

Mrs. Shira Schechter

## *Eishet Chayil: Why Friday Night?*

Every Friday night at the start of the first Shabbat meal, Jews all over the world sing the twenty-two-verse poem which concludes the book of *Mishlei*, authored by Shlomo Ha-Melekh. Literally translated, *Eishet Chayil* praises the Jewish “woman of valor.” According to many interpretations, however, these verses were written as an allegory. After surveying some of the interpretations of *Eishet Chayil*, we will try to understand the connection between *Eishet Chayil* and Shabbat -according to each.

The Malbim remarks that “most commentaries note [that] this section of *Mishlei* is an allegory.”<sup>230</sup> However, while many commentaries agree that *Eishet Chayil* is an allegory, there are a wide range of opinions as to the meaning of the allegory. The Malbim himself suggests that *Eishet Chayil* is addressed to the soul, an obedient soul that can be “taught” by the intellect to “yield to instructive ideas of moral wisdom and goodness.”<sup>231</sup> Rashi, in his commentary explaining the symbolic meaning behind the poem, follows the opinion of the *midrash* that the poem is describing Torah and those who study it. Kabbalistic sources offer a different understanding of the *Eishet Chayil*. They explain that the “*eishet chayil*” is the *Shekhinah*, Hashem’s Divine Presence in this world.<sup>232</sup> It has also been suggested that the poem is referring to the Shabbat itself.<sup>233</sup> This last approach finds support in the final stanza of *Lekha Dodi*, which is said during *Kabbalat Shabbat* on Friday night. As we turn to greet the Shabbat queen, we welcome her with the phrase “*ateret ba’alah*” – “the crown of her husband,” which is the same term used by Shlomo to describe the *Eishet Chayil* in *Mishlei*.<sup>234</sup>

Even many commentators who understand the text as a metaphor, Rashi and Malbim included, recognize that Shlomo intended his poem to be understood on different levels, and they therefore provide a literal interpretation of the text as well. Based on the literal explanations of the text, the poem of *Eishet Chayil* describes a woman who is charitable and kind, assiduous and wise, a devoted caretaker and provider for her household in all areas, materially and spiritually alike. These attributes earn her the title of “*ishah yirat Hashem*” – “a God-fearing woman,” whose endeavors and accomplishments are praised by the members of her household and beyond.

According to this approach, why would Shlomo conclude his book of Proverbs with praise for the righteous woman? The Malbim explains that the verses of *Eishet Chayil*, which conclude chapter 31 of *Mishlei*, are connected to the beginning of the chapter. Chapter 31 starts with “The words of Lemuel King of Massa, with which his mother disciplined him.”<sup>235</sup> He suggests that since the chapter starts with the wisdom of the mother of Lemuel, who was an “*eishet chayil*,” it concludes with praise of the *Eishet Chayil*. The *Metzudat David* broadens this idea and connects this poem not just to the beginning of the chapter but to the entire book of *Mishlei*. He suggests that Shlomo ended his book of Proverbs in praise of the *Eishet Chayil* as a tribute to his mother from whom he learned much of the wisdom contained in the book.<sup>236</sup>

---

<sup>230</sup>. *Mishlei* 31:11. Translation taken from R. Charles Wengrov, trans., *Malbim on Mishley: The Commentary of Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim on the Book of Proverbs* (Nanuet, 1999), 318.

<sup>231</sup>. *Malbim on Mishley*, 318–319.

<sup>232</sup>. Quoted in Yissachar Yaakovson, *Netiv Binah* (Tel Aviv, 1987), 117.

<sup>233</sup>. This idea is mentioned in the commentary on the bottom of *The Complete Artscroll Siddur*, p. 358, although no source is quoted.

<sup>234</sup>. 12:4, the only other time the expression “*eishet chayil*” is used in *Sefer Mishlei*.

<sup>235</sup>. Translation taken from *Malbim on Mishley*, 317.

<sup>236</sup>. *Metzudat David*, like many commentators, writes in 31:1 that Lemuel is Shlomo. Perhaps, then, he is really agreeing with the Malbim.

Looking to other places in *Tanakh* where the expression “*eishet chayil*” is used may yield another understanding of the *Eishet Chayil*’s identity. Aside from the two references to an “*eishet chayil*” found in *sefer Mishlei*,<sup>237</sup> the only other use of this expression is found in *Megillat Ruth*. In 3:11, Boaz says to Ruth, “for the entire gate of my people know that you are a valiant woman (*eishet chayil*).”<sup>238</sup> Indeed, Yehuda Kil, author of the *Da’at Mikra* commentary on chapter 31 of *Mishlei*, sees many hidden references to Ruth throughout the verses of *Eishet Chayil*.<sup>239</sup> And so, when Shlomo penned the last few verses of *Mishlei*, perhaps he was not writing about the mother of Lemuel or even his own mother Batsheva, but rather he was memorializing and praising his great-great grandmother, matriarch of the family of David, Ruth the Moabite, mother of Jewish royalty, a quintessential woman of virtue.

Ruth indeed was a true “*eishet chayil*.” She gave up everything that was familiar and comfortable, her family, her heritage and her wealth,<sup>240</sup> for the sake of Naomi, her destitute and embittered mother-in-law.<sup>241</sup> She left behind her culture and religion to embrace *Hashem* and His Torah. She spent the next several months in the fields with other poor Jews collecting food for herself and Naomi so that they could survive. While she embraced Torah and Judaism, she was not embraced by the Jews of Beit Lechem. She is consistently referred to as “the Moabite”<sup>242</sup> despite her conversion,<sup>243</sup> and when the anonymous redeemer hears that redeeming Elimelech’s field also means marrying Ruth, he declines. Yet, a complaint is never uttered from Ruth’s lips. She volunteers to assume the embarrassing position of gathering grain from the fields of others, doing the manual labor of the men so that Naomi can eat. She also puts herself in the uncomfortable, potentially compromising position of surprising Boaz in the middle of the night at the bidding of Naomi. For this act she is described as the ultimate “*ba’alat chesed*,” someone who continuously helps others, having not only given up everything for the sake of her mother-in-law but also for unquestioningly agreeing to marry the elder Boaz, thereby ensuring that she and Naomi are provided for while also carrying on the name of her late husband.<sup>244</sup> She is truly a virtuous and kind woman, the provider and caretaker of the family, a true “*ishah yirat Hashem*.”

How would these various understandings explain the custom of reciting *Eishet Chayil* on Shabbat? The popular understanding of the custom to sing *Eishet Chayil* at the start of Shabbat follows the literal understanding of the *Eishet Chayil* as referring to a virtuous woman. Specifically, we are praising the virtues of the woman of every household – the wife and mother who works hard all week to provide and care for her family, to help those around her who are in need of assistance, to bring God and spirituality into her home.<sup>245</sup> Each week we sing the praises of the *neshei chayil*, the women of valor, in our lives, with the same words Shlomo used to praise the *neshei chayil* in his – whether the mother of Lemuel, his mother, or his great-great grandmother, Ruth. And we recognize and value the same virtues in our *neshei chayil* that Shlomo valued in his.

However, the above understanding does not offer a clear connection between *Eishet Chayil* and Shabbat other than the fact that -traditionally the woman is the one who prepares her family for Shabbat. In his article, “*Eishet Chayil – Shutfo Shel Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu -Be-Olam*,” Ze’ev Brauner makes the connection between Woman and Shabbat more explicit.<sup>246</sup> He notes parallels in language between verses in *Eishet Chayil* and various verses regarding *Hashem*’s involvement in this world and concludes that we sing *Eishet Chayil* at the start of Shabbat, which commemorates *Hashem*’s creation of the world,<sup>247</sup> because Woman is a partner in Creation. *Hashem* created the world

---

<sup>237</sup>. 12:4 and 31:10.

<sup>238</sup>. Translation taken from the Judaica Press translation of *Ruth*.

<sup>239</sup>. See commentary of *Da’at Mikra* to *Mishlei* 31:10–31.

<sup>240</sup>. According to *Ruth Rabbah* 2:9 she was a Moabite princess.

<sup>241</sup>. See *Ruth* 1:20: “And she said to them: ‘Do not call me Naomi; call me Marah, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me’” (translation from the Judaica Press translation of *Ruth*).

<sup>242</sup>. See for example 2:6.

<sup>243</sup>. See *Ruth* 1:16, in which Ruth declares “your people shall be my people and your God my God.” In fact, laws about conversion are learned from conversion of Ruth.

<sup>244</sup>. See *Ruth* 3:10, “May you be blessed of the Lord, my daughter; your latest act of kindness is greater than the first, not to follow the young men, whether poor or rich” (translation taken from the Judaica Press translation of *Ruth*).

<sup>245</sup>. See, for example, <http://www.aish.com/sh/ht/fn/48966686.html>.

<sup>246</sup>. The article originally appeared in *Shma’atin* (1981): pp. 12–14, also found online <http://www.vbm-torah.org/vtc/002518.html>.

<sup>247</sup>. As we say in *Kiddush* on Friday night, “*zikaron le-ma’aseh bereishit*” – “a remembrance of Creation.”

and prepared it for use by humankind. The *ishet chayil*, by providing for her family and extending her hand to others as described in the verses of the poem, continues the process of Creation. God created humankind, and the *ishet chayil* helps sustain humankind.

According to the understandings that *Eishet Chayil* was not meant to be taken literally, however, what is the connection between *Eishet Chayil* and Shabbat? Based on the understanding that *Eishet Chayil* refers to the Shabbat itself, the connection is obvious. As we sit down to welcome the Shabbat with *Kiddush* and a festive meal, we start with a poem about the beauty of Shabbat. According to kabbalistic sources, twenty-two “channels” in heaven open every Shabbat through which *Hashem* bestows blessing upon us. For this reason, we sing the twenty-two-verse tribute to the *Shekhinah*.<sup>248</sup> Perhaps the explanation that *Eishet Chayil* represents the soul connects to the idea that we are given a *neshamah yeteirah* (an extra soul) on Shabbat.<sup>249</sup>

At first glance, the connection between Shabbat and Rashi’s explanation that *Eishet Chayil* is referring to the Torah is not obvious. Why is Shabbat an appropriate time to sing the praises of the Torah? Perhaps we can understand this in light of another Rashi at the beginning of *sefer Bereishit*. On the words “*bereishit bara*” – “in the beginning (*Hashem*) created” (1:1), Rashi, quoting the *Midrash*, comments, “for the Torah, which is called ‘the beginning of His way,’ and for Israel, who are called ‘the first of His crop.’”<sup>250</sup> Similarly, Rashi comments later on in the -chapter on verse 31, “[Scripture] added the definite article *hei* to ‘the sixth day (*ha-shishi* ),’ at the conclusion of the work of Creation, to say that He stipulated with [the components of Creation] that they are brought into existence on condition that Israel accept upon themselves the Five Books of the Torah.”<sup>251</sup> In both instances, Rashi teaches that the world was created for the Jewish people to keep the Torah. As Shabbat is the day that commemorates the creation of the world, we sing the praises of Torah – for it was for the sake of Torah study and Torah observance that the world was created.

In light of this understanding, perhaps we can suggest that it is not a coincidence that *Eishet Chayil* also contains allusions to Ruth, or that Shlomo chose a phrase that is used to describe Ruth when praising the Torah, since she is the first individual recorded in *Tanakh* to have sincerely and voluntarily embraced Torah. We praise the Torah on Shabbat to remind us that the world was created for the sake of Torah, and to encourage ourselves to recommit to study and keep the Torah. At the same time, we allude to a role model who found the beauty in Torah and embraced it. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that Ruth also serves as a model of *chesed*, through her demonstrations of kindness, generosity, and thoughtfulness to all – the type of person that a true adherent to the Torah should become.

---

<sup>248</sup>. *Netiv Binah* 117.

<sup>249</sup>. Referred to in *Ta’anit* 27b.

<sup>250</sup>. Translation taken from *The Artscroll Saperstein Edition of the Torah with Rashi’s Commentary Translated, Annotated and Elucidated*, p. 2.

<sup>251</sup>. *Ibid.*, p. 19. See also the second explanation of Rashi which furthers this point.