

Megillas Naomi: Identity, Alienation and Redemption

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The Book of Rus, the paradigmatic story of *chesed* and the inclusion of all those who bring themselves under *kanfei haShechina* (those who convert), is upon closer examination of the *p'shat* (straightforward reading), in essence, not about the assumed heroine Rus but actually about her mother-in-law, Naomi, and her story of alienation and redemption. The turn of events in the *megilla* are succinctly expressed through the single leitmotif of ש"ב (the letters *shin beis*)— ישב (settling), שוב (returning) and יושב (sitting). It is these words that tell us the story of Naomi, Rus, and in metaphor, the drama and dynamic flux of the Jewish people.

This *megilla* is a story of alienation, lost identity, redemption and return. While this may seem speculative, it is the clear flow of the *p'shat* (text) from beginning to end, and it carries a message that resonates for the Jewish people after their short stay in the land of Israel and the vicissitudes of their emerging history. (Rus takes place in the early portion of the time of the *shoftim*¹ (judges) only one generation after Yehosuha brings the Jewish people into the Land of Israel. According to the Gemara (*Baba Basra* 91a), Naomi was the granddaughter of the fearless and faithful Nachshon ben Aminadav. It is a theme that is equally resonant in the modern era as well, and lends itself to a different and nuanced reading of this *megilla*.

The story opens with Naomi and the short-lived Elimelech leaving their ancestral home of Beis Lechem Yehuda to live in Sdei Moav on account of the famine and depressed state of the Jewish people. After they leave their home among the Jewish nation - וישבו שם כעשר שנים (1:4) they settle in for nearly a decade with the Moavi people, and their children intermarry with the local girls.

¹ According to Rav Yehoshua ben Levi cited in *Rus Rabba* 1 and *Seder Olam Rabah* (12) the *shofet* of “ יהיה בימי שפוט “ דהשופטים, It was in the days of judges,” (Rus 1:1) is Ehud ben Gera. Rav is quoted in the Gemara, *Baba Basra* (91a) as saying that Boaz is Ivtzan, who ruled in Bais Lechem and was shortly before the time of Shimshon, a slightly later Shofet.

To fully appreciate the significance of that move, one must imagine the family as royalty and leadership of the Jewish community moving to, of all places, Sdei Moav—the seat of their arch-enemies with whom they have been in battle for the past many years. As the Gemara, *Baba Basra* (91a), describes in the name of Rav Shimon Bar Yochai, Elimelech, Machlon and Kilyon were *gedolai hador* and *parnasei hador* (leaders of the generation). Or in more contemporary terms, Naomi and her family were the first family of the Jewish State moving to the equivalent of Ramaalah for a full decade. That is alienation and disconnection from their roots (and according to R. Shimon bar Yochai, further, the cause of their downfall).

Despite their settling in, after 10 years the time has come for Naomi to return to her land and her people:

*And she arose with her daughters-in-law to **return** from the fields of Moav because she heard in the field of Moav that God had remembered his nation to give them bread.*

Rus 1:6

ותקם היא וכלתיה **ותשב** משדי מואב כי שמעה בשדה מואב כי פקד ה' את עמו לתת להם לחם.
רות א:ו

Here the *shoresh* is שׁוּב—to return, as she heard, even from the far reaches of her exile in Sdei Moav, that God has remembered the Jewish people and their fate has changed.

*She left the place where she was, with her two daughters-in-law, and she went on her way to **return** to the land of Judah.*

Rus 1:7

ותצא מן המקום אשר היתה שמה ושתי כלותיה עמה ותלכנה בדרך ל**שוב** אל ארץ יהודה.
רות א:ז

To make sure we understand the change that is about to occur, the *pasuk* repeats clearly that she is leaving her place, where she has been (no longer mentioning the place by name since she has begun the process of uprooting her identity from *Sdei Moav*), and goes on her way to return to the land of Yehuda.

In Naomi's return to her roots, her non-Jewish daughters-in-law of her deceased sons, symbols of her being an interloper in a foreign land and alienated from her identity, must go back to their place and return to their rightful ancestral home of Moav, thus:

*Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law: Go and **return**, each of you to her mother's house.*

Rus 1:8

ותאמר נעמי לשתי כלותיה לכנה **שבנה** אשה לבית אמה.
רות א:ח

At first, the bonds of their cumulative and joint suffering created a shared sense of belonging and both Rus and Orpah say they will return with Naomi:

*And they said to her: [No] we will **return** with you to your nation.*

Rus 1:10

ותאמרנה לה כי אתך **נשוב** לעמך.
רות א:י

But taking on a new identity is a transformative and active process, not something that occurs because of a past association or fleeting connection. They cannot return to a place they had never been to—thus Naomi responds:

Return, my daughters, go, because I am too old to have a husband.

Rus 1:12

שונה בנתי לכן כי זקנתי מהיות לאיש.
רות י:יב

The connection of our past is expired and will not be recreated—do not stake your identity on our past relationship. Here is where Rus’s courageous and defiant stance comes in to distinguish her—*ורות דבקה בה*, and Rus cleaved to her (1:14). But Naomi pushes back:

And she said, behold, your sister-in-law **returned** to her nation and her god, **return** after your sister-in-law.

Rus 1:15

ותאמר הנה שבה יבמתך אל עמה ואל אלהיה
שוב אחרי יבמתך.
רות א:טו

Nevertheless, Rus is steadfast in her commitment to throw her lot with the Jewish people:

Rus said: Do not implore me to abandon you, to **return** from you.

Rus 1:16

ותאמר רות אל תפגעני בי לעזובך לשוב מאחריך.
רות א:טז

Contrary to its eponymous title, this is not a story about Rus’s identity, but Naomi’s; the ensuing four *pesukim* (1:19- 22) describe Naomi’s return to Yehuda. Naomi, the woman known for her stature and nobility (as the granddaughter of Nachshon, the leader of Yehuda, the wife and parent of the first family, and a woman of outstanding wealth²), comes back as a broken and impoverished women and the entire city gasped in shock;³ she was returned empty by Hashem and bitter—*אני מלאה הלכתי וריקם השיבני ה'* (1:21). But it is here that Naomi and Rus return—*נתשב* (1:22)—and to be sure you understand from whence they were returning, they are labeled—*השבה משדי מואב*, returning from the fields of Moav.

Now that Rus and Naomi are bound into one fate, Rus is described by the *na'ar* (lad) as the Moabite women who **returned** with Naomi—*עם נעמי משדי מואב* (2:6). The story shifts, temporarily, to how, through Hashem’s providence, Rus finds Boaz, and through Boaz’s *chesed* Rus enters the Jewish people and by extension, Naomi reclaims her place among her people.

At this point in the *megilla* the guiding verb of *שוב* returning, has shifted to *ישב*—sitting and settling (2:14) as she sits by the side of the gatherers—*נתשב מצד הקוצרים*—and states that she will not be like one of his maidservants (2:13). Naomi understands that which is unfolding and sees that he is a relative and of “our redeemers,” Rus and Naomi together. On Naomi’s advice Rus stays in Boaz’s field until the end of the season—*נתשב את המותה*—and she literally sits with her mother-in-law and their fate remains bound together (2:23).

As the *geulah* (redemption) process comes to fruition we see the root *ישב*—being settled, rooted and in your place, emerge and through the play with words the text tells us the meta-narrative—that Rus and Naomi are coming to being settled as well. Shortly before the completion of the

² *Rus Rabbah*, 3:6

³ The Gemara, *Baba Basra* 91a, describes everyone’s shock, *V'zos Naomi*—is this Naomi that alienated herself from the Jewish people and has thus caused her misfortune? This highlights her disengagement from the Jewish people as the theme of her fate.

geulah process, Naomi tells her daughter-in-law: **שבי** בתי עד אשר תדעין איך יפל דבר—sit tight and see how this plays out (3:18), since Boaz has said he will act. They have done their parts and now they can see God’s plan unfold.

The next scene opens with Boaz:

Boaz went up to the gate and sat there. Behold, the redeemer that Boaz spoke about passed by and [Boaz] said to him: Please turn aside and sit here, sir, and he turned and sat. And he took 10 elders of the city and said sit and they sat.

Rus 4:1-2

ובעז עלה השער **וישב** שם והנה הגאל עבר אשר דבר בעז ויאמר סורה **שבה** פה לפני אלמני ויסר **וישב**. ויקח עשרה אנשים מזקני העיר ויאמר **שבו** פה **וישבו**.
רות ד:א-ב

Boaz too is sitting—he is in his proper place; the *goel* (*redeemer*), Ploni Almoni, on the other hand is passing by and is told to sit (**יושב**). The role of Rus (and by extension Naomi) is switching to a *yoshev* and Ploni Almoni, in contrast, is the passer-by. It is also important to note that here, in this suspenseful and pivotal moment as the story is about to turn, Naomi (and Rus) are referred back to their old identity as *hashava msdei Moav*—and thus rejected by Ploni Almoni. Here, for the last time, she is juxtaposed opposite those sitting (*neged hayoshvim* 4:4). She is seen as the returnee from Sdei Moav, not yet integrated into the community and thus cannot be redeemed—for it would destroy the purity of Ploni Almoni’s home. Here Boaz acts boldly to complete the return for Rus and Naomi:

Boaz said to the elders and to the entire nation: You are my witnesses today that I have acquired everything that belonged to Elimelech, Machlon and Kilyon from Naomi. I have also taken Rus the Moabite, wife of Machlon as a wife to perpetuate the name of the deceased on his estate, and his name shall not be cut off from his brethren and from his place. You are my witnesses today.

Rus 4:9-10

ויאמר בעז לזקנים וכל העם עדים אתם היום כי קניתי את כל אשר לאלימלך ואת כל אשר לכליון ומחלון מיד נעמי. וגם את רות המאביה אשת מחלון קניתי לי לאשה להקים שם המת על נחלתו ולא יכרת שם המת מעם אחיו ומשער מקומו, עדים אתם היום.
רות ד:ט-י

Boaz says, in public and in broad view of everyone as his witnesses, that he is redeeming the estate of Naomi and her family and also takes Rus HaMoaviah as a wife. With full awareness of their history, shortcomings and potential taint, he is the *goel* of Naomi and Rus.

As the redemption seems to be completed—all those around say **לחם שם בבית לחם**, you shall establish a good name in Beis Lechem (4:11)—the house of Naomi and Elimelech is once again established in their ancestral home, once again for Naomi and for the first time for Rus.

Boaz and Rus are married and Rus give birth to a child and is assumedly absorbed into the community. Thus ends the story of Rus, and indeed she is no longer mentioned in the *megilla* (4:13).⁴ But the story of Naomi continues (4:14-17) ...

⁴Furthering the theme of this being Naomi’s story, the Midrash (*Rus Rabbah* 6:2) says from this *pasuk* that even the story of Rus and Boaz was not absent of Naomi’s imprint—that Boaz was 80 and never had children, along comes this righteous woman (Naomi) and immediately he is blessed with children.

Upon the birth of this child to Rus, all the women say to Naami (not Rus who is no longer mentioned):

The women said: Blessed is Hashem that He did not keep from you a redeemer today and his name shall be well established in Israel.

Rus 4:14

ותאמרנה הנשים אל נעמי ברוך ה' אשר לא השבית לך גאל היום ויקרא שמו בישראל.
רות ד:יד

What is now established as the tagline to introducing a child's newly given name- ויקרא שמו (and his name should be called/established in Israel)- leaves us hanging. What is his name? That is not important only that it is indeed a name that is now “established in Israel.” Naami has reestablished her lineage and her role as a matriarch in the destiny of the Jewish people. This new grandchild will be a משיב נפש, a restorer of spirit and support in your old age—שיבתך (4:15).

Naami took the child and placed it in her bosom and became a nurse to him. The neighbors gave him a name saying: a son was born to Naami and she called him Oved, he was the father of Yishai the father of David.

Rus 4:16-17

ותקה נעמי את הילד ותשתהו בחיקה ותהי לו לאמנת. ותקראנה לו השכנות שם לאמר ילד בן לנעמי ותקראנה שמו עובד הוא אבי ישי אבי דוד.
רות ד:טז-יז

Naami, the elderly woman who throughout her life has experienced both blessing and loss, raises this young child in her lap and becomes his mentor and a link to her prestigious past and the family's future. Finally, the child (who was born five *pesukim* previously) is named Oved, but only before his nickname given by the neighbors is fully appreciated—*yulad ben l'Naami*—a son is born to Naami. It is with this and the delineation of the lineage of the house of Yehuda—from Peretz to David—that the narrative concludes and the cycle of return is complete. Naami's story of disconnection and losing everything comes full circle to returning and raising “her” child in the land of Yehuda that she once rejected and raising her “grandson” as part of the chain of royalty.

The movement of שוב, וישב to נפש משיב (restorer of spirit) tells the story of Naami's departure, return and reintegration, a feat perhaps not known possible in the early stages of the people of Israel in their land. Putting the story of Naami in this light, she fits right in to the lineage of Yehuda, Dovid and ultimately Mashiach Ben Dovid and the complete *geula*. The house of Yehuda carries the theme of fall and return to royalty, and Naami follows in her family's footsteps. It is with understanding of Naami's fall, departure and faith in Hashem to see her ultimate return through the most unlikely conduit of her Moabite daughter-in-law, that her *geulah* indeed does come. Dovid is a worthy scion from this lineage, and not just because of the ironic root of the messianic lineage from Rus the Moabite, but because Naami herself was *shav* and *yoshev*.