoted by Rashi ad loc.; see also the constant refrain in the final sequence in Sefer Sh'mot).

Rashi brilliantly notes a critical difference between Naomi's instructions and Ruth's implementation. Naomi told Ruth to bathe, anoint herself, put on her finery and then to go down to the **Goren**; Ruth

apparently inverted the order, going down to the **Goren** first and then readying herself. Rashi suggests that if she went down to the **Goren** looking and smelling as she would, any passersby would think her a prostitute. Therefore, she waited until she was at her destination before bathing etc. Besides supporting our contention that **Laylah** here means late afternoon (usually called **Erev** - see Ramban's fascinating comments on the etymology of this word at Sh'mot 12:6), we are again confronted by Ruth's dignity and modesty - even when embarking on a decidedly "immodest" mission.

Whenever an observation that someone fulfilled a command properly is noted (as in the examples above), there is always the sense that it might not have been fulfilled. In other words, it would be reasonable to be concerned that the directive would not be followed with all due punctiliousness. Sometimes the reason is laziness, expense or a demeaning task. In our case, we have good reason to be concerned about Ruth's ability/willingness to "complete the task"; the brazenness of this stealthy approach to a man's feet while asleep flies in the face of everything we already know (or sense) about Ruth's manner. Ruth has impressed us as having great humility while not being overly blessed with buoyant self-confidence (note 2:10,13). Hence, for Ruth to follow Naomi's plan, primping herself for a night of intimacy (i.e. a form of **Huppah**) and sneaking up on her soon-to-be-affianced/husband is not an image which sits well with the Ruth we've come to know so far.

One could even argue that this scene is somewhat reminiscent of her ancestress's night of cunning, when she got her own father drunk in order to conceive and (to her thinking) begin to rebuild the world (compare Naomi's instructions with B'resheet 19:31-38).

The unusual form of the penultimate word **Tzivatah** does not mean "she commanded", (which would be **Tziv'tah**), rather it is a contracted form of **Tzvat'ah** (she commanded her).

3.7. And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain; and she came softly, and uncovered his feet, and laid herself down.

Again, until they converse, Ruth seems to be following Naomi's directions to a "T" - (note, however, Rashi's observation above). Compare this verse with Naomi's words in vv. 3-4...

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. 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.

...thus confirming the statement in v.6.

...and did according to all that her mother-in-law had told her.

This is not the first time that we have encountered a supplicant waiting until the bestower of favor

has eaten and drunk his fill and become "glad of heart" (see below) before approaching. We see this as early as Yitzchak's blessing to Esav (oops - to Ya'akov - B'resheet 27) and as late (in T'nakh terms) as Esther's requests of the king (Esther 5:8, 7:3).

The term **vaYiytav Libo** (*and his heart was merry*) does not imply drunkenness (Ahashverosh may be an exception - see Esther 1:10) - in fact, in our context, it may have nothing to do with drinking. Bo'az was satisfied after an evening's work of threshing and a hearty meal, sleeping the sleep of the satisfied. Even in the context of drinking wine, it does not imply drunkenness and abandon - see Kohelet 9:7.

Ruth's arrival **Balat** (with stealth) is a beautiful counterbalance with the other heroic woman of the period of the Shof'tim who approached a sleeping man **Balat**. Ya'el, the wife of Hever haKeini, approached Sis'ra **Balat** - as he was sleeping from the milk she gave him - in order to slay him (Shof'tim 4:21).

Ruth's lying at his feet is consistent with Naomi's plan - she would lie there, doing nothing but waiting for him to instruct her further - see above, v. 4.

3.8. And it came to pass at midnight, that the man was startled, and turned over; and, behold, a woman lay at his feet.

The opening phrase **vaY'hi baHatzi haLaylah** cannot help but evoke the first occurrence of this phrase in T'nakh:

And it came to pass at midnight, Hashem struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt...

This is, by the way, the only other occurrence of **vaY'hi baHatzi haLaylah** in all of T'nakh - besides our verse. The powerful sense of impending **Ge'ulah** (redemption) which accompanies God's descent upon Egypt on that midnight is again brought to mind when we learn that Bo'az wakes from his slumber (just as God seemed to "wake up", as it were, from His on that first **Leil haPesach**) right at midnight. We fully expect the **Ge'ulah** process to begin...and we are not disappointed.

Bo'az was startled - the text reads **vaYeherad**. This is a relatively rare word - we might expect **vaYiph'had** or **vaYiyra** in its stead. Again, (as we have seen countless times in this short Megillah) we are drawn back to Sefer B'resheet. In the aftermath of Ya'akov's successful gaining of Yitzhak's blessing, Esav approaches with his venison in order to receive father's benediction. When he realizes what has happened:

Then Yitzhak trembled violently, and said, "Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have blessed him?—yes, and blessed he shall be!"

This is the only other instance where this verb is used when encountering another person (most

occurrences in T'nakh are not in reference to human interaction within a narrative frame; the few other instances where it occurs in narrative text, it is used in reference to the fear associated with war - e.g. I Sh'mu'el 21:2, 28:5). There is, again, a certain sense of the familiar, bordering on *déjà vu*. Just as the mysterious stranger, coming under cloud of night (blindness), escaped with an irretrievable and history-altering blessing, we sense that a similarly momentous event is imminent. Indeed, the text "clouds" the identities of our two heroes in this verse, calling them simply "the man" and "a woman" - as if to further the association with the Yitzhak/Esav/Ya'akov scene.

3.9. And he said, Who are you? And she answered, I am Ruth your maidservant; spread your skirt over your maidservant; for you are next of kin.

Bo'az's question is not just aimed at identifying the intruder - he is also asking "what are you doing here?" Again, this question reminds us of Yitzhak's repeated queries of Ya'akov, masquerading as Esav (see B'resheet 27:18, 20 and compare with v. 24 ad loc.).

Ruth could have identified herself as **Ruth haMoaviyah**, as **Ruth kallat Naomi** or simply as **Ruth**; yet she prefers to evoke her responses to Bo'az in the field on that day, several months earlier, when they first met:

Then she said, Let me find favor in your sight, my lord; for you have comforted me, and spoken kindly to your maidservant, though I am not one of your maidservants. (2:13)

Note the careful and allusory wording used by Ruth in her request of Bo'az - **uFaras'ta K'nafekha al Amat'kha** - *spread your skirt(wing) over your maidservant* This is so strongly evocative of Bo'az commendation of her behavior: **Asher Ba't laHasot Tahat K'nafav** (a full reward shall be given to you by Hashem, God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge - **2:12**) **that it is unmistakably worded with such a "mirroring" effect in mind. Ruth is gently but explicitly reminding Bo'az of his admiration for her - and asking him to act in kind. To wit, if Bo'az is so impressed with Ruth's willingness to embrace Am Yisra'el and Elokei Yisra'el, he should be prepared to take her under his wing. This is an echo of the command in the Torah regarding loving the Ger (stranger/proselyte):**

For Hashem your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, Who is not partial and takes no bribe, Who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and Who loves the **Ger**, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the **Ger**, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (D'varim 10:17-19)

Naomi had planned out a night of intimacy for Ruth, leaving it to Bo'az to decide the direction that the events of the evening would take. This is the point where Ruth becomes active - in her typically modest and subtle manner. As soon as she identifies herself to Bo'az, she declares her wish for Bo'az to take her under his wing. This could be understood in one of two ways: Marital or protective. In

other words, Ruth may be asking Bo'az to "take her in" to his estate and accept her as a member of his household - the language of *spread your skirt over your maidservant* is unclear. What is clear is that she immediately moves the direction of their interaction away from the romantic/marital aspect - **Ki Go'el Atah** - *for you are a redeemer*. Ruth's glory and greatness glisten and shine here; although the only dimension of the relationship with Bo'az which is of gain to her is marital, (which is why Naomi sent her *for your own good* - 3:1), Ruth's concern has always been Naomi's lot (pun intended). As soon as Bo'az recognizes her (and doesn't throw out!), she proceeds with her request that he redeem her. In other words, however we interpret the *spreading of the skirt*, it is to be understood as a package deal - with Ruth comes the obligation to redeem Elimelekh's property and restore it to the family (i.e. Naomi).

Hessed has not only been defined by Ruth - here it has been both redefined and enhanced. It isn't enough for Ruth to have followed Naomi to a land she never knew, abandoning kith and kin and seeing to her mother-in-law's physical and emotional sustenance. Even when it is her turn to be "taken care of" (by both Naomi and Bo'az), all of her concerns, efforts and negotiations are on behalf of the other, on behalf of Naomi.

3.10. And he said, Blessed be you to the Lord, my daughter; for your last loyal kindness is greater than the first one, because you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.

This is not the first time that we have encountered blessings being bestowed in this narrative. The blessing-form punctuates every major dialogue in the Megillah. This one (v.10) is similar in theme to the blessing with which Bo'az blessed Ruth in their first dialogue (2:8-14):

And Boaz answered and said to her, It has been fully told to me, all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband; and how you have left your father and your mother, and the land of your birth, and have come to a people which you did not know before. The Lord will recompense your work, and a full reward shall be given to you by the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

Just as Ruth reminded Bo'az of their first meeting by turning his admiration for her "coming under the wings..." into a request that he take her under his wings; similarly, Bo'az revives the warm feelings of their first encounter with a similar blessing...only, this time, he turns the focus on a different beneficiary of Ruth's **Hessed** - himself. A careful look at this verse reveals that he compares her fidelity to Naomi to her choosing Bo'az as a protector/mate (evidently Bo'az also understood the first part of her request as a proposal of marriage). From his perspective, this latest kindness - choosing to cleave to this older relative of her late husband and his late father over the *young men, whether rich or poor* is of greater magnitude than the first.

It is a bit curious why Bo'az would regard Ruth's choosing of him over a younger man as an act of **Hessed** at all - not to mention a greater one than her devotion to Naomi. This does seem to reflect a self-centered perspective, one which doesn't fit the rest of our image of Bo'az.

If we look back at Ruth's double-edged request, I believe that we can understand Bo'az response of increased admiration for Ruth more clearly.

... spread your skirt over your maidservant; for you are next of kin.

Ruth does not mask her motivation in asking for Bo'az as a mate. She is not motivated by his appearance, even by his kindness to her in the past. There is one reason she has asked him to *spread his skirt over your maidservant*; because **Go'el Atah** (*you are next of kin*). In other words, she makes it clear that even in marriage, her one motivation is to bring redemption to the land - and the family - of Naomi. She has only chosen Bo'az because of his relationship with her "extended family" and the potential which that marriage would have on the family's fortunes.

Bo'az recognizes this and, correctly, perceives this decision of Ruth as greater in its depth of **Hessed** than Ruth's cleaving to Naomi. A young woman who sticks with her aging mother-in-law, following her to another land and a foreign people - even accepting her God - can always walk away (at least from the mother-in-law, if not the rest of the package). Once she is married, however, she is "stuck" in that situation until events out of her control release her. Ruth was willing to go one step further than she had before - to marry for Naomi's sake. It is this act of total self-sacrifice (bordering on self-abnegation) that impresses Bo'az so deeply and motivates this blessing.

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 a worthy woman.

We have already commented on the "mirroring" in the second clause here: *I will do to you all that you ask* and the impact of that on the Q'ri/K'tiv of v. 5. We have also analyzed the relationship between the **Eishet Hayyil** mentioned here and the "famous" one at the end of Mishlei. (Both of these analyses are in last week's shiur.) One additional feature to this description (by which no other woman is described in T'nakh): It grants poetic and symbolic perfection to the match between Bo'az - the **Gibbor Hayyil** (2:1) and Ruth, the **Eishet Hayyil** (3:11).

3.12. Although it is true that I am your close relative, there is a relative closer than I am.

Within these two verses (vv. 12-13), along with one mention in v. 9, the root **Ga'ol** (redeem) appears a highly unusual 7 times - the clearest marker of a **Milah Manhah** (key word). Even though we already identified a **Milah Manhah** in this chapter (**Shakhov** - see last week's shiur); this is a classic case of a **Milah Manhah** just within this conversation.

What elegance is displayed here in the text! Ruth has taken a potential night of personal completion, a **Huppah** night, and turned it into an opportunity for redemption. This will ultimately bring about the redemption of the people she has only recently embraced - such is the power of selfless activism.

Bo'az not only shows his own commitment to Ruth and her family (especially in the next verse), but he also demonstrates the refined type of **Hessed** which is the mark of those whose values are informed by Torah. Tempting as it is to help someone, it is not always appropriate to do so - especially before considering other people who may have a stake in your kindness. This is the melding of **Hessed** and **Mishpat**, the two great poles of social behavior which, along with humility, make up Mikhah's triumvirate of God's demands of Man:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does Hashem require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?(Mikhah 6:8)

Before Bo'az can redeem the land - and take Ruth as his wife - he must give precedence to the "first redeemer" who is a closer kinsman of Elimelekh. Bo'az's ability to wait out the night, in intimate proximity to Ruth without taking advantage of this situation, is the clearest demonstration of how apt his name is to his character. (See Ruth Rabbah 6:7)

3.13. Remain this night, and it shall be in the morning, that if he will do the duty of the next of kin for you, well; let him do the kinsman's duty; but if he will not do the duty of a kinsman to you, then I will do the duty of a kinsman for you, as Hashem lives; lie down until the morning.

In some manuscripts, the **Nun** in the first word is a **Nun Rabbati** (large **Nun**); in others, it is the **Lamed** which is large - in yet others, a new **Seder** (section) is marked here. All of this, posits Meltzer (Da'at Mikra ad loc.) is due to the great significance of this verse. It not only includes the root **Ga'ol** four times (another Pesach allusion) but also is strengthened by an oath in God's Name.

One can also see the internal "completeness" of the verse, bookended as it is by Bo'az's adjuration to Ruth to lie down until morning.

One does get the sense from this comment of Bo'az's that he either had reason to believe that the anonymous "first redeemer" would elect not to redeem - or that Bo'az planned to try to engineer that result.

3.14. And she lay at his feet until the morning; and she rose up before one could recognize another. And he said, Let it not be known that a woman came into the threshing floor.

The text makes it abundantly clear that there was no (sexual) intimacy between them - the great **Hessed** which they would both perform through their union could only happen in a manner of **Mishpat** - after the proper sequence of **Ge'ulah** has been followed.

It is unclear from Bo'az's final comment here if he is concerned with her reputation, his honor or both; note however the powerful words placed in Bo'az's mouth in the Midrash (Ruth R. 7:1).

3.15. Also he said, Bring the veil that you have upon you, and hold it. And when she held it, he measured six measures of barley, and laid it on her; and she went into the city.

We have already commented on the significance of the number six in the narrative - this deliberate measuring (repeated in v. 17) is the most explicit instance of "six" in Megillat Ruth.

It is not at all clear what type of measure is the referent here - it seems to be a significant amount, in light of Ruth's mention of it when she comes back to Naomi's house.

## SUMMARY

As Bo'az and Ruth are finally united in privacy, their noble characteristics come to the fore. Ruth shifts the marital focus to the redemption of Naomi's land, while Bo'az expresses a readiness to take Ruth under his wing - only after the first redeemer has had right of first refusal. The scene is set for Ruth to return to Naomi and report on her night on the threshing-floor.

## II

### RUTH AND NAOMI

## OVERVIEW

In this brief epilogue, Ruth reports back to Naomi and they wait for the events to unfold at the city gate - understanding that Bo'az will act with all due deliberate speed.

## ANALYSIS

3.16. And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, Who are you, my daughter? And she told her all that the man had done to her.

Note how Naomi asks the same question - in the light of morning - as did Bo'az at midnight. Some interpret **Mi At Biti** (*who are you, my daughter*) literally - that Naomi did not expect to see Ruth that morning - most understand it as **Mah** instead of **Mi**. To wit - "what are you? - married or still single?"

Note that Ruth, in her typically modest fashion, does not tell of her own role in the night's events - just *all that the man had done to her*.

3.17. And she said, He gave me these six measures of barley; for he said to me, Do not go empty to your mother-in-law.

Why does Ruth share this information with Naomi? Of what matter is it why Bo'az gave her the barley?

It seems that Ruth is endeavoring to explain why Bo'az did not complete the process which Naomi envisioned for that night - it wasn't due to his own hesitation nor her unwillingness. He was fully committed to helping Naomi - the only matter standing in the way of complete redemption was the



other redeemer.

Note again the "missing" **Elai** which is supplied by the **Q'ri** - see our comments in last week's shiur. This occurrence forms a perfect *inclusio* to the two dialogues of Naomi and Ruth which bookend the interaction between Ruth and Bo'az.

3.18. Then said she, Sit still, my daughter, until you know how the matter will fall; for the man will not rest, until he settles the matter this day.

As a result of Bo'az's gift, sent for the benefit of Naomi, she understands that he is eager to make things happen anon. The six measures of barley will "hold them over" until matters are concluded. From Naomi's words to Ruth, it seems that this was a relatively small measure, indicating that matters would conclude soon - at that point, Bo'az would not have to send food to Naomi for Ruth would be his wife and she would be a member of his household.

## SUMMARY

Just as the second chapter finished **Ad K'lot K'tzir Hittim** (*until the end of the wheat harvest - 2:23*), similarly, this chapter concludes **Ki Im Kilah Davar HaYom** (*until he settles the matter this day*). Unlike the almost perceptible sense of opportunity lost at the end of the last chapter, this one ends in high suspense, awaiting the events at the gate of the city - the events which we will address next week.

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