

MEGILLAT RUTH
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This week's shiurim are dedicated by Leonard Balanson
in memory of Rose Balanson z"l

Shiur #16: The Well Scene: A Betrothal

Modern biblical scholarship has noted the presence of what is termed a "type-scene," namely, an event that recurs in the Bible and whose circumstances are expected to unfold in a given manner. One example is the biblical story in which a man goes to a foreign country, only to fear that he will be killed in order to enable a foreign king to seize his beautiful wife. Consequently, the man introduces his wife as his sister, who is then taken by the ruler to be his wife. The narrative ends when the ruler discovers the deception and responds by offering gifts as compensation. While this repeated biblical scenario contains variations, these general motifs appear in three different biblical stories (*Bereishit* 12, 20, 26). In fact, scholars maintain that it is the divergence from the expected course of events that can highlight the story's essence or central message.

In a chapter entitled "Biblical Type-Scenes and the Uses of Convention," Robert Alter examines this literary phenomenon.¹[1] His illustrative example is the betrothal scene that takes place alongside a well. As is the case with many literary phenomena noted by contemporary scholars, midrashic texts already observed the central component of the type-scene, noting that betrothals take place next to wells in the Bible:

And he sat next to the well (*Shemot* 2:15): [Moshe] absorbed the ways of the forefathers. Three people found their match [alongside] a well: Yitzchak, Yaakov, and Moshe. (*Shemot Rabba* 1:33)

Alter broadens, develops and explains this midrashic idea in a compelling manner. To begin with, Alter adds two scenarios to this list, that of Ruth and Boaz, and, more obscurely, that of Shaul and the group of girls that he meets in *I Shmuel* 9:11-14.²[2] Alter suggests that this scene is supposed to unfold in particular circumstances and with anticipated components. If any of these circumstances are changed or suppressed, the reader is supposed to take notice and understand that this discrepancy conveys an important message regarding the narrative.

1 [1] This is the title of the third chapter of Alter's book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981), pp. 47-62.

2 [2] The similarity between the story of Shaul meeting the women who have gone out to draw water and these other stories is also noted by a *midrash* (*Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* 35), which correlates the four narratives in which a man entering a city meets young women who have gone out to draw water. The conclusion of the *midrash* is somewhat different, suggesting that this bodes well for the man's future, as it portends his impending success. The most intriguing aspect of this *midrash* is that it adds this fourth narrative (Shaul in *I Shmuel* 9) to the threesome suggested by the *midrash* mentioned above. We will examine this narrative later in this *shiur*.

The expected betrothal type-scene begins when a man journeys to a distant land. There, he encounters a young woman who has come to a well.^{3[3]} As it turns out, she is a member of his extended family. Water is drawn from the well, and the young woman rushes home to tell her family about the man's arrival. The man is invited for a meal and the betrothal is concluded between the man and the young woman.

Why do some biblical characters have betrothal scenes while others do not? Generally, we can assume that a betrothal scene highlights the *Tanakh's* interest in an individual whose legacy or character is designated for perpetuation.

Yitzchak and Rivka (*Bereishit* 24)

The most striking deviation from the betrothal type-scene of Yitzchak and Rivka is that Yitzchak is not present.^{4[4]} This entire betrothal scene is executed by a surrogate for Yitzchak, who is never given a name in the narrative. Instead, he is referred to as "the servant of Avraham." Yitzchak's absence is not merely a technicality, but may be viewed as the key to the entire narrative, characterizing Yitzchak and his marriage, as well as his larger role in the narrative.^{5[5]} Yitzchak's passivity is evident throughout his story, most notably in the episode of his near-sacrifice. It is also manifest in the sole chapter devoted to his career, *Bereishit* 26. This chapter, ostensibly devoted to describing Yitzchak's life, refers to Avraham repeatedly,^{6[6]} and Yitzchak's actions in this chapter carefully mirror those of his father.^{7[7]}

3 [3] The well, which contains water, symbolizes continuity and life. Alternatively, it may simply be the most obvious meeting place, as all the people in the town must come to the well to draw water.

4 [4] Here I deviate from Alter who, although he notes Yitzchak's absence, does not view this as the most striking feature of this episode. In general, I will offer my own approach to the significance of the variations of this type-scene. While some of my suggestions overlap with Alter's, generally, my approach contains independent ideas and conclusions.

5 [5] I have endeavored to focus on the deviant feature of the narrative, which I have deemed the key point in uncovering its distinctive message. Limited space prevents me from developing each point fully. There are certainly other unique features of this narrative that illustrate its message and ideas. Consider, for example, the singular test contrived by the servant of Avraham for finding the appropriate wife for Yitzchak (*Bereishit* 24:12-14). This test seems designed to find someone who can perpetuate an important aspect of Avraham's legacy. The servant repeatedly justifies his bold appeal for divine intervention repeatedly by referring to the merits of his master Avraham. This is characteristic of the relationship between Avraham and God, which unfolds as a series of tests and demands one from the other, underscoring the novelty and closeness that characterize their unique bond.

6 [6] *Bereishit* 26:1, 3, 5, 15, 18, 24.

7 [7] The following events in this chapter mirror Avraham's life, often explicitly referring to Avraham, thereby indicating that the chapter is consciously creating a mirror between the son's actions and his father's. Yitzchak encounters a famine which causes him to journey in search of a new place to dwell; God reveals himself to Yitzchak and bequeaths upon him the blessing originally given to Avraham; out of fear of the effect his wife's beauty could have on the townspeople, Yitzchak introduces her as his sister, thereby incurring the wrath of the ruler, who accuses Yitzchak of almost causing someone to commit adultery with his wife; Yitzchak re-digs the wells originally dug by his father, bestowing (the same) names upon the wells originally named by his father; Yitzchak builds an altar and calls on God's

This imitative behavior epitomizes Yitzchak's role in the formation of the Jewish nation. The first Patriarch, Avraham, is a visionary. His relationship with God and the unique covenant which he establishes with God is meant to be a model for his descendants. Nevertheless, his son, the second Patriarch, cannot be a visionary.^{8[8]} To allow him to innovate would result in a fundamental altering, a distortion of Avraham's original vision. Instead, Yitzchak's role is to continue Avraham's path, to step gingerly into the very large footprints made by his father. Yitzchak's legacy is his father's legacy, and he cannot swerve from it at all. This point is made in the peculiar manner in which the text introduces Yitzchak's *toledot*, his genealogy:

And these are the generations of Yitzchak, son of Avraham: Avraham begat Yitzchak. (*Bereishit* 25:19)

After the introduction of Yitzchak's "*toledot*," we anticipate that a list of Yitzchak's descendants will follow.^{9[9]} Instead, the text reverts back to Avraham, creating a mirror image effect. This irregularity suggests that Yitzchak's future, his legacy, is not to be found in his future generations, but in his ability to reflect the past, the legacy of his father. It is striking, in this regard, to note that Yitzchak's first spoken word is "*avi*," "my father" (*Bereishit* 22:7), and the last word that he utters is "Avraham" (*Bereishit* 28:4).^{10[10]}

Yitzchak's passivity in the story allows him to accomplish his role, solidifying and concretizing Avraham's mission. In light of this, it is unsurprising that Yitzchak has a surrogate at his betrothal scene, one who is consistently referred to as "the servant of Avraham." Yitzchak's entire quest for continuity, the reason for his marriage, is not in order to ensure his own continuity, his own legacy, but rather that of Avraham.^{11[11]}

name; Yitzchak creates a covenant with Avimelech of Gerar and Fichol, the commander of his army, and they take a mutual oath of fealty, followed by the naming of the city Beer Sheva.

^{8 [8]} It is intriguing that Yitzchak's eyesight fails him in *Bereishit* 27:1. This lack of sight may complement the notion that I have presented – Yitzchak is not meant to have sight which is independent of Avraham.

^{9 [9]} See e.g. *Bereishit* 6:9-10; 11:10-26; 11:27; 36:1-5, 9-19.

^{10 [10]} I am grateful to Elyakim Shachaf for pointing this out to me.

^{11 [11]} Alter notes that as a complement to this, Rivka's role in this story is uniquely active. In my opinion, Rivka's activity, alacrity, exceptional kindness, and unwavering determination render her a mirror image of Avraham (unlike other betrothal scenes, in this narrative, it is the young woman who draws water for the man). This ensures that Yitzchak's passivity will not result in the waning of Avraham's vision or in Yitzchak's inability to prevent others from distorting it. Indeed, Rivka will fight to maintain the future of Avraham's vision when it is threatened by Yitzchak's blindness to Esau's bad qualities (*Bereishit* 27). Moreover, this entire betrothal scene is bent on finding a wife who possesses extraordinary kindness to strangers, the classic trait of Avraham. This emphasizes Avraham's role in this betrothal narrative, inasmuch as it is *Avraham* who is being perpetuated here, *Avraham's* traits which are sought and found.

Yaakov and Rachel (*Bereishit* 29)

Unlike the previous scene, Yaakov's betrothal scene does not involve a leisurely journey, but rather a desperate flight, an attempt to escape his brother's wrath. Yaakov arrives at the well without camels, jewels, or fanciful presumptions. The exceptional feature of this narrative is the large stone that lies on the mouth of the well.¹²[12] It is so massive that the shepherds must gather together every day to remove it in order to draw water. Yaakov's arrival at the well is marked by the information that his access to the water is blocked. This proves to be no serious obstacle; when Yaakov sees the beautiful Rachel, he approaches the well and rolls the stone off single-handedly.

Once again, the singular component of the stone contains the story's central idea.¹³[13] Yaakov is not simply the symbol of one who experiences adversity. More significantly, he is the symbol of one who prevails over adversity. Yaakov's experience in utero involves a struggle, as does his birth, as is indicated by his name.¹⁴[14] He struggles for the blessing and the birthright. Yaakov's marriage to the woman of his choice requires tremendous effort, and his relationship with his children also involves contention and hardship. In short, nothing comes easy to Yaakov, as is evident in his climactic struggle with the "man" who renames him Yisrael:

And he said to him, "No longer shall your name be said to be Yaakov, but Yisrael, for you have struggled (*sarita*) with God and with men, and you have prevailed."
(*Bereishit* 32:28)

This struggle is evident in the several of the deviances present in Yaakov's betrothal scene. As noted, this is no peaceful expedition to find a wife; Yaakov is fleeing for his life. A correlate of this is the difficulty that Yaakov encounters in accessing the water in the well. Similarly, Yaakov is not invited to a meal. Yaakov cannot obtain a wife without committing himself to years of hard labor, and he does not even receive the wife whom he had been promised, the designated woman whom he met and loved at the well (*Bereishit* 29:18-28). Nevertheless, as in the rest of the story, Yaakov overcomes these adversities by virtue of his own sheer force of will, emerging a stronger

12 [12] As in the last scenario, I have attempted to focus on what I consider the key to the dynamics of the narrative. Other unusual features also relate to the uniqueness of the character whose legacy is at stake. This type-scene describes, uniquely, the intense love Yaakov feels for the young woman he meets next to the well. This emotion is characteristic of Yaakov, illustrating his passionate nature, which will feature centrally in upcoming biblical narratives, particularly in his powerful love for Yosef, and later Binyamin. It is the injudicious wielding of Yaakov's powerful love that will prove to be his undoing, as his sons struggle to thwart Yaakov's love for Yosef.

13 [13] It is intriguing that the stone is a motif appearing throughout Yaakov's story. Consider the stones which Yaakov sleeps on in Beit El (*Bereishit* 28), the monument of stones he makes in *Bereishit* 28 and 35:14, and the stones which mark the non-aggression pact he makes with Lavan in *Bereishit* 31:45-53. Jan Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (1975) p. 125, takes this point one step further, maintaining that Yaakov's life is marked by stones because he contends with the hard, unyielding nature of life. Indeed, nothing in Yaakov's life comes easily to him.

14 [14] The text seems to offer an etymological explanation for the name Yaakov, which refers to the struggle to be born first: "And afterwards, his brother came out, and his hand was grasping the heel (*ba-akeiv*) of Esav, and he called his name Yaakov" (*Bereishit* 25:26).

man than before. Yaakov summons up supreme strength in order to overcome adversity in all areas of life, serving as a model for his descendants for many years to come.

Moshe and Tzipora (*Shemot 2*)

Several singular elements characterize Moshe's betrothal to Tzipora. Like Yaakov, Moshe is also not on a relaxed expedition to find a wife. He is fleeing for his life from Pharaoh, who seeks to kill him (*Shemot 2:15*). Moshe's early life is filled with conflict, and his betrothal story is presented within this context. Moshe's story is presented as the quest of a young man for adulthood. The primary problem in Moshe's early life is his inability to find a role model who can help him achieve self-identity. The key word in the second half of *Shemot 2* (verses 11-22)¹⁵[15] is *ish*, man (appearing seven times),¹⁶[16] and yet Moshe cannot seem to identify with any of the men whom he encounters, neither Egyptian nor Hebrew.¹⁷[17] Wherever he turns, Moshe encounters injustice and cruelty, which he cannot abide. He is overcome by anger at the evil Egyptian taskmaster (*Shemot 2:11-12*), but also cannot restrain himself when he sees two Jews fighting one another (*Shemot 2:13*). Moshe's search for justice results in his loss of hope in mankind and his flight away from civilization.¹⁸[18]

Moshe's inner conflicts and consequent goals find expression in the unique features of this story. His characteristic quest for justice and his uncompromising integrity feature in his betrothal scene. The callous shepherds who banish Yitro's sheep from the well are summarily dismissed by Moshe, who rescues the girls and himself waters their flocks (*Shemot 2:16-17*). Unlike Yaakov, who is faced with an inanimate obstacle, Moshe is faced with a human obstacle, a source of human injustice. Moshe's character traits which emerge in his betrothal scene are fitting for one who will liberate the Jews from their slavery and become the lawgiver who conveys truth and justice to the world.

However, the divergent element that seems to me to be the key to this narrative is that this is the only story in which the man does not actually meet a young girl at a well.¹⁹[19] Instead,

15 [15] Structural divisions of this chapter appear in Yehuda Rada, "*Shemot Perek 2 (Gisha Chadasha)*," in *Sefer Yaakov Gil* (1979), pp. 241-245; David Ti, "*Moshe – Ha-Yeled Ve-Ha-Ish*," *Meggadim 22* (1994), pp. 30-42.

16 [16] In a deft literary construction, the key word in the first half of the chapter is *yeled*, boy, which appears seven times in the first half of *Shemot 2* (verses 1-10)

17 [17] In explaining the verse, "And he turned this way and that way and saw that there was no man," the Netziv (*Ha'amek Davar, Shemot 2:12*) suggests that Moshe sees that no Egyptian intends to help the poor Jew. The parallel verse in *Yeshayahu 59:15-16* implies that this phrase ("and he saw that there was no man") relates to a general lack of societal justice.

18 [18] See R. Mosheh Lichtenstein's well-developed description of Moshe's despair after witnessing the evils of mankind in *Moses: Envoy of God, Envoy of his People* (2008), pp. 3-26.

19 [19] Once again, I have omitted some intriguing features of this story which, while meaningful in their own right, do not, in my opinion, constitute the key to the narrative. As I said previously, time and space limit my ability to properly develop each variant in this story. I will briefly mention the notable absence of a pre-existing familial bond between Moshe and his potential wives. This may highlight the unique balancing act that Moshe must maintain between being an insider and an outsider. While Moshe leads the Jewish people, represents them, and acts on their behalf on numerous occasions, he must remain remote, distant, and somewhat of an outsider if he is to be able to retain the authority and respect necessary

he meets *seven* young girls at the well, none of whom has a name and all of whom are equally designated for marriage. Indeed, the only appellation given to these girls is that they are the daughters of the priest of Midian. It appears that this betrothal scene is not about finding a wife, but primarily about finding a father-in-law, a man (an *ish*) who can be a role model for Moshe.²⁰[20] The final appearance of the word *ish* in this chapter is when Moshe settles down to live not with his wife, but with Yitro, who is termed an *ish* (*Shemot* 2:21). Moshe marries Tzipora, but only *after* he has settled with the sole man worthy of the appellation in the narrative. This is why the betrothal scene is not focused on a single girl, but on the daughters of Yitro, any of whom can engender a familial relationship between Moshe and Yitro. In the final analysis, it is Yitro whose partnership enables Moshe to be an effective lawgiver by helping him set up the judicial infrastructure (*Shemot* 18:13-27).²¹[21] It is Yitro who facilitates Moshe's legacy, which is not passed down vertically through his descendants, but horizontally, to this generation.²²[22]

Shaul and the Young Women

One could easily dismiss the notion that Shaul's meeting with the girls who have gone to draw water is in any way a betrothal scene. After all, Shaul does not marry any of these girls.²³[23] Yet the scene does share some salient features with the betrothal type-scene.²⁴[24] The story begins with Shaul's journey (*I Shmuel* 9:4-5). When he arrives at his destination, he encounters young women who have come to draw water (9:11). In the continuation of the story, Shaul is

to fulfill his daunting mission (see, e.g., Ibn Ezra, *Shemot* 2:3). Moshe's betrothal to an outsider may be designed to remind him that for the sake of his legacy, he himself must remain somewhat of an outsider.

²⁰ [20] In this vein, it is significant that during the course of his betrothal scene, Moshe is mis-identified by the girls as an "Egyptian man" (*Shemot* 2:19). This suggests that Moshe has not yet concretized his own identity.

²¹ [21] Abravanel (*Shemot* 2) cites an illuminating *midrash* in which Moshe's staff of God (*Shemot* 4:20) is initially firmly planted in Yitro's orchard. No man was able to uproot this staff until Moshe. It is because of Moshe's prowess that Yitro gives Tzipora, his daughter, to Moshe as a wife. Abravanel explains this *midrash* in a metaphorical manner. He explains that this is a metaphor for Moshe's wisdom, which ultimately facilitates his prophecy. I would take this a step further and suggest that this *midrash* alludes to the extraordinary partnership between Yitro, whose wisdom lies fallow in his private orchard, until Moshe arrives and releases Yitro's knowledge into the world.

²² [22] It certainly seems that Moshe's children are not the point of his marriage. Indeed, they play no significant role in Moshe's life and do not inherit his position. Instead, it appears that the central purpose of this marriage is to bind together Moshe and Yitro.

²³ [23] In fact, Shaul does not have any betrothal scene at all. We know little about Shaul's wife, whom we encounter only in one dry, descriptive sentence (*I Shmuel* 14:50).

²⁴ [24] To account for the verbosity of the young women in *I Shmuel* 9:11, a *midrash* (*Berakhot* 48b; *Midrash Tehillim* 7:14) suggests that they are enamored of Shaul's beauty. This *midrash* appears to be aware that this is a potential betrothal scene.

invited to a meal by Shmuel (9:19, 22-24),²⁵[25] which sets into motion an exceptional relationship.

The anomalies in this scene can lead us to draw a conclusion similar to that we reached with respect to Moshe's betrothal scene. Shaul's legacy does not lie in his building a dynasty, but rather in launching the kingship.²⁶[26] By creating a relationship with the prophet and conveying the idea that no king can function properly without the guidance of a prophet, Shaul properly launches the monarchy. This is his legacy.²⁷[27] To make this point, Shaul's betrothal scene is deliberately aborted mid-stream. Instead of concluding with a marital relationship, designed to continue someone's legacy through their descendants, this narrative concludes with the commencement of a different relationship (solidified by a joint meal), namely, that between king and prophet. This relationship is fundamental to the fulfillment of Shaul's legacy as the first king of Israel, who paves the path to the Judean monarchy.

Thus far, we have seen how the betrothal scene can be a useful instrument of characterization. It can emphasize the central feature of these stories, drawing our attention to the character's primary qualities and thereby foreshadowing and explaining the events in their life.

Ruth and Boaz (*Ruth* 2)

As noted in a previous *shiur*, *Megillat Ruth* consistently and meticulously avoids any hint of love or romance between Ruth and Boaz.²⁸[28] We will return to explain this matter in a later *shiur*. Nevertheless, Ruth and Boaz do eventually marry. Their first meeting, therefore, anticipates the ultimate goal of their acquaintance, namely, marriage.

It is striking that nearly all of the previously delineated components of the betrothal type-scene occur in this story. A character travels to a distant land. There, she encounters a man next

25 [25] The meal itself is unusually detailed, calling attention to its importance in the narrative.

26 [26] The betrothal scene that does not result in marriage may hint to us at the very outset of Shaul's story that he is not meant to produce a dynasty, but rather to pave the path to Judean monarchy and the Davidic dynasty. While this is contradicted by Shmuel's words in *I Shmuel* 13:14, it helps explain the difficult question of why a Benjamite was chosen to be king, given the granting of kingship to Judah in *Bereishit* 49:10 (see Ramban ad loc.) This important topic is beyond the scope of today's *shiur*. In any case, it seems to me that Shaul's betrothal scene may constitute another factor in the complex question raised above.

27 [27] That this is a sine qua non for kingship may be seen in Rashi's commentary on the law of the king (*Devarim* 17:20).

28 [28] It is possible that Boaz intends to suggest that the young men (*ne'arim*) who draw the water are the suitable candidates for marriage to Ruth (*Ruth* 2:9).

to a well.²⁹[29] This man is only significant, as we previously noted, due to his familial relationship with this young woman's husband. The man invites the young woman to a meal. As the story progresses, the couple who met near the well are betrothed.

The anomaly in this narrative is clear. The protagonist of this story is not the man, but the woman. We are focused on her marriage, and she is the one for whom we seek a mate.³⁰[30] It is Ruth's continuity which we desire, and it is her legacy and character traits which we seek to perpetuate. Indeed, this is the very essence of *Megillat Ruth*. It is Ruth whose character will bring about the Davidic dynasty. Boaz complements her character traits, thus ensuring her success, but Ruth most fully embodies the qualities necessary for kingship, and it is thus her line which we wish to perpetuate. Ruth is therefore *ima shel malkhut*, the matriarch of kingship, in much the same manner that Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov are the Patriarchs of the Jewish nation.

And so it says, "And a chair was placed for the mother of the king [Shlomo]" (*I Melakhim* 2:19). This is Ruth the Moavite, who is the Mother of Kingship. (*Yalkut Shimoni, Ruth* 596)³¹[31]

This exercise in understanding biblical literary conventions is not merely an aesthetically pleasing activity. I have tried to show that when the Bible employs a subtle literary technique, it may be mined to reveal the deeper ideas of the narrative. In this *shiur*, I have drawn your attention to the variances in the betrothal type-scene in *Tanakh* in an attempt to better understand the various personae and their central role in each narrative. It is my hope that I have demonstrated the efficacy of exploring literary techniques in order to derive the deeper theological messages of the biblical narrative.

This series of shiurim is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Naomi Ruth z"l bat Aharon Simcha, a woman defined by Naomi's unwavering commitment to family and continuity, and Ruth's selflessness and kindness.

I welcome all comments and questions: yaelziegler@gmail.com

²⁹ [29] Although there is no explicit well named, the presence of a well in Boaz's field is indicated by Boaz's words to Ruth (*Ruth* 2:9), "And if you shall get thirsty, you may go to the vessels and drink from [the water] which the boys have drawn." Water which is drawn (*sha'av*) comes from a well. See also *I Shmuel* 9:11.

³⁰ [30] A similar reversal may be observed in Boaz's allusion to *Beresheit* 2:24: "And you left your father and your mother" (*Ruth* 2:11). While in *Beresheit*, it is the man who leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, Boaz describes Ruth as the one who leaves her father and mother. The word *davak* also modifies Ruth, and not Boaz, in this narrative (*Ruth* 1:14; 2:8, 23).

³¹ [31] A similar *midrash* appears in *Bava Batra* 91b. I chose to cite the later *midrash* in *Yalkut Shimoni* simply because its phraseology renders the point more clearly.

