

ANALYSIS OF MEGILLAT RUTH (VII)

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

THE GE'ULAH (4:1-12)

OVERVIEW

The first scene of the final chapter takes place at the city-gates, where Bo'az and the anonymous **Go'el** (We will address the issue of his anonymity in next week's shiur) dialogue regarding the redemption of Elimelekh's (Naomi's) field. The theme of this entire scene is **Ge'ulah** (see the analysis at v. 4 regarding the various roles of this word within the context of this section). The scene cannot be properly understood without first noting that there are two components to **Ge'ulat Karka** (redemption of land).

1. The first, legislated in Parashat B'har Sinai (*If anyone of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, then the next of kin shall come and redeem what the relative has sold.* - Vayyikra 25:25), is oriented solely towards the redemption of the land belonging to the impoverished relative.
2. There is an additional component which intensifies the redemption in question and necessitates marrying a relative. Although the most explicit (and most clearly legislated) illustration of this is **Yibum** ("the levirate marriage"), our story exemplifies a more distant application of this "redemption".

In order to introduce the first half of the fourth chapter, it is appropriate to quote Ramban's commentary to B'reshet 38:8. Chapter 38 is devoted to the story of the marital relationships between Tamar and Yehudah's sons (and, eventually, Yehudah himself), a story which has many associations with our Megillah (note that it is expressly mentioned in 4:12, below). One of the most difficult problems raised by that story is the swift death sentence passed by Yehudah concerning Tamar when he learns of her pregnancy - and which is removed just as swiftly when he understands - and immediately acknowledges - that he is the potential father. The apparent miscarriage of justice is addressed by many M'far'shim; Ramban's comments not only enlighten us in solving the difficulty in Yehudah's behavior. Take special note of the last two lines of this comment:

The subject is indeed one of the great secrets of the Torah, concerning human reproduction, and it is evident to those observers who *have eyes to see and ears to hear*. The ancient wise men who were prior to the Torah knew of the great benefit in marrying a childless dead brother's wife, and that it

was proper for the brother to take precedence in the matter, and upon his failure to do so, his next of kin would come after him, for any kinsman who was related to him, who would inherit his legacy, would derive a benefit from such a marriage. And it was customary for the dead man's wife to be wed by the brother or father or the next of kin in the family. We do not know whether this was an ancient custom preceding Yehudah's era. In B'resheet Rabbah (85:6) they say that Yehudah was the one who inaugurated the commandment of marrying a childless person's widow, for since he had received the secret from his ancestors he was quick to fulfill it. Now when the Torah came and prohibited marrying former wives of certain relatives, it was the will of the Holy One, blessed be He, to abrogate the prohibition against marrying a brother's wife in case he dies childless, but it was not His will that the prohibition against marrying a father's brother's wife or a son's wife or similar wives of relatives be set aside. It was only in the case of a brother that the custom had established itself, and the benefit is likely with him and not with the others, as I have mentioned. Now it was considered a matter of great cruelty when a brother did not want to marry his dead brother's wife, and they would call it *the house of him that had his show loosed*, for [after the dead brother's wife had performed *Chalitzah* of the brother-in-law], he was now removed from them, and it is fitting that this commandment be fulfilled through the loosening of the shoe. Now, the ancient wise men of Yisra'el, having knowledge of this important matter, established it as a custom to be practiced among all those inheriting a legacy, providing there is no prohibition against the marriage, and they called it *Ge'ulah*. This was the matter concerning Bo'az, and the meaning of the words of Naomi and the women neighbors. The man of insight will understand. (According to some supercommentaries, Ramban's cryptic allusions refer to the mystical notion of transmigration of souls via redemption/Yibum. Anything more than this mere mention is, of course, significantly beyond the scope of this shiur.)

Although there is much more to write about in introduction to the "scene at the city-gate", we will move on to the fourth chapter itself and comment as the text warrants.

ANALYSIS

4.1. Then Bo'az went up to the gate, and sat down there; and, behold, the next of kin of whom Bo'az had spoken came by; to whom he said, Hey there, such and such a one! turn aside, sit down here. And he turned aside, and sat down.

Note that Bo'az's actions take place immediately after the "night on the threshing floor" detailed in chapter 3. First of all, the opening **uVo'az Alah** (instead of the expected **va'ya'Al Bo'az**) indicates simultaneous action. In other words, at the same time as Naomi and Ruth were conversing (at the end of chapter 3), Bo'az was ascending to the gate. Second, the verb **Alah** indicates that Bo'az was still down at the threshing-floor and it was from there that he ascended to the city-gate. (Although note II M'lakhim 15:35 and Yirmiyah 20:2, where the gate is described as "above". This implies either

that the area of the gate where judgment was rendered was built physically higher than the rest of the town, or that the **Alah** is not meant in altitudinal terms, rather as an indication of significance. Note, most significantly, D'varim 25:7.)

"Behold"...again, the word **Hinei** introduces the conveniently-timed appearance of a key figure (compare with 2:4: **v'Hinei Bo'az**...). Just as when Ruth "happened" into Bo'az's field, haKadosh Barukh Hu arranged for the "first redeemer" to pass by the city-gate as Bo'az had seated himself there in order to expedite the matter.

The two words used for "John Doe" ("such and such") are **P'loni Almoni**. This phrase appears in two other places in T'nakh: I Sh'mu'el 21:3 and II M'lakhim 6:8. Both of these citations refer to locations; our text is the only appearance in T'nakh of this phrase in reference to a person (although **P'loni** appears by itself three times in Div'rei haYamim in a name-reference).

P'loni is likely based on the root **PL'**, implying something wondrous (see Rashi ad loc.) - indicating that his identity is beyond our memory. In that case, the paired word **Almoni**, from the root **LM** (mute) stresses the inability to say his name.

Rada"K, in his **Shorashim**, explains as follows:

Someone who is not named by the person mentioning him will be called **P'loni** even though the person mentioning him remembers his name, but does not want to call him by name.

In other words, the author of the Megillah either did not know the name of this **P'loni Almoni**, since it was quickly forgotten and not maintained as part of the tradition of the story, or else the name was deliberately omitted. In next week's shiur, we will address this issue in the context of the significance of names at the end of the Megillah.

Note that Bo'az commands the same type of respect at the city gate as he does in his own field. Although the **Go'el** was a relative of Bo'az, he immediately obeys Bo'az's command to "turn aside and sit". Nonetheless, Bo'az does not take advantage of his position to bypass the rights of the **Go'el**.

4.2. And he took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, Sit down here. And they sat down.

Just as we saw in the first verse, Bo'az's commands are heeded without protest. This time, instead of just one relative, ten of the city's elders sit upon his directive.

The Gemara (BT Ketubot 7b) suggests two reasons as to why Bo'az took ten elders to participate in the events of the morning. One approach is that this is the source for the Halakhah that Birkat Hatanim (the nuptial blessings) require a Min. The other approach taken is that Bo'az wanted to publicize the Halakhah that the Torah's restrictions relating to marrying a Moavite (D'varim 23:4) only applies to the males (Yevamot 9:3, BT Yevamot 69a, Sifri Ki Tetze #39).

Whether any events of **Ge'ulah** required a full complement of elders (who comprised the judicial leaders of the society - see, *inter alia*, D'varim 19:12, and, most significantly, D'varim 25:7-9), evidently

this one had enough delicate components - including the "package deal" which included marriage to Ruth - that performing the redemption in front of a full quorum of city elders was guaranteed to preempt any later challenge to the validity of the **Ge'ulah**.

4.3. And he said to the next of kin; Naomi, who has returned from the country of Mo'av, is selling a parcel of land, which was our brother Elimelekh's;

The word **Makhrah** (translated here as *is selling*) literally means "has already sold" and implies that her commitment to selling is so complete that it is already a done deal - the only question is **who** will redeem/buy the field. Alternatively, it may mean that Naomi has already sold the field to an "outsider" and now it is up to the **Go'el** to redeem it on behalf of the family. The implication of v. 9 however, strongly favors the first approach:

And Bo'az said to the elders, and to all the people, You are witnesses this day, that I have bought all that was Elimelekh's, and all that was Kilion's and Machlon's, from the hand of Naomi.

One question raised by the entire **Ge'ulah** here is Naomi's right to sell the property - upon the death of Elimelekh, she shouldn't have been the one to inherit the land. Following Hilkhot Nahalot (The Laws of Inheritance), the land should have gone to Mach'lon and Kilyon; upon their deaths, the land should have reverted to Elimelekh's brothers (if his father wasn't alive). A satisfactory is yet to be suggested.

The phrase *our brother* here either means "our family member" (since both Bo'az and **P'loni Almoni** were related to Elimelekh) or, alternatively, it could be a term used for all Beit-Lechemites (compare with Vayyikra 25:46). The effect of using this term (rather than *our fellow* or just skipping the word) is that it ties our story to the Mitzvah of Yibum (D'varim 25:5-10), effectively broadening the scope of the levirate marriage beyond "blood brothers".

Haza"l understood the term in its literal sense, as follows:

R. Hanan b. Rava said in the name of Rav: Elimelekh, Salmon (Bo'az's father - 4:21), **P'loni Almoni** and the father of Naomi all were the sons of Nach'shon, the son of Amminadav. (BT Bava Batra 91a)

4.4. And I thought I would tell you of it, and say, Buy it in the presence of the inhabitants, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not redeem it, then tell me, that I may know; for there is none to redeem it besides you; and I come after you. And he said, I will redeem it.

Note the clear parallel between this verse and 3:13. Bo'az does not disguise his interest in

participating in the redemption here.

This first scene is punctuated with words related to the root **G'L**, which is clearly the **Milah Manchah** of this section. Indeed, it appears fourteen times - which is, itself, both significant and instructive. Although we have seen a **Milah Manchah** twelve times (chapter 1: **ShUV**; chapter 2: **LKT**) and eight times (chapter 3: **ShKhb**), each of those occasions has elicited comments about the significance of that number of instances. The reason for this is that usually a **Milah Manchah** will appear seven times (or some multiple of seven) within a given Parashah. For instance, note how many times the noun **ShBT** appears in Parashah of Shabbat in Sh'mot 31:12-17. We are, therefore, not surprised to find a **Milah Manchah** appearing fourteen times in this section - but we will find, upon further investigation, that the fourteen occurrences are thematically broken into two groups of seven, as follows:

I: vv. 1-4

1. v. 1
2. v. 3
3. v. 4
4. v. 4
5. v. 4
6. v. 4
7. v. 4

II. vv. 6-8 (v. 5 represents a turning point in the dialogue; see below)

1. v. 6
2. v. 6
3. v. 6
4. v. 6
5. v. 6
6. v. 7
7. v. 8

Note how the "intensity" of the appearance of the word is arranged in chiastic fashion.

1. The beginning (v. 1) and end (v. 8) of this sub-section contain one appearance - each time **haGo'el** - a reference to the kinsman.
2. The second (v. 3) and penultimate (v. 7) again contain only one reference in each verse, again in a relatively "light" fashion. The reference in v. 3 is (again) to the kinsman and the reference in v. 7 is to a general historic/Halakhic statement about how such deals are consummated.
3. The fourth verse contains a highly unusual five occurrences of the word - and here the sense is much more intense, one of immediacy. To wit, "make your decision if you will redeem, for, if not, I will go ahead and redeem." The sixth verse, again, contains five instances of the word. In almost mirror fashion, this verse contains the rejection of everything which had been agreed to in the fourth verse.

In order to make sense of these two "sets of seven", we have to look back to the introductory remarks to this shiur. This will also explain the critical role of verse five in this chiastic structure.

In the first seven instances of the word, the **Go'el** is agreeing to what is, essentially, a "normal" redemption of land. Bo'az offers him the "first right of refusal" and the **Go'el**, acting both out of self-interest and family loyalty (we would presume) accepts his responsibility to redeem the land. It is only with the added information, (that this **Ge'ulah** will operate on a more intense level - - taking a page out of the laws of Yibum) and will include marrying Ruth (a foreigner), that the **Go'el** refuses to comply - thus paving the way for Bo'az to redeem the field - and Ruth.

How is it that redemption of land becomes tied in with marriage? Both of these relationships - land and family - are Man's opportunity to transcend *the measure of one's days on earth*. The tragedy of dying childless (surely the simplest explanation for the Biblical punishment of **Karet** [excision: see, *inter alia*, Rashi and Ibn Ezra at B'resheet 17:14 and Rashi at Vayyikra 20:20]) is not only the missed opportunity to nurture and raise children. It is also the very real possibility that all that a person has built and created will be lost on the sands of time. It is through children that we live forever.

Biblical man understood the same about his land. Note how Navot of Carmel responds to Ach'av when the king offers to buy his land:

And Achav said to Navot, Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money. But Navot said to Achav, Hashem forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance. (I M'lakhim 21:2-3)

Ancestral land was not only a connection with the past, but also a sure link to the future. Individuality (the watchword of modern and post-modern man) is of little consequence in the thinking of Biblical Man (see Rav Kook's essay on The Development of Ideology in Yisra'el). He finds meaning in perpetuating the heritage of the past on to a brighter future through his children who will inherit his

land.

As such, redemption of land is not just about restoring a family's fortunes - it is chiefly about restoring a family's legacy and future promise. This is a meaningless act if there are no children who will perpetuate and actualize this legacy.

When Bo'az first approached **P'loni Almoni**, he gave the impression that only land-redemption was at stake - that Naomi's land was to be sold and that he had first rights to buy it in order to restore it to the family. We might call this **Ge'ulah** of the second degree. In verse 5 (below), Bo'az reveals that this **Ge'ulah** requires a more intense level of involvement with the family - a greater restoration, if you will. We might term this **Ge'ulah** of the first degree.

Herein lies the turning point between the first seven occurrences of **Ge'ulah** and the second set. In the first seven, the redeemer is prepared to act - to effect a "second-degree **Ge'ulah**"; in the second, he has refused and Bo'az is now able to perform a "first-degree **Ge'ulah**".

Parenthetically, it is clear that a distant relative who is prepared to fully restore the family's fortunes - a **Ge'ulah Sh'lemah** - takes precedence over a closer relative who is only prepared to redeem land.

4.5. Then said Bo'az, on the day that you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you must buy it also from Ruth the Moavite, the wife of the dead, to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance.

Note that Bo'az accentuates Ruth's origins - this underscores the extent of loyalty which is being demanded in this act of **Ge'ulah** - as we see from the reaction/retraction of **P'loni Almoni**.

The verb used here (and in v. 4) - **KNH** - works as a parallel to **G'L** but with a different emphasis. Whenever the root **KNH** is used, the focus is on the technical transaction; **Ge'ulah** implies more than that - it is oriented to the responsibility expressed by the putative **Go'el**. **KNH**, in Rabbinic Hebrew, becomes the common verb used (and its noun form - **Kinyan**) for all Halakhically valid transactions.

4.6. And the kinsman said, I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I harm my own inheritance; take my right of redemption for yourself; for I cannot redeem it.

Why did **P'loni Almoni** suddenly refuse to redeem the field? What was it about marrying Ruth that soured the deal?

Josephus (Antiq. V 9:4) maintains that the **Go'el** was married and had a family and did not want to bring a foreign woman into the household. (This approach is adopted by later M'far'shim; see, e.g. the commentary of Immanuel ben Solomon of Rome [c.1261-c.1328] ad loc.) Rashi seems to present his side as rejecting the fine distinction between the permitted Moavite woman and the prohibited

Moavite man. The Midrash, however, takes a more prosaic approach: "The first ones [i.e. Mach'lon] died because they married her, shall I take her as a wife?" (Ruth Rabbah 7:10).

In any case, the **Go'el**'s refusal is reminiscent of Onan's unwillingness to consummate his levirate obligation with Tamar (B'resheet 38:9), again tying the circles closer between the beginning of the monarchic line and the near-fruition of that lineage.

4.7. Now this was the custom in former times in Yisra'el concerning redeeming and concerning exchanging; to confirm a transaction a man took off his shoe, and gave it to his neighbor; and this was the manner of attesting in Yisra'el.

This verse is clearly an interjection - and one of historic note. It sheds light on ancient Yisraelite practice regarding how **Kinyanim** were formalized - see the "history of **Kinyanim**" in Yerushalmi Kiddushin 1:5. It does seem to indicate that at the time that the Megillah was committed to writing this was no longer the standard method of transfer. Thus the author has to explain - via this interjection - why a shoe will be taken off to effect the transfer.

This verse is used as the source-text for the **Kinyan Sudar** (a version of **Halipin**) which is purely symbolic in nature and effects a transfer of property. The use of the shoe here certainly evokes an association with the rejection of the **Y'vamah** on the part of the potential **Yavam** - although here it is used differently. Whereas in D'varim 25 the shoe is used to disgrace the stubborn/selfish brother-in-law, here it is the vehicle for transferring the rights of redemption from **P'loni Almoni** to Bo'az. The ambiguity as to whose shoe was taken off (see next verse below) allows for the famous dispute in Bava Metzia between Levi and Rav (BT Bava Metzia 47a) as to whose vessels are used for a **Kinyan Halipin**. The LXX adds "(...and gave it to his neighbor) the one redeeming the property" - to clarify that it is the seller who takes off his shoe. Compare with the codified Halakhah - see MT Mekhira 5:5.

It is unclear if the penultimate word **T'udah** means *testimony* (as translated here) or "custom" which is contextually more sound. **Edut** in T'hilim 122:4 is probably best translated in this manner. The Aramaic translation seems to take both approaches into account: "And this is how the House of Yisra'el was accustomed to conduct transactions one with the other in front of witnesses."

The final phrase serves as an *inclusio* to this interjection, mirroring **v'Zot l'Fanim b'Yisra'el**.

4.8. Therefore the kinsman said to Bo'az, Buy it for yourself. And he took off his shoe.

This is a repeat of the end of v. 6 (with the changed **K'neh** from **G'al**; see our notes above at verse 5). The effect of this is to restore the flow of the story that was interrupted by the historic "footnote" of v. 7. This is not an uncommon phenomenon in T'nakh - see, e.g. B'resheet 37:36, 39:1 and Rashi ad loc.

4.9. And Bo'az said to the elders, and to all the people, You are witnesses this day, that I have bought all that was Elimelekh's, and all that was Kilion's and Machlon's, from the hand of Naomi.

From this point on, the **Go'el** is out of the picture - which is reflected by the sudden silence about

Ge'ulah. In a sense, that component of the transaction has already been completed, with the transfer of the rights to Bo'az. Note how Bo'az's opening phrase (certainly a formulaic phrasing) is repeated at the end of his declaration (v. 10), forming another perfect *inclusio*. We find a similar "call to testimony" at the end of Sefer Yehoshua (24:22).

Note that Bo'az inverts the order of Elimelekh's sons from the order in which they were first presented (1:2). This produces a "broad chiasmus"; a greater significance to the switching of this order will be seen in the next verse.

4.10. And also Ruth the Moavite, the wife of Machlon, have I bought to be my wife, to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance, so that the name of the dead shall not be cut off from among his brothers, and from the gate of his place; you are witnesses this day.

Note how closely the first half of this verse parallel's Bo'az's words to the **Go'el** in v. 5:

v. 5	v. 10
<i>also from Ruth the Moavite,</i>	<i>And also Ruth the Moavite,</i>
<i>the wife of the dead,</i>	<i>the wife of Machlon,</i>
<i>[you must buy it]</i>	<i>have I bought to be my wife</i>
<i>to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance.</i>	<i>to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance</i>

We now see why Bo'az inverted the order of the names of Elimelekh's sons. By doing so, he mentions Ruth's dead husband (whose name he is perpetuating) while that name is still ringing in the ears of the assemblage.

4.11. And all the people that were in the gate, and the elders, said, We are witnesses. The Lord make the woman that has come into your house like Rachel and like Leah, who both built the house of Yisra'el. May you prosper in Ephratah, and be famous in Beth-Lechem;

4.12. And may your house be like the house of Peretz, whom Tamar bore to Yehudah, of the seed which the Lord shall give you of this young woman.

Just as the chorus of women greeted Naomi's tragic return to Beit Lechem at the end of chapter 1 (and will celebrate the birth of "her" son in a few verses), a male chorus blesses Bo'az. Note that the two locations mentioned at the beginning of the Megillah - Beit-Lechem and Ephrat - are woven into the blessing.

Note also the chiastic form of the blessing:

Yitein Hashem... *Beit'kha* ... *Beit* ...

Beit'kha ... *Beit* ... *Yitein Hashem* ...

The strong association with B'resheet is confirmed with this blessing - it is the only book outside of B'resheet where Le'ah is even mentioned - and the blessing here seems to be a feminine version of the blessing which comes at the end of Sefer B'resheet: *May God make you as Menasheh and Ephraim.*

SUMMARY

In this critical scene, which takes place the day after Ruth's bold approach to Bo'az on the threshing-floor, we learn of Bo'az's stature in the community. The blessing which the townspeople bestow on Bo'az as he begins his life with Ruth evokes - in several ways - the heroes of Sefer B'resheet. We are brought face to face with an earlier "outsider" who established Bo'az's family line - Tamar - with the clear implication that Bo'az should be similarly blessed through his union with a noble and saintly foreign woman.

Text Copyright © 1999 by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom.