

The Centrality of the Message of Megillat Ruth in Biblical Canon

Mrs. Natalie Taylor

Director of Women's Leadership Programming, Center for the Jewish Future

When reading any book in the Bible, it is important to think of the context as well as the reason why this specific book is included in the biblical canon. The Five Books of Moses lay the foundations of the Jewish people, outline laws for a moral and just society, reflect on events that we return to throughout the Jewish festivals, and include many inspirational passages. As we depart from those books and move our way into Nach, it is even more important as critical readers to ask about the placement and inspiration of each book in the Canon. What is the Divine message that we should carry with us? Why has this book and the stories therein been enshrined in our tradition? Megillat Ruth bears no exception. The bookends of this book are very important words for this question.

Ruth Chapter 1 offers us a historical context:

1 And it came to pass in the days when the judges judged, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the field of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons.

א וַיְהִי, בַּיָּמִי שֶׁפֶט הַשְּׁפֹטִים, וַיְהִי רָעָב,
בְּאֶרֶץ; וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לְחָם יְהוּדָה,
לְגוֹר בְּשָׂדֵי מוֹאָב--הוּא וְאִשְׁתּוֹ, וּשְׁנֵי
בָנָיו.

And of course the dramatic ending in Ruth 4:18-22, which provides an illustrious genealogy of the heroes as the forbearers of *David Hamelech*:

18 Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez begot Hezron; 19 and Hezron begot Ram, and Ram begot Amminadab; 20 and Amminadab begot Nahshon, and Nahshon begot Salma; 21 and Salmon begot Boaz, and Boaz begot Obed; 22 and Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David.

יח וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת פֶּרֶץ, פֶּרֶץ הוֹלִיד אֶת-
קְצָרוֹן. יט וְקְצָרוֹן הוֹלִיד אֶת-רָם, וְרָם הוֹלִיד
אֶת-עַמִּינָדָב. כ וְעַמִּינָדָב הוֹלִיד אֶת-נַחֲשׁוֹן,
וְנַחֲשׁוֹן הוֹלִיד אֶת-שַׁלְמָה. כא וְשַׁלְמֹן הוֹלִיד
אֶת-בְּעוֹז, וּבְעוֹז הוֹלִיד אֶת-עוֹבֵד. כב וְעוֹבֵד
הוֹלִיד אֶת-יֵשׁוּ, וַיֵּשִׂי הוֹלִיד אֶת-דָּוִד.

We read of the dramatic exodus of an important family from the tribe of Judah, but finish the story with the birth of *David Hamelech*. And yet, between the introductory and concluding words, a simple story develops. In the words of Chazal:

R. Zei'ra said: This scroll [of Ruth] tells us nothing either of cleanliness or of uncleanness, either of prohibition or permission. For what purpose then was it written? ...

Ruth Rabbah 2:14

אמר ר זעירא מגלה זו אין בה לא
טומאה ולא טהרה ולא איסור ולא היתר
ולמה נכתבה ...
רות רבה ב:יד

It does not brim with tensions and religious overtures. Multiple *mitzvot* do not appear in this short story, *Am Israel* is not in existential danger and there are no prophecies that are meant to open the hearts and spirits of the nation to repent and change their ways. So the question must be asked: How does this simple story of Megillat Ruth have such a prominent place in the biblical canon, and furthermore, receive center stage on the festival of Shavuot, the holiday that celebrates the giving of the Torah at Sinai? Let us explore a few themes that emerge from the narrative, and see whether they bear significance for the questions raised.¹

Chesed

R. Zei'ra said: This scroll [of Ruth] tells us nothing either of cleanliness or of uncleanness, either of prohibition or permission. For what purpose then was it written? **To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness.**

Ruth Rabbah 2:14

אמר ר זעירא מגלה זו אין בה לא
טומאה ולא טהרה ולא איסור ולא
היתר ולמה נכתבה ללמדך כמה שכר
טוב לגומלי חסדים.
רות רבה ב:יד

The introductory paragraphs describe a woman who finds herself in a foreign land, losing her husband and sons, and left with two daughters-in-law. She encourages them to return to their own homeland and give themselves the best opportunity to begin their lives again. One of the daughters-in-law, Orpah, heeds this advice and departs from the narrative. This is contrasted with a passionate plea of the other daughter-in-law, Ruth, who states emphatically to Naomi (Ruth 1:15-16):

16 And Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; **17** where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried; the LORD do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me."

טז ותאמר רות אל-תפגעני-בי, לעזבך
לשוב מאחריך: כי אל-אשר תלכי
אלה, ובאשר תליני אליו--עמך עמי,
ואלקיך אלקי. יז באשר תמותי אמות,
ושם אקבר; פה יעשה ה' לי, וכה
יוסיף--כי תמות, יפריד ביני ובינך.

Not only does Ruth align herself physically with Naomi and not leave a widow on her own, but she also casts her lot theologically with Naomi. The *mesirut nefesh* (sacrifice) of Ruth is characterized by the Hebrew verbs *davak* (cling, 2:8,21,23) and *azav* (abandon, 1:15), which have religious connotations as well. Similarly, the language of this discussion bears resemblance to the discussion between G-d and Avraham in the Book of Bereshit. Ruth mirrors the linguistic pattern here, from more general to more specific:

¹ There is a six part KMTT podcast series on Megillat Ruth by Dr. Yael Ziegler, which explores different themes in Megillat Ruth and contains useful literary comparisons to other books in Tanach. I used some of Dr. Ziegler's ideas in preparing this article.

1 Now the LORD said unto Abram: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee. **2** And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing. **3** And I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse; and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed."

Bereshit 12:1-3

א וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-אַבְרָם, לֵךְ-לְךָ
מֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וּמִמִּלְדָּתְךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ,
אֶל-הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ. ב וְאֶעֱשֶׂה
לְגוֹי גָדוֹל, וְאַבְרָכָה, וְאֶגְדַּלְהָ שְׁמִי;
וְהָיָה, בְּרָכָה. ג וְאַבְרָכָה, מְבָרְכֶיךָ,
וּמְקַלְלֶיךָ, אָאָר; וְנִבְרַכְו בְּךָ, כָּל
מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה.
בראשית יב:א-ג

It is no coincidence that we are taken back to this story, as Avraham is the progenitor of *chesed* (kindness) and monotheism, both values that are not espoused by the surrounding culture. Just as Avraham heeds a Divine call, leaves his family, homeland and everything that is familiar, so too Ruth prefers to cast her lot with Naomi, to go against what is familiar and perhaps easier, and follow Naomi back to her homeland.

Another act of *chesed* that we read takes place in the third chapter of the *megilla* and is considered to be the climactic point of the story. In a very suggestive dialogue, Naomi instructs Ruth to go to Boaz in the middle of the night and lay at his feet. Once again, we can draw linguistic parallels to the beginning of Bereshit where Lot's daughters believe that they are the only women left in the world and devise a scheme to become impregnated by their father:

31 And the first-born said unto the younger: "Our father is old, and there is not a man in the earth to come in unto us after the manner of all the earth. **32** Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father." **33** And they made their father drink wine that night. And the first-born went in, and lay with her father; and he knew not when she lay down, nor when she arose. **34** And it came to pass on the morrow, that the first-born said unto the younger: "Behold, I lay yesternight with my father. Let us make him drink wine this night also; and go thou in, and lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father." **35** And they made their father drink wine that night also. And the younger arose, and lay with him; and he knew not when she lay down, nor when she arose. **36** Thus were both the daughters of Lot with child by their father.

Bereshit 19:31-36

לֹא וַתֹּאמֶר הַבְּכִירָה אֶל-הַצְּעִירָה,
אָבִינוּ זָקֵן; וְאִישׁ אֵין בְּאֶרֶץ לְבוֹא
עֲלֵינוּ, בְּדָרֶךְ כָּל-הָאָרֶץ. לֵב לְכֵה
נִשְׁכָּה אֶת-אָבִינוּ זֶה, וְנִשְׁכָּה עִמּוֹ;
וְנַחֲמֵה מֵאֲבִינוּ, זָרַע. לֵג וַתִּשְׁקֶינּוּ אֶת-
אָבִיהֶן זֶה, בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא; וַתְּבֹא
הַבְּכִירָה וַתִּשְׁכַּב אֶת-אָבִיהָ, וְלֹא-יָדַע
בְּשִׁכְבָּהּ וּבְקוּמָהּ. לֵד וַיְהִי, מִמָּחָרֹת,
וַתֹּאמֶר הַבְּכִירָה אֶל-הַצְּעִירָה, הֵן-
שָׁכַבְתִּי אִמָּשׁ אֶת-אָבִי; נִשְׁקֶנּוּ זֶה
גַּם-הַלַּיְלָה, וּבֹאֵי שְׁכָבֵי עִמּוֹ, וְנַחֲמֵה
מֵאֲבִינוּ, זָרַע. לֵה וַתִּשְׁקֶינּוּ גַם בַּלַּיְלָה
הַהוּא, אֶת-אָבִיהֶן--זֶה; וַתִּקַּם
הַצְּעִירָה וַתִּשְׁכַּב עִמּוֹ, וְלֹא-יָדַע
בְּשִׁכְבָּהּ וּבְקוּמָהּ. לו וַתִּהְרֶינּוּ שְׁתֵּי
בָנוֹת-לוֹט, מֵאֲבִיהֶן.
בראשית יט:לא-לו

While their intentions were good, this incestuous relationship bears its "black mark" in future generations of these nations. However, in contrast to the inebriated Lot, when Boaz wakes up in the middle of the night with a woman at his feet, he demands to know who it is and does not play innocent in this scene. The kindness of this act, of taking responsibility for the situation, of promising Ruth that he shall redeem her, sheds light on the greatness of his character and of his kindness:

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 corn; and she came softly,

ז וַיֹּאכַל בַּעַז וַיִּשְׂתֵּה, וַיֵּיטֵב לְבוֹ,
וַיִּבֵּא, לְשֹׁכֵב בְּקִצְהָ הָעֵרְמָה;
וַתְּבֹא בַלֵּט, וַתִּגַּל מְרָגְלֶתֶיּוּ

and uncovered his feet, and laid her down. **8** And it came to pass at midnight, that the man was startled, and turned himself; and, behold, a woman lay at his feet. **9** And he said: "Who art thou?" And she answered: "I am Ruth thine handmaid; spread therefore thy skirt over thy handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman." **10** And he said: "Blessed be thou of the LORD, my daughter; thou hast shown more kindness in the end than at the beginning, inasmuch as thou didst not follow the young men, whether poor or rich. **11** And now, my daughter, fear not; I will do to thee all that thou sayest; for all the men in the gate of my people do know that thou art a virtuous woman. **12** And now it is true that I am a near kinsman; howbeit there is a kinsman nearer than I. **13** Tarry this night, and it shall be in the morning, that if he will perform unto thee the part of a kinsman, well; let him do the kinsman's part; but if he be not willing to do the part of a kinsman to thee, then will I do the part of a kinsman to thee, as the LORD liveth; lie down until the morning."

Ruth 3:7-13

ותשכב. ח ויהי בחצי הלילה, ויחרד האישה וילפת; והנה אשה, שכבת מרגלתיו. ט ויאמר, מי-את; ותאמר, אנכי רות אמתך, וכרשת כנפך על-אמתך, כי גאל אתה. י ויאמר, ברוכה את ליהנה בתי--היטבת חסדך האחרון, מן-הראשון: לבלתי-לקת, אחרי הבחורים--אם-דל, ואם-עשיר. יא ועתה, בתי אל-תיראי, כל אשר-תאמרי, אעשה-לך: כי יודע כל-שער עמי, כי אשת חיל את. יב ועתה כי אמנם, כי אם גאל אנכי; וגם יש גאל, קרוב ממני. יג ליני הלילה, והנה בבקר אם-יגאלך טוב יגאל, ואם-לא יחפץ לגאלך יגאלתיך אנכי, מי-ה'; שכבי, עד-הבקר.

רות ג:ז-יג

Naomi was surely aware that there was a closer relative to perform the mitzvah of *yibbum* (levirate marriage), yet she sent Ruth specifically to Boaz, in these surreptitious circumstances. Boaz, who we can define as someone who acts with intention, knew that in order for Ruth to receive full reward for her kindness (to Naomi), her redemption needed to be carried out in all its details and in strict compliance with Jewish law, i.e. elders and witnesses. And thus, this redemption earned them the following blessing:

And all the people that were in the gate, and the elders, said: "We are witnesses. The LORD make the woman that is come into thy house like Rachel and like Leah, which two did build the house of Israel; and do thou worthily in Ephrath, and be famous in Beth-lehem.

Ruth 4:11

ויאמרו כל-העם אשר-בשער, והזקנים--עדים; יתן ה' את-האשה הבאה אל-ביתך, כרחל וכלאה אשר בנו שתיהם את-בית ישראל, ועשה-חיל באפרתה, וקרא-שם בבית לחם.

רות ד:יא

The midrashim take this one step further. It is not only Boaz's kindness and attention to detail in this situation, but his *mesirut nefesh* in the face of a sexually charged situation, which are noteworthy. Let us look at a midrash that highlights this:

Rabbi Yossi said: There were three whose evil inclination threatened to overtake them, and each of them responded to it with an oath. They are: Yosef, David and Boaz. Yosef—as it says, "How can I do this most wicked thing ... and sin before G-d?" ... He swore to his evil inclination and said, "By G-d, I will not sin" ... Boaz—from where do we know? For it says, "as the Lord lives—lie down until morning" ... Rabbi Yehuda says: That entire night his evil inclination worked against him saying,

א"ר יוסי שלשה הן שבא יצרן לתקפן ונזדרזו עליו כל אחד ואחד בשבועה, ואלה הן יוסף ודוד ובוועז, יוסף דכתיב ואיך אעשה הרעה הגדולה הזאת ... נשבע ליצרו ואמר לאלהים איני חוטא ואיני עושה הרעה הגדולה הזאת ... בוועז מניין שנאמר חי ה' שכבי עד הבקר ... ר' יהודה אומר כל אותו הלילה היה יצרו מקטרגו ואומר

“You are single and seek a wife, she is single and seeks a husband. Arise and sleep with her, and she will be your wife! He swore to his evil inclination and said, “As the Lord lives, I will not touch her.”

Ruth Rabbah 6:4

את פנוי ומבקש אשה והיא פנויה
ומבקשת איש עמוד ובוועלה ותהיה לך
לאשה ונשבע ליצרו ואמר חי ה'
שאיני נוגע בה.
רות רבה ו:ד

In the final verses of the book, Ruth performs another act of kindness toward her mother-in-law. The downcast woman who lost her husband and sons is blessed with Ruth almost handing over her son to Naomi:

16 And Naomi took the child, and laid it in her bosom, and became nurse unto it. 17 And the women her neighbors gave it a name, saying: “There is a son born to Naomi”; and they called his name Obed; he is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Ruth 4:16-17

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

With such sensitivity, Ruth retreats to the background and almost allows Naomi to recapture some of her former glory.

Leadership

It was in the time that the judges judged. Woe to a generation who judges its judges and woe to a generation whose judges need to be judged, as it says (Book of Judges 2) and they even did not listen to their judges. And who were they? Rabbi Yehuda Ben Levi says it was Shamgar and Ehud, Rav Huna says it was Devorah, Yael and Barak.

Ruth Rabbah 1:1

ויהי בימי שפוט השופטים אוי לדור
ששפטו את שופטיהם ואוי לדור ששופטיו
צריכין להשפט, שנא' (שופטים ב') וגם
אל שופטיהם לא שמעו, ומי היו רב אמר
ברק ודבורה היו, ריב"ל אמר שמגר
ואהוד היו, רב הונא אמר דבורה וברק
ויעל היו.
רות רבה א:א

As was mentioned previously, the first few verses frame the story of Megillat Ruth to the time of the Judges. Historically, the period of Judges marks the downslide of *Am Israel* after the period of Joshua. The line of kingship has not yet been established and the common refrain that is repeated in throughout the book is "איש הישר בעיניו יעשה" (Shoftim 17:6; 21:25). There was no central leadership; the spiritual and moral decline of the Judges was reflective of what was taking place among *Am Israel*. Let us remember that the Book of Judges finished with the travesty of the story of the concubine in Givah, and the outcasting of the tribe of Benjamin.

It is in this context that we can compare and contrast the heroes in Megillat Ruth with those in the Book of Judges. While we see a downward spiral in Judges from a social, moral and religious perspective, Ruth and Boaz are portrayed in the exact opposite light. Ruth insists on remaining close to Naomi, following her to a new land, adopting the monotheistic theology and even serving as a caregiver to her. Boaz is seen to perform acts of *chesed* a number of times in the short story. Most striking, in a story that reminds us of Lot and his daughters and even Yehuda and Tamar, Boaz does not play innocent or allow himself to be tricked into an illicit relationship. His

words to Ruth in the shed are demanding yet honorable when compared with previous similar scenarios.

The final verses of Megillat Ruth attribute *David Hamelech*, the superior figure of the Judaic kingship, as Ruth and Boaz's great-grandson. Once again, if we compare and contrast the descent in faith and behavior found in the Book of Judges against the exemplary behavior and actions of the heroes of Megillat Ruth, we see that the introductory words are designed to show the reader what a different setting this story and people are to the other biblical characters in Shoftim. Rabbi Hayyim Angel quotes Rabbi Yisrael Rozen, who observed that the word *chesed* appears only twice, and both in negative contexts in the book of Shoftim (1:24 and 8:35). By contrast, in the small book of Ruth, which is only four chapters in length, the word *chesed* appears in a prominent way (1:8; 2:20; 3:10).² This is highly indicative of the reversal of leadership that occurs with Ruth, Boaz and Naomi, despite the reference to a darker period in Israel's history with regards to its influential people.

Conclusion

To our last question: Why has this story been chosen for special reading and attention on the festival of Shavuot? There are many reasons that the readers may be familiar with. The Abudirham³ mentions that because the *megilla* mentions harvesting the crops and the festival of Shavuot takes place at harvest time, therefore it is relevant to read. Other reasons make the connection between the fact that our forefathers received the Torah as converts, and so too Ruth was a convert. Another common reason is that *David Hamelech* came from the paradigmatic convert and his birthday and *yarzheit* (date of death) was on Shavuot. While these are all valid, perhaps we should also think about the connection of *chesed* and dignified leadership to the world of Torah.

R. Yishmael son of R. Nachman said: Derech erez preceded Torah by 26 generations. This is the meaning of what is written: "to guard the way of the tree of life" — "the way" refers to derech erez; afterward, "the tree of life," which is Torah.

Vayikra Rabbah Chapter 9

א"ר ישמעאל בר רב נחמן עשרים
וששה דורות קדמה דרך ארץ את
התורה הה"ד (בראשית ג) לשמור את
דרך עץ החיים דרך זו דרך ארץ ואח"כ
עץ החיים זו תורה.
ויקרא רבה, פרק ט

On the festival where we celebrate the giving of the Torah, how relevant it is to read this story, which celebrates the acts of kindness of Ruth, Boaz and Naomi. May Hashem bless us with inspiration to remember this in our learning and for His Name to be sanctified through our actions.

² Rabbi Hayyim Angel, "A Woman of Valor Has Been Found: Ruth Amidst a Sea of Ambiguity"
<http://tebah.org/publications/shabuot/Ruth-%20Rabbi%20Hayyim%20Angel.pdf>.

³ R. David Abudirham, 14th Century, Spain.